
CONTEMPORARY IMPORTANCE OF COLONIAL LEGACY OF NIGERIA'S RELATIONS WITH HER NEIGHBOURS

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ABSTRACT

The colonial legacy continues to exert a profound influence on Nigeria's relations with its neighbouring states in West and Central Africa. This study examined the contemporary significance of that legacy, with a focus on the political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions of interstate interactions. Using a historical-analytical approach, it explored how colonial-era boundaries, administrative practices, and economic linkages, largely crafted by British and French colonial powers, shaped patterns of cooperation, competition, and conflict in the post-independence period. The paper discovered that the persistence of artificial borders, cross-border ethnic linkages, and inherited diplomatic orientations still frames Nigeria's engagements with neighbours such as Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. While these legacies have at times fuelled disputes over territory, migration, and resource control, they have also provided frameworks for regional integration efforts through bodies like ECOWAS and the Multinational Joint Task Force. It also revealed how Nigeria's foreign policy and security strategies remain tethered to colonial-era realities, even as globalization, economic interdependence, and transnational threats reshape the regional environment. The paper recommended that understanding this enduring colonial imprint is crucial for crafting diplomatic, security, and economic policies that promote stable and mutually beneficial relations with neighbouring states.

Keywords: Colonial legacy, interstate relations, ECOWAS, boundary disputes, regional cooperation

1. Introduction

From America to Europe to Asia to Africa, colonialism did so profoundly change the communities that were once within its reach that the consequences are still visible in everyday life through social, economic and political structures. It is thus, an essentially global phenomenon that touches all corners of the world, leaving historical legacies to stretch across continents. Indeed, the 19th century colonization of Africa by the industrialized nations of Western Europe was arguably the outcome of a technological revolution that put the latter countries in an absolutely commanding position vis-a-vis the former, and indeed the rest of the world

(Crowder, 1968). Therefore, in the wake of the infamous 1885 Berlin conference, the whole of Africa except Liberia and Ethiopia had been parcelled out among the European colonial powers. The conference which redesigned the borders of African societies and handed over to Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Portugal and Spain has consequentially led to the emergence of tension-prone postcolonial states (Achebe, 2012).

For most of the early years of their occupation, these powers had to face the stiff resistance of the indigenous peoples to their presence. Eventually, the colonizers won in the struggle because of their superior military power. Put differently, if Africans seem to have been somewhat passive in their acceptance of the colonial rule once subjected to it, this resulted from a realization of the uselessness of resisting conquerors so evidently superior to them technologically (Crowder, 1968). Initially, the colonizers established a military form of administration manned chiefly by military personnel to safeguard their newly won territories. Later, however, they introduced civil administration. This administration to some extent differed from one colonial power to the other. These different situations constituted various forms of colonial rule. should be noted, however, that certain features of these patterns overlapped. Moreover, a particular pattern of rule tended to differ in details in the various territories or even different parts of a territory of a particular colonial power (Eluwa et al, 1996).

Be that as it may, the colonial project altered the nature of African states politically, socially and economically. Thus, as Gobo (2020: 243) stated, colonialism is for the most part “a history of oppression and brutality. Most importantly, it is a history of mental and cultural colonialism. The legacy of this form of invasion lasts much longer than the political relationship and the impact is deeper because the damage is at the very essence of African identity. Ironically, decades after the end of colonialism, its legacies continue to linger influence both domestic and international politics of African States. Against this background, this paper explored the contemporary colonial legacy of Nigeria’s relationship with her neighbours.

To achieve these objectives, the paper has been organized in five sections with the introduction as section one. Section two is the literature review. Section three discusses the methodology of the paper. Section four discusses the findings of the study. section five forms the concluding and policy recommendations of the paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

Colonial Legacy

The concept of colonial legacy refers to the enduring political, economic, social, and cultural structures inherited from the colonial era, which continue to influence state behaviour and interstate relations in Africa (Herbst, 2000; Young, 2001). In the Nigerian context like most other former colonies, colonial legacy manifests in arbitrary borders, weak institutions, and dependency on former colonial powers (Nugent & Asiwaju, 1996). These borders disrupted pre-existing cultural, ethnic, social, political and trade linkages, thereby creating disjointed societies and conflict-prone boundaries (Adebajo, 2007).

