

Justice, restoration and reparations: a Nigerian perspective on addressing the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial economic legacies

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates the complex nexus of justice, restitution and reparations for Africa, situating it within the prisms of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial dependency. This is anchored in the African Union's agenda of advancing justice through reparations. It assesses the impacts of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, where millions of Nigerians and other Africans were forcibly taken, stripping the continent of invaluable human capital and artefacts. It also discusses the colonial policies that entrenched economic dependency and resource rentierism, and the deleterious effects of British imperialism on Nigeria's agricultural and industrial economy in the post-colonial period. Its argument centres on the view that Nigeria's and Africa's contemporary crises, economic marginality and social fragmentation are not accidental outcomes but historical continuities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, imperial conquest and the global hierarchies sustained by neo-colonial economic regimes. Methodologically, the article deploys critical-historical, political-economy, discourse analysis, and structural dependency theory to map how the architecture of exploitation has evolved from slavery to fiscal subjugation in the toga of neoliberal economic systems. The article's findings highlight that reparations, conceived as a multidimensional project of justice, are not acts of benevolence but moral and legal imperatives for systemic redress. Thus, reparations must transcend symbolic atonement to embody transformative justice, an emancipatory process that dismantles structural inequities and restores African agency. The article then advances an innovative reparations model grounded in a dual restorative justice framework, one dimension aimed at material restitution through debt cancellation, repatriation of looted artefacts and equitable trade reforms. The other is oriented toward socio-cultural renewal via education, institutional reform and cultural renaissance. By positioning Nigeria as a vanguard of continental reparatist thought, the study envisions a paradigm of justice that reclaims Africa's self-determination, restructures global economic relations, and reimagines restitution as the foundation for a just, sovereign and regenerative African future.

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TITRE ET RÉSUMÉ EN FRANÇAIS

Justice, restauration et réparations: une perspective nigériane sur la prise en charge des héritages économiques précoloniaux, coloniaux et postcoloniaux

RÉSUMÉ: La présente contribution analyse les articulations complexes entre justice, restitution et réparations en Afrique, en les situant dans les dynamiques historiques de dépendance précoloniale, coloniale et postcoloniale. L'analyse s'inscrit dans le cadre normatif et politique de l'agenda de l'Union africaine visant à promouvoir la justice grâce aux réparations comme instrument de redressement des injustices historiques. L'article examine les effets structurels de la traite transatlantique des esclaves, au cours de laquelle des millions de Nigériens et d'autres Africains ont été déportés de force, privant durablement le continent d'un capital humain et de biens culturels d'une valeur inestimable. Il analyse également les politiques coloniales ayant institutionnalisé la dépendance économique et la rente des ressources, ainsi que les effets persistants de l'impérialisme britannique sur les structures agricoles et industrielles du Nigeria dans la période postcoloniale. L'argument central soutient que les crises contemporaines du Nigeria et, plus largement, de l'Afrique, marquées par la marginalisation économique et la fragmentation sociale, ne constituent pas des phénomènes contingents ou accidentels, mais s'inscrivent dans une continuité historique résultant de la traite transatlantique, de la conquête impériale et de la reproduction de hiérarchies économiques mondiales à travers des régimes néocoloniaux. Sur le plan méthodologique, la contribution mobilise une approche historico-critique, l'analyse de l'économie politique, l'analyse du discours et la théorie de la dépendance structurelle afin de retracer l'évolution des architectures de l'exploitation, depuis l'esclavage jusqu'aux formes contemporaines d'assujettissement fiscal et économique opérant sous couvert de systèmes néolibéraux. Les résultats de la présente contribution mettent en évidence que les réparations, envisagées comme un projet multidimensionnel de justice, ne relèvent ni de la bienveillance ni de la charité politique, mais constituent des impératifs moraux et juridiques découlant de la responsabilité historique et de l'exigence de réparation intégrale des préjudices subis. À ce titre, les réparations doivent dépasser la seule reconnaissance symbolique ou l'expiation mémorielle pour s'inscrire dans une logique de justice transformative, entendue comme un processus émancipateur visant à démanteler les inégalités structurelles et à restaurer l'agencité et la souveraineté africaines. L'étude propose, à cet effet, un modèle innovant de réparations fondé sur un cadre de justice restauratrice à double dimension: d'une part, une dimension matérielle orientée vers la restitution et la réparation économiques, notamment par l'annulation de la dette, la restitution des biens culturels spoliés et la réforme des régimes commerciaux inéquitables; d'autre part, une dimension socioculturelle axée sur le renouveau par l'éducation, la réforme institutionnelle et la renaissance culturelle. En positionnant le Nigeria comme acteur moteur de la pensée réparatrice à l'échelle continentale, la contribution esquisse un paradigme de justice susceptible de réaffirmer l'autodétermination de l'Afrique, de reconfigurer les relations économiques internationales et de concevoir les réparations comme le fondement d'un avenir africain juste, souverain et durable.

TÍTULO E RESUMO EM PORTUGUÊS

Justiça, restauração e reparações: uma perspetiva nigeriana sobre a abordagem dos legados económicos pré-coloniais, coloniais e pós-coloniais

RESUMO: Este artigo investiga a complexa ligação entre justiça, restituição e reparações para África, situando-a nos prismas da dependência pré-colonial, colonial e pós-colonial. Isto está ancorado na agenda da União Africana de promover a justiça através de reparações. Avalia os impactos do comércio transatlântico de escravos, onde milhões de nigerianos e outros africanos foram levados à força, retirando ao continente capital humano e artefactos inestimáveis. Discute também as políticas coloniais que consolidaram a dependência económica e o rentismo de recursos, bem como os efeitos prejudiciais do imperialismo britânico na economia agrícola e industrial da Nigéria no período pós-colonial. O seu argumento centra-se na visão de que as crises contemporâneas, a marginalidade económica e a fragmentação social da Nigéria e de África não são resultados acidentais, mas continuidades históricas do comércio transatlântico de escravos, da conquista imperial e das hierarquias globais

sustentadas pelos regimes económicos neocoloniais. Metodologicamente, o artigo utiliza análises crítica-históricas, político-económicas, do discurso e da teoria da dependência estrutural para mapear como a arquitetura da exploração evoluiu da escravatura para a subjugação fiscal na toga dos sistemas económicos neoliberais. As conclusões do artigo destacam que as reparações, concebidas como um projeto multidimensional de justiça, não são atos de benevolência, mas imperativos morais e legais para uma reparação sistémica. Assim, as reparações devem transcender a expiação simbólica para incorporar a justiça transformadora, um processo emancipador que desmonta desigualdades estruturais e restaura a agência africana. O artigo avança então um modelo inovador de reparações baseado num duplo quadro de justiça restaurativa, uma dimensão voltada para a restituição material através da cancelação de dívidas, repatriação de artefactos saqueados e reformas comerciais equitativas. A outra orienta-se para a renovação sociocultural através da educação, reforma institucional e renascimento cultural. Ao posicionar a Nigéria como vanguarda do movimento reparatório continental, o estudo vislumbra um paradigma de justiça que recupere a autodeterminação de África, reestrutura as relações económicas globais e reinvente a restituição como base para um futuro africano justo, soberano e regenerativo.

KEY WORDS: justice; reparations; Nigeria; colonial legacy; economic restitution; restoration; African sovereignty

CONTENT:

1	Introduction	253
1.1	Hypothesis	255
1.2	Methodology	255
2	Reparations debate: theoretical and analytical frameworks	256
2.1	Justice, restoration and reparations within Nigeria's socio-economic context ..	259
3	Slavery to neoliberal economy trajectory: Nigeria's history	261
3.1	Trans-Atlantic slave trade: demographic collapse and socio-economic rupture	262
3.2	Colonial economic policies of exploitation	264
3.3	Post-colonial spectre of extractivism	264
3.4	Contemporary unfair trade policies	265
4	Broader reparations framework: Nigeria's role	266
4.1	Historical contributions and the advocacy of Abiola	268
4.2	Nigeria, CARICOM and the African Union Reparations Agenda	268
5	Nigeria's approach toward Africa's reparative framework	270
5.1	Cultural and symbolic restoration	271
5.2	Financial compensation and economic restitution	271
5.3	Institutional reforms: strengthening governance and accountability	273
5.4	Educational and knowledge justice initiatives: fostering awareness and healing	274
5.5	Legal and policy frameworks: establishing a robust reparations infrastructure	275
6	Conclusion and reflections	277

1 INTRODUCTION

The trans-Atlantic enslavement of Africans, an ideology and enterprise adopted and authorised by European powers, including France, Great Britain, The Netherlands, Scandinavian countries of Sweden and Denmark and Germany,¹ was egregious and iniquitous. Referred to in Kiswahili as *Maafa* ('particular disaster') to mean 'enslavement', the trans-Atlantic Transatlantic slave trade culminated in over a 400-year period, the seizure, rape and forcible deportation of millions of young

