

# The Nation State, Resource Conflict, and the Challenges of “Former Sovereignties” in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Opinion leaders in Europe have often expressed penitence over Europe’s colonial legacies. While these leaders rethink the roles of their nations in colonialism, human rights abuses arising from colonialism, and state formation elsewhere, the discourse underscores the need to revisit colonialism as an ideology, and the role of the nation state in grievance construction in Africa. This article revisits colonial ideology and examines how the colonial legacy of the nation state affects the internal security of postcolonial Nigeria. The aim is to understand grievance dynamics underlying the relationship between the state and local communities, and how this relationship has resulted in contestation for sovereignty between the Nigerian state and previously independent communities. Using archival and ethnographic data, the article focuses on selected coal and oil producing communities of Southeastern Nigeria and the Niger Delta region.

## Introduction

In April 2011, David Cameron, the Prime Minister of Britain on a visit to Pakistan acknowledged the role British colonial rule played in creating Pakistan’s post-colonial security challenges. Cameron stated: “As with so many of the problems of the world, we [British people] are responsible for their creation in the first place.”<sup>1</sup> Pakistan, a part of colonial India, was a British territory between 1757 and 1947.<sup>2</sup> In a similar view on the colonial era, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams referred to colonialism as “illegitimate rule” that was “motivated by greed.”<sup>3</sup> To George Orwell, the well-known British novelist and journalist, the British Empire was “a despotism with theft as its final object.”<sup>4</sup> While these statements recall one of the most critical and poignant epochs of interracial relations in human history, they have failed to engage with both the ideological underpinnings of colonialism and the functionality of its structural relics, such as, the nation state in Africa.

The nation state in Africa has always been a subject of scholarly and policy analyses since its creation.<sup>5</sup> A look at the evolution of the state as presently constituted in Africa reveals that it is relatively new. Its history is traceable to the resolutions of the 1884-85 Berlin Conference on Africa.<sup>6</sup> Convened by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck of Germany, the conference participants, Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and King Leopold of Belgium, divided the African continent among themselves. Although the Berlin Conference has often been described as a meeting where Africa was “partitioned,” the Conference was merely to formalize long-standing colonial and commercial interests of different European nations in Africa. In what later became Nigeria, K.O. Dike, Nigeria’s foremost historian, contends that prior to the Berlin Conference “Beecroft [a British Consul]

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had succeeded in making British rule familiar to the native states under his consular jurisdiction."<sup>7</sup> This same trend was followed by various European settlers in other parts of Africa, often well before the nineteenth century. These include the French in Algeria, the Dutch (Boers) in South Africa, the British in the Natal and Cape regions of South Africa, and the Portuguese in Angola.<sup>8</sup>

The presence of colonial pathfinders such as traders and missionaries from different European countries heightened the possibility of conflicts between different European nations. Hence, one major objective of the Berlin Conference was to pre-empt wars among different European nations in Africa, a distinct possibility given the strife with which colonial officials and traders jostled for spheres of influence in Africa.<sup>9</sup> After the Conference, European nations simply strengthened their presence through "effective occupation," a principle adopted by the Conference as proof that a given power was really interested in a particular territory it had laid claim to.<sup>10</sup>

In Nigeria, the process of state creation, albeit unofficial, commenced immediately after the Berlin Conference with the granting of a Royal Charter to the Royal Niger Company (RNC) in 1885.<sup>11</sup> The charter was meant to legitimize the British presence in Nigerian territories pending the Foreign Office's formalization of the imperial takeover. Between 1885 and 1900, the RNC intensified both coercion and diplomacy on indigenous kingdoms and communities. Their goal was to obtain the signatures of the rulers of these kingdoms and communities in the form of treaties of friendship and protection. According to Boluwaji Olaniyan, an economic historian who studied consular and company regimes in Nigeria, in 1886 alone, the RNC secured 237 treaties from local rulers.<sup>12</sup> The extent to which the local rulers understood the content of these treaties has been contentious; however, the conflicts that ensued between colonial authorities and the local chiefs over their sovereignties indicate significant misreading of the treaties between both parties. K.O. Dike noted that there were usually the "differing conceptions of 'sovereignty', 'suzerainty', and 'protection'. . . between the two peoples."<sup>13</sup> At the expiration of the RNC rule on December 31, 1899, the British government took over the administration and commenced the official formation of the nation state. This included the creation of administrative units—counties, districts, provinces, and protectorates. These units were created based on commercial and administrative convenience rather than on grounded geo-ethnic understanding of local groups.

To Lord Frederick Lugard, the first Governor-general of amalgamated Nigeria, and a group of British traders in Nigeria, administrative and commercial considerations justified the declaration of colonial rule and the creation of a "Nigerian nation state" in 1900. However, to the several indigenous communities and kingdoms, the British plan was a usurpation of their sovereignties and rights to their ecologic resources. For instance, not all the sections of the so-called "Protectorate of Southern Nigeria" were effectively under British colonial rule as of 1900 when it was proclaimed. In Southeastern Nigeria, for instance, Adiele Afigbo, a notable Nigerian historian, contends that wars of conquest and pacification of resisting communities continued into the 1920s.<sup>14</sup> To these communities, known for their Greek-like village democracy, the idea of a Nigerian nation state, constituting over two hundred ethnic nationalities, some of which the British authorities were ignorant of their very existence, was more or less a joke. Hence, while the British colonial officials gloated over their successful creation of a Nigerian state in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Nigeria was anything but a united and functional state.<sup>15</sup> Different ethnic groups and their constituting communities hardly understood the meaning of the

new political structure and its implication for their indigenous sovereignties. The inattention that underlies the creation of the colonial states in Africa, especially Nigeria, illustrates the ideological basis of colonialism as expounded by the post-Columbus European ideologues. What was the ideological underpinning of colonialism and how did European ideologues justify it? How, did this ideology influence state creation and what kind of state did it create? Finally, how does the state resonate with the former sovereignties?<sup>16</sup> This article examines these questions in view of the recurring internal conflict in Nigeria between the state and local communities, especially, over natural resource ownership.

