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The Politics of Survival: UNITA in Angola

by John A. Marcum

In early 1976, the remnants of an ill-trained peasant army retreated into the vast wilderness of southeast Angola. Its rivals, spearheaded by a Soviet-armed Cuban expeditionary force, drove the army's several thousand disheveled soldiers into the sanctuary of a sparsely peopled savannah from which they had earlier waged a protracted, small-scale guerrilla war against Portuguese colonial rule. There, most observers expected the army slowly to disintegrate. Over time, however, the world heard just often enough of ambush and sabotage by rusticated insurgents of the *União Nacional para a Indepêndencia Total de Angola* (UNITA) to know that they survived as a political and military force. In 1983, seven years after defeat in the 1975-76 war, UNITA leaders and guerrillas not only survive as a reality to be reckoned with inside Angola. They have become a significant factor in the complicated quest for an internationally sanctioned political settlement in Namibia.

What is this UNITA that refused to die and instead continues to challenge the rule of its victorious rival, the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA)? An anti-communist "Cinderella" force for national liberation? A tribalist, racist movement whose Faustian leadership sold its soul to South Africa? To answer these and less tendentious questions, it may help to look behind partisan debate to the origins, character, and history of UNITA.

The Savimbi Factor

In the eyes of many, UNITA is synonymous with its leader, Jonas Malheiro Savimbi. It is Savimbi's tenacity, Savimbi's ambition, Savimbi's nationalism that define the movement. However, opinion concerning his leadership differs widely. The editor of the Johannesburg *Sunday Times,* Tertius Myburgh, characterized the Savimbi he travelled to the Angola bush to interview in mid-1982 as a "gifted, brave, and unshakeably dedicated man," a "sturdily independent spirit" on a "long march to the presidency of an Angola free of Cuban-Soviet domination." And if on that march he "can be assisted by pragmatic, but cautious, contact with South Africa, so be it." Tanzania's President Julius Nyerere, among other African political opinion leaders, perceives Savimbi as a political opportunist who betrayed Africa when he secretively aligned UNITA with South Africa.

Savimbi was born in 1934 at a railway village in Angola's central highlands where his father served as stationmaster. His parents, described by a United Church missionary as being of "exceedingly humble, primitive, pagan background," had been converted to Protestant Christianity in their youth. As a lay preacher, his father, Lote Savimbi, founded a series of small churches and schools along the Benguela railroad. Local Catholic priests repeatedly pressured colonial authorities to have Lote Savimbi transferred. The government complied, but each time it moved him, local supporters rallied to keep his church and school alive. "The end result was that all up and down the line there was a string of strong churches and elementary schools." (Missionary letter by John A. Reuling, March 2, 1959). This spirit of religious independence in the face of repressive authority had a formative impact on Jonas Savimbi. He, like other Angolan youngsters whose education began at United Church, Methodist, and Baptist mission schools, was influenced by those who preached and practiced an imported social gospel. One result was a disproportionate number of Protestants within the leadership ranks of Angolan nationalist movements that developed in the 1950s and 1960s.

After finishing Portuguese-run secondary school at "the very top of his class," Jonas Savimbi is reported by missionary sources to have confronted strong pressure to join the local Catholic church in return for scholarship aid. He refused. Reinforcing this portrayal of Savimbi as a person of principled independence from childhood on, UNITA publicists have stressed his "stubbornness in the face of injustice," citing how, even as a youth, he had the courage to challenge "a team of Portuguese settlers" that was "twisting the

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rules" during a village football match.

Savimbi continued to quarrel with Portuguese authority when, after the United Church sent him to Lisbon in 1958 to study medicine, the political police (PIDE) pressed him to inform on other Angolan students. He refused and, at the outset of 1961, shortly before anti-colonial insurgency broke out in Angola, fled to Switzerland. There, in June 1965, following an interlude of political activity in Africa, he completed, not a medical degree as some reports would have it, but a *licence* in political and legal sciences at the University of Lausanne.