Colonial legacies also shaped the linguistic divide between Nigeria and her Francophone neighbours, complicating diplomacy, security collaboration, and regional integration (Bach, 1999). Furthermore, economic dependence on European powers constrained intra-African trade, reinforcing structural imbalances that hinder cooperation (Rodney, 1972).

Thus, the concept of colonial legacy provides an explanatory framework for understanding Nigeria's relations with her neighbours, showing how history continues to structure contemporary diplomacy, cross-border interactions, and integration processes.

2.2 Theoretical Review

This paper is anchored on two interrelated theories, Postcolonial Theory and Dependency Theory, which together provide an effective analytical tool for understanding the contemporary relevance of colonial legacies in Nigeria's relations with her neighbours.

The Postcolonial Theory examines how the historical experiences of colonialism still influence political, social, economic, and diplomatic relations between nations in the Global South (Young, 2001). Nigeria's borders with neighbouring states such as Cameroon, Niger, Chad, and Benin are products of arbitrary colonial demarcations by European powers, notably Britain and France. These artificial boundaries imposed cultural, ethnic, and economic fragmentation that still influences interstate relations. Postcolonial theory helps to explain how colonial constructs, such as shared colonial administrative practices, language barriers, and identity politics affect Nigeria's current diplomatic engagements and regional cooperation (Bach, 1999).

On the other hand, Dependency Theory posits that historical patterns of colonial exploitation created structural inequalities between developed and developing states, as well as among states in the Global South (Dos Santos, 1970). For Nigeria and her neighbours, colonial legacy shaped economic dependence on

former colonial powers, influenced regional trade patterns, and determined the infrastructural linkages that either foster or hinder integration (Amin, 1976; Adebajo, 2007). For example, colonial legacies explain why certain transport, trade, and administrative systems are still more oriented towards Europe than towards intra-African cooperation (Herbst, 2000). The theory is therefore crucial in showing how colonial structures continue to shape Nigeria's relations with her neighbours through asymmetric power relations, unequal resource sharing, and competition influenced by colonial-era arrangements (Rodney, 1972).

2.3 Empirical Review

Colonial Rule in Nigeria

Colonial rule in what is today called Nigeria was a process of five successive stages. The settlement of Lagos became a colony in 1861 decade after its annexation by the British forces. From 1886 to 1900, the Royal Niger Company controlled central Nigeria. After that its territories were incorporated into new protectorate of southern Nigeria. In 1906, the protectorate of southern Nigeria was merged with the Lagos colony. Finally, the Southern protectorate was amalgamated with the northern protectorate in 1914, although a certain degree of administrative distinction between the North and South was maintained (Badawy, 2015).

The amalgamation of 1914 meant the bringing together of the three different geographical entities into which Nigeria was subdivided. Each was put under a lieutenant governor and provided independent government services. In the northern region, the colonial government ensured that the Islamic system and the sociocultural affinity of the people was never disrupted. The colonial authorities maintained the status quo, especially on religious matters. Foreign influence was severely restricted from interfering with the indigenous socio-political systems met on the ground. In contrast, the British tried as much as possible to alter the status quo in the South. External influence, especially Christian missionaries, were given relative freedom to meddle in the socio-political and religious activities. In effect, the south became more exposed to Western education and Christianity than the North (Ogunjewo, 2015).

British rule in Nigeria was an extreme case of indirect rule which was basically a system of administration which not only relied on the indigenous authorities for local government but was consistently guarding them to improvement. It was in essence a policy that advocated that "chiefs should govern their people, not as independent but as dependent rulers (Crowder, 1968). Ultimately, with the British colonialization of Nigeria came widespread cultural contact between Nigerians and Europeans, thus replacing the relatively limited contact which had been the case during previous centuries when European influence hardly went beyond the confines of coastal towns and cities. Increased contact with

a larger segment of the population resulted in profound changes in religion, law, architecture, technology and concepts of social stratification. This effected the gradual disintegration of traditional Nigerian society as the various people of the region were brought under a unified British administration. In the past, the primary concern of the British had been trade and the general promotion of commerce; with colonization and later adopted cultural integration and the desire to alter the basic traditions and customs of the society (Falola, 1991).

