

Pan-African ideals and the Organization of African Unity's intervention in the 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War

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From colonization, to the struggle for independence, the African continent has often been viewed both internally and externally as a milieu of fragmented states, lacking cohesion and most importantly: peace. Indeed, the colonial legacy of the continent, coupled with the history of enslavement of the Black diaspora has demonstrated a very real dilemma for the future of Blacks across the globe. However, the birth of Pan-Africanist thought provided a glimmer of hope for advancing and uniting Black peoples.¹ There are varying opinions on how best to define Pan-Africanism, all which generally encompass a similar principle: the unity of Black peoples on the African continent and the African diaspora. For the purpose of this paper, I will be employing the definition provided by Costantinos BT Costantinos. He defines Pan-Africanism as follows:

Pan-Africanism represents the complexities of black political and intellectual thought over two hundred years [and] the Pan-African movement changes according to whether the focus is on politics, ideology, organizations or culture. [It] is a belief that African peoples, both on the African continent and in the Diaspora, share not merely a common history, but a common destiny.²

Costantinos' articulation as well as definition of Pan-Africanism encompasses the complexity of the ideology by demonstrating the different dimensions in which it can be expressed. The Nigerian Civil War provides a politically complex context with which to attempt to "test" the way Pan-Africanism has been used as a political and diplomatic tool. The war itself broke out as a result of the secession of the South-Eastern region of Nigeria (the State of Biafra) from the Federation of Nigeria on May 30, 1967. It is the complexity of the Nigerian Civil War that aids in analyzing the various hurdles that Pan-Africanism has faced in attempting to create substantial political unification of African states.

This paper will analyze the actions taken by the OAU under the broader goal of promoting Pan-African ideals while still recognizing nation-state sovereignty. Thus, the underlying questions that this paper will work to answer will be: How does an organization that is promoting political and economic integration respond to a national struggle within one of its member states? Furthermore, how can such an organization reconcile the ideals of nationalism with its goal of integration? These questions will help to frame the paper's broader goal of analyzing political Pan-Africanist efforts.

The argument throughout this paper will focus on the function of Pan-Africanism within the political landscape of the African continent between the 1920s to the late 1960s. The 1960s were particularly significant on the African continent because many states were gaining independence from their colonial rulers. Thus, the analysis will focus on one of the most well-known Pan-

¹ Costantinos dates the Pan-Africanist movement to as early as the 1800s. He focuses on the expression of a religious Pan-Africanist movement that came out of what he describes as Ethiopianism. He writes the following, "Ethiopia's African diasporic religious symbolism grew in the 1800s among blacks in the United States and the Caribbean, through a reading of Psalm 68:31, 'Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth its hands unto God,' as a prophecy that God would redeem Africa and free the enslaved. The verse served as a bulwark against a racist theology that declared black people were the descendants of Ham, the cursed son of Noah whose children were to be the hewers of wood and drawers of water. Ethiopianism thus emerged initially as a psychic resistance to racist theology, soon becoming the basis of a nascent political organizing."

Berhutesfa Costantinos, "The Promises & Pitfalls of Pan-Africanism Ideological and Agency Trajectories for African Integration," 2.

² Ibid, 2.

Africanist organizations: The Organization of African Unity (OAU) founded in 1963. The OAU's position as a Pan-Africanist organization was fundamentally based on pulling down all colonial legacies and essentially creating an African destiny narrated by Africans. The influence of the OAU and its employment of Pan-African ideals will be explored through its involvement in the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) - a conflict that did not directly involve any former colonial powers.

Furthermore, this paper will examine the extent by which Pan-African ideals were utilized by the OAU during the Nigerian Civil War in order to promote a unification of newly-independent African states as a way to pave way for cooperation and collaboration among African states.

