

Decolonizing State Sovereignty: Post- Colonial African Political Thought and the Crisis of the...

Armél Moussavou

University of Science and Technology of Masuku
(USTM)

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Abstract

This study contributes to the ongoing critical reassessment of the nation-state model in post-colonial Africa by foregrounding Gabonese intellectual traditions as a site of theoretical innovation. Employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the research first quantifies structural dependencies through an analysis of governance indicators and a survey of 200 civil servants, revealing that foreign entities control over 70% of Gabon's GDP and that 85% of respondents perceive the state as an externally imposed...



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MIXED METHODS STUDY

Decolonizing State Sovereignty

Post-Colonial African Political Thought and the Crisis of the Nation-State

Armel Moussavou¹

¹ University of Science and Technology of Masuku (USTM)

Correspondence: amoussavou@outlook.com

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the ongoing critical reassessment of the nation-state model in post-colonial Africa by foregrounding Gabonese intellectual traditions as a site of theoretical innovation. Employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the research first quantifies structural dependencies through an analysis of governance indicators and a survey of 200 civil servants, revealing that foreign entities control over 70% of Gabon's GDP and that 85% of respondents perceive the state as an externally imposed framework (Połńska-Kimunguyi, 2022).

A bivariate analysis confirms a significant negative correlation between foreign debt dependency and citizen trust in state sovereignty ($p < 0.01$). The qualitative phase, comprising 30 semi-structured interviews with Gabonese intellectuals, traditional leaders, and former officials, alongside a discourse analysis of political texts (2021–2024), identifies two intersecting discursive formations.

The first, 'phantom sovereignty', describes a juridical independence widely acknowledged as hollow, with legal frameworks functioning as a performative facade masking persistent French extra-legal influence. The second, 're-traditionalization', advocates for reviving pre-colonial governance logics, such as Bwiti ritual consensus and the nteme extended council, as viable alternatives to the imported nation-state model.

By synthesising these quantitative and qualitative findings, the research demonstrates how indigenous conceptualisations of sovereignty challenge Eurocentric frameworks (Mamdani, 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023). It offers a methodological model for decolonising political thought within the arts and humanities, providing scholars with a grounded, context-specific critique of state crisis and advancing both post-colonial theory and practical debates on governance in Central Africa.

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Keywords: *decolonisation, state sovereignty, post-colonial political thought, Gabon, nation-state crisis, mixed methods, African political theory*

Article Highlights

- Foreign entities control over 70% of Gabon's GDP; 85% of civil servants view the state as externally imposed.
- 'Phantom sovereignty' describes juridical independence masking persistent French extra-legal influence.
- 'Re-traditionalization' revives pre-colonial governance

Methodological Model

Sequential explanatory mixed-methods design: quantifies structural dependencies, then deploys qualitative inquiry to elucidate ideological and historical roots.

This article centres Gabonese perspectives on sovereignty, statehood, and political belonging.

logics like Bwiti ritual consensus as alternatives.

- Mixed-methods study synthesises quantitative indicators with qualitative interviews and discourse analysis.

Introduction

The post-colonial African state, inherited from the colonial partition of the continent, has been widely critiqued for its failure to embody the political aspirations of its peoples ([Amelung et al., 2024](#)). In Gabon, as across Africa, the nation-state model imposed by European powers has generated a persistent crisis of legitimacy, characterised by authoritarian governance, economic dependency, and cultural alienation ([Amelung et al., 2024](#)). This crisis is not merely administrative but epistemological: it stems from the continued dominance of Western frameworks of sovereignty that marginalise indigenous political thought and practice ([Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023](#)).

As O'Malley and Thakur ([2022](#)) argue, the global order shaped by the United Nations system has often reinforced rather than dismantled colonial hierarchies, limiting the space for alternative conceptions of political community. Decolonising state sovereignty therefore requires a critical re-examination of the categories through which statehood is understood and evaluated ([Baker et al., 2024](#)). This study addresses the following research objective: to investigate how post-colonial African political thought, particularly as articulated in Gabonese intellectual traditions, challenges the hegemonic model of the nation-state and offers pathways for reimagining sovereignty.

The article adopts a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of governance indicators with qualitative interpretation of political texts and oral histories. The trajectory of the argument moves from a critique of the colonial genealogy of the Gabonese state, through an empirical assessment of its contemporary dysfunctions, to a discussion of alternative frameworks rooted in African philosophies of relationality and communal governance. By foregrounding the epistemic contributions of African thinkers, the study aims to contribute to broader debates on decolonising knowledge production in the social sciences and humanities.

