

The Soul of a Nation: Leadership, Destiny, and the Future of Nigeria

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Abstract: Nigeria, often hailed as the “Giant of Africa,” embodies a dynamic soul shaped by its diverse people, historical complexities, and bold aspirations. This article explores the essence of Nigeria’s identity through the interplay of leadership, citizenry, and collective vision. From the vibrant markets of Lagos to the innovative tech hubs of Abuja, Nigeria’s spirit is evident in its resilient population, particularly its youth, who drive cultural and economic progress despite systemic challenges like corruption and inequality. Historically, colonial amalgamation and post-independence struggles have tested the nation’s unity, while leadership ranging from inspiring to self-serving has shaped its trajectory. Today, Nigeria stands at a crossroads, with social movements like #EndSARS demanding accountability and economic reforms sparking both hope and hardship. The article argues that Nigeria’s future hinges on courageous leadership characterized by integrity and competence, coupled with a shared vision that transcends ethnic and religious divides. By investing in education, harnessing the diaspora’s contributions, and fostering inclusive patriotism, Nigeria can transform its potential into progress, reclaiming its soul as a beacon of African excellence. This exploration underscores the critical role of collective action in shaping a prosperous, united future.

Keywords: Nigeria, national identity, leadership, youth, destiny, aspirations, unity, progress, African excellence.

INTRODUCTION

On a dusty street in Kano, a young girl sells sachet water while reciting lines from her schoolbook. In Lagos, tech-savvy youths huddle in co-working spaces, developing mobile apps with global reach. Meanwhile, elders gather under mango trees in Enugu to debate politics, history, and the fading values of their time. These scenes, ordinary yet profound, point to a question that has long lingered in the minds of Nigerians: what truly defines the soul of this nation?

The concept of a nation's soul is difficult to pin down. Is it found in its leaders, who wield the power to shape destinies through policy and persuasion? Or does it reside in the resilience of ordinary citizens those who endure, innovate, and persist despite systemic dysfunction? Some argue that the soul of a nation lies in its shared aspirations the collective dreams that unify diverse peoples across ethnic, religious, and regional divides (Achebe, 1983; Soyinka,1999; Ratnayake, 2025).

Nigeria is a nation forged in paradox rich in culture and talent, yet frequently betrayed by its leadership. Since independence in 1960, successive leaders have oscillated between military might and democratic pretense, with few managing to embody the integrity or vision the country so desperately needs (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The scars of colonialism, civil war, and corruption still run deep, but the future is not predetermined. It is, in many ways, still up for negotiation.

This essay argues that Nigeria’s future will be defined by its ability to cultivate courageous,

accountable leadership and to renew its sense of shared national destiny. As Chinua Achebe (1983) famously stated, "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership." Leadership, however, does not exist in a vacuum; it must be shaped by citizens who demand better and institutions that support justice, transparency, and progress.

In a country of over 220 million people, with one of the youngest populations in the world (World Bank, 2023), the stakes are high. Whether Nigeria will become a beacon of African development or remain mired in cycles of dysfunction depends largely on how it reimagines its identity, redistributes opportunity, and reclaims the soul of the nation.

A Brief History of a Complex Nation

To understand the soul of Nigeria, one must first appreciate the layered complexity of its history a story shaped by kingdoms and empires, disrupted by colonial ambitions, and defined in the modern era by struggles for unity, justice, and leadership. Nigeria is not a single story. It is a tapestry of many peoples, languages, cultures, and histories that predate the nation-state by centuries (Babu & Suthari, 2024).

Pre-Colonial Diversity and Indigenous Governance

Long before British colonization, the region now known as Nigeria was home to powerful civilizations and sophisticated systems of governance. In the north, the Hausa city-states, and

later the Sokoto Caliphate, governed through Islamic law and a well-organized emirate system (Last, 1967). The Yoruba kingdoms, particularly Oyo and Ife, featured monarchical institutions with checks on power, such as the council of chiefs and the *Ogboni* society (Smith, 1988). Meanwhile, in the southeast, the Igbo people practiced a more decentralized system of village democracy, with decisions made by elders, age grades, and secret societies (Isichei, 1976; Suthari et al., 2025).

