# REGIONAL MULTILATERALISM IN AFRICA:
## A SYSTEM IN SEARCH OF RATIONALIZATION

Giovanni Finizio ★

───── ABSTRACT ─────

Africa is the continent with the highest density of regional organizations. Besides a continental/regional organization – the African Union – there are at least 18 sub-continental/sub-regional organizations which have proliferated over time without a centre which could coordinate them and give the whole picture a rational direction. This process has resulted in a messy system of overlapping integrative schemes with partially conflicting political and economic paradigms.

This article analyzes the historical roots and drivers of this institutional disorder, focusing on the dynamics of unification and fragmentation under colonial rule, the political debates and the power politics among African states after their independence, the features of the African state system, and the role of external actors. The article also deals with the historical process of rationalization of the African integration system, comprising two interconnected dimensions: a horizontal one, which relates to the improvement of the institutional picture at the sub-regional level, and a vertical one, related to the relationship between the OAU/AU and sub-regional organizations.

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1950s, regionalism has been considered by many African politicians, scholars and intellectuals the main instrument to provide the continent with economic development, peace and security, and to achieve the necessary autonomy and emancipation from external players

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★ Università di Torino. Address for correspondence: giovanni.finizio@unito.it.

and pressures. Today, Africa is the continent with the highest density of regional organizations. Besides a continental/regional organization – the African Union (AU), which replaced the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 2002 – there are at least 18 sub-continental/sub-regional organizations (Nagar and Ngaje 2018: 205), which have proliferated over time without a centre which could coordinate them and give the whole picture a rational direction. This process has resulted in a messy system of overlapping integrative schemes with partially conflicting political and economic paradigms (Tavares and Tang: 2011), which the literature has represented as a "spaghetti bowl".[1] Institutional disorder has heavily undermined the effectiveness of African regionalism, which has fallen short of the hopes of early Pan-Africanists and advocates of African unity so far.

The path towards the rationalization of the system has proved to be slow and difficult, because its basic features are rooted in history and have been fuelled by endogenous factors – such as the structure of the African state system and the political dynamics after the independence of African states – and external pressures.

This article aims to contribute to the comprehension of regional multilateralism in Africa, analyzing the historical roots and drivers of its institutional disorder, and the path to its rationalization. It is organized in five parts. The first four sections are focused on the historical factors which gave birth to the main features of African regionalism, and have caused what was described by the former Chairperson of the AU, Alpha Oumar Konaré, as an institutional "cacophony" (Murithi and Ndinga-Muvumba 2008: 11). Specifically, in these parts the article will discuss the dynamics of unification and fragmentation under colonial rule, the political debates and the power politics among African states after their independence, the features of the African state system, and the role of external actors. The last section deals with the historical process of rationalization of the African integration system, comprising two interconnected dimensions: a horizontal one, which relates to the improvement of the institutional picture at the sub-regional level, and a vertical one, related to the relationship between the OAU/AU and sub-regional organizations.

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[1] The concept of "Spaghetti bowl" was originally proposed by Bhagwati (1995), in order to represent the particular issue of overlapping free trade areas.

## 2. The dynamics of unification and fragmentation under colonial rule and their implications for African regionalism

The two-level conformation of the African integration system – continental and sub-continental – has its roots in the very birth of the ideal of African unity and its transformation into a political movement in the context of European colonialism. In the aftermath of World War II, a young generation of Pan-Africanists [2] – such as George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta, and Kwame Nkrumah –, started to pursue the economic, political and military unification of the territories undergoing decolonization *on a continental and supranational basis*. The establishment of a United States of Africa was considered the only way to ensure the effective emancipation of newly-independent African states from the neo-colonial pressures of the European and industrial powers, thus promoting security and development for the continent (Nkrumah 1963: 174). Once Nkrumah became the first President of independent Ghana, in 1957, the country became the driving force of Pan-Africanism and African unity was made the country's foreign policy priority. This marked a turning point in the history of African regionalism, as continental unity, originally just an ideal, mostly cultivated in restricted circles of intellectuals, then became a matter of international relations among newly independent states (V.B. Thompson 1962: 126).

In April 1958 Nkrumah and the Prime Minister of Tunisia Habib Bourgiba convened the first Conference of Independent African States (CIAS) in Accra. It was the first occasion for leaders of independent African countries [3] to meet and try to reach a consensus on many common issues, including continental unity and its organization. It immediately became clear, then, that the continental scope of Pan-Africanists' objective had to come to terms with the dynamics of both unification and fragmentation that had already affected some African regions under the colonial rule.

Countries such as France and Great Britain, in particular, had promoted a certain degree of integration among their respective administrative units through a common language, common markets, common infrastructures, and common institutions. In East Africa, for instance, as early as the late 19th century white settlers urged federation to create a white dominion

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[2] Pan-Africanism can be defined as a political ideology based on the realization of the fragmented nature of the existence of Africans, their marginalization and alienation both on the continent and in the Diaspora, and affirms the consequent need to promote their unity and solidarity for a future of emancipation, development and peace (Murithi 2005: 7).

