

## POVERTY IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL STUDY ON CAUSATION AND REMEDIATION

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**Abstract:** This paper examines poverty in Nigeria in the context of causation and remediation. It interrogated the changes and continuities in Nigeria's poverty history. This study on poverty was informed by the fact that in 2018 Nigeria became the poverty capital of the world. This development is mind-boggling because Nigeria is naturally endowed to be above poverty. She is the acclaimed Giant of Africa because of her abundant human and mineral resources critical for overturning poverty. Despite this, Nigeria's poverty profile had grown from bad to worse. Hence, the aim of this paper is to put the development of poverty in Nigeria into proper historical perspective. Its objectives were to examine the changing causes of poverty; and to demonstrate how the belief of Merrie Africa created a safe pod for poverty to hibernate and metamorphose into its extreme form. The paper used the historical research methodology and the qualitative method of data analysis to interpret sources. It found that poverty in Nigerian history ranges from situational, circumstantial, contextual and structural, income and food poverty. But they are remediable. The paper concludes that the remediation of poverty in Nigeria lies in understanding and reversing its causation.

**Keywords:** Poverty; Pre-colonial; Colonial; Post-colonial; Change and Continuity

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### Introduction

*Africa's splendor lies in the suffering of its people. The heroism of African history is to be found not in the deeds of Kings but in the struggle of ordinary people against the forces of nature and the cruelty of men.*<sup>1</sup>

Poverty is a universal phenomenon. It is an enduring social problem that is as old as man himself. In fact, Jesus Christ in the Bible drew attention to this reality when he observed that: "The poor will always be with you". This implies that in all human societies over time and space, there will always be a social dichotomy between the people. Since access to the resources of the

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<sup>1</sup> John Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 11.

nation will not be equitable some will be rich while others will be poor. Despite the fact that this is a universal truth, because of the way African states have managed their affairs since they began gaining independence in the twentieth century; African identity has become coterminous with poverty. This means that poverty has become the synonym of Africans in international narratives. The situation of not having food to eat, cloths to wear, decent housing, clean drinking water, and of one being sick, malnourished and dying because of not having money have become a badge of some sorts with which Africans are identified in the international system. In international cable network channel reportage, poverty in Africa is often given lucid presentations as if the continent is its birthplace. This is very concerning because Africa is the resource-richest continent in the world. And the phenomenon of poverty in Nigeria fittingly demonstrates this fact.

The history of poverty in Nigeria is the history of people suffering in the midst of plenty. It is a record of Nigerians struggling to make a living and survive under changing economic circumstances. John Iliffe, a prominent scholar in African poverty history, quoted above, considers the response and adaptation of Africans to the plague of poverty to be phenomenal. This accounted for the metamorphosis of poverty to its extreme form. The concept of *Merrie Africa*, that this, the myth that pre-colonial Africa was prosperous and without poverty<sup>2</sup> gave poverty a long incubation period in the continent. James Giblin and Gregory Maddox wrote that the Merrie Africa hypothesis claimed that ancient African communities were stable and lived in harmony with nature before colonialism introduced suffering, depopulation, ecological disasters and economic exploitation.<sup>3</sup> However, the phenomenon of untold and extreme poverty plaguing sub-Sahara Africa had debunked this hypothesis. It reveals that poverty in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa was not imposed. Rather, it was a deeply entrenched socio-economic phenomenon influenced by opportunities, circumstances and norms in pre-colonial African societies. Thus, it can be said that the concept of *Merrie Africa* only delayed the start of the fight against poverty in Africa.

Outside Africa, billions of people have from earliest times been haunted by poverty; but early detection and admittance of this problem led to an early start in the fight against poverty in some societies and its ultimate containment. For example, it could be said that the early problematisation of poverty in Europe and North America as an issue of national emergency was largely responsible for their poverty profile differentials with the underdeveloped

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<sup>2</sup> Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> James Giblin and Gregory Maddox, "Introduction: Custodians of Land: Ecology and Culture in the History of Africa" in Gregory Maddox, James L. Giblin and Isaria N. Kimambo (eds.), *Custodians of Land: Ecology and Culture in the History of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 2.

world. The manifestation of poverty as a global reality is evident in the categorisation of states according to their wealth and level of development as global north and global south. While wealth, prosperity and affluence are the hallmarks of the global north; poverty and lack have the trademark of societies in the global south. However, although a number of European Union citizenry such as in Bulgaria and Romania are at great risk of poverty and social exclusion; but African states and other Third World Countries (TWC) are at the greatest risk of poverty. In 2019, Nigeria overtook India to become the poverty headquarters of the world. Despite the high prevalence of the incident of poverty and hunger in Nigeria and other underdeveloped countries, it still exists in First and Second World Countries. This squarely makes poverty a global problem.

For instance, in the Slovakia Republic, poverty is increasing not only in terms of the number of people affected by it, but also in the devastation it produces.<sup>4</sup> As at 2018, Slovakia had a poverty rate of 11.9% which translated into about 700,000 of its citizens living below its national poverty line.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in the United States of America (USA) Oxfam reported that structural inequality has forced millions of working families into poverty. It revealed that 40 million people mostly Blacks and Brown immigrants and refugees and women and girls that make up 11% of USA's population are living in poverty.<sup>6</sup> In the BRICS world, poverty is also an issue of national importance. Hence, in 2010 the People's Republic of China set the goal of eradicating extreme poverty, and revitalised it in 2015. The priority given to poverty explains why in 2020 China was able to lift over 800 million people out of poverty and by so doing eradicated extreme poverty in the country.<sup>7</sup> But this does not mean that poverty has been completely eradicated in China. Although the Chinese state is now an upper-middle-income country, 17.2% of the population is still living within the poverty threshold of \$6.85 (USD) per day. This means that there is currently relative poverty in China. Robert Walker and Yang Lichao observed that this is a situation where some Chinese people

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<sup>4</sup> The Borgen Project, "Facts About Poverty in Slovakia", Accessed November 30, 2021, <https://borgenproject.org/facts-about-poverty-in-slovakia/>.

<sup>5</sup> Statista, "Poverty Headcount Ratio in Slovakia 2004-2018", Accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/126940/poverty-headcount-ratio-in-slovakia/>.