1 PM Muhammad 'The trans-Atlantic slave trade: a forgotten crime against humanity as defined by international law' (2003) 19 *American University International Law Review* 887.

and virile Africans.² Beginning around 1440 and continuing until 1867, the hideous act was committed with such savagery that it killed nearly 60 per cent of those kidnapped in Africa before they could reach the European side of the Atlantic ocean.³ Yet, as Mohammed argues, this egregious ideology, justified both 'in the name of God and out of greed', remains one of the most ignored tragedies in the jurisprudence of international relations, diplomacy and law.⁴ Yet, the enterprise transmuting into colonialism, and then neo-colonialism, was fundamental in establishing the current global power structures and politico-economic order which continue to shape Africa's contemporary reality. For Wittmann, this arguably is fundamental because, prior to the bloody epoch, Europeans were a global minority, but trans-Atlantic slavery ushered Europe into the arena of global dominance,⁵ enabling its states to control the balance of power.⁶ This article, therefore, investigates the complex nexus of justice, restitution and reparations, premised on the African Union (AU) theme of 'Advancing Justice through Reparations: Reparations, Restoration, and Renaissance', using Nigeria, shaped by what we argue as three epochs of injustice – trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and post-colonial neoliberal order – as focus.

Although it is now accepted as a crime against humanity,⁷ this heinous phenomenon yearns for international reparative justice, as the perpetrators have ignored the fettered cries echoing in the bleak darkness of injustice. Therefore, it is not yet a closed chapter, because to African peoples, international law and global ethics still have a crucial role to play until justice is seen to have been done. To this extent, the central research questions we seek answers to are, first, how historical and systemic injustices of trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonial trade regimes have influenced Africa's (and Nigeria's) present socio-economic challenges; second, in what ways justice, restoration, and reparations can be meaningfully conceptualised and applied across Africa and the black diaspora; third, what models of reparations are contextually viable for Africa, and how

2 N Wittmann 'Reparations – legally justified and *sine qua non* for global justice, peace and security' (2016) 9 *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric* 199–219.

3 As above.

4 PM Muhammad 'The trans-Atlantic slave trade: a legacy establishing a case for international reparations' (2013) 3 *Columbia Journal of Race and Law* 149, citing H Thomas *The slave trade: the story of the Atlantic slave trade, 1440–1870* (1997).

5 As above.

6 Wittmann (n 2).

7 The Rome Statute, operational since 2002 is key in making slavery as part of crimes against humanity; see Muhammad (n 1); Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitations to War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity GA Res 2391 (XXIII), UN GAOR, 23rd session, Supp 18, UN Doc A/7218 (26 November 1968); World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban, South Africa, 31 August–8 September 2001; Report of the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance UN Doc A/CONF.189/12.

Nigeria's leadership can inform a broader African reparations framework.

1.1 Hypothesis

Based on the foregoing, we hypothesise as follows:

Africa's, and by extension, Nigeria's underdevelopment, is not merely the outcome of poor post-colonial governance, but the result of a historically entrenched global economic order rooted in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonial extraction, and post-colonial structural dependency.

Working from this hypothesis, we argue that reparative justice, understood as a combination of financial, institutional, cultural and legal measures, offers a legitimate and necessary framework to redress these harms and foster socio-economic restoration.⁸ Focused on the evaluation of Africa's trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonial and post-colonial economic trajectory, this article unpacks the complex relationship among justice, restitution and reparations.

1.2 Methodology

Our methodological focus in this article is doctrinal, triangulated with, first, historical analysis through which the origins of Africa's human and economic exploitation is traced, as documented in colonial documents, records, and historical scholarship.⁹ Second, focusing on Nigeria's resource rentier economy, case study evaluation is adopted to reveal how extractivist policies have persisted post-independence, exacerbating inequality and environmental degradation.¹⁰ Third, we adopt a policy and legal analysis to critically review international legal frameworks and normative declarations recognising slavery and colonialism as crimes under international law and affirming reparations as both moral and legal obligations for African states.¹¹

8 T Pogge *World poverty and human rights: Cosmopolitan responsibilities and reforms* (2008); O Taiwo *Against decolonisation: taking African agency seriously* (2022).

9 See B Davidson *The black man's burden: Africa and the curse of the nation-state* (1992); AG Hopkins *An economic history of West Africa* (1973); W Rodney *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (1972), for accounts on how European imperialism systematically distorted African economies and societies.

10 Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (NBS) National Human Development Report (2006); M Watts 'Resource curse? Governmentality, oil and power in the Niger Delta, Nigeria' (2004) 9 *Geopolitics* 50-80; I Okonta & O Douglas *Where vultures feast: Shell, human rights, and oil in the Niger Delta* (2003); UNDP Human Development Report: Nigeria 2006 (2006) United Nations Development Programme.

11 These include the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (2001), which recognises slavery and colonialism as crimes under international law; the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981), especially arts 19-24 on economic sovereignty and development rights; the Niamey Declaration on Reparations (1993), which affirms the moral and legal obligation of reparations for African states; the Ogoni Bill of Rights (1990), which demands redress for environmental and economic exploitation in the Niger Delta; and the Pan-African Reparations Declaration (1993).

Presented as follows, part 2 highlights the theoretical and analytical frameworks of reparations, adopting a historical-structural approach to highlight the systemic nature of European economic and human exploitation, and its enduring impacts in Africa. In part 3, Nigeria's historical experiences of trans-Atlantic slave trade through to the contemporary spectre of extractivism and unfair trade policies will be critically examined. Part 4 focuses on Nigeria's strategic role in the larger African reparations debate and framework, starting with Abiola's historical advocacy. In part 5, we propose a Nigerian model of reparations for Africa, including cultural and symbolic restoration, financial compensation and economic restitution, institutional reforms, educational initiatives and legal and policy frameworks. In part 6, we present our insights and conclusions from Nigeria's strategic role in the broader African reparations framework.

Premised on an Afrocentric reading of the continent's history, wrought with violence, exploitation and dispossession processes, we argue that Africa's relationship with Europe needs to be rethought and reshaped on human, political, cultural and economic levels. This is because the relationship was originally marked, with insight from Beck, by what we argue as mental constructions that interpreted the processes as a rationale-derived Darwinian order. For Beck, this rationalises growth or multiplication as paramount, insofar as the competition for survival creates the selective pressure required for highly adapted creatures' evolution, through a complex web of life with several forces pushing and pulling in different directions.¹² Thus, we contend that Europe established on the continent, relations of dominance and subordination still currently maintained, albeit in transformed fashions. By leveraging Nigeria's position as a continental leader, and seeking restoration, renewal and reparative justice, via the proposed reparations framework, it prioritises African agency and sovereignty.

2 REPARATIONS DEBATE: THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

Undeniably, Africa is still plagued by the lingering and unsettling impacts of trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism, the legacy reflecting in most states through pervasive and systemic poverty, unequal development, and fragile political institutions, from centuries of exploitation. Aptly dubbed the 'African holocaust',¹³ trans-Atlantic slave trade was as widespread and dehumanising as the Nazi genocide. As the early advocates of reparations remind us, the cries of the enslaved and the colonised still 'echo in the bleak darkness of injustice',¹⁴ their unredressed suffering standing as 'the most glaring

12 N Beck 'The spontaneous market order and evolution' (2016) 58 *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 49-55.

13 E Barkan *The guilt of nations: restitution and negotiating historical injustices* (2000) 284.

14 Muhammad (n 1) (3) 149; MKO Abiola Keynote address at the Second Conference on Reparations and Economic Justice in Africa: Abuja Proceedings (1993); Taiwo (n 8); Wittmann (n 2).

example of an unaddressed historical wrong'.¹⁵ Between 1526 and 1867, an estimated 12,5 million Africans, predominantly from West Africa, were violently seized and transported to the Americas, 10,7 million surviving the Middle Passage, while nearly 2 million perished at sea.¹⁶ This staggering mortality rate cannot be classified as a mere statistic but a symbol of the moral abyss into which modernity descended.

The 1926 Slavery Convention (amended in 1956) marked the progression and culmination of slavery's legal definition from a juridical definition to moral disgust,¹⁷ defining slavery as the exercise of ownership over a human being, and slave trade as its systemic commodification.¹⁸ However, as Wittmann and Mohammed both contend, slavery's structural logic was not undermined by its legal abolition; for them, economies are now bound by the same coercive mechanisms that once bound bodies.¹⁹ Instead of being understood as a historical anomaly, the trans-Atlantic slave system has served as a catalyst for the creation of the contemporary global economy and a forerunner to the global order that still prioritises Euro-American wealth over African underdevelopment.²⁰ Thus, the disinformation operations, resource looting, debt traps and *coups* that characterise modern geopolitics are merely updated versions of the old colonial grammar of dominance.²¹ From this standpoint, we argue that reparations must be rethought and reconfigured as a fundamental deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of historical and institutional justice rather than as charity or recompense.