First as an associate of the Zaire (Congo)-based Bakongo leader, Holden Roberto (1961-1964), and then as head of his own movement (1966 on), Savimbi entered the realm of exile politics. Characterized by intrigue, self-delusion, frustration, and factional conflict, exile politics requires of its actors special gifts of guile, resilience, and luck. Savimbi's survival attests to an uncommon endowment of all three. Along the way, he has surmounted many setbacks.

Take, for example, the disaster of 1967, when he was leading UNITA from an exile base in Zambia. In August of that year, his guerrillas attacked and disrupted traffic on Angola's Benguela railroad, which carried significant amounts of Zaire's and landlocked Zambia's mineral exports to the sea and world markets. He assured Zambian authorities that he had sent orders to his men inside Angola not to cut the railroad, but that the orders had arrived too late. However, a combination of factors—pressure from the Portuguese government, pressure from Tanganyika Concessions Ltd. (which owned the railroad), exploitation of the situation by the rival MPLA, and suspicions that had been aroused by UNITA's cooperation with local opponents of Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda in carrying out organizational efforts among Angolan refugees—led the Zambian government to arrest and expel him. From a back alley headquarters in the Zambian capital, UNITA issued a rueful communique: "Dr. Jonas Savimbi has fallen victim of his hard work in Angola. . .This does not mean that UNITA is dead. [His] absence. . .is a temporal setback to the party and the revolution as a whole, but the work he started will gain momentum and prosper against the wishes of Portuguese imperialists and their financiers. Dr. Jonas Savimbi's absence will be felt by all peace-loving people of the world."

His absence was indeed sorely felt by his followers. But UNITA did not die. A year later (1968), with the help of Namibian nationalists of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), Savimbi successfully slipped back through Zambia into Angola. Once inside, he renounced exile and, on the rebound, undertook to lead an internally-based insurgency of attrition against Portuguese colonial rule.

In due course, Savimbi's forces were challenged by rival anti-colonial guerrillas. Equipped with Soviet arms, the MPLA infiltrated from Zambia into eastern Angola. Superior weaponry and training gave these MPLA units a distinct military advantage. They sought to parlay this advantage into a revolutionary ascendancy that would establish them as the sole contender for power in an independent Angola. In order to survive during this difficult period, Savimbi may have collaborated occasionally with the Portuguese, who viewed the MPLA as the more formidable threat. He also tried repeatedly to form an alliance with the *Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola* (FNLA) of Holden Roberto, whom he had renounced in 1964 as a pro-American tribalist. Rebuffed in these efforts, he and his movement persisted, with little outside notice or help, in a lonely bush insurgency.

With the military coup that toppled the Lisbon government of Marcello Caetano in 1974, the door to political decolonization in Angola seemed to open. Savimbi, who had always preferred and excelled in political as opposed to military strategy, seized the chance to win politically what lack of external support had made impossible militarily. With prospectively profitable wisdom, he suggested the need for a period of political education to prepare Angolans for free elections prior to independence and set out to organize broad political support.

Jonas Savimbi has long displayed a talent for discerning and telling people what they want to hear. As early as 1962, he wrote to American friends coupling pleas for financial aid with a pledge to help push communism out of Africa. In 1974-75 he proved to be a spellbinding orator, effectively tailoring his remarks to his audience. On the one hand, Savimbi soothed the anxieties of Portuguese Angolans with assurances that he considered all those who had settled, let alone been born, in Angola to be bona fide Angolans. On the other hand, he promised black Angolans a new order under majority rule, free from domination by Portuguese-educated whites and *mestiços*. In 1975, *Le Monde's* Gilbert Comte wrote: "Intelligent, intuitive, and gifted with great personal charm, [Savimbi offered] the anxious multitudes the reassuring words they so [wanted] to hear."

