

Fifty Years of African Unity: The Celebration of the African Union in 2013

Written by Horace Campbell

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HORACE CAMPBELL, JUL 18 2013

The Global Pan African family commemorated 50 years of African Unity in May 2013, with plans for year-long celebrations. These festivities represented a new phase of confidence in the Global Pan African struggles as the world woke up to the economic and political diplomacy of Africa. While the celebrations reflected on the successes of removing colonialism and apartheid, there was the recognition that there are still outstanding colonial outposts in Western Sahara, the Comoros and Diego Garcia. It was this recognition that ensured the clarity that the tasks of Pan African liberation are incomplete. At the end of apartheid in 1994, new ideas of liberation were placed on the agenda for Africa and these issues of social and economic transformation are at the top of the agenda of the African Union.

African Liberation day, May 25 2013, was marked with meetings and reflections in all parts of the Pan African world, from Kingston to Abuja and from Salvador de Bahia to Johannesburg. It was in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where the current heads of state held their celebration. The two day event at the new AU headquarters in Addis Ababa had been preceded by a week of meetings by many groups from across Africa and the Global Africa family. The reflections and discussions of these groups were very different from the communiqués that came from the heads of State at the end of the celebration. While the Heads of State focused on a standby force, their equivocation over the role of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and their vision of Africa 2063, the intellectuals, activists, artists and writers focused on the acceleration of the full unification of the peoples of Africa and the need for concrete steps towards a government that can defend Africans at home and abroad. The three terms of dignity, emancipation and unity were repeated and elaborated on by presenters who participated in a forum on “Framing a 21st Century Narrative on Pan Africanism and African Renaissance.”

In this commentary I will explore the successes of the African Liberation project and the present conjuncture where Africa is now seen as a space where the future of the world economy will be decided in the 21st century. The conclusion calls on scholars and students of IR to break from the traditional and worn out assumptions of International Relations theory and embrace the spirit of Ubuntu which is the new paradigm for politics emanating from Africa.

Origins of the Africa Union and the Implementation of Pan-African Project

Ghana had achieved its independence in 1957 and one year later President Kwame Nkrumah called a conference of African workers, freedom fighters and champions for justice. When Ghana achieved its independence in 1957, Kwame Nkrumah maintained that the independence of Ghana would be “incomplete without the independence of all of Africa.” Together with the principal freedom fighters within Ghana, Nkrumah established a Pan-African Secretariat within the Ghanaian government and appointed George Padmore to run the secretariat. The task of the secretariat was to act as the coordinating point for the establishment of links with freedom fighters on the African continent and for the secretariat to be a center for information to support those fighting for freedom.

At that historical moment, freedom was conceived of as freedom of the peoples and freedom of the states from colonial rule. This was the spirit that inspired the calling of the All-African Peoples’ Conferences in 1958. It was at this meeting where Patrice Lumumba from the Congo was introduced to the wider Pan African struggles. In tandem with

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this people-centered activity, the Pan African Project at that moment had taken the principle of the rights of peoples to self-determination as a core principle. The Spirit of Bandung had infused the Pan African project and together with the alliances from Asia and Latin America, Africans were able to establish a permanent decolonization committee at the United Nations.[i]

Meanwhile, Kwame Nkrumah had been influenced by the ideas of W.E.B DuBois, George Padmore and C.L.R James. To pursue the stated goals of the decolonization of Africa that had been articulated at the 5th Pan African Congress organized by these intellectuals in 1945 (in Manchester, UK), Nkrumah convened the Conferences of Independent African States to establish a diplomatic framework for the political union of Africa. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) emerged out of the Conferences of Independent States and out of conflict and cooperation, the peoples of Africa assigned themselves the tasks of ending colonialism and establishing the complete unification of Africa.

Although the OAU was divided (between the Casablanca and Monrovia groups), [ii] there was agreement on one question: a commitment to end colonialism and apartheid in Africa. Hence, despite the differing political orientations of the governments, the peoples supported the anti-apartheid struggles. After the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1961 the tasks of liberation were delayed significantly and Mobutu Sese Seko was propped up by the CIA and western interest for over 35 years. The literature on the role of the CIA and the support of Mobutism is too extensive to delay us here. Books such as *The Assassination of Lumumba*, *The Congo Cables* and *America's Tyrant* have exposed the collusion between the US establishment and the networks of dictatorships in Africa, but mainstream IR scholars have sought to sideline this information. What is important for the current context is that healing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo remains constrained up to the present. The same external forces that orchestrated the assassination of Patrice Lumumba are still at work seeking to dismember the Congo. This information remains buried in the reports of the Security Council of the United Nations.

