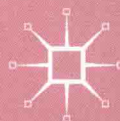




EPISTEMOLOGIES OF AFRICAN CONFLICTS

Violence, Evolutionism, and the War in Sierra Leone

Zubairu Wai



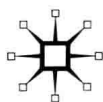
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Epistemologies of African Conflicts

*For those who lost their lives during the Sierra Leone civil war
and for those who survived and continue to believe in
the possibilities of today and tomorrow*

*. . . and for V. Y. Mudimbe,
a great scholar and friend.*

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Through a chance encounter, Vermonja Alston introduced me to V. Y. Mudimbe’s work. I am grateful to her and *The Invention of Africa* for bringing me V. Y.’s friendship. This book is a gift to V. Y. Mudimbe for his contribution to African scholarship. My debt to him, partially evident from the content of this book, is enormous. His advice, encouragement, and willingness to read several drafts of the entire manuscript at times when he was besieged by his busy schedule, as well as his patient and penetrating comments, forced me to clarify my positions and consider seriously the implications of my arguments. Though I did not always take his advice, without V. Y. Mudimbe this would have been a very different book, if it was at all possible. Needless to say, the conception of this book, its strengths and weaknesses, are entirely my responsibility.

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Foreword

How not to begin with a thank you to the author? First, for inviting this foreword. Second, for allowing me to reflect on his idea of engaging a conversation with *The Invention of Africa* that might go beyond its particular concerns. And third, for the challenge represented by his research. They are all good reasons for conceiving the foreword, a response to Zuba Wai.

Your book is a solid and original statement. One can praise it for its courage. It addresses the violence that erupted in Sierra Leone, making it an event in relation to positions that have accounted for it. These include the history of the country and the diagnoses that focused on its experience of violence. Technical or unassuming, benign or prejudiced, they are examined in a research of war with respect to peace. You depict well such a complex experience of violence and, at the same time, in your own way, you reformulate it in a mode that inscribes you uneasily in an intellectual exercise of violence.

Indeed, your research raises questions about African studies. African studies are disciplinary practices that are multiple views with agendas relying on their own histories and orientations. Specializations, they meet on a horizon, each with its own focus. Here is, for example, anthropology or history; there, demography and literature. Your study was conceived within the field of political science, under a specialization in security issues. By the force of circumstances, from the very beginning, you have been dealing with the demands of a transdisciplinary vision. This perspective has an advantage. It has made you extremely attentive to a variety of Africanist discourses, and you have handled them brilliantly.

With regards to *The Invention of Africa*, your vision is more specific. Referring to a study published more than twenty years ago, which was concerned mainly with written documents, your contribution is both more open and more inclusive. It analyzes the written and brings in perspectives of politicians and scholars, reports of journalists, and testimonials from the practice of everyday life. You bring them all in a scholarly analysis that contributes to both a history and a sociology of Sierra Leonean cultural affairs. In sum, you have reappraised a multiplicity of information about Sierra Leone. From heuristic demands, one

admires your acute *vigilance épistémologique*, to use a concept of Gaston Bachelard, with reference to the manner with which you settle issues of explanatory principles.

You are a man of hypotheses. Your approach is very clear. First of all, one sees that, born from the frustration of a Sierra Leonean citizen, your perspective is critical of traditional paths to explanation. Second, one understands that, a revisitation of the idea of Sierra Leone, your view is equally an exacting interrogation of the social science discourse as well as a lesson from perspectives in the history of Sierra Leone. All these are assumed with elegance in a personal rendering of the conflict and the work for liberal peace. From this angle, one cannot but be grateful to you for this contribution, which is a magnificent political statement.

Remarkable, this type of inquiry reflects currents in African studies. At the same time, it qualifies its disposition from Claude Lévi-Strauss's report about the complementarity between historical and ethnographic studies. But this inspiration is mainly deduced from the consideration of history and anthropology that serves as introduction to the first volume of *Structural Anthropology*. Well informed of present-day trends on questions about history, your work includes debates on the "colonial library" and the controverted notion of "the coming anarchy." It avoids the ambiguity of ethnic issues. Convincingly, it brings about methodic procedures that contribute with efficacy to featuring constructions of Sierra Leone as a nation and of Sierra Leone as an identity, confirmed by a difficult civil war. Your study is indeed supported by an empirical commitment. It advances hypotheses from local, integrative forces. These allow you an evaluation of cultural shortcomings in African studies' qualifications of the Sierra Leone crisis.

One reads clearly your central point on how theoretical demands should meet your persuasive view of a crisis in African political economy. It has references about, on the one hand, the conflicts of interpretation you explore concerning the Africanist accounting of the war and, on the other hand, the interrogation that magnifies your position concerning the question "Is there a state in Sierra Leone?" vis-à-vis your analysis of the mirror effects of the conflict. Concretely, the issue comes down to the tension that upsets you between evolutionist preconceptions and functionalist contentions.

