Reimagining Nigerian Governance: A Case for Tribal Federalism

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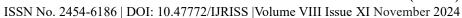**Segunobasun Consult, FCT Abuja, Nigeria**

ABSTRACT

Nigeria's governance framework, rooted in a Western-influenced liberal democratic system, has faced challenges in meeting the complex needs of its ethnically diverse population. Composed of over 250 ethnic groups and 371 tribes, Nigeria has struggled to foster a cohesive national identity amidst its centralized system, imposed under the 1999 military-led constitution. This centralization has led to uneven resource allocation, particularly in the case of Nigeria's oil wealth, resulting in elite dominance and perpetuating socioeconomic disparities. In contrast, the governance model of federal systems in countries like the United States and Switzerland, which emphasizes decentralized control over resources and local autonomy, offers valuable insights into Nigeria's situation. This study explores the potential for a decentralized tribal federalism approach in Nigeria, focusing on cultural authenticity and regional autonomy as pathways to reduce ethnic tensions and promote equitable development. By examining global governance models, this research seeks to outline a Nigerian governance structure that balances modernization and cultural heritage, emphasizing local autonomy to foster a more inclusive national identity.

Keywords: National identity, Nationalism, Cultural Authenticity, Tribal federalism, Consociationalism

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, a country of immense ethnic diversity, comprises approximately 371 tribes across over 250 ethnic groups. Since gaining independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria has operated within a governance framework heavily influenced by Western ideologies, particularly those of the United States and Britain. These influences have resulted in adopting a liberal democratic system that has often struggled to address the complexities of Nigeria's diverse and multi-ethnic society. The current governance system, operating under a constitution (Promulgation of Decree. No 24 of 1999) handed down by the military government of General Abdulsalami Abubakar in 1999, has not succeeded in addressing the core challenges that stem from Nigeria's complex sociopolitical landscape. The imposition of Western-style democracy on a nation with deep ethnic, cultural, and religious divides has contributed to a multitude of issues: corruption, insecurity, violence, poverty, and systemic governance failures. While liberal democracy emphasizes individual rights, free markets, and representative government, it often overlooks the complexities of cultural authenticity and national belonging in deeply heterogeneous societies like Nigeria.

Nigeria's centralization of power and resources has created a system where the federal government exerts disproportionate control over subnational units. Beginning with the military era, especially under General Ibrahim Babangida, oil resources have been allocated to elite friends of the president, creating a feudalist class that controls vast wealth without accountability (Osaghae, 1998). This centralization has deprived the subnational units of their resources, undermining regional development and contributing to calls for secession from various groups, such as the Niger Delta militants and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). In a truly federal system, the rights and autonomy of federating units must be protected to foster a sense of belonging and equity. The US federal system offers valuable lessons in how states can retain control over critical aspects of governance, including resource management and cultural preservation, while remaining part of a unified nation. Other countries, like Switzerland, Germany, and Canada, demonstrate that decentralization can prevent regional conflict and promote local development. For Nigeria, adopting a more decentralized federal system, where states have control over their resources and laws, could address the persistent grievances that have plagued the country since independence.

Despite Nigeria's potential in human and material resources, her constructive existence as a nation-state remains hazy. The interactions among and between heterogeneous cultural communities within the Nigerian state have been characterized by constant distrust, suspicion of each other's motives and intentions, and sometimes open confrontation. Today, the country is in a relentless grip of insecurity; mainly, memories of the civil war refuse to be relegated to the archives, but they remain reflected in the country's political decisions. Nigeria's diversity calls for a governance model more responsive to the local aspirations and needs of various ethnic groups. Amidst growing dissatisfaction, there are calls for a governance model that grants greater autonomy to Nigeria's various ethnic groups. A tribal federalism approach, similar to subnational governance systems found in parts of Europe, offers a potential solution to Nigeria's deep-rooted challenges. This essay explores the possibility of creating a subnational state system based on cultural authenticity, similar to the governance structures in some European states. It also examines the challenges to its emergence and offers potential suggestions for implementation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach, combining comparative analysis and historical context review. Primary data includes academic texts, historical records, and government publications documenting Nigeria's governance challenges. Secondary data consists of case studies from countries with decentralized governance structures, such as Switzerland, Spain, and Canada, which provide insights into successful models of federalism that respect local autonomy. The methodology is grounded in comparative case analysis to assess how decentralized governance could improve political stability, economic distribution, and ethnic cohesion in Nigeria. By analyzing international federal structures and their adaptability, this research will offer recommendations for constitutional reform that align Nigeria's governance with its diverse cultural realities.

Nigeria's Governance Structure

The governance structure of Nigeria, as defined by the 1999 Constitution, has often been criticized as a pseudo-democratic system rooted in a military-imposed framework that the Nigerian people have not genuinely accepted. The opening statement of the constitution, which says "We the people," suggests widespread consensus, but Nigerians were never given the opportunity to draft or vote on this document. Unlike in many modern democracies, where constitutions are the product of extensive national debates, referendums, or constitutional conventions, the 1999 Constitution was imposed by a military regime with no mandate to draft it. Nigeria's political structure has fostered a concentration of power in the presidency, creating what some have described as a neo-feudalist system.