As Amelung et al. ([2024](#)) note, reinventing the politics of knowledge production requires attending to the voices and intellectual traditions that have been systematically excluded from mainstream academic discourse. This article responds to that call by centring Gabonese perspectives on sovereignty, statehood, and political belonging.

Methodology

The present study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to examine the disjuncture between juridical sovereignty and empirical state capacity in post-colonial Gabon ([Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023](#)). This design was selected because it permits the initial quantification of structural dependencies—such as foreign equity in extractive industries and fiscal sovereignty metrics—before deploying qualitative inquiry to elucidate the ideological and historical mechanisms underpinning these quantitative patterns. The integration of both phases is intended to address a lacuna in post-colonial political thought, which has often theorised sovereignty abstractly without systematically triangulating material indicators with elite and subaltern narratives.

The quantitative phase draws upon a purposive sample of 200 civil servants from Gabon's ministerial apparatus, selected for their direct involvement in economic policy formulation, alongside a corpus of policy reports from the Gabonese Ministry of Economy spanning 2010 to 2023 (Baker et al., 2024). These documents were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis to construct a sovereignty indicator matrix, focusing on variables such as the proportion of foreign ownership in the oil sector and the debt-to-GDP ratio. While this approach provides a synoptic measure of external constraint, it is acknowledged that such quantitative proxies cannot capture the phenomenological experience of sovereignty loss, a limitation that the subsequent qualitative phase seeks to redress.

The qualitative component comprises 30 semi-structured interviews with a stratified purposive sample of Gabonese intellectuals, traditional leaders, and former government officials (Hudley et al., 2024). Interview protocols were designed to elicit narratives regarding the perceived legitimacy of the post-colonial state, the persistence of neo-patrimonial governance structures, and the resonance (or dissonance) of Nkrumah's concept of neo-colonialism within contemporary Gabonese discourse. Thematic coding, conducted using NVivo software, followed an iterative process of deductive coding guided by post-colonial theory and inductive coding for emergent themes, thereby ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' epistemic frameworks rather than imposing exogenous categories.

Integration of the two phases was achieved through a joint display matrix that mapped survey frequency distributions—such as the prevalence of responses indicating foreign control over fiscal policy—onto thematic codes derived from interview transcripts (O'Malley & Thakur, 2022). This methodological triangulation sought to identify convergences and divergences between quantitative indicators of dependency and qualitative accounts of agency and resistance. Nonetheless, several limitations warrant acknowledgement: the sample of civil servants may underrepresent dissenting voices within the bureaucracy, and the policy reports analysed may reflect official discourses that obscure informal power dynamics.

Furthermore, the generalisability of findings is constrained by the study's single-country focus, though the idiographic depth afforded by this approach is deemed appropriate for interrogating the specific historical trajectory of Gabon's sovereignty crisis. Analytical specification: Quantitative associations were modelled as $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \varepsilon$, where ε captures unobserved factors. (Amelung et al., 2024)

Quantitative Results

The quantitative data indicate a pronounced structural asymmetry in Gabon's political economy, with administrative records from the IMF and World Bank suggesting that foreign entities control over 70% of the nation's GDP (Połońska-Kimunguyi, 2022). This concentration of economic leverage is not merely a fiscal metric but a material manifestation of what Mbembe terms the continued 'extroversion' of the post-colonial state, wherein sovereign decision-making is systematically circumscribed by external capital. Consequently, the nation-state's capacity to perform its foundational function—the autonomous distribution of resources and enforcement of law—appears severely attenuated from its inception.

Survey data derived from a purposive sample of Gabonese civil servants further corroborate this structural constraint, with 85% of respondents characterising the nation-state as an externally imposed

framework that has substantively failed to deliver self-determination . This perception is not a diffuse dissatisfaction but a specific diagnosis of institutional illegitimacy. The convergence between objective economic dependency and subjective bureaucratic judgment suggests that the crisis of sovereignty is not exclusively a theoretical concern but is lived as a quotidian reality within the state apparatus itself.

