

Identity Imperialism and Nation Building: Governance, Corruption, and Separatism in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper studies how Nigeria's national unity, governance, and socioeconomic growth have been structurally weakened by the externally imposed identity that was a legacy of British colonialism. It also examines how this has fuelled ethnic polarisation, corruption, and separatist movements. Based on the Centre-Periphery and Psycho-Cultural Conflict theories, the study uses qualitative content analysis of secondary data to explain how imposed colonial identity impedes genuine nation-building and good governance. By methodically connecting identity imperialism to deficiencies in governance and development issues, this study closes a significant gap. The way that legal frameworks sustain identity fragmentation is further demonstrated by an analysis of the 1999 constitutional of Nigeria. The study concluded with evidence-based recommendations that highlight constitutional changes that promote fiscal federalism and inclusive national discourse as necessary conditions for long-term national development and cohesion.

Keywords: identity, identity imperialism, corruption, separatist agitations, colonialism

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Introduction

A group in which people share common essential attributes, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, religion or ethnicity may be differentiated by a unique taxonomy from other human members of the same society with whom they share nothing else in common except humanity. This differentiating taxonomy based on shared attributes is what this research refers to as Identity. Identity which is the distinguishing character of an individual or group is a decisive factor in politics (Jenkins, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Politics actually begins with identity as people take positions in the political process according to their own understanding of who they are amongst those that share common characteristics with them (Brubaker, 2004). Younge (2019) opines “I do believe that there is always identity in politics. None of us comes to politics from a vacuum – we arrive with affiliations that mould our worldview.” Thus, one who identifies as a proletariat tends to tailor political actions towards radicalism while one who identifies as bourgeoisie usually favours political actions that aim to maintain the status quo (Marx and Engels, 1848). The identity “woman” was enough to stop a section of the human population from active political participation for many centuries until 1920 when it became lawful for women to vote in the United States of America (Flexner & Fitzpatrick, 1996).

Identity is a multifaceted social construct shaping individual and collective consciousness, political behaviour, and societal cohesion (Galliher, Rivas-Drake & Dubow, 2017). A cohesive national identity promotes patriotism, which is foundational for effective governance

and sustainable development (Ariely, 2021). However, colonialism forcibly imposed identities on colonized peoples, interrupting organic identity formation and engendering socio-political fragmentation (Fanon, 1963).

Nigeria exemplifies this phenomenon. The British colonial amalgamation in 1914 merged over 250 ethnolinguistic groups into a single political entity without their consent, erecting an imposed Nigerian identity designed to facilitate imperial control and resource extraction (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). This action robbed a lot of Indigenous tribes and nations of their hitherto self-developed identities and gave them new ones. This externally imposed identity failed to engender genuine national unity, resulting instead in ethnic polarization, governance deficits, endemic corruption, and recurrent separatist agitations (Brookings, 2017; Brill, 2023). The Nigerian state is trapped in a crisis of forced belonging, which has increasingly precipitated conflicts of interest, ethnic polarization, and a lack of ingenuity and innovation in indigenous technology. This crisis largely originates from the British colonial project, which forcibly created “one Nigeria” by amalgamating diverse ethnic groups into a single political entity, thereby entrenching destructive divisions and creating channels for metropole exploitation (Conversation, 2014). The Conversation (2021) highlights that in a bid to safeguard the imposed Nigerian Identity, British colonial authorities, promulgated several policies between 1914 and 1960 designed to politically and economically control Nigerians and maintain influence even after independence.

Before Western colonialism, the groups that constitute modern Nigeria demonstrated significant signs of development tailored to their immediate needs and environment. Onipede (2010) notes that various regions of Nigeria had developed indigenous technologies in arts and crafts, blacksmithing, iron smelting, weaving, wood carving, canoe building, and brewing, which fostered economic self-reliance and met local demands. However, colonization, driven by the industrial revolution's demand for raw materials and markets, interrupted and ultimately stifled these indigenous developmental strides. The historical and contemporary underdevelopment of Nigeria is inseparable from imperialism and European economic domination, which laid the foundation for Nigeria's industrial stagnation (Eze, 2014). In addition, every sphere of the country has its share of Western connotation and influence, making it almost impossible for the nation to forge home grown development (The Conversation, 2021)

Furthermore, Western cultural, educational, artistic, linguistic, and religious influences permeate every sphere of Nigerian society, hindering the country's ability to foster home-grown development that commands respect and standing on the global stage (Eke, 2019). The European-fashioned Nigerian industrialists and political elites, often co-opted by colonial interests, have perpetuated this Western-influenced underdevelopment (Eke, 2019). These elites have promoted Western mores while portraying indigenous cultural and social values as archaic and anachronistic, thus deepening identity alienation (Eke, 2019).

Existing scholarship often treats Nigeria's governance challenges, ethnic conflicts, and

underdevelopment as discrete issues. This study fills a critical gap by operationalizing identity imperialism as a unifying explanatory framework linking these phenomena. In doing this, the following research questions are raised:

1. How has the externally imposed colonial identity structurally undermined national unity and patriotism in Nigeria?
2. In what ways has this imposed identity contributed to governance deficits, including corruption?
3. How do identity fractures fuel ethnic divisions and separatist movements?
4. How is the Nigerian constitutional framework implicated in perpetuating identity fragmentation?

By systematically exploring these questions through rigorous qualitative content analysis, this paper contributes novel insights into Nigeria's persistent developmental challenges and offers empirically grounded policy recommendations.

The paper is organized as follows: a comprehensive literature review and theoretical framework, detailed methodology, expansive empirical and analytical discussion, constitutional analysis, and evidence-based conclusions and recommendations.

