

The African Union: Pan-Africanist Aspirations and the Challenge of African Unity

by

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Abstract

The African Union is an example of regional integration that is a contemporary phenomenon. At the same time, it is seen as the realization of the desire of some of the founding fathers of the OAU to have a more integrated Union.

The wishes of the founders of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), was largely informed by the desire of the Pan-Africanists who believed that it is only full political unity that will end the Pan-African struggle. Apart from the problems of the lack of a common culture, and language that divides Africa, there is the more fundamental problem of the lack of an effective leadership in the search for unity.

Where there has been unity or union as in the case of Europe, there was first, the emergence of 'super powers': military, political, and economic. African unity is pursued under a philosophy of 'equality' among African states. This partly explains the failure of the OAU and we wait to see the fortunes of the African Union (AU).

This paper examines three basis of the African Union namely, the conviction that it will be able to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world; the desire to make Africa contemporarily relevant and the need to create a united Africa that can resist western influence.

It concludes that African unity will remain problematic if it is sought on the platform of a common alliance and desired as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end.

Introduction

The African Union is the institutional manifestation of the desire for integration in Africa. As Olusegun Obasanjo (2001:64) made the point, “the African Union is the final goal of African unity that leaders have been pursuing for more than forty years”. The search began with the Organization of African Unity in 1963. The Abuja treaty of 1991, which gave legal backing to the African Economic Community, only served as a bridge towards the actualization of the African Union.

For a variety of reasons, the OAU only succeeded to some degree in its desire to achieve unity in Africa (Cervenka, 1977). A major identifiable cause of this relative degree of success is traceable to the tripartite ideological divide (Cervenka, 1977:1-3; Agbi, 1986: chap 8) that pervaded Africa in the formative years of the OAU.

The most recent development in the history of the AU is the proposal for the establishment of the United States of Africa which was extensively discussed at the 9th African Union Summit in July, 2007. Part of the argument is that the idea is a contemporary expression of the age long Pan-Africanist aspirations for African unity. However, there is lack of consensus on when the union should be formed and how it should be administered. There is therefore a division between the ‘radicals’ and ‘gradualist’. The call by the ‘radicals’ for an immediate federation was opposed by the gradualist who support the creation of a United States of Africa. The gradualist such as South Africa’s Thabo Mbeki and Umaru Musa Yar’ Adua of Nigeria seem convinced that the issues that require immediate attention are improved regional economic integration, the greater challenges facing the countries and the need to focus more on the urgent task of strengthening and consolidating internal governance and growth structures. There is also the belief that issues like the AU’s weak administration, poverty in the continent and ongoing conflict in places like Darfur, Somalia and the brewing crisis in Zimbabwe deserve more immediate attention. The thinking is that if such problems cannot be addressed through the AU, how can commitment be made to more demanding issues such as that of a united Africa?

What is Pan-Africanism

Because the argument for the United States of Africa is based on the philosophical idea of Pan-Africanism, there is need to first address definitional questions.

There are two general approaches to Pan-Africanism namely Afrocentric and Eurocentric conceptions. The Afrocentric conception is used to explain and evaluate the position that the struggle for self assertion in Africa dates back in time to the era before Christ (Nantanmbu, 1998:568); whereas, the Eurocentric position conceive Pan-Africanism as a direct response to European slavery and colonialism (Londsdale, 1968:11-22).

If we accept the Eurocentric argument, we would also accept that Pan-Africanism is a 20th century phenomenon. But of course, that will only be so if the Afrocentric position is not valid at all.

For relevance, far from conceiving Eurocentric and Afrocentric as interchangeable terms for reaction and progress, they are more useful as perspectives on issues regarding Africa. Taken in this sense, it is possible to evaluate both perspectives. The Afrocentric perspective begins its history of Pan-Africanism from 3200 B.C. when Pharaoh Aha united the upper and the lower Nile to form a united country in order to be able to resist foreign aggression and invasion (Nantambu, 1998:568). This is argued to be the conceptual beginnings of Pan-Africanism. There is also an attempt to define Pan-African nationalism as referring to the Afrocentric version of Pan-Africanism. Thus, this version is better appreciated in form of a struggle against foreign domination; a theme that is recurrent, in the argument for political integration in Africa. In this light, Kwame Nantambu (Nantambu, 1998:569) defines Pan-African Nationalism as “the national, unified struggle and resistance of African peoples against all forms of foreign aggression and invasion. The primary goal of Pan-African Nationalism is the total liberation and unification of all Africans and people of African descent under African communalism.”

