

Review

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Review

Systemic Poverty as a Tool for Economic and Social Slavery: From Colonialism to Political Class Colonisation

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Abstract

This review examines the idea that systemic poverty is a deliberate and enduring instrument of economic and social enslavement; tracing its evolution from colonial exploitation to contemporary political class domination in Africa, with a specific focus on Nigeria. The study argues that poverty in Nigeria is not merely a consequence of mismanagement or underdevelopment but a structural tool used to maintain control, suppress resistance, and perpetuate dependency. Through historical and analytical exposition, it explores how colonialism institutionalised deprivation, by embedding extractive economic systems, hierarchical governance, and ideological subjugation. The review further discusses how postcolonial elites inherited and perfected these mechanisms, transforming political independence into a new form of internal colonisation, where poverty serves as political capital and control mechanism. The social and psychological consequences of this structure fragmentation, ethical erosion, youth disillusionment, and the feminisation of poverty are highlighted as barriers to collective progress. Finally, the paper proposes pathways toward liberation through consciousness reawakening, institutional reforms, economic diversification, and moral leadership. It concludes that the eradication of systemic poverty requires not charity but structural emancipation anchored in justice, productivity, and collective dignity.

Keywords: systemic poverty; colonialism; political class colonisation; economic enslavement; Nigeria; dependency; postcolonial state; social inequality; liberation; structural emancipation

1. Introduction

Poverty has often been discussed as a socioeconomic problem, a developmental challenge, or a humanitarian concern (Bambeni, 2025; Chen, 2025; United Nations, 2025). Yet, in the African context, and particularly in Nigeria, poverty is better understood as a systemic construct, a carefully-maintained structure of dependency that benefits those in power. It is not an accident of history but a design of politics. From the era of European imperialism to the age of domestic elite domination, poverty has functioned as a strategic instrument of enslavement; economic, psychological, and moral. The persistence of poverty across generations, despite abundant natural and human resources, raises a critical question: who benefits from the poverty of the people? This review interrogates the historical and contemporary mechanisms through which systemic poverty has served as an instrument of economic and social slavery in Africa, with Nigeria as a focal example.

The concept of systemic poverty implies that deprivation is embedded in the structures of governance, production, and social relations. It is not simply the failure of individuals to thrive, but the success of systems designed to keep them dependent (Baafi Antwi, 2011 a, 2011b; Rodney, 2018).

From colonial rule to the modern Nigerian state, the mechanisms of exploitation have shifted in form, but not in function. Colonialism imposed economic dependency and social hierarchy through resource extraction, taxation, and political control (Joshua, 1996; Baafi Antwi, 2011 a, 2011b; Rodney, 2018). The postcolonial political elite inherited and adapted these same systems, consolidating them into what may be described as political class colonisation, a domestic replication of colonial dominance, where the state's wealth and institutions serve the interests of a minority elite rather than the collective good.

Historically, European colonial powers entrenched extractive economic models that prioritised the export of raw materials and import of finished goods. Colonies were designed to supply labour and resources, not to develop autonomous economies (Njoku, 2013; Obasun, 2025). In Nigeria, the colonial administration's infrastructure and education policies were geared toward administrative convenience and resource mobilisation, not empowerment or innovation (Njoku, 2013; Obasun, 2025). The result was a dependent economy and a stratified society where power was concentrated in the hands of intermediaries who collaborated with colonial authorities (Njoku, 2013; Obasun, 2025). This legacy did not vanish with independence; rather, it mutated.

At independence, the newly formed Nigerian political class assumed the role once played by colonial rulers. Instead of dismantling exploitative structures, they appropriated them, transforming public office into a means of personal accumulation. The promise of freedom was replaced by a continuity of servitude, albeit, now under domestic masters. Poverty became a political resource: a means of control and compliance. Politicians discovered that a population struggling for survival is easier to manipulate with short-term inducements than an empowered citizenry demanding structural reform. Thus, poverty was no longer just a social problem, it became a political instrument.