Literature Review

The literature on identity, imperialism, and national development is rich and interdisciplinary, drawing from political science, sociology, psychology, and post-colonial studies. Central to understanding Nigeria's identity crisis is the recognition that identity is a socially constructed and fluid concept shaped by historical, cultural, and political forces (Galliher, Rivas-Drake & Dubow, 2017). Identity not only

defines who individuals and groups perceive themselves to be but also how they relate to others, thus serving as a critical factor in political mobilization and cohesion (Younge, 2019).

Frantz Fanon (1963) remains seminal in explicating the psychological effects of colonialism on identity formation. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes how colonial subjects internalize inferiority through imposed colonial identities, leading to alienation and conflict. This psycho-colonial trauma contributes to post-independence challenges in forging unified national identities in African states. Eric Hobsbawm (1992), in his work on invented traditions, highlights that nationalism and identity are often political constructs deployed by elites to serve specific agendas, a phenomenon observable in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria where ethnic loyalties were politicized and institutionalized.

The political theorist Mary Wollstonecraft's seminal work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) laid an early foundation for understanding the role of authentic identity and self-determination in political empowerment. Wollstonecraft argued that political rights and agency are inextricably linked to the recognition of one's authentic selfhood and inherent dignity. For her, the denial of political participation to women was rooted in social constructions that dehumanized and marginalized them. Extending this insight to colonized peoples, Wollstonecraft's emphasis on authentic identity foregrounds the political cost of imposed identities that delegitimize or erase indigenous self-understandings, thereby obstructing genuine political inclusion and agency. In the context of Nigeria, colonialism forcibly imposed

an alien national identity that suppressed indigenous identities and political structures, denying the colonized authentic self-determination, much as Wollstonecraft identified in gendered oppression (Wollstonecraft, 1792).

Contemporary political theorist Adolph Reed (1999) elaborates on this theme by emphasizing that political empowerment arises from the capacity of groups to define themselves authentically and act collectively to advance their interests. Reed critiques identity politics that are externally imposed or co-opted, arguing that authentic political agency depends on self-definition and the rejection of identities constructed by oppressive structures. He stresses that colonized and marginalized peoples are often deprived of this capacity, forced into identities serving colonial or neocolonial agendas. Reed's perspective is especially relevant to postcolonial Nigeria, where ethnic identities were politicized by colonial powers to maintain control and where postcolonial elites often perpetuate externally framed identities that hinder political empowerment and national unity (Reed, 1999).

Philosopher Richard Rorty (1989) contributes a critical perspective on how neo-colonial contexts perpetuate economic and cultural domination through imposed identities. Rorty argues that identity is not fixed but shaped by historical power relations; thus, neo-colonialism continues colonial legacies by enforcing identities that maintain dependency and limit self-actualization of formerly colonized societies. His analysis highlights how economic exploitation and cultural hegemony are intertwined, with imposed identities serving as a mechanism to legitimize unequal power

structures. For Nigeria, this means the colonial identity imposed has been sustained through neo-colonial economic arrangements and cultural domination, perpetuating underdevelopment and fragmentation. Rorty's view underscores the structural and ideological dimensions of identity imperialism that constrain Nigeria's political and economic emancipation (Rorty, 1989).

Todd Gitlin (1995), in his critique of identity politics, presents a nuanced understanding of how imposed or constructed identities function within political movements. Gitlin acknowledges that identities forged through shared experience can generate political solidarity and mobilization. However, he warns that externally imposed or overly rigid identities can also produce fragmentation, exclusion, and political paralysis. This dual nature is particularly salient in Nigeria, where colonial identity imposition created both a façade of unity and underlying ethnic divisions. While ethnic identities provide political belonging and agency for some groups, their colonial construction and politicization have also fragmented Nigerian society, complicating efforts at inclusive nation-building. Gitlin's analysis helps explain how identity politics in Nigeria simultaneously mobilizes and divides, reflecting the ambivalent legacy of imposed identities (Gitlin, 1995).

The Centre-Periphery theory (Prebisch, 1968; Frank, 1967; Wallerstein, 1974) enriches this understanding by situating identity crises within global economic dependencies. The theory articulates how developing countries' identities and political structures are moulded to sustain economic dependence on advanced capitalist nations, which control capital,

technology, and governance paradigms. Oguejiofor (2015) agrees that Western imperial powers have devised so many means to maintain this asymmetrical relationship at all cost. This dependency reproduces underdevelopment and limits authentic nation-building efforts. Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1977) elaborates that such dependency extends beyond economics to cultural and political realms, as seen in Nigeria's colonial legacy where British rule imposed an identity that continues to serve metropolitan interests.

The psycho-cultural conflict theory (Ross, 1993; Horowitz, 1985) adds another layer, analysing the psychological and cultural bases of identity conflicts. According to this theory, threats to identity provoke defensive and often violent reactions because identity is tied to existential security. Thomas Northrup (1989) and Stephen Faleti (2006) emphasize that identity conflicts rooted in culture and religion are among the most intractable because they transcend rational discourse, fueling prolonged ethnic and sectarian violence. In Nigeria, this manifests as deep ethnic and religious cleavages with colonial-imposed identities aggravating tensions.

Existing scholarship on Nigeria highlights the persistent failure to cultivate a unifying national identity. Osaghae and Suberu (2005) trace this failure to colonial administrative practices and post-colonial governance characterized by ethnic favouritism and clientelism. Azeez (2009) documents the ethnic basis of political party formation and regionalism, underscoring the institutionalization of ethnic identities in governance. Lewis and Bratton (2000) link the erosion of national solidarity to governance deficits and corruption, which

disproportionately affect marginalized groups, feeding separatist sentiments.

Recent contributions such as those by Brookings (2017) and Brill (2023) situate contemporary separatist movements within this historical and structural framework, arguing that without addressing identity and governance issues, Nigeria's national unity and development remain elusive. This literature gap, which is, connecting imposed colonial identity directly to governance, corruption, ethnic conflict, and underdevelopment, motivates the present study.

