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Indirect Rule and the Reconfiguration of Political Authority in Nasarawa Division, 1926–1960

Abstract

This article examines how British Indirect Rule reshaped political authority in Nasarawa Division between 1926 and Nigerian independence in 1960. Relying on colonial administrative reports, Native Authority records, and oral interviews conducted in communities including Umasha, Buga, and Shafan Abakwa, it situates local developments within the wider history of colonial governance in Northern Nigeria. The study argues that Indirect Rule did not simply preserve existing institutions: it selectively appropriated, reorganised, and subordinated them to the requirements of taxation, territorial administration, and colonial justice. The establishment and adjustment of Native Authorities, the appointment and removal of district heads, and the reorganisation of districts altered the relationship between leadership and community consent. The experiences of Gade, Udege, Loko, Toto, and Yeskwa demonstrate that these changes were neither uniform nor uncontested. Disputes over appointments, the resistance associated with Ohimegye Odalla, and the reported tax protest at Toto in December 1937 reveal the limits of colonial authority and the agency of local communities. At the same time, colonial rule created administrative hierarchies whose influence survived independence and continued to inform debates about chieftaincy, jurisdiction, identity, and political representation. The article concludes that Indirect Rule in Nasarawa Division is best understood as a contested process of political reconfiguration produced through coercion, collaboration, negotiation, and indigenous action.

Keywords: *Indirect Rule, Nasarawa Division, Native Authority, Chieftaincy, Colonial Administration, Political Legitimacy.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of British colonial rule in Northern Nigeria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a major turning point in the history of indigenous political institutions. Colonial control emerged through military conquest, diplomatic pressure, and administrative experimentation rather than through a single, uniform process. By the early twentieth century, British officials had organised much of the region into provinces and divisions intended to facilitate administration, revenue collection, and the enforcement of colonial policy. Indirect Rule became a central instrument of this system. Associated particularly with Frederick Lugard, it claimed to govern through existing African institutions while reducing the cost of colonial administration.

Although presented as a policy of continuity, Indirect Rule often transformed the

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institutions it claimed to preserve. Colonial officials selected particular authorities, defined their jurisdictions, and attached administrative duties to their offices. Where political authority was dispersed among councils of elders, lineage heads, age-grade associations, and ritual custodians, officials frequently sought identifiable chiefs or district heads through whom orders could be transmitted and taxes collected. The result was not simply the survival of tradition under new circumstances; it was the selective reconstruction of local authority to serve colonial objectives.

Despite its ideological presentation as a policy of preservation and continuity, Indirect Rule was, in practice, a transformative instrument of colonial domination. It involved not merely the utilization of indigenous political structures but their selective adaptation, redefinition, and, in many cases, outright invention. The British colonial state sought to impose administrative uniformity across a culturally diverse landscape, often projecting the centralized emirate model of the Sokoto Caliphate onto societies that historically lacked such hierarchical organization. In doing so, colonial officials fundamentally altered the nature of political authority, shifting it from diffuse, community-based systems to more centralized and bureaucratically regulated institutions.

Nasarawa Division, which was formally incorporated into Plateau Province in 1926, presents a particularly illuminating case for examining these dynamics. Located within the culturally heterogeneous North central region, Nasarawa Division was home to a multiplicity of ethnic groups—including the Gwandara, Mada, Hausa, Koro, Gbagyi, and Afo among others, whose precolonial political systems were largely decentralized. Authority within these societies was embedded in lineage structures, councils of elders, age-grade associations, and ritual institutions that derived legitimacy from communal consensus, spiritual sanction, and historical continuity. Leadership was neither absolute nor hereditary in the rigid sense; rather, it was negotiated, situational, and deeply rooted in the socio-cultural fabric of each community.

The encounter with British colonial administration disrupted these indigenous systems in significant ways. Faced with the challenge of governing societies without centralized political hierarchies, colonial officials embarked on a process of administrative reconstruction that involved the creation of Native Authorities headed by appointed chiefs and district heads. These figures were often selected based on their perceived loyalty, administrative convenience, or limited pre-existing influence, rather than on traditional legitimacy. Consequently, the colonial state elevated certain individuals into positions of authority while simultaneously marginalizing established institutions such as elder councils and ritual custodians of Mada, Koro, Bassa and Yaskawa among others.

This reorganization of political authority was accompanied by the introduction of new administrative practices, including taxation, codified legal systems, and territorial demarcation and Land tenure system. These measures redefined leadership as a bureaucratic function tied to colonial governance, rather than as a communal responsibility grounded in tradition. The result was the emergence of a new class of political elites whose power derived primarily from colonial recognition and whose authority was often contested at the local level.

This article argues that Indirect Rule in Nasarawa Division was a consequential process of political reconfiguration rather than a neutral preservation of precolonial institutions. It centralised selected offices, redrew administrative boundaries, and

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connected local leadership to colonial bureaucratic requirements. Yet its outcomes were shaped by local responses: communities resisted unpopular appointments, negotiated administrative changes, and continued to draw on indigenous understandings of legitimate authority. The article therefore treats colonial governance as an unequal but interactive relationship between the colonial state and local communities.

