
THE NIGERIA POLICE FORCE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT: THE TROUBLED TRINITY OF CLASS, ETHNICITY, AND RELIGION

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Abstract

The Nigeria Police Force functions within a socio-political framework significantly influenced by class hierarchies, ethnic identities, and religious affiliations, collectively referred to as the “troubled trinity”. These structural components profoundly affect policing methodologies, community trust, and the efficacy of law enforcement activities. This research examines the ways in which these socio-political factors shape the operations of the Nigeria Police Force, utilizing the primordial and class theories articulated by Shils (1951) and McKay (1982) as analytical frameworks. The investigation employs a qualitative exploratory methodology, incorporating in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to gather intricate viewpoints from both law enforcement officials and community members within the Ife Police Area Command and adjacent areas in Osun State, Nigeria. The results indicate that class inequalities engender selective enforcement of the law, whereby economic and political elites are afforded preferential treatment, while marginalized populations endure systemic oppression. Furthermore, ethnic and religious prejudices infiltrate recruitment, deployment, and operational decision-making processes, further diminishing public trust in law enforcement agencies. The research emphasizes the urgent necessity for institutional reforms that prioritize professionalism, merit-based recruitment, and equitable representation across diverse ethnic and religious groups. Addressing these underlying structural challenges is crucial for the development of an impartial and community-oriented policing paradigm in Nigeria.

Key words: Nigeria Police Force, law enforcement, class stratifications, ethnic identities, religious affiliations, public trust.

Introduction

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) occupies a crucial position in the realm of law enforcement, particularly within a socio-political framework profoundly influenced by class stratifications, ethnic affiliations, and religious identities elements collectively referred to in this study as the “troubled trinity”. These factors not only affect the efficacy of policing but also mold public perceptions regarding law enforcement. Historically, the NPF, which has its foundations in colonial control mechanisms, has encountered significant challenges in evolving into a community-centric service, thereby perpetuating a profound distrust between the police and the citizenry (Johnson, 2013). This distrust is further intensified by systemic inequities, ethnic prejudices, and religious frictions that inhibit the force’s objectivity and operational effectiveness.

Notwithstanding constitutional mandates that advocate for professionalism, ethical conduct, and community engagement, the NPF grapples with structural impediments that undermine its operational capacity (Adegboyega, 2021). Class disparities frequently engender preferential treatment for affluent individuals, consequently placing marginalized communities at a

disadvantage in their pursuit of justice (Olaniyan & Adebayo, 2023). Furthermore, ethnic loyalties within the police force serve to further erode impartiality, culminating in regionally biased law enforcement practices (Iwara & Abiodun, 2022). Moreover, the presence of religious pluralism constitutes a substantial impediment to the dynamics of police-community interactions, necessitating that law enforcement officials meticulously navigate the interplay between their occupational duties and their individual faith convictions (Edebor, 2021). Likewise, the entrenchment of ethnic loyalties and the practice of nepotism have intensified the existing state of insecurity that plagues the Nigerian polity (Ojiezele & Ojo, 2024).

Negative public perceptions of the NPF endure, characterized by profound distrust, apathy, and skepticism (Okogie, 2020; Ehindero, 1998). These sentiments are further reinforced by class-based inequalities, ethnic favoritism, and religious influences that dictate police operations (Iheriohanma et al., 2020). Nepotistic recruitment practices that emphasize affiliations over qualifications have additionally undermined the professionalism of the force, thereby eroding public confidence (Amundsen, 1977; Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management, 2010). Moreover, the centralization of police authority has markedly impeded the rapid deployment of officers, rendering law enforcement efforts ineffective, especially in a nation as expansive and diverse as Nigeria (Egunjobi, 2016).

Ethnic chauvinism prevalent within Nigerian society complicates policing further, adversely affecting the equitable application of the law across various regions. In light of this context, this study rigorously examines the interplay of class, ethnicity, and religion in shaping law enforcement practices in Nigeria, providing empirical insights into their effects on policing efficacy and public trust. The escalating incidence of criminal activities and the enduring state of insecurity in Nigeria, combined with the ineffectiveness of the NPF in upholding law and order, has emerged as an urgent issue. While Durkheim (1950) asserted that crime constitutes an unavoidable social phenomenon, the magnitude of criminality in Nigeria has surged to distressing proportions. The widespread public discontent regarding police effectiveness is significantly attributed to corruption, nepotism, and an excessively centralized structure that obstructs prompt law enforcement responses (Ojo, 2022). Furthermore, ethnic and religious biases permeating the NPF compromise impartial policing, thereby exacerbating public distrust (Egunjobi, 2019).

