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## **Federalism, National Integration and the Nationality Question in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the relationship between federalism, national integration, and the nationality question in Nigeria. The paper argues that Nigeria's persistent crisis of national cohesion is deeply rooted in unresolved identity-based grievances relating to constitutional arrangements, intergovernmental fiscal relations, and the marginalisation of minority ethnic groups. Adopting a qualitative research design based on a systematic review of secondary data, the study draws from scholarly literature, policy documents, and historical materials to interrogate the structural and sociopolitical foundations of Nigeria's federal crisis. Guided by Group Theory, the study contends that the Nigerian state has been shaped largely by unequal power relations and intense competition among ethnic and regional groups for political influence and access to national resources. Findings reveal that constitutional centralisation, inequitable fiscal arrangements, and exclusionary governance practices have weakened national identity, intensified ethnic suspicion, and fuelled separatist agitations across the federation. The study concludes that genuine federalism and sustainable national integration in Nigeria require inclusive constitutional reforms, equitable fiscal federalism, protection of minority rights, and the promotion of a stronger national culture rooted in justice, fairness, and shared citizenship.

### **Keywords:**

*Constitutional Restructuring, Federalism, Fiscal Federalism, Minority Marginalisation, National Integration, Nationality Question.*

### **1. Introduction**

The quest for national integration and the consolidation of federalism in Nigeria remains one of the most persistent and complex challenges confronting the Nigerian state since independence. Although Nigeria emerged through British colonial engineering that fused diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups into a single political entity, the country has struggled to transform that colonial amalgamation into a genuine sense of collective

nationhood. As Ayamba and Ekanem (2016) argue, the claim that Nigeria constitutes a true nation is largely implausible and inconsistent with the fundamental essence of national identity. This persistent debate over nationhood lies at the centre of Nigeria's nationality question, a multidimensional set of identity driven grievances associated with recognition, belonging, political representation, resource distribution, constitutional inclusion, and power sharing (Obire & Chiemeké, 2025). According to Mohammed (2017), the nationality question embodies the minimum conditions required to assure Nigeria's numerous ethnic nationalities of their secure and meaningful place within the federation. Over the years, this question has intensified and manifested in ethnic mistrust, indigene settler conflicts, agitation for resource control, youth militancy, religious extremism, separatist tendencies, and renewed demands for constitutional restructuring (Abiodun, 2023).

In principle, federalism provides an institutional framework for managing diversity, accommodating competing identities, and promoting stable intergovernmental relations within plural societies. Federal systems generally flourish where distinct groups willingly cooperate while simultaneously preserving their unique identities and cultural autonomy. However, Nigeria's federal experience has remained deeply contradictory and conflict ridden. Shaibume and Iornumbe (2024) observe that although federalism is globally celebrated as an effective mechanism for governing complex multiethnic societies, its practical operation within Nigeria has been undermined by structural distortions and persistent political tensions. The persistent dysfunction of Nigerian federalism is closely connected to unresolved nationality questions. Ethnic loyalties frequently supersede national consciousness, thereby weakening national integration and undermining the very foundations of the federal structure. Critical indicators of integration, including equitable fiscal relations, inclusive constitutional arrangements, and fair treatment of minority groups, have repeatedly been subordinated to narrow ethnic, regional, and parochial interests (Ita *et al.*, 2019). As Eme-Uche and Okonkwo (2020) note, Nigeria confronts the enormous challenge of cultivating solidarity, shared purpose, and collective identity among hundreds of ethnic nationalities exerting competing centripetal and centrifugal pressures on national unity. The resulting fractured political identity has fuelled separatist agitations and militant movements such as Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Oduduwa self-determination movements, Arewa nationalist tendencies, and Niger Delta militancy, all of which reflect profound dissatisfaction with the existing federal arrangement.

Existing scholarship has predominantly examined federalism and national integration from a legal institutional perspective, with primary emphasis on constitutional structures, power distribution, and the formal architecture of federal relations. However, as Yusuf and Monday (2025) contend, such perspectives often neglect the sociological foundations of federalism, particularly the lived experiences, identity negotiations, perceptions of inclusion and exclusion, and intergroup interactions that fundamentally determine the effectiveness and legitimacy of federal systems. This paper therefore adopts a sociological perspective in examining how nationality questions rooted in identity, equity, justice, and belonging obstruct national integration and ultimately undermine the realisation of genuine federalism in Nigeria.

Against this background, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. *How do nationality-related constitutional grievances affect the practice of federalism in Nigeria?*
2. *In what ways do intergovernmental fiscal relations influence the effectiveness of Nigerian federalism?*

3. *How does the marginalisation of minority ethnic groups affect the stability and operation of federalism in Nigeria?*

This study is justified by the enduring gap in existing scholarship regarding the extent to which identity-based grievances, beyond mere constitutional deficiencies, undermine the effective functioning of federalism in Nigeria. Although numerous studies acknowledge the existence of the nationality question, relatively few have comprehensively interrogated how its interconnected dimensions collectively weaken national cohesion and threaten the survival of the federation. Consequently, this study responds to an important scholarly need by reconceptualising federalism beyond narrow legalistic frameworks and placing issues of identity, belonging, justice, and sociopolitical interaction at the centre of Nigeria's federal crisis.

