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**Reflections on Africa's Security Situation: An
Examination of Nigeria Police Force, 1999-2011**

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Abstract

One of the greatest challenges that twenty-first century African states face is that of security. Of the four arms of the state security system, namely, the Army, Air Force, Navy and Police, the latter has been the most taunted. Ordinarily, the Police Force, being the closest of all the forces to civilians, is expected to be the protector of the citizenry and the defender of the Status quo, as it is the case in any genuine democratic Nation. This, unfortunately, appears not to be the case in Nigeria. The Police Force seems to have represented itself as an instrument of repression and as the product of colonialism and

imperialism. In fact, the attitude of the Police Force in Nigeria largely remains military-oriented and this contradicts the basic tenets of democracy. From a historical perspective, this paper attempts to analyse the attitude and role of the Nigeria Police Force from 1999 to 2011. It is the opinion of the author of this paper that there is an urgent need for decolonization and re-orientation in the Police Force of Nigeria to have an African-oriented Police Force if the country is serious about genuine democracy. History has shown that it is the only way out for Nigeria if she really wants to be recognized as a democratic country. Nigeria needs a Police Force that can face Nigerian realities and thereby promote peaceful co-existence particularly in Nigeria and Africa in general.

Key words: Africa, Police Force, Reflections and Security.

Introduction

Twenty-first century Africa has been labelled the least developed continent of the world (Omitola and Jiboku, 2009: 49). This observation is not unconnected with the litany of problems facing the continent. On top of these problems in recent times, has been the challenge of insecurity. It has been so worrisome that scholars have brainstormed on the issue; most of the explanations so far, hinged on colonialism (Ekeh, 1983: 60 and Eme-Awa, 1996: 2).

This paper provides a brief survey of the security dilemma in Africa with emphasis on Nigeria Police Force in the Fourth Republic which started in 1999. It then discusses the Police Force in the pre-colonial and colonial period and provides an overview of the constitutional role of the Police Force before turning to the subject of insecurity in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Further, a discussion of some of the challenges of protecting the citizenry is undertaken, which, in this context, is examined loosely as a proxy for national and continental security essentially because of the centrality of the concept in Africa, nay, Nigeria's democratic stability. Finally, the role of communities in promoting security is briefly discussed, followed by brief conclusions.

Statutory Functions of the Nigeria Police Force

No state has been so disparagingly subjected to varying derogatory interpretations of its existence and activities as the Africa State (Obianyo, 2009:10). This situation makes it imperative for a kind of re-ordering to be done so that the myriads of challenges could be tackled. While security constitute the nucleus of these challenges, the Police Force as the closest to the civilian populace must necessarily first be attended to.

The composition, establishment and operational control of the Police Force are clearly stated in the Constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979, 1989 and 1999 (1999 CFRN: 214-216). These provisions which are reinforced in the Police Act and Regulations (LFN, 1990: 359) classified the duties of the Police to include: prevention and detection of crime, apprehension of offenders, preservation of law and order, protection of life and property, enforcement of all laws and regulations with which they are directly charged and the performance of such military duties within or without Nigeria as may be required of them by, or under the authority of the Act or any other Act.

The aforesaid functions are also endorsed by the Criminal Procedure Act (CPA) and Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) (CPA: 26-27, 53 & 55, CPC: 90, 112 & 412). The puzzling question however, is: can the Nigeria Police Force be said to have put to practice these duties? Recently, the President of the Senate in Nigeria, Senator David Mark, amongst others, noted that “the Police today is one of the major problems of the country... for those who have had encounters with the Nigeria Police force, it has not been a pleasant one” (N.T.A.: 2013). What could have been responsible for this unfortunate state of affairs?. Could it be blamed on the personnel in the Force, lack of patriotism, social structure of the Nigeria state or on the past of the country?