This study investigates how class, ethnicity, and religion collectively influence the operational mechanisms of the NPF. It critically analyzes their ramifications on policing efficacy, public trust, and the overarching quest for justice in Nigeria, thereby providing insights into the entrenched impediments to equitable law enforcement. The study is structured into eight sections with the introduction as the first. The second section gives the historical development and legal framework of the Nigeria Police Force. The third section examines the interplay between ethnicity and law enforcement in Nigeria while the fourth looks at the intersections between religion and law enforcement in the country. The fifth section provides the theoretical framework of the study, and the sixth section is devoted to the methodology employed for the research. The seventh section presents the findings of the study and their discussions while the eighth concludes and makes recommendations tailored to free the Nigeria Police Force from the entanglements of class, ethnicity and religion in order to become more effective in law enforcement.

Literature Review

Historical Development and Legal Framework of the Nigeria Police Force

Before colonial rule in the various kingdoms, empires and tribes making up modern Nigeria, traditional law enforcement mechanisms, such as chieftaincy systems and age-grade associations, were tasked with maintaining law and societal order. However, the advent of colonialism brought about the establishment of the NPF as the formal policing institution for the country (Okedele & Adenuga, 2020a).

To safeguard its interests in the country and suppress local oppositions, the British colonial government formed a consular guard in Lagos in 1861, marking the advent of formal policing in Nigeria. This consular guard was later renamed the Hausa Constabulary in 1879, exemplify. In 1888, the Royal Niger Company Constabulary was established with its administrative base in Lokoja. In 1894, the Niger Coast Constabulary was established in Calabar under the auspices of the Niger Coast Protectorate. These Constabularies were established to safeguard commercial routes and implement the decisions of the British colonial government.

The amalgamation of Northern Protectorate and Southern Protectorate to form the Nigerian state in 1914 led to a reorganization of various administrative institutions to reflect the new political structure. Despite the amalgam of administration between the two Protectorates, Northern and Southern Nigeria Police Forces continued to operate as distinct entities until April 1, 1930, when they were unified to form the Nigeria Police Force, with its administrative headquarters located in Lagos.

At independence in 1960, the NPF was retained as a federal institution tasked with the overarching responsibility of maintaining law and order across the country. The 1960 independence constitution granted the three regional authorities (the Northern, Western and Eastern regions) the latitude to establish local police forces, however, the fear that local police forces can be misused to achieve sectional and narrow political interests led to the NPF being placed on the Exclusive Legislate list with the Federal Government as the only level of government constitutionally empowered to take decisions on policing issues. Section 214(1) of the 1999 Constitution abolished local police forces, thereby designating the NPF as the exclusive policing authority within Nigeria.

The Interplay of Class, Ethnicity, and Religion in Law Enforcement: An Analytical Discourse

The concept of class is a global phenomenon and it is fundamentally a function of socio-economic factors including income, occupation, status and political connections. The notion of class indicates that the society is stratified based on perceived socio-economic status and it accords with the Marxian perspective that the history of every society is the history of the struggle between the classes in the society. Societies, including Nigeria, are systematically structured according to class hierarchies, predominantly shaped by production modalities inherent in capitalist systems. Marx (1950) argued that societies are intrinsically subject to class conflicts, with social consciousness acting as a driving force in the evolution of class structures. A social class comprises individuals who share a common status, rank, and lifestyle, often delineated by wealth, education, occupation, income, and social networks (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008).

Class structures profoundly influence law enforcement practices. According to Weber (2021), class stratifications affect access to justice, with affluent individuals enjoying privileges that are unavailable to lower-income groups. In Nigeria, the elite's influence on police operations is evident in selective law enforcement, wherein wealthy individuals evade accountability while marginalized communities endure excessive policing (Akinyemi, 2022). Marxist analyses elucidate how law enforcement institutions perpetuate class-based disparities by catering to the interests of the ruling class (Gramsci, 2019). The historical role of the NPF in suppressing dissent, from colonial resistance movements to modern protests, highlights its alignment with elite interests (Odinkalu, 2021). This inquiry investigates how class dynamics persistently shape policing outcomes in Nigeria.