The study also contributes theoretically by reframing Nigerian federalism through a sociological paradigm that demonstrates how identity dynamics and intergroup relations significantly shape institutional performance and national stability. Methodologically, the study combines historical analysis, conceptual synthesis, and sociopolitical interpretation in order to illuminate the multidimensional character of the nationality question in Nigeria. From a policy perspective, the study offers practical insights into constitutional restructuring, inclusive governance, minority protection, and equitable fiscal federalism as viable pathways toward reconciling Nigeria's diversity with the broader objective of sustainable national unity and integration.

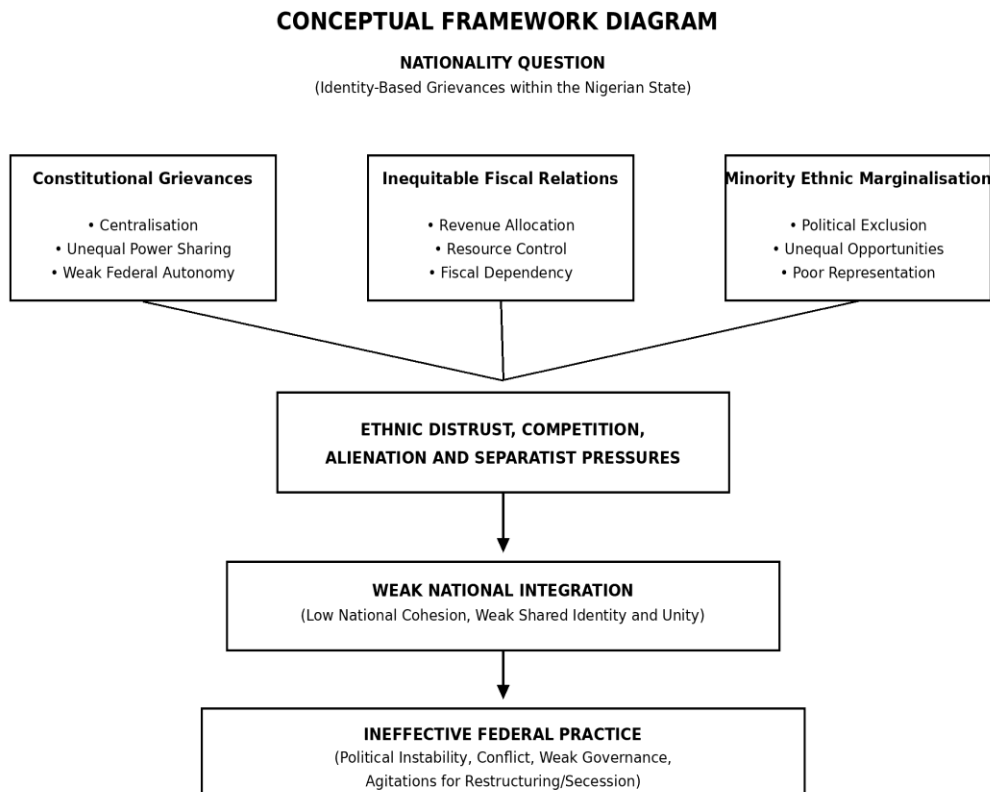
## **2. Conceptual framework**

This study is anchored on the assumption that the persistent crisis of national integration in Nigeria is fundamentally linked to unresolved nationality questions embedded within the structure and operation of Nigerian federalism. The framework explains that nationality-related grievances weaken citizens' sense of belonging, intensify ethnic consciousness, and undermine confidence in the federal arrangement. These grievances are manifested primarily through constitutional dissatisfaction, inequitable intergovernmental fiscal relations, and the marginalisation of minority ethnic groups.

The conceptual framework further posits that constitutional imbalance promotes perceptions of exclusion and unequal representation among ethnic nationalities. Excessive centralisation of powers at the federal level weakens state autonomy and generates continuous demands for restructuring and constitutional reform. Similarly, inequitable fiscal federalism fuels competition over national resources, encourages ethnic rivalry, and reinforces feelings of domination and exploitation among constituent groups. Minority marginalisation also contributes significantly to weak national cohesion because politically excluded groups often develop separatist tendencies, distrust state institutions, and resist the legitimacy of the federation.

The framework therefore argues that these dimensions of the nationality question collectively shape the quality of national integration and determine the effectiveness of Nigerian federalism. Where constitutional inclusion, equitable resource distribution, and minority protection are strengthened, national integration becomes more sustainable, thereby promoting political stability, unity, and genuine federal practice in Nigeria. Conversely, unresolved nationality

grievances intensify ethnic conflict, separatist agitations, political instability, and weak federal cohesion.