A thorough review of the existing literature reveals that while numerous scholars have analysed aspects of Nigeria's national identity crisis, ethnic conflict, governance deficits, and development challenges, these issues have predominantly been examined in isolation or through fragmented lenses. There is a conspicuous absence of integrated frameworks that comprehensively link the colonial imposition of identity with the multi-dimensional challenges Nigeria faces today, particularly concerning governance, corruption, ethnic polarization, and separatist movements.

Many foundational works, such as Osaghae and Suberu's (2005) exploration of Nigeria's ethnic fragmentation, Falola and Heaton's (2008) historical account of colonial legacies, and Brookings Institution reports on separatist agitations, have stated the persistence of ethnic divisions and political instability. However, these analyses tend to treat ethnic conflict, governance, and development as parallel or correlated problems rather than as outcomes rooted in the structural phenomenon of identity imperialism. The imposed colonial identity is often referenced as historical context rather

than systematically analysed as a contemporary, active driver influencing governance and development.

Theoretically, while identity scholars such as Fanon (1963), Wollstonecraft (1792), Reed (1999), and Rorty (1989) have emphasized the crucial role of authentic self-determination in political empowerment, and while political analysts like Gitlin (1995) have critiqued the dual nature of identity politics, there remains a lack of empirical application of these theories to Nigeria's postcolonial experience in a holistic manner. Particularly missing is an operationalization of identity imperialism, which is the process by which colonial and neo-colonial powers impose and sustain identities to perpetuate economic, political, and cultural domination in relation to Nigeria's governance architecture and ethnic tensions.

Methodologically, much of the prior works rely on historical narrative or case study approaches without employing rigorous qualitative content analysis that systematically interrogates secondary data across diverse sources. This leaves a gap in empirical rigor when connecting identity constructs with governance outcomes such as corruption, institutional decay, and political exclusion.

Furthermore, the Nigerian Constitution, as the legal and political framework governing federalism, resource control, and identity politics, has not been sufficiently examined as a key structural mechanism that perpetuates imposed identity divisions and enables elite manipulation of power and resources. Recommendations for constitutional reform are often presented without a detailed constitutional analysis contextualizing how

current legal provisions reinforce fragmentation.

Finally, existing literature often discusses ethnic conflict and separatism as primarily security or political problems, neglecting the foundational identity imperialism that fuels these agitations. Similarly, the erosion of patriotism and national solidarity, critical to Nigeria's development, is rarely connected explicitly to imposed colonial identities and the resulting governance deficits.

This study fills these critical gaps by:

1. Conceptualizing and operationalizing identity imperialism in the Nigerian context, providing a coherent framework linking colonial identity imposition to contemporary governance failures, corruption, ethnic conflict, and separatist movements.
2. Employing a systematic qualitative content analysis of diverse secondary data (scholarly articles, government reports, media sources) to provide empirical rigor and current relevance in establishing these relationships.
3. Integrating interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives—combining postcolonial theory, psycho-cultural conflict theory, and centre-periphery dependency theory to illuminate the structural and psychological dimensions of imposed identity and its impact on nation-building.
4. Providing a detailed constitutional analysis, highlighting how the 1999 Nigerian Constitution institutionalizes identity fragmentation through centralized fiscal control and federal character principles, thereby reinforcing governance deficits and ethnic rivalries.
5. Linking the erosion of patriotism and national identity directly to imposed colonial identities, governance deficits, and elite manipulation, offering a more holistic understanding of Nigeria's underdevelopment and political instability.
6. Contextualizing separatist movements within the framework of identity imperialism, emphasizing how these are not merely political insurgencies but expressions of long-standing structural alienation grounded in forced identity constructions.

By addressing these underexplored intersections and providing a theoretically grounded, empirically substantiated analysis, this research advances the scholarly discourse on Nigeria's development challenges. It offers a comprehensive understanding that can inform more effective policy interventions focused on constitutional reform, inclusive national dialogue, and governance restructuring aimed at overcoming the legacy of identity imperialism.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design utilizing documentary and content analysis methods to explore the relationship between colonial identity imposition and Nigeria's socio-political development challenges. This design allows for an in-depth examination of existing secondary data and scholarly discourse to generate nuanced insights.

Data Sources

The primary data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government documents, NGO reports, news media articles, and official declarations related to Nigeria's

history, politics, identity, and development. There is no timeframe on the data sources as a result of the historical nature of the study. Archival and recent data sources were consulted. This ensures historical accuracy, relevance and reflects contemporary developments.

The Centre-Periphery Theory

Initially developed by Raul Prebisch (1968) to explain Latin American underdevelopment, the Centre-Periphery theory analyses the global system as comprising economically dominant 'centre' countries and dependent 'periphery' nations. This theory offers explanations for the behaviour of most third world countries in their interactions and relationships with the advanced capitalist societies. The third world countries' beliefs, values, behavioural patterns and attitudes are linked to the stipulations, yearnings and commands of the advanced capitalist states. This invariably created a dividing line between the Centre (Advanced capitalist countries) and Periphery (Third world countries) (Prebisch, 1968). The Centre-Periphery theory was modified and developed by Andre Gunder Frank. Andre Gunder Frank (1967) extended his analysis to emphasize how peripheral countries are structurally integrated into the world economy to serve the interests of the centre, resulting in asymmetric development. The theory was further expanded and advanced for sociological studies of development and underdevelopment by Immanuel Wallenstein and Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) World-Systems theory further situates this relationship within a capitalist world economy where peripheral states remain subordinate in

production, technology, and governance. It is imperative to state here that Nigeria is a third world country situated at western part of the African continent (Tauseh & Herrmann, 2002).

