# The Effect of Colonialism on Religion in Contemporary Nigeria

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***Abstract***
*Colonialism fundamentally reshaped Nigeria's religious landscape by marginalising Indigenous belief systems, entrenching Christianity through missionary activities, and solidifying geographic religious divides via administrative policies like indirect rule. Contemporary Nigeria still grapples with this legacy, which fuels ethno-religious conflicts, political polarisation, and identity crises. This article investigates the historical imposition of foreign religious frameworks, specifically Christianity and Islam, during the British colonial era and their lingering effects on contemporary Nigerian society. By adopting a historical and sociological lens, this article examines how the intersection of colonialism, missionary education, and administrative boundaries transformed Nigeria's complex religious environment. This article concludes that religion in contemporary Nigeria operates as both a binding social force and a persistent vector for conflict, a direct consequence of colonial restructuring. Resolving current ethno-religious tensions requires an intentional return to indigenous moral foundations and constitutional reforms that prioritise national cohesion over colonial-era sectarian divisions.*

**Word count: 145**
***Keywords:*** *colonialism, Christianity, Historical, Indigenous, Religious.*

## Introduction

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart (Achebe 1958:152). This quote from the book '*Things Fall Apart'* by Chinua Achebe captures in a succinct way an aspect of the impact of colonialism on the social and religious life of the peoples of Nigeria. The people who have been inhabiting the area called Nigeria are people "who in all things are religious" (Katause & Achunike 2013:47). They had their religions and different mediums of worshipping God. Their religions, called 'African Traditional religions', "helped to shape probably the social, political, and economic activities of the people" (Katause & Achunike 2013:47). The average Nigerian is a religious person. Religion plays as much, if not a more important role than politics and economics in society. It was into this setting that the Europeans ventured in the 19$^{th}$ century as missionaries, explorers, traders, and eventually colonialists. Colonialism was practised in the area now called Nigeria by the British government between 1851 and 1960 (Ziltener & Kunzler 2013:295). Before the arrival of the British, the different tribes of

the area were rural but had their own organised systems of administration. They interacted mainly through trade. The advent of the Europeans changed the dynamics of the indigenous systems.
The takeover of the administration of the tribes and the imposition of the British system changed the way of life and the course of the history of the different peoples and tribes for good. This was the beginning of colonial rule. Colonialism is the "exploitation by a stronger country of a weaker one or the use of the weaker country's resources to strengthen and enrich the stronger country' or 'a situation whereby a powerful country rules a weaker one and establishes its own trade and society there" (Ogunbadejo 2013:51), The British government aimed to expand British trade and advance 'progress' and 'civilisation' "for peoples they considered inferior and backward" (Falola & Heaton 2008:110). To achieve this, they had to restructure the local societies and structures they met. They altered "those customs, traditions, and institutions that (they) deemed harmful to Nigerian progress, leaving existing political and social institutions intact to the greatest degree possible" (Falola & Heaton 2008:110). In practice, however, significant changes were made to "political institutions and economic orientation" (Falola & Heaton 2008:110). The introduction of 'indirect rule' all over the amalgamated North and South protectorates worked in the North but failed in the Southeast.

**Indirect Rule**

While indirect rule worked in the North, where they had the feudal system with emirs and other local heads, it failed in the Southeast because the East had a different kind of administration. The British colonial government failed to appreciate the differences between the North and the South, both in culture and government. The Southeast government structure was based on "a representative democracy" (Falola & Heaton 2008:113) and not the kind of feudal system in the North. Colonial rule impacted not only the political, economic, and social structures of the tribes, but also their religions. Before colonial rule, the different tribes had their traditional religions. Islam had entered the North, the Northeast, and present-day Bornu as early as 1100 AD, about five hundred years before the arrival of Christianity (Falola & Heaton 2008:47). Christianity entered the area called Nigeria through the South. The first Christians were the Portuguese Roman Catholic missionaries to Benin and Warri in the Niger Delta region in the 15$^{th}$ century (Falola & Heaton 2008:47).

