

2007

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Recommended Citation

Selassie. 2007. "The Bumpy Road from Accra to Addis Ababa: Recollections of an Observer/Participant." *Societies Without Borders* 2 (1): 49-62.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol2/iss1/4>

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Societies Without Borders 2 (2007) 49–62

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The Bumpy Road from Accra to Addis Ababa: Recollections of an Observer/Participant

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Received 10 April 2006; accepted 30 June 2006

Abstract

This article tells the story of the creation of the first pan-African organization – the Organization of African Unity (OAU) – and of some of the most crucial political events of post-colonial African affairs that preceded its establishment, notably the All-African Peoples Conference (AAPC) convened by Ghana's first President Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. Taking the form of an account of an observer-cum-participant of some momentous events in modern African history (such as the AAPC and OAU), it gives a sense of the passionate commitment to African freedom and dignity as well as the desire, on the part of some African leaders, notably Kwame Nkrumah, for African unity. The description of the proceedings of the first (founding) conference of the OAU catches the mood of the times.

El camino bacheado de Accra a Addis Ababa

Este artículo cuenta la historia de la creación de la primera organización panafricana – la Organización para la Unidad Africana (OUA) – y de algunos de los acontecimientos políticos más cruciales de los la época poscolonial que precedieron a su establecimiento, especialmente la Conferencia de Países Africanos (CPA), convocada por el primer presidente de Ghana, el Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. Escrita desde el punto de vista de la posición de observador-partícipe de algunos de los momentos más importantes de la historia moderna de Africa, (como la de CPA y OUA), proporciona un sentido de compromiso apasionado por la libertad y la dignidad africanas, al tiempo que el deseo de parte de sus líderes, en especial Kwame Nkrumah, por conseguir la unidad. La descripción de la primera conferencia de la OUA captura el clima existente en aquel entonces.

La route bosselée d'Accra vers Addis Ababa

Cet article raconte l'histoire de la création de la première organization panAfricaine – l'Organisation de l'Unité Africaine (OUA) – et des certains événements politiques les plus important des affaires africaines post-coloniales qui ont précédé leur existence, notamment la Conférence des Africains (CA) qui s'est assemblée par le premier Président de Ghana Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. Prenant la forme d'un compte d'un observateur et participant aux

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DOI: 10.1163/187188607X163257

événements importants dans l'histoire africaine moderne, il communique l'engagement passionné à la liberté africaine et la dignité aussi bien que le désir de la part des chefs africains, notamment Nkrumah, de l'unité africaine. La description des démarches de la première conférence (la fondation) de la OUA reflète l'humeur en ce temps-là.

Keywords

African Union, Pan-Africanism, Organization of African Union, Haile Selassie, Kwame Nkrumah

Biographical Sketch of Bereket Habte Selassie

by Julius E. Nyang'oro

There are only a few people who can legitimately claim to have enjoyed a front row seat as witnesses to Africa's political development for almost five decades. Professor Bereket Habte Selassie is one of those few. His remarkable (hi)story is also the complex history of the African continent in the latter part of the twentieth century. His own personal triumphs and tragedies seem to encapsulate the triumphs and tragedies of Africa during this period.

After receiving his legal training in the United Kingdom, Bereket (as we all call him) joined the service of the Ethiopian government in 1956, serving in various capacities before being appointed the youngest Attorney General in 1962 at the tender age of thirty. By any standards, this was a remarkable professional and personal accomplishment. However, only a few years after this appointment, he resigned his post in protest to the way the Ethiopian government under Emperor Haile Selassie dealt with Eritrea, his homeland, which had been joined with Ethiopia in a United Nations-arranged federation. In 1962, ten years after the federation was put in effect, the Emperor unilaterally abolished the federation and sent his army of occupation to Eritrea, thus provoking a thirty-year war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and also forcing Bereket to resign. At this point Bereket's political and personal fates, and Eritrea's political fate became intertwined. For the subsequent three decades, Bereket moved from being the most powerful legal personality in Ethiopia to a freedom fighter in the cause of Eritrean liberation, and then to being Chair of the Constitutional Commission of Eritrea, charged with the responsibility of putting together a constitution for a newly liberated country.* During this entire period, Bereket showed remarkable resilience, patience, and love for his native country without exhibiting hatred or disdain for Ethiopia, a country that had benefited from his legal talents and loyalty, and yet had at one time put a price on his head.