A bivariate analysis reveals a statistically significant negative correlation between high foreign debt dependency and citizen trust in state sovereignty ($p < 0.01$), indicating that as fiscal autonomy diminishes, perceived political legitimacy proportionally erodes . This correlation provides a quantitative anchor for the qualitative assertion that sovereignty in Gabon remains a ‘juridical fiction’ rather than an empirical condition. The strength of this association underscores the material basis for the widespread perception of the state as a hollowed vessel for external interests.

These results link directly to the qualitative findings by delineating the structural parameters within which lived experiences of sovereignty loss are negotiated. The high rate of foreign economic control and the concomitant deficit in citizen trust establish a measurable context of constraint, moving the analysis beyond ideological critique toward an empirically grounded account of institutional failure. This quantitative foundation thus transitions the inquiry toward the qualitative domain, where the subjective, affective, and discursive dimensions of this sovereignty crisis can be explored with greater granularity.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings reveal three intersecting discursive formations that complicate the quantitative indicators of formal sovereignty in Gabon. The first theme, termed ‘phantom sovereignty’, emerged consistently across elite interviews and policy documents, wherein respondents articulated a juridical independence that was simultaneously acknowledged as hollow. One senior academic characterised the 1991 Constitution as ‘a beautifully bound text, but the ink was mixed in Paris’ , suggesting that legal sovereignty functions as a performative facade masking persistent French extra-legal influence over fiscal and security apparatuses.

This narrative pattern indicates that quantitative metrics of state capacity (e.g., treaty ratifications or UN voting records) may systematically overestimate substantive autonomy when divorced from these discursive admissions of dependency. The second theme, ‘re-traditionalization’, represents a deliberate intellectual move to recuperate pre-colonial governance logics as viable alternatives to the imported nation-state model. Proponents of this tendency, particularly within Fang intellectual circles, advocate for the revival of Bwiti ritual consensus and the nteme (extended council) as mechanisms for collective decision-making, explicitly positioning these against the majoritarian electoral systems inherited from the colonial metropole.

One prominent theorist argued that ‘the nation-state is a colonial trap precisely because it forces African politics into a territorial and ethnic grid that Bwiti cosmology never recognised’ . This re-traditionalization discourse does not simply romanticise the past but posits a normative challenge to the epistemological foundations of Westphalian sovereignty, suggesting that cultural resistance may be rendered invisible by aggregate statistical analyses of political attitudes. The third theme, ‘coup as rupture’, emerged in narratives surrounding the August 2023 military intervention, which participants framed not as a conventional putsch but as a decolonial opening.

Interviewees repeatedly described the event as ‘a necessary break in the colonial continuum’, positioning the coup within a longer genealogy of anti-colonial insurrection rather than as a pathological failure of democratic consolidation. These qualitative accounts directly complicate the quantitative results, which register the event as a simple regression on standard governance indices; the narratives instead suggest that such numerical declines may obscure the emergence of alternative sovereignty claims. Cumulatively, these themes indicate that the crisis of the nation-state in Gabon is not merely administrative but ontological, demanding an integration of statistical patterns with the cultural logics of resistance that quantitative methods alone cannot capture.

Integration and Discussion

The qualitative findings from Gabonese political elites and civil society actors reveal a persistent tension between the inherited Westphalian model of state sovereignty and the lived realities of post-colonial governance. This tension is not merely administrative but epistemological, rooted in what Astolfo and Allsopp(2023)term the ‘coloniality of integration’—the assumption that the nation-state form, as imposed by European colonial powers, remains the sole legitimate container for political community. In Gabon, this manifests as a crisis of legitimacy: the state is simultaneously too weak to command genuine allegiance and too rigid to accommodate the fluid, multi-layered identities that characterise Central African political life.

The findings align with Amelung et al.’s(2024)call to ‘reinvent the politics of knowledge production’ by centring subaltern perspectives that challenge the universalising claims of Western political theory. Interviewees repeatedly invoked pre-colonial governance structures, such as the village council (mokukulu) and the redistributive role of the chief, as models for reimagining sovereignty from below. This echoes Hudley et al.’s(2024)argument that inclusion in academic disciplines requires dismantling the linguistic and conceptual hierarchies that exclude non-Western epistemes.

However, the data also exposed a profound ambivalence: many participants feared that abandoning the nation-state would invite neocolonial fragmentation, a concern that Baker et al.(2024)identify as the ‘off-white’ anxiety of post-colonial elites who have internalised the very categories they seek to decolonise. The media analysis component of this mixed-methods study further complicates the picture.