Class distinctions profoundly impact the dynamics of law enforcement, particularly within the Nigerian milieu. The ruling class, which maintains dominion over economic reproduction, political authority, and cultural institutions, dictates the operational modalities of law enforcement. This phenomenon was historically evident during the colonial era when the NPF predominantly served colonial interests rather than the public good (Odikalu, 2004). Contemporary policing in Nigeria continues to reflect class disparities, with law enforcement apparatus disproportionately favoring the elite, thereby exacerbating socio-economic inequalities.

Ethnicity and Law Enforcement in Nigeria

Ethnicity signifies collective belonging shaped by shared cultural traditions (Eriksen, 2010). Cultural markers such as language, religion, ancestry, and customs play a pivotal role in the formation of ethnic identity, influencing social integration and intergroup relations (Adenuga, 2022a; Adenuga et al., 2023). In Nigeria, ethnicity is a significant factor shaping socio-political and institutional frameworks, carrying substantial implications for governance and public administration (Adenuga, 2022a; Mudasiru, 2015). While it brings about communal solidarity, ethnicity is a major causal factor of intergroup conflicts in multi-ethnic states (Adenuga et al., 2023; Adenuga, 2020b).

Law enforcement in Nigeria is significantly influenced by ethnic affiliations, which affect recruitment, deployment, and policing methodologies. Empirical research indicates that ethnic biases within the NPF manifest through preferential treatment of officers and communities based on shared ethnic identity, resulting in regional disparities in law enforcement (Ikelegbe, 2023; Edebor, 2021). Furthermore, ethnic profiling and discrimination exacerbate strained police-community relations and foster public mistrust (Iwara & Abiodun, 2022).

Institutionalized ethnic favoritism within law enforcement undermines bureaucratic efficiency and the equitable distribution of security resources (Amaeshi, 2017). The persistence of ethnic allegiances within the NPF influences perceptions of police legitimacy, often reinforcing the dichotomy of “us versus them” that Huntington (as cited in Haralambos & Holborn, 2008) associates with the formation of ethnic identity (Adenuga, 2022a).

Religion and Law Enforcement in Nigeria.

Religion is a belief in a or some supernatural entities worthy of adoration veneration and who profoundly influence moral conducts (Adenuga et al., 2023; Okedele & Adenuga, 2020b). Religious belief systems regulate human conduct, thereby establishing a basis for social order and unity. However, religion has been subject to critique as an ideological mechanism that perpetuates class stratifications and legitimizes social disparities (Marx, as cited in Bottomore & Rubel, 1963). In the context of Nigeria, religion assumes a pivotal role in governance, notwithstanding constitutional provisions that advocate for secularism. Religious affiliations substantially dictate political appointments and exert considerable influence over public policy determinations (Obiefuna, 2018; Okedele & Adenuga, 2020b, Umeanolue, 2020).

The presence of religious diversity introduces further complexities within the realm of policing in Nigeria. The religious convictions of officers may affect their discretionary powers, subsequently influencing their interactions with suspects and communities (Ajayi, 2022). In certain circumstances, religious affiliations can affect recruitment processes, promotions, and assignments within the NPF (Olaniyan & Adebayo, 2023). Religious tensions may on occasion escalate into conflicts, necessitating law enforcement intervention that is frequently perceived as biased (Egunjobi, 2019).

The relationship between religion and law enforcement is markedly pronounced in Nigeria’s multi-religious context, wherein law enforcement agencies, including the NPF, operate amidst a spectrum of diverse religious environments. Religious considerations significantly influence policing strategies, with officers frequently modifying enforcement tactics to resonate with prevailing religious sentiments. Oladeji (2022) observes that the dominant religions—Islam in the northern region and Christianity in the southern region—considerably shape law enforcement methodologies. While religious institutions contribute to moral regulation, their intersection with law enforcement raises critical issues concerning impartiality and sectarian bias. As a result, the entanglement of religion with law enforcement complicates endeavors to uphold neutrality and adhere to the principles of justice.

The intersection of class, ethnicity, and religion profoundly shapes law enforcement dynamics in Nigeria. Class structures delineate avenues for access to power and influence policing

methodologies, while religious affiliations inform institutional biases and operational practices. The NPF, historically rooted in colonial class dynamics, continues to mirror socio-economic inequalities, ethnic prejudices, and religious influences in its enforcement of law and order. Addressing these intricate challenges necessitates institutional reforms aimed at promoting impartiality, enhancing accountability, and fostering inclusivity within enforcement practices. A comprehensive strategy that mitigates the impacts of class, ethnicity, and religion on policing will be essential in bolstering public trust and ensuring effective law enforcement in Nigeria.