<sup>6</sup> Oxfam, "Poverty in the USA", Accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/countries/united-states/poverty-in-the-us/>.

<sup>7</sup> World Bank Group, "Lifting 800 Million People out of Poverty: New Report Looks at Lessons from China's Experience", World Bank Press Release, April 1, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/-/2022/04/01/lifting-800-million-people-out-of-poverty-new-report-looks-at-lessons-from-china-s-experience/> Accessed July 3, 2024.

cannot afford to participate actively in society and benefit from the activities and experiences that most people take for granted.<sup>8</sup>

In Russia, the number of people living below the international poverty line of \$1.90 (USD) per day as at 2023 was 13.5 million. Rossat statistics reported that the number fell from 9.3% (14.3 million) in 2022 to 8.5%.<sup>9</sup> But household poverty in the country is still on the very high side. It is above 30% in 2023.<sup>10</sup> In Brazil, it was estimated that between 22.7% of the population, that is, 11.6 million people are living in poverty between 2020 and 2021; while the number of Brazilians living in extreme poverty increased by 48.2% to become 5.8 million people.<sup>11</sup> Due to this increase, the United Nations estimated that about 31% of Brazilians are either suffering from moderate or severe food insecurity.<sup>12</sup> In South Africa, the number of people living in extreme poverty as at 2023 is about 18.2 million people.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the existence of poverty even in developed societies is what informed the research questions of this study. They are: Is the universality and causation of poverty cast in iron? Can poverty be historicised? Can poverty be contextualised? Does the poverty profile of a society experience changes and continuities over time and space? And can states win the war against poverty? This study insists that understanding the causation and form of poverty in a nation is critical to its remediation. Although since the year 2000, when the United Nations (UN) launched the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) the remediation of poverty has involved more of global partnerships; because extreme poverty anywhere in the world is a threat peace and prosperity everywhere in the world. But sovereign states in the global south still have the responsibility to adopt their own individual poverty remediation strategies. This is part of the international duty conferred on them by the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States of 1933. When Third World Countries (TWC) succeeds in eradicating extreme poverty, they contribute to world peace and security by stemming the tide of illegal

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Walker and Yang Lichao, “China’s Move to Measuring Relative Poverty: Implication for Social Protection”, *International Labour Organisation Working Papers*, Retrieved from: <https://webapps/wp023/index.html/> Accessed July 3, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Reuters, “Poverty Level in Russia Dropped to 9.3% in 2023 Says Statistics Service”, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poverty-level-russia-dropped-93-2023-says-statistics-service-2024-03-06/> Accessed July 3, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Agencia Brasil, “Thirty Percent of Brazilians Lived in Poverty in 2021”, <https://agencia-brasil.abc.com.nbr/en/saude/noticia/2022/> Accessed July 3, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> World Bank Group, “Poverty and Equity Brief Latin America and Caribbean: Brazil, April 2023, Retrieved from: <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/> Accessed July 3, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Statista, “Number of People Living in Extreme Poverty in South Africa from 2016 to 2030”, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1263290/number-of-people-living-in-extreme-poverty-in-south-africa/> Accessed July 3, 2024.

cross-border migrations and the refugee crises that extreme poverty in the global south creates in the global north.

### **Geography and Peoples of Nigeria**

Nigeria is the most populous country in the West African subregion with a population of over 200 million people. Territorially, the Nigerian state occupies a total landmass of 923,768 square kilometres. It lies between 4°16'1" and 13°53'1" north latitude and between 2°40' and 14°41' east longitude. The nation has both coastal and land borders that connect the country with the rest of the world. In the south, Nigeria is bordered by the Atlantic ocean that is approximately 800 kilometres away; in the west Nigeria is bordered by the Republic of Benin; in the north Nigeria is bordered by the Republic of Niger; and in the east Nigeria is bordered by the Republic of Cameroon. Nigeria's climate falls within the humid tropics because the country is located close to the equator. Consequently, the vegetation of Nigeria ranges from the Mangrove forest in Niger Delta the coastal areas to the Savannah grasslands in the north. Nigeria's modern state building began in 1914, when the peoples were amalgamated together and named Nigeria.

This process reached its maturity stage on October 1, 1960, when Nigeria attained political independence from Britain. This enabled the country to join the international community of states as the richest country in Africa because of her vast natural and human resources endowments. With these advantages, Nigeria was expected to rise above poverty in no-time and become the beacon of hope for the African continent. The peoples of Nigeria are the Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani, Igbo, Bini, Esan, Urhobo, Isoko, Ijaw, Tiv, Ukwuani, Idoma, Igala, Etsako, Igbira, Kanuri, Ibibio, Efik, Annang, Ogoni, Oron, Berom, Itsekiri, Nembe, Kwalla and Igala among others. In total, there are over 350 tribes and tribal identities in Nigeria. They are scattered across the 774 Local Government Areas of the country. Out of these, the Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo people are the dominant majority and paradoxically the most prosperous despite the overwhelming economic wealth of the nation. The other peoples are federated into Nigeria exist as its minority groups; and they largely constitute the economically disadvantaged and less privileged population. This implies that, out of Nigeria's 36 states the phenomenon of poverty and underdevelopment is more pronounced in minority-dominated areas over time and space. However, the cumulative perception of Nigeria's rural and urban poverty profile can best be put into perspective by examining the reports of the National Bureau of Statistics from time to time in the country.

Figure 1: Nigeria's Poverty Profile by Zones



**Source:** Premium Times, “Editorial: Rescuing Nigerians from Multidimensional Poverty Trap”, <https://www.premiumtimes.com/opinion/editotial/567841-editorial-rescuing-nigerians-from-multidimensional-poverty-trap.html?tztc=1/> Accessed April 27, 2024.

