

G. Aforka NWERE: *Harmonization of African Foreign Policies, 1955-1975: the political economy of African diplomacy* (Boston: Boston University African Studies Center, 1980. African Research Studies Number 14) x, 285 pp. / 10.

Reviewed by

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This paperback book constitutes a concise and comprehensive review of both the state of the nations and the state of the art after Africa's first twenty years of formal independence. Aforka NWEKE brings together in an impressive manner a considerable amount of data and a catholic range of references. He organises information and citations well and presents a succinct synthetic overview of African diplomacy on several salient issues: decolonisation, development and conflict resolution. And the author proposes the concept «harmonisation» as a way of integrating disparate (national) interests and (international) issues:

... a question both of attempts on the part of African states to make their policies conform to certain mutually agreed general goals and of a predisposition to take actions of an implementative nature in order to facilitate the attainment of collective policy objectives (p.2).

After an introduction to this notion, the author examines patterns of African behaviour over decolonisation (especially in Southern Africa), development (particularly Nigerian initiatives on the NIEO and on association with the EEC, but also later NIEO debates and Lome negotiations), and conflict resolution (OAU involvement in the Nigerian civil war and the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly the imposition of an oil embargo on South Africa). These ten central chapters are careful, scholarly exercises that review both the history and the literature of the period. But they rarely go beyond objective description, although over the Nigerian Civil War, Nweke does distinguish three groupings of OAU members: those with «status quo», «revisionist» and «wavering» positions (p. 198).

Whilst this volume claims to be conceptual and original, unfortunately its analysis is deficient in at least two ways. First, even if one can accept the essentially «behavioural» genre within which it is written, the author concentrates on inputs rather than outputs; that is, on diplomatic initiatives rather than on substantive results. There is no way of judging from the material presented whether African coalition diplomacy has been more or less successful on particular issues or at particular times. This difficulty is fundamental because of Africa's inheritance of dependence, a characteristic that NWEKE fails to recognise until his final chapter, when «harmonisation» is effectively redefined as a foreign policy objective of African states,

... designed to minimise their vulnerability to perceived external threat and to maximise the benefit of participation in international affairs dominated by the great powers (p. 266).

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The author provides some clues about the possible bases of harmonisation by offering a periodisation of its intensity: from «high and inchoate harmonisation» (1955–1960), through «low» and «moderate» periods to «high and unstable harmonisation» (1969–1975). But the catalysts and characteristics of the transitions between these periods are unclear and unspecified.

A second deficiency follows from the first: not only is the book largely descriptive, but an orthodox positivist approach is adopted. So any explanation is advanced at the level of superstructure (e.g., diplomatic style and leadership traits) rather than substructure (e.g., mode of production and incorporation into the world system). This is particularly disturbing because the subtitle of the work is «the political economy of African diplomacy». Yet the author never goes beyond state-centric assumptions and diplomatic negotiations to examine, say, relations of production or patterns of class formation on the continent. An alternative formulation of harmonisation to that of political-integration and consciousness would be to conceive of it as an expression of common interest among the ruling classes of Africa. Instead, NWEKE explains the failure of policy harmonisation in terms of «geographical separation of the countries, linguistic and cultural differences, divergent ideologies, and levels of economic and political modernisation, as well as the preoccupation of the leaders with the internal problems of consolidating independence» (p. 256).

This apparent unreadiness to push the analysis further is particularly surprising in view of the author's belated recognition in the penultimate section of the book of the continent's position at the global periphery. He then proceeds, in a revisionist way, to explain Africa's inability to implement harmonisation in terms of «external intervention in African politics... and the lack of military and economic capability to implement a policy» (p.263). A more materialist approach might have provided a more powerful form of explanation: harmonisation is elusive as both policy and strategy because of differences within and between fractions of the African ruling class, distinctions that arise largely because of the continent's situation as a set of peripheral capitalist formations. The problematic character of harmonisation as a diplomatic exercise – the establishment and effectiveness of continental coalitions – can only be understood if Africa is situated within the context of an unequal and ubiquitous world system.