Disentangling the Question of African Agency: Maturing, Retarded or Degenerating?

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the multifaceted dimensions of African agency in international relations, this review article interrogates the complex interplay between structural marginalization and the capacity of African actors—state and non-state alike—to influence global order. Through contemporary scholarship, it challenges reductive narratives that depict Africa solely as a passive recipient of external forces. The analysis synthesizes diverse perspectives, highlighting a dynamic tension where African agency is simultaneously asserted, constrained, and evolving. The authors engage the scholarship in a quasi-comparative dialogue, contemplating whether this agency is maturing, retarded and/or degenerating, while emphasizing the importance of including Afrocentric epistemologies to enrich understanding. Notably, African states' strategic involvement in initiatives like China's Belt and Road showcases their agency amidst risks of neo-dependency, revealing both opportunities for self-defined development and potential dependencies. Future empirical research is urged to translate conceptualizations of agency into practical applications within diplomatic and policy contexts. In the conclusion, the paper emphasizes that the measure of African agency transcends theoretical discourse; it must be recognized in its operationalization within global governance structures. The paper therefore calls for a re-evaluation of Africa's role as an active player on the world stage.

Keywords: African Agency; African International Relations (AIR); Strategic Engagement; Postcolonial Politics

INTRODUCTION

The question of African agency in international relations, most especially in the Critical African International Relations (AIR) scholarship has increasingly emerged as a critical fault line in the re-examination of global power, voice, and influence (Acharya, 2011). Long consigned to the periphery of dominant International Relations (IR) theory, Africa has often been treated not as a subject with strategic intent, but as a continent acted upon—subsumed under the weight of colonial legacies, Cold War dependencies, and neoliberal restructuring (Brown, 2012). However, over the past few decades, a vibrant body of scholarship has sought to revisit and revise this narrative by interrogating whether, how, and to what extent African actors—state and non-state alike—exercise meaningful influence in shaping the contours of the global order. This article probes this complex terrain through a close textual analysis of ten key works that foreground Africa's place in IR discourse, each offering a unique lens on the evolution, possibilities, and constraints of African agency.

At the heart of this inquiry lies a provocative and timely question: is Africa's agency in the international system maturing, retarded, or degenerating? This triadic framing resists simplistic answers. Instead, it invites a careful disentangling of conceptual ambiguities, empirical manifestations, and normative contestations surrounding the idea of agency itself. While scholars like Brown (2012) and Harman & Brown (2013) acknowledge Africa's partial reclamation from the margins, others such as Shaw (1975) and Bach (2013)

caution that the structural and epistemological foundations of global politics continue to constrain Africa's role. Meanwhile, more recent interventions—such as those by Ramontja (2023), Links (2021), and Kornprobst (2020)—foreground differentiated performances of agency: strategic, instrumental, symbolic, and relational, depending on context, sector, and actor.

The literature reviewed in this article traverses a wide spectrum—from the conceptual reconstruction of African political thought to empirical case studies on trade negotiations, diplomacy, south-south cooperation, and nuclear governance. What emerges is neither a linear progression nor a uniform diagnosis. Rather, the insights reveal a tension-filled process where African agency is simultaneously asserted and undermined, celebrated and constrained, imagined and resisted. This review article, therefore, does not offer a definitive verdict. Instead, it critically maps the contours of a shifting debate, interrogating whether the current trajectory signifies a maturation of Africa's strategic autonomy, a stalling of its emancipatory potential, or a subtle degeneration into new forms of external dependency under the guise of multipolarity.

In what follows, each of the ten texts will be revisited with an analytical eye toward the nature, scale, and effect of agency as presented. The goal is not merely to summarize, but to synthesize a deeper understanding of how agency is theorized, claimed, enacted, or denied in African IR scholarship. Ultimately, by disentangling this question, the article seeks to reframe how African agency is studied—not as an assumed absence or exceptional presence, but as a dynamic and contested force in global politics.

The paper is organized into six substantive sub-sections. Following this introduction, the second section presents the methodology of the paper; the third presents the conceptual clarification of the notion of African agency, effectively introducing the varying perspectives that are delved into in the analysis section; the fourth sub-section presents the core findings of the study through a critical engagement with ten scholarly contributions. Each of these interrogate different facets of African agency. These research articles are not merely reviewed but analytically unpacked in light of emerging debates and empirics in African International Relations (AIR), with each scholar's argument contextualized within broader theoretical or empirical trajectories. The section is organized into ten thematic sub-sections, each highlighting distinct yet intersecting discourses—from sovereignty and postcolonial identity to institutional negotiation, geopolitical strategy, and epistemic resistance—revealing how African agency is conceptualized, asserted, or constrained across diverse contexts. The fifth sub-section synthesizes these insights through a quasi-comparative discussion (more descriptive than evaluative) and places the selected scholars in a dialogue. It identifies points of convergence and divergence while exposing their finding through the prism of whether African agency is maturing, retarded, or degenerating, attending to the conceptual tensions and possibilities that animate these positions. The section also offers a reflective perspective, emphasizing the evolving and contested nature of Africa's global positioning and suggests directions for rethinking agency beyond static or binary frameworks. The final section, sixth, makes the conclusion of the paper, moving away from the triadic decision options: whether African agency is maturing, retarded or degenerating, into pointing out the empirical and policy implications of the results of the paper.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study adopts a qualitative, critical literature review approach centered on ten peer-reviewed, high-value journal articles focused on African agency within the field of African International Relations (AIR). The selection process was rigorous and collaborative, undertaken in consultation with the course convener of DPP 911: Africa in International Relations. An initial pool of over 35 scholarly articles—sourced from JSTOR and other respected academic repositories—was reviewed based on a jointly agreed selection criterion. These criteria included the explicit mention or centrality of "agency" in the article's title or abstract, the article's anchoring within AIR discourse, the prestige and academic reputation of the publishing journal, and empirical visibility based on engagement metrics such as reads and citations on platforms like ResearchGate. The final corpus of ten texts settled on: Brown (2012), Shaw (1975), Mngomezulu (2019), Murray-Evans (2015), Bach (2013), Kornprobst (2020), Harman & Brown (2013), Ramontja (2023), Links (2021), and Chipaike & Knowledge (2018); therefore spans nearly five decades (1975–2023), ensuring both temporal representativeness and thematic relevance, as it captures the evolution and conceptual shifts in understandings

of African agency across historical and geopolitical moments. This long-range selection also enables an appraisal of continuity and rupture in how Africa's role in global politics has been imagined and reimagined.

The analytical strategy employed in this review goes beyond merely summarizing existing literature. Rather, it undertakes a dialogical and interrogative reading of the texts, positioning the authors not only as commentators but as epistemic actors whose interventions shape the discourse on African agency. The method foregrounds three interrelated goals: first, to critically extract each author's conceptualization of agency; second, to assess how their arguments evolve in light of empirical developments and shifting global power dynamics; and third, to reflect on how each contribution helps address the guiding question of this study: *Is African agency maturing, retarded, degenerating, or too complex to categorize?* This methodological orientation is deliberately reflexive—it treats the literature as both data and dialogue, probing the ways in which scholarly arguments invite, resist, or complicate dominant narratives about Africa's place in international relations. The outcome is a layered synthesis that not only updates classical debates but also interrogates the political and epistemological stakes of choosing one interpretive frame over another. In doing so, this methodological framework enables a more nuanced and politically aware engagement with the enduring question of African agency in global affairs.

Conceptual Clarity

The concept of African agency sits at the core of this paper, yet it remains under-theorized and inconsistently operationalized in much of African International Relations (AIR) scholarship. Frequently invoked but rarely unpacked with sufficient depth, "agency" is often treated as self-evident—a presumed capacity to act, decide, or influence. However, as this review illustrates, African agency is not a singular or uniform phenomenon; rather, it is a layered, relational, and context-specific construct that resists easy classification. Across the ten core texts examined, five principal modalities of agency emerge—*instrumental, strategic, epistemic, symbolic,* and *historically-informed*. Each of these forms represents a distinctive yet interrelated dimension through which African actors engage, resist, adapt to, and reshape the global order.

Instrumental agency refers to the tactical, often short-term maneuvers by African actors to extract benefits or avert harm within an unequal global system. It reflects a pragmatic, transactional orientation in dealings with powerful states or institutions—visible, for instance, in how African negotiators navigate donor conditionalities or multilateral aid frameworks. Strategic agency, by contrast, is about long-term, goal-oriented behavior premised on the articulation of collective interests and future-oriented planning. This is most evident in regional integration efforts such as Agenda 2063 or the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), where African institutions assert long-term visions for continental development and autonomy.

Epistemic agency highlights the capacity of African scholars, institutions, and policy actors to challenge dominant knowledge paradigms and generate indigenous intellectual frameworks. This is where decolonial thought, pan-African philosophy, and Afrocentric international relations theory take center stage—responding to the epistemic erasures that have historically positioned Africa as an object rather than a subject of IR discourse. Similarly, symbolic agency concerns the performance, narration, and projection of African identity, sovereignty, and resistance in global arenas. Here, diplomatic rhetoric, participation in global summits, or symbolic leadership in peacekeeping or environmental negotiations are less about altering material conditions and more about asserting moral authority or collective dignity.

Finally, historically-informed agency situates present action within the enduring shadows of colonialism, the Cold War, and structural adjustment, recognizing how Africa's past shapes its repertoire of choices today. This form of agency does not imply determinism, but acknowledges that agency is exercised within inherited constraints—whether through institutional path dependencies or ideological residues. Across these dimensions, agency is expressed not only by states and governments but also by regional bodies like the AU, epistemic communities, pan-African networks, civil society organizations, and even non-state actors such as social movements or transnational advocacy groups.