Source: Authors' configuration

### 3. Literature review

The discourse on Nigerian federalism and national integration has remained central within African political scholarship because of the persistent contradictions involved in governing a deeply plural and historically fragmented society. Since Nigeria's creation in 1914, scholars have continuously questioned whether the country possesses the sociological foundations required to sustain a stable and functional federal order. As Wheare (1964) famously observed, federalism succeeds where political units are willing to unite for common purposes while preserving their separate identities. Nigeria's greatest challenge has therefore been its inability to reconcile national unity with profound ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity.

Early scholars such as James Coleman (1994) and Richard Sklar (1963) argued that Nigeria's political development was deeply shaped by ethnic pluralism, noting that intense regionalism and competitive ethnicity obstructed the emergence of a cohesive national community. Contemporary scholarship has reinforced this position by demonstrating that identity cleavages continue to complicate governance, weaken national integration, and undermine federal stability. These studies consistently maintain that Nigeria's federal structure has been weakened by excessive centralisation, elite domination, and persistent struggles over resource distribution (Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025; Ogbeide, 2021; Majekodunmi, 2015).

Ahmed and Dantata (2016), in their empirical assessment of Nigerian federalism and national integration, contend that federalism, originally intended as a mechanism for managing diversity, has failed to produce meaningful inclusion and balanced participation. According to them, prolonged military intervention fundamentally distorted Nigeria's federal arrangement by transforming it from a system of coordinated autonomy into an excessively hierarchical and centralised structure. Their conclusion that Nigeria is "federal in name but unitary in practice" reflects earlier arguments advanced by Fadakinte and Abdulkareem (2021), and Aliyu and Isah (2018) all of whom highlighted the erosion of state autonomy under military centralism.

Similarly, Abiodun (2023) emphasises the importance of political leadership, anti-corruption norms, and rotational access to political offices as essential mechanisms for managing integration pressures in plural societies. His argument aligns with that of Umoh and Ayamba (2018) who maintained that inclusive political arrangements and power sharing mechanisms are indispensable confidence building measures in deeply divided societies. Abiodun extends this argument by insisting that Nigeria's inability to institutionalise credible integrative mechanisms explains the recurring anxiety surrounding national unity and political stability.

Egwu (2018) offers a structural critique of Nigerian federalism by arguing that the highly centralised fiscal system entrenched by the 1999 Constitution promotes dependency, weakens state capacity, and intensifies resentment among constituent groups. He famously characterises Nigeria's revenue allocation system as "feeding bottle federalism," in which states depend overwhelmingly on allocations from the federal centre rather than pursuing productive competition and internal revenue generation. This position is consistent with the classical works of Oates (1972) and Rondinelli (1981), both of whom argue that fiscal centralisation weakens the incentives necessary for effective federalism and local development.

Likewise, Ejeba *et al.* (2025) argues that national integration remains elusive because the Nigerian political elite lacks genuine ideological commitment to federal principles. He observes that recurring disputes over revenue allocation, derivation, decentralisation, and restructuring reflect deeper legitimacy crises within Nigeria's governance framework. This argument resonates strongly with Anyim-Ben (2016), who contends that Nigeria's federal crisis is fundamentally a crisis of legitimacy rooted in longstanding mistrust between ethnic nationalities and the state.

The constitutional dimension of Nigeria's federal problem is further examined by Ahmed and Yusuf (2023). They identify elite capture, politicisation of constitutional reform processes, and the absence of meaningful public participation as major obstacles to genuine constitutional transformation. Their critique aligns with Abah (2016) who argues that constitution making in Nigeria has historically been top down, state centric, and exclusionary, thereby failing to address the fundamental grievances of marginalised ethnic groups.

Other scholars have addressed the nationality question more directly. Ekeh (2001) introduced the concept of Nigeria's dual public system, arguing that identity loyalties remain stronger at the ethnic level than at the national level, thereby weakening national cohesion. In a similar vein, Isinkaye (2023) contends that state institutions in Nigeria are frequently captured by ethnic elites, a development that reproduces inequality and deepens perceptions of exclusion and marginalisation.

### 3.1 Identified research gap

Despite this extensive body of literature, important gaps remain. First, much of the existing scholarship approaches federalism primarily through legal and constitutional frameworks, with emphasis on institutional design, power allocation, and constitutional engineering. Although these perspectives are valuable, they often neglect the sociological foundations of federalism, particularly the roles of trust, mutual respect, identity, and shared belonging in sustaining stable political partnerships. In contrast, the sociological perspective conceptualises federalism as a function of societal cohesion rather than merely constitutional design.

Second, many previous studies examine nationality related issues such as fiscal grievances, constitutional defects, and minority marginalisation in isolation rather than as interconnected forces collectively shaping national integration and federal stability. This fragmented approach limits deeper understanding of how these variables interact cumulatively to undermine national cohesion.

