

## **Africa's Struggle for Sovereignty: Neo-Colonialism and External Control in the 21st Century**

**Emmanuel C. Ilo**

*Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan*

### **Abstract**

In the aftermath of formal decolonisation, Africa's pursuit of genuine sovereignty has been persistently undermined by evolving structures of external domination. This paper interrogates the resurgence of neo-colonialism in the 21st century, exploring its contemporary manifestations in economic dependency, political manipulation, cultural imperialism, and the emerging realms of digital and data colonialism. Far from obsolete, colonial patterns of exploitation have been reconstituted through the operations of global financial institutions, multinational corporations, geopolitical alliances, and Big Tech hegemony. These structures continue to shape African realities, subordinating the continent's political agency and epistemic autonomy. Drawing on theoretical frameworks including Nkrumah's theory of neo-colonialism, Couldry and Mejias' conception of data colonialism, and African relational ethics rooted in Ubuntu philosophy, this article critically examines how new technologies such as artificial intelligence and algorithmic governance perpetuate global asymmetries of power. The analysis adopts an interdisciplinary methodology, incorporating critical literature review, discursive analysis, and philosophical reflection. The study foregrounds the multifaceted ways in which African societies are dispossessed – economically through extractive trade and debt mechanisms, politically through foreign security entanglements, and digitally through the commodification of African data and identities. Yet, the article also emphasises African resistance, highlighting emergent movements advocating for digital sovereignty, decolonial AI ethics, and intra-continental economic cooperation, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). By situating the humanities at the centre of this discourse, the paper argues for the intellectual imperative of interrogating neo-colonial power structures and advancing alternative paradigms of African autonomy. The conclusion proposes actionable recommendations aimed at reasserting African sovereignty across economic, digital, cultural, and ethical domains. This study ultimately contributes to the broader scholarly discourse on postcolonial studies, African political thought, and the global ethics of technology, calling for a renewed commitment to decolonial futures in Africa.

**Keywords:** Neo-colonialism, Data Colonialism, African Sovereignty, Ubuntu Ethics

## Introduction

More than six decades after most African states gained political independence, the continent's quest for true sovereignty remains unfinished (Nkrumah, 1965). While formal colonial empires have disappeared, many of the structural patterns of domination persist, reshaped into new forms that scholars term neo-colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Mamdani, 1996). Africa remains subjected to disproportionate economic dependency, geopolitical manipulation, cultural hegemony, and, most recently, digital and algorithmic exploitation (Birhane, 2020; Mhlambi & Tiribelli, 2023).

This article addresses the contemporary matrix of external control over Africa, exploring the many faces of neo-colonialism operating today. The urgency of this inquiry is underscored by ongoing debates about the unequal global distribution of technological infrastructures, extractive international finance, and the ideological framing of African identities through media and cultural industries (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Kwet, 2019; Stewart et al., 2022). Building upon Nkrumah's (1965) pioneering critique of neo-colonialism as the last stage of imperialism, this paper integrates recent conceptual extensions such as data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), algorithmic colonisation (Birhane, 2020), and the Ubuntu relational ethics framework (Mhlambi, 2020; Gondwe, 2024). Through critical analysis and engagement with interdisciplinary humanities scholarship, the article examines the tensions between Africa's ongoing pursuit of autonomy and the pervasive forces of external domination. The study begins by defining the theoretical concepts of neo-colonialism and data colonialism, followed by an analysis of their manifestations in economic, digital, political, and cultural dimensions. Finally, it examines African resistance strategies and offers recommendations for reclaiming sovereignty.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

### 1. Defining Neo-Colonialism

The concept of neo-colonialism was most forcefully articulated by Kwame Nkrumah (1965), who described it as the survival of colonial practices through indirect means following formal decolonisation. Neo-colonialism persists when the former colonial powers or other global actors manipulate the political and economic systems of ostensibly independent nations to maintain dominance (Herbst, 2000; Mamdani, 1996). Unlike classical colonialism, where foreign governments exerted direct territorial control, neo-colonialism operates through subtler mechanisms such as financial dependency, trade imbalances, cultural hegemony, and ideological infiltration (Kwet, 2019). Africa remains a paradigmatic case of this dynamic. The structural adjustment policies of the 1980s imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, as well as the continued extraction of natural resources under inequitable contracts, reflect the ongoing reality of external control (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Stewart et al., 2022). These exploitative arrangements have increasingly been amplified by emerging forms of technological and informational dominance.

