

O.C.A.M. :

AN OUTDATED ORGANIZATION

by

Brigitte Nouaille-Degorce

The "Organization Commune Africaine et Malgache," (O.C.A.M.), is a regional organization constituted along the same principles as the United Nations, and the Organization of African Unity charters. Founded by the head of fourteen French-speaking African States, in awareness of the necessity of coordinating their international and economic policies, and fostering "historical, economic, social and cultural links", O.C.A.M. became one of the most permanent and successful interstate organizations in Africa. Its political and economic activities reached a climax in 1968, but since that time, its importance has declined significantly.

O.C.A.M. must be considered in light of the general movement of regroupings which spread after much of Africa gained independence. The ideal of African Unity has been shared for a long time by the nationalist leaders who saw in political independence the opportunity to realize their pre-independence dreams. For them, African Unity was the only means to assure the independence of the continent. A united Africa would play a stronger international role that many small, impoverished, scattered countries cannot assume. The will to become an international force was proclaimed at the Accra Conference in April 1958. The creation of the O.A.U. at Addis-Ababa in 1963 has been the most concrete step toward that goal. From an economic point of view, African Unity was seen as the only way to provide development for the different countries and to avoid neo-colonialism. Also, cooperation among the states was sought for internal and nationalistic reasons. By establishing institutional links among their countries, the African Heads of State thought to avoid, or to solve peacefully, the conflicts which eventually might arise among them. They also hoped to reinforce their own internal power against discontent, through intergovernmental cooperation. This became clear after the assassination of President S. Olympio in 1961. An attempt to prevent and discourage violent political overthrows or coups d'etat, was made by an agreement among existing governments that any new government established by force and violence should not be legally recognized.

In order to achieve these many aims, several organizations were founded in Africa. They varied in their form, and structure but were usually founded on similar fundamental principles. The

first principle of African Unity was the acknowledgement of national sovereignty. The institutions which attempted to infringe upon the framework or powers of the nations usually collapsed very quickly, as shown by the Mali Federation in 1961, or they were completely unsuccessful in getting underway as in the case of Ghana-Guinée unity. The authority and territorial integrity inherited from the colonial period have not been challenged on behalf of African Unity. Instead, nationalism has increased in the different African states, in an attempt to cope with the main ideological confrontations which still divided the world into two blocks during the 1960s. African organizations could not avoid being involved.

Finally, the post-colonial regroupings were characterized by the personalities of the national leaders. They were essentially dominated by Nkrumah's strong personality. But rivalry between national leaders was fanned by the differences of historical and cultural background, particularly of their colonial experience. Thus, the stronger and more durable unions have been found among groupings of either English-speaking or French-speaking areas.

O.C.A.M. is a good example of an organization incorporating the different aims and structural bases we have just described. It gathers, in a permanent structure, independent French-speaking African States which attempt to deal with common political and economic problems.

The double function of O.C.A.M. as a political and an economic organization has influenced its evolution and activities. In part, O.C.A.M. inherited a strong political organization the U.A.M. (Union Africaine et Malgache) which brought together the former French colonies existing from 1961 to 1964. In addition, O.C.A.M. also inherited the U.A.M.C.E. (Union Africaine et Malgache de Coopération Economique), which was a very loose economic association. This antithetical backdrop has been responsible for weakness in the organization. At the same time it has contributed to its successes.

O.C.A.M. must also be described as an organization strongly committed to its former colonial master, France. The economic and political ties with France are primordial in the history of O.C.A.M. . One of the resulting problems of this relationship is that O.C.A.M. has had to carefully define its relations with the English-speaking States. Moreover, O.C.A.M. has had to determine its exact position with regard to the other similar pan-African organizations surrounding it. Some, such as the O.A.U., are wider and non-specialized. Others, the U.D.E.A.C. (Union Douanière et

Economique de l'Afrique Centrale) or the O.E.R.S. (Organisation des Etats Riverains du Sénégal), have a regional economic basis.

