

MODERN AFRICA

POLITICS, HISTORY AND SOCIETY

2025 | VOLUME **13**, ISSUE **2**



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Typography by Tiskárna Brázda



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POLITICS, HISTORY AND SOCIETY



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Philosophical Faculty UHK

2025 | Volume 13, Issue 2

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POSTCOLONIAL, DECOLONIAL, AND TRANSCOLONIAL APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Abstract: In this article we attempt to think beyond the adversarial mode and imagine possibilities of concordance as a model for development in Africa. We explore the dynamics of adversariality and concordance through the stages of postcoloniality, decoloniality, and transcoloniality in African development. We argue for a shift to a reliance on concord as the basis for development. This happens to be rooted in the African notions of complementarity and harmony. We insist that theoretically and methodologically positive mindedness and a positive set of values that pursue colligation, complementarity, and overall concordance are more reliable drivers for development than the negativity that the adversarial model portends. This is part of the essence of the emerging transcolonial disposition towards accomplishing development and we think that it holds better prospects for development in Africa.

Keywords: adversariality, concordance, decoloniality, postcoloniality, transcoloniality

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Introduction

As Africa works towards accomplishing development, her quest is often permeated with a deep sense of revulsion accompanied with a tendency for confrontation and chaos. Often, this sense and tendency are expressed in two directions. One is towards the West and everything it represents due to its colonial conquest of Africa and the various levels of underdevelopment it is still perceived to sponsor in Africa. The second is towards ourselves as Africans, suggesting that fellow Africans are co-responsible for the underdevelopment we suffer. In the first instance, the leadership of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe is a clear representation of the revulsion towards the West. Even the Africanisation and indigenisation policies of Ghana and Nigeria soon after independence point in this direction. Very recently, the military junta in Niger Republic sacked the French Ambassador and ordered French troops out of the country. From the scholarly perspective, this disposition can be described as subscribing to the idea of delinking as proposed in the literature on decolonisation and decoloniality in Africa. At the second instance, the case of civil wars, xenophobia, ethnic strife, religious rancour and blaming of African leadership that have been typically African in the postcolonial era signals how one African group perceives another group as responsible for its development woes and is charged up in confrontation to retrieve such development. The #Endsars Protest in Nigeria is an example of how people react to a system of leadership that they feel has entrapped them in the snare of poverty. All these give a general sense that accomplishing development is always a struggle; development has to be taken by force. It is a form of confrontation. This is what we refer to as the adversarial model of development.

These levels of confrontation also abound in the general discourse on development. Looking through the basic theories of development, one sees that this attitude is rife. While dependency, world-system, and post-development theories of development are explicitly confrontational to the West and the various ways it has negatively impacted the development of the rest of the world, modernisation theories of development are no less confrontational, even though they are less explicit in this regard. The charge of dependency theories against modernisation, that the wealth and well-being which they wield and hold up as models for others to emulate as forms of development depended on exploiting the rest, is legitimate. The claim that the wealth of the West depends on depriving the rest is as true as it is troubling. One implication here is that the development of the West came through a form of confrontation and exploitation of the alterity of

the other and vulnerabilities thereof. In specific terms, this happened through the slave trade and colonisation, and it continues today through the coloniality of power. However, it is equally important to observe that while there is legitimacy in the charges against these historical injustices, Africa has all too well imbibed this mentality of confrontation as “the” approach to development. Michael Syrotinski (2012), quoting Achille Mbembe in this regard, is of the view that colonial rationality is re-appropriated by postcolonial regimes after Independence, and the relations of subjection are perpetuated by a process of the indigenisation of the state that colonialism had set in motion. This can be seen, for example, in the ways in which elements of ancestral tradition are appropriated and “reinvented” by African potentates in order to consolidate their power. Governance and the exercise of violent power are thus indissociable, and a logical extension of the violent origins from which they have emerged (Syrotinski 2012: 415). Syrotinski continues that, “for Mbembe both the potentate and the increasingly animalized African subject are defined by their mutual dependence on this systemic violence” (Syrotinski 2012: 415). We would say, that both the coloniser and the colonised are defined by their mutual dependence on the system of adversariality in development.

Aside the West, there are also examples of development strides in other parts of the world, particularly Asia and Latin America. One can still observe patterns of confrontation and exploitation in the way some of these nations operate. Today, Africa has newcomers among those seeking her natural resources. These newcomers include: China, Brazil, and India to mention a few. These have occupied the extractive industry in Africa along with other Western nations. Much of the consensus from the literature on the activities of these nations is that they do not operate differently from the West – their aim is to control and exploit resources from African states. In fact, Brazil was one of the leading voices in the charge of dependency theory against the West. Today, she now participates in the exploitation of Africa in a bid to move herself up the ladder of wealth. It is our opinion that these approaches to development are discordant to the extent that exploitation is not and cannot be described as a concordant relationship.

While these forms of confrontation and discord have yielded levels of human progress, it is still pertinent to ask: can development ultimately be achieved in constant discord? Despite the prevalence of these adversarial models of development, the levels of human improvement have not been commensurate to the expectations. Probably, the continued application of the same adversarial model of development could be the reason why the

tendency towards development is very slow. Besides, if discordant and adversarial relationships in the form of exploitations and confrontations are active in guaranteeing development, it will equally be legitimate to ask: can Africa exploit anyone in order to accomplish development? As it stands, Africa is at the very nadir point of the current world order. She lacks the potency to compete be it at the military, economic, and political levels in order to be able to effect any forceful change in her favour. Africa cannot afford the adversarial path given her lack of knowledge, technology, capital, and organisation. Consequently, it becomes expedient that Africa should begin to invest her mental magnitude in developing a theoretical approach to development in which her concerns can be carried along in a fruitful manner. In what follows, we shall define development and explore the point of the adversarial turn in the understanding of development. Then we shall take a look at how this turn is integral to the postcolonial and decolonial quest for development in Africa. Lastly, we shall give attention to what a concordant model entails and this will be the transcolonial turn.

Conceptualising Development

While the idea of change is integral to the understanding of development, we shall emphasise the fact of development as self-determination, which happens through positive freedom. The ultimate end is to accomplish self-capacitation or the expansion of capabilities (Sen 2003: 3-16; Nusbaum 2011). As self-determination, development is seen as human beings seeking the maximum realisation of themselves (Agbakoba 2019: 56) and this they do by themselves. In this context, freedom is vital not so much because it guarantees that obstacles in the way of accomplishing self-realisation are removed, but because it insists that the quest for self-realisation must continue in spite of the obstacles to it. This is a positive sense of freedom – *freedom to* as against *freedom from*. It is not so much about what you are allowed to do, but what you can do for yourself given the freedom you already have. Self-realisation as pursued here is the good life or what has been termed *Eudaimonia* (Aristotle 2012). This refers to the condition of consistent human flourishing consequent on the rational and conscious provision of opportunities as well as the realisation of human potentials within an active life in society.

Virtue is quite integral to the good life as conceived by Aristotle in the concept of *Eudaimonia*. “In ancient theories virtue is not discussed in isolation; it is seen as part of a larger structure in which the overarching concept is

happiness” (Annas 1998: 37-55). In Aristotle’s opinion, both intellectual and moral virtues are required for accomplishing the good life. Bearing in mind the idea of virtue for human flourishing with the idea of the supremacy of reason in modern philosophy, we can understand the case for reasonability-beneficence in development. In this case, reason and beneficence are seen together and even conceived as mutually enhancing one another, for “reason without beneficence is inhuman (in the form of inhumanness and wickedness) while beneficence without reason is inhumane (in the form of self-indulgent, nihilistic, self – destructiveness or weakness – the operation of the law of self-preservation bound by reason and morality would have taken leave here)” (Agbakoba 2019: 92). Here, we have a form of reasonability that has beneficence – in fact, ontological-beneficence (which include those things that would make self-realisation possible) – as its hallmark. By this understanding, a society of skyscrapers and super highways populated by people deficient in beneficence is considered as not properly developed. But one with not-so-flashy material conditions and possessing beneficent individuals could be considered to be a developed society. Thus, the true measure of development, in this understanding, is not so much about the fulfilment of material needs or the protection of certain inalienable rights, but first a positive mind-set. Development is first a mind-set, always tuned to finding the advantages of existence even when negative experiences are always rife. From a mind-set of this kind can emanate lasting and genuine efforts at better material conditions of human existence and the protection of human rights.

Philosophy, Development, and the Adversarial Turn

Development, as we have attempted to conceptualise above, has been of concern to human rationality for long. Philosophers have also beamed their search light on understanding what human progress is all about, as well as the various ways through which it can be accomplished. While philosophers in the ancient and medieval periods made some inroads into this conversation, as we have seen in the philosophy of Aristotle, Enlightenment philosophy is particularly instructive in the philosophical understanding of what development is. The Enlightenment has been conceived as the foundational moment or the intellectual foundation of modernity (Robertson 2020; Oram 2022). And modernity, as a project, is a basic framework for the modernisation theory of development. Thus, the intellectual roots of development as modernisation can also be traced to the

Enlightenment. Within this frame of thinking, the finest accomplishments of Western civilisation are traced to the intellectual rupture wrought by the Enlightenment from the ideals of the ancient and the Middle Ages. Margaret C. Jacob (2020) sees the Enlightenment and the First Industrial Revolution together. In her view, the mathematisation of the sciences that allowed for accurate predication and the raise of representative government are not unconnected to the Enlightenment belief in reason and the capacity of man for self-governance. Thus, the ideas of human progress, supremacy of reason, autonomy of man, democracy etc., as hallmarks of modernity, have their roots in the Enlightenment.

Notwithstanding the very noble aspirations and accomplishment of the Enlightenment and modernity, postmodern scholars raise objections to it. Devin Vartija (2020: 237) writes that, “it can still be established Eurocentrism, paternalism and even racism inherent in these concepts and movements. Rather than advancing a human programme of inalienable rights, scientific rationality and democracy, postmodernism unveils the emergence of sinister control mechanism in modern institutions such as schools, prisons and the military.” Foucault’s analysis of power and knowledge as well as Adorno and Horkheimer’s case for the dialectics of Enlightenment are quite nuanced analyses of these forms of control. For some other opinions, the ideals of the enlightenment and modernity are also the basis for coloniality (Mignolo 1995). By these analyses, there is a deep form of moral indictment against modernity. Obviously, paternalism, eurocentrism, racism, power/control and even colonialism are forms of discordant and adversarial relationships. In the intellectual constitution of the Enlightenment this form of discord is also embedded. Not minding the case for the completion of the modernity project as against those who jettison it altogether (Habermas 1987), it is safe to conclude that the moral downsides of these movements are not accidental consequences and these downsides are integral to the very makeup of modernity. The intellectual seeds for the discordant undertones of the Enlightenment and modernity is what we refer to as the ‘adversarial turn’ in the philosophical conceptualisation of development.

Kant is one of the finest composers of the intellectual and philosophical foundations of the Enlightenment. His essay “What is Enlightenment?” was instrumental in defining the movement not only in Germany, but as a whole. However, it is his work “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective” (1784) that points to this adversarial turn. It is an essay made up of nine propositions. In the fourth proposition, Kant develops an idea that is regularly linked to the “cunning of nature.” In the words of Kant, “*The*

means nature employs in order to bring about the development of all their predispositions is their antagonism in society, insofar as the latter is in the end the cause of their lawful order” (Kant 2009 [1784]: 13). He continues, “Here I understand by ‘antagonism’ the unsociable sociability of human beings, i.e. their propensity to enter into society, which, however, is combined with a thoroughgoing resistance that constantly threatens to break up this society” (Kant 2009: *ibid*). These qualities of unsociability include: envy, fierce competition, etc. Eventually, this propensity propels humans to social and cultural progress. As Kant argues,

Without these qualities of unsociability from which the resistance arises, which are not at all amiable in themselves, qualities that each of us must necessarily encounter in his selfish pretensions, all talents would, in an arcadian pastoral life of perfect concord, contentment and mutual love, remain eternally hidden in their germs; human beings, as good-natured as the sheep they tended, would give their existence hardly any greater worth than that of their domesticated beasts; they would not fill the void in creation in regard to their end as rational nature. Thanks be to nature, therefore, for the incompatibility, for the spiteful competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess or even to dominate! For without them all the excellent natural predispositions in humanity would eternally slumber undeveloped. The human being wills concord; but nature knows better what is good for his species: it wills discord (Kant 2009 [1784]: 14).

It is in such a willing of discord by nature, that “the cunning of nature” is articulated. It is still in this willing of discord by nature that Kant turns the attention of the quest for human progress to adversariality.

Hegel appropriates this discord which nature wills in Kant’s universal history into the what he refers to as the “cunning of reason” (Hegel in McCarney 2002: 121ff), whereby the Spirit uses particular individual and instances to effect change in the course of universal history through acts of chaos, disputes, and randomness (Ullmann-Margalit 2017: 148-158). The individuals who effect this kind of change are involved in the realisation of the universal idea in immediate actuality or the elevation of the singular into universal truth. Thus, these individuals are moving forces in history that represent the stage of negation in the dialectical movement of history. The ultimate resolution to which they force history to move is development.

Following the same line of thought, Marx develops his idea of the clash of classes as the basis for the development of human society. Only a revolution can move a society from the capitalist exploitation stage to the stage of communism where the inadequacies of capitalism are resolved and better living conditions are achieved for all, both the bourgeois and the proletariat. This adversarial turn in the understanding of human progress also has implications for development in Africa. We shall now shift attention to the adversarial turn in Africa.

The Postcolonial Condition and the Adversarial Turn in Africa

Apart from colonialism, the slave trade and various forms of racism were also part of the African experience of modernity as its undersides. The colonisers particularly sought to give the Africans civilisation along with Christianity and commerce. This quest to civilise the African, most times, took the form of domination, intimidation, and ultimately exploitation. All of these were meant to sustain the splendour of Europe and the West. In this condition of colonialism and slavery, decolonisation was considered as one sure path to improve conditions of existence for Africans. Nationalists from various African countries pursued this quest for decolonisation with great vigour. As countries in Africa began to gain independence, Africa entered a postcolonial phase in its existence. This is the sense of postcoloniality as temporality. It is the era immediately after colonialism.

As a corollary to this understanding, there is the sense of postcoloniality as mentality. Here, it is a “means of defiance by which any exploitative and discriminative practices, regardless of time and space, can be challenged” (Rukundwa and van Aarde 2007: 1171). It is as mentality that the postcolonial phase still resonates with the struggle sounds of decolonisation. This is the period when the empire writes back (Ascroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989). Anke Bartels, Lars Eckstein, Nicole Waller, and Dirk Wiemann (2019: 189-90) write in this regard that “Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin adopted the phrase from [Salman] Rushdie and defined it as postcolonial writers engaging the power of imperial discourse, not by writing ‘for’ the centre but ‘against’ the assumption of the centre to a prior claim to legitimacy and power” (Bartels et al. 2019: 189-90). This form of writing back is integral to Valentin Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa* (1988), which has been described as “providing the Africanist equivalent of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. But unlike Said, Mudimbe also examines how the Other writes back by including African scholars who have worked within the

limits of imposed language and epistemological frames” (Apter 1991: 172). Afrocentric scholars have taken a swipe at Hegel’s derogatory presentation of Africa in his *Philosophy of History*. Emmanuel Eze has been particularly emphatic about the racial elements in Kant’s philosophy (Eze 1997) and there have been arguments to buttress the fact that Marx only sought for the emancipation of the poor in the West, a wider programme of liberation was required to address the poor in the rest of the world. Still in this context, we have the case for how Europe underdeveloped Africa (Rodney 1972). These are all discordant responses to the evil of colonisation. The adversariality of colonisation is being matched with equal adversariality by those writing back on Africa’s behalf.

These forms of adversariality continue even in the practical implementation of decolonisation. In this case, it was more like “the empire fighting back.” In countries like Ghana and Nigeria, the Africanisation policy in the public sector was driven by this discordant mindset. In Nigeria and Ghana, for example, the indigenisation of the public service was rapid since this was under the political control of the government. However, the indigenisation of the private sector was slow and had to be forced. “Governments limited immigration quotas for expatriates, even denying new applications completely at times, such as in the early 1960s in Ghana and in the early 1970s in Nigeria. Ghana also changed the taxation of expatriate incomes in the early 1960s, which, together with compulsory reinvestment of a share of profits, made the operations of foreign investors very difficult until Nkrumah was deposed in 1966” (Decker 2010: 5). In Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe exhibited this form of aversion to colonial elements in a form of nativism as evidenced in his fast-track land reform and the black empowerment or indigenisation campaign (Mlambo 2015: 45-59). Similarly, the *Ujamaa* villagisation experiment of Julius Nyerere in Tanzania felt like a reaction to the trend of urbanisation as a residue of the African colonial experience. Even in South Africa, there were very palpable fears among the white population about what would be their fate under the regime of Nelson Mandela, whom they had so maligned in the struggle for the independence of South Africa. But Mandela was to espouse a particularly different approach to African leadership and development. One crucial point to note in all the above approaches is that their application did not ameliorate the general lack of well-being in the countries where they were implemented. In the case of the villagisation policy of Nyerere, “it was carried out so quickly that it was not possible to take much notice of its impact on agricultural production – which led to less production and was one cause of migration

to the cities” (Coulson 2013: 280). The failure of these adversarial models of development led George Ayittey (2005) to the proposal that the strategy required for winning independence is different from the strategy required to accomplish development.

Achille Mbembe (2002) reacted to all of the above and described them as “false prophecies.” He is of the view that these forms of resistance tend to be locked in what he terms a “neurosis of victimisation” and “prose of nativism” (Mbembe 2002: 252). These Afro-radical nationalists were accused of promoting a “false belief that only autochthonous people who are physically living in Africa can produce, within a closed circle limited to themselves alone, a legitimate scientific discourse on the realities of the continent” (Mbembe 2002: 241). He also stated that African scholarship that blames globalisation was informed by “a lazy interpretation of globalization” (Mbembe 2002: 269). Apart from this, Mbembe (1999) still thought that African scholarship that would continue to blame colonialism was suffering from “self-ghettoization,” taking the form of “territorialization of the production of knowledge.” An appealing area of possibility in this era is what Mbembe called Afropolitanism. While we think there are several issues with Afropolitanism, suffice it to say that Mbembe’s critique of the position of the Afro-radicals carries some elements that are of import to the transcolonial approach to development.

Adversariality and Decoloniality in Africa

The adversarial turn continues in the decolonial quest for development in Africa. The decoloniality framework insists that postcoloniality is an approach to colonialism that emerged within Western scholarship and is still steeped in the rules of the game as developed by Western scholarship. That is, their approach was focused on dealing with the problem of subaltern knowledges from within the Eurocentric focus (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009: 141). Thus, the change postcoloniality envisions is a quantitative one – expanding the voices in the discourse. Decoloniality seeks something more radical: qualitative change (Tlostanova 2009: 4-5). It wants to change the rules of the game entirely. The first way it does this is by insisting that decoloniality emerges as a framework to undo coloniality. While postcoloniality is focused on colonialism, decoloniality focuses on coloniality, which is described as the repressive and totalitarian forms of knowledge production at the very inception of modernity by Europe with the takeover of the New World and its persistence even after the end of colonialism in countries in Africa, Asia, and

Latin America (Quijano 2000: 533-580; Idachaba and Ichaba 2025: 80). It has a dyadic relationship with modernity and it is the “underside of modernity” (Dussel 1996). It is mostly the mode in which non-Western spaces experience modernity. From the African standpoint, Ndlovu-Gatsheni articulates what he terms the “genealogies of coloniality” in Africa. He identifies eight epochs in this genealogy. These include: the discovery paradigm and the mercantilist order. This stage was characterised by the slave trade and the unsavoury encounter between the Kingdom of Kongo and the Portuguese (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015a: 22-25). The second is that of the post-1648 Westphalian order in which Africa was excluded from nation-state sovereignty on racist grounds in the form of reproducing the Hegelian-Conradian-Hugh Trevor Roper discourses (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015a: 25). The third phase was the Berlin consensus in which the “curse of Berlin” (Adebajo 2010: 2) was effected. The arbitrary fixing of boundaries for African states, which was ardently support by “urbanised political elites” (Leremont 2005: 2), was the manner in which this phase was executed. The fourth phase was that of colonial governmentality and the reproduction of African subjectivity. This operated through violence and banal power (Mbembe 1992) as well as the logic of defining and ruling (Mamdani 2013). The fifth phase Ndlovu describes as the post-1945 United Nations decolonisation normative order and Cold War coloniality. Through the formation of the United Nations after the Nazi-Hitler onslaught, African nations were admitted into the world order at the lower echelon of power. Despite this, world powers interfered in African nations as the Cold War raged on. The sixth stage was the post-Cold War triumphalism of the neoliberal order. In this context Structural Adjustment Programmes were introduced in Africa and the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank began to interfere directly in Africa in an anti-statist manner (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015a: 33). In this phase, America took full stage as the identity of modernity. The seventh stage he called the post-9/11 anti-terrorism and securitisation order. In this era, Africa was no longer a development and humanitarian region, but one that needed security on the basis of weak state structures. The eighth phase is that of the coloniality of markets and the new scramble for Africa. This refers to the recent intensification of the extraction of natural resources by countries such as India, Brazil, China, and Russia atop all that European nations already did and are still doing. In all of these phases of coloniality in Africa, development is only a pretext. Africa continues to suffer domination and exploitation and her quest for development is arrested and suffocated.

Decoloniality is the antidote to coloniality. Decoloniality is different from anti-colonialism, which is largely a twentieth-century movement

aimed at overcoming colonialism. Decoloniality was inaugurated at “the moment in which the slave trade, imperialism and colonialism were launched. It materialised as resistance, thought and action” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015b: 487). This form of inaugural resistance has taken various forms and the ultimate “aim is at setting afoot a new humanity free from racial hierarchisation and asymmetrical power relations in place since the conquest” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015b: 488). Decoloniality abhors all forms of essentialism and fundamentalism and is poised to repudiate “the European fundamental LIE: colonisation=civilisation” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015b: 492). For some, decoloniality is a kind of combative ontology that is required to negate the kind of thinking embedded in coloniality and to imagine a more befitting future for Africa (Mpofu 2018). From the standpoint of practice, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni identifies *The Rhodes Must Fall Movement*, which has snowballed into students’ demand for the decolonisation of the universities in South Africa, as one indication for the continued need for decoloniality. Also the African Union’s Agenda 2063, which pushes from coloniality to pan-Africanism and African Renaissance, is another pointer towards decoloniality in Africa.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o has done much to provide the vocabulary for decoloniality in Africa. Some of these vocabularies include: decolonising the mind, moving the centre, re-memembering, and globalectics. In the words of Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “*Decolonising the mind* speaks to the urgency of dealing with epistemicides and linguisticides. *Moving the centre* addresses the problem of Euro-North Mercian centrism. *Re-memembering* is about uniting a dismembered and fragmented continent. *Globalectics* gestures towards post-racial Pluriversality as the home of new humanity” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015b: 493).

The craving for Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital data in Africa is an instance of efforts to turn over a new leaf, but this must be considered within the context of decoloniality so as to ensure that the turn to technology is not a new way of keeping the European game alive. The ECOWAS adoption of a common passport and an agreement with regard to a common currency, the ECO is a very welcome development with regard to turning over a new leaf, but Africa (especially Francophone Africa) should be careful about France. Another positive effort at turning over a new leaf is the emerging consensus and actual signing of the agreement on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) by 54 African counties. The manner in which popular uprisings, particularly the Arab Spring, is giving steam to democracy is another welcome development, but the incursion of the military into

governance as a result of this is threatening the prospects of turning over a new leaf in this direction. In these proposals of decoloniality, the thread of adversarial thinking is still prominent. The idea of a combative ideology toes the path of discordance. The centering of the Rhodes Must Fall protests and even the ideas of Ngugi wa Thiong'o on abandoning the English language as well as the general Marxist tempo of his literary work also points in the direction of adversariality. Decoloniality advocates a matching of coloniality with the same force with which coloniality has been executed in Africa.

Transcoloniality and the Possibilities of Concordance in the Development of Africa

The transcolonial approach is one that acknowledges the impact of colonialism in Africa, but proposes that we should seek to transcend this impact in positive and creative ways. That the true development of Africa can no longer come from African heritage but from positive and constructively creative ways “to go beyond the cultural borders and limitations of the pre-colonial world and the colonial deposit” (Agbakoba 2022: 47). While postcoloniality focuses on expanding the number of non-western voices within a western dominant scholarship space, and decoloniality is intent on deconstructing/delinking the legacies of colonialism/coloniality and modernity, and insisting on a return to African heritage for the development of Africa, transcolonisation focuses on the construction and appreciation of some of the positive aspects of modernity and even colonisation. Consequently, it is averse to the oppositional scholarship that grounds postcoloniality and decoloniality. In this view, oppositional scholarship leads to alienation negativity complex, victimology, auto-rebellion, and ultimately negative knowledge (Agbakoba 2022: 35). Negative knowledge only breeds a culture of opposition and tearing down; it rarely leads to creative construction. What actually breeds creative construction is positive knowledge and a positive attitude to one's circumstance. This emphasis on creative construction is part of the reason why the transcolonial disposition is inherently developmentarian. That is, it refers to an orientation to development that takes development as a supreme value. This emphasis on development points to the core of concordance in the transcolonial approach. The quest for creative construction, which should drive development, should be premised on “positive knowledge” (Idachaba and Achemu 2025: 49) and oppositional scholarship cannot guarantee this. While opposition/adversariality was appropriate to acquire independence,

the quest for development in the post-independence era requires a new approach. Therefore, we feel that now there has to be a turn to concord in the African quest for development.

While not denying the negative aspects of colonisation and modernity, transcolonisation also highlights the complicity of Africa in the success of colonisation and coloniality – a theme that is often not properly or inadequately highlighted in postcolonial and decolonial discourses (Idachaba and Ichaba 2025: 79-100). This is one of the reasons why some views consider decoloniality as unable to practice self-criticism (Bidima 2025: 27-57). This point is important for the transcolonial perspective because it considers development from an internalist and organicist perspective. It holds the view that, “the internal state of a society initiates and directs the development of a society by responding constructively to internal and external stimuli and/or by adopting or rejecting such stimuli” (Agbakoba 2019: 65). This is in contrast to the impression that comes from the postcolonial and decolonial views that development is initiated and directed largely by external forces – the coloniser or the West. The capacity to respond to internal and external stimuli is what transcolonisation refers to as “agential integrity.”

When this capacity is strong or properly developed, agential integrity is high and when it is weak or improperly developed, agential integrity is low. That Africa still complains about colonisation years after its end, or is still unable to properly deal with coloniality suggests that the agential integrity required to begin addressing the residue of colonisation is still quite low from the African standpoint. The need to address this low level of agential integrity from the African perspective is part of the reason why transcolonisation is internalist. Whereas the postcolonial and decolonial perspectives presume the integrity of the African agent, the transcolonial approach unveils its defects and seeks to address such defects. In this case the transcolonial approach advocates borrowing from colonial institutions and those of modernity. This is another aspect of its concordant approach.

In proposing concordant practice, we read Bernard Matolino's (2023) suggestion of the idea of co-operation rather than a separation of powers among the various arms of government as an example of a transcolonial approach to development in Africa. Matolino considers his proposal as aiming towards a more far-reaching reform for the structure of governance and development in Africa with regard to democracy in Africa. In his opinion, since the idea of separation of powers has not been able to establish

the practice of checks and balance in Africa, he argues that “there would be no need to think of checks and balances in the strict sense as we have come to be accustomed to” (Matolino 2023: 21). Instead, he advocates for institutions that co-operate and remind each other of their duties to a smooth running of the state. While there could be a tendency for co-operation in accomplishing nefarious activities by those in power, he thinks that this may lead to more superior outcomes than adversarial arms of government. Also, accountability is part of a co-operation. Besides, since the African political ideology is framed around community, it is equally important to see this communal disposition lived out at the levers of power. As a sequel to African political ideology as framed around community, we can further state that the concordance approach is more in keeping with African metaphysics, ontology, and ethics. African Philosophical expressions such as *Ubuntu*, *Igwebuike*, *Ibunyidanda* express African ontology and moral worldview as a harmonious world in which progress is made only in concordance. Besides, from an African Philosophical perspective revenge is discouraged and constant conflict is abhorred.

These African non-adversarial philosophies and concepts could also be useful in addressing the challenge of productivity in the African development quagmire. Confrontation greatly impedes productivity. What Africa really lacks is the ability to make good use of the resources available at her disposal. Harmony is a harbinger of productivity. These philosophies point to the harmony and communality inherent in the African worldview. For example, *Ubuntu*, a concept made popular by Mogobe Ramose (1999), advocates for a form of ontological relationality in which a person is because others are. That is, I am because we are. It is an attempt to describe “reality within the confines of interdependency, complementarity, mutuality and wholeness” (Ojemba 2023: 102). Similarly, the concept *Igwebuike*, as coined by Anthony Kanu from the Igbo language in Nigeria, when broken into its components give *igwe bu ike*, which can be translated as “number is power.” That is, solidarity and complementarity give power or the ability to be insurmountable (2017a: 121). Through this complementary relationality, human beings are able to attain the joy of completion (Kanu 2017b: 16). Complementarity is also central to the African philosophic concept of *Ibunyidanda*. In Innocent Asozu’s framing of the concept still from the Igbo cultural context of Nigeria, the African world is composed of a complementary form of ontology as different from the bifurcated one as advocated in the traditional (Aristotelian) ontology. Here, everything in reality serves a missing link (Asozu 2011: 108). As a composite of missing

links, reality requires the interdependent cooperative action of other links (Ojemba 2023: 102). Complementary ontology can also be said to posit in this regard that all things in reality have value on the grounds that everything in reality serves a missing link. What remains to be emphasised is that while these African non-adversarial philosophies have emerged from a scholarly oppositional disposition, their destiny can no longer remain oppositional. These philosophies must now aspire to a universal mission of pursuing development for Africa in a manner of concord that may involve complementarity with aspects of modernity and even colonial influences. Their radius of complementarity must not expand beyond the immediate community of the articulation of these philosophies to the wider world. This is what transcolonial concord requires.

Three concerns with the transcolonial disposition towards concord readily come to mind. First is the possibility that a confluent approach to the West and other actors in Africa could exacerbate rather than abate exploitation in Africa. Secondly, the transcolonial inclination to exposing the complicity of Africans in colonisation and by extension showing the low quality of agential integrity of the African could be a psychological complex or a sort of self-demeaning. Thirdly, is this confluent approach possible? Is it not just idealistic? Not minding the legitimacy of these concerns, we will underscore in the first case that the likelihood of exacerbating exploitation does not negate the truth that progress and development thrive more in a context of cordiality and conviviality than in an adversarial one. With particular reference to Africa, any effort to enhance productivity cannot happen in a context of heightened adversariality, be it with the West, other non-Africans or among Africans. Only a convivial context can allow for the exchange of expertise, skill and harnessing of resources required to upscale productivity. For this reason, taking the risk of concord is well worth it in the context of African development. Secondly, the refusal to accept our complicity in what we suffer only aggravates our suffering. To accept our role in our misfortune is a first fundamental step to healing. Hence, opening up the deficiencies in agency from the African standpoint is not a question of any kind of complex or self-demeaning. It is about setting aside our pride and speaking frankly to our predicament and beginning the process of seeking concrete and pragmatic redress. This is transcolonisation – confronting ourselves in our perils and promises with a view to ultimately improving the general well-being of Africa. Thirdly, the confluent approach to development may have been difficult for some of the forebearers of Africa to execute due to their first-hand experience of colonialism. Be that as it may, the examples

of Seretse Khama and even the reconciliatory disposition of Nelson Mandela after becoming President, could be leading lights. These suffered the evils of colonisation in very personal ways, yet they demonstrated an unrivalled capacity to forgive, seek reconciliation, and forge a good working relationship with their former detractors. The benefits of their concordant approach are quite clear in how their countries have fared and continue to do so. Besides, as their successors, we do not have a first-hand experience of colonialism and therefore, executing a more concordant approach to development should not be such a daunting task.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have sought to make a case for a more confluent and concordant approach to development. We have tried to establish the point of the adversarial turn in the discourse on development and to see how this has snowballed into the various phases of the quest for development in Africa. The final point we have made is to show what a concordant approach to development should be. Time and more knowledge have shown us the true significance of colonialism as well as the actual worth of our cultural dispositions as Africans. Developing a hybrid out of the mix of all the available resources should be an easy goal to accomplish. Putting these resources together in a harmonious and creative way is what a concordant approach to development is about. It is a mindset that is always poised to seek out the positive side of reality. What actually breeds creative construction is positive knowledge and a positive attitude to one's circumstances. This is transcolonisation with regard to development in Africa. We think that the era of negativity in the quest for development is over. It is now time to seek creative and positive points through which to enhance meaningful existence in Africa.

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DECOLONISING SUSTAINABILITY: INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE IN THE AGE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

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Abstract: This article explores Indigenous Frafra onto-epistemologies within the ambit of a sustainable development policy framework that better captures the Anthropocene epoch. Frafra onto-epistemologies from northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso profoundly shape how Indigenous peoples understand and relate to their environment. Their more-than-human entanglements include among other things beliefs, knowledge, and Ancestral practices that reflect a relational approach to life and the cosmos. The analysis presented here is based on an understanding of the concept of the Anthropocene as rejecting modernist ontologies and framings about a split between human and nature. It discusses respectively, the ways in which dominant forms of decolonial critique and epistemic plurality of environmental imaginaries problematise modernist sustainable frameworks and epistemic foundations that separate humans from nature in the Anthropocene as a universalising concept. In conclusion, I argue that the modernist ontologies of separation marginalise sustainability in a multiplicity of ways in the Anthropocene. It is further argued that Indigenous Frafra onto-epistemologies are a necessity if humanity is to survive the diverse ways humans perceive and interact with the Earth and cope with the unprecedented catastrophic ecological destruction largely driven by modernist, anthropocentric, and capitalist land relations.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Frafra, sustainable development, decoloniality, indigeneity, plurality of environmental imaginaries

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Introduction

The Anthropocene epoch in a highly uncertain world provoked by the great acceleration of human intervention represents a profound contemporary ecological crisis like never before (Chipato and Chandler 2022; United Nations 2020). Increased global ecological crisis hinder sustainable development and poses a major challenge for humanity in the new Anthropocene age (Chipato and Chandler 2022; Chandler and Pugh 2021). I critically examine the sustainable development policy framework in the Anthropocentric present (Chipato and Chandler 2023). The Anthropocene problematic has become an important component within the sustainable development policy framework concerned with addressing the global ecological crisis (United Nations 2020; Fu 2020; Chipato and Chandler 2022; Chandler 2022; Fu et al. 2021). Disciplines as diverse as climatology, geology, philosophy, and visual arts have adopted the Anthropocene as a new framework for understanding traditional sustainable narratives and planetary change (Chipato and Chandler 2022; Chandler and Pugh 2021; Harrington 2016). The imbrication of the Anthropocene and sustainable development policy framework have generated much debate among scholars and practitioners alike (Badie et al. 2022; Chandler 2022; Chandler and Pugh 2021; United Nations 2015). The Anthropocene serves as a contrapose to failed or failing Western modernist tropes of the universalism of security (Badie et al. 2022; Chandler 2022). The sustainable development policy framework and how it appropriates the Anthropocene entanglement on account of its claims to secure life of the biosphere has been widely discussed and debated (Chandler and Pugh 2021; United Nations 2015). However, Indigenous Frafra more-than-human onto-epistemologies and what this could mean for sustainable development narratives in the Anthropocene epoch remain strangely under-explored.

Onto-epistemology refers to a way of knowing (epistemology) and being (ontology) that recognises the interconnectedness and interdependence of humans; non-humans (animals, plants, rivers, mountains, spirits, the living-dead, Ancestors), and spiritual entities are co-constitutive of this reality. Indigenous Frafra more-than-human hybrid onto-epistemologies challenge the modernist dichotomy between nature and culture, offering a relational framework and holistic understanding of coexistence, interdependence, reciprocity and cooperation with the non-human world (Chipato and Chandler 2022). This relational and holistic framework for sustainability and resilience see mountains, rivers, forests, plants, Ancestors, and animals as active participants in existence and not just as passive resources. Hybrid onto-epistemology acknowledges both material and non-material worlds as

equally valid ways of knowing. This disrupts and subverts dominant Western sustainability frameworks that privilege empirical data over spiritual and embodied knowledge. Indigenous Frafra more-than-human hybrid onto-epistemologies challenge dominant Anthropocene discourses by breaking down hierarchical separations between human, non-human, and spiritual worlds.

The core concepts to be utilised in the article are: decoloniality and the plurality of environmental imaginaries, a tendency that destabilises and deconstructs the ontological and epistemological commitments of Western modernity (the limits of being and non-being). I posit that Indigenous Frafra more-than-human hybrid onto-epistemologies represent a more environmentally sustainable way to govern the world today. Unlike Western reductionist ontology, the Frafra relational framework and cosmologies involve humans, nature, spirits, and Ancestors. The Frafra relational ontologies understand humans, nature, animals, plants, rivers, mountains, spirits, and Ancestors as the primary source of vital force, reflecting a worldview deeply rooted in interdependence and reciprocity (Millar 2006). The aim of the article is to critique the prevailing sustainability approaches from the perspective of Frafra onto-epistemologies. From this perspective, the arguments are placed in context throughout with reference to the Frafra people of northern Ghana's more-than-human world in order to problematise Western rationalist paradigms that undergird sustainability frameworks in the Anthropocene epoch. This article poses the following central questions: to what extent can the Frafra onto-epistemology provide alternative insights into sustainability practices in the context of the Anthropocene? In what ways do various sustainability rationalities illuminate the political dynamics inherent in addressing Anthropocene-related challenges? This article offers to make sense of these pertinent and burning questions through an alternative African environmental thought within the Anthropocene entanglement.

The intention of this article is to make a call for engagement rather than generalising and essentialising the Frafra more-than-human onto-epistemologies. I move away from mere sweeping generalisations about Frafra, as Frafra people are not equally invested in ecological stewardship, mutuality, and cosmologies. The argument here avoids the risk to romanticise or idealise the Frafra more-than-human hybrid onto-epistemologies as there is no single form of existence that is common across the continent. Instead, I am interested in some of the tensions, delicate constant flux, and contradictions of traditions present in contemporary Frafra society. The

Indigenous peoples of northern Ghana may or may not share similarities to Indigenous peoples elsewhere in Africa or the rest of the world. Simply put, different ethnicities across the continent conceptualise the world differently and cannot be subsumed under “Indigenous peoples” in relation to how the Anthropocene is constructed to alternative ways of being. Crucially, the Frafra people are much more diverse in their beliefs, lifestyles, professional practices, traditional values, cultural practices, and access to wealth and opportunity. Grappling with onto-epistemology could be useful for meta-level critique of the narrow and technocratic conceptions of sustainability in the age of the Anthropocene. My point is that pluralism (heterogeneity and complexities) is what the Frafra Indigenous people of northern Ghana have to share with the rest of the world in the contemporary Anthropocene. This article contributes to an understanding of how the Frafra onto-epistemologies shape or could shape the contemporary environmental crisis in rethinking sustainability. Engaging with diverse traditions of ecological thought among the Frafra opens other possibilities for alternative futural imaginaries (Chipato and Chandler 2023; Haraway 2016). Additionally, it offers a new critical agenda for Indigenous studies and decolonial studies. In this way, this article will be of interest to policy makers, scholars, and critical theorists working in the environmental humanities or those engaged in studying and responding to the ongoing challenges so problematic in the Anthropocene politics and governance within International Relations.