Figure 1 is based on the Multidimensional Poverty Index Survey carried out by the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics between 2021 and 2022. It showed that the phenomenon of poverty in Nigeria is widespread. But it also revealed that poverty is most alarming in the northern part of the country. This is due to the fact in the bulk of the 63% of people reported to living in poverty in Nigeria in the latest report released by the National Bureau of Statistics are in the Northwest, Northeast, and Northcentral zones. The skyrocketing rate of poverty in rural Nigeria where most Nigerians live was induced by a broad range of indexes such as inability to access quality health care and good education, the poor living standard of the people, and poor working conditions and the inability of the people to absorb shocks because of lack of savings. Between 2021 and 2022 the Multidimensional Poverty Index Survey revealed that 133 million Nigerians across the 36 states of the federation are plagued with this living condition. And as seen in figure 1, a total of 106 million rural

dwellers in Nigeria are suffering from poverty; while the urban dweller suffering from extreme poverty are just 27 million people. But poverty in the country is highest among minority ethnic groups short-changed in the revenue distribution and resource allocation of Nigeria. They constitute the marginalized people such as those of the Niger Delta, who produce the wealth of the nation but are isolated from it. The federalisation and over-centralisation of resources in Nigeria had ensured the separation of people from the resources on their land. Hence, resource-rich minorities in Nigeria hardly partake in the eating of the national cake that is baked in their backyards.

### **Poverty in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

Before the advent of British colonialism in Nigeria, the claws of poverty wrecked individuals and households. The threat of poverty to Nigerian peoples in pre-colonial times was as real as the modern threat of poverty. Poverty in pre-colonial Nigeria was arguably tied to the adversities and opportunities individuals and households were exposed too. Just as environmental adversity and its attendant threat of food poverty moved the people of ancient Egypt to exploit the River Nile through irrigation farming to escape food poverty<sup>14</sup>; so also did the peoples of Nigeria in the earliest exploited their environment to combat food poverty. Since the development of agriculture in the Neolithic Age, the NOK Culture had ensured that the autonomous peoples of pre-colonial Nigeria benefitted from the development.

Thus, the rise of economic activities such as farming, animal husbandry and blacksmithing (iron works) set the wheels of wealth creation in motion in Nigeria. Hence, successful farmers, cattle herdsman, fishermen and blacksmiths and other people who make use of their products such as hunters and warriors were elevated beyond poverty by their profession in pre-colonial Nigeria. But in other pre-colonial Nigerian societies where some people were traditionally consigned to slavery and restricted from meaningful economic activities and trade poverty was high among the caste group. This was true of the *Osu*<sup>15</sup> people in Igboland who were prevented by traditions from owning properties and engaging in economic relations with free born people. Hence, *Osu* people lived like fugitives<sup>16</sup> and generally below the poverty line. Why the historian in

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<sup>14</sup> J.M. Roberts, *History of the World (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 69; and Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)* (London: Macmillan Published Limited, 2012), 30.

<sup>15</sup> Victor E. Dike, *The Osu Caste System in Igboland Discrimination Based on Descent*, A paper presented to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) 61<sup>st</sup> Session, 8-9, (August 2002), 6. He maintained that the *Osu* Caste system was an offshoot of Igbo indigenous religious practice. The *Osu* are like refugees who have been abandoned to wander in the wilderness after being dislodged from their comfortable places as the servers of the deities.

<sup>16</sup> Dike, *The Osu Caste System*, 6.

his limited wisdom cannot accurately make pronouncements on the standard and cost of living in pre-colonial; what was certain was that poverty was not extreme during the period. This was because opportunities to a large extent were evenly distributed by means of communalism. Thus, while the practice of communalism generally kept the incidence of poverty and its effects in pre-colonial Nigeria to the barest minimum; landlessness, poor harvest, childlessness, wifelessness, *cattlelessness*, and having a small yam barn among others still served as yardsticks for measuring poverty in pre-colonial Nigeria.

Historically, the traditional land tenure system (communal ownership of land) also ensured that poverty was not extreme in pre-colonial Nigeria. Therefore, communalism and Kindred spirit ensured that everybody was everybody's brother's keeper. Strong family ties in Esanland<sup>5</sup> for example enabled all able-bodied members of a family to work together in house construction projects for any member of the family that was of age and ready for marriage. And the *Umunna* system in Igboland ensured that no member of the family was left behind in the pre-colonial political economy of the region. Under these circumstances, it is plausible to maintain that while pre-colonial Nigerian societies were not poverty-ridden societies; poverty was still not farfetched. Customs, traditions and taboos in Nigeria's pre-colonial societies created the restrictions and obstacles that forced some into poverty. The restriction placed on women that kept them from cultivating Yam (the King of crops) explained why most of the wealthy farmers in pre-colonial Nigeria were men. This was a wide income (wealth) gap between men and women during the period. Slaves who had to work for their masters were by circumstances forced into poverty as their manpower was deployed for the economic good of their masters as long as they lived. In Hausaland, the effective taxation system<sup>17</sup> created a sustainable income gap between the royalty (Emirs) and the commoners. The Hausa elites rose above poverty and managed poverty in their domain through taxes that were in consonance with the Islamic fiscal justice system. They imposed the *Zakat* tax on movable property to provide revenue for almsgiving to the poor; the *Jangali* tax was imposed on livestock, the *Kbaraj* tax on land based on annual production, and the *Jizyah* was imposed on the subject people.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, what taxation did in northern Nigeria, the tribute system in the Oyo Empire and Benin Kingdom achieved in southern Nigeria. But on a general assessment pre-colonial Nigeria was not economically poor. Because studies have shown that it was the economic wealth of pre-colonial Nigerian societies that attracted the British colonialists to them.

Consequently, the conceptualisation and contextualisation of poverty in pre-colonial Nigeria must be tied to given environments, their value system and

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<sup>17</sup> G.T. Stride and C. Ifeka, *Peoples and Empires of West Africa: West Africa in History 1000-1800* (Hong Kong and Lagos, Thomas Nelson Ltd., 1971), 110-114.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 110-114.

world view. These value systems and worldviews were arguably not static and universal. They were environmentally determined and contextualised. Therefore, inherent in the indigenous socio-economic milieu of wealth and prosperity in Nigeria's autonomous societies was their conceptualisation of poverty. Thus, wealth and prosperity were conceived in terms of family size and the amount of agricultural resources such as farm produce or cattle an individual or household possesses<sup>19</sup>; while poverty in pre-colonial Nigeria was the lack of them. Consequently, there were class systems that demarcated the rich from the poor; and the haves from the have not based on the number of lands, houses, wives, children and slaves a man possesses. But the lack of these in extravagant degree did not necessarily indicate that an individual or household languished in poverty in pre-colonial Nigeria. Landless and socio-economically incapacitated people usually offered themselves as labourers to work in other people's farm.<sup>20</sup> Hence, in traditional African epistemology as far as these people were able to meet their daily needs for survival and earn societal respect by the way they conducted themselves; they were not considered as being poor.

