Towards a Pluralistic Account of Gangs: Perspectives from Sub-Saharan Africa

by
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Abstract

There is no universally accepted definition of a gang. Conceptual ambiguity underlies the study of gangs, and as such, there is little consensus on what a gang is or what its core features entail. Furthermore, most of the literature on gangs is derived from Western contexts, predominantly North America and Europe. The field of research on gangs in Africa is markedly understudied. Gangs on the continent are responsible for high levels of violence, exhibit connections to transnational organised crime, and play a significant role in political processes and state corruption, highlighting the importance of studying these groups. There is, however, a distinct lack of information on the operations, size, and structure of gangs on the continent. The nature of the relationships between gangs and the state, as well as between gangs and society in the African context, are also not explored in great depth. This brings into question whether the dominant existing literature can adequately account for gangs in Africa, or whether a more nuanced perspective is required to understand these groups. This thesis aims to address this concern, by investigating why gangs in Africa are distinctive from those in the Global North, which involves examining their essential characteristics. Sub-Saharan Africa is selected as the geographical region in which this analysis takes place, and the research is informed by case studies based on the operations of gangs in major cities in South Africa, Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Nigeria. The information gleaned from these case studies is used to construct a typology of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa, to enhance knowledge of these groups. The gangs are categorised according to four features, namely their objectives, relationship with the state, relationship to society, and degree of institutionalisation. It is acknowledged that the strict categorisation of gangs into different types is often an ineffective pursuit, given the flexibility and dynamism of these groups, and the typology is in this sense perhaps better understood as a heuristic framework to help understand gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa.

At the same time, the analysis of gangs in the African context holds implications for the concept of the 'gang' as well as for its utility in accounting for gangs in non-Western settings. It is argued that a pluralistic account of gangs is necessary to make sense of these groups, with the understanding that these groups appear to defy definition and are dynamic rather than static. This entails that their capacity for transformation should be central to how they are conceptualised, which allows for the intersections and overlapping between different non-state armed groups, a feature that is important to incorporate in notions of how gangs operate in Sub-Saharan Africa. This study therefore endeavours to provide a foundation for further research

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by offering an examination of gangs that are not well-studied, evaluating why they are distinctive from ostensibly similar groups in the Global North, and re-assessing how they can be understood and conceptualised.

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Opsomming

Daar is geen universeel aanvaarde definisie van 'n bende nie. Konseptuele dubbelsinnigheid onderlê die studie van bendes, en as sodanig is daar min konsensus oor wat 'n bende is of wat die kernkenmerke daarvan behels. Verder is die meeste literatuur oor bendes afkomstig uit Westerse kontekste, hoofsaaklik Noord-Amerika en Europa. Dit het 'n leemte in die literatuur gelaat met betrekking tot bendes in die Afrika-konteks. Bendes in Afrika is verantwoordelik vir hoë vlakke van geweld, toon verbintenisse met transnasionale georganiseerde misdaad, en speel 'n beduidende rol in politieke prosesse en staatskorrupsie, wat die belangrikheid beklemtoon om hierdie groepe te bestudeer. Daar is egter 'n duidelike gebrek aan inligting oor die bedrywighede, grootte en struktuur van bendes op die vasteland. Die aard van die verhoudings tussen bendes en die staat, asook tussen bendes en die samelewing in die Afrika-konteks, word ook nie in groot diepte ondersoek nie. Dit bring die vraag of die dominante bestaande literatuur voldoende rekenskap kan gee van bendes in Afrika, en of 'n meer genuanseerde perspektief nodig is om hierdie groepe te verstaan. Hierdie tesis het ten doel om hierdie bekommernis aan te spreek deur te ondersoek waarom bendes in Afrika verskil van dié in die Globale Noorde, wat die ondersoek van hul kern kenmerke behels. Sub-Sahara Afrika word gekies as die geografiese streek waarin hierdie ontleding plaasvind, en die navorsing word ingelig deur gevallestudies gebaseer op die bedrywighede van bendes in groot stede in Suid-Afrika, Sierra Leone, Kenia en Nigerië. Die inligting wat uit hierdie gevallestudies verkry word, word gebruik om 'n tipologie van bendes in Sub-Sahara Afrika te konstrueer, om kennis van hierdie groepe te verbeter. Die bendes word volgens vier kenmerke gekategoriseer, naamlik hul doelwitte, verhouding met die staat, verhouding tot die samelewing en mate van institusionalisering. Daar word erken dat die streng kategorisering van bendes in verskillende tipes dikwels 'n ondoeltreffende strewe is, gegewe die buigsaamheid en dinamika van hierdie groepe, en die tipologie word in hierdie sin miskien beter verstaan as 'n heuristiese raamwerk om bendes in Sub-Sahara Afrika te help verstaan.

Terselfdertyd hou die ontleding van bendes in die Afrika-konteks implikasies in vir die konsep van die 'bende' sowel as vir die nut daarvan om rekenskap te gee van bendes in nie-Westerse omgewings. Daar word aangevoer dat 'n pluralistiese weergawe van bendes nodig is om sin te maak van hierdie groepe, met die verstandhouding dat hierdie groepe blykbaar definisie teenstaan en dinamies eerder as staties is. Dit behels dat hul kapasiteit vir transformasie sentraal moet wees in hoe hulle gekonseptualiseer word, wat voorsiening maak vir die kruisings en

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oorvleueling tussen verskillende nie-staatsgewapende groepe, 'n kenmerk wat belangrik is om te inkorporeer in idees van hoe bendes in Sub-Sahara Afrika funksioneer. Hierdie studie poog dus om 'n grondslag vir verdere navorsing te verskaf deur 'n ondersoek aan te bied van bendes wat nie goed bestudeer is nie, te evalueer waarom hulle onderskei van soortgelyke groepe in die Globale Noorde, en te heroorweeg hoe hulle verstaan en gekonseptualiseer kan word.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AFRC	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
ANC	African National Congress
APC	All People's Congress
CO	Commander
CORE	Community Outreach Forum
FIRM	For It Requires Money
FARC	*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionários de Colombia*
KANU	Kenya African National Union
KYNA	Kenya National Youth Alliance
MEND	Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta
MNC	Multinational Corporation
NARC	National Rainbow Coalition
NCRC	National Crime Research Centre
NDPVF	Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force
NDV	Niger Delta Vigilantes
PAGAD	People Against Gangsterism and Drugs
POCA	Prevention of Organised Crime Act
PPC	*Primeiro Comando de Capital*
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
SLPP	Sierra Leone People's Party
UDF	United Democratic Front
US	United States of America
WSB	West Side Boys

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction and Background to the Study

Gangs have become a central component of research conducted across various disciplines over the past century. The attention placed on gangs has been explained by what is referred to in the literature as the 'gang problem', which details the relationship between gangs and associated negative economic, political, and social outcomes (Wegerhoff, Ward & Dixon, 2021:1). These include crime, drug addiction, unemployment, and homelessness, amongst other factors. As gangs operate internationally and pose significant threats both to society and to the authority of the state, there has been an increasing focus on attempting to understand these groups with the incentive to address the harms that they present. This highlights the need for robust theoretical frameworks to inform the development of strategies and policies that aim to combat gangs and the violence that they employ in pursuit of their various objectives. There is, however, no universally accepted definition of a gang. Conceptual ambiguity underlies the field of gang research, and there is little consensus on the essential features of these groups, as well as the nature of their relationships with society and the state (Knox, Ettel & Smith, 2019:18).

The study of gangs involves examining and analysing features such as group behaviour and collective violence, that have traditionally fallen under the disciplines of criminology and sociology. It is argued, however, that the research conducted on gangs should be interdisciplinary, involving other fields such as anthropology, economics, psychology (Knox et al., 2019:18) and most notably for the purposes of this study, political science. This is because political science is fundamentally concerned with conflict and power, and the threats that non-state actors such as gangs present to the functioning and survival of the state (Bateson, 2020:1). Indeed, if the state is to be understood in the Weberian sense of "an entity that possesses a legitimate monopoly on the use of force within a specified territory", then gangs challenge the authority of the state and threaten its existence and continuity (Sullivan, 2011:14). This holds significance for research on gangs within the discipline of political science.

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Recent studies on gang violence have focused on aspects such as the role of urban marginality in precipitating gang formation and conflict; the growing organisational capacity, territorial reach and power of gangs; the contestation between gangs and the state over control; and the effects of this contestation on local communities (Winton, 2014:401). These considerations are significant and form part of the examinations that will be conducted on gangs in this thesis. An important aspect that has not received a great deal of attention in the literature is the flexibility and dynamism of gangs in the Global South. The fluidity of gangs complicates and places constraints on efforts to conceptualise them. Indeed, a core feature of gangs is their capacity to transform in response to their environment (Hagedorn, 2008:31). This tendency for adaptation helps to ensure the survival of gangs and can entail adjusting their objectives, structure, levels of organisation, as well as the activities in which they are engaged, in order for them to overcome challenges and to endure over time. It is also especially apparent when gangs overlap and form connections with other non-state armed groups[1]. Indeed, evidence suggests that a strict delineation between various non-state armed actors such as militias, terrorists, vigilantes, and gangs is not always appropriate, as their objectives and behaviour change, often mirroring each other. Winton (2014:401) furthermore maintains that the intersection of these groups at local, national, and regional levels has presented a challenge to differentiating them from one another. This study aims to examine the blurring of boundaries between these non-state armed groups, with a particular focus on the key characteristics of the gang and the complicated relationships it maintains with the state and society.

The conceptual work on gangs has been located primarily in the contexts of North America and Europe with some focus on gangs in relation to the drug trade in Latin America (Spindler & Bouchard, 2011:267; Winton, 2014:402). Significantly less attention has been paid to gangs in other parts of the world, especially in Africa. There are a number of publications on groups of individuals in regions in Africa that have similar characteristics to gangs (in terms of their actions and behaviour) but are not labelled as such in the contexts in which they operate. They are instead often referred to as youth groups, militias, rebel groups, or vigilantes, highlighting the need for conceptual clarity in the gang research paradigm. There is therefore a marked gap

[1] Non-state armed groups can be broadly defined as organised groups that operate outside the control of the state, and display the capacity to use force and violence in pursuit of their objectives (Berti, 2016:2 & Hazen, 2010:257). The goals of non-state armed groups can be economic, political, or ideological in nature. As such, the term refers to militias, vigilantes, insurgents, as well as criminal groups such as gangs (Berti, 2016:2; Rodgers & Muggah, 2009).

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in the literature, as well as an important opportunity to apply these Western conceptualisations and theories to a greater array of contexts. From this perspective, it may be the case that the dominant conceptual frameworks that were developed to make sense of gangs in the United States (US) may not account for similar groups in other environments, or rather that there are some parallels between these groups (Barnes, 2021:3). Winton (2014:404) notes that there is a growing focus on examining gangs globally, across varying cultural, economic, social, political, and legal contexts. This highlights the importance of cross-national research and the examination of gangs in Africa, which has been understudied.

As alluded to above, the importance of the conceptual project of defining what a gang is, should not be understated. It is widely accepted that theory underpins practice and that understanding notions such as gang recruitment, organisational patterns, and criminal behaviour is a requirement for developing strategies to combat gangs (Knox et al. 2019:22). Indeed, the implementation of policies and interventions that are ill-informed and unbefitting to address certain non-state armed groups can exacerbate insecurity and result in higher levels of violence in particular regions. If the characteristics of gangs are understood as largely dependent on the environment within which these groups operate, and their transformations are seen as partly due to the challenges that they face and the opportunities with which they are presented, then it follows that gangs in Africa will differ in some respects from those in North America or Europe.

The dominance of Western perspectives in this field may therefore bear little relevance to policymaking in Africa, as gangs in the continent vary from those in other parts of the world. In this sense, although gangs in Western contexts may hold similarities with those in Africa due to their shared existence in urban areas characterised by inequality and economic exclusion, they differ in other notable respects. Gangs in Africa are distinctive in that they operate in a postcolonial setting, often in the absence of strong state presence. They can therefore exist during periods of armed conflict, and are sometimes recruited as militia groups, or inversely transform from militia groups into gangs. The distinctions between gangs, rebel groups, and vigilantes are also increasingly blurred in the African context. It is important to note the link between gangs in Africa and international organised crime, as gangs have connections with a number of illicit markets including the drug trade, human and wildlife trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, resource extraction and piracy (Gastrow, 2013).

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This thesis will therefore address these considerations as a contemporary study of gangs, focusing geographically on Sub-Saharan Africa. The contributions that this study endeavours to make to the literature are threefold. Firstly, it aims to provide examinations of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa based on their prominent features and characteristics. The focus will be on why these gangs are distinctive from ostensibly similar groups that operate in other settings. The objective is therefore to expand knowledge of gangs by synthesising information from different sources to explore their objectives; how they operate; how long they endure; the nature of their relationships with the state and with society; as well as the kinds of structures and levels of organisation they exhibit, amongst other factors. This is a contribution to the field as there are hardly any thorough, detailed studies on gangs in the continent. Secondly, this study has analytical utility in that it aims to analyse what types of groups could be considered gangs, in different contexts. These are groups that are not typically referred to as gangs in the literature but resemble some of the characteristics of gangs. This involves an investigation into the interconnections and overlapping between gangs and other non-state armed groups. Thirdly, the research conducted has theoretical value in that it will assist with developing a typology, or a heuristic framework of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa to enhance knowledge of these groups by classifying them into types according to their features. This classification of the gangs will be based on various features, including their objectives, relationships with the state, relationships to society, and degree of institutionalisation. At the same time, the study serves to evaluate the applicability of Western understandings of gangs to the African context. This constitutes a reassessment of the gang concept, as well as an analysis of how gangs in non-Western settings can be defined.

1.2. Problem Statement

The flexibility, adaptability, and dynamism of gangs places constraints on attempts to define them, as they can take up different roles and perform different functions at various moments in time. There are no set criteria by which to differentiate gangs from other non-state actors, as two seemingly different groups (such as gangs and militias) can take on each other's forms when deemed necessary. There is also very little literature on gangs in different regions in Africa, and even less work on a comparison between gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa, as opposed to a microanalysis in one particular area. Analyses of the interactions between gangs and the state, as well as between gangs and society are also under-examined. This highlights the need

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for studying gangs in relation to the complex and evolving contexts in which they operate, whilst taking account of their inevitable transformations over time.

The conceptual ambiguity that underlies the field of gang research, as well as the lack of information on gangs in Africa, is further problematised by the fact that the theoretical scholarship on gangs is primarily based on studies in the Global North, with very few analyses of African case studies. This brings to light a key concern with respect to how gangs are understood in the African context, and whether the existing scholarship is sufficient to make sense of gangs in Africa, or whether new frameworks need to be developed to account for these groups. It is evident that some of the existing literature on gangs is relevant to non-Western contexts. At the same time, however, given the diversity of cases in Africa as well as the fluidity of these groups, it is clear that a more nuanced perspective may be required to understand these groups, hence the construction of a typology to this end.

1.3. Research Questions

1. Why are gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa distinctive from gangs in the Global North?
2. What are their characteristics and how can these be determined?

1.4. Conceptual and Theoretical Points of Departure

1.4.1. The History and the Development of the Study of Gangs

The origin of the literature on gangs is largely attributed to Frederic Thrasher's (1927) comprehensive study of youth groups in Chicago (Fraser & Van Hellemont, 2020:1; Schuberth, 2015:310). The questions that he posed in this work remain relevant today, and include the phenomena of gang organisation, gang activities, the relationship between gangs and the communities in which they operate, as well as how their violence can be combatted (Dimitriadis, 2006:336). Almost a century later, the study of gangs has become increasingly globalised, and the proliferation of these groups not only in the US but in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa, has highlighted the necessity of conducting more research to understand them better in these varying contexts (Barnes, 2021:2). Indeed, the issues that Thrasher (1927) explored in his work, ranging from rapid urbanisation and related economic

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inequality to the development of illicit markets have become increasingly prevalent across the globe (Fraser & Van Hellemont, 2020:1). This bears relevance to Africa, as its growing population of 1.25 billion is predicted to double by 2050 (The Economist, 2020). The continent is also forecasted to have the highest rate of urbanisation in the world by that time (OECD, 2020). These factors further highlight the need for research into the proliferation and operation of gangs in Africa.

Scholars emphasise the importance of studying gangs with reference to globalisation, and therefore also to understanding gangs as being transnational in nature. In this sense, gangs are no longer viewed as isolated entities operating solely within designated communities or territories, but rather enjoy a presence in multiple regions and across borders. Furthermore, Winton (2014:402-403) notes that there has been a growing focus in the literature on "relational and organisational aspects" of gangs. In this way, gangs are increasingly understood as operating within a network and a set of relationships to the state and to society, as opposed to acting in complete isolation. They are therefore viewed as embedded in the environment in which they exist. She (2014:403) argues that they should be perceived as "coherent, logical and functional groups immersed in local institutional landscapes and responding to structural disadvantage at different scales."

Although there is a debate within the literature concerning the link between gangs and organised crime, most gangs are understood to have some connections to illicit markets, often in the drug trade or other forms of trafficking. An additional aspect of globalisation that has become increasingly important in the study of gangs internationally is the role of 'gangsta culture' in reinforcing the perceived attractiveness of armed groups through popular media (Hagedorn, 2008:85). This perpetuation of gang practices and ideals such as masculinity and territoriality has largely been inherited from the US and is becoming a feature of how gangs operate in other parts of the world (Fraser & Van Hellemont, 2020:12).

1.4.2. The Global Study of Gangs

The global research agenda on gangs has a number of focus areas, including North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia, Australia, and Africa. Researchers have paid attention to armed groups in Mexico, Brazil, El Salvador, Australia and the Solomon Islands in particular. The literature on gangs in Latin America is largely concerned with the links these non-state actors

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have with the drug trade. It is arguable that gangs in these countries are partially responsible for driving up the homicide rate (which is considerably high in Latin America), making it one of the most violent regions in the world (Rodgers & Baird, 2015:478). In a similar vein, the work on gangs in The Philippines has centred largely on their involvement with drug trafficking. The literature on both of these regions has explored the 'war on drugs' and the implementation of zero-tolerance policies to combat the violence, since the 2000s in Latin America and especially during President Duterte's term which began in 2016, in The Philippines (Reyes, 2016). Gangs in Australia, New Zealand, and Europe present a different kind of threat in that they do not challenge the authority of the state to the same extent as those in Latin America and Asia. Gangs in these states in the Global North often exist in the form of motorcycle clubs which have become a growing source of interest for scholars (Lauchs, 2019:1). There are a number of implicit assumptions that underlie understandings of gangs in the Global North. These include perceptions of gangs as operating in urban areas; the importance of their involvement in illicit industries including the drug trade; as well as an emphasis on unity and gang identity as expressed through certain means of communication (such as language or hand signals), and appearance in the form of clothing and tattoos (Hethorn, 1994).

It is apparent that gangs are not solely a North American phenomenon, despite the fact that much of the literature devoted to understanding gangs is derived from examinations and analyses of those in the US (Spindler & Bouchard, 2011:266). The theory developed to explain and account for gangs in a general sense therefore may not be fully applicable to gangs in different contexts. Despite significant variations between gangs in different continents, several authors argue in favour of a unifying conceptualisation of gangs as some of the groups' features are often shared. Spindler and Bouchard (2011:266) support the likelihood of cross-national similarities between gangs, as those in one state often share characteristics with gangs in other states. Spindler and Bouchard (2011:266) substantiate this point by referencing the similarities Klein (2002:253) discovered between gangs in the US and Europe, arguing that these consistencies are due to "common group processes and similar combinations of societal variables that produce marginalisation of some youth populations". The inclusion of European gangs into Klein and Maxson's (1995) structural typology of gangs in the US further supports this notion. It is arguable, however, that these similarities may not apply in continents as vastly different from one another as North America or Europe and Africa, given the latter's history of colonialism, and its experience of disparities in wealth, income, access to resources,

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employment opportunities, and standard of living, to name a few considerations. The economic, social, political, cultural, legal, and criminal contexts between Africa and North America vary greatly, complicating notions of applying theory from one area to another. A study on gangs in Africa must, however, be predicated on theoretical readings and should therefore still explore the contemporary literature on gangs, regardless of its utility in accounting for non-Western contexts.

There have been challenges to the development of a cohesive and comprehensive study of gangs, and this centres largely on conceptual difficulties (Barnes, 2021:3; Winton, 2014:404). Proposing a universal conceptualisation of gangs seems unlikely, in light of the varying political, economic, and social spheres in which gangs across the world operate. Barnes (2021:3) supports this point by highlighting that the word 'gang' is rarely used in some areas. He (2021:3) illustrates this by listing sixteen terms including *bandas, clikas, and maras* that have been used in reference to gangs in Latin America. Indeed, many such groups would reject being labelled as a gang choosing instead to be termed vigilantes or youth groups. There are, in practice, a wide array of varying actions, motivations, and structures to be encapsulated in the concept of a gang. This study emphasises the benefits of a pluralistic approach to the study of gangs, as opposed to a unificatory account of these groups. The latter privileges certain perspectives in an attempt to reach a consensus in how they are understood, whilst the former, in contrast, allows for a variety of aims, methods, and strategies to be used in pursuit of advancing knowledge about gangs (Wegerhoff, 2022).

The difficulties involved in advancing a definition should not, however, hinder or overshadow attempts at clarifying the concept. It is important to develop the conceptual apparatus to make sense of gangs and other violent groups, as well as to explore the issues and threats they bring to the state and society. It is widely acknowledged that understanding the features and characteristics of non-state armed groups, such as how they operate, what their objectives are, and how they are structured, is a requirement for the development of policies and interventions that aim to contain the violence they present (Wegerhoff et al., 2021:1; Wegerhoff, Ward & Dixon, 2019:58). The dangers of neglecting to explore these issues include the use of counterproductive, and at times damaging strategies that are ill-informed and unsuitable, serving to exacerbate the conflict. Examples of these include counterinsurgency tactics that are used to address gang violence or organised crime involving drug trafficking groups. This has been seen in Latin America where the use of the kingpin strategy to eliminate the leaders of

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drug cartels, a strategy commonly employed in counterterrorism measures, has exacerbated the violence by creating conflicting, localised factions that compete for power (Shirk & Wallman, 2015:1369; Phillips, 2015:324). This highlights the importance of the conceptual project of clarifying contemporary understandings of gangs, and not conflating different categories of non-state armed groups.

Hazen and Rodgers (2014:5) affirm this and maintain that it is important to acknowledge the similarities between various non-state groups without considering them equivalent to one another. The authors (2014:5) argue that labels carry expectations of how groups should behave, as well as preconceived ideas of how the state should address the groups. Barnes (2021:4) also asserts that the term 'gang' is often too loosely applied to other non-state armed groups and is associated with intrinsically negative characteristics such as delinquency and criminality, leading to the implementation of zero-tolerance security policies. This inaccurate use of the term can also reinforce prejudices, especially when it is used to refer to marginalised groups (Barnes, 2021:4). This is echoed by Winton (2014:402) who warns against sensationalising the problem of gang violence.

Barnes (2021:4) notes, then, that scholars should consider the advantages and disadvantages associated with exclusive and inclusive conceptualisations of gangs. Exclusive conceptualisations of gangs could entail incorporating aspects such as the age of members, features of recruitment and membership, and specifying paradigmatic behaviour or actions etc. into the definition of the concept. As such, the concept would become narrower, and its extension would decrease as it would refer and be applicable to fewer groups, becoming more specific to certain contexts (Barnes, 2021:5). Alternatively, an inclusive conceptualisation of gangs would involve increasing the extension of the term, by reducing the characteristics inhered in it. This would increase the number of referents, as fewer criteria would increase the applicability of different groups to the term. Barnes (2021:5) notes that both approaches yield positive and negative responses. He (2021:5) contends that there has been a tendency towards exclusive conceptualisations of gangs in the literature which has amplified the misconception that gangs were exclusive to the US.

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1.4.3. Exclusive Conceptualisations of Gangs

There was a movement to universalise the gang concept during the 1990s, so that the term could be used in reference to gangs in other parts of the world and not solely the US (Barnes, 2021:5). Klein and Maxson (2006:4) advanced a definition of gangs to this end. It has proved influential in the study of gangs and was intended to be inclusive and broad, although it was later criticised for being too narrow and restrictive (Winton, 2014:405). Klein and Maxson's (2006:4) widely cited definition, "a street gang is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity" provided an important starting point for future studies. The authors (2006:4) sought to distinguish gangs from troublesome youth groups by emphasising that the former would exist for an extended period of time, as well as specifying that the illegality and criminality of their violent actions is key to their identity, which is widely considered one of the most important features of the gang (Knox et al., 2019:17).

This distinction plays a significant role in restricting the kinds of social groups that could be misleadingly referred to as gangs if they conduct themselves in an organised group (similarly to gangs) but do not break the law (such as sports teams); or if the groups engage in illegal activities only occasionally (Spindler & Bouchard, 2011:267). Furthermore, this restrictive definition (which has decreased extension in that it has few referents), serves an important function in preventing the inappropriate labelling of marginalised individuals as criminals, as this often drives harsh security responses and further alienates these groups (Barnes, 2021:5). Barnes (2021:5) notes that it is not always possible to differentiate between gangs and gang-like groups as there is usually no set point in time where the transition from the one to the other occurs in a formal way. This process is organic, slow, and dynamic rather than static. Barnes (2021:6) observes that Klein and Maxson (2006:4) decide to focus on street groups, thereby distinguishing them from prison gangs, gangs involved in the drug trade, and more sophisticated organised criminal groups. This suggests that gang forms are distinct from one another, as well as from various kinds of organised crime (such as the mafia and cartels).

Barnes (2021:6) argues that although these neat delineations may be applicable to criminal groups in the US and Europe, they are not always fitting in other places. He (2021:6) uses the example of *maras* in Central America to illustrate this point. The origin of the *maras* is ascribed to neighbourhood gangs comprised of immigrant youths in Los Angeles, who were then

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deported back to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in the 1990s (Hazen & Rodgers, 2014:4; Hagedorn, 2008:39). The implementation of *Mano Dura*, or 'iron fist' policies as a militarised approach to crime in these states resulted in the incarceration of thousands of their members (Cruz, 2014:132). Over time, their influence extended from urban areas to prisons, and they have transformed from loosely organised street gangs, to hierarchical groups that have a centralised leadership structure and an operating style analogous to organised criminal groups (Fraser & Van Hellemont, 2020:8). Cruz (2014:136) attributes this increase in organisation in part to the resources and relationships that they were able to exploit and foster in prison. As such, their significant degree of sophistication is conducive to well-organised criminal activity, and they partake in drug and human trafficking, protection racketeering, and extortion (Cruz, 2014:137). Many scholars have, however, rejected the notion that *maras* constitute an example of organised crime, contending instead that they are street gangs, and that they are not primarily financially incentivised, but rather recruit members by providing an alternative social order to youths in marginalised communities (Barnes, 2021:7). Regardless of how they are characterised, it is apparent that these gangs operate transnationally across North and Central America, posing a challenge to the traditional and dominant conceptualisation of street gangs as localised entities (Cruz, 2014:123).

In either case, it is apparent that strict differentiations between these groups are not always possible, as they can embody differing forms (such as street gangs and drug trafficking groups that are analogous to organised crime) simultaneously. Barnes (2021:8) therefore argues that conceptualisations of gangs must incorporate these different categories. He (2021:8) also notes that there is still a misconception amongst scholars that gangs are separate from organised crime, as gangs are often perceived as engaging in petty crime rather than violent illegal activity conducted by sophisticated, hierarchically structured groups. It is apparent, however, that organised criminal groups rarely meet these outdated requirements, as they are no longer organisations emblematic of a pyramidic power structure as in the paradigmatic case of the mafia, but rather exist as groups within a network. In addition, some gangs have operated as monopolies in illicit markets by controlling the supply of goods and charging a high price for the commodities that they offer – a characteristic typical of organised criminal groups (Barnes, 2021:10). It is clear that the two phenomena are not equivalent, nor are they mutually exclusive.

The example of the *maras* also illustrates the intersection and transformation between prison gangs, street gangs, and organised criminal groups. Prison gangs are increasingly able to extend

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their territorial reach outside of the prison, and prisons are often seen as sites of street gang territory (Winton, 2014:410). The case of the *maras* also provides evidence for how zero-tolerance policies are often either ineffective or counterproductive and damaging. Incarceration does not dismantle gangs, but rather presents an alternative space for them to mobilise. This reinforces their operations, rather than dissolving them (Winton, 2014:410).