The study in question is a review of the existing literature on the Frafra people utilising a qualitative research methodology that combines observational data and historical analysis, lending support to the dynamic nature of the study (Busetto et al. 2020). This approach is increasingly characteristic of case study research that allows for an in-depth exploration of a specific subject within its real-life context. By integrating these methods, this article aims to capture both contemporary dynamics and historical trajectories, offering a nuanced and holistic understanding of the Frafra community. The article is structured as follows. Following the introduction, I argue for an Indigenous African onto-epistemology approach to sustainability, working through the Frafra people of Ghana as a case study. It explains how adherence to spiritual beings, Ancestors, and Gods leads to more sustainable practices among the Frafra people. Next, I discuss the decolonial critique in Indigenous Studies; a decolonial critique destabilises the epistemological and ontological commitments of Western thought and opens the way for alternative perspectives that reject the separation between nature and culture, human and other-than-human. I highlight the literature review

on the Anthropocene and sustainability, largely by drawing upon critical scholarship on the Anthropocene and sustainability. I conclude by arguing that the Frafra multiple ways to be human enable a real possibility of surpassing planetary limits from which we could embrace the world in the Anthropocene.

Decolonial Critique of the Anthropocene

I engage with several decolonial critiques that shed light on different aspects of the problem and from very different perspectives. The present article is positioned within a decolonially informed critique of the Anthropocene that emphasises a relational engagement with Indigenous worldviews and practices of the Frafra, a society predominantly based in northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso, as a foundational aspect of analysis. I consistently argue about decoloniality and critiquing in particular the nature/culture divide promoted by modernity. Therefore, I seek to problematise the sustainability policy frameworks. In so doing, I bring plurality and relationality in conversation with dominant forms of decolonial critique in order to challenge the universalising and Eurocentric narratives of the Anthropocene (Chipato and Chandler 2022; Haraway 2016). The Anthropocene problematic has become an important component within environmental discourse (Chandler 2023). However, from dominant forms of decolonial perspective, the Anthropocene tends to suggest a universal responsibility for global ecological crisis (Randazzo and Richter 2021). Dominant forms of decoloniality over the last decade have received much attention within the Anthropocene epoch and beyond (Escobar 2018). The dominant forms of decolonial critique seek to subvert the modernist colonial logic of the Anthropocene, particularly its framing of human-nature relationships and of the responsibility for a more sustainable future (Chipato and Chandler 2022; Haraway 2016). Contemporary theorisations of the Anthropocene privilege anthropocentric perspectives (McEwan 2021).

Decolonial scholars argue that the global environmental crisis cannot be understood without recognising how alternative ways of knowing and living of Indigenous peoples and marginalised communities have historically been dismissed and disregarded by coloniality (Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Escobar 2018; Shilliam 2021). The point of the foregoing is that the global environmental crisis cannot be understood without recognising the role of Eurocentrism and white supremacy. For decolonial thinkers,

the Anthropocene is a Eurocentric concept that overlooks knowledges of Indigenous peoples and how they have historically related to the environment/Earth. Western modernist assumptions and categories of the Anthropocene prioritise top-down, command and control governance that are deeply rooted in the ecological crises we face today. From a decolonial perspective, the Anthropocene is cohered around the insularity of Western modernist thought in driving a global catastrophic environmental crisis that continue to shape the Anthropocene epoch (De La Cadena 2010; Blaser 2009). The legacies of coloniality perpetuate epistemic violence with its destruction of and sheer disrespect for Indigenous knowledge systems, spirituality and replacement of Indigenous forms of governance and sustainable environmental practices. According to decolonial thinkers, the dominant narrative of the Anthropocene marginalises Indigenous knowledge systems and multiple ways of knowing and being. A decolonial critique of the Anthropocene argues that Indigenous and colonised peoples have historically practiced sustainable ways of living that are rooted in reciprocal relationships with land; this disavows and discredits dominant Western sustainability frameworks with its exploitative logics. Indigenous and colonised peoples' reciprocal relationships with their Earth have often been suppressed by Western modernist sustainable policy frameworks, and yet perhaps paradoxically, their knowledge and practices are often romanticised and exorcized in the Anthropocene thinking. Many Indigenous societies have historically sustained their own existence in ways that promote ecological stewardship and sustainability.

The decolonial critique of the Anthropocene also focuses on plurality and relationality (Raymond et al. 2018; Unks et al. 2021). In response to the modernist and colonial logic of the Anthropocene decolonial and Indigenous scholars have called for an alternative frame of the Anthropocene epoch that captures the plurality and relationality of environmental imaginaries (Rothe 2019; Tynan 2021). Broadly conceived, plurality and relationality relate to the understanding of environmental imaginaries that significantly influence multiple ways of relating to land (Tynan 2021). The plurality and relationality of environmental imaginaries of the Anthropocene emphasise the need for multiplicity. Multiple ways of knowing and being in relation to the environment allow for sustainability in multiple ways. In this sense, the plurality and relationality of environmental imaginaries present us with multiple "worlds" that coexist in complex relations of life and non-life forms (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; Latour 2014, 2017). Multiple ways of being human enlarge our understanding of the diversity of cultural frameworks

that see human existence as deeply intertwined with land, plants, animals, spirits, and Ancestors. Foregrounding plurality and relationality as alternative frameworks enable us to capture human/non-human worlds in addressing the Anthropocene problematic and the crisis of modernity (Chipato and Chandler 2023; Chandler 2022). Also, as alternative frameworks plurality and relationality challenge and subvert the dominance of Western modernist categories (Odysseos 2017; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Law 2015).

They promote futural possibilities to think about the environment, rooted in diverse cultural and ecological philosophies and perspectives that are historically marginalised and suppressed by liberal modernity (Tynan 2021). Indigenous ecological philosophies and perspectives emphasise the notion of more-than human onto-epistemologies (Calí Tzay et al. 2023; Buitendijk et al. 2024; Tynan 2021). In other words, Indigenous onto-epistemologies resonate with plurality and relationality. Rather than Western universalism and a top-down narrative of the Anthropocene, a decolonial critique of the Anthropocene draws attention to Indigenous onto-epistemologies; Indigenous onto-epistemologies offer futural alternatives of ecological stewardship such as those found in Indigenous communities (Buitendijk et al. 2024). Indigenous peoples more-than-human onto-epistemologies recognise relationality, reciprocity, interconnectedness, and interdependence across animals, spirits, plants, rivers, Ancestors, and other non-human entities. These relational perspectives by Indigenous peoples reject and renounce the human/nature binary and offer non-linear ways of thinking about the contemporary environmental crisis. Put somewhat differently, Indigenous perspectives problematise and deconstruct modern binary imaginaries such as the human/nature divide in the Anthropocene (Chipato and Chandler 2023; Chandler 2022). Indigenous peoples onto-epistemologies re-imagine life in the Anthropocene, allowing for productive ways of developing non-modern futures beyond modernity (Rothe 2019). For Indigenous peoples, humans are part and parcel of a larger ecological society and they have an abiding cosmic responsibility to respect and protect the non-human world. Within this framework, Indigenous onto-epistemologies call for a rethinking of the dominant modernist understandings that impose knowledge production upon others, subjugating them or viewing them as illogical (Odysseos 2017). Frafra ways of thinking in this context, sustain important cultural identities, but at the same time are entangled with processes of environmental degradation and climate stress. They sustain their own existence through the enactment of other possible worlds, rendering visible onto-epistemology conflicts at play in modernist colonial

logics. The Frafra people conceive a world in which many worlds could coexist in relation to life and non-life forms. Indigenous worldviews offer an alternative to dominant paradigms, particularly regarding sustainability narratives. The author shares in the critique of how Indigenous worldviews challenge dominant binaries (e.g., nature/culture, subject/object, human/non-human).

Colonialism, Capitalism, Extractivism, and the Transformation of Frafra Onto-Epistemologies

Frafra onto-epistemologies are not separate from modernist sustainability thought. The onto-epistemologies of the Frafra people have been profoundly shaped by, intersected with, and challenged long histories of colonialism, capitalism, and extractivism. Frafra governance practices are not only resistant and resilient, but also continuously negotiated under pressure from dominant imposed structures and systems (Amo-Agyemang 2024). Exploring this entanglement offers a richer understanding of how colonialism, capitalism, and extractive regimes have historically disrupted and reconfigured onto-epistemologies of the Frafra people. Frafra cosmologies were dislocated by colonial rule; sacred ecological spaces were reconfigured as economic zones. The Frafra people traditionally conceive of ecological spaces not in instrumental terms, but through a sacral, ancestral ontology. Sacred ecological sites have been ontologically dispossessed and erased often through climate or development finance under the banner of progress. The ecological balance, deeply embedded in spiritual and relational ontologies, has been disrupted by extractive activities such as mining and commercial agriculture. The continuity of extractive colonial logics in contemporary neoliberal governance has had catastrophic consequences for Frafra ecological systems. The rise of gold mining has desecrated ancestral lands due to open-pit mining.

Communal responsibility and stewardship norms are further destabilised and eroded by capitalist logics of accumulation and expansion. Colonialism and capitalist logics of accumulation and expansion introduced new customary access to land, resource commodification, and centralised governance models that often undermined or co-opted Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The postcolonial period saw the intensification of capitalist development where land, which had previously been held in usufruct by lineage groups, increasingly became a commodity subject to speculation and enclosure (Anabila 2020). The Frafra ethic of redistribution and communal survival

clashed with the capitalist logic of individual accumulation. Land-based identity among the Frafra people is severely severed, largely due to the migration of youth to southern Ghana and mining zones as a dominant economic strategy. Colonial forestry laws introduced new survey and land registration systems that eroded collective stewardship. The decision-making and local leadership of Frafra people are grounded in cosmological balance and ancestral authority is distributed through a network of elders, earth priests (*tengandem*), and clan heads (Issahaku 2023). The British colonial regime imposed the indirect rule system, which appointed chiefs where decentralized, spiritual leadership (such as the Frafra *tengandem*) had been the norm. Colonial rule marginalised elders and ritual specialists in favour of chiefs who aligned with colonial administration; this disrupted subordinated cosmological authority to legal-bureaucratic power, and traditional governance structures included local voices in contradistinction to the bureaucratic governance structures (Ignatov 2017). The Frafra cosmological authority and traditional governance structures and their ways of knowing have been marginalised by education and modern employment, which are seen and promoted as escape routes from “primitive” subsistence life.

Frafra relational worldviews have been violently ruptured by the intrusion of colonialism, the entrenchment of capitalist rationality, and the expansion of extractivist frontiers. However, rather than framing this as a narrative of loss, Frafra onto-epistemologies persist; they do so in tension, sometimes defiantly with ongoing struggles for land, life, and sovereignty—and sometimes in adaptation to these imposed structures. Frafra onto-epistemologies have not disappeared despite these pressures. My point is that the Frafra worldview, cosmology, and traditional practices still exist despite the hostility of modernity, colonialism, and the expansion of extractivist frontiers with its impact on their relationship with the environment and their Ancestors (Awumbila et al. 2019). Surprising as it may sound, Frafra oral traditions, spiritual insights, and more-than-human world in many respects have survived despite attacks through long histories of colonialism, capitalism, and extractivism (Anabila 2020). The Frafra survival in the face of long histories of colonialism, capitalism, extractivism, and colonisation can be seen in their ritual practices, ecological knowledge, cultural identity, and resistance to assimilation.

Frafra elders, historians, poets, and storytellers continue to pass down Ancestral knowledge, cosmologies, and history through oral narratives despite colonial legacies and modern educational systems (Awedoba 2010). For example, sacred histories and ecological wisdom continue to guide Frafra

environmental ethics through the storytelling of Tengan Sob (Earth priests), local artists, and musicians (Ignatov 2017). There is continuity of Frafra Ancestral veneration reflecting the endurance of a spiritual worldview while also adapting to new socio-political realities within modern and globalised frameworks. Ancestral appeasement ceremonies remain crucially vital, even in communities with Christian or Islamic influence and even in those deeply influenced by modernity and globalisation. Cultural resistance movements and social groups among the Frafra people demonstrate their resilience against colonial, modernist, and global pressures, reinforcing the persistence of oral traditions, sacred sites, and spiritual practices. Frafra cosmology is a living political tool and an adaptive system of knowledge; not a relic, as the resurgence and community-led resistance to mining, reforestation efforts, and the reassertion of Indigenous leadership amply demonstrate. The call for the revalorisation of the relationality of Frafra environmental thought in the face of globalisation offers opportunities for epistemic pluralism and co-governance frameworks in climate governance. The emerging call for epistemic justice and co-governance frameworks urgently necessitates the creative recalibration of their cosmologies and governance structures. Frafra thought, rooted in relational ontologies, ecological ethics, sacred ways of being, and ancestral governance offers a viable option for the Anthropocene in contrast to the extractivist logic that views nature as inert and exploitable. Their different ways of knowing that offer ecological, ethical, and governance resources are better suited to the challenges of the Anthropocene than the dominant paradigms that have brought the world to its current crisis.

Frafra onto-epistemologies open space for reimagining sustainable futures and resilience. People beyond this part of Ghana can adopt or learn from Frafra ontological humility, which acknowledges that humans are not above or separate from other beings. Europeans, or perhaps Zulu or Maasai people can learn to accept that spirits, Ancestors, and unseen forces shape the world; and that not all truths are visible or measurable. The spirit of Frafra thought — sacred ecology — can inspire similar relationships in populations beyond the area of Frafra to protect green spaces or traditional ecological areas. Rather than merely adopting, populations beyond the area of Frafra can push for climate finance and land governance systems that respect the context-specific nature of knowledge. Frafra sustainability principles provide a critical purchase on what it means to live within the Anthropocene at a time when the certainties of the modernist world are becoming undone. Frafra thought can inspire a shift in worldview that recognises that adapting to the Anthropocene requires more than technology; it requires living more

justly, more wisely, and more gently in an era of planetary crisis, which Frafra cosmology offers.

Frafra people navigate multiple contradictions including land ownership, spirituality, governance, and environmental sustainability. They have to contend with the tensions between Indigenous traditions and external forces such as colonial legacies, modernisation, and globalization in their daily lives (Behrens 2017). Frafra people face ongoing contradictions between spiritual connections, humans, nature, and non-human entities in fostering ecological sustainability. Converted Frafra Christians or Muslims outrightly reject Indigenous spiritual practices as pagan or idolatrous. Similarly, some younger Frafra under pressure from globalisation, modernity, Christian and Islamic teachings have abandoned ritual sacrifices and ancestral reverence. Indigenous conservation ethics are embedded in rituals, oral traditions, and moral obligations to Ancestors, sustaining biodiversity. However, governmental support for economic growth through deforestation, mining, and modern agriculture degrades the land. While the *Tengan Sob* (Earth priest) and elders insist on forest preservation, some younger people cut trees for charcoal trade, leading to disputes over sustainability (Anabila 2020). As much as some traditions persist, others evolve, hybridise or come under severe threat in the face of globalisation and modernisation. In spite of the fact that Frafra onto-epistemologies and modernist interventions represent two distinct ways of knowing and being in the world, they can be made to resonate through respectful negotiation, mutual learning, and structural inclusion, not through assimilation. Modernist interventions can be contextualised by involving Frafra elders, spiritual custodians, and community knowledge holders in decision-making processes rather than relying on imposition or tokenistic co-option. For modernist interventions to truly rhyme with Frafra onto-epistemologies, they must embrace co-existence over domination, make space for ritual, morality, and spirit.

Indigenous Sustainability: Insights from Frafra Practices in the Anthropocene

A critical contextualisation of sustainability in the Anthropocene will centre on specific case studies of Frafra practices that embody distinctive environmental knowledge and adaptive practices. Geographically, the Frafra people, also known as Gorse, live in the northern parts of Ghana in the Upper East region and in and around the Bolgatanga part of southern Burkina Faso (Anabila 2020; Awedoba 2010), known for their rich cultural

heritage and deep connection to their environment. The Indigenous Frafra group encompasses four main sub-groups: Gurensi, Talensi, Nabdam, and Kusasi, each with distinct linguistic and cultural characteristics (Awedoba 2010). The Frafra language, also known as *Farefare* or *Guren*, is closely related to Mòoré, also known as Moshie or Moose, spoken by another major ethnic group in Burkina Faso. Central to Frafra beliefs is a supreme creator being, and each village has a shrine to this god. They are a minority group that have diverse subsistence practices for their livelihood, with about 79% living in dispersed settlements. Predominantly agrarian, the Frafra engage in activities such as small-scale farming, animal rearing, natural resources harvesting, and hunting, which are deeply intertwined with their social structures, cultural practices, and connections to the land and ecosystems (Ba-an et al. 2022). The Frafra linguistic, political, and economic rights have been historically marginalised and silenced, and denied any substantial participation in the economy. But why then focus on the Frafra? The Frafra community was selected because of their distinctive ecological knowledge and traditional practices in fostering resilience and sustainability. Their ecological knowledge and traditional practices offer valuable insights into sustainable ways of living and resilience in the face of environmental changes. Focusing on the Frafra people in discussions of contemporary sustainability discourse within the Anthropocene offers unique insights into the plurality and relationality of environmental imaginaries in shaping climate resilience and adaptability.

The Frafra case unsettles Western modernist logics of sustainability models by offering alternative perspectives rooted in more-than-human understanding of the world and relational ontologies. Their onto-epistemologies provide a unique lens through which to examine alternative approaches to environmental adaptation and climate resilience. Understanding and valuing Indigenous perspectives like those of the Frafra can illuminate the hybridity, complexity, or contradictions inherent in the concept of the Anthropocene. The Frafra more-than-human understanding of the world and relational ontologies would be part of plural ways of contributing to global efforts in addressing Anthropocene challenges through culturally sensitive and ecologically sound environmental practices. By examining the Frafra relational worldview of environmental imaginaries in terms of their interrelationships with animals, plants, rivers, mountains, nature, spirits, Ancestors, and other vital forces we gain valuable perspectives that frame their relationship with the environment (Ba-an et al. 2022). Their practices, livelihood, culture, belief systems, and ancestral traditions highlight the

importance of integrating adaptive strategies and Indigenous knowledge systems when exploring sustainability in the Anthropocene. Frafra strategies exhibit both similarities and differences when compared to neighbouring communities. Even though the Akan people of Ghana also emphasise an integration of spiritual and environmental stewardship in their approaches to environmental adaptation and climate resilience, Frafra approaches are notably distinct. The Frafra resilience reflects a unique blend of spiritual beliefs and practical adaptation strategies, deeply rooted in a mythical worldview that assigns environmental management responsibilities to resourceful gods and Ancestors. Other regional communities in contrast may prioritise different aspects of resilience. For instance, environmental adaptation and climate resilience narratives of Akan people are deeply embedded in cultural narratives, spiritual beliefs, and adaptive practices which, while effective, differ in focus from the Frafra synthesis of spiritual and environmental stewardship. Studying the Frafra perspectives provides lessons that may inform broader regional and global environmental sustainability efforts, offering valuable insights into how Indigenous communities can navigate the complexities of climate change in the age of the Anthropocene.

Frafra Onto-Epistemologies: Pluralising Possibilities and Multiplicities

Frafra more-than-human onto-epistemologies are embedded in relationality, coexistence, interdependence, and reciprocity with the non-human world. This challenges modernist sustainability models, often rooted in Western modernist Cartesian dualism that separates humans from nature. The Frafra communities of northern Ghana Indigenous belief systems and onto-epistemologies emphasise a harmonious relationship with nature. They engage in various environmental practices deeply rooted in their relational worldview. Their harmonious relationship with nature influences how Frafra people make decisions about land use, conservation, and resource management (Ba-an et al. 2022). Their environmental stewardship involves recognising the environment as a sentient being: a complex cosmological dynamic that encompasses interconnectedness between human beings and the non-human world (Ignatov 2023). The Frafra people's environmental ethics are deeply intertwined with their spiritual beliefs and practices. In this way, Frafra cosmology views the spiritual and the physical as deeply interwoven (Amenga-Etego 2016). The essence of the relational entangled existence of the Frafra people is precisely how nature, animals, trees,

deities, rivers, spirits, Ancestors, and human beings intimately depend on each other. They promote the sustainable use and preservation of natural resources by venerating spiritual beings and adhering to traditional customs. This worldview provides a futural alternative for more-than-human ethics as well as mutual responsibility and ecological stewardship in sharp contrast to reductionist sustainability frameworks that tend to focus on how humans use and conserve nature in the Anthropocene epoch. The Frafra more-than-human mutual responsibility, ethics, and ecological stewardship are a cosmic and spiritual obligation toward the well-being of non-human entities (trees, rivers, animals, the Land, deities, the spirits, and the Ancestors) in fostering sustainability (Ignatov 2023).

To illustrate, those who violate sacred Lands are punished by the Frafra Earth priest, elders and chiefs, enforcing an ethical relationship between humans and the Land (Ba-an et al. 2022). The Earth priest, elders and chiefs govern Land as a living entity with spiritual and moral obligations not as property or a commodity. Sacred Lands in Frafra cosmology are not mere economic resources but spiritual agents that demand ethical reciprocity. This system of governance, that centres ethical reciprocity with nature, challenges modern bureaucratic conservation policies and extends beyond the limitations of conventional sustainability within modernist thought. Traditional sustainability narratives focus on Land as a property or a commodity but woefully fails to capture Land as an ancestral inheritance within the Frafra ontologies. Frafra ontologies reject the dominant Anthropocene discourse, which often centres human agency while ignoring Indigenous worldviews. The anthropocentric worldview focuses on the excessive valuing of humans to the detriment of the environment (Wiredu 1994; Ignatov 2023). The Frafra people see themselves as one among many of the entities of the natural environment and other ecosystems, making sustainability a lived practice rather than an abstract theory. This perspective eschews and deconstructs Western anthropocentrism about the human-nature binary. The Frafra Indigenous ecological knowledge and sustainable practices that recognise the significance of diversity of natural environment and other ecosystems (Millar 2006) move beyond Eurocentric paradigms that commodify Indigenous ecological knowledge.

The Frafra plural ways of knowing and being and relating speak of the veneration of Ancestors (*yan'duma*). The Frafra more-than-human relationality involves a connection with Ancestors (*yan'duma*) who are believed to govern the forces of nature. For them, sustainability is not merely about humans but also essentially about Ancestors. The Ancestors

(*yaṇḍuma*) are believed to be the moral custodians of the group/clan or the family. Within Frafra ontologies, Ancestors are at the apex of the hierarchy (Amenga-Etego 2016). In fact, Ancestorhood forms an essential inter- and intra-connectedness with the *Win* (God) (Amenga-Etego 2016; Millar 2006). The veneration of Ancestors among the Frafra provides valuable insights for deeply interconnected interrelationships with their environment (Awumbila et al. 2017). The Frafra people's adherence to Ancestors significantly influences their environmental conservation practices, fostering sustainability through several mechanisms. The strict moral code attached to Ancestorhood in Frafra Indigenous thought fosters a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the Earth (Amenga-Etego 2016; Ignatov 2023). They maintain harmony with ancestral spirits by engaging in sustainable practices that respect and preserve the environment. Their belief in the continued existence of Ancestors in the spiritual realm instils a deep sense of responsibility among the Frafra to preserve the environment and natural resources. They maintain an ecological balance and ensure the well-being of both their community and the environment by honouring their ancestors through the sustainable stewardship of natural resources. Ancestorcentrism within the Frafra way of life is rooted in their spiritual wisdom, oral traditions, customs, and ecological knowledge that understand the environment as alive and sacred (Amenga-Etego 2016; Ignatov 2023). As such in Frafra cosmology, society and the natural environment are seen as a living partner. Interestingly, traditional sustainability conservation policies fail to see the non-dualistic conception of nature and the environment of the Frafra in times of crisis.

The Frafra maintain sacred groves believed to be inhabited by spirits or deities. They understand the environment as inhabited by Ancestral spirits in specific places such as sacred groves, rivers, trees, and mountains. These sites are protected from exploitation, serving as reservoirs for various plant and animal species, leading to the preservation of biodiversity. This Frafra cosmology shapes their relationship with these areas and informs their ways of life which are geared towards ensuring that sacred groves, rivers, trees, and mountains are prevented from environmental destruction (Amenga-Etego 2012). Sacred groves in Frafra communities are Ancestral and spiritual domains where destruction is both an ecological and moral offence as opposed to being simply protected areas in traditional sustainability frameworks. The prohibition of activities like hunting, farming, polluting, and logging within these groves ensures the conservation of critical habitats. Polluting, logging, hunting or cutting down and farming in sacred groves

trees could invite the anger or the wrath of Ancestors (Ignatov 2017; Millar 2006), reinforcing the intimate relationship between the Land and Ancestors (Millar 2006). This deeply interconnected relationship shows how human actions are ethically bound to the well-being of non-human entities. In the Frafra worldview, trees and animal species are intricately interconnected with those of humans (Amenga-Etego 2016). The deep interconnection and interconnectedness with the natural environment and human life is informed by an adherence to Ancestral prescriptions such as protective taboos against harming totemic species (Ignatov 2017). Totemism among the Frafra people is associated with Ancestral spirits, wherein certain animal species or plants are revered as emblems of clans or families. The Ancestral-plants spiritual relationship illustrates how the Frafra Ancestral spirits may inhabit a plant (tree) or how some plants serve as Ancestral spirits abodes (Amenga-Etego 2012; Ignatov 2023).

The veneration and reverence of trees and plants depend largely on whether or not they are female or male ancestral spirits (Amenga-Etego 2012). The names of Frafra Ancestral spirits reflect both genders, with a female ancestral spirit bearing the name *ma'yaba* (Ancestress), and a male Ancestral spirit is referred to as *cho-yaba* (Ancestor) (Amenga-Etego 2012; Awedoba 2010). Fig trees and baobab trees are typical examples of this phenomenon (Ignatov 2017). Within Frafra thought, fig trees and baobab trees are believed to be *ma'yaba* (female Ancestral spirits). To them, the natural environment feels pain and complains. Their tall trees feel pain and cry when burned and logged. Historically, when the forest Land was young, their Ancestral spirits and deities changed into animals, trees, and other beings (Metz 2019). In this way, animal species and trees must be protected from human activities, enabling a broader concern for the environment itself. This cultural practice to protect animal species and trees from human activities helps maintain ecological balance, protect genetic diversity, and preserve native flora and fauna which significantly contributes to environmental sustainability.

Certain trees considered sacred and spiritually significant are threatened by pressures of commercial logging due to a combination of economic, legal, and cultural pressures. Rather than seeing trees as beings with spiritual or Ancestral significance, the marauding logging industry views trees primarily as economic resources for profit. The logging industry ignores the cosmological roles of sacred trees such as baobabs or shea trees targeted for their commercial value. The Ghanaian state licenses, or corporate backing that override customary governance structures, weaken Indigenous control over sacred landscapes and erode the norms that protect them. Logging

and modernisation have turned trees into just another commodity in the landscape. Therefore, tree veneration becomes a casualty of economic survival strategies in a neo-liberal economy as trees lose their spiritual or ancestral significance. There are interesting areas of resonance and tension regarding modernist notions of carbon capture and Frafra practices such as tree veneration that offer possibilities for rethinking sustainability and deeper dialogue. While modernist notions of carbon capture and Frafra practices like tree veneration both centre on trees, they do so through radically different ontologies. Modernist notions of carbon capture and Frafra tree veneration value trees in sustaining life and stabilizing climate. They both share an ethical commitment to forest preservation and cutting trees indiscriminately, although the reasons differ in purpose, ethics, and worldview; veneration protects trees through ritual, taboo, and sacred status, while modern carbon markets value trees for climate mitigation. Modernist notions of carbon capture emanate from an economic calculus —means to an end (e.g., carbon credits), while tree veneration from Frafra cosmology springs from spiritual ethics (trees are kin, Ancestors, or sacred entities, not commodities). Both frameworks acknowledge tree planting and forest conservation as can be seen through programs like REDD+ and carbon offset schemes. Both frameworks may appear to belong to vastly different paradigms, they recognise the central ecological role of trees in maintaining cosmological balance through carbon sequestration spiritual relationality. In decolonising environmental governance and fostering truly equitable climate solutions, it is essential to understand this rhyme and its dissonance. There is an urgent need for a more dialogical and decolonial approach to sustainability and policy-making. Climate adaptation infrastructure like seawalls and forestry would be more effective if the Ghanaian state were to seriously engage with Frafra cosmologies, epistemologies, and environmental ethics. If the Ghanaian state would take Frafra views on hard infrastructure such as seawalls to combat coastal erosion and sea level rise seriously – not as folklore, or as cultural heritage but as serious knowledge, as systems of meaning, ethics, and environmental design – the project might begin with ritual consultations with the sea, rather than just environmental impact assessments. In a climate adaptation process in which local elders, diviners, and farmers are not “stakeholders” but epistemic authorities, adaptation could focus on creating buffer zones that align with cosmological insights about sacred boundaries. Designing multi-epistemic policy spaces, where different ontologies can sit in tension, not hierarchy, would be a more dialogical approach in dealing with climate adaptation infrastructure like seawalls and forestry. If the Ghanaian state were to take Frafra views

seriously, rather than not symbolically, it would initiate a new conversation in which spirits, elders, engineers, and Ancestors are recognised at the same table, shaping a plural, ethical, and context-responsive future.

The adherence to Ancestral prescriptions regarding protective taboos against harming totemic species pays attention to issues of environmental sustainability (Eze 2017). The reverence for forest patches by the Frafra people ensures the availability of essential medicinal plants used in traditional healing practices. Traditional prohibitions against exploiting plant species contribute to climate change mitigation because plants act as carbon sinks by absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Farming, fishing, or hunting activities are forbidden on certain days. The community enforces these strict taboos in order to allow ecosystems to regenerate and prevent the overexploitation of resources. The Frafra ecological well-being of the non-human world fosters a profound respect for nature, shifting the focus from preservation to responsibility and reciprocity. Their more-than-human framework not only preserves biodiversity but also expands our understanding of the role of Indigenous spirituality in environmental sustainability beyond Western conservation models and environmental thought. The Frafra mutual existence among trees and animal species goes beyond the Anthropocentric worldview focused on human exceptionalism.

The Frafra spirituality and ecological practices are embedded in an environmentally sustainable outlook that constructs and maintains their natural world. Their relational framework about the natural world is embedded in the supranatural world. In this way, their approach to sustainability is through spiritual practices, rituals, and oral traditions rather than Western scientific rationality. Frafra spiritual practices, oral traditions, and rituals exemplify an Indigenous approach to sustainability, intricately intertwined with cultural practices with environmental conservation. Spiritual practices and rituals emphasise the need for the well-being and sanctity of society and the environment (Ignatov 2023). In this respect, the Frafra belief in spiritual ecology fundamentally challenges anthropocentric and rationalist foundations upon which modern sustainability frameworks are built; the belief in spiritual ecology resists reductionist sustainability models that ignore spiritual and ontological relationalities. The belief in the supranatural world shapes their relationship with the Land and the ecology in times of planetary crisis. For them, the natural environment is alive with spiritual forces, influencing the manner in which they interact with the natural environment; seeing the environment itself as a living and sacred entity that must be respected and engaged with in reciprocal and

respectful ways. Land, animals, stars, moon, sun, cloud, plants, rivers, trees, soil, humans, and spirits constitute a living system that sustain and guide the Frafra life (Ignatov 2017). Trees, animals, stars, moon, sun, cloud, plants, soil, humans, spirits, rivers, and mountains inhabiting the Land deserve to be respected, protected, and preserved by humanity not only for the sake of its own survival but importantly as a spiritual responsibility to Ancestors and the spirits of the Earth (Ignatov 2023). The spiritual elements in the Frafra people expect environmental carefulness and the sustainable use of natural resources (Amenga-Etego 2012). This forces them to develop more effective sustainable practices in order to control the well-being of the Land/environment as opposed to a universal, top-down, and one-size-fits-all concept that generalise a culturally specific vision of sustainable development in the Anthropocene.

Their environmental resilience practices and belief systems resist universalised sustainability models. The Frafra environmental resilience practices and belief system are place-based and context-specific. The Frafra cosmology, that views the spiritual and physical realms as inseparable, presents sustainable and interconnected ways of life in the Anthropocene in constitution of new ones. Their ways of knowing are diametrically different from the Eurocentric way of knowing, which is largely based on the separation of the observer and the observed world. Western modernist sustainability assumptions do not value seeing from a connection with the supranatural world. Western modernist thought about seeing from a connection with the supranatural world occurs from the first-person perspective. Persons who see from a connection with the supranatural world are persons with special qualities and positions in Frafra society. For example, Frafra communities may consult diviners or elders in times of drought to understand the ecological imbalance by communicating with Ancestral spirits (Amenga-Etego 2012), instead of relying solely on modern climate data and metrics. Frafra environmental ethics rooted in spiritual reverence, communal responsibility, and traditional regulations offer alternative conservation models in the Anthropocene epoch. Their alternative conservation models promoting environmental sustainability reject traditional sustainability frameworks that are often technocratic and rely on data-driven solutions.

Frafra notions of *Win* (God), *neri-sala* (human beings), and *tingazuo/tingongo* (Earth/environment) allow for a nuanced perspective on how the Frafra ecological knowledge could be and has been appropriated for the perpetuation and sustenance of the environment in the Anthropocene era (Ignatov 2017; Awedoba 2014). Within the Frafra schema and

hierarchy, *Win* is the creator of the world (God the Supreme Being). The Frafra people place *Win* at the centre of all existence. Central to Frafra ontology is the belief that the environment and everything in it was created by *Win* (God the Supreme Being); this establishes a profound sense of interconnectedness between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm (Awedoba 2010). Frafra ontological realities that view God as an integral part of the natural world inform their environmental practices and resilience strategies. Their ontological framework, characterised by a deep sense of interconnectedness, at once emphasises respect for nature and the importance of responsible environmental stewardship and communal values shape their understanding of sustainability. Frafra cosmology, which perceives God (*Win*) as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, including the natural world, fosters a sense of responsibility towards the environment (Ignatov 2023). To them, the environment is a gift from God to be cherished and protected, rather than be destroyed. Frafra religious beliefs often highlight the interconnectedness between God *yan'duma* (Ancestors) and the *baga* (divinities). Beneath *Win* (God the Supreme Being) are *yan'duma* (Ancestors) and the *baga* (divinities), which comprise spiritual entities such as ghosts, dwarfs, and witchcraft spirits (Ignatov 2017; Awedoba 2010). Frafra notions of interconnectedness and interdependence are rooted in the belief that human actions have consequences for the natural world and are seen as a way of honouring God. Within the Frafra hierarchy, the rest of nature and human beings are connected to *Win* (God) the creator of the universe on whom they rely for their sustenance (Amenga-Etego 2011). The Frafra worldview within the complex web of interdependence and interconnectedness ensures the continuous stay of *Win* (God) who created the universe (Awedoba 2010). Their traditional practices such as rotational farming, forest protection, and water conservation reflect a deep-seated respect for the natural world and provide a framework for sustainability that is holistic and culturally grounded, particularly in the context of the Anthropocene. The Frafra perspective, emphasising respect for nature and the importance of responsible environmental stewardship and communal values, is an invitation to think differently about conventional Western sustainability models, advocating for the inclusion of diverse worldviews and ontologies in a global sustainability discourse. It is imperative to examine the role of cosmology, ritual stewardship, and more-than-human relations in shaping ecological practice in order to understand how sustainability is conceived and enacted in this context.

Spiritual Entities in Nature

In Frafra thought, spiritual entities in nature are believed to relate to their places of abode. The stewardship of Land and the *tindana*, custodian of sacred traditions, connect the Frafra people to their Ancestors. The *tindana* ensures that there are mechanisms for resource utilisation by performing annual rituals in order to appease Ancestors for the reckless use of ecological resources by the community (Awedoba 2010). Rituals are performed by the *tindana* to assuage the displeasure of the Earth spirit, reflecting a reciprocal relationship with nature (Anabila 2020; Awedoba 2010). This notion of the ancestral ownership of Land within the Frafra traditions of thought motivates ecological stewardship and the responsible utilisation of natural resources and thus excludes individualistic conceptions of private property championed by predatory market capitalism (Ignatov 2017). While Frafra knowledge sees rituals to appease Ancestors as an important part of the ecological balance, Western sustainability models often ignore rituals and belief systems and spiritual interventions. The Frafra notion of *baga* (divinities) is one of the entities bound up in the Frafra hierarchy of relations (Anabila 2020). Their belief systems indicate interdependence and interconnectedness with *baga* (divinities). In order to secure ecological well-being and promote sustainable ways of living, Frafra society makes sure that plant *baga* (divinities) are not eaten even though they are edible (Millar 2006). The Frafra of northern Ghana ecological knowledge and the intimate interconnectedness with their environment relates to healing and food taboos or injunction in terms of divinities (Anabila 2020). The Frafra people have the responsibility in nurturing plants, forest, or water divinities because they are an integral part of the interconnected ecosystem (Ignatov 2023). The notion of *baga* enables them to have sustainable use of the ecology. This is grounded in their choice of harvesting a tree, fuel wood, where to fetch water, or where to dump specific types of household waste (Ignatov 2017; Anabila 2020). This ontological belief either at the individual level or at the community level is governed by the necessity for the sustainable management of resources and the judicial balance of what nature supplies with human demand. *Baga* divinities are seen as guardians and nurturers of the forest, which bestow life and vitality to all beings (Awumbila et al 2017). In this context, the Frafra interdependence and interconnectedness with divinities is a counter discourse to the animist conception of Land in the dominant Western sustainability frameworks.

The Frafra struggle to keep the forest Lands is intended to reduce carbon emissions and deforestation, and to conserve biodiversity (Anabila 2020).

