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DIGITAL WARFARE TRANSFORMING POLITICAL RHETORIC: SOCIAL MEDIA (AB)USE AND THE ETHIOPIA WAR OF 2020-2022

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Abstract: This article analyses key aspects of the armed conflict during the so-called "Tigray War" of 2020-2022 in northern Ethiopia, focusing on the "digital warfare" that accompanied it. I argue that the physical war was enhanced by its digital media representation, which negatively impacted (global) media reporting. Via an analysis of repeated aggressive and loaded digital memes I describe (digital) political rhetoric and its loose relation to verifiable facts on the ground. A discursive domain of misinformation and semi-fictitious appearances was created that perpetuated conflict and made open, truth-oriented fact-finding difficult: current digital media allow political rhetoric to massively go beyond the conventions of shared discursive exchange. The case study shows that beyond the analysis of digital and news media products new ways have to be found to "reality-check" or reduce these representations to themes amenable for public dialogue and eventual shared compromise.

Keywords: armed conflict, political rhetoric, digital warfare, social media, Ethiopian politics, ethnic politics

Introduction[1]

In this article I give a flashback on social media dis- and misinformation efforts perpetrated in the 2020-2022 "Tigray War" in northern Ethiopia and analyse their nature and impact. Social media utterances during that conflict and its aftermath became a form of quotidian political rhetoric of digitally active Ethiopians – first by the insurgents (of the TPLF, or Tigray Peoples Liberation Front[2]) and their sympathisers, and later to a lesser extent by the federal government and its supporters – as well as by foreigners following the country's conflict or doing advocacy work. In conjunction to studying

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1 I thank the three referees of Modern Africa for their critical comments on an earlier version of this paper. Final editing was done in December 2025.

2 I cite the name here not in the correct spelling ("People's") but in the manner that the TPLF members and most analysts always cite it.

their rhetoric, one needs to assess the global mainstream (printed) news media and their role, as they often tuned in to such social media discourse with a remarkable lack of due diligence and fact-checking of their own. This was done in a manner reminiscent of Western journalists in the 1930s Soviet Union who were duped and fêted by the repressive authorities, and neglected their professional duty to report reliably or truthfully.[3] In the Ethiopian case, due to the interaction of digital and actual warfare, and the involvement (or, one might also say, constant meddling) of multiple foreign parties, it is difficult to present a full analysis and explanation of the chain of events in this exceedingly complex war and of the devious rhetoric surrounding it - and this article only scratches the surface.

The central research question is: how did "digital activism" transform political rhetoric via social media during the Ethiopia war of 2020-2022 and impact the discursive representation of backgrounds and motives of the war in global news media reporting and policy responses?

Political rhetoric is of all times, with the first written records reflecting on it dating from the Ancient Greeks (Gagarin 2019) and it constitutes an essential discursive element in the political arena in both democratic and dictatorial forms. However, in the early 21st century its use and abuse have intensified due to cyberspace domains, often becoming manipulated and subversive due to the massively expanded use of social media exchanges, which are marginally monitored, well-networked, and moving fast via algorithmic replication. Discursive disruption, up to and including hate speech[4] and active conspiracy thinking, is rampant, due to the opportunity of users to launch (dis-)information and extreme personal views, often to sophistically mislead, intimidate, or intimidate others. While these processes indicate a "democratization" of the means of expression and of "free speech" and are not only negative, they tend to endanger ordered democratic polities (Haidt 2022) as well as reasonable discourse, and also (the acceptance of) scientific insights and truth-finding (McIntyre 2018).

3 The classic case is New York Times's Walter Duranty's "journalism" in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqnfmCu6fUk and www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6vye5DDqTo.

4 Definitions of hate speech vary, but I following Howard (2019: 96), citing Parekh's 2021 description: "… hate speech [..] is directed against a specified or easily identifiable individual or, more commonly, a group of individuals based on an arbitrary or normatively irrelevant feature"; second, it "stigmatizes the target group by implicitly or explicitly ascribing to it qualities widely regarded as undesirable"; and third, it frames the "target group…as an undesirable presence and a legitimate object of hostility." Thus, even the existence of the hated individual/group is resented.

As has often been asserted,[5] messaging in digital spaces can contribute significantly to war mongering and even to translating discursive interventions into action. Often such messaging is coordinated (via bots) and derives its power from its affective dimension (Boler and Davis 2021). It thereby often perpetuates "enemy images" and prolongs conflict or warfare (Chiluwa 2019: 22 on Mali). I contend that this has been the case in the "Tigray War" in northern Ethiopia from 3 November 2020 to 2 November 2022: there was a transformative impact of digital and global mainstream news media[6] messages on the politics of conflict.

The theoretical approach in this article is informed by the comparative analysis of digitised identity politics, or what I call "political identitarianism" – which I define as a strategy of the rhetorically overstated self-identity presentation of a group (or rather its elite) for political purposes. It is pursued based on a (political, national, religious or ethnic) group's narrowly defined identity position and done via one-dimensional political rhetoric. Political anthropologists often recognise it as behaviour based on the in-group, the "tribal impulse", which has characterised humanity throughout its evolutionary history.[7] Remarkably, in current global politics this tribal element seems to make a political comeback. My specific hypothesis on the overwhelming negative and identity group-based social messaging is derived from Schöne et al. (2021): media like Twitter, Facebook or TikTok tend to strongly spread negativity in conflictuous political situations (despite also having positive aspects, e.g., in their function as news channels). As we see in other conflict settings, in digital spaces the production and exchange of adversarial identity discourse seem paramount and correlated with the *actual* development of conflicts (Pabón and Shifa 2022). This negativity effect (also highlighted in a recent 2024 NAS report, especially Chapter 4, and in US Surgeon General 2023: 6-10) may in part relate to the very nature of digital media itself, as its technological formula appears to *stimulate* it.

An underlying point of departure is that the study of digital media communication and its discursive tropes should *not* be merely descriptive – what it says, how it "works", what the online "networks" are, what

5 E.g., Moges Teshome. 2025. " 'The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions': the Role of Facebook in Fuelling Ethnic Violence" (www.asc.upenn.edu/research/centers/milton-wolf-seminar-media-and-diplomacy/blog/road-hell-paved-good-intentions-role-facebook-fuelling-ethnic-violence).

6 I mean here CNN, BBC, Al-Jazeera, etc., press agencies like AP, AFP or Bloomberg, and newspapers like the New York Times, Washington Post, The Guardian, Le Monde, Daily Mail, etc.

7 That the "tribal" nature of human collectivities is resilient throughout human cultural history was convincingly demonstrated in the major study by prominent anthropologist Robin Fox (2011).

frequency certain themes have, etc. – but ultimately also be critical-evaluative of the assertions made in it. Its information and "truth claims" are to be comparatively assessed, not merely registered in their "persuasive" effects. This means meeting what I would call Gorgias's challenge, in Plato's dialogue (Norris 2017: 626): rhetoric for the sophist Gorgias was not concerned with the morally good or right judgement, but only with persuasion, via appeals to emotion, pleasing and charming the listeners, i.e., in an "entertaining" manner. I mention this ancient author to underline that the rhetoric of much of current social media is deeply political and self-centred, and as such is nothing new in human discourse: it seamlessly fits in with Gorgias's conception of "amoral", instrumental rhetoric. To draw only that conclusion is not enough (as Plato also noted): we need to keep in mind what "truth" is and how it can be ascertained (as best as possible, McIntyre 2018: 122). This question is becoming more relevant by the day, as we see that AI now is also brought to bear in digital misinformation and propaganda battles (Nelu 2024).

Methodologically this article is based on studying a collection of several thousand digital reactions/responses to the conflict from both the TPLF and its activists as well as from "pro-Ethiopian government" accounts (to a lesser extent, because they were fewer in number). Also, global news media reporting was followed and collected. Methods to study Twitter data are developed since at least 2013 (Kim et al. 2013). I gathered the primary digital material during the two years of the conflict and after. Collecting masses of tweets is not difficult (Ohme et al. 2024), but the selection and analysis is. I targeted thematic keyword searches and followed the messages with high numbers of retweets, then selected the recurring sites and senders that contributed to commenting on the conflict in an explicit "political" way and which were also referred to or reappearing in comments, website articles or in even written news media reports. I compared and evaluated these data during some six months of study of the tweets related to the thematic headings treated below (#"Tigray genocide", and following). I do not claim to have made a complete quantitative analysis on these materials.

Summary of the Conflict in Northern Ethiopia, 2020-2022

The enormous production of articles, papers and blog pieces on this northern Ethiopia (Tigray) conflict(s) often obscures the basic facts. This in itself is an aim of these multiple (social) media products: cultivating obfuscation and "both-sideism", neglecting historical-political context, pushing memes

to redefine the "narrative", and speculating about its unresolved aftermath in countless "expert commentaries".

The conflict of 2020-2022 in northern Ethiopia had its antecedents in the ethnic-based political system of the country, installed in 1991 under the then incoming TPLF-EPRDF regime, which made "ethnic identity" a requisite in political life and accorded great autonomy (with the "right to secession") of ethno-linguistic groups (*behéreseboch*), and also opened an avenue for new ethnic elites to establish themselves. The divisive aspects of the model have been much commented upon in the scholarly literature. In April 2018, Dr Abiy Ahmed, the candidate of the Oromo section of the then still ruling party EPRDF,[8] became prime minister. He announced a "reform agenda" and gradually ousted representatives of the deeply unpopular TPLF elite from key positions in government. Tensions rapidly escalated, with the TPLF resenting the loss of its hold on power. It refused to cooperate with the new PM and objected to the delay of the May 2020 national parliamentary election (justifiably postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic). The TPLF held the elections for the Tigray regional parliament (where it was the only party standing) and no longer recognised the power of the new PM beyond 2020. Mutual threats were made between federal government and the TPLF regional government. The largest part of the Ethiopian federal army was then still stationed in Tigray (including heavy weapons), due to the aftermath of the unresolved conflict with Eritrea after the 1998-2000 war.

Violence started on 3 November 2020, initiated by the TPLF with a nightly surprise attack on federal soldiers on five army bases in Tigray, with ca. 3 to 4,000 killed, many others injured, mutilated and abused. The details of this attack and its aftermath were discussed in many Ethiopian news outlets and publications. A telling survivor account of this attack is Gashaye's harrowing book *The Betrayed Northern Command* (2022). During the attack, the TPLF (and likely later also the federal government) cut off Internet and Telecom connections, and took over the federal army's heavy weapons. The TPLF thus tried to re-establish national prominence by attempting control of the federal army and thereby implicitly aimed at regaining federal power (as was substantiated in its attempts to move towards Addis Ababa in 2021). On 4 November 2020 the rest of the federal army was ordered by PM Abiy to start the counterattack, to "restore the federal constitutional order". After three weeks of fighting, it had pushed back the TPLF forces. It did, however, not occupy Tigray and "finish the job", but installed a Tigrayan-led

8 The "Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front".

interim government. This did not prevent the resurgence of the TPLF, which then entered the neighbouring Amhara and Afar Regions in a devastating campaign, with tens of thousands killed, including massive numbers of civilians. Huge damage was done to infrastructures, crops and livestock, educational institutions and businesses. The fighting raged on until October 2022, with three intensive rounds of battle (November to December 2020; June to December 2021; and May to October 2022), and with shocking abuses perpetrated on both sides. In the counter-offensive, Tigray Region was badly hit. In late 2022, negotiations in South Africa under the auspices of the African Union (and with meddling by the US Administration of Joe Biden) led to a 2 November 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA), which stipulated disarmament of the TPLF, humanitarian aid and rehabilitation for all civilians affected, and restoration of the federal state order (among others): effectively a surrender of the TPLF. But the TPLF movement was not dismantled, its leaders were not prosecuted in court, the rehabilitation of war-affected communities was negligible, and no overall inclusive political settlement was reached, neither for Tigray nor for Ethiopia as a whole (Abbink 2024).

Real War and Digital War

While this two-year war (November 2020-November 2022) between the Ethiopian federal government army and the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front is over since the CoHA was signed on 2 November 2022, its devastating impact is still felt four years after. Ethiopia is slow in recovering, despite its government and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed giving heads-up messages about political stabilisation, economic recovery, massive tree-planting, GERD-dam lake filling, foreign investments, etc. The economic problems are huge, armed conflict has resurfaced in the Oromia and Amhara regions, poverty is again growing, political turmoil continues in Tigray, and the material and psychological damage of the war and the shocking way it was conducted is serious and not properly addressed: no accountability yet. Indeed, social media and propaganda battles seen during the war even appear to continue, because real "reconciliation", peace, or recovery have not been achieved. A new armed conflict was opened by the federal government in the Amhara region in April 2023, trying to incorporate local militias that had contributed to the battles against TPLF into the federal army. The fact that in precarious states – such as Ethiopia – the Internet is frequently cut off by the national telecom providers (Xynou and Filastò 2023) has not made

much difference, as inventive methods are used (beyond VPN detours) to circulate messages across the country and beyond.

Social media contestation and cyberwarfare are often referred to in the case of Ethiopia, but serious studies of it are rare, especially when we look at the issues of political and sociological evaluation of the narratives and of the (lack of) arguments about the armed conflict.[9] There are quantitative studies that used API (application programming interface) when analysing X-Twitter, and/or web scraping, and these studies – few of good quality – usually come up with inventories of themes and memes in the cyber battlefronts. They rarely offer a problem-oriented, focused analysis of a *representative* body of positions and arguments based on critical fact-evaluation (Pennycook et al. 2021) or on how this feeds back into actual conflict. In this article I tried to do the latter but recognise the limitations; it is not API-based[10] and theme-selective but it gives a critical survey of representative and influential positions taken in the cyber warfare on Ethiopia.[11] The focus here is mainly on material from X-Twitter and on rhetorical positions presented by pro-TPLF activists.[12]

It is striking that militant activism on social media regarding Ethiopia's armed conflicts (especially on X-Twitter, and in the past two years increasingly on TikTok) was well-coordinated and punched above its weight. Despite the shaky and biased approaches in the messaging, it had an inordinate impact on global news media and policy-makers in the West (the "donor countries") influenced by its misinformation and incorrect memes – thus delaying a solution for the armed conflict (Abbink 2021a-b). This impact was especially pertinent from the side of the pro-TPLF activists and their

9 A note on digital media use in Ethiopia: in 2024 there were 24.83 million Internet users (i.e., a penetration of 194.4 %). There were 7.05 million social media users, i.e., only 5.5 % of the total population (this increases every year with 0.5 to 1 %). There were some 77.39 million cell mobile connections active in Ethiopia (60.4 % of the population, growing fast).(Source: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-ethiopia).

10 API (application programming interface) can no longer be freely used on Twitter since ca. February 2023: the costs now make research "to extract and process large amounts of data" (Caulfield 2023: 225) much more difficult and time-consuming.

11 While this article limits itself to the "Tigray-conflict", initiated by the TPLF on 3-4 November 2020 and formally ended on 2 November 2022 with the "Cessation of Hostilities Agreement" signed in Pretoria (Abbink 2023), serious armed conflicts in the country are continuing in the Oromia and Amhara regions between 2023 and 2025. These conflicts are also accompanied by negative and hateful social media communication but will not be extensively discussed here.

12 There are indications that over the past few years Ethiopian users now are favouring TikTok more than X-Twitter (see: https://ethiopianbusinessreview.net/ethiopians-getting-taste-of-tiktok-phenomenon; and https://hypetrace.com/top/tiktok/ethiopia/), mostly for the private or so-called funny videoclips, and often with the underlying aim to generate money. However, a pioneering analysis of political TikTok messaging regarding the "Tigray War" was done by Cozzatella and Roden 2023.

supporters. This activist social media messaging contributed to create a narrative in the global press and policy circles, whereby the TPLF and Tigray Region and its people were framed as "the underdog" and "at the receiving end" of all human rights abuses in the conflict – despite the fact that TPLF had started it with a massive and lethal surprise attack on 3-4 November 2020 and majorly contributed to the abuse. Comparable attention to similar and often worse problems that emerged in the wake of TPLF's offensives in Amhara and Afar regions has been lacking, that is, are under-reported.

Digital Warfare and Politics

The effects of "digital warfare" have strongly impacted Ethiopians in- and outside Ethiopia and perpetuated enemy images, disinformation narratives and frequently hate speech. This still hinders the (re-)establishment of durable stability and peace and is problematic for the political future of Ethiopia after the 2022 CoHA agreement: trust has been declining, and perceptions of group tension and problematic "nation-building" continue. Basically, this situation is a result of decades of ideologically buttressed "ethnic-based" politics, entrenched in the Ethiopian political system and public psyche since 1991. The socio-political effects of this constitutionally anchored model of doing politics (in the 1995 Constitution) were underestimated, but they have defined a new "political culture" of division and identity politics that has not yet delivered an integrative (multi-)nation building. For most Ethiopians – traditionally connected across ethnicity in social, cultural, and religious networks and with an ethos of "getting along" despite differences – such a fragmented future is "too ghastly to contemplate". It appears only to be (economically) attractive for self-appointed ethnic-group elites, which were fostered if not produced by the post-1991 political dispensation, and who – as the recent war and still ongoing violent conflicts in Ethiopia demonstrate – had notably failed.[13]

13 An additional problem is the self-serving behaviour of (new) ethno-elites. A recent example reported is the apparently substantial corruption and self-enrichment of the elite of the Sidama Region, a new regional state declared in November 2019 (Abera et al. 2025). Frequent press and popular Ethiopian social media also mentioned it (www.thereporterethiopia.com/41963/; www.youtube.com/live/D8Arw4Bk6tc?feature=share, at 13.30', and https://borkena.com/2023/10/20/ethiopia-sidama-over-100-government-officials-including-regional-security-chief-arrested-for-theft-of-25000-quintals-of-fertilizer/). Similar oral reports on the expansion of corruption, bribery and nepotism are heard from other regions, such as Gambela, Addis Ababa and Oromia.

Complicating these issues is that certain political agendas have also been crafted and stimulated by "diaspora"-based academics, journalists and activists of Ethiopian origin in Europe, the USA and elsewhere (Tessema and Eyassu 2023). Many of them – and including their non-Ethiopian fellow travellers – tend to be "ethno-nationalist" and produce radical, exclusionary and even violent views on local ethno-communal relations in Ethiopia, on which they comment from their comfortable homes abroad. But they have a detrimental impact on the country's public discourse and social fabric.

Digital Rhetoric in Social Media: More Conflict than Conciliation

No country escapes the shaping influence of digital media and "developing countries" are no exception. This section discusses some of its key features. In some countries the vehemence of political and communal debate or conflict is aggravated by these media. As we know from a growing body of research, the uninhibited and unmonitored venting of instant opinions online is not bringing people together but creating enemy-friend lines in the classic Schmittian sense (Schmitt 1963: 26-27), splitting the political community. Paradoxically, the enlightened ideal of free speech allegedly cherished by online communicators more often than not tends to turn into intimidation contests that undermine the informed exchange of ideas and views for a common aim or shared political space.

One may observe that digital spaces are by nature non-deliberative, iterative, non-mediated and, as mentioned above, often move toward a subversion of democracy (Haidt 2022).[14] This is enhanced by the fact that social media language is usually anonymous, non-accountable, and produces instant, non-fact-checked messaging. Indeed, it is not facts but feelings and emotions that count. In the absence of agreed-upon standards of digital literacy or etiquette, and of acceptable on-line communication, the political influence of current social media use and abuse is becoming highly problematic and in fragile political orders this carries major risks.

The content moderation boards on YouTube, Meta's Facebook, TikTok and X-Twitter[15] are of limited value: they struggle with the issue (Brown and

14 See the interesting debate among experts on "Is Social Media Undermining Democracy?" at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGxZCNBS6fQ.

15 For example, content moderation by X-Twitter moderators – many of whom have been dismissed by the current X-Twitter owner Elon Musk since October 2022 – has been weak and inconsistent. Cf. www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-01-07/elon-musk-cuts-more-twitter-staff-overseeing-content-moderation#xj4y7vzkg). In January 2025, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that his company would abolish "fact-checking" on Facebook and replace it by a "community notes" system (www.cbsnews.com/news/meta-facebook-instagram-fact-checking-mark-zuckerberg/).

Knight 2022) but their censoring incitement and misinformation is weak, and bias can be noted in their closing down certain accounts[16] after massive, targeted complaint campaigns by activists. In the period of the Tigray War discussed here, I noted that also YouTube, using equally unclear criteria, repeatedly deleted Ethiopian news accounts and critical videos, even when these were dismantling obvious fake news.

When analysing social media political rhetoric we see that it is not standard "political language" (Parkin 1984), but a comparatively new phenomenon of discourse producing its *own* standards (or lack thereof): a new language, for which, as I noted above, no mutually accepted, positive and efficient communicative standards have yet been developed or internalised. The "relevance" of its utterances is determined by personal biases, "feelings", and "motivated reasoning" (i.e., selective reasoning based on "arguments" or data only supporting one's own pre-established point of view; see Mercier and Sperber 2011: 66). The discourse is certainly *not* guided by what Paul Grice, in his pathbreaking work on language and conversation, has called the "cooperative principle" underlying verbal communication that is guided by a number of rules (Grice 1989: 26). Social media discourse relating to conflict tends to enhance polemics and imposition via its usually emotive, direct style, and its going beyond the bounds of the (more accommodative) norms and practices of local communities affected by the conflict at hand. This has meant, also in Ethiopian online communications in which aims of deliberation and discussion to *resolve* conflict are bypassed, that there is neither much attention to the possible role of existing local, grass-roots structures (e.g., traditional dispute mediation norms and institutions) in addressing and containing conflicts.

The "Creative" Force of Digital Messaging

Digital media messaging redefines and/or re-creates the perception and framing of reality by forging discursive communities of like-minded adherents, reinforced by well-known algorithmic effects. This happens notably on X-Twitter, YouTube, or Facebook, and rapidly increases on TikTok, although the content of the latter is still more "entertainment" and self-presentation. In this messaging there is no self-questioning and no dialoguing aim. The production of emotive and reactive messages is enough, reinforced by trolling and targeting, whereby much of the impact – e.g., of

16 See www.nasdaq.com/articles/facebook-removes-what-it-says-is-fake-ethiopia-account-network-ahead-of-election-2021-06.

X-Twitter – is due to it almost occurring in "real time". As reverse image-searching on the web reveals, incomplete and falsified images are frequently used,[17] and disinformation is made easy, in line with "motivated reasoning".

The effect is the shaping of conformist "communities", based on algorithm-driven numbers of clicks and reposts of related, self-confirming images and "data", or also the targeting of individuals and other "communities". This is important because waves of social media (dis-)information generated by the process (Haidt 2022; see also Harari 2018) often have a deluding impact on mainstream *global* news media outlets such as (in our case) CNN, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or *Al Jazeera*. There is a growing number of cases demonstrating this effect (for Ethiopia, see Sonderriis 2023 for numerous instances). Research on social media messaging on the Ethiopia conflict(s) was often taken in by this effect and found wanting (one example of substandard work was Wilmot et al. 2021).[18]

What makes the global mainstream news media (and also "donor country" diplomacy, cf. Abbink 2021a) susceptible for such conformistic, repetitive narratives? First, these (global) media do not all have good correspondents on the ground in the developing countries in conflict; Western correspondents are neither well-versed in local languages and context, and there is often reliance on local people who are strongly affiliated to one or the other party in the conflicts covered, and there is no proper checking of the messages produced. Second, when African situations are covered they are deemed less important than cases elsewhere (cf. the fixation on the Middle East, Ukraine, China and Southeast Asia), and this means less accuracy and depth. Third, the human rights framework is often used as primary criterion to judge regimes and countries and their policies. This perspective has serious limitations (Fox 2011: 41-55): inconsistency, paternalism, lack of sufficient information, and bias towards allies whatever their regime form.

In the 2020-2022 war Ethiopia indeed had two battle fronts: the actual fighting and the digital discursive warfare. The two were even coordinated, especially on the side of the insurgent TPLF, with activists in the US (such as the "Tigray Media House" YouTube channel and many individual but networked accounts), in Tigray ("Dimtsi Weyane" broadcasting, and the "Tigray Mass Media Agency", both under the regional TPLF government), and in Tigrayan

17 One example: www.misbar.com/en/factcheck/2021/11/16/video-of-downed-ethiopian-helicopter-is-from-2020-in-syria (accessed 16 November 2021).

18 For interesting critical commentary on social media (dis-)information, see twitter.com/Qnie_Addis/status/1448006326483918854).

"diasporas" in Canada and Europe. This digital warfare became a powerful, even creative, rhetorical register that partly (re-)shaped the course of the conflict and the international responses – right up to the signing on 2 November 2022 of the Cessation of Hostilities agreement between the fighting parties. Since then, the conflict rhetoric has subsided but not entirely stopped – notably "diaspora" Tigrayans and their Western supporters (among them, several academics) continued the (social) media warfare and new conflict fronts have been added. Government supporters and other ethno-regional activists have also joined the digital fray. As the 2 November 2022 "Pretoria Agreement", signed by the Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF with the insistence of the USA and under the auspices of the African Union, was not universally popular in Ethiopia, and did not lead to the full disarmament and neutralisation of the TPLF, critics not only of the TPLF but also of the Ethiopian federal government have stepped up their messaging campaigns.

Growing Power of Digital Political Rhetoric in Ethiopia

Surveying the domain of digital space and activism in Ethiopia since the early 2010s, we see that digital/social media rhetoric was less antagonistic in the early years (Gagliardone et al. 2015, on elections) and more geared to entertainment and broader cultural, social and also personal issues, as reflected on the first popular digital medium: Facebook. But the parameters and antecedents of rhetoric conflict were present: Ethiopian politics were a highly contested domain since the 1970s, with serious political differences sharpening during and after the 1974 Revolution. Leftist, Marxist parties and ethno-nationalist rebel groups emerged and engaged in sectarian battles. Labelling, scapegoating and group recrimination were visible in the discourse of the Derg military government (1974-1991) against "feudal elites", "class opponents" and "national chauvinists"; in the TPLF's first manifesto (1976) blaming "the Amhara" for all evils and later in its divisive state politics; and in other ethnicist insurgent movement manifestos. After gaining power in Ethiopia, the TPLF (core party of the EPRDF, ruling from 1991-2018) aggravated identity-based conflict by "ethnicising" politics in law and in practice (Ayele et al. 2023) and continued to accuse past "Amhara elites" of "repression" and "hegemonism".

Following global trends, hate speech has also emerged in Ethiopia and erupted *before* the armed conflict of 2020-2022 in the form of ethnicised speech against other population groups (Wubetu and Salau 2022; Tadesse and Tilahun 2019; Tadesse and Abebaw 2023). Hate speech and false rumours repeatedly led to killings and attacks on property. One notorious

instance was the rioting after the killing of popular Ethiopian Oromo singer Hachalu Hundesa in June 2020, which was started via ethnic incitement on social media (Facebook, Twitter), and via a big private media network in Ethiopia. Hachalu was apparently killed by Oromo ethno-nationalists,[19] but it was blamed on non-Oromo, predominantly Amharic-speaking people, and it led to 123 people being killed in gross violence (EHRC 2022a).

Time and again we see that the persuasive power of digital rhetoric resides in its mono-voiced online community structure (self-selection buttressed by algorithms) and in its non-mediated, non-refereed discursive spaces. "Educated" elites of Ethiopian background, residing partly abroad and differentiated in economic standing and geographic location, were able to exercise their often-dubious influence on political discourse in the country. They thereby contributed to a break with the Ethiopian community-based, quotidian traditions regarding the use of "healing language", of customary mediation forums, and of deliberative discourse in local settings (Endalew 2014). Social media-using people in Ethiopia – as in any country – are easily seduced by the misinformation and incitements on their timelines and accounts, and younger audiences hardly consult written media or bother to "check sources". Education systems in training people in digital skills, would ultimately have to play a much larger role here. Furthermore, in Ethiopia the monitoring (CARD 2022) and law enforcement on digital incitement and hate speech is uneven or inefficient. In the following sections I will illustrate some key instances of digital rhetoric in Ethiopia.

Social Media Memes Relating to the 2020-22 Ethiopia Conflict and their Impact on Global Media Reporting and Political Decision-Makers[20]

During the 2020-22 Ethiopia conflict, the prime influential "memes" or talking points generated by social media accounts percolating through to global print media and policy circles of "donor countries" were the following: "Tigray genocide"; "(man-made) famine"; "humanitarian blockade"; "mass rape as a weapon of war", and "targeting of civilians"/"massacres" – all allegedly carried out on Tigrayan people in the Tigray Regional State (TRS). While the level of abuse in this war was serious on all sides (JIT Report 2021; EHRC 2022b), the veracity of the claims made under the above five labels – declared relevant in the Tigray Region only –

19 See: "Manhunt for Hachalu's killer afoot", The Reporter, 11 July 2020 (available at: www.thereporterethiopia.com/9903, accessed 11 May 2024).

20 A host of entries regarding the Tigray War has been posted on Wikipedia that seem to be re-edited time and again by a pro-TPLF taskforce. None of these entries can be regarded as reliable.

was doubtful.[21] Indeed, post-war reports seem to have largely (not entirely) refuted them. We will look at each of these five claims in turn.

Example 1: "#Tigray Genocide"

In the night of 3-4 November 2020, the armed conflict started in northern Ethiopia (Tigray Region) with the TPLF's attack on federal soldiers (Gashaye 2022). On the same day, 4 November 2020 at 02:35 p.m., a digital "#TigrayGenocide" campaign started with a first tweet – while no Tigrayan had died yet.[22] The second tweet came out 11 minutes later. This meme was then reproduced and multiplied for the entire two years of the conflict.[23]

While there was evidence of serious abuse in all war-affected areas since December 2020 (as was described in a Joint Report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the UN Human Rights Commissioner, see JIT Report 2021), evidence of a genocide – in the international law sense[24] – was absent and never produced.[25]

Still global media, including those considered reputable (BBC, CNN, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*), Western commentators, certain TPLF-linked academics, and countless websites took over this meme – and even influenced policy-makers in the US and the EU, some of them re-tweeting it. Careful comparative fact-checking on its veracity was not carried out.[26]

After the 2 November 2022 Peace Agreement was signed, the presence of this meme on genocide in social media declined. A leading TPLF general (Tadesse Worede) admitted in an interview of February 2023 that there had been no case of "genocide" in Tigray.[27] But the damage was done: the global press and numerous Western activists and even academics had uncritically spread the meme, producing serious bias. Ironically, in most of their contributions, the mass killings of Amhara and Afar civilians (in arbitrary executions and destruction of villages) in areas invaded in early 2021 by the TPLF during this war were hardly ever referred to in these global media.

21 For example, see BBC 2021. The BBC was frequently guilty of spreading unchecked or misleading news, and hosted guest commentators on the conflict who for many Ethiopians were skewed towards the TPLF cause.

22 See https://t.co/9IpOUosd2H.

23 See https://abren.org/premeditated-tigray-genocide-cyber-warfare-in-the-age-of-social-media/ for a critical analysis.

24 Cf. www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml

25 See also www.getfactet.org/post/the-premeditated-tigray-genocid-campaign.

26 See What is #TigrayGenocide all about? FACT-CHECK – Awasa Guardian.

27 See https://twitter.com/affairs_horn/status/1622431497197162501.

Example 2: "Famine in Tigray"

In early 2021, pro-TPLF activists spread prolific messaging on a "man-made famine" that was "targeting the Tigrayans". While due to the conflict food security was seriously compromised since November 2020 and people in Tigray (and elsewhere) started to suffer major food deficits and dire scarcity, there was big doubt about a full-blown "famine", because no masses of people perished of starvation. Social media and global press reports repeated the phrase until late 2022, always citing "local sources" (i.e., mostly TPLF operatives in Tigray). No clear evidence was produced. Steven Omamo, head of the Word Food Programme (WFP) in Ethiopia during the conflict with first-hand field experience, concluded in a revealing memoir that the official definition of "famine" was not applicable to Tigray in 2021-2022. While the food insecurity situation was real, "there was no sign at all of famine. […] There was no evidence at all of anyone dying of hunger. None. Zero" (Omamo 2022: 59-60). Similar problems of food deficits emerged in the Amhara and Afar regions after May 2021 and again in August 2022, due to renewed TPLF attacks, occupation, theft and destruction of food supplies. They caused suffering but were not reported in the media in an equal manner.

After the 2 November 2022 peace deal was signed, no new evidence of a famine then or now in Tigray has emerged. But food deficits continued to exist and were partly alleviated via intensified aid convoys by the Ethiopian government and the WFP. Serious problems also persisted among many 100,000s of internally displaced persons (IDPs) across northern Ethiopia, notably Amhara and Afar Regions, until today (September 2025).

Example 3: "Humanitarian and Communications Blockade" (of the Tigray Region)

The accusation that the Tigray Region was purposely cordoned off and subject to a blockade of supplies of any kind was repeated time and again. This meme was closely linked to the famine accusation.

While the humanitarian situation in Tigray was dire *before* the war started in November 2020 (with ca. 950,000 Tigrayans needing aid),[28] pro-TPLF-social media campaigning stressed the "purposeful blockading" of the region by federal government forces, thus playing into the usual human rights international discourse tropes cherished by Western policy-makers and news media.

28 See: https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-30-march-2021.

Fact was that the Ethiopian government and the WFP and other partners tried to get aid and other supplies through to Tigray as much as possible (although not enough), as testified in the period after the initial victory of federal forces in December 2020 and later again when these forces *left* Tigray in May 2021, leaving behind large quantities of food and fuel, and seeds to be used by farmers for the new agrarian season. But the intensified fighting by TPLF forces since May 2022 closed off entire areas and all main roads into Tigray. In addition, food convoy trucks moving into Tigray were checked because according to Ethiopian authorities various non-Ethiopian aid organisation vehicles (including those of the UNDP) seemed to smuggle in unauthorised goods and equipment into Tigray for use by the TPLF elite (as later documented; see also Abbink 2021a: 18-19 and 2021b: 2).

The frequent complaint about imposed communications and Internet black-out[29] rings hollow, because there are strong indications that TPLF forces in the night of 3-4 November 2020 cut these communications before their attack on federal army camps. Notably, army radio communications services were also disabled (there is video evidence of armed men entering the Ethio-Telecom core office in the capital Meqele).[30] Equally, there was a huge number of cyberattacks on Ethio-Telecom in the first weeks of the war, targeting federal telecom, including in Tigray.[31] And in the first six months of the war (up to May 2021), when a federal-supported provisional regional government was installed in Meqele, dozens of technicians to repair the lines were killed and connections again severed. By 2 December 2020 the federal authorities had started reconnecting the Tigray Region.[32]

Despite the social media campaigns pushing the story, there is little evidence that a purposeful and systematic "humanitarian blockade" on Tigray was pursued. It would be unclear what advantage it would have brought to the federal government to do so, because the latter wanted to win over the Tigrayan population to its side. Despite that, however, there is no doubt that the quantities of humanitarian and other aid that reached Tigray (as well as Amhara and Afar) were insufficient and held up for long inspections, and

29 Since 01.00 a.m. on 3 November 2020, according to this source: https://netblocks.org/reports/internet-disrupted-in-ethiopia-as-conflict-breaks-out-in-tigray-region-eBOQYV8Z.

