AFRICA'S PEACEKEEPING AND REGIONAL AUTONOMY: RETHINKING COLLECTIVE SECURITY IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD ORDER

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Keywords

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Abstract

Research Problem:
The regional peacekeeping efforts in Africa are often couched within the language of dependence, fragility, and control. This is actually a way of concealing an important puzzle: Whether or not regional interventions, especially those conducted by ECOWAS, reproduce global dependency, or are practices through which African institutions constitute autonomy, legitimacy, and sovereignty in the world.

Methodology:
The research framework is constructivist institutionalism, and the study follows a mixed-methods design. Discourse analysis of the ECOWAS communiqué, peacekeeping mandates, and summit statements is done, and data from Afrobarometer, SIPRI, and the ECOWAS financial statements is used and validated. The analysis is done for the states of Liberia, The Gambia, Mali, and the contribution of Nigeria, referred to as the anchor state.

Results:
The results show the ECOWAS peacekeeping role not only as a reaction to crisis management but also as a performative act of autonomy, which symbolically asserts sovereignty, authority, and legitimacy by the regional entities. From the unmandated operation in Liberia to the democratic enforcement mission in The Gambia, the ECOWAS operation displays institutional creativity in the assertion of normative autonomy even as it remains materially dependent on others. The effect of the emergence of multipolarity upon the continent of Africa is to increase the options of the continent even as it also generates more weaknesses.

Conclusion:
ECOWAS peacekeeping practices demonstrate the constant paradox of autonomy where sovereignty is expressed both in discourse and performance, despite the continuation of structural dependence. This means that regional peacekeeping is a transitional instance where Africa

practices group sovereignty with limitations posed by global asymmetry and where intervention is transformed into legitimacy-building and not just coercion.

Key Contribution to Knowledge:

This research reconceptualizes African peacekeeping efforts from being derivative within the security sphere to being the process through which sovereignty is made, thereby contributing to the furtherance of constructivist institutionalism by showing the possibilities for the performance of autonomy even when dependence is at play. This research is relevant in the sense that it helps in the exploration of African agency.

Recommendation:

For performative autonomy to grow into structural autonomy, ECOWAS must therefore build upon its indigenous sources of financing, professionalize command structures, and strengthen its partnerships with a view to taking advantage of multipolarity to match its normative power with material capacity.

Introduction

Since the conclusion of the Cold War, Africa's regional peacekeeping organisations have emerged as prominent political developments on the continent. These institutions, first established as conflict management procedures, have transformed within ECOWAS and other organisations into a vital arena for negotiating sovereignty. Paradoxically, despite extensive literature on peacekeeping institutions in Africa, their symbolic meaning remains a subject of contention.

At the foundation of the literature pyramid lies a significant category of structural and dependency-focused analyses. Scholars of dependency theory and world-systems analysis (e.g., Amin 1972; Rodney 1973; Wallerstein 1974) perceive African regional peacekeeping missions as manifestations of reliance on global capitalist frameworks and post-colonial dependency patterns. This literary branch perceives ECOWAS operations primarily as manifestations of Western Security Governance or mechanisms employed by Western nations to outsource their order-maintenance responsibilities to vulnerable regional client-states.

Additionally, layer two is characterised by realism and neoliberal institutionalist interpretations. Realism emphasises state power and security dominance, with Nigeria's importance in this context serving as the catalyst for ECOWAS peacekeeping (Ayoob, 1995; Clapham, 1996). Secondly, neoliberal institutionalism emphasises cooperation, institutional development, and collective anarchy as mechanisms that enable ECOWAS peacekeeping (Keohane & Nye, 1989). Realism and neoliberal institutionalism effectively elucidate burden sharing and cooperation in peacekeeping efforts. However, they fail to perceive ECOWAS as an agent rather than only a tool. Furthermore, they regard peacekeeping as a pragmatic endeavour.