The refusal of successive Nigerian governments over the last 24 years to take the bold step of initiating a full-scale constitutional review that would allow citizens to debate or craft their own constitution indicates a deliberate attempt to preserve the status quo, where sovereignty in practice remains with the president rather than the people. The concentration of power in the hands of the president has created a system where those in power become disconnected from the will of the people. Critics argue that these leaders benefit from a system that places significant power in the office of the president, who controls vast state resources and has significant authority over security, national policy, and economic direction. This power dynamic has led to a patron-client political system, where the president and close allies (often crony capitalists, regional or ethnic elites) maintain control over national wealth and decision-making. As a result, no president has been willing to relinquish these powers by empowering citizens to craft their own constitution.

This excessive concentration of power in the executive branch has led to dictatorial tendencies and allowed for widespread corruption. Political theorists like Richard Dina have referred to Nigeria as a "prebendal state" where public office is exploited for personal gain and patronage networks. This has contributed to a cycle in which "mad people"—unscrupulous leaders who prioritize self-enrichment—rise to power and perpetuate the system.

The post-independence governance structure, particularly under the 1999 Constitution, has perpetuated a centralized system of government, which continues to alienate Nigeria's ethnic groups. Efforts to address the deficiencies in Nigeria's political structure, such as the 2005 National Political Reform Conference and the 2014 National Conference, have failed to yield substantial results. Both initiatives were meant to address issues of federalism, state autonomy, resource control, and constitutional reforms. However, the outcomes of these

conferences were either ignored or shelved by the federal government, reflecting the entrenched interests that benefit from the current arrangement. This reluctance to decentralize or reform the constitution can be linked to the creation of a feudalist class—a small group of elites who benefit from the extraction of resources and control over state institutions. As long as this group continues to dominate the political landscape, calls for a people-driven constitution and true democratic governance will likely be ignored.

The Call for True Federalism and Regional Autonomy

Given the deep ethnic and regional divides in Nigeria, many scholars and political activists have called for a return to true federalism. In this system, the states or regions have greater autonomy over resources and governance structures. This model would allow each region to manage its affairs while remaining part of a unified Nigeria. Some see true federalism as a solution to Nigeria's political instability and economic woes, as it would allow for cultural authenticity and regional self-determination, reducing the central government's overwhelming control.

Federalism

Nigeria, in principle, operates a federal system enshrined in its constitution in a liberal democracy. In practice, the federal system has often been undermined by a centralized governance structure that grants excessive power to the federal government at the expense of the states leading to a power imbalance and a weakening of the states, particularly in terms of their autonomy and ability to manage their own affairs. Key factors responsible for this centralization include the colonial legacy of British rule, which established a unitary system of government and has continued to influence Nigeria's political structure. The Exclusive Legislative List in the Second Schedule of the Nigerian Constitution grants the federal government exclusive control over mineral resources, such as oil and gas, which gives it significant leverage over the states. Another factor is that the federal government's ability to distribute patronage and resources has made it a powerful force in Nigerian politics, often leading to a dependence on the center. There is also the concentration of security architecture in the hands of the federal government, leading to power centralization.

In a well-structured federal system, like that of the United States, the rights and autonomy of federating units (states) are recognized and preserved through legal and constitutional frameworks. This ensures a balance of power between the national government and subnational entities, allowing each state to maintain its cultural identity, manage its resources, and control local governance matters. In Nigeria, however, the current federal system has deviated from this ideal, particularly through the centralized control of resources and the imposition of national cultural practices that undermine subnational identities. Understanding how other nations, particularly the US, manage their federal systems can provide insight into how Nigeria might address these challenges.

Comparative Federal Systems

The US Federal System: Preservation of State Rights

The United States Constitution lays the foundation for a federal system in which the powers of the national government are explicitly listed, while all other powers are reserved for the states. This division is supported by the Tenth Amendment, which states that any powers not delegated to the federal government are reserved for the states or the people. This constitutional protection allows each state significant autonomy in matters such as taxation, law enforcement, education, and public health, enabling them to preserve their unique cultures and policies.

State Autonomy and Governance: Each US state operates its government with executive, legislative, and judicial branches. States can pass their laws on education, health, and transportation, provided they do not conflict with federal laws. This level of autonomy allows for cultural preservation and regional policy differences that reflect the specific needs and values of the state's population (Dinan, 2018). For instance, states like California have more progressive environmental regulations, while Texas and others have more conservative approaches to taxation and gun rights.

Collegiate System and Federal Representation: The US Electoral College system preserves the power balance between states in presidential elections. Each state has a set number of electors based on its population, ensuring that less populous states still have a significant voice in federal elections. This system ensures that every state, regardless of size, has a role in determining national leadership, protecting the interests of smaller states, and promoting national unity (Ceaser, 2016).

State Control over Justice and Law Enforcement: States maintain separate justice systems and law enforcement agencies in the US. Each state has its own criminal and civil laws, allowing local governments to adapt legal frameworks to reflect regional cultures and practices. For example, criminal justice policies and punishments for certain crimes may vary from state to state, reflecting regional values and social norms (Zimmerman, 2012).

Resource Management and Economic Autonomy: While the federal government oversees broad economic policy and regulates interstate commerce, individual states retain control over their natural resources. States like Texas and Alaska, which are rich in oil and gas, manage their resources, collecting taxes and royalties that benefit the state economy directly. This autonomy fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, ensuring that the wealth generated from state resources benefits local populations (Musgrave & Musgrave, 2017).