30 See: https://www.ethiopiancitizen.com/2020/12/cctv-footage-shows-tplf-men-disabling-telecom-network.html, and: "Ethio telecom says service lines to Mekelle cleaved", The Reporter, 12 December 2020 (https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/ethio-telecom-says-service-lines-mekelle-cleaved).

31 See: https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2020/12/11/full-resumption-of-services-in-tigray-may-take-time-says-ethio-telecom/.

32 See: www.africanews.com/2020/12/02/ethio-telecom-restores-services-to-parts-of-tigray-official/.

that the speed of reconnecting the region to the telecom grid was notably hampered.

A further irony is that during 2020-2022 TPLF forces themselves repeatedly confiscated food aid that reached the Tigray Region and meant for ordinary people. An example: in March 2022 a unilateral ceasefire declared by the federal government was half-heartedly accepted by the TPLF, apparently so that food aid and fuel could get in. But they then took most of it for their own troops[33] and restarted the war on 24 August 2022.[34]

Example 4: "The Use of Rape as a Weapon of War" (Gender-based Violence)

The war saw multiple cases of rape of women, both of POWs and civilian women in Tigray as well as in the Amhara and Afar Regions (JIT 2021; FBC 2022). Details on numbers, locations and scale were unclear, however; as was the "systematic nature" of it. The assertion that Tigray's population was singled out and the target of systematic rape as a "weapon of war" was never substantiated by unambiguous data; still, this was amplified on social media accounts and pro-TPLF hashtags. In mid-2021 the Ethiopian authorities began charging dozens of federal army soldiers apprehended for rape. On the side of the TPLF or the Tigray government, no such cases have thus far been prosecuted, not even after the November 2022 Peace Agreement.[35]

Furthermore, in September 2021 a UN official working in Ethiopia admitted, in the face of social media accusations, that in Tigray the evidence of "mass rape" by Ethiopian and other troops was not substantial (Gramer and Lynch 2021).[36] It is doubtful that rape was consciously used as "a weapon of war" ordered by the army command of the federal Ethiopian forces. In 2022 more reports emerged that rape in the areas occupied by TPLF forces (Amhara, Afar) had been very serious, and systematic.[37] The tragic reality was that in

33 Cf. www.voanews.com/a/wfp-chief-alleges-tplf-stole-fuel-designated-for-humanitarian-use/6716378.html.

34 See www.reuters.com/world/africa/fighting-resumes-along-border-ethiopias-northern-tigray-region-resident-tigray-2022-08-24/.

35 As of November 2025, no cases were known.

36 Cp. http://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/27/united-nations-officials-downplayed-sexual-violence-ethiopia; also the Facebook post seen in twitter.com/althecat/status/1427755754094727168/photo/1).

37 See, e.g., https://twitter.com/AmharaWaag/status/1598673048919367680; https://twitter.com/hashtag/TDFRapists?src=hashtag_click; www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCVs5-iTwUw&t=3s. And with English subtitles: https://youtu.be/TpZE8TGg_zs; and https://twitter.com/Leah_ORG/status/1475468359793786885.

Tigray itself, rape by Tigrayan men on Tigrayan women, had been a serious problem well *before* the war started[38] – a fact conveniently ignored by most media. This does not excuse the occurrence of rape incidents in Tigray by armed forces during the war, but the perpetrators were from all sides.[39] Sadly, Tigray society, with a weak democratic tradition, inadequate justice system, and significant gender inequality, had a serious problem with an engrained pattern of gender violence long before the Tigray War of 2020-22.

Example 5: "Targeting of Civilians" / "Massacres"

The 2021 JIT report mentioned cases of abuse and transgressions on all sides (TPLF insurgents, federal troops, Eritrean forces). There is no doubt that civilian non-combatants on both sides were killed in the conflict. But there were significant differences.

Pro-TPLF social media messaging rapidly enumerated alleged cases of massacres of civilians in various towns and villages and even religious places. There were indeed abusive killings. The Federal Prosecutor in Addis Ababa examined dozens of cases and many perpetrators were convicted and sent to prison. For most reported cases, evidence was scant and ambivalent. The last word on this not said, but "massacre cases" in Tigray during the war that were examined in more detail appear to be exaggerated. All were hyped in the social media and extensively taken up in global news media, but unfortunately in misleading form. Five such instances are the following.

> – The highly contested case of Aksum town on 28 November 2020: social media and global press spread allegations of a targeted mass killing of locals, even with figures mentioned of over 750 civilians killed.[40] The dominant story became that hundreds of innocents had been killed in the city. This would reflect badly on the federal army – which appeared to be the purpose of all pro-TPLF messaging. However, a close analysis by writer Jeff Pearce and others disputed this on the basis of

38 Cf. the interview with Prof. Haregwoin Aseffa, herself of Tigrayan background, at twitter.com/xotrinx/status/1532529780771397641?cxt=HHwWkoCx6ejt0cQqAAAA). Also: https://t.co/32R8Vb47Sc; and https://africanfeminism.com/yikono-campaign-gives-ethiopian-women-the-language-to-challenge-violence/ - on Tigrayan women demonstrating against rape in 2019 and 2020 Also: www.radiorevolutionpanafricaine.com/single-post/rape-culture-in-tigray-region-of-ethiopia.

39 See https://x.com/EliasAmare/status/1384487496923246594.

40 See https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/24/ethiopias-leader-must-answer-for-the-high-cost-of-hidden-war-in-tigray, citing EEPA, a notoriously biased Belgian NGO.

contradictory or false evidence.[41] Indeed, people *were* killed – allegedly by Eritrean troops – but they were mostly combatants, not civilians. The JIT 2021 Report (cited above)[42] noted that in fights with the Eritrean Defence Force contingent in the outskirts of Aksum c.100 people were killed – combatants and associated civilians (the Ethiopian government denied involvement in the killings; see JIT 2021, Appendix V, p. 9). The Ethiopian Federal Office of the Attorney General reported that a total of 123 people were killed in the incidents (ibid.: 87). But a "targeted massacre on civilians" of the magnitude reported in the global press could not be confirmed.

– Maryam Dengelat in 2021: this was the place of a church and monastery in Tigray where an alleged targeted massacre by Eritrean troops occurred, with pro-TPLF media reporting that between 37 and 160 civilians had been killed. But no real confirmation of what exactly happened at this isolated site was ever obtained. Global media picked up the story and presented an unverified account. Social media reporting, and especially the CNN story based on it,[43] was analysed critically in a NAI report (NAI 2021: 29-30). Until today no clear confirmation was presented, but the image of a massacre lingers in the global press.

– A most notorious case was what allegedly happened in Humera in 2021, a town in the contested Wolqait area of Ethiopia where many Tigrayans had been evicted during the earlier stage of the war by non-Tigrayan local militias (EHRC 2021: 2-3), and especially after the TPLF-orchestrated massacre on Amharic-speaking inhabitants of the town Mai Kadra in the same region in early November 2020 that is well-documented.[44] In September 2021, problematic reports emerged in social media on an alleged massacre of Tigrayans by unknown, presumably Ethiopian, (militia) forces in Humera (which since November 2020 was under control of the Amhara Region),[45] and a curious allegation was made via

41 See https://jeffpearce.medium.com/ethiopia-lies-damn-lies-axum-and-the-west-242f471c45ae. See also Pearce 2024: 93-96.

42 https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3947207.

43 At https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/26/africa/ethiopia-tigray-dengelat-massacre-intl/index.html.

44 See https://ehrc.org/tigray-maikadra-massacre-of-civilians-is-a-crime-of-atrocity/.

45 See https://twitter.com/search?q=Tigrayan%20bodies%20Humera%20%20setit&src=typed_query&f=top.

CNN[46] that "bodies of Tigrayans [were] found in the Setit (border) river downstream of Humera". A grave accusation, based on unclear local sources, and much amplified. But again, no evidence could stand the test of veracity.[47] It appeared to be a misleading and convoluted story of people (possibly their own combatants) killed in battle and dumped in the river by pro-TPLF forces themselves.[48]

– Interestingly, massacres of Amhara and Afar civilians/non-combatants in TPLF-invaded and occupied areas and as reported by Ethiopian local media (e.g., in Amharic) were at least as serious, but despite the evidence were much less referred to in the global media. Examples were the cases in Humera itself in November 2020;[49] in Ch'enna town (over 200 killed),[50] in Qobo (over 50 killed),[51] and in Gashena in November 2021 (50-60 killed).[52] During the war period, hundreds of Amharic-speaking people were killed in the Oromia Region by an insurgent group (OLA) that had allied itself with the TPLF.[53]

– In the Wolqait/"Western Tigray" area (see above), the disputed territory between Amhara and Tigray Regions,[54] claims of mutual "ethnic cleansing" actions were made by the

46 See: https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/03/africa/ethiopia-tigray-sudan-bodies-intl-afr/index.html and https://twitter.com/WagShumZeRaya/status/1434512673803317251/photo/3 for the photo of the CNN tweet on this.

47 Cp. https://abren.org/when-cnn-faked-the-news-on-ethiopia/ for a critical analysis.

48 A quite plausible dissection of this fake news was given by this analyst: (https://twitter.com/Qnie_Addis/status/1435967588928942080?s=03). Cp. also: https://waltainfo.com/tplf-revives-fake-humera-masaccre-campaign/.

49 See "70 clandestine burial pits found in Humera-reports." Ethiopian Observer 29 Nov. 2020 (https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2020/11/29/70-clandestine-burial-pits-found-in-humera-reports/)

50 Report: https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2021/09/10/tigray-forces-killed-200-civilians-in-village-in-dabat-woreda-residents-and-officials/.

51 Cf. https://borkena.com/2021/09/20/kobo-massacre-rights-group-says-received-reports-of-civilian-massacre-by-tplf/.

52 www.reuters.com/world/africa/government-offensive-pushes-forward-scars-war-dot-ethiopias-amhara-region-2021-12-10/ and: www.ethiopiancitizen.com/2021/12/the-gashena-massacre-yet-another-ugly-scar-on-ethiopias-history.html.

53 One is mentioned on https://borkena.com/2021/10/13/east-wollega-region-massacre-ethiopia-govt-did-not-respond/.

54 See: www.hornafricainsight.org/post/welkait-ethiopia-geo-strategic-importance-and-the-consequential-annexation-by-tplf. See also the comments by a former TPLF leader on the issue: https://twitter.com/RassBariaw/status/1696669314848358610?t=lrbEaVdHYatUBRV_SPy0rw&s=03.

fighting parties, and they have some substance because abuse occurred on both sides. The earlier cited JIT report mentioned that "both Tigrayans and Amharas fled their habitual areas of residence, at different intervals, in substantial numbers, in fear or after witnessing ethnically induced human rights violations" (JIT Report 2021: 53). The issue of Tigrayans persecuted or chased out of Wolqait was amplified in social media time and again.[55] As this Wolqait issue is complicated and needs more in-depth field and digital research, I cannot discuss it here, although the area has once again become embroiled in an armed conflict in the Amhara Region (of which Wolqait was considered a part) started by the federal government in April 2023. A recent field research-based Amharic book reports the painful history of this contested region and shows the extent of human rights abuses and population manipulation since the late 1980 until the 2020-2022 war (Gondar University team 2022). Accompanying this, the status of the territory and its people continues to be the focus of intense (social) media warfare and debate.

Social Media as Negative Discourse

Throughout these examples, one can observe that social media activists produced messages on the conflicts in Ethiopia (notably the one in Tigray, 2020-2022) to create partisan narratives, marked by "motivated reasoning", seeking their own confirmation, and targeting the global news media (which were weakly represented on the ground in Ethiopia). This was evident on the side of the pro-TPLF crowd but to a lesser extent could also be demonstrated for pro-government activists. All this has been conflict-enhancing: their language use was not aimed at balance or dialogue, or "bridging discourse", but confrontational and antagonistic, and often omitted relevant facts. It was fuelled by a fear of "cognitive dissonance", manifested in the neglect or denial of factual material that threatened one's own position – evident in the debate on Ethiopia's conflicts in general. As noted above, Ethiopian diaspora groups, a main source of social media messages and online channels followed in Ethiopia, were happy to oblige. Cooperative communication or constructive argument/engagement was not the prime goal.

55 E.g., https://twitter.com/kidu_gebre/status/1522928955036250112.

While social media messaging is obviously useful for information purposes, critical analysis, and can enhance democratic debate and politics, this presupposes that users have a positive, "trained" or open attitude in dealing with the plethora of material available online so as to make reasonable judgements. This positive aspect may hardly weigh up to negative use: as an "institutional" configuration, social media messaging hardly has the aim to "dialogue". Ultimately, social media can be used/consulted usefully only when source and fact checks are pursued if not embedded in its functioning, and this is obviously not the case here. In situations of intense armed conflicts, such as in Ethiopia, the role of social media as shaping conciliatory public discourse is virtually absent, and therefore its value is limited. Social media messaging, as rooted in identity group-based political "communities", cannot be relied upon as an exclusive source – although many users do so – for any definite statements on conflict situations or political solutions. This was amply shown in the digital and actual warfare in Ethiopia.

Conclusion

The above analysis confirms the hypothesis of Schöne et al. (2021) that social media users favour negative messaging and, in the absence of digital literacy and legal regulation, this may outweigh these media's positive aspects. We should note that social media messaging is not just information, but also *drama* (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 7), with an amplification of shared beliefs and ideologies of specific groups, not led by truth conventions. In Ethiopia, X-Twitter "has become an online ideological battlefield."[56] The Tigray War is one case among several where we saw excessively negative and misleading use of social media (and other digital channels) that made the discussion of what really happened, and why and how, opaque and murky. This was of course the intention of the messengers, who placed themselves in an identitarian discourse, being supporters of a specific political and/or ethnic category to which loyalty was maintained in the face of contrary factual information in "counter-tweets" or other media messages. Of course, the instrumentalisation and abuse of social media for aggressive postings and hate speech is a global problem (Howard 2019; Bolter 2019; Haidt 2022), but in the Ethiopian case, it is particularly acute because of divisive ethnic-based politicking, weak monitoring, lack of effective judicial oversight, major disruptive impact of diaspora-based actors, and chaotic and unpredictable national politics. The growing research in Ethiopia on this subject (Tadesse

56 See Ripple Research (2022). This is an interesting, quantitatively-based study of dominant themes and emotional states in Twitter "warfare" in Ethiopia.

and Abebaw 2023; Wubetu and Salau 2022; Endalkachew 2023) seems to confirm the often-negative impact of social media on the country's political rhetoric and political culture.

Study of the Ethiopian case confirms the points made by numerous analysts (Haidt, Harari, Bolter, Bail, and others)[57] that the social media in general can have a persistent baneful influence on public debate and politics, notably in democratic countries allowing freedom of speech. It can be predicted that the current upsurge of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its use for fake messaging and digital imagery will add to the problems (Bender and Hanna 2023), especially as its unscrupulous use is tempting, and regulation of this new digital technology is even worse than that of the "mainstream" social media discussed here.

Cognizant of the fact that digital literacy and standards of online communication are absent or at least weakly moderated, that social media use is highly addictive, and that a business model of profit maximalisation by large tech social media companies is predominant, too much value is attached to social media communication *content*. The majority of the utterances being unreliable, *ad hominem* insulting, misleading, showing massive mis/disinformation and incitement has not prevented social media from becoming a potent force feeding back into the regular political and public arenas (mainstream press, policy institutes, parliaments, government ministries). The mere quantity of (unmoderated) messages, retweets and sharing ("going viral") enhances their ubiquitous online and offline impact. The current global "information ecology" system and digital illiteracy among consumers make this impact disproportionate and very risky.

The above observations would not only support the case for training users (that is, all of us) in digital literacy and critical common sense, but also for responsible legislative-regulatory efforts to rein in subversive effects of social media on society, education and political life – however difficult this may be in the technological and juridical sense. It is unlikely that this will soon happen, either globally or in Ethiopia. The large global players are the Western big tech companies, the Chinese government (TikTok), and smaller but no less active state players in totalitarian countries, such as Russia, Qatar, Turkey, Iran or North Korea. Social media are both a flourishing business model and a powerful state tool. But when they are not called to account and

57 Apart from Haidt, Harari, Bolter, Bail, see Karim et al., 2020; Dumbrava 2021; Bail 2018; Kubin and von Sikorski 2021; and www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/features/how-social-medias-toxic-content-sends-teens-into-a-dangerous-spiral/; www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/10/15/64-of-americans-say-social-media-have-a-mostly-negative-effect-on-the-way-things-are-going-in-the-u-s-today/.

legally restrained, the problem will continue. In Ethiopia, little regulatory activity is expected either – barring the frequent censorship or state control of Internet and telecom services.

As a final note, research and theoretical interpretation of social media messaging in conflict settings might need to: (a) analyse in more detail the nature of, and political-rhetorical strategies used by, the digital forums and popular accounts, as well as their "content moderation" conventions (if any), (b) locate the interests and political aims of the activists – i.e., their political-identitarian basis – and their connections and funding sources/models, and (c) deconstruct the messaging in the light of a critical appraisal of reported facts on the ground in a focused manner, necessitating extensive background research using acceptable evidence and minimising bias and selectivity.

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COFFIN DANCE MANIA IN GHANA: VISUAL RHETORIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXT IN THE INTERNET AGE'S TAKE ON DEATH

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Abstract: This study examines how the Coffin Dance, a viral video of Ghanaian pallbearers performing choreographed funeral dances, became a globally circulated meme during the COVID pandemic that started in 2019. Analysing eight representative frames, I demonstrate that the video's compositional choices (low angles, designed flatness) create a grammar that dignifies the ritual while enabling its decontextualisation. This dual semiotic logic allowed the video to challenge Western mourning frameworks (which privatise grief and suppress celebration) while becoming appropriable for political ends. The findings highlight a structural tension in digital culture: non-Western ritual practices gain global legibility through the formal design that makes them vulnerable to commodification.

Keywords: visual semiotics, COVID-19, Ghanaian funeral practices, Black representation, viral media

Introduction

During the darkest months of COVID-19 in 2020, a viral video showed six men in suits dancing while carrying a coffin, often paired with clips of accidents that online culture calls "fail videos."[1] The Coffin Dance originates from Ghana's Akan funerals, where music and dance honour the deceased, express communal support, and mark death as a homecoming (Kquof et al. 2015; Selorm et al. 2021; Witte 2003). Rooted in Akan traditions, such

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1 DigiNeko (2020) documents an actual Ghanaian funeral procession in which a group of pallbearers, dressed in matching black suits, white shirts, and sunglasses, perform elaborately synchronised dance moves while carrying a coffin through the streets – dropping to their hands and knees before rising again in unison – surrounded by onlookers filming the event. This footage was soon repurposed for political commentary, as in Naar (2020), a meme-style edit that opens with the same pallbearers performing their signature moves outdoors, with white tents visible in the background, before cutting to a split-screen video call and then returning to the pallbearers carrying a coffin labelled "BIDEN PRESIDENT," swaying and lifting it energetically. In this context, the coffin dance frames a symbolic burial of a political moment (see the Black Bodies in Visual Culture section below).

ceremonies serve as both tribute and social reaffirmation. Elaborate music, dance, and public grief demonstrate that mourning is a communal obligation, reinforcing Akan beliefs in life's continuity beyond death (Adom and Adu Mensah 2022; Witte 2001). Death is understood as "a crisis requiring ritual treatment of the social body" (Jindra and Noret 2011), a moment situated within cyclical rather than linear time (Kershaw 1972, as cited in Droz 2011). Though celebratory funeral traditions exist worldwide – Irish wakes, Black American homegoing ceremonies, New Orleans jazz funerals, and among some Balkan and Roma communities – Western[2] death practices have become increasingly medicalised, privatised, and sombre (Ariès 1974; Giddens 1991; Laderman 2005; Walter 2017). In entering global circulation, the Coffin Dance revealed tensions already present between institutionalised mourning and expressive, communal grief.

By March 2020, as the pandemic spread, memers recast the pallbearers as public health messengers, pairing them with "epic failure" clips to encourage people to stay home (Clancy 2023: 435; Machirori 2024: 145; Marfo et al. 2022: 69–70). The group's leader, Benjamin Aidoo, acknowledged the shift: people would "rather stay home than be buried by [us]" (Paquette 2020). The Dancing Pallbearers' journey from local ritual to global meme is remediation (i.e., older media refashioned by new digital forms; see Bolter and Grusin 2000). First appearing on YouTube in 2015, they gained attention via a 2017 BBC documentary and went viral in 2020 with electronic music remixes (Adrada 2023; Lansah 2017; Travelin Sister 2015). As the meme circulated globally, it was reframed across diverse contexts, including a 2020 Trump campaign ad that used the pallbearers to mock Biden's gaffe regarding Black voters (Naar 2020; see the *Discussion* below). But instead of settling meaning, remediation sets it in motion. The video thus operated as a floating signifier within racialised discourse, its meaning shifting depending on who deployed it and toward what ends (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mehlman 1972).

What follows is an attempt to work through three research questions, using semiotic visual analysis and meme studies: (RQ1) How do Ghanaian funeral practices challenge Western mourning when transformed into memes? (RQ2) How does the video complicate the circulation of Black bodies in global visual culture? And (RQ3) what does it mean that, during a pandemic, death became entertainment? I contribute (1) a close semiotic

2 In the present article, "Western" refers to dominant Euro-American cultural discourses shaped by European modernity and transatlantic institutions, while acknowledging the term's limits and internal heterogeneity (see Chakrabarty 2000; Mignolo 2000).

reading of the pallbearers' choreography, (2) an account of how viral circulation reconfigures localised ritual meaning, and (3) an argument about the simultaneous commodification and dignification of Black bodily labour in transnational visual culture.

Paradigm of Death

To understand what the Coffin Dance disrupts, we need to trace how Western culture manages death. What psychological and sociocultural mechanisms underlie Western preoccupation with grief? Scholars debate whether modern societies deny death (Ariès 1974; Gorer [1965] 1977) or manage it through medicalisation and privatised mourning (Fuchs 1969, as cited in Illich 1995: 202). The "death-denial" thesis has been influential. Scholars have been questioning its explanatory value for decades now (Kellehear 1984; Tradii and Robert 2017). What's clearer, what emerges more consistently across the critiques, is medicalisation's role in reshaping grief (Illich 1995). Not denial, exactly. Management. Sigmund Freud described grief as inhabiting "a world which has become poor and empty" ([1917] 2024: 219). Institutional management imposes temporal expectations on this phenomenology, treating prolonged mourning as pathology. Within psychological discourse, grief may become intensified or prolonged beyond culturally expected norms, giving rise to clinical concerns (Horowitz et al. 1980), and in some cases, to diagnostic categories such as prolonged grief disorder (Prigerson et al. 2009). When grief is treated as a kind of illness, and when people are expected to recover on time – to diagnose it, manage it, and move on – the result can be compounded suffering, alongside anxiety and depression (Ariès 1974; Granek 2010).

How grief is made visible and tangible reflects a medicalised, privatised world, and in doing so, makes that world feel normal. Scholars have examined "mourning pictures" (Ariès 1974; Fahd 2019; Zarzycka 2014), media portrayals (Hilliker 2006), cinema (Armstrong 2012), and digital technologies (Cupit et al. 2021; Segerstad et al. 2022; Stylianou-Lambert and Widmaier 2023) as places where grief appears restrained, private, sorrowful. Rarely, if ever, celebratory. These images teach us how to mourn – and what they teach is suppression (Doss 2006).

Historically, death has shifted from a communal experience, in which "community was weakened by the loss of one of its members" (Ariès [1981] 2008), to a private one (Giddens 1991; Rae 2007; Tarlow 1999). While death

has periodically re-emerged into public visibility through memorials and monuments (Doss 2002, 2006; Roberts 2004), these forms remain shaped by the same logics of privatisation and institutional mediation that structure contemporary Western mourning.

Danse Macabre

The Ghanaian group offers a different paradigm entirely. They are paid to "send loved ones to the other world in style" (Lansah 2017), a paradigm where grief gives way to celebration. But dancing with death is not new, though the meaning of that dance shifts across cultures and eras. Macabre images of decomposing corpses dancing alongside symbolic figures of society date back to the Middle Ages (Dujakovic 2020; Fein 2000, 2013; Oosterwijk and Knöll 2011). The Danse Macabre depicts emperors, kings, popes, cardinals, and other figures of authority, all undone by death represented as a naked, grinning corpse. The living appear in stiff, corpse-like poses, bewildered by their sudden confrontation with death, dance serving as allegory for mortality's inevitability. The effect is a farcical inversion of the social order (peasants, women, or fools, over the powerful): the dead mock the living's futile resistance, underscoring the ultimate triumph of death over all social distinctions (Dujakovic 2020: 261–262; Fein 2000: 4). It is a visual rhetoric, with emperors and peasants rendered equal before death, that derives its power from direct address.

Fein (2013: 227) argued that Danse Macabre's potency, whether in visual or verbal form, lies in its personalised confrontation with death – a detailed demonstration of one's eventual appearance, an animated corpse ruthlessly mocking its audience. According to Kinch (2017), the alternation between images of the dead and the living creates "a rhythmic pattern of movement and tranquillity, of light and colour, of existence and mortality, resonating deeply with essential aspects of human culture, rooted in the dynamic between life and death." This interplay reflects a profound human understanding that life and death are inseparable, each defining the other and together offering a complete picture of existence. The Coffin Dance shares this choreographic engagement with mortality. And yet, as we'll see, it distances itself from mockery (of the living's resistance) and advances the celebration of communal passage. Like medieval plague imagery, the COVID-19 pandemic revived visual confrontations with mass mortality, though transformed through digital mediation and memetic circulation.

Black in Visual Culture

The global spread of the Coffin Dance makes sense only when set against the contested history of Black representation in Western visual culture, particularly within the United States where the video's political appropriation was most prominent. From Jim Crow-era caricatures to Black Lives Matter, the visual portrayal of Black people has always been politically charged, reflecting shifting contests over representation and power (Bradley 2021; Edrington and Gallagher 2019; Gondwe and Bhowmik 2022; Lemons 1977; Lewis and Lewis 2009). Bell Hooks (2004: 65) notes that these portrayals reflect broader social power dynamics and racial oppression. Visual culture often treats Black bodies as commodities for white audiences, echoing historical patterns of exploitation and sustaining racial hierarchies (see Hooks 2015: 104–106; Yancy 2017). These patterns of commodification work through the instability of racial signification.

Stuart Hall (1997: 32) draws on Ferdinand de Saussure to show that signifiers (words or images) are arbitrarily linked to their meanings, which can shift as cultural contexts change. Historically, the word "black" in Western societies was linked with negativity and darkness. During the 1960s in the United States, the slogan "Black is Beautiful" transformed these associations, reclaiming black to signify pride and empowerment among Black communities (Hall 1997: 32). Yet, the reclamation was simultaneously contested: politicians such as Barry Goldwater used urban uprisings to stoke fears of Black criminality, setting the stage for the later "tough-on-crime" policies (Alexander 2010: 41). This pattern intensified in the 1980s. The Reagan administration's portrayal of crack cocaine amplified public fear with images of Black "crack whores" and "crack babies," shaping perceptions and justifying harsher drug policies (Alexander 2010: 5). Media further shifted from depicting white cocaine users as victims to framing crack cocaine as a threat posed by Black communities, reflecting entrenched racial biases and influencing policies and public opinion (Alexander 2010: 102–03). Hall (1997) rejected the notion of fixed meanings, emphasising that all interpretations arise within particular historical and cultural contexts. Representations in visual culture change over time, shaped by these contexts, and as a result, racialised imagery continues to shape perceptions of crime and contributes to the justification of hate toward Black people. The Coffin Dance enters this contested terrain: as it circulates globally, the pallbearers function as floating signifiers whose meaning shifts depending on who deploys the image and toward what ends.

Memes and Black Humour

The Coffin Dance sits – uncomfortably, productively – at the intersection of memetic culture and Black visual representation. You cannot understand how it circulates without holding both histories in view.

Memes exist to be remixed; it is in their nature (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016). Users combine image, text, and audio in new ways, becoming "prosumers" who do not just watch content, but change it as it moves through the world (Ivashkevich 2015; Jenkins 2018). As a result, memes function as cultural products that can mirror and reinforce dominant ideologies and subvert or reframe narratives through remediation and juxtaposition (see Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Ungureanu 2024). This is not a bug or a glitch that we need to fix but an intrinsic logic of participatory cultures themselves, one that the Coffin Dance taps into through a very specific register: black humour.

Black humour, or dark comedy, cynically engages serious, taboo, or morbid topics, subverts norms, and has historically helped individuals confront trauma and absurdity (Bodó 2023). Its appeal often lies in the tension between discomfort and recognition, a dynamic that digital formats amplify. Memes' rapid dissemination and adaptability make them well-suited for black humour, encapsulating complex ideas concisely and relying on shared cultural contexts, particularly among youth (Bhardwaj et al. 2024; Okafor 2024; Hakokõngäs et al. 2020). Unsurprisingly, such memes tend to surface during periods of collective strain or uncertainty. They often address social issues like death or mental illness (e.g., COVID-19 memes) and foster solidarity among like-minded audiences (De Blasio and Selva 2019; Kirmani 2024).

But – and this is where things get darker – the same memes that help people process trauma can desensitise viewers, normalise racist or sexist attitudes, perpetuate stereotypes, raising ethical concerns in digital spaces (Mortensen and Neumayer 2021; Sanchez 2020; Duchscherer and Dovidio 2016; Matamoros-Fernández et al. 2022). The structure that enables solidarity also enables violence. This dual capacity (creative expression on the one hand, exclusion, harm on the other) shows the ambivalence inherent in participatory culture, and Coffin Dance exemplifies it by enabling collective mourning during COVID-19 while simultaneously becoming extractable for political appropriation, as the following analysis demonstrates.

Methodology

This study performs a qualitative semiotic analysis of the Coffin Dance video, examining its cultural and symbolic meanings through the frameworks developed by Saussure ([1916] 2011) and Roland Barthes ([1957] 1972). The analysis draws on distinctions between signifier and signified, denotation and connotation, and Barthes's notion of myth (see Barthes 1977; Fiske [1982] 2002). Following Saussure ([1916] 2011: 66, 120–21), meaning is understood as relational, arising from differences, from contrasts between elements. Not inherent properties but structural positions. Barthes ([1957] 1972: 113–14, 142–43) theorises myth as a second-order semiological system, a "metalanguage" (a language that describes or analyses another language system) that appropriates existing cultural signs and naturalises historically contingent meanings, rendering them self-evident and depoliticised. Myth hides construction and makes culture look like nature. The analysis thus examines how visual and gestural elements function denotatively (literal representation) and connotatively (culturally coded meaning), attending to how the video's compositional choices construct a mythic narrative of communal mourning.

Following Shifman (2014: 177), who defines memes as units "created with awareness of each other," this analysis centres on the source video, since derivative forms remix and recirculate its visual motifs while preserving the semiotic structure established in the original. The present study examines a 35-second segment (1:32–2:07) of the video in which the pallbearers are introduced and perform their synchronised dance while carrying the coffin (DigiNeko 2020). This sequence condenses the visual and symbolic motifs that later recur across derivative meme forms, including fail videos and image macros. Eight representative frames – selected from distinct cut transitions within the segment (which mark shifts in composition, gesture, and rhythm that structure the video's meaning) – serve as the basis for close visual analysis. While frame selection involves interpretive judgment, the analysis is grounded in repeated viewings and attention to compositional elements (framing, colour, gesture) that structure visual meaning across frames.

The Coffin Dance

The first frame (Fig. 1) foregrounds the lower extremities of three figures, drawing attention to their footwear. The composition – just slightly asymmetrical – centres

on the feet. Natural lighting suggests an outdoor setting, while dark grey trousers and polished black-and-white shoes create moderate contrast and a formal, retro aesthetic. The low-angle shot emphasises the design of the shoes and the performers' relaxed stance. The shoes' polished, two-toned style signifies elegance, discipline, and careful self-presentation. They function as a semiotic bridge between Ghanaian funeral traditions and a globalised visual economy in which ceremonial performance is stylised (choreographed) and rendered legible to international audiences. Barthesian myth (1957/1972: 107-108) naturalises this choreographed elegance as universally legible "dignity," obscuring the culturally specific Akan framework that produces this visual grammar.

Figure 1. Screenshot at second 1 from "Coffin Dance (Official Music Video HD)" (DigiNeko 2020)

Seen at eye level, the second frame (Fig. 2) – a medium shot – draws the viewer into the scene. The pallbearers are arranged in a vertical alignment: one figure faces the camera directly, while the other three distribute the composition according to the rule of thirds, producing symmetry and visual balance. All four wear dark suits with crisp white shirts and neatly folded white pocket squares. The classic tailoring (structured jackets and clean lines) creates a unified, almost uniform appearance. Lapel pins or badges further emphasise their belonging to an organised group. The man on the left wears a tall top hat, setting him apart with a note of dignified, almost archaic elegance, while the others wear matching fez-like caps with a contrasting diagonal band, reinforcing the ceremonial cohesion of the group. Dark sunglasses worn by all four add visual consistency and an aura of authority. Light-coloured ties maintain a high-contrast palette within the black-and-white image, and the decorated cloth or sash held by one figure suggests symbolic or ritual significance.

Figure 2. Screenshot at second 3

The scene unfolds outdoors, likely in a public or ceremonial space. Trees and foliage in the background evoke a park, cemetery, or open communal area. Even lighting lends documentary quality. With no prominent architectural

elements and only indistinct figures in the distance, the background remains unobtrusive.

Figure 3. Screenshot at second 5

Four men (three on the right of the image, one on the left, barely visible, but present with his shoulder), with sunglasses, hats, white shirts, and dark suits, carry an expensive-looking coffin in front of what resembles a musical funeral procession (note the drummer in the background, on the right), their bodies arranged in a linear formation that anchors the composition (Fig. 3). What distinguishes this moment is the energy it preludes; you feel as if, shortly after, these men will break into dance.

Figure 4. Screenshot at second 11

Through the logic of montage, within seconds, the pallbearers are transported to a similar event, this time with the casket, more prominent than in the previous shots, and their kneeling posture brought into focus (Fig. 4). Composition, while not strictly aligned with the rule of thirds, remains balanced: seven figures are present, two fully visible and five partially obscured by the casket or truncated by the frame. Strong contrast between the pallbearers' black attire and the white casket, whose colour shifts from that of the previous scene (Fig. 3), draws attention to both the object and the figures.

The colour of the casket carries particular cultural weight. While black has been associated with funerary rites and death since the Neolithic period (Pastoureau 2009: 30–35), and later came to signify penance in the medieval Christian tradition (Kress and van Leeuwen 2002: 348), white has often been understood, especially within Christian theology, as a sign of life and hope (Pastoureau 2009: 38, 132), and within Protestant dress codes as a "pure colour (…) recommended for children's and sometimes women's clothing." For Western viewers, the white casket may be read as inflecting the funerary scene with connotations of purity, reverence, or even as a moral decorum. Whether this resonates with Akan interpretations remains unclear from the visual text alone.

