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POLITICS IN PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA: AN AFRICAN-CENTERED APPROACH

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Abstract

This study examines the diversity and complexity of political systems in pre-colonial Africa through an African-centered approach. Moving beyond Eurocentric frameworks that portray Africa as "stateless" or "primitive," it emphasizes indigenous philosophies, oral traditions, and locally grounded institutions as legitimate sources of political order. The research highlights both decentralized societies and highly centralized states, showing how African political life was adaptive, relational, and deeply embedded in social, spiritual, and ecological contexts. The analysis demonstrates that decentralized communities such as the Igbo, Tiv, and San organized power through kinship and consensus, while centralized empires like Mali, Ghana, Benin, and Aksum institutionalized governance through bureaucracy, trade networks, and religious authority. Case studies of Tuareg confederations, Nubian kingdoms, Azande political logic, and Aksumite Christianity illustrate the plurality of African sovereignty, ranging from mobile and oath-bound systems to complex imperial formations recognized in global history. These examples reveal that Africa's political traditions were neither derivative of Europe nor static, but innovative and relational. Methodologically, the study adapts document analysis by integrating African-centered sociology. Colonial records, oral histories, and archaeological findings are compared to reconstruct a more balanced account of African politics, exposing silences and distortions in conventional historiography. By placing African epistemologies at the center, the study highlights how categories such as community, relationality, and spirituality shaped governance in ways overlooked by Western paradigms. The findings suggest that pre-colonial African politics should be understood as a dynamic field of innovation that continues to influence modern debates on democracy, communitarianism, and relational ethics. Recognizing Africa's historical agency not only corrects colonial misrepresentations but also affirms the continent's contributions to global political thought.

Keywords: Africa, Africa-centred Sociology, African Philosophy, African Metaphysics, Politics
JEL Classification: JEL N17, N37, N47, 055

SÖMÜRGE ÖNCESİ AFRİKA'DA SİYASET: AFRİKA MERKEZLİ BİR YAKLAŞIM

Öz

Bu çalışma, sömürge öncesi Afrika'daki siyasal sistemlerin çeşitliliğini ve karmaşıklığını Afrika-merkezli bir yaklaşımla incelemektedir. Avrupa-merkezci çerçevelerin öne sürdüğü "devletsizlik" veya "ilkel" anlatılar yerine, yerli felsefelerin, sözlü geleneklerin ve yerel kurumların meşru siyasal düzen kaynakları olduğu vurgulanmalıdır. Araştırma, hem adem-i merkeziyetçi toplulukların hem de merkezî imparatorlukların varlığını göstererek Afrika siyasetinin uyumlu, ilişkisel ve toplumsal, ruhsal ve ekolojik bağlamlara derinden bağlı olduğunu ortaya koymalıdır. Analiz, Igbo, Tiv ve San gibi toplulukların akrabalık ve uzlaşıyla iktidarı örgütlediğini; Mali, Gana, Benin ve Aksum gibi imparatorlukların ise bürokrasi, ticaret ağları ve dinsel otoriteyle yönetimi kurumsallaştırdığını göstermelidir. Tuareg konfederasyonları, Nubia krallıkları, Azande siyasal mantığı ve Aksum Hıristiyanlığı örnekleri, Afrika egemenliğinin hareketli ve yemin-temelli sistemlerden küresel tarihte tanınan karmaşık imparatorluk oluşumlarına kadar uzandığını ortaya koymalıdır. Bu örnekler, Afrika siyasal geleneklerinin Avrupa'dan türemediğini, durağan değil yenilikçi ve ilişkisel olduğunu kanıtlamalıdır. Yöntemsel olarak, belge çözümlemesi Afrika-merkezli sosyolojiyle uyarlanmalıdır. Sömürge dönemi kayıtları, sözlü tarih ve arkeolojik bulgular karşılaştırılarak daha dengeli bir Afrika siyaseti anlatısı yeniden inşa edilmelidir. Bu süreçte geleneksel tarih yazımındaki suskunluklar ve çarpıtmalar açığa çıkarılmalı; topluluk, ilişkisel düşünce ve maneviyat gibi Afrika'ya özgü kategorilerin yönetimi şekillendirmedeki rolü vurgulanmalıdır. Sonuç olarak, sömürge öncesi Afrika siyaseti yenilikçi ve dinamik bir alan olarak anlaşılmalıdır. Bu miras, günümüzde demokrasi, cemaatçilik ve ilişkisel etik üzerine yapılan tartışmaları etkilemeye devam etmektedir. Afrika'nın tarihsel öznesi olduğunun kabul edilmesi, yalnızca sömürgeci çarpıtmaları düzeltmekle kalmamalı, aynı zamanda kıtanın küresel siyasal düşünceye katkısını da teyit etmelidir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Sahra Altı Afrika, Afrika Merkezli Sosyoloji, Afrika Felsefesi, Afrika Metafiziği, Politika
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1. Introduction