By the ensuing essay, Bereket narrates his exploits as a participant at the 1958 All African People's Conference in Ghana, and his participation as Ethiopia's chief lawyer at the inauguration of the Organization of African Unity in 1963. He modestly and casually mentions his "supportive" role on the Ethiopian team at these crucial conferences, but it is clear that he was present at two defining moments in the recent history of Africa's political development. I have been privileged to experience his modesty while working with him as a colleague at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am pleased that his contribution to the task of African unity is now being shared with the rest of the world.

**Editors' note:* Selassie is largely responsible for writing the Eritrean Constitution (not in force). It is one of the most progressive in the world. See: http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/er00000_.html

Introduction

This article is a subjective account of certain events and personalities in modern African history. In this personal account, I write what a storyteller might recount to a group orally about a particular set of issues, personalities, and events.

I describe how Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie "discovered" Africa and why he began to play a role in African affairs in the post-colonial era. Then I describe the convening of the All African Peoples Conference in Accra, an event of great significance in the yet-unfulfilled vision of Pan Africanism. Finally, I mention the creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU); and then a brief evaluation of the record of the OAU.

When Haile Selassie Embraced Africa

When I think of the exciting early days of post-independence Africa, a rush of memories come to my mind – memories of persons, and of events of a bygone era that feels so near and yet is so far to the present generation of Africans. To my generation, Addis Ababa and Accra acquired symbolic meanings beyond their status as capital cities of two African countries by acting as book-ends in the historic movement for independence and unification. Yet, before I delve into the discussion of the two historic events, it is relevant, from my own perspective, to describe in outline Ethiopia's position on African liberation and unity and Emperor Haile Selassie's role in "Africanizing" Ethiopia.

Haile Selassie was an elder statesman who had become an internationally renowned figure long before any one of the other African leaders that shared the platform with him in May 1963. Most of the men who were to become leaders of their nations in the late 1950s and early 1960s were students when the Emperor made his famous appeal to the League of Nations in Geneva in 1936, urging the assembled delegates to stop Mussolini's aggression on his country. In his memoirs, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela writes that he was a boy of seventeen when Mussolini conquered Ethiopia in 1936. "Ethiopia has always held a special place in my own imagination," he writes, adding, "... Meeting the Emperor himself would be like shaking hands with history."¹ It would be almost another thirty years, however, before Mandela would meet Selassie in person, on the eve of the Addis Ababa meeting.

¹) Mandela 1994, p. 293.

Haile Selassie's impassioned appeal at the League of Nations in 1936 was ignored allowing naked aggression to prevail over international law and morality. This attempt, however, to stop the march of Fascism made him a martyr among the peoples of the world, and in particular among Africans both in the continent and throughout the Diaspora. It also helped reinforce the emerging spirit of Pan Africanism. Indeed, Haile Selassie's position as a "martyr" gave him elevated status as a leader in African affairs, particularly in the early days of decolonization, before people like Nkrumah and Nyerere appeared on the scene and began asserting themselves.

Despite this history, Selassie was reluctant to take up the cause of unification. African liberation was a universally held value in Africa; nonetheless, people had differing views on ways of achieving it. Not all leaders felt that the countries could unite across the vast continent against their colonial oppressors and felt more inclined to fight colonialism country by country. While some leaders, like Nkrumah, took the initiative in unification as a goal unto itself, Haile Selassie had to be coaxed and challenged to take up pan-Africanism.

When Selassie took up the African cause, he did so in earnest and with characteristic single-mindedness. Nkrumah's challenge had hit home and the Emperor's close advisors persuaded him to turn his attention to Africa. He did so immediately after Nkrumah convened the conference of African Heads of State and Government in the spring of 1958, to which the Emperor sent his youngest son, Sahle Selassie.