The point must be emphasized that the failure of the Nigeria Police Force to deliver on its statutory functions has increased the vertical

and horizontal divide that has turned Nigerians against themselves. In fact, crime against property and the propertied class assumed frightening dimension since the attainment of political independence from Britain in October 1960. There have been eruptions in the social system since that time (Gana, 1985: 174-179). Instances include: the electoral violence of 1964-65 and 1983, through the religious confrontations in 1987, Kano, 1991, Bauchi, 1991 and Zango-Kataf in 1992 up to the outburst of the *Boko-Haram* Sect in 2009. The cause of these social disorders, to some scholars, was traced to colonialism in the sense that policing in the colonial time was nothing but a pliant instrument for the ruling government against perceived enemies. This perception was adroitly pointed out by K.O. Tinubu, one-time Assistant Commissioner of Police, when he said:

By law, it was incumbent upon the Police to enforce the law even if it derogated from the fundamental right or liberty of the citizen or was blatantly designed to silence or oppress the opposition... 'Police declaration' enjoins upon a Police officer to obey all lawful commands of the government of the Federation as by law established and of any officer set over him... (Tamuno, 1987: 148-149).

What could be gleaned from the above comment is that from the history of the emergence of the Nigeria Police, like other countries such as South Africa, United States of America, France and Cote d'Ivoire, it appeared to be one created essentially to protect the oppressor against the oppressed (Gana, 1993: 24). This was most unfortunate.

Granted that crimes could be committed by citizens owing largely to strained social relations among groups and classes with unequal political and economic power, regrettably criminal justice agencies like the Police Force failed to realize the crucial point that they ought not to 'shield' the crimes of the 'powerful' in a society where the pursuit of development, equity, human welfare and liberties should

prevail (Blumberg, 1974 and Liazos, 1979). From our knowledge of history, the Police have always performed two central functions, namely, the enforcement and maintenance of law and order. Apart from enforcing laws, the Police is “not only to monitor but also to discharge and destroy challenges to the existing order of things” (Bowden, 1978: 14). Thus, where there is crisis, the Police are deployed as a “buffer between elites and masses and perform the essential holding operations against the malcontents until military force could be applied in a punitive and salutary manner” (Bowden, 1978: 19). The Police, therefore, are supposed to help contain crimes as much as possible. How effective did the Nigeria Police Force carry out these tasks, especially within the period of our study? Perhaps, a more definitive comment can only be made after examining what the situation was, in the pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria.

Policing in Pre-colonial and Colonial Nigeria

Crimes were committed in various Nigeria communities before and even during colonial times. As a social phenomenon, crimes cannot be totally eliminated in any society. As societies develop incidence of crimes take different shapes hence the twenty-first century African states have witnessed new forms of crime such as cybercrimes, kidnapping etc. The essential thing is that as these crimes occur, the agencies statutorily empowered to curtail them must be prepared to check and prevent them. Crimes were committed in pre-colonial Nigeria societies. In such societies, as a way of avoiding the wrath of gods and goddesses that were venerated, crimes were not only checked but prevented in order to attain what the ancient Romans referred to as *pax decorum*, the favour of the gods. The coming of Christianity and western education gradually changed all of these. Before colonialism, both human and supernatural agencies were involved in the prevention and detection of crime. Whether in what came to be known as Northern Nigeria and even in Southern Nigeria, crimes were traditionally detected and prevented.

In the Southern part of what later came to be known as Nigeria, communities had their own ways of detecting and preventing crimes. Among the Okrika, Kalabari, Nembe and Akassa Ijo, according to T.N. Tamuno, there was the *Sekiapu* club. This group, also called *Sekeni* or *Ekine* enforced payment of debts, investigated and generally acted as Police in each village, just like the *Ekpe* society did among the Efiks (Tamuno, 1993: 134). Women were involved in carrying out police duties in some communities. For instance, the *Ete* group in Nsukka Division of Present day Anambra State in Nigeria, “acted as police to collect women’s “Awha” (elders) to meetings and bring women who had committed offences before their council...” (Tamuno, 1993: 137). Among the Mbama Ibos in Okigwe and Owerri Divisions, the same thing happened (Tamuno, 1993: 131), just as in Iddo district, Ekiti Division, in present day Ekiti State of Nigeria where the *Elegbe* held sway. Similar functions were performed by the *Ilari* (Oyo), *Odi* (in Ijebu), *Emese* (Ife and Ijesha) and the *Inotu* (in Uromi Village of Ishan Division). Also, in precolonial Ughievwen (Jeremi) and Ewhu clan of present day, Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State, the “*Aden*” and “*Igbun*” groups performed what amounted to police duties (Johnson, 1932). Among the Isoko people of Uzere, Delta State of Nigeria, the Eni-lake trial by ordeal also showed that the people had their own means of detecting crimes (Oghi, 2013: 132-144).