This clarification is not merely semantic; it is central to avoiding the analytical pitfalls that have historically plagued the discourse. As Brown (2012) emphasizes, African agency must be situated within the broader

architecture of international political economy, where structural constraints and enabling conditions co-exist. Similarly, Chipaike and Matarutse (2018) challenge the reductive binaries of victimhood versus sovereignty, urging scholars to recognize the fluid and negotiated nature of agency. These conceptualizations resist static or universalist notions and instead call for a differentiated, empirically sensitive approach that recognizes both action and constraint. Thus, this paper contends that any serious engagement with African agency must begin with conceptual precision, paying attention not only to *who* exercises agency, but also *how*, *when*, and *to what effect*. In this way, the notion of agency becomes not a placeholder for vague assertions of African participation, but a rigorous analytical category that reveals the complex realities of Africa's entanglements in global politics.
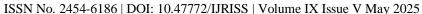
RESULTS

This section presents an analysis of ten key journal articles that offer both theoretical and empirical perspectives on the question of African agency in international relations. The selected scholars are recognized authorities in the field, and their contributions are crucial to understanding the central issues shaping the ongoing debate on the nature, scope, and complexity of African agency within the global system.

African Agency: Multiplicity, Sovereignty, and Historical Continuity

In his seminal article, *A Question of Agency: Africa in International Politics*, William Brown provides a suggestion for reorientation of how African participation in international relations should be conceptualized and assessed (Brown, 2012). Rather than subscribing to the long-standing tradition of viewing Africa as a continent merely "acted upon" by external forces, Brown insists on the necessity of repositioning Africa as a dynamic actor. From his perspective, such a repositioning is grounded in a tripartite analytical framework: first, understanding the varied dimensions of agency; second, appreciating the sovereign foundations that differentiate the roles of actors; and third, embracing a temporally embedded perspective that links present agency to historical legacies. Brown work can be viewed as suggesting a intellectual roadmap for grappling with the complexities of African agency in a global order historically skewed against its full expression. In doing so, he joins a growing body of scholars seeking to challenge narratives that have infantilized Africa or portrayed it as perpetually dependent and reactive (see Dunn, 2001; Clapham, 1996; Tieku, 2013; Acharya, 2011; Murithi, 2009; Langerud, 2016).

At the heart of Brown's (2012) argument is a commitment to analytic clarity around the meaning and manifestations of "African agency." He underscores that agency is not monolithic and cannot be reduced to the actions of states alone. Instead, African agency exists on multiple levels—including intergovernmental organizations such as the African Union (AU), sovereign national governments, individual state actors like diplomats and leaders, and an array of non-state actors. This layered approach not only resists oversimplification but also affirms the multiplicity of voices and interests operating under the umbrella of "Africa." For example, Brown notes that the establishment of the AU in 2002 marked a decisive institutional evolution, giving the continent a more structured and assertive platform for engaging in multilateral negotiations and global governance. Similarly, countries like South Africa have taken the lead in shaping Africa's place in key global forums such as the WTO, G8, and G20, underscoring the differentiated capacities and influence of individual states within broader continental initiatives (Brown, 2012; Sidiropoulos, 2014).

This pluralized understanding of agency also allows for the recognition of Africa's role in norm entrepreneurship and agenda-setting within global institutions. The African Group at the United Nations, for example, has increasingly coordinated to influence discussions on development finance, climate justice, and peacekeeping reforms (Zondi, 2017). Moreover, the continent's push for reform of the United Nations Security Council—articulated through the Ezulwini Consensus—represents a coordinated and deliberate assertion of continental interests, challenging the prevailing global power architecture (Murithi, 2009). Beyond formal diplomacy, regional economic communities such as ECOWAS and SADC have exercised significant agency in mediating conflicts and safeguarding democratic transitions, as demonstrated in the political interventions in The Gambia (2016–2017) and Zimbabwe (2008). These cases exemplify how Africa engages with global norms not just as a passive recipient but as a co-author of regional and international governance standards.

In addition to institutional and state-level actors, African agency is also animated by transnational civil society, epistemic communities, and grassroots movements. Non-state actors such as pan-African research networks, feminist movements, and climate justice coalitions have played an essential role in amplifying African perspectives on issues ranging from resource governance to intellectual property rights (Acharya, 2011; Tieku, 2013). These actors frequently challenge external policy prescriptions that ignore local contexts, asserting alternative imaginaries rooted in African realities. For instance, African civil society organizations were pivotal in shaping the discourse around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), advocating for priorities such as inequality, social protection, and indigenous knowledge systems (Bond, 2016). Taken together, these multi-scalar expressions of agency complicate reductionist portrayals of Africa and position the continent not only as a site of resistance but also as a laboratory for innovative responses to global challenges. Thus, Brown's framework remains foundational for scholars seeking to explore Africa's diverse roles in international relations beyond reactive paradigms.

Brown (2012) also pays close attention to the role of sovereignty as a foundational enabler of African agency, emphasizing that it is not merely a static legal status but a performative tool actively exercised by African states in international forums. Drawing on Wight's (2006) understanding of agency as "role-specific and contextually shaped," Brown argues that sovereignty is both the principle through which African states are recognized in international politics and the mechanism by which they claim legitimate space to act (Brown, 2012, p. 1899). Sovereignty, in this light, is more than symbolic—it is enacted in multilateral diplomacy, peacekeeping operations, and global negotiations. For instance, the African Union's coordinated response to perceived bias at the International Criminal Court (ICC), especially in cases involving Kenya and Sudan, illustrates how African leaders invoke sovereignty not to evade justice, but to assert jurisdictional equality and challenge selective application of international law. This move not only demonstrated a collective defence of political autonomy but also showed how sovereignty is deployed tactically to resist what many African states view as neo-imperial legal instruments (Murithi, 2013).

This strategic use of sovereignty is also evident in Africa's approach to global trade and environmental negotiations. During the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) negotiations between the European Union and African states, countries such as Nigeria and Senegal resisted pressure to sign trade terms that were seen as detrimental to long-term development, citing sovereign developmental priorities as the basis for their positions (Ndlovu, 2016). Similarly, within climate change negotiations, the African Group of Negotiators has consistently emphasized the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities," leveraging sovereign rights to development to argue for fairer climate financing mechanisms and adaptation support. These examples affirm Brown's position that African agency is not exercised through the benevolence of the international system but through deliberate and often contentious assertions of sovereign entitlement. By claiming their place at the table through established international norms, African states reframe their participation not as token inclusion but as principled engagement rooted in historical legitimacy and legal equality (Brown, 2012).

Yet, Brown (2012) is careful not to celebrate African agency uncritically. He introduces the concept of "external conditions of possibility" to emphasize that agency is never exercised in a vacuum but within global structures that often constrain its scope. These conditions vary across issue areas, depending on the interplay between African initiatives and entrenched global power asymmetries. For instance, while African states have made significant contributions in global climate governance—such as forming the African Group of Negotiators (AGN) at COP summits and advancing the African Renewable Energy Initiative (AREI)—their positions are often marginalized by wealthier countries that dominate financial commitments and technology transfers (Bodansky, 2016). Similarly, in trade negotiations under the World Trade Organization (WTO), African states have called for fairer terms in agricultural subsidies and intellectual property rights but continue to face resistance from powerful blocs like the EU and the United States (Hopewell, 2016). These examples show that despite assertive positioning, African actors often operate within normative and material constraints that limit the transformative potential of their agency.

The limitations are particularly visible in the realm of global security and peacekeeping, where African contributions are substantial but structurally dependent. While the African Union has made strides through missions such as AMISOM in Somalia and various ECOWAS interventions in West Africa, these efforts often

rely heavily on logistical, financial, and technical support from external powers like the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations (Williams, 2018). This dependency underscores how the continent's agency in peace and security is mediated by external actors who continue to shape the terms of engagement. Brown (2012) thus offers a nuanced perspective—affirming the growing strategic assertiveness of African actors while also recognizing the institutional and geopolitical limitations they confront. This balanced view reflects a broader scholarly consensus that African agency is both real and constrained, characterized by dynamic negotiation with the global order rather than full autonomy from it.
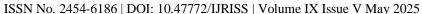
Crucially, Brown's (2012) insistence on historicizing agency invites a more layered understanding of African political engagement by foregrounding temporality as a critical analytical lens. He challenges the dominant narrative that frames Africa's role in international affairs as a recent or reactive phenomenon. Instead, he argues for recognition of Africa's agency as rooted in its own long-standing political traditions, anti-colonial movements, and post-independence aspirations for self-determination. This perspective refutes depictions of Africa as a passive terrain onto which global politics is inscribed, repositioning the continent as a historical actor with its own trajectory of interaction with the world. For example, the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) during the Cold War prominently featured African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere, who helped to define a third path that resisted both Western and Eastern blocs. These leaders' participation was not incidental but deeply grounded in Pan-Africanist thought and political philosophies of autonomy and solidarity (Adi, 2018). Brown's argument thus underscores how African strategies of engagement are anchored in historical consciousness and political traditions that long predate contemporary global governance structures.

This historical reframing also exposes the ideological work behind portrayals of Africa as perpetually marginal or victimized. Brown (2012, p. 1904) explicitly warns against depictions that render the continent "timeless," devoid of political initiative or strategic thought. Such framings are not merely descriptive; they are constitutive—they shape how Africa is perceived and engaged with in global politics. African agency, in Brown's formulation, should be viewed through the lens of continuity and evolution, not rupture or absence. The African Union's Agenda 2063, for instance, draws directly from earlier visions articulated during the era of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), including ambitions for political unity, economic self-reliance, and continental integration. Even seemingly new initiatives, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), find intellectual roots in decades of regionalism and collective economic planning (UNECA, 2020). Thus, far from being a blank slate, Africa's current global engagements are deeply historical, built upon prior knowledge, memory, and resistance. Brown's appeal to recover and foreground these histories invites scholars and practitioners to recognize the ideological bias in narratives that deny Africa's role as a historical agent in world affairs.

