

Claude Barnett and the Coverage of African Conferences Leading to the Formation of the Organization of African Unity

by

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Abstract

This paper discusses African American journalist, Claude Barnett, and the role he played in covering the transition of the Pan-African movement of African politicians and activists in the newly liberated nation-states based on the Claude A. Barnett Papers at Chicago History Museum's archives and manuscripts division. Barnett founded Associated Negro Press wire service that served Black Americans and the diaspora from 1919-1967. In 1960, he established the World News Service wire service to document the Pan-African unity conferences which ultimately led to the creation of the Organization of African Unity. Also, he was familiar with the liberated African countries; he had relationships with Liberian President Tubman and Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah who played notable roles in the conferences held to determine how Pan-African tenets could be operationalized in independent African nations.

Key words: Pan-Africanism, African diaspora, African liberation, Black journalism

Introduction

There is an adage that says journalists write the first draft of history. This is particularly true for volatile political activism, for the media cover the momentous events as well as the minutiae on a continuing basis. As it happens this raw data cannot really be classified because documentation of events cannot discern what will be historically important. However, the information it provides to the involved activists is invaluable. This is particularly true for pan-African activists because they were scattered throughout the African diaspora and unable to afford to travel to Africa to contribute or witness fundamental conferences that determined the ways in which Pan-Africanism could be applied in nation-building.

And of course these activists wanted to be involved in the last leg of the movement's goals: Africa's clear autonomy from Europe and the establishment of the free African nation-states that included a "return" policy for people in the diaspora who wanted to become citizens of the "homeland."¹ This meant that activists had to depend on media, and in particular, Black media to report on events on the African continent.

Claude Barnett: Biographical Sketch

This paper addresses the crucial role played by Claude Barnett whose news wire service covered negotiations during the period of African independence and state building conferences. Barnett was the founder of the Associated Negro Press (ANP,) a wire service he founded in 1919. At its zenith, ANP served 400 papers in the U.S. and the Afro-Caribbean. In his unfinished autobiography, *Flying in the Dark*, he says he used the Associated Press as the archetype for the ANP.² This well-established wire service helped him build the communication infrastructure and as importantly a business model that insured an efficient distribution and payment structure. Barnett advocated the non-ideological model of the AP. He would insist that reporters not focus on rivalries or ideological aspects of a story.³ Rather report the objective facts and actions involved. The ANP had reporters in New York, Washington D.C., Port-au-Prince, Haiti; Kingston Jamaica; Panama, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Monrovia Liberia; Accra Ghana; Durban South Africa, and Lagos Nigeria. He also had reports from London and Paris. ANP was in a position to report on world events for the diaspora.

ANP's dependable service provided national and some international news to Black newspapers in America and the diaspora. Having established and run the ANP for over 40 years, Barnett was attuned to the various ideological movements and stayed abreast of political activity, including parts of Africa. For example Barnett had participated with the Tuskegee led agrarian development project in Liberia, and had long-standing relationships with the African leaders involved in the modern nation-states' development. In fact he knew Liberian president Tubman and Ghana's Nkrumah, both were key figures of the conferences. Therefore his understanding of the physical terrain and colonial politics in Africa meant that he was neither naïve nor unrealistic about the challenges free African states faced. In fact, he was seen as a top authority on Africa.⁴ He was key in linking the diaspora to the conferences, which led to the founding Organization of African Unity in 1963.⁵

He did so by establishing a second wire service, World News Service (WNS) for African papers. Serving over 400 papers in the U.S. and the African diaspora via ANP and also 200 papers in Africa via WNS, Barnett connected the activists together through these wires services. This meant that he had in essence, interlocked the two services (ANP and WNS) and as such provided an invaluable international service for Pan-Africanists and other Black interested readers.⁶ In his own words he explains why the WNS was founded.

“It (WNS) covers every phase of activity in which Africans and American Negroes are engaged. On a week-to-week basis, the clearly written stories and features tell of his background, his aspirations, how he fights to improve his status, his failures, his successes and how he lives, works, play and prays.”⁷

And he held to his standard to provide unbiased non-ideological information. He was the contemporary of newsmen such as T. Thomas Fortune, Monroe Trotter, and George Schuler and of course W.E.B. DuBois. Further, he had travelled not only to African states, but also Europe. To be sure, he was a “race” man and felt his wire service helped a broader span of Blacks to receive important and useful news. This paper concerns itself with four conferences that preceded the Addis Abba conference where the Organization of African Unity was established in 1963.