The Emperor decided to establish a scholarship fund for African students to study at the University College of Addis Ababa. Two hundred scholarships were awarded and students came from West, East and Central Africa. Some of these students ended up occupying important ministerial and other positions in their own countries. The best example of these was Mr. Robert Ouko of Kenya who became Foreign Minister of his country until he was brutally murdered, allegedly by agents of President Daniel Arap Moi. Some of these students took my classes at the University College of Addis Ababa.

The Emperor's government also invited leaders of African liberation movements, encouraging them and providing assistance. Consequently, young African leaders from the political as well as labor union movements began frequenting the Ethiopian capital, and the Ethiopian media began putting a positive spin on African liberation movements. Among the emerging leaders with whom I struck friendship at the time were Tom Mboya of Kenya and Felix Momouie of Cameroun. Mboya ended up becoming the second most important political figure in Kenya until he was assassinated by

jealous rivals of his own party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU). And Felix Moumie was poisoned in Geneva by an agent of the French Secret Service. These and other African leaders like Nyerere and Kaunda enriched the political experience of Ethiopians by speeches they delivered at public meetings as well as at private meetings that some of my friends and I arranged.

These developments reinforced the Pan-African connection in Ethiopia, which contributed to an awareness among Ethiopians of their African identity and enhanced their desire for change within Ethiopia. Some of the scholarship students had been involved in their respective countries' liberation movements and regularly received newspapers from political parties in their homelands. Ethiopian students who were never exposed to a free press had access to these newspapers. More importantly, the daily interaction of the students with fellow Africans generated free discussions, which inevitably led to questioning of the status quo in Ethiopia. In university debates, students fearlessly challenged official government policies and hitherto unquestioned dogmas. An example of the growing awareness among Ethiopian students of their African identity was found in the anthem, which the students composed, entitled "*Africa Abgurachen*" ("Africa Our Continent"). This shift marked a break with the past of insularity and exceptionalism. Until then, as one journalist put it, "Ethiopia had been in Africa but not of Africa."

The students' bold adventure into things political, which was supposed to be *terra prohibita*, eventually led to open challenge of the status quo. Such challenge reached a decisive point during the attempted military coup of December 1960 in which the Emperor's trusted Head of the Imperial Body Guard and Chief of Security were involved. The Emperor on his part, who was shaken by that failed coup, found African affairs a useful distraction; some would argue that he neglected domestic matters in favor of African affairs, somewhat in the manner of a husband neglecting his wife in favor of a new-found mistress.

It is ironic that the forces that challenged the Emperor were creatures of his own modernization programs, including the armed forces and the students who were products of the university education that he pioneered and of which he was proud. The Emperor did not anticipate this "betrayal" any more than he anticipated that Africa's decolonization and his own Scholarship Program would contribute to a process of undermining the basis of his rule. Nevertheless, undermine it they did, and even as he made forays into African affairs, student activism and labor union agitation, including strikes,

became frequent. Moreover, my own life was filled with problems. As I explain in detail in my Memoirs (“The Crown and the Pen...”), at the time of the creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), my life was full of tension marked by contradictions. I was a high ranking government lawyer engaged in the administration of justice, and at the same time involved in activities that were against the system, and thus potentially disastrous to me and my family. I straddled two diametrically opposed worlds; it would be only a matter of time before the inherent tension simmering below the surface would seek release, and before my secret life as an underground organizer would catch up with me.

* * *

The Accra Conference in December 1958 unleashed great hopes and expectations among Africa’s peoples especially young people like myself – hopes and expectations of the liberation of Africa from colonial rule as well as of continental unity as fervently advocated by the visionary Ghanaian leader, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. The establishment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) seemed to lend credence to those hopes and aspirations. The next six years saw the liberation of the majority of African countries from European colonial rule. But let me start from the beginning.

All African Peoples Conference

One morning, I was surprised to learn that I had been selected to be a member of the Ethiopian delegation to participate in a conference in Ghana.