The term *political class colonisation* captures this evolution succinctly. It represents a new form of enslavement, in which the chains are economic rather than physical, and the masters are compatriots rather than foreigners. The colonisation of the state by the elite manifests in the monopolisation of opportunities, capture of state resources, and deliberate erosion of social mobility (Obogo, 2024). Access to education, healthcare, and employment remains grossly unequal, ensuring the perpetuation of a compliant underclass. Poverty, therefore, operates both as a condition and a mechanism: it disempowers individuals while empowering those who exploit their deprivation. Nigeria's experience exemplifies this paradox. Despite its vast oil wealth and human capital, the country remains home to one of the largest populations living in multidimensional poverty (Ogwumalu et al., 2017; Alemu, 2019). The contradiction of abundance amid scarcity reflects not a lack of potential, but a distortion of priorities. Public policies are often crafted to serve elite interests; corruption siphons public funds; and economic diversification remains rhetorical rather than real. The result is a cycle where poverty sustains power and power sustains poverty.

Understanding systemic poverty in this context demands a broader historical and ideological lens. As Walter Rodney (Rodney, 2018; Bambeni, 2025) argued in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, underdevelopment is not accidental but the outcome of centuries of deliberate exploitation. Frantz Fanon in the *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Kwame Nkrumah's *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965) likewise warned that political independence without economic transformation merely substitutes one form of domination for another (Fanon, 1961; Nkrumah, 1965). The Nigerian case proves their thesis: the flag of independence was raised, but the structures of enslavement remained intact, only repainted in national colours. This review, therefore, explores the continuum from colonial exploitation to political class colonisation. It examines how systemic poverty functions as both a consequence and an instrument of social control, tracing its roots in colonial history, its reinforcement through postcolonial governance, and its perpetuation in the global neo-liberal order. Ultimately, it argues that genuine liberation in Africa requires more than economic growth; it demands the decolonisation of governance, consciousness, and power itself.

2. Colonialism and the Architecture of Dependency

The historical roots of systemic poverty in Africa (and Nigeria in particular) lie deeply embedded in the architecture of colonialism (Ndukwe and Ibrahim, 2017; Abdul Azeez, 2023). European colonisation was not a civilising mission, as it was often portrayed, but a deliberate economic project designed to extract wealth and subordinate indigenous populations (Ndukwe and Ibrahim, 2017; Abdul Azeez, 2023). It established a pattern of dependency, economic, political, and psychological that has persisted long after the colonial flags were lowered. The colonial state did not merely introduce poverty; it institutionalised it, embedding deprivation within the very framework of African societies (Joshua, 1996; Baafi Antwi, 2011 a, 2011b; Njoku, 2013; Rodney, 2018; Obasun, 2025).

2.1. *The Economics of Extraction, Labour Exploitation and Indoctrination*

At the heart of colonialism was an economic motive: the exploitation of Africa's natural and human resources for the enrichment of Europe. In Nigeria, the British administration engineered an economy structured around extraction and export. Agricultural policies emphasised cash crops such as cocoa in the West, groundnuts in the North, and palm oil in the East, commodities destined for British industries. Meanwhile, local subsistence agriculture, which sustained rural livelihoods, was neglected. This monocultural dependence on exports tied the Nigerian economy to global price fluctuations and prevented industrial diversification. Across Africa, these resource extraction systems left many countries reliant on raw exports, which today are to a large extent still controlled by foreign corporations. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the mining of cobalt which is an important resource in technological production globally is largely controlled by the developed economies with local communities facing abysmal working conditions, environmental degradation and limited economic and financial benefits from this industry (Conway, 2024). The foreign corporations which are often empowered and emboldened by corrupt self-serving politicians often prioritise profit over local development.

Colonial taxation policies compounded the problem. The hut tax, poll tax, and other levies forced rural populations into the cash economy, compelling them to sell their labour or produce to meet tax obligations (Bush and Maltby, 2004; Gardner, 2012; Alexopoulou and Juif, 2017; Terungwa and Unongo, 2020). This mechanism not only extracted revenue for the colonial administration but also disrupted traditional economic systems based on communal ownership and self-sufficiency. The result was an economy that favoured cash over subsistence, elites over peasants, and the metropole over the colony. Poverty thus became structurally-embedded as a byproduct of policies that privileged extraction over empowerment.

