

CRIMINALISING THE NIGERIAN YOUTH: SCAPEGOATING AND MOB JUSTICE IN *DARK OCTOBER: ALUU FOUR EXAMPLE*

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Abstract

The criminalisation of Nigerian youth through appearance-based profiling, stereotyping, and collective suspicion remains a significant concern in contexts where public distrust of formal justice mechanisms may contribute to extrajudicial responses such as mob justice. This study examines how scapegoating and moral panic contribute to the construction of Nigerian youth as perceived threats and targets of communal violence, using TokaMcBaror's 2023 film Dark October as a case study. Drawing on Stanley Cohen's moral panic framework, the study employs qualitative textual and thematic analysis to examine how profiling, gossip, stereotypes, and misinformation contribute to the representation of the four students as "folk devils" and facilitate their wrongful accusation and lynching. The analysis reveals that Dark October presents mob justice not as an isolated act of communal violence but as the culmination of social suspicion, prejudice, misinformation, institutional distrust, and the rapid construction of perceived threats. The study further demonstrates that appearance-based stereotyping can intensify the criminalisation of young people by transforming ordinary social differences into markers of presumed criminality. The paper argues that addressing mob justice and the scapegoating of Nigerian youth requires stronger institutional accountability, improved public trust in the justice system, responsible media representation, and community-based interventions against misinformation and harmful stereotypes. The study concludes that challenging moral panic and scapegoating is essential to protecting youth, strengthening due process, and promoting respect for the rule of law.

Keywords: Corruption, Criminalisation, Scapegoating, Moral Panic, Insecurity, Profiling, Stereotype, Human Rights, Rule of Law

Introduction

Insecurity in Nigeria has reached a critical level, manifesting in troubling forms of violence and criminal activity across the nation. From insurgencies and terrorist attacks that have killed and maimed countless innocent lives, to banditry marked by cultural and moral violence. The country faces threats to peace and stability. Kidnapping and abduction have become a lucrative enterprise for armed people, who demand exorbitant ransoms in exchange for the release of their victims. Armed robbery and other violent crimes continue to undermine public safety, cloud trust in state institutions, and disrupt the socio-economic core of communities. Amidst these, the Nigerian legal system that was structured to uphold justice and protect citizens' rights has been widely criticised for inefficiency, corruption, and systemic weaknesses.

Court cases take too long to give justice. Bureaucracy, low funding, and poor court buildings break public trust in the legal institution. Okonkwo says the problem is old laws. Many date to colonial rule and can't handle new crimes like cyber fraud, terrorism, or kidnapping rings (214). In some

cases, too much delays in case resolution are worsened by underfunded courts and manual record-keeping, which have led to increased prison congestion, with a great number of prison inmates in detention awaiting trial (Alemika 45). This reality underscores the legal aphorism that "justice delayed is justice denied," as delayed legal process breaks citizens' faith in the rule of law. Corruption in the law enforcement agencies and the judiciary further destroys the credibility of legal processes, with cases fueled by bribery, political interference, or bias prosecution. Inadequate enforcement of laws allows criminal activities to flourish, as perpetrators often escape or are released without due process. Many times scholars have linked these failures from these institutions to the rise of unlawful actions such as mob justice; since communities, perceive the state and institutions as ineffective they then resort to self-help mechanisms (Olasupo 19).

The forms of criminality mentioned above is often ascribed to the youth, in particular, those whose appearance does not align with the socially approved norms of dressing or grooming. Young people with uncultured clothing styles or remarkable hairdos are labeled as perpetrators of violence and other forms of social unrest, thereby provoking prejudicial attitudes within the community. More often than not, such youths face mob justice; driven by frustration, anger, and distrust of the legal system. Communities frequently subject them to lynching, beatings, and other forms of extrajudicial violence for crimes they did not commit. These acts of mob justice are often justified by mobs as a means of "relieving" the community of threats or putting fear in anyone who may want to commit an offense, thereby increasing the cycle of injustice and lawlessness.

