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Colonialism's Enduring Impact on Nigeria's National Development

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Abstract

This study critically examines the enduring impact of British colonial rule on Nigeria's political, economic, and socio-cultural development since independence in 1960. Using historical and documentary analytical approaches, the study explores how colonial administrative structures, economic policies, and social institutions established during the colonial period created patterns that persist in contemporary governance and development challenges. The colonial state introduced centralised political institutions, indirect rule, and artificial territorial boundaries that contributed to persistent ethnic tensions, political instability, and governance inefficiencies in post-colonial Nigeria. Economically, colonial policies oriented Nigeria's economy towards the export of primary commodities and dependence on external markets, thereby limiting industrial diversification and sustainable economic growth. Furthermore, the colonial education system and socio-cultural transformations produced elite structures and developmental inequalities that continue to influence social mobility and regional disparities. By situating Nigeria's present developmental challenges within the historical context of colonial rule, this paper argues that many structural constraints to national development are rooted in colonial legacies that were insufficiently reformed after independence. The article concludes that understanding these historical continuities is essential for formulating policies aimed at sustainable development, institutional reform, and national integration in contemporary Nigeria.

Keywords: Colonialism; national development; post-colonial theory; governance; Nigeria; colonial legacy

Introduction

The colonisation of what became the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria by Britain was a gradual process that began in 1851. Britain subsequently unified the Lagos Colony and Protectorate with the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1906, establishing the Southern Protectorate with Lagos as its administrative centre. In that same year, the Northern Protectorate was created and Frederick D. Lugard was entrusted with organising its governance. He encountered a comparatively well-established political structure rooted in the Sokoto Caliphate — the product of the Islamic jihad of Uthman dan Fodio — which he converted to British administrative purposes by incorporating the emirs and their officials as agents of colonial rule. In the Southern Protectorate, no such pre-existing centralised structure existed, and colonial administrators were compelled to construct an administrative framework largely from scratch. It was again Lugard who effected the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates of Nigeria, an assignment he executed on 1 January 1914.

Nation-building and development, as Afigbo (2006) defines them, constitute the search for a collective identity co-extensive with the territorial boundaries of a nation-state — an identity that becomes the basis of consensus, solidarity, and a shared acceptance of a patterned normative order. Afigbo further argues that nation-building consists of five interconnected elements: territory, people, institutions and systems (encompassing family, economy, religion, law, and socio-political organisation), the technology of the society, and the ideas and ideologies that give meaning and legitimacy to all other elements.

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to critically examine: (a) how colonial administrative structures shaped post-independence governance; (b) the role of colonial education policy in deepening ethnic and regional inequalities; (c) the impact of colonial political engineering on Nigeria's democratic culture and national integration; and (d) the lasting structural consequences of colonial economic policies on Nigeria's development trajectory. The paper argues that many of the structural constraints that have impeded Nigeria's national development since independence are rooted in colonial institutions and policies that were insufficiently reformed

after 1960. Understanding these historical continuities is therefore essential for designing effective policies aimed at addressing Nigeria's contemporary development challenges.

Methodology

This study adopts a historical and documentary analytical approach. It draws on a critical review of primary and secondary sources including colonial administrative records, constitutions, policy documents, and nationalist correspondence, as well as an extensive body of scholarly literature on Nigerian history, post-colonial theory, political economy, and development studies. The analytical strategy involves identifying, describing, and interpreting the structural linkages between colonial-era policies and post-independence developmental outcomes in Nigeria. The study is primarily qualitative and interpretive in orientation. Its scope is bounded by the formal colonial period (1851–1960) and its legacies through to the early twenty-first century. The study acknowledges that colonial legacy is one among several factors shaping Nigeria's development, and that post-independence leadership choices and global economic forces also carry significant explanatory weight.

Theoretical Framework

Post-colonial scholarship argues that the end of formal colonial rule does not necessarily imply the end of colonial influence. Rather, colonial legacies persist through inherited institutions, economic dependencies, and socio-cultural transformations that shape the structure and functioning of post-colonial states (Ashcroft et al. 2002). This perspective provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the historical roots of contemporary developmental challenges in Nigeria.

The development of post-colonial theory is associated with several influential scholars who examined the ideological, psychological, and structural consequences of colonial domination. Fanon (1963) argued that colonialism created deep psychological and social distortions within colonised societies, influencing identity formation and political leadership in the

post-independence era. Fanon maintained that colonial structures often persist in newly independent states because political elites inherit and reproduce colonial institutions rather than transforming them. Similarly, Said (1978) emphasised the ideological dimensions of colonial domination through the concept of Orientalism, describing how colonial powers constructed knowledge systems that justified domination and shaped perceptions of colonised societies. These knowledge structures influenced governance models, educational systems, and policy priorities in many post-colonial states, including Nigeria.