The forest Land for the Frafra people provide sanctuary for humans, water, animals, plants, spirits, and other beings to coexist and interact. Their struggle to keep the forest Lands is driven by a desire to ensure a sustainable living in the Anthropocene. For this reason, the forest Land in the Frafra world transcends its existence as a mere living entity. The Frafra people preserve their forest cover and biodiversity in order to avoid deforestation outside their boundaries (Liu 2017). They protect their forest Land in order to honour Ancestral spirits (Anabila 2020), and in so doing, contribute to spiritual accountability and the social fabric of environmental adaptation rather than purely reductionist, mechanistic problem-solving and market-driven conservation (e.g., carbon credits, eco-tourism, private conservation efforts). The Frafra struggle to keep forest Lands in order to live their lives in the Anthropocene epoch is a spiritual and moral imperative that destabilises and deconstructs a dimension of sustainability understandings of reducing carbon emissions (Manzini 2019). In Frafra cosmology, thunder, winds, rain, storms, day and night, the sun, moon, and stars are essentially interconnected guardians of life that sustain the resources required for survival. The forces of cosmological order are vitally important in offsetting carbon emissions and enhance carbon sink (Manzini 2019). This approach is conspicuously absent in most modernist sustainability models in the contemporary Anthropocene. The Frafra conceptualization of Land challenges the absurdly reductionist tendencies of dominant Western sustainability models that often reduce Land to a mere resource, commodity or economic unit. In the worldview of the Frafra, Land cannot be reduced to market value because it is a living, relational entity with deep spiritual and Ancestral significance that cannot be displaced by human activity (Awumbila et al. 2017).

Cosmology, Climate Resilience, and More-than-Human Relations

How the Frafra adapt to climate resilience involves supernatural control and care for rivers, forests, and animals who are believed to hold independent souls and interact with people (Anabila 2020). Therefore, the Frafra approach sees resilience as deeply relational and a spiritual continuity in contrast to the mainstream sustainability that focuses on technological adaptation and policy-driven resilience. The cosmological and ethical resilience model of the Frafra people involves consulting the spirits and performing rituals (Ignatov 2023). Hunting, planting, farming, and harvesting are daily activities that are directly controlled by supernatural spirits. They observe and master the non-human world through objective knowledge. Thus, the Frafra interact with supernatural

spirits through learning from ancestral wisdom, rituals, storytelling, and oral traditions (Millar 2006). They get their names from animals and rivers because they believe that animals and rivers have spirits (Anabila 2020). Their treatment and interaction with animals, trees, rivers, and other entities as humans are very much in consonance with the notion of the contemporary Anthropocene. In fact, animals and other entities are considered by the Frafra as other kinds of “folks” with their own agency. Other kinds of “folks” live in their societies just like human entities do, demonstrating a governance system where other entities have spiritual and legal personhood. By recognising other entities as other kinds of “folks,” the Frafra more-than-human entanglement challenges the Western ontological bias that insists on a rigid human/non-human divide. By acknowledging non-humans as kin, agents, and co-creators, Frafra ontologies redefine what it means to exist and relate.

The construction and maintenance of environmentally conscious seawalls provide protection from storm surges and tidal forces, while aiming to hold or prevent sliding of the soil (UNFCCC 1999). Seawalls form a defining line between the sea and the Frafra Land in order to ensure no further erosion will occur, encouraging practices that support environmental sustainability. The Frafra people are environmentally conscious and seawalls lead to more sustainability by providing habitats for coastal and marine life and critical ecosystems such as mangroves, wetlands, coastal forests, marshlands, and sandy beaches that would otherwise be submerged. Their seawalls create a more adaptive and responsive solution to environmental resilience in catastrophic circumstances (Anabila 2020); The Frafra people seawalls act as carbon sinks, helping to mitigate climate change, safeguarding and protecting the livelihoods of communities, homes, and cultural sites from erosion and flooding. Seawalls safeguard human settlements and natural landscapes, contribute to the long-term viability of coastal communities, and reduce environmental impact. Seawalls provide a resilient solution to evolving climate change challenges by accommodating the projected sea-level rise and increased storm intensity ensuring the long-term sustainability of coastal areas (Ignatov 2017). This adaptability supports the sustainability of coastal protection measures over time and potentially enhances and boosts local biodiversity that often is crucial for the survival and well-being of Indigenous communities. The building of seawalls by the Frafra people of northern Ghana pushes for sustainable ways of living in the Anthropocene epoch, rather than simply reinforcing walls.

Their sustainable development practices help balance ecological preservation by ensuring that coastal regions remain vibrant and habitable for future generations. Integrating different dimensions of sustainability frameworks

through prioritising anthropogenic interventions, the Frafra more-than-human ethic ensures harmony between human and non-human forces (Liu 2017). To be sure, prioritising anthropogenic interventions enables the long-term coexistence between human activities and the environment. The Frafra seawalls are expressions of an integrated, relational, and spiritual wisdom in which water, environment, and spirits are seen as interconnected. Their design of seawalls inflects a more-than-human entanglement that integrates ecological, spiritual, and communal dimensions; this perspective extends modernist sustainability frameworks that emphasise hydrological models, risk assessments, and economic cost-benefit analyses. Building seawalls is part of a broader cosmological and ecological relationship, including sacrificial ritual and communal responsibility in order to honour ancestral spirits believed to mediate environmental balance, rather than just barriers against water. More than just barriers, the construction and maintenance of environmentally conscious seawalls transform into assets that protect both people and nature. The ethical Land and water relations among the Frafra rely on Ancestral ethics and reject modernist sustainability market-based water management.

The seawalls built by the Frafra involve ritual bunds, protective shrines, or sacred earthworks in order to appease spirits, protect sacred Land, and maintain cosmological balance, while the Ghanaian state engages in building seawalls for tourism or economic development. Engineering rationalities, cost-benefit analyses, and environmental modelling typically inform why the Ghanaian state builds seawalls. Frafra seawalls are about their ontologies and epistemologies. While the Frafra and Ghanaian state seawalls structures deal with the threat of water, they come from radically different relationships to Land, water, and knowledge. The seawall becomes an object, not a subject of ritual or reverence when the state imposes or substitutes its infrastructure. The spiritual and relational dimensions are flattened if the state proceeds with seawall projects without regard for Frafra epistemologies. The two onto-epistemologies would rhyme if construction begins with rituals and dialogue, not just bulldozers. Rhyming these two onto-epistemologies requires the recognition of seawalls not just as a structure but as a boundary of relationship—between water, people, spirits, and futures. It calls for onto-political respect, processes of co-creation, and aligning the wall's form and orientation with ancestral pathways or taboos known to local knowledge holders. Training engineers, planners, and politicians in ontological pluralism—not just technical skills—would challenge the dominance of Euro-modernist frameworks in Ghanaian development discourse and open up radical new imaginaries for what sustainability can mean on this land.

Toward a Decolonial Sustainability Framework

Frafra Indigenous knowledge offers a deeper, more embodied, and decolonial approach to environmental resilience in the Anthropocene era by reconfiguring relationships between humans, environment, and water. Rather than merely adjusting human activities to mitigate harm, the Frafra worldview offers a deeply relational, spiritual, and ethical approach to environmental stewardship (Amo-Agyemang 2024). The understanding of the natural environment and the intricacies of the spiritual world, based on the principle of reciprocity and relationality, is anchored on the non-anthropocentric philosophy of the Frafra people (Liu 2017). Their care, respect, and gratitude for the environment constitute our multiple worlds. The multiple ways of being and knowing of Frafra people in the Anthropocene invite modern environmental thinkers to acknowledge their ontological blind spots and perhaps more importantly listen to the Ancestors. Multiplicity of ways in the sustainability offers a relational way of engaging with the Anthropocene, and promotes a range of alternative futural possibilities for thinking and acting in the face of ecological crisis. Rejecting and refusing the modernist imaginary binary of nature/culture and human/non-human world, the Frafra onto-epistemology offers a novel understanding of human existence in terms of interconnectedness and relatedness (Liu 2017). Human beings/natural beings are inherently and intrinsically connected to each other and underly the values that bind the Frafra people (Manzini 2019). In this way, Frafra perspectives demand a fundamental rethinking of an intricate web of interconnectedness with various natural beings and forces that disavow and directly contrapose modernist sustainability frameworks; the Frafra worldview underscores the need for ecological diversity in the contemporary Anthropocene (Escobar 2016; Inoue and Moreira 2016). The Frafra mutual interrelationship and interconnectedness between non-humans, various natural beings, and the environment affirm and extend the Frafra people's humanity (Ignatov 2014). Indeed, nature-society dichotomous distinctions and hierarchies make no sense to the Frafra people.

Mutual respect and conviviality with the environment within which human existence unfolds provide us with insights into the broader Indigenous environmental thought that exemplifies an expression of decolonisation and living otherwise (Behrens 2017; Ignatov 2017). Frafra onto-epistemology as a decolonial framework enables us to understand environmental ethics beyond the limitations of modernist sustainability. Their more-than-human perspectives are decolonially informed and deeply interconnected with

Indigenous wisdom worldwide, enabling a non-reductionist approach that can broaden global sustainability discussions. Frafra environmental practices offer futural alternatives for decolonising mainstream sustainability: their thought provides a foundational decolonial approach in order to radically rethink the world in the contemporary Anthropocene. Frafra approaches offer decolonial sustainability models that centre Indigenous agency and sovereignty beyond modernist sustainability frameworks by re-envisioning ecological ethics, governance, and relationality. Indigenous agency and sovereignty call for self-determination in environmental governance instead of top-down Western environmental policies. Relational, holistic, and spiritually embedded understanding of nature within the Frafra people's onto-epistemology does not fit neatly within modernist sustainability frameworks that focus on managing resources for future use. Frafra thought fundamentally critiques the scope of modernist sustainability by emphasising coexistence, reciprocity, and ancestral stewardship.

The Frafra case provides a compelling example of how relational ontologies can be theorised and provide new insights into global sustainability discussions. The theorisation of Frafra relational ontology, which recognises humans, non-humans, and spiritual entities as entangled in a web of reciprocal relations, transcends localised understandings and makes observations that are universally applicable to sustainability debates. This is essentially because the theorisation of Frafra Indigenous ways of knowing and being resist reductionist sustainability frameworks by offering relational, holistic, and entangled perspectives on human-nature interactions. Their ecological rituals, spiritual taboos, and Ancestral relationships with land provide locally grounded, context-specific solutions that critique the Eurocentric bias in sustainability policies. Sustainability narratives often rest on Western academic frameworks and anthropocentric assumptions rather than on understanding it as embedded in cultural and spiritual worldviews. I suggest that experiences of the Frafra Indigenous group can be translated more globally and scaled up, to reflect on some critical Indigenous studies perspectives. The Frafra case resonates with broader Indigenous struggles globally. For instance, many Indigenous groups such as the Māori in New Zealand and the Quechua in the Andes, share relational and more-than-human sustainable development narratives. The Māori concept of *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship of land and water), the Andean cosmovision of *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) or the Anishinaabe "All My Relations" philosophy embody a deeply interconnected view of life, in which human, non-human, and spiritual forces are part of a reciprocal and relational

existence that resonates with Frafra ecological relations (Marras Tate and Rapatahana 2023; Apaza Huanca 2019; Ineese-Nash 2021). The spiritual-ecological entanglements of Yoruba (Nigeria), Sámi (Finland), and Cree (Canada) share a more-than-human ontological approach to environmental adaptation strategies, climate resilience policies, and governance that challenge modernist sustainability frameworks.

While the Frafra people's onto-epistemologies have fostered resilience and adaptation to environmental changes, it is important to underscore that these onto-epistemologies encompass practices that may inadvertently contribute to environmental challenges. Frafra agricultural practices such as subsistence farming can lead to overexploitation and overuse of Land resources due to increasing population pressures (Awedoba and Hahn 2014). The overexploitation and overuse of Land resources necessitate degradation and reduced agricultural productivity. Socio-cultural practices that include among other things the demand for resources associated with traditional ceremonies may contribute to resource depletion and environmental change. In as much as the Frafra people integrated system of being and knowledge historically promoted environmental sustainability, it is crucially important to assess and adapt certain practices in order to ensure they align with contemporary sustainability goals. The recognition of Indigenous Frafra more-than-human entanglement is the way to go if humanity is to survive many worlds on one planet and cope with the increasingly catastrophic ecological changes wrought by Western modernist thought in the Anthropocenic present.

Sustainable Development in the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene epoch is conceived for the sustainability of life. How are we to understand the relation between the rationalities of sustainable development and the problematic of the Anthropocene? Sustainable development is increasingly refracted through conceptualisations of the problematic of the Anthropocene. Anthropocene discourses appropriate sustainable development rationalities to secure life of the biosphere. The new geological era and its things, natures, and non-human forces threaten the survival of humanity and the natural environment (Harrington 2016; Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). The Anthropocene epoch is defined by the human impact on the physical landscapes, biodiversity, planet's ecosystems etc. (Harrington 2016). The Anthropocene urges humanity to face a future of destruction and to live in harm, risk, and loss amidst increasing danger

(Harrington 2016). This view is increasingly characterised by powerlessness and apathy instead of a call for the radical transformation in how we live and relate to nature (Tsing 2015; Cohen et al. 2016; Chandler 2018; Karera 2019). Deep entanglement between humans, non-humans, things, and natures evolves through co-relations. This necessitates alternative ways of being and multiple ways of knowing, particularly those grounded in Indigenous and marginalised cultural perspectives that challenge the modernist notion of linear causation (Haraway 2016).

Sustainable development narratives provide a comprehensive framework for addressing environmental concerns such as climate change adaptation, insecurity, conflict, and terrorism in international policy-making (Kopnina 2020). It emphasises tackling climate crisis and working to preserve the environment (UNEP 2004; Death 2010). The sustainable development framework gained global prominence through the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) report (Death 2010). The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), also known as the Brundtland Report after its chairwoman Gro Harlem Brundtland), was published in 1987 (Brundtland 1987). The report, titled *Our Common Future*, emphasised the interconnectedness of environmental and economic policies and laid the groundwork for subsequent sustainability discourse (United Nations 2004; Death 2010). Critical to the ambitions of *Our Common Future* and related publications underlie the causes of environmental destruction (Death 2010). Proponents maintain that sustainable development narratives shift the scope of concern from a narrow focus on human life to a broader consideration of the entire biosphere (UNEP 2004). In this sense, the turn to sustainable development, we are told, provides the rationalities to increase the long-term sustainability for all living systems, but also for protecting human populations.

Sustainable development is a useful concept precisely because it understands and addresses global challenges in the context of ecological crisis in relation to vulnerable groups and marginalised populations. Increasing the sustainability among the poor and the vulnerable groups has unsurprisingly become a common discourse in critical Indigenous studies because it is precisely the poor who are unaware of environmental issues or sustainable practices (UNEP 2004: 5). Thus, the overarching concern of the United Nations Environment Program has been to increase the sustainability of the poor and the vulnerable groups (UNEP 2004: 5). Managing threats to ecosystem entails improving the sustainability of the poor in addressing environmental challenges. This is the underlying strategy by which the Anthropocene

thinking has served to legitimate and naturalize the critique of the sustainable development framework. The Anthropocene as a philosophical framework for understanding humanity's impact on the Earth is deeply intertwined with sustainability narratives. The Anthropocene and sustainable development are critical frameworks for understanding the global challenges of the 21st century including climate change, species extinction, and ecological degradation (Chandler 2022; Grove 2019; Rothe 2019). Sustainable development in the context of the Anthropocene epoch tasks us to respect the natural environment in order to prevent ecological collapse. While categories of modernist thought infuse sustainable development rationalities, the Anthropocene entanglement opens up new imaginaries for radically rethinking the complex, more-than-human hybrid onto-epistemologies of Indigenous peoples (Grove 2019; Rothe 2019). Indeed, rethinking sustainable narratives within the Anthropocene entanglement highlights a constitutive process within complex assemblages of human, non-human, and more-than-human understandings (Chipato and Chandler 2023; Chandler 2022).

The dominant critique of the Anthropocene and its attendant modernist thought call for a serious reflection over new forms of “planet politics” that take account of “entangled humanism” (Burke et al. 2016; Connolly 2017). This account of entangled humanism forces us to direct analytical attention to the importance of more complex assemblages and entanglements that can shape the contours of onto-epistemologies that have emerged in the discipline of International Relations (Blaney and Tickner 2017). I hold the view that the neglect of critical Indigenous plural ways of knowing and being, and relating to the environment in the Anthropocene, forces us to confront the ecological costs of modernity in order to move toward a more sustainable and interconnected world. The Anthropocene requires us to think of other non-human forms. Thus, the Anthropocene presents humanity with a new set of ethics that recognise that humans are not alone on Earth. Human's mutual respect and entanglement with non-human elements of the Earth conjures different imaginaries in which humans have to preserve and sustain themselves (Ignatov 2017). This mutual respect and entanglement that comprises other humans, beings, things, and processes provide an essential lens for approaching sustainability in the Anthropocene. The sustainable development framework has been widely critiqued from various perspectives, including Indigenous academia, the policy world (most notably the UN), from critical Anthropocene theory, decolonial thought, political ecology, economic, and social justice standpoints (Chandler and Pugh 2021; UN 2015).

Critical approaches and more contemporary imaginaries of non-anthropocentric epistemologies and ontologies in the field of sustainability challenge top-down technological solutions and propose frameworks that balance human needs and planetary boundaries. Matthew Archer's book, *Unsustainable: Measurement, Reporting, and the Limits of Corporate Sustainability* (2024) emphasises how incorporating perspectives from Black and Indigenous theories ensures a more socially and ecologically just vision of sustainability. As Archer argues, mainstream sustainability approaches are anthropocentric and emphasise the importance of diverse cultural perspectives in addressing the underlying causes of climate change and social inequality. Writing on "An African Anthropocene," Emily Brownell (2022) contends that the Anthropocene concept must be applied to African contexts. As Gabrielle Hecht for instance writes, it is important to understand how global processes are interconnected with local experiences of environmental change (Hecht 2018). Iva Peša (2022) draws on decolonial approaches to understand the more-than-human narratives of the Anthropocene in Africa. Peša focuses on the case studies of Zambia, South Africa, and Nigeria to highlight how historical and socio-economic factors shape local responses to environmental degradation. These scholars have critically examined the Anthropocene, particularly in the context of Africa in order to fully grasp its multifaceted impacts. They offer nuanced perspectives that challenge modernist reductionist and universalist sustainability frameworks and has been crucial in informing and enriching global sustainability discourses as well as shape the ontological contours of debates in the Anthropocene. The mainstream sustainability does not take into account non-human agency or more-than-human relationships in order to consider the complexities of local ecosystems and cultural contexts. Indigenous critiques highlight that humans are not separate from nature but embedded within it. Indigenous critiques call for relationality and reciprocity rather than mere conservation for economic benefit within the broader sustainability discourses. It highlights relational ontologies and sacred ecologies as alternative governance frameworks. Sustainable development frameworks must prioritise localised, adaptive resilience practices rooted in Indigenous onto-epistemologies rather than top-down technological solutions. The sustainable development framework must become more aware of Indigenous sensibilities by shifting from extractivist models to relational and reciprocal approaches to nature.

Concluding Remarks

This article has shown how Frafra relational onto-epistemologies challenge the reductionism of mainstream sustainability in the Anthropocene. I have highlighted how the Frafra people natural world and perspectives make ways of knowing and being from which we can face the past, present, and future collectively. Their more-than-human modes of existence I have argued represent a deeply reflexive attempt at decolonial thought and relational onto-epistemologies. Decolonial critiques argue that the Frafra focus on relationships of interdependence and reciprocity enables the possibility of surpassing planetary limits from which we could embrace the world in the Anthropocene. By emphasising spiritual balance, ecological knowledge, and communal responsibility, the Frafra people offer a decolonial critique of the Anthropocene that calls for a radical rethinking of how we understand the relationship between humans and the environment. Frafra sustainable narratives and thought reject the Western modernist imaginary about a split between human and nature in the present context of global ecological crisis. Their worldview acknowledges that humans, animals, plants, spirits, and Ancestors, non-human entities and spiritual dimensions need to be accepted as the starting point for sustainable ecology in the Anthropocene.

By theorising the Frafra more-than-human hybrid onto-epistemologies, we can push for policy shifts that integrate relational ontologies into climate resilience frameworks. Embedding relational ontologies that emphasise the interconnectedness among humans, non-humans, and the environment can lead to more holistic and culturally relevant resilience strategies. Their rich cultural narratives and practices reflect principles of respect and reciprocity, highlighting their interconnectedness with the natural world. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness of climate adaptation strategies but also promotes inclusivity that acknowledges diverse ways of knowing and being. My contention is that policy makers and theorists acknowledge the existence of local forms of ecological knowledge, practices, and worldviews in order to enhance sustainable development and find meaning in the contemporary Anthropocene.

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THE COLONIAL LEGACY OF POWER, PROFIT, AND PREJUDICE IN GLOBAL HEALTH GOVERNANCE

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Abstract: This article examines how colonial legacies continue to structure global health financing and governance, perpetuating systemic inequities between the Global North and South, particularly African countries. Historical analysis reveals that colonial health systems were strategically designed to protect European interests while exploiting indigenous populations and establishing racially segregated frameworks whose structural biases persist in contemporary institutions. International financial architecture, particularly through bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, reinforces these asymmetries through governance mechanisms that privilege wealthy nations in decision-making and resource allocation. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these entrenched disparities, as vaccine nationalism and disparate fiscal capacities widened the existing health gaps. Emerging digital health technologies now risk establishing new extractive relationships, as health data harvested from vulnerable populations flows to high-income countries without adequate benefit-sharing frameworks, a pattern identified as data colonialism. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires decolonising global health governance through fundamental reforms that redistribute power, ensure data sovereignty, and centre historically marginalised voices in shaping health priorities and financing mechanisms.

Keywords: Africa, colonialism, COVID-19, global health equity, international finance, reinforcing disparities, systemic inequities

Introduction

The global health financing architecture operates within an intricate web of power relations that reflects persistent colonial legacies. Historically, these structures have perpetuated a hierarchical framework wherein formerly

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colonised regions are relegated to passive recipients of aid rather than active stakeholders in decision-making processes (Pearson 2018; Schrecker 2009). This donor-recipient dynamic bears a striking resemblance to colonial relationships, with profound implications for health equity worldwide. The lasting impact of these structures continues to shape the prioritisation of global health initiatives, often reinforcing disparities rather than addressing them. This systematic misalignment manifests in resource allocation and priority-setting processes. Health challenges that receive funding and attention frequently align with the worldviews and interests of powerful states, private foundations, and multinational financial institutions in the Global North, rather than reflecting the actual needs of communities bearing the highest disease burdens (Cobbett 2020). Consequently, the imbalanced distribution of health resources perpetuates structural inequities, particularly in African nations and other regions that remain marginalised in governance frameworks despite shouldering disproportionate health challenges.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic provides a compelling example of these systemic inequities. For decades, while antiretroviral treatments were available in wealthier nations, many African communities struggled to access these life-saving drugs due to financial constraints and patent restrictions, a situation exacerbated by global health financing dynamics (Krikorian and Torreele 2021). This disparity became so entrenched within global health discourse that differential access to life-saving medicines based on geography and economic status was often framed as an unfortunate but inevitable reality, rather than a fundamental violation of the right to health (Ooms, Latif et al. 2013). The delayed and uneven distribution of these medications reinforced a broader pattern wherein economic and policy-driven constraints dictate health outcomes rather than the severity of health crises. Additionally, persistent disparities exist in health research and development priorities, for example, tropical diseases like schistosomiasis or guinea worm disease. Despite affecting millions, they are often classified as “neglected tropical diseases” – a term that reflects both the lack of medical attention and their systematic exclusion from global health financing priorities (Viergever 2013). Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown these disparities with unprecedented clarity. While wealthier nations rapidly secured vaccine doses for their populations, many countries in Africa and other historically marginalised regions faced significant delays, not due to logistical constraints or lack of infrastructure, but due to the financial and contractual power dynamics embedded in global health governance.

This entrenched architecture does not merely perpetuate inequities but actively reinforces them, making systemic disparities increasingly difficult to dismantle. The recurrent underinvestment in health infrastructure within historically oppressed regions fosters a persistent dependence on external aid, leaving these communities vulnerable to health crises. As health challenges intensify under these constraints, they inadvertently reinforce damaging stereotypes regarding the capacity for self-sufficiency of affected regions, portraying them as inherently unable to manage their own health challenges. Such portrayals become naturalised within global health discourse, where structural disadvantage is reframed as inherent incapacity, thereby obscuring the political and economic choices that create and maintain these disparities. This represents not merely a matter of health, but rather a system deliberately established decades ago that continues to shape contemporary global health outcomes.

Consequently, this article seeks to trace the historical origins of these inequities, examining how global health governance frameworks have been intrinsically shaped by colonial-era philosophies and financial architectures. By critically interrogating the legacy of European colonialism, with particular attention to Africa, whilst drawing comparative insights from Asia, our research aims to uncover the ways in which structures rooted in historical racial prejudices and economic exploitation continue to dictate present realities. The colonial project in Africa represents a particularly instructive case for understanding contemporary global health inequities. The systematic extraction of resources, dismantling of indigenous health systems, and imposition of racialised hierarchies during the colonial period have established patterns of dependency and marginalisation that persist within current health financing mechanisms. The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, which formalised the partition of Africa among European powers, exemplified how health and well-being of colonised populations were subordinated to extractive economic interest, a dynamic that continues to echo in contemporary donor-recipient relations and health priority setting processes. Rectifying these structural flaws requires fundamental shifts in governance models, financing priorities, and decision-making structures to build a more just and equitable global health system.

After delineating the historical contours of inequity, it is equally imperative to examine the contemporary landscape in which digital health apps and technologies are rapidly advancing. As global health evolves, emerging technologies carry the risk of perpetuating colonial dynamics through data extraction and the reinforcement of systemic disparities. While promising

to revolutionise healthcare, these technologies do not occur in a vacuum. They unfold within the fabric of the global health financing structures previously outlined, structures still carrying the imprint of colonial-era power dynamics. It is within this context that the present article scrutinises the emergence of digital health solutions and their financing, recognising that without deliberate intervention, these advancements may unconsciously mirror historical inequities.

The article proceeds as follows: Section one historicises health inequities by examining colonial health systems across Africa and their racialised foundations. Section two traces the transition from colonial to contemporary global health inequities, analysing how international financial institutions perpetuate these power asymmetries. Section three examines how COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated these structural disparities, particularly in vaccine distribution and fiscal response capacities. Section four explores the emerging realm of digital health technologies and their potential to entrench new forms of exploitation through data colonialism. The article concludes by arguing for a fundamental restructuring of global health governance to dismantle these persistent colonial legacies. We examine the colonial legacy within formal multilateral institutions: the WHO, World Bank, and IMF, as these represent direct institutional continuities from colonial governance structures. While private philanthropic actors undoubtedly influence global health, their analysis requires different theoretical frameworks that exceed the scope of this article.

Historicising Health Inequities

It has been argued that the historical legacy of European colonialism in Africa has left deep-rooted imprints on numerous facets of contemporary African societies, particularly in the realm of health systems (Cochrane 2022). This is seen from the establishment of health infrastructures during the colonial era, which was intrinsically interwoven with the racially charged ideologies of the colonisers (Ndege 2001). Therefore, it is crucial to critically analyse their motives and methodologies in order to better comprehend present-day disparities. The racial ideologies that pervaded the colonial period were not passive beliefs but actively informed the strategies and approaches of European powers in Africa (Mahmud 1999). Many European colonisers, driven by a sense of racial superiority, believed in their civilising mission, asserting that they were bringing progress and development to “backward” societies (Ndege 2001; Conklin 1997). This perceived sense of superiority

shaped colonial health policies, driving efforts to establish medical infrastructures that primarily served European settlers, while systematically neglecting the healthcare needs of the native populations.

Observations were made that serve as a poignant extension of this argument, reiterating that the colonisers' methodological flaws were rooted in racial biases (Harrington 2015). Their frequent dismissal and systematic undermining of traditional African medicinal practices dismissing them as "primitive" or "unscientific," speaks to their deep-seated ethnocentrism. Instead of seeking a collaborative integration acknowledging the merits of indigenous knowledge, they opted to impose a Eurocentric medical model. This choice, while strategic, sowed lasting seeds of disparity. Building on this narrative, the scholarship of Peter Duignan and Lewis Gann (1973) examined the establishment of health systems with the overarching imperialistic strategy during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They underscore that Africa was predominantly perceived through an extractive lens, thus viewed as a reservoir of untapped resources awaiting exploitation. The colonisers, motivated by both racial superiority and economic ambitions, sought to harness Africa's riches. Against this backdrop, the present article argues that the health infrastructures that were established were not just influenced by racial ideologies, but also functioned as mechanisms to sustain and facilitate resource extraction. Healthy European workers, administrators, and settlers were essential to maximise the exploitation of Africa's natural resources. Thus, health systems, while overtly showcasing a facade of development, subtly perpetuated a cycle of racial hierarchy and systematic exploitation, leaving a lasting legacy of inequality and systematic exploitation in post-colonial African societies.

For instance, in Kenya, the inception of the colonial health department in 1920 had little to do with the welfare of the indigenous population (Beck 1970). Instead, its primary function was to shield the European settlers from tropical maladies such as malaria (Ndege 2001). Rather ironically, these settlers viewed the native Africans, who had lived in harmony with their land for millennia, as mere vectors of disease (Ndege 2001). While the Europeans sought refuge in well-established health facilities, healthcare services for the indigenous population were sparse and relegated to rudimentary care in remote mission stations (Latif 2019). The draconian segregation laws further accentuated this disparity, forcing Africans into congested reserves, away from European settlements, conditions that significantly heightened their health vulnerabilities.

A similar narrative unfolded in Nigeria. Britain's primary interests lay in harnessing Nigeria's abundant resources and maintaining an efficient local workforce. To this end, the establishment of a health system was not driven by humanitarian concerns but instead was instrumental, aimed more at preserving economic interests than fostering community welfare (Abubakar et al. 2022). While stringent quarantine laws ensured that no epidemic disrupted the mining and production sectors, the overall health infrastructure remained skeletal at best. Hospitals, scarce and unevenly distributed, primarily catered to British functionaries and a select few local elites, leaving the general population largely neglected. Likewise, Zimbabwe witnessed a health infrastructure largely tailored to bolster its burgeoning mining industry and the European agrarian settlements. Africans were forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands by rampant land grabbing, and confined to native reserves where the only semblance of healthcare came from missionary-run clinics (Makambe 1994). Meanwhile, in urban centres, modern and well-furnished hospitals were established, exclusively catering to the white settlers. In stark contrast, the rural clinics, aimed primarily at the indigenous population, functioned ideally to ensure a steady supply of healthy black labour for the colonial enterprise.

Looking into Algeria, previously under French rule, the narrative was not different and largely consistent with broader French imperialist strategies. The French colonial administration, focused on promoting settler agriculture and crafted health policies that overwhelmingly favoured the white farmers. Arabs and Berbers were subjected to an array of stringent health laws, from quarantines to mandatory vaccinations, all primarily designed to preserve the health of the settlers (Clark 2016). The divide between the settlers and the indigenous population was vividly reflected in the access to healthcare. The settlers enjoyed access to state-of-the-art hospitals, while the natives were relegated to rudimentary mobile clinics.

Shifting to Southeast Asia, in Burma and former Malaya, the British colonial narrative, although geographically distinct, followed similar patterns. As waves of Indian labour migrated to these regions, it became increasingly evident that their health was not just a matter of humanitarian concern but intertwined with economic imperatives. While Burma's bustling factories and Malaya's expansive plantations depended heavily on Indian labour, the establishment of the health sector was more about ensuring the continuity of this labour force than genuinely addressing their health concerns (Kaur 2006). The racial dynamics at play ensured that the Indian labourers, despite their critical contributions, were marginalized within the colonial health matrix.

Across these diverse colonial contexts, whether in Africa or Southeast Asia, the establishment of health systems was not an act of colonial benevolence. It was, more often than not, a strategic move, driven by racial prejudices and economic ambitions. The health of the indigenous and migrant populations was directly tied to their utility in the colonial machinery, and their welfare was considered secondary to the overarching imperial objectives. These cases reveal that the very establishment of these systems was marred by the racial prejudices of the time, which positioned Europeans as inherently superior and Africans as inferior and, more detrimentally, as carriers of diseases (Tilley 2016). As a result, in order to ensure the health preservation of European settlers, strict health measures such as quarantines, mandatory vaccinations, and even unsanitary settlements were enforced on the African populace (Vaughan 1991). For example, Southern Rhodesia in 1930 enacted legislation that African workers undergo medical examinations and vaccinations before entering urban areas, whilst no such requirements existed for Europeans travelling through the same spaces; a practice that framed African bodies as inherently diseased and dangerous (Valentine 2017).

This dual standard was evident throughout the established colonial medical systems. It has been demonstrated by Ann Beck (1970) that, while European enclaves had sophisticated medical facilities and swift responses to health threats, African settlements had to make do with rudimentary services, which were more focused on ensuring they remained productive workers rather than genuinely healthy individuals. The blatant racism of the colonial era was evident in the vast discrepancies in health spending. Minor outbreaks among the European populations triggered immediate and extensive interventions, whereas large-scale epidemics in African communities were dismissed as natural occurrences rather than humanitarian crises that required urgent action. Furthermore, the introduction and imposition of Western bio-medical models often side-lined and belittled indigenous medical practices and knowledge (Illiffe 1998). Instead of harnessing local expertise and attempting to integrate indigenous and Western practices for a holistic healthcare approach, colonial health policies were characterised by a top-down, coercive approach.

Beyond the establishment of health systems, the attitudes and strategies employed in their deployment were exemplified by the broader colonial ethos. Europeans' self-proclaimed civilisational superiority not only guided economic and political policies but also deeply influenced sectors like healthcare. What was promised as the spread of "civilisation" was, in fact,

the imposition of a racially biased system that viewed healthcare not as an intrinsic right for all, but as a tool of control and differentiation (Latif 2023). While many African nations have since attained political independence, the shadows of their colonial pasts still loom large, especially in sectors like healthcare. The systems and policies, originally crafted with racial biases, have frequently persisted, requiring modern African nations to grapple with these legacies as they strive to create health systems that are truly inclusive and equitable. In essence, the colonial health systems of Africa, while draped in the rhetoric of welfare and development, were in reality reflections of the racial prejudices of the era.

An analysis of the historical legacy of European colonialism in Africa reveals severe disparities in health finance, highlighting how colonial priorities hardly extended to the well-being of the indigenous populations. This disparity is evident in the case of Kenya, where the colonial health department was established not as a mechanism for indigenous welfare but as a strategic means to protect European settlers from diseases. This racially charged approach resulted into a lack of investment in the health of the native population. The colonisers left health financing predominantly in the hands of local native councils (Ndege 2001), reflecting their blatant disregard for the well-being of the African communities. The colonial emphasis on economic exploitation over humanitarian concerns resulted in a systemic imbalance in health funding. While the European enclaves benefited from well-funded and technologically advanced medical facilities, the indigenous settlements were left with meagre resources and severely underfunded clinics (Cavanagh and Veracini 2017).

This financial divide was a direct consequence of the colonial agenda, which viewed the health of the native population as secondary to maintaining a productive workforce for their economic interests. Thus, the colonial legacy of inadequate health financing remains an enduring challenge for modern African nations striving to address historical injustices and create equitable health systems. Moreover, global health finance today, to a significant extent also reflects the biases and structures established during the colonial period. The contemporary global health financing ecosystem is multifaceted, composed of diverse actors including governments, multilateral agencies, bilateral partnerships, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private sector entities, and philanthropic foundations. Each stakeholder operates within defined governance structures bringing its own strategies and priorities, thus influencing how resources are allocated and which health issues receive prioritisation on a global scale. This complex ecosystem is

often characterised by systemic power imbalances and funding streams that reinforce longstanding disparities; patterns can be seen as reflections of a colonial mindset. The next section examines this in greater detail.

A Transition from Colonial to Global Health Inequities

Whilst the previous section examined how colonial health systems embedded racial hierarchies within national contexts, this section traces how these same logics of domination were reconstituted at the global scale through post-war financial institutions, transforming explicit racial segregation into ostensibly neutral economic governance mechanisms that nonetheless perpetuate colonial power asymmetries.

The foundation of today's Global Financial Infrastructure (GFI) reflects a post-World War II era, distinguished by the creation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank Group, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which later evolved into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Barr 2014). Designed in response to the financial crises of the 1930s and informed by the protectionist barriers that arose during the Great Depression, the Bretton Woods Conference established institutions whose objective was to liberalise trade. John Maynard Keynes (2019 [1919]) played an instrumental role in crafting this vision, which was primarily centred on economic stabilisation, reconstruction, and growth.

However, beneath the progressive rhetoric of these institutions lay inherent flaws. It is evident that while these institutions were framed as universal platforms for economic cooperation, their operations were deeply entrenched in the imperialistic ambitions of the dominant Western powers. In his seminal work "Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective," Ha-Joon Chang provides a nuanced critique of these international financial institutions. He contends that developed nations, after having benefited from various protectionist measures during their own developmental phases, now advocate for free-market policies in developing nations, effectively "kicking away the ladder" that they themselves had used to climb to prosperity (Chang 2004). This perspective is widely viewed as an extension of imperialistic ambitions, where former colonial powers, through these financial institutions, seek to maintain their dominance and continue extracting value from their former colonies.

The IMF, World Bank, and WTO operationalise Western hegemony through three distinct mechanisms. First, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs),

implemented across numerous developing countries during the 1980s and 1990s, mandated aggressive liberalisation and privatisation reforms that eroded local industries and dismantled public welfare systems, including health and education. Second, voting rights determined by financial contributions ensure that wealthier, predominantly Western nations maintain disproportionate influence over the decision-making processes. Third, Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreements advance multinational corporate interests whilst hindering the access of developing nations to essential medicines and the ability to develop indigenous industries. Despite purporting to serve a broad coalition of economies, the decision-making authority within these institutions remains concentrated. The fact that both the IMF and World Bank decision-making was heavily influenced by contributions from member states, with the USA's unprecedented economic size allowing it the largest voice, meant that policies and financial decisions often mirrored Western, especially American, interests (Barr 2014).

This standardisation operates through specific institutional mechanisms: the IMF's macro-economic conditionalities impose uniform fiscal policies regardless of local contexts; the World Bank's project financing prioritises infrastructure models developed for Western economies; and the WTO's trade regulations entrench comparative advantages established during the colonial period. Each mechanism reinforces the fiction that Western development trajectories represent natural economic evolution rather than historically contingent paths shaped by colonial extraction. The marginalisation of nations in Africa, Asia, and even Latin America underscores the racial architecture of these institutions, where non-Western countries often found their voices diminished, reinforcing economic hierarchies rooted in colonial legacies (Hickel et al. 2022).

This bias reflects deeper issues of transnational accountability and global economic legitimacy. The structural bias raises crucial questions about equitable representation and the fundamental legitimacy of these institutions. Thus, what appears as technical economic governance masks the continuation of colonial power relations through financial means: a shift from direct political control to structural adjustment, from racial segregation to market segmentation, from civilising missions to development discourse. As long as decision-making authority remains concentrated in the hands of economically dominant nations, the global financial architecture will continue to reflect and perpetuate the entrenched disparities inherited from colonial-era governance.

