

Post-Colonialism and the Political Economy of Development in Nigeria: A Revisit

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a trenchant critique of the persisting developmental challenges besetting Nigeria, arguably, Africa's largest economy, situating them within the dialectical framework of colonial and neo-colonial legacies, as well as the internal governance dynamics, alongside an exploration of extrinsic global economic structures. The paper, through an interdisciplinary lens, synthesises historical, political, and economic analyses of developmental issues confronting Nigeria. The paper critically revisits the extant literature on the legacy of colonialism for stunted growth and exacerbated poverty in Nigeria today. The paper also examined internal problems ranging from endemic corruption and governance deficits to significant impediments in policy decisions which continue to reinforce dependency whilst undermining the broad goals of economic development which Nigeria aspires towards. A bulk of existing studies have solely focused on isolated aspects or propose superficial solutions, neglecting the nuanced interplay between these factors. This study fills this lacuna, combining qualitative and quantitative data, in providing a comprehensive understanding of Nigeria's developmental debacle. This is then followed up with contextualised and sustainable recommendations. By and large, the findings of the study contribute to the ongoing discourse on post-colonial development, offering novel insights for scholars, policymakers and development practitioners seeking to address the complexities of Nigeria's underdevelopment.

Key words: Post-colonial development, economic domination, Nigeria, colonial legacies,

1. Introduction

Colonialism entails a complete or partial imposition of political rulership of a superior power over a territory, presumably populated by less powerful people (Fieldhouse, 2004). The entrenchment of colonialism, is characterized by a domineering occupation or settlement, in the demarcated protectorate. This usually is followed by series of economic measures aimed at exploitation of the less powerful state by the colonizing power. As shown from examples in Africa, the colonizing power, in order to advance its political and economic aims, the colonizing power initiates series of policies, which ostensibly offer social and economic benefits to the colonized, but ultimately to siphon economic resources to the “metropolises” (Rodney, 1972; Ake, 1982; Fieldhouse, 2004). This appraisal of colonialism reflects the case with many of the countries in Africa, Asia and the rest of what is now known as the Third World. Scholars such as Walter Rodney (1972), Samir Amin (1976) argued that the underdevelopment of Africa, till today is dialectically and unequally yoked with the legacy of colonialism. Rodney (1972) observed that Africa went into and came out of colonialism with a hoe. This depicts a picturesque of the level of stagnation that Africa witnessed under colonialism and afterwards. Rodney (1972) further observed that, the economic development of states in Africa have been hampered by inability to break free from the apron-string of colonialism.

On his own part, Amin (1976) equally opined that colonialism drew the whole of Africa into the periphery of world economy and its legacy has since remained an obstacle to autonomous development of African countries. In addition to the insights offered by Rodney and Amin, this essay will draw from the wider literature to analyse how colonialism has affected the Nigerian economy since Nigeria gained independence in 1960, through years of military rule, up till 1999 when the country regained back a stable democratic government. The structure of this essay is intentional in the sense that it begins with a critical interrogation of the epistemological divide on the colonial economic legacy in Africa, West Africa and Nigeria as a unit of analysis. The limitations of the existing narrative on the economic implications of colonialism from existing literature is demonstrated using current evidence from literature. The essay then proceeds to critically justify for how colonialism has affected the economic development of Nigeria since the twentieth century.

2. Conceptual Exegesis of Colonialism in Relation to Development

Three major concepts, colonialism, development and post-colonialism are vital to this paper. Colonialism comprises the establishment and upkeep of foreign rule over a population in order for the colonizing authority to derive the largest potential economic benefits (Fadeyiye, 2005:24). Bala (2019) defines colonialism as the extension of a powerful nation's political dominance over a weaker one, in which case, the colony is run by representatives sent by the colonizing power. In colonial context, the interactions between the invading power and the colonized are asymmetrical, and the cornerstone of colonialism was that the colonizing relationship works to the detriment of the occupied territory and favours the occupier nation. This reflects so vividly in the avarice that European countries displayed toward West Africa’s untapped natural resources and the affective economic expansionism anchored on ferocious taxation policies.

The term development on its own part is challenging to define because it is a relative concept. Agagu (2004) argues that the concept of development is nebulously difficult to define because it has been interpreted differently by many authors. However, most agree that development is the process of changing from one state to another, and it may be seen in the political, social, and educational facets of a country (Rodney, 1972; Amir, 1976; Stanley, 2012). However, different authors have theorised about colonialism as the bane of economic backwardness of West Africa today.