Despite Savimbi's evident moderation, political popularity, and Western leanings, the United States played a key role in blocking UNITA's bid for political power in the 1975-76 period. In January 1975, when Angola was teetering on the edge of civil war, the Ford Administration elected to authorize a covert grant of $300,000 to Holden Roberto's FNLA—whose strategy relied predominantly on high-risk military action. In its subsequent failure to lend diplomatic support to either Portuguese or collective African (Organization of African Unity) efforts to restrain external intervention (either Soviet or South African), promote reconciliation among Angolans, and assure neutrally supervised elections, the United States forfeited its opportunity to facilitate a peaceful transition to independence.

After the MPLA took control of the reins of the central government in 1976, Holden Roberto fled back to exile in Zaire (and ultimately France). Savimbi returned to the against-the-odds bush war of the pre-independence period, continuing a long-term strategy designed to prove that the participation of UNITA is essential to any government that hopes to rule a

peaceful Angola. Logistical support from South Africa, money from Saudi Arabia, and modest help from other states such as China and Morocco, nourished his resistance. Finally, it was as David fighting the Goliath of Soviet-Cuban "imperialism" that he was discovered and lionized in the United States. Notably in conservative political circles that had shunned him and his cause during the days of anti-colonial insurgency, he became the anti-communist hope for expulsion of Soviet, and restoration of Western, influence in Angola.

Could there be a UNITA without Savimbi? Certainly the movement has capable second-tier leaders, and the basis for its political support extends to interests and grievances that do not rely solely on Savimbi's capacity to mobilize and command support. Yet UNITA's durability has rested in some measure on the sheer power of the Savimbi myth, his remarkable capacity to survive. It is impossible to know whether anyone else could effectively move up to fill the void that his loss would entail.

Tribalist or Racist?

In 1976, the year that the MPLA regime was accepted into the OAU and the United Nations as the legitimate government of Angola, a significant number of young central highlanders left their schools and families to follow UNITA into the wilderness. These politically conscious young people, mostly Ovimbundu, constituted a cadre of potential regional leadership, and their flight was thus a serious deprivation for the victorious MPLA. But did this exodus not confirm the essentially ethnic character of UNITA? Is UNITA not really a "tribalist" instrument of the Ovimbundu community that comprises up to 40 percent of Angola's population?

Nothing about UNITA is really that simple. In 1965, just prior to its founding, Savimbi wrote to the United Church Board for World Ministries setting forth the need for a new political movement to enlist the people of central and southern Angola (Ovimbundu, Chokwe, Ganguela, Ovambo) into the nationalist struggle. From the outset, the southern two-thirds of the country constituted UNITA's regional base. During the brief period (1974-75) when UNITA could freely organize in northern areas, however, it was also able to attract support within MPLA (Mbundu)- and FNLA (Bakongo)- oriented communities. And in 1976, it was accompanied in its retreat back to the bush by a multiethnic leadership. Savimbi's principal lieutenant (since 1968), Miguel N'Zau Puna, comes from the northern, oil-rich enclave of Cabinda. In addition to veteran Ovimbundu guerrillas such as Chinese-trained Commander José Samuel Chiwale, UNITA's military leadership has included significant representation from other ethnic areas—e.g., French-educated Antonio Vakulukuta (Ovambo) in the far south, and UNITA's former organizer in Zambia, Smart Chata (Chokwe), in the east. In short, though UNITA, unlike the MPLA, accepts ethnicity as a valid political variable, it is, itself, multiethnic.

