

Colonialism and the Origin of Modern Local Government Administration in Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examined the historical trajectory of colonialism and the origin of local government administration in Nigeria, with a focus on the structural, political, and socio-economic transformations introduced during British rule. Using a historical-descriptive approach, qualitative indices such as archival records, colonial government reports, and secondary literature were critically analysed to trace the pre-colonial indigenous governance systems, the imposition of indirect rule, and the institutional restructuring that shaped modern local government. The study highlighted how colonial authorities adapted indigenous institutions, particularly traditional chieftaincies, as instruments of administrative control, thereby eroding communal participatory governance and entrenching hierarchical and centralised structures. The findings revealed that colonial local government administration was more extractive than developmental, prioritising taxation and law enforcement over service delivery. The study concluded that the legacy of colonial governance, characterised by weak grassroots participation, fiscal dependency, and authoritarian traditions, continues to shape contemporary challenges in Nigerian local government administration.

Keywords: Colonialism, indirect rule, administration, local government, local government administration, indigenous governance

Introduction

The origin of local government administration in Nigeria is deeply rooted in the historical trajectory of colonialism and the administrative strategies adopted by the British. Before colonial rule, Nigerian societies had evolved diverse and sophisticated indigenous systems of governance, ranging from the centralised emirate structures of the Hausa-Fulani in the North to the decentralised, village-based political systems of the Igbo in the East, and the monarchical traditions of the Yoruba in the West (Oloruntoba, 2022; Siollun, 2021). These institutions, embedded in cultural and religious frameworks, ensured social order, political representation, and community development.

The advent of British colonialism disrupted these indigenous structures, particularly with the introduction of indirect rule, a system designed to administer vast territories through local intermediaries. Lord Lugard's blueprint for indirect rule emphasised the use of traditional rulers as instruments of colonial governance, thereby giving birth to modern local government administration in Nigeria (Lugard, 1922; Oloruntoba, 2022; Falola & Heaton, 2024).

While indirect rule worked relatively well in the North due to pre-existing centralised emirate systems, it encountered severe resistance and distortions in decentralised societies like the

Igbo, where the creation of “Warrant Chiefs” undermined indigenous political legitimacy and social harmony (Oloruntoba, 2022; Falola, 2024)

Colonial local administration was marked by a duality of power: a formal colonial state apparatus serving imperial interests and indigenous institutions struggling to maintain relevance. This dynamic gave rise to what Ekeh (1975) described as the “two publics” in Africa, wherein colonial authority alienated local communities from the state. Mamdani (1996) further explains this as the bifurcated nature of colonial governance, producing “citizens” in urban spaces and “subjects” in rural localities under customary authority.

Following independence, Nigeria retained much of the colonial legacy in its local government system. Despite reforms aimed at democratisation and decentralisation, the challenges of service delivery, corruption, and weak institutional capacity persist (Ola & Tonwe, 2009; Adeyemi, 2012). These challenges reveal the enduring impact of colonial restructuring of local authority, which not only disrupted pre-colonial governance but also entrenched administrative weaknesses that continue to shape Nigeria’s development trajectory.

Thus, the study on colonialism and the origin of local government administration in Nigeria is essential to understanding the continuities and ruptures in governance from the pre-colonial era through the colonial period and into the post-independence state. It provides a historical lens for analysing the contemporary challenges of local governance and the quest for accountable, effective, and people-oriented administration. Invariably, understanding the relationship between colonialism and the origin of local government administration in Nigeria is critical for contextualising present-day governance challenges. The colonial experience not only disrupted pre-colonial systems but also established administrative practices and institutions that remain embedded in Nigeria’s governance architecture. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the historical trajectory of local government administration from the pre-colonial period through colonial restructuring to post-colonial realities, highlighting the enduring legacies and implications for contemporary governance and development (Monday & Wijaya, 2022; Adeyemi, 2019)

