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**This issue is dedicated to the memory of
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938-2025)**

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NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O (1938-2025): A PILLAR OF RESISTANCE

Lungelo Siphosethu Mbatha^a

On Wednesday 28 May 2025, news that the Kenyan writer and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o had passed at the age of 87 was announced by his daughter through Facebook (Wako 2025). Following the sad news, tributes featured the great author's life on all major international news platforms (Aljazeera 2025; Chibelushi 2025; Lea and Cain 2025; Kimani 2025). The world had lost one of its literary giants and Africa one of its bravest and most productive decolonial scholars. Ngũgĩ will always be revered as one of Africa's most prolific writers whose life was committed to fighting social injustice through his works. His staunch resistance to multiple colonial and postcolonial injustices on the African continent inspired generations of scholars.

Ngũgĩ's Life as a Writer

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was born in 1938, in colonial Kenya. He went to Kamandura, Manguu, and Kinyogori primary schools, all in Kenya. After graduating from the Alliance High School in Kenya, he studied at Makerere University in Uganda, and then at the University of Leeds in Britain. Ngũgĩ wrote his first two novels, *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965) when he was an undergraduate at Makerere University (Kimani 2025). Before these novels, Ngũgĩ's major work was a play, *The Black Hermit* (1962), which was performed in Uganda in celebration of the country's independence. He continued publishing in the 1960s, with the novel, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), and his first set of literary essays, *Homecoming* (1969) (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o Foundation 2025). During this time, he worked as an English Literature lecturer at the University of Nairobi, where he stayed from 1967 until 1977. He also served as a Fellow in Creative Writing at Makerere University from 1969 to 1970.

During the 1970s, Ngũgĩ served at Northwestern University, USA, as a Visiting Associate Professor of English and African Studies, from 1970 to 1971. He published the plays *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (with Micere Mugo) (1976),

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and *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (with Ngũgĩ wa Mirii) (1977), along with the novel, *Petals of Blood* (1977). After being detained at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison in Nairobi, for a year without charge for the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* [translated as *I Will Marry When I Want*], Ngũgĩ opted to write in his native language, Gĩkũyũ. Apart from the need to better connect with ordinary Kenyans, this imprisonment for writing in his native tongue motivated Ngũgĩ to reject writing in English (Trivedi 2003). Thus, in the 1980s, he published the novels, *Caĩtaani Mutharabaini* [translated as *Devil on the Cross*] (1980), and *Matigari Ma Njiriuungi* [translated as *Remains of Bullets*] (1986). He also published the literary essays, *Writers in Politics* (1982), and *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), along with his first memoir, *Detained: A Writers Prison Diary* (1982). From 1982 until 1998, Ngũgĩ worked at the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya, a London-based organisation fighting for human rights. He also served at Bayreuth University in 1984, as a Visiting Professor, and as a Writer in Residence at the Borough of Islington, in London, during 1985. From 1989 to 1992, Ngũgĩ became Visiting Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Yale University, while holding the position of Visiting Distinguished Professor of English and African Literature at the Five College Consortium in Amherst, USA, in 1991.

The 1990s also saw Ngũgĩ work at New York University as Professor of Comparative Literature and Performance Studies as well as Erich Maria Remarque Professor of Languages, from 1992 until 2002. Subsequently, he moved to the University of California Irvine, where he served as Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature. During the 1990s, Ngũgĩ's most notable publications were the literary essays, *Moving the Centre: Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993), and *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams* (1998).

In the early-2000s, Ngũgĩ returned with the novel, *Murogi wa Kagogo* [translated as *Wizard of the Crow*] (2006), and several collections of literary essays, including *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (2014), along with four memoirs, including *Wrestling with the Devil: A Prison Memoir* (2018). Among his last publications were the epic, *Kenda Mũiyũru: Rũgano rwa Gĩkũyũ na Mũmbi* (2018) [translated as *The Perfect Nine: The Epic of Gĩkũyũ and Mũmbi*] (2020), as well as essays on translation in *The Language of Languages* (2023).

Ngũgĩ was prolific indeed. And the world recognised his hard work through countless awards and honorary degrees. To name but a few, Ngũgĩ won the Nonino International Prize for Literature (2001); the 6th Pak Kyong-ni Literature Award (October 2016); the Los Angeles Review of Books

Lifetime Achievement Award (2017); and the Erich Maria Remarque Peace Prize (2019). Ngũgĩ was also named Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, by Albright College (1994); Honorary Doctor of Literature, University of Auckland (2005); Honorary Doctor of Letters, Yale University (2017); and Honorary Doctor of Letters, Edinburgh University (2019) (University of California, Irvine 2023).

Ngũgĩ's Life as a Pillar of Resistance

Apart from the countless literary gifts Ngũgĩ left behind, his spirit of resistance will never be forgotten. When he lectured at Nairobi in the 1970s, he successfully fought to rename the English Department to a Literature Department that prioritised African and third world literature (Kimani 2025; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o Foundation 2025). Ngũgĩ also decided to expunge his birth name, James, as a means of resisting his own colonial inheritance. As mentioned above, he would be arrested for a year, without charge, for staging a play that was critical of the postcolonial Kenyan society. Not to be deterred, he would write the scathing novel, *Caitani Mutharabaini* [translated as *Devil on the Cross*], during his detention on toilet paper. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, during this period Ngũgĩ relinquished writing in English in favour of his native tongue, Gĩkũyũ.

After his release, Ngũgĩ and his family were continuously harassed by the Kenyan government, and upon hearing of his imminent arrest in June 1982, he relinquished living in Kenya and chose to live in exile (Hawley 1998). Nevertheless, he was still rebuked by Kenya's political leadership, his 1986 novel *Matigari Ma Njiriuungi* [translated as *Remains of Bullets*] was taken off bookstores, and universities were not allowed to refer to it until 1996 (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o Foundation 2025). Yet, Ngũgĩ continued to resist. While in exile, he gave distinguished lectures on decolonisation around the world, along with countless interviews regarding his choice to write in Gĩkũyũ (Trivedi 2003; Pozo 2004). He would crown his exile with the publication of his novel, *Murogi wa Kagogo*, translated as *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). Upon their return to Kenya, Ngũgĩ and his family had a near death experience when intruders broke into their home. They were threatened with death, if they would not remain silent. Unperturbed, Ngũgĩ continued speaking and writing about the incident. Of course, he had resisted death on several occasions, including surviving health issues like prostate cancer in 1995 and heart surgery in 2019 (Chibelushi 2025).

In his books, Ngũgĩ relentlessly exposed how colonialism, and the struggles for independence fought by ordinary people, often resulted in the destruction of friendships, families, cultures, and even villages. He did not stop there but continued to explore the confusions, evils, misfortunes, and contradictions created by independence and the subsequent capitalist development of Africa. He alerted to the exploitation of ordinary Africans by the elites, and exposed the multiple collaborations of local private ventures with former colonisers. Ngũgĩ even ridiculed the partnerships of the African elite with institutions like the World Bank and IMF, and criticised the wasted expenditure on development projects that had not helped ordinary people. Yet, he still gave a sense of hope to the ordinary person that it is possible to resist such postcolonial structures.

After resisting different forms of oppression, Ngũgĩ shared his way of resisting with the rest of the world. He spent the last decades of his long and remarkably productive life translating pieces written in one marginalised language, into other marginalised languages, always emphasising that being marginalised did not mean that the language was marginal (Pozo 2004). Ngũgĩ's life will never be forgotten, for he was a pillar of resistance to the very end.

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MOOSE SOCIO-COSMIC DUALISM: THE LOGIC OF THE VILLAGE AND THE LOGIC OF THE STATE IN BURKINA FASO

Sjoerd Zanen^a

Abstract: In the contemporary socio-economic and political order of Moose society in Burkina Faso and elsewhere in Africa so-called “traditional” witchcraft still plays an important role. But how, in modern Moose society, must the occult, the flipside of things, be understood? In what cultural scheme or discourse does it fit and operate? How do the “real” and the “supernatural,” the visible and the invisible, the “dayside” and the “nightside” of things, relate to each other in notions of political power, “development,” law, economy? In other words, what is the ambiguous, cross-fertilising relation between what is often called “tradition” and “modernity” in modern rural and urban Burkina Faso?

Keywords: *cosmic order, witchcraft, tradition, modernity, power, development, cultural ambiguity*

Introduction

In May 2021, a YouTube filmfragment,¹ obviously registered by mobile phone, appeared on social media. The recording concerned the confession by a Mossi woman from Burkina Faso who claimed to be a witch. This is remarkable: while witchcraft rumours and accusations abound in many places in the world, confessions are rare, let alone voluntary and filmed ones.

The scene of action on the short film is an urban private clinic run by a roman-catholic nurse. The woman who has entered the clinic is in a state of agitation, she addresses the nurse in an excited screaming manner. The atmosphere is tense. The nurse tries to calm her down, with little success.

1 VID 20210523 WA 0015(4).mp4

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In the course of action, the following becomes clear. The woman says that she is extremely jealous of her daughter-in-law Ami, the wife of her son Moussa. She is utterly disturbed by the fact that her son dearly loves his wife, gives her “gold” and tries to arrange her travel to the United States where he works. The woman has done everything to separate the couple and to have them divorced, but in vain. Ami should not give birth to a child by Moussa, for she is afraid that Moussa’s children may become “better” – that is, more successful and wealthier – than her own children. Ami has already had three miscarriages. Apparently, she has come to the nurse’s clinic to be treated for failed pregnancies. But Ami’s mother-in-law cries out: “Ami is not ill. I am the reason. I am a witch (*sonya*). I have entered the body of Ami. I have already eaten all three small fetuses. Moussa is in America. I have done everything to prevent Ami to join him, I have spoiled her work, spoiled her household, I have made her daughter cripple, I have even tried to kill Ami.”

The nurse and other people present are shocked, they cross themselves, invoke Jesus and Mary. Yet the nurse succeeds in letting the woman go on talking. Still worked up, the woman explains that she is neither Christian nor Muslim, but she “works through *tengkuga*.” *Tengkuga* (singular *tengkugri*) are traditional earth shrines (litt. “earth stones”) of which every *buudu* (lineage, clan, family) possesses one. They are also described as altars on which blood sacrifices are made when consulting the family’s ancestors situated “in the earth.”

After some repetitions and additional information, the film ends here. What became of the “witch’s” visit to the nurse and her confessions remains obscure.

In recent years many anthropologists have discussed the prevalence of occult phenomena, and African witchcraft in particular, in the “modern” urban world often referred to as “modernity.” Thus, Harri Englund writes in *Critique of Anthropology* (1996) that witchcraft appears to thrive as a means of rural and urban Africans alike to confront contemporary problems. In many cases witchcraft is shown to be an integral part of local struggles over state legitimacy, the support for political parties, changing gender relations, and so on. More recently, Kroesberger-Kamps (2020) refers to “new directions in the study of witchcraft in Africa.” The diversity of arguments put forward is matched by the diversity of contexts in which witchcraft is encountered, such as party politics, judicature, markets, accumulation of wealth, or football. Prominently concerned with the subject of the occult, rituals and power in contemporary Africa are Jean and John Comaroff who edited a number

of readers about the occult (1993-2018). Englund refers to publications in the 1980s and 1990s, citing above all books by Peter Geschiere (1995, 1997). In *The Modernity of Witchcraft* (1997) Geschiere focusses especially on politics, as is evident from *Sorcellerie et Politique* (1995) – the title of the French edition of the book. More particularly, the book deals with the question how the “modern” discourses on witchcraft – their continuities and transformations in new contexts – influence political developments. New forms of power and wealth rupture old domestic solidarities and evoke strong sentiments of jealousy and, therefore, hidden aggression and occult intervention. According to Geschiere these developments have two sides: a “leveling” side being the desire to undo inequalities, and a “cumulative” side, the ambition to accumulate power and wealth. The latter he calls witchcraft’s “ambiguity” (Geschiere 1997:10). Elsewhere he perceives the ambivalence of the occult force of witchcraft in its “disturbing” as well as “constructive” effects – the latter following from efforts to protect oneself or, more generally, to succeed in life. “It is precisely through this ambivalence that discourses on the occult incorporate modern changes so easily” (p. 13). Thus, “ambivalence” and “ambiguity” are the central themes on which Geschiere builds his arguments (see also Musah 2020). Geschiere’s approach is to compare witchcraft phenomena affecting politics in various regions in Cameroon. Differences and similarities are observed and analysed with reference to characteristics of the political systems of the researched societies. This analysis is based on solid fieldwork, taking the local people’s view as a point of departure of what he calls an approach “from below.”

In the present article, inspired by Geschiere’s work, I intend to take the concept of ambiguity one step further. I shall analyse it as an inclusive, integral part of a cultural system of thought and practice that – cognitively and organisationally – determines daily life. The case studied is that of the *Moose* (Mossi) of Burkina Faso, whose “ambiguities,” whether prevailing in “traditional” or “modern” discourses, form part of the dynamics on which the continuation of society depends. Transgressions of categorical boundaries are threatening a normatively desired stable equilibrium and create ambiguity. That very ambiguity, however, is a condition *sine qua non* for the reproduction and survival of society. The powers aiming at the restoration of this equilibrium may result in cultural and social adaptations and innovations. These occur in various socio-political domains, all of them being subject to specific contrasts. The one between the village and the city marks new social environments; traditional versus “foreign” powers operate in the political field; the contrast between “subsistence systems” versus “the

market” pervades the economic domain; the one between village reciprocity versus state welfare that of social security; the difference between customary and western law – testimonies of a “logic of the village” versus a “logic of the state” – affect socio-political life as a whole. All these contrasts cause the situations of ambiguity that people have to cope with in daily life. They also gradually create a “modernity” that is quite distinct from the western notion of a uniform “global village.”

This text does not intend to theorise on cultural and social theories of African modernity in general, which has been undertaken by many scholars including Achille Mbembe, Homi K. Bhaba, and Olufemi Taiwo, to mention only a few African authors. Rather, I try to follow as closely as possible local *Moose* “theories” with which I became acquainted during a long period of studying *Moose* rural and urban culture. In dealing with *Moose* society, I therefore put the words “tradition” and “modernity” between quotation marks as, in the case presented here, they are not mutually exclusive concepts in their reference to social phenomena. *Moose* rather apply them in a reciprocal manner, as is shown by the way they consider “modern” life as being determined by the interplay of “traditional” “things of us” (*mo tedom*) and “modern” “things of foreigners” (*nasara tedom*). Against this background the following questions are pertinent: Where does the *Moose* occult praxis come from, in what cultural scheme or discourse is it embedded? What is the significance of the “earth shrines”? How do the “real” and the “occult,” the visible and invisible, the “dayside and nightside” relate to each other?

The following text deals with the *Moose* of Kaya, Burkina Faso’s centre-nord region. There the first part of my fieldwork was conducted in the 1970s-1980s, when I worked and lived there for six years. It was the time of revolution and its aftermath. It was also the beginning of what is now sometimes called “modernity,” built upon – or constructed from – a “traditional” system of thought, which is still very much alive in the countryside and the urban environments alike, as we shall observe. The latter part of my research was not only conducted during regular visits to Burkina Faso, but also facilitated by improved telephone and digital communications between my Dutch residence and that of my family-in-law in Ouagadougou. This enabled me to collect on a weekly basis detailed information from key informants about the life of a *Moose* extended family in an urban context, the events in their residential urban neighbourhood, and the continuing contacts with their rural villages of origin. Thus, I have been able to follow closely the development of a fixed group of people during almost forty years.

The text will contain a number of “binary oppositions.” Certain authors are wary of the use of imposed or imagined oppositions, which historians may have borrowed from “structural” anthropology. I maintain, however, that the binary oppositions mentioned in the following exposition – fluid as they may be – are all part of the “participant’s view” (Josselin de Jong 1967) as recorded in the field “from below,” so to speak. *Moose* appear to be fond of thinking, talking, and playing with such oppositions in their daily conversations, proverbs, stories, jokes, and public speeches. They practice a discourse of paired oppositions between day and night, male and female, right and left, village and bush, cool and hot, water and fire, white and red sorghum, millet porridge (*sagbo*) and beer (*raam*), or *Moose* and Peulh. They may compare the modes of conduct of sheep and goats and apply these to the different characteristics of political chiefs and earthpriests. Likewise, they compare the character of chickens and guinea fowls to the contrasting behaviour of faithful and adulterous women. Often, one needs knowledge of local phenomena such as the flora, fauna, and the codes of social behaviour, in short, *la science du concret*, to understand the proverbs and their various associations.

Equilibrium and Transgression: Ambiguities as Cultural Dynamics

“The logic of the village” is anchored in the *Moose* system of thought (*roogm miki*, “born-found,” “tradition”), which is characterised by a discourse of oppositions, of dualism and mediation, transgression and restoration. Processes of division or separation are connected with the notion of creation. Conceptually, this notion is operative on a cosmic level in the division between heaven and earth and in the distinction between the God of Creation *Wende* and human beings. On a biological level it pertains to the division between man and woman, male and female, whereas on the level of social reproduction it is manifest in the visible world of the living versus the invisible world of spirits and the dead. On a spatial level the village contrasts with the “brousse,”² while on the socio-historical level, the distinction is that between the “people of power” (*na-biise*, mythically descended from heaven) and “people of the earth” (*nioniose*, *teng biise*, mythically emerging from the earth). These levels are indissolubly connected and form a logical whole.

2 “Brousse” refers to a peripheral or outer space reckoned from the centre of the courtyard or the village centre; it may concern the washing place/toilet near the porch, refer to fields beyond “village fields,” to wilderness, forest and barren hills, but also to other villages, countries and in general “unknown” or “uncivilised” places or “other world.”

The dynamic interaction between oppositional pairs is brought about by mediations from the “other world.” As such qualifies the ancestral legitimization of marriage through the acceptance of a bloodsacrifice by the ancestors. So does the intervention of a *kinkirga* spirit from the “brousse” in the process of reproduction (in the village).

A focal mode of mediation forms the basis of the agricultural praxis. In the sacred relation connecting heaven and earth the rain represents the “sperm,” from which the grain, the “life-force” of which originates in the “other” world, grows. Therefore, harvesting requires a separation from this cosmic source of fertility. This is achieved by performing a desacralisation ritual.

The paramount *Moose* relationship is that connecting the sovereign (*rima, naaba*) with his subjects. This is a methaphor of the well-being including the “fertility” of the kingdom (*ringu*) – the world extending from sunrise to sunset. This methaphor reflects the annual rituals preceding and relating to the agricultural season, through which the pact between the – originally immigrant – king and the autochtonous earth priests (*tengsobramba*) of the kingdom is annually reconfirmed. In the course of the *bega* ritual (as performed in Yatenga province, see Izard 1985) or the *napussum* ritual (conducted in the regions of Boussouma and Maane, see Luning 1997) the heavenly power (*naam*) descends on the “naked” king, seated on the earth and deprived of his regalia. It represents a “fertile,” reciprocal relationship between the ruler and his subjects; the latter are sometimes addressed as his “spouses.”

As a relation between the ruler and his subjects the kingdom is represented in the chiefly power (*naam*), the right to rule being provided by God (*Wende*). The territory (*tempelem*), on the other hand, encompassing the relation between village and the bush, is the domain of the ancestors (*kiimse*) in their connection to the earth (*tenga*). Heaven and Earth (*Wende* and *Tenga*) provide for a fertile relationship, modelled on a marriage relationship in which the chief (*naaba*) and the earthpriest (*tengsoba*) represent a “fertile” maternal kin-relationship (Zahan 1961).

The opposition between Heaven and the king and his subjects, on the one hand, and the one between Earth and the village and *brousse*, on the other, are in equilibrium (see Figure 1):

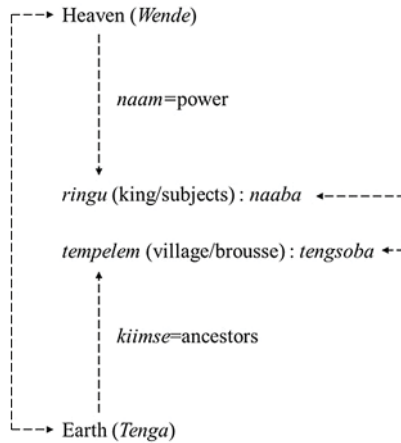


Figure 1. Equilibrium Model of the Moose Cosmic Order (Zanen 1996: 125).

An internal disturbance of harmony of each of these relations has repercussions for the equilibrium on which the social-cosmic order as a whole rests. From these relations the *Moose* system of thought is constructed. All relations of opposition, acts of transgression, phenomena of ambiguity and modes of mediation, whether occurring in the past or in the present, in various contexts and in rapidly changing environments are all related to and derive their significance from this socio-cosmological system of meaning.

The conception of *naam*, the power derived from God/*Wende*, is the basis of *Moose* social hierarchy. Both *naam* and *Wende* have a static, unaffactable character. God legitimises the totality of the world and the equilibrium in the order of people and things. God is difficult to approach directly. He cannot be manipulated individually and one cannot meddle with his power. The earth, on the other hand, “speaks”: through ancestors and spirits people enter into contact with the earth and vice versa. It is a very dynamic relationship. Therefore, the central relationship in daily life is the one between the human community and the earth. In this relation the cycle of life and death is enacted. At every social level – from the individual, the family, the lineage, all the way to the village as a whole – ritual contact with the brousse (*weogo*) and/or the earth is maintained on individual or communal occasions, either through divination, sacrifices to the ancestors, or contact with spirits. The well-being of all and sundry is dependent on this “vertical” equilibrium, as are the harmonious

“horizontal” relations between individuals, lineages, neighbourhoods, and villages. Both types of relations are interdependent, for if those between communities within the kingdom are distorted, the cosmic relations between the community and the earth, hence between earth and heaven, are affected as well. Not seldom do people explain the lack of rain in crucial periods by referring to a disturbed relation between heaven and earth, caused by human actions such as a disrespect of the ancestors or transgressions of social, ritual or moral codes.³ Therefore, in times of drought even government authorities urge people to solve social conflicts. Damaging the bush, being the domain of spirits, for instance by erosion-control activities, well-drilling, road-building, or forestry may create havoc. It may cause drought, accidents, wells running dry, and leakage of dams, unless the “chef de terre” (*tengsoba*) is consulted for his mediation with these spirits. If the ritual codes are not respected these spirits may disappear or intrude into human society. The latter would confuse the distinction between the “double” worlds of village and “brousse.”

The notion of duality, encountered in many societies in West and Central Africa, is usually explained with the notion of “doubles” being manifestations of similar but contrasting phenomena in two mirrored worlds: the visual world (*nen neere*) and the invisible world (*nen lebende*), literally “the reversed face” (“like in tissues,” the *Moose* explain) being the world before birth and after death. A series of oppositional categories is related to these two worlds: right-left, before-behind, male-female, day-night, village-bush, social ordering-undifferentiated chaos, life-death. In daily life these oppositions are symbolically expressed in situations associated with crossing the border between the two worlds, in particular in situations facing death: decease and deliverance (considered by *Moose* as “opened to death”). Pregnancy is caused by a *kinkirga* (spirit, lit. twin) from the *brousse* entering a woman’s womb, leaving the twin brother or sister behind in the invisible world *nen lebende*.⁴ A deceased is washed and offered a last meal with a left hand. While normally one sleeps with one’s head towards the door, now the corpse is laid upon the bier with the feet in that direction. One says that the deceased has “gone back” to the other side.⁵ At the *funéraille* (when the deceased is supposed

3 Informant: “the customs are no longer respected ... sexual intercourse was forbidden in the bush, and if it did happen, one had to make sacrifices of penance to ask excuse to the spirits. But we note that today this practice is current, and nothing is done to correct these abnormal practices ... that is the reason for all these problems ...” (Zanen 1996: 115).

4 The afterbirth or placenta (*naaba*) is also returned to *nen lebende*, by burying it in the earth.

5 In the 1980s, in Kaya, a man called “Apollo” had left home and stayed away so long that his family assumed he had died; they organised his “funéraille,” distributed his properties, and his wife married another man. When he reappeared one day, his family considered him a ghost,

to leave definitively this world) of a family head, the latter is represented by a small girl, and a deceased monarch by a chief-woman (*na poka*). A victim of an accident on the road or in the bush (becoming a *kumiri*, or “red dead man”) is not taken home, but buried at the spot. He does not become an ancestor but a roaming spirit in the bush, etc.

The mirrored, “opposite,” invisible world of *nen lebende* is imagined as a dry, undivided, sterile, androgynous environment without social connections. There, everything is fleeting and quickly evaporates; beings may walk upside down or backwards and are associated with madness. Such mental disturbances are also often ascribed to persons acting as mediums. These include healers and diviners (*bagba*), consultants of *kinkirsi* spirits (*kinkir bagba*), sorcerers and witches (*sonyebea*), and earth priests (*tengsobramba*). Roaming through the wild nature “in search of water” they imitate the “thirsty” ancestors in need of libation offerings (cf. Zanen 1996, chapter 4).

The “other side” may appear in daily life, too. Ordinary or sexually oriented dreams, dreaming of having intercourse with a ghost (*génie, zina*), telepathy etc. are manifestations of the invisible world *nen lebende*. So is the custom of administering an enema (*yaamde*) in the anus of a baby with ingredients from the “brousse” to transfer to it the properties of strong, aggressive or clever animals such as elephants, lions or foxes.

The *cyclical movement* of passing from the one world into the other and back is the condition for human reproduction and food security, hence for the continuation of society. The so-called occult represents half of the human condition, as it were.

The separate but interconnected mirrored worlds existing side by side – the one visible and differentiated, the other invisible and undifferentiated – is the most pronounced expression of duality in *Moose* culture. On second thought, every phenomenon in one of the worlds appears to have a parallel or *double* in the other world. An individual has a *kinkirga* spirit who remains his companion on the “other” side; a person has his own star in the sky which can be caught; and every person has his *siiga* (plural *siise*) – his double or life force, which he carries along and which determines his vitality. This force may sometimes weaken and must then be reinforced with “medicines” (*tiim*).

belonging to “the other side,” a living dead, a zombie. Thereupon Apollo became mad and went about through life naked and unshaved, his lair being on a rubble heap near the fuel station at the fringe of town. He was called Apollo, after an American space-rocket launched in that period. Unlike Apollo, a real dead person may be reincarnated in his or her offspring (segde, lit. meeting, namely between the (dead) person parting and the (living) one arriving).

If the *siiga* leaves the body of a sleeping person and comes into conflict with other wandering *siise* this person runs the risk to die. Sorcerers and witches “steal” and “eat” *siise* of children after having transformed them into meat, whereupon the children may die as well.

Thinking in dualistic structures implies the importance of equilibrium or stability. When borders are crossed, or dual categories are mixed, such an equilibrium threatens to get lost or the borders between the categories become blurred. At that moment an ambiguous, anomalous and potentially dangerous situation emerges. The society will develop counterforces in order to redress such an anomalous state, thereby neutralising danger. To that end the conceptual order may be repaired by social control, by ritual procedures with which ancestors are usually concerned, or by magic and secret ritual. Magic (*wak*, *tiim*) is applied to reveal anomalous or ambiguous situations, on the one hand, and to protect persons who find themselves in or bring themselves into such situations, on the other. A *tiim soba* is a “healer,” in every sense of the word. One such corrective mechanism, called *yu’nnigri* (“to administer, to let drink”), is applied during a public happening after many children in the village have died. The suspected culprits, usually women, are made to drink a certain potion (*korbo*, *tinssé*, *zanguéogo*) to let them confess having “eaten” the children by means of witchcraft (*soinyan*). During such occasions, after having drunk the potion certain women indeed begin to confess the deed and even mention the names of the children they have “eaten.” Such “guilty” women may be chased from the village – and sometimes even from their father’s *buudu*-lineage. Certain drinks may also be used to neutralise or remove people’s witchcraft power. In the case of serious crimes suspects may be brought before an earthshrine (*tengkugri*) where they are made to drink a beverage to find the culprit. If the guilty person still denies having committed the crime he or she is expected to die very soon, whereas the innocent suspect will survive (see also Mutaru 2019).

In states of transgression or mixture of categories the dynamics of society reveal themselves. Some people find themselves temporarily in a more or less delicate, potential state of transgression (soldiers, hunters, gold- and grave diggers, honey gatherers, travellers, residing in the domain of *brousse* or earth spirits),⁶ and some institutional actions are conditioned by transgression. Although the society is dependent on these people or actions, people remain uneasy and wary, thus expressing, intuitively, a cultural value. It will always be tried to fit in the existing order all changes from “outside,” such as the physical

6 Birds are sometimes also suspect and distrusted as they cross the borders between *brousse* and village and may carry things from “there” to the village.

consequences of climate change, macro economic or political changes, the state in general, contact with other cultures, technical, organisational or social innovations, and those from “inside” the society, such as the changing behaviour of youths as a consequence of modern education.

It is not surprising that agriculture, which implies climate (rain, wind), sky and earth, human agency, fertility, food and drink, survival and death etc. is anchored in a complex socio-political, worldly and other-worldly, physical and metaphysical, and magical complex of procedures and actions, expression of the dualistic *roogm miki* or “tradition” (see Zahan 1975; Zanen 1996; and particularly Luning 1997).⁷

Conceptions of Development⁸

According to the “logic of the village,” “development” is perceived by rural Moose as an idea (a top-down idea, as it may appear) “coming from outside.” In this context a conceptual opposition is relevant, namely that between “things of the Moose” (*mo tedo*), and “things of foreigners, strangers, whites” (*nasara tedo*). *Nasara tedo* is associated with everything which is not originally Moose and which is therefore not intelligible and controllable in accordance to the Moose system of thought; it is potentially threatening and should be approached carefully. It is not necessarily bad or disapprovable, but it remains to be seen how it may be matched with *mo tedo*. Thus, certain wells are *mo tedo* as special sacrifices were performed for them. In these wells no rubber buckets (being made from lorry tyres typically *nasara tedo*) may be used. In marriage transactions all money (*nasara tedo*) must be replaced by cowries (*mo tedo*), the traditional means of transaction.⁹ The chieftaincy’s village quarter being the “village of power” (*na tenga*) and as such *mo tedo par excellence* should not host the village development association, as “a thing of the whites,” quite *nasara tedo*.

What one observes is not so much a prevailing conservatism or a rejection of modern elements as such, but rather a fear of losing one’s “traditional” way of life following a mixing with or contamination by new foreign

7 This is the reason why agricultural development agents are often confronted with unwillingness or reserve when they advise or propose to “improve” agricultural techniques.

8 See also Zanen (2016).

9 Locally dug up gold, or money derived from the sale of gold (originally the ownership of chthonic powers), being without generative power, bring bad luck without the proper sacrifices, and no marriage should be contracted with such money (see Luning 2009: 118 who cites Katja Werthmann 2003).

elements. A typical example is described in *Things Fall Apart*, a novel by the Nigerian Nobel Prize winner Chinua Achebe (1958) about what happened in his village after the arrival of a colonial administration and Christian missionaries. At first, the chief manages to resist these forces successfully, but then he notices that his children become influenced by them. What then happens is that the traditional system no longer seems to work, the hidden forces, patriarchal authority, all “things fall apart.” A local system of values and its logic cannot be changed easily: the mixing of local and foreign elements leads to ambiguity, a non-desirable and potentially dangerous, “infertile” situation.

In politics nowadays, there are also two forms of power: the traditional power reserved for “the people of power” (*mo naam*), and the foreign “power of strangers” (*nasar naam*). The latter does not stem from God and can be acquired by anybody. During Burkina Faso’s revolution (1983-1987), in many villages the “people of the earth” (*niononse*) obtained modern power through the CDR (*Comité de Défence de la Révolution*). This created power conflicts in villages, where “development” activities came to a standstill. This situation was aggravated since official government slogans advocated “down with feudalism,” claiming that “chiefs don’t exist.”

With foreign forms of power, the traditional ruling elite maintains an ambivalent relationship. On the one hand, these forms are a threat to them, but on the other, they represent a reality that can no longer be denied. Only a compromise might turn such a situation into an advantage. This is the reason why traditional chiefs nowadays venture into national politics, and why educated civil servants are elected as village chiefs, since they know the functioning of an administration that can be rendered in favour of the village. Such cases show how the village, in a careful way, begins to interact with elements from outside, thereby accommodating two systems of meaning (Zanen 1996, 2016).¹⁰

In this perspective, “development” as the totality of ideas and measures introduced by the outside world concerns the interaction between what is their “own” (*mo tedo*) and what is “foreign” (*nasara tedo*) – a less top-down, more realistic conception of “development” (Zanen 1996). If proven advantageous, foreign elements such as innovations in the form of techniques,

10 National politics (the republican, presidential system) in Burkina Faso of course do not follow the Moose procedures in presidential succession. However, in times of trouble, Moose presidents seek the consent of the Mooro Naba, the supreme Moose sovereign, in an effort to “reconcile” *nasar naam* and *mo naam*. This relationship deserves further study.

ways of acting, and new forms of organisation may be incorporated in the society – if necessary, in an adapted form or with another significance (Boiral et al. 1985; Olivier de Sardan 1995). During such processes adaptations will take place in social life. Certain innovations will be valued by one network of actors, others by other networks. The outcome of the process of “development” is therefore dependent on the power struggle dealing with conflicting interpretations in the socio-political “arena” of the rural areas. The local assessment of foreign elements, the attribution of meaning to them, and their possible adoption, is determined by the impact they have on the social and cosmic orders and their interrelations.

The spoils of “development” usually go to the dominant elite, unless a real power struggle results into a “revolutionary” outcome. In such processes of political reinterpretation, the actors are players in a social-hierarchical field. Here the visible social world interacts with the invisible world. The latter is controlled by the Divine power from above and the ancestral powers from below (ancestors), and influenced by the powers of spirits and sorcerers from “the other side.” The field is preserved and controlled by a rural gerontocracy acting as the defenders of tradition. For an individual, operating in such an environment is not a relaxed affair. One has to be careful in what one undertakes, one is suspicious, always reckoning with danger, since, as a saying goes, “in confidence treason is born.” Danger may come from many sides, even from one’s own family. To become a witch means that a family member or beloved one has to die. The action of a witch always costs a human life.

Rather than due to coincidence or bad luck, set-backs or misfortune are always suspected to result from malign forces at work, from conspiring “enemies” or plotting jealous family members. Unexplained deaths always need a cause, and the cause may be detected in the social environment of the deceased, to be discovered by consulting “those who can see.”

For this system to function, its inherent oppositions, duality and ambiguity require mediation. Side by side with earth priests, ancestors, maternal uncles, a *yanenga* (“grandchild of the lineage”) – all being mediators in traditional contexts – shrewd individuals emerge as mediators in the new, non-traditional contexts of colonialism and development cooperation (Olivier de Sardan 1995; Bierschenk et al. 2000).

If there had been no “translators” to mediate between the reality, the language, and the logic of foreigners and those of local people, communication between the two interest groups would lead nowhere. Both parties having different cultural backgrounds, interests and intentions, hence not knowing exactly

each other's strategy, act according to different systems of meaning. These semantic differences informing their thoughts and actions open the way to ruse and cunning (*silim*). In misty, ambiguous fields of action, these lead to informal communications facilitating treachery and corruption. The ruse is mastered by people who "own cunning" (*silim soba*) that is traditionally used as conflict management in the community – good chiefs dispose of *silim*. Such a mediator or trickster acts in situations of ambiguity. He may profit from his acts of manipulating adversaries or opposing parties; he may be a crook who escapes with the booty, but he is not considered wicket or a thief (Laurent 1998). The most famous trickster known in West Africa is Wangrin, who figures in a novel by Amadou Hampate Bâh (1973). He acts as an interpreter for colonial French district commissioners and local subjects (thereby cheating both parties). Another trickster is the West African culture hero Leuk-le-Lièvre (Senghor and Sadji 1953).

