Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est / The East African Review

56 | 2021
Varia

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Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/eastafrica/1464
DOI: 10.4000/eastafrica.1464
ISSN: 2790-1076

Publisher
IFRA - Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique

Electronic reference
Catheline Nyabwengi Bosibori, "*'The Men Watching Our Borders':* The Evolution, Identity, and Tenacity of Chinkororo in Gusii, Kenya", *Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est / The East African Review* [Online], 56 | 2021, Online since 06 December 2021, connection on 09 December 2021. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/eastafrica/1464 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/eastafrica.1464

'The Men Watching Our Borders': The Evolution, Identity, and Tenacity of Chinkororo in Gusii, Kenya

Catheline Nyabwengi Bosibori

Introduction

1 On 22 September 2007, the Chinkororo hit the Kenyan headlines after its members were reported to have disrupted the ODM (Orange Democratic Movement) political rally in Nyamaramabe in Kisii county (see *The Kenyan*, April 30, 2019; *The Nation*, February 05, 2021). This attack led to mixed reactions across Kenya. In Nairobi, university pro-ODM students held demonstrations and condemned the attack (*The Kenyan*, April 30, 2019). In the Rift Valley, several buses and *matatu* heading to Kisii from Nairobi were re-routed to police stations under heavy security for the safety of passengers. The following morning, vehicles heading in the opposite direction from Kisii to Nairobi and Nakuru were stopped by rowdy youths at Sotik (*The Kenyan,* April 30, 2019). The Waki report noted that these attacks contributed to the animosity between the Kalenjin and the Abagusii communities in the 2007/2008 post-election violence (Waki, Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Post Election Violence 2008). In 2010, the government officially declared Chinkororo an outlawed unit (National Crime Research Centre 2012). It is worth noting that this was not the first time Chinkororo had been listed as an illegal group in Kenya. As of March 9, 2002 the *Daily Nation* listed Chinkororo as among the 18 groups banned after it was linked to the 1992 and 1997 post-election violence.

2 The ban of Chinkororo as a criminal unit generated debates on the identity of the unit. To some, Chinkororo included traditional Gusii warriors and was a security wing of the Abagusii. It aimed to fill the gap left by the government along the borders, especially when it came to cattle raiding by neighbouring Kalenjin and Maasai communities. Chinkororo was variedly tagged names such as a vigilante, militia, and a criminal gang affiliated to the Abagusii community. This controversy raised the need to rethink

Chinkororo's transformations over time and the ways it was perceived. This article discusses the identity of Chinkororo, its evolution, and its vibrancy despite the ban by the government. It explores the concept of vigilantes, militias, and gangs and how these units are generally encompassed in the category of non-state-tamed groups. It also discusses the historical context of non-state armed groups (NSAGs henceforth) in Kenya by explaining the backdrop against which Chinkororo and similar groups emerged. It is worth noting that NSAGs in this context refer to individuals or groups that are either completely or partially independent of the government and they threaten or use violence to achieve their end goals. The etymology and evolution of Chinkororo are interrogated, as well as its involvement in Kenya's political violence and its continuing vibrancy.

Understanding Non-state Armed Groups in Kenya: Vigilantes, Militias, and Gangs

3 NSAGs are variously identified by researchers, government institutions, and their supporters. Terms such as militias, vigilantes, and gangs are used interchangeably to describe them. Kegoro, while studying these groups and their role in political violence, refers to them as militias, whilst Anderson refers to them as vigilantes (Kegoro 2009). Wamue's definition of these groups agrees with Kegoro's as she typically regards them as militias (Wamue 2001,12). Okoth and Olang (2010), however, use the terms "gangs" and "militias" interchangeably to refer to these groups. Bosibori (2017) refers to them as security movements, while the Kenyan government classifies them as organized criminal gangs. In this context, a definition of these terms is needed to understand their reference and use in this article.