Statement of the Problem

The historical development of local government administration in Nigeria cannot be fully understood without reference to colonialism. Before colonial rule, indigenous governance systems, such as the emirate system in the north, the centralised Yoruba kingdoms, and the acephalous Igbo societies, provided effective mechanisms of political organisation, conflict resolution, and community development. However, the advent of British colonialism imposed a foreign model of administration through indirect rule, which restructured and, in many cases, distorted these traditional governance systems. The colonial local government system, designed primarily for tax collection, resource extraction, and political control, laid the foundation for Nigeria’s post-independence local government structures. Yet, these imposed systems often lacked legitimacy, created tensions between traditional authority and modern bureaucracy, and generated challenges of inefficiency, corruption, and weak grassroots participation. This raises critical questions regarding the extent to which colonialism shaped and continues to influence the nature, challenges, and legitimacy of local government administration in Nigeria today.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the historical origins of local government administration in Nigeria within the context of colonialism.
2. To analyse the extent to which colonial administrative structures modified or undermined indigenous governance systems.
3. To assess the implications of colonial legacies for contemporary local government efficiency, legitimacy, and grassroots participation in Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. What was the nature of indigenous governance structures before the advent of colonialism in Nigeria?
2. How did British colonial rule transform or undermine indigenous systems of governance in Nigeria?
3. In what ways has the colonial legacy of local government administration influenced the challenges of grassroots governance in post-independence Nigeria?

Significance of the Study

The study on colonialism and the origin of local government administration in Nigeria is significant, first, because it contributes to historical and intellectual understanding. By tracing the colonial roots of Nigeria's local government system, the research highlights the shifts from indigenous governance structures, such as councils of elders, village assemblies, and traditional monarchies, to colonial administrative frameworks that prioritised control and resource extraction. This historical insight is valuable for scholars in political science, history, and public administration, as it uncovers the foundation upon which modern governance practices in Nigeria were built and continues to explain some of the systemic challenges faced today.

Second, the study has policy and institutional relevance. Many of the inefficiencies and structural problems in Nigeria's local government administration can be traced to colonial arrangements such as indirect rule, centralised authority, and limited grassroots participation. By identifying these colonial legacies, the study provides a framework for policymakers to design reforms that enhance decentralisation, strengthen accountability, and improve service delivery. It further guides contemporary debates on restructuring, constitutional amendments, and grassroots governance by drawing attention to historical weaknesses that must be addressed for future progress.

Third, the research is significant because of its socio-political implications. Colonialism altered traditional governance systems that were deeply participatory and community-oriented. By analysing these transformations, the study sheds light on how colonial rule undermined indigenous institutions, created dependence on centralised authority, and shaped patterns of political exclusion. Understanding these dynamics helps explain contemporary issues such as weak civic engagement, elite capture of local councils, and the persistence of patronage politics at the grassroots level. The study, therefore, makes a strong case for a governance model that balances inherited colonial structures with indigenous participatory traditions.

Research Hypotheses

1. **H₁**: Colonialism significantly altered indigenous governance systems and replaced them with foreign administrative structures.
H₀: Colonialism did not significantly alter indigenous governance systems in Nigeria.
2. **H₁**: The colonial system of indirect rule undermined the legitimacy of traditional rulers in local governance.
H₀: The colonial system of indirect rule did not undermine the legitimacy of traditional rulers in local governance.
3. **H₁**: The challenges facing contemporary local government administration in Nigeria are strongly linked to colonial legacies.
H₀: The challenges facing contemporary local government administration in Nigeria are not linked to colonial legacies.

Conceptual Clarifications

Colonialism

Colonialism refers to the political, economic, and socio-cultural domination of one people by another, usually through conquest, annexation, and control of resources. In the African context, colonialism entailed the imposition of European rule over indigenous societies, often justified under the guise of “civilising missions” but largely driven by economic exploitation and territorial expansion (Lugard, 1922; Mamdani, 1996). In Nigeria, British colonialism systematically altered indigenous political institutions and restructured governance to serve metropolitan interests, particularly through the system of indirect rule.

Local Government

Local government may be understood as the lowest tier of governance within a state structure, responsible for administering local affairs and bringing governance closer to the people. Ola & Tonwe (2009) define it as a unit of government established by law to exercise authority over a defined area, provide services, and promote local development. It is expected to embody principles of representation, participation, accountability, and responsiveness. In theory, local government ensures grassroots democracy and enhances socio-economic development by making governance more accessible (Adeyemi, 2012).

Administration

Administration refers to the process of organising human and material resources to achieve specific objectives (Titus, 2025:54). It involves planning, coordinating, directing, and implementing policies and programs. Within the public sector, administration is the machinery through which government delivers services, maintains order, and implements development policies (Ekeh, 1975; Onyambayi et al., 2024). In colonial Nigeria, administration was shaped by the need to maintain control, collect taxes, and enforce colonial authority rather than to promote participatory governance.