The politics of pre-colonial Africa encompassed a striking diversity of systems, from acephalous communities to powerful empires. Decentralized societies organized authority through kinship, age-grades, and consensus-based councils, while centralized kingdoms such as Ghana, Mali, Benin, and Kongo developed hierarchical bureaucracies, taxation systems, and standing armies. Trade networks, particularly the trans-Saharan routes, connected these polities to wider worlds, transforming local economies and embedding African states in global exchanges of gold, salt, ivory, and slaves. This political plurality demonstrates that Africa was far from a "stateless" continent, as colonial narratives often suggested (Daban, 2024, p. 103).

This study adopts an African-centered perspective to explore these political formations. Rather than interpreting African societies through Eurocentric categories, it foregrounds indigenous concepts, philosophies, and practices as legitimate frameworks for understanding governance and sovereignty. Such an approach emphasizes community, relationality, and spirituality as central to political life, in contrast to the individualism and linear progress narratives embedded in Western historiography. It also affirms African intellectual traditions as generative sources of political thought that shaped not only the continent but also contributed to global ideas of freedom, legitimacy, and justice.

Methodologically, the analysis draws on historical records, archaeological findings, and oral traditions. These sources are read through a decolonial lens that pays attention to silences, distortions, and omissions in colonial accounts. Oral histories and indigenous knowledge systems, often marginalized in mainstream historiography, are given equal weight in reconstructing political realities. This approach allows for a more balanced view of African political structures, recognizing them as adaptive, resilient, and deeply embedded in their cultural and ecological contexts.

The case studies that follow illustrate this diversity and depth. The Tuareg confederations institutionalized a sovereignty of mobility, Nubia sustained layered statehood over millennia, the Azande integrated governance with cosmological systems, and Aksum forged a cosmopolitan empire linked to the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds. Together, these examples demonstrate the richness of African political traditions and their capacity to generate legitimate forms of governance independent of colonial frameworks. By centering these experiences, the study highlights Africa's agency in shaping its political destiny long before European intervention.

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2. Methodology

In this study, historical texts are examined through document analysis, but the method has been adapted to the specific needs of African-centered historical inquiry. Rather than providing a general discussion of the technique, the analysis focuses on how archival documents, oral traditions, and secondary historical narratives were evaluated in light of African epistemological perspectives. For instance, while document analysis typically emphasizes questions of authenticity, reliability, and bias (Bowen, 2009, p. 29; Prior, 2003, p. 63; Scott, 1990, p. 40), in this research these criteria were considered alongside the recognition that many available sources were written from Eurocentric standpoints. To address this, the study applied an additional interpretive filter informed by African-centered sociology, giving greater weight to oral accounts and indigenous knowledge systems that mainstream historiography often marginalizes.

In practice, this meant categorizing both European-authored documents and African oral traditions into thematic clusters—such as governance, trade, or spiritual authority—and then comparing their portrayals of political organization. Fragmentary or biased records were not dismissed outright but cross-checked against alternative indigenous sources in order to reconstruct a more balanced account of pre-colonial politics (Tosh, 2015, p. 102). By explicitly integrating African-centered sociology into document analysis, the method was reoriented from a purely archival critique toward a decolonial reading strategy. This adaptation enabled the study to move beyond identifying patterns in texts to highlighting silences, distortions, and omissions, thereby aligning methodological practice with the research's theoretical commitment to de-centering Eurocentric interpretations (Asante, 1988, p. 12; Mazama, 2003, pp. 4, 78, 92).

