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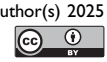
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Moral mobility and a vigilante's stony ascent in urban Burkina Faso

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Abstract

Vigilantism in Africa is usually associated with upward mobility. Particularly in contexts of poverty and fragile state security, scholarship tends to frame it as a predatory project seeking power and resources. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with Koglweogo vigilante groups in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso's capital, this article challenges this perspective by exploring the Koglweogo's everyday struggle for advancement and reconstructing an incident resulting in the death of a prisoner. In unpacking the relationship between vigilantism, social mobility, and ethics in Africa, it argues that vigilantes can only achieve upward mobility if they continue to be recognised as moral selves despite their violence, and that their social ascent is always shadowed by the possibility of moral paralysis. Based on this insight, the article demonstrates that vigilantism is not merely a phenomenon that watches others, but that is also being watched, and therefore must carefully watch itself. It further concludes that social mobility is not only dependent on education, power, and networks, but also on moral practice.

Keywords

ethics, violence, vigilantism, politics, conflict, prison, social mobility, West Africa

Introduction

Before handing Karim[1] and me a cup, Moussa numbed the bitterness of his freshly cooked green tea with a surge of sugar. We were sitting in the shadow of his small house in

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Nayoura, a marginalized district of Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou. The sun was burning and the atmosphere was as calm as only Sundays can get. People were strolling by, some dressed up to go to church or other festivities we didn't know of, their relaxed mood in stark contrast to the seriousness of our encounter. Months had passed since their vigilante group had collapsed, which meant that months had passed since Ibrahim had died under their watch. The incident still rested heavily on Moussa and Karim's shoulders, and they worried about their friend Boukari, who had been in prison ever since. Another deep concern was the once-again rising number of thefts since the Koglweogo of their district were gone. "Almost all my sheep have been stolen. Most of them didn't return from the night and they even took one from the stable," Moussa said. As we grappled with those matters, three women approached us. They were unsettled about a motorbike that had been stolen the previous night and still seemed to consider the two former vigilantes their best chance of getting it back. However, my friends' hands were tied. They advised them to go to the police or ask the Koglweogo in the neighbouring district for help, fully aware that both options would be a dead end.

In this article, I would like to unpack the relationship between vigilantism, social mobility, and ethics in Africa by exploring the emergence of the Koglweogo vigilante movement in Burkina Faso and its members' everyday struggles for advancement. I will develop three key arguments. First, I will elucidate vigilantism as a phenomenon that not only *watches* but is also *being watched* by a hyper-vigilant environment, requiring vigilantes to carefully watch themselves to regulate their internal conduct. Second, against the common view that power and authority naturally drive vigilantes' social ascent, I will argue that vigilantes can only achieve upward mobility if they continue to be recognized as moral selves despite their use of violence. Vigilantes, in other words, do not rise by claiming resources or consolidating power but by doing the right thing—exercising violence in ways judged "good" rather than "bad,"—and making choices deemed fair in their management of crime. Third, I will use the story of the Koglweogo's collapse in Nayoura to demonstrate just how difficult it is for vigilantes to sustain moral standing—especially as a collective political project. The case reveals that their upward mobility is always shadowed by the prospect of moral paralysis. It exposes vigilantes not only to the risk of social decline but also of becoming trapped in a place devoid of agency, where mistakes are unforgiven and their status frozen. Finally, on a broader note, I draw on those insights to expand on the underexplored link between social mobility and moral practice. As the material shows, in illicit and violent spheres of social life the accumulation of resources, power, and networks does not suffice. Social mobility, I suggest, may also depend on moral practice, on people's ability to find a balance between force and a certain degree of integrity.

I have outlined the contingency, relationality, and conflictual nature of vigilantes' ordinary moral practice elsewhere (see Kalfelis, 2024; drawing on Mattingly, 2013; Zigon, 2023). In this article, I use the notion of *vigilance* to elucidate how vigilantes' ordinary (im)moral practices and decisions, and the attention they pay to them, can both secure and jeopardise their social mobility. Linguistically, vigilance is akin to the notion of vigilantism, yet their conceptual genealogies are as distinct as the analytical ends to which they have been used (see Sotirin 2020). Vigilantism is primarily grounded in political science (on Africa, see Abrahams, 1998; Baker, 2002) and popular media

(e.g., Schmidt-Lux, 2013) and in an African political context typically refers to political formations that emerge in the absence of strong state institutions and that assume administrative tasks like the provision of security and crime prevention (e.g., Kirsch and Grätz, 2010). Vigilance, conversely, offers a new conceptual framework to study how ordinary citizens' attentiveness shapes political and social processes within and beyond matters of security, surveillance, and crime (e.g., Brendecke and Molino, 2018). It places greater emphasis on the individual, and on how positionality and subjectivity shift in relation to broader institutional dynamics (Dürr et al., 2023). Despite their significant linkages and shared concerns, the literatures on vigilance and vigilantism have paid scant attention to each other. This article brings both notions into conversation to demonstrate how the concept of vigilance can shed new light on the everyday lifeworlds and watchfulness of vigilante actors, helping us to rethink their social mobility and vulnerable lives.

After taking stock of the literature on vigilantes' social mobility in Africa and introducing the Koglweogo's history and internal organisation, I explore their attempts to navigate a suspicious political environment as well as the chances and risks embedded in their upward mobility (in that order). On the one hand, I show that vigilantes keep a close eye on the contested moral judgments circulating among different publics, while also monitoring their internal conduct in response to these judgements. On the other hand, I unpack the common assumption that power and resources are self-evident drivers of vigilantes' ascent. Instead, I argue that members can only advance if they do their "best good" (Mattingly, 2013: 307)—that is, exercise their power and violence responsibly, thus managing to cultivate a reputation of integrity. Building on these insights, I reconstruct the events leading up to Ibrahim's death and its repercussions and recount my visit to Boukari in prison. This allows me to carve out how flawed vigilantes' upward trajectories are—how they remain shadowed by the possibility of loss, irrevocable mistakes, and moral paralysis.

