

A NOTE ON POLICE VIOLENCE IN POST-COLONIAL GHANA.

By

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Introduction

The historiography¹ on policing in Ghana is very much inadequate and marked by substantial lacunae. Widespread public claims of a frequent resort by the police to graft, have for example, neither been properly established and documented nor subjected to adequate study and analysis. Similar gaps mark reports² of police violence against the general public.

This work aims at making a contribution towards filling such gaps. Specifically, it has as its thematic concern an identification of the significance, causes, and types of violence³ in police operations and role-performance in post-colonial Ghana. The work identifies historical and other social factors underlying police violence in Ghana; and also offers suggestions which are likely to be useful to researchers interested in the nature, dimensions, and effect of such resort to violence. Statistical data on the scope and dimensions of such violence are unavailable, though the actual phenomenon has certainly not escaped public notice and concern.⁴

I have used various methods in obtaining information for the work. They include close observation of a few randomly-selected police stations in Ghana, where I happened to have police friends and acquaintances who neither knew of,

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nor suspected, my deep interest in their professional activities. Subsequent unstructured interviews of a random sample of both police perpetrators of such violence and their victims have also been a major source of information. In addition, pertinent documentary sources (both primary and secondary) have been used. Actual field observation for the study was carried out randomly and at irregular intervals over a period of three years. It should be stated that the sensitive nature of this study does not permit a specification of identities and places, and that the present work is only a first tentative study of police violence in post-colonial Ghana.

State And Police in Ghana

It is necessary to precede discussions of police violence in post-colonial Ghana with a concise summary of the salient features and trends which characterise the Ghanaian state. This is due to the fact that the police institution which constitutes our primary focus of interest is itself an integral wing of the wider state-system, and is consequently under the strong influence of the capabilities, inadequacies and policy choices of the Ghanaian state which therefore constitutes a necessary backdrop to, and also defines the territorial and legal framework of police operations.

Ghana embraces a heterogenous assembly of diverse ethnic, religious and cultural groupings brought under a common British colonial rule. She attained the status of independent nationhood on 6th March 1957, and has since been caught in the throes of political and economic

crises. Ghana has the markings of a 'soft-state',⁵ that is, there is prevalent in it

general absence of discipline, particularly in the conduct of public business. Laws and regulations are often circumvented by officials and there is general inconsistency in the application of policies and laws. Furthermore, government servants are often in secret collusion with politicians and other influential people whose real task is to supervise the execution of policies. Corrupt practices are commonplace in order to secure objectives other than those officially stated.⁶

The post-colonial period in Ghana has as well been marked by a decline of state power and capability; and there have been various adjustments made to those realities.⁷ Policy-choices opted for by successive governments in the post-colonial years have ensured Ghana's continual integration in the global capitalist economy as a neo-colonial, peripheral, and dependent appendage. The state's speciality in the global economy has essentially been the disadvantageous one of the export of primary goods and it has consequently suffered more than its fair share of the uncertainties and stresses which inhere in the global capitalist economy. Internal mismanagement, inappropriate organizational models, and institutional fragility have, however, compounded the difficulties arising out of the state's neo-colonial status; and these crises have in turn occasioned the passage of a cumbersome array of laws, decrees and other legislative edicts which

cover virtually all facets of social existence in the state.

The Ghana Police Service is the institution assigned primary responsibility for the enforcement of these legislative enactments.⁸ Police strength in post-colonial Ghana hovers around '351 police officers, 649 inspectors, and 15,191 other grades distributed among 479 stations';⁹ and according to one estimate the 'per capita strength of the internal security force is 4 per 1,000 working inhabitants; Ghana ranks 39 among world nations in this respect.'¹⁰ Like the state itself, the police set-up in Ghana is a colonial creation. It was established on 30th June 1894 under the provisions of the Police Ordinance, 1894 (Ordinance No. 6 of 1894); and as part of British imperial effort to establish a 'Pax Britannica' over the various ethnic groupings comprising modern Ghana. The police served as an important prop of the colonial state, and also exercised extensive powers.

