

The Only African Unity Worth a Second Glance

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Any American hard hat or British miner would understand. Solidarity is the name of their union game. Alone each worker is nothing; together, over the decades, the unions have forced a redistribution of wealth, have shaken governments. The nations of Africa are new at the game. On the broader, world field they too recognize the power of unity. They too would redistribute wealth—on a world scale. But can economic solidarity, a “trade union” of African nations, inject cement into the shifting sands of their dubious political unity? That is the big question hanging over the continent.

As the hard hat or miner can vouch, wielding a cohesive front against shrewd “employers” (industrialized nations) demands sophisticated leadership, skilled negotiators, a sacrifice of individual sovereignty for the collective good—all hard requirements for very young nations, flexing their political independence and without an especially convincing record so far of mutual self-denial. In the long run, however, this is likely to be the only African unity worth a second glance. For the great unifying issue of the past—a common zeal for decolonization all the way down to the Cape—has nearly run its course. True, while the southern tip of the continent remains under white minority rule, this dispute still hangs on as the primary, the most emotional, challenge; but it is more and more a relic of the past, whereas economic development and economic independence represent the demand of the future.

One thing is clear. In bridging the vast discrepancies between African nations, especially north and south of the Sahara—differences of culture, history, language, religion, government system, resources, and wealth—the ideology and rhetoric of “brotherhood” are not enough. Africans and Arabs are perhaps the globe’s great masters in the art of confusing words for facts.

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Outside that illusory world, however, real issues of overriding importance remain absolutely essential to keep them together.

Up to now the great, unifying goal has been eviction of colonial overlords. As the wave of independence has washed southward, at last sweeping aside the Portuguese and lapping at Rhodesia, black Africans have ridden it like surfers with a common euphoria. Disagreements and outright quarrels over other matters could not entirely dissipate its unifying effect. Nor has the North Africans’ embrace of this issue, now concentrated on the white-ruled south, been entirely cynical. Certainly they extract black African support on Palestine in return for rallying against the southern redoubt. Certainly the Arabs (former slave traders, after all) can be disdainful of their black brothers. (“You know, for an abd [literally “black fellow,” or “slave”] he was quite a civilized man,” said an Arabian cabinet minister, referring to a black African ambassador, a highly sophisticated Oxford graduate, who had just visited his country.) But certainly also, the North Africans transfer some of the emotions of their own independence battles to the current struggles in the extreme south. It is not just coincidence that most of the black African liberation groups from Southern Africa have main offices in Algiers. And the Egyptians, as well as the Algerians, have dispatched weapons and training officers to help the guerrilla groups based in Dar es Salaam.

South African Prime Minister John Vorster, appreciating the growing pressure for economic gains, has adopted a subtle splitting strategy against the onrush from the north. In effect, he is tempting black Africa with offers of markets, technology, aid, and food in exchange for acceptance of his government’s legitimacy. He also holds out the lure of “dialogue”—epitomized by his visits to Monrovia in February to talk with Liberia’s President Tolbert, and to the Ivory Coast a year ago to meet President Houphouet-Boigny. And he gives at least the appear-

ance of readiness to sacrifice Rhodesia and Namibia (South West Africa), if that is necessary for South Africa's own survival. Such tactics impose a noticeable strain on African unity. At the February meeting of foreign ministers of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Addis Ababa the representative of the main South African liberation group, the African National Congress (ANC), anxiously warned against what he described as Mr. Vorster's attempt to drive a wedge into the OAU and weaken its struggle against the white-ruled south.

So far the black Africans have held out against any acceptance of South Africa's passionately denounced system of separate development (apartheid)—much as the Soviet Union refuses to dilute its own ideology for the sake of Western economic knowhow. April's OAU ministerial meeting in Dar es Salaam concluded that any accommodation with South Africa "would require dismantling the institutions of oppression and repression against non-whites by the racist minority." But some black African nations lean toward the view that trade openings with South Africa may help erode apartheid—again on much the same principle that Western trade with the Soviet bloc can perhaps help break down the rigidities of communism. South African officials now claim to be quietly in touch with many, if not most, of Africa's black governments. And Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda, backed by Tanzanian President Nyerere, is working openly with Mr. Vorster, not only to induce change in Rhodesia without massive bloodshed, but also to avert a wider southern Africa conflict.