Thus, extreme starvation, hunger and poverty were a rarity in pre-colonial times except where they were induced by poor harvests caused by famine or drought. The predominance of agriculture as the economic mainstay of pre-colonial Nigerian societies enabled most households to function independently and inter-dependently through trade by barter and currency trade. The traditional empowerment of the *Onojie* in Esanland to hold all land in trust for the people and to allocate them equitably and justly through the principle of effective occupation<sup>21</sup> helped establish socio-economic justice. Accordingly, the number of land an individual was able to clear and occupy through hard work also served to determine his status in society. More respect was given and women were generally attracted people with more lands in Esan and elsewhere in pre-colonial Nigeria. It was along this line that the possession of many wives and children to farm the vast land a man possesses was conceived as a symbol of wealth and greatness across Nigeria during the period.

More so, pre-colonial Nigerian societies were bedeviled by the trans-Atlantic slave trade through which many Nigerians descended into the abyss of poverty in plantations abroad. Before the slave trade was abolished by Britain in 1807, the lure of the trade in Nigeria engendered many inter-community wars directed towards slave conquest. The attendant consequences of these wars were the disruption of businesses and livelihood in pre-colonial Nigeria that plunged many people once above poverty below the poverty line. However,

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<sup>19</sup> Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History*, 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Osagie, "Economic Development in Esan in the Colonial Period" (Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, 2004), 23-24.

following the abolition of slavery in Europe, some of the freed slaves later returned home and helped changed the economic fortunes of their families with their newly acquired knowledge and skills working in plantations and households in Europe and America. In salvaging poverty in pre-colonial Nigeria, the environment, communal economic system, indigenous land tenure system and hard work played roles in keeping poverty at bay. The monarchy, family head and community heads were collectively saddled with the responsibility of looking out for one another. Thus, the South African concept of *ubuntu* (I am because we are) best captured the poverty containment philosophy in pre-colonial Africa. It constituted the ideological foundation of communalism in Nigeria as in elsewhere.

### **Poverty in Colonial Nigeria**

The conquest of the peoples of Nigeria was a staggered event that terminated in the colonisation of the country in 1900. From north to south, British conquest of the peoples of Nigeria was gradual and piecemeal. The impact of British imperialism on the political, constitutional and economic development of Nigeria since 1960 had received adequate scholarly attention. But the poverty profile of Nigerians under colonial rule to the best of the knowledge of the researcher had not been sufficiently covered in existing literatures. Colonialism and the introduction of Western civilisation in Nigeria triggered deeply entrenched socio-economic changes that either bridged the poverty gap or widened it. Contrary to the theory of civilising mission, it is now a universal fact of history in Nigerian historiography that the core objective of British conquest and colonisation of Nigeria's peoples was economic exploitation. L.I. Izuakpor's "*Quest for Further Exploitation: British Colonial Occupation of Nigeria*"<sup>22</sup>; S.A. Olanrewaju's "*The Infrastructure of Exploitation: Transport, Monetary Changes, Banking, etc*"<sup>23</sup>; J.O. Ahazuem and Toyin Falola's "*Production for the Metropolis: Agriculture and Forests*"<sup>24</sup>; A.G. Adebayo and Toyin Falola's "*Production for the Metropolis: The Extractive Industries*"<sup>25</sup>; and A.A. Lawal's

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<sup>22</sup> L.I. Izuakpor, "*Quest for Further Exploitation: British Colonial Occupation of Nigeria*" in Toyin Falola (ed.), *Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation and Development?* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 55-65.

<sup>23</sup> S.A. Olanrewaju, "*The Infrastructure of Exploitation: Transport, Monetary Changes, Banking, etc*" in Toyin Falola (ed.), *Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation and Development?* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 66-79.

<sup>24</sup> J.O. Ahazuem and Toyin Falola, "*Production for the Metropolis: Agriculture and Forests*" in Toyin Falola (ed.), *Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation and Development?* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 80-90.

<sup>25</sup> A.G. Adebayo and Toyin Falola, "*Production for the Metropolis: the Extractive Industries*" in Toyin Falola (ed.), *Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation and Development?* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 91-113.

“*Industrialisation as Tokenism*”<sup>26</sup> have sufficiently demonstrated that British colonialism in Nigeria was for economic exploitation.

Towards the realisation of the economic motive of British colonialism in Nigeria, the colonial authorities engendered political and economic changes across the country. In all of this, the introduction of indirect rule as a public administration strategy in 1914<sup>27</sup> was a political economy masterstroke. It created the political framework for the formulation and pursuit of economic policies that served the economic interest of the British metropolis. Furthermore, it created a safe path out of poverty and lack for the traditional rulers who were incorporated into the colonial government as Native Authority. Their role as tax collection officers and enforcers of British colonial economic policies were handsomely rewarded by the colonial power. Therefore, the response and adaptation of the peoples of Nigeria to socio-economic milieu of colonialism determined the level of wealth and fame they attained before 1960.

However, the intentional displacement and discouragement of indigenous industrialisation by the British made colonialism a double-edged sword. It improved the wealth and status of some Nigeria who could key into; and plunged many into poverty at the same breathe. By introducing new cash crops, taxation and paper money (British currency), the colonial power redirected indigenous economies away from industrial activities to cash crop production.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the collapse of indigenous industries such as textile milling in Esanland, Edo state Nigeria created loss of livelihood and deepened dependency on foreign second hand clothes (*okrika* clothes). Joseph I. Osagie and Leo E. Otoide in their study “Colonial Rule and Industrialisation in Esan, Benin Province, Nigeria: A Case Study of Institutional Adaptation” observed that the British neglected local industries in Esan in order to make the region a secured market for European finished products.<sup>29</sup> More so, the integration of Nigerian indigenous economies into the global capitalist economy as secured markets for finished foreign goods made the peoples of Nigeria import and consumption oriented. This is what Ade Alade describes as the economic basis

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<sup>26</sup> A.A. Lawal, “*Industrialisation as Tokenism*” in Toyin Falola (ed.), *Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation and Development?* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 114-123.