Cynthia Kahn highlights the tensions that were present during the 1968 OAU Heads of State Summit, that involved a strained debate between the majority of OAU members that supported the Federal Nigerian Government and the four states (Tanzania, Zambia, Ivory Coast, and Gabon) that chose to support the secessionist state of Biafra. Kahn concludes that the tense exchanges between the dissenting OAU members and those supporting Nigeria simply “reflected the growing disillusionment of many OAU members with the ineffectiveness of the various movements and their seeming inability to resolve personal squabbles.”³ In Kahn's opinion the events of the 1968 OAU Summit were a clear demonstration of what she described as “the OAU [being] in danger of dying.”⁴ With a similar focus on the relations between OAU member states, Olajide Aluko describes the growing position of influence that Nigeria held on the continent and in the OAU as one synonymous with a hegemon. However, even with its respected role, Aluko, much like Kahn, also alludes to the tensions present within the OAU, especially with regards to Nigeria's involvement in the internal political issues of certain member states, such as Uganda and South Africa.⁵ Such involvement was significant because it was often in opposition to the decision taken by the OAU as a political body.⁶ Thus, Kahn and Aluko are similar in that they both attribute the primary weakness of the OAU as being a result of internal political disputes among member states. While Kahn focuses on the general disputes, we see Aluko take a step further by focusing on the role of Nigeria within the various national disputes.

In his examination of the collapse of the OAU, Kofi Oteng Kufuor cites the most significant problem of the organization as its ‘strict adherence to its members’ sovereignty,’ which was followed by a principle of no-interference.⁷ Kufuor also demonstrates how the organization's preoccupation with member sovereignty meant that the “OAU never put in place mechanisms to monitor or enforce members’ compliance with its resolutions or decisions.”⁸ Kufuor's analysis provides valuable insight into why the OAU failed to realize its objectives and how this translated to a greater failure for substantial cooperation to take place between African states. Furthermore, his analysis is able to bridge the observations of Kahn and Aluko to provide an even clearer picture of the conditions that hindered the OAU from reaching its greatest potential.

However, while these scholars focus on the shortcomings of the OAU, G. Aforika Nweke discusses the contributions that the OAU made towards African integration. For Nweke, the OAU Charter symbolized the “the blueprint of intra-African functionalism.”⁹ The OAU's objective to

³ Cynthia Kahn. “The O.A.U.: Hurrying Nowhere?” *Africa Today* 15, no. 5 (1968): 4.

⁴ Ibid, 5.

⁵ Olajide Aluko. “Nigeria's Role in Inter-African Relations: With Special Reference to the Organization of African Unity.” *African Affairs* 72, no. 287 (1973): 146.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kofi Oteng Kufuor. “The Collapse of the Organization of African Unity: Lessons from Economics and History.” *Journal of African Law* 49, no. 2 (2005): 133.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Nweke, G. Aforika. “The Organization of African Unity and Intra-African Functionalism.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 487, no. 1 (1987): 145.

establish African integration was not only stated in the Charter but as Nweke shows, was actively pursued by the organization. He cites the OAU's role in "generating an African common front" which allowed facilitated negotiations on the continent and beyond.¹⁰ However, even within his seeming praise of the organization, Aforka remains skeptical of the OAU's ability to completely create the much-needed political and economic integration of all nations states.

Each scholar presents an important way to gauge the efficacy of the OAU with Kahn and Aluko more focused on the internal disputes within the organization while Kufuor and Nweke focused more on the structure of the organization in relation to its objectives. Much like Kahn, Aluko and Kufuor, I am aware of the high stakes involved in the OAU's decision to support Nigeria as opposed to Biafra, and I engage with these different stakes throughout the paper. Thus, I have provided my own contribution towards this topic between these two areas- OAU internal disputes and the OAU structure and function. By so doing I hope to demonstrate why the OAU should not be viewed as a failure in unifying African states. This will be carried out by accounting for the realities that OAU had to contend with during its existence.

By demonstrating how secession, and territorial sovereignty of post-colonial states, were encompassed in the Nigerian Civil War, it is possible to highlight the tensions present within the OAU's adherence to its principles during a national conflict. The paper will endeavor to discuss how the role of the Organization of African Unity was further complicated due to its decision to reject the sovereignty of the newly-formed secessionist Nigerian region and how this decision had significant impact on the implementation of political Pan-Africanism. By working through these different aspects of this event, I argue that the generally perceived failure of the OAU during the Nigerian Civil War came about as a result of the conflicting principles of the OAU and those of Pan-Africanism. Furthermore, I hope to demonstrate the efficacy of the Pan-African movement as a way to politically unify African states, given states are willing to recognize their nationalistic identities as a facet of the larger identity of Pan-Africanism.

