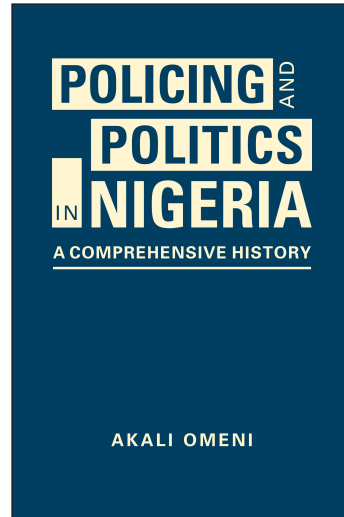


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Policing and
Politics in Nigeria:
A Comprehensive History

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1

The Nigeria Police Force

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) is one of Nigeria's four critical state apparatuses, along with the judiciary, the civil service, and the military. Today, the NPF has grown to be the largest police force in Africa, interacting with the world's largest Black population. Its origins go as far back into Nigeria's colonial past as 1861. In this book, I explore policing and the police institution in Nigeria from 1861 to the present. Crucially, I present a corrective to the notion that, unlike the military, the police have remained on the margins of Nigerian political history.

My findings and analyses indicate that the NPF has played the most persistent role of any government organ, going back to the earliest period of Nigeria's colonial administration. These colonial origins critically shaped both policy and academic discourse on the enduring challenge of policing and the police institution in Nigeria. What did the police institution originally represent? From the start, where did police constabularies fit in relation to the Nigerian citizenry and the colonial state? How was the police institution in Nigeria historically perceived? To what extent have both representation and perceptions changed over time? These are questions worth addressing, and to do so, an unsentimental journey to British rule in colonial Nigeria is vital.

A Brief Historiography of Colonial Policing

The idea of a small constabulary in Lagos was floated around before the end of the slave trade in the lower Niger areas and in the colony of Lagos, as Philip Ahire explains in *Imperial Policing*, and by the 1880s, trading

Map 1.1 Nigeria and Its Location in Africa



company constabularies had unsystematically emerged. These outfits, military forces in all but name, were used to protect imperialist trade interests.

Delving deeper into why police forces in West Africa were formed, Michael Crowder's *West Africa Under Colonial Rule* reveals their similarities and differences along with what they were meant to achieve: protecting colonial interests. By the 1940s, the NPF had shown little inclination to move away from that task. After all, serving the people and serving the colonial state often meant two different things, and the colonial police always came down on the side of the state, as shown by W. R. Shirley, again and again, in *A History of the Nigeria Police* and by C. R. Niven in *How Nigeria Is Governed*.

This tendency of the police to support the colonial state at the citizenry's expense—a feature explored in detail by Tekena Tamuno in *The Police in Modern Nigeria*—was not the only setback to the police-civilian interface. As Moses Ochonu shows in *Colonialism by Proxy*, the colonial police also had institutional pathologies wherein different constabularies,

such as the Hausa Constabulary, developed their own subcultures with a “charged atmosphere of religious difference” toward people of different ethnicities they policed. The British administration would “outsource” this subculture in the deployment of Hausa policemen (*Dogarai*) to dominate the Tiv and Idoma areas of the Middle-Belt Region. Ochonu calls this practice “colonialism by proxy.”

This use of the colonial police to subjugate large populations could also be scaled down to small-community and even individual cases of so-called corporal punishment. The use of such punishment in the by colonial police in northern Nigeria exposed the double standard of colonialism and colonial policing as noted by Steven Pierce and Anupama Rao in *Discipline and the Other Body*:

If colonialism was about the management of difference—the “civilized” ruling the “uncivilized”—the allegedly necessary violence of colonial government threatened to undermine the very distinction that justified it. Disciplining “uncivilized” people through the use of force could often seem the . . . way to correct their behaviour, but there was a problem: Violence also appeared to be the antithesis of civilized government. (4)

As Toyin Falola shows in *Colonialism and Violence in Nigeria*, the British government in Nigeria struggled with this dilemma: on the one hand appearing and acting civilized and yet on the other hand mandating its colonial police to employ force—and sometimes an extreme amount of it, including the use of Maxim guns—to pacify the angry “uncivilized” Nigerians.

Such institutional and moral concerns aside, the colonial police in Nigeria were nevertheless quite effective at their job of policing and security. These professional competencies were a notable positive in an institution otherwise fraught. As an example, detective work and investigation were particularly impressive within the NPF by the mid-1940s. Indeed, in *Man-Leopard Murders*, David Pratten shows just how well the colonial police could on occasion work with local populations to solve cases, and how adaptable colonial policing could be under pressure and amid uncertainty. The colonial police had to deal with some esoteric crimes, including cultist murders in southeastern Nigeria. As Paul Osifodunrin details in *Violent Crimes in Lagos, 1861–2000*, the colonial police for decades had its hands full dealing with the Lagos underbelly, where crime, opportunity, and a large population tested them and made them arguably the country’s most competent police force.

