# ERC Consolidator Project: SACRASEC

## Sacralizing Security: Religion, Violence and Authority in Mega-Cities of the Global South

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The United Nations predicts that the number of mega-cities in the world will grow from thirty-one in 2016 to forty-one by 2030. Mega-cities have over 10 million residents and are characterized by explosive urban growth during rapid economic change. At present, 3 out 4 mega-cities are located in the Global South.[1] The majority of mega-cities in the Global South deals with high levels of segregation between rich and poor segments of the population and displays stark spatial frontiers between high and low income urban zones.

Many mega-cities of the Global South cope with weak states that fail to guarantee the security of the urban population. Urban zones in these mega-cities are frequently described as ungoverned because state security forces are absent. However, researchers report that these areas are in fact 'governed', but differently so, with non-state security actors maintaining rule and order within discrete neighborhoods (Kraas 2007; Roy 2009, 2011). Within mega-cities, non-state security actors (vigilantes, gangs, private security) play a large role in the daily maintenance of order.

This project focuses on religious vigilantism: the bottom-up, non-state provision of security. Vigilante organizations regularly take on the functions and symbols of the state and evolve into alternative governance organizations that overlap with or complement state institutions (Andersen, Møller, & Stepputat 2007; Comaroff & Comaroff 2006; Davis 2010; Kucera & Mares 2015; Loader &Walker 2007). Residents of mega-cities thus have to deal with hybrid forms of governance that include state and non-state actors, and urban residents frequently rely on vigilantes for protection and safety.

Major questions concerning vigilantes are: when and why do residents accept their authority? The authority of non-state security actors depends on their ability to use force, on normative structures that enforce social hierarchy (Groh 2010), on the distribution of goods and services (Arias 2006) and on popular cultural expressions that clothe the authority as natural and legitimate (Jaffe 2012). Strikingly, these three aspects of vigilante authority are often organized and supported by religious actors and institutions (Baylouny 2010; Benda-Beckmann *et al*. 2013; Chido 2016; Kirsch & Turner 2009; Turner & Schlee 2017).

Nevertheless, a grounded theoretical model that can determine if and how religion helps to produce the authority of alternative governance in mega-cities of the Global South is lacking. Such a theoretical model is needed not only because the number of mega-cities is increasing but also because the percentage of people of the world's population with a religious adherence is expected to grow. According to the Pew Research Center, by 2050, Christians and Muslims will each comprise around 30 percent of the world's population and the largest increase in religious adherence will be seen in the Global South.[2] Such predictions contradict popular expectations of secularization in the face of modern progress and push to the foreground the question how religious adherence will affect the organization of social life.

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[1] http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/urbanization/the_worlds_cities_in_2016_data_booklet.pdf
[2] http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/

The aim of this research project is to determine the role of religion in the production of the authority of alternative governance organizations in mega-cities of the Global South. To achieve this aim, the project will focus on three mega-cities: Rio de Janeiro, Jakarta, and Lagos. All three face comparable challenges regarding urban governance and religion. They have all gone through a process of democratization between 1980 and 2005. All have had conflicts between state and non-state security actors and in each religion appears as an important organizing principle and identity marker. These three cities display diverse religious fields that comprise different religious traditions, which makes it possible to compare between and within the cities if and how religion produces vigilante authority.

In Rio de Janeiro, the majority of non-state, armed leaders who ruled the *favelas* (slums) were adherents of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions as the majority of favela residents were descendants of African populations. However, in past decade these leaders have started to convert to evangelical Christianity (Cunha 2014; Lanz 2016; Oosterbaan 2017) and are now often referred to as *bandidos crentes* (evangelical bandits). In Jakarta, non-state security actors (*preman*) control neighborhoods of the city (Simone 2014). Some of these actors are intricately connected to police or military institutions and to religious movements and display a complex fusion of religious and security practices (Brown & Wilson 2007; Bakker 2015). Whereas in the past urban *preman* gangs mainly identified with indigenous religion, since end of the past century, the *Front Pembala Islam* (FPI) and other Islamic vigilantes have gained significant power (Wilson 2014). In Lagos, the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), a Yoruba nationalist organization has become one of the leading vigilante groups (Nolte 2007; Harnischfeger 2010). OPC promotes indigenous Yoruba religion but also has many Christian and Muslim members. The rise of OPC stands in tension with the growth of Pentecostal and Islamic vigilantes in Nigeria that also present their practices as powerful earthly and spiritual responses to urban crime.

