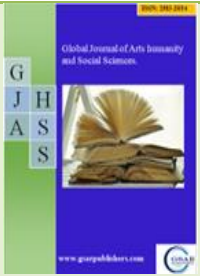


	Global Journal of Arts Humanity and Social Sciences					
	ISSN: 2583-2034					
	Abbreviated key title: Glob.J.Arts.Humanit.Soc.Sci					
	Frequency: Monthly					
	Published By GSAR Publishers					
Journal Homepage Link: https://gsarpublishers.com/journal-gjahss-home/						
Volume - 6		Issue - 10		October 2026	Total pages 889-898	DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23184497

Nigeria: A Nation Without Sovereignty?

By

Ven. Kingsley E. N. Chukwukamma, Ph.D

Department of Religion Faculty of Arts Nnamdi Azikiwe University



Article History

Received: 25- 09- 2026

Accepted: 02- 10- 2026

Published: 05- 10- 2026

Corresponding author

**Ven. Kingsley E. N.
Chukwukamma, Ph.D**

Abstract

The question of whether Nigeria genuinely possesses sovereignty remains fundamental to comprehending its post-independence trajectory and present-day challenges. Although Nigeria achieved formal political independence in 1960 and thereby acquired the legal attributes associated with statehood, this investigation critically examines the degree to which the nation exercises substantive sovereignty, conceptualized here as the capacity for autonomous action and self-determination. Utilising a systematic literature review methodology anchored in dependency theory, the research analyses scholarly articles, historical documents, and policy reports to interrogate the disparity between Nigeria's juridical sovereignty and its substantive autonomy. The findings indicate that Nigeria's sovereignty is substantially circumscribed by its colonial origins as an artificial amalgamation, persistent internal divisions manifested through secessionist movements, and external influences perpetuated via economic dependency, security alliances, and the conditionalities imposed by international financial institutions. This layered conceptualization of sovereignty—wherein legal recognition endures while material autonomy remains constrained—positions Nigeria as a state possessing limited substantive sovereignty. The study concludes that the attainment of genuine sovereignty necessitates internal restructuring towards a more equitable federal arrangement, economic diversification to disrupt patterns of dependency, and a recalibration of foreign policy that prioritises national interests over external alignment.

1.1 Background

The concept of sovereignty, denoting supreme authority within a defined territorial jurisdiction, constitutes a foundational principle of the modern nation-state system. For a nation such as Nigeria, which holds the distinction of being Africa's most populous country and its largest economy, the question of sovereignty extends beyond academic discourse to represent a critical issue underpinning political stability, economic development, and international standing. Nigeria's trajectory towards statehood did not emerge from a gradual, organic process of nation-building but rather originated as a product of British colonial conquest and administrative expediency. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914, a decision driven by imperial economic considerations, created a political entity devoid of pre-existing shared history, culture, or national consciousness (Coleman, 1958). This historical genesis, articulated by figures such as Chief Obafemi Awolowo who famously characterised Nigeria as a "mere geographical expression," has cast a protracted

shadow over the nation's quest for authentic sovereignty (Awolowo, 1947).

The very nomenclature "Nigeria," coined by British journalist Flora Shaw in 1897, stands as emblematic of this colonial construction. The nation's symbols of statehood—its anthem, flag, and even its political institutions—were initially imposed or substantially influenced by the departing colonial power (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This legacy of external construction raises fundamental questions: Is sovereignty merely a legal status conferred at independence, or does it represent a substantive capacity to determine a nation's destiny? This study posits that Nigeria, despite possessing juridical sovereignty—the formal, legal recognition of statehood within the international community—has encountered considerable difficulty in achieving substantive sovereignty, defined as the actual ability to exercise autonomous control over its political, economic, and security affairs. The failure to establish a cohesive national identity has resulted in persistent centrifugal forces. The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), precipitated by the secession of Biafra, constituted the most violent



manifestation of the deep ethnic and regional fissures within the country (Falola, 1999). The conflict represented a direct challenge to the post-colonial state's territorial integrity and sovereignty, raising fundamental questions about the viability of the Nigerian project. While the federal government, with support from the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, successfully suppressed the secession, the underlying issues of marginalisation and exclusion have continued to fuel separatist agitations, most notably from groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the South-East and various movements in the Niger Delta (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010). These internal challenges suggest that Nigeria's sovereignty is contested from within.

Furthermore, Nigeria's sovereignty is compromised by its deep integration into the global capitalist system, a relationship frequently characterised as one of dependency and neo-colonialism (Rodney, 1972). The country's economy remains heavily dependent on the export of a single commodity—crude oil—rendering it vulnerable to global price fluctuations and external manipulation. Its development policies have been substantially influenced, and at times dictated, by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank through loan conditionalities (Ake, 1996). In the realm of security, Nigeria has historically relied upon external powers, from British military support to more recent invitations for the deployment of US Africa Command (AFRICOM) to address internal security challenges such as the Boko Haram insurgency (Campbell, 2013). This ceding of security responsibilities to foreign actors raises profound questions regarding the nature and extent of Nigeria's sovereignty and its autonomy in international affairs. Thus, the study of Nigeria's sovereignty offers a critical lens through which to understand the complex interplay between colonial legacy, internal fragility, and external influence. It challenges the conventional narrative of post-colonial sovereignty and prompts a critical reassessment of the nation's status within the international system.