In development cooperation the ruse or the trick often plays a role in the communication between western-oriented donor agencies and local communities or even governments. In order to receive the maximal fruits of development the beneficiaries tend to keep up the façade that they respect the donor's rules but meanwhile pursue quite different goals and hidden agendas (cf. Laurent 1998; Zanen 2016). Many recipients of aid (not all, of course) do not attach a moral value to funds as gifts, neither do they feel bound by such standards as "good governance," "democracy," "transparency" or "accountability." Ultimately, these norms and values are "things of the whites," their reality, language and logic, *nasara tedo*, something to do with the white's *mission civilisatrice* for which many rural *Moose* do not feel accountable. They are expressions in the donor language, frequently invoked as mantras that are devoid of meaning. In many areas of rural Africa such is the attitude toward the public sphere or public goods and means in general.

Penetration of the "Village" into the "City"

Especially youths have reasons to try to escape from "tradition" (*roogm miki*), to run away from the power of chiefs, from sorcery and the wrath of ancestors, from forced conformation to village laws¹¹ and the lack of freedom. This is often linked to economic pursuits. A distinction must be made between a "wealthy person" (*ra kaagre*) in the village context and an "owner of money" (*ligdi soba*) or "big man" (*nim bedre*). The wealthy

11 Kaboré (1985:16) refers to a *Moose* song expressing *roogm miki* principles: "celui qui provoque, celui qui provoque (...) aura de nos nouvelles, Piuu Piuu" (will be killed by gun shots).

person has obtained his riches from within the Moose value system. He is considered a wise person, respected by people, who has obtained his wealth thanks to God. He is also feared by chiefs since he himself is called chief by the people. An “owner of money,” on the other hand, is a “nouveau riche.” He is materially rich but not necessarily respected. The term *ligdi soba* refers to the material side alone, with the unspoken thought that this form of affluence may turn out to be volatile.¹² The only way to legitimise the riches he obtained is in rendering them social by distributing them to lineage members and supporting networks so as to show his generosity. If he does not act in this way, he will become the object of sorcery, practiced by order of jealous supporters among his kin, neighbours, friends. As Geschiere (1997) repeatedly writes: sorcery is the night-side of kinship. That is one of the reasons, by the way, why *Moose* have more confidence in friends than in brothers.

The force of tradition, and the danger of death or insanity from sorcery and witchcraft,¹³ lead people to distance themselves from their village and even from their relatives. This may be achieved by converting to another religion, especially Pentecostal religion, in order to escape from the wrath of one’s ancestors and evil spirits. It may also be done by migrating to destinations far away from one’s kin. Such destinations are for instance the cocoa plantations in Ivory Coast (where *Moose* are the main labour force) or to other African countries, Europe, the United States or China. Many inhabitants of Burkina Faso (*Burkinabè*) who began a promising enterprise at home eventually moved away in such a manner. During the period of my fieldwork at least two very successful businessmen who had stayed “at home” went broke because of “unexplainable” reasons.

The ideal of ambitious villagers, especially educated youths, is to become “urban” or “global,” and to transcend the images of “farmer” and “villager” which in every respect contrast with “modernity,” obstructing both individual accumulation and personal development. But adoption of “modernity” does not automatically bring freedom in the course of personal development. Even if a certain degree of affluence has been attained, the social security of the lineage is not easily replaced by the certainty of “modernity.” The latter would imply that the state creates anonymous chances for individuals. But the

12 Like wealth obtained from the sale of gold, see Luning (2009).

13 *Nionionce* or *tengbiise* (“people of the earth”) distinguish two kinds of “witches” – *sada* and *soinyan*: both kill but only *soinyan* also “eats” (although this may differ per region). Inevitably, becoming a witch involves the death of a beloved person or a family member. To retract from witchcraft may result in madness.

state, in spite of pretending to be modern, hardly meets the expectations of being the carrier of such “modernity.” Instead, with continuing liberalisation, the erstwhile state-functions were replaced in education and healthcare by paid services, either officially established as such or through corruption by government employees. This has resulted in the so-called *state cannibalism* of a state that illegally exploits citizens (Bayart 1989; Geschiere 1997).

The “privatisation of the state,” as experienced by the poor in the rural, the semi-urban, and urban areas, has prevented the building up of a sense of security, needed by individuals in order to invest in socio-economic development. Most poor immigrants trudge ahead in the informal sector, “fending for themselves” (*ils se débrouillent*) on subsistence or survival level, living in unsurveyed (*non lotis*) areas which can be expropriated by the state at any moment. Among many of the immigrants, ambitions have dried up and frustrations have led to feelings of despair, fear, suspicion and jealousy – if not to drug addiction and criminality. This has brought people who have not found security with the state (which seems to be reserved for the rich and mighty) to look for the protection that is within everyone’s reach: their urban relatives and Big Men. Consequently, this has led to a farewell to the “modern” logic so dearly hoped for. Instead, one returns to magical thinking, to the reality, language, and logic of the village, and to the dependence on the very symbolic system maintained by gifts, debts, and manipulation, from which one wanted to escape. This return to the logic of the village in cities, whether or not in combination with the “modern” one, is a typical characteristic of the contemporary “modernity” of the urban poor. It means a return to traditional certainties where “development” has provided none. Once this phase has become reality, socio-economic accumulation is realised by an “economy of envy,” in which the success of the one is considered as a loss or a defeat of the other. Henceforward, there is a competition between jealous fellowmen in accumulating riches *through* competition or secret warfare, based on the accumulation of magical strength and power. Let us recall the case of an interweaving of the traditional and modern world in urban sorcery as cited at the beginning of this text. Then the woman explained that she invokes chthonic forces through so-called earthshrines (*tengkuga*), which are the gateway to the world of ancestors, death and bloodsacrifice, and – in the case of witches – even human “sacrifice.”¹³

In witchcraft a transformation takes place whereby the eating of meat (*nen neere*) is replaced by the eating of souls or life forces (*nen lebende*). Therefore, “state cannibalism” does not merely refer to an economic exploitation of the poor by state elites, but to the devouring of the “life force” (*siiga*) of society.

Sorcery and the protection against it create vicious circles of fear, distrust, suspicion, revenge, rumours, and accusations. It leads to a social crisis whereby social relations are guided by secret, silent, magical warfare, and the risk of aggression and violence. A balance or reciprocity is sought in the hope of one's own sorcery harming the other in occult battles.

In this way the entrepreneurial climate is poisoned. Economic risers, ideally assumed to be the driving forces of the economy, may become hostages in networks of competitors and dependents who are often kin. They do everything to make their successful relatives respect their lineage obligations, and thus to redistribute their "foreign" wealth, a forceful levelling mechanism.¹⁴ Those who manage to survive such a competition become Big Men, the "nouveaux riches" of the country. And the higher one rises economically, the more one manages to profit from what the state has to offer, such as well-paid jobs, political positions and tax and energy bill exemptions. Such successful people seem to privatise the state and its laws. In this climate one observes that professional mediators or middlemen in the service sector such as police, judges, lawyers, house agents, insurance brokers, and even bankpersonnel may form cliques who protect one another in exploiting the less educated who seek their help. In this way brokers become tricksters. And where do the victims seek refuge to level their misery? In urban lottery, and in a return to the logic of the village. But in cities the sense of "community" is lost, and so are the corrective mechanisms or "checks and balances." Individualism is on the rise, as is evident from the efforts of accumulating wealth and becoming powerful, whereby sorcery and witchcraft are often deemed indispensable.

In times of trouble, salaried people may spend a substantial part of their income on occult practices. Jealousy among colleagues, public rumours or accusations of corruption, rivalry in love affairs, or ineffective modern medicines can all be a reason to consult a diviner (*bagba*). This may require making regular trips to one's village of origin. It is said that in these rural areas live the real *Moose*. They still live in equilibrium with "nature" in its transcendent meaning, and they derive their strength from *roogm miki*. Detecting business profits, such diviners (*charlatans*, or *gri-gri-tiers* as they are called by educated people), or similar agents of magic have come to the cities to be "consulted." Here the markets with natural ingredients used for all kinds of magic are expanding – one can earn a good income with this business. Spirits and *génies*, *djinns* or *fantômes* roaming the dark places at

14 For the terms "levelling," "accumulation" and "circularity" in this respect, see Geschiere (1997, chapter 1).

night have also installed themselves in the city. In this way, too, the “village” has penetrated the city. The borders between the two have faded, and the “village versus brousse” and *nen neere* – *nen lebende* opposition likewise.

The urban socio-economic dualism of Burkina Faso, with its extreme contrasts of rich versus poor, has transformed itself into a new, national, dualistic “culture of modernity,” of interacting visible and invisible worlds, in which politicians, even high officials in the administration like ministers and presidents, regularly visit their “marabout” for spiritual support and physical protection (Kourouma 1998).¹⁵ It is not surprising that sorcery and witchcraft have become part of the political economy of the “western-style” state, for the traditional political system is closely linked with the occult world, the chiefly power (*naam*) being of heavenly origin and its execution legitimised by the powers of the earth. To obtain and to maintain power and wealth needs the constant crossing of metaphysical borders. In this imagery witchcraft and sorcery fit well.

Nen neere and *nen lebende* have merged. The correcting mechanisms that should serve to separate the two spheres appear to have weakened in the urban environment. This kind of societal evolution has inspired the Booker Price winning Nigerian author Ben Okri, in his novel *The Famished Road* (1991), and its successive books *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998), to evoke an imaginary African urban world where the unleashed forces of the mirrored shadow-world have penetrated and mixed with urban life, and the anomalies and ambiguities this has created.¹⁶

Ambiguous Africa

At first, in the West, “the whites” thought that with the dawn of “modern times,” independence, Christianity, development cooperation, modernisation, and globalisation so-called “primitive” customs such as the belief in fetishes, magic, divination, witchcraft, and sorcery would stop or at least diminish, just as happened in the case of local superstitions in

15 After one of the recent *coups d'état* in Burkina Faso (2022), when Paul Henri Bamiba ousted Roc Marc Kabore, all ministers were dismissed, charged of corruption, and forbidden to leave the country. Commenting on these measures people said: “les poches des marabouts se rempliront d'argent” referring to Big Men trying to save their skin.

16 In cities in Burkina Faso, occasionally, all of a sudden, there are waves of rumours of occult happenings causing general panic: people being decapitated or human skulls dug up from graves as rumours go that *gri-gri-tiers* can fill cranes with gold; or penises all of a sudden shrinking or disappearing altogether (so-called “penis snatching”). These phenomena are known in many regions in Africa (Bonhomme 2012).

Europe. One also expected that “primitive” beliefs would be replaced by western rationality, logic, values and morality. However, in contrast with such western expectations, these customs and beliefs do not disappear.¹⁷ On the contrary, with modernisation and globalisation this mechanism becomes stronger (Geschiere 1997; Ellis 2011; Zanen 2018).¹⁸ Even African expatriates abroad in Europe and the United States are in frequent contact with “marabouts” (residing in Nigeria, Cameroon, New York, Paris, Brussels or Amsterdam) who can be easily reached through modern media. They also consult immigrant spiritual secret societies or spiritual “healers” (*guérisseurs*) who may help in times of trouble, secretly slaughtering sacrificial chickens in parks, polders or behind apartment buildings.

Africa lives in two worlds in which “the things of us” and “the things of foreigners” have gradually merged into a hybrid whole. As such we may qualify the ambiguity that emanates from two contrasting logics, or systems of thought that exist side by side while overlapping and merging at the same time. Modern, “western” power relations, western law and juridical procedures, accessibility to modern media, infinite riches and political power of origins often nebulous to the public, lifestyles of the privileged elite (which match the whites/*nasara* worlds viewed on TV and videos), and modern means of communication intermingle in the cities with an undercurrent of “tradition” and customary law (*roogm miki*). The relation between countryside and city thus acquires a new dimension. The mechanisms of the village – the “things of us” – are mobilised to stand up against the new urban reality. In the countryside contestant parties in cases of succession, land ownership, or inheritance play off national law against customary law. In connection with the preservation of *Moose* values in times of change, Pacere (1984: 41) remarks that “even when the woman stumbles she will never fall on her genitals” (*paag lakr kon lub a kinde*). One also says: “the medicine bag will ever remain to contain a medicine.” In other words, “modernity” implies “tradition.” On the other hand, *roogm miki* is not invariable either. The *Moose* “tradition” is not uniform, it varies from place to place under the influence of diverging local histories and experiences.

17 The standard theme of novels written by African authors in the 1960s-1970s concerns African students who, in Europe, have tasted Western values, return to their motherland full of ideals, but who are “at home” gradually corrupted and sucked back into a parallel system of secret powers, corruption and nepotism.

18 With Burkina Faso on the brink of political collapse in 2023 (one third of the territory being presently controlled by “jihadists”), and social and economic tensions rising, it can be expected that the influence of the occult on daily life has increased.

This article was meant to show how the relation of *cross-fertilisation* between “tradition” and “modernity” works out in rapidly changing Burkina Faso, and how from this relationship new meanings emerge, giving direction to cultural and social development.

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TOWARDS DECOLONISING AFRICAN POLITICAL VALUES: A CRITIQUE OF THE DOMINANT POLITICAL VIEWS AND PRACTICES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: Since independence, the political systems in African states have been western in character, and have, consequently, failed to synchronise with their peculiar realities, resulting in political crises, coups, and developmental woes. Nigeria – Africa's largest democracy – is one of the states replete with colonially induced contradictions, controversies and developmental conundrum, and is the central focus of this paper. Using desk review of qualitative data, the paper establishes that Western political values operate more as liabilities than assets in Africa, hence the need for complete decolonisation – a multifaceted project that transcends the transfer of sovereignty. In line with a scholarly tradition that advocates the resurgence of functional African values, the paper makes a case for reforming African states' structures, political systems, and economic systems as the surest route to completing the decolonisation project.

Keywords: *decolonisation, colonialism, political values, democracy, Africa*

Introduction

The end of the second world war in 1945, the establishment of the United Nations (UN) shortly after that, and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 were significant forces that blew the wind of freedom at a time most African territories were being colonised by Western powers. Consequently, the various nationalist struggles in the colonies became realistic drives towards political independence, and by the late 1960s, most of them had achieved it. This development, however, did not

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imply that the African continent or any country therein was decolonised, given that the multi-layered and multifaceted phenomenon of decolonisation transcends the mere transfer of political power (Collins 2017).

During colonisation, African political values gradually eroded while Western values got fully entrenched in Africa. And six decades after independence, the continent is still entangled in the shadow of the West politically, economically, educationally, and mentally. Only a few of the 54 sovereign states in it today do not denigrate their traditional forms of governance in favour of some unrefined forms of Western democracy. Yet, the continent is increasingly bedevilled by intractable socio-economic challenges as development continues to evade it. Of the 31 countries with “low development” in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development index (2022), only four are not African. Conversely, no African country is among the 66 countries with “very high development.” Ironically, Africa is materially the richest continent on earth, boasting about 30% of the world’s natural resources (Irrum 2023).

International developmental initiatives have over the years offered little, if any hope of changing the fortunes of Africa. One of them was the 15 years (2001–2015) of collaboration among international actors to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Africa failed to halve its poverty levels in line with MDG 1, for example, while all other continents did. And a similar fate awaits the continent with regards to the succeeding Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as most of the states in it remain severely off track five years to the target year (2030). Their presence in the bottom of the UN 2022 world’s SDG index is conspicuous, with Nigeria, despite being Africa’s largest economy, ranked 139th among 163 countries (Sachs et al. 2022).

In light of the continuous effort by African leaders to strengthen their political institutions towards sustainable development, Mutua (2016) decried their persistent importation of western developmental pathways. He asserted that since development is not a linear process amenable to reproduction, the “transplanted models of development and politics have fared very poorly in Africa,” and “there is ample evidence, empirical and otherwise, that the traditional tools of the formulaic liberal state are not a panacea for Africa’s ills” (Mutua 2016: 166). Africa’s continuous romance with Western values is simply a consequence of incomplete decolonisation, while its future lies in home-grown solutions (Obijiofor 2001).

Questions have been, and are being raised, on how Africa can complete

the decolonisation project. There are divergent views among pan-Africanists on this, which have birthed two broad approaches. The first is advocacy for a total restoration to pure African values, while the second is advocacy for a sort of hybridity. Advocates of the first approach simply propose Afrocentrism which, in the words of Connell (2018), is the “alibi for Eurocentrism” (Connell 2018: 404). The second approach requires the integration of African indigenous values with functional Western values. The present article is guided by the second approach in agreement with the belief that total restoration to the past “would both be unrealistic and retrogressive” (Columbus 2014: 216).

Nigeria is one of the African countries replete with colonially induced contradictions, paradoxes, controversies and developmental woes, and thus direly in need of home grown solutions. As subsequently analysed, the country’s delicate structure and relentless experiment with unrefined Western political systems have made its large human and material resources – the largest in the continent – the basis for persistent crises that lead to a harrowing political journey.

Decolonisation and African Political Values: A Conceptual and Historical Overview

Decolonisation

Since the winds of freedom blew in the 1940s, discourse on the term decolonisation has garnered the interest of not a few scholars. In one extreme, Pillay (2013) captured what he termed its “most provocative formulation,” being the view of a pro-colonialism scholar who dismissed some decolonisation effort as “a dangerous call to participate in applied nationalism” (para. 11). Nationalism in this vein is viewed as an illegitimate struggle against colonial legacies. Indeed, Gilley (2017)¹ among others believes colonialism is a legitimate project for emancipation. Such a view is rooted in the perceived superiority of the colonisers to the colonised.

In the other extreme, decolonisation from an anti-colonial perspective is defined with varying degrees of complexity. The simplest and of course shallowest of them is its conception as independence from colonialism obtained through the transfer of political power, or simply put, “the transfer

1 This article was withdrawn by the publishers due to the controversy it generated.

of sovereignty from colonizer to colonized” (Smith and Jeppesen 2017: 2). This would mean all African countries, with the exception of two disputed territories (Somaliland and Western Sahara), have been decolonised. However, as Crozier (1964) has observed, merely conferring sovereignty on a country does not make it truly independent, because colonisers have other means of retaining control over colonised sovereign countries. Since independence, there has been a complex system of knowledge and power relations between Africa and the West that perpetuates the incompleteness of Africa’s decolonisation.

With regards to the knowledge relation, Kari (2023) observed that Western values and ideas have continued to exert dominance on African formal educational system to the detriment of indigenous ones. The power relation between African countries and the West is rooted in lopsided economic partnership. The West, being highly industrialised and heavily reliant on Africa’s natural resources, provide “aids” to Africa, thus paying for the pipers and consequently dictating the economic and political tunes. According to Eurostat (2023), the developing countries (most of which are African) have been at the receiving end of financial flows from the European Union (EU) for a total volume of €111.3 billion in 2021. In light of these facts, decolonisation in African context is equated with de-westernisation.

Beyond the simplistic view of decolonisation, several anti-colonial thinkers have offered more profound conceptions that illuminate its multidimensional nature. For wa Thiong’o (1986: 87), decolonisation transcends political kingdom to include the entire realm of language, thoughts, and memory, necessitating “the search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe.” Smith (1999: 98) conceptualised it as reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems and methodologies, arguing that it centres on “the long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power.” Similarly, Césaire (1972[1955]: 73) viewed it as a process of radical humanism that restores dignity and agency to the colonised. These definitions reveal decolonisation as an ongoing, comprehensive process that addresses psychological liberation, cultural reclamation, epistemological sovereignty, and structural transformation – in stark contrast to the shallow notion that focuses solely on the transfer of sovereignty while leaving colonial economic relations, cultural dependencies, and internalised hierarchies intact.

In all, the conception of decolonisation by Fanon (1963) is adopted as

a working definition in the present article. He viewed it as a process that involves various programmes geared towards de-centring colonial rationality, structures, institutions, knowledge systems, and worldview. Thus, it is a revolutionary movement that aims to restore the lost dignity of Africa and its people (Sankara 2007). This involves “the abolition of all prejudice, of any superiority complex in the minds of the coloniser, and also of any inferiority complex in the mind of the colonised” (Senghor 1957, cited in Smith and Jeppesen 2017: 4). Rather than an event like independence, it is “an ongoing process of struggle across a range of fronts’ to which intellectuals – African and non-African alike – have significant roles to play” (Creary 2012: 7). This implies an ongoing struggle against entrenched Eurocentric dominance in African education, economics, culture, and politics since colonial legacies persist through marginalised indigenous knowledge, neocolonial economic ties, and governance structures misaligned with African realities. Intellectuals play a key role in this struggle by challenging colonial assumptions, recovering suppressed African epistemologies, and re-imagining institutions to reflect local contexts, making decolonisation a continuous process of intellectual and structural transformation. Even Ethiopia and Liberia, being the only African countries not physically colonised, are part and parcel of the process (Chitonge 2018).

African Political Values

The hybridity of African institutions emanating from the overlap of African traditional and colonial values led many intellectuals to call on the continent to culturally, politically, and economically define itself (Chirisa et al. 2014). While most Africans have embraced Western values as the necessary consequence of colonialism, African traditional values refer to the social ideals that pertain to and are indigenous to African people (Columbus 2014). African political values, therefore, refer to essential political principles and ideals indigenous to the African people. These are remarkably diverse, reflecting the continent’s vast cultural, geographic, and historical variations. While generalisation must be approached with caution, several core political principles can be identified across many traditional African societies. In order to engage these values analytically, it is helpful to distinguish them into the following key typological categories that intersect and interact dynamically within African political life:

i. Institutional Values

These involve the structures and frameworks through which power is organised and exercised. A prominent example is the concept of consensus-building and communal decision-making that appears in various forms – such as the council-based governance of the Berbers, the village councils of West Africa, and the age-set systems in East Africa. Many societies practiced forms of participatory governance where elders, clan representatives, or community members had meaningful roles in political processes, and even – where centralized kingdoms existed (like in the Oyo Empire or the Ashanti Kingdom) – institutions such as councils of elders or checks on royal power were integral. African political systems were thus majorly built around kinship and communalism. In contrast to the Western notion of individuals' political and social rights as democratic ideals, African values de-emphasised individualism and promoted collectivism (Samuel and Joshua 2010). The principle of *Ubuntu* (“I am because we are”) in southern Africa exemplifies the African communitarian ethic that prioritises social harmony and collective well-being over rigid individualism. Accordingly, familyhood and brotherhood dominated the decolonisation ideas of Ahmed Sekou Toure, Kwame Nkrumah, and Julius Nyerere among other pan-Africanists. In his decolonisation project as the first president of independent Tanzania, Nyerere experimented with what he termed *Ujamaa* or “African socialism” (Nyerere 1971). The *Ujamaa* policy was however, a “heroic failure” – heroic because it was one of Africa's few home-grown routes to development, and a failure because it did not yield the fruit of development and was revoked by succeeding political regimes (Mazrui 2005 cited in Kelter 2018: 12).

In his exposition of African political structure, Idang (2015) observed that family is the first point of the hierarchy (2015: 104-5). Family heads represent their families in all political matters while village and clan heads represent their respective villages and clans in the ruling council superintended by the paramount ruler. And, in spite of the totalitarian nature of most paramount rulers, there were usually institutionalised means of checks and balances. According to Antia (2005: 145), these were enforced by various societal norms and values through secret cults, chief priests and king makers among others. In the Oyo Empire, for example, checks and balances on the paramount ruler (*Alaafin*) were maintained through three main institutions (Johnson 1921). The legislative council (*Oyo Mesi*), led by the *Bashorun*, could compel the *Alaafin* to abdicate by presenting an empty calabash or parrot's eggs. The secret society (*Ogboni*), composed of respected elders, safeguarded justice and religious order, acting as a moral check on both the

Alaafin and the Oyo Mesi. Meanwhile, the army commander (*Aare Ona Kakanfo*) operated independently to prevent the *Alaafin* from monopolising military power. Together, these bodies ensured a balance between royal authority, governance, religion, and military strength.

ii. Normative Values

These encompass the ethical and philosophical principles that guide political behaviour and relations. A few examples are justice (*ubuntu* or *omoluabi*), solidarity, reciprocity, respect for elders, communal responsibility, and the moral economy of leadership. These values prioritise community welfare over individual gains and offer a relational approach to authority, where governance intertwined political authority with moral and spiritual stewardship with leaders seen as custodians rather than sovereigns. Thus, normative values frame legitimacy – rulers are expected to embody wisdom, justice, moral uprightness, and service to the collective, or risk losing the support of their people. In practice, this varied significantly across regions and societies. Centralised kingdoms like those of Mali and Asante developed complex administrative hierarchies, while decentralised societies like the Igbo operated through more diffuse consensus systems.

iii. Procedural Values

These relate to the processes and practices through which decisions are made and power is exercised. Traditional African systems often employed consensus rather than majority rule, reflecting an emphasis on social harmony and collective agreement. Processes such as the *palaver* (open forum for deliberation) or *indaba* (consultative assembly) demonstrate a procedural commitment to inclusive dialogue and conflict resolution. Therefore, in decision making, consultation and consensus are highly essential principles to which various organs must conform. All people, directly or through their representatives, take part in the political process. And the paramount ruler in centralised systems is always duty bound to execute the will of the people based on the trusteeship principle that ensures his accountability to them (Awoniyi 2015: 9). In post-colonial democratic settings, however, these procedural values have struggled to find expression within electoral politics, which often prioritise speed and finality over communal deliberation.

iv. Cosmological Values

These are derived from African metaphysical and spiritual understandings of power, nature, and society. Many African societies view political authority as embedded in a cosmological order, where rulers are accountable not only to their subjects but also to ancestral spirits or divine forces. Land, for instance, is often considered sacred – not merely a commodity but a site of ancestral presence and spiritual continuity. This cosmological worldview influences governance values such as stewardship, sustainability, and intergenerational responsibility. It also informs African critiques of neo-liberal land commodification and environmental degradation.

Methodology

Desk review of qualitative data is employed in the present article. Drawing inspiration from Smith (1999, 2021), our research resists reproducing colonial epistemes by privileging African intellectual traditions and critical interpretations of Nigeria's post-colonial trajectory. Sources were carefully selected based on their relevance to themes such as political sovereignty, land governance, colonial and post-colonial statecraft, and indigenous systems of authority. Priority was given to peer-reviewed academic literature, policy briefs, and reports authored by African scholars and institutions. Colonial and mainstream policy documents were not excluded but treated as texts of critique rather than neutral repositories of fact. This approach aligns with Smith's advocacy for centring the margins and resisting the dominant narrative structures that have historically silenced indigenous voices.

The scope of literature reviewed spans the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence periods of Nigerian history. Emphasis was placed on understanding the political and social transitions across the country's four republics, as well as the ruptures introduced by successive military regimes. The review drew from multiple disciplines including history and political science in order to identify and synthesise multidimensional themes. This interdisciplinary approach enabled a richer contextualisation of how political values and governance converged in ways that marginalise local agency.

Data from the literature were synthesized using a decolonial analytical lens. The process involved identifying recurring themes through thematic coding. A comparative reading method was employed to juxtapose the state's post-colonial practices with indigenous models of land tenure and

governance. Throughout this process, critical reflexivity was maintained to account for researcher positionality and to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in mainstream scholarship. The resulting synthesis weaves together insights from various sources to construct a historically grounded narrative that not only interrogates the legacy of colonialism but also re-imagines the possibilities of governance rooted in indigenous values and local participation.

Colonial Rule and Its Political Legacies in Africa

In the early 1880s, the African continent was partitioned and taken over by seven foreign powers, namely Germany, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, France, Britain and Italy. After the defeat of Germany in World War I, the treaty of Versailles stripped it of all its colonies, which the League of Nations distributed among the other colonisers – except Namibia, which was given to South Africa. Following World War II, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, Britain and France granted independence to their African colonies, which together accounted for about 80% of all colonised countries on the continent as shown in Table 1

While Britain adopted indirect rule through traditional rulers in their colonies, France adopted direct rule through the policy of assimilation (later replaced with the policy of association). And while Britain administered their colonies as separate entities, France administered theirs as a federation. However, they both ruled with “arrogance” as they strived to degrade not only the culture but also the humanity of Africa (Mazrui 1978: 11). Their only difference in this regard, as Mazrui explained, is that Britain was famous for “racial arrogance” and France for “cultural arrogance.”

Coloniser	Colonies				
	Western Africa	Southern Africa	Central Africa	Eastern Africa	Northern Africa
France	Niger Togo Mali Senegal Benin Burkina Faso Guinea Cote d'Ivoire Mauritania		Gabon Central Africa Cameroon Chad Congo Rep	Comoros Djibouti Madagascar	Algeria Morocco Tunisia
Britain	Nigeria Ghana The Gambia Sierra Leone	South Africa Lesotho Botswana Eswatini		Kenya Malawi Mauritius Seychelles Tanzania Uganda Zambia Zimbabwe Somalia	Egypt Sudan
Belgium			DR Congo	Rwanda Burundi Mozambique	
Spain			Equatorial Guinea		
Portugal	Cape Verde Guinea-Bissau		Angola Sao Tome & Principe		
Italy					Libya

Table 1. African Colonisers and Colonies (Source: Authors' compilation)

In the course of over half a century of colonial rule, the colonies were sufficiently subjected to conceptions of African inferiority in the socio-political sphere among other spheres. The Eurocentric power relation was such that tried to “portray colonialism as a normal form of social relations

between human beings, rather than a system of exploitation and oppression” (Mbembe 2016: 32). Though African nationalists fought this, violently in some cases, and the colonisers eventually left, the following legacies of colonial rule had been too firmly established to be totally uprooted.

Structural Legacies

The sizes of African states represent the most enduring structural legacies of colonialism. They are the result of the elaborate partitioning of the continent and the creation of countries with arbitrarily drawn artificial boundaries. In the words of Ogbunwezeh (2005),

almost all the Modern states in Africa today were built on political ontologies, oozing from this engineered political metaphysic. The people never dialogued their differences as a basis for federating. They never talked to each other about a political union. They woke up one morning, and saw themselves conscripted into geopolitical constructs they neither chose nor bargained for (section 2, para. 6).

For example, as both Britain and France colonised Togoland, the British part of the Togoland was integrated with Ghana. Birmingham (1995) has observed that more than fifty years after colonialism, the boundaries have not much been altered as the now independent Africa has the same shape of the colonial Africa of 1946. These artificial boundaries are the most volatile features of the continent, as they continue to escalate conflicts within and between countries (Asiwaju 1990). This is because,

where Europe attempted to unify those who were different, it sowed the seeds of future separatism... Where Europe divided, it sometimes left behind latent passions for reunification – and political killings at the grassroots level have resulted from such division. In short, balkanization is a breeding-ground for political violence, including the phenomenon of assassination. And balkanization is what Africa is burdened with for the time being (Mazrui 1973: 183).

Epistemic Legacies

After the colonisers brutally conquered Africa, “the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom” (wa Thiong’o 1986: 9). The primary aim of this was to annihilate African indigenous knowledge. And having so succeeded, “on the graveyard of African indigenous knowledges, colonialism planted European memory. The church and the school played a major role in the planting of European memory including imposition of colonial languages” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 24). Over time, being fluent in a colonial language comes to be equated with being educated or intelligent and vice versa.

With few exceptions, all African countries still use colonial languages as their only official languages in schools, governmental and all other formal institutions. In the same vein, a vast majority of African countries have retained their colonial names most of which are portmanteaus originating from the colonial languages. For example, while the name “Nigeria” (coined by a British journalist, Flora Shaw, from the words “Niger” and “area”) was imposed on a colonised entity, all attempts to change it in the over 60 years of Nigeria’s independent existence have been unsuccessful. The most recent attempt speculated on a rather self-imposed colonial name: “United African Republic” – apparently half a dozen of the six. Few countries have, however, succeeded in this venture as shown in Table 2.

Colonial Name	New Name	Year of Change
Gold Coast	Ghana	1957
French Soudan	Mali	1960
Northern Rhodesia	Zambia	1964
Nyasaland	Malawi	1964
Basutoland	Lesotho	1966
Dahomey	Benin	1975
Southern Rhodesia,	Zimbabwe	1980
Upper Volta	Burkina Faso	1984
Swaziland	Eswatini	2018

Table 2. Notable African States’ Old and New Names (Source: Authors’ compilation)

Institutional Dislocations

The epitome of the political legacies of colonialism are the political systems being practised in most African countries. Most of them still practice one of the political systems of the erstwhile colonial masters – the Westminster parliamentary model, the presidential and the premier systems of Britain, France and Belgium respectively. The imposition of these systems in newly independent African states, where traditional political institutions have already been dislocated, made the first generation African nationalist leaders to also denigrate traditional institutions and leaders – whom they saw as stooges of the colonial powers. Today, the only remaining sovereign monarchies in Africa are Lesotho, Morocco, and Eswatini with only Eswatini practicing absolute monarchy. Most of the other countries have persistently reverted to unrefined western political systems after different phases of military administrations.

The series of military coup d'états experienced in Africa over the past 60 years have been partly caused by the lacklustre performance of leaders resulting from the foregoing colonial legacies that formed the ground for intolerable socio-economic and political instability. The most recent countries to experience this are Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, Niger, and Gabon. As the coup in Niger sparked sanctions and threats of military action by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), many observers believed the regional body is only being a puppet of western powers since the coup – which triggered massive jubilation and anti-French protests by Nigerians – is widely regarded as a decolonisation project. However, as witnessed in the past, the military are also bound to derail from their decolonisation mantra.

Shortfalls of the western political values in Nigeria

Western political values have been the garments in which Nigerian democratic dispensations are wrapped. Ajayi and Ojo (2014) likened them to “Siamese twins,” conjoined, but both “uncomfortable and under intense pressure that could result in all forms of hurt, even death” (2014: 107). This is because, like many other political entities in Africa, Nigeria is a creation of colonialism yet to find its ideal political bearing.

The major political entities from which the country was created were the Oyo Empire, the Sokoto caliphate and the Igbo village system. Between 1914, when the first legislative council for the new colony – the Nigerian Council – was established, and 1960, when the country was granted independence,

four constitutions had fully institutionalised western political values and relegated traditional institutions to advisory roles on peripheral matters. These were the Clifford (1923), Richard (1946), Macpherson (1951), and Lyttleton (1954) constitutions, named after the respective colonial administrators of the colony.

Five different post-colonial constitutions have retained the core features of the aforementioned, encapsulated in federalism, electoral system, and party politics. As many scholars have observed, these served as generating a milieu for unending political crises and public sector corruption (Orluwene 2018; Kifordu 2013; Fadakinte 2013). Consequently, the country meandered through the four republics shown in Table 3, as it embarked on a quest to address its “national question” towards achieving sustainable development.