Partly because O.C.A.M. has not succeeded in solving its major problems, in recent years its existence has been threatened by the withdrawal of several member states. The leaders of the organization are aware of the necessity to define its political and economic functions on a new and pragmatic basis. They must transform O.C.A.M. if they want it to survive the recent changes. In Africa, more governments have adopted radical and nationalistic policies, especially with regard to their relations with France. These nations do not want to be linked so closely with France and are asking for the revision of their cooperative agreement. In Europe, the Common Market has brought a new set of problems related to the commercial exchanges. In France, itself, the attitude toward the Old Empire seems to have evolved, at least in style, since de Gaulle's death.

The ultimate question for O.C.A.M. is whether it can solve the strains caused by these recent changes. It was created in the light of a special historical situation. It could be considered an outdated organization, a relic of the colonial past, or a structure which can no longer meet the needs of its member states.

The Evolution of O.C.A.M.

O.C.A.M. was established by a charter signed by representatives of fourteen countries, at the Tananarive African Heads of State Conference on June 27, 1966.

The decision to regroup the former French colonies in a new organization was made in March 1965 at a summit conference organized at Nouakchott by President Moktar Ould Daddah of Mauritania. The shortcomings of the O.A.U. were the main reasons which led to the fourteen French-speaking countries creating O.C.A.M. Its creation was seen by the other non-member countries as a severe blow against the ideal of African Unity. Therefore, in the Charter as well as in diverse related statements, the founders of O.C.A.M. attempted to refute the criticism made against the organization. They were particularly careful to define O.C.A.M. as an open organization and defined precisely O.C.A.M.'s position relative to the O.A.U.

In Article I of the Charter, the O.C.A.M. is declared "open, to any independent and sovereign African State which may apply."¹ This was to avoid the charge of being "valet du colonialisme." In his speech opening the conference, President Moktar Ould

Daddah reaffirmed:

Our links (common past and culture) must live and bloom. But, there is one condition: by no means will those links be exclusive. Those links shall not lead to the formation of a closed group which might become very quickly a friends' club or, even, a Heads of State trade-union.²

In the same way, the founders of O.C.A.M. were careful not to define their organization against O.A.U. . In the same speech, President Moktar Ould Daddah explained that O.C.A.M. is a kind of go-between, serving as a link between the regional groupings and the O.A.U., which embodies the great political project of African Unity. President P. Tsiranana of Malagasy compared O.C.A.M. with "a party in a political assembly; such a party is a group of men united by an ideal held more or less in common." However, the political functions of O.C.A.M. were never defined precisely.

The founders of O.C.A.M. emphasized the fact that it was based on a unified monetary zone suitable to achieve important economic projects unfeasible on a small scale. Therefore, most of the statements about O.C.A.M. include an overall description of its different economic tasks. For example, in foreign markets O.C.A.M. must find a rapid means to stop the constant fall in the world prices of tropical products, and present a common front in international meetings to obtain long term loans at low rates of interest. Among the members of O.C.A.M., the most important task is to assure cooperation in the creation of regional markets for primary commodities and in the development of mutual exchanges of all kinds.

The O.C.A.M. Charter appears to be the result of a compromise between different goals and objectives of the States which signed it. In fact, the fourteen Heads of State did not completely share the same understanding of the contents of the Charter and the substance of O.C.A.M. . The major misunderstanding on the role of O.C.A.M. can be seen in an analysis of the evolution of its membership. The basis for the withdrawal, which now threaten its existence, is due to the ambiguous nature of O.C.A.M. as a strong political organization and a loose economic association.

The members of O.C.A.M. are scattered all over Africa. Membership was not based on regional or geographical considerations. Thus, the organization includes a multiplicity of states which often do not even have common interests. In fact, the common

quality shared by the member countries is the use of French as a national language.

Evolution of O.C.A.M. Membership

Country	Admission	Withdrawal	
		From O.C.A.M.	From Agencies
Cameroon+		1973	1971 (Air Afrique)
Central African Republic +			
Congo		1972	
Zaire	1965	1972	
Ivory Coast+			
Dahomey+			
Gabon+			
Upper Volta+			
Malagasy+		1973	
Mauritania+		1965	
Niger			
Rwanda	1965		
Senegal+			1970 (Sugar Agr.)
Chad+		1973	1972 (Air Afrique)
Togo+			
Burundi	1970		
Mauritius	1972		

(+) States which signed the Charter in 1965.

