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‘None could stand before him in the battle, none ever reigned so wisely as he’: the expansion and significance of violence in early modern Africa

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Mwezi and Mirambo

The quotation in the title belongs to the nineteenth-century explorer and journalist Henry Morton Stanley, who was writing in the context of the Nyamwezi people, in north-central Tanzania, in the 1870s.¹ Stanley’s larger concern was Mirambo (c.1840–84), who was either, depending on one’s perspective, a great warrior and would-be state-builder, or an outright bandit and emblem of Africa’s savage, backward condition. What is clear is that this was a period of profound political, economic, and military upheaval, a transformative moment for the Nyamwezi and one replicated across the continent in the course of the nineteenth century. But the Stanley quotation is not in reference to Mirambo himself: rather, it reflected local memories of Mirambo’s supposed distant ancestor, an ‘ancient ruler’ called Mwezi, and thus represented a desire on the part of the revolutionary Mirambo – and on the part of the Nyamwezi in an age of revolution – to discern historical gravity and continuity in turbulent times. Mwezi may or may not have been an actual historical figure; but more importantly, in many ways, he was interpreted by Stanley’s informants as embodying two critical characteristics – the unstoppable warrior with the ability to wield maximum force on the field of combat, and the wise, judicious ruler. On the one hand, Mirambo himself was keen not to be seen as a mere upstart with newly acquired firearms, but rather as the modern incarnation of an illustrious predecessor, his violence restorative and aimed at the re-creation of unity and stability. More broadly, however, Mwezi exemplified, in the midst of a turbulent epoch, the ineffable connection between violence and sagacity and the need to frame founding ancestors as the armed founts of the political and moral order.²

It was no coincidence that in the course of the nineteenth century a host of warriors and practitioners of violence, diverse in provenance and context, looked backward into the deeper past for sources of succour and constancy. The nineteenth century was a violent epoch – of change, rolling crisis, and anxiety, in part brought on by mounting external threats³ – and Africans sought reassurance from histories in which violence was seen to have moral meaning, was characterized by righteous fervour, and was practiced by those motivated by loftier ambitions. But this was no mere exercise in historical reinvention, although there was certainly something of that too. Nineteenth-century Africans looked back several generations to a period, broadly between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries, in which the exercise of violence had begun to change dramatically, and in which the deployment of violence was critical to the emergence, consolidation, and expansion of new political and cultural orders.

The concept of the ‘early modern’, around which this volume has largely been organized, might raise some eyebrows in the Africanist academy. I do not propose to dwell at length on this issue, though there is a discussion to be had about what ‘early modern’ means in the African context.⁴ It is, of course, a primarily Eurocentric notion, but this does not mean therefore that it has no validity elsewhere. It is true that most Africans would not recognize the terminology: ‘precolonial’ remains a popular, generic term for much of what happened before c.1880. But perhaps any objection is a question of nomenclature, rather than of periodization itself.⁵ What is clear is that by the second half of the fifteenth century, much of the continent was on the threshold of a new and violent era, and the ensuing four centuries would see innovative forms of military organization, new wars, as well as new ways of fighting them, and novel cultures of militarism underpinning such systems. Certainly the evidence – though necessarily fragmentary, as I explain below – suggests that the early part of our period was a foundational ‘moment’ in modern African history. To the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can be dated the emergence of some of the continent’s most robust and enduring polities and cultures, underpinned by new technologies, deployments, and understandings of violence. Along the coastal forest of southern Nigeria and Ghana, across the West African savannah, in the Great Lakes region of East Africa, and in the central and northern Ethiopian Highlands, there was a widening use of violence to underpin political expansion early in the second millennium – prior to the age of global interaction – and new political cultures forged around security and protection. The point at which the ‘early modern’ became the ‘modern’ in Africa is perhaps a subject for discussion, though there is no question, again, that the nineteenth century was a transformative period which exhibited some continuity from the deeper past, but also a marked degree of rupture.

More broadly, of course, the reconstruction of Africa’s military history is rendered particularly difficult as a result of methodological challenges. The operation and the impact of the Atlantic slave trade is relatively well documented,⁶ but even

here, of course, assessment of the relevant source material is routinely attended by a great deal of intuition and speculation. The key point is that we rely overwhelmingly – if by no means exclusively – on European accounts, which are often problematic for all sorts of reasons, not least in terms of the profound racism and cultural miscomprehension which invariably characterizes these texts. But use is also made of African accounts, broadly under the somewhat unsatisfactory term ‘oral traditions’, many of which were put in writing in the early twentieth century. In general terms, the volume of source material increases as time goes on – the nineteenth century, notably, is comparatively well documented, although there is dramatic imbalance in coverage within the continent – which does not necessarily mean an increase in the *quality* of the material (quite the opposite, sometimes), though it does often enable corroboration.

Finally, what are we dealing with in thinking about ‘violence’? In many ways, the most visible indication of levels of violence is warfare, and the practice of war forms a central plank of our discussion here. But this cannot be about warfare alone, and in any case it could be argued that war is not necessarily indicative of levels of violence more generally. However, it is argued here that military transformations and increases in the scale and intensity of armed conflict are paralleled – indeed, made possible – by a growth in the ability of ruling elites to exercise violent control over subjects, and to develop and support internal cultures of political violence. In other words, this is not just about military violence but the spread of ideas around violence against the undeserving individual or community. At the same time, however, well-armed, ostensibly violent societies also offer possibilities for restraint and protection for those who adhere to evolving systems and processes: in a sense, a form of social contract, or ‘elite bargain’. It is also worth noting that much of sub-Saharan Africa was historically underpopulated – the direct control of people, crudely put, was often more important than the direct control of land⁷ – which meant that killing, for example, was not necessarily sensible, or desirable. This placed something of an intrinsic constraint on extreme violence, although an important caveat is in order: killing is only the end point of a spectrum and violence is exercised in all sorts of ways designed to instil fear, subdue, suppress, and enforce loyalty. This was certainly how Mirambo remembered Mwezi.