Republic	Started	Ended	Form of government	Head(s) of Government	Constitution
First	1/10/1960	15/01/1966	Parliamentary	Abubakar Tafawa-Balewa	1960 1963
Second	1/10/1979	31/12/1983	Presidential	Shehu Shagari	1979
Third (aborted)	1989	27/08/1993	Diarchy	Ibrahim Babangida	1989
Fourth	29/05/1999	Date	Presidential	Olusegun Obasanjo Umaru Yar’adua Goodluck Jonathan Muhammadu Buhari Bola Tinubu	1999

Table 3. Nigeria’s Democratic Dispensations (1960–2023) (Source: Authors’ compilation)

The First Republic (1960–1966)

Though the independence constitution of 1960 transferred sovereignty from British colonisers to Nigerians, it laid the country on a Western political system – federalism and Westminster parliamentary model. A further drive towards

decolonisation culminated in the first republican constitution of 1963, which stripped the British monarch of the ceremonial headship of Nigeria, thus making the country a republic on 1 October 1963. However, the constitution fell short of addressing the controversies beginning to plunge the country into political convulsion. These controversies were deeply rooted in the unsuitable political system, which birthed a clash of personalities, bitter battles among political parties, and fragmentation (Ayua and Dakas 2005).

Prior to independence, party politics and the creation of three regions (North, West, and East) along the three major ethnic groups (Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo) began and continued to fan the embers of divisional politics even after independence. The Northern People's Congress (NPC), Action Group (AG), and National Council for Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) were the major representatives of the respective regions. The Federal system of government further caused controversies among them, emanating from their unequal resources, revenue allocation, census, representative and distributive federalism, and leadership succession processes among other things (Orluwene 2018: 73). Such crises escalated in a large scale after the federal census of 1962.

Population, being a major determinant of revenue allocation, constituency delimitation, parliamentary seats allocation, boundary adjustments, and developmental projects among other political favours was in high demand by the regions. Most of them were dissatisfied with the 1962 census figures that led to strong dispute and its cancellation. Had the 1963 constitution sufficiently addressed the problems of Nigerian federalism and the "national question," a fresh census conducted in November that same year would have been a course for lesser or no controversy.

The 1963 census was accepted by the NPC-controlled federal government and the Western region. While the Eastern region rejected it in totality, the newly created Mid-western region accepted it only for the sake of national unity. The controversy escalated, was brought to the supreme court by the Eastern region, and ended with a ruling in favour of the federal government. Such merely indicated the extent to which governments across the regions were susceptible to lies, cheatings, and all sorts of manipulations in pursuance of political gain (Falola and Heaton 2008: 168). Another pointer to this was the 1962 leadership-induced AG crisis that resulted in the declaration of the state of emergency in the AG controlled Western region.

In 1964, the federal election conducted once again turned the country into a theatre of political crises. The ruling NPC had formed an alliance with other parties – the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) – which battled the United

Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA), being another alliance involving the opposition AG. The NNA allegedly rigged the election, sparking a large-scale crisis and consequently forming a unity government to calm the storm. The rivalry was shifted to the Western region in 1965, leading to another massive electoral crisis. As Falola and Heaton (2008) asserted, the 1964 and 1965 elections were “severely flawed elections” in which “all kinds of dirty tricks were used by every side” (2008: 159). They further revealed that, “under these circumstances, many Nigerians came to believe that the federal system was dysfunctional and that Nigeria should cease to exist in its present form.”

Amidst the unresolved federal and Western elections crises, the First Republic came to an end on 15 January 1966 when the military took over power. Divisive politics and abuse of public offices were the reasons the junta cited for their intervention, as they referred to the politicians as “enemies,” “political profiteers,” and “swindlers” who have corrupted “the Nigerian political calendar by their words and deeds” (Amaechi 1994: 20). Had the junta been consistent in their coup operations across the regions, they might have been regarded as nationalists who cleaned the country’s Augean stables towards achieving a complete decolonisation. But they, being mostly of Eastern region extraction, failed to kill any politician from the Eastern region after annihilating those of North and West. The coup was thus deemed sectional and eventually seized by the military. Events that unfolded thereafter laid bare the complications of the colonial concoction – Nigeria – having resulted in different military administrations and 30 months of civil war.

The Second Republic (1979–1983)

Preserving the major heritage of British colonialism – the single political entity called Nigeria – was the first major achievement of the military, achieved under General Yakubu Gowon who succeeded the first military administrator, General Aguiyi Ironsi. Gowon had to reverse the country to federalism as Ironsi replaced it with unitarianism in what was deemed Eastern region’s marginalisation plot. He also had to create 12 states to weaken the strength of the Eastern region. Yet, the Eastern region attempted to secede, resulting in a civil war between 1967 and 1969.

The second major achievement of the military was ushering the country to a Second Republic on its 19th independence anniversary by the Murtala/ Obasanjo administration. This administration deemed it necessary to experiment with a new political system, which culminated in drafting the 1979 second

republican constitution, with the American model presidential system as its focal feature. This was in “an effort to enhance the federal government’s ability to deal with national problems and thereby hold the country together” (Ayua and Dakas 2005: 4). However, this objective was barely achieved. As Elaigwu (1998) observed, the presidential system only over-centralised political power, giving the country more of a unitary than a federal reflection, thereby forming a ground for regional marginalisation (1998: 6). The same was reflected in states headed by powerful executive governors who superintended the affairs of different ethnic groups across various local governments.

Beyond experimenting with a presidential system, the 1979 constitution made grossly inadequate, if at all, any attempt to address the country’s “national question” or accomplish any decolonisation project. It retained the federal system with 19 states as the component regions of the federation. Having also retained a multi-party system, elections into various offices were contested by different political parties, more or less incarnates of the First Republic’s. Although conducted under supervision of the military, the elections were also controversial due to fierce political battles, appeals to sectarian rather than national interests, and allegations of monumental irregularities. Then came a constitutional imbroglio regarding the inability of all presidential aspirants to convincingly win 25% in two-third of the 19 states (Simpkins 2004). Notwithstanding, Alhaji Shehu Shagari (who won 25% in 12 states) was declared the winner, sworn in as the country’s first executive president, and survived legal actions by the election’s runner-up.

Hardly was there any serious attempt or result thereof by Shagari to address the national question or champion any decolonisation project. The regional rivalry of the First Republic was revived, with the First Republic’s opposition party leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, assuming the same role after losing the presidential election. And while the American model bicameral legislature was introduced to increase representation towards addressing the national question, members of the National Assembly failed to offer any genuine answer. Again, while the profligacy that characterised the First Republic was expected to be tamed under an executive president, corruption and impunity continued to permeate every public sector. Ogbeidi (2012: 8) claimed that Shagari, himself a gentle man, was pathetically unable to prevent public officers from embezzling over \$16 billion of oil revenues.

The re-election of Shagari in 1983 birthed another serious political crisis that resulted in another coup. While the development triggered jubilation in many quotas, it was likened to “riding a camel in a jet age” by the defunct

administration's justice minister (Oshunkeye 2010). Apparently though, "the first experiment with presidential system of government turned out to be an antithesis of the constitutional treatise to guarantee a less personalized form of government" (Kifordu 2013: 102). Public officers, as the military junta opined, "revel in squander mania, corruption and indiscipline, and continue to proliferate public appointment in complete disregard to our stark economic realities" (Emuleomo 2016, para. 6-7). In essence, the experimented system was not home-grown, and so, it did not further the course of the country's decolonisation.

The Aborted Third Republic (1989–1993)

Under the leadership of General Ibrahim Babangida, who ousted Shagari's successor General Muhammadu Buhari on 27 August 1985, Nigeria had been a laboratory for a series of political experimentations. The military embarked on endless attempts to impose a "home-grown" democratic model, in search of a more decolonised political system. But as later events unfolded, that became a ploy to elongate or even perpetuate themselves in power.

They oversaw the drafting of 1989 constitution, which retained federalism and the presidential system but significantly altered the political processes to curb the unhealthy rivalry that characterised the previous republics. In place of a multi-party system, it made provision for a government-funded two-party system and the military government (unlike Murtala/Obasanjo's) rolled out a transition programme to be carried out in phases. The first phase included gubernatorial and parliamentary elections. As winners of the former were sworn-in with appointed military deputies, those of the latter (federal) level were sworn in to checkmate a military "president." Azikiwe (1984) has referred to such an arrangement – a government involving both the military and civilians – as a "diarchy."

The military "president," however, was expected to relinquish power in the last phase of the transition programme. On 12 June 1993 – now celebrated as Nigeria's democracy day – a presidential election adjudged to be the freest, fairest, and most credible in Nigeria's history was conducted. When the declaration of the apparent winner was imminent, the "Maradona" (as General Babangida was nicknamed for his numerous dribbles in the political arena) announced the annulment of the election. Hopes for Nigeria's return to civil rule were raised to the peak only to be so dashed. The Third Republic,

a relatively more decolonised system conceived and nurtured by Babangida, was aborted by him at the point of delivery.

This made the arena too hostile for the “Maradona,” but for one last time, he dribbled the country to “interim presidency” on his 8th year anniversary. He thus became Nigeria’s only head of state to leave power not through death, transition, or a coup. Barely three months after this, the interim president Chief Ernest Shonekan was ousted by General Sani Abacha, whose transition programme was cut short by his sudden death on 8 June 1998. Unlike Babangida, who introduced the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Abacha had a fractured relationship with the West and tinkered with Africanism. But he also failed to accomplish any concrete decolonial project.

The Fourth Republic (1999 – Date)

It took General Abacha’s successor, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, less than a year to return Nigeria to democratic governance. The Fourth Republic began on 29 May 1999 with the swearing in of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as president. Obasanjo, being the subject in the first military to civilian transition, became the object in the second military to civilian transition.

Describing the political system of the Fourth Republic is tantamount to describing the Second Republic. Virtually nothing is different as the 1999 constitution is a copycat of the 1979 constitution. Federalism, the American model presidential system, a multi-party system, and bicameral legislature at the centre were all recycled. The major political parties at the beginning of the Fourth Republic were the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), the All Peoples Party (APP, later All Nigerian Peoples Party, ANPP), and the Alliance for Democracy (AD). The PDP ruled the country for 16 years until 2015 when the All Progressive Congress (APC), a merger of the ANPP, Action Congress (AD) and the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), took over power.

Both in theory and in practice, neither the ruling parties (PDP and APC) nor the successive regimes in the Fourth Republic contribute to decolonisation. Instead, they have romanticised Western political ideals devoid of institutionalised traditional values. Violence and monumental electoral irregularities have again reared their ugly heads in the political process. This is the playing out of the “rivalry and suspicions among the various ethnic groups in the country that have culminated in political instability across

the entire country” (Raji and Wahab 2016). As various political actors seek power, they play the ethnic and sometimes religious cards to gain support while causing division and crises among the masses. The electoral umpire, alongside the security have been accused of being used by the government to rig elections, while the judiciary hardly delivers justice to the aggrieved parties leading to the crises of legitimacy in governance (Omodia 2009: 38).

This was most evident in the third of the seven general elections conducted in the Fourth Republic with the declared winner of the presidential election (Alhaji Umaru Yar’adua) also admitting it “had some shortcomings” (Yar’adua 2007). In fact, the 2007 elections marked “a dramatic step backwards, even (if) measured against the dismal standard set by the 2003 election” as brazenly, “elected officials, alongside the very government agencies charged with ensuring the credibility of the polls reduced the elections to a violent and fraud-riddled farce” (Human Rights Watch 2007, Nigeria’s 2007 Milestone section, para. 1-2).

Although the electoral reform initiated by Yar’adua has enhanced the credibility of subsequent elections, the crises of legitimacy in governance, rooted in colonial legacies remain. None of the five presidents in the Fourth Republic has been able to address the long-standing national question. As dissatisfactions with governance led to calls for restructuring the country, President Goodluck Jonathan convened a national conference in 2014, with 14 committees (including “devolution of power,” “political restructuring,” and “land tenure and national boundary”) set up to look into different areas of national controversies (National Conference 2014). Although they unearthed agitations, that should trigger a massive decolonisation project, hope of implementing their recommendations died alongside Jonathan’s hope of retaining power in the 2015 poll.

In the 2015 poll, Muhammadu Buhari became a beneficiary of the system he toppled in 1983. His victory, which came on the mantra of “change” from the bad governance, corruption, and impunity that characterised Jonathan’s administration, evoked optimism among all and sundry. Ironically, his two-terms administration raised more national questions than it answered. The resurgence of militancy in the oil rich Niger Delta region, secessionist agitations in the South East, armed banditry in the North West, and terrorism in the North East have joined forces with other human security threats to threaten the continuous existence of the country – more than at any time since the 1967 civil war – and re-echo the need for complete decolonisation. These are the challenges the administration of Bola Tinubu

inherited, in addition to the crisis of legitimacy birthed by his emergence on a Muslim-Muslim ticket and through another disputed election. Halfway into his regime, Tinubu's relation with decolonisation has been more of resistance, with the effects of his Western-induced economic policies (like the floating of Nigeria's currency and zero petroleum subsidy) continuing to generate widespread discontentment among the masses.

General Observations and Findings

The major points of the foregoing analysis can be summarised as follows:

1. In the course of Africa's colonisation by seven western powers, western political heritage got firmly entrenched in the continent. These include geographical division with arbitrarily drawn boundaries, country names, and political systems among other things. Nigeria is one of the countries at the receiving end of all these, being a creation of British colonialism.
2. Decolonisation in the African context implies not just the attainment of political independence but a total emancipation of Africa from the shackles of colonialism. This cuts across mental, cultural, economic, political, and social dimensions and involves the reassessment and refinement of colonial legacies. However, the project, which received momentum in the late 1950s and early 1960s when many African countries got independence, remains incomplete over six decades after.
3. Most African countries have since their independence been trying to practice western types of democracy with little, if any, recourse to their indigenous political values. Nigeria, being Africa's largest democracy, has since independence been a subject of western political values, having practiced the Westminster parliamentary system in the first republic and the American model presidential system in the second and fourth republics. The military's attempt under General Babangida to experiment with a home-grown democracy ended with the ruthless abortion of what would have been the country's Third Republic.
4. Over-reliance on western political values accounts for the lacklustre performance of political institutions in most African countries. For example, the presidential system of government, practiced in Nigeria and other African countries has concentrated political and economic powers in the executive organ in general, and the president in particular, resulting in tyranny, impunity, and corruption (Mutua 2016). The

national assembly, which ought to represent people's interests and foster transparency, is itself accused of being an epitome of corruption, with its members not seen as true representatives of their people. In Nigeria, the high cost of running the national assembly is believed to be a stumbling block to many developmental projects in the country.

5. The perpetuation of colonial values in many aspects of African social systems is facilitated by the knowledge and power relations between the west and African countries. As the west produces knowledge, even of Africa, Africans acquire the same and continue to be subjected to the ideality of western political and other values. The power relations between them are influenced by economic relations in the form of a beggar-donor relationship. As the west provides economic "aids" to African states, they make the continent "a product of active operations of colonial matrices of power" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015: 15).
6. The consequent political instability and gross developmental challenges being experienced in many African countries have led to military interventions at different times. Nigeria has experienced a total of six successful military coups and a cumulative 28 years of military rule, which ended in 1999. The wave of military incursion is once again sweeping over African democracies with the Republic Niger and Gabon as the most recent casualties.

Decolonizing African political values: An Imperative for Africa's Development

In light of Africa's developmental woes and the incompleteness of decolonisation projects, some scholars advocate the resurgence of traditional institutions of governance as an imperative for state-building and sustainable development (Samuel and Joshua 2010; Skinner 1998). Skinner reiterates that:

Without a compromise that would ensure 'ethnic justice', neither (the) so-called 'liberal democracy', nor any other species of government will succeed in Africa. If 'liberal democracy' presently has any evolutionary advantages, it will have to adapt to local realities, and its contours will be shaped by indigenous African socio-cultural traditions (Skinner 1998: 17).

This can be achieved by reforming the state structure, political system, political process, and the economic system as analysed hereunder.

State Structure

With the artificial boundaries created within states being one of the causes of disputes, marginalisation, and conflicts among different ethnic groups, African states need to undertake re-structuring projects serious. In Nigeria, for example, some communities inhabited by the Igala ethnic group are needlessly separated from the Kogi state where they are dominant and merged with the Igbo-dominated Enugu state, thus making them a minority.

Some of such boundaries were created not by the colonisers but by military rulers who, much like the colonisers, were only concerned with administrative convenience. Until such anomalies are rectified, mutual suspicion and inter-communal clashes will continue to jeopardise the peaceful coexistence needed for sustainable development.

Political System

The western systems of government adopted in many African countries need to be reformed in line with their peculiar realities. Since being relegated by the colonisers, traditional institutions have lost the ingredients of relating with the people through family heads, village heads, and clan heads. Indeed, “citizen participation in planning – akin to the traditional African *baraza* (public open-air meeting) – allows communities to claim their own development and gives meaning to their agency” (Mutua 2016: 167). The current system of parliamentary representation is ineffective as it lacks the institutionalised means of such a relation. In most cases, the parliamentary members are only affiliated to the system and lack knowledge of their constituencies, the people, and their needs.

In fractured states such as Nigeria, where federalism and a presidential system of government are practiced, a hybrid devolution of both political and economic powers vertically (among government organs) and horizontally (among tiers of government) will strengthen the means for checks and balances on the one hand, and narrow exclusion on the other. This will ensure that the centre does not over-marginalise the states, nor does any state over-marginalise the ethnic enclaves therein. Although Nigeria's federalism is theoretically designed to ensure this, it remains largely ineffective owing to many factors. First, structural imbalances persist, as oil-dependent revenue sharing leaves states financially dependent on the centre. Second, historical legacies of military rule have established patterns of centralisation that democratic transitions have failed to reverse, while

elite capture at all government levels transforms mechanisms meant for inclusion into instruments of patronage. Finally, implementation failures, including weak institutions, endemic corruption, and selective adherence to federal principles have created a system with formal federal structures but without their functional benefits, resulting in what scholars term “feeding bottle federalism” where states remain dependent on central allocations rather than developing autonomous governance capacity.

Reviving traditional African political institutions to work side by side with the elected political office holders will ensure that the voices of the masses are heard. For instance, Nigeria’s emirate system, Ghana’s chieftaincy structures, and South Africa’s indigenous councils could enhance governance by creating complementary channels for citizen representation alongside modern elected offices. These traditional institutions, which often maintain grassroots legitimacy through cultural connections, could serve as advisory bodies to elected officials, mediators in local disputes, and accountability mechanisms that leverage community respect rather than formal authority. As Whitaker (1970: 467) has observed, the “significant elements of the traditional political system of the emirates proved to be compatible in practical terms with significant features of the modern state.”

One practical method of institutionalisation is statutory recognition of traditional authorities within the formal political framework. Botswana provides a compelling model through its *Ntlo ya Dikgosi* (House of Chiefs), a consultative body composed of tribal leaders that advises the national parliament on matters affecting culture and tradition, such as land tenure and chieftaincy. Rwanda also offers an innovative model through the formal incorporation of *Abunzi* (local mediators) into its justice system. The *Abunzi* system functions as a quasi-legal structure for resolving local disputes through reconciliation, reflecting the country’s pre-colonial emphasis on communal resolution and restorative justice. Although traditional leaders in Nigeria perform such functions to an extent, their roles remain informal, unregulated, and often manipulated.

Political Process

Reforming the political system will not yield fruit if African traditional values are not entrenched in politics and governance. Such include the spirit of respect, sacrifice, transparency, equity, and social justice. With humungous salaries and allowances in the offer, public offices in western political systems being practiced in Africa are too attractive. They offer

riches and bestow on the holders a “masters” rather than “servants” status, thus encouraging unhealthy political rivalry, electoral fraud, and violence while vying for power.

In traditional societies, the spirit of respect established hierarchies based on wisdom and service rather than wealth, while sacrifice demanded leaders to prioritise community needs above personal gain – contrasting sharply with today's extractive leadership patterns across much of Africa. Transparency was maintained through open village deliberations and council meetings where decisions affecting the community required public justification, serving as indigenous versions of modern oversight mechanisms. Equity and social justice were manifested in customary law, administered by councils of elders who typically emphasised restorative justice and community harmony over punitive measures, effectively preventing the extreme inequality that characterises many modern African states.

While these values have proved effective in smaller-scale traditional societies, adapting them to modern nation-states faces significant challenges arising from the colonial disruption of traditional institutions, urbanisation, and ethnic diversity within arbitrary borders. Nevertheless, the successful integration of these principles is evident in Rwanda's *gacaca* courts for post-genocide reconciliation, Botswana's incorporation of traditional consultation practices (*kgotla*) into modern governance, and community-based natural resource management in several countries – suggesting that re-imagining rather than merely reviving these values could address contemporary governance deficits through culturally resonant frameworks that citizens readily embrace. When properly integrated, these values could facilitate more responsive governance by providing an early warning of emerging social tensions, offering culturally appropriate solutions to local challenges, and creating alternative pathways for community voices typically marginalised in formal political processes.

Provisions for independent candidacy should also be made to remove the encumbrance of having to be either rich or sign a bond to dance to the tune of godfathers to contest election. In this vein, Abba and Babalola (2017: 127) emphasised that “since parties on their own cannot guarantee level playing ground for all party segments within the constitutionally approved processes and the conventionally sanctioned procedures, then there is the need to look outwards within the democratic space.” Of course “non-party presidency could go a long way in resolving the persistent confusion over the separation line between the arena of party politics and the real realm of public and national leadership” (Kambudzi 2001: 62)

Economic System

Western capitalist values have eroded African values of communalism and kinship. Therefore, they need to be revived if poverty among other human security threats are to be tackled for meaningful development. Julius Nyerere's *Ujamaa* policy was built upon this realisation. As he noted, capitalism propagates excessive individualism, promotes the competitive rather than the cooperative instinct in human being, exploits the weak, divides society into hostile groups, and generally promotes inequality in society (Nyerere 1971).

The major thrust should be a land tenure system reform that, in its current form, defines land ownership and access to land on western values and thus reflects "the reality of the coloniality of power and the incompleteness of the decolonial project" (Chitonge 2018: 32). The traditional communal ownership of land, replaced with the western individual ownership, should be restored. As Chitonge explained, in traditional African societies only things that grow or stand on land (e.g. crops and buildings) could be owned by an individual with the land itself belonging to the ancestors, the living and the future generation. Notwithstanding historical variations in land ownership arrangements across different African societies, pan-African scholars advocate for communal land tenure systems as the foundation for economic reforms, believing they align with indigenous African values of collective welfare and equitable resource distribution, while countering exploitative capitalist models.

Governments across Africa should be the custodians of people's access to land and ease their access to land, having been for so long alienated from it. This will enhance their productive potentials as they now only rely on paid jobs provided by the privileged few who have owned or hired lands. The preservation of the land for productive use by the future generation, which is the hallmark of sustainable development, will also be facilitated by the communal ownership. Indeed, government custody can ensure sustainability by regulating land use, protecting communal rights, enforcing environmental standards, and prioritising land for agriculture, housing, and conservation over speculative or extractive exploitation. Thus, it can balance access, equity, and ecological stewardship – key pillars of sustainable development. Failure to ensure this will continue to deviate Africa's developmental trajectory, because these land issues have direct consequences on Africa's growth and development (Moyo and Yeros 2011).

However, Nigeria now presents a paradox where state custody deepened exclusion rather than reverse it. This anomaly stems not from the principle of government custodianship itself but from its flawed implementation.

In practice, bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and the politicisation of land allocation make access to land especially difficult for the poor, sometimes resulting in forced evictions or land grabs.

Conclusion

Since independence from colonial rule, the political systems practised in Nigeria (and other African countries) have been Western in character, context, and content and have failed to synchronise with the peculiar realities of the country, resulting in political crises, abuse of power, military interventions, and developmental woes. Despite more than two decades of uninterrupted civilian administration in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, the lingering national questions have not been answered; and the polarisation of the people along ethnic, religious, and regional lines remains as strong as ever. Public sector corruption has continued to stagnate the country's developmental quest as it manifested in successive regimes, despite the avowed war against it by the leaders.

Notwithstanding progress, made in some quotas across the country, "the leading argument is that structural changes have not been expectedly effective in developing the political institutions and leadership agency capable of promoting social development" (Kifordu 2013: 110). African political values not only help to diagnose the failures of post-colonial statecraft in the foregoing analysis but also provide a decolonial framework for reconstructing political systems that are rooted in African epistemologies and historical experience while allowing for adaptation to changing circumstances. Thus, they are invaluable philosophical and institutional resources available for re-imagining governance on the continent, in the light of which we take a cue from hybridisation scholarly frameworks to advocate "the integration of indigenous methods of village cooperation with innovative forms of government, combining the power of universal rights with the uniqueness of each district's or nation's own customs and respected traditions" towards addressing the structural and systemic incongruities bedevilling Nigerian and African democracies (Owusu 1991: 384).

In order to meaningfully entrench African traditional values in politics and governance, Nigeria needs to adopt a multi-tier governance system where traditional leaders are officially represented in local government councils or act as ex-officio advisors with defined responsibilities. The successful examples of Botswana's *Ntlo ya Dikgosi* and Rwanda's *Abunzi*

systems demonstrate how traditional and modern governance systems can constructively coexist in order to improve public trust and policy effectiveness. Policymakers, academics, and civil society actors in Nigeria among other African states should therefore prioritise the development of a national framework that formally integrates traditional institutions into governance through constitutional recognition, capacity-building initiatives, and pilot programs that evaluate the impact of such integration on conflict resolution, service delivery, and democratic accountability.

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POLITICAL INTERFERENCE IN ELECTION ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTORAL IRREGULARITIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: The extant literature is replete with fine-grained explanations of problems of electoral irregularities in Nigeria. However, how political interference in election administration contributes to these problems has largely remained unacknowledged. The Nigerian Constitution establishes the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as a relatively autonomous electoral body and, also, empowers the president to appoint its principal officers subject to Senate confirmation. These provisions that allow interested parties to determine INEC membership composition delink INEC's institutional design from its operational independence and, therefore, incapacitate it from asserting its independence in order to guarantee credible elections in Nigeria. The present study relies on a triangulation of qualitative research techniques such as documentary sources, key informant interviews, and personal observations. Premised on descriptive statistics and content analyses, this study reveals that political interference in INEC membership composition and financing considerably accounts for recurring lethal electoral irregularities; shows that whoever controls the human and financial elements of INEC is in firm control of its operations for favourable electoral outcomes; and suggests the need for voter-determined reforms for a workable electoral system in the context and content of Nigeria.

Keywords: *political interference, election administration, electoral irregularities, illiberal democracy, Nigeria*

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Introduction

Nigeria has successfully held seven quadrennial general elections since it transitioned to civil rule in 1999. Beginning with the fall of a one-party state in Benin Republic in the early 1990s, Nigeria joined the league of African countries that embraced electoral democracy for state organisation during the so-called “third wave of democratisation.” The prevailing scholarship held the optimism that multiparty politics would empower voters to choose their leaders from available contestants and hold them to account. Ultimately, this would promote democracy and development (Diamond 2002; Huntington 1991). The optimism triggered the desire to replace authoritarian systems with democratic ones in many African countries such as Nigeria.

Extant pro-democracy literature has assumed that elections guarantee peaceful power transfers and provide a viable (non-violent) alternative to using force for power acquisition (Lindberg 2006; Diamond 2002; Huntington 1991). Lindberg (2006: 148) further highlights that the positive impacts of repeatedly holding elections “are not restricted to free and fair polls, at least not in the early stages of building democracy.” Going by this pro-democracy model, the nearly three-decade electoral feat in Nigeria since 1999 suggests that Nigerian elections would be peaceful and the country should, by now, master the craft of electoral democracy, gain experience in quality leadership, and institutionalise primary agencies of election administration such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties, and the judiciary. However, these claims do not truly reflect what many scholars know about the link between elections, democracy, and development, especially in Nigeria and other post-military democracies in Africa.

To begin with, Omotola (2009) provided insight into the dynamics of Nigeria’s election politics by analysing the 2007 general elections within the context of “garrison” democracy, which highlights how electoral processes can become militarised and, if unchecked, can possibly lead to democratic instability. Later, Omotola (2010) found that election administration in Nigeria between 1999 and 2007 was characterised by the ineffectiveness of the electoral governance system. The identified ineffectiveness emanates from the weak institutionalisation of the primary agencies of election administration, occasioned by the composition and funding of the INEC, which tends to undermine its institutional and administrative autonomy and makes it unable to guarantee transparent and democratic elections in the country. Like other elections held in Nigeria since 1999, Mbah et al. (2019) highlighted that, despite the relative improvement in the electoral

process in 2015, the 2015 presidential election was contentious because of the existing politics of exclusion, exacerbated by the selective dispensation of the spoils of office along ethno-religious cleavages. This worsened the political environment and heightened tensions each election season amid the notion that Nigeria is largely built on a culture of electoral fraud. This brand of politics endangers the efforts towards national cohesion and makes the quest for national development a Herculean task.

Further, Onapajo (2020) queries the institutional design of INEC, which makes it subservient to the whims of political elite and competing groups, and punctures its ability to guarantee quality elections in Nigeria. Today, election season in Nigeria is marked by a militarisation of the electoral process, contentious political communication, undemocratic attitudes towards elections by both political actors and election administrators, and cases of deadly electoral violence (Ezeibe 2021; Mbah et al. 2020; Onuoha et al. 2020; Mbah et al. 2019; Ashindorbe 2018). This situation is also exacerbated by the helplessness of security agencies to effectively provide safety of election assets (Okorie 2025) and lucrative benefits attached to the occupation of public offices in the country (Abada et al. 2023). These scholars have advanced convincing arguments and offer plausible explanations about the state of elections and violence in Nigeria's democracy. However, their arguments have not sufficiently explained why irregularities are consistently witnessed in all elections organised by INEC. They pay little attention to how political interference in election administration is linked to recurring incidents of flawed elections in Nigeria since 1999. Even when they refer to the issue under investigation, their studies rarely reflect political interference in election administration. Thus, sparse knowledge still exists about how political actors relate with INEC and how their relationship affects how INEC discharges its statutory electoral functions in Nigeria.

The present study contributes to this unending debate by querying how political interference in election administration finds expression in the perennial cases of irregularities that have marred every election in Nigeria. It contends that this interference is a contributing factor to the recurring incidents of electoral irregularities in the country. The interference also affects the human and financial elements of the INEC and, in administrative practice, it is widely believed that whoever controls human and financial elements of any organisation like INEC invariably controls its operations (input) and determines its outcomes (output). Impliedly, the control of INEC by its highly interested employers has a conditioning effect on INEC operations in the electoral process in Nigeria.

Political interference is the interplay of efforts emanating from the quest to win elections by all means. These efforts signify forms of irregularities that are deviations from the legal electoral stipulations and inhibit INEC from administering elections based on the stipulations. Many Nigerian politicians, together with their political parties and followers, behave alike and exhibit an illiberal disposition towards credible elections. They hardly allow free contests based on the laws because they operate in a lax institutional environment amid huge personal privileges associated with the occupation of public offices. They rarely consider or prioritise the consequences of their actions on the broader goal of democratisation and development. Hence, they can do or offer anything just to grab power, which in turn exacerbates the already high costs of election politics in the country. It is noteworthy that the quest for power for personal gains vitiates the general notion of politics embedded in rendering public services. This study, therefore, deviates from an existing scholarship and adds to the body of knowledge on election administration in Nigeria by interrogating the role of political interference in election administration in unending cases of irregularities during elections since 1999. It uses political interference in INEC membership composition to assess the latitude of INEC principal officers in discharging their electoral duties, and how political interference in INEC financing encourages dependence on budgets that are outside INEC's control in Nigeria.

The current effort is a qualitative one-country study and, as such, leverages the context-rich, detailed and in-depth insights to bear witness to the recurring electoral challenges bedevilling Nigeria between 1999 and 2023. It employs a triangulated qualitative research design to generate and analyse detailed data/information to buttress the foregoing arguments. The strategies include rich available literature, personal experience as active participant in Nigerian elections, and key informants across the country for data generation; while descriptive statistics and content analysis are used for data analysis. These data sources provide the flexibility and convenience required for an in-depth investigation in a diverse large country as Nigeria. The present study entails six major sections. After this introduction are sections on conceptual understanding, theoretical understanding, the study's methods, and the results and discussion. It ends with a section that depicts its findings, recommendations, and the need for further studies.

Conceptual Understanding of Major Themes

Efforts are made to explore what we know about election administration, political interference, and electoral irregularities, and what is sparse in the existing literature about these themes. The following three subsections address these issues.

Election Administration in Nigeria

Election administration is undertaken by electoral management bodies (EMBs) and involves three distinct but related categories of activities before, during and after elections. Before elections, the EMB carries out constituency delimitation, voter registration and education, and monitors campaigns and party nominations. During elections, the EMB oversees voter accreditation, voting, sorting/counting/recording of votes, and collation and declaration of results. Post-election activities of the EMB involve the management of election litigation and review of the exercise for improvement. Thus, election administration is the preparation (design) and management (implementation) of these activities by the EMBs in compliance with rules guiding the activities. Election design plays a crucial role during the election implementation stage given that poorly designed election procedures can create confusion among poll workers, pose comprehension difficulties to voters, lead to loss of crucial votes, and impede voter confidence in the electoral process (Norden and Iyer 2011).

Although other agencies such as political parties, the judiciary, and civil society organisations (CSOs) play important roles in elections, the EMBs occupy a central position in election administration. The extent to which they carry out the electoral assignments depends on the existing legal framework that underpins their structure. For instance, the system may be structured to either be centralised, decentralised, or a combination of the two. In a centralised electoral system, the EMBs oversee other agencies, supervise voter registration, and manage elections. In a decentralised setting, however, there are shared EMBs and the bulk of election administration functions are divided among two or more EMBs. Voter management is handled by a body different from the one undertaking party supervision or conducting elections. In between is a combined system that embodies the features of centralised and decentralised arrangements (Kelly 2007; Pastor 2006).

The INEC is a perfect example of a centralised EMB in policy making with “signs of decentralisation” in policy implementation in Nigeria. It was originally established in 1998 vide Part I, Section (1) of Decree № 17

of 5 August 1998 to allow legible Nigerian voters to choose their leaders, legitimise leadership, and serve as a decision-making platform on election matters. It conducted the 1998-9 transition (founding) elections: comprising subnational (council, State House of Assembly [SHA], and governorship) and national (National Assembly [NASS] and presidential) elections. The adoption of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN), 1999 (as amended) gives the INEC the legal force as a corporate entity with perpetual succession (Section 153 of the CFRN, 1999). Today, INEC organises, undertakes, and supervises elections into the offices of president/vice president of the Federation and governor/deputy governor of a state. It also oversees the elections for members of the NASS (the Senate and the House of Representatives), SHAs, and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) councils (Item F, sub-Item 15, Part I of the Third Schedule to the CFRN, 1999).

In Section 197(1) (b), the CFRN also provides for the establishment of State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) for Nigeria's 36 federating states. The SIECs are statutorily charged to manage council elections in their respective states. However, despite their existence, we maintain that the INEC remains the central electoral body in Nigeria for many reasons. First, the overall management of general elections is the exclusive preserve of the INEC. Second, the SIECs depend on the INEC for relevant voter information for the conduct of council elections in their states. Finally, the SIECs are not empowered to undertake party registration and, thus, rely on the ones registered by the INEC.