Summarily, William Brown's analysis points to a maturing conception of African agency, even as it remains uneven and contested. His framework does not romanticize African engagement but attempts to provide the theoretical tools to recognize and analyze it in its diversity, complexity, and historical depth. While acknowledging external constraints and internal challenges, he forcefully affirms that Africa is not a passive player but a region of multiple, sometimes contradictory, agencies actively shaping and being shaped by international politics. Therefore, in the context of the article *Disentangling the Question of Africa's Agency: Maturing, Retarded or Degenerating?*, Brown's work clearly supports the view that Africa's agency is maturing. This maturation is evident in the continent's increasing institutional assertiveness, its diversified international engagements, and its capacity to reframe the terms of its global participation—not as an exception or afterthought, but as a legitimate and necessary actor in the international system.

Political Economy of Constrained Agency

In his seminal piece, *the Political Economy of African International Relations,* Shaw's (1975) foundational contribution to the debate on African agency in international relations begins with a sharp critique of the inadequacy of dominant theoretical frameworks in explaining Africa's position in the global order. He notes like other writers (Amin, 1974; Rodney, 1972; Mkandawire, 2001; Moyo, 2009) that liberal and modernization theories and their attendant projects such as aid, fail to grasp the structural complexities of African states, particularly how their histories of colonialism and integration into the global capitalist economy continue to

shape their limited autonomy. In Shaw's view, the assumption that African states are naturally progressing toward Western-styled liberal democracies or economic models is both analytically weak and politically misleading. By rejecting this linear teleology of development, Shaw positions African agency not as an inevitable outcome of modernization, but as a deeply contested and constrained space marked by systemic inequality. This intervention is crucial in assessing whether African agency is "maturing" or "retarded"—as it suggests that the frameworks, we use to evaluate agency are themselves implicated in reproducing dependency.

Central to Shaw's analysis is his powerful engagement with the concept of neo-colonialism, which he presents, like Nkrumah (1965) as the main obstacle to meaningful African agency. While most African countries achieved formal political independence by the mid-20th century, Shaw argues that they remain economically subordinated to global capital through asymmetric relationships with former colonial powers, multinational corporations, and Bretton Woods institutions. This economic dependence undermines sovereignty and transforms the nature of state agency. For instance, in countries such as Zambia and Ghana, post-independence governments have struggled to exercise full control over their natural resources due to exploitative contracts signed with foreign mining and oil firms. Shaw's insight that "political independence does not equate to economic autonomy" remains highly relevant today, particularly when evaluating the conditionalities attached to foreign direct investment or structural adjustment policies that prioritize investor rights over local development. Thus, African agency, in this context, appears severely retarded—not due to internal deficiencies, but because of enduring external domination embedded within neo-colonial political economy.

Shaw introduces a compelling concept of dual agency, which further complicates our understanding of state behavior in Africa. According to this model, African leaders often find themselves caught between two imperatives: satisfying external economic interests and maintaining domestic legitimacy (Brown, 2001; Aiyede, 2010). This dynamic creates a contradictory situation in which African states project sovereignty and nationalism at home, while simultaneously enabling and profiting from exploitative global arrangements. The result is a governance model that is inherently ambivalent—where agency is exercised selectively and often serves elite survival rather than mass welfare. For example, Nigeria's strategic alignment with oil multinationals allows the state to accrue revenues while local communities in the Niger Delta suffer environmental degradation and socio-economic marginalization (Sesay, 2002). Such examples underscore Shaw's contention that Africa's agency must be analyzed not just at the level of formal diplomacy, but in terms of the material conditions that underlie elite decision-making (Ravenhill, 1985; Cheeseman, 2015). Dual agency, in this sense, reveals a degenerating form of political accountability, where sovereignty is hollowed out by elite complicity in global capitalism.

The author also critiques the uncritical application of liberal theories that overemphasize institutions and governance norms without accounting for the structural constraints that limit African agency. Shaw challenges scholars who assume that by merely adopting democratic norms, African states can transform their global standing. Instead, he calls for a political economy approach that highlights how internal class dynamics and global hierarchies intersect. In this view, African elites are not just victims of neocolonialism but are active participants in preserving systems that benefit them. For example, regimes in Uganda under Museveni or Cameroon under Biya have embraced neoliberal reforms not to expand national autonomy, but to secure aid and international legitimacy while consolidating authoritarian control. Shaw's argument implies that a superficial focus on institutional form, without analyzing the substance of power and material interests, leads to a misdiagnosis of agency. In such cases, the appearance of progress masks an entrenched reality of retarded or stunted agency, where the performance of sovereignty conceals its erosion.

A particularly provocative contribution in Shaw's paper is his discussion of "middle powers" within Africa—states like Kenya, Egypt, or South Africa—that possess relatively greater legislative, economic, or diplomatic leverage. While these states often claim to speak for the continent in international fora such as the African Union or the United Nations, Shaw cautions that their agency may in fact reinforce inequality within the continent. These countries tend to pursue foreign policies that align with global powers, seeking bilateral advantages rather than continental solidarity. South Africa's ambiguous role in Africa-China relations, for instance, reveals a pragmatic engagement that secures domestic investments but does not necessarily challenge broader asymmetries in Africa-China trade (Taylor, 2009; Lee, 2009; Lee, 2009; Carmody, 2010). Shaw thus

underscores that agency is unevenly distributed across the continent, and without a class- and power-sensitive lens, scholars may mistake elite regionalism for pan-African assertiveness. This reveals an important nuance: that even when African states demonstrate agency, it may be maturing in form but degenerating in content, as it often fails to uplift the majority of citizens.

Shaw extends his critique by examining regional cooperation and elite networking, arguing that these often mask rather than resolve the continent's structural vulnerabilities. While organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the Southern African Development Community (SADC) are frequently presented as evidence of rising African agency, Shaw questions the motives behind such cooperation (Adebajo, 2010; Schoeman, 2003). He suggests that regional integration often serves elite interests, facilitating trade liberalization and capital mobility without addressing issues of equity or representation. For instance, ECOWAS interventions in West African conflicts have sometimes been interpreted as more about stabilizing elite rule than fostering democratic transitions. Shaw's analysis challenges us to rethink what regionalism truly represents: a maturing of African strategic autonomy, or a repackaging of dependency through elite coalitions? His skepticism pushes the conversation beyond surface appearances and demands a deeper investigation into who benefits from so-called African agency.

In one of his most forward-looking arguments, Shaw calls for rethinking the locus of agency beyond the state and its elite actors. He insists that social movements, trade unions, peasant organizations, and urban youth groups often demonstrate alternative forms of political engagement that are more reflective of collective agency[1] than state diplomacy (Ballard et al., 2006; Tripp, 2000; Obadare, 2010; Ballard, Habib & Valodia, 2006). These grassroots actors resist both domestic authoritarianism and international exploitation. For instance, the Landless People's Movement in South Africa or the anti-austerity protests in Kenya and Senegal reveal an insurgent politics that challenges global and local structures of exclusion (Greenberg, 2004; Mbaye, 2010). By shifting focus to these non-state actors, Shaw anticipates the current scholarly move toward everyday agency and resistance studies, recognizing that the African public is not merely a passive victim of global processes but a site of contestation and creativity. This lens offers the most optimistic reading of agency as potentially maturing, provided that scholars and policymakers are willing to reorient their frameworks to foreground popular struggles rather than elite calculations.

Finally, Shaw concludes like Acharya (2011), by urging a theoretical reorientation in how we conceptualize African international relations. He argues that we must move beyond binary categories of dependence vs. independence and toward a more nuanced understanding of how power operates across multiple levels—historical, economic, cultural, and institutional. Agency, in this reframed view, is not a static attribute but a dynamic process shaped by both constraint and resistance. The imperative is to develop theories that are grounded in African realities and capable of capturing the complexity of Africa's place in the world. Shaw's closing plea resonates deeply with the central question of your paper: Africa's agency is not wholly maturing, nor entirely degenerating—it is a contested terrain, shaped by contradictions that demand sustained, critical engagement.

The Struggle Over Africa's Intellectual Agency

Mngomezulu (2019) interrogates the entrenched power asymmetries within the discipline of international relations (IR), presenting a sharp critique of how Africa has been structurally and epistemically excluded from the dominant currents of IR theory and practice. He highlights that "power is a contested concept, not just in IR but in other academic disciplines too. Everyone wants to have it and yet everyone attaches different meanings to it" (p. 185). This assertion reveals not just theoretical contestation but also the real politics of academic dominance, particularly the ways in which Anglo-American scholars—principally from the United States and the United Kingdom—have historically monopolized the field, shaping IR's epistemological foundations in ways that marginalize African narratives. This condition echoes Ake's (1982) critique that the social sciences in Africa have been "hopelessly dependent" on Western paradigms, and supports Zondi's (2020) argument that IR's mainstream remains "a continuation of Euro-modernist myths of civilizational

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[1] For example, rural women's associations in Mali which have successfully lobbied for land rights reforms and influenced national policies (Behrman et al., 2014)
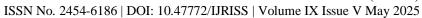
superiority." Africa's agency, therefore, is not just stunted but actively retarded by systemic exclusion, suggesting that the continent's marginality is not natural but constructed through power relations disguised as scholarly neutrality.