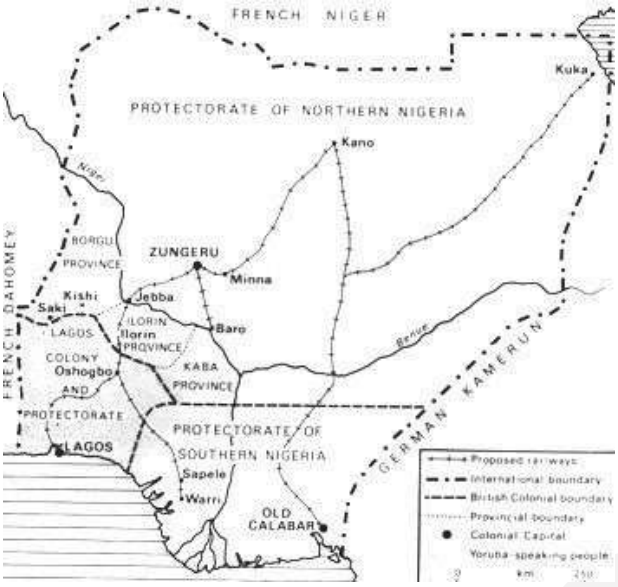



Fig. 1: Map showing the Northern and Southern protectorates before Amalgamation in 1914.

Islam thrived in the Northern protectorate. Initially, it spread mainly among the elite for social, economic, and political reasons (Kitause & Achunike 2013:47). It was not until the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio, which introduced and employed force to convert people, that the religion spread to wider areas. Kitause and Achunike (2013:47), quoting Ekeopara, said,

> From 1750 AD, Islam in Northern Nigeria entered a new phase. It became militant and intolerant of the Traditional religious system. By this time, Muslims were no more satisfied with receiving tributes. They were now bent on wiping out all associations of pagan custom with Islam. The infidels or unbelievers were forcefully converted by the military might of the Jihadists and not through preaching.

In conquered territories, they introduced the Islamic system of Law and government to wipe out any remnants of the traditional religion and firmly establish the Islamic religion and way of life (Kitause & Achunike 2013:47).

By the 19th century, Islam had become the dominant religion in the Northern part and parts of the Southwest. But the amalgamation of the two separate and distinct protectorates by the British Governor-General, Lord Frederick Lugard, in 1914, merged these two different areas and peoples and named the merged North and South Protectorates Nigeria. A name which came from the words "Niger area", as the popular river Niger runs through it from North to South. The amalgamation of the North and South protectorates was for economic reasons. "Despite the efforts of Lord Lugard and his successors to reorganise the finances of northern Nigeria, the economy of the northern protectorate had floundered" (Toyin & Heaton 2008:117).

Nigeria is a creation of the British colonial government through the then governor general, Lord Lugard. In fact, the name Nigeria was coined by his wife Flora Shaw in 1897. She was a British journalist who later married Lord Lugard in 1902. Before the amalgamation, the area was called by different names like 'Royal Niger Company Territories', 'Niger Sudan', Niger Empire, among others. She coined the name from the River Niger that runs through the entire country (Omipidan 2020:116). With the amalgamation of the two protectorates in 1914, the state of Nigeria came into being. From then until 0cctober 1, 1960, Nigeria was ruled as a British colony. The presence of the British and their administration impacted the lives of the people.

Even after the merger of the North and South Protectorates, the indirect rule system differed and developed at different paces. While indirect rule administration in the "south was conducted through councils of traditional rulers, in the north power in any given region was centralised in the hands of a single emir" (Omipidan 2020:116). In the south also, the colonial government extended European education and other social services to the people according to Omipidan (2020:116), while in the north they "explicitly forbade colonial government expenditure on such social services, in the interests of both parsimony and cultural preservation" (Omipidan 2020:116).