Literature Review

Barnett wrote a partial autobiography well before the African independence conferences in 1950's and 1960's⁸. However it does show how he built alliances with key Black journalists and slowly built the Associated Negro Press wire service. Hogan (1984) wrote a monograph on Barnett and ANP, but it only covers 1919-1945. However, Hogan does discuss the importance of accuracy and non-ideological reporting was to Barnett. He also discusses how the wire service slowly became a national news service over time. Barnett often employed African American travelers to cover events as it was not possible to carry the expense of much international travel to his ANP budget. But when possible, the ANP assigned reporters. An example of this method is Hughes-Jackson's article of Fay M. Jackson, who was the first African American Foreign correspondent for the ANP. Through Jackson, African Americans were able to ascertain news on the complex and discriminatory treatment of African Americans and continental Africans in Europe⁹. Her work spoke to the caliber of ANP reporters, whether full time or occasional reports on events, their work was nuanced and demonstrated the cosmopolitan character of ANP reporters.

Historical encyclopedias also have brief biographies of Barnett, pointing out how important his ANP was to Black newspapers. These pieces acknowledge his importance to the Black media and was also seen as a Black leader in the field. As pointed out by Vassell, the Black press is crucial to Africana politics because important information is not available in the white mainstream media.¹⁰ The New York Amsterdam News covered the most important conferences in Monrovia and Lagos as did the Baltimore Afro American. In articles on the Monrovia conference, they include the administrative conference of foreign ministers held in Dakar. However these papers do not connect American pan-Africanists to those conferences in real time as did the WNS.

Academic treatments have the advantage of distance from the era. Academics, such as Esedebe, present an in-depth analysis of the many disagreements among the states. More than the disagreement between the two groups, he details how the borders of the nascent states were fragile. For example, Ghana wanted to incorporate the Ewe population of Togo into Ghana. Ethiopia and other eastern states had challenges of the same nature. But Esedebe and Legun both corroborate the accuracy of WNS coverage of the meetings.¹¹ Vassell & Burrough (2014) - while the focus is on Europe and the U.S. - make a persuasive argument about the importance of American, European, and Black presses to activists. Further, Gaines (2006) provides insight into one of the key leaders in these conferences: Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah insisted on pushing for a United States of Africa, a goal first developed in the African Diaspora. Some of his key allies were diasporans, such as DuBois, Padmore, who had worked with him in the United States, and had “returned” to live in Ghana.

Methodology

There was an earlier biography of Barnett, which covered the establishment of the ANP news, but covered his work from 1919-1945 (Hogan, 1984.) His work during the 1950s-1960s has not been explored. Therefore this work relies on primary documents from Claude Barnett’s personal papers housed in archives held by the Chicago Historical Museum and news clippings from Barnett’s “clippings file” in Northwestern University Africana Library. The ANP/WNS news reports will be compared to mainstream press in order to gauge the accuracy of his work. Two Black newspapers will be compared, including the New York Amsterdam News and Nigeria’s Ministry of Information news reports. The mainstream press coverage comes from the New York Times and the London-based Economist, as each is considered premier news organization that routinely cover international news. This comparison should provide us with evidence to gauge the accuracy of ANP/WNS. This paper will also situate this Pan-African era into the context of the international political economy that existed at the time.

Results

Review of the *New York Times* on May 4, 1961 covers the Monrovia conference and the Lagos conference January 23, 1962. Likewise Economist on May 20, 1961 covered the Monrovia and January 27, 1962 issue covers the Lagos conference that led to the OAU corroborates the articles of WNS. However, their perspective is different. They are looking at these key conferences from the stand point of the major powers, particularly the Economist, which is based in London. The African American newspaper, the New York Amsterdam News, of course, covered the news from a diaspora perspective. In fact the paper had covered African news well before the conferences being studied. The reasons their coverage is accurate and comprehensive are that African Americans and Afro-Caribbean New Yorkers and activists were involved in various nationalist and Pan-African groups and movements before African freedom began to unfold.