Against this backdrop, this paper argues that Indirect Rule in Nasarawa Division was not a mere preservation of precolonial political systems but a deliberate and consequential process of political reconfiguration. It fundamentally altered the structure, meaning, and sources of political authority, creating new hierarchies, redefining legitimacy, and embedding bureaucratic governance within local societies. These changes were neither temporary nor superficial; they became institutionalized over time, leaving enduring legacies that continued to shape political organization, chieftaincy structures, and inter-group relations well into the postcolonial period.

By situating Nasarawa Division within the broader historiography of colonial rule in Northern Nigeria, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing scholarly debates on the nature and impact of Indirect Rule. It underscores the need to move beyond simplistic narratives of continuity and to recognize the complex interplay of coercion, collaboration, and indigenous agency that defined colonial governance. Ultimately, the experience of Nasarawa Division demonstrates that colonial rule was not merely an external imposition but a dynamic and contested process that reshaped local political realities in profound and lasting ways.

Historical Background: Nasarawa Division before 1926

Prior to the imposition of colonial rule, the region that later became known as Nasarawa Division was characterized by a remarkable diversity of political traditions and institutional arrangements. Unlike the highly centralized emirate systems of Northern Nigeria, particularly those associated with the Sokoto Caliphate, the societies of the Nasarawa area—comprising groups such as the Gwandara, Koro, Bassa, Hausa, Mada, Fulani, Gbagyi, and Afo among others, operated predominantly decentralized and segmentary political systems. These systems were not anarchic, as early colonial observers sometimes assumed, but were instead structured around well-established norms, institutions, and mechanisms of governance that ensured social order, conflict resolution, and collective decision-making.

Political authority in these societies was diffuse and multi-layered, embedded within kinship networks, lineage hierarchies, and ritual frameworks. Leadership was exercised through a combination of lineage heads, councils of elders, age-grade associations, and spiritual custodians, each performing distinct but complementary roles within the community. Rather than being concentrated in a single individual, power was shared and negotiated, reflecting a political culture that valued consensus, reciprocity, and communal participation. Decisions affecting the community—such as land allocation; dispute settlement, and ritual observance—were typically reached through deliberative processes that emphasized dialogue and collective agreement.

Among the Afo, for example, political organization was closely tied to clan structures and religious institutions. Authority derived not only from seniority within lineage groups but also from control over sacred sites and participation in ancestral cults. Ritual specialists and custodians of shrines wielded considerable influence, as they were believed to mediate

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between the living and the spiritual realm. This spiritual dimension of authority reinforced social cohesion and provided a moral framework for governance. Similarly, the Mada people maintained systems of governance centered on village assemblies and councils of elders, where decisions were made collectively and leadership roles were often rotational or situational rather than permanent.

The Gbagyi (Gwari), on the other hand, exhibited a flexible and adaptive political structure in which authority was distributed among ward heads, lineage leaders, and household heads. Their settlement patterns, often dispersed and fluid, necessitated a decentralized form of governance that could accommodate mobility and changing socio-economic conditions. Among the Afo, political organization also reflected a balance between lineage authority and communal deliberation, with elders and ritual leaders playing key roles in maintaining order and adjudicating disputes. Across these groups, coercive power was limited, and leadership depended largely on persuasion, moral authority, and the ability to maintain social harmony.

These decentralized systems were sustained by deeply rooted cultural values and social institutions. Age-grade associations, for instance, played important roles in community development, security, and socialization, while kinship ties ensured mutual obligations and collective responsibility. Land tenure systems were generally communal, with access regulated by lineage membership and overseen by elders. Justice was restorative rather than punitive, emphasizing reconciliation and the restoration of social equilibrium rather than strict legal enforcement.

The advent of British colonial rule in the early twentieth century brought these indigenous political systems into direct confrontation with a fundamentally different model of governance. Colonial administrators, trained within the framework of centralized emirate administration, found it difficult to comprehend and manage societies without clearly defined hierarchical leadership. Their prior experience in regions such as Borno, Zariya and Sokoto, where emirs exercised centralized authority, shaped their expectations and administrative strategies. Consequently, they perceived the decentralized systems of Nasarawa Division as inefficient, fragmented, and unsuitable for colonial governance.

This perception led to a deliberate effort to restructure local political systems along more centralized lines. The British sought to create uniform administrative units that could facilitate taxation, law enforcement, and political control. In the absence of pre-existing centralized authorities, colonial officials embarked on a process of institutional invention, identifying individuals—sometimes prominent lineage heads, but often relatively marginal figures—and elevating them into positions of authority as chiefs or district heads. These individuals were then incorporated into the framework of Native Authorities, which served as the cornerstone of Indirect Rule.

The creation of Native Authorities in Nasarawa Division thus represented a significant departure from precolonial political traditions. It entailed the imposition of fixed territorial jurisdictions, the centralization of authority in single individuals, and the introduction of bureaucratic procedures that were largely alien to indigenous systems. While presented as an adaptation of traditional governance, this process in reality redefined the nature of political authority, transforming it from a fluid and negotiated system into a more rigid and hierarchical structure aligned with colonial administrative needs.

