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Redefining "Nigerian-Ness" As A Foundation for Police-Public Trust and National Development

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Abstract
The persistent tension between the Nigerian police and the public reflects deeper fractures in the nation's collective identity. Nigeria has functioned as an artificial construct lacking a unifying cultural ethos, resulting in institutions, particularly law enforcement, still being perceived as alien and oppressive rather than protective. This paper argues that sustainable police-public relations cannot be achieved without first addressing Nigeria's crisis of national identity. Through a qualitative analysis of pop culture mediums (movies and music) and comparative case studies (China's patriotic nationalism and Rwanda's post-genocide cultural reconstruction), the study identifies Nigeria's contested cultural narratives and explores how a deliberate cultural renaissance could redefine "Nigerian-ness" in ways that foster institutional trust. Findings suggest that in Nigeria's complex cultural landscape while ethnic fragmentation and historical distrust hinder cohesion, shared postcolonial struggles, vibrant creative industries, and indigenous communal values provide a foundation for reimagining identity. The paper proposes, state-sponsored civic nationalism campaigns, community policing models rooted in traditional justice systems to reshape public perceptions of law enforcement, Police reform must be embedded in a broader sociocultural agenda that prioritizes a unifying identity as the cornerstone of sustainable development and institutional legitimacy in Nigeria.

Keywords*:* Cultural renaissance, institutional trust, national identity, police, public, and social cohesion

Introduction

What is Nigeria? The question itself is a national pastime, the answer a convoluted mess of competing narratives. It is a geographical expression birthed by colonial amalgamation in 1914; a patchwork of ancient nations forced into a reluctant marriage; an economic powerhouse perpetually on the brink of promise; a "giant of Africa" struggling to stand on fractured legs (Osaghae,

1998). This definitional crisis is not merely academic; it is the foundational pathology from which many of Nigeria's most pressing challenges stem and nowhere is this more evident than in the profound and often violent schism between the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) and the public it is meant to serve. This paper proceeds from the conviction that this dysfunctional relationship is a symptom, not the disease itself, the disease being the absence of a cohesive, legitimizing national identity.

For decades, the discourse on police reform has focused on technical solutions: better training, increased funding, and legislative overhauls like the Police Act (2020) yet, these efforts have yielded minimal returns. The reason is that a force originally designed as an instrument of control; to protect European lives and property and enforce colonial order, cannot be reformed into a servant of the people without a fundamental shift in the very concept of "the people" it serves, technical adjustments are akin to repainting a crumbling wall. The foundation is unsound.

Therefore, this paper argues that sustainable police reform is impossible without a concurrent, deliberate cultural renaissance that must be embarked upon as a collective audit of the Nigerian experience curating a new "Nigerian-ness" from the fragments of pre-colonial heritage, shared post-colonial struggles, and the vibrant, hybrid reality of contemporary pop culture. This is not an abstract cultural exercise but a practical necessity for institutional legitimacy and national development.

Theoretical Link Between Identity, Legitimacy, and Culture

To understand the contemporary NPF, one must first apprehend the concept of coloniality, as distinct from colonialism. While colonialism refers to a historical period of political and administrative domination, coloniality (Quijano, 2000; 2007) denotes the persistent patterns of power, culture, knowledge, and being that outlive formal colonial rule and continue to structure modern society. It is the "dark side" of modernity, the logic upon which discriminatory hierarchies of race, culture, and knowledge were built and which remains embedded in contemporary institutions, epistemologies, and subjectivities.

This framework is essential for analyzing the NPF as a living artifact of coloniality. Established formally by the British in 1861 and later consolidated into the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) in 1930, the force's foundational mandate was centered on the protection of European lives and economic interests, which in practice meant enforcing colonial order and facilitating resource extraction (Tamuno, 1970). Its design embedded what scholar Frantz Fanon (1961) identified as the "Manichean world" in *The Wretched of the Earth,* divided into the "settler" (represented by the state and its agents) and the "native" (the populace). The police were the physical embodiment of this divide, deployed as cultural outsiders to quell dissent, enforce punitive taxes, and protect colonial economic interests.

Post-independence, rather than undergoing a process of decolonization, the NPF was repurposed. As argued by Mahmood Mamdani (1996), the colonial

state bequeathed a "bifurcated" system: direct rule for urban centres and indirect rule for the rural native populace, which decentralized despotism through traditional rulers. This institutionalized ethnicity as a political identity. The post-colonial state retained the coercive apparatus of the colonial state, not to serve a new "civic" nation, but to maintain the power of successive elites, many of whom operated as what Peter Ekeh (1975) theorized as navigating two publics: the "amoral civic public" (the state, seen as a resource to be plundered) and the "moral primordial public" (the ethnic homeland, to which one owes allegiance). The police, as part of the amoral civic public, are thus not expected to be moral or just; they are perceived as just another group seeking to extract from the system.

Therefore, the NPF exemplifies what Aníbal Quijano calls the "coloniality of power," where the racial and cultural hierarchies of the colonial era have morphed into socio-economic and political hierarchies that persist today. Its legitimacy deficit is not an operational failure but a constitutional one, rooted in its genesis as an instrument of control rather than service.

This theory excels at explaining **why** Nigerian institutions are broken by tracing their pathologies to a foundational genetic defect. It however offers little analytical insight on how newer post-colonial identities might be actively constructed or how the agents within this system might escape this colonial inheritance. This static, backward looking orientation results in a vacuum regarding the process of identity formation, social negotiation and cultural production that occurs in the intersection of colonial power thus necessitating the second, supplementary lens.

If **decoloniality** explains the historical poison in the institutional well, **constructivist nationalism** explains the failure to create an antidotal sense of shared identity. Contrary to primordialist views, this perspective, championed by **Benedict Anderson (1983)**, posits that nations are not ancient, natural entities but socially constructed "imagined communities." They are imagined because members will never know most of their fellow-members, yet in each of their minds lives the image of their communion and a sense of national belonging actively made through shared narratives, symbols and rituals. This imagination is facilitated by "print capitalism" the novel and the newspaper, as well as modern pop culture mediums like music and movies as considered herein, which creates a shared sense of time, space, and discourse.

Nigeria presents a stark case of an "under-imagined" or "contested" community. Its arbitrary borders, drawn by colonial fiat (Afigbo, 2005), enclosed hundreds of distinct ethnic nationalities with divergent histories, cultures, and worldviews. The British strategy of indirect rule further hardened these ethnic identities, making them the primary unit of political negotiation and competition (Mamdani, 1996). Post-independence, the state has failed to produce a compelling, unifying national narrative capable of overriding these sub-national loyalties. State-led projects like the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) and the National Orientation Agency (NOA) have been largely perceived as ineffective or hypocritical, unable to compete with the powerful,

emotionally resonant pull of ethnic and religious identities. In the absence of a robust "Nigerian-ness," the police force, as a federal institution, is never seen as "ours." An officer from a different ethnic group is not a fellow citizen in uniform but a representative of an often hostile, "other" community, where the shared moral and cultural alignment necessary for an Andersonian imagined community is absent, making the very concept of national police force a contested idea.

The sequencing of events from theories of coloniality and constructivism culminate in the crisis of police legitimacy. While the former gives historical context and the latter lends explanatory power into **how** new nations are imagined into existence, the two frameworks still fall short with regards to explaining why some imagined communities command a sense of cohesion and obedience while others are met with resistance. It does not pinpoint what grants institutions legitimacy in the eyes of those who imagine themselves as its subjects and this gap between the existence of an imagined community and the daily practice of obeying its agents is precisely where the third theoretical lens comes in.

Legitimacy theory, particularly as developed in policing scholarship by Tom Tyler (2006) and Tankebe and Libeling (2013), argues that public compliance with the law is driven more by the perceived legitimacy of authorities than by fear of punishment. Legitimacy is the belief that an institution has the right to rule and that its commands ought to be obeyed. This legitimacy is built on two key pillars:

1. Perceived Procedural Justice: The perception that the institution's processes are fair, transparent, and respectful. People must feel they have a "voice" and are treated with dignity.
2. Shared Group Identity (or Relational Model): The perception that the police are "of the people" and share their fundamental values and morals. As Jackson, Bradford, Hough, Myhill, Quinton and Tyler (2012) argue, when citizens identify with the police as part of their own social group, they are more likely to grant them legitimacy.

In Nigeria, both pillars are shattered. The coloniality of the NPF ensures it operates with procedural injustice, reflecting its original design as a coercive, rather than protective, force. Its history and daily practices breed distrust. More fundamentally, the failure to construct a shared national imagined community means there is no shared group identity between the police and the policed. The police are not seen as "us," but as "them" the enforcement arm of a state that is itself perceived as alien and predatory.

The interplay of the triadic theoretical framework utilised in this study reveals a vicious cycle where the coloniality of the state and its institutions actively prevents the formation of a cohesive national identity (constructivism), and this absence of a shared identity, in turn, fatally undermines the legitimacy of those very institutions. Attempting technical police reform without simultaneously

addressing this foundational identity crisis is therefore, a futile endeavour. The path to legitimacy must run through a decolonial project that consciously dismantles the colonial power matrix and actively fosters the construction of a new, inclusive imagined community. This is the essential work that Nigerian pop culture, as our analysis will show, can be leveraged toward.

Pop Culture as A Site of Fragmentation and Renaissance

The choice of pop culture as the primary vehicle for analyzing and engineering a new Nigerian identity is strategically grounded in its unique capacity to shape consciousness, transcend elite-controlled narratives, and reflect a decolonial reality. While state-led initiatives like the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) and the National Orientation Agency (NOA) have largely failed to foster a cohesive identity, pop culture operates as a dynamic, bottom-up arena where "Nigerian-ness" is continuously negotiated and performed. Its potency lies in three key attributes, that directly engage with the paper's theoretical framework: its pervasive reach which facilitates the construction of community, its emotional resonance, which shapes perceptions of legitimacy and its inherent decolonial potential.

Firstly, pop culture commands an unparalleled audience and influence, particularly among Nigeria's vast youth demographic. Nollywood is the second-largest film industry globally (BBC, 2022), while Afrobeats has become a dominant force on the international music scene (The Nation, 2025). This expansive reach gives cultural products a penetrative power that state propaganda lacks. This massive reach is a prerequisite for constructing an imagined community on a national scale. When Burna Boy sings "*dem dey kill our sista, dem dey kill our broda"* in "20 10 20," he is not merely entertaining; he is articulating a shared, pan-Nigerian trauma of police brutality, using the national lingua franca of Pidgin English to bypass ethnic divisions a sonic solidarity that, amplified across social media, creates a fleeting but powerful experience of collective identity that state ceremonies have failed to achieve, a performative enactment of the shared group identity that is otherwise absent in the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Secondly, pop culture's power is rhetorical and affective, persuading through narrative and emotion rather than dry edicts, an affective power that is crucial for shaping public perceptions of institutional legitimacy. It operates on what Ikenna Emmanuel Onwuegbuna, a musicologist and senior lecturer at the University of Nigeria Nsukka's department of music, describes as a fundamentally musical culture: "*The African child is conceived, nurtured and raised in rhythm… Music follows us from the womb to the tomb.*" This cultural embeddedness gives artistic expression a persuasive power that transcends political discourse. For instance, the EndSARS movement was not led by political parties but by youth using hashtags, viral videos, and protest music as their primary tools of mobilization. The hashtag #WeAreNigerians became a powerful rhetorical frame, persuading millions to identify with a collective struggle against a common oppressor, demonstrating pop culture's ability to

perform the "imagined community" Anderson (1983) theorized, but in a form that contested, rather than affirmed, the state's authority.

Finally, and most critically, pop culture offers a site for transgressive decoloniality a creative process of re-imagining identity by blending retrieved indigenous elements with modern constructs, actively de-westernizing the narrative space. Nollywood films like "*Jagun Jagun*" (2023) do not just critique the failed colonial state model; they visually model alternatives by valorizing pre-colonial justice systems and communal ethics, not cultural escapism but world-building, demonstrating how indigenous philosophies like the Yoruba *Omoluabi* (human dignity) and Igbo *Igwebuike* (collective strength) can serve as ethical foundations for modern institutions. Therefore, pop culture is not a mere tool but the most viable crucible for forging a new, decolonial Nigerian identity because it is where the people, especially the youth, are already actively doing the work.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing thematic content analysis (TCA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Krippendorff, 2018) to examine how Nigerian identity and policing are portrayed in cultural products. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to identify 12 Nollywood films and 21 Nigerian protest/political music that explicitly engage with themes of identity, governance, and policing, curated to include both commercially successful and critically acclaimed works between to ensure a representation of culturally resonant narratives. The analysis was guided by a triad of interconnected theoretical lenses that illuminate the nexus of identity, power and legitimacy: decoloniality, constructivist nationalism and institutional legitimacy theory.

The TCA was conducted in an iterative, multi-stage process to ensure analytical rigor and trustworthiness. After selection, the researchers repeatedly viewed the films and listened to the songs, transcribing lyrics and noting initial impressions. The data was then systematically coded to identify basic elements relevant to the research questions (i.e. “portrayal of police as corrupt," "lyrics invoking ethnic unity," "depiction of pre-colonial justice" etc) these initial codes were collated and analysed to identify broader, recurring patterns of meaning (themes) guided by the theoretical framework. The potential themes were reviewed against the entire dataset to ensure they accurately represented the data and refining the themes for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Clear definitions and concise names for each theme were developed. The resulting thematic structure directly informed the creation of the tables presented in the discussion. The final analysis, as presented in the Discussion section, weaves together the extracted data with the theoretical framework to construct a coherent argument.

To contextualize Nigeria's experience, comparative case studies of China's patriotic education campaigns and Rwanda's post-genocide cultural reconstruction (e.g., Ingando camps, Gacaca courts) were conducted. These were

analyzed to distill transferrable lessons and highlight risks of authoritarianism in identity engineering.

Analysis of Pop Culture: Nollywood's Role

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of Nollywood Films through a Theoretical Lens

THEME 1: THE COLONIALITY OF POWER IN NIGERIA		
Sub-Theme	**Theme Description**	**Films**
The Police as an Alien, Coercive Force	Portrays the police not as public servants but as a violent, occupying force, reflecting their historical genesis as an instrument of colonial control. This validates Quijano's concept of coloniality, showing the institution's enduring logic of oppression rather than protection.	*Hostages* (1997) *Issakaba* (2000)
Systemic Corruption and the "Amoral Civic Public"	Depicts corruption as the fundamental operating principle of state institutions, mirroring Peter Ekeh's theory. The police and political class are shown plundering the state ("civic public") for personal gain, justifying public perception of them as inherently immoral and predatory.	*King of Boys* (2018), *The Black Book* (2023)
Historical Roots of Present-Day Dysfunction	Explicitly links contemporary issues of corruption, violence, and political instability to the legacy of colonial rule and post-colonial military regimes. This reinforces the decolonial argument that the present cannot be understood without confronting this toxic inheritance.	*October 1* (2014) *The Herbert Macaulay Affair* (2019)
THEME 2: NIGERIA AS A CONTESTED IMAGINED COMMUNITY		
Ethnic and Religious Divisions	Narratives are driven by the friction between sub-national identities, showcasing Nigeria as an "under-imagined" community where ethnic loyalty (the "primordial public") trumps national allegiance, per Anderson and Ekeh.	*76* (2016), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013)
The Search for a Unifying Culture	Actively attempts to construct a shared identity by framing local traditions as national symbols or by modelling inter-ethnic solidarity. This demonstrates the constructivist process of building an imagined community from the bottom up.	*Aso Ebi Diaries* (2025) *76* (2016)
THEME 3: CRISIS OF INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY		
Procedural Injustice and the Demand for Accountability	Highlights the absence of fair and transparent processes, a key pillar of Tyler's legitimacy theory. The films either document this injustice or narrate a quest for accountability, modeling the public's desire for procedural justice.	*30 Days* (2006) *The Black Book* (2023)
Vigilantism as a Response to Legitimacy Vacuum	The emergence of vigilante groups is framed as a logical, community-backed response to the state's failure to provide security. This powerfully illustrates the complete collapse of	*Issakaba* (2000)

	the NPF's legitimacy and the public's withdrawal of consent.	
THEME 4: DECOLONIAL WORLD-BUILDING		
Valorising Indigenous Epistemes and Justice Systems	Looks to pre-colonial ethical systems and conflict resolution models as viable alternatives to the failed Western state model. This represents a decolonial project of "world-building," suggesting legitimacy can be rebuilt on indigenous foundations.	*Jagun Jagun* (2023) *Maami* (2011)
Afrocentric Storytelling as Counter-Narrative	Consciously employs filmic language, aesthetics, and narrative structures rooted in Nigerian cultures to counter Western cinematic hegemony. This act of "telling our own stories" is a fundamental practice of decoloniality in the cultural sphere.	*The Narrow Path*, *Maami* (2 011)
Projecting Authenticity and Fostering National Pride	The global success of authentic, high-quality Nigerian films builds immense internal pride and projects a self-defined image. This fosters a positive shared group identity, which is a prerequisite for granting legitimacy to national institutions.	*The Black Book* (2023) *Living in Bondage* (1992)

Source: Thematic Content Analysis of Selected Nollywood Films (2025)

The analysis of Nigerian cinema as seen above, reveals that Nollywood functions not merely as an entertainment industry but as a primary arena where the nation's protracted crisis of identity is actively narrated, critiqued, and reimagined. The films demonstrate a persistent engagement with the country's fragmented socio-political fabric, directly reflecting the abstract's premise that institutional distrust is rooted in a deeper lack of a unifying cultural ethos. From the vigilante justice in Issakaba and the politically-motivated police brutality in Tade Ogidan's Hostages to the high-level corruption depicted in King of Boys, Nollywood consistently portrays state institutions, particularly law enforcement, as alien, corrupt, or entirely redundant a public validation of the public's lived experience and Quijano's concept, showing that the police are often perceived as instruments of oppression rather than protection, a direct legacy of their colonial origins and their subsequent service to powerful interests rather than the citizenry. This is compounded by narratives of systemic corruption, such as those in King of Boys and The Black Book, which visually articulate Peter Ekeh's theory of the "amoral civic public." By depicting state institutions as predatory networks for personal enrichment, these films justify the public's perception of the police as inherently illegitimate. Furthermore, movies like October 1 and The Herbert Macaulay Affair explicitly tether present-day dysfunction to the legacy of colonial and military rule, reinforcing the decolonial argument that Nigeria's contemporary pathologies cannot be understood without confronting this historical inheritance.

The films also highlight the absence of procedural justice while also narrating a fervent demand for it, as seen in 30 Days and The Black Book. More starkly, the emergence of vigilante groups in Issakaba is framed not as criminality but as a logical community response to the state's failure to provide security a narrative that powerfully illustrates the complete collapse of the NPF's legitimacy and represents a public withdrawal of consent from the state's monopoly on violence.

Simultaneously, Nollywood vividly illustrates Nigeria's status as a contested imagined community with films like 76 and Half of a Yellow Sun being driven by the friction between sub-national identities, showcasing a nation where ethnic and religious loyalty (Ekeh's "primordial public") consistently trumps national allegiance, thereby fracturing Anderson's notion of a cohesive national imagination. However, running parallel to this is a constructivist project aimed at building unity. This is evident in the works of Filmmakers like Tunde Kelani who employ an Afrocentric methodology to elevate indigenous epistemes and critique the lingering effects of colonialism, thereby attempting to reconnect Nigerians with a pre-colonial identity. This effort to define a cultural core exists alongside narratives that explore the stark ethnic and religious divisions hindering national cohesion.

Crucially, the global success of films like The Black Book and the works of stars like Genevieve Nnaji are not just commercial victories; they are acts of cultural representation that shape how Nigerians see themselves and how the world sees Nigeria. As The Black Book director Editi Effiong emphasized, the goal was to show "Lagos as we Nigerians see it," an authenticity that fosters internal pride and projects a self-defined image to the world. This dual role is further exemplified by films like Aso Ebi Diaries, which takes a specific Yoruba tradition and frames it as a unifying national (even West African) phenomenon, actively constructing a shared cultural language from diverse local practices.

Ultimately, Nollywood demonstrates that cultural expression is inextricably linked to institutional legitimacy. The industry does not just comment on society; it participates in shaping it. By portraying the consequences of a fractured identity from the vigilante solutions in Issakaba and 30 Days to the historical roots of corruption in October 1st and The Herbert Macaulay Affair, these films make an abstract argument tangible. They show that police reform cannot happen in a vacuum. Sustainable trust must be built on a cultural foundation that Nigerians recognize as their own, a foundation that Nollywood is actively, if sometimes unwittingly, helping to build through its powerful and pervasive storytelling.

Analysis of Pop Culture - Musical Analysis

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Nigerian Music through a Theoretical Lens

THEME 1: SUBVERTING THE COLONIALITY OF POWER		
Subtheme	**Description**	**Songs**
Condemnation of the Coercive State	Songs that name and shame the police/military as violent, oppressive, extractive actors mirroring their colonial-era function.	• Majek Fashek – "Police Brutality" (1989): • Fela Kuti – "Zombie" (1976): • Dremo – "Thieves in Uniform" (2020)
Affirmation of Indigenous Values & Communal Strength	Songs that promote indigenous philosophies of mutuality, solidarity, and collective humanity against an alienating state.	• Asa – "Jailer" (2007): • Kush – "Let's Live Together" (2013): • Veno Marioghae – "Nigeria Go Survive" (1985):
THEME 2: DIAGNOSING THE CRISIS OF POLICE LEGITIMACY		
Subtheme	Description	Songs
Procedural Injustice & Systemic Corruption	Songs documenting extortion, unfair treatment, and corruption that erode trust in state processes.	• Eedris Abdulkareem – "Jaga Jaga" (2004) • Falz – "This is Nigeria" (2018) • Ruggedman – "Is Police Your Friend?" (2020)
Rejecting a Shared Group Identity	Songs emphasising an "Us vs. Them" divide, casting police as an alien force rather than fellow citizens.	• Burna Boy – "20 10 20" (2020) • Timaya – "Dem Mama" (2007) • Fela Kuti – "Beast of No Nation" (1989)
THEME 3: THE BLUEPRINT FOR AN IMAGINED COMMUNITY		
Subtheme	Description	Songs
Patriotism & Collective Destiny	Songs crafting national pride, unity, and shared purpose of building affective ties of an imagined community.	• Timi Dakolo – "Great Nation" (2011) • Sonny Okosun – "Which Way Nigeria?" (1984) • Mavin – "Arise" (2014) • Sound Sultan – "Motherland" (2016) • Evi Edna Ogholi – "One Kilometer" (1988)

Source: Thematic Content Analysis of Selected Nigerian Music (2025)

In the late 1980s, Majek Fashek's "Police Brutality" directly named the insanity of a system where security forces *"loot," "shoot," and "kill all leaders of tomorrow."* This sentiment was powerfully echoed in the early 2000s by Eedris Abdulkareem's "*Jaga Jaga*," which became a banned yet enduring street anthem for a nation where "*everything scatter scatter, poor man dey suffer, suffer*." This

legacy of critique culminated in the soundtrack of the 2020 #EndSARS protests, which saw a resurgence of Fela Kuti's timeless indictments like "*Zombie*" and "*Beast of No Nation,*" proving the tragic continuity of autocratic governance. This musical corpus validates the public's experience and even serves as an alternative historical education in a country where formal history education at the primary level has been laughably sidelined, teaching younger generations about events like the Odi massacre through Timaya's "*Dem Mama*." The modern manifestations of this critique are even more direct. Falz's "*This is Nigeria*" serves as a stark tableau of societal ills, from SARS brutality to failed infrastructure, while Burna Boy's *"20 10 20*" acts as a sonic monument to the Lekki Toll Gate massacre, his lyrics "*You carry army go kill many youth for Lekki"* serving as a crucial counter-narrative to official denials.

The analysis of Nigerian music reveals a dynamic and continuous negotiation of national identity and institutional legitimacy, articulated through the potent, affective medium of sound. The musical corpus does not merely comment on society; it actively functions as a decolonial archive and a constructivist workshop relentlessly subverting the coloniality of power. This critique is powerfully complemented by music that actively engages in the project of constructivist nationalism, attempting to forge the "imagined community" that the state has failed to build. From Sonny Okosun's "*Which Way Nigeria*?" and Veno Marioghae's "*Nigeria Go Survive*" to Kush's "*Let's Live Together*" and the patriotic anthems of Timi Dakolo and Mavin, these songs craft a national identity based on collective resilience, endurance, and the strategic reframing of ethnic diversity as a source of strength, directly attempting to supply the shared group identity that is a prerequisite for institutional trust.

The most profound songs operate at the intersection of these frameworks, diagnosing the crisis while simultaneously proposing a path to legitimacy through a rediscovery of shared values. Asa's "*Jailer*" is a masterclass in this synthesis. By declaring, "*I'm in chains, you're in chains too,*" she performs a radical move, dismantling the Manichean divide between the oppressed and the oppressor. She argues that the entire system dehumanizes all participants, thereby suggesting that legitimacy cannot be restored through technical reforms alone but must be rooted in a philosophical recognition of our common humanity. This mirrors the argument championed in our paper, that effective change must be embedded in a broader sociocultural agenda.

Comparative Models of National Identity Construction

Table 3: Summary Table of Comparative Analysis of Rwanda, China and Nigeria

Feature	China	Rwanda	Nigeria
Primary Mechanism	Top-down, state-sponsored civic nationalism.	Bottom-up, state-guided cultural renaissance and ethnic de-emphasis.	Ad-hoc and organic, but largely fragmented and contested.
Unifying Narrative	Civilizational continuity (5,000 years), CCP leadership, economic rise, and patriotic pride against external threats.	Unity and reconciliation; moving *"Beyond Ethnicity"* to a single Rwandan identity; learning from the 1994 genocide.	Competing narratives of ethnicity, religion, and region; no overriding, state-promoted national story.
Role of History	Curated and emphasized to showcase glory, resilience, and inevitable rise under Party leadership.	Confronted and re-framed as a tragic lesson from division, forming the imperative for unity.	A point of contention; colonial amalgamation often cited as source of artificiality, with pre-colonial histories kept separate.
Institutional Link	Institutions (e.g., police) portrayed as guardians of national stability, prosperity, and sovereignty, earning legitimacy through this role.	Institutions (e.g., police) essential to enforcing the new social contract of unity and preventing a return to chaos.	Institutions, especially the police, seen as vestiges of colonial state, "alien" entities serving elites rather than the people.
Key Strategies	Patriotic education, media control, celebration of achievements, suppression of dissent as unpatriotic.	*Ingando* (solidarity camps), *Umuganda* (community work), outlawing ethnic identification, promoting new symbols.	No coherent strategy. Identity left to evolve (or fracture) naturally, with state initiatives often seen as biased.
Economic & Developmental Criticism	*Debt Trap Diplomacy*: Partner countries risk unsustainable debt. *Limited Technology/Job Transfer*: Weak local employment and skills development.	*Economic Vulnerability*: Reliance on external aid/resources; sustainability tied to foreign support.	Weak, inconsistent economic base fuels fragmented national identity; ethnic competition often linked to access to resources.

Political & Governance Criticism	*Top-Down Authoritarianism*: Single-party rule suppresses pluralism, dissent framed as unpatriotic.	*Centralized Control & Limited Political Openness*: Strong centralization undermines genuine democracy.	Highly fragmented federalism; governance often driven by ethnic patronage, weak state legitimacy.
Social & Cultural Criticism	*Suppression of Diverse Identities*: Han-centric nationalism marginalizes minorities (e.g., Uyghurs, Tibetans).	*Superficial Reconciliation & Restricted Discourse*: Unity narrative may silence deep ethnic grievances, storing long-term tensions.	Deep-seated ethnic, religious, and regional divisions remain unresolved, with no credible integrative cultural or civic project.

Source: Comparative Analysis of National Models (2025)

The analysis of Nigerian pop culture reveals a society actively wrestling with its identity, a constant push and pull between a searing critique of a failed state and a yearning, almost desperate, for a unified nation. It is from this fertile ground of artistic negotiation that the lessons of international models must be sown. The journey from this cultural diagnosis to a political prescription necessitates a global perspective, and here, the cases of China and Rwanda offer powerful insights as despite their vastly different contexts, they have successfully engineered a sense of shared identity that directly bolsters the legitimacy of state institutions providing lessons on the interplay between national narrative, institutional legitimacy, and public trust. While neither model is directly transferable to Nigeria's complex, democratic context, their comparative analysis yields crucial strategic insights.

Rwanda’s model emerges from the absolute necessity of rebuilding a society after a catastrophic failure of identity, an approach that is less about instilling pride in a millennia-old civilization and more about surgically deconstructing the toxic ethnic identities that fuelled a genocide and replacing them with a new, singular "Rwandan" identity.

When the collective memory of the denied Lekki Toll Gate massacre is seared into the national psyche through song, it echoes the need for a formal, cathartic confrontation with historical state violence. Rwanda’s lesson is that such a reckoning cannot happen through a cold, distant judiciary alone; it must be culturally resonant. The **Gacaca** courts system (a traditional restorative justice mechanism to manage the legacy of mass state and communal violence, thereby re-establishing a social contract based on security and reconciliation) is a paramount example of leveraging indigenous frameworks for truth-telling can be a profound tool for communal healing. For Nigeria, this translates directly into the proposed community-based forums, where the testimony of victims of police brutality, co-facilitated by traditional rulers and civil society, could begin to dismantle the wall of denial and impunity. This process would operationalize the empathetic connection Asa makes in “Jailer” transforming a philosophical

insight into a institutional mechanism for acknowledging that the violence of the system dehumanizes everyone, perpetrator and victim alike. Similarly, practices like **Umuganda** (communal labor) physically enact the value of unity, offering a model for how shared identity can be built through collective action rather than mere rhetoric and **Ingando** camps to ideologically inculcate it. Here, the police gain legitimacy not from their role in a grand civilizational project, but from their absolute necessity in guaranteeing the security of a fragile new social contract.

As Rwanda illustrates the power of cultural integration, China's model serves as a crucial reminder of the state's legitimizing role in cementing identity with the profound power of a unifying narrative coupled with tangible economic performance and progress. China's patriotic nationalism, while authoritarian, is underpinned by a powerful bargain: the state delivers unprecedented economic growth and stability, and in return, it demands and receives a form of legitimacy. This highlights a stark truth for Nigeria: the most beautifully curated cultural renaissance will wither if the state continues to fail in its basic functions. The yearning for direction in Sonny Okosun's "*Which Way Nigeria?"* is not just philosophical; it is a demand for a government that works. Therefore, the project of redefining "Nigerian-ness" must run in parallel with a relentless drive for good governance. The legitimacy that pop culture can foster through shared narrative must be reinforced by a state that delivers security, electricity, and opportunity, proving that this newly imagined community is not just a cultural concept but a political reality capable of improving lives. When citizens perceive the state as a vehicle for material improvement and national prestige, they are more likely to grant its institutions, including law enforcement, the benefit of the doubt. For Nigeria, a nation perennially on the brink of its economic potential, this underscores that any credible project of "Nigerian-ness" must be yoked to a demonstrable and inclusive developmental agenda. The state's failure to provide public goods fundamentally undermines any narrative of shared national purpose.

This interplay between bottom-up cultural force and top-down state performance finds a potent, if cautionary, microcosm within Nigeria itself in the phenomenon of groups like the Bakassi Boys. Their initial local legitimacy which was born from shared identity and a perceived effectiveness that the official police lacked, empirically validates the central thesis of this paper: that trust flourishes where security is culturally embedded. They were, for a time, the ultimate expression of a community policing itself, a stark contrast to the NPF who are often seen as an invasive force. However, their descent into extra-judicial violence serves as a critical warning. It demonstrates that organic legitimacy, untethered from a constitutional framework and professional standards, can curdle into chaos.

When these models are held up against Nigeria's reality, the nation's fundamental flaw comes into sharp focus. Nigeria has never committed to a coherent, sustained project of national identity formation. Unlike China, it has crafted no compelling, state-sponsored civic narrative that can override sub-national loyalties. Unlike Rwanda, it has not undertaken a profound, grassroots

cultural reconciliation to address its own history of communal violence and distrust. The result is a vacuum filled by competing ethnic, religious, and regional narratives, which ensures that a federal institution like the police is never seen as "ours." Instead, it is perpetually viewed through a lens of suspicion, as a tool of whichever ethnic or political group is perceived to be in power. The police are seen as enforcing the will of a distant, alien state, not protecting the shared values of a unified people. This grim national picture, however, is brightened by sub-national examples that suggest a hybrid approach indigenous to Nigeria is possible. For instance, the relative effectiveness of the "*Amotekun*" security network in South-West Nigeria, demonstrates a public yearning for policing that is culturally and geographically proximate. Its local legitimacy stems from its perceived role as an expression of a specific "Yoruba" communal identity, pointing to a potential model where federal policing is integrated with, rather than alienated from, localized security structures that enjoy community trust. This suggests that Nigeria's path may not be to create a monolithic identity from the centre, but to foster a "compound nationalism" where a shared Nigerian identity is built upon, rather than in spite of, the legitimacy of its constituent parts.

The critical lesson for Nigeria is not to slavishly imitate either the Chinese or Rwandan model, but to recognize that its current path of inaction is unsustainable. The threads are all there: the bottom-up, decolonial imagination of Nollywood and Afrobeats; the restorative justice principles demonstrated in Rwanda; the imperative of performance legitimacy highlighted by China; and the lessons in hyper-local trust from Nigeria's own vigilante history. The state's role is not to dictate this new identity from on high, as attempted with the NOA. but to become a skilled curator and facilitator amplifying the unifying narratives already present in pop culture, institutionalizing indigenous values into civic education, and creating the secure, functional environment where this newly forged "Nigerian-ness" can truly take root. The cultural renaissance is already underway; the strategic task is to harness its energy to rebuild the foundation of trust upon which any legitimate state and its institutions must stand.

Proposed Strategies for A Decolonial Cultural Renaissance

The study leads to a clear conclusion: leveraging Nigeria's cultural resources for a decolonial renaissance is essential for national development and the ensuing police reform and thusly, three actionable strategies are proposed.

1. Re-engineering State Institutions:

The failure of state-led initiatives like the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) is not a failure of their original intent, but of their execution. The National Orientation Agency must be transformed from a megaphone for government policy into a curator of the Nigerian narrative were instead of crafting slogans, its mandate should be to facilitate a national conversation. This could involve sponsoring and archiving local storytelling festivals, supporting community history projects, and

leveraging digital media to create platforms where ordinary Nigerians can share stories of resilience, innovation, and communal harmony. By amplifying sthese organic, bottom-up narratives, the NOA would help to build a composite and authentic national identity from the ground up, one that acknowledges the past's complexities while celebrating the shared humanity found in everyday life. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and belonging that state-authored patriotism can never achieve.

Similarly, the National Youth Service Corps must be reimagined beyond its current function as a one-year posting where its potential as a crucible for national integration is immense but underutilized. The program should be deepened to include a robust curriculum on Nigerian history, conflict mediation, and civic ethics, co-taught by academics and traditional leaders. Placements should be more intentionally designed to foster genuine cultural immersion, pairing corps members with local mentors and involving them in community-defined development projects. Crucially, the security and welfare of corps members must be guaranteed to transform the experience from one of reluctant sacrifice into a rewarding rite of passage. A revitalized NYSC would not just place graduates in different states; it would equip them with the historical understanding and interpersonal skills to become ambassadors for a unified Nigeria, building networks of trust that transcend ethnic and religious lines long after the service year ends.

2. Cultivating a Foundation: Identity Formation from Childhood through Civic Education

A sustainable national identity cannot be built solely on reforming adults; its foundation must be laid in childhood. The current educational system, with its haphazard approach to civics and the effective removal of history from the curriculum, represents a catastrophic failure of national vision. The deliberate cultivation of a shared identity must begin early, not through crude indoctrination, but through a carefully curated and truthful civic education.

This begins with the mandatory, nuanced teaching of Nigerian history from primary school onward. The argument that history is divisive is a fallacy; ignorance of history is far more dangerous. A revised curriculum must move beyond a simplistic chronology of leaders and events to explore the complex tapestry of pre-colonial civilizations, the brutal reality and logic of colonial rule, the passions and politics of the independence era, and the challenges of the post-colonial state. Students should engage with the causes and tragedies of the civil war, the dynamics of military rule, and the persistent struggle for democratic consolidation. This is not about fostering guilt or pride, but about fostering understanding. As the philosopher George Santayana famously warned, "*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."* To build a forward-looking "Nigerian-ness," citizens must first collectively understand the origins of the fractures they seek to heal.

Alongside this historical reckoning, a new civic education curriculum should be developed, rooted in the positive, shared values found across Nigeria's

indigenous cultures. This curriculum would explicitly teach concepts like the Yoruba *Omoluabi* (integrity, character), the Igbo *Igwebuike* (strength in community), and the Hausa *Mutunci* (human dignity). By framing these not as ethnic concepts but as Nigerian virtues, the education system can build a powerful, value-based national identity that complements, rather than erases, local cultural pride. This creates a generation that sees its diverse heritage as a source of collective strength and its shared citizenship as being defined by a common ethical code.

3. Culturally-Grounded Police Reform and Restorative Justice

With a revitalized civic infrastructure and an educational system fostering a shared identity from youth, the ground becomes fertile for specific, culturally-grounded police reforms. These reforms must be designed to systematically dismantle the coloniality of the police force and re-root it in the community it serves. The Community Policing mandates of the Police Act (2020) must be activated through a deep, structural partnership with traditional and community institutions. This goes beyond merely posting officers to localities. It involves the establishment of hybrid oversight committees in every local government area, comprising police commanders, local government officials, elected community representatives, and respected traditional rulers or elders who would co-design security priorities, review police conduct, and serve as a bridge for dialogue and accountability. Furthermore, deliberate policy of recruiting officers who are linguistically and culturally fluent in their areas of operation would help mitigate the "indigeneity paradox," where officers stationed outside their homeland exhibit higher brutality. Training academies must integrate modules on local customs, conflict resolution traditions, and the national civic ethics curriculum, transforming the officer's role from that of a feared enforcer to a respected guardian of communal harmony.

Finally, to break the cycle of historical grievance that poisons police-community relations, a formal process of truth-telling and historical reconciliation is essential. Inspired by the restorative justice principles of Rwanda's Gacaca courts but adapted to Nigeria's pluralistic context, the government should sponsor community-based forums on historical police violence. Co-facilitated by civil society organizations like the National Human Rights Commission and traditional institutions, these safe spaces would allow victims and their families to give testimony, for communities to articulate their pain, and for the institution to acknowledge its legacy of abuse, a collective, institutional acknowledgment of harm which is a crucial step toward the communal healing required for a shared future. This process of confronting the past, much like the teaching of accurate history in schools, would serve as a painful but necessary surgery to cleanse the wound so that it can finally heal.

Navigating the Complexities of a Cultural Renaissance

To champion a cultural renaissance as a solution is to also acknowledge its inherent complexities and potential perils. The path towards a redefined "Nigerian-ness" is not a straightforward excavation of a pristine, pre-colonial past, but a navigation through a landscape deeply scarred by the very coloniality it seeks to overcome. The proposal to leverage indigenous communal values like the Yoruba *Omoluabi*, the Igbo *Igwebuike*, or the Hausa *Mutunci* as ethical foundations for a new national ethos must contend with a sobering reality: these very concepts have not remained untouched by the pathologies of the modern Nigerian state. They have often been essentialized, fractured, and co-opted into the machinery of political patronage. This dynamic reinforces what scholar Peter Ekeh (1975) theorized as the "two publics," where morality is reserved for the primordial ethnic homeland, while the civic public (the state) is seen as an amoral space for predation. A renaissance that naively invokes Igwebuike (collective strength) without a critical lens could inadvertently strengthen ethnic blocs in national politics, while appeals to *Omoluabi* (character) could be hollowed out by politicians who perform ethnic loyalty while plundering the national treasury. Therefore, the project is not merely to retrieve these values, but to actively decolonize and re-contextualize them, forging them into a shared, pan-Nigerian civic ethic that transcends the very parochial loyalties they once exclusively defined.

This complication is further deepened by the methodological challenge of the renaissance itself. The cultural wellspring from which is drawn from is not a perfectly preserved archive. The legacy of colonialism, the globalised nature of the modern world, and the inherent limitations of oral traditions, where human memory is a subjective narrator, mean that any project of cultural retrieval is an act of interpretation and, to some extent, reconstruction were not simply awakening a slumbering giant, but consciously curating a new identity from fragments, a process that must be undertaken with scholarly rigor and a critical awareness of its own constructed nature. The goal is not an impossible return to a mythical past, but the deliberate creation of a usable past, one that provides ethical scaffolding for a functional and legitimate modern state.

In the same vein, the immense potential of pop culture as a crucible for this renaissance is matched by its capacity for fragmentation. For every film like Aso Ebi Diaries that frames a Yoruba tradition as a unifying national symbol, there are others that might traffic in ethnic caricature. For every protest anthem like Burna Boy's "*20 10 20*" that forges sonic solidarity, there are chart-topping hits that glorify the very materialism and "get-rich-quick" ethos that corrodes the civic public. Furthermore, the state and political elites are not passive observers; they actively seek to co-opt the persuasive power of popular artists and influencers to sanitize their own images and agendas. A robust strategy, therefore, cannot be a simple celebration of pop culture. It must involve a critical, ongoing engagement with it, fostering media literacy to help citizens deconstruct content that deepens divides, while strategically encouraging and amplifying narratives that build bridges, model restorative justice, and perform a truly

inclusive Nigerian identity. The renaissance must be as critically self-aware as it is creatively exuberant.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the profound schism between the Nigerian police and the public is a symptom of a deeper, foundational pathology: a crisis of national identity born from a colonial history and perpetuated by a post-independence state that failed to imagine a cohesive community. Technical reforms to the police force, while necessary, are akin to repainting a crumbling wall; they will remain superficial and futile without addressing the unsound foundation. Sustainable police reform and national development are inextricably linked to a broader, deliberate cultural project, a participatory renaissance that curates a shared "Nigerian-ness" from the country's fragmented heritage.

Nigeria's vibrant pop culture and its rich repository of indigenous ethical systems provide the raw, dynamic materials for this undertaking. However, this path is fraught with complexity. The project must be critically aware of the risks of political co-option of ethnic values and the dual-edged nature of a pop culture that can both unite and fragment. The way forward is not a naive revivalism but a critical, decolonial curation that re-engineers state institutions like the NYSC and NOA to facilitate bottom-up narratives, embeds a truthful and value-based civic education from childhood, and roots police reform in community-based, restorative justice practices. Ultimately, for the police to be transformed from an oppressive force into a legitimate guardian of the people, they must be perceived as an authentic expression of a collectively forged national identity. The project ahead is therefore not merely institutional, but existential: to finally, and consciously, build a state that Nigerians can genuinely, and proudly, call their own.

Appendix

Full List of Nollywood Films Analyzed

Hostages (1997) - Dir. Tade Ogidan
Issakaba (2000) - Dir. Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen
King of Boys (2018) - Dir. Kemi Adetiba
30 Days (2006) - Dir. Mildred Okwo (Producer: Ego Boyo)
The Black Book (2023) - Dir. Editi Effiong
76 (2016) - Dir. Izu Ojukwu
Half of a Yellow Sun (2013) - Dir. Biyi Bandele (Based on the novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie)
October 1 (2014) - Dir. Kunle Afolayan
The Herbert Macaulay Affair (2019) - Dir. Imoh Umoren
Living in Bondage (1992) - Dir. Chris Obi Rapu
Maami (2011) - Dir. Tunde Kelani
Aso Ebi Diaries (2025) - Dir. Kayode Kasum

Full List of Music Analysed

Beast of No Nation / Zombie – Fela Kuti (1989)
Police Brutality – Majek Fashek (1989)
Which Way Nigeria? – Sonny Okosun (1984)
Nigeria Go Survive – Veno Marioghae (1985)
One Kilometer – Evi Edna Ogholi (1988)
Nigeria My Beloved Country – Funmi Adams (1990)
The Way Forward – King Sunny Ade (1994)
Peace Song – Onyeka Onwenu (1991)
Jaga Jaga – Eedris Abdulkareem (2004)
Mr. President – African China (2000)
Jailer – Asa (2007)
Green Land / The Future – TY Bello (2007)
Motherland – Sound Sultan (2016)
Let's Live Together – Kush (2013)
Se Na Like This – Wande Coal (2015)
This is Nigeria – Falz (2018)
Great Nation – Timi Dakolo (2011)
Arise – Mavin (2014)
20 10 20 – Burna Boy (2020)
Is Police Your Friend? – Ruggedman (2020)
Thieves in Uniform – Dremo (2020)

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