

Dramatic ups and downs in one year
of the search for an elusive unity
in Africa

Arabs and Africans

Frederic Hunter

A remarkable series of events in the first half of this year altered the customary pattern of relations between Africa's Arab nations and its black African states.

Suddenly events suggested that the Arab nations might manage a resurgence of their influence in black Africa. They broke the normal pattern in which feelings of indifference, and sometimes distrust, are submerged in the name of continental unity and in the practice of a you-scratch-my-back-I'll-scratch-yours kind of Third World solidarity. Even more, it appeared as if conditions south of the Sahara might favor this resurgence of Arab influence.

Within the four-month period March-June, 1972, Sudan settled its seventeen-year civil war through peaceful negotiations. Uganda expelled all Israelis, and its Moslem leader, General Idi Amin, embraced his Arab coreligionists. The Arabs demonstrated a revived interest in African unity at the June Organization of African Unity summit meeting held in Rabat, and Morocco's King Hassan became OAU chairman for the year.

This series of events sparked two questions about the possible rise of Arab influence in black Africa. First, did it exist in fact or only in appearance? Second, how solidly was it based? In the second half of the year events provided an answer to these questions.

At present the continent is divided into three cultural-political regions: the Arab north, the black African center and the white, minority-dominated south. In recent years the frontiers between these regions have been areas of military conflict, political earthquake zones.

Sudan straddles one of these frontiers, and its seventeen-year period of sporadic civil war between the Arabicized Moslems controlling the Khartoum



government and the black Christian/animist Nilotes of the remote, undeveloped south tended to exacerbate latent conflicts all along this demographic frontier.

In the Eritrea province of Ethiopia, for example, Moslem guerrilla separatists tried to detach Ethiopia's most highly developed region from the control

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of the Christian imperial government. For that effort they received covert Sudanese support. Arabized Moslem guerrillas of northern Chad harassed the Christian/animist government comprised mainly of the negroid Sara peoples of the south sufficiently to require the intervention of French troops; they received covert support from Libya. Conflicts across the demographic frontier even played a part in triggering Nigeria's thirty-month civil war.

Peace in Sudan has been an event of considerable consequence. As war tended to create tensions along this frontier so peace has made possible a new amity. Negotiations between the Khartoum government and the Anyanya guerrillas were held in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital. These negotiations and earlier reciprocal state visits resulted in significantly improved Sudanese-Ethiopian relations, a development which has a much larger bearing on African-Arab relations. In terms of pan-African unity the peace settlement was taken by African optimists to symbolize the capacity of African and Arab peoples to resolve their differences amicably and live together harmoniously—even though the settlement only initiated the test of that capacity. It offered Sudan a chance to prove that it really is a bridge between Africa's peoples, or, as Sudanese President Jaafar al-Numeiry phrased it, a crucible for African unity.

But the Sudan settlement came about because a personally traumatic event armed General Numeiry with the will to resolve his country's "southern question." This event was the Communist-backed coup of July, 1971, which ousted the general for three days before Libyan intervention helped him regain power.

Prior to the coup the instability of Khartoum governments, plus their lack of will and their Arab-world orientation, made it impossible for them to solve the southern problem. Moreover their failure to solve it produced in part their inherent instability. Also prior to the coup General Numeiry appeared to seek a leadership role in the Arab world, perhaps even aspired to fill the vacancy created by the death of Egypt's President Nasser.

President Numeiry's three-day fall from power appears to have worked basic changes in his viewpoints. It gave him the will to conclude a settlement with the southern rebels. It caused him to abandon—at least temporarily—any aspiration for leadership of the Arab world. It led him to reject possible membership in a union of Arab republics, a course which has strained his relations with Egypt and Libya.

In short, the coup transformed General Numeiry into a Sudanese leader determined to solve Sudanese problems. It is in this role—as a leader not of the Arab world but of the cause of national reconciliation across Sudan's demographic frontier—that his present influence in black Africa is now founded. It is an influence he sought to extend through consultations with the leaders of Uganda, Somalia and Tanzania in July.

