

The Origin And Development Of Yan Daba: A Study Of Criminal Gangs In Northern Nigeria

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Abstract: *The origin of yandaba was traced to the political history of 1954-1966, when the principal opposition party in kano, namely the northern element progressive union (NEPU) Felt threatened and was not adequately protected by the native authority police, this led to the recruitment of local hunters as thugs to provides protection to the opposition leaders. The other political parties also recruited their private armies later, leading to clashes between the rival groups in subsequent electoral campaigns. This was terminated with the first military takeover in the country, and yandaba were reintegrated into the society. The restoration of democratic rule in the second republic, beginning with the lifting of ban on partisan politics in 1978 saw the re-emergence of yandaba. The authors adopt historical research design to carry out this researched. Findings revealed that activities of yandaba got a boost with the inception of forth republic in 1999, as they are being patronised by the politicians and they are also involve in criminal activities and political violence*

Keywords: Origin, Development, Yan Daba, Criminal Gangs, Northern Nigeria.

Introduction

The term Yan Daba literally translates to “street boys” or “area gangs.” Historically anchored in dense urban neighborhoods, motor parks, and informal market centers, these groups operated primarily as loose fraternities involved in localized crime, petty extortion, neighborhood defense, and drug abuse. Historically, these groups specialized in fadan daba localized confrontations over territorial control. The weapons of choice were low-tech but lethal, including knives, cutlasses, and gora (sticks). While universally recognized as violent gangs, their nomenclature varies regionally across Northern Nigeria: North-West (Kano, Jigawa, Katsina Kaduna.):North-Central (Niger, Plateau) Designated predominantly as Yan Daba. North-East (Bauchi, Gombe): Operating under the designations Yan Sara Suka and Yan Kalare, respectively Some Candidates routinely mobilize and fund these factions during political rallies, paying them stipends to carry out high-risk enforcement operations (Ahmad, 2026).

In many instances, electoral success has become directly proportional to the sheer volume of armed thugs a politician can deploy to, serve as private escorts while wielding local arms. Consequently, campaign cycles create a highly lucrative market for illicit drug networks. The demand for narcotics surges dramatically, as political actors and gang leaders supply these substances to embolden youth prior to deploying them for violent operations. In confidence, several political candidates admitted anonymously that they rely more heavily on these informal militias than on state security agencies, precisely because the militias execute covert, extra-legal “dirty jobs” that formal security forces cannot legally undertake. This dynamic severely compromises law enforcement. While security personnel make efforts to apprehend these actors, their interventions are frequently subverted by political patronage. High-ranking political sponsors regularly intervene to secure the immediate release of arrested militia members either at police stations or by negotiating bail once suspects are charged in court (Ahmad, 2026).

The Evolution of Yan daba in Northern Nigeria

According to (Dan Asabe, 1991 :Aliyu, 2014) the origin of yan daba was traced to the political history of 1954-1966, when the principal opposition party in kano, namely the northern element progressive union (NEPU) Felt threatened and was not adequately protected by the native authority police, this led to the recruitment of local hunters as thugs to provides protection to the opposition leaders. The other political parties also recruited their private armies later, leading to clashes between the rival groups in subsequent electoral campaigns. This was terminated with the first military takeover in the country, and yan daba were reintegrated into the society.

The restoration of democratic rule in the second republic, beginning with the lifting of ban on partisan politics in 1978 saw the re-emergence of yandaba. More so, the sponsors of the urban gangs are wealthier due to the relative economic prosperity in Nigeria. The development was also checked with the second coming of the military at the end of the year 1983(Dan Asabe, 1991 : Aliyu, 2014).

(Dan Asabe 1991 : Indabawa 1988). Further revealed that the yandaba phenomenon, from 1983 and beyond was associated with crime, and refers to a group of young stars between the age of 10 and 30 years with no visible means of livelihood and often engage in criminal activities e.g. rape, drugs abuse, homicide, killing for hire, armed robbery, war, theft etc.

The Activities of gang members got a boost with the advent of forth republic in 1999, as they are being patronised by the politicians. The art of thuggery is been professionalized that politicians contract the services of the gangs through coordinators; required service can be specified either to coerce, soften or to disorganize political opponents rallies,(Inabawa, 2002).It is the type of service requested that determines the number of the participants and price to be paid. This is in addition to the routine criminal activities (Inabawa, 2002).

