



Violent Development: Toward an economic history of African warfare and military organisation*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is deceptively simple: What has war achieved in Africa in the last two hundred years? What have the wagers of war *aimed* to achieve, even if they did not succeed? Why and in what ways has violence failed? This paper represents a preliminary attempt to explore what can broadly be termed the ‘economic aspects’ of both warfare and military organisation in Africa’s modern history – to identify the economic drivers of conflict, as well as the material constraints upon it; to explore the ways in which warfare can be said to have facilitated ‘development’, broadly defined, as well as bringing about economic catastrophe, or at least severely inhibiting economic growth; and to highlight the degree to which participation in violence, notably as armed combatant, represented material aspiration and offered opportunities for both economic gain and social mobility. At root, it is argued here that the developmental aspects of warfare – viewed over the long term, and understood within local parameters – need to be appreciated alongside its unquestionably highly destructive elements. The paper uses as its timeframe the period since c.1800, a date which – give or take a decade or two on either side, variable from place to place – denotes the beginning of Africa’s ‘modern era’. In many ways the centrepiece of the thesis presented here is that across much of the continent the ‘long’ nineteenth century – stretching between the 1780s and the 1920s – witnessed a revolution in military affairs, ongoing aspects of which have had a profound influence on postcolonial Africa. The paper aims to examine the economic dimensions of that revolution and its aftermath, and to place Africa’s recent economic and military history in a longer-term context.

*A version of this paper was presented at the 16th World Economic History Congress in Stellenbosch, South Africa, in July 2012, and I am grateful for all feedback received.

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1 The economics of African warfare over the *longue duree*

What has war achieved in Africa in the last two hundred years? What have the wagers of war *aimed* to achieve, even if they did not succeed? Why and in what ways has violence failed? This paper represents a preliminary attempt to survey what can broadly be termed the ‘economic aspects’ of both warfare and military organisation in Africa’s modern history – to identify the economic drivers of conflict, as well as the material constraints upon it; to explore the ways in which warfare can be said to have facilitated ‘development’ broadly defined, as well as bringing about economic catastrophe, or at least severely inhibiting economic growth; and to highlight the degree to which participation in violence, notably as armed combatant, represented material aspiration and offered opportunities for both economic gain and social mobility. At root, it is argued here that the developmental aspects of warfare – viewed over the long term, and understood within local parameters – need to be appreciated alongside its unquestionably highly destructive elements. I use as my timeframe the period since c.1800, a date which – give or take a decade or two on either side, variable from place to place – denotes the beginning of Africa’s ‘modern era’. The centrepiece of the thesis presented here is that across much of the continent the ‘long’ nineteenth century - stretching between the 1780s and the 1920s - witnessed a revolution in military affairs, ongoing aspects of which have had a profound influence on postcolonial Africa. The paper aims to examine the economic dimensions of that revolution and its aftermath, and to place Africa’s recent economic and military history in a longer-term context.

Above all, then, this paper is about the ‘rehabilitation’ of violence, so to speak - or at least certain forms of it – in Africa’s past. In many ways this is a history whose signals have been jammed by doggedly presentist and what we can broadly term ‘developmentalist’ thinking about African economic history. In sum, contemporary agendas are characterised by an ahistorical conceptual framework, and by an overwhelming concern for ‘solutions’ and the imposition of ‘peace’. These agendas have obscured the developmental nature of African warfare over the longer term. Needless to say, my intention is by no means to provide some form of ‘definitive’ statement - a red herring in any case - but rather to summarise my own and others’ research to date, and suggest areas in which future research may prove fruitful.

Scholarship which makes explicit linkages between economic and military history in the African context is notably rare. Historians working on economic change and/or continuity on the one hand, and on the role of warfare on the other, have, by and large, kept one another at arm’s length. The one sphere in which some degree of connection is made – and then often implicitly, rather than overtly – is in studies of the Atlantic slave trade, and to some extent the Indian Ocean slave trade. Slavery and the slave trades by definition pull together war and economics, although much remains to be done. The reasons for this distance are a matter for speculation, although it is possible to detect

a fundamental, and presumably ideological, reluctance to associate Africans' economic achievements and aspirations with organised violence – interestingly enough, given that no such squeamishness exists in European historiography, for example; indeed, quite the opposite. Moreover, when violence *is* discussed in an economic context, the tendency has been to depict war, ultimately, as an *obstacle* to economic development – or as the outcome of economic failure – rather than as representing a particular form of economic growth, and of economic opportunity. The partial exception to this is the interpretation of the ‘warlordism’ of the last twenty years as, among other things, an idiosyncratic form of business activity.¹

War is conspicuously absent from recent work on African economic history, as survey essays by both Tony Hopkins and Gareth Austin demonstrate.² Many years ago, Jack Goody's study of technology and the state – though now a little outdated – represented an early attempt to examine the relationship between economics (or more specifically, the range of factor endowments available and the influence of environment) and the waging of war, including warfare aimed at state-building.³ Yet little came of what would have been an illuminating debate. Historians of economic change and/or continuity generally shied away from examining war as either cause or outcome of particular economic conditions – witness, for example, Iliffe's work on poverty, in which the presence of warfare is certainly detectable through much of the text (it could hardly be otherwise) but in which it is never foregrounded, nor is direct connection made between poverty and violence over the longer term.⁴ Only Ralph Austen's as yet unsurpassed survey of African economic history raises the issue of the economics of warfare at key junctures, although in truth in a fairly cursory manner.⁵ A recurrent theme in the book is the idea that warfare – or predation, in the context of western and eastern slave trades – was generally inimical to long-term economic development (which sometimes happened *despite* violence), and that militarisation and military activity generally occurred at the expense of other more ‘productive’ activities.⁶ It is fair to say that this reflected the mainstream position. It is no coincidence, again, that many of Austen's references relate to the Atlantic slave trade – much of which lies outside the scope of this paper, but which needs to be noted.⁷ Similarly, work on the Indian Ocean slave trade

¹For example W.Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, 1998).