Local Government Administration

Local government administration in Nigeria, as an institutional practice, originated under British colonial rule. Pre-colonial Nigeria had various forms of governance: centralised emirates in the North, decentralised village democracies in the East, and monarchical systems in the West. Colonial authorities reconfigured these indigenous institutions to fit the requirements of indirect

rule. This gave rise to structures such as the Warrant Chiefs in Igboland, which often clashed with traditional practices and legitimacy (Okorie et al., 2025).

Indigenous Governance

Indigenous governance refers to the traditional, community-based systems of authority and decision-making that existed before colonialism and, in many cases, continue to operate informally alongside modern state institutions. In Nigeria, these systems varied by region: Centralised kingdoms and emirates, such as the Oyo Empire, Sokoto Caliphate, and Benin Kingdom, where monarchs (Obas, Emirs, Obis) ruled through hierarchical authority (Okorie, Ezeuduji, & Terver, 2025), and acephalous (stateless) societies such as the Igbo, which relied on councils of elders, age-grade associations, and village assemblies for participatory governance (Ikejiani-Clark, 2007). Governance frameworks emphasised accountability, community consensus, and cultural legitimacy, forming the foundation for local administration and conflict resolution (Olowu & Erero, 1995). Conceptually, indigenous governance in Nigeria reflects a homegrown political order rooted in tradition, kinship, and communal responsibility, which colonialism sought to replace or co-opt through indirect rule.

Colonial local administration was dual in nature; it maintained British supremacy while delegating routine governance to selected local authorities. Ekeh's (1975) notion of the "two publics" captures this tension, where colonial institutions represented the "civic public" while indigenous authorities formed the "primordial public." This colonial restructuring laid the foundation for modern local government administration in Nigeria but also created enduring challenges, such as weak institutional capacity, authoritarian local leadership, and limited accountability (Mamdani, 1996; Adeyemi, 2012; Olatunji, 2021).

Colonial Origin of Local Administration in Nigeria

By 1900, the charter of the Royal Niger Company was revoked, and the British authority took over its trading territory. As a result of the rapid expansion of the British authority in the Northern part of Nigeria by Sir Lord Lugard, there were three separate territories, viz.: the colony of Lagos, the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria - administered by the British officials (Orewa & Adewumi, 1983:xi).

When the British took over Northern Nigeria, the British colonial government introduced the native authority system. It was this form of local government, based on traditional authority, and exercising legislative, executive and judicial powers (parliamentary), over the local community under the ultimate control of British authority that existed at that time (Ogunna, 1996:65). Following the success of the system in countries like Uganda, and amalgamation of the above-named territories in 1914 by Sir Lord Lugard, the system, as a matter of administrative expediency and practical necessity, was introduced in the south.

To this effect, Orewa et al. (1983:223) had this to say:

Whatever might have been their achievements in the realm of management, the native authorities suffered from some weaknesses. The members of the native authorities were appointed by the central Government, and functioned in many cases as benevolent despots or oligarchies whose weak links with the Districts and village were mainly through the district and village heads who owed their allegiance to the authorities, rather than to the people they claimed to lead, because they were agents of indirect rule and were supported by the colonial government.

Invariably, local government in Nigeria generally and Akwa Ibom state particularly operates the same rule in disguise as the so-called elected officials and their appointed caretakers serve interest of state governments mostly.

The Northern, Western and Eastern Nigeria

In view of the emirate government, the North became a fertile ground and the first for the introduction of the system. The Emirs were absolute constitutional monarchies or autocratic agents. Such was not the case in the southern Yoruba Kingdoms, as the Obas shared political authority with their chiefs. In fact, it was a contradiction of both the principle of native administration and of the Yoruba culture – with taxation as alien to the people (Ogunna, 1996:66). Similarly, or rather, at worse, the republican and fragmented Igbo society in the East, with diffused political authority, resented the system with severe confrontation, which led to the 1929 Aba – Ikot Abasi – Etim Ekpo women riot.

The above scenarios presuppose levels of success of the native authority or indirect system in various parts of the then Nigerian country. Therefore, in an attempt to improve the hitherto traditional system (first in 1945), the annual conference of residents of provinces was convened. Major among the recommendations was the funding of District Councils or the development of their respective domains (Awofeso, 2000:50).