4 A "*militia*" is defined as a loosely affiliated organization without central leadership. Militias are committed to a set of core beliefs aimed at protecting citizens from a perceived threat (Kago 2012, 25). This is an aspect that both Wamue and Kegoro use in reference to the Mungiki and Chinkororo respectively (Wamue 2001, 12; Kegoro 2009, 60). Okumu and Ikelegbe define a *militia* as a privately organized group of armed people whose structure, hierarchy, command, procedure, and processes are always not fixed and generally mobilized voluntarily based on shared identity, challenges, general concerns, and threats (Okumu and Ikelegbe 2010, 10). They can be state or non-state, politically dominated or marketized, and have particular ethnic orientations (see Kago 2012).

5 On the other hand, a "vigilante" is defined as a self-appointed faction of citizens undertaking law enforcement in their community without legal authority, typically because the legal agencies are thought to be inadequate. Otiso explains that the vigilantes are violent and are usually involved in extortion, destruction of property, instilling fear, and violent robberies (Otiso 2019, 2). Vigilantes are generally formed to provide security to their respective communities. However, as time moves, they mutate into criminal groups, posing a challenge to national security (Ngunyi & Katumanga 2014, 30). This is the case with Sungusungu in Kisii County. Sungusungu emerged as a community policing unit but later mutated into a criminal faction used to settle political and economic scores (Gichira 2019, 19).

6 A "gang" refers to a collection of people sharing a common identity and engaging in criminality (see Knox, et al 1994). Gangs have some level of organization and continuity. Also, they have some strong leadership, formalized rules, and extensive use of common identifying symbols. Many gangs operate within a specific geographical area (Ibid). Gangs are regarded to act as vigilantes in areas where the police fail to provide protection (Nicholus 2009). There is a tendency by these gangs to behave as foot soldiers coming together when hired to do so and forming clusters to take care of the interest of local politicians and businesspeople (Ibid).

7 It is worth noting that the features of gangs, vigilantes, and militias are evident in the groups that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Kenya. These include, but are not limited to, Mungiki, Chinkororo, Jeshi la Embakasi (lit. the army of Embakasi), Sungusungu, and Jeshi la Darajani (lit. the army of Darajani). Their ban under the unilateral decision by the Kenyan government through the enactment of the prevention of Organized Crime Act of 2010, combined with their organization and identities, does, at first, sight, seem to correspond to an accepted definition of a criminal gang. Nevertheless, a close examination of these groups, their emergence, and evolution shows they are, in fact, vigilantes and militias. This is because they rose without legal authority, took the law into their own hands, and sought to fill the security gaps left by the government. Besides, at the outset, the factions aimed to protect the local community from the violence unleashed by the KANU youth wingers and neighbouring communities. Vigilantes, militias, and gangs exhibit some shared attributes. This is because they are privately organized, use violence to achieve their goals, are hired to settle economic and political scores, and claim to fill a security gap left by the government. Accordingly, the author regards them all as non-state armed groups.

The Historical Context of Non-state Armed Groups in Kenya

8 The growth of NSGAs in Kenya can be traced back to the colonial period when Kenyan communities facing repression united around the aim of decolonization. Many of these groups were constituted by the communities' educated elites and traditional religious leaders against British colonial rule in Kenya. Among the Agikuyu emerged the Mau Mau rebels, the Luo had Mumbo, among others, the Luhya had Msambwa while the Nandi operated around their leader Koitalelel Samoei (see Shadle 2002, 30–33; Vermouth 1980, 13–17). Interestingly, many of these groups were led by religious leaders and hid behind religion. For instance, the religious factor was strong among the Mau Mau, as evidenced by their beliefs and practices such as songs, prayers, and oaths.

9 Interestingly, not all community members supported these groups and sought collaboration with the British. Such was the case with Chief Wariuhe and other loyalists among the Agikuyu (Wamagatta 1968, 35–46). Just before independence, the 1960s saw the reinvention of such groups, with the youth wing of the Kenya Africa National Union (KANU) emerging as a tool for intimidating political opponents, especially members of the first opposition party, the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) (Oloo 2010, 7). This continued up to the late 1980s with increased repression from the independent government. In the 1980s, individuals of similar minds from diverse regions formed underground and civil society groups to provide security and fight for the opening of

the democratic space, respectively. Civil society groups, such as the Mwakenya, were categorized by former President Moi as a militia simply because they were anti-Government.