Other countries have adopted similar federal systems to balance regional autonomy with national unity, preventing the central government from overpowering subnational identities and ensuring equitable resource distribution.

Switzerland: Switzerland operates a confederation model in which its 26 cantons enjoy significant autonomy over governance, law enforcement, and resource management. Cantonal governments retain the power to legislate on issues like taxation, healthcare, and education, with minimal interference from the federal government. This allows for preserving cultural identities, especially in a multilingual country where French, German, and Italian speakers coexist (Linder & Mueller, 2021). Switzerland's decentralized model has contributed to its political stability, preventing the dominance of any one ethnic or linguistic group.

Germany: Germany's Basic Law establishes a federal system where power is shared between the federal government and the Länder (states). Each state has its own constitution, government, and judiciary, giving it autonomy over matters such as education and policing. One significant aspect of the German system is fiscal federalism, which allows states to collect certain taxes and manage local finances. This model has helped to prevent tensions between wealthy and less wealthy regions by ensuring that resource-rich states, like Bavaria, retain a significant portion of the revenue generated from local industries (Jeffery, 2016).

Canada: Canada operates a federal system that allows its provinces significant control over resources, especially in resource-rich areas like Alberta. The Canadian federal government manages national policy, but provinces have authority over natural resources, health, and education. Like the U.S., Canada has developed a system where regional autonomy ensures that provinces can tailor their governance to their specific needs and cultural contexts (Hogg, 2018).

Nationalism, a More Potent Force than Liberalism

Professor John Mearsheimer, in his book The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities, offered critiques of the liberal international order, particularly about national identity and cultural authenticity. Liberalism is centered on the assumption that we are, first and foremost, individuals who form social contracts. It assumes humans are, first and foremost, individuals who come together to form social contracts. Nationalism, however, is predicated on the assumption that humans are naturally social animals and are very tribal from the beginning. Human beings are heavily socialized into particular groups. Individualism takes a back seat to group loyalty, and aside from the family, the most important group in today's world is the nation. Professor Mearsheimer defined 'Nationalism' as a set of political beliefs that holds that a nation, which is a body of individuals with characteristics that purportedly distinguish them from other groups, should have its state. The word nation-state captures the essence of nationalism. The world is divided into nations, and each nation should have its own state. Professor Mearsheimer argued that liberalism's attempt to promote universal values like

democracy, human rights, and individual freedom often clashes with the inherent forces of nationalism and cultural identity. This is especially relevant when analyzing states artificially constructed by colonial powers like Nigeria without regard to deep-rooted pre-existing cultural, religious, ethnic, and tribal identities and differences within the population

The framework offered by Professor Mearsheimer provided a lens to understand the challenges encountered by such a state in implementing liberal values of individualism and democracy in societies where collective identities tied to ethnicity and religion dominate. While liberalism focuses on individual freedoms, nationalism emphasizes the belief in the superiority and unity of one's nation, often centered on the idea that a nation's people share a common identity, history, culture, and political destiny. Many cultures prioritize stability and security over individual rights, challenging the notion that liberal democracy is universally desirable or achievable. One of Professor Mearsheimer's key arguments is that nationalism is a more potent political force than liberalism, which in the context of Nigeria resonates with the continuing struggle to form a cohesive national identity amidst the deep ethnic divisions between major tribal groups like the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo. He would argue that the attempt by the Nigerian state to build a liberal, unified political identity conflicts with the powerful pull of these ethnic and cultural allegiances, which often lead to political instability, sectarian violence, and challenges in governance.
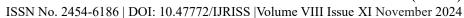
Liberalism tends to underestimate the importance of national self-determination and cultural authenticity. This is evident in Nigeria's post-independence history, exemplified by the Biafra War (1967-1970) and ongoing ethnic and regional tensions, demonstrating how the colonial legacy and lack of cultural authenticity create friction within the Nigerian state. Liberal ideals' attempts to enforce national unity, often through centralized governance, have struggled to overcome these deep-seated divisions, and the Nigerian experience exemplifies Mearsheimer's central thesis that nationalism and cultural identity often overpower liberal ideals, leading to internal conflicts and governance challenges.

Exclusionary vs. Pluralistic Model for National Unity

Today's core concepts for making sense of our societies remain nations and nationalism, and importantly, "the nation continues to be a powerful source of identity and legitimacy" (Triandafyllidou, 2021; Pg. 201). Nationalism, categorized into ethnic, civic, and state-building variants such as irredentist, pluralist, economic, and conservative, interacts with other political ideologies, such as democracy and authoritarianism, and the different forms influence state cohesion, political participation, and conflict (Mylonas & Tudor, 2021). Nationalism could be regarded as a fluid and evolving concept that is context-dependent and shaped by historical, political, and social factors, particularly in multi-ethnic states (Triandafyllidou, 2021). This characterization is highly relevant to understanding how Nigeria's colonial history has contributed to the lack of a unified national identity, with ethnic groups often prioritizing their local or regional loyalties over national allegiance.

