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AFRICAN SPECIAL ENVOYS IN PRACTICE: A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR STUDYING COMPLEX DIPLOMATIC INTERVENTIONS

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Cover:
Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security of the Chairperson of the African Union Commision, Bineta Diop at Mogadishu's Aden Adde airport in Somalia on November 25, 2014 .
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Why are African Special Envoys important? And how should we study them? African Special Envoys are a growing, yet understudied phenomenon in African peacemaking. They are the most frequent form of a regional diplomatic intervention by the African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to bring peace and stability in regions continually plagued by conflict, such as the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes. Special Envoys are also at the forefront of implementing "African solutions to African problems" as alternatives to foreign interventions in African conflicts. This makes them important to partner governments and multilateral institutions that wish to support African peace processes. However, efforts to investigate how they carry out their interventions in practice, as well as the specific social, institutional, and contextual factors and conditions that shape what they do in the field, have not kept pace with their prevalence and diplomatic relevance. In the broader peace and conflict literature, African Special Envoys have received less attention than their Western counterparts. Meanwhile, research on African peacemaking and the implementation of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) often has an institutionalist bias, which impedes the recognition of African Special Envoys as a discrete field of inquiry.

Consequently, our understanding of these interventions is beset by an unresolved paradox: they are usually complex, politicised, and fraught with contradictions and ambiguities. Yet our renditions of them are limited to official, frequently redacted accounts, and studies that underemphasise them as socially constructed phenomena encompassing diverse human interactions and important everyday activities. To address the downplaying of the everyday routines and activities involved in executing peace interventions, it is necessary to understand both the implicit and explicit processes that underpin how they are dynamically reshaped, negotiated, and made sense of in the field. This cannot be achieved simply by correlating the outcome of an envoy's mission to the mandate that they were assigned. It requires systematic research into the actual practices, politics, and agencies of those involved in implementing peace interventions, more broadly.

I propose undertaking research on African peace interventions by integrating "practice thinking" into ethnographic techniques, which prioritises emic ("insider") perspectives and delineates the practices that enact and give meaning to an intervention. This would provide additional insight into the intervention's structural conditions, as well as the envoys' perspectives and experiences during its implementation, given that actions are influenced by people's unique perceptions of reality. In the process, I would focus on the everyday unfolding of these interventions by i) categorising and examining the relevant routines and practices involved; ii) engaging with the arenas in which interventions occur and are influenced by local, regional, and global actors; and iii) researching the specific sites where they acquire significance within their framing contexts and physical environments. This approach offers insights into the life worlds of African peace interventions, which are often characterised by discretionary implementation, improvisation, and contestation. It differs from prevailing institutionalist and norm-oriented explanations, by placing greater emphasis on the role of individuals in the practical execution of regional peace mandates, where ideas and knowledges are translated into socially meaningful activities. Therefore, this report has three relatively simple goals. The first is to illustrate the empirical relevance of the special envoy instrument for peace and conflict research by reflecting its diversity and use by various African regional organisations. The second is to present an overview of the current state of research on African Special Envoys, and how it can be enhanced by

examining their intervention practices at disaggregated levels. The third is to emphasise the value of infusing practice theory and ethnographic techniques, as a heuristic for doing empirical research into how African Special Envoys concretely carry out their interventions in the field.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past three years, the African Union (AU) and African Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have conducted more than half of their diplomatic interventions through former presidents and high-ranking diplomats (AU 2023; Amani Africa 2021; IPSS 2021). These high-level intervenors, (hereafter referred to as Special Envoys) appointed as special representatives, high representatives, mediators, and facilitators, are essential to African peace diplomacy in efforts to address the continent's cyclical and destructive conflicts. They will continue to implement future regional peace initiatives because African institutions insist on African ownership of peace processes. They prefer African peacemakers over foreigners, because they are closer to the conflicts and better understand African political, cultural, and security realities (Massey 2004; Khadiagala 2007; Juma 2013; Nathan 2017).

Special Envoys are also at the forefront of executing peace interventions that support "African solutions to African problems," which has become an established doctrine in conducting African peacemaking. It emerged from a desire for homegrown solutions, which was a direct response to the ineffectiveness of strategies formulated from outside Africa in improving the socio-economic and political circumstances of the continent.

However, as is customary with high-level diplomatic initiatives, the specific activities carried out are not made public. However, African Special Envoys merit scholarly attention due to their numerous tasks and responsibilities, which might extend beyond the often-broad mandates they are assigned. These include oftentimes discreet engagements via good offices and shuttle diplomacy, as well as direct conflict mediation, dialogue facilitation, ceasefire negotiation, and peace agreement implementation (AU 2012a: 6) They also operate in unique institutional and contextual environments that can either empower or constrain them.

In this report, I argue that the intervention practices of African Special Envoys should be studied as a distinct and empirically relevant subject within the field of peace and conflict studies. First, these "practices"—which can be defined as regular patterns, interactions, and routines of undertaking an intervention—are mostly concealed from the public. They do, however, have many ambiguities, paradoxes, and even successes that call for careful examination and reflection. Doing so would not only provide insights into how interventions work in real life. It could also serve as a guide for learning and policy development within African institutions who are gradually working to enhance their documentation. By focusing on "practices", researchers can conduct more detailed empirical studies on the life cycles of interventions, rather than relying solely on official accounts and secondary literature. This could help us address numerous unresolved questions about each intervention. They include the rationales and processes for selecting and appointing envoys, as well as the conceptualisation of their mandates. It also includes how envoys interiorise their roles, enter conflict theaters (Maundi et al. 2006), frame conflicts, and how they conceptualise and plan their interventions (Witt 2018: 7). We also know very little of the interactions of African Special Envoys with civil society actors, global powers, international organisations, and other Special Envoys from RECs involved in the same conflict, and how this affects their missions. We can inquire as to whether and how "practices" can pro-

vide a common language for studying the hidden aspects of peace interventions, as well as the most effective means for positive change.

Second, Special Envoys are ad hoc instruments of diplomacy. Sometimes the activities of envoys are not always fully institutionally embedded. We therefore need to understand their scope of agency and how they exercise it on behalf of their sending institutions. We often overlook the tremendous latitude and discretion Special Envoys have in tailoring regional mandates to local realities. As Witt (2018: 3–4) further explains, understanding how and to what extent this discretion is exercised requires empirical investigations into the implementation of these interventions and their local imprints through an engagement with their concrete activities, circumstances, and politics. Third, in the field of peace and conflict studies, research on African Special Envoys has lagged behind that of their Western counterparts. Given the disproportionate number of African-led diplomatic interventions on the African continent, dedicated studies about what African intervenors actually do in the field, as well as the specific social, institutional, and contextual conditions that influence them, are required to contribute to knowledge on how the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) is being implemented.

Finally, it is vital to prioritise the viewpoints of African practitioners when generating knowledge about how African peace diplomacy works. This is to prevent extraverted, or externally focused, research that, for instance, mainly adheres to Western theoretical expectations and concerns. Instead, we should build knowledge of African peace interventions based on the lived experiences and intellectual perspectives of African practitioners. A focus on practices could produce, novel and unadulterated accounts of peace initiatives from those in charge of carrying them out.

My inspiration for a "practices" oriented research of African interventions derives from a growing body of literature investigating peace interventions "from below," as well as micro-level analyses of practitioners' work routines. It emphasises the importance of scrutinising the actual agencies, interactions, and practices of peacemaking on the ground, as a counter-narrative to the widely held belief that it is a purely technical endeavour carried out by regional organisations (Witt 2018; Witt/ Khadiagala 2018; Herpolsheimer 2023). Scholars like Séverine Autesserre provide further inspiration. Her work makes a compelling case for looking into the "everyday politics" of external interventions, demonstrating how their knowledge bases, professional socialisation, and other practices are frequently disconnected from the actual reality of local conflicts (Autesserre 2014). I am also inspired by the "practice turn" in the social sciences, in which scholars use practice theory as an analytical perspective to study politics, diplomacy, negotiations, and social realities, by closely examining the daily activities and interactions of those involved (Schatzki et al. 2001; Reckwitz 2002). The "practices" discussed in this report are conceptualised as a collection of routines, performances, everyday actions, and interactions that are interconnected and result in specific outcomes (Adler/Pouliot 2011; Bueger 2014; Cornut 2015).

