

ETHNIC AND REGIONAL POLITICS IN NIGERIA: COLONIAL AND POST COLONIAL PERIODS REVIEWED

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Abstract

The paper titled “Ethnic and Regional Politics in Nigeria, Colonial and Post-Colonial Period Reviewed” explores the complex dynamics of ethnic and regional politics in Nigeria during the colonial and postcolonial periods. It examines the manipulative policies of the British colonial administration that exacerbated ethnic divisions and the subsequent impact on Nigeria’s post-independence political landscape. The paper analyzes the emergence of major ethnic and regional political parties and discusses the challenges of ethnic and regional competition for resources and representation. It concludes by calling for further research to address the issues stemming from these dynamics and to foster a more inclusive and cohesive political system in Nigeria.

Key words: Ethnic , Regional politics , colonial and post colonial.

Numerous nations grapple with internal divisions, notably in Africa, attributable to the flawed foundations laid during the era of European colonial rule. Ethnic and regional politics in Nigeria dates back to the inception of the country by the British colonial government to advance their imperialist agenda. According to Ben Nwabueze:

The effect of the 1914 amalgamation, indeed its purpose, is to dichotomise the country from its inception; to keep its northern and southern segments apart by an imaginary, artificially created boundary line, and consequently to disunite them in interest, attitude, outlook and vision.¹

This chapter will review ethnic and regional politics in Nigeria. It will be examined under two sub-headings, namely, the Colonial legacy: shaping ethnic and regional identities, and Post-colonial era: political transitions and ethnic dynamics.

Colonial legacy: shaping ethnic and regional identities

The colonial legacy in Nigeria has cast a profound and enduring impact on the nation's social fabric, notably shaping ethnic and regional identities in ways that resonate through the contemporary landscape. This analysis delves into the intricate dynamics of colonial influence, unravelling its multifaceted implications on the formation and evolution of ethnic and regional identities within the Nigerian context.

At the onset of British colonial rule in the late 19th century, Nigeria existed as a confluence of diverse ethnic groups, each with distinct cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds. The colonial administration, driven by imperialistic motives, implemented policies that inadvertently exacerbated existing differences

and sowed the seeds for the delineation of ethnic and regional identities. For instance, the arbitrary drawing of colonial boundaries, often without regard for pre-existing ethnic affiliations, fostered a landscape of administrative convenience rather than cultural coherence. This spatial restructuring engendered a legacy of ethnic pluralism, as disparate groups found themselves within newly defined territorial confines, contributing to the complexity of Nigeria's post-colonial identity mosaic. These artificial boundaries inadvertently sowed the seeds of ethnic identity with major ethnic groups – the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo – dominating specific regions and vying for political influence. It also exacerbated ethnic cleavages between each of these majority group and the minorities in the regions of their dominance.² Thus, aggravated the “us” *versus* “them” syndrome: Northerner *versus* Southerner; Muslim *versus* Christian, Hausa-Fulani *versus* Yoruba *versus* Igbo, Fulani *versus* Kanuri, Igbo *versus* Ijaw, et cetera.

It was also widely believed, among southerners, that structural imbalance created by the colonial government was devised to perpetuate northern rule.

According to Richard Akinjide, “There are documents in the archive in London which showed that Lugard deliberately created things so that the north will be dominant and the south will be subservient”.³ For instance, the British colonialist created a structure that gave Northern Nigeria 79 percent of the land area and 53.6 percent of the population of the country⁴ (See table 1 below). In the words of Ben Nwabueze:

As one entity (Northern Nigeria), the extent of its territorial area was less than what it is today. It was in 1918... that Fredrick Lugard, as Governor-General of the unified entity, extended its (North) territorial area south-eastwards to include a good part of the territory that previously lay in the eastern province of Southern Nigeria. But he rejected demands for a similar revision of the boundary between the North and the South-West, although the people of Ilorin and Kabba divisions in the North belong to the same tribal stock – Yoruba – as those in the South-West. The only concession by the British colonial government of Nigeria was the transfer of the tiny community of Otun from the North to the South-West in 1936.⁵

Table 1 Demographic Variables

Region	Population	Land size Km Sq.	Pop. Density
North	92,713,543	719,435.0 0	12 9
South	80,266,572	190,455.0 0	42 1
National	172,980,115	909,890	

Source: NBS (2015)

The imposition of indirect rule further entrenched ethno-regional disparities. The British colonial authorities, in their quest for efficient governance, relied on pre-existing traditional structures to administer local communities. An essential part of this system was the local council, and in the Nigerian circumstances where tribalism was a fundamental factor in social living, each small group started asking for its own local council within its own tribe, thus influencing the fragmentation of the country.⁶ While indirect rule approach facilitated administrative control, it concurrently accentuated ethnic distinctions and bolstered the influence of local rulers, deepening fault lines that would reverberate in the post-colonial era.