In this sense, the pre-1926 political landscape of Nasarawa Division provides

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essential context for understanding the transformative impact of Indirect Rule. The decentralized and participatory nature of indigenous governance systems not only shaped the initial responses to colonial intervention but also influenced the forms of resistance, negotiation, and adaptation that emerged in the subsequent decades. By appreciating the complexity and functionality of these precolonial institutions, it becomes possible to more accurately assess the extent to which colonial policies disrupted, reconfigured, and, in some cases, appropriated local political structures.

Indirect Rule and Political Reconfiguration in Nasarawa Division

The institutionalization of Indirect Rule in Nasarawa Division found its most concrete expression in the establishment of Native Authorities (NAs), which became the principal instruments of colonial governance at the local level. After killing of Captain Maloney in Keffi, the British Administration moved their headquarters seat from Keffi to Nasarawa and the division became known as Nasarawa division, comprising keffi district, Nasarawa district, karu district, Yaskwa district, Loko district, Udege district, Toto district, Gadabuke district, and Toni district. Under each district mentioned above, there were Chiefdoms and other small chiefdoms such as Yeskwa Chiefdom, Karshi Chiefdom, Gurku Chiefdom, Mada Chiefdom, Agwada Chiefdom, Kube Chiefdom, Toni Chiefdom, and Karu chiefdom, all the chiefdoms mentioned above are under Keffi Native Authority. While the chiefdoms under Nasarawa Native Authority were Nasarawa Emirate, Gade chiefdom, Opanda Chiefdom, Toto (Ogye) Chiefdom, the Udege Chiefdom, Loko Chiefdom, Agatu and Turunku Chiefdom. G.W. Webster became the divisional Officer (DO). It was during the reign of Muhammadu Maiyaki, the then Emir of Keffi, that Keffi began to send members of royal families as District heads. In 1931, Waziri Abdulkadiri was sent to Panda as district head, while Toni was ruled by madakin Keffi Nuhu, Sakaruyi Audu was recongnised as the warrant Chief of Karu Chiefdom in 1905, Alhji Mamman was also recognize by the British as Chief of Karshi chiefdom. In 1926 Usmanu Dan Ahamadu was the Emir of Nasarawa Emirate, the chiefdom under Nasarawa Native Authority were Nasarawa Emirate, Gade Chiefdom, Opanda Chiefdom, Toto (Oghe) chiefdom, the Udege Chiefdom, Loko Chiefdom, Agatu Chiefdom and Turunku Chiefdom. . However, all these reconfigured Emirs and Chiefs Conceived as intermediaries between the British colonial administration and indigenous populations, these authorities were vested with wide-ranging administrative, judicial, and fiscal responsibilities. In theory, Native Authorities were intended to operate as continuations of pre-existing political systems; in practice, however, they represented a profound reordering of political authority, embedding colonial power within newly constructed local hierarchies.

Moreso, the Gade Chiefdom was paying tribute to Zariya. With the coming of British rule, Gade was a district under Nasarawa. In 1937, new district was carved out of Native Authority areas. The districts were in tribal lines or according to the old tribal chiefdoms. Gade chiefdom became Padan Gade district with its headquarters at Buga under Nasarawa Native Authority. Later the headquarters moved to Gadabuke where the Gade area court was built. Similarly, During the reign of Ohimegye Ekuzimishi in 1903, Umasha was conquered by the colonial administration and with the introduction of indirect rule, Umasha was put under Nasarawa Native Authority. In 1915, districts were created in Umasha chiefdom and members of the Nasarawa royal families were posted to them as district heads. Pakachi was send as district head of Toto district and Galadima was sent to

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Gadabuke district. All these changes do not happen without objection, the Ohimegye Odalla organized a serious resistance, but he was threatening by the cancelation or dissolution of Ogba and Katakpa district in 1928.

The district which covered the land from Udege down to Loko was under Keffi. The Nasarawa province quarterly report No. 60 for September quarter, 1915, written by J.C.Scirtino, Acting Resident for Nasarawa province, to the Secretary, Northern Provinces, Zungeru talked of Udege district up to Loko being part of Keffi Emirate and negotiations were made on their transfer to Nasarawa for administrative convenience. Also, Nasarawa, in exchange, transferred to Keffi part of Laminga area. It was around this time too that the administration encouraged the people to move from the hills to open and more fertile lands. Some towns moved to new sites. Among the towns that moved were Igwo and Agwada that moved towards Kokona (Toni) District. Later new Kana and new Apawu were also established in Toni district by some Afo who left their former settlements of Kana and Apawu in Udege District because of chieftaincy disputes. Some Afo also moved to Loko Districts. In 1957, when the British rulers allowed democratic elements into the Nigerian Constitution, and great pressure was put on the Government to attain self-independence for Afo people, the first son of Afo, Alhaji Muhammadu Wada, was appointed District Head of Udege District. This event marked the return of independence and self-reliance for all the Afos.

