UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL FABRICS OF STATE POLICE: NIGERIA'S URGENT APPROACH TO INSECURITY AND CRIMINALITY

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Abstract

Nigeria's persistent security challenges, including terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts, farmer-herder clashes, cybercrime, and organized criminality, have generated intense debates regarding the establishment of state police. Despite the existence of the centralized Nigeria Police Force, insecurity continues to threaten national cohesion, economic development, and human security. This paper examines the socio-cultural foundations of state policing and evaluates its potential as an urgent response to insecurity and criminality in Nigeria. Using a qualitative exploratory methodology based on documentary analysis of scholarly literature, policy documents, government reports, and constitutional debates, the study explores the relationship between policing and Nigeria's socio-cultural diversity. The paper argues that effective policing is deeply embedded within local cultural knowledge, language competence, traditional authority structures, and community trust networks. The centralized policing system often lacks sufficient local intelligence and cultural sensitivity necessary for crime prevention and control in Nigeria's heterogeneous society. Drawing on Social Disorganization Theory, Community Policing Theory, and Structural Functionalism, the study finds that state police could enhance intelligence gathering, improve community participation in security governance, and strengthen crime control mechanisms. However, concerns regarding political misuse, ethnic bias, and abuse of power remain significant and should be addressed within the framework of establishing the state police services in the country. The paper recommends constitutional safeguards, independent oversight institutions, professional recruitment standards, and robust accountability mechanisms to ensure that state police contribute positively to national security and democratic governance.

Keywords: State Police, Insecurity, Criminality, Community Policing, Socio-Cultural Factors, Security Governance

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1. Introduction

The provision of security remains one of the primary responsibilities of the modern state. Section 14(2)(b) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides that the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government. However, Nigeria continues to experience unprecedented security challenges ranging from Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, armed robbery, farmer-herder conflicts, separatist agitations, communal violence, and cybercrime. These challenges have exposed limitations within the country's centralized policing architecture.

Nigeria operates a federal system of government but maintains a highly centralized police structure under the Nigeria Police Force (NPF). The increasing inability of the centralized police system to adequately address local security threats, such as school abductions and kidnapping has renewed calls for the establishment of state police. Recent constitutional debates and reform proposals put forward by the President of Nigeria, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu and a Committee subsequently inaugurated by the Inspector-General of Police[2], have focused on decentralizing policing powers to state governments as a means of improving public safety and strengthening law enforcement.

The argument for state police extends beyond administrative efficiency. It is fundamentally linked to the socio-cultural realities of Nigeria, a nation characterized by over 250 ethnic groups, diverse languages, religious pluralism, and varying cultural traditions. Policing effectiveness often depends on understanding local customs, social norms, traditional institutions, and informal mechanisms of social control. Consequently, examining the socio-cultural fabrics underpinning state policing is critical to understanding its potential role in addressing insecurity and criminality.

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What socio-cultural factors support the establishment of state police in Nigeria?
2. How can state police contribute to addressing insecurity and criminality?
3. What challenges may emerge from state policing within Nigeria's socio-cultural context?

[2] The State Police Committee has 8 members, and is headed by Prof. Olu Ogunsakin, who doubles as the Director-General of the National Institute of Police Studies. The Committee has since concluded and presented its Report to the Inspector-General of Police.

4. What safeguards are necessary to ensure effective and accountable state policing?

2. Literature Review

Concept of State Police

State police refers to a decentralized policing arrangement in which subnational governments establish, fund, and administer police organizations responsible for maintaining law and order within their territorial jurisdictions. State police systems operate in several federal states including the United States, India, Canada, Australia, and Germany.

According to Aleyomi (2013), state police is consistent with federal principles because it allows constituent units of government to participate directly in internal security management. Eme & Anyadike (2012) similarly argue that decentralized policing promotes responsiveness to local security concerns and enhances community engagement.

