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Article

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IN SERVICE AND IN SILENCE: THE SACRIFICIAL ROLE OF THE NIGERIA POLICE FORCE, 1960–2000

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Abstract

This paper explored the often-overlooked narrative of sacrifice within the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) between 1960 and 2000, a period marked by political instability, regime transitions, and institutional neglect. Drawing on historical records, eyewitness interviews, and Scholarly literature, the study repositions the police not merely as instrument of state power or agent of coercion, but as an institution which bears the psychological, physical, and moral burdens of national service which is often performed in silence and without ample recognition. It interrogates the paradox in which the police are simultaneously feared and called upon, vilified yet indispensable, and exposed to danger without institutional dignity or societal gratitude. The analysis unfolds across eight interconnected themes: the colonial roots of policing, operational hazards, civil-military distortions, public misunderstanding, and the glaring absence of honour-based institutional memory. Using detailed testimonies, official documents, and critical literature the paper demonstrates how the image of the NPF has been shaped by structural contradictions and moral indifference rather than professional failures alone. It argues that the culture of sacrifice which manifest in poor pay, inadequate housing, fatal deployments, and emotional trauma, has persisted because the state and society have normalized neglect while demanding loyalty. The paper concludes that restoring dignity to Nigerian policing harps on memorialization, improved welfare, and the creation of a national honour system for fallen officers. Ultimately, the study calls for a moral reorientation in the national consciousness: one that understands sacrifice not as disposable labour but as a civic debt deserving of memory, justice, and public appreciation.

Keywords: Nigeria Police Force, Professionalism, National Security, Operational Risk, Responsibility, In-Service, In-Silece.

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Introduction

The phrase “The Police is your friend” has long been the motto of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF). It is often emblazoned on station walls and police vans, yet seldomly echoed in public sentiment. From independence in 1960, the story of Nigerian policing unfolded not only as a tale of law enforcement, but also of immense institutional sacrifice. This story remained one written in silence, shadowed by indifference, and largely forgotten in the national memory. The sacrifices made by the police were not always seen in gallant battles against criminals alone, but also in the mundane yet perilous daily grind of duty: underpaid, underappreciated, and overexposed to violence. From inception, the NPF was charged with upholding the law and preserving order in a complex, multi-ethnic nation struggling with unity, civil conflict, and political instability. Yet this expectation came without the essential safeguards of institutional dignity, welfare, or consistent public trust. Too often, the men and women in uniform served not with applause but in silence. They performed their duty in a state where service to the nation was simultaneously glorified and neglected. To understand the sacrificial role of the police, it becomes necessary to look beyond the documented crimes and reported misconducts. Indeed, Nigeria’s police system has not escaped rightful criticism. But to dwell only on failure is to obscure the deeper philosophical question: What does it mean for a national institution to give so much and receive so little in return? Sacrifice, when unrewarded and unacknowledged, is not only a moral problem but a societal failure. As Sunday Effiong reflect in the twilight of his service:

We wear this uniform, neither for glamour nor beauty. We are always seen as moving target and public enemy no 1; whether in peace time or conflict situation. When the bullets fly, it is the police they call. When the chaos begins, they send us first. When it is over, they forget us. No one to speak for us; neither are we allowed to speak. No memorial, no pension, and just a whisper that we were once there. Our reward is in heaven.¹

This sense of institutional neglect is commonly echoed in public commentaries. Scholars have documented the recurrent patterns of abuse, both by and against the police. This pattern has shown that behind the brutalized police image lies a brutalizing system. The institutional failure to address welfare, training, and public legitimacy has shaped not just how the police are seen, but equally how they see themselves. As Alemika and Chukwuma observe in their influential study on police reform:

Numerous structural constraints as well as organizational inadequacies such as poor training, poor remuneration and working conditions, scarcity of and poorly equipped office and residential accommodation, inadequate transportation and communication facilities, obsolete (sic) and firearms and inadequate ammunition within the Nigeria. Police Force continue to engender police ineffectiveness, inefficiency and even insensitivity, all of which create enduring negative police image.²

This paper attempts to reposition the Nigeria Police Force not merely as an agency of order, but equally as a community of men and women who sacrifice and serve in silence. Using

¹ Oral interview with Sunday Effiong, 64, retired Superintendent of Police at his office on November 20, 2024. He served at different capacities including as Divisional Police Officer (DPO), Studied at Police Staff College Jos, former trainer at Police College, Ikeja.

² Etannibi E. O.Alemika, *History, Context and Crises of the Police in Nigeria*. (Jos, University of Jos Press, 1993.), p.19.

verified historical and scholarly sources, this analysis unfolds in eight interconnected sections. Each explores different dimensions of police sacrifice: from colonial legacies to operational hazards, from public misunderstanding to policy neglect, from military misuse to forgotten memorials. The goal is not to excuse wrongdoing and systemic anomalies in the police. It is rather meant to enrich an understanding of their story from multiple perspective. By so doing scholarly criticism of the police would be just, particularly when one first sees them fully. The uniform may not inspire admiration in every heart, but the daily risks borne by its wearers demand a considerable appreciation.

