

**Rashidi Akanji Okunola**

*Department of Sociology, University of Ibadan,  
Ibadan, Nigeria  
mayeloyecaliphate@yahoo.com*

**Adediran Daniel Ikuomola**

*Department of Sociology, Adekunle Ajasin University,  
Akungba – Akoko, Ondo State  
diranreal@yahoo.com*

**Festival of Curses: A Traditional Crime Control Method  
In Edo State –Nigeria**

**Abstract:** Festivals and ceremonies are part and parcel of African culture, usually in all its pomp, merriment and pageantry. However, with the increasing wave of criminal activities in Nigeria especially in Edo state, festivals and ceremonies are being redefined and conceptualized in practice. Only recently a new festival 'Festival of Curses' was brought to the fore in combating crime in Edo state. The study therefore seeks to explain the festival as a traditional mechanism in crime control, the nature of the festival, the factors that led to its emergence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the level of acceptance and its impact in reducing criminal activities in the State. The study employed principally secondary literature and in-depth interviews among a cross section of the Bini. Major findings revealed that immediately after the festival of curses, a lot of criminals in the state besieged the Bini Monarch's Palace to confess their atrocities; and pleaded for forgiveness. There was an overwhelming acceptance of the festival irrespective of the people's religious affiliations to Christianity and Islam as a result of the potency and sudden drop in crime during the period. The study concludes that the festival should be taken as a mechanism of crime control and policing in Nigeria.

**Key words:** Criminal activities, traditional institutions, crime control and policing

**Introduction and Background to the Problem**

The Nigerian police has been highly criticized by various human right agencies, community based organizations, the press and the academia for its inability to stem the rising tide of crimes in Nigeria. Police performance has been adjudged entirely dissatisfactory because there is confusion concerning what they actually do on the job and what they reasonably are expected to do.

The range of services that police provide are vast and crime prevention accounts for only 20-30 percent of police work. In many cities in Nigeria today, police duties often seem to consist mainly of reaction to emergencies. It sometimes appears that the original emphasis on crime prevention has been lost (Ahire 1993; Alemika 2003). A lot of scholars have attributed this not only to corruption but to the alarming rate of unemployment in Nigeria which is over 50%, poverty rate – of less than \$2 per day is over 70%, basic infrastructures have completely collapsed – electricity, water, good roads etc, are readily unavailable; and to a large extent are factors heightening the general insecurity in most states in Nigeria (Ogundiya 2010; Utomi 2011).

This has placed more pressure on security agencies. In recent times, the incidences of police brutality, corruption, violence, murder and abuse of power have punctuated almost every aspect of the society. The operations of armed robbers in Nigeria almost with ease in the society, using deadly weapons without being challenged and detected by the police; and where the police are fully informed, they give flimsy excuses that they do not have weapons to combat the menace (Alemika 2004; Okunola 2006). It is in this regard that various alternative means such as the use of vigilante, ethnic militias, such as Oodua People's Congress (OPC) in the West, Bakassi, Egbesu boys in the East and Arewa youth vanguard for the North developed and are still being agitated for in most quarters. For cities without militia groups, other traditional means of crime control are now being revived. Researches have shown the ineffectiveness of the Nigerian police based on their staff strength, manpower development and skill acquisition which have always been attributed to the inability of handling the increasing criminal activities in the country. Responses to crime are often times evident only when armed robbery operations have taken place, leaving the public at their own peril. It is in this regard that a lot of communities are taking up security responsibility of their locale reverting back to long forgotten means of traditional crime control methods. The assumption that the rate of crime is inevitable, and that the public must endeavor to defend itself; has further enhanced various means of informal crime control methods in Nigeria (Omojola 2003; Nolte 2007). Crime prevention which is defined as the stopping, obstruction or handling of violation of law especially a serious act punishable by law is in large measure an issue that involves more than the entire community. Citizens must be ready to speak up; the public must be prepared to bear the cost of reducing crimes. The government must be willing to bear the financial, social and psychic cost of dealing with crimes in all meaningful ways possible. Those who have a stake in the existing order must accept a major dislocation of the established structure of the economic, political and social life if the goals are to be approached (Okunola *et al.* 2010).

It is important to state here that there is no society in which rules are automatically obeyed, and every society has a means of securing obedience and

dealing with crime and offenders traditionally. The society in question decides what is legal and what is not. But there is no absolute universal code of legality. Societies have their legal standards that cannot and should not be transferred for an appraisal of another society. What is legitimate depends on the culture and cultural standards of the people. Every rule a people or its majority accepts as binding is legal (Otubu 1999). Certainly, age long tradition has both prestige and power (Eades 1980), for it was the older people who knew and passed on the ways of the community to the younger ones. This was why arbiters were usually older people with experience. Theirs was the council that made laws for the people. Radcliffe-Brown (1952, 181) has described the concept of law in combating criminal activities as the application of direct or indirect penal sanctions, the settlement of disputes and the provision of just satisfaction for injuries. It is in this regard that this study seeks among others to examine the introduction and application of a long 'forgotten' traditional method of crime (*Igi'Ohen*) control among the Bini people of Edo state in combating the ravaging problem of crime in the State.

#### *Objectives of the Study*

The main objective of the study is to examine the effect of Festival of Curses as a form of crime control in Edo state. Specifically the study investigate the nature of the festival, factors that led to its emergence, the level of acceptance of the festivals and the impact of the festival in the reduction of criminal activities.

#### *Significance of the Study*

Crime is a major problem affecting the wellbeing of the state as well as threatening the peaceful coexistence of individuals in Nigeria. The control of crime hitherto left in the hand of the police and government has now taken a new dimension. For the rich, security of lives and properties is left in the hands of private security companies, while the poor rely on divine providence as the Nigerian police is seen as not living up to expectation. It is in this regard that community effort towards reducing crime and other social vices have come to dominate events in most states, especially among ethnic minorities like the Bini in Edo state without any known ethnic militia group. Similarly with the failure of the vigilante and other neighbourhood security operatives, the significance of other aspects of traditional crime control measures that are not well emphasized in criminology literature will be brought to bear in this study. Lastly, the study will highlight the ingenuity of traditional leaders in contributing to the wellbeing of the society in ensuring security of lives and properties.

