INTRODUCTION

In many African states, vigilante activities have increased greatly over recent decades. In Nigeria, vigilantism expanded both in response to the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s, the military oppression of the 1990s and the ‘godfather politics’ of the post-1999 civilian government. Today, vigilante groups have established themselves widely within Nigeria’s public and political sphere, where they engage with both the definition and provision of security provided by the state (Buur & Jensen 2004) and a wide range of political, economic, social and moral concerns related to the protection of communities. Although gender is rarely foregrounded in vigilantes’ understanding of community security, they frequently draw both on wider political debates and economic concerns (Meagher 2007) and on local trajectories of social control (Leach 2004) which affect gender relations, and women’s participation in the political sphere, in a number of ways.

Because Nigerian vigilante groups are either constituted by men or dominated by male members, the expansion of vigilante activities has been understood as a potential threat to women. Posel (2004: 233-5) has suggested that the dominance of men as well as the general increase in everyday violence associated with the rise of vigilante groups potentially intimidates women and excludes them from parts of the political process. But at the same time, women have also taken leadership roles and supported vigilante groups, especially when such groups were aiming to redefine the
boundaries of the moral community through recourse to traditional authority and seniority (Oomen 2004). Where vigilante movements have engaged with violent state oppression, women have sometimes even taken a leading role in the organization and staging of protest action, because their active participation conveyed much stronger moral outrage than that of men (Ukeje 2004).

In this article I provide an additional perspective and argue that the participation of women in vigilantism potentially empowers them, but that it also reinforces complementary gender roles. My research focuses on women in the Oodua Peoples’ Congress (OPC), a movement that emerged in the mid-1990s as one of many pro-democracy groups and local protest organizations protesting the self-perpetuation of military rule in Nigeria. Drawing on a long local history of Yoruba cultural and political nationalism, the OPC’s particular concern is the representation of Yoruba interests within the state. Since shortly after its foundation, the OPC has provided vigilante services to a growing number of Yoruba communities which perceived themselves to be under threat from the corrupt machinations of the state and individuals. From its social base in vigilantism, the OPC has engaged in a range of violent conflicts with the Nigerian Police Force and rival ethnic groups (Maier 2000: 227-249; Nolte 2004; Adebanwi 2005), and it has also, especially since Nigeria’s transition and return to civilian rule in 1999, participated in important national events and political debates (Nolte 2007). In the continuation of these activities, the OPC relies not only on the acceptance and support of women, but also on their active participation in aspects of the struggle.

To illustrate my argument, I will first give a short overview of women in Yoruba and OPC politics, which suggests that women’s positions within the organization’s inner circle of power are more tenuous than those of men. The article
then illustrates that women have their own organizational structure within the OPC through the institution of the Women’s League. The institution of women’s wings of main organizations draws both on traditional practice and on more recent political traditions of the anti-colonial movement and its Yoruba (and other) successor organizations. Historically, the existence of women’s wings is associated with the limited representation of women’s interests. However, the next section illustrates that female leadership is instituted at all levels of the OPC in the spiritually defined position of the Ìyá Oòдуà, or mother of Oòдуà, which exists in OPC councils at all administrative levels. Like the Women’s League, the office of the Ìyá Oòдуà is clearly linked to perceptions of women’s power that are based on complementary rather than egalitarian gender roles, and that aim to contain female agency within the OPC’s revalidation of Yoruba political traditions and its wider political struggle. As a result, women play more important roles within the OPC than in many other arenas of the political sphere, but the OPC does not encourage them to express their independent interests in a systematic way.

The next section of the article explores the everyday practice of women in the OPC and illustrates that women’s contributions to the organization draw on their typical experiences as daughters, wives, mothers and members of certain professions, such as trading. Through their routine activities and observations, women gain possession of the intimate information about their communities on which the OPC bases its vigilante activities. Women’s decisions to comment on or expose particular individuals help to structure the activities and the public morality of the group itself and are ultimately transformative. Through their contributions of local intelligence, women contribute actively to the public debates and practices relevant to society in general, and they ensure that these continue to include women’s concerns. However,
as women’s contributions to the OPC are instituted through recourse to traditional religious beliefs opposed by many Muslim and especially Pentecostal Christian women, religion constitutes a key cleavage for the expression of women’s interests through the OPC.

The final section of the article explores the participation of women in vigilantism and other forms of physical conflict. It points out that the OPC continues to rely on a multiplicity of existing local structures in different communities, which in turn create very different spaces within which women can participate in the OPC’s active provision of security. This reflects both the fact that women’s scopes of action remain tied, at least in part, to the political histories of their community, but it also reflects the OPC’s partly experimental approach to ethno-nationalist assertion.

Overall, the OPC’s creation of female spaces and offices within its organization empowers women in a limited but important way. Women’s roles are not conceived on the basis of gender equality, and they strongly reflect the fact that the life experiences of the majority of Yoruba women contrast sharply with those of men.

WOMEN IN YORUBA AND OPC POLITICS
As in many parts of Africa, women participated in the decision-making of precolonial Yoruba communities through female lines of authority that existed parallel to male hierarchies.6 Yoruba women held specifically female chieftaincy titles, such as the Ìyálóde title representing the interests of women, as well as other ritual positions reserved for them in ancestral masquerade societies or the Ògbóni association, which advised the rulers of the Yoruba towns and was generally concerned with the maintenance of social order and communal well-being.8 Although Yoruba women
were to a large degree excluded from the colonial administration, many contemporary Yoruba associations, including professional associations as well as churches and mosques, relied on shared male and female leadership or separate gendered hierarchies. As a result of women’s continued participation in colonial civil society, they were well represented in the anti-colonial movements and in early postcolonial party politics of the 1950s and 1960s. However, the number of women who received nominations as electoral candidates or were appointed to high offices was low (Denzer 1994: 33).