The highest tier of the pyramid features a burgeoning literature on African agency and regionalism that challenges these materialist perspectives. Research conducted by Bach (2016), Söderbaum (2019), Murithi (2019), and Brown & Harman (2013) contests these perspectives by proposing that African regional organisationsutilise strategic selectivity, norm entrepreneurship, and political agency in dependent situations. This

scholarship perceives ECOWAS engagement in Liberia and Gambia as instances of African agency rather than initiatives led by external donors. However, the extensive literature predominantly focusses on outcomes such as conflict resolution, democratisation, and regime transition, while overlooking the processes of meaning-making and the establishment of autonomy.

Notwithstanding the accomplishments, a significant void persists in the literature. It rarely addresses the issue of peacekeeping as a practice of sovereignty formation; specifically, how regional institutions employ rhetoric, legitimacy, and symbolic actions to establish autonomy despite the absence of material sovereignty or independence. Autonomy has traditionally been characterised in practical termseconomic self-sufficiency, military capabilities, or the capacity to resist external influenceswithout acknowledging the conceptual domain in which African institutions assert their authority over security administration.

Moreover, despite the growing recognition of multipolarity as a significant factor reshaping Africa's foreign policies, there remains a paucity of literature examining how, in a multipolar context, multipolarity simultaneously amplifies and mitigates susceptibility to influence, thereby shaping our understanding of 'relational autonomy.'The lack of this formulation creates a 'conceptual blind spot', wherein African peacekeeping is depicted as 'dependent' or lauded as 'agency', despite the apparent contradiction between dependency and agency. This work adopts a distinctive analytical approach that intentionally diverges from previous studies on African regional peacekeeping. This research shifts from previous analyses of African regional peacekeeping, which focused on material capacity, dependency, hegemonic leadership, and effectiveness, to examine peacekeeping as a performative act that constructs autonomy and sovereignty. This paper argues that autonomy should be perceived as a process, in contrast to dependency literature that emphasises the structural impossibility of autonomy and agency-centered literature that concludes autonomy exists based on outcomes such as conflict resolution or the restoration of democratic order. This involves comprehending the particular peacekeeping procedures of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as a "site of meaning-making" concerning sovereignty and regionalism.

This method allows the paper to surpass the previously established dependency versus independence paradigm in prior discussions. The study will utilise the concept of performative autonomy, which refers to the capacity of regional institutions to legitimise and normalise interventionist authority despite reliance on external financing and support. The paper will redirect the analysis of African intervention forces from the deficiencies of ECOWAS to the outcomes it generates through rhetoric and legitimacy.

This approach enables the reinterpretation of paradigm cases, including Liberia, The Gambia, Mali, and Lagos regional politics, transforming them from mere repetitive evidence of dependency and leadership dynamics into successive instances of the institutional reiteration of collective sovereignty. This paper examines the phenomena of multipolarity not merely as a contextual backdrop, but in an intensified manner that elevates the significance of symbolic and normative authority. This study positions itself within theoretical intervention by expanding the research on African agency while simultaneously critiquing the tendency to undermine the ideological mechanisms of autonomy. It demonstrates that ECOWAS's involvement in international peacekeeping is not indicative of

a failure of independence or a covert desire for external dominance over Africa, but rather a manifestation of the continent's endeavour to establish its position within an inequitable global order through performative legitimacy. Participation in the Discourse This study offers three contributions to the political science literature.

Initially, it effectuates a conceptual transformation in perceiving African peacekeeping initiatives as integral to sovereignty rather than merely reactive and focused on security. Secondly, it propels constructivist institutionalism by applying it to African regionalism, demonstrating that speech and legitimacy serve as sources of power within constraints. Third, it situates ECOWAS's peacekeeping initiatives within the framework of multipolarity, demonstrating that autonomy is derived not from detachment from the global order but from its stipulations. Consequently, it is essential to enquire whether African regional peacekeeping's performative independence can be converted into structural autonomy, rather than simply questioning its absolute autonomy, or if it will persist as mere rhetorical claims of agency within an inequitable global framework.

Research Problem

This dissertation identifies a research vacuum in African regional peacekeeping studies, specifically regarding the often-neglected relationship between autonomy and ECOWAS as a regional international organisation, which is seldom examined in terms of its assertion of authority and subordination to foreign influences. Autonomy is regarded as a structural concept rather than a practice.