Rodney (1972) views development as the expansion of a nation's capacity for internal and external economic, social, political, and religious freedom. This showcases that the much-emphasised sphere of economic growth when talking about development is just one side of the entire picture. Rodney (1972) further noted that economic development mirrors a condition where people have adequate opportunities for innovation and growth, alongside financial stability, reduced disparity in income level. Essentially, this essay examines economic development of West Africa as affected by colonialism.

Walter Rodney (1972) came about the underdevelopment theory and opined that colonialism encompassed more than simply exploitation and that it was essentially about exporting the wealth created in Africa as well as other African currencies. The transfer of profits and other financial resources revealed that excess values created by African resources using African labour were frequently exported, which is seen from the standpoint of reliance. But this meant that the same dialectical forces that caused Africa's underdevelopment also played a role in the development of Europe. In other words, over the course of five centuries, the colonization of Africa by Europe severely hindered the social and, as a result, the economic development of the continent.

Samir Amin (1976) in his theory of unequal development observed that, in a structural sense, and at the macro level, it is virtually impossible to understand the problems of economic development in Africa today without considering the wider socio-historical context of European economic colonization and European expansionist movements, particularly in terms of mercantile and industrial capitalism. Samir Amin (1976) observed rather unequivocally that Africa has been governed economically and politically by erstwhile foreign forces in the cultural, economic, and political enslavement, which makes the African continent dependent, mainly on countries in Europe and the United States of America. Samir Amin (1976) further raised attention to the fragmentation of states in Africa by the colonizing powers as a purposeful and well-thought-out approach to keep those territories under subjection even in post-colonial period. Amin (1976) argued that the connections with Africa continued to be profitable for European colonial powers.

The aforementioned assertions are explicitly buttressed by Rodney (1972:149), whose overview of the analysis of the relationship between Europe and Africa throughout the time of colonialism indicated that Europe were well-organized and strategic. Rodney observed that the colonizing powers collected and accumulated money from colonized African countries under their control and intelligently and astutely invested the surplus in foreign economies that were productive in order to slowly enhance the national wealth and riches of her own country, and by extension, her people.

3. Revisiting the African Experience under Colonialism

Since the dawn of the twenty-first century, different research reports have shown that Africa is not only the world's poorest and most miserable continent, but is also the only one that is becoming poorer, especially in light of Africa's clear and incontrovertible marginalization in the face of globalization (Fieldhouse, 2004). More than five decades after the majority of its countries reclaimed their freedom, it still contributes less than three percent (3%) of the world's trade (Stanley, 2012). The challenges of economic development within the continent have been the focus of several research works, and is largely attributed to the lingering problems created by colonialism. Authors such as Ake (1982) believed that colonialism had more negative effects on Africa than whatever benefits it is believed to have in terms of formal education, contemporary healthcare facilities, contemporary marketplaces, contemporary transportation, and contemporary communication, among other things. Ake (1982) equally debunked the argument that colonialism fostered peace, which attracted European investment to Africa, and rejected the view of authors such as Fadeyiye (2005) who assumed that colonialism provided African peasant farmers with resources and scientific knowledge, which aided in the development of their businesses.

While Landes (1988), an American historian of the Eurocentric school, claimed that the problem is African culture as well as their archaic political and economic practices, Ake (1982) and Fieldhouse (2004) maintained that colonialism is the major problem that have contributed significantly to Africa's underdevelopment. Examining the experience of West Africa under colonial rule, Ake (1982) and Fieldhouse (2004) asserted that European invaders exploited the land, the labour, and the natural resources of West Africa as they did elsewhere through devious means. The British invasion of African economies, according to Ake (1982:38), resulted in some essential similarities between the economies of the continent and the invading force. In the metropole's best interests, they oversaw economic expansion, which corresponded with an upsurge in colonial trade and produced structural ties and interdependence. Because colonial economic policies were created to meet the requirements and interests of the colonizing powers, African countries suffered significantly as a result of the colonial economy (Fieldhouse, 2004).

The economies of the colonial governments were managed according to the interests of the conquering nations, who made no attempt to improve on the economic potentialities of African states to resemble their own and ascend through the ladder of economic development (Fieldhouse, 2004). The rules of trade under colonial rule were unfair and disproportionately harmful to Africa, and this laid the foundation for post-colonial economic backwardness. As noted earlier, Africa is recognized as the world's poorest continent today, accounting for less than 3% of global trade and fifty years after the majority of its countries reclaimed their independence. This is in addition to the other deadly conflicts that have ravaged the continent lately (Stanley, 2012).