[3] The independent countries which were attending the conference then were eight: United Arab Republic, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia.

reaching to the Rhodesias and dominated by Kenya (Cox 1964: 36). After the WWII Great Britain launched a High Commission, which later was replaced by the African Common Services Organization (EACSO), in order to manage common services (collection of taxes, posts and telecommunications, railways, airline company, meteorological services, etc.), the common market, which was developed between 1922 and 1949, and the common currency among countries under decolonization (Massell 1963: 29). France, on the other hand, had organized its Sub-Saharan colonies into two large federations – French Equatorial Africa and French West Africa, established in 1902 and 1904 respectively – with the aim to coordinate, in larger frameworks, the activities of these territories, bestowing on them some degree of autonomy while keeping them under control (Julienne 1967: 339).

Connections and interdependence among these microcosms created by the colonial powers, however, were kept rather loose. Not surprisingly, Pan-Africanists, while holding continental unity as a long-term goal, were induced by realistic considerations to elaborate plans for the establishment of sub-regional federations as first steps towards African unity (Padmore 1956: 22). Moreover, after the independence of African countries, their natural reflex was to establish sub-regional organizations, rather than a continent-wide integration scheme. Thus, in East Africa, Pan-Africanist Julius Nyerere, together with Jomo Kenyatta and Tom Mboya,[4] led a large mixed grouping of political parties and states in the region pursuing the creation of an East African Federation[5] and paving the way towards launching the East African Community (EAC) in 1967. In British West Africa, since the 1920s some transnational movements (the West African National Congress) pursued the unification of the four British territories (Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Gambia) on a federal basis, while others (the Pan-African Federation and the West African National Secretariat) called for the unity of the whole region including the Francophone countries (Welch 1966: 17).

The approach towards integration was quite different in the Francophone colonial and post-colonial world. The French branch of Pan-Africanism, based in Paris and active since the 1930s, as well as the African leaders in the territories ruled by France, did not share the militant and radical approach to African unity expressed by Nkrumah and its Anglophone fellows. This was due to the particular relations between France and

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[4] After independence, Nyerere would become the President of Tanganika (later Tanzania), while Kenyatta and Mboya would become the President and Minister of Justice of Kenya respectively.

[5] Pan-African Movement for East, Central and Southern Africa (PAFMECSA).

its colonies. Unlike Great Britain, Paris adopted a centralized system of colonial rule based on assimilation. This approach aimed to integrate the colonies into the French constitutional system as overseas dependencies, and their inhabitants into the French legal and cultural system (Manning 1998: 70, 79). As a consequence, France imposed the absolute standardization of political, economic, social, and cultural models in all colonies, without taking into consideration the differences among their populations (Wallerstein 2005: 66). Many African leaders in the French possessions, such as Leopold Senghor and Felix Houphoët-Boigny, acquired high political positions in Paris and cemented their relations with the central power through individual concessions for personal advancement (Nandjui 1995; Wieschhoff 1944). As a result, they were not too eager to stand up to the colonial authorities. Moreover, even once the independence was achieved, they were inclined to defend the preservation of a strong interdependence with (or dependence on) Paris.

## 3. The debates on African unity and on its organization after the independence of African states

The first concrete achievement of Pan-Africanism was the establishment of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), in 1958.[6] The ECA, meant to promote the development of its region, has a double identity: on the one hand it is an institution of the universal UN system and on the other hand, it is regional in terms of constituency and focus (Berthelot 2004). The promotion of regionalism is in the ECA's DNA, because the Commission was promoted by Nkrumah and the African Group at the United Nations as an instrument of self-reliance and economic decolonization of the continent (Adedeji 1993: 408-409). As such, still today "there [is] no section in its secretariat in which the objective of integration [is] not pursued".[7] Furthermore, the Commission itself was the first sound African regional organization in which member states discussed the main issues related to the liberation of the continent and the African unity.

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[6] UN Doc. ECOSOC Res. 671A(XXV), 29 April 1958.

[7] ECA Annual Report (3 March 1964-23 February 1965), ECOSOC Official Records 39th Session, Suppl. No. 10, pp. 55-56, UN Doc. E/4004. In the very first session of ECA, the UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, suggested that regional economic integration should be among the most important objectives of the Commission, because the decolonization process was producing new states whose geographical boundaries were unlikely to be optimal for their economic growth (Adedeji 2004: 237).

After the first short term of the Sudanese Mekki Abbas (1959-1961), in 1962, the function of Executive Secretary was taken over by the Ghanaian Robert K.A. Gardiner, who gradually Africanized the ECA and strengthened its budget and staff (Sherwood 2014; Gruhn 1979: 32). After having initiated studies on the state of the economy, trade, agriculture, and industry in Africa in order to help the continent to detect its needs and priorities, the Commission started to conceive specific projects to encourage joint activities and integration among African countries (Gregg 1968: 327).

In a first phase, ECA's vision of integration was mainly continentalist, and, as of 1964, it had already prepared preliminary reports on the establishment of an African common market,[8] and played a fundamental role in the creation of the African Development Bank (Akonor 2010: 14-17).[9] In addition, it had elaborated a report on an African payments union,[10] and laid the groundwork for a permanent commission of African planners (Gregg 1968: 326).

