

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT IN AFRICA

Interview

DECOLONIZING THEORIES OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION

Interview with Dr. Ernest Tooichi Aniche, Federal University Otuoke, Nigeria



Ernest Tooichi Aniche, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer and the Acting Head of the Department of Political Science, Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. He holds BSc, MSc, and PhD degrees from the Department of Political Science, University of Nigeria with a specialization in International Relations. He is developing a new theory of African Integration (Post-Neofunctionalism), deconstructing the traditional Neo-functionalist approach. Dr. Aniche is a prolific scholar with over a hundred publications, including articles in dozens of the world's most renowned African studies journals.

He has also published co-edited books and authored and co-authored chapters in books published by reputable publishers such as Routledge (Taylor & Francis), Palgrave Macmillan (Springer Nature), Rowman & Littlefield International, Lexington Books, and Oxford University Press. The highlight of his career was co-editing books with the African scholar legend, Professor Toyin Falola. He is on the editorial boards of journals and publishers, particularly Springer Nature (SN) Social Sciences, Ubuntu: Journal of Conflict and Social Transformation, and Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

In his interview, he explains what prompted him to develop his own theory of African integration, which would actually contribute to the development of the continent. He explains the reasons for the crisis tendencies of modern African regionalism, a manifestation of which is the creation of the Sahel State Alliance. He pays particular attention to the prospects for decolonizing social knowledge about Africa. He provides inspiring cases of those African intellectuals who were able to transform the study of politics from Political Science in Africa to African Political Science, as well as to decolonize African regionalism and African border and migration studies.

Keywords: Africa, regional integration, regionalism, African theories, post-neofunctionalism, ECOWAS

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– Dear Dr. Aniche, you are one of the few researchers who have moved from using other theories to developing their own. In 2009, you put forward the theory of post-neo-functionalism in relation to African integration, which is a critical rethinking of neo-functionalist theory. What prompted you to do so?

Several reasons inspired my intention to construct an alternative theory of African regionalism which can be found in a number of scholarly works [Aniche 2018; Aniche 2021; Aniche, Oji, Mlambo 2023].

Firstly, I wanted to contribute towards decolonizing knowledge production in Africa, especially with respect to regionalism or regional integration, border and migration studies [Aniche, Moyo, Nshimbi 2021; Aniche 2022; Aniche, Iwuoha, Isike 2022]. This is to reinforce African agency in the study of African regionalism and comparative regionalism. The current situation where the study of African regionalism is dominated by Western theories and scholars is unacceptable because it is not in tandem with the mantra: *African solutions to African problems*.

Thus, I began by deconstructing and unpacking the so-called mainstream neo-liberal institutionalist theories of regional integration and supranationalism (particularly neo-functionalism), which are essentially theories of European integration [Haas 1975; Keohane 1993; Keohane, Hoffmann 1991; Moravcsik 1997; Schmitter 1970; Schmitter, Lefkofridi 2016; Tranholm-Mikkelsen 1991].

Secondly, the intention was to construct an authentic African theory of regionalism that could focus on African regionalism rather than regionalism in Africa. The former is constitutive in that it emphasizes an autochthonous model or knowledge of integration or regionalism, which is rooted in the pan-Africanist philosophical postulations of Kwame Nkrumah [Nkrumah 1963], Julius Nyerere [Nyerere 1966], and Nnamdi Azikiwe [Azikiwe 1969]. The latter is institutive because it was imposed by non-Africans, particularly the model that was championed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) as rooted in neo-functionalism: the Monrovia Strategy of 1979, the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) of 1980, and the Abuja Treaty of 1991.

Thirdly, my aspiration was to construct a theory that could reverse the current neo-functionalist trajectory of the state-driven, state-centric, public-sector-led, and top-down model of African regionalism towards people-driven, man-centered, private-sector-led, market-driven, and bottom-top African regionalism capable of fostering people-to-people integration. A post-neo-functionalist strategy of integrating African businesses, finances, and capital into conglomerates to compete with non-African multinational corporations (MNCs) and transnational corporations (TNCs) within and outside the continent or intra-regionally and extra-regionally.