For my analysis, I draw on 7 months of ethnographic fieldwork with three urban Koglweogo groups in the neighbourhoods of Nayoura, Boalu, and Djiko since 2018. This access allowed me to participate in more than 120 of the groups' conflict interventions, take part in routine activities, and accompany policing operations, all while getting to know their families. Furthermore, I followed the individual trajectories of Koglweogo members and conducted fourteen open-ended interviews with these members, the Koglweogo leadership of Kadiogo Province, prisoners, crime victims, community members, and the police.

Vigilantism in Africa: Taking stock

Vigilantism in Africa has primarily been associated with upward mobility. Comparable to actors navigating terrains of war and rebellion (Vigh, 2006; Vlassenroot et al., 2020), and in alignment with functionalist analyses of violence (Elwert, 1997), a common assumption holds that individuals who become vigilantes are ascending in social hierarchies and generating new opportunities. Particularly in scholarship focused on the political life of vigilantism and its relationship with the state (Kirsch and Grätz, 2010), vigilante formations are depicted as deeply opportunistic projects that profit from contexts of weak institutions, corruption, and patronage. "In the social disorder of contemporary Africa,"

Kate Meagher cynically notes, "everything is up for grabs, and vigilantism is just the latest strategy for grabbing" (2007: 92). In this vein, vigilante groups are presented as actors who prioritize private gain above public interest (see Baker, 2002; Smith, 2004). They appear as little more than predatory, who in "trying to gain as much utility from the existing political society as possible […] often end up serving elite interests" (Reno, 2002: 838).

Titeca (2009) offers a more nuanced understanding of how vigilante groups are embedded in political landscapes of power. Based on fieldwork in a Ugandan border town, he suggests that the vigilantes' ambition to serve their own interests and those of the community are not mutually exclusive. Ludovic Kyei, on the other hand, illustrates that vigilante groups' close affiliations with party politics in Ghana are not merely strategies for acquiring personal advantage but also ways of seeking recognition and democratic participation (e.g., Owusu Kyei, 2020; Owusu Kyei and Berckmoes, 2020). Meanwhile, not everyone profits equally within vigilante and policing projects, as Hagberg (2019) research on vigilantism and traditional hunter associations in Burkina Faso points out. As formations that emerge from and embed in pre-existing cultural and political hierarchies, it is primarily the leadership that increases their social status and accumulates power. In some cases, such as that of Colonel Dévi in Benin, vigilantism exclusively arises from the social ascent of one popular figure—and also perishes with it (Grätz, 2010).

The closest accounts of how and why vigilantes gain power and agency—especially along lines of age, gender, and class—come from the scholarship focusing on the social and cultural dimensions of vigilantism in Africa. In the context of unemployment and intergenerational conflict in South Africa, Buur (2008) provides an in-depth account of how family men fight crime and discipline the young to harvest respect and counter processes of male disempowerment. Pratten (2008), by contrast, explores how young people in Annang communities in Nigeria are policing their surroundings to challenge prevailing hierarchies and climb the social ladder. In either case, ideals of masculinity and experiences of marginalization play a crucial role in understanding vigilantes' struggle for authority. What remains widely under-represented in the study of vigilantism in Africa is the perspective of women. Adzande (2023) is among the rare scholars exploring the role of female actors in informal security provision in Nigeria. She argues that such policing practices contribute to and reinforce gendered inequalities, making it difficult for women to attain leadership positions in this field.

Although most studies—Oomen (2004) being a notable exception—situate vigilantes on the margins, little has been written about the vulnerabilities of their social position and the particular challenges tied to their upward mobility (see Meagher, 2007; Tapscott, 2020). In my view, two key factors contribute to this gap. First, vigilantes—especially those in Africa—tend to be de-humanized; they are construed as the greedy, reckless, and threatening others. Korsby and Vigh (2024) recently criticized the normative frameworks and ideologies that continue to define who is worthy of anthropological attention, arguing that these have produced blind spots around the loss and fear that drive violent and illicit action. I contend this also applies to vigilantes. Little is known about the risks they take for themselves and their families—about how high the price can be of becoming this threatening Other. Second, as I have noted before, there is a dearth of emic perspectives on vigilante groups in Africa, especially the ones that do not represent long-established

hunter associations (e.g., Hellweg, 2011; Moumouni, 2017) or a form of ethnic community policing (e.g., Heald, 1999; Pratten, 2008). Most ethnographic research on vigilantism, except for some examples from South Africa (e.g., Buur, 2005, 2010; Kirsch, 2010), has relied upon outsider perspectives or retrospective analysis (e.g., Grätz, 2010; Harnischfeger, 2003; Meagher, 2007; Smith, 2004). From such positions, an in-depth investigation of vigilantes' individual paths of mobility is difficult. It is fair to say that there remains a general deficit of *single stories* about vigilantism in the region. This article offers one such story. It aims not only to challenge some entrenched ideas about vigilante projects in Africa (and possibly beyond), but also to enhance our understanding of the social life of those we too readily categorize as "perpetrators."