Therefore, this paper interrogates and challenges the complexities of mob justice that associates Nigerian youth with criminality, cultism, and social unrest. It argues that such perceptions are both prejudicial and socially destructive. Using *Dark October* directed by TokaMcBaror as its case study, it aims to expose the dangerous complexities and consequences of mob justice. To investigate the socio-political and cultural factors that contributes to the criminalisation and examines the role of societal scapegoating and moral panic in the wrongful accusation and lynching of the four students.

Theoretical Framework: Moral Panic Theory of Stanley Cohen

Stanley Cohen (1972), a sociologist, developed the concept of moral panic to explain how individuals, groups, or social conditions may be constructed as threats to societal values and interests. According to Cohen, while the threats may be real, the views are often exaggerated thereby hyping the severity or inevitability of the harm. He examines the concept through the case of the "mods" and "rockers," two British youth subcultures whose activities became the focus of exaggerated media reporting and public concern, contributing to the emergence of a moral panic. Frothingham explains the development of the moral panic surrounding the mods and rockers as follows:

To summarise what happened, one holiday weekend, both the mods and rockers had a party where minor acts of vandalism occurred between the groups. This led to the news media arriving at the next party involving the mods and rockers, ready to report any disturbances. Once again, minor vandalism happened, and the media published highly exaggerated reports of the extent of violence between the two groups. This generated public concern and the police responded by policing future parties involving the mods and rockers, resulting in more arrests for non-violent deviant behavior. Hence, the mods and

rockers came to see themselves as enemies, and all of this was fueled by exaggeration published by the media (2).

Moral panic operates through three process in which deviant act is exaggerated, stereotypes are hardened, and societal reactions go beyond the actual threat at hand (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 35). In the Nigerian context, the framework is useful for examining how young people, particularly those whose appearance or behaviour differs from dominant social expectations, may be stereotyped as criminals or cultists and subsequently become targets of scapegoating and mob violence. These processes are represented in the film *Dark October*. This aligns with Cohen's argument that moral panics last long because of structural anxieties linger in the society and that can justify repressive measures, even in the absence of concrete evidence (Cricher 112).

The following shall be used as Cohen's guidelines for this study:

1. Folk devils: A person, group, or thing gets labeled as threat to societal norms, values, and interests. They're seen as a danger to the community. Cohen calls them "folk devils," symbolising the embodiment of societal fears and anxieties.
2. Symbolic portrayal: The community reduces the threat to simple symbols and stereotypes. They use images people know and can recognise at a glance and that makes the danger feel bigger than it is.

Moral panic happens when people become extremely afraid of a person, group, or issue, even when the actual danger is not as serious as it seems. This fear is often made worse by rumors, public opinion, or media coverage. According to Stanley Cohen (28), moral panic makes people react with too much fear and anger. As a result, society often blames a particular group of people, usually those who are already vulnerable or different and treats them as if they are responsible for society's problems. Cohen called these groups "folk devils," meaning people who are unfairly labelled as the "bad people" or enemies of society. One major effect of moral panic is that it makes people believe negative stereotypes about certain groups of people. As these stereotypes become stronger, people begin to judge, fear, or treat those groups unfairly, leading to more prejudice and discrimination (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 45).

Moral panic, state repression and other related vices can make people believe that harsh actions are acceptable. As a result, the government or ordinary citizens may arrest people without proper evidence, limit freedom of expression, or even punish or kill suspects without following the law (Cricher 118). Within countries where public confidence in formal justice institutions is weak, moral panic may contribute to vigilantism and mob justice by intensifying perceptions of threat and legitimising collective punishment. This dynamic provides a useful framework for interpreting the events depicted in *Dark October* (Olasupo 22). Such practices undermine the rule of law, erode public confidence in formal justice institutions, and may contribute to the normalisation of vigilantism as an alternative mechanism of justice.

