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West African Nationalism and Regional Integration: The Role of Pre-Colonial Cooperation in the Formation of ECOWAS

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Abstract

This article reinterprets the historical and ideological roots of West African regional integration, arguing that the formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) cannot be reduced to colonial institutions or European mimicry. Instead, it demonstrates that deep traditions of communalism, trade, and political cooperation in precolonial West Africa, later preserved and rearticulated by Pan-Africanism, Negritude, and nationalist movements, provided the conceptual and cultural foundations for ECOWAS. By weaving together archival sources, memoirs, colonial records, and postcolonial African writings, the study highlights both the disruptions wrought by the slave trade and colonialism and the resilience of indigenous frameworks of cooperation. While existing scholarship often traces West African integration to colonial infrastructure—railways, currency boards, administrative councils—this article shows that these were instruments of exploitation rather than genuine projects of community building. What endured, despite centuries of rupture, was a collective memory of integration, which surfaced in the nationalist ferment of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and ultimately shaped the acceptance of ECOWAS in 1975. Beyond historical reconstruction, the article also situates its argument within current debates in African humanities and integration theory. It engages recent scholarship on regionalism and globalization, postcolonial critiques of Eurocentric models, and African Union studies that emphasize African agency in shaping continental futures. The analysis suggests that West African integration is best understood as a layered process: precolonial traditions of interdependence, ideological movements that preserved and transmitted them, and postcolonial institutions that gave them political form. In making this case, the article challenges functionalist readings of ECOWAS as a derivative project, proposing instead that it represents a reassertion of West African intellectual and historical continuity.

Keywords: ECOWAS; Pan-Africanism; West African Nationalism; Negritude; Precolonial Integration; Postcolonial Theory.

Introduction

The establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on 28 May 1975 was hardly an abrupt invention of postcolonial politics. It was, rather, the culmination of longer historical struggles for socio-economic cooperation and integration in a region that had, for centuries, been bound by patterns of exchange, conquest, and cultural interdependence. Before European "explorations" altered the trajectory of West African societies, the region already possessed a dense web of empires, kingdoms, and city-states whose authorities extended across diverse linguistic, cultural, and religious landscapes (Bovill 142; Barry 30). These political constructs did not exist in isolation but formed a heterogeneous regional society, one in which trade routes, religious networks, and kinship ties linked communities across the savannah and forest belts. The idea of cooperation was not imported from Europe but arose out of the pragmatic needs of societies whose survival depended on forms of economic and political integration that extended well beyond their immediate borders.

The arrival of Europeans in the mid-fifteenth century disrupted, though did not erase, these integrative currents. Slave trading posts established along the Atlantic seaboard quickly transformed the region into a principal theatre for the transatlantic trade in human beings (Inikori 17; Fage 123). This devastating commerce, encouraged by local aristocracies who often participated for narrow gain, fractured West African social fabrics and drained entire communities of their most productive members. Ryder observed that Portuguese traders along the Nigerian coast, initially interested in mutual exchange, soon shifted into the brutal logistics of slavery, shipping captives to the Gold Coast and São Tomé (qtd. in Ikime 212). Over the following centuries, the Atlantic economy institutionalized violence, commodified human life, and obstructed the organic development of indigenous systems of integration. Yet even as this system disfigured the region's internal dynamics, elements of communalism and interdependence survived within West African societies.

Scholars have often claimed that integration in West Africa truly began only when European powers built infrastructures—railways, currency boards, or colonial administrative councils—that supposedly bound disparate colonies together (Gupta 12; Huillery 177). According to this line of thought, the British and French laid the groundwork for community by harmonizing currencies, connecting rail networks, or creating shared educational structures. But these infrastructures were primarily instruments of exploitation, designed to ease the extraction of resources and the movement of colonial officials rather than to cultivate a sense of collective belonging. The colonial economy, in this sense, was extractive, not integrative (Jedwab and Storeygard 160). This article challenges such Eurocentric claims by emphasizing the older traditions of regional cooperation—trade guilds, confederacies, migratory communities—that predated colonialism and outlived it.