Dikici (2022) critiques traditional forms of exclusionary, ethnocentric nationalism, advocating for pluralistic nationalism, which emphasizes inclusivity, recognition of diversity, and a balance between national unity and ethnic diversity. Dikici argues that traditional nationalism, which often promotes a homogenous identity, fails to address the realities of multicultural and multi-ethnic states. In Nigeria's case, the attempt to create a unified national identity has often marginalized minority groups and exacerbated ethnic tensions. The centralization of power and the imposition of a singular national culture have led to feelings of exclusion among various ethnic groups, resulting in political instability and secessionist movements. Triandafyllidou's framework suggests that Nigeria needs to build a more inclusive national narrative that balances civic values with respect for ethnic diversity, reducing ethnic tensions and fostering nationalism.

The concept of pluralistic nationalism advocated by Dikici (2022) suggests that Nigeria could benefit from a model that recognizes and accommodates its ethnic diversity rather than suppressing it. Triandafyllidou's framework that Nigeria needs to build a more inclusive national narrative that balances civic values with respect for ethnic diversity, reducing ethnic tensions and fostering nationalism aligns with Dikici's (2022) concept of pluralistic nationalism. Both suggestions align with calls for true federalism in Nigeria, where regions and ethnic groups could have greater autonomy over their affairs while contributing to a unified national identity (Suberu,

2001). A pluralistic approach would emphasize inclusivity and the equitable distribution of power, which could help resolve long-standing grievances related to ethnic representation and resource control (Mustapha, 2006). Dikici's argument for pluralistic nationalism provides a valuable framework for addressing the National Question in Nigeria. By fostering a more inclusive and pluralistic national identity, Nigeria could reduce ethnic tensions and create a more stable and cohesive state.

Nationalism and Ethnicity: The Nigerian Context

The quest for a shared sense of national identity for Nigeria, with over 250 ethnic groups and significant regional disparities, has been a seemingly unsurmountable challenge since its independence in Nigeria. The complex issue of how to forge a cohesive national identity in Nigeria, characterized by deep ethnic, religious, and regional divisions, is generally called the National Question. Nigeria has struggled with ethnic nationalism due to its destabilizing effects on state unity. The emergence of IPOB, Igbo secessionist movements, the ubiquitous ethnic-based mentality in Nigeria's polity, which reflects the pervasive and deep-seated influence of ethnic identity on the country's political landscape, and resource control debates in the Niger Delta are all reflections of the broader challenge of managing nationalism in multi-ethnic states.

Nigeria's legacy of British colonialism further complicates the forging of a national identity. The fact is that Lord Lugard's amalgamation of diverse ethnic groups in the southern and northern protectorates under colonial rule in 1914 failed to take into account pre-existing ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The lack of consensus on how to balance ethnic autonomy with national unity has persisted after independence, culminating in persistent mistrust in the social and political domains and conflicts (Osaghae, 1998). Calhoun's (1993) article on Nationalism and Ethnicity centers on how nationalism is a unifying force for creating a nation-state and a divisive force that can exacerbate ethnic tensions, making it highly relevant to the National Question debate in Nigeria. He highlights the paradox where the project of building a unified nation often involves the marginalization or suppression of ethnic identities. This is manifestly observable in Nigeria, where the imposition of national identity, particularly under centralized rule, has often marginalized ethnic groups, particularly minority ethnic groups.

Nandini Kundra's (2019) article showed that nationalism can lead to fragmentation and conflict when aligned with exclusionary practices. This is because history has shown that in societies where ethnic nationalism is dominant, individuals who belong to minority ethnic or cultural groups often face discrimination, limited political representation, or exclusion from the national narrative. Kundra's discussion is relevant to understanding Nigeria's struggle with nationalism, considering the tension between ethnic nationalism and the need for civic nationalism in a multi-ethnic state.

Both ethnic nationalism, which describes nationhood based on shared ethnicity, culture, or language, and civic nationalism, which is more inclusive and based on shared values and citizenship, were explored by Kundra (2019), providing a snippet view of the complexity of the concept of nation and nationalism. Ethnic nationalism has often overshadowed efforts to build a unified civic identity, leading to conflicts such as the Biafran War and more recent secessionist movements. Calhoun's exploration of ethnic nationalism provides further relevance to the Nigerian context. He notes that ethnic groups often mobilize politically to assert their identity, particularly in states where resources and political power are concentrated. This has played out in Nigeria through the lens of ethno-regional politics, where groups like the Niger Delta militants, Yoruba nationalists, and northern Hausa-Fulani elites have all vied for power and control over resources, particularly oil wealth (Watts, 2004).

Kundra's emphasis on balancing ethnic diversity with national unity provides a framework for understanding how Nigeria could address its ongoing struggles to forge a cohesive identity, reduce ethnic tensions, and promote more inclusive governance. The National Question asks whether Nigeria can transcend these ethnic power struggles to forge a genuinely inclusive national identity. The failure to address these concerns has led to continued debates over federalism, resource control, and ethnic representation in governance. Calhoun's emphasis on how nationalism can create exclusionary and inclusionary dynamics helps explain why Nigeria's centralized political system often struggles to accommodate the aspirations of different ethnic groups. The failure to implement true federalism or adopt a more inclusive constitution—one that reflects the diversity of Nigeria's

ethnic groups—contributes to ongoing ethnic tensions (Suberu, 2001).