1.1 RESEARCH AND POLICY SIGNIFICANCE

Studying the intervention practices of African Special Envoys provides insights into how "African solutions" are conceived and executed, as well as understanding and addressing various fault lines. While the African solutions mantra is an important philosophical stance against foreign interference in African conflicts, certain African peace interventions ostensibly influenced by it have been contentious. They include those led by former presidents Thabo Mbeki in Zimbabwe (2008–2013), Blaise Compaoré in Côte d'Ivoire (2007), and Yoweri Museveni in Burundi (2016). In these countries, there was significant criticism from opposition parties and civil society actors, about the supposed "Africanness" of the conflict remedies proposed. Many people raised concerns regarding the potential for the concept to be misused in a way that could afford immunity to conflict actors, including government officials, regarding responsibility for atrocities and violations perpetrated during conflict periods (Akindès 2009; Apuuli 2012). The notion's subjectivity has also contributed to accusations that some envoys 'personalised' interventions by favouring conflict parties with whom they had amicable relations and privileging covert deals that resulted in counterproductive solutions (Aning/Atuobi 2012; Aeby 2017; Motsamai 2018; Bouka 2016; Bedzigui/Alusala 2016). There have been charges too that certain Special Envoys utilise the instrument mainly to improve their public image and diplomatic standing, rather than to help resolve recurring conflicts. These criticisms draw attention to the tool's potential misconceptions and shortcomings, as well as the tensions that arise when Special Envoys devise what they perceive to be "African" or "local" remedies and face pushback from the local population. The number of external actors intervening in African domestic conflicts has also increased dramatically in recent years. To understand present trends in African peace diplomacy requires an examination of how African Special Envoys conceptualise and implement "African solutions" to African crises while dealing with outsider influences and meddling.

The intervention practices of African Special Envoys are also politically relevant for multilateral organisations like the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), as well as individual donor countries supporting African peacebuilding efforts or seeking successful collaboration with African practitioners. Western actors, such as the EU, sponsor AU and RECs peacemaking initiatives through specialised Early Response Mechanisms, providing rapid finance for preventive diplomacy, mediation, fact-finding missions, and the activities of African Special Envoys (Mattheis et al. 2023: 14). Western governments, including Germany, also at times, contribute financial and technical support to African mediation efforts. They have their own envoys and high-ranking officials who seek collaboration with African intervenors. However, the complex nature of these undertakings, coupled with the competing interests of external actors in African crises, has resulted in charges that Western envoys are self-serving and partial outsiders. This has heightened the need to understand what works in the practical realm of African peacemaking and how to support it.

The primary concern for African regional organisations is how to improve "institutionalisation" of this currently ad hoc instrument, as a way to increase the coherence of efforts to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts (AU 2012a, c). There are no set blueprints of what an optimally 'institutionalised' intervention should look like. Nevertheless, certain trends have been found to have stymied some peace initiatives on the continent and might be rectifiable by means of a more efficient institutional

integration of the tool. They include the arbitrary appointments of some envoys, their subjective adherence to institutional procedures and regulations, and the unfettered discretion they can exert over a peace initiative, especially without adequate checks and balances (Motsamai 2017). The AU and RECs further agree that for peacemaking to be effective, efforts must be coherent, coordinated, and complementary, hence they developed principles and regulations for subsidiarity in crisis management. These are based on the premise that conflict resolution processes ought to be spearheaded by actors who are culturally, geopolitically, and/or strategically close to the situation in question (Amani Africa 2023: 13). However, evoking subsidiarity to govern the relationship between envoys from the RECs and the AU participating in the same peace process is a continuous difficulty. Conflicts often fall simultaneously within the peacemaking mandates of the AU and RECs creating a complex and fragile nexus characterised by tension, ambiguity and competition over which organisation should take the lead in executing peace initiatives (ACCORD 2009: 21–22). The AU and RECs have not adequately documented how subsidiarity is concretely invoked among themselves and their envoys. As a result, the term "subsidiarity" has become overused to describe hypothetical situations as opposed to those that have actually transpired (Amani Africa 2023: 13–14). An analysis of these interventions from the perspective of "practices" could be extremely useful in describing the actions taken by African practitioners when conflicts require the application subsidiarity between the AU and the RECs . The emphasis would be placed on the practical experiences of Special Envoys and AU and REC officials who have been deployed to the same conflicts. This could offer new insights into the delineation of roles and responsibilities to mitigate competition and discord among peacemaking entities, as well as help identify strategies to optimise resource utilisation in future peacemaking efforts.

Finally, civil society, which is commonly recognised as a beneficiary of peace interventions, stands to benefit from a better understanding of how regional peace initiatives are practically carried out, particularly when they are negotiated without their participation. Official accounts of peace interventions often differ from the perceptions of local people (Witt/Schnabel 2020; Chidume et al. 2021; Witt et al. 2024). However, to fully understand an intervention's outcome and implications, we must look beyond official narratives that typically leave out many concrete details about how it was "planned, enacted, negotiated, contested, and transformed by its environment" (Witt 2018:8). By researching these elements, civil society actors may be able to develop credible counternarratives that they can use to compel regional organisations to re-consider their diplomatic approaches to managing crises.

In this report, I argue that in order to deconstruct how peace interventions are concretely carried out, African Special Envoys and their intervention "practices" should be studied as a distinct subfield of African peacemaking. The report is divided into five sections. The first section defines what a Special Envoy is and how it evolved into a multilateral instrument. The second section discusses the evolution and use of the tool by the AU and RECs, notably the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The third section explores how African Special Envoys have been studied and points out gaps in the literature. The fourth proposes a field research agenda to investigating Special Envoys' intervention practices in the field. The final section presents the report's conclusion.

2. WHAT IS A SPECIAL ENVOY?

In international diplomatic practice, Special Envoys are "persons sent abroad to conduct diplomacy with a limited purpose for a limited time" (Berridge 1994: 103). The term comes from the long-standing practice of dispatching ad-hoc delegates to foreign political jurisdictions to carry out diplomatic duties, such as information sharing, negotiation, mediation, and representation (Berridge 1994: 102–103; Morini 2018: 550). Today, these political appointees are commonly former and active politicians and professional diplomats. But they can also be private individuals and technocrats (Berridge 1994: 103).

Special Envoys, unlike ambassadors or representatives of a permanent diplomatic mission, usually have a limited assignment in terms of time and scope. They are also theoretically district from "good offices", which is another common form of third-party involvement in conflicts. A third party, such as a state or a multilateral institution, provides "good offices" when they bring disputing parties together, either to initiate direct negotiations or to find other ways to resolve the dispute (Mensah 2009, 256–257; Day/Fong 2017). The slight difference between "good offices" and a Special Envoy is that the individual or entity providing "good offices" facilitates negotiations between disputing parties without actively participating in them. Conversely, a Special Envoy takes an active part in the negotiations.

The two instruments do, however, typically overlap. For example, many Special Envoys become formally involved in disputes after fulfilling "good offices" tasks.

2.1 SPECIAL ENVOYS APPOINTED BY GOVERNMENTS

Special Envoys made a spectacular resurgence in the twentieth century, coinciding with the growing importance of emerging powers in global governance and mounting threats to international peace and security. These actors are typically divided into two categories. The first category includes those appointed by national governments to advance their foreign policy goals or to show their interest in and commitment to a particular cause (Princeton/Beecroft 2014; Morin 2018). The United States (US) has dispatched such envoys to open diplomatic channels where none existed previously, as in Iran and North Korea; to separate dispute resolution from other aspects of its ongoing relations with conflict affected countries, as in Israel and Palestine (The Economist 2021); and to mediate in international conflicts, as exemplified by its in Special Envoys for the Horn of Africa. Since the 1990s, the United Kingdom (UK) has also sent numerous Special Envoys to countries and regions afflicted by political crises or wars, such as the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea (Morini 2018: 555). France has similarly dispatched Special Envoys and representatives to Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and the Sahel region, among others, to assist in addressing existing or looming crises. Most envoys function as mediators or observers in conflict situations. They can also work under the auspices of larger regional mandates.