By the very nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict and its nearness to black Africa a setback in that area for one side is a gain for the other. Thus the expulsion in April of all Israelis from Uganda, a major reversal of Israel's diplomatic fortunes and prestige, was an important gain for the Arabs. This is especially true because Arab diplomacy appears to have been active in fostering it.

Precisely what motivated the expulsion order remains unclear. Analysts in Uganda believe that it stemmed from various factors, financial, military, religious and diplomatic. Financially General Amin has been living well beyond his foreign-exchange resources since seizing power in January, 1971. He has almost doubled the size of his army, raised its pay and bought expensive military equipment. When, early this year, the Israelis asked for an initial payment of Shs 90 million (about \$13 million) on three development projects worth some \$20 million, the Uganda treasury simply did not have the foreign exchange to meet the obligation. A rupture of relations was one way to solve the problem.

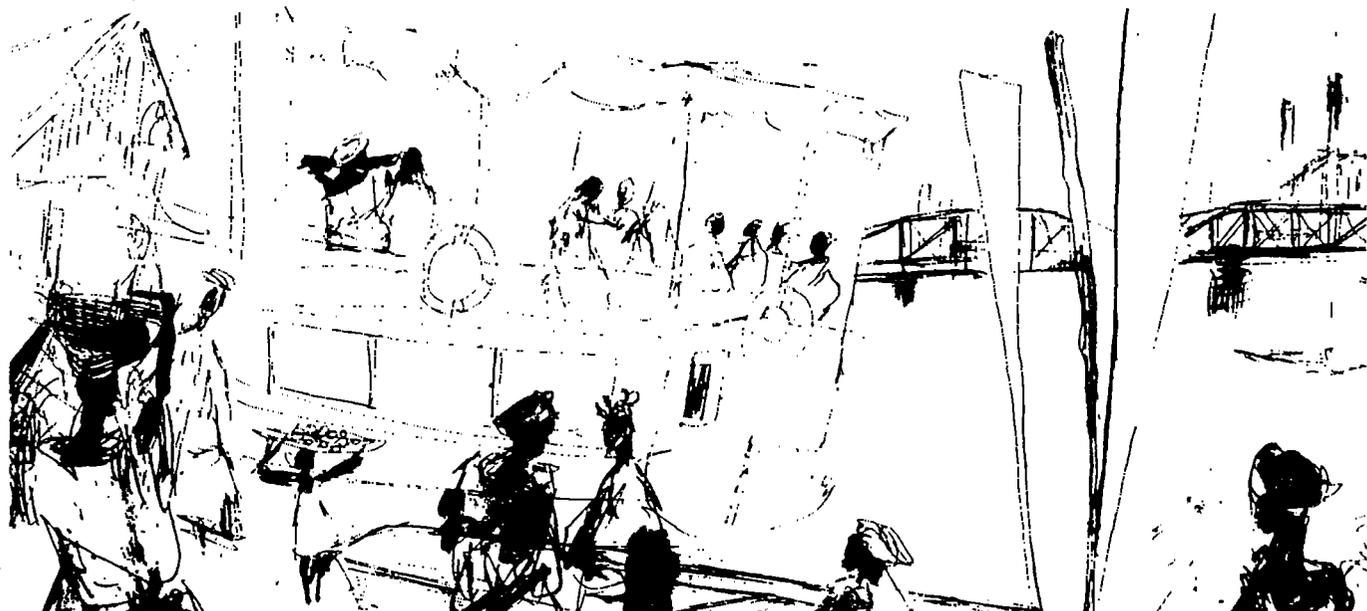
It is thought, however, that the financial problem could have been resolved had not other factors intruded. Kampala-based analysts suggest that by early this year a mutual disenchantment had cooled the extremely cordial Amin-Israel relations of the previous year. Israeli diplomats had begun to realize the extent of the third-grade-educated general's limitations and the fragility of a regime whose power base was a tribally divided army. At the same time, General Amin grew anxious about the extent of Israeli influence in his armed forces; he began to fear that Israeli military advisors had sufficient influence to control the outcome of a possible coup and thus to topple him from power.

The Sudan peace agreement may also have been a factor, particularly since the Israelis had used Uganda as a base for supplying arms to the southern rebels. (Israel supported the Anyanya guerrillas as a means of tying down Sudanese troops on a front far from Mideast battlefields.)