On the other hand, the post-colonial era in Ghana has witnessed considerable reduction of the scope of authority exercised by the police. There has been a steady but definite encroachment of other institutions upon the performance of functions traditionally assigned to the police. Police role-deflation has included their cession of border guard duties; as well as a military assumption (through the Military Police and Military Intelligence Units) of surveillance and other internal security duties originally carried out by the then Special Branch unit of the police. Establishment of rival law-enforcement bodies¹¹ and an intrusion of military and militia bodies into general law-enforcement

operations are other marks of police role-deflation in post-colonial Ghana.

Recruitment into police ranks in Ghana is by voluntary enlistment; and the police enlists people of both sexes who meet a minimum height requirement, are of robust health, and who have at least elementary school education. An exhibited preference during the colonial era for illiterates and the barely-literate has been abandoned; and police ranks in the contemporary era include significant numbers of personnel with professional training and specialized skills. The latter serve in such wings of the police as its hospitals, colleges or depots, farms, canteens, and laboratories. The police establishment in post-colonial Ghana ^{is} organized on a centralized, hierarchical and national basis; with police stations or posts spread through the state. It is headed by an Inspector-General who issues periodic Force Instructions to guide the official conduct and behaviour of police personnel. Like police forces elsewhere, the police in Ghana are primarily concerned, as law-enforcers, with the public control of individuals and with the relations of individuals with one another. Police right to intervention in the affairs of citizens with a view to the maintenance of law and order could be abused, and has, in fact, posed problems - one of which has to do with violent and brutal police behaviour towards the general public.¹²

A Typology of Police Violence in Ghana

Social interactions during which the police resort to violence vary in terms of their setting, cast and plot. However, on the basis of factors which predispose police personnel to resort to violence on those rare occasions that they do, one can identify eight general types of such violence,¹³ as indicated in Table I.

The police resort to the first type of violence when they are faced with a stalemate in their investigations into an issue. The issue may be of a civil, criminal or political nature; and the objective of police violence in all these instances is to get the victim confess an offence or submit to police dictates and thereby resolve an otherwise intractable stalemate. Awoonor offers numerous instances of this type of violence in his work;¹⁴ in one of those instances the victim reports, "They are torturing me. They have promised to kill me if I do not tell them where the shells are."¹⁵

An instance of the second type of police violence is as follows:

According to the prosecution, on November 25 last year at about 7.30 p.m. while Sergeant Kwaw Yaw was on duty at the Akatakyiman Rural Bank, he sent a 13-year old girl to call him one Madam Amah Amissah who had then returned from Monrovia. The prosecution said the girl accompanied by her brother, went to call the woman. The prosecution further alleged that when the woman arrived the policeman started playing with Madam Amissah's breasts against her will. At this stage the soldier, Isaac Dadzie, who was on the scene, advised

TABLE ONE

A TYPOLOGY OF POLICE VIOLENCE IN POST-COLONIAL GHANA

Serial Type	Background, Predisposing Factor, or Cause for Resort to Police Violence	Declared or Manifest Objective of Police Violence
1.	Stalemate in police investigations against a background of victim's failure or refusal to offer the needed information.	To get victim confess, own up, or offer the evidence which would give the police the needed break-through in their investigations.
2.	Where victim adopts a haughty, proud, or sneering attitude towards the police.	To cower victim; or elicit his co-operation, respect and deference.
3.	Lawful or unlawful demonstrations, riots, assemblies, insurrections or similar public gatherings.	To halt the demonstration, riot, etc.; and also disperse the gathering.
4.	Police swoop to arrest such petty offenders as pick-pockets, gamblers and dealers in drugs.	To cower victims (through police show of force) into non-violent submission to police arrest; and also deter, or discourage a repetition of the offence.
5.	Presentation of thieves and such other criminal offenders at the police station; or while such offenders remain in police cells.	To assert police power and authority with a view to obtaining deference and good behaviour from the victim; and also out of a desire to punish and reform the offender.
6.	Unofficial police arrest of debtors and other offenders at the unlawful instigation of one party or the other in a civil or criminal conflict.	To forcefully secure 'good behaviour' and the resolution of the conflict; or to secure payment of the loan - as the case may be.
7.	Police accidental violence, eg. stray bullets from police warning shots.	Not applicable
8.	Police personnel, on provocation, deliberately shooting to kill or harm.	Revenge; show of power; or to get even.

