

Warfare in African History

This book examines the role of war in shaping the African state, society and economy. Richard J. Reid helps students to understand different patterns of military organisation through Africa's history; the evolution of weaponry, tactics and strategy; and the increasing prevalence of warfare and militarism in African political and economic systems. He traces shifts in the culture and practice of war from the first millennium into the era of the external slave trades, and then into the nineteenth century, when a military revolution unfolded across much of Africa. The repercussions of that revolution, as well as the impact of colonial rule, continue to this day. The frequency of coups d'état and civil war in Africa's recent past is interpreted in terms of the continent's deeper past.

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Preface

The central role of warfare in human history can hardly be in doubt. Yet the fact remains that the key centres of research into the history of war have in recent decades been clustered, with few exceptions, in Europe and North America, societies in which direct experience of conflict – no matter how fresh in the memory it might be for a dwindling few – is largely lacking. It means that war is something that either *happened* some time ago, its significance hardly questioned but the interpretation of it necessarily abstract, or *is happening* somewhere else, usually in parts of Africa and (perhaps rather better known, and certainly better reported) central and western Asia. For the peoples of those regions, war is emphatically not abstract: It is something very much here and now, constantly evolving, part and parcel of daily existence, reaching some way into the past and, it would seem, for some distance into the future. This most fundamental global division is no coincidence, for it may well be that the ability to reflect historically on organised violence is a luxury – a dividend of peace, perhaps – but it also reflects the broad distinction between those who have largely ‘done with’ war, and those who have not. Whereas generations of Europeans have recently grown up only with the celebration or commemoration of conflict, and with a considered narrative of the role of war in their histories close to hand, millions of Africans – the subject of this book – have no such cultural and intellectual equipment at their disposal, yet. The story of war is still unfolding around them, often in the most horrific of ways.

This has serious implications. For example, it has meant that from a global perspective, *war studies* (encompassing the rather less

fashionable *military history*) is decidedly Eurocentric as a discipline, and that particular conventions – regulations wired into the narrative, as it were – have been imposed by one part of the world onto everywhere else. The most obvious manifestation of this, perhaps, is in the depiction of particular forms of war as less worthy than others of close examination – including those along the supposedly barbaric, undeveloped frontiers of humanity, many of which, for reasons explored in this book, are believed to be in Africa. It is also true, of course, that for the time being, at least – and it might be suggested that ‘the West’, or ‘the North’, is enjoying only a temporary *pax*, broken intermittently by terrorist attacks at home – European methods of warfare have proven remarkably successful, globally, and that in war studies, perhaps more than any other discipline, the victors have indeed written the history. Many have been written out of the story – either because their violence is not deemed worthy of classification as ‘war’, or because they have been ‘defeated’ and consigned to the dimmest corners of public memory.

Thus one of the core objectives of the present study is to overturn the misleading imagery which has long been generated around African warfare. Zulu spearmen charging down British guns in southern Africa in 1879 and the ragged members of the Lord’s Resistance Army in northern Uganda in the 1990s may appear to have little in common, but in fact they embody two of the key stereotypes of African warfare, as perpetuated by the Western mainstream. One is the brave, honourable, but doomed ‘primitive’ warrior, the ‘noble savage’, dying heroically but tragically before the inexorable march of modernity; the other is the raddled, bloodthirsty brute, rolling around in the ditches that line the road of progress, his blood-curdling screams reminding everyone else of what happens when order breaks down. The aim of this book is to tell the story of African war beyond these crude but enduring images. Insofar as such a story can be told in such a tight space, the book endeavours to give war its due place in the larger narrative of the continent’s history. The objective is to do so over *la longue durée*, and to make sense of violence as a force for both construction and destruction – and therefore to better enable readers to place modern conflict in context.

