Book Review I: The Air Transport Industry in Africa: A Legal Analysis of the Single African Air Transport Market (Routledge, 2025)

By:

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The liberalization of air transport in Africa has long been framed as both an economic necessity and an integration imperative. Yet the legal, institutional, and political economic foundations of this ambition have often received fragmented treatment across aviation policy, trade law, and regional integration scholarship.

The Air Transport Industry in Africa: A Legal Analysis of the Single African Air Transport Market makes a significant and timely contribution by synthesizing these domains into a coherent analytical narrative. Across nine chapters, the book situates the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) not merely as a sectoral reform initiative, but as a continental economic governance project embedded within the broader African Union integration

architecture.

The opening chapter performs a diagnostic function. Rather than beginning with legal instruments, the author grounds aviation liberalization within Africa's structural realities: geography, infrastructure deficits, land-lockedness, weak surface transport systems, and limited disposable incomes. Aviation is shown to occupy a disproportionately strategic position in development planning, even as demand constraints suppress route profitability. This structural framing is analytically important. It challenges legal determinism and reminds readers that liberalization alone cannot transform thin markets without complementary economic and infrastructural reform.

The historical excavation that follows traces African aviation to its colonial origins. Air routes and airport infrastructure were configured to serve imperial administrative and commercial interests, privileging extra-continental connectivity over intra-African integration. Post-independence flag-carrier nationalism, while symbolically powerful, often produced under-capitalised and politically managed airlines operating within protectionist bilateral frameworks. The historical inheritance that emerges is one of route dependency without market autonomy, an imbalance liberalization now seeks to correct.

The doctrinal analysis forms the intellectual backbone of the book. SAATM is situated within overlapping normative regimes: the Chicago Convention system, WTO trade-in-services frameworks, African Union treaty law, and domestic incorporation processes. Particularly valuable is the discussion of treaty domestication, contrasting monist and dualist constitutional traditions and exposing uneven legal penetration of continental aviation norms. Liberalization, therefore, appears legally ambitious yet enforcement-diffuse, dependent on national implementation rather than supranational compulsion.

Institutional governance analysis deepens this insight. Implementation authority is distributed across ICAO, the WTO, AU organs, regional economic communities (RECs), and national regulators. The distinction between technical safety regulation and economic market oversight is especially illuminating. While ICAO maintains standard-setting authority, it lacks market enforcement competence. The resulting institutional diffusion encourages cooperation but dilutes accountability, a pattern familiar across African economic governance

regimes.

At treaty level, the Yamoussoukro Decision emerges as the normative anchor of liberalization. Its provisions on traffic rights, tariff liberalization, capacity deregulation, and competition safeguards establish a managed liberalization framework calibrated to political sensitivities. The exclusion of cabotage underscores the sovereignty caution embedded within the regime. Liberalization is progressive but measured.

Regional implementation reveals uneven trajectories. Some RECs have advanced regulatory frameworks exceeding Yamoussoukro commitments; others remain constrained by geopolitical tensions, safety deficits, or dominant national carriers. This bottom-up pattern mirrors broader African integration dynamics, suggesting that aviation liberalization is REC-driven before continental.

The economic case for SAATM is compelling. Liberalization promises passenger growth, fare reduction, tourism expansion, trade facilitation, and employment generation. Yet implementation barriers remain formidable: infrastructure deficits, regulatory fragmentation, and persistent protectionism. SAATM thus appears economically rational but politically negotiated.

Comparative analysis with the European Union and ASEAN enriches the study. The EU model demonstrates the integrative power of supranational enforcement culminating in full market freedoms, including cabotage. ASEAN, by contrast, reflects consensus-driven incrementalism. The comparative lesson is clear: institutional supranationalism accelerates integration; intergovernmental caution slows it.

Notwithstanding its considerable strengths, the study might have benefitted from a more sustained empirical interrogation of domestic implementation practice. While the doctrinal and institutional analysis is rigorous, deeper engagement with selected country case studies, contrasting full adopters of Yamoussoukro commitments with more hesitant states, would have sharpened the political economy insights. Greater attention to private-sector dynamics, including airline consolidation strategies and airport concession financing models, could also have enriched the market analysis. These observations, however, underscore the book’s generative potential rather than diminish its

contribution.

The concluding synthesis integrates these strands within broader African Union economic governance frameworks. SAATM is positioned as a flagship Agenda 2063 initiative with direct synergies for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Air transport is framed as a logistics enabler capable of reducing trade costs and expanding continental value chains. Mobility regimes and visa openness are correctly identified as structural determinants of aviation integration.

Taken together, the book offers a textured account of how law mediates markets, sovereignty, and development in African aviation. Its central insight, that liberalizing African skies is a continental integration project rather than a narrow transport reform, renders it an essential contribution to international economic law and African integration scholarship.

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