Pan Africanism as the driving force behind the idea of African Unity had been embraced within the academy for decades after the tragedies of depression, wars, invasions, genocide and the dropping of the atomic bomb on human beings 1935-1945. Because of the autonomy of Caribbean and North American Scholars of African descent, the study of Pan Africanism was linked organically to popular social movements for liberation. The popularity of the ideation basis for African Unity did, however, not escape the machinations of the foreign policy establishment in the United States and Europe. So in the USA the establishment worked very hard to redefine the meaning of Pan Africanism and to inscribe it within the ideological battles of the Cold War. When the "wind of change" started to sweep Africa and more than 20 countries became independent in 1960, leading American scholars of Political Science such as Joseph Nye and David Apter were involved in research and writing on Pan Africanism.[iii] The ideas and practices of Pan African integration were so strong that mainstream IR scholars had to tackle these ideas. However, in the heat of the Cold War and the militant destabilization of independent states, the scholarship and research on Pan Africanism switched when Nelson Mandela was determined to be a terrorist by the establishment. It was the tenacity of the global anti-apartheid struggles that finally ended apartheid and the end of the Mobutu regime in Zaire.

Launch of the African Union

On May 26, 2001, the Constitutive Act of the African Union entered into force. This dream of uniting Africans had taken legal form and the Constitutive Act of the African Union had been drafted, circulated and completed for adoption at the thirty sixth summit of the Organization of African Unity on July 11, 2000. The first formal meeting of the African Union took place in Durban, South Africa (July 2002) and at that moment the Organization of African Unity (OAU) ceased to exist. The speed with which the African states adopted and signed the Constitutive Act of the African Union had emanated from the emergence of new momentum and social forces that had emerged in the aftermath of the end of apartheid.

While the OAU had been diminished by the stance of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, the AU moved from a position of non-interference to non-indifference. The genocide in Rwanda and the genocidal violence that had overtaken societies such as Burundi, Liberia and Sierra Leone had exposed the weaknesses of the past

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political leadership. The African Union is different from its predecessor, the OAU. The AU represents both the Africans in the geographical space called Africa as well as the millions of dispersed Africans in North America, Central America, South America, Europe, Arabia and Asia. This organization is to be the core of a number of institutions such as the Pan African Parliament, the Court of Justice, and the Central Bank. [iv] While legal experts have been toiling to give juridical meaning to the Constitutive Act, new social forces have been active in the Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA) seeking to formulate a clear and consistent position on peace and security. In 2004 the African Union established the Peace and Security Council and since that moment, there has been an uphill battle for the member states to be more serious about supporting the Peace and Security Architecture of the African Union. Scholars from Africa and other parts of the world have remarked on the interlocking organs of the AU, and depending on their intellectual and ideological orientation, the discussion usually reflect varying degrees of Afro-pessimism because the focus has been entirely on the leaders of Africa. The same leaders who facilitate capital flight from Africa are the ones who turn to the European Union and the United States to finance the operations of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union. With funding coming from the EU, the policy making agenda of the AU has been stagnant because of this relationship.

Whatever the limitations of this African Peace and Security Architecture, the African leadership was delivered a wakeup call when NATO intervened in Libya and executed the President, Muammar Gaddafi. Two hundred leading African Intellectuals wrote a strong letter denouncing NATO and there was an equally strong reaction from those states that wanted to strengthen the African Union. There was a vigorous campaign to remove the Chairperson of the African Union Commission Jean Ping. He had been considered too servile to defend Africa before the international community at the time of the NATO intervention. Dr Nkosasana Zuma of South Africa was then elected as Chairperson of the AU Commission.

Since the removal of Jean Ping the African Union has advanced its planning for the establishment of the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises. In Mali, the AU has worked closely with the Security Council of the United Nations for the establishment of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Tanzania and South Africa are militarily intervening in Eastern Congo under the umbrella of the United Nations and President Obama has now acknowledged the political and intellectual leadership coming from these two societies.