In addition to introducing Western cultures and customs to the Nigerian peoples, an entirely new world of capitalist economic system was opened up to a large segment of the population. This too, contributed to the further disintegration of traditional values and customs (Falola, 1991). The new rules of commerce which came with colonisation deeply left effects on the entire structure of the country. Head portorage, for example, gave way to modern system of transportation and free trades areas were opened up. This deprived the native rulers of the opportunity to collect custom tolls as had been part of the previous system (Crowder, 1968). Portable currency was also introduced for the first time, and with this the creation of a new consumer mentality following the introduction of more and more European goods into the Nigerian Market (Falola, 1991). It is within this context that the postcolonial country contemporaneously relates with her neighbours and the outside world decades after the departure of colonial rule.

The Policy of Nigeria towards her Neighbours

Nigeria's policy towards her neighbours since independence is largely based on the sovereign equality of all African states, respect for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of all African states, none-interference in the internal affairs of other African countries, and commitment to functional cooperation as a means of promoting African Unity (Duruji et al, 2019).

Based on these principles, Nigeria has been apathetic to the internal political power struggles in other states around her. The dispassionate attitude of Nigeria towards her neighbours can also be attributed to the feelings of phobia, real or imagined, of French response in the case of any aggressive policy against any of those states that have colonial ties with France. This policy of non-interference was later reviewed due to the series of events that unfolded within the continent. The events included the roles of the neighbouring states in assisting Biafran rebels during the Nigerian civil war, the threat posed by the establishment of the *Exclusive Communante Economique D Afrique Occidentale (CEAO)* which Nigeria perceived as an attempt to perpetuate colonial divisions and privileges in Africa and also the use of the CEAO as a counterpoise to the 'big brother' status enjoyed by Nigeria within the sub-region (Omede, 2006).

On Babangida's assumption of office, however, series of efforts were made

to rectify the soar relations between Nigeria and her neighbours. In spite of that, however, the neighbouring states particularly Cameroon often engage in actions that are detrimental to Nigeria's national interest and security.

The dynamics of Nigeria's contemporary relations with her neighbours is systematically shaped by colonial legacies of artificial border creation exercises, English language and western ideas, colonial economic policies and Pro-British stance through the instrumentality of the Commonwealth (Omede, 2006). To begin with, it is a common knowledge that the European colonizers did not take into cognizance, the socio-cultural and geographical features of African societies in their infamous border demarcation exercises during the 1885 Berlin conference. As such, there is much arbitrariness that accompanied the exercise. The consequence today is that ethnic political features of African landscape are distorted and disrupted as members of erstwhile same ethnic groups found themselves under different political sovereignties (Omede, 2006).

Put differently, the present locations of Africa's political boundaries do not represent the territorial culminations of locally generated political processes (Omede, 2006). Indeed, as a consequence of colonial legacy of artificial border creation, Nigeria has historically had conflict with most, if not all of her neighbours. Such conflict, that sometimes degenerated into arms confrontation, largely shapes the bilateral relations between Nigeria on one hand and her neighbours on the other hand.

In the case of Nigeria and Cameroon for example, the colonial border delineation has led to protracted tensions, military scheming, border management and intervention by external actors (Esara & Obuah, 2021). Clearly, the major area of dispute and disagreement between the two countries was the Bakassi Peninsular. Both Nigeria and Cameroon had claimed ownership of the Peninsular and by so doing, both countries often engaged in series of verbal vituperation and military manoeuvres which have serious political and security implications in the region. As the Africa Research Bulletin (1981) cited in Esara and Obnah (2019:373) stated:

For over two decades of territorial disagreement between Nigeria and Cameroon, no military casualties were recorded in direct combat. There was a tension between the two countries following the deadly clash between Nigeria and Cameroonians in Bakassi Peninsular. However, this relatively condonable level of conflict changed in May 1981 when a platoon of Nigerian soldiers clashed with Cameroonian forces leaving five Nigerian soldiers dead and three others wounded... The incident almost led to war between the two countries.

Be that as it may, the conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon was essentially triggered by ill-defined border delineation by the colonial powers.