Insecurity and Criminality in Nigeria: School Kidnappings, Ransom Economy, and the Case for State Police in Nigeria

The rising incidence of school kidnappings in Nigeria has become one of the most disturbing manifestations of the country's security crisis, exposing significant weaknesses in intelligence gathering, community surveillance, and rapid response mechanisms. Since the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok, Borno State, in 2014, school-related kidnappings have evolved into a lucrative criminal enterprise for insurgent groups and armed bandits. Available evidence indicates that more than 1,400 students were abducted from schools across Nigeria between 2014 and 2024, with many victims released only after prolonged negotiations and alleged ransom payments.

Recent incidents further illustrate the scale of the problem. In March 2024, armed bandits abducted approximately 287 pupils and students from schools in Kuriga, Kaduna State, one of the largest school abductions since the Chibok incident. Although government authorities announced the eventual release of the victims, the incident highlighted persistent vulnerabilities in school security and local intelligence systems.

The economic dimension of kidnapping has equally become alarming. According to data cited from the Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics, Nigerians paid an estimated US$1.42 billion in ransom to kidnappers between May 2023 and April 2024. Similarly, security analyses indicate that

between July 2023 and June 2024, at least 7,568 persons were kidnapped in 1,130 incidents nationwide, with kidnappers demanding approximately ₦11 billion and reportedly receiving about ₦1 billion in ransom payments.

These developments strengthen arguments for the establishment of state police as a mechanism for improving local intelligence gathering and community-based security management. Proponents argue that locally recruited police officers are more likely to possess cultural knowledge, linguistic competence, and familiarity with community networks that facilitate early detection of criminal activities. Given that many bandit groups operate within remote rural environments and rely on local informants, a decentralized policing structure could improve intelligence penetration, early warning systems, and rapid response capabilities. State police may therefore complement federal security agencies by focusing on localized crime prevention and school protection initiatives.

However, while state police may enhance community security, concerns remain regarding political interference, ethnic favoritism, and institutional abuse. Consequently, any move toward state policing must be accompanied by constitutional safeguards, independent oversight bodies, transparent recruitment procedures, and strong accountability mechanisms to ensure that decentralized policing strengthens rather than undermines democratic governance and human security in Nigeria.

Socio-Cultural Foundations of Policing

Policing does not occur in a social vacuum. Sociologists argue that social control mechanisms emerge from cultural values, shared norms, traditional institutions, and community relationships. In many Nigerian communities, traditional rulers, religious leaders, age-grade associations, and vigilante groups have historically performed security functions.

The socio-cultural argument for state police is based on the assumption that local officers possess greater familiarity with community languages, customs, settlement patterns, kinship systems, and criminal networks. Such familiarity may improve intelligence gathering and crime prevention.

Arguments Supporting State Police

Proponents argue that state police would:

- Improve local intelligence gathering.

- Enhance rapid response to security threats.
- Promote community participation in policing.
- Strengthen accountability through proximity.
- Reflect federal principles of governance.
- Improve cultural understanding of crime dynamics.

Criticisms of State Police

Opponents contend that state police may:

- Be used by governors for political persecution.
- Reinforce ethnic and religious biases.
- Encourage abuse of power.
- Create inter-jurisdictional conflicts.
- Increase financial burdens on states.

These concerns underscore the importance of institutional safeguards and constitutional protections which a well-designed state policing framework can mitigate.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

Social Disorganization Theory

Originally developed by Shaw & McKay (1942), Social Disorganization Theory argues that crime flourishes in communities characterized by weakened social institutions and declining social cohesion. The theory suggests that local communities are better positioned to monitor and regulate deviant behavior when social bonds remain strong.

Applied to state policing, the theory suggests that locally embedded police structures can leverage existing community networks to strengthen informal social control and reduce crime.

Community Policing Theory

Community Policing Theory emphasizes partnerships between law enforcement agencies and citizens in addressing security challenges. Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux (1990) argue that police effectiveness depends largely on community trust and cooperation.

State police may strengthen community policing by increasing police familiarity with local cultures, languages, and social structures.

Structural Functionalism

Structural Functionalists such as Durkheim (1893) and Parsons (1951) view social institutions as mechanisms that maintain social order and stability. Policing functions as an institution responsible for maintaining societal equilibrium.