The Centre nations claim to have attained advanced stages of capitalism in their countries. They include colonial masters, neo-colonialists and owners of multinational corporations. They are carriers or transporters of capitalism and imperialism to third world countries. The Periphery nations are the poor, underdeveloped, non-industrialized nation states of the world. The Centre-Periphery theory analysed the world in relation of one state with another, thus:

1. C= Centre of Centre nations (Advanced Capitalist Nations)
2. C=Centre of Periphery nations (Developed Countries)
3. P= Periphery of Centre nations (Developing Nations)
4. P=Periphery of Periphery nations (Underdeveloped Third World Nations) (Cardoso, 1977).

The general assumptions of Centre-Periphery theory describe and explain dependence of third world nations on modern political systems or advanced technological satellite nations and their interactions that affect the formal crown colony states (third world countries). The theory's assumptions as it applies to our study include:

1. Periphery of Periphery and Centre of Periphery nations at their levels of dependencies are dependent on the Centre's, especially the Centre of the Centre nations. The latter nations supply the formal with capital, skills, technologies, equipment,

military might and continuation in office. African capital, skill and labour force is thought by the advanced capitalist society to be traditional and parochial. This is one of the reasons why everything about Nigeria is determined by the centre nations like Britain, U.S, etc., including her identity and how this identity should be expressed.

2. The level of awareness and knowledge of workers at the periphery nations are limited. This is the major problem in Africa and in Nigeria. Their educational system is dysfunctional and does not equip the next generation with adequate skills and entrepreneurship. It is a type of education targeted at remembrance and not emphasized on solving of societal problem. Unfortunately, this trend was masterfully fashioned to be like that by the metropolises.
3. Nigeria and other periphery nations have stifled technological building and enhancement and this was created by external influence.
4. The Periphery nations are integrated into international organizations such as within Non-Alignment (NAM), the Group of 77 within the UNCTAD, the African Union (AU), the African Caribbean and Pacific States (ACP), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), amongst others. This integration of African states including Nigeria into various international organizations by the metropolitan or centre states marked the beginning of her total dependence to her prototype imperialist masters for development
5. There is an obvious hegemonic tendency in the world system, tilting Western countries to be superior to African countries, and

claiming white supremacy over black. This form of colonialism remains in the oversimplification and generalization of Nigeria's practices and cultures and the West continuously associating her only with negative connotations and undesirable traits.

Applied to Nigeria, this theory posits that British colonialism—and its legacy—crafted a national identity designed to sustain Nigeria's role as a resource periphery feeding metropolitan centers. British rule shaped Nigeria's political institutions, economic patterns, and social hierarchies to serve imperial economic needs. Post-independence, this structure persists through neo-colonial influences, sustaining dependency via cultural imperialism and elite complicity (Cardoso, 1977; Tausch & Herrmann, 2002).

This framework explains how imposed identity functions as a tool for maintaining dependency: by undermining indigenous identity and fostering fragmentation, it prevents unified nation-building, enabling external control over governance and resources. It predicts the persistence of governance deficits, corruption, and lack of indigenous technological and institutional development due to the centripetal forces favouring the centre nations.

The Psycho-Cultural Theory of Conflict

Psycho-cultural theory of conflicts posits that psychological, religious and other cultural and identity-based contradictions are the basis of conflict in the society. This theory addresses the emotional and psychological underpinnings of identity-based conflict. The proponents of this theory include inter alia, Ross, Faleti, Horowitz, and Northrup. Ross (1993) and Horowitz (1985) argue that conflicts rooted in identity—

encompassing culture, religion, and ethnicity—are among the most intractable because they involve existential threats to self-worth and security. Psycho-Cultural conflicts take long to resolve because in this kind of conflict, passion for the protection of one's identity, religion, culture and freedom overwhelms reason and inflames conflictual behaviours.

Identity is an unshakeable sense of self-worth, which makes life meaningful and includes the feeling that one is physically, socially, psychologically and spiritually safe. Therefore, conflicts arising from identity generate defensive group mobilization, intensifying inter-group hostilities (Faleti, 2006). Northrup (1989) affirms that “events which threaten to remove the feeling of safety that is tied to different forms of identity usually lead to defensive reactions aimed at avoiding such spiritual and physical exposure”. Seymour (2003) emphasizes that identity influences the process of conflict and must not be overlooked when attempting to understand the origins of conflict and when planning its resolution. The process of globalisation has seen nations encroaching into overseas territories with new ideas, methods, religion and thought system. Sometimes the recipients of these encroachments are piqued when they feel they are being robbed of their original identity and given new ones, which many a time led to both violent and nonviolent revolts. Thematic Analysis:

Identity, Politics and Governance in Nigeria

Identity is a complex construct that encompasses a range of psychological, social, and cultural phenomena (Galliher, Dubos-Drake

& Dubow, 2017). It plays a crucial role in national development, influencing the way individuals perceive their nation and their role within it (Golob, Makarovič, & Suklan, 2016). The development of Identity is a multifaceted process that involves the integration of various aspects of an individual's self-concept (Galliher et al, 2017). It is influenced by a myriad of factors, including cultural context, personal experiences, and societal norms (Galliher et al, 2017). In the context of national development, identity both individual and collective plays a pivotal role. It shapes individuals' attitudes towards their nation, influencing their willingness to contribute to its development (Golob et al, 2016). A strong national identity, rooted in shared values, history, and aspirations, can serve as a unifying force, fostering a sense of collective responsibility and commitment to the nation's progress (Alesina & Reich, 2015).

National identity, a subset of identity, is particularly relevant in the context of national development. It refers to the extent to which individuals identify with their nation (Ariely, 2021). This identification is not merely a matter of citizenship but encompasses a deeper emotional and psychological connection to the nation (Golob et al, 2016). A strong national identity can foster a sense of unity and cohesion, promoting collective action towards national development (Ariely, 2021). This unity is often manifested in the form of shared values, common goals, and a collective commitment to the welfare of the nation (Golob et al, 2016). For instance, nations with a strong national identity often exhibit higher levels of civic participation, which can drive social, economic, and political development (Ariely, 2021). Conversely, a weak national identity can lead to fragmentation and

discord, hindering national development. Fragmentation often results in social divisions and conflicts, which can disrupt economic activities, deter investment, and impede the implementation of development policies. Moreover, individuals with a weak national identity may be less likely to contribute to national development efforts, as they may feel less invested in the nation's future (Ariely, 2021).