Calhoun (1993) also discusses how nationalism can be shaped by elite interests, a point that directly applies to Nigeria's political elites. Since independence, Nigeria has been governed by elites from dominant ethnic groups, often using the state's resources to maintain political control. This centralization of power, particularly in the presidency, has exacerbated feelings of exclusion among minority groups (Mustapha, 2006). The 1999 Constitution, imposed by the military, has failed to create a sense of ownership among Nigerians, reinforcing the perception that elites manipulate the political system to preserve their interests at the expense of other Nigerians.

The Concept of Cultural Authenticity and Subnational Governance

Cultural authenticity could be described as governance systems that acknowledge and respect the unique identities, traditions, and values of distinct cultural groups within a state. As argued by R.S. Bishop in Reframing the Debate about Cultural Authenticity (2003), the concept of cultural authenticity is complex and multifaceted because it is not fixed but somewhat fluid, subjective, and context-dependent. An appreciation of the complexity of identity should broaden the narrow definition of cultural authenticity as the accurate portrayal of cultural norms by insiders of that culture to stave off the risk of alienating and marginalizing diverse voices, particularly those of minorities. An inflexible approach to national identity in a multi-ethnic state can exacerbate tensions between groups. H. L. Nostrand's (1989) editorial "Authentic Texts and Cultural Authenticity" stressed the need for depth in cultural representation, which should capture the diversity and internal contradictions within cultures. An authentic representation of national identity requires acknowledging and integrating the real, lived experiences of all ethnic and cultural groups within the nation. However, It is important to recognize that pursuing a "true" or "authentic" national identity can be elusive and subject to differing interpretations, influenced by factors such as historical context, political power dynamics, and individual experiences.

In the context of nation-building, cultural authenticity involves creating a national narrative reflecting the diversity, contradictions, and multiple perspectives in a country's population. Pursuing cultural authenticity in the context of statehood often involves balancing competing interests and reconciling diverse perspectives. Nigeria's quest for a shared national identity is complicated by the country's diverse ethnic and religious landscape, and the political instability and ethnic tensions could be traced to the failure to incorporate the authentic experiences of ethnic minorities and diverse groups into the national framework. Nigeria's ethnic divisions highlight the difficulty of constructing a cohesive national identity that respects the fluidity and complexity of the country's cultural makeup.

A nation-building process that mirrors Nostrand's advocacy for cultural depth and authenticity would involve fostering a national identity that goes beyond superficial unity to genuinely represent the lived experiences of its people—accommodating the various ethnic, religious, and cultural identities that make up the country. Rather than imposing a singular national identity that marginalizes minority cultures, embracing the complexity and multiplicity of cultural identities could foster national cohesion. Given the ethnic diversity of the Nigerian state, a more pluralistic approach to national identity could be beneficial to Nigeria's governance system. Nigeria can create a more inclusive and equitable society where all citizens feel valued and respected, regardless of their ethnic background, by embracing a pluralistic approach.

The imposition of a unitary or liberal democratic system on multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria leads to tensions because the system does not embrace all the component groups. However, a governance model based on subnational states, granting ethnic groups autonomy over their cultural, economic, and political affairs, could provide a more authentic expression of governance. Nigeria must, therefore, strive for a pluralistic approach that recognizes and celebrates the unique cultural heritage of each ethnic group while promoting shared values and a sense of common citizenship through decentralization of power, cultural exchange and dialogue, inclusive education, and, importantly, recognition of the rights of the minority.

Some European countries, such as Switzerland, Belgium, and Spain, are bellwether of this subnational governance model where ethnic and linguistic diversity is recognized through regional autonomy. For example,

the canton system in Switzerland allows for a decentralized governance structure, where local cantons have significant authority over their own legal, economic, and social affairs (Linder & Mueller, 2021). This structure ensures that each cultural group maintains its identity as they contribute to the broader national framework. Similarly, Belgium operates a federal system accommodating its distinct linguistic communities (French-speaking Walloons, Dutch-speaking Flemish, and German-speaking minorities), which enjoy autonomy over their regions (Deschouwer, 2009).

Nigeria's adoption of a similar system could ensure that each of its numerous ethnic groups has governance structures that respect their cultural heritage, granting them control over resources, legal frameworks, and social policies. A subnational governance system analogous to those seen in Europe could potentially address some of the grievances linked to the current unitary system.

Challenges to the Emergence of a Subnational System

While the idea of creating subnational states based on ethnic and cultural lines has its merits, significant challenges hinder its realization:

Ethnic Complexity and Fragmentation: Nigeria's ethnic diversity is more complex than in most European countries. The sheer number of tribes and ethnic groups makes it difficult to draw clear subnational boundaries without triggering new tensions. Unlike Switzerland or Belgium, where regional and linguistic divisions are somewhat well-defined, Nigeria's borders are fluid and contested, especially at the subnational level (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

Economic Disparities and Resource Allocation: A subnational governance model would likely require a significant restructuring of resource control, particularly over the lucrative oil resources concentrated in the Niger Delta region. Nigeria's political elite may resist such restructuring as it could lead to the loss of federal control over natural resources, which has historically been a source of corruption and rent-seeking behaviour (Osaghae, 1998). Any attempt to implement a federal structure based on ethnic lines would have to address the issue of resource allocation and prevent new forms of inequality.