the policeman to leave the woman alone. The policeman became angry and opened fire on Dadzie and Yankey who was also standing by. They were rushed to the Effia Nkwanta Hospital in Sekondi where they died the following day.¹⁶

The 48-year-old police sergeant was duly convicted on the charge of murder and sentenced to death by the Cape Coast High Court.¹⁷ Another instance of the second type of police violence is offered by a press report of an outbreak of confrontation between police personnel and civilians at Kumasi:

The Kumasi confrontation was sparked off when conservancy labourers of the Kumasi City Council allegedly marched to the Kejetia Police Post and the Central Police Station to protest the killing of Mr. A.K. Nyame, a health inspector of the council, by a policeman. The conservancy labourers poured human excreta on the premises of the police stations as a sign of protest. The policemen, apparently not happy at the attitude of the KCC men, fired warning shots to disperse them and brutally assaulted at least six of them, including Dr. Atta Konadu, City Manager of the K.C.C.¹⁸

Yet another illustration of the second type of police violence is as follows:

At Wawasi, near Obuasi, the Tutuka police were alleged to have brutalized residents of the Ashanti Goldfields Corporation quarters for differences over the erection of a road block on the Obuasi-Tutuka road.

Chief Superintendent S.A. Afari of Obuasi, it was alleged, went to the scene and was hooted at by the residents when he expressed his displeasure at the creation of the road block. He was alleged to have rushed to the divisional headquarters and returned with some armed policemen who jumped on the people and beat them up.¹⁹

A reported instance illustrative of the third type of police violent behaviour in post-colonial Ghana is offered by police violence in suppressing acts of political violence which marked the secessionist bid of the former Trans-Volta Togoland region of the state. A total of 5,193 firearms were seized from the secessionists by the police and the army. The then Minister of Interior defended the police against accusations of extreme violence and brutality in halting that irredentist movement by arguing that 'when people resort to lawlessness, the perpetrators cannot justly complain if their violence is met by violence. In the dispersal of riotous and armed assemblies, heads will get broken'.²⁰ Police violence in breaking students' or workers' demonstrations also fall within the third category. Quite apart from the legitimate use of force by police to disrupt an illegal or tumultuous assembly, the police may manifest a different type of violent behaviour under this category. In the latter type, police violence is manifested in their deliberate inaction and immobility as organized thugs visit violence on particular public gatherings. A detailed instance of this latter type of police violence is offered by J.K.E. Agovi as follows:

The thugs went up the stage, wrenched papers from the panelists, and tumbled the table, speaker's stand, microphones and chairs down the legs of the dumb-founded speakers and officials. Others began to beat the Chairman and his colleagues while some others threw chairs at the audience. It was at this stage that it dawned on some of us what was happening - those thugs had been deliberately planted to disrupt the meeting with maximum violence. So knives, stones and chairs began to fly. The crowd became hysterical and began to scramble out for dear life All this time the Police were everywhere..... surprisingly, all of them stood idle, and looked on with bemused indifference.²¹

Characteristically, such public gatherings have strong and clear anti-government overtones, and it is that fact which instigates movements of pro-government thugs to disrupt the function rather violently. It is in the course of such violent disruption that the police, as it were, turn blind eyes and deaf ears to the blatant acts of violence and the rather unlawful infringement of the civil liberties of those assembled publicly to exercise a civic right. The evidence indicates that when the police resort to such strictly non-violent but rather brutal inaction, they do so either under strong pressure from the existing government, or out of a prudent desire not to get into confrontation with the pro-government perpetrators of the violence. At any rate police inaction is occasioned neither by inadequate police manpower nor by insufficient police facilities; and the inaction

amounts to a serious and blatant disregard of police commitment to the maintenance of law and order.²² It should also be said that this particular manifestation of the third type of police violent behaviour is, in point of fact, rather rare in occurrence.