Some preliminary points are worth making. The first concerns the organisation and scope of the book itself. Following an introductory chapter which considers the broad themes germane to the study of African war, the book is structured chronologically, which, after a great

deal of pained deliberation, seemed to offer the best means of exploring African warfare over *la longue durée*. The divisions of time employed are by no means hard and fast, because no system of periodisation is; but these do indicate distinct episodes comprising particular experiences and processes which need to be understood in turn, in order to fully grasp the evolution of organised violence in Africa and the implications of that evolution for Africa today. Inevitably, within this broad narrative arc, things will have been left out. Further reading will point those interested in the direction of greater detail, but those seeking in-depth treatment of a particular topic within the vast canvass presented here may well be disappointed. Thus, while the continent as a whole is the subject of study, there is rather greater focus on Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa than on the northern region, although reference is made to the Mediterranean world where appropriate. Even within sub-Saharan Africa, particular areas inevitably receive more attention than others. In other words, while there is plenty that a volume of this scope and size can do – and it is hoped that this book has – it needs to be acknowledged at the outset that there is rather a lot that it cannot.

One of the central theses of this book is that war has more often been constructive than not, and that it has frequently been an expression – if at times an unpalatable one – of political and cultural energy, demonstrating tremendous creativity in social and political affairs. Too often, that energy, that creativity has been misunderstood by outside observers. However we need to be careful here, because sometimes war has emphatically *not* ‘worked’, and violence has descended into vacuous brutality – both in the deep past, and in more recent times. There is no ‘pristine’ pre-colonial past, in which Africans are always doing the ‘right thing’ and making rational choices: This would make them something more (or, perhaps, less) than human. Mistakes have been made, and central dilemmas have remained unresolved. This needs to be explored, too, particularly in terms of the need to connect warfare with economic development. It is clear, moreover, that the highly racialised interpretations of African war developed by Europeans – who dismissed it as indicative of political, cultural and even biological backwardness – have proved extremely durable. In broad terms, depictions of a savage barbarity which was uniquely African had their beginnings during the era of the Atlantic slave trade, and took on new and ever more paternalistic forms during the nineteenth century, especially during the era of partition from the 1880s onward. Africa was, according to this view, a brutal and inherently violent continent

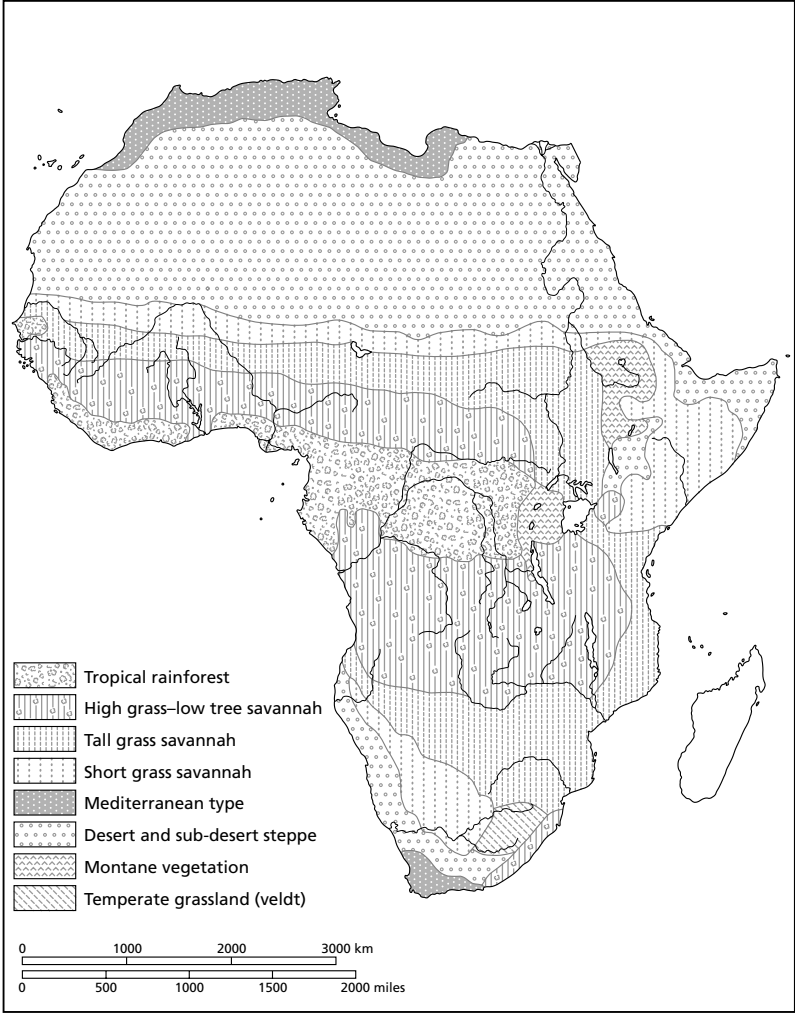
which needed outside intervention. There are many today who persist in this outlook, if in more subtle ways. It is almost superfluous to suggest that this book aims to elucidate the wrongheadedness of the basic interpretation; yet neither is it proposed that we espy instead a ‘merrie Africa’ in the mists of time, a place of innocence and industry and joy in which no violence was done to anyone before sinister foreigners brought trouble to paradise. The best we can say is that Africa has been no more violent than anywhere else, averaged out over the aeons of human history; but it has indeed been an extremely violent place at times, and in many respects, parts of it are so now. The book intends, however, to *explain* that violence, both at the micro and at the macro levels, and to give it historical depth. Such conflict has often been seminal, but it has been consistently misrepresented.