Meanwhile, the economic theme becomes ever more insistent. It is not new. In the United States, way back in 1787, James Wilson expressed similar dissatisfactions at the Pennsylvania ratifying convention:

Need I describe the contrasted scene which the revolution has presented to our view? On the one hand, the arduous struggle in the cause of liberty terminated by a glorious and triumphant peace; on the other, contention and poverty at home, discredit and disgrace abroad...and even the blessing of independency has been scarcely felt or understood by a people who have dearly achieved it....

Devoid of power, we could neither prevent the excessive importations which lately deluged the country, nor even raise from that excess a contribution to public revenue; devoid of importance, we were unable to command a sale for our commodities in a foreign market; devoid of credit, our public securities were melting in the hands of their deluded owners like snow before the sun....

Political independence for the Africans, likewise, has not produced the hoped-for rewards, at least in a majority of the new nations. Out of the twenty-five countries the United Nations describes as the world's most needy, sixteen are in Af-

rica. But, in order to "command a sale for their commodities," can the Africans learn how to stick together? From the African viewpoint there are both encouraging and discouraging portents. Perhaps the most encouraging was the (not much noticed) Lomé convention—an economic agreement between the nine-nation European Community and forty-six developing nations of the "ACP group" (all of black Africa, plus a scattering of Caribbean and Pacific islands). To everyone's great surprise, during the eighteen months of negotiations leading up to the signing of the convention in Lomé, Togo, on February 28, the ACP countries proved remarkably cohesive. European negotiators and diplomats came away talking in superlatives of the steadiness of ACP resolve, of their unity even under pressure, and of the skill and sophistication of ACP negotiators. The result, they believe, was "an agreement of equals," balancing the interests of the world's most powerful economic grouping with those of the African and other developing countries.

The Lomé convention, however, does not cover some of the most crucial commodities—oil (Nigeria and North Africa) or copper (Zambia and Zaire), for instance. Nor does it involve that arch-capitalist, the United States. Can Africans extend the unity of Lomé to the broader scene? There is no doubt both of America's increasing need of imported raw materials—Lester R. Brown states in *World Without Borders* that by the end of the century the United States will be dependent primarily on foreign sources for its supply of all the thirteen basic raw materials required by a modern economy except phosphate—and of Africa's vast store of them.

As Donald B. Easum, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, has noted, all of the world's fifty-three most important minerals are found in Africa, including 42 per cent of the world's cobalt, 34 per cent of its bauxite, 17 per cent of its copper, 96 per cent of its diamonds, 60 per cent of its gold, and 23 per cent of the free world's uranium.

In a very few years Nigeria has risen to become a major oil exporter, now among the four leading suppliers of oil to the United States. Oil has also been found off Cameroun, Gabon, Somalia, and Egypt.

Nonwhite Africa is, furthermore, a large potential market for the West's industrial goods. In Nigeria, for example, the proportion of the people in the cash economy may well rise over the next decade from today's 15 per cent to nearer 30 per cent. What will they buy?

A "special report" by *African Update* (put out by *Africa Report*) traces the growing American economic interest in Africa with two-way trading nearly tripling between 1960 and 1970, reaching \$4.3 billion in 1973. At the same time, South Africa's unchallenged economic superiority over the rest of the continent has diminished. By 1973 the value of U.S. exports to black and North Africa was twice as high as that of U.S. exports to South Africa; the value of U.S. im-