In multiparty competitive elections into executive posts at all levels (local, state, and federal), candidates are voted for in single-member electoral constituencies (Sections 132(4) and 178(4) of the CFRN, 1999). The INEC-created political wards constitute the constituencies for the post of a local government chairman, while local government areas (LGAs) and states/FCT Abuja serve the constituency purposes for governorship and presidential posts respectively. To be duly elected, the candidates must secure a majority of the valid votes and 25 per cent of the votes in at least two-thirds of the constituencies (Sections 133-134 and 179). There is also a constitutional provision for a second round of elections (run-off system) in case the constitutional requirements are not met in the first round. In this case, the candidate with the highest number of votes wins the run-off election (Sections 134(3) and 179(3) of the CFRN, 1999). On the other hand, elections into legislative seats at all levels are governed by a first-past-the-post system.

Political Interference in Election Administration in Nigeria

Political interference in election administration is the interplay of efforts by the government in power, institutions, and competing groups to influence elections and favourably determine their outcomes, usually against the expectation to engage in electoral contests by following the electoral rules. The essence of this interference is to outdo the other in order to widen one's odds of victory. These efforts include partial implementation of electoral rules, result alterations, intimidation of poll workers, and manipulation of the collation process. In some extreme cases, they include violent disruption and the use of threats/intimidation by political actors against their opponents, voters, and poll workers, or attack on property with substantial connection with elections. They are deviations from legal stipulations and signify forms of irregularities occasioned by interference that inhibits INEC from administering elections based on the stipulations.

Generally, the government in power is usually accused of using subtle means to increase its window of political opportunities or manoeuvre its way to remain in power (van Baalen 2023; Onapajo 2014). This is because so many things are going in for the government or its head – the president. The president has immense control over state power and resources, with influence over the security agencies and appointment of INEC officers (Owen and Usman 2015). However, how the government wields these assets and relates with INEC are usually dependent on the leadership disposition of the person at the helm of its affairs – the president. For illustration, the government of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) under President Olusegun Obasanjo largely interfered in INEC affairs, but President Goodluck Jonathan of the same PDP refrained from such interference. This partly explained why the 2015 elections threw up some electoral surprises: the first time in which an incumbent Nigerian president was defeated by an opposition candidate and the first time a loser accepted the outcome before the final declaration of the result, with an overture for peaceful transition amid glaring cases of fraud in some parts of the country.

Further, the interference under the purview of this study is not entirely synonymous with the government in power. Opposition groups can also take advantage of government weakness or ineffectiveness and influence public opinion in their favour as a better alternative to the latter – the government – and successfully coalesce the advantage into an electoral victory. The Nigerian experience with the All Progressives Congress (APC) is a case in point. The APC members took advantage the new elite alliances had offered

them amid the fragmentation within the ruling PDP to unseat its incumbent president in 2015 (Owen and Usman 2015). The APC deployed divergent campaign strategies to drive home their message of progressive change founded on inclusivity and convinced most voters to emerge successful at national and subnational levels during the 2015 elections. On assumption of office, President Muhammadu Buhari chose to run a sectional government (Mbah et al. 2019; Udeh et al. 2023), in a manner that could be best described as using deceitful means to grab power without commensurate efforts to deliver on their promises. Sometimes, other competing groups and institutions can take advantage offered by government ineffectiveness and the opposition's poor outing to undermine the electoral process or make critical election stakeholders to compromise on their electoral duties. The professionalism of those in charge of INEC is another factor that can bear on whether INEC can be compromised or not. Professor Maurice Iwu, unlike Professor Attahiru Jega, was accused of lacking the professionalism required of an electoral umpire (Omotola 2010).

Nigerian political leaders have the proclivity to interfere in the activities of government institutions instead of allowing them to function based on their establishment laws. During his military administration, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida used his position as a military Head of State and removed two electoral commission chairmen – Professors Eme Awa and Humphrey Nwosu – over unjustifiable reasons. Professor Awa was removed because he refused to compromise his electoral duties, while Professor Nwosu was sacked due to his Commission's position on the presidential election of 12 June, 1993, against a government decision to annul the election (Nwosu as cited in Omotola 2010). Before the 2019 elections, and given the strategic role the judiciary plays in election adjudication, President Buhari interfered in the judicial process and summarily removed Nigeria's Chief Law Officer (CLO), Justice Walter Onnoghen, over his stance on the rule of law, despite a court order that prohibited the president from sacking the CLO. Nigeria Civil Society (NCS) Situation Room (2019: 4) observes that the sack a few weeks before the 2019 elections gave “a major jolt to the polity and cast a shade on the electoral process, with the suspicion that there were other unspoken, ulterior motives behind it.”

There is a problem with INEC's institutional design that creates room for interference. The problem emanates from the 1999 CFRN, which subjects INEC's administrative autonomy to presidential control. The CFRN does not only empower the president to directly appoint all principal officers of the Commission, but also allow federal executive bodies like the presidency

to scrutinise INEC statutory activities. Secondly and more importantly, INEC funding is still domiciled in the Nigerian presidency and subjected to presidential supervision through the Budget Monitoring and Price Unit (BMPU), the Office of the Accountant General of the Federation (OAGF), and the Federal Ministry of Finance (FMoF) (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2002, 2006, 2010). The role of the president in constituting INEC membership and releasing its funds amounts to presidential oversight against the global practice that allows legislative oversight over such statutory functions. Like the judiciary, the appointment of INEC officers by the president should be on recommendation by a neutral body not peopled by politicians, if electing them by the people seems Herculean. After their appointments and given the position of EMBS in electoral democracy and the role of finance in organisational life, these officers should be empowered to draw INEC funds directly from the Federation Accounts based on its budgets approved by the NASS, with legislative powers to ensure compliance and accountability. Although the touted Electoral Act of 2022 provides for the early (not later than one year) release of election funds to INEC, the president still retains the power to release INEC funds. Also, the control of INEC officers renders INEC impotent to deliver on its core mandates and places a question mark on the pursuit of credible elections in Nigeria.

Noteworthy, INEC has made relative efforts to improve the electoral process and these have led to various interventions. These interventions have facilitated the adoption of manual and electronic methods or their combination at various election seasons (Aiyede 2012; Iwuoha 2018). But the efforts have suffered the fate of previous measures when it comes to implementation owing to political interference. For instance, the use of new technologies, a journey that began with the biometric voter registration devices in 2011 and became the prototype for similar technologies like automated fingerprint identification system (AFIS) and smart card readers (SCRs) (Ladipo and Onyemaechi 2022; Jega 2016), suffocates because INEC needlessly depended hand-in-cap on the government for requisite support.

Interestingly, the biometric voter registration, which was a fallout of the irregularities that grossly marred the elections held between 1999 and 2007, laid the foundation for the production of permanent voter's cards and the adoption of more reliable biometric devices in subsequent elections in Nigeria. Again, these devices, which are chip-embedded digital gadgets that contain the bio-data of all eligible Nigerian voters, have become a mandatory requirement to participate in Nigerian elections since 2015 (INEC 2015a; NCS Situation Room 2015a; Nwangwu et al. 2018). Nevertheless, political

interference still shapes how INEC implements biometric policy on election administration because INEC officers are not free electoral agents and do not have control over their staff and budgets. The immediate consequence is poor policy execution. This manifests in the restriction of AFIS to biometric voter registration during the 2011 election and the selective utilisation of SCRs during the 2015 and 2019 elections amid their debatable legality.

Further, the challenges that heralded the use of SCRs for the 2015 elections forced INEC to jettison its biometric guidelines and adopt the use of fraud-promoting Incidence Forms (IFs). The IFs represented a manual method of voter accreditation and were introduced to remedy the problems of device failures. Regrettably, their use removed their electronic safeguard meant to secure the electoral process and exposed the process to possible manipulations like ghost voting beyond the actual number of accredited voters (NCS Situation Room, 2015b). This also paved the way for politicians to inflate accreditation figures to allow for double/multiple thumb printing. Curiously, the INEC decision (in consultation with political parties) to use IFs for voter accreditation violated Clause 8(b) of INEC guidelines for the conduct of the 2015 elections. The guidelines provides for SCRs as the only basis for voter accreditation during the 2015 elections (INEC 2015b).

In its 2019 guidelines, INEC makes the use of SCRs mandatory for electronic accreditation with a provision to use IFs where a voter card is read but fingerprint authentication or card displays wrong details with correct details in the voter register (Clauses 10(a) and 11(b) and (c) of the 2019 INEC Regulations and Guidelines). These provisions allow voters to manually thumbprint on the voter register and require them to provide their phone numbers and, for that reason, permit manual accreditation method, which creates a room for other forms of electoral manipulation amid controlled INEC officers (INEC 2019; Onapajo 2020). Iwuoha (2018) reported that INEC used IFs and cleared voters by hand, thereby undermining the very purpose for which biometric technology was adopted.

Although the SCRs were replaced with a more secure bimodal voter accreditation system (BVAS) with legal recognition vide the 2022 Electoral Law, the latter has had its fair share of selective adoption, alternating between manual and automated methods during the 2023 elections. The 2022 Electoral Act eliminates the use of IFs and any form of manual accreditation and recognizes BVAS as the only tool for voter accreditation. Despite these measures, Nigeria's electoral system is presently governed by biometric voter registration and accreditation, manual voting, and a combination of manual

and electronic systems for result management. With this in mind, elections in Nigeria still bear the imprints of interference and electoral irregularities, which distort the democratic value of elections.

Understanding Electoral Irregularities

Electoral irregularities have always been a thorn in the flesh of credible management of elections. As a concept, they represent subtle deviations from established electoral procedures and can manifest in various forms intended to increase one's political mileage. They can begin with flawed voter registration (Ladipo and Onyemaechi 2022). This suggests that an election with integrity begins with a voter register with integrity. Electoral irregularities can degenerate into electoral malpractice and progress into lethal thuggery and violence. In short, they run at variance with the global standards on credible elections captured in Article 21(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government (The United Nations 1948).

Electoral irregularities depict a dangerous trend in the democratic process with many consequences on democratisation. They can undermine free choice and confidence in the elected authorities, endanger the quality of democracy, and, occasionally, lead to regime change. At the extreme level, they can renew and exacerbate conflict situations, destroy years of democratic progress, and trigger protests, with an unanticipated casualty rate (Mahmood 2020; Norris 2014). The irregularities that characterised the 2007 presidential poll in Kenya led to a renewal of communal clashes between the Kikuyu, Kalenjin, and Luo ethnic groups that claimed an estimated 1,133 lives, with more than 600,000 displaced persons, 900 cases of rape, and other forms of sexual harassment and destruction of livelihood (Human Rights Watch 2016). The violence associated with the 2010 elections in Côte d'Ivoire on account of irregularities led to over 1,000 deaths, one million internally displaced people, and an estimated 100,000 refugees in neighbouring countries (Birch et al. 2020). A similar ugly trend has been witnessed in Nigeria during recent elections.

Electoral irregularities can enthrone minority (instead of majority) electoral democracy and can deflate voter participation, which is inextricably linked to voter turnout (Solijonov 2016). In reverse, irregularity-free elections reflect a high degree of integrity, which requires an atmosphere free of interference, fear, intimidation, or manipulation at any stage of the electoral

process. A secure and peaceful election environment facilitates free, fair, and credible elections. Tranquil conditions in and around the voting sites lessen the problems that could compromise the integrity of records, turnout, or election results. Voters must be able to vote without fear, monitors must be able to observe without intimidation, and candidates must be able to campaign without the fear that their supporters will be harmed or even killed (GCEDS 2012).

Theoretical Understanding of Illiberal Democracy

The present study adopts illiberal democracy as a framework of analysis to explain how political interference in election administration undermines the democratic process within the context of Nigeria. Before the early 1990s, the use of illiberal democracy by political scientists to describe a system that has features of democracy like elections, freedoms, and checks and balances but does not behave like democracy in operations was not in the political science lexicon. The illiberal democracy thesis is traceable to Bell et al.'s (1995) book: *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia*. The authors used the thesis to challenge Francis Fukuyama's 1992 end-of-history thesis, which contended that political history was culminating in the global rule of liberal democracy embedded in capitalism. They queried Fukuyama's thesis for not representing the situation in Pacific Asia where illiberal democratic features have defined the practice of democracy in the region, a situation electoral reforms and the rev for biometric devices as anti-rigging tools have not remedied. The theory was further developed by liberal scholars such as Zakaria (1997), Christie (1998), and Sajó (2021).

An illiberal democracy is a government system that hides its non-democratic credentials behind formal democratic institutions (Bonet and Zamorano 2021). While some scholars query the existence of illiberal democracy, others who believe in its reality do not have a common ground on how to describe it (Self 2022; Mounk 2018; Plattner 2019). Further, there is a contention as to whether illiberal democracy has anything in common with democracy. Some scholars argue that illiberal democracy should be counted as a type of democracy because it is democratic in a plebiscitarian sense and more true to democracy's roots (Sajó 2021). In reverse, other critical scholars contend that it should be acknowledged by its authoritarian operations and, for that, should be associated with authoritarianism (Christie 1998; DeVotta 2010). They further argue that classifying illiberal democracy as democratic is overly mild to illiberal regimes. They suggest such descriptions as electoral authoritarianism, competitive

authoritarianism, and soft authoritarianism as being adequate for illiberal democracy. This debate has become unending because the style of operations and factors that define illiberal democracy are not only complex, but also vary among democratic settings. While some illiberal democrats may focus on stifling individual freedoms and mass media, others may ignore constitutional term limits to jeopardise democratic growth in their countries (Mounk 2018).

In Africa, some countries grapple with unpopular sit-tight imperial presidents who have indulged in term-limit extensions beyond the usual constitutional two-term limits to remain in power for decades (Africa Center for Strategic Studies [ACSS], 2024). Again, disputed elections have become a common reality in Africa and “smart” African politicians have learned to outsmart modern digital technologies to manipulate the process and outcome of elections. The continent has recently witnessed a breakdown of democratic systems emanating from “constitutional” coups in Chad, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, and Burkina Faso, as well as coup attempts reported in Gambia, Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, and the island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe (ACSS 2024; Mahmoud and Taifouri 2023; Sany 2022). It has also had to contend with calculated suppression of dissent and the criminalisation of popular opposition candidates in “make-belief” multiparty competitive elections (Cheeseman 2021), the changing value of violence as a lucrative strategy for leadership recruitment (Obiagu et al. 2022; Obiagu et al. 2021), and the unending large-scale insurgency that arose from unfulfilled election promises (Anku 2022).

Unlike liberal democracy which, at least in theory, protects individual freedoms and limits government operations, illiberal democracy hampers democratic values like fundamental human rights (Plattner 2019). Elections in illiberal democratic settings rarely provide the opportunities for voters to choose their leaders through the assessment of their policies encapsulated in their manifestos. In such contexts, electoral contests merely serve the purpose of “legitimising” (recognising or accepting) the government in the comity of nations and consolidating the incumbent. Undoubtedly, manipulated elections endanger the operation and pseudonymisation of democracy, and democratic institutions become adopted patterns of authoritarianism (Nyyssönen and Metsälä 2020).

Since 1999, Nigeria has regularly held multiparty competitive elections and successfully transited from one government to another, with verifiable democratic structures in place. Other fundamental features of a democratic system such as a written constitution and the existence of arms of

government and institutions like INEC are not in doubt and have become the underlining forces of democratic process in Nigeria. Regrettably, the expectation that institutions will form the basis for Nigerian democracy against individual whims is still a pipe dream. The illiberal disposition of most Nigerian leaders has led to the appointment of unprofessional electoral officers who do not have a positive disposition towards democracy or, better still, officers with questionable democratic credentials to head the INEC (cf. Omotola 2010). The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN) recognises INEC as an independent electoral body but, at the same time, contains crisis-ridden provisions that empower the federal executive authorities to determine its fate. The government in Nigeria is in firm control of INEC membership composition and financing and, therefore, influences its functions. Today, election, which is one of the strategic first steps towards democratisation, is yet to fully materialise in liberalisation where institutions are allowed to drive the democratic process.

Methodology

The study adopted triangulated qualitative research techniques for data collection and analysis. These techniques are meant to generate detailed information to provide insights into how political interference in election management is connected to electoral irregularities. It should be noted that causal analysis is predicated on an accurate and systematic description of realities, which can be observed by applying non-experimental qualitative strategies for data collection and analysis (Jackson and Cox 2013). As such, this study relied on key informant interviews (KIIs), relevant documents, and personal experience as active participants in Nigerian elections since 1999.

The KII is a qualitative in-depth strategy deployed to generate descriptive data/information from individuals with professional knowledge about specific issues (Kibuacha 2024; Donnelly et al. 2023). This study selected KII because it focused on the knowledge of professionals for an in-depth description of irregularities during elections in Nigeria. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit 36 participants because the number would be convenient to execute and easy to manage. The decision to interview 36 KII participants received the approval of the Postgraduate Committee of the Department of Political Science, University of Nigeria, vide letter no. UN/PS/P.13 of 21 March 2023. Of the 36 participants, three were drawn from each of the 12 Nigerian states, which is within the acceptable 30 per cent statistical sampling ratio of 36 states/FCT Abuja. There was a 50% benchmark for an acceptable KII response rate. The participants

were defined as stakeholders above 18 years who were knowledgeable about their electoral community and they include community leaders, party agents/candidates, election administrators, security personnel, and election observers. The interviews were conducted between March and October 2023 and contained a general theme on political interference in election administration and electoral irregularities in Nigeria, with four specific open-ended questions on how the government relates with INEC in terms of its membership composition and financing, the opposition groups showing a better alternative, and the ability of INEC to assert its authority (Appendix 1). The relevant documents provided detailed qualitative information embellished with personal experience on how elections are managed in Nigeria. The data generated were analysed with the use of descriptive statistics (such as charts and simple percentage method) and content analysis.

The methodology is adopted because it has the propensity to adhere to scientific rigours and research procedures, which involved the systematic collection, organisation, description, and interpretation of textual content. Again, the methodology was suitable for this study because it covers an expanse geographical area, which may be difficult using direct methods (Johnson et al. 2016). Nigeria is a federation with northern and southern blocs, further divided into six geopolitical zones with 36 states and an FCT Abuja. The existence of 774 LGAs (768 in 36 states, 6 in FCT Abuja) highlights Nigeria's three tiers (federal, state, and local) of government. There are 176,846 polling units (PUs) spread across 8,809 INEC-created registration areas/wards for election management in the country. With this in mind, direct strategy will be a Herculean task for researchers.

Results and Discussion

This section presents statistical data (results) for analysis and discussion in support of the claim that political interference in election administration is largely at the back of the deplorable state of democracy, emanating from electoral irregularities that have consistently defined elections held in Nigeria between 1998-9 and 2023.

The study further argues that many Nigerian politicians manifest illiberal dispositions towards institutional operations and usually influence how institutions manage their affairs. Primary agencies responsible for election administration are supposed to reflect a sense of impartiality, impersonality, and neutrality in their day-to-day operations. But in reality, especially in

the context of Nigeria, these institutions have mostly tilted towards political direction and the role of some INEC officers has largely served the interests of those who facilitate their appointments. The opposition groups that are meant to represent a better alternative to the existing government are not doing well on their part. The conduct of some primary agencies for elections like INEC and the judiciary over the years has largely shown that they are not free agents, as they have not been allowed by political actors to function as independent entities deserving of their assignments on critical electoral issues.¹

Within the fold, INEC has consistently struggled to extricate itself from the perennial accusation of manifesting illiberal attitudes towards free contests. Madueke and Enyiazu (2025) identify systemic corruption as one of the institutional challenges that prevent INEC from guaranteeing credible elections. Odinkalu (2023a) observes that INEC is the most corrupt federal agency and the corruption in INEC is so pervasive that its officials collect big money from power-desperate politicians every four years to favour their electoral contests. The judiciary, believed to be populated by “learned people,” dashes the hope of using its “learned knowledge” and institutional authority to remedy the deplorable democratic situation in Nigeria. Apart from interference, some principal judicial officers are yet to clear the allegations that they deliver election-related judgements to the highest bidders and retire from service to evade sanctions from their regulatory agency. Many judicial officers are involved in power relations and promote “judicial mercenarism” by contumeliously delivering partisan judgements that undermine electoral justice and allow its fair balance to suffer (Jega 2021; Odinkalu 2023b). It should be stated that the liberal demands allow legal stipulations to inform and shape the actions (and inactions) of political actors and institutions, and any human efforts to influence these actions run at variance with these liberal demands.

This study uses the essential ingredients of political interference to further explore this argument in the following subsections. But before we delve into this properly, the next subsection summarises the KIIs.

Summary of Key Informant Interviews

The study succeeded with 21 KII participants, which represented a 58% response rate. The unsuccessful 15 participants did not respond to our calls, messages, and emails. The KIIs recorded the lowest response rate from the northeast geo-political zone with 50% (which is satisfactory based on our

1 Interview with party and community leaders in Imo, Benue and Niger states.

50% benchmark), while the southeast recorded the highest response rate. It used a combination of face-to-face and phone interviews together with interview schedules, conveniently interfaced with research assistants and the use of relevant social media platforms (Table 1).

S/№	G-p Zone	State	Medium	№ of SI	ZT (№)	ZRR (%)
1.	North-central	Benue	ISTRA/PC	3		
2.	North-central	Niger	ISTRA/WhatsApp	1	4	66.7
3.	North-east	Adamawa	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	1		
4.	North-east	Taraba	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2	3	50.0
5.	North-west	Kaduna	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2		
6.	North-west	Kano	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2	4	66.7
7.	South-east	Enugu	FTF/PC/WhatsApp	2		
8.	South-east	Imo	FTF/PC/WhatsApp	3	5	83.3
9.	South-south	C/River	ISTRA/PC/Gmail	2		
10.	South-south	Rivers	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2	4	66.7
11.	South-west	Lagos	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2		
12.	South-west	Oyo	ISTRA/PC/Gmail	2	4	66.7
Total				24	24	

Table 1. Interviews and Interview Schedule Administration and Collection

Note: G-p means geo-political, SI means successful interview, ZT means zonal total, ZRR means zonal response rate, ISTRA means interview schedule through research assistant, and PC means phone call. Computation for ZRR is based on 3 interviews from two selected states in each geo-political zone.

Of the 21 valid (successful) participants, the majority are in firm agreement that political interference in election administration has gross implications on how INEC organises elections in Nigeria. Specifically, 14 participants representing 66.67% of the total are of the view that the appointment of INEC principal officers by the president accounts for the president's control of these officers, against 7 (33.33%) that negate the view. The majority response suggests that the president should not appoint INEC key officers, while the minority view suggests that the problem is not about who appoints. The minority are comfortable with the constitutional provisions that allow the president to appoint INEC officers

and the Senate to confirm their appointments. However, they are worried that areas that should strengthen INEC to ensure credible elections are under the control of the appointing authorities instead of the INEC. They express the view that wrongdoing should have a commensurate consequence to deter its future occurrence. Secondly, 19 participants (90.5%) of the total justify the statement that political interference in INEC financing is responsible for Commission's dependence on government budgets for election management purposes in Nigeria. In reverse, only 2 participants (9.5%) disagree with the statement. Thirdly, 4 (19.05%) participants express the opinion that the opposition groups are showing a better alternative in Nigeria, while 17 (80.95%) do not express the same opinion. This suggests that most of the participants believe that a thin line exists between those in government and opposition as nearly all Nigerian politicians have similar political mindsets, evidenced by the spate of party defections in the country. Finally, 12 (57.14%) participants do not hold the view that INEC can redeem itself and assert its independence because of the process that brought them on board, lack of financial control, and fear of being sacked. Conversely, 9 (42.86%) respondents argue that, with people of character and integrity, INEC can assert its independence amid the existing institutional framework that underpins its design.

Political Interference in INEC Membership Composition and INEC Principal Officers

The INEC membership composition comprises a Chairman and 12 National Electoral Commissioners (NECs) at the national level and 37 Resident Electoral Commissioners (RECs) for each of the 36 states and FCT, Abuja. The chairman is INEC's chief electoral commissioner, while the RECs serve the same purpose at the state level. The chairman is also the chief returning officer for presidential elections and appoints returning officers for other elections. These officers are supported by permanent management staff headed by an executive secretary at the national level and 36 administrative secretaries for the states. These secretaries are chief accounting officers and heads of administration at their various levels. There are also 774 Electoral Officers (EOs) representing INEC at the LGA level. These EOs work with other permanent staff posted from the national headquarters to implement election administration policies (Figure 1; Akinduro 2011).

Given their appointments by federal authorities, the chairman, NECs, and RECs constitute INEC principal officers. The president exercises the executive powers of the Nigerian Federation as guaranteed in Section 5 of the CFRN to appoint INEC principal officers in consultation with the Council

of State and subject to confirmation by the Senate. They are appointed for five-year tenure and renewable once and their appointments are governed by Nigeria's federal character principle, which is a quota system/formula that promotes national unity and equitable representation of Nigerian entities based on LGA or state of origin (see Sections 14(3) and Section 171(5) of the CFRN, 1999). The chairman can be picked from anywhere the president desires, but the 12 NECs are drawn two each from Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, and the RECs are selected from their respective states. In Section 14, Part 1 of the Third Schedule, the CFRN further provides that these officers shall be persons of unquestionable integrity.

It should be stated that the appointment of these officers plays a catalytic role in the policy direction of INEC in terms of how and what strategies to adopt for election management. The officers recruit other permanent staff by exercising delegated presidential powers (Akinduro 2011). As of 2019, there are about 16,000 permanent INEC staff to manage elections in 119,974 PUs. This figure, which represents a fraction of one permanent INEC staff to 7.5 PUs and falls short of the expected balance, is complemented with ad-hoc staff. These ad-hoc staff are temporarily engaged and quickly trained on the spot to make up for the shortfall in INEC permanent staff for election duties. As part of its 2021 reform, INEC increased the PUs by 47.40% from 119,974 to 176,846 and engaged about 1,265,227 ad-hoc staff for the 2023 elections (see Figure 1 and Table 2 for these statistics).



Figure 1. The Organizational Chart/Hierarchy of INEC Principal Officers and Staff (Source: Authors' compilation with data from CFRN (1999), Akinwale (2023))

Election year	Nº of ad-hoc staff	Nº of polling units
2011	300,000	119,974
2015	750,000	119,974
2019	814,453	119,974
2023	1,265,227	176,846

Table 2. Summary of INEC ad-hoc staff and polling units in Nigeria, 2011–2023 (Source: Authors' compilation with data from online sources such as PLAC (2021), Akinwale (2023))

In exercising the presidential delegated powers, INEC is expected to meet the demands for merit system under Nigeria's public service governance and, also, reflect the constitutional federal character. In reality, like recruitments in other government institutions in Nigeria, ethno-religious favouritism, patronage, and submission of lists of preferred candidates by politicians have always overshadowed the demand for merit.² INEC has always blamed its poor election conduct on the activities of the ad-hoc staff (Iwu, as cited in Omotola 2010), but is reluctant to devise implementable alternatives to address the challenges posed by the ad-hoc staff.

The majority of the participants identify factors like political and party considerations (other than the expected merit) as preoccupying the minds of the appointing federal authorities in the appointment of INEC officers and permanent and ad-hoc staff. There is a general view that if any officer should be prosecuted for electoral malfeasance in line with constitutional stipulations, the prosecution will serve as a deterrent to future violators of electoral laws.³ They further express the view that such violators seem to be untouchable or celebrated and this partly explains the recurring incidents of irregularities that have characterised every election cycle in Nigeria.⁴

Again, most Nigerian politicians are not ready to undertake comprehensive reforms that can enthrone a system because they know that such a refined system will get them out of power. In 2007, President Umar Yar'Adua publicly acknowledged that the election that brought him to office was marred by irredeemable irregularities (Adeniyi 2011). He set up a 22-man Electoral Reform Committee to improve the electoral system, which submitted its report in 2008. The report was processed into a Government Whitepaper – the

2 Interview with APC leader in Adamawa state.

3 Interviews with party agent in Taraba state, APC candidate in Rivers state, and party chieftain in Kano state.

4 Interviews with party agent in Taraba state and PDP candidate in Imo state.

government's final position on the issue contained in the report. The president accepted all the minor recommendations, but rejected the most critical items that bordered on INEC restructuring (unbundling) and firmly retained the power to appoint all INEC officers (CLEEN Foundation 2019; Aiyede 2012). INEC also faces the problem of centralising its activities. On the surface, INEC policy implementation has a tint of decentralisation, with offices at Nigeria's subnational levels. The decision to decentralise policy implementation is driven by the notion that subnational governments can promote Nigerian diversity. Unfortunately, this brand of decentralisation is restricted to establishing offices at the subnational levels, with policy formation is presently highly centralised (Electoral Reform Committee 2008). Thus, INEC activities at these levels strictly follow the directives from the central office under the firm control of those that facilitate the appointment of its officers (Akinduro 2011).

In Section 158, the CFRN recognises INEC as an autonomous body by providing that it "shall not be subject to any other authority or person" in discharging its duties as provided by law. Truly, the appointment and supervision of INEC officers by federal authorities make them a likely tool for election rigging in the hands of those who appoint them. These officers have mostly represented one political interest or the other.⁵ In 1998, Gen. Abdusalami Abubakar appointed Ephraim Akpata to "humbly" midwife the 1998-1999 military-supervised transition elections. In 2000 and 2005, President Obasanjo tested the management prowess of his two loyalists – Dr Abel Guobadia and Prof. Iwu, with the latter organising the 2007 general elections widely adjudged to be the worst in Nigeria's recent electoral history. The relief INEC enjoyed during the Jonathan presidency was truncated with his defeat in 2015 and INEC returned to the usual trajectory. President Buhari, in 2015, appointed his niece, Amina Zakari, as acting INEC Chairman when such a position was unknown to the CFRN and the laid-down procedure for the appointment was not followed (*The Guardian* 2015). The same Zakari, who was accused of helping the ruling APC to rig elections in Nigeria, including the 2018 Ekiti governorship election, was controversially appointed by INEC to head its Presidential Election Collation Committee in 2019 (Ugwueze 2019; Ugbede 2019). In 2020, President Buhari appointed a card-carrying member of his party and also his aide, Lauretta Onochie, as one of the two INEC's NECs for the South South (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre 2021).

The primary reason for this interference is because the president who is the appointing authority is also an active participant and interested party in the electoral process. Because of the challenging economic situations occasioned by government ineffectiveness, many Nigerians accept these

5 Interview with PDP leader in Imo state.

offers that expose them to tow a less dignified path. Today, the Commission, operationalised by many of its officers, has become the subject of criticism over corruption, poor election management, and impartiality that have frequently defined Nigerian elections (Momah 2016).

Political Interference in INEC Financing and Financial Dependence on the Government

Apart from the human element in any organisation, financing is another important organisational element. It is regarded as the organisational life wire (Ogunna 1999; Ezeani 2006). Bertrand Russell advanced the argument that, in everything, power lies with those who control finance, not with those who know the matter upon which the money is to be spent. The president does not only appoint relevant INEC officers, but also determines their remunerations and, in so doing, influences how they discharge their statutory election functions. The recruitment, remuneration, training, and motivation of election staff for effective performance, as well as procurement and deployment of relevant election materials, require a huge amount of money. Thus, financing occupies a central position in the day-to-day activities of the INEC. Despite this crucial role of finances in goal attainments, INEC has repeatedly faced difficult tasks accessing funds for its assignments. The Commission captures the situation by stating that its annual budget is still tailored on an “Envelop System” template through bureaucratic budget call circulars. The template sometimes delays appropriation process and affects its readiness to fund some key activities on demand (INEC 2024).

The Commission is structured to depend on government budgets and this has made its control possible by the Nigeria presidency. Thus, it has received a total sum of ₦931.5 billion between 1999 and 2023 as election expenditures from Nigeria’s Federal Government (see Table 3 for specific details). Despite these huge financial releases, INEC still bears the imprint of poor performance. To this effect, YIAGA Africa (2020a) accuses INEC of financial recklessness for wasting billions of Naira on producing many unused ballots in each election season. It observes that the cost of conducting elections in Nigeria was very exorbitant compared to an average of 35% turnout in the 2011, 2015, and 2019 general elections. YIAGA Africa (2020a) further states that INEC printed over 427.5 million ballot papers of currency quality for 80 million registered voters for the 2019 elections, but used less than 30 million for the whole elections. This suggests that INEC’s lack of financial prudence and dearth of accountability

to the public and relevant authorities is due to the prebendal neo-patrimonial relations between the government and the Commission.

Election year	Election budget (in billion ₦)	Cost per voter (₦)
1999	1.5	26
2003	120*	995
2007	60.5	983
2011	139	1,893
2015	116.3	1,691
2019	189.2	2,249
2023	305	3,263
Total	931.5	11,100

Table 3. INEC Budgets for Election Management in Nigeria between 1999 and 2023 (Source: Authors' computation with data from online sources such as YIAGA Africa (2020a) and Okocha (2022))

Note: *₦120b was proposed, but the amount government released is not in the public domain. Balogun stated that INEC received ₦450 from Federal Government between 1999 and 2018.⁶



Figure 2. Government Delay in Releasing Election Funds to INEC (Source: YIAGA Africa (2020b))

⁶ The figure is derived from Adetutu Balogun's Twitter handle: <https://twitter.com/Tutsy22/status/1100635830534717443>.

INEC is also faced with challenges arising from government delay or piecemeal release of its election funds, which has affected election preparation in the country. Before 2015, election administration was governed by the 2002, 2006, and 2010 Electoral Acts. These legal instruments empowered the federal executive authorities such as the BMPU, OAGF, and FMOF to supervise how INEC funds were disbursed and managed. The BMPU within the Office of the President is responsible for the disbursement of INEC funding, the OAGF for financial auditing of INEC funding, and the FMOF for INEC's submission of financial year estimate of expenditure and income. These authorities are regarded as regulators of the regulator by their disbursement, auditing, and budgeting functions over INEC funds. Ideally, this supervisory role is important to ensure compliance with financial regulations and proper financial management. In practice, the supervision has constituted bureaucratic inertia, largely serving the purpose of interest protection and undermining INEC's preparation for elections.⁷

For instance, voter registration was delayed in 2003 and 2007 due to a delay in fund disbursement (Akinduro 2011). In October 2006, several INEC cheques were not honoured because they did not receive BMPU clearance for payments and this affected the procurement of critical election materials needed for the 2007 elections (National Democratic Institute 2007). Similarly, INEC budgeted ₦189,007,272,393 for the 2019 elections. Regrettably, on 22 November 2018, 86 days before the elections, the Federal Government partly released ₦143,512,529,455 (76%) of the total sum. On 21 December 2018, 57 days before the elections, the outstanding balance was released (see Figure 2 for the government's pattern of piecemeal disbursement of election funds to INEC for the 2019 elections). Although the 2022 Electoral Act provides for the early release of INEC funds, the power to release these funds still resides with the president (FRN 2023).