Political economists have focused on colonial legacies as a potential explanation for why some countries have seen slightly slower growth than others (Amir, 1976; Ake, 1982). It is claimed that former British colonies in particular have had superior economic growth overall, but the mechanisms by which any possible colonial legacies might be passed down are still hotly contested. The majority of Africa's colonial economies were built to support the economies of the colonizing or metropolitan powers. What ultimately mattered was the colonists' potential to gain from the colonial economy (Fieldhouse, 2004).

As a result of the end of colonial control in those countries, the majority of African countries still do not enjoy full autonomy over their economic or political affairs (Yunusa, 2009). They are sovereign states only in name. In reality, several of them still have former kings in charge of the economy and politics. Achieving political or flag independence does not always translate into economic independence, as various African countries' histories show (Yunusa, 2009:131). Economic exploitation necessitates and presupposes a consistent flow of profits and surpluses that may be pillaged without jeopardizing the production capacity on which the exploitation regime itself is predicated. According to Bala (2019), because these factors were crucial to colonial capitalism accumulation, imperial conquerors had little interest in diminishing their people's economic potential or disturbing their social order. They viewed themselves as producers and users of excess value instead.

By and large, there continues to be numerous viewpoints on this very gloomy picture of the hopeless continent, including who is to blame for the dire economic circumstances in so many African countries. Yet, this essay maintains that the effects of colonialism on the economy of West Africa has negativities that outweigh the positives, and laid the foundation for recurring developmental problems. Mazrui (1980) had argued that the nature of the economic change which Western colonialism fostered in Africa, is one factor contributing to the continued depressing state and poor economic performance of Africa. Ayi Kwei Armah (2006) noted that due to Africa being divided into colonies, territories owned by European states, and from which European corporations took out whatever resources they wanted for their own prosperity, leaving practically all Africans in the deliberate poverty and neglect now euphemistically called underdevelopment Political overthrows, civil wars, election fraud, bloodshed, and a rise in dictatorships have all occurred in Africa.

4. Colonialism as a continuous bane to economic development in Nigeria

Throughout the decolonization of Nigeria, there was a lot of hope according to Agagu (2004) and Nigeria's path to independence was marked by anti-colonial movements, crises, coups, counter-coups, and a gruelling thirty-month civil war between 1967 and 1970 (Yunusa, 2009). According to Effoduh (2014), Nigeria experienced distinct periods, including a period of colonial despotism and absolutism, from formal colonialism until the country's "flag" independence on October 1, 1960, the rise of military absolutism and autocracy 1966-1979, the restoration of constitutional democracy 1979-1983, the return of the military and absolutism 1983-1989, the uncertainties of nationhood from 1989 to 1999 when democracy returned. Throughout the various

periods, Nigeria's socioeconomic development metrics performed below average in comparison to other emerging nations (Adeyeri and Adejuwon, 2012).

More than 50% of the population was living in extreme poverty as a result of a 52-year life expectancy and a high infant death rate. Since the 1980s, Nigeria's economy has not been expanding. Nigerians are now more vulnerable to socioeconomic problems as a result of the difficulties this tendency has put in the way of growth, according to Adeyeri and Adejuwon (2012). Effoduh (2015) added that colonialism brought about a disarticulation of the economy, the colonial economic structure also created a fertile ground for public corruption through the imposition of tax system as well as exploitative scheme of the European that was highly institutionalized, and leadership question in the country. The majority of different parts in Nigeria still struggles with problems like a lack of basic infrastructure facilities and personal and property insecurity, whereas the foundation for these things was built by Europeans in other colonized regions, particularly in Asia and South America, despite having abundant mineral and human resources (Olawaju, 2016). Additionally, the Colonial era's economic structures created a fertile atmosphere for public corruption, which later sprouted and intensified into a cyclone across West Africa, of which Nigeria is not an exception (Jatula, 2018).