<sup>27</sup> Fredrick Lugard, *Report on the Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria and Administration, 1912-1919* (London: His Royal Majesty Stationery Office, 1920), 8-11.

<sup>28</sup> R. Olufemi Ekundare, *An Economic History of Nigeria 1800-1960*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1973), 106-126.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph I. Osagie and Leo E. Otoide, “Colonial Rule and Industrialisation in Esan, Benin Province, Nigeria: A Case Study of Institutional Adaptation”, *African Research Review: An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 9(1), No. 36, 2015, 74.

of imperialism that is responsible for Africa's poverty, underdevelopment and modern neo-colonial economic dependency.<sup>30</sup>

European cultural imperialism also led to the relegation of locally made products such as soaps, gin, rice, clothes and cooking oil among others. Colonial propaganda through the missionaries and the introduced Western civilisation created the impression that the utilisation and consumption of their foreign made products improves standard of living and were a mark of civilisation (or European gentlemanliness).<sup>31</sup> Consequently, consumption instead of savings or development of local content was ingrained into the psychology of Nigerians. Therefore, through Western education and civilisation taste and preference for foreign products and lifestyles were promoted in Nigeria at great economic cost to individuals and households. Under colonial rule, increased spending on foreign goods drained income in Nigeria but generated revenue for Britain. Wealth creation in modern societies is undoubtedly tied to savings and investment which colonial education never instilled on the people. On the contrary, colonial propaganda and poisonous miseducation paradoxically created a consumer economy in Nigeria that glorified impulse buying, reckless spending and extravagance.

Therefore, in colonial Nigeria it could be argued that the poverty measurement yardstick parameter changed significantly. At the individual and household level, it was determinable by the degree of flexibility and inflexibility in responding and adapting to British induced political and socio-economic reforms. Hence, the attainment of Western education and responsiveness to the colonial cash crop economy demarcated the poor from non-poor. The more some Nigerian farmers became skilled at determining which cash crop to produce in response to export prices; the more they perfected commercial farming and became wealth.<sup>32</sup> More so, Nigerians equipped with western education who were able to serve the colonial authorities as interpreters, messengers and clerks; and traditional rulers by means of their position in the indirect rule system became useful political aids to the colonial authorities. Consequently, by virtue of their closeness and relevance to the British, these individuals arguably formed the foundation of an emergent privilege or elite class in Nigeria. More so, economic actors in colonial Nigeria such as farmers and traders who excelled as either palm tree, cocoa and rubber plantation farmers or as agents selling cash crops to the British; by virtue of hard work and opportunity identification and exploitation soon found themselves living above

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<sup>30</sup> Ade Alade, "The Economic Basis of Imperialism" in G.O. Ogunremi and E.K. Faluyi (eds.), *Economic History of West Africa*, (Lagos: First Academic Publishers, 1996), 126-128.

<sup>31</sup> John Arierhi Ottuh, "The 3Cs of Colonisation and their Impacts on African Slavery: The Nigeria's Experience", *Black Theology: An International Journal*, 20:1, 2022, 60-61.

<sup>32</sup> Ekundare, *An Economic History of Nigeria*, 197-198.

poverty. Their capacity to interface with the colonial administration and aid the realisation of British economic interest in Nigeria proved to be a major game changer for them and their families. Onwuka Njoku regards these Nigerians as the middlemen who were indispensable in the colonial trade relations between Britain and Nigerians in the hinterland.<sup>33</sup> However, Eno B. Ikpe pointed out that, the rise of these middlemen (the merchant class) in Nigeria and elsewhere in West Africa predates the colonial period and even the trans-Atlantic trade era. They are a phenomenon that is as old as the people.<sup>34</sup> This truism supports our argument that poverty in Nigeria was not a creation of the colonial economic opportunities given to some of the indigenous collaborators of the British. It only widened the gap between the haves and have-not.

Furthermore, colonial infrastructure such as road that paved the way for road transport entrepreneurs to emerge in Yorubaland and Igboland increased the number of the haves (non-poor) in Nigeria. These early road transporters such as W.A. Dawodu<sup>35</sup>, J.C. Ulasi, L.P. Ojukwu and A.E. Ilodibe<sup>36</sup> through opportunity identification and responsiveness made wealth and rose above poverty. Understandably, British colonisation of Nigeria in terms of Human Development Index (HDI) could be described as revolutionary. It raised literacy level and human capital development, improved the quality of life and life expectancy, and Gross National Income (GNI) or Per Capita Income. However, colonial rule also increased misery and poverty of some Nigerians. This it did through the displacement of indigenous industries that rendered many craftsmen unemployed, irrelevant and victims of circumstance. Artisans that failed to key into the colonial economic design were by default left to wallow in poverty. Therefore, in his assessment of the economic balance sheet of colonialism in Africa, Walter Rodney described the system as one where the colonial government made more debit entries than credit entries. They accidentally empowered Nigerians less; but purposefully exploited them more. He argued that,

*Colonialism was a one-armed bandit... By its very nature, colonialism was prejudiced against the establishment of industries in Africa, outside of Agriculture and the extractive spheres of mining and timber felling. Whenever internal forces seemed to push in the*

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<sup>33</sup> Onwuka N. Njoku, "Trading with the Metropolis: An Unequal Exchange" in Toyin Falola (ed.), *Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation and Development?* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 130-135.

<sup>34</sup> Eno B. Ikpe, "The Rise of the Merchant Class in West Africa" in G.O. Ogunremi and E.K. Faluyi (eds.), *Economic History of West Africa*. (Lagos: First Academic Publishers, 1996), 112.

<sup>35</sup> A. Olukoju, "Transportation in Colonial West Africa" in G.O. Ogunremi and E.K. Faluyi (eds.), *Economic History of West Africa* (Lagos: First Academic Publishers, 1996), 156.

<sup>36</sup> D.I. Ajaegbo, "Road Transport Entrepreneurs and Road Transportation Revolution in Igboland, 1920-1999: A Case Study of the Nnewi of Igbo Nigeria", *African Research Review*, Vol. 7 (4), No. 31, (2013): 165.

