

## CHAPTER 1

---

### The Contours of Violence *Environment, Economy and Polity in African Warfare*

An understanding of warfare in historical perspective – in Africa or anywhere else – can only begin with an appreciation of certain key drivers and dynamics over the *longue durée*. The roles of environment and economy are central in this respect, and certain social, cultural and political parameters and permutations need to be surveyed before embarking on an exploration of the finer detail. It might be pointed out that some of the broad observations made in what follows represent ‘universal truths’, in that they are by no means peculiar to Africa’s circumstances: So, for example, dense forest and open savannah facilitate markedly distinct forms of combat and military organisation; political authority, in whatever guise, is rarely without a military component, whether covert or overt; all human communities celebrate their own courage and sense of honour on the field of battle, whatever form the battle itself takes. But it will be clear from the ensuing discussion that there are particular dynamics at work in Africa’s military history – despite the enormous diversity across the continent – which can be, and need to be, highlighted by way of a preliminary overview.

#### Terrain and Population

Particular physical environments and climates have had a direct bearing on forms of organised violence. They have implications for the very nature of militarism – by which is meant the centrality of warfare in society and culture – as well as military structures and strategies

of defence and aggression. Two broad features need to be noted from the outset. Firstly, the relative regularity of Africa's coastline and the infrequency of natural harbours – with the notable exception of the Mediterranean coast – meant the absence, in general, of the armed ocean-going fleets so prominent in western European and east Asian military history; only on stretches of navigable rivers, on inland lakes, and along the West African coastal lagoon system was war waged on water. Secondly, the key distinction within the continental landmass itself is between the tropical zone infested with the tsetse fly – very approximately, a band contained between the 15th degree latitudes on either side of the equator – and the tsetse-free land north and south of it. The tsetse attacks livestock – including cattle, sheep, goats, camels and horses – and spreads trypanosomiasis, which is usually fatal; there is a human variant, known as sleeping sickness. The presence of the fly means that between the Sahara and the Kalahari, horses and other pack animals are almost completely absent, feasible only in isolated zones. Cavalry forces are therefore confined to the Sahel belt and the adjacent Sahara, and more recently the southern tip of the continent; everywhere else, only infantry forces have historically been possible, and war on foot – involving large contingents of porters carrying supplies and women in a range of support roles – predominated across sub-Saharan Africa until the introduction of mechanised transport in the twentieth century.

Beyond this fundamental division, several broad physical zones can be identified. Equatorial forest, covering much of the Atlantic coastline, much of the West African hinterland and the Congo basin, accounts for little more than 10 per cent of the continent's geography. Rather more widespread are Africa's savannahs, grasslands and acacia woodlands, which stretch across the Sudanic belt and into northeast and eastern Africa, while a separate band of woodland covers central-southern Africa, encompassing modern-day Angola and Zambia. The continent's desert expanses segue out of the grasslands – in the north the Sahara, and in the southwest the Namib and Kalahari – and indeed those zones of transition between desert and savannah, especially along the Saharan fringes, have long constituted some of Africa's most volatile and militarised frontiers. There is also the great highland plateau complex – often referred to as Africa's 'spine' – which stretches from the Ethiopian Highlands in the northeast, through the Great Lakes region of eastern and central Africa, down to the highveld of South Africa. Several riparian systems have shaped Africa's history in the

most fundamental of ways: The Niger, Benue, Senegal, Congo, Nile and Zambezi rivers are central to the histories of the regions through which they slice. The same is true of the major lacustrine clusters, notably Lake Chad in the western savannah and the lakes of the Great Rift chain, including Turkana, Albert, Victoria, Tanganyika and Malawi.

Most of Africa's enduring centres of population and indeed of state formation lay in close proximity to these sources of water. The central Niger bend, for example, where a rich soil was deposited by the flood waters coming from the Futa Jalon hills to the southwest, supported some of the region's most extensive military states, stretching between desert and coastal forest. The history of the Nile is well known in this respect, carving a trail of volcanic soil through some of the most arid landscapes on the planet. Interlacustrine eastern Africa, too – especially the cradle land encompassing southern and western Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and northwest Tanzania – was well watered, in terms of both precipitation and proximity to the lakes themselves, and was a region blessed with a rich earth which supported more people than in the equatorial forests to the west or the grasslands to the south and north. Beyond these zones of fertility, soils were thinner – or foliage denser – population was spread more thinly, and the struggle for water was more intense. Vulnerability to significant variations in rainfall, moreover, has long been a key driver of conflict, and correlations can often be traced over the *longue durée* between environmental shifts and levels of violence – as demonstrated across the Sahel and northeast Africa in the late twentieth century. The defining dynamic in a great deal of African war – in antiquity as in more recent times – has been the quest for proximity to water. This was especially true in areas with fragile ecosystems; in these places, war itself has been a cause of deprivation, removing people, whether agriculturist or pastoralist, from their natural sources of sustenance. Compelled to eke out a living in harsh frontier lands, such displaced communities have then clashed with those already there – as there almost always were. Thus the cycle of militarisation has been perpetuated, whereby war has been made central to social and political organisation, as well as cultural celebration.