Given the above, we submit that reparations represent a complex moral, legal and structural requirement. Alongside monetary compensation, they also demand the restoration of Africa's dignity, admission of guilt, and institutional guarantees that such spectres will never recur.²² The United Nations (UN) Sub-Commission on Human Rights explicitly affirmed that the 'historic responsibility of the relevant powers' must be 'solemnly and formally recognised', because slavery and colonialism produced economic collapse and social disintegration,

15 Wittmann (n 2) 199.

16 National Museums Liverpool 'Africa before European slavery' (2025), <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/history-of-slavery/west-africa> (accessed 31 October 2025); here, slavery was not only a logistical operation of mass human commodification but also a catastrophic rupture for African societies; also see Rodney (n 9); N Nunn 'The long-term effects of Africa's slave trades' (2008) 123 *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 139-176.

17 The Slavery Convention 25 September 1926, 60 LNTS 253, amended by Protocol Amending the Slavery Convention, 7 December 1953, 182 UNTS 51. Also see Muhammad (n 1) for a detailed engagement with the Convention.

18 As above.

19 Muhammad (n 1); Wittmann (n 2) 201; Muhammad (n 4).

20 As above.

21 As above.

22 Wittmann (n 2) 205-208; C Demony 'African leaders to push for slavery reparations despite resistance' *Reuters* 13 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/african-leaders-push-slavery-reparations-despite-resistance-2025-02-13/> (accessed 31 October 2025); Niamey Declaration on Reparations (1993) (n 11); Abiola (n 14).

the effects persisting ‘even today’.²³ The 2001 Durban Declaration further recognised slavery as a crime against humanity, entitling victims and their descendants to remedies,²⁴ while the Pan-African and Niamey Declarations directly linked those historical atrocities to Africa’s ongoing developmental crises.²⁵ The African Union (AU)’s recent creation of the Global Reparation Fund also reflects a continental understanding that reparations are both structurally and morally imperative and, thus, for justice to be meaningful, the society which slavery created must be repaired.²⁶ In Nigeria’s context, Eteyibo’s moral argument for reparations to Africa echoes this effort, emphasising that restitution must address both the historical pillage of the past and the neo-colonial systems sustaining contemporary inequalities.²⁷

Thus, following Owolabi, our theoretical framework is rooted in reparative justice and historical institutionalism,²⁸ which provide a useful perspective for examining how historical injustices are ingrained in persistent systems of inequality. It places injustice in the path-dependent development of institutions that sustain dependency and exclusion, and rejects atomised, individualist explanations of harm. Hence, slavery, colonialism and racial capitalism are not discrete historical events but institutional architectures that continue to organise global asymmetries in wealth, power and opportunity.²⁹ Reparations, from this perspective, cannot, therefore, be confined to monetary redress; they must seek to transform the very institutions that reproduce historical disadvantage.³⁰ By illuminating how past decisions constrain present possibilities, historical institutionalism helps us to reframe reparations as a future-oriented project of moral reconstruction and institutional renewal.³¹

23 Sub-Commission on Human Rights (2002) ‘Recognition of responsibility and reparation for massive and flagrant violations of human rights which constitute crimes against humanity, and which took place during the period of slavery, colonialism and wars of conquest’ (Resolution 2002/5).

24 Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (2001) United Nations, <https://www.ohchr.org> (accessed 31 October 2025).

25 See Niamey Declaration on Reparations African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (1993); Pan-African Reparations Declaration, First Pan-African Conference on Reparations for African Enslavement, Colonisation and Neo-colonisation (1993) Abuja, Nigeria.

26 Demyon (n 22).

27 E Eteyibo ‘Political reparationists and the moral case for reparations to Africa for Colonialism’ (2011) 40 *Africa Insight* 22-34; O Otele ‘More than money: the logic of slavery reparations’ *The Guardian* 31 March 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/ng-interactive/2023/mar/31/more-than-money-the-logic-of-slavery-reparations> (accessed 31 October 2025).

28 OP Owolabi *Ruling emancipated slaves and indigenous subjects: the divergent legacies of forced settlement and colonial occupation in the Global South* (2023) 4-12.

29 As above.

30 As above.

31 See, generally, K Thelen ‘Historical institutionalism in comparative politics’ (1999) 2 *Annual Review of Political Science* 369-404; F Lambrecht ‘On the necessity of a pluralist theory of reparations for historical injustice’ (2024) 75 *Philosophical Quarterly* 5-7; J Mahoney & K Thelen (eds) *Explaining institutional change: ambiguity, agency, and power* (2010).

Reparative justice, complementarily, expands the moral horizon of restitution by centring healing, accountability and renewal, redefining justice as the restoration of relationship rather than the infliction of punishment.³² In a joint process of healing, its tenets, including the acknowledgment of harm, admission of responsibility, participation and promises of non-repetition, emphasise the moral agency of both victims and offenders.³³ In this way, reparative justice goes beyond retaliation to become an ethic of restoration, prioritising justice to restore dignity, trust, and promote social transformation.³⁴ For Nigeria, this would include economic and educational empowerment, resuscitation of suppressed cultural heritages, in both concrete and intangible measures. Therefore, aligning with Pogge and Taiwo, we stress that global inequality is neither accidental nor natural, but the cumulative product of coercive historical structures which enriched a few, while immiserating the many.³⁵ From this perspective, reparations serve as tools for institutional rectification and moral atonement, engendering a reimagining of justice that recognises continuity between the colonial past and the contemporary neoliberal order.

2.1 Justice, restoration and reparations within Nigeria's socio-economic context

The historical politico-economic structures established during colonialism, with their enduring impacts on Africa's development trajectory, are crucial in mapping the evolution of Nigeria's economic dependency. During the colonial era, they institutionalised an export-oriented economy, monocultural production and external regulation of trade routes.³⁶ For Adedeji, these exploitative frameworks, embedded in the Minerals Ordinance of 1916, were systematic, cumulative and legally codified, not incidental, assuming complete control over subsurface resources.³⁷ They have evolved, post-independence, into unfair trade agreements and debt regimes under the World Trade Organisation (WTO)'s and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s punitive conditionalities.³⁸ They have also found their way into

32 MU Walker 'Making reparations possible: theorising reparative justice' in C Corradetti, N Eisikovits & JV Rotondi (eds) *Theorising transitional justice* (2015) 211-214.

33 As above.

34 See E Verdeja 'A critical theory of reparative justice' (2008) 15 *Constellations* 208-222; Barkan (n 13); Verdeja (above); RL Brooks *When sorry isn't enough: the controversy over apologies and reparations for human injustice* (1999).

35 Pogge (n 8); Taiwo (n 8).

36 A Adedeji *Africa within the world: beyond dispossession and dependence* (1993).

37 Adedeji (n 36) 5-10; also see S Amin *Unequal development: an essay on the social formations of peripheral capitalism* (1976).

38 HJ Chang *Kicking away the ladder: development strategy in historical perspective* (2003) Adedeji (n 36); Amin (n 37).

bilateral investment treaties (BITs), culminating in modern extractivism³⁹ in Nigeria's Niger Delta region.⁴⁰

Thus, to understand reparations within Nigeria's context, it is essential to connect abstract principles of justice to concrete socio-economic realities by applying Rawls's *Justice as fairness* as a compelling normative basis for reparations against historical injustices. Rawls's 'veil of ignorance' and the 'difference principle'⁴¹ apply to Africa's reparations claims, both demanding justice that do not advantage any particular social position.⁴² We acknowledge that Rawls's theory does not prescribe specific reparative policies; however, it provides a morally grounded framework for evaluating their legitimacy in pursuit of a more just and cohesive society. From behind the 'veil', rational individuals, unaware of their race or class, would likely endorse compensatory mechanisms that correct enduring disadvantages imposed by past discrimination.⁴³ The 'difference principle' further obliges social and economic inequalities to benefit the least advantaged which, in a racialised context, may necessitate targeted redress for historically marginalised groups.⁴⁴ It is for these reasons that we justify reparations not only as a response to past wrongs, but also as a forward-looking commitment to equity, stability and civic trust. Thus, justice implies accountability for historical and structural wrongs, particularly those that established patterns of exclusion and impoverishment.⁴⁵ Restoration, on its part, requires not just symbolic apology but material, cultural and institutional recovery of what was lost or denied, including land, sovereignty, livelihoods and human potential.⁴⁶ Flowing from these two concepts, reparations must therefore be both retrospective and forward-looking: addressing past harms while building equitable systems for the future.⁴⁷

As we shall see in part 3, for Nigeria, justice, restoration and reparations take on specific meanings because in the Niger Delta, particularly, environmental degradation and economic deprivation,

39 Extractivism emerged in Latin America and refers to the large-scale extraction of raw materials for export, often with limited processing and reinvestment in the source country. On this, see A Acosta 'Extractivism and neo-extractivism: two sides of the same curse' in M Lang & D Mokrani (eds) *Beyond development: alternative visions from Latin America* (2013) 61.