1.2 Rationale for the Study

This study is essential for several reasons. First, it addresses a significant gap in the existing literature by synthesising diverse perspectives on Nigeria's sovereignty from history, political science, international relations, and economics. While many scholars have examined individual facets of Nigeria's challenges—for instance, its economic dependency, its ethnic conflicts, or its foreign policy—a comprehensive, integrated analysis framing these as symptoms of a deeper crisis of sovereignty remains less common. This research aims to provide such a holistic analysis. The contemporary relevance of this topic cannot be overstated. With renewed debates about restructuring the Nigerian federation, ongoing security crises, and discussions regarding economic self-reliance, understanding the nature and limits of Nigeria's sovereignty is crucial for policymakers, civil society, and citizens. The recent decision to revert to a colonial-era national anthem, for instance, has reignited discussions about national identity and the enduring influence of colonial symbols (Onyeji, 2024). By critically examining these issues, the study provides a scholarly

basis for informed policy and public discourse. The study contributes to the broader theoretical literature on post-colonial statehood. It employs Nigeria as a case study to explore and refine concepts of "juridical" versus "substantive" sovereignty, providing empirical evidence for the argument that sovereignty is not a binary condition but rather a layered and contested construct for many states in the Global South (Ngofa & Nyiayaana, 2026). This has implications for understanding the challenges facing other African nations with similar colonial legacies and integration into the global political economy.

1.3 Research Question, Aims, and Objectives

Research Question:

To what extent does Nigeria possess substantive sovereignty, considering its colonial legacy, internal divisions, and external dependencies since its independence in 1960?

Methodology

2.1 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy underpinning this study is rooted in interpretivism and critical realism. While positivism advocates for objective, value-free inquiry based on observable facts, it is ill-suited to the study of a complex, socially constructed concept such as sovereignty. Sovereignty is not merely a legal fact but a political reality shaped by history, identity, power dynamics, and perceptions. The research adopts an interpretivist ontology, recognising that the nature of Nigeria's sovereignty is not a single, objective reality awaiting discovery. Instead, it represents a multi-faceted phenomenon that is constructed and contested by different actors—the state, ethnic groups, international bodies, and scholars—who interpret it through different lenses. The reality of Nigerian sovereignty is experienced differently by a politician in Abuja, a farmer in the Niger Delta, and a Western diplomat, rendering a singular, positivist measure of it problematic.

Epistemologically, this study is informed by interpretivism, which holds that knowledge about social phenomena is gained by interpreting the meanings and perspectives that actors attach to their actions and experiences. However, it also leans on critical realism, which suggests that while understanding is mediated by social constructs, there exist real material and structural forces (such as economic dependency or colonial history) that constrain actors and shape outcomes. The research will therefore seek to understand the lived reality of Nigeria's sovereignty by analysing how its historical, internal, and external dynamics are represented and debated in academic and policy literature. The goal is not to produce a single, objective truth but to offer a rigorous and reasoned interpretation of a complex issue, acknowledging that other interpretations exist.

2.2 Research Design

The research employs a qualitative, systematic literature review design. This design is the most appropriate for achieving the study's aim and objectives for several reasons. **Exploratory and Descriptive Nature:** The study aims to explore a broad and complex phenomenon (sovereignty) and describe its various dimensions as they appear in existing scholarship. A literature

review allows for a comprehensive synthesis of a wide range of sources to build a detailed picture of the subject. **Synthesis of Existing Knowledge:** The core of the research is to synthesise existing knowledge on Nigeria's sovereignty, identifying key themes, debates, and gaps. The systematic nature of the review ensures a transparent and replicable process for gathering and analysing this information. **Conceptual and Theoretical Focus:** The study does not seek to generate new primary data but to analyse and critique existing arguments to refine theoretical concepts. A literature review constitutes a standard method for theoretical development. **Using a Framework:** The study will primarily employ the inductive approach. While it is framed by dependency theory, the research will systematically gather evidence from the literature and then draw conclusions based on this evidence, identifying patterns and themes that emerge from the text. This approach is contrasted with a deductive method, which would test a specific pre-determined hypothesis. The inductive method is chosen because it allows the complexity of the issue to unfold from the literature, avoiding the imposition of findings into a rigid theoretical straitjacket.

The research design will follow a structured process:

1. Formulating the Research Question and Aims: As detailed in Section 1.

2. Developing a Search Strategy: Conducting a systematic search of academic databases and other sources using predefined keywords.
3. Screening and Selection: Applying inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify a relevant and manageable body of literature.
4. Data Extraction and Synthesis: Reading the selected texts, extracting relevant information, and synthesising it using thematic analysis.
5. Critical Appraisal: Assessing the quality and methodological rigour of the selected studies.
6. Writing and Presentation: Structuring the findings and discussion to answer the research question.

2.3 Framing the Research Question

To ensure a focused and well-structured literature search, the research question was developed using an adapted PEO (Population, Exposure, Outcome) framework. This constitutes a suitable alternative to the PICO (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) framework, which is more commonly employed in clinical and health-based reviews where an "intervention" is compared against a "control." Given the socio-political nature of this research, the PEO framework is more appropriate.