Even so, police work was far from the only function of the colonial police in Nigeria. Colonial policemen were, on occasion, deployed or conscripted to fight colonial wars for the British administration. The role of Nigerian police regiments during World War I, otherwise known as the

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Great War (explored later in this volume), is important to examine because most of the classic works on the Great War in Africa, such as Byron Farwell's *The Great War*, and Hew Strachan's *The First World*, mostly interrogate the role of the military. Some texts do focus more specifically on Nigeria and on the role of colonial Nigerian police units during World War I. Akinjide Osuntokun's *Nigeria in the First World War* is one such work; Ahire's *Imperial Policing* is another.

For that matter, the broad mandate of the police institution that emerged in Nigeria was hardly unique in Africa. As Brigadier General Edmund Howard Gorges observes in *The Great War in West Africa*, to the British colonialists, African states were defined largely in territorial terms that often came into dispute during both World War I and, to a lesser extent, World War II. Moreover, as Charles Joseph Jeffries points out in *The Colonial Police*, military force—often also employed by so-called constabularies—was quite necessary to protect territory and deter local aggression, from within and without, against colonialist interests.

Indeed, in *Khaki and Blue*, Anthony Clayton and David Killingray show that through two world wars, policemen from the Gold Coast (Ghana), Nigeria, Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, Uganda, and Kenya came to train, fight, and die alongside military personnel in protection of the Crown's interests on the African continent and beyond. Those policemen who returned from both world wars, but even many who stayed back in colonial Africa, were often equipped, trained in military drill, and indoctrinated in the tradition of using armed force to protect the colonialist interests. This militarized posture would be deemphasized by the 1950s. As colonial government records indicate, by the late 1950s in Nigeria, the police institution leaned even closer toward professionalization with a focus on police work.¹ Yet, this is not to say that the population was ever at the heart of colonial policing.

On the contrary, an examination of the police discourses from the late 1950s and 1960s suggests that the mandate and attitudes of the police in Nigeria have stayed true to their colonialist traditions even after independence. Along these lines, Tamuno, in *The Police in Modern Nigeria*, charts the history of the NPF and how, going into the 1960s, it held—but never quite fulfilled—the promise of becoming fully professionalized. Tamuno's work remains a definitive study on the police and policing in Nigeria. My book would not be possible without it and the other important works highlighted in this brief historiography.

From the Colonial Era to #EndSARS

Despite this rich history of studies on police in Nigeria, academic studies on internal security in Nigeria have positioned the army as the security

principal. This was reflected in the diminished role of the police during Nigeria's military interregnum and endured long after.²

To some degree, the #EndSARS social movement of October 2020 placed police action under the spotlight. However, Nigeria's police story is not just a debate around a disgraced antirobbery squad's excesses. The narrative on police failure in Nigeria is far more nuanced when the institution in question is more than a century and a half old and, from inception, did not place the average Nigerian's interests and well-being at the core of its culture.

By the time Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999, the military interregnum had exposed the worst of policing and the flaws of the police institution. Already tainted by its colonial origins, exploited by First Republic politics, and sidelined by successive military juntas, the NPF was hastily given a democratic veil without the requisite institutional reform. This was a hollow force: it had no substance and, at a strength of less than 100,000 operational personnel, was unprepared to serve the interest of hundreds of millions of Nigerians.³

Consequently, the modern NPF is a broken institution. Present tense, not past or future. Moreover, the flaws of the police institution can be interpreted as a microcosm of the failure of the composition and function of the Nigerian state, more broadly, as Wale Adebani and Ebenezer Obadare posit in *Encountering the Nigerian State*. Like the interests of the Nigerian state, those of the NPF were not, ab initio, aligned with the citizenry's interests. This misalignment of the police and public interests can again be traced back in Nigeria's history.

For decades, imperial policing helped both mercantilist companies and the British Crown to further their commercial and political interests within the Niger River area. Noteworthy police-related developments during the colonial era included the emergence of early constabularies after the annexation of the Colony of Lagos in 1861; the militaristic and naval role of the powerful Royal Niger Company Constabulary (RNCC) in the late nineteenth century; the deployment of NPF detachments as part of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) during World War I, and the political struggle for accelerated "Nigerianization" of the police force by the 1930s and until independence in 1960. Whereas in this period the police institution enjoyed a warm relationship with the state political institutions it enabled, it grew even more distant from the citizenry.