40 Okonta & Douglas (n 10); Watts (n 10).

41 T Shelby 'Race, reparations, and justice as fairness' in P Weithman (ed) *Rawls's a theory of justice at 50* (2023) 199-219.

42 As above.

43 T Waligore 'Rawls, self-respect, and assurance: how past injustice changes what publicly counts as justice' (2016) 15 *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 42-66.

44 As above; Shelby (n 41).

45 T-N Coates 'The case for reparations' *The Atlantic* (2014), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/> (accessed 31 October 2025); T Shelby 'Justice, deviance, and the dark ghetto' (2004) 35 *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 126.

46 As above.

47 As above.

linked to oil extraction, demand ecological restoration and resource justice.⁴⁸ In Northern Nigeria, the perpetual educational deficits and infrastructure gaps are traceable to colonial administrative neglect and post-independence deliberate underinvestment.⁴⁹ Also, the imposition of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the 1980s eroded public institutions and widened inequality, necessitating structural and economic reparations.⁵⁰ These arguably gave impetus for local expressions of reparative demands as evidenced in the Ogoni Bill of Rights below, seeking

full right to (i) control Ogoni political affairs; (ii) use at least fifty per cent of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development; (iii) protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation; and (iv) ensure the full restitution of the harm done to the health of our people by the flaring of gas, oil spillages, oil blow-outs, etc ...⁵¹

These expressions of reparative demands, we argue, are not simply grievances, but legitimate justice claims embedded in both moral reasoning and international legal instruments, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter).

3 SLAVERY TO NEOLIBERAL ECONOMY TRAJECTORY: NIGERIA'S HISTORY

It is impossible to separate Nigeria's long history of systemic exploitation from its current socio-economic complexities, each new epoch reproducing new forms of economic dependency behind the facade of progress.⁵² Its experience is a prime example of how exploitation re-emerges in shifting historical dynamics, from the forced removals of the trans-Atlantic slave trade through to the asymmetrical post-colonial structures of global capitalism.⁵³ Therefore, any meaningful discussion on reparative justice and the reimagining of development must take this continuum into consideration. This part focuses on the three epochs of injustice – trans-Atlantic slavery, colonialism and post-colonial neoliberalism – that have proved to be Nigeria's socio-economic and political development albatross.

48 Okonta & Douglas (n 10).

49 T Falola & MM Heaton *A history of Nigeria* (2008); T Falola *Colonialism and violence in Nigeria* (2009).

50 Adedeji (n 36).

51 Ogoni Bill of Rights, by The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) December 1991, Addendum 7.

52 See D Harvey 'The 'new' imperialism: accumulation by dispossession' (2004) 40 *Socialist Register* 63-87.

53 ML Ross *The oil curse: how petroleum wealth shapes the development of nations* (2012) 63.

3.1 Trans-Atlantic slave trade: demographic collapse and socio-economic rupture

Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, Africa became one of the most brutal theatres of global slave trade.⁵⁴ Over 12 million Africans were forcibly exported to the Americas. During this period, a significant proportion of them were drawn from the diverse societies inhabiting the territories now called Nigeria.⁵⁵ To Europe, Africa functioned not as a partner in commerce but as a human quarry, an inexhaustible reservoir of bodies convertible into labour power.⁵⁶ The young and able-bodied, who formed the backbone of agricultural productivity, defence and social reproduction, were torn from their communities.⁵⁷ This demographic haemorrhage dismantled entire systems of production and kinship, leading to depopulated villages, abandoned farmlands and the erosion of complex political formations.⁵⁸ By 1850, estimates suggest that some Nigerian regions suffered population declines approaching 50 per cent,⁵⁹ a depopulation that was not merely numerical but civilisational. The fabric of lineage governance, apprenticeship systems and generational knowledge transmission was thus violently interrupted.⁶⁰

These events profoundly altered the internal dynamics of Nigerian societies, with the Aro Confederacy in the Eastern region, for example, developing into a theocratic-commercial force that organised the human trafficking industry. According to Obienusi, it converted religious institutions into tools of economic pressure by using the *Ibini Ukpabi* oracle's spiritual authority.⁶¹ Thus, the Aro trading network, stretching across the Igbo hinterland and into the Cross River basin, transformed political authority into a war economy, while the oracle's decrees legitimised slavery.⁶² As survival became intertwined with complicity in violence, governance became militarised, thereby undermining community trust.⁶³ However, the Aro example was not isolated as the trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan circuits converged across the savannah and forest belts, entangling local economies in the

54 MA Klein 'Slavery' in J Mokyr (ed) *The Oxford encyclopaedia of economic history* (2003) 504; PE Lovejoy *Transformations in slavery: a history of slavery in Africa* (2012) 22.

55 E Teso 'The long-term effect of demographic imbalances caused by the African slave trades' (2016) 25 *Journal of African Economies* 1-27.

56 As above.

57 As above.

58 See IE Obienusi 'Arochukwu in the Nigerian economic equation, 1900-1960' (2025) 8 *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* 47-59.

59 As above.

60 As above.

61 As above.

62 As above.

63 As above.

global demand for commodities and slaves.⁶⁴ The Wangara Trading Network, once the heartbeat of the trans-Saharan trade in salt and gold, as Ochonlu accounts, experienced systemic destabilisation as European coastal and slave trade altered West Africa's economic logic from production to predation.⁶⁵ Thus, for Ochonlu and Klein, the moral and economic underpinnings of networks such as the Wangara were weakened by European capital and weapons' infiltration, creating an imbalanced equilibrium between trade and society.⁶⁶

However, Siollun's analysis of the purposeful economic architectures of British colonialism culminating in structural underdevelopment,⁶⁷ helps us to put Nigeria's reparations claims in sharper perspective. Siollun emphasises how the slavery epoch produced the conditions for colonial dominance, arguing that the core foundational ingredients of Nigeria's existence and problems were laid⁶⁸ during the colonial era. These include the inter-polity mistrust, social fragmentation and militarisation,⁶⁹ which made the continent's colonisation both feasible and convenient from an administrative standpoint. As he argues, the Nigerian Colonial Office's priority was to minimise the financial burden to the British taxpayer, reduce bureaucratic duplication and maximise revenue because Nigeria was a page in a colonial accounting ledger.⁷⁰ Therefore, the trans-Atlantic slave trade had completed the initial destabilisation task imperialism would use to build its political economy of control. Regretfully, the socio-economic effects persist; the slave trade normalised extractive logics by commodifying human life, resurfacing in colonial taxation and postcolonial oil economies.⁷¹ Gauging by Nigeria's current socio-political and economic dynamics, it is evident that the internalisation of violence, rivalry, mistrust and the palpable psychological rupture are the after-effects of our 'three epochs of injustice'. Therefore, for us, the trans-Atlantic slave trade is the root cause of Nigeria's current structural underdevelopment.

64 On this, see ME Ochonlu *Colonial meltdown: Northern Nigeria in the Great Depression* (2009); ME Ochonlu *Africa in fragments: essays on Nigeria, Africa, and global Africanity* (2017).

65 As above.

66 As above; HS Klein *The Atlantic slave trade* (2010) 106; Rodney (n 9) 100.

67 M Siollun *What Britain did to Nigeria: a short history of conquest and rule* (2021) 329.

68 Siollun (n 67) 311-312.

69 Siollun (n 67) 330-334.

70 Siollun (n 67) 319-324.

71 See O Adeyeri & KD Adejuwo 'The implications of British colonial economic policies on Nigeria's development' (2012) 1 *International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences* 5; HU Jacob and others 'Navigating colonial legacies and its varying impacts on Nigeria's development' (2024) 17 *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies* 325; C Ake *A political economy of Africa* (1981).