Conceptual Annotations

The phrases "in service" and "in silence" encapsulate core principles often associated with police work, emphasizing public service and disciplined restraint. "In Service" explained the NPF's mandate to protect and serve the public, uphold law and order, and foster community trust.³ This was done within the codes of professionalism, which involved ethical behaviour, operational competence, and responsiveness to citizens' needs.⁴ "In Silence" ensured a principle of discipline, restraint, and impartiality, often interpreted as avoiding public controversy or bias. It may also imply secrecy, which can conflict with transparency, a cornerstone of professionalism.⁵ During the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), the NPF's focus on security operations required disciplined silence to maintain strategic coherence. This was aimed to bolster internal professionalism, as officers adhered to hierarchical orders often under pressure without questions.⁶ After the war, police public relations efforts required the institution of the culture of silence as damage control mechanism to fortify the force from potential criticism. The Police Public Relations Department, established in the 1970s, used restrained communication to manage public perception. By avoiding inflammatory responses to criticism, the NPF aimed to project professionalism, though with mixed success.⁷ Equally, the NPF's early codes of conduct emphasized restraint and neutrality, aligning with service "in silence." Officers were trained to avoid public disputes or political bias, especially during the First Republic's regional tensions. This fostered a sense of professionalism by promoting a unified force.⁸ Tamuno confirmed the emphasis that discipline and impartiality in the 1960s necessitated the NPF's codes of conduct, which stressed restraint and neutrality to maintain public order during regional tensions. He wrote, "Officers were expected to act with impartiality, avoiding entanglement in political disputes"⁹

Origins of Duty: Colonial Legacies and Post-Independence Expectations

The burdens of sacrifice shouldered by the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) is traceable to pre-independence. A better understanding thus traces its lineage to colonial policing. The force was not born out of democratic ideals but out of imperial necessity. Its earliest foundations

³ Oral interview with Udom Ekpoudom, 72, Retired Deputy Inspector General of Police, fwc, mni; Chairman, Governing Council, University of Calabar. at his office, Tower of Ivory Schools, Abak, April 24, 2025.

⁴ Ibid,

⁵ Oral interview with Sunday Effiong, 20, November 2024

⁶ Ibid,

⁷ Tekena N. Tamuno, *The Police in Modern Nigeria, 1861–1965: Origins, Development and Role*. (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970.), pp. 210, 211.

⁸ Ibid,

⁹ Tekena N. Tamuno, *The Police in Modern Nigeria, 1861–1965: Origins, Development and Role*. (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970.), pp. 201, 202.

in the 1860s were laid to protect trade routes, suppress local resistance, and enforce British authority. It was not meant to serve indigenous communities. This legacy at independence in 1960, profoundly shaped both its institutional culture and the expectations of the service thrust upon the force.¹⁰ By 1906, British colonial authorities had formally amalgamated the various constabularies into the Northern and Southern Nigeria Police Forces. These were paramilitary in nature. Their organizational style was modeled after the Royal Irish Constabulary, and operated under a strict chain of command. Their primary role was not to protect citizens in the modern sense but to enforce order on behalf of the Crown.¹¹ Tekena Tamuno, in his classic study,¹² described the early function of the colonial police with clarity. According to him, the primary objective of colonial policing was the maintenance of public order as defined by the colonial state. Public order in this sense had little to do with safeguarding the rights or liberties of the colonized. Rather, it involved the suppression of dissent, the enforcement of tax collection, and the protection of commercial interests, especially those of the British.¹³ This coercive framework set the tone for what would become an enduring pattern. By the time Nigeria achieved independence in 1960, the police had already acquired negative reputations for being harsh, repressive and militarized. And this resulted in alienating the police from the very people they were meant to serve and protect.¹⁴

Transition from Imperial Enforcement to National Security

The expectation at independence was that the police would shed their colonial skin and embrace a new identity grounded in democratic accountability and public service. But the transformation proved difficult. The police remained a centralized institution, bound by military-style discipline and directed hierarchically from above. Even the 1960 Constitution did little to democratize policing; it offered limited mechanisms for the state or community input. As Rotimi noted in his historical overview, although independence brought new symbols and rhetoric of national service, the structural and philosophical foundations of the police remained unchanged. The same colonial doctrines, the same top-down management hierarchical styles, and the same instruments of coercion continued under the flag of the new republic.¹⁵ No doubt, there were early attempts at reforming the police. For instance, the push for unification of regional forces and the appointment of indigenous Inspectors-General of police prevailed. However, these were more symbolic than structural. The deeper issue remained: the institution was still geared more toward control than community engagement.

Early Burdens of National Service

Despite institutional inertia, the expectations placed on the police at independence were immense. They were tasked with maintaining peace in a newly federated nation. Meanwhile the system was already wracked by ethnic tension, political rivalry, and weak infrastructure.

¹⁰ Etannibi E. O.Alemika, *History, Context and Crises*, p.2.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 3.