### **Racial Minimalism and the "Morality" of Colonialism**

Colonialism as a phenomenon best demonstrates a racist conceptualization of white supremacy over non-white races. This phenomenon took centuries of consistent justifications (by adventurers, religious men, and scholars), ideological mutations and blending with mercantilism to evolve into reality. While racist jingoism may have been as old as when two different races first came into contact, some of the earliest records of colonial intents may have been influenced by the developments in the post-Columbus New World. This includes the transatlantic slave trade and stories written by European adventurers and traders in Africa. According to the political scientist and anthropologist Mahmood Mamdani: "Although the origin of European race doctrines about Africa lay in the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, these doctrines grew in complexity in the period that followed that of 'discovery' and colonial conquest."<sup>17</sup>

To demonstrate the way in which Europeans, especially, Enlightenment scholars perceived Africa and Africans in this era, writers depicted Africa and its peoples in various strange ways. Robert Burton (1577-1640), an English scholar at Oxford University noted:

Leo Afer observes of the commonalty of Africa – base by nature and no more esteemed than dogs; no learning, no knowledge, no civility, scarce common sense, nought but barbarism amongst them, like rogues and vagabonds, they go barefooted and barelegged, the soles of their feet as hard as horse-hoofs...laborious, miserable wretched, unhappy life, like beasts and juments if not worse (for a Spaniard sold Indian boys for a cheese, and a hundred negro slaves for a horse).<sup>18</sup>

Burton did not limit his criticism to the Africans; he also assailed the Indian race. Burton wrote, "Indian drudges are ugly to behold, and...rusty and squalid, because poor, it is ordinarily so. Others eat to live, but they live to drudge; a servile generation, that dare refuse no task".<sup>19</sup>

The well respected Scottish Enlightenment philosopher and historian David Hume (1711-1776) ridiculed the African's value and sense of judgment. Hume noted "You may obtain anything of the Negroes by offering them strong drink, and may easily prevail with them to sell, not only their children, but their wives and mistresses, for a cask of brandy."<sup>20</sup> In another context in which he compared European civilization vis-a-vis Africa's, he differentiated the two thus: "So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour. The religion of fetishes so widespread among them [Africans] is perhaps a sort of idolatry that sinks as deeply into the trifling as appears to be possible to human nature."<sup>21</sup> According to Hume's biography he did not visit Africa during his lifetime; hence, his writing is likely to have been

influenced by stories told by slave traders and merchants trading between Africa and the Americas.<sup>22</sup>

Immanuel Kant, a German Philosopher/Anthropologist and a contemporary of David Hume, also wrote in line with the prevailing perception of Africa and Africans in Enlightenment Europe. In his 1763 essay *Observations of the Beautiful and the Sublime* Kant stated:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who represented anything great in art or science any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world.<sup>23</sup>

For Kant and some of his contemporaries, Africans and other non-Europeans were more inclined to laziness and were intellectually less gifted than Europeans. While Kant was a celebrated anthropologist and philosopher of his age, he failed to acknowledge the exploits of the ancient African civilizations of Egypt, Kush, Nok, Ghana, Igbo-ukwu, Ife, and Benin, among others. Again, like his contemporary David Hume, it is not on record that Immanuel Kant visited Africa.<sup>24</sup> In addition, he did not explain the method he used in his assessment of industry and talent among black people.

To other writers of the Enlightenment and Industrial Europe (mostly in the 1800s), the emancipation of non-European races depends on colonialism and state formation by European nations. It was thought that European civilization and Christianity would salvage non-Europeans from primitivism. The 1800s constituted a defining century in European colonial adventurism, especially in Africa except for the Cape region of South Africa where the Dutch had settled since the 1650s. After the theoretical abolition of the slave trade in Britain and its territories in the 1790s, efforts in the 1800s focused on suppressing the trade in Africa and convincing other nations to also abolish the trade in their territories and promote civilization via legitimate commerce—trade in commodities.<sup>25</sup> It was perhaps the commercial need of Europe and the strategic importance of Africa that changed the tone of Euro-centrists from one of derision to that of relative partnership. To the German poet and literary critic Wolfgang Menzel, Africans and aboriginal Australians could only emerge through some kind of fusion (perhaps genetic and/or cultural) with Europeans. This, he hoped, would yield a highly intelligent society. Menzel ascribed what he described as the “splendid qualities of the Greeks and Romans” to a “similar combination of the Thracian and Semitic families.” In detail, Menzel wondered:

It may be asked whether at some future time the rest of the world may not be flooded with Europeans from the East Indies, from the Cape, and from the Botany Bay, and by this means a universal commixture take place? I believe rather that the final complete triumph of Christianity and of [European] civilization will be the consequence of an entire fusion of the whites and blacks.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, Menzel cited America as an example where White civilization has triumphed over Indian primitivism and hoped Australian aborigines and Africans would follow. It is such

racist illusionism that Arthur de Gobineau echoed in his quip: "history springs into being only at the magic touch of the white race."<sup>27</sup>

To further illustrate the misconceptions about Africa and justification for colonialism in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Captain Vallier, a French traveler in the Congo, wrote in 1900 about Congo: "We find here nothing but anarchy and ill-will, in order words, a society in its infancy, without any organization, a scattering of humanity, who escape from contact with us and paralyzed our most generous efforts with inertia."<sup>28</sup> As we shall see later in this article, it is this idea of racial superiority on the part of European colonial adventurers that underpinned colonial administration and the state it created. Hence, from its inception, colonial rule aimed at changing supposedly the inferior indigenous to something superior, alien and European.