Two interrelated themes permeate the existing literature. The dependency/political economy perspective highlights external control, donor reliance, and institutional subordination, perceiving African regionalisms just as reflections of global dynamics. Conversely, the agency/region approach underscores the concepts of initiative, normative engagement, and leadership, with autonomy frequently originating from the outcomes, effective conflict resolution, or the restoration of democracy. Each approach offers insights overlooked by the other; nevertheless, neither adequately examines the establishment and maintenance of autonomy within an institutional context as it potentially could.

This analytical blind spot is especially evident in the ECOWAS example. ECOWAS clearly exhibits state-like characteristics through military interventions, sanctions, mediation of settlements, and the promotion of democracy; nonetheless, it relies on the UN, EU, and other nations for financial, logistical, and strategic support. Existing frameworks of international relations fail to adequately explain both activities of ECOWAS, resulting in insufficient analysis of the politics surrounding regional peacekeeping.

This results in an inadequate comprehension of autonomy's position in a multipolar international system as a performative activity through relationships and discourse. The existing literature fails to acknowledge that peacekeeping embodies the exercise of sovereignty, hence overlooking how African regional institutions manifest sovereignty through the establishment of legitimacy, authority, and identity within the international system. This thesis establishes an alternative foundation: the performative role of ECOWAS in peacekeeping, rather than its mere presence or absence as a tangible activity.

Research Objectives

“The overall drive here is to reinterpret ECOWAS peacekeeping as an operationally performative practice through which regional autonomy and collective sovereignty are articulated in the face of material dependency. In this regard, this study seeks to:”

a. Consider, by way of illustration, how the interventions by ECOWAS in both Liberia, The Gambia, and Mali operate as steps in performances of discourse and institution, and so on.
b. Examine how the material aspect of its dependency on others coexists with, or functions to constrain/enable, the performative practice of autonomy within ECOWAS peacekeeping roles within a world order characterized by a multipolar structure.
c. Examine the extent to which Nigeria's leadership shapes both the capacity and the "limits of autonomy" of ECOWAS.

Research Methodology

The research framework is constructivist institutionalism, and the study follows a mixed-methods design. Discourse analysis of the ECOWAS communiqué, peacekeeping mandates, and summit statements is done, and data from Afrobarometer, SIPRI, and the ECOWAS financial statements is used and validated. The analysis is done for the states of Liberia, The Gambia, Mali, and the contribution of Nigeria, referred to as the anchor state.

Research Design

This research adopts a methodological approach that embraces constructivism and follows constructivist institutionalism. This is because it combines both qualitative and quantitative analysis, which is important in understanding both the conceptual world of ECOWAS peacekeeping, including legitimacy, authority, and semantic aspects, and also considers its material aspect, including its funding and reliance. This is especially important because it is not only what occurs that is important but also how autonomy is constructed.

Study Population

The population comprises institutional texts and secondary data sets regarding ECOWAS peacekeeping operations from 1990 to 2023. This data encompasses ECOWAS communiqués, summits, peacekeeping mandates, annual reports, binding UN Security Council resolutions pertaining to ECOWAS interventions, SIPRI data on official military expenditures and peacekeeping missions, Afrobarometer datasets on citizens' perceptions of ECOWAS legitimacy, and financial reports from the ECOWAS Peace Fund and ECOWAS Commission.

Nonetheless, as the study is document-based and employs secondary data, the sample size conforms to the standards of both qualitative and secondary quantitative research. A possible collection exceeding 500 ECOWAS-related peacekeeping and security documents spanning 1990 to 2023 was found. This resulted in a deliberate sampling of 210 documents. They were selected based on their relevance to the study issues, emphasising material that addresses significant phases of peacekeeping and achieves analytical saturation.This study's quantitative aspect utilises data from rounds 7 and 8 of Afrobarometer, featuring nationally representative samples ranging from 1,200 to 2,400 individuals per country, employing stratified multistage random sampling. There are no sampling mistakes in the financial data from SIPRI and ECOWAS, as the data is utilised in its whole.