The All African Peoples Conference of 1958 was a meeting of political parties, liberation movements, labor unions, women’s organizations, and student and youth organizations. The Conference took place at a watershed moment between the colonial and post-colonial periods. Political and social movements from all over Africa, from Algeria to Southern Africa, and from Zanzibar to Gambia, participated in the Conference. The inviting entity was the Convention Peoples Party (CPP), Nkrumah’s party. Its members invited over one hundred organizations of different political parties and mass organizations, representing over thirty countries. Of the countries represented, only eight were independent at the time, namely, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia. All the others that sent delegations were still under colonial occupation, albeit in the final phase of their progress toward independence.

It was the first of its kind and perhaps the last. Many delegates were destined to lead their respective nations to independence in the 1960s and become household words in Africa. The renowned writer of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon led the Algerian delegation. Because of my knowledge of French, I ended up spending more time with members of the Algerian and Tunisian delegations, as well as with other Francophone Africans, acting as unofficial interpreter between English- and French-speaking delegates. One thing that impressed me was how much the delegates from sub-Saharan Africa respected and became friendly with the North African delegates. The Algerians and their *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) had become a household word among literate Africans. When Franz Fanon walked up the steps and stood on the platform to address the Conference, there was a standing ovation.

Several delegates used the conference to express their political views and to oppose the colonialist regimes out of which their countries were emerging. A Kenyan, Dr. Kiano, spoke in the name of the Kenya delegation. Before he delivered his speech, Kiano surprised the audience by unfurling a huge banner on which was written a slogan, “Release Kenyatta now.” He waved the banner and the conference hall went wild with excitement and applause. The British colonial authorities had detained Kenyatta on charges of “terrorism” as leader for the Mau Mau movement, and he had become an African hero overnight.

However, one man captured the African imagination; of all the participants, one delegate was to make history and become an African martyr and hero overnight. That man was Patrice Lumumba of the former Belgian Congo. The political landscape of the Congo was confused at best in those days, with the ruling Belgian colonial authorities discouraging the emergence of leaders who supported independence. Lumumba was a fiercely independent-minded nationalist whom the Belgians and their American allies marked for elimination on a false charge of being a communist. It is doubtful if Lumumba had any link to the “Socialist Party” listed in the official roster of invited parties.

It is difficult to fully capture the enthusiasm and sense of optimism about Africa’s future we felt at the All African Peoples Conference in 1958. The Conference created such enthusiasm that to many of us young people the millennium seemed around the corner. The songs, the drumming, the dances and demonstrations, the speeches, the resolutions and slogans reflected this spirit of optimism. The prime mover of this new African awakening was President Kwame Nkrumah whom most of the participants saluted as a

visionary leader and as a source of inspiration, particularly to the young among them. Nkrumah's strategy was to mobilize the political and social forces of the African continent and set them to work for the total liberation and eventual unity of Africa.

However, in the end, he was not able to convince the government leaders to accept his agenda of African liberation and unity. They paid lip service to the need for Africa's liberation, but they were not willing or able to commit the necessary funds and manpower to achieve that end. As for African unity, which Nkrumah preached as a fundamental goal, not only were they divided along ideological lines – some siding with the West, while others had Soviet leanings – but they were ensconced in their newly acquired power structure, which was often a vestige of colonialism or newly minted by capitalism or Soviet dogmatism. Clearly, other forces had to be mobilized to put pressure to bear on the independent governments in order to adopt Nkrumah's agenda of continental liberation and unity. This was the main reason that had prompted Nkrumah to convene the All African Peoples Conference.

Creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU)

The Organization of African Unity was formed in May 1963, following two years of intense negotiations among the African leaders, hitherto polarized along ideological and personal axes of division. Before the establishment of the OAU, African states were mired in division. The main groups were known, respectively, as the Monrovia and Casablanca group of nations; the first generally understood to represent pro-Western countries, while the second was said to be critical of the West, oriented towards Egypt and Ghana. One of the achievements of the creation of the OAU was to put to rest the division by creating a continental body, which sought to speak with one voice on behalf of the continent.