Elsewhere, war has been one of the drivers of urbanisation, especially in the western half of the continent; in some areas, the roots of urbanisation lie in itinerant royal camps comprising armies and their enormous entourages, whereas in other circumstances, communities have come together in fortified urban clusters for protection,

a phenomenon associated particularly with the nineteenth century – among the Yoruba, for example, or the Nyamwezi. It should be noted, however, that violent conflict has just as often stymied fragile urban growth, causing the dispersal of people away from turbulent areas and abandoning nascent settlements to the bush.

Difficult and diverse terrain meant both distinctive local variations and innovations, as well as limitations on the scope and range of war in those areas. The open spaces of desert and grassland allowed for relatively rapid movement – particularly outside the tsetse zone, where horses were deployed – and military operations could develop over large areas; the problem facing leaders, however, was control of those operations and the maintenance of logistical support for – and linkage to – the mounted outriders of expansionist projects. Conversely, movement in the equatorial region could be ponderous and difficult, especially during the wet season, and within the tsetse zone more generally, the deployment of men and material without draft animals or wheeled transport meant limitations on the range and the type of military operations. Communities large and small tailored their military structures and their tactics accordingly. In thick forest, where manoeuvrability was restricted, useable battlegrounds were comparatively limited and were probably carefully chosen, becoming well established in the process; at the same time, ambush along forest paths was especially important in tactical terms. In fertile, relatively densely populated regions, military hierarchies made use of vertical chains of recruitment, command and deployment; across more thinly peopled regions, horizontal systems of organisation were often more effective, allowing as they did the mobilisation of – and operation across – larger areas, such as the age-set systems favoured by dispersed pastoral groups and segmentary societies.

Throughout Africa's history, however, logistical challenges, stemming from vast and difficult terrain, have persisted, and what has been described as a 'skulking way of war' or 'raiding war' has often resulted: This refers to cycles of assaults on the enemy – particularly on their human, animal and material resources – as well as the more familiar (to Western audiences) 'campaigning war' involving prolonged, larger-scale operations and set-piece battles. Although discrete 'episodes' in wars of both types might be relatively brief – a matter of days, for example – it is clear enough that many such episodes – that is, individual raids or particular campaigns – constituted wars of considerable

duration, sometimes over a number of years. In many respects, the highly mobile, skirmishing style of combat has endured into the modern era.

Ultimately, then, much organised violence in Africa's history was concerned with the struggle to domesticate often harsh, and certainly fragile, environments, and this needs to be understood alongside much of the continent's historical underpopulation. One of the key vectors in Africa's military past has been the drive to maximise and control productive and reproductive labour; coercion has often been required to control people in a relatively land-rich continent, and thus slavery and polygamy have long been underpinned by cyclical military operations, seen as critical to the growth and indeed very survival of the community. The continual formulation and reinvention of unifying ideologies, moreover, has long been used to justify warfare, as well as in the attempt to prevent the perpetual process of fission which has characterised much of Africa's history. The armed frontier is continually reproducing itself as groups split from the metropolitan community for economic or political purposes, migrate to adjacent territory, and fuel regional rivalries over local resources. Naturally, this has been especially true in areas where population levels have increased somewhat over time – for example, as a result of inward migration. Relatively land-rich these areas may still have been, but a shift in the land-to-people ratio means that frontiers become 'closed' – that is, communities press in on them from all sides – rather than 'open', in other words offering opportunities for continued expansion into empty or sparsely peopled land. In these cases, competition over ever more restricted space, and conflict within and across local 'closed' frontiers, is increasingly violent. Nonetheless, in general, it remains the case that people have been the focus of much warfare rather than the annexation of territory per se, for land is plentiful and easily devalued, although there are a number of important exceptions in which territorial expansion has itself been a core objective. Again, however, as earlier instances of local population growth – and in particular the population boom in Africa since the mid-twentieth century – have demonstrated, more people does not necessarily mean less war, indeed often quite the opposite: In recent decades, especially, economic failure has rendered population growth disastrous, and a new dynamic has emerged whereby there are too few people with valued and fulfilling lives.