10 At the end of the 1980s, with reduced returns from agriculture, repression from the KANU regime, and the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), many groups proliferated (Roessler 2005, 13–18). With the advent of multiparty politics in the 1990s, the Taliban, Jeshi la Embakasi, Mungiki, and Sungusungu emerged either in response to marginalization or the struggle for political and economic power (Ngunyi and Katumanga 2014, 31–33). These groups grew in various regions in Kenya, and as Oloo Adams asserts, a majority of them were ethnically oriented (Oloo 2010, 8–10). For example, Sungusungu originating from Tanzania, operated in Kisii county. It started as a community policing unit but later mutated into a criminal unit for hire to settle political and economic scores. Sungusungu became notorious for its summary executions and political violence (see Otieno and Akinyi 2014; Masese and Mwenzwa 2012). As regards Mungiki, it operated mainly in central Kenya, parts of the Rift Valley, and Nairobi areas. Its main stated purpose was to advocate for the return to the Agikuyu traditional way of life (Wamue 2001, 5–7). In July 30, 2003, BBC reported that Jeshi la Embakasi emerged in the then Embakasi constituency in Nairobi and was used for political hire to intimidate the political opponents of former Member of Parliament, David Mwenje (also see Nganu 2019, 33–34). In addition, the Taliban began as an offshoot of the Baghdad Boys. It was the original group founded by the Luo tribe in response to the havoc and violence mated by the Mungiki of the Agikuyu tribe (Ibid).

11 Katumanga asserts that groups such as Mungiki, Sungungu, and Taliban rose due to power struggles and state security failure (2005, 5–10). For example, the security agencies' ineffectiveness in crime prevention and failure by the police to stop cattle stealing are cited as the driving factors for the emergency and tenacity of Sungungu in Kisii County (Masese and Mwenzwa 2012). The United Nations Development Programme (2012) reports that a state's failure to provide fundamental rights such as security creates a vacuum that allows non-state actors to control the sovereignty of the state and territory. Accordingly, whenever a community feels threatened by another and propelled more by their government's reluctant response to a call of distress, the locals usually come up with their armed groups to counter the insecurity (Schuberth 2018). Accordingly, because of the security provided by these groups to own communities in the face of an unconcerned or unresponsive state, their existence within the territorial boundaries is justified. Security failure is usually marked by the inability of the state to monopolize its weapons of violence, increased attacks among communities, politicians identifying themselves with local militias, and public incitement of violence using outlawed groups. The existence of these ethnic-based non-state armed groups in itself is a sign of the failure of various institutions of governance to evolve more legitimately inclusive nationhood. Chinkororo is one example of such groups.

12 As a measure towards security, the government banned several groups in Kenya. For instance, in March 9, 2002, the *Daily Nation* reported that the police commissioner had outlawed 18 groups and private armies. In 2010, under the Prevention of Organized Crime Act (POCA), 33 groups were banned in Kenya. Again, in 2012, the National Crime Research Centre identified 46 illegal groups in Kenya. In August 9, 2019, the *Standard Digital* reported that by 2017, the number of these groups had increased to 326. It is

worth noting that in all these bans, Chinkororo was listed. Despite these bans, Chinkororo continues to operate. To this end, two significant questions arise regarding Chinkororo: first, what is the identity of Chinkororo? And second, how does it survive despite the constant ban?

The Etymology of Chinkororo

13 The origin of the name Chinkororo has been debated. While Bosibori recognizes three etymological sources, she contends that the *Wild Creature* Theory best explains the name Chinkororo[1]. In this theory, the author argues that etymologically, Chinkororo is derived from a Gusii word *enkororo,* "Colobus monkey ," that lives in the forest, especially on trees near water catchment areas (Bosibori 2017, 55). In an interview with the author in Kiango on April 1, 2016, a Chinkororo ex-member explained that the animal is gentle until its territory is invaded, and its young ones disturbed. When there is such a threat of invasion, the animal responds fast and aggressively, which can lead to the invader's death. The description of the Colobus monkey fits Angwenyi's (2011) and Bosibori's (2017) submissions that the Chinkororo movement is latent until the Gusii territory is invaded. This response often leads to the death of the invaders (Bosibori 2017, 55). The approach is akin to what the California Crime and Violence Prevention Center ascribe to gangs. Criminal gangs tend to identify themselves with names of wild animals to serve as threats, challenges, or warnings to rival gangs; alternatively, they identify themselves through a description of criminal acts committed by the group (see California Crime and Violence Prevention Center report 2017). For example, "the Cutthroat" gang in Columbia was named so because of its practice of slitting the throats of its victims (Peterson 1943, 144).