Elsewhere, the historic people of Kanembu, Shuwa Arabs, Kanuri, Fulani, Manga, Koyam etc find their kith and kin divided into sovereign states of Nigeria and Chad. These people, who traditionally lived together in precolonial times, before migrating into cluster settlements across the border communities of Nigeria and Chad, saw themselves cut-off by the international boundaries of the new independent states (of Nigeria and Chad) somewhere within the Lake Chad area (Ani & Okakorotu, 2018).

Ironically, after the creation of the new independent states, many of the citizens of the above ethnic groups, especially those from Kenem-Borno empire, found it difficult to appreciate the differences in their nationality within the Chadian and Nigerian states respectively, notwithstanding their cultural bond in the empire. Border dispute often pushes the Chadian military to attack Nigerians, and this ultimately affects the Nigeria-Chad bilateral relations (Ani & Okakorotu, 2018). In the same vein, the relationship between Nigeria and the Republic of Benin has over the years been marred by frequent occurrences of border clashes between the two countries. For example, the period between 1969 and the late 1970s in particular led to a deterioration of political relations between the two countries (Mohammed, et al, 2019).

One of the major sources of threats to Nigeria from Benin is derived from the activities of Beninese gendarmes who continuously and forcefully collect taxes from Nigerians along the Nigeria-Benin border villages. Another area of contention is frequent removal of the Nigerian flag and its replacement by the Republic of Benin flag sign of their occupation (Omede, 2006).

In essence, as a result of shared border, the relationship between Nigeria and Benin and the criminal activities around the border area has caused a lot of insecurity in Nigeria. For example, the high rate of trafficking ammunitions around the border area as well as illicit drug trade has serious implications for Nigeria and often prompted the country to formulate a number of policies that will manage the threats from Benin. In other words, the border porosity led to the inflow of illegitimate goods that over the years undermine Nigeria security and consequentially caused a sour relation between the two countries (Mohammed, et al, 2019).

Although, Nigeria does not share land border with Equatorial Guinea, the relationship between the two countries has been cat and dog since colonial period. There were illegal movements of persons and goods from Nigeria to this Atlantic Island. Series of agreement to improve bilateral relations did not remove suspicion between the two countries. Nigeria always has the feeling that the Island could be used as a launching ground to attack her by any of her enemies while Equatorial Guinea fears that Nigeria would annex the Island (Egeonu, 2021). Nigeria's fear could be substantiated as the Island was used by the Red Cross to ferry food, arms

and armaments to Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War. France was also accused of providing covert military activities, weapons and ammunitions to the secessionist group through Equatorial Guinea (Egeonu, 2021).

Colonialism also did harm to societies in Northern Nigeria and Niger. Before the demarcation of the Nigeria – Niger Republic border by the Western colonialists, the present-day Nigeria and Niger were not just the same nation but derived their respective names from the River Niger that runs through their territories (Umate & Idris, 2021). Even though Nigeria has a more cordial bilateral relations with Niger Republic than the other neighbouring states, border problem could not be entirely ruled out in the relationship. There exist pockets of incursions into Nigeria by Nigerien destitute. However, the magnitude of such forays is minimal when compared with those of other neighbouring countries.

Colonialism has also left a legacy of language barrier and imposition to shape relations between Nigeria and her Francophone neighbours. Before the imposition of English and French languages in West Africa, there was some communality in the languages spoken in the region. The Berber and Chadic languages were spoken in Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali. The Kwa, Mende and Gur language groups were spoken in Liberia, Ghana, Togo and Southwest Nigeria. At present, the imposed languages often act as divisive tools and have affected cross border movements and interactions between government officials within the block. And while all the five neighbours of Nigeria are Francophones, Nigeria has more influence in the sub-region (Sam, 2024).

Colonial rulers also left a legacy of economic domination in their former colonies that continues to dictate Nigeria's economic relations with her neighbours. During the colonial era, British economic policy has resulted in the growing dependence of Nigeria on an export economy dominated by European firms with which the local and neighbouring state enterprises could not compete. The story is the same with the French colonies neighbouring Nigeria. As a consequence, the volume of contemporary economic relations between Nigeria and her neighbours is still very low and largely takes place at an informal level. Paradoxically, the countries under discussion often prefer to trade with their former colonizers (Talib, 2019).