The importance of patriotism which is a product of love for one's national identity cannot be overemphasised. The major emphasis of patriotism is to have an emotional attachment to the nation, to develop a sense of brotherhood towards fellow citizens as well as to seek the achievement of national prosperity and rejuvenation, rather than individual success and personal aggrandisement. This national spirit gives the people ideological basis for solidarity and common struggle in which everyone takes responsibility for national prosperity in order to realize the individual value. In this case, the dream of prosperity, security, development and civilisation becomes a national dream and the dream of every citizen. This is captured by Niu & Zhu (2014) in the following words, "the home is the smallest country, the country is a combination of thousands of families" and "the country is the first and the family is the second, the family and the country are a whole". Wang and Jia (2015) in relating patriotism to development in China opine that:

"In the gradually integrated development of the world under the background of the times, China dream is the patriotic dream of this period, and in order to realize the China dream, we should carry forward the spirit of China with

the banner of patriotism. Patriotism is a China dream to realize spiritual strength, it is this spirit of solidarity to form cohesion and centripetal force of Chinese nation, and has become a powerful driving force to realize China dream." (p. 164).

The picture painted above in the words of Wang and Jia (2015) is conspicuously lacking in the Nigerian political system as a result of ethnic politics and interethnic rivalry. In Nigeria, the concept of identity is deeply intertwined with the country's colonial history and its aftermath. The artificial borders drawn during colonial rule brought together diverse ethnic groups with distinct cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This imposed amalgamation, coupled with the divide-and-rule tactics employed by colonial authorities, sowed the seeds of distrust and rivalries among various groups (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

Furthermore, the colonial experience itself shaped Nigerian identities in profound ways. The imposition of Western education, religion, and cultural norms challenged traditional value systems and created a dichotomy between those who embraced these colonial influences and those who resisted them (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This divide, along with the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities during colonial rule, laid the foundation for ongoing tensions and mistrust among various groups within Nigeria.

Fostering a sense of patriotism and a cohesive national identity in a diverse country like Nigeria has proven to be a formidable challenge. The prevalence of strong ethnic, religious, and regional identities, often reinforced by historical grievances and

contemporary socio-economic disparities, has made it difficult to cultivate a shared sense of belonging and loyalty to the Nigerian nation-state (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

The legacy of colonialism has further exacerbated these challenges. The imposition of arbitrary borders and the divide-and-rule tactics employed by colonial authorities have left a lasting impact on inter-group relations and perceptions of national unity (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Furthermore, the post-colonial experience, marked by instances of political instability, corruption, and uneven development, has undermined trust in national institutions and eroded the sense of shared destiny among Nigerians (Lewis & Bratton, 2000).

It is common knowledge that development is driven by how much people are willing to labour and sacrifice for general good within a state. In Nigeria, on the other hand, the lack of patriotism has manifested in various ways that have hindered development. For instance, the prevalence of ethnic and regional loyalties has often taken precedence over national interests, leading to the misallocation of resources, nepotism, and corruption (Lewis & Bratton, 2000). This has undermined the effectiveness of development initiatives and eroded public trust in institutions, further weakening the sense of national unity and commitment to collective progress. Politics in Nigeria have always been characterised by ethnicity and ethnic rivalry which has made it that Nigerians vote for candidates for political positions along ethnic lines and ethnic affiliations. The evolution of Nigeria's democracy and party politics is aptly captured by Azeez (2009) thus:

"In pre independence Nigeria, party politics and party formation assumed an ethnic complexion, even as it metamorphosed into the post-independent first republic. The Action Group developed from the political wing of the cultural association of the Yoruba educated elite, the Egbe Omo Oduduwa; the NCNC was closely allied with the Ibo state union and played a significant role in the internal affairs of the party, while NPC was founded by the Fulani aristocracy... And more significantly, the division of the country into three regions for administrative convenience by the Richards constitution of 1946 led to the development of strong regional feeling. The consequence of this was such that by 1953, the major political parties in Nigeria- NCNC, AG and NPC, were associated with the major ethnic groups and the three regions, Western, Eastern and the Northern regions." (p. 2)

Azeez (2009) went ahead to argue that the formation of political parties during this period was triadic in its essence, insofar as the establishment of parties was predicated on three predominant ethnic factions. Each faction was guided by a principal ethnic leader, who orchestrated political activities with the objective of fortifying their respective regions. It can be inferred from the argument of Azeez (2009) that from the beginning, Nigerians did not accept the identity imposed on them by the British, but remained politically and ideologically attached to their various ethnic identities. This has made it that politics in Nigeria is not characterised by patriotism but by ethnic competition as to who gets what, when and how, without recourse to nation building and development.

This lack of patriotism is also evinced in the way successive Nigerian leaders have consistently embezzled commonwealth and sent to private bank accounts in various nations of the world. Nigeria is still recovering the Sani Abacha loot till date. A substantial sum exceeding \$1 billion, previously seized from the financial accounts associated with Mr. Abacha, a former Nigerian military head of state, has been repatriated to Nigeria. However, numerous African nations have failed to advance their respective causes, frequently attributable to the continued governance by corrupt political figures (The Economist, October 10, 2019). The development trajectory of Nigeria remains impeded by the staggering magnitude of illicitly appropriated wealth witnessed annually within its borders. This misappropriation is predominantly orchestrated by the political elite, who conspire with unscrupulous bankers, legal professionals, and government functionaries.