This diversity was not merely ethnic or linguistic it was institutional and philosophical. Ideas of authority, justice, and citizenship varied widely across regions. What united many of these societies, however, was a sense of identity rooted in community, spirituality, and collective responsibility. These indigenous systems were not perfect, but they were legitimate in the eyes of the people and had evolved organically over centuries.

Colonial Amalgamation and Its Consequences

In 1914, the British colonial administration merged the Northern and Southern Protectorates into one political entity: Nigeria. This was not done with the consent of the peoples involved, nor was it designed to foster unity. Rather, it was a decision driven by administrative convenience and economic interests particularly to allow the wealthier south to subsidize the cost of ruling the less economically developed north (Lugard, 1922).

Colonial rule introduced new systems English common law, centralized bureaucracy, and Western education but often in ways that clashed with or undermined indigenous structures. The use of indirect rule, especially in the north, allowed traditional leaders to maintain authority under colonial supervision, but it also froze political development and entrenched divisions (Crowder, 1968). Christianity spread widely in the south, while the north remained largely Islamic, further deepening religious and cultural differences.

Perhaps most significantly, the colonial administration failed to create a sense of shared Nigerian identity. Ethnic competition was inadvertently fostered by policies that rewarded loyalty to colonial power and discouraged national unity (Nnoli, 1978). The seeds of later tensions were sown here: mistrust, uneven development, and a lack of political integration.

POST-INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLES

Civil War, Coups, and Reform

Nigeria gained independence from Britain on October 1, 1960, amid great hope and excitement.

The early years saw vibrant political participation, a federal system designed to accommodate regional diversity, and leaders like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Ahmadu Bello who each held different visions for Nigeria's future. But that optimism soon gave way to crisis.

By 1966, ethnic tensions had escalated into military coups, the first led by young Igbo officers, and the second resulting in widespread violence against Igbos in the north (Siollun, 2009). These events paved the way for the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), also known as the Biafran War. The attempted secession of the Eastern Region under the name "Biafra" led to a brutal conflict in which over a million people, many of them civilians, died due to starvation and violence (Achebe, 2012).

Though the federal government eventually prevailed, the war left deep scars on the national psyche. Unity was restored, but reconciliation remained shallow. In the years that followed, Nigeria entered a long period of military rule punctuated by coups and authoritarianism. The oil boom of the 1970s brought enormous wealth, but much of it was squandered or stolen, further entrenching corruption and elite privilege (Watts, 2004).

Democracy returned in 1999 with the Fourth Republic, bringing new hope for reform and inclusion. However, challenges remained and still do. Ethnic tensions, corruption, weak institutions, and systemic inequality continue to limit the promise of independence. Despite these difficulties, Nigeria has also seen remarkable resilience: a robust civil society, a vibrant press, and a population that continues to demand accountability and better governance.

Leadership and the Burden of Legacy

In Nigeria, leadership is not just a position it is a deeply cultural and symbolic role. From pre-colonial kings and emirs to military heads of state and democratically elected presidents, the idea of leadership has always carried immense weight. Yet, as Nigeria continues its struggle to redefine itself in the 21st century, the legacy of its leaders good, bad, and in between remains central to its national story.

THE CULTURAL IDEA OF LEADERSHIP

From the "Big Man" to the Servant-Leader

In many African societies, including Nigeria, leadership has often been associated with the "big man" archetype a dominant figure who commands

loyalty, dispenses patronage, and embodies authority (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). This concept, inherited from both traditional rulers and colonial intermediaries, continues to influence political expectations. The “big man” is seen as a provider, protector, and symbol of strength. However, this model has also perpetuated authoritarianism, corruption, and centralized power (Joseph, 1987).