Third, the nationality question itself remains insufficiently theorised within Nigerian federalism literature. Although scholars acknowledge the existence of deep identity grievances, few studies conceptualise the nationality question as a multidimensional phenomenon requiring holistic sociopolitical analysis. In contrast, the present study treats the nationality question as a composite problem encompassing constitutional dissatisfaction, fiscal inequities, identity exclusion, and minority grievances. Fourth, much of the literature pays insufficient attention to the micro sociological dynamics that shape Nigeria's federal experience, including intergroup perceptions, local identities, and community level grievances. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of how everyday identity politics and interethnic relations influence the stability of the federation.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a sociologically grounded and multivariable framework that integrates constitutional grievances, fiscal federalism, and minority marginalisation as interconnected dimensions of the nationality question affecting Nigerian federalism. Unlike earlier studies, this paper synthesises these variables holistically and argues that meaningful national integration requires addressing all dimensions of the nationality question simultaneously rather than treating them as isolated concerns. The study therefore contributes to both the theoretical advancement of Nigerian federalism scholarship and the broader policy debate on how diversity can be reconciled with national unity in Nigeria.

### 4. Theoretical underpinning

This study is anchored on Group Theory, originally developed by Arthur Bentley (1935) and later expanded by David Truman (1951). Emerging from the behavioural revolution in political science, the theory argues that political outcomes, public policies, governance structures, and state decisions are products of continuous interaction, competition, and bargaining among organised groups within society. Bentley maintained that groups, rather than individuals or formal institutions, constitute the fundamental units of political life. Truman further argued that the state functions as an arbiter that moderates competing group interests and stabilises political outcomes in order to maintain societal equilibrium.

Group Theory is founded on several key assumptions. First, politics is fundamentally a struggle among competing groups. Public policy does not arise merely from constitutional ideals or elite goodwill but from the contest among groups seeking to protect and advance their interests.

Second, groups differ in influence, resources, and access to power. Some groups enjoy dominance because of demographic strength, economic advantage, historical privilege, or institutional control, while others remain weak and marginalised. Third, public policy reflects the prevailing balance of power among competing groups at a given historical moment. As power relations shift, policy outcomes also change. Finally, weaker groups often struggle to influence political outcomes because dominant groups possess greater capacity to shape decisions unless the balance of power changes through mobilisation or political realignment.

Group Theory provides a compelling framework for understanding Nigeria's nationality question, crisis of national integration, and the distortions within its federal system. Nigeria's federal experience can largely be interpreted as the outcome of persistent competition among groups struggling for power, recognition, and access to state resources. The formation of Nigeria itself reflected a group-based process in which British colonial authorities, acting as the dominant group, imposed the 1914 amalgamation primarily to advance imperial interests. Indigenous ethnic nationalities lacked the political capacity to influence or resist this foundational arrangement. Consequently, the Nigerian state emerged from a highly unequal power configuration that favoured colonial interests over indigenous aspirations.

Following independence, the locus of group competition shifted to Nigeria's major ethnic blocs, particularly the Hausa Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo groups. These dominant groups became central actors in shaping national policies, controlling political offices, and defining federal power relations. Public policies relating to revenue allocation, state creation, military appointments, and political representation often reflected the interests of the most powerful groups, frequently to the disadvantage of minority ethnic nationalities.

The nationality question, expressed through constitutional dissatisfaction, fiscal grievances, and minority marginalisation, can therefore be understood as the cumulative consequence of unequal group relations. Dominant groups have historically exerted substantial influence over constitutional arrangements, fiscal distribution, and political decision making, leaving weaker groups dissatisfied and politically alienated. This unequal power structure explains the persistence of agitations for restructuring, resource control, equity, and even secession.

The theory also explains Nigeria's difficulty in achieving meaningful national integration. The country's inability to develop a cohesive national identity reflects unresolved struggles among competing groups, each seeking to shape federal arrangements in its own favour. Persistent imbalances in group power have weakened trust, undermined national cohesion, and obstructed the effective practice of genuine federalism.

Group Theory is therefore particularly relevant to this study for several reasons. First, it explains how competition among groups generates the nationality tensions that undermine national integration. Second, it clarifies why constitutional provisions and fiscal federalism often reflect unequal power relations among competing ethnic groups. Third, it situates minority marginalisation within the broader dynamics of group dominance and political exclusion. Finally, it demonstrates that Nigeria's federal structure is shaped less by constitutional ideals and more by continuous struggles among groups seeking political and economic advantage.

## 5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a systematic review of secondary data. The study critically examines scholarly literature on federalism, national integration, and the nationality question in Nigeria with the aim of understanding how identity-based grievances influence the practice and stability of Nigerian federalism. Relevant academic materials including journal articles, textbooks, policy documents, conference papers, and institutional reports were reviewed. Sources were selected using specific inclusion criteria that required studies to focus explicitly on issues relating to constitutional dissatisfaction, intergovernmental fiscal relations, minority marginalization, identity politics, restructuring debates, and national integration within the Nigerian federation. Particular attention was given to studies that provided theoretical, historical, sociological, and political analyses of Nigerian federalism and the nationality question.