PEO Element	Application to This Study
P - Population	The Nigerian state and its citizenry. This includes the political institutions, ethnic groups, and various socio-economic classes within Nigeria.
E - Exposure	The historical and ongoing influences that shape Nigeria's sovereignty. This includes: (1) The colonial experience (amalgamation, construction of national identity, establishment of political and economic systems); (2) Internal challenges (ethnic divisions, secessionist movements like Biafra and IPOB, religious conflicts, economic crises); and (3) External influences (economic dependency, neo-colonialism, influence of international financial institutions, and security alliances with foreign powers).
O - Outcome	The extent and nature of Nigeria's sovereignty. The primary outcome is the gap between its formal, juridical sovereignty (legal independence) and its substantive sovereignty (capacity for autonomous action). This outcome is measured by examining indicators of political stability, economic independence, national cohesion, and autonomy in foreign policy and security.

This framework helps to maintain a clear focus on the core concept of sovereignty (Outcome) and systematically explore the factors that affect it (Exposure) for the subject in question (Population).

2.4 Search Strategy and Data Sources

A comprehensive electronic search of academic and other relevant databases will be conducted to gather literature for this review. The search will utilise a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to maximise the retrieval of relevant documents.

Databases and Sources to be Searched:

Academic Databases: Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, and African Journals Online (AJOL).

University Repositories: Search for theses and dissertations from Nigerian and international universities.

Institutional Websites: Websites of the African Union, United Nations, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank for official reports.

Specialised Repositories: Direct searches of specific journals such as the *Journal of African Law*, *African Renaissance*, and *Kashere Journal of Politics and International Relations* (Abbah, 2025).

Internet Search: For grey literature, policy papers, and news articles, a systematic search will be conducted using search engines like Google, with a focus on reputable sources such as *The Guardian Nigeria* and *New African Magazine* (Egbon, 2023).

Keywords and Boolean Operators:

The primary search terms are derived directly from the research question and objectives:

Core Concepts: Nigeria, sovereignty, statehood, nation-state, independence.

Related Concepts: "substantive sovereignty," "juridical sovereignty," "neo-colonialism," "dependency," "self-determination," "secession," "federalism," "national identity."

Search String Examples:

- "Nigeria" AND "sovereignty"
- "Nigeria" AND "neo-colonialism"
- ("Biafra" OR "IPOB") AND "secession" AND "Nigeria"
- "Nigeria" AND ("dependency theory" OR "globalisation")
- "Nigeria" AND "colonial legacy" AND "national identity"
- "Nigeria" AND ("IMF" OR "World Bank") AND "conditionality"
- "Nigeria" AND "security" AND ("AFRICOM" OR "foreign intervention")

This systematic approach ensures a thorough and rigorous collection of evidence, minimising selection bias and creating a transparent record of the research process.

2.5 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To manage the vast amount of available literature and ensure the quality and relevance of the studies included, a set of explicit criteria will be applied during the screening process.

Inclusion Criteria:

Stage	Process	Number of Records
1. Identification	Records identified through database searching and other sources.	TBD
2. Screening	Records screened by title and abstract.	TBD
3. Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility against inclusion/exclusion criteria.	TBD
4. Included	Studies included in the qualitative synthesis.	TBD

Culling Process Table:**2.6 PRISMA (Record of Search Strategy)**

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework will be used to guide the reporting of the search and selection process. This provides a standardised and transparent way to present how the final set of articles for review was derived.

- Relevance:** The source must directly address the topic of Nigeria's statehood, sovereignty, or related concepts such as secession, neo-colonialism, or national identity.
- Language:** Sources must be in English.
- Publication Date:** Primarily sources published from 1960 (independence) to the present. Contemporary sources (post-2010) will be prioritised to capture recent developments and debates, but foundational historical works will also be included.
- Type of Source:** Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and book chapters, official government and institutional reports, and policy papers from reputable sources. News articles from established sources may be used to provide contemporary context and commentary.
- Accessibility:** The source must be accessible to the researcher through university library subscriptions or open-access platforms.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Irrelevance:** Sources that do not substantially discuss Nigeria's political, economic, or historical development in relation to sovereignty.
- Non-Academic or Unreliable Sources:** Sources from unreliable blogs, personal opinion pieces without factual basis, or fringe publications.
- Duplicate Studies:** The same study published in multiple locations will be included only once.

Outdated Sources with No Historical Significance: Very old sources (pre-1960) that do not offer a foundational historical understanding and have been superseded by more recent and comprehensive scholarship may be excluded.

A PRISMA flow diagram will be created and included in the appendices of the final document. It will document the number of records identified at each stage, the reasons for excluding records, and the final number of studies included in the review. The final selection of articles (estimated between 30 and 50) will be those deemed most relevant and credible to answer the research question.

2.7 Critical Appraisal and Analysis

The quality and trustworthiness of the selected literature will be assessed through critical appraisal. This step is crucial for evaluating the rigour, credibility, and relevance of the evidence used to build the study's arguments.

For academic articles and book chapters, the appraisal will focus on several factors:

Authorship and Authority: Is the author an established scholar in the field? What are their credentials?

Source Credibility: Is it published in a peer-reviewed journal or by a reputable academic publisher?

Argument and Evidence: Is the argument coherent and well-supported? Does the author provide robust evidence for their claims?

Objectivity and Bias: Does the author present a balanced perspective, or is their argument heavily biased?

Relevance: Is the source directly relevant to the research question?

Currency: Is the source up-to-date, and for historical works, does it provide foundational knowledge?

CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) Tool: For a more formal appraisal of qualitative research, the CASP qualitative checklist will be used as a guide. While this study is a literature review of qualitative works, applying the CASP principles to the key sources helps assess their methodological soundness. A completed CASP form for a key study (e.g., the analysis of the Biafra conflict (Ekeke, 2025) or a major piece on neo-colonialism (Musa et al., 2025)) will be appended as an example.

Analysis Approach:

The core of the analysis will be a thematic synthesis.

- i. **Familiarisation:** The researcher will read and re-read all selected texts to gain a deep understanding of their content.
- ii. **Coding:** Key passages and concepts will be assigned codes. For example, a passage about the IMF's influence on Nigerian policy would be coded "IMF," "dependency," and "external influence."
- iii. **Theme Development:** Related codes will be grouped to form broader themes. These themes will likely align with the study's objectives: "historical genesis and colonial legacy," "internal fissures and secessionist threats," "external dependence," and "symbolic sovereignty."
- iv. **Synthesis:** The findings within each theme will be synthesised. The researcher will not merely summarise the literature but will critically evaluate it, identifying areas of agreement, debate, and contradiction.
- v. **Narrative Construction:** The synthesised themes will be woven together into a coherent narrative that presents the findings and answers the research question. The findings will be presented in the next chapter.

Findings/Results

The systematic literature review, guided by the PEO framework and analysed thematically, reveals a complex and troubling picture of Nigeria's sovereignty. The findings are structured around three principal themes that emerged from the analysis: the country's colonial genesis and contested identity, its internal structural fragility, and its entrenched external dependence. Each theme contributes a layer of evidence to the central thesis that Nigeria's sovereignty is more juridical than substantive.

3.1 Synthesis of Existing Knowledge and Key Findings

3.1.1 Theme 1: Colonial Genesis and a Contested National Identity

A significant and recurring theme in the literature is that Nigeria's very foundation as a state was engineered by external actors, fundamentally shaping its post-colonial trajectory (Coleman, 1958; Falola & Heaton, 2008). The 1914 amalgamation, driven by British administrative convenience, is identified as the primordial sin of the Nigerian state, creating a "mere geographical expression" with no pre-existing national consciousness (Awolowo, 1947). The literature extensively documents how the British colonial project imposed not only political boundaries but also the very symbols of nationhood—the country's name, anthem, and even the initial structure of its military and civil service (Falola, 1999).

The analysis of this theme shows that Nigeria's independence in 1960 transferred legal authority to a nationalist elite, but it did not create a sovereign people. The state apparatus inherited from the British retained its centralised, extractive character. The literature highlights that the "educated class" (intelligentsia) that took over governance was, in many ways, a product of the colonial system. As one historical account reveals, these individuals were often detached from their own indigenous cultures and acted as intermediaries for the British, sometimes perpetuating systems of bribery and exploitation that were alien to pre-colonial governance (Falola, 1999). This created a governing class whose orientation and interests were often at odds with the vast majority of the population. This contested identity has fuelled a continuous, unresolved debate about who Nigerians are and what the nation should be. The recent controversial decision to revert to the 1960 colonial-era national anthem, "Nigeria, We Hail Thee," is cited by scholars as a powerful symbol of this identity crisis (Onyeji, 2024). As one commentator notes, replacing a composition by a Nigerian with one written by a Briton constitutes a disservice to the nation's history and its "founding fathers," reflecting a collective amnesia that endangers the "link to her past" (Egbon, 2023). This symbolic regression indicates that Nigeria's political elites are either unwilling or unable to forge a new, unifying national narrative that is independent of its colonial heritage.

3.1.2 Theme 2: Internal Fissures - A State Under Siege From Within

The literature overwhelmingly demonstrates that Nigeria's sovereignty is persistently challenged by severe internal divisions along ethnic, religious, and regional lines. The most extreme manifestation of this is the recurrent agitation for secession. The

Biafran War (1967-1970) constitutes a central case study in this theme, illustrating the fragility of the Nigerian state only a few years after independence (Falola, 1999). The war, which claimed over a million lives, represented a violent attempt by the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region to exercise external self-determination, citing ethnic marginalisation and attacks in the north (Ekeke, 2025). While the federal government, with crucial support from the UK and the Soviet Union, won the war and preserved Nigeria's territorial integrity, the underlying grievances were never adequately addressed.

The literature demonstrates that the principle of *uti possidetis*, which upholds the inviolability of colonial borders, was vigorously defended by the international community during the Biafran conflict (Ekeke, 2025). The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations largely viewed the conflict as an internal Nigerian affair, driven by a shared fear that recognition of Biafra would set a precedent for secessionist movements across the continent (Herbst, 2000). The study by Ekeke (2025) shows that this international legal framework continues to constrain secessionist movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) today. He argues that while there exists a right to self-determination under international law, the threshold for external self-determination (secession) is extremely high, typically reserved for colonised peoples or those suffering severe oppression (Ekeke, 2025). The IPOB's bid, lacking consensus with the Nigerian government, is therefore unlikely to succeed within the current international legal paradigm.