The scene unfolds in a wide shot of a crowded outdoor setting organised around the casket from Frames 1–3, with similar attire and props (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Screenshot at second 13

Numerous figures populate the frame: some mingle and converse, while others appear to dance, creating an atmosphere closer to a social gathering than a strictly solemn ceremony. This impression is reinforced by the diversity of dress, ranging from formal outfits, such as women in long festive dresses, to more casual clothing, including a man in a blue T-shirt holding a trumpet. Despite the visual abundance, the composition centres on the pallbearers – their body language suggests coordinated movement: legs and arms are positioned to support the casket, and there is a sense of rhythm implied by their postures, even in the still frame – and the coffin, establishing balance and depth. A figure dressed in a black-and-white body covering, resembling either a robe or a garment associated with premodern attire, approaches the carried coffin, creating visual variety without detracting from the central figures. The eye-level perspective invites the viewer into the scene, balancing immediacy with compositional clarity.

The coffin functions as a point of convergence within a dense social field. Its central placement acquires meaning through the surrounding bodies, tents, and movement that situate the ritual in open communal space. The pallbearers' symmetrical formation provides a stabilising axis within this visual abundance, organising attention while allowing peripheral activity to remain active and visible. This compositional structure renders the ritual simultaneously focused and diffuse; a concentrated act embedded within everyday social circulation. And so, meaning arises through relations between centre and periphery, coordination and dispersal.

Figure 6. Screenshot at second 16

In the foreground, in a medium shot at second sixteen, the pallbearers support the casket on their bent and spread legs, stabilising its weight (Fig. 6). Three face away from the camera, one faces forward with his expression visible, and one or two others are partially flanked, sensed only through their role in balancing the coffin. Their raised hands release the casket, and hold white handkerchiefs. Slight motion blur conveys movement

and transition. The off-centre placement of the coffin accentuates dynamism and the sense of action. In the background we see an open tent, distant figures gathered beneath it, and trees. The pallbearers' asymmetrical stance energises the composition.

The handkerchiefs mark the first appearance of a ceremonial prop beyond attire, amplifying the ritual's gestural vocabulary. The asymmetrical stance (bent legs, raised arms, off-centre coffin) generates compositional energy absent from the vertical alignment (Fig. 2) or linear formation (Fig. 3). Where earlier frames stabilised ritual through symmetry and balance, Figure 6 destabilises through asymmetry and blur, rendering mourning as kinetic performance.

Figure 7. Screenshot at second 27

The pallbearers' backs are bent, as if they are straining to lift the casket, which lies close to the ground between them (Fig. 7). A colourful figure occupies the foreground, partially framing and obstructing the action and creating an off-centre focal point. Another outsider, closer to the pallbearers but still apart from the crowd, is a man in casual clothing (bright pants and a white T-shirt with a green stripe) holding a camera or mobile phone, likely recording the moment. The slightly lower angle captures their actions and interactions. Some spectators on the right also hold mobile phones, seemingly recording the scene. This time, the crowd keeps its distance, forming what appears to be a circle around the event.

The colourful foreground figure inserts non-ritual presence into the ritual's visual field and disrupts hierarchy. Similarly, the people with cameras and mobile phones mark a shift from performance to documentation, anticipating the video's remediation as meme. The circular arrangement of spectators creates spatial containment, framing the pallbearers as bounded spectacle (contrast Figures 3 and 5). The bent postures and low casket emphasise physical effort, mourning as embodied labour, not just symbolic gesture.

The last frame presents the pallbearers from a low angle, monumentalising their presence through frontal, poster-like compression (Fig. 8). The shot faces the group head-on. The pallbearers stand aligned: two visible in front, heads tilted slightly forward and to the side, and one in back, likely the coordinator, whose head peeks out beneath the casket. In the background, an open tent and a few white umbrellas. The frame continues from Figure 7: spectators recording remain

visible, but the angle has shifted, the casket lifted, the anonymous foreground figure disappeared.

Figure 8. Screenshot at second 30

The low-angle perspective monumentalises the pallbearers. The shot's frontal, poster-like compression shifts this monumentalisation from depth to iconicity – the frame is visually self-contained, legible at small scale, and extractable from its video context. Where Figure 7 shows spectators recording the ritual, Figure 8 shows the ritual formally composed for circulation: the flatness creates a meme-ready aesthetic through internal design. The coordinator's visibility introduces internal hierarchy within the group, differentiating roles (organiser vs. carriers) previously treated as collective. The montage shift from bent labour (Fig. 7) to upright monumentality (Fig. 8) transforms embodied effort into static icon, obscuring the physical work beneath the ceremonial image.

Discussion

The Coffin Dance video operates through a dual semiotic logic: it embeds the ritual in communal space while extracting it as a bounded spectacle. This tension, between ritual participation and ritual commodification, structures the video's transformation from local Ghanaian funeral practice into global meme. The eight frames show how this works compositionally. The video establishes ritual dignity through synecdoche (Fig. 1: polished shoes as metonym for formality) and hierarchical differentiation (Fig. 2: top hat distinguishes leader), then destabilises this solemnity through kinetic transformation. Anticipatory stillness (Fig. 3) gives way to asymmetrical blur and gestural props (Fig. 6: handkerchiefs), culminating in monumental iconicity (Fig. 8: low-angle frontal compression). Here is what matters: the video situates the pallbearers within social circulation (Fig. 5: centre/periphery tension, festive mixing with formal) while simultaneously framing them as performance-for-cameras (Fig. 7: spectators recording, circular containment). Embedded and extracted at once. The chromatic shift from light-brown to white casket (Fig. 4) inflects the scene with Christian connotations of purity and hope, translating Akan belief into globally legible visual grammar. This designed reproducibility (formal flatness, self-contained iconicity, extractability from video context) anticipates the video's remediation as meme before that circulation occurs.

Challenging Western Mourning Frameworks

Where Western mourning signifies through uniformity, stasis, and privatised grief (Ariès 1974; Giddens 1991; Laderman 2005), the Coffin Dance generates meaning through kinetic disruption and communal embedding (RQ1). The video's visual grammar challenges Western funeral conventions by pairing formality with celebration. The pallbearers' black suits and synchronised formation initially signal solemnity (Figs. 1–2), establishing visual continuity with Western mourning codes. But the subsequent kinetic transformation – from vertical alignment (Fig. 2) to anticipatory energy (Fig. 3) to destabilising asymmetry and blur (Fig. 6) – ruptures these associations. This is formality mobilised, creating a semiotic structure in which dignity and celebration coexist.

The video's centre/periphery composition (Fig. 5) further distinguishes it from Western funeral imagery. Where Western mourning practices increasingly isolate grief as individual experience (Ariès 1974; Giddens 1991), Figure 5 embeds the ritual in dense social circulation: the pallbearers provide a stabilising axis, but peripheral activity, such as dancing, conversing and festive dress mixing with formal attire, remains visible and active. The ritual is simultaneously focused and diffuse, a concentrated act within everyday communal space. This compositional structure mythologises (in Barthes's sense) death as communal passage, naturalising the Akan understanding of death as homecoming (Witte 2003) for global audiences unfamiliar with this framework.

Like the medieval Danse Macabre, the Coffin Dance depicts death as levelling social hierarchies (Dujakovic 2020; Fein 2000). But where Danse Macabre mocked the living's futile resistance to mortality, the Coffin Dance celebrates death as ritual affirmation and communal cohesion. The shift from memento mori (remember you will die) to ritual homecoming (death as transition, not termination) reframes mortality within a paradigm Western audiences have largely abandoned since the decline of public, celebratory death rituals.

Black Bodies in Visual Culture

The video's formal design – particularly its monumentalisation through low-angle framing and frontal compression (Fig. 8) – positions Black bodies as dignified, authoritative, and visually commanding (RQ2). This contrasts with historical patterns in which Black bodies in Western visual culture have been commodified, exoticised, or framed within narratives of tragedy and

suffering (Hooks 2004, 2015; Yancy 2017). The pallbearers are neither victims nor exotic others; they are ritual specialists performing skilled, coordinated labour with cultural authority.

Figure 9. Screenshot of Donald Trump's "Biden's Coffin Dance Video Meme" as presented in Naar (2020)

This dignified representation becomes unstable as the video circulates beyond its original context. Let us consider the case of US President Donald Trump's use of the Coffin Dance video: his predecessor Joe Biden blunders during an interview by making a racially insensitive remark (Fig. 9). The inexpedient and infamous assertion that if the Black audience were unsure of whether to vote for him or Trump, then "[they] aren't Black!" is followed by the dance of the Ghanaian Pallbearers (Naar 2020). The reaction of Charlamagne Tha God is telling. He freezes when Biden makes that remark, evidently unsure of how to respond. But Trump knows. The change is sudden, transitioning from a political discourse (the US election) to a funeral. In this instance, we observe that the pallbearers are not the cause of "death" (i.e., an implied death or a potential death of Biden's campaign, possibly leading to an election loss). The cause would be Biden's imprudent, rushed response. In return, the pallbearers served as the messengers or escorts, as suggested by the campaign logo present on the coffin carried by the bearers. What the ad shows – brutally, efficiently – is how the visual rhetoric, initially rooted in Akan beliefs about a dignified transition to the afterlife, became a floating signifier within American racial discourse, where Black bodies, Black death, and Black celebration have historically been sites of contested political meaning (see Hooks 2004, 2015; Yancy 2017). Its effectiveness depended on audiences reading the pallbearers as simultaneously dignified and mocking, a duality produced by the video's passage across radically different interpretive contexts.

This dual reading – celebration and mockery, dignity and spectacle – is encoded in the video's formal structure. The monumentalising low angle (Fig. 8) elevates the pallbearers, but the poster-like flatness and frontal compression also render them extractable, reproducible, and decontextualisable. The frame is designed for circulation, anticipating its remediation as meme. The spectators recording with cameras and phones

(Fig. 7) mark the shift from performance to documentation, from ritual act to archivable commodity. The pallbearers are simultaneously ritual actors and visual commodities, performing for immediate witnesses but also for the logic of digital remediation. This designed reproducibility renders the video's global circulation vulnerable to appropriation in contexts (like the Trump ad) that instrumentalise Black bodies for political ends.

Death as Entertainment During COVID-19

Fail videos maintained consistent structure: mistake followed by pallbearers, as in the viral skiing video by @lawyer_ggmu (Kotowski 2022: 55; Mansoor 2020: 128) (RQ1). This crisp juxtaposition transforms the pallbearers into symbolic escorts guiding the transition from action to consequence, mirroring their ritual role in guiding the deceased from life to afterlife.

During the pandemic, Aidoo and his crew were reframed as Grim Reapers (see Paquette 2020), a symbol often used to depict death, typically envisioned as a man or a cloaked skeleton carrying a scythe. In some instances, the Grim Reaper can cause the victim's death by coming to collect that person's soul (Cánovas 2011, as cited in Breault 2014). In other interpretations, it functions as a messenger, one that does not decide who dies, or an escort of the newly deceased (Card and Wilson 2006). And so, the pallbearers became symbolic messengers of pandemic mortality: their silhouettes, sunglasses, and accompanying music made them recognisable symbols of death's presence. But unlike the Grim Reaper (skeletal, threatening, wielding a scythe), these figures retained their dignified, celebratory character. Death remained inevitable, but the escort remained festive.

The Orthodox meme (Fig. 10) extends this logic through cultural juxtaposition. Posted on 15 April 2020, during Orthodox Easter, the meme superimposes the pallbearers' heads onto Orthodox priests' bodies, situating them at an altar with religious iconography. The juxtaposition creates absurdist humour: solemn Orthodox Easter imagery (vestments, altar, cross, and the depiction of Jesus Christ) meets the lively Ghanaian dance

Figure 10. Meme of the Coffin Dance pallbearers, published on 2Meme (facebook.com/2Memeee/; April 15, 2020)

known for accompanying dramatic or unexpected outcomes. By placing the pallbearers in priestly vestments, the meme suggests they fulfil a similar transitional role, guiding souls from life to afterlife with dignity and, in their cultural tradition, celebratory farewell. The meme translates the pallbearers' ritual function into a different religious register, revealing the universal aspects of death ritual (transition, escort, communal witnessing) beneath culturally specific forms. Posted during a period when death dominated global news and Orthodox Easter observances were restricted by pandemic lockdowns, the meme offered comic relief during a grim period, leveraging the unexpectedness of seeing serious religious figures replaced by dancing pallbearers.

So, what does it mean that, during a pandemic, death became entertainment? I keep returning to this question because it seems, initially, obscene. But the video operates dually and that duality matters (RQ3). On the one hand, the Coffin Dance meme helped people cope with pandemic-related death anxiety (Akram et al. 2021; Myrick et al. 2021), offering a framework in which death could be acknowledged without being dwelt upon, faced with humour not paralysis (cf. Chudzik 2021 on carnivalesque responses to pandemic death anxiety). The meme's repetitive format (fail → consequence → pallbearers) created ritual structure in a moment when traditional death rituals were disrupted by lockdowns and social distancing.

On the other hand, the meme risked trivialising mortality through its ubiquity and comedic framing. The designed reproducibility identified in Fig. 8 (flatness, iconicity, extractability) enabled endless remixing and detached the image from its ritual origins. The pallbearers became visual shorthand for "death" or "failure" without the Akan cultural framework that understands death as homecoming and communal passage. This is the cost of global circulation.

During the pandemic, as in-person gatherings became restricted, funerals moved online: families livestreamed ceremonies, mourners participated virtually, and digital platforms became central for collective grieving (Burrell and Selman 2022; MacNeil et al. 2021). The Coffin Dance meme represented something different from virtual funerals that sought to replicate traditional practices digitally. The meme was a ritual redesigned for digital circulation, favouring celebration over solemnity and viral sharing over private mourning. Its popularity coincided with pandemic conditions that heightened death's presence in daily life while prompting new digital ways to process it. The meme thus belongs to a moment when COVID-19

forced grief onto screens and into circulation while creating entirely new emotional and ritual experiences, experiences in which death became something people could face together, joke about, fear deeply, and hold at a distance, sometimes all at the same time.

Conclusion

The Coffin Dance exposes a structural paradox in digital visual culture. The formal properties that make a non-Western ritual readable to global audiences – low-angle framing, designed flatness, the progressive movement from communal embedding to bounded spectacle, and the chromatic and sartorial grammar of formality – are exactly the ones that expose it to decontextualisation, commodification, and political misuse. The semiotic analysis conducted here traces that logic step by step. The video begins by embedding the ritual in communal space, grounding it in the social density of shared movement and collective witness. It then moves, progressively, toward a visual mode that flattens and concentrates, producing a self-contained image that can be read at a glance and reproduced across contexts. That movement draws on the authority established through formal attire and monumental framing, and it simultaneously makes the pallbearers portable in ways their original cultural context could not fully control (given that the logic of digital remediation operates independently of the intentions embedded in local ritual practice).

The observation carries a broader implication for how participatory media relates to cultural difference. Non-Western practices gain global legibility by conforming, at least in part, to a visual logic that the dominant media economy already knows how to circulate. Global reach, therefore, comes at the cost of cultural specificity, and the Coffin Dance makes that cost visible.

Limitations and Future Directions

This analysis examines how the Coffin Dance produces meaning through formal composition but cannot account for why it became a global meme or how diverse audiences interpret it. A reception study examining user-generated remixes (fail compilations, TikTok adaptations, political appropriations) would reveal whether viewers read the video as celebratory, ironic, or both, and how these readings shift across cultural contexts. Ethnographic work with the pallbearers themselves and with Ghanaian

audiences could clarify intended meanings behind the choreography, which may differ from the circulating meanings analysed here.

Future research could compare the original video with its derivative meme forms to trace how semiotic elements (gesture, colour, rhythm, spatial logic) are retained, transformed, or discarded in remediation. Do fail videos preserve the kinetic energy (Figs. 3, 6) or only the iconicity (Fig. 8)? How do different meme formats (GIFs, image macros, video compilations) privilege different aspects of the source material? Additionally, analysing other examples of African cultural performance that circulate as memes (South African gqom dance videos, Nigerian wedding celebrations) could reveal whether the formal logic identified here (flatness, iconicity, designed reproducibility) is unique to this video or indicative of a broader memetic aesthetic that structures how non-Western cultural practices are translated for global digital circulation.

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FOREST CONSERVATION IN THE AKYEM ABUAKWA KINGDOM IN GHANA'S EASTERN REGION: AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

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Abstract: Since the 1970s, the Akyem Abuakwa Kingdom in Ghana's Eastern Region has attracted scholarly attention, largely focused on its social and political history. However, little attention has been paid to the historical development of forest conservation from the pre-colonial era to the present. The present study addresses this gap and contributes to Ghana's environmental historiography. Using archival sources, oral traditions, colonial records, and secondary literature, the research traces changing conservation practices across pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. The findings show that indigenous environmental ethics and traditional institutions played a central role in regulating forest use and protecting natural resources. Over time, these systems have come under significant strain due to commercial agriculture, illicit mining, deforestation, and the weakening of traditional authority, particularly since colonial rule. The study argues that these combined pressures have undermined sustainability and calls for renewed attention to indigenous conservation frameworks in contemporary environmental policy.

Keywords: Akyem Abuakwa Traditional Area, environmental conservation, indigenous conservation practices, cultural heritage, Akan societies

Introduction

In the seventeenth century, a group of exiles from Adanse, commanded by Ofori Panin, established themselves in the region north of the Birem River, currently known as Akyem Abuakwa (Wilks 1957). Upon their arrival, the majority of present-day Akyem Abuakwa was incorporated inside the Akwamu Empire, which had its capital at Nyanoase. Asamankese was a significant

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town, subordinate only to the king of Akwamu (Addo-Fening 1975). The Akyem established themselves on the western frontier of the Akwamu Empire, and from the mid-seventeenth century on, they began to jeopardise the empire's integrity through a succession of raids into its northern territories. The Akyem maintained pressure on the northwestern boundary until 1730, when, in collaboration with discontented people of Akwamu, they conquered the whole western region of the empire, including the original Akwamu territory, which was lost to the Akwamu (Addo-Fening 1975). The subjugated territories were thereafter apportioned between Kotoku and Abuakwa, with the largest share allocated to the latter. Over a span of seventy years, certain members of the Asona family groups migrated from the Banso region to the vacated territories, accompanied by some immigrants from Adanse.

This made the Akyem Abuakwa Traditional Area one of the areas in the Eastern Region that possesses abundant natural, biological, cultural, and historical assets with the potential to be transformed into tourist destination sites in Ghana (CONTRAD and P & H Consultants 2005). The area has a striking topography, ancient artefacts, and customary practices. The traditional area features abundant renewable natural resources including forests, waterfalls, rivers, and a diverse range of wildlife and sanctuaries. The territorial boundaries of the Abuakwa Traditional Area encompassed the region stretching from the eastern banks of the River Pompom to the western banks of the Pra River. In the northern direction, the kingdom expanded from the Kwahu border, while in the southern direction, it reached as far as the Densu River. The consolidation of these territories occurred under the Abuakwa land tenure system (Addo-Fening 1980).

In recent decades the global emphasis on the preservation, safeguarding, and management of native and sacred sites has intensified due to their importance for sustainable livelihoods, recreation, and scientific research, and because of the intimate interdependence between local communities and their environments (Chandran and Hughes 2000). Across Ghana and other indigenous contexts, scholarship demonstrates that long before the advent of formal state forestry regimes, forest conservation was embedded in cultural norms, cosmological beliefs, and customary institutions that regulated access to land and natural resources. Among Akan societies in particular, taboos, sacred groves, ritual prohibitions, myths, proverbs, and ancestral sanctions functioned as effective conservation mechanisms by controlling exploitation and linking ecological transgressions to social and spiritual consequences (Asante, Ababio and Boadu 2017; Adom, Kquofi and Asante 2018). Conversely, rising deforestation has been associated with agricultural expansion, mining, population pressures, the increasing

scarcity of certain herbal remedies and the erosion of Indigenous authority under centralised, top-down conservation policies that marginalise local custodianship (Kwawuvi, Bessah and Owusu 2018). These dynamics reflect broader global critiques of exclusionary "wilderness" models that disregard the historical role of Indigenous peoples in shaping and sustaining biodiverse landscapes (Fletcher et al. 2021), and reinforce arguments that sustainable environmental management depends on recognising Indigenous land rights, knowledge systems, and worldviews as integral to conservation practice (Ahammad et al. 2026). Therefore, academic literature widely acknowledges that effective environmental management and the safeguarding of cultural heritage, including traditional institutions and oral traditions are essential to sustainable community development (Ojomo 2010). It is within this analytical framework that this study examines how the people of the Akyem Abuakwa Kingdom in the Eastern Region of Ghana conserved their forests from the pre-colonial through the post-colonial period.

Sources and Methods

This study employed a qualitative methodology grounded in the interpretative research philosophy to examine forest conservation in the Akyem Abuakwa Kingdom from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period. Given that indigenous conservation practices are embedded in cultural norms, customary law, and spiritual beliefs, an interpretative approach was appropriate for reconstructing meanings and institutional change over time. The research adopted environmental history and ethnohistorical approaches, combining chronological analysis with institutional and legal analysis to trace continuity and transformation in indigenous strategies and colonial forestry legislation in the Gold Coast. The study was organised under four themes: a brief history of Akyem Abuakwa, indigenous conservation techniques, colonial forest legislation, and post-colonial ecological degradation.

Primary archival documents were meticulously gathered from the Public Records and Archives Administration Department in Accra. Data were also collected from relevant secondary literature, and from semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants from six communities, including traditional authorities and herbal practitioners. Most participants were over sixty years old, reflecting the study's historical focus, and participant selection was based on knowledge of conservation practices across historical periods. The semi-structured format allowed probing of emerging themes and clarification of historical accounts.

Data analysis involved rigorous source criticism, thematic coding, and narrative reconstruction. Archival documents were assessed for authenticity and bias, while oral testimonies were cross-checked with documentary evidence to ensure triangulation. Ethical standards were strictly observed: informed consent was obtained, confidentiality assured where necessary, and cultural protocols respected in engaging traditional authorities. These procedures ensured methodological rigour, credibility, and cultural sensitivity.

Figure 1. Study Area

Source: Adapted from Ofosu-Mensah, The Economic, Social and Political Impact of Mining on Akyem Abuakwa from the Pre-Colonial Era up to 1943 (2017)

Geographical Features of Akyem Abuakwa

An elevated evergreen forest primarily covers Akyem Abuakwa, which is located in the high forest zone. The mountain range features north-to-south-oriented plateaus, with a maximum elevation of 842 meters above sea level. The Akyem Abuakwa forest consists of two distinct forest blocks: the Atewa Range, which spans 237 km2, and the Atewa Range Expansion, which spans 21.3 km2 (Kusimi 2015).

The Atewa Forest is situated at the eastern extremity of the Upper Guinea forest eco-region. The Upper Guinea forest refers to the moist woods located in West Africa, stretching from Senegal to the Dahomey Gap in Togo and Benin (Oboli and Church 1965). The Upper Guinea forest eco-region is acknowledged as a location with a high level of unique species, including birds, and is considered a global hotspot for biodiversity.

Lying within an area of high rainfall, Abuakwa is heavily forested and some of the very steep slopes still maintain their original high forest vegetation (see Figure 1). The forest experiences an average annual precipitation of approximately 1650 mm. The rainfall in the forest follows a bimodal distribution, meaning it has two distinct peaks. The wet seasons comprise a primary period from May to July and a secondary period from September to October or November. The forest gives way to three rivers that etch a radial pattern into the surrounding landscape. The Birem River functions as the primary water source for the eastern region of Ghana, ultimately merging with the Pra Basin, a significant river that serves the western region. The Ayensu River originates in the eastern region and ends in the Ghana's central region. The Densu River feeds the Densu Basin and the Weija Reservoir, which is the primary source of potable water for most of Accra (Lawer et al. 2020).

A great deal of different plants and animals live in Akyem Abuakwa forest. Some of the rarest and most interesting species are the Atewa dotted butterfly (*Mylothris Atewa*), the Colobus monkey (Colobus Vellerosus), and the large-headed shrew (*Crocidura Grandiceps*) (McCullough et al. 2007). The forest reserve has confirmed the existence of fourteen non-flying small mammal species, including rats and shrews. Two of these species, C. Grandiceps and C. Wimmeri, are currently under the endangered species classification (Weber and Fahr 2007). The Forest Reserve of Akyem Abuakwa is home to several plant species including Odum (*Milicia execlsa (Welw.) C.C. Berg*), Mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis (A. Chev*), and Wawa (*Triplochiton Scleroxylon*).

Certain parts of the reserve include significant deposits of gold and bauxite, which have drawn the interest of both large mining companies and individuals engaged in small-scale and traditional mining operations, in addition to its rich variety of plant and animal species (Lawer et al. 2020). Chainsaw milling, also referred to as logging, is a prevalent practice in the reserve. The success of these initiatives can vary due to the uneven distribution of mineral resources and commercially viable timber species. The use of these resources is often more significant in areas with higher concentrations of mineral reserves and valuable, marketable trees.

Akyem Abuakwa has a high degree of soil fertility, rendering it conducive to cultivating some of the most sought-after food and crops in the traditional state. The region in which it is situated is characterised by a dense tropical forest that has maintained its lushness since ancient times, leading to the Okyenhene (title of the King of Akyem Abuakwa) being bestowed with the honorary title of Kwaebibiremhene (King of the Black Forest) (Kwakye 2007).

The Akyem Abuakwa people are a subset of the Akan people, a meta-ethnicity in Ghana and Ivory Coast, and the most populous ethnic group in Ghana. They traditionally practice a religion that focuses on the Supreme Being, ancestors, lower divinities, and spiritual entities. The living are believed to live under the watch of ancestors, who can punish and reward them. Blood is closely connected to kinship, and a blood covenant binds the dead, living, and future family members. To avoid supernatural punishment, the Akan seek to restore a broken relationship with the spirit world through sacrifices, with a traditional priest serving as mediator. At the onset of the colonial era, Akyem Abuakwa had attained a notable status as an Akan kingdom that had successfully maintained its sovereignty without being subjugated by any other traditional kingdom. Throughout Akyem Abuakwa's history, several battles have been both won and lost, although it is important to note that the sovereignty of the kingdom has consistently remained intact (Kwakye 2007).

The majority of Akyem Abuakwa was previously covered in forests before the Akwamu takeover. At first, the Abuakwa people deforested some parts of the area to create space for the establishment of settlements and farms. The timber was used for construction purposes and as firewood. The forest of Akyem Abuakwa was also used for subsistence farming, hunting, and traditional gold mining (Addo-Fening 1997: 32). Though there is no concrete data on the details of how subsistence farming and hunting transformed the ecosystem of Akyem Abuakwa in pre-colonial times, current research

has shed light on how subsistence farming diminishes biodiversity by eliminating indigenous flora and substituting it with a limited selection of crops determined by the farmers (Medoaur 2021). Additionally, some traditional cultural practices like slash and burn agriculture and mono-cropping would have negatively impacted the forest. Also, given that current research on endangered species in the forest indicates that the endangered and near threatened animals' species are in single digits (Lindsell et al. 2019), it is reasonable to assume that pre-colonial hunting patterns prized certain animals over others. This was due to the low population density and the mysticism associated with Akan forests and animals in general which would have further limited the scope of hunting activities.

The Birem valley in Akyem Abuakwa is historically renowned for its abundant reserves of gold and vibrant gold mining operations date back to times immemorial (Ofosu-Mensah 2017). Regarding pre-colonial artisanal small-scale mining, it is important to mention that the environmental impact was minimal due to the low population density and the simple technology used by the native miners of Akyem Abuakwa. In contrast, modern mining in the twentieth century, which involved the use of heavy machinery such as bulldozers, caused significant environmental degradation. The traditional approach to mining merely skimmed the outer layer of the deposits. The sole significant drawback to the landscape was the numerous excavations in the forest, posing fatal hazards to unsuspecting travellers. Travelers passing through Akyem discovered that the terrain surrounding frequently used trails was extensively perforated with numerous small pits, measuring approximately two feet in diameter. These holes posed a significant risk to unsuspecting individuals who could easily stumble into them during nighttime (Ofosu-Mensah 2017).

According to oral tradition and documentary sources of the 17th and 18th centuries, the gold was used to make ornaments, royal regalia and also circulated as currency. Much of it was also traded on the coast in the castles for firearms, ammunition, textiles, knives and alcohol (Ofosu-Mensah 2011).

Commercial Farming and Deforestation

The introduction of large-scale commercial farming altered the Akyem Abuakwa landscape and unavoidably impacted the eco-system by replacing forest trees with commercial crops. Starting in the 1820s, Akyem Abuakwa

witnessed a significant increase in the number of political exiles seeking refuge from the retaliation of the Asante kingdom. The individuals in question were citizens of Kotoku and Dwaben who had been forced to leave their respective kingdoms. The Kotoku state was initially restored at Gyadam in 1824 and later moved to Western Akyem in 1863 following the Gyadam War (Addo-Fening 1980). In (Addo-Fening 1973), the royal house of the New Dwaben State temporarily moved to Abuakwa. The exiles utilised these grounds, which were exempt from rent, for the cultivation of oil palm plants and this negatively impacted the forests of Akyem Abuakwa (Colonial Secretary 1911).

Later, in the mid-nineteenth century, large tracts of Abuakwa lands were sold to Krobo and Akuapem farmers for the purpose of engaging in commercial farming. The Industrial Revolution led to a significant increase in the need for palm oil to lubricate machines in Europe. As a result, palm oil production in West Africa surged from 1,000 metric tonnes in 1810 to more than 40,000 metric tonnes in 1885 (Hopkins 2014 [1973]). Palm oil emerged as a significant and widely cultivated cash crop on the Gold Coast, mostly for export to the European market. The Krobo people of the south-eastern Gold Coast played a prominent role as producers and suppliers of this commodity (Amanor 1999: 51). The growing demand for palm oil and the profitability of the trade led to a large number of Krobo and Akuapem farmers coming to Abuakwaland to buy untouched forests for growing oil palm trees. The Chiefs of Akyem Abuakwa indulged in imprudent transactions of stool lands from the latter part of the 19th century to the early 20th century. The expansion of commercial farming expedited the rate of deforestation in the state.

The Krobo farmers initiated their land acquisitions from neighbouring communities in the 1820s. By the 1860s, they had expanded their purchased lands by around ten miles, stretching from the Akuapem scarp to the Ponpon River. During the period from the 1860s to the 1870s and up until 1890, they obtained around 120 square miles of Abuakwa land from the Begoro Stool. This expansion allowed them to extend their borders from Ponpon to Odumatta (Adm. 11/1/1122). The haphazard disposition of Begoro lands had allowed the Krobo people to gradually expand their territory from the River Bisa to River Akrum, a distance of eight miles, by the early decades of the twentieth century (Adm. 11/1453). Consequently, Krobo farmers who lacked sufficient land resources sought to expand their oil palm plantations and, subsequently, cocoa cultivation, and thus participated in the competition for Abuakwa lands. Akuapem oil palm farmers obtained

leasehold rights to Abuakwa lands next to Ahabante from the Kukurantumi stool for the purpose of cultivating palm. In 1865, they compensated Nana Ampaw with palm oil as a tribute for the use of his land. In 1865, Okyenhene Amoako Atta I, reclaimed the lands on the left side of the Densu River from Ahabante to Adweso and resold these properties to Akuapem farmers (Adm. 11/1/1122).

This spike in land sales was because the Abuakwa chiefs experienced a gradual decline in wealth following the abolition and emancipation of slaves and pawns as well as the establishment of legitimate trade. Consequently, they developed an interest in selling forest land to commercial farmers. These irresponsible and unauthorised land transactions had a significant impact on the Akyem Abuakwa terrain, resulting in a drastic transformation and a decrease in forest coverage, thus becoming an environmental concern.

The advent of cocoa cultivation exacerbated the environmental situation of Akyem Abuakwa. Cocoa production expanded to Akyem Abuakwa in the 1890s, originating from the Akuapem scarp. By 1900, the majority of Abuakwa lands to the west of the Densu River had been sold and acquired by Akuapem and Krobo farmers. Subsequently, the Shai, Fante, and Ga commercial farmers also joined in (Hill 1997 [1963]). Johannes Muller (1893), a Basel missionary stationed on the Gold Coast, provided a description of the rapid acquisition of Abuakwa estates in 1893 as follows:

> "People from Accra, Abokobi, Aburi and Mampong are all the while moving their farms towards Akyem soil. Many parcels of land have been sold to people from the coastal districts by the Akyems. They are moving into the vicinity of Kukurantumi and into the Begoro hills and in the south, they are a day's journey from Asman [i.e., Asamankese] or the Akim side of the Densu... there is now a hunger to possess land among the people."

Due to the abundance of land, the Divisional Chiefs of Akyem Abuakwa frequently assigned plots to migrant farmers from nearby states. The leaders of Apapam, Maase, and Asafo sold their stool lands to farmers without discrimination, allowing them to cultivate cocoa. For instance, Odikro Kwame Mane of Apapam sold a significant portion of his ancestral lands, which extended from Apapam to Nsawam and were located west of Suhum, at an extremely low price. Likewise, the chiefs of Asafo and Maase sold off a majority of their lands located just to the west of the Densu River. Akyem Abuakwa lands gained significant commercial value due to the strong demand for industrial raw materials (Addo-Fening 1997).

The cocoa industry had a significant impact on Akyem Abukwa. It accelerated the rate of deforestation in the state. By 1893, forests still covered the majority of Abuakwa territory—about 80%—in untouched or mature conditions (Buck 1879). However, by 1933, around one-third, or 33%, of the entire land area of Abuakwa had been deforested for the production of cocoa (Adm. 11/1779). During the 1890s and the early twentieth century, migrant farmers from the colony continued to acquire Abuakwa stool lands. Akuapem migrant farmers purchased large parcels of forested land from the Akanteng, Asamankese, and Apapam Stools. By 1933, they had converted 26 km of land along the Asamankese-Suhum road into cocoa fields. The land commercialisation during the period from 1900 to 1914 was characterised in an extreme manner, resulting in the majority of Abuakwa land being sold and acquired by migrant farmers. Furthermore, farmers from the Fante, Ga, Shai, Ewe, Akuapem, Krobo, Anum, and Awutu occupied land in the Asamankese region (Adm. 11/1779).

Indigenous Approaches to Forest Conservation in the Akyem Abuakwa Region

The preservation or conservation of environmental resources was a feature of Akyem Abuakwa customary law and religion throughout pre-colonial times.

Sacred Groves

An important means of environmental conservation was the sacred grove. In Ghana, sacred groves are designated areas or islands that have been preserved in their natural state. Local socio-religious and cultural systems played a significant role in the partial or complete protection of forests with diverse features (Interviewee 1, personal communication, 23 August 2021). The traditional religious authorities are responsible for their maintenance, occasionally without the need for official intervention (Ntiamoa-Baidu 2008). The significance of this phenomenon encompassed several dimensions, including ecological, socio-cultural, medical, religious, and ecotourism aspects (Bempong and Nsiah 2010). The Anweam sacred grove, located within the Esukawkaw Forest Reserve in Akyem Abuakwa, was one of the focal points of preservation initiatives. Anweam serves as the Asunafo royal family's ancestral home and final resting place. Despite the entire ethnic group's relocation during the establishment of the forest reserve in the 1930s, the chiefs and elders have managed to maintain deep connections to their sacred territory.

