CHAPTER 3

Addressing Ethnic Diversity: Pragmatic Approaches for Fostering Inclusive Dialogue and Voice Amplification within the African Union

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Introduction

In this chapter, the intricate problem of ethnic diversity within the African Union (AU) – with an emphasis on workable strategies to promote inclusive discourse and elevate voices from a range of ethnic backgrounds – is examined. Although there is a great deal of cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity on the African continent, these differences can cause problems with social cohesion, representation and government. These ethnocentric perspectives inform the Western-centric perspectives through which the Western complexities of the binaries are shaped. The West exploits the ethnocentric perspectives to enable Western countries to shape how they locate Africa in relation to Africa's desire to locate itself in the power shifts and fixes within the Global South. An ethnically disintegrated group is easier to penetrate than a coherent one.

The overview starts out by placing ethnic diversity in the AU into context and recognising the historical influences, colonial legacies and current processes that define ethnic relations on the continent. The section highlights how important it is for the AU to embrace variety as a source of strength rather than as a source of divisiveness.

This chapter emphasises how important it is to comprehend and deal with ethnic diversity in a way that promotes inclusivity and gives voice to underrepresented groups within the AU framework.

The narrative begins by recognising the diverse range of cultures,

languages and ethnic groups that make up the African continent and stressing the value of embracing difference as a strength rather than a cause for conflict. The researcher recognises the difficulties and complexities that come with leading a diverse community by identifying the historical, sociocultural and political elements that have shaped ethnic relations within the AU, a continental body that is ethnically fragmented and lacks a unified agency in the Global South platform.

The overview also presents achievable strategies for resolving issues stemming from ethnic diversity within the AU, with an emphasis on promoting inclusive discourse and elevating the voices of various ethnic groups. One of these strategies is to create forums for inclusive discourse where representatives of various ethnic groups can convene to exchange grievances, goals and concerns. The overview also emphasises the significance of media techniques, capacity-building programmes and cultural exchange programmes in fostering empathy, deference and representation for minority ethnic groups inside the AU.

In the end, this chapter promotes an all-encompassing and comprehensive strategy for resolving ethnic difference within the AU, stressing the value of communication, inclusion and social cohesion in creating a more resilient and inclusive continent. Within the framework of the AU, the chapter seeks to promote social justice, peace and sustainable development via research grounded in evidence and practical solutions.

Objectives

This chapter aims to explore pragmatic approaches for fostering inclusive dialogue and amplifying diverse voices within the AU. The specific objectives are:

1. To analyse the historical, sociocultural and political factors influencing ethnic diversity within the AU and their impact on governance and representation.
2. To examine the challenges and opportunities associated with ethnic diversity in the AU and its member states.
3. To propose inclusive dialogue mechanisms that can facilitate

constructive engagement among diverse ethnic groups within AU frameworks.

4. To evaluate the role of media, cultural exchange programmes and capacity-building initiatives in promoting representation, empathy and social cohesion among ethnic communities.
5. To provide policy recommendations for the AU to enhance inclusivity, equitable representation and sustainable development through ethnic diversity management.

Scope

This chapter focuses on ethnic diversity within the institutional framework of the AU and its broader impact on governance, representation and social cohesion. It examines how ethnic diversity shapes political and social structures across AU member states, with particular emphasis on regions where ethnic diversity has significantly influenced governance and policy-making. By analysing ethnic relations within the AU, the chapter seeks to highlight both the challenges and opportunities associated with fostering inclusivity in a multi-ethnic context. A key area of focus is the historical legacies, sociocultural dynamics and political structures that have shaped ethnic relations within the AU. The chapter explores how colonial histories, post-independence governance models and contemporary political developments have influenced ethnic representation and participation. It also examines the role of policy interventions, dialogue mechanisms and media strategies in fostering inclusivity and mitigating ethnic tensions. By assessing the effectiveness of these strategies, the chapter aims to provide insights into how the AU can strengthen its institutional capacity for managing ethnic diversity.

Additionally, the chapter takes into account both historical and contemporary perspectives, analysing past challenges and presenting efforts while proposing future strategies for improving ethnic inclusivity within AU governance structures. Special attention is given to how inclusive dialogue platforms, capacity-building programmes and cultural exchange initiatives can enhance representation and participation among diverse ethnic groups. While the primary focus remains on the AU as a

continental body, the chapter also considers how individual member states implement policies related to ethnic inclusivity within national and regional frameworks. This comparative approach allows for a better understanding of best practices and potential lessons that can be applied across different contexts to promote social cohesion and equitable representation within the AU.

A glimpse of cultural divergences, languages and ethnic groups that make up the African continent

Africa is a continent rich in heritage, culture and traditions, making it one of the most diverse places on earth. Home to more than 1.3 billion people, Africa comprises nearly 3 000 tribes, each with its own distinct cultural identity. These tribes are often classified based on similarities and differences in their traditions, languages and ethnic composition. The African cultural landscape is shaped by historical influences, geographical variations and sociopolitical structures that have evolved over centuries (Reid 2020). The diversity found in Africa is not just a reflection of its people but also of the environmental and historical factors that have shaped their ways of life. Despite the differences in culture, language and ethnicity, Africa's diversity is a source of strength and should not be viewed as a barrier to development. Instead, it presents an opportunity for socioeconomic growth and political advancement across the continent, particularly through the AU's initiatives aimed at fostering unity while respecting diversity.