The fourth type in our typology is far more common, though none of such experiences seems to have been documented. It has to do with police violence towards those indulging in such offences as pick-pocketing, gambling, and peddling of hemp and narcotics. Police harassment in such instances can be attributed to frustration induced by their apparently futile but unending efforts at the eradication of these social vices. The fact of police impatience with such offenders explains such pleas as the following:

The Greater Accra Regional Lotto Receivers Union has appealed to the Inspector-General of Police to stop policemen from harassing its members for alleged hoarding of lotto coupons.²³

Resort to the fifth type of violence is part of police expression of their disgust at whatever crime a particular offender may have committed. Such violence is usually brief; but may easily resume if the victim (whilst in police custody) gives 'cause' (by way of any 'annoying behaviour' on his part) for such resumption. It should be pointed out that popular wisdom and culture in Ghana find nothing wrong with physically assaulting apprehended burglars, thieves and the like; and more often than not those accused of such offences are physically

assaulted en route to the police station. Whatever violence the police themselves may inflict on them is relatively mild in comparison to 'the mob justice' they receive prior to their arrival at the police station.

In the sixth, the police are unofficially used by a party in litigation to get the other party to do what it would otherwise not have done. Police involvement in such affairs may involve unrecorded and unofficial arrests, threats, detention or physical assault. What induces the involvement of police personnel in such transactions is the prospect of their making corrupt gains. An instance of police violence falling within this category is offered by the following:

Two police officers in Kumasi alleged to have unlawfully detained a suspect for 73 days in police cells in a civil case without bail, have been sued one million cedis for assault, unlawful detention and false imprisonment. The policemen, D.S.P. Okine and Sgt. Norman, both of Zongo Police, are said to have been used by one Mrs. Monica Osei to retrieve a debt of 567 dollars from Mr. Yaw Barfoe.²⁴

An instance of the seventh type is offered by the story of a police recruit who accidentally shot at a colleague of his.²⁵ An example of the last type of police violence in our typology is offered by an incident in May 1979 in which a policeman fatally shot at a

university student and wounded two others who had expressed misgivings at his interpretation of what constituted a disturbance of public peace. Unlike the sixth type where police involvement is at the instigation of an interested party, in this last type, their involvement is on their own volition and incidents of this type involve only the police and the victims of their violence.

The third, fourth and seventh types apart, the usual venue for acts of police violence, paradoxically, is the police station. It should also be stated that police violence in Ghana does not involve ^{the} use of sophisticated gadgets and torture equipments. Physical assault constitutes the normal (though not the sole) form of police violence. The gun, the truncheon, armoured cars, and tear-gas seem to be about all the equipments the police in Ghana may utilise when they resort to violence. With the exception of the truncheon, however, the ordinary policeman does not have easy access to those equipments.²⁶

A word need also be said on police verbal behaviour whilst enacting violence on their victims. The second and third types of police violence apart, the police tend to be verbally active when visiting violence on their victims. With regard to the first type, the police, in aggressive and moralising tones, repetitively exhort their victims to 'talk true',²⁷ though vituperative language is not entirely excluded. Threats, intimidation, mockery, blackmail and insults usually accompany almost all the other types of police violent

behaviour. Where such violence takes place at the police station, the vast majority of police functionaries are actually uninvolved and seem unconcerned whilst the violence lasts. Police violence, both at their station and elsewhere, are perpetrated almost exclusively by male police functionaries.

Conclusions

Occasional resort to violence has been shown to mark police functioning in post-colonial Ghana. Indeed, this is neither peculiar to Ghana nor to any other state for that matter. Neither does that fact necessarily indicate that Ghana has been, or is, a police state. Police violence has also been shown to be purposive and goal-directed. Factors which predispose, or motivate the police towards such violence have been identified. So have the nature and manifestation of such violence. The point has as well been made that police violence is not always illegal and unofficial. The aura of legitimacy and official (though not necessarily social) approval mark those instances of police violence where the police are so impelled either by the victim's prior resort to unlawful force, or by an obvious incapacity or failure of peaceful alternatives to halt tumultuous or socially disruptive occurrences. Police violence towards rioters illustrates this legitimate usage of the coercive power of police establishments.