The independence of 13 new Francophone African countries in 1960, however, made the intergovernmental cohesion on the continent and the activities of the ECA more difficult. Most of them did not share, in fact, Nkrumah's vision of African unity and of relations with former metropoles. As a consequence, the front of African States spawned at least two political-ideological blocs. The Casablanca Group, established in 1961 and led by Nkrumah, comprised radical states supporting, or at least open to, the idea of continental political unity (called *Union Government*, or *United States of Africa*). They considered this approach to African unity as the only way to ensure security, development, and effective emancipation for Africa.[11] However, for Nkrumah, in particular, this supranational project was incompatible both with the construction or survival of political-ideological blocs still linked to former colonial powers, and with gradualism in African unification, based on functional sub-regional organizations. In his opinion, unity should be immediately established, in order to prevent neo-colonial forces from organizing and perpetuating relationships of dependence with

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[8] *ECA Programme of Action*, UN Doc. E/CN.14/261; ECA Res. 100 (VI).

[9] *Establishment of an African Development Bank*, ECA Res. 52 (IV).

[10] UN. Doc. E/CN.14/262. As explained by the ECA, "an African payments union is an interstate organization for settling mutual claims to payments in an area primarily to make inconvertible currencies inside the area transferable, i.e. to enable a country A having trade credit against country B to use it in payment of a trade debit against a country C": ECOSOC and ECA, *African Payments Union*, Conference of Governors of African Central Banks, 15-22 February 1966, Addis Ababa, UN Doc. E/CN.14WP.2/4, p. 1.

[11] The Group was composed of Morocco, United Arab Republic, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic.

former colonies. The Monrovia Group, on the other hand, was established in 1962 and was composed of more conservative leaders including nearly all the Francophone states.[12] They tended to be against the breach of ties with former metropoles[13] and considered African unity a mere search for cohesion and solidarity among sovereign countries, rather than a supranational political construction.[14] As a consequence, according to them continental political unity was neither desirable nor possible in the short term. Rather, unity would have to take the form of a continental intergovernmental organization and functional sub-regional organizations which could become, in the long run, the building blocks of continental unification.

At the Conference of Addis Ababa, in 1963, where the OAU was established, the position of the Monrovia Group prevailed. The new continental organization was strictly intergovernmental, based on the respect and protection of national sovereignty, on the sovereign equality among member states, and on non-interference in domestic affairs. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of African states overcame Nkrumah's resistance to "regional associations and territorial groupings" which, according to him, "can only be other forms of balkanization unless they are conceived within the framework of a continental [political and supranational] union" (Nkrumah cit. in Sanger, 1964: 274). Most countries were convinced that the OAU was incompatible with closed *political-ideological* blocs, and called for the suppression of any pre-existing sub-regional groupings or organizations, such as the Monrovia and Casablanca blocs, PAFMECSA and the Union Africaine et Malgache (UAM),[15] which had divided African states. However, it became generally accepted that, given the extreme diversity

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[12] The Group comprised 20 countries: Libya, Tunisia, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Togo, Somalia, Ethiopia, Benin, Upper Volta, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), Ivory Coast, Gabon, Madagascar, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal. The only Francophone countries which did not join this group were Sekou Touré's Guinea and Modibo Keita's Mali, which belonged to the Casablanca Group. In August 1961, they had established, together with Ghana, the Union of African States, an organization with supranational ambitions, at least on paper (Welch 1966: 331).

[13] See, for instance, Senghor (1958: 41-42).

[14] The description of the two Groups provided here is necessarily schematic and oversimplified. For a detailed discussion on this cf. V.B. Thompson (1969: 162 ff.).

[15] UAM, born in September 1961, represented an institutionalization of the so-called Brazzaville Group and comprised all conservative Francophone countries. This organization reenacted the ties among African Francophone territories of the colonial period, but on a much looser integrative basis (Tevoedjre 1965: 10-11). The members of the group were: Benin, Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), Ivory Coast, Gabon, Madagascar, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal. Mali and Guinea refused to join the group and established together with Nkrumah the Ghana-Guinea-Mali Union (or Union of African States), an organization with supranational ambitions, at least on paper (Welch 1966: 331).

of the African continent and the heritage of past political factors, the development of *functional* sub-regional organizations was the only possible approach to African unity. As a consequence, the gradualist approach that had prevailed in Addis Ababa turned political and supranational unity into a potential, long-term objective.

This double strategy, which decentralized the African unification process, while trying to close the door on the linguistic-political-ideological fragmentation of the continent, was formalized at the Council of Ministers of Dakar, in August 1963. A resolution of the Council established that "any regional grouping or sub-regional groupings be in keeping with the Charter of the OAU and meet the following criteria: a) [to be based on] geographical realities and economic, social and cultural factors; b) [to co-ordinate] economic, social and cultural activities peculiar to the States concerned".[16]

This outcome was heavily influenced by the gradual marginalization of Nkrumah among African leaders, caused by the active efforts of Nigeria and Ivory Coast (Aluko 1976; Migani 2008; Nandjui 1995), and the Ghanaian leader's faulty strategy. In fact, the general political obsession of most African leaders was the preservation of the *status quo* in order to ensure the survival of their young states and regimes. Nkrumah, however, kept insisting on the *Union Government* and boycotted the OAU in order to prevent it from consolidating. Moreover, he promoted the subversion of most conservative regimes, in order to replace them with radical leaders sympathetic to the political unification of the continent (W.S. Thompson 1969: 324-326, 333-336). In practice, Nkrumah's "revolutionary" policy had helped to forge a bond of shared hostility towards him and his position on African unity as between most Francophone and Anglophone countries (Mazrui 1967: 66).