After the collapse of Nigeria’s First Republic, women’s tenuous foothold on the postcolonial state declined. During two long periods of military rule (1966-1979, 1983-1999), women were almost completely excluded from active political participation in southwest Nigeria. Women were also particularly affected by low and negative economic growth, and the introduction of structural adjustment programmes from the 1980s onwards. The majority of Yoruba women are engaged in some form of trade, and reduced economic growth and increasing pressure on the informal sector affected their livelihoods in particular (Howard 1985). Moreover, the militarization of power in Nigeria during the 1980s and 1990s contributed to a militarization of civil society, affecting schools, businesses and general perceptions of the legitimacy of violence, which made it more difficult for women to organize and speak on behalf of themselves (Abdullah 1993; Shettima 1995). By the time the OPC was established, very few women held personal wealth or public office, and most of them were the daughters or wives of even more powerful men. Since then, things have slightly improved (see below).

On the whole, few Yoruba women have responded to their progressive marginalization from economic and especially political life by organizing on their
own behalf, primarily because their predicament appeared to be part of a long history in which Yoruba speakers were sidelined within Nigerian politics. During the decolonization period, an existing Yoruba cultural nationalism strongly based on enlightenment values was politicized under the leadership of Obafemi Awolowo, who founded several political parties based on, but not limited to, Yoruba support. Representing a social democratic and reformist agenda, Awolowo lost the country’s first national elections in 1960 as well as the subsequent and bitterly disputed national elections of 1979 and 1983 to more conservative coalitions. Yoruba resentment over this development was assuaged when after Awolowo’s death in 1987, his erstwhile rival Moshood Abiola won the presidential election of 1993 on the platform of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the more liberal of two state-created political parties. When the military annulled this election and deprived Abiola of his (and his voters’) victory, many Yoruba speakers formed the opinion that the national government was not only against any form of social and political reform but also deliberately anti-Yoruba (Adebanwi 2005).

As the military government following the annulled elections was associated with increased political oppression and the general decline of peoples’ life chances, a large number of human rights and protest resistance movements, in some of which women were well represented, organized different forms of protest. Several groups within this wider movement aimed to address Yoruba marginalization and evoked Odùduwà or Oòduà, a mythical founder of the Yoruba nation. In this context, the Oodua Peoples’ Congress was originally established as a socio-cultural organization by a group of Yoruba public intellectuals under the leadership of medical doctor Frederick Fasheun. When he was arrested, his deputy, Gani Adams, took over the organization’s control and expanded it significantly by expanding into vigilantism.
The OPC’s provision of vigilante services addressed widely held fears that the Nigerian government used both political and economic crime to undermine Yoruba speakers, and it won the group significant popular support from a range of groups including market women (Sesay et al. 2003: 100-103). The fact that the OPC addressed the concerns of market traders in particular may also be related to the fact that one of the OPC’s nine founding members, Idowu Adebowale, popularly called ‘Ìyá Ìjèbù’, was a women’s leader from one of the markets in Mushin, Lagos.

Since its foundation in 1994, the OPC’s attitude towards the national government has undergone important changes, some of which are related to the actions of female leaders within the organization. During the transition programme leading to the 1999 return to civilian rule, the OPC was increasingly divided over how it should participate in Nigerian politics, with Adams refusing to legitimate the transition and the released OPC leader Fasheun favouring a more moderate approach. The female OPC leader Yemisi Akinyeye, more widely known as ‘Lady B’, undermined Gani Adams by accusing him of having abused Fasheun’s trust during his imprisonment, and eventually the two men’s growing inability to work with each other led to the split of the OPC into two factions in 1998 (The News 16 April 2001).

When Olusegun Obasanjo was elected as the first Yoruba president of Nigeria in 1999, both OPC factions considered him a stooge of the military, and during Obasanjo’s first years in office, the OPC engaged in a series of violent battles both with the police and between its own factions. But after a rapprochement of the two factions from 2001 onwards, and in response to Obasanjo’s political choices, popular and OPC support for Obasanjo increased, and in 2003 both Fasheun and Adams supported Obasanjo’s re-election for a second term. As most Yoruba speakers had never voted for the national government, the electoral victory of Obasanjo’s Peoples
Democratic Party (PDP) in southwest Nigeria constituted an important turning point for Yoruba politics, because it suggested for the first time in the existence of an independent Nigeria that the Yoruba could be a consenting part of the Nigerian state (Nolte 2007: 228).

Yet while ethno-national pride in a Yoruba president – as well as local discontent with the local elites in the Yoruba ‘opposition’ party\(^\text{15}\) – may have sustained the local acceptance of the Obasanjo re-election in 2003, OPC leaders protested strongly when President Obasanjo’s supporters attempted to extend his period in office beyond constitutional provisions. Like other leaders of vigilante groups critical of Obasanjo’s attempt to extend his stay in office, both Adams and Fasheun spent time in prison for their convictions\(^\text{16}\) to be released only when the Obasanjo ‘third term’ agenda was eventually defeated. As the rotation of office between different geographical zones underlies Nigerian views of democracy, the OPC’s opposition to a ‘third term’ for Obasanjo meant that the next candidate backed by the OPC would not be a Yoruba. This turn of events not only demonstrated the OPC’s ability to see beyond a narrowly defined notion of Yoruba interests but also its preparedness to support the – much criticized – national constitution.

But while the rapprochement of the Fasheun and Adams factions in 2001 paved the way for a more constructive participation of the OPC in national politics, it came at a cost to Akinyeye. Because she had alienated Adams, she had to leave the organization in order to pave the way for a reunification of the factions, which eventually took place in 2005. Akinyeye then founded the Oodua Defence Assembly (ODA), which has remained a minor nationalist organization\(^\text{17}\). Since Akinyeye’s departure, there has not been a prominent female OPC leader at the national level.
Akinyeye’s case suggests that female political leadership within the Yoruba nationalist movement is possible, but it also suggests that female leaders’ hold on power remains more tenuous than that of men.\textsuperscript{18} This probably reflects the postcolonial entrenchment of men as political actors as well as prejudices and fears associated with the agency of women that are part of the traditional repertoire revalidated by the OPC and explored in more detail below.