Political Resistance from the Elite: Nigeria's political elite, who benefit from the current centralized system, are unlikely to support a shift toward a more decentralized model. The current system allows for the concentration of power at the federal level, where political officeholders control vast resources and patronage networks. Allowing subnational autonomy would decentralize power, potentially threatening the elite's influence (Suberu, 2001).

Historical Tensions: Nigeria has experienced several conflicts related to ethnic and regional divisions, including the Biafra War (1967–1970). These historical tensions have left scars, and any move toward granting ethnic groups greater autonomy could reignite secessionist movements. The challenge lies in ensuring that the subnational model fosters unity rather than fragmentation (Nwosu, 2021).

The Need for a Tribal Federalism Approach

The limitations of the current governance system in Nigeria stem from its failure to represent the country's vast ethnic and cultural diversity effectively. A tribal federalism system, in which subnational states are created based on tribal and ethnic identities, could offer several advantages. First, there will be enhanced representation of all component groups. A governance model based on tribal federalism would ensure that each ethnic group has a greater say in the governance process. By decentralizing power to subnational units, diverse ethnic groups would have more control over decision-making processes that directly affect their regions (Osaghae, 1998). Second, a tribal federalism approach facilitates increased autonomy, giving tribal states greater autonomy to manage their affairs, including control over resources, education, and healthcare. This increased autonomy would promote local accountability and responsiveness to each region's citizens' needs, ultimately leading to more efficient governance. Thirdly, tribal federalism would promote rapid economic development and foster economic self-sufficiency by allowing each region to manage its resources. Regions could focus on their unique strengths, such as agriculture, industry, or tourism, thus promoting localized economic development that aligns with each

region's cultural and natural assets. Lastly, this approach will reduce conflict within the nation. Nigeria's current political framework has often exacerbated ethnic and regional tensions, as different groups feel marginalized or excluded from governance. A governance structure that recognizes and accommodates ethnic diversity could help mitigate these tensions, creating a system where all groups feel represented and valued (Suberu, 2001).

Challenges to Implementing Tribal Federalism

While tribal federalism offers potential benefits, its implementation in Nigeria would face significant challenges. Some of these challenges include:

Divisiveness and Fragmentation: Critics argue that tribal federalism could further entrench ethnic divisions and exacerbate secessionist tendencies. Regions with strong ethnic identities might seek independence if they feel that autonomy is not enough, raising concerns about the unity of the Nigerian state.

Resource Allocation: A fundamental challenge to implementing tribal federalism would be determining the equitable allocation of resources between the federal government and tribal states. Nigeria's wealth is concentrated in certain regions, particularly the Niger Delta, which produces the majority of the country's oil. Ensuring that all regions have access to resources while preserving the autonomy of resource-rich states could prove contentious (Watts, 2004).

Institutional Capacity: Many regions in Nigeria lack the institutional capacity to govern themselves effectively. Establishing governance frameworks, training civil servants, and building local infrastructure would require significant investment and time.

Resistance from the Political Elite: Nigeria's current power structure, which concentrates significant authority at the federal level, may resist efforts to decentralize power to tribal states. Political elites who benefit from the current system may view tribal federalism as a threat to their dominance and control over national resources.

Mechanism for Achieving Tribal Federalism

For a country with over 250 ethnic groups, such as Nigeria, a fitting tribal federalism approach that addresses ethnic complexity and fear of fragmentation is a consociational model. Consociationalism is a political theory developed by political scientist Arend Lijphart in the 1960s to address governance in fragmented societies along ethnic or sectarian lines. It is designed to manage deep ethnic, linguistic, religious, or cultural divisions within a society by promoting power-sharing between different groups. Consociationalism encourages collaboration and shared governance through institutional mechanisms and discourages a winner-take-all system that could further alienate minority groups.

Key Features of Consociational Federalism include the formation of a Grand Coalition Government in which the leaders of all major ethnic or social groups form part of the governing coalition, ensuring that every significant group has representation in decision-making. There is the Segmental Autonomy wherein each ethnic or religious group has autonomy to manage its own affairs, particularly in areas like education and culture. Consociational federalism provides for Proportional Representation to ensure that political representation and distribution of resources are done proportionally, ensuring that all groups have a fair share of power based on their population size. As a safeguard, there is a Mutual Veto that allows groups to veto decisions that may threaten their interests, providing a safeguard for minority groups against majority

dominance.

Successful Implementation of Consociationalism

Switzerland:

One of the most successful examples of consociationalism can be found in Switzerland, a multi-ethnic country

with German, French, Italian, and Romansh speakers. Switzerland's federal system gives significant autonomy to its linguistic and cultural regions, known as cantons, allowing diverse groups to coexist peacefully. The grand coalition government, which includes representatives from all major language groups, and the system of direct democracy ensure that all groups have a voice in governance (Linder, 2021).

Belgium:

Another significant example is Belgium, which is divided between Flemish-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia, and a small German-speaking community. Belgium adopted a consociational model in response to tensions between these linguistic groups. It uses proportional representation, federalism, and mutual vetoes to maintain peace and stability (Deschouwer, 2009). Power-sharing agreements between Flemish and Walloon parties ensure that neither group dominates the government, but both have significant regional autonomy.