²G.Austin, ‘Resources, techniques and strategies south of the Sahara: revising the factor endowments perspective on African economic development, 1500-2000’, *Economic History Review*, 61:3 (2008); A.G.Hopkins, ‘The new economic history of Africa’, *Journal of African History*, 50:2 (2009).

³J.Goody, *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa* (London, 1971).

⁴J.Iliffe, *The African Poor: a history* (Cambridge, 1987).

⁵R.Austen, *African Economic History: internal development and external dependency* (London, 1987).

⁶*Ibid.*, pp.45, 67, 96.

⁷For example, N.Nunn, ‘Historical legacies: a model linking Africa's past to its current underdevelopment’, *Journal of Development Economics*, 83 (2007); N.Nunn, ‘The long term effects of Africa's slave trades’, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 23 (2008). For earlier – and rather more empirically grounded – work on war and economy in the Atlantic context, see by Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire c.1600-1836: a West African imperialism in the era of*

tended – for all the right reasons, no doubt – to highlight either the purely *economic* functioning (and impact) of the commerce in human beings, or to discuss the socio-political implications of long-distance trade across the eastern half of the continent, without overtly considering the links between war and economy, or indeed the developmental potential of the slave trade itself.⁸

It is certainly noteworthy that much of the literature on European warfare is explicit in its treatment of economic aspects – indeed, historians of war have been rather more prepared to look at economics than economic historians (in common with their Africanist colleagues, if for different reasons) have been to look at war. In the western European context, the state was in large part the outcome of a revolution in military affairs, for only increasingly elaborate state systems could bear the costs of expanding armies – armies which were making ever greater use of expensive ordnance. States, in sum, arose because political elites needed to raise revenues to pay for war.⁹ Nonetheless, it is important to note recent work by David Parrott, who sheds new light on the role of the ‘private’ military, the contracted mercenary, which has potentially great relevance for our understanding of the African situation.¹⁰ In sum, Parrott argues that contrary to the received wisdom concerning the expansion of state-run armies, the *privatised business of war* in fact grew enormously, and was the norm: namely, the role of the private sector in organised violence was much more significant, and much more ‘normal’ than has previously been believed.

There can be no doubting the importance of the relationship between economic and military stabilisation and expansion, and the transformative economic power of organised violence in European history. Economic growth underpinned military success; military success might enlarge economic capacity; and the most effective polities were those whose state systems were efficient enough to do both.¹¹ The links between war and economic development are explicitly drawn in the European context; the same connections, however, are largely absent from assessments of Africa’s historical trajectories. In sum, long-term economic analyses have tended to overlook the role played by war – and

the Atlantic slave trade (Oxford, 1977); and *The Slave Coast of West Africa 1550-1750: the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on an African society* (Oxford, 1991).

⁸E.A.Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa* (London, 1975); W.G.Clarence-Smith (ed.), *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1989); R.Gray & D.Birmingham (eds.), *Pre-Colonial African Trade: essays on trade in central and eastern Africa before 1900* (London, 1970); H.Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History* (London, 1996); A.D.Roberts (ed.), *Tanzania Before 1900* (Nairobi, 1968); A.Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar: integration of an East African commercial empire into the world economy, 1770-1873* (London, 1987).

⁹For example, M.Howard, *The Invention of Peace and the Reinvention of War* (London, 2002) pp.13-14.

¹⁰D.Parrott, *The Business of War: military enterprise and military revolution in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2012).

¹¹W.H.McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: technology, armed force and society since AD 1000* (Chicago, 1982); P.Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London, 1988); C.Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990 – 1992* (Oxford, 1992); G.Parker, *The Military Revolution: military innovation and the rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge, 1996); M.Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford, 2009).

when it is discussed, it is, by and large, in a negative way. Despite the recent flood of literature dealing with modern African violence, little of it considers warfare over the long term, and is notably contemporary in its focus.

An understanding of both opportunities and constraints over the *longue duree* – the broad economic and environmental parameters within which African warfare was played out – is clearly critical. This is not to suggest some timeless ‘state’: indeed it is the central thrust of this paper that over the long term economic systems and associated cultures of socio-political aspiration were underpinned by war in increasingly sophisticated ways. But it is true that certain perennial themes need to be identified in terms of the long-term relationship between war and economy.¹² Water, most obviously, was critical: state-formation and other forms of socio-political organisation occurred close to sources of water. Vulnerability to environmental shifts and the vagaries of rainfall have been key drivers of violence throughout African history. Linked to this, there is the ongoing battle to domesticate land, which also means maximising relatively sparse population. The drive to maximise and control productive and reproductive labour – often through coercion, which often became culturally normative (slavery and polygamy) – was underpinned by military organisation. At the same time, cyclical armed rivalries perpetuated over continual processes of fission and fusion, as frontiers armed and challenged the centre; centrifugal conflicts over regional resources have been recurrent, hence also unifying cultures and ideologies. People were generally the key focus of war rather than land *per se*.

War was waged over a range of factor endowments: arable land, pasture, minerals, water, livestock, skills, and labour. The presence of such endowments drove, and the absence of them placed constraints upon, war-making. Above all, war itself was always dictated by economic timetables – harvests, most obviously, for food either enabled armies to stay on campaign, or forced them home. Nonetheless unforeseen disasters (drought, especially) could wreck military plans and escalate frontier violence. Meanwhile economic specialisation at the local level was clearly critical, notably in terms of available materials and skills, which were crucial to military success.