*direction of African industrialization, they were deliberately blocked by the colonial governments acting on behalf of the metropolitan industrialists.<sup>37</sup>*

**Poverty in Post-Colonial Nigeria**

Poverty in post-independence Nigeria has a multidimensional causation. In this period, particularly since the twenty-first century poverty had been able to come out of its incubator through many outlets. Poverty is finding breathing spaces because of corruption in public life, misplaced priorities and poor lifestyle choice of Nigerians, and even population growth. These factors had enabled poverty in Nigeria to metamorphose into a self-sustaining problem feeding on the wrong actions and inactions of her people. This implies that, Nigerians are solely responsible for making the choices that led them straight to poverty. Suitable examples of this claim can be seen in the bad electoral choices Nigerians deliberately make during elections and in the consumption oriented lifestyles of both the leadership and followership of the country create the enabling environment for poverty to breed. Despite the fact that the nation at independence was endowed with all the economic potentials to overcome poverty, poverty had continued to beget poverty because of corruption. And one of the consequences of this development was seen in 2009 when the World Bank International Development Association (IDA) asserted that life span of Nigerians at birth had plunged to 46.9 years.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, due to the phenomenon of poverty in Nigeria illiteracy level, infant and maternal mortality rates, homelessness, destitution, criminalities, youth restiveness, violence and insecurity and other social vices across the country went up.

Thus, in post-colonial Nigeria it is expedient for poverty to be historicized. The findings of this study would complement other efforts aimed at monitoring and tracking poverty in Nigeria. Economic development planning in the country through the tracking, monitoring, evaluation and profiling of poverty in the context of relativity kick-started in 1974 through series of National Income and Expenditure Surveys. This measure was basically directed towards keeping Nigeria’s poverty statistics into proper perspective and to facilitate its remediation.

**Table 1: Nigeria’s Poverty Statistics, 1980-2010**

Year	No n-Poor (%)	Mod erately Poor (%)	Extr emely Poor (%)

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<sup>37</sup> Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L’Ouverture, 1972), 223-237.

<sup>38</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency, *Federal Republic of Nigeria: Study for Poverty Profile (Africa)* (Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting Co. Ltd., 2011), 8.

0	198	72.8	21.0	6.2
5	198	53.7	34.2	12.1
2	199	57.3	28.9	13.9
6	199	34.4	36.3	29.3
4	200	43.4	32.4	22.0
0	201	31.0	30.3	38.7

**Source:** National Bureau of Statistics, “Harmonized Nigeria Living Standard Survey 2010” cited in *Nigeria Poverty Profile 2010*. Abuja: National Bureau of Statistics, 2010, p. 12.

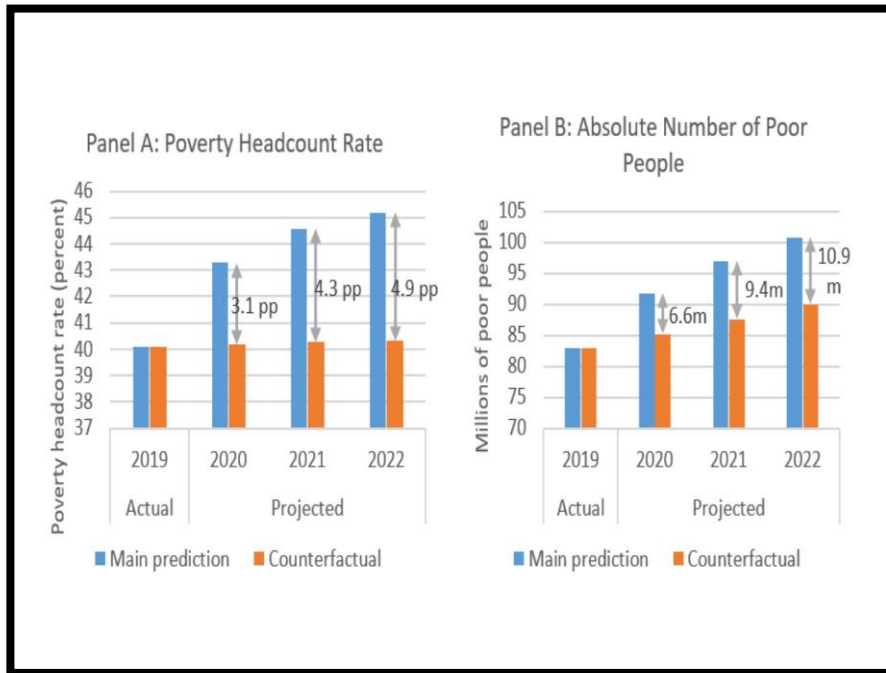
Table 1 above shows that the poor in Nigeria are either moderately poor or extremely poor. It also revealed that since 1980 the phenomenon of extreme poverty in the country had been growing sharply. This revelation came to light squarely from 1980-1996 due to the introduction of a new series of poverty measurement parameters known as the National Consumer Expenditure Survey (NCS).<sup>39</sup> The practice of tracking poverty through consumption expenditure pattern in Nigeria rather than income was done to harmonize poverty economics in the country with global best practices.<sup>40</sup> This is because consumption expenditure pattern is the most ideal tool for gauging household welfare than income. Furthermore, consumption expenditures have the added comparative benefit of being easier to tabulate and chart. Because household consumption expenditures are usually recurrent and ritualistic regardless of changes in income, price, taste and fashion; while household income are usually unpredictable and un-chartable because they do come from many sources that are at times difficult to monitor or track (e.g. gifts and remittances).

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<sup>39</sup> National Bureau of Statistics, *Nigeria Poverty Profile 2010* (January 2012), 4-5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

**Figure 2: Nigeria’s Poverty Statistical Growth 2019-2022**



Source: Leadership News, “Nigeria’s Poverty Statistics”, <https://leadership.ng/nigerias-poverty-statistics/Accessed April 27, 2024>.

