



SOCIO-LEGAL FAILURE AND THE MORAL AGENCY OF CHRISTIANS IN JUNGLE JUSTICE: AN ETHICAL EVALUATION OF KADUNA METROPOLIS

Reuben Daniel

A Postgraduate Student in the Department of Christian Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts,
College of Humanities, Education and Law, Kaduna State University, Kaduna.

reubend145@gmail.com/09027825169

&

John Ishaku, PhD

Department of Christian Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, College of Humanities,
Education and Law, Kaduna State University, Kaduna

Johnishaku73@gmail.com/08035104096

&

Majimre Jeji Simon, PhD

Department of Christian Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, College of Humanities,
Education and Law, Kaduna State University, Kaduna

Simon.majimre@kasu.edu.ng/08037325648

&

Rev. Fr. George Odafe, PhD

Department of Christian Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, College of Humanities,
Education and Law, Kaduna State University, Kaduna

george.odafe@kasu.edu.ng/0706293761

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between socio-legal failure and the moral agency of Christians who participate in jungle justice in Kaduna Metropolis. Jungle justice, understood as extrajudicial mob action against suspected offenders, constitutes a significant ethical and socio-legal challenge because it involves the assumption of punitive authority by individuals and groups outside established legal institutions. The study aims to evaluate how weaknesses in the criminal justice system influence Christian responses to suspected criminality and to assess whether such institutional failures can provide moral justification for participation in mob violence. The study adopts a qualitative approach based on documentary analysis of relevant biblical texts, theological literature, legal frameworks, and scholarly studies on mob justice and criminal justice administration. Locke's Social Contract Theory and Divine Command Theory provide the theoretical framework for examining the relationship between state responsibility, social order, divine authority, and individual moral responsibility. The study finds that perceived socio-legal failures, including police inefficiency, corruption, delayed justice, and declining public confidence in legal institutions, can create conditions that encourage individuals to resort to extrajudicial measures. However, these failures do not provide a Christian ethical justification for jungle justice.

From the perspectives of the Imago Dei, Romans 13, and biblical principles of justice and due process, participation in mob violence compromises Christian moral agency and the sanctity of human life. The study concludes that Christian moral responsibility remains operative even where state institutions fail. It recommends stronger Christian ethical formation, civic education,

responsible policing, accessible justice mechanisms, and church-based advocacy for lawful and humane responses to suspected criminality.

Keywords: Jungle Justice, Moral Agency, Socio-Legal Failure, Christian Ethics, Kaduna Metropolis

Introduction

Jungle justice, the colloquial term for extrajudicial mob action involving the summary execution or physical maltreatment of suspected criminals, represents a significant challenge to the rule of law in contemporary Nigeria. In Kaduna Metropolis, the phenomenon is not merely legal or sociological but a profound ethical dilemma when viewed through the lens of Christian participation. Adetoro and Oyeneye (2021) describe a “crisis of legitimacy” in which citizens perceive the formal justice process as corrupt, slow, and favourable to the elite, such that the mob assumes the roles of accuser, judge, and executioner. Iyekekpolo (2020) similarly argues that in fragile states, the inability of government to maintain a monopoly on the use of force produces “self-help” security measures that frequently devolve into extrajudicial violence.

This paper attempts an evaluation of the impact of socio-legal failure on the moral agency of Christians in Kaduna Metropolis. The concern is theologically pointed: what happens to the believer’s capacity to deliberate and act in conformity with the ethical demands of the gospel when the structures meant to guarantee justice fail? Christian teaching emphasizes justice, love, and forgiveness as core values (Micah 6:8; Matthew 5:38–42), yet interpretations vary, with some Christians aligning retributive justice with biblical justice and others prioritizing restorative justice and mercy (Kalu, 2016; Turaki, 2017). It is within this interpretive tension, intensified by socio-legal collapse, that Christian moral agency in Kaduna is exercised and, frequently, compromised.