At the core of this transformation was the centralization of power, a marked departure from the decentralized and segmentary political systems that characterized much of Nasarawa Division before colonial rule. Authority that had previously been dispersed among lineage heads, councils of elders, and ritual specialists was now concentrated in the hands of a single individual—the chief or district head—whose position was recognized and sustained by colonial authority. This shift not only altered the structure of governance but also redefined the nature of leadership itself. Chiefs became executive agents of the colonial state, responsible for enforcing policies, collecting taxes, maintaining order, and adjudicating disputes within their jurisdictions.

Closely linked to this centralization was the process of territorial reorganization. Colonial administrators introduced clearly demarcated administrative units—districts, villages, and wards—that often bore little resemblance to existing socio-political boundaries. In many cases, these new jurisdictions cut across established clan, lineage, and settlement patterns, thereby disrupting traditional networks of authority and allegiance. Among the Mada, for instance, communities that had historically operated as relatively autonomous clan units were grouped under single district heads, effectively subordinating multiple lineages to a centralized authority. Similarly, in Mada and Gbagyi areas, the imposition of fixed territorial boundaries constrained previously fluid systems of governance and mobility, creating new forms of political identity tied to administrative units rather than kinship affiliations.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of Indirect Rule in Nasarawa Division was the creation of new political elites. Colonial officers, faced with the absence of centralized authorities in many areas, exercised considerable discretion in selecting individuals to serve as chiefs or district heads. While some appointees were drawn from established lineage heads, others were relatively marginal figures whose authority was amplified primarily through colonial endorsement. For instance, colonial administration merged Yeskwa land

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with Keffi to become Yeskwa District. The ruling Odyong Nyankpa at the time, Odyong Oda from Ajoy, was dethroned as a District Head and Wazirin Keffi was appointed by the Keffi Native Authority (NA) from the Keffi royal family and superimposed on the Odyong Nyankpa and his people; including the tribes living in the district; namely the Gwandara and the Koro among others. The first district head to be appointed from Keffi was Waziri, others that follows in order of succession were Ruskuwa, Iya Idirisu and Muhammadu. The Yeskwa people did not seems to be comfortable with this serial appointment therefore, decided to protest against these appointments with their attendant exploitation of the people through the collection of taxes, levies and gifts. As a result of persistence protest on this development a Yeskwa Man from Bagaji named Mijin Yawa was appointed to succeed Muhammadu. This did not satisfy the Yeskwa people as Mijin Yawa was seen as a loyalist to the Emir of Keffi and was not the people's choice. The protest continued and it resulted in the deputation of Mijin Yawa by the colonial Divisional Officer (DO) and the appointment of Ogara from Kuda to take place. Scribes were however, sent from Keffi to serve under him. These scribes were Mallam Habu and Mallam Ahmadu Maikwato. The Yeskwa regarded them as scribes but in effect, they were the over roll heads of all the ethnic groups in the district, the Yeskwa, the Gwandara and the Koro. These three tribes were independent of each other culturally, polititically and socially. Inter-marriage amongst them was very rare. Each of them managed their own affairs. Because of this, the so-calld scribes had to move between the three groups for the purpose of collecting taxes and settling disputes. This gave rise to the much talk about "Pada uku" of the Yeskwa District. Gradually, Ahamadu Maikwato took over the whole District and the Yeskwa people saw their leader Odyong Ogam Kuda sidelined, the struggle for supremacy and liberation however, continued among the Yeskwa people because of their numerical strength and as they saw the other tribes as settlers. In 1948, Ahmadu Maikwato was made the Emir of Keffi, while Suleiman Hidi I succeeded him as District Head. Tribal agitation continued not only in Yeskwa land. In Gbagyi and Mada communities, for example, individuals who demonstrated willingness to cooperate with colonial officials—whether through tax collection, labor mobilization, or administrative compliance—were elevated into positions of power that they had not previously occupied.

This process fundamentally altered the basis of political legitimacy. Whereas precolonial authority had been grounded in lineage seniority, ritual significance, and communal consensus, the new colonial order privileged bureaucratic recognition and administrative functionality. Chiefs derived their authority less from the people they governed and more from the colonial state that appointed and sustained them. This often created tensions within local communities, as newly appointed leaders struggled to reconcile their roles as representatives of colonial authority with expectations of traditional legitimacy.

The reconfiguration of political authority in Nasarawa Division was neither uniform nor uncontested. It involved continuous negotiation between colonial officials and local actors, as well as varying degrees of acceptance, adaptation, and resistance. In some instances, colonial administrators modified their approaches by incorporating elements of indigenous governance or by adjusting administrative boundaries to accommodate local realities. Nevertheless, the overall trajectory remained one of increasing centralization and bureaucratization.