Global Health Governance

Translating these financial and political imbalances into the realm of global health reveals a landscape rife with disparities. For instance, although the WHO's prioritisation of diseases with pandemic potential is essential for global health security, it may also evoke feelings of colonial-era policies that prioritised the protection of European settlers over the health of local populations. This dynamic is codified legally in the International Health Regulations (WHO 2005)), which focus on preventing the international spread of disease, mirroring the quarantine laws of the colonial period (Fidler 2004). Additionally, whilst the WHO operates on a one-country-one-vote principle, the organisation's dependence on voluntary contributions creates a *de facto* influence for wealthy donors who can earmark funds for specific priorities, thereby overshadowing the voices of less affluent countries, despite their formal voting equality, a structure that perpetuates colonial governance patterns. In the realm of resource allocation, the pattern of directing funds towards specific disease-focused vertical programmes creates parallel health systems that often serve urban elites who can access specialised clinics, whilst neglecting the comprehensive primary healthcare infrastructure needed by rural and marginalised populations. This mirrors the colonial approach that established sophisticated medical facilities for European settlers whilst providing only rudimentary services for indigenous populations (Mackey 2013).

The global health law also reflects these disparities, particularly in the protection of intellectual property rights in agreements such as the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). TRIPS have been criticised for favouring pharmaceutical companies in high-income countries at the expense of accessible healthcare in the global south ('t Hoen 2009). Moreover, imposing universal guidelines without adequate consideration of local contexts may reinforce a one-size-fits-all approach, thereby marginalising indigenous knowledge. Emergency response and international aid, often framed as humanitarian assistance, can sometimes create dependencies that echo the paternalistic civilising missions of the colonial powers, instead of empowering local health systems (Ndege 2001). In addition, the sometimes-lack of cultural competency in some health interventions harks back to the colonial dismissal of local customs, which were critical to community health practices.

Furthermore, global health is shaped not only by natural epidemiological factors but is intertwined with the policies and priorities of global financial institutions. For instance, health programs funded by the World Bank often reflect the health priorities of the Western countries, side-lining pressing

health challenges endemic to regions such as Africa or Asia. Consequently, countries may be pressured to adopt Western health financing models that do not align with their unique socio-cultural and economic contexts. Such a misalignment risks creating health systems that fail to address the unique needs of their populations, thereby potentially widening health disparities. For instance, donor countries may earmark funds for high-profile diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, which although undeniably critical can overshadow basic healthcare services, maternal health, and non-communicable diseases that increasingly burden low-income regions. This situation may perpetuate dependency, as recipient countries adjust their health agendas to conform to donor preferences, a dynamic that mirrors the colonial economic systems in which local economies were restructured to serve the interests of the colonisers. This is in line with the concept of structural violence, which can be understood as the systematic ways in which social structures harm or disadvantage individuals.

As Paul Farmer (2023) demonstrates, structural violence embedded in global economic policies, predominantly influenced by the West, exacerbates health inequalities, especially in resource-limited settings. This violence manifests itself through various global health financing mechanisms. Whilst initiatives such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, represent significant efforts to channel funds towards targeted health crises, their vertical approach reveals another dimension of structural violence. These funds, despite achieving success in addressing specific crises, may contribute to fragmented health systems by bypassing national frameworks and creating parallel structures that undermine the sovereignty of domestic health policy planning. While the present article focuses primarily on Africa as representative of the Global South's experience, it is essential to recognise that these patterns of structural violence extend beyond the African continent. Allan Lumba's work on the Philippines, for instance, demonstrates how racial capital – the process through which racial difference is produced and valued to facilitate capital accumulation – operated within colonial structures to produce similar outcomes in Southeast Asia, revealing the transnational character of these exploitative frameworks (Lumba 2022). Indeed, the architecture of health inequity transcends simple geographical binaries of Global North versus South.

In conclusion, the colonial imprints are not confined solely to national governance and economic structures; they have also bled into global health governance. Despite their universal mandates, global health institutions frequently mirror colonial-era power dynamics. Decision-making processes,

the allocation of funds, the determination of health priorities, and research orientations are often dominated by these historically dominant nations. This unfortunately means that global health agendas often prioritise the interests of these dominant nations over the urgent needs of the most vulnerable populations. Thus, while many global health initiatives are praised for their ambitious scope, they often, perhaps unintentionally, reinforce and perpetuate the very inequities rooted in colonial-era practises. The design and operation of these institutions often result in systems in which financial and knowledge-based resources disproportionately flow towards priorities that align with the interests of historically dominant nations. Consequently, the most pressing challenges faced by historically marginalised communities are systematically sidelined in global health agendas and global health decision-making.

Global Health Disparities following COVID-19

While the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank appear to function as democratic multilateral entities, the concentration of power operates through different mechanisms in each institution. In the WHO's case, despite its one-country-one-vote system, the dramatic rise in extra-budgetary contributions, now comprising over 80% of its budget, allows wealthy donors to earmark funds for specific priorities, effectively bypassing democratic decision-making. The World Bank, conversely, formally embeds this power imbalance through voting shares tied to financial contributions. Both mechanisms marginalise voices from low- and middle-income countries whilst fundamentally eroding the principles of global partnership. Furthermore, this asymmetry extends beyond governance to fiscal matters. Wealthy nations, often descendants of former colonial powers, tend to maintain a disproportionate control over global health funding. This dominance frequently skews global health priorities often giving privilege and attention to diseases that predominantly affect high-income nations while marginalising health concerns that disproportionately impact lower-income nations.

This pattern reflects colonial days when the interests of the colonisers were prioritised over the colonised. For instance, the past neglect of certain tropical diseases, which, despite their significant prevalence in low-income regions, have historically received minimal attention and funding (Ndege 2001). Similarly, in the realm of Research and Development, a critical sector, research and development are significantly dominated by high-

income countries of the global North. Wealthy countries, leveraging their superior research infrastructure and financial resources, dictate the medical research agenda, often prioritising diseases and technologies aligned with their interests. A clear example of this disparity emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic of the early 2020s, when vaccine development and initial distribution were heavily concentrated and monopolised by richer nations, leaving many poorer countries dependent on external mechanisms and aid for supply access (Stevano et al. 2021).

The global health landscape, historically entrenched in systemic inequalities, remains deeply fragmented, raising urgent concerns about equity. The intersection of health disparities and entrenched financial hierarchies illustrates the persistent structural barriers that impede equitable global health outcomes. In this regard, Philip Alston (2020) in his report on poverty eradication, examines the pervasive nature of poverty and illuminates the entrenched contours of global health inequities. By framing global health within the broader “existential crossroads,” including pandemics, economic instability, and movements against systemic racism, Alston affirmed the need for a more profound scrutiny of these structures. Beyond exposing vulnerabilities in health systems, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a critical reflection of broader failures within the global economic order. It became a mirror reflecting the fragility and exploitative nature of contemporary capitalist structures. Whereas prior crises of the century were rooted predominantly in financial collapses, COVID-19 emerged as a multifaceted crisis, underlining the interconnectedness of health, economic, and social sectors. Its disproportionate impact on marginalised communities affirmed the enduring inequalities within global capitalism (Stevano et al. 2021).

At the core of these exploitations lie colonial-era structures, which persist under the guise of modern capitalism. The very systems that govern our world, though technologically advanced and globalised, continue to embody enduring inequities rooted in colonial legacies. Moreover, the pandemic prompted a reconsideration of the state's role, revealing that states must act not merely as facilitators of economic activities but as direct agents in shaping equitable responses to crises. Wealthy countries swiftly deployed expansive fiscal interventions, while nations in the Global South, constrained by historical debt burdens and financial dependency, faced limitations widening the pre-existing gap between Global North and South. The inequality became painfully evident in the vaccine distribution crisis, with wealthy nations securing disproportionate shares of vaccine stocks, reinforcing the broader inequities embedded in global capitalism (Ning et

al. 2022; Li et al. 2021; Oxfam 2020). This systemic imbalance is neither accidental nor temporary. It reflects the entrenched biases within global financial architecture, prioritising profit-driven motives over human welfare.

The catchphrases for COVID-19 mitigation, “stay home, socially distance, wash hands,” exposed deep inequities in global pandemic preparedness and response. For those cushioned by affluence, these directives may seem minor inconveniences. However, for countless individuals entrenched in poverty, they were not merely difficult but nearly impossible to adhere to. How does one socially distance in overcrowded slums? How does one regularly wash hands without reliable access to clean water? Far from serving as the “great leveller,” the pandemic widened the gap between the privileged and the marginalised. The pandemic laid bare the systemic neglect of those living on the fringes of prosperity (Alston 2020). It is within this context that the structural biases of the global financial system demand scrutiny. To reiterate, the post-colonial world order, built upon structures established by the Global North, has not only inherited economic hegemonies but also actively sustains them, continuing the legacies of extraction and exploitation (Latif 2019). These structures operate across multiple dimensions, through trade policies, intellectual property laws, and debt mechanisms, prioritise financial accumulation over equitable health access. They are not the passive results of global economic development but, in many ways, emblematic of an architecture rooted in racist ideologies and Eurocentric paradigms.

From a financial standpoint, the pandemic further exposed the disparity in available resources for health emergencies. Western countries, with their considerably larger economies, were able to quickly mobilise vast financial reserves to cushion the impact of the crisis. The contrast was also evident in government spending; for instance, the United States passed relief packages totalling trillions of dollars (Sheth and Zeballos-Roig 2021), and the European Union established a €750 billion recovery fund (Boffey and Rankin 2020). In contrast, many African nations, weighed down by historical debt and limited fiscal autonomy, found it challenging to mobilise similar levels of resources. Even when international bodies such as the IMF and World Bank provided emergency financial assistance, the aid often fell short in comparison to the self-financed large-scale stimulus packages of the West.

The financial constraints faced by African nations had direct and severe implications for health disparities. While Western nations rapidly scaled up their health infrastructure, implementing mass testing, expanding

hospital capacity, and securing medical supplies, African nations struggled to obtain basic diagnostic kits during the early phases of the pandemic. The disparities became even more pronounced with the rollout of vaccines and the distribution. Prior procurement agreements ensured that wealthier Western countries secured billions of doses, effectively stockpiling vaccines for their populations (United Nations 2021). In contrast, many African countries became heavily reliant on the COVAX initiative, a global effort to ensure equitable access to vaccines. However, COVAX struggled with supply chain constraints and was unable to meet demand adequately. As of mid-2022, while many Western countries had achieved substantial vaccination coverage, a significant portion of the African population remained unvaccinated due to supply constraints and logistical challenges. Furthermore, the pandemic's economic fallout disproportionately impacted African nations. Many African economies, heavily dependent on tourism and commodity exports, saw their revenue streams dwindle, furthering the pre-existing financial instability. In contrast, many Western countries, benefitting from diversified economies and substantial stimulus packages, began showing signs of economic rebound far more quickly.

The COVID-19 vaccine apartheid represents not a departure from but a continuation of colonial medical segregation. Just as colonial health systems reserved advanced medical treatments for European settlers whilst subjecting African populations to experimental vaccines and substandard care, the pandemic response replicated these racial hierarchies on a global scale. The mRNA vaccine technology, developed with significant public funding and global scientific knowledge, became the exclusive property of Western pharmaceutical corporations through patent monopolies, which is a modern iteration of colonial resource extraction where knowledge and innovation from the Global South contribute to technologies they cannot access. When African nations requested temporary patent waivers to produce vaccines locally, they faced the same paternalistic arguments once used to deny colonies industrial development: concerns about “quality control” and “technical capacity” that masked the real intent to maintain technological dependence. This deliberate creation of scarcity through intellectual property regimes mirrors colonial strategies of artificial famine and resource hoarding, transforming life-saving vaccines into instruments of geopolitical control that reinforce the colonial fiction of Western benevolence delivering “aid” to the “helpless” Global South, rather than acknowledging how structural barriers prevent equitable access to commonly-held human knowledge (Uddin 2021).

The narrative of global inequities, especially within the framework of fiscal capacities and health disparities, paints a tale of two different worlds. In one, the gleaming hospitals of high-income nations stand tall, bolstered by strong fiscal capacities that give them the edge in times of crisis. The Global North, with its expansive coffers and access to low-interest loans, is not just financially affluent but also medically privileged. When pandemics strike, these nations rapidly deploy resources in order to bolster their medical infrastructure and launch vast public health campaigns. Yet, travel a little south, and the picture becomes markedly different. The Global South, with its constrained financial autonomy and inadequate safety nets, grapples with a dual challenge. On the one hand, there is the immediate health crisis, demanding funds, resources, and attention. On the other, there is the looming shadow of long-term economic instability. For these nations, borrowing constraints are more than financial hurdles, they reflect entrenched global disparities in health access. In essence, they face a grim dilemma to either prioritise urgent health interventions or safeguard future economic stability; a choice no country should be forced to make.

This stark division is not merely economic. It is fundamentally structural and deeply rooted in historical power dynamics. As John Harrington (2015) elucidated, these disparities are manifestations of systems designed during colonial times, with their primary purpose being to serve colonial interests rather than to promote equitable health outcomes. The contemporary financial architecture, while ostensibly more inclusive, nevertheless perpetuates these historical biases, frequently prioritising the interests of wealthier nations over addressing the pressing health needs of poorer countries. Crucially, the COVID-19 response has highlighted the urgent need for what David Fidler (2004) terms a “post-Westphalian” approach to global health governance, one that transcends state-centric models and acknowledges the interconnectedness of global health challenges.

The pandemic also exposed what Ellen 't Hoen (2009) described as the “intellectual property paradox” in global health. While Intellectual Property Rights protections are essential for innovation, they can also impede access to essential health technologies. This was evident in debates over vaccine patents, where the needs of pharmaceutical companies were often prioritised over the imperatives of global health equity. Additionally, the pandemic highlighted the consequences of what Tim Mackey (2013) identified as the fragmentation of global health governance, with various entities often working in silos rather than in coordinated fashion. This fragmentation mirrors colonial-era divisions and undermines efforts to address health crises comprehensively and equitably.

Ultimately, as Sara Stevano et al. (2021) argue, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored not just health inequities, but also the broader crisis of global capitalism, which continues to prioritise profit over people. The pandemic demonstrated starkly how existing financial architectures, with their roots in colonial institutions, exacerbate rather than alleviate health disparities. Moving forward requires what Chang (2004) would describe as a fundamental reimagining of the global economic order one that does not simply offer the Global South a chance to climb the existing ladder, but reconstructs the ladder itself in order to ensure equitable access to health resources regardless of a nation's economic status or colonial history.

Global Health, Digital Health Apps, and International Finance: Initial Analysis

The persistent global health inequities rooted in historical structures have found new expression in the realm of digital health, particularly through the development of health apps amid widespread digitalisation and the COVID-19 pandemic. At the height of the pandemic, the disparity in funding allocation for health apps revealed a divide reminiscent of colonial-era power dynamics. Wealthy nations, leveraging their considerable resources, were able to rapidly develop and implement technologies for tracking and tracing the virus. In contrast, as Kevin Kavanagh et al. (2021) have shown lower-income countries faced significant challenges not merely due to lack of apps but because of structural barriers: limited digital infrastructure, inadequate technical capacity for app development, insufficient data governance frameworks, and a dependence on foreign technology platforms, all legacies of colonial underdevelopment that prevented autonomous technological responses to the pandemic.

Beyond their immediate public health function, these health apps became instruments that inadvertently mirrored the extractive practices of colonialism through asymmetric data flows. Just as colonial powers extracted raw materials from colonies for processing in metropolitan centres, these apps collected vast amounts of behavioural, location, and health data from users in the Global South, which flowed to servers controlled by technology companies in the Global North, where the data was processed, analysed, and monetised without meaningfully benefit-sharing with the source communities (Aouragh et al. 2020). While initial investments in these technologies were driven by the urgency of the pandemic, a creeping but significant concern now emerges: the extensive data amassed by these apps

(Wongsin et al. 2022). The management and control of this data raises fundamental ethical and governance concerns because of data sovereignty: the right of nations and peoples to govern their own data is systematically undermined when health information is stored in foreign jurisdictions, subject to foreign laws, and controlled by foreign corporations, creating new dependencies that echo a colonial-era loss of sovereignty over natural resources. This foreshadows the emergence of a new variant of colonialism: data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias 2019). This emerging form of exploitation mirrors historical colonial patterns, as control over health data is disproportionately concentrated in high-income countries, often without equitable benefit to, or consent from, the populations of lower-income countries who are the subjects of the data (ibid.).

Data colonialism actively exacerbates global health disparities by enabling the continuation of unequal power dynamics. High-income countries can leverage this data to strengthen their healthcare systems and advance economic interests, thereby reinforcing their dominant positions. Conversely, lower-income nations, already marginalised by the digital divide, face further exclusion and are denied access to the benefits and insights extracted from the health data of their own populations. This situation widens the gap in global health outcomes, as data increasingly becomes the new commodity for perpetuating existing inequities and perpetuating international imbalances.

This emerging data paradigm must be contextualised within the broader historical patterns of extraction that have characterised North-South relations. As Stefania Milan and Emiliano Treré (2019) argue, these digital asymmetries constitute a continuation of longstanding patterns of appropriation, where resources now in the form of data flow predominantly from the Global South to the North. During the pandemic, this manifested concretely: contact tracing apps such as Singapore's Trace Together were adapted by Western technology firms, who then deployed modified versions across Africa and Asia, collecting location and proximity data from millions of users. Google and Apple's exposure notification framework, while presented as a public health tool, required countries to route their citizens' health data through American-controlled infrastructure (Lee and Lee 2023). The commodification of health data, particularly from vulnerable populations, without adequate consent mechanisms or benefit-sharing frameworks, represents what Michael Kwet (2019) has termed "digital colonialism." For instance, health screening apps deployed at African airports collected biometric and health data that was stored on Amazon

or Microsoft cloud servers, creating technological dependencies where countries could not access or control their own citizens' health information without paying licensing fees to Western corporations thereby reinforcing historical power imbalances through digital means (Blume 2022).

The collection and utilisation of health data through digital apps raises significant concerns about ownership and sovereignty, particularly regarding who controls the data, who profits from it, and who decides how it is used. When citizens in Kenya or Nigeria use COVID-19 symptom checkers or vaccination verification apps, their health data often becomes the property of foreign technology companies through terms of service agreements written under U.S. or European law, effectively stripping individuals and nations of sovereignty over their most intimate information. Nick Couldry and Ullises Mejias (2019) describe how data extraction operates through seemingly benign technological interfaces that mask underlying power dynamics. Within health contexts, this often manifests as surveillance systems ostensibly deployed for public health monitoring but effectively functioning as mechanisms of data accumulation that privilege external actors over local communities.

During the pandemic, thermal scanning systems installed across African airports by Chinese and European companies collected not just temperature readings but facial recognition data, movement patterns, and health histories, creating databases controlled by foreign entities whilst local health ministries received only limited aggregate reports. Digital vaccine passports required by international travel systems forced African nations to upload their citizens' vaccination records to platforms controlled by Western technology consortiums, creating a situation in which accessing their own citizens' health data required paying licensing fees to foreign companies (Lyon 2022). This structural arrangement reflects what Lyla Latif (2024) identifies as "algorithmic colonialism," whereby technical systems encode and reproduce existing hierarchies of power and privilege.

These parallels with historical colonialism are not merely metaphorical but represent substantive continuities in how resources and power are distributed globally. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) observed, digital technologies often reinforce rather than disrupt colonial patterns of knowledge production, particularly when the technical expertise and infrastructure for data analysis remain concentrated in wealthy nations. Within health contexts, this frequently results in the Global South serving primarily as data sources rather than equal participants in the production of health knowledge and

innovation. For instance, genomic data collected from African populations during COVID-19 variant surveillance was predominantly analysed in European and North American laboratories, with African scientists often excluded from resulting publications and patent applications despite providing the biological samples. Machine learning algorithms trained on health data from diverse Global South populations are developed by Silicon Valley companies who then sell these AI-powered diagnostic tools back to the very communities whose data trained them, at prices that extract value whilst providing minimal local benefit. African researchers frequently find themselves reduced to data collectors for Western-led studies, gathering information that is analysed abroad and published in journals they cannot afford to access. This creates a perverse cycle where the Global South provides the raw materials: health data, that fuel innovation and profit generation in the Global North, whilst being excluded from both the knowledge production process and its economic benefits, precisely mirroring colonial relations when raw materials were extracted for value addition elsewhere (Jansen and Auerback 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these trends, as the rapid deployment of digital health solutions often occurred without adequate attention to issues of data governance and equity. Governments and private corporations in high-income countries rapidly developed digital contact tracing applications and vaccine passport systems, frequently with limited consideration of their potential implications for digital sovereignty or privacy, particularly in contexts with limited regulatory frameworks (Wongsin et al. 2022). This pattern mirrors historical approaches to health interventions in colonised regions, which frequently imposed external models with minimal adaptation to local contexts or considerations of long-term sustainability.

The absence of robust international frameworks governing health data flows further compounds these inequities. Unlike physical resources, which are subject to various international agreements regarding extraction and compensation, data operates in a regulatory vacuum that privileges those with the technical capacity to extract and analyse it. This regulatory asymmetry reinforces what Zuboff (2019) described as “surveillance capitalism,” wherein the unequal extraction of behavioural data from marginalised populations serves as a primary mechanism of value creation and accumulation. For lower-income countries, this frequently creates impossible choices between participating in potentially exploitative data relations or being excluded from the benefits of digital health innovations altogether.

Thus, future research stemming from this work will critically examine the governance of health data and address the structural mechanisms that sustain data control while perpetuating the legacies of colonialism. By interrogating these exploitative dynamics and advocating for more equitable governance of health data, there exists an opportunity to transition away from data colonialism and toward an ethically just model of data distribution. International finance plays a decisive role in either reinforcing or dismantling these inequities. It offers the potential to reconfigure global health equity. Without the constraints of its current colonial undertones, it can serve as a catalyst for transformative change, one that prioritises transparency, democratic decision-making, and the sovereign control of health data by lower-income nations.

A reimagined framework for health data governance must incorporate principles of data justice, ensuring that the collection, analysis, and application of health data serve to reduce rather than reinforce existing inequalities. This requires significant reforms to international financial institutions that currently shape digital health investment patterns. The World Bank, regional development banks, and bilateral donor agencies must integrate robust data rights frameworks into their funding mechanisms for digital health initiatives, ensuring that investments in technical infrastructure are accompanied by investments in local data governance capacity.

Furthermore, private capital flows into digital health must be subject to greater scrutiny and regulation, particularly when targeting lower-income regions. Without appropriate safeguarding, private investment in digital health can replicate extractive models that prioritise commercial interests over public health needs. International finance institutions have a critical role to play in establishing standards and incentives that promote equitable data partnerships rather than exploitative ones. The development of local technical capacity represents another crucial dimension of addressing data colonialism in health. As technical resources for developing digital health solutions remain concentrated in high-income countries, lower-income nations often have little choice but to adopt externally developed systems that may embed foreign values and priorities. Targeted financial support for indigenous innovation in digital health, coupled with technology transfer mechanisms that prioritise local ownership and control, can help address these structural disparities.

As we look toward the future of digital health in a post-pandemic world, the path we choose will determine whether these technologies serve as tools of emancipation or instruments of continued exploitation. By critically

examining the colonial legacies embedded within current approaches and actively working to dismantle them, we can harness the transformative potential of digital health to create a more equitable global health landscape, one in which all communities have meaningful agency over their health data and equitable access to the benefits it generates.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how colonial-era health inequities persist in modern global health financing and governance, shaping disparities that disproportionately impact the Global South. The historical examination reveals that health systems established during colonial rule were designed primarily to serve European interests rather than indigenous populations, creating structural biases that continue to influence contemporary global health architecture. These biases manifest themselves in present-day power imbalances among global health actors, resource allocation priorities, disease focus, and institutional decision-making processes. The transition from colonial to post-colonial structures has not fundamentally altered these power dynamics, as international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank replicated colonial hierarchies through governance mechanisms that privilege wealthy nations. These structural imbalances have tangible consequences for health outcomes, evident in the stark disparities in health spending, life expectancy, and access to essential services between high and low-income regions. The COVID-19 pandemic of the early 2020s has further revealed these injustices, showing how financial architectures rooted in colonial legacies have widened the gap between wealthy and poorer nations in health response capabilities, vaccine access, and economic recovery.

As digital health technologies gain prominence, there exists a significant risk of perpetuating exploitative dynamics through data colonialism. Without deliberate governance frameworks, health data collected from marginalised populations may be extracted without equitable benefit-sharing, replicating historical patterns of resource exploitation. The commodification of health data without adequate consent mechanisms or sovereignty protections represents a contemporary manifestation of colonial extraction in digital form. Addressing these deeply entrenched inequities requires more than incremental reform. Global health governance must be fundamentally restructured in order to ensure equity, transparency, and the meaningful representation from historically disadvantaged regions. This includes

elevating marginalised voices in decision-making processes, redirecting financing toward a comprehensive health system strengthening rather than vertical interventions, and establishing ethical frameworks for digital health governance that prioritise data sovereignty and equitable benefit-sharing.

Only through consciously decolonising global health governance structures, by redistributing power, resources, and decision-making authority, can we begin to dismantle the persistent inequities that shape global health outcomes. This requires not merely acknowledging historical injustices but actively reconstructing international financial frameworks to serve the needs of all populations equitably, independent of their economic status or colonial history. The path toward global health equity demands nothing less than a fundamental reimagining of how health resources, knowledge, and power are distributed across our interconnected world.

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THE POST-2018 ETHIO-SOMALILAND RELATIONS AND FACTORS BEHIND ITS DYNAMICS

Abebe Tigire Jalu^a and Asnake Kefale^b

Abstract: This article examines post-2018 Ethio-Somaliland relations and some major factors shaping them. The study utilised a qualitative approach, involving key informant interviews, archival materials, and published documents. The findings indicate that the post-2018 Ethiopian government's policy of re-unifying Somalia and of non-intervention in Somalia's domestic affairs harmed Ethiopia's previously friendly relations with Somaliland. Furthermore, tensions were increased by tripartite agreements between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia; Ethiopia's re-unifying attempts; and Ethiopia's hosting of an anti-Somaliland clan meeting. However, a gradual modest shift in Ethiopian foreign policy towards the region and Somalia due to regional factors, as well as the focus placed on Ethiopian access to the sea, altered the trend. The shift reflects that external regional and global factors, next to domestic factors, influenced Ethiopia's foreign policy, and the dynamics of Ethio-Somaliland relations.

Keywords: access to the sea, Ethiopia, Horn of Africa, international recognition, Somaliland

Introduction

Ethiopia and the *de facto* state of Somaliland are located in the Horn of Africa, where the countries have an interconnected regional security complex, wherein any development in one of them has an impact on the others either directly or indirectly¹ (Tafesse 2009). Historical linkages, political ties,

1 The Horn of Africa is the "bull horn" shaped Northeast region of the continent that faces the Red Sea to the East, the Indian Ocean to the Southeast, and the Nile Basin to the West. The Horn of Africa, like most geographic terms, is defined differently due to a lack of consensus among researchers

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traditional economic relations, and religious and cultural activities are all shared in the Horn of Africa. According to John Markakis (1998: 5), the Horn is more than just a geographical designation; it is also a cultural and socio-economical entity that distinguishes it from adjacent regions. Olika Tafesse refers to this culturally, physically, and economically connected set of states as “a cultural and economic zone” (2009: 3).

The region has an important geopolitical importance due to its geostrategic location. First of all, the area is situated at a crucial geostrategic intersection of Africa, Europe, and Asia. It is bordered by the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. At the northern end of the region is the Suez Canal, at the southern end is the strait of Bab el Mandeb (approximately 28-30 km wide from Djibouti to Yemen), which is a choke point that connects the Indian Ocean and Red Seas. In addition, the region has a large population, a large geographic area, and promising economic performance that can be an enormous potential market place. It is also rich in natural resources (trans-boundary rivers) and commodities (gold, crude oil, lithium, potash, and diamonds) (Yirga 2021).

Moreover, the region is one of the world's most important international commercial corridors, carrying roughly \$700 billion in commodities and more than 40% of global oil supply each year. Every year, 30-40,000 ships travel through this Red Sea corridor. Furthermore, it is close to oil-rich Arab republics (Mabera 2020). This has resulted in the region becoming the focal point of intense geopolitical struggle among regional and global countries seeking military bases to protect their economic, political, and security interests. Despite its importance on a global scale, the Horn of Africa has been seen as one of the most unstable regions for interstate conflict and internal dissension. Along with high levels of political violence and instability, the region is known for its lack of democracy, recurrent droughts and famines, poverty, intrastate and interstate conflicts, and secession between *de facto*-Somaliland (1991) and *de jure*-Eritrea (1991) and South Sudan (2011) (Clapham 2017). This makes the region a land of paradoxes: one of the most strategically important and one of the world's most volatile and fragile areas.

about its scope. Some confine the scope of the region to the geographic Horn, which includes countries of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia (including the *de facto* state of Somaliland after 1991) (Tafesse 2009; Schmidt et al. 2019; Clapham 2017); while others have a broader approach and include much of Northeast Africa, including the countries of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi (Kidane and Redie 2012; Fisher 2014). In the present study, the Horn refers to Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia, including the *de facto* state of Somaliland.

Countries of the Horn maintained relations with one another, driven by the desire to safeguard, advance, and protect their respective national interests. Ethiopia has maintained long-standing foreign relations with several countries, including its neighbours. Its relation with the *de facto* state of Somaliland has continued to be exemplary and dynamic. The 2018 leadership change in Ethiopia, as well as the rise of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his government's new foreign policy towards the *de facto* state of Somaliland, and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by both parties in 2024, had an impact on their bilateral relations. Given that the region serves as a centre of gravity for both great and intermediate powers, the dynamics of their connections have had an impact on Horn of Africa geopolitics (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map of Somaliland and the Horn of Africa (Shah 2024)

The aim of the present article is to explore trends of the post-2018 Ethio-Somaliland relations and to analyse key internal and external factors that have shaped the dynamics. The main argument of this study is that the complex interplay of internal and external factors influenced the Ethio-Somaliland bilateral relations after 2018. Internally, Ethiopia's 2018 political

reform and the new leadership's new foreign policy towards the republics of Somalia and Somaliland, as well as Somaliland's national interest that centred on gaining international recognition, and externally, geographical vulnerability, the nature of the Horn of Africa, and the interests of great and intermediate powers in the region played a crucial role.

Using neo-classical realism, the article attempts to look at the trends of the bilateral relations and major factors causing the relations swing between peaceful relations and mutual animosity. Neo-classical realism, also known as post-neorealism theory, was first introduced by Gideon Rose in his 1998 work "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy." It is predicated on the idea that the systemic explanation of global politics offered by neo-realism or structural realism is insufficient and should be complemented by more accurate explanations of unit-level variables such as the perception of power and the exercise of leadership (Zakaria 1992). As a result, it made an effort to bridge the gap between global structural elements and unit-level elements, including state leaders' perceptions, state-society interactions, and state motivation. Regarding foreign policy, neo-classical realism, which explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables, puts that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy are driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities (Rose 1998). A sovereign state's foreign policy is influenced by both internal and external factors. Neo-classical realists define these factors as systemic (anarchy, relative power distributions, security dilemma, and polarity), state-level (domestic politics, national interest, national capability, and states' identity), and individual-level (leaders' idiosyncrasies or beliefs, profession, leaders' background, and history).

Given the subject's recent and ongoing nature, as to our reading and reach, there is no academic scientific article that provides a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of the post-2018 Ethio-Somaliland relations. Meaning that the basic issue of this study did not get due attention from researchers and authors so far. The present article attempts to fill this gap by producing information to contribute to the literature as well as knowledge gaps that exist on the issue, and providing recommendations that will serve as input for concerned bodies that work to ensure amiable relations between Ethiopia and Somaliland.

Our article is structured into four broad sections. The first section provides a background analysis on how the Ethio-Somaliland relations started before the *de facto* state of Somaliland was re-born in 1991. Section two deals with major patterns of Ethio-Somaliland relations from 1991 to 2018 and the way

the Ethiopian government was handling the issue of Somaliland recognition. The third section analyses the new post-2018 foreign policy of Ethiopia towards the republic of Somalia and Somaliland, the major Ethiopian actions that affected Ethio-Somaliland's relations, and Somaliland's diplomatic reactions to this. The final section explores the regional implication of the 2024 Memorandum of Understanding, and the influence of foreign actors on the Ethio-Somaliland relations.

Data and Methods

Methodologically, the present study is designed to employ a qualitative research method, employing both primary and secondary sources. As primary sources of data, semi-structured interviews were used. Pursuant to this, the data are collected from purposively and carefully selected respondents of key informants from the officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, ambassadors, diplomats, researchers, and experts. The informants include seven active ambassadors or diplomats, and two researchers, academicians, and foreign affairs analysts. Five of the seven are Ethiopian representatives in Somaliland, Somalia, Djibouti, and Egypt. The remaining two are from officials and diplomats representing Somaliland and Somalia in Ethiopia. The eighth interviewee is a high-ranking Ethiopian academic and foreign affairs expert who has written a variety of documents on international relations, the Horn politics, and foreign policy. The remaining interviewee of the study is a researcher at the Ethiopian Institute of Foreign Affairs.

Secondary sources included materials from the archives of different institutions (mainly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), books, journal articles, media reports, official documents, electronic sources, research papers, magazines, newspapers, web sources, reports, and others scholarly works or documents.

With regard to data analysis, the study adopted a general inductive approach. According to this approach, the analysis process started with the collection of data (raw data), which was then organised and prepared for analysis. The data was then looked through, segmented, and categorised (coded) in order to interrelate themes/issues. Finally, the analysis was completed by interpreting the meaning of associated themes and issues or generating meanings from the data (Creswell 2009). In order to improve the reliability and validity of findings, triangulation was used to synthesise information from both primary and secondary sources on crucial issues.

“Common Enemy” as an Embryo of pre-1991 Ethio-Somaliland Relations

The formal Ethio-Somaliland cordial political relations started from the day the *de facto* state, Somaliland, declared itself independent and joined the politics of the region in 1991. Before reasserting its independence in 1991, Somaliland (the former British protectorate of Somaliland) had achieved independence in 1960 (Matshanda 2020: 3). However, after five days of enjoying sovereignty, when the UN Trust territory under Italian control was liberated, it was united with this former Italian colonial section of Somalia to form the Republic of Somalia in 1960. The first democratic government in post-colonial Africa was created in Somalia at this period, according to Abdi Ismail Samatar (Samatar 2016). The motivation that made British Somaliland abandon the republic and join the union after five days of independence, and after being recognised by 35 nations (including all five members of the UN Security Council), has been debatable. An interviewee of the study, (KI1),² said “we [British Somaliland] accepted the Italian Somaliland to join us mainly to establish Somalis unity and to appease the popular desire for unification.” Another interviewee of the study, (KI2)³, put it differently saying, “what motivated Somaliland to seek union with Italian Somaliland was a fear of domination from its powerful neighbour, Ethiopia.” The unification was primarily influenced by pan-Somalian nationalism, which aimed at creating a single nation-state out of all ethnic Somali-inhabited areas in the Horn of Africa.

After British and Italian Somaliland joined to form a new Republic of Somalia in 1960, the new country’s relations with Ethiopia entered into animosity due to several reasons. To begin with, the Republic of Somalia attempted to put into practice the antiquated and disastrous “Greater Somali Republic” ideology,⁴ which aimed at unifying all Somali-speaking peoples under a single republic with Mogadishu as its capital. This irredentist goal pushed it into conflict with Ethiopia, which has a sizable Somali-speaking population in the eastern section of the country (Muhumed 2019). This later precipitated the Ethio-Somalian War (1977-1978) between the two nations, which resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of both combatants and civilians.

2 KI1: An official of the Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia.

3 KI2: Ethiopian Ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeisa).

4 Greater Somalia has been the pre-independence Somalian irredentist plan to combine the five Somali-inhabited territories of the then French Somaliland (current Djibouti), the Northeast Frontier Province of Kenya, the Ogaden (in Ethiopia), and Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland, which were united in 1960 to create an independent Somalia. In order to signify this plan the republic of Somalia adopted a flag that included a five-pointed star in its centre in 1960 (Arnold 2008).

In addition, Somalia's tyrant and military-led rule of Said Barre (ruled 1969-1991) instilled animosity for Ethiopia among Somalis. Ethiopia was labelled as the "number one enemy of Somali-ethnic people" throughout the region (KI1).⁵ It took significant work to persuade Somalis to accept the idea, which is still remembered today. It became stories that could be passed down to younger generations. Moreover, the military administration formed armed rebel groups to fight against Ethiopia. It also armed, hosted, and supported the struggle of various rebel groups against the Ethiopian government (Belete 2024).

The dictatorial government of the Republic of Somalia pursued an aggressive stance against all Somalilanders immediately following the unratified and unsuccessful unification of Somalia and Somaliland on 1 July 1960. The people of Somaliland opposed extra-judicial killings, rape, robbery, and crimes against humanity by Somalia's military administration. Between 1980 and 1990, 255,000 Somalilanders died, while over two million others fled to Ethiopia. An interviewee of the study, (KI1),⁶ said that "the socio-economic and political marginalisation forced the Somalilanders to start an armed struggle to reclaim their 5 days sovereignty of 1960." Accordingly, the Somali National Movement (hereafter SNM), was founded with the goal of resisting Siad Barre's harsh dictatorship in Somalia and achieving political independence for northern Somalia [Somaliland].

The military government made extensive military engagements to liquidate the SNM forces from Northern Somalia. The conflict between the SNM and Mogadishu's military government forced hundreds of thousands of the Somaliland population to evacuate their homeland. In that circumstance, Ethiopia received SNM and their fellow Somaliland refugees. According to an interviewee of the study, (KI2),⁷ Ethiopia's support is still in the hearts and minds of Somalilanders.

Ethiopia served the SNM, the group that later declared the re-birth of independent Somaliland in 1991, as a sanctuary, a base, and a major material and moral assistance supplier in its fight against the repressive government of the republic of Somalia (Elmi and Abdullahi 2006). Ethiopia sided with the SNM based on the common regional policy of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," because the Mogadishu regime's irredentist aspirations had led them both to fight in the Ethio-Somalian War of 1977-78, and even after the

5 KI1: An official of Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia.

6 KI1: An official of Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia.

7 KI2: Ethiopian ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeissa).

war, the regime emerged as an active supporter of rebel elements opposed to the Ethiopian government. Thus, SNM's enmity towards the dictatorship in Mogadishu sparked the two countries' relations.