Colonial labour systems were equally exploitative. Forced labour for public works, plantations, and mining operations displaced communities and entrenched inequality. In parts of Nigeria, men were conscripted to build roads, railways, and administrative centres projects that primarily served the needs of colonial commerce, not local development (Bush and Maltby, 2004; Gardner, 2012; Alexopoulou and Juif, 2017; Terungwa and Unongo, 2020). The colonial state relied on indirect rule, co-opting traditional rulers as intermediaries. This system reinforced hierarchical power structures and rewarded collaboration over resistance. A new class of local elites emerged, benefiting from access to education, trade, and administrative privilege; while the majority remained impoverished and voiceless. This dual economy, which included a small, Westernised elite class, and a vast underclass mirrored the colonial vision of governance: efficient control through inequality. Education was narrowly tailored to produce clerks and interpreters rather than scientists, engineers, or entrepreneurs. The colonial curriculum trained Africans to serve, not to lead; to administer, not to innovate (Ndukwe and Umar, 2017). In his seminal work *Decolonising the Mind* Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o discussing the role of literature and culture during colonialism opined that in the colonial system, culture and language were used to make the colonised feel inferior and therefore more accepting of the position of the coloniser as ruler. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o later argued, this was part of the

psychological colonisation that accompanied economic domination, a subtle but enduring form of enslavement (Thiong'o, 1986; Rani, 2022).

2.2. Political Control Through Poverty, Cultural and Ideological Domination

Poverty was not merely a consequence of colonialism; it was one of its most effective instruments of control. By ensuring widespread deprivation, colonial administrations governed populations that were easier to manipulate and less-likely to challenge authority; and economic dependence translated into political docility. Through deliberate scarcity and restricted access to resources, people were conditioned to accept subordination in exchange for minimal sustenance (Wang and Guo, 2022; Ukeyima, 2025). The colonial economy thus functioned not only as an extractive system but also as a disciplinary one. This logic of control extended into the physical and economic infrastructure of the state. Colonial investments in roads, railways, and ports were highly-selective, designed to connect production zones to export terminals rather than to integrate local communities or stimulate internal trade (Bonfatti and Poelhekke, 2014; Jedwab et al., 2016). Such spatial and economic patterns institutionalised uneven development, producing regional disparities that persist in postcolonial Nigeria. The Niger Delta's continuing experience of resource extraction without commensurate development exemplifies this colonial legacy of taking without giving.

Dependency theorists later formalised this understanding, contending that colonialism and its modern continuation, neocolonialism entrenched global structures of economic dependence and inequality (Hendricks, 2010; Alaye and Ogunbanwo, 2024). Wealthy nations advanced through the systematic exploitation of poorer ones, a process perpetuated today through foreign debt, unequal trade, and structural economic subordination (Neckerman and Torche., 2007; Litte 2014). Yet the legacy of colonialism was not only economic; it was also psychological and cultural. Colonial rule redefined African consciousness by undermining indigenous systems of knowledge, governance, and morality, replacing them with Western norms presented as superior (Wangui, 2024). This process of cultural displacement produced a deep sense of alienation, a detachment from native value systems, and an internalised dependence on foreign validation. Poverty, in this broader sense, was not merely material but existential. Africans were taught to aspire to European ideals of civilisation while being systematically denied the means to attain them, trapping generations in a cycle of frustration, imitation, and internalized inferiority (Aregbeshola and Adekunle, 2024). This ideological colonisation deepened systemic poverty by eroding collective self-reliance. Pre-colonial economies often operated on reciprocity, communal ownership, and mutual aid. Colonial capitalism replaced these with competition, accumulation, and exploitation (Layden et al., 2025). Communities that once viewed wealth as communal began to internalise scarcity and individualism as natural conditions. Thus, even after independence, the inherited mindset persisted, development became equated with Westernisation, and the pursuit of equality was replaced by the struggle for access within an unequal system.

2.3. The Seeds of Postcolonial Continuity

By the time Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the architecture of dependency was firmly established. The new political leaders inherited a state built for extraction, not inclusion. The economic structures favoured export over production, the education system produced administrators rather than innovators, and political authority was centralised in a way that mirrored colonial governance. The continuation of these patterns ensured that systemic poverty remained intact, only now managed by local elites.