3.2 Colonial economic policies of exploitation

It is undeniable that colonialism, taking a leaf from the slavery epoch, institutionalised and perfected the logic of extraction logic, with Nigeria becoming an economic appendage of the British Empire. To match Nigeria's productive forces with Britain's industrial appetite, the colonial economic policy was meticulously crafted between 1914's amalgamation and 1960.⁷² While native processing industries were actively discouraged, cash crops such as cocoa, palm oil and rubber were given priority, with the colony continuing to serve as a market for British manufactured goods and a supply of raw materials.⁷³ Punitively, participation in the colonial economy was imposed by taxation schemes such as the head and hut taxes, yet indigenous entrepreneurs were routinely and systemically excluded from markets and credit.⁷⁴ However, British companies benefited from monopolistic advantages.⁷⁵ Roads, ports, railroads and other infrastructure were also designed as conduits for resource extraction from the hinterlands to coastal export depots rather than as tools of national integration.⁷⁶ Thus, as will be seen in the post-colonial extractivist analysis, the colonial state institutionalised inequality to guarantee Nigeria's economy would continue to be externally orientated, technologically dependent and structurally incapable of autonomous growth.

3.3 Post-colonial spectre of extractivism

As noted above, Nigeria's colonial architecture was not dismantled by independence; rather, only its administrators were replaced, with Nigeria effectively becoming the quintessential 'rentier' state after oil discovery in Oloibiri, Niger Delta. As Watts and others observe, the post-colonial state's reliance on oil revenue entrenched neo-colonial extractivism, substituting crude oil for palm oil while maintaining the same external dependency.⁷⁷ Over 90 per cent of export earnings and 80 per cent of government revenue accrued from oil by the 1970s⁷⁸ through joint ventures between the Nigerian National Petroleum

72 As above.

73 As above.

74 CU Uche 'Banking developments in pre-independence Nigeria: a study in regulation, control and politics' PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London, 1997 93-95.

75 JD Hargreaves 'West African states and the European conquest' in LH Gann & P Duignan (eds) *Colonialism in Africa, 1870-1960* (1969) 200.

76 Uche (n 74).

77 See, eg, OA Bello 'Human rights and environmental justice as psychosocial and transcendent in systems of humanity: the Luhmann effect in Nigeria's Niger Delta oil complex?' in J-CN Ashukem & SM Sama (eds) *Domestic and regional environmental laws and policies in Africa: a research companion* (2023) 103-123; M Watts *Curse of the black gold: 50 years of oil in the Niger Delta* (2008); Watts (n 10).

78 Falola & Heaton (n 49) 11.

Corporation (NNPC) and major multinational oil corporations,⁷⁹ including Shell, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Eni (Agip) and Total. Their operations, however, have wreaked havoc on the Niger Delta, resulting in ‘widespread, systematic contamination’⁸⁰ of both land and water, as the 2011 UN Environment Programme (UNEP) report on Ogoniland highlighted. Once self-sufficient through farming and fishing, communities such as Ogoni are now in ecological and socio-economic ruin.⁸¹

To protest this structural violence, resistance groups such as Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) emerged, but were brutally suppressed; in 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni activists were executed.⁸² The persistence of dispossession is further demonstrated by the 2021 Petroleum Industry Act’s Host Community Development Fund, which allots only 3 per cent of operating costs⁸³ to the oil-bearing communities. This implies for us that the Nigerian government, like its colonial forebear, prioritises elite capture and interests, and foreign capital over citizens’ welfare.

3.4 Contemporary unfair trade policies

As a continuum, the post-colonial global order entrenches historical inequalities via contemporary neoliberal trade and financial systems⁸⁴ through which Nigeria’s economic subordination has persisted as exporter of raw materials and importer of finished goods.⁸⁵ This is exemplified by the SAP imposed in the 1980s by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which exacerbated this dependency, promoting deregulation, privatisation and subsidy removal. These policies culminated in currency devaluation, inflation and a decimated social

79 For full engagement with this, see Bello (n 77); Watts (n 10); Watts (n 77).

80 United Nations Environment Programme Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland (2011), <https://wedocs.unep.org/20.500.11822/7947> (accessed 31 October 2025).

81 United Nations Environment Programme (n 80) 15–60.

82 See O Bello ‘“Spectacularising” Nigeria’s Niger Delta condition as necropolitics: revisiting Ken Saro Wiwa’s genocide in Nigeria: the Ogoni tragedy’ (2021) *Academia Letters* article 3548, <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL3548> (accessed 31 October 2025); CC Ike, K Ifesinachi & RG Nnamani ‘Reflections on state security and violence in Africa: a prognostic analysis’ (2014) 4 *Open Journal of Political Science* 160.

83 Y Omorogbe ‘The Petroleum Industry Act from a governance perspective’ (2022) 7 *Crescent University Law Journal* 33; M Adigun, PK Oniemola & DD Adeyemo ‘Legal issues in the demands for self-determination in Nigeria’ (2024) 31 *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 951–952.

84 YD Izom & IS Kombo ‘A critical analysis of the effects of colonial legacy and economic dependency on Nigeria’s post-independence development’ (2023) 14 *Lapai Journal of Humanities* 151; GC Bond ‘Globalisation, neoliberalism, historical conditionalities’ (2003) 88 *Journal of African American History* 330.

85 OV Ekanade ‘The dynamics of forced neoliberalism in Nigeria since the 1980s’ (2014) 1 *Journal of Retracing Africa* 11.

sector.⁸⁶ What the neoliberal regime implies for Nigeria, and other African and Global South states, is that tariff structures maintained by the Global North impose high barriers on processed goods from them, while subsidies in Europe and the United States (US) allow their agricultural exports to flood Nigerian markets.⁸⁷ Thus, Nigeria's low or zero capacity for refining its crude oil forces it to export it and import the refined petroleum products at high cost, thereby compounding its trade deficits.⁸⁸ This legacy of mono-product dependence, unfavourable trade terms and limited industrial capacity has equally left Nigeria vulnerable to global shocks and systemic underdevelopment.

Our stance is that the current unfair trade practices are not coincidental; rather, they are the reincarnation of past extractivist structures, emasculating both natural and human resources. We contend that while the trans-Atlantic slave trade commodified human labour, colonialism commodified land and crops; however, neoliberalism commodifies policy, dictating the parameters within which Nigeria must 'participate' in the global economy. From this, we stress that these three epochs of injustice are cumulative strata of a single process of the reproduction of dependency through restructured modalities of control rather than distinct historical phases. Thus, what has transpired is that neoliberal economy financialises and digitises the same reasoning. We therefore submit that development aid and apologies are insufficient forms of reparative justice. To address the historical continuum of extraction that started with the slave ships and continues in the cargo ships and capital flows of the twenty-first century, reparative justice calls for a drastic restructuring of international economic relations.

4 BROADER REPARATIONS FRAMEWORK: NIGERIA'S ROLE

Nigeria plays a significant role in the global reparations movement that goes well beyond statecraft; it sits at a complex intersection of philosophy, cultural reclamation and diplomacy that aims to reinterpret the moral framework of post-colonial justice. According to Savoy, Nigeria has emerged as an influential cultural negotiator and interlocutor between fractured histories and Africa's moral future, through its diplomats, academics and artists' collective agency, seeking

86 AA Usoro & LU Akah 'Assessment of selected World Bank policies and their implications on the fight against poverty in Nigeria' (2011) 10 *Global Journal of Social Sciences* 45-51; A Jega 'The state and identity transformation under structural adjustment in Nigeria' in A Jega (ed) *Identity transformation and identity politics under structural adjustment in Nigeria* (2003) 31-33.

87 L Kornher & J von Braun 'EU common agricultural policy – impacts on trade with Africa and African agricultural development' (2020) ZEF – Discussion Papers on Development Policy 294, Centre for Development Research, Bonn, 45.

88 Omorogbe (n 83).

the return of its looted artefacts.⁸⁹ This means that Nigeria's reparative diplomacy serves as both a mirror of decolonisation and an institutionalisation of pan-African solidarity, converting intangible notions of redress into concrete manifestations of reclaimed sovereignty.⁹⁰ Thus, its participation in this movement represents what could be referred to as reparative statehood, a rethinking of the country not only as the recipient of justice but also its creator, defining the parameters of a continental ethics of restoration and remembrance.

From the moral fervour of Chief MKO Abiola's leadership⁹¹ to the intellectual stewardship of scholars such as Ade-Ajayi,⁹² Nigeria's reparations diplomacy has developed as a combination of moral conviction and epistemic clarity. From the early 1990s to the present, it has created a lasting advocacy continuum that spans the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the AU and the UN, weaving together the symbolic, structural and spiritual aspects of redress.⁹³ The movement's origins find their basis in the First Pan-African Conference on Reparations, held in Abuja in 1993 under Chief Abiola's leadership, the event transforming Nigeria into the intellectual hub of African reparative consciousness.⁹⁴ By designating slavery and colonialism as crimes against humanity and presenting reparations as a morally and legally required measure for world justice, the Abuja Proclamation that resulted from that assembly was more than just a declaration. It represented a philosophical break in the international politico-juridical order.⁹⁵ It expressed the profound idea that 'the debt of compensation to the Africans as the most humiliated and exploited people of the last four centuries of modern history'⁹⁶ is an ethical requirement, not a sentimental grievance.