Data for the study were obtained through an extensive review of scholarly materials sourced from JSTOR, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Scopus indexed journals, and other credible academic databases. The review covered literature published between 1980 and 2025 in order to capture both historical and contemporary debates on federalism and national integration in Nigeria. The selected literature was drawn from diverse but related disciplines including political science, sociology, public administration, development studies, constitutional law, and peace and conflict studies. This interdisciplinary approach enabled a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the structural and sociological dimensions of the nationality question in Nigeria.

The study employed thematic and content analysis in examining the selected materials. Key themes such as constitutional imbalance, fiscal federalism, ethnic domination, minority exclusion, power sharing, and national cohesion were identified, categorized, and critically interpreted in relation to the objectives of the study. The analysis was further strengthened through engagement with prominent theoretical perspectives on federalism, identity politics, and group relations, particularly Group Theory as advanced by Arthur Bentley (1935) and David Truman (1951). Through this methodological approach, the study argues that the persistent challenges confronting Nigerian federalism are deeply rooted in unresolved nationality questions and unequal power relations among competing ethnic groups. The qualitative design therefore provides an appropriate framework for interrogating the complex sociopolitical realities shaping national integration and federal practice in Nigeria.

## 6. Findings and Discussion

### i. Nationality Question, Constitutional Provisions, and Nigerian Federalism

The challenge of evolving an inclusive and equitable constitutional framework remains one of the most critical dimensions of Nigeria's nationality question. Over the years, constitutional arrangements in Nigeria have significantly undermined national integration and weakened the effective practice of federalism. Unlike successful federations built on broad consensus and collective bargaining among constituent units, Nigeria's constitutional history reflects deep structural imbalances, unequal power relations, and elite domination.

Drawing a comparison with the United States Constitution of 1787, Onwe (2025) argues that the American founding fathers carefully debated and negotiated constitutional principles that

would safeguard both present and future generations. The endurance of the American Constitution for over two centuries demonstrates its adaptability, legitimacy, and rootedness in popular consensus. In contrast, Nigeria's constitutional framework has largely been shaped by the interests of powerful political actors, creating what Ojo (2019) describes as a "bigman" constitutional order in which institutions remain weak and subordinate to political authority.

According to Obasanjo (2022), Madisonian federal principles succeeded in the United States because they effectively regulated relations among different levels of government and prevented excessive concentration of power. Nigeria's experience has been markedly different. Successive constitutions introduced from the colonial era onward entrenched unequal power sharing and institutional distortions among the federating units. Rather than promoting unity, these constitutional arrangements deepened regional suspicion and political imbalance.

Ayoade (2020) argues that British colonial authorities deliberately promoted ethnic consciousness through constitutional designs that reinforced regional identities. The Macpherson Constitution of 1951, for instance, divided Nigeria into three dominant regions corresponding largely to the Hausa Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo ethnic blocs. This constitutional arrangement intensified ethnic loyalty and transformed political competition into an ethnic enterprise. From that period onward, political mobilisation in Nigeria increasingly assumed ethnic and regional dimensions.

Beyond encouraging ethnic division, the colonial constitutional framework also created serious institutional weaknesses. Omotosho (2022) observes that the Macpherson Constitution introduced a rigid and conflict-ridden form of federalism that lacked coherent national planning and coordinated defence strategy. Similarly, Adebayo (2010) maintains that the Clifford Constitution of 1922, the Richards Constitution of 1946, and the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 entrenched regionalism and legitimised the manipulation of ethnic identities as instruments of governance. Colonial authorities showed little interest in building a common political identity for Nigerians, and post-colonial political elites largely sustained this divisive orientation.

Tsuwa and Asongo (2013) further contend that both centralised and decentralised models of federalism practiced in Nigeria have remained fundamentally defective because they failed to reflect the plural character and collective aspirations of the Nigerian state. In contrast to federations such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, which emerged through voluntary agreements among previously autonomous entities, Nigeria evolved through a reverse process in which powers were reluctantly devolved from a unitary colonial authority to regional structures. Consequently, the Nigerian federation lacked the consensual foundations necessary for genuine federal practice.

The legitimacy crisis surrounding Nigeria's constitutional order became even more pronounced under military rule. The 1979 Constitution, later adopted with minor amendments as the 1999 Constitution, has been heavily criticised for lacking popular legitimacy and failing to establish genuine citizenship and equality. Olusola (2023) argues that the constitution promotes state and ethnic identities rather than a shared national identity, while simultaneously concentrating excessive powers at the centre. He further criticises provisions that weaken civil liberties, entrench executive immunity, and elevate political office holders above the rule of law. The claim in the preamble that the constitution was enacted by "We the People" has therefore

remained highly contested because the constitution was fundamentally a military creation rather than a product of broad democratic participation. Onwe (2025) adds that the constitution drafting process under General Obasanjo between 1976 and 1979 excluded critical national questions relating to unity, religion, ideology, and state structure. Even though constituent assemblies were established, the process remained tightly controlled by the military government.