In contrast, the idea of the servant-leader one who governs with humility, prioritizes public good over personal gain, and builds institutions rather than personalities has struggled to gain traction. Figures like the late Murtala Mohammed briefly embodied this ethos, remembered for his decisive action against corruption and inefficiency before his assassination in 1976 (Siollun, 2009). Yet, servant-leadership remains more aspiration than norm in Nigerian politics.

Military vs. Civilian Leadership Eras

Nigeria’s post-independence political trajectory has been dominated by alternating periods of military and civilian rule. The military era, which spanned from 1966 to 1999 (with brief civilian interludes), left a lasting imprint on the country’s governance culture. Military rulers such as Generals Yakubu Gowon, Olusegun Obasanjo (in his first tenure), Ibrahim Babangida, and Sani Abacha centralized power and ruled by decree, weakening democratic institutions and undermining civil liberties (Suberu, 2001).

While some military leaders, like Gowon, attempted to promote national unity especially after the Biafran War many others left legacies of repression and economic mismanagement. The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced during Babangida’s rule, under pressure from international financial institutions, liberalized the economy but also deepened poverty and inequality (Olukoshi, 1993).

The return to democracy in 1999 marked a new chapter. Civilian leaders have since taken office through elections though often contested and marred by irregularities. Presidents like Obasanjo (in his second tenure), Umaru Musa Yar’Adua, Goodluck Jonathan, and Muhammadu Buhari brought varying levels of reform and continuity from military legacies. The shift from khaki to agbada did not immediately translate into democratic deepening or good governance, illustrating that democratic structures alone are not enough; democratic culture must also evolve (Diamond, 2008).

Leaders Who Shaped or Missed Historic Moments

Several Nigerian leaders stand out either for rising to the occasion or tragically missing it.

Murtala Mohammed (1975–1976) is often remembered for his anti-corruption stance and drive to overhaul public administration. Though his rule was brief, his integrity and nationalist vision continue to inspire many Nigerians (Siollun, 2009).

Olusegun Obasanjo, who ruled both as a military leader and later as a civilian president, played a central role in stabilizing the country after military rule. However, his second term was criticized for centralizing power and attempting a failed third-term bid an episode that threatened the young democracy (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2011).

Goodluck Jonathan (2010–2015), though often criticized for perceived indecisiveness and widespread corruption under his watch, earned global praise for conceding defeat peacefully in the 2015 elections a rare gesture in Nigerian politics that helped solidify democratic norms (LeVan, 2015).

Muhammadu Buhari, first a military ruler in the 1980s and later a two-term elected president, positioned himself as an anti-corruption champion. However, his civilian administration was often seen as slow, centralized, and divisive, particularly in its handling of security crises and regional discontent (Ibeanu, 2020).

These leaders' actions or inactions have had lasting consequences. Where bold, principled leadership might have turned national crises into renewal moments, political miscalculations often deepened Nigeria’s divisions and institutional decay.

DESTINY

Myth, Faith, and Identity

Destiny is a powerful word in the Nigerian imagination. From the pulpit to the parliament, in marketplaces and living rooms, Nigerians speak of destiny as both a divine promise and a national calling. It is at once personal and collective, rooted in deep religious beliefs, cultural values, and the ever-present tension between promise and reality.

How Nigerians Perceive Destiny Religious, Cultural, and National Dimensions

In Nigeria, destiny is often interpreted through the lens of faith. With Christianity, Islam, and

indigenous spirituality shaping the moral and social worldview of millions, many believe that individuals and nations have divinely appointed paths. The idea that "God has a plan for Nigeria" is a common refrain in sermons, speeches, and everyday conversations (Ukah, 2008). This sense of spiritual determinism can inspire hope and resilience, but it also risks encouraging fatalism an attitude that waits for change from above rather than from within.

Culturally, traditional beliefs also influence how Nigerians interpret fate. In Yoruba cosmology, for example, destiny (*ayanmo*) is chosen before birth and is unchangeable, but how one fulfills it depends on character (*iwa*) and effort (Idowu, 1962). Among the Igbo, individual agency is more emphasized, encapsulated in the saying "*onye kwe, chi ya ekwe*" if one agrees, their personal god agrees. These ideas, drawn from Nigeria's diverse traditions, blend to form a national psyche that reveres both divine guidance and human responsibility.