### **Racial Minimalism: The Limitations of a Discourse**

The common string linking the views advanced by writers of Enlightenment and Industrial Europe was the assumption that non-Europeans were racially and institutionally inferior to Europeans. The Nigerian philosopher Michael Eze has identified common limitations to this thesis: most of these minimalist scholars never travelled outside their home continent; they relied on European adventurers' notebooks, meaning that they did not write experientially; they believed that geography determined human psychosocial development and character.<sup>29</sup>

The racial parameter as a template for judging civilization and development cannot provide an informed basis for the comparative history of different peoples. As the popular cliché goes, "empires rise and fall." Hence, in assessing a race or culture, its present state relative to others may not sufficiently portray the achievements of its past. It is this mode of racial perception in which one people is presumably superior to others that often overlooks the accomplishment of individual members of the "other." Once a so-called race is profiled as inferior, the tendency is for the supposedly superior race to forcibly impose its institutions on the perceived inferior race. It should be noted, however, that there were exceptions to such views. For instance, L.S Amery, a former British Dominion Secretary, differed with the imperial idea of making the colonies look like little Englands. To Amery, Western values "tend to judge distant problems in the light of its own experience and to try to fit them into its own formulas, regardless of their relevance to local conditions."<sup>30</sup> In other words, he recognized that fundamental institutional differences between the West and other peoples could hinder the functionality of imposed Western values and institutions in other contexts.

It must be emphasized that judging one civilization based on the values of other civilizations obscures the dynamism and functionality of its institutions. The existence of humanity in any geo-cultural context reveals that to a large extent its institutions and material and immaterial cultures are not static. The dynamic interaction of diverse elements in Africa's indigenous socio-political and ecological spaces sustained its people long before the Euro-African relationship developed. It is the ideological ground as provided by racial minimalism and fuelled by mercantilism that thus justified colonial adventurism in Africa and the nature of the nation states it bequeathed. To colonial apologists, therefore, the colonization of Africa and imposition of the nation state as a philanthropic "civilizing mission" was indispensable.<sup>31</sup>

While different states existed in Africa prior to the European colonial era, the state with its present geopolitical constitution is essentially a relic of that era.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, a critical

question that arises in this context is to what extent is the notion of the new state a civilizing and sustainable institution in Africa, especially in Nigeria? It is arguable that creating a sustainable and grassroots oriented state was ever the goal of colonialism. The conscious alienation of colonial administration from indigenous peoples, the master/servant relationship that colonial labor policies promoted, racist slurs against local people, harsh tax practices, forceful expropriation of natural resources, alienation from land, and other forms of exploitation illustrated the fact that the state represented an alien and economic agenda of the colonial powers against the interest of their subject peoples.<sup>33</sup> As will be seen later in this article, for the local communities, such as in Nigeria, the idea of the state (colonial or postcolonial) became equated with racism, maltreatment, dispossession, elite pillage, and injustice; hence, the emergence of resistance to the state. What was the socio-political framework in pre-colonial Nigeria, and how did colonialism change it? The next section examines this question.

### **Colonial Intrusiveness: Contradicting the “Indigenous” and “Reforming” It?**

Ethnic groups or communities in different regions of Nigeria developed into sovereign monarchical kingdoms, chiefdoms or village democracies.<sup>34</sup> In Southeastern Nigeria and the Niger Delta region, from where this study draws its primary data, small independent communities with full territorial, socio-ecological, and economic and political sovereignties controlled their land and natural resources. In these areas, no known efforts were made toward building large ethnic or multiethnic kingdoms. Prior to British rule in Nigeria, these polities had their tailored government, sustainable land tenure systems, and resource ownership models. In Southwest and Midwestern Nigeria, the Yoruba and Benin peoples both evolved ethnic kingdoms. However, like their eastern neighbors, they also practiced communal resource-ownership systems, although with greater hierarchical control by their *obas* (kings in Yoruba and Benin).<sup>35</sup>

The Hausa-Fulani rulers of Northern Nigeria developed kingdoms or emirates. The emirs adopted an Islamic administrative system and exercised enormous control over their territories. Land and natural resource ownership system based on relative feudalism was practiced and the Fulani emirs collected taxes from landless commoners or *talakawas*.<sup>36</sup> The primary place of the traditional rulers in the political administration of Northern Nigeria made it easy for the colonial state to take control of the land, once they gained control of the emirs. Land in Northern Nigeria (especially among the Hausa/Fulani), does not seem to have as much mystical connotation as in Southern Nigeria.<sup>37</sup> The perception of land in a non-mystical sense may have been connected to the predominantly Islamic practices and the nomadic economy of the region.

In Southern Nigeria (East and West), land and natural resource ownership did not reside with one individual; rather it resided with the community. The colonial era British ethnographer Percy Amaury Talbot noted that “throughout the whole of Southern Nigeria the land is...communal and belongs to the people generally.”<sup>38</sup> Degradation of land was seen as an abomination in local communities, because land degradation contravenes certain attributes of land, among which is that the land is holy, i.e., believed to be a link between the living and the dead. Talbot describes the mystical perception of land in Southern Nigeria thus: “The feeling [reverence] partly arises, no doubt, from the belief in the spirits of the earth, the local representative of which is usually regarded as the tutelary guardian of the people and its soil, and partly from the worship of ancestors who dwell in it.”<sup>39</sup>