Local Government Finance/Function in Colonial Nigeria

As observed by Awofeso (2000:89), “the colonial government did not hide its intention to finance the administration of native authorities through locally generated resources”. Expectedly, taxation, the oldest, most reliable and applied source of support to the government, became the major source of financing the Colonial Native Authorities. As noted in Awofeso (2000:90), one of the addresses by Lord Lugard in 1903 to the leaders of Sokoto stated unambiguously that:

The government holds the right of taxation, and will tell the Emirs and Chiefs what taxes they may levy, and what part of them must be paid to the government.

The primary and statutory functions of the local government during this era included the provision of primary education, health services, markets, and rural roads. The main sources of revenue involved grants from the regional government, rates, licenses, market dues, earnings from commercial ventures, et cetera (Amuneke, 2005:30-37). Other sources of revenue to local authorities in the North were: Grants from the federal appropriations, personal income tax, which was based on the Pay As You Earn (PAYE) system and which the native authorities were entitled to twenty (20) per cent of the total proceeds, and community tax. In Eastern Nigeria, there were grants from the regional government, capital rate (tax), tenement rate, fines/fees from customary courts, fees from markets and motor parks, license fees, loans and education grants from the regional government. That of the Western region was similar to that of the Eastern region (Adamelokun et al., 1988:184).

This local taxation became statutory through the enactment of the Native Revenue Proclamation No. 2 of 1906. The 1906 ordinance became a welcome development to the northerners as it both unified several indefinite taxes into definite direct taxes, as well as eliminated “earlier practices whereby traders and peasants were arbitrarily extorted. Consequently, both the government and Native Authorities, through the new system of taxation, were rationalised into fixed salaries and allowances to chiefs from whom the former avenues for raising tributes and fines had been closed (Adamelokun et al., 1988:184).

This success, owing to obvious reasons, was not replicated easily in Southern Nigeria. In fact, the introduction of direct tax in the South in 1927, though carefully studied for close to two decades, produced fair success in the South-West, and a failure which culminated into the Aba-Ikot Abasi-Etim Ekpo “Women” riot in 1929. However, the gradual but forceful intervention of government got to its apogee with government not only having the rioters subdued, but also “asserting its total control over all revenue (sic) generated through taxation” (Orewa et al, 1983:22-28).

Problems of Local Government in Nigeria

Notwithstanding the reformatory attempts, the British continued to have the reserved powers to appropriate not only land for public purposes, but also to approve the choice of new chiefs and or rules and regulations made by the native authority. The general dissatisfaction (particularly among the educated elites) with the operation of the native authority ordinance of 1916 and its successive amendments created the social and political milieu that helped to pave the way for a modern democratic form of local government in Nigeria. Overall, the era of evolution for councils in modern local government systems throughout the country (as earlier stated) was in the 1950s when Ikot Ekpene was used as the testing ground in the whole of the West African region (Ogunna, 1996:66, Okorie et al., 2025).

Worthy of note is the fact that toward the end of the first republic, the three-tier system in many areas gave way to single all-purpose councils as a result of conflicts associated with the federated or tier system. Accordingly, the number of single-purpose local government areas was increased from 229 in 1970 to 301 in 1976, 449 in 1989, 589 in 1991, and 774 in 1996 without a corresponding increase in the spread of development across the nooks and crannies of the country as envisaged (Ogunna, 1996; Awofeso, 2004:35).

Thematically, the problems inter-alia are: financial; lack of autonomy; inadequate trained staff; grouping of different communities into a single local government; indiscriminate creation and proliferation of local government by civilian governments; struggle for supremacy between the traditional authority and local government council; incessant cases of boundary disputes and adjustment; policy inconsistency arising from political instability via intermittent military coup; lack of committed and patriotic leadership; lack of credible, free and fair elections at the grassroots (Okoli, 2005:94-96).