Methodology

The paper adopts a Documentary research design. Documentary research is appropriate because the study seeks to critically examine the origin and development of Yan daba: a study of criminal gangs in northern Nigeria rather than generate primary survey data. According to (Angela, 2026). Documentary research is a form of research that uses records to get accurate information about a particular subject. It is a systematic investigation and analysis of existing records or documents. These documents can be in written forms, visual/audio materials, photographs, videos, books, etc. documentary research is a valuable approach used in exploring historical events, cultural phenomena, and societal trends to get deep insight into a topic, subject or research question.

The Conceptual Clarification of Terms:

The Concept of Criminal Gang

According to Hamton (2019). A criminal gang is defined as a group of three (3) or more people who form an alliance, who engage in criminal activity individually or collectively to enhance the status of their group, who create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation within the community, and who also conform to some of the following traits:

- Share a common group name
- Share common symbols, tattoos, branding, or graffiti
- Share common hand signs for communication
- Share a common style of clothing or colors worn
- Frequent a hang out or claim a particular location
- Have a structured leadership or chain of command
- Have a process of initiation.

The Concept of Criminal Activities

Criminal activities refer to any action or behavior that violates established laws and is punishable by law. This can involve a wide range of illegal actions, from theft and assault to fraud and drug trafficking. Criminal activity is typically classified based on the severity of the crime, with offenses ranging from minor infractions to serious felonies. The legal system defines what constitutes criminal activity, and penalties for such activities can include fines, imprisonment, or other legal consequences (legal glossary 2025).

Where they reside

The 'Yan Daba live either separately or collectively in settlements popularly known as unguwa (ward or quarters). In most cases, the security operatives know their hideouts. Some members of the gangs still reside with their parents, but most live outside the home, in hotels, rented rooms or houses, uncompleted buildings, cinema houses, garages and motor parks, around river banks and market places (Emmanuel, 2022).

Tools used in operations

Among the tools used for an operation are knives of various sizes, razor blades, matches, cutlasses, nails, iron rods and hammers, and broken bottles, guns (imported and locally made). The more affluent amongst them have cars and even cellular telephones. Another device used by the 'Yan Daba is hypnotism. Victims are often rendered totally helpless when under a hypnotic spell and will thus open the doors of their homes and bring out all their money and jewelry (Emmanuel, 2022).

Drugs used by Yandaba

Many 'Yan Daba are heavy smokers of cigarettes and Indian hemp (marijuana) and use drugs such as cocaine, ajigarau. Other intoxicants such as beer, whisky and locally produced alcoholic drinks like ogogoro, burukutu and kinkana (Emmanuel, 2022).Tramadol, Rohypnol diazepam, and codeine (Global Initiative, 2023). Methamphetamine, Fentanyl (JOUAV, 2024).

Places of Operation

In 1995, Bashir Karaye, the Kano State Commissioner for Information and Culture, published a complaint in the Triumph Newspaper listing the usual places where the 'Yan Daba operate. Some of the well-known places in Kano: – Kwanar Goda, Gyaranya, Sabon Sara, Mandawari, Shoshe Quarters (Emmanuel,2022). Filin Idi, Shahuci, Gabari, Kofar Wambai, Dala, Gwale, Kofar Mata, Gandun-Albasa, Kofar-Dan-Agundi, Zango, Zage, Rimi, Yakasai and Dorayi quarters among others (Yushau & Halima, 2015).; Kaduna – Kabala, Unwar Rimi, Tudun Wada, Ungwar Sarki, Ungwar Shanu, Badarawa, Hayin Banki, Bakin Ruwa, Tudun Nufawa, Rigachikun, Rigasa, Tudunwada Zaria(Emmanuel,2022).Angwan Rimi, Zangon Kawo, Abakpa; Maiduguri – Bulunkutu, Tashan Bama, Tashan Baga, Jajeri, Hausari, Wulari, Gomari (Emmanuel, 2022)..

