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Volume 38, 2011 - [Issue 128: LAND: A NEW WAVE OF ACCUMULATION BY DISPOSSESSION IN AFRICA?](#)

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Pages 277-287 | Published online: 21 Jun 2011

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DEBATE

Who wants to be a millionaire? Nigerian youths and the commodification of kidnapping

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Introduction

Kidnapping has become so pervasive in Nigeria that there is now a palpable apprehension among the people who are unsure of whom the next victim will be. The crime has become a veritable commodity in the hands of its perpetrators who apparently have now made a multi-million naira business out of it.

In a number of cases, whilst agents of the state have helped to negotiate with and pay the kidnappers in order to release their victims, there are cases where employees of banks and state security agencies have allegedly colluded with kidnappers (Yun 2007, Adekoye 2009a). Kidnapping is neither historically new nor peculiar to Nigeria. Historically, the rivalry generated by nineteenth-century slave trading was characterised by raids, piracy, abduction and kidnapping of able-bodied men in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta region (Ikime 2006, p. 211).

Modern kidnapping has emerged as an instrument of engagement for economic survival, securing political and business advantage over rivals and co-competitors. Kidnapping is quite widespread and indiscriminate regardless of nationality, age or profession, and is largely undertaken with

impunity. Some victims have been released after huge ransom settlements, yet others have been brutalised by kidnappers. Among reasons given for kidnapping are: for ritual sacrifice (Oguseri 2007); economics; and political vendetta.

Our analysis aims to account for this pervasive phenomenon of kidnapping in Nigeria and uncover the reasons for and predispositions to commodified kidnapping in relation to the role of the state in both the emergence and the management of kidnapping. The analysis examines some of the theoretical discussion of youth and restiveness in Africa, the nature of the Nigerian state, the social forces that impel kidnapping and it gives a conclusion.

Conceptual framework

As deployed in this paper, ‘commodification’ refers to the process of kidnapping as well as actual exchange of forcefully abducted individuals for the pecuniary gain of the perpetrators. Kidnapping is a criminal act involving the seizure, confining, abducting and subjecting of a person to servitude by force against their will, threat and deceit with the intention to receive ransom, and forcing the person to commit crime or with the intent of harming the person (Goldberg 2000).

The youth

Youths (aged 15–35) constitute the majority of the African population. The meaning,

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Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Dr Godwin Uyi Ojo and three anonymous reviewers for their useful comments on the initial draft of this article.

Notes

For more on ritual kidnapping, see Nigerian Tribune ([2009](#), p. 13) and Sanyaolu ([2008](#)). (All newspapers and magazines cited are those published in Nigeria, except where otherwise stated.)

Though the motive of this form of kidnap might be to liquidate business rivals, several millions of naira are usually received by the perpetrators.

Several individuals and groups have been implicated on collusion with kidnap gangs including businessmen, traditional rulers and even banks, which are said to leak the account details of their wealthy customers to the criminals (Adekoye [2009a](#)).

For more details, see Abati ([2009b](#)) and Okocha and Constance ([2009](#)).

Expatriates and nationals of developed countries are particularly targeted for huge ransoms. The Nigerian government often pays promptly to secure the release of this set of victims in order to avoid embarrassment from the international community (Akhaine [2009](#), Orji [2009](#)).

The retired general was kidnapped from his farm in Edo State and taken through the creeks to Bayelsa State in the volatile Niger Delta region.

This estimate is conservative, as some cases are unreported for fear of re-kidnapping.

Some popular hideouts of the kidnappers in Anambra have been identified to include Ogbunike, Nsugbe, Ayamelum, a forest between Nawfia and Enugwu, Abakaliki and Nibo (Anyanwu [2009](#)).

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