The historiographical debate is often framed as one of mimicry versus originality: Was ECOWAS a derivative of the European Union's model, or was it an autonomous African project? Börzel and Risse have suggested that the European Union's institutional success encouraged global diffusion of integration schemes, including ECOWAS (3). But such arguments risk flattening the complexity of African political history, treating West African integration as if it were an echo rather than an expression of indigenous traditions. While one cannot deny elements of institutional

borrowing, it is more persuasive to view ECOWAS as a hybrid: shaped in part by exposure to European forms but also, and more fundamentally, rooted in West African traditions of community and the intellectual ferment of Pan-Africanist and nationalist ideologies (Fioramonti and Mattheis 680).

This study adopts an Afrocentric interpretive stance, engaging what it calls the Humanity Theory: the idea that all peoples share an innate drive toward cooperation, dignity, and collective flourishing. Within the African context, this theory underlines how ancient forms of communalism and solidarity persisted even under colonial duress. Humanity Theory resonates with the ideological movements of Pan-Africanism and Negritude, both of which emphasized unity, cultural affirmation, and the struggle for dignity against the dehumanizing logics of slavery and racism (Nielsen 348; Ako 345). West African nationalism, too, emerged as an articulation of this humanistic impulse, connecting political independence to the recovery of community-based integration.

At the same time, this article acknowledges the methodological challenges of reconstructing such continuities. Archival records, colonial reports, and early ethnographies are often shaped by European biases, framing African societies as static or "tribal" rather than dynamic and integrative (Manning 51). To counter this, the study draws not only on colonial archives but also on memoirs, Pan-African writings, and oral traditions where possible. These sources complicate the Eurocentric record, illuminating the persistence of indigenous patterns of integration beneath the surface of colonial disruption. While gaps remain—especially in reconstructing pre-fifteenth-century political economies—the interpretive method emphasizes what African scholars have long argued: that West African societies possessed their own philosophies of cooperation long before colonial intervention (Ewa 7; Zeleza 142).

The argument advanced here is both historical and theoretical. Historically, it demonstrates that precolonial polities such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai operated as integrative structures, drawing together diverse groups under shared political and economic institutions (Conrad 360; Canos-Donnay 22). Even after the collapse of these great empires, successor states—Jolof, Oyo, Benin, Sokoto—continued to develop federative or confederal arrangements that preserved integrationist ideals. Theoretically, the article situates these continuities within current debates in African humanities, particularly the critique of Eurocentric models of regionalism and the search for African-centered frameworks of unity (Adesina 117; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 204). The claim, then, is not merely that ECOWAS had historical antecedents, but that its legitimacy and durability rest on a much older and deeper cultural memory of integration.

The contemporary relevance of this argument becomes clear when one considers the present crises of ECOWAS. In recent years, political upheavals have destabilized the region, most dramatically with the 2025 withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. This rupture, though severe, should not be read simply as the collapse of integration but as a reminder of the tensions between inherited institutional forms and indigenous expectations of community. ECOWAS's transitional arrangements have minimized disruption, yet they have not resolved underlying grievances of sovereignty, legitimacy, and security. If anything, the persistence of regional dialogue—even in moments of fragmentation—suggests that the spirit of cooperation remains deeply embedded in West African political culture.

This article, therefore, proceeds with three objectives. First, it seeks to debunk the notion that West African integration is primarily a colonial construct or an imported

European model. Second, it highlights the role of Black intellectual movements—Pan-Africanism, Negritude, and West African nationalism—in preserving and transmitting the region's communal traditions. Third, it situates this reinterpretation within broader scholarly debates, connecting the historical argument to current discussions of postcolonial theory, globalization, and African agency. By doing so, the paper not only revisits the origins of ECOWAS but also repositions it as a case study in how African societies negotiate continuity and change in the pursuit of unity.

The structure of the paper reflects these aims. Following this introduction, the next section offers a critical review of prevailing interpretations of West African integration, engaging with both Eurocentric and African-centred perspectives. It then turns to the historical evidence of precolonial integration, tracing how empires and kingdoms established networks of trade, governance, and cultural exchange. The subsequent section examines the disruptions of slavery and colonialism, exploring how Black intellectual and ideological movements kept alive the memory of integration. Finally, the article analyses the formation of ECOWAS in light of these historical continuities and concludes by reflecting on the challenges and prospects of West African regionalism today.

In adopting this layered approach, the study hopes to contribute not only to the historiography of West Africa but also to the broader field of regional integration studies. ECOWAS, too often understood in terms of its institutional weaknesses or failures, deserves to be read as a creative political experiment grounded in long traditions of African communal thought. To do otherwise is to reduce African agency to the margins of global history, an oversight this article seeks to correct.

