

Chapter 1: Warlords and States in Africa

Introduction

This book concentrates on the development of ‘warlordism’ across Africa. Although the idea of the warlord is universal and is applied to similar individuals and groups within areas as diverse as Colombia, the former Soviet Union, Central Asia and the Far East, it is in Africa where the idea and the systems associated with it appear to have reached their most ‘developed’. Taking as its starting point a survey of nineteenth century African governance practices, the book paints a picture of governance in pre-colonial African empires and draws out themes and issues of pre-colonial governance that can be traced through the colonial and post-colonial periods. In particular, ideas connected with the core characteristics of collapse of central power, trade, primitive accumulation, use of violence and governance systems are seen to be long-term historical features of many African (and other) polities.

The growth of warlords is intimately related to the overall growth of private, non-state actors in the security sector in Africa, which, quite correctly, is seen as a very clear symptom of state weakness. The growth of private military companies is well documented, but there is a wide variety of military operators available to those who are willing to pay for it¹. Governments, for example, have resorted to hiring mercenaries to clear areas governing resources. Executive Outcomes, Sandline and others have been hired by a variety of African Governments with the aim of taking control of natural resources and splitting the profits, including Angola (oil and diamonds) and Sierra Leone (diamonds). The companies are, however, the ‘top end’ of the market playing for high stakes and rich rewards. There are a number of other, less well-paid actors within the private security sector ranging from individual mercenaries from the former Soviet Union (frequently hired as pilots) through to freelance militias consisting of footloose, armed gangs.

This represents an extension of warlordism in two ways. Firstly, the idea of an international mercenary class willing to undertake such work, which evokes images of the medieval Swiss and Lansknacht troops or the itinerant *samurai* of Japan. In other words; warlords willing to work for money, but having no territorial interests. Secondly, it questions the ‘legitimacy’ of governments (and it is usually governments) who hire such companies and enter into a power struggle over available resources, begging the question: how do we tell the difference in actions between a supposedly legitimate state and a warlord opposing it? In the end, we have to address the question of privatisation of security as a logical extension of the ‘big man’ idea of African politics

¹ See, for example, Paul Jackson “‘War is much too serious a thing to be left to military men’: private military companies, combat and regulation”, *Civil Wars*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Winter 2002

and the extension of privatised networks of power and what Achille Mbembe terms 'private indirect government'².

Given this complex political system, a view of what the concepts of governance, autocracy and stability mean in the context of warlordism is offered drawing on the previous analysis to bring out the core features of warlords as they represent embryonic governments. Following Mancur Olsen's influential view, in the African context, stable bandits may be better than itinerant ones, and may be a key feature in the foundation of sustainable post-colonial African states. In particular, African borders have been remarkably strong since independence, and yet, African history is largely one of shifting borders. The influence of violent insurgent and warlord movements that question the integrity of these international borders could present Africa with an opportunity to reassess its own political make-up. This obviously has profound implications for policy towards warlords and governments and the future of the nation state itself across Africa.

Contrary to much of the recent literature on so-called 'new' wars, stable and well developed nation states based on the rule of law have been the exception rather than the rule in terms of governance and violence. Mary Kaldor (1999), for example, takes as a central argument the premise that warlord conflicts across the world represent a departure from the 'norm' and are explicitly 'new' in form. Conveniently, her characterisation of war begins with the advent of the European nation state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is convenient because, before then most of Europe as well as the rest of the world were engaged in the sorts of conflict she then categorises as 'new'. In fact, the relationship between Africa and Westphalian assumptions of sovereignty, statehood and nationalism underpins much of the recent history of Africa³. Since the European powers first projected their rule on to the continent, the underlying contradictions between African polities and European ideas of the nation-state have produced an ambiguous, troublesome and eventually violent relationship, culminating in some regions in a rejection of 'state' power in favour of private economic networks that ignore international boundaries. Of course a major difference between European wars and current wars in Africa is that European wars were about state and empire expansion into peripheral regions, but African wars are really about state collapse and retreat, and the contestation of the vacated spaces as well as the skeletons of the state itself.

A more long-term view of political conflict in Africa reveals a direct link between the pre-colonial warlord empires of Africa and the post-Cold War structures currently extant in Sub-Saharan Africa. The characteristics of the armed groups that emerged under nineteenth century African

² Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 2001)

³ See Herbst, *J States and Power in Africa* (Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2000)

trader, or ethnic networks, for example such as those of Tippoo Tib, the Azande and the Lunda, as well as the emergence of a 'bandit class' that could be employed on a financial basis (so-called 'Ruga-Ruga'), can be distilled and elaborated as a set of warlord characteristics, most of which are present in current warlord states. That is not to say this is a simplistic or straightforward relationship, in fact in places it is tortuous, and it relies on themes and patterns rather than an easily identifiable empirical link. Nevertheless, the historical experience of African politics has a critical bearing on the current crisis of the state in significant areas of the continent. As Yusuf Bangura states: 'Violence does not have one logic, but several'⁴

In a period of rapid political change in Africa, coupled with a changing set of global networks and a crisis in the colonial, western models of the state inherited at independence, a re-Africanisation of politics is taking place that mirrors some of the warrior supremacies of the past⁵. Before colonial rule, African political actors were engaged in violence, were importing arms, employing foreigners and seeking allies and patrons amongst overseas powers. The curious element of much of the literature dealing with current African warlords is that many of the analogies employed are from early modern Europe, not Africa. Whilst there are obvious comparisons with, say, 'feudalism' as a societal form, and to a lesser extent 'medieval' governance, frequent analogies are drawn with 'praetorianism' (ancient Rome) 'fascism' (Italy again), 'absolutism' (general), 'corporatism' (Italy and others) and 'bonapartism' (France). Ignoring Africa's own political history distorts the analysis and reinforces the view that Africa is somehow 'backward', peripheral, and is located at a historical stage that the west experienced centuries ago. This analysis rejects a clear linear hypothesis, but accepts the role of patterns of governance, and particularly pays attention to the pre and post-colonial continuities inherent within the politics of African violence and warlords in particular.