One of the accepted aspects of an institutionalised EMB is control of its budget with legislative (not executive) oversight (Wall et al. 2006). The current practice in which INEC financing is controlled by federal executive authorities has given the authorities an edge to influence how INEC manages elections. The financial waste witnessed in the country over the years without adequate mechanisms for financial accountability has become worrisome to many Nigerians. The delay in releasing INEC funds by the federal government has serious strategic implications for election governance and is akin to the saying: *he who pays the piper, dictates the tune*. A situation where

7 Interview with election observer in Imo state.

the government delays or engages in a piecemeal release of funds to INEC vitiates the very essence of INEC autonomy, makes it susceptible to political influence, and undermines its ability to guarantee acceptable elections.⁸

Synthesized Summary of Discussion

In modern administrative practice, personnel and finance are two crucial organisational elements, and whoever controls them invariably is in a firm control of the “soul” of the organisation. This explains the predicaments of INEC even though some of them are intrinsic. Many politicians in Nigeria display illiberal disposition towards electoral contests and rarely believe in the dual nature of the contests: every election inevitably produces winners and losers. To these politicians, elections have become a must-win contest. Since election administration falls within the administrative governance under INEC, they view INEC as an institution that must be captured in order to increase their odds of victory.

Again, INEC is not programmed to run by robots. Rather, it is embodied by its officers (and other staff) and, as such, represents what the officers and the appointing authorities make of it. Because of the way INEC is structured, these officers daily grapple with the fear of being sacked by their appointing authorities.⁹ This cripples INEC’s institutional autonomy and make its officers malleable to political whims. The contentious appointment process has placed INEC in a leadership recruitment dilemma, with recurring cases of poor election preparation and postponement in Nigeria. According to SBM Intelligence (2023), the financial costs of election postponement both for INEC and the Nigerian economy are quite significant. Postponing any aspect of elections until a later time places a question mark on the credibility of the process. It also results in staggering losses arising from the suspension of economic activities and restrictions imposed on the movement of people. The estimated primary and secondary cost of postponing the 2019 elections is \$2.23 billion and this figure represents 2% of Nigeria’s \$420 billion Gross Domestic Product (SBM Intelligence 2023).

Electoral irregularities are a reflection of collective criminality that requires collaboration of politicians, election officers, and party agents. Accordingly, Madueke and Enyiazu’s (2025) findings reveal that before the automated

8 Interviews with community leaders in Oyo and Kaduna states, and a politician in Cross River state.

9 Interview at Otobi, Otukpo LGA, Benue state.

election process in Nigeria between 1999 and 2011, politicians and their supporters voted many times and electoral officers helped them to justify their bloated figures by ticking random names in the voter registers. On one of these occasions, a voter who came to exercise his civic responsibility discovered that someone had voted on his behalf based on INEC record. The authors conclude that INEC has not truly demonstrated its independence in providing a level playing ground for Nigerians seeking to gain power through competitive peaceful elections due to political interference.

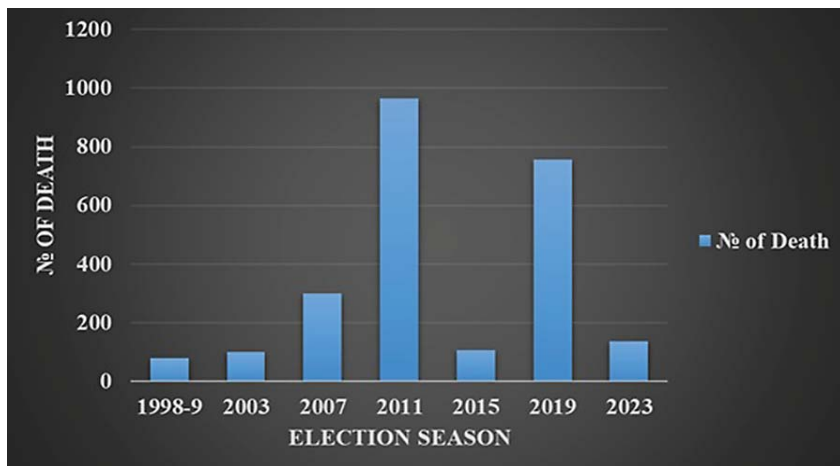


Figure 3. Trend in Bloody Nigerian Elections: 1998-99 and 2023 (Source: Authors' compilation with data from Mac-Leva (2022), Bekoe (2011), Human Rights Watch (2007, 2011), SBM Intelligence (2019))

Today, Nigerian elections are undermined by incidents of violent irregularities. Cases of vote suppression, double or multiple voting, vote buying, and intimidating statements are the common visible defining features of Nigerian elections amid various government-determined reform measures to improve INEC performance. All elections conducted by INEC have reportedly claimed 2,444 lives: 80 in the 1998-99 election season, 100 in 2003, 300 in 2007, 965 in 2011, 106 in 2015, 756 in 2019, and 137 in 2023 (Figure 3).

From these statistics, even the widely acclaimed credible 2015 elections recorded cases of irregularities with bloodshed and loss of lives. Elections held in this situation cannot wear the hallowed toga of credibility. This study,

therefore, maintains that something is intrinsically wrong when Nigerian elections, which are supposed to be peaceful contests, end up taking human lives and depriving legitimate winners of their victories due to irregularities. Hence, INEC activities or operations will rarely be different from its already susceptible human and financial composites.

Conclusion

This study makes an insightful empirical contribution to the debate on political interference in election management in Nigeria. It focuses on how this interference cripples INEC's independence in terms of its membership composition and finances. By its nomenclature and constitutional recognition as a statutory federal body, Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) conveys the notion of independence and is expected to exercise it in determining functional strategies to improve the quality of Nigerian elections. But the reality is that INEC independence exists in the attachment of "independent" to its name, at least for now.

Since INEC is not in firm control of its key officers and financing, its operations become a shadow of what politicians desire them to be. This explains why many Nigerians have serious misgivings about the constitutional provision that empowers federal authorities to appoint and supervise INEC principal officers, control its financing, and subtly determine its operations. This constitutional INEC design delinks the institutional INEC independence from the operational INEC independence, which existence is determined by the government. With this design, elections in Nigeria have always had charges of irregularities on their management.

These findings underscore the need for voter-determined electoral reforms since government-determined ones have not addressed the fundamental problems with the electoral system in Nigeria. Instructively, this study does not claim to offer a one-swoop explanation of the myriad of electoral problems facing democratic operations in developing countries like Nigeria by exposing the enduring systemic interference in election management. It leaves other plausible explanations in the domain of further studies, which can explore the possibility of getting INEC's principal officers on board through a credible process by the electorate (not by executive selectorate) to truly reflect their statutory mandates as recruiters of elected political leaders via credible elections.

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Appendix 1. Key Informant Interview Schedule

General theme: political interference in election administration and electoral irregularities in Nigeria.

1. What is your view on the claim that political interference in INEC membership composition accounts for the control of INEC's principal officers like the chairman and resident electoral commissioners in Nigeria?
2. How do you justify the statement that political interference in INEC financing is responsible for INEC's dependence on government budgets for election management purposes in Nigeria?
3. What is your opinion on the argument that the opposition groups are showing a better alternative in Nigeria?
4. Is it possible for INEC to assert its independence amid the present institutional framework that establishes it?

DEVOLUTION AND THE QUEST FOR PEACE AND NATIONAL COHESION IN ZIMBABWE

Charles Moyo^a

Abstract: This article investigates whether devolution, as currently implemented in Zimbabwe by the Mnangagwa administration, will project the nation towards peace and national cohesion. Such an interrogation is motivated by Zimbabwe's historical trajectory that is underpinned by deep-seated political, ethnic, racial, and regional cleavages that predate the colonial epoch. Accordingly, this article, based on interviews and the study of reports and literature, posits that the current devolution process in Zimbabwe is part of the Mnangagwa administration's package of cosmetic reforms designed to mislead Africa and the West. Congruently, lukewarm and cosmetic devolution dictated by a kleptocratic, financially constrained, and authoritarian centre (central government) is likely to frustrate the periphery (grassroots), accentuate existing social schisms, and further inflame secessionist sentiments in some provinces of Zimbabwe.

Keywords: *decentralisation, devolution, peace, national cohesion, Zimbabwe*

Introduction and Context

Paradoxically, decentralisation in Zimbabwe traces its roots to Robert Mugabe (1924-2019), the country's first and longest serving post-colonial leader who ruled the country with an iron fist from 1980 to 2017.¹ Mugabe was toppled by his military generals via a "soft coup" in November 2017.² Moyo and Mandikwaza (2022: 6) attribute Zimbabwe's political and

1 Zimbabwe is a Southern African nation divided into 10 provinces, 59 districts, and 1, 200 wards. The country covers an area of 390,745 km² and had a population of 16,320,537 as of 2022 (Zim Rights 2020: 13). Zimbabwe gained its independence from Britain in April 1980 through a blend of armed struggle and negotiation process.

2 It is often referred to as a "soft coup" because no naked force was used on then President, Robert Mugabe. Rather, he resigned under duress.

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economic decadence to Mugabe's scorched-earth policies. Also, he was a controversial leader who was loved and hated in equal measure; hence, the lexicons "Mugabephobia" (hatred for Mugabe) and "Mugabephilia" (love for Mugabe) (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ngqulunga 2022: 6). The coup that dislodged Mugabe in 2017 ushered in Emmerson Mnangagwa (Mugabe's former deputy) as the new president of Zimbabwe. When Mnangagwa assumed power in 2017, he promised to implement an ambitious programme of economic and political reforms in Zimbabwe (Moyo and Mandikwaza 2022: 8), including the implementation of devolution. The devolution process and its trajectory in Zimbabwe cannot be divorced from the country's colonial history and subsequent decentralisation efforts in the post-colonial era.

The need for decentralisation in general, and devolution in particular in Zimbabwe, sprang from the country's style of administration during the colonial epoch. The colonial administration in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) was highly centralised and curtailed grassroot participation (Kurebwa 2012). In the same vein, Mapuva and Mapuva (2014) note that: "The centralised local government system imposed substandard and centrally defined programmes on African and Native Councils..." After independence, there was therefore the need for a radical policy shift to accommodate the grassroots in the policymaking and implementation processes through decentralisation.

In the early stages of the Zimbabwe's independence, the government embarked on the policy of decentralisation of power and authority to local authorities. In that regard, the Prime Minister's Directive (1984 and 1985) was meant to create local government structures to promote participatory development and good governance through the process of decentralisation. Equally important were the Thirteen Principles to Guide the Decentralisation Process (1996), which "covered a variety of areas including decentralisation of responsibilities and fiscal powers, capacity building and coordination of government activities" (Zinyama and Chimanikire 2019: 153). Other relevant measures included the Growth with Equity and ZIMPREST policies, and the local government Acts. However, due to excessive central government interference in local governance structures and what Brand (1991) terms, "centrally created decentralisation," decentralisation in Zimbabwe failed to pay dividends, leading to calls for a more "radical" form of decentralisation called devolution. Devolution is provided in section 264 of Zimbabwe's 2013 constitution.

Though it seems to support devolution at face value, the Mnangagwa administration has displayed hesitancy in fully implementing devolution in Zimbabwe. Correspondingly, Mbuso and Motsi (2023) observe that:

“Mnangagwa has not only continued the actions that are ultra vires Zimbabwe’s new Constitution but has exhibited reticence to supporting meaningful actions that give effect to a devolved political system in Zimbabwe.” Such hesitancy by the Mnangagwa administration to fully implement devolution runs contrary to development literature, which often touts devolution as a locomotive for good governance and development. Notably, devolution is often linked to essential ingredients of the development process such as peace and national cohesion (OECD 2019). This article therefore seeks to interrogate whether devolution as currently implemented by the Mnangagwa administration, will lead to peace and national cohesion in Zimbabwe. There is a glaring scholarship lacuna in the context of devolution vis-à-vis peace and national cohesion in Zimbabwe, hence the relevance of this article. This article utilises data gleaned from conversations with leaders of civil society organisations, resident associations, governance experts, academics and community members in Zimbabwe. In addition, this article also utilised observation and desktop research.

Decentralisation: A Conceptual Overview

Decentralisation, which is sometimes characterised as a “silent” or “quiet” revolution, is among the most important reforms of the past 50 years (OECD 2019). Decentralisation is a complex multifaceted concept (World Bank 2020). Hence, Olowu (2001: 2) describes decentralisation as “a relative, complex and multidimensional process.” But what exactly is decentralisation? This section provides a conceptual overview and highlights the dividends and drawbacks of decentralisation. The “three waves of decentralisation” are also highlighted.

Definitions of decentralisation vary but are interconnected. Decentralisation is “the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to subordinate or quasi-independent government organisations and/or the private sector” (World Bank 2020). Correspondingly, “Decentralisation is usually referred to as the transfer of powers from central government to lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy (Crook and Manor 1998; Agrawal and Ribot 1999). Sayer et al. (2004: 5) note that: “The term decentralisation is used to cover a broad range of transfers of the ‘locus of decision making’ from central governments to regional, municipal or local governments.” The common denominator among the above definitions of decentralisation is that it entails dispersing political and economic power and authority from the centre (central government) to the periphery (grassroots).

Decentralisation mainly falls into four categories: political, administrative, fiscal, and economic/market-decentralisation. Some of these four types have their sub-types. Political decentralisation aims to give citizens or their elected representatives more power in public decision-making. It is often associated with pluralistic politics and representative government, but can also support democratisation by giving citizens, or their representatives, more influence in the formulation and implementation of policies (World Bank 2020). On the other hand, administrative decentralisation seeks to redistribute authority, responsibility, and financial resources for providing public services among different levels of government (ibid). It is divided into de-concentration, delegation, and devolution.

De-concentration as described by Muchabaiwa and Chiminya (2010: 26) in the following way: “Occurs when central government disperses its officials to sub-national levels to carry out regular functions under the authority of the central government. There is no transfer of power to sub national levels of government.” Therefore, de-concentration does not entail the transfer of power and authority to local levels of government. Delegation on the other hand is the transfer of certain functions to sub-national levels to be performed on an agency basis. However, central government still retains public accountability and responsibility to provide funds, material resources, and personnel for the delegated functions (Muchabaiwa and Chiminya 2010: 26). Like de-concentration, delegation is not free from the vice of central government control.

Furthermore, devolution involves “the transfer from centre to locality decision making powers and associated resources... An important element of devolution is discretionary authority which limits central government supervisory role so as to ensure that local government is operating within national policies” (Elcock and Minogue 2001: 101). The most striking feature about this definition is the powers that are granted to local authorities in terms of dealing with local resources. Devolution can therefore entail fund raising, budgeting, and financial use of local resources by local authorities. It is a more “independent” form of decentralisation.

Fiscal decentralisation and economic decentralisation (sometimes known as market decentralisation) are also common types of decentralisations. Fiscal decentralisation can be described in the following terms:

Fiscal decentralisation can take many forms, including a) self-financing or cost recovery through user charges, b) co-financing or co-production arrangements through which

the users participate in providing services and infrastructure through monetary or labour contributions; c) expansion of local revenues through property or sales taxes, or indirect charges; d) intergovernmental transfers that shift general revenues from taxes collected by the central government to local governments for general or specific uses; and e) authorisation of municipal borrowing and the mobilisation of either national or local government resources through loan guarantees (World Bank 2020).

The most complete forms of decentralisation from a government's perspective are privatisation and deregulation because they shift responsibility for functions from the public to the private sector (World Bank 2020).

Economic decentralisation is divided into privatisation and deregulation. Muchabaiwa and Chiminya (2010: 26) note that deregulation, “Consists of transferring service provision or production activities previously owned and regulated by the public sector to competing private organisations. The best example of deregulation is where government hires a private company to provide certain services to government.” De-regulation is mainly the contracting of private entities by government in order to execute certain duties for or on behalf of the government. Privatisation on the other hand “Is the transfer of service provision through the divestment of state-owned enterprises and private-public ventures. In this case the government creates parastatals which will provide services on a business principle of gaining profit” (Muchabaiwa and Chiminya 2010: 26). Therefore, privatisation is meant to boost government revenue and is opposed to free service delivery that is advocated by socialists.

Importantly, decentralisation in Africa unfolded in three notable periods or “waves.” The first decentralisation period (or “wave”) consolidated itself just before and at the point of independence (from the late 1940s through the early 1960s), when local (and state) authorities were being established by mutual agreement between the nationalists and the departing colonial authorities (Stren and Eyo 2007: 3). The next phase occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s. “when in a response to overcentralisation and problems with local project implementation, central governments throughout the developing world looked for administrative means of relocating development committees, technical ministries, and even large projects at the district level ‘closer to the people’” (Stren and Eyo 2007: 5). The third phase started in the late 1980s up to the present moment and involved a great number of states—both large and medium-sized—opting to undertake measures of

decentralisation from the centre to local governments with support from the civil society (Stren and Eyo 2007: 5). Zimbabwe's decentralisation agenda can be linked to the early and late 1980s.

Decentralisation has proponents and critics. Proponents of decentralisation often credit it as an engine for good governance and development. OECD (2019: 128) lists some of the benefits of decentralisation as follows: allocative efficiency, efficient public service provision, innovation, fiscal responsibility, accountability, economic growth, regional convergence, participation, increased revenue collection, reduced corruption, and political stability. Scholars and authorities whose viewpoint dovetail with the above viewpoint on decentralisation are many and include: Stren and Eyoh 2007; Olowu 2001; World Bank 2020; Zinyama and Chimanikire 2019; Crook and Manor 1998; Agrawal and Ribot 1999, among a host of others. On the other hand, OECD (2019: 128) also highlights the pitfalls of decentralisation as the following: diseconomies of scale, overlapping responsibilities, lack of capacities, destructive competition, disparities, local and national elite takeover, low participation, and risks of slow development and stagnation. Thus, decentralisation presents both opportunities and challenges. As indicated by Olowu (2001) and OECD (2019), the success of decentralisation is largely hinged on how it is implemented.

Decentralisation and the Principle of Subsidiarity

Decentralisation (including devolution) can be viewed through the lenses of the principle of subsidiarity as espoused and practiced by the European Union. The principle of subsidiarity is laid down and encapsulated in Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and Protocol (No 2) on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality (European Parliament 2024). The general aim of the principle of subsidiarity is to guarantee a degree of independence for a lower authority in relation to a higher body or for a local authority in relation to central government. It therefore involves the sharing of powers between several levels of authority, a principle that forms the institutional basis for federal states (European Parliament 2024). In other words, instead of every function to be performed at the EU headquarters in Brussels, the principle of subsidiarity decentralises certain functions and powers to member states based on competence. This is a reflection of decentralisation at a macro level. The same principle is applicable in the context of decentralisation where power, authority, and certain functions are decentralised to the local or lower levels of government. This dovetails with the principle of subsidiarity.

Devolution: Salient Arguments and Counter-Arguments

Devolution is one of the most hotly debated policy issues in Africa and beyond. The devolution debate is polarising in the sense that, over time, it has led to the emergence of two antagonistic camps: its staunch and relentless supporters versus its vehement critics. Common arguments for and against devolution are presented below.

Arguments for Devolution

Proponents of devolution such as OECD (2019) argue that it promotes transparency and accountability by promoting grassroots participation. Devolution brings government officials closer to the people through local governance structures. This promotes citizen participation and transparency in policy formulation and implementation. Styler (2013) observes that although South Africa has hurdles to overcome, devolution has given a voice to the grassroots in governance issues. Devolved local structures could also be training grounds for politicians in preparation for national level politics. Also, devolved structures of governance could act as buffer zones that prevent the national political elite from abusing local resources thereby preventing corruption.

Most African states were subjected to colonial rule's divide and rule strategy which left them politically, ethnically, regionally, religiously, racially fragmented. These cleavages sometimes plunge nations into civil strife. Also, they have the potential to stoke secessionist sentiments and longing (Olowu 2001: 12), as in the case of South Sudan which separated from Sudan in 2011. However, one viewpoint is that devolution's inclusive approach could rectify regional imbalances and curtail separatist movements by making their agenda irrelevant. If devolution is properly implemented, regions would benefit from their local resources. This could curtail disgruntlement by locals as they would be benefiting from the national cake at a local level. Thus, devolution could promote harmony and cohesion by uniting different regions in their diversity. Furthermore, one of the most popular narratives about devolution is that it promotes regional equality due to its promotion of exploitation of local resources for the development of the same regions (OECD 2019: 128). A formula can be devised where regions with more resources can share with those with less to achieve regional equality. Devolution can therefore promote equitable resource distribution.

Furthermore, Olowu (2001) notes that in most cases, the postcolonial state in Africa is strong where it ought to be weak and weak where it ought to be strong. Olowu traces this problem to a centralisation of power by the central governments of both the colonial and postcolonial era. Arguably, devolution can therefore whittle the powers of central government to ameliorate the abuse of power and authority by the central government. Styler (2013) notes that South Africa's devolution of power and authority was a response to the Apartheid government's centralised power and authority. Also, devolution is believed to promote administrative efficiency by limiting bureaucratic hurdles through sharing responsibilities with local authorities (OECD 2024; Olowu 2001). In that regard, it can be argued that delays are eliminated, and efficiency and effectiveness promoted. This could also promote investment opportunities, as investors do not like red tape.

Counter-Arguments

Though often presented as an antidote to poor governance, inequality, corruption and national disunity, devolutionary decentralisation seems to have its shortcomings and sceptics. Although devolution is often said to promote transparency and accountability, evidence in some cases suggest otherwise. Lambsdorff (2013) notes that devolution, and decentralisation in general, sometimes represent “a big story that does not deliver” as they sometimes lead to the decentralisation of central government corruption and inefficiencies to local levels. Correspondingly, Chepngetich, Waiganjo and Ismael (2020) revealed that Kenyan County “First Ladies” were getting hefty salaries and abusing public funds at the expense of local communities. Apart from Kenya other countries that practice devolution such as the Philippines, Ukraine, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, and Trinidad and Tobago have not been spared from local government corruption linked to syndicates at the national levels (ibid.). Furthermore, local structures could be “captured” by the local elite, which in turn inhibits grassroot participation (Olowu 2001; Chepngetich, Waiganjo and Ismael 2020; OECD 2019). Grassroot participation is an essential hallmark of devolution.

Furthermore, instead of fostering national unity, devolution could lead to directly the opposite. This is in line with Olowu's (2001) argument that devolution can undermine national unity by accentuating local, ethnic, tribal, regional, and separatist tendencies and trajectories. Veritas (2010), read by *New Zimbabwe* (2013), notes that devolution “can encourage regionalism or tribalism. Advancing one's own province or even tribe may be acceptable

in a provincial politician, but it is a very serious defect at the national level.” Therefore, devolution could lead to what Fanon (1963: 121) greatly feared: a scenario where “the tribe is favoured over the nation.” In the Zimbabwean context, devolution could potentially provide ammunition to separatist groups in Matabeleland and Midlands. Separatism undermines national unity. Bort (2010) notes that devolution in the UK fuelled calls for Scottish independence from the UK by Scottish nationalists who viewed devolution as inadequate.

Devolution is argued to also pose the danger of exacerbating existing regional inequalities as it encourages the exploitation of local resources by respective regions (OECD 2024). This means that regions with more resources have the potential to develop at a faster rate in comparison to their counterparts. This is a recipe for regional inequality and discord. Experience in Scotland has shown that devolution can result in increased taxation by local authorities, which can create class diversities across a nation (Bort 2010). While it is true that devolution dilutes central government powers by transferring power and authority to local structures, experience in most countries has shown that the central government remains in control and can even manipulate local structures to its own advantage. Furthermore, devolution can also lead to decentralisation from central government authoritarianism to local levels especially where local leaders become stumbling blocks to citizen participation. This would be like horse-trading evil for evil.

Olowu (2001) notes that devolutionary decentralisation suffers from an administrative dilemma. Besides the danger of duplication of duties by the central and local authorities, devolution can also weaken performance by handing responsibilities to unqualified local staff which in turn could undermine administrative efficiency and effectiveness. A case in point is that of Kenyan County “First Ladies” who occupy offices with full benefits despite lack of skills by most of them (Waiganjo and Ismael 2020). Given the arguments for and against devolution, it can be deduced that the benefits of devolution outweigh its shortcomings. However, any country that implements devolution should be wary of its shortcomings.

Decentralisation in Zimbabwe: A Historical Synopsis

As indicated in the introductory section, the need for decentralisation in Zimbabwe sprang from the country’s colonial history, which was characterised by a centralisation of power and authority by the minority colonial regime. Decentralisation efforts in Zimbabwe are hinged

government policy documents such as Growth with Equity, the Prime Minister's Directive (1984 and 1985), ZIMPREST, the Thirteen Principles of Decentralisation (1996), and the local government

Acts of parliament (Zinyama and ChimaniKire 2019: 153). Notably, "The Prime Minister's Directive (1984 and 1985) outlined the new local government structures and introduced new development committees, at village, ward, district, provincial and national levels with the aim of fostering bottom-up development planning" (Muchadenyika 2013: 6). Development was supposed to be initiated from below (grassroots) in a bottom to top approach. The Prime Minister's Directive (1984 and 1985) meant that development and policy initiation was supposed to be channelled from the ward, district, province up to the national level.

Notably, in 1988, some progress was made when a Committee of Ministers on Decentralisation was set up, as well as a Working Party of Permanent Secretaries and the Rural Development Council Coordinating Body for Provincial Business (RDCCBP) on Decentralisation and the Cabinet adopted Thirteen Principles to Guide the Decentralisation process. The 13 principles covered a variety of areas including the decentralisation of responsibilities and fiscal powers, capacity building, coordination of government activities, taxation, and transfer of power and authority to lower levers of power (Zinyama and ChimaniKire 2019: 153). However, a closer look at the 13 principles would indicate that they are devoid of political will and legal force that was needed for devolution to fully roar into life.

Also, decentralisation as spelt out in the Prime Minister's Directive (1984 and 1985) and other government policy documents did not materialise due to the government's desire to create a one-party state modelled along the lines of a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist centralised polity. Correspondingly, Onslow (2011: 2) notes that:

In Zimbabwe and ZANU-PF's case the process of centralising power took place in stop-start phases: first, there was the period 1980-1987, leading to the 1987 Pact of Unity, after which ZAPU was absorbed within ZANU-PF. The one-party phase dominated the political scene until 1999, a period ended by the emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change. In the third phase, post-2000, ZANU-PF maintained its dominance by restructuring state power, and attempting to manipulate the constitution and the electoral process, until the Global Political Agreement of September 2008.

As stated by Onslow above, the ZANU PF government has been concerned about the centralisation of political power since the 1980s up to the present moment. The quest for a one-party state and the centralisation of power left the line between the ZANU PF party and the state blurred. Hlatywayo and Mangongera (2020) characterise this phenomenon as “party-state-military conflation.” This largely explains why decentralisation did not yield positive results. Muchadenyika (2013: 6) adds that, “It is evident that the government was not committed to the letter and spirit of making local government a distinct sphere.” There was a lack of commitment to enforce decentralisation on the part of the government. “In practice, development planning agencies suffered time and budgetary constraints, lack of skilled personnel and central government interference in local decision making” (ibid.). As a result of central government interference and control, decentralisation in Zimbabwe produced what Brand (1991) calls “centrally created decentralisation.” For decentralisation to succeed, it must not be heavily controlled by the central government.

There are legal and regulatory instruments in place that makes decentralisation dependent on the central government in Zimbabwe. For instance, according to the Thirteenth Principle to guide the decentralisation process, “the Public Service Commission will manage the transfer of personnel from central government to rural district councils where this happens as part of decentralisation” (Zimbabwe Institute 2005: 5). The Zimbabwe Institute (ibid.) further notes that:

The Ministry of Local Government administers all the Acts and Statutory Instruments promulgated in the local government area. The Minister retains a substantial supervisory role over all local government units (LGUs) and enjoys the ultimate power of intervention and suspension of any local council. In some sense, the LGUs in Zimbabwe operate at the behest and suffering of the Minister. In fact, the main legal instruments of local government invest the President and the Minister of Local Government with the power to suspend or act in place of a local authority and the power to nullify some decisions of local authorities. For instance, in the RDC Act alone, there are more than 250 instances where the Minister can intervene in the day to day running of Rural District Councils.

The excessive interference of the Minister of Local Government in local affairs impedes on decentralisation compromises between participatory development and good governance. As highlighted above, the minister responsible for local governance can interfere 250 times in the day-to-day running of local governance structures. Thus, the minister is given power by law to usurp the powers of local governance structures. This renders them ineffective and irrelevant. The president can also directly interfere in local governance structures. “Under the RDC Act, for instance, the President is empowered to declare, name, alter or abolish a district” (Zimbabwe Institute 2005: 5).

In addition, the government created the District Development Fund (DDF) in order to provide resources to local communities, especially communal areas. However, DDF has been rocked by corruption and mismanagement. “It has since suffered from goal displacement and has become a vehicle for massive mismanagement of resources and corruption by both the local and national political elite” (Zimbabwe Institute 2005). Where there is too much interference by the central authorities in local government issues, transparency and accountability are difficult to attain. As a result, corruption and poor service delivery prevail.

Central government interference on local structures compromises development and good governance. “The implication is that there is very little participation in the development of policies” (Sachikonye 2007: 54). After the failure of decentralisation and the resultant underdevelopment, regional inequality, and poor governance, there have been calls for devolution by some Zimbabweans. MDC N (2013) notes that, “Due to an absence of a devolved system of government, excessive centralisation of power, high levels of corruption, politicisation of public institutions, awkward institutionalised policy and widespread bad governance – the past three decades have triggered the virtual collapse of our public service delivery.” This is the reason why most Zimbabweans are calling for a more independent form of decentralisation called devolution.

Zimbabwe’s Troubled History: Political and Social Schisms

This section reflects on Zimbabwe’s tumultuous history. Such a reflection is crucial in terms of understanding why most Zimbabweans are yearning for devolution in the country. One of the biggest stains in the history of Zimbabwe is political violence articulated by Moyo (2020: 65) as the “specter

of violence” in Zimbabwe. The country’s culture of political violence can be conceptualised and contextualised through the lenses of the country’s political culture and socialisation in the context of the country’s pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial historical trajectories (ibid). During the pre-colonial period, around 1873, the Shona communities were subjected to political violence by their Ndebele counterparts. Such violence, which is succinctly chronicled by Beach (1974) and also echoed by Malunga (2018), took the form of raids, displacements and killings.

Zimbabwe was subjected to brutal British colonial rule from 1897 up to the country’s independence in 1980. “Through colonialism, settlers became local in Africa and Africans became aliens in their own native territories. Colonialism, especially in its apartheid expression... questioned the humanity of Black Africans, displaced them, and dispossessed them of their land” (Mpofu 2022: 36). Thus, colonialism even in Zimbabwe was characterised by violence dispossession and displacement. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009: 1144) rightly observes: “Colonialism was never a terrain of democracy, human rights and freedom; rather it was a terrain of conquest, violence, police rule, militarism and authoritarianism.” Banana (1989) sheds light on how brutal the British colonial system was in Zimbabwe. Consequently, colonialism in Zimbabwe deeply divided the people according to racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and class persuasions.

Political violence continued unabated in the post-colonial era in Zimbabwe. The “Entumbane” clashes between ZANLA and ZIPRA liberation forces in 1981 laid the seeds of disunity in newly independent Zimbabwe. However, in independent Zimbabwe, the darkest era in terms of political violence falls between 1982 and 1987 (Moyo 2020: 70). During this period, the Mugabe regime implemented the “Gukurahundi” policy, which was meant to stamp out “dissidents” in the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces of Zimbabwe. The Gukurahundi massacres left 20,000 civilians dead according to a report by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (1997). Just like the Entumbane clashes, the Gukurahundi massacres fuelled ethnic antagonism in Zimbabwe.

Political violence in Zimbabwe was also notable in the early 1990s. Moyo (1992) analyses electoral violence, which witnessed the shooting of the opposition Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) candidate, Patrick Kombayi by known state security agents in 1990. In the year 1999, a new opposition political party was formed in Zimbabwe in the mould of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The MDC was formed to provide a democratic

alternative to the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF)’s violent and kleptocratic rule (Moyo 2020: 66). Since the time of the formation of the MDC in 1999 to date, political violence has become a permanent feature of Zimbabwe’s political landscape. The violence of the 2000, 2002, 2005 and 2008 elections is sufficiently chronicled by scholars such as Makumbe (2002; 2006; 2009a; 2009b), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2004) and Masunungure (2009), among a host of others.

It should be noted that the centralisation of political power largely created the Zimbabwe Crisis. In 1987, Robert Mugabe abolished the position of Prime Minister and replaced it with the powerful and authoritative position of Executive President. In the early 2000s, Mugabe militarised the state. Masunungure (2009) notes that the militarisation of the state under Mugabe occurred in two phases. The first stage took the form of a growing number of senior military officers being appointed to lead strategic state institutions. The second stage took the form of the creation of the “Joint Operations Command (JOC)” – an institution that comprised of heads of the military, police, air force, prison service, and intelligence. The JOC was involved in the bloody 2008 elections, which, according to Masunungure (2009), were a “militarized election.” Congruently, Mandaza (2014) characterises Zimbabwe as a “securocratic state.”³ Also, Zimbabwe can be described as a quasi-military dictatorship and a de facto one-party state due to the dominance of what Hlatywayo and Mangongera (2020) call the party-state-military conflation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ruhanya (2020) characterise the current crop of ZANU PF nationalist leadership as the “Chimurenga aristocracy” considering their entitlement mentality. Considering their low levels of craft competence in public affairs, the current ZANU PF leadership arguably fit into the kakistocracy label.⁴

Moreover, the post-Mugabe era has also been characterised by political violence. On 1 August 2018, soldiers gunned down six civilians and seriously injured 35 others on the streets of Harare during election related protests (Report of the Commission of Enquiry on the 2018 Post-Election Violence 2018: vi). Also, the killing of at least 17 people during the protests of January 2019, and the subsequent abductions of pro-democracy activists and opposition politicians by state security agents (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum 2019), is a grim illustration of the dominance of political violence in Zimbabwe. Since Mnangagwa seized power via a military coup

3 Securocrats are powerful military personnel. Therefore, a securocratic state is a state dominated and dictated by securocrats.

4 Kakistocracy is rule by the least qualified individuals in a country.

in 2017, attempts have been made through state institutions to decimate opposition and dissenting voices in Zimbabwe. This has further accentuated political polarisation in Zimbabwe. It is also worth mentioning that the coup that dislodged Mugabe drove away his ministers to exile and angered his loyalists at home.

Notably, Zimbabwe's post-independence history is also characterised by massive corruption scandals which have caused the country's economy not only to plummet but also aggrieved the masses. Zimbabwe's main corruption scandals since the country's independence and the most famous ones include the 1988 Willowgate Scandal, the 1994 War Victims Compensation Scandal, and the 2020 COVID-19 scandal involving Drax International LLC (Pindula News 2022). Considering the list of above cited corruption scandals during the Mugabe and Mnangagwa eras, it is fair to characterise Zimbabwe as a kleptocracy.⁵ Other triggers of economic collapse in Zimbabwe are the IMF-supported economic structural adjustment programme (ESAP) of the early 1990s, the war veterans' pay-outs in 1997, and the participation in and funding of Zimbabwe's intervention in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's civil war in 1998-99. These events greatly strained Zimbabwe's economy (Moyo 2020: 74-75).