Cultural diversities

The concept of 'culture' is central to understanding African societies. 'Culture' is broadly defined as the way of life of a people, encompassing their beliefs, values, customs, traditions, laws, religion and artistic expressions. Africa's cultural landscape is incredibly diverse, with variations existing not only between different countries but also within the same nation (Reid 2020). For example, Nigeria alone is home to over 250 ethnic groups, each with its own language, traditions and

social norms. Similarly, Ethiopia boasts a rich ethnic composition, with groups such as the Amhara, Oromo and Tigray each contributing unique cultural elements to the nation's identity. This cultural diversity is not only reflected in everyday social interactions but also in governance, economic structures and artistic expressions. African cultures manifest in various forms, from traditional dances and music to religious beliefs and family structures. These cultural elements serve as symbols of identity and belonging for many communities across the continent. Cultural practices such as music, dance and art serve as vital expressions of African identity. Traditional African music is deeply rooted in oral traditions, with drums, string instruments and wind instruments playing a central role in various ceremonies and celebrations. According to Van Pinxteren (2019), each ethnic group has its own unique musical styles and dance forms, reflecting the values and experiences of their people. In West Africa, for example, the djembe drum is widely used in cultural performances, while in Southern Africa, the marimba and mbira are commonly played. Art, including sculpture, beadwork and textile design, is also an essential aspect of African culture. Many African artists incorporate indigenous themes and symbols in their work, preserving cultural heritage while also embracing modern influences.

Language

Language is one of the most striking markers of Africa's diversity. The continent is home to more than 2 000 languages, making it the most linguistically diverse region in the world. Linguistic diversity in Africa is shaped by historical migrations, trade interactions, colonial influences and indigenous developments. The main linguistic groups in Africa include the Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo (commonly referred to as Bantu), Nilo-Saharan, and Khoisan language families. These linguistic classifications are based on common grammatical structures, vocabulary and historical origins. The Niger-Congo language family, for instance, is one of the largest in the world, with languages such as Swahili, Yoruba, Igbo, Zulu and Kikuyu spoken by millions of people across different regions. Swahili, which is widely spoken in East Africa,

serves as a unifying language, bridging communication gaps between diverse ethnic groups. Similarly, Hausa is a major lingua franca in West Africa, facilitating trade and social interactions across different ethnicities (Robinson 2017).

The Bantu-speaking peoples, who belong to the Niger-Congo language family, are spread across Central, Southern and East Africa. The Kikuyu and Kamba people of Kenya, the Tswana of Botswana and South Africa, and the Kongo people of Congo share linguistic similarities despite being geographically dispersed. This linguistic connection suggests historical interactions and migrations that have influenced cultural and social exchanges. The Afro-Asiatic language family, on the other hand, is predominant in North Africa and parts of the Horn of Africa, including languages such as Arabic, Amharic, Berber and Somali. Arabic, as a dominant language in North Africa, has played a significant role in shaping cultural and religious practices in countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Algeria and Morocco. Meanwhile, the Nilo-Saharan language family, spoken by communities in the Nile Valley and parts of East and Central Africa, includes languages such as Luo, Maasai and Kanuri. The Khoisan language family, known for its unique click sounds, is primarily spoken by indigenous communities in Namibia, Botswana and South Africa.

Ethnic diversity

Ethnic diversity in Africa is deeply intertwined with historical, social and economic structures. Ethnic identity plays a significant role in shaping governance, political affiliations and resource distribution within many African nations. In some cases, ethnic diversity has contributed to social cohesion, fostering cultural exchange and economic cooperation. However, ethnic divisions have also been a source of political conflict, particularly in cases where competition for power and resources has fuelled tensions. The Rwanda Genocide of 1994, for example, remains one of the most tragic instances where ethnic divisions led to large-scale violence. Similarly, ethnic tensions in countries such as Sudan, Nigeria and Ethiopia have influenced political stability and governance (Robinson

2017). Despite these challenges, many African nations are actively working towards fostering inclusivity and national unity by promoting policies that encourage cultural coexistence and equitable representation.

Religion

Religion is another crucial element of Africa's cultural diversity. The continent is home to a variety of religious beliefs, including traditional African spirituality, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Indigenous African religions, which predate the introduction of foreign faiths, are still practised in many communities and often coexist with Christianity and Islam. These traditional belief systems are characterised by ancestor worship, rituals and a strong connection to nature and spirituality. Christianity and Islam were introduced to Africa through trade, migration and colonial influences, and they have since become dominant religions in many regions. North Africa is predominantly Muslim, while Christianity has a strong presence in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. Despite religious differences, Africa has a long history of religious tolerance, with many communities practising interfaith dialogue and coexistence.

Despite its vast diversity, Africa continues to strive for unity through regional and continental initiatives such as the AU, which has played a critical role in promoting Pan-Africanism, encouraging cooperation among African nations while respecting their unique cultural identities. Organisations such as the African Cultural Fund and the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organisation (UNESCO) have also contributed to the preservation and promotion of Africa's cultural heritage. Efforts to document indigenous languages, protect endangered traditions and promote cultural tourism are essential in ensuring that Africa's rich heritage is preserved for future generations.