1.4.4. Inclusive Conceptualisations of Gangs

Hagedorn (2008:30) argues that gangs are difficult to define, as they are constantly in flux as opposed to uniform and static. He (2008:30) states that they cannot always be distinguished from other non-stated armed actors. As such, Hagedorn (2008:31) supports an amorphous and inclusive conceptualisation of gangs: "they are simply alienated groups socialised by the streets or prisons, not conventional institutions". He (2008:31) further notes that the only constant feature of gangs is "their changing forms" and that they can fit certain categorisations at one point in time, and then take on a completely different form in the future. Indeed, attempts to standardise and universalise gangs have been unsuccessful, as they "appear to defy definition" (Winton, 2014:405).

Barnes (2021:8) notes that Hagedorn's inclusive definition, which has fewer criteria than that of Klein and Maxson's (2006), as well as increased extension, offers some advantages to the gang research paradigm. Firstly, rather than focusing on how to differentiate between street, drug, and prison gangs, Hagedorn draws attention to the similar foundation of many of these armed groups as existing in marginalised environments, excluded from traditional institutions (such as schools and religious organisations) that provide a sense of grounding, meaning, and identity to youths (Barnes, 2021:8). Secondly, Hagedorn supports the inclusion of other non-state armed groups into the global study of gangs through this conceptualisation, as he (2008:33) argues that gangs are fluid entities, with the possibility of transforming from a street group to an organised criminal syndicate, or a militia group absorbed by government. In this sense, groups such as vigilantes, terrorists, rebels, militias, or drug cartels can be understood as gangs at various points in time, especially if they have a common origin in economic, social, or political exclusion and operate in areas characterised by limited state presence (Barnes, 2021:8). Barnes (2021:8) terms this the evolutionary gang concept, in which gangs transform, intersect, and overlap with other non-state armed groups.

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This intersection and transformation between various non-state armed groups has been seen in many parts of the world. Hagedorn (2008:34) and Barnes (2021:9) illustrate this point using the example of rarray boys in Sierra Leone, who initially formed gangs that were recruited by politicians during the 1960s to intimidate voters during elections, and that later transformed into militia and rebel groups during the civil war. This was also observed in Medellin during the 1980s, where organisations such as the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionários de Colombia* (FARC) and M-19 absorbed local gangs to form militias tasked with combatting criminal groups (Barnes, 2021:9; Hagedorn, 2008:35). This bears relevance to the debate concerning the legitimation of gangs and their activities when they are conscripted and assimilated into the security forces of the state. Barnes (2021:10) notes that an estimated 53 gangs have members in the US military, thereby allowing these criminal groups access to information concerning strategies and training for conflict. In addition, there have been many cases of gangs being formed by or comprised of demobilised soldiers. Indeed, the shift into criminality in post-conflict states is a key concern in the literature on the demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants. This link should not be overstated, however, as there are also cases of gangs emerging in post-conflict settings that are not formed from ex-combatant populations, as demonstrated in Chapter Three in the case of Freetown in Sierra Leone. These connections between gangs and various non-state and state actors illustrate how difficult it is to distinguish between these groups clearly. Barnes (2021:10) therefore suggests examining how they evolve, in order to fully understand the dynamic and complex nature of these categories.

Gangs can be incorporated and used by the state and other non-state actors. However, this does not mean that these entities are identical to one another, nor should they be conceived of as equivalent. Barnes (2021:10) argues that a useful definition of gangs should meaningfully distinguish between these groups, as to consider them equivalent would broaden the conceptualisation of gangs too far, rendering the definition meaningless. From this perspective, Hagedorn's (2008:31) broad and inclusive definition does not clarify understanding by clearly differentiating between groups such as gangs, terrorists, and insurgents. A number of scholars use terms such as 'criminal insurgencies' and 'narco insurgents' (Sullivan, 2011:3; Bunker, 2013) to refer to gangs in South America, due to the threat they pose to security, the terrorist strategies that they employ, and their transnational nature. These terms illuminate the severity of the violence that these groups present, however, they do not provide conceptual clarity on these categories, as gangs are fundamentally different from terrorists in that they are not usually politically motivated (Winton, 2014:402). Although gangs may become involved in local

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politics, by acting as arbiters in disputes, fulfilling the role of the state in providing public goods, and occasionally working with political actors, they do not seek to overthrow and replace the state, as is the case with terrorist groups (Cockayne, 2013:12; Barnes, 2021:10). In instances where gangs and armed political actors intersect, it is usually the case that gangs are recruited by armed groups that have political aims, in order to perform certain functions, such as acting as foot soldiers. Barnes (2021:10) argues that gangs do not usually undertake political endeavours of their own accord, and do not evolve into terrorist groups. It is therefore not useful to consider gangs as terrorists, and to do so is potentially damaging in the sense that it overstates the threat gangs pose, thereby encouraging harsh and extreme policy responses that serve to amplify the violence (Winton, 2014:402).

The conflation of gangs with other non-state armed actors extends to cartels and other organised criminal groups. This has been seen in Latin America, where cartels involved in the drug trade have employed gangs as enforcement arms. Indeed, although these groups often cooperate and work together, they should not be conceived of as the same entities. Gangs and organised criminal groups are different in terms of their origin, membership, territory, and connections with other important actors (Barnes, 2021:11). Knox et al. (2019:21) further note that organised criminal groups differ from gangs in that the former usually reinvest the profits accrued from crimes to expand and advance the group. In addition, organised criminal groups are often comprised primarily of adults as opposed to youths, have greater territorial rule, and stronger relationships with important political elites (Barnes, 2021:11). The way in which organised criminal groups use gangs is therefore analogous to the way in which terrorist groups use them, that is, in pursuit of greater objectives. Barnes (2021:11) acknowledges that it becomes difficult to distinguish gangs from these other groups when the former is absorbed by the latter but argues that it still can and should be done, as large, well institutionalised criminal groups are fundamentally different from local, smaller groups.

As such, gangs that are able to grow in size and reach, become highly organised and sophisticated, and monopolise an illicit industry, can be understood as an organised criminal entity. This does not mean, however, that other organised criminal groups should be considered gangs, as their foundations, members, and operations differ fundamentally from one another (Barnes, 2021:11). The *maras* illustrate this point, as their prominence is tied to the significant profits that they were able to generate from the drug trade, much like organised crime. Their expansion, however, is emblematic of gangs, as it was largely dependent on connections

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between prisoners as a result of *Mano Dura* incarceration policies. This is unlike organised criminal groups that progress with the assistance of political actors (Barnes, 2021:11). In summary, some gangs and their activities can be understood as examples of organised crime, however this does not necessarily entail that all organised criminal groups should be conceived of as gangs.

1.4.5. An Alternative Conceptualisation of Gangs

It is apparent that Klein and Maxson (2006) as well as Hagedorn (2008) are unable to provide a satisfactory account of gangs, as the former's is too restrictive and does not fully encapsulate the nature and different forms of gangs, whilst the latter is too inclusive thereby reducing analytical utility and the ability to distinguish between various actors. Barnes (2021:12) argues that Hazen and Rodgers' (2014:8) definition of gangs finds a balance between these two issues and covers three key criteria for gangs that are sufficiently inclusive and restrictive. According to the authors (2014:8):

> A gang will (1) display a measure of institutional continuity independent of its membership; (2) routinely engage in violent behaviour patterns that are considered illegal by the dominant authorities and mainstream society; and (3) consist of members who are principally, though not necessarily only, under the age of twenty-five.

Hazen and Rodgers (2014:8) state that they are not proposing a definitive and universal conceptualisation of gangs, but rather attempting to provide a foundation for further research. In this sense, the authors' definition can serve as the groundwork for more contextualised studies and allow for comparative research, during which the definition can either be utilised, expanded upon, or rejected. Barnes (2021:12) also notes that Hazen and Rodgers' definition is specific enough to focus on gangs as opposed to other non-state armed groups, but also general enough to include various gang forms and manifestations such as drug, prison, and street gangs.

The authors' first criterion asserts that gangs should maintain a degree of permanence or continuity, thereby distinguishing them from young troublemakers or delinquent youth groups that are more transient in nature, often forming temporarily for short periods. Barnes (2021:13) therefore argues that although this component may exclude a great deal of criminal activity, it

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is important to note that a key feature of gangs is their ability to endure and adapt to changing conditions in order to ensure their survival.

The second criterion incorporates the notion of habitual violence and behaviour that is regarded as illegal by the state and society. This separates gangs from gang-like groups that operate in areas with an absent or failed state, as there is no official authority to declare their actions illegal or to enforce the law. According to this view, militia and rebel groups that exist during periods of interstate or intrastate war would not be considered gangs (Barnes, 2021:14). In addition, the political ambitions of these groups would therefore not be criminalised, even if they seek to establish their own political authority in the absence of a functioning state. Such groups are frequently referred to as 'criminal gangs' to undermine their activities and broader political movement however this framing of the groups is not accurate, nor is it analytically useful as gangs are not usually politically motivated (Barnes, 2021:4). Indeed, the aforementioned factors are consistent with militia and rebel groups' often differing origins, incentives, actions, and behaviours that are not typically considered characteristic of gangs (Barnes, 2021:14). Barnes (2021:14) notes that a significant advantage that this criterion provides is to separate gangs from groups that do not have overt political ambitions to acquire power over a territory, and to only consider groups as gangs if they operate in areas where state presence is felt to some extent.

Barnes (2014:14) argues that this criterion also allows for a differentiation between gangs and vigilante groups. There are similarities between the two groups in that they both arise in the face of increasing levels of violence and insecurity when the state is unable to adequately address the threats that various actors present. They differ, however, in that vigilante groups usually act in accordance with the state's mandate to uphold and enforce the law, whereas gangs act in opposition to the state. Barnes (2021:14) therefore argues that vigilantes as well as self-defence groups can be considered "extra-legal entities rather than criminal ones" in the sense that their activities "go beyond the law, which implies an action that is moving in the same direction as the law, but exceeding its scope or severity" (Bateson, 2020:5). Barnes (2021:14) further notes that this is reflected in how vigilante groups are criminalised to a lesser extent than gangs even in cases where the former has engaged in violent activities of a similar nature to the latter.

There is therefore a theoretical basis for differentiating between gangs and vigilantes, however it is more difficult to do in practice given that the two groups' behaviour and actions often

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overlap. This is seen in cases where gangs act as vigilantes, especially in areas where state presence is lacking, to provide protection and security to local communities. Barnes (2021:14) notes that some gangs participate in violent community justice practices that target individuals who exhibit predatory behaviour and who pose a threat to the safety of the community. Furthermore, when gangs grow in size and power and are able to control a territory, they become an alternative to the state in terms of authority and power. Barnes (2021:14) and Cockayne (2013:12) observe that gangs often implement their own system of justice, acting as arbiters of disputes and punishing individuals who transgress or violate their rules accordingly. The communities often endorse the roles gangs play in this regard, especially in areas where the armed groups are able to impose some semblance of order in the absence of a functioning state. This was observed in parts of Latin America during the COVID-19 pandemic, as gangs and drug trafficking groups such as the *maras* in El Salvador and the Red Command in Brazil were involved in imposing and policing lockdown restrictions in 2020 (Sampaio, 2021). It was also seen in Mexico, as gangs provided care packages to local communities suffering during the pandemic (Gomez, 2020), thereby increasing public support for these criminal groups as they seemingly exhibited prosocial functions (Knox et al., 2019:16; Winton, 2014:403). The tendency to romanticise and glorify gang activities in different forms of media further exacerbates this issue of encouraging support for the groups and recruitment of members, thereby perpetuating their existence.

The *Primeiro Comando de Capital* (PPC), a criminal group that had its origins in prison gangs in São Paulo during the 1990s (Biondi, 2016:3), illustrates the intersection between gangs and vigilantism. The PCC has implemented their own *de facto* system of rule in poor areas of São Paulo, providing a sense of security to many neighbourhoods. The group is also credited for the considerable decrease in homicide rates in these areas (Barnes, 2021:14). This use of violence in exerting control, combatting other criminal groups, and thereby instilling order and stability in communities is emblematic of vigilantism. At the same time, vigilante groups in Brazil called *milicias* are known to engage in activities that are distinctive of gangs, such as implementing protection rackets in various communities (Arias & Barnes, 2017; Wolff, 2015:24). Barnes (2021:14) therefore argues that in the same way that gangs and organised crime are not completely distinct from nor identical to one another, vigilante groups and gangs often intersect and overlap, but are not mutually exclusive.

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Lastly, the age restriction of 25 as the third criterion serves to distinguish gangs from more established and professional organised criminal groups that are usually run by older individuals (Barnes, 2021:15). Barnes (2021:15) maintains that whilst it may seem arbitrary to have 25 as the cut-off point, it is necessary to include this feature as the term 'youth' is not definite or distinct, however it is a central component of gangs and their members. This is not to say that none of the members in a gang exceed the age of 25, but rather that they are often brought into the gang from an early age or transition to adulthood in the gang. Whilst hierarchically structured gangs are often comprised of older individuals at the higher levels of leadership, the majority of membership is young men or women (Barnes, 2021:15). This criterion does not separate gangs from militia or rebel groups that incorporate child soldiers, but it serves as an important point of distinction between gangs and organised criminal groups comprised mainly of adults (Barnes, 2021:15).

In summary, the definition proposed by Hazen and Rodgers (2014) provides a useful foundation for the global comparison of gangs, as it distinguishes gangs from other armed groups, whilst being sufficiently inclusive to ensure that the relevant groups are included in this conceptualisation, and to incorporate criteria that encapsulate their varying forms. Barnes (2021:16) further argues that this definition meets a primary objective of the gang research paradigm, which is to account for how these groups "can emerge in a variety of ways, under a range of circumstances, and can potentially change from one type of social organisation to another" (Hazen & Rodgers, 2014:16-17). To understand these transformations and evolutions involves examining how gangs are organised and structured, as well as the kinds of relationships (including cooperation, competition, and integration) between gangs and other armed groups (Barnes, 2014:17).

1.5. Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are developed in response to the two research questions that were stated above.

1. Gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa are distinctive because they do not entirely conform to Western conceptualisations of what gangs entail, nor do they adhere to the assumptions of gangs that these contexts seem to prescribe. Moreover, gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa often overlap with

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and exhibit links with other non-state armed groups, which is not always typical of gangs in other geographical areas.

2. The core features of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa overlap with some of the essential characteristics incorporated in Western definitions of gangs. These include the notion that gangs display a degree of permanence and continuity; routinely participate in violent criminal activity that is regarded as illegal; and are comprised predominantly of youths. The features of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa are determined through the empirical analysis of case studies.

1.6. Research Methodology and Design

A multiple case study design was selected for this thesis, as it allows for the detailed examination (Burnham, Lutz, Grant & Layton-Henry, 2008:65) of gangs in different parts of the Sub-Saharan region. The case studies include major cities in South Africa, Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Nigeria, and they were chosen based on the proliferation of gangs as well as other non-state armed groups in these states. These cities include but are not limited to Cape Town, Freetown, Nairobi, Lagos, Aba, and Kano, as gangs are largely an urban phenomenon and operate across each of the states. They are dynamic groups and cannot necessarily be confined to a specific area as they evolve and move over time. The amount of space dedicated to each case study is reflective of the available literature on gangs in that region, given the understudied nature of this field of research. The utility of the case study design is apparent in this regard, as it enhances knowledge of complex phenomena with reference to the importance of context (Yin, 2009:18). At the same time, the use of multiple case studies provides points of comparison, as gangs from these areas are being examined in similar contexts, marking a departure from the existing scholarship which is based on studies of gangs in the Global North.

This study employs a qualitative methodology and consists primarily of desktop research. Secondary sources including books, journal articles, news reports, government reports, and publications by various international institutions were used to inform the research. The scholarship on gangs in Africa is limited, and as such, desktop research was supplemented with semi-structured interviews with two researchers who were selected because they focus on gangs and gang violence in different regions in Africa. Several key informants were invited to be interviewed, but only two of the experts agreed to participate in the study. This was not a

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limitation to the study, however, as the interviews endured for approximately thirty minutes to one hour, and the respondents' answers were thorough and detailed.

The participants were asked about how gangs are defined (including what the core features of gangs entail), as well as how gangs operate in different contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa. They were also asked to comment on the intersection and blurring between different non-state armed groups, and to provide opinions on gangs in Africa (specifically their relation to militias, ex-combatants, and vigilantes). One of the researchers specialises in gangs in Cape Town, and they therefore provided more information on that particular case study. The informants were also asked to comment on the relation between gangs and the state, as well as between gangs and society, specifically in relation to Sub-Saharan Africa. The experts' answers were recorded in the form of notes written on a Microsoft Word document, and this information was used to supplement the analysis that was based on secondary sources. The interviews enhanced the study as they filled the gaps left by the available literature.

As the study is qualitative, it followed a non-linear and flexible path (Neuman, 2005:168) and made use of inductive theorising. This involved examinations of the nature and characteristics of gangs in different parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, which led to the construction of a typology that aims to categorise them according to their salient features. The research is exploratory as it is focused on an issue that is understudied and not well understood. It is also explanatory in that it explores how and why gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa are distinctive from gangs in the Global North, as well as how they relate to the state and society (Neuman, 2005:40). The theoretical examination of the concept of the gang and its applicability to non-Western contexts is an attempt to elaborate on previous work.

1.7. Ethical Considerations

This study is informed primarily by desktop research. Interviews with two academics who focus on gangs were used to supplement the desktop research, however, as the literature on gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa is limited. The participants were invited to be interviewed in advance. The interviews were conducted online, and the interviewees were given a document providing information on the study, as well as a consent form that they had to sign which informed them that they were able to withdraw participation at any time. Their involvement is

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confidential, and the two interviewees are hereafter referred to as expert x and expert y to ensure their anonymity. The interviews did not involve the collection of any sensitive information, as the interviews were based on the key informants' views, insights, and opinions on gangs as researchers in the field. As such, the Department Ethics Screening Committee classified the study as low risk on 13 April 2022, and the project received approval from the Research Ethics Committee on 17 May 2022. The interviews took place in June 2022 and August 2022.

1.8. Outline of the Study

Chapter One provided an introduction to this thesis as a contemporary study of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa. It identified the focus of the thesis through the problem statement and research question that guides the study. The chapter also included a section on the conceptual and theoretical points of departure that form the groundwork on which the study is conducted. It introduced hypotheses that will be examined with reference to the case studies, as well as the research design and methodology, and ethical considerations relevant to this study.

Chapter Two offers a detailed examination of gangs in South Africa. It is split into two parts, that are focused on the apartheid and post-apartheid eras respectively. The first section provides a historical context to the emergence of gangs in Cape Town, which is followed by an analysis of how these groups developed during apartheid. It ends with an examination of the intersections between gangs, resistance movements, police, and the state during the apartheid years, as this unique context offers interesting insights into the operations of groups during periods of conflict. The second section examines gangs in Cape Town during the political transition and in the present. It traces how gangs developed since apartheid, enhancing knowledge of how these groups profited from involvement in illicit trades, expanded their operations, and institutionalised to become some of the most powerful non-state armed groups in Africa. This is followed by an examination of the current gangs in the Western Cape, termed the 'supergangs', which include the Americans, Hard Livings, Mongrels, and Sexy Boys.

Chapter Three offers an interesting case study for the examination of gangs in Freetown through Sierra Leone's civil war and post-conflict periods. It explores loosely structured groups of youths termed rarray boys that have operated through the state's post-independence era, as

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well as the overlaps between gangs and militias such as the West Side Boys during the civil war. The three predominant gangs that currently operate in Freetown, namely the Bloods, Black, and Crips are then examined with reference to their use of violence and connections to the state and society.

Chapter Four departs from the previous chapters in that it focuses solely on an armed group named the Mungiki that operates primarily in Nairobi. It therefore provides an in-depth examination of the group, allowing for novel insights into gangs in the African context, as the Mungiki is simultaneously described as a religious and cultural movement, political organisation, militia, vigilante group, and gang. The Mungiki illustrates how gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa depart from the dominant, Western understandings of these groups by allowing for the features of fluidity, flexibility, and dynamism to be central to its conceptualisation.

Chapter Five focuses on non-state armed groups in Nigeria that have been termed gangs at different points in time. These include area boys, which are analogous to youth street groups, that have engaged in criminal activity in Lagos since the state's independence, as well as the Yandaba which are considered one of Nigeria's most threatening non-state armed groups. The Bakassi Boys are also examined, and are understood as a vigilante group and gang that was endorsed by the state to combat crime in certain regions of Nigeria. Lastly, the Niger Delta provides an interesting study for the confluence of different non-state armed groups that highlight how the conceptual categories that differentiate between them are blurred in practice.

Chapter Six aims to consolidate the information from the case studies in the preceding chapters to conduct an analysis of these gangs, based on their various features. It examines the intersections between different non-state armed groups, such as militias, vigilantes, pirates, ex-combatants, and gangs to establish how they can be differentiated from each other. In addition, it unpacks how gangs in Africa can be understood, by examining why they are distinctive and how their various characteristics illustrate this fact. This includes an analysis of their features with reference to four factors, namely: objectives, relationship with the state, relationship to society, and institutionalisation. These factors assist with the construction of a typology, or heuristic framework that endeavours to enhance knowledge and understanding of gangs in the African context. The chapter ends with a discussion on how gangs are defined, the extent to which Western conceptualisations of these groups are applicable to gangs in Africa, and what this entails for the study of gangs on the continent.

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Chapter Seven concludes the thesis with an evaluation of the research that has been conducted, by applying the theoretical frameworks to the case studies that rendered descriptive accounts of gangs in Africa. It addresses the research question and hypotheses, and explores the limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research.

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Chapter 2: Gangs in South Africa

2.1. Introduction

Gangs are prevalent in most cities in South Africa. Gang-related violence, however, is highly concentrated in Cape Town, which is affirmed by the fact that it is considered one of the most dangerous cities in the world (Ludidi, 2022). This is supported by its murder rate of 67 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants as measured in 2022 (SACN, 2022); a figure which is partially accounted for by gang violence. It is unsurprising, then, that a great deal of space in the literature on gangs in Africa is occupied by analyses of these groups that operate in Cape Town, which is reflected in the length of this chapter. The focus of these studies is violence attributed to gangs that operate in what is often termed the coloured[2] informal settlements of the Cape Flats, an area that lies in the outskirts of the city. These armed groups are pervasive, well-entrenched, and pose a considerable threat to the communities in which they operate. The infamous Number gangs that have existed in South Africa's prisons for over a century are also commonly included in research on gangs. The distinguishing features of these gangs, namely their identity (as formed by their resistance to oppression), their espousal of mythological narratives that guide their practices, and their hierarchical structure, will be explored throughout this chapter.

This chapter consists of two parts. The first focuses on gangs during apartheid, by examining the conditions that led to the emergence of these groups. Gangs in South Africa have a long history of development, which is analysed with reference to three factors in particular during apartheid. These include the role of forced removals, the emergence of the drug trade, and the growing significance of prison gangs, in shaping the groups that currently operate in the Cape Flats. This is followed by an analysis of the intersections between gangs, resistance movements, police, and the apartheid state, which offers unique insights into how these actors interacted during a period characterised by political instability and conflict. The second section of this chapter addresses gangs in post-apartheid South Africa. This involves an examination

[2] The term 'coloured' refers to the classification of individuals into one of four official racial categories, namely white, black, Indian, and coloured, as stipulated by the Population Registration Act (1950) during apartheid (Higginson & Benier, 2015:539; Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:193). It is understood to mean 'mixed race', and as Jensen (2014:47) states, "although it is a constructed category, it has maintained its importance as a self-referential identity".

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of how these groups developed and transformed during the state's period of democratic transition, as well as in the post-apartheid era. Several factors are highlighted as important to these developments, and these include the role of political uncertainty, the opening of the state's borders, involvement in illicit trade, and the growth of anti-crime movements. The last section of this chapter analyses the 'supergangs' that have become increasingly powerful over the last few years. This includes an examination of their operations, size, levels of organisation, and involvement in illicit activity.

2.2. Historical Context

Gangs have operated in South Africa, in various forms, for centuries. Scholars including Penn (1990:15) and Ulrich (2014:1154) have noted the presence of gangs in the state dating back to the mid-to-late eighteenth century. Penn (1990) has written widely on this topic, providing historical accounts of the droster gangs[3] that emerged after the arrival of the Dutch East India Company to the Cape from the Netherlands, which marked the advent of the colonisation of South Africa. Bangstad (2005:196) and Redpath (2002:34) have similarly observed the existence of early gangs that operated in prisons during the nineteenth century. Petrus and Kinnes (2019:180) further maintain that these early gangs existed in an array of different locations and contexts. Contemporary studies of gangs in Cape Town often note the emergence of these groups with reference to the Group Areas Act (1950) which mandated the forced removal of 'non-white' populations[4] out of white areas, and importantly to this case study, of coloured communities to what is now called the Cape Flats (Goga & Goredema, 2014:6; Goga, 2013:3).

Samara (2011:93) argues that the forerunners to the gangs that currently operate in the Cape Flats existed in coloured communities in Cape Town such as District Six, prior to the forced removals. Overcrowding in these areas had created competition for jobs, and this promoted the spread of youth groups that sought economic upliftment through illicit activities (Samara,

[3] These gangs were made up of "runaway slaves, deserted sailors, absconding soldiers, 'land loopers', vagabonds, escaped murderers, bandits, thieves and assorted criminals" who were unified by the common objective to resist oppression (Penn, 1990:15).

[4] The term 'non-white' is used to refer to the apartheid government's classification of all racial groups other than white as a separate group, the treatment of which was reflected in the state's segregationist policies. The term is used to reflect this fact, and should not be interpreted as an endorsement of the perspective that other race groups are derivative.

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2011:93). Du Toit (2014:2) affirms this, and notes that the presence of gangs in these communities was not considered a significant threat to the safety of other residents. This shifted in the following years, as gangs became more violent after the relocations to the Cape Flats. The early development of gangs in Cape Town has therefore been observed as occurring in two phases (Jensen, 2014:33; Samara, 2011:96). The first is the formation of gangs in the city prior to the implementation of apartheid policies, when rates of urbanisation were escalating, and parts of the city were overpopulated. The second is the growth of gangs after the forced relocations of 'non-white' populations to the Cape Flats. The gangs initially suffered setbacks after the removals, and then resurfaced ten years later, growing rapidly, and spreading widely as they reportedly operated in all informal settlements in the area (Jensen, 2014:33; Goga, 2014:3).

2.3. The Development of Gangs in the Cape Flats During Apartheid

Gangs in Cape Town should be understood as part of the legacy of apartheid, and it is important to study them within this context, as the regime created conditions conducive to their growth and permanence. Several factors during this period proved instrumental in shaping the landscape of gangs in Cape Town and are necessary to examine in order to understand these groups in the present. Standing (2006:8) notes three factors in particular, namely the rise of street gangs as partially resulting from forced removals; the emergence of the drug trade and involvement in organised crime; and the growing significance of prison gangs.

It is widely acknowledged that the forced relocations of 'non-white' populations (which increased in the 1960s and 1970s) were one of the most important factors in the development of gangs in the Cape Flats (Lambrechts, 2014:792; Du Toit, 2014:2; Goga 2014:2, Samara, 2011:93). To illustrate this point, scholars have drawn comparisons between coloured communities before and after the relocations, as gangs were only seen as a danger to local populations after the 1980s. It was during that time that the media started reporting gang-related violence, perpetrated by groups such as the Mongrels, Sexy Boys, and the Scorpions (Standing, 2006:11). The limited threats that gangs had posed to these coloured communities prior to the

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removals were curbed by forms of 'informal social control'[5] through family ties and neighbourhood networks that dated back generations (Pinnock, 2016:34; Du Toit, 2014:2; Higginson and Benier, 2015:540; Petrus and Kinnes, 2019:181). This disintegrated with the forced removals as the fragmentation of these longstanding support systems left way for isolated family units that were lacking external support (Pinnock, 2016:47).

