Matteo Grilli and Frank Gerits (eds.), Visions of African Unity: New Perspectives on the History of Pan-Africanism and African Unification Projects (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

By:

Poppy Cullen

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The new collection *Visions of African Unity* edited by Matteo Grilli and Frank Gerits is very welcome. Pan-Africanism and African unity are highly significant in the modern history of the continent, yet have too rarely received the sustained academic attention they deserve. The editors have done well to establish a diverse set of contributors from Africa, Europe and America, with specialisms in history, law, and international relations. The subject is a broad one, and the chapters reflect this. Many of them are highly engaging and informative and will be of value to scholars interested in the particular facets

covered as well as in the broader subject. In a collection of this nature, there are always issues which could have been further addressed, or which are more tangential to the subject under discussion. Nonetheless, the book as a whole gives a good sense of both visions of Pan-Africanism and the practicalities of pursuing unity from the mid-twentieth century to the present.

The book is divided into three sections, though there are themes which cut across all three. The first part, “Imagining and Debating African Unity”, contains case-studies which explore the era of decolonisation and immediate aftermath. These chapters explore the ways that elites and other groups have attempted to make unity a reality in particular regional contexts. The second part covers “The Impact of African Liberation and Cold War on African Unity”. The chapters here make clear that continental liberation could act as a unifying force among African states, although there were also challenges. Some of these chapters are not so directly focused on issues of unity, and this section of the book has the least coherence. The third part, “From the OAU to the AU: Historical Trajectories”, contains chapters focusing on process and specific organs of the OAU and AU. These give a good sense of how the organisations work in practice, and thus how the main organs put in place to foster unity have lived up to those aims.

A key feature about African unity revealed through many of the chapters is that, despite much lip-service and often genuine support, it has been difficult, if not impossible, to actualise. As Grilli and Gerits argue in their introduction, “Different conceptions of African unity had animated the anti-colonial struggle and once independence had been attained, those differences burst into the open and came to structure inter-African diplomacy”(2). This fundamental tension is revealed in many of the case-studies discussed in the volume. Alice Musabende helpfully draws a distinction between “two interrelated ideas: an aspirational ideal for unifying ‘all African people’ as they emerged from white colonial rule, and an elite-driven process to interweave and harmonize post-independence institutions and relationships among states, in an effort to create a continental system of government” (345-6). Her engagement with the intellectual content of Pan-Africanism is welcome in showing both its appeal and why it has proven so challenging.

Frequently, the contributors point to the tension between political unity and state sovereignty. Kate Skinner, for example, highlights “fundamental differences in understandings of national sovereignty during the early 1960s” (44) as a key reason for why Kwame Nkrumah’s views diverged so much from those of others after the Togo coup in 1963. Elsewhere, Chris Vaughan, Julie MacArthur, Emma Hunter, and Gerard McCann show that in the case of the proposed East African Federation, “leaders have persistently demonstrated limited enthusiasm for the practical surrender of national sovereignty” (50). This was so much the case, they argue, that federal proposals could become “a tool for nation-building” (62). The importance of national sovereignty was also one of the foundational tenets of the OAU in 1963. As Kathryn Nash usefully shows, however, this was not inevitable, and there were multiple visions put forward at the founding conference of the OAU, where different choices could have been made.

The tension between unity and national sovereignty is shown in several chapters to have had a particular impact on conflict and security. As Oluchukwu Ignatus Onianwa shows, the OAU’s principles could be severely restricting when it came to addressing ongoing conflicts. The Nigerian civil war, Onianwa argues, was “a litmus test for the OAU in terms of resolving conflicts across the continent” (221), and one that it struggled to meet. In part, this was because of the role of external powers, but it was also due to these OAU norms. John J. Hogan’s chapter on the formation of the AU’s security apparatus highlights the change away from prioritising state sovereignty towards giving the AU a right to intervene. Hogan provides excellent detail of this process, arguing that it was adopted because of African political developments and democratisation, humanitarian tragedies, and the structure of decision-making in the OAU and AU. Rui Garrido’s chapter on the African Court on human and peoples’ rights highlights another part of the OAU and AU’s apparatus where ambiguous commitment from members has limited its potential.

Another significant theme is the importance of liberation and anti-colonialism in fostering unity in meaningful ways. Supporting liberation movements was more palatable than divesting oneself of national sovereignty. And while the OAU privileged non-interference, as Nash points out, “Non-interference was accorded to states that agreed in principle to racial equality and self-determination” (283), meaning that criticism of colonialism and apartheid fit

within such a framework. Still, many of the contributors on this subject highlight the tensions and difficulties that emerged around liberation struggles. Discussing Southern Africa, Chris Saunders shows the competitive nature of liberation movements, with “few examples of joint action and collaboration between liberation movements, and much tension and rivalry between them” (142). The example of Botswana is developed by Myra Ann Houser, where solidarity with liberation movements was an important but challenging part of the country’s independent politics. Alexandra M. Dias argues too that while liberation struggles were sometimes unifying, they were increasingly overshadowed by Cold War alliances and competing international loyalties.

In a welcome addition to the book, the views of grassroots actors are brought out in a number of contributions which highlight how ordinary people have felt connected to those beyond their borders. The projects of the OAU and AU are often seen as elite-driven, with the visions of post-colonial leaders like Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere frequently the focus of attention. These remain important here, notably in the chapter by Robert Anthony Waters, Jr. on the All-Africa Trade Union Federation. Yet several chapters look beyond elites. Lamine Doumbia and Ousmane Diouf argue that in Mali and Senegal there were considerable cross-border connections and “the redrawing of state boundaries did not necessarily affect the ties between communities” (122). Drawing on oral history interviews, they argue that “Despite the OAU only being formed in 1963, African societies were already interconnected long before that dream, through different social commitments, migration, marriages, collective resource managements, trade and labour union networks” (111). Given the artificial nature of many colonial borders in Africa, this should not be surprising, but the prioritising of such connections by scholars is valuable. Other contributors too show the importance of non-elite actors. Vaughan et al demonstrate how collective identities across East Africa were pursued, even as elite enthusiasm for the federal project waxed and waned. Elsewhere, Paraska Tolan-Szkilnik argues that “Pan-African networks in the postcolonial era often grew outside the purview of the state”; focusing here on “guerrilla-poets” connected to Morocco (240). This chapter convincingly shows that such networks of activists and creatives are key to understanding ways in which visions of unity were understood.

Rather disappointingly, there is no conclusion to the volume, which would have been helpful to reflect further on some of the connecting themes. Still, the chapter by Toyin Falola discussing “How Africa can unite” does act as a final word. Falola makes proposals for contemporary unity, considering sport, politics, military, language, regions, economic and currency unions, and development. This is exciting research and a call to action which complements the rest of the book and shows the ongoing development of the ideas explored in earlier chapters. The postscript is a further useful addition, written by Chedza Molefe, an archivist at the AU archives, which provides useful detail of their collections, as well as information about the process and functioning of the OAU and AU. All of this will be very useful for researchers interested in making use of these archives, although, as the editors stress in their introduction, “innovative research on African unity requires improved access to these archives” (13). This is an important consideration, but this book shows the possibilities for research into Pan-Africanism using a variety of perspectives and should encourage further research.

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