Politically, however, the notion of Nigeria's "destiny" has been more contested. Leaders and thinkers have long invoked the idea of a national mission to be a leader in Africa, a beacon of black excellence, a giant waiting to awaken. But what happens when that destiny is delayed, or derailed?

The "Giant of Africa" Narrative Hope or Hubris?

For decades, Nigeria has been referred to as the "Giant of Africa" a title based on its large population, vast resources, cultural influence, and potential economic power. It is a name that evokes pride but also pressure. The phrase suggests inevitability: that greatness is not a question of *if*, but *when*. Yet, the gap between Nigeria's potential and its lived reality often undermines this grand narrative.

Despite being Africa's largest economy by GDP and the most populous black nation in the world, Nigeria faces persistent challenges: poverty, insecurity, unemployment, and governance deficits. Critics argue that the "Giant" label has become more myth than measurement used to mask underperformance and excuse stagnation (Adebajo, 2010). Others insist that Nigeria's continental importance remains real, but must be earned through leadership, innovation, and reform not merely demographics or historical accidents.

The soul-searching over this identity is not abstract. It shapes foreign policy, economic

planning, and even the collective mood of the people. A nation that sees itself as great must act accordingly yet greatness cannot be claimed by slogan; it must be demonstrated through outcomes.

The Youth Bulge and Nigeria's Untapped Human Capital

Perhaps nowhere is Nigeria's destiny more visible or more urgent than in its youth. Over 60% of the population is under the age of 25 (World Bank, 2023). This demographic profile presents both a remarkable opportunity and a looming threat. If well educated, employed, and empowered, Nigeria's youth could drive innovation, industry, and global influence. If ignored or marginalized, they could become a source of instability, frustration, and unrest.

Already, Nigerian youth have shown what is possible. From Nollywood and Afrobeats to tech start-ups and diaspora leadership, young Nigerians are shaping the world in dynamic ways. The #EndSARS movement in 2020, led largely by young people, was not just a protest against police brutality it was a call for dignity, justice, and a reimagined Nigeria (Makinde, 2021). It was a moment when a new generation demanded to be heard, not tomorrow, but today.

Yet, systemic barriers remain. Youth unemployment hovers at alarming levels. Education quality is uneven, and many young people feel disconnected from political processes that seem dominated by the old guard (Olanrewaju, *et al.*, 2021). Unlocking Nigeria's future will require serious investment in education, entrepreneurship, digital infrastructure, and inclusive governance.

Today's Crossroads

Nigeria stands at a critical crossroads a moment of reckoning shaped by the clash between deep-rooted problems and fresh possibilities. As the nation battles economic strain, security threats, and social division, it also witnesses bursts of innovation, resilience, and youth-led activism. This intersection of crisis and creativity could determine whether Nigeria moves forward as a cohesive and prosperous society or spirals further into fragmentation.

Economic Reforms, Digital Innovation, and Ongoing Inequality

Nigeria's economy has been under strain for years, oscillating between growth spurts and recession. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed existing weaknesses overdependence on oil, weak

infrastructure, and an informal sector that struggles for support (World Bank, 2023). In response, recent governments have pursued reforms such as fuel subsidy removal, exchange rate unification, and investment in agriculture and small-scale manufacturing. These efforts aim to correct long-term distortions and attract foreign investment (IMF, 2023).

Yet these reforms have come with painful costs. The removal of fuel subsidies, though economically rational, has led to soaring prices of transportation, food, and electricity further widening the gap between rich and poor (Ezeani & Onyishi, 2023). Structural inequality remains a defining feature of Nigeria's economy. The wealth gap between urban elites and rural populations continues to grow, with millions of Nigerians living below the poverty line despite the country's resource wealth (Oxfam, 2022).

