Regional and Multilateral Cooperation: Translating Africa's Hospitality Norms within Regional Blocs (ECOWAS, AU, EU)

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ABSTRACT

The cultural expressions of *Ubuntu, Teranga and Ujamaa* are the basis of Africa's hospitality philosophies, as they legislate normative forms with objective implications for regional governance and multilateral cooperation. This article demonstrates in what precedent these indigenous standards translate into institutional rationalities of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU) with observation to the questions of migration, free movement and collective solidarity. The analysis centers on Constructivist theory, which questions collective norms and identities in the act of construction of regional order, and on Normative Power Theory which treats blocs project and internalize values beyond state interest. These foundations question the reason why norms are peripheral to regional integration. However, the structural relevance defines the method through which the blocs manage cross-border mobility and respond to humanitarian crises. It also demonstrates that African hospitality norms have been absorbed into AU and ECOWAS instruments more visible in free movement protocols and refugee forms according to their operational weight. In comparison to EU which reveals the distinctiveness of African normative traditions and the tensions that emerge when indigenous ethics encounter bureaucratic institutionalization. Eventually, this contribution decolonizes the study of regional integration and centers African epistemological traditions as legitimate foundations for multilateral governance.

Keywords: Multilateral governance, African epistemology, norm diffusion, normative power, regional blocs

INTRODUCTION

The question of hospitality is treated on rare occasion as an open subject of regional governance. However, in the African continent mutual obligation, philosophies of welcome and communal belonging for a long time have organized relations between strangers and states. Most are associated with southern Africa such as Ubuntu which traditionally expresses the conviction that personhood is a constitution of relationship through which, the aphorism that a person is a person through other persons (Mangaliso, 2001; Hoffmann & Metz, 2017). Teranga, the Senegalese concept denotes an ethic of welcome through which the stranger with the highest courtesies reserved for kin. As for Ujamaa, with Julius Nyerere's postindependence for Tanzania enlarges family obligation into a collective social organization (Nyerere, 1968). These traditions in reality emerge from distinct contexts but possess the same shared premise which is reciprocity and care for public goods with implications of states. This article sheds light in ways which such indigenous ethical traditions transcend from the register of culture to the register of regional governance. ECOWAS and AU are described in common as instruments of African-led regional integration where, the founding texts on free movement stipulate a shared continental identity (UNU-CRIS, 2024). As for the European Union, it advances a long-studied prototype of a bloc which confers as a normative actor and manages a restrictive approach to migration (Manners, 2002, Okabe, 2026).

The reading of these institutions in all angles clarifies that African hospitality ethics enlighten regional practice and the effects to them according to language treaty and interstate bargaining. In this study, two theoretical traditions lead the discussion. One the one hand, Constructivism stipulates that regional orders are constituted through shared norms and identities. Through this factor, the bloc becomes a community whose members

recognize obligations of each one throughout repeated normative interaction (Wendt, 1992, 1999). On the other hand, Normative Power Theory advances this view by demanding in what precedent blocs project values beyond their borders and whether practice is faithful to declared principle. (Manners, 2002). Both theories are important as hospitality norms are social rather than material, whether it is Ubuntu, Teranga or Ujaama they operate in governance but the dependence is formally minimal in a legal angle. However, states and citizens continue to perceive these norms as binding and encoded into administrative practice and protocols.

Cultural Foundations and Regional Identity

Constructivist thinkers see regional identity as built and factual than discovered, which is produced through accumulated shared practice (Wendt, 1999). In West Africa, this factor includes hospitality norms that forwent colonial partition and that regional organizations consider it as part of their founding rationale. Ratified in 1979, the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement has served to decolonize the borders that did not bear any reference to precolonial social ties (Adepoju et al., 2010). Ubuntu conceives a similar one but a distinctive contribution. Scholars who worked on migration and diaspora depicted it as an ethic of collective responsibility which refers to how African migrants understand obligations to kin and other distant strangers with common heritage (Adegbile et al., 2025; Hoffmann & Metz, 2017). Generally, when Ubuntu introduces discussions of regional governance and marks a resource for refugee protection instead of a codified legal principle. This is a central call that treats displaced persons as members of extended moral community (Mangaliso, 2001). As for Ujamaa, extends a self-reliance concept that comes across with AU aspirations toward economic and social integration. However, any of these traditions were not destinated as tools of interstate diplomacy but their consideration into regional governance is perceived as contested process of norm diffusion through which cultural resources are sometimes diluted in the act of local practice into language treaty (UNI-CRIS, 2004).