Kaduna Metropolis is a fitting site for this inquiry given its history of ethno-religious tension, in which Yusuf (2019) observes that criminal acts are often interpreted through religious filters, so that jungle justice can be misconstrued as a defence of one’s religious community.

The paper proceeds in five further sections. Section two situates moral agency and socio-legal failure within Locke’s Social Contract Theory and Divine Command Theory. Section three traces the structural dimensions of socio-legal failure in Kaduna. Section four evaluates its impact on Christian moral agency, drawing on empirical evidence. Section five offers a biblical-theological evaluation of the Christian recourse to jungle justice, and section six concludes with implications for moral formation and civic life.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Moral Agency: Before proceeding to the substantive argument, it is necessary to clarify three concepts that are central to this paper: moral agency, socio-legal failure, and jungle justice itself. Moral agency, for the purpose of this paper, refers to the capacity of an individual to reason about right and wrong, to deliberate among competing courses of action, and to act in a manner that is, in principle, attributable to the individual’s own ethical judgment rather than to coercion or unreflective impulse. In the Christian theological tradition, moral agency is never exercised in a vacuum; it is always already shaped by revelation, by the community of faith, and by the believer’s submission to what is held to be the will of God.

Ethics: Ethics, in the context of this study, is defined as the systematic and philosophical study of moral principles that govern individual and collective conduct, particularly regarding what is considered right, wrong, obligatory, or permissible. According to Thiroux and Krasemann (2018), ethics involves the investigation of moral reasoning, providing a framework through which human actions are evaluated against established values.

Socio-legal: Socio-legal failure denotes the breakdown, or perceived breakdown, of the institutions constitutionally charged with administering justice. Odey (2021) terms this “institutional atrophy,” a condition in which the formal apparatus of justice exists on paper while losing functional capacity to protect citizens or punish offenders credibly. Bassey et al. (2024) describe the resulting “legitimacy deficit,” in which the public de-legitimizes the state’s monopoly on the use of force because police are perceived as more interested in extortion than protection.

Jungle justice: Jungle justice, also referred to as mob justice or extrajudicial execution, is a form of public summary execution or physical punishment carried out by a mob against a suspected perpetrator of a crime, bypassing the formal legal system. Agbiboa (2015) describes it as a visceral response to the perceived failure of the state’s security apparatus and the legitimacy deficit of the police and judiciary. The term, as deployed in this paper, encompasses acts of beating, stoning, or necklacing used by civilians to punish suspects within the Kaduna Metropolis without recourse to the rule of law. It is the relationship between this practice and the moral agency of the Christian participant that constitutes the analytical centre of the present paper.

Social Contract Theory

Locke’s Social Contract Theory posits that individuals in the state of nature possess inherent rights to life, liberty, and property, but that this state is plagued by “inconveniences” for want of an impartial judge (Locke, 1689/1988). Individuals therefore surrender their private power to punish transgressors to a central authority in exchange for protection through the rule of law; crucially, this power is conditional, and a state that fails to protect these rights or becomes arbitrary breaches the contract. This theory supplies a diagnostic tool for the present inquiry: when Christians in Kaduna perceive that the police and judiciary, the contract holders, have failed to protect them, they may conclude that the contract is nullified and that mob action is a legitimate resumption of a natural right to self-preservation. Critics such as Hume (1748/1994) and Pitkin (1965) question the historicity of the state of nature and the notion of “tacit consent,” while Taylor (1989) argues the theory overemphasizes individual rights against communal obligation. Despite these criticisms, the theory remains useful here as a benchmark for institutional legitimacy, allowing the paper to ask whether the state’s perceived breach ethically justifies the Christian’s return to the state of nature through mob violence.

