



Decolonizing Borders: Rethinking the Berlin Conference's impact through Pan-African Unity and Regional Integration Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

The 1884–85 Berlin Conference established arbitrary colonial borders that continue to shape Africa's contemporary geopolitical challenges. This paper reframes the Berlin Conference not merely as a historical artifact, but as an ongoing structural problem requiring active mitigation through Pan-African unity and regional integration. Drawing on postcolonial theory, international relations, and African political economy, the study examines how the African Union (AU), the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) function as vehicles for border decolonization. Through policy analysis and scenario modelling, the paper explores juridical reforms and cross-border governance innovations that challenge colonial spatial legacies. Findings demonstrate that while complete border reconfiguration remains politically unfeasible, functional integration through economic cooperation, freedom of movement protocols, and harmonized legal frameworks offers pragmatic decolonization pathways. This paper makes a twofold contribution to scholarship: first, it bridges postcolonial theory and integration studies by operationalizing decolonization as a measurable policy outcome rather than an abstract ideal. Second, it advances scenario-based frameworks for evaluating border governance innovations, offering scholars and policymakers a replicable analytical toolkit for assessing Pan-African integration trajectories. The paper thus repositions regional integration as simultaneously an economic imperative and an act of epistemic and political decolonization.

Keywords: Berlin Conference, Decolonization, Pan-Africanism, Regional Integration, African Union, AfCFTA, Border Politics, Postcolonial Theory

INTRODUCTION

The territorial configuration of contemporary Africa remains fundamentally shaped by the colonial partition formalized during the 1884–85 Berlin Conference. In that historic gathering, European powers negotiated the division of African territories with no African representation, establishing borders that often bisected ethnic groups, disrupted traditional trade routes, and imposed artificial political entities.¹

¹ Herbst Jeffrey, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Pierre Englebert, Stacy Tarango, and Matthew Carter, "Dismemberment and Suffocation: A Contribution to the Debate on African Boundaries," *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 10 (2002): 1093–1118.

More than a century after formal decolonization began, these borders continue to generate profound challenges for African development, sovereignty, and identity.²

Traditional scholarship has analysed the Berlin Conference primarily as a historical event whose consequences, while regrettable, are essentially fixed.³ This perspective treats colonial borders as immutable facts of contemporary African politics. However, recent decolonial scholarship challenges this fatalism, arguing that the spatial legacy of colonialism can and must be actively contested through alternative frameworks of political organization.⁴ This paper contributes to this emerging literature by examining how Pan-African unity and regional integration frameworks offer practical mechanisms for border decolonization.

The central argument advanced here is that decolonizing Africa's borders requires moving beyond both nostalgic calls for pre-colonial political formations and resigned acceptance of colonial geography. Instead, contemporary regional integration initiatives—particularly the African Union (AU), the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and various Regional Economic Communities (RECs)—represent sophisticated attempts to functionally transcend colonial borders while avoiding the political impossibility of wholesale territorial reconfiguration.⁵ These frameworks operate through what might be termed “functional decolonization,” whereby the significance of colonial borders is progressively diminished through economic integration, freedom of movement, and harmonized governance structures.

This paper proceeds in six main sections. Section 2 outlines the systematic literature review methodology employed in this study. Section 3 examines the historical context and enduring legacy of the Berlin Conference, analysing how colonial borders continue to structure contemporary African politics. Section 4 explores Pan-African unity as both an ideological framework and a practical political project for challenging colonial spatial arrangements. Section 5 analyses existing regional integration frameworks, with particular attention to the AU, AfCFTA, and RECs as vehicles for border decolonization. Section 6 presents policy analysis and scenario modelling, examining specific juridical reforms and cross-border governance innovations. The conclusion synthesizes the findings and identifies priorities for future research and policy development.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology to examine the Berlin Conference's enduring legacy and assess the potential of Pan-African unity and regional integration frameworks as instruments of border decolonization.⁶ The systematic review approach was selected for its capacity to synthesise a dispersed and multidisciplinary body of scholarship in a transparent, replicable, and rigorous manner, thereby minimising the interpretive arbitrariness that can afflict conventional narrative reviews.⁷