For example, they cover African diplomats in America, especially stories about their treatment in the U.S.; they did provide coverage of newly liberated states, such as Tanganyika. Also the United Nations (UN) is in New York; and of course African diplomats participated in UN sessions regarding African freedom and economy. Their reports are quite similar to WNS, but it adds nuggets of information. For example, it reports that President John F. Kennedy sent a “message of friendship” to the African countries meeting in Monrovia.¹² This suggests that the U.S. was following and interested in these conferences. The New York Amsterdam News covered ancillary political events concerning African liberation and unity in the U.S. For instance, the American Committee for Africa’s Freedom Day rally hosted several African activists, including Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia; Tom Mboya of Kenya; and Oliver Tambo of South Africa spoke.¹³ The Baltimore Afro American is quite similar to WNS and Amsterdam News. However, they seem to favor the Nigerian view of events.¹⁴

Review of Pan-African movement: 1958-1962

The 1950’s – 1960’s was the golden age of Pan-Africanism, when the political struggle for African statehood finally shifted to Africa. This transition was complicated because it involved replacing colonial political order with a system that served the political and economic interests of the emerging African states. At the same time they sought to create an alliance that allowed the new states to unify efforts of modernization, economic freedom and interstate commerce. For the most part diasporan pan-Africanists lacked the resources to make the transatlantic journey to the Continent, not to mention the time and distance between the conference sites. These conferences occurred in Casablanca Morocco, Monrovia Liberia, Dakar Senegal and the culminating conference in Lagos, Nigeria in January 1962. There they established the Organization of African States, which led to the Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa in 1963.

Due to extensive journalistic experience and skill, his attention to Black American and diaspora issues, coverage of Africa was a reasonable expansion of his wire service. The WNS began at a critical time for African political development. This coverage was crucial to Pan-Africanists interested or involved in the eradication of European colonialism and establishment of modern nation-states.

He had travelled to Africa often and understood the development challenges facing the newly freed states. In particular, he understood Liberia’s fragile relationship with the U.S. and its efforts to build an independent economy. He also knew Ghana’s Prime Minister, Nkrumah, who had been involved in the 5th Pan-African Congress. Nkrumah also had studied in the U.S. and had political relationships with most diasporic Pan-Africans. Because Barnett travelled to Africa numerous times, and he had been a newsman at least since 1919, he knew other continental activists.

Monrovia Group and the Casa Blanca Group

Of course there had been similar conferences before, such as the Brazzaville conference of former French colonies. The Brazzaville summit had no intention of breaking ties with France and also could not address complicated political and demographic issues in Congo.

However there were two groups of states that did discuss and debate the future of African Unity, the so-called Monrovia Group and the Casablanca group.

The Casa Blanca group seemed to prioritize political union - the notion of a “United States of Africa,” whereby the individual state boundaries would recede as political and economic unity grew, erasing colonial and traditional borders.

At the very least, Nkrumah wanted to bring Pan-Africanism to fruition. For decades, a United States of Africa was the central goal of Pan-Africanists worldwide.¹⁵ And now it seemed that the goal was achievable and so they pushed for institutions that would further that goal and also embrace the struggles of African nations still dominated by Europe. One of the serious disputes between the Monrovia group and the Casablanca group was the issue of openly supporting revolutionaries still contending for freedom. In particular the Casablanca group wanted to include Algerian revolutionaries in all gatherings. The Casa Blanca group supported a socialist economy and a non-alignment stance toward the West. Yet it was clear that international trade relations were necessary with Machiavellian European and American powers. There was no other way to accrue capital and other resources. In this era, there were similar conferences in East and South Africa around Pan-Africanism unity and growth.¹⁶

The Monrovia Group sought to bring together disparate ideologues and find a way to unite the states by advocating the prioritization of economic ties to facilitate growth. But at the same time the Monrovia group was adamant about the “territorial integrity” of each state. That is to say each state had to have internal control of state boundaries.