Much African war was total economic war, involving the seizure and / or destruction of enemies’ resources, and slavery. So-called ‘raiding war’ could be enormously destructive.¹³ Violence was often essential from an economic point of view, involving the subjection of the insurgent province or frontier, the distribution of scarce largesse, the accumulation of resources and people for labour, skills and reproduction. People-centred violence escalated with external slave trades, and drove new and sophisticated political, economic and cultural systems – in Atlantic Africa from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and in eastern Africa especially in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ It was an extension of pre-

¹²J.Lamphear, ‘Sub-Saharan African Warfare’, in J.Black (ed.), *War in the Modern World Since 1815* ((London, 2003); R.J.Reid, *Warfare in African History* (New York, 2012) pp.1-5.

¹³Lamphear, ‘Sub-Saharan African Warfare’, pp.171-2; see also P.M.Malone, *The Skulking Way of War: technology and tactics among the New England Indians* (Lanham, 1991).

¹⁴J.Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa 1500-1800* (London, 1999); R.J.Reid, *War in Pre-Colonial Eastern Africa: the patterns and meanings of state-level conflict in the nineteenth*

existing African economic war; but of course increasingly the major struggles were over imported weapons, notably horses and firearms, and hence the critical importance of controlling burgeoning global commerce. From the seventeenth century, warfare was increasingly concerned with imports and exports, as armed entrepreneurs now also sought to grab commercial as well as endogenous opportunities. There was increasing awareness of wealth in a global economy to which various African communities (sometimes organised into states, sometimes not) now wanted access. Many ended up destroying the very thing (namely trade) they sought to control. War often led to economic expansion; and as expansion took place, ever more ambitious military projects were facilitated. Yet war just as often undermined economic growth, and certainly economic consolidation. In the more recent past, certainly, war has been the outcome, not the cause, of economic instability. Nevertheless, African war must be understood in terms of a ‘political’ model (endogenous stimuli and growth processes) as well as an ‘economic’ one (response to exogenous commercial stimuli).¹⁵ Above all, almost all war was entrepreneurial, and aimed at ‘development’ (i.e. the maximisation of resources and their distribution), even if this was not always achieved.

2 The nineteenth-century military revolution

I have argued elsewhere that in the course of the nineteenth century much of Africa experienced a revolution in military affairs.¹⁶ It is not my intention to rehearse the thesis in detail here, but rather to highlight a number of salient points germane to the general argument of this paper. War, in sum, was frequently developmental, in aim if not always in outcome. Economic growth across a number of sectors was sustained either by the privatisation of violence, or by more efficient state-management of violence. In turn military innovation meant warfare in pursuit of clearly defined economic goals. The ‘take-off’ point can be identified as falling between the 1780s and the 1840s. Across the continent in the nineteenth century, there are clear indications of an enlargement of economic vision, and of increased economic capacity as well as diversification. States and societies organised violence in order to accumulate people; to broaden the available range of factor endowments; and to channel and control commerce. Equally important, the violence itself and the political turmoil which attended it involved heightened social mobility, while a range of polities used war to bring about social cohesion: cultures of militarism were developed which celebrated the community’s achievements and provided a spirit, an ethos, an *identity*, in which the majority of members could invest. This must also be seen in devel-

century (Oxford, 2007).

¹⁵Reid, *War in Pre-Colonial Eastern Africa*, p.109.

¹⁶See for example my *Warfare in African History*, Chap 5. Also relevant are ‘Violence and its Sources: European witnesses to the military revolution in nineteenth-century eastern Africa’, in P.Landau (ed.), *The Power of Doubt: essays in honour of David Henige* (Madison, 2011); and ‘The Fragile Revolution: rethinking war and development in Africa’s violent nineteenth century’, in E.Akeampong *et al* (eds.), *African Development in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

opmental terms, because the outcome of the process was the strengthening of social bonds and political institutions, leading to more competitive and indeed combative economic units capable of imposing themselves on ever larger areas, or utilising more efficiently the resources within existing territories. Often, this process was violent, and in many cases ultimately failed – especially when war became counterproductive (which at a certain point, variable from case to case, it does). But when it worked, it did so to a remarkable degree. Many, perhaps most, of Africa’s most successful and dynamic political and social systems have been profoundly violent ones.

Numerous examples may be mobilised to illustrate socio-economic and military transformation; I will restrict myself to just a few. The collapse of Oyo in the Slave Coast hinterland – caused at least in part by exogenous commercial factors, including declining revenues from the slave trade – led to heightened commercial competition among the Yoruba, and ultimately to a revolution in warfare in the region.¹⁷ Several decades of warfare and military innovation involved the rise of new military leaders, some of whom had links to the old Oyo political establishment, but many of whom were ‘self-made.’ They commanded increasingly professional forces, comprising ‘War Boys’ armed with both matchlocks and flintlocks; these were often mercenaries for whom war was now a career choice, and the most effective means by which to achieve both material advancement and social status. An intimate interconnection between politics and the military can be traced to the Oyo Empire during its eighteenth-century pomp, but these forces represented especially fierce economic competition, new social classes, and new forms of military organisation. The expansion of the illegal slave trade and broadening commercial frontiers led many newly armed youth to eschew older loyalties and conventions in search of economic, social and political opportunities. Further south, in west-central Atlantic Africa, similar processes of militarisation and professionalization, driven by commercial entrepreneurialism, can be discerned among the Ovimbundu and the Chokwe.¹⁸ In eastern Africa, too, privatised violence drove commercial growth – and vice versa – during the era of the slave and ivory trades from the late eighteenth century onward. Among the Nyanwezi, new military leaders utilised the manpower offered by youth – uprooted by the commercial adventurism which underpinned the slave trade – to create new polities as well as to pursue economic growth.¹⁹ Mirambo exemplified the process; but mention should also be made of Nyunguya-Mawe among the Kimbu, Msiri in Katanga, and Tippu Tip in eastern Congo.