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Importantly, the experience of Nasarawa Division reflects broader patterns observed across Northern Nigeria, while also highlighting the distinct challenges posed by decentralized societies. Among the Tiv of the Benue Valley, the imposition of warrant chiefs—figures with little or no grounding in indigenous political traditions—provoked widespread resistance and exposed the limitations of applying Indirect Rule to segmentary societies. In contrast, in the emirates of Kano and Zaria, where centralized political structures already existed, Indirect Rule reinforced the authority of emirs but simultaneously transformed the basis of their legitimacy. Emirs became increasingly accountable to colonial administrators, and their authority was reshaped to align with the demands of colonial governance rather than purely Islamic or hereditary principles.

Nasarawa Division thus occupies a ground in the historiography of Indirect Rule. It illustrates both the adaptability of colonial policy and its disruptive consequences, particularly in regions where precolonial political systems did not conform to the hierarchical models preferred by colonial administrators. The imposition of Native Authorities in such contexts required not only administrative innovation but also the active reengineering of local political structures.

In essence, Indirect Rule in Nasarawa Division was a process of political reconfiguration rather than preservation. It redefined authority, altered patterns of leadership, and introduced new institutional frameworks that reshaped the relationship between rulers and the ruled. These changes were deeply embedded in the colonial experience and laid the foundation for subsequent developments in local governance, chieftaincy institutions, and political organization in the region.

Reshaping Traditional Authority in Nasarawa Division

The introduction of Indirect Rule in Nasarawa Division brought about a fundamental transformation in the nature, structure, and functions of traditional authority. Precolonial leadership, which had been largely consultative, ritualized, and embedded in communal norms, was redefined within a colonial administrative framework that emphasized hierarchy, efficiency, and state control. Chiefs, who in many cases either did not previously exist in centralized form or held limited influence, were repositioned as key agents of the colonial state, such Sakrauyi of Gbagyi Chiefdom and Mamman of Karshi Chiefdom. Their roles expanded beyond customary responsibilities to include taxation, judicial administration, maintenance of order, and the mobilization of labor for colonial projects. In effect, traditional authority was bureaucratized, and leadership became increasingly tied to colonial expectations rather than indigenous legitimacy.

This transformation represented not merely an adjustment of existing institutions but a profound reorientation of political culture. Authority was no longer primarily derived from lineage, age, ritual status, or communal consent; instead, it became contingent upon colonial recognition, administrative competence, and the ability to implement state policies. Consequently, chiefs found themselves operating within a dual and often contradictory framework—expected to embody traditional legitimacy while simultaneously enforcing colonial directives that were frequently unpopular within their communities.

Taxation and Administrative Authority in Nasarawa Division

One of the most significant instruments through which traditional authority was reshaped was the introduction of systematic taxation during the 1920s and 1930s. In

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precolonial Nasarawa Division, economic obligations were generally expressed through communal labor, tribute, or reciprocal exchanges rather than through standardized monetary taxation. The imposition of head taxes and other levies by the colonial administration therefore represented a marked departure from established practices.

Chiefs, as the principal agents of Native Authorities, were tasked with the assessment and collection of these taxes. This responsibility placed them in direct confrontation with their communities, as taxation was widely perceived as an alien and coercive imposition. In many Ibira, Mada, and Gbagyi settlements, oral traditions recall widespread resentment toward chiefs who enforced tax policies, with some communities questioning the moral and cultural legitimacy of such demands. Chiefs who failed to meet colonial revenue expectations risked removal from office, thereby reinforcing their dependence on colonial approval rather than popular support.

The association of chiefs with taxation significantly undermined their traditional standing. Previously regarded as custodians of communal welfare and moral authority, they increasingly came to be seen as instruments of external domination. This shift eroded trust and altered the social contract between leaders and their communities, replacing reciprocal obligations with hierarchical enforcement. Moreover, the integration of taxation into local governance introduced new economic pressures that reshaped patterns of production, labor, and social relations within the region.

Native Authority Courts in Nasarawa Division

The establishment of Native Authority courts constituted another critical dimension of the transformation of traditional authority. These courts were designed to administer justice at the local level, ostensibly based on customary law. However, in practice, they represented a hybrid legal system that combined selected elements of indigenous norms with codified colonial regulations.

Prior to colonial rule, dispute resolution in Nasarawa division was typically conducted through councils of elders, lineage heads, and ritual authorities. These processes emphasized mediation, reconciliation, and the restoration of social harmony. Justice was communal and participatory, with decisions emerging from collective deliberation rather than unilateral judgment.

The Native Authority courts fundamentally altered this system. Judicial authority was centralized in the hands of chiefs and court officials, who operated within a more formalized and bureaucratic framework. Proceedings were often recorded, fines were standardized, and judgments were enforced through the authority of the colonial state. This shift produced several significant consequences:

Decline of Collective Decision-Making

The role of councils of elders and other communal institutions in dispute resolution diminished, as authority became concentrated in the hands of court officials.

Centralization of Judicial Power

Chiefs assumed judicial functions that had previously been distributed across multiple actors, thereby consolidating their authority.

Reinterpretation of Customary Law

Indigenous legal practices were selectively codified and reinterpreted to align with

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colonial administrative priorities, often stripping them of their original social and cultural context.