Synopsis of *Dark October*

Dark October tells the tragic story of four university students Tizzy, Big L, Tamuno, and Chiboy, whose promising futures are cut short by mob justice. Popular on campus for their musical talent, the friends aspire to successful careers in music while pursuing their academic goals. As they prepare for a campus music event, they encounter financial difficulties and decide to collect a debt owed to Tizzy by a man named Wisdom. After repeatedly avoiding repayment, Wisdom eventually asks them to come to his residence to collect the money. Unknown to the students, the Aku

community in which Wisdom resides is experiencing heightened fear because of recurring incidents of armed robbery, burglary, and rape. The students arrive at Wisdom's residence early in the morning, accompanied by Gabriel, a classmate associated with a cult group. Rather than repay the debt, Wisdom runs out of his residence shouting, "Thief! Thief! Thief!" and falsely accuses the students of being armed robbers.

The community vigilante group quickly captures the four students, while Gabriel escapes. Despite the students' repeated explanations and presentation of their university identity cards, the vigilantes refuse to believe them. Instead of handing the students over to the police, they accuse them of being responsible for the crimes that have plagued the community. Although a village elder recommends handing the suspects over to the police, the vigilantes reject the suggestion, claiming that law enforcement has failed to protect the community. They subsequently visit Wisdom's residence to determine whether the students are telling the truth. When they discover that Wisdom has fled the area, they conceal evidence found at his residence and use the students as scapegoats for the community's insecurity.

Film Analysis: Scapegoating and Mob Justice in *Dark October*

The Dangerous Consequences of Scapegoating and Mob Justice *Dark October*: Scapegoating is a social process when blame for a crisis is pinned on one person or group unjustly, even though they're not really at fault. The main aim might be probably to shifts attention away from the actual cause. The idea comes from a symbolic ritual an old Hebrew Bible: a goat was loaded with the community's sins and sent into the wilderness [Girard 4]. In sociology and psychology today, scapegoating works two ways. It's a psychological defense mechanism, a way people adopt to offload blame. It's also a political or cultural tool that points collective frustration at groups who are vulnerable and sidelined with little power (Allport 67). In the film *Dark November*, in the meeting between the vigilante group and the chief elders:

Elder: If I hear any word from anybody I'll send that person out.
Asari.

Vigilante Leader: My chief

Elder: Your family cannot decide who will cut the banana leave
from the groove.

The atmosphere here reveals the group's desperate attempt to establish the relevance of its presence and duties within the community. The Chief Vigilante, Asari, explains

Vigilante Leader: My chief, as you know, we've been cooperating with the
police. The big problem now is that, are the police ready to
cooperate with us?

This perceived failure of the formal security system intensifies the vigilantes' desire to demonstrate their relevance and effectiveness. They therefore become increasingly inclined to identify an individual who can be presented as an example of the consequences of threatening communal security. In this context, the need for a scapegoat emerges. When the student appears to fit the profile of the people whom the vigilantes associate with the Amnesty Camp, they readily project their suspicions onto them and make them scapegoat.

Mob justice, also known as jungle justice or vigilante justice, is the act of a group of people punishing or killing someone they believe has committed a crime without allowing the police or the courts to investigate or decide the person's guilt. It usually happens when people lose confidence in the formal justice system and believe that the police or the courts cannot deliver justice quickly or fairly. As a result, they take the law into their own hands instead of following the legal process (Okoli and Okpaleke 50). Often time mob justice involves violent acts such as beating, lynching, or burning a suspected offender in public. People who take part in these acts usually believe it serves as punishment for the person's crime and at the same time warning others not to commit similar offences. Studies show mob justice grows where courts are weak, corrupt, or out of reach, and where people don't trust the police or judiciary [Barkan 142].

Mob justice is often connected to moral panic and scapegoating because people sometimes direct their anger at vulnerable or stereotyped individuals instead of those who have actually been proven guilty. Although some people defend mob justice as a way of protecting their community, studies show that it weakens the rule of law, encourages more violence, and can lead to the death of innocent people who have not committed any crime (Olasupo 20; Adinkrah 341). Scapegoating and mob justice are closely connected and often feed each other, leading to serious harm for both individuals and society. When people unfairly blame a person or group for social problems, it becomes easier for public anger and fear to grow into mob justice, whereby people punish suspected offenders without following the due process. When this happens, innocent people may suffer or even lose their lives, as such, public trust in the justice system declines further, and taking the law into one's own hands gradually becomes accepted as normal (Girard 22; Adinkrah 343).