This angle might make your reader uneasy for a number of reasons. You have a strong voice apropos traditional political science. One agrees with your guiding theme. Namely, you are right in considering that a research on Sierra Leone can deal with its object as a configuration in its own right and that it should be decoded from its own internal structural conditions and possible norms of explanation. This is your viewpoint. You propose analytical grids that indicate ways for interpreting causes and contradictions in the Sierra Leone civil war.

The heart of your stance, the demonstration of the book, contributes to an evaluation that comes to designate an epistemological violence. This situation would have been characterizing most conflicting affirmations about the Sierra Leone civil war.

The main idea of your intellectual position is a reservation about the power of intellectual genealogies. Reading your work carefully, one understands your narrative from three angles and procedures they authorize: external expectations of any study on Africa, disciplinary paradigms, and prevalent ethical principles. With regard to Sierra Leone, you force your reader to come to terms with these three angles—specifically, accepting them from the legality of disciplinary discussions. In African studies, as in other areas, they might in principle be dissociated.

One touches here the main originality of your book. It is a position concerning the pervasive power of argumentations using the idea of an ontological anteriority. This concept, to be understood in relation to the coherence of an analysis, was recently used in a publication of Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *L’Affaire de la Philosophie Africaine*. In reference to the mentioned procedures—external expectations, intellectual paradigms, and ethical norms—consider how Eboussi uses them as a key to deconstructing the “*Bantou Problématique*.” It leads to the heart of the issue. In a contextual argument, about an intellectual plan, an ontological anteriority simply functions as a motivation and an instrument in justification. This might take place in the history of ideas, in the practice of disciplines, or in discussions about an ethical presupposition. The ontological anteriority, another name for an ontological seniority, can operate in any context that might or might not pay attention to a sociocultural dimension. A good example analyzed by Eboussi concerns an impeccable illustration. The authority of Reverend Placide Tempels in Christian missionizing infers the fact of a cultural seniorship in faith. From a relation to what justifies the mission, a seniority in the belief and knowledge of the true God, the missionary speaks with the certainty of a valid authority. The seniorship translates a rank of inscription in the tradition of Christianity. In missionizing, it fuses with what validates it historically.

One can easily transfer the metaphor to African studies and to the paradox of postcolonial discourses: on one side, the myth of science, and on the other, that of its critique. The ontological seniorship, or anteriority, would stand historically as being an obvious prerogative. In effect, it claims to represent a faithful inscription in a lineage of descent. In science, as in life, one is always inscribed in a relation that explicates descendance. Any genealogical measure enacts the truth of an inscription in a lineage. Understandably, it is often translated by a biological metaphor. One sees how such a measure might reflect itself on the *a priori* of a scientific authority. The history of African studies could be a good

illustration of such an image. One doesn't need a Placide Tempels in order to interpret the history of social sciences, or to revisit the debate on historical and ahistorical societies. From this point of view, you are perfectly right in raising the issue and debating the question of how to address the conditions of the history of war and the conditions of a history of peace in Sierra Leone.

One comes to understand what could qualify as heretical in your study. Indeed, some people might consider it an accident. There is a real elegance in the manner by which you bring your autobiographical descriptions in the cultural space you are analyzing. A clear detachment defines you as an "eye." Your position is one of a subject, an African researcher, a Sierra Leonean scholar. You look at yourself within the space of your scientific practice. This is a hard project. Objectively, your biological data contribute to a credibility of your perception. But it is your subjective voice that justifies your reading, within the space of both the requirements of a scientific project and the faithfulness of the statement, within your own cultural milieu.

Your vision actualizes an intellectual attitude that defines its experience from a fidelity to both a discipline and a culture. Confusion is always possible. Even in the success stories of positive sciences, technical features sometimes come to engage a dominant cultural economy. The social sciences have tended to invest their objectives from the progressive transformations of an ontological anteriority. Going native, for instance, might be a paradoxical expansion of ways in accommodating manners of an authority.

This is the main question of method in your book. It challenges the assumptions of an ontological anteriority. You question its determining fundamentals in the conceptualization of scientific analysis and, in this case, the African studies hypotheses in interpreting the civil war in Sierra Leone. This is to say that your investigation is a testimony. A lively critique in security studies, it is also a lively demonstration in a critique of an ontological anteriority, or seniority, within a concrete cultural space. Implicit, the critique serves well your decoding of the Sierra Leone civil war. Explicit, the critique serves, as well, as an approach to the conflict of interpretations in the social sciences in this specific case.