Even the ECA aligned with the new trend,[17] decentralized its structure establishing sub-regional headquarters and put its technical expertise at states' disposal to establish effective sub-regional economic organizations (Gruhn 1979: 86-87).[18] After a period of strong rivalry between the ECA and the OAU for the steering of Africa regionalism (Andemicael 1976: 201),

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[16]  OAU Doc. CM/Res. 5(1), 10 August 1963.

[17]  Within the ECOSOC, Gardiner clearly expressed his increasing support for sub-continental solutions: ECOSOC *Official Records* (37th Session), Supplement No. 10, para. 109. Not surprisingly, his position caused a clash with Nkrumah (Dei Anang 1975: 5-6).

[18]  ECA opened regional headquarters in Niamey (for West Africa), Lusaka (East Africa), Tangiers (North Africa), Leopoldville (Kinshasa, for Central Africa). As regards the promotion of regionalism, such headquarters were meant to assist governments in the building of sub-regional institutions, but also to be nuclei themselves of sub-regional organizations.

which had been encouraged by the harsh hostility of the most Francophone countries towards the ECA,[19] in 1969, the former institution ended up formally accepting the latter's primary responsibility over intra-African cooperation.[20] The OAU, in turn, remained dependent on ECA's technical expertise.[21] This interdependence, together with a shared vision of African Unity as a gradual process based on the central role of sub-regional organizations, paved the way to a regular and fruitful cooperation between the two institutions in promoting regionalism. None of them, however, had any real power to impose coordination and rationalization on regional institutions and their member states.

## 4. The African state system and its effects on the regional governance

The "cacophonous" nature of the African regionalism framework is also due to the structural features of the African state system, which was inherited from colonialism. It is widely known that the model of the centralized and bureaucratic state was imported to Africa by colonizers and then applied to the new African states. While in Europe the construction of modern states took centuries, in Africa the high expectations from newly-acquired independence, and from the nationalist leaders, required a rapid construction of strong and effective states, able to provide "fast-track" development, welfare and security (Warner 2001: 86). However, this endeavour proved to be quite difficult because of the very characteristics of

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[19] A relevant cause of this hostility was the fact that the ECA was born before the independence of Francophone countries, which considered it as an institution in the hands of radical Anglophone leaders. From their perspective, this conviction was confirmed by ECA's opposition to the relationship between Francophone countries and the European Economic Community formalized in the Yaoundè Conventions of 1963 (Gruhn 1979: 105; Migani 2008). ECA's reports described the Yaoundé Conventions as reckless (ECA 1960). ECA's position was actually in line with the orientations of radical Anglophone countries, which were against the influence exerted by Paris on the continent and argued that the Yaoundé Conventions fueled neo-colonialism and undermined regional cooperation in Africa: see, for instance, Nkrumah (1965: 19), who described the Conventions as a case of collective neo-colonialism.

[20] UN Doc. E/CN.14/Res/190(IX), 11 February 1969.

[21] ECA, led by an expert Executive Secretary like Gardiner and endowed with expert and well-payed UN economists, was in a better position to undertake initiatives on African economic problems (Červenka 1977: 178-179). It is worth mentioning that at the birth of the OAU, all issues on the table of its Economic and Social Commission had already been analyzed by the ECA in its own reports – the restructuring of international trade and the harmonization of national development plans; the establishment of a free trade area in Africa, of a common fund for the stabilization of prices of raw materials, of an African payments Union and of a coordination of transports and telecommunications: See OAU Doc. ECOS/16/Res. 2(I), 13 December 1963; OAU Doc. ECOS/17/1/Res./3(I), 13 December 1963.

the post-colonial states. Firstly, in most cases their borders coincided with the administrative borders of colonial territories, which had been drawn by colonial powers according to their own interests, disregarding any ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious considerations, as well as any pre-colonial affinities or loyalties. While Nkrumah's project aimed to "dilute" them within a supranational entity, a decision to maintain the colonial borders according to the principle *uti possidetis* was agreed upon in Addis Ababa.[22] This decision, on the one hand, fueled ethnic heterogeneity within territories, on the other hand, assigned populations of the same community to two or more neighbouring countries, thus laying the foundations for structural instability within the new states. In fact, this arbitrary partitioning prevented these states from having adequate consolidation in terms of effectiveness, an ability to command loyalty from their citizens, and an ability to govern such diverse societies. Moreover, in many cases, these conditions gave rise to small (in terms of size and population) and unviable states, which are faced with, or are critically challenged by, a vast array of security vulnerabilities and threats (Francis 2006: 38). In other words, the decolonization process "had launched in international politics a group of the world's poorest, weakest and most artificial states" (Clapham 1998: 1).