UNITA's critics sometimes portray the movement as racist. One reason why UNITA, from its creation, displayed sharp distrust of the MPLA's commitment to multiracialism may have been that Portugal's harsh colonial policies belied and discredited an official doctrine of color-blind multiracialism that failed to mask the reality of white domination. Viewing the world through prisms of educational and economic disadvantage, "Unitists" dismissed MPLA multiracialism as a rationale that would enable *mestiços* and whites within its leadership ranks to assure their own form of elitist rule. UNITA tended, instead, to adopt a pragmatic form of Afrocentric populism, which was at once aggregative and demagogic. Thus, when it seemed as though Angola's more than 300,000 resident Portuguese would be participating in the creation of an independent state (1974-75), UNITA actively recruited white membership. But in the same time period its spokesmen told the American editor of *Black World* (October 1974 issue) that whites would be accepted as "visitors—nevermore as leaders" and that black American settlers would be welcomed in independent Angola.

Perceiving their own social experience in terms of racial exploitation, UNITA leaders espoused Pan-African solidarity, which they extended to include black Americans. In 1973, representatives from a black American liberation support group hiked deep into Angola to attend a UNITA congress which obligingly proclaimed "its militant and active solidarity with the African brothers and sisters in the Americas who are heroically fighting against imperialist oppression." UNITA named one of its military units the Black Panthers.

In 1976, last-minute efforts to recruit black Americans to help stave off defeat by the MPLA *(The Washington Post,* January 27, 1976) came to naught. Both before and since, however, UNITA's public relations in the United States have been handled by Florence Tate and Associates of Washington, D.C. Florence Tate described herself in a 1976 interview as someone who for "nearly 20 years has played an active role in the civil rights, Black Power, and Pan-African socialist movements in the United States" and who knew "at first hand the lengths to which the U.S. will go to discredit and destroy that which it deems undesirable and cannot control." "Any U.S.-born African" with political experience, she argued, knows that U.S. policy toward Angola is based upon a globalist or "superpower view" of U.S. (not Angolan) interests. Because it does not act with genuine knowledge of what other people want for themselves, she concluded, the United States may intervene disastrously in support of an unpopular regime in Vietnam, then fail to assist a popularly supported UNITA in Angola. It will fail to understand that Angola is potentially "Russia's Vietnam" *(The Washington Post,* January 11, 1976). An angry UNITA document of the same period entitled "Left/Right Counterfeit in Angola" similarly concluded: "The West found it safer and cheaper to deal with a predictable minority and dependent party like MPLA because it could influence MPLA through its detente partner, Russia, more effec-

tively than it could influence a broad democratic front, a mass party like UNITA that would remain unpredictable and unmanageable as long as it drew its strength from popular support rather than a superpower."

Seen from the perspective of UNITA's black nationalism, the Soviets and Cubans represent an extension of white rule. After their deportation from Angola in 1977, the last two missionaries of the United Church of Canada described racial and political attitudes prevailing in the central district of Bie: "People were always noticing that UNITA's platform is for complete independence and not neo-colonialism from either the East or West. A completely African society and government. Whites can stay providing they are willing to be under a Black government. This attracted support for UNITA. People felt that the Cubans running over them were just another white people taking the place of the Portuguese. Some said that if they had to have a foreign power in there they might as well have kept the Portuguese."

Capitalist or Socialist?

Although wishfully depicted by some Americans as a pro-Western champion of free enterprise, Jonas Savimbi has consistently declared himself an exponent of African socialism. Asked in late 1975 by American journalist Robin Wright to describe his politics, Savimbi responded that he was neither communist nor capitalist. Socialism—democratic, not "extremist" socialism—is the "only answer" for Angola, he said, for the country's new leaders ought not to become "exploiters of the people." As for foreign investors, Savimbi declared himself against nationalization but for tough bargaining and contracts so as to insure a proper share of corporate profits for the public treasury.