In many instances, the application of "customary law" within Native Authority courts bore little resemblance to precolonial practices. Colonial officials' exercised considerable influence in defining what constituted acceptable custom, leading to the standardization and sometimes distortion of local legal traditions. This process not only reshaped legal institutions but also redefined the meaning of justice within local communities.

Generally speaking, the reshaping of traditional authority under Indirect Rule in Nasarawa Division was both structural and functional. It transformed chiefs into bureaucratic agents of the colonial state, altered the economic and judicial foundations of governance, and weakened the influence of indigenous institutions that had previously ensured balance and accountability. These changes were not merely administrative adjustments but constituted a deeper reconfiguration of political authority, with far-reaching implications for social relations, legitimacy, and governance in both the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Decline of Indigenous Institutions in Nasarawa Division

A critical consequence of Indirect Rule in Nasarawa Division was the gradual erosion and marginalization of indigenous political institutions that had historically structured governance and social life. Before colonial intervention, institutions such as age-grade associations, councils of elders, lineage assemblies, and ritual authorities formed the backbone of political organization. These bodies ensured a balance of power, facilitated participatory decision-making, and upheld moral and spiritual order within the community. However, with the consolidation of Native Authority structures, these institutions experienced a steady decline in influence and functionality.

The elevation of chiefs as central figures of authority under colonial rule fundamentally altered the institutional landscape. Power that had previously been diffused across multiple actors was increasingly concentrated in the office of the chief or District head, who now exercised executive, judicial, and fiscal authority. This centralization weakened the role of councils of elders, which had traditionally served as consultative and deliberative bodies. In many cases, elders were reduced to advisory roles or excluded entirely from formal decision-making processes, thereby diminishing their capacity to check abuses of power or ensure communal accountability.

Similarly, age-grade associations—once vital for organizing communal labor, maintaining security, and fostering social cohesion—lost their relevance within the new administrative framework. Colonial authorities preferred dealing with identifiable individuals rather than collective institutions, leading to the sidelining of these groups in governance. Ritual authorities and custodians of spiritual institutions were also affected, as the secular and bureaucratic orientation of colonial administration left little room for the integration of spiritual legitimacy into formal governance structures.

The cumulative effect of these changes was a profound shift from communal and participatory governance to individualized and bureaucratic authority. Leadership became associated with office-holding and administrative power rather than collective responsibility and moral legitimacy. This transformation not only disrupted existing political balances but also redefined the relationship between leaders and their communities, with long-term

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implications for governance and social cohesion in the region.

Conflict, Resistance, and Negotiation in Nasarawa Division

The imposition of Indirect Rule in Nasarawa Division was far from a seamless process. Rather than passively accepting colonial policies, local communities actively engaged with, resisted, and reshaped the new system of governance. The interaction between colonial authorities and indigenous populations was therefore characterized by a dynamic interplay of conflict, resistance, and negotiation, revealing both the limits of colonial power and the resilience of local political traditions.

Resistance to Imposed Authority in Nasarawa Division

One of the earliest and most persistent forms of resistance emerged in response to the imposition of chiefs who lacked traditional legitimacy. In many Ibira, Koro, Bassa and Mada communities, oral traditions recount widespread dissatisfaction with leaders appointed without consultation or communal approval. Elders, lineage heads, and ritual custodians often questioned the authority of such chiefs, viewing them as agents of an alien system rather than as legitimate representatives of the people.

Resistance took various forms, ranging from subtle non-compliance to open defiance. Some communities refused to recognize the authority of appointed chiefs, declined to participate in Native Authority proceedings, or continued to rely on traditional institutions for governance and dispute resolution. In certain instances, disputes over chieftaincy appointments led to prolonged tensions within communities, reflecting the deep-rooted importance of legitimacy in indigenous political culture.

Tax Revolts in Nasarawa Division

Taxation constituted another major source of conflict under Indirect Rule. The introduction of compulsory monetary taxes was widely perceived as an unjust and intrusive measure, particularly in societies where economic obligations had previously been organized around communal labor and reciprocity. As a result, resistance to taxation became widespread across Nasarawa Division.

In several Ibira, Koro, Yeskwa, Mada, and Gbagyi settlements, communities openly refused to pay taxes, leading to confrontations with Native Authority officials and, at times, direct intervention by colonial officers. For instance, at Toto District 0n the 19th of December 1937 according to colonial records Shafan Abakwa youths gathered in numbers, with Sticks and revolt against the Tax collection. Such acts of resistance underscored the coercive dimensions of colonial rule and exposed the limitations of relying on local intermediaries to enforce unpopular policies. Tax revolts also revealed the persistence of indigenous notions of autonomy and justice, as communities sought to defend their socio-economic systems against external imposition.

Negotiated Governance in Nasarawa Division

Despite these challenges, colonial administration in Nasarawa Division was not solely reliant on coercion. Recognizing the limitations of force, colonial officials often engaged in pragmatic adjustments aimed at securing local cooperation. This gave rise to a system of negotiated governance, in which policies and administrative arrangements were continuously modified in response to local conditions and resistance.

