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Full Length Research

Beyond Westphalia: Decolonising African Political Thought

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Abstract

This article offers a rigorous critique of the Eurocentric underpinnings of mainstream International Relations theory and exposes their profound inadequacy for grasping African political realities. I argue that the Westphalian narrative – long the organizing schema of IR – operates as a form of intellectual imperialism that systematically marginalises African perspectives. Drawing on interdisciplinary evidence and a grounded case study, the paper shows how this hegemonic pedigree has produced conceptual lacunae in how we understand statehood, sovereignty, and the distribution of power across the African continent. Decolonisation, the argument proceeds, was never only a question of political emancipation; it has always been an ongoing struggle for epistemic liberation from European analytical frames. Through a careful examination of Nigeria's educational structures and the institutional emergence of African Studies, I point to viable pathways for recentring African epistemologies within global political thought. The concluding plea is for theoretical pluralism in political philosophy so that analysis of African political life becomes more accurate, inclusive, and respectful of historical specificity.

Keywords: Decolonisation, African political thought, Westphalian sovereignty, Intellectual imperialism, Global International Relations, Epistemic pluralism

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1. Introduction

Political philosophy and the study of international relations have, for centuries, been shaped by what is often called the "Westphalian narrative" – a European-derived schema that elevates the territorially bounded nation-state to the primary actor in world politics and thereby secures a Eurocentric hegemony in theoretical practice. Rooted historically in the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, this dominant paradigm has routinely marginalized non-European experiences, forcing African political realities into ill-fitting Western templates. The result is a proliferation of hybrid political formations whose unique problems are frequently overlooked or misinterpreted by prevailing neoliberal, neorealist, and structural accounts.

These theoretical deficits become especially pronounced in Africa, where pre-colonial institutions, colonial interventions, and post-independence trajectories yield political forms that resist easy assimilation into Western theory. As Craig Murphy (2001) observes, despite Africa comprising more than a quarter of the world's nation-states, "fewer than one in a hundred university lectures on International Relations given in Europe or North America even mention the continent," a statistic that reveals a deeper disciplinary lacuna and reflects a long history of European intellectual dominance that perpetuated myths of African inferiority. This paper contends that the Westphalian framework lacks the conceptual instruments required to illuminate contemporary African political life. It

proceeds in five parts: first, an account of the architecture of intellectual imperialism in political theory; second, an interrogation of the problematic inheritance of Westphalian sovereignty in Africa; third, a survey of African intellectual resistance; fourth, a focused case study of the Nigerian educational system as a field of ideological contestation; and fifth, a set of proposals for cultivating authentic African political thought.

This article is guided by a central question: *To what extent does the Westphalian conception of sovereignty and statehood obscure, distort, or inadequately capture the historical and contemporary political realities of African societies?* In addressing this question, the paper adopts a critical-theoretical orientation informed by decolonial thought. Rather than testing a hypothesis in the positivist sense, it undertakes a normative and interpretive critique of dominant International Relations (IR) paradigms, interrogating the epistemic assumptions that structure them. The objective is not merely to expose theoretical limitations but to contribute constructively to the development of a pluralized and contextually grounded political philosophy capable of accommodating African historical experience.

2. Methodological Orientation

This study employs a qualitative, critical-interpretive methodology combining conceptual analysis, historical reconstruction, and documentary examination. First, it undertakes a genealogical critique of the Westphalian paradigm – tracing its historical emergence in the aftermath of the Peace of Westphalia and examining how its conceptual architecture became universalized within international relations theory.

Second, the article draws upon interdisciplinary sources in political philosophy, intellectual history, and African studies to reconstruct the epistemic dimensions of colonial domination. This dimension of the study is primarily analytical and normative, engaging canonical and decolonial thinkers in order to expose embedded Eurocentric assumptions.

Third, the paper presents a focused case study of Nigeria's university curriculum in international relations. Nigeria was selected due to its demographic, political, and institutional prominence within Africa and its influential higher-education regulatory structure. The analysis of the National Universities Commission's Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) is conducted through qualitative content review, examining course distribution, thematic emphasis, and epistemic orientation. While illustrative rather than statistically exhaustive, the case study provides concrete institutional evidence of broader epistemic patterns identified in the theoretical sections.

The methodological aim, therefore, is explanatory and normative rather than predictive: to illuminate structural patterns of intellectual dependence and to propose pathways toward epistemic reform.

3. The Architecture of Intellectual Imperialism in Political Theory

Intellectual imperialism constitutes a subtler yet no less coercive plane of colonial domination: it is the predisposition of dominant scholarly communities to ignore, exclude, or denigrate alternative theories, methodologies, and epistemic traditions (Jussim, 2002). Operating in concert with overt political and economic forms of subjugation, this intellectual dimension produces a tripartite oppression of exploitation, cultural domination, and epistemic rationalisation. In Africa, that has meant the systematic suppression of indigenous knowledge systems and the imposition of European theoretical frames that frequently bear little relation to local realities.