The Koglweogo: The rise of a vigilant order

In October 2014, a popular insurrection suddenly ended the 27-year rule of President Blaise Compaoré. Not long after this pivotal moment in Burkina Faso's postcolonial history, the country saw a massive escalation of jihadi and inter-communal violence, leading to the deaths of thousands and the displacement of millions. A series of military coups further destabilised the country, uplifting the current military president Ibrahim Traoré to power in 2022. On the verge of the ruptures in 2014, the Koglweogo (*koglè* "to protect," *wêogo* "territory") self-defence movement mushroomed nationwide,[2] fighting theft, fraud, rustling, and raids across the country. Especially in the northern and eastern rural areas, Koglweogo members also took up the fight against jihadism and joined the militia *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (VDP) after it was initiated by President Roch Kabore in 2020. More recently, since Traoré is in power and has mobilised thousands of civilians into the VDP, a growing number of urban members have begun actively supporting the national combat against jihadism as well (see Kalfelis, 2023).

Beyond the stage of the national security crises, the Koglweogo are operating autonomously, only informally tolerated by the government. The state tried to institutionalize the movement as a neighbourhood police in 2016, but its national leadership refused. In Ouagadougou, where I conducted research, the Koglweogo's relationship with state security forces varies from group to group. In most cases the relationship is cooperative yet distanced—an arrangement crucial for the Koglweogo to maintain community support (see also Hagberg, 2019). In these neighbourhoods, the Koglweogo run their own prisons and hold conflict interventions. To resolve cases of theft and fraud, they summon accusers, accused persons, witnesses, and family members to mediate restitution and determine appropriate punishments. Penalties may include fines and reimbursements, shaming, corporal punishment such as whipping, short-term incarceration, moral instruction, and symbolic acts like cultural oaths. In their early years, public whippings and shaming of alleged thieves gave rise to much clamour. Over time, however, they reduced such public displays and the extent of their violent interferences, thereby slowly evolving into a formation that merges vigilante politics with approaches to conflict resolution (see Kalfelis in print). The conflicts and the illicit gains sought have become increasingly multi-faceted and diversified significantly. Among others, they attend to people with drug and mental health problems, mediate land disputes, resolve broken business promises, discipline misbehaving children, and provide protection at public events.

Unlike other vigilante groups in West Africa, such as the Bakassi Boys, the Koglweogo have managed to establish themselves as a viable institution of conflict resolution—something explained by both their moderation and the diversification of their services. Another critical factor has been the movement's elaborate, hierarchical chain of command, which ensures internal surveillance and keeps the scattered mesh of single groups under control. At its head stands Rassamkandé Nikiema, who issues national codes of conduct and turns to the public whenever conflicts of national importance arise (Kibora et al., 2018). While compliance with these codes varies within individual groups and occasionally leads to internal friction (Kalfelis, 2021), they have ensured a minimum of control over the Koglweogo and safeguarded their overall reputation. Another important element of internal monitoring is the movement's integration into chieftaincy structures in Burkina Faso. While the scholarship on the Koglweogo has mainly emphasized their submission to customary authority as a strategy to cultivate legitimacy (e.g., Soré, 2019), this article illustrates that the Koglweogo's dependency on local chiefs' authority also serves to restrain individual groups. New groups cannot establish themselves in a community or take up new members without the chief's permission (see also Kibora et al., 2018). Chiefs can also, as will be seen, revoke the group's permission to intervene and can even order their dissolution: "If the chief tells us to stop, we will lay down our arms that same day," a member explained (22.03.2021).

Beside the movement's national leadership and roots in chieftaincy structures, Koglweogo groups are organized in a patriarchally informed, transregional hierarchy of superordinate and subordinate groups spanning both rural and urban areas (Kibora et al., 2018). Individual groups are dependent upon each other and coordinated through a pronounced topology resembling a tree. To give an example, in the region of Kadiogo, which encompasses Ouagadougou, approximately 64 groups existed in 2023 (numbers vary). At their head is one group in Tahnghin Dassouri, a rural community in the capital's western district, whose president is also the Koglweogo president of the whole Kadiogo. Under the top leadership are several superordinate groups, which tend to be the most ancient ones in Ouagadougou (the first dating back to 2013). They have the power to introduce new Koglweogo units for which they are responsible in many ways, such as dealing with internal disputes and abuses of power (see also Soré, 2019).

Finally, alongside this elaborate chain of command, each Koglweogo group is organised according to a patriarchal order that regulates daily tasks and surveys different aspects of their intervention: how suspects are caught, how prisoners are treated, how conflict interventions are managed, and what happens whenever the primary leadership is not around. The lowest rank mainly consists of younger members, known as *wibse* (*wibega* in singular)—literally "sparrowhawks." They carry out patrols, arrest suspects, and execute punishments. The *chef de mission* oversees the *wibse*'s missions outside of the centre, while the *chef du court* is responsible for the way prisoners are punished and cared for. Above this executive rank stands the Secretary General, who serves as the bookkeeper and is often one of the better-educated members, as well as the council of advisers. These advisers are typically older, respected men—sometimes of royal lineage—who play a key role in deciding guilt, determining punishments, and mediating conflicts. Above them are the president and the vice-president, though in practice the vice-president usually handles the day-to-day business while the president is more of a symbolic figure

who appears rather sporadically but carries, as we shall see, ultimate responsibility. Most of these positions are held by men. While the Koglweogo do include women, the majority of female members work in secret or spend far less time at the vigilante groups' centres.

As the following section illustrates, this internal order of vigilance is vital for the Koglweogo's survival, and with it, the social mobility of their members. As an organisation that exercises violence outside the state's legal structures, they are suspiciously—if not anxiously—watched, requiring the groups to be exceptionally careful in navigating their social and political environment.