The Re-birth of Somaliland and Ethio-Somaliland Ties (1991-2018)

After the removal of Somalia's Said Barre's government by force in 1991, amid the disintegration and collapse of the Republic of Somalia, the SNM unilaterally declared the re-emergence of the independent Republic of Somaliland at the Grand Conference of Northern Nations, in Burao, in May 1991. Then, Somalia and Somaliland reverted to their original 1960 constituencies (Mohamoud 2015: 1). Though not yet acknowledged by the international community as "a sovereign state," this *de facto* state, dominated by the Isaaq clan, has been engaging in bilateral political relations with Ethiopia since 1991. The "reborn" Somaliland has been operating freely and independently since its re-birth. Even though the Somali federal government considers Somaliland as its federal member state, it has no control over Somaliland other than through international institutions such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (Abdeta 2020: 9). Somaliland has its own passport, currency, identity, political system, military and security apparatus, economic system, and stability.

The post-1991 Ethio-Somaliland formal political relations started immediately after the re-birth of the *de facto* state of Somaliland when Ethiopia opened its quasi-embassy in the capital of the state, Hargeisa. This initiative made Ethiopia the first African country to open a consulate in Somaliland, which offers visas to Somaliland passport holders (Duale and Ahmed 2014: 1). Although Somaliland remained a *de facto* state because it lacks external recognition, this political entity fulfils the four basic criteria of statehood: population, territory, government, and the capacity to enter into a relation with other states (internal sovereignty). Ethiopia upgraded its diplomatic office in Hargeisa to the ambassadorial level in 2006. Ethiopia has also allowed Somaliland to establish its liaison office in the capital, Addis Ababa. Ethiopia Airlines travels to Somaliland multiple times per week (ibid.).

After 1991, Somaliland's foreign policy towards Ethiopia remained steady as a friendly country. This is related to the fact that the Somali leadership has been either SNM warriors, leaders, or someone who watched how Ethiopia welcomed and aided Somalilanders during a tough period. Furthermore,

nearly 74% of the population is under the age of 40, having never seen another flag or country. Moreover, most of them are either the sons or daughters of liberation fighters or in some way related to them. As a result, they are unwilling to shift their positive foreign policy towards Ethiopia. An interviewee of the study (KI1) said:

Somalilanders are a culturally aware society that never forgets who stood by their side. Thus, unlike other nations where the enthusiasm is more administration-dependent, Ethiopia has popular support in Somaliland. This makes Somalilanders consider Ethiopia to be their friend, regardless of who holds the reins of power.

The 1993, the election of Muhammed Ibrahim Egal, an elder statesman and the former Prime minister, as the President of Somaliland, was a turning point in Ethio-Somaliland relations. Egal paid several visits to Ethiopia, where he received a warm welcome, and laid the foundation of bilateral diplomatic relations between the two countries. At an apogee of the relations, Ethiopian military forces in the Hararghe region of Eastern Ethiopia, and its counterparts of Somaliland contacted and agreed to work together in order to ensure the peace and stability of both countries' border areas. Ethiopia, a close ally of Somaliland, has been helping its partner in the state-building process, and giving military training to sustain the relative peace in Somaliland. On the other hand, the peaceful border between the two has been serving Ethiopia as a security buffer zone against jihadist groups who have been using Somalia as a safe haven since 1991 (KI2).⁸

An interviewee of the study (KI3)⁹ said:

Ethiopia gives much concern to Somaliland not only because of the regional security complex; but also due to geostrategical reason, because the de facto state of Somaliland is close to Jijiga, the capital of Ethiopia's Somali region, which is a security-sensitive spot in the country.

In 2017, President Ahmed Mohamed Silanyo and his groups visited Addis Ababa and met the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia. Both agreed to work on strengthening the shared language, culture, aspirations, and history between the people of Somaliland and Ethiopia (Horn Diplomat 2017). Ethiopia was later permitted to purchase a 19%

8 KI1: An official of Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia.

9 KI3: Horn Affairs Analyst and academician.

ownership stake in the Berbera Port in 2017, even though it was terminated in 2022 since Ethiopia could not meet the standards to do so (Hood 2022).

The Issue of the Recognition of Somaliland

The alpha and omega of the post-1991 Somaliland foreign policy has been gaining *de jure* recognition (KI1).¹⁰ As a result, in the Ethio-Somaliland political relations, the issue of recognition has been very much debatable. Despite several attempts on the side of the *de facto* state, no country or intergovernmental body, including the bordering states, has recognised Somaliland internationally. As one of the close allies, the reason why Ethiopia has restrained from recognising Somalia has been exposed to several interpretations.

As far as the stand of the Ethiopian government with regards to Somaliland recognition is concerned, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (ruled 1991-2018) has been with very clear justification. The Ethiopian foreign policy document, FANSPS (2002: 43) puts that:

Regarding the recognition of Somaliland as an independent state,[.] t[T]aking this initiative is not preferable to Ethiopia because it would create negative feelings on the part of Somalis living in the rest of Somalia and others would be suspicious of our intent. Therefore, our cooperation with this region should not include recognizing the regional administrations as independent states.

Corroborating the above claim, the head of the EPRDF, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi (ruled 1991-2012) mentioned that "Ethiopia is not going to be the first state to recognise Somaliland, and Ethiopia is not ready to take another accusation concerning the issue of Somaliland" (Rudincová 2016: 22). He also added that "...but Ethiopia won't be the third either".

There are different interpretations on Ethiopia's denial of Somaliland's *de jure* recognition. The Brenthurst Foundation (2011: 26) argued that Ethiopia's hesitation to recognise Somaliland was mostly due to its concern about Somalia's government's accusations that it was aiming to balkanise or fragment Somalia and weaken its unity. In addition to that, the paper of the foundation contends Ethiopia's status within international organisations such as the African Union and the IGAD, and its history of adhering to

10 KI1: An official of Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia.

the principle of the territorial integrity of African states hindered Ethiopia from recognising the *de facto* state (ibid.). This was linked to the assumption that the recognition of Somaliland would be opening a “Pandora’s box” of several succession claims in various parts of Africa. In conclusion, the Brenthurst Foundation (2011: 26) contended that the pragmatic goal of keeping Somaliland dependent on Ethiopia rather than the opposite forced Ethiopia not to provide it a *de jure* recognition.

An interviewee of the present study, (KI3),¹¹ contends that Ethiopia hesitated to recognise Somaliland due to its Federal Constitution’s article 39, which supports the secession of Ethiopia’s regional entities, (including the Ethiopian Somali regional state) if they meet the requirements of secession. Another scholar, Muhumed (2022: 4) claimed that Ethiopia delayed recognition because providing recognition to Somaliland would elevate Somaliland’s status to that of Ethiopia. Recognition would make it difficult to promote Ethiopia’s interest in Somaliland in comparison to the unrecognised and weaker nation. He also added that Ethiopia’s unfavourable perception of all Somali ethnic groups, stemming from the assumption that “Somali is typically Somali wherever it is,” had hampered the recognition thus far (2022: 3). Lastly, Duale and Ahmed (2014) linked the case to Somaliland, arguing that the lack of vibrant diplomatic pressure and drastic political bargaining from Somaliland and Hargeisa’s government’s failure to present a compelling economic development program to entice Ethiopia to invest in Somaliland was the main reason.

The Ethiopian government appears to have taken a cautious but practical stance between 1991 and 2018. Ethiopia apparently embraced the “recognise in practice, not in name” strategy to capitalise on Somaliland’s stability and avoid the diplomatic costs of granting *de jure* recognition. Therefore, without granting *de jure* recognition, it continued to retain close informal ties with the *de facto* state of Somaliland through economic deals, diplomatic exchanges, and security cooperation.

Finally, the real motive for Ethiopia’s denial of Somaliland’s *de jure* recognition was revealed under the post-2018 government in 2024 when Ethiopia used the recognition of Somaliland as a negotiation chip to end its three decades long landlockedness and geographical imprisonment. Hence, Ethiopia kept the recognition of Somaliland as a playing card in order to manipulate the government in the republic of Somalia. Ethiopia has been a landlocked country since its northern province (now Eritrea)

11 KI3: A Horn Affairs analyst and academician.

succeeded from it in 1991. As recounted in the next sections of this article, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2024, in which Somaliland committed to lease Ethiopia a coastal line in exchange for Ethiopia reconsidering the *de-facto* recognition.

The Post-2018 Ethio-Somaliland Relations

Ethiopia's New Direction and the Deterioration of Ethio-Somaliland Relations (2018-2024)

Neo-classical realists contend that a change in leadership or government might induce a foreign policy recalibration. This is because leadership changes might result in new views of dangers and opportunities, new strategic priorities, or a changed understanding of the state's role in the international system (Zakaria 1992). The Ethio-Somaliland political relations, like most of the interactions between Ethiopia and its neighbours, was never free of the influence of the mid-2018 Ethiopian political reforms. The rise of a new leadership to power, led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (Ph.D.) with a new policy, brought about new geopolitical patterns in the Horn of Africa. The historically robust relations between Ethiopia and Somaliland, in which the *de facto* state sees Ethiopia as one of its closest friends and allies in the area, have been profoundly influenced by the new vision of Ethiopia's new leadership.

The 2018 government maintained pillars of giving priority to neighbours, an inside-out approach, regional integration, diversifying partnerships, prioritising the preservation of Ethiopia's national security and interests, peaceful conflict resolution, economic diplomacy, and other factors. Some policy shifts were also exhibited after 2018, including avoiding labelling neighbours as enemies or allies orientations; not limiting the importance of neighbouring states to security issues and emphasising both their economic and security importance; ensuring Ethiopian access to the sea; citizen centred and diaspora participating diplomacy; digital diplomacy; enhancing relations with Gulf countries; handling diplomatic contacts with neighbouring countries by leaders; and encouraging Ethiopian nationals to invest in neighbouring countries (Jalu and Adgeh 2025). Above all, Prime Minister Abiy's commitment to uniting the Horn of Africa, and his foreign policy strategy that prioritises non-intervention and regional integration changed the dynamics.

An interviewee of the study, (KI4),¹² stated that “despite the foreign policy principles stated in foreign policy documents, such as good neighbourliness, non-intervention, mutual benefit, and others, Ethiopia had been using a divide-and-rule foreign policy in the case of Somalia from 1991-2018. Ethiopia had been interfering in Somalia’s domestic politics and building alliances with various federal areas, warlords, and clan leaders until 2018.” The new government ended the pre-1991 intervention in Somalia’s domestic politics and relations with regional governments, including Somaliland, and tribes (Abebe and Asnake 2025). It focused on intra-governmental interactions with Somalia’s federal administration (KI2).¹³

After 2018, the following three important occurrences prompted Somaliland to reconsider its perspective of Ethiopia as a loyal friend.

Re-Unifying the Somaliland and the Republic of Somalia

The new Ethiopian Prime Minister’s doctrine, which emphasises Medemer (synergy or coming together), as well as the broader context of regional integration, compelled Abiy to view Somalia as a single entity. For Somaliland, which attempted the union from 1960 to 1991 but withdrew because all major positions in the union (including the offices of the president, prime minister, and speaker of parliament) were dominated by personalities from Italian Somaliland, the re-union was viewed as a blasphemy to the SNM’s independence struggle and the relatively stable and democratic state it had been establishing since 1991.

Prime Minister Abiy had an early success in mediating the two. This was due to Somaliland’s willingness to discuss the matter, which stems from the notion that the Horn of Africa integration would help all countries to live in harmony as peaceful neighbours, and that it would be based on mutual understanding and respect between Somaliland and Somalia. Accordingly, accepting Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s request to strengthen Somaliland’s relations with the Federal Government of Somalia, President Muse Bihi of Somaliland confirmed his government’s willingness to strengthen Somaliland’s relations with Somalia in the future, including one-on-one and bilateral discussions with the Republic of Somalia. This progress between the two led to the first-ever high-level face-to-face meeting between the presidents of both nations in Addis Ababa on 11 February 2021, which Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed

¹² KI4: Ethiopian diplomat to the Republic of Somalia.

¹³ KI2: Ethiopian ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeissa).

brokered (All Africa 2020). However, the demands made by the Republic of Somalia to incorporate Somaliland to itself as any federal regional states of the republic of Somalia caused Somaliland to view the process with scepticism. Such demands ignored the legal and historical factors that had forced Somaliland to declare itself an independent state when the Somalian state was failed in 1991 (Peace Research Facility 2022).

According to an Ethiopian ambassador to Somaliland, the new leadership's policy of re-unifying Somalia and Somaliland was not warmly welcomed by some Ethiopians. This disagreeing group claimed that it would be better for Ethiopia if both of them remained as they were, because Somaliland is a stable and peaceful territory in the region, in contrast to the rest of Somalia, which is home to terrorist organisations. This fear emanated from the assumption that if Somaliland would join the Republic of Somalia under the current weak central government it would be likely for Somaliland to become unstable and home to terrorist organisations like the rest of the country. This would, on the other hand, make Ethiopia lose the security advantage it has been enjoying with a stable Somaliland, which had been serving as a security buffer Zone (Abebe and Asnake 2025). Some of them proposed this notion because, considering that Somalia has been a top security danger since the 1960s, a fractured Somalia would provide a geopolitical advantage for Ethiopia.

However, despite internal pressure to stop the new policy since the country had never experienced terrorist attacks through its border with Somaliland, the federal government arranged conferences three to four times to bring the two leaders of Somalia and Somaliland together to resolve their differences.

Ethio-Somaliland people-to-people relations have progressed during the last more than thirty years. However, the new policy has negatively impacted it. An interviewee of the study (KI4)¹⁴ said:

The re-unifying policy has highly disappointed the majority of the people of Somaliland who were saying that they would rather prefer to be in union with Ethiopia than the Republic of Somalia. It is because over the last more than thirty years they have developed a significant difference with Somalia, as evidenced by the fact that a Somali passport holder needs a visa in order to enter Somaliland, which must be obtained from one of Somaliland's missions.

14 KI4: Ethiopian diplomat to the Republic of Somalia.

Trilateralism Among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia

In 2018, Ethiopia's new government responded to critical demands from Eritrea and the Republic of Somalia. It accepted as well as pledged to implement the 2000 Algiers Agreement,¹⁵ without any preconditions with regard to Eritrea, and it promised not to interfere in Somalia's domestic affairs. The three countries' positive climate led to the creation of a new trilateralism. Ethiopian Premier Abiy, Eritrean President Isias, and Somali President Abdullahi had a tripartite meeting in Asmara, Eritrea, in September 2018. Lastly, the three issued a joint declaration with four points: to maintain subregional peace and security; to strengthen political, economic, security, and social ties; to promote cooperation that advances the goals of their people; and to create a Joint High Level Committee to harmonise their efforts within the parameters of this Joint Declaration (Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Cooperation Between Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea 2018).

The formation of a tripartite coalition between Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea with the purpose of "regional integration" increased the suspicion of Somaliland. This is because the ratification of a tripartite agreement on regional integration directly affected Somaliland's sovereignty as it would seek international recognition for breaking away from Somalia. The growth of Ethio-Somali relations was viewed as a threat to Somaliland's relation with Ethiopia, as the government had long favoured the Republic of Somalia. Thus, Somaliland's central government considered Dr. Abiy, who regarded Somaliland as an extension of Somalia, hostile to the state (KI4).¹⁶

Furthermore, during the 2020-2022 Northern Ethiopian Tigray Conflict between the Ethiopian federal government and the regional government of the Northern Ethiopian Tigray region, Eritrea and Somalia supported the Ethiopian Federal Government in its fight against the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF). Getachew Reda, the leader of the TPLF group, told the BBC that "Abiy is a crazy man because he wants our enemies, Somaliland and Somalia, to unite and destroy us." This statement, along with

15 The Algiers Agreement was the 2000 agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea to put an end to the 1998–2000 Ethiopian–Eritrean war over the town of Badme, a disputed border territory. A Boundary Commission was established under the Agreement, and its job was to draw their border. The commission decided that Badme was Eritrea's property. Nevertheless, Ethiopia disapproved of the ruling and declined to give Eritrea the town, which resulted in the two decades of diplomatic impasse or the "No peace, No war" era between the two countries from 2002 to 2018 (Kinfe 2006).

16 KI4: Ethiopian Diplomat to the Republic of Somalia.

propaganda of the TPLF that Dr. Abiy was an ignorant man who wanted to subjugate Somaliland to Somalia, aroused Somaliland's desire to form an alliance with the TPLF in order to remove Dr. Abiy (Muhammed 2022: 2).

Anti-Somaliland Clan Conference in Ethiopia

The dismay on the Somaliland side peaked when traditional leaders, religious experts, and members from major sectors of the Dhulbahante clan convened in Jigjiga, capital of the Ethiopian Somali-speaking regional state, from 10 to 15 December 2022 (Abebe and Asnake 2025). The group was from the Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn (henceforth SSC) regions of Somaliland. Since Hargeisa's government took it from Puntland in 2007,¹⁷ Somaliland has ruled over this Dhulbahante clan territory, also known as the Khatumo, who hold Lasanod as their capital. Both Somaliland and Puntland claimed Khatumo, an area that lies between them, and they backed their claims with colonial borders and clan loyalty. This clan has been calling for greater autonomy and regional sovereignty and accusing the Somaliland government of ethnic marginalisation (Hassan 2022). Prompted by the federal government of Somalia, an ally of Ethiopia, Dhulbahante nationalists launched their movement for autonomy and separation from Somaliland in 2022, joining the Republic of Somalia. They described the previous fifteen years in Somaliland as a repressive period in which one clan (the Isaaq Clan) had dominated and reigned, while their tribe had been marginalised. The Dhulbahante expressed their wish to join Somalia rather than continue to be governed by Somaliland (International Crisis Group 2023). Next, from 10 to 15 December 2022, their delegates convened in Jigjiga for a conference. They came to the conclusion that using force was the only way to put an end to the occupation after discussing the socio-economic and political marginalisation of their clan and establishing committees or councils (Hassan 2022).

Abdifatah Abdi (Hadrawi), a well-known politician in the opposition party of Somaliland from the Dhulbahante clan, was assassinated by armed assailants on 26 December 2022, in the town of Lasanod. His death turned the grievances into a non-violent protest. Later, the disturbance evolved into the Lasanod armed conflict in February 2023, between the Somaliland National Army and local Dhulbahante clan militia forces, also known as SSC forces (International

¹⁷ Puntland, formally known as the Puntland State of Somalia, is an autonomous entity in the northeastern section of Somalia. It declared independence from Somalia in 1998. However, it is now operating as a federal member state of Somalia because its autonomy has not been recognised by the international community.

Crisis Group 2023). Numerous people lost their lives and thousands were displaced as a result of the fighting. About 60,000 Lasanod escaped into Ethiopia (Hoehne 2023: 1). The government of Hargeisa placed the blame on other actors, including the government of Mogadishu, Ethiopia (the Somali region), Puntland, and extremists (International Crisis Group 2023). Thus, Ethiopia's anti-Somaliland cooperation flipped everything upside down (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Map of disputed territories between Somaliland and the Republic of Somalia (Shah 2024)

On the other hand, the incident at Lasanod indicated that there were divisions in Somaliland. The internal politics of Somaliland are heavily influenced by clan dynamics. Some regions and clans have voiced doubts or outright resistance to Somaliland's independence, especially in disputed territories such as Sool and Sanaag. Clans with historical ties to Somalia reside in these areas and might not entirely agree with the movement for the country's recognition as an independent state. In its pursuit of recognition, Somaliland's united front is weakened by this internal divide.

Somaliland's Reaction

To deal with Ethiopia's new foreign policy towards Somaliland, Somalia employed a double-track diplomacy. This included sustaining superficial diplomatic relations with Ethiopia, and strengthening bilateral ties with Ethiopia's regional rival, Egypt.

Superficial Diplomatic Relations with Ethiopia

Even if Ethiopia's new approach jeopardised Somaliland's major interests, the *de facto* state opted not to sever long-standing bilateral relations with Ethiopia. Rather, it superficially resumed managing bilateral intergovernmental diplomatic affairs. After Somaliland's president Muse Bihi Abdi had congratulated Dr. Abiy Ahmed Ali on his rise to the position of prime minister, he made the first working visit to Addis Ababa on 20 February 2019, at the invitation of the new Ethiopian premier (The Somalia Star 2019).

On 25 December 2019, Somaliland welcomed a team from Ethiopia's regional states of Oromia and Somalia, who went there for an official visit (Horn Diplomat 2019a). This was followed by a high-level meeting between an Ethiopian team led by Finance Minister Ahmed Shide and the president of Somaliland on 22 July 2020 in Hargeisa, Somaliland. The president and the Ethiopian team discussed a variety of bilateral topics, including economic, security, and social concerns (Horn Diplomat 2020). Following this Ethiopian finance minister's visit, Ethiopia upgraded its diplomatic relations with Somaliland elevating Dr. Said Mohammed, the head of Somaliland's consulate, to the rank of full ambassador (Hiiraan Online 2022).

Somaliland also welcomed Mustafa Omer, the president of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State, who paid an official visit to Hargeissa on 27 November 2021. During his visit, he met with Somaliland's president, Muse Bihi Abdi, and discussed socio-economic and security issues on behalf of Ethiopia (Somtribune 2021). Mustefa Omer finally said "As Somaliland is a sisterly nation we love, it is imperative that we hold consultations on the shifting dynamics and the impact of new developments in the region in order to avert negative effects and cooperate on how to mutually manage them" (ibid.).

The Somaliland government terminated Ethiopia's 19% ownership in the Berbera port in a way that did not sever the bilateral relations. Somaliland's Finance Minister Saad Ali Shire announced in June 2022

that “Ethiopia failed to meet the conditions required to acquire the stakes before the deadline. So it no longer has a stake, although it should be noted that ownership is irrelevant” (Tesfa-Alem 2022: 1). He went on to say that Ethiopia lost its share because it failed to contribute financially to the port’s construction as agreed. The termination gave the DP World UAE 65% of the share and the government of Somaliland the remaining 35%.

On 7 July 2022, Somalia warmly received a high-level Ethiopian team led by Transport Minister Dagmawit Moges and the National Security Adviser to the Prime Minister Ambassador Ridwan Hussein. Both countries’ representatives, Ridwan Hussein and Esse Kayd (Somaliland’s Minister of Foreign Affairs) inked an agreement to stabilise the price of Chat (Khat) and vegetables exported from Ethiopia to Somaliland. The deal was motivated by the fact that following the doubling of the price of Ethiopian Chat (Khat), Somaliland’s Chat (Khat) traders had warned not to import Chat (Khat) from Ethiopia and instead divert their attention to Kenya and Yemen (Abdi 2022). The agreement stated that the prices of Chat (Khat) and vegetables would be restored to their previous levels (ibid).

Strengthening Somaliland-Egyptian Ties

Ethiopia is a regional powerhouse with vast resources, a massive population, a strong army, a long history of statehood, and a long diplomatic history, with the potential to become a regional hegemon. Despite internal turmoil and insecurity, it has been among the fastest growing states in Sub-Saharan Africa. Egypt has consistently raised concerns about its water security when Ethiopia, (the source of the Blue Nile that flows into Egypt, began to use the Nile River in its own territory. An interviewee of the study, (KI5),¹⁸ said that “to prevent Ethiopia from utilizing its resources, primarily the Nile River, Egypt has been implementing policies that include preventing Ethiopia from receiving funding from international development institutions, encircling Ethiopia, cooperating with neighbours who are not friendly with Ethiopia, and destabilizing Ethiopia by sponsoring internal and external anti-Ethiopian actors.” After the completion of the Ethiopian dam became imminent,¹⁹ Egypt modified its policy from securing its uninterrupted water flow to making Ethiopia remain landlocked and not becoming a maritime actor working with Ethiopia’s neighbours. In

¹⁸ KI5: Ethiopian diplomat to Egypt.

¹⁹ The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) was opened by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in September 2025.

order to balance against threats, neo-classical realism argues that nations can employ the enemy of my enemy is my friend argument. Ethiopian neighbours have used Ethio-Egyptian rivalry as a common approach to influence Ethiopia's position in the region. Accordingly, when Ethiopia turned its back on it, Somaliland began to build bilateral connections with Egypt, recognising how dangerous and sensitive this was to Ethiopia's national interests.

Egypt has long opposed Somaliland's independence due to its strategic calculation that Somaliland and Somalia's unity was critical to countering Ethiopia's hegemonic ambitions in the region. The growing Ethio-Somalian republic's relations, and the growing tension between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) (the dam that Ethiopia began construction on the Nile River in 2011 and completed in September 2025) brought Egypt and Somaliland together. Thus, Somaliland President Muse Bihi hosted a high-level delegation from Cairo in Hargeisa in 2019 that was led by Ambassador Hamdi Sanad, Deputy Foreign Minister for African Affairs. They talked about ways to improve trade, livestock, and the socio-economic integration of the two communities. In return, a group of government representatives from Somaliland, headed by Liban Yusuf, a former Minister of International Cooperation and Deputy Foreign Affairs, travelled to Egypt on official business to discuss strategies for strengthening relations between the two countries. For the first time, they talked about forging diplomatic ties and expanding mutual collaboration in all fields (Horn Diplomat 2019b).

The relations between Egypt and Somaliland irritated Ethiopia when, at the height of tensions over the GERD, a top Egyptian delegation visited Somaliland to discuss Egypt's plan to create a military facility in Somalia's coastal areas in July 2022. In addition, both parties agreed to open offices in Cairo and Hargeisa. Egypt's presence in Ethiopian backyards was viewed by Addis Ababa's government as a national security danger since it allowed Egypt to keep a close eye on Ethiopia. As a result, Ethiopia formally opposed the proposal and immediately deployed a high-level delegation led by Finance Minister Ahmed Shide to Hargeisa. During the delegation's visit, it was agreed to reconsider its relations with Somaliland and send an ambassador to Hargeisa in order to resume formal diplomatic relations (Hersi 2020).

The 2024 Memorandum of Understanding and the Resurgence of the Ethio-Somaliland Relations

From 1991 to 2018, Ethiopia's foreign policy approach to the port was one of broadening options to develop the Ethiopian economy, so that neighbouring countries competed to get Ethiopia to use their ports. Hence, the 1991 Ethiopian government accepted the landlockedness of the country and made no effort to restore Ethiopia to an international water partner. It perceived the port as just a service or any goods that can be bought and accessed (Jalu and Adgeh 2025). After 2018, however, the issue received greater attention and securitised, and subsequently a policy of having access to the sea, possessing a port that Ethiopia could manage, and becoming a naval power, was adopted (KI6).²⁰ The 2018 government held the position that the Nile and the Red Sea would shape Ethiopia's destiny and these two waters would either contribute to its progress or demise.

Referring to Ethiopia's population tsunami as well as to historical, geographical, economic, and ethnic claims, including Ethiopia's legitimate need for access to the sea, Prime Minister Abiy requested that the unofficial bloc containing Ethiopia (by neighbouring countries) be disbanded and that neighbouring countries assist the state in its existential question of sea-access. In the "Red Sea speech" of October 2023, Prime Minister Abiy described restoring sea access as an existential issue for Ethiopia and expressed Ethiopia's willingness to engage in negotiations with any state that would provide it access to the sea. He emphasised peaceful methods like federation/ confederation, land exchange, and granting the part of significant Ethiopian enterprises and projects including the GERD, Ethiopian Air Ways, and Ethio-telecom (Abebe and Asnake 2025). Somaliland remained mute, while other neighbouring states, primarily Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia, not only expressed their refusal to engage in conversations, but also saw the statement as tactless, bold, and a challenge to their sovereignty (Badar 2023). Two interviewees of the study (KI3²¹ and KI7²²) said that neighbouring states' responses, as well as some previous regional events,²³ have influenced Ethiopia's post-2018 government's vision and policies towards the region and Somalia. This pushed the government to re-examine its idealistic and hopeful policies, shifting its focus to Ethiopia's national interests.

20 KI6: Ethiopian ambassador to Djibouti.

21 KI3: Horn Affairs analyst and academician.

22 KI7: Researcher at the Ethiopian Institute of Foreign Affairs.

23 Sudan's invasion of the Ethio-Sudan borderland of Al-Fashga in 2020, and the gradual deterioration of Ethiopian relations with Eritrea and Somalia.

Ports are essential entry points for trade, connectivity, and strategic influence in the age of globalisation, and they have come to represent power. Since 90% of world trade occurs by sea, coastal countries are situated at the centre of global supply lines, giving them more freedom to project political and economic dominance. Undersea fiber-optic cables, which make up the world's digital infrastructure, are located beneath the oceans and serve as the foundation for international communication, highlighting the strategic significance of marine access. A more outward-looking global viewpoint and cultural confidence are frequently fostered by this seafaring identity. On the other hand, landlocked countries striving for regional influence are often limited by logistical challenges, and their geopolitical narrative leans more towards containment than expansion. Geographic isolation may result from this, influencing national identity and policies in more inward-looking ways. Landlocked countries face 30-50% higher trade expenses than coastal countries (World Trade Organization 2021). Besides, the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries estimates that their GDP is lowered by 1.5 to 2.2% per year (UN-OHRLDC 2025). Furthermore, the transit time of these states is often twice that of littoral states. Moreover, 85-90% of landlocked countries' trade channels are controlled by other states, making them more susceptible and reliant on international trade logistics. In terms of human consequences, landlockedness raises basic commodity prices, slows industrialisation, reduces foreign direct investment, and disempowers the global image (KI3).²⁴

Direct access to the Red Sea is essential for Ethiopia's security and economic development. Ethiopia requires relief from its reliance on Djibouti (95%) and Somalia (5%) for external trade, which has cost it \$2 million per day in transit and around \$1.5 billion per year (Hashem 2024: 6). Because Ethiopia is landlocked, its security is dependent on its neighbours, who are weak, fragile, and vulnerable to outside interference. Defending its foreign trade, which is entirely conducted by sea, ensuring national security, contributing to regional peace, and the need to protect its fiber-optic cables and microwave networks in the Red Sea, which connect it to the rest of the world via Djibouti, made sea access critical. The negative reaction of neighbouring states, the ascension to power of an anti-Ethiopian president in Somalia, and the convergence of interests between Ethiopia and Somaliland prompted the two countries to negotiate and end the era of mutual suspicion, ushering in a new era of friendship. On 1 January 2024 Ethiopia and Somaliland

24 KI3: Horn Affairs analyst and academician.

took the first historical step towards realising their three-decade dream of port ownership peacefully and *de jure* recognition respectively by signing a Cooperation and Partnership Memorandum of Understanding in Addis Ababa (KI8).²⁵

The memorandum, which aimed to quench both actors three-decade thirst for access to the sea and recognition, and strengthen their claims to join the Red Sea Forum,²⁶ mentioned Somaliland's agreement to provide Ethiopia with a naval and commercial sea access (20KM of coastal area on a 50-year lease) in exchange for a fair share in the Ethiopian airlines, and Ethiopia's in-depth review of Somaliland's *de facto* recognition (Mehari 2024). According to the great personality behind the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), as an interviewee of the study (KI2) remarked,²⁷ this soon-to-be operationalised agreement would benefit both and not negatively affect any party or country. It could be perceived as an economic/commercial give-and-take deal that would foster regional economic integration, mutual prosperity, and regional peace and security.

On the benefit of the Cooperation and Partnership Memorandum of Understanding, an interviewee of the study, (KI1),²⁸ said that:

The benefits of the MoU will extend beyond the boundaries and will not be limited to the two countries. It will help to implement global connectivity by connecting the region or continent to the rest of the world. The MoU would help to construct railways and other routes that will alleviate the region's economic issues. It will also support the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and its policies in Africa. Aside from economic benefits, the MoU will contribute to world peace and stability [particularly maritime security] by stabilizing the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, which are extremely violent routes that no government in the region is contributing to. It will strengthen the international community's counter-terrorism efforts and contribute to the

25 KI8: Ethiopian ambassador to the Republic of Somalia.

26 The Red Sea Forum is a new project aiming at promoting collaboration between countries bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. To improve stability and safety in the region, members cooperate to tackle shared security issues such as terrorism, smuggling, and piracy. Ethiopia and Somaliland need to take part in the discussion of their regional issues. Ethiopia needs access to the sea in order to be a part of the Red Sea corridor, while Somaliland requires recognition.

27 KI2: Ethiopian ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeissa).

28 KI1: An official of Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia.

defeat of violent extremism in the region. Most crucially, it will grant a long-forgotten right to both Somaliland and Ethiopians: the ability to exist as a country and the right to sea access.

Two scholars who conducted research on it, Khan and Ahmed (2024: 901) supported the above interviewees' idea concluding that the MoU could: greatly increase trade efficiency by boosting connectivity and logistics; strengthen regional security by coordinating efforts to counter common threats such as piracy and terrorism; create a more stable environment that would be favourable to economic growth and development; and open the door for a greater international recognition of Somaliland.

Generally, the correct implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding could have the following significances: transforming the feature of the region from mutual destabilisation to regional integration and cooperation; inter-connecting the states and making regional states concerned about each other's economic and security well-being; burying the "Greater Somalian Agenda" with the creation of a new Somaliland state; causing neighbouring states to take matters seriously when dealing with Ethiopia regarding its critical interests; influencing Puntland and Jubaland in their long-term aspirations for statehood; and strengthening Ethiopia's negotiation power and influence throughout the region. The MoU appears to have graduated Ethiopia from being a shy state that is reserved and hesitant in the region to a cunning state with the ability to navigate complex situations with cleverness in order to achieve its main national interest objective. At the same time its potential to cause security tensions and dilemma in the region should be emphasised.

Neo-classical realists contend that in order for *de facto* nations to be recognised internationally, they may use diplomatic ploys, seek patronage from strong powers, build up their domestic legitimacy and state capability, and take advantage of geopolitical chances (Zakaria 1992). Somaliland hopes to gain Ethiopia's support for international recognition by utilising its geographic advantages, promoting economic interdependence, coordinating with Ethiopia's regional interests, and manipulating internal and foreign pressures. By partnering with Ethiopia, an imperfect regional power, Somaliland hopes to garner legitimacy and support from other Horn of Africa countries and abroad. Ethiopia has enormous diplomatic potential in the region, continent, and world. Its capital, Addis Ababa, is generally referred to as the world's third largest diplomatic hub, after New York and Brussels. This classification is backed by the fact that the city is

home to nearly 150 foreign embassies and acts as the headquarters for major international organisations such as the African Union and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). Somaliland intended to capitalise on this potential to get an international recognition by utilising its geostrategic value. Furthermore, the lease would allow Somaliland to gain economic benefits from Ethiopia.

Ethiopia has been viewing the matter of re-evaluating Somaliland's recognition, which raised concerns about opening a "Pandora box" on the continent, through different perspectives. The *first* is the right to self-determination, which is protected by international law and Ethiopia's 1995 Constitution (Article 39) (KI2).²⁹ This right allows all nations to govern themselves and determine their socio-economic and political fate. The *next* is Ethiopia's unrevoked permanent (*de jure*) recognition of Somaliland in 1960. Ethiopia was one of the 35 countries to provide permanent recognition to Somaliland. The *de jure* recognition is not only unrevoked in principle, but Ethiopia has never attempted to rescind it officially. The *third* is Ethiopia's commitment to the Organization of African Unity's (hereafter OAU) principle that decolonised African nations should maintain their colonial territory and borders drawn by colonial powers should be honoured. Since redrawing borders could result in international conflicts and disagreements, possibly sparking civil wars and ethnic tensions, the OAU adopted this policy to spread stability and peace throughout the continent. Somaliland's current quest is for the recognition of the area and border with which it was decolonised in 1960. Thus, giving recognition to Somaliland, re-claiming recognition for the independence and territory it decolonised with in 1960, is consistent with the OAU's principle. *Finally*, the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial distinct histories of Somalia and Somaliland. There was no state called Somalia during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. The Republic of Somalia was established for the first time in 1960, five days after the former British colony gained independence and the Republic of Somaliland emerged. It was founded when the Republic of Somaliland merged with Italy's colonised territories in Somalia. This union was dissolved in 1991, when Somalia's sovereignty crumbled. Since then, Somaliland has recognised itself as an independent state and has operated independently.

The first step in the area was taken when Ethiopia upgraded its consular office in Hargeisa into a full-fledged embassy status. Although there is no official statement confirming the upgrading from the Ethiopian government, this

29 KI2: Ethiopian ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeissa).

was done in May 2024. Despite the heightened regional tensions as Egyptian expertise and weapons began to arrive in Mogadishu, Ethiopia appointed Teshome Shunde as its new ambassador to Somaliland on 30 October (Abdu 2024). This was viewed as going more than halfway to recognising Somaliland.

The Memorandum of Understanding and External Powers Influence on the Ethio-Somaliland Relations

Neo-classical realism, which places emphasis on how the balance of power in the international system shapes state behaviour, contends that small states frequently experience uneasiness or insecurity when they have large, powerful states as neighbours due to the power imbalance that exists between them and could lead to dominance and coercion (Rose 1998). Ethiopia is the second most populous region in Africa (Gebre et al. 2020: 1). It has a booming economy, a robust military, natural resources, diplomatic potential, an uncolonised history, and regional leadership experience. Ethiopia's internal insecurity is the primary reason why experts consider it an "imperfect regional hegemony" (Sonia 2018: 1). Some Ethiopian regional adversaries opposed the MoU, thinking that Ethiopia's access to the sea and building of a naval base in the region would make it considerably stronger.

The Somalian republic, which claims Somaliland as its northern territory, protested the MoU, arguing that it violated the state's territorial integrity and sovereignty (KI9).³⁰ Somalia's leader replied to the MoU by claiming that "no one has the authority to cede any land in Somalia and that no piece of our land, sea, or air can be violated." An interviewee of the study (KI9)³¹ went on to say that "the country [the Republic of Somalia] views the MoU as an aggression and an obstruction to the region's good neighbourliness, peace, and stability, which is already facing numerous challenges."

Following this objection, Somalia took other actions, including recalling its ambassador to Ethiopia, calling the pact "null and worthless," denying Ethiopian Airlines permission to fly its high-level team to Hargeisa, organising international opposition to the pact, and urging friends and international organisations to help push Ethiopia to end the agreement, inciting "the Greater Somalian agenda," claiming that Ethiopia had taken Somalia's land, and conducting a protest march in Somalia; forming

30 KI9: A Republic of Somalian diplomat to Ethiopia.

31 KI9: A Republic of Somalian diplomat to Ethiopia.

connections with anti-Ethiopian parties (after the President's visits to Cairo and Asmara), and citing Ethiopian peacekeeping forces in Somalia as a direct threat to its territorial integrity and calling for their withdrawal once the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) would conclude in December 2024 (Abebe and Asnake 2025). As previously said, Somaliland possesses its own identity, passport, currency, political system, economic system, military and security apparatus, and stability. For the past thirty years, since 1991, it has been participating in such agreements on its own and has functional sovereignty.