The disruption to communities as a result of the forced removals, together with rising unemployment and poverty, have been viewed as contributing factors to gang formation and recruitment in the Cape Flats (Jensen, 2014:31; Lambrechts, 2014:792). This is because gangs provide protection, status, power, a sense of belonging, and in many cases a source of income to those who are marginalised by a discriminatory political system (Higginson & Benier, 2015:540; Standing, 2006:122-123). Interestingly, scholars have noted that although youth movements were emerging in many regions in South Africa, this was not happening to the same extent in the Cape Flats, as gang recruitment was more popular to youths than partaking in the struggle for liberation (Goga, 2014:3).[6] Indeed, Desai (2004:17) highlights how powerful gangs in the Cape Flats had become by describing accounts of how resistance fighters "had to negotiate with the Cape Flats gangs for safe passage in the 1980s". It is arguable, then, that although resistance movements can provide similar attractions to oppressed youths (in the way of offering support to those suffering in the aforementioned conditions), gangs are still viewed as an attractive means by which to cope with these kinds of discriminatory contexts. Gangs could, perhaps, also be viewed as a different kind of resistance to exclusionary systems (Maringira & Gibson, 2019:57). This helps to account for why the effects of gang recruitment during the apartheid years are still felt today, as the Cape Flats is home to some of South Africa's most pervasive gangs.

The relationships between gangs and their communities shifted during apartheid. Accounts of early gangs in the Cape Flats mention the rise of 'community-based defence gangs' that aimed to protect local populations from those who threatened the safety of the community (Goga, 2014:2). These gangs reportedly arose due to the apartheid government's neglect of 'non-white' areas and its failure to protect the citizens that lived in them, however the vigilante-like

[5] Pinnock (2016) employs this term to describe how youths grew up in an environment characterised by social integration, common understanding and agreement on norms and values amongst community members, forms of surveillance on youths and outsiders, and regulation of the actions of youths.
[6] This was the case until the mid-1980s when the United Democratic Front (UDF) was founded, after which joining youth movements became more common (Goga & Goredema, 2014:7).

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groups started to resemble the criminals they were fighting when they charged inhabitants with protection tax (Goga, 2014:2). Several scholars including Samara (2011:95) and Goga (2014:2) have noted the increase in gang presence and the interesting relationship that developed between gangs and their communities during this period, as explained by the apartheid state's sustained lack of concern for the wellbeing of 'non-white' citizens. This entailed that non-state groups such as gangs began to provide state services, including protection and security, to populations in neglected areas (Goga, 2014:2). Goga (2014:3) argues that the conditions formed by the apartheid government in these communities fostered criminal activity and the growth of gangs, as citizens increasingly relied on them for resources in a context in which they were lacking other opportunities. At the same time, gangs became an alternative source of authority to the state, particularly in the Cape Flats, as it had become marked by increasing levels of conflict and violence, and criminals were able to capitalise on this to strengthen their networks and reinforce their power (Goga, 2014:3; Jensen, 2010).

The second factor mentioned by Standing (2006:8) is the development of illicit industries during apartheid. This refers to how gangs were able to extend their reach in the late 1970s through their involvement in international organised crime. Goga and Goredema (2014:7) and Standing (2006:10) maintain that mandrax (methaqualone) was influential in this regard, as the emergence of the illicit market for the drug (which was banned in 1977) linked South African cities such as Cape Town to Asia through its supply chain, in the development of the drug trade. Samara (2011:94) further argues that the market for mandrax served to embed gangs within communities in the Cape Flats, as it provided a source of income. At the same time, it had devastating social impacts on the communities that lived in the area, through the increased consumption of drugs and the associated growth of gang-related violence (Standing, 2006:10; Samara, 2011:94). The illegal trading of alcohol and drugs in Cape Town drove up incarceration rates, and prison conditions deteriorated as the number of inmates increased (Goga & Goredema, 2014:7; Standing, 2006:15). The extent to which gang involvement in organised crime could develop was limited, however, due to South Africa's status as a pariah state. The links between gangs and organised crime therefore became more pronounced after the end of apartheid, as the state's borders were opened to international markets. This will be examined in the section on gangs during the post-apartheid era.

The third major development during apartheid was the growth of the prison gangs in the Western Cape. Standing (2006:15) notes that incarceration rates rose rapidly during the 1950s,

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and that these figures continued to increase throughout the apartheid years. It was during this time that the Number gangs rose to prominence; they became increasingly influential towards the end of apartheid (Standing, 2006:15). The Numbers are referred to as gangs by non-members, and identify and refer to themselves as a gang. Standing (2006:15-16) argues that this labelling can be misleading, as the Numbers are often considered to be a 'clandestine organisation' that is hierarchically structured, operating throughout the state's prisons, and in the Western Cape in particular. Distinctive features of the Number gangs include their mythology (as derived from their history), ideology, and a related sense of purpose informed by their past that underlies their practices (Steinberg, 2004). Some of these aspects are shared with gangs in other parts of the world[7], however the inheritance of military customs as a legacy of colonialism which is evident in the Numbers, is pronounced in the African context.

The origin of the Numbers dates back to a group of outlaws and bandits, called the Ninevites[8], that emerged in Johannesburg during the late 1800s (Lötter, 1985:69; Steinberg, 2004:xiv; Standing, 2006:16). A notable feature of the Ninevites that can still be observed in the Numbers today, was their 'militaristic organisation' (Standing, 2006:16) in terms of the ranking system and the imaginary uniforms that they adopted (Steinberg, 2004:xv). These were derived from the "white colonial administration that governed South Africa at that time" (Standing, 2006:16). The Ninevites were disbanded in the early 1900s, and many of the leaders and members of the gang were incarcerated, after which they established their own system of rule in prison (Steinberg, 2004:xv; Lötter, 1985:69). The gang later split into three groups, namely the 26s, 27s, and 28s that are guided by a rich oral history that has been passed down for generations (Lötter, 1985:69; Standing, 2006:16). These narratives are imbued with anti-colonial sentiment and resistance to oppression, which became even more prominent during the struggle against apartheid. Ideology is, in this sense, central to their way of life (Steinberg, 2004:xv). In addition, the Numbers' history forms part of their daily practices, in terms of the rituals they adopt, the knowledge they are expected to acquire about the gangs (which is used as an indicator of a members' status), as well as how their interactions take place (with reference to the language and hand signals they use, and tattoos that they get) (Standing, 2006:16-17; Lötter, 1985:72-73).

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[7] An example of a gang that is guided by ideology and is also hierarchically structured is the Aryan Brotherhood, which is perceived as one of the largest and most dangerous gangs in the US (Finley, 2018:9-10)

[8] van Onselen (1985) has provided detailed accounts of the actions and transformations of these groups, as well as of their leader, Nongoloza.

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Standing (2006:17) argues that the Numbers can be understood as providing certain functions. The first is that they are organised hierarchically and exert control over inmates; they act as a parallel authority to those in charge of the prison. Indeed, engagement and collaboration with the Numbers, on the part of prison authorities, is often a requirement for the absence of conflict in prison. Lötter's (1985:70) study on gangs during apartheid affirms this, as his findings indicate that the 26s, 27s, and 28s had codes of conduct by which prisoners had to adhere, in order to minimise the probability of conflict breaking out. This desire for order (which is often achieved through coordination) is a distinctive feature of the Numbers. Standing (2006:17) further notes that they govern activities, such as dealing contraband, as well as regulate violence and sexual relations between prisoners. The second aspect is that the Numbers can be perceived as an expression of resistance and a form of protest against repression, both in terms of their life inside prison and outside of it (Standing, 2006:17). The third element is that the Numbers can provide a means by which to cope with the harsh conditions of prison and the difficulties that inmates face daily (Lötter, 1985:71; Standing, 2006:17). The influence of the members was initially limited to the prisons in which they were confined, however that began to shift in the late 1980s and 1990s when they had more of an impact on street gangs and were increasingly involved in organised crime (Goga & Goredema, 2014:7; Standing, 2006:18). Lötter (1985:70) notes that the 26s, 27s, and 28s developed alliances with street gangs in the Cape Flats and that these links reinforced divisions between the Numbers in the recruitment of new members in prison. The Numbers' involvement in external illicit activity was, however, limited during apartheid.

It is apparent that gangs emerged and developed during the period of forced removals in the Western Cape, and that they reorganised during the tumultuous and violent period of political upheaval in the 1980s (Samara, 2011:96). Samara (2011:95) maintains that the government became more repressive and that resistance to the regime increased at that time. Gangs reportedly capitalised on this turbulent situation, and engaged in more criminal activity, such as extortion, theft, and involvement with the drug trade. This political and economic instability had also allowed for the spread of organised crime towards the end of the apartheid regime (Samara, 2011:95). Goga (2014:3) and Samara (2011:94) observe that the threats posed by gangs to the safety of communities in the Cape Flats were worsened by the apartheid government. This is because the state was disinterested in addressing problems that plagued 'non-white' areas. In addition, the government collaborated with gangs during apartheid, which served to further embed them in the communities in which they operated (Pinnock, 2016:46;

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Samara, 2011:94). Evidence suggests that gangs make use of periods marked by economic, political, and social instability and uncertainty, and that they can adapt and transform as their environments change (Samara, 2011:96).

2.4. Gangs, Resistance Movements, Police, and the State

The intersection between gangs, resistance movements, and political actors was strengthened during the struggle against apartheid. Goga (2014:3) makes important links between the first two mentioned groups in this regard, as they helped each other pursue their respective economic and political goals. He (2014:3) states that liberation activists created smuggling routes in different parts of the country, and developed connections with criminal groups in informal settlements as they required their support to access funds for their political objectives. Standing (2006:137) and Goga and Goredema (2014:7) note that these connections are not well understood[9], but that there is evidence to indicate that a mutually beneficial relationship formed between these two groups. Resistance fighters required financial assistance, hiding places, and help with gathering intelligence. At the same time, criminals who could offer support to the fighters needed assistance with the drug trade, transporting illegal goods, and attaining weapons (Goga & Goredema, 2014:7).

Standing (2006:139) and Goga (2014:4) further maintain that these networks endured after the end of apartheid, and that important figures who were involved in criminal activity and who had links to gangs, later assumed prominent political or economic positions in society.[10] There is evidence to suggest that the differences between non-state armed groups (such as gangs and resistance movements) became increasingly blurred during this period of conflict. This is supported by reports that indicate how the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party engaged in criminal activities such as theft and the smuggling of drugs, including mandrax (Standing, 2006:137-138; Goga & Goredema, 2014:7).

[9] Standing (2006:138) maintains that this is partly due to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission not being requested to conduct research into the links between these groups or the illicit activities in which they were engaged.

[10] Goga (2014:4) illustrates this with reference to Cyril Beeka, who was suspected of criminal involvement even after the transition to democracy, and who maintained connections with police officers and political actors linked to the ANC (Goga & Goredema, 2014:7).

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The apartheid state and gangs in the Cape Flats also developed a symbiotic relationship during the struggle. Pinnock (2016:46), referencing his research during the 1970s and 1980s, noted that there was a significant degree of collaboration between gangs and the police at that time. This is supported by Goga (2014:4) who maintains that the state used gangs to suppress political opposition and dissent. This is explained by the fact that gangs had accrued a great deal of power and held influence in the communities in which they operated. They performed several roles for the government, including to act as informants, as well as to threaten or intimidate resistance fighters (Pinnock, 2016:46). Gangs were also used to assassinate individuals involved in liberation movements (Standing, 2006:137; Goga & Goredema, 2014:8). In return for their assistance, the police ignored the criminal activity of gangs, and they were not prosecuted for their actions. Pinnock (2016:46) also notes that gangs were engaged in 'quasi-policing' in that they (together with the police) would target certain individuals and maintain order in some communities, ensuring that the violence was relatively contained, whilst the gangs remained intact. Goga (2014:4) and Pinnock (2016:57) maintain that this mutually beneficial relationship served the gangs well, as they were emboldened to extend their reach and power. This is not to say, however, that the police were always in collaboration with gangs. Jensen (2014:40) argues that the two groups were often in conflict with each other, and that some reports indicate that the apartheid government often treated gangs and liberation fighters alike – as threats that needed to be contained – often with violence.

As political conflict intensified in the mid-1980s, the state employed covert counterinsurgency strategies to undermine the efforts of resistance movements such as the ANC and the UDF in the communities in which they operated (Lamb, 2022:79, Douek, 2020:91; Standing, 2006:137). This involved the provision of weapons to gangs and vigilante groups in different parts of South Africa, to incite violence and disorder in communities, and in this way weaken the mobilisation of these movements (Lamb, 2022:78). These armed groups also targeted individuals who appeared to be political activists, as well as those who seemed to support the resistance. The intention was to diminish opposition to the apartheid state (Lamb, 2022:79). An example of this phenomenon[11] occurring in Cape Town includes the Witdoeke, a vigilante group (that has been described as a gang), that attacked individuals who were suspected of being aligned with the UDF (Douek, 2020:91; TRC, 1998:25, Lamb, 2022:79). This

[11] Other examples include "the Toaster Gang in Tembisa; the A-Team in Natal; the Black Cats in Ermelo; and the Khetisi Gang in Sebokeng" (Lamb, 2022:79).

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outsourcing of violence to gangs by the state (Doeuk, 2020:91) arguably served to legitimise their operations. The gangs and their use of violence were being sanctioned by the state, which thereby fostered their growth.

Samara (2011:96) further notes the connection between the apartheid state and organised crime (which has been linked to the operations of gangs), through the former's clandestine counterinsurgency tactics. This relates to the creation of smuggling routes by the security forces, in order to attain resources necessary for military operations, as the state was experiencing sanctions on goods including oil and weapons. The South African Defence Force was also reportedly involved in the illicit trade of ivory, which assisted with securing funding for operations (Standing, 2006:136). These routes paved the way for criminals to engage in illicit activities such as drug and wildlife trafficking years later, through the use of these established networks (Samara, 2011:96). It is apparent, then, that the complicity of the state, as well as its support of gangs, was partially responsible for the growth of these armed groups in South Africa during apartheid.

2.5. Gangs in Post-Apartheid South Africa

The end of apartheid signified a transformation in gangs in the Cape Flats, as they became more powerful and entrenched in society. This period, from 1994 until the present, has been marked by a shift in their size, power, and operations. The street gangs of the apartheid era have become 'supergangs'[12], and in some cases, are considered criminal syndicates due to their sophistication, levels of organisation, and involvement in international organised crime (Lambrechts, 2012:787; Dziewanski, 2021:2). Scholars have noted significant factors that played a role in their transformation during the post-apartheid era, which will be examined in greater detail in this section. These include opportunities for the growth of gangs that were attributed to the political transition, namely the weakening of police institutions and the opening of the state's borders to international trade (Standing, 2006:39, Shaw & Reitano, 2013). The influence of the Prevention of Organised Crime Act of 1998 (POCA) has also been cited as a factor, as it laid the groundwork for how gangs were perceived and treated by law

[12] The term 'supergang' is often used in reference to gangs in Cape Town (such as the Americans and Mongrels), that enjoy large membership and have significant territorial reach. They are also highly organised and well-entrenched in the communities in which they operate.

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enforcement; and the role of anti-crime initiatives, namely People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) is also noteworthy in this regard (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:184-185; Standing, 2006:43). PAGAD is often noted as an important factor that inadvertently shaped how gangs in the Cape Flats conduct their operations, but it also provides an interesting insight into the inherent contradictions of organisations that set out to combat criminal groups (Desai, 2004; Standing, 2006).

The supergangs of the post-apartheid era have branched out, and their reach is no longer limited to the Cape Flats. This expansion is largely due to their involvement in international organised crime, and their criminal activities have grown to include theft, extortion, protection racketeering, drug trafficking, and wildlife trafficking. The threat that gangs present to the state and society seems to be worsening, and violence attributed to gangs is on the rise (Maringira & Gibson, 2019:57). There is, therefore, a strong incentive for an evaluation of these gangs, in order to understand how they operate, what their objectives are, and how they are structured, as well as to acquire knowledge on the types of criminal activity in which they are engaged. These groups are referred to as gangs in the literature, but also identify as being gangs. This section will examine the characteristics of gangs in the Cape Flats, as well as the extent to which they fit the dominant conceptualisations of gangs as derived from Western literature.

2.6. The Development of Gangs in Post-Apartheid South Africa

The development of gangs in South Africa has been attributed to several factors which will be explored below. These groups underwent marked transformations during the state's political transition, from approximately 1992 until 1994, and this period has been cited as providing the groundwork for the growth of gangs in the post-apartheid era. It is therefore within this context that an analysis of gangs in the Cape Flats should be conducted. Indeed, Standing (2006:36) argues that crime attributed to gangs became more prevalent in the early to mid-1990s. Scholars such as Samara (2011:95) and Shaw (2016:360) similarly note that gangs and other criminal groups grew in power, size, and influence during that time. There are two arguments that are commonly cited in providing reasons for these developments. The first is the notion that criminal groups thrive in environments of political uncertainty. The redirection of the state's attention away from crime, towards addressing political matters, provides opportunities for the

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growth of armed groups such as gangs (Shaw, 2016:360; Shaw & Reitano, 2013:1-2).[13] Goga and Goredema (2014:3) further argue that there was a power vacuum[14] during that time, and the state's ability to address violence and related threats was limited for at least ten years – a situation that criminal groups welcomed and used to their benefit.

The second argument that features in discussions around the transformation of gangs in South Africa during that period involves the opening of the state's borders (Standing, 2006:39). This occurred after South Africa had been a pariah state for several decades, and was isolated from international trade as it had experienced sanctions on numerous commodities. The end of apartheid therefore signified growing access to global markets, and the increasing porosity of the state's borders, which presented a stark contrast to the economic and political isolation that characterised the period prior to 1994 (Desai, 2004:18; Standing, 2006:39; Shaw & Reitano, 2013). Standing (2006:40) and Desai (2004:18) further note that foreign organised criminal groups sought South Africa as an attractive base for their business operations, due to the state's well-developed economy, sophisticated infrastructure, and proximity and access to lucrative markets. This resulted in an influx of foreign syndicates[15] to the state as well as the increasing involvement of domestic groups (including gangs) in global organised criminal networks (Standing, 2006:40). Standing (2006:41) cites Gastrow (1998) who further argues that through these developing partnerships, domestic street gangs were exposed to new markets (including for drugs and arms), acquired new knowledge and skills, and were encouraged to become more organised to facilitate these illicit operations and ensure greater profits. The domestic market for drugs was highly profitable at that time, given the extensive use of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and amphetamines locally (UNODC, 1999). The international drug trade, however, played a particularly significant role in connecting gangs in the Cape Flats to global criminal networks, as South Africa became a transit point in the transportation of drugs from Asia and other parts of Africa to the US and Europe (Dziewanski, 2021:31).

[13] The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent growth in organised crime is often cited as an example of this phenomenon, as the political instability created an environment conducive to the success of these armed groups (Standing, 2006:42; Shaw, 1998:2).
[14] This relates to what Standing (2006:38) terms 'a weakening police state' as the reduced capacity of the police to combat gangs is highlighted as a factor that enabled the latter's development. Standing (2006:39) supports this claim with findings from interviews with key experts, which indicate that the transformation and restructuring of the police after apartheid created instability and disunity within the force (Standing, 2006:38; Desai, 2004:17).
[15] These include the Russian Mafia, the Italian Mafia, Nigerian organised criminal groups, and Chinese Triads (Shaw, 1998:4-5; Standing, 2006:40).

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The sale of drugs became central to the operations of gangs in the early 1990s, and a series of gang wars erupted during that time due to competition over turf. These wars received growing public attention during the state's transition, as gang-related violence started escalating by 1995 (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:184). This leads to an additional factor that shaped the transformation of gangs after the end of apartheid, namely, the role of anti-crime movements which placed external pressures on gangs, prompting them to reorganise and restructure (Standing, 2006:42). Foremost among these was a community anti-crime movement, which became a vigilante group, named PAGAD. PAGAD emerged in 1996, as a response to escalating levels of crime, and in particular, the prevalence of gangs and drugs in the Western Cape (Redpath, 2002:35; Kinnes, 2014:22; Desai, 2004:1). The group aimed to combat powerful and violent gangs in the Cape Flats, given the disillusionment community members felt concerning the police's willingness and capacity to contain gang-related conflict and restore a sense of safety to the area (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:184).

PAGAD's membership grew over several years, and it became increasingly powerful and known for targeting gang members in the Cape Flats. Petrus and Kinnes (2019:184) provide support for this, by stating that the group had eliminated thirty gang leaders by 2008.[16] The violence was attributed to PAGAD, however reports indicate that 'militant splinter groups' from the organisation were responsible for the attacks (Standing, 2006:43). Regardless, PAGAD was criticised for becoming a criminal group, and it has been suggested that PAGAD's behaviour and actions began to resemble those the group sought to combat or eliminate (Desai, 2004). In this sense, PAGAD began to operate in opposition to the state, used violence in pursuit of its objectives, and created fear in communities.[17] It is plausible then, that the activities of the group could be considered gang-like, and this highlights how rigid categories that delineate how certain groups should operate often fail to capture what happens in practice. PAGAD highlights the flexibility of these groups, and their ability to transform from one type of armed group to another.

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[16] One of the most noteworthy events in this regard, was the shooting of Rashaad Staggie, leader of the Hard Livings gang, in 1996 (Nombembe, Alexander & Hyman, 2019).

[17] PAGAD therefore met many of the criteria for broad conceptualisations of a gang during certain periods. It existed for a prolonged period, engaged in criminal activity (often resulting in the deaths of civilians), and challenged the state's monopoly on violence. Dixon and Johns (2001:7) refer to PAGAD as a 'terrorist organisation' due to its tactics and the nature of its attacks, although the group did not seek to supplant the state. Petrus and Kinnes (2019:184) remark that PAGAD should not be thought of as a gang, because its incentives, or *raison d'être*, centred around combatting violence to ensure the safety of others. This provides a contrast to the motivations of gangs as primarily being self-enrichment (through criminal activity) to the detriment of others.

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The period of 1996-2003 has been described as a 'state of war', during which PAGAD, gangs, and the police were embroiled in a conflict that resulted in many casualties[18] (Kinnes, 2014:22). The government instituted POCA in 1998, partially as a response to this threat. POCA aimed to combat gangs by criminalising the membership of these groups, and targeting their leadership through the forfeiture of their assets (Standing, 2006:43; Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:184). It was during this period that the structure and levels of organisation of gangs began to change. In response to both PAGAD and POCA, gangs started to decentralise their operations in an attempt to protect leaders from being targeted (Standing, 2006:43; Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:184). Many of them also established a "second-tier leadership and diversified their activities" so as to become less vulnerable and more impervious to the efforts of law enforcement (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:185). As Standing (2006:43) notes, the effect was

> to create a greater complexity in the internal hierarchies of gangs and to consolidate power among larger, better organised structures. The larger gangs became more hierarchically structured to afford greater distance and protection to their leaders.

Standing (2006:43-44) substantiates this claim through evidence from interviews with key experts, who maintained that gangs became more organised and began to collaborate with each other to ensure greater profits. This occurred in the late 1990s, arguably as a result of both PAGAD and POCA, as gangs in the Cape Flats realised that fighting amongst themselves made them weaker against these two forces. An example of this kind of unintended outcome includes the establishment of a group, formed by gang leaders belonging to different gangs in the Cape Flats, called the Community Outreach Forum (CORE) (Redpath, 2002:35). The CORE served as an umbrella organisation and a united front to combat PAGAD and its challenges to the survival of gangs in the area (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:184). It is understood that the group's purpose was to garner support from community members, and in this way undermine mobilisation for PAGAD (Redpath, 2002:35).

Standing (2006:98) argues that the nature of the illicit industry determines the features of the group that profits from it. Following this reasoning, the transformation of gangs in Cape Town

[18] Bangstad (2005:190) notes that 225 people died in Cape Town during 1998, reportedly as a result of "urban terrorism, much of it attributed to PAGAD".

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is partially due to their investment in commodities (such as mandrax, and then cocaine, heroin, and ecstasy) that are difficult to obtain[19], allowing for the creation of a monopoly in the illicit market for drugs. The number of drug suppliers was therefore limited, and there was a large demand for drugs, which meant that the levels of organisation of these groups had to increase in order to become more sophisticated, and to coordinate to provide these goods to the region. This was the case when the formation of a syndicate termed For It Requires Money (FIRM) helped to influence the organisation of gangs in Cape Town (Desai, 2004:18; Shaw, 1998:3). The group grew to prominence in 1996 and was made up of drug merchants and gang leaders who aimed to expand and consolidate the illicit market for drugs (Schärf & Vale, 1996:30; Redpath, 2002:35). Their objective was therefore to diminish competition over turf, to organise large shipments of drugs, and to supply these drugs based on set prices that were agreed beforehand (Shaw, 2002). This increase in the level of organisation and sophistication of certain gangs in the Cape Flats was instrumental in their development. Although syndicates are distinct from gangs and the two groups function independently of one another, there are cases where they collaborate, and it is apparent that gangs can transform into syndicates (Redpath, 2002:35; Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:185). This highlights the intersections and capacity for evolution that these groups display.

A series of conflicts in 2002 resulted in the incarceration of members and leaders of both PAGAD and gangs in the Cape Flats (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:184). This led to a rise in young, militant individuals becoming leaders of the gangs, who readily employed violence in pursuit of their objectives and encouraged the diversification of illicit activities to include not only the drug trade, but also the entertainment sector, transportation industry, and wildlife trafficking (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:185). The result of these investments was the emergence of a criminal elite, as several individuals were able to accumulate significant profits from these trades (Desai, 2004:19; Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:185). Standing (2006:44) further notes that the gangs were incentivised to extend their reach to include formerly white areas such as Sea Point, and in this way capture new markets and more consumers for drugs and avoid members of PAGAD and law enforcement. At the same time, Kinnes (2000:15) notes that gangs spread out into rural areas and initiated a strategy of 'buying the town', in places such as Saldanha and Bredasdorp.

[19] These drugs require great financial investment, skill, and appetite for risk in order to supply them to domestic markets. Conversely, Standing (2006:98) argues that the nature and characteristics of gangs in Cape Town would be vastly different to how they are today if the groups had not branched out, and continued to sell marijuana, a drug that is easily accessible and whose market entails fewer barriers to entry.

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This would entail gang leaders purchasing key economic and commercial infrastructure, including shops and petrol stations, and exerting their influence over these spaces to recruit youths (Kinnes, 2000:15). Standing (2006:102) further argues that the wealth of these gang leaders stands in stark contrast with the poor economic status of these communities. This leads to the idolisation of gang members by local youths, as they aspire to accumulate wealth and power in an environment characterised by limited opportunities for upliftment (Lambrechts, 2012:794). Standing (2006:102) notes the inherent contradictions of these figures, as they are simultaneously viewed by community members as being violent and ruthless individuals who are involved in illicit businesses, as well as philanthropists who provide for the community.

The aforementioned factors, namely the effects of the political transition on policing, the increased porosity of borders and welcoming of international trade, the role of anti-crime movements and the effects of anti-gang legislation, set in motion the transformations of gangs in South Africa to become the formidable and violent groups that can be observed today. There are several prominent supergangs that operate in Cape Town, that are characterised by their large membership; high levels of organisation; participation in a range of illicit activities; and significant territorial reach, particularly in urban areas. These will be examined below.

2.7. Gangs in Cape Town

The Cape Flats is still a centre of gang violence in the state, as conflict attributed to gangs is rife in communities such as Manenberg, Mitchells Plain, Hanover Park, Delft, Kraaifontein, Lavender Hill, and Nyanga (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:182). In 2006, Standing (103) noted that there were approximately 130 reported gangs in the Cape Flats, although this was not considered an accurate figure, even at that time. The number of gangs is now believed to be much higher, with reportedly over 100,000 members operating in the region (Lambrechts, 2012:792; Dziewanski, 2021:1). A minority of these groups has a significantly larger membership and has operated for a longer period than the others. Their distinguishing features include their size, their control over territories, and a degree of continuity in that they have outlasted their leadership, and in this sense can be perceived as ‘institutions’ (Standing, 2006:103). These ‘supergangs’ or ‘street syndicates’ include the Americans, Mongrels, Hard Livings, and Sexy Boys (Dziewanski, 2021:2; Lambrechts, 2012:787-788). The smaller gangs, by comparison, are more transient and their territorial reach is limited, sometimes to merely an

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apartment block or a section of a street. Standing (2006:103) further notes that there is no specific way in which gangs form or evolve. They sometimes endure as long as the leadership remains intact after which they dissolve, or they are able to recruit more members and grow, or they form alliances with a bigger gang and are absorbed by it (Standing, 2006:103-104). The membership of gangs also varies, as Roloff (2014:2) and Standing (2006:104) maintain that smaller gangs can consist of merely ten individuals, whereas supergangs are often made up of thousands, or hundreds of thousands of members.