Individuals who own land adjacent to the reserve intentionally conceal the precise whereabouts of particular sites and continue to remunerate the local owners (Amoako-Atta 1998). This practice has been explained by Gerard Chouin who interprets it as one of the many ways royal families legitimised their position by linking their matrilineage with one of the earliest settlements in the kingdom (Chouin 2008). According to an informant, the propagation of the grove helped prevent the plundering of royal graves as the spirituality surrounding the grove discouraged grave-robbers from defiling the royal tombs, which were typically laden with gold and valuables (Interviewee 1, personal communication, 26 August 2021). Due to the myths and traditional beliefs surrounding the groves, the Akyem Abuakwa people harmoniously coexisted with the grove.

Totemism

Furthermore, totemism which is major part of the Akyem Abuakwa traditional belief system also promoted forest species to some extent. According to George Benson (2021), totems are items, such as animals, that are held in high regard by individuals or certain groups of people due to their sacred nature. In addition to animals, totems encompass plants or natural entities that are perceived to have ancestral connections to a clan or family, serving as tutelary spirits (Ntiamoa-Baidu 2008). Moreover, customary belief sees some natural entities as having ancestral connections to a particular ethnic group, clan, or family. In the context of totems, it was considered a holy and highly respected practice for individuals to refrain from causing harm to their totems. Due to this rationale, individuals refrained from consuming, exterminating, or restraining such creatures, avian species, or aquatic organisms (Interviewee 5, personal communication, 20 August 2021). Though it is unlikely that the main idea behind totemism was environmental protection, the belief that certain animals were spiritually related to sections of the population afforded them some protection. However, the level of eco-protection afforded by totemism was marginal as other members of the community who did not have ancestral ties to the totems were free to hunt them.

Within the Akyem Abuakwa traditional area, each clan possesses distinct totems that are representative of various animals inhabiting the surrounding forested regions. The beliefs pertaining to totems thus contribute to the preservation of certain areas where these animals are situated. According to Benson (2021), the Bretuo clan is associated with the leopard, the

Ekuona clan with the buffalo, and the Oyokuo clan with the falcon. The conservation efforts implemented in indigenous forest reserves, to some degree, safeguarded several species of flora and fauna, which also held significant value in traditional medicinal practices in Ghana.

Sasa

Among the Akan of Ghana, several plant species are believed to embody *sasa*, a potent spiritual force that commands reverence, fear, and ritual regulation. These beliefs significantly shape patterns of resource use and function as indigenous conservation mechanisms.

Foremost among such plants is Okuobaka aubrevillei (Odii), widely regarded as the "king" of plants in traditional Akan cosmology and a totem among the Akwapim. Odii is believed to possess extraordinary spiritual power: informants maintain that few animals can pass beneath it without spiritual consequence, and that spiritually weak animals may die instantly if they attempt to do so (Interviewee 6, personal communication, 23 August 2021). Hunters report the presence of animal bones beneath the tree, reinforcing its feared status. Only spiritually potent animals, such as the giant rat (Okusie) and the porcupine, are believed capable of passing under it unharmed. Such narratives underscore the hierarchical spiritual ordering attributed to both flora and fauna within Akan thought.

Similarly revered is Spiropetalum heterophyllum (Homakyem), distinguished by its blood-like sap and reputed ability to "speak" at night. Traditional priests and healers attribute significant medicinal value to this plant, but its harvesting is strictly regulated (Interviewee 7, personal communication, 20 August 2021). Only spiritually fortified individuals may cut it, and even then, only at dawn or dusk to avoid casting a shadow upon it—an act believed to constitute self-inflicted spiritual harm. Ritual appeasement, typically involving eggs and libation (often alcohol), precedes any cutting (McLeod 1981). These elaborate prescriptions reinforce both spiritual discipline and ecological restraint.

Chlorophora excelsa (Odum) is also regarded as possessing immense *sasa* and is sometimes considered divine among the Akan (Abbiw 1990). It is believed that Odum can assume human form at night and inform chiefs of wrongdoing within the community, thereby functioning symbolically as a moral guardian. This belief partly explains why Odum trees are often located at the outskirts of settlements. Ritual offerings

precede its felling; as noted by Sarfo-Mensah et al. (2010), an Ashanti craftsman traditionally offers an egg and petitions the tree for protection before cutting it.

Another spiritually potent species is Entandrophragma (Tweneboa), commonly found in Ghana's forest zones. Its wood is used to carve the sacred *fontonfrom* drum, central to Akan ritual performance (Rattray 1959; Warren 1986). The intense emotional and possessive states induced during drumming are attributed to the spirit residing within the tree itself. Consequently, only spiritually powerful carvers are deemed capable of working with Tweneboa, reinforcing controlled access to the species.

Finally, Ceiba pentandra (Onyina) is associated with unusual stillness and is widely regarded as an abode of spirit beings, including *mmoatia* (fairies) (Sarfo-Mensah et al. 2010). Among communities such as Berekum, Eguafo, and Abrem, libation and offerings—often eggs—precede its felling. The aura of sacred presence surrounding Onyina has likely contributed to its preservation.

Collectively, beliefs in *sasa* surrounding these species impose ritual restrictions, spiritual sanctions, and moral obligations that regulate human interaction with the natural environment. In doing so, they functioned not merely as cosmological expressions but as culturally embedded systems of biodiversity conservation.

Animism

Animism, which involves attributing a living soul to plants and other natural objects, has been utilised in diverse ways to safeguard the preservation and proliferation of several plant species and animal populations throughout the African continent. The utilisation of this notion has been observed in Akan indigenous culture, namely among the Akyem Abuakwa community, as a means to safeguard and sustain the natural environment (Ntiamoa-Baidu 2008). This notion examines the conservation of natural resources with the aim of ensuring the long-term sustenance of the human species. The animistic inclination has been seen and analysed by several researchers. According to James Frazer, contemporary and forthcoming generations have a significant debt to their predecessors due to their adeptness in environmental preservation, which was facilitated by the principles of animism and totemism (Frazer

1910). Based on the findings of the present study, it is contended that animism and totemism had the perhaps unintended effect of preserving certain environmental resources in support of traditional medicinal practices. The acquisition of potions and medications by traditional or indigenous healers sometimes involved sourcing them from various animals and plants. To substantiate the aforementioned claim, a senior individual argued that, throughout the colonial epoch, the field of medicine encompassed a holistic approach, wherein the acquisition of remedies was not just limited to plants.

> "Numerous compounds have been utilised by our predecessors, as well as in contemporary times, for the goal of therapeutic intervention. Mortor [a mixture of a plant and animal products] and onini srade [python fat/oil], for example, were derived from animal remnants. These animals were not intended to be hunted for the sake of human food. Our forefathers engaged in the act of safeguarding them with the intention of using them for future medicinal applications" (Interviewee 2, personal communication, 25 November 2021).

Taboos

Additionally, taboos have been and continue to be regarded as significant socio-cultural norms that are rigorously adhered to within the Akyem Abuakwa traditional area. Taboos are social constructs that define the boundaries within a group, determining the acceptability or unacceptability of various activities (Ntiamoa-Baidu 2008). Traditionally, these ideas are widely acknowledged and embraced throughout the academic community. According to Ntiamoa-Baidu (2008), the act of violating a taboo is commonly regarded as a tangible and metaphysical transgression, resulting in potential adverse consequences for the community, such as the occurrence of natural disasters, scarcity of resources, and loss of life, which are perceived as divine retribution. Therefore, in order to pacify the deities and purify the territory, it becomes necessary to perform rituals or make sacrifices.

Based on empirical studies, it has been noted that some animal species have a significant level of reverence among the residents of Akyem Abuakwa village. It is crucial to underscore that the hunting and killing of several species of monkeys and leopards, was considered taboo. In our endeavour

to comprehend and acknowledge this inclination, a senior member of the Abomosu community underscored that:

> "It is widely accepted that these creatures play a crucial part in the development of our community. The prevailing belief is that these objects serve as totems for certain clans. Historically, stakeholders designated their dwelling places as restricted areas in order to safeguard themselves from being pursued or harmed by individuals for the purpose of consumption" (Interviewee 3, personal communication, 26 August 2021)

The primary purpose of these taboos was promoting the sanctity and purity associated with divine entities while simultaneously mitigating the adverse effects of human activities on natural resources such as land, rivers, and forests. In several villages where the Birem river god is held in high regard, Tuesday is regarded as a sacred day, often known as "*dabone*," during which the aforementioned actions are strictly forbidden. The local communities impose sanctions for any violation. Offenders are required to appease the deities by engaging in sacrificial practices. The determination of sacrifices is often carried out by the priests in collaboration with the deity through consultation. Nevertheless, it has been verified by individuals residing in the area that the efficacy of these taboos is being eroded as a result of an increasing lack of faith in the customary rituals, mostly influenced by the presence of Christianity and Islam (Sarfo-Mensah et al. 2007).

Proverbs and Songs

Proverbs and songs also serve as significant traditional methods employed in Akyem Abuakwa for the preservation of environmental resources. Throughout the African continent, the utilisation of proverbs and songs has been prevalent as a means to convey and transmit significant insights on societal realities. Throughout history, proverbs have served as a prominent means through which African traditional cultures have conveyed many ideas, particularly those pertaining to the concept of God (Yankah 1989). Moral teachings are commonly conveyed through what are referred to as "wise sayings." The interpretation of proverbs is necessary in order to achieve more comprehensive and nuanced knowledge. In a similar vein, akin to proverbs, traditional songs within the Akyem community serve as vehicles for imparting moral teachings aimed at fostering the preservation of their forest and environment.

Folktales

In addition to proverbs and songs, myths and folktales serve as an additional strategy employed as a means of forest protection in the region of Akyem Abuakwa. Myths have a significant role in intergenerational communication throughout several African traditional communities (Apter 1987). Myths are a form of traditional narrative that hold religious significance and provide insights into people's beliefs on divinity and historical events (Frobenius and Fox 1999). The older members of the Akyem Abuakwa community recount these myths and legends with the intention of instilling a sense of purpose among individuals to safeguard the forest for its practical benefits.

Conservation in the Field of Medicine

The Akyem practice herbal therapy that has long been recognised as a significant provider of health remedies for African populations throughout history. Significantly, it is widely acknowledged by researchers that before European colonisation, indigenous medical practices, including the utilisation of herbal medicine, constituted the primary medical system in Africa (Feierman et al. 1992). The data provided by the aforementioned interviewee indicates that the primary factor motivating the community to enforce a prohibition on tree felling in the vicinity of riverbanks was the preservation of the surrounding green ecosystem. Additionally, one might deduce that the preservation of the region and its resources has functioned as a significant centre for traditional herbal treatment for several generations. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (2020), existing information indicates that around 28,000 plant species, which are distributed across forest ecosystems worldwide, exhibit diverse therapeutic properties (see Table 1).

Local name	**Botanical name**	**Therapeutic properties**
Nseduansehoma	Berlinia confusa Hoyle	Menstrual cramps
Aprokuma	Antrocaryon micraster A. Chev.	Pressure, Chicken pox, Stomach ache
Kumanini	Lannea welwitschii (Hiern) Engl.	*Aseram*, Child fever, Piles
Ofram	Terminalia superba	Convulsion

Table 1. Medicinal tree species used in the treatment of diseases by the forest-fringe communities

Mode of Preparation

The study revealed a variety of methods used in the communities under study to prepare plant-based treatments for ailments. The most commonly used method of preparation was decoction. The process entails grinding, crushing, infusion, and direct consumption of the raw material. Nevertheless, factors such as the specific plant components used, the administration method, and the nature and location of the ailment it aims to treat influence the selection of the preparation method. According to Wodah and Asase (2012), traditional societies across Africa extensively use these preparation methods. Muluye and Ayicheh observed that combining different modes of preparation for medicinal plants can enhance the extraction of a higher percentage of the active components (Muluye and Ayicheh 2020). The interviewees explained that grinding was preferred for preparing herbal treatments while the plant parts were still fresh mainly because the plant materials required for healing are not easily accessible or obtainable in a dried state. Next, they subject the ground material to decoction, boiling it in water in a pot to extract phytochemicals from the plant material. This also aids in the long-term preservation of the plant material. Numerous studies have demonstrated the widespread preference for these preparation methods across various global regions, particularly in Africa.

The type of condition, the specific body area the ailment affects, and the species of medicinal plant used influenced the choice of remedy delivery routes. Oral delivery was the most commonly used method, followed by body massage, ingestion, bathing/steam bathing, nasal/ear/eye drop, and inhalation. Traditional medicine techniques commonly utilised both exterior and internal modes of administration for traditional cures (Wodah and Asase 2012). Nevertheless, certain skin and trauma-related problems necessitated oral administration of treatments. Asigbaase et al. (2023) also argue that many medicines were provided using solvents, such as water and meals, because they were believed to facilitate the transportation of remedies to specific organs in the body.

The authors found that the participants obtained information about medicinal plants from various sources. The majority of the herbal healers interviewed acquired their knowledge primarily through parental training with just a small minority obtaining their knowledge through apprenticeship. Other individuals acquired their information from common knowledge and recommendations from others.

Deforestation impacts the spread of plants, interactions between species, and the availability of resources by felling trees and breaking up the areas where they naturally grow. The escalating deforestation rates in Akyem Abuakwa have posed significant challenges for traditional healers in their search for therapeutic plants. According to the herbalists, spending hours searching for the right plant may not yield results (Interviewee 4, personal communication, 23 August 2021). The growing scarcity of medicinal plants has led to a significant increase in the costs of herbal medical care. Practitioners have observed a significant rise in traditional medical care prices ranging from 50% to 100% (Interviewee 2, personal communication, 25 November 2021). Some herbal medicinal practitioners claimed they have resorted to using more accessible but less potent herbs to cure ailments, resulting in a decrease in the treatment's efficacy (Interviewee 4, personal communication, 23 August 2021). In rural areas of Akyem Abuakwa where contemporary medical treatments are prohibitively expensive or inaccessible, the effects of deforestation on medicinal plants pose significant challenges in treating diseases.

Forest Conservation Practices in Akyem Abuakwa during the Colonial Era

Colonialism did not end Akyem Abuakwa's traditional forest conservation practices but rather they were subsumed under colonialist conservation efforts. During the colonial era, the British government implemented land conservation laws in Ghana's Gold Coast, primarily driven by the growing global demand for minerals and natural resources. These laws aimed to regulate and manage the region's forest resources, including gold, cocoa, and timber.

Background to Forest Legislation in Ghana

The colonial authority did not enact forest legislation until mining and wood businesses began their operations on a significant scale (Agbosu 1983). The Native Jurisdiction Ordinance of 1883 granted Traditional Councils the authority to establish bye-laws to safeguard water courses and preserve forests. Prior to the publication of the Report of the Commission on Agricultural Potential of the Gold Coast in 1894, the colonial authority did not enact any forest legislation. The report highlighted the potential prospects that the woods of the Gold Coast presented to the British business community. However, it cautioned against the perils of haphazard and

unregulated use of the forests, which were described as an "untouched reservoir of riches." The government's strategy during the first three decades of the nineteenth century would have been influenced by the perspectives outlined in this report. Therefore, the focus shifted to preserving enough land as forests in order to support agricultural demands, guarantee sufficient water resources, and sustain the production of lumber, fuel wood, and other forest products in quantities suitable for both export and local consumption.

Within a span of four years following the publication of Report of the Commission on Agricultural Potential of the Gold Coast, wood and mining companies significantly expanded their operations. The magnitude of their operations was evident in the quantity of lumber exported to Europe from 1900 to 1906. These actions posed significant hazards to the trees, which may potentially threaten sufficient water supplies and negatively impact the climate of the colony. The mining industry during this period saw significant growth, utilising timber sourced from surrounding woods in proximity to the mining hubs. Miners favored a species known as "Kaku" or "fillacopsis kaku" for fuel and props, leading to the indiscriminate cutting down of undersized trees (Rodger 1901). This engagement in these activities has resulted in significant hazards, potentially jeopardising the availability of sufficient water resources and adversely impacting the colony's climatic conditions.

Scientific evidence supports the notion that enough vegetation creates favourable weather conditions that positively affect health Amanor states that the Forest Ordinance implemented measures to prevent excessive exploitation and preserve the climate of the forest zone and watershed (Amanor 1999: 51). The colonial administration was concerned about uncontrolled deforestation and illegal mining activities in the Birem Forest Reserve. The Forestry Department, which was established in 1909 to this effect, had the authority to allocate concessions for these forest reserves, with 40% of the proceeds going to the owners and the Forestry Department keeping the remaining 60% for administrative purposes (Teye 2008). The Forest Ordinance of 1910 and the Forest Reserve Ordinance of 1937 were also enacted in the Gold Coast, specifically in Akyem Abuakwa. The Forest Ordinance aimed to restrict activities like mining and logging that caused degradation of the Birem forest. The goal of the Forest Ordinance was to establish a forest reserve for future use. This would immediately and later have beneficial effects on the lives of the residents of Akyem Abuakwa as these two regulations protected the forests which would result in favourable weather conditions and pristine water bodies. Additionally, the forest reserve would

later catalyse a vibrant eco-tourism industry promoted by an appreciable depth of academic research. The colonial authority also established the positions of Forest Commissioner and Reserve Commissioner to guarantee the efficient implementation of this policy (Forest Ordinance 1927). The beneficial influence of this approach on the environment has diminished over the current era due to the excessive use of natural resources in Akyem Abuakwa. During the reign of Nana Sir Ofori Atta I, specific measures were enacted to safeguard rivers against pollution and establish traditional bye laws to manage and maintain the environment in Akyem Abuakwa.

Adu-Gyamfi et al. (2020) have argued that the land conservation laws implemented by the British during the colonial era in Ghana, then known as the Gold Coast, served not only as a means of environmental management but also as a tool for the British to exploit the forest resources of the region. This assertion is corroborated by Sackeyfio (2012), who wrote that the implementation of various land conservation laws on the Gold Coast by the British during the nineteenth century was primarily driven by a growing global demand for minerals and other natural resources, including gold, cocoa, and timber. However, the authors of this article argue that these laws resulted in the preservation of the forests, which were later developed into eco-tourism sites in Akyem Abuakwa. One of such tourist sites is the Atiwa Forest Reserve.

Indirect Rule and the Foundations of Environmental Degradation in Akyem Abuakwa

Under indirect rule, the relationship between the colonial state and Akyem Abuakwa traditional authority was unstable and contingent, shaped less by concern for environmental protection than by the colonial imperative to control land, revenue, and political authority. From the outset, colonial interventions in governance undermined the institutional foundations through which environmental norms had historically been enforced. Beginning in the 1880s administrative reforms targeting chiefly judicial authority gradually hollowed out indigenous systems of land and resource regulation, creating conditions that later enabled widespread environmental degradation.

A critical turning point was the re-enactment of the Native Jurisdiction Ordinance of 1878 as the Native Jurisdiction Ordinance (NJO) of 1883. The ordinance fundamentally altered the basis of chiefly power by rendering

judicial authority derivative rather than inherent. Chiefs became liable to removal for abuse of power, while their authority to make by-laws and exercise civil and criminal jurisdiction was made contingent on gubernatorial approval. Although framed as measures to promote "peace, good order, and welfare," these reforms subordinated customary governance to colonial legal hierarchies and transformed chiefs into administrative auxiliaries of the state (Metcalfe 1964). Akyem Abuakwa's exclusion from the NJO (1883) further accelerated this erosion. The absence of a recognised political head during the exile of Okyenhene Amoako Atta I (Addo-Fening 1980), colonial mistrust of his loyalty (Adm. 11/1/1095), and the perception that NJO recognition was a privilege reserved for compliant rulers combined to place the state outside the formal framework of native administration (Chief Justice 1889). As a result, native courts in Akyem Abuakwa were increasingly delegitimised. From 1884, English courts treated unregistered native courts as mere arbitrators' tribunals, repeatedly warning chiefs that they exercised judicial power "at their peril" (Addo-Fening 1990: 108). District Commissioners refused to recognise or enforce their judgments, effectively stripping traditional authorities of coercive capacity (Adm. 11/1/1477).

This weakening of authority was compounded by contradictory colonial jurisprudence. While *Opon v. Ackinnie* (1887) affirmed that the Supreme Court Ordinance of 1876 had not abolished chiefly jurisdiction, this recognition was quickly overtaken by administrative centralisation. In October 1887, Akyem Abuakwa was constituted as the Eastern Akim District, and a permanent District Commissioner's court was established with authority to rehear cases already decided by the Okyenhene (Adm. 11/1/1094). Backed by armed constables, the colonial court offered subjects an alternative and often more intimidating forum for dispute resolution (Addo-Fening 1990: 99). As in the coastal towns, where judicial commissioners increasingly commanded popular obedience, this arrangement proved deeply subversive of traditional authority (W. B. Griffith 1887, *Public Records and Archives Administration Department,* Adm. 11/1/1477).

The consequences for environmental governance were profound. Chiefly judicial power had long underpinned the enforcement of religious norms, land-use restrictions, and communal obligations regulating forests, rivers, and farmlands. Sacred groves, hunting taboos, and controls on land alienation depended not on formal legislation but on the social authority of chiefs and their courts. As colonial interventions fractured this authority, these informal but effective systems of environmental regulation weakened.

By the end of the nineteenth century, central authority in Akyem Abuakwa was close to collapse. Sub-chiefs and subjects openly defied the Okyenhene, disrupted court proceedings, and assaulted his messengers, while the colonial state's indulgent posture toward litigants encouraged habits of independence and indiscipline (Addo-Fening 1990).

These political changes coincided with expanding commercial opportunities under an economy of "legitimate trade," further loosening traditional control over land and resources. The erosion of authority was reflected in the actions of timber loggers and "Kroo boys," who increasingly ignored customary restraints on forest use (Agbosu 1983). By the time the Akyem Abuakwa State Native Authority by-laws were introduced under Nana Ofori Atta I after 1912, chiefly power had already been significantly compromised. Although these by-laws, enacted under the Native Jurisdiction Ordinance, were presented as instruments to protect property for future generations, generate revenue, and impose administrative order, they operated within a colonial framework that denied chiefs effective coercive power.

The case of the Atiwa Range Forest Reserve illustrates the long-term consequences of this trajectory. Designated in 1926 under Native Authority by-laws, Atiwa initially remained under traditional control. Yet illegal logging proliferated as timber concessionaires, operating through independent contractors, flouted both customary and statutory regulations. The Concessions Ordinance governed the acquisition of timber rights but provided no effective oversight of operations, and concession agreements were routinely withheld from the Commissioner of Stamps and the Concessions Courts (Agbosu 2000). Chiefs, though formally responsible for forest protection, lacked the institutional means to enforce compliance.

In 1935, the colonial government intervened by vesting the Atiwa Range Forest Reserve in the administration, holding it in trust for the Akyem Abuakwa Traditional Authority. This transfer marked the culmination of a process set in motion decades earlier. Traditional authorities were blamed for mismanagement, yet the judicial and political powers that had once enabled them to regulate land and forests had been systematically dismantled. Environmental degradation in Atiwa thus cannot be understood simply as administrative failure; it was the outcome of a prolonged erosion of indigenous authority under indirect rule, which destabilised local systems of environmental governance long before colonial conservation measures were imposed.

Thus, the Atiwa Forest occupies a distinctive place at the intersection of chieftaincy, ecology, and colonial governance. Long embedded within the authority of the Akyem Abuakwa chieftaincy, the forest was initially designated a reserve by colonial authorities because of its strategic importance as a watershed, encompassing the headwaters of the Birem, Densu, and Ayensu rivers and their tributaries, which supply water to surrounding communities and the city of Accra. Several streams of particular local significance, including Awusu, Kokoben, Obiri ne Obeng, and Abudwusu, also originate within the forest. Beyond its hydrological role, Atiwa has since been recognised as a site of exceptional biodiversity, providing habitat for more than 227 bird species and over 100 species facing global extinction (BirdLife International 2021). The subsequent vulnerability of this ecologically and culturally significant landscape highlights how changes in political authority under indirect rule reshaped the conditions under which environmental protection was practiced and enforced.

The Impact of Christianity on Indigenous Conservation Methods in Akyem Abuakwa

The introduction of Christianity into Akyem Abuakwa in the mid-nineteenth century profoundly disrupted indigenous environmental governance. Conservation had long been embedded in taboos, ritual prohibitions, and sacred laws regulating forests, water bodies, wildlife, livestock, and agricultural cycles. With the establishment of the Basel Mission station at Gyadam near Osino in 1853 and the subsequent spread to Kukurantumi and Kyebi by 1861, missionary activity backed by colonial authority systematically challenged these institutions (Addo-Fening 1990: 83). By promoting a Christian ethic that denounced traditional practices as "pagan" and inimical to progress, the mission weakened the legitimacy and enforceability of customary conservation mechanisms (Buck 1879).

Missionary hostility toward taboos culminated in Rev. Karl Buck's 1879 appeal to the colonial administration to legislate against certain customary prohibitions (Addo-Fening 1997: 67). This marked a turning point: regulations once collectively binding were redefined as matters of individual choice. The contested taboos, including bans on transporting firewood and palm nuts into towns, using brass pans in streams, keeping goats in residential areas, and farming on sacred days, had functioned to limit deforestation, protect water sources, manage livestock impact, and provide ecological fallow periods (Addo-Fening 1997: 75). Yet in 1882 the Civil Commandant

of the Volta District instructed Chief Buabeng of Anyinam that such rules could not be enforced, effectively stripping chiefs of regulatory authority while permitting voluntary observance (Adm. 1/9/2).

For traditional leaders such as King Amoako Atta I, taboos were integral to political sovereignty and environmental stewardship. The Basel Mission, however, framed them as violations of the "Christian conscience," positioning Christianity as a rival authority (Addo-Fening 1997: 80). Resistance to their erosion was widespread. In Asiakwa, converts were attacked for fishing in a prohibited stream; in 1877 Okomfo Kasewaa of Begoro attributed a deadly typhus outbreak to Christian violations of taboos against importing pigs and felling Odum trees; and Asafoatse Abam mobilised the asafo to prevent further destruction of sacred trees (Mohr 1878). Such episodes reveal a persistent belief that ecological imbalance and social calamity followed the breach of sacred conservation laws.

From the 1870s, the mission deepened these divisions by establishing segregated Christian settlements, Salem or *Oburonikrom*, intended to shield converts from "pagan" influence. Though initially viewed by the Okyenhene as a "state within a state," these enclaves gained support among converts seeking exemption from customary restrictions (Addo-Fening 1997: 178). Christians at Osiem in 1890 explicitly linked relocation to freedom from prohibitions on goat-keeping and farming on sacred days (Mohr 1890). Salem thus offered not only spiritual refuge but release from communal environmental controls, institutionalising selective adherence to conservation norms and fracturing the Akan conception of community as a unified moral-ecological order.

The long-term effects were evident well into the twentieth century. In 1940s, Christians in Osino openly contravened taboos, transporting firewood and palm nuts into mission stations and preparing fufu during the Ohum festival, acts forbidden in the main town (Addo-Fening 1997: 201). Efforts by King Amoako Atta in the 1880s to reassert traditional authority, including enforcing sacred rest days, met sustained Christian resistance and, at times, violent confrontation in towns such as Asiakwa, Asuom, Asunafo, and Kyebi (Addo-Fening 1997: 187). Over time, missionary education and ideology fostered growing alienation from indigenous culture, further eroding the social foundations of conservation.

By the close of the nineteenth century, the combined influence of the Basel Mission, colonial intervention, Western education, and measures such as the 1887 Public Announcement had substantially weakened Akyem Abuakwa's traditional conservation regime (Addo-Fening 1997: 189).

Through desacralising taboos, curtailing chiefly authority, and creating enclaves exempt from communal oversight, Christianity disrupted an integrated system of environmental management that had historically sustained ecological balance.

Post-Colonial Destruction of Eco-Resources in Akyem Abuakwa

The Akyem Abuakwa traditional area in Ghana has seen substantial challenges to its cultural and natural assets in the aftermath of colonial rule. This deterioration can be linked to several sources, such as illegal artisanal small-scale mining, commercial operations including farming and forest logging, bush fires, the disintegration of traditional institutions, and inadequate state aid (Attuaquayefio and Fobil 2009). Indigenous mining in Ghana, starting from the pre-colonial era and continuing until the 1980s, was predominantly uncontrolled and with minimal oversight from state entities. However, the Small-Scale Gold Mining Law (PNDCL 218) was enacted in 1989, granting Ghanaians the opportunity to get a licence for gold mining on a tract of land no larger than 25 acres. This licence permits mining activities without the use of explosives for the duration of three to five years (Hilson 2001).

As identified by Hilson and Potter (2003), the severe lack of employment opportunities and widespread poverty across the country in the 1980s have led to a remarkable expansion in both participation and output in Ghana's artisanal and small-scale gold-mining industries. Though economic conditions have vastly improved since then, poverty is still a major driver of informality. Approximately 31% of the country's population is below the poverty threshold, as reported by the World Bank (World Bank 2022). Also, economic development and legitimate employment opportunities remain low in rural areas which are still largely agrarian. Individuals without the resources to go into commercial agriculture and those unable or unwilling to take the risk of rural-urban migration have few avenues to make a living and mostly turn to artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), a labour-intensive, low-tech method of mining and mineral processing. Regulatory failings and lack of institutional support have compounded the environmental dangers posed by small-scale mining and resulted in rampant environmental degradation (Hilson and Potter 2003).

Akyem Abuakwa has emerged as a refuge for itinerant individuals and seasonal agricultural workers, attracting a significant influx of migrants

from Wa and Bolgatanga, Accra, Kumasi, Prestea, and Tarkwa. The practice of artisanal small-scale mining in Akyem Abuakwa has highlighted two significant concerns: the impact on public health and the destruction of the environment. Communities have been experiencing enduring health consequences for centuries due to the presence of hazardous substances, such as mercury. The dumping of these chemicals into local waterways, such as the Birem River, has resulted in the contamination of streams and rivers, hence causing a rise in waterborne illnesses.

During the pre-colonial period, the Abuakwa people held the River Birem in high esteem since it provided them with essential resources and nourishment. The presence of gold in the Birem River further intensified their veneration, seeing it as a deity. Historically, traditional leaders, priests, and priestesses have diligently followed established customs about water use (Goba 2015). However, the decline of traditional authority and religion in Akyem Abuakwa during the colonial period laid the foundations for much of the degradation under discussion.

Still, just as in the colonial era, there have been efforts to re-assert traditional modes of conservation. The current King of Akyem, Abuakwa, is known both nationally and internationally for his conservation endeavours. He has integrated indigenous conservation practices with contemporary methods to ensure the safeguarding of the trees and wildlife in the traditional region. One of his numerous endeavours is the establishment of the Okyeman Brigade. The guards enforce adherence to conventional rules and regulations that safeguard the environment. They interact with government ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs), as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to safeguard the environment. The environmental subcommittees of local governments (district assemblies) depend on them for information regarding the activities of illegal loggers. The Forestry Services Division of the Ghana Forestry Commission partners with Brigade soldiers to patrol many forest reserves. Numerous environmental NGOs operating in the traditional region engage the brigades to implement community initiatives, specifically in water conservation and forest and wildfire prevention and management. Despite these efforts, the Forestry Service in the traditional area is still limited in reach and have expressed the lack of participatory off-reserve forest activities to sacred sites in more remote communities, which are vulnerable to the clandestine activities of illegal chainsaw operators. Such collaborative efforts could also provide the needed support of and training for local people in fire prevention and control to reduce the risk of fire outbreak.

Another area of environmental degradation concerns the landscape and has caused reduced biodiversity. Akyem Abuakwa is now facing significant environmental challenges caused by the small-scale gold mining sector. The Atiwa forest, which serves as a protective habitat for the River Birem's source, has seen extensive deterioration as a result of the use of illicit surface-mining techniques in the area. Illegal miners in Akroful, Adadientam, Asiakwa, and Sedwumase have devastated cocoa and other fields in order to conduct their mining activities, resulting in a loss of biodiversity and a decline in the presence of medicinal plants. The actions of illegal small-scale miners result in the destruction of medicinal plants that are locally used for the treatment of various maladies such as anaemia, asthma, gonorrhoea, measles, and typhoid. Opanin Denyira Ofori, a herbalist residing in Apapam, cautions that unless illegal small-scale mining activities are well controlled, it would pose significant challenges for herbalists to provide remedies for many illnesses in the coming times (Interviewee 4, personal communication, 23 August 2021). This highlights the possibility of mining operations to decrease natural resources, which can address health concerns in Apapam and nearby places.

The government’s endeavours to enhance the efficacy of small-scale gold-mining enterprises in Akyem Abuakwa have not primarily focused on environmental concerns. The government has implemented three primary strategies, namely formalisation, military intervention, and alternative livelihood schemes. Banchirigah (2006) asserts that the government's insufficient comprehension of the intricacies of illicit mining groups has impeded their endeavours. Nevertheless, these endeavours have failed to provide substantial gains leading to many protests and confrontations between security forces and local residents (Okoampa-Ahoofe 2014). These protests have centred on the activities of legal and illegal small-scale miners who claim government and the chiefs have failed to protect their water bodies and farmlands from the degradation of mining companies. There have also been claims of government-backed illegal mining operations. The government has described these confrontations as the result of locals’ attempt to stop the operations legally registered mining companies and the actions of angry illegal miners who have been affected by police crackdowns (GhanaWeb 2014). The involvement of certain traditional leaders, such as chiefs, heads of families, and other members of traditional authorities in causing harm to the environment is apparent in different traditional societies. These leaders have amassed significant sums of money from illegal concessions resulting in the depletion of forests, the

devastation of agricultural fields, and wetlands. The collection of money has enabled illicit miners to undermine the nation's established legal system. Local illegal operators and certain small-scale miners opt to sell their unprocessed gold or gold powder to intermediaries rather than making the arduous journey to towns to sell their gold. The intermediaries gather a sufficient amount of gold and transform it into purified chips, which are then either sold to the Precious Minerals Marketing Company or smuggled out of the country via both legal and illegal means (Hilson 2002). However, artisanal small-scale mining remains a high hazardous venture with an estimated average annual fatality rate of 44, which far exceeds the annual fatality rate of 5 of the large-scale mining sector of Ghana.

The illegal small-scale mining operations carried out in the Akyem Abuakwa region have significantly harmed the reputation of the established traditional authority. The authors' recent field investigation in Kyebi found that traditional authorities lack resolve in enforcing laws inside their territory. This is mostly due to the substantial financial benefits they receive from illegal artisanal small-scale mining operations.

Figure 2. Illegal miners at work at Akyem Apapam
Source: Ofosu-Mensah (2017)

The sustainability and safety of small-scale mining rely on the implementation of efficient organisational and regulatory structures within the business. Facilitating land release and implementing operator regularisation can encourage the adoption of organised and environmentally

sound practices. Research done in Noyem found that a significant number of people, including women, children, and elderly adults, participate in illegal galamsey activities (see Figure 2). However, they are open to actively seeking alternative work.

Yet another challenge to forest conservation is forest logging in Ghana in general and Akyem Abuakwa in particular. Illegal logging in Ghana involves various activities that involve corrupt methods to obtain access to forests, unauthorised extraction from protected areas, the felling of protected species, and the extraction of timber exceeding agreed-upon limitations (Tacconi et al. 2003). In Akyem Abuakwa, Ghana, chainsaw operators and registered logging enterprises are the primary culprits engaged in illicit wood extraction.