Although as can be seen in table 1 above, extreme poverty in Nigeria declined in 2004, but in 2010 it bounced back to 38.7%. And since this period Nigeria’s extreme poverty profile has continued to grow. This reality is demonstrated in Figure 2 above. It shows that the number of people living in absolute or extreme poverty in Nigeria since 2019 has been growing geometrically. Nigeria’s poverty potential to increase exponentially became clear in 2020 when a total number of 6.6 million Nigerians fell into extreme poverty that year alone. Therefore, it can be safely argued that Nigeria’s extreme poverty differentials from 2021 to 2022 means that poverty within this period became self-sustaining by the people. In 2021, 9.4 million people fell into extreme poverty and 10.9 million people in 2022. The resultant poverty differential of 1.5 million people living in extreme poverty was to a large extent determined by Nigeria’s rate of population growth. Other yardsticks for ascertaining this poverty statistics included consumption and expenditure surveys such as the Harmonised Nigeria Living Standard Survey (HNLSS) that sought to provide information not only on expenditure patterns of households; but also on other poverty identification indexes. These include changes in demography, fertility

behavior, education and skill/training, employment and time-use, housing and housing condition, social capital, agriculture and household income.<sup>41</sup>

However, the end result of the HNLSS was used to guide government's response and containment strategy to the pandemic of poverty. It had been responsible for the initiation of anti-poverty policies and programmes in Nigeria such as New Economic Empowerment and Development (NEEDs), National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The HNLSS also provide data for determining other methods for measuring poverty.<sup>42</sup> These other methods or parameters for measuring poverty in post-colonial Nigeria include the following:

1. Relative Poverty Measurement approach,
2. Absolute (Objective) or Food Poverty Measurement approach,
3. Subjective Poverty Measure approach,
4. Dollar Per Day Measurement approach,
5. Gini Coefficient (or Inequality Poverty Measurement approach which explains poverty in terms of the inequality between income and consumption expenditure), and
6. Poverty Mapping.

These other poverty measurement strategies were basically used to divide the poor in Nigeria and elsewhere from the non-poor. In Nigeria, the computation of the mean per capita of household expenditure derived from the HNLSS is generally the basis for arriving at the poverty line. This implies that one-third ( $\frac{1}{3}$ ) of the mean per capita of household expenditure obtained from the HNLSS was used to derive the population in extreme poverty; while two-third ( $\frac{2}{3}$ ) of the mean per capita expenditure gave the population of Nigerians living in moderate or relative poverty. The summation of these two poverty lines gives the total population of poor Nigerians or what is called Nigeria's poverty profile. Thus, the non-poor from the HNLSS computation in Nigeria are greater than two-third ( $\frac{2}{3}$ ) of her total poverty population.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, in the post-colonial period, the usage of consumption expenditure<sup>44</sup> to measure poverty lines means that poverty in Nigeria is now more of a product of choice and human decisions than lack of opportunities. And this assertion was strongly supported by the findings of a study carried out by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in 2011.<sup>45</sup> JICA's study in poverty and inequality in Nigeria revealed that male-headed households are more likely to be living in

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<sup>41</sup> National Bureau of Statistics, *Nigeria Poverty Profile 2010*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>44</sup> National Bureau of Statistics, *2019 Poverty and Inequality in Nigeria: Executive Summary*, (May 2020), 4.

<sup>45</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency, *Federal Republic of Nigeria: Study for Poverty Profile (Africa)*, 15.

poverty than female-headed households. As argued by the report, this was because female-headed households by widows or single-mothers are generally likely to be smaller in size and disposed to attaining higher level of education. Thus, the report established that 50% of female-headed households in Nigeria have 2-4 persons per household. This size makes for effective maximisation and redirection of scarce resources towards the attainment of laudable goals.<sup>46</sup>

More so, the pandemic of poverty in post-colonial Nigeria was compounded human factor decay and disorientation responsible for extravagant lifestyles, elaborate partying and ceremonies, consumerism (the Thank God it is Friday Syndrome (TGIF)) and low savings and investment culture. The leadership and people of the country have apparently prioritized the building of stomach infrastructure today over saving and investing for the future. Hence, the phenomenon of celebrating marriages, burial and naming ceremonies among others elaborately as if life depends on it had been worsened by an emergent culture of TGIF. This syndrome has turned weekends in the country into days for beer parlors and pepper soup joints. These developments in the twenty-first century are slowly but surely destroying the economic fabrics of the nation and plunging many into poverty. Consequently, the supposed "Giant of Africa" had been effectively reduced to size by poverty. The most populous country had been plagued by its inability to exploit its demographic explosion for good. Nigeria is now home to the most poor and hungry people in the world. Thus, the country could be regarded as one of the wonders of modern civilisation because of its rising phenomenon of poverty in the midst of plenty. Nigeria is economically rich yet a larger section of her population is languishing in extreme poverty due to uneven distribution and allocation of income and wealth. Worst yet, in 2018 Nigeria toppled India to become the poverty capital of the world with most of its citizens living in extreme poverty.

This anatomy and sociology of poverty in post-colonial Nigeria shows that poverty was entrenched deeper into the society more of by choice than accident. Bad leadership, bad followership, ostentatious lifestyles and consumption-centric nature of Nigerians have collaborated together to enable poverty breed in Nigeria. There is generally no transparency and accountability in politics and governance in the country because the people are too weak to hold their leaders accountable. They even justify the failures of political office holders and myopically laud payment of salaries and pensions as mark of political achievements by government. Some state governors in the country have even been celebrated by the people as being the "Alert Governor" for paying salaries promptly. Therefore, while extreme poverty continues to plague Nigerians; mental poverty had continued to have its own toll on the people. Good values and hard work are undermined and unrewarded; while criminalities and ill-gotten wealth are lauded by Nigerians. Some of the youths

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<sup>46</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency, *Federal Republic of Nigeria*, 15.

now regard education as a scam and by so doing ignorantly agree with the philosophy of the dreaded *Boko Haram* Sect that “Western Education is a sin”. Some even proudly wear clothes with the inscription “who school help” or “school has ruined my life”. It is at this stage, it is safe to contend that the problem of poverty in Nigeria has evolved and gotten worse.