In many ways these appear to have been relatively ‘straightforward’ - in economic terms – predatory militarisms, in which charismatic warrior-entrepreneurs used heightened access to firearms and slave soldiers to feed off the violent disor-

¹⁷J.F.A.Ade Ajayi & R.Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1964); S.A.Akintoye, *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland, 1840-1893* (London, 1971); R.C.C.Law, *The Oyo Empire, c.1600-1836: a West African imperialism in the era of the Atlantic slave trade* (Oxford, 1977).

¹⁸For an excellent overview, see D.Birmingham, ‘The forest and savanna of Central Africa’, in J.E.Flint (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Africa: Vol 5, from c.1790 to c.1870* (Cambridge, 1976).

¹⁹Reid, *War in Pre-Colonial Eastern Africa*.

der which they then helped to perpetuate. But behind this deceptively simple model there was rather more at work. These military polities developed increasingly sophisticated redistributive systems; strengthened local and regional markets; harnessed – and often fulfilled – greatly heightened material and social aspirations; and brought into play a wider range of economic goods and services, thus leading to increased economic specialisation and social stratification. One especially tangible outcome was urbanisation, notably the urban centres which grew up among the Nyamwezi and the Yoruba.²⁰ These may in the first instance have been rooted in the needs of defence in increasingly dangerous neighbourhoods; but these fortified centres were also foci of trade and of local manufacture. Much of this was indeed underpinned by war, but it was war with a range of outcomes, both intended and unintended.

The problem was that political and indeed economic reforms usually lagged behind military innovation. In political terms, violent upheaval produced unstable systems of succession and overly personalised rule, and a failure to create institutions as opposed to nurturing notably talented individuals; in economic terms, we can identify an inability to redistribute commodities more effectively and more inclusively, and to reinvest in alternative economic futures. Yet there were instances in the course of the nineteenth century in which increased economic competition gave rise to novel forms of large-scale statehood involving political reform, as among the Ngoni chiefdoms in the southeast.²¹ From the late eighteenth century onward, a combination of increased Indian Ocean trade and a more endogenous struggle over land following a period of prolonged population growth meant the emergence of more centralised states which militarised long-standing age-sets systems. As elsewhere, youth was harnessed for the purposes of expanded political and economic scale. The Zulu state which ultimately resulted inspired others beyond the immediate region, although while some were based on cattle, agriculture and trade, some were rather more predatory and limited in economic goals. In the case of the Sokoto Caliphate, a new expansionist state system provided constructive conditions for economic growth, both within the caliphate itself, and to some extent outside it, through trade networks. Again war – in this case jihadist violence – had underpinned a major political reform project which fostered commerce over a wider area and involved an expansion in economic scale, notably in terms of the plantations which formed the basis of a thriving textile industry.²² Sokoto was responding to the opportu-

²⁰ For example R.S.Smith, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa* (London, 1989), pp.99-109; R.J.Reid, 'Warfare and Urbanisation: the relationship between town and conflict in pre-colonial eastern Africa', in A.Burton (ed.), *The Urban Experience in Eastern Africa* (Nairobi, 2002).

²¹ E.Eldredge, 'Sources of conflict in southern Africa, c.1800-30: the 'mfecane' reconsidered', *Journal of African History*, 33:1 (1992); C.Hamilton, ' "The Character and Objects of Chaka": a reconsideration of the making of Shaka as "Mfecane" motor', *Journal of African History*, 33:1 (1992); J.Wright, 'Turbulent Times: political transformations in the North and East, 1760s-1830s', in C.Hamilton *et al*, eds., *The Cambridge History of South Africa: Vol 1, from earliest times to 1885* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²² P.Lovejoy, 'Plantations in the economy of the Sokoto Caliphate', *Journal of African History*, 19:3 (1978).

nities offered by ‘legitimate’ commerce, even if its domestic economy was based on slavery. The same was true of Dahomey and Asante, states of longer standing which sought, in different ways, economic diversification underpinned by military strength.²³

In Ethiopia, similarly, gifted armed leaders harnessed the growing professionalism (and increasing size) of provincial armies to reinvent the medieval Christian highland kingdom, and in so doing bring about a dramatic expansion in economic scale. The process was led in the 1840s and 1850s by Tewodros, who was then derailed by the restless violence of the 1860s; but the project was resuscitated and carried to fruition between the 1870s and 1890s by Yohannes and Menelik. By century’s end, an Amhara military elite was sustained by land grants – the result of several decades’ steady territorial expansion – and a booming export trade via the Red Sea.²⁴ In each of these cases, and certainly in the case of Sokoto and Ethiopia, military expansion involved the breaking down of political barriers to trade, and opening up more effective access to a range of commodities across wider areas. In other words, war opened up spaces for economic growth, in which terms both Sokoto and Ethiopia need to be understood. In other instances again, war and internal military reform were used to strengthen existing state systems, which were in large part concerned to bring about economic expansion. In Buganda, notably, sought to control long-distance trade and increase its range of local factor endowments through both military reform on land and the state-sponsored creation of canoe fleet.²⁵ Arguably the most dramatic example of such integrated programmes of reform is Muhammad Ali’s Egypt, which between the 1810s and 1840s witnessed massive exercise in military and economic restructuring.²⁶

Nonetheless there were inherent limitations to what could be achieved across the continent, and some of these relate to the perennial themes discussed earlier. Economies remained fragile, and were vulnerable both locally (in terms of environmental and demographic challenges) and at the global level (notably in terms of fundamentally inequitable balances of trade). Particularly problematic was the failure to nurture a large internal population which might ‘consume’ the produce of the violence itself. Too much war, in simple terms, was aimed at export, and too large a proportion of the profits were retained by a small and politically unstable elite. In many parts of Africa, underpopulation or at least fragile population levels had implications for social organisation, the capacity for mobilisation, and indeed for the levels of risk states and societies were prepared to take on. Many polities were vulnerable to overextension, and much of

²³For example, G.Austin, ‘Between abolition and *jihad*: the Asante response to the ending of the Atlantic slave trade, 1807-1896’, in R.Law (ed.), *From Slave Trade to ‘Legitimate’ Commerce: the commercial transition in nineteenth-century West Africa* (Cambridge, 1995).