To the contrary, however, Stanley (2012) argued that Nigeria's predicament cannot be absolutely attributed to colonialism alone, the leadership problem and corruption of the highest order that have become Nigerian political culture in the post-colonial era will continue to fuel the fire of development crisis. This perspective itself inadvertently lends credence to the causal implication of colonialism for economic backwardness in West Africa, Nigeria not excluded. The attestation that colonialism alone did not lead to development crisis does not water down the significance of colonialism as a causal factor in underdevelopment of West Africa (Adeyeri and Adejuwon, 2012). The colonial-induced problem of economic disruption could do nothing but keep growing after many years of colonial domination and the problem of post-colonial leadership itself cannot be detached from the colonial legacy because the system only reproduced accomplices and surrogates to the established colonial order (Adewara, 2021). This has been buttressed by Walter Rodney (1972) in his monumental publication "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa" who authoritatively asserted that:

"The question as to who and what is responsible for African underdevelopment can be answered at two levels. Firstly, the answer is that the operation of the imperialist system bears major responsibility for African economic retardation by draining African wealth and by making it impossible to develop more rapidly the resources of the continent. Secondly, one has to deal with those who manipulate the system and those who are either agents or unwitting accomplices of the said system. The capitalist of Western Europe were the ones who actively extended their exploitation from inside Europe to cover the whole of Africa" (Rodney, 1972:33)

5. Post-Colonialism and the Dilemma of Development in Nigeria

The postcolonial framework offers critical insights into the complexities of African development, challenging dominant narratives of modernization and Westernization (Fanon, 1961; Nkrumah, 1965). At its core,

postcolonialism highlights the historical and ongoing impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism on Africa's economic, political, and cultural trajectories (Amin, 1990; Rodney, 1972). Walter Rodney's seminal work, "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa" (1972), presented a provocative analysis of Africa's underdevelopment, attributing it to European colonialism and exploitation. While the claims of Rodney are substantiated with facts and figures, there is an opinion in many academic journals that the views expressed by Rodney, are, respectively, obsolete. A number of scholars have revisited and challenged Rodney's arguments, offering alternative perspectives on Africa's development. Take for instance, George Ayittey (2005) contends that Africa's underdevelopment now stems from internal factors, rather than the position of Rodney, which laid emphasis on the age-long slavery and colonialism.

Ayittey (2005) vehemently argued that internal problems of poor governance, corruption, and absence of cultural values to substantiate developmental goals, are the superstructure of underdevelopment in Africa. This explains the perspective of Ayittey (2005) that, the solution is not what Rodney refers to as breaking from the apron-string or strangle hold of colonialism. Ayittey (2005) argued for internal, especially, institutional reforms. Buttressing the position of Ayittey, Paul Kennedy (2013) as well as Muchie (20015) argues that Rodney's focus on European colonialism overlooks the complex internal dynamics and agency of African societies. While acknowledging the historical impact of colonialism, they argue that African nations must take responsibility for their own development. Kennedy emphasizes the need to consider African initiatives and regional interactions. Mammo Muchie (2015) went ahead to critique Rodney's simplistic portrayal of Africa as a passive victim. Muchie advocates for a more nuanced understanding of Africa's historical and contemporary development, highlighting the role of African innovation and entrepreneurship.

Yet, the revisionism of Ayittey among others has not completely discarded Rodney's submissions into utter extinction. Recent writers such as Dambisa Moyo and Issa Shivji (2009) subscribe to the neo-colonial apron-string argument of Walter Rodney. This is apparent from the view of Dambisa Moyo (2009) that African nations' reliance on foreign aid has created dependency and stifled economic growth. Issa Shivji (2009) argues that the so-called globalization has led to the recolonization of Africa, with international financial institutions dictating economic policies. With reference to Nigeria, the country's reliance on oil exports, corruption, and poor governance have stifled growth and worsened poverty. This is in addition to other external factors, such as globalization and foreign aid, which have reinforced dependency. According to studies, however, while the developmental challenges of Nigeria in the post-colonial era do share some similarities with Walter Rodney's arguments, the revisionist perspectives are evident. This paper agrees that Nigeria's post-colonial challenges are complex and multifaceted, and are complicated to a very large extent by internal factors, ranging from corruption to poor governance, which contribute significantly to the country's developmental stagnation. Stifling economic growth, despite the country's rich natural and human resources. The situation is made worse by the colonial-era infrastructure and institutions inherited by Nigeria. But then, it is argued that Nigeria's colonial experience laid the foundation for post-colonial economic domination. The British colonial administration exploited Nigeria's natural resources, imposed unequal trade relations, and established a mono-