A world of violence? From ‘pre-contact’ to external intrusion

The term ‘pre-contact’ is, of course, hugely problematic. What does it even mean? In this exposition, we are concerned with relative scale: in the African context, there are communities which are *relatively* self-contained – at least until the nineteenth century – and which are the product of largely *endogenous* dynamics, including the utilization of land, population growth, and regional migration. Pure indigeneity is not a concept in which I would normally trade, but for the purposes of this chapter – and of the larger collection of papers, focused as these are on the

global parameters of violence – I consider it significant, insofar as the overriding purpose is to assess the extent to which Africans experienced violence in a global context and as the result of external influences, in the early modern period. And so I begin with the stark idea that some parts of the continent, notably eastern Africa, were *not* influenced by external intrusions until quite late in our timescale. So what does the available evidence suggest about such communities?

In some cases, again, it is the evidence for broadly *military* change which is revealing. The linguistic, archaeological, and ethnographic evidence for west-central Africa, for example, suggests shifts in the practice and culture of violence which predates the external slave trade: a process of militarization is discernible over several centuries, doubtless driven by gradual population increase and the attendant expansion in political and economic scale, involving greater military cooperation across wider areas, larger armies, and greater levels of destruction and bodily harm. By the fifteenth century, young men were commonly organized into age sets (discernible in coastal Angola, for example), pointing towards the heightened social significance of organized violence – or the threat of it – in underpinning political cohesion, while an increasingly diverse array of weaponry (throwing and stabbing spears, throwing knives, battleaxes, and, unsurprisingly, body armour) is indicative of increasing *levels* and more destructive *forms* of bodily violence.⁸

In the Great Lakes region of East Africa, political entrepreneurs in the first half of the second millennium CE used violence to build new states and societies and developed ideologies rooted in the notion that violence was necessary to the securement of ‘peace’ and social cohesion, as well as in the drive for economic expansion and exploitation of factor endowments.⁹ In Bunyoro, and later Buganda and Nkore, founding fathers were men of war, but simultaneously builders of coalitions and guarantors of collective security. In these new communities, created in the swirl of population movement across some of the most fertile land in the region, morality was central to the exercise of violence, as well as in its restraint. In the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a string of small but potent territorial states between lakes Tanganyika and Victoria – Bunyoro, Buganda, Nkore, Toro, Rwanda, Burundi – boasted a capacity for rapid military mobilization and built traditions of martial prowess into their social and moral edifices. Kings needed to be war leaders, capable of protecting their peoples from outside attack, but equally able to command regular campaigns aimed at territorial expansion and resource extraction.¹⁰ The connection between external armed adventurism and cohesion at home was robust: in eighteenth-century Buganda, for example, war itself underpinned a thriving military culture at home, and a set of martial values according to which ‘good citizenship’ was measured.¹¹ In a political equation familiar in our own era, security against outside aggression meant handing over to governing elites the right to exercise a degree of violence at home against dissidents and malcontents, real or imagined. The expansionist Ganda state was directed by an increasingly powerful kingship which, in the course of the eighteenth century, was

able to reward military loyalty and prowess with land and political appointments. At the same time, the violence exercised by kings – both random and punitive – was tolerated among the broader populace, even expected.¹² Later, nineteenth-century European accounts were certainly at pains to describe a society seemingly inured to suffering, and in which violence could befall anyone within reach of the king's whim.¹³ These accounts, of course, are problematic, and in any case the ruler who overreached himself might expect serious repercussions, up to and including armed ouster. There may well have been considerable tolerance of violence on the part of the populace, but only up to a point, as oral tradition relating to the punishment of wayward kings indicates.¹⁴

So much for those regions in which we can identify some measure of endogenously driven practice and cultures of violence. The fact remains, however, that the predominant driver of violence – in politics, in military practice, and in social relations – across swathes of the continent in the early modern era, was interaction with global forces. This is emphatically not to suggest that violence on multiple levels was an external invention; that would be ludicrous. It is to argue that cultures of violence changed rapidly as a result of external exchange and led to new ideas about the value and the limitations of violence as a political and social process. Two examples from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries illustrate the dynamics at work, if in distinctive ways. The first, Ethiopia, certainly needed no external stimulus to violence, as its remarkable earlier history demonstrates. Political entrepreneurs were at work in the Ethiopian Highlands – frequently seen in terms of exceptionalism¹⁵ – where the Solomonic state rested on an overtly ideological and religious deployment of violence in both subduing external enemies and moulding an internal, 'national' identity. Christian Ethiopia was particularly adept at mobilizing a dramatic historical vision – centrally, the notion that it was the New Zion, with a covenant with God – legitimizing both an expansion in the scale of war and new forms of violence against internal dissenters and backsliders.¹⁶ The politicization of violence was spurred, too, by an influx of migrants into the highlands from the south in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: these were the Oromo, depicted in terms of fear and loathing by contemporary Ethiopian chroniclers who portrayed them as the embodiment of primordial savagery, intent on the destruction of highland Christian civilization.¹⁷ But the early modern period also witnessed new external irruptions. Ethiopia was threatened by an increasingly aggressive Muslim presence in the Horn, emanating from the eastern lowlands and the Somali plains, and often bolstered by influences from Arabia. Notably, the jihad of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim in the 1530s brought the kingdom almost to the point of destruction, avoided in part by the arrival of several hundred Portuguese musketeers.¹⁸ The latter formed part of an expanding presence in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, slowly but surely encompassing this vast region within a frontier of global violence. It was frequently the case in Ethiopia that an upsurge in violence – both externally, in the form of wars against encroaching antagonists,

and internally, against non-believers and the culturally unassimilated – was driven by a revival of religious consciousness. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Jesuit missionaries infiltrated the highlands, won a number of converts to Catholicism from Orthodox Christianity, and instigated a crisis for the state which culminated in a bloody civil war in the 1620s.¹⁹