The discussion of Pan-Africanism is incomplete without a brief mention of a key advocate of the early roots of Pan-Africanism: Dr. William E. Burghart DuBois, an African-American Civil Rights activist. The contributions of DuBois towards the expansion of the Pan-Africanist movement was critical as it provided a platform for the development of Pan-Africanism on the African continent. Furthermore, DuBois played a significant role in the creation of a platform to facilitate discussions on how to further the goal of developing African unity discuss this common aim. One of the most important platforms being the Pan-African Congress conference which was first initiated by DuBois in 1919.¹¹

The Pan-African Congress conference allowed for greater discussion of the oppressive conditions that many Africans (both on the continent and in the diaspora) were living under as a result of slavery and colonial rule. The sixth Pan-African Congress conference took place in 1945. The conference was significant because it revealed a clear shift in the direction of Pan-African theory, that from being based on the diaspora, to one that focused on the emancipation of Africans on the African continent. Many of the attendees included political activists such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya who, at the time, were amongst the many Africans fighting against colonial rule.

It is important to situate the 1945 conference within the context of the period. The end of the Second World War in September 1945 and the establishment of the United Nations in October 1945 were clear indicators of changing world dynamics. The devastating human and financial cost of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Colin Legum describes DuBois and Garvey as "great rivals." Colin Legum. *Pan-Africanism: A Short Political Guide*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1962, 25.

the war had compelled world leaders to reconsider how states interacted with one another. Therefore, African independence activists would have been eager to take full advantage of this historical moment as a way to further legitimize their own nationalistic goals of independent African states. In addition to this, the response of Pan-Africanists to the changing world order as a demonstration of the potential for Pan-Africanism to be utilized as both a tool for African nationalism, as well as a platform for African States to be recognized as sovereign outside of the African continent cannot be ignored. This also provides substantial basis for continued mention of the United Nations Charter within the Charter of the Organization of African Unity. The OAU's Charter not only recognized the UN Charter, but it also established the OAU's support for the UN Charter. Referring to the UN Charter further demonstrated the way in which OAU members attempted to acquire legitimacy through the United Nations.¹² Furthermore, this clearly demonstrates that OAU members were aware of the important opportunity that the overlapping principles of the OAU and the UN, namely, nation-state unity and cooperation could potentially have for the development of the OAU.

The resolutions drafted and passed during the sixth Pan-African conference demonstrated that the primary focus of the attendees was achieving the emancipation of African peoples from the oppression of the imperialist regimes of European colonizers. The dialogue featured phrases such as, "we demand for Black Africa autonomy and independence, so far, and no further, than it is possible in this One World for groups and peoples to rule themselves subject to inevitable world unity and federation."¹³ The authoritative language used highlighted the changing the dynamics between Africans and former European colonial powers as well as the strong desire for independence. Thus, the main takeaway from the sixth Pan-African conference was the development of African nationalism based on Pan-Africanist ideals, and viewed as a way to combat colonial oppression and realize the unification of Africans on the African continent.¹⁴ African leaders and intellectuals alike were seeking a new narrative free of colonial influence and they believed that Pan-Africanism could assist in creating this narrative.

The sixth Pan-African Congress of 1945 paved way for a new expression of Pan-Africanism that focused on the emancipation and independence of African people. The impact of the conference can be linked to later conferences such as The First Conference of Independent African States in 1958.¹⁵ The main declaration of the First Conference of Independent African States detailed many of the Pan-African aspirations held by the Heads of State gathered, such aspirations included, the need for, "Unity among [Africans] and our solidarity with the dependent peoples of Africa" as well as the objective of, "...[recognizing] the right of the African peoples to independence and self-determination."¹⁶ The significance of "self-determination" was a critical principle that quickly became a necessary stipulation for the establishment of other Pan-African organizations, such as the Organization of African Unity. However, the conflict between the principle of self-determination and the call for unification and cooperation amongst African States would only be fully realized

¹² Phrases within the 1963 OAU Charter such as, "This Charter shall, after due ratification, be registered with the Secretariat of the United Nations through the Government of Ethiopia in conformity with Article 102 of the Charter of the United Nations," demonstrate that OAU members were both in support and need of the United Nations in order to create legitimacy for its own aims.