Techniques of Sampling

The qualitative data collection involved purposeful sampling. Documents were chosen based on their relevance to peacekeeping or security governance by ECOWAS, specifically concerning the cases of Liberia, Gambia, and Mali, and whether they were produced during or after intervention activities essential for legitimacy and norm enforcement. The

quantitative data was gathered using Afrobarometer's probabilistic sampling methods, including stratification and cluster sampling, to ensure national representativeness and reliability.

Methods of Collecting Data

The qualitative data was obtained from archival searches of the institutional publications of ECOWAS from official archives, as well as from UN resolutions and policy declarations. The other source of the data was the military expenditure and peacekeeping operation datasets offered by SIPRI, Afrobarometer survey, and the financial statements of the ECOWAS Commission.

Method of Data Analysis

Similarly, the research methods included qualitative analysis, which utilized thematic and discourse analysis, with a focus on narrative, legitimacy discourse, sovereignty discourses, and the construction of autonomy, and quantitative analysis, which examined trends in the deployment of troops, finance contributions, and perceptions of legitimacy. These two methods enhanced the validity of results.

Validity and Reliability

Lack of validity was addressed through triangulation on diverse sources and methods. Enhanced reliability was achieved by well-defined criteria in sampling and consistent analysis methods. Reflexivity was incorporated to acknowledge the interpretive character of constructivist research, situating the analysis within the larger discourse on African regionalism and global order.

Limitations of the Study

Two limitations are recognized. First, official ECOWAS financial data are often unpublished or incomplete. Second, discursive bias in public documents overestimates normative coherence. To mitigate these, triangulation with SIPRI, UN, and independent think-tank data was employed, encouraging a balanced interpretive reconstruction.

Conceptual Clarification

This section establishes the conceptual foundation underlying the analysis of this study by repositioning these concepts within current debates in scholarship and contextualizing them in a form suitable for testing. Conceptualization is essential because it makes it possible for us to discuss these ideas within a framework that is familiar to scholars, in a form in which "definitions are;

Autonomy: In the literature on African regionalism and peacekeeping, autonomy is frequently defined in material terms: money, resources, and independence from foreign intervention. Dependency scholars argue that the regions of Africa do not have autonomy, while agency scholars infer the existence of autonomy based on successful intervention. This paper will take a different approach. This paper will conceptualize autonomy on a processual and relational basis the ability of an institution to write, legitimize, and normalize itself within their given environments even under material dependence.

Performative Autonomy: From constructivism and institutionalism in sociology comes the concept of performative autonomy, which this study proposes. Performative autonomy refers to the performance of autonomy performed by words, institutional ritual, legal mandates, and practices of intervention, which convey authority and legitimacy. The emphasis moves from the material to the political: from the lack of power to the politics of production of legitimacy, legitimacy effects, recognition, and compliance. Performative autonomy accepts the condition of dependence: it explains how effective authority nevertheless may be

exercised under the condition of autonomy itself.

Sovereignty : In contrast to approaches focusing on sovereignty as a fixed characteristic of a state, a sovereignty-making perspective is pursued. Sovereignty is viewed here as a product of institutional practice and discursive assertions. The practice of ECOWAS peace-keeping is approached from a perspective considering where power is exercised to make assertions over authority within a geography that places sovereignty beyond the confines of a national state.

Multipolarity: "Multipolarity refers to a global topology with multiple centers of power." In the context of African security governance, multipolarity manifests as a diversity of global actors, including the UN, the EU, China, and bilateral actors. In a broader strategic sense, multipolarity increases the degree of freedom, and yet it also increases pressure and dependency. In the context of this thesis, multipolarity is conceived as a "basic context" that shapes performative practices and thus reinforces the relational quality of autonomy."

Theoretical Framework: Reconceptualizing Constructivist Institutionalism and its Application for African Regional

This study utilises Constructivist Institutionalism in a non-linear and critical manner, intentionally extending its application outside traditional boundaries in the analysis of Europe's governance and domestic transformations. This paper aims to reconceptualise Constructivist Institutionalism not merely as a discourse-focused analytical framework, but as a theoretical approach for establishing sovereignty within contexts of reliance.