## Literature Review: Traditional African Societies Law and Order

Insight into law and order in traditional African societies has benefited a lot from Western anthropological studies. Although the collective efforts of such studies contributed a lot to African scholarship, it was initially affected by a self-inflicted problem of whether such societies have institution in the sense of 'modern' Western societies. Legal anthropologists later accepted that all societies have legal norms. The controversy that persisted is the validity of the use of the basic tools of Western jurisprudence for the analysis of traditional legal system. Be this as it may, and given the anti-imperialist intellectual development in African scholarship, it can now be safely argued just as Onwuejeogwu did (1975, 135) that African societies have laws even though their degree of complexity might appear to be relatively simple. This is because if law implies:

*Explicit or implicit rules of conduct of members of society that are generally recognized or accepted and for which positive or negative sanction exist* (Beals & Hoijier 197,1406). Then there is no human society that does not possess it, irrespective of its degree and level of complexity. The structural arrangement for its management may only differ from society to society (Onwuejeogwu 1975).

A meaningful understanding of the present state of law and order in rural African societies should begin by an insight into the past. For Africa this will mean a search into two earlier stages – the pre-colonial and the colonial. A search into the understanding of law and order in early societies will necessarily revolve round the political systems (Bohman 1963; Beals and Hoijier 1971; Mair 1972; Onwuejeogwu 1975; and Beals *et. al.* 1977; Okunola 2006). The use of the political system as a guide becomes imperative when one notes that:

The political process in general deals with those aspects of social behaviors that have to do with the establishment of behavioral standards (legislation and control) and with the circulation of individuals from status to status (Beals *et. al.* 1977, 40).

In the understanding of pre-colonial situation, anthropologists have conventionally classified the traditional political systems of Africa into three broad types – simple 'band' types; societies that lack centralized forms of political authority; and societies with kinship and clearly defined central chieftainship. Irrespective of this classification it is on record that while some institutions withered away in the re-organization and re-ordering of indigenous social structures in colonialism (Ekeh 1980), African societies have shown considerable resistance to change, particularly to change introduced from outside. The causes of this African cultural conservatism and resilience are numerous and

vary from place to place. They include, according to Van Den-Berghe 1965, 8, the following factors:

(a) Cohesiveness of African cultures and ability to adapt to new conditions, in terms of their own internal dynamics, without borrowing from outside;

(b) Western way of life was not only seen as alien but also unattractive because its exemplars (colonial officials) were part of the hated colonialism;

(c) Colonial policy in Africa, in practice and irrespective of official ideology, tried to leave African cultures undisturbed, wherever doing so was convenient and economical (i.e. colonial administration in tropical Africa was essentially a shoestring operation involving maximum utilization of cheap 'native authorities' and minimum of social services).

### Crime Control

Before the colonialists pummeled their way into the land unified in 1914 by Lord Fredrick Lugard and later named Nigeria, there had been an effective traditional system of arbitration and crime control in every community. The Binis for instance had over time created various effective and simple institutions for settlement of disputes, civil and criminal cases (Onwuejeogwu 1975). More specifically, dispute settlement, as an institution, constitutes a human device for monitoring the structure of a particular society and maintaining its status quo (Lambert 1947; North 1991; Gulliver 2000). Such institutions could comprise both formal and informal constraints, which could be in the form of sanctions, speech rights, taboos, customs, or mores. Where such an institution is formal, the constraints will come in the form of laws, property rights, and constitutions. Institutions help guide and control interpersonal relationships. Judicial institutions are the primary means of achieving such control.

There has been a growing interest in understanding the causes of crime. Beginning from the earliest theological explanation to the modern scientific theories, from the single factor focus to the multiple causation explanations, the objective has remained the same – to be able to evolve valid measures for the social control of crime (Offiong 1984; Okunola 2006). The quest for the control of crime has led to various strategies, which vary across societies and periods. This study is about institution that has evolved in response to this common feature of social life – crime. The belief that crime occurs less frequently in rural areas is supported by Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) data in the case of America (see Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000). Here, urban areas rates were found to be higher than rural crime rates, while violent crime rates

are especially high in large cities relative to rural counties. In general, the types of crime that are most frequent in large cities are also those that are most frequent in rural areas, with the exceptions of robbery, which is overwhelmingly an urban crime. While official records are useful indicators, they are known to suffer from a number of shortcomings (Alemika 2004). Thus one of the alternatives is to ask citizens whether they have been victims of crime. Highlights of the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) in America by urban, suburbs and rural between 1993–1998 showed a consistent highest victimization in the cities and lowest in rural areas (Duhart 2000, Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000). Similarly, the summary of crime statistics in Nigeria from 1994–2003 indicated that armed robbery, murder, suicide, rape, kidnapping and forgery in cities outnumbered that of the rural areas by 51.8 percent (National Bureau of Statistics 2004).

### Research Setting and Methodology

The research setting for this study includes five randomly selected quarters of Ogbe, Oliha, Ogida, Ivbiore and Uselu. These are key areas historically known for protecting the Bini kingdom from enemy oppression and aggression, insecurity and general maintenance of law and order. Also they are major locations of traditional shrines and places of worship. The study employed principally in-depth interviews among a cross section of 45 households' heads, nine (9) from each quarter and five (5) chief priests drawn randomly and via a snowballing sampling method in the selected quarters. In all, three (3) key informants from the Police force, and 50 respondents constituted the sample size. As a qualitative study, data collected were subjected to content analysis.