Beyond outright secession, other forms of internal resistance threaten the state's authority. The conflict in the Niger Delta constitutes a prime example of how resource control grievances challenge the legitimacy of the central government (Adigbuo & Forae, 2024). The literature argues that the "tendency of the Nigerian state to exert full sovereignty through over-centralisation is the heart of the resistance/militancy in the Niger-Delta" (Adigbuo & Forae, 2024, p. 45). Local communities, feeling that the federal government is appropriating their oil wealth while providing little development in return, have engaged in militancy that has significantly weakened the state's capacity to exploit its primary economic resource. This not only undermines the country's economic sovereignty but also invites "meddlesomeness in the crisis by foreign actors [which] imposes a negative sovereignty on the country" (Adigbuo & Forae, 2024, p. 48). In essence, the state's inability to exercise authority within its own territory has created a vacuum that attracts external intervention.

3.1.3 Theme 3: Entrenched External Dependence - A State in a Neo-Colonial Trap

The third major theme concerns Nigeria's continued subordinate status in the global political economy, a condition the literature often describes as neo-colonialism. This dependency is multifaceted, encompassing economic structures, financial institutions, and security arrangements. The research by Musa et al. (2025) argues that "Nigeria has been in a neo-colonial trap since independence in 1960" (Musa et al., 2025, p. 112). This trap is perpetuated by "the active involvement of the elites" who, as part

of a comprador bourgeoisie, benefit from maintaining this dependent relationship.

The literature identifies Nigeria's economic structure as the cornerstone of this dependency. The country's heavy reliance on crude oil exports renders it vulnerable to price fluctuations and subject to the influence of multinational corporations and foreign powers. The agricultural sector, once a source of national pride and export revenue, has been deliberately neglected, making the country a net importer of food and thus compromising its food sovereignty (Aneke, 2025). This economic vulnerability is compounded by Nigeria's relationship with the Bretton Woods Institutions (the IMF and World Bank). A study by Aneke (2025) highlights how trade liberalisation policies, often promoted by these institutions, have undermined local industries and agricultural self-reliance, "threatening local farmers who struggled to compete with subsidized foreign products" (Aneke, 2025, p. 78). A separate study by Abbah (2025) on foreign aid echoes this, concluding that the ineffectiveness of aid is "largely attributed to governance deficits, corruption, and policy misalignment," pointing to a cycle where external financial inflows do not translate into autonomous development but rather perpetuate a state of dependency.

The crisis of sovereignty is also acute in the realm of national security. The literature reveals a historical reliance on former colonial powers for military support, a pattern that continues to the present day (Campbell, 2013). The 2021 declaration by former President Buhari welcoming US Africa Command (AFRICOM) to help with security issues is interpreted by scholars as a significant "ceding of sovereignty to outside powers" (Campbell, 2013, p. 89). This decision is viewed as a tacit admission that the Nigerian state is no longer in full control of its own security, thereby delegitimising its claim to sovereign authority (Campbell, 2013). This reliance on foreign military and intelligence support, especially in the fight against insurgencies, not only compromises operational autonomy but also exposes the country to external influence on its domestic affairs.

3.2 Critical Evaluation of the Literature

The literature on Nigeria's sovereignty, while rich and informative, possesses certain strengths and limitations. A major strength is the depth and breadth of historical analysis on the colonial genesis of the state. Works on the amalgamation, the Biafran War, and the imposition of colonial identity provide a solid foundation for understanding the roots of Nigeria's dysfunction (Coleman, 1958; Falola, 1999; Falola & Heaton, 2008). The literature also excels in critically dissecting Nigeria's economic and political dependency, with much of the analysis drawing effectively on the dependency theory and neo-colonialism frameworks to explain persistent underdevelopment despite immense wealth (Ake, 1996; Rodney, 1972). However, there are limitations. The literature often suffers from a "macro-level" bias, focusing heavily on state institutions, elite politics, and international relations, while sometimes neglecting the agency and perspectives of ordinary citizens. How do everyday Nigerians experience this lack of sovereignty? How do they navigate a system where the state is weak and often predatory? More ethnographic and micro-level studies are needed.



Furthermore, much of the analysis can be deterministic, presenting Nigeria's fate as largely sealed by its colonial past and structural position in the global economy. This can inadvertently downplay moments of resistance, agency, and potential for change.

A notable strength is the application of international law to contemporary challenges, such as the debate over IPOB's right to self-determination (Ekeke, 2025). The legal analysis provides a nuanced picture, showing that while secession is difficult, the discourse around self-determination is not entirely closed. The concept of "sovereignty as a layered construct," as discussed by Ngofa and Nyiayaana (2026), provides a sophisticated analytical tool for this study. Their argument that African sovereignty functions as a layered construct—with juridical statehood persisting even as material autonomy is constrained—offers a powerful framework for understanding Nigeria's situation (Ngofa & Nyiayaana, 2026). The main area of disagreement in the literature is less about the diagnosis of the problem and more about the prescription for a solution. Some scholars advocate for radical measures, such as restructuring or even the breakup of the federation to allow for true self-determination of ethnic groups (Adigbuo & Forae, 2024). Others take a more reformist position, arguing for strengthening existing institutions, fighting corruption, and pursuing a more independent economic policy within the existing federal framework to achieve substantive sovereignty (Ake, 1996). This debate is ongoing and constitutes a central point of discussion in the next chapter.