State police can be understood as an adaptive institutional response to changing security realities in Nigeria's federal system. The establishment of state police may improve institutional effectiveness by aligning policing structures with local social realities.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design. Secondary data were obtained from scholarly journals, books, government reports, constitutional documents, policy papers, and security studies literature.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Relevant themes identified include:

Federalism and Policing: Federalism and policing refer to the distribution of law enforcement responsibilities between national and subnational governments. In federal systems, decentralized policing enhances responsiveness to local security needs while preserving national coordination. Scholars argue that federal policing structures improve efficiency, accountability, and community engagement in diverse societies (Alemika, 2010; Watts, 2008).

Community Security: Community security emphasizes the protection of individuals and communities from crime, violence, and social disorder through collaborative partnerships between citizens and security agencies. It prioritizes local participation, trust-building, and preventive measures. According to the human security perspective, sustainable security emerges when

communities actively contribute to identifying and addressing threats (UNDP, 1994; Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990).

Socio-Cultural Diversity: Socio-cultural diversity refers to the coexistence of multiple ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural groups within a society. In policing, understanding diversity is crucial for effective communication, legitimacy, and conflict management. Scholars contend that culturally sensitive policing promotes trust, reduces tensions, and enhances law enforcement effectiveness in pluralistic societies (Banks, 2016; Giddens, 2021).

Local Intelligence Gathering: Local intelligence gathering involves collecting, analyzing, and utilizing information from community sources to identify potential security threats and criminal activities. Effective intelligence relies on local knowledge, trust, and social networks. Research shows that community-based intelligence significantly improves crime prevention, early warning systems, and law enforcement responses to emerging threats (Ratcliffe, 2016; Gill, 2000).

Security Governance: Security governance refers to the processes, institutions, and actors involved in managing security within a society. It encompasses government agencies, civil society, private organizations, and local communities working collaboratively to address security challenges. Effective security governance promotes coordination, transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in maintaining peace and public safety (Krahmann, 2003; Hänggi, 2005).

Accountability and Oversight: Accountability and oversight are mechanisms designed to ensure that security institutions operate lawfully, ethically, and transparently. Oversight may be exercised through legislatures, courts, civilian review boards, and independent commissions. Effective accountability reduces abuse of power, strengthens public trust, and enhances institutional legitimacy in democratic societies (Bayley, 2006; Stone & Ward, 2000).

The qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows an in-depth examination of complex socio-cultural and institutional dimensions associated with state policing.

5. Discussion/Findings

State Police and Cultural Intelligence

One of the most compelling arguments in support of state police in Nigeria is its potential to enhance cultural intelligence in policing. Cultural intelligence refers to the capacity of law

enforcement personnel to understand and effectively engage with the linguistic, religious, ethnic, and socio-cultural characteristics of the communities they serve. Scholars have argued that policing effectiveness is closely linked to officers' familiarity with local customs, social norms, and community dynamics (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2000; Goldstein, 1990; Smah, 1997). In a culturally diverse country such as Nigeria, locally recruited police officers are more likely to possess indigenous knowledge, language competence, and contextual understanding necessary for effective crime detection and prevention. Many criminal activities, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, are embedded within kinship networks and informal social structures that may be difficult for externally deployed officers to penetrate. Consequently, state police could improve intelligence gathering, facilitate early detection of criminal activities, and strengthen proactive policing strategies through culturally informed law enforcement practices.

Traditional Institutions and Security Governance

Traditional institutions have historically played a significant role in maintaining social order and resolving conflicts within Nigerian communities. Traditional rulers, village heads, religious leaders, age-grade associations, and community vigilante groups constitute important components of indigenous governance systems that predate colonial state structures (Aiyede, 2006; Olaniyi, 2017; Smah, 2025). These institutions continue to serve as custodians of local norms and possess extensive knowledge of community relationships and conflict dynamics. The establishment of state police could create opportunities for stronger collaboration between formal law enforcement agencies and indigenous security structures. Such collaboration may enhance local security governance by integrating traditional mechanisms of social control with modern policing approaches. According to Baker (2008), effective security governance in Africa often depends on productive partnerships between state institutions and informal community-based actors who possess local legitimacy and social trust.