Thus, what Abiola, Ade-Ajayi and the Group of Eminent Persons achieved in Abuja was to transform Nigeria into a sacred geography where historical trauma was translated into diplomatic language. Abuja became the symbolic capital of pan-African reparative imagination. The conference's demands for debt cancellation, institutional reconstruction and cultural heritage restoration signalled a sea change: reparations would now transcend ethical discourse and enter a

89 B Savoy *Africa's struggle for its art: history of a post-colonial defeat* (2022) 8-10; also see F Sarr & B Savoy *The restitution of African cultural heritage: toward a new relational ethics* trans DS Burk (2018).

90 As above.

91 Abiola (n 14); Taiwo (n 8).

92 JF Ade-Ajayi 'The philosophy and history of the crusade for reparation' Paper presented at the First Pan-African Conference on Reparations, Abuja, Nigeria 27-29 April 1993.

93 RE Howard-Hassmann 'Reparations to Africa and the group of eminent persons' (2004) 44 *Études africaines* 81-97.

94 Taiwo (n 98).

95 Pan-African Reparations Declaration (n 25).

96 Pan-African Reparations Declaration (n 25) para 8.

framework of international negotiation.⁹⁷ This, arguably, established the African claim in the context of both international law and philosophical legitimacy.

4.1 Historical contributions and the advocacy of Abiola

Chief Abiola's activism, however, did not operate in isolation but was embedded within an intellectual tradition sustained by Nigeria's historical scholarship. The reparations discussion gained conceptual coherence and historical weight through Professor Ade-Ajayi's intervention as a member of the Group of Eminent Persons. Ade-Ajayi reinterpreted reparations as an epistemic repair project, a reclaiming of Africa's intellectual agency and civilisational dignity,⁹⁸ beyond just a financial demand. He placed the movement within the broader endeavour of decolonising African history itself by arguing that reparations must restore both material wealth and lost knowledge systems.⁹⁹ This line of reasoning is still present in modern reparative theory, with scholars such as Savoy and Sarr reiterating that returning African cultural heritage is an act of justice that is essential to rebuilding African identity rather than a curatorial favour.¹⁰⁰ They point out Nigeria's restitution proposal to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), calling for the return of important artefacts from Great Benin, to constitute the connection between cultural return and sovereignty.¹⁰¹ These reclamation efforts, frequently written off as tokenistic in Western discourse, serve as the foundation for a new moral economy of heritage in which cultural restoration is inextricably linked to both economic and epistemic restoration.¹⁰² This, for us, represents a moral geography in which the restoration of beauty turns into the restoration of existence; hence, Nigeria's endeavour to have stolen artefacts from Western museums return to it is a re-inscription of Africa's sovereignty over its own history, culture and aesthetics.

4.2 Nigeria, CARICOM and the African Union Reparations Agenda

Nigeria's reparations diplomacy also takes place in the context of a transoceanic dialogue, connecting Africa and its diasporas, especially through the changing dynamic between the Caribbean community and

97 Italian Institute for International Political Studies 'Africa is uniting in the call for reparations for historical injustices' 4 March 2025, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/africa-is-uniting-in-the-call-for-reparations-for-historical-injustices-202101> (accessed 31 October 2025).

98 Ade-Ajayi (n 92).

99 Ade-Ajayi (n 92) 2-3.

100 Sarr & Savoy (n 89).

101 Sarr & Savoy (n 98) 18.

102 As above.

the African Union.¹⁰³ The reparative discourse was expanded into a global framework during the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Follow-Up Summit on 6 to 7 September 2025, which focused on economic re-engineering, diaspora engagement, climate justice and reparations litigation.¹⁰⁴ Nigeria's attendance at this summit reaffirmed its pivotal role in mediating between the Caribbean and Africa as hubs of a common historical wound and aspiration. A vision of inter-hemispheric reparative solidarity, a united voice across oceans demanding justice for slavery, colonialism and their structural afterlives, was outlined in the summit's Communiqué, which was built on the 2021 AU-CARICOM framework.¹⁰⁵ Three key priorities emerged from the summit and currently serve as the foundation for Africa's reparations discourse. These are strengthening of cultural restitution as both material and symbolic reparations; institutional cooperation between African and Caribbean reparations commissions; and economic re-engineering through debt justice and technological partnerships.¹⁰⁶ These priorities reveal a paradigm shift, one making reparations a blueprint for global equity, echoing Savoy's insistence that the return of African heritage is an act of justice rather than display.¹⁰⁷

However, a paradox casts a shadow over Nigeria's moral leadership in the reparations' movement, despite taking a moral compass for it; it has not yet succeeded in converting rhetorical authority into a formalised national framework. This makes comparative experiences from other parts of the continent, such as Ghana's Year of Return Initiative 2019,¹⁰⁸ to provide valuable insights. The initiative reframed symbolic recognition as a tool for cultural and economic reconstruction in honour of the four-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Africans in slavery in the Americas.¹⁰⁹ It illustrated how reparations can mobilise diaspora capital, turn collective memory into investment, and give the state back the power to tell its own history.¹¹⁰ The project demonstrated that in addition to recognition, reparations call for

103 United Nations Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, World Conference Against Racism (2001).

104 CARICOM 'Transcontinental partnership in pursuit of reparatory justice for Africans and people of African descent through reparations' Second Africa-CARICOM Summit 6-7 September 2025, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

105 As above.

106 As above.

107 Savoy (n 89).

108 See E Egbejule 'Ghana's 'year of return' delivers a bittersweet buzz as tourists push up prices' *The Guardian* 14 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/14/ghana-year-return-tourists-prices-africa#:~:text=It%20began%20in%202018%20with%20President%20Nana,the%20state%20of%20Virginia%20in%20the%20US> (accessed 31 October 2025).

109 N Akufo-Addo 'Speech launching Year of Return, Ghana 2019', cited from B Tetteh '2019: Year of Return for African diaspora' *Africa Renewal* 7 December 2018, <https://africarenewal.un.org/en/magazine/2019-year-return-african-diaspora> (accessed 31 October 2025); EA Adu-Ampong & A Dilletie 'Commemoration and commodification: slavery heritage and Ghana's Year of Return' (2023) 26 *Tourism Geographies* 120-139.

110 As above.

institutional innovation and channels that transform sorrow into development and memory into rebuilding.

Additionally, despite its flaws, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) established reparations within a legal framework of testimony and recognition.¹¹¹ Although its limited implementation highlights the risk of political inertia, the Commission's assertion of a 'right to reparation' based on international human rights law emphasised that moral claims must be supported by enforceable frameworks.¹¹² Parallel to this, Kenya's Mau Mau case against the British government broadened the concept of reparations by showing that historical accountability is still possible even decades after colonial abuse.¹¹³ The successes recorded through this case are financial restitution and the symbolic admission of wrongdoing, which was bolstered by the revelatory power of documentary disclosure.¹¹⁴ These comparative experiences underscore the importance of reparations for Africa and the necessity of going beyond moral appeal, to be understood as tools for structural change informed by institutional design, fiscal responsibility and epistemic sovereignty.

These insights also suggest that moral leadership needs to give way to infrastructure leadership in Nigeria and, thus, it is imperative that the next stage of its reparations' trajectory institutionalises what it has long stated. This is by establishing national reparations commissions and engaging transcontinental coordination mechanisms. Nigeria's diplomacy must also be complemented by a legal framework and financial systems that can convert aspirations into long-lasting results in accordance with the AU-CARICOM partnership. From this perspective, we submit that reparations are no longer considered an afterthought in the discourse of development. Rather, they are its moral cornerstone, a dynamic system of justice that allows African states to reinterpret memory, sovereignty, and the moral economy of globalisation.

5 NIGERIA'S APPROACH TOWARD AFRICA'S REPARATIVE FRAMEWORK

The cumulative historical injustices meted out to Africa through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and post-colonial neoliberal and unequal economic structures demonstrate a systemic pattern of exploitation and disempowerment. However, we have shown that their

111 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Final Report Vol 1-5 (1998) Pretoria: Government of South Africa.

112 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (n 111) vol 6, sec 5, ch 2 'The right to reparation' (1998) 615.

113 See HM Government (UK) Foreign & Commonwealth Office 'Statement to Parliament on settlement of Mau Mau claims' Rt Hon William Hague, 6 June 2013.

114 House of Commons 'Mau Mau Claims (Settlement)' Hansard Debate Record, 6 June 2013.

effects can be alleviated through reparation and restoration.¹¹⁵ This part synthesises the insights from previous analysis to outline the contours of a contextualised, actionable and rights-based reparative framework, premised upon Nigeria's approach. Drawing on comparative models, legal norms and local experiences, the proposed framework integrates material and symbolic redress while addressing structural inequalities rooted in historical dispossession, as discussed below.