According to Jega (2022), constitution making processes under military administrations merely created the appearance of participation without genuine democratic legitimacy. The authoritarian character of military rule undermined the credibility of constitutional reforms and weakened public confidence in the constitutional order itself. Over time, constitutional developments significantly transformed Nigeria from a relatively decentralised federation at independence into a highly centralised political system with 36 states, 774 local governments, and a Federal Capital Territory. Although state creation was intended to promote inclusion and administrative efficiency, it also intensified debates over imbalance, representation, and resource allocation. Musa *et al.* (2021) argue that no federal unit should become sufficiently dominant to impose its will on others. Yet, according to Egwu (2018), Nigeria's federal structure continues to favour the North disproportionately in terms of political influence and representation.

Nigeria's geopolitical evolution has further complicated the federal question. What began as a North South dichotomy later evolved into regional and eventually zonal fragmentation, producing the present six geopolitical zones. While these arrangements were intended to manage diversity, they also reinforced identity consciousness and intensified competition among ethnic and regional groups for power and resources. Ojo (2022) argues that the original regional structure created an asymmetric federation in which the Northern Region possessed overwhelming demographic and political dominance over the Western and Eastern regions combined. Such imbalance, he argues, inevitably produces unitary tendencies rather than genuine federalism. This imbalance persists today, as the North possesses more states than the South, thereby sustaining demands for additional state creation and broader constitutional restructuring.

Abiodun (2023) maintains that the constitutional settlement at independence planted the seeds of future political crises from which Nigeria has yet to recover. He further argues that colonial authorities created a structurally defective political arrangement that forced numerous diverse groups into an unstable federation designed primarily to serve colonial interests. The legacy of this imbalance continues to shape Nigeria's political instability and weak national integration. Consequently, the crisis of national integration in Nigeria remains severe. According to Oyediran and Adeshola (2016), the unresolved contradictions surrounding Nigeria's formation, constitutional development, and ethnic diversity have pushed Nigerian federalism toward a dangerous level of fragility. The interaction between deep social heterogeneity and structurally flawed constitutional arrangements continues to fuel distrust, conflict, separatist agitations, and centrifugal pressures within the federation.

## **ii. Nationality Question, Intergovernmental Fiscal Relations, and Nigerian Federalism**

The problem of intergovernmental fiscal relations remains one of the most contentious dimensions of Nigeria's nationality question and a major obstacle to the effective practice of

federalism. Over the years, the various revenue allocation formulas and fiscal principles adopted in Nigeria have failed to produce the level of equity, cohesion, and national integration required for a stable federation. The persistent inability to distribute national resources fairly among the federating units has deepened regional grievances, intensified ethnic suspicion, and weakened public confidence in the federal system.

According to Oriakhi and Diepreye (2023), dispute surrounding revenue allocation are not peculiar to Nigeria alone, as even older federations such as the United States and Canada have experienced fiscal tensions. However, these countries have managed such challenges more effectively because of stronger institutions, mature democratic traditions, and relatively stable systems of governance. In Nigeria, by contrast, fiscal relations have remained highly politicised and deeply intertwined with ethnic competition and struggles for dominance.

Olowu (2020) argues that the search for an acceptable formula for sharing resources among the various tiers of government constitutes one of the most persistent crises confronting Nigerian federalism. Supporting this position, Mohammed and Suleiman (2018) observe that debates over fiscal relations in Nigeria have historically centred on the allocation of revenue among regions and the principles guiding such distribution. These disagreements became major sources of regional rivalry and political conflict, particularly before 1966. Similarly, Onuoha (2020) notes that the distributive crisis in Nigerian federalism revolves around struggles over fiscal resources and unequal access to political opportunities among competing groups.

The principles underpinning Nigeria's fiscal system were often designed not necessarily to ensure equity, but to maintain political accommodation within a deeply divided society. As Bello and Mackson (2022) explains, the acceptance or rejection of particular revenue allocation principles frequently depended on which region benefited most and how politically influential that region was relative to others. Consequently, fiscal federalism in Nigeria became less a mechanism for balanced development and more an instrument of political bargaining and regional competition.

This pattern reflects a broader struggle for political and economic advantage among competing ethnic and regional groups. Ugbem (2019) argue that nation building in plural societies is often accompanied by intense struggles among communal and regional forces seeking greater access to political power, economic rewards, and social privileges. In Nigeria, ethnic groups increasingly viewed the state as the primary avenue for securing access to the "national cake," including political appointments, public resources, and infrastructural development. As a result, loyalty to ethnic and regional interests often overshadowed commitment to national integration.

Egwu (2018) further argues that ethnic groups in plural societies compete aggressively for strategic resources because they perceive themselves as culturally and politically distinct from one another. In such environments, groups with superior political influence and organisational capacity tend to dominate access to state resources, while weaker groups experience exclusion and marginalisation. This explains why national cohesion in Nigeria has remained fragile and why disputes over resource distribution continue to generate distrust and conflict across the federation.