²⁴R.Caulk, ‘Firearms and princely power in Ethiopia in the nineteenth century’, *Journal of African History*, 13:4 (1972); S.Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London: Heinemann, 1976); R.J.Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in Northeast Africa: genealogies of conflict since c.1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁵R.J.Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda: economy, society and warfare in the nineteenth century* (Oxford, 2002).

²⁶A.L. al-Sayyid, *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad Ali* (Cambridge, 1984).

the nineteenth century witnessed cyclical struggles for equilibrium which generated brutally creative, restive, and indeed invariably violent frontiers – zones of conflict which ultimately threatened to subsume the very centre itself. War was thus central, but often inimical, to emerging political and economic systems: this was a perpetual process of fission and fusion, in which the armed frontier opposed the expansionist and extractive centre, and replicated many of the latter’s cultures and strategies. It was a process which was attended by great creativity, most clearly manifest in military adventurism, but it was often ultimately inimical to economic consolidation and political reform.

Yet it is undeniable that advances were clearly being made in this direction in the course of the nineteenth century, which was in many respects a ‘golden age’ for much of the continent, involving political, military and economic dynamism, and attended by heightened levels of social mobility. Like many a ‘golden age’ elsewhere, it was also an extremely violent one, characterised by total economic war. But the violence should not disguise the real processes unfolding during this tumultuous era. The military revolution was characterised by *development*, according to a basic interpretation of that term. The extent to which economies were based on destruction rather than production has been overstated, in many cases: this was violence aimed at the maximisation of production. War was being used in innovative ways to pursue economic and social development. Again, war led to the creation in many areas of larger, enhanced and protected trade zones; and at the same time, expanded territorial polities meant enhancement of the factor endowment base. New economic centres and new markets were created, often located in fortified towns. War became profession, promising material reward, as entrepreneurs of violence seized opportunities offered by burgeoning global commerce. Such entrepreneurialism was also representative of social mobility and intergenerational struggle; the nineteenth century witnessed the rejection of older systems of authority and the embrace of new ones by young men set loose by access to guns and other commodities. These new levels of aspiration would be carried forward into the colonial era, and beyond.

3 Colonial interlude: The military in the ‘pax’

The era of the Scramble for Africa supposedly effectively ‘demilitarised’ Africa, and passed the initiative in bringing about economic transformation to Europe. But this is a misreading – and certainly a gross oversimplification – of the dynamics at work, seen over the longer term. The revolutionary transformations of the nineteenth century had produced across the continent a swell of militarised and displaced manpower, willing to serve those who were ready and able to arm and pay them. This was, in many ways, a key aspect of the economics of the African frontier: that is to say, violent conflict had long produced groups of skilled men-at-arms who were at the same time entrepreneurs. The same groups of people had served emergent African warrior-states throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Now they were drawn into European service, between the 1880s and the 1900s, for many of the same reasons: these were armed

entrepreneurs, in search of causes and security, and economic opportunity.

For many of the same reasons, of course, entire communities sought to utilise the presence of Europeans – who were able to insert themselves into the fault lines of conflict opening up between states and societies in the course of the nineteenth century – by supporting military adventures in particular areas and seeking economic advantage in the process.²⁷ European intervention, in other words, represented opportunities for the economic co-option of foreigners on the part of African societies which had experienced decades of revolutionary turmoil. The Scramble for Africa was part of a rolling process of political, economic and military change for the continent, and Europeans were as much absorbed into that process as they were able to influence it.

All of this meant, therefore, that colonial armed service in the first half of the twentieth century was based on the military and commercial entrepreneurialism which had characterised much of Africa's nineteenth century. Service offered financial stability and in some areas, to an extent, facilitated the emergence of distinctive social classes.²⁸ Again this was a process which had really begun in the nineteenth century with the increasing professionalization of soldiery; but it is important to bear in mind that much military service – whatever it may have become, and however particular local loyalties may have evolved – began as an investment decision, as with much African warfare and militarism, and represented financial opportunism and social aspiration. In many respects, then, there were continuities in colonial militarism and colonial-era military activity from the preceding century.²⁹ Frontiers often remained 'live', usually (at some level) because of economic need, or at least armed opportunism; military service in colonial armies represented, or at least had its roots in, the same armed entrepreneurialism witnessed in the nineteenth century, and offered many of the same kinds of socio-economic rewards.

However, arguably the single biggest impact of the colonial interlude was the fact that it prevented unfolding processes of developmental violence from reaching fruition: in other words, the issue with colonialism from a long-term perspective is not so much that it created instability from which postcolonial states have struggled to escape, although it certainly did so. It is, rather, that it stopped expansive war at a critical 'moment' in Africa's history, and thus institutionalised a greater level of instability than would otherwise have been the case. African war had an organic logic to it which was denied by

²⁷J.Lonsdale, 'The European scramble and conquest in African history', in R.Oliver & G.N.Sanderson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Africa: Vol 6, from 1870 to 1905* (Cambridge, 1985); B.Vandervort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa, 1830-1914* (Bloomington, 1998) pp.113-83; D.Porch, *Wars of Empire* (London, 2001) pp.108-57.