The biggest human rights cost of scapegoating and mob justice is this: the victim never get a fair trial. They're often shamed in public, beaten, or killed before anyone proves whether they're guilty or not [Okoli and Okpaleke 48]. These practices also affect marginalised groups more than others. The young people who appear differently, speak differently, or live lifestyles that do not fit society's expectations are often unfairly judged, profiled, and labelled as criminals or troublemakers, even when they have done nothing wrong (Ryan 120). Barkan argues that this cycle leaves deep emotional and psychological scars on individuals, families, and whole communities. It also splits people further apart and builds a culture where revenge matters more than fairness, justice, or the law [145]. Other scholars opinions of says that it also creates mimetic violence. The urge for revenge spreads like a contagion in a crowd. People copy each other's anger and violent impulses [Doran 89]. Then as people continue to copy one another's anger and violent actions, the level of aggression keeps increasing.

According to René René Girard, this can lead to what he calls a sacrificial crisis, a situation in which respect for the law, life, moral values, and individual judgment breaks down, and the crowd becomes united in carrying out acts of violence together (Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 21). In Nigeria, mob justice is now a serious human rights problem. There are documented cases of jungle justice killings in both rural and urban areas. When the students are initially apprehended by the vigilante group, the vigilantes seize their mobile phones and identity cards, despite the students' repeated protests that they are students of the Uniport who have come to collect money owed to them by Wisdom. Rather than considering their explanation or verifying their identities, the vigilantes interpret the students' presence through an already established stereotype of the Amnesty Camp boys who allegedly enter the community to steal and commit other atrocities.

Community Leader: (to the vigilante group) Stop beating them! Don't touch them again!!! (to Asari) we'll have to talk with them ...

Vigilante 1: Wisdom said they collected his phone and laptop...

Vigilante 2: Yes, I was even there when the shot Wisdom... You're thieves, criminals... Shut up...

Having perceived that the students fit this preconceived profile, the vigilantes seize the opportunity to portray them as members of the group they already suspect. Their decision to disregard the students' explanation and identity documents demonstrates how stereotyping can override evidence and rational judgment. By daybreak, news of the alleged criminals' capture had already spread throughout the community. Without waiting for proper investigation or verification of the circumstances surrounding their arrest, the community quickly formed its own judgment and demanded jungle justice. The situation reflects the community's eagerness to satisfy its collective anger and frustration by immediately punishing those perceived to be responsible for the insecurity and atrocities within the community.



Plate 1 & 2. Showing one of the students in terror and mob violence

The 2023 film *Dark October* shows this clearly. It shows how misinformation, prejudice, and failed institutions come together to excuse the brutal killing of innocent youth in the name of “community justice.” In *Aku*, people are angry that police often release suspects the community had arrested and handed over to them. Those suspects walk free without prosecution or any real legal consequence. When law enforcement fails like this, the effect is, trust in the justice system falls. Residents then feel forced to take the law into their own hands through vigilantism and mob justice [Alemika 35]. Mob violence and public lynching are among the worst breakdowns of the rule of law. Truth about the whole situation gets buried. For example, a vigilante leader hid evidence that could have cleared the innocent students. The mob then replaces what actually happened with whatever story it wants to believe. With these evidence and due process don't matter. What matters is the mob's urged to lynch and release its anger. Okafor posits that when legal process is replaced by mob violence, the damage can't be undone. It spreads fear and destroys trust in the justice system [Okafor 212].

The Sociopolitical and Cultural factors that Contribute to the Criminalisation of Nigerian Youths:

In Nigeria today, many young people are unfairly treated as criminals both by the formal justice system and by society. They are often seen as dangerous, dishonest, or likely to commit crimes simply because of the way they appear, speak, or live their lives, especially when they do not fit in

to society's expectations. According to scholars, this negative perception is shaped by historical, political, social, and cultural beliefs that judge a person's character based on their social class, appearance, and willingness to conform to accepted norms rather than on their actual behaviour (Otu 56). So, young people grow up under the fear of suspicion instead of opportunity. A major reason youth are criminalised is institutional failure, especially in policing and the courts. Across Nigeria, many communities say police arrest people and then release them without trial. That destroys trust in the justice system. When the system fails, communities turn to vigilantes. Those groups often go after young people who "look criminal."