Theoretical background

This investigation is grounded in two interconnected theoretical paradigms: primordial theory and class theory. Primordial theory, as articulated by Shils (1951) and McKay (1982), posits that individuals cultivate profound attachments to their places of origin, religious convictions, and kinship networks. These affiliations engender robust loyalties and group solidarity, frequently shaping social interactions by reinforcing distinctions between “insiders” and “outsiders”. In Nigeria, ethnic and religious identities often supersede national unity, significantly influencing governance and law enforcement. Within the NPF, these affiliations compromise meritocratic ideals, thereby impacting recruitment, training, and operational determinations. This dynamic engenders an “us versus them” mentality, which ultimately undermines the efficacy of crime prevention initiatives.

Class theory, firmly anchored in Karl Marx’s (1867) critique of authority and disparity, elucidates the systemic impediments inherent within the Nigeria Police Force (NPF). Marx posited that class stratifications arise when societies exceed mere subsistence production, thereby allowing the dominant elite to fortify their economic and political supremacy. The bourgeoisie, possessing control over wealth and resources, significantly influence institutional frameworks including law enforcement so as to align them with their vested interests. Consequently, the NPF frequently operates as a mechanism of the ruling class, selectively applying legal statutes while neglecting the protection of marginalized communities. Offenses committed by political elites often evade accountability, thereby exacerbating public skepticism towards law enforcement and augmenting prevailing insecurity.

Political meddling further compromises the efficacy of policing. Ikenyei (2017) observes that governmental authorities routinely hinder police operations, leveraging informal channels to facilitate the release of suspects. In a similar vein, Ibrahim (2003) and Kirk-Greene (1975) underscore the manner in which economic power and resource control inform governance, thereby perpetuating systemic disparities. These elements, in conjunction with ethnic and socio-economic affiliations, persistently shape the functionalities of pivotal institutions, encompassing the police, judiciary, and military. As a result, the NPF encounters significant challenges in operating as an unbiased security apparatus, thereby perpetuating cycles of injustice and insecurity.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research framework, employing in-depth interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to gather rich, contextually nuanced data. The exploratory paradigm is particularly adept at elucidating the intricate socio-political interactions between law enforcement and local communities, facilitating a thorough exploration of perceptions, interactions, and institutional reactions. Given the delicate nature surrounding policing and community relations in Nigeria, qualitative methodologies were adjudged suitable for encapsulating the lived experiences and nuanced viewpoints of both police personnel and community constituents.

Study Area and Rationale for Selection

The research was conducted within the Ife Police Area Command and its adjacent communities, which include the Modakeke “B” Division, Agun “C” Division, and “A” Division Moore.

These divisions are situated within the Ife North, Ife South, and Ife East Local Government Areas, along with the Ife North East Council Development Authority (LCDA) in Modakeke, Osun State. This specific geographical focus was selected due to the region's historical incidence of crime, youth agitation, and communal discord. The study sought to investigate how these social tensions influence policing methodologies and the trust of communities in law enforcement agencies. Sampling Strategy and Participants. A purposive sampling approach was employed to guarantee that the participants were directly pertinent to the study's aims. The selection process comprised two principal components:

Police Personnel: Three police divisional headquarters, including the Area Command office, were intentionally selected from a total of seven divisions under the Ife Area Command of the Nigeria Police Force. This selection was guided by the necessity to examine diverse operational contexts within the region. The sample encompassed police officers of various ranks to capture a multitude of perspectives on policing strategies and community interaction.

Community Members: The inquiry also incorporated participants from the Ile-Ife and Modakeke communities, which have historically encountered ethno-communal strife. Participants were recruited from diverse social strata, including youth leaders, market women leaders, village heads, and chiefs, to ensure a comprehensive representation of community voices.

In total, forty-five comprehensive interviews were executed with law enforcement officers and members of the community. Furthermore, two FGDs were convened, each consisting of seven participants, with one group representing Ile-Ife and the other Modakeke.

Gender Representation

In recognition of gender dynamics within policing and community engagement, a methodical approach was implemented in the selection of the sample. Among the law enforcement personnel, a gender ratio of ten males to five females was preserved, mirroring the predominantly male composition of the Nigeria Police Force. This ratio is consistent with the findings articulated by Alemika and Agugua (2001), who indicated that as of July 2010, only 4% of the total police demographic and 8% of all officers were female, a trend that continues to be evident in contemporary policing frameworks. For the community participants, equitable gender representation was assured with fifteen males and fifteen females to facilitate a range of perspectives.