At the grassroots there is no great difference between popular male and female attitudes towards the OPC, although women join the OPC less frequently than men. According to Gani Adams, women constitute between 10 and 20 per cent of the OPC’s overall membership of roughly 3 million (interview Adams 22 February 2005).\textsuperscript{19} On the basis of my own research, this number seems more realistic than the suggestion by Sesay et al. (2003) that the proportion of women in the OPC could be as high as 40\%. As I illustrate below, women are welcomed into the OPC in many communities, but they are excluded from important aspects of OPC work in others, and the nature of female membership varies somewhat and is dependent on local political structures. The most visible structure of support for women within the OPC is its Women’s League.

\textbf{THE WOMEN’S LEAGUE}

Despite the disparity in membership, female OPC members control an organizational wing within the OPC. The OPC Women’s League functions autonomously within the overall structure of the organization and co-ordinates the activities of female members. According to the OPC’s constitution, the particular role of the Women’s League is to ensure that women play a full role in the life of the OPC and in its
struggle for the emancipation of the oppressed. The Women’s League is also committed to the liberation of women themselves (Shakirudeen 2000: 35-9). The double role ascribed to women within the OPC – as both liberators and those to be liberated – reflects the fact that women’s responsibilities and interests are not specifically articulated in national OPC documents but that women were given the political space to do so if required, and without the interference of men.

The existence of parallel male and female wings within the OPC echoes local practices of shared male-female leadership, which in turn draws on the understanding that women have access to particular spiritual powers that are less accessible to men. At the same time, the OPC’s recognition of women both as ordinary members and as a group in itself was probably influenced by the structure of Yoruba organizations and political parties in the run-up to independence and thereafter. After the formation of the ultimately unsuccessful Nigerian Women’s Party by Yoruba leader Oyinkan Abayomi in 1944, women’s wings were introduced by all major groups associated with Yoruba politics, and indeed by most anti-colonial political parties active at the time.

The women’s wing of the *Egbé Qmo Odùduwà*, founded in 1945 by Obafemi Awolowo to promote the success of a Yoruba national project, specifically mobilized women as supporters and financial contributors to the organization (Arifalo 2001: 125). Drawing on the political mobilization of the *Egbé Qmo Odùduwà* from 1951, Obafemi Awolowo’s Action Group (AG) and its successor parties also mobilized the moral and financial support of women through women’s wings. Certain aspects of the organization of women’s wings in the Egbe and the AG were influenced by local traditions and debates, but the existence of women’s wings in general probably also reflected more widely held views on women’s political
participation at the eve of independence. Many of the political parties emerging in Africa during the 1940s and thereafter maintained separate political spaces for women.23

Women’s wings did not usually share equally or even consistently in intra-party decision-making. At the same time, women’s wings exposed women to politics and enabled a few of them to gain office or power. This was certainly the case for women in the Action Group. Wuraola Esan played an important role in the party and was elected in 1960 as a Senator to the National Assembly.24 Obafemi Awolowo’s wife Hannah also drew on her headship of the women’s wing to expand her role within the AG when her husband and other party leaders were arrested during the 1960s. However, the limited female representation provided by and facilitated through women’s wings was ended by the military takeover in 1966. During Nigeria’s Second Republic (1979-83), the role of women’s wings was mostly ornamental, and their political relevance was probably even lower than that of their predecessors in the 1960s. As Shettima puts it,

Women’s wings existed in political parties in the second republic, but … women were merely mobilizing agents who campaigned, sung and danced at rallies and were rewarded with token appointments and a few yards of cloth. Indeed, despite women’s very active participation in campaign rallies and voting, very few women were elected or appointed (1995: 62-63).

It is perhaps no coincidence that one of Nigeria’s most radical women’s organization, Women in Nigeria (WIN), was set up during this period.25 After another military takeover in 1983, and a long period of transition politics leading up to the cancelled elections of 1993, WIN and other women’s groups participated in fostering
the return of grassroots politics. However, eventually all independent political parties were proscribed, and two government-created institutions were set up to contest local and state elections. The same decree that set up the political parties also banned women’s wings. The result of this process was that while very few women held political office during the failed transition or thereafter, women were well represented in the pro-democracy movement, including the umbrella organization Campaign for Democracy (CD), throughout the 1990s.

In this context, the OPC’s adoption of the gendered form of traditional and early anti-colonial organization constituted a protest against the near total exclusion from women from state politics under military rule and during the so-called transition, but it was also a step away from the autonomous representation of women’s concerns in other pro-democracy organizations, such as WIN or CD. Moreover, its reliance on traditional practice, which alienated some Christian and Muslim women, reinforced a religious division that complicated any attempts by the OPC to represent women’s concerns as homogenous.

Interestingly, several post-1999 Nigerian parties have women’s wings. At the same time, the number of women in public office has increased slightly, though in most cases by appointment rather than election. While this development suggests that women’s wings have, in the absence of other forms of women’s inclusion, a small positive effect on female representation, it also illustrates the very real constraints of mobilizing women through structures appended to the main (male) section of organizations. Like the women’s wings of political parties past and present, the OPC’s Women’s League reflects both its commitment to the inclusion of women and its attempts to control and contain autonomous female agency. However, beyond the
Women’s League, women are also members of the main OPC, where important offices are reserved for them.

FEMALE REPRESENTATION AND AGENCY IN THE OPC

A female presence is instituted at all levels of the OPC’s administration through the creation of female leadership positions that complement those of men. At the highest executive level, the National Coordinating Council includes the secretary general, the OPC state co-ordinators, and the Ìyá (or mother of) Oòduà and Bàbá (or father of) Oòduà, female and male spiritual advisers versed in traditional Yoruba practices respectively. OPC councils at lower administrative levels closely mirror the set-up of the national executive, with weekly council meetings at state, local government and zonal level. Indicating the widespread understanding that political and social bonds are both spiritual and mundane, the Ìyá and Bàbá Oòduà in OPC councils at every level ensure the security and success of the group’s endeavours through divination and sacrifice.