Key strategies employed by colonial administrators included:

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Redrawing Administrative Boundaries: Adjusting district and village boundaries to align more closely with existing social and political structures.

Replacing Unpopular Chiefs: Removing or reassigning chiefs who faced strong opposition and appointing individuals with greater local acceptance.

Incorporating Local Elites: Co-opting influential elders, lineage heads, and other community leaders into the Native Authority framework to enhance legitimacy.

These measures highlight the adaptive nature of Indirect Rule. Rather than a rigid or monolithic system, it functioned as a flexible and evolving arrangement shaped by ongoing interactions between colonial objectives and indigenous realities. The process of negotiation not only facilitated the consolidation of colonial authority but also allowed local actors to influence the form and functioning of governance within their communities.

Postcolonial Legacies in Nasarawa Division

The attainment of Nigerian independence in 1960 marked a significant political transition, yet it did not dismantle the institutional foundations established under colonial rule. Instead, many of the structures and practices associated with Indirect Rule were absorbed into the emerging postcolonial state, where they continued to shape patterns of governance, authority, and political interaction.

In Nasarawa Division, the Native Authority system—with its centralized chieftaincy structures, defined territorial jurisdictions, and bureaucratic orientation—remained deeply embedded in local administration. Traditional rulers, whose authority had been consolidated under colonial rule, continued to play important roles as intermediaries between the state and local communities. Although their functions were redefined within the context of modern governance, their positions retained significant social, political, and symbolic relevance.

The persistence of these institutions underscores the enduring impact of colonial political engineering. Far from being a transient phase, Indirect Rule established a framework of authority that outlived colonialism itself, influencing the evolution of postcolonial governance, the configuration of local power structures, and the dynamics of political legitimacy in Nasarawa State and beyond.

Continuity of Traditional Authority in Nasarawa Divsion

The attainment of independence in 1960 did not result in the dissolution of traditional authority structures established under colonial rule. Rather, these institutions were incorporated into the framework of the postcolonial Nigerian state, where they continued to function as important intermediaries between government and local communities. In Nasarawa Division, the Native Authority system—though formally modified—remained influential, particularly in rural governance, dispute resolution, and community mobilization.

Traditional rulers, whose authority had been consolidated and bureaucratized during the colonial period, retained both symbolic and practical relevance. They continued to preside over customary courts, oversee land matters, and serve as custodians of cultural heritage. Their legitimacy, however, became increasingly hybrid in nature—derived partly from precolonial traditions and partly from colonial recognition and postcolonial state endorsement. This dual foundation of authority enabled them to navigate both customary and modern political spheres.

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Furthermore, successive Nigerian governments—military and civilian alike—found it expedient to maintain and utilize traditional rulers as instruments of local governance. In many instances, they were formally recognized within state structures, receiving stipends and advisory roles in local administration. This institutional continuity underscores the enduring legacy of Indirect Rule, as the colonial reconfiguration of authority provided the template upon which postcolonial governance at the grassroots level was constructed.

Political Mobilization in Nasarawa Division

The role of traditional rulers underwent significant transformation during the First Republic (1960–1966), as Nigeria transitioned into a competitive party-political system. In Nasarawa Division, as in much of Northern Nigeria, chiefs and district heads became key actors in electoral mobilization, serving as crucial links between political elites and rural populations.

Leveraging their positions of authority and influence, traditional rulers facilitated the dissemination of political messages, mobilized voter support, and, in some cases, mediated between rival political factions. Their involvement in partisan politics reflected the adaptability of colonial-era institutions to new political realities. While Indirect Rule had originally positioned chiefs as agents of colonial administration, the postcolonial context redefined them as brokers of political legitimacy and grassroots support.

This politicization of traditional authority, however, was not without consequences. It often blurred the boundaries between customary leadership and partisan allegiance, leading to tensions within communities. In some cases, chiefs who aligned with particular political parties risked alienating segments of their populations, thereby undermining their traditional role as neutral arbiters. Nonetheless, their continued relevance in political mobilization highlights the persistence of colonial-era power structures in shaping democratic processes in post-independence Nigeria.

Contemporary Implications

The creation of Nasarawa State in 1996 marked a significant milestone in the political history of the region, but it also brought to the fore enduring questions surrounding chieftaincy, territorial boundaries, and political authority. Many of the debates and conflicts that have emerged in the post-1996 period are deeply rooted in the institutional and administrative legacies of Indirect Rule.

Chieftaincy disputes, for instance, frequently draw upon colonial-era precedents to legitimize claims to authority. Boundaries established under the Native Authority system continue to serve as reference points in contests over jurisdiction, land ownership, and political representation. In areas such as Nasarawa Eggon, Akwanga, and Keffi, competing groups often invoke historical arrangements dating back to the colonial period to support their claims, illustrating the enduring relevance of these administrative decisions.

