



Symbolic decolonization: secession and the stamps of pseudo-states in Sub-Saharan Africa

Gary Baines (Rhodes University, South Africa)

Although averted by United Nations intervention, the secession of Katanga from the newly independent Congo set a precedent for the way in which separatists would be treated in post-colonial Africa. The Organization of African Unity's 1963 Charter committed OAU members to preserve the territorial integrity of the continent's former colonial boundaries and oppose the recognition of new states through secession. Not only did OAU members deny secessionist states admission to the organization, but they sought to influence international opinion against their recognition. Thus, when the white settler state of Rhodesia proclaimed its Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain in 1965 and Biafra attempted to break away from the Nigerian federation in 1967, their sovereignty was contested. Each of these three pseudo-states fought not only for independence but to assert their sovereignty in the comity of nations.

The struggle for sovereignty occurred not only in the diplomatic sphere but also in the realm of symbolism. The creation and adoption of new national symbols such as flags and anthems were a critical part of the decolonizing process in former sub-Saharan African colonies. Kenrick (2019) refers to efforts to establish the trappings of new sovereign states as symbolic decolonization. His study of the repertoire of symbols created by Rhodesia after UDI is instructive but makes no reference to stamps. Unlike other symbols, stamps are only fully invested with sovereign power if they are accepted as valid receipts for prepayment for postage on a reciprocal basis with other states (Brownell 2018).

This paper will examine the iconography of the stamps of Katanga, Biafra, and Rhodesia. It suggests that stamps issued to commemorate independence signalled to the world that they had achieved statehood. Although it is difficult to gauge the impact of the messages communicated by these stamps on its target audiences, they do not appear to have done much to promote their claims to recognition. While diplomatic recognition is the prerogative of individual states, collective non-recognition went a long way in determining whether states were accepted in the family of nations. Katanga, Biafra, and Rhodesia were never accorded recognition by the international community. They were not admitted as members of the United Nations and consequently enjoyed no standing in the Universal Postal Union. Each of the three pseudo-states were subjected to some form of postal sanctions at the request of their respective "mother country", namely the Congo, Nigeria and Britain. Despite attempts to restrict the distribution of their mail to foreign destinations, much of it was still delivered. However, the stamp-bearing mail arguably achieved little success in projecting claims to sovereignty.