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African Spycraft: Examining Africa's Overlooked Intelligence Traditions

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Abstract

The twenty-first century is marked by the power of information; its generation, processing, distribution and consumption. However, Africa is constantly depicted in media and literature as being in the subaltern position vis-à-vis the hegemonic West on the matter of intelligence gathering. This perceived subordinate position does not solely stem from Africa's reliance on the support of the West to face its gravest security threats; It is partly due to a dearth of Afro-centred research on African intelligence systems and the factors that have contributed to their evolution. To fill this gap, this study explores how African intelligence systems; from indigenous pre-colonial practices through colonial adaptation to contemporary regional cooperation, have developed with unique collection, analysis, and production techniques shaped by local contexts. Using historical analysis and comparative case studies of Kenya, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Ghana, the study establishes that Africa's intelligence culture has been deeply shaped by international conflict. Colonization, the Cold War and the American-led "War on Terror", as well as the unipolar international system have all impacted Africa's intelligence systems. Key findings of this study demonstrate that pre-colonial African civilizations had advanced human intelligence networks, colonial intelligence systems were adapted and not inherited, and that the current regional collaboration using Committee of Intelligence and Security Service of Africa (CISSA) and Continental Early Warning Systems (CEWS) is real African innovation in intelligence sharing. This study uses the postcolonial theory to describe how African intelligence systems have been adapting and changing as historic regional cooperation efforts respond to regional security concerns. The main recommendations of the study are the reinforcement of regional intelligence collaboration, development of indigenous education institutions, the building of cyber capabilities, and African-centered scholarship on emerging security threats.

Keywords: African intelligence, spycraft, colonialism, counterterrorism, indigenous intelligence systems, neo-patrimonial

Introduction

African intelligence systems have traditionally been analysed through external lenses, with Euro-American academics and professionals describing African spy crafts as being driven by foreign influences and neocolonial politics. Even a superficial search for literature shows an overwhelming imbalance, with accounts of African espionage almost exclusively written by non-Africans, and the voices of African perspectives lacking within their literature on intelligence practices. This intellectual gap has clouded the achievements of the continent as far as contributions to the study of espionage and security are concerned.

The issues of external control in the production of knowledge regarding African intelligence systems is more than an academic issue. It can be seen in extensive trends of cultural imperialism, which have dominated relations between Africa and the West since the colonial period. As Achebe (2014) cynically noted, there is the need, one might even say the desire, in Western psychology, to stage-manage Africa as

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a foil to Europe, as a land of negations that is both distant and uncomfortably familiar. Such framing has significant impact on the knowledge, comprehension, and evolution of African intelligence systems.

This study fills an essential gap in the intelligence literature: the absence of African-centered research on native intelligence practices and their evolution. The study examines the evolution of African intelligence systems across three facets; the collection procedures, analytical design and production systems, in the pre-colonial period, the colonial period; covering the cold war and post-cold-war and the contemporary regional cooperation systems in specific countries. The key research questions guiding the analysis will be: What were the indigenous methods of collecting and analysing intelligence in pre-colonial Africa, and how did they operate within the socio-political frameworks of the pre-colonial African societies? How did historical experiences of colonialism, Cold War, and post-Cold War dynamics change African intelligence systems? How are the emerging intelligence capabilities and models of regional cooperation informing us about the increased autonomy of intelligence operations in Africa?

Methodology

The study utilises historical analysis to explore the development of African intelligence systems since pre-colonial periods up to modern regional cooperation systems. As a supplement to this historical methodology, the study also adopts case study methodology to offer intensive analysis of particular settings, events, and institutional changes that shed light on general trends in the evolution of African intelligence. The study's design is comparative historical, entailing development analysis of intelligence system in Kenya, South Africa, Ethiopia and Ghana during three different periods in history: pre-colonial and colonial era (pre-1960s), Cold War period (1960s-1990s), and post-Cold War period (1990s-present). Kenya, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Ghana were selected as they exemplify different colonial experiences, different post-independence political paths, and different geographical positions in the region (East, South, and West Africa). The primary method of data collection in the study was document analysis of past and current materials. The analysis was based on determining intelligence practices, institutional arrangements, and policy frames over the three historical periods in the stated countries. Thematic historical analysis based on postcolonial theoretical framework was used to analyse the findings. The sampling technique used in this study was purposive sampling of countries. The selection of countries was based on purposeful criteria such as: varied colonial experiences, presence of documented evidence, coverage of the various African regions, and its importance in the development of African intelligence (e.g., the role of Kenya in regional co-operation, sophisticated capability of South Africa, and post-independence transformation of Ghana). Qualitative historical research using purposive sampling is suitable when the objective is the intensive knowledge and not statistical extrapolation. Postcolonial theory, employed in this study as articulated by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, addressed colonial experiences and their influence in institutions, production of knowledge, and power structure in former colonies. Its fundamental tenets namely; hybridity (the integration of colonial impositions and indigenous traditions), agency (the ability of colonized peoples to resist and transform structures imposed on them), and mimicry (a form of appropriation and adaptation of colonial models); offered the means of analysis of institutional development beyond the simplistic transplantation tales.

Literature Review

Historical Foundations of African Intelligence Studies

African intelligence agencies were viewed as essential tools of state-making and regime consolidation in different national settings such as Kenya, Sudan, Botswana, and Nigeria among others (Reno, 2024). These services served as formal and informal instruments of power that were used for consolidation of regimes, and repression of democratic or separatist movements in the neo-patrimonial politics. The intelligence agencies were not accountable to the larger national interests but individual presidents or ruling parties and as a result, came up with parallel power systems functioning outside the legal channels (Lubin, 2022). Politicization and dictatorial use of intelligence services became characteristic elements that can be traced to colonialism patterns of governance and post-independence pressures of state consolidation (Shaffer & Ashraf, 2024).