It has, however, been established that other forms of violence exist beyond this legitimate and defensible use of violence. Illegal

and unofficial resort to violence by the police are occasioned (or even impelled) by organizational and technical inadequacies marking the police establishment in Ghana. Technical outlays for effective and efficient policing in Ghana are grossly inadequate. Worse still, quite a substantial portion of the little that is available is either obsolete or in rather bad shape. Scientific and technical equipments are indispensable for efficient policing in the contemporary era; and the serious inadequacies of Ghana's police in these areas give rise to a frustration of police functionaries in their efforts to meet legitimate social expectations made of them. In the event, violence sometimes offers them a way out of their dilemma. The inadequate wage-levels and inflationary spiral in the economy serve as other pertinent variables in making for police resort to violence. Virtually all workers, policemen included, are compelled by prevalent economic difficulties to find means of earning kickbacks or some other income to augment their grossly inadequate and unrealistic salaries. Ineffective administrative organizations and rules; inadequate specialization of jobs, poor training facilities, recruitment policies which make for an enlistment of considerable numbers of people ill-suited for police work, and low morale within police ranks are all problems within the police organization which induce occasional violence in its personnel. In addition, the small numbers of the police relative to the magnitude of their task does not particularly encourage police resort to non-violent but

painstaking methods of crime investigation.

Unauthorized and illegal violence on the part of the police are sometimes directed towards the realization of such organizational goals as the apprehension of criminals or the 'extraction' of information or of statements of confession from evigently guilty suspects. At other times too, unauthorised and illegal violence is meant either to avert a possible disturbance of the public peace or to restore 'law and order'. Lastly, it could also be directed towards acts of police revenge or their show of authority.

Police use of force, then, does not depend on any one factor as such, but rather on a wide variety of predisposing factors. In some of these, police motivations are reinforced by their expectation of bribes or such other rewards.

Conditions of police encounter with victims of their violence are also pertinent in explaining the phenomenon of police violence. The police normally resort to violence in their bid to assert authority towards securing control over situations they are expected to handle; or they do so to secure deference to their authority where such authority is being challenged. They may also take to violence as part of efforts to outwit those bent on frustrating the successful pursuit of their professional assignments; or in a bid to earn some private gain for themselves. The marginalized segments of Ghanaian society tend to

be the likeliest victims of police violence. This segment embraces the illiterate, rural folks, the unemployed, and the urban lumpen-proletariat.

Paradoxically, the police station is quite a significant venue for the perpetration of police violence. The police categorises people they encounter at their station into complainants, informers, offenders, or suspects. In virtually all cases, the police view victims of their violence at the police station as either offenders or suspects.

It should, finally, be stated that prevalent cultural norms and practises in Ghana are also conducive to police violence. Popular perceptions of police functions regard them as extending beyond mere law enforcement and the keeping of public order. Sections of Ghana's population see the police as the embodiment of the might and authority of the state and tend to use various means to get police personnel to settle their various conflicts. Underlying that trend is the fact that the public is unclear about the differences between civil and criminal issues. The police enforce the state's criminal laws regardless of the willingness of the citizenry to be policed; and efforts are often made to get them deal similarly with non-criminal breaches of the moral order. Where such efforts succeed, the police may be compelled by the circumstances of the case to resort to some measure of violence.

The point should as well be made that police violence in post-colonial Ghana has colonial antecedents. Under the colonial epoch the police made considerable use of force; and that tradition has not been

entirely lost on the police in the contemporary era.²⁸

In a word, then, internal organizational and administrative inadequacies pertaining to the police set-up per se, coupled with definite historical, social and cultural factors identified above, account for the incidence of police violence in post-colonial Ghana.