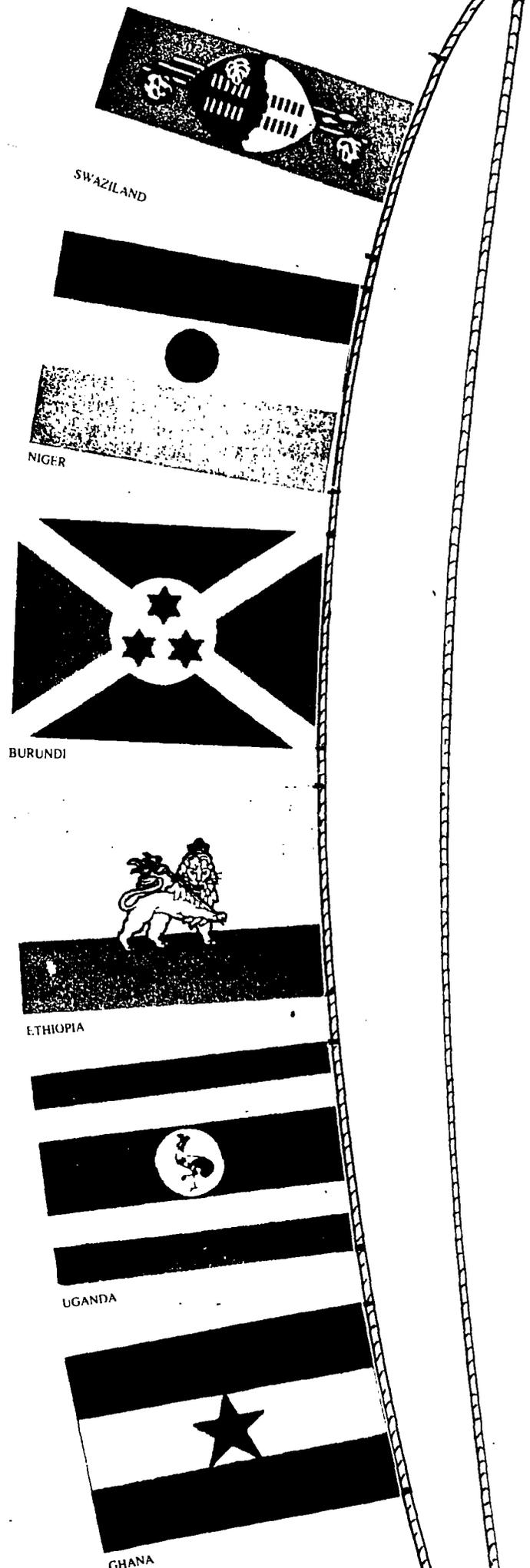
ports from black and North Africa was six times as high as that of U.S. imports from South Africa. The same year saw British trade with black Africa, for the first time, exceed that with South Africa.

Clearly there is great wealth, and leverage, available to nonwhite Africa if it can unite to exploit it. That will indeed be an acid test, considering the differences between individual countries (Libyan GNP per head is \$1,770; Niger's, \$70) and the fact that these are still widening. Africa has one of the world's highest rates of population growth; its per capita food production is falling (by 7 per cent from 1970 to 1973); and, according to the U.N.'s Economic Commission for Africa, while the OAU's six major oil producers had accumulated reserves totaling \$12 billion by 1974, the thirty-six other members had a collective deficit of \$2.4 billion.

Soaring oil and fertilizer prices have done enormous damage to delicate black African economies. And while few black African leaders have spoken out openly against their oil-rich neighbors, there is much private bitterness over the initial failure of the Arabs to come swiftly to their aid. This leaves a particularly sour taste in black African mouths because of their own consistent support of the Arabs in the dispute with Israel. Even before the October, 1973, war, a majority of the thirty or so black African nations that used to have diplomatic relations with Israel had, under Arab pressure, broken them off. All but four concluded the process when the war broke out. Again, at the U.N. General Assembly last fall the Africans backed the Arab stand on Palestine—including the invitation to PLO leader Yasser Arafat, the curbing of Israel's right to respond in debate, and the final pro-Palestinian resolution—even though many black Africans continue to support Israel's right to exist and quietly said so during the debate itself.

In return, what have the Africans got? Well, first of all they saw South Africa bundled out of the 1974 General Assembly. Victory! Yet, in retrospect it has a hollow ring, even to some black Africans. It removed their target from their 1974 General Assembly sights and confronts them with a real problem for this session: what to do for an encore? Second, they earned Arab promises of \$200 million in aid. But even this sum, scarcely bounty when measured against the Africans' needs, initially provoked resentment. For only \$25 million reached the African Development Bank in Abidjan. The rest, announced the Arabs tactlessly, is waiting for you to claim at the Arab League office in Cairo—prompting Sierra Leone's foreign minister at the Addis Ababa OAU meeting to exclaim that black Africa was not going to go down on bended knee to obtain the promised largesse.