The decade between 1960, when Nigeria gained independence, and 1970, when the civil war of Nigeria ended, was a pivotal period in the country's political history. In the early 1960s, the colonialists departed and, shortly after, the three major political parties emerged within Nigeria's early First Republic polity: the Yoruba-led Action Group (AG) in the Western Region, the Igbo-led National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC),

and the Northern People's Congress (NPC). The period also brought critical incidents, including the political crisis from 1962 to 1965, two coups d'état in 1966, anti-Igbo pogroms in northern Nigeria in the same year, and the outbreak of civil war in 1967. The conviction and incarceration of statesman Obafemi Awolowo, the emergence of Akintola's Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), the state of emergency in western Nigeria in 1962, and the contentious elections of 1964 and 1965 also shaped the decade. However, much of the existing literature on this period of Nigerian history focuses mainly on politics, the politicians and political parties, and the Nigerian Army. In this work, I present a corrective, arguing that the NPF was not just an important actor between the 1950s and 1960s but played a vital role in the political events that unfolded from 1962 forward. Indeed, both the NPF Special Branch and the Police Mobile Force (MOPOL), in the early 1960s, changed Nigeria's political history.

The intrigue within the NPF did not end with the departure of the colonialists. Instead, shortly after independence and only three years after the first Nigerian became the head of the police force, the civil war broke out. The civil war (1967–1970) is a widely researched part of Nigeria's history. Quite surprisingly, however, there is next to no academic research and writing on policing and the Biafran Police Force during the conflict. I offer a study on policing in Biafra that will appeal to historians and scholars who wish to learn more about the police, not just the Biafran Army, in eastern Nigeria during the war.

Moving on from the traumatic experience of the civil war, I also examine how the police served under military dictatorships for most of the subsequent four decades. There was a lot of violent crime, and many infamous armed robbers and gangs emerged. Furthermore, public firing squads first introduced in 1970 in response made for macabre time indeed. Checkpoints and, by the 1980s, anti-robbery squads, were introduced to curb the spread of violent crime.

In addition to the rise in violent crime, working under authoritarian rule was a significant challenge for the NPF. Police forces in such regimes are not apolitical. On the contrary, they tend to be coercive instruments that invariably support the state, often stifling free will and abusing the police's constitutional monopoly on excessive force. This proved the case in Nigeria for most of the period between 1970 and 1998. An examination of policing and the NPF during this period demonstrates how military rule further damaged the police-civilian interface and further enabled the culture of coercion within the NPF. This organizational culture came with consequences for police legitimacy in the postmilitary era.

There is a rebuttal worth highlighting here. Military rule ended in 1998, and colonial rule ended even earlier, in 1960. Why, then, are these eras so instrumental to understanding the modern police and policing in

Nigeria? After all, since 1999, the NPF has existed under uninterrupted democratic rule. In theory, the actions, perceptions, and organizational culture of the modern NPF should be markedly different than they were in the two preceding eras. There are no more imperialistic colonial masters to manipulate the force and contort its purpose. There are no more military heads or governors to unconstitutionally distort policing and damage its function as part of a power-preservation process.

Nevertheless, as I argue here, decades of organizational culture and historical experience cannot be easily set aside. The likelihood and pace of substantive reform are often contingent on both, and organizations—large ones especially—are often relatively slow to shake traditionalist behaviors and implement change. This is no different for police forces.

For such reasons, despite much rhetoric about modernization and reform, the NPF has retained the colonial and military-era traditions that underpinned an uneasy relationship with the population. At the heart of this tradition is a culture of coercion in its darkest manifestations: torture, extortion, extrajudicial killings, and impunity.

Indeed, by October 2020, police brutality and heavy-handedness in Nigeria seemed to have reached a peak. The #EndSARS social movement initially started as a protest movement in response to the NPF's notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The movement quickly escalated to mass protests against a Nigerian government that, in many ways, had mirrored police indifference to human rights, the rule of law, and public trust. #EndSARS gained traction in part because of social media and new media, and in part as a result of the impunity with which the NPF had acted throughout Nigerian history.

Structure of the Book

In Chapter 2, I aim to demystify the narrative on British imperialism and colonialism in Nigeria. It provides a background of how imperial policing emerged to protect both. The Royal Niger Company (RNC), the West African Frontier Force (WAFF), and the Armed Hausa Police were deliberate creations as representations of British colonial interests. These institutions demonstrate why an imperial police force had been required since the earliest days of Nigeria's colonial administration. The chapter links imperialism, mercantilism, and colonialist administrations' arrival in the lower Niger area to the emergence of imperial policing and the NPF. The chapter employs case studies and theory to interrogate history from the end of the slave trade in Britain in 1807 up to 1899. The emergence of the RNC and the formation and role of its constabulary are critical themes within the chapter.