Furthermore, in the last two decades, secessionist movements and parties have emerged in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe. Mthwakazi Liberation Front (MLF) and Mthwakazi Republic Party (MRP) are the most notable. The motivations behind these secessionist parties include the unresolved Gukurahundi massacres, "phony" decentralisation, perceived ethnic discrimination, political persecution, and economic marginalisation (Moyo 2021; Moyo 2022; Fornies 2022; Hadebe 2020). However, in 2022, Zimbabwe's president, Emmerson Mnangagwa issued a chilling warning to secessionist movements in Zimbabwe. He promised to "shorten their lives" and urged them to "walk a path that prolongs your life" (Pindula 2022). This shows that, if not handled well, the issue of secession can plunge Zimbabwe into civil strife and chaos. Accordingly, the burning questions are: can devolution as currently implemented by the Mnangagwa administration quench the desire for secession and the potential instability associated with it in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe? Can devolution promote national peace and cohesion in Zimbabwe? The next sections tackle these questions.

5 Kleptocracy means rule by the very corrupt.

Devolution in Zimbabwe

This section seeks to highlight the policy, institutional, and legal effort that has been made vis-à-vis the implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe. Before delving deep into the discussion, it is important to mention that due to Zimbabwe's democracy and good governance deficit, also known as the "Zimbabwe Crisis," civil society organisations, resident associations, communities, and opposition parties are clamouring for devolution as a redemptive policy path. Proponents of devolution in Zimbabwe believe that decentralisation, as espoused in the Prime Minister's Directive (1984 and 1985) and other policy blueprints, failed to pay dividends and, therefore, ought to be replaced with devolution. Moreover, the majority of Zimbabweans favour devolution. An Afro-barometer survey of 2012 revealed that 7 out of 10 provinces of Zimbabwe and 61% of the population favour devolution (Afro-barometer 2012). Unlike the Mugabe administration, which was opposed to devolution, the Mnangagwa administration has made some effort, albeit cautiously, in terms of devolutionary decentralisation. ZEPARU (2019: VII) observes that: "The government has adopted a gradualist approach to the implementation of devolution and not a big bang approach as has happened in other jurisdictions in order to learn and pick lessons as the process is being rolled out." However, this hesitancy and slow pace in implementing devolution has raised criticism from different quarters.

Devolution is enshrined in Section 264 (1) of the new constitution of Zimbabwe: "Whenever appropriate, governmental powers and responsibilities must be devolved to provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities who are competent to carry out those responsibilities efficiently and effectively." In the same vein, the constitution provides that the three tiers of government in Zimbabwe are: the national government; provincial and metropolitan councils; and local authorities, which are urban and rural councils (Zim Rights 2020: 12). Furthermore, the government amended the constitution and repealed sections 268 and 269 of the constitution to set out separate frameworks for provincial and metropolitan councils. Section 301(3) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe also states that no less than 5% of the national revenues raised in any financial year must be allocated to the provinces and local authorities as their share in that year. The 2019 National Budget Statement provided US\$ 310 million in the budget to execute devolution, which was to be shared among 92 local authorities and 10 provincial councils. The total budget was initially projected to increase by 12% and 15.2% to US\$ 347.2 million and US\$ 400 million in 2020 and

2021 respectively (ZEPARU 2019: 3). Existing legislation such as the Urban Councils Act and the Rural Districts Councils Act is also meant to anchor the devolution process in Zimbabwe.

The government blueprint, Transitional Stabilisation Programme and Reforms Agenda (TSPR), adopted in 2018, directly addresses the issue of devolution of governmental powers, responsibilities, and resources with a key focus on provinces championing economic development. This resulted in a budget allocation of US\$ 310 million to provincial councils in the 2019 financial year as part of the five per cent subnational and local governments are entitled to in each financial year, and this was carried over to the 2020 budget (Zimbabwe Human Rights Association 2020).

There are also institutional measures that have been put into place for the successful implementation of devolution. For instance, the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) is involved in building capacity of the devolved areas in packaging their resources for investment attraction and the President of Zimbabwe chairs of the Cabinet Committee on Devolution (ZEPARU 2019: vi). In addition, President Mnangagwa created the portfolio of Minister of State for Provincial Affairs and Devolution. Also, with support from government, the Midlands State University established the Centre for Public Policy and Devolution in 2020. The purpose of this centre is:

To help with the designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating of devolved and participatory governance;
 To assist the Government of Zimbabwe frame devolution implementation, build the necessary consensus, draw lessons and creatively devise necessary institutional reforms; To provide appropriate technical and policy skills necessary for practical implementation and evaluation of devolution; and,
 To provide capacity development to individuals and groups from the three tiers of government, community, civil society and private sector institutions (Centre for Public Policy and Devolution 2024).

No.	Step	Nature of Step	Year	Function
1	Constitution of Zimbabwe	Legal	2013	The constitution provides for devolution and the need to allocate resources towards its implementation.
2	Rural and Urban Councils Act (Amendment)	Legal	2017	Establishes structures critical for the implementation of decentralisation including devolution.
3	Minister for Provincial and Devolution Affairs	Institutional	2018	Oversees the implementation of devolution.
4	Transitional Stabilisation Programme Reform Agenda (TSPR)	Policy	2018	Outlines policies, strategies and projects that guide <i>Zimbabwe's</i> social and economic development including devolution.
5	2019 National Budget Statement	Policy	2019	Indicates the amount of resources to be allocated for devolution purposes.
6	Cabinet Committee on Devolution	Institutional	2020	Responsible for planning and overseeing the implementation of devolution.
7	Devolution and Decentralisation Policy	Policy	2020	Promotion of inclusive growth and development through devolution.
8	Midlands State University Centre for Public Policy and Devolution	Institutional	2020	Provides capacity building in public policy and devolution.
9	Inter-Governmental Fiscal Transfers System Administrative Manual	Policy	2024	Guides local authorities on how to manage devolution funds in a transparent and accountable manner.

Table 1. Summary of Legal, Institutional, and Policy Steps Towards Devolution by the Government of Zimbabwe

Thus, it can be seen from the above discussion in this section that unlike the Mugabe administration which had a “phobia” for devolution, the Mnangagwa administration has taken some steps, albeit half-heartedly, to tackle the devolution question. However, the question is whether such steps or efforts are adequate, genuine, and whether they will lead to economic development and ultimately peace and national cohesion. The following section addresses these particular questions.

Will Devolution Foster National Peace and Cohesion in Zimbabwe?

This final section tackles the question whether devolution will translate to national peace and cohesion in Zimbabwe. The section relies on conversations with community members, traditional leaders, governance experts, civil society leaders, and existing literature on the subject. The target population for the interviews was chosen from all 10 provinces of Zimbabwe through purposive sampling and the collected data was analysed through thematic analysis. In terms of gaps vis-à-vis the collected data: the collected data was qualitative in nature and was collected through interviews and desktop research. A mixed method research (qualitative and quantitative) approach would have probably strengthened the validity and reliability of the collected data.

Findings from the discussion revealed that if past conflicts, especially the Gukurahundi massacres, are not resolved, even devolution will not foster national peace and unity in Zimbabwe. For instance, a headman in Silobela remarked: “Devolution cannot work at the present moment especially here in Midlands where people were killed during the Gukurahundi period and there has not been any meaningful effort to resolve the issue.” He added that: “While other provinces were developing and enjoying peace, the people of Matabeleland and Midlands were subjected to unspeakable state sponsored violence for five years. This led to the underdevelopment of our regions.” Regional inequality is detrimental to national cohesion. This rhymes with what a visibly angry man from Bulawayo said: “The ZANU PF government was busy siphoning our resources during the Gukurahundi period. They are still doing it today and it will lead to regional inequality and consequently ethnic and national disharmony. The current devolution framework does not consider that dark past. What we want is genuine devolution.” Relatedly, one community member remarked: “We have many gold mines in the province but we do not see the benefit of having all those rich gold mines, we have every right to believe that our gold is being used to develop other areas and this must

be corrected” (Zimbabwe Human Rights Association 2020: 6). In other words, the devolution exercise is like scratching on the surface and ignoring deep-seated past atrocities that were committed by the state. Therefore, there is a need to address the issue of the Gukurahundi genocide through a grassroots-oriented process that will lead to national peace, cohesion, and reconciliation.

A think tank leader from Bulawayo, who described the current devolution efforts as “tokenism,” was also of the view that the current devolution efforts are unlikely to succeed due to the political marginalisation of the people from Matabeleland and some parts of Midlands provinces. She went further to state that political marginalisation at a national level will impact the devolution process at a local level since the current devolution process is controlled by the ruling elite in the capital Harare. The issue of political marginalisation of leaders from Matabeleland started during the early years of Zimbabwe’s independence. For instance, Tendi (2016: 7-8) notes that former ZIPRA intelligence officers were systematically weeded out of Zimbabwe’s intelligence service, the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO). Political marginalisation, whether perceived or real, of the leaders of Matabeleland is detrimental to national cohesion in general and inimical to the successful implementation of devolution in particular. Devolution seeks to achieve the opposite of exclusion and marginalisation.

Furthermore, a businessman from Manicaland province said devolution in Zimbabwe would hardly succeed in cultivating a climate of peace and national cohesion in Zimbabwe due to its disregard of local culture. He retorted: “The case of devolution is a case of contradiction. How do you bring devolution to the people of Matabeleland and at the same time undermine their ceremonial king, fire their chiefs like Ndiweni, and destroy their cultural symbols at airports?” This is related to what a student from Lupane State University said: “Devolution in its current state is detached from the people’s aspirations. Devolution means that at a local level, people should come up with their own leadership in line with their community and cultural needs.”

Another potential challenge that was highlighted is the potential capture of the devolution process either by national or local elites leading to community discontentment. To that end, a university lecturer based in Masvingo noted that: “Devolution is a good developmental concept. However, there is a lurking danger of the process being hijacked by local or national elites for personal aggrandisement. In Kenya, the County First Ladies captured the process and embezzled funds.” This argument is buttressed by Olowu’s (2001: 12) submission:

A political dilemma is the problem of local elite capture. In many instances, it is local elites rather than the most vulnerable that capture decentralised power, which is then utilized to repress the local minorities, women and foreigners in the various communities. Many traditional rulers in different parts of Africa have used decentralized power to obstruct development by diverting decentralised resources to personal uses; such rulers may thus be opposed to basic modern education, health services, sanitation and water supplies because of their fear that these may break their hold on local power.

This argument seems to hold water considering the power wielded by traditional leaders, especially chiefs in Zimbabwe. Since the Mugabe era up to the present moment, chiefs have often been pampered with hefty benefits by the ZANU PF government. Some of these benefits include connection of their homes to the power grid, luxurious vehicles, and renovation of their homesteads. In turn, chiefs and other traditional leaders such as headmen, have been at the epicentre in terms of entrenching ZANU PF's violent rule at a local level. It is therefore likely that traditional leaders, especially chiefs, will "hijack" the devolution process for personal expediency. Alternatively, they will be manipulated into puppets and agents of the central government in order to scuttle democratic devolutionary efforts. The likely end result would be public disgruntlement and disunity.

Another notable challenge with Zimbabwe's devolution exercise is a lack of political will by the Mnangagwa administration. Moyo and Motsi (2023) contend that devolution in Zimbabwe is more of a myth than a reality especially in the context of its implementation. The Mugabe administration was openly and vehemently opposed to devolution and never made efforts to implement it despite constitutional provisions on the matter. On the other hand, the Mnangagwa administration has displayed a half-hearted approach in relation to devolution. Correspondingly, a lecturer from the University of Zimbabwe noted that, "The Mnangagwa administration does not want to lose power through devolution, hence the political grandstanding and haranguing on the matter. There is paucity of resolve and devolution is merely part of Mnangagwa's reforms propaganda meant to deceive the West and African Union. Devolution largely exists on paper rather than in reality. It is a paper tiger."

The Mnangagwa administration is a continuation of the Mugabe administration, which was vehemently opposed to devolution. Notably, Mnangagwa's strategy is a blend of autocracy and progressive reforms

propaganda. Hence, “Mnangagwa’s leadership generally projects a powerful autocracy that practically maintains the status quo while instrumentally using public relations for plausible deniability and reforms propaganda” (Moyo and Mandikwaza 2022: 20). Devolution can be argued to be part of Mnangagwa’s package of cosmetic reforms designed for propaganda purposes. Congruently, Mhandu (2021) characterises devolution under the Mnangagwa administration as: “phony decentralisation, an enemy of the municipal administrative system and a threat to infrastructure development.” Sloganeering and politicking by the central government in relation to devolution should therefore be avoided.

Lack of political will can also be linked to the snail pace in implementing devolution, the limited desire to set up robust devolutionary structures, and meagre resource allocation towards devolution by the central government. The 5% budget allocation for subnational and provincial councils is hardly enough and displays a lack of political will on the part of the central government. Another challenge is Zimbabwe’s economy, which is in the “intensive care unit” and characterised by closure of companies, high levels of unemployment, acute poverty levels, low salaries, and skyrocketing cost of living. Such economic conditions coupled with rent-seeking behaviour, makes the implementation of devolution cumbersome. A lecturer in local governance at the Midlands State University noted that Zimbabwe’s economic climate is not currently in sync with the successful implementation of devolution. Furthermore, the devolution implementation approach is also questionable. In the same vein, one Nkayi resident argued that the current “one-size-fits-all approach” is problematic, as it does not consider the historical, political, and socio-economic dynamics of different provinces in Zimbabwe. She argued that such an approach would lead to regional inequality and consequently fuel regional and ethnic tensions in Zimbabwe.

Decentralisation experts and scholars cite the dilemma of implementing devolution vis-à-vis national fragmentation and secession. For instance, Olowu (2001: 12) postulates that “devolutionary decentralisation might undermine national cohesion and fan the embers of secession, which is usually a real consideration in societies in which ethnic and community loyalties are quite strong relative to national cohesion.” The dilemma for the Mnangagwa administration relates to fears that devolution in Zimbabwe might deepen calls for secession especially in the south-western parts of the country. Hadebe (2020: 155-180) notes that an “upsurge of pro-Mthwakazi ethnic consciousness” has taken place in Zimbabwe’s western provinces of

Matabeleland.⁶ He further notes that a number of political organisations and parties have since 2000 been established, demanding Matabeleland's secession from Zimbabwe, more especially since 2017, grounding their discourse on the perceived discrimination of the Ndebele people by the Shona, who constitute the majority in the country.

In light of calls for secession from Zimbabwe by some sections of the population, especially in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe, the burning question is: will the current devolution exercise quench the thirst for devolution and ultimately lead to national cohesion? It is important to pose such a question considering President's Mnangagwa's chilling warning that he will shorten the lives of those pursuing the secession agenda in Zimbabwe (Pindula 2022). This indicates that the Mnangagwa administration is ready to unleash high intensity violence to quash secessionist efforts. One Karoi resident was sceptical about devolution and noted that: "I think we should stick to the general decentralisation process as pronounced by the late President Mugabe. Devolution will strengthen the voice of those who want to divide Zimbabwe into two countries. We should strive for peace and unity and not the opposite." This statement seems to hold water considering that one member of the Mthwakazi Republic Party (a separatist party) stated that: "I think devolution is a starting point in pursuit of secession. Devolution will give us the autonomy and leeway to advance our cause. The only problem is that it is cosmetic devolution." Thus, the potential of devolution in fuelling separatist yearning and sentiments should not be overlooked. The Scottish case is a good example. Furthermore, a youth from Kezi who subscribes to secession remarked: "They are [central government] trying to deceive us with their phony devolution hoping that we will abandon our cause of separation from Zimbabwe. They are adding fuel to the fire. We will not be bribed with crumbs."

Correspondingly, a leader of one of the resident trusts in Harare argued that if the Mnangagwa administration had implemented a genuine, democratic, and horizontal devolutionary process, chances are high that the secessionist agenda would have been contained. In the same vein, a resident from Lupane noted that: "How do you go and impose cosmetic and phony devolution to a historically and culturally sensitive region like Matabeleland. It is an insult. This government wants national disharmony. They want to divide and rule us." If well implemented, devolution can promote the participation

6 Pro-Mthwakazi consciousness and groups refers to political and social groups that advocate the secession of Matabeleland and Midlands provinces from Zimbabwe in order to form an independent nation called Mthwakazi.

of minority groups like those found in Matabeleland thereby promoting their inclusion in public policymaking. Hence, decentralisation (including devolution) “can reduce tensions arising from historical, ethnic or cultural reasons by accommodating heterogeneity in public policy. Automatic decision making can help suppress local motives for conflict with central administration” (OECD 2019: 168). Devolution can also help promote the flourishing of local culture and thereby promote peace. Hence, one community member noted that: “Devolution will help to preserve and foster peace. This would also help by hiring local police who love us for who we are, not being humiliated by police who cannot speak the local languages” (Zimbabwe Human Rights Association 2020: 6).

Also, the Mnangagwa administration seems to be focused on power retention and centralisation rather than the reverse. Hence the overemphasis of section 1 of the Zimbabwean constitution, which provides that Zimbabwe is a unitary, democratic, and sovereign republic. “They will talk and talk until they’re old and dead and Zimbabwe will be here still as a unitary state,” bellowed President Mnangagwa (Pindula News 2022). A leader of one of the biggest youth organisations in Zimbabwe remarked: “This is a cosmetic process (devolution) driven by the central government. The Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) controls everything and the President chairs the Cabinet Committee on Devolution. It is centrally created devolution. Where are the grassroots?” Furthermore, a political analyst based in Bulawayo argued that, “Zimbabwe, as pointed out by Dr. Ibbo Mandaza is a securocratic state. I should add that Zimbabwe is a quasi-military dictatorship and de facto one-party state. Such a state cannot share power with local structures. What we are seeing in the post-Mugabe era is not decentralisation (devolution). It is re-centralisation.” This viewpoint holds water considering the stranglehold that the President, his cabinet, and Provincial and Devolution Ministers have over the devolution process in Zimbabwe.

Another stumbling block to the successful implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe is the existence of undemocratic local government-related legislation, especially the Rural Districts Act and Urban Councils Act that inhibited the dispersion of power and authority to local structures during the country’s decentralisation era especially in the 1980s. This explains the excessive interference by the local government minister in local government affairs. Devolution is unlikely to succeed until such undemocratic local governance legal instruments are reformed for the better. In recent years, the firing of mayors and chiefs by the local government minister is an indication of a highly centralised governance system that is impervious to democratic devolutionary

decentralisation. Thus, given the entire discussion in this section, it is evident that devolution is unlikely to lead to national peace and cohesion in Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it can be said that, just like the decentralisation agenda of the 1980s and 1990s, devolution as currently implemented by the Mnangagwa administration is unlikely to pay dividends in Zimbabwe. The Mnangagwa administration is pursuing a dual and contradictory policy of decentralisation (devolution) and re-centralisation of power and authority. Notably, the current devolution process in Zimbabwe is cosmetic, lukewarm, elitist, centrally created and dictated, and contrary to the spirit of democratic decentralisation. It is executed by an authoritarian, securocratic, kleptocratic, centralised, and de facto one-party state, at the detriment of the periphery (grassroots). The likely result could be an accentuation of regional inequality, poverty, and ethnic disharmony. This, in turn, is likely to stoke grassroot discontentment and augment separatist sentiments, especially in the Matabeleland region and in some parts of the Midlands province. Thus, the current devolution implementation matrix in Zimbabwe is likely to undercut national peace and cohesion in the country. A quasi-military dictatorship that is obsessed with power centralisation and retention like the Mnangagwa administration is unlikely to pursue a grassroots-oriented devolutionary decentralisation agenda. Therefore, there is need to democratise the centre, fully address past atrocities, cease political violence, avoid reforms propaganda, and stamp out corruption for genuine and people centred devolution to be realised. National peace and cohesion will then follow.

It should be underlined that devolution should not be misconstrued as a “magic pill” that will automatically propel Zimbabwe towards a trajectory of good governance, peace, and national cohesion. It is merely part of the solution to Zimbabwe’s governance and development quagmire. Notably, this article is one of the foremost to tackle devolution vis-à-vis national peace and cohesion in Zimbabwe, hence its originality and vitality in bridging the scholarship lacuna that has existed. Therefore, insights from this paper can be useful to policymakers, students, and civil society in Zimbabwe and beyond.

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HUNGARIAN DIPLOMACY TOWARDS AFRICA: FORGING BILATERAL RELATIONS IN THE 1960s AND 1970s

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Abstract: One of the defining facts of Hungary's foreign policy is that it had political sovereignty only for short periods until 1989. At the beginning of the 1960s a pragmatic and constructive Hungarian foreign policy began to take shape, which, in the period of the *détente* within the Soviet Bloc, could follow a relatively independent path. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) was one of its key relations, and it became one of the priority foreign policy directions of Hungarian diplomacy. The diplomatic steps taken towards SSA, and the formation of the Hungarian Africa policy during the *détente* period, we argue, offer relevant considerations from a pragmatic international relations perspective even today. Based on archival and printed press sources, the article provides an analysis of Hungary's "African turn" between 1960 and 1970.

Keywords: *Hungarian foreign relations, Cold War, détente, Sub-Saharan Africa, Red Africa, Southern Opening*

Introduction

The present article offers an in-depth historiographical analysis of Hungarian foreign policy towards Africa during the 1960s and 1970s. In order to understand on what grounds and for what reasons today's Hungary fosters re-engagements with African countries, we provide the context of the formulation of the country's first Africa policy during the Cold War. The article begins by drawing a broad picture about the context of limitations before the 1960s, then describes how Hungary led the way in improving trade, economic and diplomatic relations with numerous partners across the African continent. Following this, we look at Hungary's special place

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and status in the Soviet Bloc before and after Stalin's death and the country's attempts to break out of the status quo of international isolation. As a next step, we discuss at length the government's achievements under János Kádár-led, chairman of the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Hungary, practically Prime Minister between 1961-1965, in creating a new pragmatic, well-thought-out first foreign policy in Africa. Finally, we explore several cases of pioneering Africa-related diplomatic efforts.

During the 1950s and 1960s, a peculiar geopolitical situation had arisen in Hungary, one of the satellite states of the USSR. In its foreign affairs, a gap had opened up, a tangible diplomatic window for which there had not been an example for several centuries. Until the end of the so-called "Hungarian question" at the United Nations (in which the UN investigated the events of the Budapest Revolution in 1956), the country lived in international isolation and diplomatic quarantine: it could hardly open embassies and its foreign relations were reduced to a minimum. The issue remained on the agenda of the UN General Assembly until December 1962 and was only closed in 1963. Thereafter, Hungary's primary aim was to gradually get off the international community's blacklisting: to expand its embassy network, re-establish bilateral agreements, and move around the world as a member of the international community (Békés 2022: 259-274). Hungary also had the intention to enhance its economic power and independent leeway in the geopolitical space. Therefore, in the post-1956 period, Hungarian geopolitics could be objectively characterised as "languishing in fetters": with its feet and hands bound, wishing to move freely, and come to agreements as a political formation. Following the "Year of Africa" in 1960, when 17 formerly colonised countries gained their independence, at the same time but independently of events in Africa, Moscow fell into an open confrontation with China, its primary and most important ideological follower. As a result of these events, Hungary felt obliged to give China the cold shoulder, even though earlier on the Chinese government had supported János Kádár in his consolidation attempts (Vámos 2017: 47-75). In this altered, special geopolitical situation, leading Hungarian politicians arrived at a pragmatic decision: they turned towards Africa, a move that Moscow not merely endured, but rather positively supported.

In the present article, we review the political-historical developments that led to the opening of Hungarian diplomacy towards Africa after 1960. We use different archival documents to present the foundations of Hungarian relations with Africa in the détente era ("relaxation," the period of 1960-1980 during the Cold War), with the aim of stimulating further, more detailed research. The aim of the study is not to examine a specific direction

or country-relation in detail, but rather to provide an analytical overview. This research is new and filling a gap as Hungarian-African relations after 1960 have scarcely been researched in detail.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical analytical approach of this research was developed by considering three basic, interacting geopolitical pillars: (1) the Western or capitalist value and political system dominated by the United States on one side of the bipolar world order, (2) the undemocratic, socialist Eastern Bloc dominated by the Soviet Union, which in many respect was quite different from it, and (3) the emerging independent third world or developing countries, including the new African state formations with both Western and socialist values. The research was carried out in a complex theoretical framework including political realism with a focus on the realities of power politics as the ultimate goal in the international system (Carr 1939). Also, structural realism was offering here the ground not only to shed light on the foreign policies of states, but also on the international system as such (Waltz 1995: 67-83). In connection with this paper, structural realism has a particular relevance, as John Mearsheimer found, nations should pursue their own and ideological interests, asserting their own interests regardless of the international environment (Mearsheimer 2019). Ideological cooperation, in line with Soviet foreign policy during the *détente*, the time of late Cold War, was strongly associated with cooperation and national parochialism as pragmatic “state” interests. The emphasis on the specificities of these three pillars is particularly important for our article, since the expansion of the foreign policy of the Hungarian People’s Republic and the increase of its diplomatic room for manoeuvre can only be interpreted correctly in the context of the specificities and events of the bipolar world order.

This article is based on archival sources, mostly from the National Archives of Hungary (MNL) and the Miklós Bánffy Specialised Library of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (KKM BMSZ). The importance of the archival material lies in the fact that, from 1989 onwards, a huge amount of previously classified primary sources became available, for which (apart from a few examples already mentioned) relatively scarce research had been done on African relations. Secondary research and a critical review of the associated classical and contemporary literature was complemented by an examination of the Hungarian print press of the period, which was made possible by the now abundant, almost complete online databases of daily and weekly newspapers.

Timeframe of the Present Study

The research topic is situated in the international system of the bipolar world after 1945, in the political era of the *détente*. The period is also known collectively as the Cold War or the Cold War era. There is relatively broad agreement on the timing of the Cold War, including the fact that it is not possible to pinpoint its starting point with absolute precision. In contrast to the Second World War, the beginning of which can be treated as a historical fact, the Cold War did not break out but emerged as a result of a complex process. The primary dynamic of the period and the core of events was the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union by 1945. According to Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, John Mearsheimer, and Stephen M. Waltz, the chronology of the Cold War can be most accurately defined as two intervals: its initial development between 1945 and 1947 and its full duration between 1947 and 1991 (Morgenthau 2013: 198-210). The entire period can be defined as the period between the end of the Second World War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Warsaw Pact. This is perhaps the most generally and widely accepted classical view. It is important, however, to place the European political events following the Second World War in the context of the movements that were then gaining strength in sub-Saharan countries. This was emphasised, among others, by the Africanists Radoslav A. Yordanov and Robert G. Patman when they focused on African relations in the period between 1950 and 1960 (Yordanov 2016). In assessing the Cold War, Patman analyses that special attention should be paid to the African countries that became independent in the 1960s and sought to move on not towards the capitalist West but towards the countries of the Soviet bloc. Many of these African countries wanted to join the world defined by the Soviet Union rather than the United States, a political motivation that led to real and, in many cases, mutually beneficial peaceful cooperation (Patman 1990: 35).

To sum up, in post-1956 Hungary, an outward-looking and active foreign policy began, mainly in the early 1960s, and more intensively after Leonid Brezhnev's election as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1964. The conclusion of the UN's "Hungarian question" in 1963 and the independence of African countries from 1960 created the conditions for a normalisation of bilateral relations with individual countries and a proactive opening towards the developing world.

An Inescapable Path: Hungarian Foreign Policy in the Soviet Bloc

Our investigation begins in 1944–1945, after the communist takeover, when the country's foreign policy was fundamentally transformed. Hungary became part of the Soviet sphere of influence, sinking to the level of a Soviet satellite. At the inaugural meeting of the Cominform (Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties) in 1947, Andrei Alexandrovich Zhdanov outlined the dual worldview of power in the international system: an aggressive, warmongering imperialist bloc vis-à-vis a peaceful, democratic, socialist bloc (Anonymous 1953; Délmagyarország 1953: 1-2). Hungary was Sovietised at a stormy pace: the parliamentary system as well as the multi-party system ceased, a one-party-based administration was established, and the diplomatic space was clearly closed. Joseph Stalin (General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1922 to 1952 and Chairman of the Council of Ministers from 1941 until 1953) became the ultimate leader of foreign policy, controlling each secretary general of satellite country's state-parties through the foreign affairs department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in Moscow. In Hungary, Mátyás Rákosi, Secretary-General, later Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Hungary, adopted "the Soviet form of proletarian dictatorship" (Borhi 2004: 131). Ernő Gerő, First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Hungarian People's Republic between 1953 and 1955 and Minister of Interior until 1954, and Rákosi's right-hand man, managed "Hungarian foreign policy." However, the leaders of the Hungarian communist country did not have their discretion: there was no ministry for foreign affairs, no foreign service, no diplomacy, the leaders were only executing the orders coming from Moscow. There was no "independent national foreign policy in the traditional sense, as the country's subordination to the Soviet empire was the prime determinant of its foreign policy" (Békés 2011: 65-97). The system and network of Stalinism provided the international framework of reference in terms of foreign affairs: the Hungarian–Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (1948), the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), and the so-called "collective defence treaty" of European socialist countries, the Warsaw Pact (1955).

The events of the Cold War narrowed down the diplomatic leeway for Hungary even more: the possibility of travelling abroad was eliminated or reduced to a minimum (it was difficult or impossible to obtain a passport enabling travel to the West), sending letters was also limited; the country's foreign relations became hostile and conflicted with countries beyond the "Iron Curtain." Embassies, diplomatic missions in the West only had formal functions, if any. Nonetheless, certain foreign economic relations intensified by the 1950s:

Hungarian foreign policy, which turned primarily to the East, sought new partners and bilateral agreements. The period can be considered a new opening, one of the most significant diplomatic steps of which was Hungary recognising (among the first few countries) the People's Republic of China and reopening its embassy in Beijing in 1949. However, a turn towards Africa could not yet begin as Stalin refused to recognise the newly independent colonial countries. Following Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet foreign policy sought opportunities for easing tensions: Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev was the First Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, later the President of the Council of Ministers, who saw an opportunity in cooperating with the Third World and tried to support the Non-Aligned Movement, which presented not only ideological grounds, but also pragmatism in the development of relations. After a short period of "diplomatic quarantine," following the events of the revolution in Budapest in 1956, Hungarian travel restrictions were eased in the 1960s: visa-free travel was allowed within the socialist bloc and official travels abroad were also easier (MNL2 3115/1957). At first, most Western countries considered the Hungarian government led by János Kádár to be illegitimate, and later "only" uncomfortable, thus diplomatic relations were kept to a minimum. Therefore, Moscow became interested in compensating elsewhere and looked for international recognition, foreign economic connections, and ideological allies in other directions. The first significant attempts to break out, no longer exclusively in Europe, took place in the early 1960s: nearly 90 new diplomatic missions were established even on ambassadorial levels in African, Asian, Middle East, and Latin American countries.

Developing Foreign Policy in the Kádár Era towards the Third World

A more dynamic period of Hungarian foreign policy concerning the African continent began in the 1960s. Prior to that, with Stalin's death in 1953, a more open, rational Soviet foreign policy mindset emerged. His successor, Khrushchev, urged secession from Stalinism; his policy meant relief, breaking out of isolation, and more open diplomacy towards the world. Thus, new connections were established in the socialist relation, but trust had to be earned first. Clearly, we could see "an abandonment of the Zhdanov doctrine for a more global approach."¹ With the stabilisation of

1 The Zhdanov Doctrine was a Soviet cultural doctrine developed by Central Committee secretary Andrei Zhdanov in 1946. It aimed to establish a clear ideological divide between the communist and capitalist worlds, positioning the USSR as the leader of an anti-imperialist, democratic camp against Western imperialism. Its purpose was to enforce strict cultural and political conformity within Soviet and allied states.

the situation in the Europe from the early 1960s, the Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern Bloc could turn their attention to other regions as well” (Békés et al. 2015).

Building trust was not easy for Hungary, ruled by Mátyás Rákosi, in constant confrontation with the West. Bilateral cooperation was one-dimensional, the country was economically exhausted, Western diplomatic relations became hostile, mutual expulsions became regular, and relations with the West froze in general. In 1949, the country’s membership in the UN failed, and it also reduced its involvement in international organisations in which Western states were members (e.g., it withdrew from the World Health Organization in 1950). After the defeat of the 1956 Budapest revolution, and the retaliation, the Soviet influence did not cease. However, with the new socialist leadership by János Kádár, easing also began in Hungarian politics: a soft dictatorship, the so-called “goulash communism,” gradually unfolded itself, and a period of relative prosperity began. In a matter of years, Hungarian foreign policy was transformed, as the only rational course of action (Ignáth 2010: 200). In 1956, Kádár became the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Hungarian People’s Republic (practically the head of government). For Khrushchev, he became a good disciple, and Hungary became a vanguard in the Bloc. Róbert Szabó Győri put it this way: “Between 1957 and 1964, the Khrushchev-led Soviet Union pursued a dynamic, proactive, self-confident foreign policy. [...] It became more cooperative and flexible with its allies, alleviating the complete subordination of its subject states” (Győri Szabó 2011: 270). In Hungary, power was held by the state party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (HSWP).

In foreign affairs, the Political Committee of the HSWP made decisions, which were prepared by the Foreign Affairs Department of the Central Committee, for which the Secretary for Foreign Affairs was responsible. Kádár was open for and interested in international affairs and pursued a pragmatic foreign policy from as early as the beginning of the 1960s. He believed in the struggle between the Western capitalist and the socialist world orders, but wanted to create his new political and economic system in a negotiated, constructive way. Among the principles of the foreign policy he outlined at the Ninth Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party (HSWP) in 1966 in Budapest we find: the development of economic and cultural connections, supporting the independence movements of the Third World, and cooperation with the newly decolonised states (Anonymous 1967; Magyar Tudomány 1967: 3). Frigyes Puja, who was Foreign Minister for almost ten years, summarised the essence of proletarian internationalism:

“the principle of the foreign policy of the Hungarian People’s Republic is the principle of peaceful coexistence of countries with different social systems; an interstate relationship in which the parties renounce war, respect each other’s sovereignty and consider this as a general norm in their bilateral relations” (Puja 1981: 55). The foreign policy of the Kádár regime no longer reflected the retaliatory, unyielding worldview of Rákosi’s Hungary between 1940–45 (Balogh 1982: 68). The weight of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs increased and trained professionals such as the former Reformed Bishop, politician János Péter, the former Piarist student, lawyer, career diplomat (and Africanist) Endre Sík, or Foreign Minister Frigyes Puja, who led the ministry for ten years, joined the administration. As a trained Africanist, with a degree from Moscow and a doctorate from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest, Endre Sík served as deputy foreign minister (from 1954), then, as first deputy of the foreign minister (1954–1957), finally, as the country’s foreign minister (in 1958), “at a time when the ‘Hungarian question’ was highly controversial at the UN and other international gatherings” (Búr 2007: 164).

Sík’s familiarity with African history and peoples surely gave him an advantage in the government’s negotiations with their African counterparts. Budapest took the first steps to establish bilateral relations with Africa, especially with Ethiopia, which was visited by Foreign Minister Endre Sík in December 1959. Sík’s visit to East Africa was the first significant Hungarian state visit and created opportunities for the entire Hungarian diplomatic corps to show a deeper commitment to the continent. This visit also boosted the commitment of the Hungarian socialist state administration, and Sík, armed with personal experience, represented the new foreign policy direction in Hungarian political decision-making bodies. The 1959 trip proved to be a momentous one, followed by others, and it laid the foundations for all of them.