The ritual in question was carried out in Bini Hall (*Uropkota*) located at the centre of the Kingdom, the Edo State capital, by over a hundred priests and chiefs priest from various quarters in the State, all in their white and red regalia. As crime was a major issue for all to contend with, it became compulsory for all and sundry to assemble in the heart of the town for the festival. The hall was jam-packed and all vehicular movement and commercial activities were put to a halt by myriads of people witnessing the event. It was said that before this event was performed in the open, series of rituals have been done at various quarters that did not need the presence of the public (Interview with the chief priest in Oliha quarters). This study was limited to interviews and discussions with the residents of the various quarters: elders, (male and females) and the priest and chief priest who participated in the festival.

## Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The table below shows the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents involved in the study.

**Table 1. Showing the Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

<b>Gender</b>	Frequency	Percentage
Female	13	28.9
Male	32	71.1
<b>Age</b>		
35-44 years	5	11.1
45-54 years	14	31.1
55-64 years	17	37.8
65-74 years	9	20.0
<b>Religion</b>		
Islam	3	6.7
Christian	27	60.0
African Trad. Religion	15	33.3
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	30	66.7
Single	3	6.7
Divorced	8	17.8
Widowed	4	8.9
<b>Educational Qualification</b>		
Tertiary	13	28.9
Secondary	21	46.7
Primary	1	2.2
<b>Occupation</b>		
Civil Servants	19	42.2
Traders	15	33.3
Farmers	11	24.4

Field Survey, 2010

### *The Nature of the Festival*

Renewed efforts in fighting crime formally seems to have failed, as activities of criminals and hoodlums have soared higher between the 2004 and 2009 than ever recorded in the history of Bini Kingdom, not even compared to the era Lawrence Anini reigned and terrorized the people in the 1980s (Oredo Bulletin 2010). The situation in other states is notable in terms of comparison.

Worst still is the increasing rate of kidnapping and assassination of notable Bini indigenes and returnee migrants from Europe and America. The climax became obvious as turnout and participation in the popular *Igue* festival held every December was also recorded as lowest ever in 2009. No thanks to insecurity of lives and properties which discouraged a large number of Bini in Diaspora from returning home. For those who returned, Lagos became their home, as narrated by one of the interviewers. Having observed these since December 2008 and also the participation and attitude of Binis in Diaspora during the 2009 Easter celebration in April 2010, local families had to turn to the traditional ruler for help. A major factor accounting for why the palace organized the *Igi'Ohen* (Festival of Curses) on 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2010. The nature of the festival was narrated by a chief priest in Oliha quarters:

There is no need to deny the fact, the festival took place in the ancient city, and in the Bini town Hall (*Uropkota*) located at the centre of the Kingdom, the State capital. This was a result of the present state of insecurity in the country. It was a festival of curses on criminals, initiated by the Benin monarch himself the *Omo Noba Nedo...Erediatwat*. The Oba's directive saw traditional worshippers in the seven Bini speaking local government councils come out en-mass for two days. Invoking curses with a clear declaration that all criminals must leave the state or face the wrath of ancestral spirits. (IDI/Chief Priest/Oliha/12/07/10)

For another interviewee, it took the effort of market women to rally round the city and the palace for solution to the problem.

Tradition has it that, once problems can no longer be solved by individuals, families, and governmental institutions, the traditional head is usually the final place for help. That was how we all marched to the palace bare footed first week of May, because economic activities were no longer booming. Between 5 and 6 pm, traders and buyers are all in a hurry to leave the market for safety, to avoid molestation and robbery. In the past that used to be the peak of trading and shopping. (IDI/ Female resident/Ogida/15/07/10)

Collectively, and in collaboration with the *Oba*, tradition has it that laws are developed when necessary. Strictly speaking, there was no need to prescribe formal laws as deterrents against asocial and antisocial behavior, because everybody accepted implicitly that any departure from the behavior approved by the deities and the ancestors was punishable. Thus, when laws were promulgated by the king and his council chiefs, the laws were invariably given a divine sanction (Offiong 1991). However, the enforcement of laws did not rest solely on them. It was also the civic duty of the chiefs of various grades in specific towns and villages to enforce laws. Following these it was not surprising that women, according to an eyewitness, participated wholeheartedly, an unusual fit in traditional settings, also in conjunction with the key players mostly men were the *E'Nigie* (the traditional regional heads), the *Egie Ohen*

(Traditional Voodoo priests and Herbalists) whose shrines are strategically located in the seven Bini speaking communities. The event which took place at the *Urokpota* hall (Kings Square) culminated in the invocation of the wrath of the gods by the offering of sacrifices and pouring of libations before curses were eventually placed on the hoodlums. Hundreds of men and women plaid in red attires prosecuted the supernatural war against men of the underworld whose activities have besiege the state, and placed the citizens in bondage.

The festival began as early as 6am and ended at about 6 am the next day. The ceremony started with incantation to the gods, the arrival of chief priest and markets' heads, men and women all in red and black attire, with kola, and coconuts, broomstick, native chalk, cowries and local gin. . .we were earlier instructed through jingles and adverts that we all should abstain from food and water before coming. (IDI/Male/Usefu)

Corroborating further, another respondent, mentioned the chanting of praises to the past heroes of the Kingdom and the gods in ages past:

The history of the kingdom was read by one of the Chiefs highlighting the good old days of the kingdom, praises and adoration were given to past kings and the gods. By mid day with the brightness of the sun the curses commenced till 6am the next day. (IDI/Male household head/Ivbiore/Quarter).

