

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS IN NIGERIA AND SENEGAL AND THEIR IMPACT ON ECOWAS INTEGRATION

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Abstract

Separatist movements in West Africa have been a significant challenge to regional stability and integration. Rooted in colonial legacies, ethnic divisions, and political marginalization, these movements have disrupted national governance and regional cooperation. This article employs a qualitative research approach to explore the historical origins of separatist movements in West Africa and their impact on the integration objectives of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Utilizing post-colonial theory as the theoretical framework, the study examines the colonial imposition of artificial borders, ethnic divisions, and governance structures that continue to influence contemporary separatist agendas. The findings highlight the ongoing challenges these movements pose to ECOWAS's integration and peacebuilding efforts, and suggest that addressing historical grievances is crucial for regional unity.

Keywords: *Separatist Movements, Regional Integration, Political Marginalization*

Introduction

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975, represents a bold vision for fostering regional cooperation, stability, and integration among its 15 member states. Presently, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have announced plans to leave ECOWAS due to dissatisfaction with the regional bloc's actions and priorities. These nations, governed by military juntas, perceive ECOWAS as heavily influenced by external powers, undermining their sovereignty. They also criticize the bloc for imposing sanctions following their military coups, which they view as punitive and harmful to their national interests. ECOWAS founding ideals stem from the recognition that collective development and unity could help overcome the socio-economic challenges inherited from colonialism. However, these aspirations have been repeatedly challenged by the emergence of separatist movements within the region, which pose significant threats to national and regional cohesion. These movements, often rooted in historical grievances, reflect the enduring legacies of colonial rule, including ethnic fragmentation, socio-political exclusion, and economic disparities.

The Biafran War in Nigeria (1967–1970) and the Casamance conflict in Senegal exemplify the disruptive effects of separatist struggles in West Africa. These conflicts, while seemingly localized, resonate with broader patterns of post-colonial struggle, where the boundaries drawn by colonial powers failed to align with the complex tapestry of ethnic, cultural, and political identities. Consequently, these artificial borders became fault lines for conflict, as marginalized groups resisted domination and sought autonomy.

Situating these developments within the framework of post-colonial theory reveals a profound understanding of their roots and implications. Post-colonial theory provides a critical lens through which the colonial encounter and its aftermath can be analyzed, particularly the processes of alienation, exploitation, and division that shaped the political landscapes of colonized regions. The theory highlights how colonial administrative policies, such as divide-and-rule tactics, created and institutionalized ethnic hierarchies and regional disparities, leaving a legacy of mistrust and fragmentation that persists in the post-independence era.

In West Africa, colonial powers often manipulated ethnic identities to maintain control, granting privileges to certain groups while sidelining others. For instance, in Nigeria, the British colonial administration reinforced regional and ethnic divisions by prioritizing the northern Hausa-Fulani elite in governance, marginalizing southern groups like the Igbo. This exclusionary system laid the groundwork for post-independence tensions, culminating in the Biafran War. Similarly, in Senegal, French colonial policies ignored the distinct cultural and political identity of the Casamance region, sowing the seeds of its separatist conflict.

These historical dynamics underscore the relevance of post-colonial theory in examining the challenges faced by ECOWAS. The theory illuminates how colonial legacies continue to influence contemporary governance and regional integration efforts. By understanding separatist movements as manifestations of unresolved colonial grievances, post-colonial theory offers a framework for addressing these conflicts not merely as security threats but as symptoms of deeper structural inequities.

Furthermore, post-colonial theory critiques the homogenizing aspirations of regional integration initiatives like ECOWAS, which often overlook the complexities of identity and historical marginalization. The push for integration must contend with the fact that many communities in West Africa remain alienated from national and regional governance structures, perceiving them as extensions of colonial domination. Addressing these perceptions requires a reimagining of integration that prioritizes inclusivity and justice, ensuring that all groups feel represented and empowered within the regional framework.

In this context, the exploration of separatist movements in West Africa, guided by post-colonial theory, reveals a nuanced narrative of struggle and resilience. It highlights the need for ECOWAS to navigate the tensions between historical legacies and contemporary aspirations, crafting solutions that embrace the region's diversity while fostering unity.