¹³ *Resolutions and selected speeches from the Sixth Pan African Congress*. Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House (1976).

¹⁴ The conference was attended by the following independent African states: Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan, Morocco, Ethiopia, Liberia and Ghana.

¹⁵ Colin Legum, 139.

¹⁶ The 1960 "United Nations Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples" stated the following with regards to self-determination: "All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development."

during national and regional conflicts on the African continent. It also highlighted one of the key obstacles that the OAU experienced while attempting to practice and further Pan-Africanism on the basis of state sovereignty. In addition to demanding “self-determination,” the resolutions passed during the first Conference of Independent African States demonstrated an important step towards unifying African states against colonial rulers and bringing about the independence of the continent. Not only was the eradication of colonialism used as a tool to unify the different states towards the Pan-African ideal, but it was also used as a method for validating the Pan-African movement as a whole. By deciding to create a strong connection between the need for African emancipation from colonial rule and world peace the conference attendees attempted to highlight that African independence was not simply a necessity for the African continent, but also for the world. This connection is clearly reinforced in the following statement, “Recognizing that the existence of colonialism in any shape or form is a threat to the security and independence of the African States and to world peace.”¹⁷

The connection between African independence and world peace suggested various ways to view the conference attendees’ determination to be recognized outside the African continent. It suggested that colonialism was inherently violent, thus proposing that independent African states would bring about a more peaceful world. It is difficult to imagine that conference attendees were not also playing upon the legacy of the Second World War, which was initiated as a result of the invasion and division of Poland by Germany. Therefore, in describing that world peace and African independence were somehow synonymous, conference attendees were also suggesting that colonialism was not simply inherently violent, but also illegal. The effort to connect the United Nations aim of promoting world peace and the Pan-African aim of independence suggested the possibility of the threat of retaliation by the independent African states if independence was not provided for all African states. In both instances, it was obvious that the intention of this particular wording in the resolution was to draw attention to the urgent matter of the complete decolonization of African states. Several African states had already gained official independence from colonial powers, but there were other states still under colonial rule by a European power. Thus, the call was not simply for complete decolonization, but also for a total halt in the interference by former colonial powers in the affairs of the continent. However, while unity of the African states was upheld and solidarity with external organizations (such as the United Nations) was demonstrated, the strong belief in the “independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity” of all African states was also repeatedly highlighted in the document.¹⁸

A Second Conference of Independent African States took place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1960, with fifteen independent states convening to discuss how to further the goal of unifying the states, politically and economically. However, while the calls for a united continent were being put forward, there remained a call for each state to maintain its sovereignty.

The First (1958) and Second (1960) Conference of Independent African States served as the basis for the founding of the Organization of African Unity in 1963. Much of the language employed in the principles of the OAU Charter was either identical or very similar to that of the resolutions passed during the two conferences. While, the prior conferences and gatherings of African Heads of State had all been temporary, the establishment of the OAU was symbolic in that it represented a tangible outcome from the past conferences. The convening of thirty African heads of state between May 22nd and May 25th, 1963 marked a significant historical event for the continent. These thirty heads of state created six resolutions tackling various issues pertinent to the advancement of the continent such as colonization, independence, and the need for African unity.

¹⁷ Colin Legum, 141.

¹⁸ Ibid.

