

Comment

Conflict: Bismarck's legacy to Africa?



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What were the ramifications of Bismarck's Berlin conference for Africa? It was indeed in 1884 that he opened that momentous conference. In 1994 Africa closed the last chapter of partition with an election to abolish political apartheid in South Africa. Between the two events were 110 years of European penetration of Africa. What was the aftermath?

I. Fragmentation and the Paradox of Racial Deficit

The partition of the continent unleashed unprecedented changes in African societies: political, economic, cultural and psychological. Here we pay attention to their implications for problems of security and governance over that period of a century and 10 years. Africa consists of some 54 countries. Partly because of this fragmentation, at least a third of independent Africa has experienced large scale political violence or war. Most of the political violence in Africa concerns ethnic, racial, religious, national or ideological boundaries.

Countries differ in violence even when they are neighbours. Barack Obama's father hailed from Kenya. Kenya shares borders with five other countries. Four

of those countries have experienced civil wars: Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. The fifth country is Tanzania which was partly born out of a revolution; the Zanzibar revolution of 1964. By comparison with its neighbours, Kenya has been spared of large-scale civil conflict, except for a short upheaval after the 2007 elections.

What about the subject of conflict in fragmented Africa in terms of a series of dialectical propositions, sometimes ironies, sometimes paradoxes, sometimes outright contradictions? At stake quite often are boundaries of identity, engulfed within frontiers of conflict. Since the middle of the 20th century more people have died in Africa as a result of conflict between Black and Black than because of conflict between Black and White. While anti-colonial wars did cost a lot of lives, post-colonial wars have been even more ruthless.

And yet the seeds of the post-colonial wars themselves lie in the sociological mess which the post-Berlin partition created in Africa. The partition destroyed ancient boundaries of identity and old methods of conflict-resolution without creating effective substitutes.

II. The Paradox of Fatal Borders

While most African conflicts are partly caused by borders, those conflicts are not necessarily about borders. They are partly caused by Bismarckian borders as those were created by colonial powers to enclose groups with no traditions of shared authority or shared systems of settling disputes.

Conversely, African governments have tended to be possessive about colonial borders and have discouraged challenging them. The borders generate conflicts within them, but have not normally generated conflict across them. The recent war between Ethiopia and Eritrea is more an exceptional inter-state conflict than a rule.

III. Between Religion and Ethnicity

While the worst conflicts in Arab Africa are partly religious, the worst conflicts in Black Africa are ethnic, so-called 'tribal'. Algeria in the 1990s had the worst conflict in Arab Africa proper; and the boundary was between Islamists and militant secularists. It was one of the ugliest wars in the world. Egypt in Arab Africa has also had recurrent religious conflict. Again, the boundary has been between the sacred and the secular.

The worst conflict in Black Africa in the

1990s was between the Hutu and Tutsi especially with the genocides in Rwanda and Burundi in the 1990s. These recurrent explosions have been ethnic in the so-called 'tribal' sense. Sudan is caught between. Was the conflict between N and South primarily ethnic or primarily religious? What about the Darfur chaos? Choose your own diagnosis. In Somalia the conflict is often sub-ethnic, between clans rather than between tribes.

IV. Between Identities and Resources

While Black against White in Africa is often a clash of identities. While racial conflicts in Africa are ultimately economic tribal wars are ultimately cultural. White and Black folks fight each other about who owns what. Black folks fight each other about who is who. Anti-apartheid struggle was ultimately an economic confrontation. But Hutu against Tutsi is a culture-confrontation. The demarcation of property may be less deadly than the clash of identities.

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