As the principal architect of UNITA doctrine, Savimbi has persistently called for a cooperative socialist society able to accommodate Angola's African cultural heritage and create a new "liberated man." As recently as December 1982 (see *CSIS Africa Notes,* No. 7, January 25, 1983, pages 3-4), he told a group of Western correspondents that he is "not a capitalist" because he does not intend to exploit his people. On the other hand, a recently distributed UNITA document, *National Economic Reconstruction in Angola: The Challenge and the Approach,* avoids the word "socialist" and dwells instead on the merits of "realistic socio-economic analysis" as compared to "the sloganeering, Marxist rhetoric and poor performance of East European 'cooperantes'" who have brought only "economic disaster." The document goes on to describe both public and private enterprise as appropriate and suggests that: "In order to encourage Angolan nationals to undertake business initiatives [a UNITA] government would set up appropriate technical, financial, and research assistance programs for small and medium enterprises." Whether this statement represents a shift away from earlier commitments or merely an avoidance of words offensive to Americans, UNITA's economics might be more safely described as nationalist and pragmatic than as socialist.

Natural Affinities and Unnatural Expediencies

Economic doctrine represents but one of many areas in which UNITA's original inclinations or intentions seem to have been at least temporarily modified, deflected, or compromised in response to perceived political necessity. Of special relevance to the search for diplomatic solutions for the turmoil in Angola and Namibia are UNITA's fluctuating relationships with Namibia's SWAPO and South Africa.

SWAPO's traditional political base lies in the Ovambo community, which straddles the Angola-Namibia boundary. Since access to Ovamboland from SWAPO's exile headquarters in Zambia lies across southeast Angola, geography has provided a basis for UNITA-SWAPO collaboration. For a full decade, this collaboration was close and extensive. It started in 1965 at Dar es Salaam, where Savimbi established such intimate relations with SWAPO leaders that he used their post office box as his own address. That same year an initial cadre of 12 UNITA guerrillas began training with SWAPO at a military base in China. Describing the decade of collaboration that followed, a UNITA spokesman later wrote: "During this time, SWAPO was able to reach Namibian territory to fight the South African racists by transiting UNITA-held territory. UNITA provided food, refuge, and training—particularly for SWAPO soldiers who had received Soviet training which did not prepare them for successful guerrilla warfare." In response, South African helicopters transported their own and Portuguese assault forces in attacks against both Angolan and SWAPO guerrillas across a broad zone of southeast Angola.

In 1973, the leader of the MPLA, Dr. Agostinho Neto, complained to Zambia that SWAPO was shipping arms and Zambian travel documents to UNITA under the false pretext that UNITA controlled the "vital passage" of southeast Angola. The UNITA-SWAPO alliance managed to survive pressure from the Soviet Union, which was supporting SWAPO and the MPLA (but not UNITA) with arms. Sharing ethnopopulist affinities that distanced them from the left-wing multiracialism of the MPLA, UNITA and SWAPO continued to cooperate even after the Portuguese coup of 1974. Ovambo youths, who slipped northward across the Angolan border to join SWAPO, were fed and sheltered by UNITA. And according to UNITA sources, when Savimbi and his colleagues moved into urban areas to campaign (1974-75), they also shared vehicles, medical supplies, office facilities, and weapons with SWAPO, thereby enabling the latter to step up political and military activities against South Africa. Collaboration even persisted for a while after South Africa intervened in Angola, but came to an end, according to UNITA, in 1976 after Cuban forces drove south into areas of SWAPO activity, and the Namibians were obliged by their own national interests to lead the Cubans to UNITA camps and to work with the MPLA.

It is possible to read the evidence somewhat differently. Already in late 1974, UNITA's representative

in Luanda seemed to be putting some distance between the two groups by implying to *The Star* (Johannesburg) that it was up to Namibians to fight for their own independence, leaving Angola free to establish relations with South Africa based on mutual "respect and noninterference." In mid-1975, as it became evident that power in Angola would be taken by force of arms rather than an electoral contest all neutral observers picked UNITA to win, a sense of desperation seized UNITA leadership.