¹² Tekena N. Tamuno, *The Police in Modern Nigeria, 1861–1965: Origins, Development and Role*. (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970.) ., pp. 4, 64

¹³ Human Rights Watch. *"Everyone's in on the Game": Corruption and Human Rights Abuses by the Nigeria Police Force*. (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2010.). p. 14

¹⁴ Ibid, pp 14-16

¹⁵ K. Rotimi, *The Police in a Federal State: The Nigerian Experience*. Ibadan: College Press and Publishers, 2001. P. 72

Without adequate preparation or resources, the police were thrust into crises ranging from electoral violence to regional uprisings. The situation deteriorated rapidly in the mid-1960s. Political turmoil led to widespread disorder and, eventually, military coups. The First Republic collapsed, and the police were caught in the crossfire of partisan politics and authoritarian repression.¹⁶ Femi Odekunle captures the impossible position of the force in these years. Police officers found themselves torn between conflicting loyalties to the law; to political patrons; and to their own survival. Without adequate training, logistical support, or public legitimacy, they were asked to safeguard a volatile polity. Their failures were inevitable, yet they bore the blame manly.¹⁷ As coups gave way to the Nigerian civil war between (1967–1970), the role of the police expanded beyond envisaged constitutional responsibilities. They were involved in managing crises at war zones and counter-insurgencies, including refugee control. The Nigerian Civil War placed immense demands on a police force that was already struggling with morale, identity and its reputation. Officers were deployed with minimal logistics including protective gear, inadequate firearms, and little psychological support. A retired Police Mobile Force (PMF) officer recalled those years in haunting terms:

We were neither soldiers nor civilians. We were sent to guard relief centers in the East, man checkpoints in hostile towns, and suppress riots in the North. Sometimes we went without food for days. When we returned, there were no medals. Just silence. And more deployments.¹⁸

This narrative of self-effacing service continued through the 1970s and beyond. The early burden placed on the NPF became not merely administrative but also existential. The police were expected to redefine themselves while holding together a fracturing state. And it became the origin of the long, unbroken chain of sacrifice that this paper seeks to unearth. A sacrifice rendered invisible not because it was absent, but also because it was seldomly a scholarly narrative. This silent tradition was marked by risk, fatigue, and neglect. It became the operational culture of the Nigeria Police Force embellished in “loyalty and discipline”.

Professional Duties, Culture of Endurance and Silent Service

The burden of duty within the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) is not merely a function of law enforcement, it is a philosophical condition shaped by the paradox of expectation and neglect. From the early post-independence years through decades of civil unrest and authoritarian rule, the Nigerian policeman was expected to perform tasks imbued with constitutional legitimacy but executed in the shadows of inadequate logistical support, strained public legitimacy, and muted institutional recognition. This condition cultivated a culture of silent endurance. Here the existential risk of life was exchanged just for little more than subsistence, amidst suspicion. The daily duties of the police officers in Nigeria involved a multiplicity of risky engagements. They are utilized for patrols in crime-infested neighborhoods, riot control in politically volatile cities, conflict resolution in domestic disputes, and surveillance in insurgency-prone territories. Yet, these functions are

¹⁶ Solomon E Arase and Iheanyi P. O. Iwuofor (eds.), *Policing Nigeria in the 21st Century* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd 2007), p. 201.

¹⁷ Femi Odekunle, Overview of Policing in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects.” In Tekena N. Tamuno, Isaac Olawale Albert, Emanuel E Alemika, Kayode O Oguntuase, *Policing Nigeria: Past, Present and Future*, 130–150. Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1993, p. 136

¹⁸ Anonymous Inspector (Rtd.), oral history recorded 2000, retrieved from NPF unpublished source material at FHQ on 26th March 2025

historically being undertaken with meager remuneration, sparse logistical support, and limited career incentives. The physical and psychological toll of such responsibilities cannot be overstated.

Daily Operational Risks and Responsibilities

Policing in Nigeria entailed constant exposure to violence and uncertainty. Officers are regularly deployed to volatile areas, ill-equipped and poorly briefed. During internal crises, they are sent to confront armed militias, bandits, and mobs without commensurate preparation, briefing or protection. In the face of rising criminal sophistication, their tools (both material and procedural) often lagged behind. As noted in a personal testimony by a police commander who served during the oil boom years:

It was very common seeing officers killed in ambushes. While some were hacked in communal riots, others were shot in bank robberies. Most of them had no bulletproof vests, no communication gadgets. Sometime they carried obsolete rifles with limited ammunition. And yet, they kept showing up. Not because the system respected us, but because we had chosen the job with an oath of loyalty.¹⁹

Despite the constant exposure to danger, the institutional response to these sacrifices are often lethargic. Deaths in active service rarely culminated in official recognition or posthumous compensation. Widows and orphans are left to navigate bureaucracies too slow to respond and too indifferent to care.

Policing without Voice: Media, Morale, and Muteness

The silence surrounding police sacrifice is compounded by the voice that denied the police institution in national discourse. Rightly, the media is positively instrumental in exposing abuses. However, they historically presented the police in one-dimensional terms: as extortionists, brutes, or agents of political oppression. Rarely did the fourth estate highlight the humanity of the average constable, or the existential dilemmas faced in carrying out duties under impossible conditions. Alemika and Chukwuma have identified this asymmetry in representation: The image of the police in Nigeria is often constructed through the lens of misconduct and brutality. While these issues are real, they obscure the deeper institutional problems of neglect and underinvestment. The police officer is simultaneously expected to be a hero and scapegoat, protector and predator, without sufficient voice to articulate his predicament.²⁰ The result is police force whose morale is persistently undermined by public ridicule, administrative silence, and psychological fatigue. In the past Police officers were demotivated not only by poor wages or living conditions but also by the absence of affirmation in a nation that routinely questioned their purpose but rarely acknowledged their peril. Even if the police did not always command citizens' respect, their courage and sacrifices deserved appreciation.