In this context, the very high popular expectations from the new states and regimes were accompanied by painful disillusionment and the exercise of effective jurisdiction over national territories became increasingly difficult. Territorial integrity and the very survival of the states became the most pressing concerns of political leaders throughout Africa. These factors caused a concentration of power in the hands of Presidents and a general regression of new states into dictatorship. Leaders of states (many of which weak or "quasi-states")[23] found the authoritarian option necessary when having to face the constant threats of centrifugal forces and oppositions that, due to awakened ethnic or regional interests, did not only question the government in office but also the unity of the state. Not surprisingly, this regression affected also radical countries, even though this was clearly in contrast with the spirit of human emancipation typical of Pan-Africanism (Wallerstein 2005: 98; Salih 2005: 11). In addition, in the struggle to control state power and consolidate regime survival, political authority

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[22]  The principle was enshrined in a resolution passed by the OAU General Assembly, in July 1964, after many border disputes had occurred in the first years of the Organization: *Border Disputes among African States*, July 1964, OAU Doc. AHG/Res.16 (I).

[23]  Robert Jackson (1990) defines "quasi-states" those political units whose external sovereignty is recognized by the rest of the international community but which are internally ineffective, in terms of the monopoly of the use of force and the ability to respond to their own citizens' demands.

in post-colonial Africa became increasingly personalized, thus ending up being based on patrimonial networks and patronage (neo-patrimonialism).

Such considerations provide some basic explanations for characteristics of African regionalism. First of all, it is not surprising that regimes concerned with their own political survival are the most vociferous and zealous defenders of the idea of sovereignty (Francis 2016: 43). Indeed, still today, these factors, together with the lack of a strong democratic identity among African states, partly explain the intergovernmental and elite-driven nature of most African regional organizations (Adar, Finizio and Meyer 2018: 22-26). Furthermore, they fuel the disorganized proliferation of regional organizations. In fact, the *Spaghetti-Bowl* is primarily the responsibility of African leaders, who, according to some scholars, fuel it mainly to strengthen their position and their stay in power, without expressing much concern about the effectiveness of the institutions involved ("regime-boosting regionalism": see Söderbaum 2007: 192-195). The conclusion of multiple regional agreements and the proliferation of regional summits are described as symbolic practices aimed to strengthen the images of leaders and of the profile of their regimes. Therefore, although the overlapping of organizations and sub-regional agreements obstructs effective and orderly integration and raises inter-institutional competition to obtain the scarce resources available, many African leaders do not perceive this as an issue. Rather, as noted by Bach (2005: 183), the multiple membership in many regional organizations is considered an opportunity thanks to increased conference-diplomacy and participation in initiatives often funded abroad.

## 5. External interferences on the development of African regionalism

Policies of external actors in Africa have exerted a strong impact on the development of regionalism, further fuelling the *Spaghetti-Bowl*. France, even though has played an integrative role for Francophone countries, has systematically prevented any attempt at building effective sub-regional organizations transcending colonial cleavages, and therefore has hindered any rationalization of the whole system. After the independence, the Francophone countries gave birth to exclusive sub-regional organizations supported by Paris in West and Central Africa. Still today, organizations such as UEMOA and CEMAC[24] problematically coexist and overlap in their sub-

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[24] UEMOA and CEMAC are the French acronyms of West Africa Economic and Monetary Union, and Central African Economic and Monetary Community respectively. On the problematic coexistence of ECOWAS and UEMOA cf. Asante (2004). On the regional integra-

regions with more comprehensive organizations such as ECOWAS and EC-CAS, which transcend the political and linguistic cleavages inherited from the colonial period.

In West Africa, in particular, Nigeria promoted ECOWAS in 1975 as an exercise of regional leadership with the aim of promoting economic development through regional planning and emancipation from external forces (from France, in particular). It still comprises all 15 West African countries and represents the Anglophone and Francophone countries' first attempt to overcome linguistic and colonial separation between them. Paris, on the other hand, promoted and actively supported first the Communauté Economique de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CEAO) and then UEMOA, both involving only Francophone countries, in order to keep them under its influence and oppose Nigerian leadership ambitions.

The two overlapping and competing organizations partially share the same objectives and competences, but UEMOA presents more supranational characteristics and is more effective than ECOWAS.[25] The former enjoys the direct political, economic and technical support of France and the EU (Commission Européenne 1997), and its integrative project is based on the monetary union made possible by the participation of its member countries in the CFA monetary zone, managed by Paris and linked to the Euro. Not by chance, its structure and powers resemble to some extent the EU's normative instruments and institutional model (Claeys and Sindzingre 2003).

The EU, too, contributes to making the rationalization of African regionalism more complicated. Since the 1960s the EU has been widely recognized as the most important promoter of regionalism in Africa and elsewhere, both as a model and as an active supporter of regional integration through specific policies (Fawcett 2015). However, over the last two decades it has contributed, particularly because of its trade strategies, to making African regionalism more disorganized.