Upon Ghana's Independence in 1957, 96% of all timber concessions were held by expatriate companies. However, the number of Ghanaians involved in the timber industry increased over time, with interest-free loans being a mechanism for increasing the number of Ghanaian contractors. In 1972, the Timber Operations (Government Participation) Decree was passed, leading to an unprecedented level of state involvement in the timber sector. The Timber Industry and Ghana Timber Marketing Board (Amendment) Decree, 1977 conferred the sole monopoly of export of Ghana timber on the Timber Marketing Board (Oduro et al. 2011).

The period between 1972 and 1982 was marked by over-regulation, productivity disincentives, infrastructure collapse, institutional demoralisation, public sector mismanagement, and lack of rural infrastructure. This led to a decline in production and exports, with the value of timber exports falling from US$183 million to US$15 million. By 1982, the industry's share of overall export earnings dropped from about 18% to under 2% (Agyeman and Oduro 2007). In the Economic Recovery Programme (ERP) era (1983-88), soft loans were made available to some timber companies to enable them purchase new equipment and materials (Agyeman and Oduro 2007). The wood industry remained mainly export-oriented, with the local market virtually neglected. Since the construction boom during the ERP era, demand for lumber has been on the increase both domestically and for exports. The chainsaw permit system has been grossly abused by communities, District Assemblies, and some Forestry officials, making it spiral out of control (Oduro et al. 2011). Chain-sawing was consequently outlawed in 1997, and the Timber Resources Management Act, 1997 (Act 547) and the related LI 1649 were enacted to ban chain-sawing.

The Timber Resources Management Act (Act 547) of 1997 and the Timber Resources Management Regulations (LI 1649) of 1998 introduced a legal reform of the concession system, replacing timber concessions with Timber Utilisation Contracts (TUC) in forest reserve and off-reserve areas. TUCs provide greater enforcement of regulations, including compliance with forest management specifications and periodic audits. Act 547 formalised the rights of other stakeholders and required applications for timber rights to address social needs of communities (Birikorang 2001).

In 2002, Act 617 and LI 1649 were amended to exclude granting timber rights on land with private forest plantations or timber grown or owned by individuals or groups of individuals. Competitive bidding for timber rights was introduced, and the reforestation obligation was dropped. Forest reserves, created under the Forest Ordinance 1927, protected under the Forest Protection Decree 1974, and regulated under the TRM Act of 1997, 1998, and 2006, form the core legal framework supporting the 1994 Forest and Wildlife Policy.

The European Union initiated a Forest Law Enforcement, Governance, and Trade (FLEGT) in the early 2000s to combat illegal logging and trade. In Ghana, illegal chainsaw timber accounts for at least 80% of the domestic market. The chainsaw operation ban by LI 1649 in 1998 failed and to this day, it is clear that the law's enforcement has been ineffective and advocacy for alternative strategies has begun (Oduro et al. 2011).

Illegal chainsaw timber does not earn any formal timber revenue, and strict regulations on the production and transportation of chainsaw timber, along with a ban on private log exports, effectively keep local timber prices significantly lower than global market prices (Odoom 2005). Illegal logging has had significant adverse environmental, economic, and social consequences, such as the deterioration of forests, decrease in government revenue, erosion of democratic processes, exacerbation of poverty, and decreased local and international pricing of forest products (Arnoldo 2002).

Illicit logging and mining provide significant risks to biodiversity protection in the region. Okyeman has a protracted history of economic reliance on forestry, with numerous timber concessionaires operating in the region. The economic trees in the region comprise species such as odum (Milicia excelsa), wawa (Triplochiton scleroxylon), African walnut, and African redwood. Logging is not confined to woods beyond designated territory; for instance, in Atewa, the most recent official logging was in 1991; however, illegal logging persists, and the repercussions of logging are apparent. The

population of chainsaw operators has been rising since the mid-1980s and is currently prevalent. Chainsaw operators transport the extracted timber from the forest to easily accessible roadside locations for loading onto trucks. A recent study suggests that there could be up to 500 chainsaw operators in the Atewa reserve, including approximately 2,500 young men employed as operators and timber transporters. Moreover, illegal logging has encroached upon areas deemed sacred and previously venerated by local communities. Illegal logging, chainsawing, and commercial fuelwood harvesting have become prevalent in "Okyemanpo," the burial ground of the Kings of Okyeman, which was formerly a prime example of traditional forest conservation efforts in Ghana (Ghana Wildlife Society, GWS 2005).

Conclusion

This article has examined the historical trajectory of forest conservation in the Akyem Abuakwa Kingdom, tracing its evolution from pre-colonial practices rooted in indigenous knowledge systems to the complex environmental challenges faced in the contemporary period. By situating environmental history within the broader framework of social, political, and economic transformations in Ghana's Eastern Region, the study demonstrates how traditional environmental ethics and local governance institutions once played a central role in regulating forest use, maintaining ecological balance, and sustaining culturally significant species and sacred groves. Pre-colonial conservation practices were closely intertwined with spiritual beliefs, customary laws, and the authority of chiefs and elders, which collectively created an effective system of natural resource stewardship.

The findings reveal that these systems have been gradually eroded under the combined pressures of colonial and postcolonial interventions, commercial agriculture expansion—particularly cocoa farming—illegal mining operations, and widespread deforestation. Colonial policies disrupted traditional governance and land-use arrangements, weakening the authority of indigenous institutions, while modern economic incentives and population pressures further strained forest ecosystems. As a result, the sustainability of natural resources has been compromised, sacred and ecologically important areas have been degraded, and the cultural practices that reinforced environmental protection have declined.

This study underscores the critical importance of recognising and

revitalising indigenous conservation frameworks as part of contemporary environmental policy and management strategies. Integrating traditional ecological knowledge with modern approaches not only has the potential to enhance biodiversity protection and sustainable resource use but also to reinforce local governance, cultural identity, and community participation in conservation. By highlighting the historical interactions between culture, governance, and ecology, this research addresses a notable gap in African environmental historiography, demonstrating that sustainable forest management cannot be fully understood or achieved without appreciating the historical and sociocultural context in which these ecosystems exist.

Ultimately, this work advocates for a multi-dimensional approach to environmental stewardship in Ghana, one that bridges historical understanding, indigenous practices, and contemporary policy interventions. It calls for scholars, policymakers, and local communities to engage collaboratively in protecting the forests of Akyem Abuakwa, ensuring that both ecological integrity and cultural heritage are preserved for future generations. By situating forest conservation within the intertwined histories of power, economy, and culture, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of environmental challenges in Ghana and offers lessons for broader conservation efforts across West Africa and the continent.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

Statement of Ethics

This study adhered to established ethical standards for qualitative and historical research involving human participants and archival materials. The research was conducted with due respect for the cultural, social, and institutional contexts of the Akyem Abuakwa Kingdom, recognising that indigenous forest conservation practices are deeply embedded in customary law, spiritual beliefs, and traditional authority structures. Throughout the research process, cultural sensitivity was paramount, particularly in documenting indigenous knowledge relating to sacred groves, ritual practices, and spiritual beliefs associated with forest conservation. Culturally restricted information was neither solicited nor disclosed without appropriate authorisation. The study ensured that indigenous knowledge systems were

represented accurately, respectfully, and within their proper historical and cultural contexts. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to decline to answer questions or withdraw at any stage, and the intended academic use of the data. Community entry protocols were strictly observed, and permission was sought from relevant traditional authorities before interviews were conducted in the selected communities. To protect participants' identities, all interviewees were fully anonymised. In the presentation of findings, they are identified only as Interviewee 1 to Interviewee 7. No personally identifying information is disclosed, and any contextual details that could indirectly reveal identities have been carefully managed. The study also complied with ethical standards in archival research. Primary documents obtained from the Public Records and Archives Administration Department were handled in accordance with institutional regulations. Archival materials were critically assessed for authenticity, context, and potential bias. Oral testimonies were cross-checked with documentary and secondary sources to ensure triangulation and minimise misrepresentation. By integrating informed consent, strict anonymisation, cultural protocol adherence, and methodological triangulation, the research upheld principles of respect, confidentiality, academic integrity, and cultural sensitivity.

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Interviewee 5, traditional priest, 20 August 2021, Akyem Bomaa

Interviewee 6, traditional priest, 23 August 2021, Akyem Nsuta

Interviewee 7, traditional priest, 20 August 2021, Akyem Sekyere

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INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE AND DESCENDANTS OF THE ENSLAVED IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: Intimate partner violence is a global challenge particularly in South Africa. Colonial legacies are often not included in related research, yet colonial violence and intimacy continue to shape the domestic and present conditions of slave-descendant families. Drawing from the work of South African feminist writer Pumla Gqola and American scholar Christina Sharpe, this article analyses contemporary levels of intimate partner violence among slave descendants in light of slave memory and intimacy in this case study of Cape Town, South Africa. Research conducted for this study explored the transmission of intergenerational violence with three generations of enslaved descendants within families of mixed racial origin. The findings indicate that intimate partner violence was one of the effects of the slavery – a trauma that was often intergenerationally transmitted through silencing. The article contributes to understanding intimate partner violence among descendants of the enslaved in a (post-) colonial context.

Keywords: intimate partner violence, colonial legacies, intergenerational transmission of trauma, slave heritage, post-humanism

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) has been coined the "shadow pandemic" in South Africa (CSVR 2024). This was due to the sharp increase in IPV since the South African government introduced lockdown protocols to manage the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 (Jain 2021). According to crime statistics for 2023/2024, there were 14,401 grievous bodily harm assaults, 10,516 accounts of rape and 1,515 cases of attempted murder against women in South Africa (SAPS 2022). The country remains in a crisis with 5.5 women killed by intimate partners per 100,000 women between 2020 and 2021, femicide rates have remained high, according to the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC 2024). Intimate partner violence can be

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defined as all acts of physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional violence committed by a current or former intimate partner or spouse (Barnett et al. 2011). It includes actions which intentionally and unintentionally harms the partner. Family violence is conceptualised as physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and spiritual abuse which takes place between immediate family members: husbands, wives, children, and parents (Warren et al. 2024).

In South Africa, IPV is often framed within the context of apartheid and individual pathology; however, there is sufficient historical data to indicate that intimate partner and family violence occurred on a regular basis from 1700 to 1900 in the Cape Colony among slave owners as well as among the enslaved (Murray 2010; Scully 1995; Shell 2001). Research by Brown et al. (2022) concluded that colonisation was a driver of IPV in postcolonial countries and that patriarchal postcolonial countries had higher risks for IPV than countries which had not been colonised. The study found that colonialism imposed patriarchal beliefs and together with continued structural inequities made women vulnerable to violence (Brown et al. 2022). Therefore, the colonial context is important for situating the ways in which racist sexualisation, derogatory representations of black bodies, and suffering find its ways into the present framing of gendered violence (Boonzaier 2023).

Black and indigenous scholars describe how historical traumas of slavery and colonisation have contributed to the high levels of violence perpetrated against black and indigenous women today (Baderoon 2015; Burnette 2015; Gqola 2010). For example, Sarah Baartman, a Khoisan woman serves as a representation of how black women's bodies have been commodified and sexualised over centuries. In 1810 she was labelled as the Hottentot Venus and "Hottentot" is one of the derogatory names which indigenous people were referred to in South Africa (Aiswarya and Anu 2024). Sarah was forced to work as a domestic help and a slave for white farmers after the Dutch settlers killed her father and husband on her wedding day, when she was coerced to go to London by a British surgeon to be displayed in London's Piccadilly where people would pay to see her. Eventually Sarah was sold and displayed in France's Palais Royale. Her brain and genitals were preserved for research, and the findings were presented to the Academy of Sciences. A plaster cast of her body was also made, and it is preserved in the Museum of Natural History along with her skeleton. Both her brain and genitalia were on display in the Musée de l'Homme (Museum of Man) until 1972 (Aiswarya and Anu 2024).

Atrocities like the dehumanisation and enslavement of Sarah Baartman were largely ignored and forgotten by society. Jessica Murray (2010) stated that enslaved women's voices have been silenced in historical records. This article puts to work Pumla Gqola's (2010) slave memory project and Christina Sharpe's (2016) "Wake" as a post-humanist framework enabling us to re-imagine slave memory. By re-imagining the past, we may find new ways of inhabiting the present. Re-imagining slavery is about ethical remembrance of a human atrocity rather than memorialising the enslaved as victims or choosing to dissociate from the memory. What is often forgotten or "unremembered" is that both slavery and colonialism were gendered projects. Gqola (2010: 8) uses the term "unremembering" to describe a calculated act of exclusion and erasure inscribed by power hierarchies. Unremembering can be viewed as the deliberate exclusion of enslaved women's narratives from public discourse. "Unremembering" can also occur when societies deny events took place because it threatens their sense of safety or stability and is often referred to as dissociation. It is a common response to trauma (Stein 2012).

Trauma scholars refer to this denial of traumatic historical events by society as the "conspiracy of silence" (Danielli 1985). The term was based on the case of holocaust survivors as victims were rendered silent because they feared no one would believe them or listen to them. Furthermore, the silence is maintained by society. The trauma of enslavement has resulted in descendants not wanting to remember their past. Cape historians often refer to the "amnesia" of Cape slave descendants not recalling their slave heritage (North 2020; Shell 2001; Worden 2016). The amnesia is about trauma that is being dissociated and cut off not only for the individual or family but for society more broadly (Stein 2012). Tracing the longer history of the violence at Cape Colony may therefore enable us to interrogate the ways this violence has been reproduced intergenerationally.

Historical Context

Southern Africa was inhabited by indigenous groups which predate the first Dutch settlers in 1652 by centuries. Collectively they are called "Khoisan," made up of two groups, namely the San and the Khoi. The groups had encountered Europeans between 1487 and 1488 when the Portuguese went on an expedition led by Bartolomeo Dias, seeking a route to India (Verbyst 2022). The ship passed the southern tip of Africa which was known as the Cape of Good Hope. Eventually the Europeans engaged with the Khoisan

hoping to trade. The first recorded incidence of violence occurred between the Khoisan and Europeans when the Europeans attempted to take water protected by the Khoisan.

The seventeenth century was the start of European colonisation of Southern Africa marked by the arrival of the first Dutch settlers in 1652 who brought with them African and Asian slaves. Although the Cape formed a small part of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company – VOC) it was strategically valuable because it served as a refreshment station halfway between Europe and Asia. By 1731 the enslaved made up 42% of the population (Worden 2016). The shifting pattern of slave trading in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from the Asian to the African Indian ocean meant that the enslaved who were brought to Cape Town were from East Africa and Mozambique. By 1807, African slaves were in predominance.

By preferring Asian and local born enslaved above African enslaved people the Dutch had set up the racial hierarchy within the Cape where mixed race or creolised slaves became more sought after and valued entrenching the racialised gendered relationships (Shell 2001; Worden 2016). This pattern of racial hierarchy was continued when the British occupied the Cape Colony. For example, a British traveller to the Cape in the early nineteenth century noted the racial appearance of the enslaved: "the Mozambique and Madagascar slaves are at once distinguished from the Malays by their black colour, woolly hair and negro countenance" (Burchell 1822-24, I: 33). Nigel Worden (2016) described how the Customs Controller in Cape Town in the 1820s categorised the enslaved at the Cape "into three classes: the Negro, the Malay, and the Africander" (locally born slaves). Both Worden (2016) and Robert Shell (2001) analysed the origins of the enslaved in the Cape and the historians also noted that there was a gender imbalance in Cape slavery with enslaved women consistently being in the minority. Jessica Murray (2010) discussed the gendered and patriarchal nature of the Cape Colony in the eighteenth century, when both enslaved and free women experienced domination by white males.

Murray (2010) explained how intimate partner violence among the enslaved and slave owners was prevalent in the eighteenth-century Cape Colony. The racial and patriarchal nature of the Cape society legitimised violence against enslaved women (Murray 2010). Men would be the head, and everyone would be subordinate to him. Enslaved women were often forced to have sex with visiting Europeans by their slave owners for the owner to profit from the situation either by being paid for the slave or by benefitting when the slave became pregnant (Murray 2010). Though male slaves were also deemed powerless, in their

intimate relationships they appear to project their powerlessness on the enslaved women they were in relationship with. Violence and the threat of violence were also a means of social control, reminding the enslaved of their powerlessness. Cape white families who were slave owners were patriarchal with the husband being the head of the household and ruling over his wife and children. His slaves were given the status of children and were denied opportunities to become adults. Infantilising the enslaved, slave owners referred to male slaves as "boys" and female slaves as "girls" (Shell 2001).

What made Cape slavery unique was that many slaves, particularly women, worked in the homes of their owners rather than on plantations. Alan Mountain (2004) postulates that the ramifications of the enslaved being integrated into free burghers' homes was an ambiguous intimacy. They were slaves, but the patriarchal nature of the Cape household provided a quasi-sense of family. Many enslaved women were used as nannies and surrogate mothers. Slaveholders in the Cape regarded enslaved women and girls as easily available to them for sexual relationships (Shell 2001). Even though these relationships were not always violent, from a gendered perspective, enslaved women were exceptionally vulnerable because of their status.

Gendered divisions of labour within slaveholder families brought about division between enslaved women and men because enslaved women were employed in the houses of slave holders while enslaved men worked in the fields (Shell 2001). For 200 years, the enslaved were not allowed to marry one another. Pregnancies resulting from rape or relationships between slave owners and slave women in the Cape Colony often led to violence with male slave partners accusing mothers of infidelity (Murray 2010). Enslaved women's sexual vulnerability was acute because their freedom was associated with having a white slave owner as the father of their children. If slave women had children with their owners, the owner could choose to marry them, making the children legitimate. Roman Dutch Law at the time provided some safety for the child born of a free person or slave owner, in that the child could not be sold, and neither could the mother of the child be sold. In this way slave mothers and their children could not be separated (Vernal 2008).

Emancipation and the Early Twentieth Century

Emancipation in 1834 did not necessarily lead to the end of oppression for both the enslaved and free women. After emancipation, most liberated

slaves were integrated into their former owner's families. Often, they were forced to live in the same lodgings their former masters provided when they were still enslaved. On the other hand, there were cases where single women were evicted from the lodgings of the slaveholders (Ross and Martin 2021). Historical records of court cases between 1896 and 1939 reveal how little women's positionality in Cape society changed after emancipation. Women were still being controlled by men, the state and religious institutions in society. Court cases reveal how women were punished for having abortions and conducting abortions (Moore 2021).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most slave women left their former masters' homes after emancipation and went to live with their husbands who supported them (Ross and Martin 2021). This indicates that while enslaved women were emancipated, they remained dependent on men. In Cape Town, women who were the descendants of slaves were generally only allowed to be domestic workers or washers. The availability of domestic labour and the economic struggles of previously enslaved families meant that girls often left school at an early age to work for white families.

In the 1890s women were not granted divorces even when they were in violent relationships and they were regarded as legal minors and had to be represented by a male member of their family in legal matters (Moore 2020). The law during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in South Africa did not protect women against domestic violence. Courts did not always believe women, nor did they punish domestic violence, and the outcome would be in the husband's favour. The physical violence black women experienced at the hands of men in the twentieth century should also include the state violence of apartheid, which has been documented in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC 1998), whose report dedicated a chapter to the atrocities committed against women. Furthermore, structural inequalities, and unemployment among black men challenge notions of masculinity and contribute to feelings of powerlessness. In South Africa, black men were and are equally victims and perpetrators of violence, but men's vulnerability is often ignored.

Violent Intimacies

The focus of the article is on the silences and intergenerational transmission of violent intimacies such as intimate partner violence (IPV) and family violence. Intimacy studies have predominantly focused on the domestic

sphere which has meant associating intimacy with positive outcomes and relationships. Intimacy is also associated with continuing connectedness, interdependencies and relationalities of intimate lives and related to gender and class of intimate practice (Jamieson 2013). However, critical scholars believe that intimacy is a space of contested power and that closeness and proximity is not a neutral practice. According to Asli Zengin (2024) intimacy can also take on violent forms. Violent intimacies centre on the formation, organisation, and circulation of intimacy through violence. Zengin (2024) purports that the state uses intimacy as a weapon of power within relationships of closeness and that violence and intimacy may work concurrently to shape institutions, forms of control and power.

In Cape Town, South Africa, IPV and family violence occurred within the context of structural violence of colonialism and apartheid. The violent legacy of colonialism is manifested both in the creolised racial identities and intimate relationships of descendants of the enslaved of the Cape Colony today. According to Voit et al. (2020) it is the intersection of race and gender that creates the context for IPV. Racial and gender oppression has resulted in gendered, social, and economic inequalities for black people in South Africa and those who have been previously colonised. The implications for black women in South Africa are that they are oppressed due to both their gender and race. An intersectional approach views IPV not just about gender but also about race in order to encompass all parts of an individual's identity (Crenshaw 1991). I argue that it is not only the context of slavery and colonisation, but also the ongoing oppression and marginalisation of black bodies that keep the "past" violence in the present.

Slave Memory and Post-Humanism

Pumla Gqola (2010) and Christina Sharpe (2016) have argued that traumatic memories of slavery have been transmitted through historical consciousness and through the collective values and beliefs of society. The "transmission of memory is a process by which biographical knowledge contributes to the construction of collective memory (representation of a shared past) from one generation to another" (Svob et al. 2016). Memory resists erasure and is important for the symbols through which communities re-invent themselves. Memory makes it possible that the legacy of intimate colonial relationships be transmitted to multiple generations today. In other words, colonial intimate violence can be viewed in the postcolonial present where slave descendant families experience high levels of IPV and family violence.

Gqola (2010) and Sharpe (2016) offer a post-humanist framework in which historical experiences of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid are not mutually exclusive but embedded in each other. Sharpe's "Wake" (2016) is a concept which describes the mourning and grieving of black people, which is ongoing, as their grief related to the violence of slavery as well as to contemporary violence in which black people's experiences have not been legitimised. This grief is also about the effects of the trauma of slavery which continue. Similarly, Karen Barad (2018), from a post-human feminist perspective, discusses the indeterminacy of time and the fact that each history co-exists with other histories. Therefore, post-humanism presents opportunities for interconnections with the material settings in which we live: with each other, and with the environment and all that it contains. Material settings in post-humanism refer to something which contains matter, it can be human or non-human. According to Jasmine Ulmer (2017), in post-humanism researchers come to understand how "matter comes to matter-." Interconnections with material settings in post-humanism open creative ways of understanding that the interconnections or interactions between humans and non-humans may be relevant for research. What this means is that we can learn from the intimate experiences of the enslaved even though they are long dead, as if they are present. Memories of the past that have been transmitted from the enslaved may not be their exact replicas, as intergenerational relationships can produce both continuity and changes to behavioural patterns, but it can still allow researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the enslaved. Humans who are alive are therefore not the only subjects we can do research with. We can therefore engage with the "ghosts" of the "past."

In this article, I interact with the sociological "ghosts" of the past by examining the narratives of my participants and the enslaved heritage they are connected to. These "ghosts" are the post-humans which Barad (2018) refers to by drawing on Jacques Derrida's (1994) "hauntology". Hauntology is the study of "politics of memory, of inheritance and of generations" (Derrida 1994: xix). Slave memory always evokes ambivalence and shame (Graff 2007), but a more-than-human turn in research offers a different set of methodological possibilities, beginning with the timeframes in which and about which we produce knowledge. As scholars, we should be interested in how we come to imagine new ways of knowing the past beyond factual archives and how we come to recognise that the past is not yet past but may resurface as toxic debris (Stoler 2008). The concept of intergenerational trauma and intergenerational transmission of violence provides us with an

explanation to connect historical experiences of trauma such as colonial violence and the trauma of enslavement with contemporary traumatic and violent experiences.

Intergenerational Transmission of Intimate Partner Violence

Intergenerational transmission of violence occurs when the trauma of the violence is not processed or worked through by the individual, family, or community (Stein 2012). Intergenerational transmission also occurs when traumatic memories are transmitted intergenerationally through collective memory. Two key means of intergenerational transmission of violence are enforced silence and socialisation. Socialisation is a means of transmitting emotions, values, and rules onto the next generation. Enforced silence refers to isolation and indifference, "to be treated as if nothing terrible had happened as if there was no reason to be upset" (Stein 2012: 180). This silencing also transmits the violence and trauma to the next generation because the individual or group has not been able to process the traumatic experience either through talking about it or making sense of the experience through self-reflection. In the context of family violence, intergenerational transmission refers to the socialisation and social learning that helps to explain the ways in which children growing up in a violent society and family learnt violent roles and, subsequently, may play out the roles of the victim or victimiser in their own adult families (Pinna 2016; Voith et al. 2020; Wareham et al. 2009). Understanding the mechanisms of transmission helps one to identify what is being transmitted and how it is being transmitted from one generation to the next. According to Ibrahim Kira (2001), there are two kinds of intergenerational transmission. The first type happens within a family, for example, intergenerational family violence. The second takes place in a collective setting and is divided into two kinds: historical trauma like genocide or slavery, and social or structural trauma. This means that individuals can be exposed to trauma collectively through socio-historical events as well as within their families.

Colonisation and Contemporary Intimate Partner Violence

Black feminists such as Katherine McKittrick (2006) suggest that there is a long settler colonial history of sexualised violence against black women's bodies which has implications for contemporary violence against women. While the literature on the intergenerational transmission of family

and intimate partner violence focuses on violence that occurred in the last three decades, indigenous scholars such as Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998; Duran and Duran 1995; Menzies 2007 have explored how colonisation has contributed to contemporary levels of intimate violence today. They argue that disenfranchised grief has transmitted the colonial trauma over multiple generations of indigenous communities and families leading to effects such as intimate partner violence and high rates of substance use. The term disenfranchised grief can be defined as the types of losses and grief that families, communities, and societies refuse to recognise as legitimate or do not acknowledge. The term has been applied to histories of colonisation and loss of life and land as well as slavery (Doka 1989). According to psychoanalysts, when people are not allowed to grieve, or their grief and trauma is silenced they may re-enact the traumatic experience causing those around them to feel traumatised (Kogan 2012). Moreover, if grief and mourning are repressed or dissociated, enactment occurs where the individual or group "acts out" to avoid painful experiences related to the loss. Enactment is the externalisation of traumatic themes from the past in the form of non-verbal behaviour and violence is one of the ways people may act out (Kogan 2012).

Methods

The present article is based on an empirical study of three generations of seven families who were descendants of the enslaved. I chose a multiple case study design, in which each family represented a case or the unit of analysis. This methodology allows one to focus on the complexity and details of relationships between people. The phenomenon which I studied through qualitative research interviews with participants who were descendants of the enslaved, was the historical trauma of slavery and the resulting transmission of violence.

The research in Cape Town focused on families who had typical slave surnames such as Titus, Scipio, September, and February, as well as various Muslim surnames that were slave surnames (Shell 2001). Pseudonyms have been used in the article so that participants and their families cannot be identified. The participants originated from one of apartheid's racially designated groups, namely "Coloured." In the 1820s the word "mulatto" or creole slave was conveniently replaced by the word "Coloured" and Shell (2001) noted that this term "Coloured" has stubbornly persisted. Creolisation occurred when enslaved women living in the Cape gave birth to children

who were also enslaved. The families lived in one of the largest "Coloured" communities established during apartheid due to forced removals under the Group Areas Act of 1950. Due to structural inequalities of the past, the community experiences high levels of poverty, crime violence, and substance use. These are also known risk factors of IPV.

My qualitative, interpretive research methodology involved seven families and twenty-one participants. According to intergenerational trauma literature, one can identify the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next by focusing on two or three generations.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance from the University of Western Cape was obtained. Furthermore written, voluntarily informed consent was obtained from participants. All participants were informed that external support or counselling was available due to the types of questions posed in the interview schedule. Prior arrangements with a counsellor were made and there were no costs for the participants. Some of the participants were experiencing the long-term effects of trauma and were offered the opportunity to go for counselling with an independent trauma counsellor, which they took up.

Data Collection

Life histories, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups were utilised to collect the data. The focus groups consisted of three or two generations of each family, with each family forming a separate focus group. Family history covering three generations can easily cover over a century and include historical events and social changes that affected the family over that time (reference). The life histories consisted of two interviews, one being largely unstructured and based on two questions: "Can you tell me about your life, living and growing up in Cape Town?" and "Could you please tell me about your family history or what you know about your family's history?" In the second, semi-structured, interview participants were asked to talk about their lives before they were displaced and their slave heritage. The main questions posed to participants were "Can you please tell me about any significant events in your life or your family's life?" and "Describe how you feel about the fact that your family has a typical slave surname given the history of slavery in the Cape?"

The six phases of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis were used to examine the data. The themes revolved around intergenerational trauma and slave heritage. Once all the data had been collected from all seven cases, themes were generated. Themes started to emerge on experiences of displacement, loss and nostalgia, poverty, alcohol abuse and drug abuse, and community and family violence, specifically intimate partner violence and slave heritage. I did not ask the participants to discuss IPV, but the participants disclosed IPV as significant events in their lives.

Discussion

While the article is about IPV, other forms of violence that made up the daily experience of the participants cannot be excluded. According to Zengin (2024) intimacy with violence is often the lived experience of marginalised groups. Voith et al. (2020) found that IPV is influenced by historical and socio-cultural forms of oppression and violence experienced by men of colour, and these include racism. IPV is an outcome of colonial violence by slave owners, enslaved men, and colonial governors (Ramphele 1989). On her examination of rape in the Cape Colony Pamela Scully (1995) stated that race, gender, and class guided colonial rule and that the sexual violence perpetrated against black women during colonial rule remains underinvestigated. Therefore, race operates as a form of symbolic violence.

Sexual Violence

Patriarchal beliefs and assumptions that women are required to fulfil men's sexual needs underpin the sexual and physical violence that both enslaved women and descendants of the enslaved experienced (Murray 2010). The vulnerability of the women in my study revealed how the oppression of race and gender remains operational in families of enslaved descendants. The women in my study disclosed the sexual violence where intimate relationships had become sites of violence:

> "I became so scared of him because I thought he was going to kill me. He said I am either going to kill you or do this or take you out of Cape Town. And I thought what could I do, I don't recognise this man [husband] and then he raped me. I was so scared. It felt like a stranger who was raping me." (September, second generation)

> "I know that my mother was pregnant with me because my father raped her. I also experienced the same thing [rape] and I also never spoke about it." (September, third generation)
>
> "I'm [an] abused woman, I had to flee, because of what my husband did to me. Everyone knows what my husband does. But I don't talk." (February, second generation)
>
> "I was four or five years old. So, this man called me in the house and then he would tell he would give me money. Because there are sometimes things that you can't remember, but if it's something you will always remember. And you will grow up with it. But I hope that he doesn't do what he did to me to other children. Because I don't know if he's still out there may be doing it [sexual abuse] still, because of that cycle that he is in. And this other guy, I was also…in grade 6… he used to touch me. I told my mother, I don't think she believed me. But this [sexual abuse] I never told my mommy and my daddy all she would [say to] me is don't tell your father what happened. And I kept my mouth because I was still a child. She never told my father." (February, third generation)

The trauma of sexual violence may permanently damage one's ability to become intimate and form healthy attachment and close relationships (Cassidy 2001). As can be seen in the third generation September participant, the daughter knew that her father had raped her mother, because her mother explained this to her when her father was imprisoned. The quotes indicate how the participants felt that they should not speak about their traumatic experiences. Silence also communicates that the trauma is indescribable. In this way, third-generation children share the trauma without knowing any details of the traumatic experiences of the second generation who were the mothers of the third generation. Therefore, the trauma is transmitted through indirect "knowing" (Hoffman 2004). The narratives of the participants reveal their powerless position as women in addition to the long-term effects of the trauma of sexual violence. Moreover, the quotes demonstrate how violent intimacy challenges the boundaries of what is private and public, personal and political, also of what is local and global (Zengin 2024). On the one hand sexual activity is perceived as private and personal and on the other hand sexual violence has become both a public and political matter in South Africa. In a local and global space, black women's bodies remain a site of violence connecting the participants intimately with black women who have

experienced sexual violence. The potential for resistance can therefore also emerge from sites of violent intimacies where women find their collective voice as has been the case in South Africa where violence against women has been placed on the political agenda of the president.

Intimate Partner Violence

Studies on male perpetrators of IPV in Cape Town have indicated that men become violent towards their intimate partners because they want to control them and thereby affirm successful notions of masculinity (Hoosain and Robertson 2023; Mathews et al. 2015). Several participants in my study disclosed exposure to intimate partner violence. In the interview Mr. Valentine revealed that he had witnessed IPV as a child and he had also been violent in relationships. Mr. Valentine's son, a second-generation participant, also disclosed that he witnessed his father being violent towards women:

> "Then I saw there's violence between my dad and my stepmother but growing up I remember a lot of stuff." (Valentine, first generation)
>
> "One of the first times where I'd seen my father was violent with a woman, and it's something that has always been on my mind, you know. I tried not to go there." (Valentine, second generation)

The quotes indicate the intergenerational nature of intimate partner violence, as well as how both participants remembered the trauma of the experience. For children, family is the main source of socialisation and parents can transmit indirect knowledge and traumatic knowledge to their children. Traumatised people may also re-enact their trauma, exposing those close to them to this trauma. The trauma is then transmitted to those around them. This can take the form of re-enacting violence (Kogan 2012). The quotes of participants above reveal how the Valentine family is attempting to deal with traumatic violence across two generations. The February family and the Valentine family were also trying to deal with the trauma of IPV over multiple generations as the participants reflected on the significant events in their family:

> "My father abused my mother. He abused her and then he would return, then he would come with alcohol. He would lift up the bed then my mother and I are sitting on it. Then

> he would tip the bed upside down. How could he abuse my mother like that? I know we were young, but we saw those things, I grew up with that and it [traumatic memories] will not go away." (February, second generation)
>
> "We women have a choice, my father hits my mother, why she does not divorce him I don't know? When I met the father of my baby, I don't know why he [father of the baby] hurt me. So, I left him." (February, third generation)

In the February family the quotes of the participants indicate that there were three generations who were exposed to IPV. The third generation of the February family was also exposed to parental violence. Exposure to continuous interparental violence has long-term negative psychological, social, and academic effects on children. Patriarchal beliefs remain embedded in South African society due to the intergenerational transmission of knowledge of gender relations and stereotypes through socialisation in family and society. "How can we know something if we were not there?" Barri Belnap (2012) says that some remembrances of trauma are passed down from our ancestors in the form of life lessons.

However, contemporary ways of getting people to narrate their personal stories is problematic for oppressed people because most of the forms of violence committed against oppressed groups and people have been implicit or structural and may remain hidden in personal accounts of trauma (Menzies 2007). Individual stories of personal trauma form part of the larger historical formations of colonialism and violence. Studies on intimacy in relationships reveal the entanglement between power and violence. Scholars of intimacy are not interested in the subjective experience between intimacy and violence but are concerned with the social and political implications of the connection. The connection between violence and intimacy and its social and political ramifications for the descendants of the enslaved has been mediated by time and memory. But if time is understood as cyclical and histories as embedded in each other, as Sharpe (2016), Gqola (2010) and Barad (2017) suggest, then slavery and contemporary violence against black women and men would be connected.

Recalling Slave Heritage

Sharpe (2016: 15) says "In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present." For the participants in my study, there was

no separation between past and ongoing violence in their lives. Participants spoke as if the violent past was in the present.