Zooming in on the practices of these religious vigilante groups shows that beyond religious scripture and ritual, the organizations also employ sound, music, uniforms, logos, tattoos, icons and visual imagery to demonstrate their presence and unity. Religious and non-religious artefacts (visual and sonic) are blended. This raises the questions: how does the material culture of religious vigilante organizations help to produce their authority and what is the role of religious sound, imagery, objects and practices?

To analyze the role of religious vigilante organizations in megacities in the Global South, it is critical to move beyond popular conceptions of contemporary religion and violence. In public debate, religious practices that appear in the midst of societal conflict are generally interpreted as signs of backwardness and it is often assumed that the presence of religion is at the root of the conflict (Cavanaugh 2009). In such modernist schemes of interpretation, reason, rationality and democracy are generally associated with secularity, whereas religion is associated with irrationality, violence and authoritarianism. Envisioned futures of peace, stability and safety generally picture secular societies and diminishing religious practices that retreat into the private domains of social life.

SACRASEC will approach political and religious struggles with a *postsecular perspective* (Oosterbaan 2014) which posits that teleological arguments that describe modern progress in terms of a decline of religious appearance in public life do not suffice. Religious traditions provide moral and cosmological frameworks that are connected to modern power in different ways (Mahmood 2009). The SACRASEC team will research how urban residents experience the relation between religion and security and what this means for the authority of religious vigilantes in contexts of alternative governance and weak state presence.

Two subfields of research about religion and violence have become very prominent in the past decade: the study of religious terrorism and the study of religious fundamentalism (Appleby 2000; Borradori 2003; Esposito 2002; Juergensmeyer 2003, 2008; Omer, Appleby & Little 2015; Selengut 2003). Within these subfields, debates concerning religion and security have explored whether and when religion leads to excessive violence and terrorism and when it leads to peace in conflict situations, for instance in reconciliation processes. Nevertheless, religious vigilantism differs from religious terrorism. Examples of religious violence committed by terrorists comprise excessive acts of violence aimed at overthrowing the state and seeking the broadest audience possible (Juergensmeyer 2003), but globally there are many religious vigilante organizations that structurally use violence but neither strive to overthrow the state nor seek a global audience to witness their violence. Novel starting points are needed when we want to understand the relation between religion and violence in mega-cities of the Global South.

Religious vigilante organizations are neither fighting for the establishment of a separate nation-state nor the constitution of an autonomous territorial community but operate side-by-side or in cooperation with state actors to maintain a privileged economic position and to secure political power (Abrahams 1998; Buur & Jensen 2004; Pratten & Sen 2008). Violence plays an important role but not in the same manner as it does for terrorist groups. Religious vigilante organizations employ violence to maintain order and relative stability. With regard to these organizations, the pressing challenge is not to understand when religion leads to excessive violence and terrorism, but if and how specific religious practices support the authority of religious vigilantes that produce relative peace (Clunan & Trinkunas 2010; Keister 2014).

Researchers of religion and security with a background in conflict studies and in international relations have recently started to oppose secularist assumptions concerning security provision to argue for a more thorough analysis of the relation between religion and security (Seiple, Hoover & Otis 2013; Silvestri & Mayall 2015; Shani 2016). Nevertheless, most of that research looks at examples of religious-ethnic conflict between groups that strive for territorial and political autonomy, and the majority of scholars singles out recognized religious groups on the basis of widely known religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism) that are identifiable by their institutions (churches, mosques, temples).