The adaptation also required attention to the historical legacies of colonialism and systemic racism, which African-centered sociology emphasizes as critical to understanding social and political structures (Karenga, 2002, p. 45; Nobles, 1986, p. 63). Furthermore, the method was aligned with Gordon's (1997, pp. 88, 101) call for decolonizing knowledge production by challenging Western epistemological dominance. In this way, the methodology was not merely descriptive but transformative, designed to ensure that the analysis of documents reflected African-centered perspectives while countering the limitations of conventional Eurocentric frameworks.

3. Eurocentrism and Critiques

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So, what is this Eurocentric thinking? Eurocentrism has long functioned as a dominant paradigm in the social sciences and historiography, portraying Europe as the center of progress while relegating other regions to the status of "lagging behind" or "primitive." This is not merely an epistemological bias but also a cultural narrative that legitimized colonial expansion. Yet, critical interventions from Indigenous voices and intellectual traditions in the Global South have consistently challenged this framework, producing alternative epistemologies.

David Graeber and David Wengrow emphasize the role of what they call the "Indigenous critique." They argue that Enlightenment debates on freedom and equality were not purely European inventions but were significantly shaped by Indigenous critiques articulated during encounters with Native Americans. These critiques were often reduced in Europe to the cliché of the "noble savage," yet in reality, they represented pointed challenges to European institutions, such as monarchy, clerical hierarchy, and private property. By highlighting these silenced contributions, Graeber and Wengrow reveal how Eurocentrism worked by both universalizing Europe and erasing non-European intellectual influences (Graeber & Wengrow, 2024, pp. 50–52, 87–88, 169, 595).

In Latin America, José Carlos Mariátegui developed one of the most original critiques of Eurocentrism through Marxism. He argued that Peru's social formation could not be understood through Eurocentric evolutionary or positivist frameworks. Instead, Indigenous communal traditions offered the key to grasping Latin American realities. Mariátegui explicitly rejected the teleological notion of linear progress and universal history, which were central to Eurocentric modernity. His Marxism was grounded in local conditions and Indigenous collective practices, thereby fusing revolutionary thought with the rejection of European superiority narratives (Rubbo, 2025, pp. 4–6).

Mariátegui's critique also reflected a selective engagement with Western modernity. As Moraña points out, he saw Eurocentrism both as a hegemonic force subordinating local particularities and as a provider of emancipatory ideas when critically reworked. By linking Marxism with elements of Inca communitarianism, he showed how Latin American realities could transform imported theories rather than simply replicate them. This strategy not only resisted Eurocentrism's homogenizing tendencies but also produced an epistemology rooted in both Indigenous and transnational perspectives (Moraña, 2020, pp. 41–42).

Taken together, these perspectives expose three key flaws in Eurocentrism: (1) its erasure of non-European contributions to universal concepts such as equality and liberty, (2) its reliance

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on a teleological model of history centered on progress, and (3) its monopolization of knowledge production under the guise of universality. The Indigenous critique (Graeber & Wengrow), Mariátegui's Marxism (Rubbo), and Latin American philosophical readings (Moraña) collectively offer alternatives that foreground relational, plural, and locally grounded ways of knowing.

An African-centered approach does not simply invert Eurocentrism but redefines the very grounds of knowledge by grounding them in African philosophies, worldviews, and lived realities. This perspective emphasizes relationality, community, and the moral significance of human interdependence. For instance, African environmental ethics stresses a relational theory of moral status, where the notion of *ubuntu*—the idea that a person becomes fully human only through others—stands in contrast to the individualist orientation of Western philosophy (Metz, 2019, pp. S12–S14). In this framework, moral value is not located in abstract rational capacities but in the quality of relationships and communal flourishing.

African philosophy also resists being reduced to "ethno-philosophy," a mere catalog of collective worldviews. Thinkers like Kimmerle highlight that African philosophy develops through dialogue between oral traditions and critical analysis, while maintaining concepts such as "vital force" and communalism as key categories of being (Kimmerle, 1995, pp. 40–46, 143–147). The communal ontology at the heart of African thought positions the individual within an extended family and social fabric, where identity and moral worth are inseparable from one's contribution to the collective. This stands as a corrective to Eurocentric epistemologies that universalize individualism and linear progress.