The second example is the central African kingdom of Kongo, an early participant in the slave trade following the arrival of the Portuguese in the 1480s. The scholarly consensus is that a wide area was exposed to the predations of slave-raiding armies equipped with muskets (sometimes accompanied by contingents of Portuguese soldiers), while Kongolesse political culture incorporated an aggressive strand of militarism centred on the king. As provinces rebelled to protect themselves from the ravages of royal armies, violence ultimately consumed the old kingdom in the course of the sixteenth century.²⁰ Kongo demonstrates the early impact of the slave trade, and in no arena is the transformation in violence more clearly demonstrable than in Africa's Atlantic zone – defined here as stretching between Senegambia in the north and the Angolan coast in the south – for this vast region, encompassing a considerable hinterland, was transformed by the slave trade to the Americas between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. There is considerable evidence that across key zones of global engagement – most obviously in Atlantic Africa including Senegambia and points further east, the Slave Coast states on the Bight of Biafra, the Kongo kingdom, present-day Angola, and as far south as the Cape of Good Hope, site of eventual European settlement – violence escalated dramatically and was used to both commercial and political ends.

Central Africa, again, illustrates a particular pattern. In the area of present-day Angola, a more or less direct outcome of external engagement was the emergence of new forms of violence, driven in large part by private armies under entrepreneurial warlords. The Imbangala, possibly originating from a subversive faction of a local Ovimbundu army and certainly arising out of slave-raiding violence in the late sixteenth century, were mobile bands of professional warriors who attacked and invaded the Atlantic coast in the 1570s and 1580s. In the decades that followed, they came to dominate much of the Ovimbundu region, and by the mid seventeenth century there were several areas under the control of Imbangala bands stretching across central Angola. Imbangala armies themselves had a ferocious reputation – theirs was a form of total war, involving widespread pillaging as well as the capture of people for sale – and were organized along complex lines of command; boys were taken when young and trained up to be fed into the system.²¹ Again, evidence from the military sphere is worth noting: the Imbangala frequently served as mercenaries in others' armies, and indeed the use of mercenaries was increasingly common across the Atlantic zone through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, another indication of growing military professionalism as well as of the privatization of violence itself and the opportunities for a career in violence. Smaller coastal polities such as Allada and Whydah, for example, made use of Akwamu soldiers from the

neighbouring Gold Coast region in the late seventeenth century.²² All of this certainly suggests heightened levels of destruction, as well as profound changes in the perception of violence – i.e., that it was ‘normal’, was seemingly tolerated, and had clear economic and political rationality.

The Imbangala exemplified a new kind of restless, predatory military culture, one generated by the slaving violence of the age. But other, no less predatory, political forms emerged with direct links to the external slave trade, in particular new territorial states with increasingly complex military systems and ideological approaches to the organization and interpretation of violence: the states of Oyo,²³ Asante,²⁴ and Dahomey, most notably. Dahomey, in particular, was a dynamic and expansionist state, its roots in the slave trade and organized around a predatory militarism. Dahomey’s army comprised a series of well-drilled regiments equipped increasingly with firearms, in particular flintlock muskets. Each regiment made use of emblems and was sustained by a system in which young boys were assigned to soldiers for rigorous training. The kingdom fought wars for slaves, large numbers of whom were earmarked for export. Just as important were those needed for internal consumption, including for the sustenance of the domestic economy, but also, according to somewhat titillating contemporary European accounts, for sacrifice in public ceremonies exhibiting royal power and assuaging ancestors. Certainly such sources depicted a deeply violent, blood-soaked society – an increasingly common trope in European discourse about Africa in the early modern period. But, as in the eighteenth century, there was a distinction between those who – as part of the campaign to abolish the slave trade – depicted Dahomey as the *product* of that nefarious commerce, and those accounts written by slave traders who sought to describe a kingdom which was *naturally* violent and which needed no external stimuli to be so. Still, there is little doubt that the authority of Dahomean kings was to a significant extent rooted in their ability to command armies, to capture people, and above all to inflict violence, up to and including death itself.²⁵ Dahomey exemplifies the expansion of centralized, militarized political power, in other words, which was attended by the increase in the capacity of that authority to wield various forms of personal violence; the rise of new military states, inextricably linked to the commerce in human beings, involved the increase and normalization of acute forms of interpersonal violence in the ‘domestic’ sphere, and Dahomey illustrates the pattern.