While the gendered nature of the OPC administration reflects local traditions of female political participation, it is also based on the way in which women’s personal power is perceived. In many strands of Yoruba tradition, women’s greatest source of power is their ability to create human beings. But women’s power also includes the making of social beings through a range of activities linked to their everyday lives, i.e. by linking families through the birth of children, by naming men as fathers, and by performing the songs and rituals that turn the deceased into ancestors. Conversely, women can destroy the relationships between groups and individuals through malicious talk or other forms of subversion. Women’s powers of social production are often believed to reflect their spiritual powers, and women are widely thought to be able to guarantee or destroy relationships with the spiritual world.
(Opefeyitimi 1994; Flynn 1997: 127-9). Within a world view based on this understanding, the support of women is essential for any political project. At the same time, the potentially threatening activities of women must be reined in.

During an interview with Gani Adams I came to believe that this attitude towards women characterizes his personal understanding of the sources of the OPC’s success. After a long and somewhat tiring debate about a number of OPC clashes in various communities, Adams gained visible interest when asked about female OPC members. Implying that I had finally asked a good question, he commented, ‘Now you are talking.’ In the ensuing discussion, Adams emphasized his personal conviction that women were indispensable for the OPC project. However, his implicit criticism of those who ignore women, including the leaders of the Nigerian state, also pointed to their potentially destructive powers.

Without women, nothing can succeed. If you have family or a town or even a state, it cannot exist without the women’s support...

But if the women give you their blessing it is a very powerful thing (interview Adams 12 February 2005).

Especially older women often hold central positions by leading chapters of the Women’s League or by acting as the Ìyà Oòduà in OPC councils at different levels. Many Ìyà Oòduà are traditional worshipers or ritual specialists in their own right, such as òrìṣà priestesses or members of the local Ògbò́nì or the Ogboni Aborigine association. Sometimes female OPC members are also Ìfá diviners. The prominence of older and post-menopausal women in the OPC reflects the increase of free time and disposable income of women with older children, but it is also indicative of the notion that older women often have greater access to their spiritual powers, which include the acute judgment of other peoples’ character and intentions.
However, outside the OPC, its positive understanding of women’s power is sometimes turned inside out. A female OPC member commented:

… if one considers how the community feel about me and other active women members of OPC, one would not want to be involved at all. Some call us prostitutes, while some others call us witches (interview Raimi 13 May 2005).

The charge of prostitution is probably related to the fact that sometimes OPC membership empowers a woman to a degree that allows her to act independently of her husband. This is particularly the case for women whose trades link them to the OPC, for example traders in herbs or owners of beer parlours frequented by the OPC. If a woman finds that a growing part of their clients are OPC members and she agrees with the association’s objectives, she may decide join the association herself, even against the husband’s will, to improve her business. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such cases frequently lead to separation or divorce (interview Benjamin 15 February 2006). Where observers feel uneasy about the opportunities provided to women by the OPC, it is only a short way from the assumption of promiscuity among divorced or separated women to the stereotyping of all similarly independent women as prostitutes.32

The related accusation of witchcraft very likely reflects, at least in part, prejudices against politically active women which mirror and respond to the mostly positive understanding of women’s powers crystallized in the office of the Ìyá Oọduà. In her study of ‘Big Women’ in the history of Okuku, Barber (1991: 235) suggests that successful women were frequently perceived as threatening and confronted with suspicions of moral subversion and witchcraft. These days, accusations of witchcraft often also indicate the discomfort among some Yoruba speakers over the OPC’s
revival of Yoruba traditions. Although the revitalization of Yoruba traditional practice provides a potential basis for the unification of a nation that is divided into Christians and Muslims in almost equal numbers, it is also perceived as morally suspect by important groups, and especially among Pentecostal Christians.

The fact that women hold reserved positions within the OPC gives them a voice at different levels of the organization. However, women’s activity in this context is clearly channelled into gendered roles, and the systematic expression of female concerns that go beyond the traditional gendered economy is unlikely. Relations to non-members and critics of the OPC probably reinforce women’s acceptance of the OPC’s vision of female powers and concerns. Because some outsiders continue to attribute witchcraft to prominent female OPC members, and even perceive the OPC’s mobilization of tradition as threatening in itself, female OPC members interacting with outsiders potentially suffer a double discrimination, both as politically active women and as traditionalists. Awareness of such prejudice is likely to contribute to women’s appreciation of the OPC’s particular but overall positive mobilization of female power, although it is ultimately limited.

WOMEN’S ACTIVITIES IN THE OPC

Irrespective of some outside views, female OPC members perceive themselves as sources of moral guidance and principle. In this capacity they control the behaviour of existing OPC members both during and outside associational activities, and they make sure that no member abuses the power derived from his or her OPC membership in ways believed to be harmful to the community at large. OPC leaders are also aware that dishonest men and women could further their own undesirable ends through the
powers and support obtained from an OPC membership. The Ìyá Oòduà plays an important role in the screening of membership applicants and ensures that only those with good intentions are allowed to join the OPC.

As the cooperation of men and women within the OPC creates its own potential problems, female OPC members are watchful over the relationships between men and women within the OPC and especially over those between male leaders and their female subordinates (Olarinmoye 2005). In particular, women ensure that male members keep the taboo that prevents them from having relations with other members’ wives under all circumstances (interview Mrs A 30 August 2005). There is no similar taboo for women, and as a result women’s control of the chastity of OPC members’ wives contributes to an understanding of ethno-national harmony that foregrounds male rather than female solidarity. However, the emphasis on female loyalty reflects the central social institution of the patrilineage, which is deeply embedded in the traditional and cultural revalidation of Yoruba culture advocated by the OPC. The control of female reproduction is important for the patrilineages to which both men and women – as daughters, sisters and aunts – belong.

Financially established women also mobilize local resources for OPC projects, and they provide support to existing members as well as helping to recruit new ones. If OPC members are arrested or wounded, female members also find means to ensure that their families are looked after. Moreover, if members need to hide from the police, older women can be convincing allies (interview Adekoya 4 August 2002).

Beyond the observation and support of aspiring and existing members, women play important roles by sharing the intimate knowledge gathered in the practical domesticity of everyday life. In a public speech in Lagos in 2004, factional OPC
leader Gani Adams explicitly asserted that the information derived from the intimate knowledge of everyday interactions was crucial to the OPC’s success in vigilantism.