The Cotonou Agreement, signed in 2000 by the EU and the African, Pacific and Caribbean (ACP) countries, launched the project of concluding seven Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs; five in Africa, one in the Pacific and one in the Caribbean region) by 2008, establishing as many South-South-North free trade areas coherent with WTO rules and based on the reciprocity principle. This venture is part of the EU's attempt to

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tion processes in Central Africa, and the relations between CEMAC and the broader Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), see Meyer (2014a, 2014b).

[25] According to a report released by ECOWAS Secretariat, for instance, in 1998 only 45% of ECOWAS programs have been implemented by its member states, compared to 68% of UEMOA programs by its members (ECOWAS 1998).

promote partner countries' development by gradually integrating them into the world economy. Moreover, while these EPAs were presented as an exercise in region-building aimed to prepare African countries for a global competition, they have contributed to hinder the development of an effective regionalism on the continent. In fact, these agreements found resistance from many ACP countries, so much so that, as of 2008, only the EPA with the Caribbean countries had been signed and had entered into force. Among the many criticisms was the fact that groupings of states envisaged by the EPAs in many cases did not coincide with the existing sub-regional organizations, making the *Spaghetti Bowl* even more complex and interfering with the African ownership of African regionalism (Jakobeit 2015).[26] Although the EU, as early as 2007, committed itself to support, together with the AU, the integration of different sub-regional organizations, making it compatible with the EPAs process (Council of the European Union 2007: para. 99), the current situation is still difficult (Krapohl and Van Huut 2019). However, the EU could use the opportunity of the negotiations for a new EU-ACP agreement, which were supposed to end by February 2020 but are still under way, to contribute to the rationalization of African regionalism, for example by involving existing sub-regional organizations in the negotiations and in the future agreement.

6. THE PATH TOWARDS THE RATIONALIZATION OF AFRICAN REGIONALISM. MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

The facts and processes assessed above paved the way to the development of African regionalism along the general lines which still define it today. The decentralized and gradualist approach to African unity, shared by the OAU and ECA, opened the door to the proliferation of partially overlapping sub-regional organizations which no continental institution can control or regulate (Nagar and Ngaje 2018; Ojo Oloruntoba 2020; Hout and Salih 2019). To this "horizontal issue" at the sub-regional level, a "vertical" inter-institutional dimension should be added, which relates to the increasing need of cooperation and complementarity between the OAU/AU and sub-regional organizations both in the economic and security areas. In the 1990s, in particular, the limits of the OAU (Gomes 2008) and the UN (Kennedy 2006: 95-112) in the maintenance of peace and secu-

[26] In Southern Africa, for instance, members of Southern African Development Community (SADC) belong to three different EPA groupings.

rity in Africa, laid bare by the proliferation of the so-called "new wars",[27] had brought African states to equip regionalism with mechanisms for crisis management under the slogan "African solutions for African problems". This movement was also induced by the reluctance of the international community to employ resources to face increasingly demanding crises (in Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone…) on a continent, which had lost its strategic relevance after the cold war. In fact, while sub-regional organizations became increasingly active in the field of peace and security (e.g. ECOWAS, SADC, IGAD),[28] the African Union established an African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), meant to involve them on a regular basis. In the economic field, the OAU (and then the AU), mainly originally entrusted with political tasks, became increasingly relevant.[29] In general terms, the risk of economic marginalization affecting Africa in the increasingly competitive post-cold war context, pushed African regionalism to strengthen its economic instruments and relaunch its activities based on new paradigms. As the OAU/AU and sub-regional institutions gradually began to operate in the same fields of activity, coordination and co-operation between them gained more and more importance. The multi-faceted challenges brought by globalization and the new post-bipolar context demanded a stronger regionalism and more inter-institutional cooperation, which implied a general (horizontal and vertical) rationalization of the system.

These issues had been addressed by the OAU and ECA, as early as 1980, when the OAU Assembly convened an extraordinary session to discuss the economic problems of the continent. The adoption of the *Lagos Plan of Action* (LPA; OAU 1980; Fashole and Shaw 1984), complemented by the Final Act of Lagos (FLA) set up a new paradigm for the economic development of the continent, based on the principles of collective self-reliance, self-sustainment, democratization of the development process, and a fair distribution of the fruits of development (Adedeji 2004: 261). The LPA approach was aimed to overcome the vulnerability of African economies to

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[27] Mary Kaldor (1999) called "new wars" civil wars with elements of transnationality, whose main victims (and targets), in contrast to traditional inter-state wars, are the civilians and not the military.

[28] The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), comprising 8 countries in the Horn of Africa, Nile Valley and the African Great Lakes, was established in 1996, succeeding the earlier Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD).

[29] Although in 1963 the OAU was endowed with an Economic and Social Commission to foster economic cooperation in Africa, especially in the early years the Organization was mainly focused on political objectives such as decolonization, the protection of member states' sovereignty, the cooperation among them for a common projection on the international arena (Legum 1964).

their external environment, which was considered the main cause of their underdevelopment. In this framework, the Plan proposed to integrate national economies and build continental and sub-regional markets. An African Economic Community (AEC) was to be launched by 2000 to ensure economic, cultural, and social integration for the continent. This was to be the culmination of a gradual process that included the strengthening of existing sub-regional organizations, the creation of new ones where needed, their coordination, and the final implementation of an African common market. To this end, the ECA divided Africa into five sub-regions in which to build five Regional Economic Communities (RECs) transcending linguistic colonial cleavages.

