

Data Colonialism: A Historian's Perspective on the Struggle for Nigeria's Data Sovereignty

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ABSTRACT: Nigeria is a data intensive country because the socio-economic system of the nation relies on the use of large volumes of data generated across diverse sectors which include oil and gas, banking, health and education. These data are used for policy formulation, budgeting, security and resource allocation. Nevertheless, Nigeria has long been vulnerable to data colonisation since the advent of the British administrators who collected, controlled and exploited data in Nigeria for administrative control, imperial socio-economic interest and classification of Nigerians into various ethnic groups. The consequences of data colonisation in Nigeria during the British rule were quite extensive. These include the distortion of historical narratives, resource exploitation, inter-ethnic rivalry as well as difficulty in accessing the data collected by the British administrators. Unfortunately, data colonialism in Nigeria spanned through the digital era where data collected from Nigerians are controlled by foreign Information and Communication Technology (ICT) platforms with or without consent and fair compensation, thereby further threatening the data sovereignty of the nation. It is against this background that this study provides an in-depth study of data colonisation in Nigeria from the colonial period to the digital era. This is with the view to revealing the struggle of Nigeria in achieving data sovereignty.

KEYWORDS: colonial period, data colonialism, data sovereignty, digital era, Nigeria.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 was significant for the partition of Africa among European powers. Specifically, Britain secured political control and maximised economic gain in Nigeria through the exportation of raw materials such as tin, coal, rubber and gold. By 1914, the British administrators amalgamated the Lagos colony as well as the Northern and Southern Nigeria protectorates, fundamentally creating the boundaries of the present-day Nigeria. This event was a practice of domination which subjugated the kingdoms of the amalgamated protectorates [1]. The missions of the British colonialists in Nigeria include managing the resources of the country, missionary expansion and domination of trade routes along the Niger River and Atlantic coast. According to Falola and Heaton [2], the British administrators adopted the indirect rule which enabled traditional leaders and existing political institutions to rule the local people. The main duties of the traditional rulers were to collect taxes, maintain law and order, report census and tax records and encouraged the cultivation of crops demanded by the British. Hence, the traditional rulers served as intermediaries between the British administrators and the natives to ensure effective colonial administration. This mode of government enabled the traditional rulers to transmit data on agricultural outputs, natural resources, customary laws, population, land mass, taxation amongst others to the British colonial headquarters in Lagos and London through the District Officers. These data were considered to be exclusively owned by the British and thus were controlled by the British administrators who use them for several purposes such as policy formulation, resource extraction, public finance and taxation, recruitment and administration [3]. However, it was evident that the data collected by the British government in Nigeria was for exploitative purposes and to maintain dominion [4]. Undoubtedly, data became a powerful tool which the British administrators used to establish their governance in Nigeria as well as shape the country's political, economic and social landscape during the colonial period. This form of data collection, control and exploitative use of data is simply referred to as data colonisation.

According to Thatcher et al. [5], data colonisation is the privatisation, control and exploitative use of data generated by individuals, government, non-governmental organisations and corporations, usually without fair benefit or compensation to the individuals from whom the data were obtained. Nonetheless, it should be emphasised that data colonisation and colonialism are two distinct terms. While colonialism focuses on the exploitation of a nation's resources by a dominating country through military conquest, political domination and economic control, data colonisation is aimed at extracting, analysing, and utilising the data of a subordinating group

of individuals, communities and nations for the purpose of making profit with insignificant benefit to the data source [6]. Nevertheless, data colonialism reflects historical colonialism because it involves the dispossession of valuable and insightful data from the colonised by the power dynamics of the colonisers who possess significant power and control over the colonised.

The consequences of data colonialism in Nigeria during the British rule were far-reaching. These include the distortion of historical narratives, resource exploitation, inter-ethnic rivalry as well as difficulty in accessing the data collected by the British administrators as most of these data were stored in British museums and institutions. Unfortunately, data colonialism in Nigeria spanned through the digital era where data collected from Nigerians are controlled by privatised foreign Information and Communication Technology (ICT) platforms with or without consent and fair compensation of the citizens. For instance, the ubiquitous nature of social media platforms and foreign cloud services such as Google Cloud and Microsoft Azure facilitate the storage of local information in data centers in the Global North. This new form of data colonisation also referred to as digital colonialism in turn makes the nation vulnerable to decisions made by foreign countries. This no doubt threatens the data sovereignty of the nation as the decisions made by the foreign countries with the data may not align with the interest of the nation. Furthermore, with digital colonisation, citizens are prone to continuous monitoring and surveillance by foreign countries. This no doubt puts personal and national data at the risk of hackers, misuse of data, discriminatory practices such as advertisements and data manipulations. These facts are in line with the thoughts of Young [7] who argued that colonialism never ends but transforms. It is against this background that this study provides an in-depth study of data colonisation in Nigeria from the colonial period to the digital era and how this phenomenon is gradually being resisted. This is with the view to protecting data sovereignty in Nigeria as well as safeguarding citizen's privacy and right to protection of data.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on two theoretical frameworks which are postcolonial theory and theory of political economy of communication.