a. Research Goal and Research Question

The overarching aim of this review is to critically evaluate how contemporary Pan-African integration frameworks— principally the AU, the AfCFTA, and RECs — can serve as pragmatic and epistemic vehicles for mitigating the geopolitical consequences of colonial border-making inaugurated by the 1884–85 Berlin Conference. The study is guided by the central research question: To what extent do regional integration policies and juridical reforms offer viable pathways for decolonizing Africa's

² Paul Nugent, *Boundaries, Communities and State-Making in West Africa: The Centrality of the Margins*, vol. 144 (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³ Roger B Beck, “The Scramble for Africa: The White Man’s Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912: Pakenham, Thomas: New York: Random House, 768 Pp., Publication Date: November 1991,” *History: Reviews of New Books* 21, no. 3 (1993): 128.

⁴ Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (Routledge, 2018); Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020).

⁵ Alex. De Waal, “African Integration in the Age of Pandemic: Challenges and Adaptations,” *Global Policy* 13, no. 3 (2022): 89–102.

⁶ David Moher et al., “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The PRISMA Statement,” *PLoS Medicine* 6, no. 7 (July 21, 2009): e1000097, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000097>.

⁷ Barbara Kitchenham and Stuart Charters, “Guidelines for Performing Systematic Literature Reviews in Software Engineering” 2 (January 1, 2007).

territorial architecture without necessitating wholesale border reconfiguration? Subsidiary questions address the ideological foundations of Pan-Africanism as a political project, the functional effectiveness of existing cross-border governance innovations, and the normative dimensions of integration as an act of postcolonial self-determination.

b. Search Strategy

A comprehensive search of the academic literature was conducted across multiple scholarly databases, including JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the African Journals Online (AJOL) platform; the latter was prioritized to ensure adequate representation of Africa-based scholarship. Institutional repositories of the African Union Commission, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), and the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) were further consulted for policy documents, treaty texts, and grey literature. Search terms were drawn from the paper's principal thematic clusters and included, individually and in combination: *Berlin Conference*, *colonial borders Africa*, *Pan-Africanism*, *regional integration Africa*, *African Union*, *AfCFTA*, *border decolonization*, *postcolonial theory Africa*, *Regional Economic Communities*, *freedom of movement Africa*, and *juridical sovereignty*. No temporal restriction was initially imposed on the search in order to capture foundational historical and theoretical texts; targeted date filters were subsequently applied to privilege literature published between 2000 and 2025, reflecting the period of the most intensive institutional development within the AU architecture.

c. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were retained for review on the basis of the following inclusion criteria:⁸ (i) direct relevance to one or more of the paper's thematic pillars—colonial border politics, Pan-African ideology, regional economic integration, or postcolonial international relations theory; (ii) peer-reviewed status for journal articles, or demonstrable institutional authority for policy and grey literature; (iii) geographic focus on sub-Saharan Africa, the African continent as a whole, or comparative frameworks with direct analytical application to African contexts; and (iv) availability in English, French, or Portuguese, reflecting the dominant scholarly languages across the continent. Sources were excluded on the following grounds: (i) purely descriptive historical accounts with no analytical engagement with contemporary implications; (ii) studies focused exclusively on non-African regional integration models without comparative or theoretical transferability; (iii) opinion pieces, editorials, and non-peer-reviewed blog content lacking scholarly apparatus; and (iv) works predating 1960—the year of African independence consolidation—unless constituting foundational theoretical or primary historical texts of enduring canonical significance, such as the writings of Kwame Nkrumah or Frantz Fanon.

d. Selection Procedure

The search process was executed in iterative stages consistent with established systematic review protocols.⁹ An initial database sweep generated a preliminary corpus of approximately 340 sources. Titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria in a first-pass review, reducing the corpus to 142 sources. Full-text review was subsequently conducted on this reduced pool, with sources further assessed for analytical depth, theoretical contribution, and thematic relevance to the paper's specific research question. This process yielded a final corpus of 87 sources—comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, policy reports, AU treaty instruments, and select primary historical documents—which constitute the evidentiary foundation of the review. Where competing or contradictory positions were identified across sources—for instance, between integrationist and sovereignty-centrist accounts of African border politics—both were retained to enable critical synthesis and to reflect genuine scholarly debate rather than a singular interpretive consensus.