This research will also look closely at religious traditions. However, in the context of mega-cities many indigenous and hybrid religious practices exist which may draw on recognized religious traditions but which are not institutionalized, allowing for flexible interpretation and praxis (Orsi 1999). Religious vigilantes and residents use amulets, posters, banners, paintings, music and rituals that are not part of the institutionalized religious traditions but are at the heart of their security practices. Such non-institutional religious ideas and practices can best be defined as lived religion (McGuire 2008). To understand thoroughly how religion contributes to authority in mega-cities an anthropological perspective is needed that investigates how religion *and* security are lived and grounded in particular local histories and cultural contexts (Bubandt 2005; Goldstein 2010). SACRASEC is innovative because it looks at both religious institutions *and* at lived religion.

Much research on religion focuses on the theological and ideological underpinnings of religious traditions that help to produce authority. We propose to go beyond approaches of authority that place too much emphasis on the ideologies of alternative governance structures at the expense of a focus on the material and embodied elements. This research proposes to study the cognitive *and* embodied acceptance of and resistance to authority (Bourdieu 1990; Hoy 2004; Panagia 2009). The research approach is indebted to scholarly appropriations of Foucault's notion of governmentality (Lemke 2001; Garmany 2010) that highlight the ways in which power operates on and through

bodies (Butler 1990, 1993) and the ways in which those in power maintain their position through division and control of spaces and the mobility of citizens (Huxley 2008).

In varying degrees, urban studies, security studies and religious studies have been influenced by what are commonly described as materialist approaches: scholarly perspectives influenced by actor-network theory (Latour 2005), vitalist materialism (Bennet 2010; Deleuze & Guattari 1987) and posthumanism (Haraway 1990; Barad 2003; Braidotti 2013). Consequently, scholars in all three fields have argued to investigate the place and power of 'things' to shape human behavior. In urban studies this perspective is known as the infrastructural approach that understands cities in terms of socio-material assemblages that regulate urban life (Amin and Thrift 2002; McFarlane 2011; Larkin 2008, 2013; Simone 2006). In security studies this is exemplified by the attention for security apparatuses as entanglements of technology, matter and discourse (Aradau 2010; Coward 2009). In religious studies, scholars of the 'material turn' (Meyer & Houtman 2012; Vásquez 2011) argue that 'things' are essential in making the transcendental present. SACRASEC will employ and advance the insights of these three fields of study to analyze the materiality of alternative governance structures in mega-cities and in particular the ways in which objects and media of religious vigilantes help to produce their authority. The collection of cultural works that reinforce the authority of non-state security actors can be called 'the popular culture of sovereignty' (Oosterbaan 2015). A focus on such a collection in the context of mega-cities shows us which religious traditions (practices, images, objects) play a role in the constitution of the authority of security actors and allows us to understand embodied acceptance of vigilante authority.

Recently, religious studies scholars have started to employ visual material as elicitation devices in the study of religion (Notermans & Kommers 2012; Vassenden & Andersson 2010). Elicitation as method consists of using audio-visual material in interviews to acquire new and different information about social phenomena that words often do not immediately raise or elucidate. SACRASEC will employ elicitation tools including a novel audio database comprising urban and religious sound artefacts to study religion and security. Security actors make ample use of sound (whistles, music, alarms) and both violence and religion have a profound aural character (Daughtry 2015; Oosterbaan 2009; Schmidt 2000; Weiner 2013). Employing sound artefacts as elicitation devices allows the research team to analyze the sensory environment (Howes 2005) in which religion and security acquire meaning and value (Vokes 2007). To train the team and to develop the methodological techniques, SACRASEC will include an Audio-Elicitation Methods Lab, designed by the PI.