As many of these gangs are very large, it is not always possible for their members to coordinate their actions or to operate as a cohesive unit. Members preserve a sense of unity, however, through common practices, such as wearing certain clothes, getting distinctive tattoos, and using slang or a unique language to communicate. The Americans are considered to be one of the biggest and most powerful gangs in Cape Town (Roloff, 2014:9). Individuals belonging to this gang signify their membership by placing the American flag on tattoos, clothes, and graffiti to indicate turf (Dziewanski, 2021:2). Dziewanski (2021:2) notes that the Americans have connections with smaller gangs such as the Dollar Kids and Dixie Boys, that sometimes fight with them under the US flag. These groups have distinct identities, however, and are not entirely subsumed into the larger gang. By contrast, several gangs align under the British flag to combat the power and dominance of the Americans. These include the Hard Livings, Mongrels, and the Laughing Boys (Roloff; 2014:9; Dziewanski, 2021:2). It is important to note that these affiliations shift, as gangs adapt to survive in response to the changing conditions of their environments.

Standing (2006:104) also highlights that affiliations are important to analyse in order to understand how gangs in the Cape Flats operate. He (2006:104) notes that these can be perceived as "trading blocs or fighting alliances". In this sense, a smaller gang might depend on a larger one for a supply of drugs and arms, and in exchange, the larger gang will expect the smaller one to assist with fighting competitors or enemies. The Numbers are influential in this regard. As examined in the previous section, the Numbers did not have significant connections to street gangs during apartheid, however this changed after the state's transition to democracy (Steinberg, 2004:72-73). These prison gangs now have alliances with supergangs. These connections, however, are flexible and change over time (Interview with Expert x, 2022). Standing (2006:106) notes that membership in prison gangs also influences an individual's status once they are released and return to street gangs. This is supported by evidence of former

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members of the Numbers becoming leaders of street gangs once returning from prison. The Numbers were also influential in that after former members had been released, they began to impart their "culture and organisation skills" on street gangs when they joined them (Standing, 2006:106). Street gangs then began to implement practices that were emblematic of the Numbers' rank structure, and they instituted rituals inspired by the prison gangs (Pinnock, 2016:113-114; Steinberg, 2004:73).

It is difficult to acquire information on how gangs in the Cape Flats operate. It is apparent, however, that there is a degree of specialisation within many gangs, and a division of labour in that individuals can focus on specific tasks, ranging from robbery and drug dealing to organised killings (Dziewanski, 2021:2). Involvement in gang activity has also been observed as intermittent. Standing (2006:114) notes that supergangs are often mistakenly viewed as pyramidal organisations with a centralised command structure. The operations of these gangs, however, are more analogous to a franchise in that the various cells of a particular gang operate autonomously (Standing, 2006:114). Supergangs should therefore rather be perceived as decentralised structures, with the absence of an overarching authority to control daily operations (Kinnes, 2014:19). Standing (2006:115) terms them as operating as "a conglomerate of affiliated smaller businesses" with loose ties between the varying cells that operate in different areas.

A significant trend that can be observed on the development of gangs in the Cape Flats is their increasing involvement in both licit and illicit business. This is particularly apparent for several of the large, organised supergangs. Petrus and Kinnes (2019:185) note that this expansion of business interests can be seen in the Sexy Boys' involvement in the property market and extortion; the Hard Livings' focus on the drug trade, arms supply, protection racketeering, and extortion; and the Americans' investment in the drug trade. The reach of these gangs extends to most areas of the Cape Flats, and the connections between them have made them more complex and difficult to challenge (Dziewanski, 2021:2). Gang-related violence also often involves high levels of organisation (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:188; Dziewanski, 2021:2). This is seen in the assassinations of leaders, kidnappings of members from enemy gangs, and cases where larger gangs enlist smaller ones to engage in proxy wars, and fight on their behalf (Dziewanski, 2021:3).

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The nightclub security war in Cape Town illustrates how gangs have branched out into different business ventures, and highlights how these armed groups have extended their reach to include more areas in the city (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:182). The effects of this conflict have subdued since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent closing of nightclubs, however, these businesses were the site of gang-related operations and violence as recently as 2019 (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:183; Dolley, 2019). Petrus and Kinnes (2019:183) note that the extent of the organisation and sophistication of the supergangs became apparent through the successful running of protection rackets. Gang members have been competing to provide security (or bouncers) to nightclubs in the city, as this is a form of income for these groups. In addition, regulating entry into these establishments also entails control over the movement of individuals and the sale of drugs, and in this sense can be seen as the extension of a gang's turf (Dolley, 2019:6,129; Shaw, 2016:357). The conflict over the provision of security resulted in several shootings of gang members and leaders. Analyses of these clashes indicate that there were ties between prominent figures in the security industry and members of gangs in the Cape Flats (Dolley, 2019; Shaw, 2016:357-358). The involvement of gangs in this situation also highlights how these groups have become increasingly sophisticated and participate in organised crime. This marks a contrast to the operations of gangs during apartheid, as the current gangs in the Western Cape are highly organised, have connections to illicit industries such as drug trafficking and protection racketeering, and pose a significant threat to the legitimacy and authority of the state (Lambrechts, 2012:787; Petrus & Kinnes, 2019:184).

There are several additional trends to be observed in relation to gang violence more generally. Intergang conflict in the Cape Flats, particularly between the Americans and Hard Livings, has been recorded since the 1990s (Kinnes, 1995; Kinnes, 2014:15; Standing, 2006; Redpath, 2002:34). Kinnes (2014:15) notes that the nature of the violence caused by these groups has evolved over time, due to increasing organisation and technological advancements, which has led to more deaths. In addition, gang wars result in diminished access to state services including health care, education, and transportation. This poses a threat to the wellbeing of affected communities, as well as the to the authority and legitimacy of the state (Kinnes, 2014:16; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2022). Kinnes (2014:17) has observed that gang violence in the Cape Flats is cyclical, and that it is correlated with political uncertainty, especially during the time leading up to elections. In addition, gang wars are protracted and endure for longer periods, as compared to the fights that occurred during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (which often lasted several days and at most a few weeks) (Kinnes,

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2014:18). These fights also involve a myriad of different actors, and the violence is difficult to contain and resolve due to the complexity of the conflict (Sullivan & Bunker, 2020). Kinnes (2014:18) also notes that the conflict has become more widespread and youth recruitment of members has been increasing.

Kinnes (2014:18) also argues that gangs and the police are mutually influential in that each group of actors shapes the other's behaviour and actions. There has been a focus on short-term policing during the post-apartheid era, which involves containing violence by taking control of an area, through the 'governance of space' (Kinnes, 2014:18). The contestation over governance leads to gangs shaping the way in which the police approach them and attempt to govern these areas. At the same time, the actions of the police influence how the gangs conduct their operations and extend their reach in contested spaces. Kinnes (2014:18) and Du Toit (2014:3) argue that policing often results in the disillusionment of community members and increased support for the gangs (as a result of both fearing them and identifying with the challenges they face). There is also a more general point to be made about the notion of labelling (on the part of the state, law enforcement, and the media) being a self-fulfilling prophecy. From this perspective, defining a group as a 'gang' or 'terrorist organisation' serves to encourage or reinforce behaviour that is in line with the understanding of what such a label should entail. Asserting that a group or individual will act a certain way tends to promote the very act that is being denounced. The way in which gangs are described and portrayed by various sources of information therefore requires critical reflection.

2.8. Conclusion

The forerunners to the formidable gangs that currently operate in the Cape Flats emerged and transformed during apartheid. Their development occurred in two phases, namely prior to the forced removals and post these relocations. Three factors stand out with respect to the evolution of gangs during that time and are important to consider when examining the nature of gangs in Cape Town today. The first is the growth of street gangs, which is partially accounted for by the devastation caused to coloured communities during and after the forced removals. Gangs therefore provided security, resources, and a feeling of belonging to those suffering at the hands of an oppressive regime. The second factor is the emergence of illicit industries and the growing involvement of gangs in organised crime that provided them with income and power,

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serving to embed them within their communities. The third is the increasing significance of prison gangs, namely the Numbers. Their appeal to mythological narratives (as informed by their history), as well as the ideology that guides their practices is noteworthy in this regard. The prison gangs provide support for the hypotheses that gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa share features with gangs in the Global North through their hierarchical structure and emphasis on rules, but also that they are distinctive from gangs in Western contexts as exhibited by their inheritance of military practices as a legacy of colonial rule. In addition to these developments, gangs in the Western Cape forged connections with resistance movements, police, and political authorities. These intersections became increasingly blurred throughout the conflict, as both state and non-state groups assisted each other with fulfilling their various economic and political objectives. This reinforces the hypothesis that gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa often exhibit links with other non-state armed groups, which is not always a feature of gangs in other contexts. It is arguable that the apartheid state's disregard and at times, support, of gangs served to further embolden them and increase their power. This provided the foundation for their development during the political transition, was examined in the second section of this chapter.

The post-apartheid era has been marked by the development of gangs in the Cape Flats. Several of these gangs have become highly organised, sophisticated groups that have decentralised operations, hierarchical structures, large memberships, and significant territorial reach. The features of these groups overlap with Western conceptualisations of gangs in urban areas, as they have endured for a long period and routinely engage in criminal activity. The prominent groups in Cape Town include, but are not limited to, the Americans, Hard Livings, Mongrels, and Sexy Boys. Their transformations can be attributed, at least in part, to the changes ascribed to the state's political transition to democracy. This refers to how gangs capitalised on opportunities presented by the state's period of political uncertainty, during 1992 to 1994. These factors include weakened policing institutions, and the increased porosity of the state's borders as it welcomed global trade after a time of international isolation. The role of anti-crime movements, and PAGAD in particular, was also significant in inadvertently encouraging collaboration between gangs. This development was also encouraged by POCA, and two examples of this phenomenon of cooperation to consolidate gangs in the Western Cape include the formation of FIRM and the CORE.

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Gangs still operate in the Cape Flats, however, their reach has extended to include parts of the city that were reserved for white populations during apartheid. This is illustrated by the recent nightclub security war, as gangs have been vying for control over security in establishments in Cape Town. An additional trend that can be observed in the operations of gangs today, is their increasing involvement in licit and illicit business. Economic activity is central to their existence, and gangs are involved in the drug trade, extortion, protection racketeering, and wildlife trafficking (Shaw, 2017; Shaw, 2018; Williams, 2022). Gang affiliations are also important to analyse in order to understand how these groups operate, however these alliances are considered dynamic. It is apparent that gangs have become increasingly violent over time, which highlights the importance of analysing these groups in order to combat the threats that they present to the safety of communities, as well as to the authority of the state.

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Chapter 3: Gangs in Sierra Leone

3.1. Introduction

Sierra Leone offers an interesting and unique study for the examination of gangs, given the state's turbulent political history. This context of political instability and insecurity which culminated in a civil war, provides a point of contrast to the dominant assumptions[20] of how gangs operate in other parts of the world, as well as the environments from which they emerge. In this sense, the political conflict (and the notion of civil war in particular) provides a novel setting in which to analyse gangs and the interesting formations that they construct. There is therefore a significant overlap between different armed groups, such as militias and gangs, and these formations have transformed over time in response to changing contexts. This period of conflict was characterised by the formation and disintegration of various groups, notably the West Side Boys (WSB), which will be examined in this chapter.

The topic of gangs in Sierra Leone is greatly understudied, and as such, a limited number of sources were available to inform this section. In addition, a few of the groups which are examined do not fit neatly into the conceptualisation of gangs, but have been included in studies of gangs in Africa. This is because some of their characteristics correspond to those of gangs. They may, however, be better understood as gang-like, rather than being strictly defined as a gang. The end of the war signified the beginning of the formation of new kinds of gangs in Sierra Leone, and Freetown in particular, as most of the groups analysed in this chapter operate in the capital city. Gangs that currently operate in the state fit the dominant Western understandings of gangs more closely than the groups that operated in the same areas before and during the war. These gangs are commonly referred to in the literature as 'cliques', and these terms are used interchangeably in this section. Their inheritance of military practices provides an insight into the distinctive features of gangs operating in post-conflict settings. In addition, there have been strong links between gangs, or gang-like groups, and political actors throughout the state's post-independence history. These gangs are becoming increasingly powerful, and have the potential to grow in the future, which offers further support for the importance of their examination.

[20] These assumptions refer to gangs operating in urban areas which are often marked by inequality, and limited state presence (as opposed to the absence of state control). Commonly cited examples include the ghettos in the US and the favelas in Brazil i.e. areas that are not war-torn.

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3.2. Youth Groups in Sierra Leone

Discussions concerning gangs in Sierra Leone have centred around youths termed rarray boys (Hagedorn, 2008; Abdullah 2002; Utas, 2014). This label is used to refer to marginalised youths who are on the fringes of society. They are perceived as idle, uneducated, demotivated, deviant, and anti-social. Authors including Abdullah (2002) and Utas (2014) contend, however, that they can be understood as a form of resistance against a political system that does not provide for them. Their emergence as a 'social group' has therefore been dated to the late nineteenth century, and their existence has endured given that the conditions that produced these marginal groups have remained consistent in the state's postcolonial era (Abdullah, 2002:21; Hagedorn, 2008:34). It is noteworthy that reports of youth gangs in Freetown date back to 1917 (Abdullah, 2002:22). These youths, however, could be viewed as partaking in illicit activities as a means to survive in the face of structural inequality, as opposed to being perceived as inherently delinquent and criminal (Mitton, 2022:48).

Rarray boys are understood to have operated primarily in Freetown, which is where most individuals in the group were from, before membership expanded to include migrants from other parts of the state (Abdullah, 2002:21). Rarray boys hold similarities with gangs in that they partake in criminal activities such as theft and drug dealing (Hagedorn, 2008:34). They also use violence in pursuit of their objectives, and in this way act in opposition to the state, which has been identified as a core feature of gangs (Utas, 2014:173). This use of violence is often focused on territoriality and the governance of certain areas. Rarray boys became more prominent in the 1960s, as these groups were used by politicians to perform certain tasks. Mitton (2022:49) argues that this participation in politics deepened youth groups' marginalisation, in that their employment involved violence in pursuit of political objectives, rather than to be included in the political processes that could empower them. This kind of political involvement also signals the legitimation of violence, when it is condoned by the state, and this phenomenon is apparent for gangs in Sierra Leone today (Abdullah, 2002:24; Hagedorn, 2008:34). The existence and operations of rarray boys are sometimes viewed as an act of defiance against the economic, political, and social structures that ensure their marginalisation (Utas, 2014:187; Abdullah, 2002:22,27). The role of American culture is interesting in this regard, and is indicative of a broader insight concerning globalisation and the influence of Western culture on armed groups at the local level. Several armed groups in Sierra Leone have been inspired by hip hop and rap (Hagedorn, 2008:107), and the messages

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of resistance this music often conveys, which has played a role in their practices, and will be examined in greater detail in the following sections. Although rarray boys are often included in analyses of gangs in Africa and they exhibit features that are distinctive of gangs, their loose structures, low levels of organisation, and fluidity often preclude them from being termed gangs (Utas, 2014:173). They are therefore considered gang-like, which illustrates how it is not always possible (nor is it useful) to strictly delineate these groups into certain categories. Rarray boys featured in literature from the 1960s, however this archetype has also been invoked in the scholarship examining gangs in post-war Sierra Leone.

3.3. Civil War, Gang-like Groups, and Militias

Sierra Leone's history has been fraught with political instability. It is important to analyse armed groups in the state within this context, as they are fundamentally influenced by their environment. Two parties have commanded the political landscape since the state's independence in 1961, namely the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC). The SLPP assumed power from 1961 to 1967; 1996 to 2007; and from 2018 until the present. The APC governed from 1968 to 1992, and from 2007 to 2018. During the latter's rule, Sierra Leone became a one-party-state led by Siaka Stevens and his regime was characterised by corruption, the disintegration of political institutions, and the prevalence of state-sanctioned violence (Utas & Jörgel, 2008:488; Utas, 2014:176). The political transitions were also accompanied by conflict, and several military governments took control at different points in time since the 1960s. The conflict escalated in 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a rebel group, attempted to overthrow the APC's regime. The subsequent civil war endured for eleven years, ending in 2002, during which several different armed groups vied for power (Abdullah, 2002:34; Utas, 2014:176; Mitton, 2022:46). Utas (2014:176) notes that this factionalism illustrates the state's insecurity, as seen in its political affiliations that seem to shift over time.

These changing political conditions, and their role in the emergence and dissolution of various armed groups, is highlighted in the case of the WSB which was formed in 1999-2000 (Utas & Jörgel, 2008:487). The origin of the WSB has been traced to splinter groups that arose from a military group named the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) that disintegrated towards the end of the war (Utas & Jörgel, 2008:492). A large portion of the WSB was therefore

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made up of the sons of soldiers who were in the AFRC. These youths had been raised in a military context (as they lived in barracks or nearby communities, in the western part of Freetown) (Utas, 2014:177). Their name has also been attributed to the influence of American music and is reportedly derived from the lyrics of Tupac Shakur[21]. This highlights how art forms[22] that focus on gangsterism have been imported into different contexts, as Utas (2014:177) and Mitton (2022:49) note that Tupac has been a source of inspiration for militias across Africa. There is a common understanding and rejection of corruption, marginalisation, and exclusion that is expressed in this music (Utas, 2014:179). Utas & Jörgel (2008:498) further note that the music serves to construct a "group mythology and common solidarity" in the face of similarly experienced challenges.

Utas (2014:173) maintains that the media viewed the WSB as "nothing more than renegade, anarchistic bandits, devoid of any long-term goals". In contrast, however, the WSB were in fact a highly organised and unified militia; they were significant players in the war. The WSB were utilised by leaders in the military, as well as by political actors to pursue their various objectives (Utas, 2014:173). This is not unlike the employment of gangs by politicians to help achieve political goals – a feature of gangs that has become increasingly popular in post-war Sierra Leone. Utas (2014:179) argues that the WSB accrued more members and mobilised through connections and networks that had existed prior to the war. He (2014:179) maintains that as they trained and developed military skills and obtained arms, their use of violence became an expression of resistance against a repressive regime and an exclusionary system that maintained their marginalisation. This is not dissimilar to the gangs that operate in Freetown today, as their actions have been viewed analogously as a means of protest against a similarly inequitable system (Mitton, 2022:48; Utas, 2014:179).

Utas (2014:179) draws on fieldwork conducted in Freetown (and more specifically an area called the Pentagon which is located on a street corner in the city) during 2004 to 2006 to inform his research on armed groups in the state. He (2014:179-180) references a group comprised of about fifteen young men, the majority of which had been involved in the war as

[21] Tupac Shakur was an American rapper who has been a source of inspiration for marginalised groups across the world. He is considered the 'hero of hip-hop' and an icon of gangsterism; his music explores themes relating to inequality, racism, and oppression (Hagedorn, 2008:xxix; Dziewanski, 2020).
[22] This music provides these groups the sense of being understood, of having shared experiences with influential and powerful individuals in other parts of the world, and the feeling that their behaviour and actions are justified (Prestholdt, 2009:198).

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members of the WSB. This group bears a resemblance to the common features of a gang, in that it was made up of several members who were youths, and these individuals engaged in criminal activities such as theft, drug dealing, and selling stolen goods. The group had a loose structure, and several members were also involved in the informal economy, performing jobs such as car washing for additional sources of income. Interestingly, the profits from these endeavours were shared amongst the group, so that each member would receive supplementary amounts of money and resources, which is comparable to how gangs operate as a unit (Utas, 2014:185).

There are parallels between youths during the civil war (including members of the WSB and rarray boys) and gangs in Western contexts that align with the dominant understandings of these groups as presented in the literature. Utas (2014:186) notes similarities in both cases, relating to youths' experiences of marginalisation, inequality, and a lack of opportunities for upliftment. He (2014:186) argues, however, that the different 'politicoeconomic structures' in these contexts resulted in varying reactions and outcomes. Gangs compete for territory and are involved in the drug trade, in areas with little state presence in the US (Utas, 2014:186). In Sierra Leone, however, the absence of state authority across the country (particularly during periods of conflict) provides conditions conducive to the formation of military groups that vie for control. Utas (2014:186) notes that this follows "the logic of gang-like groups" and that youths became part of groups like the WSB, that were either pro or anti-government.

The RUF was one of several military groups that recruited youths, such as rarray boys, from underprivileged communities (Abdullah, 2002:34; Mitton, 2022:49). This provides an interesting insight concerning gangs and gang-like groups in Africa, in that marginalised youths who lack opportunities and who have previously engaged in violent behaviour are easily targeted in the formation of militias. The transformation from one kind of armed group to another is enhanced in this sense. The military skills that gang-like groups develop during conflict (if they become militias) are also useful in post-war settings, if these ex-combatants have little choice but to return to criminal activity.

The pre-war gang landscape consisted predominantly of rarray boys, or loose groupings of youths who engaged in opportunistic criminal activity. These men can be perceived as a form of resistance against the economic and political structures that ensure their marginalisation, and at the same time as 'entrepreneurs of violence' to determine their success (Utas, 2014:187).

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The transformations of armed groups in Sierra Leone reflect the political transitions that the state underwent. Prior to the war, gang-like groups in Freetown consisted of individuals encapsulated in the idea of rarray boys. These loosely structured groups that exhibited a low degree of organisation then evolved into rebel and militia groups that were more cohesive and better organised during the war (Hagedorn, 2008:34). After the conflict, these groups split, and individuals formed gang-like groups that resembled the loosely knit connections and networks of the pre-war period. As Hagedorn (2008:35) and Barnes (2021:9) note, the progression was from gangs, to soldiers, to gangs in Freetown during the pre-war, war, and post-war periods. These transformations are exemplified in the case of the WSB (Utas, 2014:187).

3.4. Gangs in Post-War Sierra Leone

There is a dearth of literature on gangs in post-war Sierra Leone. This is partly accounted for by the fact that much of the information gathered on youths in the state focuses on ex-combatants. Gangs have become increasingly prominent over the past twenty years, however, and have the potential to grow and institutionalise to a greater extent in the near future (Mitton, 2022:46; de Bruijne, 2019a). These groups are often referred to as cliques, and most of the studies that examine their operations focus on Freetown as the centre of gang violence in the state. There are three broad, overarching gangs or federations under which smaller cliques have united. These are Members of Blood, or Bloods; So-So Black (referred to as Black); and Crips (Abdullah, 2020:35; Mitton, 2022:46). Although there are exceptions, the Bloods are understood to control the western part of Freetown, as well as small areas in the centre and the east. The Black clique, which is the largest of the three, governs the eastern part of the city, with the Crips in the central part of Freetown (Abdullah, 2020:42). The gangs are territorially based and have conflicts with competing groups. Individuals in these three gangs wear red, black, and blue bandanas to signal their membership to the Bloods, Black, and Crips cliques respectively (Mitton, 2022:46; Abdullah, 2020:42). The identities of these gangs can be viewed as an additional example of the adoption of American gang culture in Africa (Mitton, 2022:46).[23]

[23] This refers to the names of the cliques, as the Bloods and Crips are two of the most well-known and influential gangs in the US, and they too display their membership using bandanas (Deutsch, 2014).

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Mitton's (2022) study of gangs in Sierra Leone provides a substantial contribution to the literature as the field is markedly understudied. His work is informed by 180 interviews conducted in Freetown, which included members of the three main gangs and smaller affiliated cliques. He (2022:47) notes that the size of these groups differs, from small cliques made up of approximately 20 youths, to bigger groups made up of over 200 individuals. Cliques in Sierra Leone consist predominantly of youths in urban areas, who are poor and seek gang membership as a means to combat financial insecurity (Mitton, 2022:54). Mitton (2022:54) argues that the context of economic, political, and social exclusion that gave rise to rarray boys also drove the mobilisation of militia groups (such as the WSB), and is now promoting the recruitment of cliques. These gangs should therefore also be viewed as a product of their environment, and a form of protest against an inequitable system.

It is noteworthy that the structure of these gangs is military-inspired, which is arguably a feature of the state's political history. This refers to their hierarchical structure, as they have 'soldiers' which are governed by a commander (CO), and a Five Star General (5-0) who controls daily operations (Mitton, 2022:46: de Bruijne, 2019a).[24] Abdullah (2020:48) further notes that this centralised command structure is different from how rarray boys operate, in that the latter group lacks organisation and norms that unify members. The military influence that is evident in the organisation and structure of these cliques marks a departure from many gangs in other parts of the world. The inheritance of military terms and rank structures is apparent in other case studies in this thesis, however, such as the Numbers in South Africa. It is a characteristic that is, in many respects, a distinguishing feature of several gangs in Africa and can be understood as part of the legacy of civil war and colonialism.

Members of cliques participate in a variety of both licit and illicit activities. These range from car washing, cleaning, and physical labour to theft and the running of protection rackets (Mitton, 2022:54; de Bruijne, 2019a). It is noteworthy, however, that the income gained from these endeavours is by no means substantial. Mitton (2022:55) describes them as 'subsistence activities' that help to ensure members' survival. He (2022:55) reports that "gangsters understand their violence as a consequence, not a cause, of insecurity". Their illegal activity therefore results, at least in part, from the absence of other legitimate options from which to

[24] There are several other ranks including Four Star General and Three Star General (as indicators of decreasing status). There is also a degree of variation in the ranking system of these groups, with positions such as Godfather, Chair, Brigadier, Secretary (Mitton, 2022:61; de Bruijne, 2019a).

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survive. This is in contrast with some gangs in other parts of the world, which engage in criminal activity to earn a profit. The lack of investment in profitable business operations could be perceived as inhibiting the growth, development, and institutionalisation of these cliques (Mitton, 2022:47).

It is easy to confuse gangs with rarray boys and ex-combatants, as they share characteristics and partake in similar activities. Although the conditions that produced these groups have remained consistent, this does not entail that they respond to their environment in the same way (Mitton, 2022:55). Gangs should not be viewed as an extension of ex-combatant groups; their membership does not consist of ex-combatants, at least for the most part; and gangs hold few connections with ex-combatant groups (Mitton, 2022:55). Cliques in Freetown also reject being labelled as rarray boys, as they consider these groups as made up of directionless, demotivated individuals who prioritise their own interests above those of others. Conversely, gang membership signals strength, courage, and loyalty to the group and to their community[25] (Mitton, 2022:55). The militaristic structure of cliques is also markedly different from the loose organisation of rarray boys, and these differences indicate how these groups should not be conflated (Abdullah, 2020:48).

A distinctive feature of gangs in Sierra Leone is their involvement in political affairs. Armed groups have played a role in politics since the state's independence, with ex-combatants being the focus during the post-war period. Cliques have started replacing ex-combatants in performing tasks for political actors, however (Mitton, 2022:47). These gangs have been employed to protect politicians, prevent interference from opposition parties during rallies, and to encourage voter turnout (de Bruijne, 2019b). de Bruijne (2019b) argues that political actors at all levels of government, and all of the main parties have used gangs to fulfil certain objectives.

[25] Mitton (2022:55) notes that cliques rarely target their own communities; they view themselves as guardians of these spaces. This provides a contrast to rarray boys who reportedly target their own communities for personal gain. This attribute of cliques provides an interesting perspective on the relationship between gangs and society in Sierra Leone, as the notion of protecting a community is not common to all cases of gangs in Africa.

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3.5. The Development of Gangs in Sierra Leone

Although gangs in Sierra Leone have only been studied very recently, they had already started to form over two decades ago. Mitton (2022:50) states that their development can be observed as occurring in three phases. The first is a formative phase (from 2000 to 2007); the second is a coalescing phase (from 2008 to 2015) and the third and current phase is one of institutionalisation (from 2016 to 2021) (Mitton, 2022:50). The first phase describes the origins of many different gangs that arose from 'social clubs' made up of students and 'street youth' during the early post-war period. A distinctive feature of cliques during that time was their adoption of American gang culture, which was reflected in their interests, activities, and behaviour (Mitton, 2022:50). Mitton (2022:50) notes that there were some tensions between groups from the east and the west, although this conflict only intensified in the following years. Violence attributed to cliques worsened during the 2007 elections, and identities and gang loyalties started to strengthen.

