Political Development in Nigeria [1]

1. Pre-colonial Polities: Pre-Jihad Hausa, Emirate, Tiv, Igbo, Yoruba

Before the arrival of colonialists, different groups in what is now Nigeria had their own sophisticated political systems. These systems varied significantly based on their history, culture, and geography.

A. Pre-Jihad Hausa States

Before the 19th-century Sokoto Jihad, the Hausa states (like Kano, Zazzau, Katsina, Gobir, Daura, Rano, Biram) had distinct political structures.

- **Structural Organization:**
  - **Sarki (King):** The head of the state, with both political and religious authority. His power was not absolute; he ruled with the consent and advice of a council.
  - **Council of State:** Composed of powerful chiefs and title holders (e.g., Madawaki, Galadima, Waziri, Dogari, Yari), who advised the Sarki.
  - **District Heads:** Appointed by the Sarki to oversee territories outside the capital.
  - **Village Heads:** Responsible for local administration and tax collection.
  - **Judicial System:** Operated according to Islamic law (Sharia) in some areas, alongside traditional customs. The Alkali courts administered justice.
- **Functions of their Political Institutions:**
  - **Sarki:** Maintenance of law and order, defense, administration of justice, collection of taxes, spiritual leadership.
  - **Council:** Advised the Sarki, participated in decision-making, acted as a check on his power.
  - **Taxation:** Collected taxes (e.g., haraji on land, jangali on cattle, zakkat as religious tax) to fund administration and military.
  - **Military:** Provided security and defense for the state.
  - **Judiciary:** Settled disputes and enforced laws.

B. Emirate System (Post-Jihad Hausa/Fulani)

Following the 19th-century Sokoto Jihad led by Uthman Dan Fodio, the Hausa states were transformed into Emirates under the Sokoto Caliphate, ruled by Emirs. This system was more centralized and religiously driven.

- **Structural Organization:**
    - **Emir:** The spiritual and political head of the Emirate, appointed by the Caliph (Sultan of Sokoto). He exercised vast powers, combining religious, judicial, and administrative functions.
    - **Council of Elders (Majlis):** Advised the Emir. Key officials included:
        - **Waziri:** The chief minister and administrative head.
        - **Madawaki:** Commander of the cavalry.
        - **Galadima:** Administrator of the capital or a major district.
        - **Sarkin Fada:** Head of palace officials.
        - **Alkalis:** Islamic judges.
    - **District Heads (Hakimai):** Appointed by the Emir to oversee districts, responsible for tax collection and local administration.
    - **Village Heads (Dagatai/Mai Unguwa):** Responsible for the smallest administrative units.
- **Functions of their Political Institutions:**
    - **Centralized Administration:** Stronger, more unified rule under the Emir and the Caliph.
    - **Strict Adherence to Islamic Law (Sharia):** Governed all aspects of life, including justice, marriage, and trade.
    - **Taxation:** Systematic collection of Islamic taxes (Zakat, Jizya, Kharaj) for state revenue.
    - **Military:** Well-organized military for defense and expansion.
    - **Religious Leadership:** The Emir was seen as a religious leader, enforcing Islamic teachings.

C. Tiv Political System

The Tiv people, found in central Nigeria, had a largely acephalous (stateless) political system, meaning they had no centralized authority like a king or emir.

- **Structural Organization:**
    - **Segmentary System:** Society was organized into segments based on patrilineal descent, from family to lineage to clan.
    - **Compound Head (Orya):** The eldest male in a compound, responsible for daily affairs.
    - **Lineage Head (Torkula):** Respected elders who settled disputes within their lineage.
    - **Council of Elders (Mbatsav):** Highly respected elders with moral authority, who mediated disputes and maintained order through consensus. They were believed to possess supernatural powers (*tsav*) to ensure justice and prosperity.
    - **Age Grades:** Groups of individuals born within a certain period, performing communal labor and acting as informal law enforcement.
- **Functions of their Political Institutions:**
    - **Decentralized Governance:** Decisions made through consensus among elders at various levels.
    - **Conflict Resolution:** Disputes were settled through arbitration by elders and lineage heads.
    - **Communal Labor:** Age grades mobilized for communal projects like farming or road construction.

    - **Maintenance of Social Order:** Based on kinship ties, respect for elders, and traditional customs.

D. Igbo Political System

Like the Tiv, the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria largely operated an acephalous system, characterized by decentralized governance and democratic practices.