The paper forcefully argues that the narrative of African passivity in global politics must be dismantled. Mngomezulu emphasizes that "Africa has made significant contributions to IR but has been deliberately excluded from IR discussions" (p. 185), citing examples such as the continent's centrality in anti-colonial struggles, its role in shaping UN resolutions, and African scholarship's substantive engagements with democracy and governance. For instance, African states were among the most vocal actors in the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War (Mazrui, 1980), and countries like Ghana, Tanzania, and Algeria actively influenced global human rights discourse through the UN in the 1960s and 1970s (Mutua, 2002). Further, intellectuals such as Claude Ake, Ali Mazrui, and Archie Mafeje have all interrogated the foundations of liberal democratic theory from African perspectives, with Mngomezulu noting that "African scholars have led a debate on the substance of democracy that deepens the liberal construct in both meaningful and useful ways" (p. 189). This makes the exclusion of African voices from mainstream IR both unjust and intellectually impoverishing. Nkiwane (2001) affirms this, arguing that African thought adds not only a critique but also a unique normative and conceptual contribution to global IR.

Mngomezulu's critique of Eurocentrism in IR theory aligns with broader efforts to decolonize knowledge systems. He argues that IR as a discipline "has been the site of the power struggle, firstly between the British and the Americans, but lately between the West and Africa" (p. 191). This claim situates Africa's agency within an ongoing epistemic conflict where knowledge production is not neutral but reflects hegemonic control. For example, the exclusion of African experiences from foundational IR texts has led to what Tickner (2003) calls "epistemological silencing." The result is a disciplinary paradigm that naturalizes the dominance of Western histories and ideas while rendering African contributions peripheral. In practical terms, this leads to skewed representations of African states as perpetual recipients of global order, rather than co-constructors of it. This distortion mirrors the representation of African states in security and development studies, where they are often seen only through the lens of "fragile states" or "zones of disorder" (Clapham, 1996; Englebert & Tull, 2008), reinforcing notions of degeneration rather than recognizing active negotiation of global norms.

In advancing a way forward, Mngomezulu insists on a rethinking—not merely an inclusion—of Africa in IR. He argues, "the idea is not to write Africa into IR. Instead, the focus should be on revisiting the IR discipline with a view to presenting it in a holistic manner which includes all role-players" (p. 191). This distinction is crucial. It challenges tokenistic inclusion and instead calls for a paradigmatic shift where Africa is viewed as an epistemic agent rather than a belated participant. Scholars such as Acharya and Buzan (2019) have similarly emphasized the importance of Global IR, which centers local histories and ideas in the re-theorization of international relations. Mngomezulu's emphasis on collaboration also calls out the complicity of Western scholars in maintaining the status quo, stating clearly that "European and American scholars have as much to do to correct the current exclusion of Africa as Africans do" (p. 191). This resonates with the calls by scholars such as Mbembe (2016) and Zeleza (1997) who advocate for an epistemic pluralism that values knowledge from the Global South as constitutive, not derivative, of global thought. It is through such restructuring that Africa's agency can move from the margins to a co-equal status in shaping IR theory and practice.

Ultimately, Mngomezulu's contribution to the debate on African agency in IR is not only a critique of exclusion but a visionary appeal for transformation. He powerfully asserts that "before, during and after colonial occupation, the continent continued to play its role in global politics" (p. 191), challenging the notion that African agency is a recent or reactive phenomenon. This assertion is supported by historical evidence of Africa's centrality in global trade, diplomacy, and norm entrepreneurship—from Pan-African congresses in the early 20th century to Africa's role in shaping the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Murithi, 2011). His argument underlines that Africa's agency is multifaceted—expressed in resistance to domination, in contribution to global ideas, and in the envisioning of alternative world orders. As such, Mngomezulu's work pushes us to consider whether Africa's agency is maturing through reclamation, retarded by structural exclusion, or degenerating under epistemic oppression—and it compels us to act in ways that ensure the first of these outcomes.

Case Illustration: The SADC-Minus EPA Negotiations and African Agency

Murray-Evans (2015) provides a compelling analysis of African agency in the context of Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) negotiations between the European Union (EU) and a group of Southern African states known as SADC-Minus—comprising Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, and South Africa. The study contributes to the broader literature on African agency in international politics by advocating for a conceptual distinction between ontological questions about the structure-agency relationship and empirical investigations into the preferences, strategies, and influence of African actors. This framing is important for escaping a reductionist view that equates agency solely with resistance or influence, and instead encourages attention to coping, compromise, and strategic engagement within unequal global structures.

He writes:

"If the focus of the African agency literature falls only on those African actions that are expressed in the form of successful influence, contestation or resistance, we may miss the wide range of African actions that serve to perpetuate existing structures or that are simply geared towards coping and survival within a highly unequal global system" (p. 2).

Importantly, Murray-Evans challenges the normative assumption that agency is inherently emancipatory or expressed only through contestation. Instead, African states often act within systemic constraints, and their strategies may include accommodation, survival, and the pursuit of limited developmental gains. He thus defines agency in a constructivist vein—as "the ability or capacity of an actor to act consciously and, in so doing, to attempt to realise his or her intentions" within a structure that is not fully determinate (p. 5). This approach allows for empirical exploration of how African states interpret context, formulate strategies, and produce outcomes, even within asymmetrical power relations.

One of the critical findings in the paper is the heterogeneity of preferences, ideologies and development strategies among African states involved in the EPA process. Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Mozambique—termed 'EPA enthusiasts'—favoured liberalisation and saw the EPAs as instruments of developmental opportunity and market access. These preferences were rooted in national development plans prioritising deregulation, diversification, and donor alignment. Conversely, countries like South Africa and Namibia were more sceptical, wary of the EPAs' implications for policy space and industrial sovereignty. These divisions undermined regional cohesion and illustrated how agency is not monolithic but fractured along lines of ideology, economic interests, and power asymmetries.

The paper also situates agency within the institutional and historical context of Southern Africa, particularly the fragility of regional structures like SADC and SACU. South Africa's dominance played a decisive role in steering the negotiations. Initially adopting a resistant stance, it later shifted to active engagement, invoking the language of regionalism and development to frame the EU's tactics as aggressive and contradictory to their own commitments to integration. This rhetorical strategy allowed South Africa to both challenge EU positions and align other member states to its preferences. Murray-Evans (2015) demonstrates that rhetorical contestation is a form of agency, where discourse becomes a tool for shaping both intra-regional and external negotiations.

Ultimately, the study makes two significant contributions to the literature on African agency. First, it shows that African agency must be studied as a context-specific, relational, and strategic phenomenon rather than as a normative ideal of resistance. Second, it warns against assuming that regional cooperation uniformly enhances African agency. In practice, regional dynamics—especially when shaped by internal hierarchies—can obscure or suppress the preferences of smaller or less powerful states. Thus, while regionalism is often presented as a strategy for amplifying African voices on the global stage, it can also be a terrain of internal contestation and constraint.

Murray-Evans' work adds important empirical depth to the discourse on African international relations by illustrating how African states, operating under asymmetrical conditions, still exercise differentiated forms of

agency. These include both strategic alignment and cautious resistance, with outcomes shaped by national developmental trajectories, regional institutional architectures, and global discursive framings.

In light of the analytical frame posed by *"Disentangling the Question of Africa's Agency: Maturing, Retarded or Degenerating?"*, Murray-Evans' analysis suggests that African agency is maturing—albeit unevenly and under structural constraint. His emphasis on reflexivity, strategic interpretation, and empirical variation points to a more politically sophisticated, differentiated, and situationally responsive African agency. While Africa continues to operate under profound asymmetries of power, its states are increasingly capable of navigating these pressures with discernment, strategic adaptation, and selective resistance. Rather than degenerating into subservience or being retarded by structural dependency alone, African agency in this case reflects a growing ability to manage complexity, assert interests (however unevenly), and contest global norms through both institutional negotiation and rhetorical engagement. The SADC-Minus EPA thus emerges not as a story of African capitulation or idealized resistance, but of cautious and pragmatic political agency in a multipolar and uncertain world.

At the Frontier of Agency; Africa's Uneven Ascent in Global Politics

In his seminal contribution, Daniel Bach (2013) interrogates the evolving narratives of Africa's place in international relations by employing the concept of the "frontier" as both a metaphor and a tool for analyzing global perceptions of the continent. This metaphorical lens enables Bach to unravel how Africa's agency has been constructed, contested, and occasionally affirmed in the international arena since the end of the Cold War. He argues that "the association of the frontier with a diversity of interpretations offers a useful tool to monitor the narratives, policies and trajectories associated with the African continent" (p. 2). The metaphor of the frontier allows us to grasp the tensions between Africa's structural marginality and its emergent importance in global discourses, capturing both its perceived underdevelopment and its economic potential. Through this analytical device, Bach introduces a dialectical tension that has shaped the modern understanding of African agency—caught between being an object of external imposition and a subject of strategic reengagement.

Bach's historical framing reminds us that for decades, Africa was positioned as a "distant abroad" and later a "significant other," always peripheral and rarely autonomous in global discourse. He notes that "theorists in the field traditionally had been prone to depicting Africa as a global periphery, an agency-less victim of great power manipulations… Africa exists only to the extent that it is acted upon" (p. 5). This framing resonates deeply with dependency theory and postcolonial critiques, which highlight how global political economy structures render African sovereignty contingent. However, Bach identifies a shift in the 1990s and 2000s, whereby Africa began to be recast—notably by emerging powers like China, India, and Brazil—as a space of strategic importance, resource wealth, and political partnership. These powers approached Africa not solely through the lens of humanitarianism or conditional aid, but as a frontier of opportunity and coalition-building. In this context, African states have increasingly leveraged their natural resources, voting blocs in international institutions, and regional organizations to reposition themselves as actors in global negotiations, thereby creating new spaces for agency.