That is certainly not to say that the current crop of warlords across Africa is merely some reversion to a pre-colonial proto-state. Neither are they, however, just creatures of the current system. The popular support enjoyed by most of these groups relies on a call to older and identifiable characteristics such as ethnicity, at least some of which is pre-colonial, whereas some, such as the Acholi are explicitly colonial inventions⁶. Nevertheless, there are a number of features that pre-date colonialism that deserve far more attention than they currently receive, and these continuities certainly do not deserve to be dismissed or ignored in the analysis of a phenomenon

⁴ Yusuf Bangura, 'Understanding the political and cultural dynamics of the Sierra Leone war: a critique of Paul Richards' *Fighting for the Rain Forest*', *African Development* XXII, ¾ (1997) p.130

⁵ This is an argument that was partially put in A. Mazrui, 'Soldiers as traditionalisers: militarisation and the reAfricanisation of Africa', *World Politics*, 28/2 pp.46 - 72

⁶ Paul Jackson, 'The March of the Lord's Resistance Army: Greed or Grievance in Northern Uganda', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 13/3, Autumn 2002

that has grown out of a questionable legitimacy of a proto-colonial, nation state structure. The experience of colonialism was key, not only because it produced a disjuncture in African politics that prevented the emergence of fully-fledged, indigenous African states, but also because it magnified specific aspects of the pre-colonial 'traditional' structures of decentralised despotism, including patrimonialism and the politics of 'the big man'⁷.

This basic descriptive set of tools and analyses can be applied to the context of modern African groups led by individuals such as Joseph Kony and Charles Taylor, as well as to the motley collection of freebooters, bandits and gangs that exploded in collapsed states such as Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo and even peripheral Uganda. In an echo of earlier resistance to western imperialism, many of the current warlords use traditional magic to give them power, at least over their followers. This is an element that is frequently ignored in much of the literature, or is dismissed as unimportant, but it remains a strong link to prior politico-religious structures across Africa⁸. A central defining feature of many African warlord groups is their appeal to 'higher' motives, usually involving magic and/or witchcraft. It is striking when reading about Joseph Kony in Uganda, for example, how much he uses spirituality, witchcraft and other non-worldly appeals to his followers, a feature echoed in Sierra Leone, Liberia and with *maji maji* in the DRC. This is also something that has increased with the increasing use of child soldiers who are clearly more susceptible to magic as a means of terrorism.

This then is another pre-colonial link. If government based on colonial structures are breaking down, then the structures taking their place must represent an alternative legitimacy of some sort. This could, and is in some cases, an economic legitimacy based on the ability (in stark contrast to the state) to raise cash from trading – usually in 'grey' trade areas such as drugs and arms, but also in other areas such as mineral wealth and natural resources. In Africa, legitimacy is also expressed through the appeal to ethnic ties, although this is far more problematic than, say in Bosnia, since there is some degree of fungibility of ethnicity in parts of Africa. However, the fact remains that African warlords are building a means to govern, if only through breaking or taking over from the state's monopoly of violence.

Much discussion of ethnicity has a certain inexorable logic to it within Africa. The idea that illegitimate nation states, with poor civil culture and a lack of effective institutions will break

⁷ See, for example, Jan Vansina *Paths Through the Rainforests: Toward a history of political tradition in equatorial Africa* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison WI, 1990) which argues that big man politics is a long-term tradition in Africa, and also Paul Nugent *Big Men, Small Boys and Politics in Ghana: Power, ideology and the burden of history, 1988-1994* (Pinter, London, 1995) which argues that colonialism added on to indigenous systems of governance and chieftancy allowing patrimonialism to develop much deeper in the countryside.

⁸ There are clear exceptions to this, including the fine work of Stephen Ellis in Liberia.

apart as sub-groups assert their independence has a strong body of evidence behind it. However, on the ground the reality of 'ethnic mobilization' and ethnic conflict varies considerably across boundaries and areas and the direct links between ethnicity, conflict, economic motivation and poverty are, at best, flexible. The much quoted examples of Rwanda and Burundi are extreme examples of long term ethnic conflicts where very specific ethnic hatreds were used as an excuse to maintain or alter power structures in favour of one group or another. Even in such a seemingly clear cut case as Rwanda, whilst ethnicity was certainly a huge issue, the retention of power by the smaller ethnic group was also a strong driver, particularly in the assassination of a President who had just compromised on power-sharing.

This book will attempt to disentangle some of this complicated bundle of conflict drivers and to explain the militarism of ethnicity, alienation and other sub-national groups in Africa. The development of warlordism has largely superseded the liberation movements of much of the post-war period, and represents a movement away from ideological struggle towards more immediate local demands in areas of scarcity. As a response to poverty or alienation, it remains eminently logical to attach yourself to a local strongman capable of delivering benefits and advantages to followers. The questions remain why do followers decide to attach themselves to warlords and how do warlords actually provide for their followers?