Chinkororo: A Neighbourhood Vigilante

14 A wealth of literature is available on the Chinkororo, but there is hardly any generally accepted description of Chinkororo. This is because the diversity of activities scholars associates the group with, generates a bifurcation in narratives. In the first narrative, Chinkororo is regarded as a unit of traditional warriors from Abagusii, whose role is to protect the community against cattle rustling (Owaahh 2013). This narrative indicates that Chinkororo engages in cattle rustling to compensate for lost cows. The idea of Chinkororo participating in cattle ruling has been backed up by the New Humanitarian report (February 22, 2008), which holds that Chinkororo is equivalent to the Maasai and Kalenjin warriors representing the security wing of the Abagusii, who are traditionally mobilized to defend the community against cattle raiders. Reports on vigilantism in Kisii county also indicate that Chinkororo was formed to protect the Gusii territory against cattle rustling from their Maasai and Kalenjin neighbours (Otiso 2019, 100).

15 The second narrative depicts Chinkororo as a political group mobilized during political, ethnic clashes to defend the Abagusii community. On this note, Chinkororo was said in various post-election violence reports to have unleashed violence against the presupposed enemies. Reports accuse Chinkororo of participating in political violence. For example, as of December 5, 200 the Canadian Immigration report states that Chinkororo participated in the 1982 political flare-up along the Gucha/Transmara border. In the 1992's post-election period, Chinkororo is reported to have participated

in fighting the Kalenjins in the Rift valley/Gusii border (Anderson 2002, 42). In 2007, they were reported to have disrupted an ODM political rally in Kisii county. While writing on 2007/2008 post-election violence, Kegoro contends that Chinkororo took part in violence on the Gusii/Kalenjin/Maasai border (Kegoro 2009, 65). Similarly, The Waki Report (2008), Kenya Rights Watch (2013), and Kenya Human Rights Commission's information (2008) on the 2007/2008 post-election violence shared this point of view. In 2010, with the enactment of the Prevention of Organized Crime Act, Chinkororo was banned together with 33 other groups. It was among the 46 criminalized groups in Kenya listed in 2012 and among the 326 illegal groups listed in 2017. These two diverse narratives raised issues concerning the identity of the Chinkororo movement and its ability to stay in the limelight, despite the ban. An examination of the two narratives above reveals a commonality in the region of operation and Chinkororo's initial purpose. The history of the Gusii people indicates that Chinkororo never existed in the precolonial period. Traditionally, Abagusii never had one centralized political unit, and they never fought as a single unit[2]. Even during the colonial period, only Bogeke, Nchari, Getutu, and Nyaribari fought the British[3]. Accordingly, the history of Chinkororo can only be traced to the early 1960s. In the early 1960s, it was difficult for the Abagusii to cross the Maasai border to trace their stolen animals due to strict colonial policies. As a result, Gusii men dressed like Maasai to avoid being detected by the colonial government and crossed the border to pursue their stolen animals, because Gusii needed a permit from the government (Kegoro 2009, 40). The situation became worse in the 1970s with the intensified brutality from the state and KANU youth wing, which scholars regard as the genesis of all vigilantes and gangs in Kenya (Oloo 2010, 13–14). The state had forgotten her duties, left her people vulnerable, and exposed them to attacks. This feeling of deep insecurity led Gusii border residents to meet in 1972 in Kiango to find a long-lasting solution to their predicament (Bosibori 2017, 60). Out of this meeting, Chinkororo was born. The activities Chinkororo came to the limelight, with cattle raiding being the most salient aspect. For instance, the *Daily Nation* of September 17, 1973 reported that a group of men called Chinkororo men were killed in a raid between the Maasai and the Gusii.