Withdrawals from O.C.A.M. have occurred mainly during the years 1971 to 1973. However, before that a few states had renounced their membership; others made a distinction between the organization's political and economic activities. For example, Congo-Brazzaville left the political organization but stayed in the economic agencies. Since 1971, however, that dichotomy has been blurred, as the withdrawal from one activity was often the first step to complete withdrawal. In leaving O.C.A.M. the withdrawing countries, Chad for example, have denounced it as "an instrument of the French imperialism and neo-colonialism." In addition, O.C.A.M. has lost one of its economic bases with the weakening of the monetary zone: "la zone franc". Some African States merely withdrew from O.C.A.M., as was the case with Mauritania in 1971. And France has tried to free itself directly from monetary obligations which are no longer to its advantage.

The evolution of O.C.A.M. underlines the weakness of its original ambiguities, particularly the dichotomy of being both a political and an economic organization. The difficulty of a scattered membership whose principal assimilative feature is a common French cultural legacy constitutes another weakness. Through an analysis of its activities in three principal areas (political, economics and culture), it may be possible to determine why an organization which seemed strong and efficient in 1968 was completely ineffective in 1974.

The Political Life, the Economic and Cultural Activities of O.C.A.M.

In its two principal endeavors, political and economic cooperation, O.C.A.M. has had different degrees of success. In the economic arena, O.C.A.M. has succeeded in presenting a real unity in important international discussions. The political activity of O.C.A.M. is characterized, in general, by moderation. In all decisions and statements, the O.C.A.M. members appeared wanting to assure "the triumph of a sensible and cautious Africa." By taking moderate and neutral positions (some might say conservative and pro-capitalist), they demonstrated that they could succeed in making an active and successful unity where other more radical countries failed. In fact, the apparent unity was established by agreements on minor points. Generally, the members of O.C.A.M. have carefully avoided the major problems which might divide them. Positive results can be found, however, in questions concerning the defense of national sovereignty. However, on the major problems, events and crises which occurred in Africa, the members have not been able to reach agreement. It further appears that O.C.A.M. policy reflects an intent not to alienate French support, without which it cannot exist.

Another activity that has also developed in recent years is

the creation of a "Francophonie" community. Cultural activities have always been a part of O.C.A.M. activity. However, the idea of "Francophonie" which was launched in 1966, has been revived. That cultural notion, based on the common use of the French language, may also have been used in order to hide the failure of the main goals of the Organization. However, it is questionable whether a cultural project which has political implications, can be a means to reactivate a failing O.C.A.M. .

The most constant effort of O.C.A.M. members has been to secure the stability of their legal governments against all attacks which could come from internal strains or from outside interference. The members denounced the increasingly radical foreign policy of Ghana, during the time when Ghana was giving political shelter to the opponents of the President of the Ivory Coast and to the members of the banished U.P.C. (Cameroon People's Congress). In the case of the Congo crisis, O.C.A.M. was the first organization which recognized and gave support to Moïse Tshombé's government as the legal government of the Congo. In his analysis of the Congo crisis, Le Vine states:

The conference (Nouakchott Conference) choosing its words very carefully, avoided mentioning Tschombé by name or promising any military aid to his government. . . It solemnly affirmed the urgent necessity of restoring peace to Congo-Leopoldville by aiding the legal government to hasten national reconciliation in order and liberty, in conformity with the resolutions of the Addis-Ababa Conference and the Security Council.³

The main purpose of O.C.A.M. Heads of State was to put an end to conflicts which could threaten their own power. In July 1965, Congo-Leopoldville was admitted as a member of O.C.A.M. . Mauritania withdrew as a protest against the conservatism of Tshombé's government. Even before the official birth of O.C.A.M., disagreements were obvious among the founders. However, in 1968, O.C.A.M. succeeded in mediating a dispute between two of its members, Congo-Leopoldville (Zaire) and Rwanda, about a mercenary affair. Rwanda was charged by the Congo-Leopoldville of giving refuge to mercenaries who fought against the legal and national government of Congo. Once more, the main purpose of the O.C.A.M. action was the protection of a legal government against subversive elements.

On the other hand, the O.C.A.M. members never found agreement on the principal issues which involved fundamental choices. Major problems were not discussed officially in order to avoid the dissolution of the organization itself. Three of these major issues

the Chinese presence in Africa, the Biafra Secession and the South African problem, bear further examination.