- **Structural Organization:**
    - **Family (Umunna):** The basic unit, with the eldest male as the head.
    - **Lineage/Kindred (Umunna broader sense):** A group of extended families tracing descent from a common ancestor.
    - **Village Assembly:** The most important political institution, where all adult male (and sometimes female) members participated in decision-making through direct democracy.
    - **Council of Elders:** Composed of respected lineage heads, Ozo title holders, and influential individuals, who guided discussions and mediated.
    - **Ozo Title Holders:** Men who achieved high social status through wealth, character, and traditional rites; they wielded significant influence.
    - **Age Grades/Sets (Ogbo):** Groups of individuals of similar age, responsible for specific community tasks, law enforcement, and development projects.
    - **Secret Societies (e.g., Ekpe, Okonko):** Influential in maintaining law and order, enforcing traditions, and acting as a check on authority.
- **Functions of their Political Institutions:**
    - **Direct Democracy:** Decisions made by consensus in the village assembly.
    - **Checks and Balances:** Power was diffused among various groups (elders, age grades, title holders), preventing the concentration of power.
    - **Justice Administration:** Disputes settled through traditional arbitration and communal pressure.
    - **Communal Development:** Age grades and community meetings organized for infrastructure and welfare projects.
    - **Social Control:** Maintained through communal pressure, religious beliefs, and secret societies.

E. Yoruba Political System

The Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria had well-organized, centralized city-states and kingdoms (like Oyo, Ife, Benin – though Benin is separate Edo), with complex political structures.

- **Structural Organization:**
    - **Oba (King):** The traditional ruler, regarded as sacred and divine (*alase ikeji orisa* - second in command to the gods). He was the spiritual and political head of the kingdom. His power was extensive but not absolute.
    - **Council of Chiefs (Iwarefa/Oyo Mesi in Oyo):** Powerful chiefs who advised the Oba and acted as a check on his power. For instance, in Old Oyo Empire, the Oyo Mesi (headed by the Bashorun) had the power to compel an Oba to commit suicide if he became tyrannical.

    - **Ogboni Society:** A powerful secret society of elders and influential citizens, which acted as a religious and judicial check on the Oba and the Council of Chiefs, ensuring good governance.
    - **War Chiefs (Balogun):** Responsible for military affairs.
    - **Aremo:** The Oba's first son, groomed for succession, but with no direct political power until his father's death.
    - **Town Heads (Baale):** Appointed by the Oba to administer towns and villages.
- **Functions of their Political Institutions:**
    - **Centralized Administration:** Effective governance through the Oba and his chiefs.
    - **Checks and Balances:** The Council of Chiefs and Ogboni Society provided significant checks on the Oba's power, preventing despotism.
    - **Justice System:** Administered through traditional courts and the Oba's authority.
    - **Military Defense:** Maintained armies for protection and expansion.
    - **Spiritual Guidance:** The Oba performed religious rituals and was seen as a link between the people and their ancestors/gods.

2. Imperialist Penetration: The British in Nigeria

Imperialism refers to a policy of extending a country's power and influence through colonization, use of military force, or other means. For Nigeria, this was primarily British penetration.

A. The British Process of Acquisition

The British did not just walk in and take over. Their acquisition of Nigeria was a gradual process involving various strategies:

- **Trade (Legitimate Trade):** After the abolition of the slave trade, European powers, including Britain, shifted to legitimate trade in natural resources like palm oil, timber, and minerals. This led to increased presence and competition.
- **Missionary Activities:** Christian missionaries arrived in the 19th century, establishing missions, schools, and hospitals. Their presence often created a need for "protection" by their home government, paving the way for colonial intervention.
- **Company Rule (e.g., Royal Niger Company):** Trading companies like the Royal Niger Company (originally United African Company, UAC) were granted charters by the British government, giving them administrative and military powers over vast territories. They signed treaties with local rulers, often deceptively, to gain control. The RNC effectively laid the groundwork for British administration in much of Northern Nigeria.
- **Protectorate:** Once trade and company rule established a foothold, the British declared "protectorates" over various territories (e.g., Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1885, which became Niger Coast Protectorate in 1893; Northern Nigeria Protectorate in 1900). This declaration meant Britain assumed responsibility for external affairs and internal "good governance," even if local rulers still exercised some authority.
- **Colony:** Certain areas, particularly coastal towns like Lagos, were directly annexed and declared "Colonies" (e.g., Lagos Colony in 1861). These areas were under direct British administration.

B. The British Colonial Administrative Policy: Direct and Indirect Rule

The British adopted different methods of administration in Nigeria, largely influenced by the nature of pre-existing political structures and cost considerations.

- **Direct Rule:**
    - **Definition:** A system of administration where British officials directly governed the local population, bypassing or dismantling existing traditional political structures.
    - **Characteristics:**
        - Imposition of British laws and administrative practices.
        - Traditional rulers were either removed or reduced to mere agents of the colonial government.
        - High presence of British administrative officers (District Officers, Residents).
        - Often applied in areas where centralized traditional systems were absent or where resistance was strong (e.g., parts of Southern Nigeria, particularly Lagos Colony and areas after the initial conquest).
- **Indirect Rule:**
    - **Definition:** A system of administration devised by Lord Lugard, where the British governed through existing traditional rulers and institutions, advising them on policy matters.
    - **Characteristics:**
        - Preservation of traditional rulers (Emirs, Obas, Chiefs) as intermediaries.
        - Use of native laws and customs, as long as they didn't conflict with British "justice" (e.g., no human sacrifice).
        - Low cost, as traditional rulers handled local administration, tax collection, and justice.
        - Native treasuries were established, funded by taxes collected locally.
        - Often applied in Northern Nigeria where the centralized Emirate system was strong, and later introduced (less successfully) in Western and Eastern Nigeria.
        - **Warrant Chiefs:** In Eastern Nigeria (e.g., Igbo land), where centralized traditional authority was largely absent, the British appointed "Warrant Chiefs" who were given official warrants, but often lacked traditional legitimacy, leading to significant resistance.