General Amin comes from the West Nile district of northwestern Uganda. As a member of the Kakwa tribe, most of whom live in southern Sudan, he was not unsympathetic to southern Sudanese nationalist aspirations, especially since tribal brothers were among the victims of the war. But once the war ended, his government became interested in strengthening the peace. Anti-Sudanese Israeli activities ran counter to this interest.

General Amin is also a Muslim—and a sufficiently devout one to want to extend his faith's impact on the world scene. This devotion makes him a natural ally of Libya's Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi, the mercurial and wealthy Moslem zealot. Amin's poverty makes him a natural client.

It has been suggested that during General Amin's mid-February visit to Tripoli Colonel Qaddafi of-



ferred him Libyan financial aid on condition that he oust the Israelis from Uganda. It is not clear that this is what happened, but, whatever happened, the cementing of Ugandan-Libyan ties which occurred at that time certainly appears to have played a role in the Israelis' departure. As a means of underscoring his new Arab orientation General Amin visited some nine Arab states during his return trip from the Rabat OAU summit in early June.

The June summit was considered by many African leaders to have been the most effective meeting of the OAU's nine-year history. All but one of the 41 member states (Malawi) were represented. Strong resolutions reinforced the OAU Liberation Committee, whose budget was increased by 50 per cent, and equally vigorous statements on the Middle East were adopted. One resolution "denounced" Israel while "urging" support from member states for Egypt. These resolutions satisfied the special interests of the Arab and black African blocs. The summit raised hopes that interest in African unity had revived and that both the Arab and black African states had found a new basis for cooperating toward its realization.

By July there seemed some reason to believe that Arab influence was increasing in black Africa and that it possessed at least some potential for shaping the African future. Subsequent events demonstrate that the resurgence was as illusory and transient as the post-OAU optimism—except in the special case of the Qaddafi-Amin alliance. Moreover these events have shown that Sudan's capacity to act as a "crucible for African unity" could be achieved only by reducing its ties with the Arab world.

The crucial events exposing African realities were General Amin's abrupt decision to expel all non-citizen Asians within ninety days, the abortive mid-September invasion attempt by Ugandan exiles from Tanzania, and the reactions of African and Arab states to these events.

Observers of the African scene have for a long time been somewhat skeptical of the OAU and its quest for African unity. They know the movement has lost its revolutionary fervor, its conviction that unity can be achieved. Leaders of the movement's revolutionary core have either been overthrown (Ghana's Nkrumah, Mali's Keita, Algeria's Ben Bella) or have turned their attention to domestic problems (Tanzania's Nyerere, Guinea's Touré). Then too world conditions do not presently favor African unity's achievement. The Arabs have been almost totally preoccupied with the Middle East since the 1967 Six-Day War. The Sahara cuts off the Maghreb states from black Africa. Algeria is trying to consolidate an internal revolution while Morocco seeks to forestall one. Along Africa's other fault line, that separating black from white-run Africa, the liberation movements have proved totally impotent. Continental unity does not appear feasible so long as the Arabs look to the Middle East and so long as South Africa, the continent's richest nation, and some thirty million Africans remain under white control. In addition, the American-Soviet and American-Chinese *détentes* remove Africa as an area of big-power competition. Big-power interest in the continent has declined and with it the power of Africans to wrest economic concessions conducive to unity.

Given these conditions and the relative lack of tangible economic or political advantage stemming from the unity movement, there appears little impelling the black African and Arab states to unify.

They really have little in common. They share the same land mass, yet the Sahara separates them more effectively than a body of water. They are both of the Third World, yet they are at different stages of development in it. The Arab states share a common culture, language and religion, all of which are far different from the cultures, languages and religions of the black African states. Even the common experience of foreign domination differs considerably.

The Arab states enjoy a higher culture, technology

and statecraft than the black African states. If they are indeed brothers, the Arabs regard themselves as the older, more experienced brothers. In the past, moreover, Arab enslaved Africans, and the relationship is not unaffected by this history. Most important, few African states feel any real commitment to achieving continental unity—at least not on the conditions presently offered.