In Chapter 3, I examine the Lagos Police, the oldest police force in Nigeria's history. I discuss the formation of the force during the annexation of Lagos (1861), the emergence of the Armed Hausa Police (1863), and the Glover Hausas later that year. The twentieth century brought a range of police-related changes in Nigeria. The RNC was no more, and with it went its constabulary. At the same time, on 1 January 1900, Lord Frederick Lugard became high commissioner of Northern Nigeria. Lugard had an atypical view of what policing should look like and had the resources and the drive to implement that vision. In a sense, his vision was more like Glover's, within the Armed Hausa Police establishment in Lagos. In Chapter 3, I also interrogate the concept and practice of policing and the constabulary according to Lugard. As an example, in the latter part of the chapter I look at Lugard's reforms implemented within the Northern Nigeria Protectorate Police Force and examine the implications of these reforms for the Northern Police Force by 1914.

The year 1914, to many Nigerians, is readily recognizable as when Lugard amalgamated the Northern and Southern Protectorates to become Nigeria. However, for many Europeans, that year bears a different meaning: 1914 was when hostilities began in World War I. For Britain as one of the principal actors in that war, the conflict profoundly affected its imperialism, including the African colonies. The conflict also had specific consequences for colonial policing in Nigeria between 1914 and 1918. In Chapter 4, I investigate the colonial period that coincided with that war. Some of the themes I discuss include police involvement in both the Kamerun and German East Africa military campaigns; the insecurity in Nigeria that came about because of troop reallocation to the war effort, and police challenges caused directly or indirectly by the war.

In Chapter 5, I begin with the impact of World War I on the state and nature of policing, from 1918, when military and police units returned to Nigeria after four long years of war, to the police amalgamation of 1930. In Chapter 5, I also discuss the intrigue within the police institution and the issues that delayed both the amalgamation of the police force and the upward mobility of Nigerian mid- and senior-level personnel within the force.

In Chapter 6, I examine the Nigerianization question in more detail. By the 1930s, it was increasingly likely that Britain might eventually relinquish its rule in some of its colonies. Furthermore, the workforce required to administer and effectively control colonial institutions, such as the police in the case of Nigeria, meant that local staffing, administration, and eventually control would have to shift in phases. The mostly British-administered model would need to accommodate a shared model with African police officers. Ultimately, however, an African-only model would have to be in place when, or soon after, the British left Nigeria. In practice, this Nigerianization of the NPF was not nearly as straightforward as it

sounds. For decades, the colonial administration demonstrated little to no progress. Indeed, even the most talented African policemen and officers were not being promoted. By the 1950s, the urgency of the Nigerianization issue came to a head. By this time, the NPF was rapidly Nigerianized to such a degree that by 1955, no new expatriate police officers were being brought into it. During this period, the first Nigerians were sent to Britain for police training; the Women Police was formed; and robust police training courses were established in Enugu, Lagos, and Kaduna. Building on these opportunities, Nigerians for the first time entered senior police ranks. Using *Blue Books*, archival material, and third-party historical literature, in Chapter 6 I unpack the nuances of the Nigerianization question from the 1920s to the 1950s.

Insofar as Nigerianization was the salient point between the 1930s and 1950s, it is nevertheless crucial to acknowledge and discuss the positives of having a police force in areas such as Lagos, where crime statistics began to grow as the colony became more commercialized and more populated. Moreover, other areas of Nigeria also had notable incidents involving police intervention that are worth examining. In Chapter 7, I shift from the Nigerianization debate ongoing during the same period and focus on policing practice and institutional issues within the NPF through these formative years.

In Chapter 8, I look at the most salient police and policing issues to emerge in the independence era. As an example, if the Nigerianization debate was a pressing concern for state lawmakers and indeed members of the NPF between the 1930s and the 1950s, by the late 1950s the debate fulcrum had shifted. The main discussion point to emerge was the issue of centralization of the police. This was a contentious issue that showed the politics of police control and partisanship in Nigeria's First Republic. Some of the other issues I examine in Chapter 8 include the formation of the MOPOL and the relationship between the now-dominant NPF and the Native Authority (NAP), the influence of which had waned considerably in many areas. One of the key features of this chapter is my detailed examination of the NPF Special Branch: its emergence in March 1958, its key actors, its role in the politics of the era, and its eventual decline in the mid-1970s. I end Chapter 8 with an analysis of the health and structure of the NPF by the end of J. E. Hodge's tenure as the last British inspector-general in 1964.