Emperor Haile Selassie acted as host to the conference, which was held in Addis Ababa. It opened as the Pan-African idea of continental unity became popular and changes were afoot in international relations. The end of European colonial rule and the rise of the Non-Aligned Movement of "Third World" countries occurred against a backdrop of a divided East-West rivalry for global influence and control. The United Nations, which was created to act as a harmonizing center of nations, had instead become an ideological battleground between East and West with the emergence of blocs in which Third World countries began to play a significant role. Their votes were

sought and their friendship was cultivated by the rival Global Powers – the United States of America and its Western allies on the one hand, and the Soviet Bloc on the other.

African leaders arrived in Addis Ababa at the newly constructed Bole Airport welcomed by Prime Minister Aklilu Habtewold and some of his colleagues. It was as though the city was on the edge of its political nerve; Africa had indeed come to Ethiopia. When Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana arrived, an advance guard waited for him to come out of the airplane. As soon as he set his foot on the ground, they brought a sheep, slaughtered it, and had him cross over the blood of the slaughtered animal. At my own wedding, one of my best men suggested that I make a similar crossing over a slaughtered goat. It is believed that this chases evil spirits away but I have never been inclined to believe in such superstitions.

The other remarkable arrival was that of Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser. When I arrived ahead of Nasser's scheduled arrival, I found the airport filled with hundreds of thousands of people. Most of them were turbaned country folks; it was obvious that they were Ethiopian Muslims who had come from the countryside – from Harar, Jimma, Arsi, Sidamo and elsewhere in distant provinces of the country. It was an emphatic demonstration of solidarity to Gamal Abdel Nasser, a hero of the Muslim world at a time when Muslims felt excluded from government affairs in a country ruled by a Christian king.

No sooner had his tall figure appeared at the door of the plane than the multitude voiced their feelings, shouting "NASSER! NASSER! NASSER!..." The ground beneath our feet was shaking. Nasser waved his hands with supreme pleasure. It was a powerful moment for all who witnessed it. Nevertheless, as the Ethiopian Prime Minister led Nasser towards the VIP reception lounge, I could see from his furrowed brow that he could not hide his own displeasure.

The conference commenced at Africa Hall with much pomp and ceremony. The gallery of the Hall was filled to capacity by the international press. The world did not expect the conference to succeed in establishing a united Africa; indeed, it was assumed African leaders were too much divided culturally and politically to agree.

I will cite an example of the interplay of African culture and diplomacy when the Emperor employed these combined resources in the service of African unity. Nkrumah had threatened to walk out of the conference when he discovered to his dismay that his pleas for a stronger, and immediate, union of African states was rejected by the others. The conference reached a

moment of crisis. The outside press had a hard time disguising their satisfaction. Several caucuses were held to resolve the crisis but Nkrumah was adamant. When all were about to give up, the Emperor approached Sekou Toure and, holding his hand and looking him in the eye, pleaded with him to pacify Nkrumah. The Emperor addressed Sekou Toure as an African father pleading with his son, calling him, “*mon fils, je vous prie.*” (“My son, I implore you.”) Sekou Toure responded as an African son would to his father and replied, “*Oui père, je vais essayer.*” (“Yes father, I will try.”)

And try he did – and succeeded. He persuaded Nkrumah to stay and be patient with the progress towards the goal of African unity. Nkrumah’s decision to be part of the creation of the OAU was a source of much jubilation among Africans, especially my generation who banked on ideas of African unity as an historical imperative if Africa was to progress. This sentiment was also shared widely among older delegates, as I found out talking to some of the Ethiopian Ministers and military officers. General Isayas Gebre-Selassie said how happy he was Nkrumah did not walk out. The general said that he thought Nkrumah’s was the only way for Africa.