5.1 Cultural and symbolic restoration

This form of reparation finds basis in the psychosocial engagement¹¹⁶ with the past with a view to imagining a future of restitution and restoration of lost values. This comes by way of the repatriation of African artefacts, many of which were forcibly removed during pre- and colonial military campaigns, transported and kept in Western museums and private collections. For Nigeria, the most striking example are the Benin bronzes, captured by the British army during the 1897 campaign against the Kingdom of Benin.¹¹⁷ More than 700 of these items were kept in the British museum,¹¹⁸ but the restoration process began with the French government returning 26 artefacts to Benin Republic in 2021.¹¹⁹ Then, in 2022, Germany signed an agreement with Nigeria to return more than 1 130 Benin bronzes, some of which have been handed to the Oba of Benin and the Nigerian government.¹²⁰ These acts of restitution, although symbolic, for us, restore more than stolen property; they provide a recognition of historical and colonial injustices, capable of restoring the dignity and cultural continuity of the communities owning the artefacts. Restoration also covers the promotion of indigenous languages, knowledge systems, festivals, and even traditional forms of governance that were erased or marginalised by colonial powers.

5.2 Financial compensation and economic restitution

In this framework, financial compensation and economic restitution hold a particularly contentious yet indispensable position. As Ndikumana and Boyce contend, despite the political sensitivities

115 Lovejoy (n 54).

116 Bello (n 77).

117 S Lundén 'Displaying loot: the Benin objects and the British museum' PhD thesis, University of Gothenburg, 2016 7.

118 As above.

119 'France returns 26 looted artifacts and artworks to Benin' *Reuters* 12 November 2021 CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/benin-art-returned-scli-intl> (accessed 31 October 2025).

120 A Steffes-Halmer 'Germany returns Benin bronzes to Nigeria' *DW News* 2 July 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-returns-benin-bronzes-to-nigeria/a-62323704> (accessed 31 October 2025).

surrounding financial reparations, Africa's economic dependency must be viewed as a structural continuation of colonial dependency rather than an accidental legacy.¹²¹ This way, financial reparations, following Moffett, become juridical imperatives within the broader grammar of justice rather than being moral indulgences.¹²² Thus, engaging in repair amounts to restructuring, while the act of compensation engenders redistribution of power. In the African context, this entails resolving the development deficiencies brought about by centuries of exploitation, and the current patterns of global marginalisation. The CARICOM Ten-Point Plan strong model, particularly, the part that focuses on institutional rehabilitation, is an example of how reparations can be incorporated into transformative development as opposed to being discrete acts of restitution.

Therefore, we position Nigeria to champion the creation of a Pan-African Reparations and Development Fund (PRDF) as an institutional repository for reparations. The body should be funded by proportionate contributions from former colonial powers and multinational corporations which, for Ndikumana and Boyce, accrued wealth from Africa's historical exploitation.¹²³ By allocating funds to historically underserved communities' infrastructure, health care and education, this fund has the potential of transforming moral claims into developmental dividends. Also, the creation of a Pan-African Cultural Reparations Fund, parallel to PRDF, would aid the mobilisation of diaspora investments, restitution agreements, and public-private partnerships to revitalise Africa's creative economies and community museums. This would align with and extend Savoy's thesis that the restoration of cultural dignity is inextricably linked to the restoration of cultural artefacts.¹²⁴

Intricately linked with Nigeria's vision of financial reparations is the much-debated issue of comprehensive debt cancellation,¹²⁵ a type of indirect reparation that reframes economic emancipation as a moral right. Many of the debts with which African states are currently burdened are either colonial in origin or the result of post-colonial dependency, especially those accrued during Structural Adjustment Programmes,¹²⁶ which weakened sovereignty and increased inequality. For us, the complete cancellation of such debts would be a restitution of justice rather than a charitable concession, as it would enable African countries to reallocate funds to prioritise internal development. Thus, Nigeria as a moral leader and regional power is ideally positioned to

121 L Ndikumana & JK Boyce *Africa's odious debts: how foreign loans and capital flight bled a continent* (2011).

122 See L Moffett 'Reparations as balance' (2024) 55 *Social Philosophy* 624-642.

123 Ndikumana & Boyce (n 121).

124 Savoy (n 89).

125 B-V Ikejiaku 'International law and sustainable development: grounds for cancellation of Africa debts' (2023) 16 *Law and Development Review* 385-411.

126 See ZV Sinkala 'Structural adjustment 2.0' *New Internationalist* 21 December 2022, https://newint.org/features/2022/12/05/structural-adjustment-zambia-imf-debt?utm_source=chatgpt.com (accessed 31 October 2025).

spearhead the review and repudiation of such ‘odious debts’,¹²⁷ connecting this to preferential trade frameworks to address the structural imbalances of the global economy.¹²⁸ This would entail advocating World Trade Organisation (WTO) reforms that acknowledge past injustices in markets, tariffs and access¹²⁹ in addition to negotiating reparative debt relief.

We also advocate Nigeria’s leadership via the articulation of a new developmental reparations’ paradigm in which global trade reform and fiscal justice are used as instruments to decolonise economic relations. However, as the reparations debate reclaims economic justice, the critical question it must address is who should benefit first, the nation or the communities most affected?¹³⁰ The answer we find in the CARICOM framework which seeks financial reparations to prioritise payments reaching the communities most impacted,¹³¹ rather than being absorbed by national treasuries. From this, distributive justice should be the cornerstone of Nigeria’s reparations plan, guaranteeing that funding goes directly to historically marginalised groups still bearing the socio-economic scars of slavery, colonial extraction and post-colonial exploitation. Such local accountability could be institutionalised by a National Reparations Commission that links social reconstruction and financial justice, modelled after CARICOM. Under this arrangement, financial reparations become more than just restitution; they develop into regeneration plans, and instruments for restoring the continent’s moral economy, and a model for its renaissance.

5.3 Institutional reforms: strengthening governance and accountability

However, financial justice in itself is insufficient to heal the monumental historical harm; extensive institutional reform is also required. Gauging by the AU Transitional Justice Policy Framework, rebuilding the political and legal systems which allowed and sustained injustice is essential.¹³² Here, Nigeria’s leadership has the potential to be revolutionary by giving reparative justice institutional legitimacy via the formation of national and regional commissions for reparations

127 Ndikumana & Boyce (n 121).

128 See, generally, D Rodrik *Straight talk on trade: ideas for a sane world economy* (2018); JE Stiglitz & A Charlton *Fair trade for all: how trade can promote development* (2005).

129 UNCTAD *Debt sustainability: oasis or mirage?* (2002).

130 On this, see HA Watson ‘The political economy of reparations and the dialectic of transnational capitalism’ (2024) 55 *Development and Change* 752-772.

131 See CARICOM (n 104).

132 GM Wachira ‘The African Union Transitional Justice Policy Framework and how it fits into the African governance architecture (AGA): promise and prospects for the African Court of Justice and Human Rights’ in CC Jalloh, KM Clarke & VO Nmeihelle (eds) *The African Court of Justice and Human and Peoples’ Rights in context: development and challenges* (2019) 147-149.

under the aegis of the AU. In addition to supervising restitution programmes, these organisations would guarantee openness, responsibility and equity in the distribution of reparative funds.¹³³ Importantly, Nigeria could support the establishment of an AU Reparations Tribunal to decide cases and offer advisory opinions on reparative justice, modelled after the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Court). The right to reparations would be elevated from moral discourse to legal doctrine by such a tribunal, which would codify it within African jurisprudence.¹³⁴ In this way, institutional reform becomes ontological rather than just administrative; by substituting the ethics of accountability for the logic of extraction, it reinterprets the relationship between the African state and its people.

5.4 Educational and knowledge justice initiatives: fostering awareness and healing

Another pillar of Nigeria's proposed reparations model is educational and knowledge justice, since no kind of restitution is complete without the restoration of memory and knowledge. Education is recognised as both a site of historical harm and a tool for collective restoration in the AU's Theme of 2025, focused on knowledge and racial healing.¹³⁵ Nigeria could make a significant contribution in this regard by infusing into national curricula at all educational levels modules to engage the study of slavery, colonialism and resistance justice as reconstruction rather than retaliation. The epistemic hierarchies that colonialism ingrained in educational systems would be upended by a curriculum that emphasises African agency and resilience, created by African academics, and grounded in indigenous epistemologies.¹³⁶ Furthermore, Nigeria could support the creation of Pan-African Reparations Studies Centres, acting as intellectual hubs for comparative studies, reparatory theory, and innovative policy making.¹³⁷ Similar to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Framework,¹³⁸ a flagship AU Centre for Reparations and Restorative Justice, possibly housed at the University of Ibadan, could serve as a think tank and a memorial. Such institutions would bridge academia,

133 As above.

134 T McCarthy 'Coming to terms with our past, part II: on the morality and politics of reparations for slavery' (2004) 32 *Political Theory* 750-772.