> "Hendrik yeah, my grandmother's husband. He was part of the historical events, the slavery part. How do I cope with it? I overlook it, I have to overlook it now. You see. Because there's better things to look at. Things to read, understand that's how I have to cope with it. It makes me stronger. I try not to, like I said I try not to fight them [White people], always try to avoid an argument, if you say something then I say I sorry I didn't mean it. You know. Rather be the weak one. Or pretend to be the weaker. Rather be submissive, that's ok, you know you can be strong, just leave it. [Prevent the argument from going further]. There are times where you have to do something about it, you can just keep quiet or run away." (Valentine, first generation)

Recalling the trauma of his slave heritage, even though Mr. Valentine was born 200 years after emancipation, is an indication of traumatic memory which has been transmitted intergenerationally through socialisation in the family and society. Zengin (2016: 14) views socialisation as a process in which the workings of state power operate through the establishment of intimate (including sexual) links that reach into the inner lives and bodies of its citizens. Mr. Valentine recalls his slave heritage and experiences as if he were his great-grandfather Hendrik. The interview evolved as if it were Hendrik, the great-grandfather, who was enslaved and died, was speaking. The participant relates to his great-grandfather through kinship and reveals how intimacy can also be an embodied experience formed and mediated through social relations, affective ties, and senses (Zengin 2024). I was therefore engaged with the sociological ghost, the great-grandfather of the participant.

The quote by Mr. Valentine is an example of how slave memory and hauntology confound linear conceptions of time. According to Barad (2017), in quantum physics, one particle can co-exist across multiple times and spaces which means that we can subjectively occupy multiple spaces in time, and this is how memory can operate over multiple spaces of time. This would explain Mr. Valentine's knowing the subjective experience of his enslaved ancestors. In addition, the participant's words are in response to the trauma of slavery and his encounters with racism are an indication of the colonial trauma response which Teresa Evans-Campbell (2008) conceptualised. The colonial trauma response focuses on both historical and contemporary trauma responses where current

discriminatory experiences can trigger the individual to connect or identify with a past collective sense of trauma as a member of an oppressed group. When Mr. Valentine states that he "has to overlook it now" he was referring to trauma of slavery and "overlooking it" is a traumatic stress response of avoidance and dissociation, where the individual is disconnecting from the thoughts and feelings that threaten their sense of safety. Mr. Valentine's response is symbolic of how society avoided engaging in slave memories. Participants from another family had similar responses to recalling their slave heritage:

> "If you look at the movies, and you know that's probably the only time where we can really see what slavery meant, because we never lived through that you know. But whether it's now fact or fiction I don't know." (Jacobs, second generation)

> "I am not really interested in what they say about slaves, because it's not a good topic for me to speak about or to hear even about. I avoid that topic being a slave." (Jacobs, third generation)

The participant's avoidance is reflective of mourning and grieving for a loss that has not been recognised by society (Doka 1989). Social and collective silence marginalises the process of meaning-making and questioning for people involved and affected by the trauma. Personal memories remain individually isolated and unacknowledged by the larger society. This leaves the younger generation without a context that would connect identity, family, and community with history, culture, and society (Lin et al. 2009). Intimacy according to Cassidy (2001) is about the truth about who a person really is, and if Zengin (2024) purports that we are intimate citizens of the state then citizens descendants may experience a conflict between what they are told by society and what they experience. For example, a participant explained "honestly think we're still living the same, we still getting treated the same, we haven't moved forward ever since. Although the white man is not ruling, there's been so much changes, but it is still not enough for us for what our parents went through" (Jacobs, second generation) The participant's quote demonstrates the conflict and cognitive dissonance descendants experience when they reflect on their positionality in South African society.

Race and Gender

Contrary to popular discourse, racialised gendered relationships – referring to the simultaneous effects of race and gender on relationships – were a feature of Cape society before apartheid had occurred (Scully 1995). While black

women shared gender oppression with white women, what white women and the enslaved women did not share was racialised oppression. Writing about the children of enslaved women and white men, Fiona Vernal (2008) noted that there was a "whitening" of Cape Colony slaves through violent intimacy, while Beckles (1996) stated that in Barbados enslaved women were consciously choosing white men to ensure the freedom of their children. Vernal argued that while the narratives of enslaved women may provide indication that not all intimate relationships between slave women and men were violent, the narratives always reveal the extreme vulnerability of slave women's bodies. Vernal's argument demonstrates how intimacy and violent intimacy was used to control the enslaved and their descendants. Even indirectly, my participants cast "creolisation" as problematic on different levels foremost about their identity, as many descendants still have questions about their ancestry.

> "I never looked at my family's surname [typical slave surname] in that way. This history is important to me. I want to know about how my mother's mother lived. I would be interested in looking up my family's surname and history." (February, third generation)

> "I want to know where I come from. I am glad I wasn't born then [during the slave era] but I would like to know where I come from at the end of the day." (Valentine, second generation)

The quotes reflect the silencing both within families and Cape society regarding the history of slavery (Gqola 2010; Wilkins 2017; Worden 2016). Forced creolisation was also damaging for the gender relations between enslaved men and women because it created racial tensions in families and divisions within families that still persist today (Shell 2001). Participants explained the racial hierarchy based on the texture of hair in their families.

> "I think my grandmother was white. Or mixed race or something, but she had long plaits. My mother them are all grandchildren who could enter the house because they had the "hair" [straight hair.] If you did not have straight hair, then you did not belong to her. My grandmother's sisters' children had hair which was a little curly and she would throw them with plates." (September, third generation)

> "But my wife was not like white, they hold it in such type – in the white line, she was mixed actually, English and Afrikaans. But she was like totally English. And that "Ladie-dah" [upper class] type, and she's like dark of complexion, looks like an Indian complexion wise. And her hair and that type of thing." (Valentine, first generation)

The participants above discuss whiteness and straight hair as markers of European features and as valuable. In fact, the September participant described how her grandmother would give preferential treatment to grandchildren who had white features while rejecting the ones who had curly hair. Only the slave women of the Dutch East India Company's Slave Lodge were allowed to be married, and only because it became embarrassing for a Dutch Commissioner when he saw the number of mixed-race children or what was then called "malutto slaves" (Shell 2001). However, violent intimacies can also be sites of empowerment as Vernal (2008) recalls a single court case where an enslaved woman's plea to free her children from enslavement was granted. This created tensions between enslaved men and women because the women were given preferential treatment. The interference of the colonial state in intimate relationships was a violent intimacy because the enslaved experience the colonial state intimately in their lives. Having a partner who was either white or had white features was also sought after, which can be seen in Mr. Valentine's quote regarding his wife's hair and the fact that she was regarded as "upper class." This is an indication of how enduring the colonial legacies of racial stratification and the ramifications on intimate and family relationships have been transmitted intergenerationally.

Family Life and Children

It is well documented that black women have worked in white families as domestics and nannies since the seventeenth century and still do. Shell (2001) wrote extensively about the history of enslaved women working for settler families and Gqola (2010) discussed black domestic workers in post-apartheid. Although my participants did not make the connection with domestic work as a legacy of slavery, generations of descendants took up domestic work with white families. For example, the second-generation September family member left school in grade four to work for a white family. The participant was forced to leave her own family and live and work with the white family whom she did not know. This took place in 1978. She was chosen because of her gender as well as her European appearance.

> "Mommy said to me, my child you must go with this white woman; you are going to work with her. Like I can remember, mommy packed my poor clothes just like that in a plastic bag. Oh, and I cried. I was just a child, I can't, I am only in grade four how can I leave here?" (September, second generation)

The participant was traumatised by the experience as it was her mother who was supposed to protect her. As a woman, Mrs. September would be perceived

as being a bad mother for forcing her daughter to leave school while in grade four. However, working for white families as domestic help and nannies was common practice in the Cape Colony during the period of slavery as well as after emancipation (Ross and Martin 2021). Another participant recalls how she also left school at a young age to work for a white family, and she also mentions that her mother worked and lived with white people.

> "My mother slept in by white people. And my mother worked, so she was not the one who cared for us, but my grandmother cared for us, but ok my mother would see that we had food when she was home on a Saturday. I had to help the family. And then I did not really have much of an education because I was the eldest of the girls and so I also had to work by white people to help my mother." (Caesar family, first generation)

> "We did not have the privileges of white people that time [1940s to 1994]. That time my grandmother worked for white people and my aunt worked all the years for white people, my mother also worked for white people." (Caesar, second generation)

In these quotes generations of children were denied the opportunity to be raised by both their parents. For example, a second-generation participant (Caesar family) discussed that he was raised by his grandmother because his mother was working as a domestic for a white family. Through colonial practice and apartheid laws reaching into domestic spheres, the intimate relationships of descendants have been shaped, often resulting in separation and loss of familial figures. The participants' narratives revealed the intergenerational nature of black women's subordinate position and the long-term implications that violent intimacies have on the family life of descendants.

Conclusion

An individual's identity develops within multiple systems and histories. What if those histories are traumatising and not recognised? The stories of participants in the above case study of Cape Town memories allude to a past that is not finished and confounds linear conceptualisations of time. The narratives may represent the notion of the haunting of sociological ghosts, which highlight that a story has not been told, and a trauma has not been mourned. The narratives of the participants highlight that society may try to silence either contemporary intimate violence or the past, however traumatic memories resist erasure.

Within a post-humanism framework, the participant's narratives are also symbolic of history repeating itself. Descendants of both slave owners and slaves have difficulty in engaging with slave memory. Engaging with the sociological ghosts of the past through slave memory can allow us to disrupt discursive knowledge of racialised gender relations which has been transmitted over multiple generations. Re-imagining the past in new ways allows us to transform current practice and spaces with descendants. The concept of re-membering is not about going back to what was, but related to doing justice to those who have experienced past traumas and that makes new histories possible. Re-imagining slave memory creates the space to excavate subjugated experiences and memories bringing to the fore a perspective that culturally hegemonic practices have closed off. In postcolonial contexts, intimate partner violence is not recent, but part of an ongoing oppression of black women while men's vulnerability may be invisible.

Violent intimacies can be sites of oppression, but they can also include resistance where descendants have survived both enslavement and apartheid, and the struggle for black women's empowerment is ongoing and takes place in intimate ways.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest is reported by the author.

Statement of Ethics

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Office of the Dean of Research, the University of Western Cape (UWC), Community and Health Science Faculty Board Research Ethics Committees, and the UWC Senate Research Committee. The Social Work Code of Ethics of the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) was also adhered to.

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WOMEN ASYLUM SEEKERS AND INTERMEDIARIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: Intermediaries play dual roles as both facilitators and meddlers of migration for migrant women seeking asylum in South Africa. South Africa's non-encampment policy makes it an attractive destination for migrant women seeking jobs. Drawing on exploratory qualitative research**,** including participant observation and semi-structured interviews with twelve women asylum seekers, the study found that they encounter structural, legal, and administrative barriers that shape their migration trajectories and expose them to exploitation by intermediaries. They depend on intermediaries, also referred to as "agents," because of urgent immigration needs, desperation, and the complexity of the South African asylum and permit renewal process. Intermediaries exploited women by portraying asylum as the only option, even in cases where they do not qualify for such protection. The article underscores the need to regulate intermediaries to address vulnerability and exploitation.

Keywords: agents, intermediaries, asylum seekers, migrant women, refugees

Introduction

The proportion of migrant women seeking asylum is increasing, and migration intermediaries play a paramount role in their migration path. The number of migrant women increased from 79.6 million in 1995 to 130.2 million in 2019, propelled by several factors, such as gender-based and sexual violence (Migration Data 2019). In 2018, South Africa hosted 211,000 refugees, 273,000 asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants in 2019 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR 2019). They are from African countries. Although precise data on the gender of asylum seekers is limited, within this migration trend, migration intermediaries play a critical role in their migration trajectory. Although intermediaries play a critical role in the migration trajectory of women asylum seekers,

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there are limited studies on why they depend on them, a gap this study seeks to fill. Insights into intermediaries along the migration trajectory provide a nuanced understanding of the complexity of the South African migration landscape and of how migrant women navigate it through intermediaries.

The literature notes that intermediaries play a significant role (Dağdelen 2025; Sha and Khor 2024; Van Eerbeek and Hedberg 2021; Cranston et al. 2018; Deshingkar 2017; Alpes 2017; De Gruchy 2015; Xiang and Lindquist 2014; Wimmer 1997). Intermediaries influence migrants from Ethiopia to South Africa, as migrants are "active constituents of these assemblages" because they desire to migrate and actively participate in selecting and paying intermediaries. Intermediaries have long been embedded in the African migration system. For instance, intermediaries facilitated migrant domestic work in Ghana (Deshingkar 2019). In the context of South Africa's immigration industry, intermediaries, referred to as "agents," have historically facilitated labour migration in Southern Africa (De Gruchy 2015; Åkesson and Alpes 2019; Alpes 2013). Intermediaries have been critical in labour migration in Southern Africa since the late 19th century, recruiting farm labourers from Transkei, Ciskei, Mozambique, and Namibia (Wilson 1976). However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, agencies such as The Employment Bureau of Africa (TEBA) were established throughout Southern Africa to recruit workers for South African mines and farms (De Gruchy 2015; Wilson 1976). Governments could, directly or indirectly, organise migration through intermediaries for recruitment or emigration programmes, as they have financial or regulatory relationships with these organisations.

The need for intermediaries and the complexity of immigration policy in South Africa contribute to challenges during the asylum application process (Ramoroka 2014; Kock 2018; Zoutman 2018; Alabi 2021; Botha 2024). Ramoroka (2014) analysed the complexities of asylum applications at South Africa's Refugee Reception Offices, arguing that asylum seekers who enter South Africa through a port of entry or illegally face numerous challenges before reaching a refugee reception office. Due to a lack of documentation, those who enter through a port of entry risk being turned away by Immigration Officers.

Asylum seekers are frequently unable to reach refugee reception offices due to a lack of cooperation between Immigration Officers, the South African Police Service, and functionaries in refugee reception offices (Ramoroka 2014; Boynton 2015; Carling and Haugen 2020; Bernard 2021). Immigration

officials cannot distinguish between asylum seekers and economic migrants, complicating the determination of refugee status (Masuku and Rama 2020; Dawson and Ekambaram 2019; Zoutman 2018; Suleman, Garber and Rutkow 2018). Rather than protecting asylum seekers, it is used for immigration control and to turn people away (Zoutman 2018; Oxford Dictionaries 2014). The literature suggests that migration intermediaries are characterised by fraud, corruption, credibility issues, and criminal activities, which aggravate the precariousness of migrant women in the Global South (Deshingkar 2019; Alpes 2017; De Gruchy 2015). In recognition, African governments are regulating and strengthening broker regulatory processes, such as the Ethiopian 1998 Overseas Employment Proclamation, which establishes a system of 400 private employment agencies in Ethiopia, restricted to brokers facilitating migration to the Middle East (Alpes 2017). Also, in the South African context, the 2002 South Africa Immigration Act, Section 46, followed a global pattern of regulating the immigration sector and the activities of intermediaries (Department of Home Affairs 2016; De Gruchy 2015).

Despite the roles of intermediaries in the migration aspirations of women asylum seekers in South Africa, relatively little is known about why women migrants are seeking asylum in South Africa. In South Africa, people use intermediaries for their migration and asylum applications/renewals. The study's objectives are: (1) to explore the underlying motivations and reasons women asylum seekers utilise the services of intermediaries and (2) to understand how the intermediaries enable or hinder the migration aspiration of women asylum seekers. Insights into immigration intermediaries, their roles, and the services they offer women asylum seekers provide a more nuanced understanding of migrating to South Africa and the vulnerability of women asylum seekers. Importantly, there is a notable scarcity of studies that centre the direct perspective and lived experiences of women. This paper addresses this gap by focusing on the experiences and voices of women asylum seekers themselves.

Conceptual Clarifications: Migrants, Refugees, Asylum seekers, and Intermediaries

Migrants migrate from their home countries for various reasons, including economic, educational, and employment opportunities (Statistics South Africa 2020). While asylum seekers are awaiting their refugee status determination claims seeking protection from persecution in another country (Zoutman 2018; Kock

2018; UNHCR 2019; IOM 2019). In contrast, refugees are people whose asylum has been approved and who have been granted recognised refugee status (Kock 2018; Mbanza 2017; Department of Home Affairs 2016). Intermediaries facilitate both regular and irregular migration through various strategies (Axelsson et al. 2022; Cranston et al. 2018). The migration industry comprises a wide range of actors and institutions that facilitate international mobility, settlement, information flows, communication, and resource flows, whose operations are influenced by entrepreneurial motives (Hernández-Leon 2013; De Gruchy 2015; Mail and Guardian 2015). Intermediaries include a broad spectrum such as "money lenders," "recruitment agencies," "individual brokers," "transportation providers," "travel agents," "coyotes," "lawyers," and "courier service owners" (Axelsson et al. 2022; Alpes 2017; De Gruchy 2015; Spener 2009; Salt and Stein 1997). Intermediaries are also associated with terminologies such as "agents," "dalals," "taikongs," "recruiters," "placement agencies," "smugglers," "human traffickers," "dokimen," "facilitators," "coyotes," "feymen," "migration brokers," "big men" and "immigration consultants" (Axelsson et al. 2022; Alpes 2017; Deshingkar 2017; De Gruchy 2015).

Maybritt Alpes (2017) distinguished between three types of migration intermediaries: "dokimen," "feymen," and "big men." *Dokimen* are artisans who forge or imitate documents. Dokimen are craftsmen who imitate, forge documents, and offer support. Dokimen does not have offices but advertises its services on posters, flyers, or in cybercafés. They sell travel documents that facilitate obtaining a visa or a residence permit, including birth certificates, marriage certificates, school-leaving certificates, bank statements, or entry or exit stamps in passports. *Feymen* exploit the limited legal options for international travel, deceiving clients and disappearing either after a failed attempt or even before the departure process begins (Alpes 2017: 10). In contrast, *big men* are prominent and well-connected individuals who use their networks and social standing to promote migration, often portraying their activities as benefiting others rather than solely profiting from them (Alpes 2017). Importantly, Alpes noted an ambiguous distinction between "formal or legal" intermediaries and "informal or illegal" intermediaries, as the two are mutually beneficial and form a continuum (De Gruchy 2015: 17; Baey and Brenda 2018; Erulkar 2020; Blumenstock et al. 2021). De Gruchy (2015: 17) argued that formal intermediaries employ informal intermediaries with stronger social ties to a specific community to locate migrants, thereby circumventing labour legislation that formal agencies are required to follow.

Registered immigration practitioners in South Africa were 20,000 in 2014 (De Gruchy 2015: 7). The relevance of intermediaries in South Africa testifies to South Africa's migration landscape, characterised by restrictive immigration

laws, the less efficient Department of Home Affairs, and arbitrary deportations (Oyewo 2022; Mbanza 2017; De Gruchy 2015; Ramoroka 2014).

South Africa Migration Policies and Asylum System

South Africa became a signatory to the UN Convention in 1993 after its democratic transition in 1992, when it joined the UN and the Organization of African Unity Conventions [OAU] on refugees. This commitment is reflected in the Refugee Act No. 130 of 1998, which stipulated institutions and procedures to safeguard asylum seekers and refugees fleeing their home countries. Key actors in South Africa's migration landscape include the Department of Home Affairs, government officials, immigration practitioners, and specialised lawyers, and attorneys (De Gruchy 2015: 7; Crush and Skinner 2017; Kavuro 2022). Migration intermediaries, in contrast, are individuals with a limited legal background in migration and individuals without training (De Gruchy 2015: 7). The Department of Home Affairs (DHA) oversees migration, citizenship, and asylum seekers in South Africa (Department of Home Affairs 2016).

Successful first asylum seekers are issued an asylum permit that is renewed every 6 months. They have the right to study, work, trade, and start businesses while their application is being processed, and they cannot be deported (Pikoli 2020; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020; Ncube 2021). In recent years, amendments to South African immigration policies and the Refugee Act have resulted in various regulations affecting women asylum seekers, notably the Refugees Amendment Act of 2015. This act reduced the 14-day asylum application period to 5 days and increased the number of years a refugee could wait before applying for permanent residence from 5 to 10. This implies that the Refugee Amendment Act would increase the time a refugee must stay in the country before applying for permanent residency to twice that amount. This also entails requesting recognition as an indefinite refugee, which is available only to those granted refugee status for 10 years, twice the 5-year requirement (Department of Home Affairs 2018). Due to amendments in immigration policies, it has become increasingly complex to claim asylum. Thus, intermediaries act as the go-between for women asylum seekers and the state.

Methods

The study is exploratory qualitative research because of limited knowledge about a phenomenon or problem (Creswell 2018; Theron 2015; Nowell et al.

2017; Elliott 2018). In this context, relatively little is known about why women asylum seekers in South Africa depend on the services of intermediaries and how the intermediaries facilitate or hinder the migration aspirations of women asylum seekers. Data were generated through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with twelve women asylum seekers. Interviews facilitated the use of open-ended questions and rich, detailed narratives from participants (Creswell 2018). The interviews were conducted face-to-face and by telephone, lasting twenty to ninety minutes. The participants were selected by purposive and snowball sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) over 18 years old and (2) a woman migrant with an asylum permit. Purposive sampling was a suitable choice for this study because it helped determine participants who were considered ideal sources for the research due to their knowledge of the topic (Creswell and Poth 2018). Participants were recruited through referrals, the Refugee Social Services Centres, and the Refugee Reception Centres. The small number of participants reflects the sensitivity of the topic, as qualitative research emphasises the extraction of rich, in-depth information (Creswell 2018).

The interviews were complemented by participant observation of the asylum application process at the Marabastad Refugee Reception Centre (RRC). Data were collected by two researchers who visited the Refugee Reception Office (RRO). Observation allowed to observe the asylum procedure at RRO and interactions between RRO officials and asylum seekers, and waiting in the queue for asylum seekers. Data saturation was achieved when subsequent interviews yielded no new themes. Ethical standards were ensured through the anonymity and confidentiality of participants' data. The data analysis also involved constructing relationships and links among the codes to establish overarching themes and categories that aligned with the interview schedule questions. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, paraphrased, or summarised, based on the nature of the interview guide questions (Bans-Akutey and Tiimub 2021; Guest et al. 2020; Creswell and Poth 2018).

Findings

The twelve women are from four African countries: Ghana, the Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, and Zimbabwe, representing diverse nationalities and regional migration patterns in South Africa. Data analysis generated five major themes aligned with the study's objectives. The findings revealed five central themes, including: (1) Misguided information from "Agents" and Transition from Legal to Illegal Migrant Status, (2) Becoming Asylum Seekers by Default, (3) Financial Exploitation by agents and administrative entrapment, (4)

Participant and nationality	Permit Duration	Education / Skill	Employment Aspiration	Intermediary Promise	Key Barrier Encountered	Work Sector	Impacts	Coping Strategy	Outcome
W1 (Zimbabwe)	6 months	Secondary	Formal employment	Work permit processing	Short permit validity	Informal	No bank account	Informal work	Economic precarity
W2 (Nigeria)	6 months	Master's Degree	Teaching	Appeal reversal	Bureaucracy (SACE)	Informal	Deskilling	Petty trading	Underemployment
W3 (Nigeria)	3 months	Medical training	Health sector	Job + visa	Detention, bribery	Informal	Trauma, pregnancy risk	Informal survival	Legal insecurity
W4 (Ghana)	6 months	Secondary	Formal job	Employment access	Misinformation	Informal	Repeated rejection	Street vending	Marginalization
W5 (DRC)	6 months	Limited literacy	Any formal job	Permit processing	Language barriers	Informal	Financial exploitation	intermittent street vending	Continued dependency
W6 (Nigeria)	6 months	Teaching qualification	Teaching	Quota permit	Fake SAQA certificate	Informal	Appeal delays	Petty trading /schooling	Professional stagnation
W7 (Nigeria)	6 months	Bachelor's Degree	Teaching	Credential recognition	SACE bureaucracy	Informal	Education disruption	Food vending	Deskilling
W8 (Ghana)	6 months	Secondary	Stable work	Documentation	Birth registration	Informal	Child documentation	Hair making	Social exclusion
W9 (Nigeria)	6 months	Secondary	Formal employment	Permit conversion	Lengthy appeals	Informal	Financial loss	Asylum claim	Legal limbo
W10 (DRC)	6 months	Secondary	Formal job	Visa checklist	Language barriers	Informal	High costs	Reapplication	Exploitation
W11 (Fhana)	6 months	Secondary	Stable income	Queue access	Xenophobia	Informal	Police extortion	Street trade	Insecurity
W12 (Nigeria)	3–6 months	Secondary	Formal employment	DHA contacts	Bank access	Informal	Frozen bank account	Cash economy	Financial exclusion

Table 1. Reasons and effects of the use of intermediaries by migrants

Passing through Needle's Eyes to apply and renew the asylum permit, and (5) Structural constraint of no license–no work. Table 1 summarises these themes.

(1) Misguided Information from "Agents" and Transition from Legal to Illegal Migrant Status

Participants mentioned that their migration journeys to South Africa were influenced by intermediaries, commonly referred to as "agents." Agents provided misleading and inaccurate information, especially on asylum applications, visa conversions, and document requirements, despite presenting themselves as "expert." According to the participants, the agents sold the idea of applying for asylum by claiming they had a connection (a link) "inside the Refugee Reception Offices (RROs)". They could therefore "assist with the processing and documentation." Two types of intermediaries emerged from the data: (i) informal, individual intermediaries, operating independently and often unregistered, and (ii) licensed formal agents registered with the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) as immigration consultants.

Findings reveal that misleading information from "agents" led to the illegal activity. Several women described how "agents" had provided misleading information. W3, for example, travelled from Nigeria through Mozambique in desperation to see her husband after several failed attempts to secure a spousal visa in her home country, and enlisted the help of an intermediary. Intermediaries provide little or erroneous information to migrant women during the migration process in their home country, resulting in them seeking asylum in South Africa. Intermediaries play a critical role in women asylum seekers' aspirations and amplify their challenges in South Africa because of incorrect information. Participants refer to intermediaries as "agents," who describe their roles in the migration process as providing information on how to claim asylum in South Africa. Local clichés such as "agents" convey connections of confidence between intermediaries and women asylum seekers.

This study's findings also indicate that most participants entered South Africa legally with visitor's visas but became undocumented because their visas could not be renewed due to fraudulent documents, such as bank statements, arranged by agents. One woman recounted how she followed her husband on a visitor permit to South Africa in 2013, hoping to convert it to a study visa, only to find herself "stuck in the application process because of fraudulent documents packaged by the agent." The participants cited diverse reasons for migrating to South Africa and for seeking asylum. They entered South Africa between 2013 and 2017. In 2013, visas were issued for three-month multiple entries; however, amendments to the 2014 immigration law

changed the dynamics of changing a visitor's visa status within South Africa**.** Some participants entered South Africa with visitor's visas to visit their husbands, who also had pending permits due to backlogs at the Department of Home Affairs. Some participants had attempted to convert their visitor visas to other visas, like study or work visas, but in several cases, agents had submitted fraudulent supporting documents, especially bank statements and foreign educational qualifications like the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), resulting in visa conversion, rejection, and the loss of legal status. In some cases, they had to appeal the rejection within ten days.

(2) Becoming Asylum Seekers by Default

Several participants recounted how agents forced them to seek asylum as a last resort, frequently after giving them false information and advice during previous visa applications. A woman described what happened to her:

> "I paid enormous amounts of money to change my status from a visitor's visa to a quota work permit. My husband's friend in South Africa mentioned that teaching jobs are available. I gave him money to apply for work. He told me to contact the intermediary. The South African Council for Educators [SACE] document was fake. I waited several years for a permit because I was unfamiliar with the process. Once your permit is rejected, you must appeal within ten days and provide the document for which the application was denied. After years of waiting, I applied for an asylum permit and pursued postgraduate studies. Before then, I visited the Home Affairs Branch office of the Department of Home Affairs to check on my appeal. The system indicates that the appeal is pending, which implies it has not been processed for seven years" (W9).

Claiming asylum is a strategy participants adopt to become legally settled in South Africa after exhausting all other options. As the findings reveal, intermediaries and brokers, in the context of the present article, are informal or illicit actors. They inspire migrant women to turn to fraudulent techniques in order to get documentation, particularly when legitimate channels are unavailable, unduly difficult, or non-existent. Some participants describe agents as facilitators who help them connect with "oga" (boss), enter the "RRO building," and obtain the "pali" (a Yoruba slang term for a document).

Observations reveal that asylum seekers from Francophone countries, such as the DRC, have access to interpreters and coordinated services more than migrant groups from West African countries. This suggests that not all intermediaries are entirely informal or illicit because some operate in ways that complement official processes. Thus, agents explain the asylum application procedure to applicants, fill out the asylum application form for those who cannot read or speak English, or, in some cases, "fabricated reasons" for asylum (motivation for applying for asylum). Language barriers affect applicants from non-English-speaking countries because of the limited number of professional interpreters in the RRO, often requiring asylum seekers to provide their own interpreters. Ever since the closure of several RROs, applying for and renewing asylum documents has become increasingly complex. Recounting her experience applying for and renewing asylum since 2016, the participants captured their experiences in the quotes below. One participant recounted her experience:

> "You would be marched from the queue from the field to the refugee reception office [RRO] compound. If you are lucky and rugged, you can even enter the compound. When you enter the refugee compound, the officials will collect your passport and make a photocopy of the data page to attach to your asylum application. Your passport will show how you entered South Africa. After that, you are called and given a B1-1590 form to collect your data. From there, you proceed to where your fingerprint and image are captured in the refugee system. Afterwards, a Refugee Reception Officer (RRO) conducts an interview, and the B1-1590 forms are duly completed. I was issued a one-month asylum permit after going to the RRO countless times. The way we are treated like animals, pushed here and there, talked to anyhow, female security officers will slap you. They do not consider whether you are pregnant. Detained me and said my asylum is fake" (W5).

Another participant echoed the complexity and risk of inconsistencies in the asylum process:

> "You may be unaware of which official has your asylum application file... If you do not conduct your interview on the same day you apply, you may be unable to complete the process because the file may become stuck in a system. You may have to return several times or apply again" (W10).

The study found that asylum permits are short-term, ranging from 1 to 6 months, while claims (asylum stories) are verified. Women seeking asylum face rejection if their statements are inconsistent, particularly when details provided during the first interview contradict those given in subsequent interviews**.** A participant described that some asylum applicants, during their initial interview with the RRO official, mentioned that they arrived in South Africa through the bush. In contrast, their international passports indicate they flew on a visitor visa. These discrepancies weaken the validity of their asylum claims and the possibility of rejection. Participants echoed the importance of accuracy when filling out an asylum application:

> "Asylum seekers should be extra wary when describing their justification for claiming asylum during interviews with the Home Affairs official, because any irregularity may be used to verify that they are telling lies. However, this could be complicated when the applicant [asylum seeker] is not the person who filled in the asylum application form" (W7).

Another participant noted:

> "In the subsequent interview, you stated that you fled your home country because of terrorism, and in another interview with the Home Affairs official, you stated something different" (W2).

The findings indicate that restrictive legal immigration routes limit access to legal pathways, prompting asylum seekers to rely on intermediaries and, in turn, to experience financial strain, stress, long-distance travel, and ambiguous asylum procedures. These challenges make agents a solution for navigating the asylum bureaucracy, who exploit them by prompting women to apply for asylum as a survival tactic. Findings also indicated that immigration policy changes aggravated migrants, being illegal, confusing, and requiring the services of agents to navigate the "migration policy complexity."

Before the 2014 South African immigration changes, migrants entering with a three-month multiple-entry visitor visa could apply to change or convert their immigration status in South Africa. However, after the amendments, the word "visa" was replaced with "permit," and those who had been issued a visitor visa could no longer convert their status, leaving many uncertain about the correct procedure. One participant explained:

> "When the 2014 immigration law was amended, the problem started. I have been in this country since 2014. I applied for

> a quota worker permit. The amended 2014 migration law scrapped some permit categories and did not state which permits foreigners should apply for. I have been waiting for my appeal to be finalised and approved. The Department of Home Affairs rejected my work permit on the grounds of a fake South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA] qualification evaluation certificate. As a teacher with a Master's degree in my home country, I am qualified for the quota permit; however, my agent submitted a fake document because I was unfamiliar with the visa application process. He travelled home, and I kept asking him about my permit. He said the intermediary would contact me. I am still waiting for the appeal to be approved and engaged in petty trading [selling women's clothes]" (W6).

The findings indicate that restrictive permit conditions and persistent bureaucratic delays intensify women's dependence on intermediaries to manoeuvre the application process.

(3) Financial Exploitation by Agents and Administrative Entrapment

Financial exploitation by agents and administrative entrapment were also recurring themes among the participants. In one instance, a woman described paying an agent 2,000 rand (approximately US$130) in 2017 to apply for an asylum permit. As one participant noted, "they are profit-maximizing actors with little attention to our welfare" (W3). Participants mentioned that the lack of permits created additional legal barriers for their children, especially obtaining birth certificates for those born in South Africa. In many cases, agents offered to produce these documents, usually for a fee, placing additional financial and emotional burden on women. One participant recounted her struggle:

> "When I put to bed, it was a tug of war getting a birth permit for my child. My husband and I thought we could claim a South African man as the father of my child in desperation. I need the birth certificate to register my child in school. I need a permit to have a birth certificate. I am tired of this country. I called my friend in my home country. She said my job is still available" (W8).

Participants' narratives also highlighted the financial costs of relying on agents. Some individuals paid exorbitant fees for services, including

fraudulent supporting documents, without their knowledge, only to have their permits denied or their immigration status remain unsettled for an extended period. Women who first entered South Africa lawfully on visitor visas were frequently turned into irregular migrants by the intermediaries' false information, making it more difficult for them to navigate the asylum system, obtain social services, and obtain basic documentation for themselves and their children.

(4) Passing through Needle's Eyes to Apply and Renew the Asylum Permit

Findings reveal the relevance of intermediaries during the asylum application process. Our study identified such intermediaries as "informal and illicit," who sometimes lack documents themselves but offer their services as a means of survival. Services offered include assisting immigrants with appointments or paperwork (sometimes illegally) and granting access to fake or fabricated documents. This involves editing someone else's asylum document by inserting other people's records and names, and charging for services that are promised or accelerated.

Participants stated that the asylum application and renewal (extension) process is nerve-wracking. They likened it to "passing through the needle's eyes to apply and renew an asylum permit" because they must arrive early at the Refugee Reception centres in the queue by 4 a.m. Closing some Refugee Reception Offices in Johannesburg and Cape Town has had several impacts on them and exacerbated the challenges of applying for and renewing (extending) their asylum permits. The closure of three Refugee Reception Offices also led participants to enlist the assistance of agents to navigate the asylum application process. Although after a lengthy legal battle by non-governmental organisations and civil society, some RROs reopened with limited functions, such as being closed to new asylum applications, but remaining open to current asylum seekers and refugees. Although the closure of RROs has been the subject of legal battle by the Legal Resources Centre (LRC), which filed a case against the government over the closure of Cape Town RROs in 2012, the Supreme Court of Appeal ruled in 2017 that the closure was illegal.