Notably, the source of the above mentioned problems is god-fatherism or god-motherism, as the case may be. It might have been exacerbated in recent times, but it all started from the colonial period. Godfatherism is a slang term and a belief system related to the head of a criminal organisation or mafia group. In Nigeria, political parties and politicians thrive through it. This is where the popular will of the electorates is “replaced with the vanquished candidates” (Jacob, 2014:116) through connection by blood, money, membership in a club or cult, et cetera. Examples of this unwholesome and undemocratic practice are those of the “APC, Senator Mamora Olorunnibe Adeleke, a ranking senator who represented Lagos East Senatorial District in the 5th and 6th Senate... replaced with Mrs. Oluremi Tinubu (wife of the party leader Asiwaju Ahmed Bola Tinubu. Bola Tinubu did the same thing when the selection of the Deputy Governor to the incumbent Lagos State Governor, Raji Fashola, was to be made. Against Fashola’s wish, Bola Tinubu replaced Mrs. Sara Adebisi Sosan with Mrs. Adejoke Orellope-Adefulire” (Ukaeje, 2011:29 in Jacob, 2014:116). As earlier stated, politics in Nigeria thrive mostly through political patronage or god-fatherism – Governors claim ownership of the party and the State, as the president holds sway at the federal level. Sincerely speaking, it is not a lack of internal democracy per se that engenders godfatherism; rather, it is a lack of respect for the rule of law in Nigeria’s nascent democracy.

Understanding the relationship between colonialism and the origin of local government administration in Nigeria is critical for contextualising present-day governance challenges. The colonial experience not only disrupted pre-colonial systems but also established administrative practices and institutions that remain embedded in Nigeria's governance architecture. This study, therefore, explores the historical trajectory of local government administration from the pre-colonial period through colonial restructuring to post-colonial realities, highlighting the enduring legacies and implications for contemporary governance and development.

Colonial Institutional Origins

The dominant interpretation in recent scholarship holds that Nigeria's modern local government structures are not the result of a neutral process of administrative modernisation but the direct product of British colonial strategies, chiefly the policy of indirect rule. Under indirect rule, British administrators sought to govern at low fiscal and political cost by co-opting existing indigenous authorities (chiefs, emirs, councils) and embedding them in administrative structures that served colonial extraction and order-maintenance rather than local development. Contemporary studies emphasise that this approach produced institutional templates, native authorities, district and provincial councils, native courts, and treasuries, whose design prioritised centralised control, fiscal dependency, and limited bureaucratic depth at the local level. These templates persisted into the post-colonial period and continue to structure the incentives and capacities of local government institutions (Yiaga Centre, 2024).

Recent research (2021–2025) refines this general argument in two important ways. First, authors demonstrate how indirect rule created regionally variegated administrative forms: the North's emirate-based native authorities, for example, differ structurally and politically from the chiefs-and-council arrangements encountered in many southern areas. These regional differences, scholars argue, help explain divergent trajectories in local governance capacity and legitimacy after independence. Empirical and comparative pieces find that localities where colonial administrations invested in physical infrastructure, permanent district offices, or early schooling and mission presence tend to show stronger administrative continuities and often better contemporary outcomes on selected service indicators than localities that were lightly administered. This implies that colonial investment was not uniform and that variation in colonial administrative intensity is a productive covariate for explaining present heterogeneity across local governments (Aregbeshola, 2024).

Second, recent literature stresses the legal and fiscal mechanisms through which colonial designs endured. Colonial-era codifications (e.g., native courts, statutory definitions of native authorities) and fiscal arrangements (local tax collection channels that largely flowed upward) established institutional dependencies that subsequent post-independence regimes often reproduced rather than redressed. Policy reviews and legal analyses from 2023–2025 document how the structural legacy of centralised fiscal control and limited own-source revenue for local councils has contributed to chronic underfunding and political subordination to state executives. Scholars treating these outcomes historically note that legislative reforms (e.g., the 1976 local government reforms) frequently reorganised administrative boundaries and functions while leaving the underlying fiscal incentives and control mechanisms, descended from colonial governance, largely intact (Veriva Africa, 2025).

A third strand of recent work situates indirect rule within broader debates about decolonisation and institutional persistence. Critical and Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAAIL)-influenced writings argue that the colonial deployment of traditional authorities was not simply a pragmatic administrative choice but part of a political project that reshaped local

power hierarchies, social stratification, and land regimes, effects that continue to surface in land conflicts, patronage networks, and contested claims to legitimacy. These studies encourage a re-reading of local government reform as a decolonial project that must address both formal legal change and informal social relations shaped by colonial administration. They also call for more careful archival work paired with micro-level field studies to reveal how specific colonial legal instruments (e.g., native courts, land proclamations) translated into enduring local practices (Oni, 2024).

