

Policing and the Limits of the Political Imagination in Postcolonial Nigeria

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On Lagos Island, the bustling commercial center of West Africa's largest city, a serene park sits close to the middle of the action. Concerts are held there in the evenings, and artists exhibit their work along the paths. Freedom Park, as it has been known since 2010, serves as a place to reflect on Nigeria's past and future. Its name refers not only to the political independence Nigeria won in 1960, but also to the fact that the park sits on the site of one of the colonial government's most important penal institutions. From the 1880s until 1979, it was the home of Broad Street Prison, where nationalists, revolutionaries, criminals, and nonconformists of many types were incarcerated by the British, and later by Nigeria's First Republic and the military regimes that followed it. Today statues and monuments dot the park, and people chat or work on their laptops in the reconstructed cells.

Not far from the park sits another important site in the history of crime and punishment in Nigeria—the Dodan Barracks. From 1966 to 1991, when the capital was moved to Abuja, this military base, named for a Burmese battlefield where Nigerian soldiers fought in the Second World War, served as the seat of the Nigerian government.¹ As Nigeria's statehouse, it witnessed state visits, assassinations, several coups, and major protests. After the end of military dictatorship in 1999, the army handed most of it over to the Nigeria Police Force. Today the former barracks are a police compound that serves the neighborhoods adjoining it: wealthy Ikoyi on one side and densely built, working-class Obalende on the other. Like many police

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installations, it is a city within a city. Officers live there with their families; there are police shops and social clubs, and police churches and mosques. The fates of these two Lagos landmarks in the twenty years since the return of democracy show where the limit of the public imagination lies when it comes to law enforcement. Freedom Park suggests that an end to incarceration is possible and desirable, even if it does not portend the actual abolition of prisons.² The police, encamped in a place that was once the heart of state authority, are much harder to imagine coming to an end.

Geographically, the barracks and the former prison sit near the historic locations of power: the old European residential quarter and the colonial secretariat, respectively. This is not coincidental. Figures of law enforcement—police, wardens, magistrates—feature more prominently in Nigerian history than they do elsewhere in Africa. In the early stages of colonial rule, Hausa-speaking northerners, whom the British saw as a “martial race” naturally suited to authority, were recruited in large numbers for both the West African Frontier Force and the constabularies of local chiefs, towns, and regional governments.³ Police and soldiers worked together. Soldiers were the thin edge of the wedge that established British authority, and police maintained it after they marched onward. British policing for export to Africa was repressive and authoritarian, and it concerned itself with sedition and the suppression of dissent even at its lowest levels. At home, British police forces were developing along the lines of a “citizen’s aid” model—a professionalized, generally unarmed force that courted the approval of the public and encouraged citizens to observe the law before punishing them for violating it. In colonies like Nigeria, policing took a more coercive form. Soldiers and the police defended Britain’s local allies from rivals and protected the interests of European businesses, and in return they enjoyed a privileged position in the colonial hierarchy.

After independence, the center of organizational power in the Nigeria Police Force shifted from the local to the regional and national, but the ethos of policing remained in place. So did most of the officers who did the everyday work of patrolling and investigating. The police continued to play an important political role. During the period of military rule that began in 1966, they were emboldened by regimes that prioritized order and discipline. Police were given the authority to impose summary corporal punishment, and their power to harass and detain was checked only by that of soldiers (who, to most civilians, were equally harsh in their comportment). The colonial regime that created the Nigeria Police Force and the military regimes that bolstered it came to an end, but policing still bears the marks of its origins.

Demographically speaking, Africa is lightly policed. Many of the states with a police-to-population ratio of less than one hundred officers per one hundred thousand people are on the continent, and those that have relatively large police forces (including Nigeria) often distribute them unevenly. Urban areas like Lagos are subject to heavy albeit ineffective policing, while rural areas are left to their own devices. Rates of incarceration are among the world’s lowest, both in the present and

historically.⁴ In part, these are legacies of colonial rule. The desire to administer colonies in as authoritarian a manner as possible on a tight budget discouraged the establishment of large, European-style police forces.⁵ Corporal forms of punishment, which had the virtue of being cheaper than incarceration, lasted well into the twentieth century for that reason. The “thin white line” of colonial officers who controlled vast territories set a precedent for skeletal police administration, which some postcolonial states carried on.⁶ Independent governments that expanded their police forces, like Nigeria, would later be compelled to pare them back as part of the austerity measures the IMF and the World Bank mandated in the 1980s.

Even if they are relatively few in number, however, the police loom large in daily life. In Nigeria, they are almost universally unpopular.⁷ To the poor, they seem to only defend the interests of the rich. The wealthy see them as ineffective and venal, and as little better than the armed robbers and confidence artists they pursue. Even judges, whom one might assume would have a greater faith in law enforcement, see them this way. “Who is to guard the guards themselves?” asked Supreme Court Justice Chukwudifu Oputa in a 2003 address. “It is a sad commentary on the discipline and efficiency of the police, that in many cases of armed robbery the police manage to arrive just after the robbery, that policemen on patrol duties sleep at night or conveniently move out of their beat for criminals to move in.”⁸ “The allegation of corruption in the police force is as old as the force in this country,” remarked Justice E. O. Ogwuegbu of the Federal Court of Appeal in 1988. “The disease has been there all along.”⁹ The police insinuate themselves in everyday disputes, offering their services to whichever party will pay the most.¹⁰

They view themselves differently, of course. As one of the few institutions in Nigeria that was genuinely national, many police officers see themselves as nation builders. In their own accounts, they are the guardians of public order, or bureaucrats who are not so different from other public servants.¹¹ As the editors of a recent volume write, “police work in Africa is as workaday as it is anywhere, a fact often overlooked by the customary debates about violence and corruption that consume scholarly writing about police in Africa.”¹²