The perception of land in this manner implies also that land is valued beyond pecuniary compensation. Writing about indigenous land use practices in Southeastern Nigeria in pre-colonial times, P.E.H. Hair, a British colonial official in the Udi Division of Eastern Nigeria, noted that this "was the correct traditional doctrine: ancestral land must never be bartered for money."<sup>40</sup> Talbot argued that it was in fact colonial rule that introduced the commoditization of land in Southern Nigeria: "By immemorial custom it [land] can never be alienated or sold, and it is only of recent years and in a few parts of the country, where Europeans and other aliens have made dual appearance in numbers, that any private individual rights in land are beginning to be recognized."<sup>41</sup>

The indigenous model of land ownership and alienation did not fit into the colonial context, hence the necessity to reform it. The reformation, which ignored the indigenous socio-ecological order, involved the proclamation of several land and mineral resource-related Ordinances beginning with the Crown Land Ordinance of 1900. With this legislation, all territories the Royal Niger Company had acquired from local rulers through treaties were turned over to the colonial state.<sup>42</sup> These lands became known as "Crown Lands."<sup>43</sup> T.O.S. Elias noted that Crown Land was "no more than a convenient administrative device or a generic name for all the lands which are in reality the property of the Nigerian public, held on their behalf by the Government."<sup>44</sup> A question that may be of interest here is: how much did Nigerians realize their stake in the new state as of 1900? Put differently, was there any such thing as a "Nigerian public" as of 1900? The Nigerian nation state as presently constituted is unarguably a relic of British colonial craftsmanship. As pointed out earlier, prior to the commencement of British colonial rule in 1900, indigenous communities in Nigeria lived in sustainable independent political units.<sup>45</sup> Hence, the awareness of a national wealth belonging to "the Nigerian public" hardly existed in 1900. Independent kingdoms and communities were not integrated into a common Nigerian public and preferred to be identified by their indigenous identities than as Nigerians.<sup>46</sup> This leads us to the question, why was Nigeria created, by whom and for what purpose? The following section peers into these fundamental questions that underlie the evolution of the Nigerian state.

### **The Nigerian Nation State: For Whom and for what Purpose?**

This section examines the arguments adduced by colonial officials for the formation of the Nigerian nation state and the role players in this process. If put in question form: what were the arguments behind the formation of the Nigerian state as presently constituted? Did Nigerians create their state? On the other hand, was the state imposed on Nigerians? This section will attempt to offer insights into these questions in order to understand the grievance dynamics and the nature of the conflict between the nation state and former sovereignties in Nigeria.

The formation of the present-day nation state of Nigeria was purely British-driven and followed a top-down colonial approach. The process started with the amalgamation of the Colony of Lagos and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria in 1906 into the "Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria" with Lagos as its headquarters.<sup>47</sup> The Protectorate of Southern Nigeria included the two provinces of Eastern and Western Nigeria; while the provinces of Northern Nigeria formed the "Protectorate of Northern Nigeria." Essentially two separate countries, the "Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria" and the "Protectorate of Northern Nigeria" maintained distinct administrative structures and were governed by their respective High Commissioners.<sup>48</sup> This initial structure, which somewhat

reflected the broader ethnic/religious divides between the mainly Islamic Hausa-Fulani North and a more diverse South, was considered expensive for purposes of administration and “unsustainable” in the long term.<sup>49</sup>

Considering the challenges posed by the administration of two countries in a contiguous geography, different British colonial officials expressed the need to amalgamate both countries before 1914.<sup>50</sup> From an official viewpoint, which was stated by Lord Frederick Lugard, the eventual creation of a Nigerian state on January 1 1914 was based mainly on the subsequent reasoning: “The construction of a rival railways in Northern and Southern Nigeria accentuated the necessity of having a single railway policy, with a single administration, and over a year ago [1913], the Secretary of State decided that the time had come to give effect to the scheme of constituting a single Government for Nigeria.”<sup>51</sup> While it may seem ridiculous to amalgamate two distinct countries merely to have a unified railway system, it shows the economic basis (rather than socio-cultural consideration) behind the British decision to amalgamate the distinct Northern and Southern Nigerias. Various opinions have been expressed on the amalgamation of 1914. Takena Tamuno, a Nigerian historian argues: “As in 1906 [amalgamation], the primary British aim was economic.”<sup>52</sup> Northern Nigeria is landlocked and its produce exports had to go through Southern Nigerian seaports. Hence, it did not make economic sense for British trading companies to pay double taxes in two countries, when they could pay once in a united country. The amalgamation movement also gained popularity with the revenue forecasts, which indicated a bright economic future for the country. For instance, Lugard had projected that the revenue for 1914 was “exactly a million Sterling greater than the estimated revenue for 1912...The estimated Revenue of Nigeria this year [1914] stands at 3½ millions, and Trade has increased from 5 million to nearly 15 millions in this period of under 8 years.”<sup>53</sup> In another instance, the mineral resource potential of Nigeria was also highlighted to support the viability of a Nigerian nation state: “The possibilities of United Nigeria under the new *regime* are practically unlimited, with the large store of vegetable and mineral wealth that the country has been found to possess”.<sup>54</sup>

Economic consideration in Lugard’s colonial conception was clear. For him, colonial rule was not just “philanthropy.”<sup>55</sup> He perceived colonialism and the formation of nation state as a dual mandate in which Britain will bestow civilization, or as he puts it, “happiness and welfare [to] the primitive races.”<sup>56</sup> In return, Britain and indeed Europe will reap industrial growth by sourcing cheap raw materials from Africa. According to Lugard:

Let it be admitted at the outset that European brains, capital, and energy have not been, and never will be, expended in developing the resources of Africa from the motives of pure philanthropy; that Europe is in Africa for the mutual benefit of her own industrial classes, and of the native races in their progress to a higher plane; that the benefit can be made reciprocal, and that it is the aim and desire of civilized administration to fulfill this dual mandate.<sup>57</sup>