What happened in the Southern part of Nigeria was not different from the Northern part of the country. In areas like Bata and Nbula in Yola Province, the *Mbamto* which was a virgin priestess was also instrumental to the detection of crimes just as in Tivland where the council of elders, the *Mbavesen*, performed useful quasi-police functions (Tamuno, 1993: 132). Basically, precolonial Nigeria communities had persons who were entrusted with police duties. These ranged from men of valour, repute and those of military acclaim, but certainly not strangers, rather, those who had local knowledge of the area. Even though messengers and bodyguards were used, emphasis was on physical fitness and character.

The advent of colonial rule however, altered the policing activities in most Nigerian communities. There were changes not only in the procedures for recruitment but also in the method of operation. Recruitment into the Force in the pre-colonial times was something of imposed authority as defined by the social structure of the societies and the method of operation was largely dictated by the norms of societies. The procedure for entering the Police Force in the Colonial period was poignantly captured by Kemi Rotimi when she stated that:

First the native authority could recommend a candidate to the Assistant District Officer who was in charge of the NAPF. He would in turn, recommend to the District Officer that the candidate be recruited or rejected. The decision of the District Officer would be communicated to the native authority and the Resident. Second, the Assistant District Officer could initiate the enlistment process; the recruitment of eligible candidates was referred to the native authority and Resident for ratification (Rotimi, 1993: 190).

The above procedure made it possible for regional parliamentarians to influence the management of police affairs and thus assert their powers. Consequently, District Officers and Residents, who hitherto, served moderating purposes were whittled and later removed as the march towards independence progressed (Gboyega, 1987).

Techniques of investigation and detection of crimes in the pre-colonial times differed when compared to the colonial and post colonial times. Whereas colonial and post colonial method of investigation involved the use of 'finger-prints', pre-colonial traditional method of investigation made use of house to house, village to village inquiry and even "foot-marks". In the Argungu Division of Sokoto Province, writes Tamuno, "a person who had committed theft, highway robbery or adultery, could be detected once one of his footmarks was covered with calabash (Tamuno, 1993: 140) and there after people were

invited to authenticate whose footprint it was. Among the Uzairue group, Afemai Division, Benin Province, similar thing was done. It is important to note that even though for most Nigerian communities the criticisms could bother on issues of fairness and accuracy; it nevertheless helped in the detection and control of crimes. There were cases of abuse, yet the norms worked.

It is also essential to draw attention to the fact that even though Native Authority Police as it were, had their peculiar problems; they were more effective because they had knowledge of the culture and norms of the people. The Nigeria state as it is today needs to take a cue from the past. Policing can only be effective where the actors are familiar with the area being policed.

Nigeria Police Force and Maintenance of Law and Order, 1999 – 2011

The security of African States is not only a necessity but a task that must be vigorously pursued. African states in this sense, included: the territory, people, property and environment. It is only when this is done that democracy can thrive well. The responsibility of securing these components rests on the government. Before independence in most African states, this responsibility was borne by the kings or paramount chiefs. This duty covered all aspect of life health, public safety and external aggressions. In actualizing this role, “many rulers undertook ceremonies of oath-taking and admonition, and when they were appointed, one effect was that it impressed on them what was required of them (Beattie, 1966: 162). In places like Yorubaland, Nupe, the king appointed *Baloguns*, in Edo there was the *Okakuo*. These officers reported to their appointors, affairs concerning security in their areas of authority. In Uromi (Esanland) for instance, community heads (*Odionwele*) were used. These people were in turn responsible for providing person(s) accused of a crime as complaints were made first to the *Odionwele* (Momodu, 2011: 92). By and large, structures existed that ensured security.