As Walter Rodney observed, colonialism "developed Europe while underdeveloping Africa" (Rodney, 1972). The wealth extracted from African labour and resources financed European industrialisation, while African economies were left dependent, fragmented, and under-resourced. The colonial project was thus not a historical accident but a calculated act of socio-economic engineering, a blueprint for dependency that postcolonial rulers would later replicate for their own gain. The end of colonial rule did not dismantle the architecture of systemic poverty; it merely

changed its custodians. The next phase of Africa's (and Nigeria's) subjugation was not managed from London, Paris, or Lisbon, but from Lagos, Abuja, and the state capitals. The tools of oppression shifted from imperial decrees to political manipulation, patronage, and corruption. What emerged was political class colonisation an internal form of enslavement where poverty became a deliberate strategy for maintaining power.

3. The Transition: Independence Without Liberation

Nigeria's independence in 1960 was celebrated as the dawn of freedom, a symbolic severing of colonial chains. Yet, beneath the national euphoria lay a sobering truth: though the colonial flag was lowered, the colonial framework remained intact (Oromareghake et al., 2021). Political independence did not translate into economic emancipation or social justice (Dugguh, 2023). The newly independent state inherited not only the administrative structures of the colonial regime but also its logic of control, inequality, and dependency (Dugguh, 2023). Thus began a new phase of systemic poverty now domestically-engineered and politically-sustained.

The postcolonial Nigerian state was built upon colonial foundations. Its bureaucracy, laws, and economic orientation were like its predecessor designed it to serve extraction, not inclusion. The British model of indirect rule had trained a class of local intermediaries to govern on behalf of the empire; after independence, these same elites simply took over as the new custodians of power (Oromareghake et al., 2021). The state itself was not a neutral apparatus, it was a mechanism of privilege, structured to benefit those who controlled it. The political elite who emerged after independence quickly realised that maintaining the colonial-style hierarchies ensured their dominance. Instead of dismantling exploitative systems, they appropriated them. Access to power became the primary route to wealth, and governance turned into an avenue for accumulation rather than service. The result was a continuity of colonial control, now exercised internally. As Frantz Fanon observed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, many postcolonial leaders became "transmission lines" for colonial interests, local managers of an inherited system designed to perpetuate dependence (Fanon, 1961).

The Nigerian economy after independence remained tethered to global capitalist structures that favoured Western powers (Oromareghake et al., 2021). The focus on raw material exports persisted; first agricultural, later petroleum, while industrialisation and technological innovation were neglected. The illusion of progress was maintained through resource-based revenue, particularly after the oil boom of the 1970s, but this wealth did not translate into broad-based development. The oil economy, in fact, deepened systemic poverty. It concentrated wealth in the hands of the state and its political managers, while eroding the productive base of the society (Adigizi, 2025). Agriculture declined, manufacturing stagnated, and import dependency grew. The Nigerian state became a rentier state, a political economy driven by rent-seeking rather than productivity (Manu et al., 2023). Poverty became a byproduct of elite enrichment; the more the state earned, the less the people prospered.

Economic dependency was further reinforced through foreign aid and debt. Loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank during the 1980s' Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) imposed neoliberal reforms that dismantled social welfare systems, devalued the currency, and privatised public assets (Oluwadara, 2022). These policies, though presented as "restructuring," effectively reimposed external economic control (Oluwadara, 2022). The poor bore the brunt through inflation, unemployment, and the collapse of public education and healthcare. The nation found itself re-colonised this time through financial instruments and policy conditionalities.

4. The Rise of the Political Class and Internal Colonisation

As the postcolonial state evolved, a new political class emerged, one that mirrored the colonial administrators in both lifestyle and outlook (Obikaeze et al., 2023). They positioned themselves as "owners" of the state, wielding control over national resources as private patrimony. This new elite

class perpetuated the colonial principle of divide and rule, manipulating ethnicity, religion, and regionalism to fragment public resistance and maintain dominance. Systemic poverty became a tool of political engineering. By keeping the masses economically dependent, the political class ensured perpetual control (Wang and Guo, 2022; Garpiya, 2025). Employment, welfare, and even education became instruments of patronage, distributed along political and ethnic lines. Citizens were conditioned to rely on their “godfathers” or “connections” rather than on fair and functional institutions (Bolarinwa and Osuji, 2022). In this sense, poverty was not accidental; it was deliberate, functional, and politically-profitable. This institutionalised poverty then creates a conundrum that reinforces Edward Banfield’s assertion that the fundamental problem of the lower class trapped in poverty is a lack of futuristic thinking and behaviour (Banfield, 1970). Consequently, they often settle for immediate benefits, a psychological state that ultimately serves the interests of the political elite. This form of internal colonisation also redefined the concept of slavery. The chains were no longer iron but economic; the masters no longer foreign but domestic. The Nigerian poor have become trapped in a cycle of dependency, their aspirations mediated through a system designed to extract loyalty rather than to empower.