Behind the problem of the Chinese presence in Africa, was the question of O.C.A.M. neutrality. The members were not unified on that subject. The presidents of Ivory Coast, Malagasy and Cameroon denounced the influence of the Chinese in Africa. At the same time, four members, Sénégal, Dahomey, Central African Republic and Congo-Brazzaville established diplomatic relations with Peking. The members of the Nouakchott Conference wanted to avoid internal conflicts, and thus, they compromised by reaffirming the principle of non-alignment as the political basis of O.C.A.M. . In fact, the O.C.A.M. States did not vote together for the admission of China to the U.N. .

The secession of Biafra put a dangerous stress on O.C.A.M. cohesiveness. Some States, Ivory Coast, for instance, acknowledged the government of Biafra; meanwhile, Sénégal supported the Federal Government of Nigeria. At the Kinshasa Conference in February 1969, no agreement could be reached on that problem. The fundamental principles of sovereignty of the States and non-external interferences were opposed to the equally important fundamental right of self-determination. In fact, it may be argued that economic interests were at stake. Nigeria was indeed one of the most powerful English-speaking countries, and its weakness was good for the economic development of other countries such as the Ivory Coast.

Finally, the unity of political action of O.C.A.M. failed on the problem of South Africa and Portugal. The Heads of State Conference denounced colonialism and racist policies in a general way only. In 1971, the question of relations with South Africa was not discussed. In 1972, while the selling of weapons to Portugal was criticized, the O.C.A.M. members never put pressure on France to stop it. At the same time, the Ivory Coast, Gabon, and the Malagasy Republic proposed to open a dialogue with South Africa. The common interests between France and O.C.A.M. showed clearly although these have always been denied by both sides.

The economic realization of O.C.A.M. may be described as a brief but obvious success. Since independence, the African States have been working for economic development. The means of development involve political choices. The French-speaking African States have chosen to unify their efforts and cooperate within diverse regional organizations. In addition, they have elected to keep technical and economic ties with France. Thus, the main purpose of O.C.A.M. is to present a common African front in bargaining with Europe in order to preserve their privileged relations. As a matter of fact, cooperation with France was not

organized in the framework of O.C.A.M. . It was based on bi-lateral agreements that each country signed with France. However, the French adhesion to the Common Market has obliged the French-speaking countries to create elaborate conventions with the E.E.C. concerning commercial relations and privileged tariffs. The second aspect of the economic activities of O.C.A.M. is the management of diverse specialized agencies and the development of the scientific projects.

While the main thrust of O.C.A.M. in the international arena has been its relations with E.E.C., its action as a bargaining group in the international agencies should not be neglected. After their independence, the former French colonies decided to sign a convention with the members of the Common Market. This was the Yaoundé Convention which was signed in 1964. It is renewed every four years. Its principal aims are the development of trade exchanges and financial cooperation through a specialized agency called the F.E.D. (European Development Fund). The States which joined this convention received the status of Associated States, Etats Africains et Malgaches Associés (E.A.M.A.). The African States associated with the E.E.C. as well as members of O.C.A.M. used that organization as a pressure group in the Yaoundé negotiations.

With the widening of E.E.C., a new threat to O.C.A.M. existence occurred by the extension of E.A.M.A. status to the African members of the Commonwealth. This tended to weaken the special relations between E.E.C. and the French-speaking States. For O.C.A.M. it is both a political and an economic threat: economic because the French-speaking states would lose their privileged relations and tariffs, political because one of the principal characteristics of O.C.A.M. has always been its willingness to adhere to the E.E.C., a consequence of its special ties with France.