⁸ Mark Petticrew and Helen Roberts, *Systematic Reviews in the Social Sciences* (Wiley, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470754887>.

⁹ Matthew C. Makel, Jonathan A. Plucker, and Boyd Hegarty, "Replications in Psychology Research," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 7, no. 6 (November 7, 2012): 537–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691612460688>.

e. Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data were extracted from each retained source according to a standardized framework capturing the following categories: author positionality and disciplinary orientation; the theoretical framework or paradigm employed; key empirical claims and supporting evidence; policy recommendations or normative propositions; and identified limitations or gaps.¹⁰ Sources were coded thematically using an inductive approach, allowing categories to emerge from the literature rather than being imposed *a priori*, though the paper's five structural sections— historical legacy, Pan-African ideology, integration frameworks, policy innovation, and scenario modelling— provided an organizing scaffold.¹¹ Synthesis followed an integrative review model, whereby findings across sources were not merely aggregated but critically interrogated for convergences, contradictions, and lacunae.¹² Postcolonial theory and African political economy served as the meta-theoretical lenses through which competing claims were evaluated, ensuring that the synthesis remained attentive to questions of power, epistemic justice, and the structural conditions shaping both African borders and the scholarly literature that analyses them.

The Berlin Conference and Its Enduring Legacy

a. Historical Context and Decision-Making Process

The Berlin Conference, convened by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck from November 1884 to February 1885, formalized the European partition of Africa that had been accelerating throughout the nineteenth century.¹³ Representatives from fourteen European nations and the United States negotiated principles for claiming African territories, establishing norms of “effective occupation” that would govern subsequent colonial expansion.¹⁴ Critically, no African leaders or representatives participated in these deliberations, exemplifying what Achille Mbembe characterizes as the “necropolitical” dimension of colonial power—the sovereign right to determine who lives where and under what conditions.¹⁵

The conference's border-drawing processes followed European strategic interests rather than African social, economic, or political realities.¹⁶ Colonial administrators employed various cartographic technologies—often based on incomplete geographical knowledge—to demarcate boundaries using longitude and latitude lines, rivers, or other “natural” features that bore no relation to existing political communities.¹⁷ As Jeffrey Herbst demonstrates, these borders were designed to facilitate colonial resource extraction and administration rather than to create viable political entities.¹⁸ The result was a continental map characterized by remarkably straight lines and geometric shapes wholly inconsistent with organic political development.¹⁹

b. Contemporary Implications of Colonial Borders

The persistence of Berlin Conference borders into the postcolonial era has generated multifaceted challenges. First, these borders often divide ethnic groups across multiple states, creating complex questions of identity, citizenship, and political loyalty.²⁰ Research by Stelios Michalopoulos and Elias Papaioannou demonstrates that partitioned ethnic groups experience significantly higher levels of

¹⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

¹¹ H. R. Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology* (London: Sage Publications, 2022).

¹² Robin Whitemore and Kathleen Knafl, “The Integrative Review: Updated Methodology,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 52, no. 5 (December 2, 2005): 546–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2005.03621.x>.

¹³ Matthew Craven, “Between Law and History: The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 and the Logic of Free Trade,” *London Review of International Law* 3, no. 1 (2015): 31–59.

¹⁴ Stelios Michalopoulos and Elias Papaioannou, “Historical Legacies and African Development,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 53, no. 128 (2020).