To emphasize this economistic drive in the creation of the Nigeria, other colonial advocates, especially British traders, had since 1830s called for direct British rule of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria as a way of ensuring safe trading environment.<sup>58</sup> For instance, in 1882, a British trader in the Niger Delta had suggested to the British Crown: “I believe that instead of so many petty kings and chieftains, if we had one strong government over all these rivers, the increase in our trade would be enormous, and the impetus it would give to civilization would be almost incalculable.”<sup>59</sup> In effect, while the formation of the Nigerian

nation state arguably may have benefited Nigerians in some ways, the primary goal of its founders was the economic benefit that Britain and its traders gained. Africa as a continent was viewed by European traders and officials as a land of great economic potentials and the risk of investment in colonialism did not compare with the projected benefits. One writer fantasized about the riches of Africa thus:

On the land itself, Nature seems to breathe the fifth part of all her nectar [on Africa]. ‘Africa,’ says a well known geographer, ‘is eminently rich in the variety and high development of its animals.’ Her mineral wealth is now attracting the attention of the civilized world. Foreigners can hardly look up on her commercial resources with eyes unmoved.<sup>60</sup>

How did the colonial (Nigerian) state resonate with local communities and individuals? Local opinions voiced against the new nation state immediately after its amalgamation in 1914 reveal the inherent arbitrariness in the formation of Nigeria. Colonial officials had ignored the indigenous socio-cultural affinities and geographical contiguities of communities. They were even distorted in certain instances. Perhaps no opinion captured this anomaly than the February 3 1914 editorial in *The Times of Lagos*:

We had been complaining for years that portions of Yoruba tribes had been incorporated into the administration of Northern Nigeria, notwithstanding that they were allied to the countries and peoples under the Southern administration by conterminous boundaries and by ties of kindred, kinship and intermarriages, and by tribal institutions. By an arbitrary arrangement, an imaginary line ran in some cases through a town or single and individual tribal territory. As a consequence the inhabitants or dwellers in one town found their town, their territory and themselves cut up into two divisions and placed under two distinct and differing types of administrations, with different laws, customs and usages, although professedly and admittedly British. A farmer finds that his dwelling and himself come under one administration, while his farm land goes under the laws of another and an altogether antagonistic system . . . Even properties of an individual owner within the radius of the same locality shared the same fate. This anomaly was the subject of frequent discussions in the Legislative Council, brought up by the native unofficial members of the Council.<sup>61</sup>

The editorial writer thus captured a dire scenario whereby the Yoruba ethnic group, which geographically belonged to Southern Nigeria, had some of its villages excised and added to Northern Nigeria, which before 1914 was a separate country.

More recent Nigerian scholars and analysts, critical of the unification of contrasting peoples into one country, later expressed their fears on the viability of the state. Takena Tamuno describes the nature of the 1914 amalgamation of Nigeria this way: “A single Governor-General for the Northern and Southern Provinces from January 1, 1914 constituted an important feature of Lugard’s Amalgamation scheme, which resulted in the political fusion of North and South without compelling immediate or subsequent administrative unification.”<sup>62</sup>

In the same manner, Ahmadu Bello, the leader of the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) in the 1960s and also the former Premier of Northern Nigeria described the amalgamation in his autobiography *My Life* as “the mistake of 1914.”<sup>63</sup> He wrote this to describe not only the administrative challenges facing the Nigerian nation state but also the lack of commitment at

nation-building and citizenship orientation on the part of colonial officials. It is this view of Nigeria that Obafemi Awolowo, the leader of the defunct Action Group and a contemporary of Ahmadu Bello, made more lucid in his description of Nigeria: "Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression . . . The word 'Nigerian' is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria and those who do not."<sup>64</sup> These fears not only point to the mosaic nature of the Nigerian state but also mark the beginning of a contentious relationship between the superior authority of the state and the former sovereignties that constitute the new state.

The hurried creation of the state, especially the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates, presented its challenges as it did not give room for any consultations with local people. Lugard admitted that he spent only "six months . . . studying local conditions and submitting proposals for the Amalgamation" of Nigeria.<sup>65</sup> After this period of feasibility study, Lugard travelled back to England and submitted his findings to secretary of State Sir Edward Grey, who then mandated the amalgamation.<sup>66</sup> It is not known how Lugard arrived at his conclusion that all the indigenous communities and ethnic kingdoms could surrender their sovereignties to the powerful central authority of the state. As his account shows, he did not consult local communities; neither did he work in a committee. Takena Tamuno notes: "The British government did not seek the opinions of Nigerians before amalgamating Northern and Southern Nigeria in January 1914."<sup>67</sup>

It was not practicable for Lugard to arrive at credible conclusions in just six months. Nigeria is a large country, and as of the early 1900s lacked a good communication infrastructure that would have afforded him access to all the parts of the country. In his report, Lugard acknowledged that the country "covers an area of over 330,000 square miles, or more than five times the size of England and Scotland, or one-third of the size of British India [present day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh]."<sup>68</sup> With this challenge, it would have taken Lugard several years to reach out and consult with all of the constituencies of Nigeria. This initial anomaly spurred opposition to the new state from local communities and individuals critical of the state.

To help gain a deeper understanding of the views of local people on the formation of the Nigerian state, the article utilizes primary data on issues related to the sovereignty of the new state over local communities and the responses of individuals and communities to its authority vis-à-vis the ownership of natural resources in local communities. Primary data, such as archival materials on colonial era events, observation, and interview responses were used in this analysis.

### **Collection of Primary Data**

The data used in this article were collected from Enugu-Ngwo, a coal producing community in Southeastern Nigeria and the oil-rich community of Egbema and its neighbors in the Niger Delta. These communities are known for their conflict with the state over their land and mining rights. Elderly respondents with experiential knowledge of state-community contestation, coal mining and oil exploration/exploitation in their communities were interviewed. In addition, archival materials on coal mining and oil exploration in colonial Nigeria were also collected from the National Archives Enugu (NAE) in Southeastern Nigeria between November 2007 and March 2008. The validity of archival documents was verified from the narratives of elderly respondents who experienced mining-related activities and conflicts in both colonial and post-colonial Nigeria.

