Algorithmic Colonialism: AI, Language Misrepresentation, and Democracy in Africa

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Abstract: *AI is reshaping governance in Africa, not only through bias and misinformation but through a deeper process of algorithmic colonialism, where external technologies distort African languages and political realities. Due to limited linguistic coverage and foreign dominance in digital infrastructure, AI systems undermine epistemic access and democratic participation. This paper argues for a Pan-African AI Sovereignty Agency to build sovereign AI hubs, cultural data libraries, and public foundation models, enabling the continent to reclaim algorithmic sovereignty and ensure epistemic autonomy.*

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy; Epistemic Sovereignty; Digital Dependence; Algorithmic Colonialism; Sovereign AI Infrastructure

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly influencing governance and politics in Kenya. Yet beyond the familiar concerns about bias and misinformation lies a deeper phenomenon: algorithmic colonialism, in which external powers impose interpretive control over African social and political realities (Birhane 2020; Coleman 2019; Menon 2023; Warganegara 2024). This essay discusses how AI, through the dominance of external big tech, produces language misrepresentation. In this regard, to overcome these challenges, it is necessary to set up continental institutions that can reclaim algorithmic sovereignty and guarantee epistemic autonomy.

Primarily, AI's impact on democracy is epistemic: it reshapes how knowledge is formed, distributed, and validated. Thus, remodelling societal awareness and governance. As a case in point, the models trained on non-African corpora misinterpret and fail to understand Swahili and other local languages, social behavior, and political sentiment systematically. This misalignment is structurally enhanced considering that Kenya is linguistically diverse, with 61 living indigenous languages (UNESCO 2025). In fact, top Large Language Models (LLMs) support only about 42 African languages, which means that there is a coverage gap of more than 98% (Alhanai et al. 2025). Therefore, benchmarks indicate that even the most sophisticated LLMs are noticeably worse in African languages than English and generate distortions of mass discourse (Khoboko, Marivate and Sefara 2025). When digital infrastructure and information systems are dependent upon such outputs, citizens' ability to engage, comprehend, and participate based on information in their native languages becomes manipulated by external categories, leading to distortion of civic expression and shared understanding.

Secondly, despite the growing use of AI systems across African countries, the continent is still deeply dependent structurally on external technologies, introducing foreign influence into digital and institutional infrastructures. On this point, less than 2% of the worldwide data centre capacity is located in Africa, with the majority of it becoming concentrated in a few countries. As for 2025, Kenya hosts 20 data centres, while 23.9 % of the continent's total capacity is located in North Africa (Heirs Technologies 2025; Data Center Map 2025). Despite the proliferation of local data centres, firms from the US and Western Europe, such as Amazon Web Services, Microsoft Azure, and Orange, continue to dominate digital infrastructures. Hence, AI services have indirect influence over African societies' digital and linguistic ecosystems, imposing external norms, eroding local epistemic trust, and undermining the credibility of indigenous interpretive and knowledge framework (Azeez and Adeate 2024).

In order to resolve these significant issues, I propose the establishment of a Pan-African AI Sovereignty Agency under the African Union, which will bring together resources to achieve collective and united digital sovereignty. This institution would set up AI hubs funded by different members of the African Union to ensure digital autonomy, a sovereign data library for the preservation of African languages, cultures and political data, and public foundation AI models trained to interpret African priorities.

A pertinent example is the European Artificial Intelligence Office, established in May 2024 by the European Commission with the European AI Board (European Commission 2024), which is in charge of coordinating AI regulation, research and innovation among the different member states. Implementing such a model in Africa could promote the implementation of a structured mechanism for harmonized governance, fostering Kenya and other African countries to systematically address algorithmic dependency, secure their knowledge access, and make sure that AI tech corresponds to local languages, politics, and cultures, thus reinforcing democratic involvement all over the continent.

In conclusion, AI, through the systems of LLMs and big tech infrastructures, imposes algorithmic colonialism by prioritizing external linguistic hierarchies and distorting the local languages in Kenya and the rest of Africa. Accordingly, this restricts digital sovereignty and the control over information, along with restricting epistemic access of citizens, which is the central pillar of democratic engagement. To address this, sovereign infrastructures, cultural datasets, and open-AI sources are needed to put local authority over knowledge and interpretation.

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