

Mysticism And the Social Construction of Armed Actors in South East, Nigeria

DORCAS ILODE OTTO¹, KIALEE NYIAYAANA²

¹Centre For Peace and Security Studies Faculty of Social Sciences University of Port Harcourt

²Department of Polical Science Faculty of Social Sciences University of Port Harcourt

Abstract- Armed actors in South-East Nigeria have become increasingly central to the region's security landscape, ranging from vigilante groups to separatist militias and the so-called "unknown gunmen" often emerging in response to perceived state failure, and ethnic identity politics. While this study agrees with these assertions, there is limited literature on the constructivist perspective that underpins the legitimacy of local armed actors as alternative systems of protection and justice. This study therefore, examines mysticism as cognitive and symbolic systems through which communities assign legitimacy and meaning to armed actors in South East, Nigeria. The theoretical justification was Harold Garfinkel's theory of ethnomethodology. Adopting an ethnographic approach, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 participants across Abia, Anambra, and Imo States, and analysed thematically using ethnographic content analysis. Findings reveal that mysticism operates as an ambivalent interpretive framework. While spiritual beliefs confer legitimacy and moral authority on certain actors, especially in contexts of weak State institutions, these belief systems are simultaneously contested and vulnerable to manipulation by elites and criminal actors. Additionally, the "unknown gunmen" label functions as a narrative tool that obscures accountability and shapes insecurity perceptions. The study recommends that security policies should avoid indiscriminate targeting of cultural practices, align interventions with local belief systems, disrupt elite networks exploiting such narratives, and strengthen accountability within State security institutions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Oral tradition occupies a pivotal yet often misunderstood position within African historiography. For centuries, it has been overshadowed by Eurocentric scholarship that privileges written records as the primary source of historical authenticity. Within this paradigm, the oral knowledge systems of societies such as the Igbo of

South Eastern Nigeria were often dismissed as myths or folklore rather than recognized as legitimate historical evidence (Vansina, 1985; Barber, 2019).

Culturally speaking, historical consciousness is not confined to texts or documents; it is embedded in rituals, performances, and communal practices (Finnegan, 2012). Colonial and missionary institutions systematically undermined these indigenous forms of knowledge, branding them as primitive or unreliable (Falola & Heaton, 2018). Notwithstanding, indigenous practices and beliefs persists and are pivotal for conscientization in local settings.

The process of conscientization, as conceptualized by Paulo Freire (1970), refers to the awakening of critical consciousness among people, empowering them to recognize and challenge social injustices and cultural alienation.

In this sense, indigenous narratives become transformative instruments, enabling individuals to question established norms and to envision alternative possibilities for their communities.

Thus, storytelling traditions carry moral and ethical messages that inspire introspection and promote collective responsibility. As Sharma (2016), observes in his study of Himachali Nati and other regional art forms, folk performances historically combined entertainment with education, encouraging reflection on communal values and societal development.

When social institutions consistently promote shared national values through education and community engagement, individuals are more likely to see themselves as integral parts of a collective whole rather than as alienated members of an unjust system.

In context, since Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the State has grappled with recurring peace and security challenges including; political instability, resource conflicts, militancy, ethnic conflicts, insurgency/terrorism, kidnapping, and other forms of violence.

These persistent crises have undermined national cohesion and weakened public trust in State institutions.

According to the position of Nwosu (2017), and Okonkwo & Idigo (2025), the inability of government agencies to effectively manage emerging crises reflect deep-seated failures in Nigeria's social and political structures. Cultural nationalism on the other hand, is perceived to have gained more public trust amidst these crises through mysticism or ethnic patriotism.

Even State institutions have at various points adopted local vigilante security networks like the Amotekun, Bakassi Boys, Agunchemba, Ebubeagu, OSPAC etc., to curb crime within communities.

The South-East region of Nigeria, home to the Igbo ethnic group, is one of the most homogeneous nations in Nigeria. They all speak one language with minimal dialectic distinctions amongst communities and states, they share a common religion which includes christianity and African traditional religion, their food, dressing, governance structure, market days, taboos and other customs are very similar throughout the group.