Plate 3 & 4. Showing the meeting between the vigilante and village head, and failed police system

In *Dark October*, the meeting between the vigilante group and the village elders shows that the community has lost confidence in police and the country's legal and justice systems. Because they no longer believe the police or the courts can deliver justice, they decide to take the law into their own hands by acting as investigators, judges, and executioners of people accused of committing crimes. In addition, political leaders sometimes make the problem worse by presenting crime in a way that unfairly blames young people. Instead of recognising that youth unrest may be caused by unemployment, poverty, and poor governance, they often portray it as proof that young people are naturally criminal. This shifts public attention away from the government's failures and places the blame on the youth instead (Rotimi 122). At the meeting, the vigilante group said former militants from the amnesty camp slip out at night to commit crimes in the community, and then return before dawn to avoid being caught. They also claimed the police cover for them. This, they said, stops the community from taking further action. These accusations point to a wider fear; that security agencies are protecting offenders instead of stopping them. The conversation goes thus:

Asari: The problem is from the from the amnesty camp, they are stealing. They will sneak out in the night or early in the morning, enter the town and commit atrocities and before you know it, they have sneaked back in to the camp.

Village leader: I've discussed this with the DPO, you understand me, and we have discussion, good discussion and the will call another meeting where all of us will meet and discuss a way out.

Asari: Chief! Another meeting? The meetings we have done before what has happened? The boys we caught before and gave to the police where are they? And we are talking about another meeting.

people lawlessness amongst our people... Let the police do their job...

Asari: We caught these boys and gave them to the police, chief, within one week they're back, and when they come back they commit more atrocities.

Chief 1: There is a skeleton in the cupboard. Yes, something is fishy.

Village Head: We will do our job and let the police do their own. What we will do more is to obey the law, and not beat the law.

Asari: Chief, police are not helping matters. As you know, we have been cooperating with the police. The big problem now is that, is the police ready to cooperate with us?

As one of the elders remarked, "Something is fishy." In this context, the statement reflects the community's suspicion that something was not right. They believed that either some police officer's were benefiting from the criminal activities of certain individuals in the amnesty camp or that they were hiding information because of political or personal interests. Such suspicions reflect wider concerns about corruption and the involvement of powerful people in influencing police actions, causing law enforcement to protect certain interests instead of ensuring justice. The presence of police officers at the scene where the four University of Port Harcourt students were lynched, without successfully preventing the attack, further highlights the failure of institutions responsible for protecting lives and enforcing the law.

On one hand, the police failed the community by not carrying out their basic duty of protecting lives and property. On the other hand, they also failed the students because they did not stop the mob from attacking and killing them. This double failure weakened public trust in government institutions and showed how poor law enforcement can encourage people to take the law into their own hands. As a result, vigilantism and mob justice gradually become accepted as normal ways of dealing with suspected criminals in Nigeria.

Ideas about what is considered "respectable" in a culture often influence who people see as a potential criminal. In many cases, the way a person dresses, their hairstyle, or even the way they speak can lead others to assume that they are deviant or involved in criminal activities, even without any evidence (Ojo 88). In Nigeria, these attitudes are made stronger by cultural beliefs that place greater value on age and social status than on the opinions and independence of young people. Because of this, young people who look different or challenge traditional expectations are more likely to be seen as threats to society. In *Dark October*, the students' clothing and hairstyles immediately made them stand out as outsiders in the community. Their appearance reflected modern youth fashion and university culture, but many community members interpreted it as a sign that they were criminals or troublemakers. As they moved through the community, they were met with suspicious looks and clear signs of disapproval from the indigenes. This shows how people often judge others based on visible social differences rather than facts. Such judgments can lead to prejudice, exclusion, discrimination, and, in extreme cases, violence against innocent people.