This epistemic subordination has deep historical roots in the colonial period, when European powers actively discredited African systems of thought. The notorious claim by Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (1963) – that Africa had no history prior to European contact – encapsulates an ideological project that constructed the continent as a void, a pretext useful for legitimising imperial domination. Such pronouncements were not neutral academic opinions but active instruments in a broader narrative that sought to deny Africa its past and thereby rationalise European rule (Fage, 1981).

The enduring consequences of this intellectual colonisation are visible within African universities, which remain among the most persistent colonial institutions on the continent. Although political independence dismantled imperial administrations, many higher-education institutions remained institutionally and curricularly dependent on European models, thereby reproducing neo-colonial hierarchies within academic structures (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The curricular architecture of disciplines such as International Relations – exemplified by instruments like the National Universities Commission's Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards in Nigeria – reveals that the majority of prescribed courses remain anchored in Eurocentric traditions while only a small proportion engages directly with African experience.

4. Westphalian Sovereignty and the African State: A Problematic Inheritance

The model of statehood inherited by Africa at independence was premised on Westphalian assumptions – territorial integrity, sovereign equality, and the norm of non-intervention. Yet when that model was grafted onto African political terrains shaped by distinct historical practices, tensions emerged almost immediately. The Westphalian template, designed for the historical evolution of European polities, often proves discordant when applied to the continent's variegated political formations.

Precolonial African polities exhibited remarkable

diversity, ranging from centralized monarchies and empires to acephalous, kinship-based societies, and were characterized by institutional flexibility, reciprocal governance relations, and conflict resolution mechanisms that did not always correspond to the rigid territorial logic of the modern state (Dunn & Englebert, 2019). Colonial cartography compounded the dissonance by drawing artificial boundaries that cleaved ethnic, linguistic, and cultural communities, producing what scholars have aptly described as arbitrary territoriality. This mismatch between imposed borders and social realities has continued to shape political contestation across the continent.

In the postindependence era African leaders have struggled to reconcile Western models of statehood with indigenous political traditions. The hybrid systems that resulted present a series of "exotic" theoretical challenges, questions of identity, belonging, and legitimacy, that elude neat capture by state centric International Relations theory and demand conceptual apparatuses capable of accommodating multiple loci of authority and allegiance.

5. African Responses and Intellectual Resistance

Countervailing the hegemony of Eurocentric theory, African scholars and intellectuals have long engaged in robust modes of resistance aimed at reclaiming indigenous epistemologies and fashioning conceptual frameworks attuned to African realities. This resistance is diverse in form: decolonising scholarly production, revitalising indigenous political philosophies, and creating analytical categories that place African experiences at the centre of inquiry.

A decisive expression of this resistance is the rise and institutionalisation of African Studies as a discipline. By validating non-literate sources – oral traditions, material culture, and local archives – and by deploying interdisciplinary methods drawn from history, archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and art history, African Studies radically challenged earlier Eurocentric assumptions and enriched global historical methodology. The disciplinary emergence of African Studies was intimately linked with political struggles for independence and can be read as the intellectual arm of broader liberation projects.

Beyond academia, movements such as Négritude and Pan-Africanism animated popular and elite debates by repudiating European civilisational claims and affirming African cultural and philosophical worth. For many political thinkers, the fight against colonialism and racial subjugation were inseparable struggles that required coordinated continental responses. The intellectual currents of the mid-twentieth century were not merely theoretical exercises; they furnished the normative, political, and even material resources that sustained anti-colonial and decolonial mobilisations.

6. The Nigerian Educational System as a Site of Ideological Struggle

Nigeria's educational architecture furnishes a revealing specimen of how Eurocentric frameworks persist institutionally. The National Universities Commission (NUC) (2007) defines minimum academic standards for university programmes, and a close reading of the NUC's Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards for International Relations demonstrates the curriculum's marked Eurocentrism.

Of the forty-five courses prescribed for International Relations undergraduates, only six—coded IRS103 (Introduction to African Politics), IRS308, IRS309, IRS402, IRS409, and IRS411—explicitly attend to African experiences and perspectives. The overwhelming majority remain oriented toward European history, Western political thought, and Eurocentric IR theories. This pattern amounts to a pedagogical reproduction of intellectual imperialism: successive cohorts of students are socialised into Western analytical languages while receiving scant formal exposure to indigenous political thought or locally rooted theoretical alternatives.

The implications of such curricular design extend far beyond the academy. By privileging Western political models and marginalising African intellectual traditions, the educational system produces professionals and policymakers who may lack conceptually appropriate tools for addressing local challenges – what amounts to conceptual dependency. Language reinforces this dependency: European tongues remain the shibboleths of prestige while African languages are frequently relegated to the status of vernacular, further widening the gap between formal education and indigenous knowledge (Mazrui, 2002).