Yandaba and Political Violence in Northern Nigeria

The 'Yan Daba, therefore, are like an army of mercenaries, available for hire at any time, to protect party members, to instill fear in the voters and to rig elections. During political rallies they paste handbills on walls and trees, carry placards and move about on motorcycles and in cars. The 'Yan Daba appeared regularly on the scene during the days of the People's Redemption Party (PRP), National Party of Nigeria(NPN), Great Nigeria Peoples Party (GNPP), Social Democratic Party (SDP), as well as the National Republican Convention (NRC) (Emmanuel, 2022).

They were used to create intra- and inter-party conflicts, and they were capable of frustrating the political future of any candidate their "bosses" disliked. A clear case of political hostility by the 'Yan Daba in Kano took place on 10 July 1981. There was an intra-party power struggle in the People's Redemption Party (PRP) between the followers of Alhaji Aminu Kano, seen not only as their mentor but also as the champion of the cause of the talakawa and the new breed redemptionists, such as followers of Alhaji Abubakar Rimi, the then governor of Kano State, and Alhaji Balarabe Musa, the governor of Kaduna State. The crisis generated bitter strife between political stalwarts. Alhaji Abubakar Rimi and Alhaji Balarabe Musa were seen as ingrates and renegades by the orthodox party leadership. They, however, did not go unpunished. Rimi's friend and political adviser, Dr. Bala Mohammed had his house surrounded by an armed group of 'Yan Daba, who were loyal to Alhaji Aminu Kano. They murdered Bala Mohammed and burned his body to ashes before setting his house ablaze (Emmanuel, 2022).

Yan daba played important roles in the political activities in Kano State since the return of democracy in 1999 or the fourth republic, this can be seen in the rate of electoral violence that characterized the state, the influx of the jobless youths into government ministries and parastatals demanding for and extorting money from politicians and even civil servants in the ministries. They also engaged in the act of intimidation and victimization of especially opponents on media and inflicting injuries to other party members and even killing the victims. They equally served as bodyguards to their political godfathers against other groups who could pose threat and cause public panic and unrest (Lawan, 2024). With the return to democracy in Nigeria in 1999, political thuggery resurfaced. In Kand State during the National Assembly elections, much election violence erupted. At Filin Wali, Indahawa Polling Center, of Kano Municipal LGA, a group of yanbanga attempted to steal the ballot box and on the process stabbed one Isa Babba Danagundi." (Lawan, 2024). Kano residents pointed to violence playing a significant role in the 2023 electoral process. There have been shifts in the kinds of violence perpetrated: while the theft of ballot boxes and ballot papers has been a central element of Yandaba electoral violence since 1999, in the 2023 elections, violence was directed at intimidating and attacking voters and electoral officials and destroying voting materials. This shift was in part due to the introduction of a new electronic voting system, known as the Bimodal Voter Registration System, which made ballot box theft irrelevant(Global Initiative, 2023 :Yakubu *et al*, 2025).

Yandaba and Criminal activities in Kano State

After the election season, Yandaba are left without income and resort to criminal activities (Aliyu, 2024). Yandaba attacks on passers-by, become frequent in Madigawa area of Kano, northwestern Nigeria, forcing many residents to lock themselves indoors in the early evening to remain safe. The criminals are known to destroy kiosks and unfinished structures, remove gates and to raze shops. The criminals, moving in hundreds, had razed all the shops in the area, including the newly constructed kiosk. "They usually come to rob people of their properties, but that fateful day, they found no one because shop owners closed early, and that was the reason they burnt down all the shops in the area (Aliyu, 2024: Yakubu *et al*, 2025). The Case of 'Yandaba in Kano, Nigeria streets of neighbouring Kulkul and as far as Dorayi. The presence of criminal's mostly male teenagers known locally as 'yan daba casts a problematic shadow over the daily lives of residents. The criminals operate with brazen impunity, their numbers swelling as they prowl the streets in search of victims. In newly built areas like Kuyan Layout in Gwale and Kumbotso Local Government Areas, and they often stormed people's houses and robbed them of their properties (Aliyu, 2024).

