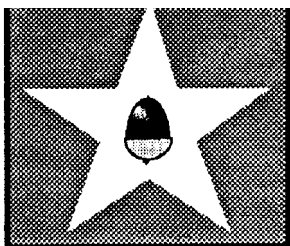


Conflict Studies Research Centre

Dr A Clayton

**Conflict in Africa:
How Different?**

January 1999



M17

Conflict in Africa: How Different?

Dr A Clayton

This paper seeks to analyse the roots of present and recent conflict in sub-Saharan Africa. It is useful to begin with a look at a number of general features of the African underdevelopment predicament some of which can give us insights into causes, and more importantly the escalation in scale, of African conflicts, and then move on to some recent analyses. Africanist readers must excuse this brief initial survey, the features of which will be only too well known to them, but since most readers of this paper will not be African specialists some highlighting may perhaps be useful.

In human history, has any part of the earth's surface been subjected to such rapid and traumatic change as Sub-Saharan Africa in the 20th Century? Traditional polities and societies, to which I will return later, were destroyed or fell apart with the arrival of the colonial power and the setting up of the colonial state within frontiers drawn to suit later 19th Century European diplomacy. Within the colonial state, in benevolent if misguided paternalism, administrative divisions were generally demarcated to correspond with local ethnicities, thereby serving in practice to incite or sharpen ethnic consciousness; the role of traditional custom and authorities became skewed or reinvented with the effect of devaluing or debasing them; religious divisions, not only Moslem versus Christian but sometimes Christian versus Christian, and Anglophone versus Francophone, were opened; economic development and consequential provision of social services was uneven, some areas generally urban gaining while others, rural areas, were neglected; and in British Africa and to some extent French the military legacy favoured certain ethnicities perceived as martial. Perhaps above all individual men whether as labourers, officials or entrepreneurs found themselves acting within new arenas, on the stage sets of the colonial state, with new needs or with widened ambitions – and just as significant, widened anxieties over rivals. All this was held together by the “colonial glue”, until the 1940s and 1950s.

But when the colonial glue began to melt the newly independent successor states found it difficult to surmount not only their new multi-ethnic, social and economic problems, but also certain old historic enmities which resurfaced. Politics in one form or another, civil or military, soon degenerated to those of winner takes all, loser loses all, with a resulting breakdown or absence of norms and restraints on behaviour – the military, or certain units of the military, for example often ceasing to be an impartial national institution but men with guns supporting the political winner, players rather than referees in the game, part of the problem not its answer. Looking, for example, at President Mugabe's North Korean trained Fifth Brigade deployed to subdue Matabeleland one is reminded of the admiration expressed by Ciano, Mussolini's foreign minister on seeing Hitler's SS: “A small private political army”, he wrote in his diary; Doe's Krahn Army of Liberia was no better. Regimes and states accordingly lost legitimacy in the eyes of sections of their communities; the loss of state legitimacy soon led to acquiescence, if not active support for those in revolt.

Economic difficulties – of one crop and primary produce economies, balance of payments, debt, all worsened, especially after 1974. Above all populations

continued to rise and add to the pressures of frustration – and envy. Take four examples: Kenya in 1939 4m, 26m in 1989; Sudan 5m in 1939, in 1999 27m; Nigeria in 1939 20m, 108m in 1999; the Congo in 1939 10m, in 1999 46m. Foreign intervention and aid was sometimes helpful, where a great power saw it in its interest to secure stability in a particular country but this might only be short term, or propping up an inherently corrupt regime, making that regime's final fall the worse. In other cases, foreign intervention, in particular Angola, took the form of a surrogate extension of the Cold War, with a Soviet general and Cuban troops in combat with a United States supported South Africa.