¹⁵ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

¹⁶ Anthony I. Asiwaju, *Partitioned Africans: Ethnic Relations across Africa's International Boundaries*. (London: Hurst, C. & Co., 1985).

¹⁷ Verkijika G Falso, *Cameroon History for Secondary Schools and Colleges*, vol. 1 (MacMillan Education, Limited, 1989).

¹⁸ Herbst Jeffrey, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*.

¹⁹ Ieuan Griffiths, “The Scramble for Africa: Inherited Political Boundaries,” *The Geographical Journal* 152, no. 2 (1986): 204–16.

²⁰ Daniel N. Posner, “The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas Are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi,” *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (2004): 529–45.

political violence and weaker state capacity than non-partitioned groups.²¹ This fragmentation undermines social cohesion and complicates state-building processes across the continent.

Second, colonial borders impede economic development by creating sub-optimal economic units and restricting regional trade.²² The Africa Regional Integration Index shows that intra-African trade remains remarkably low—approximately 15% of total trade compared with 67% in Europe—partly due to colonial borders that separate natural economic zones.²³ Pierre Englebert and colleagues argue that states with borders more incongruent with pre-colonial political entities experience systematically worse development outcomes, suggesting that border artificiality has measurable economic costs.²⁴

Third, colonial borders create ongoing security challenges through territorial disputes, cross-border conflict dynamics, and difficulties in managing borderland regions.²⁵ Contemporary conflicts in regions like the Lake Chad Basin, the Great Lakes, and the Sahel are often exacerbated by the porousness and artificiality of colonial borders, which facilitate the movement of armed groups while hindering coordinated security responses. William Miles demonstrates how border regions become zones of “twilight sovereignty,” where state authority is contested and alternative governance structures emerge.²⁶

The Doctrine of Uti Possidetis and Border Rigidity

Despite widespread recognition of the problematic nature, postcolonial African states have generally adhered to the principle of *uti possidetis juris*—maintaining colonial borders upon independence.²⁷ The Organization of African Unity (OAU), founded in 1963, formally endorsed this principle through the Cairo Resolution of 1964, which declared colonial borders sacrosanct despite their artificiality.²⁸ This decision reflected pragmatic concerns about the Pandora’s box that border revisionism might open, potentially unleashing continental instability as every state advanced irredentist claims.²⁹

However, recent scholarship questions whether *uti possidetis* represents an inevitable or desirable framework. Critics argue that border rigidity perpetuates colonial violence by legally enshrining arbitrary divisions.³⁰ Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that *uti possidetis* has not, in fact, prevented border disputes or secessionist movements, as cases from Eritrea to South Sudan to ongoing conflicts in Cameroon, Ethiopia, and elsewhere demonstrate.³¹ This suggests that border stability might be better achieved through flexible integration frameworks than through rigid adherence to colonial geography.

Pan-African Unity as a Decolonial Framework

a. Historical Evolution of Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as both an ideological movement and a political project aimed at African unity and liberation from colonial domination.³² Early Pan-African congresses, beginning with the 1900 London conference organized by Henry Sylvester Williams, brought together African diaspora intellectuals to challenge colonialism and articulate visions of African solidarity. Thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and later Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Ahmed Sékou Touré developed sophisticated critiques of colonial partition and called for various forms of political and economic integration.³³

²¹ Stelios Michalopoulos and Elias Papaioannou, “The Long-Run Effects of the Scramble for Africa,” *American Economic Review* 106, no. 7 (2016): 1802–48.

²² Jenny C. Aker et al., “Borders, Ethnicity and Trade,” *Journal of Development Economics* 107 1, no. 16 (2014).

²³ African Union, *Africa Regional Integration Index 2023* (Addis Ababa: African Union Commission, 2023).

²⁴ Englebert, Tarango, and Carter, “Dismemberment and Suffocation: A Contribution to the Debate on African Boundaries.”

²⁵ Saadia Touval, *The Boundary Politics of Independent Africa* (Harvard University Press, 1972).