135 African Union (n 103).

136 This view is inspired by T Adeate & A Sewchurran 'African epistemologies and the decolonial curriculum' (2023) 55 *Acta Academica* 1-19.

137 On this suggestion, see J Nyoni 'Decolonising the higher education curriculum: an analysis of African intellectual readiness to break the chains of a colonial caged mentality' (2019) 4 *Transformation in Higher Education* a69.

138 NCTR 'Delivering on Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action, National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation' National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Organizations | HR Hub (accessed 31 October 2025).

policy and activism in the pursuit of epistemic justice by fostering moral consciousness in addition to knowledge production.

5.5 Legal and policy frameworks: establishing a robust reparations infrastructure

The Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation, established by UN General Assembly Resolution 60/147, provide a legal framework for dealing with egregious human rights violations.¹³⁹ This makes it equally essential for frameworks for laws and policies to convert moral aspirations into legally enforceable rights regarding historical harms Africa has experienced. Nigeria's initiatives for reparations can gain credibility and coherence if it adheres to these principles. Thus, to constitutionalise reparations as a legal right, we recommend that Nigeria leads the mobilisation of groups such as the BRICS, G77 and ACP to support reparations diplomacy through international and multilateral forums such as the CARICOM-AU cooperation.¹⁴⁰ At the continental level, Nigeria should spearhead the effort to draft an African Reparations Protocol under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.¹⁴¹ At the sub-regional level, we suggest a harmonisation of reparations legislation throughout West Africa, with Nigeria using its regional clout within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to guarantee consistency in cross-border claims and unity in execution. By taking these steps, Nigeria would be positioned at the centre of a Global South alliance, creating bonds that go beyond colonial boundaries and turning reparations into a forum for South-South collaboration.

Nigeria's legal leadership should also extend to environmental reparations, given the well-documented issues of the Niger Delta, where ecological destruction reflects the exploitative logics of colonial resource extraction.¹⁴² In addition to alleviating local suffering, acknowledging environmental harm as historical injustice would bring Nigeria's reparations agenda into line with international climate justice movements.¹⁴³ When taken as a whole, these legal, educational and

139 General Assembly Resolution 60/147 (Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law).

140 CARICOM (n 104).

141 On this, see International Law Commission *Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts* (2001).

142 See Bello (n 77); Watts (n 10); Watts (n 77); B Gould 'Cradle of depletion: unravelling the tears of the Niger Delta' (2024) 5 *Cambridge Journal of Political Affairs* 131-148; F Gbadamosi & J Aldstadt 'The interplay of oil exploitation, environmental degradation and health in the Niger Delta: a scoping review' (2025) 30 *Trop Med Int Health* 351-367; AO Babatunde 'Oil exploitation and food insecurity in Nigeria's Niger Delta' (2023) 61 *Journal of Modern African Studies* 165-187.

143 See J Falaju 'Global North owes Nigeria \$9.9tr in climate reparations, says ActionAid' *The Guardian, Nigeria* 10 February 2025, <https://guardian.ng/news/global-north-owes-nigeria-9-9tr-in-climate-reparations-says-actionaid/> (accessed 31 October 2025).

institutional changes extend the reasoning behind monetary reparations into a more comprehensive theory of structural justice. They also portray Nigeria as a country uniquely positioned to articulate what could be referred to as reparative sovereignty, and as a moral and political leader in Africa's reparations movement. This finds justification in Nigeria's continuous attempt to move reparations from a moral appeal to an institutional design.

At the 2023 UNGA, President Tinubu's demand that Africa be acknowledged as 'a partner in progress rather than a debtor of history'¹⁴⁴ represents a continental reawakening of purpose, echoing this philosophical evolution. However, as commentators and academics, including Okereke, warn, unless Nigeria's reparations agenda is supported by comprehensive and well-coordinated institutional frameworks, it runs the risk of remaining merely symbolic.¹⁴⁵ This problem is highlighted by Táíwò's criticism that uncoordinated reparations turn into performative action rather than justice.¹⁴⁶ Hence, even the most passionate moral discourse runs the risk of reproducing the very asymmetries it aims to correct in the absence of systemic coherence.¹⁴⁷ Nigeria's next frontier must, therefore, be the design of an integrated reparations architecture that balances its domestic priorities with continental and international movements, and ensures that administrative capability and the political will match its moral leadership. Nigeria could accomplish this by creating a National Reparations Commission, which would act as the institutional hub connecting the national, local and continental reparations agendas.

The ramifications of this reconceptualisation extend to the development paradigm. If appropriately institutionalised, it becomes a theory of historical justice in motion, uniting memory, responsibility, and the future to form a moral economy and a theory of historical

144 UNGA General Debate: Address by H.E. Bola Ahmed Tinubu, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (78th session) 23 September 2023, New York: United Nations; C Asadu 'At UN, African leaders say enough is enough: they must be partnered with, not sidelined' 23 September 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-united-nations-01d4460bddfaf67e6e6531e69ae58e48> (accessed 31 October 2025).

145 C Okereke 'AU's reparative justice agenda: Africa needs structural change, not just compensation' *Premium Times Nigeria*, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/775485-aus-reparative-justice-agenda-africa-needs-structural-change-not-just-compensation-by-chukwumerije-okereke.html> (accessed 31 October 2025).

146 J McCarthy 'Why are reparations essential for climate justice? interview with Olúfemi Táíwò' *Global Citizen* 4 February 2022, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/reparations-for-climate-justice-olufemi-taiwo/> (accessed 31 October 2025).

147 OO Táíwò *Reconsidering reparations* (2022); OO Táíwò 'The fight for reparations cannot ignore climate change: racial redress should be modelled on the global anticolonial tradition of worldbuilding' *Boston50Review* 10 January 2022, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/the-fight-for-reparations-cannot-ignore-climate-change/> (accessed 31 October 2025).

justice in motion.¹⁴⁸ However, the difficulty of reparations, as our analysis has shown, is not just in calculating past wrongs but in rebuilding society's moral foundation.¹⁴⁹ From this broad perspective, reparations are generative rather than retroactive; they restore the circumstances that make justice possible.¹⁵⁰ Thus, Nigerian leadership is reframed as both a political endeavour and a moral calling; it is a call for the continent to rethink sovereignty as a restoration of our common humanity rather than as a display of power.

6 CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

We have attempted to examine the historical and structural makeup of economic injustice in Africa through a reparative justice lens on the back of the unresolved legacy of trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonial extractivism and post-colonial dependency. All linked to Africa's and Nigeria's developmental crises, we evaluated them, through a theoretical synthesis of historical institutionalism and reparative justice using a triangulated methodology. This was with a view to arguing that the persistent injustices necessitate systemic change. To advance a continental strategy based on law, collaboration and international discourse, we proposed a comprehensive reparations framework that incorporates cultural, financial and institutional renewal. This would involve Nigeria, taking the lead in turning Africa's past and ongoing injustices into a basis for restorative sovereignty and a collective renaissance.

We conclude by restating that the enduring developmental disparities throughout Africa are structural afterlives of trans-Atlantic slavery, colonialism, post-colonial dependency. Thus, reparative justice serves as the lens through which these systemic injustices are not only recognised but also methodically eliminated. These interconnected components come together to form what can be called reparative sovereignty, a revolutionary framework that gives Africa back its material wealth as well as its moral right to establish justice according to its own standards. Nigeria's contribution to this endeavour embodies the nuanced combination of philosophical reimagining, visionary leadership and historical accountability. Its reparative diplomacy offers a radical transformation of reparations from a vocabulary of grievance into a map of continental rebirth, positioned at the intersection of economic justice, institutional reform and epistemic renewal. The task at hand is profound: to transform the moral burden of history into an

148 See S Truccone-Borgogno 'Responding to historical injustices: collective inheritance and the moral irrelevance of group identity' (2024) 23 *European Journal of Political Theory* 65-84.

149 C Duarte 'Beyond compensation: reparatory justice as a structural economic imperative for Africa' *Africa Renewal* 2 May 2025, <https://africarenewal.un.org/en/magazine/beyond-compensation-reparatory-justice-structural-economic-imp-erative-africa> (accessed 31 October 2025).

150 K Schwarz *Reparations for slavery in international law: transatlantic enslavement, the Maangamizi, and the making of international law* (2022) 100-105.

enduring architecture of dignity, to transform remembrance into reform. Reparations, properly conceived, represent nothing less than the philosophical reconstitution of Africa's humanity and its sovereign right to narrate its own destiny. Nigeria's role in actualising the goals cannot be overstated.