Emotional Labour and Psychological Toll

The psychological strain of policing in Nigeria is seldom discussed in policy circles. Officers often bore the emotional weight of engaging daily with death, domestic violence, child abuse, violent robbery, and mob justice. Yet, the institution provides no structured

¹⁹ Sunday Effiong, interviewed November 20, 2024

²⁰ Etannibi E. O. Alemika, and Innocent C. Chukwuma. *Police-Community Violence in Nigeria*. (Lagos: Centre for Law Enforcement Education, 2000), p. 38

psychological support, trauma counselling, or mental health services. The stigma attached to expressing emotional vulnerability within a militarized police culture only compounds the crisis. In her seminal analysis of internal resistance to police reform, Alice Hills contends, “the command culture within the Nigerian Police discourages introspection and empathy. Officers are trained to suppress emotion, not process it. In such an environment, exposure to chronic violence produces not resilience but emotional detachment and moral disorientation.”²¹ This condition not only affects performance but erodes interpersonal conduct and community relations. Officers under psychological strain often become irritable, brutal, or indifferent. This response is then criminalized or condemned without reflection on the institutional stressors that produced them. Within the force, stories abound of officers who died from preventable stress-induced conditions, or who committed suicide after years of silent suffering. Yet, the institution had no mechanism for documenting such losses or integrating them into collective memory. The recurrent narrative reflects not only the cost of physical service but also the crushing weight of institutional silence. In such a context, sacrifice became not an act of valour but a ritual of disposability. And yet, amidst the despair, one thread remained a constant: namely, duty in silence. The sense of enduring commitment, whether misplaced or heroic, continued to animate many officers despite the odds. Their silence, while painful, became their voice.

Sacrifice without Reward: Conditions of Service and Institutional Neglect

While sacrifice is often regarded as noble, its nobility wanes in the absence of recognition, reward, and institutional dignity. In the case of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), service to the nation historically translated into a perpetual deficit of care. This was manifested in poor salaries, inadequate housing and dilapidated training infrastructure. It was further aggravated by the indifference to the risk and fatal deployments encouraged by bad leadership. From the post-independence era through the end of military rule in 1999, the police operated within a structure that demanded loyalty without offering protection, and service without verifiable promise backed with committed reward system.

Salaries, Welfare, and Housing

Remuneration in the Nigeria Police rarely reflected the risks and responsibilities associated with policing. Officers, particularly those in the lower cadres, earned minimum wages that fell below the national living standard. This therefore compelled many to seek alternative income through more problematic instances like extortion. The Udoji Public Service Review Commission of 1974 exposed this imbalance. It recommended a comprehensive salary adjustment for the civil service. Yet, implementation was piecemeal and often stalled by bureaucratic inertia and political resistance. As the Commission stated: “the remuneration of police personnel must reflect the danger and discipline inherent in their duties. A force that secures life and property cannot itself be left insecure by poverty and uncertainty.”²² In practice, these ideals were rarely realized. Police barracks remained overcrowded and squalid, with leaking roofs, shared toilets, and no running water. Officers’ children were raised in these environments, shaped early by deprivation. Officers lived in perpetual anxiety, not

²¹ Hills, Alice. “The Dialectic of Police Reform in Nigeria.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 46, no. 2 (2008): pp. 215–234.

²² *Federal Republic of Nigeria. Report of the Public Service Review Commission (Udoji Report)*. Lagos:Government Printer, 1974. p. 212.

only of death in the line of duty but of domestic collapse due to economic strain.²³ The systemic underinvestment in police welfare was not accidental. It reflected a political culture in which the police were viewed as expendables. They became a necessary instrument of statecraft, but were not viewed as the other citizens who deserved protection or comfort.

Training, Equipment, and Operational Limitations

Another dimension of institutional neglect lies in the realm of training and operational preparedness. Though successive regimes paid lip service to police reforms, training institutions remained underfunded and often neglected. Underqualified instructors were often deployed to the college on punitive expedition while the syllabi remained outdated. The Police College Ikeja and Staff College Jos, being flagship institutions struggled with crumbling infrastructure and obsolete teaching materials. According to Alemika and Chukwuma; "Training Institutions of the Nigeria Police are emblematic of broader institutional decay. Recruits are drilled more in parade than in procedure, and human rights modules are taught without passion or pedagogical coherence. The result is a constabulary more adept at command compliance than community engagement."²⁴ Operationally, the situation was not better. Officers were often deploy without required walkie-talkies, patrol vehicles, or functioning firearms. In many divisions, the only patrol van was frequently immobilized due to lack of fuel or mechanical failure. Divisional Police Officers (DPOs) who wished to achieve results must turn to 'beggars' in the name of community policing.²⁵ Cases were investigated without forensic support, and criminal databases were either non-existent or manually outdated. As one officer sarcastically noted in a post-deployment debrief:

We were asked to hunt armed robbers with batons. We ran after motorcycles on foot. We 'beg' to fuel and maintain the patrol cars. We wrote statements on torn or improvised files. Still, they said we were inefficient. Little mistake we are defaulted, queried and dismissed. But nobody asked how we survived.²⁶

This irony underscores a recurrent theme in Nigerian policing: high expectations and minimal support. The contrast between the duties assigned and the tools provided created a functional gap that no amount of patriotism could fill.