This does not mean that the OAU has no real function. It means only that its functions have little to do with fostering African political unity. The OAU does serve as a forum for discussing continental problems, such as dialogue with South Africa; as a means of fostering economic cooperation, such as the All-Africa Trade Fair and the Trans-Africa Highway; as a mediating body for the resolution of African disputes, such as border issues; and as a means of addressing the rest of the world with a louder voice.

The last point is the chief interest of the Arabs, many observers feel. The OAU provides the Arab states with an organization through which they can lobby African support on the Middle East, particularly in the United Nations, and through which they can try to counter Israel's extensive diplomatic contacts and effective technical aid programs in black Africa. In turn the Arabs support the black Africans on the issue of decolonizing white-ruled Africa.

The experience of the East African community amply illustrates the practical problems in trying to implement economic or political unity in Africa. The community comprises a capitalist state (Kenya), a socialist state (Tanzania) and a third partner (Uganda), where policy has been improvised almost literally on a day-to-day basis for almost two years. During these two years Tanzania's President Nyerere has refused to meet with Uganda's General Amin, whose government he does not recognize. As a result the community's highest decision-making body has virtually ceased to function.

President Nyerere has not forgiven General Amin for toppling his socialist colleague Milton Obote from power. His hostility to the Amin government led him to sanction an abortive invasion by Ugandan exile followers of Dr. Obote in mid-September. The invasion, which was quickly routed, brought Uganda and Tanzania to the brink of war. In fact the Ugandan air force carried out three bombing raids against Tanzanian towns.

It was at this point that events stripped away any illusion of a real Arab commitment to continental unity and African brotherhood. While the Somalis and the Camerounian Secretary-General of the OAU sought to put together a peace; while President Boumedienne inveighed from Algiers against the possibility of "fratricidal war" and King Hassan, OAU chairman, offered ineffective counsel from Rabat, where he had just escaped the second

attempt on his life in fifteen months—while all this was happening Colonel Qaddafi sent 400 officers and men and five planes loaded with arms to reinforce his ally-client General Amin. The Libyan action came after the Ugandan army had demonstrated its superiority over the exile invaders and before the Amin regime had encountered any serious military threat. It convincingly proved Colonel Qaddafi's willingness to aid a Moslem ally-client. But because the reinforcements clearly tipped the military balance in Uganda's favor, Qaddafi's action also showed his total disregard for the cause of African peace.

The Libyan action had several consequences. It sparked black African resentment over Arab intervention in a black African affair. It rekindled suspicion that Arab states are interested in black African nations only as their support affects the Middle East crisis. It forced Egypt, now in process of forming a union with Libya, to choose between Uganda and Tanzania; it chose Uganda. Perhaps most important of all it made Sudan and General Numeiry opt for Africa—and for the survival of Sudanese domestic policy. The Libyan reinforcement planes traveling through Sudanese airspace were forced to land at Khartoum. There the Sudanese government instructed them to return to Libya. Evading Sudanese detection systems, however, they went on to Uganda.

As a result of his move General Numeiry's relations with both Libya and Egypt have become extremely strained. As of this writing Sudan and Egypt are dismantling their programs of interstate cooperation. Egyptian business firms have been closed in Khartoum and Sudanese troops have been asked to leave Egypt. In trying to prevent Libyan intervention in Uganda, General Numeiry was no doubt primarily motivated by his desire to preserve peace in his own southern region. But he also sought to further peace among African states.

On balance it seems obvious that the Arabs could not build solid influence in black Africa on two shaky foundations: the OAU and an alliance between Colonel Qaddafi and General Amin, possibly the world's two most erratic leaders. Within a matter of four or five months any semblance of solid influence has crumbled. On the other hand these events have produced at least one positive result. Sudan has been forced to abandon its yearning to play a key role in the Arab world. Sudan chose decisively for its own interests, for a policy of forging effective national unity among its Arab and black African peoples. Thus events have given Sudan an opportunity to prove that, when circumstances demand, unity in Africa can be achieved.

Unity will not happen quickly, for even the Sudanese peace is fragile. It may not happen at all. But if Sudan does achieve viable internal unity it will be a sign of hope to a deeply divided African continent.