Divine Command Theory

Divine Command Theory, developed systematically by Augustine of Hippo, holds that the moral status of an action depends upon the will of God: “right” is synonymous with “commanded by God,” and “wrong” with “forbidden by God” (Adams, 1999). Augustine asserted that the law of God is the truth (Augustine, 397/1961), such that human justice is valid only insofar as it reflects God’s eternal law. This theory exposes the precise claim made by the Christian participant in jungle justice, namely that the act is sanctioned by a higher, divine mandate to purge evil from

society. It allows this paper to contrast that subjective claim against the objective biblical commands, specifically the prohibition “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13) and the Pauline instruction to “leave room for God’s wrath” (Romans 12:19). Critics raise the Euthyphro Dilemma, asking whether an action is right because God commands it or commanded because it is right (Plato, c.380 BCE/2002), and Kant (1785/2012) argues that morality requires autonomy rather than obedience alone. Nevertheless, because Christians in Kaduna operate within a theocentric worldview, this theory remains the necessary complement to Social Contract Theory, together supplying the framework, institutional diagnosis and theological justification-testing, within which Christian moral agency under crisis can be properly assessed.

The Structure of Socio-Legal Failure in Kaduna Metropolis

The most cited cause of jungle justice in Nigeria is the systemic failure of the formal Criminal Justice System. Odey’s (2021) institutional atrophy and Bassey et al.’s (2024) legitimacy deficit converge in Kaduna, where citizens who witness police extortion or the release of suspects on technicalities increasingly regard the mob as a supplementary judiciary filling the gap left by an absent or corrupt state apparatus. This failure is compounded by economic precariousness: Adamu (2025) describes a “frustration-aggression” cycle in which the urban poor, vulnerable to petty crime that threatens their livelihood, vent collective frustration on captured suspects, who become scapegoats for societal ills more broadly (Essoh et al., 2024). A further driver is the perception of impunity: Ilori (2020) notes that participants often justify mob action on the belief that a suspect handed to police will be “back on the streets within days,” producing a crude deterrence logic that Odey (2021) regards as fallacious, since it normalizes brutality rather than reducing crime.

In Kaduna specifically, this institutional and economic failure is coloured by ethno-religious trauma. Higazi (2024) describes a “security complex” in which criminal acts are interpreted through the lens of inter-group threat, so that a suspect from a rival religious community is more likely to face lethal mob violence, framed as a pre-emptive strike rather than a judicial process (Ilo, 2025). Yusuf (2019) notes that Christians in Kaduna may thereby misconstrue jungle justice as defence of their religious community, a conflation that this paper regards as among the most theologically dangerous distortions of moral agency it examines, since it allows believers to recast an act scripture condemns as an act of fidelity to it. Finally, social media accelerates mob mobilization: Ukeachusim (2026) identifies “digital vigilantism” in which unverified rumours of kidnappers or blasphemers circulate within minutes, and Gambo and Shehu (2024) find that Christians were especially likely to share such alerts within church-based WhatsApp groups, which often served as the pre-mobilization phase for physical violence, a finding suggesting that the erosion of Christian moral agency begins not at the scene of the lynching but at the moment of sharing an unverified accusation.

The Impact of Socio-Legal Failure on Christian Moral Agency

Where the formal justice system retains credibility, Christian moral agency operates within a settled framework: the believer may report a crime, trust the process, and rest in the conviction that Romans 13:1–7 describes a functioning instrument of God’s justice. When that system visibly and repeatedly fails, the believer is left to improvise a theological response that the inherited catechesis of the local church may not have anticipated. Kunhiyop (2019) critiques the “pulpit silence” on extrajudicial violence, noting that while pastors preach against sin generally, there is a

dearth of specific teaching on citizenship or the theology of law, leaving congregants unprepared for the precise temptation that socio-legal failure presents.