Homi K. Bhabha introduced the concept of hybridity to explain how colonial encounters produced complex cultural and institutional mixtures. According to Bhabha, colonial rule did not simply impose foreign systems but created hybrid political and social arrangements that continue to influence post-colonial governance structures. Within the African context, scholars such as Rodney (1972) and Ake (1981, 1996) extended post-colonial analysis to examine how colonial economic systems and political institutions undermined the developmental capacity of African states. Rodney's argument that Europe systematically underdeveloped Africa through resource extraction and trade dependency remains a foundational reference point for this study.

Spivak (1988) further enriched post-colonial theory by drawing attention to the silencing of subaltern voices within colonial knowledge production — a dimension particularly relevant to understanding how marginalised ethnic minorities in Nigeria have been historically excluded from national decision-making processes. Taken together, these theoretical contributions provide the analytical scaffolding for examining how colonialism's institutional, economic, and cultural legacies continue to shape Nigeria's developmental trajectory.

Conceptual Clarification

Colonialism

Colonialism refers broadly to a system of political domination in which a powerful state establishes control over another territory, exploiting its resources and governing its people for the benefit of the colonising power. Rodney (1972) describes colonialism as a form of imperial ex-

pansion involving the political conquest of territories and the restructuring of their economies to serve the interests of colonial powers. Similarly, Fanon (1963) characterises colonialism as a system of domination that transforms the social, economic, and cultural structures of colonised societies, producing lasting inequalities and psychological consequences. In Africa, colonialism involved the imposition of European political authority, economic systems, and administrative institutions over indigenous societies. In the case of Nigeria, colonial rule was formally consolidated by Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, following the territorial demarcations of the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference. Colonial administration introduced centralised governance structures, indirect rule through traditional authorities, and an export-oriented economic system designed primarily to supply raw materials to European industries.

National Development

National development refers to the process through which a country improves the economic, political, and social well-being of its citizens. It encompasses economic growth, institutional development, technological advancement, improved living standards, and the equitable distribution of resources. Ake (1996) argues that development should be understood not merely as economic growth but as the transformation of social structures and institutions to improve the quality of life for the majority of citizens. Development therefore involves expanding human capabilities, strengthening governance systems, and promoting inclusive participation in national life. In Nigeria, national development has been a central policy objective since independence in 1960, with successive governments seeking to promote economic growth, political stability, and social progress. Development outcomes have, however, been persistently uneven due to structural constraints inherited from the colonial era, including economic dependency, regional disparities, and institutional weakness.

Colonial Legacy

Colonial legacy refers to the enduring political, economic, social, and cultural effects of colonial rule that persist in post-independence societies. These legacies manifest in institutional

arrangements, economic structures, administrative practices, and social identities shaped during the colonial period. Post-colonial scholars argue that many contemporary challenges faced by African states can be traced to these inherited structures. Rodney (1972) argues that colonial economic policies reorganised African economies to serve external interests, creating patterns of dependency that continued after independence. Such legacies are observable across multiple dimensions of Nigerian national life: politically, colonial administrative systems established centralised governance structures and reinforced regional divisions that continue to influence political competition; economically, colonial policies encouraged export commodity production while limiting industrial development, resulting in structural dependence on external markets; and socially, the colonial education system produced a Westernised elite that assumed leadership of the post-colonial state while often reproducing colonial institutional practices.

Empirical Literature Review

A substantial body of scholarly literature has investigated the relationship between colonial legacies and Nigeria's political economy, governance structures, and development outcomes. This section reviews the most significant contributions.

One of the earliest and most influential studies is Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), in which Rodney argues that colonialism systematically restructured African economies to serve European interests through resource extraction and trade dependency. In the case of Nigeria, colonial economic policies emphasised export-oriented cash crop production — including cocoa, palm oil, and groundnuts — while actively discouraging industrial development. This entrenched a commodity-dependent economy whose structural characteristics continue to shape Nigeria's development challenges.

Ake (1981), in *A Political Economy of Africa*, contends that colonialism fundamentally distorted African political and economic systems. Colonial governance structures, Ake argues, were designed primarily for control and resource extraction rather than development, with the result that post-independence African states inherited weak institutions and centralised administrative systems that have often hindered democratic governance and sustainable development.

Ake (1996) extends this argument in *Democracy and Development in Africa*, contending that the democratic deficits visible in many African states are in significant part products of colonial institutional design.