The second phase describes how the three main overarching gangs rose in importance. Mitton (2022:51) notes that the Bloods and the Crips were the first groups to be established, with the Black gang forming as a response to the insecurity caused by the first two. Territoriality is central to the operations of these groups, and smaller gangs that operated in areas controlled by rival groups were often targeted upon leaving their home turf. Importantly, youths who did not belong to a clique also sought membership to help ensure their protection from other gangs, thereby encouraging recruitment and the growth of these groups (Mitton, 2022:51). During this period, and prior to the elections in 2012, politicians attempted to foster peace between gangs by appealing to their leaders. These attempts failed, however, and gangs remain disillusioned with government, as these groups seek long-term assistance to address marginality, rather than short-term solutions offered by politicians. The incentives for the peace agreements have also been perceived as a campaigning tool to encourage popular support for the parties (Mitton, 2022:52).

During the third phase, gang-related violence received increased attention from the media and political figures. This arguably influenced the adoption of a zero-tolerance stance to policing, resulting in increased arrests for petty crime (Mitton, 2022:52). The gangs grew, however, and had institutionalised significantly by 2021 as they were considered well-entrenched in the communities in which they operated (Mitton, 2022:53; de Bruijne, 2019a). Several

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communities reportedly rejected the gangs at first, however their relationship with these groups transformed as the gangs developed, and the leaders were able to govern these areas by controlling youths and ensuring the safety of community members from rival gangs (Mitton, 2022:54; de Bruijne, 2019a). There have also been reports of gang members fostering mutually beneficial relationships with corrupt police, highlighting the connections between state institutions and armed groups. Mitton (2022:54) further argues that these cases indicate how gangs have developed, from loosely grouped individuals on the margins of society, to organised cliques that are involved in politics and are influential in controlling violence and the levels of stability in their communities.

3.6. Gang Violence in Sierra Leone

Mitton (2022:56) notes three distinctive aspects of clique-related violence in Freetown that play a role in perpetuating conflict in the region. The first is the notion of 'inter-gang rivalry' as a primary source of conflict, as opposed to competition over lucrative illicit markets which is often identified as a driver of violence for gangs in other areas. The development of the drug trade in Cape Town, for example, has been cited as a primary cause of conflict between gangs in the area and the reason for their institutionalisation. The rivalry and polarisation of gangs in Freetown is, in contrast, based on loyalty to the group (and consequent hostility towards other groups), rather than economic incentives. These inter-gang rivalries are not unique to Sierra Leone, however, and have been observed as a cause of violence in other states too. Mitton (2022:56) also observes that members of gangs perceive "themselves as soldiers in a street war", a perspective that is reminiscent of the state's history, and distinctive of gangs in post-war contexts. The second aspect involves the advocacy of certain values and behaviours as conditions for the promotion of members. An individual's status and position in a gang is therefore linked to actions that exhibit loyalty, courage, power, and dominance. The kinds of acts that signal these characteristics include conflict with rival gangs and offenses that lead to incarceration (Mitton, 2022:56).[26] There are, therefore, incentives for youths to use violence in pursuit of advancing in the gang. The rivalries between gangs create insecurity in Freetown. This is the case both for members who may cross into the territory of other gangs, as well as for civilians who unintentionally dress in gang colours, as these events threaten the safety of

[26] The top positions in the cliques (such as the CO and 5-0) require injuring or killing competing gang members, and these qualifications are often tattooed on the individual's body (Mitton, 2022:56).

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individuals (Mitton, 2022:57). This relates to the third aspect of gang violence, which is that insecurity encourages recruitment as individuals seek membership for safety. This is heightened as gangs grow in size and power, and as the threats that they present to other gangs and to society intensify. The incentives for membership are also most acute in economically marginalised communities (Mitton, 2022:57).

These three features create a cycle of violence in Freetown, which is worsened by zero-tolerance policing that encourages the growth of gangs. This is because being targeted by the police increases an individual's 'street capital' as well as the prospects for improving one's position in the gang (Mitton, 2022:57). Incarceration also exacerbates the development of gangs as prisons provide a space for networking. In addition, Mitton (2022:57) notes that gang presence in prisons in Sierra Leone is strengthening, and that affiliations and tensions between groups are becoming stark. Reasons for gang recruitment in prisons include the search for protection in a hostile environment, as well as the opportunity to develop partnerships and access networks that could be beneficial once leaving prison (Mitton, 2022:57). Overpopulated prisons in Sierra Leone also allowed for transfers of prisoners to different regions, which assisted with dispersing gangs across the state. This phenomenon has been observed in the *maras,* as the deportation of gang members from the US to Latin America facilitated their development and proliferation across many states (Cruz, 2014). The current levels of violence attributed to gangs in prisons in Sierra Leone is low, however, these groups are becoming an important feature of prisons (Mitton, 2022:58). An additional trend relating to the growth of cliques is the increased involvement of youths and school students. Mitton (2022:58) notes that as students become involved, they can work towards becoming full members of the gang based on their performance. The increased popularity of gangs poses a challenge to law enforcement, and a threat to the safety of citizens.

Gangs in Sierra Leone are also enabled and encouraged by the state's political system to grow, develop, and institutionalise. This relates to financial incentives and rewards given to armed groups for achieving certain political objectives, such as using violence to ensure electoral outcomes (de Bruijne, 2019b). Mitton (2022:59) highlights the possibility that gangs could become even more involved in politics, and that instead of having a sole political purpose in terms of the state using them to outsource violence, these cliques could become governors of their communities. This could result in increased political participation, and politicians co-opting gangs to ensure greater support from voters.

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3.7. Conclusion

Sierra Leone, and Freetown in particular, provide an interesting case study of gangs in Africa. If these groups are to be understood as a product of their environment, Sierra Leone's political history provides a unique context for their development. Studies on gangs in Africa have focused on rarray boys, that share similarities with gangs and can be considered gang-like according to their behaviour and actions. The onset of civil war provided an insight into the intersections between gangs and militias over time, as gang members were recruited as soldiers. Groups that resembled gangs transformed into militias and then back into gangs after the conflict. This is evident in the case of the WSB, which operated in Freetown. These transformations highlight the dynamism and fluidity of these groups, and the difficulty of classifying them into certain types, given that their evolution is central to their survival. This offers support for the hypothesis that gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa are distinctive from those in the Global North, given the intersections and overlapping between different non-state armed groups during periods of conflict. The hypothesis is further reinforced by features such as the adoption of military ranking systems inherited from Sierra Leone's period of political conflict, which are similar to the structures of prison gangs in South Africa.

The post-war period has been marked by the emergence of cliques that resemble gangs in Western contexts more closely. There are three main groups in Freetown, termed the Bloods, Black, and Crips gangs. They are territorially based, well-embedded in their communities, and have the potential to grow in size and power in the future. The three examinations of armed groups in the state illustrate the role of US gang culture (in the form of music, film, dance, clothing, and media) in influencing the behaviour and actions of gangs and gang-like groups. These features, together with the importance of territory and inter-gang conflict; and the notion that violence is being employed in response to common experiences of economic, political, and social exclusion; provide support for the hypothesis that there are similarities between gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa and gangs in the Global North. The distinctiveness that gangs in Sierra Leone exhibit is arguably based on the context in which they emerge, which may help to account for some of the differences between gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa and those in the Global North, on the basis of political stability and state presence.

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Chapter 4: Gangs in Kenya

4.1. Introduction

The threats that gangs present to the authority of the state and to the safety of civilians, are pronounced in Kenya. Reports indicate that the number of gangs in Kenya has increased in recent years, and that they are likely to continue growing and spreading across the state in the near future (NCRC, 2018). Nairobi in particular is considered the centre of much criminal activity, with over 40% of the violent incidents that occur in the city being attributed to gangs (Rasmussen, 2020:435). A great deal of the literature on non-state armed groups in Kenya has focused on the role of violent insurgents such as Al-Shabaab in fostering insecurity in the state (Anderson & McKnight, 2015). This section, however, will focus on an armed group called the Mungiki, which is considered one of the most dangerous criminal entities in East Africa (Rasmussen, 2014:213). It will be analysed in great depth because it provides a unique study for the examination of gangs on the continent. The group operates primarily in Nairobi which is the focus of this chapter, however members been observed in other parts of Kenya (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2013a). The Mungiki has been termed a gang, cult, religious sect, militia, vigilante group, and political movement, and the variation in these labels illustrates how the group seems to defy categorisation, presenting a challenge to the conceptualisation of gangs in non-Western contexts.

Indeed, the Mungiki does not refer to itself as a gang, however it is understood to share features with gangs, and is often included in analyses of gangs in Africa as it is considered gang-like (Dziewanski, 2021; Rasmussen, 2014:213). The Mungiki is markedly different from gangs in other case studies in this thesis, in that it plays a role in ethnic conflicts; exhibits explicit involvement in politics; has a strong ideological and cultural focus that guides its practices; and significant overlapping with other non-state armed groups. It is perhaps most useful to employ a broad conceptualisation of gangs, as opposed to a restrictive framework to understand the group, as the Mungiki provides insight into the transformations that armed groups undergo, as well as their various intersections with each other, even if it does not meet all of the characteristics of gangs as presented by the dominant, Western accounts of these groups (Rasmussen, 2014:214). This section will provide an account of the history of the Mungiki, an analysis of how the group has been understood in the literature, and an examination of its criminal activity and political involvement, thereby tracing its transformations over time.

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4.2. Historical Context

The Mungiki was formed in 1987, by youths belonging to the Kikuyu ethnic group (Kagwanja, 2005:55; Ruteere, 2008:7). It was not initiated as a criminal group, but rather began as a movement that advocated a revival of Kikuyu traditions and values in response to the dominance of the West through colonisation during the twentieth century and later through globalisation (Wamue, 2001:453; Kanneworff, 2008:115). Indeed, many of the group's rituals, such as oath taking, baptism, and initiation practices, are derived from Kikuyu customs (Rasmussen, 2018:121; Kanneworff, 2008:120). Mungiki members draw on the legacy of the Mau Mau as influential in guiding their activities. The Mau Mau was a group that consisted predominantly of Kikuyu youths that resisted the British in the 1950s, by fighting for 'land and freedom' from colonial rule (Kagwanja, 2003:29; Rasmussen, 2014:220; Ruteere, 2008:15).[27]

Many members of the Mungiki assert that they are the descendants of Mau Mau fighters, and this narrative heightens their sense of purpose and importance in being part of a movement that stands for the resistance to oppression (Ruteere, 2008:11; Rasmussen, 2014:220). This is apparent in the case of the founders, Maina Njenga and Ndura Waruinge, whose grandfathers were part of the Mau Mau (Rasmussen, 2014:220; Wamue, 2001:455). It is arguable that the appeal to the history of the Mau Mau incentivises Mungiki members to pursue their various objectives in service to the group, through the narratives of courage, perseverance, and loyalty, with reference to their warrior forefathers. At the same time, the Mau Mau were persecuted by the British, and remained unable to access land and resources after the state's independence in 1963 (Rasmussen, 2014:221). The Mungiki's connection to this history therefore entails that the group has inherited a position on the periphery of society. This encourages mobilisation for the Mungiki, through the narrative of collectivism and unity against a common enemy, which is a driving force for gang recruitment that has been observed in the literature. This is especially apparent given that Kikuyu youths from urban areas, and individuals who are economically and socially marginalised comprise the majority of those who are recruited for membership (Kagwanja, 2003:29; Rasmussen, 2014:221). The parallels between these two groups also serve to legitimise the activities of the Mungiki, as members feel that their actions and behaviour are justifiable given the importance of their fight against oppression (Rasmussen, 2014:221). The Mungiki's appeal to mythology, traditionalism, and ideology as informed by

[27] The Mau Mau were preceded by a group called the *Anake wa 40,* that resisted British colonial rule in the 1940s. It was one of the first groups to be labelled a gang in the state (Rasmussen, 2020:438).

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the Mau Mau, is central to the group's practices and provides a unique aspect to the study of gangs in Africa. It is not uncommon for gangs on the continent to be influenced by historical figures and events, as seen in the adoption of military rank structures in prison gangs in South Africa and gangs in Sierra Leone. The Mungiki, however, places more importance in rituals and customs, and these features form part of the group's identity.

4.3. Interpretations of the Group

Ruteere (2008:8) argues that there are four dominant understandings of the Mungiki in the literature. The first is that it is a 'religio-cultural movement', as influenced by Wamue (2001)'s study of the Mungiki and its emphasis on the importance of Kikuyu traditions and values to help resolve social issues. The significance of the religious and cultural aspects of the Mungiki has been questioned, however, as the group has adopted conflicting views and acted in ways that contradict its values, at different points in time. Ruteere (2008:9) and Rasmussen (2014:216) therefore argue that the Mungiki has an instrumentalist perspective on religion and culture, in that the movement appeals to these features for mobilisation and political support, in service to the survival of the group. The second interpretation of the Mungiki is that it is "the local manifestation of the anti-globalisation forces" (Ruteere, 2008:9). This perspective is informed by Brownhill and Turner (2004) and entails that the movement incorporates marginalised groups as part of the legacy of the Mau Mau, and opposes the widespread inequality generated by the acquisition of capital by a corporate and political elite. These first two perspectives of the Mungiki ignore its use of violence, which is central to its operations. This leads to the third interpretation of the Mungiki as a 'criminal gang and vigilante' that engages in illicit activity, which corresponds to the public's perspective of the group. The movement is very complex, however, and cannot be conceptually limited to being termed a violent group (Ruteere, 2008:10). The fourth view of the movement therefore adds an additional dimension to the understanding of the group, and is that of a 'political organisation', as presented by Kagwanja's (2003) influential analysis of the Mungiki's role in politics during the 1990s (Ruteere, 2008:11). These four interpretations illustrate different features of the group, however, they need not be mutually exclusive. It is more useful to adopt a more pragmatic perspective of the Mungiki, that incorporates the notion that it has traditional, ideological, criminal, and political interests which are reflected in its operations. This also

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acknowledges the dynamism of the Mungiki, as a comprehensive account of the group should incorporate its transformations over time.

4.4. The Transformations of the Mungiki

4.4.1. The Mungiki as a Vigilante Group and Gang

The Mungiki originated in parts of the Rift Valley and Central Kenya, and drew membership from victims of ethnic violence and forced displacement that was sanctioned by the state, the majority of which belonged to the Kikuyu ethnic group (Kanneworff, 2008:120; Rasmussen, 2020:441; Ruteere, 2008:8). The initial stated objective of the movement was to liberate youths from economic, cultural, social, and political oppression (Rasmussen, 2014:218). Its inception has therefore been understood as a response to the political environment at that time, which was characterised by a one-party system led by the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and patrimonial rule by the president, Daniel arap Moi (Rasmussen, 2014:218; Kagwanja, 2005:55). Civilian participation in political affairs grew after the elections in 1992, and it was during that time that the Mungiki became increasingly vocal about the repressive Moi regime and the need for a change of power (Kagwanja, 2003:34; Rasmussen, 2014:215; Kanneworff, 2008:19). The group's involvement in political affairs has continued since the early 1990s, and is considered central to the identity of the Mungiki, which will be explored in greater detail below.

The movement began to increase in size as it spread to urban areas, primarily those that were dominated by Kikuyu communities in informal settlements in Nairobi (Rasmussen, 2014:224; Ruteere, 2008:6). As this move took place, the group's financial focus shifted, placing a growing emphasis on the informal economy. The Mungiki started to partake in illicit activities including extortion, theft, and protection racketeering. Foremost among these is the group's monopolisation of the *matatu* (minibus) industry, which has earned the Mungiki a significant amount of media attention, due to the profits it has accrued and the violence it has incited as a consequence of its involvement in this business (Kagwanja, 2005:67; Rasmussen, 2014:224; Kanneworff, 2008:121). The Mungiki took control of the industry, by organising transport routes and charging operators of the *matatus* a protection fee (Ruteere, 2008:2; Kagwanja, 2005:68), which is reminiscent of behaviour and actions that are typically attributed to gangs

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and organised criminal groups. This perspective of the Mungiki therefore gives weight to the conceptualisation of the group as a gang.

The Mungiki's influence also grew as its membership expanded and it absorbed youths that were economically excluded, living in the poorest areas in Nairobi. The Mungiki operated in areas of the city where state presence was low, with the reported incentive to eradicate crime where the police had failed to do so, especially in the late 1990s as Nairobi was considered unsafe (Ruteere, 2008:15; Rasmussen, 2020:439). The Mungiki's success in community policing enhanced the perception of the group as a local security force, and established its status as a vigilante group, given that it provided security to communities in return for a small fee (Ruteere, 2008:15; Rasmussen, 2014:226; Kanneworff, 2008:121). There are other groups across Kenya that have performed similar functions, such as the Sungu Sungu that have acted as a vigilante group in certain communities since 1998 (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2013b; Rasmussen, 2020:441).[28] The size and power of the Mungiki differentiate it from other non-state armed groups in the state, however, and its involvement in providing security has assisted with the institutionalisation of the movement, as it became increasingly embedded in communities (Rasmussen, 2014:226).

The Mungiki's provision of services has also been linked to improving communities' access to water, electricity, and ablution facilities (Forti & Maina, 2012:70). The control of the *matatu* industry and organisation of its routes, as well as the creation of illegal power supply lines, are examples of unlawful activities that the Mungiki has engaged in for the betterment of the community, whilst providing employment for its members in the process and collecting small taxes for the services it offers (Rasmussen, 2014:225; Ruteere, 2008:7,15; Kanneworff, 2008:121). Kagwanja (2003:37) and Ruteere (2008:15) note that in addition to providing public goods to citizens, the Mungiki has been involved in efforts to alleviate poverty in certain parts of the state where it has significant membership. These initiatives illustrate the complexity of the movement and complicate efforts to understand it. A more nuanced perspective is useful when analysing groups like the Mungiki, which stands in stark contrast to the binary framing and representation of the movement by the state and media as a group that is solely dangerous, as opposed to one that also provides for communities. This is not to say that the Mungiki should

[28] Other examples include the "Pokot and Samburu ethnic groups in north-western Kenya" (Rasmussen, 2020:441).

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be praised for its community work, but rather that it occupies an ambiguous position in society in that it has been both helpful and threatening, at different times and in different parts of the state.

The involvement in community projects to improve the wellbeing of local populations, especially in areas where the state is unwilling or unable to provide public services, is a common feature of gangs. Rasmussen (2014:225) argues that in this way, the Mungiki (and similar groups) portray themselves as “a state within the state” which is comparable to Lund’s (2006) ‘twilight institutions’. These are non-state groups that perform the roles of the state, without having the authority or legitimacy to do so. These institutions take advantage of the failures of the state, but are not limited or restricted to following the rule of law, and therefore act in accordance with their own code of conduct (Rasmussen, 2014:225). The Mungiki’s role in service delivery helps to mobilise support for the movement, which is essential to the institutionalisation of the group as it becomes more entrenched in the communities in which it operates.

4.4.2. The Mungiki as a Political Movement

A distinguishing feature of the Mungiki is its explicit involvement in politics, which became increasingly apparent after 1992. The group received a great deal of media attention and was subject to widespread condemnation due to its role in conflict relating to the 2002 and 2007 general elections, in particular. These two incidents have comprised much of the literature devoted to analysing the Mungiki. The movement became noticeably engaged in political affairs in the lead up to the 2002 general elections. This was exemplified by the leaders of the movement, Maina Njenga and Ndura Waruinge, joining a political party and competing for positions in parliament (Ruteere, 2008:17; Kanneworff, 2008:116). The Mungiki also developed ties with the ruling party, KANU (Kagwanja, 2003:46). The elections were marked by violence due to rivalries based on political affiliations as well as tensions between different ethnic groups, and the Mungiki was central to this conflict, giving the group increased media attention (Kanneworff, 2008:116; Ruteere, 2008:17). Reports indicate that the Mungiki received vehicles from the military, to support KANU’s election campaigns before it lost to the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) (Telewa, 2003). This highlights the links between armed groups and politics, and how the overlapping between gangs and militias can make it difficult to distinguish between these actors. Indeed, several accounts of the Mungiki have

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termed it a militia (Kanneworff, 2008:120; Dziewanski, 2021:27), arguably because it has displayed the characteristics of such a group at different points in time.

The Mungiki also became involved in conflict relating to the *matatu* industry after the election in 2002, which prompted the NARC to implement a zero-tolerance stance towards policing (Forti & Maina, 2012:70). According to Kanneworff (2008:126), 957 members belonging to the movement were incarcerated over two months. The Mungiki was also banned as an organisation by the government in 2002, due to threats it was imposing on the state and society (Rasmussen, 2014:226; Forti & Maina, 2012:72). This entailed that the some of the activities of the leaders and the operations of the group became more covert. The Mungiki retained an interest in politics, however, and it registered as a political party, named the Kenya National Youth Alliance (KNYA), in 2004 (Rasmussen, 2014:215). The group's continued involvement in criminal activity enhanced its reputation as a gang, vigilante group, and militia and resulted in negative public sentiment towards the Mungiki. This was followed by the government deregistering KNYA before the 2007 elections. Leaders of the Mungiki then claimed that the movement was ending, however it is apparent that it still exists, and has the same hierarchical structure, levels of organisation, and network as before (Rasmussen, 2014:216).

The following general election in 2007 involved the most intense political violence that the state had experienced in recent years, in which many Mungiki members were implicated (Forti & Maina, 2012:67; Ruteere, 2008:3). The post-election violence in 2007 followed similar patterns to the conflict that had ensued after the 2002 general election. The violence endured for four weeks, and was linked to differences in political opinion and ethnic tensions, resulting in about 1,500 deaths, as well as the displacement of around 600,000 citizens (Ruteere, 2008:22). Rasmussen (2020:435) maintains that over a third of these deaths were attributed to gangs mobilised by political groups. Mungiki members were accused of being mobilised by the government to conduct some of these attacks, and although the validity of these claims is unclear, it is apparent that individuals belonging to the movement were involved in the conflict. The International Criminal Court (2015) also filed charges against then President Uhuru Kenyatta, for allegedly mobilising non-state groups including the Mungiki, although these did not result in a conviction due to insufficient evidence (Rasmussen, 2020:442). Rasmussen (2020:442) notes that violence becomes more intense and unpredictable at the time of elections in Kenya, which is similar to the trends Kinnes (2014) observed concerning gangs in South Africa. The blurring between politics and criminality during this period is arguably more

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pronounced in Kenya, however. Citizens in Kenya reportedly experience fear of conflict before elections due to previous incidents of violence, giving credence to this claim (Rasmussen, 2020:442).

4.4.3. The Mungiki and the State

Although the Mungiki has been involved in political, social, and economic conflicts in Kenya and is in this way considered a dangerous and threatening group, it has also been the target of state-sanctioned violence since the late 1990s (Kagwanja, 2003:40; Rasmussen, 2014:226). This was particularly apparent in 2007, when the NARC government adopted a zero-tolerance policing strategy towards the Mungiki, after a series of attacks on *matatu* operators by members of the movement (Ruteere, 2008:19). The violence was attributed to conflict that had erupted when the movement increased the fee it had charged *matatu* operators (Ruteere, 2008:20). The police were also criticised by human rights groups, for conducting extrajudicial executions on suspected members of the Mungiki. The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (2008) reported that the police may have killed approximately 500 members of the Mungiki during 2007. This is supported by the United Nations General Assembly (2009) which also recorded hundreds of deaths caused by the police at that time. In response to these reports, Rasmussen (2020:443) provides an interesting framing of what he terms 'secret police death squads' as a kind of gang, referring to the type of lethal violence that they employed, which is typically attributed to the actions of non-state armed groups. Ruteere (2008:2) also comments on these killings by highlighting the discord between the human rights groups' condemning stance on the police's violence in comparison to public sentiment that viewed the police as central to containing the conflict. He states that it is difficult to "reconcile Mungiki's twin identities as victims and perpetrators of human rights violations" (Ruteere, 2008:3). Rasmussen (2020:446) furthermore draws parallels between the police and gangs, as the police are often viewed as instigators of violence in the state, and at the same time are considered instrumental to dispelling violence. Gangs are analogous in the sense that they occupy ambiguous positions in society, as they take part in criminal activity, are involved in politics and employ violence in pursuit of their objectives, but also provide public goods and security for communities where state presence is minimal or absent.

The connection between gangs and the state has also been described as symbiotic. From this perspective, gangs in Kenya, and the Mungiki in particular, have developed ties with political

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actors. These armed groups offer voter support for political parties (which is important in the case of the Mungiki, as it has a significantly large membership), as well as violence to intimidate opposition, in return for complicity in gang operations (Kanneworff, 2008:125; Kagwanja, 2003: 27; Forti & Maina, 2012:61). This is supported by Rasmussen (2020:442) who argues that the Kenyan government would outsource violence to non-state armed groups who would control and rule over certain communities in between elections. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that the Mungiki received political authorisation to control *matatu* routes in exchange for supporting KANU during the elections in 2002 (Rasmussen, 2020:399). The connections between political actors and gangs, and their mutually beneficial relationship, serves to increase their impunity whilst undermining the rule of law (Kagwanja, 2003:27; Rasmussen, 2020:443). These actors are also often involved in business, illustrating the nexus between crime, economics, and politics (Rasmussen, 2020:443).

4.5. Size and Membership

The size of the Mungiki is difficult to ascertain, given the clandestine nature of the group. Membership is significantly large, however, and has been reported to include between one hundred thousand and a million members (Rasmussen, 2014:218; Ruteere, 2008:16; Kagwanja, 2003:34). The uncertainty regarding the size of the movement is arguably political in that the Mungiki has an incentive to overstate its membership to signal its influence, whilst the state is motivated to do the opposite to undermine the threats that the group presents (Ruteere, 2008:16). Kanneworff (2008:120) notes that members of the movement are organised into cells that operate at the local level, under the guidance of a leader that belongs to a council that governs the group. Rasmussen (2014:218) describes the Mungiki as a heterogenous group, as the local factions differ from each other in terms of their activities and focus. As such, smaller branches can display an interest in either religious, politics, or economic affairs, and this determines the nature of their operations.

An important feature of the group is its capacity to mobilise thousands of individuals from different branches across Kenya in a short amount of time, illustrating that it can be termed a mass movement (Rasmussen, 2014:218; Forti & Maina, 2012:74). Rasmussen (2020:439) notes that the Mungiki has a broad appeal due to its focus on traditional values, its promise to provide employment, as well as its political incentives to resist oppression and alleviate

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poverty. It is also noteworthy that the majority of Kenya's population is under 30, and gangs are generally understood to be comprised primarily of youths (Rasmussen, 2020:440; Hazen & Rodgers, 2014:8). This, combined with various economic and socio-political issues in the state, implies that there is a broad base of potential members from which gangs can recruit. Gangs can also assist with the transition to adulthood, both socially (in terms of rites of passage and rituals that mark this transformation) and economically (through financial incentives). This is especially apparent in postcolonial settings, where the loss of tradition and identity during colonialism leaves a gap that can be filled by armed groups, such as the Mungiki, through its appeal to the Mau Mau (Rasmussen, 2020:440). The fact that these groups are comprised of youths (who are often impressionable) also makes them susceptible to exploitation. This is seen in the case of gangs being used by politicians to provide protection and intimidate rivals, often through violence (Rasmussen, 2020:440; Kanneworff, 2008:118).