Approaches to the analysis of conflict

There has been an explosion of literature addressing conflict since the early 1990s, taking the analysis of wars away from either military analysts or development specialists. This growth in literature has been characterised by a plethora of ideas regarding the causes of conflicts and the reasons for their continuation. Explanations for conflict vary considerably. Some argue that violence is embedded in social, economic and political institutions⁹, whereas the 'political economy school' emphasises the vested interests of the armed groups within the conflict¹⁰. At the same time, many analysts argue that conflicts continue because of the inability of political elites (or states) to address underlying issues such as poverty or unemployment, or that new wars are really about a search for identity¹¹.

⁹ E.W. Nafziger and J. Auvinen, 'War, Hunger and Displacement: an Econometric Investigation into the Sources of Humanitarian Emergencies' *WIDER Working Papers 142* (Helsinki: WIDER, 1997)

¹⁰ For example, Mark Duffield, 'Post-modern Conflict: Warlords, Post-adjustment States and Private Protection' *Civil Wars* 1/1 (Spring 1998) pp.65-102

¹¹ Jean-Paul Azam 'The Redistributive State and Conflicts in Africa' Unpublished paper presented as a keynote address at the Norwegian Association for Development Research (NFU), Oslo September 1999; L. Cliffe and R. Luckham, 'Complex political emergencies and the state: failure and the fate of the state' *Third World Quarterly* 25/1 (1999) pp.27-50; and, Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1999)

Starting in the late 1990s there was a clear change in emphasis amongst analysts towards economic factors¹². Whereas many conflicts were accepted as being a result of a crisis of state legitimacy, governance or economic dislocations, a continuing economic incentive to maintain a war economy has risen out of the conflict. In fact, initial economic factors have become a chief factor in the chronic war economies of SSA. In short, the birth of conflicts was said to have been political, and their continuation economic.

Luckham et al make three distinctions between different forms of economically motivated violence¹³:

1. Top down violence mobilised by elites, and bottom-up violence mobilised by ‘rebels’, so-called ‘subaltern violence’.
2. Violence mediated by the state where access to resources through the state organs is the source of conflict, and unmediated violence, such as clan or warlord protection rackets.
3. Between violence driven by greed and that driven by grievance based on past deprivation and inequality¹⁴.

These three axes provide a useful analytical framework for examining conflicts, but in many ways they raise more questions than they answer. Nevertheless, these distinctions do provide an opportunity to consider the changing nature of African conflicts. The nature of top-down violence, for example, has shifted outside the confines of a state framework. Top-down violence has historically been associated with organised systems of state repression (so-called ‘silent’ violence) rather than through open warfare. However, during the 1990s, regime control over patronage and resources, and the means of violence, seriously declined due to a mixture of donor power, fiscal crises, the nature of reforms and the nature of the states themselves.

Once control is lost, political actors have sought a variety of means of constructing alternative quasi-governance structures outside the decaying state. This has involved the development of private armies, militias and mercenaries and the direct control of geographical areas containing valuable resources such as diamonds, hardwoods, rubber and oil. At the same time, the decline of

¹² See, for example Mats Berdal and David Malone (eds), *Greed and Grievance: economic agendas in civil wars* (London: Lynne Rienner 2000) and P. Collier and A. Hoeffler (note 1)

¹³ Luckham et al (note 2)

¹⁴ The strongest ‘greed’ argument is provided by Collier and Hoeffler (note 1), whereas grievance is best represented by analysts such as Frances Stewart, ‘The Root Causes of Humanitarian Emergencies’ in E.W. Nafziger, F. Stewart and A. Vayrunen (eds) *War, Hunger and Displacement: the origins of humanitarian emergencies, Volume 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000)

the state has led to a fragmentation of control over resources as disaffected and unpaid soldiers (amongst others) have essentially privatised themselves. In this way peacetime crime has become associated with the development of war economies. For example, diamonds have always been smuggled in Sierra Leone and Angola, but now form the main revenue source for new, armed groups.

The incentive to take over such valuable commodities has been further enhanced by the opening up of the global economy. Mark Duffield's assertion that armed groups 'act locally, but think globally', is reinforced by the burgeoning international trade in conflict commodities¹⁵. The current conflict across the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), wars in Sierra Leone and Angola as well as the attempted coup in Equatorial Guinea, illustrate the importance of resources such as diamonds, rutile and oil to African conflicts¹⁶.

There have been parallel transformations in the development of subaltern movements. The previous, well-known, model was one of the war of liberation against colonial rule, followed by post-colonial 'reform' wars such as the TPLF and EPLF in Ethiopia, or the NRA in Uganda. In this model, an open war is waged against a regime that is seen as being illegitimate. These wars typically had clear political (and usually social) objectives, enjoyed widespread popular support and were fought by well-disciplined and motivated forces, often very effective and often with substantial external support.

This clear-cut model has been called into question since the early 1990s as forms of privatised violence have emerged. Even existing movements such as the SPLA, where they exist at all, have changed into corrupt ghosts of their previous selves¹⁷. At the same time, the motivations of subaltern groups remain and their frustration with state failure to deal with their problems has increased as the state itself has declined. Several recent studies such as that of Richards have emphasised the importance of alienation amongst youth as a primary factor in developing 'militia' groups where economic gain and short term 'power' were achievable through violence, without the threat of punishment from an ineffective state apparatus¹⁸. The nature of subaltern movements has therefore changed not least in terms of motivation of the participants. The motivated, well-disciplined groups of the liberation wars have given way to disaffected youths seeking economic and other gains through violence.

¹⁵ Mark Duffield 'Globalisation and war economies: promoting order or the return of history?' *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 23/2 pp. 19-36

¹⁶ As of 2001, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Uganda, Namibia, Angola, Burundi, Sudan, Zambia and Botswana all had troops in the DRC, all controlling 'strategic' resources.