Finally, as Soyinka reminds us, African thought carries a distinctive humanism rooted in historical experience and cultural resilience. Figures like Léopold Sédar Senghor developed *Négritude* as a philosophy of African humanism, drawing on the richness of African cultures and the notion of an *"humanité noire"* that centers solidarity, dignity, and creativity (Soyinka, 2018, pp. 30–31, 39). This perspective underscores that Africa does not need to be "discovered" or validated by Europe; rather, it possesses an intrinsic epistemic authority grounded in its own cultural and historical trajectories.

Taken together, these insights illustrate that an African-centered approach entails not only de-centering Europe but also affirming African categories—*ubuntu, vital force, communalism, humanism*—as legitimate foundations for knowledge and politics. Such an approach challenges

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reductive colonial narratives while contributing alternative philosophical resources to global debates on ethics, politics, and community.

4. Pre-Colonial Politics from an African-Centric Perspective

The politics of pre-colonial Africa was characterized by remarkable diversity, ranging from stateless societies to centralized kingdoms and empires. In decentralized societies such as the Igbo in present-day Nigeria and the Nuer in South Sudan, authority was dispersed among councils of elders, with decision-making based on consensus and kinship ties (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1940, p. 7). Similarly, the Tiv in Nigeria and the San in Southern Africa relied on egalitarian structures, communal sharing, and cooperation, which allowed for flexibility and survival in resource-scarce environments (Bohannan, 1958, pp. 54, 77; Lee, 1979, pp. 98, 132).

In contrast, centralized states like Ghana, Mali, Benin, and Kongo developed hierarchical structures headed by kings, supported by nobles, warriors, and administrators. Political legitimacy was often reinforced through religious symbolism: the Asantehene of the Ashanti Empire, for example, embodied both political and spiritual authority, symbolized by the Golden Stool (McCaskie, 1995, p. 47). The Kingdom of Benin was notable for its highly organized bureaucracy under the Oba and its extensive trade with Europeans (Bradbury, 1973, pp. 43, 67, 89). The Ethiopian Empire also maintained a stratified order of nobility, clergy, peasants, and slaves, while sustaining diplomatic ties with neighboring and distant powers, including the Ottoman Empire and Portugal (Beach, 1980, pp. 112, 158; Pankhurst, 1997, p. 146).

Trade was a vital factor shaping political development. Regional and trans-Saharan networks linked African polities with North Africa and beyond. The Mali Empire under Mansa Musa became a global symbol of wealth and power due to its gold trade (Levtzion, 1973, p. 82; Davidson, 1991, p. 122). These states possessed standing armies, taxation systems, and bureaucracies, fulfilling many of the criteria of modern statehood. As Mızrak (2022) argues, empires such as Mali and Asante met principles later codified in the Montevideo Convention, including population, defined territory, governance, and recognition through diplomacy (pp. 54–55).

The role of traditional chiefs was another important feature of governance. In the Mossi Kingdom, provincial chiefs (*kombeemba*) embodied royal authority at the local level, ensuring justice, defense, and continuity of customs. Their power, while subordinate to the king, was central to the endurance of Mossi political structures across precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras (Mashoud, 2025, pp. 68–70). Such examples illustrate that African polities

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were not simply centralized monarchies but layered systems in which local authorities mediated power and legitimacy.

Urbanization also shaped African political life. Cities such as Jenne-jeno and Timbuktu were centers of commerce, religion, and scholarship. By the fifteenth century, Timbuktu had become an intellectual hub of the Islamic world, housing renowned scholars and libraries that influenced governance and culture (Bıçakçı, 2018, pp. 61–62). These cities show that Africa was not merely a land of "tribal villages" but a continent with vibrant urban networks and cultural innovation.

Finally, the erasure of these histories has been part of a broader colonial strategy. As recent scholarship highlights, the "share of silence" in African historiography reflects not the absence of states or institutions but their deliberate marginalization. By denying or minimizing Africa's complex political achievements, colonial narratives sought to justify domination and exploitation. In sum, pre-colonial Africa encompassed egalitarian communities, powerful monarchies, resilient urban centers, and internationally recognized states. These political systems were adaptive and deeply embedded in local traditions, contradicting colonial myths of statelessness and restoring African agency in global history.