#### *Fear of Crime among Residents in Edo State*

The participation of women was well noted in the festival, the reason no doubt is not farfetched as women are key players in the informal sectors in Nigeria (Gallin and Jhabvala 2001) especially in the areas of trade and commerce, a major employer of labor in the state. No thanks to globalization on one hand, and failure of governmental responsibility in creating adequate job for its citizenry. Little wonder informal vocation everywhere. The protection of workers in the formal economy is threatened under the impact of global deregulation, even though workers in the informal economy remain integrated into global production and marketing chains. What is particular to the informal economy widely dominated by women is the absence of rights, social protection and security of the workers involved in it. In every other respect, the formal and informal economies form an integral whole and, whilst it is easy to identify the core elements of each, the borders between them are blurred and shifting. For the most part, informal workers are women. A significant number of workers expelled by the global economic crisis from regulated, steady work are women. ILO, (2002) noted that women are the principal victims of most crime, and the pauperization created by the crisis of unemployment; and have therefore massively entered the informal economy, where they constitute a silent majority.

The survey revealed a significant difference between male and female respondents' perceptions of the police and fear of crime. Specifically, questions were asked on their perception of police security in the state and to know if they were concerned about their personal safety in the public spaces and in their neighborhood at night. The responses to these questions indicated a clear bifurcation along gender lines. This finding should not be surprising as even a cursory literature review reveals that women have a greater fear of victimization than men (Clemente and Kleiman 1977; Toseland 1982; Young 1992). All the female respondents (29%) indicated worries about safety in their neighborhoods, whereas only 24.4% of male respondents indicated any concerns. Not only were female respondents more likely to be fearful while outside in their neighborhoods at night but were fearful inside their homes at night as well. Roughly two-third of the female respondents were concerned about their safety inside their home at night, whereas fewer than half (26.7%) of male respondents indicated such concern. In brief, female respondents were more than twice likely to indicate concern about their safety indoors and outdoors than their male respondents. For safety about more distanced places there was a general consensus that government security agencies should curtail criminal activities outside the state. Responses revealed that they were more concerned about the insecurity in Benin, the stigma and stereotype crime has brought to the inhabitants of the state.

*Factors that Led to the Emergence of the Festival of Curses in Benin*

The major factors highlighted by respondents as necessitating the festival were all geared towards the lackadaisical attitude of the government and the police in fighting crime over the years. The peak of the interviews revealed that the decline in the number of participating Bini indigenes, especially the returnee migrants and foreign based indigenes, was the straw that broke the camel's back. In other words the traditional rulers had to come up with a strategy on time to encourage individuals to avail themselves in the next *Igue* festival, and to ensure security of lives and properties during and after the festive period. Similar, the preceding year was also described as discouraging as foreign remittances from folks living overseas reduced in terms of gifts and construction activities such as building and upgrading of personal properties.

A clergy man, also a household head, painted a very grey picture of the situation when he said during one of the interview sessions:

... the situation of crime is as terrible as the epileptic nature of power supply in the country. Today many households have become their own government because they provide everything for themselves, they have their own police by hiring security personnel, and they have their own power company as they must provide themselves with power gene-

rating sets for electricity. For the unemployed and potential criminals also, they have to fend for themselves since there are no social protection agencies to cater for them.

A respondent noted that the festival is not entirely new to the people; he went further to state that it became imperative when the situation seems uncontrollable, and could no longer be curtailed by relevant authorities. This suggested that the *Igie-Ohen* festival, a cultural practice had to be revisited. As many people were not familiar with it, it was described by young respondents as a completely new phenomenon. A 65-year old respondent who lived all his life in Bini quite agreed that he only heard of it in local tales, but never before had he witnessed such a grand event. The importance of the festival to the people cannot be overemphasized, as respondents related the events to the famous *Igue* festival described as opposite of the *Igie-Ohen*, as it emphasized blessings instead of curses. The *Igue* festival was narrated by the same respondents in relation to the famous Bini art and bronze casting, thus:

After the Bini bronze and other art works, the *Igue* festival, no doubt is the next most important and the last surviving festival in the kingdom. The fear of losing this festival calls for concern as only recently it has been added as one of the numerous celebrated festivals in world history (Household head/ Ogbe).

Table 2 below highlights some of the reoccurring factors mentioned by respondents as precursors to the festival.

**Table 2: The Major Factors that Brought About the Festival (as listed by respondents)**

	Frequency	Percentages
Failure of the Nigerian police overtime in combating the reoccurring problem of crime	13	28.9
Low turnout in the last <i>Igue</i> festival as a result of insecurity	11	24.4
Low sale and early closure of markets as a result of fear of crime	6	13.3
Low turnout of returning migrants for the past three years in every celebration at home as a result of the increasing wave of crime.	10	22.2
Loss of properties and lives	5	11.1
Total	45	100

Field Survey 2010

As indicated above, the failure of the Nigerian police to effectively combat crime was mentioned by about 29 percent of the respondents as reason for the festival. Other mentioned reasons were: the low overall turnout of individuals in the last *Igue* festival (the most popular festival among the Bini), and the low return of migrants to participate in the same festival. In one of the interviews it was said that, 'the *Igue* festival cannot be complete without our brothers and sisters who are based abroad.'

In the words of a female respondent:

It was as if planned, the usual funfair was absent as our children who came back from Europe and America were nowhere to be seen or found during the festival, last December, 2009. The festival is an occasion to bless them and wish them well in their place of residency and workplace in the coming year; and their safe return to their base. This was however not the case as they were not present there to be in such ceremony. The few returnees who came to the country were all in their hideout.

Another recalled his childhood and the funfair of the *Igue* festival with particular reference to the nocturnal activities which usually characterized the festive period, starting from the 24<sup>th</sup> of December – Christmas Eve.

While growing up, once it is December, you begin to feel the vibe, the arrival of youths and adults based abroad, the display of newly acquired cars, marriage ceremonies, house warming and other landslide achievements were usually celebrated. One does not need to be told that the *Igue* festival is around the corner, which in Bini tradition signifies the beginning of a new year. It is a time for the Bini Monarch to bless his subjects, pronounce peace to his people, and wishes of success to all hard working individuals both home and abroad. Last year was the worse as only few people were seen trooping to the palace for blessing. It was a shame to the Monarch. The usual hustling and bustling culture of the city at night starting from the week before Christmas to the first week in January has gradually died. Once it is 7pm streets are now emptied because of the fear of crime.