Hospitality Norms within ECOWAS and African Union Instruments

There is a profound measure in the codification of free movement as a legal right. The 1979 protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishments are ambitious mobility regimes outside Europe (Adepoju et al., 2010). Some scholars interpreted the protocol as institutional expression of a regional ethic of welcome rather than an economic instrument (Prokoph et at., 2023). The free movement constitutes as huge issue of restoring the condition of precolonial circulation among people whose language, trade networks, kinship and colonial interrupted boundaries. The African Union pursed a parallel project through its Free Movement Protocol promoted by the AU Economic, Social and Cultural Council through national dialogues which intended to build support for ratification (African Union, 2023). The dialogue in fact, structures free movement as a solid element to a broader Pan-African identity. The AU's long standing refugee foundations have been perceived as encoding a hospitality ethic that exceeding, in comparison to international instruments in generosity to the benefit of people fleeing in conflicts (Adegbile et al., 2025). Despite the sluggishness of the ratification and the ECOWAS pattern in which normative commitment coexists through securitized border practice at the continental scale.

The European Union and the Limits of Normative Power

The European Union provides a meaningful comparison as it accorded a normative power in which their external relations are driven by values such as human rights and solidarity (Manners, 2002). Theoretically, it claims consistency between declared values and practice and migration policy is an instance of that consistency. Scholars committed to examining the 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum moved from procedural neutrality to transactional diplomacy in which cooperation with third countries on migration control is bargained alongside other foreign policy interests (Obake, 2026). This transition triggered a debate whether the EU can be described as normative power in the migration domain. Despite the increasing number of humanitarian language displacement that characterized EU discourse on asylum, more importantly the externalization arrangements with African transit states (Okabe, 2026). In opposition to ECOWAS and AU instruments which struggle underenforcement of an extensive normative engagement, meanwhile the EU experience advances a related tensions in which formal commitments coexist with practice if consistency is applied. The normative authority of ECOWAS and AU is derived in aspiration from an indigenous ethic of

welcome which predates the institutions, whereas the EU's claims remain on liberal internationalist term except a comparable precolonial tradition of hospitality toward the stranger.

Tensions between Indigenous Ethics and Bureaucratic Institutionalization

A structures tensions resorts to all three blocks. Regional organizations function through treaty text, interstate negotiation and administrative procedure, whereas Teranga, Ubuntu and Ujamaa advanced in contexts where issues are direct and demonstrate reciprocity and communal accountability. They are translated a register where hospitality and solidarity depend on state capacity and political determination instead of social sanctions nourish the norm in its original setting (Adegbile et al., 2025; UNU-CRIS, 2024). National governments privilege discretion to execute free movement commitments, whereas discretion practiced in ways that prioritize domestic anxieties over labor competition and security above continental hospitality (Prokoph et al., 2023). Ubuntu scholarship on the diaspora conducted a study to demonstrate in what precedent migrants continue to feel bound by obligations of solidarity when governments provide a little institutional recognition of them (Adegbile et al., 2025). This instrumentalization in which hospitality concepts are rhetorically brought into existence without corresponding action in implementation, a way that led ECOWAS scholars to predict uncritical replication of European integration models for mobility systems grounded in West African realities (UNU-CRIS, 2024)

CONCLUSION

African philosophies such as Ubuntu, Teranga and Ujamaa cannot be considered as marginal cultural curiosities but normative resources that formalize free movement and refugee structure of ECOWAS and the African Union. The proof of that formality lays on constructivism where the representation of regional identity construction asserts against colonial borders. In comparison to the normative theory thought in which the EU demonstrate that no bloc, under all circumstances must declare principle and administered practice which is different from other blocs.

Studying African epistemological traditions in the field of regional integration reorients the analytical commencement of certain important factors, where the European integration provides the guide against which alternative regionalisms should be systematic (UNU-CRIS, 2024). Fundamentally, African hospitality norms are the reflection of societies where the stranger's welcome is a routing obligation of political community.

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