However, as pointed out earlier, the dislocation caused by the introduction of colonial rule led to economic crisis that rocked the Nigeria state such that there was the upsurge of crime index. In Jos area of present day Plateau State, “the conquest of Bauchi Plateau led to the establishment of Police Courts and prisons as means of coercion (Gwom, 1992 and Freud, 1981: 30). To curtail crime, the “Yandoka” which was the pre-British system of policing was made to join the British Police. As it were, the ‘Yandoka’ co-operated with the Native Authority Police and Government Police such that “the decrease in crime in the Province in 1933 was partly attributed to it (NAI, Ibadan). This episode has a lot of historical lesson for Africa in general and the Nigeria state in particular.

By May 29, 1999, Nigeria's Fourth Republic started. This was as a result of the transition programme that was midwived by General Abdul Salami Abubakar and this ultimately led to the coming into power for the second time of General Olusegun Obasanjo under the aegis of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Between 1999 and 2011, how effective did the Nigeria Police Force discharge its constitutional role as mentioned in the early part of this paper? What could have been responsible for its performance? No doubt, the period under review witnessed a lot of challenges that ranged from electoral matters to general insecurity. This atmosphere fuelled the rise of insurgent and militia groups that the country managed to curtail. However, as a scholar observed, the cumulative effective of the spate of violence in the country, is that “Nigeria is towing the path toward the destruction and exterminations that took place in Kingali, Rwanda (Akubor, 2013). The preponderance of violence and its recrudescence in the Nigeria state since the start of the Fourth Republic are clear indications of the inability of the Nigeria Police Force to maintain law and order. There were even occasions where violent clashes occurred between the Force and other military forces. Little wonder that the insurgent *Boko-Haram* Sect were able and have continued to make lives and property unsafe in the Nigeria State.

On October 15, 2005, Police officers and soldiers in the Nigerian Army clashed at Area C Police Command Headquarters, Surulere, Lagos. The cause of that violence bordered on who was to enjoy the benefit of free transport on the commercial minibus in which some Police officers and soldiers were riding; a concession by the state then, to ease the burden of transport costs borne by servicemen. The inability of both parties to reach a truce led to conflict in which about forty-four vehicles were destroyed (*This Day*, 2005: 8).

Apart from the litany of violent eruptions in which the capability of the Nigeria Police Force was put to question, their role in the electoral process to say the least, was not pleasant. This was evident in the 2007 General elections. A case in point was the Edo State Gubernatorial Election. The “alliance” of the Nigeria Police Force with the then ruling party was uncalled for and to a large extent, lend credence to the “coercive” agent tag reminiscent of the force in the colonial era. As protectors of the life and property of the citizenry, the Police Force had no business with being ‘agents’ of a political party. However, a determined PDP government as it were, found a ready accomplice in order to perpetuate itself in government, not only co-opted the Police Force, but also, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as the first branch of government (Asemota, 2007: 12-13). As it turned out, violence broke out, most of which were targeted at election materials, which involved hijacking of ballot boxes from polling stations to private homes or palaces of traditional rulers (*The Guardian*, 2007: 67). In the circumstance, what could the Police Force do? Obviously, nothing because the open involvement of the Police in such electoral criminality made it difficult for aggrieved voters to report to the Police (Abutudu and Obakhedo, 2011: 146-169), because it would have been reporting a crime to the perpetrators.

The Nigeria social atmosphere became more destabilized with the emergence of the ‘Boko-Haram’ Sect in 2009. Nigeria ranked second only to the state of Somalia with about five hundred and ninety three deaths recorded officially in 2011 (Akpomera and Omoyibo, 2013: 95). The Sect conducted about 136 attacks in 2011 and 31 in 2010, on