In recent times, the South East has seen the rise of ethnonationalist movements: the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and its splinter, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), following perceptions of political marginalization, socio-economic exclusion, amongst other agitations. Further accentuating that when communities feel alienated from State institutions and decision-making processes, they often turn to alternative forms of belonging, the IPOB formed its armed wing; the Eastern Security Network (ESN) in 2021.

Recent analysis notes that the formation of the ESN coincided with a wave of guerrilla attacks in the region (Uchime, 2025).

These killings by unidentified armed assailants (commonly described in Nigerian media as "unknown gunmen") have become disturbingly routine. The modus operandi typically involves random shootings, abductions, vandalism, jailbreaks, and targeted assassinations. Their victims include politicians, business owners, civil servants, and private citizens. Such attacks have devastating socio-economic consequences, including the destruction of property, loss of livelihoods, population displacement, and declining investor confidence.

According to Akinyetun et. al. (2023), these assaults have contributed to a growing humanitarian crisis, marked by rising numbers abductions, land competition and food insecurity. Despite frequent reports, the extent of these attacks is often understated or inconsistently covered in the press.

Numerous prominent Nigerians have lost their lives in such assaults (Akinyetun et. al, 2023), illustrating the deepening crisis of insecurity across the nation. These recurring tragedies reflect not only the State's inability to maintain internal security but also serve as evidence of Nigeria's growing institutional fragility. According to the London School of Economics (2018), state fragility is a major driver of global crises such as terrorism, human trafficking, and mass displacement. Likewise, Tonwe and Eke (2023), identify Nigeria as a fragile state where weak governance structures, deteriorating legitimacy, and persistent insecurity threaten economic development and social cohesion.

This study uses the theory of ethnomethodology to examine the nexus between African traditional mysticism and the construction of armed actors in the Southeast. Ethnomethodology is an approach that investigates how people make sense of their social world through everyday talk and behaviour (Garfinkel, 1967). It suggests that concepts like "security," "rebel," or "injustice" are constructed in social interaction, not given a priori. Applying this to the South East, this paper seeks to uncover how

locals use culturally significant mysticism to frame armed actors.

In practice, it analyzes conversations portrayals to see how mythic themes enter the popular discourse.

Understanding this narrative is important; as Okafor et. al. (2026), warns, ignoring unaddressed histories only “hardens” them and drives people to fill the vacuum with contested legends. By tracing the ethnomethodological path between myth and meaning, this research clarifies the problem that while much is written about South Eastern grievances and guerrilla groups, little attention has been paid to the cognitive frameworks of mysticism through which locals view these actors.

The central research question therefore is: How do indigenous mystical beliefs and narratives shape public perceptions of armed actors like the ESN in Nigeria’s South East? This article investigates that question, aiming to fill the gap at the intersection of cultural belief and security in the region.

This study makes a significant contribution by deepening understanding of how legitimacy is constructed and sustained in local conflict settings. It demonstrates that the acceptance or rejection of armed actors within communities is not determined solely by their use of force or political proclamations.

In contexts where state institutions are perceived as corrupt, ineffective, or inaccessible, mystical belief systems are often viewed as more trustworthy and morally superior, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of actors associated with them. By highlighting this dynamic, the study shifts the analysis of legitimacy from a purely institutional or rational basis to one that is socially and symbolically constructed. This underscores the need to understand legitimacy as a culturally mediated process rather than an automatic outcome of formal authority.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly discussions on armed actors in Africa increasingly recognise that warfare is not only shaped by material and political factors but also by belief systems embedded in local cosmologies (Luka, 2023;

CASADE, 2026; Dols García 2021). Within this perspective, mysticism refers to the belief in supernatural forces, rituals, charms, and spiritual protection that influence human behaviour and social organisation. Such beliefs often shape how violence is understood, legitimised, and practised in conflict settings.

Empirical studies have increasingly examined how spiritual beliefs shape the behaviour and organisation of armed groups in Africa. Dols García (2021), analysed the role of spiritual beliefs in armed conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa and argued that mystical worldviews significantly shape warfare dynamics. The study finds that spiritual beliefs influence discipline, motivation, and cohesion among fighters while also providing psychological protection through the belief in supernatural immunity from harm. In addition, such beliefs often help armed groups legitimise their activities and mobilise support from local communities.