Conceptual Clarifications

Separatist Movement

According to Encyclopedia Britannica Separatist movement refer to organized efforts by a specific group of people within a country seeking autonomy or independence from the central government¹. These movements often stem from perceived political, economic, or cultural marginalization and have historically posed significant challenges to nation-states in West Africa. For instance, the Biafran secessionist conflict in Nigeria (1967–1970) and the Casamance independence movement in Senegal exemplify how separatism can destabilize national unity. Such movements frequently disrupt regional peace and stability, thereby complicating the agenda of organizations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) that strive for regional integration. ECOWAS, established in 1975, aims to foster economic cooperation and political stability among member states; however, separatist agitations impede these objectives by fracturing national cohesion and creating transnational security threats².

Regional Integration

Regional integration involves the process by which neighboring states coordinate policies and actions to achieve collective goals, such as economic growth, political stability, and enhanced regional security. ECOWAS, as a leading example of integration in West Africa, was established to create a unified economic space and promote free movement of goods and people among member states. However, separatist movements challenge this vision by fostering localized conflicts and undermining the political will needed for integration. For example, the secessionist-driven instability in Mali has diverted attention and resources from regional developmental goals to crisis management³. Thus, the success of ECOWAS' integration efforts is inextricably linked to its ability to mitigate the impact of separatist conflicts in the region.

Political Marginalization

Political marginalization is a critical concept in understanding the roots of separatist movements. It describes a condition in which certain groups within a country are systematically excluded from

meaningful participation in political processes or decision-making. In West Africa, marginalized communities often perceive their exclusion as a justification for pursuing self-determination. The Niger Delta crisis in Nigeria and the ongoing Tuareg rebellions in Mali highlight how perceived neglect by the central government can escalate into full-blown separatist agitations. These conflicts not only destabilize individual countries but also have ripple effects across the region, straining ECOWAS' mechanisms for conflict resolution and integration⁴. Addressing marginalization is therefore essential for achieving sustainable peace and fostering regional cooperation.

Theoretical Framework: Post-Colonial Theory

Post-colonial theory is the most appropriate lens for understanding the historical roots of separatist movements in West Africa and their impact on ECOWAS integration. This theory critiques the legacy of colonialism, particularly the arbitrary borders imposed by colonial powers without regard for the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic realities on the ground⁵. These borders often created multi-ethnic states, which became prone to ethnic tensions and separatist movements once colonial rule ended⁶. Colonial borders in Africa, including West Africa, were drawn with little regard for the existing ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups. These arbitrary boundaries grouped diverse and sometimes antagonistic communities into single political entities, creating multi-ethnic states. For example, in Nigeria, over 250 ethnic groups were amalgamated into one country, leading to competition for political power and resources.

After independence, the absence of a unifying colonial authority exposed and exacerbated these divisions. Marginalized groups, feeling excluded from political or economic benefits, often sought autonomy or independence, leading to tensions and separatist movements. The Biafran War in Nigeria is a prime example, where the Igbo people, feeling politically and economically sidelined, attempted to secede.

These tensions reveal how colonial borders ignored the socio-political realities of the region, sowing seeds for post-independence instability.

Post-colonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha have argued that the colonial encounter left deep scars in the form of political fragmentation, social exclusion, and cultural alienation⁷. In the case of West Africa, colonial powers divided ethnic groups and imposed centralized forms of governance that marginalized local systems of authority, laying the groundwork for post-independence secessionist movements. Thus, post-colonial theory helps explain how the legacies of colonialism continue to fuel ethnic separatism and conflict, which hinder regional integration efforts like those of ECOWAS.

Historical Roots of Separatist Movements

The historical roots of separatist movements in West Africa are deeply intertwined with the region's colonial history. During the colonial period, European powers drew arbitrary boundaries that did not align with the ethnic and cultural realities of the indigenous populations. This process of boundary-making was a fundamental aspect of colonialism, where European powers imposed artificial borders that ignored the historical, cultural, and social fabric of local societies. Post-colonial theory, particularly as articulated by scholars like Frantz Fanon, highlights how colonialism distorted indigenous identities and social structures, setting the stage for long-lasting grievances. In Nigeria, for example, the British amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914 failed to account for the distinct cultural and ethnic groups that inhabited the regions, leading to tensions between the various ethnic groups that would later result in the Biafran War⁸.