In conclusion, Africa's cultural divergences, languages and ethnic compositions make it one of the most diverse continents in the world. This diversity, rather than being a challenge, presents an opportunity for growth, development and unity. The interconnection between culture, language ethnicity and religious affiliation highlights the importance of

inclusivity and mutual respect in fostering social cohesion. While historical and political challenges have at times created divisions, Africa's resilience lies in its ability to embrace diversity as a source of strength. Through policies that promote cultural understanding, linguistic preservation and interethnic cooperation, Africa can harness its rich heritage to drive sustainable development and political stability across the continent.

Distribution of linguistic and ethnic groups in Africa.

The main linguistic groups found in the Central African region are the Niger-Congo, *Bantu*s and the Nilo-Saharan Pygmy ethnic groups. The Niger-Congo Bantus are the Baka, Chewa, Chokwe and Kongo ethnicities (Van Pinxteren 2019). They are found in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Western *Central African Republic*, Northwest *Congo*, *Botswana*, Malawi, Mozambique, *Namibia*, *Tanzania*, *Zambia and Zimbabwe*. The Nilo-Saharan Pygmy tribes found in the Central Africa region are the Aka and Efe tribes, who are found in the *Ituri Rainforest* of *Congo*.

The East Africa region is mainly populated by the Nilotic and Bantu tribes. The Nilotic groups are believed to have migrated from South Sudan and settled along the Nile River and lake and highland regions of East Africa. Some of the Nilotic groups includes the Alur, Kalenjin, Teso and Karamojong people of Uganda, Turkana and the Maasai, who occupy some parts of Tanzania and Kenya. The Bantus of East Africa are composed of the Kikuyu, Taita, Luhya, Baganda, Hutu, Tutsi and Makonde people of Tanzania.

The Afro-Asiatic Cushite people are the major ethnic group in the Horn of Africa region. They include the Afar people of Eritrea and Ethiopia, and the Agaw, Beja, Oromo, Soho, Somali and Sidama people of Egypt, Somalia and Sudan. The Afro-Asiatic, Semantic group is a minor ethnic group in the Horn of Africa region composed of the Gurage, Tigray and Tigre people found in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan.

The major ethnic groups found in North Africa are the Afro-Asiatic, Semantic and Berber groups and the Nilo-Saharan groups composed of the Dinkas Nubian people (Van Pinxteren 2019). The Egyptian Arabs are found in Egypt, while the Berbers are distributed across, Algeria, Libya

and Morocco. The Nubians and Dinkas live in Sudan and the north-eastern region of Africa.

Niger-Congo Bantus comprise the majority ethnic groups found in the southern part of Africa. They include the Awambo, Bemba, Ndebele, Shona, Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, Hererro and Venda people. The Khoisan ethnic group is composed of the KhoiKhoi and San people of South Africa. Indo-European people, also known as the Afrikaner ethnic group, are among the minority groups found in the southern part of Africa.

West Africa is a region characterised by multiple ethnic groups distributed across the region. Niger-Congo Bantus make up the highest number in the region. They include the Ashanti, Baka, Akan, Bambara and Benin people of Ghana and Nigeria, and the Fulani and Mandinka people. The Nilo-Saharan people include the Songhai and Igbo. Hausa and Creole ethnicities are also found in the West African countries of Chad, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Niger, Nigeria and Sudan.

Understanding colonial legacies and influences on Africa's inter-ethnic relations in precolonial Africa

The African continent has a long history related to the existence of legal and precolonial societies as linked to the numerous cultural and linguistic structures that were distributed across the region. In an African society, family is considered the basic social unit, and the extended family played a critical role in the development and organisation of political structures. Kiwanuka (1972) argues that in precolonial Africa a group of families connected through a common and unique ancestry and language formed a tribe. In most places across the region the tribes controlled the different territories or ethnic regions. Several anthropological and ethnographic studies posit that the African continent was composed of different cultural groups which co-existed peacefully while others warred over the territories. Precolonial Africa was a continent that was comprised of many large empires located across the continent (Taylor 2018). The continent was then sub-divided into what we identify as West, East, South and Central African regions composed of diverse ethnic groups

that distinguished themselves using a complex range of cultural, religious, economic and political worldviews. Therefore, most people need to understand that there is a diverse African origin that existed before colonialism in terms of religious, cultural and political arrangements.

Historical studies indicate that Ancient Egypt was the home of African civilisation during the precolonial era. Ancient Egyptians were ruled by monarchs who unified both the upper and lower parts of Egypt (Edgerton 1947). The Egyptian way of life is considered to be complex, as it composed farmers, hunters and builders. This mix is believed to have shaped ancient Egyptian civilisation. The Egyptian empire was a leading religious, cultural and economic factor that influenced the people of Northern Africa in the period around 3000 BCE. However, after existing for a long period of time, the Egyptian dynasty fell apart after being attacked by the Macedonian empire. This led to the emergence of the Mali empire, another significant precolonial society of West Africa.