Constructivism is typically of lesser significance compared to realism, liberalism, or dependence theory in relation to institutions wielding material power, such as the EU or industrialised nations (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Schmidt, 2008, 2010). The principal frameworks for African peacekeeping include realism, liberalism, and dependence theory, influenced by material inadequacy, donor supremacy, or hegemonic authority (Ayoob, 1995; Clapham, 1996; Williams, 2017). If constructivism is applicable, it typically serves to elucidate the diffusion of norms rather than institutional actions.

This work diverges from that trajectory by conceptualising Constructivist Institutionalism as an approach rooted on theories of agency under constraint, rather as agency derived from capacity. It is argued that in circumstances of structural reliance, namely within African regional peacekeeping operations, institutions wield power not via material means, but by actions that bestow legitimacy and foster a common identity. It articulates and actualises its notion of autonomy via performance. Whereas earlier perspectives regarded discourse as primarily introspective or justificatory, the approach articulated here posits that it is fundamentally formative, hence framing sovereignty as a construct rather than merely an exercise. ECOWAS peacekeeping can be viewed as both an implementation of insecurity management and an institutional manifestation that redefines sovereignty from non-interference to a jointly defined obligation.

This signifies an extension of conventional issues related to institutionalised constructivism. The article critiques the constraints associated with the Constructivist Institutionalism method. This approach is effective in analysing the process of interpretation; nevertheless, it may overlook the material aspect associated with power imbalances if not subjected to critical analysis. Consequently, this topic is examined within the context of an awareness pertaining to the

reliance on the Nigerian region and donor funding.

Major Argument of the Research: Performative Autonomy; Sovereignty-Making through Regional Peacekeeping under Conditions of Dependence"

This study posits that ECOWAS-style peacekeeping in Africa exemplifies performative autonomy. Sovereignty is not merely a property; it is an action executed and negotiated through institutional discourse, especially in contexts of economic dependence within a multipolar globe. This argument does not solely rely on the aggregation of information from sources; instead, it constitutes an interpretive act that perceives literature as a continuous dialogue that may and should be expanded and, in part, challenged.

The dependence and political economy frameworks conventionally assert a connection to subordination by dominant global powers, which influences the African peacekeeping mission as a manifestation of this subordination. The scholarship of Amin, Rodney, and Wallerstein highlights how Africa's position as a sub-system inside the global financial market influences the autonomy and security capabilities of African governments. Consequently, in the context of peacekeeping, it is crucial to underscore Africa's reliance on external financial support and political endorsement for peacekeeping operations

. However, when dependency is employed to analyse regional organisations, it becomes deterministic and diminishes the role of Africans to just passive conduits for external influence, rather than recognising them as players with political agency.Realist and neo-realist analyses emphasise the significance of material power, depicting ECOWAS peacekeeping efforts as Nigeria's strategic intervention or security outsourcing driven by national aspirations and interests (Ayoob, 1995; Clapham, 1996). These methodologies effectively highlight the imbalance of power, notably emphasising Nigeria's dominant role in regional initiatives. Nonetheless, realism fails to account for instances in which ECOWAS disregards the explicit desires of significant external entities or where UN authorisation is not obtained for interventions, as exemplified by the situation in Liberia in 1990. Realism delineates leadership patterns but does not elucidate the rationale for deeming the intervention a regional moral imperative or for establishing its legitimacy.

Consequently, there is a necessity to transcend the role of power. Neoliberal institutionalist methods emphasise collaboration, regimes, and collective action dilemmas (Keohane and Nye, 1989). These methodologies elucidate the degree to which ECOWAS orchestrates its members and mitigates transaction costs. The fundamental notion is that power derives from effective institutions and common objectives. In the context of Africa's regional integration, the institution must first ensure its existence before achieving the necessary efficiency. This elucidates the continued presence of ECOWAS peacekeeping interventions despite limited enforcement capacities. This indicates that the approach elucidates the cooperation process while minimising the significance of identity and the legitimacy of identities.