The post-colonial culture of African intelligence is irrevocably marked by the colonial surveillance systems, especially the British Special Branch and the French intelligence models that were not dismantled but modified after the independence. This partial decolonization resulted in what Chauke (2024) calls “colonial sinews of postcolonial espionage”, with newly independent nations inheriting authoritarian forms, structures, and personnel of the former imperialist states. The politicization of African intelligence services; that is, when the agencies report to presidents or ruling parties instead of national interests at large; becomes one of the identifying characteristics that can be traced to colonial governance examples, as well as the undue duress of state consolidation after independence (Gwatiwa, 2024). These services emerged in neo-patrimonial political structures as parallel systems of power functioning beyond the legal systems, while simultaneously, acting as a source of regime security, patronage relations, and suppression of political opposition.

The cosmic theory of African intelligence by Gwatiwa (2024) is a paradigm shift in the epistemological discourse of African ontologies and the reality of African contexts. This theoretical intervention assumes that Africa is an ontological anomaly in the Western security studies, and that approaches to it must center state-making, nation-building, and African agency as its characteristics of defining intelligence rather than seeing the provision of African services as a derivative of Anglosphere patterns. The decolonial turn questions what Eriksen (2022) define as methodological Whiteness and epistemic violence in Eurocentric knowledge production that treats others as fundamentally different from the normative West. Contemporary literature focuses on de-Westernizing studies of African intelligence by exploring the power dynamics, biopolitics, and continuing coloniality that influence relations of intelligence with former colonial powers and new actors such as China and Russia.

The African intelligence cultures grew in multilateral premises characterized by the strong influence of Western, Middle Eastern and Asian intelligence services through capacity-building programs, intelligence-sharing arrangements and intelligence security assistance (Kleynhans & Wyss, 2025). These global alliances had a likelihood of recreating similar relationships to colonial relationships, relaying the question of whether the African states could develop intelligence capabilities that reflected local security cultures and the traditional systems of governance. African states were limited in their abilities to completely decolonize intelligence institutions and their practices due to the structural and material interconnectedness with the external actors (Ilo, 2025). O'Neill (2022) avers that intelligence services were characterized by blurred lines between external and internal security agencies, predominant politicization in the name of

regime security, and multi-layered connections between official state services and informal surveillance groups that may be based on traditional authority formations.

Colonial Era

Pre-colonial African societies already had elaborate intelligence systems that allowed them to keep security and control relations with neighbouring communities well before the European colonization (Monteh, 2024). The spies worked in disguises of ordinary people, including artisans, actors, beggars, and herdsmen, and collected important facts about the weapons of the opponents, the number of warriors, and the security measures. The pre-colonial kingdoms and empires heavily used informal intelligence networks formed by alliances, trade relations and social networks to gather intelligence on their opponents, observe internal dissent and organize military campaigns (Thomas & Curless, 2023). These native forms of intelligence were based on community-level surveillance and conventional forms of governance that emphasized collective security over the state control (Ivan, Chiru & Acros, 2021).

With the influx of European colonizers towards the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, more centralized and formal intelligence-collection techniques were brought into Africa that radically changed the way Africans started conducting surveillance. Early information collection by colonial powers was done by missionaries, traders, and tourists, but with the establishment of formal intelligence collection in the local level after 1895, commissioners and retainers recruited African allies and collaborators as informants (Cornelius, 2022). Colonial governments covertly subverted existing intelligence networks, but they avoided destroying them, they recruited mercenaries who at first acted as porters and guides, but later on, became the chiefs of communities, replacing the traditional leaders, and generating a layer of malleus collaborators (Kiras, 2024).

British colonial powers created Special Branch units in Africa as dedicated political intelligence units in police forces and this transitioned into a key turning point with institutionalized state surveillance (Dambre, 2025). The British East African Police began intelligence collection in Kenya in 1892, but in the World War One, it shifted its attention off African matters to adversaries' activities in adjacent states, hiring African agents who tapped telegraphic communications, tracked enemies, and gleaned information out of workers in border points, beaches and hotels (Stapleton, 2025). This 1920 metamorphosis into the Kenya Police coincided with an increase of settler influx; and the formal Special Branch activities was established in 1926 to monitor political agitation and independence movements, as well as, trade unions. These colonial intelligence tactics involved spying on natives and political repression instead of curbing crime, with Special Branch officers engaged in extensive surveillance of influential African figures and providing comprehensive reports to retain colonial rule (Stanton, 2023).

The surveillance apparatus developed in Africa by the colonial rulers comprised fingerprinting, census-taking, map-making, and population profiling; methods that would become the basis of contemporary biometric solutions (Trikanad & Bhandari, 2022). Fingerprinting was seen by British officials as an important instrument of colonial rule, and they created scientific techniques of classifying populations, placing them in categories of “deviants” versus “normal” after a security crisis such as the Sepoy mutiny of 1858 in India (Girardi, 2020). Intelligence activities by the colonies were highly dependent on Africa informants, former rebels, and networks of converters, with intelligence personnel recruiting local labourers, cooks, and village residents, who would deliver information regarding anti-colonial operations. It was this colonial system of surveillance; with its centralized control, systematized record keeping, and

politicized intelligence activity; that would be largely preserved by post-independent African governments, and which would be highly resistant to a change in the political system.

Cold War Aspects

The Cold War was one of the most consequential events of the twentieth century, spanning almost the entire latter half of the century. In the aftermath of World War II, the US and the Soviet Union were locked in a contest of titans to determine which of the two nations would have the most power or influence over the world, whether politically, militarily, economically or even socially. Each of the two had its cluster of supportive nations. While Russia had the Warsaw Pact, which comprised the Soviet Union and seven other satellite states in Eastern and Central Europe, the US had the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) which was an organisation comprising West-oriented nations that came together in a treaty of mutual alliance and assistance.