The Mali empire existed between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and profoundly impacted and influenced the culture and religion in the north-west part of Africa (Alapo 2022). This was achieved through the spread of its beliefs, customs and language along the Niger River and other regions – thus the vast spread and growth of the Mali empire in the region. Trade was the origin of power across the Mali kingdom. Characterised by a decentralised system of governance, the empire enjoyed political stability and flourished thanks to the gold trading in the region. Mansa was the head of the monarchy and the key military and judicial authority of the kingdom. Alongside the Mali empire, there existed the Ghana and Songhai kingdoms in the western part of Africa. The two empires were among the most powerful kingdoms across the globe due to the availability of natural resources like gold, which played an important role in global trade. The Songhai empire dominated the greater Mauritania and southern parts of Mali. It was characterised as a strong military system of governance. The empire was headed by a tyrant who ruled according to a brutal and dictatorial system that saw any resistance to his rules lead to severe punishment or death. Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2020) indicate that the Ghana empire, also referred to as the Waghudu, was a powerful precolonial system located between Senegal and the Niger

Delta. The empire was an epicentre of trade between the Berbers (people of Northern Africa) and the Arabs. It grew and developed rapidly due to the gold and salt trade in the region.

In the southern parts of Africa, including what is now known as Zambia and Zimbabwe, precolonial societies and legacies existed among the people. The great Zimbabwe empire, also known as the Mutapa empire, was located in the areas of the Limpopo and Zambezi Rivers across the Shona region. During the precolonial era, the Mutapa empire was an elaborate civilisation which focused on exploiting the mineral wealth of the regions. The Zulu kingdom is another powerful empire of Southern Africa. It is characterised by a decentralised system of governance. The Zulu people are traditionally organised into small clans headed by chiefs who are guided by a senior chief. The chiefs are male and are tasked with solving disputes among the clan members. The Zulu kingdom is among the empires that still exist in modern Africa.

The precolonial communities in Africa interacted mostly through trade, migration, language, marriage, warfare and diplomacy. Before the arrival of Europeans, there existed around 10 000 states or societies which varied greatly in size, structure and civilisation (Young 2023). Precolonial societies and legacies on the African continent can be categorised as either centralised or decentralised systems, where the centralised societies were led by rulers or monarchs who oversaw the making and executing of laws, collection of taxes, and the development of communities through trade and agriculture. A deep analysis of societies indicates that the power possessed by the rulers varied between empires, with some emperors possessing more power while others acted a symbolic status. In the decentralised societies, like the Igbo of Nigeria, power was distributed across the community through the group system of governance. Local community elders governed with the help of the overall population. This was the case among the Agikuyu people of Kenya, Pygmy people of the Central African Republic and the Khoisan people of Southern Africa.

Therefore, it is evident that the African continent existed and was controlled by the indigenous inhabitants before the colonial era (Binns, Dixon and Nel 2012). As a continental people, Africans had a unique way of life and governance which was influenced by cultural practices such as

language, beliefs and economic activities. It is important to understand that most European settlers and explorers claimed that precolonial Africa was unsettled and lacked civilisation upon their arrival, which is a misguided argument.

Colonialism and the scramble for Africa

European colonisation of Africa began during the nineteenth century and ended in the mid-twentieth century. The nineteenth century in Europe was a period of rapid industrial development. This means that Europeans sought a source of raw materials, labour and markets for its finished products (Gilley 2018). Politics in Europe also led to the colonisation of Africa. During that era, nationalism was a key factor in Europe. This led to competition and war related to colonial expansion of European states in Africa. The scramble for Africa began in earnest at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, during which the European nations focused on accessing the key trade routes in Africa, especially along the Congo and Niger Basins. This was aimed at reducing the internal African trade that was prevalent in those areas. The Berlin Conference placed a ban on importing and selling firearms in Africa, as a way of ensuring the Europeans attained monopoly over the locals. After agreement was reached, the annexation and occupation of the African continent was achieved by the early 1900s, by which time about 90% of the African continent was under colonial rule. The European nations partitioned Africa into spheres in accordance to colonies, influence and other segments. It is important to note that the colonisers partitioned the African continent with limited information on the histories, ethnicities and geographical structure of its people.

Colonialists employed deceitful and underhanded powers in their territorial acquisition of Africa. They dealt preferentially with the local African leaders, using divide-and-rule tactics, direct rule and intimidation as ways to attain what they needed. The scramble for and partition of Africa during the Berlin Conference led to the adoption of the Berlin Act, which saw the colonialists design and develop regional maps as a way of eliminating competition among them. Due to a lack of critical knowledge about the African continent, the regional maps and partition focused solely on land

and resource allocation, without considering the spread of the continent's ethnic groups. The colonial borders ended up dividing people from the same ethnic groups across Africa. For example, in the Horn of Africa, the Somali people were split into British Somalia, French Somalia, Ethiopian Somalis and the Somali people of the northern part of Kenya.

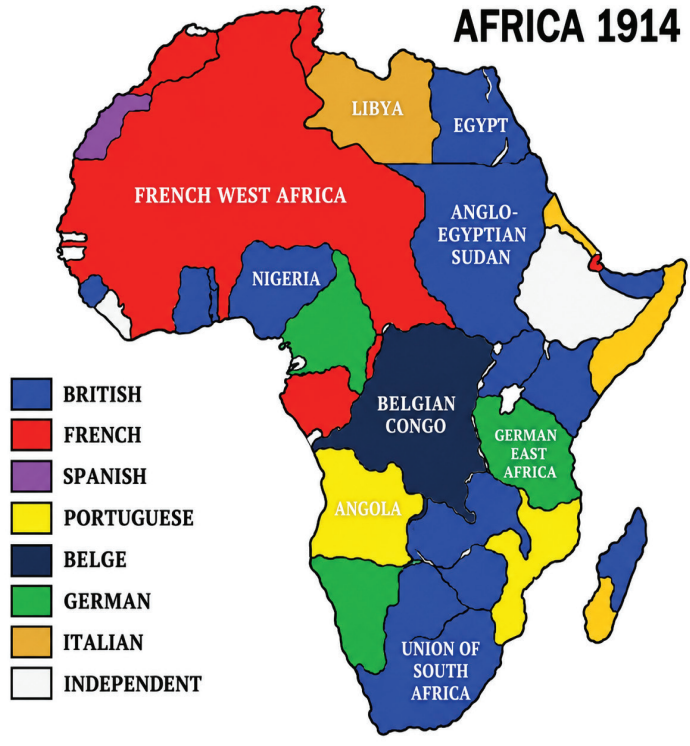


Figure 3.1: A political map of Africa in 1914.