Critique of Main Conceptions of West African Integration

A serious study of West African integration cannot avoid the long and sometimes circular debates over whether ECOWAS is a colonial artefact, a product of European mimicry, or a genuine expression of indigenous traditions. For decades, much of the scholarship has been framed by Eurocentric assumptions: that Africa borrowed its integration model from the European Union, or that colonial infrastructures such as currency boards and railways were the original precursors of regional unity. Börzel and Risse, for example, argued that the success of the EU provided a template for other regions, advancing integration globally through mechanisms of persuasion, socialization, and mimicry (4). This claim has an undeniable surface plausibility, since ECOWAS shares some institutional similarities with the EU. Yet it risks flattening the African experience into a derivative story, obscuring the fact that regional cooperation in West Africa long preceded both colonialism and European integration.

Indeed, other scholars have attempted to nuance this view by shifting the focus from EU mimicry to colonial legacy. Gupta, for instance, insists that ECOWAS must be understood in relation to the institutions created by Britain and France to manage their West African colonies—railways, airways, examinations councils, and financial boards (14). From this perspective, regionalism emerges less as a voluntary project of Africans than as a pragmatic adaptation of colonial systems of exploitation. Such interpretations are historically accurate in describing how infrastructure linked colonies, but they often fail to ask a more basic question: integration for whom? These institutions did not serve West African communities as such; they were instruments for cost-saving and control. The risk of overstating colonial origins is that it obscures the agency of African intellectuals, activists, and communities who reimagined integration as a political and cultural project after independence.

More recent scholarship has begun to shift away from this binary. Piccolino suggests that ECOWAS represents a compromise between two strands of regionalism: a developmentalist approach rooted in self-reliance, and a market-driven approach influenced by global neoliberalism (3). While this reading moves beyond the EU-versus-colonial dichotomy, it still struggles to locate the deeper historical and cultural continuities that make integration in West Africa distinctive. Fioramonti and Mattheis sharpen the critique of "isomorphism" by contrasting the EU's legalistic emphasis on convergence with ECOWAS's grounding in Pan-African principles of geographical contiguity and solidarity (676). Their argument helpfully reminds us that African integration cannot be understood through institutional blueprints alone. Yet they stop short of tracing these divergences to the deeper roots of West African communal traditions, which, I argue, are central to the legitimacy of ECOWAS.

This oversight is partly a consequence of the intellectual history of African economic studies, which has long been dominated by dependency theory, Marxist materialism, or neoclassical orthodoxy. Dependency theorists highlighted the asymmetrical economic relations between colonies and metropolitan powers, yet rarely addressed indigenous processes of cooperation (Mistry 560). Marxist approaches, for their part, read African history through class struggle and dialectical materialism but often overlooked the distinctive ways West African societies organized labour, trade, and community. Meanwhile, neoclassical economists treated African economies as marginal or deficient relative to capitalist modernity, dismissing precolonial structures as inefficient or "traditional" (Fourie and Gardner 3). These paradigms left little room for indigenous agency in shaping integration, thereby reinforcing a narrative of external dependence.

This article, in contrast, takes seriously the intellectual traditions that emerged from within Africa and its diaspora. By adopting Humanity Theory, which emphasizes the innate human drive toward cooperation and self-actualization, it critiques the colonial anthropology that denied African societies the capacity for organization and unity. The theory aligns with Pan-Africanist and Negritude thought, which reclaimed African identity and solidarity in the face of enslavement and colonialism (Lambert 244; Nielsen 346). It also resonates with newer currents in African humanities that stress agency and creativity in processes of globalization. Scholars such as Adesina, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, and Zeleza have argued that African integration should be understood not as mimicry but as part of a long struggle for decolonization and epistemic sovereignty (Adesina 119; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 205; Zeleza 150). These perspectives push the debate beyond whether Africa followed Europe, asking instead how Africans redefined integration in their own terms, often in tension with global structures.

Contemporary global debates on regionalism further complicate the picture. Hettne's work on "new regionalism," for example, frames integration as a multidimensional process shaped by globalization rather than by functionalist efficiency alone (Hettne 12). Similarly, Acharya emphasizes "norm localization," showing how regions adapt global models in ways that reflect local histories and identities (Acharya 25). Applying these insights to West Africa suggests that ECOWAS cannot be understood merely as an institutional transplant; it is a site where older traditions of cooperation were adapted to new global and postcolonial realities. This does not mean that ECOWAS is free of external influence—neoliberal globalization and donor conditionalities clearly shaped its evolution—but it does suggest that West African integration cannot be reduced to dependency or imitation.