Beyond the Failed States Narrative

The portrayal of Africa in the international system has been historically through the lens of backwardness, anarchy, and failure. In the past, the European merchants' mission to "civilize backward Africans" was the dominant narrative about Africa on the global stage and was used as a defense for the colonization and dehumanization of Africans. In contemporary times, the term "failed states" has been concocted by militarists and lobbyist for private military contractors to justify western realists' appetite for intervention and militarization in Africa.[v]

As the dominant paradigm of IR, realism implied that Africa was outside the mainstream of IR theory. More than ten years ago Errol A. Henderson presented a paper at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism in International Relations Theory." This paper did not receive real attention by realist scholars. More recently, John Hobson published from Cambridge University Press the book, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics*. From all corners of the world there are now books and articles on *Decolonizing International Relations*. These studies along with the intervention of feminist scholars of IR theories are slowly breaking the orthodoxy of the main stream theorists in North America and Western Europe.

On many fronts, the Pan African struggle for liberation and human dignity was and still is a struggle against the Eurocentric ideologies of racial hierarchies, biological determinism, survival of the fittest and domination. These ideologies are strongly rooted in the same European Enlightenment that defined the modern international system and girded it with the hierarchical, domineering, and deterministic narratives couched in such international relations theories as liberalism, constructivism and realism. When "the inalienable rights of man," "social contract," "freedom, liberty, and egalitarianism" were popularized in the Enlightenment ideation, Africans were never considered the kind of beings to whom these concepts applied. Thus, the historic resistance and self-determination struggles of peoples

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in the Pan African world against slavery, colonialism, and neo-imperialism are largely struggles against the Eurocentric ideation that emanated from the Enlightenment and ossified by the western intellectual traditions which IR theories are based on.

Since the new phase in world politics where Africa is forging new relations with emerging centers of power and there is an awareness that the fastest growing economies are in Africa, other mainstream IR scholars are now writing on the African Union and the place of Africa in International Relations theory. Sophie Harman and William Brown authored an article titled, "In from the Margins? The Challenging Place of Africa in International Relations." Other European scholars are now seeking to catch up with the new brand of scholarship that is percolating in Africa.[vi] But in the main, the racist assumptions about the hierarchy of states and hierarchy of humans inspire mainstream IR scholars to write about Africa in the context of "failures." Even members of the so-called left in Europe represents the view that there is currently a scramble for Africa and that 'The African Union is up for grabs.'[vii]

This narrative about "failed states" has been used repeatedly by IR scholars such as Christopher Clapham, Robert Rotberg and William Reno. Other commentators and scholars, such as Robert Kaplan (author of *The Coming Anarchy*), have made a reputation for themselves as foreign policy analysts with views about instability in Africa. [viii] This line of argument was then taken up by organizations such as the United States Institute for Peace that carried out research on "Collapsed States." From these platforms there is then an international NGO constituency that bid for resources on the basis of the idea of "state failure" in Africa. It will require the more tenacious researcher to draw out the linkages between the lobbyists for the private military industry and the Failed States Index that puts a stamp of failure on African people that are tackling the challenges of societal reconstruction. More and more, it is being exposed how the complicity of U.S. military and the private military contractors are destabilizing Africa. [ix] The work of Jeremy Keenan and Abdi Samatar on North Africa and the Horn of Africa stand out in this regard. Contrary to the impression presented by western media outlets and academia that the whole of Africa is terror-swamped, of the 54 countries in Africa, violent extremists are active in less than five countries. In each of these five societies, Mali, the DRC, Somalia, Nigeria and the Sudan, there are advanced initiatives by the African Union to deploy resources to end violence and mini wars. African women both at the grassroots and feminist scholars in Africa have been intervening and the place of gender in IR theory is so pervasive that in all positions at the AU there has to be parity between males and females.

A New Paradigm For Africa

Since the onset of the global capitalist crisis in 2008, there has been new attention paid to the growth of Asia as the engine of the world economy, but the journalists who have studied Africa for decades now recognize that the 'the next Asia is Africa.' [x] In 2012, the International Monetary Fund forecast that seven of the 10 fastest growing countries in the world will be in Africa and states such as Morocco that had opted to seek membership in the European Union is now pleading to be re-admitted to the African Union. Such a re-admission will require Morocco to end its claims on the Western Sahara. The World Bank has projected that Africa will grow faster than the world average in coming years and economists are trying to catch up with books such as *The fastest Billion: The Story behind Africa's Economic Revolution*. The projected population strength of Africa in the next thirty years has not only gripped the attention of demographers but also of investment bankers. Wall Street is looking at the mega deals between Brazil, China and Africa and wants to find a way in. When President Barack Obama visited Africa in June 2013, he explicitly stated that the United States wanted to change its paradigm about Africa. For the first time the President of the United States met with the chairperson of the African Union Commission, Dr Zuma.

