

Introduction

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ONE OLD DEBATE—emanating from European cultural arrogance—has now subsided. This is the debate concerning the issue of whether Africa has a history at all. Even the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University may now wish to re-examine his notorious assertion:

“Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history... But at present there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness... and darkness is not a subject of history.”¹

But the argument that African history is only a “history of Europeans in Africa” can take a more subtle and dangerous form. In this latter form an analyst could indeed concede that Africa has a history independently of the Europeans—and go on to assert that the impact of Europe on Africa in a few decades has virtually obliterated almost all traces of that history in the lives and customs of the people. By this argument less than a century of European influence was enough to put an end to two or more millenia of African tradition and experience.

This blindness to the *continuities* of African history is more characteristic of political scientists and economists than of social anthropologists and historians. Among political scientists the study of “modernization” until recently was characterized by a belief that the changes inaugurated by the colonial experience had their own momentum, were desirable and were almost irreversible. Political scientists were so preoccupied with studying political change that they virtually forgot how to study political continuity.

Economists have similarly been relatively indifferent to the continuities of traditional economic behaviour in Africa. One five-year plan after another has floundered on this insensitivity to sociological and historical realities. And one economic projection after another has revealed that the study of development requires more than an expertise in the process of change; it also needs an understanding of the nature of resilience. Future targets can only be approximated after adequate allowance has been made for past origins.

The warrior tradition is of course only one aspect of African historical tradition. Even in its purely historical context in African societies of the past

1 Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Rise of Christian Europe” *Listener* (London), November 28, 1933, p. 871.

this tradition is only just beginning to be studied in depth. African military history—how traditional African states fought their wars and with what forms of organization—is still an underdeveloped field of study. But there is a growing interest in military history among West African historians, and increasingly among Eastern African scholars as well.

Clearly African societies varied enormously in military organization. Considerable additional work needs to be done if we are to grasp the range fully. *This collection of essays is primarily interested in the meeting point between culture, war and politics. The warrior tradition is precisely that meeting point.*

The warrior tradition is that sub-system of values and institutionalized expectations which define the military role of the individual in the defence of his society, the martial criteria of adulthood, and the symbolic obligations of manhood in time of political and military stress.

At one level the warrior tradition is a major link between the individual and society. It signifies the readiness of the eligible individual to sacrifice his life for his society. At another level the warrior tradition links each household with the wider community. In defending his own cattle or his own women from external raiders, the warrior is often fulfilling a *military* obligation as real as participating in a regular army.

The warrior tradition is also a link between culture and war. In some African societies a young man is not eligible for marriage unless he has risked his life in a martial endeavour. When reduced to precise evidence, the custom could mean that no man is really a man unless he has at least engaged in a mortal duel—and killed his opponent. In conditions of normative fluidity what is murder to, say, the Kenya police may be a prelude to matrimony through the eyes of the Kenya tribesman. Armed struggle, dance, romantic courting, betrothal, the right to sire children, protecting cattle and status in the community can all become one inter-related subsystem of values.

Dent Ocaya-Lakidi's, Judith Lynne Hanna's and Mazrui's essays in this collection have emphasized this cultural context of the warrior tradition. The linkages between culture and the warrior tradition encompass *means of production* (land and animals), *sexuality* (virility and marriage), *religion* (invocation of the supernatural), *aesthetics* (dance and song) and *political culture* (system of authority and allegiance).

The link with political culture in turn raises the whole issue of the origins of the state in Africa and how it relates to military factors in historical evolution. With the coming of statehood the warrior tradition becomes absorbed into a larger complex of military organization. Sometimes the individual warrior becomes no more than a cog in a military machine. But the warrior tradition as a sub-system of norms and perspectives may continue to condition military behaviour in spite of the enlargement of organization scale. G. N. Uzoigwe's, Warren Weinstein's and Mazrui's essays in the first section of this collection, touch upon some of the issues which thus link statehood with military history.