Similarly, in Senegal, the colonial division of the Casamance region from the rest of the country fueled separatist sentiments. Post-colonial theory argues that such colonial divisions often entrenched divisions within the colonies, creating a legacy of artificial borders and competing ethnic identities. The people of Casamance, who share closer historical and cultural ties with neighboring Guinea-Bissau than with the rest of Senegal, have long agitated for independence, arguing that they were marginalized by the central government in Dakar⁹. The Casamance region's distinct cultural and historical ties to Guinea-Bissau, with shared ethnic groups like the Jola, exemplify the kind of post-colonial division that Fanon

and others argued would lead to a fractured sense of identity and belonging. Despite being part of Senegal, many Casamance residents feel politically and economically sidelined by the central government, which they perceive as prioritizing the northern regions. This sense of marginalization has fueled a long-standing separatist movement, with demands for independence rooted in grievances over unequal development, cultural identity, and resource allocation.

These separatist movements, though varied in their origins and forms, share a common feature: they are all responses to the perceived marginalization of ethnic or regional groups within artificially constructed states. According to post-colonial theory, these movements can be seen as a reaction against the colonial legacy that fragmented societies and imposed foreign governance structures. The post-independence political elites, who often failed to address these historical injustices, inadvertently fostered the rise of separatism. By neglecting to reconcile the artificial divisions created during colonial rule, these elites perpetuated the inequalities that continue to fuel regional and ethnic separatism today.

Case Studies of Separatist Movements in West Africa

The post-colonial theory provides a powerful lens through which we can analyze the separatist movements in West Africa, such as the Biafran War in Nigeria (1967-1970) and the Casamance conflict in Senegal. These movements are deeply rooted in the artificial boundaries and governance systems imposed by colonial powers, which failed to account for the complex ethnic, cultural, and historical dynamics of the regions they controlled. By examining these case studies, we can understand how the post-colonial state, shaped by the legacy of colonialism, continues to struggle with issues of identity, autonomy, and governance.

The Biafran War (Nigeria, 1967-1970)

The Biafran War remains one of the most significant examples of a separatist movement in West Africa. The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, feeling politically and economically marginalized, declared the independence of Biafra. This declaration was driven by a belief that their political and economic exclusion by the Nigerian government, coupled with ethnic tensions, could only be addressed through secession¹⁰. The Biafran secession was a direct response to the perceived injustices faced by the Igbo people within the Nigerian state. Ethnic tensions, exacerbated by policies that favored other regions and the violent anti-Igbo pogroms in northern Nigeria, deepened the Igbo sense of insecurity. The experience of these violent attacks, combined with the Igbo's historical and economic marginalization, led them to believe that their rights and interests would never be adequately protected within the Nigerian state. Thus, the only viable solution, from their perspective, was independence.

The war had devastating consequences, not only for Nigeria but also for the entire region, as it strained relationships among neighboring ECOWAS member states and highlighted the limits of regional diplomacy in resolving intra-state conflicts. Some ECOWAS members, like Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon, supported Biafra's cause, recognizing its independence and providing aid. Others, such as Ghana, attempted to mediate the conflict, though their involvement was ultimately insufficient to end the war. This divergence in positions created tensions among ECOWAS states, undermining regional unity.

From a post-colonial perspective, the Biafran War highlights the fragility of the post-colonial state, which is often an artificial construct that fails to reflect the ethnic, cultural, and regional realities of its inhabitants. As Frantz Fanon noted, colonial powers imposed arbitrary borders that disregarded the diverse and distinct identities of the people they controlled. In the case of Nigeria, the amalgamation of the northern and southern regions by the British in 1914 created a state that had little coherence in terms of ethnic and cultural unity. This lack of cohesion led to persistent ethnic tensions, which were only exacerbated by the centralization of power in the hands of the federal government. The Igbo, feeling excluded from political power and economic opportunities, sought to reclaim their autonomy through the declaration of Biafra.