The restriction of the provision of social services in the North was not limited to schools and hospitals, but also the activities of Christian missionaries. "In the name of preserving traditional cultures, Lugard and his successors severely restricted the access of Christian missionaries to the Muslim areas of northern Nigeria" (Omipidan 2020:116). This restriction of Christian missionaries in the northern part of Nigeria not only affected the spread of the Christian faith to that part of the country, but also limited the provision of schools and other social services because these were mostly done by Christian missionaries. "As a result, the inhabitants of northern Nigeria did not have access to European education that southerners had. By the time the colonial office decided to amalgamate the northern and southern provinces of Nigeria into a single administrative unit in 1912, the two regions were already on very different paths" (Omipidan 2020:116).

This inequality in the areas of education and social services still exists today, and it is the bane of Nigeria. The people of the South are more educated than the people of the North, but the control of government is more in the hands of the people of the North. This was attested to by the Governor of Kaduna State, one of the core northern states, Mallam Nasir el-Rufai, when he said,

> in terms of human development indicators, Nigeria consists of two countries: there is a backward, less educated, and unhealthy northern Nigeria, and a developing, largely educated, and healthy southern Nigeria. We have to speak the truth to ourselves and ask: why is it that northern Nigeria has development indicators similar to Afghanistan, a country still at war? We have the largest number of poor people in the world, most of them in Northern Nigeria. Nigeria also has the largest number of out-of-school children, virtually all of them in northern Nigeria (Punch Newspaper 2021).

**Brief History of Nigeria and Location**

Nigeria is a country in West Africa. It has a size of about 356, 668 square miles, stretching about "700 miles from west to east and 650 miles from south to north, covering an area between 3° and 15° E longitude and between 4° and 14° N latitude," according to World Atlas. It is three times the size of the United Kingdom (Falola & Genova 2008:2). It is bordered to the north by the republics of Niger and Chad, to the east by the Republic of Cameroon, to the west by the Republic of Benin, and to the south by the Atlantic Ocean (Toyin & Genova 2008:2).

Below is a map of Africa that shows the location of Nigeria on the African continent




Fig. 2: Map of Africa showing the location of Nigeria on World Atlas.

Nigeria has two major season, rainy or wet season from May to October and the dry season from October to about March. Though in the Northern part of the country, the wet season is a lot shorter (July to September) according to Falola and Genova 2008:2. During the dry season between "January and February, the *harmattan* season brings high winds and dust from the Sahara (desert) southward" (Falola & Genova 2008: xxxi). Nigeria is inhabited by different tribes and cultures. There are over 200 ethno-linguistic groups with three main ethnic groups, the Hausa to the North, the Yoruba to the Southwest and the Igbo to the Southeast (Falola & Geneva 2008: xxxii). The lingua franca of the country is English because of British colonisation. It is the language used in schools, businesses, and official government transactions. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and the seventh in the world, with a population of 218,595,590, based on the projection of the latest United Nations data. The United States Census Bureau projects that the population of Nigeria will surpass that of the United States in 2047, when it will hit 379.25 million, which will push Nigeria to the position of the third most populous country in the world. The United Nations projects that the overall population of Nigeria will reach about 401.31 million by the end of the year 2050. By 2100, if current figures continue, the population of Nigeria will be over 728 million.