16 Given the decentralized nature of the Abagusii political system, the emergence of Chinkororo in 1970s, and its presence only in Kisii county, this author believes that the group should not be regarded as "traditional warriors" from Abagusii, but as a non-state armed wing created to suit the security needs of the Gusii border residents. Chinkororo emerged to fill security gaps along the Gusii/Maasai/Kipsigis border and to protect its people against cattle rustling. The security gap was evident, with constant cattle raids occurring along the border. Chinkororo, therefore, constituted itself as a neighbourhood vigilante, a self-appointed unit of citizens who undertook law enforcement in their community without any legal authority, typically because the legal agencies were thought to be inadequate. such groups believe that the government and security agencies failed to enforce order in the area under their jurisdiction (Pedahzur and Arie 2003, 9).

Kenya's Political Violence and the Vibrancy of Chinkororo

17 From the 1970s, Chinkororo had been in the limelight over what the state labelled as criminal activities. The group is associated with conflicts and cattle rustling along the Gusii/Maasai/Kalenjin border and has been accused of unleashing post-election violence. Chinkororo was classified as a banned, illegal group in 2002 and 2010 under POCA. Nonetheless, events in Kenya's political sphere have seen it come into the limelight despite the ban. This implies a significant symbiotic relationship between the vibrancy of Chinkororo and political events and climate in Kenya. A study by Bosibori revealed that Chinkororo operated as a neighbourhood group until the 1990s, when it transformed into a violent actor in Kenya's politics (Bosibori 2017, 71–72). Accordingly, exploring Chinkororo's political actions since the 1990s is essential in unmasking the dynamic between Kenya's politics and the group's vibrancy.

18 The early 1990s marked a landmark period in Kenya's history. The wave of democratization had reached the African continent, and Kenya was not left behind. Section 2A of the Kenyan constitution was repealed, and multiparty politics took root in Kenya (Patel 2019, 55–60). The surge of multiparty politics intensified ethnicity in the country because most of the political parties formed were along ethnic lines. This view is reflected in Kwatemba's observation that since Kenya opened its political space in the early 1990s, the country continued to fight tribal conflicts (Kwatemba 2008, 97). This political divide based on ethnic lines was so violent and unsettling that some analysts have asserted that, save for personality cultism, no power had exerted as much influence on political parties in Kenya since the advent of political pluralism as ethnicity (Mutua 2008, 2). Ethnic-based politics paved the way for the 1992 political clashes immediately after the 1992 multiparty general elections. In these elections, the state hired *jeshi* to execute some illegal directives, such as disrupting political rallies of political opponents of the regime (Okoth and Olang 2010, 16). The KANU government used the provincial administration to oppress the opponents of the ruling party (Ibid, 15–16). On their part, the opposition responded by recruiting *jeshi* from their communities (Ibid., 17). During the 1991–1993 period, the nation witnessed a bourgeoning of two dominant factions: state-indulged militias and organic vigilantes. State indulged militia enjoyed the support and goodwill of the government of the day. These include KANU youth wingers, the only state-indulged militia used to contain civil disobedience rallies and intimidate the time's opposition leaders (Ngunyi and Katumanga 2014, 32–33). On the other hand, organic vigilantes emerged to counter the activities of state-indulged militias (Ibid, 32). Politicians and political parties formed several such units to defend their people against KANU youth wingers. In this way, gangsterism became a political expression of the regime in this cycle. There was a conscious and vicious attempt by the regime and its opponents to use Jeshi in reaction to each other's activities. In Kenya's history, this period is claimed to have recorded the most protracted state indulged clashes in Kenyan history (Ibid, 32). As the popularity of these youth wings waned, the groups took new identities, like Jeshi la Mzee[4] among others (Ibid, 32–46). The groups received more significant support and acknowledgment from their kinsmen that resulted in a commodification of violence. Their activities continued to increase with demand by the community.