On public radar: Navigating a hyper-vigilant landscape

"Don't take a picture!" (25.02.2019), Adama, a Koglweogo member, shouted at me. It was the third day of my first fieldwork with a Koglweogo group, and I was witnessing my first beating. The victim was Karlo, a man in his 30s, who denied having stolen money from his client. The Koglweogo, however, were convinced of his guilt, and whipped him to elicit a confession. My stomach turned. Panicked, I grabbed my phone to retreat into the online world, trying to distract myself from the situation I had found myself in—too frightened to consider how my gesture could be misinterpreted. After all, the group was deeply suspicious and watchful of me—a white female researcher seeking to understand their work. My grabbing for the phone implied that I wanted to record the beating. Perhaps they even feared that I wanted to use it against them.

This incident unfolded in a wider transnational context of negative media coverage on and moral condemnation of the Koglweogo. While vigilantes tend to be seen as actors who watch others, this section argues that they, too, are also being watched, a phenomenon that, in turn, prompts them to watch themselves. Being vigilant as a vigilante, in other words, not only means surveilling the outside but also directing scrutiny inward, regulating internal conduct to maintain a good—or at least a tolerable—public image.

Between 2016 and 2020, national news, international briefings, and social media were notably filled with animated discussions about the Koglweogo, focusing on the dangers and risks they posed to the state and society overall. Henrik Vigh's (2011) view of "hyper-vigilance" offers a lens for understanding such public reaction. Originally a psychological concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g., Dalgleish et al., 2001), Vigh's notion of "hyper-vigilance" describes not a pathological but experiential condition of distress, a troubled anticipation. In the context of post-war Guinea-Bissau, this negative anticipation has grown from past experiences with violent conflict, which has rendered the possibility of violence "a quasi-present feature of social life" (Vigh, 2011: 94). Those expectations, Vigh argues, make people and communities "hyper-vigilant" toward others and assess life as unreliable and possibly disruptive. The future appears full of turmoil, conflict, and other "negative potentialities" (Vigh, 2011: 99), thus shaping a social situation of permanent alertness.

This hyper-vigilant alertness also shaped responses to the Koglweogo. Especially in their early years, the moods, moral judgements, and fears they elicited at international, state, and community levels were infused with negative anticipations: their potential to weaken the state, destroy social cohesion, and provoke bloodshed. Most people I knew—including myself—would attentively monitor the groups from afar, wondering anxiously

what atrocity or misconduct might be next. From the outside, however, what one could not discern was just how attentive many Koglweogo were to how the world perceived them, or of the crucial role played by social media and news coverage in shaping public opinion. Members kept a cautious eye on this highly dynamic assemblage of emotions and judgements, and at times even responded with tangible changes in conduct (see also Kalfelis, 2024), acutely aware that their current social position—and the power attached to it—was fragile and prone to collapse.

For instance, in response to human rights debates at both international and state levels, they increasingly restrained violent punishments and ceased circulating videos of them online. "This [posting of violent videos] destroys the name of the country" (21.03.2021), Moussa, the vice-president in Nayoura, explained to me. A key event that triggered this shift in conduct occurred in 2020, when a mass grave with more than 180 extra-judicially executed bodies was discovered in northern Burkina Faso (HWR, 2020). The discovery prompted international scrutiny, which increased national interest to reduce global headlines. At the same time, community support—so often highlighted in studies of vigilantism in Africa (e.g., Buur, 2008), was proving fractured. I encountered people who were divided, ambivalent, and deeply suspicious of the Koglweogo. A serious moral concern lay in the widespread circulation of photographs of suspects via social media—a practice banned by the national Koglweogo leader Rassamkandé Nikiéma in 2020. Only by adapting their internal rules to such criticism, the Koglweogo gradually—albeit very slowly—cultivated an image "good-enough" for acceptability. The emergence of such an image was also mirrored in my surroundings, where even the most dismissive voices began to acknowledge some degree of moral effort in their striving. The Koglweogo, in other words, were increasingly seen as truly pursuing what Cherly Mattingly terms their "best good" (2013: 307).

As I have argued, violent vigilantes must navigate a hyper-vigilant environment that requires them to be vigilant not only of the outside but also themselves. Only through this multidirectional watchfulness have they been able to adapt their conduct to the various, sometimes conflicting judgements and thus soothe suspicions. However, while negative anticipations and moral condemnations of the Koglweogo have abated, they never fully disappear. The next section will clarify how the Koglweogo's violence—and the power it entails—keeps complicating their social standing, which remains inseparably tied to their ability to do the morally right thing.

Moral ascent: Reputations, temptations, risks

Based on the observation that vigilantes need to be watchful of multiple hyper-vigilant publics as well as of themselves to socially advance, this section takes an in-depth look at how they practice and pursue social mobility in everyday life. The section further scrutinizes the common assumption that vigilantes advance socially and economically by simply consolidating power and authority.

From the outset, the Koglweogo have been widely suspected of accepting thieves among their ranks, of abusing their power for private economic gains and advancement, and of growing into a mafia-like or ideological threat. As Mohammed, a high-ranking member and chief in Djiko, recalled: "When Koglweogo was born, some people said

they're bandits! But now they know they are not bandits, they work under the eyes of the people" (08.10.2021). He thereby highlighted that the Koglweogo never fly under the radar but are always in the spotlight. This constant presence "under the eyes of the people," and members' awareness of it, strongly shapes how they navigate everyday life. In their conflict interventions, accusers, witnesses, accused, and their kin closely monitor how the group manages retributions, treats prisoners, and handles confrontations (see also Kalfelis, 2024). Convincing every one of the moral fairness of a decision—or the justifiability of a beating—is impossible. What matters is the overall impression that the Koglweogo are doing their "best good" (Mattingly, 2013: 307).

