Understanding the wars of West Africa through the prism of Political Economy by Kai Matturi

During the 1990s, West African conflict in places like Liberia and Sierra Leone contributed to an increasingly heated debate concerning "new" forms of warfare. While these different frameworks provide interesting insights into the proximate and long-term causes of wars, this literature is uneven in explaining the driving forces behind such wars. Recent attempts at interpreting the dynamics of some of these wars have been presented in the context of either "greed" and / or "grievance". This particular framework seeks to explore the real or imagined "economic agendas in… these civil wars."[1] Until recently, these crises were perceived to be totally unconnected processes, and often attributed simply to Africans having "the habit of conflict."[2]

Such processes were also often seen as part of a complex series of occurrences that simply saw the state in Africa as being "criminalized"[3], resulting in a distinctive "politics of the belly."[4] The persistence of wars in certain parts of the African continent has made pseudo-academic Afro-pessimism fashionable and acceptable in some circles in the west.[5] In academic circles, it is becoming trendy and acceptable to argue that historical anthropology can provide answers to questions related to some of Africa's conflicts. This has resulted in the dubious suggestion by Stephen Ellis that "there is an echo of this African historical tradition in the practice of present day warlords."[6] Thus these conflicts are interpreted as decidedly "African" civil wars, reflective of an "instrumentally plausible re-traditionalisation of society", and the excesses that routinely occur in these conflicts are presented as the way in which

[1] Mats Berdal and David M. Malone eds. Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000).
[2] Oliver Furley, "Introduction: Africa – The Habit of conflict in Africa" in Oliver Furley, ed., Conflict in Africa, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995).
[3] Jean-Francois Bayart, Stephen Ellis and Beatrice Hibou, The Criminalization of the state in Africa, (Oxford: James curry, 1998).
[4] Jean-Francois Bayart, The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly, (London: Longman, 1993).
[5] One of the most influential articles of this genre is Robert Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," Atlantic Monthly 271, no.2 (February 1994): 44-76. For a similar viewpoint see David Rieff, "In Defence of Afro-Pessimism", World Policy Journal 15, no. 4 (Winter 1998-1999): 10-22.
[6] Stephen Ellis, The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimensions of an African Civil War, (London: Hurst, 1999).

"Africa works." Such conflicts have thus become "part of the everyday calculus of power in contemporary Africa."[7]

This paper attempts to untangle the different conceptual frameworks and explanations for Africa's conflicts. I focus, in particular on the extent to which discourses around greed, grievance, and economic agendas in these conflicts are tenable. I will then proceed to suggest an alternative framework for explaining the multiple relationships and trajectories between political economy and conflict in West Africa, focusing particularly on the cases of Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Attempts at theorizing African politics and conflicts have spawned different ontology's and epistemologies. One of the most enduring is the concept of neopatrimonialism, which has been presented by some analysts as the "distinctive institutional hallmark of African regimes."[8] A core tenet of this concept is that processes of rule and leadership are personalized and operate through patronage rather than through ideology or law. The effect of such personalization of power is that violence becomes part of everyday life.[9] Though this paradigm has its utility, it does not fully explain why other states in similar situations do not disintegrate or experience similar violence, for example Equatorial Guinea.

A second popular framework employs "rational choice" analysis to explain the seemingly senseless violence and brutalities that occur in some of Africa's conflicts. The basic premise here is that social action and reaction are closely related to either group or individual calculus based on self-interest and the expectation of gain. This approach claims to perceive an underlying rationality to actions of rebel factions. Writers of this persuasion, such as David Keen, characterize the actions of rebel groups as a "particularly organized kind of chaos, a rational kind of madness."[10]

---

[7] Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument (London: James Curry, 1999).
[8] Michael Bratton and N.Van de Walle, "Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa," in Peter Lewis, ed., Africa: The Dilemmas of Development and Change, (Boulder; West view Press, 1998).
[9] Chabal and Daloz, Africa Works.
[10] David Keen, "A Rational Kind of Madness," Oxford Development Studies 25, no.1 (1997): 67-75.