Taken together, these debates reveal a gap that this article seeks to fill. The literature has identified elements of diffusion, legacy, and adaptation, but it has rarely foregrounded the indigenous traditions that gave meaning and legitimacy to ECOWAS. By situating the community in a longue durée of precolonial integration, Black intellectual resistance, and postcolonial negotiation, the article contributes to both African historiography and the broader field of comparative regionalism. The point is not to deny the significance of colonial infrastructures or global pressures but to insist that these were layered upon, and often resisted by, much older frameworks of cooperation. In this sense, ECOWAS is best read not as a derivative of Europe but as a reassertion of West Africa's own history of integration.

Integration in Pre-Colonial West Africa

When one looks closely at pre-colonial West Africa, what emerges is not a picture of isolated communities, but of polities constantly weaving themselves into larger networks of exchange, power, and culture. From the early Ghana Empire through Mali and Songhai, the region produced federations of kingdoms and trading systems that transcended ethnicity or language, building what we might call an "integration before integration" (Mauny 202; Bovill 140). These empires were not static; they expanded and contracted with shifting ecological pressures and political rivalries, yet they all shared an underlying logic of interconnectedness. Long-distance traders, often Mandinka or Hausa, carried more than goods: they transmitted norms, rules of exchange, and even systems of dispute resolution that linked diverse communities into overlapping spheres of trust. In that sense, integration was not an abstract idea but a lived daily practice, visible in caravans, markets, and intermarriages.

The geography of West Africa also encouraged this interdependence. Bounded by the Sahara to the north and the Atlantic to the south, the region was a crossroads of ecological zones—savannah, forest, river valleys—that demanded exchange between communities specializing in different products. Gold, salt, kola nuts, textiles, and later firearms circulated through intricate networks that connected as far as the Senegambia valleys to Lake Chad. As Ewa reminds us, political power was inseparable from control over these routes, which both enriched rulers and compelled them to negotiate with neighbours (12). Integration thus emerged not out of altruism but necessity: no single community could be self-sufficient in such an environment, and survival required interdependence.

The collapse of Songhai in the sixteenth century did not spell the end of this integrative logic. New confederacies arose, such as the Jolof Empire in Senegambia and the Oyo and Benin polities in the forest zones, each experimenting with federated systems that balanced central authority with local autonomy. The Jolof federation, for instance, unified Wolof, Serer, and Tukolor groups under a loose arrangement that lasted nearly a century before internal pressures unravelled it (Conrad 364). Similarly, the Oyo Empire developed an elaborate system of provincial administration and checks on the Alaafin's power that maintained cohesion across ethnically diverse territories. These examples suggest that integration was not an anomaly but a recurrent political strategy, adapted to shifting conditions but deeply rooted in the region's historical imagination.

Religion added yet another layer. Islam spread along the trade routes, introducing not only faith but also legal codes, literacy, and diplomatic conventions that facilitated interaction among distant communities (Barry 42). Muslim scholars moved between Timbuktu, Kano, and Agadez, creating a republic of letters that paralleled the commercial republic of traders. Later, Christian missions along the coast would also

reshape connections, though in different ways. What matters here is less the doctrinal content than the integrative infrastructure religion provided: common languages of ritual and law, networks of scholarship, and symbolic forms of legitimacy that transcended local identities. Religious movements, sometimes peaceful and sometimes militant, knitted societies together in ways that foreshadowed the ideological currents of Pan-Africanism centuries later.

Of course, integration was never uncontested. Wars of conquest, succession disputes, and ecological crises often fractured empires, producing waves of migration that destabilized one region while enriching another. The Fulbe jihads of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, culminating in the Sokoto Caliphate, exemplify this dual character. On the one hand, they were disruptive, displacing older polities; on the other, they created new supra-regional structures that linked vast territories under shared institutions of law and administration (Singleton 360). Migration itself, whether spurred by conflict, famine, or trade, spread ideas of interdependence, leaving behind pockets of Hausa, Mandinka, and Yoruba traders who settled permanently in foreign cities and acted as cultural brokers. Thus, even instability generated new webs of connection.