Economic policies implemented during colonial rule also played a pivotal role in shaping regional identities. The concentration of economic activities, such as agriculture and mining, in specific regions contributed to disparate development trajectories. Regions endowed with exploitable resources witnessed economic growth, fostering a sense of distinct regional identity, while others lagged behind, fuelling

perceptions of marginalization. The differential colonial economic policies ensured that the Southern region, especially the Lagos seaport area, was relatively more advanced economically than the Northern region, while Southern cities became the hub of the country's commercial and industrial activities.⁷

In addition, there was also the phenomenon of urbanization. Rapidly growing urban hubs like Enugu, Calabar, Kano, Jos and Lagos became hubs of potential, attracting large numbers of people from diverse linguistic, religious, and socio-cultural backgrounds. Consequently, these burgeoning cities exhibited both ethnic diversity and, simultaneously, a unique blend of ethnic integration and distinct cultural awareness. However, despite the coexistence of individuals from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds in urban centers, one might have anticipated a significant degree of ethnic understanding and tolerance to develop. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Intense competition for scarce employment opportunities hindered interethnic understanding and harmony. Proximity fuelled tension, fear of dominance, and reinforced prejudices, especially during the decolonization period, leading to a swift decline in any existing traces of ethnic nationalism or tribal jingoism.⁸ In addition, the urban environment laid the foundation for the springing up of ethnically-based unions or associations, such as the *Ibibio*

State Union, *Igbo State Union*, *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* and the *Jamiyan Mutanem Arewa* among others.

The introduction of Western education further catalyzed the crystallization of ethnic and regional identities. Educational institutions, established primarily in urban centers, inadvertently became conduits for cultural assimilation and the dissemination of Western values. However, the British colonial policies on education and on missionary evangelists were disintegrative. The Lugardian policy for education in Northern Nigeria helped in fixating the segregation of the Muslim emirate from their non-Muslim relations in the south. Even within the administrative territory, known as the northern Nigerian protectorate, Lugard, armed with this segregationist and parochial ideology advocated and tried to provide separate education for the Muslim and so-called 'pagan' sectors of the population.⁹ Christian mission were not allowed in the Muslim North, and thus there was no Christian established schools in the Muslim North; and the colonial government did not establish government schools, except few.¹⁰ Again, the British administrators killed the incentive for learning English by making Hausa the medium of intercourse with Northerners. British official even learned Hausa. The results were that:

In 1906 Southern Nigeria had 126 primary schools and 1 secondary school, as against 1 primary school and no secondary school in the Northern Nigeria. In 1926 southern Nigeria had 18 secondary schools and 3,828 primary schools while Northern Nigeria had no secondary school only 123 primary school. In 1947, Southern Nigeria had 43 secondary schools while Northern Nigeria had 3 while in 1957 Southern Nigeria had 176 secondary schools and Northern Nigeria had 18.¹¹

The differential impact of colonial education policies ensured that the Northern region was educationally backward relative to the Southern region.

In addition, this striking contrast in the educational development between Northern and Southern Nigeria had a disintegrative and far reaching impact on nationalism in Nigeria. First, the absence of English-speaking educated class in Northern Nigeria in the early period necessitated the importation of thousands of southerners into the north as clerks and artisans. These created unnecessary jealousy and resulted later in the "northernization" policy.¹² The resultant emergence of educated elite, predominantly from specific regions, accentuated regional consciousness and contributed to the shaping of political landscapes along ethnic lines.