We only use members who are residents of a particular area to police the same area. They know the place inside out. There is hardly a new face that will settle there, who they will not fish out in a matter of minutes. *(Vanguard 9 January 2004).*

Through their typical work as household organizers, traders, mothers, step-mothers and co-wives, women are often the holders of intimate knowledge about changes and news in their compounds as well as in markets, shops and schools. Women also frequently observe or hear about the suspicious behaviour of individual members of their communities, and they pass on this information to the male members. Holding important information about private goings-on in their parts of the town, and being able to pose as innocent inquirers in various circumstances, women act as informers for almost all vigilante activities (interview Faniyi 30 August 2005).

Reflecting the OPC’s reliance on traditional practice, women also play an important part in the evocation and control of spiritual powers for the group’s struggle. To provide protection for the OPC and its project, the group institutes not only the presence of a *Baba* and *Ìyá Oòduà* at every level, but also employs other male and female traditional religious experts and charm-makers, which include *Ijá* diviners and the priests of widely known Yoruba deities (*òrìṣà*), who are sometimes also aided by Islamic and, less frequently, Christian specialists. Their specialist work is complemented by the sharing of spiritual power at the grassroots, where male and female OPC members reveal, test and refine charms, medicines, protective clothing and spiritual techniques handed down in individual families and learned in local cults. Powerful tools and techniques were reported to higher levels and might eventually be
distributed to members on a national level (interview Eweina 31 August 2005). Thus, women contribute to and shape an emerging ethno-national repertoire of spiritual practices concerned with power by bringing together, experimenting with and generalizing different local practices for the OPC’s aims.

Women’s roles in the OPC are deeply rooted within a traditionally gendered experience, and they also reflect traditional understandings of female agency. But, drawing on these sources, women’s contributions to the OPC are highly dynamic. Women play an important part in the creation of widely shared moral boundaries within the OPC through their control of fellow members, and they also help to draw and redraw the boundary between good and bad behaviour within the wider community and, by implication, the Yoruba nation. Where women divulge the secret activities of those who may then be punished by the OPC, they contribute to a wider social debate over morality. The changes resulting from such debate can further women’s interests, for example where women expose men who are violent and abusive towards their wives or daughters to be punished by the OPC. Thus, women’s contribution to the OPC’s work is not only aimed at the maintenance of social order, but potentially also at the transformation of the community. Moreover, as the following section illustrates, women’s activities in the OPC are not entirely limited to supporting male vigilantism.

**WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN VIGILANTISM AND CONFLICT**

An OPC list of 302 political detainees in Lagos published in January 2000 included 8 women and confirmed women’s active participation even in violent battles with the police (OPC mimeograph ‘K’ 2000). Although women constituted less than 3% of
those arrested by the police after clashes, the fact that they were arrested as fighters is an indicator of high female mobilization for active OPC work. However, Lagos is an unusual terrain, because in many parts of Lagos, OPC membership is extremely inclusive. One of the reasons for this development is that the participation of women in vigilantism probably predates the success of the OPC in many parts of Lagos. In many parts of Lagos, the OPC successfully recruited from the pool of disenchanted women – including younger women – who already made a living from security work in the widest sense.

Reflecting the heterogeneous population of Lagos as a whole, many of the ‘area’ boys and girls were the descendants of non-Yoruba migrants. The inclusion of a number of ‘area’ groups into the OPC and the wide appeal of the OPC’s vigilante work to the crime-ridden residents of Lagos explains the fact that the Lagos OPC has a significant number of members with non-Yoruba names. This included female OPC members like 27-year old Nancy Igbinovia, a Lagos resident born in Edo state to Edo-speaking parents, who had failed to prevent her from joining the OPC in 1999. Igbinovia was imprisoned for several months in 2000 for her activities and went underground in the following year (This Day 2 July 2004).

In Osogbo, a city in which women hold significant spiritual and temporal power due to the importance of the female local deity Òsun, some women also claim to participate in vigilantism beyond the support of male members, and to patrol certain streets assigned to them at night (interview Faniyi 30 August 2005). At the zonal meeting on 30 August 2005 in Atelewo quarter of Osogbo, a central section of the town populated mostly by old Osogbo families, Mrs A explained her active participation in vigilantism not only as a form of social and crime control, but as a specifically female moral duty. Perhaps reflecting the prominent roles of older women
in Osogbo, and evoking the powers associated with successful motherhood, Mrs A implied that women had the moral obligation and authority to protect the community. Drawing on the authority derived from traditionally highly valued female roles, women had an obligation to punish criminals:

I stand at the entrance to the street where my house is situated every night from 11 pm until about 2 or 2:30 am. If I do not recognize a passer-by, I ask them to identify themselves and to state their mission. If they carry anything that I do not recognize I also ask them to open their package. …

A mother is responsible for her children. If one of them goes astray, she has to punish him (interview Mrs A 30 August 2005).

However, despite the strong presence of women in day-to-day OPC meetings in Osogbo, the degree of their participation in vigilante activities is interpreted differently by different observers. While female and some male OPC members and sympathizers agreed that women like Mrs A participated regularly in vigilante activities, others suggested that this was only the case during particular times, such as during the Òṣun festival, and that women normally only give moral support to male vigilantes. As women have invited male OPC vigilante to areas of Osogbo which are dominated by female traders, such as the Orisumbare and Ojaoba markets, it seems that the number of women actively involved in potentially dangerous work is low. However, all observers of the Osogbo OPC agree that women are strongly represented in non-vigilante OPC activities and that their presence is central to the success of the OPC in Osogbo (interview Eweina 31 August 2005).