Political legacies

Colonialism deeply impacted and influenced the political system of the people of Africa. The current political structures and borders are a direct reflection of European colonialism in Africa. The colonialism structure directly influenced African policies by getting rid of the

indigenous political institutions. A centralised and decentralised system of governance was practised across the continent. However, the introduction of colonialism hugely influenced political structures and societies by introducing slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism. This means that the modern African countries have a political system which is a remnant of the colonial systems.

Contemporary African states continue to suffer from the effects of colonialism. The political legacies of colonialism across Africa are associated with increased corruption and authoritarian and bureaucratic leadership systems. Exploiting resources across the continent was the key aim of colonialism. This means that the Europeans employed an undemocratic leadership system which imposed pungent measures as a way of attaining their targets. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the European economy was vast due to the rapid Industrial Revolution. This led to the introduction of imperialism between Africa and Europe. Parashar and Schulz (2021) state that imperialism was considered a postcolonial legacy of colonialism in Africa by the mid-twentieth century. After the struggle for independence by most African countries, the colonialists were forced to consider decolonisation. However, decolonisation led to the introduction of neocolonialism as a continuum of European colonisation.

Neocolonialism refers to the long-lasting impact or influence of colonialism in Africa. It operates in subtle ways, and most prominent African leaders, including Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, considered neocolonialism 'the worst form of imperialism' (Langan 2017). Neocolonialism has exposed most African states to exploitation, forcing people to continue suffering (John, Messina and Chukwuemeka 2023). The West continues to manipulate African countries through international control of the global markets, high-interest loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, foreign aid with attachments and humiliating conditions, use of the labour unions and movements to sow destabilisation, manipulation of the media, and domination of African economies through multinational corporations (Mkandawire and Soludo 2003). This has led to unequal development and underdevelopment of most

African countries (Tabi 2016). Moreover, neocolonialism shows its presence in some African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan, through the Western nations creating a state of inevitability and instability, thus leading to underdevelopment and exploitation of resources (Udegbunam 2020).

Colonial influence on Africa's inter-ethnic relationships

Ethnic divisions in Africa have been significantly shaped by the colonial system, which imposed artificial boundaries, disrupted traditional governance structures and fostered ethnic rivalries. The ethnic fragmentation witnessed across the continent today is largely a product of colonial-era policies that prioritised European interests over indigenous cohesion. Colonial rulers employed a divide-and-rule strategy, deliberately pitting ethnic groups against each other to maintain control. This approach created a lasting legacy of mistrust, conflict and political marginalisation, which persists in many African nations. The marginalisation and exclusion seen in postcolonial African political systems stem directly from the administrative structures established by European colonisers. These systems not only suppressed indigenous governance but also deepened ethnic divisions by favouring certain groups over others.

One of the most detrimental impacts of colonial rule was the erosion of Africa's social identity and traditional structures. Colonial powers implemented various governance models, such as direct rule, indirect rule, and assimilation, each of which altered the preexisting social fabric in different ways. Traditional leadership structures were often dismantled, and in their place colonial authorities appointed leaders who were loyal to European interests. This frequently resulted in ethnic conflicts, as those who collaborated with colonial rulers gained economic and political advantages, while those who resisted faced marginalisation. The long-term effect of this policy is evident in the contemporary African political landscape, which sees ethnic affiliations continue to dictate political alignments. Instead of fostering national unity, many post-independence African leaders have exploited ethnic divisions to advance their political ambitions. Politicians often mobilise support along ethnic lines, leading to

electoral violence, political instability and sustained inter-ethnic tensions (Fearon 2003).

A notable example of ethnic divisions rooted in colonial legacies is the case of Somalia and Sudan. In Somalia, colonial powers divided the Somali people among different territories, with portions of the population ending up in present-day Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya. This fragmentation has contributed to ongoing political instability and conflicts over territorial identity. Similarly, in Sudan, the British colonial administration reinforced ethnic and religious divisions by governing the northern and southern regions separately, fostering resentment and eventual civil war. Another example is the case of the Lou-Nuer people of South Sudan and the Jikany-Nuer people of Ethiopia. Although they share a common ethnic background, colonial-imposed borders have separated them into different nationalities, fuelling tensions and hostility between them. These examples demonstrate how colonial boundaries and policies continue to influence inter-ethnic relations in modern Africa, often leading to disputes over identity, land and political power.