These conditions, compounded additionally in some African countries and within the minds of particular leaders of culture clashes or external ideological teachings, have resulted in manifestations of psychological dissonance – wild, irrational, lashing out behaviour patterns, and in actual conflict the ruthless use of brutality and terror – one is reminded of Einstein's phrase describing the German psychology of 1917, "epidemics of the mind". The dissonance has been in several lands infinitely worsened by mass communication sometimes simply spreading the epidemic of hatred, at worst, as in Radio Mille Collines in Kigali in 1994 rivalling only Belgrade radio in specifically inciting mass genocide. The concerns of traditional witch doctors were local, often domestic; modern spin-doctors can inflame large numbers into hatred. Drawings by Liberian school children of their civil war factions at work often show the fighters with a television set nearby – films of the Gulf War or violence/Rambo type video films had been the pre-literate sub-culture of those without education, work or land; the bizarre clothing of many fighters was another expression of the world of fantasy. Drugs and alcohol are used, and abused to increase fanaticism. Mutilations, as in Northern Ireland, are used to strike terror, and the ferocity of faction fighting in Liberia and Sierra Leone bears comparison with the Soviet entry into Germany 1945 or Chechnya fifty years later.

In the decade now ending we have seen further new features, or more accurately horror, all fanning the flames. The end of the Cold War and more urgent Middle Eastern or European problems in the new world disorder have led to withdrawal of great power support for certain regimes, laying them open to inevitable attack. Intervention from outside Africa became replaced firstly by attempts by African regional forces to intervene – not always with either success or disinterest, Ecomog in Liberia, for example, long being part of the problem not its answer. A second form of African intervention in other African conflicts has been that of a far from disinterested sympathy, or a shared mutual apprehension as in Uganda, from regimes which had come to power by insurgency for other revolutionary movements; a third form is that of the "ungrateful child", revolutionary regimes such as that in Eritrea turn against their former backers in Ethiopia in rivalry over economic assets. Commercial companies, willingly or unwillingly, found themselves caught up in conflicts, as targets or as providers of cash as ransom, to the local faction in control, other companies entered the conflicts as rifle/security businesses, even as surrogate armies or guard forces, for a variety of motives, not always wholesome. Population increase ensured an on-going supply of men to the militias of factions; when short the supply became supplemented either by South African or East European mercenaries or by very large numbers of juvenile and child soldiers initiated into violence by a number of repulsive methods, in some cases based on debased traditional rituals. Weaponry, especially simple light weapons such as the Kalashnikov AK-47 or the RPG-7 grenade launcher, the guerrillas' pocket artillery, became easy to come by, either as a legacy from

supplies, mostly Soviet, provided in the Cold War era or from the impoverished successor states of the former Soviet Union.

I have sketched these factors out as stage settings for any study of conflict in Africa; most factors are present in greater or lesser measure in all. Let me now proceed to more specifically academic analyses. In his foreword as editor of a recent book African Guerrillas, Professor Christopher Clapham of Lancaster University in Britain suggests a classification of insurgent violence; a typology based on political science discipline and analyses. Clapham and his team have excluded from their case studies anti-colonial guerrilla movements, and those movements, notably UNITA and RENAMO, associated with the former apartheid regime in Pretoria. The remaining insurgent movements he classified under three headings:

- (1) Separatist insurgencies – where insurgents such as those in Eritrea or the original South Sudan AnyaNya were aiming to secede,
- (2) Reform insurgencies – where insurgents such as the present Sudan Peoples Liberation Army and the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front aim simply at radical reform of the central government, and
- (3) Warlord insurgencies – where a particular figure seeks a change of leadership in his favour, perhaps, like Taylor and his National Patriotic Front of Liberia, with a personal fiefdom for the leader and his immediate entourage within the changed arrangements.

In the book's excellent detail chapters based on exhaustive field work carried out under very difficult conditions that follow, a number of interesting points emerge: the importance of the role of the petty bourgeoisie in the Eritrean and Tigray insurgency movements; the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army's preference for the use of traditional institutions of native administration and chiefs' courts rather than revolutionary ideology (a preference based on the essentially defensive rather than offensive nature of its strategy); the argument that political entrepreneurs, using traditional kinship categories played a more important role than the kinships themselves in Somalia's disintegration; the consequences of the presence of Rwandan exiles in Museveni's Uganda, and the peculiar lumpen city dwellers nature of Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front, second generation unemployed city dwellers living on petty theft, violence, reggae music and marijuana.