Although O.C.A.M. members are strongly affected by the Common Market, they have not neglected relations with other international institutions of economic cooperation. In 1968, at the Niamey Conference, President Diiori Hamani proclaimed that "we will present a common front at the U.N.C.T.A.D. Conference in New Delhi."⁴ In the same way, according to the O.C.A.M. General Secretary Diakha Dieng, the activity of the Secretariat with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, has had the following results: "loans obtained by O.C.A.M. States have risen from zero in 1962-1963 to \$ 1.5 million in 1963-1964, to \$ 24.9 million in 1964-1965 and to \$ 71 million in 1966-1967,"⁵

An important part of O.C.A.M.'s economic activity involved the management of specialized agencies and the realization of

several development projects. Success has varied according to the ambitions and the means available. Two main agencies, Air Afrique and U.A.M.P.T. were the symbols of the success of O.C.A.M. . They were founded in order to develop cooperation between African States through economically feasible companies. Meanwhile, the political regroupings suffered fluctuations, and the agencies continued to pursue their activities in an autonomous way. Prior to 1971, Air Afrique had a certain stability. The withdrawal of Cameroon, which preferred to have its own airline company, was the first blow. With the denunciation of O.C.A.M. by many countries in recent years, Air Afrique has lost an important part of its members. In 1972, an internal crisis reinforced the problem provoked by the withdrawals. Contrary to what had happened in the past, Air Afrique could not survive O.C.A.M. break down. That was due partly to the inequality of economic development between the African countries, especially the poorest ones for whom the financial costs of such a company did not compensate for the minor economic improvement. Air Afrique failed to benefit the less developed States. Moreover, nationalistic irritabilities sometimes overcame the common interest. The Air Afrique crisis has also been caused by the political changes which occurred in Africa. As a colonial heritage, Air Afrique was assimilated with O.C.A.M. political institutions and denounced as a neo-colonialist instrument. But its future depended not only upon the political future of O.C.A.M. but also upon its economic feasibility.

If O.C.A.M. inherited Air Afrique and U.A.M.P.T. from the previous U.A.M., it also created its own agencies and signed economic agreements. Such agreements were mainly concerned with the market organization for local products. The Sugar, Coffee and Meat Agreements have tried to limit the effects of the decreasing prices of those products on the international market. They have had limited success since they have little influence on the world rates of exchange. O.C.A.M. planned an organization for the development of tourism in Africa (O.D.A.T.). This institution, like the Agreements, faces the major problem of lack of international financial resources. Thus it will have to become dependent on foreign aid. Several projects which have planned to develop scientific research in Africa have had similar financial problems.

The O.C.A.M. members have never attempted to stop the "balkanization" of the College system in French-speaking Africa. The student problems have given rise to harsh internal disputes among the members of O.C.A.M. and demonstrated the strength of nationalist feelings.

The results of the economic activities appear varied;

successes and failures intermingle. The recent political developments do not suggest any improvement. Notwithstanding, the activity which seems to monopolize the attention of many O.C.A.M. Heads of State is the cultural project of "Francophonie."

The idea of "Francophonie", under the conjoint initiative of Presidents Leopold S. Senghor from Sénégal and Habib Bourguiba from Tunisia, was presented to the O.C.A.M. members at the Tananarive Conference. But what does "la Francophonie" mean in Africa and what are the practical applications?

"Francophonie" has been defined as the formation of a linguistic and cultural community. The assumption is that the cultural links between French-speaking people are worthy of recognition, and that they are strong enough to be the basis of an actual community. Secondly, a community based on French language unites many countries outside of France and Africa. Indeed, French is spoken in 31 countries with completely different political and economic situations. If, officially 215 million people are speaking French, most of them live in underdeveloped countries where the rate of illiteracy is very high. Actually, this figure must be reduced to 80 million. Such a linguistic community can only make obvious the gap between the advanced industrial societies like Belgium, Canada and France, and the underdeveloped countries mainly in Africa. Therefore, through the vague concept of "Francophonie", there is another network for international cooperation which goes beyond the bi-lateral relations with France.

As a matter of fact, since 1966 the concept of "Francophonie" has been interpreted and understood differently by the peoples concerned with it. A member of O.C.A.M., President L. S. Senghor of Sénégal introduced the notion of "Francophonie" in these terms: "it is the confirmation of our wish to keep and fructify the positive contributions of French colonialism, by which I mean those virtues of logic and clarity, of nuance of thought, of the sense of humanity, that are indispensable to our continent."⁶ President Senghor has limited his interpretation of "Francophonie" to a cultural and rather vague level. Some members of O.C.A.M., especially Presidents Hamani from Niger and Houphouët-Boigny from the Ivory Coast have developed the "Francophonie" idea in a sense of a new framework for an economic, technical, and cultural multi-lateral cooperation. They initiated an elaborate project which was to organize a political "Francophonie" community including consultations on foreign policy. It would have been something like a new U.A.M. not strictly limited to France and Africa.