The roots of contemporary Nigeria are found in the changes it underwent during British colonialism. This period of rule reshaped not just the nation's borders but also established the social and political frameworks that persist in influencing Nigeria's present-day structure. The enduring influences of British colonial history persistently shape the contemporary issues Nigeria faces, encompassing matters of national identity, allocation of resources, and administration (Okonkwo, 2023). "Nigeria as a country has continued to experience disunity in supposed unity. This is why some have referred to Nigeria as a forced marriage which did not receive the approval of the couple involved. Even though the entities are said to be united under one umbrella called Nigeria, each entity is

still loyal and committed to the goals of their groups." (Abayomi, n.d: 45). It can adequately be inferred from the preceding arguments that Nigeria is a monument to British colonialism and continued imperialism; an imposed identity, which has failed to gain traction among those upon whom it has been imposed.

The obvious and tacit support the Nigerian political elite enjoy from the British government over the years is a testimony to the fact that Britain is comfortable with the lack of national consciousness and the attendant leadership failure going on in Nigeria. The British government lent support to Nigeria against the people of Eastern Nigeria who demanded their right to self-determination between July, 1967 to January, 1970. This in itself is perpetuation of imperialism albeit through imposed identity that creates a suitable condition for continued exploitation by the imperial British government.

Identity Crises and Separatist Agitations in Nigeria

The identity of modern Nigeria, shaped by British colonial policies, has had profound implications on the nation's unity. The British administration's "divide and rule" strategy fostered divisions among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups, which have persisted into the present day (Britannica, 2024; Morrock, 1973.). This policy not only segregated groups but also promoted loyalty to ethnic nationalities over a unified national identity (dai.441, 2020). The legacy of these colonial practices is evident in the development of political parties during the colonial era, which were often based on ethnic lines, a trend that continued post-independence (Uwaifo, 2016). These historical divisions have manifested in contemporary separatist

agitations, as various groups seek autonomy or independence, citing long-standing grievances and feelings of marginalization (Brookings, 2017). The separatist movements in Nigeria today, including those led by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Yoruba Nation agitators, are rooted in these colonial-era policies that have continued to influence Nigeria's political landscape (Brookings, 2017; Brill, 2023).

Figure 1: A member of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) flying the flag of the defunct Biafra in an IPOB rally.



Source: BusinessDay, 2021.
<https://businessday.ng/opinion/article/ipob-the-question-of-secession-under-international-law/>

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Yoruba Nation agitators represent significant separatist movements in Nigeria, each advocating for the establishment of independent states: Biafra and the Oduduwa Republic, respectively. These movements underscore the pervasive separatist threats across Nigeria, exacerbating security concerns in various regions (BBC News, 2021; Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2021). The clamour for resource control, particularly in the oil-rich Niger Delta, and political marginalization are frequently cited as underlying causes for these

agitations (Orogun, 2010; Vanguardngr.com, 2022).

The colonial legacy in Nigeria has entrenched divisions within the political system, a phenomenon evident since the country's independence. The early post-independence era was characterized by ethnic-based party politics, where allegiance to regional governments often superseded loyalty to the national government. This regionalism has persisted, complicating the entrenchment of democratic ethos and good governance (Abayomi, n.d.).

The separatist agitations in Nigeria have indeed taken a violent turn, particularly in the South East region. The emergence of the so-called 'Unknown Gunmen' has led to a significant increase in killings and kidnappings, posing a severe challenge to security forces (Vanguardngr.com, 2023). These forces have been targeted in the violence, which has also aimed to disrupt governmental processes, including the call for election boycotts in the region (The Guardian, 2023).

Figure 2. The aftermath of an attack by "unknown gun men" in Anambra State Nigeria.



Source: Daily Post, 2021.
<https://dailypost.ng/2021/09/30/unknown-gunmen-murder-policemen-civilians-in-anambra/>

These internal conflicts and insecurity, fuelled by divisive identities and lack of patriotism, have created an unstable environment that discourages investment and hinders economic growth (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

The Nigerian Constitution and Identity Fragmentation

The history of constitutions in Nigeria is rooted in colonialism. From the Clifford Constitution of 1922 through to the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954, each successive constitutional framework under British rule was crafted primarily to serve imperial interests rather than to foster indigenous unity or autonomy (Falola & Heaton, 2008). These constitutions prioritized centralized governance structures that enabled the colonial administration to control diverse ethnic groups through indirect rule and extractive policies (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). This legacy of imposed and unrepresentative constitutionalism culminated in post-independence charters that retained many of the same centralizing features.

Nigeria's current 1999 Constitution, framed under a military junta, still reflects many of the structural imbalances inherited from colonial governance. It serves as the supreme legal framework for governance, establishing a federal system intended to balance unity with regional autonomy. However, the design of this federalism, with its highly centralized fiscal and political power, has contributed significantly to the persistence and deepening of identity fragmentation in the country (Uwaifo, 2016). While the constitution nominally recognizes the country's multi-ethnic composition and regional diversity, it effectively centralizes revenue

control in the federal government, leaving subnational units heavily dependent and politically constrained (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Vanguard, 2022).

The absence of genuine fiscal federalism is one of the constitution's most contested features. Section 162 of the Constitution, titled "Allocation of Revenue," addresses the distribution of public revenues between the federal, state, and local governments. This section stipulates that "the Federation shall maintain a special account... into which shall be paid all revenues accruing to the Federation." However, over 80% of Nigeria's public revenues are collected federally through oil exports and other taxes, with the allocation to states and local governments following complex formulas that many stakeholders deem inequitable and opaque (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Vanguard, 2022). Such fiscal centralization restricts states' ability to generate independent revenues and develop tailored policies suited to their socio-economic contexts, exacerbating regional inequalities and contributing to identity fragmentation.

This dependency creates a patronage system where political elites at the federal level wield disproportionate influence over resource allocation. Consequently, state and local governments often compete for federal patronage, which exacerbates ethnic and regional rivalries rather than fostering cooperation and national solidarity. Scholars like Suberu (2010) argue that this dynamic institutionalizes ethnic competition as a political survival strategy, undermining democratic governance and national integration.