The colonial legacy's influence on Nigeria's political structure, as reflected in the post-independence federal system, has perpetuated ethno-regional dynamics. The allocation of resources and political power along regional lines has fuelled competition among ethnic groups, sometimes escalating into political and social tensions. Despite the 1914 amalgamation of Nigeria, the administrative individuality of the former separate territories was maintained. The colony of Lagos preserved its unique legal status, until the inauguration of the Macpherson constitution in 1951.¹³ More so, the Northern and Southern provinces was administrated by a separate lieutenant governor, reporting directing to the governor, and by a distinct colonial

bureaucracy. The officials of the two bureaucracies spoke different official languages. In the north it was Hausa; in the south it was English.¹⁴ According to B. Adediran:

By 1930, the colonial government set up the Hausa Translation Bureau, which later became the Northern Literature Agency and by 1955 became known as the Hausa Language Board. Earlier in 1952, the government of the Northern Region began an adult literacy programme in Hausa. By the middle 1950's the Hausa language became the official language of the North and the Northern minorities had adopted the language in conducting their local affairs.¹⁵

The legislative council was another institution that would serve as an integrative force. However, the British colonizer adapted a deliberate policy of excluding the educated elite from the government and the legislative council. The educated Nigerians have had the chance to travel, either in the process of acquiring education or in the quest for gainful employment in the civil service, and had therefore had national outlook which would have helped in national unity. Instead, the British preferred to deal with national rulers. In 1913 the Nigerian council was established as an advisory body, but the whole idea was abandoned in 1922 because the six national rulers appointed to it would not attend its meetings. In 1923, the council was reorganized to provide for four elected African members, and its purview was extended to include all southern Nigeria. This body endured until 1947 the people of the Northern provinces did not participate in the legislative council, except for the abortive Nigeria council.¹⁶

The advent of party politics compounded by the country's division into three geopolitical regions—East, North, and West— was a primary factor driving identity politics. As earlier noted, each region was predominantly inhabited by a major ethnic group, serving as both the residence for minority ethnic groups and a stronghold for the majority ethnic community. Moreover, each region was politically dominated by a specific party aligned with the majority ethnic group.¹⁷ This circumstance heightened ethnic divisions not only among the major ethnic groups but also between each major group and the minorities within the regions where they held sway. Political parties were formed along ethnic lines. For instance, in 1951, the leadership of the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* formed a political party, the Action Group. According to Ajasin Ajasin:

We decided that the party should be separated from the Egbe, members of the Egbe wishing to do so should join it, and people who were not members of the Egbe should be allowed to join the party provided that they embraced the political programme of the Egbe.¹⁸

Many traditional rulers identified with the Action Group because it grew out of the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa*, with an emphasis on cultural unity. On the other hand, many Yoruba youth supported the Action Group not for cultural reasons but for political participation.¹⁹ Similarly, the *Jamiyyar Mutanen Arewa* (JMA) formed by the Hausa-Fulani group in 1949 was transformed into the Northern People's Congress (NPC). Also, the National Congress of Nigeria and the Cameroons, later Citizens (NCNC), established in 1944 as a progressive party for the working class, quickly assumed the appearance of an Igbo ethnic party.

These developments laid the ground for identity politics in Nigeria, with many adverse effects. For instance, between 1950 and 1953, two significant conflicts unfolded between the North and South. The first transpired in 1950 during the Ibadan conference reviewing the Richards Constitution. The Northern delegates demanded 50 percent of seats in the proposed central House of Representatives and per capita revenue allocation, threatening separation if their wishes were not granted. The Eastern and Western delegations opposed this, resisting perpetual Northern control. The second conflict emerged in March 1953, when Anthony Enahoro proposed 1956 as Nigeria's self-government date. Northern members opposed, suggesting "as soon as practicable," leading to a Southern walk-out. The ensuing tension escalated with resignations and riots, prompting Northern demands for selfgovernment based on regional civil service Northernization and efficient local government. The meeting concluded with the adoption of an eight-point programme²⁰, namely:

1. Complete regional autonomy, except for defence, external affairs, customs and West African research institutions;
2. No central legislature or executive;
3. A central Agency, responsible for the exception in (1) and for any other matter delegated by a region;
4. This Agency to be at a neutral place, preferably Lagos;
5. The Agency to be non-political, with its composition, powers and responsibility defined by the constitutional order-in-council;
6. The railway, air services, electricity and coalmines to be run by independent statutory corporations, organized inter-regionally under experts, with minority representation of regional governments;
7. All revenues to be regional, except customs which would be collected at the port by the Central Agency and paid to the receiving region;
8. Each region to have a separate public service.