The study further found that, due to the short 6-month duration of the asylum permit, companies refuse to employ asylum seekers because of uncertainty about continuous renewal and the risk of breaching the law by recruiting unauthorised workers. Hence, some participants work in the

informal economy because of difficulties gaining employment in the formal sector. A participant described her experience:

> "DHA purposefully keeps you in asylum status; you cannot progress to refugee status because you will be paid a stipend for Refugee status if granted" (W11).

Another participant emphasised the difficulty of accessing RRO facilities:

> "It is difficult to enter the RRO centre because you must queue from the field into the refugee centre" (W12).

Many asylum seekers travel long distances, ranging from 7 hours to 28 hours, from provinces such as Durban, Cape Town, and the Eastern Cape to apply or renew [extend] their asylum permits in RRO Pretoria, on allocated days for different nationalities. First-time asylum seekers in particular find the process challenging. Unlike other African countries such as Kenya and Rwanda, with encampment policies where asylum seekers are confined to asylum camps, South Africa does not confine asylum seekers to camps. Due to the non-encampment of asylum seekers, South Africa is a sought-after destination for asylum seekers. Asylum seekers' fundamental rights to access social services, such as education, work, and health care, are restricted when they have no legal documentation. As a participant noted, before the Department of Home Affairs introduced a paperless asylum renewal process in 2016, you would have to queue from 3 a.m. to enter the refugee centre. In response to the queue during asylum application and renewal processes, the Home Affairs Minister introduced a paperless system in some RROs in order to reduce waiting times and corruption. Although South Africa's laws and policies governing asylum seekers and refugees have been regarded as progressive, asylum seekers increasingly need help to exercise their rights due to policies and practices preventing them from regularising their stays.

(5) Structural Constraint of No Permit–No Work

Participants' responses indicate a desperation for employment in the formal sector, which in turn heightens their reliance on agents. Some participants were unaware that they had been issued a fake work permit, while others claimed ignorance of the work visa process. This involves an intermediary approaching them and promising to overturn the pending appeal decision with their "contacts" (link, connection) in the Department of Home Affairs. However, "when the money has been paid to the intermediaries, they fail to

deliver the permits" (W5). Participants mentioned that they employ agents because they seem to have much experience with migration. As a participant echoed, "I trust him when he showed me photos and images of ostensibly government officials whose contact appeared genuine" (W5).

Many participants also expressed concern about the negative aspects of being issued a 3-month or 6-month asylum permit, particularly the difficulty of finding permanent jobs in the formal sector. Difficulty finding jobs in the formal sector means they work in the informal sector. Participants with teaching qualifications who hope to enter the South African teacher labour market mentioned that one significant barrier to entering the labour market is bureaucracy and discrimination by the South African Council for Educators (SACE) in registering migrant teachers. To work as a teacher in South Africa, you must register with SACE. Some participants had Bachelor's degrees and some also had Master's Degrees. Findings demonstrate the difficulties skilled women asylum seekers encounter in converting their credentials into official employment. The experience of W7 illustrates how institutional rigidity, competing requirements, and bureaucratic obstacles impede professional integration. She attempted to have the South African Council for Educators (SACE) review her teaching degree. However, she encountered a vicious cycle in which companies required certification, while SACE required employment documentation:

> "I tried to evaluate my degree at SACE to enable me to teach different hurdles, nevertheless. The school employer says I should bring my SACE certificate. When I arrive at SACE, I will be told to bring an employment letter, and the school will request that I bring my SACE certificate. How will I get this? I eventually resorted to selling food. Although I still want to further my education" (W7).

The findings indicate that legal precarity and exclusionary labour practices significantly constrain asylum-seeking women's access to formal employment in South Africa. The W3 account illustrates bureaucracy in the asylum management system:

> "I was working as medical personnel in my home country [Nigeria]; coming to South Africa with a visitor's visa was not the best. I needed the necessary papers to get a job in the formal sector. When I visited the RRO office, the official told me not to come again, or I would be deported. The last time I went to RRO, I was detained in the RRO cell despite being pregnant.

> The other ladies in the cell settled [bribed] and were released. The official told me to call someone to send money. I have no money, and I was released in the evening. On my way home (10 hours), I fell asleep and alighted at the wrong place."

Overall, the findings demonstrate that attending a job interview does not guarantee employment. "Upon attending an interview, you know you performed very well, but the interviewer would say the position is for South Africans" (W4).

Nine participants work in the informal economy as street vendors, selling food, or as nail technicians. They expressed experiencing xenophobia while working in the informal sector. The participants explained:

> "Locals claim that foreigners are taking jobs. Foreigners should not work in the formal sector; we should not work in the informal sector [such as nail technicians, hairdressers, spaza shops, or selling ladies' clothes] because foreigners often sell at lower prices. The locals protested and chased us from the road, where we used to sell, because we did not have a license to trade. However, we go to shops and rent, yet the metro police come daily to extort us" (W11).

Being issued a 3-month or 6-month asylum permit also affected women asylum seekers' access to social services and their ability to open a bank account. Few South African banks open bank accounts for asylum seekers, and these accounts are typically linked to the duration of their permits. Bank accounts could be frozen because of an expired asylum permit.

Discussion and Way Forward

This study has examined the motivations behind women asylum seekers' reliance on intermediaries and how these intermediaries enable or hinder their migration trajectories. The findings revealed five central themes. This includes misguided information from "agents" and transition from Legal to Illegal Migrant Status, becoming asylum seekers by default, financial exploitation by agents and administrative entrapment, passing through needle's eyes to apply and renew the asylum permit, and structural constraint of no permit–no work.

Across the themes, findings reveal that intermediaries play dual roles, as both facilitators and complicators of migration. While some women asylum seekers were initially legal, misinformation by "agents" and fraudulent

supporting documents led them to be classified as illegal migrants. The structural vulnerabilities that women asylum seekers experience were reflected in the recurring patterns of financial exploitation, administrative entrapment, and reliance on intermediaries to navigate complicated asylum processes.

Intermediaries operate at several migration stages before the arrival of migrant women seeking asylum, during their arrival, and throughout settlement in South Africa. The intermediaries in this study exhibit the characteristics of "*Feymen"* and "*Dokimen*" described by Alpes (2017: 10) by "fabricating and falsifying supporting documents" for women asylum seekers. Their prominence reflects South Africa's restrictive immigration laws and visa regime, which have increased demand for intermediaries who position themselves as experts to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles.

In line with this, legislative reforms have sought to regulate the immigration industry and curb intermediaries' fraudulent activities. South Africa's immigration amendment requires individuals who intend to operate as immigration practitioners to pass an examination administered by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA). Successful candidates are then authorised to provide immigration advice and represent migrants in dealings with the DHA. Section 46 of the 2002 Immigration Act further stipulates that only attorneys, advocates, or registered immigration practitioners may represent another person in immigration matters. proceedings or procedures. Although the legislative framework attempts to curb fraudulent activities by intermediaries, this study's findings indicate that intermediaries continue to operate in parallel to the official system, filling gaps created by bureaucratic inefficiencies and migrants' urgent need for documents.

Despite these regulations, women asylum seekers employ the services of intermediaries because they create pathways for women asylum seekers' migration into South Africa and during the asylum application process in South Africa. Agents' strategies include manipulating regulatory loopholes or circumventing migration regulations entirely. Intermediaries can sometimes restrict access to information and resources, disadvantaging migrant women by being supportive or exploitative, such as providing wrong or misleading information. The study reveals that the structural constraint of "no permit, no work" also reflects the direct limitation on women's livelihoods imposed by their inability to secure or renew documentation.

In addition, the study indicates that frequent immigration amendments further amplify women asylum seekers' challenges and migration requirements.

A previous study by Harvey et al. (2018) found that migration is a process influenced by diverse actors embedded in migration sectors, rather than by individual choice or macro-level policy. As this study revealed, the challenges of the asylum application process, gathering supporting documents (e.g., bank statements, SAQA, SACE), and navigating the asylum system leave them heavily dependent on intermediaries.

However, as the study shows, such claims often serve as deceptive tactics used to exploit vulnerable women. South Africa's non-encampment policy makes it an attractive destination, and the assumption that intermediaries have "connections" capable of altering the outcome of an immigration application or appeal process further enhances its appeal. Still, the urgency to legalise their stay in a frantic move has led many to fall prey to intermediaries who either support or exploit them. Also, as the study shows, agents' claims of a connection to RRO officials are deceptive strategies to exploit their ignorance and vulnerability. The legal environment further complicates women's experiences. Many women rely on agents due to linguistic barriers, unfamiliarity with South African immigration laws, or the complexity of visa requirements. Before these immigration amendments, those who overstayed were classified as "undesirable," a term previously used for individuals with criminal records. Maple (2005) argued that refugee reception is a process influenced by institutional, political, and legal factors, rather than a single point of entry. Systematic flaws in South Africa's migration governance are also reflected in the tendency for individuals to become asylum seekers by default.

Conclusion

This study indicates that intermediaries exploited women by portraying asylum as the only option, even in cases when individuals do not qualify to meet the requirements for refugee protection when their permit is rejected. This situation also makes women categorised as asylum seekers, which was not their original plan and intention, adversely affecting their integration and access to social services in South Africa. In the end, women who are economic migrants applying for asylum face the same scrutiny as those who need actual protection. Studies found that the "migration industry" encompasses recruitment firms, brokers, and transportation companies that generate revenue by facilitating international migration from both the migrant's home and host countries. The findings of this study align with those of Riva and Hoffstaedter, Adugna et al., and Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen**.** They

found that restrictive visa regimes and immigration regulations often increase reliance on brokers, as migration brokerage functions at the intersection of labour demand, migration policies, and business motives.

More importantly, in order to overcome complicated legal and administrative obstacles, migrants paid exorbitant fees, were misinformed, or given false papers, which opens the door for exploitative acts. This study provides insight into the scant research on intermediaries embedded in global migration infrastructure, who influence migrants' migration and vulnerability. The findings revealed five central themes, including: (1) Misguided Information from "Agents" and Transition from Legal to Illegal Migrant Status, (2) Becoming Asylum Seekers by Default, (3) Financial Exploitation by agents and administrative entrapment, (4) Passing through Needle's Eyes to apply and renew the asylum permit, and (5) Structural constraint of no license–no work.

Drawing on exploratory qualitative research**,** including participant observation and semi-structured interviews with twelve women asylum seekers, the study concludes that asylum seekers encounter structural, legal, and administrative barriers that shape their migration trajectories and expose them to exploitation by intermediaries. They depend on intermediaries, also referred to as "agents," because of urgent immigration needs, desperation, and the complexity of the South African asylum and permit renewal process. Intermediaries exploited women by portraying asylum as the only option, even in cases where they do not qualify for such protection. Therefore, there is an urgent need to regulate intermediaries' interactions with 'women' asylum seekers in order to reduce their vulnerability and address their exploitation in the process.

The study is limited in size. Yet, notwithstanding these limitations, the study provides valuable data on the gendered dynamics of asylum processes and the roles of intermediaries, laying the groundwork for further research and policy engagement. The article underscores the need for a transparent and consistent asylum system that mitigates the vulnerabilities of women asylum seekers. Regulation of intermediaries to address vulnerability and exploitation will go a long way toward safeguarding their human rights and the human asylum system.

Disclosure Statement

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Statement of Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with established research ethics to ensure the protection, dignity, and well-being of all participants. The research followed the principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities, and all identifying information was removed from the data. We upheld confidentiality to safeguard participants' privacy and protect them from harm. All procedures were guided by the principles of minimising risk and of respecting participants' constitutional rights, dignity, and emotional well-being, in line with recognised ethical standards for social research.

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FACTORS INFLUENCING RELATIONS BETWEEN UKRAINE AND AFRICAN STATES, 2022–2025

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Abstract: This study examines Ukraine's challenges in pursuing the African direction of its foreign policy during the Russian-Ukrainian war that began in 2014 and intensified in 2022. It analyses the processes of intensifying Ukraine's cooperation with African states, evaluates the outcomes of the African vector of Ukraine's foreign policy, and assesses future prospects for the development of Ukraine's relations with African states in terms of existing obstacles and emerging opportunities. The article systematises the key problems that Ukraine faces in the development of relations with African states and investigates the factors that influence Ukraine's cooperation with African states. For a long time, the African media space rarely focused on Ukraine. The study identifies the main barriers to a sustainable cooperation between Ukraine and African states, including the absence of a long-standing tradition of cooperation, limited mutual understanding of needs and priorities, differences in political regimes, and other constraints.

Keywords: African direction of Ukraine's foreign policy, Global South, national interests, geopolitics, security challenges

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has pursued the development of a global network of partnerships. However, for a long time, it has devoted limited attention and resources to relations with the Global South, particularly Africa. Due to domestic political and economic challenges, the solution of which was a priority in the early years of independence, together with the destructive influence of other states or other factors, for a long time Ukraine's foreign policy was focused on only several areas. Africa was not among them. Another obstacle arose after the collapse of the USSR

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in 1991, when the newly established Russian Federation appropriated nearly all diplomatic ties with African states. Ukraine, therefore, had to independently develop communication channels with African partners, along with a system of foreign diplomatic institutions, etc.

The rapid growth of security challenges in the early 2020s prompted Ukraine to intensify relations with African states. After the full-scale invasion of Russia in February 2022, Ukraine felt the consequences of having neglected the African vector of foreign policy for many years. In contrast, Russia, China, India and other states have consistently expanded their influence on African states. Now, in this reality, Ukraine faces the task of building new and competitive partnerships.

In recent years, Ukraine has sought to rapidly fill the gaps in its foreign policy by developing an institutional framework to strengthen cooperation with African states. For example, it adopted the *Ukraine-African Countries Communication Strategy* (Ministry 2023b). This step has not produced immediate results but it did lay the groundwork for future relations. In addition, numerous obstacles to closer Ukraine-Africa cooperation have become evident. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to identify problems Ukraine has faced in implementing its African foreign policy direction in recent years. The analysis focuses on the period of 2022–25, as it is the factor of the Russian-Ukrainian war that accelerated the African direction of Ukraine's foreign policy.

The issues of Ukraine's relations with African states under new geopolitical and security challenges are currently under-researched. African scholars have not yet devoted systematic attention to the topic of Ukraine. Their focus lies primarily on the continent's internal problems, relations with China, the USA, the EU or former colonial powers such as France and Great Britain. The few existing studies do not address Ukrainian-African cooperation but mainly the economic consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war for African states. These include rising inflation and food prices, commodity shortages, new threats to food security (Lopes 2022; Ndifon et al. 2024), slowing down the achievement of the *Sustainable Development Goals* by African states (Mhlanga and Ndhlovu 2023), etc. Notably, economic and humanitarian aspects are displacing the study of the problem from the perspective of geopolitics, values, etc. Moreover, African researchers rarely frame Russian aggression as a war (Manboah-Rockson et al. 2024), referring to it as a "conflict" or "crisis" in Russian-Ukrainian relations (Duho et al. 2022; Mhlanga and Ndhlovu 2024). Studies by African

scholars on the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on specific states of the continent remain scarce (Minja 2024). Instead, the emphasis is placed on the principle of neutrality, non-alignment of African states (Ajaja 2022; Ayodele 2024; Darkwa and Attuquayefio 2024), as well as a pragmatic approach to assessing foreign policy problems (Brosig and Verma 2024). Attention is drawn to the sensitive issues of differences in the attitude of European states towards refugees from Ukraine compared with those from African states (Iberi and Saddam 2023), reduction of aid to African states due to support for Ukraine, etc.

The case of Ukraine is studied only sporadically in the context of analysing broader geopolitical issues. Even the flagship publication of the African Association of Political Science, the *African Journal of Political Science*, practically does not cover the topic of cooperation between African states and Ukraine. Meanwhile, in Western, especially European, scientific publications the focus on the problems of African affairs appears more visible. For instance, the British journal *African Affairs* has published a study on the impact of the war in Ukraine on the African Union (Staeger 2023). Madalina Dobrescu (2023) in *Mediterranean Politics* highlighted the obstacles to developing a constructive dynamic in relations between Ukraine and the states of North Africa. Most often, however, the analytical focus remains socio-economic rather than political. The confrontation between Russia and Ukraine in covering African issues is attributed to the factors that exacerbate the problems of poverty, food shortages, and debt dependence of African states (Balma et al. 2024; Gallagher et al. 2024; Kedir et al. 2024; Mhlanga and Ndhlovu 2024).

Shortly after the onset of the full-scale Russian aggression researchers from central and eastern European states (Pardyak 2023) pointed out that Ukraine would compete for the support of African states. This observation gave rise to an analysis of Ukraine's foreign policy track in Africa (Atamanenko and Konopka 2024). Nevertheless, there remains a pressing need to systematise the challenges that Ukraine faces in its efforts to build partnerships with African countries. Existing studies on various aspects of the issue confirm the existence of debatable positions in assessing the state and prospects of Ukraine's relations with African states, especially in the light of global security challenges.

This study relies methodologically on theories of international relations that explain the motivation for the cooperation between states, the level of intensity of their interactions, etc. The question is which of the

contemporary theories of international relations can best explain why most African states remain cautious about intensifying cooperation with Ukraine today (during wartime), despite Ukraine's initiatives? A combination of neorealism and postcolonial theory (neo-Marxism) appears to offer the strongest methodological foundation:

> – neorealism rests on geopolitical pragmatism and the principle of self-preservation. African states operate within a system of global anarchy, where each subject of international politics seeks to minimise their risks. They do not want to be subjected to Russian political or economic pressure, lose the necessary supplies or other preferences. Many African governments therefore view cooperation with Ukraine as carrying a potentially high strategic cost and offering limited benefits;
>
> – postcolonial theory/neo-Marxism also holds methodological value for this study, since many African leaders and citizens of African states perceive Ukraine as part of the Western geopolitical bloc. There is a strong collective memory in African states that the West frequently ignored conflicts in Africa. Many focus on the fact that sanctions or other forms of international response never reached the same intensity when wars unfolded in Africa. At the same time, Ukraine, in its appeals to African states, also presents itself as a victim of colonialism, but only of Russian colonialism (*Kyiv Post* 2022). From the perspective of postcolonial theory/neo-Marxism, several African states hesitate to openly support Ukraine because they interpret such a step as a continuation of old patterns of international injustice.

Within the study of historiography, research that applies neorealism and postcolonial theory/neo-Marxism to relations between Ukraine and African states therefore draws particular interest. The direct applications of the aforementioned methodologies to the topic of relations between Ukraine and African states remain very limited in the scholarly literature, yet several works prove useful within a broader geopolitical context. For example, Elias Götz's (2016) approach to neorealism provides a theoretical framework that can be adapted to characterise the geopolitical behaviour of African countries towards Ukraine in the context of Russian aggression. African states pragmatically choose whom to cooperate with and whom to support in international organisations, weighing the balance of power against their potential losses.

Eric B. Niyitunga and Anslem W. Adunimay (2023) examined the impact of Russia's war against Ukraine on international relations in Africa from a methodological perspective of realism. The researchers demonstrated how international anti-Russian sanctions, disruptions in supply chains, and changes in the economic and security situation shifted African states' interests.

Bonnie Ayodele (2024) applied a neorealist approach to assessing Nigeria's pragmatic foreign policy position regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war. The researcher argues that despite Western pressure, Nigeria adopted a pragmatic indifferent stance, avoiding open condemnation of Russia and demonstrating a tendency towards geopolitical balancing. The principle of non-alignment and an Afrocentric worldview are at the centre of the value paradigm. Ayodele's findings indicate that many states of the Global South found themselves caught between the West and Russia. Overtly backing either side could jeopardise their interests and economic ties. These states clearly seek to keep channels of communication open both with the West and with pro-Russian states and intergovernmental organisations such as BRICS, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa as well as Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates.

Although not directly focusing on neorealism, Joseph Kwabena Manboah-Rockson, Robert Yakubu Adjuik and Tanko Daniel Dawda (2024) present the logic of the crisis decision-making model, which is similar to the neorealist model. This model highlights how African leaders make decisions under the pressure of global conflict, taking into account above all the likely consequences of international wars and crises for their national interests.

Olena Khylko and Maksym Khylko (2024) applied the explanatory potential of a postcolonial approach to international relations, showing how this methodology can help analyse the factors shaping current relations between Ukraine and African states. These authors' findings contribute to an understanding of how leaders and the public in African states perceive various international armed conflicts through the prism of colonial history and the double standards of the West.

Peculiarities of Building Relations Between Ukraine and African States in the Context of Growing Security Challenges

Intergovernmental cooperation between Ukraine and African countries began in the early 1990s but remained limited. Representatives of

Ukraine and African states were often engaged inat international forums, while meetings between Ukrainian and African heads of state remained rare. Overall, in the more than three decades of Ukraine's independence, Ukrainian presidents paid only a handful of visits to African countries, and African leaders likewise seldom visited Ukraine. Intergovernmental visits between Ukraine and African states have been relatively infrequent since the early 1990s. Ukrainian presidents undertook official visits to Egypt (in 1992 and 2008), Tunisia (in 1993), Libya (in 2003), and South Africa (in 2025). Ukrainian prime ministers likewise conducted official visits to Egypt (in 1997 and 2011). Conversely, visits by African heads of state to Ukraine have been limited. The only documented instances include those of the President of Equatorial Guinea (in 2004, with several defence-related visits recorded between 2005 and 2014) and the Libyan leader (in 2008).

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the beginning of Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine, Ukraine's diplomatic resources were directed at seeking external support and condemning Russia's actions at the global level. In this context, African states did not become strategic partners of Ukraine, although some of them openly supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine. It should be noted that Ukraine's aspirations to join the EU and NATO appeared distant and unfamiliar to African states, many of which had aligned with the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

One of the most intensive areas of work of Ukrainian diplomats since 2014 has involved efforts to secure global condemnation of Russian aggression at the UN General Assembly (UNGA). Ukraine has sought the broadest possible support from African states when UNGA voted on resolutions related to the Ukrainian issue. However, these states often did not vote, abstained or voted against such resolutions, starting from 2014. The first resolution since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, *A/RES/68/262 Territorial integrity of Ukraine* of 27 March 2014 (UN General Assembly 2014), was only supported by 19 African states, 26 abstained, two voted against, and six did not vote. Annual UNGA resolutions from 2016 on human rights in temporarily occupied Crimea and the militarisation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, as well as parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov received even lower support from African states.

We assume that most African states did not view Ukraine's security problems as urgent issues requiring global involvement. This remained evident until 2022, when Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine increased the risks of

a food crisis in numerous African states. Several reasons explain this earlier lack of engagement: differences in values, the focus of African states lay primarily on countless conflicts within the continent, pragmatic interest in cooperation with Russia, etc. Until 2022 Ukraine's security problems did not directly affect the welfare of African countries and did not impact their existential interests. Consequently, there was no adequate support for Ukraine from African states.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine prompted some African states to revise their assessment of the Russian-Ukrainian war in the direction of increased support for Ukraine. This trend is reflected in the voting results on resolutions on the Ukrainian issue in the UN General Assembly between 2014 and 2025. Of course, certain countries, such as Eritrea, are steadfast in their allied position with Russia. At the same time, the majority of African states, as evidenced by the results of voting on UNGA resolutions, choose a convenient and supposedly neutral position for themselves. On the one hand, they usually support the UN normative principles (on non-aggression, non-interference, and inviolability of borders). On the other hand, African states avoid any practical steps to sanction violators, that is, the practical implementation of these same principles.

An analysis of the voting results for UNGA resolutions on the Ukrainian issue since 2014 has led to the following conclusions: (1) declarative resolutions (e.g., calls for a ceasefire, respect for international law, etc.) received much more support from African states; (2) when voting for resolutions of a specific nature, African states mostly abstained from voting (such as restrictions on Russia's activities in UN bodies, the creation of mechanisms for compensation for damages caused by Russian armed aggression against Ukraine, the protection of nuclear power plants, etc.). This behaviour reflects African states' commitment to neutrality. Thus, many African states distance themselves from responsibility for decisions that may have negative consequences for their national interests; (3) the voting results of African states are influenced by the nature of ties with Russia and their importance for the life of a particular state; and (4) the comparatively higher support for Ukraine in recent years is due not only to the challenges to the food security of African states (Ukraine being an important producer of grain), but also to the intensification of the African track of Ukraine's foreign policy.

Visits by African leaders during the full-scale invasion were sporadic. In October 2022, the President of Guinea-Bissau *Umaro Mokhtar Sissoco*

Embaló, who also chaired the ECOWAS union of West African countries, visited Ukraine. The presidents and special representatives of the Republic of South Africa, Zambia, the Union of the Comoros, Senegal, Egypt, Congo, and Uganda visited Ukraine to promote the African Peace Initiative in 2023. However, the latter visit was combined with a visit to Russia. The interest of African leaders was not so concerned with establishing long-term cooperation with Ukraine, but with resolving a specific food problem. We agree with the assessment of Miłosz Bartosiewicz and Krzysztof Nieczypor (2023), that "the African delegation's main objectives were to draw attention to the problem of the war's negative consequences for the food security of their countries and to lobby for the de-escalation of the conflict."

It should also be noted that the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy has not addressed the parliament of any African country online, although in 2022-2023, there were dozens of such speeches (Official web site of the President of Ukraine *2023*). The exception was *Volodymyr* Zelenskyy's collective appeal to the leaders of the African Union in connection with the food crisis and other challenges caused by the Russian aggression (CGTN Africa 2022). Furthermore, no Ukraine-Africa summits have been held to date, although Ukraine initiated the possibility of holding them.

Since 2023, Ukraine has been arranging meetings with groups of African media representatives to counter the narratives spread by Russia in the information space of Africa. At the same time, Ukraine's efforts cannot be considered systematic. Clearly, much greater efforts are needed to effectively confront the consequences of Russia's many years of expansion into the information space of African states.

Thanks to the efforts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, communications with African countries have intensified significantly since 2022. These processes have been referred to as the "Ukrainian-African Renaissance" (Ministry 2023a). Ministers of Foreign Affairs (Dmytro Kuleba, Andrii Sybiha) have made five tours of African countries: (1) October 2022 (Senegal, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Kenya); (2) May 2023 (Morocco, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Mozambique, Nigeria); (3) July 2023 (Equatorial Guinea, Liberia); (4) August 2024 (Malawi, Zambia and Mauritius); (5) October 2024 (Angola, Egypt, South Africa). Visits to individual countries (such as Ghana, Rwanda, Mozambique, Equatorial Guinea, and Liberia) took place for the first time in the history of bilateral relations between the countries. The work of the Institution of the Special Representative of

Ukraine for the Middle East and Africa has also been activated. Among the major results of African tours and other visits are agreements on the opening of diplomatic institutions in Ukraine. In April 2025, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy paid a visit to Africa, including the Republic of South Africa. At the head of state level, this was the only visit to the African continent during the full-scale war.

It is noteworthy that no African state has imposed sanctions against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. Generally, sanction instruments are rarely used by African states. African diplomats try to avoid the topic of Russian aggression against Ukraine. This reflects the position of African countries on neutrality, non-alignment, etc., as well as their attempts to maintain relations with all those with whom they have pragmatic national interests. Obviously, Ukraine must take this feature into account when building relations.

Thus, it is against the background of full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine that Ukraine's interactions with African states have intensified, strategic communications have begun to be established, and a network of Ukrainian diplomatic missions on the continent is developing. However, there remains a set of problems that Ukraine must solve to have an effective presence in Africa. In particular, most African states have long-established close trade and security ties with Russia, which they do not want to disrupt. Given the problems with the quality of democracy, economic arguments and long-standing dependence on Russia determine the choice of foreign policy priorities. Certainly, this does not apply to all African countries, but Ukraine is currently dealing with a very complex geopolitical landscape that requires long-term and consistent steps. It is also crucial that Ukraine's interest in Africa maintains an upward momentum and does not become undulating. This conclusion is substantiated by the observation that, in 2025, Ukraine's diplomatic initiatives and the expansion of its diplomatic network shifted their focus from Africa to Latin America.

Results and Prospects for Intensifying Ukraine's Relations with African States

Despite the intensification of relations between Ukraine and African states, many foreign policy successes are situational. Only initial steps are being taken for possible sustainable partnerships. Let us illustrate the peculiarity of the situation with an example. A significant number of African states

supported resolution *A/RES/ES-11/1 Aggression against Ukraine* (UN General Assembly 2022), which called upon Russia to cease the illegal use of force and withdraw troops from Ukraine. However, the Summit on Peace in Ukraine (15-16 June 2024) highlighted the lack of adequate support for this initiative by African states. Only a small number of African states (18 out of 54) attended the summit (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs 2024), and not all of them signed the Joint Communiqué, which outlined a path to peace for Ukraine based on the principles of the UN Charter. For example, Libya, Mauritania, South Africa, and Rwanda did not sign the joint document.

Over the three years of actively pursuing its African foreign policy vector, Ukrainian diplomacy has achieved certain results. Among the most notable achievements is the increased visibility of Ukraine in the information space of African countries. Yet, Russian-funded propaganda media outlets are undermining these efforts. It seems that Ukraine has not developed its foreign broadcasting network. Consequently, for a long time, the African media space rarely focused on Ukraine. This was probably due to the lack of influence of events in Ukraine on the states of the continent. The situation changed in 2022 when African countries felt the threat of a food crisis following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as a decrease in funding from European and other funds due to the redirection of part of their resources to support Ukraine. In the latter context, some African states interested in Western aid began to view Ukraine as a competitor, which did not contribute to the establishment of relations. It is noteworthy that the issue of international financial support is actively exploited by Russian propaganda to create negative sentiments among the elites and public of African countries towards Ukraine.

Thanks to the efforts of Ukrainian diplomats, several African states changed their positions when voting for resolutions on the Ukrainian issue in the UN General Assembly. Before 2022, many African states either abstained or did not vote for such resolutions at all. However, the first UN General Assembly resolution since the full-scale Russian invasion, *Aggression against Ukraine* of 2 March 2022, was supported by 28 (out of 54) African states. In 2023, 30 African states voted in favour of resolution *ES-11/6 Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine* (UN General Assembly 2023). Within one year of the war, Egypt, Madagascar, and South Sudan abandoned their previously neutral stance on resolutions concerning Ukraine. At the same time, opposite trends emerged. For instance, Gabon supported the aforementioned resolution in

2022, but abstained from voting in 2023; notably, during 2023–24 Gabon became the largest supplier of sanctioned spare parts for Russian aircraft, while Russia began using Gabonese ports to hide tankers of its shadow fleet (Grau 2025). The occurrence of military coups, such as happened in Gabon during the summer of 2023, has the capacity to effect rapid alterations in the realm of foreign policy. Consequently, the establishment of Ukraine's partnerships with several African nations is hindered by the political instability within these countries and Russia's overt support for local military juntas. Gabon's case illustrates the situational nature of African states' support for Ukraine, despite Ukraine's diplomatic efforts to secure every vote.

A key achievement of Ukraine's foreign policy in Africa has been the opening of new diplomatic missions across various regions of the African continent. In 2023–24, Ukraine opened embassies in Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Mauritania, Mozambique, Rwanda, and other states, and received authorisation to establish an embassy in Sudan. As a result, Ukraine has expanded its diplomatic presence in every part of Africa. The importance of opening embassies lies in maintaining strategic interaction with African partners. Nevertheless, Ukraine's current diplomatic network on the continent remains insufficient.

A crucial step in Ukraine-Africa relations has been the implementation of a humanitarian initiative to deliver Ukrainian grain and other critical products to African countries. The Black Sea Grain Initiative, launched in 2022 as a quadrilateral agreement among the UN, Ukraine, Turkey, and Russia, aimed to guarantee the safe export of Ukrainian grain and prevent famine, particularly in Africa. Despite the shelling of Ukrainian seaports by the Russian army, Ukraine resumed the transportation of food unilaterally within the framework of the humanitarian initiative *Grain from Ukraine*. As part of this initiative, Ukrainian grain was delivered to Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Yemen, and other countries. As of the beginning of 2025, three international food security summits *Grain from Ukraine* (Ministry 2024f) were held, which fostered dialogue not only with international food security organisations but also with the leaders of African countries (Ministry 2024c). Importantly, in the context of humanitarian cooperation with Africa, Ukraine initiated the construction of grain hubs in African countries, from which agricultural products could be transported across the continent. This would reduce the dependence of African countries on supply disruptions provoked by Russia. The implementation of grain hub projects is being considered jointly with Senegal, Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt, and other countries

with access to the sea, but as of early 2025, no concrete agreements have been reached. To achieve tangible progress in Ukraine-Africa relations, visits at various levels, the signing of memoranda, and other documents must result in concrete projects; otherwise, real advancement will remain elusive.

Ukraine and Russia possess unequal capacities, resources, and leverage in bilateral interactions with African states. Russia has long entrenched itself across much of the continent, investing heavily in its presence. It has established networks of formal and informal contacts, cultivated the image of a "reliable partner of Africa" among many African leaders and communities, maintained a lasting presence in the continent's information space, and built an extensive network of diplomatic institutions, etc. Given Russia's strong diplomatic positions in African states, Ukraine must complement traditional diplomacy with new creative tactics of foreign policy influence (Morrow 2024).

Expanding interstate partnerships and integrating Ukrainian expertise in information technologies have the potential to establish a foundation for long-term collaboration between Ukraine and African states. Despite the ongoing war, Ukrainian information technologies continue to be one of the principal areas of national export, as exemplified by the *Diia* digital application. Demand for such systems exists in African states, although until recently the implementation of Ukrainian *Diia* analogues relied on funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (EU4Digital 2024). In 2025, the Trump administration suspended these programs. Ethiopia, Zanzibar, and Zambia had previously negotiated with USAID about adopting *Diia* and adapting it to their populations' needs. The suspension of U.S. support thus constitutes an external factor that may affect Ukraine's cooperation with African states.

Another area in which Ukraine attracts the interest of African countries is the management of energy systems and overcoming energy deficits. Against the backdrop of constant Russian attacks on Ukrainian energy systems, the experience of Ukrainian energy specialists and their skills in quickly restoring networks offer valuable expertise for African professionals. Ukraine's assistance in the development and maintenance of the African electricity infrastructure could become an important dimension of bilateral cooperation.

In the sphere of trade, Ukraine engages with various regions of Africa to differing extents. Historically, trade with East African countries has been

markedly lower than that with North Africa. However, since the launch of the *Grain from Ukraine* humanitarian programme, East Africa has emerged as a principal focus of attention. This suggests that the situation remains dynamic and does not yet exhibit stable, long-term patterns. African states are chiefly interested in cooperation with Ukraine in the spheres of agriculture and technology. Promising avenues for partnership include: (1) technology transfer, particularly in precision agriculture and irrigation systems; (2) investment projects within the food industry; (3) exports of Ukrainian agricultural machinery and equipment; and (4) collaboration in the information technology sector. It may be contended that Ukraine is most likely to strengthen its relations with African countries through economic cooperation, as this constitutes a domain in which African partners display both interest and willingness to engage.

Ukraine retains the ability to influence those African states that express a pro-Ukrainian stance in the context of the war against Russia but do not consistently support Russia, remain independent from the aggressor state, maintain certain relations with Western countries, and demonstrate some progress in democratic transformation. Active interstate dialogue with these states could lead to future changes in their support for Ukraine.