Furthermore, the Biafran War also exposed the limitations of ECOWAS's predecessor organizations in dealing with internal conflicts. ECOWAS, which was established in 1975, was primarily focused on fostering economic cooperation and regional integration among member states. However, it lacked the

institutional capacity to address intra-state conflicts, which were often driven by ethnic or regional grievances. The Biafran War underscored the need for stronger conflict resolution mechanisms within ECOWAS, a challenge that continues to persist as the organization grapples with addressing internal conflicts across West Africa. The failure of ECOWAS to prevent or resolve the Biafran War illustrates the limits of regional diplomacy in the face of deeply entrenched national issues.

The Casamance Conflict (Senegal)

The Casamance conflict, which has lasted for over four decades, provides another example of a separatist movement driven by a sense of ethnic, cultural, and political marginalization. The Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) advocates for the independence of the Casamance region, citing its distinct cultural and historical identity, which differs significantly from the rest of Senegal. The region's population, predominantly Jola, shares closer ties with neighboring Guinea-Bissau than with the Wolof-dominated central government in Dakar. This sense of alienation is further compounded by the region's geographical separation from the rest of Senegal, as it is cut off from northern Senegal by The Gambia. Casamance residents believe their development has been systematically neglected, with limited economic investment and political representation. This perception of exclusion has fueled long-standing grievances, which have been expressed through the MFDC's demand for autonomy¹¹.

The geographical isolation of Casamance and its distinct cultural identity have contributed to a strong sense of regionalism, which in turn has fueled separatist sentiments. The MFDC's push for independence is not simply a political demand; it is an expression of a deeper cultural and historical longing for self-determination. The region's identity, which is rooted in the Jola people's way of life, their language, and their historical connections to neighboring Guinea-Bissau, has long been at odds with the national identity promoted by the central government in Dakar. This conflict, although smaller in scale than the Biafran War, has nonetheless posed a significant challenge to the Senegalese government and has had broader implications for the region.

In the context of post-colonial theory, the Casamance conflict is another example of how colonial borders have exacerbated regional tensions. The colonial powers, in this case, the French, imposed borders that ignored the ethnic and cultural ties that existed across what are now national lines. The Jola people of Casamance have closer cultural and historical ties to the people of Guinea-Bissau than to the Wolof-majority population in Senegal. These artificial borders have created a sense of alienation and exclusion, which the MFDC has sought to address through its calls for independence.

Moreover, the Casamance conflict underscores the challenges faced by post-colonial states in reconciling the diverse identities within their borders. While Senegal has made efforts to integrate Casamance into the broader national framework, these efforts have often been seen as insufficient by the people of the region, who feel that their distinct identity is being disregarded. This sense of exclusion, rooted in both the colonial legacy and the centralization of power in the post-colonial state, has driven the ongoing separatist movement in Casamance.

Both the Biafran War and the Casamance conflict illustrate the continuing impact of colonial legacies on post-colonial African states. Through the lens of post-colonial theory, we can see that these separatist movements are not merely about political or economic grievances, but about the deep-rooted cultural and historical identities that were ignored or suppressed by colonial powers. The artificial borders drawn by colonialists created states that did not reflect the ethnic, cultural, and historical realities of the people they encompassed. As a result, these states have struggled to create cohesive national identities, and regions with distinct identities have sought autonomy or independence.

In both Nigeria and Senegal, the failure of the post-colonial state to adequately address the grievances of marginalized regions has led to separatist movements. These movements, driven by a desire for autonomy, self-determination, and recognition, highlight the limitations of the post-colonial state in resolving conflicts that are rooted in the colonial legacy. As such, the Biafran War and the Casamance conflict serve as powerful reminders of the enduring challenges faced by post-colonial African states in overcoming the divisions created by colonialism.