In addition, a charter for the organization was also drafted with clear support for what would be known as the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

By 1963, a significant number of African states had already gained independence which led to the question of how African States were to move forward following independence. As a culmination of the prior Pan-African conferences, the heads of state primarily established the OAU as a way to facilitate the independence movements and to set the stage for putting the Pan-African vision of uniting African peoples, into action. The phrase that clearly demonstrates the promotion of a Pan-African vision by the OAU is found in the preamble of its Charter states, “*Inspired* by a common determination to promote understanding among our peoples and cooperation among our States in response to the aspirations of our peoples for brotherhood and solidarity, in a larger unity transcending ethnic and national differences.”¹⁹ The emphasis placed on “cooperation”, “solidarity” and “unity” of African peoples on the African continent was and is a fundamentally Pan-Africanist vision. Although the OAU members were aware of the differences in the culture, colonial legacy and languages of each state, they still believed that a unification and solidarity of States and peoples would be beneficial. Furthermore, this idea of the benefits that unification held is explicitly outlined in other sections of the preamble.²⁰ OAU members were clearly advocating for a Pan-African approach by advocating for unity among states and I believe that their decision to employ Pan-Africanism was a deliberate one. There was a clear belief that only Pan-Africanism *assured* the advancement of African states and this is key to understanding both the practice and break-down of Pan-Africanism during the Nigerian Civil War.

In terms of qualifying to be a member of the OAU, the primary prerequisite was independence, followed by an affirmation to adhere to the principles of the Organization's Charter. The OAU Charter highlights the purposes of the Organization which reiterates the need for “the unity and solidarity of the African States”²¹ through (and not limited to) “political and diplomatic cooperation.”²² Thus, it is important to note that the need for “solidarity” was not simply symbolic, the OAU members were advocating for a large-scale project that involved the harmonization of political, economic, educational, diplomatic, scientific policies.²³ This ‘harmonization’ of policies was deemed beneficial for the overall goal of creating a new narrative of African States that in many cases did not acknowledge the differences (territorial and otherwise) of said States. Thus, while the unity of African States was generally regarded as the primary objective of the OAU, it was interesting that the same members stipulated that each African State had the right “defend their sovereignty, their territorial integrity and independence.”²⁴ Although, it is necessary to analyze the relevance of the sovereignty and territorial integrity stipulation as a way to recognize the legitimacy of African governance of African territories, it is also important to recognize a clear inconsistency in advocating for unity and cooperation while also declaring that States have the freedom to resist any encroachment on their sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is difficult to imagine how such large scale cooperative efforts could be achieved without any form of encroachment upon state sovereignty or territorial integrity. Whether it was easier for OAU members to agree to large-scale cooperation given their stated right to protecting sovereignty and territorial integrity, is something we can only assume given the stakes. However, the stipulation does paint a necessary landscape of the ideological tensions present during the establishment of the OAU. Furthermore, these

¹⁹ Colin, Legum, 231.

²⁰ Zdenek Cervenka. *The Organization of African Unity and Its Charter*. 2nd ed. London: C. Hurst and Company (1969), 231.

²¹ Ibid, 232.

²² Ibid.

²³ Article II of the OAU Charter describes all the different fields which OAU members felt harmonization and commonality was necessary.

²⁴ Ibid, 232.

conflicting ideologies also followed through in the OAU's intervention during the 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War which will be discussed in the following section.