As he watched Soviet arms and Cuban instructors building the MPLA into a certain winner, Jonas Savimbi turned to South Africa. He was quoted in the *Windhoek Advertiser* (June 12, 1975) as saying that Angola faced problems of such nature as to preclude it from assisting SWAPO. Impressed by South African military power, convinced that NATO countries shared South Africa's determination to keep Angola free from Soviet influence, and apparently believing that South Africa's policy of detente toward such states as Zambia, Zaire, and even Mozambique had reduced the liabilities of association with Pretoria, Savimbi took the plunge. According to American intelligence sources, UNITA undertook to provide information on the location of SWAPO bases as a quid pro quo for South African arms, instructors, and commandos. For reasons that were political rather than military, South African forces stopped short of taking Luanda. Then, in the face of a growing Cuban expeditionary force that had been given international (specifically African) legitimacy by the threat of South African conquest, the South African military drew back into Namibia from whence it has continued to provide UNITA with logistical support and arms. UNITA and SWAPO guerrillas were left to fight for control over sparse cattle, food, and water resources in the barren south of Angola.

Despite all this, the affinities which underlay the long operational alliance between UNITA and SWAPO still persist. UNITA sources have recently quoted Savimbi as saying that relations between the two movements have moved back from a state of fratricidal war to one of distant cordiality (their soldiers avoid contact) and that he would expect UNITA to have good relations with a future SWAPO government in Namibia. Despite continuing reports of UNITA-SWAPO clashes, MPLA government officials are reported to be concerned about the possibility that a SWAPO government might, indeed, ultimately align itself with UNITA.

In assessing UNITA, one must reckon with both political preferences and Savimbi's willingness to compromise, even wantonly. These are important considerations in any assessment of the possible consequences of either integrating UNITA into or keeping UNITA out of the government of Angola. While Savimbi and his colleagues prefer Western to Eastern associations, the record is clear that in 1964, as his partnership with Roberto was fraying, he made a bid for Soviet personal support during a journey to Moscow seldom mentioned in UNITA circles. Soviet terms were for him to join the MPLA. He refused, choosing instead to look elsewhere for means to ensure him and his supporters survival as an independent political force. More acceptable was China's offer of military training and some arms in return for rhetorical celebration of Maoist achievements and Soviet failures.

Savimbi and his colleagues would prefer to govern Angola alone. But they have periodically sought a common front or entente with the MPLA from the time UNITA was officially founded in 1966. When the MPLA finally exhibited interest in a two-party alliance (against the FNLA) during bilateral talks at Lisbon in August 1975, the United States reportedly interceded to dissuade UNITA from such an accord. In a 1979 interview with Charles Cobb of *Africa News*, Savimbi referred to the MPLA as "patriots" who also "fought for the independence of our country" and indicated that he would not even make the withdrawal of Cuban troops a precondition for negotiations with the MPLA. But he also acknowledged that the MPLA was unlikely to talk until, in a year or two, it had finally come to accept that it could not militarily eliminate UNITA. Since then, UNITA guerrillas have extended their activities northward into the Mbundu country of Malange.

For the MPLA in 1983, it may be difficult to decide whether a politically supple Savimbi is more dangerous within or without. For the Soviet Union, the entry of UNITA into the Luanda government would, like the departure of the Cubans, constitute an embarrassing political setback. For South Africa, a role for UNITA in Luanda would vindicate the earlier decision to assure UNITA's survival. And for the Reagan Administration, UNITA participation in the government would be perceived as a political gain, even though American corporate investors have been positive in their view of the MPLA government as pragmatic and honest.

As for Savimbi and UNITA, they could be expected, if brought into the government, to league together with black nationalists in the MPLA in quest of expanded power. If kept out, they could be expected to fight on, forcing the retention of Cuban or other foreign garrisons. By drawing upon stockpiled arms and Ovimbundu support, UNITA might even survive a cutoff of South African aid in the eventuality of an Angolan-South African ceasefire accord. Meanwhile, the advice of their Chinese mentors that the march to power may be long and tortuous remains a guiding principle for UNITA as it pursues the politics of survival into an uncharted future.