Community Trust and Police Legitimacy

Trust and legitimacy constitute critical foundations of effective policing. According to procedural justice theory, citizens are more likely to cooperate with law enforcement agencies when they perceive them as fair, accountable, and representative of community interests (Tyler, 2006). In many Nigerian communities, public confidence in centralized policing has been undermined by perceptions of inefficiency, corruption, and cultural detachment. State police may enhance

legitimacy by promoting local ownership of security institutions and increasing officers' familiarity with community values and concerns. Community-oriented policing scholars argue that culturally embedded police officers are more likely to establish productive relationships with residents, thereby encouraging information sharing, public cooperation, and collective crime prevention efforts (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990). Consequently, state policing may strengthen the social contract between citizens and security agencies through improved responsiveness and accountability.

Addressing Contemporary Security Challenges

Nigeria's contemporary security environment is characterized by increasingly complex threats, including banditry, terrorism, kidnapping, farmer-herder conflicts, separatist agitations, cybercrime, and communal violence. These challenges have exposed operational limitations within the country's centralized policing framework. Scholars have argued that the centralized structure of the Nigeria Police Force often constrains local responsiveness, intelligence gathering, and rapid deployment capabilities necessary for addressing geographically specific security threats (Alemika, 2013; Eme & Anyadike, 2012). State police could complement federal security agencies by concentrating on local crime prevention, intelligence collection, surveillance, and early warning mechanisms. Through proximity to communities and familiarity with local terrains and social networks, state police may be better positioned to detect emerging threats and respond more effectively to localized security challenges. This decentralized approach aligns with contemporary security governance models that emphasize multi-level and community-centered security management.

Potential Risks? and Challenges of State Police

Despite its potential benefits, the establishment of state police presents several significant risks that must be carefully addressed, although the country cannot continue to wait until those fears are completely addressed. One major concern is the possibility of political manipulation by state governors, who may utilize police institutions to intimidate political opponents, suppress dissent, or influence electoral processes. Similar concerns have been raised by scholars examining subnational security institutions in developing democracies (Ojo, 2014). Furthermore, ethnic and religious majorities within states may dominate recruitment and promotion processes, thereby marginalizing minority groups and undermining social cohesion. Another critical challenge relates

to accountability and oversight. Without robust institutional safeguards, decentralized police structures may become vulnerable to corruption, abuse of power, and human rights violations (Bayley, 2006). Therefore, the successful implementation of state police would require strong constitutional protections, independent police service commissions, civilian oversight bodies, judicial review mechanisms, and transparent recruitment processes to prevent abuse and ensure professionalism.

These risks highlight the need for constitutional safeguards and independent monitoring institutions as proposed by the State Police Committee Report.

6. Conclusion

The debate on state police in Nigeria reflects broader concerns regarding insecurity, federalism, and governance. This paper has demonstrated that policing effectiveness is closely linked to socio-cultural realities. The ability of law enforcement agencies to understand local cultures, languages, social networks, and traditional institutions significantly influences crime prevention and control.

Given Nigeria's growing insecurity challenges and socio-cultural diversity, state police presents a potentially viable strategy and opportunity for strengthening local security governance. However, its success depends on strong institutional safeguards, professional standards, and democratic accountability mechanisms.

7. Recommendations

1. Constitutional amendments should clearly define the powers and limits of state police.
2. Independent State Police Service Commissions should oversee recruitment, discipline, and promotions.
3. Recruitment should reflect ethnic, religious, and gender diversity.
4. Human rights training should be mandatory for all officers.
5. Community policing and restorative justice frameworks should be institutionalized.
6. Independent civilian oversight boards should monitor police conduct.
7. Collaboration between federal and state police agencies should be legally guaranteed.

8. Traditional institutions should be formally integrated into local security governance frameworks.
9. Technology-driven intelligence systems should support state policing operations.
10. Strong judicial and legislative oversight should prevent political misuse of state police.

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