According to Abiodun (2023), the issue of resource allocation and control remains central to Nigeria's national integration crisis. Mbah and Akpan (2017) observe that revenue allocation

principles adopted since independence have progressively weakened the fiscal capacity of lower tiers of government, thereby limiting their ability to provide basic services and development projects within their jurisdictions. The overwhelming financial dominance of the federal government has therefore generated widespread dissatisfaction among states and local governments.

The situation became even more controversial during the military era when federal grants and allocations were frequently distributed in a discriminatory manner to favour politically aligned states. In many instances, financial assistance was allocated arbitrarily without adherence to established fiscal principles, thereby intensifying resentment among states perceived to be politically disadvantaged. Such practices weakened trust in the federal arrangement and reinforced perceptions of exclusion and inequality.

Perhaps no issue better illustrates the crisis of fiscal federalism in Nigeria than the prolonged agitation by oil producing communities in the Niger Delta. For decades, these communities have demanded a fairer share of the national wealth generated largely from their region. Despite contributing over ninety percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings, many oil producing areas continue to experience environmental degradation, poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural neglect. This contradiction has fuelled widespread feelings of exploitation, marginalisation, and alienation from the Nigerian state.

Gbervbie (2016) argues that in any federation where the bulk of national revenue is derived from a particular region without adequate compensation or developmental consideration for that region, such an arrangement is bound to generate resentment and separatist tendencies. The persistent agitation for resource control, fiscal restructuring, and derivation in the Niger Delta therefore reflects deeper dissatisfaction with the unequal character of Nigeria's fiscal federalism.

Ultimately, the crisis of intergovernmental fiscal relations in Nigeria reveals the deeper structural contradictions within the federation. Rather than promoting balanced development and national cohesion, fiscal arrangements have frequently reinforced inequality, ethnic competition, and political domination. Until Nigeria evolves a more transparent, equitable, and development oriented fiscal framework, the challenge of national integration and the realization of genuine federalism may remain difficult to achieve.

### **iii. Nationality Question, Minority Marginalisation, and Nigerian Federalism**

One of the most persistent challenges confronting plural societies such as Nigeria is the marginalisation of minority ethnic nationalities by dominant groups. The inability of the Nigerian state to guarantee fairness, inclusion, and equitable distribution of resources has continued to weaken national integration and undermine the stability of federalism. In deeply divided societies, where access to political power and economic resources is often shaped by ethnic considerations, minority groups frequently experience exclusion, neglect, and exploitation.

According to Anderson (2013), justice and fairness cannot thrive in a society where ethnic consciousness subtly determines the distribution of national wealth, opportunities, and public resources. Once ethnic identity becomes the hidden basis for allocation, marginalised groups

gradually lose faith in the political system and withdraw emotionally from the state. This alienation weakens national identity and fuels resentment against the federation itself.

Ayamba *et al.*, (2024) observes that the protection of minority groups possesses both domestic and international significance. International norms require states to protect minority rights through inclusive policies and equitable governance structures. These rights include the right to exist as a distinct group, preserve cultural identity and language, participate meaningfully in political affairs, and enjoy social and economic wellbeing. Failure to guarantee these rights often generates political instability and distrust within plural societies.

Minority groups generally refer to smaller ethnic, religious, linguistic, or political communities that lack numerical strength and political influence within a state. In Nigeria, only a few ethnic groups have historically occupied dominant positions, while numerous minority groups remain politically disadvantaged. According to Ugwoke *et al.* (2025), minority groups are often denied equal access to opportunities, social amenities, political appointments, and economic benefits. Such inequalities deepen feelings of exclusion and reinforce perceptions of second-class citizenship.

At independence, Nigeria achieved only fragile regional integration rather than genuine national unity. Madueke (2025) observe that nationalist leaders merely succeeded in uniting the diverse groups within individual regions, while substantial minority populations within those regions continued to assert separate identities and grievances. Political power subsequently became concentrated within dominant ethnic groups, which frequently allocated public resources, employment opportunities, and developmental projects in favour of their own communities. Minority groups, as argued by Ayamba *et al.* (2025), faced serious obstacles in accessing strategic political positions both at regional and federal levels because dominant groups viewed such positions as privileges reserved primarily for themselves.

The situation has been particularly severe in the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta. Despite contributing enormously to Nigeria's national revenue through petroleum resources, many oil producing states continue to experience poverty, unemployment, environmental degradation, and infrastructural decay. Abiodun (2023), argues that decades of neglect and ecological destruction have produced widespread frustration and anger within these communities. This neglect contributed significantly to the rise of youth militancy, violent agitation, and armed resistance movements, especially among the Ijaw ethnic nationality.

Similarly, Chime and Ojiakor (2021) note that the proliferation of violent ethnic based organisations across Nigeria reflects growing dissatisfaction among marginalised groups. Many of these groups perceive the federal system as structurally biased and incapable of protecting their interests. Consequently, separatist agitations, ethnic militancy, and demands for restructuring have become recurring features of Nigeria's political landscape.