The postcolonial theory, also referred to as postcolonialism theory was first propounded by Edward Said, who is referred to as the foundational figure of the theory in 1978 [8]. Other prominent theorists who contributed to the theory of postcolonialism include Chinua Achebe, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha. The theory of postcolonialism focuses on the historical, political, economic and social consequences of British colonialism and imperialism on the culture and power structures of the formerly colonised countries. The theory stresses that colonised countries usually retain the political and socio-economic structures of the colonial powers ultimately reducing their independence, marginalising their voices and reshaping their cultural identities. Nevertheless, the theory emphasises that there is an urgent need to decolonise the power structures of the Western nations in their attempts to continuously dominate the world. This theory is related to this research because it helps to understand that a new form of colonialism has emerged in the digital era in Nigeria which involves the claim of ownership and exploitative use of data collected via the social media and other digital platforms owned by foreign countries.

There is no singular author credited to the development of the theory of political economy of communication. However, several notable authors such as Harold Innis, Vincent Mosco, Karl Max and Marshall McLuhan have contributed immensely to the development of this theory. The theory focuses on the power interplay between the mass media, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) devices and the socio-economic structures in which they operate. The theory of political economy of communication emphasises the influence of political and economic factors on the production, distribution and consumption of data in mass media within the context of capitalist societies [9]. This theory also stresses that media ownership, commercialisation and regulatory environments determine the structural forces that shape the flow of information within a society. This theory is related to this study because it helps to understand that the dominance of foreign data infrastructures such as servers, social media platforms and the cloud in Nigeria is a form of digital imperialism which have marginalised technological access, voices, choices, cultural norms and control over data.

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There is a need to clarify certain terms that are used in this study, which are data, colonialism, data colonialism and data sovereignty. In historical context, data can be viewed as the facts about past events, circumstances and phenomenon pertaining to a particular subject. Data can be in form of numbers, alphabets, pictures or images and videos which can ultimately be used for decision making. Sources of historical data can be classified as primary and secondary. Primary sources of data include the firsthand accounts of an event while secondary sources of data are derived from the interpretation, analysis and synthesis of data obtained from primary sources. Typical examples of primary sources of data include oral data, census, tax record, artifacts, archival materials, diaries, court proceedings, maps and letters while books and scholarly works by historians, journals and biographies are examples of historical sources of secondary data.

The term colonisation is a word that is derived from the Latin word "colere" which means to cultivate, till, or inhabit [10]. In simple terms, colonialism refers to a practice which involves the domination of a nation usually by a more powerful country which maintains full or partial control over the dominated nation. Colonisation is usually achieved through military conquest, treaties and settlement. However, the primary goal of colonisation is to facilitate the exploitation of agriculture and mineral resources in subjugated nations while the superior nation maintains political, socio-economic, and cultural domination over the colonised nation in pursuit of its interests.

Data colonialism refers to the continuous extraction, appropriation and exploitative use of data generated by individuals, government, non-governmental organisations and corporations, usually without fair benefit or compensation to the data source. Although the term data colonialism was not used during the period of colonialism in Nigeria, the colonial administration however focused on extracting, controlling and exploiting the data generated during this period to their own benefit. In recent times, the ubiquitous nature of social media and other digital platforms developed by corporations in the Global North have led to the exponential rise in this trend of data colonialism currently referred to as digital colonialism. In recent times, social media platforms extract metadata from their users across the globe with or without their explicit consent thereby facilitating cross-border data flows. This no doubt results in the publishing of users' data without their consent, sharing and transferring users' data without authorisation and preventing users to have control over their data. This form of digital colonialism has continued to weaken data sovereignty in Nigeria.

Data sovereignty on the other hand refers to the ability of a country to control, store, access and use the data it generates under the laws and regulations of the country. Hence, data sovereignty defines how data is managed within the borders of a country while protecting the privacy rights of its citizens.