Ukraine faces a particular challenge in developing relations with African states that pursue a firm policy of neutrality while carefully balancing diplomacy between the West and Russia. Angola illustrates this case. Ukraine is well known there because Ukrainian troops participated in UN peacekeeping missions in 1996–99 (UNAVEM III), 1997–99 (MONUA), 2002–03 (UNMA). Angola's current foreign minister, Tete António, has studied in Ukraine. Although Ukraine and Angola marked the thirtieth anniversary of their diplomatic relations in 2024, only recently did Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrii Sybiha make the first official visit to Angola. Despite Angola's close ties with Russia, Ukraine seeks to deepen its partnership with this country and offers specific initiatives: modernisation of Angola's energy and transport infrastructure, introduction of high-tech agriculture (such as the use of drones in farming), participation in the Lobito Corridor railway project, and others (Ministry 2024a).

A destructive factor undermining Ukraine's efforts in Africa is the presence of Russian military formations (The Africa Corps) in several states, including Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali. These groups destabilise the continent, threaten regional security, and violate human rights (Bryjka and Czerep 2024). At the same time, Ukraine has gained substantial experience in countering the

Wagner Group and can share its knowledge with African states regarding the tactics of Russian mercenaries and effective strategies to resist them.

Through interstate communication at multiple levels and on various platforms, Ukraine has begun to promote its own agenda in Africa's information space. Yet, progress will become noticeable only if Ukraine engages in consistent, daily work to advance its position and neutralise Russian propaganda. To achieve this, Ukraine needs to expand its foreign-language broadcasting network despite the high costs involved.

It should be noted that the aforementioned *Ukraine–African Countries Communication Strategy* outlined Ukraine's intention to move away from the principle of situational cooperation and ensure consistent and comprehensive diplomatic coverage of each region in Africa (Ministry 2023b). The Strategy was adopted for a three-year period (2024–26) and underscores the importance of abandoning outdated perceptions of Africa, taking into account the continent's multifaceted and mosaic character. It seeks to present Ukraine as a reliable partner to African states while countering misinformation and propaganda.

However, certain strategic objectives appear highly ambitious within the three-year timeframe, given the current state of Ukraine–Africa cooperation. Notable examples include efforts to "ensure the official condemnation of Russian armed aggression by as many African states as possible" and "ensure a favourable attitude of internal and external audiences to Ukraine's policy towards African countries" (Ministry 2023b). Given Ukraine's difficulties in adequately financing its foreign policy, it is challenging to fulfil the task of maintaining "a consistent, strong Ukrainian presence in Africa at both official and unofficial levels, including media engagement" (Ministry 2023b). This challenge is compounded by Russia's entrenched economic, military, and diplomatic ties with African states. One factor complicating Kyiv's ability to communicate its objectives to African elites and publics is Ukraine's success in garnering broad support from Western partners. While the *Ukraine–African Countries Communication Strategy* sets important and legitimate goals, their practical implementation appears rather fragmented. It is unlikely that African leaders could be persuaded to abandon their long-standing partnerships with Russia within a short timeframe.

From a neorealist perspective, African states aim to cultivate relations with actors capable of guaranteeing their security and enhancing the stability of their regimes. The foreign policy of most African countries is primarily driven by the imperative to survive within an international system in which

they are not dominant actors. Motivations for inter-state engagement are shaped by security and economic considerations, as well as by the desire to engage in soft balancing vis-à-vis influential international actors such as Western states, China, and Russia. Ukraine is not perceived as a sufficiently strong actor whose cooperation would fulfil the strategic requirements of most African states. Decisions by African leaders and governments concerning the extent of engagement with Ukraine are largely determined by structural factors, including the distribution of power, external pressures, and resource dependencies. Within the neorealist paradigm, inter-state cooperation globally is thus understood as a consequence of structural inequalities and the pursuit of security and autonomy through balancing among centres of power.

From a postcolonial theoretical perspective, the reluctance of many African states to develop relations with Ukraine can be explained by the fact that Ukraine is not one of the "centres of power around which global political and economic interactions are built" (Ministry 2023b). This shapes the selection of partners with whom African states choose to cooperate, which typically include China, Russia, the United States, and the EU. African states are oriented towards these centres of power because they control financial flows, provide security guarantees, and facilitate diplomatic engagement.

At present, many African countries are economically dependent on states that are either engaged in armed conflict with Ukraine, such as Russia, or experiencing latent tensions, such as China. Enhancing relations with Ukraine could therefore entail risks for African countries in terms of access to financing, political support, and military assistance. Consequently, the foreign policy of peripheral states is heavily influenced by external factors. African leaders do not perceive Ukraine as possessing significant economic resources or institutional levers of influence, nor as a source of loans. From a postcolonial perspective, Ukraine is not considered a "centre of power," and there is currently little incentive for African states to reorient their cooperation towards it.

From a postcolonial perspective, the role of discourse is equally significant. Information systems shape both African elites and the media, within which Russia, as the successor to the USSR, continues to be perceived as a power that has supported African states in their struggles against the West and colonialism. By contrast, Ukraine is largely absent from these discourses and is often viewed primarily as an ally of the West. Among the political

elites and publics of African countries, there is little recognition of Ukraine as a state that has also suffered from colonialism.

Factors Affecting Ukraine's Relations with African States

Although Ukraine has activated the African vector of foreign policy, rapprochement with African states remains difficult. Ukraine's initiatives do not always receive the expected support from African states, and discussions of cooperation often fail to progress to a higher level. These dynamics reveal persistent problems that slow the advancement of the African vector of Ukraine's foreign policy.

Several factors explain the current instability of Ukraine's positions in Africa: geographical and cultural remoteness; lack of historical continuity in the development of relations; long-term neglect by Ukrainian governments of the development of relations with the states of the continent; and passive observation by the Ukrainian authorities of Russia's expanding influence on the continent (Dobrescu 2023). In striving to deepen relations with the states of the Global North, Ukraine has long underestimated the importance of allies within the Global South. No proactive policy was pursued either in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, or other regions. Today, Ukraine attempts to accelerate bilateral and multilateral cooperation with African states, but this process faces major obstacles due to the destructive and often latent interference of third parties, primarily neo-authoritarian states (Khoma and Nikolaieva 2023; Khoma and Vdovychyn 2024).

Thus, the problems that shape Ukrainian-African relations can be grouped into three categories. The first group includes problems that are caused by Ukraine's activity/inactivity on the African continent. The second includes problems caused by the perception of Ukraine by African political elites and communities. The third includes the influence of external geopolitical players who are also interested in Africa.

First, let us consider the problems caused by Ukraine's activity/inactivity. The key problem preventing African states from offering stronger support for Ukraine lies in the insufficient experience of cooperation between Ukraine and African states. This problem affects all areas and aspects of cooperation: political, diplomatic, economic, cultural, social, interpersonal contacts, etc. Building trust and partnerships requires time, during which these ties strengthen, networks of contacts are formed, and social capital is accumulated. At the political level, this problem is manifested in the

lack of stable traditions of personal contact between the elites of Ukraine and African states. This limits the process of persuading African states to support Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression. Of course, the lack of sustained cooperation and established contacts between Ukraine and African countries is not the only factor that has influenced the low level of involvement of African countries in Ukraine's peacebuilding initiative. Still, this is a negative factor for accelerating the development of bilateral cooperation between Ukraine and African countries.

At the diplomatic level, the lack of continuity of Ukrainian-African interactions manifests itself in Ukraine's limited diplomatic presence in African states and in the weak representation of African states in Ukraine.

Undoubtedly, Ukraine has taken visible steps in recent years, including the opening of new embassies in Africa and plans to further expand its diplomatic network. These efforts aim to establish systematic dialogue with African states and societies and to foster cooperation in areas of shared interest. However, such processes cannot deliver results as quickly as Ukraine currently needs. In addition, Ukraine struggles with limited human and financial resources to expand its diplomatic institutions. Establishing new missions requires budgetary funding, which is difficult to allocate while defence expenditures continue to rise.

It should be noted that, following an intensification in 2024, the development of Ukraine's network of diplomatic missions in Africa has recently slowed. This is primarily due to Ukraine's limited diplomatic presence both in Africa and on other continents. Ukraine is seeking to expand its network of diplomatic missions in multiple directions simultaneously, which constrains its capacity to concentrate on African countries. For instance, in 2025, Ukraine focused on Latin America, where several diplomatic missions were established.

African states also hesitate to expand their diplomatic representation in Ukraine. Due to financial constraints for the development of a network of diplomatic institutions and the priority of resolving internal problems over a global diplomatic presence, a significant number of African states are not considering opening diplomatic missions in Ukraine. Only a few states have maintained embassies in Ukraine (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, South Africa) amid the war. In recent years, no African country that previously did not have a diplomatic representation in Ukraine has opened its embassy. The sole exception is the opening of the honorary consulate of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2024. There are also embassies that ceased work in Ukraine in 2022 and have not yet resumed it, despite ongoing dialogue (Morocco).

Another particularly serious issue is that many African states not only lack diplomatic representation in Ukraine, but their embassies in the Russian Federation are responsible for Ukrainian issues. Examples include Namibia, Mozambique, Mauritius, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Chad, etc. As long as the Russian Federation is the diplomatic core of relations, it is complicated for Ukraine to build open partnerships. However, certain positive developments have occurred. For example, in 2025, Gambia and Mozambique appointed non-resident ambassadors to Ukraine. These are now diplomats serving as ambassadors to Turkey and Germany, respectively, rather than as diplomats in Russia.

The events of 2024 in Mali (Battle of Tinzawaten) tested Ukraine's efforts to establish relations with African states. Despite the Ukrainian government's denial of assistance to the Tuareg rebels, the governments of Mali and Niger broke off diplomatic relations with Ukraine (Ministry 2024d). To some extent, this may affect Ukraine's efforts to gain the support of African states. Some African states have perceived Ukraine's actions as the beginning of a hybrid war between Ukraine and Russia on the territory of Africa and are fearful of disastrous consequences for themselves. For the elites and communities of many African countries, contemporary processes are associated with the events of the Cold War and the damage caused to their continent by the rivalry between the USSR and the USA.

Another challenge for Ukrainian-African relations lies in the absence of high-quality communication between the parties. The adopted *Ukraine-African Countries Communication Strategy* has not yet improved the situation. In the resulting information vacuum, misconceptions and stereotypes continue to hinder Ukraine's interaction with African countries. Ukraine could resolve many of these communication problems more effectively if it developed its own media channels and international broadcasting platforms for African audiences. The lack of Ukrainian media resources that would disseminate accurate information about Ukraine to African societies creates an additional obstacle to productive intergovernmental relations. Information about the true state of affairs in Ukraine has begun to penetrate the information field of the African continent, thanks to materials by local journalists who visited Ukraine, in particular the de-occupied territories, and met with government representatives and victims of Russian crimes. As of the end of 2025, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine organised six press tours for journalists from a number of African countries. Nevertheless, the scale of Russian media activity outweighs the positive impact of individual publications with a pro-Ukrainian view of events.

To foster a positive attitude of the public in African countries towards Ukraine and to establish interstate dialogue, Ukraine needs to strengthen its media presence. However, financial constraints hinder Ukraine's ability to sustain foreign-language broadcasting abroad. Budget reductions in this sphere began as early as the mid-1990s, not only during the war. A limited number of foreign-language editorial offices and Ukraine's weak presence across radio frequencies have further restricted its outreach to African audiences.

Ukraine recognises the importance of engaging with audiences in African states to raise awareness about Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine and the war crimes committed by Russian forces on Ukrainian territory. However, the resources currently available are insufficient to mitigate Russia's destructive influence on the elites and public opinion in African countries. Ukraine's efforts are complemented by projects led by international partners. An example of this is the *Ukraine Communications Group* (UCG) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland 2024). This institution was established in 2024 by the United States and Poland, with the participation of other partners, with the aim to "promote accurate reporting of Russia's full-scale invasion, amplify Ukrainian voices, and expose Kremlin information manipulation" (U.S. Embassy in Poland 2024). Such forms of support for Ukraine are highly important. However, Russia invests substantial resources in Africa's information space, creating networks of media partners and similar structures. Artificial intelligence, the use of social media, and other technological innovations accelerate the dissemination of pro-Russian narratives (Ministry 2025b). At present, significantly greater efforts by democratic actors are required to counter Russian informational influence in Africa.

The most significant factor within the second group of problems that negatively affect the dynamics of the development of Ukrainian-African relations is the divergence in political regimes and values between the states. Most African states are hybrid or neo-authoritarian. In recent years, the overall quality of democracy across the continent has declined. Also, the growth of violence and coups d'état in some African states has not helped the development of democracies on the continent.

Mutual understanding between Ukraine and African states on important strategic issues suffers from the widespread narrative of a proxy war between the West and Russia, which is present in leadership circles of certain African states. For these governments, the war in Ukraine appears as the result of

a struggle between the West and Russia for spheres of influence. Specific historical hostility toward Western regimes reinforces this perspective. Many African countries remain influenced by disappointment over unequal access to vaccines, masks, and ventilators during the coronavirus pandemic. Consequently, a considerable number of African governments continue to view Russian aggression in Ukraine as a problem generated by the collective West. In each new problem, African states feel vulnerable due to a lack of solidarity (Lopes 2022: 21). In this context, African states are primarily concerned with protecting their own national interests and reducing the impact of external problems on domestic stability, the well-being of the population, and the ability to receive external assistance. Support for Ukrainian peace initiatives and condemnation of Russian aggression under such conditions are not relevant for most African governments.

The positions of African political elites may also hinder the active development of Ukraine's relations with African states due to the scale of assistance to Ukraine from Western partners. Until 2022, the EU allocated extensive funding to African states to support peace and humanitarian initiatives. Starting from 2022, however, the bulk of the European Peace Facility budget is directed to support Ukraine; only a small share of the funding was allocated to African states (European Union Websites 2023). This shift of EU support away from the African continent to Ukraine has generated dissatisfaction among African elites. After the termination of U.S. assistance programs under USAID in 2025, the competition between African states and Ukraine for assistance from various sources will become even more pronounced.

In African states, there is a growing perception that the continent's problems (security, economy, healthcare, etc.) are being neglected. The leaders of African states interpret the change in the scale of support as a policy of double standards, inferior perception by Western partners, and disregard for the international principle of equality among states and peoples. Such sentiments are reinforced by the unequal treatment of refugees from African states, the Middle East, and Ukrainian refugees since 2022 (Mickelsson 2024: 8).

Actions by some African officials have also undermined closer ties with Ukraine by contradicting the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. For example, at the end of 2024 members of parliament from twelve African states (Ethiopia, Tanzania, Malawi, Uganda, South Sudan, Comoros, Equatorial Guinea, Djibouti, Eswatini, Zambia, Somalia, and Mozambique)

visited the occupied part of Ukraine. They expressed solidarity with Russia. Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs assessed this visit as a manifestation of gross disrespect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and a violation of the fundamental principles of international law (Ministry 2024b). Another example is the visit of the ambassadors of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to the temporarily Russian-occupied Crimea in September 2025 (Ministry 2025a). By undertaking this visit, the African diplomats grossly violated international law, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, as well as several UN General Assembly resolutions, in particular Resolution No. 68/262, "Territorial Integrity of Ukraine," which reaffirms the non-recognition of any changes in the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. Such actions also contravene Ukrainian legislation, which clearly defines the procedure for entering the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine.

Let us turn to the third group of factors that influence Ukraine's relations with African states: the role of external players. Since modern international relations are dominated by the deep interdependence of subjects and their interactions, the dynamics and nature of Ukrainian-African relations depend significantly on other global and regional players and processes. Among the key actors influencing Ukraine's engagement with African countries are Russia (most prominently) followed to a lesser extent by China, the United States, and EU member states. The nature of these countries' relations with both Ukraine and African states directly affects the success of Ukraine's initiatives on the continent.

Russian influence poses the greatest obstacle to the advancement of Ukraine–Africa relations. Analysts differ in their assessment of the strength of this influence. For example, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace expert Gopaldas Ronak (2023) suggests that support for Russia on the continent may be exaggerated. Russian influence is often limited to the extent to which it can influence the political elite of a particular state and, in some cases, co-opt that elite into a patronage network. Instead, according to Omar Raafat (2023), Africa has become an arena of geopolitical rivalry, characterised by Russia's resurgence, as its influence is steadily growing in contrast to the influence of the United States, the EU countries, and others.

Russia has maintained a presence in the internal space of many African countries since the mid-1950s. It secured positions in the defence, economic, information, and other sectors. After the collapse of the USSR in 1990-91, Russia quickly resumed an active expansionist policy. Following the annexation of Crimea

in 2014, the Kremlin redoubled its diplomatic efforts in Africa, since, under Western sanctions, new partners and sales markets were needed. Although Russia's economic presence in Africa is not as extensive as that of China or India, some Russian goods and services are in demand in a number of African countries. Russia serves as a major supplier of weapons and equipment to various African regimes and has deployed a large-scale presence of private military campaigns on the territory of the continent. This motivates many African governments to maintain positive relations with Russia, and to this end, to refrain from criticising Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Russia regularly hosts high-profile events involving African states, including the Russia-Africa summits in 2019 and 2023. In contrast, Ukraine has not yet developed such communication platforms, although it has proposed holding the Ukraine-Africa and Ukraine-African Union summits. Since the beginning of the full-scale war, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has held more than sixty contacts with the leaders of African countries. Still, many initiatives currently remain at the discussion level and require funding for implementation. A common platform for Ukraine's dialogue with African states has not yet been created.

Consequently, regardless of how intensive Ukraine's actions in Africa are today, they have a much weaker impact on the political elite and communities of African countries than the long-term systemic and financially costly influence of Russia, China, etc. A large group of African states continue to regard Russia as a reliable friend and ally. At the same time, they welcome Ukrainian delegations and, from a pragmatic standpoint, remain open to potential cooperation with Ukraine.

Conclusion

Ukraine's initiatives to intensify diplomatic relations with African states are significant in two respects:

(1) within the current moment of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukrainian political elites are seeking diplomatic support for their resistance to Russia's illegal invasion in 2022. These processes concern the entire world, but the states of the Global South have been in the focus of attention since 2022. In fact, it was the emergency situation of a full-scale invasion that contributed to this. In 2014–22, when Russia was carrying out armed aggression, the Ukrainian government sought support primarily from the collective West, while the Global South was underestimated. Obviously,

Russia took advantage of this moment to continue building new and strengthening old networks of ties throughout the Global South, primarily in Africa;

(2) within the broader perspective, which is related to the post-war development of Ukraine, cooperation with African states is very important. Although Ukraine's hopes for post-war reconstruction are predominantly linked to Western countries, numerous areas of cooperation with African countries are opening up, as Ukraine seeks new markets and partners. Potential areas include agricultural products, technologies in the agricultural sector, mechanical engineering, energy, security technologies, etc.

We believe that the main factors that currently determine the condition and prospects of Ukraine's relations with African countries are: (1) Ukraine's long-standing failure to develop relations with countries of the African continent; despite efforts of recent years and a certain progress in relations, it is not possible to achieve significant success in the short time; (2) problems in the perception of Ukraine by both African political elites and communities in African countries; (3) the influence of powerful external geopolitical players (mostly neo-authoritarian) with interests on the African continent. To this end, interested actors are investing in infrastructure projects, the media space, the military sphere, etc. of African states.

Currently, it is difficult for Ukraine to counteract Russian influence in Africa. Moscow's power is rooted primarily in: (1) networks of connections inherited from the USSR; (2) many years of large-scale arms sales; (3) a strong propaganda machine supported by the Russian regime; and (4) support for military juntas willing to accept mercenaries from private military companies such as the Wagner Group.

For a long time, Ukraine lacked a clear strategy for building relations with African states. Interaction basically took the form of trade and economic cooperation as well as humanitarian aid.

The consequences of this became acutely manifest during the full-scale war with Russia when only a few states of the Global South supported Ukraine. Foreign policy contacts between Ukraine and African states have intensified tremendously since 2022, thanks to Ukraine's initiatives. Apparently, stable partnerships cannot emerge quickly, given the starting positions and external factors. In 2024, two African states (Mali and Niger) severed diplomatic relations with Ukraine, yet this setback did not halt Ukraine's efforts to expand its presence in Africa. Strengthening ties with

African countries has become one of Ukraine's strategies to counter Russian neocolonial influence and remove African states from Russian control. Figuratively, these processes of geopolitical confrontation can be described as the "battle for Africa."

Within a short time and under wartime conditions, Ukraine has managed to intensify contacts with individual African states. However, numerous internal and external factors continue to constrain the implementation of specific initiatives. The current historical moment is critically important for Ukraine to establish relations with African states in order to secure their support and develop broader partnerships with the Global South as a whole. It is obvious that in the case of African states, Ukraine needs to strengthen the pragmatic component of its arguments for cooperation rather than rely solely on appeals to values.

Over the past three years, Ukraine has established communication with several African states and expanded its diplomatic presence on the continent. Nevertheless, Ukrainian diplomatic missions in African states need to be reinforced with material and human resources, and the overall network of diplomatic institutions needs further growth. In most cases, Ukraine initiates efforts to intensify relations, while African states tend to adopt a more passive and observational stance.

The legal and regulatory framework of Ukraine-Africa relations also requires greater precision, shifting from declarations of intent to concrete agreements. Many signed intergovernmental documents have not yet been translated into practical projects. Concurrently, from the perspective of pragmatism and national interests, African states need a clear understanding of the tangible benefits of cooperation with Ukraine.

Ukraine's positions in the countries of the Global South, in particular Africa, remain unstable. Adoption of appropriate strategies, opening of new diplomatic missions, official visits, etc. will not change this situation quickly and fundamentally. Several factors hinder the transformation of Ukraine's cooperation with African states: the character of Ukraine's policy towards Africa in previous years; the interests of major non-democratic powers (Russia, China, first and foremost); and the stance of African political elites, who often prefer neutrality and adopt a pragmatic approach in choosing international partners, etc.

It is crucial to understand the problems that Ukraine faces in implementing the African vector of its foreign policy. Formally, Ukrainian-African contacts have intensified. A series of visits have been made, significant funds (which are noticeable for the state budget in the context of the war) have been invested

in expanding the network of diplomatic institutions, etc. However, there has been no visible increase in political support for Ukraine from African states. Even if Ukraine managed to enlist the support of an African state during the vote for one of the resolutions on the Ukrainian issue, this did not imply that this particular state would support Ukraine in other cases. In other words, this is situational support that dynamically changes under the influence of a system of factors at a specific historical moment. Under circumstances other than those in which Ukraine has been operating in recent years, the development of interstate cooperation would be seen as a gradual process, the results of which are not expected by the Ukrainian government in the shortest possible time, as required by the war situation. Nevertheless, in the context of a full-scale war, Ukraine's expectations are very high, and the issue of support in the war with Russia is extremely sensitive.

It should be borne in mind that not only the political, but also the economic influence of Ukraine on African states is currently limited. This does not mean, however, that there are no prospects, because the African continent as a market is rapidly growing both demographically and economically. Definitely, the success of Ukrainian-African relations in the long term depends on the transition from crisis diplomacy to systemic, mutually beneficial cooperation. It should cover both politics and the sphere of food security, as well as investments, innovations, cultural exchanges, and the development of interpersonal contacts. Only through such comprehensive efforts can Africa become a reliable partner for Ukraine in the international arena. There is an obvious need for a complex approach to the development of relations, clear investment projects and strategies for their implementation. At present, the African response to the idea of a Ukrainian-African renaissance in relations is mostly symbolic, and the concrete results are rather limited. Long-standing economic and investment projects, from which African leaders and the public will see long-term benefits, can contribute most to the development of sustainable relations with African countries. Certain initiatives are coming from Ukraine, for example, the creation of a hub for the production and transportation of fertilizers in cooperation with the Republic of South Africa, as well as energy projects. However, important is a real transition from initiatives and discussions to implementation and tangible results.

Thus, the major problems that hinder the establishment of stable cooperation between Ukraine and African states, as revealed in 2022–25, include:

(1) the absence of a tradition of sustainable cooperation between Ukraine and African states, and therefore insufficient understanding of each

other's problems and needs; (2) differences in political regimes, the nature of political culture, and politico-legal values; (3) limited financial capabilities of both Ukraine and most African states for expanding the network of diplomatic missions; (4) passivity or even disinterest of some African states in intensifying relations with Ukraine; (5) the absence of quality communication at various levels; (6) frequent internal political changes in many African states, as well as the Russian-Ukrainian war; (7) stagnation of democratic processes and the strengthening of pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian propaganda narratives in the information space of African states.

Therefore, Ukraine faces the difficult task of countering an entire system of factors that hinder cooperation with African states while seeking to change their neutral stance toward a pro-Ukrainian position. Since the policies of many African states often rest on pragmatic rather than value-based considerations, Ukraine can adopt an effective strategy by demonstrating to African partners the concrete benefits of developing relations with Ukraine.

Disclosure Statement

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REVIEW

Kara, Siddharth. 2023. *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 274 pp. ISBN 978-1-250-32407-8

Anum Khan[a]

The reflection of the sky in the ocean bestows a serene cerulean hue, reminiscent of the coveted cobalt shade once revered by both the Persian Empire and the Ming Dynasty for its illustrious use in art and pottery. Over the course of the 21st century, society has traversed a vast path in recognising the pivotal role of cobalt, a mineral now indispensable in myriad aspects of our lives. Cobalt stands as a ubiquitous mineral, serving as a fundamental component in lithium-ion rechargeable batteries that power a plethora of devices, ranging from smartphones and tablets to laptops and electric vehicles. The significance of this mineral extends beyond its role in batteries; it plays a critical part in various industrial applications. Today, cobalt finds itself essential not only in lithium-ion batteries but also in electric propulsion systems for ships and in the production of superalloys utilised in the manufacturing of jet engines, gas turbines, and magnetic steel. Above this foundational usage lies a realm of gleaming innovation embodied by electric vehicles championed by technology giants such as Tesla, Rivian, Renault, and Volvo. However, beneath this surface of prosperity lies the stark reality of the cobalt industry, particularly in regions like the Congo, where the supply chain originates from copper mines. These mines represent a world unto themselves, where despair looms large. Here, the lives of men, women, and children are burdened by meagre daily wages and human rights violations. In this context, the colour of cobalt shifts from serene blue to a haunting red on the palette of human suffering.

The book *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives* by Siddharth Kara, published in 2023, is the first of its kind exposé of the cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where approximately 75 per cent of the world's cobalt supply is mined in grotesquely inhuman conditions. This first-hand testimony of life in the mines is painted in red, as the toll taken on both people and the environment is insurmountable.

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Kara is a Rights Lab Visiting Professor of Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery at the University of Nottingham. He previously served as a British Academy Global Professor with the Rights Lab. He is widely recognised as an author, researcher, and screenwriter, and, most notably, as an activist who has consistently examined and exposed the harsh realities of modern slavery worldwide. Kara's research travels across over fifty countries have equipped him to undertake empathetic stocktaking exercises of societal wrongs such as child labour, sex trafficking, and modern slavery. *Cobalt Red* is, therefore, the result of his extensive exploration of 31 mining sites in the Katanga region in south-eastern Congo. His deft research aptly brings forth the grinding ordeal of the "artisanal" miners (p. 7) – those who are not officially employed by mining companies but undertake mining activities in a freelance capacity, often with rudimentary tools and even bare hands. The book was a Pulitzer Prize Finalist in General Nonfiction for 2024.[1]

Kasai and Katanga are the two mining and mineral-extracting regions of the country, with Kasai known for diamonds and Katanga for metals. The DRC is estimated to have $25 trillion worth of untapped minerals and ores, almost the same as the combined GDP of the U.S. and Europe. The book spans seven chapters and lays forth a dreadful picture of prominent mining sites in various provinces of Katanga, which have become both the literal and geographical periphery of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but far bleaker and more ravaged by the millions of hapless voices that surreptitiously depict the modern face of an atrocious Conradian world. The blistering profit-making intentions of foreign mining companies have cratered mines, where the people of the DRC pour day in and day out into inescapable servitude. Mining in Katanga is a profession with no alternative – if the people of Katanga want to survive, they have to dig.

The DRC is a violence-ridden space, embroiled in skirmishes since the Rwandan genocide of 1994. It has also famously hosted the First African World War and witnessed an attempt at secession by Katanga. Today, as it grapples with renewed tensions with Rwanda and sees the re-emergence of the M23 rebels, its mineral-rich zones are struggling with a hidden conflict where miners face "relative deprivation." This conceptual lens is broadly applicable across Africa, as it helps explain how individuals and groups experience discontent when they perceive a disparity between their existing conditions and their legitimate expectations or entitlements. Most African states infested with active armed conflicts jeopardise a major

1 https://www.pulitzer.org/finalists/siddharth-kara

section of their population, who experience threats to life, loss of livelihood, displacement, and harrowing survival choices. Cobalt mines reflect the dearth of governance and fragility of statehood in the DRC. In the book, Kara navigates his way to elusive cobalt mines by attaching a wrenching life experience to each visited site. Every chapter peels back a layer, unveiling a tale grievously told by some but experienced by many.

The book is structured across seven chapters, accompanied by an introduction that situates cobalt at different levels of the value chain, particularly highlighting its most opaque and problematic segments. The first two chapters – *Unspeakable Richness* and *Here It Is Better Not to Be Born* – focus on Lubumbashi, a major mining hub in the southeastern Haut-Katanga province, as well as Kipushi, a historic zinc–copper mining site. The third chapter, *The Hills Have Secrets*, shifts attention to the Likasi–Kambove area. Together, these chapters expose the excruciating mining practices and the entrenched Chinese dominance over operations. The fourth chapter, *Colony to the World*, revisits the historical trajectory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo – from slavery and colonial exploitation to the postcolonial period – arguing that despite its formal sovereignty, the country continues to function as a de facto colony within the global economic system. The final three chapters – *If We Do Not Dig, We Do Not Eat*, *We Work in Our Graves*, and *The Final Truth* – lay bare the harsh realities of mining life, revealing a system structurally aligned with broader economic interests at the expense of miners' welfare.

This structural progression is complemented by a detailed, ground-level account of how cobalt actually moves through this system, beginning in the mineral-rich Katanga region, which holds more cobalt reserves than the rest of the world combined and thus constitutes the first link in the global supply chain. In practice, heterogenite – the cobalt-bearing ore – is extracted by *creuseurs* ("diggers"), artisanal miners who operate informally under hazardous conditions, often without safety equipment or adequate compensation. Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) plays a critical role in sustaining the formal mining industry in the Congo, with much of the labour performed by these miners. They extract ore-bearing rocks, transport them in raffia sacks, and sell them to *négociants* (traders) and *comptoirs* (depots), also known as *maisons d'achat* (buying houses), which together form an informal commercial ecosystem facilitating trade. From there, the ore enters the formal supply chain, passing through processors or concentrators, then to commercial-grade refiners, and ultimately reaching battery manufacturers. This detailed mapping of cobalt's journey

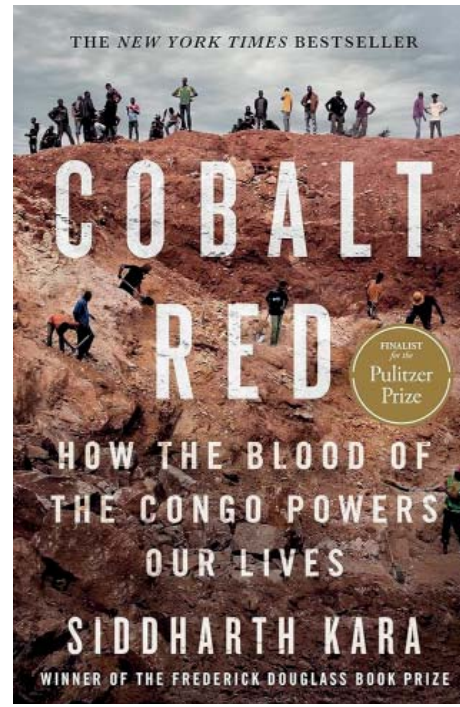
is particularly well documented in the first chapter, *Unspeakable Richness*, which also begins to uncover the broader patterns of exploitation across the Haut-Katanga and Lualaba mining provinces.

The book, in its exhaustive attempt to cover each aspect of the cobalt trade out of Katanga, presents a few contrasting images. Firstly, the tech barons are prostrate about the ethical and responsible sourcing of minerals. Secondly, there is the gruesome state of industrial mines, where tragedies are abundant and tunnels run deep, militias guard the mining process, and toxic effluents from primary refining units run into dwindling water bodies, thus degrading the environment. Thirdly, China's stronghold in the cobalt mining industry is portrayed since the imposition of the Mining Code on the DRC in 2002. In 2009, Joseph Kabila brokered a deal with the Chinese government to render development projects to the country in return for mining concessions. Apart from mining activities, China also leads the cobalt processing chain. When analysing China's broader Indian Ocean aspirations, its port diplomacy has an essential underpinning. For example, the semi-refined form of cobalt is transported by China Molybdenum Co. to the ports of Dar es Salaam, Durban, and various small ports of Mozambique before being shipped to Hainan. Today, Chinese companies own 15 out of 19 primary industrial copper-cobalt mining concessions. Fourthly, the book portrays a passive presence of Artisanal Mining Cooperatives and model mining sites such as the CHEMAF Model Site and Congo DongFang Mining (CDM) Model Site, extensively covered in chapter six, *We Work in Our Graves*, where the so-called formalised mining ventures shroud grievous mining situations with a few amenities.

Though Kara's painstaking efforts are worth acknowledging in building this book and bringing attention to child labour, subhuman working conditions, insufficient wages, and severe injuries that often take lives or result in lifelong impairments for the miners, the biggest contribution of the book is the meticulous assessment of the situation on the ground within and underneath the mines. Any analysis of conflict in Africa risks remaining superficial unless it is grounded in close, context-sensitive engagement. In this respect, Kara's field-based research is particularly valuable, as it foregrounds empirically rich narratives that capture the lived experiences of diverse actors within the mining sector of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). However, the book has limitations. While it serves the purpose of investigating modern slavery in the DRC, it fails to trace cobalt's various journeys out of the country. The recalibration of the land-based usage of cobalt against that of the ocean also seems to be

missed. Cobalt is yet to realise its full potential in the shipping industry, but mining and shipping are connected via their respective importance to steel. The usage of lithium-ion batteries in ships is still emerging and, at present, contributes toward reducing emissions, improving energy efficiency, enhancing safety, and enabling the integration of renewable energy sources, thus helping to formulate a more sustainable and environmentally friendly maritime industry.

Overall, *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives* by Siddharth Kara presents a deeply disturbing and eye-opening account of the cobalt mines in the DRC. It sheds light on the inhumane conditions, human rights violations, and modern slavery that prevail in these mines, where the lives of miners are sacrificed for the supply of cobalt that powers our modern devices and industries. The book is a significant contribution to the understanding of the dark side of global supply chains and the urgent need for responsible sourcing and ethical practices in the mining industry. Moreover, it remains true that artisanal mining is a precondition to cobalt mining, as the process helps in fetching the cobalt of the highest grade. Industries across sectors are part of international coalitions like the Responsible Minerals Initiative (RMI) and the Global Battery Alliance (GBA), which promote the responsible sourcing of minerals in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights. However, during his research, Kara failed to see any action from these coalitions on the ground. Tech giants that fully benefit from the stable properties of cobalt, and sectors like shipping and aviation that are likely to reap the upcoming advantages of cobalt, need to make these coalitions impactful and result-oriented.



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