That February OAU meeting brought a good deal of black African resentment bubbling embarrassingly to the surface. In response, it also elicited a number of



Arab "clarifications." First the Arab members of the OAU explained that the money, although in Cairo, was ready for immediate use. Second, the Arabs at their own summit meeting in Rabat, Morocco, conjured up a second \$200 million for distribution when the first sum was used up; this second sum could be increased to as much as \$500 million, they said. Third, the Arabs agreed that it would probably be better to channel the money through the Arab-African Development Bank just being set up in Khartoum (a sort of neutral, north-south ground), instead of through the Arab League in Cairo. And fourth, the OAU meeting decided to expand the scope and size (from seven to twelve members) of the OAU committee handling African-Arab relations. The aim was for the enlarged committee to come up with concrete proposals for development projects in black Africa; the Arabs promised then to consider financing them.

Since then, more Arab money has flowed southward. But it has not been nearly enough, nor sufficiently evenly distributed (Muslims are the main beneficiaries), to paper over black African criticism. Burning resentment surfaced again at the July OAU summit in Kampala, with the black African moderates and Egypt sabotaging the radical Arabs' demands for Israeli ouster from the U.N. General Assembly this fall.

Meanwhile, underneath the shadow of the two overriding issues of colonialism and economics a variety of other potentially divisive issues smolder. In Ethiopia, ironically the headquarters of the OAU itself, the central government is fighting against Muslim secessionist forces trying to take over Eritrea, the rich and strategic Ethiopian province bordering on the Red Sea. The secessionists have been in rebellion for thirteen years, receiving much of their military and financial support from fellow Muslims in the Arab world, ranging from Saudi Arabia to Algeria and the PLO. Black Africans are deeply concerned at this "outside" interference. The concepts of exterior intervention and of retention of ex-colonial borders are both founding principles of the OAU, reaffirmed at bitter cost in the subjugation of "Biafra's" attempted secession from Nigeria.

Then there are the antics of President Idi Amin in Uganda, a man considered by most black Africans as more of a tragedy than a comedy for the continent. Libya's Muslim zealot Muammar al-Qaddafi has gone out of his way to support his fellow Muslim Amin, stirring deep African animosities.

The OAU summit in Kampala, Amin's terrorized

capital, was attended by only nineteen heads of state. Three of Uganda's neighbors sent no representatives at all. And while the newly promoted "Field Marshal" duly rotated into the OAU presidency, the organization's weakness was further underlined by its failure to agree on any meaningful mediation to end the fighting raging in Angola.

But such issues are secondary. They can be kept under wraps so long as harmony is maintained on the major continental issues. Similarly, that harmony (perhaps "pragmatic unity" would be a more accurate phrase) provides the core—critics say disparagingly, "the ballast"—for Third World cohesion.

With forty-two members, the OAU constitutes a solid numerical slice of the Third World "bloc." In addition, as India has become preoccupied with its own immense problems, as Guyana and Yugoslavia have also pulled back somewhat from front-line roles in the nonaligned conglomerate, as the emphasis has shifted leftward from political struggle to economic struggle, so Algeria has emerged as the outstanding leader of the Third World. The Algerians have used their revolutionary credentials, their geographic position in Africa, their Arab nationalism, and their role within OPEC to make themselves the undisputed champions of the nonaligned. Even American and West European diplomats reluctantly acknowledged the skill and leadership of Algerian Foreign Minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika when he presided over last year's U.N. General Assembly. At time of writing they are bracing for his presidency of the U.N. special economic session, for which the Third World had been diligently preparing in a series of talks this year in Dakar, Geneva, Algiers, and Lima.

Seizing the issue of the hour, the Algerians have filled the leadership vacuum, but even their radical fervor cannot enforce total Third World cohesion on issues not directly related to Africa, Arabs, or oil. For instance, despite all their efforts they were unable last year to swing a U.N. majority against the West on Korea or (just) on Cambodia.

This year the radicals are going to have to perform some extraordinarily skillful maneuvers, or to backpedal if they are to avoid a similar split on the issue of Israel's ouster.

The conclusion, once again, is that unity still depends on the issue at stake; that, for all the redolent rhetoric, self-interest rather than ideology is the clincher.

And will self-interest foster unity between Africa's affluent and indigent? Who would dare prophesy?