Before turning to specific regional examples, it is crucial to highlight how different African societies institutionalized sovereignty and governance in locally meaningful ways. The following case studies—ranging from the mobile Tuareg confederations of the Sahara to the riverine kingdoms of Nubia, the ritualized political systems of the Azande, and the cosmopolitan empire of Aksum—demonstrate the plurality of African political traditions and the need to analyze them from an African-centered perspective rather than through Eurocentric frameworks.

4.1. Tuareg

The Tuareg (Kel Tamasheq), Berber-speaking pastoralist groups whose presence in the central Sahara can be traced to antiquity, consolidated their political influence between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries through the formation of mobile, confederated polities across the Sahara–Sahel. These confederations, known as *ettebel*, emerged most visibly in regions such as the Ahaggar, Aïr, and Adrar during the late medieval and early modern periods, coinciding with the rise of Sahelian empires like Mali and Songhay. Their legitimacy rested on kinship ties, oath-based alliances, and control over circulation routes—caravan trails, pastures, and wells—that connected trans-Saharan commerce. At the apex stood the *amenukal*, a paramount leader

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whose authority combined military, judicial, and symbolic functions while being constantly negotiated with autonomous noble lineages and affiliated groups. Warfare and organized raiding (*rezzou*), especially prominent from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, were not simply acts of predation but integral political instruments of alliance-making and resource security. These practices were ritually marked by the beating of the war drum, a ceremonial emblem of sovereign capacity and communal mobilization (Alesbury, 2013, pp. 108–110).

Tuareg social order was stratified yet functionally interdependent: nobles (*Imajeghen*) as armed protectors, vassal clients (*Imghad*) providing pastoral labor and military support, religious specialists (*Ineslemen*) mediating law and baraka, artisan castes (*Inaden*) sustaining economic and technological skills, and enslaved populations (*Iklan*) integrated into pastoral and domestic production (Alesbury, 2013, pp. 109–111). In the southern Sahara, status and servility became increasingly coded through racialized vocabularies—*bīḍān/sūdān*—which intersected with Tuareg hierarchy and desert–sown frontiers; these categories were mobilized to naturalize domination over sedentary agricultural communities and internal subaltern strata (Hall, 2005, pp. 339–342).

Economically and geopolitically, Tuareg confederations were pivotal brokers of the trans-Saharan system, moving salt, gold, slaves, and manufactured goods between Sahelian towns and Mediterranean markets. Command over corridors linking Timbuktu, Gao, Agadez, and the Bilma salt mines conferred revenue (tolls, safe-conduct, tribute) and leverage vis-à-vis neighboring states (Alesbury, 2013, pp. 112–113). From an African-centered standpoint, this illustrates a sovereignty of mobility: authority constituted not by sedentary territorial fixity alone but by the capacity to secure persons, routes, and resources across ecological zones—an historically legitimate mode of rule in the Sahara that coexisted with, contested, and bargained with the great Sahelian empires.

Placing Tuareg politics within the wider Sahelian archive also challenges Eurocentric denials of precolonial sovereignty. Indigenous chronicles and oral epics from the Mali–Songhay world (e.g., *Tarikh al-Fattāsh*, *Tarikh al-Sudān*) attest to oath-rituals, conjurational idioms, and legal-political reasoning through which sovereignty was instituted and recognized long before European intervention. Read through this lens, Tuareg confederations appear as lawful, historically grounded polities whose legitimacy derived from covenantal practice, protection, and jurisdiction over movement and exchange. As Wise argues, precolonial Northern and Sahelian Africa possessed complex, indigenous theories and practices of sovereignty that refute narratives portraying the region as politically inchoate prior to colonialism (Wise, 2017, pp.