### Contending for Natural Resource Rights and Notions of Sovereignty: Field Data

Different archival accounts of the reactions of local peoples to the mineral exploration of their communities during the colonial era give insights into the manner in which local people responded to the emerging state vis-a-vis the sovereignty of their communities. In this letter written in January 1949 by a community chief against Shell D’Arcy’s oil exploration, the community rejected the right of the state to explore for mineral resources on their land. According to his letter:

In the full interest of our land, we do not want any of the Shell D’Arcy parties [exploration groups] to enter or to explore our land nor to drill it. *The land is ours* and should not be tampered with by any party whether alien or aborigine. We are yet preparing to send our children overseas to study all about land with all in it and so we don’t want *our mineral resources* to be touched or to be meddled with lest posterity [and] the unborn will blame us for the same. The arrangement or license granted by the government to the Shell D’Arcy Exploration Parties (*both of you not being the land owners*) is inimical to our interest and we don’t cherish or welcome it. *We are the land owners*. If any exploration is thought expedient to the economic benefit of *our people*, such an arrangement and permit to enter our land and explore it should be between us and the experts to such an exploration under some terms which would be for the *interest of us present and our descendants to come* (emphases added).<sup>69</sup>

In a similar petition written on November 15, 1949, the petitioners also disputed the sovereignty of the state over their land and as the petition stated, over “everything that grows on top or stays in the ground.” In detail, the petition noted, “We the aborigines of this community, dispute the right of anyone – Nigeria or British Empire, over our land, water, trees, rocks. In short, everything that grows on top or stays in the ground. We urge you Dear Sir [District Officer] tell the Shell Company to stay away from our domain.”<sup>70</sup>

While the above views were expressed in colonial Nigeria, the author wanted to know how the study communities viewed state authority over mineral resources in their communities presently. The author asked Chief Nduka (pseudonym) in an interview in Egbema, an oil producing community in the Niger Delta, why communities such as Egbema, resist the exploitation of oil in their localities? He responded:

We [the Igbo people] have never been conquered by other tribes [ethnic groups], we have never been ruled by others. Igbo communities did not seek to build empires by incorporating other communities or looking towards our non-Igbo neighbors. So when they [colonial officials] came, what they brought with them [the state] was strange, lumping everyone together, dictating how you use your land, imposing chiefs on local communities, exploring and taking our oil in Egbema and our neighbors in Rivers area [lower Niger Delta]. It was strange. In that case it will be difficult for the people to accept the new state in just a few years, so we resisted the imposition of Nigeria, because Nigeria means taking our land by force, imposing forced labor policy, collecting taxes and dictating how we use our land...In Egbema in particular, history follows us everywhere we go; so I am not surprised if the present generation has not given up fighting to keep what is ours, the way their fathers resisted the Whiteman.<sup>71</sup>

To this respondent, the Nigerian nation state takes: “our land by force...dictating how we use our land.” Another respondent in the coal-producing Enugu-Ngwo community, Chief Uwakwe (pseudonym), was also detailed in the way he saw the acquisition of their ancestral land by the colonial state in 1915 for coal mining.<sup>72</sup> Local people in this community have always felt the colonial state acquired their land through deception and force. The 76-year-old chief, citing copiously from a copy of the “Deed of Grant” (colonial agreement for transfer of land to the state), said:

Remember, this land [colliery] was originally taken by force in 1912. However, as a result of British diplomacy, in order to show the world that they are democratic, they came back in 1915, employed a very terrible and ruthless Warrant Chief Onyeama, ordered him to go inside the bush and fish out the leaders of these people to sign a Deed of Grant so that the land they took by force can be covered by a legal document. In 1915, the eleven chiefs signed the Deed of Grant under duress, granting the land to the colonial masters. The land was taken by force in the period of ignorance. Now is the era of awareness, we are saying, give us back our land.<sup>73</sup>

A former highly-placed political office holder in old Anambra State and an indigene of Enugu-Ngwo, discussing the acquisition of his community’s land for the establishment of the colliery, gave an account of why the forebears of Enugu-Ngwo thought, they “were robbed by Nigeria.” In detail, he said:

Before the coming of the Whiteman [often implies British colonialism], Enugu-Ngwo owned its natural resources. Natural resources in this sense do not mean coal. Our fathers did not know about coal, tin or oil, but they knew about their God-given land, they guarded it jealously and fought off the belligerent *Nike*, *Akegbe* and *Awkunanaw* neighbors who were always intent on carving out portions of our land. Their understanding of nation-hood and ownership of national properties did not encompass what belonged to Nike, nor did Awkunanaw believe that Enugu-Ngwo land belonged to it. Each community guarded its wealth. At the inception of colonial rule, it changed. So what is yours now became mine and vice-versa. This was in principle. Did all communities accept it? No. It was an alien concept. Even the Irish have not accepted English domination; there is still war in Britain over the imposition of England on Northern Ireland. How then do you think Enugu-Ngwo, rich in coal, will allow its traditional enemies such as Nike and Akegbe to share in its wealth? Extend it to Ijaw land; will they allow the Igbo or Hausa to share the [oil] wealth in their land? They were robbed by Nigeria...The community; the national identity of groups is still alive. You talk about the Nigerian public, whose public? When did it emerge? Who initiated it?<sup>74</sup>

When the researcher raised the issue of resource ownership and conflict between mineral-producing communities and the state, the former highly placed political office holder stated:

The press and the Nigerian public have given what is happening in local communities a wrong interpretation. Those people dying and killing others [militants] in the creeks are not asking the federal government to give them back their oil. The issue is greater than oil, it is greater than coal. It is a question being raised about the polity [Nigeria]. Without the Whiteman, the

fighters in the Creeks would not have known about oil; but without oil, they have long in the days of their fathers asked the Whiteman to leave their land and go back to Europe. That is what Jaja of Opobo fought and died for, that is what Nana of Itsekiri and Obong of Calabar fought and died for. That is self and community assertion. We should not limit the agitation to oil and coal. Oil and coal are foreign but land is not. That is the same thing Enugu-Ngwó is saying, a reversal to the pre-1915 order, not the coal. Minerals are immaterial without the land.<sup>75</sup>

Local narratives in this section question the sovereignty of the Nigerian state over the natural resources in local communities, such as, oil, and coal. They show similarities with colonial era opposition to oil exploration activities as contained in the archival sources above. These sources reveal how local people opposed mining rights that were granted by the colonial state to British mining companies such as Shell D’Arcy without the consent of host communities – a practice that has continued in the postcolonial dispensation. Hence, to the local people, there is little or no difference between the manner they have been treated by both the colonial and the postcolonial states. Opposition to the modern state is therefore a continuation of the struggle against the loss of indigenous sovereignty to British colonial rule, even though the present state is no longer under foreign rule. It is this intersection between the assertion of community rights (often based on the pre-state notion of sovereignty) and state authority that leads to conflict between the state and the local communities that produce mineral resources.

## Discussion

The minimalist theory of race that Eurocentric writers championed provided the ideological platform upon which European colonization of Africa and other regions of the world rested. In Africa, the theory spurred paternalism, mercantilism, colonial adventurism, and, finally, the creation of modern nation states by colonial powers. These states, in most cases, have remained more or less as geopolitical contraptions that served colonial interests and are estranged from local peoples. In the case of Nigeria, this article has highlighted that economic considerations of the British government and colonialist drive, more than any other issue, underpinned the formation of the Nigerian state. To colonial officials, the socio-ecological and political interests of the local communities were secondary. Hence, in the formation of the state, the opinion of indigenous communities was not sought, nor were their political structures accepted as the basis of the new state. While this framework was used in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, it was not entirely the same in other British colonies. For instance, in the former British Malaya (Malaysia and Singapore), the colonial state was created out of recognized pre-existing sultanates and pirate forts. These structures also became the constituent provinces of its post-colonial existence, with Singapore later permitted to secede in 1965.<sup>76</sup> In Africa, the United Nations hurriedly stamped the borders of postcolonial states without considering the pre-colonial geo-ethnic order.<sup>77</sup>

As noted above, this imposed state structure with its characteristic centralization of authority has often been at variance with the socio-ecologic and economic interests of local communities, a conflict that threatens the survival of the post-colonial state. Hence, although British colonialism bequeathed a nation state to Nigerians at independence in 1960, the overall concept of the state estranges it from local communities where it is seen as alien and a dispossessor of local sovereignty.

For instance, British colonialism distorted pre-colonial indigenous land tenure system and set up a framework in which the state owns all land, mineral resources, and the power to transfer usufruct.<sup>78</sup> This colonial framework, which the postcolonial state retains, has become volatile and has resulted in contestation for ecological and mineral resource rights between the state and formerly independent communities. To the local communities, therefore, there is hardly any difference between the oppressive colonial state and a postcolonial state that has continued the dispossession begun by the colonial state. The perception of the state as an interloper in communities' natural resource wealth owes to an institutionalized view of the state as an alien institution synonymous with British colonialism known for its racist and exploitative practices.<sup>79</sup> In this conflict, pre-state sovereign units assert the desire to repossess their ecological rights from the state. This assertion of indigenous resource-ownership rights (or resource nationalism of former sovereignties) portrays an uncomfortable relationship between pre-colonial political units and the new, more powerful nation state. It also indicates a resurgence of traditional political authorities against a dominant nation state, such that it poses a threat to the survival of the state.

### Conclusion

In the light of the above analysis and the "penitence" shown by post-colonial European leaders (such as the British Prime Minister) on the roles their nations played in creating these problems, it is important to suggest that the former colonial powers have critical roles to play in enhancing the sustainability of the postcolonial states such as Nigeria. A more rational and realistic approach to remedying what is often seen as "colonial injustices" by local communities must go beyond mere rhetoric or financial reparation as in the Italian-Libyan Treaty in 2009.<sup>80</sup> The security challenge of the post-colonial state is as much a reality in Africa as it is in Pakistan. Hence, former colonial powers must engage with the agitation for restructuring the nation states in ways that acknowledge pre-colonial identities and rights. In Nigeria, this agitation has been swirling among pro-democracy groups for the practice of true federalism since the early 1990s. Such conflict due to structural imbalance is not exclusive to Nigeria alone; it is at the fore in the Angolan/Cabindan conflict, among others.<sup>81</sup> The structural certification granted to African nations by the United Nations Organization (UNO) in the 1960s did not consider the fact that they were merely colonial contraptions that served foreign interests.<sup>82</sup> Those interests are not entirely relevant in the postcolonial dispensation.

While this article does not advocate a wholesale return to a pre-colonial status quo conflict between the state and its component parts over mineral resource-rights in countries such as Nigeria poses an existential threat to the state. The prevailing framework of the nation state (at worst) reflects internal colonization of formerly independent communities whose sensitivities have often been ignored by the state. Put differently, the alienation initiated by colonialism persists under the post-colonial dispensation. Remedying this framework should constitute a part of any meaningful measure aimed at addressing those "problems of the world" David Cameron and other Western leaders are sorry for. How can Britain "remedy" its colonial misdeeds in Nigeria?