4.6. Conceptual Ambiguity

It is clear that the Mungiki cannot be fully captured with reference to a single label. It is neither solely a religious cultural movement, nor a gang, nor a political organisation (Forti & Maina, 2012:67). Rasmussen (2020:436) highlights how the lack of clear definitions and frameworks for understanding these groups is reflected in the policies that aim to contain them. He (2020:436) references a paper published by the National Crime Research Centre (NCRC) in Kenya, that listed 46 gangs in the state in 2012. This was a more extended list than a previously gazetted list, compiled in 2010 by the minister of internal security, to include 33 organised criminal groups (Forti & Maina, 2012:67). An updated gazette in 2016 then listed 90 organised criminal groups in the state. This was longer than the earlier compilations in 2010 and 2012, however it did not include many of the 'gangs' that were previously included, such as the Sungu Sungu, al-Shabaab, and the Mungiki. Rasmussen (2020:436) argues that the increasing list could indicate exponential growth in the number of these groups during several years, however, after analysing the papers, it is clear that the difference in reported numbers is due to conceptual ambiguity in terms of how gangs are understood. This illustrates how narrow conceptualisations of gangs (as employed by the NCRC) lead to the identification of fewer groups than broad conceptualisations of gangs (that are used often in legal frameworks to ban certain groups) (Rasmussen, 2020:436). Rasmussen (2020:437) notes that the literature on the groups that are included in these lists reflects their variety in terms of their incentives, structure,

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activities and role in society. In this sense, studies that analyse the Sungu Sungu focus on vigilantism, those that examine Al-Shabaab tend to emphasise the role of ideology, militancy, and religiosity; and studies on the Mungiki explore the group as a gang, political organisation, as well as a religious and cultural movement (Rasmussen, 2020:437). These varied focuses illustrate how easy it is to conflate different groups by referring to them using the same term. At the same time, the lack of clarity concerning the conceptualisation of these groups suggests a revision of their terms. This could entail a revised understanding of gangs to incorporate a variety of features that are not typical to similar groups in non-Western contexts, as well as an appreciation of the fact that they can transform over time.

4.7. Conclusion

Kenya, and Nairobi more specifically, offer an interesting case study for the examination of gangs in Africa through the Mungiki, as the group defies neat categorisation. The group has features that correspond to Western conceptualisations of gangs, such as a membership comprising predominantly of youths and involvement in violent criminal activity, which supports the hypothesis that there are some characteristics that are shared between groups in these different regions. The Mungiki also has features that make it distinctive from gangs in the Global North, however, thereby reinforcing this hypothesis. These features include the aspects of tradition, culture, and religiosity that guide the group's practices; the role it has played in ethnic conflicts; and its overt participation in political affairs. The group's involvement in criminal activity ranging from theft to protection racketeering is also noteworthy. These characteristics furthermore illustrate how the Mungiki has been termed a gang, vigilante group, political organisation, and ethnic militia, which highlights the overlapping between these conceptual categories. It is arguable that many of the differences that arise between the Mungiki and gangs in other regions is due to the context from which they emerge, which is elucidated by the importance of the postcolonial setting in understanding the Mungiki.

A great deal of the literature devoted to analysing the Mungiki has focused on its political role, most notably during the 2002 and 2007 elections. This is due to the group's immersion in political conflict that claimed the lives of thousands of civilians. The link between political affairs and the operations of the Mungiki is a feature that is shared with other gangs in Africa,

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however this connection is arguably more pronounced and explicit in Kenya. The Mungiki's involvement in illicit business, particularly the *matatu* industry, is emblematic of the activities in which gangs partake. In addition to criminal activity, the Mungiki has played a role in providing public services to communities in which there is limited state presence. This presents a threat to the authority of the state, and assists with the institutionalisation of the group as it becomes embedded in certain communities. The state's approach to containing the Mungiki has been characterised by zero-tolerance policing and crackdowns, together with violence that has resulted in the deaths of numerous members of the group. This illustrates how the demonisation of the group and the glorifying of the police by the media is not always indicative of the actual state of affairs. The Mungiki is also unique in that it has a significantly large membership compared to other gangs. The group has not received as much media attention in recent years in comparison to the early 2000s, however, there has been some speculation about the role the Mungiki could play in Kenya's 2022 elections (Otieno, 2022). The Mungiki brings to light the conceptual ambiguity concerning how armed groups are defined and understood. It highlights how the concept of a 'gang' is not always applicable to non-Western contexts, as well as how such groups can evolve over time. The policies and strategies that are developed to combat the violence that these groups present depend on these conceptualisations, however. This illustrates the importance of the conceptual project to better understand how gangs and other non-state armed groups function and operate.

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Chapter 5: Gangs in Nigeria

5.1. Introduction

Nigeria is home to a number of criminal groups. Significant attention has been paid to the operations of gangs, militias, vigilantes, and insurgent groups in contributing to conflict in the state, as well as their involvement in international organised crime, notably the transnational drug trade. Despite the proliferation of non-state armed groups that operate in Nigeria, there is still a lack of information on gangs in the state. There are, however, several groups in Nigeria that have been included in analyses of gangs in Africa, as they are considered gang-like, or have resembled gangs at different periods of time. This means that although there are constraints in terms of how in-depth an analysis of gangs in Nigeria can be, given the limited information that is available on gangs, it is still useful to examine how they operate, as well as how they overlap with other non-state armed groups.

The state's civil war (1967-1970), combined with the degradation of political institutions and economic stagnation provided the conditions for the emergence of non-state armed groups that have endured over time (Smith, 2004:445; Dziewanski, 2021:31). Conflict in Nigeria has been marked by broad divisions along ethnic and religious lines. A rudimentary demarcation of these links entails that the north of the state is occupied by the Hausa-Fulani groups (which are predominantly Muslim); the south-west is made up of the Yoruba (who are Christian and Muslim), and a number of smaller, split groups (including the Christian Igbo) are based in the south-east and Niger Delta (Casey, 2012: 203; LeBas, 2013:244). These fragmentations are reflected in political affiliations that are organised into regional blocs, which has been a feature of the political landscape even after the state returned to a multi-party system in 1999 (LeBas, 2013:244). The connections between gangs and politics are marked in Nigeria (similarly to Kenya), forming part of the conflict in which these groups engage. There is, therefore, a geographical dimension to violence in the state, as it is employed by different groups from a variety of regions. This chapter will examine the operations of four different kinds of non-state armed groups across several regions, with an emphasis on Lagos. These groups include area boys, yandaba, Bakassi Boys, and armed actors in the Niger Delta.

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5.2. Area Boys

Analyses on gangs in Nigeria have focused on area boys, which refers to youths that are part of loosely structured groups that partake in criminal activity, in Lagos (Dziewanski, 2021:33; Higginson & Benier, 2015:542). The emergence of these kinds of groups[29] has been dated to the colonial period, as youths sought gang involvement as a means to combat economic, political, and social marginalisation, particularly between the 1920s and 1960s (Heap, 2010:48). Descriptions of Lagos during the early years of British colonial rule illustrate how the city was inhabited by closely-knit communities, that were made up of strong family ties and neighbourhood networks (Heap, 2010:52), which bears a resemblance to South African 'non-white' communities prior to the forced removals during apartheid. Pinnock's (2016:34) notion of 'informal social control' is apparent in this regard, as these community ties assisted with raising children in a supportive environment and prevented youths from taking part in criminal activity (Heap, 2010:54). The colonial government's gentrification policies involving 'slum clearances' in the late 1920s fragmented these social connections (Bigon, 2008; Davies, 2018). This lack of community support, combined with various socio-economic issues, arguably provided the foundation for youths to form groups and partake in criminal behaviour. These groups were the antecedents to area boys that operate in Lagos today.

Higginson and Benier (2015:542) note that the persistence of area boys in the city should be examined with reference to high rates of population growth and rapid urbanisation, together with related issues regarding overcrowding, degrading infrastructure, limited access to education, and inequality. The threats that they have posed to citizens in Lagos have endured for over three decades (Salaam & Brown, 2012:84). Area boys are described as being comprised of street children and unemployed youths, who spend time in neglected or abandoned urban spaces such as dilapidated buildings and car parks. A significant proportion of these groups is made up of migrants, and they have limited opportunities for upliftment due to their lack of skills and qualifications (Higginson & Benier, 2015:542; Salaam & Brown, 2012:92; Adisa, 1994). They sometimes seek part-time employment in the informal economy, including jobs such as unofficial security guards, labourers, and market traders (Salaam & Brown, 2012:92). Area boys also acquire money through various criminal activities, including extortion, theft, participation in the drug trade, and racketeering (Heap, 2010:48; Salaam &

[29] Heap (2010:48) provides a historical account of these groups that operated in Lagos during the early twentieth century, including the *akali boys, boma boys,* and *cowboys.*

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Brown, 2012:84; Adisa, 1994). Salaam and Brown (2012:84) observe that area boys often engage in disputes with competing groups over territory, which is considered an important feature of street gangs in the Western literature on these groups. The operations of area boys are localised, and their motivation to exert control over space is linked to economic incentives. This refers to access to employment opportunities and having precedence over others to work at markets due to their location (Gore & Pratten, 2003:14). The gangs also set up car parks in public areas, and charge customers fees for the use of the space. Area boys have also been enlisted, paid, and in some cases armed by political actors to perpetrate violence in pursuit of political objectives (ICG, 2007:11; Salaam & Brown, 2012:84). This includes conducting attacks on members of the opposition, intimidating citizens, and tampering with election results (ICG, 2007).

Area boys have received media attention that focuses on their criminality and their reputation as being threatening and dangerous, often creating fear rather than presenting a realistic perspective of the group (Dziewanski, 2021:34). Indeed, as Dziewanski (2021:34) notes, there has been a tendency to conflate urban lifestyles (referring to those who spend time on the street) with crime, by perceiving groups like market traders in the same light as street gangs. He (2021:34) describes how youths in the state are "treated as a problem to be objectified, organised, controlled, and disciplined". This results in the creation and implementation of policies that criminalise urban youths. The dangers of labelling being a self-fulfilling prophecy are also apparent in this regard. A more charitable reading of these groups, however, views area boys not as ruthless or bloodthirsty gangs, but rather as youths that work together to survive, in the face of challenging conditions (Dziewanski, 2021:34).[30]

5.3. The Yandaba

The Yandaba is a non-state armed group that is often included in examinations of gangs in Africa (Dziewanski, 2021:34; Higginson & Benier, 2015:541). It is considered one of the most well-known and infamous armed groups in Nigeria, and it operates in Kano, in the north of the state, a region that is predominantly Muslim (Matusitz & Repass, 2009:503; Ya'u, 2000:162).

[30] There are, in this sense, parallels between area boys and rarray boys in Sierra Leone, as both groups lack high levels of organisation, sophistication, and institutionalisation. Instead, they are sometimes viewed as engaging in illicit activity as a means to survive, in the face of their economic exclusion.

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Matusitz and Repass (2009:503) and Casey (2012:207) note that the gang is made up of youths who are on the fringes of society. These individuals have resorted to crime because they lack access to other opportunities (similarly to area boys), given that they have not received an adequate education and are unable to find employment.

Ya'u (2000:162) supports this understanding of the group, adding that members join the Yandaba for a sense of belonging and solidarity in the face of poor socioeconomic conditions. Umar (2007:327) affirms this, and states that most of the members suffer from drug addiction, a factor that arguably compounds the violence that they employ. Matusitz and Repass (2009:503) add that the Yandaba has assumed an identity marked by resistance, and this is displayed in its aggressive behaviour and violent activities. Members of the Yandaba are unified by a commitment to the preservation of the group, often committing acts of violence to this end, in the name of loyalty (Ya'u, 2000:165). Matusitz and Repass (2009:504) argue that individuals in the Yandaba engage in inter-gang conflict that often centres around reputation, disrespect, and challenges to the group's authority. The group's emergence is understood as a response to the economic, political, and social environment and as such, its persistence is explained by the continuity in these conditions in the state (Umar, 2007:327). The aforementioned features are analogous to those observed in gangs in other contexts, both in Africa (as highlighted in previous case studies), Asia, and North and Latin America.

The origin of the group has been traced back to the advent of 'modern partisan politics' in the state, between 1954 and 1966 (Umar, 2007:332). During that time, political parties employed hunters as security guards to keep leaders safe at campaigns, as violence linked to opposition parties threatened their safety (Dawha, 1996; Umar, 2007:332; Ya'u, 2000:170). The result was that these groups were able to acquire finances and arms relatively easily, whilst becoming increasingly involved in political activity. The Yandaba reportedly arose from these groups of hunters (Umar, 2007:332). It displayed some of the characteristics of a gang at that time, as members described having alliances and rivalries with other groups based on the wards or villages in which they operated (Casey, 2012:205).

Umar (2007:332) and Shaw and Reitano (2013:11) maintain that the oil boom in the 1970s resulted in economic growth, investment in infrastructure and higher rates of urbanisation, which transformed the nature of gangs in Nigeria. These groups became more flexible and dynamic and were involved in a variety of illicit pursuits. This transition took place after the civil war in Nigeria, which had resulted in widespread destruction and high numbers of

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internally displaced people (Casey, 2012:203). The growth of the oil sector promised economic upliftment, but instead was marked by 'petro-capitalism', and deepened tensions along religious and ethnic lines, as well as an increased focus on control over the state's land and resources (Casey, 2012:203). The role of political actors was therefore pronounced, and gangs developed connections with politicians (through the provision of security services); they formed part of militias and youth wings of political parties; and offered their expertise as mercenaries (Umar, 2007:332-333). In addition to these political pursuits, members of the Yandaba also engaged in theft and arson, were involved in intra-and inter-gang conflict and causing riots, and they participated in ethnic clashes (Dawha, 1996).

Matusitz and Repass (2009:503) argue that the rise of the Yandaba gangs formed part of a general trend in which criminal groups that were structured around ethnic and religious lines started to move across the state after the transition to democracy in 1999. The Yandaba maintained these political connections, and have been used to mobilise support during campaigns and intimidate opposition during elections (Ya'u, 2000:176). There are also reports of the Yandaba acting as protectors of communities, by coercing political actors to deliver on the promises that they had made to those in need, when they had been trying to secure voter support (Matusitz & Repass, 2009:503).

A distinctive feature of the Yandaba that is central to the group's identity and practices is the importance that it places on religion and culture (Higginson & Benier, 2015:541; Casey, 2012). Matusitz and Repass (2009:503) maintain that individuals belonging to the group are viewed as revolutionaries, as they have espoused Islamic beliefs, traditions, and customs, as opposed to Western ones. This is evident as the group is comprised of thousands of members that are spread across northern Nigeria, and they are involved in efforts to enforce Shariah law and criminal codes in these regions, together with other youths that are followers of Islam (Casey 2012:211). Yandaba members are also sometimes used by religious figures to influence public opinion, which often involves the use of violence (Matusitz & Repass, 2009:503). The group has been reported in the media for being involved in religious violence, and stated that it had been responsible for burning churches across the state (Matusitz & Repass, 2009:503). This feature of religiosity is central to the operations of the Yandaba, and arguably plays in a role in how the group is defined, as seen in its depiction as a 'terrorist group' in various reports (Umar, 2007:326). Although this label might be misleading as the Yandaba does not seek to supplant

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the state, the use of these terms illustrates the difficulty involved in classifying these kinds of groups.

5.4. The Bakassi Boys

The Bakassi Boys have received a great deal of international attention due to their use of violence, and they are commonly cited as one of the most prominent armed groups in Nigeria. At the height of the group's success, it was both feared and valued by citizens and politicians alike, for carrying out a high number of extrajudicial killings on alleged criminals and simultaneously reducing rates of crime in several states across Nigeria. Although reports indicate that the Bakassi Boys have disbanded and that their activities have halted over the past few years, there is still speculation concerning a potential revival of the group (Njoku & Nzeagwu, 2021) highlighting the significance of examining it.

The Bakassi Boys originated as a vigilante group comprised of youths that operated in urban areas in the state (Smith, 2004:429). The emergence of the group is understood as a response to the failure of the state to provide security for its citizens, especially during the late 1990s when Nigeria transitioned to democracy after a period of military rule and crime rates began to increase (Smith, 2004:429,433; Harnischfeger, 2003:23; Pratten, 2008:1). Smith (2004:429) highlights that this phenomenon can be observed in other parts of Africa, which is illustrated by PAGAD in South Africa and the Mungiki in Kenya. This is affirmed by Abrahams (1998) who contends that vigilantism can be seen across various settings, with the unifying or common feature in these contexts being insecurity and challenges to the authority and legitimacy of the state, wherein armed groups attempt to fill this gap and act as an alternative to government institutions (Smith, 2004:431). The public's support of vigilante groups can therefore be understood as reliance on non-state armed groups in the face of political instability, inequality, and a lack of security (Harnischfeger, 2003:23). Smith (2004:431) argues that in this sense, the persistence of the Bakassi Boys was not solely due to its combatting crime, but rather that its activities were a response to issues concerning "inequality, ethnicity, region, and religion".

The Bakassi Boys were established in 1998, in Aba, a city in the south-east of Nigeria. The group was founded as a vigilante force by market traders who had been targeted by criminals that were becoming increasingly violent, threatening the lives and profits of these merchants through robbery and extortion (Smith, 2004:431; Harnischfeger, 2003:24). It was therefore

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initially comprised of youths who were partially funded by the traders' association to combat these criminals in the main market in Aba, in return for wages (Smith, 2004:431; Harnischfeger, 2003:24). The group quickly gained notoriety for its use of public executions, which involved killing alleged criminals with machetes and burning their bodies in busy urban spaces (Harnischfeger, 2004:25; Smith, 2004:431).

Harnischfeger (2003:24) reports that the Bakassi Boys successfully drove the rates of crime down across the state of Abia within several weeks, after which citizens in nearby states requested to be protected by the group. The Bakassi Boys grew and adopted a regional presence over a short period, as Smith (2004:431) notes that the group spread across a number of cities and three states in the south-east of Nigeria by 2000. At the same time, the group received a great deal of public attention and support from local politicians which served to legitimise its operations (Pratten, 2008:5). This political backing was explicit in a few states, where governors supplied the Bakassi Boys with vehicles and finances, and gave them official titles such as 'the Abia State Vigilante Services' (Smith, 2004:431). The implicit or explicit support of armed groups (such as vigilantes and gangs) by state authorities serves to embolden their operations and ensure their continuity, as is evident in previous case studies.

The Bakassi Boys are distinctive in that the group exhibits a high degree of organisation and places importance on traditions as being central to its identity. This is supported by Harnischfeger (2003:34), who maintains that members of the Bakassi Boys attended military training in Aba to equip them for their duties, and that they underwent initiation practices before becoming warriors in the group. This is analogous to the Mungiki's emphasis on the importance of ceremonies and rites of passage in admitting new members. In addition, members of the Bakassi Boys reportedly communicated with each other using a secret language (Harnischfeger, 2003:34), drawing attention to the clandestine nature of the group, which bears a resemblance to how prison gangs in South Africa operate. Smith (2004:441) and Harnischfeger (2003:32) further argue that there was a widespread belief that the Bakassi Boys had supernatural powers which strengthened public support of the group, due to its purported ability to find guilty individuals and punish them accordingly. This kind of belief in the mystical and superhuman capabilities of a group may be a distinctive feature of gangs in Africa, and marks a point of departure from how non-state armed groups are commonly understood in other parts of the world.

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The complexity of the group is illustrated by how it is labelled. The Bakassi Boys are understood to be a vigilante group, but they have also been viewed as a gang, as well as an 'ethnic militia'. The latter term is used because the group is comprised primarily of members of the Igbo group, and it has been used to execute individuals belonging to other ethnic groups (Harnischfeger, 2003:23,27; Smith, 2004:442). Smith (2004:442) further argues that the group is considered "the Igbo alternative to Sharia law in the Islamic north", highlighting the similarity between the Yandaba and Bakassi Boys in terms of their relationship to society. Their role, in this regard, was to enforce law and order in parts of the state, although they too have been termed as gangs (which often perform similar functions) and are included in analyses and studies of gangs in Africa.

As the Bakassi Boys grew more powerful, their activities became more criminal in nature, and their use of violence intensified to the point that they began to resemble the groups that they sought to combat (Smith, 2004:431). An important aspect of their illicit activity includes protection racketeering, as they taxed businesses in return for being safeguarded from other criminals (Smith, 2004:448). This is reminiscent of the *milicias* or paramilitary groups in Brazil, that have links to the police and govern *favelas* in exchange for a fee that is charged to residents. The *milicias* have been termed vigilantes, but they are criticised for being incentivised by profit, perpetuating violence, and developing ties with gangs (Arias & Barnes, 2017). It is evident that the transformation to criminality is not uncommon in vigilante groups, as is exhibited by PAGAD in South Africa. It is arguable, then, that these groups resemble gangs at certain periods in time due to the nature of their activities, and that they fit the broad conceptualisation of gangs as described by Hagedorn (2008), according to this characterisation.

The Bakassi Boys received increased attention from human rights groups by 2002, due to the violence they employed in pursuit of political objectives, as well as their executions of innocent individuals. Smith (2004:447) maintains that it is difficult to estimate how many people were executed by the Bakassi Boys, however it is likely that this number is over one thousand as suggested by reports from Amnesty International (2002) and Human Rights Watch (2002) (Harnischfeger, 2003:26). Mounting pressure on the government led to the Bakassi Boys being disbanded that year, with members being incarcerated and their headquarters destroyed (Smith, 2004:432). These measures were widely supported by human rights groups, however several political actors and some members of the public campaigned for the group to be reinstated, in order to address crime in other parts of the state (Smith, 2004:432; Meagher, 2007:99). This

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too bears a resemblance to the relationship between gangs and the communities in which they operate, as these associations can be mutually beneficial in terms of gangs offering protection and providing public goods whilst receiving popular support. This is particularly apparent in the case of Nigeria, given the state's history of military rule. There is widespread distrust of state institutions, and citizens perceive the police to be unwilling or incapable of addressing crime, as well as complicit in criminal activity (Smith, 2004:436; Baker, 2002:226). In addition, state repression through military action arguably normalised the use of violence to combat threats, thereby inadvertently encouraging the perception that vigilantism (or gang activity in service of the community) is an acceptable means to deal with problems (Smith, 2004:436; Baker, 2002:226).

The government's criminalisation of the group, together with a loss of public support in its endeavours led to its eventual decline. This was partly due to the view that the Bakassi Boys were being co-opted by politicians, as well as their perceived position in society as thugs that could be paid to intervene in disagreements, or to extort money from locals (Smith, 2004:445; Harnischfeger, 2003:40). These behaviours and actions are not unlike those of gangs that operate in other parts of Africa, and communities similarly associated the Bakassi Boys with being criminal, corrupt, and having political ties, as opposed to being a local security force (Smith, 2004:445).

5.5. Armed Groups in the Niger Delta

A great deal of the literature devoted to examining armed groups and criminality in Nigeria has focused on those involved in the oil sector. These groups are located in the Niger Delta, in the south of the state, as this region is home to significant reserves that contribute to Nigeria's status as one of the greatest producers of oil in the world (News Agency of Nigeria, 2021). This also entails that the region is strategically important in relation to the state's economy, with political instability or insecurity easily affecting the international price of oil (Watts, 2007:637; Oluwadare, 2016:159). Despite the promise of economic upliftment for communities in the Niger Delta due to foreign investment in the oil industry, the conditions experienced by locals have been marked by environmental degradation, land dispossession, and poverty (Courson, 2011: 25; Oluwadare, 2016:159).

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The emergence of armed groups such as the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in the early 2000s should therefore be understood within this context of underdevelopment, resource competition, and a lack of support and concern for citizens on the part of the government (Hazen, 2009:282; Oluwadare, 2016:159; Watts, 2007:637). These groups are often referred to as militias, insurgents, and gangs in the literature, due to their different and sometimes conflicting incentives in terms of providing for communities, acquiring resources, campaigning for the rights of local populations and the environment, as well as contesting government and multinational corporations (MNCs). Oluwadare (2016:160) argues that groups operating in the Niger Delta are often defined in terms of their militancy or criminality. The difference between these aspects can be determined with reference to motive and objectives. In this sense, the aim of militancy is to safeguard the rights of communities living in the Niger Delta, whereas criminality involves activities and pursuits that are in service of the self-enrichment of militants, often to the detriment of the wellbeing of others (Oluwadare, 2016:160). This provides an insight into the differentiation between militias and gangs, through analyses of their various objectives. Armed groups have been responsible for a range of criminal activity in the Niger Delta. This includes the destruction of infrastructure; kidnapping and hostage-taking; illegal oil bunkering; and the killing of political actors (Watts, 2007:646-647; Courson, 2011:31; Oluwadare, 2016:161; Hazen, 2009:295).

Oil bunkering, which is particularly lucrative, refers to oil theft and entails siphoning oil illegally from petroleum infrastructure, and then transporting it to another location to be sold to local or international markets (Oluwadare, 2016:163; Hazen, 2009:295). Oluwadare (2016:164) argues that oil bunkering has "increased the incidence of piracy" and riverine crime in the Gulf of Guinea and in Nigeria. The UNODC (2022:85) argues that riverine criminals operating in the Niger Delta are commonly referred to as pirates, but that they should rather be termed 'gangs' because they do not operate in international waters. Although there is a theoretical distinction between these groups on the basis of the environment in which they operate, there seems to be a blurring between the two categories in practice, as exhibited by Oluwadare (2016:164) who refers to criminal groups in the Niger Delta as pirates. The difference between pirates and gangs (which lacks attention in the literature) was discussed in the expert interviews. Interviewees suggested that pirates are distinctive in that their operations are highly specialised, and that this distinguishes them from gangs which typically exhibit a lower degree of organisation (Interview with Expert x, 2022; Interview with Expert y, 2022).

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In addition, pirates operate in marine or riverine settings, whereas gangs are assumed to operate on land (often in urban areas), and they are usually territorially based. The UNODC's (2022:85) categorisation of riverine criminals (that are commonly referred to as pirates) as 'gangs' illustrates the complexity of this issue, and the arguments brought up during the interviews bring to light the implicit assumptions that are at play in how gangs are conceptualised. Indeed, it is arguable that pirates[31] could be broadly understood as gangs as they share certain features. From this perspective, pirates act in opposition to the state; use violence in pursuit of their objectives; engage in criminal activity such as theft; and often exhibit a degree of permanence in terms of their continued existence. An inclusive account of gangs (such as Hagedorn (2008)'s conceptualisation of these groups) therefore allows for the incorporation of pirates as a kind of gang. This highlights the complexity of these actors and illustrates the utility of pluralistic accounts of these groups to examine how they operate. Furthermore, using a gang framework may be useful to understand other non-state armed groups, and ultimately address the violence that they present to the state and society.

Oluwadare (2016:164) also notes that "oil bunkering has become the most profitable illegal private business in Nigeria". It has grown from a small-scale business in which stolen oil was used locally or sold in domestic markets, to a large-scale trade involving international organised criminal networks (Oluwadare, 2016:164). This highlights an important point about illicit trade in Nigeria, as the state has been an important hub and transit point for international organised crime due to its geographical position. Indeed, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (2021:55) reports that Nigeria has one of the highest rates of criminality in the world, explained in part by its long coastlines, ports, and sophisticated trade infrastructure which enables illicit trade. Non-state armed groups including gangs are involved in these crimes, which include the illicit trade for drugs, human trafficking, wildlife trafficking, the market for non-renewable resources and the arms trade (Ellis, 2009:171; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2021:68).

Reports indicate that intra-gang and inter-gang conflict is a significant contributor to instability in the region (Oluwadare, 2016:164). The rivalries between these groups centre around control over territory, which is a common feature of gangs that has been observed in many different

[31] The term 'pirate' will be used hereafter to refer to pirates that operate in international waters, as well as the riverine criminals in the Niger Delta that are often called pirates in practice, but do not fit the theoretical description of these groups (as they are not found on the high seas).

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contexts. Oluwadare (2016:164) cites disputes between the NDPVF and the Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV) as examples of these types of 'gang confrontations', further lending support to the conceptualisation of these groups (which are often termed militias or insurgents) as gangs, at different points in time. He (2016:164) supports this by claiming that the examples of gang conflicts are criminal in nature, as members of these groups would use gang fights as an opportunity to rob citizens and loot property, including houses and shops.