African countries, especially dominant regional powers, have also employed Special Envoys to address high-stakes conflicts and advance their foreign policy interests. These were prevalent for various Kenyan administrations, especially from the 1980s, when President Daniel Arap Moi was eager to carve out the country's role as peacemaker in its troubled neighbourhood. Kenya has a long history of Special Envoys who have mediated conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia (Okoth 2008; Kahuria 2010; Affey 2011). In Nigeria, former military commanders, such as Abdulsalami Abubakar, were coaxed out of retirement to participate in high-profile diplomatic missions. Abubakar, Nigeria's military leader from 1998 to 1999 who oversaw the country's transition to civilian rule, was appointed by then President Olusegun Obasanjo as a Special Envoy to Liberia, Sudan, and the Darfur region. Kenya and Ethiopia replicated this trend within IGAD when they both appointed Special Envoys to the Assessment and Evaluation Commission of Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2008. Both Ethiopia and Kenya currently employ "peace envoys" with a wide range of responsibilities, including exerting diplomatic influence on regional matters and promoting their countries' positions on contentious issues. For example, in 2022, Kenyan President William Ruto appointed his predecessor, President Uhuru Kenyatta, as a peace envoy to neighbouring Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Two months later, the East African Community (EAC), which includes Kenya and the DRC, appointed him as a facilitator of political negotiations to help end the security crisis in the DRC's eastern region. Ethiopia has also dispatched peace envoys to strategic countries and international institutions, often in the midst of contentious conflicts and external developments that could escalate tensions with its neighbours.

2.2 SPECIAL ENVOYS APPOINTED BY MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS

The second category of envoys are those appointed by multilateral organisations or heads of their secretariats. Institutions dedicated to maintaining international peace and security, like the UN, have used this tool for decades, since its initial appointment of Count Folke Bernadotte as mediator in Palestine in 1948 (Franck 1995: 362–365). The UN has dispatched numerous diplomats, over the years to manage interstate and intra-state conflicts, including border and territorial disputes, constitutional and electoral crises, reunification negotiations, ceasefire negotiations (Franck 1995; UN 2011). Numerous "special and personal representatives, envoys, and advisers of the secretary-general" have been stationed around the globe, with a significant number being African figures. These include former President Olusegun Obasanjo, who served as a UN Special Envoy to the Great Lakes region in 2008 (UN 2011: 10). Haile Menkerios, an Eritrean diplomat, was appointed to Sudan and South Sudan in 2011; Said Djinnit, an Algerian diplomat, to the Great Lakes in 2014; and Hanna Serwaa Tetteh, a former Ghanaian minister of foreign affairs and co-facilitator of the High-Level Forum for the Revitalisation of the Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (2017–2018), was appointed as the UN Envoy to the Horn of Africa in 2022. These examples also highlight the custom of giving envoys expansive and hence, adaptable mandates to help tackle particular conflicts within a specified geographic area.

The UN has also appointed several special representatives of the secretary-general (SRSGs) with a regional focus. They include Ambassador Mohammed Chambas, ECOWAS' former secretary-gen-

eral, who led the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) from 2014 to 2021. Other SRSGs serve in similar roles, focusing on individual countries, such as those active in Sudan, Mali, the DRC, the CAR, Libya, and Western Sahara. However, the UN's mediation role has been diminishing over time as regional and subregional organisations increasingly assume the lead in resolving African disputes (Benomar 2023). This also explains the Special Envoy tool's increasing popularity and use among African organisations.

Within the EU, it is also common to consolidate envoys' responsibilities to cover both countries and regions. The EU deployed its first Special Representatives (EUSRs) in 1996 to engage in conflict resolution efforts on its behalf, gather information about ongoing conflicts and assist it in developing a common policy toward a given country or region (Tolksdorf 2015: 70). EUSRs are currently appointed by the EU Council "on a recommendation from the High Representative", presently Josep Borrell, and under whose authority they formally operate (Council of the EU 2021). The EU currently has nine EUSRs responsible for advancing EU policies and interests in certain nations and regions, as well as participating in initiatives that promote stability, peace, and the rule of law (Council of the EU 2021). There are just two for the African continent: EUSRs for the Horn of Africa and the Sahel (Council of the EU 2021). Most of the EUSRs are diplomats and foreign policy experts, rather than past or current political figures.

Special Envoys from l'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), also known as "La Francophonie", are also active in Africa. The OIF is an international organisation of 88 member countries and territories where French is the primary language, or there is a strong cultural link to France (La Francophonie, 2024). Although the OIF is still predominately viewed as the continuance of France's foreign policy in its former colonies (Clavaron 2020), its mandate also encompasses peace diplomacy as way of addressing political turbulences in its member states. Over the years, the OIF's Secretary General has appointed Special Envoys to specific countries and regions embroiled in crises. For instance, former Swiss Confederation President Pascal Couchepin was appointed for the Great Lakes, while Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, the former UN SRSG for West Africa, was assigned to Chad. In 2015, former Senegalese foreign minister Cheikh Tidiane Gadio was dispatched to Mali. This was after peace talks between the Malian government and the rebels failed, a period in which France's military Operation Serval evolved into Operation Barkhane, the largest external counterterrorism force at the time in the Sahel (APA News, September 21, 2020).

3. EMPIRICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ACTIVITIES OF AFRICAN SPECIAL ENVOYS

In this section, I show that multilateral envoy-ship is a historically significant African phenomenon rather than an exclusively European trade. I discuss the history and use of the Special Envoy instrument by the AU, and how RECs have used it. The AU is the largest multilateral organisation outside of the UN system. It plays an important role in responding to conflicts across the continent through its continent-wide peace and security architecture, which includes RECs as primary implementors. All RECs have a mandate to promote peace and security. They have made significant contributions

to democratisation and conflict resolution through high-level interventions spearheaded by Special Envoys. While this is the case, I highlight that the AU and RECs employ Special Envoys in efforts to resolve conflicts according to quite distinct logics and procedures. Because the tool was originally designed as an ad hoc instrument, the institutional embedding of the envoys' operations is extremely varied, and has led to a search for more institutionally ingrained practices.

3.1 THE EVOLUTION OF OAU SPECIAL ENVOYS

The AU's use of Special Envoys has emerged from decades of diplomatic interventions in African conflicts by its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The initiatives undertaken included ad hoc committees comprising selected African presidents or their representatives; summit mediations in which presidents not involved in a specific conflict engaged in mediating it with the approval of the OAU; and the good offices of member states, which were extended either voluntarily or in response to requests from countries in conflict (ACCORD/AU 2014: 11). Following this, a pattern developed in the 1980s whereby civil disputes were resolved via state-led mediation, specifically with the participation of incumbent presidents and "elder statesmen", who were typically former presidents (Khadiagala 2007, 2018). The interventions in question brought about significant transformations in the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention (Amoo/Zartman 1992; Munyangwa/Vogt 2000). Postcolonial conflict management mechanisms were predominantly state-centric, in response to the OAU's principles of territorial sovereignty and non-intervention, which held sway for nearly three decades (Amoo/Zartman 1992; Khadiagala 2018; Murithi 2009; Ani 2016). In the 1960s and 1970s, the OAU made several concessions regarding the establishment of mediation and conciliation structures to address interstate issues. For example, in 1978, it formed an ad hoc Wise Men's Committee to resolve the conflict that had erupted in 1976 between Morocco and the Polisario Front as a result of Spain's withdrawal from Morocco, and the latter's subsequent occupation of Western Sahara (Munyangwa/Vogt 2000: 6). It also attempted to resolve border conflicts through its heads of state, including those between Algeria and Morocco, Mali, and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Somalia and Kenya, and Ethiopia and Somalia (Touval 1967; Muleli 1970; Munyangwa/Vogt 2000).

However, the OAU's conflict management mandate and institutions were insufficient to address the intrastate conflicts that engulfed Africa from the 1980s onwards, beginning with Uganda's civil war and escalating into the 1990s with conflicts in Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, the DRC, Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan. The 1985 intervention by then Kenyan president Daniel arap Moi aimed at ending the Ugandan civil war provided the groundwork for these norm shifts, outlining the limits for African intervenors in African conflicts (Khadiagala 2007). But the OAU saw the Ugandan civil war as a domestic problem, due to its rigorous adherence to the principle of non-interference. Moi, on the other hand, used his position to summon the disputants – the National Resistance Army led by Yoweri Museveni and the interim administration of General Tito Okello – to Nairobi for three months of talks aimed at creating a power-sharing agreement. However, the talks resulted in a hastily prepared pact that Museveni broke when he seized power in January 1986 (Khadiagala 2007: 49; Makumi 1994: 272–276). The Nairobi agreement was problematic because of the power imbalance between the parties. However, its failure was aggravated in part by Moi's lack of authority and credibility as a

mediator. This lesson became crucial in the search for more credible and legitimate African high-level intervenors (Khadiagala 2007: 49).