The French had reservations about the idea of "Francophonie."

At first sight, the French government did not find any practical interest in it. They feared that France would be accused once more of neo-colonialism. Although the French government favoured and supported O.C.A.M., it did not see the necessity to expand it. Moreover, it preferred to keep bi-lateral agreements and feared that a loose community would allow Canada to spread its influence all over French-speaking Africa. Indeed, the French government has been led to support the "Francophonie" as an answer to the activity displayed by Canada, which, having solved its internal problems with Québec, supported the idea, took the initiative, and often led the different concertations on the matter.

Generally, "Francophonie" has been seen by the observers of African political life as a means to avoid a possible change in French aid. According to the Report on Cooperation (Rapport Jeaneney), France would profit by extending its aid to English-speaking African States.

"Francophonie" appears principally as a word which meets with many diverse interpretations. However, the notion has taken shape with the creation of an "Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique des pays d'expression Française" (Agency of Cultural and Technical Cooperation among French-speaking countries). It was founded at the Niamey Conference, February 1969. The headquarters have been set up in Paris. The most important accomplishment of the Agency has been the creation of the "Ecole Internationale de l'Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique" in Bordeaux (France) in 1972. This school trains functionaries from all French-speaking countries to deal with the problems of developing countries and prepares them for cooperation service. The school also provides scholarship grants for African students.

However, "la Francophonie", born and supported by O.C.A.M. underlines two points already noticed. O.C.A.M. is essentially based on special relations between France and its former colonies. Secondly, the uncertainties of the political or economic definition of O.C.A.M. as well as the cultural or economic orientation of the "Francophonie", reveal the long term rivalry between Presidents Senghor of Sénégal and Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast for the leadership of West French-speaking Africa.

Finally, O.C.A.M. as an institution appears in a certain way outdated. The series of withdrawals which occurred in 1972-1973 have not been purely accidental. The ideal of African Unity and the needs for development have not passed away, but, the ideological contents have changed in Africa as well as in the world. On the one hand, with the end of the Cold War, the

"Red Peril" has vanished. Anti-communism is not nowadays a strong enough cement for an international organization, nor is the Chinese threat. On the other hand, the African States are coming into a new stage. In most of them, military governments have insured a certain political stability and a national cohesiveness based on nationalist feelings. President Mobutu's policy of "Authenticity" led logically to the denunciation of such an organization as O.C.A.M. . Finally, France no longer has the means to support an economic and political empire or sphere of influence in Africa.

Hence, the future of O.C.A.M. would seem rather bleak and uncertain. After Malagasy Republic's withdrawal in August 1973, an emergency ministerial meeting was attended in Dakar by the remaining members of O.C.A.M. . They claimed that the recent withdrawals were due only to external pressure and had nothing to do with O.C.A.M. structures. The President in charge, L. S. Senghor sustained old arguments; he attacked the "leftist" elements in Africa and the imperialist politics of the English-speaking states. At the end of the meeting it seemed certain that O.C.A.M. would continue at least as an instrument of economic, technical and cultural coordination. If some changes appeared unavoidable to all the members, the assembly was divided on the question as to what degree these changes should be implemented. However, the decision was made to review the Charter in order to prevent further withdrawals.

Footnotes:

1. O.C.A.M. Charter, Article I; personal translation.
2. President Moktar Ould Daddah, "Discours d'Ouverture" found in "La Rencontre de Nouakchott," *Nations nouvelles*, (March, 1965), p. 7. Personal translation.
3. Victor T. Le Vine, "The Nouakchott Conference: New Direction for French-Speaking Africa?" *Africa Report*, (March 1965), p.9.
4. B. J. Oudes, "O.C.A.M. Comes of Age," *Africa Report*, (February, 1968), p.54.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

MS. BRIGITTE NOUAILLE-DEGOCE completed an MA degree in African Studies in 1974 at the University of California, Los Angeles. Currently, she is a research assistant at the Centre d'Etude d'Afrique Noire, Institut d'Etudes Politiques, Domaine Universitaire, Talence, France.