The inception of the 'northernization' policy, driven by the Sardauna's vision of 'One North, One Destiny' and aimed at consolidating the Northern region, marked an official schism between the North and the South. This policy prioritized "permanent employment to northerners, and then to expatriates or other West Africans, only in the last and inescapable resort to Southern Nigerians, who must be on terminal contract."²¹ Between 1954 and 1958, a total of two thousand, one hundred and forty-eight (2,148) Southerners faced job loss in the Northern public service due to the implementation of the northernization policy.²²

In conclusion, the colonial legacy in Nigeria has left an indelible imprint on the nation's identity landscape, significantly shaping ethnic and regional identities. The arbitrary drawing of boundaries, administrative policies, economic disparities, and the introduction of education collectively contributed to the intricate mosaic of Nigeria's diverse identities. Acknowledging and understanding this colonial legacy is imperative for navigating contemporary challenges and fostering a more cohesive and inclusive national identity.

Post-colonial era: political transitions and ethnic dynamics

The post-colonial era in Nigeria has been marked by intricate political transitions and the complex interplay of ethnic dynamics, shaping the nation's political landscape in profound ways. This analysis delves into the nuanced evolution of political transitions and the enduring influence of ethnic dynamics in Nigeria's post-colonial trajectory.

The attainment of independence in 1960 marked a pivotal moment in Nigeria's history, signalling the end of colonial rule and the emergence of a self-governing nation. However, the transition from colonial rule to self-rule was not without challenges, and the post-colonial political landscape was immediately confronted with the task of unifying a diverse array of ethnic groups under a single national identity. The First Republic (1960-1966) saw the establishment of a parliamentary system of government, but this period was characterized by regionalism and ethno-political tensions. The three major ethnic groups – the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo – each predominant in specific regions, vied for political influence. The federal structure, intended to accommodate regional diversity, inadvertently intensified ethnic competition for power and resources.

The political transition from the First Republic to military rule in 1966 was marked by a series of coups and counter-coups, reflecting the fragility of Nigeria's political institutions. The first military coup (15 January 1966) was tagged "Igbo coup" because most of the politicians and senior Army officers who were killed were from the North and the West, except a political leader and a senior army officer from the mid-west and the east respectively. More so, the eventual assumption of power by Gen. Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo, made the coup to be misunderstood as an ethnic-biased. Thus, the Northern military revenge in a counter coup of July 29, 1966, which began with the murder of Gen. Aguiyi Ironsi and over 300 military officers and men of Igbo origin, and escalated into the massacre of surprised and unsuspecting Igbo civilians in many towns.²³ The culmination of this instability was the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967-1970), also known as Nigerian Civil War, which arose partly from ethnic tensions and regional imbalances. The war left an indelible mark

on Nigeria, accentuating the need for a delicate balance between centralized authority and regional autonomy.

The subsequent military regimes, notably under leaders like Yakubu Gowon and later Murtala Muhammed, attempted to address the ethnic dynamics by introducing state-led initiatives such as the creation of states to foster administrative efficiency. However, these efforts were met with varying degrees of success, and ethnic considerations continued to influence political dynamics.

The transition to the Second Republic in 1979 marked a return to civilian rule. The adoption of a presidential system sought to provide a more stable political framework. However, ethnic politics persisted, with political parties often aligning along ethnic lines. For instance, the five political parties that were registered - National Party of Nigeria (NPN), United Party of Nigeria (UPN), Nigeria Peoples' Party (NPP), People's Redemption Party (PRP), and the Great Nigeria People's Party (GNPP) - were believed to be a reincarnation of the first generation political parties. According to H. Dlakwa "NPN was a reconstruction of NPC, the UPN that of AG, the NPP that of NCNC, while the PRP was a reincarnation of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU). The GNPP was a product of the split of NPP".²⁴

The ethos of second republic political parties is encapsulated in the ethnic predisposition of their leadership. From inception to the end of the second republic, the UPN represented the interest of the Yoruba faction of the Nigerian bourgeoisie. In the same manner, the NPN and the NPP represented the interest of the Hausa-Fulani and the Igbo interest, respectively.²⁵ The political landscape remained characterized by competition for power among the major ethnic groups, contributing to a cyclical pattern of political instability.

The prolonged military rule, particularly under General Ibrahim Babangida in the 1980s and early 1990s, further complicated the political transitions.