However, while it remains a truism that Nigeria’s dysfunctional party politics and ethnicity have deepened poverty in Nigeria by engendering corruption and exclusionism; this paper maintains that they are not the sole causation of poverty in the country. They did not tie the hands of Nigerians nor block their reason, innovativeness or creativity. Thus, political dysfunctionality while creating the enabling environment for poverty to thrive in Nigeria did not destined Nigerians to live abject poverty. Therefore, the people have a clear choice whether to embrace bad government, underdevelopment and poverty or not during periods of elections. But what modern political history in Nigeria since 1999 had revealed is that the people by tribalising and selling their votes are the partners in crime of the politicians. Mike Omilusi in his study “*Election with Tribal Marks: Interrogating Primordial Sentiments in Nigeria’s Electoral Democracy*” maintained that: *In poor and underdeveloped countries, democracy is not just a system of government. It is a vehicle for conveying the people from despair and poverty to hope and security.*<sup>47</sup> Thus, by collaborating with the political class to mar politics with ethnicity, regionalism and vote-buying; the people with their eyes wide open chose underdevelopment and poverty as their lot in life.

Granted the state in post-colonial Nigeria underperforming in the areas of providing social amenities such as electricity that is critical for small and micro businesses to start-up and thrive; and had failed in creating employment opportunities for Nigerians through industrialisation. But this situation in the country continues to remain hopeless and worsen by the day because of the disillusionment of the people. Their devotion to their tribe over the nation allows them to condone corruption in public life and bad governance as long as the perpetrators of the act are members of their tribe. Hence, poverty is looming large in Nigeria partly because tribal identity and tribalism had been giving impetus to situations that cause poverty. This makes the people more culpable than the leadership in the political economy of poverty in Nigeria. It would appear therefore that in Nigeria, the people and state have so far been getting the king of leader they deserve. The tangling of poverty between followership and leadership in Nigeria need not continue indefinitely. The people need to break free from the shackles of poverty and become the true masters of their fate as the sovereign of the country. Therefore, through patriotic politicking, entrepreneurship, innovation, creativity and utilisation of

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<sup>47</sup> Mike Omilusi, “Elections with Tribal Marks: Interrogating the Primordial Sentiments in Nigeria’s Electoral Democracy” in Adeola Durotoye (ed.), *Elections in Nigeria: A Contemporary Analysis* (Saarbrücken: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2016), 153.

their ability to think outside the box Nigerians like their counterparts in India can dethrone poverty and move its headquarters away from their country.

Therefore, towards the remediation of poverty in Nigeria it is deducible from figure 2 above that there is a direct relationship between population growth and poverty growth that needs to be addressed. This presupposes that the containment of excess population growth over resources in post-colonial Nigeria is partly central to poverty remediation. Thus, in development economics playing the blame game and gas lighting the government over the menace of poverty in Nigeria would not do anybody any good. Time spent on pointing accusing fingers should be best spent on fashioning out how to obtain optimum population. Hence, there is a growing need for academic works promoting family planning, education or skill acquisition and the development of savings and investment culture. These measures are valid socio-economic sledge hammers for breaking overpopulation and poverty; and they do not require heavy government intervention for Nigerians to wield them. For instance, where families are large in Nigeria, the government has never been known to be responsible for impregnating people's wives and daughters. And the Nigerian government has never been known to marry many wives for anybody. Hence, family decision to cut down family size does not need government approval to hold. Government cannot plan families for Nigerians. The people must live up to their national development mandate of making family size sustainable. Because at best one can only take a horse to the river but one can never be able to force the horse to drink water from the river. Hence, government's role in the fight against poverty in Nigeria can be said to be advisory and regulatory. It can conceive poverty alleviation strategies; but only the people can make them work. Therefore, combatting poverty is arguably more of an individual and household obligation than that of the government. Without doubt, the people of every society are the means and ends of its development; and the case of Nigeria cannot be different. Consequently, this paper insists that poverty in Nigeria is neither pre-determined nor beyond remediation. It has multidimensional causation; and the understanding of the causes of poverty in their individuality or collectively (composite causes) is critical to knowing how best to tackle poverty in Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

Historicising poverty in Nigeria is apt for conceptualising and contextualising it in time perspective. It is also central for re-interrogating the myth of *Merrie* Africa that suggested the inexistence of poverty in pre-colonial Africa. The paper finds that the late start to the problematisation and profiling of poverty in Nigeria allowed it enough time to incubate and regenerate in the nation. During the time poverty was not in the front burners of academic and national discourse, it responded and adapted well to the forces of change and

continuity to metamorphose into its extreme form. From being a contextual and situational problem in pre-colonial Nigeria, poverty in the colonial and post-colonial period evolved to become a real socio-economic pandemic. And the emergence of new poverty measuring parameters such as income, consumption, level of literacy, level of savings and investment enhanced its reality and physicality. At the peak of Nigeria's poverty history, the country succeeded in dethroning India to become the reigning heavyweight poverty champion of the world. Findings in this study showed that the causations of this man-made phenomenon in post-colonial Nigeria are bad choices, extravagant lifestyle, investment in consumption rather than enterprise, and dysfunctional politics and governance. Therefore, the paper argued that the containment of poverty in Nigeria and the reversal of her status as the epicenter of poverty globally cannot be achieved through legislation. While poverty eradication and alleviation policies and programmes in Nigeria are containment strategies in the right direction; they are bound to fail without the right attitude and will-power of the people to resist poverty.

The study also revealed that the peoples of Nigeria in pre-colonial times did not exist in a state of complete bliss where they were untouched by poverty. It argued that poverty existed in pre-colonial Nigeria contrary to the *Merrie Africa* doctrine that portrayed the people of Africa as a people living in abundance before colonial rule. However, the phenomenon of poverty and its attendant catastrophic effect in human society in the pre-colonial Africa was well managed and mitigated against through communalism as reflected in the philosophy of "*Umbuntu*" that means "I am because we are". Through care care-giving and generous sharing of resources among members of a family and community poverty was successfully hidden and camouflaged in pre-colonial Africa. Hence, it was the conquest and colonisation of African peoples and their embrace of Western individualistic lifestyle that paved the way for poverty in Africa to come to the limelight and degenerate. It is against this backdrop that this study examined the changes and continuity in the phenomenon of poverty in Nigeria. The study revealed that poverty in Nigeria is not a colonial creation. The poor had always been there. But since independence, poverty indicators in Nigeria had changed significantly and this have birthed novel continuities of the problem. Worsened by its inherited colonial legacies, poverty in post-colonial Nigeria has become a wild beast. Despite the enormous human and natural resources at the country's disposal for taming poverty, Nigeria's poverty profile has become second to none. But this problem is not irremediable. The country needs to checkmate its rampaging over population and invest in the human capital development of its people than all else.