Plate 5&6 Foodseller urging the students to vacate the community immediately and onlooker gossiping about them

When Tizzy and Big L visited the Aku community to confront Wisdom over an outstanding debt, their arrival was swiftly noticed by community members. The locals responded with scornful and dismissive remarks that immediately framed the students as suspicious and criminal. A foodseller engages them say:

- Food seller:** Please, you two come. Are you Uniport students?
- Big L:** Yes ma, we came to look for our friend, Wisdom, he stays at number nine, he asked us to come.
- Tizzy:** Give us two of those...
- Food seller:** Are you guys staying in this town?
- Tizzy:** No ma, we stay in the hostel, PG hostel.
- Foodseller:** Look, let me tell you guys I see that you guys don't know what is going on in this town. This town is tensed now because some bad boys came here to attack and rob people, and they are looking for the perpetrators seriously. So, if you are not from this community just buy this food and leave immediately. They are arresting people desperately...

Onlookers in a barber's shop made utterances such as:

- First Person:** See these Uniport students walking around like goats...
- Second Person:** I've been telling you that even with their parents money, these boys are up to no good and they have nothing to offer....
- Third Person:** Leave them, that's how they will be walking around, stupid boys...
- Second Person:** Don't worry, I'll lay my hands on one of the one day and they'll see...

The mere sight of the students quickly provoked feelings of hostility and aversion among the community members, leading to their being perceived as the perpetrators of the ongoing criminal activities in the area and making them fit to be used as scapegoats for pay for them atrocities in the community.

Discuss on Societal Scapegoating, Moral Panic and Mob Justice

On October 5, 2012, four University of Port Harcourt students were publicly lynched by members of the Aluu community in Rivers State, Nigeria. The tragic incident shocked and moved the nation to tears, and that exposed deep social problems, including the dangers of mob justice, prejudice, and the failure of law enforcement. Although the community claimed that the students were involved in theft and other criminal activities, a closer examination of the events, as portrayed in *Dark October*, suggests that the mob justice was driven by scapegoating and moral panic. According to Stanley Cohen, a moral panic occurs when a person, group, or situation is labelled as a threat to society's values and interests, causing fear and exaggerated public reactions (Cohen 1). In Nigeria, young people especially those whose appearance, dressing, or behaviour differs from local expectations are often unfairly stereotyped as criminals, cultists, or social deviants, making them easy targets for suspicion and wrongful accusations (Adebayo 42).

The community's decision to ignore human rights, the law and the police reflects its growing frustration with the long-standing failure of the justice system in Nigeria. Many of the people believe that criminals often escape punishment because of corruption, political influence, or poor law enforcement. As a result, some communities like the Aluu community feel they must take the law into their own hands to achieve justice. In *Dark October*, this loss of confidence is shown when the Aku community quickly abandons any attempt to involve the police, rejected police attempt to rescue the student or the courts. Instead, the vigilante group and other community members assume the roles of investigators, judges, and executioners. This form of self-administered "justice" is made even more dangerous by moral panic.

According to Stanley Cohen, moral panic increases fear, exaggerates perceived threats, and makes extreme actions seem acceptable, even when they are directed at innocent people (Cohen 18). When moral panic combines with scapegoating, suspicion quickly turns into collective anger, making it easier for a crowd to justify violence against those they perceive are responsible for the community's problems. In this case, the truth no longer matters. What becomes important is the crowd's desire to release its anger on visible and easily identifiable targets, which in this case, are the four university students. By ignoring due process and the rule of law, the community not only commits a grave injustice but also creates a dangerous situation in which public emotions take the place of evidence, legal procedures, and respect for human rights and life.

Criminalising based on appearance happens when the way people dress, speak, or live is wrongly used as proof that they are criminals or social deviants. In *Dark October*, the students' modern hairstyles, fashionable clothing, and urban mannerisms immediately made them stand out in the Aku community. Before any evidence was presented, many community members had already viewed them with suspicion. In the sense described by Stanley Cohen, the students became "folk devils", people who were unfairly labelled as threats to society. The community's quick assumption that being a university student and looking different meant being a criminal shows how moral panic can replace facts with stereotypes. This false association paved the way for scapegoating and eventually led to the mob violence that claimed the students' lives.