This group included most of the twenty states represented at the Lagos conference. Their vision or goals seemed reasonable and without (seemingly) ideological undercurrents. Straight forwardly they wanted to work on a reliable communications system among them, and concrete plans to link state roads of the countries to facilitate trade and cultural integration. The Casablanca Group clearly agreed with these goals. But the Monrovia group was not interested in taking up the political struggles of states still colonized or efforts to build a new financial system. More than likely, Monrovia, Liberia had a different stance on development as it had become a republic in 1824. Liberians knew about intricacies of development and that it had to be realistic and not accept an ideology.

Yet, the Monrovia Group did have an agenda. These nations wanted to join the international political economy as sovereign nations but in the well-developed Western capitalist markets. From their perspective, Africa was overwhelmed by the vastness of its population and plethora of ethnic groups and languages. Thus their “unity” entailed keeping sovereignty for every state, but to begin linking the free states through roads, communication systems, education programs and the united goal of retaining their freedom from re-colonization by European powers.

Dakar Conference

The Monrovia Group agreed to have their foreign ministers to meet and thrash out the steps that would incrementally move the states toward reasonable arrangements in the areas discussed earlier. The ministers’ report included projects like language alignment so that former French and British colonies could communicate efficiently. They also designed plans to link transportation nodes across the states where feasible. While there is no evidence that Casablanca group participated in the Dakar Conference, they did agree that these plans were necessary.

The Lagos Conference

The Lagos Conference was held in Lagos Nigeria in January 24-30, 1962. This was an exhilarating time as unification plans had been drafted in Dakar. And because the Casablanca group refused to participate in the Lagos conference its key planks were not considered as a part of a workable plan toward unity. However, even in their absence, the Lagos confab decided to at least allow representatives of the colonized states to attend. WNS news coverage suggested that the Lagos Conference is where the contemporary notions of a “United States of Africa” collapsed.

The purpose of the conference was to continue to pound out ways to not only safeguard their sovereignty but to build economic and political unity between the states. Unity was seen as imperative to jointly build compatible infrastructure and trade agreements between the Free states. But as importantly, “border integrity” of state borders was key to any unification efforts.

Perhaps the Lagos conference was the precursor of the Organization of African Unity (OAU,) which was established the next year in Addis Abba, Ethiopia.

The African activists and their diaspora supporters realized that for Africa to unite, it was necessary to abolish several colonial institutions; but, at the same time, expand on the physical infrastructure that Europe built to move the pilfered resources from Africa to Europe and the housing for ex-pats. Under colonial rule, the infrastructure included paved roads for resource excavation sites to the ports for loading on ships bound for Western Europe.¹⁷

The European infrastructure was designed, not to serve the indigenous people, but to use modern institutions for their own advantage. This meant that modern infrastructure was not very useful in growing African economies with the capabilities of moving exports to port but to also create a road system that would tie the African states together to achieve regional commerce and economic development.¹⁸

Contextualizing the Conferences in the International Political Economy

For economic unity to happen, the states had to understand the neo-colonial relationships and to understand the commerce structures that had to be the base of the interstate road network and banking systems. WNS provided a clear assessment of the complications and the stress experienced by the new nation-states.

And the complications were many: they had been acculturated into British and French culture; different political structures to bring together; the split into two groups caused by the different visions to the way forward; the difference in resource wealth among the states to carry out functions and infrastructure development. In other words each state could not contribute resources as they were in different stages of development and wealth levels. The following section delves more into these challenges and possibilities to not only have freedom in words but the capabilities to build the physical and political structures necessary.

Cultural and Political Differences

While one could surmise that liberation would be an adhesive for African Unity, along with that came complicated problems. First, colonization divided ethnic groups according to the lines drawn at the Berlin conference, which arrogantly divided the African continent into colonies for Western Europe. Since the colonial languages were a practical way for the African states to communicate, there still had to be a facilitation to bridge English and French. For instance, one ethnic group could have relatives in a French colony as well as an English one simultaneously. Further, each state had multiple ethnic groups, which often had historical discord between them. Such divides and traditional African cultural differences also would naturally make negotiations complicated. For example, there are few cultural similarities between West African Guinea and East African Ethiopia.