## War and Economic Development

These geographical and demographic dynamics have had a direct bearing on the continent's economic systems. Different forms of violence were supported by different economies, which either grew or contracted as a result of war over the long term. The relationship between war and economic development is complex and multi-faceted: A range of factor endowments – arable land, pasture, minerals, water, livestock, people and skills – both drove and placed constraints on warfare in Africa's history. Centralised military states appeared in areas with fertile soil and reliable rainfall, and were thus able to use agricultural surpluses to maintain armies in the field for longer, and over a larger area – although, of course, soldiers routinely supplemented their own supplies by feeding off enemy land, and often were wholly reliant on being able to do so. Strong sedentary economies – for example, in the Great Lakes, the Ethiopian Highlands, the West African forest and parts of the western savannah close to the Niger – thus facilitated expansionism. Elsewhere, however, the demands of pastoralism, combined with the lower yields of subsistence agriculture in the grasslands and drier savannahs, placed limits on the range and type of operations. Only short-term mobilisation was possible, and the outcome was the distinctive pastoral militarism – organised around age-sets – whereby young men (among the Fulani, the Oromo, the Maasai, and the Ngoni) were both warriors and herdsman. In either case, however, terrain and environment remained inhibitive, especially south of the Sahara, again, where most African armies were infantries with no access to pack animals, and the seasons dictated military activity. Movement during particular seasons was extremely difficult, and impossible over large distances: In particular, as noted earlier, the wet season presented problems for soldiers on the move and was usually avoided completely. Some societies were able to take advantage of waterways – rivers and lakes, usually, rather than oceanic coasts – but this was exceptional rather than normative. More generally, military operations were dictated by agricultural calendars and the success of harvests; armies marched as far, and stayed on campaign for as long, as their duties in the fields allowed them, or as their extant food supplies permitted. For these elements, societies could lay plans, but lack of rainfall, the failure of the harvest, or the outbreak of livestock disease could either wreck military ambitions or push communities thus deprived to violence in search of basic resources. Again, peoples were

often forced to move to less fertile districts, which in turn perpetuated economic instability and militarised frontier zones.

A great deal of African conflict involved total economic war, the objective of which was the seizure of key resources or their destruction in enemy territory. Thus, 'raiding war' could be enormously destructive from an economic and social point of view, involving the capture of livestock, foodstuffs and, above all, people. Starvation and impoverishment often were political processes as well as biological and economic ones. The defeat of a particular province or chiefdom was usually followed by episodic professions of loyalty, underpinned by the regular payment of tribute in goods and people. Such tribute, importantly, might be redistributed among loyal officers of the state, who might also expect to be appointed to lucrative positions of administrative authority over newly conquered territory. Violence, then, was often critical from an economic point of view, especially where trade was difficult or insufficient. War, again, was used to underpin local systems of slavery; women and children were prime targets. Population growth, and even mere demographic stability, often depended on successful campaigns of people-gathering, and conflict frequently occurred over technical skills and economic specialisation. Wars over people clearly intensified with the growth of the external slave trades – notably the Atlantic system between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in eastern Africa during the nineteenth century – which unquestionably involved new levels of organised violence, economic in objective; warfare escalated as the export of people became more lucrative, while expanding states likewise needed slaves to maintain levels of domestic economic growth. Nonetheless, it represented an extension of African economic war, and in particular of the long-standing practice of waging war for the capture and incorporation of people.

Even so, the Atlantic system signified the growing importance of long-distance commerce, the drive for control of which had been a factor in African warfare since antiquity – particularly in the northern half of the continent, where the lucrative trans-Saharan trade network rewarded the ambitious and well-organised military states of the savannah, or where Red Sea trade provided a crucial commercial outlet for the restless Axumite state. But with the expansion of the global economy from the middle of the second millennium, and the relative decline it signified for Africa, commerce became ever more critical to the latter. Wars were increasingly about exports and imports; opportunities for rapid commercial gain presented themselves – not without

considerable risk – to armed entrepreneurs, and states and societies had to weigh up the costs of war alongside the commercial benefits that *might* result. Many miscalculated; the ‘golden goose syndrome’ was much in evidence, as armed polities sought to take advantage of the new opportunities, only to find that the violence involved in the endeavour destroyed trade itself. This remained a dilemma into the twentieth century. Still, many flourished, especially those for whom this was not *solely* a matter of responding to external demand for certain commodities, but for whom the construction of political and cultural edifices was just as important. There has certainly long been evidence of *both* a ‘political’ model – by which we mean that over the long term, African war was the result of endogenous development and stimuli, such as local processes of state formation – and an ‘economic’ model – in other words, that ultimately violence in Africa has been stimulated by exogenous commercial pressures, from the slave trades onwards. States have often resulted from such activity, but just as often they have not, largely because states represented unnecessary encumbrances on the relatively ‘straightforward’ business of raiding-and-trading. Either way, there can be little doubt that in more recent times, and certainly since the nineteenth century, a great deal of violence has been entrepreneurial, and indeed developmental in aim if not in outcome, as African communities seek to access some of the wealth they perceive to be moving around a global economy within which they are marginal.