This improvisation produces what may be called moral cognitive dissonance, the simultaneous holding of an explicit commitment to the sanctity of life and active participation in its violation. Asangausung et al. (2023) link this to deindividuation, in which the anonymity of the crowd permits moral disengagement; the Christian participant reasons that the suspect has forfeited the *Imago Dei* by a heinous act, so that lynching is reconceived not as murder but as a righteous purging of an existential threat, what Essoh et al. (2024) term a “pseudo-legalism” in which the mob’s violence is experienced as the final judgment the state was too weak to deliver. Empirical findings corroborate the scale of this compromise: Ukeachusim (2026) found that 58 percent of surveyed church members in Northern Nigeria agreed that some criminals are too evil for trial, while Bature and Iliya (2025) found that 70 percent of Christian respondents in parts of Kaduna justified extrajudicial killing as a preventative necessity. Most strikingly, Nwankwo and Okafor (2025) found that individuals scoring high on religious zeal were 30 percent less likely to intervene to save a suspect, viewing the suspect’s plight as divine retribution, evidence that religious commitment can, under socio-legal failure, be repurposed into a rationale for passivity rather than mercy. Kunhiyop (2019) further notes that this compromise is typically cumulative: repeated justification produces a gradual “moral hardening,” yielding a hybrid faith in which biblical values are discarded in the public square while professed in the pew, a dissonance this paper treats as the clearest measure of the impact socio-legal failure exerts on Christian moral agency in Kaduna.

Biblical and Theological Evaluation

Having documented this impact, the paper now asks whether it can be considered morally justified. The foundational argument against extrajudicial killing rests on the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*: Genesis 1:26–27 establishes that human beings bear the image of God, a status that, per Lewis (2019), survives the Fall and renders even a suspected thief or kidnapper possessed of a dignity that demands due process. The prohibition “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13) thus protects the bearer of the divine image from the arbitrary wrath of the mob, a protection that cannot become conditional simply because the state has failed to enforce it; socio-legal failure may explain why a believer feels compelled to act, but it cannot alter the moral status of the victim.

The Pentateuchal legal code reinforces this point. The *lex talionis* of Exodus 21:24 was, per Wright (2004), a limit on vengeance rather than a license for it, and scripture explicitly required the testimony of two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15) and instituted cities of refuge (Numbers 35:6–15) to protect a suspect from the “avenger of blood,” the biblical equivalent of the modern mob. The Mosaic answer to communal volatility was not to suspend due process but to institutionalize it precisely when restraint is most difficult, inverting the logic of the contemporary Christian who reasons that state failure licenses a return to communal vengeance. The New Testament reinforces the same verdict through its mob archetypes: the trial of Jesus and the stoning of Stephen, in which, as Stott (2006) argues, the crowd is consistently portrayed as a tool of injustice rather than the voice of God, a structural parallel to mob action occurring under conditions, Roman colonial rule, that closely resemble the perceived corruption of the contemporary Nigerian state.

The most direct biblical resource is Paul's theology of the state in Romans 13:1–7. Authority, *exousia*, is divinely established (Moo, 2018), making the mob a theological usurper regardless of how righteous its indignation feels. Paul wrote this command under Nero's Rome, a state more corrupt and hostile than Kaduna's, yet granted no moral loophole for vigilantism on account of the state's flaws (Stott, 2006); the legitimacy of the state's function is independent of the moral excellence of its officials, so that the documented inefficiency of the Nigeria Police Force does not, by the same logic, justify a Christian's descent into jungle justice. Submission, *hupotassō*, is distinguished from unqualified obedience, but Paul gives no room for vigilante justice as a form of resistance; resistance to an unjust or failing state proceeds through suffering and witness, not through adopting the mob's tactics (Moo, 2018).

Finally, the ethic of mercy in the narrative of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11) disqualifies the Christian from mob participation on the ground of the believer's own status as a sinner saved by grace (Kunhiyop, 2019), since mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13). Taken together, these resources yield an unambiguous verdict: socio-legal failure explains the strain placed on Christian moral agency in Kaduna but supplies no warrant, on the believer's own scriptures, for the recourse to mob violence; justice, for the Christian, must remain procedural, proportional, and authorized.