Meanwhile, the widening and increasingly skilful use of firearms – especially in coastal states and societies – undoubtedly facilitated new levels of violence. But caution is needed here: interestingly, there is some evidence that, on battlefields at least, the close military formations of the seventeenth century sometimes gave way to more open, fluid deployments in the eighteenth, often involving smaller and more mobile units. A number of African armies now sought to avoid close combat altogether and amassed musketeers at vantage points from which fields of fire were designed to overwhelm enemies at distance. Exceptions to this loosening up of battlefield formation were to be found in the frontier zones between forest

and savannah, where infantry armies were accustomed to facing enemies on horseback. Guns could unquestionably inflict horrific bodily injury, and the increasing frequency of gunshot injuries must have shaped, in very profound ways, perceptions of the power of such weapons over bodies and enhanced the threat value intrinsic to centralizing political and military authority. Still, it was just as often the sound and smoke of guns – when they worked – which generated an aural and visual violence just as critical to the success of armies and political elites: this was in many ways psychological warfare based on a *fear* of much greater violence than was sometimes realistically possible, even if – and the point is an important one – guns did not generally do any manifestly greater damage to bodies than existing, very sharp, very poisonous, very effective weapons. More broadly, in an increasingly competitive political and economic environment, the size of armies expanded and the nature of war itself changed. A general trend across the Atlantic zone was the deployment of archers as skirmishers in support of soldiers equipped with short spears, clubs, and knives, whose main aim was to close on the enemy and engage the latter in hand-to-hand combat.²⁶ The close-range nature of much physical combat suggests the increasing prevalence of ideas about bodily destruction as necessary to the achievement of political and economic objectives. With military and political change, in other words, came implications for levels and forms of interpersonal violence, which in turn served as both representation and extension of the personalized power of kings and warriors.

At the same time, it is important to note that while slave raiding undoubtedly involved targeted killing – especially of the old and infirm – its primary objective was to take captives alive and relatively unharmed. Dead or badly injured slaves were wasted assets.²⁷ In that sense, it might be suggested – counterintuitively, perhaps – that the very nature of the slaving economy meant *constraints* on the infliction of violence. Slavery and slaving, in other words, also involved the exercise of *restraint* – notwithstanding the immediate and accurate association of slavery with a particularly odious and relentless form of physical violence. But, beyond a certain point, it was not economically advisable to inflict too much damage on slaves, and certainly not to kill them, although a certain death toll was evidently regarded as acceptable in the course of military operations. This of course relates to an earlier point – namely, the economic and demographic rationale for restraint. In historically underpopulated sub-Saharan Africa, people were more valuable than land, and in this context violence must be understood in more nuanced terms. Overt violence needed restraint and was selective, because it was vitally important to tie people to you as a political leader; land was plentiful, and therefore other institutions of implicit violence – slavery, polygamy – were necessary. African ideologies and religions made much of fertility and reproduction.²⁸

The heightened and increasingly central role of militarism, cultures of arms, and the exercise of violence in West and Central African states and societies, were at least in part the outcome of sustained engagement with external dynamics – specifically,

the commercial and industrial societies of the North Atlantic. Innovations in violence in these vast regions intersected with Europe's own revolutions in the exercise and culture of violence. The European military revolution facilitated the emergence of the nation state system, involved close linkages between trade and war, and was characterized by the deployment of violence for the purposes of both internal cohesion and external expansion.²⁹ There can be little question that African societies' engagement with this violent revolution was at least in part, if not wholly, responsible for processes of militarization and widening deployment of violence in those societies. An equally interesting dynamic – though not one for which there is space to explore here – is the degree to which Africans' use of violence influenced Europe's own unfolding transformation: for it most certainly did, whether in terms of military tactics or of cultures of violence.

Much of the Atlantic zone can be considered a frontier of global interaction with major repercussions for the uses and cultures of violence. But that frontier was altogether more tangible at Cape Colony, established by Dutch settlers in 1652 and rapidly becoming one of the most violent and militarized of African–European frontiers. Here, Dutch settlers' seizure of Khoisan cattle prompted Khoisan counterraiders and led to significant conflicts in 1659–60 and in the mid 1670s. Armed initially with matchlocks and then with flintlocks, the Dutch, or Boers ('farmers'), expanded onto Khoisan land from the late seventeenth century onward, compelling dispossessed Khoisan into a life of hunting and raiding. The Boers themselves would counter the growing Khoisan threat by forming militia units known as *commandos*, in what represented an escalation of frontier violence.³⁰ Across the eastern borderlands of Cape Colony, too, the Boers were engaged in cyclical conflict with the Xhosa, who represented a rather more robust obstacle to their seemingly inexorable advance than the Khoisan. Prolonged warfare, waged between Boer and Xhosa raiding parties, was fought over the *Zuurveld*, Xhosa grazing land, began in the 1770s and 1780s and periodically erupted throughout the nineteenth century.³¹ Along and within the expanding frontiers of the Cape, the growing racialization of violence was a harbinger of what was to come, in southern Africa and elsewhere on the continent, whether in terms of the settler approach towards supposedly genetically inferior enemies, or in the quotidian deployment of violence towards conquered and subject populations.³² To the north-east, in the Zambezi valley, Portuguese *prazos* – land grants, originally created for white settlers – were increasingly dominated by African-Portuguese warlords, or *prazeiros*, the product of local intermarriage and a hardy, militarized frontier culture. In the course of the eighteenth century, these warlords led armies of slave-soldiers (known as *chikunda*), not dissimilar in form and ethos to those of the West African hinterland, who spent much of their time feeding off burgeoning global trade, raiding neighbours for tribute, and hunting.³³ Here, too, was an emerging frontier of global interaction which brought with it opportunities for the fortunate and the brave – not least in terms of the fulfilment of new material aspirations – but one

of whose essential characteristics was also the exercise of unprecedented levels of physical and psychological violence. It was the age of commodities, but it was also the age of heightened anxiety and entrepreneurial might.