Hungary–Africa Relations in the Socialist Era

In his speech at the 1967 Conference of the HSWP, Kádár described the development of foreign relations with African (as well as Asian and Latin American) countries as a primary goal: in the spirit of proletarian internationalism, “we develop our cooperation with independent states in Africa, we strive for peaceful coexistence,” he claimed. However, behind this explicitly open-minded, proactive foreign policy stood partly political pragmatism and partly the political ideology of the Communist Bloc (Puja 1981: 5). Historically, there had been a “co-evolution” of events: many of

the newly independent countries of sub-Saharan Africa had at the same time sought to begin on their path of independence and began to build up their economic and administrative frameworks. Some independent African countries were open to socialist ideas and accepted the (predominantly ideological) help offered by the Communist Bloc countries. As Fage and Tordoff wrote: “In the independent countries, there was a rapid shift from pluralism to the centralisation of power (power was usually concentrated in the hands of a single party) and a kind of socialist approach. However, only eight African countries have officially announced a socialist government program. By the 1970s, only a handful of African leaders identified with orthodox Marxist views. Instead, most of them adapted Marxism and other ideas to the African conditions. The ‘socialist umbrella’ in Africa was so broad that even the Kenyan and Senegalese leaders who pursued capitalist-type policies could fit in under it” (Fage and Tordoff 2022: 154). A kind of unique “African socialism” (as Léopold Sédar Senghor called it) was born, fusing anti-communism, pragmatic cooperation with the West, and the conscious incorporation of private capital.

Kádár, whose programmatic speeches at the Congresses of the HSWP showed a clear plan for his foreign policy’s directions, tried to canalise his foreign policy into this trend (Békés 2019: 11). We can learn more about this train of thought in detail through the books of Frigyes Puja, Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1973 and 1983, “Unity and Debate in the International Communist Movement” published in 1969, and “Hungarian Foreign Policy” published in 1980. “Proletarian internationalism and peaceful coexistence” were the primary principles of Kádár’s diplomacy. Kádár saw a force in the socialist world that could serve as a tool for the former colonial countries with a socialist orientation to build their state (Puja 1981: 50). He supported “the struggle of national liberation movements against old and new colonisation, imperialist oppression [and] sought to develop its cooperation with the independent countries of Africa” (Ibid. 62). Linked to the Chinese and Cuban processes, initially indirectly, Kádár also sought to help this “fight” in South Africa, Angola, Namibia, and Mozambique. The relation between Hungary and developing countries, including sub-Saharan Africa, was seen by Kádár as areas of potential partnership, and possibly a new strategic direction for Hungarian diplomacy. Moreover, he especially saw the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, primarily East Africa and the former Portuguese colonies, as key figures in the international class struggle, natural allies in the fight against imperialism and neo-colonialism. In this approach, Kádár began to take his first, independent diplomatic steps in the 1950s.

The Kádár Era's first Africa Connections

The revolutionary events in Budapest significantly influenced developments in 1956, which indirectly contributed to Hungarian foreign policy directions between 1956 and 1960–1961. The diplomatic goal of the Kádár administration was to have Hungarian foreign policy recognised in the international arena, break with the isolated, pariah state of the 1950s (and before), and develop its economic relations. János Kádár wanted to achieve all this with pragmatic, well-thought-out foreign policy instruments. He sought to settle this struggle peacefully, in political, economic, and ideological competition. In terms of ideology, he believed in socialism's supremacy, saw a balance of power in the politico-military field, and perceived significant backwardness only in economic terms, so he tried to focus on this area. In order to implement this plan, the first (or somewhat revitalised) symbolic steps took place in 1956 and 1957 with Egypt and Sudan, and later with other sub-Saharan African countries (MNL5 3002/1956).

In August 1957, a government delegation travelled to Egypt under Károly Szarka, Deputy Foreign Minister (and UN Ambassador in 1972). The primary purpose of Szarka's visit, which took place before the UN autumn session, was to gain support for the Hungarian delegation in the debate on the "Hungarian question" (Király 2006: 37). In April that year (as a prelude to the mission), Foreign Minister Imre Horváth (former Ambassador in Berlin, London, and Prague, leader of the second Hungarian UN delegation in 1957) submitted a motion to the Council of Ministers (the government) to start negotiations on promoting the consulate in Cairo to the rank of an embassy. The proposal read: "In order to deepen the friendly relations established between the two countries, it is necessary to raise our consulates to the rank of embassies vis-à-vis" (Gazette Hungary 1957: 389). This idea was on the table before 23 October 1956, but could not be discussed due to the Hungarian revolution that took place (MNL3 3175/1957). The (first) Hungarian Revolutionary Workers' and Peasants' Government led by Kádár finally decided in 1957 to raise the consulate (reopened in 1947) to the rank of an embassy and the delegation led by Szarka started negotiations in Egypt (MNL3 3175/1957). On 29 August 1957, President Gamal Abdel Nasser received the Hungarian delegation at his apartment, and they discussed the situation of the UN and the Fifth Committee, in particular. According to the meeting notes, Nasser said that: "Western powers use the Hungarian problem for propaganda at the UN, primarily against the Soviet Union. He stated that the support of Egypt and Syria is granted" (J. Nagy 2017a: 61). The mission was successful in this respect: in the next

five years, while the UN was investigating the “Hungarian Problem,” Egypt and the Arab countries voted in favour of the Hungarian government. A reciprocal visit took place in the same year: an Egyptian parliamentary delegation visited Hungary, during which military, economic, cultural, and agricultural trade issues were on the agenda. The Hungarian press covered the event extensively, dailies reported about it in detail. They illustrated the visit of Abdel Fattah el Bindari, the Governor of Cairo, to the Budapest City Council and the trip of Minister of Transport Mustafa Khalil, who travelled from Hegyeshalom to Győr on a diesel train manufactured in Hungary, with photo reports. News about the “developing world” became recurring topics, the newspapers *Szabad Nép* (*Free People*), *Népszabadság* (*Liberty of People*), *Pesti Hírlap* (*Pest News*), *Esti Hírlap* (*Evening News*) all reported on domestic and international affairs of the Arab countries. Relations between the two countries (similar to the situation before 1945) were revitalised. Western diplomats, such as the French ambassador stationed in Budapest, reported on this “Eastern Opening” and “trade offensive” (J. Nagy 2017b: 341). Just a few examples of the revived cultural and economic collaborations:

- Egypt bought three million table tennis balls from the Toothbrush Factory in Mosonmagyaróvár, securing the year-round operation of the plant (Anonymous 1957a).
- The Vác and Ganz Shipyards manufactured 100-ton floating cranes for Egypt (Anonymous 1957b).
- The Ganz Shipyard produced special coco-fired boilers for Egypt (Anonymous 1957c)
- The Ikarusz bus company and MÖGÜRT Foreign Trade Company exported seventy trucks and dumpers
- The “expedition” of the Hungarian Museum of Natural History replaced the museum’s previously destroyed collection of animals containing reptiles, insects and birds from Egypt
- The Egyptian government ordered cattle for breeding from Hungary
- Gyula Germanus gave his inaugural speech at the Egyptian Academy of Sciences (Anonymous 1957d).

All these examples are excerpts of this prosperous bilateral relations between Hungary and Egypt, but also show the dynamics of the economic, sports, and scientific diplomacy of the era, outlined in a separate economic plan by the prominent politicians of the day (MNL4 3200/1957). After nearly

two years of preparation and diplomatic negotiations, Gamal Abdel Nasser finally visited Budapest on 29 April 1958, with other senior government politicians of the United Arab Republic, such as Vice President Abdel Latif Baghdadi or Mahmoud Fawzi, Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Hungarian press reported on the short visit on several front pages (Anonymous 1957e).

By the end of the 1950s, Hungary had become an active player in international diplomacy. By 1960, among other examples, the Japanese–Hungarian diplomatic relations were restored, and collaborations were established with the (neutral) countries of the European Free Trade Association. Hungary’s foreign policy with the Middle East and Latin America, as well as with the newly independent “developing countries” in the former African colonial territories, was vital and effective: by 1955, Hungary had established diplomatic relations with 36 states, and by 1958 with 39 states in the World (Györi Szabó 2011: 266). The weight of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs increased primarily due to the leading role of the career diplomat and scientist Endre Sik, and the fact that the foreign services became more and more professionalised.

Hungary’s African Relations after 1960

In October 1960, János Kádár travelled to New York, where he continued to try and win over the UN General Assembly in connection with the revolution of 1956. By this time, the interest in Hungarian affairs of the international community had waned. In 1961, John F. Kennedy became President of the United States, representing a more cooperative policy towards the Soviet Union (thus also with Hungary) and supporting the removal of the “Hungarian question” from the UN’s agenda. In 1962, the Hungarian–American relation seemed to be settled, and by 1963, at the initiative of the United States, the UN had closed the Hungarian case, and the UN Special Committee ceased its operations (Király 2006: 40). Subsequently, the Hungarian government’s room for manoeuvre in foreign policy expanded significantly and the second significant period of Hungarian–African relations began in 1963 (Kecskés 2018: 261).

The Hungarian government embarked on a more proactive and open foreign policy than before. The general rules of travel were “relaxed”: it was possible to travel visa-free with a red passport within the socialist bloc (except the Soviet Union), while for voyages to the West a blue passport was issued once every three years with the possibility to exchange a limited amount of currency

(MNL1 3241/1956). However, travelling to Western countries still required a visa. The entry rules were also relaxed: from 1964, all Hungarian embassies could issue visas to Hungary. Even more travel restrictions were lifted for Hungarian citizens beginning with the 1970s (Bencsik 2002: 31-50). The foreign affairs apparatus and administration were transformed, and diplomats' training was developed and expanded. Hungarian–African relations became more vital than before. In the following we shall present in more detail the state visits that have fundamentally shaped Hungarian-African relations since 1960. These trips have been selected with the aim of highlighting the foreign policy moves and mindset that shaped bilateral relations the most.

The Tour of the Kállai Delegation in 1962

In 1960, the Hungarian government, led by Ferenc Münnich, appointed a government envoy to attend the ceremony of Somalia's declaration of independence, and at the same time decided to recognise the country and establish diplomatic relations. Similarly, Hungary recognised the Federation of Mali, Malgas, Ghana, Togo, Mali, and the Republic of Senegal. A decision was made to train Algerian workers invited by the National Council of Trade Union (SZOT) and to set up a joint committee with the United Arab Republic (Anonymous 1931 in *Pesti Napló* 82). In connection with the latter, the Hungarian government concluded a loan agreement in 1962 to purchase Hungarian technology. In the same year, an educational, scientific, and cultural agreement was concluded with the Republic of Ghana and the country's president was invited to Budapest. Although these can be considered small steps in the bilateral diplomatic relations with countries of Africa, they were preliminaries to the complex decision made in 1962, which provided for the political, economic, cultural, and information objectives of the Hungarian People's Republic in sub-Saharan Africa. This decision no longer addressed African issues on a case-by-case basis but set out comprehensive guidelines. It clarified that "in accordance with our capabilities and opportunities, we must gradually increase our involvement in helping the countries of sub-Saharan Africa" (MNL6 3177/1962). It laid down plans for sending delegations to Guinea, Mali, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria, and Tanganyika. It set forth the objective to conclude a "commercial payment, credit, technical assistance and cultural contract" with the Republic of Mali and set up a trade office in Ethiopia (MNL7 3340/1962). The comprehensive resolution signed by János Kádár on 14 June 1962 is one of the most important documents of the era for our topic. The significance

of the document is that it was the first governmental decision, following a couple of lower precedents, to transform the relatively ad hoc relations into a policy level decision. The policy level created a new direction in the attitude of the entire Hungarian administration, which now had full governmental authority (Solymári 2023: 283-303).

One of the most significant results of the era in terms of African relations were connected to the tour of the delegation led by Gyula Kállai in 1962. This visit was not an isolated event but the consequence of a constructive opening process. The Hungarian government decided to send a high-level government delegation to West and North Africa, led by Gyula Kállai, Vice-President of the Revolutionary Workers'-Peasants' Government. The delegation travelled to Africa on 1 December 1962. In addition to ambassadors and institute leaders, the members were Jenő Incze, Minister of Foreign Trade; Károly Szarka, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs; and János Molnár, Deputy Minister of Culture. The delegation visited seven African countries: Guinea, Mali, Dahomey, Ghana, Nigeria, Algeria, and Morocco, participated in high-level meetings, and concluded numerous agreements. The Hungarian press reported about the tour on an almost daily basis (e.g. *Esti Hírlap*) and, upon their return, the delegation compiled a detailed package of proposals for the government. As a result of the agreements of Gyula Kállai, the government approved the following proposals in its resolutions of 29 August 1963:

- On sending building materials and specialists to Guinea and Ghana
- On the deployment of water management technology in the Republic of Mali and Ghana
- On the economic and credit agreement to be concluded with Algeria
- On setting up African joint ventures
- On entering into international organisations with a strong presence in less developed countries
- On accelerated training for professionals speaking the languages of African countries
- On lobbying in multilateral organisations for the support of experts to be sent to African countries
- On sending experts from the TESCO Foreign Trade Company to African countries²

2 TESCO (International Technical and Scientific Cooperation and Trading Office) was the agency for managing technical-scientific cooperation, established by the Hungarian government in 1962.

- On offering 137 scholarship places to African countries for the 1963/64 academic year (and increasing this number following the construction of new student hostels from 1964/65)
- On the establishment of an English-language group of students at the Medical University of Pécs
- On the registration of persons who can be sent to Africa for university and college teaching
- On the English-language sports coach programme at the College of Physical Education for Guinean students
- On launching the international relations degree programme at the Károly Marx University of Economics in Budapest and hosting scholarship holders
- On introducing African cultural products to the Hungarian public
- On establishing a Department of African Studies at the Faculty of Humanities, Eötvös Lóránd University in Budapest
- On preparing the establishment of the African Scientific Institute, with the involvement of the African-Asian Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on the development of a research program
- On scientific publishing and the sending of books with the involvement of the Institute of Cultural Relations of Hungary
- On sending music teachers to Ghana and hosting African cultural professionals
- On establishing embassies in Nigeria and the Republic of Dahomey
- On János Kádár's invitation of the President of the Republic of Guinea.

Gyula Kállai extended the invitation of his government to the presidents of the host African countries, including Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella; President Hubert Maga of Dahomey; President Sékou Ahmad Touré of Guinea; Modibo Keita, the first President of Mali; and the heads of Moroccan and Nigerian delegations. Students from brotherly African countries receiving government scholarships from Hungary began their studies at Hungarian universities in 1963; mainly in Budapest, but in other “university hubs” too, like Pécs, Kecskemét, and Debrecen. Health care coverage for these students was provided for by the Ministry of Health based on the Council of Ministers’ decision because they did not have health insurance. We see

further reference in this regard in the detailed report of the Scientific and Higher Education Council titled “On the situation of education and training of professionals abroad and training of foreigners in Hungary,” which can also be considered a result of Kállai’s African tour (MNL8 3410/1963). The document analyses and formulates plans for the training of Hungarian professionals working abroad and integrating foreign professionals into the Hungarian labour market. It urges international framework agreements on the reception of Hungarian professionals abroad and on creating financial resources for this field. The Hungarian government also concluded a trade and technical-scientific agreement with Kenya in 1964 and a cultural and scientific agreement with the Republic of Mali.

The trip to Algeria by Kállai and his delegation had additional benefits: on 1 November 1964, a Hungarian delegation of Hungarian government officials, party and KISZ members viewed the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the start of the Algerian war of liberation.³ The delegation (in addition to representatives of the local government and economic organisations) met with President Ben Bella, with whom the following issues were discussed according to a report addressed to Béla Biszku, Minister of the Interior from 1957 to 1961 and from 1962 until 1978 Secretary of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party. Some examples of this political nature: the production of new sculptures in Hungary to Algir’s main square, the training of President Bella’s bodyguards, and the experimental production of Hungarian seeds (MNL9 3446/1964).

Hailé Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, visited Hungary in September 1964. The Hungarian press covered his visit in detail and his speech in Parliament was published in full, which symbolised the importance of the event (Anonymous 1964; Népszabadság 1964: 1; Marsai 2019: 48-66). In May 1965, a Hungarian government delegation travelled to Ethiopia to conclude a technical, scientific, aeronautical, and cultural agreement with the Ethiopian Empire, signed by Seyoum Haregot, acting foreign minister. At this meeting, the sending of Hungarian experts and receiving of Ethiopian scholarship students were discussed. The idea of Hungary building a college of physical education in Ethiopia came up and the Hungarian government offered five million USD in development aid (which eventually did not materialise because of Hungary’s economic limitations).

3 KISZ (Hungarian Young Communist League) was a communist youth movement in Hungary founded in 1957 (on the anniversary of the Hungarian Soviet Republic’s declaration in 1919), following the break of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. It claimed to represent all the country’s youth and sought to educate young people politically and to supervise political as well as some social activities for them.

Besides these aspects of political, economic, and scientific life, the dynamic foreign political opening of the 1960s affected numerous other areas as well. The Hungarian Geographical Society, founded in 1872, as well as other exploring, mountain-hiking clubs, all turned towards Northern and Eastern African territories with an ever increasing interest and stood as beneficiaries, or at least were affected in some way by the continuously strengthening African relations. The Budapest Zoo and Botanical Garden also gained an opportunity to enhance its African connections, with this venue frequently incorporated into the African delegations' visits to Budapest. The acquisition of several animals became a reality during this time (i.e., hippos, lions). In addition, African students attending the Gödöllő University of Agrarian Science (Gödöllői Agrártudományi Egyetem) frequently completed their research projects in the Budapest Zoo, later writing their theses related to the fauna of their home countries. A special highlight deserving yet another mention is that the Hungarian Airlines (MALÉV) launched flights into African capitals. For MALÉV, the debut of these flights to African countries was made possible by the Ilyushin Il-18-type aeroplanes that began operating in 1960, as these finally possessed the sufficient range (4800 as well as 6500 km). Initially, however, this only covered North-African destinations. Besides the scheduled flights, MALÉV's aeroplanes also carried a significant freight trade into specific African states, bearing primarily agricultural products such as livestock (chicken hatchlings, pullets, sheep). The first Hungarian aeroplane to pass through the Equator (Type Il-18, registration mark: HA-MOH) completed a government flight on 11 February 1966, on the Budapest to Addis Ababa to Nairobi route. Together with economic and cultural cooperation agreements, aeronautical accords had earlier on been signed with sub-Saharan countries, such as the Hungary-Egypt Treaty on 20 March 1958 and the Hungary-Ghana Agreement on 23 October 1961. Following this, nine more aeronautical accords were sealed with sub-Saharan countries until the 1970s.

Kállai's 1966 Africa Tour

In order to further strengthen relations with Africa, a proposal for sending a new government delegation was again made in 1966. Following a decision of Foreign Minister János Péter (a Reformed Bishop), the Hungarian government once again instructed Gyula Kállai to lead a delegation to conclude negotiations in the United Arab Republic, the Ethiopian Empire, the United Republic of Tanzania, Kuwait, India, and Cyprus. As was typical

for this era, the Hungarian press reported on the tour with a strong interest in foreign policy.⁴ The Hungarian delegation's first stop was in the United Arab Republic, where they met with Prime Minister Zakaria Mohieddin and President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Their speeches were published in full by the Hungarian press, and mostly contained the political messages of the time about moral support for the newly independent African states. A few days later, the delegation had negotiations in Addis Ababa, where the Ethiopian ruler awarded Kállai with the ribbon of the Holy Trinity and his wife with the Queen of Sheba Order. The delegation continued its journey to Tanzania in the company of Julius K. Nyerere. Kállai gave a speech on the anniversary of the Zanzibar Revolution, and bilateral negotiations began. The delegation then travelled to Kuwait and India. Returning from the tour, Kállai submitted a nearly 50–page analytical report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was followed by the government decisions below:

- On continuing political, economic, and cultural activities in the newly liberated countries, further strengthening high-level relations
- On increasing the proportion of financial and scholarship support available to students and professionals
- On establishing a Hungarian- Ethiopian EAEC Joint Economic Committee, and concluding a tourism and an aviation agreement
- On establishing an experimental farm in Ethiopia, providing sports equipment, developing a support-plan for an Ethiopian college of physical education, and supporting the work of the Ethiopian state's folk ensemble
- On setting up a mechanical engineering commission with Tanzania, sending a TESCO delegation to the country, launching a training and exchange program with the University of Dar es Salaam, and concluding an aviation agreement.

In the same year (following the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1962), Hungary opened a foreign mission in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and in 1967 concluded a trade agreement with Côte d'Ivoire. In 1968, a Hungarian economic government delegation visited the Central African Republic, Upper Volta, Senegal, Cameroon, and Mauritania, where trade agreements were signed (Foreign Policy Yearbook 1968: 87).

4 János Kádár personally said goodbye to Kállai at the airport, which was published on the front pages of dailies in 1966.

The Tour of Pál Losonczi in 1970

Pál Losonczi, President of the Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic, made another African tour in August and September 1970. He met with Gamal Abdel Nasser in the United Arab Republic, Julius K. Nyerere in Tanzania, and Yaafar Numeiry in Sudan. In Sudan, the "Revolutionary Command Council awarded Pál Losonczi with Sudan's highest award, the Order of Merit, for his outstanding achievements in developing relations between the two countries and consolidating friendship between their peoples. Sudanese President Gaafar Nimeri was awarded the first degree of the Order of the Flag of the Hungarian People's Republic decorated with diamonds by the Hungarian Presidential Council" (Magyar Nemzet 1970: 1). An economic cooperation agreement was signed in Budapest in the same year, in which the Hungarian government provided a "ten million dollar long-term loan to the Sudanese government to purchase Hungarian machinery and equipment for the African country's economic development" under a Five-Year Plan (Anonymous 1970c; Világgazdaság 1970: 73).

Losonczi's visit, in which cooperation with African countries was strengthened on a "non-capitalist path," marked the end of the "incubation period" of Hungarian foreign policy before 1963. Hungary was elected as non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in the autumn of 1967 and, in the spring of 1968, the Hungarian Prime Minister Jenő Fock made the first Hungarian visit to Western Europe. Hungary's foreign trade intensified: in 1970, as a result of the agreements concluded with Africa, imports reached almost HUF 440 million while exports reached HUF 560 million (Foreign Policy Yearbook 1970).

By 1970, the Hungarian People's Republic had diplomatic relations with a total of 89 countries, 88 at ambassadorial level, with embassies operating in 53 countries, 1 consulate, and five consulate generals. By then, Hungary "maintained trade and economic relations with about 80 developing countries; more than 30 of them located on the African continent. A total of 40 treaties with eighteen countries were in force in 1970" (Anonymous 1970a; Kisalföld 1970: 2). In Africa, Hungary had diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level with 26 countries. The Hungarian Foreign Policy Yearbook launched in 1968 (the "almanac" of Hungarian diplomacy) listed those in detail. The list of cultural agreements of Hungary with African countries included:

- UAR-Hungary Cultural Convention (Cairo, 5 September 1957)
- Guinea-Hungary Cultural Convention (Conakry, 12 January 1960, Gov. Stat. 5/1961)
- Ghana-Hungary Cultural Convention (Accra, 27 April 1961, Gov Stat. 20/1962)
- Dahomey-Hungary Cultural Convention (Budapest, 21 June 21 1962)
- Mali-Hungary Cultural Convention (Bamako, 9 December 1962)
- Algeria-Hungary Cultural and Scientific Convention (Algiers, 25 May 1964)
- Ethiopia-Hungary Cultural Convention (Addis Ababa, 25 May 1965, Gov. Stat. 28/1966)
- Tanzania-Hungary Scientific and Cultural Convention (Dar es Salaam, 15 February 1966, Gov. Stat. 32/1966).

By 1970, Communist Hungary had developed a matured Africa policy – with policy papers, well-prepared diplomats, experienced ambassadors – established, or rather revived primarily by the foreign ministers of that time, János Péter and Frigyes Puja. In his memoir on “Hungarian Foreign Politics,” Puja provided a clear study of the geopolitical concept that was to be realised as a kind of counter-diplomacy in opposition to the foreign diplomacy of capitalistic Western countries. Hungary realised that political relations with African countries would only become strong and mutually acknowledged if coupled with well-established economic, cultural, and scientific cooperation. The Hungarian leaders thoroughly learned this lesson from the experience of delegations returning from Africa – clearly recognising that for the politicians of sub-Saharan countries, merely an ideological aim would not be enough; they would also need concrete, tangible results in order to obtain vital, bilateral relations. The experts of political science and economics of that era – as well as the press – then created the theoretical justification content as a background of this “counter-diplomacy.” Among others, *Népszabadság* (a major left-leaning Hungarian newspaper) and *Külpolitika* (Foreign Affairs, the theoretical-political periodical of the Hungarian Institute for Foreign Affairs) regularly published an interpretation of the Africa Policy as practiced by the Hungarian Foreign Affairs Ministry, and its truly outstanding, gap-filling economic and cultural achievements.

The foundation of the International Technical and Scientific Cooperation and Trading Office (TESCO, established in 1962) signalled the responsibility

to thoroughly coordinate and implement the bilateral technological, educational, and vocational training agreements in the areas of community service, education, healthcare, agriculture, as well as water conservation and management. Transferring knowledge and technology entailed expanding the export activity directed from Hungary towards Africa. For a long time, Africans knew numerous Hungarian products closely: they used the Ikarus and Csepel buses, Medicor medical devices and appliances, and Ganz electrical devices. By the end of the 1970s, Hungarian products became well-known and renowned in the SSA region. Roads, railways, and hospitals were built based on Hungarian engineering expertise, among others in Algeria, Libya, Morocco, but the country's specialists were also present in Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania (Tarrósy 2018: 92-111).

Conclusion

In our study, we have given an overview of the Hungarian Africa policy in the détente period. Our aim was to present a broad picture of post-1960 Hungarian-African relations, which can serve as a basis for future research and which determined the development of Hungarian-African relations after 1960. From the 1970s the construction of Hungarian foreign policy continued and Africa became a priority strategic area for Hungarian diplomacy. In 1971, Tanzanian Prime Minister Rashidi Mfaume Kawawa visited Hungary and later that year Pál Losonci travelled to Algeria and Guinea. In 1973, Losonci negotiated to strengthen bilateral relations in Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone, then in 1975 in Libya and Somalia. The Hungarian Foreign Office's journeys continued and its commitments in Africa deepened in the 1970s and 1980s. By mid-1979, 101 Hungarian professionals worked in nine "Black African" countries, and out of 20 African states, thanks to the state-funded scholarship program, 171 students attended Hungarian academic institutions. Over the course of approximately fifteen years, 268 African students graduated in Hungary, while 315 African students took part in post-graduate training in the country between 1970 and 1978. Even though all this was backed by the political attitudes of the age and the Communist Bloc, the achievements are undeniable: the successive Hungarian governments engaged in open, initiative-filled, and pragmatic foreign policy with the SSA countries.

The direction and content of the era discussed is underdocumented and understudied. The significance of this period does not only demonstrate the rebirth of Hungary's connections with Africa, but also the rebirth of

Hungarian foreign affairs as a whole after 1945. The present research article has presented an in-depth analysis mainly of Hungarian African foreign policy of the 1960s and 1970s. Based on archival sources, it has become clear that Hungary wanted to break out of the Bloc's foreign limitations and, at the same time, boost and enhance its diplomatic connections. As a result of its pragmatic foreign policy, and several highly capable diplomats, Hungary was able to improve trade, and economic and diplomatic relations, with partners in almost every possible country in Africa. From a pragmatic point of view, these relations can remain relevant for the Africa Strategy published by the Hungarian government in April 2019.

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BRITAIN AND THE ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONALE DU CONGO, JANUARY 1884 - FEBRUARY 1885

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Abstract: In 1884, Britain was concerned with negotiations surrounding three agreements that were closely related to the Berlin West Africa Conference, which began in November 1884 and ended in February 1885; the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty signed on 26 February 1884, which sparked the diplomatic crisis that resulted in the conference; a pre-emption agreement, signed between the *Association Internationale du Congo* and France on 23 April 1884; and the recognition of the *Association* as a sovereign power by Britain after the conference had begun on 16 December 1884. During the period under examination, there was an emphasis on territorial negotiations regarding the lower Congo River between Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, and the *Association Internationale du Congo*. This article focuses on the background to these agreements thereby providing an important contextual framework for what was discussed at the Berlin Conference.

Keywords: *Berlin West Africa Conference, Association Internationale du Congo, Anglo-Portuguese Treaty, Scramble for Africa*

Introduction

The Scramble for Africa produced the peculiar map of modern Africa along with numerous myths that have proved to be widespread and durable. The most prevailing of these myths is that Africa was divided at Berlin. For example, the well-known account of colonialism in the Congo, *In the Footsteps of Mr Kurtz*, described the Berlin Conference as one “at which the world powers carved up Africa” (Wrong 2000: 42). Similar sentiments have also been expressed by African political leaders such as former Ghanaian

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President Kwame Nkrumah, who stated that the partition of Africa was arranged at the Berlin Conference (Wesseling 1996: 126). The reality was more nuanced and by the time the Berlin Conference began in November 1884, many boundaries had already been set (Katzenellenbogen 1996: 21). The Berlin Conference – held between November 1884 and February 1885 – was arranged mainly because Germany wished to impose international control over the Scramble and also to try and limit British expansion. The main issues discussed at the conference were international freedom of trade and navigation on the Congo and Niger rivers, as well as the drafting of international rules for future occupations of territory. The parties agreed that all would be able to participate in the economic exploitation of each claimed territory. It was also agreed that no precise boundaries would be agreed on at the conference. Regarding colonial boundaries, the Berlin Conference only marked an important stage in a process that began much earlier and proceeded long after (Katzenellenbogen 1996: 21-22). In the words of H.L. Wesseling,

As we have seen, Africa was not only not divided at Berlin, but the subject was not even on the agenda; indeed partition of Africa was explicitly rejected by the conference. It is true that the idea was in the air. The large map of Africa did not adorn the wall for nothing, and the conference had of course been called because here and there in Africa a fierce race for colonies, protectorates and spheres of influence had been started. The conference aimed to stop this process, or at least to keep it in check. It was a ‘holding operation’, an attempt to calm matters by reaching agreement on principles and codes of conduct... The conference therefore did not so much preside over the partition of Africa as serve as a symbol of it (Wesseling 1996: 126).

With regard to future “effective occupations” of territory, Germany wished to set out unambiguous criteria for the international recognition of territorial claims. This has led to the spread of another myth: that the conference established the rule that the legitimacy of territorial claims was based on the principle of “effective occupation.” Notably, the concept of “effective occupation” went against traditional British policy, which was to “secure only a degree of influence which would ensure that their interests were not discriminated against in favour of any other power” (Chamberlain 1974: 56). Furthermore, the “insistence on ‘effective occupation’ was probably only intended to abrogate Portugal’s ancient but shadowy claims to half the

coastline of Africa” (Chamberlain 1974: 56). In fact, Chapter VI of the Berlin Act refers specifically to effective occupation of the coasts, most of which had been divided among the European powers before the conference. Germany had intended to reach a consensus on clear criteria on this issue but this was not achieved as Bismarck realised that German and British interests were complementary. Importantly, this did not put a stop to Britain, other states and individuals using the principle of “effective occupation” to further future claims. The concept of “effective occupation” developed in Europe from the sixteenth century onwards as maritime empires tried to resolve disputed claims of “unoccupied” land. Lawyers made reference to the Roman law of *occupatio*, a principle traditionally applied to *terra nullius*, which referred to vacant or empty land (Katzenellenbogen 1996: 22). Martin Shaw has argued that while the provisions of the Berlin Act would apply in the occupation of *terra nullius*, it does not mean that the continent of Africa was in fact declared as such (Shaw 1986: 38). While it goes without saying that the political, social, and economic actualities of pre-colonial Africa were completely disregarded when boundaries were demarcated, what is contained in Chapter VI of the Berlin Act is largely irrelevant and the principle of “effective occupation” was used by European powers to try and legitimise claims and counter-claims. Any direct reference to the Act “was in reality nothing more than posturing” (Katzenellenbogen 1996: 23). “Effective occupation” had applied in some territorial disputes, such as in respect of islands in the English Channel and disputes in North America between England and Spain, but the principle was never the determining factor in any boundary delimitations in colonial Africa. If anything, “effective occupation” may have “provided some spurious legality for the imperial carve-up” (Katzenellenbogen 1996: 23).

John MacKenzie has described the Scramble as “not so much a reaction to events that had already taken place as to events that it was feared might take place. It was less the result of a ‘general crisis’ than a symptom of the anxieties that a general crisis was on the way” (MacKenzie 1983: 45). Importantly, the Scramble was not the outcome of Africa’s “failed modernity, but of a tumultuous, dynamic process of global engagement” (Reid 2021: 1447). There was also something irrational about the partition as seen in the policies of King Leopold II of Belgium, Carl Peters and Cecil John Rhodes, that was anathema to more rational figures such as Lord Salisbury and Count Otto von Bismarck (MacKenzie 1983: 45). MacKenzie also notes that Africans were not passive actors and took part in the Scramble by entering into treaties and manipulating various European players to achieve the best outcomes (MacKenzie 1983: 41).

Fourteen European powers were represented at the conference of whom only four had a direct interest in the Congo basin: Britain, France, Germany and Portugal. The other nations at the conference were Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey (Gavin and Betley 1973: 128). The *Association Internationale du Congo* occupied an ambiguous position as, although it had been recognised as a sovereign power by the start of the conference by France, Germany and the United States, it had not been recognised by the other countries, notably Britain and Portugal. Leopold, who “genuinely believed that he was pegging out claims for a new Java or India in the African interior,” had previously founded the *Association Internationale Africaine* at the Brussels Geographical Conference in 1876 (Viaene 2008: 750). The conference was ostensibly concerned with the international coordination of future geographical exploration and the suppression of the slave trade in Africa. It was agreed that the *Association Internationale Africaine* would be set up to construct and staff a number of scientific stations in equatorial Africa and it elected an International Committee, of which Leopold was elected head, as well as a number of national committees. Britain declined to form a committee within this structure and instead formed the Royal Geographical Society in 1877. Although Belgium formed a national committee of its own, Leopold founded the *Comité d’Études du Haut Congo* in 1877 to deal exclusively with his interests in the Congo basin. This body was renamed the *Association Internationale du Congo* (the “*Association*”) during 1882 (Anstey 1962: 11). The *Association Internationale Africaine* convened only once in June 1887, and never fulfilled its dual mandate of opening up Africa to scientific exploration and contributing to the suppression of the slave trade (Bederman 1989: 63-73; Crowe 1942: 13-15). The *Association* was not officially represented at the conference, and Leopold needed to work through the representatives of other states such as Belgium and the United States, in order to ensure that the views of the *Association* were taken into account (Crowe 1942: 98). Importantly, Leopold kept the vast wealth of the Congo – something he became aware of in 1876 through the discoveries of Verney Lovett Cameron – secret from his allies during the conference (Van Beurden 2022: 99-100).