Similarly, Omeje (2005), examined the role of African spiritism in the activities of the Egbesu Boys and the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria. Using case study analysis, the study found that mystical beliefs and ritual practices formed a central component of the operational identity of these militias. Fighters often relied on ritual initiation and spiritual protection narratives, which reinforced their legitimacy and authority within their communities. However, the author argues that the reliance on spiritually legitimised militias reflects a broader failure of the state to provide effective security.

In another study, Ibrahim (2024), investigated the use of protective charms among members of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria in Lagos. Drawing on actor-network theory, the study demonstrates how vigilante authority is constructed through relationships linking vigilante members, ritual specialists, sacred objects, and traditional deities. The findings suggest that these ritual practices strengthen the legitimacy of vigilante groups and reinforce their authority within local communities. The study also shows that vigilante leaders often frame charm practices as forms of “Africanised” security in order to reconcile traditional practices with the

predominantly Christian and Muslim identities of their members.

Beyond the internal organisation of armed actors, research has also examined how narratives shape the social construction of security threats. Ejiofor (2021), analysed how political and media narratives in Nigeria have constructed Fulani pastoralists as a “suspect community.” The study finds that historical narratives portraying the Fulani as violent outsiders contribute to social exclusion and reinforce conflict dynamics. According to the author, such narratives hinder peacebuilding efforts by legitimising punitive security responses and deepening mistrust between communities.

Research on mystical practices and crime in Nigeria further highlights the widespread social belief in supernatural protection. Agidigbi et al. (2024), conducted a survey-based study on spiritual fortification practices and found that a significant proportion of respondents believed that rituals and charms could provide protection, success, and wealth. However, the study also reports that many respondents associate spiritual fortification with criminal behaviour and social instability. These findings indicate that mystical beliefs remain deeply embedded in social interpretations of crime, protection, and authority.

Similarly, studies on regional vigilante institutions highlight the role of identity narratives in shaping security dynamics. Nyiayaana (2024), examined the emergence of regional security outfits such as Amotekun and Ebubeagu in Nigeria and found that these institutions are driven partly by regional identity politics and ethnic security concerns. While such initiatives are intended to strengthen community protection, the study argues that they can also deepen ethnic consciousness and contribute to the politicisation of security governance.

Although existing scholarship recognises the importance of spiritual beliefs in the organisation of militias and vigilante groups, most studies focus on the internal practices of armed actors or on institutional security dynamics. Not much attention has been paid to how communities interpret and construct the identities of armed actors through

mystical belief systems. In particular, there is limited research examining how mystical narratives shape local perceptions of armed actors as protectors, avengers, or supernatural agents of justice in South-East Nigeria. This study therefore addresses this gap by analysing how mysticism influences the social construction of armed actors within communities in the region.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative design. Primary data was gathered through indepth one-on-one interviews with locals in Abia, Anambra and Imo states. A total of 20 people were interviewed; 16 men and 4 women above the ages of 20. Among the participants were academics, Elders, artisans, business people, civil servants and . The interviewees were gathered through purposive and snowballing sampling. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants, transcribed and analysed under themes of legitimacy, moral authority, alternative justice, social regulation and narrative framing.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that myths and mystical belief systems play a significant but ambivalent role in the mobilisation and legitimisation of violence associated with the phenomenon of “unknown gunmen” in South-East Nigeria. Rather than operating merely as residual cultural beliefs, mysticism emerged as an active mechanism of moral regulation and social control within communities, particularly in contexts where formal state justice and security institutions were perceived as ineffective, corrupt, or inaccessible.

Respondents consistently described communal practices involving oaths, blood covenants, shrine-based adjudication, and spiritual sanctions as alternative systems of justice. These practices were widely understood as mechanisms capable of revealing guilt, punishing wrongdoing, and deterring deviance through supernatural means. Importantly, belief in their efficacy rested on the assumption that spiritual forces are incorruptible unlike the police or courts which made them appear morally superior and more trustworthy. This aligns with studies suggesting

that spiritual beliefs play strategic roles in legitimising armed actors and strengthening their authority within communities (Dols García, 2021; Omeje, 2005).