Yandaba and Criminal activities in Kaduna State

Yandaba in kaduna state known as 'Sara Suka' or 'Yan shara' attacked Naval officer, Lieutenant Commander M. Buba, they stabbed him to death by suspected phone snatchers near the Kawo Flyover Bridge in Kaduna while attempting to fix a flat tyre on his vehicle. Buba, a student at the Armed Forces Command and Staff College, Jaji, near Kaduna, was returning to base when the incident occurred around 4:30am on Saturday, according to military and eyewitness sources. The officer had stopped by the roadside to fix the deflated

tyre when an unidentified yandaba approached and demanded his mobile phone. When he resisted, the attacker stabbed him in the chest with a sharp object believed to be a locally made knife. The officer was rushed to Manaal Hospital but was confirmed dead on arrival. His remains were later deposited at the 44 Nigerian Army Reference Hospital mortuary (Attah, 2025). It was learnt that in Angwan Rimi, two people were killed by the gang members. In Angwan Kawo, the hoodlums were said to have invaded the Goat Market in the area and slaughtered the goats brought to the market for sale. Also a 16-year-old girl was reportedly raped by the gang members and her boyfriend killed (John, 2018). The gang was said to have invaded Ostrich Bakery, along Katuru road, wielding dangerous weapons. After parking loaves of bread, they collected money and mobile phones from customers and vandalised the place before they left (John, 2018).

Yandaba and Drug Trafficking in Northern Nigeria

Drug trafficking, refers to the illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution, and sale of substances that are subject to drug prohibition laws, is a global issue causing significant harm (JOUAV, 2024). During the period of military rule that followed the 1983 coup in Nigeria, the services of Yandaba were no longer needed by the politicians, which cut off the gangs' principal source of finance. The 1986 structural adjustment programme compounded this by further narrowing employment opportunities, making many young people vulnerable to recruitment by criminal gangs. The Yandaba sought alternative funding streams, and Kano's growing drug market became a key source of income. Since the 1980s, the Yandaba have evolved from drug users to players in drug distribution, strategically positioning themselves as dealers of commonly abused drugs, including cannabis, diazepam, tramadol and, from the early 2010. Analyses of gangs and drugs in Kano have portrayed Yandaba gang members primarily as drug users, largely ignoring the Yandaba's systemic role in drug trafficking (Global Initiative, 2023).

Drug trafficking has arguably become the central source of finance for Yandaba outside election periods, when their services are not required by political actors. The drug market therefore serves as support for Yandaba's economic resilience, and consequent entrenchment into the political structures of Kano. Yandaba have diversified across drug supply chains over the years, supplying cannabis and Rohypnol since the 1980s, and codeine and tramadol as well as other pharmaceuticals control drugs since the initial years of the 2000. While Yandaba are central to distribution feeding Kano's significant local consumption market (Global Initiative, 2023).

Factors leading to membership of Yandaba

According to (Balarabe, 2023; Emmanuel, 2022). Identified some factors leading to membership of Yandaba are:

- **Illiteracy:** - This is another cause of political violence. Some studies revealed that most of those that engage or used by politicians in their shoddy deal are either illiterate or received low level of education as such they become prey to overzealous politicians as they are vulnerable to resort to violence.
- **Poverty:-** High level of unemployment have accounted for high level of poverty in the northern. As most of youths come from humble families which cannot fulfill their obligation. It goes with the common saying "a hungry man is an angry man" hence need little effort to join any group of militia/thugs.
- **Broken home:** Marital conflicts and divorce are rampant, where this happens the children are usually stranded, which leads them to delinquency.

Conclusion

The term Yandaba literally translates to "street boys" or "area gangs." Historically anchored in dense urban neighborhoods, motor parks, and informal market centers, these groups operated primarily as loose fraternities involved in localized crime, petty extortion, neighborhood defense, and drug abuse.

Recommendations are:

- **Ending Political Patronage:** Politicians must stop recruiting, arming, and utilizing youth gangs for electoral violence and intimidation during campaigns.
- **Cracking Down on Illicit Drugs:** Suppressing the drug distribution networks (such as trafficking in codeine, tramadol, and cannabis) that when taken fuel gang violence.
- **Job Creation:** Providing meaningful employment and vocational training programs gives youth sustainable alternatives to gang membership

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