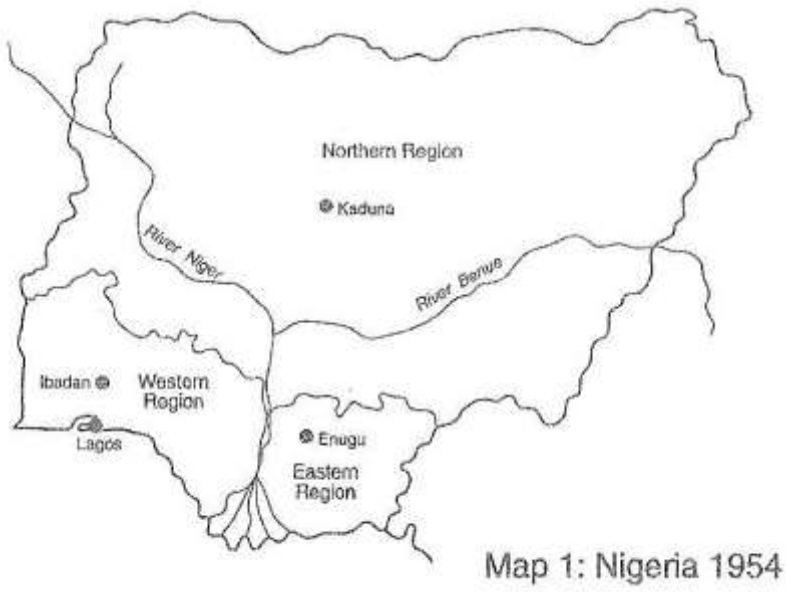



Fig:3 Map of Nigeria showing the three major regions at Independence in 1960

The economy of Nigeria is the biggest in Africa and one of the fastest-growing in the world. It is one of the "Next Eleven" economies along with some other members of the Commonwealth of Nations. Since the 1970s has been the most important and highest-earning export commodity, accounting for over 75% of the country's revenue. The other developing sectors are telecommunications and other financial services. Until the discovery of oil or petroleum, agriculture was the mainstay of the economy of the different peoples that today make up Nigeria. There was groundnut in the North, Cocoa in the Southwest, oil palm in the Southeast, Rubber in the South-South, amongst many others.

**Religious Demography**

According to a 2018 report from The World Factbook by the CIA, about 53.5% of Nigeria's population is Muslim, 48.5% are Christians (10.6% Roman Catholic, Protestant 35.3% other Christian) 0.6 local religions. Nigeria's constitution ensures freedom of religion, and the country is home to some of the world's largest Muslim and Christian populations simultaneously. Nigeria is divided roughly in half between Muslims, who live mostly in the north, and Christians, who live mostly in the south; indigenous religions such as those native to the Igbo and Yoruba ethnicities are in the minority.