In conclusion, it also aims to construct a theory that can break the neo-colonial ties of African economies to the West, particularly the former colonial masters such as France, Britain, Portugal, and Spain, by fundamentally rethinking the path to regional integration in Africa as an enduring solution to enhance its prospects and minimize its challenges.

– What is wrong with conventional regional integration theories? Why don't they fit the African case?

I have insisted that these theories are Euro-centric, Western, parochial, and one-size-fits-all [Aniche 2020a; 2021a]. The political context of the EU is very different from that of the African Union. Even in the case of European integration, the explanatory value of neo-functionalism suffered a serious setback as a result of the unpredictable trajectory of the upsurge of nationalism in the EU (a good example is Brexit), such that many of its exponents began to interrogate these theories, particularly neo-functionalism [Aniche 2020b].

I noted that one of the major defects of neo-functionalism is that it assumes that regional integration is a gradual and linear process, making explanations of setbacks difficult. This also undermines the ability of the theory to predict, pre-empt, and prevent drawbacks in regional integration [Aniche 2023]. For instance, Brexit negated the three core mechanisms of neo-functionalism. More specifically, it shows that European integration, just like its African counterpart, has always been fundamentally state-driven, despite the supranational claims of neo-functionalism [Aniche, Alumona, Moyo 2021].

I stated that another of its defects is that neo-functionalism assumes that the integration of states is an integration of equals rather than seeing it as the integration of unequals [Aniche 2021b; Aniche, Iwuoha, Isike 2022]. In other words, it presumes that regional integration is essentially a relation of interdependence rather than a relation of dependence. This suggests that neo-functionalism conceives regional cooperation as symmetrical integration rather than as asymmetrical integration. Therefore, the theory is inadequate for explaining the dependence of African economies on Western economies and the integration of the dependence of the African states on each other [Aniche, Alumona, Mlambo 2023].

– So, you think that neo-functionalist theory was not practically useful for African development?

It lacks the analytical utility for analyzing the fact that the structural dependence and vertical integration of African economies into developed economies trump the horizontal integration of African economies. It is not analytically useful for understanding the reason why intra-African trade has been as low as 10 percent (or the lowest when compared to intra-regional trade of other regions) and why Africa accounts for about 4 percent of the global trade.

The poor explanatory value of neo-functionalist theory is also demonstrated by the fact that African regionalism has failed as a means of collective self-reliance. Neo-functionalism does not advance a sufficient basis to explain the fact that, after more than five decades, African regionalism is yet to solve or address African developmental challenges. It has no solution to some of the challenges militating against successful African integration, such as politico-ideological differences, the disparity in the size of African economies, variation in the development of African states, the fear of economic cum political domination, the monopolization of benefits, the unwillingness of some African leaders to surrender their sovereignty, the internal vertical linkages of weaker African economies to regional economic hegemony, intractable civil strife, and the attendant refugee crises and internal displacements.

The theoretical approach cannot suggest the panacea for overcoming some of the obstacles to African regionalism, such as the adverse activities of MNCs operating in Africa; neo-colonial ties; the export-oriented primary products of African states; the external historical, political, economic, and vertical linkages of African economies to Western economies; and the structural dependence of African economies on Western economies and now on the Chinese economy. Consequently, the neo-functionalist

approach has not been able to enable African regionalism to overcome trade diversion, diverse trade regimes, and restrictive customs procedures; administrative, bureaucratic, and technical barriers; limited productive capacity; inadequate trade-related infrastructure, trade finance, and trade information; the lack of factor market integration; and inadequate focus on internal market issues as in the newly established AfCFTA.

– What are the prerequisites for the transition of African researchers from using social theories developed outside the continent to developing their own concepts? What do you see as the optimal balance between using extra-regional theories and developing African ones?

The prerequisites include:

(1) to decolonize knowledge production so as to reinforce African agency in the study of African regionalism and comparative regionalism.