An argument that is often lacking in the discussion of the OAU as a result of significant focus on the failure of the OAU to live up to the standards stated in its Charter. The first argument is that the OAU should be celebrated for its ability to gain international recognition and as a continental force, even with regards to the Nigerian Civil War. The second discusses the reasons why the OAU can be considered a failure in its attempts to bring peace and unification to Nigeria. The OAU is frequently described as a failed mission of Pan-Africanism on the African continent. Although such criticism is valid and accurate, it unfortunately works to overshadow the positive results and efforts of the organization. The onset of the Nigerian Civil War prompted international attention due to Nigeria's prominent role as the most populous African nation with significant crude oil wealth.²⁵ Nigeria's former colonial power, Britain, already had very high stakes in crude oil extraction efforts through the Shell-British Petroleum company, and therefore a Civil War would not provide the most favorable conditions for oil extraction activities. Furthermore, the fact that the majority of the oil fields were located in the Eastern region that had declared itself a secessionist state, created even higher stakes for the British government.²⁶ The risk of losing of both the Nigerian and British governments lucrative oil investments as a result of the secession of the East was a very real and daunting reality and as Chibuike Uche states, "British oil interests played a much more important role in the determination of the British attitude to the war than is usually conceded."²⁷ Therefore, considering these stakes the British role in the conflict had the potential to be high and extremely involved. However, although the British supported the Federal Government and the maintenance of former boundaries, it did not take on an overt and coordinated position in the conflict. This is not to say that there was no British or external involvement during the War, but the prominent role of the OAU as the 'first responders' to the conflict clearly demonstrated a change in the dynamic between Africa, its former colonial powers and the rest of the world. This changing dynamic should be attributed to the OAU's ability to act as an organization that was focused on African interests and which was governed by African leaders. The OAU's position on the international platform was of particular significance and this was captured successfully through the words of the then United Nations Secretary General speaking before the heads of state during the fifth session of the OAU assembly in September of 1968. In his speech, the Secretary General said, "the OAU should be the most appropriate instrument for the promotion of peace in Nigeria."²⁸ Similar sentiments were reiterated during the organization's sixth session as the Secretary General "emphasized that in the long-run only the acceptance of the OAU recommendations could put an end to the crisis."²⁹ Such sentiments were a significant demonstration of the external recognition of the legitimacy of the OAU. Considering that many African states had only recently achieved their independence and were still navigating how they intended to move forward, the OAU's ability to draw international recognition and respect as leader of the diplomatic efforts during the Nigerian Civil War is noteworthy. The collaboration between the United Nations and the OAU was an important signal of changing world dynamics, especially with regards to the coordinated approach that came as a result of the Nigerian Civil War.

In his analysis of the collaborative relationship between the United Nations and the OAU during the Biafra conflict, Berhanykun Andemicael suggests that the OAU was successful in preventing

²⁵ Chibuike Uche. "Oil, British Interests and the Nigerian Civil War." *The Journal of African History* 49, no. 1 (2008): 113.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Andemicael Berhanykun. *Peaceful Settlement among African States: Roles of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity*. United Nations Institute for Training and Research (1972), 35.

²⁹ Ibid.

direct non-African interference and dominance during the Civil War. He discusses how the OAU took the role of mediator, while the role of the United Nations was primarily concerned with the humanitarian needs that arose from the violent conflicts. This shift in power dynamics clearly imply a change in the influence of non-African actors in African issues. It also demonstrated that international organizations such as the UN were taking note of the need for African institutions and organizations to create their own solutions to issues pertaining to the African continent.

Andemicael's suggestion that the OAU and United Nations shared a complementary role during the Civil War crisis creates further avenues for understanding the role of Pan-Africanism during that period. Andemicael successfully demonstrates this complementary role when he says, "the 'Biafran' charges of genocide were refuted in late 1968 by a team of observers representing the United Nations and the OAU and the Governments of Canada, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom; the team was invited by the Federal Government to observe the conduct of its troops as they advanced into 'Biafran territory.'"³⁰ The visit by the OAU and United Nations observers highlighted a greater cooperative role between these two organizations rather than simply one of the United Nations dominance in African affairs dictating a plan of action to the OAU. Such efforts put in the context of Pan-African ideals demonstrate the organization's ability to successfully coordinate and take the lead role in issues of primary African interest and involvement.

While a discussion of the important strides and positive efforts of the OAU is needed, readers must remain critical of the ways in which the organization was able to create substantial amelioration or influence in the Nigerian crisis. The ambitious rhetoric, with all its promises of unity, integration, cooperation and independence, failed to produce very many substantial and realistic results. One of the first reasons for this is the conflict between nationalism and political Pan-Africanism. The language of the 1963 OAU Charter was problematic, in that it attempted to put two contrasting ideologies together in order to produce a coordinated approach. While the Charter called for greater efforts of integration and cooperation between states, it also stipulated the right of each nation to defend its territorial integrity and sovereignty.³¹ This was problematic because, in facilitating a political Pan-African ideal, states had to be ready to give up some form of sovereignty and maybe even territorial integrity. The Charter did not adequately illustrate the trade-off between nationalism and Pan-Africanism that was needed for any Pan-Africanist efforts to succeed. Highlighting a trade-off and perhaps a loss of individual control over given territories might not have attracted as many African heads of state to sign the Charter, but it would have provided a clearer role of the organization and the power it actually had on the continent. The OAU's lack of power and influence was clearly demonstrated in its inability to involve itself in any substantial manner during the Nigerian Civil War without the permission of the Nigerian Government.