The memory of violence

These dynamics became all the more potent across the continent in the course of the nineteenth century, an era of military revolution and violent sociopolitical transformation. A military revolution during this epoch involved the centrality of power over violence on the part of rulers, with violence underpinning political and religious authority. In that sense, the expanded deployment of violence was both 'personal' and state-level. This is the period, above all, when these dynamics converge across the continent: whatever differentiation in drivers, purpose, and levels of external/global influence there may have been between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, there is no doubt that 'globalized' dynamics, especially in the realms of commerce but in more general contact too, bred heightened levels of both interstate/intercommunity and interpersonal violence. New political orders were organized around new forms of violence, which was ever more central to social and cultural cohesion, as well as access to new forms of weaponry. Across Africa, there was a clear correlation between expanding warfare and the use of violence within societies. In an age of heightened economic competition which necessitated the creation of new means of social control, the internal and external uses of violence were indelibly intertwined.³⁴

Yet this was not purely about naked coercion: violence was also moral, and the most common means of asserting that morality was in the construction of historical narratives to legitimize the use of force at home and abroad; states and societies in an age of violent upheaval sought historical gravitas by rooting themselves in the earlier era, seeking stability and legitimacy in antiquity. Instances of this proliferate across the continent – in neo-Solomonic Ethiopia;³⁵ among the Ganda and Nyoro of the Great Lakes region;³⁶ among the Zulu in the wake of Shaka's rise;³⁷ in the intellectual organization of the Sokoto Caliphate and other jihadist states in West Africa;³⁸ and, as we noted at the outset, among the Nyamwezi under the insurgent warlord Mirambo. We cannot know for certain whether 'Mwezi' actually existed; what we do know is that Mirambo sought ancestry for his violence and identified figures in the deeper past who had supposedly governed extensive polities with teeming (but united) populations.³⁹ The hunger for political and moral lodestars is evident in Buganda, too, where nineteenth-century kings ruled in the shadow of mythical founding father Kintu, who in most traditions had recourse to armed force to conquer the area for civilization, but who then became the exemplar of peaceable and moral governance.⁴⁰ Ultimately, the historicization of violence reflected the ideological core of polity-building in the nineteenth century: the creation of political order, now as in the deeper past, was a moral process and involved

righteous violence exercised by pioneers and entrepreneurs who embodied certain ideal characteristics. They were spiritually righteous, morally sound, politically astute, physically courageous. In an era in which the expanding scale of warfare and numerous state-building projects, driven in large part by rapid economic change, involved rising levels of interpersonal and social violence, it was critical to believe that violence ultimately had pure and virtuous goals in the deeper past – that kinship, citizenship, and ‘peace’ itself were guaranteed by the righteous warrior and his loyal adherents.

Something of a historical revolution attended social, political, and economic transformation in the nineteenth century. However, in the course of the twentieth century, the trend was towards the steady foreshortening of Africa’s past on the part of colonial strategists and African elites alike, driven in large part by discomfort around the idea of violence in the deeper past and the eschewal of such histories in favour of a more positivist vision of the future based on ‘modern’ economic development.⁴¹ Violence in Africa during the nineteenth century, in particular – but in fact throughout the era under examination – was consistently misunderstood by European observers and was used, ultimately, to justify European imperialism. Perceptions of African warfare, notably, became increasingly racialized; outside observers did not see the sociopolitical creativity, or the developmental potential, of African war, but only violent disorder which was symptomatic of racial backwardness and which needed to be brought to an end. As European discourse around the continent became increasingly couched in the language of race and progress, and as the European ‘civilizing mission’ took shape, centred on ideas about development and primitiveness, the ‘savage barbarity’ which was espied everywhere in Africa – not least the persistence of the ‘illegal’ slave trade – was used to validate armed intervention.⁴² It may not have been a direct *cause* of the partition, but it provided the essential cultural and moral framework within which imperialism was deemed not merely possible but necessary. This was a chronic misapprehension of what had been momentous events and processes across Africa, and it is a view which has persisted to the present, in various ways. The late nineteenth-century interpretation of much African violence as fundamentally barbaric and illegitimate has proven robust and has frequently prevented more nuanced understanding of the role and practice of warfare in the continent’s early modern history. Modern memory is problematic: while nineteenth-century military rulers often reached into the past and imbued violence with moral value and a deep sense of temporality, their twentieth- and twenty-first-century counterparts have had a more diffident relationship with histories of violence. In some ways, a trend towards forgetting is wholly understandable, even desirable, as has been argued eloquently by David Rieff.⁴³ Historical remembrance, he suggests, is sometimes burnished with a value which is in fact undeserved, and which in any case can go badly wrong – witness any number of atrocities in recent times which have been somehow justified by a particular version of collective historical

memory.⁴⁴ Given the traumas facing Africans over the past two centuries, a bout of amnesia might be regarded as wholly fitting. Perhaps it is. However, in modern Africa the problem has been not so much one of forgetfulness, but rather of distortion and misremembering.