4 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF DATA COLONISATION IN NIGERIA

The history of data colonialism in Nigeria can be traced to the late 19th century when the British administrators began the mapping of Nigeria for administrative and economic purposes. According to Collier [11], the colonised countries in Africa lacked mapping as at time they were colonised. Hence, the British administrators began with mapping project in the continent with the aim of generating geological data. The sources of the data for this exercise include collection of samples such as rocks and sediments for laboratory analysis, seismic surveys and gravity surveys as well as satellite imagery and aerial photographs. The primary objectives of this data collection were for the exploitation of mineral resources, revenue generation through taxation and for administrative purposes all at the expense of the indigenous population [12]. Although, these data were obtained in Nigeria, the geological data were ultimately owned by the British Crown, which represented the colonial government. Nevertheless, in recent times the Nigerian government is making frantic efforts to retrieve these data from the United Kingdom through agencies like the Nigeria Geological Survey Agency (NGSA) [13].

By 1866, the British colonial government conducted the first census in Nigeria within the Lagos colony and by 1911, the exercise covered the Southern and the Northern Protectorates [14]. The data obtained from the 1911 census was eight million, one hundred and fifteen thousand, nine hundred and eighty-one (8, 115, 981) for the Northern Protectorate, while the data for the Southern Protectorate and Lagos colony was given as seven million, nine thousand and four hundred (7,009, 400 million). Hence, the total population was put at 15,125,381 million [15]. After the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Nigeria Protectorates in 1914 by Lord Lugard, the census ordinance was enacted in 1917 and this paved way for the conduct of the first nationwide census in 1921 under Sir Hugh Clifford who was the Governor-General of Nigeria. This activity was carried out in two phases which were the township census and the provincial census. While the township census was focused on counting residents of towns and cities, the provincial census was based on the entire country [16]. The census exercise was primarily used to collect data of the population which include their demographics, languages, educational qualifications, ages, ethnic origins, religion and social status. The method of data collection during this process included house-to-house enumeration, tax records and estimations from District Officers, especially in rural areas [17]. This data was primarily used by the British to classify Nigerians into various ethnic groups. The use of the census data to construct tribal identities in Nigeria significantly contributed to data colonialism because the census data in actual fact was used as a tool to understand, govern and categorise the people of Nigeria under the colonial rule. It is however interesting to note that each group was distinctly unique with its own historical background, culture, kingship institutions and religion before the British policy of divide and rule which exacerbated ethnic tensions and rivalry [18]. In addition, the British administrators used this data to effectively extract resources from different regions, determine tax obligations, recruit labour and allocate resources. This no doubt further reinforced colonial power structures and governance in Nigeria during this period. The 1931 as well as the 1953 censuses in Nigeria also contributed significantly to the legacy of data colonialism in Nigeria considering the fact that the data obtained from the exercises were manipulated by the British officials to serve imperial interest [19]. The data generated from these censuses were used to reinforce colonial power structures and influence economic and political decisions in ways that benefited the colonisers.

The colonial period in Nigeria also witnessed the extraction and exportation of raw materials and agricultural products to British industries which include United Africa Company (UAC), John Holt, Paterson and Zochonis (PZ) and Lever Brothers [20]. The British collected data which include market price and export volumes on raw materials from the Department of Agriculture established in the Northern and Southern Protectorates. Data on these products according to Shokpeka and Odigwe. [21] were also collected by the British administrators through surveys, agricultural reports and direct observation. The primary aim of the data collection process was to promote the cultivation of raw materials such as cotton, cocoa, groundnut and palm oil to serve the factories in Britain. The British administrators used this data as a tool for resource extraction for the British industries at the detriments of the local industrial development. Hence, the data on the quantity, quality and distribution of raw materials were used by the British administrators to justify the investments in infrastructural developments such as the construction of roads, ports and railways in areas that were rich in these resources while neglecting areas that were not involved in the production of these raw materials for exportation. The infrastructural development in the extraction zones were primarily to efficiently transport the raw materials to Britain. This no doubt led to the

underdevelopment of the marginalised areas. Nonetheless, the data collected on Nigeria's raw materials were owned and controlled by the colonial administrators, while the communities and the local farmers had no access and control over these data.