Central to Bach's analysis is the recognition of how Africa's deepening economic integration into the global system reflects both a transformation in its role and the persistence of structural dependency. While increased foreign investment and market liberalization signal potential for growth and global relevance, they are also couched in terms of Africa's resource extractivism and continued vulnerability to external shocks. Bach writes that "the current revival of interest in Africa is associated with two broad scenarios: increased dependency on commodities or a pattern of innovative policy-initiatives that offer a contemporary expression of the emerging economies paradigm" (p. 2). The duality embedded in these scenarios illustrates how Africa's agency remains constrained by the very avenues that enable its visibility. For instance, the rapid influx of Chinese investment in infrastructure and extractive industries, while contributing to development, often replicates asymmetries reminiscent of past colonial economic relations (Alden, 2007). Nonetheless, African states have also used this opening to diversify diplomatic relations and exercise policy autonomy, suggesting agency is not wholly extinguished but unevenly distributed and pragmatically exercised.

Bach also foregrounds the African Union's NEPAD initiative as a pivotal, albeit flawed, expression of collective African agency. He observes that while NEPAD symbolized a commitment to good governance and integration into the global economy, "its major achievement probably lay elsewhere: it had contributed to keeping Africa on the global agenda" (p. 8). NEPAD's emphasis on liberalization and its creation of the African Peer Review Mechanism attempted to redefine Africa not as a passive aid recipient but as a normative actor committed to reform. However, the limited implementation of its goals and the short-lived enthusiasm surrounding its launch led to skepticism about whether such frameworks truly enhanced Africa's capacity to act on its own terms. The international endorsement of NEPAD, especially by the G8, arguably demonstrated that Africa could set the terms of engagement, yet the continent remained susceptible to external conditionalities and donor priorities. In this regard, Africa's agency appears performative and constrained, simultaneously asserted and compromised.

Moreover, Bach's use of the frontier metaphor highlights how Africa's growing internal consumer markets and indigenous entrepreneurial ecosystems challenge static depictions of dependency. The rise of mobile banking in Kenya, for example, through platforms like M-Pesa, has been hailed globally as a model of innovation emerging from the Global South (Jack & Suri, 2011). These developments illustrate that domestic capital accumulation and technological leapfrogging are becoming salient sources of African agency. Yet, Bach cautions against romanticizing the frontier, warning that this framing may obscure exploitative dynamics and environmental degradation. The extractive economy, he notes, still dominates, raising questions about the sustainability of Africa's current development path. As such, Africa's agency must be interrogated not only through its increasing participation in global markets but also through the quality and autonomy of that participation.

Bach's conclusion is instructive in shaping a broader understanding of Africa's place in global politics. He acknowledges the historical marginalization of Africa in dominant IR theory and policy, but also points out that "a slight shift in perspective could bring the continent 'to the centre of various paradigms and discourses'" (p. 7). He refers to Africa's new relevance in emerging security issues, global health, and regionalism, offering evidence that the continent is being reconstituted as a site of knowledge production, norm entrepreneurship, and strategic action. Nonetheless, this evolution is not linear. The continent's agency is fragmented—distributed unevenly among countries, dependent on sectoral strength, and vulnerable to discursive and material appropriation by more powerful actors.

In light of your overarching question—*Is Africa's agency maturing, retarded, or degenerating?*—Bach's analysis most closely aligns with the argument that Africa's agency is maturing, though cautiously and unevenly. His use of the frontier metaphor captures the simultaneity of marginality and possibility, constraint and creativity. Africa is no longer merely acted upon; it increasingly participates in the co-creation of its global image and interests, both through regional initiatives and external partnerships. Yet this maturity is still nascent, surrounded by unresolved contradictions and fragile institutional foundations. What Bach offers is not an uncritical celebration of African ascendance but a realistic appraisal of an evolving agency that must navigate, reshape, and sometimes resist the structural frontiers imposed upon it.

Contours of Influence: African Agency in the International Politics of Nuclear Disarmament

In *African Agency and Global Orders: The Demanding Case of Nuclear Arms Control*, Kornprobst (2020) crafts a nuanced, empirically grounded narrative that challenges dominant assumptions about Africa's passivity in international relations by foregrounding African states as active, strategic agents in shaping nuclear arms control regimes. The central thesis posits that, despite structural constraints and marginalization by nuclear-armed powers, African states have played a consequential role—particularly through shaping background institutions that underpin global nuclear governance. Kornprobst's intervention is both theoretical and empirical; he contests Eurocentric meta-narratives that present Africa as a mere object of international order, arguing instead that "a small body of literature has emerged that challenges the conceived wisdom," showing that African actors "are at times rather successful in shaping international institutions" (p. 908). Through the prism of three pivotal moments—the creation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), its indefinite extension in the 1990s, and the emergence of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)—the study demonstrates how African states, through sustained diplomacy, norm

entrepreneurship, and strategic alliances, influenced the discursive and institutional architecture of the global nuclear order.

Kornprobst's analysis of the NPT's origins (1958–1970) effectively subverts the notion that African states were peripheral actors. Rather, he shows that their participation, particularly through the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and through the initiatives of states like Ghana, Nigeria, and Egypt, was pivotal in transforming the scope of global nuclear discussions from mere non-proliferation to encompassing disarmament and the peaceful use of nuclear energy. While acknowledging that African states were sidelined during the *decisive* design phase—where their proposals for equitable technology transfer and stronger disarmament clauses were rejected by the U.S. and Soviet Union—Kornprobst emphasizes their earlier contribution to framing the terms of debate. This highlights his core methodological and conceptual argument: to appreciate African agency, scholars must look beyond foreground institutions (codified texts like the NPT) and examine the background norms and discourses that shape them. As he notes, African actors "were, together with like-minded states from other regions, quite successful in shaping the background institutions that set the frame for the foreground institutions enshrined in the NPT" (p. 900). Thus, African co-authorship is not always inscribed in final treaties, but it is embedded in the ideological and normative architectures that precede them.

The strategic repositioning of African states during the NPT's extension negotiations (1974–1995) further supports Kornprobst's claim about agency. By this time, African diplomats, especially from Egypt and Nigeria, had matured into effective 'spokesstates'—a term that captures their role as both norm entrepreneurs and coalition-builders among non-nuclear states. The diplomacy during this period reflects not only continuity in Africa's advocacy for disarmament and technological equity but also a growing sophistication in navigating the multilateral system. The indefinite extension of the NPT was contingent, in part, on African actors' ability to mobilize shared grievances and aspirations within the Global South, particularly through South-South cooperation. This moment of diplomatic influence underscores the interplay between long-term background advocacy and opportunistic engagement with foreground negotiations, again reinforcing the need to reconceptualize agency not as momentary disruption but as layered and temporal.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Kornprobst's analysis lies in his treatment of the TPNW and the shift toward a human security paradigm. African agency here is not only visible but decisive, as African states and individuals—such as Egypt's Nabil Elaraby and Nigeria's Olusegun Obasanjo—actively contributed to the framing of nuclear disarmament as a humanitarian imperative. This paradigmatic shift, supported by the UNDP's 1994 report on human security and furthered by Kofi Annan's *In Larger Freedom* (2005), reflects the resonance of African diplomatic ideas with global civil society. The TPNW, emerging from the humanitarian initiative, embodies the success of African states in aligning normative agendas across state and non-state actors, a strategy that Kornprobst sees as central to their diplomatic efficacy. As he notes, "The forum lobbied for security to refer to human beings rather than states" (p. 906), marking a conceptual transformation in how security itself is understood and legislated at the global level.

Importantly, Kornprobst avoids overstating the case. He concedes that African states "may at times struggle to leave a mark on negotiating foreground institutions" but insists that they are "more successful in moulding background institutions" (p. 910). This distinction is vital: it reframes the criteria for measuring agency. Rather than gauging success by formal authorship or treaty outcomes, Kornprobst urges scholars to trace the genealogies of norms, discourses, and networks—realms where African influence is more pronounced but less visible. Such a move is not merely methodological; it is epistemological, challenging IR scholarship to question whose contributions are deemed legible in the first place. By redirecting attention from final texts to the broader ecology of ideas, values, and coalitions that shape international outcomes, Kornprobst aligns with a decolonial IR agenda that insists on recognizing the multiplicity of actors, knowledges, and strategies in world politics.

Kornprobst's study, then, is a powerful rejoinder to depictions of Africa as passive or peripheral in international affairs. His argument that African states have persistently and strategically engaged with global nuclear governance—shaping its evolution even when excluded from its formal processes—opens up new possibilities for understanding agency as relational, discursive, and deeply political. As he concludes, "African diplomacy did make a difference in shaping the global nuclear order, although NWS were not easily swayed"

(p. 909). This measured but assertive claim invites future scholarship to further investigate the micro-processes, intra-African dynamics, and transnational networks through which African agency manifests. Kornprobst not only vindicates African diplomacy within a specific policy domain but also contributes to a broader re-theorization of global order—one in which power is not only exercised by the dominant, but also constantly negotiated, resisted, and reshaped by the ostensibly weak.

In light of the broader debate encapsulated in the theme *Disentangling the Question of Africa's Agency: Maturing, Retarded or Degenerating?*, Kornprobst's (2020) contribution decisively leans toward the argument that African agency is maturing**,** albeit within a constrained global structure. Rather than accepting the dominant narratives that portray Africa as a passive recipient of global norms or merely reacting to international pressures, the study meticulously illustrates how African states have strategically mobilized diplomatic tools, leveraged historical legitimacy, and shaped normative frameworks—particularly within the background institutions of the global nuclear order. While African states have faced structural marginalization and have at times been sidelined in the crafting of foreground institutions such as the NPT, Kornprobst convincingly shows that they have played a formative role in shaping the very discursive and normative architectures that enabled later developments like the TPNW. This is not the story of degeneration or stagnation, but one of gradual but deliberate maturation—of African diplomacy growing more sophisticated, networked, and normatively potent over time. In tracing these long arcs of influence, the study affirms that Africa is neither retreating from the global stage nor merely surviving within it, but is instead slowly asserting itself as a co-author of global security governance, signaling a maturing agency that must be recognized both in theory and in practice.