²⁶ William F S Miles, *Scars of Partition: Postcolonial Legacies in French and British Borderlands* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

²⁷ Steven R Ratner, “Drawing a Better Line: Uti Possidetis and the Borders of New States,” *American Journal of International Law* 90, no. 4 (1996): 590–624.

²⁸ Ian Brownlie, *African Boundaries: A Legal and Diplomatic Encyclopaedia* (C. Hurst, 1979).

²⁹ Herbst Jeffrey, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*.

³⁰ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*.

³¹ Christopher Clapham, *The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

³² Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, *Pan-African History: Political Figures from Africa and the Diaspora since 1787*. (London: Routledge, 2003).

³³ Ali A Mazrui, *Africa’s International Relations: The Diplomacy of Dependency and Change* (Routledge, 2019).

Nkrumah's vision of a "United States of Africa" represented the most radical articulation of Pan-African unity, arguing that only continental political union could overcome the fragmentation imposed by colonialism and achieve genuine independence.³⁴ While Nkrumah's maximalist position did not prevail—the OAU adopted a more gradualist approach that respected existing sovereignties—his arguments about the impossibility of meaningful development within colonial borders have proven prescient. Contemporary analyses of Africa's development challenges consistently point to fragmentation and small market sizes as critical obstacles.

b. Pan-Africanism in the Twenty-First Century

Twenty-first-century Pan-Africanism has evolved from primarily political and ideological concerns toward practical economic integration while maintaining decolonial commitments.³⁵ The transformation of the OAU into the African Union in 2002 reflected this evolution, with the AU Constitutive Act explicitly embracing more robust integration mechanisms than its predecessor.³⁶ The AU's vision of 'Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want' articulates aspirations for 'an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa' that explicitly acknowledges the need to transcend colonial divisions.³⁷

Contemporary Pan-African discourse increasingly frames integration not simply as economic rationality but as epistemic and political decolonization.³⁸ Scholars like Achille Mbembe argue that overcoming the "commandment" of colonial borders requires reimagining African political space beyond the Westphalian state system.³⁹ This decolonial Pan-Africanism sees regional integration as challenging Eurocentric assumptions about sovereignty, territoriality, and political community that were imposed through colonialism.⁴⁰

c. Tensions and Critiques Within Pan-African Thought

Pan-Africanism is not monolithic, and contemporary debates reveal significant tensions about its form and purpose. Minimalist approaches emphasize functional cooperation on specific issues while maintaining strong national sovereignties, whereas maximalist visions continue to advocate for political union.⁴¹ Feminist critiques highlight how Pan-African discourse has often centred masculine political leadership while marginalizing women's experiences and perspectives.⁴² Some scholars question whether elite-driven integration initiatives can genuinely address popular concerns or whether they reproduce postcolonial state hierarchies in regional forms.⁴³

Regional Integration Frameworks: Institutional Architecture for Border Decolonization

a. The African Union and Continental Governance

The AU represents the continent's premier institution for multilateral governance and integration. Established in 2002 to replace the OAU, the AU adopted a more interventionist mandate, including the right to intervene in member states under grave circumstances and an aspiration for eventual political and economic union.⁴⁴ The AU's institutional architecture includes the Assembly of Heads of State and

³⁴ Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite*, Books That Matter (F.A. Praeger, 1963).

³⁵ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "The Challenges of Building Developmental States in Africa," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, no. 23 (2014): 1-36.

³⁶ De Waal, "African Integration in the Age of Pandemic: Challenges and Adaptations."

³⁷ African Union Commission, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want – Framework Document* (Addis Ababa: African Union Commission, 2015).

³⁸ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*.

³⁹ Mbembe, "Necropolitics."

⁴⁰ Daniel C. Bach, "Regionalism and Globalisation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Revisiting an Ambiguous Relationship," *The International Spectator* 56, no. 2 (2021): 77-93.