According to Mr Olubi, an expert in the production of charms and OPC officer in Agbowo quarter in Ibadan, a newer area of the town dominated by the nearby University of Ibadan, women who support the OPC through active fighting are
considered *obinrin d’okinrin*, a term referring to physically and mentally authoritative women who are believed to have become like men. Such women are treated like men in all respects, and they are also paid and given access to charms for their vigilante work. Locally, Olubi’s comparison of strong women to men is not considered derogatory, and the same expression has traditionally been used in many localities to praise women who advised and guided male-dominated masquerade societies or other civic associations (Olusino Adekoya, personal communication). However, perhaps even more so than in Osogbo, women who acted as active vigilante or fighters were considered very unusual (Olubi 16 April 2005).

In most cases, the participation of women in vigilantism and physical conflict in Ibadan is based on their command of genres in praise and support of the male warriors. Women are often present if physical conflict is expected and they create an atmosphere that exerts great psychological pressure in support of the men. Thus, Mr K, a bricklayer and active OPC vigilante from Agbowo describes women as the force ‘behind’ men:

> Women are the second line of defense. When the men are out or down or helpless they take over. … We don’t joke with them. … We also call them iron ladies (interview Mr K 28 May 2005).

Mr K’s comment refers to the fact that women constitute a powerful audience during any physical confrontation. They curse and abuse their opponents loudly, and they extol the virtues and strengths of their own party, making their presence a powerful incentive for male bravery. Conversely, the women’s observations of men’s behaviour in battle make it painfully shameful for any man to avoid conflict, run away or admit defeat. Many women ensure that cowardly behaviour is brought to the attention of others, and groups of women may mock and embarrass those of their own
party whom they consider cowards. After a conflict, the women’s songs sometimes become popular knowledge, and the fear of public shame often gives new energy even to those men that are tempted to withdraw from the conflict.

This form of female participation in violent conflict draws heavily on the 19th century, when many of the Yoruba-speaking polities were engaged in warfare with each other and the British. This revival of warrior traditions is echoed by other practices used by the OPC, such as the use of battle charms, in the production of which women also participate (see above), and a general reverence and concern with warrior-like attitudes including physical strength and personal power. Women’s close support for male outings in the ‘second line of defense’ is widely understood as fighting. Wulemotu Raimi (13 May 2007), a female OPC member from Ilobu, a town north of Osogbo, made this clear in the following exchange:

Q.: But can women fight?

A: Nowadays is there anything a man can do which a woman cannot do?

… Yoruba problems go beyond men’s shoulders. All of us need to go join together …

Q: Do you as a person carry a gun?

A: Is it only gun they use to fight? I do not carry gun.

Q: What do you use to fight?

A: We do not fight. But we do try to defend our right in Nigeria.

Q: What do you use to defend the Yoruba right in Nigeria?
A: We use Yoruba power. … You see, in Yorubaland women do not lead war. We do the same thing in OPC; we follow the warriors and assist them.

Interestingly, although the OPC has enabled and accepted women’s active participation in physical confrontations and vigilante activities in some communities, it has excluded women from such roles in others. Thus, women are excluded from most vigilante activities and conflicts in several of the communities of Ijebu and Remo, certainly so in the towns of Sagamu and Ago-Iwoye. The main reason for this appears to be that in those communities, vigilante activities were originally linked to the male-only Orò association, which is often described as the executive of the Ògbôni (called Òṣùgbó in this area) with which the OPC shares some affinity (see above).

In southern Nigerian communities including Ijebu and Remo, both Ògbôni and Orò have traditionally played a very significant political role, and several local Orò associations have taken on or supported vigilante activities for years or even decades. When, as in Lagos, the existing vigilantes joined the OPC from the mid-1990s onwards, they often organized outings side by side with Orò. As a result, women do not participate in most of the activities related to the OPC’s vigilantism, because this would mean breaking the taboo of ‘facing’ the Orò masquerade, which is believed to cause death or infertility for women. As women are excluded from parts of OPC meetings dealing with Orò, their contributions to OPC activities in these communities are less important than those of women elsewhere (Nolte 2004: 69-73).

In conclusion, the differences between women’s activities in different localities are substantial. In Lagos, women of both Yoruba and non-Yoruba backgrounds participate actively in OPC security work. In Ibadan and Osogbo,
exceptional female OPC members actively support male-dominated vigilantism but their roles are interpreted in different ways. In Ibadan, a traditional warrior city, female vigilantes and warriors are legitimized – albeit by male respondents\textsuperscript{38} – through a discourse of masculinity. In Osogbo, a city associated with a powerful female deity, an active female OPC member represents women’s support of OPC vigilantism in terms of typically female powers such as motherhood. Finally, in several Ijebu and Remo communities, female OPC members are prevented from active participation in or support of vigilante activities because of the near-assimilation of the local OPC into the \textit{Orò} association.

The wide range of women’s roles in the case studies points to the continuing importance of local institutions and local leaders for the OPC. The fact that the OPC remains embedded in such differently gendered economies may be related to the OPC’s reliance on local leaders during an expansion into a new community. Usually, the OPC expands into a new area by inviting a member of a local community to join and become an OPC chairperson. If the new member accepts the invitation, he – or sometimes she – invites other officers and members to join him or her. As a result of this process, women’s agency is often circumscribed by their position within the local hierarchies relevant to the OPC.

The multiplicity of women’s roles in this context also suggests that the OPC is engaged in an ongoing project, in which local institutions and practices play an important role. As a result, the OPC represents not only a fluid vision of the putative Yoruba nation but also of the scopes of action of Yoruba women. Moreover, it is likely that the multiplicity of women’s roles is part of the practical and experimental attitude adopted by the OPC as part of its project of developing traditional
technologies related to power. If that is the case, the contributions made by women to the OPC in the present will contribute to the expansion of women’s roles in the future.

CONCLUSION

Through its creation of female hierarchies and offices, but perhaps more importantly through its reliance on women’s typical and traditional knowledge and skills, the OPC enables and supports female participation in its political project. While women’s participation is contained within the overall agenda of the OPC, it also contributes to this agenda, because women’s concerns about the community or particular individuals play an important role in the shaping of the OPC’s vigilante activities and thus in its vision of the community. Because OPC vigilante activities structure debates and morality within the wider community, the organization’s reliance on female intelligence and support also ensures that women’s concerns are an integral part of the wider debate about Yoruba, and of course Nigerian, society and politics.