Case Studies of Fatal Deployments and Official Responses

The ultimate test of any institution's ethical foundation is its response to the death or incapacitation of its personnel. In this, the Nigeria Police Force failed to pass the test. The risk of the job entails that officers are frequently endangered and sometimes killed in the line of duty. This occurred particularly during political unrest, sectarian conflict, and anti-robbery operations. However, the institutional response is often typified by delay, silence, or bureaucratic entanglement or total neglect.

²³ Solomon E Arase and Iheanyi P. O. Iwuofor (eds.), *Policing Nigeria in the 21st Century* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd 2007), p. 79.

²⁴ Alemika, E. E. O. and Chukwuma, I. C. *Criminal Justice and Police Reform in Nigeria*. Lagos: CLEEN Foundation, 2004.p. 72

²⁵ "Beggings" could be considered to also be a form of extortion

²⁶ Oral Interview with Victor Lekan, on November 13, 2024. 60, Retired Superintendent of Police, widely trained; pass student of Police Staff College Jos, Police College Ikeja, holds MSc, LLB, BL. Interviewed by author

In the 1987 Kaduna riots, several police officers lost their lives trying to quell sectarian violence. Eyewitnesses and colleagues reported that the officers were deployed without riot gear and communication devices. When the situation escalated, they were overwhelmed, outnumbered, and killed. Their families received condolence letters, but no compensation followed for years.²⁷ The former Inspector-General of Police, M.D. Yusuf, lamented this systemic apathy in his submission to the 1994 Police Reform Panel: “We ask these men and women to die for the country, yet we are unwilling to remember them. This is not just a policy gap. It is a moral failure.”²⁸ This constituted the tragic irony of policing in Nigeria where: a police officer is hailed as a hero only in death, and even then, selectively. When alive, he was mocked, mistrusted, or ignored; when dead, he was mourned with bureaucratic slowness. And yet, the service continued. While public trust wavered, the sacrifices of the Nigerian police remained constantly worthy of national respect.

Public Perception and Misunderstanding of the Police Role

The relationship between the Nigeria Police Force and the public it serves had long been strained by suspicion, mutual disappointment, and deeply entrenched stereotypes. Public perception, shaped by daily encounters, media representations, and historical narratives, often painted the police as predatory, corrupt, and untrustworthy. While these criticisms are not without merit, they failed to capture the complex sociological and institutional dynamics that underlaid policing in Nigeria. The result is a paradox. The very institution responsible for public safety is widely feared, even loathed; yet it were their members that were the first to be called upon in moments of crisis.

Civil Society, Media Narratives, and Public Trust

From the 1960s onward, civil society organizations and the Nigerian press played an important role in scrutinizing police conduct. The media, particularly in urban centers, consistently reported on incidents of police brutality, extortion, and misconduct. This watchdog function was essential for democratic accountability, yet it also helped entrench a singular narrative of police as abusers, obscuring the less visible daily sacrifices of thousands of officers working in hazardous and thankless conditions. As noted by Chukwuma and Alemika:

The media's fixation on police misconduct, while crucial for reform, has often been selective and sensational. Rarely are acts of bravery, restraint, or sacrifice reported with equal vigor. This imbalance has contributed to a skewed public consciousness in which the policeman is always suspect, never hero.²⁹

While public distrust is rooted in real grievances, including extrajudicial killings and harassment³⁰ at checkpoints, it is rarely nuanced. The psychological toll this reputation

²⁷ Sunday Effiong, Oral Interview in 2024

²⁸ Yusuf, M. D. *Report of the Presidential Committee on the Reform of the Nigeria Police Force*. (Lagos: Federal Government Printer, 1994.), p. 19

²⁹ Etannabi E. Alemika, and Innocent Chukwuma, *Police Accountability in Nigeria: Proceedings of a Seminar on Civilian Oversight and Accountability of Police in Nigeria*. (Lagos: CLEEN Foundation, 1999), p. 66.

³⁰ Alemika, Etannibi E. O. *History, Context and Crises of the Police in Nigeria*. (Jos, University of Jos Press, 1993), p. 16.

Alemika, Etannibi E. O., and Innocent C. Chukwuma. *Police-Community Violence in Nigeria* , p. 72

imposed on officers is severe. Many served in communities where they were never greeted, never thanked, and sometimes openly despised. This alienation fueled resentment within the ranks and deepened the gulf between law enforcement and society. This vivid reality contradicts the romanticized motto "Police is your friend," transforming it into an object of ridicule in public discourse.³¹ Yet, beneath the slogan lies a profound truth: friendship in this context is not about affection but about shared responsibility, mutual protection, and reciprocal recognition. The cognitive dissonance at the heart of public-police relations in Nigeria is salient: the same police officer who arrests armed robbers and rescues kidnapped victims is also the one who demanded bribes at checkpoints. This contradiction arose not from individual pathology alone but equally from structural and systemic dysfunction. This is transient through poor training, inadequate welfare, lack of institutional accountability, and pervasive corruption across society.