Moreover, the hierarchical structure of traditional authority introduced during colonial rule continues to shape contemporary governance. The recognition and ranking of chiefs, the delineation of chiefdoms and emirates, and the integration of traditional rulers into state institutions all reflect patterns established under Indirect Rule. These structures influence not only local governance but also broader issues of identity, belonging, and political inclusion.

In addition, the persistence of traditional authority in modern governance highlights

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the complex interplay between continuity and change in Nigeria's political development. While the postcolonial state has introduced democratic institutions and administrative reforms, it has also retained and adapted elements of the colonial system to suit contemporary needs. This hybridity underscores the lasting impact of Indirect Rule as a formative force in the political evolution of Nasarawa State.

In view of the foregoing, the contemporary political landscape of Nasarawa cannot be fully understood without reference to its colonial past. The legacies of Indirect Rule—manifested in chieftaincy institutions, territorial arrangements, and patterns of political authority—continue to shape governance, conflict, and identity in profound and enduring ways.

This study has demonstrated that Indirect Rule in Nasarawa Division between 1926 and 1960 was neither a straightforward continuation of precolonial government nor a system imposed uniformly across the region. It was a sustained process through which British officials reorganised political authority to make local communities more legible and administratively manageable. The establishment of Native Authorities, the appointment of district heads, the demarcation of jurisdictions, and the expansion of taxation and formal courts altered the location and exercise of power. These measures strengthened selected chiefs and office-holders while narrowing the role of some council of elders, lineage authorities, and other institutions through which communities had previously negotiated decisions.

The local cases discussed in this article make the consequences of that transformation visible. The reorganisation of Gade and the movement of its administrative headquarters, the placement of Udege and Loko within changing jurisdictions, the appointment of officials to districts associated with Nasarawa and Keffi, and the contest over leadership in Yeskwa show that colonial boundaries and appointments were politically consequential. The reported opposition led by Ohimegye Odalla and the tax-related protest at Toto in December 1937 further demonstrate that colonial decisions could provoke resistance rather than automatic compliance. The Yeskwa experience is especially revealing: successive appointments and the role of officials sent from Keffi exposed the gap between administrative recognition and local acceptance. These examples suggest that legitimacy remained contested even when colonial power formally recognised a particular office-holder.

Taxation and Native Authority courts also changed the practical meaning of leadership. Chiefs and district heads were expected to collect revenue, maintain order, and support the administration of justice. Such responsibilities could bring leaders into conflict with the people they governed, particularly when communities regarded appointments or levies as imposed from outside. Nevertheless, colonial rule did not eliminate indigenous agency. Communities protested, relied on established institutions, negotiated boundary changes, and sometimes secured the replacement of unpopular office-holders. Colonial administration therefore operated through a combination of coercion, collaboration, and pragmatic adjustment.

The effects of these changes extended beyond 1960. Postcolonial governments retained and adapted many of the administrative and chieftaincy structures consolidated under colonial rule. Traditional rulers continued to play important social and political roles, while colonial-era jurisdictions and precedents remained relevant to debates about identity,

authority, and representation. These continuities should not be taken to mean that contemporary institutions are unchanged replicas of colonial arrangements; rather, they reflect the continuing adaptation of inherited structures to new political conditions.

The central conclusion is that Indirect Rule in Nasarawa Division must be understood as a contested reconstruction of political authority. Its legacy was not simply the survival of tradition, but the creation of hybrid institutions in which customary claims, community consent, administrative recognition, and state power interacted. A fuller understanding of present-day chieftaincy and local governance in the area therefore requires close attention to the historical processes through which offices, boundaries, and political legitimacy were redefined during the colonial period.

2. CONCLUSION

The experience of Nasarawa Division demonstrates that colonial rule was not simply imposed from above but was a dynamic and interactive process. Its legacy remains visible today, especially in the continued relevance of traditional authority and ongoing political contestations in modern Nigeria.

First, further research should compare the experiences of individual districts and chiefdoms within the former Nasarawa Division. The cases of Yeskwa, Gade, Udege, Loko, Toto, and Umasha indicate that colonial administration did not produce identical outcomes everywhere. District-level comparison would clarify how local political structures, migration, and community responses shaped the implementation of Indirect Rule.

Second, historians should triangulate oral testimony with colonial correspondence, assessment reports, Native Authority records, court documents, and contemporary maps. Oral accounts are indispensable for recovering local perspectives, but dates, names, titles, and administrative sequences should be checked against documentary evidence wherever possible. Where records conflict, the article or future research should state the disagreement rather than force a single interpretation.

Third, contemporary chieftaincy and boundary disputes should be examined with historical sensitivity. Colonial administrative decisions can help explain the origins of particular claims, but they should not automatically be treated as conclusive proof of present-day rights or jurisdiction. Historical evidence should be assessed alongside applicable law, subsequent administrative changes, and the testimony of affected communities.

Finally, local archives and oral-history collections should be systematically preserved. Recording interviews with elders, documenting place names and administrative changes, and cataloguing relevant archival files would help safeguard community histories and provide a stronger evidential foundation for future scholarship on Nasarawa Division.

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