

**GOVERNMENT TAKEOVER OF MISSION SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS
FOR RELIGIOUS TENSIONS AND EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS IN OSUN AND
KWARA STATES**

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the government takeover of mission schools in Nigeria and its implications for educational standards and religious polarisation, with particular focus on Osun and Kwara States. Mission schools historically combined academic excellence with moral and religious formation, contributing significantly to Nigeria's intellectual and social development. However, government intervention, especially in the post-Civil War era, altered their administrative structure and guiding philosophy, producing lasting institutional and socio-religious consequences. Adopting a multi-method qualitative approach, the study integrates historical analysis, policy evaluation, comparative assessment, and stakeholder analysis to explore the motivations behind the takeover and its long-term effects. The research evaluates changes in curriculum, discipline, teacher welfare, infrastructure, enrolment patterns, and stakeholder perceptions, thereby providing a multidimensional understanding of the policy's impact. Findings reveal that while the takeover expanded access to education, it contributed to declining academic standards, weakened moral instruction, policy instability, and underfunding. Additionally, disputes over school identity and religious expression intensified tensions between Christian and Muslim communities, particularly in Osun and Kwara states. The study concludes that the intersection of education policy and religious identity has deepened polarisation and weakened institutional quality. It recommends structured public-private partnerships, sustainable funding mechanisms, and the reintegration of value-based education to restore standards, rebuild interreligious trust, and strengthen national cohesion.

Keywords: Government Takeover, Mission Schools, Religious Tensions, Educational Standards, School Governance, Nigeria Education Policy

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Introduction

The intersection of religion and politics in Nigeria is neither episodic nor peripheral; it is historically embedded in the formation of state institutions, public policy trajectories, and social identity configurations. From the colonial encounter to the post-independence era, religious organisations have functioned not only as spiritual communities but also as socio-political actors shaping education, welfare provision, and moral regulation. Scholars of Nigerian political development consistently observe that religion operates as a mobilising structure and identity marker within a plural society characterised by ethno-regional diversity (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Kukah, 1993). Unlike the classical European trajectory in which secularisation gradually differentiated church and state authority (Casanova, 1994), Nigeria's experience reveals a more complex pattern of institutional overlap and negotiated coexistence. Religious institutions—particularly Christian missions and Islamic authorities—have historically exercised influence over education, law, and community leadership, embedding religion within the architecture of governance. Consequently, educational policy in Nigeria cannot be analytically separated from religion–state relations; it is one of their most visible arenas.

Formal Western education in Nigeria was pioneered in the nineteenth century by Christian missionary bodies such as the Church Missionary Society, the Roman

Catholic Mission, and the Methodist Church Nigeria. These missions did not merely establish schools as literacy centres; they designed them as instruments of evangelisation, moral discipline, and social transformation (Fafunwa, 1974). Education became intertwined with religious conversion, civic orientation, and leadership formation, producing early Nigerian elites who later occupied strategic political positions (Coleman, 1963). By the mid-twentieth century, missionary schools dominated primary and secondary education, particularly in Southern Nigeria, while Qur'anic schools and Islamic educational traditions remained influential in the North (Taiwo, 1980). Thus, education evolved within denominational structures, embedding religious identity within schooling systems and shaping regional educational disparities. This denominational foundation of education meant that the governance of schools was not simply administrative; it was symbolic of moral authority, communal prestige, and ideological influence.

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) profoundly altered state perceptions of national cohesion and integration. In the aftermath of the conflict, the military government pursued centralisation policies aimed at nation-building, equity, and post-war reconstruction. Within this context, the takeover of missionary schools in the early 1970s was framed as a strategic intervention to eliminate denominational fragmentation and reposition education as a public good under state control (Fafunwa, 1974). State

authorities argued that education was too critical to national unity to remain under private religious management. This intervention reflected broader postcolonial African trends toward state expansion in social sectors (Migdal, 2001). However, the policy also reconfigured long-standing relationships between religious bodies and the state. While enrolment increased and access widened under public management, critics maintain that the moral ethos, discipline, and administrative efficiency historically associated with mission schools declined (Omede, 2017). The tension between expansion of access and perceived decline in quality has remained central to debates over educational governance in Nigeria.

In contemporary Nigeria, the unresolved consequences of the 1970s takeover of missionary schools continue to manifest in recurrent public controversies, particularly in states with deeply rooted religious histories such as Osun and Kwara. Recent analyses indicate that debates over school ownership and religious expression reflect broader anxieties about identity politics and state neutrality in plural societies (Afolabi, 2021; Ibrahim & Aduloju, 2022; Edewor, 2023). In Osun State, alumni associations and Christian bodies have repeatedly agitated for the return of mission schools to their original proprietors, contending that prolonged state control has diluted denominational ethos, weakened discipline, and eroded academic standards. In Kwara State, tensions have crystallised around disputes concerning the wearing of hijab by Muslim students in

historically Christian-established public schools, generating litigation, protests, and interfaith contestation (Ibrahim & Aduloju, 2022). These conflicts transcend dress codes or administrative policy; they embody struggles over symbolic ownership, religious recognition, and political accommodation within a multi-religious polity. As Kukah (1993) earlier observed, education in Nigeria often becomes a proxy battleground for wider religion–state negotiations, and recent developments confirm the enduring resonance of these historical policy legacies.

Furthermore, the oscillation between centralisation and the partial return of schools to religious proprietors in several Nigerian states reveals a persistent instability within the country’s educational policy architecture. Rather than resolving tensions, repeated reversals of ownership structures have institutionalised uncertainty, politicised school leadership appointments, and amplified sectarian anxieties among religious communities. As Suberu (2001) argues, in deeply plural societies where religious affiliation intersects with ethnic and regional identities, policy inconsistency can intensify perceptions of marginalisation and competitive victimhood. Contemporary studies of Nigerian education policy similarly highlight how fluctuating governance frameworks disrupt institutional continuity, undermine teacher morale, and exacerbate inter-community distrust (Adewumi & Yaya, 2023; Okoye & Orolu, 2024). In this context, education becomes more than a service-delivery sector; it operates as a symbolic

arena in which struggles over recognition, moral authority, and communal legitimacy are enacted. Debates concerning curriculum orientation, religious symbols, school names, and administrative control inevitably carry broader implications for national cohesion and interfaith relations (Ibrahim, 2022). Consequently, examining Osun and Kwara States provides critical empirical grounding for understanding how the legacy of the 1970s takeover continues to shape patterns of religious polarity in Nigeria's contemporary educational landscape.

The theoretical anchoring of this study is grounded in historical institutionalism and conflict theory. Historical institutionalism argues that formative policy decisions create path dependencies that structure future political behaviour and institutional outcomes (Pierson, 2004; Thelen, 1999). The nationalisation of missionary schools in Nigeria during the 1970s established durable legal frameworks, bureaucratic hierarchies, and normative expectations regarding state authority over education. These arrangements did not merely transfer ownership; they redefined legitimacy, governance routines, and public perceptions of educational control. Consequently, contemporary attempts in Osun and Kwara States to renegotiate school ownership or redefine religious expression occur within historically sedimented institutional constraints. Complementing this, conflict theory conceptualises education as a strategic arena for ideological reproduction and group competition (Collins, 1975). In Nigeria's religiously plural context, control of

schools signifies influence over moral values, identity formation, and symbolic capital. Thus, both the original takeover and ongoing disputes reflect enduring struggles over power, recognition, and authority, explaining persistent patterns of religious polarity within educational governance.

The Early Missionary Presence in Nigeria

European missionary activity in what is now Nigeria began in the 15th century, with the arrival of Portuguese Catholic missionaries in Benin in 1472 (Agha, 1999). Over the next two centuries, these missionaries sought to establish both religious and educational footholds, interacting closely with the Oba and palace officials. However, their evangelistic efforts were largely undermined by the entanglement of religious and political interests. Adiele (1996) highlights that Church-state policies in Portugal tightly linked ecclesiastical and political objectives, such that missionary work often served the crown's commercial ambitions rather than purely spiritual purposes. The lucrative transatlantic slave trade further compromised missionary influence; many missionaries were drawn into the trade or subordinated their religious activities to economic imperatives. Nnadi (2004) notes that although Portuguese missionaries attempted to run a school in the Oba's palace in 1515, it quickly collapsed, demonstrating how competing political and economic priorities stifled early evangelisation and education efforts.

From 1640 to 1748, Spanish and Italian Capuchin missions operated in Benin and Warri, continuing the pattern of prioritising trade and political influence over education and religious instruction. Nwankiti (1975) observes that during this period, missionary endeavours were often exploitative, emphasising European control and commercial gain rather than sustainable community development. These early failures underscore that the modern history of missionary work in West Africa-characterised by structured evangelism, education, and local empowerment-did not emerge until the Sierra Leone experiment of 1787 and 1792. This initiative established systematic training for African missionaries and promoted local church leadership, marking a critical shift from purely European-dominated missions to a model that empowered indigenous agents of Christianisation.

The 19th century heralded a significant expansion of missionary work in Nigeria, catalysed by the British Niger expedition of 1841. Prior to this, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) had already established missions in Sierra Leone in 1804, targeting liberated slaves as both evangelistic and educational beneficiaries. Prominent missionaries, including Samuel Crowther, Simon Jonas, and J.C. Taylor, were recruited from Sierra Leone, where they received formal training at Fourah Bay College. Webster (1964) emphasises that Sierra Leone served as the first field of modern African missionary enterprise, producing well-educated Black missionaries who facilitated

the growth of churches across coastal cities. These missionaries were instrumental in introducing structured education to Nigeria, ensuring that local communities received instruction not only in literacy but also in religious, moral, and civic values. The presence of indigenous missionaries created a sustainable model of African-led church development, reducing dependence on European oversight while embedding Christianity more firmly within local societies.

The Purpose of Schooling in Christian Missions

Education was central to the missionary agenda, serving as a strategic instrument for evangelism, moral formation, and social transformation. Heward-Mills (1998) emphasises that the teaching ministry of the church necessitates regular and systematic instruction, arguing that effective evangelism depends on well-trained individuals capable of influencing their environment. Barclay (1975) similarly stresses that one cannot meaningfully teach others without first being taught, highlighting the importance of formal institutions in preparing individuals for religious instruction. Missionary schools, therefore, were not merely literacy centres; they were deliberate platforms for cultivating disciplined, morally grounded, and socially responsible individuals who could serve both religious and communal leadership roles. This integration of moral education with formal learning reflected the missionaries' belief that knowledge of God and practical skills were

inseparable in promoting both personal development and community upliftment.

By the 21st century, missionaries had fully recognised education as the most effective instrument for pragmatic evangelism and societal development. Urukpa (1996) notes that missionaries shared a philosophy that linked schooling directly with evangelistic success, aiming to produce literate, morally conscious, and civically engaged converts. Schools were thus deliberately located in areas where they could facilitate both the spread of Christianity and the broader development of African society, laying the foundation for modern educational structures in Nigeria. Through this approach, formal education became compulsory within missionary work, as it ensured that religious instruction was systematic, sustainable, and socially transformative. Missionary schools, thereby, achieved dual objectives: fostering Christian discipleship while introducing Africans to modern knowledge, literacy, and civic responsibility, creating enduring social and educational legacies that continue to influence Nigerian society.

Management of Mission Schools

Effective management was central to the success of missionary schools in Nigeria, as the missionaries understood that establishing institutions alone was insufficient without strong administrative structures. Urukpa (1996) observes that the establishment of schools required not just vision but also sustained organisational strategies capable of

ensuring long-term operation and growth. Missionary bodies developed denominational administrative hierarchies tailored to their operational philosophy. Each mission had clearly defined units-dioceses, presbyteries, vicariates, archdeaconries, and parishes-each supervised by senior clergy such as bishops, presbyters, or presidents. These structures allowed systematic oversight, ensuring that schools operated within the broader ecclesiastical framework, aligning religious objectives with educational management. By integrating the church's administrative system into school governance, missionaries created a model in which clerics supervised educational affairs alongside spiritual responsibilities, ensuring coherence between mission goals and day-to-day school operations.

The diocesan education boards played a pivotal role in operational management. Composed of clergy, headmasters, and nominees from local parishes, these boards were accountable to the diocesan synod and oversaw policy implementation, budgeting, and curriculum supervision. Headmasters, often devout members of the church, doubled as catechists, treasurers, or church officials where necessary, ensuring that school management and evangelism were inseparable duties (Urukpa, 1996). Recruitment and appointments followed strict criteria, favouring individuals with demonstrable loyalty to church values, professional competence, and spiritual integrity. This integration of administrative hierarchy with ecclesiastical authority

fostered accountability and ensured that schools were run in accordance with both educational and religious principles.

Furthermore, the missionaries' emphasis on professional training and strategic delegation enabled operational consistency across wide geographical regions. Supervisors regularly monitored school activities, ensuring that teachers adhered to curricular standards, discipline codes, and moral expectations. This hierarchical yet participatory model allowed mission schools to scale effectively, maintain uniform standards, and achieve institutional sustainability. By embedding management within church structures, missionary schools operated as disciplined, well-organized entities, capable of delivering both academic excellence and moral formation in tandem (Urukpa, 1996; Fafunwa, 1974).

Discipline in Mission Schools

Discipline was a defining characteristic of mission schools, and it underpinned both academic and moral achievements. Fafunwa (1974) notes that missionaries employed rigorous disciplinary measures, combining structured labour with corporal correction to address idleness, truancy, disobedience, and slow learning. Students and teachers alike were trained to adhere to rules, punctuality, and moral conduct. This strict environment was instrumental in shaping a culture of diligence, accountability, and resilience, contributing to the rapid academic and social successes recorded by mission schools.

Urukpa (1996) further emphasises that adherence to regulations was viewed as both a moral and spiritual duty, reinforcing the connection between religious devotion and scholastic achievement.

The code of conduct extended to all staff, encompassing regular participation in church services, devotionals, and educational responsibilities. Teachers were prohibited from behaviours that could compromise moral integrity, including illicit relationships, and strict consequences were enforced for violations (Urukpa, 1996). This approach ensured that teachers modelled the ethical and religious standards expected of students, creating a culture of consistent moral and academic expectation. By integrating religious observance with educational discipline, mission schools instilled a holistic sense of responsibility, merging character formation with formal learning.

Finally, discipline in mission schools was inseparable from the broader goal of societal transformation. Beyond academic performance, the missionaries aimed to produce individuals capable of serving as moral exemplars and community leaders. Students were guided to internalise church doctrines, respect authority, and cultivate personal virtues that would influence families and communities. This structured environment fostered both spiritual and intellectual growth, producing graduates who were academically competent and morally grounded, capable of promoting social

cohesion and religious values across Nigerian society (Fafunwa, 1974; Urukpa, 1996).

Quality as the Watchword in Mission Schools

Quality education was a hallmark of missionary schools, reflecting a commitment to both evangelical and societal objectives. Missionaries prioritised rigorous instruction, recruiting only teachers with sufficient knowledge, unwavering loyalty to church authority, and exemplary character (Urukpa, 1996). Teachers were graded according to qualifications and experience, and supervisors regularly visited schools to ensure adherence to standards. The primary purpose of education was not profit, but evangelism; schooling served as a vehicle to convert, educate, and socially empower students, transforming character alongside intellect.

Missionary schools also emphasised comprehensive development, integrating literacy, religious instruction, moral education, and practical skills. Students were trained to become active contributors to society and ambassadors of the church, fostering leadership, civic responsibility, and cultural engagement. While some graduates became highly fluent in English and adopted European ways, the objective was not cultural abandonment but the formation of well-rounded individuals capable of bridging traditional and modern contexts (Urukpa, 1996). The missionaries bore financial and operational burdens to ensure these standards were maintained, reflecting their commitment

to producing quality outcomes without compromise.

The enduring success of mission schools is evident in their long-lasting influence on Nigerian education and society. Grammar schools such as CMS Grammar School in Abeokuta, established in 1853, exemplified the integration of academic rigour, discipline, and moral formation. Despite criticisms that mission education lacked practical orientation or overemphasised literary instruction, the outcomes achieved-literacy, leadership, social cohesion, and moral development-demonstrate the effectiveness of the missionary approach (Urukpa, 1996; Fafunwa, 1974). By prioritising quality, missionaries ensured that their educational initiatives not only facilitated evangelism but also laid a foundation for modern educational structures in Nigeria, leaving a legacy of academic excellence intertwined with spiritual and social development.

Mission School Was a Successful Enterprise.

The success of mission schools in Nigeria is evident when evaluating their historical objectives and enduring impact. Urukpa (1996) observes that despite criticisms regarding relevance, practical orientation, and the emphasis on literary education, these critiques often fail to appreciate the foundational purpose of mission schools. The missionaries aimed primarily at evangelism and moral formation, using formal education as a vehicle to

transform individuals both spiritually and socially. Critics of mission schools, many of whom were direct beneficiaries, acquired literacy, discipline, and ethical grounding through these institutions. The elite produced by mission schools were expected to extend societal development, and to blame contemporary educational challenges on the missionaries is historically misinformed. By focusing on character formation, religious instruction, and intellectual growth, mission schools successfully achieved their objectives of producing morally upright and academically competent citizens, thereby establishing a template for future educational endeavours.

Moreover, the success of mission schools is reflected in the establishment of advanced institutions, such as grammar schools, which extended access to higher education. In the Yoruba mission, for example, CMS Grammar School in Abeokuta was established as early as 1853, creating avenues for academically talented students to pursue advanced studies. The schools not only facilitated academic excellence but also served as incubators for leadership and civic responsibility. Through a deliberate integration of evangelism and education, mission schools produced graduates capable of contributing meaningfully to society and promoting the growth of the church and civil institutions. Consequently, the missionary enterprise catalysed both societal transformation and the consolidation of education as a key tool for nation-building in Nigeria (Urukpa, 1996; Fafunwa, 1974).

Contributions of Mission Schools in Nigerian Development

Mission schools significantly shaped the moral and intellectual development of Nigerians, particularly in curbing previously unrestrained behaviours and promoting social cohesion. The early missionaries instilled values of self-discipline, communal responsibility, and rational inquiry, replacing fear and superstition with confidence and inquisitiveness among students (Agha, 2004). Exposure to formal education transformed mentalities, enabling individuals to critically engage with information, adopt rational problem-solving, and embrace tolerance and fraternity. These values were foundational to the development of national consciousness, as reflected in Nigeria's first national anthem: "Though tribe and tongue may differ, in brotherhood we stand" (Adiele, 1996). Furthermore, the missionaries promoted literacy in both local vernaculars and English, expanding horizons for communication, cultural understanding, and civic participation. By facilitating these changes, mission schools prepared Nigerians to engage with both domestic and global developments, fostering the growth of a literate, rational, and socially cohesive citizenry.

In addition to moral and intellectual formation, mission schools contributed to technical and industrial development. The establishment of industrial schools, such as the first in Abeokuta in 1851, provided practical training in trades including brick-making, carpentry, navigation, horticulture,

and industrial management. Students sent abroad by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) gained skills that later underpinned local industries and infrastructure development. In Onitsha, industrial mission schools trained accountants, clerks, carpenters, and masons, whose work left tangible legacies in church construction and community development (Nwankiti, 1996). By equipping students with vocational skills alongside academic learning, mission schools enabled early forms of economic empowerment and self-reliance.

Mission schools also produced a cadre of indigenous leaders and professionals who shaped the administrative and spiritual landscape of Nigeria. Reverends George N. Anyaegbunam, Henry Ven Okosi, Theophilous B. Akpam, and others trained in institutions like Kikpo Hill Training Institution, Lokoja, were instrumental in administering churches and missionary projects, transferring skills and knowledge from expatriate missionaries to indigenous leadership (Azikiwe, 1958; Agha, 2004). Similarly, the first Igbo indigenous Catholic priests, such as Father Paul Obodoechina Emecheta, emerged from mission schools, ensuring continuity in church administration and educational leadership. These leaders facilitated the localisation of both ecclesiastical and educational authority, bridging the gap between European missionary oversight and indigenous governance.

Finally, the broader societal impact of mission schools encompassed leadership development, human capital formation, and social modernisation. Institutions like the Hope Waddell Training Institute in Calabar, established in 1895 by Scottish Presbyterian missionaries, produced scholars, technicians, civil servants, and political leaders who played crucial roles in Nigeria's development (Agha, 2004). Through a combination of academic rigour, moral education, and vocational training, mission schools laid the foundations for modern Nigerian society, influencing governance, technological advancement, and social cohesion. The cumulative effect of these contributions demonstrates that mission schools were not only successful in achieving their religious and educational objectives but also instrumental in driving national development and socio-economic transformation.

Government Involvement in Mission Schools in Nigeria

The involvement of government in Nigeria's mission schools gradually evolved from negligible engagement to total control, reflecting the shifting political, social, and economic priorities of successive administrations. Initially, European missionaries were the primary providers of education, as neither colonial governments nor traders considered education a priority in their quest for governance or commerce. Onyeidu (2004) observed that by 1865, government involvement in education was virtually non-existent, leaving missionaries to

fund and manage schools independently. When the colonial administration eventually intervened in 1872, they provided a paltry sum of 30 pounds to each of the three mission societies-CMS, Wesleyan Methodist, and Catholic-intended to support educational activities in Lagos. This meagre contribution increased to 100 pounds and later 200 pounds by 1877, but it remained insufficient given the rising demand for education among Nigerians. The missionaries were, therefore, compelled to develop innovative funding strategies and management practices to sustain schools. This early period set a precedent in which educational responsibility was perceived as primarily a religious and philanthropic endeavour rather than a government obligation, shaping patterns of intervention that would later define post-colonial educational policy (Osokoya, 1989).

Government interference gradually intensified, reflecting both political control ambitions and concern over educational content. By 1877, the colonial government established the first educational board for Lagos, signalling a desire to supervise and regulate mission schools. Yet, the administration often clashed with the missionaries over the emphasis on religious instruction and the use of local vernaculars in teaching. Missionaries, especially in the Southern regions, continued to exercise considerable autonomy, ensuring that education remained closely tied to evangelism. In contrast, the Northern emirates, dominated by Islamic rulers, restricted missionary education, limiting

schools to areas outside emirate control. This uneven pattern of government intervention created regional disparities in education access and quality, illustrating how colonial political considerations intertwined with religious sensitivities to shape educational policy (Fafunwa, 1974).

Following independence and particularly after the Nigerian Civil War, the government moved to assert centralised control over education. The military-led federal administration implemented a sweeping takeover of all mission schools in 1970, a measure that Madiebo (1980) describes as a political strategy to curtail the influence of missionary agencies, especially in the Muslim-majority North, where missionary education had gained a significant foothold. The takeover was framed as a mechanism to promote national unity, standardise education, and expand access to schooling. However, it also reflected a power struggle between state authorities and religious institutions over ideological influence. The Catholic Church in the Eastern Region opposed government programmes such as free education, fearing erosion of religious instruction, whereas Anglo-Catholics accepted it conditionally. These differing responses highlight the complex interplay between religion, politics, and education, demonstrating that government involvement in mission schools was never purely administrative but inherently political and ideological.

The consequences of government takeover were profound, particularly for the

quality of education and school management. Mission schools, which had previously been exemplars of moral discipline and academic excellence, suffered declines in teaching quality, student behaviour, and infrastructure maintenance. Qualified teachers were often underpaid or left the profession entirely due to inadequate remuneration, creating a deficit of skilled educators. School facilities deteriorated as government policies failed to provide consistent funding or maintain infrastructure. Moreover, the withdrawal of free education in 1982 due to economic austerity further worsened access, forcing many students out of school. These challenges underscored the unintended consequences of government control: while intended to expand education, the takeover disrupted established management systems, undermined discipline, and weakened the moral and academic ethos of the mission schools (Onyechi, 2014).

Despite these setbacks, the government defended its interventions as necessary for modernisation, teacher welfare, and equitable access. Policies were aimed at improving infrastructure, ensuring payment of salaries, and creating standardised curricula. However, these objectives were largely unfulfilled due to poor planning, bureaucratic inefficiency, and inconsistent policy implementation. The delayed or inadequate provision of qualified teachers, lack of infrastructural investment, and political interference compounded the crisis. Over time, mission schools became emblematic of broader failures in public education, prompting religious organisations

to advocate for the return of schools to their original proprietors. This historical trajectory highlights the enduring impact of state intervention on education governance in Nigeria, particularly in shaping debates about school management, quality, and the intersection of religion and politics.

Difficulty in Running Mission Schools in Nigeria Today

Mission schools in contemporary Nigeria face significant challenges that hinder their ability to maintain the high standards established during the colonial and early post-colonial periods. Unlike the missionary era, when schools enjoyed autonomy and were supported by dedicated expatriate organisations, today's mission schools operate in a competitive educational market with government, private, and community-owned schools vying for students. Enrolment has declined because parents now have more choices, and school administrators often lack the training, ethos, and vision instilled by the original missionaries. Many contemporary managers are products of government education systems and may prioritise financial gain over holistic education, including moral and spiritual formation. Olaboye (2004) emphasises that the shift in management culture has undermined the historical purpose of mission schools as centres of disciplined, values-driven education, creating a gap between past successes and present challenges.

Infrastructure deficits exacerbate the difficulties faced by mission schools. Adequate facilities-including classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and recreational spaces-are essential for quality education. However, many mission schools today operate in substandard buildings with limited teaching materials and inadequate land to foster creative and practical learning environments. Olaboye (2004) identifies school infrastructure, instructional materials, and a conducive school environment as crucial components of effective education, yet many contemporary mission schools lack even basic provisions. The absence of a robust physical and instructional infrastructure impairs students' ability to learn, restricts teachers' effectiveness, and undermines the overall objectives of mission-based education.

Funding constraints pose another severe challenge. While missionaries historically benefited from international support and organised church funding mechanisms, contemporary schools rely heavily on tuition fees, often rendering education unaffordable for many families. Fees range from 15,000 to 50,000 naira per term, surpassing the national minimum wage and effectively excluding low- and middle-income students (Silberberg, 2012). Furthermore, funds generated from fees are frequently diverted to other church projects, leaving schools under-resourced. This situation shifts the mission schools' focus from student formation and quality education to financial survival, compromising

their ability to replicate the success and moral integrity of the earlier missionary model.

The human resource capacity of contemporary mission schools further limits their effectiveness. There is a shortage of qualified, motivated teachers, and those employed often receive low remuneration, resulting in high turnover and demotivation. The absence of rigorous training aligned with the missionary ethos contributes to lapses in discipline and educational quality. Combined with the inadequate funding and infrastructural deficits, these challenges mean that contemporary mission schools struggle to achieve the holistic, character-driven education for which they were originally established. While new schools are being founded by churches to address these gaps, lack of preparation, insufficient resources, and administrative inefficiencies continue to undermine their impact, creating a persistent struggle to balance quality, affordability, and sustainability in mission school education today.

Methodology

This study adopts a multi-method qualitative approach to examine the government takeover of missionary schools in Nigeria, with a particular focus on Osun and Kwara states. The **historical analysis method** is employed to contextualise the takeover, exploring the political, social, and historical circumstances surrounding the policy, including post-Civil War efforts at national unity, the drive to standardise

education, and the evolution of the missionary school system prior to state intervention (Fafunwa, 1974; Adeyemo, 2020). Complementing this, the **policy analysis method** evaluates the consequences of the takeover for educational quality, curriculum content, moral instruction, teacher welfare, infrastructure, and student outcomes, enabling an understanding of both intended and unintended effects of the policy (Omede, 2017; Adewumi & Yaya, 2023). The study also integrates a **comparative analysis approach**, contrasting missionary schools' performance, student discipline, and academic achievement before and after state control, thereby highlighting specific institutional changes and shifts in educational environment and enrolment patterns (Okoye & Orolu, 2024). Finally, a **stakeholder analysis method** is applied to capture the perceptions, concerns, and experiences of key actors-including missionary bodies, teachers, principals, students, and parents-whose perspectives illuminate the social, religious, and political implications of the takeover policy (Ibrahim & Aduloju, 2022). Together, these methods provide a comprehensive, multidimensional framework for understanding the historical, institutional, and social dynamics shaping the takeover and its enduring effects on education and religious polarity in Nigeria.

Findings

The government takeover of mission schools in Nigeria resulted in a **decline in quality and morality**, which has been widely

documented. Historically, mission schools emphasised both rigorous academics and strong ethical formation. Students were trained to uphold Christian values, discipline, and civic responsibility. However, after government intervention, there was a noticeable deterioration in both the quality of education and moral instruction. Religious teachings, once central to the school's ethos, were de-emphasised, resulting in graduates who were literate but less morally grounded. The collapse in ethical formation weakened the schools' role as instruments of societal transformation, undermining the foundational purpose for which they were originally established.

While the takeover did increase **enrolment and broaden access** to education, particularly in northern Nigeria, where missionary presence had been limited, it simultaneously strained the system. The rapid expansion was not accompanied by sufficient investment in qualified teachers, facilities, or learning materials. Overcrowding, inadequate resources, and underqualified staff became widespread problems, reducing the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Consequently, while more children were able to attend school, the overall quality of education suffered. The imbalance between quantity and quality created a generation of students who were less prepared academically and less disciplined than those educated under missionary management.

The government takeover also sparked **calls for the return of mission schools** to

religious organisations. Pressure groups emerged, emphasising the negative impact of the takeover on educational standards and ethical formation. This movement reflects broader societal concerns regarding the intersection of religion, education, and governance. The takeover further politicised religion, as schools became instruments in political campaigns, creating denominational tensions and fuelling stereotypes between different religious groups. These outcomes eroded social cohesion, diminished trust between communities, and challenged national integration, highlighting that the implications of the takeover extended far beyond mere school administration.

Challenges of Government Takeover of Mission Schools

One major challenge was **policy instability**, which disrupted the consistent administration of schools. Frequent changes in educational policies, curricula, and teacher management led to instability that affected both students and staff. Mission schools previously operated under well-structured frameworks, ensuring disciplined learning environments and ethical education. The takeover dismantled these frameworks, causing confusion, inefficiency, and a decline in educational outcomes, which undermined public confidence in the system.

A second challenge was **underfunding and neglect**. Despite initial promises, the government failed to adequately maintain infrastructure or provide necessary teaching

resources. Classrooms became overcrowded, school facilities deteriorated, and students had limited access to textbooks and learning equipment. Teachers, particularly qualified ones, were demotivated due to delayed or inadequate salaries, causing many to leave the system. The resulting shortage of competent teachers further compromised the quality of education delivered in formerly mission-run schools.

Religious tensions intensified, creating a **division between Christian and Muslim communities** in educational access and administration. Christian groups viewed the takeover as discriminatory because it restricted religious instruction and evangelism in schools they traditionally managed. Meanwhile, Muslim-dominated areas benefited from the expansion of schools, generating resentment among Christian communities. These tensions occasionally escalated into violence and acrimony within schools, undermining the learning environment and threatening societal harmony.

The final challenge involved **the proliferation of substandard schools** as a response to government control. Religious organisations, seeking to reclaim their educational influence, established private schools at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Institutions such as Olivet Academy, Ajayi Crowther University, Bowen University, and Caritas University were created to meet community needs. However, these schools faced difficulties due to lack of

preparation, insufficient infrastructure, and difficulty recruiting qualified staff. While they served as a remedy to government inefficiencies, the rapid proliferation of schools without proper planning introduced new challenges in maintaining high standards of education and discipline.

Recommendations

A key recommendation is the establishment of **public-private partnerships (PPPs)** between government and religious organisations. By collaborating, both parties can pool resources, share expertise, and maintain educational quality. The church can provide oversight, ensure moral and ethical instruction, and uphold the mission school ethos, while the government supports funding, infrastructure development, and teacher remuneration. Such collaboration can stabilise the system, maintain discipline, and promote holistic education, combining academic excellence with value-based formation.

Another recommendation is the provision of **grant-in-aid and financial support** to mission schools. Adequate funding from government or donor organisations will enable schools to maintain facilities, pay qualified teachers, and provide sufficient learning materials. Establishing dedicated education funds and soliciting contributions from philanthropic individuals or organisations can reduce financial strain. This support ensures that schools can focus on delivering quality education rather than

struggling for survival, thereby preventing the decline in standards observed following the takeover.

The **integration of moral and cultural values into curricula** is also crucial. Schools should include teachings on ethics, Christian values, and local culture alongside academic subjects. Staff development programmes, fair remuneration, and training workshops for teachers will ensure effective delivery of this curriculum. By combining infrastructure support, human resource development, and value-based education, mission schools can restore the quality, discipline, and moral foundation that were central to their success prior to government intervention.

Conclusion

Mission schools continue to play a pivotal role in Nigeria's educational landscape, remaining critical instruments for shaping not only academic minds but also ethical, socially responsible, and civically conscious individuals. Despite decades of government mismanagement and neglect, these institutions historically integrated moral guidance with intellectual development, producing disciplined graduates capable of contributing positively to societal transformation. Their approach emphasised holistic education, instilling values such as honesty, diligence, and respect alongside literacy and numeracy. By restoring this balance, mission schools can address contemporary challenges in Nigeria's educational system, including declining

discipline, moral decay, and erosion of academic standards. Revitalising these schools ensures they remain centres for nurturing leaders who are ethically grounded, socially engaged, and prepared to advance national development through knowledge and principled action.

To reclaim their historic success, mission schools must be strategically prepared and well-resourced. Proprietors should secure sustainable funding, develop competent and committed staff, and actively pursue the recovery of schools from government control to restore their autonomy. Emphasis must remain on delivering qualitative education that prioritises moral guidance and character formation over short-term financial gain. Investment in infrastructure, teacher development, and structured management is essential to create learning environments that promote discipline, creativity, and critical thinking. With careful planning, consistent oversight, and a renewed focus on values-driven education, mission schools can once again transform Nigeria's youth into ethically informed leaders, innovators, and citizens capable of fostering societal progress and national cohesion.

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