The insecurity of lives and properties without being mentioned could also be inferred from the statements above. This however was also mentioned by 11.1 percent of the respondents. In the same regard, early closure of markets and shopping centers was also highlighted, invariably affecting the income generating capacity of the traders, as indicated by 13.3 percent of the respondents.

#### *Narratives of the Festival of Curses*

Unlike the *Igue* festival, *Igie-ohen* (*Festival of Curses*) is a cleansing ceremony where the gods are appeased, asking of forgiveness through incantations, and public declaration of war against criminals and evil in the kingdom.

The festival started on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May with a sensitization programme and arrangement of the venue while the festival proper, took place on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2010, in the ancient city of Bini town hall (*Uropkota*) located at the centre of the kingdom, the Edo State capital. The festival brought to the fore the present state of insecurity in the country. The festival was directed by the Benin Monarch. At the forefront of the event were traditional worshippers from the seven Bini speaking local government councils with a clear declaration that all criminals must leave the state or face the wrath of ancestral spirits.

The festival started with the public pronouncement of the festival, washing of heads, hands, foot, cleaning of the chest with a piece of white clothe, and sprinkling of local gin on the floor and on air. These were purification acts. The chanting of the word '*Uhunwun*' was audible from the voices of the Chief priests adorned with the white, black and red regalia usually worn in public during core traditional festival and period of crisis. At their disposal were items such as bowl of kola-nut, coconuts, white fowls, black puppies, alligator pepper, used in performing and appeasing the gods. A piece of the kola-nut is struck on the fore head, while the blood of the fowl and puppy is smeared on it and on every priest and core followers of tradition present.

*Uhunwun* in Edo language means the head; the head symbolized personality which must be in good terms with the gods, and the community; and to be able to do what is expected and normal. The Edo man believes that it is the head that takes you through the life journey. The head, *Uhunwun* from interviews with the priests is also used to depict society, and that it is good to perform life's journey without any hindrance from any criminal minded person. Interwoven with this, is the belief of the Edos in *Ehi* - his second self – The spiritual self that guides and protect the temporal self which when in conflict with the gods creates abnormal behaviors in society. This simply explains one of the reasons why the festival was urgently called for, to reconcile humans and the society at large to the realm of the spirit and to create a peaceful environment.

The climax of the event came when everybody present, was asked to commence the curses on criminals and miscreants tormenting the people, and giving bad names to the community. This session lasted for about 3 hours (from 3pm to about 6pm). The atmosphere was that of a collective condemnation of all acts of criminality and vices in the community and the nation in general.

The remaining hour was time to round up the festival and sacrifice; this was marked with praises to the various gods of the land, by the chief priests, community heads and onlookers' one after the other. The festival came to an end with everyone present thanking the supreme God for keeping their heads on top of their neck in the midst of all the travails of life with particular emphasis on the upsurge in crime and then begging for good luck after the sacrifice.

*The Level of Acceptance of the Festival*

The turnout of residents (indigenes and non-indigenes alike) to *Uhrokpota*, hall venue of the ceremony, as observed and reported by the media, no doubt shows that the situation of criminal activities was no longer bearable as people of diverse background in terms of ethnic and religious affiliations put aside their differences at home and were eager for the ceremony to occur and cleanse the land. The attendance was massive and responses to the call, with great expectation that it would certainly bring about crime reduction by and large as all hope has been lost in the police force.

A Christian religious leader described the event thus:

When the government has failed his people, it was then necessary for the people to seek help elsewhere. This same thing would have happened if the traditional system fails the people, they too would have abandoned it. What I am saying in essence is that people have waited for too long for government to tackle the menace of these hoodlums to no avail.

Buttressing further on the issue of Christians participating in the ceremony he said:

The people are first and foremost Bini, and religion and culture are intertwined, traditional institutions and leaders are ordained by God. My only advice to my members is for them not to go against the tradition of the land and that they should always pray along for the community. He however commended the efforts and the initiatives of the Bini monarch, coming to their aid at this point in time.

Another highlighted some of the powers vested on the monarch in ensuring the peaceful coexistence of his subjects residing in the kingdom:

The Oba of Benin blesses and curses as appropriate, he has been endowed with such powers. He is expected to bless the loyal and faithful and curse the unjust, the evil, and banishing them from the land. But modernity is restraining the King from performing these rites regularly as demanded (A Bini Chief priest/Ogbe quarter)

Eboreime (1980) noted that these acts and rituals are re-enactments of ancestral spirits and episodes in the dynastic past well known in the oral traditions and histories of all Bini natives. Similarly, Adewoye (1977) emphasized that the influence of ancestors and ancestral spirits in crime and conflict resolution cannot be overlooked in African history and that they have special interest in the peaceful co-existence of earthly communities. To offend the ancestors therefore is to incur the wrath of the deities. To avoid spiritual retribution therefore, the offence must be ceremonially purged (Driber 1934, 238).

An elderly man in Uselu recalls that:

...events in Benin city vis-à-vis Edo State were not surprising to us, the elderly ones, as this has happened in the kingdom in the past, where a lot of people deserted the kingdom because of crime and insecurity of lives and properties and failure of the then Oba, to also make the necessary sacrifices to appease the gods for normalcy, not until the selfless sacrifice was performed by Emotan (IDI/Male/Uselu).

In the same vein, a female interviewee, a Moslem noted that:

The Christians have Xmas, the Muslims have their feast of Ramadan, the Jews have the Hanukkah; African-Americans have the Kwanzaa and the Edo has the *Igue* festival among others.