Different Modes of Administration and Intra-State Competition

Secondly, both France and Britain are significant powers in the Western hemisphere, but their cultures differ to a point where colonization structures were dissimilar. The French assimilated Africans into the colonial administrative structure with a modest award system that reflected their cultural norms.

The British system was quite different having a more hierarchical structure, with strict codes on what the indigenous people could do. These two cultural variables inhibited smooth transition to African unity, as these countries were assimilated into modernity according to the colonizer's ethos. Add ideology to the mix and it becomes clear that casting off the throes of colonization was a monumental undertaking for African political and economic unity and development. As the result the conference tried to bring together states that had the problems discussed above. Ideology in particular caused discord. In the end, the Casablanca Group did not attend the Lagos conference. There was speculation that the Casablanca group knew that it would be outvoted. Others thought that the group deliberately did not go because it would have encumbered progress toward African unity.

Encroachment of Colonial Powers

Both groups could not ignore the ever-present colonial powers. Clearly, the West would want control over resources upon which their European economies relied. These powers relinquished the *political* control of colonies but not their *economic* reliance and power to control most African external trade agreements. All necessary tools and equipment of international trade still lay within their domain. For example Liberian rubber trees were the source of tire production for the lucrative Western auto industry. Already Britain and France had encroached upon Liberian borders. Liberia or other free states could not counter these movements.

While both groups made what seemed to be sensible paths to development, their ideologically based arguments could not suffice nor replace capital.

The Monrovia Group had actual insight into the challenges of governance because Liberia and Ethiopia had been Free states before the spate of African liberation had begun. These states had trade agreements with other nations, and that trade had to continue to provide state income. Without trade the states would not be able to develop their countries. They were also privy to the volatility in the international economy. However, its reliance on external capital from the very powers that had caused the underdevelopment of Africa was arguably insurmountable. There were funds available through tariffs, but with little manufacturing and resources to trade, that funding was negligible at best.¹⁹

The same held true of the Casablanca group. First, its members were well dispersed: Egypt, Algeria and Morocco revolutionaries in the Maghreb region, Ghana and Guinea in West Africa and some east African states. These geographical problems clearly entailed that its main goal of a "United States of Africa" was unworkable during this era. Even more daunting was the myriad of ethnic groups, languages, religious beliefs and formidable terrain clearly would prevent this goal. To deal with these obstacles, they planned gradual regional growth, but this option could not address the problematic nature of the Casablanca group's strategies. This is because these states not only required capital, but professionals to build the roads, improve education and communications as did other "free" nations.

This group relied upon the character of the West: it did need Africa's resources, which was a valuable bargaining tool. However, the West could employ a Machiavellian approach: trade could be controlled without making a standard trade agreement with those less equipped to demand anything. While African and other new states held sway in United Nations' general assembly, Western powers in this era controlled the Security Council, which along with contributions to run the UN, were the actual leaders of the body.

Conclusion

When the Pan-African Movement was located in the Western Europe states of Britain, France, Belgium, and the U.S., diasporic pan-Africans were informed via African American newspapers. International news was available to diasporic pan-Africans because the news network involved African American and Afro-Caribbean newspapers, particularly the NAACP's Crisis. However, when the movement's activities transitioned to Africa, where it rightfully belonged, the news coverage shrank because most African Diaspora newspapers were not linked to the African audience or its political proceedings. News that was available about the conferences and efforts to establish unity among the Free states was sporadic at best. One reason is that there were few non-colonialist news outlets. Barnett was able to close that gap by extending his wire service resources to Africa. Research has not uncovered other extensive news outlets beyond the Associated Negro Press (ANP) and its sister wire service for Africa, World News Service (WNS). Not only did Barnett bring the wire service, he was familiar with Africa because he had travelled to Africa for a variety of reasons and so understood the nuances in matters that would interest his subscribers in the diaspora and Africa. Comparison made with other news sources, such as the New York Amsterdam News, Africa Today and the New York Times indicated that the WNS covered these complicated political issues accurately, without favoring any ideology. (The New York Amsterdam News had followed some of the conferences but not consistently and did not have the global web that embraced both the diaspora and Africa.) Between the ANP and WNS, 600 papers received information on these four historic conferences. Further, the WNS primary documents indicate that news articles consistently conveyed information of interest to WNS and ANP customers. It was informational and educational coverage that Pan-Africans in the diaspora and several continental activists could rely on so that they remained a part of the negotiations and the Pan-African discourse.