Another case that dovetailed with the emerging norms of non-indifference and diplomatic intervention was Tanzania's leading of the 1992/3 negotiations towards ending the Rwandan civil war between the government of Juvenal Habyarimana and the rebels of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (Khadiagala 2007). Building on its wider credibility as a model of ethnic harmony in East Africa, the Tanzanian government delegated the mediation to a team of officials in its foreign affairs ministry, who oversaw the mediation undistracted by competing state tasks. This contrasted sharply with presidential mediations. Even though the mediation was conducted professionally and in ways that improved on Moi's mediation in Uganda (Khadiagala 2007: 52), the Arusha Accords reached in August 1993 did not prevent Rwanda from falling victim to the genocide that began in April 1994. However, Kenya and Tanzania's peacekeeping efforts in their neighbourhoods contributed to pressures on the OAU to change its non-intervention norms, beginning with the OAU's decision in Cairo in June 1993 to establish a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, and Prevention (Munyangwa/ Vogt 2000; Mukisa 1997).

The Cairo Mechanism's primary goal was to enable the OAU secretary-general to be more proactive in conflict prevention, management, and resolution. It required him to "consult with authorities in their countries of origin and eminent African personalities" when intervening in conflict situations. He may use "other appropriate expertise, deploy Special Envoys or special representatives, and dispatch fact-finding teams to conflict areas as needed" (OAU 1993). This was put to the test when the OAU's then secretary-general, Dr Salim Ahmed Salim, intervened directly in the Burundi conflict in 1993 and 1994, attempting to rebuild the democratic institutions that had crumbled following the assassination of a newly elected president (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue 2011: 9; Ould-Abdallah 2000). Dr Salim focused on assisting the UN SRSG, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, and paved the way for the OAU to establish a field presence in Burundi (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue 2011: 9).

From 1995 to November 1999, the OAU process was led by Tanzania and its former president, Julius Nyerere, with collaboration between the OAU's Special Envoy to Burundi, Mamadou Bah, and the UN SRSG Berhanu Dinka (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue 2011: 18–19). The OAU dispatched two military missions to Burundi and helped establish the Great Lakes Regional Initiative for Peace in Burundi (GLRIPB), which provided political and coordination assistance to the Burundi peace process. The OAU is said to have provided Nyerere with some legal and political support (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue 2011: 23–24). But he preferred to work independently from the OAU's political and bureaucratic institutions and had even renounced his title as an envoy, preferring that of facilitator (Humanitarian Dialogue 2011: 23). Many other African Special Envoys have favoured this approach, which render their positions more "free-flowing" and institutionally unconstrained, allowing them to play their roles in far more flexible ways. From 1999 to 2009, and following Nyerere's death, South Africa led the process when the OAU appointed the former South African president Nelson Mandela as chief facilitator through the GLRIPB (Nhlapo 2015: 2).

Envoys were also dispatched to address secessionist and constitutional crises, such as the one in the Comoros in 1997. Ambassador Pierre Yere, the Ivorian Permanent Representative at the OAU and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), was appointed as the OAU Secretary General's first Special Envoy (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue 2011; Diouf 2017). Yere was explicitly instructed to reject any method of partitioning the Comoros Islands, thereby upholding the tenets of territorial integrity as outlined in the OAU Charter (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue 2011: 38). This prerequisite for dialogue caused discord between the OAU and certain Comorian factions. As a result, the engagement had a difficult transition, from extensive shuttle diplomacy to targeted sanctions and a military intervention in 2008 (Ahamed 2020).

3.2 AU SPECIAL ENVOYS

The AU succeeded the OAU in 2002. The Cairo Mechanism was further solidified in the 2002 AU Constitutive Act and the Protocol establishing the Peace and Security Council (PSC), with the principles of non-indifference and local ownership informing diverse peacebuilding and diplomatic efforts in Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Sudan, Togo, and Zimbabwe (Adebajo 2005; Vines 2013; Otunnu/Exebio 2014). The PSC Protocol empowers the Chairperson of the AU Commission to use good offices on his or her own initiative or at the request of the PSC, to prevent potential conflicts, resolve actual conflicts, and promote peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. They can do so personally or through Special Envoys, special representatives, the Panel of the Wise, or Regional Mechanisms (AU 2002, Article 10). Envoys can also be selected from regional networks of women mediators, such as Femwise-Africa, to counteract a traditionally male-dominated sector (ACCORD 2018). The PSC Protocol further defines five types of peacemaking arrangements to be used at the request of the AU Assembly, the PSC, or the Chair of the AU Commission. They include ad hoc mediation committees comprising an individual state or a group of states and high-level panels, as shown in Table 1.

Various Chairpersons of the AU Commission have designated a diverse range of Special Envoys, high representatives, and ad hoc committees to help address conflicts or advance specific peace initiatives throughout the continent, in the last 20 years. These processes involve an array of individuals, whose potential to advance peace processes is reinforced by their prior leadership experience and ability to harness resources at the national, regional, and international levels. Some serve as traditional mediators, while others engage in preventive diplomacy, and the development and strengthening of institutions and mechanisms that support ongoing peacebuilding processes. They can be grouped into five categories.

The first group comprises individuals assigned the distinctive title of 'Special Envoy'. This has included the former Mozambican president Joaquim Chissano, appointed in 2014 to bolster AU efforts to resolve the drawn-out Sahrawi crisis in Western Sahara. Mohamed El-Hacen Ould Lebatt oversaw negotiations between Ethiopia and Sudan from 2019 to 2021 as the principal strategic adviser to the AU Commission Chairperson and a Special Envoy to Sudan.

Table 1: AU mediation and peacemaking tools, 2013-2024

Individuals			Bodies	
Special Envoys	**High Representatives**	**Special Representatives**	**High-Level Ad-hoc Committees**	**High-Level Panels**
Western Sahara Frm. Pres. Chissano (2014-2022)	Mali & the Sahel Frm. Pres. Pierre Buyoya (2013-2020) Maman Sambo Sidikou (2021-date)	Great Lakes	South Sudan (2015)	Sudan (2024)
Libya Frm. Pres. Kikwete (2016-2022)	Silencing the Guns Ramtane Lamamra (2017-2020), Mohamed Chambas (2023)	DRC	Libya (2009)	Ethiopia (2021)
Sudan, Ethiopia Border Conflict Mohamed El-Hacen Ould Lebatt (2021-date)	Darfur (AU-UN Joint SR) Martin Uhomoibhi (2015-2020)	Central African Rebublic		Egypt (2013-2014)
Lord Resistance Army (LRA) Jackson Kiprono Tuwei (2014-2020)	DRC National Dialogue Edem Kodjo (2016-2020)	Somalia		Sudan & South Sudan (2009)
Youth Aya Chebbi (2018-2021), Chido Cleo Mpemba (2022-date)	AU-EU Relations Post 2020 Carlos Lopes (2018-2020)	South Sudan		
Women Peace & Security Bineta Diop (2014-date)	Infrastructure Development Frm. PM. Raila Odinga (2018-2022)	Libya		
Tunisia Pedro Pires (2013-2015)	The Horn of Africa Frm. Pres. Olusegen Obasanjo (2021-date)	Liberia & Sierra Leone		
Covid 19 (2020-2022) Ngozi Okonyo-Iweala, Donald Kaberuka, Tidjane Thiam, Trevor Manuel, Abderramahne Benkahtta	Sudan/South Sudan – AUHIP Frm. Pres. Thabo Mbeki (2008-2022)	Madagascar		
	South Sudan Frm. Pres. Alpha Oumar Konare (2015-2022)	South Kordofan & Blue Nil State		
	Somali John Mahama (2021)	Côte d'Ivoire		
	The AU Peace Fund Donald Kaberuka (2016-2022)	South Sudan		
		Sudan		
		Burundi		
		Chad		
		Counter-Terrorism Cooperation		

Source: Compiled by the author from AU and media sources.

The second group of intervenors is high representatives (HR), who carry out AU initiatives in certain countries and regions. Notable examples include former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo's appointment for the Horn of Africa in August 2021, with a broad mandate "to advance peace, security, stability, and political dialogue" in that region (AU 2021). Former President Obasanjo led the AU's diplomatic initiative to address the civil war in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, beginning in 2021. It resulted in a peace deal between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in November 2022. The negotiations were held under the auspices of an AU "High-level Panel in Ethiopia", which involved two other prominent high-level envoys: former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta and Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, South Africa's former deputy president and a member of the AU's Panel of the Wise. Dr Mlambo-Ngcuka's inclusion in the Ethiopia High-level Panel was especially laudable, considering that the majority of African high-level intervenors are male.