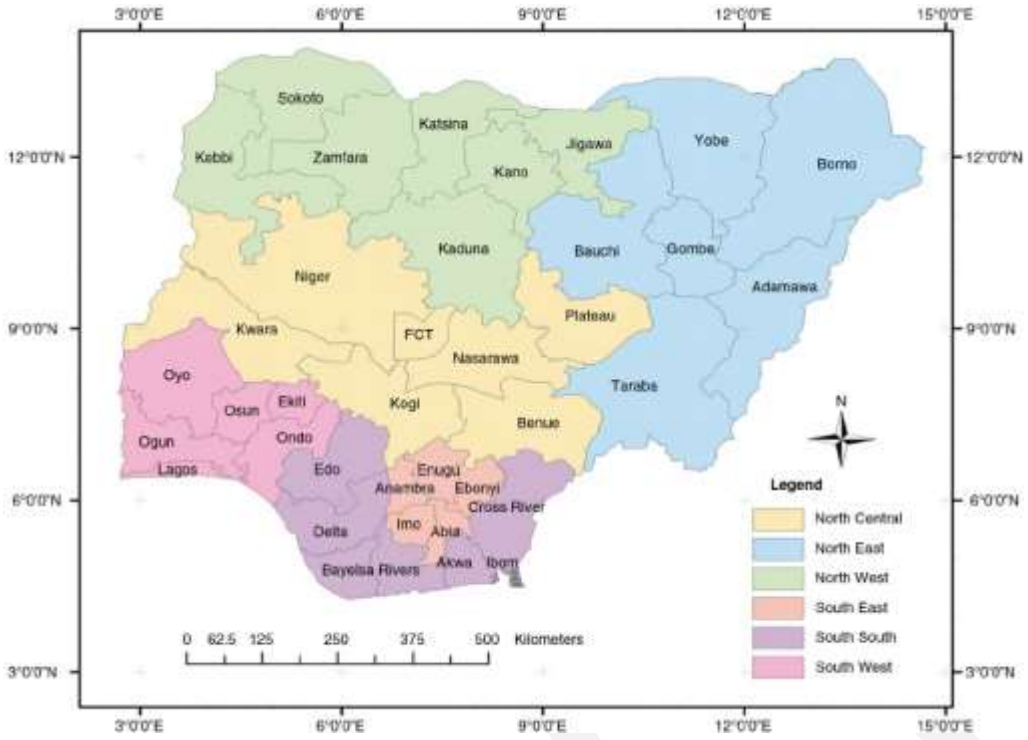



**Fig:4 Map of Nigeria Showing the 36 States and the Six Geopolitical Zones**

The religious tension caused by the legacies of colonialism is threatening the continued existence of the country. There is division between the Muslim North and the Christian South. There are calls for secession from the East and West, and the Boko Haram insurgency. This article added to the existing body of knowledge regarding the subject of discussion for academic purposes, policy formulation, and future references. Though this article focuses on the Islamic and Christian religions, mentioning Indigenous belief systems or African traditional religion where necessary. The aim of this work to investigate how colonial laws through the various constitutions favoured Islam over Christianity, and how this legacy is still influencing laws and policies in Nigeria today.

**Positive Effect of Colonialism in Nigeria**

Colonialism necessitated the coming of a new religion into the country called Nigeria. That is, Christianity, which was believed to be the religion of the whites, was introduced. The coming of Colonialism and its concomitant Christianity helped to abrogate rituals involving human beings or human sacrifice. In other words, it helped to put an end to some of the traditional religious rituals conducted by sacrificing human beings to appease the gods. The arrival of colonialism, coupled with the appearance of Christianity, brought Western education, which is considered a vehicle of civilisation. Uniforms were introduced, and schoolboys and girls had to dress, behave and speak like Europeans. The coming of whites, especially before the abolition of the slave trade, boosted the economic status of the kings as well as some dignitaries who collaborated with the whites in the slave trade. This helped in transporting Yoruba traditional religion to Latin America, such as Brazil and Cuba. It can also be seen that, after the imposition of a ban on the slave trade, seeking legitimate trade also puffed up the savings of the merchandisers who served as intermediaries between the British traders on the coast and the peasants in the interior land. The colonial masters

led to the availability of transport networks. The railway was introduced first in south-western Nigeria. It started from Lagos in 1896 and reached Abeokuta in 1900. A year later, it reached Ibadan, and by 1909 it linked the border of northern Nigeria (Olubomehin, 2001:32). Besides the railway, roads were also constructed. The first road was built in 1906 from Oyo to Ibadan to link with the railway line. In 1907, another 30 miles were constructed, linking Oyo to Ogbomoso and a 27-mile road from Oyo to Iseyin. By 1910 and upwards, Ikirun to Ila, Osogbo to Ilesa and so on were constructed (Olubomehin, 2001:32). It also ushered in other social amenities such as hospitals, electricity and so on. However, looking into these so-called positive impacts could prove negative if they were to be scrutinised, as the following phase will expose it.

**Negative Effects of Colonialism in Nigeria**

Colonialism brought negative effects into the existing religions through the introduction of a new religion (Christianity); both Yoruba traditional religion personnel and Muslims felt threatened. Missionaries were converting many traditionalists and Muslims into the new religion, while these actions caused havoc among the followers of the same religion. Yoruba rulers, who were the custodians of the traditional religion, and Muslim clergy did not fold their arms and allowed their religion respectively to be castrated. They put efforts to resist the conversion. However, both the Colonialists and Missionaries worked together to subdue the existing religions. This could be inferred from Fafunwa's (2002:71) statement: "The missionaries depended on the Europeans for help in keeping the rebellious African Chiefs in their place, while the European authorities hoped to conquer by religious persuasion what they failed to achieve by force of arms." Perhaps it could also be comprehended from this statement that the introduction of Christianity by the Colonial master was not for religious sake –not for their love for the Father or Son or Holy Spirit- but to achieve hegemony. It could also be argued that the introduction of Christianity is aimed at completely uprooting the existing norms, as it is said that "the primitive religions are all destined to perish and disappear" (Kraemer 1938: 230). The following quotation also speaks volumes. The missionary is a revolutionary, and he has to be so, for to preach and plant Christianity means to make a frontal attack on the beliefs, the customs, the apprehension of life and the world, and, by implication, because tribal religions are primarily social realities in the social structures and basis of primitive society. The missionary enterprise need not be ashamed of this, because colonial administration, planters, merchants, Western penetration, etc., perform a much more severe and destructive attack. (Kraemer 1938:342). It is mentioned earlier that Colonialism and Christianity brought in Western education and civilisation. However, it is now proved that the negative side of it preponderates over the positive side in the sense that the school was used as an instrument of conversion, that is, to convert the beneficiaries to Christianity.