Methodologically, the most promising recent scholarship combines historical institutionalism with mixed methods: coding archival indicators of colonial administrative presence (native authority status, presence of district headquarters, taxation regimes) and linking these to contemporary quantitative outcomes (local revenue, staffing levels, service-delivery indicators), complemented by in-depth case studies that trace institutional trajectories at the community level. Reviewers note two evident gaps: a dearth of large-N quantitative studies that systematically map colonial administrative variation across Nigeria's hundreds of localities, and a shortage of gendered or intersectional analyses that assess how colonial administrative forms differently affected subgroups within communities. Both gaps suggest a clear empirical agenda for thesis work that aims to make causal claims about colonial legacies (Yiaga Centre, 2024).

In sum, the recent literature (2021–2025) reinforces the claim that Nigeria's local government architecture bears the imprint of indirect rule. Rather than treating contemporary dysfunction as a purely post-colonial failure of reform, current scholarship situates many institutional pathologies in the historical design choices of colonial administrators, including legal codifications, fiscal arrangements, and patterns of administrative investment. For empirical research, the implication is straightforward: unpacking colonial-era variation and tracing its links to present performance is essential to both scholarly explanation and policy prescriptions that aim to make local government more autonomous, accountable, and effective (Veriva Africa, 2025; Aregbeshola, 2024)

Post-Colonial Implications

Colonial institutions created a durable path-dependency in local administration. Structures, legal frameworks, and bureaucratic practices introduced by colonial rule persisted after independence, shaping the form and limits of local government reform (Mamdani, 1996; Berger, 2009).

A major fiscal implication is the centralisation of resources. Colonial systems concentrated revenue authority at higher levels, leaving local governments weak and dependent on central allocations. Post-colonial Nigeria retained this arrangement, resulting in limited local fiscal autonomy and poor service delivery (Adeyemi, 2013).

Colonial indirect rule also distorted accountability. Chiefs and warrant leaders were made answerable to colonial officers rather than to local communities, a pattern that continued after independence. As Ekeh (1975) notes in his theory of the "two publics," this weakened downward accountability and fostered clientelism.

Another implication is political fragmentation. Colonial boundaries reinforced ethnic divisions and created competition for local offices as vehicles for resource distribution. This legacy has heightened ethnic mobilisation and intensified subnational political struggles in post-colonial Nigeria (Berger, 2009).

Finally, colonial staffing patterns left behind weak administrative capacity. Personnel were selected for loyalty rather than professionalism, undermining bureaucratic competence. This institutional weakness continues to constrain local government performance (Adeyemi, 2013).

Empirical Review

Study 1: Monday & Wijaya (2022) – Historical Development of Local Government Administration in Nigeria:

Focus: This study empirically traced local government systems from pre-colonial governance through British colonial rule to contemporary structures.

Methodology: Qualitative empirical analysis used interviews with traditional leaders and senior local government officials, plus content analysis of archival and literature sources.

Key Insights:

- i. Showed how British indirect rule was grafted onto pre-existing indigenous governance structures during colonialism.
- ii. Identified how colonial administrative legacies (e.g., indirect rule, Native Authority systems) shaped the organisational structure and functions of modern local governments.
- iii. Highlighted persistent problems such as a lack of autonomy and uneven implementation across regions.

Usefulness: Provided an empirical narrative of institutional evolution with field data tied to colonial origins, directly relevant to your topic.

Study 2: Adeyemi (2019) – Local Government Administration in Nigeria: A Historical Perspective:

Methodology: Secondary data analysis drawing on historical records, governmental documents, and literature on local government evolution.

Key Insights:

- i. Demonstrated that the native administration/indirect rule systems created under colonialism were foundational for present local government structures.
- ii. Argued that colonially imposed hierarchies and administrative practices persisted after independence, shaping the legal status, autonomy, and functions of local councils.
- iii. Connected colonial administrative design to modern challenges (e.g., interference by state governments).

Usefulness: Strong empirical review with historical institutional analysis linking colonial governance directly to modern local government forms.

Study 3: Onyekwere & Igbokwe-Ibeto (2025) – Challenges to Local Governments and their link to Colonial History:

Methodology: Secondary analysis of academic and government sources to trace the lineage of local government features and problems (e.g., centralised control, autonomy issues).