(2) to avoid the one-size-fits-all theory because the circumstances of Africa and other regions, particularly the West, are not the same in terms of historical, geographical, strategic, socio-cultural, and political contexts. For example, most European countries that adopted a neo-functional approach to regional integration that resulted in the EU have largely transcended problems of national unity, de-industrialization, and internal insecurity. But this is not the case with African states, which are still confronted by national questions. Therefore, adopting a neo-functional approach to African regionalism will be problematic.

(3) to avoid giving credit and relevance to Western theories that were designed to deepen the dependency trap, reinforce neo-colonial ties, and facilitate vertical integration for Africa. African scholars should focus on the construction of emancipatory theories that can provide African solutions to African problems, such as structural dependence, low intra-African trade, unfavourable terms of trade (unequal exchange), extra-regional vertical integration, centrifugal forces of sub-nationalism, disintegrative nationalism, mass unemployment, abject poverty, extreme inequality, insecurity, etc.

– You were one of the editors of *Essays in Honour of Elochukwu Amucheazi*. Could you tell us what this researcher meant to you? Was the experience of rethinking his scientific heritage that you undertook with your colleagues successful?

Elochukwu Amucheazi was one of the professors who mentored, groomed, and molded us (all the editors of the book) at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels in the Department of Political Science, University of Nigeria¹. As a result of his profound impact on our academic trajectories, we decided to honour him by publishing the book in his honour for his enduring academic leadership and legacy in the fields of comparative politics, Nigerian government and politics, African politics, political history, political communication, political sociology, and political behaviour [Ibeanu *et al* 2022].

– Which other African intellectuals have influenced your perception, even though you consider their scientific contributions to be still underestimated?

¹ Elochukwu Amucheazi (1939–2024) graduated in 1966 from the University of Ibadan. Since 1967, he had been teaching Political Science at the University of Nigeria. For the last four decades, he had studied the influences of diverse interests on politics and political decisions, especially in the East of Nigeria. In 1993, he was the Director-General of Nigeria's National Orientation Agency (NOA) created to communicate government policy (*Editor's Note*).

Some of the scholars who have directly and indirectly influenced my academic growth and scholarly trajectory are Assisi Asobie, Ogban Ogban-Iyam, Okey Ibeanu, Claude Ake, Walter Rodney [Rodney 1972], Okwudiba Nnoli [Nnoli 1978; 2003], Toyin Falola, Ken Kalu [Kalu 2018], Christopher Isike, Inocent Moyo, Chris Nshimbi, Jussi Laine [Brambilla, Laine, Bocchi 2015], and Samuel Oloruntoba.

Most of these scholars have contributed immensely toward the decolonization of knowledge production. Assisi Asobie [Asobie 1977], Ogban Ogban-Iyam [Ogban-Iyam 2005], Okey Ibeanu [Ibeanu 2006], Claude Ake [Ake 1981; 1982], and Okwudiba Nnoli [Nnoli 1978] were able to transform the study of politics from Political Science in Africa to African Political Science. Toyin Falola [Aniche, Falola 2021], Christopher Isike [Isike, Isike 2022], Inocent Moyo, Chris Nshimbi [Nshimbi, Moyo 2017], and Samuel Oloruntoba [Oloruntoba 2015] made a tremendous contribution toward decolonizing African regionalism, and African border and migration studies.

Professor Assisi Asobie tried to replace the study of International Relations in Africa with African International Relations [Asobie 2007]. By so doing, he was able to make his students (including me) see the study of International Relations from an African perspective, particularly African contributions to the study of International Relations, which had often been de-emphasized by the dominant Western scholarship. Similarly, Professor Okwudiba Nnoli and Professor Okey Ibeanu were able to transit from the study of Political Science in Africa to African Political Science. Both were able to mainstream the contributions of African scholars to the study of Political Science, especially in the area of African political thoughts like African socialism, African democracy, African welfarism. As such, they were able to present critiques of the mainstream Western political theories.