¹⁷ Luckham et al (note 2)

¹⁸ P. Richards, *African Issues: Fighting for the rainforest. War, youth and resources in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey 1996)

The second of the three distinctions mirrors the changes in the first. The liberation wars provided a clear military role for the state: counterinsurgency. This was often relatively successful in pure military terms but unsustainable in the long run in terms of resources (for example in the former Rhodesia). However, as the power of the state itself has declined, and with it the attractiveness of the resources available to potential opposition groups, violence has become increasingly unmediated by the state. The development of warlord economies in Liberia and in Somalia, for example, was explicitly outside the state. One of the reasons that Charles Taylor of Liberia was so successful, for example, was that whilst he was able to run a free market economy shorn of any taxes and above all, any debt, the legitimate government of Liberia was located in a narrow enclave around Monrovia and was also subject to the demands of international debt repayment¹⁹.

At the same time, the state is not yet irrelevant. The experience of Uganda from independence in 1962 onwards is a long story of alternating ethnically based control of the state. The regimes of Obote I, Amin in the 1970s and Obote II in the early 1980s were all characterised by takeover by specific ethnic groups, which ran the state for their own benefit. This argument is similar to those put forward by Chabal and Daloz who assert that the state is a source of resources with which to support patronage networks and, by extension, the means of violence²⁰. The real difference in terms of 'new wars' is that some warlords and other groups have been able to construct alternative governance systems without accessing the state. More typically, armed groups are not able to construct detailed governance systems and operate more as bandits or as 'militia'²¹.

Greed versus Grievance

More recent literature, particularly the statistical studies done by Collier and Hoeffler seem to support the assertion that greed is more important than grievance in Africa's wars and Collier, for example, ties the insight that there are economic factors involved in conflict directly to a neo-classical framework²². Cramer argues that what this model gains in theoretical elegance it loses in social understanding²³. Collier takes the root underlying assumption of 'orthodox' economics, individual greed, and uses it to construct a theory of why wars have lasted in Africa. He states that greed, and not grievance is the chief reason why combatants *remain* fighting.

¹⁹ Duffield (note 4)

²⁰ P. Chabal and J-P. Daloz, *African Issues: Africa works. Disorder as a political instrument* (Oxford: James Currey 1999)

²¹ The term 'militia' covers a great many types of armed group, ranging from the well armed armies of Somalia to small groups of bandits levying 'taxes' on remote roads. For a more detailed deconstruction of the term 'militia', see Alice Hills, 'Warlords, Militia and Conflict in Contemporary Africa: A re-examination of terms' *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 8/1 (Spring 1997)

²² Collier and Hoeffler (note 1) and P. Collier, 'Doing Well out of War' paper presented at the Conference on Economic Agendas in Civil Wars, London April 26-27th 1999

²³ Cramer (note 1)

The model designed to take this argument forward, proxies economic agendas through measures of the share of primary commodities in GDP, the proportion of young men in the country and the average years of education. Primary commodities represent 'lootable' opportunities, or opportunities for predatory taxation, the number of young men as a pool of potential recruits and as a measure of youth impoverishment, and the educational measure partly captures the alternative, peaceful employment opportunities available to these young men. Grievances in the model may be captured by measures of ethnic and religious fragmentation, land inequality, degree of political rights and the per capita growth rate in the economy. Collier's statistical results suggest that some societies are more prone to conflict "simply because they offer more inviting economic prospects for rebellion". On the other hand, inequality has no effect and political repression and a high degree of religious and ethnic fragmentation have the opposite to their predicted effects²⁴.

Collier further argues in support of his findings that there is a free rider problem with justice, revenge and relief from grievances that acts as a disincentive to rebellion and that people are unwilling to fight for a cause where the outcome is uncertain. A greed-motivated rebellion avoids the free rider problem through restricting the benefits to the participants and allowing predatory taxation of primary commodities. Furthermore, such rebellions do not need the carrot of a final 'victory', if recruits can be paid off immediately and continually with commodity rents. Clearly, in true market fashion, the motivation for wars in Africa can be explained explicitly by the overcoming of the free rider problem and implicitly by the aggregation of individuals rational utility maximising choices²⁵.

There are, of course, several issues with this approach, not least are the arguments of Wolf and Homer-Dixon that emphasise grievances arising from the mix of resource scarcity with social inequality and human rights abuses²⁶. Messner et al (1998) take this further, asserting that violent struggles arise as much out of the perceptions of grievances as much as from absolute shortages²⁷. Overall, the greed hypothesis is a highly stylised approach reliant on a few key assumptions. For example, many would regard youth impoverishment as being just as symptomatic of social inequality as of 'greed'. On the grievance side too, the factors chosen are hugely simplified proxies for complex, deep conflict drivers within society. In addition, this type

²⁴ Collier (note 17).

²⁵ Cramer (note 1)

²⁶ E. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper Row 1969) and T. Homer-Dixon and J. Blitt (eds), *Ecoviolence: Links Among Environment, Population and Security* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield 1998)

²⁷ E. Messer, M.J. Cohen and J. D'Costa, 'Food from Peace: Breaking the Links between Conflict and Hunger' *Food, Agriculture and the Environment Discussion Paper 24* (Washington: International Food Policy Research Institute 1998)

of cross-national analysis has little to say about the historical transformation of conflicts, or the emerging political systems, shifting alliances and social transformations. Consequently, the greed hypothesis fits some conflicts (Liberia, Angola) better than others. Finally, whilst much violence has been located outside the state, the state itself remains an important actor, frequently remaining as a perpetrator of violence itself. In Liberia, the archetypal warlord/greed example, the eventual aim of the NPFL was political – it wanted control of the state, despite the establishment of a quasi state. Once peace was achieved, Taylor held elections and took over the state, allowing him to further exploit resources with the backing of the international community.