Finally, it is clear enough that this is a contentious topic: Many will disagree with the periodisation and the analysis which follow. But hopefully all will recognise the need to attempt such an analytical and narrative synthesis, even in a preliminary way, in order to more properly understand the role of warfare and the military in African history over *la longue durée*. In our modern rush to ‘stop’ conflict, perceiving it as uniformly a ‘bad thing’ which must be eradicated, we have too often been guilty of presentism, of historical foreshortening: We have been, in other words, staring down the wrong end of the telescope. We need to begin at the beginning and understand, above all, that most precious of tools in the scholar’s kit, namely *historical context*.

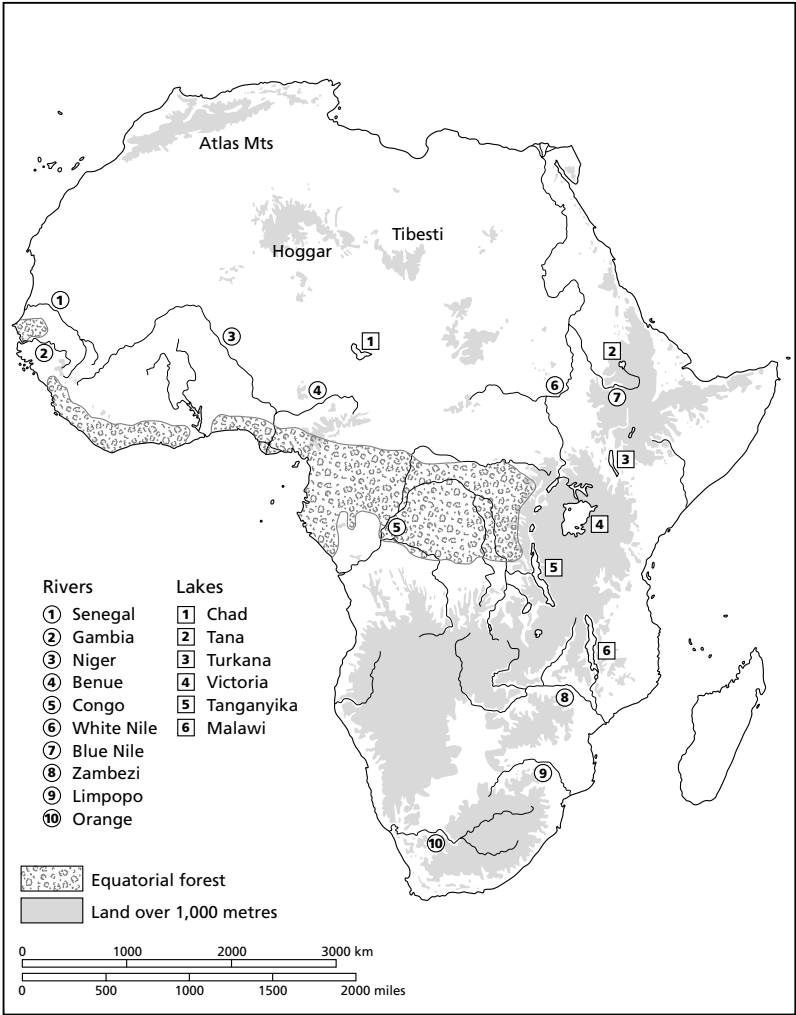
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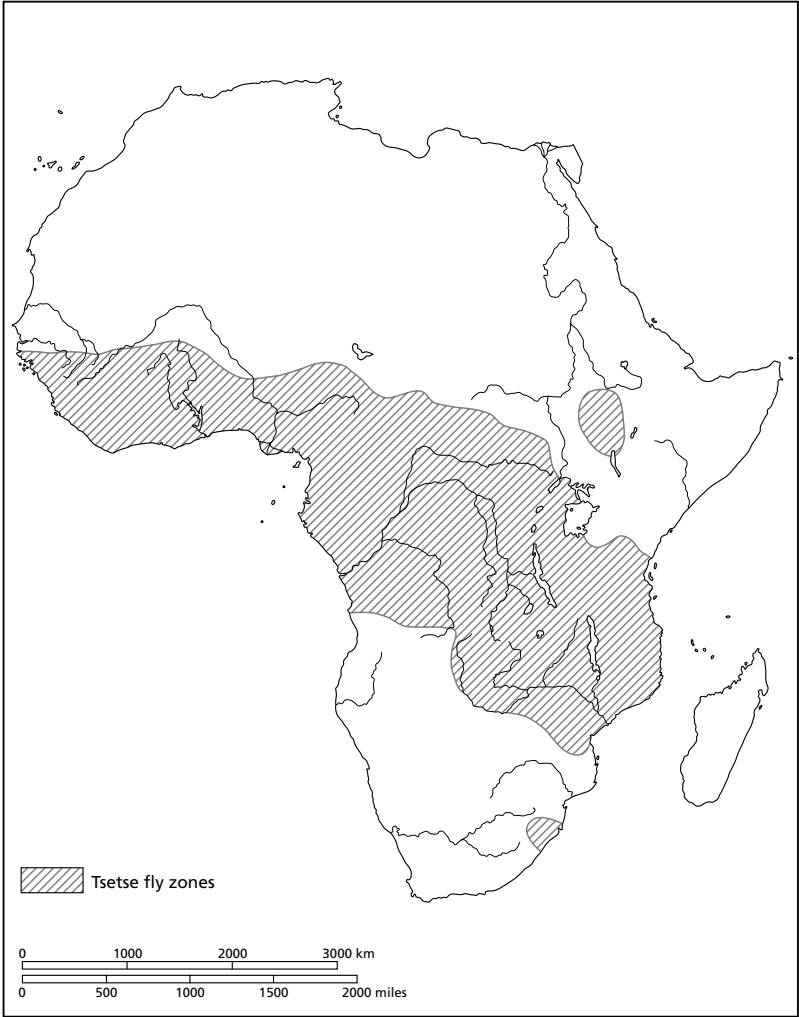
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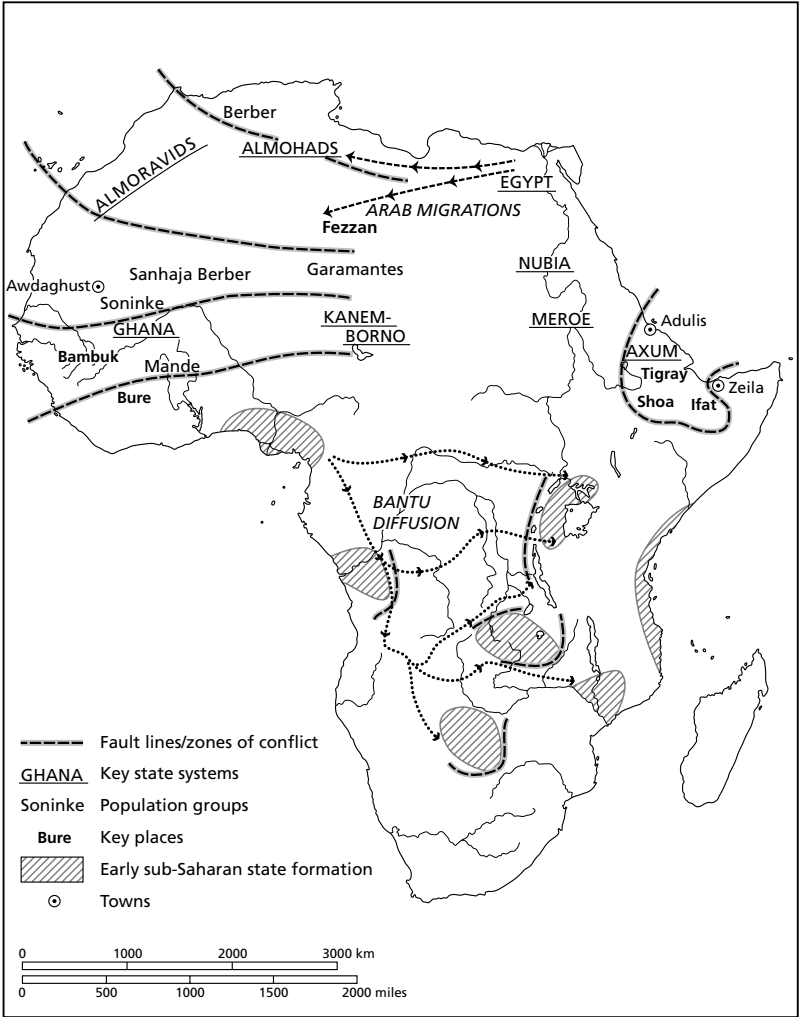
MAP 1 Main vegetation zones.