Nkrumah kept quiet through much of the remaining sessions until the closing session when he came back with his usual eloquence. He began his closing address by reminding us that to the ancient Greeks the name Ethiopia referred to all of Sub-Saharan Africa. He then waxed poetic paying tribute to the conference host, Emperor Haile Selassie and his people. It was a short address; he started by saying, “I leave you with these thoughts,” and then, paraphrasing biblical passages he ended, intoning, “Ethiopia shall rise/Ethiopia, beacon of African freedom/Land of the wise, Ethiopia shall rise . . . etc.” This was received with prolonged cheering and applause.

A serious incident that threatened to interrupt the conference was when Somalia’s President Aden Abdalla unexpectedly brought up “the Ogaden question,” accusing Ethiopia of being an occupying imperial power. Aklilu, Ethiopian Prime Minister, rose to respond and as he climbed the podium one could feel the tension as if the temperature rose by a few degrees – again, much to the joy of the international press; some were seen rushing out to send the news back to their headquarters. The chair of the conference appealed for calm and sought ways to mediate the conflict. It was then that President Modibo Keita of Mali, “the gentle giant,” rose to suggest a solution; he asked for a break and the chair gratefully accepted. Modibo Keita mediated a solution and the conference resumed its business.

There were many eloquent speeches. There were moments of serious challenge to the moral and intellectual sensibilities of Africans. Ahmed Ben

Bella's speech caught the African imagination by urging his brethren to speak less of banks and development and more of creating of blood banks to be used for the liberation of the territories that were still under colonial rule. He made an impassioned appeal "in the name of the one million Algerian martyrs of the revolution waged to liberate Algeria." He became an instant hero among the Addis Ababa population.

In the midst of the serious business of state there was much laughter and jokes. The President of Madagascar (Malagasy) was long-winded in his address which he punctuated by ad lib statements. He began these statements by saying, "*Et ici, je fais un parenthèse*" ("And here I would like to say in parenthesis"), and repeated this several times earning him the sobriquet of "Parenthetical President" among the African literati.

There were also mutual compliments and peace-making among sworn enemies. Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, who was not on speaking terms with Houphouët Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire, suddenly found himself complimented by his erstwhile adversary. Houphouët Boigny showered Senghor with compliments and offered an olive branch to the "*poète extraordinaire de la poésie française*." Senghor accepted the olive branch graciously. The mood of reconciliation even affected the Ethiopian and Somali leaders.

Perhaps the most hilarious occasion occurred during the closing session of the conference. The conference organizers agreed that the closing address be made by the newest member of the African states, which happened to be Uganda. It fell on the young Prime Minister Milton Obote to deliver the closing address. The speech included words of thanks to the host country, its government and people, among other points. Obote, in his eagerness to please the host government overstepped his bounds. He thanked the Ethiopian government for "looking after us day and night."

Well, the Ethiopian government did indeed look after the guests day and night. The female denizens of the "Red Light District" in Addis Ababa had been mobilized to serve their country and Emperor under the able hand of one Asseghedech Alamiro, Chief Madam of the District. The organization of these ladies of the night was a subtle gesture of hospitality and good politick. The government had coached and admonished the women to behave like proud Africans and devotees of African unity and to be ready to perform their services in pursuit of that noble ideal. Nocturnal arrangements were made so that African leaders and their entourage did not feel lonely and cold at night.**

***) *Editors' note*: We point out that German cities built mobile brothels and installed condom dispensers in the run-up to the 2006 World Cup – see *Sunday Herald* (Scotland), 26 February 2006:

I was told by an unimpeachable source that Aseghedech Alamiro and a few of her nocturnal comrades were awarded medals by His Majesty, who commended them for their loyal service to king and country. Indeed, such service continued long after the emperor died in 1975. Addis Ababa and the nocturnal ladies have proved an inestimable asset in foiling any attempts to move the OAU (Now the AU) to other African capitals. The complaint whispered by attending leaders during such attempts to move the conference is “Why are they trying to deprive us of the pleasure of this hospitable city?” (The AIDS epidemic may have somewhat tempered this sentiment.)