The Nigerian police are both resented and relied upon. They are condemned as the agents of repression and simultaneously summoned as the guardians of order. This paradox reflected the unresolved contradictions in Nigeria's state-society relations, where law enforcement is simultaneously feared and needed.³² This duality bred what sociologists call "moral ambiguity fatigue".³³ It refers to situations where right and wrong are unclear, or where actions have both good and bad consequences. In such cases, decisions are morally complex, blurry, or easily compromised. Fatigue in this context refers to the mental and emotional exhaustion that comes from constantly having to navigate, justify, or endure morally ambiguous situations. Here, the public becomes resigned to corruption, and officers internalize public hatred as part of their job. In such an environment, professional motivation gives way to survival instincts, and mutual distrust becomes normalized. The rise of vigilante groups, such as the "Bakassi Boys" in the late 1990s, further underscored the distrust. Many communities turned to non-state actors for protection, not because they preferred violence, but because they felt abandoned or victimized by the state's own law enforcement architecture. Such developments are not only dangerous for the rule of law but also corrosive to the moral authority of the police.

Policing the Ungrateful: Societal Dissonance and discordance?

To serve a public that does not recognize one's humanity is one of the most profound forms of alienation. Nigerian police officers frequently recounted situations where their interventions saved lives or property, yet no gratitude. What followed was only criticism, cynicism or complaint. This persistent lack of appreciation depleted morale, encouraged withdrawal, and fostered institutional culture of indifference. While it was necessary to hold the police accountable, there was the greater need to also recognize their humanity. The police are citizens too. They have families and feelings just like every other men and women who bleed, grieve, and fear. To reform the police, the public's perception of the police also requires reformation. Indeed, the culture of ingratitude extended beyond the public. Government officials frequently exploited the police for personal or political gain, only to abandon them when public backlash ensues. During election cycles, officers were deployed to flashpoints without insurance, proper feeding, or protective equipment. When violence

³¹ Alemika, Etannibi E. O. *History, Context and Crises of the Police in Nigeria*. Jos, Nigeria: p.16

³² Rotimi, *The Police in a Federal State*, 2001, p. 119

³³ Cris Parker, *Moral Fatigue and Decision Making*, The Ethics Center Publication, 24th April, 2020
https://ethics.org.au/moral-fatigue-and-decision-making/?utm_source=chatgpt.com, retrieved on 2nd July 2025

erupted, their deaths go unreported. When they acted with force, they were accused without investigation. No one speaks for them.

This institutional scapegoating left many officers with a deep sense of betrayal. A divisional police officer posted to Jos during the early 1990s religious crises confessed; “they sent us to the scene without briefing and no backup. We were outnumbered, outgunned, and no friend. When it ended, our Commissioner shook hands with the governor. We buried three men. Nobody came to the funeral.”³⁴ These testimonies illustrate the profound disconnect between public expectation and institutional capacity. To demand professionalism from the police without offering public respect or systemic reform is to demand sacrifice without compensation, loyalty without love. The trajectory of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) between 1960 and 2000 cannot be understood without details of the volatile interference between authoritarianism and democracy. During this period, the country oscillated between brief democratic interludes and prolonged military dictatorships. Each regime brought with it shifting burdens and altered expectations for the police. Under civilian governments, the police were framed as guardians of constitutional order. Under military rule, they were deployed as instruments of repression. Yet, across both systems, the constant denominator was that their sacrifice was exploited but never honored. Military regimes redefined the role of the police from law enforcement to regime preservation. Police officers were often co-opted to enforce draconian decrees. This militarized role engaged them to suppress dissent, detain political opponents, and manage the dynamics of “order” while the real administrative power remained in military hands. This created a hybrid security arrangement in which the police were both subordinate to and scapegoated by the military.³⁵ As Alice Hills states:

Under military rule, the police were neither autonomous nor protected. They were required to implement decisions they did not make, in ways that exposed them to public hatred while shielding the military from direct culpability. Their loyalty was demanded, but their sacrifice was disavowed.³⁶

This above assertion led to recurrent operational confusion and institutional demoralization. Police morale plummeted as their professional identity was subsumed under military authority. In field operations, they were expected to follow orders from military officers, usually their junior in ranks, who often viewed them with disdain and treated them as lesser operatives. The infamous Decree No. 2 of 1984, which permitted detention without trial, exemplified this dynamic. The police were to enforce it through arrests, surveillance, and custodial detentions. But, when public outrage ensued, it was the police who bore the blame while the military architects of the decree went absolved. A retired Chief Superintendent of Police, Lekan, who served under General Buhari’s regime recounted thus:

Police were the front line. When students marched, they sent the police. When journalists wrote, they asked us to arrest them. How can they speak for us when we were always stopping them? When unions protested for their rights, we were ordered to disperse them. We became perceived as

³⁴ Oral interview with Victor Kalejeiyi, CSP, MSc. Worked in various capacities including as Unit Commander, DPO, Widely trained Officer, Former trainer at Staff College Jos. Interviewed by author, November 9, 2024.

³⁵ Alemika, Etannibi E. O., and Innocent C. Chukwuma. *Police-Community Violence in Nigeria*. p. 66

³⁶ Hills, *The Dialectic of Police Reform in Nigeria*, 2008, p. 122.

their enemies. But when the nation cursed, it cursed the police, not the men who gave the orders.³⁷

The paradox here is glaring. In serving the state, the police undermined their own legitimacy. In obeying the regime, they were alienated from the public. And when death or injury occurred, they were left to mourn alone.