Because of its strategic geopolitical significance, the Horn of Africa has been the focus of major and medium power competition. The region is a gateway to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, has a maritime border with the Middle East, and overlooks important shipping channels that connect Asia and Europe. Including the USA and China, nine great and middle powers have more than ten military bases in the region for the protection of their national interest. These countries do not want strong local states to become coastal states since it could jeopardise their free influence in the region. Hence, the Republic of Somalia aggressively objected to the Cooperation and Partnership Memo-randum of Understanding because of their influence on it. An interviewee of the study, (KI7),³² argued that the return of Ethiopia was looked at with distrust by the great powers who have military bases in the region along the international waterways and have been sending their ships and doing whatever they want over the region's water bodies. This is because Ethiopia is a strong, independent state with a successful maritime history, a sizable naval force, and the potential to organise regional states that lease military bases to these great countries. He added that, despite its poverty, Ethiopia is a robust country with significant diplomatic, economic, and social potential that could affect the status quo. This prompted these big powers to oppose the MoU and persuaded the Somalia government to do the same (see Figure 3).

32 KI7: Researcher at the Ethiopian Institute of Foreign Affairs.

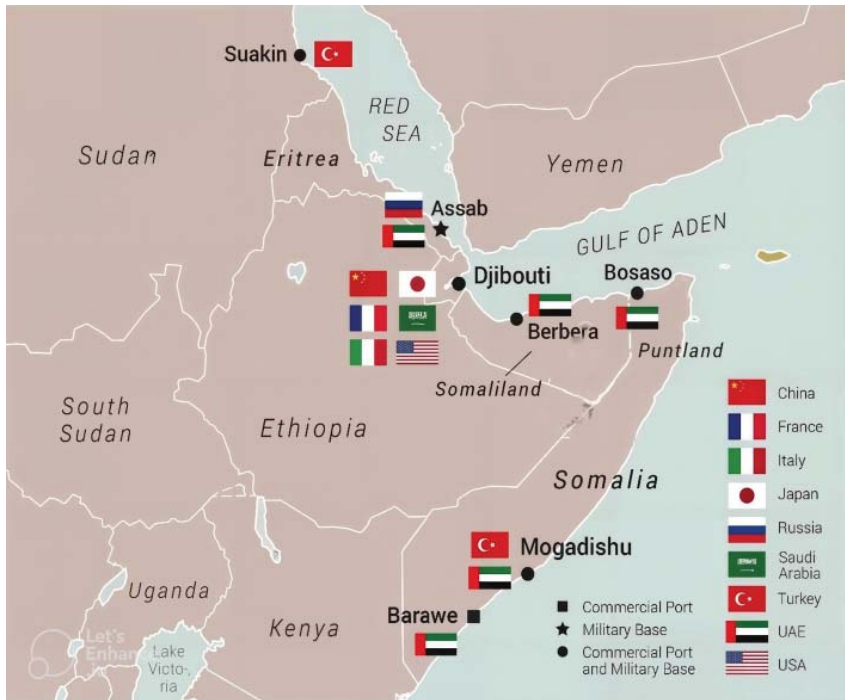


Figure 3. Map of foreign powers' military bases in the Horn of Africa (Fekede and Mulugeta 2023)

Stability in the region was threatened by the dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia over the MoU and the ensuing alliances between Egypt, Eritrea, and the Republic of Somalia. Egypt and Somalia have reached a security cooperation agreement. According to the agreement, the first shipment of troops, weapons, and military equipment arrived in Somalia on 27 August 2024 (Webb 2024). Ethiopia established a military alliance with Somaliland in retaliation for Somalia's military partnership with Egypt. Ethiopia trained most Somaliland soldiers, while Egypt supplied Somalia with arms. Additionally, Somalia's government demanded that all 10,000 Ethiopian peacekeeping forces depart the country by December 2024 and planned to bar Ethiopian forces from the post-ATMIS mission unless Ethiopia would withdraw from the MoU. This is in spite of reports of alliances between Al-Shabaab and Houthis in Somalia and Ethiopia's government's assertion of alliances between the Al-Shabaab and Oromo Liberation Fronts army.

An interviewee of the study, (KI7),³³ said that Ethiopian forces played a dominant role in Somalia's security and peacekeeping operations for more than two decades. This force is capable of operating effectively in Somalia in the same way that Somali forces do. The Ethiopian military have merged with the population; they can speak Somali and understand the psychology of the community. Most importantly, their protracted stay has allowed them to learn about the topography, psychology, and war tactics of terrorist groups. This insight allowed them to effectively paralyse terrorist organisations in Somalia. While the question of who would maintain the failed Somalia's security has been a source of concern, Somalia's plan to bring Egyptian forces to its country, as well as the tension it creates between Ethiopia and Egypt and Ethiopia and Somalia have made the future peace of Somalia and the region look bleak. Thus, the region's security was dire due to rising radicalism and Al-Shabaab influence, Egypt's arrival, the security of the Red Sea, and the growing interest of major and middle-sized powers in the area. Given the trajectory, numerous regional and international actors have called for diplomatic talks to de-escalate regional tensions caused by the Memorandum of Understanding.

After Somalia strengthened its military ties with Egypt, Ethio-Somalia disagreements continued to manifest themselves by allegations and counter allegations between the two states. In an interview in which he rejected Mogadishu's allegations that Addis Ababa's government was shipping weapons to Puntland, Field Marshal Birhanu Jula, commander of the Ethiopian National Army, warned that if accusations of interference or incitements of civil war against Ethiopia persisted, Ethiopia would not only transport weapons to Somalia, but would also take any necessary measures (Garowe Online 2024: 1). In December 2024, a military confrontation broke out between the Somali federal government and Jubbaland, a member state of the Somali Federation. In an effort to maintain its power in Somalia, Ethiopia stated that it would continue to maintain troops in the country after the December 2024 African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) withdrawal deadline. Ethiopia is a close ally of the Jubbaland leader, who, together with the South West State federal member states, openly opposed the Somali federal government's wish to expel Ethiopian forces.

Finally, the defeat of Somali federal government forces in a military clash that took place near Raas Kambooni forced it to relinquish its precondition of negotiating with Ethiopia (which was only after Ethiopia terminated the MoU contract with Somaliland) and signed the Ankara Declaration with Ethiopia the next day to ease tensions. Somalia acknowledged the sacrifices

33 KI7: Researcher at the Ethiopian Institute of Foreign Affairs.

made by Ethiopian soldiers for Somalia's stability, rejected its objection to Ethiopia's involvement in the peacekeeping mission that would replace ATMIS, and promised to negotiate Ethiopian access to the sea (Thomas 2024). Following the Ankara Declaration, Somalia acknowledged the role and significance of the Ethiopian military in the post-ATMIS operation. This Ethio-Somalian reunion had a severe effect on the friendly post-MoU relations between Ethiopia and Somaliland. However, the hostility was never made public because the Ankara peace deal remained contentious as it did not reverse the MoU, and Somaliland remains the most viable path to Ethiopia's future access to the sea dream, not only because of its democratic culture and stability, but also because of its people's genuine positive attitude towards Ethiopia, and the public support Ethiopia has there. Following the MoU, Ethiopia earnestly pursued sea access as a foreign policy goal, while Somaliland pursued a diplomacy of utilising its geostrategic location as leverage to gain international recognition from great powers.

However, to recover the two countries' friendly relations, the strengthening of bilateral diplomatic relations need to be reflected in social and economic relation elements. Hence, it is critical to Ethiopia and Somaliland to strengthen and diversify connections beyond security and focus on other areas. Somalilanders participate in medical tourism on an annual basis. They travel to Ethiopia for therapy. Ethiopia obtains approximately \$20 million annually from this medical tour (KI2).³⁴ However, Ethiopia is not using this opportunity to boost its economic and social advantage. There is also work to be done to make it easier for Ethiopian investors to invest in Somaliland and the Somaliland investors to invest in Ethiopia. Because economic interconnection is crucial to sustain amicable relations between two actors.

Ethiopia should recognise Somaliland's desire for independence and refrain from publicly pushing the concept of a united Somalia and the restoration of Somaliland to the Republic of Somalia. Somalia is a failed state (Szuma 2015: 50) and Egypt's commitment to Somalia could not be stronger, given that the country is supporting Somalia to further its own interests. Even though internal conflicts and insecurity have been ravaging its economy since 2020, Ethiopia has managed to finish the GERD's construction, and its completion may compel Egypt to abandon its strategy of encircling Ethiopia and collaborating with anti-Ethiopian forces. If Ethiopia's domestic socio-economic and political problems are resolved, this will eventually boost Ethiopia's regional prominence.

34 KI2: Ethiopian ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeissa).

Conclusion

According to neo-classical realists, domestic politics including leadership changes play an important role in shaping foreign policy. Political leaders interpret systemic pressures differently depending on their perspectives, ideologies, and internal political restrictions. Ethiopia's foreign policy, in general, and its approach towards the republics of Somalia and Somaliland in particular, has shifted slightly as a result of the 2018 political transition. The new government's foreign policy pillars, such as "regional integration," "non-intervention in Somalia's domestic affairs," and "uniting Somaliland with Somalia" collided Ethiopia with Somaliland, a *de facto* state which had been autonomous for three decades and sought international recognition. This Ethiopia's policy, on the other hand, allied Ethiopia with the Somali Republic, which regards Somaliland as an integral part of its territory. Neo-classical realism holds that when states perceive that the distribution of power in the international system threatens them, they can counterbalance it by forming military alliances. Perceiving Ethiopia and Somalia as a danger to its aspirations for international recognition, Somaliland established a bilateral partnership with Ethiopia's arch-enemy, Egypt. As a result, Somaliland was able to resist the influence of its neighbours.

The change of president in Somalia in 2022, as well as the removal of a pro-Ethiopian leader and the rise to power of a pro-Egyptian president, had a severe impact on Ethiopian-Somalian ties. Ethiopia is the world's most populous landlocked country, with about 130 million people in 2025. The shortest distance from the tip of Ethiopia to the tip of the Red Sea, passing through Eritrea, is approximately 60 km. Since 1991, the country's economic development and security have suffered as a result of its landlocked status. Ethiopia's desire to make a business deal so that it might have access to the sea was not welcomed by all of Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti.

When a country's security and survival are at jeopardy, it will adopt every action necessary. The 2024 Cooperation and Partnership Memorandum of Understanding reflected the compatibilities of Ethio-Somaliland national interests. Even though the bordering countries, as well as certain great powers and regional powers, were dissatisfied with the agreement, it turned Ethio-Somaliland ties to cordial. As a result, the region's anti-Ethiopian governments, Somalia, Eritrea, and Egypt, established a military alliance. Ethiopia responded by expanding its military ties with Somaliland. The strain posed a threat to the security of the already fragile Horn of Africa. However, internal and global pressures eventually forced Ethiopia and

Somalia to defuse hostilities and sign the Ankara Declaration in Turkey in December 2024. Though contentious, the Ankara Declaration is an important step that thwarted the bilateral tension and foiled anti-Ethiopian trilateral military axis. However, this deal ignored the MoU, sowing the seeds of future uncertainty. Acknowledging Ethiopia's legitimate sea access concerns and regional peacekeeping role, it has promoted Turkey's influence in the region. Above all, it implies how the regional and big powers influence the patterns of bilateral ties between states in the region.

Although the magnitude differs, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Somaliland have domestic issues. Premier Abiy's government is facing massive socio-economic and political challenges as a result of the prolonged domestic instability. The Tigray conflict (2020-2022), which caused a socioeconomic, political, and diplomatic crisis in Ethiopia, has also had a long-term negative impact, contributing to the conflict in the Amhara region (2023-now), another security crisis in Tigray (2022-now), and the restoration of mutual enmity between Ethiopia and Eritrea after 2022. Currently, the federal government is fighting rebel groups in the two major regional governments of Oromia (2018-now) and Amhara (2023-now), while the problem in Tigray worsens and the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments have mobilised their armies for war since the beginning of 2025. Likewise, Somaliland is in an internal security crisis due to clan division, territorial disputes, as well as disagreements on the issue of Somaliland's international recognition. The weak federal administration in Mogadishu is proving incapable of dictating regional member states, as evidenced by the recent confrontation between Jubaland regional states and Somalia's federal government, which arose as a result of Jubaland president's refusal to obey federal orders. The Al-Shabaab, an Islamic fundamentalist group, is also occasionally gaining more territory in Somalia.

Because inter-state tensions have an impact on regional stability, countries such as Ethiopia must be conscious that significant access to the sea objectives must be pursued peacefully and diplomatically, utilising their own economic, security, diplomacy, and geopolitical leverages. Other interested intermediate and great powers, as well as the region's main security threat, Al-Shabaab can exploit the situation and escalate tensions. Thus, direct negotiations between Ethiopia, Somalia, and Somaliland would benefit the entire region. Egypt's military engagement in the region, Somaliland's recognition, Ethiopia's sea access, and Somalia's sovereignty could all be addressed during such a negotiation. The negotiation will have the potential to both drain the interference of other regional states in their affairs as well as turn the conflict into an opportunity that benefits them all fairly.

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List of Key Informants (KI)

Code	Name	Position	Month/Year
KI1	Anonymous	An official of the Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia	June 2024
KI2	Anonymous	Ethiopian Ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeisa)	January 2024
KI3	Anonymous	Horn Affairs Analyst and academician	July 2023
KI4	Anonymous	Ethiopian Diplomat to the Republic of Somalia	February 2024
KI5	Anonymous	Ethiopian Diplomat to Egypt	January 2024
KI6	Anonymous	Ethiopian Ambassador to Djibouti	January 2024
KI7	Anonymous	Researcher at Ethiopian Institute of Foreign Affairs	August 2024
KI8	Anonymous	Ethiopian Ambassador to the Republic of Somalia	January 2024
KI9	Anonymous	Republic of Somalian Diplomat to Ethiopia	August 2024

DISCOURSE OF RESISTANCE THROUGH DIGITAL ACTIVISM: A RHETORICAL CRITICISM OF NIGERIAN POLITICS

Kunle Oparinde^a

Abstract: Amid widespread disillusionment marked by governance failure, insecurity, and economic hardship, many ordinary Nigerians turned to social media as a space for political resistance. The present article explores the ways in which citizens engaged digital platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter), to contest power and reframe the national political discourse during the 2023 presidential elections. Drawing on purposively selected posts, messages, and texts, the study interrogates how Nigerians deployed language as a tool of resistance against dominant political narratives. Anchored in Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the article identifies four key strategies employed in this digital resistance: (1) emotive appeals and affective language, (2) strategic discursive maneuvering, (3) rejection of the (ab)normal, and (4) propaganda and counter-narratives. In mapping these discursive acts, the article foregrounds the agency of citizens in shaping political meanings.

Keywords: discourse of resistance, digital activism, social media, political discourse in Nigeria, Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

The sporadic ability of social media applications to spread information has been exploited by many social media users for their own benefit. From utilising social media for marketing purposes, to using it as a platform for information sharing, users of digital media are constantly reinventing ways to maximise their potential. This indestructible power of social media has also found its way into politics, where politicians utilise the platforms for the purpose of political engagement. Conversely, social media users have found the platforms comfortable for challenging power and political authority. In fact, according

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to Adewale Fadugba (2023), networked digital activism is a transformative force in Nigerian politics, giving rise to new forms of resistance from below. Rodwell Makombe and Grace Agbede (2016: 40) also affirm that traditional methods of speaking truth to power, such as demonstrations, strikes, and petitions, are being increasingly replaced, or in some cases complemented, by digital resistance. Thus, through social media one becomes aware of critical occurrences in several parts of the world, especially through trending topics or hashtags. Although not without its own shortcomings, one cannot dispute the fact that social media is indeed powerful in disseminating dissident views.

Scholars have established that several parts of the African continent are permeated with governance failure. In a study by Thomas Tieku (2019), in which he examined the entire continent through the lens of the African Union (AU), the author contends that Africa has continued to lack in specific areas for a long time, such as: the provision of common public goods and services valued by commoners in Africa; giving a voice to the majority of young people in Africa; the promotion of intra-Africa trade; good governance; and financial independence in the African continent. Tieku's (2019) study implies that despite the existence of the African Union, the continent continues to suffer from dysfunctional governance. More specifically, Nigeria, which is often said to be the giant of Africa, is currently inflated with several socio-political issues including corruption, governance inefficiency, insecurity, economic instability, and so forth. This is a point affirmed by David Nwogbo and Akhakpe Ighodalo (2021), who state that Nigeria is often affected by dysfunctional governance due to corruption, a dysfunctional educational system, high poverty rates, infrastructural decay and unemployment, insecurity, the rigging of elections, embezzlement of public resources, poor economic growth, manipulation of electoral process by government officials, and consequent political instability.

Dele Babalola (2024) examines Nigerian politics through the lens of the 2023 presidential elections, offering insights that can be seen as reflective of the broader state of the nation's political environment. He argues that Nigeria's political landscape is primarily defined by the pursuit of electoral victories and a significant focus on the distribution of the country's wealth among the political elite. This observation highlights the prevailing dynamics of power consolidation and resource distribution that shape Nigeria's political landscape, which in turn creates a context in which resistance to the status quo becomes a necessary response for many Nigerians. The perspective presented by Nwogbo and Ighodalo (2021) effectively encapsulates the state of Nigerian governance and the motivations behind the widespread challenge to the political status quo in 2023, particularly among Nigerian youths.

These youths, leveraging the influence of social media, sought to disrupt the entrenched political elite. Building on the momentum of the 2020 #ENDSARS protests – when Nigerian youths rallied against police brutality – the 2023 general elections emerged as a crucial opportunity for change. The protests highlighted the limitations of direct action in addressing governance issues, leading to the adoption of the slogan “take the anger to the polls.” This phrase was intended to channel the energy of the protests into active participation in the electoral process, offering an alternative means for effecting change by voting for better leadership. Thus, the surge in resistance discourse among Nigerian youths in 2023 can be traced back to the 2020 protests, which, despite their focus on police brutality, also saw additional fatalities at the hands of law enforcement. In the wake of the protests, many Nigerians began to explore the concept of a “third force,” a political alternative to the two dominant parties that have governed the country since its return to democracy in 1999.

Hence, for the first time since 1999, a less popular political party convulsed the political atmosphere of the entire country in an unpredicted and unprecedented manner. When the eventual Presidential candidate of the Labour Party (LP), Peter Obi, suddenly decamped from the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) in May 2022, several Nigerians who perceived him as a potentially good leader saw hope for the “third force” and began to demonstrate discourses of resistance towards the two popular political parties and their candidates – Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and Atiku Abubakar of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP). The abilities of social media were thoroughly exploited, which resulted in arguably the biggest populist movement in Nigeria referred to as the “Obidient Movement,” a coinage which stems from “Obi,” the surname of the Labour Party candidate. It is worth noting that although the discourse of resistance permeated the Nigerian social media space, mostly by the “Obidients” (supporters of Peter Obi or those who subscribe to Peter Obi’s ideology), it did not result in Peter Obi winning the general elections. However, it brought about the greatest number of votes by a determined “third force” in Nigeria, as well as a significant amount of the “third force” making their way into the National Assembly of the country, which comprises the legislators. These instances all draw dividends from the discourse of resistance, promulgated using social media as a platform for challenging power and authority.

Theorising Resistance in the Era of Social Media: An Overview

Attempts to understand resistance have been met with scholarly variations, which have prevented the concept from developing a universal definition.

Hence, as scholars continue to investigate resistance from multidisciplinary viewpoints, the exploration of the concept expands. Despite these variations, approaches to the study of resistance have maintained one focus – a refusal to comply. However, notwithstanding the lack of a generic definition, scholars have made significant efforts to conceptualise resistance through different facets. Authors have referred to resistance through varying concepts which include, but are not confined to, acting autonomously in one's interests, active efforts to refuse cooperation, abusive behaviour and control, engaging in opposing behaviours, as well as questioning and objecting (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). Jocelyn Hollander and Rachel Einwohner's (2004) study of resistance appears to be one of the most popular in terms of the concept from a sociological perspective. From their study, it appears that older viewpoints on resistance put too much emphasis on the concept as a physical or material activity, often in the form of social movements, protests, picketing, and marches among others. In their typologies of resistance, they developed seven categories, namely overt, covert, unwitting, target-defined, externally defined, missed, and attempted resistance. Their study is in fact an indication of why resistance should not be treated universally. While they admit that there is a virtual consensus that resistance involves oppositional action of some kind, the natures and forms of resistance are still loose, suggesting that as the word develops resistance will continue to take on new dimensions and approaches.

Later studies have rightly extended the understanding of resistance to include new elements in the current world. Scholars such as Makombe and Agbede (2016), drawing from Achille Mbembe's (1992) notion of resistance as cohabitation rather than oppositional confrontation, argue that Internet memes are now a form of resistance used to subvert oppressive regimes. They use Zimbabwe as a case study. In their study, they note that although meme creation as a form of resistance may not have the same effect as direct, oppositional resistance, it is effective for those who wish to challenge the system without disclosing their identity, particularly ordinary people. Kunle Oparinde and Rachel Matteau-Matsha (2021) also argue for the use of counter-discourse as a form of resistance, basing their argument on Felicitas Macgilchrist's (2007) logical inversion which suggests countering a situation by arguing for an alternative reality. Oparinde and Matteau-Matsha (2021) contend that resistance from the use of counter-discourse can be achieved through formulating messages to expose the gravity and prevalence of a problem, call for the recognition of alternative ways of solving the problem, and ultimately call for action in changing the system.

Thus far, it has been established that resistance transforms based on the available resources and situational contexts. For this reason, political resistance through discourse has become even more popular since the proliferation of social media. In what Hollander and Einwohner (2004) refer to as the consensual core of resistance, overt resistance is the behaviour that is visible and readily and generally recognised as resistance. Overt resistance could include collective acts, such as social movements and revolutions, as well as individual acts of refusal, such as personal fights against abuse. Hollander and Einwohner's (2004) typologies are still relevant, although the present study intends to broaden the overt resistance by incorporating social media posts meant to challenge political power in its definition. This point is echoed by Maria Cristina Nisco (2021), who claims that digital media is increasingly advocated as a tool to engage with society's most pressing and tricky issues, reaching a more inclusive public discourse that can empower minority or stigmatised groups by granting them access to online communication and, potentially, to public, political, and institutional dynamics.

Praisegod Aminu, Ifeoluwa Awopetu and Foluke Unuabonah's (2024) study spotlights the political resistance embedded in the Oduduwa secessionist rhetoric by analysing not only the linguistic elements of the discourse but also the non-verbal modes of communication, including visual symbols, that play a significant role in the secessionist messaging drawn mainly from Twitter and Facebook. According to them, the language used by secessionist leaders often portrays the Yoruba people as victims of systemic oppression, positioning their resistance as the means to recover lost dignity and sovereignty. This framing mobilises support by appealing to a shared sense of history, highlighting the injustices suffered by the Yoruba people under the current political system. The authors maintain that the political resistance articulated through the Oduduwa secessionist discourse is a response to long-standing issues of political exclusion, and without engagement from the central government, Nigeria may face increasing challenges to its unity. In a similar study, Aminu (2024) affirms that social media serves as a vital tool for political resistance, particularly in marginalised communities by examining how digital communication technologies are employed to reinforce the secessionist agenda and mobilise support for Yoruba self-determination. Aminu highlights the discursive techniques employed by secessionists on social media to assert their political resistance as including aggressive rhetoric and provocative statements, which are common in online discourse. His study concludes that the digital space has transformed the dynamics of political discourse, providing a platform for marginalised groups to challenge state power.

Innocent Chiluwa's (2012) contribution to the study of discursive resistance recognised social media as a tool that has been used to champion social protests and resistance against oppression and political power abuse. Chiluwa explored how social media was used as a platform for political resistance, particularly in the context of the Biafran separatist movement. He argued that online discourses surrounding Biafra were vital in constructing and disseminating resistance narratives against the Nigerian state. Thus, social media platforms became an instrument that provide a space for marginalised voices to challenge government authority, articulate grievances, and mobilise support for the Biafran cause. Through a socio-linguistic critical discourse analysis (CDA), Chiluwa highlighted the linguistic and communicative strategies, such as framing, emotive language, and historical references that the Biafran separatists employed to reinforce their political resistance. He suggested that these discourses not only serve to critique the central government but also to forge a collective identity among supporters, strengthening their resolve for self-determination and challenging the political status quo.

Social media has had an unprecedented influence on several sectors, among which the communication, marketing, and public relations sectors are included, among others. It has equally changed how common people, including those traditionally discriminated against and marginalised, now voice out against oppression. The traditional way of opposing repression has strategically transformed since social media has become one of the most powerful tools of resistance. Trending topics now receive global attention due to the sporadic nature of social media. It is for this reason that discourse of resistance has become a popular phenomenon on social media. For Fadugba (2023), digital activism is now utilised as a tool for political resistance in Nigeria, focusing on grassroots movements. He argues that the Internet, particularly social media, has become a powerful platform to express dissent and challenge dominant political structures. Through networked digital activism, ordinary Nigerians now amplify their voices, and draw attention to issues such as corruption, inequality, and government repression. Fadugba emphasises that this form of resistance empowers citizens, fosters solidarity, and enables rapid mobilisation, while also revealing the potential for digital activism to challenge political authority and disrupt the status quo.

Political resistance to oppression in Nigeria, particularly on social media platforms, has manifested in various forms. As demonstrated by Aminu (2024) and Chiluwa (2012), secessionism represents one such form of resistance. Awopetu and Chiluwa (2023) presented a different form in their multimodal critical discourse analysis of resistance in visual narratives focusing on the

images of the #EndSARS Protests in Nigeria. The study uses multimodal critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how images from the protests communicate resistance, amplify the demands of protesters, and challenge the Nigerian government's actions. The authors argue that these visual narratives, including photographs, posters, and social media images, played a crucial role in shaping the discourse around police brutality and state repression. By analysing the visual language, symbols, and emotional appeal of these images, they showed how protesters used them to mobilise support, draw international attention, and frame their struggle as one for justice and human rights. Awopetu and Chiluwa conclude that visual narratives were essential in expressing dissent and enhancing the impact of the #EndSARS movement.

Another instance of digital resistance in Nigeria is the frequent admonition on social media for young Nigerians to flee the country in what is now popularly known as the *japa* syndrome. Oparinde and Makombe (2024) discuss how the term *japa*, referring to the mass emigration of Nigerians in search of better opportunities abroad, is constructed on social media. They argue that the rhetoric surrounding *japa* reflects deep anxieties about economic instability, political failure, and the erosion of hope within Nigeria. The social media discourse around *japa* portrays it as both a form of resistance to the country's perceived dysfunction and an act of self-preservation. Oparinde and Makombe analyse how this migration discourse creates a complex identity, positioning Nigerians who leave as both victims of a failing system and agents seeking personal success.

Having explored resistance in various contexts, the present study aims to examine resistance within the framework of electioneering, utilising data from social media, particularly X (formerly known as Twitter). Agaptus Nwzor et al. (2022: 109) characterise politics in Nigeria as “a power game akin to war,” emphasising the immense value placed on political power and its associated benefits. This perspective highlights the intense competition and high stakes involved in Nigerian politics. Given this context, political discourses in Nigeria are inherently diverse, taking various forms as individuals and groups navigate the complexities of politics in the country.

Conceptual and Methodological Approaches

To achieve an in-depth analysis of instances of discourse of resistance in Nigeria politics, this study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to deconstruct the raw data for the purpose of this study. There are as many approaches to CDA as there are scholars. However, to satisfy the objectives of this study,

Norman Fairclough's approach is considered more suitable and preferred. In his book, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (2013), Fairclough establishes a strong connection between language and power, thus suggesting that language use in everyday context (discourse) has the power to construct and reconstruct reality. Tracing back to his earlier work on language and power, it can be argued that the predominant objectives of Fairclough's CDA are twofold: (1) correcting a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance, and change of social relationships of power; and (2) increasing consciousness of language and power and how language contributes to the domination of some people by others (Fairclough 1989: 1-4). Fairclough's approach to CDA relies on the notion that language use influences society and society is, in turn, shaped by language. The foregoing implies that it would be inappropriate to conduct a study on language use without simultaneously considering the societal conditions, inferences, and implications.

Therefore, Fairclough's analytical framework of discourse involves text, discursive practice, and social practice. Texts, which are considered the smallest particles of the framework, deal with the discursive objects of analysis. The discursive practice is concerned with the process of discourse creation, distribution, and the interpretation of produced discourse. The social practice aspect of the framework relates to the social conditions of consumption and interpretations of the produced discourse. Putting this clearly, language on its own does not have power, it is in the societal context that the language is used in, and the function fulfilled by such language that power is fully exercised. Undoubtedly, language has power, and by extension language becomes powerful when used in a specific social context to achieve a specific social function. Hence, what CDA is about is revealing the hidden power in discourses and, in the case of the present study, examining power in the discourse of political engagements on social media. Essentially, Fairclough's CDA recognises that the current world is fraught with unequal power relations, hence the need for the critical study of language as a tool to challenge power in the era of globalisation and Internet (Fairclough 2013).

The present qualitative study deploys a purposive sampling technique to gather relevant data for the purpose of this study. The criterion for selection includes whether the data showed resistance to power in relation to the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria in the form of social media posts, messages, and memes. Specific keywords were used to gather the data for this research. The keywords included: *Obidient(s)*, *BAT(ists)*, *Atikulate(d)*, *renewed hope*, *possible*, *BATified*, and *Emilokan*. They all represent the identity of each of the

three leading candidates as they are popular mantras/slogans used by their supporters. The candidates include Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Atiku Abubakar, and Peter Obi, who are the flagbearers of the All Progressives Party, Peoples Democratic Party, and Labour Party, respectively. Since the data were collected in an election season, the data crawling process revealed a total of 1,790,469 results combined. The inclusion criteria for the data included in this study are: (1) the data were posted on X (formerly Twitter) from March 2022 to September 2023; (2) the data showed evidence of resistance; (3) the data spoke particularly to the 2023 Nigerian Presidential elections. To refine the initial dataset, the researcher applied a filtering process based on relevance, engagement metrics (likes, shares, and comments), and thematic alignment with resistance discourse. Only posts that meet at least two of these criteria in relation to the 2023 elections were found suitable for this study. It is worth noting that although the data were already in the public space, the originators of the content of the posts were deliberately left out of this research.

In line with Fairclough's (2013) three-step framework for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the researcher conducted a thorough examination of raw data by considering its relevance to the study's objectives. The analysis focused on the discourse of resistance in Nigerian politics as articulated on social media, beginning with an examination of the texts alongside the broader discursive and social practices. Fairclough's approach emphasises the necessity of not isolating discourse from the context in which it is embedded but instead establishing a connection between discourse and the socio-political practices that shape it and are shaped by it. This methodological orientation underpinned the analysis, particularly in the context of understanding how ordinary Nigerians resist power using social media as a tool. This involved examining not only the content of the discourse but also the situational contexts that prompted such forms of resistance. The study aimed to capture how these discourses intersected with broader social practices, which is in line with Fairclough's notion that discourse cannot be treated in an isolated manner without considering the social structures and power dynamics surrounding such discourse.

The analytical process followed the thematic approach outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2016), which provided a structured and systematic framework for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within the data. The process began with the researcher immersing himself in the data by repeated reading of the data thus ensuring a versed understanding of the content. Then the initial codes were generated where relevant data were highlighted and organised into meaningful categories. Then the researcher began the process of theme development guided mainly by the objectives

of this study. The analysis resulted in a series of themes and relevant data demonstrated at least one or more signs of demonstration. The researcher maintained a reflexive stance throughout the analysis in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2016) advice to consistently revisit the data and their interpretations in order to ensure the validity and rigor of the study.

Discourse of Resistance in Nigerian Politics: Discussing Themes

To breakdown the discourse of resistance emerging from social media in connection with Nigerian politics, a thematic analysis of the discourse of resistance collected from social media regarding Nigerian politics was undertaken. Critical Discourse Analysis, for its prowess in deconstructing the relations between discursive strategies and social context, was used to uncover instances of resistance in the gathered data. The four themes that emerged from the critical analysis of the raw data include: (i) emotive use of language; (ii) strategic maneuvering; (iii) rejection of “(ab)normal”; and (iv) propaganda and manipulation.

Emotive Appeals and Affective Language

Aristotle's examination of rhetoric, and by extension, language, suggests that emotion plays a crucial role in the act of persuasion. Thus, in a political context, the use of emotive language is perhaps considered appropriate, going by Franziska Marquart et al.'s (2022) view that emotions do not only play an important role in everyday politics, but individuals also react emotionally to political messages, and, depending on the respective emotions activated by political stimuli, peoples' attitudes and behaviour toward political entities vary. A non-contestable fact acknowledged by scholars of political discourse is that the language of politics is fraught with emotional rhetoric in order to appeal to the in-depth feelings of the voters. However, several scholars, such as Marquart et al. (2022) and Kunle Oparinde et al. (2021), among others, have mostly described such emotive use of rhetoric from the perspective of politicians and their political parties. Therefore, in the present study the notion of emotive language is extended to include how the voters utilise emotive language to resist power in Nigeria as revealed by data drawn from X.

Table 1 below presents examples of emotional appeals and affective language categorised broadly into Positive Emotive Language (PEL) and Negative Emotive Language (NEL), selected based on their affective tone and function

within resistance discourse. The categorisation draws on Sajira Khatoon and Varisha Rehman's (2021) distinction between positive emotions (eliciting hope, encouragement, or solidarity), and negative emotions (expressing anger, hostility, or frustration). Posts were included if they contained affective political expressions relating to the elections. The instances of presented below were selected from a broader set of frequently circulated X posts during the 2023 campaign period.

Positive Emotive Language (PEL)	Negative Emotive Language (NEL)
<i>To all the Obidients out there working without anyone noticing; may you never labour in vain. God will reward our efforts with good governance (PEL1)</i> <i>Obidients are challenging the establishment, and this is highly commendable. Let us keep pushing (PEL2)</i> <i>Obi's supporters offline might be the game changer. Kudos to the hardwork support groups did offline. You are the heroes (PEL 3)</i> <i>All I see is a young population willing to take back their country and change the status quo. But we have to avoid being overzealous so we can achieve the goal (PEL4)</i> <i>The Obidients movement is a workaholic one. We cannot relent. We are working hard building bridges and pressing the neck of oppositions. Let us do more! (PEL5)</i>	<i>Any old man or woman who is supporting Atiku and Tinubu is an enemy of the youth (NEL1)</i> <i>Anybody voting for Tinubu is against my future and my enemy (NEL2)</i> <i>Anyone voting for Tinubu is an enemy of Nigeria (NEL3)</i> <i>Nigerians are goats, despite all the gaffes by Tinubu, they still want to vote him. Is Nigeria a joke to you?? (NEL4)</i> <i>If you will be voting Tinubu or Atiku in the next election, you are an irredeemable idiot and a threat to my life (NEL5)</i>

Table 1. Categorisation of emotional language in Nigerian political resistance discourse (selected posts from X, 2022–2023).

The instances above represent a few examples of the social media activism that took place in Nigeria in the lead-up to the 2023 presidential elections. A significant movement within this activism was initiated by the “*Obidients*,” a group of supporters advocating for Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP). This movement, which gained considerable traction, saw many youths express strong enthusiasm in their efforts to resist the established political order. Notably, many young Nigerians viewed Peter Obi as a political saviour, one who could rescue the country from the political turmoil attributed to the APC and PDP (Ikechukwu-Ibe and Aboh 2024). However, the widespread perception of Obi as a liberating figure led to some, at times, overly zealous expressions on social media, which resulted in the PEL and NEL classifications above. The NEL instances illustrate negative emotional expressions, whereas the PEL instances demonstrate positive emotional displays. A key factor influencing many Nigerians’ support for Peter Obi was the desire to avoid electing visibly older candidates. Of the three leading candidates, Atiku Abubakar at the time was 76 years old; Bola Tinubu was 70 years old; and Peter Obi was 61 years of age (Kohnert 2023).

NEL1 explicitly characterised supporters of the other two presidential candidates as enemies of the youth, which can be interpreted as an attempt to foster division between Peter Obi’s supporters and those backing alternative candidates. This aligns with the findings of Chioma Ikechukwu-Ibe and Sopuruchi Aboh (2024), who observed that criticisms and resistance directed at APC and PDP politicians also extended to their supporters, particularly those who had overlooked the parties’ failings in campaigning for their re-election. In a democratic society like Nigeria, however, individuals retain the fundamental right to vote for any candidate of their choice without being stigmatised as enemies of the people. This perspective is similarly relevant for NEL2 and NEL3. Furthermore, in the context of resisting the candidacy of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the presidential candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC), NEL4 resorted to dehumanising his supporters by depicting them in animalistic terms. This “name and shame” strategy, as Mark Nartey and Yating Yu (2023: 4) argue, serves the purpose of publicly identifying individuals, groups, or organisations guilty of criminal or anti-social behaviour, thereby exposing them to public disgrace. This form of derogatory discourse highlights the perception that the choice of candidate by these individuals was considered, by others, as both unacceptable and misguided.

Similar to NEL4, NEL5 resorted to the use of insults in an attempt to discourage Nigerians from supporting either of the other two presidential

candidates. This mirrors the findings of Praisegod Aminu (2024), who notes that aggressive rhetoric and provocative statements have become common discursive techniques in political resistance. Aminu suggests that this represents a shift in how political resistance is organised and executed in Nigeria. Social media, in this context, serves as a platform for expressing dissent and challenging the political establishment, free from the constraints of traditional media. The instances identified within the NEL category highlight significant expressions of overzealousness and negative emotions by Nigerians as they sought to resist the prevailing political situation in the country. The anger displayed by some Nigerians can be partially attributed to the governance of the APC prior to the elections, which many perceived as having been woeful in its performance. Consequently, the potential replacement of an APC president with another individual from the same party incited widespread anger, further amplified by the fact that the PDP had previously governed the country for 16 years. Together, the APC and PDP would have governed Nigeria for a combined total of 24 years. As a result, ordinary Nigerians took to social media to portray both the APC and PDP as obstacles to progress, emphasising their failures during their respective 16-year and 8-year terms in office, and presenting arguments as to why neither party should be re-elected (Ikechukwu-Ibe and Aboh 2024).

Given that Peter Obi was often perceived as the underdog among the three leading candidates, many of his supporters resorted to negative emotive language in their discourse of resistance. However, the data also revealed several instances of Positive Emotional Language (PEL), where many Nigerians maintained a positive emotional tone despite their resistance to power. As illustrated in PEL1, PEL2, PEL3, PEL4, and PEL5, there was a clear emotional investment in the commitment of the *Obidients* as they sought to challenge the dominant power structures in the country. Numerous posts on X (formerly Twitter), as seen in the PEL examples, were dedicated to appealing to the emotions of Nigerians, urging them not to relent but to intensify their determination as the nation attempted to wrest power from the APC. In PEL4, a social media user commended the resistance of Nigerian youth, recognising their efforts as praiseworthy, but also cautioned against the overzealousness observed in the NEL instances. According to Ikechukwu-Ibe and Aboh (2024), the juxtaposition of positive associations (prosperity) and negative associations (failure) in the X posts creates a compelling narrative that draws a distinct contrast between Peter Obi and his opponents, while reinforcing the perceived salvific nature of Obi's anticipated leadership. PEL5 frames the *Obidient* movement as

a formidable challenge, especially in light of the established dominance of the two other major political parties, encouraging Nigerians to persist in resisting the status quo. PEL1, PEL2, and PEL3 serve as evidence of Nigerians expressing emotions towards fellow Nigerians who are perceived to be challenging the hegemonic political structures in the country.