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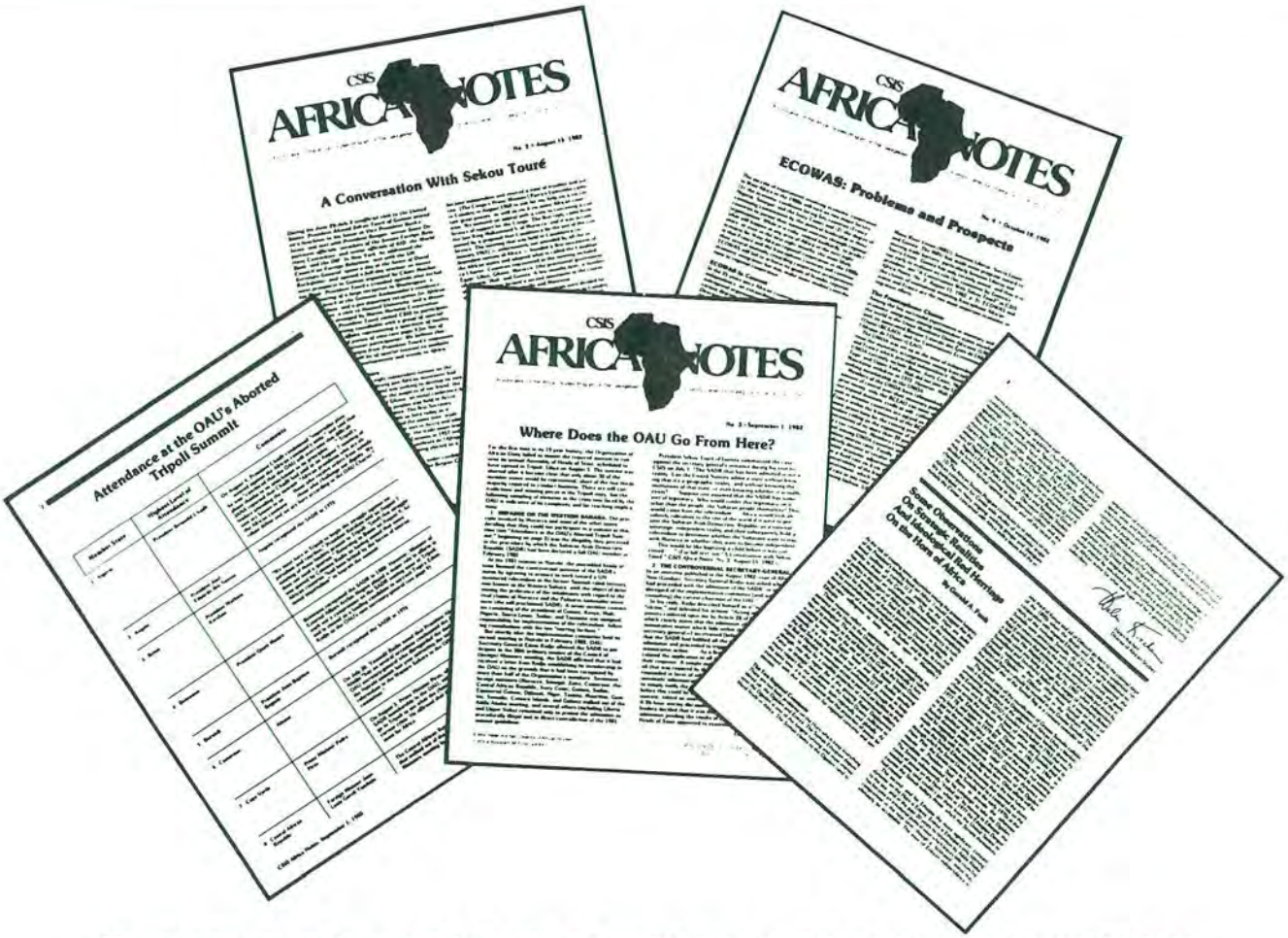

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