²⁸T.H.Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File: social implications of colonial military service in the King's African Rifles, 1902-1964* (Portsmouth NH, 1999); Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, 'Colonialism and the construction of national identities: the case of Eritrea', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 1:2 (2007); Francesca Bruschi, 'Military collaboration, conscription and citizenship rights in the Four Communes of Senegal and in French West Africa (1912-1946)', in H.Liebau, K.Bromber, K.Lange & R.Ahuja (eds.), *The World in World Wars: experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia* (Leiden, 2010).

²⁹For example, see Reid, *Frontiers of Violence*.

colonial administrators, and subsequently by historians, and indeed by Africans themselves. The key point here is that the result of the colonial co-option – in effect, a *global* co-option – of the African military revolution was the retardation of core dynamics driving African material expansion: in the simplest terms, the colonial *pax* stripped polities and communities of various hues of the ability to exercise violence in pursuit of economic gain. It did not, moreover, offer anything substantial in its place.

4 Economies of militarism and violence in the modern era

There is a tendency to espy discontinuity and ‘modernity’ (or the failure of it) in African warfare since the 1950s and 1960s; yet a longer view picks up rather more in the way of continuity. A range of guerrilla ‘liberation’ movements and insurgencies have arisen in the same kinds of frontier zones, among many of the same kinds of disenfranchised and marginalised groups, and pursuing many of the same kinds of goals as their nineteenth-century predecessors. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the resurgence of a revolution in military affairs begun in the early nineteenth – but also witnessed the crisis of that revolution, the result in many cases of distortions arising during the colonial period.

The first indications of that resurgence came in the form of military *coup d’etat*, for in the early years of Africa’s independence armies across the continent reasserted themselves in political affairs. This had some short-term causes, not the least of which was the culture of competition and division fostered by (and within) colonial armies. There was also the mismanaged process of decolonisation itself, which relegated new commercial elites to a supporting role.³⁰ This, arguably, created the conditions for the re-emergence of military entrepreneurs in the 1960s and 1970s. They rejected the controlling influence of the postcolonial regimes created in the process of decolonisation, and represented a reversion to the nineteenth-century ‘economics of the armed frontier’. It is quite possible that a more prominent role for the commercial class of the 1940s and 1950s would have disarmed the frontier in African political culture. More broadly, however, the *coup d’etat* represented a continuation of the nineteenth-century military revolution.

Army officers quickly saw opportunities for intervention, and were driven by their own grievances and aspirations. These were often ethnically or regionally defined, as soldiers were drawn from often peripheral or marginal groups, and quickly recognised their importance to regimes, as well as the opportunities to exercise a disproportionate amount of influence. The economic motivations could be ‘micro’ - often soldiers were motivated by poor pay and conditions – and ‘macro’, in that they sometimes embraced larger revolutionary visions for

³⁰Austen, *African Economic History*, p.228.

the 'nation'.³¹ It is also worth noting that the countries which were especially prone to army rule were those with higher-than-average military expenditure, and in that sense the military regimes of the 1960s and 1970s may be seen as the postcolonial successors to the highly militarised regimes of the nineteenth century.

Soldiers – especially the officer corps – were factionalised in ethno-regional terms, but also over access to economic benefits, around which ethno-regional identities frequently coalesced. Military rulers therefore became distributors of largesse and patronage, much as had been the case in the nineteenth century – although the difference now was that colonial rule had entrenched and hardened systems of exclusion and rivalry. Thus, while in the nineteenth century the new military systems had had enormous economic potential, and were often dynamic, efficient and inclusive, those of the 1960s and 1970s were characterised by inefficiency and kleptomania. Nevertheless, there was considerable continuity in terms of armed entrepreneurialism, in which charismatic 'warriors' (or at least uniformed demagogues) built personalised followings through the ability to distribute political and material largesse.³² It was a pattern of long standing, and in many instances represented the advance of the frontier on the centre; these were political systems underpinned by the economics of the armed and mobile frontier.

In the meantime, these dynamics were paralleled by another form of armed economic entrepreneurialism which again represented a pattern rooted in the nineteenth century, and indeed earlier. This was manifest in guerrilla insurgency, widespread across the continent (though particularly in the eastern and southern zones) from the 1960s onward.³³ The guerrilla insurgency and the military *coups d'etat* may have looked quite different, but in fact they had a common ancestor – the nineteenth-century revolution in military affairs – even if they represented distinct historical lineages. The wars of 'rebels' were frequently struggles between groups seeking access to both political and material resources, within the artificial confines of the colonial territory. Essentially the various movements themselves represented new forms of armed entrepreneurialism. The twentieth century saw the continuation of struggle to manage and control economy at the local as well as the global level, and the violence was driven by both heightened levels of inequality and population growth. Heightened levels of violence resulted from entrenched material and political inequity and regional conflict, which to some extent had been emerging in the nineteenth century but which was greatly exacerbated by colonial rule and the postcolonial order that usually resulted. Yet perhaps most significant in terms of the perpetuation and indeed intensification of conflict was the absence of the manoeu-

³¹J.M.Lee, *African Armies and Civil Order* (London, 1969); W.F.Gutteridge, *Military Regimes in Africa* (London, 1975); S.Decalo, *Coups and Army Rule in Africa* (New Haven & London, 1990).

³²See for example a number of essays in A.A.Mazrui (ed.), *The Warrior Tradition in Modern Africa* (Leiden, 1977).

³³C.Clapham (ed.), *African Guerrillas* (Oxford, 1998); M.Boas & K.C.Dunn (eds.), *African Guerrillas: raging against the machine* (Boulder, 2007); W.Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa* (New York, 2011).

vulnerability and flexibility which had so characterised nineteenth-century violence. Now war also needed to be waged on an international order which not only recognised but often actively supported regimes which were rooted in socio-economic inequity and which systematically marginalised particular groups.