5. The Corruption-Poverty Nexus: The Endless Poverty Alleviation Programmes

Corruption also became both the method and the justification for systemic impoverishment. Public funds meant for development were routinely diverted into private accounts, while the visible poverty of the populace served as a pretext for endless “poverty alleviation” programmes many of which exist only on paper. The irony of Nigeria’s postcolonial experience lies in the fact that poverty itself has become an industry, one that generates wealth for those who claim to be fighting it. From the *Operation Feed the Nation* campaigns of the 1970s to present-day conditional cash transfer programmes, successive anti-poverty initiatives have often been captured by political interests (Dada and Owolabi, 2013; Manjo, 2023). These schemes offer temporary relief but produce no lasting structural transformation. The perpetuation of poverty thus sustains a cycle of dependency that reinforces elite power. As Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe famously observed, “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership” (Achebe, 1984; Bolarinwa and Osuji, 2022).

While Achebe’s assertion remains profoundly relevant, contemporary realities reveal that systemic poverty extends beyond material deprivation to encompass a psychological dimension, a continuation of the colonial project through mental subjugation. Many Nigerians have internalised poverty as both normal and moral. Hardship is glorified as endurance; inequality is rationalised as destiny. This internalisation produces what may be described as a *poverty of expectation*, a collective mindset that ensures compliance and stifles resistance. When people come to believe that nothing can change, they cease to demand change.

The psychological trauma endured for decades at the hands of the political elite (their so-called benefactors) initially produced a society marked by dependence and helplessness. Over time, however, this has evolved into a troubling social condition in which citizens have developed sympathetic or even positive feelings toward their captors, the very political elite responsible for their deprivation. This state of cognitive distortion mirrors the phenomenon known in psychology as Stockholm syndrome, where victims form emotional bonds with their oppressors, mistaking subjugation for loyalty. This psychological dimension of poverty maintains the ideological infrastructure of modern enslavement. As long as the majority accept deprivation as inevitable, the minority continue to profit from it. Thus, systemic poverty functions not only as an economic condition but as a strategy of control, a mechanism that sustains social hierarchies and silences dissent.

The postcolonial state, rather than dismantling the colonial system of control, perfected it. Nigeria’s tragedy lies in this continuity: political independence without social liberation, economic sovereignty without productivity, democracy without accountability.

6. Political Class Colonisation: The New Empire Within

Independence may have freed Nigeria from foreign domination, but it did not liberate Nigerians from the chains of internal oppression. Over time, the nation's political elite transformed themselves into domestic colonisers, ruling with the same extractive logic as the imperial powers they replaced (Bolarinwa and Osuji, 2022). This phase of political class colonisation represents the internalisation of colonial power structures and their redeployment by local actors to sustain dominance. The instruments of control remain the same: deprivation, dependency, and disempowerment; and only the faces have changed.

Political independence was expected to usher in self-determination, justice, and prosperity. Instead, it produced a form of inverted freedom, where liberty exists in law but oppression thrives in practice. The state, rather than being the protector of citizens, became an apparatus for elite accumulation. Governance became a business, and politics a marketplace of influence. The very institutions meant to deliver social equity, education, healthcare, justice, and employment were systematically weakened, ensuring that the masses remained too preoccupied with survival to challenge power (Olarinmoye, 2007). This inversion of freedom redefined the citizen-state relationship. Citizens became subjects once again, not of the British Crown, but of political godfathers, party machines, and entrenched oligarchies (Ali, 2019; Oghuvbu, 2023). The language of democracy provided a façade of legitimacy, but the underlying structure mirrored colonial authoritarianism: extraction at the top, submission at the bottom.

In the Nigerian context, poverty has evolved into a political asset, a currency of control. The poor are not merely victims of systemic dysfunction; they are the instruments through which that dysfunction is maintained (Oyesola, 2007; Nmah, 2019)). Political elites understand that a population struggling to meet basic needs is easier to manipulate. During elections, food items, clothing, and small cash incentives become tools of persuasion. Votes are exchanged for survival, not ideology. This deliberate perpetuation of economic hardship transforms poverty into a form of social enslavement. It conditions people to depend on their oppressors for relief and reinforces the false narrative that benevolence, not justice, is the foundation of governance. The cycle is self-sustaining: the poor elect their exploiters out of desperation, and the exploiters maintain poverty to secure re-election. Thus, systemic poverty becomes the engine of political continuity, a calculated mechanism that transforms inequality into legitimacy.