19 It is against this background that Chinkororo re-organized and shaped itself into a more complex and defined armed wing among the Abagusii. As such, Chinkororo had defined recruitment, training, and organization system. Although initially aimed at defending the community against cattle rustlers, the fighters started taking part in political wars. This was the case in the 1992 and 1997 ethnic clashes, where Chinkororo was reported to be among those who unleashed violence against political opponents (Commission of Inquiry Act CAP 102 July 31, 1999). These opponents included the Kalenjin communities in the Rift Valley. According to the Akiwumi report (Commissions of Inquiry Act 1999), the genesis of rivalry began with the multiparty politics' preamble in 1991. Non-Kalenjin communities such as the Agikuyu, Abagusii, Luhya, and Luo supported multiparty politics. However, this was in contrast with the Kalenjin and Maasai communities, who were supporters of the ruling KANU and opposed to KANU's monopoly of politics. Accordingly, the 1992 and 1997 election violence aimed at evicting the non-indigenous communities who were perceived to be opposing KANU. In an interview with the author at Kiango in March 2016, an ex-Chinkororo member explained that the group also punished Gusii residents who failed to comply with them in times of clashes. Another interview with a clan elder at Gucha in May 2016 revealed that compliance included providing Chinkororo members with chicken, food, money, and nails for making weapons and helping them hide some of the cattle stolen from Rift valley during the clashes. The old man was quick to note that failure to comply with what Chinkororo members or their messengers required was regarded as a betrayal of the Gusii people and would lead to punishment such as physical beating. Additionally, Chinkororo began receiving political support and patronage from the community's politicians. Consequently, the Gusii politicians began openly identifying themselves with Chinkororo. These politicians would then use it as a threat against the political opponents from other communities.

20 In 2002, intensified violence from NSAGs led to their ban by the government. However, between the years 2002 and 2005, two significant events shook Kenya's politics. First, the NARC coalition collapsed and the re-ethnicization of Kenyan politics began (Aljazeera, 2005). Second, after the referendum, Liberal Democratic Party members (LDP) led by Raila Odinga were expelled from the Cabinet (Ngunyi and Katumanga 2014, 35). The LDP members moved to the opposition under Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). Aggression was directed at the Kikuyu nation, as it had been in the referendum. The Kikuyu nation was represented by a ruling regime with exclusionist tendencies (Ibid). This anti-Kikuyu ideology was a reason for the 2007 post-election violence (Ibid). The disintegration of the NARC elite occurred against the backdrop of intense populism based on the resurgence of ethnic nationalism, which underpinned the campaign and voting during the elections and prepared the ground for post-election violence (Kagwanja and Southall 2009, 261–264). Ethnic polarity increased the formation of NSAGs to protect communities. The 2005–2007 period was characterized by more militia activities in the history of Kenya compared to the 1992–1997 period.

21 During this period, the existing groups that had been banned in 2002, including Chinkororo, revived their operation. In 2007/2008 Chinkororo fought to rescue the Abagusii from the Kalenjin warriors who regarded the Abagusii as pro-PNU. Chinkororo terrorized the communities perceived as Abagusii enemies (Kegoro 2009, 65–66). In a key informant interview with the author in Kisii town on January 1, 2016, a security officer noted that Chinkororo, just like others mentioned in the Waki report, killed

innocent people without even interrogating them on their political stand. They engaged the Kalenjin in Sotik, Bureti, Gucha, and Trans Mara areas. A GSU officer interviewed by the author in Kisii town on January 1, 2016, asserted that the attack and destruction of property by these groups were not only for political gains but also for personal gains. In another interview on January 10, 2016 with a with a GSU officer deployed for security during the 2007/2008 post-election violence it was revealed that Chinkororo could first loot before setting the houses on fire. The Waki report on Kenya's post-election violence agrees with this point of view and notes that the violent groups during the war not only set properties ablaze but also looted.

