Book Review of Grilli M and Gerits F. Visions of African Unity: New Perspectives on the History of Pan-Africanism and the African Unification Project. Palgrave Macmillan (2020) 435pp.

By:

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Only a few subjects on Africa has attracted more attention that the idea of unity. In its several iterations, the concept of unity continues to provide the lens through which Africa's political, economic, and social development is discussed. In poetry, music, scholarly works, political rhetoric, and policy documents, there exist the consensus on the necessity of the African unification project, albeit the methodology of achieving this goal vary. This point further lends itself to some pertinent issues. One is the worrying gap between the articulation of necessity and the requisite implementation of policies. Another is state-centric

grip on the institutional and normative processes of the unification project, with little or no attention paid to centring civil society. Also, the politico-economic interference of external parties in the institutional and ideational processes of unity remain a concern. A better way of understanding contemporary initiatives aimed at advancing the African unification project is the historicization of the idea. As the saying goes, to know one's destination, it is imperative to understand where the journey started. This point informs the basis of this edited book. As the editors noted in the introductory chapter, the book emphasises the importance of access to archival sources in gaining "new understanding of the project to unify the African continent" (p. 4).

The book is divided into 15 chapters, written by 21 authors from diverse social science backgrounds. In line with the objective of the book, most of the chapters use archival materials to explore and bring to the fore some pertinent information that have not enjoyed significant consideration in existing scholarship. These chapters are grouped under four parts: Imaging and debating unity; the impact of African liberation and cold war on African unity; From the OAU to the AU: historical trajectories; and Postscript. Overall, the chapters present a broad lens for understanding how historical conditions have mediated and moderated the business of uniting the peoples of Africa. Issues such as ideological cleavages, trade union politics, interference of external actors in domestic politics, perceptions of civil society and cultural actors on African unification, and transnational institution building in post-colonial Africa are some of points analysed in this book.

The use of archival and ethnographic sources by some of the chapters is one of the book's strong points. This position is essential for three reasons. First, it helps fill the gap in literature regarding the rationale behind the actions of political actors in articulating the idea of unity. Second, it exposes the readers to a trove of information that assist in appreciating historical continuities and discontinuities, particularly in the way in which the present uncannily imitates the past. Similarly, one could even argue that the analyses in the book may give credence to Ibn Khaldun's famous aphorism that: 'the past resembles the future more than one drop of water resembles another.' Thirdly, it reinforces the nexus between empirical research and nuanced analysis of regional integration efforts in Africa, a point that should be taken seriously by researchers and policy-makers.

The book contains some insightful chapters. Chris Vaughan et al. provide important examples on the important role of civil society in shaping the debate on federalism and regionalism in East Africa between 1960-1977. Here, the authors refer to opinion polls in the early 1960s, statements by political actors, various activities by the epistemic community, and educational materials to show that regionalism in east Africa was far from been a state-centric enterprise. Robert Waters Jr. examines Kwame Nkrumah's pragmatic manoeuvring of labour union politics in the pursuit of achieving continental unity. This chapter is important for understanding the contradiction between Nkrumah's position on the imperative of an assertive labour union for national and continental development and his post-independence suppression of their activities. Lamine Doumbia and Ousmane Diouf use ethnographic and archival sources to provide a narrative of grassroots perception on the short-lived Mali Federation (a union between Mali and Senegal between 1959 and 1960), and its connections to the pan-African unification aspirations. Paraska Tolan-Szkilnik illustrates the contributions of Morocco to the liberation struggles in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Lusophone Africa. An important contribution of the chapter is the emphasis on how the artistic community in Morocco forged transnational networks with revolutionary artistes and intellectuals in Lusophone Africa. Kathryn Nash argues that the normative instrument of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) should be understood as an innovative adaptation of international norms for reinforcing the sovereignty and legitimacy of newly independent African states. This assessment provides an important prism for understanding the root of norm localisation in post-colonial African regional integration drive.

Despite the important contributions of the book, there are some shortcomings that must be highlighted. One such is the lack of a gendered analysis of the African unification project. The important role women played in the struggle for independence, and factors that continue to ensure their marginalisation after flag independence are debates that cannot be ignored in any analysis on African politics and history. The works of pan-African feminists such as Amina Mama, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyèwùmí, Nanjala Nyabola, Fareda Banda, and Sylvia Tamale, just to mention a few, have articulated the imperative of a critical intersectional discourse of African issues.

Another drawback is the limited discursive lens of part 3 of this book. This is in respect of the selective discussion of transnational institution-building and development in the African Union (AU). The focus on peace and security (chapters 11, 12 and 14), human rights (chapter 13), and a very brief discussion of the Pan-African Parliament (pp. 380-381) do little to provide a holistic understanding of the state of normative institutional processes in the AU. As no explanation is provided for this limited focus, it is not out of place to critique the non-consideration of other AU institutions, and even the regional economic communities that are designated as the building blocks of continental integration in Africa. Additionally, a chapter could have been dedicated to exploring the scope and scale of these developments, especially situating the ongoing AU reforms process within a nuanced historical understanding.

Lastly, for a work of this magnitude, it is disappointing to see typographical errors and incomplete sentences in some of the chapters. Although this is not significant enough to detract from the general quality of the book, it remains an avoidable distraction.

Despite the shortcomings pointed out in the foregoing, this book is a welcome and important addition to the body of scholarship on African unity and development. It will no doubt serve as a useful navigational tool for looking back in order to understand the future dynamics of the quest for a united Africa. Indeed, it is the beginning of an important conversation.

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