Lebanon:

Lebanon implemented a consociational system after its independence in 1943 to manage divisions between its Christian, Sunni, and Shiite populations, among other smaller groups. The National Pact and later the Taif Agreement formalized power-sharing based on religious communities, including a grand coalition where the president is always a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is Sunni Muslim, and the parliament speaker is Shiite Muslim. However, Lebanon's consociational system has faced challenges, mainly when political leaders prioritize sectarian interests over national unity, contributing to tensions and civil strife (Salamey, 2014).
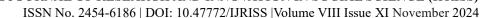
Challenges of Consociationalism

As has been shown, consociationalism has had some measure of success, but its operation is not without challenges, as with every system. Consociationalism comes with the risk of entrenching divisions by institutionalizing ethnic or religious identities in political systems, which can prevent the development of a shared national identity. The domination of the Nigerian governance space by neo-feudalist elites may manifest in another form, as the system may encourage elite bargaining and political domination by a small group of leaders, leaving ordinary citizens excluded from the decision-making process. The impact can be tempered if real power and significant autonomy are decentralized to the subnational components. Another challenge in consociationalism is stagnation in Policy Making, as the requirement for consensus and veto rights can lead to slow or stagnant decision-making, particularly when groups cannot agree on critical issues. Innovative measures to avoid these pitfalls could be agreed upon in an open and good-intention discussion by all the ethnic groups.

Sense of Belonging for All

The current system has been unable to address the country's diversity and has instead perpetuated inequality and marginalization. Creating a governance system that gives a sense of belonging to the approximately 371 Nigerian tribes across over 250 ethnic groups, that takes into account the cultural authenticity and resource rights of each ethnic group, is a complex and challenging task and would require a significant overhaul of the current political and economic structures. The creation of a new governance system that addresses the needs and aspirations of all Nigerians would require a broad-based consultation process involving all stakeholders, including ethnic groups, civil society organizations, and government representatives. This would be a complex and time-consuming process, requiring significant resources and political will.

Fear of Secession

The fear of secession, particularly by resource-rich regions and commercial hubs like Lagos, is the prevailing fear of Nigeria's power elites, which made them not consent to the apparent necessity to restructure Nigeria, granting greater autonomy to the subnational to make it work for all. However, this dynamic raises important questions about justice, equity, and the rights of resource-rich regions. The unsaid question is, why must a collective of people be forced to remain in a country space that does not benefit them or recognize their contribution fairly simply because other component groups and ethnicities believe they cannot survive without

these resources? What is in it for the resource-rich regions in a country that fails to make them feel they belong? Does it not amount to a neo-colonialist system of the people and resources of the region forced to remain in Nigeria? The solution to the fear must be for each region to develop its economy, thrive independently of other region resources, and engage collaboratively based on mutual respect.

For many in resource-rich regions like the Niger Delta, the current structure of Nigeria's federal system feels like a form of neo-colonialism. The frustration felt by many in the resource-rich regions is rooted in the belief that they are being exploited and forced to remain in a political arrangement where their resources are extracted to the benefit of others. At the same time, they continue to suffer from underdevelopment, environmental degradation, and a lack of infrastructure. The question, "What is in it for these regions?" reflects the growing sentiment of dissatisfaction and marginalization. Scholars such as Osaghae (1998) have argued that Nigeria's federal structure, which centralizes control of resources at the federal level, deprives local populations of the benefits of their own resources. This echoes colonialism, where regions rich in natural resources are compelled to remain part of a larger entity for the benefit of that entity. In Nigeria's case, the insistence that resource-rich regions must stay within the federal system can be viewed as the continuation of an exploitative system, where the economic viability of some regions is sustained at the expense of others.

Nigeria's history is indeed complex and was shaped by The British colonial administration led by Sir Frederick Lugard, with economic consideration at the heart of it. It emerged in 1914 as an artificial construct of the British colonialists, which aimed to create a single entity that would facilitate easier administration and economic management using the Southern Protectorate's surplus revenues to cover the Northern Protectorate's operating loss. This arrangements was for a period of one hundred years expired in 2014. Nigeria's 2014 centenary of the amalgamation marked the symbolic expiration of this colonial agreement. However, successive governments have not acted to address the fundamental question of whether Nigeria's diverse groups wish to remain in a unified country. The current neocolonialist government of Nigeria is unwilling to risk the dissolution of the arrangement by convoking a national conference of all ethnicities to chart a shared future.

A Path Forward: Economic Independence and Collaboration

The reimagined Nigeria federal system must have at its core the devolution of power to the states, allowing them to manage their resources, develop their economies, and craft laws that reflect the culture and identity of the local population. By giving each region more autonomy, the federal government could alleviate feelings of exploitation and marginalization. Like the US, Nigeria could implement a collegiate system to give more voice to autonomous administrative areas within a state and smaller states in national decision-making. This would ensure that regions with smaller populations are not overpowered by more populous regions, creating a more equitable federal system. Importantly, Nigeria should adopt a system of fiscal federalism, allowing states greater control over the resources found within their boundaries. This could prevent the monopolization of wealth by a small elite and promote regional development, reducing the tension that fuels calls for secession.

The fear that resource-rich regions might secede if granted autonomy is understandable but may be misplaced as history suggests that greater autonomy does not always lead to secession. The fact is granting regions control over their resources and governance often reduces the desire to secede. For example, regions like Catalonia and the Basque Country have significant autonomy in Spain, allowing them to maintain a strong regional identity while still being part of Spain (Guibernau, 2013). Nigeria's centralization of power and resources has often led to political instability and ethnic tension. A more decentralized system as in Spain could alleviate these tensions by giving each region a greater sense of ownership over its resources and

governance.