It is therefore possible to trace the history of Pan-African Nationalism from 300 B.C. when the unification of Africans took place in Egypt through revolutionary Pan-African Nationalism against slavery between the fifteenth and nineteenth century to the intellectual, geopolitical, scientific, and cultural Pan-African Nationalism of the twentieth century culminating in the proposal of the United States of Africa.

But, the Afrocentric analysis underemphasizes the political attitudes embedded in modern nation-states conceptions and expectation that existed in early Pan-Africanism. Even in early times, Africans did not see themselves as one and discriminated against each other even in artistic representation (Snowden, 1993:106) more than that, there is evidence that ‘civilized’ Egypt enslaved other Africans: a reality that negates the contemporary argument that Pan-Africanism necessarily involve or suggest political unity on the basis of ‘similarity’ in order to counter the hegemonic European power structure; although, that should automatically justify European conceptions (Henige, 1983:117). However, that does not mean that the superior explanations of Africans and the possibility for interpretations towards relevance cannot be accommodated (Langely, 1973:100).

The Eurocentric version can be categorized as political-cultural, geographical, and racial. The first category is represented by the writings of Peter Esedeke (1977:67-68), George Padmore (1972:95), and Robert Chrisman (1973:2). In all of these, the position is taken that feelings of solidarity among Africans birthed the idea of Pan-Africanism. However, there is no appreciation of the fact that different interests exist for example, between Africans in Africa and those in the diaspora.

Even where there is similarity of interest, there is no concurrence on strategy (Young, 1982:22). This provides insight into the contradictions between the revolutionaries and gradualist at the 9th African Union summit in Ghana. As would be expected, the priorities and political/economic realities of each country are different. This is likely to strain and weaken the feeling of solidarity that the Eurocentrists talk about.

The geographical analysis of Pan-Africanism overlooks the solidarity of African people and compartmentalizes African liberation struggle into sub-saharan, trans-saharan, trans-Atlantic, west hemispheric and global pan-Africanism (Mazrui, 1977). Despite the pit-falls of this explanation (Natanmbu, 1998:563), it brings to fore the geographic element in Pan-Africanist agitations and expectations.

Finally, James Kariuki (1974:2-3) focuses on the racial elements in his explanation of Pan-Africanism. This perspective is an error, because economics rather than race are the underlining factor in the European enslavement of Africans (Williams, 1961:51); so is the argument for political unity of Africa on the basis of race. Even within African nation states, ethnic or racial affiliations still undermine national integration; why should we expect a factor that has proven to be divisive to serve an integrative function? The explanation that Walter Rodney (1976) offers for Pan-Africanism where interest aggregation and articulation is the basis of African unity, does not admit the desire for political integration. If anything, we can only justify, on this basis, highly networked economic cooperation since economics is the only specific cause that can justify African integration. By making economics the pivot of cooperation, Africans make themselves the key players of Pan-Africanism rather than the victims (Mazama, 2001:388).

Pan-Africanism and the African Union

Pan-Africanism which is the perceived need to mobilize peoples of Africa against racism and colonialism (M' bayo, 2005:19) is the political philosophy behind the current effort to achieve political unity in Africa through the instrumentality of the African Union. In this way, Pan-Africanism has in the twenty first century, transformed into a mobilizing ideology and a development blueprint. The idea of a United States of Africa was first mooted in a Pan-African meeting in Cairo in 1960, by Kwame Nkrumah. He is the father of the 'radicals' while Nyerere who argued for first, the building of regional unions and then improvement on these to create the United States of Africa, represent the doyen of the gradualists.