Yet by the fifteenth century, a new and far more destabilizing force appeared on the horizon. European explorers, merchants, and eventually colonizers entered into this complex landscape, exploiting rivalries and redirecting integration toward external markets. Initially, as Ryder observed, Portuguese traders dealt in cloth, metals, and a limited number of slaves along the coast (qtd. in Ikime 210). But demand from the Atlantic world soon turned these modest exchanges into a massive human trade, uprooting millions and skewing the region's political economy toward raiding and warfare. Where integration had once been driven by mutual need and negotiated coexistence, it increasingly became distorted by coercion and external demand. The traditional structures did not disappear, but they were bent into serving an economy of extraction that eroded their autonomy.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that European intrusion simply erased West African integrative traditions. In many cases, local rulers adapted, negotiated, or resisted. The kingdom of Benin, for instance, tightly regulated European access to its markets, while Asante leaders used firearms acquired from Europeans to consolidate broader regional authority. These strategies reveal a degree of agency, even within the unequal terms of exchange. What endured, across these centuries, was the memory and practice of cooperation—fragmented, distorted, but not extinguished. This is why, when Pan-Africanist and nationalist leaders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries spoke of unity, they could draw upon more than abstract ideals: they were recalling, even if imperfectly, a history of integration embedded in the region's experience.

In this light, pre-colonial West Africa cannot be dismissed as a fragmented mosaic awaiting European "civilizing" order. It was a dynamic field of polities experimenting with integration across political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Some attempts succeeded for centuries; others collapsed quickly. But taken together, they demonstrate that the idea of West Africa as a community is not a postcolonial invention. Rather, it is a continuity—interrupted by slavery and colonialism but deeply embedded in the region's historical trajectory. To understand ECOWAS today, and indeed to assess its crises and resilience, one must first appreciate these older foundations of interdependence.

Impact of European Intrusion and Slavery on West African Integration

The arrival of Europeans in the fifteenth century radically altered the trajectory of West African integration. Initially, the exchanges resembled earlier trans-Saharan networks: Africans traded gold, ivory, hides, and sometimes domestic slaves for European textiles, metals, and firearms. But within a few decades, the balance shifted decisively. By the sixteenth century, the demand for slave labour in the Americas had transformed the Atlantic into a vast theatre of human trafficking, with West Africa at its centre (Inikori 27; M'baye 609). Entire communities were depopulated, wars of capture proliferated, and the intricate webs of cooperation that had sustained earlier empires began to unravel. What had once been systems of negotiated exchange became increasingly subordinated to an economy of predation.

It is sometimes argued that slavery was already part of West African political culture, and to an extent this is true. Captives had long been absorbed into households or labour systems. Yet the scale, brutality, and external orientation of the transatlantic trade dwarfed anything that had come before. Millions were uprooted, often violently, and sold into markets that bore little resemblance to local systems of incorporation (Fage 126; Van der Linden 11). The destabilization went beyond demography. Agricultural production declined as able-bodied men and women were removed, local industries stagnated under the flood of imported goods, and societies became locked into cycles of raiding to meet European demand. Integration, once tied to reciprocity and interdependence, was now distorted into dependency.

The Europeans themselves did not act alone. Many coastal elites, chiefs, and middlemen became complicit, trading captives for guns, cloth, or other commodities. Ryder observed that along the Nigerian coast, Portuguese traders initially pursued commerce in goods but quickly shifted toward the more lucrative trade in human beings (qtd. in Ikime 214). Bandit groups flourished in regions without strong central authority, raiding indiscriminately to supply captives. The logic of integration was turned upside down: cooperation now served the extraction of people rather than their incorporation into wider communities. It is no exaggeration to say that the Atlantic slave trade hollowed out the integrative capacity of West African societies for centuries.

The abolition of the trade in the nineteenth century did not immediately restore stability. Even as Britain outlawed slavery in 1807 and sought to enforce the ban with its navy, the social and economic scars ran deep. Abolition itself was driven as much by European industrial needs and shifting moral climates as by humanitarian concern (Manning 55; Van der Linden 14). But within West Africa, the crucial development was the response of intellectuals—many of them former slaves or their descendants—who began to articulate critiques of slavery that drew on both European liberalism and African traditions of communalism. Figures such as Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano insisted not only on the immorality of the trade but also on the dignity and organizational capacity of Africans themselves (Levesque 271). Their writings helped to preserve and reinterpret older concepts of community for a new era.