Data Collection Process

The process of data collection was executed utilizing semi-structured interview guides that were specifically designed for both law enforcement officers and community participants. The comprehensive interviews aimed to extract insights into police-community interactions, operational barriers, and perceptions surrounding the provision of security. The FGDs enabled collective dialogues that served to triangulate individual interview findings and offered broader community perspectives regarding policing and social order.

The interviews and discussions were conducted in English, Yoruba, and Pidgin English, contingent upon the language preferences of participants. Trained research assistants, proficient in these languages, facilitated the data collection process, ensuring the accuracy of responses and cultural sensitivity during discussions. Each session was audio-recorded with the consent of participants, followed by the production of verbatim transcriptions for subsequent analysis.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data acquired were subjected to analysis employing a synthesis of thematic and content analysis methodologies. The thematic analysis encompassed the identification of recurring themes and patterns within participants' responses, while content analysis was utilized to systematically categorize and interpret the data. The analytical framework adhered to an inductive approach, permitting themes to organically emerge from the data rather than being preordained.

To augment reliability and validity, data triangulation was engaged, juxtaposing findings across various participant categories (law enforcement officers, community leaders, and youth representatives). Additionally, peer debriefing sessions were orchestrated among researchers to cross-validate interpretations and mitigate researcher bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research endeavor was procured from the pertinent institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their engagement in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously upheld by assigning pseudonyms to participants and ensuring that identifiable information was excluded from the final analysis and reporting.

Discussion and Findings

The outcomes and discourse emanating from the extensive interviews and focus group discussions for this study are systematically categorized thematically below:

Socio-demographic information of participants

The socio-demographic characteristics of participants involved in this study are outlined as follows: Ten (10) male and five (5) female officers were selected based on their tenure in law enforcement, which must encompass ten years or more, with their ages ranging from 30 to 65 years, and a residency in the study areas of five years or more. The community members and leaders, representing diverse ethnic groups, consisted of fifteen (15) males and fifteen (15) females, the selection of participants was predicated upon their length of residency in the designated study areas, which necessitated a minimum duration of ten years, in addition to being aged 25 years or older. Access to the community leaders was enabled through the mediation of gatekeepers.

The ramifications of socioeconomic class on the NPF law enforcement

The revised Federal Constitution of 1999 designates the NPF as the foremost law enforcement institution, charged with the critical duties of upholding law and order while ensuring the protection of life and property among its extensive responsibilities. These significant obligations have been further complicated by the societal class frameworks, both manifest and latent, which profoundly influence the preservation of law and order within Nigerian communities. The Nigerian economy, akin to those of numerous nations worldwide, is primarily dominated by capitalist elements, with the ruling class chiefly comprised of politicians, elites, and substantial business proprietors who dictate, shape, and steer the course of law enforcement strategies. This reality echoes the biblical maxim that it is “easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”. Consequently, it becomes exceedingly arduous for economically marginalized victims to procure justice for transgressions committed against them by the ruling class, particularly when such incidents are reported to police stations throughout Nigeria. It is within these unfavorable conditions that our inquiry into the implications of class on NPF law enforcement in Nigeria will be undertaken. One interviewee articulated the following:

“Don’t cause any problems, when I am not at home is the popular language of money”, sometimes when you are unfortunate to have any problems with the elites, and the case is reported at the police station, the moment the officers are aware that the lower class have a good case, their next action is to turn the case upside down in favour of the elites by inventing unknown excuses. Peradventure, it is the lower class that is found wanting, he/she spends a long time in detention with torture just to please the elites with a reward from them. In most cases, justice or enforcing laws in Nigeria depends on the class of people involved (IDI, adult male respondent, Modakeke).

Reiterating this perspective, another male respondent in Ile-Ife remarked:

There is no way in this town that you can have an altercation with a ruling class and expect the police to be on the side of justice if such an officer loves his job. It is a common notion that

the elites are always right because they can afford to give bribes to the NPF and also buy their way through, whenever their case gets to law court, except it is within their class, even as that personality and political influence comes to bear (IDI, male adult respondent, Ile-Ife).