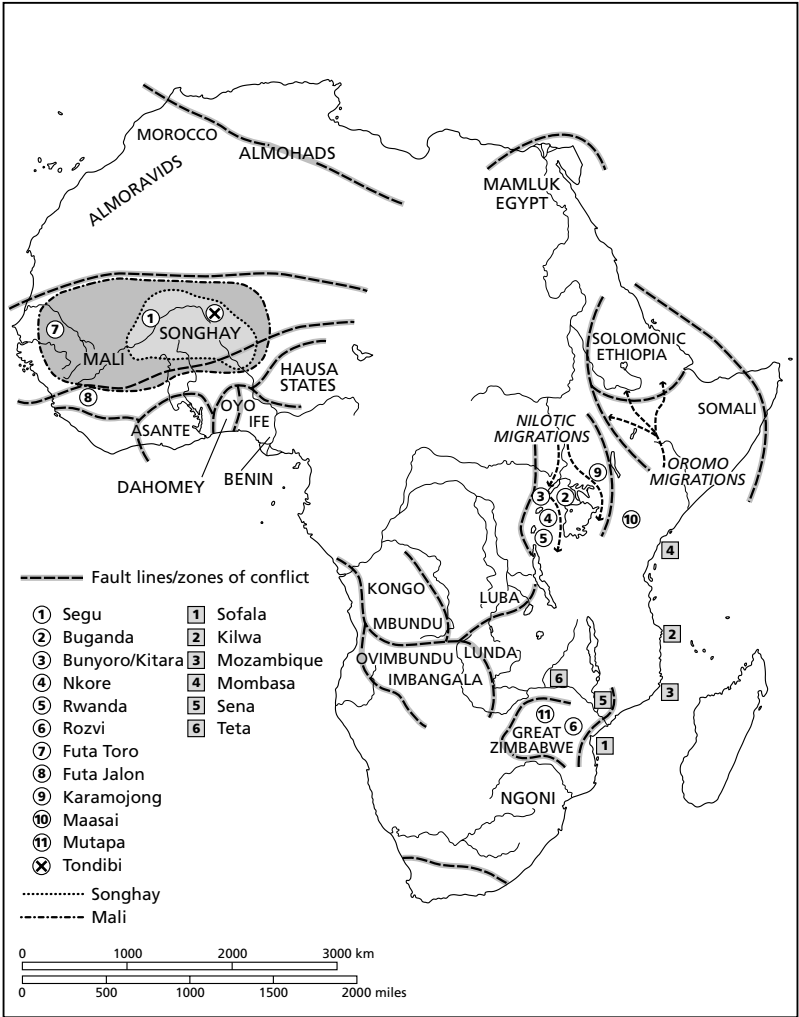
MAP 2 Physical Africa.