economy reliant on primary commodities (Ake, 1981; Falola, 1999). After independence, Nigeria's economy remained tied to Western interests through: International Financial Institutions (IFIs). The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) imposed structural adjustment programs (SAPs) that prioritized debt repayment over development (Mkandawire, 2015; Shivji, 2009). In terms of foreign investment, transnational corporations (TNCs) dominated and still continue to dominate key sectors, such as oil and gas, extracting resources and repatriating profits (Ihonvbere, 2000). There were unequal trade agreements, such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), limiting Nigeria's economic sovereignty (Adebayo, 2013). This is worsened by the activities of local elites and politicians who collude with foreign interests, perpetuating economic domination. Nigeria's oil exports account for 90% of its foreign exchange earnings (Ojo, 2017). The country relies heavily on imports, with a trade deficit of \$4.4 billion in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Nigeria is concentrated in the oil sector, with 70% of FDI flowing into the sector (UN Conference on Trade and Development, 2020). In spite of oil revenues and resources, a staggering 87 million Nigerians lived in extreme poverty, representing 43% of the population (World Bank, 2020). Nigeria's Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, stood at an ebb of 0.485 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The country ranked 161 out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index (UN Development Programme, 2020). Nigeria's external debt as of 2020 was at \$27.4 billion, with 70% owed to foreign creditors (Debt Management Office, 2020). The country receives significant foreign aid, with \$2.4 billion in official development assistance (ODA) in 2020 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). During the heat of the Covid-19 pandemic, Nigeria lost an estimated \$15 billion annually to corruption (Transparency International, 2020), not minding the fact that the country ranked 149 out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2020). Well below the African average, Nigeria's GDP growth rate averaged 2.3% between 2015 and 2020 (International Monetary Fund, 2020). By 2023, Nigeria's country's trade deficit was already at \$6.3 billion, showing a very high rate compared to what was recorded in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Nigeria decreased by 33.4% to \$1.5 billion in 2022 (UN Conference on Trade and Development, 2023). 94 million Nigerians live in extreme poverty, representing 46% of the population (World Bank, 2024). Nigeria's external debt rose to \$34.8 billion in 2023, with 75% owed to foreign creditors (Debt Management Office, 2024). The country was estimated to lose another \$18 billion annually to corruption (Transparency International, 2023). The country's general inflation rate rose to 22.4% in 2023, the highest in 17 years (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024), whereas food inflation reached 30.7% in 2023, exacerbating poverty (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

6. Way-Forward

No doubt, colonialism disrupted Africa's pre-colonial development paths, imposing external systems of governance, economy, and culture (Mamdani, 1996). This legacy of dependency and exploitation continues to shape Africa's relationships with the global North (Wallerstein, 1974). Postcolonial thinkers argue that

colonialism created dependent economies, exploiting Africa's resources and labour, and perpetuating unequal global power relations (Frank, 1966). Nonetheless, the implications of postcolonialism for African development are profound. It advocates for African-led development initiatives, prioritizing local knowledge, cultures, and contexts (Mkandawire, 2015). Postcolonialism critiques neoliberal policies that perpetuate dependency and exploitation, advocating for alternative economic models (Amin, 1990; Shivji, 2009). Regional cooperation and integration are encouraged, reducing reliance on external actors (Adedeji, 2002). To move forward, it is essential to integrate postcolonial perspectives into development policies and address ongoing colonial legacies and power imbalances (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Inclusive, participatory development processes must be fostered, and African-led research and knowledge production promoted (Mkandawire, 2015). By acknowledging the complex historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism, postcolonialism offers valuable insights for rethinking African development.

7. Conclusion

While there is an academic dichotomy over the effects that colonialism continues to have on Nigeria today, this essay has shown that the colonial policies and legacies indeed have enduring effect on Nigeria's economic development. The economic exploitation that characterised British colonization laid the grounds for stagnation of the Nigerian economy as it did to other economies in Africa, Asia and the rest of what is now known as the Third World. Furthermore, the public corruption that Nigerian leaders engaged in during colonialism persisted in the post-colonial period, creating loopholes for economic disruption and dilapidation of resources that could have fostered economic development. The economic facilities that showed prospects of development in the colonial era were not enduring, as they only served the temporary interests of European economic exploitation. This paper, in view of the diagnosis of the Nigerian case in post-independence era, concludes that there is need for entrepreneurship, research, and development. There is equally a need for institutional reforms namely the strengthening of democratic institutions, ensuring accountability, and promoting transparency. The country needs to also embrace economic restructuring, marked by transition to a knowledge-based economy, driven by innovation and agility.

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