'Malthus with Guns'

A second group of theories surrounds what Richards terms 'Malthus with guns'²⁸. This idea originated with Homer-Dixon and basically puts forward the thesis that environmental scarcity leads to conflict²⁹. The story of this approach to the analysis of conflict is one of a shifting position by Homer-Dixon himself between the initial 1991 article and the 1999 book. The initial study was very strong in identifying environmental scarcity as the cause of violence in a number of diverse environments, including the Nile and Jordan water conflicts, flood-induced migration in Bangladesh and land shortages in China and the Philippines. As Richards points out, the empirical basis of this view has been gradually diluted by the empirical evidence. For example, Homer-Dixon's example of conflicts along the Senegal River valley between Moors and Black Africans was caused by competition for land that had become more productive due to changes in the river basin – in other words the so-called environmental conflict was caused by land becoming *more* productive.

Another major deficiency with the approach, is that Homer-Dixon does not acknowledge the importance of political influence over access to resources. A more careful empirical approach may have shown that resource conflict may not actually be the result of an absolute lack of resources, but a lack of access to the resources, i.e. distributive justice. Even in the well-known case of water resources in the Jordan Valley, it is clear that one of the main issues is Israeli commercial farming removing large quantities of water before it is able to reach Palestinian farming areas, thus using political/economic power to access the resource. It follows that conflict may not be the cause of conflict, but access to justice in resource allocation clearly is.

Furthermore, if scarcity really was a cause of conflict then overseas aid could, theoretically put an end to conflict. However, as studies by de Waal and Duffield, amongst others, have shown, food

²⁸ Paul Richards (ed) *No Peace, No War: An anthropology of contemporary armed conflicts*, (James Currey, Oxford, 2005)

²⁹ T.F. Homer-Dixon, 'On the threshold: environmental changes as a cause of acute conflict', *International Security*, 16 (2): 76-116. See also T.F. Homer-Dixon, *Environment, scarcity and violence*, (Princeton UP, Princeton NJ, 1999)

aid and the international donor community may be perpetuating and prolonging conflict³⁰. The real dynamic of war must, therefore be different.

This neo-Malthusian view of scarce resources is clearly entrenched amongst international development agencies and NGOs, and also within anti-globalisation and environmental campaign agencies. However, the main value of the Homer-Dixon hypothesis must surely be that the initial assumptions have largely been undermined by the empirical evidence. The rather weak conclusions of the 1999 book that scarcity of renewable resources can contribute to ‘civil conflict’ is difficult to disagree with, but remains a long way off providing a systematic explanation of why environmental scarcity actually causes war – the initial thesis of the 1991 article³¹.

New Barbarism and the Clash of Civilisations

It is a truism that attendance at the dinner parties invariably comes around to ‘...and what do you do?’ In my case, once I tell them the most common response is ‘Well that is all due to tribalism, isn’t it?’ Other favourite phrases would also eventually boil down to a mixture of ‘ethnic’ or ‘tribal’ reasons for African conflicts. Whilst at one level this is perhaps unsurprising at a dinner party, it is a little more surprising to find it as a central strain of political analysis.

Following the demise of the Cold War, and the collapse of the associated political systems, there were a series of outbreaks of violence, notably, in Africa and also in the former Yugoslavia. According to Robert Kaplan, the originator of much of this analysis, these wars were the result of ‘ancient hatreds’³². This view was further reinforced in mainstream international relations theory by Samuel Huntington’s thesis that the world is divided along a series of fault lines between seemingly irreconcilable civilisations³³. The appeal is really twofold: in the case of areas like the Balkans and ‘messy’ wars of ancient hatred the West should not get involved; and, in the case of large civilizational power blocs (e.g. Islam) the West can adapt its existing Cold War security apparatus – after all, Islam is just another power bloc. It should also be pointed out that the policy and academic world that had been concerned with monitoring the Soviet Bloc saw Huntington as a clear area for their skills to be applied, just to a different subject, which partly

³⁰ Duffield, *Global Governance and New Wars*, A. de Waal, *Famine Crimes: politics and the disaster relief industry in Africa*, (James Currey, Oxford, 1997)

³¹ See N. Peluso and M. Watts, *Violent Environments* (Cornell UP, Ithaca, NY, 2001) and also Richards (ed) *No Peace, No War* for further criticisms of Homer-Dixon’s approach.

³² Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: a journey through history* (Macmillan, London, 1993), also Robert Kaplan ‘The coming anarchy: how scarcity, crime and overpopulation, and disease are rapidly destroying the fabric of our planet’ *Atlantic Monthly*, February, 44-76. There are echoes of this Balkan analysis in Mary Kaldor *New Wars*

³³ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the New World Order*, (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1997)

explains the recent dominance by Huntington of the academic world of International relations and also its attraction of powerful advocates.

In short, Kaplan's idea of barbarous and difficult to explain conflicts has failed to materialise in practice. Its legacy is really one of obscuring the real reasons for conflicts in many cases through skewing the analysis towards ethnicity and tribalism as a lens through which to view African conflicts that may equally be about lack of voice, exclusion and poverty. Furthermore, the policy world has moved on and interventionism (in Afghanistan and Iraq) has rather undermined Kaplan's policy recommendations by recognising that 'failed states' are too dangerous simply to ignore³⁴.