This "best good" means, on the one hand, striving to maintain and repair relations rather than destroy them, and de-escalating rather than escalating conflicts. On the other, it means exercising power in a responsible and careful way. After all, Koglweogo members are people with friends and neighbours, they hold jobs and have children going to school. They need to be seen as part of their community despite their violent interventions—as people who may have chosen a tricky path but still strive toward something good. For this reason, they must avoid creating sharp boundaries between an "us" and a "them," dividing vigilantes as perpetrators of violence from the rest as its potential victims.

Against this background, the link between morality and power lies at the heart of vigilantes' social mobility. As ordinary people cultivating new forms of power via group membership—sheer manpower and the power to harm (Popitz, 1986)—outsiders are quick to assume that they will use this power to impose their will, behave irresponsibly, or generate advantages for themselves. Against this suspicion, Karim explained:

> We have to be careful. We should not fight. If [a neighbour] wants to fight with me, this is not the fight of the Koglweogo. It's between him and me. [...] When you talk to me, I shouldn't talk bad or pick a fight by saying that I am Koglweogo. If I pass [with my motorbike], put dust on you and you complain, I cannot say "who are you?" No, no, I have to be careful with the people. Even if you are insulted, like "Koglweogo is a thief," I have to let it go. (Karim, 25.03.2021)

For Karim, being "careful" with people meant that becoming a vigilante confers not only power but also the responsibility never to treat people arbitrarily or pick fights. Members are expected to remain humble and shun confrontation. They need to distinguish between personal conflicts and matters that concern the Koglweogo and should actively take a step back—particularly when provoked or disliked.

This downplaying of power in everyday interactions questions the common assumption that vigilantes tend to abuse it. Power in itself is not, as often implied, a self-evident driver of vigilantes' upward mobility; it must be made morally accountable to be recognized as such. What complicates this further—as the next section illustrates—is that vigilantes' social mobility is entangled in a collective process of political action. Koglweogo members are individuals with different lives and views (see also Kalfelis, 2024), yet they are also part of a political entity. Consequently, each member's individual behaviour quickly projects on the whole group, just as the group's reputation projects back on the members' personal lives. The bad or good choices by a single Koglweogo member can affect the others, just as the failures of one group can affect the wider movement or single members—and vice versa.

Thus, while Karim, the founder of the Koglweogo in Nayoura, claimed to keep their personal, political, and moral lives as distinct as possible, those lives remain deeply entangled. Navigating a vigilante's social position is beset with risks and challenges, which is one reason why many families oppose their kin joining the Koglweogo:

> My wife complained to the point of exhaustion. There's no one who's a Koglweogo, and his family says you should stay being a Koglweogo. It's a risky job. You see, one day they wanted to lock the president up [...] for nothing. It's not family work, it's not his job, he hasn't done anything, he doesn't get paid. But he can still go to prison for nothing. That's why the family doesn't want him to be Koglweogo. (Karim, 25.03.2021)

Those in powerful positions particularly carry heavy risks and responsibilities. As seen below, they can end up in prison[3] for bad choices made by others—or sometimes simply due to police chicanery, as Karim recounted.

Another source of family critique, beyond the riskiness of the role, is that being a Koglweogo is not "a job" at all. Membership is voluntary, and members are expected to earn their living independently. The widespread assumption that violent groups' key ambition is to make financial and material profits (e.g., Elwert, 1997) does thus not apply in the Koglweogo case. I never saw any member significantly advance in economic terms, and only heard of a few leaders—mostly rural—who became rich (or maybe died trying). Quite the opposite: the question of money is rather complicated for the Koglweogo. They make savings, and like community savings groups, they only use these funds in an emergency. Otherwise, as in other grassroots associations throughout Burkina Faso (see Kalfelis, 2020), expenses are difficult to cover. Fuel, motorbike repairs, the care of prisoners, and prepaid mobile-phone money are usually paid through small fees collected for handling complaints, money gifts from victims and the kin of suspects, and support from powerful patrons. In Nayoura, for instance, the group built a second prison for people with mental health issues and drug problems. A *Hallaj*[4] paid for the four bags [of cement] so we only had to build the house," a member explained. He added: "The population supports us" (25.03.2021).

Still, becoming a vigilante can generate certain economic advantages. Members strengthen economic safety nets—especially in moments of existential crisis. Although each is expected to have a job, unemployment levels in Burkina Faso are high and many struggle to ensure their own and the livelihood of their family. In some cases, the groups even took in particularly marginalised men—those without families or jobs, struggling with alcohol addiction—simply to give them something to do and a place to belong. I observed situations where members in difficulty sporadically received small amounts of support from the leadership. Whenever a member faced a crisis, such as a child in hospital, everyone would contribute. After Severine, a female Koglweogo member, was diagnosed with uterine cancer, the whole group raised money for her treatment. "We are not even a family," she said, "We're almost more than the same family" (13.02.2023). At the same time, membership creates new connections and thus generates opportunities. For instance, Alassane and Youssouf, two high-ranking members in Djiko, proudly showed me the parcels of land they had acquired to build houses and rent to students from the Université Thomas Sankara. Upon enquiring how they had paid for the land, they pointedly stressed

that it was a private matter. Still, as this new investment represented significant economic advancement for them, their Koglweogo leadership role may have facilitated the connections to gain access to the land.

On a broader note, the moral line for vigilantes is exceedingly thin when it comes to money: between helping a member in need and paying for one's livelihood; between taking money as a sign of gratitude and being bribed; between accepting a share of retribution for auto-financial purposes and the group enriching itself. Karim warned: "Someone who is not straight can't be a Koglweogo. […] Someone who loves doing 'business.'" In Burkina Faso, the term 'business' is one of the rare English loanwords; it is used to refer to illicit and immoral making of money. "Doing business" signals stealing, and for a Koglweogo—whose primary goal is to combat theft—it constitutes the highest form of betrayal. I was repeatedly told that Koglweogo members who steal are punished twice as severely. In Boalu, I saw a *wibega* in chains for offering a phone thief his freedom in exchange for 25.000 CFA. Ironically, it was the thief's parents who exposed him. They gathered a crowd and went to report him at the Boalu centre. In Nayoura, a case of internal embezzlement almost led to the group's dissolution after leaders had begun doing 'business' with thieves' parents and secretly released prisoners in exchange for stolen goods. An internal fight ensued, and a new leadership was installed.