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417–420, 423–426). In short, the Tuareg exemplify a Sahelian form of sovereign order—relational, mobile, oath-bound, and commercially embedded—that an African-centric approach recognizes as fully political on its own terms

4.2. Nubia

Nubia, stretching from the First Cataract at Aswan to the confluence of the White and Blue Niles at modern Khartoum, represents one of the earliest centers of complex state formation in inner Africa. Its position between Egypt, the Ethiopian highlands, and the Libyan Desert made it both a corridor of exchange and a frontier of political contestation. As Bruce Williams and Geoff Emberling emphasize, "Nubia" is not a fixed category but a shifting designation encompassing diverse geographies, languages, and identities. There have been, historically, "several Nubias": the Bronze Age cultures culminating in the Kerma state, the Kushite kingdoms of Napata and Meroë, and the Christian polities of Makuria, Nobadia, and Alodia (Williams & Emberling, 2019, pp. 3–6). Such multiplicity resists the homogenizing tendencies of Eurocentric scholarship, which long treated Nubia merely as Egypt's periphery.

During the New Kingdom (c. 1550–1070 BCE), Egyptian pharaohs extended colonial rule into Lower and Upper Nubia, constructing forts, temples, and administrative centers at Buhen, Amara West, and Sai Island. Yet recent scholarship stresses that this was not simple domination: Nubian communities selectively adopted Egyptian practices, while retaining indigenous traditions in material culture, religion, and kinship. Spencer, Stevens, and Binder argue for understanding this encounter as "colonial entanglement," in which hybrid identities emerged through negotiation rather than passive assimilation (Spencer, Stevens & Binder, 2017, pp. 1–6).

In the medieval period, Nubia was the seat of Christian kingdoms that resisted the southward spread of Islam for centuries. Makuria, centered at Dongola, successfully checked Arab expansion through the famous *baqt* treaty, while Nobadia and Alodia forged their own trajectories of political survival. By the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, Nubia was enmeshed in a wider Afro-Mediterranean world: Adam Simmons demonstrates how Nubian rulers corresponded with Crusader states, Byzantium, and Ethiopia, positioning themselves as active players in transregional diplomacy and Christian solidarity (Simmons, 2022, pp. 85–90). Far from being isolated, Nubia was a strategic pivot between Africa and the eastern Mediterranean.

The modern rediscovery of Nubia has also shaped its historical image. Margaret Drower recalls how, during the construction of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s, international salvage

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archaeology revealed temples, cemeteries, and settlements otherwise destined to be submerged. This "drowning land" narrative, while born of crisis, highlighted Nubia's monumental legacies and reinforced its role as a cradle of ancient African civilization (Drower, 1970, pp. 7–15).

Taken together, Nubia illustrates how African-centered approaches can recover political agency and cultural creativity long obscured by Egyptocentric and Eurocentric lenses. Its polities—Kerma, Kush, Makuria, Nobadia, and Alodia—were not peripheral appendages but sovereign actors whose strategies of resistance, hybridity, and diplomacy shaped the political landscape of the Nile Valley for over three millennia.

4.3. Azande

The Azande, whose historical territory spans across present-day South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, developed political institutions and intellectual systems that both reflected their local environment and challenged external interpretations. Edward Evans-Pritchard's classic study situates the Azande polity around royal courts led by the *Avongara* aristocracy. Kingship (*avongara*) was the apex of a stratified hierarchy that integrated nobles, commoners, and dependents. Authority was exercised not only through military and administrative control but also through ritual, as rulers mediated between political governance and spiritual order (Evans-Pritchard, 1971, pp. 15–22). Succession disputes, warfare, and alliances with neighboring groups further shaped the flexible but resilient nature of Azande sovereignty.

Central to Azande governance was the institutionalization of witchcraft (*mangu*) and oracular practices as regulatory mechanisms. Far from being irrational, these formed a system of adjudication through which disputes were resolved and political authority legitimized. The poison oracle (*benge*), for example, was a critical means of verifying accusations and ensuring communal consensus, binding political decision-making to ritualized procedures that carried both epistemic and juridical weight (Evans-Pritchard, 1971, pp. 29–35). In this sense, political and cosmological orders were deeply intertwined.

Later philosophical analyses have revisited Azande reasoning to question Eurocentric assumptions of "primitive logic." Steven French (2011) shows that apparent inconsistencies in witchcraft beliefs—such as inheritance patterns of *mangu* that do not map neatly onto Western logical universals—can be modeled within the framework of *partial structures* and *quasi-truth*. This approach reframes Azande thought as internally coherent and context-sensitive rather than contradictory (French, 2011, pp. 17–20). Likewise, Richard Jennings (1989) argues that Zande

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logic, far from violating the principle of non-contradiction, is socially embedded reasoning: oracles and witchcraft beliefs function as "shared patterns of thought" selected to maintain communal stability and institutional legitimacy (Jennings, 1989, pp. 327–330).