Ethnic cohesion and identity was clearly crucial in many cases, but this is not the place to explore this. Rather, a key point to make is that ethnicity was often economically defined – defined, that is, in terms of relative deprivation and marginalisation, in the way that communities had always been forged in conflict along frontiers and fault lines. In other words, ethnicity was often (if not always) a proxy for socio-economic conflict. It is certainly the case that ‘armed liberationism’ of various hues – involving the mobilisation and militarisation of the frontier – made much of socio-economic revolution, notably in terms of land redistribution and empowerment of the disenfranchised and the marginalised in Mozambique, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, or Zimbabwe.³⁴ This was often conceived in terms of ethnicity and region, as such divisions – whether of long standing or of more recent creation – were now part of the biology of postcolonial states. Again, however, this was in many respects an expanded and ‘modernised’ vision of the capacity of the frontier to transform society, a process of expansion and revolutionary transformation with its roots in the nineteenth century.

At the same time, natural calamity drove violence – notably drought and resultant famine during 1970s and 1980s. This had long been the case. Much of the catastrophe was man-made, for deliberate starvation and targeting the enemy’s economy more generally – long a core practice in African warfare – now became all the more devastating with greater technological capacity, as perhaps most dramatically illustrated in the case of Ethiopia.³⁵ There was a cyclical dimension to this, because as violence (and deliberate policy on the part of militarised regimes) drove people away from arable land, competition over fewer land resources was heightened, and frontiers in harsh environments were further militarised as a result. This, again, was a key aspect of African warfare in the deep past, and was especially marked in the nineteenth century. Notably, pastoral groups – often the clearest manifestation of the economically marginalised in a world based increasingly on sedentary (and wage labour) economics – were particularly vulnerable to these cycles of violence, as well as to state-sponsored land grabs.³⁶

Over the last two decades, the predatory economics of warlordism and other forms of violent organisation in Africa have been profoundly unpalatable to the contemporary observer. Those searching for some kind of military ‘pro-

³⁴B.Munslow, *Mozambique: the revolution and its origins* (London, 1983); D.Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government: the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front* (Oxford, 2001); Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: war in the Horn of Africa* (New Haven & London, 2009); A.M.Tripp, *Museveni’s Uganda: paradoxes of power in a hybrid regime* (Boulder, 2010); T.Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe* (London, 1985).

³⁵J.Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge, 1987); Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1987: a transformation from an aristocratic to a totalitarian autocracy* (Cambridge, 1993).

³⁶K.Homewood, *Ecology of African Pastoralist Societies* (Oxford, 2008) pp.74ff, 85.

priety', *a la* Clausewitz, are routinely disappointed, indeed disgusted.³⁷ Yet much African warfare has not been about winning pitched battles: it is about the seizure of people and resources, and only sometimes land for its own sake. The ragged, mobile, brutal wars of the RUF in Sierra Leone, or the LRA in Uganda, or a host of militia groups in eastern Congo,³⁸ are in fact archetypical of a form of pre-colonial African warfare, and indeed of pre-colonial African economics: skirmishing, cyclical, raiding, and often relentless. Identities are formed around frontier cultures, aimed at opposition to or destruction of old orders, and destruction of enemies' economies and enhancement of their own, however apparently crude in operation and vision. They are creative, but horrendously brutal. Yet they represent economic logic, even if they are not always 'successful': the destructive element has become much more prevalent than anything 'productive', certainly compared to the constructive and energetic visions in evidence for the nineteenth-century predecessors of modern militias. Yet above all they signify the shifting frontier cultures which have long been the drivers (and the outcome) of warfare and militarisation, and which represent in turn economic aspiration. The 'greed versus grievance' dichotomy, while throwing up some interesting ideas, has tended to over-simplify understanding of modern violence.³⁹ Greed, or mere 'plunder', is driven in the first instance by economic need, real or perceived, and this is often deeply historically rooted. Moreover, violence represents access to one very particular and long-standing 'resource' on the part of the alienated and the marginalised – the military capacity of the armed frontier, the ability to kill, maim, steal, destroy. It is worth observing that over the last half-century armed movements have arisen on historic frontier zones and deep fault lines, along edges and peripheries dating to at least the nineteenth century and sometimes of even greater antiquity: eastern Congo and the central lacustrine region; northern Uganda and southern Sudan; the borderlands between Sahara and savannah; the West African coastal forest; the Ethiopia-Eritrea and Ethiopia-Somalia frontier zones.

The economics of violence in modern Africa, then, must be understood in terms of both short- and long-term factors. In terms of the former, there is the failure of the colonial order, in political and economic terms, as well as its distortion of extant processes of militarisation. Since the 1960s, violence has been driven by poverty, unemployment and the mass marginalisation engendered by the post-colonial state, underpinned by dramatic population growth; and war-

³⁷This has been the case for some time: R.J.Reid, 'Revisiting Primitive War: perceptions of violence and race in history', *War and Society*, 26:2 (2007); P.Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern war through Western eyes* (London, 2009).

³⁸P.Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: war, youth and resources in Sierra Leone* (Oxford, 1996); K.C.Dunn, 'Uganda: the Lord's Resistance Army', in Boas & Dunn, *African Guerrillas*; G.Prunier, *From Genocide to Continental War: the Congolese conflict and the crisis of contemporary Africa* (London, 2006); F.Reyntjens, *The Great African War: Congo and regional geopolitics, 1996-2006* (New York, 2009); K.Vlassenroot, 'A societal view on violence and war: conflict and militia formation in eastern Congo', in P.Kaarsholm (ed.), *Violence, Political Culture and Development in Africa* (Oxford, 2006).