### 2. Theories of Sovereignty and Power

Sovereignty, traditionally defined within the Westphalian framework, refers to a state's legal and political independence from external interference. However, in the globalised world order, sovereignty is increasingly undermined by supranational institutions, multinational corporations, and global financial mechanisms (Herbst, 2000; Krasodomski-Jones et al., 2024). Michel Foucault's (1977) notion of disciplinary power, which operates through surveillance, regulation, and normalisation, provides a useful lens to understand how African states face persistent external scrutiny and control even without direct colonisation. Dependency theory, pioneered by Latin American and African scholars, further explains how developing countries are trapped in asymmetric economic relationships that reinforce global hierarchies (Mamdani, 1996). Africa's integration into global markets has often resulted in extractive rather than reciprocal relationships (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

### 3. Emerging Concepts: Data Colonialism and Algorithmic Control

Couldry and Mejias (2019) introduced the term *data colonialism* to describe the appropriation of human life through data extraction, positioning Big Tech companies as contemporary imperial powers. Unlike the resource extraction of the colonial era, this new phase involves the commodification of social behaviours, habits, and relationships (Mejias & Couldry, 2024). Birhane (2020) builds on this critique by coining the term *algorithmic colonisation*, which highlights how African societies are subjected to foreign-designed algorithmic systems that reinforce global North priorities and exclude African values and contexts. The deployment of artificial intelligence (AI) systems, surveillance technologies, and data infrastructure by foreign corporations in African contexts echoes the patterns of dispossession and marginalisation seen under historical colonial regimes (Asiedu et al., 2024; Gondwe, 2024). An important alternative perspective comes from African relational philosophies, notably Ubuntu. Ubuntu, often translated as “*I am because we are*”, embodies an ethic of community, care, and interconnectedness (Mhlambi, 2020; Gondwe, 2024). Mhlambi and Tiribelli (2023) propose Ubuntu as a decolonial ethical framework that challenges the Western individualist assumptions underlying most AI and data governance models. Relational autonomy, as conceptualised by Mhlambi (2020), argues that individuals only flourish within relationships of mutual care and solidarity, providing a radically different ethical basis for designing technologies.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach rooted in critical analysis and interpretive inquiry. The complexity of neo-colonialism as a global, multi-sectoral phenomenon demands an examination that crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries. Humanities scholarship offers valuable theoretical and historical insights to analyse power structures and socio-political dynamics that statistical or purely empirical approaches may not capture (Mamdani, 1996; Nkrumah, 1965). The research draws primarily on a critical literature review, integrating academic publications, reports, and primary documents on neo-colonialism, digital colonialism, and African sovereignty. Major sources include landmark texts such as *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (Nkrumah, 1965), theoretical developments on data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), algorithmic colonisation (Birhane, 2020), and Ubuntu relational ethics (Mhlambi, 2020; Gondwe, 2024).

This literature base is complemented by recent peer-reviewed articles, policy analyses, and case studies drawn from African contexts, providing contemporary illustrations of emerging forms of external control (Kwet, 2019; Asiedu et al., 2024; Barrett et al., 2025). The analysis follows a thematic structure that examines the economic, digital, political, and cultural dimensions of external domination. Within each domain, the paper critically evaluates the persistence of neo-colonial mechanisms, the evolution of new technologies of control, and the counter-strategies of African states and civil society actors. This research does not claim statistical generalisability but offers a rigorous, theory-driven synthesis of existing knowledge to advance academic understanding of the African condition under 21st-century neo-colonial pressures. The methodology aligns with humanities traditions of close reading, discourse analysis, and theoretical interpretation to expose hidden power dynamics within global systems.