Perhaps the worst colonial legacy in Nigeria's relations with her neighbours is on the issue of loyalty. Despite Nigeria being the largest player in the sub-region, its neighbours are generally more loyal to France than it. Conversely, Nigeria often pursues policies that serve British interest rather than her neighbours' interest particularly through the instrumentality of the Commonwealth. In fact, the former colonies are still controlled to a certain extent, by their former colonial masters. The influence of the colonial masters in some cases, is so strong that, they are able to determine the direction of their votes at international summit meeting on several

issues. In this regard, the recent attempt by Nigeria (through ECOWAS) to launch a military intervention in Niger Republic was arguably the result of external pressure (International Crisis Group, 2024; Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2023).

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design anchored on historical and interpretivist approaches. A qualitative approach is suitable because it allows for a contextual analysis of how colonial legacies shape Nigeria's relations with her neighbours, focusing on meaning, interpretation, and historical continuity (Creswell, 2014). The research relies primarily on secondary data sources, including books and journal articles on colonialism, Nigeria's foreign policy, and African regional relations.

The method of content analysis is applied to identify recurring themes, such as border conflicts, economic dependency, linguistic divides, and institutional continuity from colonial rule. The study also employs comparative analysis to contrast Nigeria's relations with Anglophone and Francophone neighbours, thereby highlighting how colonial experiences differently shaped cross-border interactions.

By triangulating data from multiple sources, the methodology ensures validity and provides a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary importance of colonial legacy in Nigeria's foreign relations.

4. Findings

Drawing from the foregoing, the study revealed that colonial structures continue to exert significant influence on Nigeria's diplomatic, social, economic, and security interactions with her neighbours in the following areas:

- i Colonial boundary demarcations remain a central source of disputes between Nigeria and her neighbours, which has periodically escalated into diplomatic tensions like in Bakassi and across the Northern-Nigerian flank following activities of the Boko Haram terrorist group;
- ii The colonial legacy of language divides Nigeria from its Francophone neighbours; Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. This linguistic dichotomy complicates bilateral negotiations, military collaboration, and institutional coordination within regional organizations;
- iii Nigeria's economic structure reflects more towards colonial linkages as policies remain oriented toward Europe rather than fostering intra-African integration;
- iv Colonial borders that cut across ethnic communities have facilitated cross-border smuggling, insurgency, and migration challenges, particularly in the

- Lake Chad Basin and recently across Niger Republic with the activities of armed elements commonly referred to as bandits; and
- v Colonial administrative systems and legal frameworks remain embedded in Nigeria's diplomatic practices. Bureaucratic procedures, treaty obligations, and governance structures established during colonial rule still shape how Nigeria engages with its neighbours.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Long before colonization of Africa, there were extensive contacts and mutual interactions between various African peoples and societies. Colonialism and colonial domination in such societies affected their interactions due to the creation of international borders and boundaries by colonial powers. Thus, heterogeneous and homogeneous societies were forcibly divided into various European countries' spheres of influence. The precolonial societies had many things in common and were linked together by internal trade routes and geographical influence and thus simply lived in peace with one another. The partition led to the balkanization of African states and the disintegration of their corporate existence through arbitrary demarcation of territories which separated people of the same race or tribe from one another as well as transferred them to different societies. Nigeria and her neighbours are among the countries affected by this colonial division. The paper, therefore, concludes that colonial legacy is not just a historical antecedent but a major factor that determines Nigeria's contemporary relations with her neighbours.

5.2 Recommendations

The study therefore recommended as follows:

- i Nigeria and her neighbours should strengthen and enforce border management strategies, including joint border commissions and shared infrastructure projects, to reduce disputes and promote stability;
- ii Enhance diplomatic and educational initiatives to promote bilingualism and cultural exchanges to bring about homogeneity;
- iii Strengthen intra-regional economic activities through the instrumentalities of existing frameworks under ECOWAS and the African Union;
- iv Promote regional security mechanisms such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF), Nigeria-Cameroon Cross-border Security Committee, and similar platforms; and
- v Nigeria should intensify support to ECOWAS, the African Union and other international/regional organizations in mediating boundary issues and promoting the peaceful settlement of cross border conflicts.

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