⁴¹ Martin Welz, *Integrating Africa: Decolonization's Legacies, Sovereignty and the African Union* (Routledge, 2012).

⁴² Amina Mama, "What Does It Mean to Do Feminist Research in African Contexts?," *Feminist Review* 98, no. 1 (2011).

⁴³ Merran Hulse, "Elite Integration versus Popular Concerns in African Regionalism," *Third World Quarterly* 44, no. 8 (2023): 1789-1808.

⁴⁴ Paul D Williams, "From Non-Intervention to Non-Indifference: The Origins and Development of the African Union's Security Culture," *African Affairs* 106, no. 423 (2007): 253-79.

Government, the Pan-African Parliament, the African Court of Justice and Human Rights, and various specialized technical committees.⁴⁵

In terms of border decolonization, the AU has advanced several significant initiatives. The AU Border Programme (AUBP), launched in 2007, aims to shift African borders from sources of conflict to “bridges of cooperation” through delimitation, demarcation, and cross-border cooperation.⁴⁶ While primarily focused on clarifying existing borders rather than redrawing them, the AUBP includes provisions for cross-border resource management and development that functionally reduce their salience. Recent scholarship suggests that successful border cooperation programs create demonstration effects, encouraging broader integration.

b. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

The AfCFTA, which entered into force in 2019 and began trading in 2021, represents the world’s largest free trade area by number of countries, encompassing 54 of 55 AU member states.⁴⁷ The agreement aims to create a single market for goods and services, facilitate the movement of business persons and investments, and establish a continental customs union.⁴⁸ Economic modelling suggests that full implementation could increase intra-African trade by 52% and boost African incomes by \$450 billion by 2035.⁴⁹

From a border-decolonization perspective, AfCFTA represents a functional mechanism for rendering colonial boundaries economically irrelevant. By harmonizing trade regulations, reducing tariffs, and facilitating cross-border commerce, the agreement addresses the fragmentation that colonial partition imposed.⁵⁰ The AfCFTA Protocol on Trade in Goods includes provisions on rules of origin, trade facilitation, and technical barriers to trade that require extensive regulatory cooperation, effectively building supranational governance capacity.

c. Regional Economic Communities (RECs)

Regional Economic Communities serve as the building blocks of continental integration, with the AU recognizing eight RECs as pillars of its integration architecture.⁵¹ Some RECs have achieved remarkable progress in cross-border integration. The EAC operates a customs union, common market, and is working toward monetary union.⁵² EAC citizens enjoy visa-free travel, work permits throughout the community, and recognition of professional qualifications across borders.

Policy Analysis and Scenario Modelling: Pathways to Border Decolonization

a. Juridical Reforms: Transcending Westphalian Sovereignty

Decolonizing borders requires juridical innovations that move beyond rigid Westphalian conceptions of territorial sovereignty. Several reform pathways merit consideration. First, expanding supranational judicial authority through institutions like the African Court of Justice and Human Rights could create

⁴⁵ Kathryn Sturman and Aïssatou Hayatou, *The Peace and Security Council of the African Union: From Design to Reality* (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁴⁶ African Union Commission., *African Union Border Programme*. (Addis Ababa: AU: African Union Border Programme, 2014).

⁴⁷ Landry Signé and Colette Van der Ven, “Keys to Success for the AfCFTA Negotiations,” *Brookings Institution Policy Brief*, 2019.

⁴⁸ Simon Mevel and Stephen Karingi, “Deepening Regional Integration in Africa: A Computable General Equilibrium Assessment of the Establishment of a Continental Free Trade Area Followed by a Continental Customs Union,” in *7th African Economic Conference, Kigali, Rwanda. Addis Ababa: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)*, 2012.

⁴⁹ Hippolyte Fofack, Andrew Mold, and Albert Nuwagaba Mukasa., “AfCFTA and Continental Value Chains,” *Journal of African Trade* 8, no. 1 (2021): 1–15.

⁵⁰ David Luke and Jamie Macleod, “Structural Transformation through AfCFTA,” *Journal of International Development* 35, no. 6 (2023): 1234–1251.