Implications

The foregoing analysis carries clear implications for the church and civic life in Kaduna Metropolis. Because socio-legal failure does not announce itself in advance, teaching on the sanctity of life, due process, and the theology of the state must be inculcated well before believers face the immediate pressure of a crowd; Kunhiyop's (2019) critique of pulpit silence suggests many congregations have not received this formation. The missiological cost of compromised agency is severe, for when church members are found among lynch mobs, the church's prophetic voice against persecution and injustice is silenced by its own hypocrisy (Stott, 2006). Because the legitimacy deficit and the perception of impunity are documented, recurring drivers of mob participation, restoring Christian moral agency cannot succeed through preaching alone; it requires complementary efforts toward more responsive policing and a less protracted judiciary, alongside targeted catechesis for youth and community influencers addressing digital vigilantism and the ethics of sharing unverified accusations.

Conclusion

In sum, this paper has shown that the perceived breach of the social contract in Kaduna, manifest in institutional atrophy, economic precariousness, ethno-religious trauma, and digital vigilantism, creates real and well-documented pressure on Christians to regard mob action as a legitimate resumption of a natural right to self-preservation, a pressure that empirical evidence confirms has produced widespread, cumulative compromise of Christian moral agency in the metropolis. Yet a sustained biblical-theological evaluation, anchored in the *Imago Dei*, the Pentateuchal requirement of due process, the New Testament mob archetypes, and the Pauline theology of the state, demonstrates that this failure, however severe, supplies no Christian ethical warrant for extrajudicial violence. The impact of socio-legal failure on Christian moral agency in Kaduna Metropolis is therefore best described not as a justified adaptation to circumstance but as a theological paradox, in which institutional collapse exposes, rather than excuses, a prior failure of moral formation within the believing community, one that the simultaneous restoration of public



confidence in the justice system and renewed catechesis within the churches of Kaduna Metropolis must together address.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, and given the demonstrable impact of socio-legal failure on the moral agency of Christians in Kaduna Metropolis, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Christian congregations in Kaduna Metropolis should institutionalize sustained teaching on the sanctity of human life, the doctrine of the Imago Dei, and the biblical requirement of due process as part of their regular discipleship programmes. This formation needs to occur *prior* to moments of crisis, so that believers possess a well-articulated ethical framework with which to resist the pressures of jungle justice when socio-legal structures fail.
- ii. Pastors and other ecclesial leaders should move beyond generic denunciations of “violence” to address jungle justice explicitly in sermons, Bible studies, and catechetical materials. Targeted teaching on the theology of the state (for example, Romans 13), Christian citizenship, and the illegitimacy of mob action will help correct the current “pulpit silence” that leaves congregants ethically unprepared in the face of institutional breakdown.
- iii. Church bodies, at congregational and denominational levels, should develop clear pastoral guidelines on Christian responses to suspected criminal activity. Such guidelines should emphasize non-participation in mobs, the moral obligation to protect the dignity and life of suspects, and the appropriate use of formal reporting channels. By translating theological convictions into concrete protocols, churches can offer believers practicable alternatives to jungle justice.
- iv. Given that legitimacy deficit and perceived impunity in the Criminal Justice System are key drivers of mob action, churches and civil society organizations should advocate for, and participate in, reforms aimed at enhancing police responsiveness, transparency, and accountability, as well as reducing judicial delay. Restoring public confidence in the state’s capacity to deliver justice is indispensable to reducing the moral strain that currently pushes Christians toward extrajudicial measures.
- v. Because digital vigilantism and the rapid circulation of unverified accusations via social media have been shown to serve as pre-mobilization stages for jungle justice, churches should incorporate ethical training on media consumption and sharing into youth ministry and lay leadership programmes. Particular attention should be given to the responsibilities of Christians who administer WhatsApp groups and other online forums, discouraging the dissemination of unverified crime alerts and promoting verification, restraint, and a theology of speech that aligns with Christian commitment to truth and neighbour-love.