He went further to say:

...If African American can invent and contrive a festival, it will then be sad for us to desert ours, especially for the one that will ensure our safety. In spite of religious onslaught on African festivals, festivals in Bini have continued to wax stronger in terms of recognition except in recent times that people have been forced to stay indoors by criminals. But what is most astonishing to some religious faithful and non – Bini is the fact that no matter how an Edo man preaches and embraces Islam and Christianity he does not play with instructions from the monarch.

It is interesting to note that decades after colonial rule, the Bini still hold dear to some aspects of their cultural heritage, and traditional measures of social control especially in areas where modern and western systems have failed. The re-enactment of the Bini festival of curses justifies the claim of late R.E. Bradbury (1973), a pioneer British anthropologist on Benin studies, who did mention that:

Ritual episodes ... constitute, for the Edo (Bini) themselves, explanatory models for their own society ... these episodes are not static in models, for it would be possible to produce evidence to show that they are deliberately altered to meet circumstances which are recognized to have changed.

The statement above, though made years back, buttresses some of the shortcomings highlighted by the interviewees that such festival and rituals were supposed to be performed in all communities and major rivers and shrines in the state. Rivers like Ovia, Ikpoba, Egor, Orhian and other places are where major Bini shrines are located. A female respondents however noted that:

For the period of May to July, after the festival was performed, crime rate was reduced to the minimum in the city. The reverse was however the case in neighboring communities outside the state capital, Benin City (IDI/Female/Ogida).

Another recalled:

That though the festival was effective as it was televised, few days later armed robbers were seen returning stolen items, pleading for forgiveness. It seems that others have shifted their activities outside the city centre (IDI/Male/Uselu).

I know from the onset that the festival will reduced crime once it has been performed, which it has actually done. But the problem still persists in other areas for the simple reasons that the festival and ritual was done only in the city centre and not in other constituent part of the state (IDI/female/Ogbe).

In Oliha and Ivbiore quarters for instance, chief priests noted the magnitude of crime in the country and the state in particular as worrisome. In Oliha it was mentioned that if only government and the public will support the traditional institutions, crime will be effectively managed. Same as the regular police duties, the government funds are needed to perform these sacrifices at every shrine across the state. It was also mentioned by 75 percent of the respondents in the study that for the fact that the Bini traditional council has undertaken the bold step in crime control through unorthodox means, it still remains the duty of the Nigerian government through the police force to ensure safety and crime control in the society:

The police should wakeup to their responsibilities, because we are all paying our taxes, from which their salaries are paid, it is not proper for elders and chief priests whose duties are meant to safeguard the cultural heritage of our society to also delve into security of the state. I can tell you categorically that they are not well equipped for such (Vigilante head/Ivbiore quarters).

The previous responses showed that the involvement of traditional institutions in crime control is a right step in the right direction. Nevertheless, the action was also viewed in some quarters as s fallout of security agencies' duties of securing the nation.

#### *Impact of the Festival in Reduction of Criminal Activities*

It is interesting to state here that immediately after the Festival of Curses, it was reported that many criminals in the state besieged the Oba's Palace to plead for forgiveness, and thereafter, during May and June 2010, the crime rate in the city was reported as low. A key informant in one of the police posts in Uselu quarters confirmed the report by saying:

To be candid after the ceremony, criminal activities were barely reported and recorded. The only reported common criminal issues where household related deviance and crime such as petty stealing and fighting.

Though two-thirds of the respondents agreed that the ceremony was a success in reducing major criminal activities, the police however refuted the re-

port by saying that the same period was when more equipment and personnel were sent to strengthen security in the state from the police headquarters.

I completely disagree with that report 'that the reduction in crime was as a result of the ceremony or festival'. The intensification of security in the state was the major reason for crime reduction in the state and nothing else. New patrol vehicles were delivered in that same period; more men were deployed as well as the combined effort of mobile police men and women on strategic locations in fighting crime.

Nonetheless there were other respondents (33.3percent) who felt crime reduction in the said period was a result of the combined efforts of the police, traditional institutions and prayers of all religious bodies (Christians, Moslems, and Traditionalists). Despite the controversy of whether it was the festival or not that temporarily, reduced crime, it is important to note here that even though Nigerian society is one where the majority professes to be either Christian or Moslem, it took the Festival of Curses to bring them out to confess their atrocities, an indication that criminals and non-criminals fear the traditional gods more than the Almighty God whom many profess to be worshipping. In Oliha and Ogbe quarters, respondents were of the view that crime was reduced drastically. In one of the respondents' analysis of the crime rate thereafter, it was noted that though the situation is getting better within the city, the same cannot be said of the neighboring towns outside the city centre. This again depicts the urban bias focus of governmental policies and security issues. In the long run, the disparity of insecurity matters has been described by scholars as endangering poverty in the hinterland as well as lowering production of food crops and economic activities (Henderson 2002; Mitlin 2002). Indeed, the urbanization of poverty at least over the past two decades has been associated with a growing problem of security of food, lives and properties (Karshenas 1996).

### Summary and Conclusion

The study however revealed once again the potentials inherent in traditional institutions rising up to the occasion when it matters the most. It has been noted by several interviewees that the capacity of traditional institutions in solving problems facing the society cannot be overemphasized. As it was and has been observed by many scholars on the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), Egbesu Bakassi, and Arewa youth ethnic militias in solving crime (Offion 1991; Olaniyi 2005; Nolte 2007), so also are other relatively unknown social control means of solving crime, such as the *Igie-ohen* re-enacted in the face of the alarming rate of crime in Edo state among the Bini. This simply points to the fact that there is an increasing dissatisfaction and loss of confidence in the

nation's security agencies especially the police, whose performance has been described as pro-government and often times reactive after incidence of crime. For the populace opting for traditional means of crime control in the twenty-first century, indicates that all is not well as far as security of lives and properties is concerned, not just in Benin, Edo state as it is, but rather a problem in most part of the country; from north to south the story is almost the same; Sokoto to Sapele, from Ikom to Isikwator, there is no difference in the story of insecurity. Innocent citizens are killed and kidnapped, and their properties taken by men of the underworld. Many believe that the police and other security agencies have failed in the discharge of their duties. They in turn blame the situation on lack of modern crime prevention strategies and inadequate intelligence gathering mechanisms vis-a-vis other aspects of investment in security of lives and properties as an essential part in nation building.