The AEC integration process was, actually, launched by the 1991 Abuja Treaty, which entered into force in 1994 and envisaged a 6-step continental integration process to be fulfilled within the next 34 years, based on the RECs as building blocks. The final goal included the free movement of people and of production factors, the creation of a single market, an economic and monetary union, a central bank, and a single currency (Bach, 2005: 175).[30] To this end, the 1998 Protocol on Relations between the AEC and the RECs promoted horizontal coordination among RECs and provided an institutional structure enabling the AEC Secretariat to harmonize programs and policies for the realization of AEC objectives. It also established that the RECs reviewed their statutes to recognize the realization of AEC as a final goal and to be absorbed into the African common market at the end of the process.[31]

The management of the AEC process was taken over by the AU in 2002, whose Constitutive Act included among the objectives of the new organization the "coordinat[ion] and harmoniz[ation of] the policies between the existing and future Regional Economic Communities for the gradual attainment of the objectives of the Union" [art. 3 (l)]. In 2006, in order to contribute to the rationalization of the system of regional governance, the AU Summit held in Gambia decided to recognize and support only eight RECs as building blocks of regional integration[32] and established a moratorium on the creation of new sub-regional organizations.[33]

Furthermore, a protocol signed by the RECs and the AU in 2007 requested them to coordinate and commit themselves to rationalize the system.

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[30] *Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community*, art. 6.

[31] *Protocol on Relations between the African Economic Community and the Regional Economic Communities*, 1998, art. 3 and 5.

[32] ECOWAS, COMESA, EAC, ECCAS, SADC, IGAD, Arab Maghreb Union, CEN-SAD.

[33] AU Assembly, *Decision on the Moratorium on the Recognition of Regional Economic Communities*, 1-2 July 2006, AU Doc, Assembly/AU/Dec.112 (VII).

However, still today, "multiple membership of African countries in different RECs with conflicting or overlapping standards, procedures and obligations" make the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers and the creation of larger regional markets very difficult (African Union 2007: para. 352). In addition, as most RECs lack effective supranational institutions and enforcement mechanisms, the implementation of trade liberalization has proved to be very slow and uneven (Akonor 2010: 82). Not surprisingly, the Abuja Treaty's stated aim of establishing eight regional customs unions within 23 years (i.e. by 2017) has not been achieved yet and different RECs have divergent integration timelines (ECA, AU, ADB and UNCTAD 2019: 48).

As a consequence, African leaders decided to fast-track the establishment of the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA).[34] The Treaty establishing it, brokered by the AU, was signed on 21 March 2018, and entered into force on 30 May 2019. As of today, it has been signed by 54 out of 55 AU member countries. While most observers have welcomed this important step towards African economic unification, its implementation has to come to terms, once again, with the coordination and rationalization of RECs, an issue which was originally supposed to be solved before, and not after a continental trade liberalization. Still today, only 12 African countries belong to a single REC; 33 belong to 2 RECs, 8 to 3 RECs and 1 to 4 RECs (ADB, AU and ECA, 2019), which hinders the advancement of deeper continental economic integration. Therefore, an explicit objective of the CFTA itself is to "resolve the challenges of multiple and overlapping memberships and expedite the regional and continental integration processes".[35]

Currently, there are four functioning free trade areas by AU recognized RECs: COMESA,[36] ECOWAS, EAC and SADC (ECA, AU and ADB 2017: 35). In June 2015 COMESA, the EAC and SADC created the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA), based on the assumption that the three organizations would "start working towards a merger into a single REC".[37] This did not happen, however (ECA, AU and ADB 2019: 56), and the fact that the AU does not have any power to impose effectiveness, convergence, and rationalization on RECs, does not help either.

Moreover, given that Article 19 of the CFTA agreement allows the REC trading arrangements to persist as islets of deeper integration within the

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[34] *Decision on Boosting Intra-African Trade and Fast-Tracking the Continental Free Trade Area*, EX.CL/700(XX), Assembly/AU/Dec.394(XVIII), 29-30 January 2012.

[35] *Decision on Boosting Intra-African Trade and Fast-Tracking the Continental Free Trade Area*, cit.

[36] Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa.

[37] *Final Communique of the COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Summit*, October 2008.

CFTA system, the Continental Free Trade Area does not, in the short term, consolidate the REC FTAs. Rather, it fosters liberalization across the continent but does not conclusively address the issues posed by membership in overlapping trading regimes. In addition, it does not fully consolidate Africa's fragmented markets into a single regime, but leaves a web of better connected but distinct trade regimes instead. Nevertheless, by liberalizing trade between these regimes, the CFTA functions as an intermediate step towards their later consolidation (ECA, AU, ADB and UNCTAD 2019: 54).