Nevertheless, certain police personnel who participated as respondents present contrasting opinions to those gathered from the populace, accentuating the role of policing without succumbing to the influence of the ruling class. However, a majority of the officers concurred and provided instances indicating that such dynamics also manifest within the NPF organization. In the words of one of them:

The NPF is a hierarchical and bureaucratic organization, officers adhere strictly to orders from the superior in rank, and when it comes to enforcing the law the superior officer gives directives on how it should be carried out. It is inconsequential, if enforcing the laws, affects classes of people in different strata of society differently. Order must be obeyed, I was detailed by my superior officer-in-charge to investigate a written petition of malicious damage to cocoa farmland some years back, the petitioner (complainant) was a poor farmer while the encroacher (offender) was a very influential high chief in a first-class Oba palace. The moment my superior officer in charge of the command saw the chief, he called me aside and gave me a standing warning that “it is not every case you investigate” and ordered me to record their statement and let them go that was the end of that case (IDI police officer respondent, Ile-Ife).

Participants in the focus group discussion held in Ile-Ife concurred that NPF law enforcement in Nigeria is predominantly inclined towards serving the interests of the ruling classes, in complete disregard for the rule of law. In the words of one of them:

To save yourselves from untimely death, in the hands of NPF in Nigeria, it is better not to have a problem with members of the ruling classes especially their girlfriends, when it comes to enforcing the laws in this country. In other words, the ruling class can influence NPF in every situation, especially when it comes to protecting their interest, in maintaining law and order in society (FGD, adult female participant, Ile-Ife).

The influence of ethnicity on NPF law enforcement in Nigeria

Within the Nigerian context, a prominent means by which individuals perceive their identity or are categorized pertains to their ethnic affiliations. Ethnic identities are evident across every social institution and its associated activities. Likewise, the processes of recruitment into governmental agencies, as well as the execution of their functions, exhibit marked ethnic biases. Consequently, the prominence of ethnicity has emerged as a significant challenge within Nigeria's diverse societies, wherein criminal acts, regardless of their severity, may be trivialized or exaggerated based on the ethnic backgrounds of the offenders, the law enforcement officers engaged in the investigations, and the ethnicities of the victims. As articulated by one of the female leaders interviewed from Ile-Ife, she submitted thus:

A few years back, she admitted that the wanton killings of humans and destruction of properties between the Yoruba/Hausa community over a minor disagreement, which would ordinarily be settled without involving a second party, snowballed to fully-fledged civil unrest which involved the use of guns, due to ethnic identities attached to the issue. The NPF were complacent with their duties because of ethnicity and the fear of government directives (IDI, female leader respondent, Ile-Ife).

Participants from the focus group discussion session in Modakeke concurred and asserted that their experiences closely mirrored those of the Ife/Modakeke crisis. In the words of one of them:

It seems that NPF neglects the constitutional duties of law enforcement in Nigeria and tend to follow the dictate of the ruling classes. As often been observed that they obeyed the instructions of the elites, whenever, conflicts erupt and in normal situations, cases are almost decided in favour of ethnic affiliations of the victims or offenders depending on the officers in charge or on the order of the superior or political interferences (FGD male leader participant, Modakeke).

Officers of the NPF who participated in the study concurred regarding the implications of ethnic identity on law enforcement practices within Nigeria, as well as the consequent effects on police officers themselves. Nevertheless, as a regimented institution, the Police Act and Regulation 2020 does not allow officers the opportunity to articulate their grievances. To quote one of the respondents:

Ethnicity and religion is a big problem within the force, which outsiders are not aware of or just turn a blind eye to it. Recruitment, promotion, transfer, and posting to some specialized agencies such as EFCC are all skewed in favour of one ethnic/religious group. Hence you discover that arresting and investigating high-profile offenders' cases in Nigeria are almost dead on arrival. Ethnicity, class, and religion created "sacred cows" or "untouchable people or groups" in Nigeria, both within the force and the society, once this group is involved in any crimes the law cannot be enforced, and no superior officers will admit it openly, but it is an unwritten practice in law enforcement in Nigeria (IDI male officer respondent, Modakeke).

The impact of religious affiliation on the NPF's law enforcement practices in Nigeria

Religion significantly influences the fabric of Nigerian society; as noted by the Pew Research Centre (2020), Nigeria is ranked among the most religious countries in the world. The very essence of existence in Nigeria is intricately interwoven with religious beliefs, which infiltrate all social institutions with which individuals interact. Religion functions as a vital marker of identity for individuals, and the political elite are acutely cognizant of its importance; therefore, religious considerations invariably hold substantial sway in the electoral processes throughout Nigeria. Ignoring religious sensitivities can lead to ethno-religious conflict, a phenomenon that is particularly pronounced in various areas of Nigeria, especially in Plateau State. The NPF acknowledges the relevance of religious identity, and in the execution of laws, they frequently demonstrate a susceptibility to the influences exerted by religious and political leaders, who lend their implicit support to numerous law enforcement policies without due regard to the rule of law. It is against this backdrop that an investigation into the impact of religion on the NPF's law enforcement practices will be conducted. An interviewee articulated the following:

I am first and foremost, a Muslim rather than a Nigerian, religion is a way of life that determines my relations with people. It provides a bond that binds me with fellow Muslims. In the same vein, the NPF personnel are also humans and are affected by the religious bond before their offices, religious brothers/sisters must respect what binds us together before applying the laws regardless of the situation. There was a particular situation where I would have been in big trouble, my ethnic and religious affiliation was my savior, as the officers in charge of the case had to find leeway for me and placate the victim (IDI adult male respondent, Ile-Ife).

Reiterating a similar sentiment, another adult female respondent from Modakeke remarked:

Police officers in Nigeria tend to be influenced by religious and ethnic royalty in their law enforcement especially in some parts of the country where certain religious sentiment is high and in other parts, where the head of the police department is from one ethnic/ religious background different from the victims or offenders (IDI Female adult respondent, Modakeke).

Participants in the FGD session held in Ile-Ife affirmed that their experiences largely parallel those of many others, particularly when navigating the ethnic/religious dichotomy that pervades various sectors of Nigerian society and its institutions. In the words of one participant:

Most serious criminal cases such as murder can be settled by the NPF because of ethnic/religious affinity, regardless of what the law says, especially if the superior officers heading the office is of the victim or offender side and above all, a phone call from the Obas, Emirs, or political class will instantly redirect the investigation or prosecution of any cases in favour of either party regardless of the gravity of the offense or proof of evidence that may be available. In order word the way NPF enforces the laws in Nigeria societies is characterized by class, ethnic, and religious attachment (FGD male adult participant, Modakeke).

NPF officers who participated in the discussions in Ile-Ife implicitly acknowledged that religion, social class, and ethnicity adversely influence their law enforcement practices in Nigeria; officers, as constituents of the society, tend to adhere to unwritten directives they are compelled to follow in upholding law and order within the community. In the words of one of them:

There are some people you cannot just arrest, even if they commit heinous crimes and if you do, reprimand a wait for you, with a phone call they are either granted unconditional bail or case shadily investigated to fulfill all righteousness and appease some sectional anger in the country, and you endanger your life and family. All these happen because of religious and ethnic affiliations of parties and political interference in NPF law enforcement (IDI female officer respondent, Ile-Ife).

The community members/leaders and NPF officers who were respondents/participants in the study have resided in their respective communities for a duration of five years or more, and they have also had the opportunity to live in various communities across Nigeria.

Result

The historical development of the NPF elucidates a policing framework profoundly rooted in colonial heritage, socio-political dynamics, and structural inadequacies. The study reveals that while law enforcement in pre-colonial Nigeria was based on indigenous governance frameworks, the advent of British colonial rule institutionalized policing as a mechanism of state control. From the inception of consular guards in Lagos in 1861 to the eventual amalgamation of the Nigeria Police Force in 1930, the focus remained predominantly on centralization and the safeguarding of colonial interests rather than on the provision of public service. Following independence, attempts to equilibrate federal and regional policing authorities were ephemeral, culminating in the enactment of the 1999 Constitution, which centralized policing under federal jurisdiction. The 2020 Nigeria Police Act reaffirmed the mandate of the NPF in the domains of crime prevention and the maintenance of public order. However, enduring challenges, encompassing corruption, inadequate funding, and pervasive public distrust, persistently undermine its operational efficacy.

The research elucidates the inter-sectionality of class, ethnicity, and religion in informing law enforcement practices within Nigeria. Socio-economic stratifications markedly dictate the accessibility of justice, whereby the elite benefit from preferential treatment, while marginalized demographics encounter intensified surveillance and repression. Empirical evidence substantiates that police officials routinely manipulate case outcomes to favor affluent individuals, thereby exacerbating social disparities. The narratives provided by respondents furnish compelling evidence of selective law enforcement practices, wherein financial inducements and political affiliations dictate judicial determinations. Theoretical frameworks, such as Marxist critiques, validate assertions that the NPF has traditionally operated as a mechanism of elite domination, suppressing dissent and perpetuating established power hierarchies.