In this fraught period, when both the Soviet Union and the United States were fighting for supremacy in the African continent, there was a lot of danger and excitement. African nations were emerging from a colonial reality into a postcolonial dispensation, and they had to decide on the economic philosophy they wanted in place and the friends they wanted to work with in the community of nations. While some countries chose communism and thereby sided with the Soviet Union, others, like Kenya, stuck to their former colonial masters in the Western bloc and became capitalist nations. In this period of grave uncertainty and meddling foreign interests, there were many assassinations, coups and counter-coups, and the future of the continent was uncertain.

In a continent where governments were constantly being overthrown, espionage in Kenya came to mean identifying threats to the state and pre-empting them, or infiltrating them and subverting their objectives to the state's advantage. The Cold War played a big role in this, given that most of the coups in Africa occurred thanks to external interference by foreign agencies such as the CIA. African heads of state were in the uncomfortable situation of having to perpetually regard their citizens and many of their appointees and even close friends as possible double agents working for foreign governments keen on destabilising their rule and imposing puppets.

It was for this reason that the university, where professors were perceived by the state as threatening due to their Marxist leanings and potential influence over students, became a target for intelligence agencies amid prevailing fears of political subversion and regime overthrow. In the eighties, the University of Nairobi was a site of espionage, with several lecturers and students working clandestinely with the Special Branch to spy on their fellow staff or students (Amutabi, 2003). After the 1982 coup attempt was foiled, there were arrests of many students and some lecturers, being suspected of collaborating with the Airforce in planning the coup, and SONU leader Titus Adungosi would die in prison in 1988, with his family suspecting foul play.

In South Africa, just as in Kenya, the government used intelligence agencies to crack down on opponents, chiefly the anti-Apartheid agitators (Hughes & Plaut, 2024). South Africa had inherited its intelligence systems from Britain. As in many African countries, intelligence was used in the service of the politics of the day. Interestingly, the Apartheid government's security systems were mirrored in the security systems of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), the opposition parties which were fighting to end Apartheid rule.

The story of Lumumba's assassination is captured in a book with a very telling title: *The Lumumba Plot: The Secret History of the CIA and a Cold War Assassination*. In his review of the book, a retired CIA operations officer Paul Kepp rejects the notion that the assassination plot was done to the CIA only as suggested by the title, and insists the title is incomplete insofar as it does not highlight the shared role of the Belgium and the UN in the plot to get rid of the mercurial Congolese revolutionary (Kepp, 2024). Eduardo Mondlane of Mozambique and Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso were also killed with the connivance of foreign intelligence agencies.

On February 24, 1966, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana was overthrown in a military coup d'état, and he escaped into exile. It is an open secret that the US, through the CIA, was involved in this plot (Quaidoo, 2010). While Ghana had proclaimed itself a non-aligned state, some of its policies raised eyebrows in the US. While Nkrumah admired the US, he did not prefer the liberal ideology and was of the opinion that socialism was the key to rapid development on the African continent. The souring of his relationship with the US was a direct consequence of his decision.

The Soviet Union's intervention in Africa during the Cold War centred heavily on assisting liberation movements that were fighting for independence from their European colonisers, for example, Mozambique's FRELIMO and South Africa's ANC. The Soviet Union also provided military equipment and support to the MPLA which succeeded in defeating the US-supported FNLA and UNITA in Angola. Supporting liberation movements in Africa was a critical Cold War policy that began under Joseph Stalin's successor, Nikita Krushchev (Darch, 2023).

One of the problems the Soviet Union encountered in establishing its influence over Africa was its own dearth of knowledge regarding this continent. Unlike other European nations, which had colonies in Africa, the Soviet Union was new to the continent. As a result, the role of intelligence gathering was critical for the success of the Soviet Union's foreign policy in Africa. The writer E.A. Domatolski who visited West Africa in 1960 complained about this weakness to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: "...we know very little about many of the most important aspects of life in African countries ... We have little knowledge of the complex social life of countries, sometimes ... it turns out that [our] efforts were wasted ... Deep knowledge of the situation, of everyday life ... should play a huge role in establishing economic, social, and political ties ..." (Darch, 2023).

The Soviet Union deployed journalists, middle-level diplomats, and KGB officers as the principal interlocutors of African politicians and the representatives of the liberation movements that the Soviet Union was supporting. It was these intelligence analysts and journalists who were relied upon for espionage for the Soviet Union on the continent (Darch, 2023).

The Soviet Union's intelligence arm, the KGB, was renowned for its disinformation campaigns, and indeed, to this day, Russia is legendary for its disinformation, as evidenced by the accusations that Russia interfered in the 2016 US elections to discredit Hillary Clinton and help Donald Trump. Former KGB head of foreign counterintelligence Oleg Kalugin admits that during the Cold War, the KGB would send anonymous, nasty letters to African diplomats at the UN, the letters purportedly being from American white supremacists, with the point being to convince the Africans that the US was virulently racist (Kalugin, 2009). The diplomats made some of these letters public, using them as proof of the rampant racism in the US.

Post-Cold War Aspects

While the Cold War defined the latter half of the twentieth century, its end laid the foundation for the incoming twenty-first century, and it has been called the most momentous event in international politics since the end of World War II. Fanani (2015) explains that the end of the Cold War was preceded by a number of critical factors: the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev who introduced the famous perestroika reforms in the Soviet political and economic systems; the Soviet Union's withdrawal from regional conflict, as superpowers committed to eschew use of military force; arms control agreements between the US and Soviet Union intended to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons; the emancipation of Eastern Europe; and the unification of Germany. After the end of the Cold War, Russian influence on the continent petered out.