The third framework for analyzing African conflicts is in fact a variant of the rational choice school. The arguments about the economic rationale for civil wars that have been put forward by Paul Collier – have generated some of the most heated debates in the recent study of the political economy of Africa's civil wars.[11] At the heart of the argument is that war is profitable, social actors engage in warfare because it generates private equity. Collier summarizes his own argument: "a country with large natural resources, many young men, and little education is very much at risk of conflict."[12]

Unfortunately, the picture painted by Collier is done in rather broad-brushed strokes. These ideas can, in fact, be applied to various degrees to many postcolonial countries. His argument fails to explain why and how some of the countries with the proxies he identifies manage to avoid conflict while others cannot. Collier's analysis is also static, and lacks any sense of the underlying political dynamics that actually drive countries possessing these proxies towards conflict.

The Genealogy of Conflict in West Africa

It is necessary to avoid exaggerating the role of resources in conflicts and the excessive generalization of the nature of "resource conflicts." Different types of resources and resource-extraction regimes are associated with different types of politics and patterns of conflict. Some types of local resource-driven conflicts, for example those involving "survival assets" such as grazing land and water resources, have received less attention in academic literature, presumably because they lack the glamour of diamonds and other internationally traded resources. The recent international profile given to Edward Zwick's film, Blood Diamond, about the role of conflict diamonds in Sierra Leone's civil war, is indicative of such a phenomenon.

[11] Paul Collier, "Doing Well out of War: An Economic Perspective", in Berdal and Malone, Greed and Grievance, pp.91-111.
[12] Ibid.p.97.

The cases of Liberia and Sierra Leone present different forms and settings of resource conflicts in West Africa. Though both cases should be seen as representing particular trajectories of struggle and responses to state repression and decay, they nevertheless share certain common features. While neither Liberia nor Sierra Leone may conform to the argument that current violent conflicts have a previous history of conflict, both countries do share a political history of bad governance, virtual one-party statism and / or military rule, and mismanagement of key resource industries. Furthermore, these conflicts were preceded by popular struggles that undermined sitting regimes that were subsequently pre-empted by a process of militarization. Samuel Doe's coup in Liberia in 1980, Valentine Strasser's putsch in Sierra Leone in April 1992, all attest to this point. West Africa's new military "proconsuls" faced subaltern armed revolts, even as other actors increasingly stepped in to challenge the ability of the state to exercise its authority.

Regime resistance to legitimate struggles for change by civil society opened the door to more radical and destructive attacks on the state by warlords, revolutionaries, as well as legitimately aggrieved movements. Civil-political struggles, however, persisted in the shadow of armed conflicts and provided a countertrend, challenging the culture of militarization and weaponization in West Africa. This dialectic also challenged fashionable depictions of conflicts in these countries as unrelieved cases of unedifying brutality that could be salvaged only by external intervention.

Another overarching theme is the extent to which these conflicts have seen the intertwining of youth, ethnicity, and resources. Paul Collier's thesis, and much recent writing, converges on the analysis of the politics of youth as a critical opposition group and key ingredient in these conflicts. "Youth politics," however, is seen in much of this literature as both homogenous and debased. While collier is right to identity the pre-eminent role of youth in driving conflicts, there is no hint in his analysis of the heterogeneity of this social stratum and of its politics. "Youth" is socially determined, and who or what constitutes it differs, to some degree, according to one's culture and society. While youth politics embodies certain universal traits, they are also contextual. Though much emphasis is often placed on the agency of youth as political actors, they are also open to manipulation by other groups in society. For more on this, see Paul Richards.[13]