It must be acknowledged that the United Kingdom holds considerable influence on Nigeria's economy and at the United Nations where it is a permanent member. To demonstrate UK's economic influence on Nigeria, the UK Trade & Investment notes that

Nigeria is the second largest trading partner of the UK in Africa.<sup>83</sup> Such influence could be used, though tactfully, to support local groups calling for a national conference for the restructuring of the Nigerian state to reflect a truly federal system where power is devolved between the central government and local communities/federating ethnic groups. While these groups have been largely ignored by state officials or hounded by erstwhile military regimes, the popularity of the “agitation for restructuring” among communities and ethnic groups is not in doubt. Hence, given the UK’s influence on Nigeria and at the UN, strong support from the UK for the restructuring of the country alongside federal principles that bequeaths some socioeconomic and ecologic rights to the local communities will be a more sustainable way to atone for colonial misdeeds.

## Notes

- 1 BBC 2011a.
- 2 Moore 2010, p.57.
- 3 BBC 2011b.
- 4 See Brendon 2007, p. 4.
- 5 Ekeh 1975; Davidson and Munslow 1990; Bayart 1993.
- 6 Bassett 1994, p. 316.
- 7 Dike 1956, p. 128.
- 8 Olaniyan 1971, p. 70.
- 9 Ibid., 1956 pp. 166-80.
- 10 Herbst 2000, p. 59.
- 11 Dike 1956, pp. 65-69.
- 12 Olaniyan 1971, p. 67.
- 13 Dike 1956, p.86; Umejesi 2011, p.8.
- 14 Afigbo 2006, pp. 410-14.
- 15 Tamuno 1970; Afigbo 2006.
- 16 “Former sovereignties” connote local communities, kingdoms, and other geo-ethnic expressions that were politically independent in pre-colonial Nigeria. It is this collective that were constituted under British colonialism to form the Nigerian nation state.
- 17 Mamdani 2002, p. 78.
- 18 Burton 1857, p. 214.
- 19 Ibid., p. 214.
- 20 Cited in Hannaford 1996, p. 216.
- 21 Cited in Zack 2002, p. 22.
- 22 [www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume](http://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume).
- 23 See Yancy 2004, p. 147.
- 24 [www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant](http://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant).
- 25 See Dike 1956.
- 26 Menzel 1840, p. 163.
- 27 Cited in Eze 2011, p. 20.
- 28 Cited in Bayart 1993, p. 3.
- 29 Eze 2011, p. 21.
- 30 Amery 1953, p. 181.

- 31 See Zins 1998, p. 66.
- 32 See Griffiths 1986, p. 204.
- 33 See Meredith 2011, pp. 93-115.
- 34 Horton 1979; Alagoa 1979; Smith 1979.
- 35 Adedipe et al. p. 1997.
- 36 See Grundy 1964, p. 387.
- 37 Uchendu 1979, pp. 63-67.
- 38 Talbot 1937, p. 680.
- 39 Talbot 1937, p. 682; see also Shipton 1994.
- 40 Hair 1954, p. 56.
- 41 Talbot 1937, p. 680.
- 42 Meek 1946, p. 88.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Elias 1951, p. 46.
- 45 Dike 1956; Horton, 1979; Alagoa 1979; Smith 1979.
- 46 See Ekeh 1975.
- 47 The Colony of Lagos has been under British rule since 1860. *The Times of Nigeria*, February 3 1914, p. 4; Tamuno 2006, p. 393.
- 48 Lugard 1914, p. 1.
- 49 Tamuno 2006.
- 50 Lugard 1914, p. 1.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Tamuno 2006, p. 394.
- 53 Lugard 1914, p. 3.
- 54 *The Lagos Standard* 7 January 1914, p.5.
- 55 Lugard 1972, p. 272.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Dike 1956, pp. 128-52.
- 59 *The Lagos Observer* 12 October 1882, p 3.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 *The Times of Lagos* 3 February, 1914, p. 4.
- 62 Tamuno 1970, pp. 565-66.
- 63 Cited in Afigbo 1982, p. 95.
- 64 Cited in emeagwali.com.
- 65 Lugard 1914, p. 1.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Tamuno 2006, p. 394.
- 68 Lugard 1914, pp. 1-2.
- 69 NAE: OW 7915:26.
- 70 See Ibid, p. 39.
- 71 Chief Nduka (pseudonym). 2008. He was eighty years old. Personal interview, Obiapku Egbema, Imo state (one of the states in the Niger Delta region), 12 January 2008 (transcript in author's possession).
- 72 Chief Uwakwe (pseudonym). 2008. He is a titled traditional chief (*Ishi-Ani*), age seventy

- six. Personal interview, Coal Camp in Enugu on 15 February 2008 (transcript in author’s possession).
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Ndukwe (pseudonym). 2008. He was eighty two. Personal interview, Hilltop community, Enugu-Ngwo, Enugu. 27 and 28 February 2008 (transcript in author’s possession). Old Anambra state in Southeastern Nigeria, comprised present-day Anambra, Enugu state and Ebonyi states. It was divided in 1991.
- 75 Ibid. The community’s land was expropriated for coal mining by British colonial government in 1915.
- 76 Clive 1998.
- 77 Herbst 1997, p. 121.
- 78 Meek 1946; Uchendu 1979.
- 79 See Davidson and Munslow 1990; Umejesi 2011.
- 80 Under the 2009 Treaty, Italy agreed to pay, five billion dollars to Libya within a period of 20 years (see Armstrong 2009, pp. 1-2).
- 81 See Porto 2003, p. 13.
- 82 Herbst 1997, p. 121.
- 83 [www.http://www.ukti.gov.uk/export/countries/africa/westafrica/nigeria.html](http://www.ukti.gov.uk/export/countries/africa/westafrica/nigeria.html).

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