The present crusade is being led by Muammar al-Gaddafi (Browne, 2003) who has abandoned Pan-Arabism for Pan-Africanism in broader terms. Diaspora Africans, who constitute District six that was created at the formation of the African Union, is expected to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union. The African Union is therefore the product of many years of Pan-Africanist aspirations. It is the expression of Pan-Africanism as a structural working frame work for action in regard to the multiple issues facing African people.

Regional Hegemony and Regional Integration

Regional hegemony is a description for regional powers; a listing that includes at least three African countries (Pastor, 199:25). These are the anchor countries (Nolte, 2007:3) around whom regional integration is meant to revolve. Regional (great) powers are potential middle powers in the international system (Wight, 1978:63) and therefore deserving of considerable attention. They are defined on the basis of military power (Wight, 1978:65), population size and economic power as indicated by GDP (Kelly, 2004). By definition, a regional power is a state which is part of a geographical region, able to stand up against any coalition in the region, highly influential in regional matters and have the potential of being a great power (Osterud, 1992:12). Some countries that are listed as regional leaders are also included in the list of great powers (Cooper, 1997; Westhuizen, 1998; Hurrel, 2000; Hurrel, 2006; and Schoeman, 2003). This is quite remarkable especially when we think of regional integration within the context of globalization.

Since the 1990s regional integration processes have begun in most regions of the world. We may wonder if there is a relationship between regional powers and a process of integration, are regional powers the driving force of regional integration. This subject had not been adequately treated (Hurrel, 2005). However, in the contention of the theory of cooperative hegemony (Pederson, 2002), regional integration is to be understood in terms of the interest and strategies of regional powers.

Certainly, the AU and the proposed United States of Africa are regional integration projects, the notable regional powers in Africa: South-Africa and Nigeria (The third being Egypt) are gradualists in the African integration project. If regional integration is to be understood in terms of the interest and strategies of regional powers, we may well say that the African project is still in the planning stage. What is more, Pan-Africanism and its assumptions of solidarity and equality are not in tune with the realism of power in the international system. For example, power transition theory (Organski, 1958; Kugler and Organski, 1989; Tammen et al., 2000; Lemke, 2002; Kugler and Tammen, 2004; Kugler, Tammen, and Efrid, 2004; Kugler, 2006). posits a hierarchical international system in which there is a dominant power at the top and great, middle and small powers subordinating them. By implication, the international system will not take any observable pattern without these structured power interactions. In the case of regions, integration will not take place if there is no power leadership. As a fundamental flaw, Pan-Africanism does not make allowance for a consideration of power in its call to unite; it only explores the sentiment of similarities of origin and experience to expect integration. Whereas, in today's world, these are not sufficient mobilizing forces for integration

The Rational for African Unity

However, the quest for unity and therefore integration can be appreciated from three perspectives. The first is the belief in the capacity of integration to enable the continent in the need to effectively meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world (*African Association of Political Science Newsletter*, 2001:17). Within this framework; integration is conceived as an enabling tool for a more effective African bargain in the global scheme of things. The fallout is a more positive position for Africa in the equation of global economic benefits. In Obasanjo's (2001:64) calculation:

“It is important that Nigerians are fully aware of the consequences of this new frontier in African unity by which the management of their political, social, and economic affairs will be integrated into those of the African continent. The message...should be that the African Union is entirely in the interest of the people and that they stand to gain infinitely from this new continental entity.”

It is important to stress that regional integration does not automatically guarantee the trickling down of these benefits. In anticipation of the positive by – products of regional integration, a number of organizations were formed. A roll call appears below:

1. Customs and economic union of central Africa (UDEAC) 1964 that transformed in to the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC).
2. The East African Community (EAC) 1967-77 now known as the East African Cooperation.
3. The West African Economic Community (CEAO) 1972.
4. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS 1975)
5. The West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) 1994.
6. The preferential trade Area (PTA) 1981 now known as the common market for Eastern and Southern African (COMESA) 1995.
7. The Southern Africa Development Conference (ASDCC) 1980 now known as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) 1992.
8. The Union of Maghreb Arab State (UMA) 1988.