An ethnographic perspective

Over the last few years anthropology has moved into the field of conflict analysis and has brought a series of invaluable insight into the social processes that lead to violence. Historically, anthropology has somewhat downplayed conflict within many of the cultures studied, assuming that conflict was not the norm, but a departure from the norm³⁵. However, a group of more recent analysis led primarily by Richards, Knauff himself and Kopyoff have begun to reassess anthropological approaches to conflict, seeing violence as patterns already embedded in society, rather than taking the more Hobbesian view of war as a state of nature overcome by a social contract³⁶.

This approach highlights two main elements as its core: that wars are a result of social process; and that mono-causal perspectives (greed, resources, etc.) are ultimately inadequate as explanations of conflict. Moreover, the study of wars should engage with those social processes in order to fully understand them. This approach could be interpreted as a post-modernist rejection of meta-theory, but in practice it represents more a recognition of what actually happens on the ground and what the combatants themselves feel about their own motivations for involvement in violence.

In particular, Kopyoff, looking at pre-colonial Africa, sets out a view that mirrors Knauff's work in Melanesia in looking at 'loser' groups, i.e. those who were excluded from political and economic networks. Kopyoff sees these groups as constituting the 'norm' in pre-colonial Africa. Furthermore, these groups were frequently involved in the mainstream of African political development and social formation. Social upheaval, frequently through war, usually through

³⁴ Paul Richards, *No Peace, No War*

³⁵ B.M. Knauff, 'Melanesian warfare: a theoretical history', *Oceania*, 60: 250-311

³⁶ Knauff, 'Melanesian warfare', Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*, I. Kopyoff (ed) *The African Frontier: the reproduction of traditional African societies* (Indiana UP, Bloomington, 1987)

excluded groups, was the main pattern of social creativity in terms of forming African polities, social structures and economic networks³⁷. In particular, Kopytoff also discusses re-enacting or reinventing 'traditional' social structures, usually based upon some idealised or mutated idea of social perfection.

The challenge for analysts of war is therefore how to see conflict as a social process rather than a one-off with clear, identifiable, external causes. The focus should be not only on how social groups engage with conflict and why, but on their own internal social processes and ideologies and their relation to competing systems and structures. In terms of modern Africa and conflict, the main competing sets of ideology and structures are provided by the post-colonial state. It is the collapse of the state and the social processes involved with benefiting from, undermining and opposing states that forms the basis of the analysis within this book. Essentially, the approach taken is to map some of the historical processes that have contributed to the current socio-political landscape within which 'loser' groups turn to violence in order to change their poor positions into better ones. The means by which this happens in the real world is by means of social processes, including access to political and economic networks and the means to overcome social exclusion.

Where do warlords come into it?

The modern day version of the warlord has arisen in a variety of situations, but all have been characterised by a similar group of factors that will be analysed in more detail in chapter 2. The rise of 'grey' as well as legitimate international trade, the existence of primitive accumulation and the collapse of central authority have all happened in those areas of the globe dominated by warlords. On the periphery of the world economy, the collapse of states was somewhat inevitable after the end of the Cold War. With the decline of Cold war 'empires', client states could no longer continue their monopolies of violence, accumulate resources and therefore maintain their systems of patronage.

Given the collapse of state control, warlords represent an attempt to re-establish stability within anarchy, a form of what Mamdani calls 'decentralised despotism'³⁸. All warlords, to an extent, are rebuilding patronage networks and the means to enforce contracts – quasi-government operating a monopoly of violence within established, although flexible areas. An analysis of warlord economies leads one to feel that the study of governance could be enhanced by the study of warlords.

³⁷ Kopytoff *The African Frontier*

³⁸ Mamdani (1996)

The governments that began to emerge in Western Europe under the Tudors in England and under William the Silent in the Netherlands are the exceptions in overall history. Normal dynasties were established by effective use of violence, frequently legitimated by ‘divine right’, where rulers felt uninhibited in turning to murder, torture and mutilation to sustain their rule. The history of the state and government in Africa, both pre and post colonial is littered by homicidal leaders who were precisely those who were most likely to succeed in the context of anarchy with no restrictions on the use of force³⁹. The twentieth century has also, of course, had its share of homicidal leaders heading hierarchical organisations. Warlord, or gangster governments have ruled medieval China, the Ottoman Empire, much of Africa, pre-Columbian Mexico and Peru as well as parts of Europe. Governments that have a deep concern for democracy, human rights and welfare are rare exceptions in human history. Warlords are the norm.

So where does this analysis finally get us? The rather anodyne conclusion ‘warlords are not new’ does not really progress the argument, even if it is true. The fact that they are common in human societies characterised by a decline in central control and societies dominated by violence does, however, beg a series of questions about the historical evolution of warlords and the common conditions that lead to their creation and destruction. A realistic analysis of history shows that warlords are sometimes embryonic governments. They do not need anarchy, they require stability to sustain their economic systems. They gain access to international capital purely because they can provide stability in specific areas. The use of violence, though abhorrent, is a necessary element of establishing control and enforcing contracts and therefore maintaining stability, as is the development of patronage systems based on feudal relationships and primitive accumulation.

Violence apart, many of the violent groups that are labelled as ‘warlords’ also share certain common characteristics. Note that this book uses a broad definition of ‘warlord’ to encompass a wide range of movements since it is not conceptually simple to actually split off a clear ‘warlord group’ as such. There is a wide range of groups sharing characteristics that may have started from radically different positions but are coming to share certain features. In summary, these features can be identified as:

- the widening of war aims to encompass economic aims;
- the construction of alternative governance systems in spaces not occupied by the formal state coercive mechanisms;
- the use of violence to consolidate power;

³⁹ Where the term ‘liberty’ occurs before the sixteenth century (as it does frequently) it does so in the same context as that in the Magna Carta, i.e. the liberty of the ruling class to do what it wants without interference either from above or below.