It was the success of the anti-apartheid struggles that brought a new paradigm of IR to the world. This is the idea of Truth and Ubuntu. In Africa, Ubuntu literally means, love, reconciliation, forgiveness and sharing. Both Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu sought to elevate this beyond theory to establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Later, South Africa hosted the 3rd World Conference against Racism. These international initiatives on Reparations and Climate justice have marked a new turn in world politics.

Africa cannot continuously be put on the margin in a changed world situation in which the continent strives to feature prominently; Africa can no longer be ignored by those who want to remain relevant in world politics and global

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political economy. Events surrounding the recent visits to Africa, in quick succession, by China's President Xi Jinping and the President of the United States Barack Obama attest to the shifting paradigm on Africa in international relations. I share the point of view of Professor Calestous Zuma of Harvard University, who commented that,

“Another important feature of the trip is that Obama was able to focus on critical infrastructure such as energy while acknowledging that China was focusing on transportation. This division of labor should open opportunities for trilateral cooperation between the US, China and Africa and usher in a new age of collaborative economic diplomacy. The new Africa offers fertile soil upon which the seeds of a new multi-polar world could take root. With consistent nurturing, Obama's visit may have plowed new ground for a more peaceful and prosperous Africa.”[xi]

When Kwame Nkrumah wrote the book, *Africa Must Unite*, he had developed a clear vision of a reconstructed international system where Africa can prominently hold its own. The celebration of the 50th anniversary of African unity brought back the ideas of the full unification of Africa to the center of the agenda. The unveiling of the statue of Nkrumah at the HQ of the African Union was a proper tribute to the ideas of Pan Africanism and unity. The challenge now is for scholars internationally to work in the spirit of international cooperation mentioned by Professor Juma.

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[i] In April, 1955, representatives from twenty-nine governments of Asian and African nations gathered in Bandung, Indonesia to discuss peace and the role of the Third World in the Cold War. The core principles of the Bandung Conference were political self-determination, mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, and equality. These issues were of central importance to all participants in the conference, most of which had recently emerged from colonial rule. These ideas are referred to as the Spirit of Bandung. See Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*, Free Press, New York 2009. See also Remy Herrera, “Fifty years after the Bandung conference: towards a revival of the solidarity between the peoples of the South? Interview with Samir Amin,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Volume 6, Number 4, 2005

[ii] The Casablanca and Monrovia groups referred to the two principal formations among the leadership of Africa in the period of the decolonization and the struggles for independence in Algeria. The Casablanca group included leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Gamal Nasser of Egypt, King Muhammad of Morocco and Sekou Toure of Guinea. The Monrovia group had been dominated by the former French colonies along with states such as Liberia that were heavily influenced by the United States and the United Kingdom. For an analysis, see, Vincent B. Thompson, *Africa and Unity: the Evolution of Pan Africanism*, Longmans, UK 1969

[iii] Nye, Joseph, (1965), *Pan-Africanism and East African Integration*, Harvard University Press; and David Apter and James Coleman, “Pan Africanism or Nationalism in Africa.”

[iv] See “OVERVIEW OF THE PAN-AFRICAN PARLIAMENT,” see also Manelesi George, “The African Union and the Pan African Parliament,” Working Papers, Africa Institute, Pretoria, 2001.

Fifty Years of African Unity: The Celebration of the African Union in 2013

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[v] Elliot Ross, "Failed States are a Western Myth," *UK Guardian*, June 28, 2013.

[vi] See Sophie Harman and William Brown, *African Agency in International Politics*, Routledge, 2013, See also the spate of articles published by Chatham House in their journal *International Affairs*. For example see Brendan Vickers, Africa and the rising powers: bargaining for the 'marginalized many', *International Affairs*, May 2013

[vii] Regis Debray, "The Decline of the West," *New Left Review*, 80, March-April 2013

[viii] Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*, Random House, New York 2012

[ix] The fast pace of change in Africa has had a major impact on the major intellectual investment of the Africom Social Science Programs in Africa. This has meant that before much of the work on AFRICOM is published, these writings are overtaken by events. For example see the book, *African Security and the African Command: Viewpoints on the US Role in Africa*, edited by Terry Buss, Louis Picard, Joseph Adjaye and Donald Goldstein, Kumarian Press, 2011

[x] Howard French, "The Next Asia Is Africa: Inside the Continent's Rapid Economic Growth," *The Atlantic*, May 12, 2012

[xi] Calestous Juma, "Obama Plows New Ground in Africa" Belfar Center for International Affairs, July 5, 2013.

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