But women’s empowerment and representation in the OPC is based on a view of the sexes as complementary rather than equal. This view draws on local traditions, but it also contains a practical and ideological critique of the Nigerian state, where women’s participation in the formal political sphere of party politics and military administrations has been very low, and, in the case of Yoruba women, lower than in the precolonial period. The OPC’s mobilization of women as holders of complementary powers to men also implicitly questions the ideal of gender equality, which underlies the conception of the state and its institutions at least in theory. However, gender equality is based on the assumption that both men and women can effectively participate in and contribute to given structures and opportunities, which is not the case in most Yoruba, and indeed Nigerian, communities.
Generalizing from women’s contributions to the OPC, a number of points about the relationship between female political participation and vigilante activities in Nigeria, and perhaps beyond, can be suggested. First, the contributions of women to vigilante politics are likely to draw on their typical roles and experiences, which may involve their intimate knowledge of others as well as wider social perceptions of their powers, and even witchcraft. As in the OPC, it is therefore most likely that opposition to women’s participation in vigilantism also centres on these practices and perceptions. Also, women’s roles within vigilante organizations may be determined both by wider visions of the community – such as the OPC’s vision of the Yoruba nation – and by very local relations of power. The resulting practices are likely to contain elements of social and political experimentation.

Finally, vigilantism does not expand, and potentially reduces, women’s participation in the political sphere on the basis of gender equality, but it can constitute women as the representatives of a gendered practice which assigns to them powers complementary to those of men. Therefore, women’s contributions to vigilante activities are likely to contain an implicit criticism of the state’s negotiation of gender roles and the notion of gender equality, which reflects the fact that for the vast majority of Africans the life chances of men and women remain very different.

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A, Mrs. Mrs A is a grassroots member of the OPC in Atelewo quarter, Osogbo, who preferred to remain anonymous. She is a member of her local OPC vigilante group. Interview conducted by Insa Nolte on 30 August 2005 in Ile Eweina, Atelewo quarter, Osogbo, Osun State.

Adams, Chief Gani. Chief Adams was long the leader of the more radical OPC faction and is now the national co-ordinator of the national OPC with its headquarters in Lagos. Interviews conducted by Insa Nolte on 12 February 2005 and 22 February 2005 in the ‘White House’, Adam’s personal residence, Iyana-Oba, Lagos, Lagos State.

Adekoya, Chief (Mrs) Erelu. Chief Adekoya is the chairwoman of the Ogun State Women’s League. She has served in numerous political appointments at the federal level, and is a supporter of the OPC and other Oodua movements in Ogun state (where Ago-Iwoye and Sagamu are based). Interview conducted by
Insa Nolte on 4 August 2002 in Ile Oba Amero, Ode Remo, Ogun State.

Benjamin, Mrs Ajike. Mrs Benjamin is a member of the OPC in Osogbo and originally hails from Ayede Ekiti. She sells herbs and other ingredients mainly used for traditional practice. Interview conducted by Aderemi Ajala on 15 February 2006 in Osogbo.

Eweina, Mr Lasun. Mr Eweina is a traditional practitioner and the leader of the OPC in Osogbo, Osun state. Interview conducted by Insa Nolte on 31 August 2005 in Ile Adunni, Osogbo, Osun state.

Faniyi, Chief (Mrs) Doyin. Mrs Faniyi is a priestess of the deity Òṣun in Osogbo and an OPC supporter. Interview conducted by Insa Nolte on 30 August 2005 in Ile Adunni, Osogbo, Osun State.

K, Mr. Mr K is a bricklayer and a grassroots member of the OPC in Agbowo, Ibadan, who preferred to remain anonymous. He is a member of a local OPC vigilante group. Interview conducted by Bolaji Olarinmoye on 28 May 2005 in Agbowo, Ibadan, Oyo State.

Olubi, Mr. Mr Olubi is an officer of the Alaka Faction of Gani Adams OPC in Agbowo, Ibadan. Interview conducted by Bolaji Olarinmoye on 16 April 2005 in Agbowo, Ibadan, Oyo State.

Raimi, Mrs Wulemotu. Mrs Raimi is the member of the OPC in Ilobu, a small town north of Osogbo. She owns a beer parlour frequented by OPC members. Interview conducted by Aderemi Ajala on 13 May 2005 in Ilobu, Osun State.

NOTES
The expression ‘godfather politics’ refers to the practice in which powerful individuals, often connected to former military governments, sponsor political candidates. If these candidates are elected, their godfathers expect them to act in their (the godfathers’) interests.

In this article, ‘tradition’ refers to all practices and beliefs deriving legitimacy from recourse to the precolonial period.

The article is based on research among male and female OPC leaders and supporters in several Yoruba towns and cities.

During the 1990s, local perceptions of the state as a criminal actor reflected both the suspected involvement of high government officials in the perpetration of crime (Apter 2005: 224-249) and rising local crime rates, which were perceived as the result of the state’s lack of interest in providing security for southwest Nigeria for political reasons. Similar suspicions, albeit in a milder form, continue to exist in many Yoruba communities.

In this article, Yoruba words include tone and diacritical marks unless they are place or personal names, and unless they are part of organisational names which include English.

In some Yoruba communities, women could also contest titles that were typically male, such as the title of the ruler of a town or kingdom. For example, Denzer (1994: 8) points out that before the 19th century, three women were installed as rulers, or Awújalè, of the Ijebu capital Ijebu-Ode.

The Ìyálóde title is often associated with the activity of market women. A historical discussion of the role of the Ìyálóde in Ibadan politics is provided by Denzer (1998).

The role of the Ògbóni association in Yoruba traditional society has been the subject of some scholarly research (see for example Fadipe 1970: 243-250; Morton-Williams...
Important regional differences continue to exist between the Ògbóni’s influence in southern Yoruba communities, where it tends to hold greater power, and its role in northern towns and cities (Lloyd 1971, 1973).

9 In schools and businesses, structures of management and control were increasingly authoritarian, and legitimate forms of representation from below, such as staff or student unions, were forbidden or bullied (Agozino & Idem, 2001: 11).