### Analysis and Discussion

Africa’s political independence has not translated into economic autonomy. The continent remains entangled in global financial architectures and trade relationships that perpetuate structural dependency. Nkrumah (1965) described this phenomenon as “a state in which the economic system and thus the political policy of a nation are directed from outside.” The mechanisms of this control have evolved but remain deeply entrenched. The 1980s debt crisis marked a significant turning point, forcing many African nations into structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (Mamdani, 1996). These policies mandated deregulation, privatisation, and austerity measures,

dismantling national industries and deepening poverty across the continent (Herbst, 2000). Critics argue that SAPs laid the groundwork for a continued pattern of economic subordination (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Today, external control manifests through predatory debt diplomacy and the unequal terms of trade for natural resources (Asiedu et al., 2024). Resource-rich African countries often find themselves locked into extractive contracts that disproportionately benefit multinational corporations while depriving local populations of meaningful economic gains. The Democratic Republic of Congo's cobalt mining industry, vital for global tech production, illustrates how African resources continue to be exploited under neo-colonial terms (Barrett et al., 2025). Similar dynamics play out in the exploitation of rare earth minerals, lithium, and gold, where environmental degradation and labour abuses remain rampant. The rise of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has introduced new forms of dependency. While BRI projects have contributed to infrastructure across Africa, including railways, ports, and highways, the conditions of financing have raised concerns. Scholars note that debt-for-equity swaps, tied loans, and contractual opacity risk create modern debt-trap diplomacy, leaving African nations with unsustainable liabilities (Asiedu et al., 2024; Stewart et al., 2022).

The continued use of the CFA franc by 14 West and Central African countries, despite formal agreements to reform it, remains a powerful symbol of economic subjugation (Stewart et al., 2022). The system effectively ties African monetary policy to the French treasury, limiting states' ability to implement independent fiscal policies. Africa's subordination in global supply chains is further amplified by the continent's lack of manufacturing and processing capabilities. The export of raw materials and the import of finished goods results in persistent trade deficits and value-chain exclusion (Kwet, 2019). Despite efforts by regional bodies such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to promote intra-African trade and industrialisation, progress remains uneven (Barrett et al., 2025). Collectively, these contemporary dynamics illustrate that Africa's role in the global economy remains largely extractive and peripheral, echoing Nkrumah's (1965) warning that neo-colonialism is "the worst form of imperialism" because it operates under the guise of independence while sustaining structures of external domination.

### **Digital and Data Colonialism**

The digital transformation of Africa has generated optimism for technological leapfrogging, yet it has also exposed the continent to a new form of exploitation: digital and data colonialism. Couldry and Mejias (2019) describe this phenomenon as the appropriation of human life through data extraction, with global corporations treating personal and collective data as a free resource to be harvested and monetised. Africa has become an epicentre of this process, not only due to its rapidly growing mobile user base and expanding digital infrastructure but also because of weak regulatory frameworks and limited domestic technological sovereignty (Kwet, 2019). By 2023, Sub-Saharan Africa had over 495 million mobile subscribers and 272 million mobile internet users (GSMA, 2023). Yet most of this infrastructure, including undersea cables, data centres, and cloud computing facilities, is owned and operated by foreign multinational corporations (Birhane, 2020). The consequence is that vast amounts of African data flow to servers controlled by corporations in the global North, thereby depriving African states and communities of control over their digital futures (Mejias & Couldry, 2024).

Birhane (2020) introduced the concept of algorithmic colonisation to articulate how African societies are subjected to decision-making systems designed elsewhere, often without regard for local cultures, norms, or legal systems. These technologies not only reproduce but also intensify global asymmetries of power. For example, AI-powered surveillance tools, predictive policing algorithms, and automated facial recognition systems are increasingly deployed in African contexts, often in partnership with authoritarian governments, raising serious concerns over human rights and accountability (Asiedu et al., 2024; Barrett et al., 2025).

Digital finance offers another frontier of data extraction. The proliferation of mobile money platforms such as M-Pesa and digital credit services has created a parallel financial infrastructure largely governed by non-African corporations and venture capitalists. While these services have enhanced financial inclusion, they also expose vulnerable populations to predatory lending and unchecked data collection (Kwet, 2019). The lack of African participation in global AI ethics forums and standards-setting bodies exacerbates the risk of systemic exclusion. African voices are underrepresented in shaping algorithmic fairness, transparency, and accountability guidelines that increasingly govern global technological ecosystems (Mhlambi, 2020; Gondwe, 2024). The commodification of African identities, behaviours, and relationships for advertising, behavioural prediction, and social engineering echoes the extractive logics of colonial resource exploitation. Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue that data colonialism represents a continuation of imperialist patterns: first taking land and labour, and now taking human experience itself. There are emerging efforts at resistance. Several African nations, including South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, have begun to implement national data protection laws aimed at asserting digital sovereignty and protecting citizens' rights. The African Union's Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (the Malabo Convention) is a continental initiative aimed at harmonising digital rights, though enforcement remains uneven (Barrett et al., 2025). Despite these positive developments, the balance of power remains heavily tilted towards global technology firms and foreign states, leaving Africa vulnerable to a 21st-century form of colonial subjugation through data dependency and algorithmic control.