In the field of peace and security, too, the Constitutive Act expresses the intention of the AU to develop closer collaboration with the many and diverse sub-regional economic communities and security defense systems (Francis 2006: 128). In 2002, a new continental machinery called African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) was established, and it comprises many bodies such as the African Stand-By Force, the Panel of the Wise, the Continental Early Warning System, and, as central pillar, the 15-member Peace and Security Council (PSC). The APSA recognizes the Regional Mechanisms (RM) active in the maintenance of peace, security and stability as a fundamental part of its system. Moreover, the Protocol establishing the PSC called for a harmonization and coordination of activities with these Mechanisms to ensure effective partnership, taking into account "comparative advantage of each and the prevailing circumstances" (art. 7 and 16).[38] To this end, in January 2008, the AU and RECs concluded a Memorandum of Understanding in this direction, through which they committed to contribute to the full operationalization and effective functioning of APSA "in adherence to principles of subsidiarity, complementarity and comparative advantage".[39]

The problem with the implementation of an effective partnership between the AU and sub-regional organizations lies, again, in the fact that, although the former is supposed to have the primary responsibility for peace and security, it does not have the power to impose cooperation on other independent and autonomous institutions. Rather, organizations like ECOWAS and SADC had become active in this field well before the AU was established, mainly because of the shortcomings of the OAU. Moreover, both the AU and the RECs are primarily vehicles through which member states pursue their interests. Therefore, "the extent to which cooperation

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[38] *Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union*, 9 July 2002, art. 2.1.

[39] *Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Area of Peace and Security between the African Union, the Regional Economic Communities and the Coordinating Mechanisms of the Regional Standby Brigades of Eastern Africa and Northern Africa*, June 2008.

and coordination takes place within and between these organizations depend to a large extent on national interest calculations and the prevailing balance of power among member states" (Nagar and Ngaje 2016: 225). In any given conflict situation, states will prioritize the authority of either the AU or a REC, after a careful assessment of the conflict dynamics and the capabilities of that organization to respond appropriately, but mostly on the basis of which organization affords them enough space to legitimize their preferred approach to resolving the conflict (*ibid.*).

## 7. Conclusions

Nowadays, both political elites and the literature recognize that the decentralized African integration system is affected by disorganization, and needs to be harmonized and rationalized in order to be effective and address Africans' needs.

As we can see from this article, the basic features and limits of African regionalism are rooted in history. Early proposals made by radical Pan-Africanists had called for a supranational and continent-wide political, economic and military Union. However, both endogenous and exogenous historical factors have led to the construction of an intergovernmental organization at the continental level – the OAU, replaced by the AU in 2002 – and a disordered proliferation of partially overlapping institutions at a sub-regional level. The legacy of colonialism proved to weigh heavily in the balance. While imperialists divided in order to rule but ended up creating a sentiment of oneness in Africa (Mazrui 1967: 46), they also laid the foundations for a structural fragmentation and disunity on the continent. In the colonial period, European powers (France and Great Britain in particular) had promoted aggregative dynamics among their territories, thus, dividing the continent into rather closed regional microcosms dependent on their respective metropoles. Not surprisingly, once independent, the natural reflex of African States was to establish sub-regional organizations, rather than a continent-wide integration scheme. In addition, the very African state system which originated from the end of colonialism sowed the seeds of disunity and over-complexification of regionalism in Africa. The structural weakness and instability of many newly independent states created the conditions for the affirmation of presidential, neo-patrimonial and autocratic regimes. These, in turn, combined with the pressures and the interference of external actors such as France and (paradoxically) the European Union, help to explain the intergovernmental (rather than supranational) and regime-boosting character of African regionalism. Moreover, these factors explain the irrational proliferation of sub-regional orga-

nizations, often funded by external donors, and have made Nkrumah and like-minded leaders' attempts to establish a *Union government* impossible. In addition, they paved the way for a messy two-level system of regional governance which is still in need of rationalization.

Today, in both fields of development and peace/security the AU is supposed to lead an integration process based on the RECs as building blocks, which should be fully harmonized and associated to the integrative effort. In the economic field, the treaty launching the Continental Free Trade Area has entered into force as an intermediate step towards a common market and a monetary union. In the security field, the APSA was launched in 2002 as an instrument to deal with conflict dynamics, to tackle security challenges and to promote peace and sustainable development on the continent.

Both the AU and the sub-regional organizations, however, are independent intergovernmental institutions composed of sovereign states which use them to pursue their national interests. As a consequence, the AU has not been endowed with the power to impose any rationalization of the system. Moreover, RECs are still weak institutions affected by enforcement problems and cooperation with the AU remains problematic. CFTA is expected to "resolve the challenges of multiple and overlapping memberships and expedite the regional and continental integration processes". However, this institution does not seem, in the short term, to consolidate the REC FTAs and to conclusively address the issues posed by membership in overlapping trading regimes. In the field of security, relations between the AU and RECs seem to be inspired more by competition that by cooperation and complementarity.

Both APSA and CFTA represent important steps towards the rationalization of the system of African regionalism, but the road ahead seems to be still long and challenging. Moreover, the process needs and deserves international support. The EU, whose contribution has been so far ambivalent in this respect, can use the opportunity offered by the undergoing negotiations for a new EU-ACP agreement to help the advancement of the process.

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