The colonial education system also played a significant role in rein forcing ethnic and cultural divisions in Africa. Schools established by colonial administrations served as tools of oppression, deliberately alienating African children from their native cultures, languages and traditions. Students in colonial schools were often forbidden from speaking their mother tongues and were instead required to adopt European languages. This practice contributed to the erosion of indigenous languages and cultural heritage. In many African countries today, the colonial languages introduced during this period remain dominant, often at the expense of indigenous languages. For instance, English is the official language in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe, while French is widely spoken in countries such as Benin, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Rwanda and Senegal. Similarly, Portuguese remains the official language in Mozambique and Angola. While these languages have facilitated communication and governance in multi-ethnic nations, they have also contributed to the marginalisation of indigenous languages and cultural identities.

Beyond language, colonial policies also instilled a sense of inferiority

among African communities regarding their cultural heritage. Many indigenous customs, belief systems and governance practices were labelled 'backward' or 'uncivilised' by colonial authorities. This perception persists in some African societies today, with Western cultural norms often regarded as superior. The emphasis on Western education, attire and governance models has, in some cases, further distanced African people from their traditional ways of life. The erosion of indigenous knowledge systems has also contributed to a loss of cultural continuity and intergenerational identity.

Despite gaining independence, many African governments have struggled to dismantle the deeply entrenched colonial legacies that continue to shape ethnic relations. Fearon (2003) argues that, rather than addressing the root causes of inter-ethnic divisions, some African leaders have perpetuated colonial-era practices by favouring their ethnic groups in political appointments, resource allocation and economic opportunities. This has fuelled resentment among marginalised communities, leading to political instability and, in some cases, violent conflicts. The persistence of ethnic-based politics in Africa indicates that colonialism's impact on inter-ethnic relations was not merely a historical event but an ongoing challenge that requires deliberate efforts to overcome.

Efforts to address ethnic divisions in Africa must include policies that promote national unity while respecting cultural diversity. Governments should invest in inclusive governance structures that provide equal opportunities for all ethnic groups, regardless of their historical affiliations. Additionally, there should be initiatives to preserve and promote indigenous languages and cultural traditions to counteract the effects of colonial assimilation policies. The AU, regional organisations and national governments must collaborate to foster dialogue, reconciliation and policies that address historical grievances while building cohesive societies.

Therefore, colonial influence has had a lasting impact on Africa's inter-ethnic relationships, shaping the continent's political, social and cultural dynamics. The divide-and-rule strategy employed by colonial powers entrenched ethnic divisions, leading to conflicts that persist to this day. Colonial education systems further reinforced these divisions by

alienating African people from their indigenous languages and cultures. Post-independence African leaders have, in some cases, exacerbated these divisions for political gain, rather than working towards genuine unity. However, by acknowledging these colonial legacies and implementing inclusive policies, African nations can work towards a more cohesive and harmonious future. Addressing the historical injustices of colonialism requires a commitment to promoting cultural preservation, equitable governance and national unity across ethnic lines.

State of play in the African Union Commission

The African Union is a continental body composed of 55 Member States that make up the countries of the African continent. The primary role of the bloc is to promote unity and solidarity among the African states, and social-economic development of the member countries. The AU is tasked with the responsibility of attaining development through integration of the Member States with the international community. It focuses on enhancing socio-economic development of the continent through collaborative efforts geared towards alleviating poverty, tackling corruption and strengthening good political governance. This can be attained through enhancing the political process and civil governance – by promoting the democratic system as a way of enhancing transparency and accountability throughout the continent. However, the AU is faced with several challenges that undermine its ability to promote socio-economic development on the continent. Ethnic diversity is among the myriad challenges that still hinder the organisation's ability to attain its goals and objectives across the continent (Syed 2020). It is quite unfortunate that most African countries are faced with ethnicity issues such as ethnicity-based conflicts. Countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Somalia are still crippled by complex ethnicity-based conflicts, which rank among the complexities in balancing ethnic diversity in the AU. Ethnic diversity is an issue that combines with other factors, such as poverty, corruption, poor administration and governance, which weaken institutions such as the AU. It is vital to understand that ethnicity is a deep-rooted personal matter for Africans. Yet, it is a key issue

that must be addressed to solve several challenges facing the continent.

Ethnicity is an issue that is linked to instability and economic division in the AU. It is an issue that has hugely shaped the political status and conflicts in many African societies. The complexities inherent in balancing ethnic diversities in the continent have been known to overshadow the role of ethnicity in developing nationalism in Africa. Since the late twentieth century, conflicts and instabilities in Africa have been linked with the ethnic divisions that exist among the political systems among the AU Member States (Comaroff and Stern 1995). In most African countries, the political elite are known to gather either positive or negative ethnicity as a way of staying in power and maintaining their political status. Therefore, successful integration of the different ethnic groups is a key challenge for most of the AU Member States. Currently, the AU struggles with integrating the different ethnic groups found in a country into one common unit – a process also known as developing a national identity. The prevalent ethnic conflicts, such as those in the DRC and Somalia, have become a salient destabilising force, creating several complexities in balancing ethnic diversities in the AU (Posner 2005). Moreover, ethnic conflicts can lead to internal conflicts within a country, or to cross-border conflicts like that between Ethiopia and South Sudan.