Other high representatives include the former Malian president Alpha Konaré, appointed in 2015 to strengthen the IGAD mediation in South Sudan. Former Tanzanian president Jakaya Kikwete was appointed in 2016 to help promote a successful political transition in Libya, and help support the implementation of the 2015 Libya Political Agreement brokered by the UN. In 2021, former ministers Maman Sidikou and Basile Ikouebe were appointed in similar capacities to Mali, the Sahel and Chad. High representatives can also be given thematic mandates that lack explicit geographic delineations. To illustrate, in 2018, former AU Commissioner for Peace and Security Ramtane Lamamra was designated as its High Representative for Silencing the Guns in Africa. He then served as the Head of the AU Election Monitoring Mission to Madagascar in November the same year. A month later, he was dispatched to Madagascar as the AU's Special Envoy to help mediate a standoff between the Malagasy government and the opposition. Lamamra has subsequently been replaced by Ambassador Chambas, who also leads the AU's diplomatic initiative in Sudan, to put an end to the country's civil conflict, which has been waging since April 2023. Ambassador Chambas presides over a three-member AU high-level panel in Sudan, with former Ugandan vice president Dr Speciosa Wandira-Kazibwe and Ambassador Francisco Madeira, the Head of AMISOM/ATMIS, and a former Special Representative of the Chairperson of the AU Commission (SRCC) in Somalia as the other members.

SRCCs are another group of intervenors who are country-based and work through liaison offices. Former ministers Barbosa Pequeno, Hawa Youssouf, Josephine Kala and Wahira Ayari, who were appointed in 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2016 respectively, head the AU liaison offices in São Tomé and Príncipe, Madagascar, Côte d'Ivoire and Libya. Michele Ntab and former ambassadors Matias Matondo, Mohamed Belaiche and Joram Biswaro serve as liaison officers in the DRC, CAR, Republic of Sudan, and South Sudan.

High-level intervenors can also be grouped together in high-level ad hoc committees and panels, which are typically made up of current or former heads of state. High-level ad hoc committees are commonly established to provide political support to fragile political processes, such as those created after the Libyan civil war in 2011 and the disputed elections in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010 (Apuuli 2012; Nmaju 2013; Motsamai 2017: 4). In its inception in 2011, the AU High-Level Ad Hoc Committee for Libya comprised the presidents of Mali, Mauritania, the Republic of Congo, South Africa, and Uganda. It was dormant for some time and got resurrected in 2016, when the prime minister of Ethiopia and

the presidents of the DRC, South Africa, Mauritania, Gabon and Niger joined it. Its membership was expanded again in 2019 to include the presidents of Libya's neighbours, Algeria, Chad, Egypt, Sudan, and Tunisia. The following year, the Libyan high-level committee established a contact group chaired by the Republic of Congo to provide political leadership and improve coordination of international efforts in the search for a solution to the Libyan conflict. Generally, the work of high-level panels is quite complex and requires a high degree of coordination among its members. High level panels also temporary structures with highly obscure ways of working. Their contributions and impacts are frequently hard to pin down (Van Wyk 2016: 69).

High-level panels, like ad hoc committees, are made up of high-ranking diplomats and former presidents (rather than current ones), with the perceived leverage to advance peacemaking initiatives. As previously mentioned, the most recent is the AU High-Level Panel on Sudan constituted in 2024, chaired by Ambassador Chambas who concurrently serves as the AU High Representative for Silencing the Guns. Other previous examples include the 2008 High-Level Panel on Darfur (AUPD) consisting of former President Mbeki, the former Burundian president Pierre Buyoya, and the former Nigerian president Abdulsalami Abubakar, which lasted until October 2009. The AUPD was also a pioneer in bringing together African and international mediation efforts. It began its operations after the UN and the AU jointly appointed former Burkina Faso minister of national security, Djibril Bassole, as the UN-AU Joint Chief Mediator in Darfur; although, coordination between the two organisations was frequently strained (Khadiagala 2014; Sudan Tribune 2011).

In 2009, drawing on the AUPD, the AU PSC formed the Sudan High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP), making it one of the longest-running AU panels. It facilitated the implementation of the AUPD's recommendations and Sudan's 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Presidents Mbeki, Pierre Buyoya and Abdulsalami Abubakar presided once more. The panel's mandate was extended numerous times before it was renamed the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel for Sudan and South Sudan in 2012 (AU 2013). Its remit was broadened following South Sudan's secession in 2011, to encompass promoting peaceful relations between the two governments and mediating internal conflicts in South Sudan. It has a revised and broader mandate to "create a regional and holistic solution to the challenges of peace, security, stability, and development in the Horn of Africa" (AU 2013). Another example is the 2013–2014 High-Level Panel for Egypt, which was presided over by Alpha Oumar Konaré. It included the participation of former Botswana president Festus Mogae and the former Djibouti prime minister Dileita Mohamed Dileita. Its mandate was wide-ranging too and included "promoting constructive political dialogue in Egypt as part of national reconciliation as well as between the Egyptian government, and Gulf region countries" (Van Wyk 2016: 57–69). As with many earlier panels, not much is known about how it actually operated or how much of a contribution it made to Egypt's post-Arab-Spring transition.

3.3 IGAD SPECIAL ENVOYS

In the Horn of Africa, intra-state and inter-state conflicts in have been intricately intertwined. They produced a unique system of regional peace diplomacy where a considerable portion of the Special

Envoys appointed by IGAD heads of state to mediate these conflicts had previously served as peace envoys or ambassadors to the country in question. The close historical ties and political, social, and personal networks among countries in the Horn of Africa not only account for this dynamic, but also for the significant influence of incumbent presidents over the domestic affairs of crisis-stricken neighbours. In Sudan, where IGAD ran a high-profile mediation effort for close to two decades, neighbouring countries actively intervened through diplomatic initiatives led by incumbent presidents. They established the IGAD Standing Committee on Peace in Sudan, chaired by Daniel arap Moi, with the presidents of Ethiopia (Meles Zenawi), Eritrea (Isaias Afewerki) and Uganda (Yoweri Museveni) as additional members. Most of its work was carried out by a ministerial committee of representatives of the four countries, with Moi presiding over its activities. Moi also appointed General Lazaro Sumbeiywo, who had previously served as Kenya's Special Envoy to the IGAD-led Sudanese peace process (1997/8), and its mediator from 2001 to 2005 (Simmons/Dixon 2006: 22). IGAD appointed the Ethiopian ambassador Lissane Yohannes as an additional envoy in 2000, to provide political and technical assistance to the peace process. It then established an office for its Special Envoy to Sudan. These efforts paved the way for Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed in 2005.

When a civil war broke out in newly independent South Sudan in December 2013, IGAD appointed three Special Envoys to lead the mediation efforts: Sudanese General Mohammed El Dhabi, Ethiopian Ambassador Seyoum Mesfin, and Kenyan General Lazaro Sumbeiywo. The three envoys came from the three frontline countries affected by and with influence over the conflict. They also knew the parties personally because they were directly involved in the CPA negotiations (IGAD 2019: 8–9). The peace process went through multiple rounds of talks and intermediary agreements, in addition to coordination challenges and disputes of hierarchy among the three envoys. IGAD highlights these in a rarely published evaluation of the peace process (IGAD 2019). It attributes some of the challenges to ambiguities in the mediation mandate, stating that: "...there was no formal delegation of authority or hierarchy among the Special Envoys; coordinating schedules was complicated by the presence of three distinguished individuals; and leadership was deficient when one envoy or the other and their senior advisers were absent" (IGAD 2019: 10–11).

To address some of these problems, IGAD later established the Office of Special Envoys for South Sudan in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It supported negotiations that ended in August 2015 when the parties signed the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS). The latter's implementation was tenuous, the peace was short-lived, and South Sudan relapsed into conflict in 2017 (Apuuli 2015; Vertin 2018). This time, IGAD switched from a multi-envoy model to a single envoy in order to increase the cohesiveness and coordination of the peace process, despite the risk of reducing regional buy-in and the initiative's sources of leverage. Ambassador Ismal Wais was appointed as the IGAD Special Envoy in charge of the negotiations that produced the revitalized ARCSS in September 2018, as well as its subsequent implementation. This is a position he still held at the time of writing.