22 After the 2007/2008 violence, the activities of Chinkororo spilled to other counties. By 2014 Chinkororo was found in Nairobi, where it accounted for 1.7% of reported crimes (Ngunyi and Katumanga 2014, 65). The group accounted for 4% of the crime reported in Nakuru, 3.4% of the crime reported in Kakamega with zero percent community legitimacy, and 5% community illegality (Ibid, 65). These statistics conform to the National Crime Research Centre report that organized crimes ignore borders creating a problem for law enforcers in states and nations (National Crime Research Centre 2012). Such presence in other counties reveals that Chinkororo is neither focused on preventing cattle rustling along Gusii borders nor involved in Gusii politics only. In this way, Chinkororo is presented as a borderless NSAG relying on violence and criminality to meet its end objective. Moreover, the statistics would be informed by the 2007/2008 violence fears. Driven by the loses caused during the war, Gusii people outside Gusii region may have begun other vigilantes and labelled them as Chinkororo, for community identity and in solidarity with their own group.

23 In 2010, the Prevention of Organized Crime Act (POCA) was enacted, leading to the ban of the Chinkororo movement and of 32 other groups. After the ban, Chinkororo went underground, and its activities were no longer in the limelight. However, this did not imply that Chinkororo was extinct. A report by the National Crime Research Centre indicated that NSAGs tended to go underground as a temporary strategy. During this time, they re-organize themselves before resurfacing and mutating, and presenting a new challenge to law enforcement agencies (see National Crime Research Centre 2012). To hide their identity, Chinkororo changed some of their rituals and beliefs, their residence, and dress code. Additionally, their membership and leadership became undefined, and their actions were dictated by the spur of the moment (Bosibori 2017, 120–133). They became unpredictable.

24 Though regarded as a criminal gang by the state, in times of war with their neighbours, Chinkororo enjoyed the support and goodwill of the Gusii community and even leaders who worked in government (see *The Standard* October 18, 2017). The group is still vibrant among the Abagusii, as was evident in the chaos that ensued in 2015 along the Gusii/Trans Mara border after the Maasai stole cattle from the Gusiiland (Ogot 2015). Also, in October 19, 2017, the *Nation Media* reported that there were open reports of Gusii leaders proudly identifying themselves with Chinkororo during the electioneering period. For instance, amid heightened tension and post-election violence in 2017, the then acting minister of interior identified himself as a Chinkororo. The remarks were meant to threaten anybody who would interfere with the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) voting centres (Kenya Human rights Commission October 24, 2017). Human Right Commission also reported that in the 2017 October elections, the ethnic militia was being mobilized, and vernacular media houses were

calling people to prepare for war. Chinkororo was identified as one of the groups that was being mobilized for violence. In October 23, 2017, the International Federation for Human Rights shared the same sentiments in its expression of why Kenya was not ready for free and fair elections at the time. Chinkororo has not been mentioned to have taken part in the 2017 post-election violence. However, its presence in the limelight at the time was used to threaten those who intended to destroy the IEBC voting centres. This remark reveals that Chinkororo still exists and can be called upon for political violence any time when needed.

25 In an interview with the author at Kiango in December 29, 2015 an ex Chinkororo member noted that the ethnic nature of Kenyan politics informs the manifestations and statuses of Chinkororo. He explained that this is because the group is involved in political clashes and violence each time they erupt in Kenya. Given the ethnic nationalism in Kenya, Abagusii supports the group because there is no trust among Kenyans, especially during elections. This is because Kenyans do not trust co-nationals from other communities. This mistrust stems from the dark memories of the 2007 post-election violence suffered by certain ethnicities. Therefore, at all times, they are prepared for evictions (Bratton and Kimenyi 2008, 5). A group of youths who interacted with the researcher in January 16, 2016 in Nyangusu in a focus group discussion held that Chinkororo has to remain vibrant in any form as criminals or otherwise to defend their own. This is because political activities in Kenya since 1992 are a construction where there is mobilization and use of conflicts on ethnic lines as the main instrument of political contestation. This does not make it easy for individuals to drop their ethno-regional militias (Ajulu 2002, 55–58). Additionally, the vibrancy of other armed groups in Gusii, and other regions promotes the tenacity in Chinkororo. These groups indicate that the culture of the militias, vigilantes, and gangs is still alive in Kenya. Accordingly, given the aftermaths of elections in Kenya- ethnic violence, and notwithstanding the cessation of hostilities in the post-election violence, one can contend that Chinkororo has only hibernated, pending the emergence of conditions that may warrant the need for their services.