Despite the existence of these and many other organizations, an assessment of their degree of impact and development levels in Africa, places a certain reservation on the excitement over the establishment of the African Union and the progress to the United States of Africa. At least, if and when it is considered that the African Union may as well become insignificant as these other organizations.

The second strand in the understanding of the argument for integration in Africa, which partly derives its origin from the first is, the concern for Africa not to be left behind in the global trend of regional integration. As one (Obasanjo, 2001:64) of the signatories to the constitutive Act of the African Union expressed this concern:

“You are all aware that the developed countries of Europe, North America, Latin America and the Asia-Pacific regions are moving steadily towards political and economic integration. The European Union is expanding and the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) has, at a ... summit in Canada, decided to establish a free Trade Area of the Americas. The association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Forum, are both examples of the growing global trend towards economic regionalism, Africa cannot afford to be left behind”

The tendency for Africa to imitate or present the mirror image of the rest of the world particularly the West smacks of the lack of sui generis initiative in development strategy (ies) for Africa. Of course, one may argue that the ideals of Pan-Africanism predate global integration projects. What cannot be denied however is the fact that the present development in Africa is a response to global trends.

The third platform for the desire for African integration is hinged on the belief that Africa need to come together to be able to resist, Western influence and ability, to constrain Africa to accept measures considered not to be in the interest of Africa. This ‘coalition for resistance’ argument originally assumes that, Africa is at the receiving end, negative that is, of international economic, political, and social relations. Abdel Rahman Mohamed Shalgam essentially expressed the same point albeit in a different language when he declared that despite Africa’s victory over colonialism and racism it is required for the purpose of reinforcing Africa’s unity and cooperation to Unite. The ultimate objective is for Africa to be able to effectively confront the challenges of a world that is rapidly involved in integration projects (*African Association of Political Science AAPS Newsletter*, 2001:64.).

These three strands highlight integration in Africa as a responsorial objective. So is the thinking of replicating European integration in Africa. The problem of this project begins with the understanding that response infers a non-anticipative attitude towards development efforts in Africa. Extended, response also means that such policy (ies) do not address concrete issues. More importantly, the advantage of the initial policy initiator is not by such policy reduced.

Contemplating Africa's Prospects for Success at Regional Integration

What the above implies is that, the success or failure of the integration project in Africa is not an index of the fortunes of other integrations. The strongest argument for integration remains the strength it provides for Africa to bargain. As the OAU secretary general stated in his progress report on the implementation of the treaty establishing the African Economic Community, there is the need "...For Africa to speak with one voice, and abide by commonly agreed African positions, as this would reinforce Africa's negotiating power in this age of globalization" (*African Association of Political Science AAPS Newsletter*, 2001:10). As already implied above, the utility of this perspective is depended on whether the bargain is carried on, in line with perceived interest or as necessitated by external factors.

Apart from the strategy adopted in the utilization of combined bargain and the general inadequacy of responsorial social policy, a number of other factors can be identified as explaining the tendency for African integration not to be a guarantee of success, in contrast to global trends.

These reasons can be divided into two, namely, structural and sociological. Three dimensions of the structural aspect can be identified. The first is the structural poverty of the African continent. By structural poverty, we refer to the lack of structures, both concrete and ideological, that function to ensure social continuity. Africa is replete with cases of policy failures, administrative incapacities, and the general failure of the public realm.

It can therefore be logically argued that the structural problems of the atomic units of an integrated Africa will be manifested in the operations of a united Africa. This argument is not just speculative. The policy of a common travel document in West Africa is a reference point. It would have been expected that human traffic between West African borders would be unhindered as a result of that policy. On the contrary, the usual inhibitions and especially, corrupt activities have continued to upset free human traffic; so that the policy was unable to achieve its desired objectives.

The second structural problem is the level of organizational maturity of the AU, which is expected to give birth to the United States of Africa. Indeed, the African Union is "...intended to be a transformation of the existing institutional framework into a qualitatively higher form of integration and cooperation that would better meet the aspiration of the peoples of Africa for greater unity and solidarity in line with the vision of the founding fathers" (*African Association of Political Science AAPS Newsletter*, 2001:18). Incorporated in this line of thought, is the consideration that the African Union is a living institution undergoing an evolutionary process which had the merger of the OAU and AEC as its ultimate destination (*African Association of Political Science AAP Newsletter*, 2001:18).