IGAD has also dispatched former Sudanese and Kenyan ambassadors to Somalia as Special Envoys since the early 2000s. They have served as the organisation's focal point in addressing crises

in Somalia. Ali Abd-al-Rahman al-Numayri was appointed to this position in 2001, and Ambassadors Mohamed Abdi Affey and Mohamed Ali Guyo were appointed in 2019 and 2022, respectively. Presently, Ambassador Guyo serves as the IGAD Special Envoy for Somalia, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. He also served as former President Kenyatta's technical adviser during the AU-led peace talks to address the war in Tigray, indicating an effort to improve coordination between the AU and IGAD in peace mediation. Currently, what distinguishes IGAD from other RECs is the institutional structure of its Special Envoy tool. IGAD Special Envoys are permanent employees of the organisation, with specialised offices in or near the conflicts for which they are responsible. They also received far more consistent mediation support from the IGAD Secretariat during peace processes. What is also discernible is the "downscaling" of the number of envoys involved in a single conflict. While individual countries continue to use bilateral peace envoys regionally, IGAD's custom of allocating multiple envoys to a single conflict is giving way to the deployment of a single envoy.

3.4 ECOWAS SPECIAL ENVOYS

ECOWAS has a practice of designating former and current presidents as facilitators, mediators and Special Envoys, to tackle regional disputes, often in conjunction with military interventions. The revised 1993 ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which urged member states to "undertake work to safeguard and consolidate relations conducive to maintaining peace, stability and security within the region", marked the beginning of its diplomatic interventions. In the Protocol, ECOWAS countries pledged to address regional conflicts through employing "good offices, conciliation, mediation, and other peaceful dispute resolution methods"(Odigie 2016). But this emphasis coincided with ECOWAS's aggressive military interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the early 1990s. Later in the decade when conflicts erupted in Guinea, Guinea Bissau, and Côte d'Ivoire, ECOWAS, led by Nigeria, combined preventive diplomacy, mediation, and peacekeeping efforts to address them. As a measure to scale down military interventions and strengthen its peace and security architecture, ECOWAS adopted the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security, as well as the supplementary 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (Aning/Atuobi 2012; Odigie 2016). The protocol also established the ECOWAS Council of the Wise (previously the Council of Elders, formed in 1999) as a vital mediation and diplomacy instrument, although it remained inactive in many of ECOWAS's conflicts.

Instead, Special Envoys, including both current and former presidents, have been prominent. Former Nigerian President Obasanjo, and other Nigerian diplomats have served as ECOWAS Special Envoys on many occasions. This could be explained by Nigeria's influence and diplomatic clout within ECOWAS. It can also be linked to Nigeria's prior and considerable military and diplomatic involvement regionally, specifically in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Togo, in addition to the Mano River dispute between Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. In 2011, Obasanjo was dispatched to Côte d'Ivoire in an effort to help resolve the crisis stemming from a disputed presidential election. He assumed a similar role in 2020, leading the ECOWAS mediation mission in Mali following its military coup. Other Nigerian diplomats who have served as ECOWAS Special Envoys include Mai Manga Bukar, who was assigned to Togo in 2007 to support the transitional national unity government after a violent and difficult

post-authoritarian transition, and Jonathan Oluwole-Coker, who was deployed to Côte d'Ivoire in 1999 following the country's military coup.

Blaise Compaoré, Burkina Faso's president for 27 years, has also featured prominently as an ECOWAS Special Envoy. Reportedly, he often used his decision-making authority as chair of the ECOWAS Authority to influence his own appointment. In 2006, he served as the ECOWAS Mediator for the Inter-Togolese Dialogue. In 2007, he brokered the peace agreement signed by the Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo and the New Forces leader Guillaume Soro in Côte d'Ivoire; and in 2012, he was the ECOWAS Mediator for Mali, facilitating negotiations for a transition to constitutional rule following a coup d'état that overthrew President Amadou Toumani Toure's government (ECOWAS Commission 2023: 35). While these missions were crowned with success, they also sparked debates and controversy, with many observers suspecting that his success was due to more than just good mediation skills. For example, Amy Niang's research into Compaoré's role as a peace broker and mediator during the Ivorian conflict sheds insight into the infrastructure that enabled him to negotiate and cut deals (Niang 2016). She described his ability to mobilise his political resources within the regional Françafrique network, as well as his collaboration with "a team of advance men, which included démarcheurs, infiltrators, informants, and various hommes-de-main," the majority of whom were unknown to the general public and worked in the shadows (Niang 2016: 15). These observations also show that interventions undertaken outside of formal institutional parameters, involving presumably arcane kinds of practices might (equally) result in solid agreements.

More recent ECOWAS envoy appointments have sought to mediate coup transitions, following a series of unconstitutional changes of government in the ECOWAS region between 2020 and 2023. They include those led by former Niger president Mahamadou Issoufou in Burkina Faso, and Ambassador Chambas in Guinea to begin discussions with its military leadership about a democratic transition. Ambassador Chambas resigned after the military junta refused to recognise his mission and rejected a previously agreed-upon 36-month transition period to hand over power to a civilian government (Agyakwa 2022). There is also an emerging practice of dispatching envoys alongside the AU. ECOWAS and AU authorities appointed former vice president of the Gambia Fatoumata Jallow-Tambajang as a Joint Facilitator in Sierra Leone in October 2023, in response to public grievances regarding the conduct of the June 2023 general elections (ECOWAS Commission 2023: 30). Nonetheless, the simultaneous appointment of envoys by the AU and RECs is a relatively recent development.

3.5 SADC SPECIAL ENVOYS

The SADC Special Envoy system has traditionally relied on peer arbitration and presidentially-led political dialogues, placing a premium on discreet diplomacy. This comes out of an aversion to outside interference due to the region's history of settler colonialism and proxy civil wars (Motsamai 2018). These interventions began in the mid-1990s, when then-South African President Nelson Mandela, Botswana´s President Ketumile Masire, and Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe dispatched fact-finding missions to Lesotho to address a military mutiny. They formed a conciliation commission, which resulted in the reinstatement of Lesotho's prime minister. Although these ad hoc mis-

sions were well intentioned, and some initially had positive outcomes, they were heavily reliant on the prestige and influence of serving heads of states. They were also fraught with conflicts of interest.

These peace initiatives also had minimal oversight from the SADC Summit and support from the SADC Secretariat, which, up until 2017, lacked institutionalised mediation capacities (Deleglise 2023). This resulted in interventions highly centralised around certain personalities. For example, in the aftermath of an electoral crisis and state-sponsored violence in Zimbabwe in 2007, SADC appointed South African President Thabo Mbeki as its facilitator, resulting in him mediating a power-sharing agreement between the ruling regime and opposition parties. Mbeki worked unconstrained by SADC's bureaucratic protocols and reporting procedures. He formed his own team with no institutional backing from the organisation. This allowed him to unilaterally pursue his much-criticized policy of "quiet diplomacy" that relied on his close and apparently uncritical relationship with President Mugabe, then a recalcitrant party to Zimbabwe's recurring crises (Hamill/Hoffman 2009). When President Jacob Zuma took over the implementation of Mbeki's Global Political Agreement, he too formed his own team and appointed advisers such as Lindiwe Zulu, Mac Maharaj and Charles Ngacula (Nhlapo/Mokwele 2020: 111). Despite his more critical approach, the lack of effective leverage and sanctions for the government parties' inaction, harmed SADC facilitators' credibility in Zimbabwe. It sparked charges that the envoys and the regional organisation were more interested in defending Zimbabwe's sovereignty than nurturing good governance and ensuring the respect for human rights (Dzimiri 2017).

In Madagascar, SADC appointed former President Joachim Chissano to mediate a political crisis triggered by President Marc Ravalomanana's removal from power in a 2009 coup. Former Mozambican foreign affairs minister Leonardo Simão took over the mediation process after initially providing assistance to Chissano. But the mediation team had its fair share of challenges. They had to negotiate its remit with a range of international organisations already involved in the conflict, namely la Francophonie, the AU, the Indian Ocean Commission, the EU, and the UN, jointly grouped as the International Contact Group (Cawthra 2010: 20). The mediation team also received limited capacity support from the SADC Secretariat, which took a minor role in the negotiations that were mostly left to the political heads. Civil society was likewise largely, if not entirely, excluded from the initial peace process (Cawthra 2010: 20–22). When the mediation team eventually produced a roadmap for ending the crisis, it was rejected by key political players (Deleglise 2023: 47). This also implies that Special Envoys require the political support and confidence of constituents beyond their appointing heads and institutions, in order to be effective.

The preceding examples of African Special Envoys are by no means exhaustive. But they demonstrate that the Special Envoy instrument is a prominent and growing tool for the AU and RECs. They also show that it is a tool governed by informalities and unwritten rules about which we know little. This provides a persuasive rationale for devoting scholarly investigations into the practices, routines, and activities of the chief implementors of regional diplomatic initiatives.