7. The Economics of Power and Privilege

The Nigerian economy today mirrors the stratified order of a colonial enclave. A narrow elite class including politicians, contractors, and bureaucrats which controls vast wealth, while the majority live below the poverty line. Public resources are channeled through opaque networks of patronage, where access is determined by proximity to power rather than merit or innovation. This concentration of wealth fuels social paralysis. Small and medium enterprises struggle under taxation and lack of infrastructure, while the political elite live in extravagant isolation, insulated by private schools, hospitals, and estates. In many ways, the Nigerian political class functions as an occupying force extracting from society while contributing little to its productivity. They have become what Claude Ake described as "a bourgeoisie without industry," (Ake, 1978, 1996, 2003) thriving on rents, contracts, and corruption rather than value creation.

Institutions that should serve as counterweights such as the judiciary, civil service, and media have been co-opted or weakened. Laws are selectively applied, ensuring impunity for the powerful and punishment for the powerless. Access to justice, like access to education and healthcare, has become a privilege of class. Meanwhile, policies ostensibly designed to alleviate poverty often deepen it. Subsidy regimes, loan schemes, and social programmes are routinely captured by political loyalists. In this system, institutions do not fail by accident they are made to fail so that dependence on individual benefactors replaces trust in the state. The resulting social order is one of controlled instability: chaotic enough to prevent collective resistance, stable enough to protect elite interests.

8. Media, Religion, and the Manufacture of Consent

The Nigerian elite have also mastered the art of psychological colonisation through media and religion. Propaganda and disinformation normalise suffering, while religious rhetoric reframes poverty as a divine test rather than a man-made injustice. Churches and mosques, once centres of resistance during colonial times, are now often complicit in perpetuating silence. Sermons preach submission, not revolution; miracles, not reform. The mass media, captured by political interests, amplifies distractions and trivialities turning attention away from structural injustice. The result is a population that is both informed and disempowered, aware of its suffering yet unable to mobilise against it. As long as people blame fate rather than systems, the cycle of enslavement continues unbroken.

Overall, political class colonisation is not a rupture with the past but a continuation of colonial logic under new management. The same mechanisms of economic dependency, elite privilege and psychological control remains intact. What distinguishes the current system is its localisation: the oppressor now speaks the same language, prays in the same mosque or church, and hails from the same ethnic group as the oppressed. This localisation of exploitation gives it moral cover. It transforms oppression into “governance,” exploitation into “policy,” and survivalism into “resilience.” Yet, beneath this façade lies the same principle that guided colonial administration: control through deprivation. Political class colonisation represents the final stage in the continuum from foreign domination to domestic enslavement. It is the reason why, decades after independence, Nigeria remains rich in resources but poor in human welfare.

9. The Consequences of Systemic Poverty: Social Fragmentation and the Erosion of Citizenship

Systemic poverty in Nigeria is not merely an economic condition; it is a sociopolitical pathology that corrodes the moral fabric of society and erodes the sense of collective destiny. When deprivation becomes institutionalised, it reshapes identity, weakens social bonds, and transforms the meaning of citizenship itself (Ziprebo and Obi, 2024). The outcome is a fractured society where individuals compete for survival rather than unite for justice, and where poverty becomes both a personal burden and a collective weapon of control.

In traditional African societies, community solidarity was the bedrock of survival. Precolonial economic and social systems were built on reciprocity, mutual obligation, and collective responsibility. Colonialism disrupted this balance by introducing hierarchy, individualism, and competition. The postcolonial political class deepened this fracture by weaponising ethnicity, religion, and region to divide citizens along artificial lines. As poverty worsened, these divisions hardened. Ethnic and religious identities became survival tools in a zero-sum economy. Citizens increasingly turned to kinship, tribe, or faith for protection and opportunity, rather than to the state or shared citizenship (Idike and Okechukwu, 2015; Gana, 2023). The result is a nation where solidarity has been replaced by suspicion, and collective struggles are weakened by sectarian loyalties. This fragmentation serves the interests of the political elite: a divided populace cannot mount unified resistance. Poverty thus functions not only as deprivation but as a centrifugal force, pulling communities apart and preventing the emergence of a cohesive national consciousness.