However, if the tripartite view (*African Association of Political Science AAPS Newsletter*, 2001:14) on the status of the OAU in relation to the AU is anything to go by, it could be inferred that the OAU had not attained organizational actualization. Were the opposite to be the case, it would have been readily obvious, what the relationship between the African Union and OAU could and ought to be. The European Economic Community had already attained a high level of efficiency before its transition to the European Union. This is in addition to the efficiency levels that the various countries are expected to bring to the activities of the European Union. The attainment of organizational efficiency by the EEC before transition to union is one basis to expect the success of the European Union.

On the contrary, the OAU, as Cervanka has noted, cannot be described as an organization that attained fulfillment. When, for example, rated in terms of regional cohesion, economic development, and the creation of a peaceful Africa. Consequently, it can be expected that the African Union would inherit this burden of lack of fulfillment from the OAU. The implication is that, ab initio, African integration is not guaranteed of success, unlike its other global examples.

The sociological factors militating against African integration include the following. First, is the lack of political will on the part of the African governments to submit domestic political and economic interest to supranational institutions. Currently, Nigeria has vision 20/20/20. How well various domestic policies will be harmonized is yet to be seen.

The lack of good governance and rule of law coupled with debilitating civil wars and armed conflicts is another sociological reason not to expect success for the integration project in Africa so far, the AU has not shown sufficient commitment in troubled spots like Darfur. One reason why Africa might as well have been dubbed the 'troubled continent' is the endless circle of civil wars and political crisis. It is heartwarming that article 30 of the constitutive act of the African union prescribes that any "government which shall come to power through unconstitutional means shall not be allowed to participate in the activities of the union". What is left to be seen is whether national interest, real or apparent, will not frustrate this legal stipulation aimed at bringing sanity to Africa's 'madhouse of politics'.

The inadequate mechanisms for equitable sharing of the costs and benefits of regional arrangements are another factor working against success for African integration. One fundamental problem of the OAU was the inability or shall we say unwillingness on the part of African states to pay their annual dues. If this culture of not honoring financial obligations is carried over to the integrated union, success cannot be guaranteed. Importantly, there is not the understanding or maybe appreciation in Africa, of the fact that benefits are shared in a manner corresponding to responsibility, more so in international relations. Subsequently, the success of the integration project in Africa is dependent on, the willingness of African states to accept the responsibility of organizing for and consequently, reaping the benefits of success. Then and only then will the African Union make meaning because, integration is aimed at reaping such benefits.

Another reason not to expect automatic success for the integration project in Africa is the lack of policy consistency and credibility as well as antipathy to market-oriented economic reforms; in Nigerian for example, the market-oriented economic reforms of the Obasanjo years is being completely reversed by the Yar' Adua regime. Such policy vacillation and reversals in the implementation of reforms is not consistent with a successful integration project. Africa has not, at least, in the days of the OAU shown consistent commitment to organizational goals. If this attitude is carried over into the African Union, the result is predictable failure.

Beyond antipathy, the creation of a market driven economy in Africa is constrained by the absence of an investment friendly public coupled with the low regulatory capacity of most African states (see Okhonmina, 2003:40-44). The current trend in which foreign investors take advantage of privatization programmes in Africa leaves much to be desired. The perpetration of foreign hold on African economies will not result in the much-desired locally constructed and driven economies.

The absence of organizational harmony between and amongst regional groupings in Africa poses another threat to the success of African integration. Overlapping memberships of several regional groupings, with duplicative mandates and structures, leading to inadequate financing of the integration process and inefficient use of limited resources, is one major index of this organizational disarticulation. It would have been expected that African integration would begin from the harmonization of regional organization. The lack of vision in this regard implies that the objective of the union may be undermined by these sub regional groupings.