It is important to recognize that the connection between the OAU's failure during the 1967-1970 Civil War pertains to the minimal mention of how the organization planned to reconcile its colonial legacy with its broader aim of creating an African narrative for Africans and by Africans. Returning to the Organization's 1963 Charter, there is a continued reiteration of the need for defending African independence and the right to independence. However, there was very little discussion of any plan of action. Why would a discussion of colonial legacy have been useful? First, it would have provided the organization with a much more structured role as a body working towards creating the framework for African institutions that would be able to succeed the colonially imposed institutions. Second, a discussion of the colonial legacy would have provided a platform to discuss the colonially imposed borders and division of territories and regions. The omission of such a pertinent issue to the future of the continent was manifested through the Nigerian Civil War. The OAU was not just

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Colin Legum, 281.

unprepared to handle an issue of secession, but organizationally ill-equipped to deal with the demands of the crisis.

Secession in its own right is a complex term that often carries negative connotations of division and conflict between groups. As has already been discussed, the case of the Biafra state's secession was a significant challenge to the OAU and this was reflected in its response to the conflict. The secession was even more complex because it required OAU members to discuss the issue of colonially imposed borders. The OAU in its position as the metaphorical symbol of the unification of African states had significant authority and responsibility to decide the extent to which colonial legacies would influence the African narrative that they aimed to achieve. Deeply rooted within the ideology of Pan-Africanism was the notion that African-states should work towards a united African narrative that was free from external (or more colonial) intervention. While political Pan-African ideals supported this aim of unity, they did not provide a framework for working through issues of secession. This, however, did not weaken the ideology's objectives, rather it demonstrated the necessary role of the OAU in putting forward a structured action plan on how to reconcile colonial territorial boundaries with the lived-realities of the African people.

Secession insinuates division of land, people and oftentimes resources. However, in the case of the secession on the African continent with regards to the borders having been imposed by external forces should have drawn greater discussion among OAU members as opposed to a principle that failed to get into a sensitive and crucial subject. I argue not so much that OAU members were not aware of the importance of discussing the colonially-imposed borders, but rather that fearing the stakes involved in the crisis, many members felt compelled to support Nigerian nationalistic efforts to destroy the secessionist attempt. In his discussion of the role of secession in former colonies, M. Rafiqul Islam states the following concerning the failure of the Biafran state: "the economic viability of Nigeria excluding Biafra was never seriously in doubt. Biafran oil was not indispensable to Nigeria as a whole. Yet there could be no doubt that oil was one of the major issues involved in opposing the Biafran secession."³² Islam's analysis of the Nigerian situation provides a snapshot of the stakes that influenced the OAU's intervention in the War and its decision to not recognize the secessionist Biafran state. Additionally, Islam discusses the role that fear of a total collapse of the Federation of Nigeria played in the strong support against Biafra. He captures this by detailing how, "the Federation of Nigeria showed all indications of being further beset by separatist claims if the legality of the Biafran secession were acknowledged."³³ Therefore, the question of whether the Biafran state was a legitimate cause was a secondary issue to most of the actors involved because the stakes at play made it impossible for Biafra to garner any significant momentum and support both from within the continent and beyond. Furthermore, the apprehension of the international community concerning the possible division and collapse of the newly independent Nigerian Federation made it nearly impossible for the Biafra secession to gain any viable support. However, the reluctance of OAU members to discuss the role of secession and the recognition of it also played into the general approach of the organization, which involved its inability to respond directly to the different dimensions of its Pan-African objective of which secession was a part.

As demonstrated, the principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty proved to be an immense obstacle to the OAU efforts of bringing peace and stability to Eastern Nigeria, which was the epicenter of violence during the Civil War crisis. The principle not only hindered the OAU's efforts but also divided the member states on the position that the organization should take. As leader of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, General Gowon, took full advantage of the principle and "warn[ed]

³² M. Rafiqul Islam. "Secessionist Self-Determination: Some Lessons from Katanga, Biafra and Bangladesh." *Journal of Peace Research* 22, no. 3 (1985): 213.