Under political class colonisation, citizenship itself becomes a tradable commodity. The rights and privileges of belonging such as employment, education and security are no longer guaranteed by law, but negotiated through patronage. Individuals align with political godfathers, ethnic blocs, or religious leaders to access opportunities. The state ceases to be a provider and becomes a marketplace where loyalty, not merit, determines worth. In such a system, poverty devalues personhood. The poor are denied the full rights of citizenship, treated not as stakeholders but as dependents. Civic participation becomes transactional, votes are exchanged for temporary relief and allegiance traded for handouts. This erosion of citizenship reduces democracy to a ritual rather than

substance; where we have elections without empowerment and representation without accountability.

When poverty becomes pervasive, survival takes precedence over principle. A society where the majority struggle daily to eat and live cannot sustain a robust moral order. Corruption becomes normalised, not necessarily because Nigerians are inherently corrupt, but because the system demands compromise for survival. Teachers demand bribes to supplement inadequate salaries; police officers extort to make ends meet; civil servants inflate contracts to offset delayed payments. Each act is individually rational but collectively destructive. The moral consequence is a society trapped in ethical paralysis, where injustice is tolerated because everyone participates, willingly or unwillingly, in sustaining it. This condition is the psychological triumph of systemic poverty: it replaces outrage with resignation and resistance with adaptation. The enslaved no longer need physical chains as they are bound by the very routines of survival.

10. The Erosion of Trust and Public Faith

Systemic poverty undermines not only material well-being but also the trust that sustains social order. When citizens lose faith in government, institutions, and even one another, society descends into cynicism (Mood and Jonsson, 2016); and public service loses meaning; while collective action becomes futile. Citizens retreat into private worlds, caring only for immediate family or clan. This erosion of trust explains why national development projects often fail. Without belief in a common good, policies are viewed through lenses of self-interest or suspicion. Every government programme is interpreted as an avenue for enrichment and every reform as a disguise for exploitation. The nation becomes an arena of competing private ambitions, not a collective enterprise.

Perhaps the most tragic outcome of systemic poverty is the disillusionment of Nigeria's youth. Deprived of quality education, meaningful employment, and credible leadership; many young Nigerians have lost faith in the promise of their nation. Those who can leave do so, fueling a relentless brain drain. Those who remain often oscillate between apathy, crime, or desperate religiosity. The rise of internet fraud, political thuggery, and extremist movements can all be traced to this vacuum of hope. When legitimate systems fail to reward effort or merit, alternative economies licit or illicit emerge. In this way, systemic poverty not only drains the nation of talent but also breeds instability and moral decay.

Women and children also bear a disproportionate share of the consequences of systemic poverty. In many Nigerian communities, women are both the economic backbone and the most economically-excluded. Limited access to education, property, and capital keeps them trapped in cycles of dependency (Adie and Anam, 2023). The neglect of maternal health, poor sanitation, and food insecurity further compound gendered inequality. This feminisation of poverty is not incidental it reflects the broader logic of exclusion that defines political class colonisation. Just as the poor are kept powerless to preserve elite control, women are kept marginalised to sustain patriarchal dominance. Poverty thus reproduces itself through gender, generation, and geography.

Over time, the weight of systemic poverty breeds a culture of silence, and a collective numbness to suffering. Nigerians continue to adapt, joke, pray, and endure. Resistance becomes rare because endurance is celebrated. The people who once defied colonial masters with collective action now face domestic oppression with muted resignation. This silence is not consent; it is exhaustion. It is the weariness of generations who have learned that protest brings punishment but little change. In this sense, systemic poverty achieves what brute force could not: a compliant populace sustained not by fear, but by fatigue. The social and psychological effects of systemic poverty have transformed Nigeria from a nation of citizens into a collection of survivors. Yet, history shows that no system of enslavement external or internal endures forever.