Geography is a key aspect associated with creating complexities in balancing ethnic diversities in Africa. Foucher (2019) argues that the current African map and its geography are strongly associated with the continent's colonial past. Geographical structure is a factor linked with the current political power within the continent. In Africa, geography is the foundation of power or the different Member States of the AU. During the scramble for Africa, the colonisers divided the continent into West, North, East, Central and South. This division is associated with the exacerbation of ethnic differences among Africa's people (Gilley 2018). The colonisers carelessly divided the land without considering the traditional form of administration and boundaries, thus resulting in immediate conflicts and instability among the different ethnic groups. This destabilised the traditional African socio-economic order, dividing the pre-existing ethnic communities into different countries and regions. For instance, the Abasamia people are found in Kenya and Uganda,

despite speaking the same dialect and language and sharing customs (Saideman 2001). The new borders created an unnatural situation which has remained static over the years. This effect is still a challenge for most African countries as, despite gaining independence, they still fail to understand the real meaning of cohesion and integration, thus resulting in dictatorship and lack of democracy. This has led to a lack of ethnic integrity and social cohesion among the African Union Member States (Funjika and Getachew 2022). For instance, the 1994 Rwanda Genocide is an example of the complexities in balancing ethnic diversity among AU countries. Despite the Rwandan population being composed of two major ethnic groups, namely the Hutus (Bantus) and the Tutsis (Hamitic), the difficulties in balancing ethnic diversities led to dreadful conflicts, which saw the Hutus massacring many Tutsis, leading to their exile into Uganda, Burundi and Kenya during independence. However, the exiled children grew and turned against the Hutus in a four-year civil war that led to the famous Rwanda Genocide of 1994. It is important to understand that genocide does not occur between communities that see each other as 'legitimate' despite their differences. However, it occurs among people of different ethnicities that are purportedly 'illegitimate' – and any slight attempt to ascend to power is considered a disruption. This is a clear example that post-independence African citizenship in the AU is still crippled with challenges of who belongs and who does not. Despite efforts by the AU to turn Africa into one united continent, the treatment of African citizens in most African countries still raises the silent question of who belongs and who does not, which can be considered a silent form of apartheid. Ethnic differences created by a changed geography decided by outsiders is the new form of twenty-first-century apartheid within the continent – thus a major complexity in balancing ethnic diversity in the AU.

Corruption within the AU is another complexity inherent in balancing ethnic diversity among the AU Member States. Postcolonial Africa is associated with massive corruption and poverty. Corruption still poses serious challenges in the socio-economic development of Africa. It undermines the existence of institutions such as the AU, which values democracy, justice and societal ethical values. Therefore,

corruption within the African continent has jeopardised sustainable social and economic development of the region. Corruption and unequal distribution of resources are associated with the major sources of conflict and coup d'etats in the African continent. According to an AU report, most African leaders, political elites and civil servants steal more than US$200 billion dollars per annum, which has led to increased ethnic conflicts, instability and increased rebel activities, especially among the West African countries like Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leonne.

Bad governance and exclusionary political practices are issues that create complexities within the AU when it comes to balancing ethnic diversity. Due to the lack of a national identity framework within the AU, most politicians exploit the concept of ethnicity as a way of mobilising voters. In many African countries, flawed elections have precipitated political disputes and increased tensions that turn into conflicts. In the past few years, violent post-election conflicts have emerged associated with the struggle within different ethnicities to ascend to power, such as those in Ethiopia and Kenya in 2007. This has created challenges in balancing ethnic diversity within the continent, as most political elites adopt ethnic differences during their mobilisation, thus stifling any opportunity for good or effective governance and development of democratic institutions. In most AU Member States, some candidates or communities are barred from participating in elections due to their ethnicity. For instance, an ex-Prime Minister of Cote d'Ivoire, Alassane Ouattara, was barred from participating and contesting in elections since his parents had migrated from neighbouring Burkina Faso. This created some challenges in balancing the aspect of ethnic diversity within the African continent. As a result, the concept of bad governance affects the political practice of the AU, creating significant challenges when it comes to balancing ethnic diversity within the continent.

The quest for fair representation within the AU framework

The question of fairness for underrepresented groups within the AU framework is something that has been lingering on and is as old as the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The establishment of the OAU

in 1963 was aimed at establishing an organisation that would create some loose framework to improve the relationship between the different African states and promote independence of African nations from the colonisers. The foundational principles of the organisation included chartering social, economic and ethnic cooperation among the Member States. The OAU Charter enacted several principles, such as promoting sovereignty, territorial integrity and equality among the Member States. The initial frameworks were deemed important during the struggle for independence. However, they lost vigour after countries like South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe liberated themselves from colonial rule. This was replaced by a massive violation of human rights across the continent, such that the organisation was criticised for practising authoritarian leadership. This led to the establishment of the AU in 2001 as a way of addressing the major challenges facing the African continent that its predecessor failed to address.

However, the AU framework is still facing several complexities when it comes to balancing ethnic diversity within the continent. This leads to the question of fairness for the underrepresented minority groups within the organisational framework (Vermeulen and Coetzee 2006). Many Member States fail to consider the question of minority and under-representation as an African problem. At the same time, most ethnic groups categorised as minority groups living in the continent suffer from lack of representation. This means that their rights and concerns often tend to be ignored. According to the organisation's framework, the Member States have disavowed the issue of ethnic diversity as a factor that is divisive and have assumed a mythical nationalism among states, despite most of them being multi-ethnic states (Comaroff and Stern 1995). Therefore, to address the question of under-representation, it is vital for the AU to accommodate ethnic diversity among its policies and framework in order to combat the issues of socio-economic and political exclusion within the continent.