The Niger Delta provides an interesting insight into the interconnections between a range of different actors. There is a debate within the literature on whether many of these groups are engaged in forms of protest or criminal activity (Watts, 2007). The boundaries between environmental activism and criminality are often blurred in practice, given that groups can transform from the former to the latter whilst employing violence to attain their objectives. Oluwadare (2016:170) argues that there has been a "transition of the insurgency from popular to criminal violence", highlighting how dynamic and flexible these groups are, in that their incentives, behaviour, and activities can shift over time. Examinations of these armed groups, such as the NDPVF, MEND, and the NDV illustrate this, as they have become increasingly violent and often prioritise their self-interest over the rights of marginalised groups even though the protection of these groups was their initial stated objective (Iwilade, 2014; Refugee Review Tribunal, 2008). At the same time, the case of the Niger Delta brings to light the dangers of uncritical labelling, given that terms such as 'domestic terrorist' can have detrimental consequences for the membership of the associated group. This also relates to the criticism of the binary framings of certain non-state armed groups as solely dangerous, which was examined in Chapter Four, especially considering that MNCs and the state sometimes contribute to this narrative but also play a part in the destruction of the environment. In addition, "there are complex relations between patrons and militias, between ethnic minorities and petro-elites, between MNCs and militias, between oil communities and militias, and between armed groups and gangs" (Oluwadare, 2016:170), which illustrates the conceptual blurring between these different categories as they intersect with each other.

5.6. Conclusion

A number of non-state armed groups operate in Nigeria, posing a threat to the safety of civilians as well as to the authority of the state. A few of these groups are not strictly defined as gangs,

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however they sometimes display behaviour or have adopted operations that are considered gang-like, and they have resembled gangs at different points in time. Area boys are often cited in studies of gangs in Nigeria, and refer to loosely structured groups of youths that partake in criminal activity. Members of these groups often form part of the illicit economy, and their operations are understood as a means to survive in an environment characterised by social, political, and economic marginalisation. The Yandaba*,* by contrast, is considered markedly dangerous, and is described as a gang that operates in the north of Nigeria. The Yandaba has been observed to develop affiliations and rivalries with other groups, as well as to participate in inter-gang conflict. Several of the features of area boys and the Yandaba therefore offer support for the hypothesis that gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa share some characteristics with gangs in the Global North.

The Yandaba is unique, however, in that it displays strong connections to Islamic traditions and culture, and has been involved in religious conflicts across the state. This aspect of religiosity marks a departure from many gangs that operate in other parts of the world, and is a marked feature of these groups in Nigeria, reinforcing the hypothesis that gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa are distinctive from gangs in the Global North. The Bakassi Boys have been termed a vigilante group that grew and developed rapidly over a short period. It quickly developed a reputation for brutality, as evident in the group's use of public executions of alleged criminals. Despite these overt displays of ruthlessness, the Bakassi Boys received widespread public support for their eradication of crime and enjoyed political backing for several years. The group's downfall relates to its transition to criminality, as it began to represent the groups it sought to combat, a feature of vigilante groups that is not unique to Africa. In this sense, the Bakassi Boys closely resembled a gang at various points in time, through their behaviour and actions. This supports the hypothesis that gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa overlap with other non-state armed groups. Analyses of conflict in the state often focus on the Niger Delta, as armed groups vie for control over the lucrative oil industry. Some of these groups have arguably transformed from militias that campaign for the rights of local communities, to criminal groups that engage in illicit activity for self-enrichment. An examination of this area brings to light the intersection and overlapping between various groups, and elicits an inquiry into how they are delineated and distinguished from one another.

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Chapter 6: A Critical Analysis of Gangs in Africa

6.1. Introduction

The preceding chapters in this thesis have served to provide insights into gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa, by analysing these groups in various contexts including major cities in South Africa, Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Nigeria. These case studies have illuminated various features of gangs in non-Western settings, by examining aspects such as their objectives, structure, levels of organisation, size, relationship to the state and society, and degree of institutionalisation. This chapter aims to consolidate information from the previous sections, in order to elucidate how gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa are distinctive from gangs in other parts of the world. This will also involve the construction of a typology to enhance understanding of the different kinds of gangs that operate in Sub-Saharan Africa. There is a caveat to highlight with respect to the typology of gangs that is presented below: it is by no means a fixed, rigid, or definitive delineation of how these groups should be categorised. Instead, it is a coarse-grained attempt to distinguish between gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa based on the information gleaned from the available literature, as well as interviews with experts in the field. It is therefore perhaps better understood as a heuristic framework than a typology. This will be examined in greater detail below.

The chapter will proceed with an analysis of the intersections and overlapping between different non-state armed groups, as has been observed in the case studies. This includes an insight into the implications of the fluidity of these groups for the conceptualisation of gangs as a distinct entity. The following section will be devoted to understanding gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa, by examining why they are distinctive, as understood by their characteristics. Four features will be analysed, with reference to gangs that were investigated in previous chapters. These include objectives; relationship with the state; relationship to society; and institutionalisation. These features will also form part of the typology, which is the focus of the following section. The chapter will then end with an examination of how gangs are commonly defined, as well as how understandings of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa conform to Western understandings of gangs, and the consequent implications for the conceptualisations of these groups.

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6.2. The Intersections and Overlapping between Non-State Armed Groups

A number of non-state armed groups have been included in this analysis, that are not strictly defined as gangs. They are, however, commonly included in studies of gangs in Africa, which brings to light how they can be considered gangs at different points in time. The cases of groups that engage in vigilantism are perhaps most apparent in this regard. These include PAGAD in South Africa, the Mungiki in Kenya, and the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria. The trend in these cases seems to be that the groups emerge with the incentive to provide security in areas affected by crime, by enforcing the law and combatting armed groups that threaten the safety of citizens. This corresponds with the conceptualisation of vigilante groups by Barnes (2021:14) as "extra-legal entities rather than criminal ones", as they aim to exert control and bring order to regions where state presence is lacking or absent. In this sense, they "go beyond the law" as described by Bateson (2020:5), which marks a contrast to gangs that operate in opposition to the state. The case of the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria illustrates how vigilantes can operate in service of the state, as the group received explicit political support and official endorsement by government (Amnesty International, 2002:5). This kind of political backing serves to legitimise such groups, and was also observed in South Africa during apartheid when the state used the Witdoeke to target political activists that sought to undermine the apartheid regime.

Indeed, it is important not to conflate these two groups, as they can display marked differences in terms of their incentives, how they operate, the kinds of activities in which they engage, and the nature of their relationship with the state and society. There is, therefore, a theoretical distinction between gangs and vigilantes, however it is more difficult to distinguish between them in practice when their behaviour, actions, and objectives start to mirror each other. The cases of PAGAD, the Mungiki, and the Bakassi Boys show how vigilantes can engage in various forms of criminal activity, such as protection racketeering and extortion. By acting in their self-interest in this way, they present a threat to local communities instead of being a source of protection, thereby resembling gangs. These groups can therefore fit inclusive and broad conceptualisations of gangs during different periods. This argument also extends to the classification of armed groups as both insurgents (or 'terrorists') and gangs, although the former terms are usually distinguished from the latter by their incentive to supplant the state (Winton, 2014:402). The Yandaba being termed a 'terrorist group' (Umar, 2007:326) illustrates how gangs are sometimes labelled as terrorists, especially when they display a connection to

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religious ideology and practices. This signals the fluidity of these groups and alludes to the difficulties involved in trying to define and differentiate between them.

These cases also bring to light the importance of temporality in understanding gangs in Africa, which relates to how they cannot be captured in fixed or stable definitions. The case studies in previous chapters indicate how there are groups that act and behave like gangs at particular moments in time, given certain conditions. These groups then resemble other non-state armed groups such as vigilantes at other points in time due to their changing behaviour and actions, which is often in response to shifts in their environment. These violent groups should therefore be understood as dynamic, and are arguably shaped by a more volatile context that prompts these transformations, as compared to those in the Global North. This conceptualisation of gangs allows for their capacity for transformation, which marks a departure from the dominant literature that tends to perceive gangs as relatively static phenomena.

The transformations of armed groups from one form into another is also apparent in contexts marked by conflict. In particular, the literature on the demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants focuses on the potential for members of groups involved in the conflict (such as militias) to engage in criminal activity in the post-conflict period (Peña & Dorussen, 2021:1). There are a multitude of reasons for this phenomenon, including a lack of opportunities for upliftment on the part of ex-combatants in the post-conflict context, as well as the relative ease with which ex-combatants can shift into criminality after developing skills relating to the use of weaponry (Nilsson, 2005:14). The emergence of the WSB from the splinter group of a military force and its transformations to a group that resembled a gang after the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone, illustrates how these groups can evolve in response to changes in their environment.

The overlapping between militias and gangs is apparent in numerous case studies in Africa. It is especially evident in instances of gang involvement in politics. Indeed, gangs that are employed by politicians to perform duties such as to protect certain individuals, intimidate opposition, or foment election violence are often termed militias. It is also interesting to note that the political divisions in certain states are sometimes marked along ethnic lines, as seen in the cases of Kenya and Nigeria, leading to these groups being termed ‘ethnic militias’ (Harnischfeger, 2003:42). The links between gangs (or militias) and political authorities have endured, and are not particular to environments plagued by conflict. The state’s sanctioning of

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violence related to non-state armed groups (as in the case of vigilantes, militias, and gangs) arguably serves to embolden them, fostering their growth over time.

The connections between gangs, pirates/riverine criminal groups and militias are marked in the Niger Delta. The intersections between these groups brings into question how they differ from one another, and what this entails for how they are understood and defined. Militia groups are typically defined by their relationship to the state, and are distinguished from other non-state armed groups based on their use of violence that is usually either authorised by the state, or in opposition to the state (Interview with Expert y, 2022). Pirates and gangs, on the other hand, do not necessarily have explicit connections to the state, and are characterised by their criminality. Indeed, by some accounts, pirates may fit inclusive and broad definitions of gangs. The differences between these two groups highlights the implicit assumptions that inform how gangs are conceptualised, an issue that will be explored in greater detail below.

The fact that a variety of non-state armed groups are included in the few existing studies of gangs in Africa is also indicative of the extent to which the field is understudied. From this perspective, the idea that groups such as vigilantes, insurgents, militias, and ex-combatants occupy space in the literature on gangs in Africa suggests that there is limited information on groups that are uncontestably perceived as gangs. As discussed in the expert interviews, the research on gangs in Africa is not representative of most gangs on the continent. There are far more small-scale groups that resemble gangs operating across Africa than the few that receive international attention due to their extreme use of violence. At the same time, however, it is arguable that the inclusion of these various groups in the gang research paradigm is fitting, as it illustrates a core feature of gangs – their ability to adapt to their environment and transform over time. The intersections and overlapping of gangs with other non-state armed groups, although not unique to the African context, seems to be pronounced in the continent.

6.3. Understanding Gangs in Africa

If gangs are to be understood as a product of their environment, then it is important to situate discussions of these groups within the African context. This brings to light how and why gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa differ from gangs in other regions, such as North America, Latin America, Europe, and Asia. The case studies presented in this thesis share various economic,

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political, and social features that are emblematic of the postcolonial setting, and they suffer from issues that are endemic to African states. In this sense, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Kenya all display features that are considered part of the legacy of colonialism, as well as the influence of weak political institutions that have characterised the post-independence era. These features include, but are not limited to, economic degradation, high levels of inequality, and the marginalisation of certain population groups (Kanneworff, 2008:117-118). Many of these states have been experiencing significant population growth, and a high proportion of populations in Africa are made up of youths – a factor that bears relevance to the study of gangs on the continent as these groups are usually comprised predominantly of youths. The growing populations put pressure on states to meet the concomitant demand in resources, however the needs of many Africans are not being fulfilled. A great number of states face high rates of unemployment, and many citizens do not have adequate access to education of a high quality, nor do they benefit from functioning public services. These conditions are conducive to the emergence of non-state armed groups, and importantly to this study, gangs. Disillusioned youths seek gang involvement to remedy their experiences of economic exclusion, as well as social and economic marginalisation, amongst other factors. This phenomenon is well-documented in the literature on gang recruitment and membership (Salaam & Brown, 2012; Higginson & Bernier, 2015). The following section aims to address the distinctiveness of gangs in Africa, as understood by their various features. There is a multiplicity of features that could be included in this analysis, however four have been selected because they elucidate how and why these groups operate; how they endure; and they provide insight into the relationships that gangs have with the state and society.

6.3.1. Objectives

Objectives are arguably one of the most important defining and characteristic features of a gang. They help to explain the reasons for a gang's existence, by examining what the gang aims to achieve, as well as the intentions that underlie and motivate its behaviour and activity. Several different kinds of objectives or goals have been attributed to gangs in the literature on these groups. These include fostering respect and developing a reputation for being powerful; control over territory; preserving a sense of belonging amongst members; and engagement in illicit activity for economic gain (Leverso & Matsueda, 2019:5). There is, of course, a confluence of interrelated objectives that a gang can have, which is evident in a variety of

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contexts across Sub-Saharan Africa. The supergangs in Cape Town, for example, are known for their involvement in international organised crime, their status as some of the most powerful and influential gangs on the continent, as well as their control over turf (which is linked to profiting in the drug trade).

It is arguable that there is a relationship between the objectives of a gang, and its degree of organisation, as coordination amongst members enhances the success of various pursuits. This is supported by Leverso and Matsueda (2019:5) who maintain that "features of gang organisation – leadership, roles, rules…meetings, and initiation rites – generally facilitate attaining gang objectives". Objectives and organisation could be said to mutually reinforce each other in this way. The case of the supergangs illustrates how this occurs, as their incentive to invest in the drug trade encouraged them to become more organised to supply these scarce commodities to the region in which they operated. This, in turn, influenced the nature of their relationship with the state and with society as the groups became more threatening and began to use violence more readily in order to secure greater profits. Objectives are included in the typology below, and despite the preponderance of different kinds of objectives that gangs can have, only one is included in the categorisation of these groups. The objective that is selected is the gang's overarching goal; it's *raison d'être*.

6.3.2. Gangs and the State

The relationship between gangs and the state is a key concern in the study of these non-state armed groups. Indeed, in defining gangs, a feature that is central to their conceptualisation is the aspect of criminality, which implies the existence of a state to declare the groups' actions as illegal. Rasmussen (2020:441) devotes attention to gangs and the state, and argues that the nature of their relationship can be ambiguous. The case studies examined in this thesis illustrate how this relationship can be considered both collaborative and antagonistic at different points in time. Cases of collaborative relations between gangs and the state are not unique to Africa and have been observed for decades across different regions. A great deal of the literature on this phenomenon has focused on Latin America and the role of the drug trade in empowering gangs and cartels, which in turn develop corrupt relations with government officials that allow

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them to continue their operations without impediment.[32] This was affirmed by gang expert y (2022) during an interview, who argued that these mutually beneficial ties between gangs and the state are not new, nor are they specific to Africa, however they take on a different dimension in the African context. In this sense, gangs on the continent do not merely receive tacit support from state authorities in exchange for bribes, but rather form explicit connections with politicians and are employed to perform certain functions. This has been observed in Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Nigeria, where gangs are used by political actors to intimidate opposition; mobilise voter support (especially in cases where gangs are influential in certain communities or have a large support base, such as the Mungiki); tamper with election results; and provide security to politicians. South Africa, too, displayed this kind of relationship when gangs were used by the state to silence political opposition to the apartheid regime. This phenomenon can therefore be observed in different political systems across Africa.

The antagonistic relationship between gangs and the state develops because the two entities act in opposition to one another. Gangs threaten the rule of law which the state is mandated to uphold (Barnes, 2021:14) and the state confronts this threat in various ways, by employing different strategies, which in turn can influence the behaviour of gangs. LeBas (2013:259) affirms the distinction between these collaborative or antagonistic relationships by arguing that governments have combatted the violence presented by gangs through either co-optation or repression. Nigeria serves as an example of the former, as the government has attempted to co-opt and collaborate with various criminal groups over several decades, including the Bakassi Boys which were endorsed and funded by the state during the early 2000s (Smith, 2004:431; LeBas, 2013:252; Kanneworff, 2008:117). Kenya, on the other hand, offers an example of state repression and antagonism as evident in its treatment of the Mungiki (LeBas, 2013:252). This brings to light Rasmussen's (2020:443) framing of police squads as a kind of gang, which serves as a reminder of the shortcomings of binary interpretations of entities as either 'good' or 'bad', as these dynamics are usually more complicated in practice. The portrayal of gangs as types of twilight institutions affirms this sentiment, as gangs often perform the roles of the state by providing public services and resources to communities in which state presence limited. This is evident in the case of the Mungiki, as the group assisted with the provision of

[32] Mexico offers an interesting case study in this regard, as the levels of violence in the state were low from the 1980s until the 2000s, during which time a few cartels fostered strong ties to government authorities and offered bribes in return for permission to control certain territories and to ensure evasion from law enforcement (Guttierez-Romero & Oviedo, 2017:3).

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water and electricity, amongst other goods and services, to communities across Kenya. Kanneworff (2008:117) furthermore argues that this blurring between the public and private realms is a feature of many postcolonial states in Africa.

6.3.3. Gangs and Society

The relationship gangs have to society can shift over time, take on different dimensions in various contexts, and be described as protective or predatory (LeBas, 2013:259). Gangs can be considered to adopt protective roles in relation to communities when they fulfil the duties of the state by providing public goods and services. They can, in this way, improve communities' access to water, education, and healthcare, by investing in local infrastructure with the profits they accrue from their operations. A recent example of this phenomenon involves the provision of food and other resources by gangs to communities in the Cape Flats during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Sullivan & Bunker, 2020). At the same time, gangs are also considered protective when they provide security and ward off competing non-state armed groups that aim to target communities through robbery, theft, and extortion, for self-enrichment (LeBas, 2013:244; Hazen, 2010:268). This is especially apparent in Sierra Leone with the Bloods, Black, and Crips as these groups are markedly territorial and have strong ties to their communities. Gangs have also been observed to play a role in the arbitration of disputes and enforcement of contracts, establishing standards for behaviour and acting as authorities in communities that experience limited state presence (LeBas, 2013:244; Cockayne, 2013:12). Groups that adopt such roles can be termed 'informal institutions of order' (LeBas, 2013:259). LeBas (2013:244) cautions against viewing gangs as benign, however, arguing that they are primarily focused on their own objectives, as "they often create the demand for security that they then supply" through fostering insecurity in local communities.

Gangs have also been noted to fill an important social role in assisting youths with the transition to adulthood. This has been observed in societies that suffered from a loss of identity and tradition during colonial rule and the imposition of Western cultural practices. As such, gangs fill this gap in two respects, both socially (by offering rites of passage and rituals that mark entry and initiation into the gang) as well as economically (through financial incentives that make young men feel empowered and worthy). This has been observed by Rasmussen (2020:440) in the case of the Mungiki with its connection to the Mau Mau, as well as by

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Pinnock (2016) in his examinations of gangs in the Western Cape. Rasmussen (2020:441) further notes that such traditions marking the transition to manhood were historically important in bringing a sense of security to communities. The effects of gangs recruiting impressionable youths and assisting with these kinds of transitions, however, are not usually positive.

Predatory relations between gangs and society develop and are visible when gangs target youths for recruitment. This was observed by Kinnes (2000:15) as he references how gangs in Cape Town would buy property that would be used by the whole community, and exercise control over these areas, using their power and influence to recruit members. Community members are also often victims of gang conflict, as many gangs have a reputation for indiscriminate violence, and show little concern for compliance with the law (Hazen, 2010:268). The proliferation of small arms on the continent also entails that the intensity of violence attributed to non-state armed groups has increased in recent years (Kwaja, 2021; Hazen, 2010:268; Rasmussen, 2020:441). This was affirmed by gang expert x (2022) during an interview, who remarked that one of the key trends concerning gang violence in Cape Town is that gang members are armed with guns, and this is reflected in their style of attack as they increasingly use drive-by shootings and mass attacks to eliminate opposition. There are high numbers of civilian casualties as a result of this development. The accrual of arms by local non-state groups has also linked them to illicit trades and international organised criminal networks, arguably helping to ensure their success (Rasmussen, 2020:441).

It is important to note that the relationship gangs have to society is influenced by the relationship between gangs and the state. The way in which these dynamics play out in practice, and the outcomes of the interconnections between gangs and the state is, however, ambiguous. One might suggest that if the state adopts a repressive stance towards gangs and is simultaneously perceived as untrustworthy and unjust, communities will adopt a sympathetic attitude towards gangs (especially if they play a role in the provision of public goods), thereby increasing popular support for these groups. These were arguably the dynamics at play with the Mungiki during the early 2000s, when the state adopted a zero-tolerance policy towards the group and it enjoyed a large support base. If the state attempts to co-opt gangs, however, to fulfil political objectives on the part of politicians, this can decrease support for gangs which are no longer considered allies of the community. This occurred in the case of the Bakassi Boys and is cited as a factor that led to the group's eventual downfall (Smith, 2004:445). LeBas

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(2013:259) contends this by illustrating how these interactions are more complex than they appear, arguing that

> Both political manipulation and state repression can erode whatever links and ties of accountability might have existed between armed actors and the communities upon which they ostensibly rely. Predation is as likely as public goods provision, since these organizations, at their root, directly rely on coercion to sustain their material base.

This demonstrates that a nuanced perspective is necessary when examining the relationships between these various actors, as well as the consequences of their interactions. It furthermore highlights the difficulties inherent in the development of policies and strategies that aim to eliminate gangs and to curb the violence that they present, as their sources of support and modes of operation can be unpredictable.

6.3.4. Institutionalisation

The literature on gangs has increasingly focused on their degree of institutionalisation as an indicator of their influence and success (Rasmussen, 2020:8). It can be understood as a measure of how established a gang is and is often evaluated by a group's level of embeddedness in the communities in which it operates, as well as its demonstration of continuity or permanence in that the group outlasts changes in leadership. Hagedorn (2008:7) elucidates how the theoretical underpinnings of the notion of institutionalisation in organisations originates from Philip Selznick's (1957) work on the objectives of these groups. Selznick (1957) argued that the primary goal of an institution was not the completion or accomplishment of certain tasks, but rather to ensure survival and continued existence through various means. By prioritising survival over daily undertakings and projects, "institutions acquire an identity that is shaped by the need to adapt to changing conditions" (Hagedorn, 2008:8). These shifting circumstances can refer to rivalry with different groups, and contestations over power by leaders of the organisation. In addition, the process of institutionalisation entails that groups form certain practices and rituals that differentiate them from other groups that would otherwise be considered similar. At the same time, groups develop a code of conduct, a "formal or informal structure with rules and role expectations", and members belonging to it start to identify with

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the group (Hagedorn, 2008:8). It also garners support from some individuals in the community in which it operates.

These theoretical insights on institutionalisation can be applied to gangs, to understand how they endure, as the preservation of the group is upheld by its members' support which is based on "a belief in the organisation itself" rather than being contingent on how well it functions and performs (Hagedorn, 2008:9). The implications of this are that institutionalised gangs are difficult for law enforcement to dismantle. Institutionalisation, then, can be understood and measured by several factors. These include: a degree of permanence in that the group endures (even in the face of leadership succession); that the group is organised and members adopt several roles that can change over time; the group can adapt and transform to changes presented by the environment (including war or state repression); it meets some of the community's needs (such as goods provision or offering security); and it influences the identity and outlook of members (through symbols, customs, and traditions) (Hagedorn, 2008:9-10). Institutionalised gangs feature prominently in their communities and the wider region in which they operate, and are considered almost impossible to eliminate.

In light of the aforementioned factors, it is apparent that several gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa can be considered to have institutionalised. This is highlighted by Mitton (2022:53) who argues that the Bloods, Black, and Crips are becoming increasingly prominent in Sierra Leone; they have developed significantly over the past few decades, and exhibit that they have "reached an advanced stage of institutionalisation" (Mitton, 2022:53). Community members in Freetown affirm this, by reporting that the gangs provide protection from other predatory groups, and help to control youths (Mitton, 2022:53). This is also evident in the case of gangs in South Africa, such as the Americans, Hard Livings, Sexy Boys and Mongrels, as they have existed for an extended period of time, are well-organised, have adapted and transformed in response to changes in their environment, assist with meeting some of the needs of communities in the Cape Flats, and influence the identity and perspectives of their members.

There also seems to be a connection between the dynamism and flexibility of these gangs and the levels of institutionalisation that they exhibit. From this perspective, a group's capacity for adaptation and development arguably helps to ensure its institutionalisation, as it can be considered resilient, robust, and likely to endure over time. This ties into the observation referenced above, concerning the dynamic nature of gangs in Africa which is central to how

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groups on the continent are understood. It is arguable that states in Africa are characterised by environments that are relatively more volatile, unstable, and unpredictable than those of the Global North. Gangs operating in the former settings, then, need to be dynamic and flexible in order to survive and institutionalise. This provides a contrast to how gangs in the Global North are often understood as entities that are more stable than gangs in other regions, which is reflected in the Western literature on gangs.

6.4. Typology

This section is focused on the construction of a typology that aims to enhance understanding of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa, by grouping them according to several features that are represented in the table below. There is a caveat to bear in mind with respect to the typology, however, as it should not be interpreted in the traditional sense of providing rigid labels and categories into which the groups are fixed. Furthermore, the typology does not aim to specify necessary and sufficient conditions for the categorisation of a gang into a gang type. Rather, its purpose is to provide a visual representation of the rough delineation of groups according to characteristics that they share, and that distinguish them from other groups. Indeed, many academics involved in the gang research paradigm may rightly contend that typologies are not useful in a practical sense as various non-state armed groups can overlap at different times. Their objectives, structure, levels of organisation, and operations also develop and transform as these groups adapt to their changing environments. To echo Hagedorn (2008:31), the only fixed feature of these groups is their ability to evolve. It is, however, arguable that the typology is still useful to illustrate what kinds of gangs operate in Sub-Saharan Africa, how they can be understood in terms of their main characteristics, and why they are distinctive. From this perspective, the typology is perhaps better understood as a heuristic in the sense that it offers an overview of some of the most prominent gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa, a topic that is not well-studied. It is an attempt to examine, analyse and understand these groups and it endeavours to offer a foundation for future studies focusing on gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The preceding chapters in this thesis have contributed to the literature on gangs, and enhanced knowledge of these groups by providing accounts of how they operate, what their objectives entail, the kinds of activities in which they are engaged, as well as the levels of organisation that they exhibit. The shortcomings of this study are explained by the lack of available

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information on gangs in most parts of Africa, which has implications for the construction of a typology as features such as the exact size of the group, or its precise duration are difficult to acquire due to the understudied nature of the field. At the same time, in developing a typology it is important to only select a few features for detailed analysis, that elucidate something meaningful about gangs. Four features have been chosen for this purpose, including objectives, relationship with the state, relationship to society, and institutionalisation. These have been explained in the previous section but will be elaborated upon with reference to the specific case studies and the typology below.

6.4.1. Features in the Typology

It is important to examine the objectives of a group, in order to understand why it exists and what it aims to achieve. These reasons and motivations can vary widely, and although gangs typically have multiple objectives, only one overarching objective has been selected for the typology for the purposes of clarification. The second feature is the relationship between gangs and the state, which offers insight into how the two entities interact and influence each other. The two kinds of relationships that are included are collaborative and antagonistic. All of the groups in the typology have both collaborative and antagonistic relationships to the state, however these play out in different ways, in different contexts. These relationships also change over time, and are by no means static. The third feature is the relationship between gangs and society, which similarly provides information on the interactions between the two entities, and which is distinguished by predatory or protective relations. Most of the gang types exhibit both predatory and protective relationships that manifest in various ways. The term ‘protective’ as it is used below, refers to protecting the wellbeing of a community or communities, and therefore can entail providing security, or public goods and services. In essence, it signifies the safeguarding of some of the rights of citizens. Predatory, then, is the opposite of protective and accounts for when members of society or specific communities become victims of criminal activity attributed to gangs. This can result from their being targeted directly by gangs, or being caught in the crossfire. Lastly, institutionalisation is a measure of the influence and continuity of a gang. It is determined by three factors, including duration of the group, its embeddedness in the community in which it operates, and its level of organisation. These appear in the typology below, however, they should not be understood as the means by which to reach exact

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calculations of institutionalisation but rather as being used for approximations of the degree of institutionalisation.

6.4.2. Gang Types

This study has employed Hazen and Roger's (2014:8) definition of gangs as including three main criteria. These include the notion that gangs display a measure of continuity and a degree of permanence; routinely engage in violent criminal activity that is regarded as illegal; and are comprised predominantly of youths. The typology that is presented below is grounded on this understanding of gangs, as the groups that are included have displayed these characteristics. The typology includes features of gangs that are not always cited in definitions of these groups, but which nonetheless enhance how they are understood. The typology also helps to answer the research question that guides this study, by outlining how and why gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa are distinctive from gangs in the Global North, through an examination of their characteristics. It is important to note that the gangs depicted in the typology are dynamic and can transform from one type into another over time. Indeed, this is a key feature of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa and is observed when the environments in which gangs operate change, as the gangs adapt to survive. This often entails changes in their objectives, relationship between the state and between society, and levels of institutionalisation.