The study finds that one of the main factors behind the incident was the spread of community gossip, which portrayed university students as the source of the community's problems. This perception was driven by jealousy, resentment toward the opportunities associated with university education, and frustration over the rising level of crime and insecurity in the area.

According to Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, such gossip can become a "weapon of the established" against "outsiders," strengthening unity within a community by portraying those who are different as dangerous or undesirable (Elias and Scotson 103). By spreading rumours and unverified claims, gossip created a socially accepted reason for treating the students with suspicion and, ultimately, for using violence against them. The study also finds that the lynching became a way for the crowd to release accumulated anger, fear, and frustration. The fact that no one could provide evidence that the students had robbed or assaulted anyone became unimportant. Instead of seeking the truth, the mob was driven by a desire for revenge and emotional satisfaction. The violence gave participants a temporary sense of relief and control over the insecurity affecting their community, even though the victims were innocent. This demonstrates how fear, rumors, and collective anger can overpower reason, evidence, and justice.

Conclusion

This study has examined the criminalisation of Nigerian youths through the interconnected processes of scapegoating, moral panic, and mob justice, using *Dark October* as a case study. The analysis demonstrates that the criminalisation of young people cannot be understood solely as an individual or behavioural problem; rather, it is shaped by interconnected political, institutional, and cultural factors. Weak law enforcement, corruption, public distrust of the justice system, negative stereotypes, and moral panic can contribute to the profiling, scapegoating, and victimisation of young people. As demonstrated in *Dark October*, individuals may be wrongly identified as threats when their appearance, behaviour, or social identity differs from dominant cultural expectations.

The film illustrates how fear, misinformation, suspicion, and institutional distrust can converge to transform unsubstantiated accusations into collective violence. The Aluu Four narrative represented in the film therefore demonstrates the devastating consequences of replacing due process with mob action. The study further establishes that scapegoating and moral panic can reinforce negative stereotypes and legitimise extrajudicial responses to perceived threats. When communities lose confidence in formal justice institutions, there is a heightened risk that individuals or groups may resort to self-help mechanisms, thereby weakening the rule of law and undermining social cohesion. The criminalisation of Nigerian youths should therefore be addressed not only through security measures but also through institutional reform, public education, responsible media representation, and the promotion of human rights. Ultimately, combating mob justice requires a multidimensional approach that addresses the institutional and social conditions that allow suspicion and prejudice to develop into collective violence. Strengthening justice institutions, challenging harmful stereotypes, improving public trust, and promoting respect for due process are essential to protecting young people and sustaining the rule of law in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Therefore, based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthening justice institutions: Government institutions should strengthen the police, judiciary, and other justice mechanisms by improving accountability, transparency, investigative capacity, and access to justice.

Public education and community awareness: Government agencies, community leaders, religious organisations, civil society groups, and educational institutions should intensify public education on the dangers of mob justice, vigilantism, scapegoating, and extrajudicial punishment.

Protection of young people: Communities should discourage the profiling of Nigerian youths based on appearance, dress, hairstyle, lifestyle, ethnicity, or other characteristics that do not conform to dominant cultural expectations.

Responsible media reporting: Media organisations should report crime accurately and responsibly and avoid sensationalism, unverified allegations, and representations that may reinforce stereotypes, prejudice, or moral panic.

Promotion of due process: Suspected offenders should be reported to the appropriate law-enforcement authorities and subjected to investigation and judicial procedures rather than punished by individuals or groups.

Community-based conflict resolution: Community leaders and civil society organisations should develop programmes that promote dialogue, peaceful conflict resolution, human rights awareness, and constructive relationships between communities and law-enforcement institutions.

Balanced representation of Nigerian youths: Filmmakers and other media practitioners should promote balanced representations of young people that challenge the tendency to associate youth identity, appearance, or lifestyle with criminality.

Further research: Future studies should examine mob justice, moral panic, and youth criminalisation across different Niger.

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Filmography

Dark October directed by TokaMcBaror, Produced by: Linda Ikeji Media.