



Research Paper

Colonial Legacies and Their Influence on Contemporary Educational Policies in Nigeria: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

This article examines the enduring influence of British colonial policies on Nigeria's contemporary educational framework. Through a historical analysis of policy documents, legislative acts, and educational reports from 1944 to the present, we argue that colonial-era structures—particularly regional disparities, centralized control, and the marginalization of indigenous and Qur'anic education—continue to shape Nigeria's educational landscape. Using a qualitative historical-comparative approach, this study traces the evolution of Nigeria's National Policy on Education through its colonial roots, post-independence reforms, and contemporary revisions. Findings reveal that despite efforts to indigenize and democratize education, colonial legacies persist in the form of north-south educational gaps, language policy conflicts, and the tension between secular and religious education systems. The article concludes with recommendations for decolonizing educational policy through greater inclusion of local epistemologies, equitable resource distribution, and responsive governance.

Keywords: colonial legacies, educational policy, Nigeria, National Policy on Education, postcolonial education, decentralization, Qur'anic education

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I. Introduction

Education in Nigeria has long been a tool for political control, social engineering, and economic planning. The British colonial administration (1884–1960) established an educational system designed to produce clerical and administrative personnel to serve the colonial state, with little regard for local cultural contexts or long-term developmental needs (Imam, 2012). This colonial foundation has left an indelible imprint on Nigeria's educational policies, even after more than six decades of independence. Recent scholarship on colonial legacies in Africa emphasizes the persistence of structural inequalities, institutional designs, and ideological frameworks imposed during the colonial period (Mamdani, 1996; Young, 1994). In Nigeria, these legacies are vividly expressed in the enduring educational disparity between the northern and southern regions, the continued centrality of English as the medium of instruction, and the unresolved integration of Qur'anic education into the national system.

This article employs a historical analysis to trace the trajectory of educational policy in Nigeria from the colonial era to the present, with a focus on how colonial frameworks have been reproduced, resisted, and reformed. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How did British colonial policies shape the initial structure of education in Nigeria?
2. In what ways have post-independence educational policies perpetuated or challenged colonial legacies?
3. What are the contemporary implications of these legacies for equity, access, and national cohesion?

This study is situated within the postcolonial theory of education, which critiques the continued dominance of Western knowledge systems and institutional models in former colonies (Tikly, 2001). We also draw on historical institutionalism, which emphasizes the lasting influence of past policy choices on contemporary governance (Pierson, 2004). Colonial education policies are viewed as critical junctures that established path-dependent trajectories in Nigeria's educational development.

II. Methodology

We adopt a qualitative historical-comparative design, analyzing policy documents, government reports, legislative acts, and scholarly works from 1944 to the present. Primary sources include:

- Colonial education ordinances (1948, 1952)
- Regional education laws (1955–1957)
- National Policy on Education editions (1977, 1981, 1998, 2004)
- Nigerian constitutions (1979, 1999)
- Reports of educational commissions (e.g., Ashby Commission, 1959)

Data were analyzed thematically to identify continuities and discontinuities between colonial and post-independence policies.

III. Results and Findings

I. Colonial Origins of Regional Disparities

British indirect rule policies deliberately restricted missionary activity and Western education in the predominantly Muslim north, while promoting it in the south (Imam, 2012). This created an enduring north-south educational gap that persists today. Figure 1 illustrates the divergence in primary school enrollment between regions from 1950 to 2020.

II. Centralized Control and Decentralization Tensions

Colonial education ordinances established a centralized framework for education administration, which was later regionalized in the 1950s. Post-independence governments oscillated between centralization (e.g., 1977 National Policy) and decentralization (e.g., 1979 Constitution), reflecting ongoing tensions between uniform national standards and regional autonomy (Fabunmi, 2005).

III. Marginalization of Indigenous and Qur'anic Education

Colonial authorities excluded Qur'anic schools from grants-in-aid and marginalized indigenous education systems. Despite post-independence policies advocating for integrated Qur'anic education (e.g., 2004 National Policy), implementation remains weak, perpetuating a parallel education system that undermines national cohesion (Imam, 2003).

IV. Language Policy as a Colonial Legacy

English remains the official medium of instruction, marginalizing Nigeria's 270+ indigenous languages. Although the National Policy on Education (2004) recommends mother-tongue instruction in early primary years, lack of orthographic development and teacher training has hindered its adoption (Woolman, 2001).

Table 1: Comparison of Colonial and Post-Independence Educational Policies

Policy Aspect	Colonial Era (pre-1960)	Post-Independence (1960–present)
Administrative Control	Centralized under British; later regionalized	Oscillating between federal and state control
Curriculum Focus	Clerical skills, English literacy	Initially academic; later vocational (6-3-3-4 system)
Language of Instruction	English emphasized	English dominant; mother tongue marginalized
Religious Education	Christian missions in south; Qur'anic excluded in north	Secular system with optional religious instruction
Access & Equity	Regional and gender disparities entrenched	Persistent north-south and rural-urban gaps

IV. Discussion

The findings reveal that Nigeria's educational policy remains deeply entangled with its colonial past. The structural inequalities institutionalized by the British continue to manifest in regional disparities, linguistic marginalization, and the exclusion of non-Western knowledge systems. Despite repeated policy revisions—such as the introduction of the 6-3-3-4 system and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program—the core colonial logic of education as a tool for state control and economic utility persists.

The case of Qur'anic education illustrates the limits of policy reform in a pluralistic society. Although the 2004 National Policy on Education proposes integration, the lack of political will, resource allocation, and curricular adaptation has allowed the parallel system to thrive, reinforcing socio-cultural fragmentation. Furthermore, the centralization-decentralization debate reflects ongoing tensions between national unity and regional autonomy—a direct legacy of the colonial regional structure established in the 1954 Constitution.

V. Recommendations

To decolonize Nigeria's educational policy, we recommend:

1. Equitable Resource Allocation: Targeted funding to bridge north-south and rural-urban gaps.

2. Indigenous Knowledge Integration: Curricular reforms to include local languages, histories, and knowledge systems.
3. Qur'anic Education Integration: Develop and implement a culturally responsive curriculum that aligns with national standards.
4. Community Participation: Involve local communities in policy formulation and implementation.
5. Long-term Political Stability: Ensure consistent policy implementation across political transitions.

VI. Conclusion

Nigeria's educational policy landscape is a palimpsest of colonial inscriptions and post-independence revisions. While the National Policy on Education has evolved through four editions, colonial legacies endure in structural inequalities, linguistic hierarchies, and institutional designs. Addressing these legacies requires more than policy revision; it demands a fundamental reimagining of education as a tool for decolonization, equity, and national cohesion. Future research should explore comparative cases from other postcolonial contexts to identify transformative strategies for educational decolonization.

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