Reconceiving Africa's Position in International Relations – A Call for Epistemic Pluralism and Global Agency

Harman and Brown (2013) conducts an interrogation of Africa's marginalization in the discipline of International Relations (IR), highlighting a persistent epistemological and ontological gap in how African realities are represented—or rather misrepresented—in global theoretical debates. The article is premised on a paradox: despite the intensifying international relevance of African issues, the continent remains on the intellectual periphery of mainstream IR theory. The authors argue that this exclusion is not simply a function of disciplinary oversight but is deeply rooted in the Western epistemic architecture of IR, which privileges great power politics and Euro-American paradigms of sovereignty, statehood, and global order. By foregrounding this marginalization, the article exposes the limitations of dominant IR frameworks in accommodating the political complexities, historical specificities, and evolving agency of African actors.

At the same time, the article recognizes that empirical research on Africa within international relations has proliferated significantly. From studies on conflict and peacebuilding to analyses of humanitarianism, trade regimes, and global health governance, Africa features prominently in empirical explorations. Yet this empirical richness is undercut by a conceptual disconnect: Africa is often deployed as a site for applying pre-existing theoretical models rather than as a source of theoretical innovation or critique. Harman and Brown criticize this instrumentalist engagement, noting that Africa is frequently cast as illustrative of pathologies—state failure, corruption, illicit flows—thereby reifying its subordinate status. This framing both reinforces Africa's position as an "object" of international relations rather than a "subject" with its own agential capacity, and reveals a deeper disciplinary reluctance to allow African experiences to inform, challenge, or redefine the theoretical boundaries of IR.

Crucially, the authors call for a more reflexive and dialogical engagement between African studies and the field of IR, wherein the analytical tools of the latter are not merely imposed upon African contexts but are interrogated, adapted, and potentially reconstituted through African perspectives. This appeal to epistemic pluralism is central to the article's intervention, as it positions Africa not merely as a passive recipient of international structures but as an active site of political, normative, and institutional innovation. Indeed, Harman and Brown point to practical innovations emerging from Africa—such as mobile financial technologies, regional security arrangements, and participatory governance mechanisms—as evidence that African contexts are fertile grounds for reimagining international cooperation and governance. These

innovations not only contest the notion of Africa as a developmental laggard but also underscore the continent's capacity to generate models with global relevance.
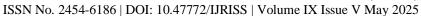
Nevertheless, the article is not uncritical of the state of African IR scholarship itself. South Africa, often cited as the intellectual hub of IR on the continent, is characterized by a vibrant yet empirically skewed scholarship that rarely ventures into theoretical abstraction. This empirical orientation, while valuable, inadvertently reinforces the perception that Africa is a provider of data rather than theory. Harman and Brown thus raise a vital concern about the politics of knowledge production in IR: who theorizes, from where, and about whom? In doing so, they align with broader decolonial critiques that call for a redistribution of epistemic authority in global knowledge systems. For Africa's agency in international relations to be taken seriously, African scholars and institutions must be empowered not only to contribute data but also to shape the theoretical frameworks through which global dynamics are understood.

Ultimately, Harman and Brown argue for a disciplinary reorientation that moves beyond tokenistic inclusion to genuine intellectual integration. The project of "worlding beyond the West" requires that IR take seriously the histories, contributions, and political trajectories of regions like Africa—not as peripheral curiosities but as central to the evolution of global order. This reorientation would entail reconceptualizing IR as a pluralist discipline, open to multiple epistemologies and geopolitical experiences. It would also require IR scholars to critically reflect on the ways in which their categories of analysis—such as sovereignty, development, and security—are imbued with Eurocentric assumptions that often misrecognize or misread African realities. In so doing, the article positions Africa not only as a space of exception or experimentation but as a legitimate interlocutor in the theoretical and normative conversations that define international relations.

In the context of the broader debate on Africa's agency—whether it is maturing, retarded, or degenerating—Harman and Brown's intervention affirms the continent's potentially maturing agency, contingent on the recalibration of both IR theory and African scholarly production. While institutional and epistemological constraints remain, the growing recognition of Africa's role in shaping international norms and practices, coupled with calls for more inclusive frameworks of knowledge, suggest a pathway towards greater agency. However, this maturation is not automatic; it requires deliberate efforts to dismantle hierarchical knowledge systems and to center African voices, experiences, and epistemologies within global theoretical discourses. In this sense, Africa's agency is not merely a descriptive condition but a political and scholarly project that must be actively pursued both within and beyond the academy.

Ramontja's (2023) examination of African political thought and its role in shaping global political economy (GPE) offers a critical perspective on the longstanding marginalization of African agency in international relations (IR). His paper begins with a forceful critique of the persistent portrayal of Africa within the global political arena as a passive recipient of external interventions, rather than a contributor to global discourses. This framing has, for decades, reinforced a narrative that sidelines African political contributions, positioning Africa as a mere object in the global order. By introducing Afrocentricity as a theoretical lens, Ramontja challenges this view, arguing for a reconfiguration of GPE theories that foreground African insights and experiences. His analysis uncovers a deeper question about Africa's political agency: Is it maturing, retarded, or degenerating? In this light, Ramontja's critique is a necessary intervention in the discourse on African agency, one that directly questions the extent to which African political thought can mature and influence global politics, or whether it remains hindered by colonial legacies and external domination.

The invocation of Afrocentricity in the paper serves as a robust framework for challenging the Eurocentric biases that dominate mainstream IR theories. Afrocentricity, which centers African experiences, histories, and perspectives, offers an antidote to the neoliberal and neorealist theories that have traditionally overlooked or dismissed African agency. By critiquing these prevailing paradigms, Ramontja's argument resonates with broader critiques of global political economy, particularly those advanced by scholars like Amin (1976), who also critiques the historical neglect of African contributions to global economic thought. However, while Afrocentricity provides a powerful theoretical tool, Ramontja could enhance his analysis by engaging more deeply with other non-Western epistemologies. The concept of Global IR, as advocated by scholars such as Acharya (2014), calls for a broader inclusivity of diverse epistemic traditions beyond Afrocentricity, which could potentially provide a more comprehensive framework for analyzing Africa's place in global politics. By

engaging with other non-Western frameworks, Ramontja's critique could move beyond a singular focus on Afrocentricity and toward a more global conversation about the role of marginalized regions in shaping international relations.

The broader trajectory toward maturing agency

Central to Ramontja's critique is the argument that African scholarship has long been underappreciated and undervalued in global political discourse. Through a careful examination of African intellectuals like Amin (1976) and Mkandawire (2010), the paper highlights how their works have fundamentally challenged dominant global economic paradigms. Amin's critiques of neoliberal policies and Mkandawire's analysis of the detrimental effects of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) offer powerful insights into the failures of Western-imposed economic frameworks on the African continent. These scholars not only provide alternative ways of thinking about Africa's place in the global economy but also emphasize the need to decolonize knowledge production. Yet, while Ramontja draws attention to these contributions, his analysis could benefit from a deeper exploration of the barriers to the recognition and integration of African scholarship in mainstream GPE discussions. The global academic system, which remains dominated by Western institutions and practices, presents significant obstacles to the dissemination of African intellectual thought. The lack of adequate platforms for African scholars and the marginalization of African political thought in mainstream IR journals highlight the systemic issues that prevent the maturation of African agency within global intellectual discourse. Without addressing these structural barriers, the paper risks overlooking the continued challenges faced by African intellectuals striving to assert their agency in global academic spaces.

Furthermore, Ramontja's emphasis on postcolonialism as a lens for understanding African agency adds a crucial layer to the discussion of Africa's political maturation. Postcolonial theory, which critiques the ongoing domination of Africa by Western epistemologies, serves as an important tool for reclaiming African historical narratives. Writers like Achebe (1958), who have long contested the dominance of Western knowledge systems, provide a powerful counter-narrative that underscores the importance of African voices in global political discourse. However, while postcolonialism is an essential perspective for understanding African agency, it is not without its limitations. Postcolonial theory tends to focus on the external forces of domination and neglects the internal dynamics that shape African politics. By failing to critically engage with the political, economic, and social conditions within African states, postcolonialism sometimes overlooks the complexities of intra-African power structures that can hinder the realization of full political agency. Scholars like Jackson and Lawson (1993) have critiqued the postcolonial emphasis on external domination, arguing that internal factors also play a significant role in shaping African political outcomes. By incorporating this critique, Ramontja could offer a more nuanced understanding of African agency—one that recognizes both external and internal factors in the political maturation process.

Pan-Africanism plays a central role in Ramontja's analysis, as it represents a political and intellectual movement that has sought to unify African states and empower African agency in global affairs. The evolution of Pan-African thought, from its early roots in the writings of figures like Du Bois (1969) and Nkrumah (1963), to its contemporary expressions in movements like the African Union, offers a powerful testament to Africa's collective struggle for political independence and social justice. Ramontja's examination of Pan-Africanism underscores its importance not only as a theoretical framework but also as a practical movement that seeks to unify Africans and amplify their collective political voice. Yet, while Pan-Africanism has played a significant role in the quest for African political agency, it also faces significant challenges in the contemporary era. The fragmentation of the Pan-African movement, fueled by regional divisions, neoliberal policies, and global power imbalances, has made it difficult for Pan-Africanism to fully realize its potential in shaping African agency on the world stage. The internal contradictions within Pan-Africanism, as well as the rise of new political and economic dynamics on the continent, point to a complex reality in which Africa's political agency may be maturing, but still faces significant setbacks. Engaging with contemporary scholars like Táíwò (2020), who critiques the limitations of Pan-Africanism in the current global context, could deepen Ramontja's analysis of the movement's relevance in today's world.