11. Liberation and the Path to Structural Emancipation

If colonialism created systemic poverty and the political class perfected it, then liberation must involve more than mere political rhetoric or economic reform. True emancipation requires the decolonisation of the mind, the restructuring of institutions, and the reawakening of civic consciousness. Nigeria's challenge today is not the absence of resources, but the persistence of structures; economic, social, and psychological that perpetuate dependency and exploitation. Liberation, therefore, must be multidimensional: it must confront not only poverty as a condition but also poverty as a system.

The first site of liberation is the human mind (Subbau, 2024). Systemic poverty endures because people have been conditioned to accept inequality as normal and injustice as inevitable. The most powerful chains are not physical; they are mental and ideological. As Steve Biko wrote, "the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed." Nigeria's liberation must therefore begin with intellectual reorientation, reviving critical thinking, historical awareness, and civic education. Schools, media, and religious institutions must become spaces for awakening, not sedation. A new national consciousness is required: one that teaches Nigerians to see poverty not as destiny but as design, not as divine will but as human policy. Once people recognise poverty as a man-made system, they can begin to dismantle it. This consciousness is the foundation of all structural change.

Secondly, no nation can overcome systemic poverty without rebuilding its institutions. Nigeria's current structures are colonial in logic, corrupt in function, centralised, opaque, and unaccountable. The path forward requires decentralisation of power, transparency in governance, and strong social accountability mechanisms. Institutions must be redesigned to serve citizens rather than control them. Accountability must cease to be a slogan and become a culture. This demands an active citizenry that demands explanations, not excuses; results, not rituals. In the absence of institutional rebirth, reforms merely recycle corruption in a new language.

Thirdly, economic emancipation is central to ending social enslavement. Nigeria's rentier economy, built on oil extraction and political patronage must transition to a productive and knowledge-driven model. Structural poverty cannot be defeated in an economy that produces neither goods nor ideas. These shifts demand deliberate policy choices moving from consumption to production, from import-dependence to local creativity, and from elite enrichment to shared prosperity. Economic freedom, in essence, is the redistribution of opportunity.

Finally, no amount of policy reform can succeed without moral renewal. Systemic poverty thrives in environments where corruption is rationalised and integrity is mocked. Nigeria's crisis is at its core a ethical one, and a collapse of public virtue. The nation must rediscover moral leadership, leaders guided not by greed or godfatherism, but by conscience and service. This requires cultural transformation: redefining success not by wealth accumulation but by impact, empathy, and integrity.

Such moral renewal begins in homes, schools, and faith communities. Religious institutions, in particular, must reclaim their prophetic voice challenging injustice rather than sanctifying it. Liberation demands moral courage: the willingness to confront privilege, expose deceit, and live truthfully in public life.

Throughout history, transformation has always been led by the young and the enlightened. In Nigeria, the youth constitute the demographic majority, and the ideological minority. Many are educated but excluded, vocal but unheard. Reclaiming the future demands a reawakening of youth activism and intellectual leadership. Universities must become centres of problem-solving, not credentialism. Student movements must transcend partisanship and rediscover the tradition of radical civic engagement that shaped Nigeria's independence struggle. The intellectual community, academics, writers, and thinkers must once again assume the role of society's conscience, interrogating power and imagining alternatives. No foreign nation or elite class will liberate Nigeria; only a conscious, courageous generation can.

The ultimate goal of liberation is dignity, the restoration of self-worth to individuals and sovereignty to communities. A dignified society is one where citizens do not beg for survival but create, question, and thrive. Poverty is not merely a lack of money; it is the denial of dignity. Reclaiming dignity requires rebuilding trust, restoring fairness, and ensuring justice. It means a new social contract in which governance is service, not supremacy. Leadership is about accountability, not entitlement; and wealth is measured by contribution, not corruption.

As long as one Nigerian child must die of malnutrition while living beside an oil pipeline, or one graduate must risk death on the Mediterranean in search of hope, our liberation as a nation remains incomplete.

Conclusions

From colonial exploitation to political class colonisation, systemic poverty has functioned as a deliberate instrument of control; an invisible chain binding millions in material and mental servitude. Yet within every structure of oppression lies the potential for renewal. Nigeria's future depends on its ability to confront this history honestly, dismantle its architecture of inequality, and rebuild a society grounded in justice, productivity, and shared humanity. The emancipation of the Nigerian mind and economy is not merely an act of policy; it is an act of revolutionary self-belief. Only then will the nation move from survival to sovereignty, and from dependence to destiny.

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