Civilian Governance and Reform Rhetoric

In contrast, the brief civilian administrations of the First (1960–1966) and Second Republics (1979–1983) projected a more humane vision of policing. There was rhetorical emphasis on constitutionalism, civil liberties, and professionalism. However, the translation of these ideals into policy was marred by political manipulation and weak oversight structures. Political elites often used the police to harass rivals, rig elections, or suppress protests. State governors lacked operational control over Commissioners of Police, though they used informal channels to influence postings and deployments. The result was a politicized force caught between loyalty to the federal command architecture and subservient to state actors. As Rotimi observed: In Nigeria's pseudo-federal arrangement, the police were both centralized and localized, autonomous in law but vulnerable in practice. Civilian politicians manipulated the police with impunity while denying them the resources, dignity, or stability needed for professional development.³⁸ The police were expected to uphold democratic norms in an environment where such norms were fragile or almost non-existent. Officers tasked with electoral security were often deployed without training or support. They were made pawns in violent contests which they could neither control nor refuse. A common example was the experience of officers during the 1983 elections, which were perceived widely marred by violence and rigging. Lekan maintains that:

They were often told to maintain order without specific plan. When politicians invade polling booth with thugs snatching ballot boxes, they became helpless. When riots broke out in reaction to the politician's thuggery, they were blamed for doing nothing. But nobody cared to ask what their specific roles were. And they had no one to speak in their defense while they remained silent in compliance with force directives.³⁹

This structural contradiction deepened the moral crisis within the police and compounded public distrust. They demanded lawful neutrality from a force under unlawful means and control.

The Police as Victims of State Contradiction

What emerged from both military and civilian regimes was a pattern of instrumentalization. The police were used, but never empowered; exposed, but never shielded.⁴⁰ They became highly and visibly subservient to the rich and powerful politicians.⁴¹ Their role was critical, yet their institutional dignity was systematically eroded. As observed by Alemika:

³⁷ Oral interview with Victor Lekan on November 13th 2024.

³⁸ K. Rotimi, *The Police in a Federal State*, 2001, p. 95

³⁹ Oral interview with Victor Lekan by researcher on November 13, 2024

⁴⁰ Etannibi E. O Alemika, *History, Context and Crises of the Police in Nigeria*. Jos, Nigeria p1

⁴¹ The role of the police, compliance with the rule of law. *Journal of Social Science and Public Policy* Volume 3, March 2011

Police are the most visible governmental agents through which the character of a government and political system may be assessed. This is so because the police are the guardian or vanguard of the status quo. To a large extent, the actions and behaviours of the police reflect the political and economic character of society as well as what those in power are willing or able to tolerate or condone.⁴²

The M.D. Yusuf Panel on Police Reform convened under General Abacha in 1994 tried to articulate this contradiction. Although the panel operated under an authoritarian regime, it nevertheless laid bare the internal crisis within the force. The Nigeria Police Force had become a casualty of political opportunism and administrative neglect. It was asked to perform miracles with no tools, to show restraint with no training, and to defend law in a state that often subverted it. This was not reformable by rhetoric alone. It required moral clarity and institutional courage.⁴³ Tragically, this moral clarity was absent in both the military and civilian government. The price was paid by rank-and-file officers who served silently, and often fatally through riots, coups, curfews, and regime transitions. This silence was ritualized, institutionalized, and recurrent. It became the enduring language of police sacrifice in Nigeria. The police may not always be revered, but their unseen battles for public safety merited enduring gratitude.⁴⁴

The Institutional Identity of Sacrifice: Memory, Honour, and the Forgotten

Institutions endure (whether military, religious, or civic) and survive not only by policy or structure but by memory. Memory confers meaning. It sacralizes and binds generations through a shared sense of purpose. For the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), however, the institutional memory of sacrifice is frail, fragmented, and often silenced. Unlike militaries that commemorate fallen soldiers with parades, medals, and monuments, the NPF had no standardized ritual of remembrance for its dead. No walls of honour, no public roll calls, no institutional mourning. Only the silent departure of another officer whose sacrifice is quickly buried.

The Culture of Silence within the Force

One of the most pervasive yet least discussed features of Nigerian policing is its internal culture of silence. This silence remains:

- i. Operational: this is reflected in the disciplined suppression of dissent. Police do not go on strike. They are not permitted to address the press. They are simply required to be 'loyal'.⁴⁵
- ii. Existential: whereby the institution refuses to speak openly about the human cost of service. Within barracks and offices, death and injury are absorbed as routine incident, and they may not be revered.⁴⁶

Innocent Chukwuma observe this institutionalized amnesia. When a police officer dies in the line of duty in Nigeria, there is often no institutional follow-up, no psychological support

⁴² Etannibi E. O. Alemika, *History, Context and Crises of the Police in Nigeria*. p1

⁴³ Report of the Presidential Committee on the Reform of the Nigeria Police Force, 1994, p. 47

⁴⁴ Oral interview with Regina c Udoette PSC, CP, at her Office Commissioner of Police, Commandant Police College Oji River, Enugu, May, 14 2025

⁴⁵ Oral interview with Regina c Udoette PSC, CP, at her Office Commissioner of Police, Commandant Police College Oji River, Enugu, May, 14 2025

⁴⁶ Oral interview with Sunday Effiong, 2024

for colleagues, and no public commemoration. The event disappears into paperwork. This culture of erasure delegitimizes sacrifice and weakens professional identity.⁴⁷ Younger officers learn early to suppress grief beginning from the college. Senior officers are trained in the ethos of militarized obedience.⁴⁸ They often view emotional expression as weakness. The cumulative effect is a police culture where bravery is muted, loyalty is unrewarded, and death is unceremoniously replaced by a transfer order. Etido Udoh has it that:

When my husband died in active service, they said there was no option than to bring his replacement the following day. I was immediately informed to pack from his office and the quarters for the new officer to resume duty. There was no minute of silence, no letter to his wife and children. Even preparing for his burial was a challenge. No fund to begin. And when it was time to process his death benefit, I saw hell. It took me years before I could figure out the way forward.⁴⁹

Such experiences produce not just trauma but a loss of professional pride. Without rituals of honour, officers feel interchangeable. And when a profession ceases to honour its dead, it begins to forget its soul.