With the Cold War over, the US no longer needed to prop up dictators like Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko, whom they had assisted to get rid of the charismatic Patrice Lumumba. The consequences of the end of the Cold War were resounding, and one of them was that the US did not intervene when the guerrilla Laurent Kabila went back to Congo with the assistance of Rwanda's RPF, sending Mobutu into exile. Kenya's President Moi also suffered the consequences, as Western donors withdrew funding with the demand for him to open up the political space and liberalise the economy. It was this pressure by the West that ultimately led to the repeal of section 2(a). After that, the agitation for constitutional reforms picked up pace, as foreign nations were funding pro-democracy activities in the country. Unfortunately for Moi, his hands were tied because his government relied on funding from the IMF and other Western donors. During the Cold War, the US and the West in general had overlooked the excesses of African dictators because they needed allies in the fight against the Soviet Union and the communist ideology.

Promoting democracy had become a key cog of the US's foreign policy agenda, an idea based on the notion of American exceptionalism. It was due to this conviction of its own "manifest destiny" (de Souza, 2025) as a "city upon a hill", a special nation in the world, that the US made itself to the chagrin of others the prefect of the global order. After dropping the atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the US had become even more convinced of its special position in the world order. The period of relative peace in the Western Hemisphere since 1945 came to be known as Pax Americana and was launched by the famous Marshall Plan, which saw the US transfer \$13.3 billion (which is approximately \$170 billion today) in economic recovery programs to 16 Western European countries, and this plan in fact became the foundation of the creation of NATO.

All this became significant during the Cold War, because it provides an insight into why the CIA was given a free rein by the US government to interfere in African countries, where they propped up dictators, organised or bankrolled coups, backed opposition candidates, and planned or executed political assassinations. These activities were antithetical to the proclaimed goal of the United States to promote democracy in the world. The CIA overstepped moral bounds in clandestine operations, and there can be no doubt that African intelligence agencies like Kenya's Special Branch were learning a lot through their cooperation with the CIA. This collaboration took various forms: in the Cold war era, the Special branch of Kenya liaised with the CIA in counter-intelligence activities, especially in the 1967 Yuri Loginov affair when the Special Branch spied on a CIA-KGB double agent in Nairobi. More substantively, post-9/11 cooperation followed as the CIA implemented the intensive integration program that in 2004, created the Rapid Response Team; an undercover 60-member paramilitary outfit that was trained in Maryland by CIA contractors on rendition operations, tactical counter-terrorism, and controversial shoot-to-kill protocols. It was clear that intelligence agencies were allowed to sidestep the avowed moral positions of the governments

they served, and this would become a framework that would guide their activities even after the Cold War, especially with the emergence of terrorism in the twenty-first century.

Contemporary Realities

Intelligence cultures emerge around security threats, with most countries' intelligence organisations having been necessitated by wars or revolutionary activities. The first permanent military intelligence service was formed in Austria in the nineteenth century in response to the revolution in 1848. This was followed by other European nations, usually in response to wars. The two great wars of the twentieth century were a major catalyst for further development of intelligence cultures in the great powers. The US formed the Office of Strategic Service (OSS) to coordinate its espionage activities during World War II, and this organisation would subsequently be folded and its activities continued during the cold war by two successors: the lesser-known Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In Kenya, the modern Special Branch was formed in 1952 in response to the Mau Mau insurgency. It is therefore not surprising that after the Cold War, intelligence culture in Africa would morph in response to emerging security threats such as terrorism, cyber warfare, and human trafficking.

Summary of Identified Gaps in Literature Review

First, the current literature lacks interactions with inclusion dynamics, such as gender and diversity, in African intelligence communities. Although contemporary scholarship on African intelligence cultures broadly explores the impacts of colonial inheritance, neo-patrimonial politics, and decolonial epistemologies, there is effectively no empirical investigation into the representation and experience of women or marginalized populations in the intelligence services of Africa, and no empirical systemization of how the viewpoint of gender influences the production of intelligence, threat perception, or operational decision-making in African settings.

Second, the current literature has insufficient scholarship on the epistemological break between the pre-colonial African indigenous systems of knowledge of intelligence and modern formalized state intelligence systems, which leaves unexamined questions of whether effective decolonization of African intelligence practices is possible by returning to and incorporating traditional knowledge systems, community-based surveillance systems and indigenous conceptions of security that put collective protection above state control. The literature herein recognizes that pre-colonial African societies had rich intelligence systems embedded in trade relationships, traditional structures of authority and practices of communal surveillance, but gives no substantive insight into how such indigenous intelligence traditions; oral transmission, participatory knowledge-generation, interpersonal intelligence-gathering and collective-security-lying paradigms, enshrined in wider African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) literature, may be influencing and changing the intelligence practices of the twenty-first century beyond a mere recognition of their historical existence. This lacuna is acute considering the recent theoretical input by researchers like Olaitan (2024) and Gyamerah (2025) showing how colonial education systems have systematically marginalized and delegitimized African knowledge systems via their strategies of disinformation and selective omission.

Third, the literature deduces insufficient scholarly scrutiny to the institutional progression and contemporary threats confronting African intelligence agencies in the post-Cold War era, especially with respect to emanating threats and regional synergy mechanisms. The remodelling of intelligence customs in response to twenty-first-century security pitfalls; including terrorism animated by the US embassy bombing

of 1998 and 9/11 attacks, cyber warfare epitomized by the Anonymous Sudan attack on Kenya's eCitizen platform in 2023, and international organized crime, demands detailed academic involvement that can inform practice and policy. Moreover, the efficacy of regional partnerships in intelligence sharing, terror and skill development remains under-explored, in spite of their relevance to the architecture of the continent's security.

Findings

Pre-Colonial Intelligence Traditions

This study established that pre-colonial African societies had compound intelligence systems, which functioned using different collection, analysis, and distribution channels, adjusted to local socio-political systems. These indigenous systems challenged the notion of African intelligence being nothing but a colonial importation.