Territorial negotiations regarding the lower Congo occurred in Berlin between Britain, France, Germany, Portugal and the *Association*, but these took place outside the formal proceedings of the conference. The *Association* emerged as the Congo Free State with the largest share of the Congo basin and an enormous hinterland (Anstey 1962: 185). Britain had no claims in

the region and she preferred to play a passive role in the negotiations, which involved dividing the territory around the mouth of the Congo between the *Association*, France, and Portugal. France and the *Association* signed a bilateral agreement whereby the *Association* would cede the Koulilou valley, north of the Congo River, to France. In exchange, France supported the *Association's* claims to the north bank of the Congo River and mouth. Portugal claimed the entire coastline from Ambriz to the French frontier, as well as both banks of the Congo and the north bank as far as Boma. Britain's main role was to support Germany and France in resisting Portugal's claims. The three powers feared that the Free Trade Zone in the Congo basin that was established at the conference would be endangered if Portugal had control over both banks of the Congo mouth. Portugal was accordingly permitted to retain the south bank, as well as Kabinda and Malemba, which were north of the river but separated from it by territory granted to the *Association*, as she regarded them as historic domains of the Portuguese crown (TNA FO 84/1821, Malet to Granville, 4 February 1885).

As the *Association* was not officially represented at the conference, there was very little correspondence between itself and the Foreign Office on matters directly related to the conference. Notably, with respect to the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty and British recognition of the *Association*, direct communication between Leopold and the Foreign Office virtually ceased after April 1884, and Lord Granville dealt with matters relating to the *Association* principally through Sir Edward Malet, the British envoy in Brussels (Pakenham 1991: 241). Britain was concerned with negotiations surrounding three agreements that were closely related to the conference and were signed during the course of 1884: the Anglo-Portuguese treaty signed on 26 February, which sparked the diplomatic crisis that resulted in the conference, a pre-emption agreement, signed between the *Association* and France on 23 April, and the recognition of the *Association* as a sovereign power by Britain after the conference had begun on 16 December. Based on archival sources housed in the National Archives in London, this article will focus on these agreements, which provide an important contextual framework for what was discussed at the Berlin Conference.

The Anglo-Portuguese Treaty

Since 1879, Britain and Portugal had been in negotiations regarding Goa, Mozambique and the Congo. Regarding the Congo River, they resolved that the navigation of the Congo would be regulated by an Anglo-Portuguese

Commission although Britain would have preferred an international commission. Ultimately, France and Germany persuaded Portugal to decide the question of the Congo River at an international conference, to be held in Berlin. Britain's rationale for signing the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty was to put a stop to France's ambitions in the region (Chamberlain 1974: 53-55). The idea of a conference arose as a direct result of the treaty, which was signed on 26 February 1884, but never ratified. Portugal had the oldest claim to the lower Congo, but this was not internationally recognised, and she was unable to occupy the territory as the other European powers were strongly opposed to the idea of Portuguese control of the Congo River mouth (Crowe 1942: 11). After France had ratified Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza's claims to the right bank of the Congo in November 1882, Britain countered this by recognising Portugal's claims to the lower Congo in return for guarantees of free trade (Robinson and Gallagher 1979: 604). This formed part of Britain's transition away from the slave trade towards "legitimate commerce," which began in the mid-1800s (Reid 2021: 1434). The terms of the treaty, which in S.E. Crowe's view was an attempt by Britain to establish a veiled protectorate over the Congo, were that Portuguese territory lying between 5° 12' and 8° south latitude would be recognised by Britain in return for a low tariff of 10% on imported goods, and most-favoured-nation treatment for British subjects. Importantly, it provided for an Anglo-Portuguese Commission on the river to regulate shipping traffic (Crowe 1942: 15-16). Portugal suggested the arrangement to Britain as she correctly judged that Britain had no territorial ambitions in the region, and it appeared that Britain's decision to accept Portugal's offer was motivated by fear of France's exclusive commercial policies (Crowe 1942: 15-16). The treaty was strongly opposed by commercial interests in Britain, as they feared the extortions of ill-paid officials as well as high customs dues, and were determined to prevent the annexation of the Congo mouth by Portugal (Anstey 1962: 113-114).

Britain did not intend the treaty to be directed against the *Association*, which during 1883 and the early part of 1884 was a small private organisation whose stated ambitions to uphold free trade and promote civilisation were genuinely believed by the European powers. During the negotiations with Portugal, Lord Granville maintained excellent relations with Leopold, frequently informing him of developments related to the treaty. At times he thought that Leopold was too exacting in his demands, but believed this was because he was only defending the "cause of [civilisation] and the freedom of trade" (TNA FO 123/212, Vivian to Granville, 18 February 1885). Similarly, in early 1884, Granville believed that the treaties that had recently been concluded

between Henry Morton Stanley and chiefs in the Congo were not intended to effect anything more than the protection of the Congo trade from the designs of de Brazza, and the opening of that trade to the world. However, Sir Thomas Lister, the assistant under-secretary in the Foreign Office clearly had reservations about the *Association* and commented that the wording of the treaties he saw was “certainly calculated to convey the idea of strict monopoly” (TNA FO 84/1809, Lister to Mackinnon, 20 January 1884). In spite of this, Britain wished to make arrangements with Portugal to ensure that regulations regarding trade in the Congo basin would not affect the part of the river where the *Association* was operating. The station of Vivi was to be placed beyond Portuguese limits and the *Association* was to be granted exemption from any transit duties. This was to ensure that “the King of the Belgians need fear no interference with his great enterprise” (TNA FO 84/1809, Lister to Mackinnon, 20 January 1884). Leopold had reason to be concerned about the terms of the treaty because, once it was ratified, Portugal would gain control of the Congo mouth, which would severely compromise any future commercial or territorial expansion of the *Association*. Therefore, in the weeks before it was signed, Leopold exploited the goodwill that existed between Britain and the *Association* to press for changes to specific clauses. Although at this stage of the negotiations Leopold stressed the importance of free trade, his ultimate aim was “direct income to be derived from the exploitation of a tropical dependency” (Viaene 2008: 752).

Leopold was particularly concerned about Article V of the treaty, which dealt with tariffs on goods in transit. Large ships could only travel as far as Boma, and their cargoes needed to be transferred onto smaller vessels at that point. In the process, goods would have to be stored onshore, and Leopold wanted assurance that no tariffs would apply in such circumstances. He was successful, and the exemption was applied to goods in transit, including those landed and temporarily stored, until they could be transported further up the river (TNA PRO 30/29/198, Granville to Leopold, 20 February 1884). After this amendment had been successfully negotiated, the Portuguese complained to Britain that the agreement was constantly being reopened. In spite of this, Leopold wanted to make a further amendment to be made in order to ensure that goods transported by land would also be exempt from duties but was unsuccessful (TNA FO 123/213, Granville to Malet, 21 February 1884). Granville made many references to his commitment to humanitarian ideals in official correspondence. However, Foreign Office correspondence refers to an incident towards the end of the conference that casts doubt on his sincerity. Just before the close of the conference in February 1885, Granville received

news of alleged ill treatment by agents of the *Association* of members of the Hausa tribe who were British subjects from the Gold Coast. On one occasion, some ran away from a station and were retaken and, at the orders of an agent of the *Association*, were each given 100 blows with a hippopotamus hide whip, which drew blood at every stroke; the ringleader later died after receiving 600 lashes. In addition, some were subjected to hard labour in chains, which was against the regulations of the *Association* itself. In spite of these abuses of British subjects during the conference itself, Granville allowed Leopold to employ Sierra Leoneans as replacements for the Hausas in April 1885 (TNA FO 84/1821, Malet to Granville, 1 February 1885).

Lord Granville hoped that Leopold's objections to the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty would be satisfied as the "great work of civilisation and humanity will be in infinitely greater danger if this treaty were not concluded, with all the safeguards that are therein provided being abandoned" (TNA PRO 30/29/198, Granville to Leopold, 20 February 1884). Granville's willingness to accommodate Leopold indicates that he too had misgivings about Portugal and her long history of commercial exclusivity and slavery. The preservation of free trade was the government's main priority, and the best means of achieving that in the short term Portugal's claims to the lower Congo would be recognised. However, Britain could not turn to the other powers for diplomatic support as they bitterly opposed the treaty. This explains why she maintained friendly relations with the *Association* as it represented her best chance of gaining an ally who shared her desire to promote free trade in the Congo basin. In spite of this goodwill, Leopold actively joined French, German, and British commercial interests in their successful bid to destroy the treaty as soon as it had been signed. Its subsequent demise led to the question of the Congo basin being discussed at the conference, and ultimately enabled him to place the *Association* in a position to take control of the Congo basin (Crowe 1942: 79). When the treaty was eventually signed on 26 February 1884, "it was born into a world very different from that in which the negotiations had begun" as France and Leopold were now established in the Congo basin and Bismarck was now involved and he refused to recognise it (Sanderson 1975: 29).

Even though the government was forced into adopting an active policy as a result of international pressure in the late nineteenth century, the basic policy of safeguarding free trade continued. According to this interpretation, Britain's decision to enter into negotiations with Portugal was purely an attempt to preserve free trade on the lower Congo, rather than an attempt to expand her political sphere of influence. The purpose of the treaty was to safeguard free trade, even though it was concluded with Portugal, a

country with little tradition of upholding free trade principles (Robinson and Gallagher 1953: 14). This explains why Britain allowed Leopold to become involved in the drafting process; she needed the support of a power that believed, at least ostensibly, in free trade in order to counterbalance Portugal, which followed exclusive economic policies.

An analysis of Cain and Hopkins's socio-economic theory leads to the more fundamental question of whether the Hobsonian economic principles on which the entire foundation of gentlemanly capitalism is built, are applicable in the West African context (Fieldhouse 1994: 534). J. A. Hobson's theory is based on the emergence of under-consumption in the domestic economy, and Lenin's is based on the rise of monopoly capitalism. Both used their respective theories to argue that imperialism was a result of the need for investors to export capital, which resulted in government intervention to protect those investments (Lenin 1982: 57). Importantly, both interpretations are based on the assumption that dramatic changes in the domestic economy after 1870 were the root causes of imperial expansion in the late nineteenth century. Robinson and Gallagher criticised this aspect of the Hobson-Lenin thesis and argued that Britain continuously expanded her overseas influence throughout the nineteenth century, through "informal empire" and free trade. Their theory of the "imperialism of free trade" is founded on the extension of influence by merchants and traders, and the willingness of the government to extend British spheres of influence. In the mid nineteenth-century, the government played a passive role but was forced to intervene as a result of international competition in the late nineteenth-century. This interpretation explains Britain's decision to enter into negotiations with Portugal, as she wished to preserve free trade rather than protect the overseas investments of bondholders in the City.

According to Robinson and Gallagher's theory, Britain entered into negotiations with Portugal because France began to actively defend her West African interests at the same time as the occupation of Egypt. This has been disputed by Cain and Hopkins who claimed that France began advancing inland from Senegal in 1879 and sought control on the Niger River in the early 1880s (Cain and Hopkins 1993: 385). Diplomatic explanations suggest that France's decision to ratify de Brazza's treaties was an attempt to gain diplomatic advantages in Europe. However, the present case study suggests that neither interpretation offers an adequate explanation, and France appears to have been primarily motivated by the desire to protect her commercial interests, which compelled her to expand her sphere of influence.

The Pre-emption Agreement

In the months following the rejection of the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty, the two major issues that were discussed between Britain and the *Association* were British recognition of the latter as a sovereign power, and the closely related issue of the pre-emption agreement entered into between the *Association* and France. Leopold realised that international recognition of the *Association* was vital to the success of his venture, and he dispatched his envoy, Henry Sanford, to the United States in November 1883 with a view to obtaining this from Congress (Crowe 1942: 81). In order to maintain momentum, Leopold sought recognition of the *Association* by one of the powers that understood the legal arguments for recognition but also accepted that it was in its own interests to grant it and the United States was identified as the “softest target” (Ewans 2002: 84). The United States duly recognised the flag of the *Association* as that of a friendly government on 22 April 1884 in return for the promise of free trade in the Congo basin. This was something Leopold never had any intention of honouring, as his agents were actively signing treaties during this time with local chiefs in terms of which the *Association* was granted exclusive monopolies (Crowe 1942: 81). France recognised the flag of the *Association* the next day – 23 April – in return for a right of pre-emption granting the French the right of first refusal to purchase and occupy the *Association's* territories in the Congo basin in the event that it was forced to sell them. France also undertook to recognise the *Association's* stations and territories. Following the signing of the agreement, Maximilien Strauch, an advisor to Leopold, reported a general sense of antipathy towards the *Association* noting that Britain regarded the pre-emption agreement as an abandonment in favour of an unfriendly country (Anstey 1962: 168-171).

Undoubtedly, France signed the pre-emption treaty with the *Association* out of fear of Britain, as the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty had recently been signed but not yet ratified (Crowe 1942: 81). The French also firmly believed that the *Association* was in a perilous financial state and would be compelled to sell its African possessions in the near future. By signing the pre-emption agreement, France believed it had outmanoeuvred the *Association* as well as Britain and Portugal. In fact, the treaty signed on 23 April 1884 was a “masterstroke of diplomacy on the part of Leopold in which he succeeded in completely outwitting the French” (Crowe 1942: 82). The signing of the pre-emption treaty resulted in a complete reversal in the international situation with fear of Anglo-Portuguese control of the Congo River mouth being replaced by a fear of France and the imposition of French tariffs (Crowe 1942: 82-83).

This act by the *Association* had arguably the greatest effect on the relations between itself and the European powers, and Leopold skillfully exploited its effects. It caused great apprehension among the powers, as they all believed that the *Association* would be unable to control its territories in the Congo basin for very long. Portugal, Germany, and Britain greatly feared the imposition of French tariffs, and they were therefore forced to support the *Association* politically (Crowe 1942: 81-82). The British became aware of the French right of pre-emption a day after it was concluded and the *Association* had declared that, although it had no “present idea of realizing its property, should it be obliged to do otherwise, the French government should have, in the first instance the option of purchase” (TNA FO 123/213, Malet to Granville, 25 April 1884). In consideration of this advantage, France would respect the “possessions and establishments of the *Association*, and in no way interfere with its authority” (TNA FO 123/213, Malet to Granville, 25 April 1884).

Britain had been completely excluded from the negotiations, and she resented the fact that the right had not previously been offered to her. In addition, the government had to rely on press reports on the matter, as France had not officially informed it of her agreement with the *Association* (Hansard's Parliamentary Papers, Sir Herbert Maxwell to Fitzmaurice, 31 July 1884). On hearing the news, Granville candidly wrote to Leopold that, “I cannot pretend that the French convention produced no excitement in this country and no apprehension as to the prospect of the future of the great [enterprise]” (TNA PRO 30/29/198, Granville to Leopold, 2 March 1884). Jules Devaux, Leopold's cabinet secretary, unsuccessfully attempted to reassure Granville that “it could not be too distinctly stated the objects of the *Association* are purely philanthropic and that the *Association* never will, under any circumstances, become a commercial undertaking – that this was the firm and irrevocable decision of the King” (TNA FO 123/213, Malet to Granville, 27 April 1884). The resentment that Britain felt as a result of the agreement was long-lasting and clouded relations between herself and the *Association* throughout 1884. A month before the conference began, Lister wrote to Baron Solwyns, a senior Belgian diplomat, about the “Berlin Conference and the folly of Belgium mixing herself up in these matters, and losing the friendship of England” (TNA FO 881/5023, Lister, Memorandum, 16 October 1884). He said he “had not the slightest idea what had induced the King to throw himself and his Congo *Association* into the hands of France, but he was evidently much annoyed at the underhand game which His Majesty had played towards England” (TNA FO 881/5023, Lister, Memorandum, 16 October 1884). Even by the end of the Berlin Conference in February 1885, Sir Percy Anderson, the head of

the African department, displayed the government's feelings towards the *Association* as a result of it entering into the pre-emption agreement: "I quite agree that the King of Belgians has behaved badly... especially in his secret bargain with the French behind our back" (TNA FO 84/1821, Anderson, Memorandum, 4 February 1885). The pre-emption agreement destroyed the cordial relations that had existed between Britain and the *Association* during the Anglo-Portuguese negotiations, and this partly explains why Britain delayed recognising the *Association* for so long.

News of the pre-emption agreement was badly received nationwide, even in Manchester, the centre of commercial support for the *Association*. It was generally agreed that Portugal – with all her faults – might have been easier to deal with than France (Anstey 1962: 181). Doubt was also expressed in commercial circles about the *Association's* general motives in Africa. For example, the *Manchester Guardian* criticised the *Association* after its agents had been engaged in buying up the sovereign rights of chiefs in the Congo, and a few days later it suggested that commercial leaders weigh the possible advantages offered by Portugal against the uncertain conditions offered by the *Association* (Anstey 1962: 181). Although major newspapers such as the *Times*, *Manchester Guardian* and the *Manchester Examiner* supported recognition, this was not without serious reservations, which stemmed from fears aroused by the *Association's* exclusive treaties and the pre-emption agreement (Anstey 1962: 182).

Britain's negative reaction on hearing the news that the *Association* had granted France the right of pre-emption was partly because she was concerned about the imposition of French tariffs in the Congo basin. However, the government's distrust of France went deeper than commercial issues, as their relationship had deteriorated sharply since the British occupation of Egypt in 1882. Anderson wrote that fear of France was the principal factor that determined British policy after 1883 and believed that France had an antagonistic policy towards Britain, on the East and West coasts of Africa (Louis 1966: 293). According to Robinson and Gallagher, France began to actively defend her interests in West Africa as compensation for her loss of influence in Egypt, which is possible as de Brazza's treaties were ratified only five months after the bombardment of Alexandria. In addition, diplomatic theories suggest that the occupation destroyed a political alliance lasting more than 20 years and hampered future cooperation in West Africa. Importantly, both interpretations of the Scramble explain the source of Anglo-French antagonism as originating outside the scope of the case study. This supports Robinson and Gallagher's theory that Egypt had a significant effect in all areas and phases of the Scramble (Robinson and Gallagher 1965: 13-14).

Recognition of the *Association*

One of the main difficulties faced by Leopold was the lack of international recognition of the *Association Internationale Africaine* and the *Association internationale du Congo*. Without a secure legal position and a recognised flag, it was not assured that these organisations' jurisdiction would be respected and their treaties honoured (Anstey 1962: 168). Britain felt isolated once she became aware of negotiations between the *Association* and Germany regarding recognition of the *Association's* flag as that of a friendly state. It is evident from this quotation that Lister could hardly believe Bismarck's decision:

It is inconceivable that Bismarck would seek to promote and establish the claims of the *Association* knowing that there was every possibility of the vast territories they allege themselves to have acquired becoming the property of the French government. I believe he has been bamboozled by the *Association* and that it is therefore important to open his eyes to the truth. As for committing ourselves I think we are bound to commit ourselves against the filibustering of an irresponsible *Association* of no nationality which cheats the natives out of their lands and sovereign rights in order to sell them to the highest bidder (TNA FO 84/1812, Lister to Granville, 17 July 1884).

Furthermore, Bismarck put pressure on Britain to recognise the *Association*, saying it was the only way she could be of use to the other powers who had interests in the Congo. He also believed that the work of the impending conference would be much more difficult "if the *Association* is not given the vitality which it can alone receive from recognition" (TNA FO 84/1816, Malet to Granville, 1 December 1884). Malet informed Granville that Bismarck regarded the matter very strongly, and he suggested that the issue should be considered in a wider context: whether it was worthwhile to "incur a generally unfriendly attitude of Germany on the matter of the highest importance to us. I fear that this will be the result if we refuse to meet the Chancellor's views on the point of recognition" (TNA FO 84/1816, Malet to Granville, 1 December 1884). He also warned that if a treaty was not concluded with the *Association* before the end of the conference "it will greatly militate against the interests of the *Association*, in consequence of the Scramble for territory which is likely to immediately succeed the Conference" (TNA FO 84/1815, Malet to Granville, 8 December 1884).

The British ambassador in Paris, Lord Lyons, wrote of the serious implications for Britain of Germany's decision. He had heard reports that, in addition to granting the French the right of pre-emption, Leopold was willing to cede the *Association's* territories to Germany. In addition, he heard that the *Association* was considering reneging on the pre-emption agreement, which it claimed it had entered into solely to guard itself against Portugal, and it hoped that the conference would assist it to "force itself from that engagement" (TNA FO 84/1816, Lyons to Granville, 2 December 1884). The *Association* also claimed that the right given to France only extended to territories that it possessed at the time of the treaty. However, it appeared that France was determined to hold the *Association* to the terms of the treaty: that its rights included all territory acquired by the *Association* at the time of the agreement, as well as all territory acquired after that date. Lyons suggested that in light of France's determination to hold the *Association* to the agreement, Bismarck wished to come to an understanding with France to support the transfer of the territories to the French. Both believed this would be imminent because of the weakness of the *Association*, and Bismarck wished to achieve "the double object of presenting Germany to France in the light of a profitable friend, and of providing French energies with occupation at a distance from Europe" (TNA FO 84/1816, Lyons to Granville, 2 December 1884).

After realising the importance of the negotiations between the *Association* and Germany, Lister suggested that the treaties made between the *Association* and the various powers, as well as information held by the Foreign Office on the pre-emption agreement, be sent to Bismarck. This was because the government was anxious to ensure that the German government was aware of the risks involved in recognising the *Association*; in her view it was tantamount to supporting the establishment of monopolies on the Congo River, and their "transfer with extensive sovereign rights to the French government uncontrolled by any treaty engagement" (TNA FO 84/1812, Lister to Granville, 4 July 1884). However, Granville suspended the dispatch of this instruction to Lord Ampthill, the British ambassador in Berlin, after rumours were heard of Bismarck's plans for hosting an international conference in Berlin. After this, the British government adopted an acquiescent policy towards the *Association* – Anderson pointed out that if Britain expressed her suspicions of the aims of the *Association* now that Bismarck was planning a conference on the basis of German support for it, Britain would run the risk of expressing her hostility towards the *Association* without gaining any advantage (TNA FO 84/1812, Anderson, Minute, 14 July 1884).

The Foreign Office eventually decided to recognise the flag of the *Association* and, rather than admitting the political reasons for doing so, it sought to justify her decision with a series of convoluted constitutional arguments. They are insightful as they express the safeguards and rights that Britain wanted in the Congo, and therefore help to explain her motives in wanting to retain her position as a commercial power in the Congo basin. Granville wrote that the *Association* did not yet constitute a state, but it nevertheless contained elements out of which a state could be created. Despite the fact that its constitution was unknown and its government probably only existed on paper, there was no fundamental reason why it should not be allowed to become a reality, and the government would “watch with great interest and sympathy its efforts to develop itself into a new state” (TNA FO 84/1814, Granville to Malet, 15 November 1884). Granville insisted that only if these efforts resulted in the establishment of a political organisation with a regular government and the constituent elements that, according to public law, were indispensable to the existence of a state, would Britain consider recognising it (TNA FO 84/1814/ Granville to Malet, 15 November 1884).

Similarly, Lister wrote that it was one thing to assist the *Association* in its endeavours to become a state, and another to actually recognise it as one. He said it was usual, in recognising a state, to have a clear idea of its boundaries as well as proof of the validity of its claims to territory. He felt that the *Association* should explain its constitution, and give assurances of its intentions regarding personal, religious, and commercial freedom before seeking recognition (TNA FO 84/1815/ Lister, Minute, 19 November 1884). Sir Julian Pauncefote, the under-secretary at the Foreign Office, agreed with this view, as he suspected that Germany, France, and the USA were in possession of secret information regarding the recognition of the *Association*. He felt that a middle course could be devised, outside the conference, whereby the *Association* might be recognised not as an actual state, but as a “state in course of formation” on certain defined conditions as to consular jurisdiction, religious liberty, and freedom of trade (TNA FO 84/1815, Pauncefote, Minute, 19 November 1884). In the meantime, it should not have power to accredit or receive diplomatic or consular representatives. On those conditions it might be provisionally recognised for all practical purposes as an “inchoate state” (TNA FO 84/1815, Pauncefote, Minute, 19 November 1884). He acknowledged that “it will be a new feature in the practice of nations, but I do not see any great objections to it under all the circumstances” (TNA FO 84/1815, Pauncefote, Minute, 19 November 1884).

The Foreign Office questioned whether Germany's treaty with the *Association* was lawful because she had recognised the *Association* as a "state" (TNA FO 84/1816, Pauncefote, Memorandum, 2 December 1884). In the view of Pauncefote, they had in reality recognised the existence of certain "Free States created by Treaties with legitimate Sovereigns" (TNA FO 84/1816, Pauncefote, Memorandum, 2 December 1884). Sovereignty therefore vested in the people who had chosen the *Association* as their governing body. As mandatory of the Free States, the *Association* had "adopted for itself and for the said free states a standard or flag" (TNA FO 84/1816, Pauncefote, Memorandum, 2 December 1884). Therefore, in his opinion, to recognise the *Association's* flag was to recognise the flag of the Free States of which the *Association* was the governing body (TNA FO 84/1816, Pauncefote, Memorandum, 2 December 1884). Having formulated this legal justification for its decision, the Foreign Office finally granted authorisation to Malet on 22 December 1884 to negotiate a convention with the *Association* in terms of which the government would recognise its flag as "the flag of the Free States administered by [*the Association Internationale du Congo*]" (TNA FO 84/1816, Pauncefote to Malet, 2 December 1884).

Cain and Hopkins's interpretation of the Scramble, as well as Hobson's theory on which it is founded, can be applied in assessing the extent to which commercial interests influenced the government's decision to recognise the *Association*. In his socio-economic theory of imperialism, Hobson referred to a select group of financiers in the City who were the main investors in overseas markets, and who had a significant influence on government policy (Hobson 1938: 46-56). However, he failed to elaborate on the nature of this group, even though it was an important part of his thesis. Cain and Hopkins built on Hobson's original idea in extraordinary detail, in a number of papers as well as their authoritative work on the subject, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688-1914* (Cain and Hopkins 1993: 385). Unlike Hobson's theory, Lenin's largely economic discourse fails to establish a causal nexus between the export of capital and the territorial division of the world among the imperialist powers; in other words he failed to show how the export of capital influenced government policy. Cain and Hopkins recognised that a socio-economic theory was needed to bridge this gap, and they turned to Hobson's idea of a financial elite centred on the City. In order for Cain and Hopkins's thesis to be applied to the issue of the influence of commercial interests on the British government to recognise the *Association* in 1884, the role of gentlemanly capitalists must be established. Cain and Hopkins strongly emphasised the centrality of the City and the southeast

of England for the development of the service sector and the rise of gentlemanly capitalism. They acknowledged that there was a growth in the number of wealthy manufacturers but claimed that their political influence did not rise commensurately. Economic policy continued to be controlled by gentlemanly capitalists, and commercial interests in provinces were largely excluded. Importantly, they stress the great divide between the City and provincial cities such as Manchester and Birmingham.

J. F. Munro argues that William Mackinnon and his enterprise network played a significant role within the trading history of the British Empire, and in sustaining and supporting British political influence on the frontiers (Munro 2003: 505). However, they were not the “gentlemanly capitalists” centred around the City who Cain and Hopkins identify as the group, which had the greatest influence on British policy (Munro 2003: 9). To interpret the economic history of late-Victorian Britain purely from the perspective of the City is to “set aside as insignificant the activities, interests and influence of businessmen working outside the charmed circle of the ‘square mile’” (Munro 2003: 507). Munro also mentions that the concept of gentlemanly capitalism plays down the role of provincial regions in “empire-building,” such as Merseyside’s close connections with West Africa as a result of the palm-oil trade and the Royal Niger Company (Munro 2003: 507).

Since the publication of *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688-1914* in 1993, the debate on the divide between the gentlemanly capitalists in the City and the bourgeois industrialists in the provinces, and the influence of the latter on imperial policy, has prompted Cain and Hopkins to publish articles addressing these issues. Hopkins accepted that the debate should not disguise the fact that key interest groups were incorporated into “Great Britain plc” by being given a stake in both domestic and imperial policy making. He referred to the tobacco lords in Glasgow, the jute manufacturers in Dundee, the steel producers of Sheffield and the millocracy in Manchester and acknowledged that the wealth of these disparate groups was derived from the empire, as well as areas of informal influence overseas (Hopkins 1997: 15).

More recently, Cain and Hopkins have explained that their theory on “gentlemanly capitalism” was not about the economics of empire, but rather an explanation of its place in the structure of political power, and how it influenced the conduct of relations with foreign countries in general, as well as with the empire (Cain and Hopkins 1999: 198). This significantly changes the nature of the debate away from the structure of the British economy, the

character of the business classes and how these related to the empire, to one about how the elites, whether they were businessmen in the City or in the provinces, were defined and recognised both by government and society, and how they fitted in to the political structure (Munro 2003: 508).

With regard to pressure from commercial interests to recognise the *Association*, James Hutton and Mackinnon, who had opposed the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty, were Leopold's chief advocates in Britain. James Hutton began his commercial career as the manager of the Manchester branch of his family firm, W.B. Hutton and Sons, which supplied European and native West African merchants with British goods for the West African market. He became the Belgian consul in Manchester, as well as President of its Chamber of Commerce from 1884 to 1885 (Anstey 1962: 65-66). Anstey argues that as these two men had been involved in Leopold's African ventures for a number of years, they accepted as perfectly reasonable the gradual changes away from the humanitarian ideals stated by Leopold in 1876, to an agenda based on trade and the creation of a sovereign state. Importantly, unlike the *Association Internationale Africaine*, the stated aim of the *Comité d'Etudes du Haut Congo* was to establish its own markets on the upper Congo. Hutton and Mackinnon are unlikely to have questioned the idea that an extension of trade was to be commended, and whether it was brought about by moral or commercial means was immaterial to them. Similarly, they had no reservations about supporting the creation of a state. Even if Mackinnon, Hutton, and Sir John Kirk had doubts about the *Association's* moral agenda and the possibility that it might develop into a monopolistic state, these views were never expressed.

The principal hurdles to securing the recognition of the *Association* were the strong feelings of the government against Leopold as a direct result of the right of pre-emption he had granted to France. Sir Percy Anderson wrote that the reasons given by Leopold for the agreement with France were the attacks of Portugal and his desire to intimidate his adversaries. Anderson also believed that these secret schemes were directed more against Britain than Portugal (Anstey 1962: 171). In light of this, Mackinnon saw Anderson on two occasions in an attempt to allay the fears of the Foreign Office and push for recognition. The press was also used, for example, by Sir Frederick Goldsmid, one of Leopold's administrators, who published an article in the *Times* in June 1884, explaining the *Association's* position (Anstey 1962: 172). A campaign to force the government to recognise the *Association* was launched the following month, and Stanley arrived in Britain to conduct a series of speeches. He was extremely well received by the Chambers of Commerce in London and

Manchester, where he stressed the role of the *Association* as the guardian of free trade in the Congo basin (Anstey 1962: 168-176). Hutton subsequently sent an unanimous resolution of the Chamber to Granville requesting recognition of the *Association* (Anstey 1962: 175). He then invited a number of Liverpool firms to Manchester to discuss the Congo trade, and later made a further representation to Granville from 36 merchants and manufacturers in Manchester and Liverpool, requesting that the British delegates at the conference be instructed to negotiate for the recognition of the *Association* (Anstey 1962: 176).

After Stanley's reception in Manchester, representatives of the city's commercial interests went to London, Liverpool, Glasgow, and other centres, but they were less well received, and Hutton was unable to persuade them to make representations to the government in favour of recognition. Similarly, he was unsuccessful in persuading the anti-slavery movement to lobby the government to recognise the *Association*; among the humanitarian and missionary groups, only one sent a memorandum to the government. The exception to this general state of apathy was the Congo District Defence Association founded in July 1884. It represented merchants from Liverpool who believed that the *Association* should become the dominant power not just in the Congo basin, but also over the entire coast from Gabon to Angola. Importantly, the body, whose formation was unlikely to have been initiated by Hutton, sent four delegates to the Berlin Conference (Crowe 1942: 99-100). They expressed doubts about the lengths to which Hutton had gone to obtain petitions in favour of the *Association*, and they shared the government's feelings concerning the pre-emption agreement with France. They were also displeased at the news that an agent of the *Association* had signed a treaty securing exclusive trading rights in the Congo in July 1884. Even though the Congo Association supported the *Association* at the conference, this was probably because of their fear of France and Portugal's exclusive trade policies, rather than any genuine belief in the *Association's* commitment to upholding free trade (Anstey 1962: 180).

Conclusion

In the months during which Britain prevaricated over whether to recognise the *Association* or not, the Foreign Office received a steady stream of petitions from commercial lobby groups in favour of recognition. It is clear from a memorandum by Pauncefoot that the government was very aware of the concerns and wishes of the commercial lobby during the conference (Anstey

1962: 182). However, there appears to be no further official correspondence on the issue, and Anstey concludes that commercial interests did not play an essential part in influencing the British decision to recognise the *Association*. However, he does not elaborate on how he came to this conclusion and he simply lists a number of political factors that may have induced Britain into recognising the *Association* (Anstey 1962: 182-185).

Britain's decision to enter into an agreement with Portugal was motivated out of a fear of France and the need to protect British interests, rather than a desire to form a long-term alliance with the Portuguese. Granville's efforts to maintain cordial relations with Leopold, manifested by his willingness to change aspects of the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty to suit the king's wishes, suggest that Britain felt isolated in Europe. This was because of being alienated by France and Germany as a result of negotiating a treaty with a minor power - Portugal - that she did not fully trust herself.

Relations between Britain and the *Association* changed literally overnight when the Foreign Office was informed of the pre-emption agreement that had been concluded with France. Subsequently, Britain adopted a policy of trying to ensure that France would not acquire the *Association's* African territories, and she believed that if the *Association* was not universally recognised as a sovereign power, the pre-emption agreement would be of no effect. However, she was eventually forced to recognise the *Association* during the Berlin Conference, after diplomatic pressure from the other powers, especially Germany, as many of the conference's resolutions could not have been enforced without the *Association*. Commercial interests in Britain were united with the *Association* against the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty, as they believed it would hinder free trade in the Congo basin. However, news of the pre-emption agreement was badly received and this, together with later reports of the agents of the *Association* concluding monopolistic agreements with local chiefs, added to the growing mistrust of the *Association*. As a result, commercial interests were disunited in the months leading up to the conference, as Hutton struggled to maintain support for the *Association*. In the end, he secured their approval for the recognition of the *Association*, but this was not without serious reservations.

Diplomatic interpretations of the Scramble hold that Bismarck's African policy was designed to alienate Britain in order to strengthen the Franco-German *entente*. This view explains his motives in recognising the *Association* in order to support France's pre-emptive rights over the *Association's* territories in the Congo basin. Bismarck also wanted to support French expansion in Africa in order to divert her attention from the issue of Germany's annexation of Alsace-

Lorraine. Germany's predominance in matters relating to the Congo basin can also be explained by the rise of the united German Empire after 1871, which was characterised by rapid industrialisation, and which radically changed the European political landscape. Another factor that strengthened Bismarck's position was Germany's alliance with Austria-Hungary and Russia, which isolated Britain and allowed Bismarck to force her to recognise the *Association*.

Robinson and Gallagher's theory suggests that the "official mind" in London influenced Granville to recognise the flag of the *Association* as that of a friendly state. The cabinet as well as officials in the Foreign Office made their decisions in light of domestic and European politics; the state of the economy; the expansive demands from India; and the white settler colonies. Policymaking was a mix of debate and reasoning, and was a reading of the long-term national interest that remained constant regardless of what government was in power. Although ministers were not always fully aware of all the factors at play and were not completely in control of the processes of empire-building, primary documents are, despite these limitations, able to illuminate the workings of the "official mind" by revealing the underlying reasons at play in imperial expansion into Africa (Robinson and Gallagher 1965: 19-20).

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