While the numerical distribution of courses provides a preliminary indicator of epistemic imbalance, the issue extends beyond mere quantity. A closer examination of course descriptions reveals that even where African politics is addressed, it is frequently framed through externally derived theoretical lenses. Core courses in classical realism, liberal institutionalism, and structuralism dominate the foundational stages of training, while African political thought is often introduced as a supplementary or specialized topic rather than as a constitutive dimension of theory-building.

This structural sequencing is pedagogically significant. Students are first socialized into Western conceptual vocabularies and only subsequently exposed to African perspectives, thereby reinforcing the implicit hierarchy of theoretical legitimacy. The effect is not the absence of Africa in the curriculum but its epistemic subordination.

A more transformative curricular reform would require not only increasing the number of Africa-focused courses but also reconfiguring theoretical foundations themselves – integrating African political philosophies into introductory theory courses and positioning them as co-equal interlocutors in global debates.

7. Pathways Toward Authentic African Political Thought

The construction of genuinely African political thought need not entail an absolutist rejection of Western theory nor an uncritical romanticisation of pre-colonial forms. Rather, it requires a careful, critical synthesis: an engagement with multiple intellectual lineages that privileges African historical experience while remaining open to useful theoretical insights from elsewhere. Theory must be both contextually grounded – rooted in the social and historical conditions that produce political phenomena – and cognisant of the contemporary world's interconnectedness.

A first imperative is the systematic recovery and critical interrogation of indigenous African political philosophies and governance practices. Mid-twentieth-century African thinkers advanced sophisticated responses to colonialism and racial injustice; contemporary scholars should build upon those foundations. For example, revisiting local conceptual resources – such as Igbo ideas of egalitarianism and communal solidarity – may yield alternative conceptual vocabularies for discussing legitimacy, redistribution, and social accountability. Such recovery must be historically nuanced: tracing the transformation of indigenous philosophies under the pressures of Western culture, capitalism, Christianity, and the persistence of patrimonial tendencies in politics.

Second, educational reform is indispensable. Moving beyond the "continuous dependence of African universities on European structures" calls for more than additive curricular interventions; it entails rethinking pedagogical foundations and epistemological commitments (Walter, 2012). Epistemic pluralism – an institutional commitment to multiple ways of knowing – should be the organizing principle. Decolonisation of the academy requires creating curricular space for African languages, oral forms of scholarship, community-engaged research, and methodologies that valorise local knowledge while maintaining rigorous standards of evidence and argumentation.

It is important to clarify that epistemic pluralism does not entail relativism or the abandonment of shared standards of intellectual rigor. Rather, it calls for expanding the range of legitimate sources, concepts, and historical experiences that inform theoretical reflection. Critical engagement, evidentiary discipline, and argumentative coherence remain indispensable. What changes is not the commitment to rigor, but the scope of voices permitted to participate in defining theoretical horizons.

Recent developments within Global International Relations, often referred to as Global IR, scholarship further underscore the urgency of this project. Contemporary scholars have called for moving beyond parochial universalism toward a genuinely dialogical discipline in which multiple civilizational experiences inform theoretical construction. The present argument aligns with these efforts but insists that inclusion alone is insufficient. The task is not merely representational diversity but epistemic restructuring that is, questioning the foundational assumptions that define what counts as theory in the first place.

In this respect, decolonizing African political thought contributes not only to African scholarship but also to the renewal of political philosophy as a global enterprise. A discipline that marginalizes a continent comprising over a quarter of the world's states inevitably impoverishes itself.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that the prevailing Westphalian narrative within political philosophy and International Relations fails to provide adequate conceptual tools for apprehending African political realities. Its Eurocentric assumptions operate as intellectual imperialism, displacing African experiences and constraining the discipline's capacity to theorise the continent's political life. Decolonising African political thought is not a parochial project; it is an intellectual necessity for crafting frameworks that both illuminate Africa's specificities and speak to global political questions.

Progress requires a sustained programme of recovery – excavating pre-colonial political philosophies, critically reappraising anti-colonial thought, and nurturing contemporary theorisation rooted in African experience. It also calls for substantive pedagogical reform, the cultivation of epistemic pluralism, and institutional transformations that reduce the dependency of African universities on inherited European configurations. A political thought that is robust, inclusive, and applicable to African realities must be anchored in the histories, cultures, and social dynamics of the continent itself, even as it engages in constructive dialogue with global theory.

Ultimately, the critique of Westphalian universalism is not an argument for parochialism but for theoretical honesty. Concepts such as sovereignty, legitimacy, and statehood are neither culturally neutral nor historically innocent. If political philosophy is to remain intellectually credible in the twenty-first century, it must reckon seriously with the plurality of historical experiences that constitute the modern world. Decolonizing African political thought is therefore not a regional corrective; it is a necessary step in reconstructing international relations as a genuinely global discipline.

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