Colonialism followed closely on the heels of abolition, and in some respects it extended the logic of extraction. European powers, formalizing their control in the late nineteenth century, built infrastructures—railways, schools, administrative councils—that at first glance seemed integrative. Yet these were not designed for African unity but for the efficient exploitation of labour and resources (Huillery 178). As Adedeji observed, colonial regionalism was "integration without community," a system in

which connections were engineered to benefit the metropole rather than to sustain indigenous societies (23). Once again, integration was distorted by external priorities. But here too, resilience can be glimpsed: Africans appropriated, subverted, or reinterpreted colonial institutions in ways that often exceeded their intended purpose.

Despite these disruptions, memories of earlier integration survived in cultural practices, migratory networks, and religious affiliations. Market women continued to organize across ethnic lines, itinerant traders maintained transregional ties, and Islamic scholarship preserved channels of intellectual exchange. These forms of everyday resilience suggest that integration never fully disappeared; it was suppressed, bent, and distorted, but it endured beneath the weight of exploitation. When twentieth-century nationalists later invoked unity, they were not simply importing an abstract European model. They were recalling a deeper history of belonging—fragmented but still alive—that could be mobilized in the struggle for independence.

Black Ideology Movements and the Survival of West African Integration

The survival of West African integration in the modern era owes much to what may be called the Black ideological tradition. By this I mean the constellation of ideas, strategies, and political movements that emerged from the struggles of Africans and their descendants against slavery, racism, and colonialism. These movements were not merely reactive; they actively preserved and reimagined older traditions of community that had been fractured by centuries of external domination. In North America and the Caribbean, in Europe, and back in Africa, Black intellectuals and activists articulated visions of solidarity that, while shaped by their immediate contexts, consistently drew on the memory of African communalism. They provided the intellectual scaffolding for the nationalist projects that would eventually culminate in regional organizations such as ECOWAS (Du Bois 15; Garvey 42).

Pan-Africanism was perhaps the most visible of these ideological currents. Emerging in the late nineteenth century and maturing in the early twentieth, it sought to unify all people of African descent, insisting that their liberation was bound together. Pan-African congresses, often held in London, Paris, or later Manchester, brought together diaspora intellectuals and African leaders who argued that freedom for one part of Africa required solidarity with the whole (Adi and Sherwood 21). The idea resonated with older West African traditions of interdependence but also acquired new urgency in the face of colonialism. Pan-Africanism did not always agree on strategy—some favoured gradual reform, others immediate revolution—but it created a shared vocabulary of unity that could be mobilized across borders.

Negritude added another layer, blending cultural pride with political resistance. Developed by francophone thinkers such as Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, Negritude challenged the denigration of African culture by celebrating blackness as a source of creativity and dignity (Ako 347; Nielsen 343). Its influence extended beyond literature; it offered a philosophical foundation for solidarity by affirming that Africans shared not just oppression but also a cultural inheritance that could inspire integration. Critics later dismissed Negritude as essentialist, but its insistence on the legitimacy of African identity provided a counterweight to the assimilationist ideologies of colonial powers. In West Africa, Negritude fed directly into nationalist discourse, giving leaders a framework for articulating unity in cultural as well as political terms.

West African nationalism, meanwhile, was the most explicitly political of these movements. Building on both Pan-Africanist and Negritude currents, it sought not only independence from colonial rule but also regional unity. Figures such as Africanus Horton, Edward Wilmot Blyden, and J.E. Casely Hayford envisioned a self-governing West Africa decades before independence became a reality (Eluwa 209; Abdulrasheed and Muhammad 5). Organizations like the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA), the West African Students' Union (WASU), and later the West African National Secretariat (WANS) gave institutional form to these aspirations. They organized petitions, lobbied colonial offices, and, perhaps most importantly, cultivated a generation of activists who saw West Africa as more than a collection of colonies. Though these groups often struggled with elitism, limited resources, or repression, their persistence kept the idea of integration alive.

The interplay between diaspora and homeland was crucial. Students and intellectuals in London or Paris often encountered Pan-Africanist networks that broadened their horizons, then carried those ideas back to West Africa. WASU, for example, was both a welfare association for students and a training ground for future leaders, many of whom later spearheaded nationalist movements at home (Adi 112). Similarly, WANS, though short-lived, linked anglophone and francophone activists in ways that anticipated postcolonial regionalism (Sackeyfio-Lenoch 347). These transatlantic and transregional exchanges demonstrate that integration was not only remembered but actively rehearsed in the lived experiences of young West Africans abroad.