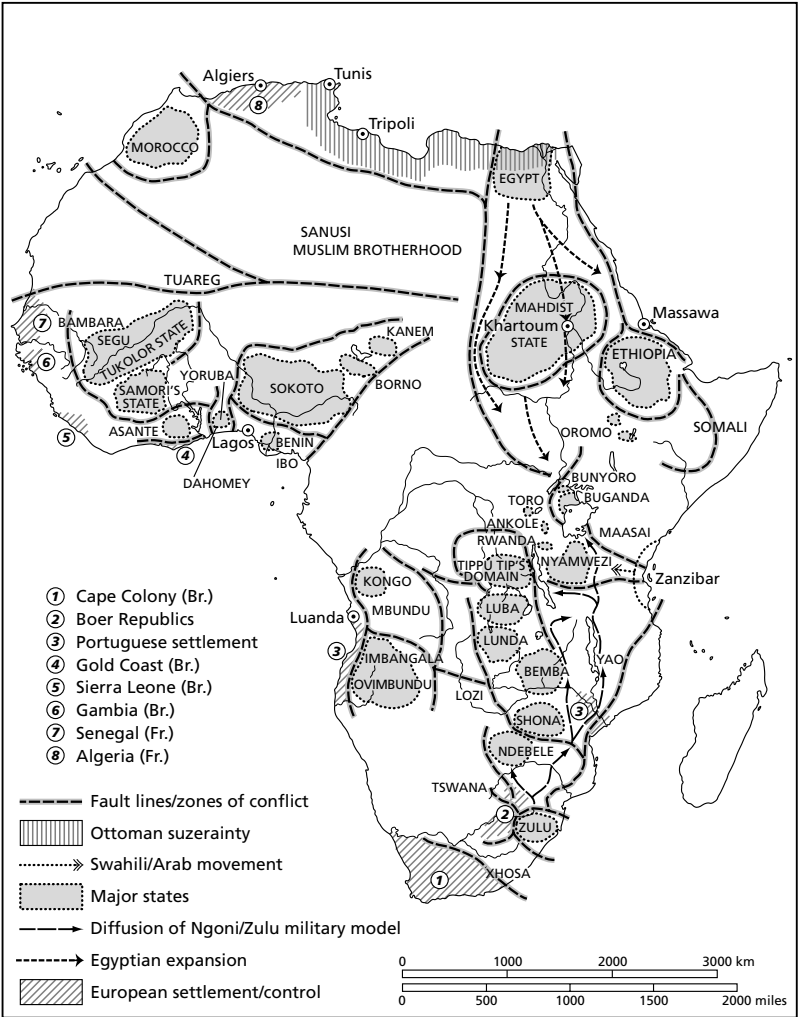
MAP 3 The tsetse fly zone.



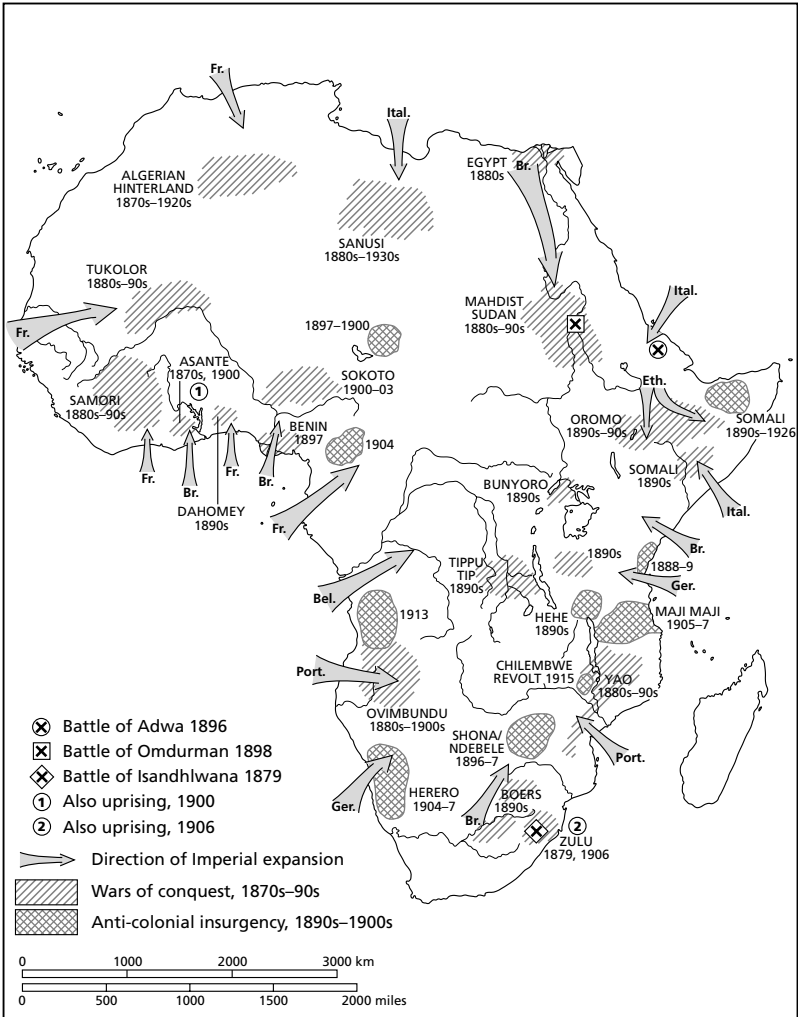
MAP 4 Arms in antiquity, to c. 1000.