"You can't go in hot and cold water as you like" (25.02.2021), Ludovic, the *chef de mission* in Nayoura later stressed, indicating that Koglweogo cannot afford to live a hypocritical life based on double moral standards. Identifying and drawing the necessary consequences for internal embezzlement and abuses of power is a crucial decision for vigilante groups (see also Smith 2004). Temptations to engage in illicit activity are everywhere. Members not only form many new relationships with chiefs, local politicians, and the police, but also encounter people who, in their words, have "theft as a profession" (28.06.2022). Each encounter generates opportunities of its own. Resisting such temptations is critical for vigilantes if they are to maintain their moral integrity. The group in Djiko has been highly successful in this regard. One of the clearest signs that people have come to believe in their moral integrity was when a microcredit savings group dropped by to ask whether they would safeguard their loan funds. Still, as the following section demonstrates, cultivating a reputation of trustworthiness and integrity is not sufficient. Regardless of how vigilant the Koglweogo are of their own conduct, their violent interventions remain riddled with pitfalls and moral dangers.

The death of a prisoner: From vigilant lapses to collapse

In September 2021, the Koglweogo group in Nayoura suddenly collapsed, triggering a rapid social downfall of its members. By reconstructing events of what happened thereafter, this section demonstrates how the politics of the vigilantes, and the upward mobility tied to them, rely on a fragile and complex balance between internal vigilance and the moral limits of violence.[5]

It was a regular Tuesday noon when Ludovic, the Koglweogo's *chef de mission* in Nayoura, picked a fight with the street vendor Mariam. Drunk as he was, he ordered a grilled corn, only to reveal after that he had no money to pay it. "I didn't accept because he was a stranger," Mariam recounted in an interview with a news channel (2021) on

Facebook.[6] "That's when he started insulting me, telling me he'd do anything he wanted with me. That, as long as he can't have sex with me, he won't pay the money. So, I told him to just leave […]." Mariam tried to de-escalate the situation, but Ludovic continued mocking her, eventually blocking her kiosk's door so she couldn't get out. When her husband Mamadou arrived, the conflict reached a peak and he stabbed Ludovic with a knife. "After seeing the wound I was scared and fled to take refuge with my friend #Ibrahim (may he rest in peace)," Mamadou remembered.

Ludovic was hurt severely. His treatment at the hospital would cost the Koglweogo a fortune. The lower ranks of the group were in rage about the incident and spread out to search for the person who had attacked their *chef de mission*. When they found him hiding at Ibrahim's place, they took both into custody, considering Ibrahim as an accomplice. Ibrahim, however, was the son of a senior Koglweogo member himself. When his father heard about his son's arrest, he asked the customary chief in the Nayoura district to order Ibrahim's liberation. "My son […] didn't know anything about [the incident]. He heard that someone was stabbed but he didn't know who was responsible", he told a local newspaper (2021).[7]

At the center in Nayoura, the Koglweogo leadership grappled with the question of how to pay the hospital bill and what to do with the culprit and his alleged accomplice. Delicate as the case was, Boukari, the group's president, contacted the superordinate leadership in Thangin Dassouri (see above). They ordered them to bring Mamadou to the gendarmerie. Boukari obeyed and called the brigade commander, who told him that Mamadou would go to prison for several years, but the costs of Ludovic's treatment would not be repaid. Boukari didn't like this outlook. He decided to keep Mamadou in their prison overnight and resolve the issue of money with his family before handing him over. They would later accept paying the bill. Boukari also received the chief's call about Ibrahim, to whom he promised that Ibrahim would remain untouched and be released the same day.

After these decisions were made, Boukari left the centre, but the *wibse* didn't like his orders. Still eager to take revenge, they tied both Mamadou and Ibrahim to a frame and gave them a whipping. Moussa, the vice-president, told them to let Ibrahim go. But again, they didn't listen. "This is not your work," they said to him, Moussa recounted (12.02.2023). As the beating proceeded, Moussa turned to the *chef du court*, who is formally responsible for the inmates, urging him to intervene. He eventually made the *wibse* stop, but the damage was already done. The next morning, they found Ibrahim in a bad state. He died before they arrived at the hospital.

The story of Ibrahim's death, tragic as it is, exposes the inherent dangers and risks of vigilante life. Ludovic's conduct, which ultimately led to the collapse of the group, offers a good example of the presumptuous and reckless behaviour that Koglweogo members are expected to guard against, as discussed in the previous section. Ludovic, in other words, had failed to embody the moral expectation of being humble and avoiding conflict. Quite the opposite: he picked the fight himself.

What happened in the aftermath of the incident shows how lapses of attention within the Koglweogo's chain of command could prove fatal. The superordinate leadership and the chief neglected their responsibilities to supervise how this delicate situation was handled by their subordinate. The matter was personal: one of their own members was injured while the son of a Koglweogo sat in prison, and the hospital bill put the group

under financial strain, which ultimately provoked Boukari to disregard instructions from above. Why the leadership acted this way is unclear. Perhaps they were too occupied with other issues. Perhaps they underestimated the emotional dimension and financial pressure of events. Perhaps they didn't envisage that one of their leaders would ignore their instructions. Or perhaps they assumed that the most basic rule of the Koglweogo—that cases of stabbing, manslaughter, and murder must be transferred to the police—would be followed without any question.