Professor Claude Ake in his various scholarly works pointed out that Social Sciences as studied in Africa should be regarded as imperialism [Ake 1981] and, like Professor Walter Rodney, provided a critique of the modernization theory of development [Ake 1996]. Professor Toyin Falola devoted most of his scholarly works to how to decolonize knowledge production in Africa. Similarly, Professor Christopher Isike, Professor Inocent Moyo, Professor Chris Nshimbi and Professor Samuel Oloruntoba have contributed immensely to decolonial theory, especially in the areas of African regionalism, border and migration studies. I have collaborated with them in co-editing books and co-authoring book chapters and journal articles on deconstructing neo-functionalism, Westphalian and Berlin colonial border thinking in Africa.

– You co-edited several books with Professor Toyin Falola, the world-famous African scholar. What did this experience give you?

Toyin Falola is one of the few scholars who influenced my academic trajectory the most. While co-editing these books [Aniche, Falola 2020; Aniche, Falola 2021] and co-authoring these book chapters, I had to unlearn, learn, and relearn or unthink, think, and rethink. I offered myself to be untaught, taught, and re-taught by the African scholar legend².

² Toyin Falola (born in 1953) is a Nigerian historian (Ibadan school) and world-leading scholar in African epistemologies who earned his B.A. and PhD at the University of Ife (Nigeria), where he taught until, in 1991, he joined the University of Texas at Austin (USA). He is an author and editor of more than one hundred books on African history, religion, culture, migration, IR, etc. In 2014–2015, he served as the president of the African Studies Association (*Editor's Note*).

It was a very deep, insightful experience from him – his academic majesty and intellectual highness. The experience is indelible, priceless, and invaluable. He is the mentor of mentors. He devoted all his life to elevating and promoting the growth of young and budding African scholars. His enormous contributions to decolonial theory and the decolonization of knowledge production can never be over-emphasized. In fact, history will be fair to him.

– In 2023, an extraordinary event for African regionalism took place: three Sahel countries created a new integration grouping, the Alliance of Sahel States, and left ECOWAS. How do you comment on this? Does it indicate a crisis of traditional regionalism in Africa?

Yes, it heralded a crisis of African regionalism, which I pointed out earlier in my post-neo-functional theory of African regionalism [Aniche 2018; Aniche 2021]. So, it was not totally unexpected, given that ECOWAS, like other RECs in Africa, as orchestrated by UNECA, toed a neo-liberal institutionalist, neo-functional, state-driven, state-centric, public-sector-led, and top-down path to regional integration.

These are the challenges confronting African regionalism, as highlighted by post-neo-functionalism [Aniche, Ukaegbu 2016]. ECOWAS has become a neo-colonial instrument for legitimizing sit-tight leadership in West Africa that protects the exploitative economic interests of the West.

Regrettably, contemporary African integration is still driven by African leaders rather than African people. Expectedly, African economies remain fragmented after over five decades of regionalism. African economies are still structurally weak, non-industrialized, and undiversified, such that they trade more extra-regionally than intra-regionally. Consequently, the economies are externally dictated by international financial and trade institutions, structurally dependent and vertically integrated into the developed economies of the West, and now China. Thus, African regionalism has neither been able to facilitate national and continental unity, nor has it been successful as a strategy for overcoming African security and developmental challenges. In other words, it has not been able to achieve its core objectives: collective self-reliance and a strategic framework for economic transformation and development.

This significantly departs from the current neo-functional theoretical approach, which has only facilitated state-to-state cooperation, public sector-led integration, government-to-government, state-to-state, inter-state, or inter-governmental integration. This top-down approach to regional integration fails to prioritize appropriate solutions for the causes that, in the first instance, prevent intra-regional trade from growing. Each next step in the linear process brings additional and costly burdens in that moving from an FTA to a customs union requires joint policies on tariffs, harmonization, and coordination of domestic legal instruments. This further requires collective governance as well as institutions to manage the common external tariff (CET). This is difficult and costly given that some governments still rely on customs revenue, thereby frequently invoking a lack of capacity and sensitive national interests as justifications for derogations from legal obligations.