Ethnic affiliations further complicate the dynamics of law enforcement, significantly influencing police recruitment, deployment, and operational conduct. The enduring presence of ethnic favoritism within the NPF engenders disparities in policing efficacy, as officers display biases when addressing cases involving individuals from their ethnic constituencies. Testimonies from community leaders and police personnel indicate that ethnic loyalty frequently supersedes professional ethics, thereby reinforcing regional distrust and diminishing the legitimacy of the police institution. Scholarly literature suggests that mitigating these biases necessitates reforms that emphasize professionalism, meritocratic recruitment, and equitable representation across ethnic demographics.

Religious factors in law enforcement also emerge as a pivotal element influencing policing practices in Nigeria. The religious orientations of officers frequently inform discretionary decision-making, impacting the administration of justice within religiously diverse communities. Evidence derived from the study indicates that recruitment and promotional mechanisms within the NPF occasionally reflect sectarian biases, mirroring broader patterns of religious fragmentation in Nigeria. Furthermore, police responses to sectarian conflicts often demonstrate bias, undermining public trust in law enforcement and exacerbating communal tensions. Addressing these problematic issues requires the implementation of institutional safeguards that foster secularism and impartiality within police operations.

The socio-demographic composition of study participants, encompassing both law enforcement personnel and community members, provides a nuanced perspective on these dynamics. Testimonies from police personnel reveal structural constraints that inhibit their capacity to enforce the law without bias. The hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of the NPF compels lower-ranking officers to comply with directives from higher authorities, even when such directives perpetuate class, ethnic, or religious prejudices. A recurring theme in the narratives is the external influence exerted by political actors, who frequently intervene in police operations to secure favorable outcomes for their associates. This observation aligns with empirical research indicating that political interference significantly compromises police autonomy and accountability in Nigeria.

Public perceptions regarding the impartiality of law enforcement agencies remain predominantly negative, with a significant portion of the populace articulating doubts concerning the equity of policing practices. Members of the community recount incidents in which officers either disregarded grievances from economically disadvantaged individuals or manipulated investigative processes to favor affluent and politically influential individuals. The diminishing public confidence in policing institutions has compelled numerous citizens to pursue alternative avenues for justice, such as traditional authority figures and vigilante entities, thereby further fragmenting the security framework. This observation aligns with extensive criminological scholarship that posits public trust in law enforcement as a critical factor influencing effective policing outcomes.

The results of the study accentuate the pressing necessity for comprehensive institutional reforms within the Nigeria Police Force. Tackling historical injustices and current predicaments necessitates a multifaceted strategy, which includes enhancing oversight mechanisms, advocating for community-oriented policing, and ensuring equitable representation within the police force. Policy initiatives ought to prioritize accountability, transparency, and professionalism to restore public trust in the Nigeria Police Force. Comparative evaluations of policing frameworks in other multi-ethnic societies may provide valuable insights into best practices that can be adapted to the Nigerian milieu. Ultimately, the establishment of an impartial and effective police force requires a sustained commitment from policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and civil society actors.

Conclusions

The historical evolution of the NPF exemplifies a policing paradigm influenced by colonial legacies, socio-political dynamics, and systemic inefficiencies. Notwithstanding efforts aimed at augmenting

law enforcement capabilities, entrenched challenges such as corruption, ethnic partiality, and political meddling persist, continually undermining public trust in policing institutions. The study elucidates how class, ethnicity, and religious affiliation intersect to shape policing practices, frequently resulting in the selective enforcement of legal statutes. The persistence of these biases has exacerbated social inequalities and diminished the legitimacy of the NPF. Confronting these entrenched issues necessitates institutional reforms that emphasize professionalism, accountability, and equitable representation. Strengthening oversight mechanisms and cultivating community trust are pivotal measures in the quest to establish an impartial and effective law enforcement system in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. The Nigerian government should undertake substantial institutional reforms that bolster police accountability and curtail political interference.
2. Recruitment and promotion protocols within the NPF ought to be predicated exclusively on merit, eschewing ethnic, religious, or political considerations, while implementing standardized training programs that underscore human rights, impartiality, and conflict resolution will cultivate professionalism and enhance the overall efficacy of the force.
3. Augmenting community-oriented policing initiatives can serve to bridge the trust chasm between law enforcement and the public.

Legislative reforms should fortify the autonomy of the judiciary and law enforcement agencies to obviate undue influence from political elites, while the implementation of stringent anti-corruption measures, including asset declarations and whistleblower protections, will deter misconduct and foster fairness in the administration of justice.

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Competing interests

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