This observation is consistent with research highlighting how ritual practices and sacred networks contribute to the organisation of community-based security structures (Ibrahim, 2024). It also supports arguments that the resurgence of spiritual security mechanisms represents a form of security re-traditionalisation in response to weak or distrusted state institutions (Omeje, 2005).

My mom told me that there was this thing in the community, I think that was a kind of ritual of sorts for the entire community against things like petty theft and expose all the evil in their community... the thing was a blood covenant kind of... she recalled a lot of really strange things that happened there were enchantments, manifestations, you know people who were seemingly possessed. (Male, 30+ Abia)

From my father's side (Omumma, Imo State), for example, there was this traditional priest people called on when they start to see a pattern of troubles, maybe in the family. The guy would come to the house and do one or two things and dance until eventually his spirit supposedly would take over him, and he would point to particular spots in the compound where something is buried. They would start digging until they find something truly very strange.

There was one guy, Dede, who was supposedly in acrimony with our extended family and there were a lot of funny stories around my grandfather's death. He was trying to tussle for a traditional seat and then, you know, he had this sickness where your legs swell. The exact name for it is elephantiasis. It is a very common thing in Igboland and it comes just when you're having a confrontation or a quarrel with someone, so it was diabolical, or something like 'they do you jazz.'

So, in my grandfather's case, everyone already suspected that it was this man. So, they brought one priest who was supposed to find something that was buried through the same practice. While they were

digging, Dede was hovering. Just as they were about to get to a particular point, Dede just lunged towards the hole himself, stuck his hand in, pulled out something, and fled with it. And that was the last of that. (Male, 20+, Imo)

I know of a woman, she was once a Christian, even a choir mistress. But a few years ago... she's no longer a Christian. She's now an Eze Nwanyi. She's no longer a Christian, even she loves it. When it comes to that, she loves it. She's even doing it with passion. (Female, 30+, Anambra)

Omenana has become popular again in our place. There is this big Masquerade at the Nkwo market. They have a big shrine there at the market. It became popular in the last 3 years. (Female, 60+, Anambra)

The Chiefs are the custodians of traditions; they have the understanding. So whenever there are issues that family cannot solve, like land dispute, you take it the Chiefs... He was able to settle the case. Nowadays our culture works hand in hand with modern legal system because they are the ones that know the land. Government cannot know the history of land in your community. (Male, 40+, Abia)

Accounts of the activities of the Bakassi Boys illustrate how ritualised violence and mystical protection can transform vigilante actors into socially sanctioned enforcers of order. Community acceptance of their actions, despite the violent nature of their methods, reflects broader patterns identified in the literature in which spiritual protection narratives help mobilise public support and reinforce the authority of militias (Omeje, 2005; Ibrahim, 2024).

During the late 1990s and the early 2000s there was the Bakassi Boys – an elite army. Nobody knew where they came from. They used charms to fish out bad people. We saw these things live; we didn't hear stories. They will move around swinging a machete, if they point it in the direction of your shop and it turns red, it means that your hands are not clean and they will kill you on the spot... And no one challenged it, no one person said the culprit was falsely accused in fact the Bakassi Boys were praised and recognized in the South East. But, you see, those

ones were maintaining order in the society not causing mayhem. And because of the mysticism, people trusted them more than the police because you cannot bribe the juju. (Female, 60+, Anambra).

At the same time, participant accounts also reveal skepticism regarding the reliability of such systems, suggesting that mystical justice is neither universally accepted nor immune to manipulation. This ambivalence indicates that while spiritual enforcement mechanisms may provide moral reassurance, their legitimacy remains socially negotiated rather than absolute. This partially challenges the tendency in some studies to portray mystical authority as widely accepted or uncontested. Instead, the findings suggest that the legitimacy of mystical systems depends on ongoing social validation.

people go to shrines to go and make complaints. They go and swear and so on and so forth. But I don't think this is the best, because I know somebody that reported the matter to Aluosi Okija... and they were all lies (Male, 60+ years, Imo State)

However, in the course of it, some youths were brainwashed and began using Omenana to commit crimes, for kidnapping, ritual killing, and different perpetuation of evil. When they do evil, people will not catch them. (Male, 60+, Anambra)

The data further suggest that myths and symbolic narratives may facilitate the social construction of contemporary armed actors. If agitation movements are framed through narratives of protection, resistance, or cultural defense, such framing may provide symbolic cover for actors whose activities later diverge from the original ideological claims.