Further lapses in the Koglweogo's hierarchy of attention occurred after the money issue was resolved. Boukari, who should have realised how tense the situation remained, left the centre without ensuring that the others would obey his orders and release Ibrahim. Furthermore, Moussa, who is quite powerful in his role as vice-president, saw his authority undermined and was unable to keep the *wibse* from executing their punishment. "They didn't listen to us" (06.02.2023), he told me. Karim wasn't surprised but deeply frustrated by the fact that Boukari left the centre that day. "I have warned Boukari. One day, something would go wrong. […]" (30.09.2021), he said in consternation only briefly after the incident, recalling how he had urged Boukari to keep a closer eye over his group, demanding more vigilance. Already in the preceding years, the moral limits and rules of violence had been contested within the group (see Kalfelis, 2024). Karim had protested several times about some members' cruelty, and a week before the incident, he had left the group for good. When I asked why, he told me about other prisoners who had been brutally beaten, ending up in hospital. One particularly striking episode, he recalled, was when he caught the *wibse*, with no leaders present, whipping several prisoners who had been tied to a wooden frame. The *wibse* had thus carried out the punishment on their own authority—but just as troubling was that they tied the prisoners to a frame before beating them, a practice strictly forbidden, as in the case of Mamadou and Ibrahim. "We are not the law. We cannot hurt people like this. It is too much" (30.09.2021), Karim cautioned.

News of Ibrahim's death spread like a wildfire. A community mob formed, stealing the looted goods stored with the Koglweogo, and set their centre ablaze. By then, the members had already scattered. The three *wibse* who had carried out the punishment tried to flee the city. Two were caught by the police. Boukari, who, as the president, was formally responsible for Ibrahim's death— despite his absence during the punishment—also went into hiding. In an interview to a local newspaper (2021)[8] he explained: "Unfortunately, the beating was too much and he lost his life. […] I think the *wibse* overdid their beating. We took him to hospital, but he didn't survive," he explained. He publicly asked Ibrahim's family for forgiveness. Soon afterward, the police arrested him as well. The following section highlights the severe consequences Boukari faced in terms of social decline and reveals the paralysing position vigilantes are prone to fall into if something goes wrong.

Prison afterlives and standstill

I returned for further fieldwork a couple of weeks after the incident in Nayoura. Moussa had just returned to Ouagadougou after visiting his brother in Bobo Dioulasso, waiting for the initial heat of the situation to calm down. As the Koglweogo centre was no longer in operation, and with no other obvious place to go, we met at a petrol station around the corner from my hotel. Though we didn't admit it, it seemed both of us felt more

comfortable meeting in a public space, where we could easily blend in with the hustle and bustle of the city. Moussa was tense. "Only 2 days ago, I wouldn't have met you," he said. He had meanwhile gained some confidence because he was able to talk with the chiefs, who were willing to help pay a lawyer to get the others out of prison. Still, Moussa was worried about Boukari, whose family lived next door to his own.

A couple of days later we met in front of the large gate of the *Maison d'Arret et de Correction de Ouagadougou*, the national prison, to visit Boukari and the *wibse*. When the gate officer heard Boukari's name, he asked: "You are here to see the Koglweogo?" The visitors' room was dark. A little light fell through a small window at the end of the room. The long benches were packed with people and the air was stuffy. As soon as Boukari saw us he seemed relieved. Moussa and he immediately got down to the burning issues—the lawyer, the money, the *wibega* who was still on the run—before I had a chance to speak to him. They were sharing a cell with eighty others. On asking if this created tensions, he replied: "They know we are Koglweogo. They are afraid. They leave us in peace" (03.10.2021). The prison officers, he added, were kind to them. "So, they are sympathetic of what the Koglweogo do," I asked. "No," he replied. "They are not okay in general, but they treat us well."

Both the officer's reference to Boukari as a Koglweogo as we entered the prison complex and Boukari's hint of being treated well by the police indicated his special social—and moral—position within the prison. The police may not be "okay in general" with the Koglweogo yet treated their members "well" because they recognised the risks they took to support their communities. In prison, Boukari was not a murderer or criminal, but rather someone who had tried his best to counter crime but whose group had taken it too far. He was someone who had done something very wrong but was neither seen as irrecoverably bad nor denied being, in principle, a moral self. In prison, Boukari was still someone—someone who is known and deserves some recognition.

At the time of our visit, Boukari hoped to be released within 2 months. When I asked about his plans, he firmly replied that he no longer wanted to be a Koglweogo. Instead, he wanted to help his brother with the furniture store and was hopeful to be able to continue working for the radio: "I still have my dictaphone" (03.10.2021), he said. However, the 2 months turned into more than 2 years. Ibrahim's father refused to drop the charges, and amidst the upheaval of military coups and political ruptures, a verdict was never made. In spring 2024, under the new Traoré government, Boukari was among a group of prisoners who were liberated. When we finally revived our exchange over WhatsApp, I was pregnant and have been unable to return to Ouagadougou ever since. In one of his first voice notes, he asked whether I could send him money. His family had struggled with the economic consequences of his imprisonment for years.

A year later, Boukari's situation didn't seem to have changed much. Unable to revive his work opportunities at the radio, he helped his brother. His life, in a way, continued in a similar vein to that of Karim and Moussa, who continued with their ordinary economic activities and tried to bring the past events to their close. However, some issues remained unresolved. Ibrahim's father never forgave the Koglweogo in Nayoura for his son's death. Moussa and Karim apologized several times, asking for forgiveness, but whenever I asked about it, they told me that the father was adamant. At the same time, the superordinate Koglweogo leadership neither allowed for a new group to establish itself in Nayoura nor

let Moussa and Karim formally leave the Koglweogo. "We went to the headquarters in Tanghin Dassouri several times," Karim told me. "But each time they said they would come, they didn't. […] They say we haven't managed well. […] He [Ibrahim's father] didn't forgive us" (06.02.2023).