Ultimately, Ramontja's call for greater recognition of African scholarship in GPE and IR is a crucial step in the effort to empower African agency. The paper highlights the intellectual contributions of African scholars

and argues for their integration into global political discourse. However, the persistent underrecognition of African intellectual contributions within mainstream GPE analysis points to a deeper question about the conditions that prevent African scholarship from flourishing in global academic spaces. Structural barriers in the global academic system, coupled with the continuing dominance of Western paradigms in political and economic thought, present significant obstacles to the full realization of African agency. Until these systemic issues are addressed, African political thought will remain marginalized, and the maturation of African political agency will remain incomplete. In this regard, Ramontja's analysis points to a critical moment in African political history—one in which the question of Africa's agency is still very much in flux. Is it maturing? Is it retarded? Or is it degenerating? This question remains unresolved, as Africa continues to navigate the complexities of its political, economic, and intellectual struggles on the global stage.

Strategic Crossroads or Subtle Subjugation? African Agency and the Politics of Engagement in China's Belt and Road Initiative

In evaluating Links' (2021) contribution to the discourse on African agency, the analysis of Africa's engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emerges as a vital lens for understanding whether Africa's agency in international relations is maturing, retarded, or degenerating. The paper challenges monolithic views of Africa as a passive actor in global affairs, particularly within the structure of South-South cooperation. Through the BRI, African states are positioned at a strategic crossroads where their agency is neither predetermined nor wholly surrendered—it is rather continuously negotiated. The framing of the BRI as aligning with the African Union's Agenda 2063 creates a normative space where agency is imagined not simply as resistance, but as strategic alignment and constructive engagement with a global power that presents alternatives to Western developmental paradigms. Yet, this theoretical promise is shadowed by the reality of structural asymmetries and dependencies that have long characterized Africa's place in global political economy.

The dual narratives presented in the paper—developmental opportunity versus dependency trap—mirror the broader debate on African agency. On the one hand, the optimistic perspective views African states as capable of harnessing Chinese capital to pursue self-defined development objectives. This view reflects a maturing form of agency where African actors act as agenda setters and engage in bargaining processes to secure national and regional interests. This aligns with scholarship by Mawdsley (2012), who emphasizes the agency of Southern actors within development cooperation, showing that African states are not simply reactive. On the other hand, the dependency narrative evokes historical critiques akin to those of Walter Rodney (1972), warning of neo-colonial dynamics embedded in unequal economic relationships. Critics argue that unchecked participation in the BRI could entrench debt dependence, undermine local industries, and compromise policy sovereignty—outcomes that would suggest a degenerating or at best stagnating form of agency.

Importantly, Links (2021) problematizes the conceptualization of agency as synonymous with material power. By shifting the analytical gaze toward more nuanced expressions of influence—such as diplomatic maneuvering, agenda setting, and normative contestation—the paper reflects a broader academic shift that includes scholars like Achille Mbembe (2001), who call for a reevaluation of African subjectivity beyond binary categories of domination and submission. Within this interpretive framework, African states exhibit forms of "soft" agency that may not be immediately visible in conventional geopolitical metrics but are nonetheless significant in shaping the terms of engagement with China. These include selective project prioritization, renegotiation of debt terms, and leveraging Chinese interest in African markets to secure favorable terms. Such strategic agency, while not uniform across the continent, evidences a context-specific and evolving capability to shape international interactions.

The emphasis on the multiplicity of African actors further reinforces the idea that agency cannot be essentialized. Links' recognition of the heterogeneity within Africa—state and non-state actors, regional organizations, local governments, and civil society—enriches the analysis and departs from reductionist narratives that treat Africa as a singular, homogenous entity. This pluralistic perspective recalls the work of Cornelissen et al. (2012), who argue that African agency must be understood as a dynamic and decentralized process, not confined to state diplomacy alone. In the context of the BRI, this multiplicity is particularly salient as it reflects varied national strategies toward Chinese investment, with some states exhibiting assertiveness in

policy design and oversight, while others remain vulnerable to opaque deals and elite capture. The unevenness of agency here is not a weakness but a diagnostic tool for understanding the political economy of engagement.

However, the paper is not uncritical in its optimism. The contested nature of African agency is laid bare through the contradictions inherent in China-Africa relations. While Chinese engagement offers infrastructure and development capital, it also risks replicating the same extractive and externally oriented models that African states have long struggled to overcome. The perception of unbalanced partnerships raises questions about how far Africa's agency can genuinely evolve if systemic constraints—both internal (governance deficits, elite complicity) and external (global financial structures, asymmetrical knowledge flows)—remain unaddressed. Here, the agency is not absent but constrained, a reality also observed by Mohan and Lampert (2013), who caution against romanticizing South-South relations without accounting for internal African political dynamics.
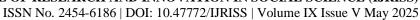
Moreover, Links' analysis offers a timely interrogation of Africa's role in negotiating global power realignments. As global hegemony becomes increasingly polycentric, African states must navigate a complex matrix of interests, avoiding new forms of dependency while capitalizing on emerging opportunities. This context affirms the importance of constructing new narratives that reflect Africa's growing role in shaping the global future. If agency is understood as the ability to define and pursue one's interests within structural limitations, then African engagement with the BRI represents a moment of potential maturation. But this potential must be tempered by critical awareness and strategic foresight—elements that will determine whether Africa's agency will be sustained or undermined in the long run.

In sum, Links (2021) provides a layered and reflective contribution to the ongoing debate about African agency by illustrating how agency is both expressed and contested within the BRI framework. While acknowledging the structural constraints that persist, the paper also celebrates the diverse strategies African actors employ to exert influence, reframe narratives, and secure developmental outcomes. The paper pushes against the stagnation of agency by advocating for a more sophisticated understanding that goes beyond binary tropes of empowerment and dependency. In doing so, it aligns with the view that Africa's agency is not fixed—it is dynamic, complex, and unevenly distributed. Whether it matures, regresses, or degenerates depends not solely on external partnerships, but on the political will, institutional robustness, and epistemic self-confidence of African actors themselves.

Thus, in grappling with the Belt and Road Initiative as both a geopolitical opportunity and a potential neocolonial pitfall, Africa's agency reveals itself as a paradox—simultaneously strategic and constrained, emergent and encumbered. The continent's engagement with China neither affirms a fully matured agency nor condemns it to degeneration; rather, it exposes the uneven terrain upon which agency is constantly negotiated. The insights from Links (2021) caution against premature conclusions, suggesting that Africa occupies an ambiguous middle ground where soft power maneuvers, pluralistic actor involvement, and selective alignment coexist with enduring structural limitations and governance fragilities. In this context, to decisively label Africa's agency as either maturing or degenerating risks flattening the very complexity the term "agency" now demands. It may be more analytically honest to speak not of a destination reached, but of a process in flux— where Africa's international posture is being reimagined through fragmented yet conscious efforts to assert autonomy in a world still shaped by deep asymmetries. The difficulty lies precisely in this ambivalence: Africa is both shaping and being shaped, moving forward yet tethered, aspiring yet circumscribed. And perhaps it is in this tension that the real work of disentangling African agency must begin.

Reclaiming African Agency in International Relations Theory (IR)

Chipaike & Matarutse (2018) begin their contribution by addressing the longstanding erasure of African agency in dominant international relations (IR) theory. They argue that traditional IR scholarship—rooted in Euro-American epistemologies—has systematically constructed Africa as a passive object rather than an active subject in global affairs. This marginality, they contend, is historically grounded in the legacies of slavery, colonial conquest, and neocolonial economic subjugation, which have perpetuated a discourse of dependency and victimhood. The authors challenge this narrative by advocating for a conceptual reorientation that views African actors—states, civil society, and individuals—as capable of influencing global dynamics. This
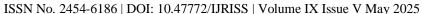
corrective effort aligns with recent calls in critical IR theory for decolonizing global knowledge production and recognizing agency in the Global South (Acharya, 2011; Ake, 1981). Chipaike and Matarutse thus position their study within the broader intellectual movement that seeks to provincialize Western IR and foreground Africa's active participation in world affairs, not as an exception, but as a standard part of global processes.

A central and original contribution of the study is the authors' conceptualization of African agency as both multifaceted and multi-actorial, moving beyond statist-centric interpretations. African agency, they argue, is not the exclusive preserve of government elites but emerges from a range of societal actors, including civil society movements, ordinary citizens, diaspora networks, and notable individual figures such as Nelson Mandela and Mo Ibrahim. This expansive view aligns with contemporary scholarship on agency as relational, diffuse, and situational (Brown, 2012; Bilgin, 2010). For instance, the authors point to grassroots-level agency demonstrated by Ghanaian citizens engaging with Chinese migrants as indicative of bottom-up influence in international engagement. Moreover, they recognize the dualistic nature of state–civil society relations in Africa, where some regimes, such as Ghana's, allow civil society to function as a partner in diplomacy and development, while others, like Angola's, suppress these actors as threats to state authority. Such variations underscore that African agency is contingent on domestic political configurations, levels of democratization, and the openness of regimes to inclusive governance. The notion that agency is distributed across scales and actors is a powerful rejoinder to earlier IR literature that confined agency to sovereign state behavior, thereby offering a more complex and accurate picture of Africa's international engagements.