In Chapter 9, I examine the role the NPF played under the New Republic. I look at why the partisanship debate about the police was particularly important in the fragile political climate from 1962 to 1964. I also explain how the police force was structured, the role of each department, and why the Special Branch of the NPF Criminal Investigation Department (CID) was so crucial to the period's polity and political intrigue. I furthermore address the police centralization debate, its outcome, and its impact on the force.

It is no overstatement to say that the period between January 1966 and May 1967 was a pivotal time in an already tense political dispensation. I dedicate Chapter 10 entirely to these eighteen months, providing a detailed discussion of the police role in the military and political intrigue of the period. Additionally, I examine the Special Branch's role and its report on the first military coup d'état in Nigeria's history. I analyze from a police-centric lens the consequences of the first coup, which eventually led to civil war in 1967.

In Chapter 11, I offer a corrective to the narrative that military operations in Biafra defined the spectrum of political governance and indeed society in the region. I begin with the outbreak of civil war in 1967 and discuss the role of the police during the war (1967–1970). Employing original field sources, historical court and police records, declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) material, and input from a range of then-serving and retired NPF personnel, in Chapter 11 I critically examine the role of the NPF inside the rebel-held territory of Biafra, where a separate policing arrangement was made by the rebels, who had a different police command structure, and a separate inspector-general, to the NPF. In Chapter 11, I also examine the Biafra Police Force's regular duties, aside from supporting the war-front army. In the chapter I argue that this war effort was fraught because it compromised policing, the courts, and the criminal justice system in Biafra. I examine a range of court cases, the challenge of criminality, the negative impact of firearms, and the blurring of the lines between military and police functions. All of this would have significant implications for policing in post-civil war Nigeria.

In Chapter 12, I look at the police since the end of the civil war, through the tumultuous decades of military rule, and into the democratic Fourth Republic, which commenced in 1999 and remains today. I investigate six broad themes: first, the controversial firing squad decrees promulgated during military rule and whether these decrees were effective. Second, I look at the historical attitudes toward murder and armed robbery in Nigerian culture and how that held up in the climate of fear during the reign of armed robbery gangs from the 1970s through the 1990s era of military rule. Third, I examine the police restructuring under the Babangida era and its implications, if any, for effective antirobbery efforts by the police. Fourth, I outline violent crime and robbery during the Abacha era. Fifth, I look at detailed case studies of armed robbers and discuss robbery gangs and the police response, including the infamous trio of Oyenusi, Mighty Joe, and Anini. In the case of Anini, I examine Deputy Superintendent George Iyamu's role as a collaborator and how the police in Bendel enabled, suffered at the hands of, and eventually helped stop Anini. In Chapter 12's final section, I briefly discuss hired killings and assassinations as another violent crime category with which the police of the era had to contend.

In Chapter 13, I examine how military rule further undermined the police institution in Nigeria. In the chapter I do not just show that the NPF declined in this period but also explain why. Several police failures during the era endured into the contemporary debate on police reform. Moreover, at the heart of this debate remains police brutality; extrajudicial killings; and the deep-seated coercion culture, which arguably feeds its other pathologies. Indeed, despite much rhetoric around modernization and reform over the decades, the modern NPF failed to change this culture. However, the notion that Nigerians had somehow learned to live with police brutality proved misplaced. By October 2020, police failure in Nigeria seemed to have reached a head, triggering collective action and mass protests.

Framing #EndSARS within social movement theory (SMT), in Chapter 14 I focus on the Special Anti-Robbery Squads (SARS) and the #EndSARS riots. #EndSARSS gained traction partly because of widespread social media access and the impunity with which the NPF had acted for decades. In this regard, #EndSARS stands as another indicator of police failure. It is a manifestation of how the institution emphatically and enthusiastically dismantled the trust between the citizenry and the police.

In Chapter 15, my conclusion, I follow up on the #EndSARS discussion and argue that the NPF is a failed institution. Examining a range of issues—mental health, police welfare, workforce, equipment, salaries, and the Police Act, in the chapter I aim to demonstrate that, despite how seemingly controversial it might seem to declare the NPF a failed institution, this description is not only accurate but altogether necessary if the relevance of reform is to be recognized and implemented. I conclude the chapter with a range of reflections of possible steps by which the police institution in Nigeria might be able to reverse its current course.

Notes

1. Federal Republic of Nigeria, *General Report and Survey 1958*.
2. Arase, “Security in Post-Military Nigeria.”
3. Ibid.