Case Study: Ethiopian Intelligence Networks

The Ethiopian Empire, which dates back to the 10th century BC, created one of the most advanced pre-colonial intelligence systems in Africa. The gathering of intelligence became a part of diplomatic missions and envoys to neighbouring kingdoms and other distant powers had the dual purpose of being a negotiator and an information collector. The Ethiopian system used multiple different approaches to collection:

To gather diplomatic Intelligence, Pearce (2022) avers that Ethiopian emperors sent envoys to the Byzantine Empire and thereafter to European powers and other countries in the African continent. They were chosen among the nobility and were trained in the art of observation, such as the evaluation of military capacity, political sustainability, and economic status. Upon their return, they provided detailed oral reports to the emperor and his council as documented in Ethiopian chronicles.

Another method employed was Religious Network Intelligence. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church also had monasteries and churches across the empire and even beyond, which established an intelligence network in the disguise of religious facilities (Ghattas, 2024). The members of the clergy were informed about local sentiment, possible uprisings, and external threats. This network was useful in wars with Islamic sultanates as well as the pressures from European colonies.

The findings further established that Ethiopia incorporated trade Route Surveillance. To ensure they controlled its trade routes between the interior and Red Sea ports, Hagmann and Stepputat (2023) posit that Ethiopia needed continuous intelligence information on the movement of merchants, any potential danger to the caravan, and economic intelligence on the neighbouring areas. Specific officials were assigned to watch the major routes and report to regional governors who would centralise intelligence to be sent to the capital.

The Ethiopian system was analysed in concentric circles with local intelligence being measured by regional governors who were well aware of their localities (Alapo, 2022). The Imperial Council which consisted of the military commanders, religious leaders and advisors, analyzed the strategic intelligence, and the emperor made decisions based on the synthesised analysis (Debelee et al., 2024). This concept brought back the local expertise and strategic orientation, which is largely lacking in the discourse of African intelligence today.

Case Study: West African Kingdom Intelligence Systems

The findings indicated intelligence systems of the pre-colonial West African kingdoms, such as the Ghana Empire, Mali Empire, and subsequently the Ashanti Confederacy, were adapted to the decentralised political systems and their trade connections, which spanned great distances. The focus on intelligence collection was on human networks as opposed to centralised institutions.

Griots (traditional storyteller/historian) acted as intelligence collectors and analysts who made their way between the kingdoms by performing at the royal courts, as they kept an eye on political processes, military planning, and economic situation (Jones, 2023). Their access to leaders and mobility rendered them perfect intelligence assets. Griots used the same networks with other rulers as they reported to their patron kings, establishing a form of informal intelligence-sharing throughout West Africa (Bourbon & Murimi, 2024).

Findings of this study also established that there were Merchant Intelligence Networks. Kohnert (2022) asserts that Trans-Saharan trade had established large intelligence networks, and merchants reported on political stability, military threats and economic opportunities in North and West Africa. Rich trading families kept agents in more than one kingdom and managed the flow of information in other areas (Austen, 2024). This royalty intelligence directly determined the choices of royalty in terms of trade policy, military alliances and even the diplomatic programs.

There were also Age-Grade Intelligence Systems as established in the study. The West Africans had a system of grouping young men into age-grades to defend their community (Onah et al, 2024). These age-grades carried geographical reconnaissance of the community, kept watch on outsiders into the group and reported any threat to the seniors. This decentralized intelligence gathering secured the safety of communities and gave them an early alert of external attacks.

Case Study: Southern African Intelligence Practices

The study evinced that Shaka, who was the founder and king of the Zulu Kingdom, had set up a special scout squadron dubbed *izihlangu*, which made a reconnaissance over a long distance before military campaigns (Laband, 2020). The scouts were chosen on the basis of speed, stamina, and observational capabilities and were trained to interrogate the strength of the enemy, and any present vulnerabilities that would threaten their security. They had a direct reporting relationship to the military commanders who utilised this intelligence to organise tactical responses.

Additionally, Shaka, according to Clegg (2021), adopted extreme operational security measures such as execution of warriors who revealed the military schemes and also subterfuge operations to frustrate the intentions and capabilities of the enemy. These counterintelligence measures safeguarded the Zulu military.

Van Deventer (2024) notes that Shaka himself went through intelligence reports and identified the weak points and terrain of the enemy. His military strategies, such as the buffalo horns formation, were innovated partly as a result of an intelligence analysis which provided information on the vulnerability of the enemy (Ginestet, 2025).

These pre-colonial intelligence systems clearly had common features: a combination of intelligence with the social structures that were in place; human intelligence networks; communal or consultative analysis;

and adjustment of the security threats and political environment. Albeit less technologically advanced than modern systems, these indigenous techniques also reflected the principles of intelligence: gathering, inference, distributing, and counterintelligence, which are still used in contemporary intelligence services in Africa.

Colonial Period Intelligence Development

The colonial period changed the African intelligence by introducing the western systems that were aimed at oppressing the African resistance and establishing infrastructure that would be inherited and modernized by the post-independence states. This era shows passive acceptance, active adaptation and resistance by Africans.

Case Study: Kenya's Special Branch Evolution

The Special Branch of Kenya, formed as a result of the Mau Mau emergence (1952-1960), demonstrates a perfect example of adapting colonial intelligence in the context of African agency in repressive systems (Wright, 2022). The colonial rule was confronted by an elaborate insurgency that had its own systems of intelligence, compelling it to develop the British intelligence systems very quickly.

The colonial Special Branch utilised several collection methods, most of which were variations of British domestic and imperial practice but tailored to the Kenyan ecosystem. The African informants were a great source of human intelligence, which somewhat made it an awful system since some Kenyans were sharing intelligence on the Mau Mau fighters, who at that time were fighting to seek self-rule (Miriti, 2023). However, this system also became a model of passive resistance, with some of the informants giving inaccurate intelligence and acting as spies for Mau Mau (Lawrence, 2024). Other tactics used by the colonial government were the surveillance of suspected Mau Mau sympathisers, intercepting mails, and interrogating the detainees (Burton, 2020).