10 For a detailed discussion of the mobilization of enlightenment values in Yoruba cultural nationalism, see Peel (1989).

11 Women were strongly represented in the Campaign for Democracy (CD), which was founded in 1991 and took a leading role in criticising the annulled 1993 elections (Shettima 1995: 84).

12 Some anecdotal evidence suggests that women might be slightly more likely than men to oppose the OPC due to their strong presence in Pentecostal churches, which at present are the group most strongly opposed to the OPC’s revalidation of traditional spiritual practices. However, a sample of popular attitudes towards the OPC by Dr Aderemi Ajala, which suggested slightly stronger Christian than Muslim reservations towards the OPC, did not confirm a feminine bias (Dr Aderemi Ajala, personal communication).

13 This name refers to the bearer’s origin from the Ijebu area of southwest Nigeria.

14 ‘Lady B’ is also the name of a female musical artist.

15 In an allusion (of abbreviations) to the Action Group (AG) once led by Obafemi Awolowo, the Yoruba party contesting the 1999 and 2003 elections was called Alliance for Democracy (AD).
Precisely because Adams and Fasheun were arrested together with many other vigilante leaders who opposed the ‘third term’ agenda, it seems likely that their imprisonment was part of the preparation for the 2007 elections.

The OPC has been the source of a number of breakaway movements, including the Oodua Liberation Movement (OLM) in 1997 and the Federation for Yoruba Culture and Consciousness (FYCC) in 2001.

Some rumors suggest that in 2001 Adams and Fasheun secretly agreed to exclude women from the inner circle of the OPC’s national leadership to prevent a recurrence of conflict between them. However, none of my interview partners was willing to comment on this suggestion.

Despite the strong presence of the OPC in most Yoruba communities, the number of 3 million members seems very high.

Matory (1994) discusses the appropriation of female powers by men in the historical context of ritual in the Oyo town Igboho.

The *Egbê Omo Odùduwà* was originally founded in London and inaugurated in Nigeria in 1948.

An inner circle of the AG party already held regular meetings in 1950.

Beyond Nigeria, examples include Kwame Nkrumah’s Convention Peoples’ Party (CPP) in Ghana as well as the United Independence Party (UIP) in Zambia. For a wider discussion of women’s representation in political parties of (southern) African Commonwealth countries, see Geisler (1995).

Esan continued her political career after 1966 and became the *Ìyálòde* of Ibadan in 1975 (Denzer, 1998: 26-35).
Tripp (2001) suggests a similar development for Uganda in the mid-1980s, when independent women’s organisations emerged as the influence of the women’s wings in politics declined.

The factors influencing both the politics of women’s wings and women’s political representation are complex and probably indirect. I do not suggest a direct causal relationship between the two.

Meetings of State Coordinating Councils are held either on Wednesday or Thursday and include the state coordinator and its head of security, spiritual advisors and OPC coordinators at local government level. On the local government level, the OPC chairman would have recruited several dozen zonal coordinators in order to keep groups of members relatively small. Zonal coordinators meet weekly in Local Government Coordinating Councils which were set up very similarly to the councils at national and state levels and usually took place after the meeting at state level. Ordinary members are only obliged to attend zonal councils, with financial and other punishments meted out to those members who fail to attend meetings without good reason (Fawole 2001: 33-4; interview Adams 12 February 2005).

Traditional Yoruba belief includes the worship of a pantheon of deities or Òrìṣà.

The precolonial Ògbôni association operated on the level of an individual town. After the establishment of colonial rule, higher-level Ògbôni associations were formed in many parts of Nigeria to facilitate wider cooperation, and the Ogboni Aborigine regularly discusses the political concerns of traditionalists at meetings representing higher administrative levels. It should not be confused with the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (ROF), which is organised in a slightly different manner and also draws on Christian (Anglican) roots.
Traditional Yoruba belief includes the highly complex *Ifá* divination system. Useful introductions and bibliographies can be found in Bascom (1969) and Abimbola (1976). A very short overview is provided in Abraham (1958: 274-7).

Women can be *Ifá* diviners as well, but few of them are. On the gender division in *Ifá* divination, see Peel (1990).

Politically active women in other African countries sometimes suffer from similar accusations, even if they just spend nights away from their husbands during campaigns (Geisler 1995: 548-549).

The role of women in the preparation of OPC charms seems more prominent than indicated in Simpson’s (1980) study of religion and traditional medicine in Ibadan. However, this does not necessarily represent a change in practice. Most of Simpson’s informants and 88% of his respondents were men, and the information obtained by him may reflect the low participation of women in his study.

I am particularly grateful to my colleagues Aderemi Ajala and Sola Ajibade, from the Universities of Ibadan and Ile-Ife respectively, for their comments (personal communication). Both experts on Osogbo history, politics and culture, they have generously shared their entirely contradictory views with me. However, although they could not agree on whether women were recognised as vigilante in Osogbo, they agreed that some women went out at night to give practical and moral support to male vigilante.

Barber (1991: chapter 6) provides a very illustrative description and discussion of the virtues for which 19th-century men were celebrated in the Oyo town of Okuku, and which include unassailability, independence of spirit, and indifference to the attack of rivals (239).
Weisser (1992) provides a useful overview over general ethnographic literature on Orò, and Peel (2000, 2002) discusses the historical practice of Orò in Abeokuta in some detail.

The different names for this representative town association do not appear to be clearly demarcated. Abraham (1958: 492) describes the Òṣùgbó as the Orò cult, and a number of sources refer to an Òṣùgbó ‘guild’ in the senior ranks of the 19th-century Egba Ògbóni, which was in charge of the secret, male-only Orò association (cf. Abraham 1958: 585; Fadipe 1970: 245). However, for Ijebu and Remo, Epega ([1919] 1934: 27) describes the individual members of the Òṣùgbó as Ògbóni.

During the research work for this article, my research assistant, Mr Bolaji Olarinmoye, was unable to interview female OPC members in Ibadan. At the time, he thought that his male contacts were mistrustful of his motives and therefore prevented him from speaking to women.