The study of African agency and norm entrepreneurship is very illuminating in this context. Adebajo, Murithi, Söderbaum, and others underscore that African institutions play a vital role in formulating norms about intervention, democracy, and collective security. This accurately elevates African agents to the position of political actors rather than mere subjects of global authority. Nevertheless, a significant portion of the literature concentrates on either norm distribution or policy influence, leaving the expression and re-creation of agency under

dependency largely unexamined. This work seeks to expand the existing research by conceptualising peacekeeping not merely as a mechanism for norm propagation, but as a recurring institution through which sovereignty is established.

Constructivist and constructivist institutionalism approaches offer methodologies that effectively address this gap. Certain researchers, notably Finnemore and Wendt, investigate the influence of norms and identities on state behaviour, whilst others, such as Schmidt and Hay, explore institutions as arenas of discourse. Most of these applications are to material strength in circumstances that are quite similar in Europe. This research examines the use of constructivist institutionalism in circumstances marked by scarcity, asymmetry, and reliance. In this context, speech becomes essential to power.

This research pioneers the argument that ECOWAS peacekeeping operations represent a phenomenon in which sovereignty is neither entirely absent nor guaranteed, but rather manifested through actions of authorship concerning regional security. This is exemplified by interventions in Liberia regarding the right to intervene, The Gambia's efforts to enforce democracy, and Mali's military autonomy, which is constrained by diplomatic norms and resistance. Consequently, West African peacekeeping should be understood not merely as crisis intervention or a display of power, but also as a form of constitutive politics, wherein "acts of writing" create a specific reality that is established through these acts, facilitating the formation and sustenance of a community of meaning, thereby rendering the West African subregion a reality shaped by discourse, independent of any prior assumptions about that reality.

Discussion of Findings

This research demonstrates the insufficiency of the traditional independence-dependence dichotomy for ECOWAS peacekeeping operations. The ECOWAS system consistently occupies an intermediate position of autonomy within reliance, rather than aligning itself solely with independence or dependency on the spectrum. This indicates that the system relies on external financing and resources yet sovereignty is both preserved and redefined within the framework of regional peacekeeping operations. This clearly opposes the dependency theory, which equates dependency with the lack or forfeiture of autonomy (Amin, 1972; Rodney, 1973; Williams, 2017).

The intervention in Liberia serves as a pertinent example. Nigeria provided the largest resources to the ECOMOG-led operation. This action was executed without prior UN authorisation and was justified by a regional moral necessity. This refutes the realist argument that agents in a state of reliance lack agency (Ayoob 1995). ECOWAS did not merely respond passively to an external agenda; rather, it articulated its own intervention strategy in ethical terms. This implies that dependency exists, yet initiative may originate within rather than externally from that dependence. Previous studies (Clapham, 1996; Adebajo, 2002) frequently interpret ECOWAS interventions as a demonstration of Nigerian dominance in the region. Rather than negating hegemony, it will be demonstrated that leadership does not inherently preclude regional autonomy. Regional autonomy is institutionalised through processes that collaboratively determine and validate decisions. This guarantees that power imbalances are transformed into localised legitimacy. It moderates hegemony by demonstrating that authority is effective only when institutionalised to acquire legitimacy.

Furthermore, regional sovereignty is predicated not on equality but on communal intentions.

These results necessitate a shift from perceiving autonomy exclusively through material or operational aspects. This indicates that autonomy is characterised by practice rather than mere capacity, where the ability to delineate acceptable intervention, define intervention, and establish authority serves as a significant source of influence. This indicates a clear divergence from prior literature on African peacekeeping, which regarded operational independence as the sole factor of autonomy. This research demonstrates that autonomy can be achieved despite the absence of material freedom, provided that control over interpretation is preserved.

Ultimately, in addition to the principle of autonomy, the findings indicate that ECOWAS peacekeeping operations exemplify the principle of sovereignty-making. This replaces the principle of sovereignty management. This is particularly relevant in Liberia, The Gambia, and Mali, where sovereignty has been persistently redefined from the strict norm of non-interference to one of communal responsibility. This validates Wendt's (1999) assertion that sovereignty is a socially constructed concept. Nevertheless, the role is broadened in that the construction is executed by regional entities rather than by governments.