NOTES

1. For two different concise reviews of this historiography, see David Killingray's short review of S.K. Ankama's Police History: Some Aspects In England and Ghana, in Ghana Studies Bulletin, No.1, January 1984; p. 20; and 'The Police and Society: A study of The Role of The Police in The Ghanaian Polity' a University of Ghana's unpublished M.A. thesis presented by Kumi Ansah-Koi; pp. 1 - 2.
2. The Pioneer of Monday, December 2, 1985 (No. 10,325) offers an example of such reports in its editorial piece: 'Some of the Police in their execution of their duties as peace officers are sometimes accused by some members of the public of being brutal towards we wish to point out that some of the low ranking officers are so arrogant, insulting and so ready to use their fists that one wonders whether they forget that they are also citizens of this land. It will not be necessary to cite any specific examples; one only needs to visit any Police Station and watch what sometimes happens to those at the 'counter-backs and in the cells'.
3. For purposes of clarity, violence is defined here as the use of considerable physical force against another person or group.
4. The Pioneer; op. cit.
5. Gunnar Myrdal, Asian Drama: An Inquiry Into The Poverty of Nations, Vol. 2 (New York) 1968, p. 896.
6. Goran Huden, 'Problems and Prospects of State Coherence', in State Versus Ethnic Claims: African Policy Dilemmas. edited by Donald Rothchild and Victor A. Clorunsula, Westview Press, 1983.
7. For the origins, nature, and impact of this decline, see Naomi Chazan, An Anatomy of Ghanaian Politics: Managing Political Recession 1969-1982, Westview 1983.
8. Act 350 of the Republic of Ghana, titled the Police Service Act, asserts, inter alia, that: 'It shall be the duty of the Police Service to prevent and detect crime, to apprehend offenders, and to maintain public order and the safety of persons and property'.
9. Encyclopaedia of The Third World, Revised Edition, Vol. 1, by George Thomas Kurian, London 1982, p. 663.
10. Ibid.

11. Examples of these include the vigilante's under Ghana's Third Republic, and People's Defence Committees under the Provisional National Defence Council rule.
12. It should be stressed that such behaviour is universal. Police organisations everywhere occasionally resort to violence. For examples of such violence in Britain, Pakistan, and the Philippines, see The Times, October 22, 1985, No. 62,275. Our focus on Ghana is in no way meant to imply that the incidence of such violence in Ghana is relatively high or in any way abnormal.
13. It can be contended that an imputation of objectives and motives to all acts of police violence is rather erroneous, and that some perpetrators of such violence may be giving vent in so doing to their sadistic orientations. The position of the present work, however, is that even when such is probably the case, the police still find rational objectives and motivations to serve as a pretext for their violence.
14. Kofi Awoonor, The Ghana Revolution, Background Account From A Personal Perspective, New York, 1984. See p. 26 for an instance involving the police.
15. Ibid., p. 62.
16. Daily Graphic, November 21, 1985. (No. 10,893), p. 8.
17. Ibid.
18. Ghanaian Times, June 10, 1983, p. 8.
19. Ibid.
20. Daily Graphic, May 2, 1957 (No. 2,058), p. 1.
21. J.K.E. Agovi, Ruling A Sovereign People, A Collection of Essays, Letters And Commentaries In The Mass Media, unpublished manuscript, Institute of African Studies, Legon.
22. See Act 350 of the Republic of Ghana, titled 'The Police Service Act'.
23. Ghanaian Times, September 7, 1985 (No. 8,610), p. 1.
24. People's Daily Graphic, November 30, 1984 (No. 10,591), p. 1.
25. Ghanaian Times, September 18, 1985, p. 3.

26. Ghanaian Times, May 8, 1979.
27. Pidgin for 'Speak the truth'.
28. The truncheon (called 'kotibaa' - often abbreviated to 'koti' - by the Akans and other ethnic groups in Ghana) was so distinct as a feature of the colonial police set-up that to date, the term 'koti' has remained a popular derisive name for the police in Ghana.