Postcolonial African leaders certainly foreshortened historical memory, especially in terms of warfare and ideas about violence more generally. Such histories were eschewed in favour of more positivist, economic visions of the future – couched in ideas about modernity which was (ironically) conceived of in terms of peace and prosperity, in sharp distinction to the realities unfolding across postcolonial Africa. In the postcolonial age, builders of nations became altogether warier of the violent past – in large part because of their own violent present. Uganda illustrates the theme, with a president, Yoweri Museveni, who was vocal and forthright in his belief that ‘The Past’ was a problem to be left behind, that the precolonial age had seen no significant achievements in Africa but only ‘backward tribes’, and that history in any case was a ‘useless subject’.⁴⁵ Museveni was wont to point towards the sectarian bloodletting which had characterized much of Uganda’s deeper past, and in so doing he effectively repackaged Dark Continent mythology for a local audience. He was not alone among early twenty-first-century African leaders in exhibiting nervousness about imbuing past violence with too much positive significance.⁴⁶ But leaders such as Museveni could have taken comfort, had they looked more closely, from the utility of violence over *la longue durée* and from the fact that their predecessors’ aims were much in line with their own. Violence in early modern Africa was denied a developmental role, and indeed its place, as a critical part of human experience – not only in terms of the actual exercise of violence, but also in terms of restraint, which was such an essential part of unfolding experimentation in relationships between governed and governing. The rehabilitation of violence in Africa’s deeper past is a necessary part of ongoing political struggles and culture wars, though without question it is a challenging project and one fraught with risk.

Conclusions: a continent neither ‘merrie’ nor ‘dark’

The assessment of violence in African history is fraught with difficulty. On the one hand, the argument made in this chapter – that the continent in the early modern period was a pretty violent place, and increasingly so – is not one which will go down well in certain quarters. On a superficial level, it seems to reinforce a set of well-established tropes around a ‘Dark Continent’ which first emerged in Europe during the eighteenth century, hardened during the age of high imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century, and which persist still in various popular interpretations of Africa in the Global North.⁴⁷ I hope it goes without saying that this is not the intention of the argument here. It is, rather, my intention to inject a greater degree of sophistication into the analysis of violence in Africa’s history,

and to recognize the purposes it served. Often, those who would deny the idea that Africa has indeed experienced significant levels of violence in its deeper past tend towards the depiction of what Tony Hopkins once termed a 'Merrie Africa'⁴⁸ – a kind of idyll, before the intrusions of grasping foreigners.⁴⁹ The external was clearly of enormous significance in some regions. But a reasoned, evidence-based approach disproves both 'Dark Continent' and 'Merrie Africa' mythology. Like many other parts of the world in the early modern period, Africa's political, social, and economic development was intimately linked to profound shifts in the culture and practice of violence. In many ways this was 'organic', a natural part of population movement, settlement, and attendant political evolution; but it was also often, and by the nineteenth century almost everywhere, connected to global relationships which facilitated new – and in many respects more brutal – forms of violence.

Several years ago, the cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker argued that violence was in decline: this was the thesis presented in a mighty tome published in 2011,⁵⁰ and often cited by those who believe in the exorable march of progressive modernity. It represents a kind of disturbingly Eurocentric optimism. Nonetheless, the argument represents something of a 'new orthodoxy', as termed by John Gray, who has also delivered one of the most devastating critiques of the book.⁵¹ In Africa, meanwhile, it can be demonstrated that violence has steadily *increased* in scale and expanded in purpose over the last half-millennium or more. It should not be the job of historians – and many others, including those with their hands on the levers of political power – to disguise this fact, or represent it as something other than what it is. The problem, rather, is that this broad trend has been *mis*-represented and *mis*understood, packaged within a set of racialized tropes current in Europe and the Global North since the nineteenth century about the intrinsic backwardness of African violence; or represented as imposed on a maligned continent by outside forces. Again, indeed, an Afrocentric audience would balk at the idea of framing such violence in terms of political and economic *development*, or as something perfectly normal or understandable, and scholars who point to histories of violence in Africa *at all* are likely to be drowned out by cries of derision and accused of perpetuating old stereotypes about the continent.⁵² Yet violence attends change, generally, whether 'good' or 'bad' change, and it is rarely one or the other.⁵³ In some ways, the righteous, putatively revolutionary violence of the mid and late twentieth century threw into shadow the notion that violence in the deeper past could be equally utilitarian and constructive in aim (if not necessarily in outcome).

The outcome of the process in motion between c.1500 and the late nineteenth century was an expansion in military scale, the professionalization of soldiery, the adoption of new weaponry, and the militarization of the polity – whether 'state-based' or otherwise. The militarization of African polity and society was an ongoing process between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, a period which in many ways witnessed the foundations being laid of modern African political systems. This

would culminate in a veritable military revolution in the nineteenth century, a transformation in the organization and culture of violence, without which Europe's later partition of the continent cannot properly be understood. The early modern era, in sum, witnessed the heightened use of violence internally and externally in pursuit of social cohesion and political consolidation; new forms of war and uses of violence were at the heart of many states, communities, and identities forged during the fertile, foundational era of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There were often different factors at work, and the key distinction between Atlantic Africa and the rest of the continent is the presence in the former of clear external drivers. But the organization of violence across early modern Africa had much in common, in terms of the aim to control factor endowments, to maximize population, and to construct enduring ideological systems, whether territorially or culturally defined.