The lack of confidence that corrupt, violent, or hapless policing inspires—and in some places the absence of police infrastructure altogether—leads many Nigerians to find ways of getting by without them.¹³ Informal and community-based mechanisms of policing, often glossed over as “vigilantism,” have expanded to fill the void. Vigilantism often looks like a tool of the disenfranchised—a subaltern strategy to antagonize corrupt or despotic authorities, or to provide a public service when the state does not. But it can also prop up those authorities, and not all who practice or support vigilantism in Nigeria are distant from power. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff ask whether we should see vigilantism as “revenge of the poor against the rich, young against old, male against female? Or as a mode of ‘cultural policing’ directed at those held to threaten the well-being of the community?”¹⁴ In Nigeria, it

is variegated enough for the answer to be all of the above. Many different models exist; there are urban vigilante movements that mirror the structures of criminal syndicates, institutions that draw on old symbols to present themselves as traditional, and deputized committees of citizens that are given some degree of official recognition by the state.¹⁵ Safety is also provided by other means; for those who can afford them, private security guards are more reliable than either police or vigilantes. Hired guards are a ubiquitous feature of Nigerian urban life¹⁶—even Freedom Park is patrolled by them.

This adds up to a grim picture. The Nigerian police are indelibly associated with colonialism, they are widely disliked, and many Nigerians find their security needs better met by informal or private agents. All of this might lead one to believe that Nigeria would be at the vanguard of police abolitionism. Elsewhere, similar circumstances have spawned movements that question whether police are necessary at all. The idea has caught on in South Africa, for example, where well-established movements to abolish incarceration sometimes blur into a larger critique of law enforcement tout court. But in Nigeria, which by one estimate has the world's most disliked police force,¹⁷ almost no one expresses the view that Nigeria might do away with policing. When criticism of the police is voiced publicly, it usually takes the form of reformism.¹⁸ This is especially striking because post-military rule Nigeria has a vibrant press and a tradition of free—and often excoriating—critique of the state by its citizens.

The indispensability of the police in colonial administration, and their elevated role during military rule, placed them near the center of political power.¹⁹ They have remained there despite their poor reputation. The police are entangled in Nigerian social life, including in ways that have little to do with their law enforcement mandate. There is still some prestige attached to police work, and it is a secure if poorly paid vocation. Graft can make it lucrative even if the salary cannot. Large numbers of people rely on the police through relationships of family and friendship. One anthropologist estimates that Nigeria's 377,000 police officers support a network of nearly two million dependents, which would give the police and their families a population larger than some Nigerian states.²⁰ They constitute a class unto themselves and are a powerful constituency in Nigerian electoral politics. Officers have their own internal culture. They live on bases like the Dodan Barracks that are worlds unto themselves, and they maintain close connections to both the civilian political elite and the military (jurisdictional and factional quibbles between them notwithstanding). It is hard to say what Nigerian politics, or Nigerian society, would look like without them.

Freedom Park turned a reviled symbol of colonial rule into a poignant object lesson about authoritarianism. But dismantling Nigeria's police apparatus, which also has a colonial provenance, would be a taller order. Nigeria does not provide a clear model for how to govern without the police, but its history offers an admonition to those who envision such a future: police forces that are enmeshed in the societies they patrol do not need to be popular to remain powerful.

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Notes

1. Nigeria's period of military rule lasted from 1966 to 1999, with brief interruptions during the civilian administration of Shehu Shagari from 1979 to 1983 and the abortive Third Republic of 1993.
2. Nigeria still has many prisons, including one that is only a few miles away from Freedom Park. Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison in Apapa was built shortly before independence, and it became notorious during military rule. It remains overcrowded and dangerous today.
3. Ochonu, *Colonialism by Proxy*, 14–16.
4. Exceptions would include South Africa and Nigeria, both of which consistently rank higher. Generally, see Bernault, *A History of Prison and Confinement in Africa*; Dikötter and Brown, *Cultures of Confinement*.
5. Sara Berry famously called this philosophy “hegemony on a shoestring.” Berry, “Hegemony on a Shoestring.”
6. Kirk-Greene, “The Thin White Line.”
7. This is well established by social scientists, but it is most vividly captured by writers of fiction. Among many examples are Abani, *Lagos Noir*; Adenle, *Easy Motion Tourist*; Ogueji for, *Fast Track*.
8. Okeke, *Towards Functional Justice*, 135.
9. Ogwuegbu, *Commentary on Police Powers*.
10. A comic treatment of this can be found in Maja-Pearce, *The House My Father Built*.
11. Olurode, *The Story of Anini*, 99–104.
12. Beek et al., *Police in Africa*, 8.
13. South Africa has been an important site for these discussions. See Steinberg, *Thin Blue*; Smith, *Contradictions of Democracy*.
14. Comaroff and Comaroff, “Policing Culture, Cultural Policing,” 515.
15. There are many case studies to choose from. See Smith, “The Bakassi Boys”; Nolte, “Ethnic Vigilantes and the State”; Pratten, “The Thief Eats His Shame”; Higazi, “Social Mobilization and Collective Violence.”
16. Olaniyan, “African Urban Garrison Architecture.”
17. International Police Science Association, *World Internal Security and Police Index*.
18. On criticism of the police see Hills, “The Dialectic of Police Reform in Nigeria.”
19. Generally, see Tamuno, *The Police in Modern Nigeria*; Rotimi, *The Police in a Federal State*; Anderson and Killingray, *Policing the Empire*; Ahire, *The Emergence and Role of the Police in Colonial Nigeria*.
20. Owen, *The Nigeria Police Force*, 7.

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