This “emotive appeals and affective language” theme aligns with Fairclough’s (2013) CDA theoretical dimensions. At the textual level, it examines the linguistic expressions, while at the discursive level, it considers how users interpret and circulate emotionally framed messages for the purpose of solidarity and mobilisation. The social practice level underscores the broader societal perspectives of the Nigerian citizens.

Strategic Discursive Maneuvering

Some of the discourse of resistance strategies employed by Nigerians can be interpreted as instances of strategic manoeuvring, which primarily involves the use of rhetorical tactics and strategies to influence discourse in a manner that furthers one’s objectives. Strategic manoeuvring is understood as a communicative process in which messages are conveyed through stages, tactics, and pragmatic strategies (Al-Hindawi and Rahi 2022). Given that the individuals visibly resisting the status quo on social media were predominantly from opposition parties, the task of gaining popularity was one that the *Obidients* embarked upon at an early stage as a means of counteracting the established candidates’ dominance. Strategic manoeuvring manifested in various forms of political resistance, predominantly through persuasion, caution, and exploitation. Instances of *Obidients* encouraging other Nigerians to cross-post across different social media platforms include:

- i. Obidients stop waiting for mainstream politicians to endorse Obi, the people have endorsed Obi and that is all that matters, shout on all social media.
- ii. Guys, let’s show them what four people tweeting in a room can do. Continue to post your support for Obi.
- iii. Intensifying publicity for Obi is all that should matter now, spread the message across social media.
- iv. Always include #Obidients in your tweets so others can also retweet to make the message go viral.
- v. Retweet aggressively.

With Peter Obi running as the candidate of the Labour Party (LP), a party that held less than a quarter of the popularity of the other two major contenders (APC and PDP), the initial challenge was how to increase the party's visibility across Nigeria with only eight months remaining until the election. The solution was found in leveraging social media. Given that the *Obidient* movement aimed to primarily engage Nigerian youths, the prevalent belief that many youths were active on social media reinforced this approach. This was exacerbated by dismissive social media posts from opposing parties, which underestimated the Labour Party's potential to achieve significant traction in such a short period. Early in the *Obidient* movement's rise, certain remarks from rival parties became highly popular on social media, reflecting their underestimation of the movement's capabilities. These remarks include: *"4 people tweeting in a room, Labour Party has no structure, Peter Obi cannot even get up to 100,000 votes, a party of only on region."*

Remarks such as the ones mentioned above quickly gained traction on social media, suggesting that the number of individuals supporting the Labour Party and the *Obidient* movement was smaller than initially assumed, with many of these posts likely originating from the same geographic location. There was a prevailing belief that it was highly unlikely for anyone to amass such online support in such a short time frame. Additional comments insinuated that the Labour Party lacked the human and physical infrastructure necessary to challenge the APC and PDP, particularly considering Nigeria's size and the limited popularity of both the party and its candidate, Peter Obi, across the country. These concerns implied that the *Obidient* movement would need to intensify its efforts to spread its message nationwide within the span of less than a year, with social media emerging as their most significant tool. This point is also acknowledged by Aminu (2024), who argues that the rise of online resistance movements highlights the limitations of traditional state responses to dissent, as social media platforms enable the rapid dissemination of information and the mobilisation of large numbers of people. In the first example mentioned above, when many *Obidients* were uncertain about their next steps and eagerly awaiting influential politicians to publicly endorse Obi to enhance his popularity, a supporter advised caution, urging the *Obidients* to manage their expectations. Rather than relying on political endorsements, the supporter encouraged them to shift their focus to engaging with the general public, advocating for the use of social media as a platform to campaign for Peter Obi. Such advocacy represents an element of strategic maneuvering, which Oparinde et al. (2021) identify as encompassing both warning and persuasion, a characteristic commonly found in political discourse.

The second and third examples above illustrate instances of *Obidients* attempting to encourage their supporters to heavily invest in social media engagement as a strategy for broadly disseminating support for Peter Obi. The views expressed in the posts above were widely shared by many *Obidients* and reshared by numerous others. It soon became evident that reliance on social media was essential. The hashtag #*Obidients* was created and rapidly gained traction across the country. In the fourth example mentioned above, supporters were encouraged to consistently include #*Obidients* in their posts in order to increase their viral potential and encourage reshares. This strategy has become a popular method of campaigning on X, a point also acknowledged by Felicity Morse (2014), who argued that hashtag activism was an effective way to draw attention to a campaign. Recognising the power of hashtags, the *Obidients* strategically leveraged this tool to their advantage. As Fairclough (2013) asserted, discourse practices perform ideological work by shaping the representation of societal or community realities. In this context, the social media posts by *Obidients*, as a form of resistance discourse, highlighted the collective experiences of many Nigerians concerning the country's challenges. Other hashtags that emerged included #Obidientmovement, #LabourParty, #PeterObi4President2023, #Obidatti2023, and others. The use of these hashtags played a crucial role in spreading the movement's message. Nisco (2021) further noted that hashtags, with their ability to represent experiences, amplify ideas and opinions, navigate interpersonal relationships and alignments, and can be viewed as a form of social practice. This practice has attracted an increasing number of activists and ordinary individuals seeking to engage in public debate through social media.

A phrase commonly used by many X users in support of Peter Obi was to "retweet aggressively." This expression was frequently employed by *Obidients* to rally other members into solidarity whenever a tweet was posted, with the goal of amplifying its reach. "Retweet aggressively" was typically used in response to new information, alarming revelations, propaganda, or rebuttals from *Obidients*. In this context, retweeting was not merely about sharing content but was framed as a fierce and deliberate action. What became evident through this practice was that *Obidients* had captured a significant portion of social media, bolstered by their growing popularity and the sometimes-unruly behaviour of certain members who exploited this visibility to attack supporters of other political parties. It is, however, not surprising that Nigerian youths are highly motivated in their demand for substantial change through the #Obidient Movement on Nigerian social media, as

many view the movement as a catalyst for the comprehensive restructuring of the country's educational, political, and economic systems (Ikechukwu-Ibe and Aboh 2024). The resistance discourse demonstrated on social media was undeniably loud and pervasive, to the point where opposition party members began referring to *Obidients* as “keypad warriors.” This led to new insinuations from supporters of Bola Ahmed Tinubu (BATists) of the APC and Abubakar Atiku (ATIKUlates) of the PDP, claiming that elections are not won on social media. Despite being a seemingly minor political party with a less popular candidate, it became apparent that *Obidients* had made a notable impact on social media. As *Obidients* sought to challenge the status quo, new evidence emerged that the tweets were not the product of a small, localised group, but rather represented a nationwide movement, largely driven by youths who were disillusioned with the country's current state.

The strategic maneuvering theme directly reflects Fairclough's (2013) CDA theoretical dimensions of discursive practice involving the deliberate production and distribution of persuasive content aimed at shaping public perception and rallying support.

Rejection of the “(Ab)normal”

The complex nature of Nigerian politics has given rise to various practices and behaviours that have gradually become normalised or accepted by the Nigerian populace. One of the key resistance strategies employed in the lead-up to the 2023 general elections was the overt rejection of what had been considered “abnormal” yet unconsciously accepted as the norm by many. By referencing the political candidates' past actions and consistently highlighting various forms of abnormalities, Nigerians aimed to reject the aspects of Nigerian politics that, while having become accepted, were deemed inappropriate.

Even before the elections, it was an undeniable fact for discerning Nigerians that the country required improvements in its leadership. This recognition provided the justification for rejecting politicians from the old order, with the belief that in order for the nation to progress, power must be wrested from those entrenched in the corrupt political system. Among the three leading political parties in the 2023 presidential elections, the candidates from both the APC and PDP were widely regarded as representatives of the old political establishment. Although Peter Obi of the Labour Party had also held a political position, his tenure was more recent, and his political

trajectory was perceived as distinct from that of the other two candidates (Ikechukwu-Ibe and Aboh 2024). This perspective aligns with the argument put forth by Rehan Tariq et al. (2022), who assert that the younger generation is more dissatisfied with democratic performance than the older generation, and that young adults have increasingly turned to social media to fulfil their political needs. Their study identified a connection between political interests and candidates' past experiences, suggesting that in political communication, reference to antecedents is inevitable. Consequently, the widespread awareness of what has been perceived as the norm in Nigerian politics fostered a need to challenge and reject some of these established practices. The following examples are reference made to prior knowledge in a bid to challenge power in Nigeria:

- i. We no dey give shishi
- ii. We cannot have another sick president use our money for treatment abroad.
- iii. Tinubu doesn't look healthy, let's not do this to ourselves again.
- iv. We need a healthy person to oversee the affairs of this country, Tinubu looks very sick.
- v. Bola Tinubu and Atiku are forcing themselves on Nigerians, in terms of age, both of them cannot pilot a digital economy.
- vi. Atiku is just too old to be running for the highest office in Nigeria.

Nigerian youths once again utilised social media to challenge the candidacies of Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Atiku Abubakar, drawing upon their awareness of these politicians' past experiences. A notable example of this was the widespread circulation of the phrase "*we no dey give shishi*" across Nigerian social media platforms, which was a direct response to the prevalent monetisation of Nigerian politics. It is evident that financial incentives have become a key determinant in Nigerian elections, with voters being heavily influenced by money politics (Onah and Nwali 2018; Dauda and Moses 2024).

Consequently, politicians who are unable to financially support voters face significant challenges in gaining traction. Although the phrase "*we no dey give shishi*" is expressed in *Pidgin*, a widely spoken English-based informal language in Nigeria, it can be loosely translated as "*we do not give a dime*." For years, politicians have relied on financial inducements to attract supporters, and vote-buying has become a normalised practice. As a result, the Labour Party's perceived lack of financial resources led to the belief that Peter Obi's candidacy would struggle to survive in the Nigerian political

landscape, where money is often used to secure votes and garner support. In response to this, Nigerian youths sought to resist the prevailing norm of politicians buying their way into office, only to perform poorly once elected. This desire for change, combined with the widespread understanding of Peter Obi's reputation as a prudent and meticulous politician, gave rise to the phrase "*we no dey give shishi*." Through this slogan, *Obidients* leveraged social media to discourage vote-buying, signalling that this traditional practice would not be tolerated in the current election cycle.

The second, third, and fourth examples cited above mocked Bola Ahmed Tinubu's frailty, highlighting his unsteady posture and incoherent speeches, which reminded many Nigerians of the outgoing President Muhammadu Buhari. According to Ibitayo Oso (2024), a major issue in the campaign against Bola Tinubu was the state of his health as it was hotly debated that he had an ailment that he was battling with that he had not disclosed to Nigerians. Thus, the political resistance posts in Nigeria tended to reflect Peter Obi as young, good looking, and healthy while Tinubu was represented as old, incapable and sickly thus portraying Tinubu as incapable due to age and ill health (Oso 2024). Given Buhari's frequent medical trips abroad during his presidency, particularly to the United Kingdom, many Nigerians expressed concern about repeating this situation. At the time of his election, Buhari was 72 years old, and his health challenges during his two terms in office led to continual foreign medical visits. This sparked fears of a similar scenario under Tinubu, whose contested age (71) and health issues, including frequent medical trips to France, already raised concerns about his ability to govern effectively.

Similarly, Atiku Abubakar, at 76 years of age, was also viewed as too elderly to lead, with many Nigerians advocating for a younger, more energetic president. This desire for a change in leadership was reflected in the growing support for Peter Obi, who, at 61, was seen as a more dynamic and viable alternative to the ageing candidates. A view shared by Chukudi Okwelum (2023) was that the 2023 general elections was one in which the Nigerian youths became keenly interested in seeing that the old brigade was rooted out of power and, in order to do so, they routed their support for the youngest of all the presidential aspirants particularly within the bracket of the four front liners in the race in the person of Peter Obi. The "rejection of the (ab)normal" theme particularly engages Fairclough's (2013) social practice dimension by challenging normalised political dysfunctions in Nigerian society. The explicit rejection of ill health, age, and corruption in candidates reflects a shift in societal expectations and values among Nigerians.

Deployment of Propaganda and Counter-Narratives

As with political discourse, generally, rhetorical devices of engagement and manipulation are popular discursive strategies during campaigns and electioneering. Tsz Hang Chu and Tien Ee Yeo (2020) rightly posit that social media has been widely credited for facilitating young people's political engagement, most notably by providing a conducive platform for political expression. It is no news that a successful political endeavour requires connecting and engaging with the voting population. Since the *Obidient* movement relied mainly on social media engagement, words of advice, warning, and admonishments among other things were disseminated using social media platforms. In mobilising for more people to support the *Obidient* movement, thereby resisting the status quo, the rhetorical devices discussed under this theme were used both positively and negative by *Obidients* in their engagement with the voting populace. While some engaged other Nigerians respectfully by disseminating accurate and useful information, others made use of social media platforms for the purpose of manipulation by spreading inaccurate, false, and exaggerated information to attract more supporters. The use of manipulation is not new to politics. For Garth Jowett and Victoria O'donnell (2018), manipulation is a type of disinformation defined as the systematic and deliberate process of shaping opinions, influencing thoughts, and directing the behaviour of a person to achieve a desired intention. Instances of this theme include:

- i. There are 26 days to collect your PVC [permanent voter's card] from INEC
- ii. Obidients please make out time to do the needful and get your PVCs as soon as possible.
- iii. Tinubu is a druglord who went to jail in the US, we cant afford to have a criminal president.
- iv. Tinubu forged his certificate and did not attend any university as he claimed.
- v. Atiku has stolen enough money from Nigeria that there is nothing to steal again, he needs to rest and should not be contesting for any position.

In challenging the established candidacies of Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Atiku Abubakar, *Obidients* also utilised social media as a tool to expose what they perceived as the corrupt histories of both individuals, while simultaneously presenting Peter Obi as the superior candidate. As a result, many Nigerian

youths contended that the electorate should avoid choosing leaders with questionable pasts. In their efforts, many of Peter Obi's supporters resorted to character assassination and the dissemination of hate speech, particularly targeting Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Atiku Abubakar, whom they widely regarded as having corrupt backgrounds. Tinubu, for example, was accused of involvement in a drug trade and of falsifying his educational qualifications. Atiku, on the other hand, was alleged to have misappropriated public funds in the past. In contrast, Peter Obi was portrayed as the candidate with greater integrity. According to Ikechukwu-Ibe and Aboh (2024: 340), "the idea of Peter Obi being a saviour is reinforced by contrasting him regularly with the perceived negative qualities of his opponents and those affiliated with the APC and PDP, further solidifying his image as a viable candidate for change." This strategy not only highlighted the perceived flaws of Tinubu and Atiku but also served to bolster Obi's reputation as a candidate capable of bringing about the desired transformation in Nigerian politics.

Some of the perhaps well-intended messages the *Obidients* intended to make known was the lack of differences between the APC and the PDP, which are the two most popular political parties in the country. This is quite evident in the dealings of the two parties as in the past several politicians have decamped and cross-carpeted between the two parties for their own political interests. In fact, the former Chairman of the country's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Professor Attahiru Jega, had referred to the two parties as "Siamese twins of corruption" (Vanguard 2021). Also, a blunder made by Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who was the presidential candidate of the APC, when he accidentally almost said God bless PDP further confirmed to the *Obidients* that there is no significant difference between the two parties (Oparinde and Makombe 2024). Although Bola Ahmed Tinubu corrected himself instantly, the statement eventually unfolded as God bless PDAPC. Several memes, posts, and tweets surfaced for several months to inform Nigerians that the two parties are not different from each other and that there is no better candidate between their flagbearers. Findings from the study of Oluwayemisi Adebomi (2025) also suggest that many *Obidients* saw the PDP and the APC as partners in progress in terms of political ideology of corruption and misrule.

As part of their efforts to engage the public constructively, *Obidients* used social media to encourage Nigerian youths to obtain a PVC, a permanent voter's card, which would enable them to vote for Peter Obi. Members of the opposition party frequently made remarks such as: "*Elections are not won on social media; many of you won't even vote since you don't have PVCs; elections are not about shouting 'Obidients' on social media.*" In response,

Obidients launched a countdown to the PVC collection deadline, urging potential voters with statements such as: “*There are 26 days left to collect your PVC from INEC; Obidients, please make time to do the needful and get your PVCs as soon as possible.*” These statements served as reminders and calls for action for Nigerian youths to acquire their PVCs, emphasising that this was the only legitimate means of voting.

In addition to mobilising voters for PVC registration and collection, it is significant to note that during the 2023 presidential election campaign, X became a platform for recruiting volunteers who would eventually penetrate grassroots or rural areas to further mobilise voters (Ikefuama 2023). The social media activity, while essential for engagement, would have been futile without the acquisition of PVCs. Although social media was used productively to engage with the population, resist the status quo, and advocate for a change in leadership, it also gave rise to overzealous reactions. Some individuals exploited the momentum to spread unruly messages and manipulate the discourse. Unverified information, and in certain cases, deliberate disinformation, became part of the resistance narrative. Allegations surfaced about Bola Ahmed Tinubu’s past criminal activities, just as stories emerged regarding Atiku Abubakar’s alleged theft of government funds. These unsubstantiated claims contributed to the charged atmosphere surrounding the election, demonstrating how social media was used not only for mobilisation but also for the spread of divisive and sometimes misleading narratives. Idayat Hassan (2023) also found that social media has emerged as a significant source of fake news, with disinformation being strategically employed as a tool to manipulate public opinion and delegitimise opposing voices.

These and numerous other accusations gained traction on social media, portraying both candidates as highly corrupt and, consequently, unfit to serve as presidential candidates for Nigeria. While neither of the two candidates has been convicted of any crimes, the widespread perception of their alleged corruption was strategically used to influence public opinion and steer the populace towards considering an alternative in Peter Obi. The “deployment of propaganda and counter-narratives” theme illustrates how textual elements such as repetition, exaggeration, and metaphor were used to frame political opponents and reassert preferred narratives, which aligns with Fairclough’s (2013) textual dimensions of CDA. At the social level, the use of both propaganda and counter-narratives signals a broader societal struggle, with digital activism acting as a space for contesting hegemonic representations of leadership and governance.

Conclusion

The present study has established that the concept of resistance has evolved significantly, particularly in terms of its form and nature, diverging from its traditional perceptions of direct action or physical social movements. The rise of social media has contributed to this transformation by facilitating novel communicative techniques, allowing resistance to oppression to manifest in more subtle, discursive ways. Drawing from data collected during the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections, the study illustrates how ordinary Nigerians utilised social media as a platform to challenge the prevailing political status quo. In this context, resistance was framed not as physical opposition but as a discourse rooted in verbal chastisement, reproach, and warnings, with social media serving as a tool for public expression. From a Faircloughian perspective on power in discourse, this shift reflects the reconfiguration of power relations in the digital age. Social media platforms provide a space for individuals to exercise counter-power, subverting traditional hierarchical structures of authority through the exploitation of discourse.

Nigerians employed a range of discursive strategies to enact resistance, including the deliberate use of emotive language, rhetorical maneuvering, rejection of the “(ab)normal”, and engagement with propaganda. The strategic deployment of emotive language, ranging from affirming to deeply pejorative, served to unsettle dominant narratives of political legitimacy by amplifying public affect and fostering dissent. Similarly, the production and circulation of digital propaganda functioned dually: as a warning against certain political choices and as a tool for delegitimising opposing candidates. This dual function highlights how propaganda, in the digital era, becomes both a defensive and offensive discursive weapon. Taken together these strategies reveal a complex discourse of resistance in which power is challenged not through direct physical confrontation, but through the calculated manipulation of language and media. This study’s reliance on purposively selected social media posts limits its ability to capture the full range of resistance discourses or reflect offline motivations. By focusing on digital activism, it also overlooks traditional resistance and the interplay between online and offline efforts. Future research should incorporate broader data sources, such as interviews and surveys, in order to better understand how these forms of resistance intersect within Nigeria’s socio-political context.

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TEARING DOWN THE STRONG MAN IN THE GOLD COAST: THE ASANTE EMPIRE, 1820-1901

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Abstract: The present article investigates the Asante Empire's transformation from a dominant power in West Africa to a vassalage. It examines the multifaceted causes of this decline, including military confrontations with European powers, internal political strife, economic disruptions, and evolving regional alliances in the nineteenth century. Through a historiographical approach, the study moves beyond the political centre of Kumase to include peripheral states and local dynamics often overlooked, enriching the understanding of its historical significance. This enables to construct a more nuanced narrative of Asante's history, underscoring the complexities of power, resistance, and cultural imperialism in nineteenth-century Africa, offering critical insights into the factors that led to the annexation of one of West Africa's most powerful empires. The article contextualises the decline within broader imperial rivalries and the shifting dynamics of Afro-European relations.

Keywords: Asante, Anglo-Asante Wars, British colonialism, Golden Stool

Introduction

The Asante Empire,¹ one of the most formidable pre-colonial states in West Africa, was an Akan state that lasted from 1701 to 1901. It rose to prominence through military prowess, centralised governance, and economic wealth, particularly in the gold and slave trade (Kwarteng 2024; Watt 2023; Hass 2017). However, by the late nineteenth century, this once-dominant polity experienced a dramatic decline, culminating in its colonisation by British forces in 1901. The present article provides a comprehensive account of the Asante Empire's rise and fall, emphasising the internal and external pressures that led to its transformation from a powerful African state to a subjugated colonial province.

1 The Europeans spelt Asante as Ashanti. As indigenes, the correct spelling is Asante.

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Historiographically, the study of Asante has evolved from a focus on the political centre—particularly Kumase and the Asantehene's royal court—to more nuanced understandings that include peripheral states and regional dynamics. Scholars like Larry Yarak (1986) have criticised the synchronic-centric approach, which prioritises the perspectives of the ruling elite while overlooking local dissensions and regional variations. The present article adopts a broader analytical lens, combining archival evidence, oral traditions, and historiographical synthesis to reassess the narratives surrounding Asante's trajectory. The decline of the Asante Empire is best understood through a multipronged approach: the expansion of British imperialism, the weakening of Asante's economic base, internal succession disputes, and the failure to adapt to rapidly changing global and regional dynamics. Scholars such as Ivor Wilks (1975), who emphasised structural internal issues, and Kwame Arhin (1986), who underscored the violent disruption imposed by British colonial ambitions, enrich this historiographical narrative.

By examining the multifaceted factors contributing to the decline of one of West Africa's most powerful empires, this research sheds light on the complex dynamics of power, resistance, and cultural imperialism in the nineteenth century. The study not only enriches the historiography of Asante but also provides critical insights into the broader implications of colonial encounters in Africa. Furthermore, it emphasises the necessity of re-evaluating established narratives by incorporating perspectives from both the political centre and the periphery, thereby fostering a more inclusive understanding of Asante's historical context.

Methodology

Employing a historical approach, the author has used primary and secondary sources to unravel the multifaceted factors for the decline of the Asante empire in the nineteenth century. I utilise the qualitative method of historical research, combining archival research, oral history, and the review of rare books to understand the changes in Asante's political status in the nineteenth century. To retrieve primary materials, the author has used traditional and digital archives, such as the National Archives of Ghana, the Internet Archives, and Google Scholar.

Primary archival documents were meticulously gathered from three main repositories: the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD. ADM.11/1731), the British National Archives' online platform, and

the Internet Archive. Essential documents comprised government reports, correspondence, and publications detailing Asante and British interactions, the Asante-British Wars, and the broader context of Gold Coast affairs. These were critically analysed to unveil vital historical insights. The archival materials also encompass communication dispatches between Governors and the Colonial Government, accounts from colonial officers involved in military confrontations with the Asante, and the British Parliamentary Papers. Oral history enriches the research by capturing personal narratives and lived experiences often overlooked in archival documents, providing unique insights into the social and cultural contexts of the Asante Empire.² It amplifies marginalised voices and ensures a more nuanced understanding of the empire's decline and its historical significance. Secondary sources included academic articles and scholarly works that deepened the understanding of the subject matter.

The article employs historiographical synthesis and fabulation to identify patterns, trends, and differences in perspectives. The methods are selected to help engage with the archives and the silences, absences, and speculative possibilities that shape historical understanding. The first phase involved a critical historiographical synthesis, which entailed a systematic collection, review, and interpretative analysis of existing historiographies, archival materials, scholarly commentaries, and institutional records relevant to the study's period and theme. By synthesising the multiple sources, the article aims to uncover dominant discourses, contestation, and epistemic shifts in understanding Asante's political evolution.

The historiographical synthesis approach not only reconstructs events but also serves as a critical conduit to examine the evolutionary trajectory. Therefore, it foregrounds the multiplicity of historical voices and reveals how official accounts have been constructed, legitimised, or resisted over time. Also, in recognising the limitations and partialities of the archival records, the research employed fabulation as a decolonial and imaginative strategy. Here, there is a speculative narrative—not conjectured facts—that fills historical silences and discloses alternative epistemologies.

With fabulation, the lived experiences, dissenting voices, and submerged knowledge often excluded from formal historical records are made alive.

2 This research was conducted in accordance with standard academic and ethical guidelines for social research. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, methods, and potential uses of the data prior to participation. Each interviewee provided informed consent and explicitly agreed to be identified by name in this publication. No participant was coerced or offered inducements, and all responses were recorded and reported with accuracy and integrity.

Through fabulation, the article enacts a critical re-narration of Asante's decline in the nineteenth century while ensuring historical rigour to expand its creative and ethical possibilities. The triangulation of historiographical synthesis and fabulation enables the research to move beyond state-centric historical accounts, as it provides structural and evidentiary grounding. It interrogates the gaps and reconfigures the narrative terrain. This approach affirms that historical knowledge is both constructed and interpretative. As such, by triangulation, the article embraces critical synthesis and speculative reimagining, not only recovering lost or marginalised voices but also critiquing the epistemic foundation of Asante's decline.

Historical Context

Oral tradition, according to the Kokofuhene, Barima Offe Akwasi Okogyeeasuo, indicates that the Asante migrated from Asaremanke in the seventeenth century, settling at Asiakwa before finally settling at Santemanso under the leadership of Ankyewaa Nyame, the ancestress of the rulership of Kwaaman (interview, 26 August 2023). Due to population growth, the immigrants settled in Omanso and, later, Kokofu, building towns and villages; thus, they became known as Amansie. At Kokofu, Pinaman Panyin, the daughter of Ankyewaa Nyame, became the first chief, who later gave birth to Mmua Brayie and Manu Kotosie, the mother of Osai Tutu and his brother Gyami. By the beginning of the 18th century, the nation had become a kingdom with Osai Tutu as the first Asantehene and by the nineteenth century, the Asante territory had become an empire stretching beyond its present location and included all the geographical locations after the Asante region, the Fanteland, parts of Ivory Coast and then British Togoland. The Asante empire included Gyaman, Dagomba, Gonja, the former Brong-Ahafo region, Sehwi, Wassa, Asen, and Denkyira (Bosman 1705; Bowdich 1819; Ellis 1893: 108-10; Reindorf 1895; Freeman 1898).

Colonial Encounters and Early Conflicts, 1800–1872

By 1800, the Asante kingdom had its tributaries rebelling to reassert their independence due to unfair treatment by the Asantehene. Robert B. Edgerton (1995: 1) asserts that the decline of the Asante began in 1817 when the first British envoy met the Asantehene and in 1821 when the British Government took over direct affairs on the Gold Coast following the Treaty of Paris of 1783. In 1821, a dramatic episode unfolded when Opentri,

the de facto chief of Abora, beheaded a fugitive named Kwame Tettey at Moree. This violation enraged the British Governor John Hope Smith, who dispatched troops to arrest Opendri—only for his emissary, Mr. Colliver, to be murdered on 9 April 1821. This incident triggered diplomatic chaos (Ellis 1893: 144; Reindorf 1895: 179). Asantehene Osei Tutu Kwamena, enraged by the British interference, halted all trade with Cape Coast until August 1821 due to miscommunication. With the miscommunication cleared, the trade resumed, but British meddling only intensified.

Governor Charles MacCarthy began to meddle in local affairs and to instigate Fante citizens against their kings and chiefs as MacCarthy established the Royal African Colonial Corps of Light Infantry, which created friction. In November 1822, a mulatto sergeant of the corps, Kwadwo Otetefo, was kidnapped by Asante residents—Kwame Butuakwa, Amoa Bata, and Apentento—at Anomabo due to a quarrel in May 1822 and taken as a prisoner to Dunkwa (Reindorf 1895: 179-80). This outraged MacCarthy, who tried everything diplomatic to have the sergeant return to him, but to no avail. In January 1823, the Asantehene sent a state executioner, Kwame Butukwa, to Dunkwa in order to acquit Kwame Otetefo. However, the chiefs of Denkyira took the responsibility to put the sergeant to death and convey the skull and head to Kumase, the capital of Asante. The execution occurred in February 1823.

This incident began the first Anglo-Asante war (1823-1831). MacCarthy rallied the Fante, Wassa, and Denkyira kings and chiefs to throw off their allegiance to the Asantehene because these states had endured the suppression of the Asante residents in the Fantelands, convincing MacCarthy that war against the Asante was the best solution. Upon realising that the British wanted to involve themselves in this war, the Asantehene remarked, “If you, the British, dared to invade us, Asante, I will use your skull as a drinking cup and your jaw bones to beat my drums.” This statement showed the seriousness of Asantehene’s involvement with the British Governor, Sir Charles MacCarthy (Nana Kwame Ackom, interview, 24 January 2025).

On 21 February MacCarthy launched a campaign, only to be ambushed a day later. At this time, the Asantehene, Osei Tutu Kwamena, had become old and ill. The Asantehene, upon rehearing of the incident, sent emissaries led by the linguist Kwasi Apente with Prince Owusu Pra and Anoneano and Abam to Akra³ (Accra) to find out if the Ga Mantse would join the British to fight against the Asante. The Ga Mantse vowed that “no nation will dare

3 Akra is now anglicised as Accra.

to invade Kumase unless we rather make war against that nation. Whoever attempts to burn Kumase shall quench the fire with his own blood” (Reindorf 1895: 182). In April 1823, MacCarthy met with the Akra chiefs and the King to detach from the Asante alliance. After numerous meetings, the Ga state unanimously resolved to support the British. However, the Ga Mantse, Adama Akuredze, told the Asante prince, Owusu Pra, to return home speedily to inform his father that his country would be invaded (Ellis 1893: 148-9; Reindorf 1895: 182-5).

On 4 June 1823, the planned invasion of MacCarthy took place. The Asante marshalled 4,000 soldiers to engage MacCarthy in a palaver. Osei Yaw Akoto had succeeded as Asantehene, but Osei Assibey (Osei Tutu Kwamena) warned him never to take up arms against the white men at the coast before his death. He was a young man and inexperienced in war; thus, Boaten and Awua Yaw, chiefs of Kumase, took the opportunity and desired to kill the chiefs of Denkyira, Twifo, and Wassa—i.e., Kwadwo Tsibo, Owusu, and Animiri—respectively. Major John Chisholm, then acting Governor, sent a contingent of about 2,000 soldiers under Captain Liang to confront the Asante army at Anomabo, forcing the Asante army to retreat on 21 January 1824 (Ellis 1893: 165-70; MacDonald 1898: 302-3). The large contingent convinced the Fante states about the determination of the British forces to resist Asante; thus, Kwasi Amankwa, chief of Essikuma and the Fante states, refused to pay their tributes to the Asantehene. The Dutch in Akra, whom the British counted upon, refused to sell Asante guns under Captain Blenkare, who seized some Asante and sold them as slaves. The Asante army consisted of 10,000 strong men on the advance.

Upon seeing the large army, the Fante and Wassa soldiers fled, leaving their arms behind, leaving the unfortunate MacCarthy and his 500 men with the Denkyira forces to fight the Asante and Anomansa alliance. The bush was too thick for open fire against the Asante, providing the Asante with an advantage over the British and their allies. In the war, the Asante army shot and killed 9 British officers and 180 regular militia, including beheading Sir Charles MacCarthy, Ensign Wetherall, and Beresford Teddlie, who were sacrificed at Essaman (Reindorf 1895: 185-98).

In the wake of the death of MacCarthy, the Asante forces marched with determination to Cape Coast, arriving on 21 June 1824. The British response was decisive; James Chisholm was appointed as Governor and immediately began strategising to dismantle the Asante kingdom and restore British pride. Utilising his diplomatic acumen, Chisholm garnered the support of

European merchants, governors, and southern Asante states. Just two weeks later, on 5 July, he mobilised an impressive army of 15,000 men, leveraging the assistance of Major Johan Christopher de Richelieu, the Danish Governor stationed at Christiansborg Castle in Akra. This alliance brought on board the Akra, Akuapem, and Akyem states, fortifying the British stance against the Asante.

Between 7 and 12 July, 1824, the Asante camped strategically near Ketse Kokoado, which rose as a hill directly opposite the Cape Coast Castle. An intense confrontation ensued as they laid siege to Cape Coast town, initiating open fire against the 5,074-strong British and Fante defenders, with the Fante making up the bulk of these forces at 4,650. Amid these clashes, an errant cannonball from the Smith Towers struck the palanquin of the Asantehene, ultimately forcing the Asante to retreat. The retreat was exacerbated by the substantial losses they faced, particularly the annihilation of Osahene Kwaku Biri from Asante Akyem at the hands of Okuapehene, Addo Dankwa, combined with outbreaks of smallpox and dysentery among their ranks, insufficient food supplies, and dwindling ammunition (Ellis 1893: 174-7; Reindorf 1895: 197-9).

On 7 March 1826, seeking vengeance against the Ga state for their allegiance to the British during the Nsamankow (Essaman War), the Asante advanced towards Akra.⁴ However, in August 1826, the British rallied allied troops from southern nations—Osudoku, Krobo, Akwamu, Shai, Akuapem, and Akyem—to resist this aggressive incursion. According to intelligence from an Akuapem captive named Okai Koi, the Akra forces had assembled at Dodowa, gearing up for a confrontation. The Akra and their allies amassed around 11,380 soldiers compared to the Asante force of 10,000. On 4 August the Ga and their confederates established their camp at Oyeadufa (Oyarifa) under the leadership of Ga Mantse, Taki Kome I, and by 7 August the Asante army advanced towards Dodowa.

The confrontation at Dodowa was marked by intense fighting, with the British left-wing comprising Denkyira, Asen, Fante, and Agona forces commanded by Denkyirahene, Kwadwo Tsibo. Meanwhile, the right-wing, led by Akwamuhene Akoto Panyin, included troops from Akwamu, Akyem, Akuapem, as well as Ningo, Tema, and Dangme. In this harrowing battle, the Asantehene Osei Yaw Akoto was wounded, and the chief of Essikuma, Akwasi Amankwa, suffered a grim fate—cut to pieces and beheaded

4 Akra consisted of Tema, Dawhenya, Teshie, La, Ngleshie Alata, Osu, Akanmadjen, Otublohum, Sempe, Gbese, Abola and Asere Tsono.

by Asante forces. This conflict resulted in the Asantehene losing wives, daughters, and numerous relatives, alongside the confiscation of valuable royal treasures, including state umbrellas, gold-hilted swords, jewels, and a military chest filled with gold cartouches, the divine currency used in their Odwira celebrations.

The Akwamuhene and his Ada captured the Golden Stool, a profound symbol of Asante unity and strength. However, Nkuntrase Antwi and Boaten valiantly fought back to reclaim the Golden Stool, which was ultimately brought to the Dwabenhene and delivered back to the Asantehene. Tragically, the Asante suffered a devastating loss of sixty generals, chiefs, and captains, including notable figures such as Yaw Osei Kyere, Nsutahene, Atakora Manu of Mampon, Dominasehene of Kumase, and twenty other chiefs, marking the Dodowa War, or Akatamanso War, as a catastrophic defeat that shattered the power of the Asante kingdom since its inception in 1701 (Ellis 1893: 181-3; Reindorf 1895: 207-17; Rattray 1929: 240).

Following this devastating encounter, the British severed trade routes with the Asante for a year, exacerbating their food scarcity and forcing the Asantehene to seek peace. On 1 September 1827, emissaries, including linguist Okwakwa, Amankwa Kuma, Nkwantabisa, Kankam Kyekyere, Afaaboo, Princess Achiaa, and Mr. Amissa, a British official detained during the Akatamanso War, arrived in Cape Coast to negotiate a truce. There, the Asantehene agreed to a subservient position under British governance. Under Governor Sir Neil Campbell, initial peace talks commenced but were delayed until December 1827 due to objections from allies, notably the Akra. Eventually, on 27 April 1831, a peace treaty⁵ was signed by the British and their allies—including Fetu, Fante, Anomabo, Denkyira, Twifo, Wassa, and Asen, alongside chiefs Adwumako, Asikuma, Akumfi, Abora, Agya, and Appolonia—with Asante representatives Princess Achiaa and Okakwa.

To reaffirm his commitment to peace, Osei Yaw Akoto deposited 600 ounces of gold and offered two young Asante princes—Owusu Ansah and Nkwantabisa—as hostages for six years. The treaty reinstated open trade routes while asserting that the Asantehene would no longer seek tribute or homage from southern states under British or European protection. This significant treaty was formalised in the Great Hall of Cape Coast Castle in

5 The Maclean Treaty. This treaty was signed after the Battle of Akatamanso, 1826. It formally ended hostilities between the British-Fante alliance and Asante. Through this treaty, the influence of the British along the coast was recognised and the Asante sphere of influence in coastal affairs was restricted.

June 1831. Upon the treaty's expiration in 1837, the British returned the gold—a gesture of goodwill in a fraught relationship shaped by centuries of conflict, diplomacy, and shifting allegiances in the historical tapestry of West Africa.

The signing of a treaty ignited a fierce civil war between Kumase and Dwaben. Kwaku Boaten, the Dwabenhene, perceived the treaty as a sign of weakness from the Asante and seized upon the turmoil that arose, particularly due to a dispute with the Asantehene over the enstoolment of Nsutahene. The Asantehene's hesitance to release Yaw Odabo Akumi (Kotiaaku), a native of Kubease, who had wronged Boaten by having relations with his three wives, further complicated this conflict. This bloody conflict persisted until 1836, after which Asante-British relations remained amicable for thirty years.

However, by 1862, under the governorship of Richard Pine, this cordiality deteriorated, culminating in war. The catalyst was Kwasi Gyanin, an Asante chief who sought sanctuary with the British. Asantehene Kwaku Dua demanded Gyanin's extradition over accusations of withholding gold nuggets due to the size of the amount they should have forfeited to Asantehene. Pine, fearing for Gyanin's life, demanded evidence of his guilt, ultimately leading to the Second Anglo-Asante War of 1863-64, wherein the Asante brought defeat to the British forces (Hay 1874: 56-7). This loss incited Pine's vow to dismantle the Asante military apparatus.