One of the key concerns of this chapter has been the changing patterns and aims of war and the scope and scale of organized violence. But it is clear that this cannot be considered in some form of 'military isolation': we must also pay attention to the relationship between war and military organization on the one hand, and wider sociocultural and political norms and values around the exercise of violence on the other. Expanding political power meant militarization and expanding cultures of military command, which led to new ideas about what violence *meant* and how widely it could be exercised or controlled. Military transformations and escalations in war were paralleled by the growth and ability of ruling elites to exercise violent control over subjects and to develop internal cultures of political violence. At the same time, militarily organized societies also offered possibilities for restraint and protection to those who adhered to evolving systems and processes: the ultimate social contract. Of course, this relationship could be seen in more ambiguous terms: for example, did increasing militarization and military professionalism *actually* mean greater collective and individual security? Or was it in fact symptomatic of wider insecurity and of an increasingly indiscriminate use of violence (and celebration of violence) across society as a whole? Perhaps it is never quite so simple in terms of cause and effect; both scenarios are valid and can be valid simultaneously. Moreover, the infliction of bodily injury and punishment changed over time – not least because weapons themselves changed. But alongside this, cultures and representations of such acts of violence altered too; in other words, levels of tolerance, or indeed intolerance, of certain forms of violence shifted according to circumstances and contexts. Political and military leaders commanded armies. But political and military authority increasingly extended into the exercise of interpersonal and individual violence and the right, as well as the power, to inflict death and injury. What is also clear, of course, is that this was as much about fear, anxiety, and imagined threat, as burgeoning scholarship in the realms of emotions history indicates.⁵⁴

Yet equally important was the moral rationale: reciprocal and collective security and cohesion, underwritten in many ways by the fear of sanction. Thus there emerged idealized visions of kingship. Yet potent interpretations of the past in

the nineteenth century – a time of creative if violent energy – contrasted with the rather more diffident, selective, and even anxious visions of historical violence in the twentieth. In more recent decades, developmental agendas have generally precluded more nuanced, sophisticated, and robust discussions of the historical role of violence over Africa's *longue durée*.

Notes

- 1 H. M. Stanley, *How I Found Livingstone* (London, 1872), p. 517.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 517–18; also London Missionary Society Archives, London (LMS): Central Africa, Incoming, Box 3: Southon to Thomson, 28 March 1880, encl., 'History, Country and People of Unyamwezi'.
- 3 I explore this in 'The Fragile Revolution: Rethinking War and Development in Africa's Violent Nineteenth Century', in E. Akeampong, R. H. Bates, N. Nunn, and J. Robinson (eds), *Africa's Development in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 2014).
- 4 For a discussion of the broader issues, see P. Manning, 'Africa and World Historiography', *Journal of African History*, 54:3 (2013).
- 5 The editors of the *Cambridge History of Africa* (8 vols, Cambridge, 1975–86), for example, chose 'c.1600' as the cut-off point between volumes 3 and 4 and 'c.1790' between volumes 4 and 5.
- 6 See for example J. Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa 1500–1800* (London, 1999); R. Smith, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Precolonial West Africa* (London, 1976).
- 7 J. Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge, 2007), chap. 1.
- 8 J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (London, 1990), pp. 80, 82, 106–7.
- 9 See for example D. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, a Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region* (Oxford, 1998).
- 10 This is the focus of local texts based on oral tradition: for example, A. Kagwa, *The Kings of Buganda*, ed. and trans. M. S. M. Kiwanuka (Nairobi, 1971); J. Nyakatura, *Anatomy of an African Kingdom: A History of Bunyoro-Kitara*, ed. G. N. Uzoigwe (New York, 1973); H. F. Morris, *The Heroic Recitations of the Bahima of Ankole* (Oxford, 1964).
- 11 R. J. Reid, 'War and Militarism in Pre-Colonial Buganda', *Azania*, 34:1 (1999).
- 12 See for example L. Mair, *Primitive Government* (London, 1962).
- 13 J. H. Speke, *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (Edinburgh and London, 1863).
- 14 It is a theme which pervades Kagwa, *Kings of Buganda*, for example.
- 15 J. Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1993).
- 16 The *Kebra Negast* – 'Chronicle of the Glory of the Kings' – is the Ethiopian national epic, assembled in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, and provides ideological justification for the righteous deployment of violence. See for example M. Brooks (ed. and trans.), *A Modern Translation of the Kebra Negast (The Glory of the Kings)* (Lawrenceville, NJ, 1995).
- 17 It is a view associated particularly with a monk, Abba Bahrey, whose 1593 chronicle 'History of the Galla' described the Oromo in terms of fear and loathing, but also with

- some admiration: see C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford (eds), *Some Records of Ethiopia, 1593–1646* (London, 1954).
- 18 These wars are described in a contemporary chronicle written by a Yemeni supporter of Ahmad, Shihab Al-Din Ahmad Arabfaqih: *The Conquest of Abyssinia: Futuh Al Habasa*, ed. and trans. P. L. Stenhouse (Addis Ababa, 2005). The events were also the focus of nineteenth-century European writing: for example S. Gobat, *Journal of Three Years' Residence in Abyssinia* (New York, 1969; 1st ed. 1851), p. 6off; A. Bulatovich, *Ethiopia Through Russian Eyes: Country in Transition 1896–1898*, ed. and trans. R. Seltzer (Lawrenceville, NJ, 2000), pp. 92–4.
 - 19 Father J. Lobo, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, trans. S. Johnson (London, 1789), p. 107; Gobat, *Journal*, pp. 81–3. See also D. Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (London, 2000).
 - 20 J. Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo: Civil War and Transition, 1641–1718* (Madison, WI, 1983); L. Heywood, 'Slavery and its Transformation in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491–1800', *Journal of African History*, 50:1 (2009).
 - 21 D. Birmingham, *Trade and Conflict in Angola: The Mbundu and their Neighbours under the Influence of the Portuguese 1483–1790* (Oxford, 1966), p. 66ff; J. Thornton, 'The Art of War in Angola, 1575–1680', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30:2 (1988).
 - 22 R. Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomy* (London, 1789), p. 137; R. Law (ed.), *Further Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England relating to the 'Slave Coast', 1681–1699* (Madison, WI, 1992), p. 55, entries 69 and 70.
 - 23 By Robin Law, for example, see: 'A West African Cavalry State: The Kingdom of Oyo', *Journal of African History*, 16:1 (1975); 'Horses, Firearms and Political Power in Pre-Colonial West Africa', *Past and Present*, 72 (1976); *The Oyo Empire, c.1600–c.1836: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford, 1977).
 - 24 I. Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1975).
 - 25 A selection of valuable contemporary accounts would include W. Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea* (London, 1734); W. Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea* (London, 1744); and A. Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy* (London, 1789). See also R. Law, 'Dahomey and the Slave Trade: Reflections on the Historiography of the Rise of Dahomey', *Journal of African History*, 27:2 (1986).
 - 26 These trends are explored in Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa*; on guns, see for example R. Kea, 'Firearms and Warfare on the Gold and Slave Coasts from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of African History*, 12:2 (1971) and more recently, G. Macola, *The Gun in Central Africa: A History of Technology and Politics* (Athens, OH, 2016).
 - 27 The degree of violence and destruction involved in the slave trade had long been a matter of dispute, not least among contemporary apologists for and critics of the trade itself: see for example Dalzel, *History of Dahomy* and T. F. Buxton, *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy* (London, 1967; 1st ed. 1839–40).
 - 28 J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and Portsmouth, NH, 1990).
 - 29 P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London, 1988); C. Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990–1992* (Oxford, 1992); G. Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and*