Ataide and Enebong (2020) therefore advocate the inclusion of all ethnic groups in decision making processes at every level of governance. He argues that Nigeria requires a more egalitarian political order in which every group enjoys equal recognition, equal opportunity, and guaranteed participation in the economy, governance, and social life of the country. Without such inclusiveness, national integration will remain weak and fragile.

Historically, minority agitations in Nigeria date back to the colonial period. Ethnic minorities in Calabar, Ogoja, Rivers, Ijaw, Tiv, and Bornu areas demanded separate political identities

and administrative autonomy because they feared domination by majority ethnic groups. In response, the British colonial administration established the Willink Commission under the chairmanship of Sir Henry Willink to investigate minority fears and recommend possible solutions. However, according to Azikiwe (2015), the colonial authorities had little genuine intention of fundamentally restructuring the federation to protect minority interests.

Olaniyi and Adejumo (2020) further argue that although political leaders publicly promoted national unity, political power was largely deployed to strengthen the economic and political position of dominant ethnic groups. Regional leaders competed fiercely for control of the federal government because access to federal power provided the opportunity to channel national resources toward their ethnic and regional bases. In practice, therefore, loyalty to ethnic constituencies often outweighed commitment to national cohesion.

According to Onifade and Imhonopi (2023), Nigeria has failed to establish the fundamental principle of collective political partnership required in a federation. The social contract that should bind diverse groups together through justice, equity, and shared interests remains weak and poorly institutionalised. Instead, Nigeria's federal history has largely been characterised by repeated constitutional experiments that failed to confront deep inequalities in the distribution of power and wealth. The inherited three region structure at independence not only created structural imbalance but also intensified the continuous struggle by minorities and marginalised groups for recognition, autonomy, and self-determination.

Ultimately, the marginalisation of minority ethnic nationalities remains a major threat to national integration and federal stability in Nigeria. A federation cannot achieve enduring unity where significant groups feel politically excluded, economically neglected, and socially alienated. Genuine federalism therefore requires a deliberate commitment to inclusion, equity, justice, and balanced representation so that all ethnic nationalities can develop a meaningful sense of belonging within the Nigerian state.

## **7. Conclusion and recommendations**

The challenge of national integration has remained one of the most enduring and contentious issues confronting the Nigerian state since independence. Despite numerous constitutional reforms, political arrangements, and institutional mechanisms, Nigeria has continued to struggle with the task of forging genuine unity among its diverse ethnic nationalities. The persistence of ethnic loyalties, regional suspicions, structural inequalities, and exclusionary political practices has significantly undermined both national cohesion and the effective practice of federalism.

This study has demonstrated that the nationality question in Nigeria is deeply rooted in constitutional grievances, inequitable intergovernmental fiscal relations, and the persistent marginalisation of minority ethnic groups. These interconnected challenges have continued to fuel distrust, weaken national identity, and generate recurring agitations for restructuring, resource control, and political inclusion. Rather than functioning as a framework for unity in diversity, Nigerian federalism has often reflected unequal power relations and intense struggles among competing ethnic and regional interests.

The study therefore concludes that genuine federalism and sustainable national integration in Nigeria cannot be achieved without addressing the structural and sociopolitical foundations of the nationality question. A federation cannot remain stable where significant groups perceive

themselves as politically excluded, economically disadvantaged, or constitutionally marginalised. National integration requires more than symbolic unity. It demands fairness, justice, inclusive governance, balanced representation, and a collective sense of belonging among all constituent groups.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are advanced:

First, Nigeria requires a truly inclusive and people driven constitutional framework capable of reflecting the sociopolitical realities of the federation. Any future constitutional reform process should emerge through broad national participation involving states, geopolitical zones, ethnic nationalities, civil society groups, and other critical stakeholders. Such a constitution must promote equity, decentralisation, accountability, and genuine federal principles rather than merely preserving elite political interests.

Second, there is an urgent need to establish a more transparent, equitable, and development oriented fiscal arrangement. Revenue allocation formulas should be guided by fairness, derivation, need, productivity, and balanced development rather than ethnic or political considerations. Greater fiscal autonomy should also be granted to states and local governments in order to strengthen accountability, reduce overdependence on the federal centre, and promote healthy intergovernmental relations.

Third, deliberate efforts must be made to build a new national culture anchored on merit, justice, inclusion, and shared citizenship. Nigeria must gradually move beyond narrow ethnic and sectional loyalties toward a stronger national identity. Policies and institutions should encourage equal opportunities for all citizens irrespective of ethnic origin, religion, or region. In this regard, federal appointments and employment opportunities should prioritise competence and merit while still accommodating the principles of inclusiveness and federal character.

Finally, the persistent issues surrounding indigeneity and state of origin should be fundamentally reconsidered in favour of residency rights and national citizenship. Nigerians who reside, work, and contribute meaningfully in any part of the country should enjoy equal social, economic, and political opportunities without discrimination. Only through such inclusive reforms can Nigeria strengthen national integration, reduce ethnic tensions, and move closer toward the realization of a stable, realistic, and functional federal system.

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