The Gambian situation signifies a fundamental transformation in the essence of intervention itself. The implementation of election outcomes without armed conflict indicates a transition of sovereignty from territorial dominance to institutional authority via constitutionalism, rather than spatial control. This result diverges from interpretations that regard democratic involvement as a manifestation of transnational liberal norms (Söderbaum& de Lombaerde, 2013). This theory posits that sovereignty, instead of being augmented by intervention, is supplanted by the regionalisation of democratic legitimacy as a transformative textual domain in West Africa due to the interventionist efforts of ECOWAS.

The Malian experience complicates the matter further. Despite the challenges posed by insurgency and the lack of substantial material leverage in a densely populated multipolar security environment, which includes UN peacekeeping forces, French counter-terrorism efforts, and various private Russian security firms, the Central African regional organisation, ECOWAS, has upheld a narrative of ownership in the political transition processes through sanctions and diplomatic initiatives. This contests the claim that ECOWAS has sidelined the Sahel Region (Charbonneau, 2021). The grouping has opted to assume the role of a mediator for authorities in these circumstances.

These findings theoretically advance constructivist institutionalism scholarship by demonstrating that discourse serves as a formative, rather than merely justificatory, process of institutional authority. Sovereignty is not antecedent to practice; rather, it is a consequence of repeated institutional actions that achieve recognition over time. Consequently, ECOWAS peacekeeping exemplifies how institutions shape political reality despite encountering asymmetrical challenges.

These findings also present a challenge to dialogues regarding African agency in a multipolar context. While multipolarity enhances diplomatic opportunities and diminishes the dominance of Western powers in global politics, it simultaneously results in an expansion of diverse sub-regional control mechanisms (Brown & Harman, 2013; De Carvalho, 2020). The situation of ECOWAS in Mali demonstrates that a multipolar world does not inherently ensure autonomy, yet it

also does not render regionally based actors unimportant.

This transition does not equate to the elimination of reliance. International financing and worldwide recognition remain essential to the sustainability of peacekeeping efforts. Consequently, the ramifications of multipolarity include the perpetuation, rather than the resolution, of the autonomy conundrum. In other terms, autonomy has become relative rather than absolute. Collectively, these findings validate the paper's argument that ECOWAS peacekeeping can be effectively understood as performative autonomy. This autonomy is based not on self-sufficiency, but on the capacity to establish normative authority, define the parameters of interventionist accountability, and articulate the discourse of institutionalised legitimacy within an unequal international order. This study extends constructivist institutionalist theory to dependent institutions, challenging materialist concepts of autonomy, and demonstrates that African regional peacekeeping does not equate to the relinquishment of sovereignty or a mere manifestation of external oppression. It represents an alternate manifestation of sovereignty that redefines the parameters of autonomy, the narrative of legitimacy, and the dynamics of power within the Global South. Dependence, in this context, does not negate agency but rather provides the enabling environment for its expression.

This table synthesises the four scenarios across three analytical dimensions: (1) Material Autonomy (funding, command of troops), (2) Normative Autonomy (speech, legitimacy), and (3) External Influence (donor or great-power intervention).

Case	Material Autonomy	Normative Autonomy	External Influence	Key Interpretation
Liberia (1990–1997)	Low Nigeria funded 80% donor fatigue.	Moderate African solution discourse	High Later UN co-mandate	Foundational experiment in regional sovereignty
The Gambia (2017–2021)	Moderate 62% ECOWAS funded	High democracy enforcement	Moderate EU post-conflict aid	Assertive normative autonomy within dependence
Mali (2012 - 2023)	Low No ECOWAS troops; aid dependent	Moderate Sovereignty defense rhetoric	Very High UN, France, Russia	Autonomy as diplomatic resistance

Nigeria (cross-case)	High Financial Hegemon	Variable Legitimacy Contested	High Relies on Donor Alignment	Structural enabler and constraint of ECOWAS agency