While respecting much of Clapham's detail I would suggest that the frame, limited to his chosen group of conflicts is incomplete, very informative on the "who" of movements, but less so on the "why?" From the point of view of an historian it seems to me a better understanding of the "why" of conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa is to be found in comparisons with the pre-colonial African past. In pre-colonial Africa there existed several thousand polities, at least 5,000 if not more. A few of these could support a central state administrative system. Many more, in what one might call demi-states, had provision by simple communication methods and age-set structures for a mobilisation of youth for conflict when necessary but little standing infrastructure. Yet many more were acephalous groupings with organisation limited to small communities, or groups centred on particular geographic features that led to a cohesion for self-defence. All, states, demi-states, or acephalous peoples, sought to control areas and resources but with, generally, no clearly demarcated formal boundaries. The young men, the warriors, in Cambridge Professor John Iliffe's words were frontiersmen, engaged in continuous local scrapping over what were perceived as the assets: lands, cattle, women. They became warriors after rituals, they enjoyed prestige. In this scrapping ethnic groups were formed, broken and reformed in frontiersmen warfare. If one takes a

frontiersmen template there are clues to the better understanding not only of the three types of guerrilla insurgency chosen by Clapham, but the full range of warfare in Africa since 1950, including the inter-nation wars, the civil wars and also the divisions within the anti-colonial liberation campaigns as well. These it seems to me all possess a common theme, and classification merely confuses understanding.

When all is said and done and ideological rhetoric stripped away, what then has most of the fighting in post-independence Africa in the second half of this century been about? From Mau Mau, originally styling itself the Kenya Land Freedom Army, to the factions in Angola and Sierra Leone out to grasp diamond production, from the white racialists of Verwoerd's grand apartheid seeking to ensure white control by physically ethnically cleansing out non-whites except as migrant labourers from the richest productive areas (a strategy comparable to Hitler's designs for Poland and Ukraine), to the economic warfare of the Niger delta peoples puncturing holes in Shell's pipelines to seize a share of what they perceive as "their" oil, and including the international conflicts of Uganda and Tanzania, Somalia and Ethiopia, and even within the divided anti-Portuguese and anti-Rhodesian insurgency forces, we see a similar pattern, different sides of the same coin. We see groups of people fighting to seize or secure for survival assets – these now extending to oilfields, plantations, forests, mines, on South Africa's Rand job opportunities, as well as land, which they perceive as theirs for their group. The Niger delta peoples have essentially the same aims as Colonel Ojukwu's attempted break away Biafra state; the Front for the Liberation of the Cabinda Enclave and UNITA have the same aim, to prevent Luanda taking over the resources in their area. The conflict involving so many countries in central Africa at the moment is not so much about the political future of Laurent Kabila as an aggressive pegging out of claims for extended frontiers in order to control the Congo's mineral installations – Kabila's government, the Tutsi, UNITA and their respective external backers, as many fingers in the pie as in Germany in the Thirty Years War and with the probability of comparable death and devastation. We see again frontiersmen as the new warriors, they mostly fight with the small scale weapons of present day frontier warfare, the AK-47 rifle, the torch necklace, landmines, the RPG-7 grenade launcher, the mortar, multiple barrelled cannon or machine guns mounted on the back of a Toyota truck. In a few of the larger insurgent movements, weaponry extends to purchased or captured artillery. Armies in the inter-nation frontier conflicts will, so long as their countries' economies permit, use artillery, helicopters, and other items of the last decade's conventional warfare equipments.

Our understanding is often obscured by giving regional-based groups the pejorative label of "tribalism", so creating a new "other", people to be seen as beyond the pale, acting illegitimately because they dare to destabilise an area of Africa that we perceive as having been legitimately demarcated as a state in the colonial era. Their use of terror rather than tactics and the asymmetrical style of warfare both serve to distance the "other" still further in Western minds.