One sphere where overseas commerce has been especially critical, of course, is in terms of imported weaponry. There existed almost limitless local variations on the basic technology available to African societies – spears, swords, bows and arrows – and innovation and refinement were continual, particularly with the spread of ironworking. Economic specialisation was central to military success, and the quest for new materials – whether iron ore from which to fashion spear-heads, or particular types of wood for weapons or canoes – was often behind military adventures. But some of the most radical innovations came as a result of imports, from horses in the early centuries of the first millennium to firearms and other equipment from the sixteenth century onwards. Entrepreneurs needed to export in order to acquire not only the commodities the distribution of which secured the continued loyalty of their followers, but the arms and ammunition needed to maintain military success. The pioneers of expanding military states were often not soldiers but traders in distant commercial centres,



negotiating for firearms and bullets; and by the nineteenth century, in some places at least, the efforts of merchants were supplemented by the skills of craftsmen able to repair guns and make ammunition. Since the middle of the twentieth century, the business of arms trading and local adaptation has continued as before, albeit on a greatly enlarged scale.

War often has indeed facilitated economic expansion, sometimes dramatically so, and indeed economic growth itself has in the past facilitated ever more ambitious military operations. But again, environmental and demographic constraints have frequently placed limits on the nature of this growth. At the same time, a great deal of violence in Africa's past may be seen to have been inimical to economic development – and it is another of our 'universal truths' that sometimes war is indeed just that. Yet it has rarely been economically *irrational*, even where it has not achieved the kind of stability and growth witnessed beyond the continent. Indeed, in the modern era, armed conflict is more frequently a symptom, not the cause, of economic instability.

### Questions of Culture and Society

War is a social and cultural phenomenon, reflecting – often in the starkest of terms – a community's values and sense of self. War and military prowess permitted, in the most unambiguous of ways, the display of courage and the winning of honour – achievements celebrated by all societies, even if they differed in the detail of how these might be realised. Success in war brought social standing and respect; it also often brought material benefit and political advancement. Almost everywhere, however, ideas about participation in war, and thus about access to honour, were deeply gendered, for it was men who usually did the fighting and who designed the military systems and the cultures that celebrated them. In truth, it is difficult to avoid analyses of war becoming oppressively androcentric affairs. Courage was almost always masculine, and cowardice feminine; for young males, war was a means of attaining full manhood. However, women played a myriad of roles: They were logistical support; they maintained economies when not travelling with the soldiers; sometimes, indeed, they too fought, and led. Women certainly provided much of the narrative, and critique, both during the battle and when the dust settled. But women were invariably targets, as well as rewards by which success

was measured in the aftermath of battle. The sources for before the twentieth century are problematic, being produced by men and for men; but unquestionably further research is needed on women's roles in other spheres – in local recruitment, for example, and in influencing military strategies. In certain 'warrior societies', or communities which had experienced high levels of male casualties, larger numbers of women than of men awarded polygamy and the control of women a matter of particular urgency; yet such circumstances must have afforded women opportunities for considerable leverage. We know enough already to suggest that they did indeed play such roles, even if the detail is still lacking.

Certainly, both men and women invested in the cultural and ethnic identities which were developed around war and violent struggle and sacrifice; stories of heroism and martial prowess were woven into national narratives which themselves became – among other things – celebrations of the worthier characteristics of a particular community, and essential guidelines for would-be leaders. Very often, these cultures of militarism emerged in response to the perennial need to maximise human resources and to create wider unity as a defence against hostile neighbours. Militarism was not – or not solely – about blood-thirsty smiting and the thrill of killing: It was a celebration of the community's achievements, and tapped into the social needs of cohesion, camaraderie, self-reliance, and courage in the face of danger. And war was continually historicised, too: The past was very much present in the organisation of violence, even during the revolutionary upheaval of the nineteenth century and the self-consciously modernist struggles of the mid-twentieth century. States and societies sought historical precedent and heroic forebears, for both inspiration and solace, and constructed both oral and written narratives – although very rarely physical monuments – for the purpose.

Such celebrations and traditions have rarely lacked a spiritual dimension, and indeed the role of religion and spirituality is frequently central. Much war was waged with spiritual sanction and according to belief systems which periodically demanded violence, not least to appease ancestral spirits. Ghosts attended the battle, and the dead proffered or withdrew their blessing; diviners were critical in providing sanction and even tactical guidance, while particular gods – specialising in violence – were routinely consulted in advance of the campaign. Ultimately, only spirits could keep men safe and only through spiritual observance could post-war healing take place. There was much local