4. EXISTING RESEARCH AND GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Although research has demonstrated the importance of Special Envoys, it has almost exclusively concentrated on multilateral or bilateral envoys from the West. In a seminal article, Morini (2018) provides a comparative overview of Special Envoys and high representatives dispatched by major foreign policy actors and multilateral institutions, as well as their institutional contexts. Koops, and Tercovich (2020), Adebahr (2011), Tolksdorf (2015), Fouéré (2016), Pinfari (2018), and Costa/Francisca et al. (2019) have written about the engagements of EU special representatives in conflict resolution, addressing issues such as their leverage, coordination, and institutionalisation. There are also studies on US Special Envoys that are likewise concerned with the bureaucratic contexts and politics of institutionalisation than with their practical operations (Fullilove 2005; Princeton/Beecroft 2014). The scholarship on African envoys is strikingly sparse, even though the AU is the largest multilateral organisation outside the UN system. Africa is also home to the highest number of peace interventions lead by its own Special Envoys worldwide, making it more compelling to dedicate studies to African high-level intervenors.

However, African Special Envoys are rarely studied as a discrete subject in African peacemaking research. There are few systematic and empirically grounded studies that have focused solely on their on-ground operations and concrete activities. Those that have done so include a 2006 co-authored study by four renowned African conflict management scholars who investigated the conditions for successful entry into mediation, focusing on the pre-mediation phase as a key prelude to the viability of their roles (Maundi et al. 2006). Studies that provide first-hand descriptions of the activities of African intervenors, delving into the conditions and agencies of the intervenors themselves, are also valuable (Niang 2016; Khadiagala 2007, 2008, 2018; Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue 2011). Khadiagala's corpus of work on state-led mediators and African elder statesmen particularly offers a systematic analysis of their interactions and engagements with local and regional players (Khadiagala 2007, 2008, 2018). It also traces the gradual transition of state-led mediation to the ceding of mediation functions to African Special Envoys and elder statesmen, while documenting the sources of credibility of the intervenors and their broader impact on the legitimacy of interventions. Important insights into Special Envoy interventions can also be found in biographical accounts that document their lived experiences. One such example is a book written by Mauritanian diplomat Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, in which he narrates his experiences as a UN Special Envoy in Burundi from 1993 to 1995, where he was meant to support negotiations for democratic power sharing and efforts to prevent a then-looming civil war (Ould Abdallah 2000).

The expansion of empirical research on high-level intervenors has been aided by investigations into intervention mandates that limit or confer authority to the intervenors (Nathan 2017; Aeby 2017; Witt 2017). However, not all studies pay sufficient attention to the concrete activities underlying the execution of mandates. The scant research on Special Envoys despatched by African states to conflicts (Okoth 2008; Kahuria 2010; Mohamed 2011) on the other hand, illuminates the forces and influences that impact envoys operating under bilateral obligations. It shows how those countries' governments wielded disproportionate influence over their missions. It also flags how external actors,

and other intermediaries can undermine specific peace initiatives, a subject that is not sufficiently explored in the broader peacemaking scholarship.

Another observation in existing literature is the sole emphasis on "envoys as mediators", despite the fact that the roles of envoys continuously alter during a peace process. Focus has progressively shifted to looking at the science and art of mediation (Nathan 2013, Tieku 2011) as well as the driving forces of competition and collaboration among mediators (Lanz 2021, Duursma 2017; Vertin 2018). However, a significant portion of studies investigate envoy interventions in ways other than their concrete activities. For example, those looking into the legitimacy and ripeness of interventions, and the leverage and strategies of mediators (Juma 2009; Yabi 2010). Other research in this range investigates norm divergences in interventions, which arise when normative expectations are not fulfilled within the context of a peace process (Shillinger 2009; Aeby 2019; Nathan 2013, 2017, Motsamai 2018).

Most studies also propose institutionalist explanations of peace interventions, drawing little distinction between the institutions that prescribe the intervention and the actors in charge of carrying it out. Local contestation of peace interventions is then ascribed to the disjuncture between institutional norms and implementation frameworks, rather than the actual activities and choices that produced them. Crediting interventions solely to the actions of regional institutions neglects the empirical importance of the implementors, and in particular, the agency of envoys and their capacity for invention and improvisation. This is why it has been argued that new perspectives are needed to broaden our understanding of the practical and concrete aspects of African diplomacy, shifting from a top-down examination of regional norms and institutions to a bottom-up focus of the actual practices involved (Witt/Khadiagala 2018: 133; Witt 2018; MacGinty/Firchow 2016).

Finally, while the research on African mediation has contributed significantly to our understanding of African peacemaking, it is far from complete. Most studies concentrate only on a few aspects of the concrete activities of African Special Envoys, and discuss their intervention practices tangentially. Others neglect to investigate how different envoys work in practice, as well as the numerous institutional routines and external factors that empower or constrain them. Such studies also rely on classic arguments from mediation literature that are not always applicable, such as the requirement for unbiased or impartial mediators. Mediator bias can be inescapable in many African contexts, where conflict parties frequently agree to specific envoys based on former or current personal relationships. This highlights a contrary logic that needs further exploration.

I therefore believe that conventional explanations of African peace interventions do not adequately consider: i) the mindsets of envoys, how they understand their roles, and how it influences their execution of an intervention; ii) the envoy's scope of action and the multiple agencies involved in carrying out an intervention; iii) the interventions' knowledge bases; and iv) institutional embedding. This omission misses important aspects of African diplomatic interventions. First, they involve a large number of players vying for space and influence within various power and knowledge hierarchies (Lanz/Gasser 2013). Second, they are distinguished by both formal and informal interactions, between different actors in multiple locations. Third, they are contested, with numerous gaps between

theoretical regional peace frameworks and the non-linear nature of peace initiative implementation. To address these shortcomings, current scholarly engagement with African Special Envoys must shift away from institutional biases that view interventions as linear instances of regional norm implementation (Witt/Khadiagala 2018: 137). Instead, they should prioritise frameworks that search for evidence from 'emic' perspectives and investigate relationship complexities, as well as the full range of routines and activities required to implement a peace intervention.

5. TOWARDS A PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH AGENDA ON AFRICAN SPECIAL ENVOYS

In the next section, I propose combining elements of practice theory with ethnographic techniques, as a field research approach to investigate the intervention practices of African Special Envoys. It would go a long way in producing processual and experiential accounts of peace processes, which would significantly diverge from institutionalist readings of peace interventions. African Special Envoys are a niche topic. This is where ethnographic techniques and practice theory are useful in helping researchers adopt innovative approaches to researching phenomena that are understudied and often beneath the radar.

5.1 USING ETHNOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES TO GET EMIC VIEWPOINTS

Ethnographic research techniques are useful for researching the practical activities of African Special Envoys, since they allow in-depth examinations of their daily routines, and the exploration of uncharted domains (Schensul/LeCompte 2012; Ploder/Hamann 2021). Rather than testing or applying theories, they use thick descriptions that offer in-depth portrayals of observed situations (Nurani 2008). This allows researchers to focus on what envoys actually do rather than what they fail to achieve, as is common in mediation-oriented analyses of African peace interventions. Thick descriptions help maintain objectivity in data collection and analysis since the idea is to document detailed and unadulterated accounts of events in their chronological order (Leeds-Hurwitz 2015).

Ethnographic techniques also prioritise doing research in natural environments to collect emic or insider perspectives of an intervention. Emic viewpoints are crucial for gaining a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon while avoiding subjective interpretations (Chapman/Kinloch, 2011: 379). They can help researchers comprehend the internal logics of interventions, such as how intervenors conceptualise them, and determine appropriate courses of action. Emic research requires extensive fieldwork. It entails collecting primary data directly from practitioners in the respective headquarters and field offices (natural settings); and conducting semi-structured, open-ended interviews with envoys as well as other frontline practitioners and actors. Field research in 'natural settings' also allows researchers to collect grey literature, such as mission reports and unpublished notes. Grey literature helps give the research more context and can reveal information that traditional interviews may have missed.