Nigeria is such a blessed nation that no part is not resource-rich. With an area of approximately 983,213 square kilometers, about 70-80% of this land is considered arable, but only around 30-40% is currently under cultivation. With a solid industrial development plan, as observed with China and Malaysia, Nigeria can make quality human capital investments to jumpstart its manufacturing economy and recreate the healthy competition among the regions in the first republic before the military incursion put the country on the back foot. Therefore, rather than suppressing demands for restructuring out of fear of secession, a more equitable approach would

allow regions to develop their own economies, control their resources, and engage with other regions based on mutual respect. The encouragement of economic independence among Nigerian states could reduce the disparities that drive resentment. Such a federal system would emphasize autonomy in resource management and economic development to foster mutual respect and interdependence rather than dependence. Allowing sub-nationals to control their resources and develop their economies will most likely foster collaborative relationships based on mutual benefit.

Federalism, as practiced in other countries, allows for both regional autonomy and national unity. Switzerland's canton system is an example of how regions can enjoy significant autonomy while still being part of a cohesive nation (Linder & Mueller, 2021). Similarly, Canada's provinces have considerable control over their natural resources, contributing to regional development without threatening national unity (Watts, 1999). In Nigeria's case, if each region or ethnic group were allowed to manage its resources, there would be a greater incentive for all regions or ethnic groups to develop their economies. This would lead to a system of collaboration based on economic interdependence rather than exploitation. For instance, resource-rich regions would benefit from selling their oil, while other regions might focus on agriculture, manufacturing, or tourism. By decentralizing economic power, regions would be more motivated to thrive independently, reducing the temptation for secession.

CONCLUSION

Cultural authenticity and governance in Nigeria are deeply complex, shaped by the country's ethnic diversity, historical context, and centralized governance structures. Despite the challenges posed by colonial legacies, globalization, and rigid national governance, efforts to preserve Nigeria's rich cultural heritage continue. Promoting indigenous languages, reviving traditional governance structures, and incorporating cultural diversity into the national identity can help build a more cohesive, inclusive society. Balancing modernization with respect for Nigeria's unique cultural history will be essential in fostering a sense of belonging among future generations.

Nigeria's governance structure has repeatedly failed to meet the needs of its diverse population. While challenging to implement, a tribal federalism or decentralized model offers a promising path forward by granting regions the autonomy to address local needs, promote economic growth, and reduce ethnic tensions. This system would require careful, gradual implementation with attention to institutional capacity, resource allocation, and conflict resolution mechanisms.

The current governance model, influenced by Western structures, has proven ineffective in addressing Nigeria's deep-seated issues of corruption, insecurity, and socioeconomic disparity. A system based on cultural authenticity, similar to European models, could give Nigeria's ethnic groups a sense of belonging and autonomy. Though such a model faces significant obstacles—such as ethnic diversity, control over resources, and potential political resistance—carefully planned constitutional reforms could help build a system that is more equitable, representative, and aligned with Nigeria's cultural realities.

The consociational model—as seen in Switzerland and Belgium—demonstrates a pragmatic approach for multi-ethnic societies, promoting power-sharing and inclusivity. However, its success depends on leaders prioritizing national unity over sectarian interests, alongside mechanisms that ensure fair power-sharing. Addressing Nigeria's governance challenges will require innovative solutions that acknowledge ethnic, regional, and cultural diversity while fostering collaboration and reducing exploitation.

One significant fear surrounding restructuring is that resource-rich regions may secede if granted autonomy over their resources. However, forcing these regions to remain in a system that fails to address their needs only reinforces this fear. Creating a federalized system, where each region has the autonomy to thrive economically and control its resources, could promote a sense of belonging. Regions like Catalonia and the Basque Country in Spain demonstrate that autonomous governance can foster unity by allowing regions to develop independently without threatening national cohesion (Guibernau, 2013). Similarly, a restructured Nigerian federalism could allow each region to develop on its own terms while maintaining national unity through mutually respectful collaboration.

Nigeria has abundant resources, yet the centralized governance model often fails to leverage this potential. Nigeria could stimulate inter-regional competition and foster development by emulating examples from countries like China and Malaysia, which have capitalized on regional economic plans and human capital investments. Encouraging economic independence among Nigerian states could reduce disparities, enhance regional growth, and foster interdependence based on shared benefits rather than enforced dependence. This decentralized approach would motivate regions to control their resources and economies, creating partnerships driven by mutual benefits.

Globally, federalism has allowed for both regional autonomy and national unity. Switzerland's canton system and Canada's provincial resource management illustrate how regions can maintain significant control over local resources, spurring development without threatening national unity (Linder & Mueller, 2021; Watts, 1999). A decentralized Nigerian model, granting regions control over resources and fostering independent economies, would likely reduce temptations for secession, increase economic stability, and encourage each region to find its unique path to prosperity.

In sum, to address its governance crisis, Nigeria must decentralize power, empower regions to manage their resources, and implement constitutional reforms that reflect the country's diversity and aspirations. Moving from a centralized, pseudo-democratic system to one rooted in cultural authenticity could strengthen national unity, empower local governance, and provide a more sustainable framework for Nigeria's future.

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