**Major Research Questions**
To answer the main question - what is the role of religion in the production of authority of alternative governance organizations in mega-cities? - SACRASEC differentiates the following sub-questions:
**Q1**. What are the vernacular uses of the prime categories of this research in each mega-city under scrutiny: *religious, secular, security, insecurity, justice, injustice, community and outsiders*? **Q2**. What are the prevalent religious practices in the neighborhoods of study? **Q3**. What religious practices do vigilantes demonstrate? **Q4.** What kind of security norms and punishments residents recognize? **Q5.** How are vigilante practices and actors related to recognized religious institutions (churches, mosques)? **Q6.** Who are deemed to be the legitimate actors to police the neighborhood and apprehend and punish people who transgress local norms? **Q7.** Do residents think differently about the practices of state and non-state security actors and why (not)? **Q8.** Which practices, rituals and material artefacts (buildings, icons, clothing, music) do residents recognize as part of the authority of the non-state security actors that police the urban zones? **Q9.** Do people consider non-

state security actors as good security providers and why (not)? **Q10.** Are their differences between the authority of indigenous religious vigilantes and of vigilantes that draw on global religions? These sub-questions will be at the center of each ethnographic fieldwork in work packages B to G.

**Structure of the Research Project**

This research consists of eight work packages. At the heart of this research stands a comparison of religious vigilante organizations in three mega-cities of the Global South (WPs B-G). Three cases studies will be carried out by PhDs (WPs B, D, F), two by postdocs (WP E and G) and one by the PI (WP C). The six cases at the heart of SACRASEC have a similar ethnographic research design (WPs B-G). To operationalize the main questions of this project, the researchers will focus on the norms and rules that residents of mega-cities identify and on the practices (policing and punishments) of religious vigilantes.

During the initial six months of SACRASEC, PI, postdocs and PhDs will work together closely to calibrate the research design (WP A). Postdocs and PhDs will participate in the Audio-Elicitation Methods Lab designed by the PI to train the researchers to include sonic artefacts in ethnographic research. After that, all PhDs will conduct 3 months of preliminary ethnographic research. The postdocs will support the PhDs in Jakarta and Lagos during the preliminary research and do ethnographic research themselves for three months. The PI will visit all PhDs during this preliminary phase and will support the PhD in Rio de Janeiro. After this phase, the research team will select the definitive PhD research locations. The PhDs will spend their second year on fieldwork and their third and fourth year on writing. Postdocs will do another five months of fieldwork. In year one, two and four, the research team will organize workshops to share insights with colleagues. In year three and five, the team will organize conferences where the major findings of the research will be presented.

The division of work in the structure of this research is devised to ensure collaboration and enhance comparability of the various research components across sites. Close analysis of two cases per mega-city will allow the research team to analyze the specificities of religious traditions in relation to religious vigilantism in each city while the focus on different religious traditions per city will also allow the research team to analyze the role of religion beyond specific religious traditions in each city. The selection of different religious traditions offers the possibility to draw general conclusions about the role of religion in alternative authority structures and also make it possible to say more about the specific mergers between vigilantism and globally circulating religious traditions such as Christianity and Islam.

**Overview of the Work Packages**

| WP | Title | Personne | City | Years |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | Calibrating Religion and Security | PI, PhDs Postdocs | All sites | 1-2 |
| B | *Bandidos Crentes* 1st Brazilian Case | PhD 1 | **Rio de Janeiro** | 1-4 |
| C | Religious *Milícias* 2nd Brazilian Case | PI | **Rio de Janeiro** | 2-3 |
| D | *Front Pembala Islam* 1st Indonesian Case | PhD 2 | **Jakarta** | 1-4 |
| E | Indigenous *Preman* 2nd Indonesian Case | Postdoc 1 | **Jakarta** | 1-2 |
| F | **Oodua People's Congress** 1st Nigerian Case | PhD 3 | **Lagos** | 1-4 |
| G | **Pentecostal/Islamic Vigilantes** 2nd Nigerian Case | Postdoc 2 | **Lagos** | 1-2 |
| H | Comparing the Authority of Religious Vigilantes | PI | All sites | 3-5 |

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