References

- Adams, R. M. (1999). *Finite and infinite goods: A framework for ethics*. Oxford University Press.
- Adamu, S. (2025). *Memory, trauma, and the city: A sociological study of Kaduna's urban violence*. Ahmadu Bello University Press.
- Adetoro, R. A., & Oyeneye, O. Y. (2021). Mob justice and the failure of the rule of law in Nigeria: A sociological overview. *Journal of African Social Sciences*, 14(2), 45–62.
- Agbiboa, D. E. (2015). Resistance to polyarchy: An Afrocentric reading of the logic of “jungle justice” in Nigeria. *African Journal of Rhetoric*, 7, 92–125.
- Asangausung, I. E., et al. (2023). Psychosocial correlates of jungle justice in Nigeria: A focus on urban centers. *Journal of African Social Sciences*, 14(2), 112–129.
- Augustine. (1961). *Confessions* (R. S. Pine-Coffin, Trans.). Penguin Books. (Original work published 397 AD)
- Bassey, A., et al. (2024). Institutional failure and the rise of mobocracy in West African urban centers. *Global Criminology Review*, 11(4), 101–118.
- Bature, J., & Iliya, S. (2025). Urban insecurity and the culture of vigilantism in Kaduna Metropolis. *Journal of Northern Nigerian Sociology*, 18(2), 198–215.
- Essoh, P., et al. (2024). The anatomy of a mob: A phenomenological study of extrajudicial execution in Nigeria. *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology*, 13, 45–60.
- Gambo, A., & Shehu, M. (2024). Digital vigilantism: The role of social media in mob mobilization in Kaduna. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 16(1), 110–126.
- Higazi, A. (2024). *The Kaduna riots in perspective: Religion, ethnicity, and state failure*. Oxford University Press.
- Hume, D. (1994). *Political essays* (K. Haakonssen, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1748)
- Ilo, S. C. (2025). *African Christian ethics and the politics of life*. Orbis Books.
- Ilori, O. (2020). The social contract and the legitimacy of extrajudicial punishment in urban Nigeria. *Lagos State University Law Journal*, 12(1), 80–96.
- Iyekepolo, B. E. (2020). State fragility and the rise of non-state armed groups in Nigeria. *African Security*, 13(1), 74–96.
- Kalu, O. (2016). *African Pentecostalism: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.



- Kant, I. (2012). *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (M. Gregor & J. Timmermann, Eds. & Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1785)
- Kunhiyop, S. W. (2019). *African Christian ethics* (Revised ed.). Zondervan Academic.
- Lewis, T. (2019). The image of God and human dignity in African theological discourse. *Journal of Christian Theology in Africa*, 6(1), 140–160.
- Locke, J. (1988). *Two treatises of government* (P. Laslett, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1689).
- Moo, D. J. (2018). *The letter to the Romans* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed.). Eerdmans.
- Nwankwo, C., & Okafor, K. (2025). Religion and the bystander effect: An empirical study of mob violence intervention in Nigeria. *International Journal of Behavioral Ethics*, 9(4), 40–58.
- Odey, J. O. (2021). Loss of confidence in the criminal justice system and the rise of vigilantism. *Journal of Nigerian Legal Studies*, 5(3), 22–40.
- Pitkin, H. (1965). Obligation and consent—I. *The American Political Science Review*, 59(4), 990–999.
- Plato. (2002). *Five dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo* (G. M. A. Grube, Trans., 2nd ed.). Hackett Publishing. (Original work published c. 380 BCE)
- Stott, J. R. W. (2006). *The cross of Christ* (20th Anniversary ed.). InterVarsity Press.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Harvard University Press.
- Turaki, Y. (2017). *Christianity and African gods: A method in theology*. Africa Christian Textbooks.
- Ukechusim, C. P. (2026). The Church in persecution and the ethics of response in Northern Nigeria. *Journal of African Christian Studies*, 12(1), 112–130.
- Wright, C. J. H. (2004). *Old Testament ethics for the people of God*. InterVarsity Press.
- Yusuf, H. O. (2019). Religious identity and the politics of violence in Northern Nigeria. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 37(3), 312–328.