But when all is said and done war is primarily a theatre of *violence*. The warrior tradition has to be seen as in part a tradition for legitimizing certain

forms of violence. Claude E. Welch Jr. analyzes in both historical and political perspectives four forms of political violence. He examines these in terms of their association with the warrior, the rebel, the guerrilla and the putchist in Africa's experience. Victor C. Uchendu looks at violence in terms which go beyond politics, the warrior tradition and collective purpose, and raises instead questions about aggressivity in relation to culture. Mazrui's essay on "The Warrior Tradition and the Masculinity of War" asks whether there is a link between the fact that most soldiers are men and the fact that most crimes of physical violence are committed by men. "Is this link between *Warriorhood* and *Mafiahood* accidental? Or are there organic interconnections between them?"

Aidan Southall is dismayed by the warrior tradition. He is not convinced that the warrior tradition served Africa well before colonization, and is not convinced either that it has much relevance to contemporary African realities. Southall's position serves as a useful word of caution against romanticizing the warrior tradition. Southall is also sounding a warning against carrying too far the search for precolonial historical continuities in contemporary African experience.

On the other hand, those who are less sceptical about the warrior tradition may be convinced that even the ordinary, rurally-recruited guerrilla fighter in the remote areas of modern Zimbabwe, Namibia or Angola has probably often perceived combat and war in terms which have been influenced by his ethno-cultural universe. And that universe does bear the imprint of precolonial as well as colonial continuities.

Section IV of this collection deals in part with this issue. Modern liberation struggles have had points of contact with the tradition of African primary resistance going back to the nineteenth century and beyond. Mazrui's essay in this section compares the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and his strategy of *passive resistance*, the impact of the warrior tradition on African *primary resistance*, and the influence of Marxism on *revolutionary resistance*.

M. Louise Pirouet reflects on the specific experiences of the Anya Nya in the Sudan and the Mau Mau war in Kenya. She examines the conditions which give rise to political commitment and armed resistance, and explores some of the experiments in counter-insurgency devised by the governments of the Sudan and of colonial Kenya when faced with armed insurrection.

But war—especially in contemporary Africa—has broad international implications even when it seems to be primarily domestic. The civil wars of Nigeria (1967–1970) and Angola (1975–1976) illustrated this even better than did the civil war in the Sudan (1956–1972). J. Isawa Elaigwu takes on the challenge of examining the linkages between domestic politics and diplomatic intrigues, between internal factors and external repercussions. He examines the civil wars of Nigeria and Angola in this broad perspective, and draws conclusions which may have relevance for other areas of civil strife in Africa in the years ahead. Elaigwu's essay is not explicitly on the warrior tradition but it provides the meeting point between war, politics and modern diplomacy.

All collections of essays are exposed to the charge that they have not covered enough of the field they ostensibly sought to examine.

Secondly, all collections of essays are inevitably guilty of imbalance. Even the areas which are covered are not necessarily dealt with in correct proportion.

This collection has not been able to escape these two pitfalls. In a work of multiple authors, with different research interests and different intellectual perspectives, imbalance is natural. What ought to be remembered is that the same imbalance can sometimes be academically rewarding. No art critic today is likely to affirm that symmetry is the be-all and end-all of aesthetic excellence. Similarly, evaluators of works of scholarship may sometimes have to moderate their own preoccupation with symmetry. In trying to promote further understanding of the nature of the warrior tradition in modern Africa this editor has sought to bring together not only perspectives explicitly on the warrior, but also intimately related perspectives on violence, aggression, sexual division of labour, guerrilla struggle, revolution, manhood, and the diplomacy of warfare.

In this collection the warrior is in one sense overshadowed by some of the bigger issues examined by the authors. But in another sense the warrior tradition underlies all those other issues, linking precolonial combat to modern warfare, mediating between culture and politics, affirming the individual's obligations to society, defining the functions of men and women in the social order, and constantly drawing and redrawing the boundaries between war and peace in human experience.

This is a large claim to make for the warrior tradition. But then, the warrior is a large subject in Africa's history.