In conclusion, there is therefore a need to reposition the *Igie*-Ohen festival as a mechanism of crime control and policing in Nigeria not necessarily at the peak of criminal activities to complement the conventional police and other security agencies for effective community policing initiatives. In the same vein opening of new police stations in under-policed areas, especially in areas outside the city capital such as highways and villages; proper funding should be emphasized, as well as setting up of crime prevention units in crime prone areas. Good enough, the federal government has put in place measures to re-equip the security forces and put them in proper stead to fight crime head on. It has been realized globally that the police alone cannot prevent crime so there is also the need for other actors to be involved with special emphasis for the inclusion of the traditional institutions and custodians of culture. Government and other community based organizations such as vigilante groups, opinion leaders, village and youth heads; and various relevant associations should rise up to this challenge. No doubt the federal government cannot shy away from playing the leading role with other informal partners in developing a framework from which local mobilization can blossom. Lastly, a lot needs to be done to empower the unemployed youths, who are easily lured into crime as a means of survival. With these in place, security of lives and properties will be enhanced, for the development of the society at large.

#### Literature

- Adewoye, O. 1977. *The Judicial System of Southern Nigeria 1854-1954*. London: Longman Group Limited.
- Ahire, P. T. 1993. "Native Authority Police in Nigeria: End of an Era". In *Policing Nigeria: Past, Present and Future*, T. N. Tamuno, I. L. Bashir, E. E. O. Alemika and A. O. Akano (eds.). Lagos: Nigeria Police Force and Malthouse Press Ltd.

- Alemika, E. E. O. 2003. "Police Corruption and Insecurity in Nigeria". In *Police Corruption: Paradigms, Models and Concepts – Challenges for Developing Countries*, S. Einstein and M. Amir (Eds.), Chapter 18, 445-494. Huntsville, Texas: Office of International Criminal Justice, Sam Houston State University.
- Alemika, E. E. O. 2004. "Crime Statistics and Information Management in Nigeria Justice and Security Systems". In *Crime and Policing in Nigeria: Challenges and Options*, Alemika, E. E. O. and Chukwuma, I.C. (eds.). Lagos: Network on Police Reform in Nigeria (NOPRIN).
- Beals R.C. and Hoijer, H. 1971. *An Introduction to Anthropology*, 4th Ed. New York: The Macmillian Pub. Co. Chp. 13.
- Beals, R. C., Hoijer, H. and Beals, A. R. 1977. *An Introduction to Anthropology*, 5th Ed. New York: Macmillian Pub. Co. Chp. 14.
- Bohanman, P. 1963. *Social Anthropologist*. New York: Holk, Rinehart and Wiston.
- Bradbury, R. E. 1957. *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South Western Nigeria*. Int. Afr. Inst. London Passim.
- Bradbury R. E. 1973. *Benin Studies*. O.U.P. p. 249-50.
- Clemente, F. and Kleiman, T. 1977. Fear of crime in the United States: A multivariate analysis. *Social Forces* 56 (2): 519-531.
- Driberg, J. H. 1934. The African conception of law. *Journal of Cooperative Legislation and International Law*: 17-26.
- Duhart, D. T. 2000. *Urban, Suburban and Rural Victimization, 1993-1998*. Accessed from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs> on 15/05/2006.
- Eades, I. S. 1980. *Changing Cultures: The Yoruba Today*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Eboreime, O. J. 1980. *The Funerary Rites of Late Oba Akenzua II and the Coronation of Omonoba Erediuwa (1978-79)*. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Documentar. Lagos, Nigeria.
- Ekeh, P. P. 1980. *Colonialism and Social Structure*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Gallin, D. and Jhabvala, R. 2001. Organizing in the Informal Economy. Background Paper prepared for the ILO Task Force on the Informal Economy, ILO, Geneva.
- Gulliver, P. H. 2000. *Social Control in an African Society. A Study of the Arusha: Agricultural Masai of northern Tanganyika*.
- Henderson, V. 2002. Urbanization in Developing countries. *World Bank Research Observer* 17 (1): 89-112.
- ILO, 2002. *State Violence in Benin Alternative Report to the Committee on Human Rights*. [www.ilo.org/2002report](http://www.ilo.org/2002report) Retrieved 12/09/2010.
- Karshenas, M. 1996. Dynamic economies and the critique of urban bias. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 24 (1-2): 60-102.
- Lambert, H. E. 1947. *The Use of Indigenous Authorities in Tribal Administration: Studies of the Meru in Kenya, Colony; Cape Town*. Communications from the School of African Studies, N.S. No.16.
- Mair, L. 1972. *An Introduction to Social Anthropology* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). London: Oxford University Press.
- Mitlin, D. 2002. *Understanding Urban Poverty: What the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers Tell Us*. IIED Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas Series Working Paper 11.