Impact of Silence in Police Professionalism

The expectation of silence stifled internal dissent, preventing officers from addressing systemic issues like poor welfare. Low morale, with salaries as low as ₦500/month in the 1980s, led to unprofessional behaviour, including bribery and desertion.⁵⁰ Equally, under military rule (1966–1979, 1983–1999), "in silence" meant compliance with authoritarian directives. Officers were pressured to remain silent about political abuses, such as election rigging or suppression of dissent, undermining ethical conduct. For instance, the NPF's role in silencing activists during the 1990s Abacha regime damaged its professional reputation.⁵¹ "In silence" often translated into a lack of transparency and culture of secrecy. Incidents of police misconduct, such as extrajudicial killings (e.g., the 1990s Apo Six case), were rarely addressed publicly, eroding accountability. This secrecy contradicted professional standards, as it shielded corrupt officers and fueled public distrust.⁵² Silence in the face of criticism, such as media exposés of brutality, reinforced the NPF's repressive image of the force. By the 1990s, this lack of engagement deepened the gap between police and communities, contradicting the professional goal of public trust.⁵³ The ideals of "in service" and "in silence" sometimes conflicted, thus creating tensions between the principles. Serving the public required openness and engagement, while silence often meant withholding information or avoiding accountability. This tension is evident in the NPF's response to human rights abuses, where silence protected officers but undermined service credibility.

⁴⁷ Innocent Chukwuma, "Donor Support and Police Reform in Nigeria." In *Policing a New Democracy: A Review of Police Reform Initiatives in Nigeria*, edited by Etannibi E.O. Alemika and Innocent Chukwuma. Lagos: Frankad Publishers, 1998. P. 44

⁴⁸ Oral interview with Sunday Effiong, 2024

⁴⁹ Oral interview with Regina Etido Udoh, 49, widow of a colleague who died in active service, interviewed by the researcher through phone on October 21, 2024

⁵⁰ Tekena N. Tamuno, *The Police in Modern Nigeria*, p. 198.

⁵¹ Ibid, p.232.

⁵² Ibid, p. 244.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 236.

Tekena Tamuno indirectly notes that the NPF's service mandate was undermined by secretive handling of misconduct, and that the police's commitment to public service was questioned when errors were concealed"⁵⁴ Both principles, when misapplied, contributed to public disillusionment. By 1999, surveys indicated that over 70% of Nigerians distrusted the NPF, reflecting a failure to professionalize despite reform efforts. Tamuno noted growing public disillusionment and distrust due to corruption and brutality, writing, "the police's failure to inspire confidence weakened its legitimacy"⁵⁵ To reimagine professionalism in the Nigeria Police Force is to reimagine dignity. Professionalism is not a technical term; it is a moral vision which accentuates a belief that those who serve the public must be equipped, protected, and honoured. This means adequate salaries, functional housing, modern equipment, and transparent promotion systems. But it also means cultural change within the police and in society at large. As Hills argued, professionalism cannot survive in a climate of disdain. Professional identity requires esteem, not just from within, but from outside. A police force treated as a national embarrassment will behave accordingly. A police force honoured as a pillar of peace will aspire to that image.⁵⁶ Professionalism begins with how the state sees its officers. If officers are treated as expendable, they will not internalize the ethical values necessary for modern policing. But if they are seen as agents of national care and community dignity, they will be empowered to reflect those values in action.⁵⁷

Conclusion

The Nigerian police officer, from independence in 1960 through the close of the twentieth century, laboured in a space defined by contradiction—visible yet invisible, empowered yet unprotected, public yet unhonoured. The story of the Nigeria Police Force during this period was not simply a history of institutional failure; it was also a philosophical inquiry into the cost of civic service without moral reciprocity. The silence that has enveloped their sacrifice was not accidental, it was structural, systemic, and sanctioned by a nation that grew comfortable expecting everything from its police and offering them nothing in return. There is a heavy moral cost to institutional silence. Every unrecognized sacrifice, every unhonoured death, and every dismissed act of duty corroded the social contract between the state and its peacekeepers. As has been evidenced throughout this paper, police officers had died protecting communities that refused to acknowledge their humanity, served regimes that discarded them, and endured public ridicule while enforcing the very laws that hold the republic together. Alemika and Chukwuma's conclusion is unequivocal: The legitimacy of the police is not just a function of performance; it is a moral pact. That pact is broken when the state demands sacrifice without care, and society demands security without gratitude. Silence in the face of sacrifice is not neutrality, it is betrayal.⁵⁸

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⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 244.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 237.

⁵⁶ Hills, *Policing Africa*, 2000, p. 132

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