In addition to data extraction and algorithmic decision-making, African nations are increasingly subjected to externally imposed AI-driven metrics and benchmarking systems that claim to assess development, security, health, education, and governance outcomes (Krasodonski-Jones et al., 2024). These AI metrics, often developed without African consultation or contextual sensitivity, serve as soft instruments of global surveillance and influence. By conditioning foreign aid, investment, or access to technology on externally defined performance indicators, these tools perpetuate dependency and reduce African agency over national priorities (Birhane, 2020; Gondwe, 2024). Mhlambi (2020) argues that such metrics embody a form of algorithmic paternalism that undermines local values and relational autonomy. Instead of empowering African societies, AI metrics frequently reproduce biases, obscure structural inequalities, and enforce conformity to external expectations of "good governance" or "development success" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

### **Political and Military Control**

Although formal colonial rule has ended, many African countries remain sites of foreign geopolitical competition. Western and non-Western powers continue to maintain military bases or negotiate exclusive security agreements with African governments (Herbst, 2000). The United States' AFRICOM operations and France's military presence in the Sahel reflect ongoing external influence in domestic security affairs (Stewart et al., 2022). Such arrangements are often justified by global counterterrorism efforts, yet they also serve to protect strategic interests, including access to natural resources and critical infrastructure (Mhlambi & Tiribelli, 2023). These forms of political leverage compromise African states' sovereign decision-making capacities and entrench external dependency. The rise of soft power diplomacy, particularly by China, Russia, and Turkey, has further complicated the geopolitical landscape. While these new actors offer alternatives to traditional Western influence, they often reproduce similar asymmetrical power dynamics under a different guise (Asiedu et al., 2024).

### **Cultural Imperialism**

Cultural neo-colonialism remains an under-acknowledged but powerful force. The global dominance of Western media, film, fashion, and consumer culture has contributed to the erosion of indigenous African cultural practices and knowledge systems (Mhlambi, 2020). Through global platforms and advertising, Western ideals are normalised and local values are marginalised (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). The control of internet infrastructures and online

platforms by non-African corporations allows foreign actors to shape discourse and dictate the visibility of African narratives (Kwet, 2019; Birhane, 2020). This information asymmetry is not merely technological but ideological, reflecting the continuation of colonial-era logics of cultural hierarchy and exclusion. Efforts to promote African cultural industries, including Nollywood and local publishing, represent important counter-narratives but remain dwarfed by the scale of foreign media saturation (Stewart et al., 2022).