- National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). 2004. "Summary of Crime Statistics in Nigeria from 1994-2003". In *Crime and Policing In Nigeria: Challenges and Options. Network on Police Reform in Nigeria*, Etannibi E. O. Alemika and Innocent C. Chukwuma (eds).
- Nolte, I. 2007. Ethnic Vigilantes and the State: The Oodua People's Congress in South-Western Nigeria. *Journal of International Relations* 21(2): 217-37. SAGE Publications <http://ire.sagepub.com>. Retrieved on 20/10/2009.
- North, D. C. 1991. Institutions. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5 (1): 97-112.
- Offiong, D. A. 1984. The Functions of the Ekpo Society of the Ibibio of Nigeria. *African Studies Review* 27: 77-92.
- Offiong D. A. 1991. *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Magic and Social Order among the Ibibio of Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing.
- Ogundiya, I. S. 2010. Democracy and good governance: Nigeria's dilemma. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 4 (6): 201-208.
- Okunola, R. A. 2006. *The Limit of General Criminal Law. A Study of Traditional Institutions in Crime Management in Rural Nigeria*. A Ph.D Thesis of the Department of Sociology, University of Ibadan.
- Okunola R. A., Ikuomola A. D. and Adekunbi, K. A. 2010. *Information and Policing in Nigeria: Issues and Way Forward*. A paper presented at the Nigeria 50 conference of the Department of History, University of Ibadan-Nigeria, August 8-11, 2010.
- Olaniyi, R. O. 2005. *Community Vigilantes in Metropolitan Kano*.
- Omojola, B. 2003. "Self-Determination Groups in Yorubaland". In *Urban Violence, Ethnic Militias and the Challenge of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria*, Tunde Babawale (ed.). Lagos: Malthouse Press, P. 93.
- Onwuejeogwu, M. A. 1975. *The Social Anthropology of Africa: An Introduction*. Ibadan: Heineman Educational Books.
- Oredo Bulletin. 2010. *Curbing Crime in the Kingdom*. Edo Press.
- Otubu, T. 1999. "Legal overview of housing in public and private enterprises". In *Management and Legal Policies: Issues in Public and Private Enterprises*, J. A. Sokefun (ed). Ijebu-Ode: Maicap Publishers.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.
- Toseland, R. 1982. Fear of crime: Who is most vulnerable? *Journal of Criminal Justice* 10: 199-209.
- Utomi, P. 2011. Betraying the mission of the generation. *The Guardian*, Friday, 04 - February.
- Van-Den-Berghe ed. 1979. *Africa: Social Problems of Change and Conflict*. California: Chandler Pub. Company.
- Weisheit, Ralph A. and Donnermeyer, Joseph F. 2000. Change and Continuity in Crime in Rural America. *The Nature of Crime: Continuity and Change* Vol. 1: 309 - 357.
- Young, V. 1992. Fear of victimization and victimization among women: A paradox. *Justice Quarterly* 9 (3): 419-441.

Rašidi Akanji Okunola

Odeljenje za sociologiju, Univerzitet Ibadan, Nigerija

Adediran Daniel Ikuomola

Odeljenje za sociologiju, Adekunle Ajasin Univerzitet,  
Akungba – Akoko; država Ondo

Festival kletvi: tradicionalni metod kontrole kriminala  
u državi Edo u Nigeriji

Festivali i ceremonije su sastavni deo afričke kulture, obično praćeni pompom, veseljem i raskoši. Međutim, s porastom kriminala u Nigeriji, posebno u državi Edo, festivali i ceremonije su redefinisani i konceptualizovani u praksi. Tek od skoro uvedeni "Festival kletvi" izašao je na videlo kao važan u borbi protiv kriminala u državi Edo. Ova studija, stoga, pokušava da objasni festival kao tradicionalni mehanizam u kontroli kriminala, da objasni prirodu tog festivala, faktore koji su doveli do njegove pojave u 21. veku, nivo njegove prihvaćenosti i uticaj koji ima na smanjenje kriminalnih aktivnosti u državi. U tekstu se koristi sekundarna literatura i dubinski intervjui tokom unakrsnog ispitivanja Binija. Glavnina nalaza otkriva da, odmah nakon festivala kletvi, većina kriminalaca opsedne Kraljevsku palatu Bini (Benin) da bi priznali svoja nepočinstva i zamolili za oprostaj. Festival je naišao na ogromno prihvatanje bez obzira na religijsku pripadnost učesnika (hrišćana i muslimana) kao rezultat njegove moći i naglog pada kriminala tokom festivalskog perioda. U studiji se zaključuje da bi festival trebalo prihvatiti kao mehanizam policijske kontrole kriminala u Nigeriji.

*Ključne reči:* kriminalne aktivnosti, tradicionalne institucije, policijsko istraživanje, kontrola kriminala

Festival des malédictions : Une méthode traditionnelle  
de contrôle du crime dans l'état d'Edo du Nigéria

Les festivals et les cérémonies font partie intégrante de la culture africaine, généralement dans toute leur pompe, joie et solennité. Toutefois, avec une vague croissante des activités criminelles au Nigéria et particulièrement dans l'état d'Edo, les festivals et les cérémonies sont redéfinis et conceptualisés dans la pratique. Ce n'est que récemment qu'un nouveau festival, 'Festival des Malédictions' a été porté au premier plan dans le combat contre le crime

dans l'état d'Edo. C'est pourquoi cette étude cherche à expliquer le festival comme un mécanisme traditionnel de contrôle du crime, puis la nature du festival, les facteurs qui ont conduit à son émergence au 21<sup>e</sup> siècle, et enfin le niveau d'acceptation et l'impact du festival sur la réduction des activités criminelles dans l'Etat. L'étude a principalement utilisé la bibliographie secondaire et les interviews détaillées sur un échantillon parmi les Binis. Les principales conclusions ont révélé qu'immédiatement après le festival des malédictions, nombre de criminels dans l'état avaient assailli le Palais du monarque de Bini pour confesser leurs atrocités et pour demander le pardon. Indépendamment de l'appartenance des habitants au christianisme ou à l'islam, le festival a fait l'objet d'une acceptation massive due à la puissance et de la soudaine baisse du crime au cours de la période. L'étude conclut que le festival devrait être adopté comme un mécanisme de contrôle du crime et du maintien de l'ordre en Nigéria.

*Mots clés:* activités criminelles, institutions traditionnelles, contrôle du crime et maintien de l'ordre.

Primično: 14.12.2011.

Prihváčeno: 10.02.2012.