Impact on ECOWAS Integration

Separatist movements in West Africa have had a profound impact on the integration efforts of ECOWAS. First, these movements create instability within member states, which undermines regional cooperation. For example, Nigeria's involvement in regional peacekeeping operations has been complicated by its own internal conflict with separatists, particularly in the southeastern part of the country¹². The government's focus on maintaining internal stability has often limited its capacity to fully engage in regional peace efforts, as resources and attention are diverted to managing domestic tensions and security concerns.

Second, separatist conflicts often exacerbate ethnic tensions within states, which in turn affects cross-border relations between neighboring countries. The Casamance conflict, for instance, has drawn in Guinea-Bissau, as ethnic groups in both regions have shared historical ties and sometimes support the separatist cause. The Casamance conflict has drawn in Guinea-Bissau due to shared ethnic ties, particularly among the Jola people, who inhabit both Casamance and parts of Guinea-Bissau. These ethnic connections have led to mutual support for the separatist cause, with some groups in Guinea-Bissau offering sanctuary and assistance to the MFDC (Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance). The historical and cultural affinity between the two regions has fostered cross-border solidarity, further complicating the conflict and drawing Guinea-Bissau into the broader struggle for Casamance's independence¹³.

This cross-border element of separatism complicates ECOWAS's efforts to maintain peace and stability in the region.

Lastly, separatist movements challenge the very notion of state sovereignty, which is a cornerstone of ECOWAS's integration framework. Separatist movements challenge the concept of state sovereignty by questioning the legitimacy of established national borders and governments. ECOWAS, as a regional integration body, is built on the principle of respecting the sovereignty of its member states, which is essential for regional cooperation and stability. However, when separatist movements arise, they threaten this foundational principle by advocating for the disintegration of states, potentially leading to instability within and between countries. This directly conflicts with ECOWAS's goals of promoting peace, security, and unity, as the recognition of secessionist entities undermines the territorial integrity that is central to the organization's framework.

The rise of separatism, if left unaddressed, threatens to fragment the region further, making regional unity and economic cooperation increasingly difficult to achieve.

ECOWAS's Role in Addressing Separatism

It is important to state that ECOWAS has worked to resolve conflicts through mediation and peacekeeping efforts, its approach to separatist movements has been largely reactive. In the case of the Biafran War, for example, ECOWAS did not exist at the time of the conflict, and thus had no role in mediating the dispute. In more recent years, ECOWAS has made efforts to mediate conflicts, such as the Casamance issue, but has often struggled due to its limited capacity to address the root causes of separatism¹⁴.

To effectively promote regional integration, ECOWAS must focus on addressing the historical grievances that fuel separatism. This involves supporting inclusive governance, promoting economic development in marginalized regions, and providing platforms for dialogue among ethnic and regional groups. By addressing these underlying issues, ECOWAS can strengthen its role as a regional actor committed to peace, stability, and integration.

Conclusion

The historical roots of separatist movements in West Africa run deep, tracing their lineage to the divisive legacies of colonial rule, entrenched ethnic divisions, and systemic political exclusion. During the colonial era, artificial borders were drawn with little regard for the complex ethnic and cultural tapestry of the region, sowing the seeds of discord that persist to this day. These boundaries not only fractured

communities but also entrenched inequalities, creating a fertile ground for grievances that have festered over decades.

In the post-independence period, these colonial-era injustices were often exacerbated by political systems that marginalized certain groups, denying them meaningful representation and access to power. Consequently, separatist movements emerged as a response to perceived exclusion and as a call for self-determination. While these movements vary in their demands and methods, they are united by a shared history of struggle against oppression and inequality.

For the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to fulfill its vision of a truly integrated and prosperous region, it must confront these historical grievances head-on. This requires more than rhetoric; it demands deliberate action to promote inclusive governance that ensures all voices are heard, regardless of ethnic or regional affiliation. Additionally, ECOWAS must invest in robust conflict resolution mechanisms that address not just the symptoms of separatism but also its underlying causes.

By prioritizing reconciliation and equity, ECOWAS can pave the way for a more cohesive and peaceful West Africa. In doing so, the region can transcend its painful past and chart a new course—one that celebrates its diversity as a strength rather than a source of division.

ENDNOTES

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