The aftermath of this war brought contempt for the British, particularly from figures like Kodwo Essien Egyir IV Oguamanhene, who defied British authority by being insubordinate despite the 1844 Bond. Governor Pine's ire led to his exile (1865). The silence of kings and chiefs on the Gold Coast concerning the exile of Oguamanhene served as the launch pad for the British to meddle in the affairs of the Gold Coasters long before colonialism. This absolute silence from other rulers strengthened the stance of the British influence to overthrow the kings and chiefs. Following Kwaku Dua's death in April 1868, his successor, Kofi Karikari, aligned with the Dutch in Anomansa to combat British influence, undertaking a bold invasion that included a failed assault on Krepi.

Following the outcome of the Asante expedition, the British Government changed policy. The British response was decisive, acquiring Dutch forts,⁶ with critical changes occurring on 25 February 1871, leading to the loss of

6 The Treaty of Exchange, 1867. This began the transfer of Dutch forts and settlements to the British but it was not actualised until 1871 due to the resistance of other states such as Denkyira and Anomabo. The actualisation of the treaty became known as The Gold Coast Treaty of 1871.

Elmina Castle—a pivotal stronghold for the Asante coastal authority (Snape 1874: 21; Manning 2021: 65). Kofi Karikari's protests regarding Elmina fell on deaf ears, revealing the precarious position of Asante amidst expanding British ambitions.

Expansion of British Influence and Internal Strife, 1873–90

The escalating tensions between the Asante Empire and British colonial powers during the early 1870s set the stage for a significant period of conflict that would reshape the region. At the centre of this tumultuous chapter was Kofi Karikari, whose approach to diplomacy with the British was heavily antagonistic. This stance alienated him from many Asante chiefs and advisors, particularly with the impending Akatamanso War on the horizon, thereby eroding his support base. His brutal actions—most notably the execution of 300 individuals as part of the final funeral rites for Kwaku Dua—further alienated crucial allies, including the influential Dwabenhene, who found his thirst for blood and vengeance unacceptable.

In October 1872, a pivotal moment occurred when the Dutch transferred their forts to British control. The British responded by removing Acheampon, the Asante Resident at Half Assini, to Cape Coast Castle before ultimately returning him to Kumase (Hay 1874: 66-7). Once back, Acheampon quickly rallied the Asantehene, urging a call to arms against their British adversaries. By December 1872, Kofi Karikari mobilised his forces, directing Adu Bofo to lead an assault with 5,000 soldiers against Wassa and Denkyira. Simultaneously, he tasked Bantamahene Amankwatia II with commanding a larger contingent of 12,000 warriors to strike at the southern coast. At the same time, Mawerehene was given a small force to secure the necessary territories of Akyem and prevent their defection to the Fante forces (Manning 2021: 76).

On 29 January 1873, the Asante forces launched an unexpected assault against the Fante, catching the British off guard. This began the Third Anglo-Asante War. While the local chiefs had alerted the British about the looming threat, they were unable to provide them with ammunition since no preparations had been made for such an invasion. As the Asante army triumphed over the Asen resistance at Nyankumase, occupying Fante Nyankumase by 9 February, the British Governor Robert William Harley was infuriated. In a swift response, he exiled Kobina Gyan, the King of Anomansa, whom he deemed a pivotal figure among pro-Asante sentiments along the coast.

In light of the ongoing conflict and its catastrophic consequences, particularly the ensuing famine, the British Government took action. On 10 March 1873, they dispatched rice and provisions to Cape Coast Castle, hoping to stabilise the dire situation (Hay 1874: 69-70). Meanwhile, British troops, led by Lieutenant Hopkin and his Hausa company from Lagos, joined forces with warriors from Asen and Denkyira to confront the invading Asante army that had breached Fanteland. This engagement forced the British to retreat to Cape Coast to regroup, consolidating their forces at Dunkwa by 8 April 1873. During this tumultuous period, Mankessimhene Kwasi Edu reached out to Britain, questioning the British Government's commitment to supporting the Fante Confederation, which he believed was under its jurisdiction (Hay 1874: 70-72).

As May 1873 unfolded, the British Parliamentary Under Secretary at the Colonial Office articulated a fierce resolve to subdue the Asante, advocating for a "severe lesson" to curb any aspirations of future aggression. Sir Garnet Joseph Wolseley was appointed as the new Governor, and shortly thereafter, on 5 June 1873, Asante forces achieved a significant victory, routing the opposition at Dwokwa and moving ahead to Effutu (British Parliamentary Papers 1874). The motives guiding British actions during this period were heavily intertwined with commercial interests, as emphasised by the Earl of Derby's assertion in October 1870 that trade thrived even in regions devoid of political control (Snape 1874: 16). In retaliation against the Asante, Governor Harley enacted martial law, and on 16 June, he ordered the incineration of the town, utilising firepower for a swift 20 minutes to reassert British dominance.

The situation escalated further when Governor Wolseley landed on the coast in October 1873, accompanied by notable military figures such as Captains Redvers Buller, George Huyshe, Colonel John McNeil VC, Evelyn Wood VC, and Lieutenant Arthur Eyre. Upon arrival, Wolseley imposed immediate restrictions on military engagements against the Asante until he could finalise a comprehensive strategy. He personally oversaw the surveying of key routes north of Anomansa's coast, enlisting Captain Huyshe and Lieutenant Hart for this critical task. However, the local coastal kings and chiefs exhibited wariness in supporting British efforts; the scars of the 1863-1864 War lingered heavily in their collective memory.

On 14 October, Wolseley led an imposing force of 600 European officers and 300 Hausa troops through Elmina, initiating a campaign against the Asante that resulted in the complete destruction of enemy camps located at

Essaman, Ankwana, Akyemfo, and Ampene. This decisive victory revitalised confidence in British superiority among the southern coastal chiefs and those from interior states. In response, Colonel Wood, Captain Glover, and Major Baker Russell began to train local militias, familiarising them with martial capabilities as they prepared for further engagements (Manning 2021: 103-13).

However, the tides of war shifted once more. On 27 October 1873, Colonel Festing launched an assault on the Asante camp at Asuboi. By November, unfavourable conditions, including illness that afflicted many European troops, including Garnet Wolseley, hampered British advances. The Asante defenders put up a fierce resistance at Abrakrampa. However, by 8 November, British forces advanced to Ahensan, facing a difficult battle where Fante warriors, particularly the Abora fighters, faced calamity, causing chaos, and the loss of life among their ranks.

As the year drew to a close, on 26 December 1873, Wolseley sent a missive to the Asantehene, demanding that the King sign a treaty laden with stipulations. However, the Asantehene, misled by Amankwatia regarding the realities of the British expedition, dismissed the urgency of Wolseley's demands, marking a critical moment in the continuous conflict between the Asante and British forces. Following a proper debriefing, Amankwatia was ordered to halt hostilities against the British forts, and he was directed to pay 50,000 ounces of gold (£200,000). Ignoring any diplomatic overtures from the Asantehene, Wolseley and his forces marched into Asante territory by 2 February 1874, through Praso (Colonial Office 1874). On 6 January, Wolseley issued an ultimatum for the immediate release of all captives, the gold payment, and the signing of a treaty in Kumase. As a gesture of goodwill, the Asantehene released Reverend Ramseyer and his wife on 12 January. By 13 January, they sent an envoy to Dompooase with a thousand ounces of gold, which the British received at Fomena.

Despite these efforts, Wolseley still presented the drafted treaty, which was met with resistance; the Asantehene rejected the renunciation of Adanse as the drafted treaty required the Asantehene to renounce the states of Adanse, Asen, Akyem, and Denkyira as tributaries. In a coded letter dated 29 January, Kofi Karikari cautioned against deceit. The decisive encounter occurred at Amofo, leading to a crushing defeat for the Asante, who lost a fifth of their forces. On 2 February, Wolseley captured Kumase, culminating in its destruction by 5 February. A peace treaty signed on 14 March mandated the Asantehene's renunciation of allegiance from Denkyira, Asen, Akyem,

Adansi, and Elmina and the payment of gold. The war's aftermath saw disunity within Asante leadership and upheaval in their political landscape (Colonial Office 1874; Ellis 1893: 342-3; Rattray 1929: 202; Headrick 1981; Manning 2021: 90).

One of the primary reasons for the British's triumph over the Asante was the disunity among the senior and Kumase chiefs. For instance, the Asantehene, Karikari, destooled the Kokofuhene, Kwame Appiagyei, on the allegation of plotting against him (Rattray 1929: 202). The intrusion of new weapons by the British tilted the battles in their favour, winning three battles and driving the Asantehene and his troops from Odasu to Akropon. The Asante used flintlock guns with an official range of 200 yards but with an efficiency of 80. The British utilised guns that used the violent explosive potassium chlorate as a detonating powder and a percussion lock, which could be fired in any weather, unlike the flintlock, which could not be used in rainy or damp weather, as experienced in November 1873. The British used 9lb rockets, 12-pounder mountain howitzers, 4,000 snider rifles and 3.2 million rounds of ammunition in that war against the Asante, who used spears, swords, bows, and arrows and the flintlock guns (Headrick 1981; Manning 2021: 90). The 1873 War resulted from a cultural clash that influenced how the British perceived Asante. For instance, Richard Freeman, a British Medical Doctor, described the welcoming ceremony in his honour by the Asantehene on 22 December 1888, as 'foolish ... and ... in imitation of an epileptic and waving a horsetail' (Freeman 1898: 99).

During the expedition, the British took away an Asante Stool—*Mpomponsu*⁷—to Britain, which Captain Jackson took. With the submission of the Asante to the dictates of the Fomena Treaty of 1874,⁸ the British

7 It is the state sword stool. The stool was returned in January 1986 after a succession negotiation between the Ghana Government and British Government. The stool was returned in an effort to improve cultural relations and acknowledge historical wrongdoings. The returned stool was received by the Asantehene Otumfuo Opoku Ware II through Nana Opuni Yankyimadu II, Dadeasoabahene of Agogo Traditional Area.

8 The Treaty of Fomena, 1874. This treaty was signed after the Sagranti War of the Anglo-Asante War (1873-74) following the British capture, looting, and burning of Kumasi under Sir Garnet Wolseley. The seat of the Asantehene was then at Pampaso and not present-day Manhyia. Through this treaty, the Asante agreed to renounce claims over other southern vassal states such as Denkyira, Akyem, Fante Confederacy States, Wassa, Asen, Sehwi and to pay an indemnity of £200,000 (50,000 ounces of gold) to the British; abolish all human sacrifices and certain traditional practices such as panyarring and slavery. The treaty was a massive blow to Asante's political hegemony and territorial influence and this marked the commencement of real British dominance. Following this treaty, the British in July 1874 declared the coastal areas and their immediate hinterlands as a colony.

began to influence states that previously paid tributes to the Asante to come under their protection. Such nation-states included Asante-Akyem, Akyem Abuakwa, and Akyem Kotoku. The Ahanta and Awuna came under British influence through a treaty. After 1873, the Asanteman Confederacy was dissolved, and most of the former vassals became autonomous (Freeman 1898: 37-52). On 17 December 1874, the British issued an edict that slavery and panyarring⁹ had been outlawed, decreed that no nation-state was to subject Kumasi hegemony, and stationed Hausa soldiers around the newly built palace at Manhyia in order to ensure there was no such attempt to rise again (Nana Kwame Amponsa, interview, 16 December 2024).

Following the Asante's defeat in the 1873-74 War, rebellions erupted in Gyaman, Atebubu, Kintampo, and Nkoranza, vital chiefdoms that served as economic links between the Asante Empire and the north. These areas were crucial trading hubs where Asante merchants resided after their northern expeditions, particularly in Kintampo, which was known for producing kola nuts, a major export of Asante. The Gyaman traders began to loot Asante goods, leading to a significant economic decline in Asante as vital trade routes were compromised. The Gyaman controlled two principal trunks passing through Bonduku and Salaga, which met at Kintampo on the west, while Timbuktu passed through Kong and Julasu. Kintampo, which produced the principal exports of Asante—kola nuts—began to levy Asante traders in 1875.

In 1875, the Gyaman state sought British protection, redirecting its trade to Kinjabo in modern Ivory Coast, exacerbating Asante's economic woes. The formal establishment of Gyaman as a British Protectorate on 25 January 1889, following the Peace Treaty between Nana Agyeman and the British, struck a severe blow to the Asante economy, particularly as Bonduku served as the principal rendezvous of the caravans from Kong, Timbuktu, and Western Sudan, which engaged in the Asante kola trade. At the time, Mo and Banda were tributaries of Gyaman (Freeman 1898: 204-6).

As trade threats increased, Asante traders faced harassment as they were molested by the Asen, Wassa, and Adanse people, necessitating British escorts (ADM.11/1731 1888: 5). By 1880, Atebubu had closed its routes, limiting Asante to trade with Kintampo only, which became the largest inland market (Boaten 1970: 43). Trade liberalisation after 1874 shifted the economic

9 It was the practising of seizing and holding people as collaterals until the repayment of a debt or a resolution of a conflict. The act developed from pawnship, where family members were pledged as collaterals to a debt when the debt was unpaid. It was officially banned following the 1831 Peace Treaty following the defeat of the Asante during the Akatamanso War (Dodowa War), but the Asante nation continued after the relapse of the Treaty.

power possessed by the Asantehene and his courtiers to Akonkofo,¹⁰ leading to an annual treasury loss of over £5,000, impacting the Asante economy significantly (Arhin 1974: 45). The lack of a common currency—the use of cowries and gold dust—affected trade and commerce as gold dust was more significant in Asante, while its trade neighbours valued cowries because it did not require specialised knowledge to exchange transactions (Boaten 1970: 49–50). The granting of independence to Nsoko, Denkyira, and Asen also affected the volume of gold dust available to Asante as these vassals contributed significantly to the gold volume of the state treasury (British Parliamentary Papers 1874). The decline in the volume of gold dust meant the dominant use of Asante's forbidden currency—cowries (Arhin 1974: 47).

The abolition of slavery further strained finances, as slave markets like Salaga, Edwera, and Kintampo were closed, causing a loss of approximately £20,000 annually and ceasing inter-regional commerce. Lastly, Kofi Karikari's lavish spending during customary rites and the desecration of past chiefs for gold further deteriorated the treasury. For instance, during each Adaye, the Asantehene dispensed over £500 (over forty peredwanes) to his visitors and the needy. According to Nana Kwame Ackom, during the Adaye of 1874, Kofi Karikari dispensed gold specks of dust valued at over £400 to the visitors and citizens, which further deteriorated the treasury of Asante, leading to his eventual destoolment amid the broader context of growing European imperial ambitions during the Berlin Conference of 1884–85.¹¹

In 1875, the Kotoko Council of Kumase came into conflict with the Dwaben state, which severed ties with Kumase and formed an alliance with Asokore, Afidwase, Nsuta, and other Oyoko chiefdoms to establish an independent kingdom (Prempeh 2003: 8–10). The conflict degenerated where traders were frequently abused, maimed, killed or imprisoned by the seceded state of Dwaben, forcing the Asantehene to respond with military operations. The actions of Dwaben and its allies caused Bekwai and Kokofu to declare their independence (Ellis 1893: 353–5).

10 Slaves, who served as tradesmen of chiefs.

11 Berlin Act (General Act of the Berlin Conference on West Africa), 26 February 1885, in *British and Foreign State Papers*, Vol. 76 (1885): 12. The 1880s saw colonial powers' deliberate interest in annexing the African continent, thus the Berlin Conference of November 1884 to February 1885. During the Berlin Conference, European powers negotiated territorial claims in Africa, leading to the formalisation of British control over the Gold Coast. This acquisition was driven by Britain's imperial ambitions and strategic interests in trade, allowing it to establish a foothold in a region rich in resources and trade potential. The Berlin Conference, which argued for a claim on African territories, saw a wave of military expeditions aimed at conquering and subjecting the Africans. Africa became the central focus of European diplomacy in the 1890s.

However, with the growing strength of Kumase supported by Asumegya, Mampon, and some factions in Dwaben, in August 1875, Kokofu and Bekwai returned their allegiance to Asantehene after the Asantehene had acquired Snider-Enfield rifles from a German merchant, Neilson, and formed an army of Hausa to help transform the Asante army (Ellis 1893: 353-7; Manning 2021: 159). The Asantehene, realising that Asante would never be strong enough to resist British invasion and the devastating nature of Dwaben, wrote to Governor Freeling to annexe Dwaben under its protection. The Governor rejected this proposal, for Britain was not ready for another Asante war. Mensa Bonsu established cordial relations with the various governors, such as sending 2,000 ounces of gold (£8280) as a sign of goodwill. However, many Asante chiefs in Kumase saw these actions as humiliating. These gifts were sent after Dr. Gouldsbury went to Dwaben and Kumase in order to resolve the impasse and received the indemnity, but in Kumase, a mob pelted emissaries with mud.

Between 1876 and 1880, the Asante, especially Bantamahene, Awua, and Bekwaehene Opoku, vowed to annexe Adanse, but the Asantehene, fearing that he would lose, greatly opposed the invasion. On 18 January 1881, a Gyaman prince, Owusu, having incurred the displeasure of the Asantehene, fled to the Elmina Castle for protection. The next day, an emissary arrived from Kumase with a golden axe, asking for his extradition. The golden axe was misconstrued as war instead of the matter being great; therefore, the Lieutenant-Governor, William Brandford Griffith, asked for reinforcement from Sierra Leone and from England (Ellis 1893: 363-5).

Upon hearing this, the Asantehene despatched emissaries to Cape Coast on 8 and 17 February 1881, to inform the Acting Governor, Griffith, of miscommunication. The Asante and British made peace on 29 April by asking the Asante to make an indemnity of 2,000 ounces of gold to cover the expenses, and Captain Rupert La Touche Lonsdale was made the British Officer Resident in Kumase. Even though the Asante paid, they considered it blackmail, and on 17 July, the Gyaman fugitive committed suicide. In February 1882, the Gyaman invaded Banda, which led the Asantehene to complain to the Governor since the Treaty of 1874 asked for non-interference; thus, the Governor commissioned Captain Lonsdale to embark to Bonduku in order to assess the situation. Captain Lonsdale reported that Kumase was responsible for the situation as the Asantehene had instructed the Bandahene and Nkoranzahene to rob and kill Gyaman traders and that it was in this response that the Gyaman nation had attacked.

With Mensa asking for the intervention of the British in the Gyaman-Banda issue, the Asante chiefs considered it a weakness and sought an opportunity to depose him. With Mensa deposed, Asante was thrown into chaos as some chiefs asked for the reinstatement of Kofi Karikari, and others supported Osei Mensa (Ellis 1893: 372-4). This led to a civil war that lasted almost a decade. The Asantehemaa, Yaa Akyiaa, after assessing the kingdom's state, convened a meeting of all chiefs. They agreed to elect and enstool an Asantehene, provided the British Official Resident, Captain John Glover Wilmot, approve the appointment in order to legitimise it. Asantehemaa proposed that her son, Kwesi Kissi, and an envoy were dispatched to Cape Coast in October 1884 to inform Governor William Alexander George Young. However, his death affected the recognition, and the British failed to act on it for two years. The failure to act was on the premise that, as Asante continued to find itself in political turmoil, its military threat was nullified.

In 1886, when Governor Brandford Griffith was reappointed, he sent an African interpreter, C. W. Badger, to assess the Asante situation. Two candidates emerged to be selected for the position: Asantehene—Kwabena Kyeretwie and Yaw Twereboanna. Kwabena Kyeretwie was the eldest son of Asantehemaa, and although she preferred her younger son, Kwaku Dua Asamu, to be Asantehene and Saamanhene, Akyampon Panin supported Yaw Twereboanna. With Kwabena Kyeretwie's rejection and Yaa Akyiaa's desire to have her son become Asantehene, she mooted Yaw Akyereboanda, the grandson of Asantehene Kwaku Dua I. The Asantehemaa preferred the young Kwaku Dua Asamu, and so she smeared the boy with white clay, insisting that the oracular shrine of Taa Kwadwo at Asokwa had revealed that Kwaku Dua Asamu was the Asantehene, therefore raising suspicions.

The issue polarised Asanteman, resulting in a meeting at Bekwae for reconciliation. Unfortunately, Akyampon Panin and his supporters were apprehended by Edwesohene, Kwasi Afrane, at the orders of the Asantehemaa and executed while Yaw Twereboanna was detained in Kumase. This action of Asantehemaa caused the chiefs of Kokofu and significant divisional chiefs of Kumase to organise Nsuta, Mampon, and Agona to support the cause of Twereboanna in May 1887. Yaa Akyiaa, on 5 March 1888, convened a meeting in Kumase with her supporters and enstooled Kwaku Dua Asamu as Agyeman Prempeh, the Asantehene, on Monday, 26 March 1888 (Prempeh 2003: 12-3). The proponents and supporters of Yaw Twereboanna—Kokofu, Mampon, Nsuta, Nkoranza, Ahafo and Kumase Gyaasehene, Asafo Boakye—fled across the Pra to seek refuge in the British Protectorate. It deepened the civil war in Asante, so Captain E. A. Barnett was sent to mediate the crisis.

While Asante tried to resolve its differences on who ought to be the Asantehene, the Gyaman, under Kwadwo Agyeman, sent an emissary to Cape Coast led by Kofi Dabi to entreat the British to annexe Gyaman. Gyaman formally became a British Protectorate on 25 January 1889. Although Osei Kwaku Dua III (Prempeh I) had been elected as Asantehene, he had not been placed on the Golden Stool. He was not officially recognised because the ceremony involved a considerable amount, and he could not meet these expenses. Therefore, he requested that the British Government extricate him by loaning him £400, which was made secretly (Freeman 1898: 2-3). The presence of Mamponhene, Owusu Sekyere II, and Kokofuhene, Osei Assibey, which validated the legitimacy of the Asantehene, was absent during the enstoolment of Prempeh.

The British had no interest in the affairs of the Asante after the 1873-4 War, but the incessant civil wars and political turmoil coupled with a growing interest of the French Government in penetrating and influencing Kong, Salaga, and Kintampo in 1886-89 and German's sudden impingement into Asante from Togo in the east influenced the British to salvage the Asante nation and put it under its protection. This event caused the British Colonial Office's fury as they saw this as a threat to their dominance, a violation of the treaty, and Asante's attempt to modernise its military.

The Path to Annexation, 1891-1901

In April 1891, the British Government on the Gold Coast invited Prempeh to submit Asanteman under British protection because "it was in danger of gradually falling into a decay," but Prempeh rejected the proposal and responded in a letter:

I am happy to say we have arrived at this conclusion that my Kingdom of Ashanti must remain independent as of old, at the same time to be friendly with all white men. Believe me, Governor, that I am happy to inform you that the cause of Ashanti is progressing (Colonial Office 1891; Prempeh 2003: 16).

Following this proposal, the British signed a treaty of friendship with Atebubu and concluded commerce with all nations that distanced themselves from Asanteman, including Nkoranza, Dwaben, and Agogo, in 1893. In 1894, when the Asante tried to reassert its influence on Atebubu and Nkoranza, Governor Griffith rejected it. He stationed a British Resident in these nation-

states while the Asantehene and his senior chiefs received stipends. On 11 June 1894, Kwaku Dua Asamu or Agyeman Prempeh officially became the Asantehene under the stool name Kwaku Dua III and, on 28 June, he responded to the proposal of the Governor that Asante would advance “a great farming and trading community ... and that trade ... may increase daily to the benefit of all interested in it” (British Parliamentary Papers 1894; Manning 2021: 166). The British Governor refused to recognise him as Asantehene and referred to him as “King of Kumase” on the suspicion that human sacrifices formed part of his enstoolment as Asantehene.

In April 1895, Governor William Edward Maxwell suggested that all Asante chiefdoms accept British protection with guarantees for free trade between the interior and the coast and the safety of all missionaries and abolish all forms of human sacrifices and failure to adhere to these proposals; there would be a lead in mustering (Freeman 1898: 123). In September 1895, Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain instructed Governor Maxwell that the indemnity of the 1874 Treaty had not been honoured in full and Asante had not refrained from attacking its neighbouring chiefdoms and had refused to accept a British Resident, so an attack should be launched. This hatred came from the back of George Reckless, a wealthy businessman in London who signed an agreement with the Asante envoys to develop Asante (Prempeh 2003: 18). This resulted in the 1896 burnt down of Kumase.

On 17 January 1896, the British Special Service Corps, comprising 250 men and 800 Africans primarily of Hausa descent, arrived in Kumase. There, Asantehene Kwaku Dua III and his chiefs waited solemnly and with passive dignity. Governor Fredrick Mitchell Hodgson demanded the payment of the indemnity. He ordered the Asantehene and the Asantehemaa to embrace his feet, which they prostrated and embraced the feet of the Governor and his Commander, Francis Cunningham Scott, in a gesture of submission (Colonial Office 1896). Prempeh could only afford 6,800 ounces, which meant that Asante had paid 7,840 ounces of gold since the Third Anglo-Asante War of 1873-74. Asantehene asked for an instalment payment, but Hodgson announced that Kwaku Dua, with his mother, father, Kwesi Gyambiri, brother, Agyeman Badu, and two close relatives—John and Albert Owusu Ansa—would be detained alongside the kings of Mampon, Offinso, and Edweso—Kwamena Appia, Kwadwo Appia and Kofi Mensa Afrane, respectively. Also, Amankwatia Bantamahene, Asafo Boakye, Boakye Atansa, and Kwaku Owusu were arrested as prisoners; these were Kumase chiefs (Burleigh 1896: 546-7). The British forces destroyed the royal

mausoleum at Bantama and blew up the sacred kumnini trees¹² in Kumasi, aside from marauding the royal palace (Manning 2021: 169-78). Asantehene and his family were initially detained at the Cape Coast Castle, then at the Elmina Castle on 1 February 1896, before the final exile to Freetown and Seychelles (Prof. De-Valera Botchway, interview, 13 January 2025).

With Kwaku Dua detained and subsequently exiled, Asanteman became administered by a British Resident, Captain Donald Stewart, and Kumase was placed in the care of three chiefs—Opoku Mensa, Nantwi, a linguist and Afrifa of Atwemahene, whom many perceived as British puppets, forcing many chiefdoms to drift away from Kumase. The British signed separate treaties with all satellite chiefdoms, including Edweso, Kokofu and Mampon, to curtail the centralisation of power in Kumase.¹³ On 29 March 1900, the British forces under Governor Hodgson, with Cecil Hamilton Armitage and Arthur Forbes Montanaro, marched to Kumase to ask for the Golden Stool. The Colonial Secretary sanctioned this act. In Kumase, Governor Hodgson informed the Kumasi Council that Kwaku Dua III was never coming back and that, if he was to return, the Asante was to pay £12,500 and demanded the Golden Stool (House of Commons 1901).

The seeking of the Golden Stool was premised on the assertion that if the Golden Stool was in the possession of the British, the English need not fear that the Asante nation would ever have the political power of a king with which to focus their opposition. The demand for this was premised on the information given by Kwame Tua, the Gyaasewahene of Kumasi, to the British that the Golden Stool contained the soul and embodiment of the Asante. The demand for the Stool was seen as an insult to the supreme authority of the Asante. At the meeting, the Governor met the Mamponhene, Dwabenhene, Bekwaehene, Kumawuhene, Kokofuhene, Adansehene, Edwesohe-maa, and Agonahene with some Kumase chiefs (Armitage and Montanaro 1901: 1-4). During the meeting, Yaa Asantewaa remarked that it was silly of the Governor to ask for the Golden Stool from the Asante chiefs, as each chief knew only their own stools. Hence, she spat on the Governor after chewing a kola nut. This red saliva scared the Governor, resulting in Nana Yaa Asantewaa remarking that “even the spit of a woman scares

12 These trees were the planted trees that established Asanteman as a kingdom.

13 The Treaty of Exile or the 1896 Treaty, was signed after the unaware invasion of Asante by Governor William Maxwell and the abdication of the Asantehene. Through this treaty, the Asantehene was forced to renounce claims to sovereignty and other leaders were exiled to the Seychelles. Through this treaty, Asante became a protectorate. This treaty effectively ended Asante's independence.

the white man, so all men should get up.” In times past, a spit on a person meant war, hence the Yaa Asantewaa War (Nana Osei Bonsu II, interview, 16 September 2024).

After the departure of the Governor, the chiefs of Kumase, Edweso, Offinso, Atwema, Ahafo, Kokofu, Bechem, Nkwanta, and Adanse asked to declare war, but the chiefs of Mampon, Nsuta, Dwaben, and Agona stood against the proposal, arguing that the war risked the Golden Stool being captured and lost forever. This resulted in another battle in which Asante rebelled, resulting in another Anglo-Asante Battle—the Yaa Asantewaa War (1900)—which would later result in the annexation of Kumase and its surrounding territories, ending Asante sovereignty and subsequently declaring a colony. According to an interview with Nana Yaa Asantewaa Afrane II, this demand resulted in a meeting at Kumase to secure the return of Kwaku Dua III.

However, there was a disagreement on the matter. At the meeting, she remarked, “I have now seen how fearful many of you have become. Are there no men in Asanteman? Have all men become women? If this were in the brave days of Osei Tutu, Obiri komfo Anokye, Opoku Ware, Mensa Bonsu and Kofi Karikari, would the white man dare step foot in Asante to take Asantehene away while the chiefs stayed aloof to see their King taken away without gun exchanges?” She further retorted: “Tomorrow by this time, the graveyard would have established a town and all dead women who were unmarried would be married.” This implied a declaration of war. The Golden Stool was, therefore, hidden in the forests of Barekese before Wawase in Kwabre for over thirty years until the return of the Asantehene and the re-establishment of the Asanteman (Nana Yaa Akosua Akyiaa, interview 10 April 2022).

On 31 March 1900, the Asante forces fought gallantly against the British forces, but subsequently, the British vanquished them, and Kumase was burned on 25 April 1900. After the defeat of the Asante, the following nation-states were made Amanhene (Paramount Chiefs) for their loyalty to the British—Nkoransa, Bekwae, Mampon, Kumawu, Dwaben, Nsuta, Gyaman, Wam, Berekum, Wenchi, Takyiman, Atebubu, Manso Nkwanta, and Asumegya (Ward 1958: 310-1). Captain Cecil H. Armitage was appointed the new British Assistant, and later Asante became a colony. Following the defeat of Asante, the British Government exiled Yaa Asantewaa, Edwesohe-maa, and the chiefs of the following chiefdoms for rebellion: Offinso, Atwema, Ahafo, Bechem, Nkwanta, and Adansi, as well as some chiefs of Kokofu. The Asante was officially annexed in 1901 when the British Government nominated all chiefs.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of the Asante Empire underscores a profound narrative of resilience amid the relentless pressures of colonial encroachment. The present study has illuminated the multifaceted causes behind the transition of Asante from a powerful empire to a British vassalage, revealing the intricate dynamics of internal governance and external confrontations that shaped its fate. The exploration of Asante's decline—rooted in military, political, and economic challenges—demonstrates how the interplay of local strife and European imperial ambitions ultimately culminated in the empire's annexation.

The complexity of this decline invites a re-evaluation of historical interpretations, advocating for an inclusive approach that acknowledges both the perspectives of the political centre in Kumase and the experiences of the marginalised periphery, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the empire's historical context. By integrating these varying viewpoints, this research not only enriches the historiography of the Asante Empire but also contributes to a broader understanding of colonial encounters in Africa.

The legacy of the Asante Empire serves as a poignant reminder of the intricacies of power, resistance, and adaptation in a rapidly changing world. As contemporary scholars continue to unpack the threads of this significant chapter in African history, let us remain cognizant of the importance of diverse narratives in shaping our understanding of the past, thereby ensuring that the voices of all those involved in this monumental era are heard and preserved. The present research not only adds to the existing body of knowledge on Asante but also serves as a critical examination of the broader implications of colonial encounters in Africa during the nineteenth century. The legacy of the Asante Empire remains a vital case study in the dynamics of power and cultural adaptation in the face of imperial expansion.

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REVIEW

O'Carroll, Brendan. 2023. *The Long Range Desert Group in North Africa*. Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military. 256 pp. ISBN 978-81399064057

Blessing J. Edet^a

Brendan O'Carroll, the author of *The Long Range Desert Group in North Africa* (2023), has sojourned the worlds of military research; a process that enabled him transition from a Custom Officer in New Zealand into juggling roles of Military Historian, Editor, Collector, Exhibitor, Author, and Specialist in the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) of World War II (WWII). His many decades of researching LRDG explain the book in terms of its authoritativeness and the author's capacity to weave a simple but engaging narrative on the subject. Prior to this publication, O'Carroll had published six books on LRDG (O'Carroll 2000, 2002, 2005, 2020a, 2020b, and 2022). The present one being reviewed is the seventh but not the last of his publications in the LRDG series. The book is an addition to the historiography of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) aspects of WWII in North Africa.

The LRDG was a British Special Force unit formed in July 1941 that operated until the end of 1943 in the Desert Campaigns in North Africa during WWII. Operating from Egypt, the LRDG carried out ISR operations around the southern borders of Libya and Tunisia. As a matter of fact, one may wonder what the significance of LRDG was to the overall outcome of the war. LRDG's success in the campaign as a whole was the first major Allied land victory that marked the turning point of the war and allowed the Allies to launch further offensives into Europe. Formed primarily for reconnaissance and intelligence gathering behind enemy lines, the LRDG within the period of the campaign became reputed for penetrating deep into German- and Italian-held territories in North Africa in order to notch up vital information while putting their lives on the line with daring exploits and raiding missions that eventually paved the way for the Allied victory

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in WWII. The LRDG became the epitome of success in manoeuvre and tactical warfare framed by excellent leadership, troop's organisation and discipline, resilience, and individual heroics that reaffirmed the significance of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance in warfare.

Although the book attempts to paint the picture of soldiers' doggedness in-between two unfavourable alternatives as in the mythological Scylla and Charybdis, in this case, between fighting Axis forces and battling the harshest conditions of the Sahara, the introductory section and the other chapters mellow these conditions pointing to a campaign that was considered by some LRDG soldiers as the most enjoyable when compared to other battle theatres they once served (see p. xi). This notion of troops "enjoyment" gives the impression that soldiers of LRDG were on holidays in North Africa in comparison to their counterparts in Europe who, bugged in the trenches, faced constant barrages of enemy fire, threats of disease, and the unsanitary environment of the trenches.

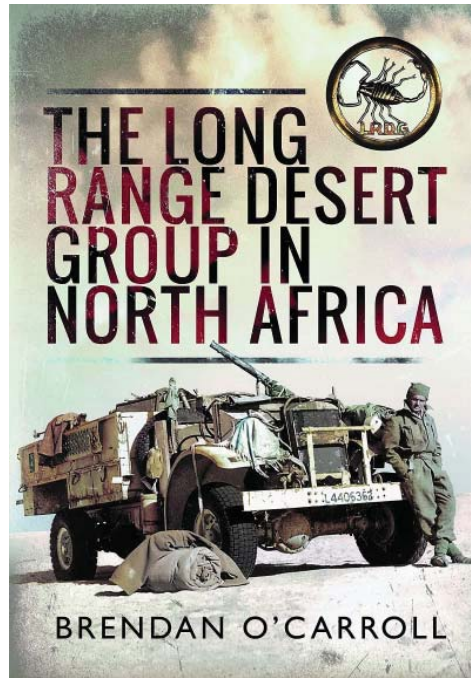
On the contrary, the LRDG in the North African campaign was no tea party. The twelve chapters of the book vividly encapsulate two major challenges of the campaign. First was the challenge of the desert terrain which could be hot and uncomfortable, ridden with flies, snakes, and scorpions and on occasion subject to huge sandstorms. This, of course, impacted the overall efficiency of the LRDG and constantly threatened their missions. The second challenge was combat actions in which the LRDG was frequently exposed to enemy's aerial strafing and bombing, landmines and direct combat operations in their desert strongholds and forts. This left the LRDG with casualties: dead, wounded, maimed, and prisoners of war (POW).

The chapters also describe the responses of the LRDG to these challenges: they include a well-organised LRDG divided into Reconnaissance Patrol groups with aerial support from the Royal Air force (RAF); Heavy and Vehicles sections to transport food, fuel, men and equipment to forward bases; efficient weapon systems for offense and defence; a signal group to abreast the General Headquarters (GHQ) with Situation Reports (SITREPs); constant supplies of food to soldiers; navigational equipment for survival and topographical information; military paraphernalia for identity and protections against the harsh conditions of the desert; a taxi service mission (Libyan Taxi Service) for guiding, inserting, supplying, rescuing, collecting, recovering wounded LRDGs, undercover agents, downed aircrew, and POW; and a road watch to give detailed observations and reliable intelligence of enemy movement along the Tripoli-Benghazi road.

Consequent upon these measures, the LRDG not only delivered its military objectives but increasingly frustrated the military brains of the Desert Fox – Erwin Rommel and his *Afrika Korps*. Many cases of ISR operations during WWII have come under scrutiny over the years. For example, the intelligence failure that preceded the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941; Operation Barbarossa of June 1941; the German Blitzkrieg on the Maginot Line; and the launch of the Ardennes offensive in December 1944, amongst others, has been questioned by scholars. However, the LRDG operations in North Africa not only proved the strategic and tactical importance of ISR in warfare but also influenced the outcome of WWII.

The book did not only weave a fascinating narrative of the everyday life of the LRDG troops in the North-African desert but this was done by using a technique that combines transcriptions of the original LRDG operational reports with oral interviews and pictorial evidence, mostly taken from private cameras of the LRDG. The sources were combined to animate the realities of operating in such a difficult terrain. The copious number of pictures used gives a balance between the author's analysis and operational reports. In so doing, the author, although sensitive to the needs of a scholarly and a lay audience, presented a narrative that extensively relies on primary evidence; in a way that almost allowed facts to speak for themselves.

Although the author has done a fantastic job of using mainly primary sources to relate the LRDG operations in North Africa, it may be hard to conclude that O'Carroll exhibited historical objectivity, given that he told a story in which the voice of enemy forces was rarely heard. In the chapter on "Enemy Encounters," the author relies extensively on oral accounts and private letters of New Zealand members of the LRDG to explain his points. This is likely because he wants to weave a simple narrative that concentrated on the experiences of the LRDG. More could have been done to generate new insights on the campaign by interacting with sources on German and Italian troops' impressions of the LRDG. Moreover, a comparative analysis of Allied and Axis ISR operations in the North African campaign invokes possibilities of future scholarship. Although his sources may be one-sided, O'Carroll provides a generally reasonable account that will attract a wide readership especially those interested in the tactical details and personal experiences of LRDG troops in WWII. However, a fairly sizeable number of pages devoted to explanatory analysis compared to that devoted to pictures may indicate the author's intention of reaching both professional and casual audiences. Given the nature of evidence utilised, the book can serve as authoritative secondary material for Military Historians.



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ISSN 2336-3274 (Print)

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ISSN 2336-3274

ISSN 2570-7558 (ONLINE)

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