African personnel in the Special Branch held subsidiary positions but had great agency (Roadmap, 2025). Heidger and Higgins (2024) divulge that others took advantage of their status to shield combatants of independence by issuing threats of intended attacks or fabricating intelligence data. Additionally, many gained expertise in intelligence tradecraft, which they would subsequently use in post-independence services. This two-sided reality, cooperation and resistance, defines the African response to colonial intelligence structures.

Kenya finally seized Special Branch infrastructure, staff and practices at independence in 1963 (Maupeu, 2021). The then Kenyan leaders, however, modified the system to suit national interests and not colonial ones. The priorities changed from repression of independence movements to managing external threats (Cold War interference), internal issues (ethnic tensions, coup proposals) and crime (Nasong'o, 2024). This adaptation process was based on retaining the effective methods (informant networks, surveillance capabilities) and redefining the objective and leadership.

Case Study: South African Intelligence Under Apartheid and Liberation Movements

The findings demonstrate that the situation in South Africa is special as there were two parallel intelligence systems at work: the security apparatus of the apartheid state and the underground networks of the liberation movements (Keniston, 2024). This is a parallel evolution that shows how African intelligence is innovative in extreme circumstances.

South African intelligence services, such as the Bureau of State Security (BOSS) and later the National Intelligence Service (NIS), used advanced collection and analysis techniques aimed at the oppression of the anti-apartheid movement (Duncan, 2022). These services relied on electronic monitoring, spy networks among the black communities, international collaboration in intelligence with the Western services, and callous methods of interrogation. As a result of significant resources and Western training, and collaboration, the intelligence capabilities of the apartheid system were equal to those leading then (Kocaman, 2025).

Additionally, ANC established its own intelligence, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) Intelligence, which was a covert operation both in South Africa and in exile (Hughes & Plaut, 2024). MK Intelligence collection techniques comprised of: infiltration of the apartheid security agencies via recruited spies; surveillance of government officials and military bases; safe houses and secret communication networks; international intelligence support with the socialist states and other liberation groups (Cartwright, 2022). ANC intelligence operations were incredibly innovative, such as the invention of coded communication systems, dead drops, and counter-surveillance methods that were invented without any formal training. This native intelligence power, which came into existence out of necessity and retaliation, served to demonstrate that African practitioners could attain advanced intelligence regimens even during the period of extreme oppression (Wong, 2025).

Both apartheid and ANC intelligence services were able to generate formal intelligence reports, albeit with considerably different levels of resources. Maharajh (2021) contends that the apartheid government generated overarching intelligence evaluations disseminated via the state apparatus, and ANC intelligence accounts circulated within exile command and underground cells. The contrast portrays that intelligence production is flexible to organisational structures and resources instead of a single model.

Case Study: Ghana's Post-Independence Intelligence Transformation

Nkrumah created the Ghana Intelligence Service, which utilised the colonial Special Branch but changed the focus of their mandate to safeguard Ghanaian sovereignty. The service kept a check on external dangers (especially the ones posed by remnant colonial ambitions) and internal dangers (coup plotters, frequently with foreign support) (Murfett, 2023).

Ghana's experience shows how African countries converted the inherited colonial intelligence system to serve post-independence goals. After achieving independence in 1957, Kwame Nkrumah had the challenge of transforming the colonial intelligence infrastructure that was geared towards the suppression of nationalism into one that would guard the new nation (Chauke, 2024).

Cold War Intelligence Evolution

The Cold War era saw the African intelligence systems negotiating between the superpower demands while still in the process of attaining self-reliance. This period mirrors African agency in spite of external interference.

Case Study: Kenya's Counter-Coup Intelligence

Kenya managed to prevent coup attempts in 1971 and respond quickly to the 1982 Airforce coup, which indicates proper intelligence gathering and analysis during the period (Laugesen, 2021). The 1982 coup attempt gives us a detailed overview of Kenyan intelligence capabilities.

The Kenyan Special Branch had been able to infiltrate dissident groups in the military and placed informants who reported on planning events (Shaffer, 2023). Close and constant surveillance of university campuses also led to the identification of student leaders who were linked to junior Airforce officers. Communications between plotters might have been intercepted by signals intelligence, possibly with Western aid (Gronning, 2024).

Special Branch intelligence personnel realised there was some pattern to a coup plot: stranger than usual meetings between military officers and civilians; higher levels of political rhetoric amongst the junior officers; and the acquisition of supplies indicating that they were preparing to go on long operations (Kleynhans & Wyss, 2025). This assessment, which was submitted to the security council of President Moi, elicited more security measures.

Intelligence on the impending coup was obtained by high-ranking military leaders and police leadership, who responded swiftly when the coup broke out (Cormac, 2022). The six-hour coup repression is a sign of proper intelligence-driven operational planning. This success is in contrast with intelligence failures in other African nations where coups were successful, denoting the relative intelligence sophistication in Kenya at the time.

Case Study: South African Intelligence During the Liberation Struggle

The intelligence activities of both the apartheid government and liberation movements in the course of the Cold War serve as an example of parallel development of intelligence and its ultimate convergence. The 1960-1994 was a time of intense intelligence work:

The South African security agencies adopted aggressive counterintelligence tactics, such as assassinations of ANC members in exile, infiltration of ANC networks by recruited agents and collaboration with Western intelligence agencies which considered the ANC's communist ties a menace (Turton, 2024). These activities were successful in the short term but failed in the long run to restrain the fall of apartheid.