Western education and its religion focused on spiritual and some aspects of social life. Therefore, little or no emphasis was laid on other human endeavours such as interpersonal morality and societal norms. Likewise, the concept of Western religion concentrated on belief rather than practice. Colonial education was fundamentally literary, based on reading, writing, arithmetic, Bible knowledge, Christian literature and so on, which all aimed to produce Christian who could read the Bible and serves as clerks, agents and interpreters for colonial masters and facilitate their trade. Western/Colonial education relegated the existing education into oblivion. For instance, before the advent of Western education, Arabic/Islamic education flourished, and the Yoruba language was written in Arabic alphabets. This was replaced and substituted with the Roman alphabet that is used till today. The traditional education system also paved the way for moral and

other forms of education available outside school, while in Western education, the system of boarding accommodation denied them such golden opportunity, according to Omotosho 1998:43 and Ogunbado 2011:23. It is also claimed that the slave trade helped to spread the Yoruba traditional religion beyond the locality and boosted the economy. It is argued that those slaves who were taken to foreign lands were forcibly transported to work on their masters' farms. They were not even allowed to practice their religion; they were converted to Christianity. Only a few of them remained in their religion and were able to practice it after they gained their freedom. Most of them even died on the way and were thrown into the ocean. Apart from that, the departure of the slaves from their home was disastrous to their family and community because they were the pillars and able bodies (working force) in their community. It was only the economic status of the collaborators that was boosted, and they were a minority while the majority suffered the consequences. Furthermore, the negative effects of colonialism in Nigeria include the arbitrary amalgamation of diverse ethnic groups, leading to lasting socio-political tensions, the structural distortion of the economy to serve external powers, and the erosion of indigenous cultures and values

**European Imperialists and Missionaries**

European missionaries and imperialists were deeply intertwined during the colonial era. Missionaries often acted as the "religious arm" of colonial powers, providing moral justifications for expansion while simultaneously relying on colonial governments to protect and facilitate their work. European imperialists and missionaries systematically undervalued, stigmatised, and suppressed Indigenous belief systems, branding indigenous socio-spiritual systems as "backward". Colonial administrative policies, particularly indirect rule in Northern Nigeria and the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates, created artificial boundaries that widened socio-political divides between religious and ethnic groups. Western missionary education, while advancing literacy and healthcare, served as a tool of Westernisation that eroded indigenous ethical norms and replaced them with imported dogmas. The lingering effect of this religious favouritism, geographical regionalism, and distorted cultural values remains at the root of modern ethno-religious conflicts and political instability.

**Conclusion:**

Colonialism in Nigeria permanently reshaped the spiritual landscape, replacing indigenous cosmologies with dominant foreign faiths. While providing Western education, colonial policies marginalised African Traditional Religion (ATR) and created rigid ethno-religious divides, forging a contemporary Nigeria defined by religious syncretism, political polarisation, and persistent sectarian tensions. Colonial administrators and missionaries actively stigmatised ATR, often equating indigenous practices with "heathenism" and prioritising Christianity to control and reshape the moral/cultural fabric of local societies. "Divide-and-rule" policies drew artificial geographic boundaries, deepening existing rifts. This legacy continues to feed into contemporary ethnopolitical conflicts. Rather than complete eradication, the clash of cultures produced deep religious hybridism. Many contemporary Nigerians practice a blend of Christian, Islamic, and traditional worldviews. Successor governments have struggled to maintain a truly secular state, as historical colonial fault lines frequently manifest in modern resource struggles and identity politics. There is an ongoing post-colonial effort to reclaim indigenous history, with scholars advocating for a massive return to African roots to reverse the cultural damage caused by colonialism

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