Present day African frontiersmen are the "why", their groups may as the "who" be formed in a variety of different forms according to existing local traditions or circumstances. Most will be rural, led by townsmen. They fight for informal frontiers within, but increasingly also across, the colonially drawn boundaries; the circumstances I set out above are beginning to make some boundaries almost irrelevant. While secessionism has played a rhetorical part in Sudan, Chad, the Congo and Nigeria, only in Eritrea has it really commanded the support necessary to succeed, due to the strong solid continuity of support from, paradoxically, a host community divided culturally. A comparison can be made with Belgium in 1830.

Elsewhere, be it Rwanda, Burundi, Kwa-Zulu, Liberia or Sierra Leone it has been the local aim, who is to control the local assets, that has mattered rather than any deliberate aim to secede from colonial frontiers.

The groups are usually, but not invariably, based on ethnicity. But some groups, notably Liberia's NPFL and Sierra Leone's RUF take one back to the mixed ethnicity ruga ruga warrior bands of 19th Century East Africa that simply fought to live and lived to fight, an African version of mediaeval Italy's condottieri-led mercenary bands. And, as in pre-colonial scrapping, groups now ally, break away, fragment and reform in changing patterns.

Ideology, particularly Chinese liberation war teachings, of course have contributed enormously to the organisation, cohesion and discipline of a number of insurgent movements. But when one looks at the behaviour of many soi-disant revolutionary regimes in success, on assuming power, ideology appears increasingly to have been used as a tool for that cohesion rather than a lodestar, a tool as in the Soviet Union, soon reduced to lip service or even discarded.

In a very stimulating article in the July 1998 issue of Royal African Society's Journal African Affairs, Queen's University professor Bruce Berman adds a further dimension of understanding when he notes the continuity of the "big man" in African history and present day affairs. In the colonial era the dependence of government in rural areas depended on what Berman describes as the "decentralised despotism" of chiefs and headmen, forming the "Big Men Small Boys" politics of rural society. This evolved into patron-client relationships in the turbulence of post-colonisation. When violence erupts the relationship takes new forms, new "big men" emerging as insurgent leaders or warlords with their entourage, as clients. Taylor, Savimbi and Aideed are obvious examples of the "big man" of a frontiersmen group; the faction leaders in England's 15th Century Wars of the Roses, seeking to take over the state to their own advantage would have understood them perfectly. Clapham also emphasises the importance of the leader in some insurgencies, noting the successful have all elite or middle class origins with organisation abilities, even though most purely guerrilla movements had rural origins.

Frontiersmen and frontier warfare, perhaps with a "big man" as a local or regional or Somali clan warlord I would suggest is the new instability in Africa. In a continent still one of poverty, ignorance and disease your own control of the little that you have becomes the more desperately important for survival, or as a hope for betterment - especially in rural areas which see themselves even more disadvantaged than their national arena's urban communities.

But a necessary reminder perhaps, frontiersmen, big men and a quest for or the protection of lebensraum are not purely African conditions - ask any British or US serviceman returning from former Yugoslavia and Big Man Slobodan Milosevic, servicemen with no particular knowledge of Africa or history, and their reply would be "Well, what's new?" And while we are comparing the frontiersmen of Africa with the frontiersmen of Bosnia a further lesson can be drawn. An insurgent can be taught to fire an AK-47 and simple field craft in a few days; an efficient soldier peacekeeper needs to come from a mature, or at least stable, political culture and be well controlled, disciplined, and exceedingly well motivated and trained.

Disclaimer

The views expressed are those of the
Author and not necessarily those of the
UK Ministry of Defence

Published By:

**The Conflict Studies Research
Centre**

Directorate General Development and Doctrine
Royal Military Academy Sandhurst
Camberley
Surrey
GU15 4PQ
England

Telephone : (44) 1276 412346
Or 412375

Fax : (44) 1276 686880

E-mail: csrc@gtnet.gov.uk
<http://www.csrc.ac.uk>