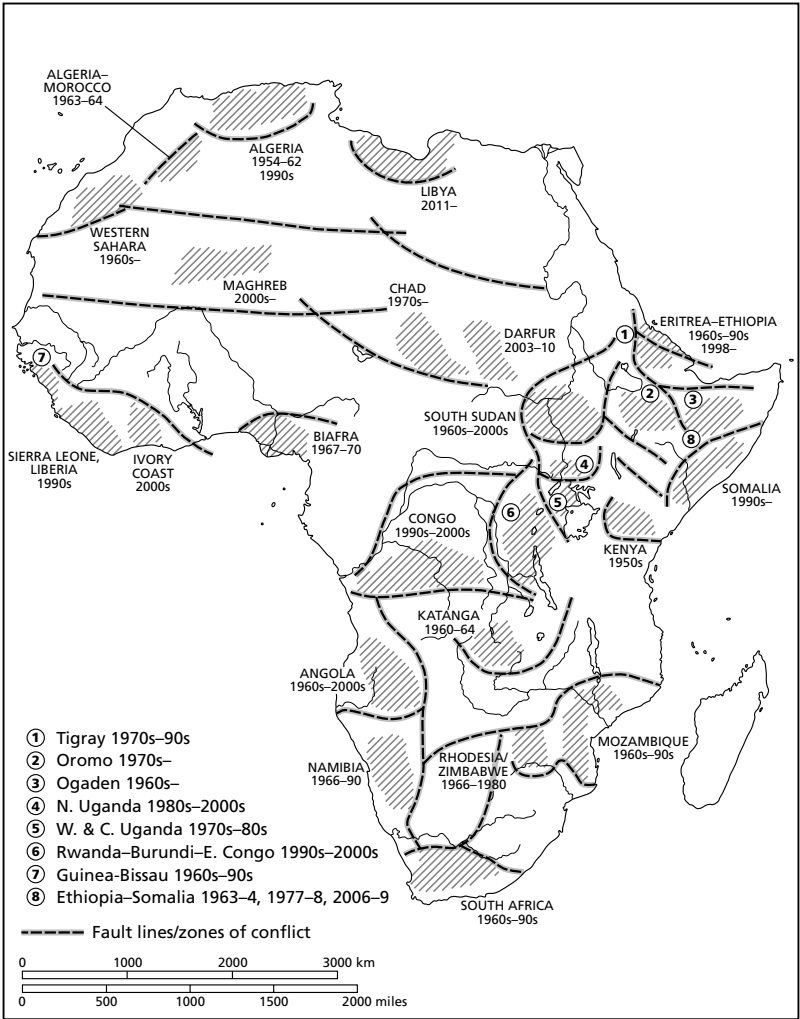
MAP 5 Military states, c. 1000–c. 1800.



MAP 6 Nineteenth-century military revolution.



MAP 7 The 'scramble' and its aftershocks.



MAP 8 Warfare since the mid-twentieth century.