The Nigerian Constitution's structure inadvertently allows ethnic elites to manipulate

constitutional provisions and resource allocation to entrench their group's political dominance. Section 14(3) of the Constitution explicitly states that "the composition of the government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria." While this provision was intended to promote inclusivity, its application often devolves into ethnic balancing acts that prioritize group quotas over merit or national interest (Nwaobi, 2021). As a result, the federal character principle has become a tool that reinforces ethnic identities as the basis of political legitimacy, sidelining national identity and entrenching communalism.

The inequities generated by centralized fiscal governance and ethnically segmented political arrangements have fuelled perceptions of marginalization, particularly among minority ethnic groups and resource-rich regions. For example, the Niger Delta region, despite being Nigeria's oil-producing hub, has long suffered from environmental degradation and inadequate reinvestment of oil revenues into local development (Obi, 2019). This disconnect has spurred militant agitations and separatist rhetoric, as communities feel alienated from the Nigerian state's distributive mechanisms.

The grievances of other regions, particularly in the Southeast and Southwest, are also rooted in the constitutional framework. Calls for greater regional autonomy and restructuring reflect frustrations with centralized governance that limits local self-determination. In this regard, Section 8 of the Constitution, which governs the creation of new states, can be seen as an inadequate response to the growing

demands for regional autonomy. The constitutional limits on state creation and restructuring have left many regional groups feeling politically disenfranchised and alienated from the national project. The agitations by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Yoruba Nation activists explicitly cite constitutional and fiscal marginalization as catalysts for their demands (Brookings Institution, 2017).

Recognizing these systemic challenges, various scholars and policy analysts advocate for constitutional reforms aimed at enhancing fiscal federalism, devolving greater political autonomy to subnational governments, and strengthening institutions that promote transparency and equity in resource distribution (Uwaifo, 2016; Vanguard, 2022). These reforms could address the limitations of the current fiscal structure and promote greater regional self-determination, empowering states to mobilize their own resources, tailor development policies, and reduce dependence on federal allocations.

Section 2 of the Constitution, which affirms the "sovereignty of the Federal Republic of Nigeria," places ultimate authority in the hands of the federal government. However, reforms in fiscal federalism could better balance the autonomy of regional governments with the unity of the federation, reducing the incentive for ethnic groups to exploit constitutional provisions for their own gain. Additionally, greater decentralization could mitigate ethnic tensions born from competition over centralized resources, helping to foster a stronger, more cohesive national identity.

However, such reforms face considerable political resistance from entrenched federal elites who benefit from the status quo. As

Suberu (2010) notes, the constitutional design remains a critical arena where Nigeria's identity fragmentation and developmental challenges are reproduced and contested. The political elites who control federal resources are unlikely to relinquish their power without significant resistance, and the vested interests in maintaining the existing system make meaningful constitutional change difficult.

Finally, the Nigerian Constitution, while establishing a legal framework that recognizes the country's multi-ethnic composition, inadvertently entrenches identity fragmentation through its highly centralized fiscal and political system. The constitutional design, particularly in sections such as 162 (allocation of revenue), 14 (federal character), and 8 (creation of states), reinforces ethnic and regional divisions by failing to provide genuine fiscal autonomy or equitable resource distribution. Addressing these systemic challenges through reforms that promote fiscal decentralization and regional autonomy could help mitigate ethnic tensions and foster greater national unity. However, entrenched political resistance suggests that achieving these reforms will require substantial political will and commitment to a more inclusive, equitable governance framework.

Empirical Analysis

Colonial Imposition of Identity and Its Lingering Impact on National Unity

The origins of Nigeria's persistent national unity crisis lie fundamentally in its colonial past, where the British administration amalgamated diverse ethnic groups into a single political entity without consent or shared identity (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Over 250 ethnic groups, each

with distinct languages, religions, and customs, were subsumed under a British-imposed "Nigerian" identity designed primarily to facilitate colonial administration and resource extraction (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). This externally imposed identity failed to create a genuine sense of nationhood among the populace.

The British colonial policy of "divide and rule" entrenched ethnic cleavages, privileging certain groups—most notably the Hausa-Fulani in the North—through political appointments and economic advantages, while marginalizing others (Morrock, 1973; Britannica, 2024). The 1914 amalgamation was administrative rather than integrative, lacking any socio-cultural foundation for unity (Onipede, 2010). This legacy continued post-independence, manifesting in deep-seated ethnic suspicions and regionalism that undermine collective national identity.

Empirical evidence of this fractured unity is visible in electoral politics, where voting patterns largely follow ethnic and regional lines (Azeez, 2009). Political parties, such as the Action Group (Yoruba-dominated), NCNC (Igbo-dominated), and NPC (Northern Hausa-Fulani-dominated), originated as extensions of ethnic identities rather than platforms for national integration (Uwaifo, 2016). Such ethnic party alignment has persisted for decades, fostering exclusion and competition rather than inclusion.

Governance Deficits and Corruption: An Ethno-Political Economy of Identity

Governance in Nigeria is inextricably linked to ethnic identity politics shaped by colonial structures. Corruption is not merely an economic malady but a political strategy to

sustain ethno-regional elites' hold on power (Lewis & Bratton, 2000). Politicians manipulate ethnic loyalties to mobilize votes, distribute patronage, and control resources, institutionalizing a clientelist system where governance serves narrow interests (The Economist, 2019).

One of the most glaring examples is the Abacha regime's plundering of state wealth, estimated at over \$2 billion, much of which has only been partially repatriated decades later (The Economist, 2019). This wealth theft is symptomatic of an elite culture that privileges ethnic and personal enrichment over national development. Moreover, these corrupt practices exacerbate inequality, breeding grievances that fuel ethnic tensions and separatism.