Babangida's administration introduced a series of political transitions and reforms, including the establishment of two-party systems. Despite these efforts, the manipulation of political processes and perceived favouritism toward certain ethnic groups fuelled discontent and heightened ethnic tensions. The derailment of the third republic ushered in a wave of ethnic nationalism in the nation. The nullification of the June 12, 1993, presidential election fuelled ethnic emotions, with claims that M. K. O. Abiola was denied the presidency due to his Yoruba ethnicity and southern origin. Consequently, Afenifere, a pan-Yoruba ethnic association, collaborated with the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) to advocate for Abiola's cause, leveraging the June 12, 1993, incident to stoke ethnic sentiments. Other ethnic cultural organisations, such as the *Ohanaeze Ndigbo*, the *Arewa* Consultative Forum, and the Movement for the Survival of *Ogoni* People (MOSOP), *et cetera* also heighten their advocacy for the enhancement of their ethnic's well-being.

The transition to the Fourth Republic in 1999 marked a return to civilian rule, yet the legacy of ethnic dynamics persisted. The political landscape remained fragmented along ethnic lines, and the winner-takes-all system intensified competition for political power. Ethno-regional considerations continued to shape political alliances, electoral outcomes, and policy decisions. The fourth republic also saw the active participation of ethnic-based unions in national politics. For instance, in response to the Sharia crisis in 2000, ethnic unions, like the *Ohanaeze Ndigbo*, the *Afenifere* and the Union of Niger Delta, under the umbrella of Southern Leaders, convened and opposed the implementation of Islamic law, Sharia. They restated Nigeria's secular nature, asserting that the adoption of Sharia contradicted the supremacy of the Constitution. According to the group:

For the benefit of the good people of Nigeria, we restate the supremacy of the Nigerian constitution over any other law. Therefore, the attempt by the Sharia states of the North to incorporate into our legal system, the Sharia deriving its authority solely from the Holy Quran is inconsistent with sections of the constitution of the Republic of Nigeria which prohibit the adoption of any one religion as a state religion.²⁶

The Federal Government of Nigeria, on February 29, 2000, banned the Sharia.²⁷ This was in line with the position widely advocated by the earlier mentioned ethnic unions.

The post-colonial era in Nigeria reflects a delicate dance between political transitions and ethnic dynamics. While the nation has witnessed shifts in governance structures and attempts to address ethnic imbalances, the underlying ethnic complexities persist. The challenge lies in forging a national identity that transcends ethnic affiliations, fostering inclusivity, and promoting a shared vision for the future. Acknowledging the historical interplay between political transitions and ethnic dynamics is essential for charting a course toward a more cohesive and unified Nigeria in the 21st century.

Table 2a: Some ethnically-based unions or association formed during the colonial period. .

Name of the Union	Date of formation	Ethnic-based of the union	Remark(s)
Edo National Union	1940s	Edo	
Egbe Omo Oduduwa	1945	Yoruba	Egbe Omo Oduduwa formed Action Group, a political party in 1951
Ibibio State union	1928	Ibibio	The first ethnically-based union in Nigeria.
Igbo State Union (ISU)	1944 1947	Igbo	Igbo Federated Union formed in 1944 was later converted to ISU in 1947.
Ijaw Tribal Union	1940s	Ijaw	
Itsekiri National Society	1940s	Itsekiri	
Jamiyyar Mutanem Arewa (JMA)	1949	Hausa-Fulani/Core North	Jamiyyar Mutanem Arewa (JMA) formed Northern People's Congress, a political party.
Urhobo Brotherly Society	1931	Urhobo	
United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC)	1949	Middle Belt region	Northern Nigeria Non-Muslim League (NNNML) formed in 1949 later metamorphosed to UMBC.

Source: Author's compilation

Table 2b: Some post-independence ethnically-based unions or associations.

Name of the Union	Date of formation	Ethnic-based of the union
Afenifere	1992	Yoruba
Arewa Consultative Forum	2000	Hausa-Fulani/core North
Middle Belt Forum (MBE)	Post-1999	Middle Belt region
North-East Consolidated Peoples Forum (NCPF)	Post-1999	North-East region

Ohanaeze Ndigbo	1976	Igbo
Pan-Niger Delta Forum (PANDEF)	Post-1999.	Niger Delta region

Source: Author's compilation

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