- the Rise of the West, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1996); M. Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford, 2009).
- 30 J. van Riebeeck, *The Journal of Jan Van Riebeeck*, ed. H. B. Thom (3 vols, Cape Town, 1952–58); and R. Ross, 'Khoesan and Immigrants: The Emergence of Colonial Society in the Cape, 1500–1800', in C. Hamilton, B. K. Mbenga, and R. Ross (eds), *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, vol. 1, *From Early Times to 1885* (Cambridge, 2010).
 - 31 N. Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (London, 1992); R. Price, *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge, 2008).
 - 32 This is movingly captured in Rian Malan's memoir, *My Traitor's Heart* (London, 1991).
 - 33 E. A. Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa* (London, 1975).
 - 34 See R. J. Reid, *Warfare in African History* (New York, 2012), chap. 5.
 - 35 Emperors Tewodros and Yohannes both historicized their own struggles to a marked degree, especially for foreign audiences: National Archives of the UK (UKNA) FO 881/1609 Rassam to Lord Stanley, 1 September 1868; UKNA FO 1/27B Yohannes to Queen Victoria, 10 August 1872.
 - 36 H. M. Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent* (2 vols, London, 1878), I; see also D. Henige, "'The Disease of Writing": Ganda and Nyoro Kinglists in a Newly Literate World', in J. Miller (ed.), *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone, 1980).
 - 37 L. Mphande, 'Heroic and Praise Poetry in South Africa', in F. Abiola Irele and S. Gikandi (eds), *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 2004).
 - 38 For example, M. Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (London, 1967).
 - 39 LMS Central Africa, Incoming, Box 3: Southon to Thomson, 28 March 1880, encl., 'History, Country and People of Unyamwezi'.
 - 40 Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent*, I, pp. 276–81; J. Yoder, 'The Quest for Kintu and the Search for Peace: Mythology and Morality in Nineteenth-Century Buganda', *History in Africa*, 15 (1988).
 - 41 This philosophy underpins F. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh and London, 1923).
 - 42 J. Chamberlain, 'The True Conception of Empire (1897)', in E. Boehmer (ed.), *Empire Writing: An Anthology of Colonial Literature 1870–1918* (Oxford, 1998); and in the same collection, R. Kipling, 'The White Man's Burden' (1899).
 - 43 D. Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and its Ironies* (New Haven, CT and London, 2016).
 - 44 M. Macmillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London, 2009).
 - 45 Author's fieldwork and informal interviews, Kampala, Uganda, August 2012; Yoweri Museveni, speech at the opening of a political seminar for NRC members, 6 September 1989, reproduced in Y. Museveni, *What is Africa's Problem?* (Minneapolis, 2000), p. 163; M. Mulondo, 'For the sins of Uganda, I repent – Museveni', *New Vision* (Kampala) (18 Oct. 2012).
 - 46 R. J. Reid, 'States of Anxiety: History and Nation in Modern Africa', *Past & Present*, 229 (2015).

- 47 I explore this in 'Horror, Hubris and Humanity: The International Engagement with Africa, 1914–2014', *International Affairs*, 90:1 (2014).
- 48 A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (Harlow, 1973), p. 10.
- 49 See for example M. K. Asante, *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony* (New York, 2007).
- 50 S. Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* (London, 2011).
- 51 J. Gray, 'Steven Pinker is wrong about violence and war', *Guardian* (13 Mar. 2015).
- 52 This was a key theme in a recent panel discussion to launch the new *Journal of African Military History* at the African Studies Association, Chicago, November 2017.
- 53 For a more nuanced discussion of civil wars, for example, as in some ways necessary, cleansing, and even constructive, see D. Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (New York, 2017).
- 54 For example: K. M. Fierke, 'Emotions in IR: the "Dog that did not Bark"': www.e-ir.info/2015/02/20/emotions-in-ir-the-dog-that-did-not-bark/ (accessed 10 Mar. 2020); R. Jeffries, *Reason and Emotion in International Ethics* (Cambridge, 2014); K. Booth and N. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (Basingstoke, 2008); O. Lowenheim and G. Heimann, 'Revenge in International Politics', *Security Studies*, 17:4 (2008).