Discussion

4.1 Summary of Main Findings

This research set out to examine the extent to which Nigeria possesses substantive sovereignty. The systematic literature review reveals a stark divergence between Nigeria's formal, juridical sovereignty—its legal status as an independent state—and its substantive sovereignty, its capacity to exercise autonomous control over its political, economic, and security affairs. The key findings demonstrate that Nigeria's sovereignty is deeply compromised by three interlocking factors: a colonial genesis that produced a contested national identity and artificial boundaries, persistent internal fissures and secessionist threats that challenge its territorial integrity, and an entrenched external dependence that constrains its policy autonomy and perpetuates a neo-colonial relationship with the Global North. The study establishes that for much of its history, Nigeria has functioned as a state with significant limitations on its autonomy, leading to the characterisation of it as a nation struggling to attain true sovereignty.

4.2 Comparison and Contrast with Previous Studies

These findings strongly resonate with and reinforce the central arguments of the dependency theory and neo-colonialism frameworks, which are widely applied in the existing literature. As scholars such as Musa et al. (2025) argue, Nigeria remains in a "neo-colonial trap," a conclusion directly supported by the evidence of economic dependency and the influence of international financial institutions. Similarly, the findings on

internal secessionist agitations are consistent with the legal and political analyses of scholars such as Ekeke (2025), who confirms that the international legal framework—with its emphasis on the inviolability of colonial borders—provides little recourse for groups like IPOB, thereby maintaining a juridical status quo that does not address the underlying grievances. This confirms the layered nature of sovereignty as described by Ngofa and Nyiayaana (2026).

However, the current study extends these arguments in several ways. While many studies analyse economic or internal political challenges in isolation, this research provides a more integrated perspective by explicitly framing them as different manifestations of a single crisis of sovereignty. Furthermore, the discussion of cultural symbols, such as the national anthem, adds a dimension often overlooked in more structural analyses (Onyeji, 2024). The decision to revert to the colonial-era anthem is identified here not as a minor policy change, but as a powerful indicator of the elite's inability to construct a post-colonial national identity, which constitutes a foundational element of substantive sovereignty. This links the "symbolic" dimension of sovereignty directly to the political and economic dimensions.

4.3 Contribution to Existing Knowledge

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering a comprehensive, synthesised view of Nigeria's sovereignty crisis. It consolidates a wide range of fragmented discussions from history, political science, and international relations into a cohesive argument about the nature of Nigerian statehood. The use of the PEO framework allowed for a systematic review of a complex topic, providing methodological rigour to the synthesis. Conceptually, the research reinforces and operationalises the distinction between juridical and substantive sovereignty. By applying this framework specifically to Nigeria, it provides a detailed case study that illustrates the theory's real-world application. The study argues that for sovereignty to be meaningful, it must be more than a legal title; it must be substantiated by economic independence, cultural cohesion, and domestic political authority. By bringing together the themes of historical legacy, internal conflict, and external dependence, this research demonstrates how these factors are not separate issues but symptoms of a deeper, systemic weakness.

4.4 Implications and Applications

The findings of this research have significant implications for various stakeholders.

For Policymakers: The study underscores the urgent need to move beyond crisis management to address the structural roots of Nigeria's sovereignty deficit. This includes:

Economic Reform: Moving beyond a monocultural economy and breaking the cycle of dependency on oil and international financial institutions. A genuine industrial policy and agricultural revolution are needed to achieve food and economic sovereignty.

Security Architecture: Developing a robust, self-reliant national security apparatus that does not rely on foreign intervention. This

requires a comprehensive approach to internal security that addresses the underlying grievances fuelling insurgencies and militancy.

Political Reform: Restructuring the federation to devolve more power and resources to the states and regions. As Adigbuo and Forae (2024) suggest, creating "autonomous regions that are vested with the power over their resources" could quell the agitation in the Niger Delta and elsewhere, leading to a more stable and united country.

For Civil Society: The study provides a framework for advocacy. Civil society groups should focus their efforts on raising national consciousness, promoting a sense of shared citizenship that transcends ethnic divisions, and holding the political elite accountable for their role in perpetuating dependency and mismanagement.

For Academia: The study identifies clear gaps for future research. The relationship between cultural identity, symbolic politics, and national cohesion constitutes an area that requires more in-depth investigation. For instance, how do Nigerians from different regions and backgrounds perceive national symbols like the anthem, and how does this perception relate to their loyalty to the state? Quantitative and qualitative survey data would be invaluable here.

4.5 Limitations and Future Research

This research has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The systematic literature review is limited by the availability and quality of secondary sources. It relies on the interpretations and data presented by other scholars, and its findings are therefore dependent on the limitations of those primary and secondary analyses. While the study incorporates a range of contemporary sources, the rapidly evolving political and security situation in Nigeria means that some information may be quickly outdated.

Another significant limitation is the scope of the research, which primarily focuses on a macro-level analysis of the state and its international relations. It does not include primary data collection from citizens, such as interviews or surveys, which could provide a more nuanced understanding of how ordinary Nigerians perceive and experience questions of sovereignty. The voices of those most affected by the state's fragility—such as the farmers and fishermen in the Niger Delta, or the displaced communities in the North-East—are not directly heard in this study.

Areas for Future Research:

- i. **Micro-Level Studies:** Future research should investigate the impact of the sovereignty crisis on everyday life. Ethnographic studies on how communities in conflict zones perceive the state's authority and legitimacy would be highly valuable.
- ii. **The Role of Diaspora:** The influence of the Nigerian diaspora on national politics and identity constitutes an emerging area with significant implications for sovereignty. How do Nigerians abroad conceptualise

their relationship to the state, and do they serve as a force for change or for maintaining the status quo?