- the extensive use of patrimonial webs of personalized distribution;
- the construction of alliances to maintain non-formal power structures; and,
- the shared identity of the dispossessed in some way (frequently reinforced by some form of mystical or religious belief).

To this you could also add a reliance on external intervention in the form of covert support, international trade and the availability to arms. Certainly the use of violence is intimately connected to alienation, but also to the desire to better oneself in a similar way to those pre-colonial groups using the well-defined exit strategy from the state.

This obviously has profound implications for international organisations working to establish peace in areas dominated by warlords. For a start, negotiations based upon notions of ‘the state’ and organisations such as the Organisation of African Unity that consist of states may have their legitimacy questioned on the grounds that they hold no power on the ground. Analysts such as Robert Kaplan have spoken of ‘a coming anarchy’, in which warlords exist outside the organised systems of international relations and operate a mutated anarchy based on drugs, violence, environmental decline and, above all, ‘tribalism’. The idea that now the Cold War has ended, there will be a return to ancient tribal enmities has been a common theme in the political analysis of warlords⁴⁰. Kaplan’s analysis of the Balkans in *Balkan Ghosts*, has long been cited as an influence on President Clinton not believing that much could be done in terms of solving Balkan hostilities⁴¹. However, this type of pessimistic fatalism ignores the historical development of many currently existing states, many of which evolved out of warlord-type polities, suggesting that warlordism in Africa may actually be a violent convulsion leading to the creation of new polities⁴².

Warlords, however, unacceptable on conventional terms, are the real power in many areas. They tend to control the economic resources, the arms and the manpower to build quasi-states, certainly at the top of the warlord hierarchy. The emergence of these responses to anarchy may represent a basis on which the colonial borders of regions in Africa, for example, could be re-examined according to more realistic terms such as identity, resources and control. The tendency, particularly amongst political scientists, to revert to labels such as ‘tribalism’ and ‘ethnicity’, characterising them as being outside the more formal international relations systems has led to a

⁴⁰ This theme of tribalism has, of course, been a long-standing historic theme in British policy towards warlords.

⁴¹ David Keen, ‘Incentives and Disincentives for Violence’, in Berdal, M, and Malone, D. *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (London: Lynne Rienner 2000)

⁴² Herbst (2000). See also Charles Tilly *Coercion, Capital and European States* (Blackwell, Malden MA (1992) for a discussion of the centuries of violence that accompanied European state formation.

relatively unsophisticated discussion of the internal dynamics of these conflicts and their relative importance, in particular a neglect of complex social analysis and class relationships⁴³.

There are also profound questions that need to be asked of international aid agencies, which are frequently caught in the middle of this type of conflict, seeking a return to 'development'. Development practitioners usually see conflict as a disruption in the normal, unthreatening, process of 'development'. This is represented more clearly by the use of a number of non-negotiable and accepted words beginning with the prefix 're': rehabilitation; resettlement; repatriation; and, reconstruction⁴⁴. Such sentiments, whilst providing a valuable field of analysis, tend to view conflict as temporary and a universally bad thing for everyone involved. In a world where several conflicts have been maintained for the benefit of those involved, and where conflict is more the norm than the exception, this analysis finishes in a cul-de-sac⁴⁵. In addition, aid agencies have been accused of helping to prop up war economies and prolong war even when motivated by the desire to help some of the most deprived people in Africa⁴⁶. Clearly the relationship between aid agencies and war is a complex one.

The question remains, what can and should we do about warlords in the modern world? A different mindset is the first step to finding a solution. Warlords are primarily responses. They respond to the fraying of state power to the point where the central state becomes, at best, patchy. Warlords offer security, rewards and stability (at least in the short term) at a local level, but may not (indeed, historically do not) offer long-term stability beyond the life of the individual warlord, except when they are able to form a proto-state. What warlords force us to do is to re-examine the structures and the natures of the states that could provide long-run stability both economically and politically. The current set of national boundaries in Africa, based on colonial settlements and ideas of nation-states, contain states that are invariably bankrupt, frequently corrupt and that provide little economic hope for their inhabitants. Warlords offer a logical alternative way out. Whether motivated by greed or by grievance, or usually both, is irrelevant, for many people living in these areas there are currently no alternatives.

⁴³ N. Chazan, P. Lewis, R. Mortimer, D. Rothchild and S. Stedman *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder CO, 1999)

⁴⁴ Keen (2000)

⁴⁵ In fact, several NGOs have been implicated in the continuation of wars, for example in the Sudan. See Mark Duffield *Global Governance and the New Wars: The merging of development and security* (Zed Books, London, 2001)

⁴⁶ See, for example, Duffield's pessimistic analysis in *Global Governance and the New Wars*, and also T. Tvelt *Angels of Mercy or Development Diplomats? NGOs and Foreign Aid* (James Currey, Oxford, 1998)

Conclusion

Warlord movements themselves may be unstable, but many of the conflicts remain. Getting rid of warlords does not necessarily stop the forces that lead to conflict in the first place. Much of the policy focus is placed on the warlords themselves rather than the deeper, underlying factors that led to their emergence. Warlords are a symptom of a longer-term historical process of state construction. Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced a historical disjuncture in political development caused by colonial powers taking over and administering trade networks. This was largely carried out by destroying the polities that existed before the advent of Empire and by taking over the administration of trade areas.

Since many of the European rulers saw their Empires as being dominated by 'tribes', 'chiefs' and 'ethnicities' the institutions of the colonial state were established along those lines through 'indirect rule' and 'native administration'. Certain groups controlled the army, others the bureaucracy and others trade. The end of colonial rule led to a scramble for these resources once rivalry between those groups and others excluded from access began. An integral element of ethnic rivalry in many parts of Africa relates to who controls what aspects of the economic network.