C. The French Colonial Administrative Policy: Assimilation and Association

Unlike the British, the French generally pursued a more centralized and culturally intrusive approach in their colonies.

- **Assimilation:**
    - **Definition:** The policy of trying to integrate colonized people into French culture, language, and political systems, aiming to make them "black Frenchmen."
    - **Characteristics:**
        - Aimed to erase indigenous cultures and replace them with French culture.
        - Direct administration with a strong emphasis on French laws and education.
        - Limited opportunities for "evolved" Africans to become French citizens with full rights, but even these were few.
        - Traditional institutions were largely ignored or undermined.

        - Highly centralized administration from Paris.
        - Applied in French West Africa (e.g., Senegal, Mali, Niger).
- **Association:**
    - **Definition:** A later, modified policy where the French recognized that full assimilation was impractical. It focused on cooperating with local elites while still maintaining French superiority and control.
    - **Characteristics:**
        - Still emphasized French language and culture, but with less pressure for full integration.
        - Allowed for some traditional institutions to exist, but under French supervision.
        - Aimed at developing the colonies primarily for French economic benefit.
        - Provided minimal representation for Africans in French institutions.

D. Impact of British Colonial Rule

British colonial rule profoundly transformed Nigeria in various aspects.

- **Economic Impact:**
    - **Exploitation of Resources:** Raw materials (palm oil, groundnuts, cocoa, tin) were extracted for British industries.
    - **Cash Crop Economy:** Encouraged the cultivation of cash crops for export, often at the expense of food crops, making the economy dependent on international markets.
    - **Introduction of Taxation:** Imposed various taxes (e.g., hut tax, poll tax) to force Africans into wage labor and generate revenue for the colonial administration.
    - **Infrastructure Development:** Railways, roads, and ports were built, primarily to facilitate the evacuation of raw materials to the coast for export, rather than for internal development.
    - **Disruption of Indigenous Industries:** Local industries suffered due to competition from cheaper British manufactured goods.
    - **Emergence of a Monetized Economy:** Replaced traditional barter systems.
- **Political Impact:**
    - **Amalgamation (1914):** The forced merger of Northern and Southern Protectorates, creating the artificial entity of "Nigeria," without sufficient consultation of the diverse peoples. This laid the foundation for future ethnic tensions.
    - **New Administrative Structures:** Introduced provinces, divisions, and districts, often disregarding traditional boundaries.
    - **Erosion of Traditional Authority:** Even with Indirect Rule, the power of traditional rulers was reduced, as they became agents of the colonial state rather than autonomous leaders.
    - **Introduction of Western Legal System:** English common law and statute law were introduced, often conflicting with customary laws.
    - **Emergence of Nationalist Sentiments:** The experience of colonial rule, its injustices, and the introduction of Western education eventually sowed the seeds of anti-colonial nationalism.

- **Socio-cultural Impact:**
    - **Introduction of Western Education:** Established schools that trained Nigerians for clerical jobs, but also exposed them to Western political ideas like democracy and self-determination.
    - **Spread of Christianity:** Missionaries converted many, leading to cultural clashes and the decline of traditional religions in some areas.
    - **Urbanization:** Growth of administrative and commercial centers attracted people from rural areas, leading to new social dynamics and challenges.
    - **New Social Classes:** Emergence of an educated elite, salaried workers, and traders.
    - **Breakdown of Traditional Values:** Erosion of communal ties and traditional governance structures.
    - **Racial Discrimination:** Colonial administration was inherently racist, with Europeans holding superior positions and Africans subjected to discrimination.

E. Comparison of British and French Colonial Administration

Feature	British Colonial Administration (e.g., Nigeria)	French Colonial Administration (e.g., Senegal)
Philosophy	Indirect Rule, Pragmatism, "Separate Development"	Assimilation (initially), later Association
Goal for Africans	To develop along their own lines (but still subordinate)	To become "black Frenchmen" (elites)
Local Rulers	Retained and used as intermediaries	Largely ignored or subordinated; direct control
Law	Dual system (British law + "Native Law & Custom")	French law largely imposed; less recognition of native law
Citizenship	British subjects (not citizens)	Limited path to French citizenship for "evolved"
Centralization	Less centralized, more regional autonomy	Highly centralized from Paris (Federations)
Culture	Less intrusive, preserved some local culture	Intrusive, aimed at cultural eradication/Francophone
Language	English for administration, but encouraged local languages	French imposed as the primary language