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Urban landscapes of territoriality and ethnic violence

The spread and recurrence of deadly riots in Jos, Nigeria

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Summary

Contestations over indigene rights and political representation have led to large-scale Christian-Muslim clashes in the central Nigerian city of Jos. Over 5,000 people were killed in episodic violence between 2001 and 2010, distinguishing the riots as some of the most atrocious and persistent in Nigeria's modern history. What are the factors that shaped the spread, patterns and recurrence of violence in the neighbourhoods of Jos? Scholars agree that the ethnic composition of a locality is crucial for explaining its vulnerability to violence. However, views are divided on the exact nature of the interrelation. One group of scholars argues that ethnically segregated areas are more susceptible to violence because segregation engenders in-group solidarity, out-group resentment and eases the communication costs of mobilising for violence. Another perspective runs counter, maintaining that ethnically mixed areas are more violence-prone because they foster friction, competition and confrontation. Empirical evidence is conflicting, supporting one perspective in some instances and suggesting the exact opposite in others. In Jos, both segregated and mixed areas have been associated with noteworthy violence.

This dissertation proposes that the ambivalence surrounding the interrelation between ethnic composition and violence can partly be traced to three identifiable oversights in the literature: 1) a focus only on a neighbourhood's ethnic composition without paying adequate attention to its location and the ethnic composition of adjoining areas; 2) a disregard for the shared boundaries of neighbourhoods and the barriers, roads and other demarcations that separate or link them; and 3) a neglect of the mobile nature of armed mobs, thereby conflating the origins of rioters with the destinations of their violent events. The dissertation argues that ethnic composition, alone, is not enough to explain a neighbourhood's vulnerability to violence; other factors that shape the spread and patterns of violence are a neighbourhood's location and adjacency to surrounding areas of

similar or dissimilar ethnic composition, their shared boundaries and how these boundaries facilitate or hinder the mobilisation and mobility of armed mobs.

The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Jos between September 2015 and July 2017. It relied on a plethora of key informant and mobile interviews, visual documentation and other sources of data not previously explored in Jos, such as primary school registers and hospital records of victims of violence. The dissertation concludes that contrary to the determinism that dominates the ethnic composition-violence discourse, both segregated and mixed neighbourhoods in Jos contributed in the production of violence, albeit differentially. While segregated localities provided a hospitable environment for mobilising armed mobs, the mixed areas, especially those located between segregated settlements, served as the frontiers of collective violence. Moreover, locals-only pedestrian alleys linking neighbourhoods with contiguous boundaries enhanced the mobility of armed mobs, while major highways and other physical barriers hindered it. These findings have both scholarly and practical implications. Academically, they draw attention to the importance of analysing neighbourhood location and the mobility of armed mobs in the study of ethnic violence. Practically, they offer authorities deeper understanding of the mobilisation and mobility of rioters in different sociospatial settings – an insight that is crucial for developing context-sensitive measures to mitigate, and even prevent, violence.