The European Empires arrived in Africa relatively late and managed to carve up most of the territory impressively quickly. The 'territorialisation' of Africa, by a division into states was driven by a desire by the Europeans to prevent conflict amongst themselves, and also to control their trade networks. These states at independence became national entities in name and in constitutional terms, but did not have clearly constituted communities providing legitimacy to the state infrastructure. At independence the elites that took over the institutions of the state gradually reinforced their own personal power at the expense of the support of many groups within the state boundaries⁴⁷.

Many weak African states are devoid of a middle class that is economically independent from the state. The middle class, such as it is, largely consists of state-related professionals or those who have enjoyed privileges of access to education, state-owned enterprises, the civil service or politics, or a combination of these elements. The lack of economic independence compelled this middle class to take direct control of the state in order to control its material wealth and access, in the process changing politics into a conflict over scarce resources, eventually ending up, as the conflict intensified, as a zero sum game for those engaged and excluding increasing numbers of

⁴⁷ See, for example, Jean Francois Bayart, Stephen Ellis and Beatrice Hibou *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (James Currey, Oxford, 1999) and Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Deloz *Africa Works: Disorder as a political instrument* (James Currey, Oxford, 1999)

the population⁴⁸. Even where private capital does exist, it is frequently appropriated by patronage networks and hence politicised in Mamdani's system of 'private indirect government',⁴⁹.

The politics of violence in Africa exist within a structural framework of weak states that can be described as follows: economic crisis; institutional weakness or collapse; scarce resources; elite politics; lack of consensus over the 'state' as an entity; and external vulnerability characterised by weak international position and susceptibility to criminal trading networks. With significant external patronage, as existed during the Cold War, weak states can survive for considerable lengths of time, but the withdrawal of patronage takes weak states back to their own resources and their own processes of state making. In the case of many parts of Africa, the process of state making was in its infancy when the European powers established the ultimate in external patronage – an Empire. The illusion of many African states was maintained for administrative and economic reasons within the framework of Empire. Once the imperial powers withdrew, African states drew on external patronage more indirectly from the Cold War rivals. However, the 1990s saw the absence of external patronage without conditionality. The Washington consensus of the new empire of capitalism is not concerned with the African state beyond what it does to allow the growth of capitalist economies.

The catalysts for turning structural weakness into conflict within Africa are the political elites. The economic structures of many former colonies were deliberately structured towards export and economic networks governed by specific groups and the post-colonial history of many states can therefore be seen as a form of elite competition, or that of control and alienation from, these economic networks. Elites effectively compete for control in a scenario where the state has become the main source of resources. Paradoxically, overseas aid can add to this resource base by lacking a political dimension to public sector reform. Pushing through donor cash without protecting against elite control merely replaces one patronage system with another. Ethnic politics, centralisation and social exclusion, patronage and clientalism, authoritarianism and the maintenance of war economies are all strategies adopted by many African states at various times to counteract their structural weaknesses of institutional malformation, economic crisis, lack of legitimacy, patrimonialism and external vulnerability. The authoritarian politics of exclusion that characterise many African states arise out of an inability of an elite to transform its own power into genuine political rule within the context of a nation state.

⁴⁸ In many ways, this transformed class relations in many African states from relations of production to relations of power in the same way that was experienced by many Eastern European states. Milovan Djilas' coined the phrase 'The new class' to describe this state-reliant middle class in Yugoslavia (Djilas, *The New Class*, (London; Harcourt & Brace: 1956)

⁴⁹ Mamdani (1996). See also Roger Tangri *The Politics of Patronage in Africa: Parastatals, privatization, private enterprise* (James Currey, Oxford, 1999)

In a zero-sum game, taking up arms to oppose an elite that seemingly exists merely to further its own interests is a completely logical solution. Charles Taylor's rebellion in Liberia mushroomed when the exclusive rule of Samuel Doe had become so paranoid that when Taylor crossed the border from Cote d'Ivoire the government slaughtered hundreds of people in Nimba County for supposedly supporting Taylor. As a result of this brutality, thousands joined Taylor in armed opposition to the Government and the brutality of the Liberian War was determined. In the same way, increasingly kleptocratic regimes accentuate the alienation of those who are excluded from the ruling elite. Alienation and opposition to successively corrupt regimes in Sierra Leone were the initial sparks of the RUF rebellion.

The emphasis on the historical nature of the weak state problem suggests that this type of warlord conflict is likely to be a feature of African politics for some time to come. However, this does not mean that there is no alternative, or that policy-makers are impotent in the face of history, rather the process of state making requires careful management over a very long time period. Whilst early warning systems for conflict can greatly enhance the prevention of short-term violence and remain important, attention needs to be given to the long-term nature of building legitimacy. If the concentration of power within certain kleptocratic elites is one of the underlying issues of warlord politics and the weak state, then intervention to prevent conflict and to engage in state making must address this concentration of power. In some parts of Africa it appears that not much has changed since the pre-colonial period. As Igor Kopytoff explains, the pattern of pre-colonial African structure consisted of the following:

‘The core, usually the area of earliest political consolidation, continued to be ruled directly by the central authority. Then came an inner area of closely assimilated and politically integrated dependencies. Beyond it was the circle of relatively secure vassal polities, straining at the center's political leash. Beyond, the centre's control became increasingly symbolic.... The center could only practice political intimidation and extract sporadic tribute through institutionalized raiding or undisguised pillage.’⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Igor Kopytoff quoted in Herbst (2000) p.43.