³⁹P.Collier & A.Hoeffler, 'Greed and grievance in civil war', *Oxford Economic Papers*, 56:4 (2004).

fare is certainly common in (though by no means exclusively restricted to) states with low incomes, poor growth rates, and reliance on exploitation of natural resources. Especially vulnerable are mineral rich countries with extremely narrow access to resultant wealth.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, there are rather deeper dynamics at work, namely the reassertion of the soldier in political leadership, and the revitalisation of the frontier as an agency of change. These are the key themes of the nineteenth-century military revolution as outlined earlier, yet there have been much greater limitations in terms of the transformative power of war in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries than had been the case in the nineteenth.

5 **Armed entrepreneurs, fertile frontiers, and the implications for an economic history of African warfare**

This paper has sought to highlight a number of core themes. Armed entrepreneurs have long played a key role in African economic history, and often, the militarised frontiers in which they operated were zones of economic vitality. The militarised polities which resulted have long sought to develop redistributive mechanisms, with varying degrees of success. Revenues from increased factor endowments and global commerce were generally used to pay for military professionals, and from the early nineteenth century an expanding mercenary culture signified both military professionalism and commercial entrepreneurialism. Enlarged military systems were aimed at the delineation of territory which was economically valuable as well as measurable, even if it was not always possible to fully exploit or indeed measure the economic value of conquered land and population. Slavery, in its myriad forms, played a central role in most nineteenth-century states and societies, and was critical to economic growth and the expansion of economic scale. Slavery itself in some cases represented a kind of armed internship or indentureship, an apprenticeship, within which (and as a result of) social mobility was possible. More generally, social mobility was possible through the bearing of arms, and as a result of expanded military systems which created dynamic and aspirational cultures – however much they were rooted in violence.

Meanwhile, struggles over both internal and external resources gave rise to identities underpinned by cultures of militarism and violence. There is also some evidence that ever wider participation in war and military organisation might promote wider political participation and heightened levels of elite accountability, including checks and balances on military authority. It is important to qualify this, however, by noting that it only really occurred in relatively ‘compact’ communities, for external overreach (which in turn buckles internal balances and frequently prompted internal violence) was the perennial strug-

⁴⁰R.H.Bates, *When Things Fell Apart: state failure in late-century Africa* (Cambridge, 2008).

gle for many states and societies. The transformative power of violence was ultimately restricted by the very mobility of the frontier, which was itself the result of low population densities and availability of land; most successful states were in many ways ‘compact’, territorially as well as culturally. Otherwise the risk of losing control of frontiers was ever-present. Notably, in the last twenty years or so a new form of political-military organisation has emerged in the form of armed developmental authoritarianism, exemplified by Ethiopia under the EPRDF and Uganda under the NRM. These are heavily militarised regimes seeking to dominate and harness the frontier rather more efficiently than most African states have managed in recent decades.⁴¹ Yet even here, such states represent an African pattern of long-standing, albeit on a larger and more brutally effective scale. Historically characteristic of the armed economics of the African frontier, these distinctively militarised economies, often run by first-generation ‘civilians’, represent nineteenth-century warlordism, the armed frontier, on a grand scale.

Again, I have argued for greater continuity than has usually been assumed. Nonetheless, the colonial impact involved some degree of rupture and distortion. Africa’s capacity to effect last change had long been vulnerable. War over commerce led to a ‘golden goose’ scenario, wherein violence destroyed the very thing being fought over. An increasing reliance on external weaponry reduced the capacity of communities to achieve resolution and rendered them susceptible to external shifts in trade as well as attitudes. Moreover the nature of the export trade itself was fundamentally ill-suited to internal economic development and thus inimical to the consolidation of clear political and economic gains; many states and societies did very well with what they had, but export commodities were not conducive to sustained development – quite the contrary, in that they tended to sustain militarised societies fighting over the control of proceeds, rather than being able to invest and sustain internally. Colonialism entrenched this situation, as the export trade – its benefits unequally spread among particular groups – created conditions which encouraged violent internal competition. In the post-colonial era, militarisation has escalated, but there has been none of the manoeuvrability of the nineteenth century, and in particular no capacity to wage war to the point of resolution. War has in turn been fuelled in the twentieth century by a sense of relative deprivation – in other words, the belief that others are better off, and that a range of broadly defined ‘resources’ need to be captured in order for the many to share in the comforts of the few.

Ultimately, then, there is irony in the fact that so much violence in Africa has been racialised over the past two hundred years: a great deal of violence in Africa throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century has been aimed at development, the very thing it is thought to prevent. What has hindered Africa in comparison to Europe is the nature of Africa’s internal struggle, in many ways embodied by the frontier. The frontier is the outcome of environment, uneven demography, and the needs of careful ecological, demographic and economic

⁴¹‘How state capitalism helps the super rich’, *The Africa Report*, No.38, March 2012.

micro-management. Centrifugalism has ultimately hindered economic consolidation. But the apparently simple matter of timing is also critical: violence aimed at, and in many ways contributing to, development in the nineteenth century was ultimately misunderstood by a rampant Europe, whose own military and economic intervention in Africa buckled the continent's efforts to manage socio-economic change on its own terms. The issue of relative cost is also central: compared to Europe, ultimately, African warfare over the last two hundred years has been relatively low-cost, and so unlike Europe, most African societies – although many were clearly progressing in this direction – did not need to develop elaborate systems to pay for it. Capital investment requirements were relatively slight, and so far-reaching and sustainable innovations aimed at consolidation were unnecessary, and in any case more difficult owing to the perennial problem of mobile frontiers. Nonetheless, the nineteenth century does indeed suggest movement in this direction: capital accumulation; political reform; new systems capable of more efficient economic management in the face of rapid change. However the military revolution has in many areas evolved into a military crisis, via colonial and postcolonial mishandling of centrifugal forces: in other words, communities' capacity to use violence to bring about economic growth has been greatly impaired and rendered illegitimate. Formerly a creative and fluid process, such violence has always had developmental potential, but the armed intervention of Europe and the colonial moment distorted this particular trajectory.

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