All across West Africa, the marginalization of youth is painfully evident. Alienation caused by frustrated aspirations, collapsing mobility structures, and damaged family and community social safety nets has led the region's youth to seek radical alternatives. These radical alternatives have manifested themselves in the forms of new fundamentalist and revivalist religious movements, cultural identities, and revolutionary and populist ideas. This phenomenon has spawned different types of religious sects, gangs, and "revolutionary" political factions. Both the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front were initially able to attract youth through populistic rhetoric, much of which was patterned on the language of "revolutionary regimes" in other parts of Africa like Ghana and Libya. The globalization of Hollywood imagery, with its hyermasculine and ultra-violent "Rambo" culture, has also insidiously impacted West African youth and intersected with these "revolutionary" adventures, as clearly evidenced by the cases of Liberia and Sierra Leone. To quote Richards, "If West African urban youth are 'loose molecules' they are surprisingly well-informed about events in the modern world, via radio news and journalism."[14]

[13] Richards, Paul. (1996), Fighting For The Rain Forest; War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone, London: Villiers Publications.

[14] Ibid. p.114.

Ultimately, the impact of different competing ideas and beliefs on youth depends on the strength and coherence of community ties at the social level; at the political level, it depends on the success of regimes such as those of Jerry John Rawlings in Ghana and Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso to invent new modes of political incorporation of youth. The critical factor to understanding this phenomenon is therefore not the abstract properties of youth, but the nature of alternative oppositional discourse that arise to "interpellate" and incorporate this mobilized section of the population. "Ethnicity," though present in both case studies – Liberia, and Sierra Leone – that I examine next, has played rather different roles in each case. However, in none of the cases can ethnicity be regarded as the primary cause of conflict. Ethnicity has been employed by leaders to try to rally support for a sinking power base, as well as to repress opposition (as in Doe's Liberia); or used as an instrument in interfactional conflicts. In Liberia, Taylor's efforts at building a "pan-West African" rebel force incorporating many non-Liberian fighters were belied by the ethnic polarization of Liberian politics and the organization of rebel movements during the civil war. In Sierra Leone's civil war, on the other hand, issues of ethnicity were relatively marginal.

Finally, these conflicts need to be related to emergent forms of post-Cold War interstate relations in West Africa, with the phenomenon of crisis-ridden states like Nigeria and Senegal attempting to salvage even more crisis-ridden neighbours. Many inescapable ironies are associated with this development – the supreme expression being General Sani Abacha's Nigeria, with its internal conflicts and viciously authoritarian government under international sanctions for human rights abuses, intervening militarily to suppress civil conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and even restoring democratic rule to Sierra Leone in 1998.

Whilst mindful of the pitfalls of a rational-centric model of analysis, I believe that some level of rationality underlies and informs the actions of the warring factions that ravaged a number of countries in West Africa. This rationality may not exclude economic motivations, but cannot be adequately understood within a solely economic prism. Grievance has been an undeniable and persistent feature in these conflicts, whether they remain precariously within the confines of the state (as in the case of the Niger Delta) or assume the status of a full-blown rebellion to contest the power, and indeed to displace, the state (as in Liberia and Sierra Leone). A discussion of the specific features and dynamics of these conflicts is thus essential in order to situate the rationales of the major protagonists in these conflicts within a specific nexus. Such an approach allows us to appreciate the interests of the diverse factions, their capabilities, and motivations driving their actions. It also provides us with useful insights into the diversity of functions that violence serves, particularly in politically fragile, ethnically divided, and economically weak states like Liberia and Sierra Leone. Through this analysis, I also hope to contribute to demystifying some perceptions of wars in Africa as intrinsically unjustified, irrational, and dysfunctional. I will now endeavour to assess the political economy of the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, which to a large extent were interlocking, before briefly concluding with a number of key lessons resulting from the two case studies.