5.2 EXAMINING AND ANALYSING THE PRACTICES INVOLVED

Practice theory foregrounds what people do in ordinary life. Since most academic research on African diplomatic interventions tends to underplay the role of individuals in the practical execution of mandates, I propose using it to look at the dimensions of human activity that are typically overlooked when examining institutions in isolation. A practice lens is beneficial since it highlights how human behavior is constrained by structure and how human activity either maintains or alters these structures. However, what defines a practice and what does not is a continuous debate among practice theorists. This is because rather than being a unified theoretical framework "practice theory" is a research approach that incorporates elements from various academic fields, most notably philosophy, anthropology, and sociology (Cornut 2015). Some of its underlying principles, such as the notion that all phenomena are socially created, mediated by relations and power, and acquire meaning via performance and reproduction (Bueger/Gadinger 2018: 7), are useful to examine the processual and relational aspects of African peace interventions. I understand "practices" as a collection of performances, everyday routines, and interactions that reify background knowledge and discourses to produce certain effects in socially organised contexts (Adler/Pouliot 2011; Bueger 2014).

This definition encompasses four distinct axes for studying the intervention practices of Special Envoys. The first is the performance aspect, looking at the everyday aspects of doing something. These "doings" can exhibit regularities. But they can also be heterogeneous and change over time (Reckwitz 2002: 250). However, in order to establish what these "doings" are and what ties them together, they need to be categorised or sorted. This can be accomplished by using the ethnographic process of developing thick descriptions. It involves describing the intervention's timeline and tracing how and when certain activities arose, evolved, altered, stayed constant, or dissolved into other activities. These activities would then be categorised or sorted into generic and more uniform activities and specific and less structured ones. The practices that can be grouped from these activities encompass those pertaining to the entry of envoys into conflict zones, agenda-setting and negotiation, institutional embedding and support, knowledge production and documentation, and peace agreement implementation. Envoys and other practitioners involved in a specific intervention should be interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of "how things really work" in practice. The focus would be on their tangible undertakings, including the ways in which their work was organised and embedded institutionally.

Since diplomatic interventions are spatially dispersed, the second axis pays attention to sites and the situatedness of practices. Sites are the physical terrains or geographical locations where an activity is planned and the actual location(s) where it was carried out (Schatzki 2002). However, field study on envoys' intervention practices should extend beyond visiting the headquarters and field offices of organisations of mandating organisations. The different localities in which local, regional, and international actors engage with, shape, resist or transform these interventions must be identified (Witt 2018: 2). Interventions are not only negotiated in single localities. Many involve negotiations and meetings in different capitals, towns, and countries, requiring an analytical gaze that goes beyond the "local" as a site of intervention (Witt 2018: 2). For example, when considering the concept of the "the international community", we can distinguish between the "distant international commu-

nity", which consists of global institutions, and the "international community on the ground", which consists of local embassies and other diplomatic representations. Therefore, researchers should locate and interview interlocutors across many places. Sites also have a temporal dimension. This means taking into account the different actors involved in its execution at different points in time.

Flowing from the different sites of an intervention is the concept of "arenas". These are the different points at which an intervention converges. This axis is predicated on practices being relational, meaning that they emerge from interactions and relationships. In this sense, I see a diplomatic intervention as a space in which international, national, and local actors with diverse agendas and legitimacy interact and shape its course. To understand the interconnectedness of local, regional, continental, and global spaces, and how peace is constantly renegotiated as envoys execute their mandates, researchers need to gather insights from those with first-hand experience in each arena.

The last axis is concerned with how conflicts are "framed" and what interpretations envoys consider while executing an intervention. In this sense, an intervention's site serves as a "frame" within which activities are carried out and acquire meaning (Schatzki 2002: 71). It is also "a site of subjectification" where social interactions are mediated by judgments based on selective readings and personal experiences (Witt 2020: 43). Focusing on how conflicts are framed enables researchers to gain a better understanding of the social construction of facts, truth, and authenticity in interventions, a process that is intrinsically political (Lesch, 2023). To do this, researchers delve into the problematisation of conflicts, how they are understood (epistemic practices), and the interpretations employed to negotiate and moderate the intervention. In this sense, researchers go beyond the existence of conflicting narratives to see how they are presented and integrated within the intervention's life cycle.

5.3 SOME CHALLENGES

While I advocate emic and practice-inspired research techniques in the field, I am aware of the challenges involved. The first concerns accessing high-level intervenors and frontline practitioners and persuading them to engage in interviews, especially in closed peace processes. Envoys may be unwilling to engage with researchers for fear of contradicting official narratives. It might help to respond to research concerns effectively, and to demonstrate the value of the research to the envoys. While this may guarantee some level of cooperation, interviews may not always yield complete facts or behind-the-scenes insights. There might be omissions to protect areas of confidentiality. This means that data collection on certain "practices" may be limited. Researchers would need to find proxy sources to supplement data collection. Second, researching practices is labour-intensive and requires considerable time in the field. In multileveled and multi-actor interventions, a large pool of people must be located and interviewed, including envoys and their support teams, practitioners and officials from the mandating institution's headquarters, conflict actors, and actors from regional and international institutions. It is also vital to identify the "insiders" and "hidden" actors who play informal roles in a given peace process. This is a massive undertaking.

Third, accessing envoys, practitioners, diplomats, and conflict parties relies heavily on social capital, that is, professional and personal contacts, to maximise the number of relevant field research respondents (Edwards 2004: 15). However, relying on relationships may create problems that are rarely acknowledged or discussed, such as maintaining objectivity and the ethics of conducting research among shared social networks. There are also dilemmas of conducting field work in closed contexts, or those characterised by past or present violent conflict, as Bliesemann de Guevara and Bøås (2020) discuss in their instructive edited volume. Local role players tend to mistrust researchers from different socio-cultural and political settings and can have pragmatic security concerns that can affect the completeness and the quality of information collected. However, in all cases, research findings must be presented in a way that is mindful of ethical quandaries and sensitive to concerns about anonymity and privacy.

Some of these challenges though may not materialise. They also do not diminish the added value of the proposed approach for investigating i) the envoys' discretion and scope of agency, which is supposedly exercised through virtuosity and improvisations rather than norm compliance; ii) the perspectives, motives and intentions of different actors and how they adapt and transform interventions; and iii) the institutional embedding of interventions that may shift the balance between conventionally attributing the intervention to "African institutions" and the actors carrying it out. The strength and appeal of this approach is to facilitate researchers' immersion in the unknown realm of practitioners. This can produce research that challenges traditional and hence limited explanations of regional peace interventions, which stands to make a notable contribution to peace and conflict research.

6. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this report was to show that African Special Envoys are a salient but understudied phenomenon of African peacemaking, that ought to be subjected to greater academic scrutiny. My intention was to emphasise the value of ethnographic techniques and frameworks based on studying "practices" in filling research gaps and contributing to the current literature on African peace interventions. This approach can help researchers to develop credible counter-narratives to official accounts of peacemaking that frequently present sanitised portrayals of their often messy and non-linear trajectories. The report has also highlighted how the field methodology could help collect data that contributes to more comprehensive knowledge of APSA's on-ground implementation, while providing a unique understanding of the agency of envoys in practice. It has illustrated how prior research has studied these interventions either tangentially, or through institutionalist lenses that conflate institutions and intervenors or solely through mediation analytical frameworks.

Following my discussion of the benefits of blending practice theory and ethnographic techniques, I offered some recommendations for gathering data about the spatial and temporal dimensions of interventions, as well as their macro and micro dynamics. I consider the proposed research agenda as a useful tool for investigating these interventions' institutional embedding and knowledge bases, as well as the agency of intervenors and the multiple agencies involved in implementing it. Engaging with practice theory also promises academic innovation in investigating APSA implementation from

a theoretical standpoint. It highlights how theoretical explorations could enrich empirical studies of African peace interventions. This has practical relevance for African institutions aiming to improve the tool's effectiveness, as well as Western governments such as Germany and multilateral institutions interested in supporting African Special Envoys and wider peacebuilding initiatives. It is also relevant for civil society actors impacted by diplomatic interventions, who may seek to influence future peacemaking activities by amassing systemic evidence of their successes and shortcomings.

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AFRICAN SPECIAL ENVOYS IN PRACTICE: A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR STUDYING COMPLEX DIPLOMATIC INTERVENTIONS

Dimpho Deleglise

African Special Envoys deployed by the African Union and Regional Economic Communities are a growing phenomenon in African peace-making as part of a broader project of deepening local solutions to African problems. However, there are still many gaps in the research examining how they carry out their interventions in practice and the specific social, institutional and contextual factors and conditions that influence what they do in the field. Dimpho Deleglise's report fills this gap by reconstructing the activities of African Special Envoys to date, identifying existing research and gaps in the literature, and highlighting the need for a practice-oriented research agenda on African Special Envoys.

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