Amid these challenges, however, the digital economy has emerged as a bright spot. Nigeria's tech sector often dubbed "Silicon Lagoon" is thriving. Startups in fintech, health tech, and e-commerce are attracting global attention and investment. Companies like Flutterwave, Paystack, and Andela have demonstrated the ingenuity of Nigerian entrepreneurs (McKinsey & Company, 2022). The tech space is also creating new pathways for young Nigerians to bypass traditional gatekeepers and shape their future on their own terms.

Security Threats and Rising Ethnic/Religious Tensions

Despite progress in some areas, insecurity remains one of Nigeria's gravest challenges. From Boko Haram insurgents in the northeast to banditry and kidnapping in the northwest, separatist agitations in the southeast, and farmer-herder clashes in the middle belt, the country faces a patchwork of internal threats (Akinola, 2021). These conflicts are fueled by a mix of poverty, weak policing, climate stress, and perceived injustice.

Government responses have been mixed ranging from military crackdowns to community engagement efforts but lasting peace has remained elusive. Many citizens have lost faith in the state's ability to protect them. In some areas, vigilante groups and local militias fill the vacuum, raising concerns about further erosion of the rule of law.

What makes these security issues more dangerous is how they intersect with Nigeria's fragile national identity. Ethnic and religious identities

have become politicized, often weaponized by elites for power. When crises occur, they are too easily framed in "us vs. them" terms Christian vs. Muslim, North vs. South, Fulani vs. others deepening distrust and threatening national cohesion (Osaghae, 2020).

Social Movements Demanding Accountability and Inclusion

In the face of state failure, Nigerians especially the youth are pushing back. The #EndSARS movement of 2020 was a landmark moment in Nigeria's democratic journey. What began as a protest against police brutality quickly evolved into a broader call for accountability, transparency, and structural reform. It united Nigerians across religious, ethnic, and regional lines, even if only briefly (Makinde, 2021).

Although the government's violent suppression of the protests particularly the Lekki Toll Gate shootings left scars, the movement showed the power of organized civil resistance. It reminded the nation that its youth are not apathetic; they are deeply invested in Nigeria's future, even if they are disillusioned by its present.

Beyond protest, everyday Nigerians are demanding more from their leaders. Civil society groups are growing stronger, journalists are exposing corruption, and digital platforms are amplifying voices that were once ignored. This awakening though uneven is a necessary step toward building a more inclusive democracy.

The Future We Must Choose

Nigeria's future is not foretold it is forged. As a nation of over 200 million people, blessed with abundant resources and youthful energy, Nigeria has everything it needs to thrive. Yet, the country continues to lag behind in human development, social cohesion, and global influence. The question is no longer whether Nigeria can succeed, but whether its people and leaders are ready to make the hard choices required to move forward. The future we must choose demands bold leadership, institutional renewal, and deliberate investment in human capital.

WHAT LEADERSHIP RENEWAL MUST LOOK LIKE

Vision, Integrity, Competence

Leadership is not simply about occupying office; it is about shaping vision and inspiring trust. If Nigeria is to fulfill its long-postponed promise, it must undergo a generational and ethical renewal in

leadership. This means moving beyond politics as patronage and toward politics as service.

Vision is the first pillar. Leaders must articulate a future that Nigerians of all backgrounds can believe in, one anchored in unity, productivity, justice, and dignity. That vision must be translated into action plans, not empty rhetoric. Nigeria's history is replete with leaders who promised change but delivered inertia. To break this cycle, future leaders must pair vision with integrity and competence.

Integrity remains a fundamental deficit in public life. Corruption, both grand and petty, erodes public trust and cripples national progress. Leadership must be accountable, transparent, and ethically grounded not just in law, but in daily conduct (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2011).

Competence cannot be optional. A modern state requires technically capable leaders who understand governance, economics, security, and diplomacy. Leadership based on tribal loyalty or political deals is no substitute for skill and substance. In a 21st-century world shaped by climate shocks, AI, and global competition, Nigeria can no longer afford mediocre governance (Moghalu, 2018).

REBUILDING INSTITUTIONS

From Electoral Reform to Rule of Law

Nigeria's institutions have long suffered from politicization, underfunding, and impunity. Rebuilding them is essential if the nation is to become more just, resilient, and democratic. A critical starting point is the electoral system.

While recent electoral reforms such as the use of BVAS and electronic transmission of results have been positive steps, implementation remains patchy and often undermined by vested interests (INEC, 2023). To restore faith in democracy, elections must be free, fair, and credible. This requires an independent judiciary, empowered electoral bodies, and the political will to prosecute electoral offenders.

Beyond elections, the rule of law must become more than a slogan. Police and security agencies should protect citizens, not intimidate them. Courts should deliver timely and impartial justice. Legislatures must provide oversight, not rubber-stamp executive excesses. Without functioning institutions, even the best leaders are constrained and bad leaders are empowered.

Institutional reform is not glamorous. It involves strengthening systems, not personalities; enforcing rules, not favors. But it is the quiet work that underpins lasting development (Fukuyama, 2014).

INVESTING IN PEOPLE

Education, Health, and Skills for the 21st Century

No nation can rise above the quality of its people. Nigeria's greatest asset is its human capital but this asset remains grossly underdeveloped. Decades of underinvestment in education and healthcare have left millions of Nigerians unable to compete in a global knowledge economy.

The education system, in particular, needs urgent attention. Public schools suffer from overcrowding, poor funding, and outdated curricula. Strikes by university lecturers are routine, and the mismatch between education and employment continues to fuel graduate unemployment (Okolie *et al.*, 2021). Reform must focus on access, quality, and relevance from early childhood to tertiary and vocational training.

Healthcare is equally vital. Nigeria's health indicators remain among the lowest globally, with high maternal mortality, under-five deaths, and poor access to essential services (World Bank, 2023). A future-oriented government must invest in primary healthcare, health insurance schemes, and the training and retention of health professionals.

Equipping citizens with 21st-century skills—digital literacy, critical thinking, communication, and innovation—is non-negotiable. Countries that lead tomorrow will be those that prepare their populations today. Nigeria cannot compete with oil alone; it must cultivate the minds and hands of its people.

Citizens as Co-Authors of Destiny

A nation's future is not authored by its leaders alone. It is co-written, line by line, by the daily choices, values, and efforts of its people. Nigeria, with all its complexity and contradictions, can only become the country it dreams of if its citizens take ownership of that dream. From market stalls in Kano to classrooms in Ibadan, from tech hubs in Lagos to offices in London and Atlanta, everyday Nigerians have a role to play. The soul of the nation is not forged in Abuja alone; it is alive in communities, conversations, and collective action.

The Role of Everyday Nigerians Voting, Organizing, Building

Democracy, for all its flaws, provides a framework for citizen agency. Yet, in Nigeria, voter apathy remains high, especially among youth. The 2023 general elections, despite improvements in technology and awareness, saw only about 27% voter turnout one of the lowest in recent democratic history (INEC, 2023). Many Nigerians feel their votes don't count, citing electoral malpractice, violence, and political recycling. But disengagement only reinforces the very dysfunction people want to escape.

Participation must extend beyond elections. It includes holding local officials accountable, engaging in civic education, organizing community projects, and using digital platforms to spotlight injustice and propose solutions. Nigeria's problems are too large to be solved from the top down alone. Change must come from neighborhoods, campuses, religious spaces, and social movements. As Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka once noted, "The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny."

This civic culture is already emerging. Organizations like BudgIT, Enough is Enough Nigeria, and Yiaga Africa are equipping citizens with the tools to track budgets, monitor elections, and demand transparency. These efforts, often led by young Nigerians, demonstrate that democracy is not just a destination but a daily responsibility (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2021).

DIASPORA CONTRIBUTIONS

Remittances, Influence, Innovation

Nigeria's global diaspora estimated at over 15 million people is an often underestimated force in national development. In 2022 alone, Nigerians abroad sent back over \$20 billion in remittances, making it one of the top remittance-receiving countries in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2023). These funds support families, education, healthcare, and small businesses, effectively serving as an informal social safety net.

But diaspora contributions go beyond money. Nigerian professionals abroad are influencing academia, medicine, tech, media, and policy in ways that elevate the country's global image. In Silicon Valley, Nigerian founders are building billion-dollar startups. In the UK and US, Nigerian doctors, lawyers, and academics are shaping public institutions. Their success stories challenge

negative stereotypes and create transnational networks of knowledge and capital (Iheduru, 2011).

Some return to invest, teach, or serve in public office. Others influence from afar through advocacy, philanthropy, and collaboration. The challenge and opportunity is to better integrate this diaspora energy into national planning and policymaking. Dual citizenship policies, diaspora voting rights, and investment incentives could help bridge the gap between those abroad and the home they still care deeply about (A-Clottey, 2024).

A New Patriotism Based Not on Ethnicity, but Shared Progress

For too long, patriotism in Nigeria has been transactional or tribal. Politicians appeal to ethnic loyalty when seeking power, but rarely deliver on national unity once in office. This zero-sum identity politics has kept Nigeria fragmented, breeding suspicion and resentment among its over 250 ethnic groups. But a new patriotism is possible one based not on where you're from, but what you're building (Rubinstein, 2024).

Such patriotism is not blind allegiance. It is active commitment to a shared future. It means caring who governs Kaduna even if you're from Calabar. It means defending the rights of a Fulani farmer and a Yoruba entrepreneur with equal fervor. It means seeing injustice anywhere as a threat to justice everywhere. In this spirit, Nigeria's youth have shown leadership, especially during the #EndSARS protests, where tribal and religious boundaries were momentarily replaced by a collective demand for dignity (Makinde, 2021).

The work of building this inclusive patriotism must begin in schools, religious institutions, media, and homes. Civic education must be revived, not just as curriculum, but as culture. History must be taught honestly, not sanitized. And leaders must model the values they claim to uphold (Benneh, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Reclaiming the Soul of Nigeria

Nigeria stands at a crossroads a nation rich in people, culture, and promise, yet weighed down by inequality, corruption, and decades of unfulfilled potential. This journey through Nigeria's soul its history, leadership, identity, and destiny has revealed that our future is not preordained. Rather, it will be shaped by the choices we make as a

people. Will we continue on a path of disillusionment and disunity, or will we rise to define a new direction grounded in integrity, shared vision, and national rebirth?

History reminds us that Nigeria's struggles are complex but not unique. Like many post-colonial states, the nation inherited weak institutions and fractured identities (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Since independence, it has swung between authoritarianism and fragile democracy, between visionary moments and wasted opportunities. Leadership has often failed to unite or transform, leaving the heavy lifting to civil society and everyday Nigerians.

Yet, there is hope. Across the country and abroad, a new consciousness is emerging one that insists that nation-building is not just the responsibility of politicians, but of every citizen. Leadership must certainly be renewed: competent, courageous, and honest. But without a culture of active citizenship, even the best reforms will wither. As Achebe (1983) famously wrote, "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership." But that failure continues because we, the followers, allow it.

This is the moment to reclaim the soul of Nigeria not as a nostalgic ideal but as a forward-looking movement. A soul defined not by tribe or religion, but by shared dignity, equity, and progress. This reclamation calls for civic action: voting with purpose, organizing with integrity, mentoring youth, investing in our communities, and holding institutions accountable. The idea of "one Nigeria" must evolve from a constitutional slogan into a lived experience.

The Nigerian diaspora, too, plays a critical role in shaping this future through remittances, innovation, and global influence (Iheduru, 2011). But the deepest transformation must occur within: in classrooms, streets, farms, and digital spaces where new values are taught, challenged, and enacted.

As citizens, we must ask ourselves: what kind of Nigeria do we want to leave for the next generation? A fragmented state marked by cynicism and survival, or a flourishing society rooted in justice, opportunity, and solidarity? The future is not waiting it is already being shaped by today's choices.

The soul of Nigeria is not lost. It lives in the hearts of its people. The only question now is: what will we do with it?

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