A major weakness of Africa policy reform projects is the non-inclusion of its civil society in the planning process. The African Union has evolved mainly as a product of political engineering championed by Libya. Libyan particularly, Gaddafi's leadership in the effort to unionize Africa was recognized that much by Theo Ben Gurirab Namibian Foreign Minister when he recognized Libyan people and leadership in their "...mission to establish the African Union" (*African Association of Political Science AAPS Newsletter* 2001:3).

Apart from the elaborate inauguration ceremony, which involved public celebration, very little has been done in terms of mass mobilization. The involvement of the African Development Bank, Economic Commission for Africa and regional economic groups such as Economic Community of West African States (*African Association of Political Science AAPS Newsletter*, 2001:4), cannot substitute for civil society involvement. Such integration projects without the involvement of the peoples of Africa always tend to fail. Gaddafi recognized this much at the 9th summit of the African Union in Accra.

What is being presented here is not a pessimistic evaluation of the African Union. Rather, it is a timely awakening that Pan-Africanism must endeavor to achieve contemporary definitions and relevance for it to successfully serve as the philosophical basis for African integration. Part of this process involves heeding the call by the gradualist for fundamental issues to be addressed before a consideration of greater integration.

Conclusion

Ali Mazrui (2001) noted that Karl Max's call for workers of the world to unite was of particular relevance to Africa because they were the first workers of the world. Their peculiar conditions required an idea in the form of Pan-Africanism to unite them. Even today, peculiar conditions still exist for Africa to unite. Indeed, Africa must unite (Nkrumah, 1963) but for what? Fundamental to the Pan-African struggle is the need to achieve development and shrug off the chains of oppression. If this is the focus, the underlining philosophy must also be so defined in such a way that the objective is achieved.

In the case of Africa, Pan-Africanism is the philosophy of integration. As we have noted before, this philosophy is flawed in many contemporary respects. For it to be meaningful there is need to subject it to redefinition. For example, unity on the basis of equality is a project that is difficult because hierarchical power relations are a reality. Whenever there has been unity or union as in the case of Europe, there was first the emergence of regional (super) powers. It is doubtful if the Economic Community of West African States would have been a reality but for the pioneering work of Nigeria, a regional power. What is more, power status is dependent on recognition by peers and smaller states willing to accept the legitimate authority of those at the top (Hurrell, 2000:3); this also applies for regional powers (Nolte, 2007:12). The current arrangement in Africa does not recognize this power reality; thus we wait to see how integration can be achieved without regional powers playing their traditional role.

Pan-Africanism as it is, is fixated in the past and such fixation on racial similarities does not allow Africa to fully exploit the benefits of a globalizing world. The benefits of an expanded frontier have already been noted (Barry, 1997). Rather than continue to rely on ancient racial affinities, Africa should redefine those identifies in terms of modern needs and realities. For example, Africa should not feel threatened with globalization because there is abundant evidence to show that, historically, Africa was part of the globalization trend (Mazrui, 2001) and indeed, when properly examined we would discover that the prevailing global cultures and social practices that are being exported to Africa today are indeed the same cultural practices that were exported from Africa during the enslavement era, the only difference being that they have undergone transformation (Mazrui, 2001:6; Almeida, 1986; Downey, 2005).

The assumption that all Africans have a common interest and are therefore expected to fight on the same side may not hold true in all cases. It should be expected that when their interest conflict their commonality will give way. Such was the case that even in the early days of Pan-Africanism, the Liberian elite refused Marcus Garvey the right to settle African Americans in their territory for fears based either on elite perceptions or colonial pressures (Martin, 1976), outright disapproval of Garvey's perception and expectations of the Pan-African struggle (Cronon, 1969:129) or in the outright defense of self interest (Chalk, 1967:141). Such disagreements and divisions would even be deeper now.

Finally, Pan-Africanism and the proposed transition to a United States of Africa do not address a fundamental aspect of Africa's development problem namely, the leadership question. Certainly, unity is important, however it is not sufficient to guarantee success and development, and a great first step (Cromer, 1997). But how that step is taken is profoundly strategic to the achievement of set objectives.

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