Colonial authorities, unsurprisingly, viewed these movements with suspicion. British officials dismissed the NCBWA as elitist and unrepresentative, while French administrators feared Negritude's anti-assimilationist thrust. After the Second World War, as global politics polarized between capitalism and communism, West African nationalists were often accused of harbouring dangerous socialist sympathies (Sackeyfio-Lenoch 349). The repression was real, but it also underscored how seriously colonial powers took these movements. By portraying them as threats, European authorities inadvertently confirmed that Black ideologies had the power to destabilize imperial order.

What endured across Pan-Africanism, Negritude, and West African nationalism was not a single doctrine but a shared conviction: that Africans possessed the capacity, and indeed the responsibility, to organize their own futures. These ideologies reactivated the memory of precolonial integration and recast it as both a critique of colonialism and a blueprint for postcolonial unity. They did not create ECOWAS directly—institutions never emerge so neatly—but they prepared the intellectual and political ground. When West African leaders gathered in the 1970s to sign the ECOWAS treaty, they did so in a world already saturated with the language of unity, solidarity, and African self-determination. The Black ideological tradition had made such a step thinkable, and perhaps inevitable.

West African Nationalism

By the early twentieth century, West African nationalism had begun to crystallize as a distinct political project, overlapping with but not identical to Pan-Africanism. Whereas Pan-Africanism envisioned a global solidarity of all people of African descent, West African nationalism focused more directly on building unity within the subregion. Its intellectual roots can be traced back to the writings of Africanus Horton in the 1860s, who argued that British colonies in West Africa should be allowed to govern themselves as a federated region rather than as fragmented dependencies (Horton qtd. in Abdulrasheed and Muhammad 7). Edward Wilmot Blyden amplified

this call by linking the idea of West African self-determination to broader notions of racial pride and cultural revival. By the 1920s, these ideas had matured into organized movements, as elites, professionals, and students sought to push colonial powers toward conceding space for African voices in governance.

The National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA), founded in 1920, was the first major attempt to give institutional form to these aspirations. Led by figures such as J.E. Casely Hayford, the Congress drew support from elites in the Gold Coast, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Gambia. Its platform included demands for elective representation in colonial legislatures, the establishment of a West African Court of Appeal, and the creation of a university for the region (Eluwa 212). These demands were cautious rather than revolutionary, reflecting both the moderate disposition of the Congress and the constraints under which it operated. Yet they were significant in that they articulated West Africa as a coherent political unit, deserving of common institutions. Even if dismissed by the Colonial Office as elitist, the NCBWA laid down an early template for regional thinking.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the torch passed increasingly to younger activists, many of them students abroad. The West African Students' Union (WASU), founded in London in 1925 by Ladipo Solanke, became both a welfare organization and a political hub. It offered housing, scholarships, and cultural support to West African students but also encouraged them to think of themselves as part of a collective regional identity (Adi 115). WASU's branches in the colonies fostered ties with youth groups and traditional leaders, expanding its influence beyond the diaspora. Through debates, pamphlets, and direct lobbying, the union became a training ground for the nationalist leaders who would later dominate postcolonial politics. Its rhetoric of solidarity was not just aspirational—it actively built habits of cooperation across colonial boundaries.

The end of the Second World War gave fresh momentum to nationalist movements. The establishment of the West African National Secretariat (WANS) in 1946 reflected this shift toward greater political urgency. Figures such as Kwame Nkrumah and Wallace Johnson, inspired by the Fifth Pan-African Congress held in Manchester in 1945, sought to turn regional activism into coordinated strategies for independence. WANS attempted to bridge the linguistic divide by engaging francophone leaders such as Léopold Senghor and Sourou Migan Apithy, marking an early experiment in cross-colonial solidarity (Sackeyfio-Lenoch 348). Its explicitly socialist orientation alarmed colonial authorities, who quickly moved to suppress it. Yet even in failure, WANS underscored the central point: that the struggle for independence was inseparable from the struggle for regional integration.

Colonial officials, predictably, viewed these movements as dangerous. In 1948, riots in the Gold Coast were blamed on WANS's supposed communist sympathies, providing British authorities with a pretext to curtail its activities. Such accusations reflected Cold War anxieties as much as local realities, but they also reveal the extent to which regional nationalism had become a genuine political force. To colonial administrators, the very idea of Africans organizing across territorial lines posed a threat to imperial order. For West African activists, however, these networks were essential. They provided the language and organizational experience that would later prove vital in the transition to independence.

By the 1950s, the leaders shaped by these movements—Nkrumah in Ghana, Azikiwe in Nigeria, Senghor in Senegal—were pushing for national independence while still carrying the imprint of regionalist ideals. Their visions were not always aligned; some

prioritized national consolidation over supranational unity. Yet the memory of WASU debates, NCBWA petitions, and Pan-African congresses lingered, shaping their rhetoric and strategies. When ECOWAS was eventually formed in 1975, it was not conjured out of thin air. It was the institutional offspring of decades of nationalist agitation that consistently framed West Africa as more than the sum of its colonies.

West African nationalism, then, cannot be reduced to elite ambition or student activism, though it drew on both. It was, rather, a layered ideological formation that combined cultural pride, political strategy, and historical memory. Its power lay in its ability to connect the ancient traditions of interdependence with the modern struggle against colonialism. By envisioning West Africa as a shared community, nationalists helped to lay the intellectual groundwork for ECOWAS. Their efforts remind us that institutions rarely spring fully formed; they are preceded by long histories of imagination and contestation.

Conclusion

The history of West Africa resists simple narratives. Long before the arrival of Europeans, the region's empires and kingdoms—Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Oyo, Benin, Sokoto, and many others—wove together diverse peoples into networks of commerce, governance, and cultural exchange. These arrangements were rarely perfect, often fragile, but they testified to a persistent desire for cooperation across lines of language, religion, and ecology (Mauny 205; Bovill 145). That desire was not extinguished by the traumas of the Atlantic slave trade or by the bureaucratic structures of colonial rule. Instead, it survived in cultural memory, resurfacing in the ideologies of Pan-Africanism, Negritude, and West African nationalism. These movements, though sometimes fragmented or suppressed, kept alive the conviction that unity was both possible and necessary.

The formation of ECOWAS in 1975 must therefore be understood as more than a diplomatic arrangement between postcolonial states. It was, at least in part, the institutionalization of much older traditions of integration—traditions preserved and reimagined by nationalist leaders who drew upon both the historical record and the ideological ferment of their time. By foregrounding these continuities, this study challenges the view that ECOWAS is merely an imitation of the European Union or an outgrowth of colonial infrastructures. Those influences are present, of course, but they were layered onto a foundation that was distinctly West African. Recognizing this foundation allows us to see ECOWAS less as a fragile transplant and more as the latest expression of a deeply rooted regional identity.

That said, the story is not one of seamless continuity. Integration in West Africa has always been contested, and ECOWAS is no exception. Recent events—most dramatically the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in 2025—underscore the fragility of regional institutions when they fail to address underlying grievances of sovereignty, legitimacy, and security. These crises are not unprecedented. Similar fractures appeared in earlier centuries when empires collapsed, when trade shifted, or when rivalries destabilized fragile federations. Yet what history also shows is that West African societies consistently reconstituted forms of cooperation in the aftermath of rupture. If anything, the persistence of ECOWAS dialogue in the wake of withdrawals suggests that the underlying impulse toward integration endures.

The task for scholars and policymakers alike is to engage this history with both humility and imagination. ECOWAS cannot be sustained by technical fixes or donor-driven frameworks alone. It requires a recognition of the deeper communal traditions

that give regionalism legitimacy in West African political culture. Here, the insights of Pan-African and postcolonial scholarship are instructive. They remind us that integration must be grounded not only in economic rationality but also in cultural memory and political identity (Adesina 121; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 210). To ignore these dimensions is to risk repeating the colonial mistake of building structures without communities.

Ultimately, the lesson of West African history is that integration is not a static achievement but a process of constant negotiation. It is forged in trade routes and student unions, in shared rituals and political congresses, in the resilience of everyday cooperation and the bold visions of intellectuals. ECOWAS stands today as both an achievement and a challenge: an institution that embodies centuries of aspiration yet remains vulnerable to the same tensions that have long shaped the region. Its future will depend less on mimicry of external models than on its capacity to draw from the well of its own past. To acknowledge this is not to romanticize history but to recognize the enduring truth that West Africa has always been more than its fragments. It has been, and continues to be, a community in the making.

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