Book Symposium Introduction: Visions of African Unity: New Perspectives on the History of Pan-Africanism and African Unification Projects

By:

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In January 2016 we arrived in Bloemfontein, South Africa. We had accepted postdoctoral positions at the International Studies Group at the University of the Free State because both of us wanted to be part of a group of scholars committed to thinking about Africa in international and global terms. Our doctoral research projects – which are published as books – had already made the case that African agency needed to be reassessed when it came to diplomacy and international relations more broadly[1]. If we wanted to explore the significance of Africa to international affairs, we had to become part of an institute that embraced a research culture where African, Asian, European and

U.S. historians would be given the freedom to develop their own scholarship on Africa. We are therefore incredibly grateful to Afronomicslaw for organizing the book symposium in the same spirit. Babatunde Fagbayibo, Diana M. Natermann and Poppy Cullen are all incredible researchers, hailing from different places, but all committed to thinking through the meaning of African agency in global affairs.

When we met in Bloemfontein the idea for what ultimately became *Visions of African Unity* emerged in our first weeks there. Surprising as it may be, despite the importance of African Unity as an idea in African politics, the literature on continental unity is limited, and many aspects of this fundamental element of post-colonial African history still require analysis. In 1975 and in 1994 Yassin El-Ayouty edited volumes on the history and politics of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), discussing the developments of the international organisation after ten years and thirty years respectively from its founding[2]. We felt it was time to offer a new and improved version that would make use of the newly available source material, the increased ability to work across continents and the new innovative scholarship. Years of conversation and looking for funding led to the organization of a two day workshop in March 2019 in Bloemfontein. Scholars from different places met to discuss different aspects of African unity while also enjoying a '*Braai*' in the evening. The fact that we managed to hold the conference on the African continent with the participation of African scholars was vital to this project which wants to foreground a multitude of voices from varying national and disciplinary perspectives while calling for an improved access to African archives and resources.

This edited volume explores continental and international visions of African unity. Continental integration had many different iterations beyond the OAU and it is therefore approached by contributors not only as a political project, but also as an ideology, a cultural marker and a legal issue. This collection is also a discussion of the place of African unity within the international system, a topic that is underreached despite the archives revealing how officials in the Global North struggled to understand the pan-African and pan-Arab challenges to international relations.

This edited collection offers a systematic overview of the visions of African unity in three parts. First, the volume turns to non-state actors as well as

governments to reveal the counter-intuitive origins of many of the foundational ideas. Kate Skinner as well as Chris Vaughan, Julia MacArthur, Emma Hunter and Gerard McCann redirect our attention to the state. Skinner examines new evidence of the Ghanaian policy vis-à-vis Togo and the latter group of scholars bring the many competing rationales for East African integration to the fore. Robert Anthony Waters Jr. studies the inability of the All-African Trade Union Federation (AATUF), a pan-African trade union organisation formed in November 1959 through the initiative of Nkrumah, to bring together Africa's workers into a disciplined Pan-African vanguard. In their contribution, Lamine Doumbia and Ousmane Diouf explore the grassroots origins of African unification in French West Africa. The second part documents how the project of African unification fared in the context of Cold War proxy wars in Southern Africa and the international system more broadly. Chris Saunders, Mary Ann Houser and Alexandra M. Dias discuss the influence of continental networks and institutions on the various fronts of the liberation struggle, including the understudied OAU Liberation Committee and the case of Botswana. Onianwa Oluchukwu Ignatus argues the OAU Consultative Committee's actions during the Biafra War were rendered less effective by the Anglo-American overbearing influence. Morocco, where anticolonial militants were active, is the focus of Paraska Tolan Szkilnik's contribution which connects Luso-African poets and militants in Rabat and Paris with the debates about pan-Africanism and world revolution.

The final part takes a closer look at the transition from the OAU to the AU in 2002. The security aspects of the OAU/AU are often overlooked but studied in depth here by Kathryn Nash and John Hogan who seek to understand the policy choices that were made during the transition from the OAU to the AU, while Rui Garrido connects the burgeon field of human rights history with the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. Alice Musabende researches the extent to which the AU provides a marker of identity, taking into consideration the OAU's 'African-ness'. Since many of these contributions raise questions about the future of African integration and showcase much of what African archives have to offer, Toyin Falola in his think piece offers readers different options to think about ways to attain unity, while Head Archivist of the African Union Archives, Chedza Molefe, discusses the collections and the history of the archives in her contribution.

We hope Visions of African Unity will inspire scholars and activists alike to think anew about one of Africa's most enduring and influential ideas. This roundtable is an excellent starting point.

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[1] Matteo Grilli, *Nkrumaism and African Nationalism*: *Ghana's Pan-African Foreign Policy in the Age of Decolonization* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018); Frank Gerits, *The Ideological Scramble for Africa: How the Pursuit of Anticolonial Modernity Shaped a Postcolonial Order, 1945-1966* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).

[2] Yassin El-Ayouty, ed., *The Organization of African Unity after Thirty Years* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994); Yassin El-Ayouty, *The Organization of African Unity after Ten Years: Comparative Perspectives* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1975).

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