Acemoglu et al. (2001) provide important cross-national empirical evidence that extractive colonial institutions tend to produce long-term developmental challenges. Their comparative research demonstrates that where colonial administration prioritised resource extraction over inclusive economic institutions, post-colonial states have consistently experienced weaker economic performance and more persistent inequality — a finding that resonates strongly with the Nigerian case.

Hopkins (1973), in *An Economic History of West Africa*, provides historical evidence that colonial economic policies integrated Nigeria into the global capitalist system primarily as a supplier of raw materials. This external orientation limited domestic industrialisation and reinforced economic dependency on global commodity markets, a structural condition that persists in modified form to the present day.

Ekeh (1975) introduced the influential concept of the 'two publics' in African political culture, arguing that colonial rule created a bifurcation between the primordial public — associated with ethnic and communal loyalties — and the civic public, associated with the state and formal institutions. This division has contributed to governance challenges, widespread corruption, and weak public accountability in post-colonial Nigeria, as citizens have tended to feel moral obligations to ethnic community but not to the impersonal state.

Davidson (1992) argues that colonial borders frequently grouped diverse ethnic communities into artificial political units, creating structural tensions that continue to influence political instability and national integration challenges across Africa. Cooper (2002) further emphasises that colonial administrations established centralised bureaucratic systems not designed to promote inclusive development but rather to maintain imperial control, with the consequence that many post-colonial governments inherited administrative structures poorly suited to delivering development outcomes.

Heldring and Robinson (2012) demonstrate that colonial infrastructure investments — rail-

ways, roads, and ports — were designed primarily to facilitate raw material exports rather than to promote balanced regional development, thereby entrenching geographic inequalities in economic capacity. In Nigeria, this pattern contributed to uneven economic development between the coastal south and the interior north. Nnoli (1980), in *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*, highlights how colonial administrative policies intensified ethnic consciousness and political competition through divide-and-rule strategies, laying the foundation for many of the ethnic and political conflicts that have characterised post-independence governance.

More recently, Izom and Kombo (2023) examined the impact of British colonial economic policies on Nigeria's post-independence development through documentary analysis, finding that colonial policies prioritised extraction for the benefit of the colonial power and created long-term economic distortions and external market dependency. Similarly, Adalikwu-Obisike and Obisike (2019) demonstrate how colonial agricultural policies evolved into neo-colonial economic relations after independence, reinforcing Nigeria's dependence on a narrow range of primary commodities and contributing to persistent development challenges.

Taken together, this scholarship demonstrates that colonialism has had a profound and enduring impact on Nigeria's national development. Colonial economic structures, political institutions, and administrative policies created structural conditions that continue to shape Nigeria's development challenges. These historical legacies offer a significant — though not exclusive — explanation for persistent problems of institutional weakness, economic dependency, uneven regional development, and ethno-political tension.

The Amalgamation of 1914 and Its Developmental Consequences

Nigeria's difficulties in nation-building can be traced in significant part to the 1914 amalgamation, a policy that artificially unified diverse regions and ethnic groups. Significant differences existed between the peoples of the Northern and Southern Protectorates with regard to language, religion, and cultural practices, even though Islam enjoyed broad acceptance in the Northern Protectorate. For the amalgamation to have been meaningful in terms of nation-building, the process would have needed to allow for gradual social and political integration.

Instead, only governmental services were amalgamated. The two societies were deliberately kept apart, chiefly because the British were pursuing their own goals, which most certainly did not include the promotion of Nigerian unity (Ikime 2006). As a consequence, there emerged a deep North-South dichotomy in Nigerian national life that would prove difficult to overcome after independence.

The structural asymmetry created by the amalgamation was compounded by subsequent colonial administrative decisions. In 1939, the colonial government reorganised the Southern Protectorate, splitting it into Eastern and Western groups of provinces, ostensibly on the grounds that no historical or cultural unity existed to keep the South intact. This argument sat uncomfortably against the fact that the Northern section was itself riddled with cultural, religious, and linguistic plurality — a reality that colonial policy chose to suppress rather than acknowledge. The practical effect of this reorganisation was that while the North was accorded a semblance of administrative unity, the South was denied the same opportunity, with lasting consequences for national political balance.

Colonial Education Policy and Its Inequalities

Colonial education policy produced severe and lasting inequalities between the regions of Nigeria. In general, neither the missionaries nor the colonial authorities were interested in producing high-level professional manpower. Their objective was the production of low-level religious ministries and clerical staff for commercial houses and the government bureaucracy. Even in the South, where education was not formally inhibited, the colonial authorities were reluctant to provide substantial government assistance to voluntary agency schools.