Barnett provides a puzzle piece that we didn't know was missing: in that space between the Pan African leadership transfer to the Continent and the founding of the OAU. His journalism seems to have played a huge role to the African American and African discourse. Because the ANP covered Black affairs from 1919 thru 1967, Barnett and his work should be included in any historical or political research on pan Africanism. Barnett's contribution to Pan-African and Diaspora politics may change our thinking about Pan-African politics.

Future Research

The Claude A. Barnett Papers at Chicago History Museum's archives and manuscripts division provides a wealth of information that can help us to understand the expansion of the Pan African movement to the continent. Barnett seems to have brought the Pan African diaspora communities to the meetings about the development of the Homeland. I am interested to study Barnett's ties to Africa. Clearly he knew the key leaders in the work toward unity: Nkrumah, Selassie, Tubman and Azikiwe. Exactly what was his relationship with them and how is it reflected in his journalism. Further paradox for me to explore is why his feeding American and African readers with insight of African development does not include the standard byline ANP, as does AP and Reuter's wire services. Finally since he was held in high regard, why is he not included in works on more famous journalists such as DuBois, Ida B. Wells and T. Thomas Fortune? I would argue that exploration of the Barnett papers will expand our understanding of the viability of Pan Africanism from the standpoint of a journalist who understood its reach from the diaspora and from Africa. Barnett has much to tell us.

Notes

¹ See Franklin & Moss. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 8th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000) Lewis, David Levering (2000) *W.E.B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century*. (New York: Henry Hold & Company, LLC., 2000;)Bandeles *Black Star: African-American Activism in the International Political Economy*. Chicago: University of Illinois .Press (2008).

² His partial unpublished autobiography is in Box 406/1-7. It is housed in both the Chicago History Museum and the History Vault.

³ Hogan, Lawrence. *A Black National News Service*. Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1984) pp. 66-68.

⁴ Barnett, Claude, "ANP introduces Special News Service For African Papers." Barnett Papers, 1960 (no other date information) Box 163, Folder 10. Barnett's Papers are housed at Chicago History Museum Archives.).

⁵ See Barnett Papers, "WNS overseas release, Feb. 15, 1963, Box 164, folder 5, Chicago Historical Museum.

⁶ Barnett Papers, Box 164/6 p.5. The WNS was announced in 1960, with the headline *Special News Service for African Papers*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Claude Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum, Box 406/1-7; also available in History Vault, Proquest database.

⁹ See Hughes-Watkins article appears in the *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.3, no.2, September 2009, pp.119-134.

¹⁰ See Blackpast.org for basic history of Barnett and the ANP. Also see Vassell and Burrough article: No Other But A Negro can Represent the Negro: How Black Newspapers ‘Founded’ Black America and Black Britain. They make a persuasive argument about the importance of American and European black presses to activists. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.7, no. 4, October 2014, pp.256-267.

¹¹ Esedebe, P. Olisanwuche. *Pan-Africanism: The Idea and Movement: 1776-1963* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982).

¹² New York Amsterdam News, *20 African States pledge unity*. May 20, 1961.

¹³ Ibid. *American Committee on Africa hosts 3rd annual rally*. May 22, 1961.

¹⁴ Baltimore Afro American, *African Leaders vote to plan for an association*. February 10, 1962

¹⁵ Several of Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanists colleagues relocated to Ghana and supported the need for U.S. of Africa. See Gaines, Kevin, *African Americans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

¹⁶ See Mbughuni treatment of the *Pan African Freedom Movement for East and the Central/Pan African Freedom*. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.7, no. 4, October 2014, pp.211-238.

¹⁷ See Rodney. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.

¹⁸ Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Pambazuka Press., 2012 Ed.; First published in 1972).

¹⁹ Clearly, Dr. Nkrumah of Ghana and President Tubman of Liberia were among the strongest leaders in these conferences. See D. Elwood Dunn. *Decolonization and the Making of an African Order* .The Perspective. August 4, 2009.