The authors further highlight the collective dimension of African agency, especially as manifested in regional diplomatic behavior through institutions such as the African Union (AU). They introduce the idea of "diplomacy of solidarity," which is deeply rooted in African communitarian values such as *ubuntu*, to explain why African states often act in concert to shield one another from external criticism or intervention. Examples cited include the AU's refusal to censure Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe over human rights violations and its collective non-cooperation with the International Criminal Court (ICC) in relation to the indictment of Sudan's Omar al-Bashir. Such acts of soft balancing reflect a deliberate strategy by African states to assert their sovereignty and resist perceived Western impositions. This insight enriches IR literature on regionalism and norm diffusion by showing how African collective identity and shared historical experiences inform policy preferences and alliance-building. Importantly, Chipaike and Matarutse (2018) demonstrate that African states are not merely reacting to global forces but are actively shaping multilateral engagements through solidarity, consensus-building, and norm entrepreneurship—thus asserting strategic autonomy within the constraints of a structurally unequal international order.

Lastly, the article engages with Africa's changing bargaining position in the context of a shifting global power configuration. Chipaike and Matarutse argue that the rise of non-Western powers—such as China, Brazil, Turkey, and South Korea—has enabled African countries to diversify their diplomatic and development partnerships, thereby reducing dependence on traditional Western donors. This geopolitical pluralism has created opportunities for African governments to leverage strategic commodities such as oil, rare earth minerals, and agricultural products in their negotiations with foreign partners. The case of Ghana's oil-driven infrastructure deals with China is illustrative of this dynamic. Such leverage points to a form of instrumental agency where African states exploit the global competition for resources and markets to secure more favorable terms of engagement. This trend also reflects broader transformations in international political economy, where the Global South is increasingly asserting itself through south-south cooperation and alternative financing mechanisms (Mason, 2017; Carmody, 2013). By foregrounding this emerging strategic assertiveness, the authors complicate narratives of dependency and offer empirical grounding for the argument that African actors, while still constrained, are gaining room to maneuver and shape outcomes within the international system.

In light of my the study theme: *Disentangling the Question of Africa's Agency: Maturing, Retarded or Degenerating?*, Chipaike & Matarutse's (2018) work offers a challenge to the prevailing narratives that have historically characterized Africa's agency in international relations as passive or subordinated. Their findings suggest that the question of African agency is not easily framed within a dichotomy of maturity or stagnation. Rather, it reveals a complex, nuanced reality in which African actors, from government elites to civil society groups and ordinary citizens, assert agency in ways that are often shaped by both historical legacies and

contemporary global dynamics. By emphasizing that African agency is multifaceted and multi-actorial, the authors suggest that African states and non-state actors do not simply react to external pressures but actively shape global affairs through strategies of solidarity, soft balancing, and leveraging resources. This complicates the conventional understanding of Africa as either a passive victim or a fully autonomous global player. While the shifting global power dynamics—especially the rise of non-Western powers—offer Africa new opportunities for strategic engagement, these opportunities remain embedded within the structural constraints of an international system that still favors the Global North. Thus, Chipaike and Matarutse's study points to a more dynamic view of African agency, one that oscillates between assertiveness and subordination, highlighting that Africa's agency is indeed maturing but remains constrained by enduring inequalities and power imbalances in the international arena. In this light, it is difficult to decisively label Africa's agency as either maturing or degenerating; rather, it is continuously evolving in response to both internal transformations and external forces, making the question of its development in global affairs far more complex than simple categorizations allow.

DISCUSSIONS: SCHOLARS IN DIALOGUE

The enduring debate over Africa's agency in international relations reflects a rich but often contested intellectual terrain, where scholars grapple with whether Africa is maturing into a self-determined actor, retarded by structural and internal limits, or degenerating under new forms of dependency. William Brown (2012) sets the tone by interrogating the structural constraints embedded in the international system, emphasizing that African agency must be understood within global structures that condition, but do not entirely foreclose, strategic action. He cautions against romanticizing African states' participation as wholly autonomous, arguing instead that agency is often exercised within externally imposed parameters—a perspective that both complements and challenges more optimistic readings. This argument converges with Harman and Brown (2013), who argue that Africa is no longer entirely on the margins of international relations but remains defined through the terms of global hierarchies, where even inclusion reflects conditionality and instrumentalism rather than true equality. This perspective supports a thesis of "retarded agency," where African states are visible but constrained, speaking to a global order that disciplines rather than empowers.

Yet divergence appears in the assertive tone of scholars like Mngomezulu (2019) and Ramontja (2023), who insist on an epistemic decolonization of international relations. Mngomezulu challenges the dominance of Eurocentric paradigms and underscores the necessity of reclaiming an African worldview rooted in indigenous political philosophies. His argument aligns with Ramontja's call to revalorize African political thought, particularly the intellectual traditions that shaped anti-colonial struggles and the non-aligned movement. For these authors, the current malaise of African agency stems from the failure to centre endogenous paradigms in both scholarship and practice. This view diverges from the structuralist caution of Brown and aligns more with a "maturing agency" thesis, wherein African actors are not passive recipients of international norms but are actively redefining the terms of engagement—albeit unevenly and with internal contradictions.

Further deepening this tension, Shaw (1975), in one of the earliest articulations of Africa's place in global political economy, critiques how dependency theory framed African agency as largely reactive. While Shaw acknowledges the exploitative nature of global capitalism, he cautions against the portrayal of Africa as entirely devoid of strategic initiative. This dual recognition anticipates the complexity later scholars wrestle with: how to account for both structural domination and local maneuverability. Bach (2013) extends this complexity by introducing the metaphor of the "frontier," arguing that Africa operates as a conceptual and geopolitical frontier where competing global interests play out. While this frontier status grants Africa visibility, it also renders it a laboratory for experimentation rather than a locus of policy innovation. Thus, Bach's metaphor suggests a degenerative logic, where Africa is continually re-appropriated into global processes in ways that reproduce its marginality, rather than empower it.

In a more policy-focused contribution, Murray-Evans (2015) illustrates how African agency is exercised in highly contingent and negotiated ways, particularly in trade diplomacy. His case study of the SADC-Minus states during Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) negotiations with the EU demonstrates that African states can and do shape outcomes—though often from a defensive posture. This "negotiated agency"

challenges binary distinctions between autonomy and dependency. Similarly, Kornprobst (2020) demonstrates Africa's proactive stance in global nuclear disarmament dialogues, especially through norm entrepreneurship and coalition-building. However, he also acknowledges that African states must work through uneven power structures that rarely allow for full authorship of global norms. These cases suggest a maturing form of agency that is both constrained and strategic, highlighting the nuanced and often contradictory ways African actors navigate the international stage.

Links (2021), examining Africa's role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), further problematizes agency by illustrating how African governments engage China on terms that mix opportunity with vulnerability. While some governments use BRI engagement to leverage infrastructure development and regional integration, the asymmetry in knowledge production, financing, and long-term strategic planning raises concerns about recolonial tendencies masked as South-South cooperation. This resonates with the caution expressed by Chipaike and Matarutse (2018), who argue that discussions of African agency often oscillate between celebration and critique, with little consensus on what constitutes authentic agency. They highlight how agency is frequently theorized without sufficient grounding in African epistemologies, leading to misdiagnoses of both potential and constraint.

Across these contributions, convergence emerges around the idea that African agency is real, but unevenly expressed and persistently undermined by global structures and internal governance challenges. Divergence lies in how scholars theorize the sources, scope, and substance of that agency. Some foreground structural limits and co-optation, painting a picture of retarded or degenerative agency; others emphasize epistemic resurgence, negotiation, and norm creation as signs of a maturing political subjectivity. Together, these perspectives enrich the conceptual toolkit for understanding Africa's place in global politics—not as a singular, static position but as a field of struggle where multiple trajectories of agency are continually contested, reinvented, and reasserted.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS EMPIRICAL AND POLICY REORIENTATIONS

The competing visions of African agency—whether retarded, maturing, degenerating, or hybrid—underscore a critical imperative: the theorization of agency must now give way to its empirical grounding and policy translation. The current literature, though rich in conceptual nuance, largely remains insulated from the urgent realities of African diplomacy, institutional reform, and global engagement strategies. Future empirical research should thus interrogate how specific forms of agency (e.g., negotiated, symbolic, epistemic) manifest in practice across diplomatic forums, trade negotiations, and regional security architectures. For instance, the "negotiated agency" highlighted by Murray-Evans (2015) invites comparative studies on African bloc behavior in institutions like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the African Union Peace and Security Council. Equally, Kornprobst's (2020) insights into norm entrepreneurship open new empirical terrains in climate diplomacy, public health governance, and disarmament negotiations—fields where African states are no longer mere rule-takers but are attempting to co-author the normative order. In short, bridging theory with data is not merely an academic exercise; it is a political necessity for advancing Africa's global standing.

Moreover, the conceptual plurality revealed in this review calls for a more purposive policy agenda that integrates agency as a foundational principle in regional development and South-South cooperation. The epistemic turn advocated by Mngomezulu (2019) and Ramontja (2023) demands that African states reconfigure their foreign policies around endogenous knowledge systems and historical political wisdom, reclaiming voice and vision in multilateral institutions. This re-centering should be matched with institutional reforms that equip regional organizations with not just procedural capacity but ideational authority. For example, African-led think tanks and diplomatic academies can serve as hubs for policy experimentation and strategic foresight, ensuring that Africa's international engagement is not merely reactive but visionary. Similarly, initiatives under the Belt and Road framework, as critiqued by Links (2021), should be approached with a recalibrated understanding of partnership—one that prioritizes long-term sovereignty over short-term infrastructure gains. Ultimately, the true test of African agency lies not in how it is theorized, but in how it is institutionalized, contested, and reclaimed in the evolving global order.

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Author Contribution

OAK conceived, researched, wrote, revised and submitted, corrected/revised and resubmitted the article for publication.
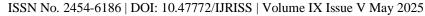
Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The researcher declares no conflict of interest during the conceptualization, research, writing, revision, and submission of the article.

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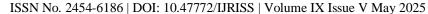
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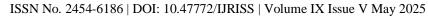
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