This episode of the Koglweogo's collapse in Nayoura and its aftermath underscores the vigilantes' vulnerable social position. It didn't matter who was— or wasn't—present the day Ibrahim died or who carried out the punishment: the moral failure of beating him too harshly—beyond the boundaries of what is judged good or "not-too-bad" violence—affected every member of the group. Vigilantes rely heavily upon each other: on the others' ability to do the right rather than the wrong thing, on the others' will and capacity to act with care and responsibility, no matter how turbulent times are. Furthermore, the trajectories of Boukari, Moussa, and Karim indicate that no matter how far violent vigilantes may rise, their social ascent is shadowed by the prospect of irreversible loss and failure. They risk, unlike in other cases of social mobility, more than social decline. Actors like the Koglweogo can get stuck in a place where their mistakes remain unforgiven and their status frozen. This place is one of moral paralysis, where those harmed never accept their apology, and prevent them from moving beyond emotions such as shame and remorse. It is also a place devoid of agency, with those in power refusing to allow them to stop being vigilantes, all while preventing them from acting as such. In light of this social situation, the Koglweogo in Nayoura were—to revisit the beginning of this article—asked for help yet couldn't respond. They were recognized and yet paralyzed, caught in a position of being at once somebody and nobody; a somebody they didn't want to be, and a nobody unable to realize what they had once striven to become.

Conclusion

Membership of a vigilante group means to become someone—someone who seeks to protect others, who makes sacrifices, who is violent, and who lives at the edge of moral failure. Being this someone brings the capacity to acquire social capital, make oneself known to powerful people, and generate fresh opportunities. Yet it also places one under the suspicious watch of different publics, never leaving the realm of the illicit. Vigilantes may rise and gain recognition, yet they do so without formal protection, insurance, or any claim to a pension. They find powerful supporters and patrons, but also create sworn enemies. They act from a place of force and power yet fall deeply whenever this power is gutted or abused. For vigilantes, the risk of social decline looms each day anew: a decision too wrong, a judgement too hard, a suspect too violated—not only by oneself, but also by the others.

Doing the right—rather than the wrong—thing is the only way that will enable vigilantes like the Koglweogo to move upward. They are not ascending through education, networking skills, or career paths but moral practice. Here, the case of the Koglweogo expands the broader understanding of social mobility—the mechanisms that enable upward movement and contribute to downward trajectories. At the same time, it complicates common assumptions about dynamics of social mobility in illicit spheres. As shown above, it is not necessarily sheer force, fear, or a ruthless claim to authority through which those considered to be perpetrators and predators are climbing upward. Some of

them rise because they manage to become moral selves despite the bad things they do. They rise because they operate their violent project, and the moral dangers it carries, with vigilance and care.

This moral condition of social mobility comes from a marginal and vulnerable position. It requires the Koglweogo to maintain a multi-directed, never-ceasing vigilance in all directions: toward the things and people they try to counteract, toward internal affairs, and toward a hyper-watchful environment that suspiciously awaits the eruption of their violent potential. Vigilante groups therefore need to be understood as more than a political formation of vigilance. They embody a culture of vigilance in its own right: a pivot of alerted attention that is not alone watchful but is also carefully watched, constantly positioned to monitor and attend to the multiple, often diverging moral views, demands, and judgements inside and outside the group.

Managing, balancing, and responding to these competing moral imperatives enables vigilantes' social ascent, but this can only be achieved together. The vigilante project, as has been seen, is a collective project, relying on a shared sense of responsibility and care framed through violent means, as well as a minimal agreement on what is right and wrong. The moral misstep of one can trigger a chain of events that quickly evolve into the moral failure of all, which, in turn, undermines the project. Consequently, vigilantes may pursue a better life for themselves and others, but they do so on a slippery slope. As they strive to be recognized as moral selves despite their violent means—as actors trying to do their "best good" (Mattingly, 2013: 307)—the possibility of inflicting too much or too harsh harm never ceases to exist. Their violence, in other words, carries risks with extraordinarily high social and moral stakes. It can not only halt their upward mobility and unleash a downward spiral, but also immobilize them—caught in the damage they have inflicted and the suffering they have caused.

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Notes

1. All names and places in this chapter have been anonymised to protect the individuals involved in the research. The names of the neighbourhoods are fictional names.
2. The first Koglweogo group appeared in 2005 in the Yatenga region (Hagberg 2019), followed by the establishment of the first urban group in Ouagadougou in 2013.
3. The best-known example occurred in 2019, where the Koglweogo had been involved in a community clash after a jihadi attack in Yirgou. In this instance, it was one of the top superordinate Koglweogo presidents who went to prison for a while, even though he lived miles away.

Due to the above-mentioned chain of command, he was considered responsible for the Koglweogo's involvement in the violent clash.

4. With *Hallaj,* people in Burkina Faso usually refer to an influential Islamic leader.
5. The incidents presented in this section occurred briefly before I returned to the field at the end of September 2021. However, based on informal conversations, Whatsapp voice notes, interviews, newspaper articles, and social media posts, a reconstruction of events has been possible.
6. For the purpose of anonymising the persons involved, I refrain from providing the exact reference.
7. For the purpose of anonymising the persons involved, I refrain from providing the exact reference.
8. For the purpose of anonymising the persons involved, I refrain from providing the exact reference.

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