In the predominantly Muslim areas of the North, Christian missionaries were not tolerated, and Western education was accordingly limited to non-Muslim parts of the region. By the eve of independence in 1957, the consequences of this policy divergence were stark: the South had 13,473 primary schools and 176 secondary schools, with 2,343,317 and 28,208 pupils respectively, while the North had only 2,080 primary schools and 18 secondary schools, with 185,484 and 3,643 pupils respectively (Nnoli 1980). The percentage of the population with

four or more years of formal education stood at approximately 10.8 per cent in the East, 10.7 per cent in the West, 1.4 per cent in the non-Muslim North, and just 0.7 per cent in the Muslim North.

These disparities had far-reaching consequences. Since Muslim schools did not prepare their pupils for modern professional occupations, workers for postal, telegraphic, and railway services, as well as commercial messengers and clerks, were predominantly drawn from the South and the non-Muslim areas of the North (Hatch 1971). When the administration began recruiting local staff for the colonial bureaucracy, applicants from the North were required to meet lower educational qualifications than their Southern counterparts for equivalent positions — an accommodation driven not by merit but by the educational inequalities that colonial policy had itself created. This situation bred considerable inter-regional disharmony that would intensify after independence.

Colonial education policy also served explicit political purposes. Frederick Lugard excluded the Nigerian educated elite from the Nigerian Council, preferring Nigerian interests to be represented by traditional rulers — the Alaafin of Oyo, the Sultan of Sokoto, the Emir of Kano, and Chief Dogho Numa of the Benin-Delta area. Hugh Clifford, Lugard's successor from 1919, was hostile to the demands of the National Congress of British West Africa and ensured, through the 1922 Constitution, that the elective principle was restricted to Lagos and Calabar, effectively excluding the Northern Protectorate from constitutional participation. These decisions retarded the development of a broad-based political culture and contributed to the deep inequalities that would characterise post-colonial political competition.

Colonial Political Engineering and Governance Challenges

Colonial rule left a complex and largely dysfunctional political inheritance. The regional administrative structure introduced through the 1945 Richards Constitution — which created three regions aligned with broad ethnic divisions — institutionalised a federal framework in which no region was genuinely balanced against the others. The Northern Region contained approximately 55 per cent of the country's total population, placing it in a commanding position

to dominate federal politics by virtue of demographic weight alone. At the Ibadan Constitutional Conference of 1951, the Northern Region was accordingly allocated one half of the total number of seats in the House of Representatives, a provision it threatened to renegotiate by secession if challenged. Conversely, when the Western Region threatened to secede at the 1953 London Conference over the status of Lagos, it became apparent that regional interests were consistently prioritised over national cohesion — a dynamic that colonial policy had cultivated rather than discouraged.

The formation of Nigeria's first political parties reflected and deepened these regional divisions. The National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC), founded in 1944 and subsequently dominated by the Igbo under Nnamdi Azikiwe, drew support primarily from the Eastern Region. The Action Group (AG), which emerged from the Egbe Omo Oduduwa cultural organisation founded by Obafemi Awolowo in 1945, was dominated by the Yoruba of the Western Region. The Northern People's Congress (NPC), which coalesced from a fusion of Northern social and political associations and held its first convention in December 1949, was dominated by the Hausa-Fulani of the Northern Region. The dominance of the three major ethnic nations in their respective regional parties meant that national politics became, in effect, ethnic competition conducted at the federal level.

The negative consequences of ethnically constituted parties became rapidly evident. The 1951 indirect elections, the 1953 elections, and the 1959 federal elections were all attended by widespread irregularities — vote-buying, electoral violence, and manipulation of results. British colonial officials were not passive observers: in the Northern Region, officials working under Bryan Sherwood Smith actively assisted the NPC in preparing its manifesto and electoral strategy, ensuring the political dominance of a party regarded as less radical and more amenable to continued British interests (Ikime 2006). The normalisation of electoral malpractice in this formative period established a political culture in which elections were instruments of ethnic mobilisation rather than democratic expression — a legacy whose consequences have persisted through successive electoral cycles in independent Nigeria.

Colonialism and Ethnic Divisions

Another major problem that colonial rule created was the intensification of ethnic consciousness and the politicisation of ethnic identity. Before the establishment of colonial rule, the peoples inhabiting what became Nigeria were identified primarily by sub-ethnic and community names — Oyo, Ijebu, Egba, Owu, Awka, Orlu, Izzi, Kano, Daura, Zaria, Katsina, Isoko, Ijaw, Urhobo, and many others. It was with the advent of colonialism that collective identities came to be attached to groups of peoples sharing a common language, and larger pan-ethnic identities such as Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo were consolidated and politically activated (Ikime 2006).