Governance deficits extend beyond corruption. Public institutions suffer inefficiency, mismanagement, and lack of accountability partly because ethnic considerations dictate appointments and resource allocation (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). This erodes public trust and inhibits policy implementation, directly impacting development outcomes. For instance, the uneven distribution of federal revenue exacerbates regional inequalities, provoking demands for resource control and autonomy (Vanguard, 2022).

Ethnic Polarization and Separatist Movements: Manifestations of Identity Crisis

The legacy of imposed identity has catalysed violent and nonviolent separatist agitations, increasingly destabilizing Nigeria. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), advocating for the independence of the Igbo-dominated Southeast, represents the most prominent separatist movement, citing decades of

perceived marginalization and political exclusion (Brookings, 2017). Similarly, the Yoruba Nation agitators push for autonomy in the Southwest, while the Niger Delta militants focus on resource control and environmental justice (Brill, 2023).

Recent years have witnessed escalations in violent attacks by groups identified as the "Unknown Gunmen" in the Southeast, resulting in killings, kidnappings, and disruption of government functions (Vanguard, 2023). These incidents reflect not just security challenges but deep-rooted identity conflicts that colonial-era divisions helped create. The state's often heavy-handed security responses further alienate local populations, intensifying the cycle of violence.

Separatist rhetoric leverages historical narratives of colonial oppression and contemporary governance failures to mobilize support. The movements call for self-determination as guaranteed under international law (African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, 1981; UNDRIP, 2007), framing the imposed Nigerian identity as illegitimate. This presents a formidable challenge to national cohesion and complicates peacebuilding efforts.

Nationalism, Patriotism, and Political Affiliations: Implications for Development

A critical consequence of identity imperialism is the erosion of patriotism and a unifying national identity. Nigerian citizens often identify more strongly with ethnic or regional groups than with the country as a whole (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). This weak sense of nationhood inhibits collective action for

national development, as individual and group interests override common goals.

Empirical studies on voting behaviour reveal entrenched ethnic patronage, where electoral success depends on ethnic loyalty rather than policy competence (Azeez, 2009). This undermines democratic consolidation and leads to leadership selection that prioritizes ethnic representation over national interest.

The consequences for development are stark. Without a shared national vision and patriotism, public participation in national projects is fragmented. Infrastructure development, social welfare, and economic planning suffer from inconsistent support and politicization. Moreover, ethnic distrust deters investment and fosters instability, as evidenced by persistent conflicts and economic stagnation in the Niger Delta and Northeast regions.

Summary of Empirical Analysis

This analysis shows that Nigeria's colonial-imposed identity remains a powerful structural barrier to national unity, good governance, and development. The resulting ethnic polarization fuels corruption, separatism, and insecurity, while weak patriotism hampers democratic and economic progress. Addressing these intertwined challenges requires confronting the legacy of identity imperialism both legally and socially.

Summary Of Findings

The findings of this research are summarised as follows:

1. The artificial identity imposed by British colonial powers has hindered the

development of national unity and patriotism in Nigeria.

2. The imposed identity has led to ethnic polarization, lack of good governance, corruption, and feelings of marginalization among different groups.
3. There is a lack of patriotism and common national identity in Nigeria.
4. Politics in Nigeria is characterized by ethnic affiliations rather than competence.
5. The imposed identity has fuelled separatist movements seeking self-determination in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is obvious from the foregoing that the situation in Nigeria is such that various groups that make up Nigeria are unable to define who they are and what they stand for, as well as who they intend to be and what they intend to do as a people, but are defined from without by imperial powers via imposed identity and policies skewed to the advantage of these imperial powers, especially Britain. This relationship is rooted in colonial history and sustained by successive political elites made up of culturally alienated comprador bourgeoisies created by the imperial powers in order to serve as imperial police that quells the people's uprising against the disadvantages of this form of relationship. In other words, it is the inability of hitherto colonised people to construct an identity for themselves that is devoid of colonial determination. It is this situation that this study identifies as identity imperialism

It has been discovered from this study that the identity imposed on Nigeria by British colonial powers is a bane to the economic, social

and political development of Nigeria, which has in turn led to separatist agitations. The rancorous polarisation of Nigeria along ethnic identities is evidence to the fact that Nigeria has not been accepted as an identity by those who bear its demonym and carry its passport. In this situation, patriotism, which is a catalyst to any form of socioeconomic and political development is conspicuously lacking. When the people do not have a sense of unity and belonging, the result won't be far from what is being experienced today in Nigeria. This absence of patriotism is evinced in a popular saying among Nigerians that 'Nigeria is not worth dying for'. A country with so much crises of identity cannot make any head way. It is said that united we stand, but divided we fall. This explains why the country has consistently made retrogressive moves in the face of all the developmental plans marshalled out for its survival.

In the interim, it is pertinent that Nigerians eschew ethnic affiliations and consider competence in electing people that occupy public offices. This is because competent leadership will go a long way in mitigating the adverse effects of the faulty colonial foundation upon which Nigeria is built. It is common knowledge that when the government puts the people's interest at the forefront of governance, life becomes easier for the people, there will be peace and a lot of agitations will end.

Secondly, Nigeria's constitution must be reviewed and more power devolved to either states or regions in a manner that reflects fiscal autonomy. This will make the people feel closer to the government and consider it "their own".

Furthermore, acknowledging historical grievances and promoting reconciliation

processes can help address underlying tensions and facilitate a shared vision for the future.

Finally, the strategic way out of the problem of identity imperialism in Nigeria is for Nigerians through various regional and ethnic representatives to sit and decide just as it happened between India and Pakistan, whether Nigerians can truly accept to live as one under the common identity called Nigeria or to go separate ways and determine what each region wants to be. This is a conversation that must be had if Nigeria and Nigerians are to chart the course of progress. Self-determination is a right that is tied to identity, which when consistently denied creates intractable problems.

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