The matrix above demonstrates that ECOWAS lacks autonomy in the dichotomy of autonomy against non-autonomy. Instead, it exists on a continuum influenced by the resources it can mobilise, its capacity to impact collective legitimacy, and the appeal of external sources. In the aforementioned examples, ECOWAS have little autonomy about resources, however there are variations in its normative strength. This example demonstrates that the sovereignty inherent in African participation in continent-wide peacekeeping is rooted on the establishment of legitimacy rather than the acquisition of resources. According to the constructivist institutionalist perspective, this affirms that agencies must emerge not by transcending their dependency, but by altering the conditions under which dependent activities are sanctioned.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The significance of the aforementioned study resides in its endeavour to ascertain if African regional peacekeeping, particularly the ECOWAS scenario, functions independently or merely recalibrates dependency dynamics within a multipolar context. The research, conducted within a constructivist institutionalist framework and analysing the cases of Liberia, The Gambia, Mali, and Nigerian regional leadership, concludes that the peacekeeping role of ECOWAS cannot be simply characterised as independence versus dependency. It indeed exists within the domain of autonomy-in-dependency.
The data reveals a response to crises, but more significantly, it highlights the function of ECOWAS peacekeeping missions in the establishment of sovereignty. The unmandated intervention in Liberia by ECOMOG, the promotion of democratic intervention in The Gambia, and the diplomatic sanctions in Mali illustrate how the norm of collective responsibility, advocated by ECOWAS, challenges the concept of sovereignty by shifting the focus from non-interference to regional accountability for sovereignty. This scenario deviates from the established norms of the older reliance theories regarding the function of peacekeeping interventions in Africa.

This distinctiveness also acknowledges the limitations of this normative agency. Dependency on the European Union for financial assistance, collaboration with Western military infrastructure for logistics, and engagement with United Nations agencies constrains this autonomy. This indicates the existence of a reality characterised by institutional autonomy, a hybrid structural relationship, wherein African regionalism possesses a specific significance and status, yet remains part of a broader and inequitable dynamic. From a theoretical standpoint, it signifies transformation rather than failure. “Utilizing constructivist institutionalism demonstrates that in a context of dependency, institutions evolve not only via resource accumulation but also by redefining the concept of authority delegation.” ECOWAS's peacekeeping initiatives signify a shift from a tangible concept of self-sufficiency to a conceptual understanding of leadership that encompasses the authority to define credible intervention, order, and responsibility. It suggests that African agencies are more

involved in redefining the terminology of international order than in contesting international hierarchies. Transitioning from performance-based sovereignty to a genuine structural level of independence is not guaranteed. If peacekeeping efforts in Africa are to stay strong in rhetoric but lacking in substance, they will be incapable of achieving professionalism in their command-and-control frameworks and logistics independently.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Indigenous Financing: ECOWAS can also enhance participation in the Community Levy and develop the ECOWAS Peace Fund to reduce overdependence on exogenous sources of funds. Internal funding sources are central to institutionalizing peacekeeping with a focus from externally driven interventions to homegrown institutions in the region.

2. Align Normative Authority with Capacity: The regional leadership that ECOWAS has shown in the realm of norms has to be matched by its actual capabilities in military strength and administrative preparedness. Joint capability in training and common command systems are essential in order to actualize discursive autonomy.

3. Diversify External Partnerships Strategy Instead, ECOWAS should embrace selective and pluralistic partnering in the presence of multipolarity. This approach may enable the subregion to feel less reliant on any one group while still being able to set the agenda. This can be achieved by partnering with non-Western countries.

4. **Enhance Democratic Oversight and Accountability** Establish stronger parliamentary and civil society controls within the ECOWAS to anchor peacekeeping interventions in the region in popular consent.

5. **Redefining Autonomy as a View autonomy**, not as a movement away from the global system, but as a move into it as equals for its governance. ECOWAS can show the way by establishing the norms of partnership into which other players have to be brought from a position of dependence into one of interdependence.

Summarily, African regional peacekeeping is no longer a secondary or derivative project. It is a testing ground for thinking about sovereignty differently, in conditions of asymmetry. The question is still open as to whether ECOWAS is able to translate performative autonomy into structural independence, though their peacekeeping interventions have altered discourse on sovereignty, agency, and legitimacy in African and international security.

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