Before the advent of the British administrators, Nigeria like other African countries was known for the wide spread of endemic diseases such as sleeping sickness or human trypanosomiasis, a disease spread by the tsetse fly and the mosquito-borne infection malaria which took a significant toll on human lives [22]. Earliest treatment for these diseases during this period included the use of herbs, appeasement to gods, hygiene practices and spiritual healing. The incidence of epidemic diseases such as small pox, black water fever, Gonorrhoea, leprosy and tuberculosis also escalated in the nineteenth century with the advent of the British administrators in Nigeria who disputed the traditional healthcare systems and replaced them with western styled healthcare system [23]. Consequently, the British officials elicited health related data from the populace which included the number of reported cases of the epidemic diseases, date rate and the locations of disease outbreak [23]. These data were collected through hospital and missionary health records, census and colonial medical services. Unfortunately, these data were not collected for the benefit of Nigerians, but to contain the epidemics so as to protect European explorers and colonial administrators from the diseases [23]. Furthermore, these data were sent to British institutions to develop western medicine in Nigeria, however, the rural areas were marginalised from the data collection process. This further widened the gap in modern medical interventions between the rural and urban communities where the Europeans resided. Hence, the data collected for public health diseases in Nigeria during this period was incomplete and not generally satisfactory as data available for indigenous national medical policies.

By 1960, Nigeria gained independence but still continued to suffer from data colonialism in the hands of its former colonial masters. For instance, international organisations such as the World Bank, United Nations (UN) and International Monetary Funds (IMF) collected several data of Nigeria such as economic and financial data, health and social data, agricultural data as well as data relating to infrastructural development. These data were collected through the ministries, national censuses, field work and health records. The major objectives of the data collection were for economic surveillance so as to shape the nation's economy in line with interest of the Europeans. Although the data collected helped Nigeria in development by providing access to financial aids and improving her educational and health programs, it however heightened disparities in education and healthcare services and also contributed to debt burdens in Nigeria through diverse economic policies such as structural adjustment programs and austerity which no doubt resulted in economic hardship in the nation [24]. This neocolonial data collection exercise further contributed to the legacy of data colonialism in Nigeria.

The evolution and ubiquitous mature of the social media and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) devices in the 21st century has continued to reinforce data colonialism in Nigeria. This form of data colonialism in recent times also referred to as digital colonialism is viewed by Coleman [25] as the modern-day scramble for Africa. Digital colonialism involves the capability of digital media to extract data from individuals and nations for the purpose of making profit, storing the data as raw materials for predictive analytics as well as regulating the behaviours of individuals with little benefit to the data source [26]. These data are usually extracted with or without the consent of individuals through Information and Communication Technology (ICT) devices usually developed and owned by multinational corporations such as Meta in the Global North. Typical examples of data extracted by individuals on social media platforms include name, date of birth, email addresses, shared messages, comments, and likes. Other forms of data extracted include phone brand, operating system, time zone, locations, Internet Protocol (IP) address and stored cookies. While the users technically own data on these platforms, these companies possess the right to reproduce, publish, distribute, and display the data in exchange for the services they provide. These data are primarily used by these companies for generating revenue through advertisements and content monetisation tools such as advertisements on reels. The extraction and use of users' information without their consents by these multinational companies re-echoes historical colonial patterns of data colonialism in Nigeria.

5 CONSEQUENCES OF DATA COLONISATION IN NIGERIA

The vast amount of data such as artifacts, tax records and census data collected by the British in Nigeria were kept in colonial archives, museums and British institutions, hence, the ownership and control of the data was mainly in the hands of the Europeans and this often results in a misrepresentation of the history of the Nigerian people. That is, the data obtained largely depended on the European biases about the people of Nigeria. As such, the historical data were largely subjected to European views with its effect on the writing of the history of the people of Nigeria from a historical point of view of the British. Figure 1 shows the artifact of Queen Mother Idia in Benin which was taken to the British Museum, London, United Kingdom by the British administrators.



Fig. 1. *The Artifact of Queen Mother Idia taken to the British Museum, London [27]*

Nevertheless, the access to these data were restricted to British officials, institutions and researchers. By and large, the colonial government in Nigeria restructured the data collected in Nigeria to serve colonial interests. For instance, the British reports labelled Benin Kingdom as barbaric and uncivilised to serve their colonial interests while downplaying the rich history and sophistication of the Kingdom [28]. In addition, the oral history of the Benin people which emphasises their sovereignty and cultural heritage was distorted in British reports because the British government was in charge of the collection, preservation and dissemination of data about the Benin. Nigerians had little or no access to these data even in the post-colonial era due to bureaucratic, legal, political challenges as well as ethical considerations. Thus, Nigeria faces the challenge to adequately protect, preserve, and promote her cultural heritage.