### **African Resistance and Sovereignty Movements**

While neo-colonial forces have intensified in the 21st century, they have also been met by an equally determined wave of African resistance. This section explores the multiple strategies through which African states, intellectuals, activists, and civil society organisations have challenged the evolving matrix of external control. The African Union (AU), building on the legacies of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), has increasingly positioned itself as a voice of continental self-determination. The launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in 2021, now the world's largest free trade area by number of participating countries, seeks to reduce Africa's dependence on non-African markets and improve intra-African trade (Barrett et al., 2025). Although the implementation faces logistical and political challenges, it marks a significant step toward reducing Africa's vulnerability to external market pressures. Digital sovereignty has become an urgent priority for African policymakers and scholars. Countries such as Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana have enacted national data protection laws modelled on the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), albeit with context-specific adaptations (Kwet, 2019; Barrett et al., 2025). These legal frameworks aim to curb the uncontrolled extraction of African data by foreign technology firms and to empower citizens with enforceable rights over their personal information. The push for decolonising artificial intelligence and data ethics has emerged as a key intellectual resistance strategy. African scholars such as Mhlambi (2020), Birhane (2020), and Gondwe (2024) have advanced theoretical frameworks grounded in Ubuntu relational ethics. Ubuntu, defined by the principle "*I am because we are*", rejects the extractive, individualistic foundations of Western AI systems and proposes a model centred on mutual care, solidarity, and collective responsibility (Mhlambi & Tiribelli, 2023). This philosophy provides an African moral and political critique of the commodification of human experience under data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Grassroots movements have also played a vital role. In Kenya, civil society groups successfully challenged the introduction of a compulsory biometric digital ID system (Huduma Namba), citing data privacy and human rights concerns (Asiedu et al., 2024). Similarly, in South Africa, the Right2Know campaign has mobilised against the increasing surveillance of citizens under the pretext of national security. African intellectuals and legal scholars have called for reform of global governance structures to give a greater voice to developing nations. Proposals include establishing pan-African technology standards, negotiating fairer trade terms, and creating Africa-led research infrastructures that reduce dependency on global North institutions (Barrett et al., 2025; Resisting Data Colonialism Network, 2023). Resistance also takes cultural forms. The rise of Nollywood, African literature, and independent media channels provides platforms for Africans to reclaim narrative authority and challenge the hegemony of Western cultural products (Stewart et al., 2022). These industries not only preserve indigenous knowledge and languages but also offer an economic counterweight to cultural imperialism. In sum, African resistance is neither singular nor passive. It is characterised by a diverse array of strategies that operate across legal, technological, intellectual, political, and cultural domains. As Mhlambi and Tiribelli (2023) argue, the African decolonial project is ongoing and iterative. While the struggle for true sovereignty remains incomplete, the growing assertiveness of African voices and institutions provides cautious optimism for the continent's quest to redefine its place within the global order.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The persistence of external control mechanisms in Africa, despite formal decolonisation, confirms Nkrumah's (1965) warning that neo-colonialism represents the most insidious form of imperialism. This article has demonstrated that contemporary external domination manifests across multiple domains: extractive economic arrangements, exploitative digital infrastructures, geopolitical interference, and cultural hegemony. The emergence of data colonialism and algorithmic control as new frontiers of global power relations presents additional challenges for Africa's pursuit of genuine sovereignty (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Birhane, 2020; Mhlambi & Tiribelli, 2023). However, the article has also shown that African states, scholars, and civil society organisations have not been passive actors. Increasing regional cooperation, the rise of Pan-African solidarity, and critical discourses on data sovereignty and Ubuntu ethics point to emerging pathways for contesting and overcoming neo-colonial pressures (Mhlambi, 2020; Gondwe, 2024).

A final dimension of Africa's modern struggle for sovereignty lies in the subtle yet profound influence of externally imposed AI-driven metrics and assessments. These AI metrix, often designed in the global North without meaningful African input, function as contemporary instruments of algorithmic control. By prescribing rigid standards of governance, development, health, and education, they reduce the space for African nations to define their own priorities and trajectories (Birhane, 2020; Krasodonski-Jones et al., 2024). Rather than promoting genuine progress, these tools often entrench dependency by linking aid, foreign investment, or access to technologies to external benchmarks. This quiet form of algorithmic imperialism risks reinforcing old patterns of neo-colonial subjugation under the guise of data-driven modernity (Mhlambi, 2020; Couldry & Mejias, 2019). It is therefore essential for African scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors to challenge these external metrics and develop sovereign frameworks grounded in African values, relational ethics, and collective well-being.

To strengthen Africa's capacity to resist external control and assert genuine sovereignty, this study proposes the following recommendations:

Strengthening regional bodies such as the African Union and fully implementing initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) can increase Africa's collective bargaining power in global arenas (Barrett et al., 2025).

African nations must develop indigenous technological infrastructures and regulatory frameworks that safeguard citizen data and ensure that digital systems reflect local values and priorities (Kwet, 2019; Mhlambi, 2020).

Revisiting exploitative debt arrangements and resource extraction contracts, and pushing for fairer trade terms, will reduce economic dependency (Mamdani, 1996; Asiedu et al., 2024).

Promoting local media, cultural production, and research institutions is vital for countering cultural imperialism and preserving indigenous knowledge systems (Stewart et al., 2022).

Embedding Ubuntu principles of relational autonomy, shared responsibility, and collective well-being into policymaking and technology governance can offer a distinctly African pathway for resisting algorithmic and data exploitation (Mhlambi & Tiribelli, 2023; Gondwe, 2024).

Africa's struggle for sovereignty remains ongoing but far from static. The continent's historical legacy of anti-colonial resistance provides the intellectual and political foundations upon which to build a decolonial future. Humanities scholarship must continue to interrogate and expose these evolving systems of external control while offering ethical and theoretical tools for constructing alternative paradigms of African autonomy.

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