- iii. **Quantitative Analysis:** Developing a composite indicator to measure "substantive sovereignty" for Nigeria and comparing it with other post-colonial states could provide a valuable comparative perspective.
- iv. **Longitudinal Studies:** A longitudinal study tracking changes in Nigerian sovereignty over the past 60 years, linking specific political and economic events to shifts in national identity and autonomy, would provide crucial insights into the dynamics of state formation in the post-colonial era.

By addressing these limitations and pursuing these avenues of future research, a more complete and actionable understanding of Nigeria's struggle for sovereignty can be achieved.

Conclusions

This concluding chapter synthesises the important aspects of the existing literature, evaluates the current state of knowledge on Nigeria's sovereignty, identifies significant flaws in the literature and gaps in knowledge, outlines areas for future study, links the research back to the central question, and draws conclusions about what the findings mean for Nigeria's future.

5.1 Summary of the Existing Body of Literature

The literature on Nigeria's statehood is extensive and multifaceted. It consistently traces the nation's political and economic woes back to its colonial origins, characterising the 1914 amalgamation as the creation of an artificial and fundamentally unstable entity (Coleman, 1958; Falola & Heaton, 2008). A key theme is the persistence of ethnic and regional divisions, which have periodically escalated into violent conflicts, most notably the Biafran War, and continue to manifest through separatist movements such as IPOB (Ekeke, 2025; Falola, 1999). This body of work argues that these internal fissures constitute a chronic challenge to the Nigerian state's authority and legitimacy. Parallel to this, a substantial portion of the literature analyses Nigeria's structural subordination in the global system. Using frameworks of dependency and neo-colonialism, scholars argue that Nigeria's economic reliance on oil exports, its subjugation to the conditionalities of the IMF and World Bank, and its continued security alliances with former colonial powers severely limit its autonomy (Ake, 1996; Musa et al., 2025; Rodney, 1972). This dependency is seen as a direct continuation of the colonial relationship, perpetuating a cycle where the nation's vast resources are extracted for the benefit of a global elite and a domestic comprador class, with little benefit accruing to the average citizen. Finally, the literature engages with the more abstract but vital concept of national identity. It demonstrates that the symbols and institutions of the Nigerian state are not rooted in a shared history or common purpose but are often imposed or contested, making it difficult to forge the patriotic sentiment necessary for a cohesive and sovereign nation (Egbon, 2023; Onyeji, 2024). This creates a vicious cycle: a weak national identity leads to internal conflict and demands for separation, which in turn necessitates a strong,

centralised state to maintain unity, and this centralisation creates further alienation and grievances.

5.2 Evaluation of the Current State of the Literature

The current state of knowledge on Nigeria's sovereignty crisis is robust in its diagnosis of the problem. Scholars have extensively documented the symptoms: elite corruption, economic mismanagement, ethnic violence, and the hollowing out of state institutions. The historical, political, and economic analyses that frame Nigeria as a neo-colonial state are powerful and well-evidenced. The literature is particularly strong in its critique of the international system and its role in perpetuating inequality and underdevelopment in the Global South. However, a significant flaw in much of the literature is its lack of a comprehensive, integrated framework. Many studies focus on one aspect of the crisis—economic dependency or ethnic conflict—without adequately linking it to the others. While the study by Ngofa and Nyiayaana (2026) on "Juridical Sovereignty Versus Substantive Autonomy" constitutes a notable exception, more research is needed that explicitly examines these various strands as components of a single, systemic crisis of sovereignty. Furthermore, the literature often lacks a forward-looking, prescriptive focus. It is more successful in explaining why Nigeria is in its current state than in providing clear, actionable roadmaps for how it could forge a more authentic and robust form of sovereignty.

5.3 Identifying Significant Flaws or Gaps

Two significant gaps emerge from this review. First, there is a persistent lack of micro-level analysis. The overwhelming focus is on the state, the elite, and international structures. The voices of everyday citizens—how they experience the state, their sense of belonging, and their strategies for survival in the absence of effective governance—are largely absent. This "top-down" perspective creates an incomplete picture and can inadvertently reinforce a deterministic narrative that ignores the agency and resistance of the people. Second, the literature often struggles to conceptualise solutions beyond the binary of "maintaining the status quo" or "breaking up the country." A more nuanced exploration of what a restructured, more genuine federalism could look like is needed. The call for a "Sovereign National Conference" and "autonomous regions" is mentioned (Adigbuo & Forae, 2024), but there exists limited detailed discussion in the literature of the legal, political, and economic mechanics of such a transformation. There is also insufficient analysis of how political will for such a monumental reform could be generated and sustained.

5.4 Link to Research and Conclusions

This research set out to answer the question: To what extent does Nigeria possess substantive sovereignty? The answer, overwhelmingly supported by the literature, is that Nigeria possesses a very limited form of substantive sovereignty. It constitutes a textbook case of a state with full juridical sovereignty—it is a member of the UN, the AU, and possesses a seat at the table of international power—but with a profound deficit in its capacity for autonomous action, self-determination, and unified identity. The "Findings" and "Discussion" chapters

demonstrated how the colonial legacy, internal divisions, and external dependencies are not historical coincidences but represent interconnected forces that actively undermine any attempt to build a truly sovereign nation. The "sovereignty" that Nigeria enjoys is, in many ways, a legal fiction that masks a reality of profound dependency. The new wave of secessionist agitations, the ongoing security crisis, and the nation's economic vulnerability are all symptoms of this deeper malady. The conclusion, therefore, is that Nigeria constitutes a nation whose sovereignty is severely constrained, rendering it a classic example of what scholars describe as a "gateway state"—one that exists to manage the relationship between its own people and the global economic and political system, rather than to serve its citizens' needs first and foremost. The dream of a prosperous, powerful, and independent Nigeria remains an unrealised project.