Key Insights:

- i. Confirmed that many *colonial legacies* (such as indirect rule, revenue collection systems, and subordination to higher tiers) still affect local governments today.
- ii. Contrast pre-colonial indigenous governance with colonial impositions to highlight differences in legitimacy and function.
- iii. Linked institutional origin to contemporary administrative weaknesses.

Usefulness: Provided a comparative empirical lens that situates colonial practices as explanatory factors for current governance dynamics.

In sum, the reviews combine historical institutionalism to show how colonial policies stick over time. Contrast pre-colonial and colonial systems, Etebom & Wijaya and Igbokwe-Ibeto show how indigenous governance existed before British rule and was transformed under indirect rule.

Interestingly, Adeyemi’s review helps bridge the historical narrative to modern local government reforms and the autonomy issue.

Theoretical Framework

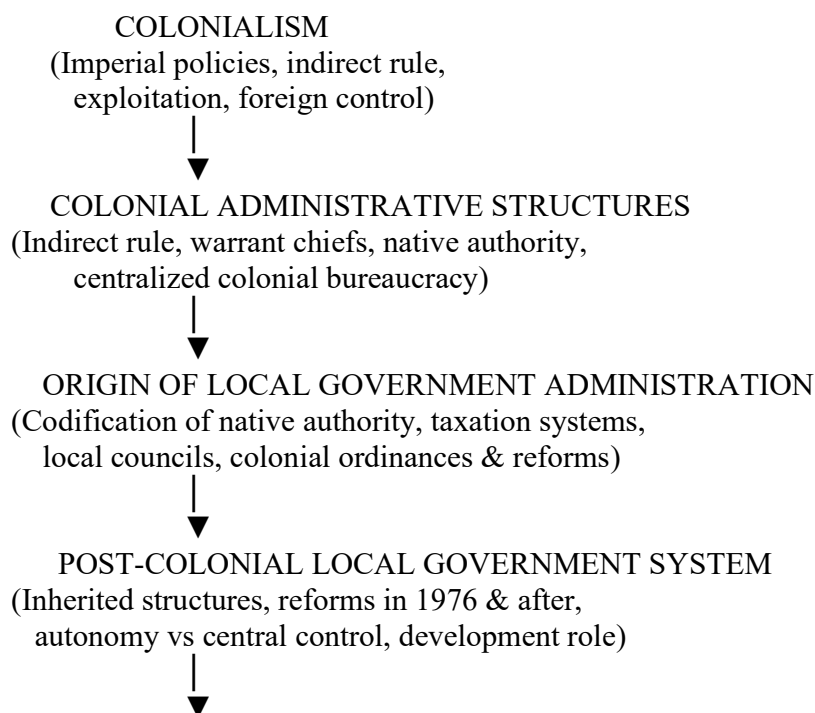
Dependency Theory

Dependency theory by Raúl Prebisch (1901–1986) argues that colonialism created structures of underdevelopment, making African states dependent on the metropole. In Nigeria, local government administration was designed not primarily for development but to serve colonial economic interests, such as tax collection, resource extraction, and maintenance of law and order (Ellner, 2024; Wung et al., 2025). Local councils functioned as instruments for sustaining dependency, as they lacked autonomy and operated within the dictates of the colonial state. Notably, Ellner 2024 gives a recent theoretical revival and critique of dependency theory, while Wung et al. (2025) apply dependency ideas to empirical African economic outcomes.

Post-Colonial Theory

Post-colonial theory by Edward W. Said (1935–2003) shifted analysis of colonialism from purely material exploitation to cultural and epistemic domination. To this end, scholars examine how colonial legacies of domination, identity distortion, and institutional imposition continue to affect postcolonial states. In the Nigerian context, postcolonial theory helps explain how colonial local government systems marginalised indigenous governance practices, delegitimised communal authority structures, and imposed Western administrative norms. This theoretical lens also highlights the hybrid nature of Nigerian local governance, where colonial administrative models coexist and conflict with traditional governance institutions (Mamdani, 1996, Akla, 2025; Nyhus, 2025).

Diagrammatic Framework



CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

(Weak institutions, democratic deficit,
corruption, community development gaps,
push for decentralisation)

Explanation of Flow

- i. Colonialism introduced foreign governance logics.
- ii. These shaped administrative structures like indirect rule.
- iii. This directly birthed the origin of local government administration in Nigeria.
- iv. After independence, the post-colonial local government system carried both colonial legacies and reforms.
- v. Today, this results in contemporary governance implications.