Pragmatic approaches for fostering inclusivity and voice amplification

Since inception, the AU's vision has been based on the spirit of Pan-

Africanism, which focuses on creating socio-political and economic liberation of all Africans (Gwagwa, Kazi and Hilliard 2022). The organisation is focused on fostering an all-inclusive development and voice amplification of all people from the different ethnic groups which are underrepresented in the overall AU framework. This can be achieved by creating a united Africa or a federal government structure focused on accelerating continental unity of all Member States. Adoption of Pan-Africanism into the AU framework will encourage and strengthen the bonds of brotherhood between people of different ethnicities across the continent. The push for African nationalism means that the organisation will focus on accelerating socio-economic and political development as a key aspect of fostering continental unity and integration of democratic institutions across Africa (Okedele 2021). Moreover, this means that the organisation will work towards eliminating all forms of colonisation that remain in Africa and ensuring the full liberation of the African people.

The adoption of a common language across the continent is the key to fostering inclusivity and voice amplification of the underrepresented groups in the AU (Nwachi 2021). According to Chakanyuka (2020), language is a powerful driver of inclusion that allows people to communicate and engage with each other (Chakanyuka 2020). It plays a key role in AU stakeholder engagement and promotion of the overall organisational culture of the Member States (Gwagwa, Kazim and Hilliard 2022). Adopting a common language will enhance inclusivity, as it acknowledges diversity and promotes acceptance of the values of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. A common language helps develop a sense of inclusion, as it involves empowering the audience or citizens of the Member States. It helps in eliminating conscious and unconscious bias, thus it can be used to shift negative attitudes and beliefs within the organisation. This fosters inclusivity and voice amplification within the continent.

The organisation should focus on bolstering good governance as a way of addressing inequality, peaceful ethnic co-existence and socio-economic development of the continent. This can be achieved through enhanced regional cooperation that ensures effective participation of all Member States in both economic and political systems within the organisations,

as this would include all the underrepresented ethnic groups within the continent. Therefore, the AU framework should focus on encouraging each Member State to address the key governing challenges that they are encountering and engage in robust national dialogue and institutional reforms to form an effective and inclusive government that promotes the aspect of nationalism. Inclusion needs good leadership, which means it must include democracy and respect for human rights (Consuegra 2020). The AU framework must be developed to ensure that the organisation has a universal culture that promotes democratic values, equality and respect for the rule of law and human rights. Democratic values involve adoption of capable governing institutions that foster equitable development for all people. This means that the organisation must develop rules that enhance inclusivity and voice amplification for all people, including the underrepresented ethnic groups. Therefore, this will involve enhancing the AU's 2001 constitution, including a detailed implementation plan related to tackling questionable leadership with the organisation and its Member States. According to Mengisteab (2010), AU leaders must enhance good governance and democracy as the foundation of boosting inclusivity and fostering voice amplification within the continent as it relates to enhanced socio-economic and political development in the African continent.

Enhanced sustainable development is the key to fostering inclusivity and voice amplification within the AU (Rwigema 2024). The organisation should develop a framework pertaining to the aspiration and adoption of sustainable development across the continent (Giovannetti 2010). This should emphasise regional developments as a way of attaining continental socio-economic and monetary integration. According to Munyaradzi (2014), sustainable development must emphasise enhancing the living standards of the African people as a way of enhancing the economic stability of people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Munyaradzi 2014). This will foster inclusivity, as it promotes peaceful co-existence and reduced conflict among the different Member States, thus contributing to economic development and integration of the continent (Waal 2002).

Conclusion and recommendations

Africa is a continent that is made up of people with different ethnicities. For a long time, ethnic diversity within the continent has been a liability, due to the increased ethnic conflict being witnessed in Africa. The West exploits ethnicity to shape African agency and how it is located in the Global South. As a continent, Africa has experienced devastating effects related to diversity, fuelled by colonialism and rapid globalisation. This has led to people of different ethnicities perceiving others as being 'lesser', especially when it comes to socio-economic and political matters – which has led to increased division and the emergence of modern conflicts in countries like the DRC. Historical analysis of Africa indicates that ethnic conflicts are quite a challenge, especially when it comes to resolving them.

For a long time, politicians in Africa have exacerbated ethnic conflicts through unfair distribution of resources, as a way of gaining their selfish political advantage. Ethnicity in Africa is used as a prominent tool by those in power, and it is the fuelling force in politics. This has led to increased ethnic competitiveness, thus creating a lot of political uncertainty and political instability within the continent. Therefore, it is important to adopt ethnic diversity as an invaluable asset, and not a liability associated with insecurity and conflict in Africa.

Removing ethnicity from African politics is the key step towards tackling issues related to ethnicity across the continent. This can be achieved by treating ethnic diversity as an asset that fosters growth and development in both the public and private sector. Research studies indicate that adopting ethnic diversity is vital for institutions and governments, thus positive outcomes related to socio-economic development of the AU Member States could be expected. Regional organisations must focus on embracing management strategies such as Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programmes, as they help in enhancing social inclusion, co-existence and peace. Therefore, by fostering an inclusive structure where ethnic diversity is embraced, Africa is more likely to enjoy political stability and reductions in conflicts, insecurity and

violence. This will lead to economic growth and development through enhanced trade, investment and performance of both government and non-governmental organisations.

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