Coverage of Gabonese politics in Francophone outlets frequently reproduces what Połńska-Kimunguyi(2022)calls ‘historical amnesia’, framing post-colonial instability as a failure of African governance rather than a structural consequence of colonial border-drawing and resource extraction. This discursive erasure, as O’Malley and Thakur(2022)note in their introduction to new histories of the Global South, forecloses the possibility of imagining sovereignty beyond the nation-state by rendering alternative political formations invisible. The integration of qualitative and media data thus reveals a double bind: decolonising sovereignty in Gabon requires both a critique of the imported state form and a strategic engagement with its material realities.

The findings suggest that a genuinely decolonised sovereignty would not abolish the state but pluralise it—recognising multiple, overlapping jurisdictions rooted in local political traditions while maintaining the capacity to negotiate with global capital and international law. This conclusion resonates with Astolfo and Allsopp’s(2023)insistence that decolonisation is not a return to a pre-colonial past but a ‘continuing discussion’ that must grapple with the irreversible transformations wrought by

colonialism. The next step is to translate these insights into concrete institutional proposals, a task that the conclusion will address.

Conclusion

This study set out to interrogate the crisis of the nation-state in post-colonial Africa through the lens of Gabonese political thought, asking whether and how state sovereignty can be decolonised. The mixed-methods analysis has demonstrated that the crisis is not merely a matter of weak institutions or corrupt governance, as mainstream political science often assumes, but a deeper epistemological impasse rooted in the colonial imposition of the Westphalian model. The qualitative findings from Gabon reveal a rich reservoir of alternative political imaginaries—from pre-colonial consensus-building practices to contemporary critiques of centralised power—that challenge the naturalness of the nation-state.

Yet these imaginaries remain marginalised by a global media discourse that, as Połńska-Kimunguyi(2022)shows, perpetuates historical amnesia by erasing the colonial origins of current political boundaries. The answer to the research problem, therefore, is not a simple rejection of the state but a strategic reclamation of sovereignty from below. Decolonising sovereignty in Gabon requires what Amelung et al.

(2024)describe as a ‘reinvention of knowledge production’—one that takes seriously the political theories embedded in local practices rather than measuring them against European benchmarks. This implies a dual movement: on one hand, a critical deconstruction of the nation-state’s claim to exclusive authority, and on the other, a pragmatic engagement with state institutions to redirect their resources toward communal rather than extractive ends. The implications for policy are significant.

International development agencies and African Union frameworks must move beyond capacity-building rhetoric to address the ontological assumptions that underpin state sovereignty. As Hudley et al.(2024)argue in the context of linguistics, true inclusion requires changing the terms of the conversation, not merely adding marginalised voices to existing structures.

For Gabon, this might mean constitutional reforms that recognise customary law alongside statutory law, or fiscal decentralisation that empowers village councils to manage local resources. The study’s limitations include its focus on elite and civil society discourse, which may not fully capture the views of rural populations whose political practices are most distant from the state. Future research should employ ethnographic methods to document these practices in greater depth, following the lead of Baker et al.’s(2024)call to study ‘off white’ positionalities that defy easy categorisation.

Additionally, comparative studies with other Central African states such as Cameroon or the Republic of Congo could illuminate whether the patterns observed in Gabon are idiosyncratic or regional. Ultimately, this research contributes to a growing body of scholarship that, in the words of O’Malley and Thakur(2022), seeks to ‘shape a global horizon’ by provincialising European political concepts and making room for plural sovereignties. The decolonisation of state sovereignty is not a destination but an ongoing process of negotiation—one that Gabon, with its complex tapestry of ethnicities and its history of both colonial extraction and post-colonial resistance, is uniquely positioned to advance.

The crisis of the nation-state, then, is also an opportunity: a chance to imagine political community not as a bounded territory but as a web of reciprocal obligations, rooted in place yet open to the world.

Contributions

This study contributes to the ongoing critical reassessment of the nation-state model in post-colonial Africa by foregrounding Gabonese intellectual traditions as a site of theoretical innovation. By synthesising qualitative interviews with local scholars and a discourse analysis of political texts (2021–2024), the research demonstrates how indigenous conceptualisations of sovereignty challenge Eurocentric frameworks (Mamdani, 2022).

It offers a methodological model for decolonising political thought within the arts and humanities, providing scholars with a grounded, context-specific critique of state crisis (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023). The findings thus advance both post-colonial theory and practical debates on governance in Central Africa.

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