Findings

1. **Colonial Restructuring of Governance:** The study established that colonialism significantly altered the indigenous governance structures in Nigeria. Pre-colonial societies, which operated through decentralised systems (e.g., Igbo village assemblies) or centralised monarchies (e.g., Hausa-Fulani emirates, Yoruba kingdoms), were restructured through the introduction of indirect rule. Indigenous institutions were subordinated to colonial objectives, resulting in the erosion of local autonomy.
2. **The Imposition of Indirect Rule:** Findings reveal that indirect rule, while ostensibly designed to govern through traditional rulers, in practice, undermined their legitimacy. Many rulers were co-opted or appointed by colonial authorities, which created divisions between traditional elites and their subjects. Over time, this weakened trust in indigenous institutions and disrupted long-standing socio-political balances.
3. **Institutional and Socio-Economic Transformations:** The local government system introduced during colonialism was primarily geared toward taxation, resource extraction, and political control rather than service delivery. This shifted the orientation of governance away from community-driven accountability to externally imposed administrative structures.
4. **Colonial Legacies in Contemporary Administration:** The research further revealed that many challenges faced by Nigeria's modern local governments, such as corruption, lack of accountability, and administrative inefficiency, are rooted in colonial legacies. The emphasis on centralised authority, weak fiscal autonomy, and a disconnection between rulers and the ruled continue to shape governance outcomes today.

Discussion of Findings

The study reveals that colonialism played a transformative role in the origin and development of local government administration in Nigeria. Before colonial rule, indigenous governance structures such as councils of elders, age-grade systems, and traditional rulers ensured order, justice, and communal welfare. However, the introduction of British colonialism restructured these systems through the policy of indirect rule, which sought to govern through existing traditional institutions while reshaping them to serve colonial economic and political interests.

Findings indicate that colonialism significantly altered indigenous systems by weakening the autonomy of traditional rulers and aligning their roles with colonial objectives. Local government institutions were transformed into extensions of the colonial state, primarily designed for tax collection, resource extraction, and maintenance of law and order, rather than community-

driven development. This led to a hybrid governance system where indigenous institutions lost legitimacy as they were seen as agents of foreign domination.

Furthermore, the study shows that colonial administrative legacies laid the foundation for Nigeria's modern local government structure. The reforms introduced during the colonial period, such as native authorities, native courts, and treasury systems, became the precursors of post-independence local councils. However, the system was marked by centralisation, limited accountability, and weak citizen participation, challenges that continue to affect local government administration in Nigeria today.

In essence, the findings underscore that while colonialism institutionalised formal local government in Nigeria, it simultaneously undermined indigenous governance practices and sowed the seeds of the structural and legitimacy crises that persist in local administration.

Conclusion

The study concludes that colonialism had a profound and lasting impact on the origin and development of local government administration in Nigeria. While pre-colonial governance systems were adapted to suit the British model of indirect rule, this adaptation disrupted indigenous legitimacy and accountability mechanisms. The introduction of foreign administrative structures entrenched a legacy of centralised control, weak institutional capacity, and political alienation at the grassroots. These historical distortions remain visible in contemporary governance, where local governments struggle with legitimacy, autonomy, and effective service delivery. In sum, the colonial state laid the foundation for a system more aligned with imperial exploitation than with the promotion of democratic local governance.

Recommendations

- i. There is a need for constitutional reform to strengthen the autonomy of local governments, ensuring they are not mere appendages of state governments but function as genuine grassroots democratic institutions.
- ii. Local government administration should integrate useful aspects of pre-colonial governance, such as participatory decision-making, communal accountability, and collective responsibility. This could help bridge the gap between state institutions and local communities.
- iii. Strengthening the capacity of local governments through training, fiscal reforms, and anti-corruption measures is essential to overcome colonial-era inefficiencies and promote accountability.
- iv. Mechanisms for citizen engagement in local governance, such as town hall meetings, participatory budgeting, and community monitoring, should be institutionalised to rebuild legitimacy and reconnect governance with the grassroots.
- v. Policymakers should recognise that many of the current challenges in local governance are not merely administrative but historical. Acknowledging and addressing these colonial legacies can help design more context-appropriate reforms that resonate with Nigeria's socio-political realities.

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