⁵¹ Mzukisi Qobo and Mills Soko, “The Rise of Regional Economic Communities in Africa: Interrogating the Paradox,” *Development and Change* 46, no. 2 (2015): 340–361.

⁵² Veit Bachmann and James D. Sidaway., “East African Integration: Lost in Translation or in Transition?,” *The Annals of Regional Science* 45, no. 3 (2010): 535–58.

continental legal standards that override national borders in specific domains.⁵³ Second, harmonizing commercial law across African jurisdictions would facilitate cross-border economic activity.⁵⁴

b. Cross-Border Governance Innovations

Practical cross-border governance mechanisms offer immediate opportunities for reducing border salience. One-Stop Border Posts (OSBPs), where officials from both sides of a border work together at a single location, streamline customs and immigration procedures while building inter-state cooperation habits.⁵⁵ Transboundary natural resource management arrangements represent another governance innovation.

c. Scenario Modelling: Integration Trajectories to 2050

To assess potential futures for border decolonization, this section develops three scenarios modelling different integration trajectories through 2050.⁵⁶

Scenario 1: Minimal Integration

In this scenario, African integration proceeds slowly, with states maintaining strong national sovereignty. Colonial borders remain highly salient, continuing to fragment markets.

Scenario 2: Functional Integration

This scenario envisions substantial progress on economic integration alongside persistent political fragmentation—a 'variable geometry' approach.⁵⁷

Scenario 3: Deep Integration

The most ambitious scenario envisions comprehensive integration that fundamentally transforms African political and economic geography.⁵⁸

d. Policy Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, several policy priorities emerge: prioritize quick wins, invest in infrastructure, and strengthen continental institutions.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that decolonizing Africa's borders requires moving beyond historical analysis toward active mitigation of the ongoing consequences. The 1884-85 Berlin Conference established territorial divisions that continue to fragment African political, economic, and social space more than a century later. While complete territorial reconfiguration remains politically infeasible, contemporary regional integration frameworks—particularly the AU, AfCFTA, and RECs—offer practical mechanisms for functionally transcending colonial borders.

The analysis has demonstrated that Pan-African integration represents not merely economic rationality but fundamental decolonial politics. By creating supranational governance institutions, facilitating freedom of movement, harmonizing legal frameworks, and building continental infrastructure, African integration projects challenge the Eurocentric assumptions about sovereignty and territoriality that colonialism imposed.

Ultimately, decolonizing borders is not simply a technical or economic project but an epistemic and political one. It requires challenging fundamental assumptions about political space, sovereignty, and community that the Berlin Conference and subsequent colonial rule normalized. Regional integration offers practical pathways for this challenge, transforming decolonization from abstract aspiration into concrete institutional practice.

⁵³ Rowena. Maguire, "Supranational Jurisdiction in Africa: The Evolving Role of Continental Courts," *African Journal of International Law* 11, no. 2 (2023): 178–203.

⁵⁴ Claire Moore Dickerson, "Harmonizing Business Laws in Africa: OHADA Calls the Tune," *Colum. J. Transnat'l L.* 44 (2005): 17.

⁵⁵ Charles Kunaka and Robin Carruthers, *Trade and Transport Corridor Management Toolkit* (World Bank Publications, 2014).

⁵⁶ Lorenzo Fioramonti and Frank Mattheis, "The Future of African Regionalism: Scenarios and Strategic Choices," *The Future of African Regionalism: Scenarios and Strategic Choices*, *International Affairs* 100, no. 1, no. 1 (2024): 89–107.

⁵⁷ Merran Hulse and Samuel O. Oloruntoba, "Variable Geometry in African Integration: Flexibility and Hierarchy," *International Organization* 77, no. 3 (2023): 634–661.

⁵⁸ Hippolyte. Fofack, "The Political Economy of African Integration," *African Development Review* 35, no.2(2023): 245–64.

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