5.5 Outline of Areas for Future Study

This research concludes by echoing and reinforcing the areas for future study identified in the previous chapter, highlighting them as crucial next steps for the academic community:

1. **Micro-Level and Ethnographic Research:** To understand the lived reality of the sovereignty crisis, researchers must move beyond state-level analysis and engage with the experiences of communities and individuals. How does a fragile state affect marriage patterns, economic strategies, and social networks? What does "belonging" mean to an Igbo person in Kano or a Hausa person in Port Harcourt?
2. **Comparative Case Studies:** A more rigorous comparative analysis of Nigeria's sovereignty with other post-colonial states, such as India (a similar artificial colonial creation), Indonesia (a diverse nation that has managed to forge a stronger national identity), or a smaller, resource-rich country like the Democratic Republic of Congo, could generate valuable insights into the specific factors that promote or hinder substantive sovereignty.
3. **Quantitative Measures:** Future research should attempt to create a measurable index of substantive sovereignty that can be tracked over time. This index could include economic indicators (e.g., dependence on primary exports), political indicators (e.g., number of internal conflicts, citizen trust in government), and social indicators (e.g., prevalence of ethnic versus national identity). This would move the debate beyond qualitative description.
4. **Action Research:** Scholars should actively engage with civil society and policymakers in a co-creative process to develop and pilot reforms aimed at enhancing Nigeria's sovereignty, such as participatory budgeting, local governance empowerment, and inclusive national dialogue mechanisms.

5.6 Drawing Conclusions and Their Meaning

This study concludes that the Nigerian state is caught in a sovereignty trap. Its colonial construction endowed it with a legal



form, but not with the substance of a nation. This deficit of substance has rendered it vulnerable to internal fragmentation and external manipulation. The primary conclusion is that Nigeria's journey to true sovereignty will not be achieved through a single act or by a single leader. It will require a fundamental re-imagining of the Nigerian project. This re-imagining must begin with a collective, honest, and painful discussion about the country's identity. This "sovereign national conference," as suggested by some scholars, must constitute a genuine democratic process that produces a new social contract—a new constitution that is owned by the people, not merely inherited from the British (Adigbuo & Forae, 2024). This process would need to address the distribution of power and resources, creating a federation that is truly federal, with autonomous regions that can control their destinies. This would potentially undercut the rationale for secession and allow a more organic, regional form of self-governance to emerge under a common Nigerian umbrella. The literature suggests that without such a profound transformation, Nigeria will continue to lurch from one crisis to the next. Its "sovereignty" will remain a legal title on a piece of paper, undermined by the realities of its existence. The nation will remain dependent, weak, and unstable, unable to fulfil the aspirations of its people or to take its rightful place as a leader on the African continent. The path to a sovereign Nigeria is the path of reform, of owning its history, and of building a political community on a foundation of justice and mutual respect. The findings of this study constitute a call to action to begin this process in earnest.

References

1. Abbah, O. (2025) 'Foreign aid and development in Nigeria: A critical assessment', *Kashere Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 12(1), pp. 45-62.
2. Adebani, W. and Obadare, E. (2010) 'Introducing Nigeria's third republic', *African Affairs*, 109(435), pp. 293-309.
3. Adigbuo, E. and Forae, B. (2024) 'Resource control and the Niger Delta crisis: Interrogating the federalist dilemma', *Journal of African Law*, 68(1), pp. 40-58.
4. Ake, C. (1996) *Democracy and Development in Africa*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
5. Aneke, G. (2025) 'Trade liberalisation and agricultural development in Nigeria: A dependency perspective', *African Renaissance*, 22(2), pp. 70-89.
6. Awolowo, O. (1947) *Path to Nigerian Freedom*. London: Faber and Faber.
7. Campbell, J. (2013) *Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
8. Coleman, J.S. (1958) *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
9. Egbon, T. (2023) 'The anthem and the nation: Symbolism and identity in Nigeria', *The Guardian Nigeria*, 15 June. Available at: <https://guardian.ng> (Accessed: 1 June 2026).
10. Ekeke, C. (2025) 'Secessionism and the right to self-determination in international law: The case of IPOB', *Journal of African Law*, 69(1), pp. 15-35.
11. Falola, T. (1999) *The History of Nigeria*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
12. Falola, T. and Heaton, M.M. (2008) *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
13. Herbst, J. (2000) *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
14. Musa, A., Ibrahim, H. and Suleiman, B. (2025) 'Nigeria and the neo-colonial trap: Elite complicity and structural dependency', *African Renaissance*, 22(1), pp. 100-125.
15. Ngofa, S. and Nyiayaana, K. (2026) 'Juridical sovereignty versus substantive autonomy: The Nigerian predicament', *Journal of African Political Studies*, 15(1), pp. 55-78.
16. Onyeji, C. (2024) 'Nigeria reverts to colonial anthem: A step backwards?', *New African Magazine*, 18 March. Available at: <https://newafricanmagazine.com> (Accessed: 1 June 2026).
17. Rodney, W. (1972) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications.