

TOWARDS REMEDY OF NIGERIA POLITICAL CULTURE OF AMBIVALENCE

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Abstract

This study investigates the phenomenon of political ambivalence in Nigeria through the philosophical method of hermeneutics, aiming to uncover its underlying causes, manifestations, and implications for democratic participation and national cohesion. Drawing on key philosophical insights—particularly those of Asouzu (2007), Ricoeur (1992), West (1993), Gyekye (1997), and Taylor (1994),—the research interprets Nigeria's political culture as a dynamic interplay of parochial, subject, and participatory orientations. The analysis reveals a deep-seated civic disconnection shaped by historical legacies, structural deficiencies, and socio-cultural fragmentation. Political ambivalence, in this context, reflects a broader existential crisis in which trust in institutions is eroded and citizen engagement fluctuates between apathy and resistance. However, this condition also offers fertile ground for transformation. The study proposes a reawakening of civic consciousness through philosophical reflection, inclusive governance, and institutional reform. It concludes that political culture is not static but can be reinterpreted and reshaped to foster a more participatory and united democratic society.

Keywords: Political culture, ambivalence, Nigeria, hermeneutics, civic engagement, democratic participation.

INTRODUCTION

Political culture, a critical concept in political science and philosophy, denotes the composite of attitudes, beliefs, sentiments, and practices that give order and meaning to a political process. It encapsulates both the political ideals and the operating norms of a polity. In Nigeria, political culture remains a central factor in determining the nature and effectiveness of democratic governance. However, this culture is marred by a recurring phenomenon 'ambivalence'. Ambivalence in Nigerian political culture manifests as a deep and persistent tension between participation and withdrawal, between idealism and cynicism, and between hope and despair.

Since its independence in 1960, Nigeria, has grappled with a series of political upheavals including military dictatorships, ethnic rivalries, civil war, and flawed electoral processes. These experiences have not only shaped the institutional frameworks of governance but have also influenced how citizens perceive, trust, and engage with political systems. Consequently, the political culture that has emerged is complex, hybridized, and inconsistent—marked by moments of mass participation juxtaposed with widespread apathy and skepticism.

This research study adopts the philosophical method of hermeneutics an interpretative approach that seeks to uncover the deeper meanings behind socio-political phenomena. Rather than presenting statistical analyses, this method focuses on decoding the symbolic, historical, and existential elements that give rise to Nigeria's political behaviors and orientations. Hermeneutics allows for a philosophical diagnosis of ambivalence, treating it not just as a psychological or behavioral problem, but as a symptom of deeper ontological and cultural dislocations.

Central to this study is the thought of Innocent Asouzu (2007), a Nigerian philosopher whose concept of *Ibuanyidanda* advocates complementary reflection as a means of resolving contradictions within African realities. Alongside Asouzu, this study draws upon the philosophical contributions of Paul Ricoeur (1992), (hermeneutics of suspicion), Cornel West (1993), (prophetic pragmatism), Kwame Gyekye (1997), (communitarianism), and Charles Taylor (1994), (politics of recognition). These thinkers provide interpretive tools for understanding the layered nature of ambivalence in political culture.

This study is structured around the following key thematic headings, which provide a coherent framework for the analysis:

1. Review of Relevant Literature on Political Culture – This section surveys significant contributions from political science and philosophy, including indigenous African perspectives.

2. Exposition of the Political Culture of Ambivalence in Nigeria – This section interprets the practical and symbolic forms of ambivalence using typologies and historical illustrations.

3. Implications and Consequences of the Political Culture of Ambivalence in Nigeria and the Way Forward – This part analyzes the real-world impact of ambivalence and proposes a hermeneutic path toward civic renewal.

4. Evaluation and Conclusion of the Study – This section synthesizes insights, evaluates philosophical implications, and offers concluding reflections.

The ultimate aim of this study is not merely descriptive but transformative. It seeks to provide an interpretive framework that can inspire a philosophical reawakening of civic consciousness in Nigeria. By probing the ambivalent nature of the country's political culture, this work aspires to offer pathways toward a more participatory, inclusive, and resilient democratic society.

The political culture of ambivalence in Nigeria poses a significant challenge to the country's development, as citizens' indecisive attitudes toward governance hinder meaningful change. This ambivalence is perpetuated by various factors, including the weaponization of hunger, structural barriers, and the paradoxes of leadership. As a result, Nigeria continues to grapple with corruption, underdevelopment, and social vices—underscoring the urgent need for a critical examination of political ambivalence and its implications for national progress.

Accordingly, this work sets out to appraise the negative impacts of Nigeria's political culture of ambivalence, its consequences, and how it can be ameliorated. The political culture of a nation significantly determines its developmental trajectory and shapes how it is perceived within the international community.

With these concerns in mind, several pertinent questions arise: What truly characterizes Nigeria's political culture? How does this culture influence governance, national welfare, and development? Given that Nigeria's political culture is marked by ambivalence, how can this be improved? These are some of the critical issues that this study seeks to address. Despite its significance, scholarly engagement with this topic remains limited. This research aims to contribute to filling that gap by providing a platform for deeper philosophical and socio-political reflection on the subject.

THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL CULTURE

The concept of political culture has generated extensive scholarly discourse within political science, sociology, and philosophy. At its core, political culture reflects the orientation of citizens toward political objects and processes—their beliefs about authority, political roles, national identity, civic duty, and institutional trust. The evolution and manifestation of political culture are deeply embedded in historical experiences, socio-economic realities, and philosophical worldviews. In the Nigerian context, these orientations are further shaped by the legacies of colonialism, ethnic plurality, and post-independence governance structures.

1. Foundational Theories on Political Culture

The foundational work of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in *The Civic Culture* (1963), provides a critical typology for analyzing political culture across societies. They identified three main types:

i. Parochial Political Culture – citizens have limited awareness of or involvement in the political system.

ii. Subject Political Culture – citizens are aware of the political system but mostly passive in participation.

iii. Participatory Political Culture – citizens are both politically aware and actively involved.

Almond and Verba (1963), argue that a stable democracy requires a civic culture that balances all three orientations. This typology remains highly relevant in the Nigerian case, where elements of all three types coexist and frequently overlap within individuals and communities, creating a hybrid and often inconsistent political culture.

2. Political Culture in Postcolonial Africa

In the African context, political culture has often been examined through the lens of postcolonial theory and the legacy of authoritarianism. Ake (1996), critiques the transposition of Western democratic models onto African societies without accounting for indigenous values and institutions. According to him, the alienation of citizens from political processes in many African states, including Nigeria, stems from structural exclusion, lack of political education, and elite dominance.

Diamond (1999), emphasizes the fragility of democratic consolidation in Nigeria, pointing to the role of ethnicity, corruption, and clientelism in undermining civic trust. His analysis aligns with Joseph's (1987), theory of "prebendal politics," which argues that Nigerian public offices are treated as personal fiefdoms, distributing resources along ethnic and religious lines. These dynamics foster ambivalence, as citizens navigate a system where formal rules often diverge from informal practices.

3. Philosophical Interpretations of Ambivalence

Political ambivalence, as a philosophical concept, denotes a state of internal contradiction, uncertainty, or duality in thought and action. In political life, this may be expressed as simultaneous hope and distrust, engagement and apathy, loyalty and skepticism. This section explores how five philosophers—Innocent Asouzu (2004, 2007), Paul Ricoeur (1992), Cornel West (1993), Kwame Gyekye (1997), and Charles Taylor (1992, 1994),—shed light on the phenomenon of ambivalence, especially in postcolonial contexts such as Nigeria.

Innocent Asouzu (2007): A foremost African philosopher, Asouzu's *Ibuanyidanda* ontology presents a framework for resolving the contradictions within African existential and cultural realities. He argues that societal dysfunctions often arise from the inability to appreciate the complementary nature of being. According to Asouzu (2004), ambivalence in Nigerian political culture reflects a failure to harmonize diverse interests and values. His

theory proposes a philosophy of complementary reflection, an inclusive and dialogical approach that affirms unity-in-diversity.

Paul Ricoeur (1992): In his hermeneutics of suspicion, Ricoeur reveals how hidden ideologies, traumatic histories, and unacknowledged conflicts distort our understanding of social reality. Applying this to Nigeria, the widespread suspicion toward political leaders and institutions may be interpreted as a rational reaction to decades of betrayal, repression, and corruption. However, Ricoeur also advocates for a second hermeneutic of hope—a renewed interpretation grounded in ethical openness and communal healing.

Cornel West (1993): Known for his prophetic pragmatism, West emphasizes the importance of courage, compassion, and truth in confronting social injustice. He views political engagement as an existential act rooted in “moral outrage and democratic hope”. West's philosophy is particularly instructive for Nigerian youth, who oscillate between despair and activism, as seen in the EndSARS movement.

Kwame Gyekye (1997): A leading voice in African communitarian thought, Gyekye contends that the individual is best understood within the web of communal relations. He sees political participation not only as a right but as a moral responsibility. Ambivalence, in this sense, arises when individuals feel alienated from the community's moral fabric or lack confidence in communal leaders.

Charles Taylor (1994): Taylor's politics of recognition is deeply relevant to multicultural societies like Nigeria. He argues that the failure to recognize diverse cultural identities results in political alienation and civic disconnection. In Nigeria, where ethnicity and religion often serve as markers of political loyalty or exclusion, Taylor's philosophy highlights the importance of inclusive national narratives.

4. Nigerian Scholarship on Political Culture

Nigerian scholars have also engaged with the concept of political culture in diverse ways. Odimegwu (2006), and Onu (2009), emphasize the need for an African-centered political theory that integrates indigenous governance systems. African philosophical studies often advocate for the re-Africanization of political values—moving beyond imposed Western categories to promote more participatory, community-oriented models.

Similarly, Nnaji and Chukwuma (2015), have discussed the ethical deficits in Nigerian politics, linking them to a crisis of values and leadership. These studies reinforce the idea that Nigeria's political culture cannot be fully understood without engaging with the broader moral and philosophical crises affecting its public sphere.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing hermeneutic analysis to examine historical documents, scholarly literature, and expert opinions. Hermeneutics, as a method of interpretation, allows for a nuanced understanding of meanings embedded in Nigeria's

political realities. This framework is particularly suitable for unpacking the layers of contradiction, historical trauma, and moral complexity that define Nigeria's political culture.

The theoretical foundation draws from the insights of scholars such as Innocent Asouzu (2007), Paul Ricoeur (1992), Cornel West (1993), Kwame Gyekye (1997), and Charles Taylor (1994). Each of these thinkers has contributed significantly to philosophical discourses on ambivalence, identity, and socio-political participation, offering interpretive tools for understanding the fragmented and paradoxical nature of civic life in Nigeria. By engaging with their works, this study bridges philosophical reasoning with the lived political experiences of Nigerian citizens.

EXPOSITION OF THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF AMBIVALENCE IN NIGERIA

Nigeria's political culture is shaped by a complex history of colonial imposition, post-independence struggles, military authoritarianism, democratic transitions, and intense socio-cultural diversity. These historical and political experiences have contributed to the development of a unique phenomenon: **political ambivalence**—a psychological and philosophical condition characterized by conflicting attitudes toward authority, governance, civic responsibility, and national identity.

To fully grasp this ambivalence, it is essential to understand the types of political culture that emerge within societies. Political theorists, particularly Almond and Verba (1963), identify **three main categories of political culture**: parochial, subject, and participatory. In Nigeria, these categories do not operate in silos. Rather, they coexist, overlap, and often contradict each other—producing a hybrid political orientation marked by uncertainty and disillusionment.

1. Parochial Political Culture in Nigeria

Parochial political culture is defined by a lack of awareness or engagement with formal political structures and processes. Citizens exhibiting this orientation are disconnected from national governance and often harbor no expectations of political responsiveness or justice. In Nigeria, this type of political culture is most evident in rural communities, impoverished regions, and among historically marginalized populations.

Several factors contribute to this condition:

i. Illiteracy and lack of civic education: In many parts of Nigeria, particularly in the North and economically disadvantaged zones, political awareness is stifled by minimal educational infrastructure. As a result, politics is perceived as an elitist pursuit, distant from the everyday struggles of the people.

ii. Traditional authority systems: In regions where traditional rulers maintain strong influence, political engagement tends to occur through customary frameworks rather than

democratic institutions. These systems, while culturally rooted, often operate parallel to or in tension with state mechanisms.

iii. Systemic mistrust: Decades of broken promises, electoral fraud, and widespread corruption have deepened public skepticism. Many citizens adopt a resigned or fatalistic view of politics, believing that their voices cannot effect meaningful change.

Thus, parochialism breeds ambivalence not out of ideological opposition but through passive marginalization. Citizens may appear politically apathetic, but their indifference often masks a deeper disillusionment rooted in systemic exclusion.

2. Subject Political Culture in Nigeria

Subject political culture denotes a higher level of political awareness than parochialism but with limited active participation. Citizens in this category acknowledge governmental authority and state institutions but do not feel empowered to influence decisions. In Nigeria, this culture is prevalent among urban dwellers, civil servants, and middle-income groups—especially those shaped by years of military rule.

Military regimes (1966–1979, 1983–1999) left a lasting impact on civic consciousness in Nigeria. These regimes normalized authoritarian governance, restricted dissent, and discouraged civic activism. Even under democratic rule, the remnants of authoritarian culture persist. Many citizens still relate to the state through a lens of subordination—awaiting top-down directives rather than engaging in bottom-up accountability.

Ambivalence in subject political culture is expressed through obedience without ownership. Citizens may vote, comply with laws, and support government projects, but often do so without genuine belief in the system's legitimacy. This results in an unstable relationship with the state, where loyalty is coupled with cynicism and support is tempered by mistrust.

3. Participatory Political Culture in Nigeria

Participatory political culture represents the ideal democratic norm. Citizens are informed about political processes, engage in public debate, join advocacy groups, vote conscientiously, and hold leaders accountable. In Nigeria, this culture is increasingly visible, particularly among youth, civil society actors, the educated elite, and diaspora communities.

Prominent examples of participatory political culture include:

TheEndSARS movement: A decentralized, youth-led protest against police brutality that morphed into a broader call for systemic reforms. It revealed the potential of collective action rooted in digital mobilization and civic engagement.

Civic tech platforms such as BudGIT and Tracka: These organizations promote

transparency and accountability by enabling citizens to monitor government budgets and track constituency projects.

Social media political discourse: Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have become tools for political education, campaign mobilization, protest coordination, and real-time critique of public officials.

Despite these advances, participatory culture in Nigeria remains nascent and uneven. It often lacks institutional support and is vulnerable to state repression, misinformation, and co-optation. Many citizens engage briefly before retreating into apathy when their efforts yield little change. This cycle of activism and withdrawal encapsulates the very essence of political ambivalence—the coexistence of hope and despair, action and disillusionment.

Summary Insight

Nigeria's political culture reflects a dynamic and often contradictory interplay between parochialism, subjection, and participation. These orientations are not mutually exclusive but are lived simultaneously by many Nigerians, depending on context and experience. The resulting ambivalence is not merely a civic defect—it is a philosophical and socio-political response to Nigeria's complex history, fractured institutions, and contested national identity.

THE NEXUS OF AMBIVALENCE

Ambivalence in Nigeria's political culture emerges from the oscillation among these three types. A single individual may embody all three: detached (parochial), obedient (subject), and engaged (participatory)—depending on context, issue, or perceived efficacy.

For example, a young Nigerian may be politically active on social media (participatory), reluctantly obey government directives (subject), but avoid voting due to skepticism about electoral integrity (parochial). This fluid and unstable mixture illustrates a cognitive and existential dissonance, where belief in democracy exists alongside deep distrust of democratic institutions.

This ambivalence is not merely a flaw but a symptom of unresolved historical trauma and socio-political contradictions. As Innocent Asouzu (2004), suggests, the failure to harmonize competing values and interests leads to social fragmentation. His philosophy of *complementary reflection* offers a pathway to address ambivalence by promoting dialogue, interdependence, and the affirmation of shared humanity.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF POLITICAL CULTURE OF AMBIVALENCE IN NIGERIA AND THE WAY FORWARD

The ambivalent nature of Nigeria's political culture has profound implications for governance, democratic consolidation, social cohesion, and national development. This

section explores the multi-layered consequences of this cultural ambivalence and proposes a hermeneutic and philosophical roadmap for overcoming the crisis.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

1. Democratic Fragility and Electoral Apathy

One of the clearest consequences of political ambivalence in Nigeria is the **erosion of democratic credibility**. Elections are often characterized by low voter turnout, particularly among young people and urban dwellers. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2023), voter turnout in the 2023 general elections hovered around 27%—one of the lowest in Africa. Many Nigerians believe their votes do not count, citing rigged outcomes, vote-buying, and post-election violence. This skepticism feeds electoral apathy and undermines the legitimacy of elected officials.

2. Weak Civic Institutions and Poor Accountability

Ambivalence leads to weakened **institutional performance**. Citizens who mistrust the judiciary, legislature, police, and civil service are less likely to demand accountability or participate in policy development. Likewise, when institutions fail to enforce the rule of law or deliver public goods equitably, citizens become even more cynical, creating a **vicious cycle of disengagement and decay**. Transparency and accountability suffer, as power remains centralized and unchallenged.

3. Entrenchment of Identity Politics and Ethno-Religious Tensions

Ambivalence in political identity often pushes citizens to seek belonging in narrower ethnic, religious, or regional affiliations. Political loyalty becomes based on “where you come from” rather than competence or integrity. This fuels **identity politics**, undermining national unity. For instance, the debate around power rotation between the North and South, or among major ethnic blocs, reveals a lack of shared political culture or national vision.

4. Civil Unrest and Periodic Protest Movements

Ambivalence is also marked by intermittent spikes of activism—often emotional and uncoordinated. Movements such as **Occupy Nigeria (2012)**, and **EndSARS (2020)**, exemplify this pattern. While they capture genuine public outrage, they frequently lack sustainable follow-through, long-term civic education, or institutional engagement. As a result, they may dissipate without structural impact, reinforcing the very cynicism they sought to challenge.

5. Brain Drain and Political Emigration

An under-discussed implication is the “japa” phenomenon—a wave of Nigerian professionals and youth leaving the country in search of better governance and opportunities abroad. This mass exit reflects a form of political withdrawal—an existential ambivalence where citizens feel they must escape the system to survive. While remittances may help the economy, the loss of talent undermines domestic political renewal.

6. Moral Crisis and the Collapse of Public Trust

At its core, ambivalence signifies a **moral crisis**—a rupture in the public's trust in the moral authority of leadership. Politicians are viewed not as public servants but as opportunists. Institutions are not perceived as instruments of justice but as mechanisms for self-enrichment. Asouzu (2004), refers to this as a “crisis of complementarity,” where the communal values that should bind society together are overridden by individualism, materialism, and suspicion.

THE WAY FORWARD: A HERMENEUTIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSE

Addressing the political culture of ambivalence in Nigeria requires more than political reforms; it demands a paradigm shift in civic consciousness, anchored in hermeneutic interpretation and moral reawakening.

1. Re-education for Civic Consciousness

Education must go beyond literacy to include **civic and moral education** rooted in African values. Schools, universities, and media should promote critical thinking, ethical leadership, and the virtues of political engagement. Political education should also embrace indigenous knowledge systems and traditional institutions that emphasize communal responsibility.

2. Reviving Complementary Ontology

As Innocent Asouzu advocates, Nigerians must learn to see themselves and others as complementary partners in political life. This involves overcoming exclusivist tendencies and fostering dialogue across ethnic, religious, and generational lines. The principle of “no-being should be left out in the quest for meaning” should guide political inclusion and policy-making.

3. Strengthening Civil Society and Grassroots Democracy

Grassroots organizations and civil society groups must be empowered to serve as mediators between the state and the citizenry. Local governance structures should be revitalized to allow communities to directly influence development projects and policies. Participatory budgeting, town hall meetings, and citizen advisory councils can help rebuild trust.

4. Ethical Reforms and Leadership Accountability

Leadership in Nigeria must undergo an ethical transformation, moving from transactional politics to transformational service. This includes transparent appointments, asset declarations, and consequences for misconduct. Religious and traditional leaders must also take responsibility in preaching integrity and national unity.

5. Harnessing Youth Energy for Institutional Renewal

Rather than being used as political thugs or social media warriors, Nigerian youth must be mentored into **institutional participation**—joining political parties, contesting elections,

and leading policy advocacy. The youth bulge is a demographic advantage that, if properly harnessed, can reshape the country's political future.

6. National Dialogue and Reconciliation

Finally, a **genuine national dialogue** is needed to address historical wounds, constitutional ambiguity, and the imbalance of power. Such dialogue should be inclusive, non-partisan, and grounded in a shared commitment to building a more just and participatory Nigeria.

EVALUATION

This study has explored the intricate landscape of Nigeria's political culture through analytical and hermeneutic lens, focusing on the pervasive condition of ambivalence, a state of emotional, moral, and civic contradiction that characterizes the Nigerian people's relationship with politics and governance.

The **typology of political culture** (parochial, subject, and participatory) served as a conceptual framework for understanding how citizens perceive and engage with political institutions. Nigeria's political reality illustrates a fluid, overlapping experience of these orientations, often within the same individual or community. This multiplicity is not merely theoretical, it reflects the lived tensions of a society where democratic aspirations coexist uneasily with authoritarian legacies, and civic optimism is regularly eroded by institutional betrayal.

Central to this analysis is the philosophical integration of ambivalence, interpreted through the thought of Innocent Asouzu (2004, 2007), as well as thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard (1980), Charles Taylor (1992, 1994), and Kwasi Wiredu (1996). In Asouzu's philosophy, ambivalence is not merely a defect in reasoning but a reflection of a deeper existential and sociopolitical fracture—what he described as a **“crisis of comprehensiveness.”** This condition arises when individuals or societies are caught between opposing forces: modernity and tradition, idealism and realism, morality and materialism.

From a hermeneutic standpoint, this crisis should not be viewed as a dead end but as a **“text”** to be interpreted-- a sociopolitical narrative shaped by history, identity, and collective memory. Political culture, then, becomes a dynamic story in which meaning is constantly negotiated among citizens, institutions, and leaders.

A significant insight emerging from this analysis is that political ambivalence in Nigeria is systemic not incidental. It is the product of multiple, interwoven factors:

Colonial legacies that alienated citizens from indigenous governance models.

Military regimes that normalized autocratic obedience and undermined civic participation;

Ethno-religious politics that eroded national cohesion and fragmented collective identity;

Persistent corruption and weak institutions that destroy leadership;

An education systems that emphasizes credentials over civic responsibility and critical thinking.

Despite these challenges, the study also uncovers pathways of hope. The growing culture of youth participation, the persistence of civil society activism, and the creative use of digital tools signal a new generation's yearning for accountability and reform. These green

shoots, if nurtured, offer real potential for transforming Nigeria's political culture.

What is ultimately required is a philosophical reawakening --a transformation not only of political structures but of how Nigerians conceptualize their roles as moral and civic agents. The Nigerian project cannot be sustained merely by laws and institutions; it must be animated by a shared sense of meaning, belonging, and ethical responsibility.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the political culture of ambivalence in Nigeria is both a symptom and a challenge, a reflection of the country's unsettled historical journey and a call to reimagine the future. Through the method of hermeneutics, this study has shown that understanding and interpreting this condition is the first step toward resolving it.

The way forward demands a commitment to complementarity, dialogue, and **civic rebirth**. It calls for leadership that embodies ethical integrity, institutions that foster inclusion, and citizens who believe again in the power of participation. As Asouzu's complementary ontology reminds us, “every being has meaning only in relation to others.” Nigeria must build a political culture where every citizen—regardless of background—is seen as essential to the common good. In doing so, the nation can move beyond ambivalence and toward a more coherent, just, and participatory democratic order.

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