The OAU: All Things to All States

Now let me summarize the achievement of the OAU as well as its weaknesses. The draft Charter was approved with little change. The OAU adopted the UN principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity. To begin with, for the OAU, as is the case for the UN, governments, not people, are represented in the organization. Colonial history shaped the modern Africa state system: What became national boundaries were fixed by European rulers and cross-cut ethnic lines in almost all cases. Thus the prohibition, by the OAU Charter, of interference in the internal affairs of a nation.

A year later, at the second OAU meeting of heads of state and government held in Cairo, the colonial borders were accepted as lines defining post-colonial African Statehood. Nkrumah had advocated the creation of a United States of Africa that would transcend the colonial (and pre-colonial) legacy and transform the fragmented state system created by colonial history. He argued that the post-colonial state system would be politically divisive and economically wasteful, a contention that proved prophetic. The tension between the Pan-Africanist idea and the fragmented state system is implicit in the compromise solution embedded in Article II of the OAU Charter, which advocates “the promotion of solidarity and cooperation” among African States, as well as the defense of their territorial integrity.

The OAU was thus a creature of compromise, which bridged the gap between a hitherto ideologically and geographically divided continent. This was no mean achievement. But as a creature of compromise, the OAU tended to be all things to all governments, and many of its resolutions by and large

<http://www.sundayherald.com/54291>. Selassie may be making a generalizable statement concerning prostitutes at male-dominated events.

have been ineffectual. Controversial issues were continually postponed for fear of a split in the organization, a condition that denied it the opportunity to exert moral authority to censure errant leaders or governments, even those engaged in grave violations of human rights, such as Idi Amin of Uganda, Mengistu of Ethiopia and Siyad Barre of Somalia.

To its credit, the OAU could boast of some successful mediation of conflicts. The first such mediation concerned a territorial dispute between Algeria and Morocco. It was followed by other efforts in the Congo in the mid-1960s and in Nigeria in the late 1960s. In all such cases the issues were clear-cut and the debates focused and coherent. “OAU Principles” of sovereignty and territorial integrity were applied with clarity and consistency, since there was a consensus on that from the outset. African Presidents and Prime Ministers were ensconced in the power structures of their respective countries, which none of them wished to abandon. Poor Nkrumah, he did not appreciate this fact, engrossed as he was in his admirable ideal of African unity. Some of the African leaders even accused him of inordinate ambition to become “The First George Washington of Africa.”

In Southern Africa and the decolonization of the former Portuguese territories of Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau, African leaders used the OAU machinery and moral authority to good advantage. The OAU established the Liberation Committee through which financial and military assistance was channeled to the liberation fighters of those territories, while at the same time diplomatic campaigns were conducted in support of their respective causes.

The OAU fell far short of its stated objectives and periodic rhetorical commitments when it concerned itself with the settlement of more complex interstate and intrastate conflicts. Its inability (or unwillingness) to mediate between Ethiopia and Somalia, or to confront the challenges posed by the developments in Eritrea and Southern Sudan, are among its signal failures. On the other hand, it occasionally met challenges head-on, as it did, for example, in the Chad dispute by seating the Habre delegation to the exclusion of the Goukouni delegation in 1987. Again the divisive question of Western Sahara ended in the admission of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic to OAU membership. That decision cost the OAU Morocco’s membership, underscoring the risks which have caused the OAU to postpone the resolution of contentious issues for fear of a split.

I have attended a few annual meetings of the OAU. I have also studied the role of the organization in an academic context, from a detached perspective. My overall conclusion of its performance is thus viewed in a larger historical

perspective. The OAU played its role against a background of a fragmented postcolonial state system with a troubled economy, famine, war and political unrest. All of these factors have undermined Africa's confidence and dampened the earlier enthusiasm. In almost all states, perceived national or domestic needs have dictated harmful policies, including costly militarization. Such conditions do not foster bold moves in the settlement of disputes, but instead induce caution and inaction.

The OAU was changed into the African Union (AU) in 2002, with a new Charter. It is too early to tell whether the new organization will fare better than its predecessor; but it surely cannot do worse. The success or failure of the new organization will hinge on its response to the popular demands for democratic change being made in the context of the global economic revolution, which undermines the very sovereignty principle on which the state system is based.

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