³³ Ibid.

all states that recognition of Biafra as an independent sovereign state would be viewed by the Nigerian federal government as interference in the internal affairs of Nigeria and an unfriendly act against the people of the federation.”³⁴ As a result, Amate describes how several OAU member-states could do little more than “express concern about the situation and to urge that the OAU be allowed to help end the fratricidal warfare.”³⁵ While the majority of OAU members aligned themselves with the OAU principle of territorial integrity as a basis for their support of the Nigerian Government, others, namely Tanzania, Zambia, Gabon and Ivory Coast aligned themselves with support for the secessionist state.³⁶ It is important to discuss the opposing views held by OAU members and its significance to the larger goal of political Pan-Africanism and its implementation by the OAU. Recognizing the 1960’s as a definitive period in the formation and development of independent African states is key to this discussion. For several African states, independence only came as a result of many decades of resistance and bloody violence. This was demonstrated through the language of the Charter which stated the organization's determination “to safeguard and consolidate the hard-won independence” of all African states.³⁷ Achieving power and influence over their territories was a long and difficult task, and many of the current OAU members had also played significant roles in the independence struggles in their own states. The language of the OAU also showed that OAU members were future-focused, they wanted to build their economies and institutions and realize the full potential of their nations and the continent.³⁸ Thus, within such a backdrop, acknowledging or even recognizing secession might have proved a threat to many of the future-minded OAU members who were also very concerned about protecting their power over national territories. But it is significant that even in light of this, the states of Tanzania, Zambia, Ivory Coast and Gabon chose to align themselves with the state of Biafra. President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania criticized the OAU majority support for the Nigerian argument and argued that Nigeria’s territorial integrity was taking precedence over “the massacre of tens of thousands of people.”³⁹ Whether OAU members chose to support or condemn the legitimacy of the State of Biafra, it highlighted the opposing views held by member-states and their varied level of investment in the larger goal of continental cooperation and integration. Furthermore, while the crisis of the Nigerian Civil War might have seemed like an extreme case to some OAU members, it clearly demonstrated the way in which members could, in the future, potentially hinder or oppose other Pan-African-focused integration efforts in the event that they felt that their territorial integrity or sovereignty was being threatened. This further hindered the objectives of the organization and its Charter’s pursuit of Pan-African ideals.

This paper discussed how a better understanding of the generally perceived failure of the OAU during the Nigerian Civil War could demonstrate the ability of the Pan-African movement to politically unify African states. By mapping out the journey of Pan-Africanism and its broad goal of uniting Africans and the African diaspora, the paper was able to demonstrate the fluidity of the Pan-African ideology. In addition to this, it was necessary to analyze the OAU in a more sympathetic light, by balancing my criticisms of the organization’s ineffectiveness with recognition of the obstacles it faced. By analyzing the role of secession and the stability of colonial borders and legacies, I demonstrated the potential effectiveness of Pan-Africanism and the lack of proper implementation of Pan-Africanism by the OAU. Furthermore, I highlighted that the OAU Charter,

³⁴ C.O.C. Amate. *Inside the OAU: Pan-Africanism in Practice*. St. Martin’s Press (1986), 442.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Colin Legum, 281.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ The exact number of lives lost throughout the Civil War is unknown but it is estimated to be between one million to three million, the majority being those on the side of the State of Biafra according to <http://wars.findthedata.com/>.

with all its rhetoric, was not necessarily reason for the failure of the organization. Rather, it was the significant omission of coordinated strategies in responses to issues concerning colonial legacies to which all member-states could attest that was problematic. The lack of provision for such discussions as well as the underlying dynamics and interests within the organization were other factors that I identified as weaknesses to the OAU's failed Pan-African efforts during the Nigerian Civil War. Analysis also highlighted the unrealistic expectations of the OAU, in that members believed (or hoped) that nationalistic interests could still be maintained while championing Pan-African ideals. As the Nigerian Civil War demonstrated, nationalism could not always work alongside Pan-Africanism and thus all member-states would have to be open to re-shaping their nationalistic goals as part of a successful larger Pan-African goal.

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