Police Stations and churches (Akpomera and Omoyibo, 2013: 95), during which over 510 Christians were killed (Yishau, 2012: 2-3). As it were, the United State of America was quick to tag the three key leaders – Abubakar Shekoru, Abubakar Adam Kamar and Khalidal – Barnawi, “International terrorists” and offered Nigeria technical and intelligence assistance (Yishau, 2012: 3). Unfortunately, the argument canvassed by Nigeria government was that such designation could scare away foreign investors from Nigeria and innocent Nigerians would suffer strict Visa restrictions and embarrassing treatment at International airports across the European Union, with cumulative negative effects on the Nigerian economy (Akpomera and Omoyibo, 2013: 95). Yet, nothing was done to put the situation under control, rather, on weekly and monthly basis, death tolls was on the ascendancy. It showed that the security apparatus had collapsed. It was so bad that most police officers posted to hotspots such as Maiduguri, Borno State, for fear of death resorted to lobbying senior officers to avoid posting to the hotspots (Onuche, 2013).

What could be inferred from the above brief survey is that the role of the Nigeria Police Force in the maintenance of law and order since the commencement of the Fourth Republic was not edifying. Of course, modest achievements were made in terms of combating crimes, a lot more needed to be done by the Force. To improve on the performance level, the challenges of policing need urgent attention.

Impediments to Policing and Security in the Nigeria State

Between 1999 and 2011, the Nigeria Police Force was and is still faced with myriads of challenges that impeded its efficient operation. These challenges as identified by E.O. Alemika, include: the influence of the autocratic philosophy left by colonial administration with tendencies of incivility, brutality, emphasis on order rather than security and safety of citizens, inclement political environment and poor economic management and performance (Alemika, 2007: 143-164). In order to overcome these challenges, Alemika suggested: Restructuring the legacy of past political structure, an overhaul of the

weak intelligence, investigation, operational and administrative capacities of the force; reform of the Police System, establishment of institutions that will not only help to build the capacity and integrity of members but also improve democratic policing and providing adequate training and remuneration thereby promoting professionalism (Alemika, 2005).

Much as it is held in this paper that the above recommendations are vital, they are difficult to be realized without focusing on the 'credentials' of the individual policeman. Sad enough, there were cases where policemen had been caught in robbery operations in their uniforms (*The Nation*, 2013: 56). This underscores the need to investigate thoroughly the past of persons recruited into the Force. The practice of recruiting persons based on the presentation of complimentary/business cards from senior highly placed persons in the society should not subsume the need for thorough investigation of an applicant. The 'cleansing' process must begin from this point. The success story of communal policing before colonial rule in most African societies was largely due to the involvement of the citizenry who were committed to the task assigned to them. Persons with criminal backgrounds cannot be entrusted with the enormous responsibility expected of the Nigeria Police Force. It could amount to licensing a criminal in the guise of being a Police officer. The Nigerian democracy like other transitional democracies, apart from purging itself of colonial heritage (westernized philosophy) must look inwards.

Furthermore, it must be mentioned that one of the causes of security breakdown is the failure to recognize moral and religious values (Dopamu, 2008: 6 and Alamu, 2010: 141-155), building the future of a society on foreign cultures, values of systems amounts to communal suicide (Dopamu, 2009: 62). African religion promotes natural security through community policing. Vigilante groups like *Oodua Peoples Congress*, *Bakassi Boys*, *Egbesu Boys*, *Arewa Youth* to mention but a few, represent communal efforts that could be used in checking crimes like stealing, kidnapping among others. In traditional

Yoruba society for example, the concept of *agogo eewo* (the forbidden gong) was a check on criminality. When sounded, persons who are into crime, fraud and corruption, law breakers and robbers shivered with terror because they would die soon. Such practices could still be resuscitated in our communities.

Conclusion

African states must rise up to the challenge of insecurity in the continent. For Nigeria, which unarguably, the most populous country in the continent, something must be done to checkmate insecurity. As a country that is naturally endowed with natural resources it is even more compelling. Most importantly, curbing insecurity involve improving the quality of life of the people. Economic well-being is a *sine qua non* to ensuring security. It was once argued that “if we fail to find the right solution to our economic problems, we would not succeed in solving our political and social problems (Awolowo, 1968). While advocating a return to the precolonial security the economic life of the people must be improved because, it is difficult to “put something on nothing and expect it to stay there. It will collapse (Lord Denning, 1962). This is the only way to cushion the scourge of insecurity in African States.

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