ANC established advanced intelligence adaptation to counter the infiltration by the apartheid regime. These were compartmentalisation of operations, vetting of recruits, counter-surveillance training, and identification of enemy agents (Contemporary Intelligence in Africa Report, 2022). The ANC also had an intelligence connection with the services of the socialist countries, where they were trained and supported in developing capabilities. The ANC intelligence officers were recruited into the new South African

intelligence agencies after the fall of apartheid, and they were able to transfer their experience, ensuring continuity despite the political change (Hughes and Plaut, 2024).

Case Study: Ghana After Nkrumah

After the coup of 1966, a series of later coups and counter-coups (1972, 1979, 1981) followed in Ghana, exposing the vulnerability of the intelligence systems (Hart, 2025). This trend shows that successful intelligence is more than just a technical ability, but it must have institutional validity, professional integrity and political desire to act upon intelligence estimates.

The study established that weaknesses of the Ghanaian intelligence community were: politicization of intelligence - where services had turned into instruments of certain regimes instead of national institutions; insufficient analytical capability - where emphasis was laid on gathering intelligence, as opposed to analysing it; and lack of accountability and transparency - where intelligence services had been left to operate without accountability (Eshun, 2022). These were not isolated cases in Ghana but were typical of most African intelligence services in the Cold War era.

Post-Cold War and Contemporary Developments

With new security demands, African intelligence systems have grown in autonomy, regional collaboration, and sophistication in the post-Cold War era.

Case Study: Kenya's Multi-Sectoral Intelligence Approach

Kenya's response to the 2007-2008 post-election violence reflects a partial failure of intelligence, hence the reform thereof. According to Bwana (2023), the Waki Report gave an account of how Kenyan intelligence agencies gave early warning of imminent violence, but other institutions of the state did not respond to the warning, resulting in over 1,000 deaths.

In 2010, the Constitutional Amendment formed the National Security Council, which provided a multi-sectoral solution to the national security decision-making process (Kosmider, 2021). This reform was a response to the lack of coordination that defined the crisis of 2007-2008. The NSC framework also guarantees that decision-makers, who have the authority to take preventive actions, receive intelligence assessments (Boit and Mutungi, 2023).

Kenya created special counterterrorism intelligence following terrorist attacks in 1998 (Embassy bombing in US), 2002 (Kikambala), 2013 (Westgate Mall), and 2015 (Garissa University) (Manyonge, 2021). They include: human intelligence networks in the Somali communities in Kenya; signals intelligence to monitor Al-Shabaab communication; collaboration with regional intelligence services via IGAD; and collaboration with Western intelligence services without losing operational independence. These capabilities have proven effective with several planned attacks prevented, but the specifics of how it works are secret.

Kenya instituted the National Forensic Laboratory in 2022, fully endowed with digital forensics facilities to analyse cyber threats, electronic evidence, and digital communications (Directorate of Criminal Investigations, 2022). These capabilities were put to test during the DDoS attack of the eCitizen platform in Kenya in 2023 by the group Anonymous Sudan. Kenya's response which included but not limited to;

determining the source of the attack, defensive response, and service stability; illustrates an escalating level of cyber intelligence (Kitili & Abiero, 2023).

Case Study: South African Intelligence Post-Apartheid

The findings established that South Africa, in the post-apartheid era, incorporated retired apartheid intelligence officers with the ANC intelligence agents into a single service. This corroborates Segell (2021), who contends that the process of integration was politically charged, but it formed an intelligence community that fused technical know-how of the apartheid world with the innovative tradecraft and international relationship of the ANC.

South Africa created strong intelligence oversight structures, such as parliamentary committees that had access to classified intelligence and an independent inspector-general that supervised intelligence operations (Duba & Lehohla, 2025). These monitoring systems are some of the most sophisticated in Africa and are a response to the intelligence misuse that occurred during apartheid.

Discussion

These findings have demonstrated that the development of African intelligence is a process of adaptation, innovation, and growing independence and not complete reliance on foreign models. This discussion explores major themes that come out in the case studies.

Indigenous Intelligence as Foundation

The case studies of the pre-colonial era essentially contradict the narrative that intelligence practice in Africa is only a colonial import. The Ethiopian diplomatic intelligence networks, the pre-colonial information networks of Kenya, the Griot networks of West Africa, and Zulu military reconnaissance systems evidence an advanced usage of the fundamental intelligence principles; collection, analysis, dissemination and the use of counter-intelligence, integrated into culturally specific systems of governance. This is in stark contrast to what Masiziani (2021) calls colonial amnesia, which refers to the invisibility or primitiveness of indigenous knowledge systems in the dominant historical discourses.

More importantly, such systems display structural properties that are problematic to Western paradigms of intelligence; primary emphasis on human networks as opposed to technological collection techniques; organic connectivity in social structures, as opposed to bureaucratic division; communal analysis as opposed to compartmentalised Western intelligence models; and operational flexibility to localised threat contexts. This divergence is best demonstrated in the Ethiopian case, in which functions of intelligence pervaded diplomatic, religious, and business life simultaneously, depicting what could be theorised as distributed intelligence, essentially the opposite of the Western institutional silos. Although colonialism shattered these systems, the use of the concept of hybridity used by Masiziani (2021) shows traces of how native elements were still present under the surface and re-emerged after independence as an abstraction of what Price (2025) may term strategic essentialism; the selective recuperation of pre-colonial practices to establish post-colonial legitimacy. This implies that the intelligence agencies of the present-day African context are in what Koenig et al., (2023) refer to as entanglement; existing both in the institutional forms of colonisation and acting in agency through indigenous ideologies of operation, and therefore require modes of analysis that go beyond the binary colonial/indigenous dichotomies and toward appreciating the complex adaptive synthesis it entails.