Complementing this new linguistic identity was the emergence of ethnic associations intended to promote the social, educational, and cultural activities of ethnic groups. Some Nigerians with foresight warned against the growing power of these associations, arguing that the greatest need of Nigerians was to evolve a national selfhood and foster coordination that would build a strong national consciousness. This advice went largely unheeded, partly because rural-to-urban migration and the search for employment outside one's homeland made ethnic solidarity increasingly relevant to ordinary Nigerians, particularly after the promulgation of the 1945 and 1951 constitutions.

The founding of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa by Obafemi Awolowo in 1945 and the hostile response it provoked from the NCNC and its affiliated press exemplified the intensity of inter-ethnic competition. Rivalry between Azikiwe and Awolowo as the chief political gladiators of the South drew the Hausa-Fulani into the fray to protect Northern interests, and ethnic antagonism became a defining feature of Nigerian political life. Minority ethnic nationalities bore the greatest cost of this competition: despite constituting approximately 70 per cent of the country's total population in aggregate, their calls for the amelioration of their marginalisation through the creation of states went unheeded even after a commission of inquiry in 1958 confirmed the legitimacy of their fears (Ikime 2006). At independence in 1960, the country was as disunited as it had been on the eve of amalgamation. As one scholar observed, colonialism made Nigeria

but failed to make Nigerians — and that onerous task was left to successor regimes to grapple with.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the legacy of British colonial rule continues to shape Nigeria's political, economic, and social structures long after independence in 1960. Colonial administration introduced institutions, economic systems, and governance frameworks designed primarily to serve imperial interests rather than indigenous development. These structures created patterns of economic dependency, regional inequality, weak industrial foundations, and governance challenges that still influence Nigeria's developmental efforts in the twenty-first century.

Colonial policies such as indirect rule, the export-oriented economy, artificial amalgamation without genuine integration, educational imbalance, and the deliberate cultivation of regional political parties contributed to persistent political instability, ethnic tensions, and uneven development across regions. While colonialism did introduce certain administrative structures, modern educational institutions, and infrastructural foundations, these were largely shaped by the logic of resource extraction rather than sustainable national development. As a result, Nigeria's post-colonial governments have had to navigate complex institutional and structural challenges for which independence alone could not provide solutions.

Nevertheless, Nigeria possesses significant human and natural resources that can be harnessed for development if appropriate structural reforms are implemented. Understanding the colonial roots of many contemporary developmental challenges is essential for designing policies that address structural imbalances, promote inclusive national integration, and overcome the political culture of ethnic competition that colonialism helped to construct. In accordance with the imperial doctrine of *divide et impera*, colonial rule in Nigeria promoted those aspects that divided Nigerians and kept them apart. Reversing this legacy requires conscious, sustained, and institutionally grounded efforts — the kind that have so far been fitful and incomplete.

Recommendations

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, this paper advances the following policy recommendations for consideration by Nigerian policymakers, development partners, and civil society organisations.

First, inherited colonial administrative structures should be comprehensively reformed to promote transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance. Strengthening democratic institutions and reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies will help to address governance weaknesses rooted in colonial administrative design. This should include the reform of centralised revenue allocation mechanisms that reproduce colonial patterns of resource dependency.

Second, policies that promote national unity, inclusive political participation, and equitable resource distribution should be strengthened to reduce the socio-political tensions rooted in colonial divide-and-rule strategies. National integration must move beyond symbolic rhetoric to encompass structural measures that address the historic marginalisation of minority ethnic groups.

Third, Nigeria should invest substantially in expanding access to quality education, research, and skills training in order to overcome the structural developmental gaps created during the colonial era and to foster innovation-driven economic growth. In particular, the persistent educational inequalities between regions — themselves a product of differential colonial education policies — require targeted interventions.

Fourth, policymakers should actively work to incorporate indigenous governance structures, local knowledge systems, and community participation into development planning, so as to ensure that development strategies are culturally grounded, contextually appropriate, and sustainable. This is both a corrective to the colonial marginalisation of indigenous knowledge and a pragmatic response to the limitations of externally derived development models.

Fifth, post-colonial educational curricula and public discourse should more systematically address the history of colonial rule and its developmental consequences, so that Nigerians develop a clear-eyed understanding of the structural inheritance they are working to transform.

Historical awareness is not merely an academic virtue; it is a prerequisite for effective national development policy.

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