– In your research, you study not only integration issues but also security ones. Meanwhile, we see a number of problems with the implementation of the African Peace and Security Architecture. RECs' standby brigades are not being deployed as quickly as was planned. More and more conflicts on the continent are resolved

within ad hoc formats, be it the MNJTF, the G5 Sahel, or others. Could you explain why this is happening?

These are still part of the failure of the neo-functional approach to African regionalism to overcome the challenges of the centrifugal forces of sub-nationalism (separatist movements) and disintegrative nationalism (secessionist tendencies) inherent in the colonial legacy of the partitioning of Africa in Berlin in 1884 along its sphere of influence in what is now known as colonial borders. All these have been discussed in my integration theory (post-neo-functionalism) as a stage of security regionalism involving nation-building, national unity, national integration, peace-making, and peace-building, not limited to the kinetic approach of peace enforcement [Aniche 2018; Aniche 2021; Aniche, Oji, Mlambo 2023]. Experience has shown that external intervention from the West has only exacerbated the conflicts and security challenges.

– Africa is becoming more and more popular in Russia. Many young scholars would like to devote their scientific careers to studying the continent. What is your advice to them? What books and papers should they read to get an authentic perspective?

It is a welcome development that many young Russian scholars are becoming interested in African studies. I will advise them to prioritize the scholarly works of African scholars in their literature reviews and to rely more on data collected from fieldwork undertaken by them than secondary data from West-controlled institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, WTO, etc.

It will be preferable for them to come to Africa and conduct the fieldwork by themselves to ensure the validity and reliability of the data. I am willing to help nurture these budding Russian scholars who make African studies part of their areas of research interests at the level of thesis moderation and external examination, or even visiting positions in Russian universities and research institutes. For a country trying to challenge American hegemony and sphere of influence, I think it is also time for Russia to establish the Centre for Russian Studies or the Institute of Russian-African Relations in Africa. This is needed for African scholars to know more about Russia. There are so many misconceptions about Russia in Africa.

Interviewed by Denis A. Degterev

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ДЕКОЛОНИЗИРУЯ ТЕОРИИ РЕГИОНАЛЬНОЙ ИНТЕГРАЦИИ

Интервью с доктором Эрнестом Тоучи Анише, Федеральный университет Отуоке, Нигерия

Эрнест Тоучи Анише, доктор философии, профессор и заведующий кафедрой политических наук Федерального университета Отуоке, штат Байелса, Нигерия. Имеет степень бакалавра, магистра и доктора философии факультета политологии Университета Нигерии со специализацией в области международных отношений. Э. Анише разрабатывает новую теорию африканской интеграции (пост-неофункционализм), деконструируя традиционный неофункционалистский подход. Доктор Э. Анише – плодотворный исследователь, имеющий более сотни публикаций, включая статьи в десятках наиболее известных журналов по африканским исследованиям. Им также были опубликованы книги в соавторстве, он автор и соавтор глав книг, опубликованных такими авторитетными издательствами, как *Routledge (Taylor & Francis)*, *Palgrave Macmillan (Springer Nature)*, *Rowman & Littlefield International*, *Lexington Books* и *Oxford University Press*. Кульминацией его редакционной карьеры стало совместное редактирование книг с легендарным африканским ученым, профессором Тойином Фалолой. Он входит в редколлегию журналов и издательств, в частности *Springer Nature (SN) Social Sciences*, *Ubuntu: Journal of Conflict and Social Transformation* и *Cambridge Scholars Publishing*.

В своем интервью Э. Анише объясняет, что побудило его разработать собственную теорию региональной интеграции в Африке, которая способствовала бы развитию конти-

нента. Он объясняет причины кризисных тенденций современного африканского регионализма, проявлением которых стало создание Альянса государств Сахеля. Особое внимание он уделяет перспективам деколонизации социального знания в Африке. Он также приводит вдохновляющие примеры тех африканских интеллектуалов, которые смогли превратить политическую науку об Африке в подлинно африканскую политологию, а также деколонизировать африканский регионализм, пограничные и миграционные исследования.

Ключевые слова: Африка, региональная интеграция, регионализм, африканские теории, постнеофункционализм, ЭКОВАС

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