In sum, these perspectives reveal that the Azande maintained a sophisticated political system anchored in both social hierarchy and cosmological reasoning. From an African-centered standpoint, their institutions exemplify how sovereignty, law, and logic were articulated through frameworks distinct from but no less rational than European models. Rather than reducing witchcraft and oracles to superstition, acknowledging them as central institutions affirms the Azande's place in the broader history of political philosophy and rational inquiry.

4.4. Aksum

The kingdom of Aksum, located in the northern Ethiopian highlands, flourished between the first and seventh centuries CE as one of Africa's most powerful pre-colonial states. Its origins lay in earlier Pre-Aksumite societies such as Dʿ MT, centered at Yeha around the 8th century BCE, which combined local agricultural traditions with selective adoption of South Arabian cultural forms. As Jacke Phillips notes, the monumental temple at Yeha and early inscriptions in Sabaean script demonstrate interaction with Arabia, yet the development of Aksum was primarily an indigenous process rather than foreign colonization (Phillips, 2016, pp. 1–2). Phillipson similarly stresses that the emergence of Aksum should be viewed as a "foundations of an African civilization," where outside influences were reworked within a distinctively highland cultural trajectory (Phillipson, 2012, pp. 12–15).

By the first centuries CE, Aksum had become a dominant force in regional politics. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* identifies Zoskales, an early king, as controlling the Red Sea port of Adulis and inland trade routes linking the Horn of Africa to the Nile Valley. Later rulers extended Aksumite influence across Eritrea, northern Ethiopia, and into South Arabia. Inscriptions such as the *Monumentum Adulitanum* detail campaigns across the Ethiopian plateau and Arabian Peninsula, underscoring the kingdom's military and symbolic projection of sovereignty (Munro-Hay, 1981, pp. 32–35).

Economically, Aksum thrived on its control of long-distance trade in ivory, gold, and exotic goods destined for Mediterranean and Indian Ocean markets. By the third century CE, it was the first sub-Saharan African polity to mint coinage in gold, silver, and bronze. These coins, inscribed in Greek and later Geʿez, not only facilitated commerce but also asserted Aksumite kingship on par with Rome and Persia (Phillips, 2016, pp. 2–3; Munro-Hay, 1981, p. 34).

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Monumental stelae and urban centers such as Aksum and Matara embodied the wealth and authority generated by this trade.

Religion became a decisive factor in the fourth century when King Ezana converted to Christianity under the influence of Frumentius. Ezana's inscriptions replaced solar symbols with the cross, and coinage began to display Christian iconography. This transition linked Aksum to the Byzantine world without compromising its autonomy, allowing it to act as an African Christian power in the centuries preceding Islam's expansion (Phillipson, 2012, pp. 104–106). Later kings such as Kaleb projected Aksumite authority into South Arabia, framing their military expeditions as both political and religious missions.

From an African-centered perspective, Aksum was not a peripheral appendage of Mediterranean empires but a sovereign actor recognized as one of the world's great powers. Contemporary sources, including the Persian prophet Mani, ranked Aksum alongside Rome, Persia, and China as one of the "four great kingdoms of the world" (Munro-Hay, 1981, p. 32). Its capacity to synthesize indigenous traditions, external contacts, and religious transformation illustrates the creativity and resilience of African statecraft. Although Aksum's maritime dominance declined after the seventh century, its legacy endured in the Christian Ethiopian polities that carried forward its political and cultural traditions.

5. Discussion: Communitarianism, Democracy, and Relationality

Research on African pre-colonial politics challenges Eurocentric assumptions that statehood and political complexity emerged only through colonial imposition. As Monroe (2013, pp. 17–30) demonstrates, centralized polities such as Dahomey, Ghana, and Mali were consolidated through the ingenuity of local rulers who mobilized resources from agriculture, iron production, and long-distance trade. Likewise, Osafo-Kwaako and Robinson (2013, pp. 19–26) emphasize the active role of African entrepreneurs and communities in state formation, showing how West African empires and East African Swahili city-states flourished through trade and cultural exchange. These historical patterns also illustrate how political authority was not a mere product of hierarchy but often grounded in collective decision-making processes that resonate with communitarian traditions.

Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2014, pp. 2–5) extend this argument into the present, showing how degrees of political centralization in the pre-colonial era continue to shape regional development outcomes. Their findings confirm that institutions rooted in long-standing communal structures foster durable advantages. At the same time, African communitarian

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philosophies deepen our understanding of why political power has historically been exercised in relational, rather than strictly individualistic, terms. Communitarianism, as articulated by Chemhuru (2018, pp. 38–50), Metz (2020, pp. 32–37), and Menkiti (2017, pp. 461–463), stresses that personhood and rights are realized through community. This orientation does not deny individuality but locates it within a broader web of obligations, reciprocity, and solidarity.

Here, the notion of relationality provides a conceptual bridge. Escobar, Osterweil, and Sharma (2024, pp. S3–S9) argue that modern capitalist and colonial systems produce "anti-relational" ontologies, privileging separation over interdependence. Against this backdrop, African political traditions—whether the Tuareg's oath-based alliances, Nubian sacred kingship, Azande oracular decision-making, or Aksumite Christianity tied to community and trade—embody relational forms of governance. These were systems where political authority emerged from reciprocal ties, shared cosmologies, and ritualized responsibilities, not merely coercion. Nhemachena (2017, pp. 279–284) underscores this point in his analysis of Chivanhu and Ukama traditions in Zimbabwe, showing how African temporalities and ancestor relations challenge linear modernist assumptions and affirm "suppressed African modernities."

Lejano and Kan (2022, pp. 2–11) further conceptualize relationality as a political ontology, suggesting that decision-making is not reducible to rational self-interest but unfolds within networks of care, reciprocity, and shared identity—what they call *curae ergo sum* ("we care, therefore we are"). Such a view illuminates why African pre-colonial participatory democracy often took the form of councils, assemblies, and community consultations, where elders and leaders acted relationally rather than as isolated decision-makers.

Taken together, these insights show that African communitarianism, participatory democracy, and relationality are mutually reinforcing. Pre-colonial political institutions were grounded in collective responsibility, ritualized obligations, and relational ontologies that persist in contemporary African thought. Recognizing this heritage challenges Eurocentric models of political modernity and affirms Africa's own traditions of democracy rooted in community, interdependence, and the ethics of relational life.

6. Conclusion

The political systems of pre-colonial Africa reveal an extraordinary range of institutional creativity, from decentralized kinship-based communities to powerful empires integrated into transregional trade and diplomacy. These systems were not static; they evolved in response to ecological pressures, economic opportunities, and cultural interactions, demonstrating the

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adaptability and resilience of African societies. Far from the colonial image of a continent without states or order, Africa nurtured political traditions that combined pragmatic governance with spiritual legitimacy.

Examining these formations from an African-centered perspective brings to light the epistemologies and values that structured governance on the continent. Authority was often relational, rooted in community and reciprocity, while sovereignty was expressed through mobility, ritual, and diplomacy as much as through coercion. Such perspectives challenge Eurocentric frameworks that measure political development only by reference to European trajectories, and instead affirm Africa's own categories of personhood, community, and relationality as valid grounds of political order.

The case studies of Tuareg confederations, Nubian kingdoms, Azande governance, and the Aksumite Empire illustrate how African polities institutionalized power in diverse yet interconnected ways. They demonstrate that mobility, hybridity, ritual authority, and international engagement were all legitimate forms of sovereignty, situating Africa as a participant in global history rather than its periphery. These examples show that African political thought and practice cannot be reduced to "tribalism" or "pre-modernity" but should be recognized as fully political, philosophical, and innovative.

Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of decolonizing the study of African politics by foregrounding indigenous categories and historical agency. Pre-colonial African societies not only governed themselves effectively but also contributed to wider human understandings of authority, justice, and community. Recognizing this heritage enriches contemporary debates about democracy, communitarianism, and relationality, while also affirming Africa's central place in the intellectual and political history of the world.

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