The Political Economy of Civil War in Liberia and Sierra Leone

The struggle to control resources to sustain the state and state elites has a particularly long and poignant, if not tragic, history in Liberia, related to the peculiar origins of the state and patterns of dependency woven into its fabric from the very beginning. Different Liberian administrations, from William Tubman (1944-1971) to William Tolbert (1971-1980) to Samuel Doe (1980-1989) to Charles Taylor (1997-2003), managed or more appropriately, controlled "reforms" to acquire new resources. Various authors, including William Reno[15], and Stephen Ellis[16] have traced the roots of the Americo-Liberian oligarchy's use of the True Whig Party to maintain political hegemony over the indigenous majority population, culminating in Doe's 1980 putsch and his own subsequent manipulation of the political system in favour of his ethnic Krahn and Mandingo allies. Taylor perpetuated this trend by using security forces dominated by Gio and Mano fighters to maintain a ruling clique in power. Ibrahim Abdullah[17] and William Reno[18] have traced the roots of state decay in Sierra Leone. Since these issues are covered in more detail elsewhere, I will focus in this brief section on some of the economic agendas of Liberia's factions during the civil war of 1989 to 1997, and on the political economy of Sierra Leone's civil war between 1991 and 2000.

[15] William Reno, Warlord Politics and African States, (Boulder: Lynne Reinner, 1998).
[16] Stephen Ellis, "Liberia 1989-1994: A Study of Ethnic and Spiritual Violence," African Affairs 94, no.375 (April 1995): 165-197.
[17] Ibrahim Abdullah, "Youth Culture and Rebellion: Understanding Sierra Leone's Wasted Decade," Critical Arts 16, no.2 (2002):19-37.
[18] William Reno, Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

In the course of the civil war in Liberia, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) was able to exploit natural resources, while simultaneously having access to strategic communication lines. Nimba County, the launch pad for the movement's march towards Monrovia (the capital city of Liberia), was rich in iron ore and shared a contiguous border with Ivory Coast, which provided consistent political and military support to Taylor. Nimba was linked by rail to Buchanan, Liberia's second major port for exports and arms transported from neighbouring Ivory Coast. Aside from the NPFL, seven other factions emerged by 1994 to prevent Taylor from taking over the executive mansion (the seat of power in Liberia). The leaders of these factions claimed to have built their armies to defend their ethnic groups against attacks from other armed factions. Ethnicity, however, was employed simply as a façade to camouflage political ambitions and aspirations to maintain power within a small circle of Liberia's elites. Control and access to natural resources and minerals contributed to the emergence of the different factions. Some of the heaviest fighting in Liberia occurred in areas rich in natural resources, such as Tubmanburg, and Bomi County, this would also characterize much of Sierra Leone's civil war.

Economic opportunities became an important factor in reproducing conflict and undermining prospects for peace in Liberia. Over time, such economic calculations came to determine the pattern of the war, and were a major factor in the failure of thirteen peace accords between 1990 and 1996. The NPFL was able to take advantage of this situation, while aligning with conventional state-driven geopolitical agendas within the region. Large business firms domiciled in France - a historical regional rival of Nigeria – established temporary bases in Ivory Coast and negotiated business deals with the NPFL in the timber trade without having to satisfy export controls and other demands.

Due to the relative success and innovativeness with which faction groups exploited natural resources and negotiated economic deals with European, North American, and Asian firms, there was a particularly opportunistic and instrumental edge to the manner in which Liberia's civil war was fought. By March 1991 the political economy of the war and war- related enterprises had expanded to such an extent that it involved several thousand people who had a stake in the continuation of hostilities. The unwillingness of the warlords to end the civil war thus mirrored a "rational choice" analysis of the costs and benefits of continuing the war. With control over vast territories rich in natural; and mineral resources, the NPFL commenced the efficient and calculated exploitation of these abundant commodities. "From this period, a lucrative export business based on diamonds, timber, iron ore, and gold was initiated with French, Belgian, Turkish and Taiwanese firms."[19]

To circumvent the blockade that had been placed on the ports of Buchanan, Harper, and Greenville by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Cease-Fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in 1993, these products were shipped through the Ivorian port of San Pedro. Ivorian intermediaries and their French counterparts dealt directly with the NPFL in order to avoid the export controls and restrictions resulting from the embargo. "The NPFL is estimated to have made $450 million from these illicit exports during the course of Liberia's protracted civil war."[20]