Colonial Intelligence as Contested Space

The colonial era was not only a unidirectional imposition of Western ways of intelligence but also a dialectic realm of African agency, operating through multilateral mechanisms of resistance, subversion and knowledge appropriation. Using the framework of weapons of the weak developed by Scott (Dasgupta, 2024), the Kenyan case study shows how the deployment of agency by African staff in colonial intelligence services played out in the provision of disinformation, sabotage of establishment using strategic intelligence leaks, and the systemic acquisition of tradecraft, which was used in post-independence state-building. This undermines the monolithic accounts of colonial intelligence as a mere repressive apparatus, and babbles out it is an arena of what Bhabha refers to as sly civility (Mishra, 2022), where the colonised subject inhabited and subjugated the colonial apparatus, simultaneously stashing up strategic capital that could be deployed later in their independent capacity.

The South African liberation struggle is the best example of this agency, as movements such as the ANC generated similar intelligence structures which became as sophisticated as the apartheid state intelligence could be. The invention of secret communication systems, anti-surveillance strategies and anti-intelligence measures under circumstances of utter oppression exemplifies what Fanon theorised as combat breathing; the creative potential of resistance to generate native institutional innovations beyond imitation (Owen, 2024). The postcolonial hybridity theory explains how the post-independent African intelligibility systems developed based on selective synthesis and not wholesale rejection or uncritical inheritance of colonial institutional frameworks: they were radically re-oriented in purpose, leadership and dispositional endowment and operational priorities toward the interests of sovereign national interest. Bourke (2025) described this as the process of provincialization - the active recontextualization of European paradigms in African epistemological and political discourses, neither passive continuation nor total discontinuity but productive adaptation to its specific historical path and security needs.

Cold War as Catalyst for Indigenous Development

The Cold War period poses a paradox in the development of African intelligence: on one hand, the patronage of superpowers resulted in deep-seated external interference and dependence relationships, while on the other hand, it led African institutions to enter the phase of indigenisation in the form of an adversity-driven innovation. The frequency of coups de etat, political assassinations, and proxy destabilisation has pushed African intelligence services to build autonomy, as they understood that any external support would be conditional, unreliable, and ultimately serve donor, and not recipient interests on security. This complements the argument by Dimier (2021) that Cold War clientelism had unintended consequences that caused the African states to formulate a dual capacity, i.e. sustaining patron relations while still developing independent operation capacities that counter the vulnerability of dependency.

This indigenous capacity building can best be illustrated by the counter-coup successes that Kenya achieved. Western training programs and liaison relationships only established the technical backgrounds, whereas the essential intelligence capabilities, infiltration of the military systems and finding of the signs of coups through informal contacts, and quick reaction coordination, were fulfilled by Kenyan officers who modified the means of imports to the political cultures, their kinship ties and the context of the institutions. Kenya has a relatively coup resilience that can be attributed by this indigenous agency compared to other counterparts in the region. Conversely, the vulnerability of Ghana to coups over time demonstrates the institutional weakness of too much reliance on external parties and political instrumentalization, validating

Kelecha (2023) that professional institutions of the African state must have an embedded autonomy. This comparative study argues that technical competence, although a requirement, is still inadequate without institutional autonomy and contextual adjustment.

Technology and Contemporary Capabilities

Modern African intelligence communities are confronted with issues that demand technological advancement: cyber warfare, digital terrorism, and information warfare. The case studies show that African nations have been investing in cyber intelligence, digital forensics, and technical training. The capacity of the National Forensic Laboratory in Kenya and the cyber intelligence in South Africa depict African technology.

Nonetheless, there are concerns about perpetual reliance on technology adoption. Most of the cyber intelligence technology is manufactured by Western or Asian businesses, which can pose new modes of dependence. The emergence of National Intelligence Research University (NIRU) and such other educational establishments implies that Africans have realised that they need indigenous technological capacity, rather than imported technology.

Education on intelligence can be taken as a long-term independence investment. Through the creation of indigenous intelligence scholarship and professional education, African nations can establish intellectual bases to further autonomous growth.

Conclusion

This study has established that African intelligence systems have come a long way since their colonial beginnings to develop into highly sophisticated networks integrated regionally and able to face current security issues. Although external powers have indeed affected the building of African intelligence, the continent has had its power in creating its own intelligence practices and has since built its own independent capabilities. The study identifies three main findings: First, while colonialism informed the evolution of African intelligence institutions, the foundational premise of intelligence practice on the continent are much older, grounded in pre-colonial systems that were attuned to local political, social, and security contexts. Second, although the Cold War was characterised by intensive external encroachment into African intelligence affairs, it also encouraged local innovation and adjustment that preconditioned modern capacities. Third, there has been African intelligence autonomy in the post-cold war era in unprecedented forms; in forms of regional cooperation, technological growth, and institutional growth.

Recommendations

This research provides recommendations, which may be used in understanding African intelligence development based on the findings: African governments must be encouraged to invest in further centralizing their regional intelligence integration mechanisms, building on the success of CISSA and CEWS to cultivate an even stronger regional intelligence capability. A priority should be given to the establishment of specialised intelligence education colleges, support to institutions, such as NIRU or to develop similar courses in other universities in the country. As Africa becomes dependent on cybersecurity, governments should invest in cyber intelligence and training programs to counter digital threats. There is a need to invest in African scholars and practitioners working on intelligence issues to build the capacities of indigenous knowledge production. Additionally, The African Union has an obligation to further build the

operational capacities of CISSA and enhance its mandate to cover contemporary security challenges. Regional bodies ought to invest in advanced early warning programs that can predict and stop security crises before they occur. Secure information sharing systems need to be established and coordinated between African intelligence services. Regional bodies are needed to promote professional development initiatives and collaboration among African intelligence services. Finally, international aid must not reinforce a dependency relationship but instead support African initiated intelligence development projects. Partner nations should assist with transferring proper technology to boost the intelligence capacity of the African markets without violating their sovereignty. Academic and professional exchange programs should be encouraged to improve African intelligence scholarship and professional growth.

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