Referring to figure 1 below, four types of gangs have been identified, the first of which is the traditional gang that has predominantly financial objectives. This often entails involvement in international organised crime, and participation in illicit activities such as the drug trade and protection racketeering. This gang type's relationship with the state is typically antagonistic, as these groups present a significant threat to the authority of the state due to their use of violence and power (as they accrue a great deal of wealth). Their relationship with the state can also turn collaborative when it is characterised by corrupt interactions between gang members and state officials that serve to embolden the group. The traditional gang's relationship to society is predatory given that it uses violence indiscriminately, in service of financial profits. It can be protective, however, in that it offers protection and provides public goods to certain communities. It enjoys a high level of institutionalisation due to its existence over a long period of time, entrenchment in communities, and high levels of organisation. Examples of this gang include the Americans, Hard Livings, and Mongrels in Cape Town.

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The second gang type is the youth street gang, which engages in subsistence criminal activity that usually takes the form of opportunistic crime such as theft and extortion. These groups are comprised of impressionable youths that form collaborative relationships with the state, which usually entails being co-opted to perform duties for politicians. Their relationship with the state is also antagonistic by virtue of the groups being in opposition to the state (by engaging in crime), resulting in them being targeted by law enforcement, however they are not considered a major threat to the authority of the state. The gangs' relationship to society is, unsurprisingly, also considered predatory as it threatens the safety of individuals or small groups. This type of gang exhibits a low degree of institutionalisation as it is comprised of loosely structured youths who are not well organised and do not coordinate their activities. The groups are also not strictly defined as a gang, lack leadership and the delineation of roles, and therefore do not endure as a distinct entity. They are also not well entrenched in communities. Examples of this type include rarray boys in Freetown, and area boys in Lagos.

The third type of gang is termed the vigilante gang, and it refers to groups that aim to combat crime and enforce social control in areas characterised by limited state presence. They can form both collaborative and antagonistic relationships with the state, as they can assist with policing and eradicating crime (and are at times even endorsed by government). At the same time, however, these groups tend to resemble the criminals they initially seek to combat, and this is when they can be considered gang-like, and develop antagonistic relations with the state. Similarly, their interactions with society can be protective when these groups aim to ensure the safety of the community, however they can turn predatory when the groups start to engage in criminal activity. The level of institutionalisation of these groups can be described as medium, or average, as they are usually well-organised and entrenched in communities, however they do not always endure for an extended period of time. The Bakassi Boys and PAGAD are examples of these groups.

The ideological gang is the fourth type, and refers to groups that have explicit political, religious, or cultural ambitions. They can develop collaborative relationships with the state, as they perform duties for politicians, but also have antagonistic interactions with government when they break the law and engage in criminal activity. As such, their relations to society can be considered predatory but they are also protective in that they aim to enlighten and ensure

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the wellbeing of the communities of which they are a part. This protective aspect can refer to certain members of the community that share the gang's ideological outlook, or to the whole community when the group performs duties that benefit everyone. They are well institutionalised, as they exist for a prolonged period of time, are embedded in their communities, and highly organised. The Mungiki and the Yandaba are examples of such groups.

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TYPE	PRIMARY OBJECTIVE	RELATIONSHIP TO THE STATE	RELATIONSHIP TO SOCIETY	INSTITUTIONALISATION	EXAMPLE
1. Traditional gang	Financial • Involvement in lucrative illicit activities	Antagonistic Collaborative • Corruption	Predatory Protective • Offers protection and services to certain communities	High • Has endured for an extended period • Is well embedded in communities • Highly organised (has links to international criminal networks)	Americans (South Africa); Hard Livings (South Africa); Mongrels (South Africa); Sexy Boys (South Africa)
2. Youth street gang	Subsistence criminal activity • Opportunistic crime	Antagonistic • But not considered a major threat to the authority of the state Collaborative • Develops ties to political actors to perform duties for them	Predatory • Threatens individual citizens	Low • Youths form loosely structured groups that are not strictly defined and do not endure • Is not well embedded in communities • Is not highly organised	rarray boys (Sierra Leone); area boys (Nigeria)
3. Vigilante gang	Selective crime combatting	Antagonistic • When the group starts to engage in criminal activity Collaborative • Assists with combatting crime and policing	Predatory • When the group engages in criminal activity Protective • Aims to ensure the safety of the community	Medium • Endures for a short period • Is well embedded in communities (and often receives popular support) • Highly organised	Bakassi Boys (Nigeria); PAGAD (South Africa)

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4. Ideological gang	Ideological • Can be religiously, culturally, or politically motivated	Antagonistic • When the group engages in criminal activity Collaborative • Develops ties to political actors to perform duties for them	Predatory • When the group engages in criminal activity Protective • Aims to enlighten and ensure the wellbeing of the community	High • Endures for an extended period of time • Is well embedded in communities • Highly organised	Mungiki (Kenya); Yandaba (Nigeria)

Table 1: Typology of Gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa

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6.5. Defining Gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa

There is no universally accepted definition of a gang. The case studies in this thesis have provided support for the notion that gangs are difficult to define categorically. Gangs behave and act differently in various regions, and this is largely due to historical and environmental factors that shape how they emerge and transform. It is not useful, then, to make generalisations about gangs based on studies conducted in North America, as there are different manifestations of gangs in other states. Furthermore, there is an argument to be made that the dominant, Western understanding of gangs as derived from North America may be an exceptional perspective on these groups, given the varieties of gangs in the African context. The depth of variation between gangs across Africa is evident in their competing objectives, degree of organisation, structure, size, relationships with the state, relationships to society, and level of institutionalisation. Their capacity for transformation also entails that they do not fit rigid or fixed definitions, as they may be perceived as one kind of non-state armed group at one time, and another at a different period in time. Scholars have been engaged in theoretical discussions on the utility of even attempting to develop a universalised definition of gangs, given that conceptual ambiguity seems to be inherent to the understanding of these groups (Dziewanski, 2021:36). Indeed, the incentive to reach the standard of objectivity in the study of gangs is misplaced and arguably does more harm than good, by misrepresenting and inadequately taking account of these groups. This also relates to the problems associated with naming non-state armed actors, as labels carry expectations concerning the objectives, behaviour, and actions of the group in question (Bhatia, 2005). The argument that labelling can be a self-fulfilling prophecy therefore creates doubt concerning the utility of definitions and naming.

It does not follow, however, that the project to analyse and conceptualise these groups should be abandoned completely. The ambition to achieve conceptual clarity with respect to gangs, although difficult, is not without value, as knowledge of these groups forms the foundation for how they are addressed. Once acknowledging that a standardised definition of gangs (that is applicable to all contexts) is a fruitless pursuit, the benefits of a pluralistic account of these groups comes to the fore. There is therefore still merit in proposing definitions, analysing how well they are able to explain and account for what happens in practice, and revising these conceptualisations so as to encapsulate the core features of a particular phenomenon, in order to enhance knowledge and understanding.

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The theoretical framework in Chapter One explored the problems that scholars have encountered when trying to define gangs. The first involves the development of exclusive definitions (which have decreased extension and applicability to only a few groups) that are therefore too narrow to properly account for the majority of gangs (Barnes, 2021:8). Conversely, the second main issue referenced above refers to the use of inclusive definitions of gangs (which have increased extension due to too few criteria) that are too broad to be meaningful (Barnes, 2021:8). This is because inclusive definitions of gangs can incorporate groups that do not resemble gangs sufficiently. The alternative conceptualisation of gangs presented by Hazen and Rodgers (2014:8) mentions three key criteria, including that the group will maintain a degree of permanence; participate in violent activities that are considered illegal; and be comprised predominantly of individuals who are youths under twenty-five years old.

The first criterion makes reference to one of the features of institutionalisation, and separates gangs from other more transient groups. Barnes (2021:14) argues that the second criterion distinguishes gangs from militia and rebel groups that operate in environments characterised by an absent or failed state, as the existence of the state is implied in the notion of the actions of a gang being declared illegal. At the same time, he (2021:4) contends that this also allows for a distinction between gangs and vigilantes as the latter group's objectives are to enforce the law, and they are typically not considered criminal entities whereas gangs are. There is, in light of the above, a theoretical justification for distinguishing gangs from other non-state groups. This is complicated in practice, however, as these non-state armed groups tend to mirror each other at different moments in time, and the boundaries between them blur, making it difficult to know where one conceptual category begins and another ends. The implication of this, then, is the salience of the capacity of gangs to transform – a feature that should be included in conceptualisations of these groups. At the same time, the overlapping between militias, rebel groups, vigilantes, and gangs calls into question the utility of Western definitions of gangs in the African context. From this perspective, conceptualisations of gangs in Africa should take into account these intersections and overlaps. Furthermore, the third criterion in Hazen and Rodgers' (2014:8) definition has been contested by gang experts during interviews, as the two interviewees suggested that gangs are not always predominantly comprised of youths (Interview with Expert x, 2022; Interview with Expert y, 2022). It is, however, expected that older members who have more experience assume leadership roles whereas younger members are lower in the hierarchy of the group.

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There are also implicit assumptions present in the dominant understanding of gangs to which gangs in African context do not comply. These assumptions imply a static context, and analysing them emphasises the importance of an account of gangs that can incorporate different points of view that are not typically considered in Western conceptualisations of gangs. This is based on the understanding that gangs operate in response to the opportunities and threats that their environments present. As such, gangs in cities in North America vary from those in the Niger Delta, as factors such as the built environment and illicit economies in these contexts differ and influence these groups in various ways.

The distinction between pirates/riverine criminals and gangs brings these implicit assumptions of how gangs operate to light. In this sense, pirates are perceived as distinct from gangs on the basis that they conduct highly specialised operations that take place in marine or riverine settings. Gangs, on the other hand, are considered to be comparatively less organised and operate on land, usually in an urban environment. They are also territorially based and often focused on control over turf. Information garnered from preceding case studies complicates these assumptions, however, as groups such as the supergangs in Cape Town have illustrated high levels of organisation and specialisation through their involvement in various illicit trades. In addition, the intersections between various non-state armed groups in the Niger Delta bring into question the importance of the setting in which they operate. Indeed, some of these groups have been termed 'gangs' in the literature (Oluwadare, 2016:164), even though they operate in a riverine environment and are involved in the trade of a non-renewable resource. These observations call for an inquiry into whether pirates can be considered a type of gang, perhaps by broad definitions and accounts best exemplified by Hagedorn's (2008:31) inclusive conceptualisation of these groups. Furthermore, this entails an examination of whether these implicit assumptions of gangs, such as the emphasis on operating on land (typically in urban settings) and not conducting specialised operations, are important features of gangs.

This thesis does not attempt to answer this question, nor does it seek to propose a novel definition of gangs. Rather, it aims to emphasise that scholars in the gang research paradigm are not dealing with stable concepts, and should be open to pluralistic accounts of these groups that allow for different perspectives on how they operate in a variety of contexts, as well as how dynamic they can be. At the same time, this involves an account of gangs that is relational as opposed to atomistic, as these groups do not operate in isolation, but rather in response to and in connection with factors in their environment. The definition of gangs as proposed by

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Hazen and Rodgers (2014:8) therefore provides a solid foundation for understanding gangs, with the amendment of the third criterion to involve the group sometimes being comprised primarily of youths, as opposed this usually being the case. This entails using Hazen and Rodgers' (2014:8) definition without being limited in terms of how gangs are thought about and understood; and at the same time incorporating the notion of transitions from one non-state armed group to another, accounting for their ability to transform over time, and the overlaps that they may share with others.

The information in this section serves to answer the two research questions that guide this study, and to address the hypotheses that were presented in Chapter One. The first question, "why are gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa distinctive?", and its corresponding hypothesis that these groups are distinctive because they do not conform to Western conceptualisations of these groups, is correct. Gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa differ from those in Western contexts in that they do not adhere to the implicit assumptions of gangs that Western contexts seem to prescribe. The second part of this hypothesis states that gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa are unique in that they overlap and exhibit links with other non-state armed groups. Although the connections between gangs and other non-state armed groups have been observed in other settings, they seem to be pronounced in Africa, where a wide variety of groups including militias, vigilantes, rebel groups, ex-combatants, and gangs interact. In addition, these groups have been observed to transform into one another, an aspect that is prominent in Sub-Saharan African states. This can be explained in part by the volatility and instability that often characterises the African context, which prompts the adaptation of gangs on the continent, a consideration that is markedly different from the operations of these groups in the Global North. The second research question is "what are the characteristics of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa, and how can these be determined?". The information garnered from previous chapters offers support for the hypothesis that the core features of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa overlap with some of the essential characteristics incorporated in Western definitions of gangs. This includes some correspondence to the first two criteria in Hazen and Rodgers' (2014:8) definition of a gang. There is a departure from the stipulations of the second hypothesis here, however, as the third criterion involving youth membership has been amended as outlined above.

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6.6. Conclusion

This chapter sought to offer a theoretical analysis of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa based on the information that the case studies in previous sections provided. One of the most prominent aspects of gangs is their intersections and overlapping with other non-state groups, which is especially evident in the African context, as seen in major cities in South Africa, Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Nigeria. Understanding gangs in Africa therefore entails a contextual examination of the underlying environmental factors that give rise to their emergence. Gangs on the continent can be analysed with reference to four features that provide insights into how they differ from one another. These include objectives, the relationship between gangs and the state, the relationship between gangs and society, and institutionalisation. These features were used to provide a typology, or heuristic framework, for examining gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa. This typology yielded four different gang types, namely the traditional gang, youth street gang, vigilante gang, and ideological gang. These groups displayed similar kinds of relationships with the state and society, but differences in the way that these interactions manifested, as displayed by the typology.

There is a great deal of variation between gangs, as is evident in their different objectives, activities, behaviour, level of organisation, structure, size, and relationships with the state and with society. At the same time, gangs possess the ability to develop and transform in response to their environment, highlighting the flexibility and dynamism of these groups. In addition, the case studies in this thesis illustrated how non-state armed groups can transition from one group to another, a feature that is arguably pronounced in the African context. These considerations call for a re-evaluation of the dominant, Western conceptualisations of these groups, and their applicability to gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is apparent that gangs in this region share characteristics with those in other parts of the world, however they also display differences in terms of the implicit assumptions that underlie how they are understood. This emphasises the importance of a pluralistic account of gangs, that incorporates a range of perspectives in how they are conceptualised, as well as cognisance of their capacity for transformation over time.

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Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1. Introduction

This thesis has explored the topic of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa. The field of gang research is marked by conceptual ambiguity and a lack of agreement concerning how these groups should be defined. This is further problematised by the fact that most of the literature on gangs is derived from research conducted in the Global North, with very little focus on Africa. There is, in this sense, a dearth of information concerning how gangs in Africa operate, how they are structured, what their objectives entail, and how long they endure, amongst other factors. This brings into question whether the existing scholarship is sufficient to understand gangs in Africa, or whether alternative theoretical frameworks need to be developed to make sense of these groups. This thesis has sought to address this issue in several different respects. Firstly, a theoretical examination of the existing literature was presented in order to provide a foundation for the study through an analysis of how gangs have been defined and conceptualised in the past. This was followed by four chapters that endeavoured to provide an overview of gangs and gang-like groups that have not received a great deal of attention in the literature on these groups in Africa, given the understudied nature of the field. These case studies, on cities in South Africa, Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Nigeria were used to inform an analysis of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa in Chapter Six. Chapter Six was devoted to investigating how non-state armed groups intersect and overlap with each other, examining what the features of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa entail, constructing a typology to enhance knowledge of these groups, as well as evaluating how they can be conceptualised and defined. This concluding chapter aims to consolidate this information, and to provide some clarity to the conceptual difficulties that have been highlighted above. It proceeds with an evaluation of the research questions and hypotheses, a discussion of the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

7.2. Findings

7.2.1. Research Questions

This thesis was guided by two research questions, that are presented below:

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1. Why are gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa distinctive from gangs in the Global North?
2. What are their characteristics and how can these be determined?

7.2.2. Hypotheses

A first hypothesis was developed in response to question one:

1. Gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa are distinctive because they do not entirely conform to Western conceptualisations of what gangs entail, nor do they adhere to the assumptions of gangs that these contexts seem to prescribe. Moreover, gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa often overlap with and exhibit links with other non-state armed groups, which is not always typical of gangs in other geographical areas.

This hypothesis was affirmed by the examinations of gangs in the case studies. The first part of the hypothesis refers to how gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa depart from the dominant perceptions of these groups. As mentioned in Chapter One, there are implicit assumptions that underlie Western conceptualisations of gangs. These include the notion that gangs operate in urban areas, are primarily territorially focused, often prioritise engagement in illicit industries such as the drug trade, and emphasise unity and the importance of gang identity which is expressed through various means (such as clothing and tattoos). Many of the gangs in the case studies correspond to some of these Western assumptions, as evident in the supergangs in Cape Town as well as the Bloods, Black and Crips in Freetown. There are, however, many cases of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa that do not conform to these assumptions. This was seen in the cases of groups that operate in rural settings, with the Mungiki in different parts of Kenya, as well as a variety of groups in the Niger Delta. There are also several groups that do not prioritise involvement in lucrative illicit trades. These include loosely structured groups such as rarray boys in Sierra Leone and area boys in Nigeria. Well organised gangs also do not necessarily participate in these trades, as is evident with the Bloods, Black and Crips that are involved primarily in 'subsistence activities' (Mitton, 2022:55). Their actions are perceived more as a form of resistance and means for survival in the face of economic and political exclusion than as a way to earn substantial profits. In addition, territoriality was not always mentioned as an important feature in the operations of these groups, although it was cited as a factor that drives inter-gang conflict in many cases.

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There were also several aspects of the operations of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa that were mentioned across different case studies, but that do not seem to be central features in the Western literature on gangs. This includes the role of ideology in guiding the actions, behaviour, and practices of a gang, which is evident in gang type four (the ideological gang) in Chapter Six. Ideology can be religious, cultural, or political in nature. The Mungiki exemplify this characterisation, with its appeal to the traditions of the Mau Mau and its involvement in political and religious affairs. The Yandaba, too, exhibit these ideological inclinations, through the group's role in enforcing Shariah law in parts of northern Nigeria. Historical context is also important to consider when examining gangs in Africa, which is evident in the military rank structures and practices that have been inherited by gangs in this setting. The prison gangs in South Africa are organised and structured militarily, which affirms this point. The Bloods, Black, and Crips in Sierra Leone also exhibit this feature, through their hierarchical command structure that is delineated by militarily inspired roles such as soldier and general. The adoption of these terms and structures is, in many respects, a distinctive feature of gangs in Africa and can be understood as part of the legacy of colonialism and post-war contexts. It does not feature strongly in the literature on gangs in the Global North.

The second part of the hypothesis addresses an aspect of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa that makes them distinctive from gangs in the Global North. This involves the extent to which gangs intersect and overlap with other non-state armed groups. This feature was discussed in Chapter Six, through analyses of how gangs in most of the case studies have displayed connections with non-state armed groups such as vigilantes, militias, rebel groups, ex-combatants, and insurgents. There is also a blurring between these conceptual categories, as the groups tend to mirror each other at different points in time, when they hold similar objectives, and adopt similar practices, behaviour and activities. This complicates attempts to differentiate between non-state armed groups, and poses a challenge to the conceptual project of defining gangs and taking account of their core features. The transformations that gangs undergo can be viewed as a response to changes in their environment, and this ability to adapt and evolve over time is central to the survival of gangs. It is arguable that the dynamic nature of gangs is pronounced in Sub-Saharan Africa given that the context in which these groups operate is often less stable than that of the Global North. There is, in this sense, a heightened incentive for gangs to evolve and transform in Sub-Saharan Africa due to the changing conditions that they experience in their environment. This is supported

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by the fact that the literature on gangs in the Global North perceives these groups as relatively static, which provides a stark contrast to how gangs in the Global South are understood. The notion that gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa do not conform to the assumptions of how gangs operate in the Global North, as well as their capacity to shift and transform, highlights the importance of an account of these groups that is pluralistic rather than fixed and rigid. This emphasises the integration of different perspectives that are not usually included in Western conceptualisations of these groups.

A second hypothesis was developed in response to question two:

2. The core features of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa overlap with some of the essential characteristics incorporated in Western definitions of gangs. These include the notion that gangs display a degree of permanence and continuity; routinely participate in violent criminal activity that is regarded as illegal; and are comprised predominantly of youths. The features of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa are determined through the empirical analysis of case studies.

The case studies in previous chapters served to provide support for this hypothesis. The features that are included in Western conceptualisations of gangs are derived from Hazen and Rodgers' (2014:8) definition of these groups. The gangs in the case studies exhibited a degree of continuity or permanence in that the groups outlasted changes in leadership. This quality bears reference to the degree of institutionalisation that gangs exhibit, as they are considered well institutionalised if they endure over time. Not all of the gangs that were examined still exist, however they endured for an extended period of time. The Bakassi Boys are an example of this kind of entity, and there is speculation concerning a revival of the group, which highlights how powerful and influential it was during the course of its existence. Relatedly, all of the groups that were investigated displayed violent behaviour and engaged in activity that was regarded illegal by the state. Criminality was, in this sense, central to their existence. The kinds of criminal activity in which these groups participated include extortion, robbery, theft, protection racketeering, and involvement in the drug trade. Some of the groups, such as the supergangs in Cape Town, had links to international criminal networks, whereas others including rarray boys in Sierra Leone participated in minor crimes on a smaller scale. The last criterion, relating to membership being comprised predominantly of youths, has been contested by experts in the field during interviews (Interview with Expert x, 2022; Interview with Expert y, 2022). They

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argued that it is not necessarily the case that gangs are comprised predominantly of individuals under the age of 25, as was specified in Hazen and Rodgers' (2014:8) definition of these groups. The definition of gangs can therefore be amended to incorporate this change in perspective, as was discussed in Chapter Six. Gangs, therefore, can be understood to sometimes consist of members that are youths, in contrast to this usually being the case.

One of the most consistent features of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa that is central to how they are understood is their dynamism and flexibility. Their capacity for transformation ensures that they are able to survive, and this should be included in how gangs on the continent should be conceptualised. This reiterates that scholars in the field are not dealing with stable concepts, and should make use of pluralistic accounts of these groups that allow for the incorporation of different perspectives on how gangs operate and what their characteristics entail. It is evident that some of the Western literature on gangs is applicable to groups that operate in in non-Western settings. There is, however, a need for a more nuanced perspective of these groups that acknowledges how they are distinctive from gangs in the Global North, and that acknowledges the centrality of their dynamic nature to how they are understood. Chapter Six introduced the typology, or heuristic framework, that was constructed to advance knowledge of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa. The features that were included in the typology are not considered central to how gangs are defined, but instead aimed to enhance understanding of these groups given that they are markedly understudied. The typology incorporated four features relating to gangs on the continent, namely objectives, relationship with the state, relationship to society, and degree of institutionalisation. These were used to categorise gangs into four different types, termed traditional gangs, youth street gangs, vigilante gangs, and ideological gangs. The gang types displayed a wide variety of different characteristics, with objectives ranging from financial pursuits to ideological ambitions; relationships with the state being antagonistic and collaborative; relationships to society being predatory and protective; and a range in the degree of institutionalisation that they exhibit. The last part of this hypothesis refers to how the features of these gangs can be determined. The previous chapters in this thesis offered support for the hypothesis that the characteristics of these groups can be established by empirical analyses of the case studies. This was completed by examining and analysing gangs in major cities in South Africa, Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Nigeria using desktop research through consultation with a variety of secondary sources, as well as interviews with experts in the field.

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7.3. Limitations

Whilst this thesis has endeavoured to advance several contributions to the study of gangs in Africa, there are a few limitations to consider in its evaluation. The first was alluded to in Chapter Six and refers to the lack of literature on gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa. This was mentioned during the interviews with gang experts, who noted that the gangs that were investigated in this study are not necessarily representative of most gangs on the continent (Interview with Expert x, 2022; Interview with Expert y, 2022). The groups that were examined are well-known for their use of violence, which accounts for why they have received international attention. Most gangs in Africa, however, are made up of smaller groups of individuals, that operate in both urban and rural areas, and their existence remains largely unstudied. Analyses of these groups would consist of a great deal of fieldwork across the continent, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. As this thesis served to examine a range of groups in different regions in Sub-Saharan Africa, there was a trade-off to make between investigating a large number of groups in a limited amount of detail, or rather focusing on a few groups and examining them in great depth. This study aimed to strike a balance between these two considerations, and the space devoted to each section reflected the amount of information that was available inform it. In this sense, the case study on Cape Town in South Africa is lengthy because it is well-studied, and provides insight into the operations of gangs across political transitions. The section on Sierra Leone, by contrast, focuses on several groups for which there is not a great deal of information. In light of this, there were several case studies, such as cities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, and Liberia that were not included in the study.

7.4. Recommendations for Future Research

There are a number of opportunities for future research in the study of gangs, especially with reference to the Global South and Sub-Saharan Africa in particular. There is a need for more information on gangs across the continent, especially with respect to groups that are not well-known and that have not been the focus of fieldwork in previous studies. This would aid in further reassessments of the applicability of the ‘gang’ concept to non-Western settings , given that groups in these environments seem to display characteristics that make them distinctive from gangs in the Global North. At the same time, it may help to use gang frameworks to

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understand and address non-state armed groups that bear similarities with gangs, but are not typically termed as such, which could be a topic for further research. The information garnered from these observations could be incorporated into postcolonial analyses of why gangs emerge in these contexts. The insights from this study could also be used to inform similar investigations on the dynamism and fluidity of non-state armed groups in other regions, such as Asia or Latin America.

The gang research paradigm is also lacking studies on the role of women in these groups, as the field has historically been centred on men as comprising the majority of membership. An increasing number of gangs are made up of women, however, and women are still involved in gang operations, and hold important positions in communities in which gangs operate, even when they do not contribute to the membership of these groups (Mitton, 2022:47). The influence of women is therefore important for consideration, especially with reference to studies in the Global South as there is already a lack of information in this field. In addition, the nexus between gangs and natural resources is important to examine in the African context. Further investigations into this phenomenon could include groups such as the *zama zamas* in South Africa, as these illicit miners engage in turf wars that are reminiscent of inter-gang conflict in urban areas (Mtembu, 2023). Cybercrime is also becoming increasingly prominent, posing a threat to individuals, businesses, organisations, and political institutions alike (Shaw, 2018). Cyber gangs may therefore form the basis of future research, as an emerging and evolving category that could change how gangs are conceptualised and understood.

7.5. Conclusion

The central theme of this thesis has been to enhance knowledge of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa. The importance of this pursuit is emphasised by the lack of conceptual clarity concerning the study of gangs, as well as the dearth of literature that investigates gangs on the African continent. It is argued that some of the existing scholarship on gangs in the Global North serves a purpose in helping to make sense of gangs in non-Western contexts, however, a closer assessment of these groups' features is necessary to understand them better. This thesis aimed to address this, whilst making three contributions to the literature. The first is descriptive in nature, as it involves the examination of gangs in different case studies, namely cities in South Africa, Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Nigeria, which is significant given that the field is

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understudied. Secondly, this study has analytical utility in that it analyses what kinds of groups are considered gangs, whilst exploring the intersections and overlapping between different non-state armed groups. Thirdly, the research that was conducted has theoretical value in that the information collected from the case studies was used to construct a typology, or heuristic framework, that classified gangs into four different types. This provided insights into the features of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa, which served to confirm the hypothesis that these groups are distinctive from gangs in the Global North. At the same time, the study evaluated the applicability of Western understandings of gangs in the African context. This entails the recommendation for a pluralistic account of gangs that includes different perspectives on how these groups operate, and incorporates the centrality of their flexibility, dynamism, and capacity for transformation in how they are conceptualised. Future studies on gangs should therefore be sensitive to the points raised in this thesis, as it has provided a re-evaluation of how these groups should be understood in non-Western contexts. This thesis has, in this way, illuminated paths forward for further research on the topic of gangs in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

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