Conclusion

26 To conclude, Chinkororo is not a group of traditional warriors for the Abagusii community, but a non-state armed group whose initial purpose was to defend the Gusii border residents against cattle raiding from the neighbouring communities. However, over time, the unit mutated to include elements of political violence, leading to its classification as a criminal group under the Prevention of Organised Crime Act. Despite the ban, its affiliation with the political elites and the ethnic nature of Kenyan politics that Chinkororo did not *cease* to exist. Chinkororo enjoyed the goodwill of the Abagusii community and the leaders from the region since the late 1950s to date. The group was seen as the security wing of the Abagusii in times of post-election violence that characterized Kenya's elections from 1992 to 2017. This, therefore, confirmed that the political leaders may be key players in the formation and financing of non NSAGs, hence perpetuating violence in Kenya. Furthermore, the ethnic attachment of these groups to specific ethnic communities makes them difficult for governments to root them out because it may be difficult to identify the criminals in the larger community.

27 The use of NSAGs as a tool in the political sphere placed the country in a difficult situation in the fight against vigilantes, gangs, and militias. It became hard to eradicate units that political leaders publicly associate themselves with. The passing of security Acts was not enough to curtail these groups. Until Kenyan leaders and the elite genuinely embark on promoting security in the country and stop ethnic-based politics, these groups will continue to cause havoc and harm people. Chinkororo is no exception. Most of these NSAGs began as a reaction of opposition politicians to the activities of the KANU youth wingers in the early 1990s. After that, there was a commodification of violence in political elections. This meant that where elections and electoral campaigns were marked with open use of violence, killing, intimidation, communities were displaced whenever perceived as political opponents (Maupeu, Katumanga, and Mitullah 2005, 16–18). Politicians used *jeshi* (armed groups) from their ethnic groups to protect them and at times disrupt political rallies of opponents (Okoth and Olang 2010,17). These *jeshi* mutated after the 1990s to become the armed units we know today. This implies that ending these groups must begin with avoiding violence as a tool in political contests.

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NOTES

1. Other interpretations include the angry version and the rain version; see Bosibori (2017, 54–56).

2. See Kenya National Archives Rw, 967.6203.MAX; Rw 967.628 WIP; also Ochieng (1974, 10).

3. See Kenya National Archives Rw 967.628 WIP.

4. Jeshi la Mzee was generally a youth wing that was in support of the president Moi. However, other counter groups such as Jeshi la Mama, Jeshi la Kingore and Jeshi la Embakasi emerged later.

ABSTRACTS

Non-state armed groups have been the subject of research in Kenya for a long time. Many of them emerge in response to social, political, and economic inequalities and the dissatisfactions they engender. Kenyan society is marked by unemployment, a huge gap between the rich and the poor, and marginalization due to ethnic-based politics. As a result, almost every region in Kenya has registered at least one instance of activity by a non-state armed group. These groups have posed a continuous threat to the social and political spheres of Kenya and were banned under the Kenyan Prevention of Organized Crime Act of 2010. However, many of them are still active. The author focuses here on the Chinkororo movement in Kisii county. There exist competing perspectives on the role of Chinkororo: it is viewed as a group of traditional warriors from Abagusii, a criminal gang, a vigilante for economic and political hire by the highest bidder, or even a security provider filling the government's security gaps. The author outlines the history and activities of Chinkororo and the reasons for its continuing vibrancy despite a government ban through the enactment of the Prevention of Organized crime Act. The paper argues that Chinkororo is, in fact, a vigilante that transitioned from being a simple neighbourhood formation to a political and economic instrument for violent post-election score-settling. Its activities come more into the limelight during electioneering periods. Accordingly, it is hard to extinguish Chinkororo's activities because of constant election-related violence in Kenya.

INDEX

Geographical index: Kenya
Keywords: Chinkororo, militia, post-election violence, Abagusii, multipartyism

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