Findings depict the unknown gunmen as a "metamorphosis" into criminal chaos orchestrated by "Conflict Entrepreneurs" and political actors. Respondents argue that the original vigilantism of the ESN was hijacked and weaponized by elites who armed criminals for political leverage. The perception that "na politicians get gun" reflects a belief that violence is not spontaneous but mediated through patronage networks.

In as much as Nnamdi Kanu came up with the ESN... The Eastern Security Network wasn't just like all those other vigilantes that were set up purely for security. So it kind of had an agenda which some conflict entrepreneurs took advantage of. So I think that is what metamorphosed into the unknown government. Just physical criminals that were armed for a different purpose, but then couldn't be controlled. (Male, 30+, Imo)

When you want to kill a dog, you give it a bad name. The violence was escalated at the time just so that they can achieve that purpose of that proscription. (Male, 60+, Abia)

Ask the government! That question, is to ask to politicians. Because na the politicians get gun... We, civilians, we don't know anything about guns. (Male, 40+, Anambra)

Another key finding concerns the use of the label "unknown gunmen" as a broad narrative category that obscures the identities and motivations of perpetrators. Participants argued that the term "Unknown Gunmen" allows various independent crimes to be lumped together, thereby shielding specific perpetrators from accountability while escalating the narrative of terrorism to justify state force

...But it appeared that after the creation of ESN, every crime that's committed in the South-East, they will now say it's unknown gunmen. So there was no more armed robbery, there was no more kidnapping, there was no more homicide... Even when cultists are fighting and they kill themselves, they'll say it's unknown gunmen. (Male, 30+, Imo)

It is these boys who don't have what to feed themselves with that are even contributing money, dedicating their time to destabilise the region. You can imagine closing down the market on Mondays, who are we doing? Since we have been doing it how has it hurt the other parts of the country? It is hurting us more. We are losing on both sides. The thing eh... infact nobody is happy with the current development. (Female, 65, Anambra)

This observation resonates with literature on the social construction of security threats, which shows how labels and narratives can shape public perceptions of violence and justify particular security responses (Ejiofor, 2021). The findings therefore suggest that the “unknown gunmen” label functions not only as a descriptive category but also as a discursive tool that influences how violence in the region is interpreted.

CONCLUSION

The research on mysticism and the social construction of armed actors in South East, Nigeria with a theoretical underpinning in ethnomethodology, sought to answer the question: How do indigenous mystical beliefs and narratives shape public perceptions of armed actors like the ESN in Nigeria’s South East? Findings portrayed mysticism as a source of legitimacy, moral authority, as a system of alternative justice and social regulation. The research also recorded ambivalence and consternation in mystical justice. Furthermore, the findings poked at the narrative masking of the “Unknown Gunmen” label.

Overall, the findings neither fully confirm nor fully reject the existing literature. Instead, they suggest that mysticism operates as a symbolic framework through which violence is interpreted, justified, or contested. While spiritual beliefs may contribute to the legitimacy of armed actors and the organisation of alternative justice systems, they do not mechanically produce violence. Rather, these beliefs provide symbolic resources that political actors, conflict experts, and communities draw upon to interpret evolving security dynamics.

In this sense, the findings extend existing scholarship by showing that mystical belief systems shape the social construction of armed actors, influencing whether they are perceived as protectors, criminals, or political instruments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest that community actors recognize that mystical and mythic frameworks operate as socially meaningful interpretive systems

thus the following recommendations emerged in managing security in the region:

1. Security and governmental policies that indiscriminately target cultural or spiritual practices risk eroding trust and pushing communities further away from formal state systems. Programs, therefore, should align with local belief systems and symbolic frameworks to improve acceptance and effectiveness.
2. Security interventions should focus on disrupting elite and patronage networks that exploit cultural narratives and mystical beliefs to mobilise violence.
3. State security agencies must address corruption and accountability issues to compete with the perceived moral credibility of spiritual justice systems.

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