While the British government extracted data in Nigeria for resource exploitation in the colonial era, similar challenges are experienced with the use of digital technology hosted in the western world to extract large volumes of data in Nigeria. This is largely due to limited computing facilities and resources such as stable electricity supply, local data centers, nationwide high-speed broadband internet, cybersecurity infrastructure and skilled technical workforce. Obviously, the trend of distortion of historical narratives remarkably continued in this era of digital colonisation in Nigeria as Western based digital platforms are used for storing and sharing data on the history and culture of the people. The countries where these platforms are hosted have a great influence on the visibility of these data, thereby limiting the access to the data as well as a continuity in the distortions and misrepresentations of the data.

Since the beginning of the twenty first century, Nigeria historical reality has been that of data neo-colonialism considering the pervasive nature of digital devices and a high level of dependency on these devices particularly among young adults and teenagers. This act is usually driven by factors which include entertainment, information dissemination, business and political engagement. However, social media platforms leverage on the data collected by users to promote contents that reinforces Western cultural norms. This no doubt facilitates the dominance of Western ideologies, values, and lifestyles at the detriment of the Nigerian indigenous culture, which in turn strengthens Western cultural hegemony in Nigeria [28]. Furthermore, data stored on foreign digital platforms are vulnerable to surveillance by the host countries because these data falls under their legal jurisdictions. For instance, the United States Cloud Act of 2018 allows law enforcement agencies to access personal data stored across borders by US companies and servers. Hence, data privacy and sovereignty in Nigeria remains a challenge.

6 THE STRUGGLE FOR DATA SOVEREIGNTY IN NIGERIA

Data sovereignty is essential to combat data colonialism as well as enhance self-reliance in gathering historical data for the reconstruction of history in Nigeria. By so doing, there is absolute control and access to the data generated within the Nigeria borders. As pathway to data sovereignty, the Nigerian government has since engaged in frantic efforts to reclaim looted artifacts, as well as historical data including maps, photographs, anthropological records and linguistic data from British institutions and museums. This step asserts Nigeria's right to ownership and control of its cultural narratives, properties and heritage as well as independent reconstruction of history from the African perspective. In the contemporary sense, this step to data sovereignty is aimed at facilitating national development as well as the reconstruction of Nigerian history.

Another step that the Federal Government of Nigeria is taking to ensure data sovereignty is in the protection of digital data as well as other forms of data generated within the boundaries of the nation. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria does not explicitly emphasise data protection or protection of digital data. However, Section 37 of the constitution guarantees the protection of the privacy of every citizen [29], [30]. Consequently, Freedom of Information Acts of 2011, Cybercrimes Act of 2015, Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (NDPR) of 2019, Nigeria Data Protection Act (NDPA) of 2023, and Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC) of 2023 were enacted to protect the data generated within the boundaries of Nigeria. This grants the nation the absolute control over the use, control, storage and access to the generated data. However, lack of citizens awareness of their rights under the NDPR and NDPA frameworks, weak enforcement mechanisms due to limited financial and technical resources to implement these laws as well as complexities in cross border data transfer are some of the notable challenges facing the implementation of these laws in Nigeria. In addition, these laws do not address the risks and the complexity of emerging digital technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Biometric Surveillance and Internet of Things (IoT). This ultimately leads to increased data breaches, cyber threats and data exploitation, which further heightens data colonialism in Nigeria.

Generally, most Nigerians are not aware of their data protection and privacy rights even though there exists numerous data protection and privacy laws and frameworks which guide against data collection without consent, data misuse and unauthorized sharing of data. Consequently, the Federal Government of Nigeria is making frantic efforts for the provision of adequate awareness campaign programmes on the importance of data protection and privacy rights for citizens.

7 CONCLUSION

The roots of data colonisation in Nigeria can be traced to the era of British colonial rule, which has gradually ascended to the present digital landscape. Hence, the historical mechanism of resource extraction through data exploitation deployed by British administrators have evolved into a new form of neocolonial dominance through the control of data generated in Nigeria by International data centers hosted in foreign countries. This reveals how data has been used as tools for socio-economic and cultural subjugation by foreign countries. This study therefore concludes that to achieve data sovereignty in Nigeria, the existing data protection and privacy laws must be strengthened and the government should not relent in its efforts in recovering looted artifacts and historical data kept in British institutions.

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