Like Liberia, Sierra Leone had abundant natural resources, principally gold, diamond, iron ore, rutile, and bauxite. Ethnic disputes were not unknown in the country: conflict between the Krio elite and interior "tribes" had driven colonial politics. Ethnoregional divisions had also shaped post independence politics, and the two main parties – the Sierra Leone People's Party and the All People's Congress – derived their support primarily from the Southeastern – based Mende and Northern – based Temne respectively. Compared to other African countries, however, Sierra Leone was relatively free of sectarian strife. The seemingly tranquil Sierra Leonean polity, however, masked a history of militarization and consistent mismanagement of the country's mineral industry. Mineral resources were primarily exploited by

[19] David Harris, **From 'Warlord' to 'Democratic' President: How Charles Taylor Won the 1997 Liberian Elections**, pp. 431-455, The Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol. 37, No. 3, Sep., 1999.
[20] Ibid, pp.446.

outsiders. By the 1970s and 1980s the economy had plummeted as a result of kleptomaniac practices by Sierra Leone's elites. Smuggling and corruption decimated the diamond industry: "In 1970 the country produced two million carats of diamonds; by 1988 this figure had declined to 480,000 carats."[21]

From 1992 to 1994, the military regime of Captain Valentine Strasser earned praise from external donors for its rigour in pursuing a structural adjustment programme, but this adulation proved to be short-lived. Before long, members of the military junta were openly involved in the diamond trade. Meanwhile the war with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels spiralled out of control, with government soldiers becoming sobels: soldiers by day and rebels by night. Both soldiers and rebels soon became entangled in a $450 million annual diamond trade.[22] This was the context of the economic and political crisis that precipitated the increasing alienation of the country's youths and helped to provide a fertile breeding ground for the twelve-year rebellion that blighted the former "Athens of West Africa."

Learning Lessons

The above analyses suggest key lessons, which I will briefly discuss in concluding this paper. First, conflicts in West Africa tend to have multiple causes, but the most important single cause is poor governance over a sustained period coupled with frustrated aspirations for political change, often occurring in a context of profound state debilitation. In the longer view, violent struggles for control of resources in these weak economies should be seen to result from conflict at least as much as they cause it. To challenge the state is to challenge state control over resources, and vice versa. While resource control has been central to postcolonial state formation and politics in Africa, it is important to note that "resource conflicts" were initially played out at the level of politics. The main intellectual and policy challenge today is to understand the violent turn of resource politics in the 1990s, a development that we associate pre-eminently not with resources themselves, but with the destruction of political institutions and processes on the continent. It is this degradation of politics, which mediates or should mediate the way that resources are distributed, that requires explanation, not resources themselves.

---

[21] Lansana Gberie, A Dirty War In West Africa - the RUF and the destruction of Sierra Leone, (London Hurst and Company, 2007)
[22] Ibid., pp.105.

Secondly, we have learned again and again that continued repression in situations of state weakness is counterproductive. It is usually better to manoeuvre a political opening, change course, or yield power altogether. This may prove embarrassing and even traumatic in the short term, but can actually yield long-term benefits. The growing numbers of former West African military leaders who have stepped graciously aside and were subsequently elected to power in a free vote – Mali's Amadou Toure, Nigeria's Olusegun Obasanjo - are living testimony that such an outcome is feasible.

Finally, analyses of the political economy of conflicts in Africa must stress the critical importance of proper security sector governance, in terms of both accountability and operational effectiveness and reform. The conduct of the security sector, including its repressive capability, has made a crucial difference to whether a country is plunged even further into conflict, or whether conflict is averted. The failure to reform Taylor's security forces after elections in Liberia in 1997 saw the country's subsequent descent into conflict within two years – perhaps the most obvious recent example.