Structurally, any senior is closer to the origin than any junior. This is to say that often an ontological seniority conveys rationally the virtues of an origin. This is basically and supposedly its originality. In other words, on the one hand, there is this notion of seniority that refers to that of a source and on the other hand, the same notion would suppose virtues of the same source. One sees here the temptation of any essentialist claim to authenticity. From your study, however, and from its epistemological vigilance, one would prudently hypothesize that any normative claim to a genealogical authenticity could imply also a faithful inscription in a living tradition. This brings to mind the idea of

a line in filiations, ethnic and cultural, scientific and intellectual. And loom here the haunting excessive pleas that have been exploiting biological images. That was true in Sierra Leone. That has also been true in practices of the social science.

From this angle, one measures the remarkable statement your book represents and the critical challenges it voices for the social sciences. And also from this angle, indeed, one admires both the measure of your disciplined practice of the social sciences and the measure of your exemplary devotion to Sierra Leone, the idea and the reality.

V-Y. M. MUDIMBE

June 4, 2012

Duke University

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INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone, Conflict, and the Will to Truth

The real problem seems to be about epistemological configurations and the types of discursive practices they make possible.

—V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*

The themes and questions that animate this book emerged from my frustration with the way contemporary African conflicts have come to be understood. I had originally planned to write a book on the Sierra Leonean civil war as a way of finding answers to some of the very difficult questions that have continued to cloud understanding of what happened in that country in the 1990s. Armed conflict broke out in Sierra Leone in March 1991 when insurgents calling themselves the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) crossed the border from Liberia and initiated an insurgency against the All People's Congress (APC) government of Joseph Momoh. Initially restricted to the countryside, the conflict gradually spread until it engulfed the entire country. By the time it ended in 2001, tens of thousands of people had lost their lives; thousands more had been maimed; atrocities of horrific proportions had been committed; widespread destructions of lives and property had taken place; governments had been convulsively jolted and toppled, and violence and war, in their nastiest proportions, had taken hold of Sierra Leonean society.

I was just about to complete high school when the war broke out, was in university when it started to intensify and spread across the country, and was a high school teacher when it ended. As I experienced it, the war was a labyrinth of contradictions and paradoxes; of confusing tales of deceptions, subterfuge, and betrayal; of collective misrepresentations, conflicting narratives, and contentious interpretations heightened by a multiplicity of competing, contradictory, and overlapping interests, paradoxes, and complexes. At other times, it presented

possibilities for political renewal as the war-wary population, struggling to find meaning in the carnage that had taken over their society, resisted the brutality of the insurgency.

The war in Sierra Leone was difficult and puzzling, and to this day, questions concerning the agency, timing, and nature of the war have continued to haunt understanding of the Sierra Leonean conflict: who were the rebels and why did they commit such appalling atrocities against the very people they claimed to be fighting for? Why did the war unfold the way it did? Why did it become so destructively violent to the point that every faction involved in it resorted to similar pattern of violence and atrocities? What was the relationship between the various warring factions, and how could the multiple contradictory and perplexing complexes that animated the conflict be explained? These types of questions initially consumed my intellectual energy when I began investigating the war. However, my attention was soon drawn to a different set of concerns when I started to detect a fundamental disconnect between my experiences, having lived through the war, and the accounts that were purporting to explain it.

The Representations of Violence and the Violence of Representation

The war is understood as a specific manifestation of a larger global phenomenon: the upsurge of what are now widely, even if problematically, regarded as “new wars”—that is, a new kind of intrastate violence in the post–Cold War era. Unlike “old wars” (believed to have been shaped and dictated by Cold War superpower rivalry), “new wars” are said to be an admixture of violence, terrorism, and organized crime that disqualify them from being conceptually defined in the mode of traditional warfare. Said to collapse the local and the global and to blur the distinction between the private and the public through transnational networks of actors who engage in profitable crime under the cover of war and organized violence, “new wars” are thought to portend a dangerous and atavistic future for the world (Kaldor 2001; Duffield 2001; Munkler 2005; van Creveld 1991; Kaplan 1994, 2000).

The war in Sierra Leone, like many of the contemporary conflicts in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South, is seen as an archetypal example of this new type of warfare. But it is also seen as an example of the savage violence typical of the African continent. Removing the war from any meaningful sociohistorical and political contexts that informs it, these representations obscure the complex structures and power relations that undergirded it from start to finish. Politics, which structures every social process, gets either completely written over or removed from the realm of the political and placed in the realm of the pathological, so that one encounters in these accounts disturbing notions about

Sierra Leone's implacable alterity (as part of a larger something called "Africa"), together with the deformity of its political and social formations.

In mainstream media representations, for example, it is the particularly disturbing aspects of the conflict that are isolated, overdramatized, and presented as the overarching reality. The images and stories reported are not only decontextualized and excised from all meaningful sociohistorical contexts but also presented in a manner that conforms to and reinforces the already-held assumptions, ideas, biases, and stereotypes about the continent and its people. In these accounts, Sierra Leone is the generic and undifferentiated African state, with the Sierra Leonean person, himself or herself also the generic African, completely essentialized as either viscerally violent or hopelessly hapless and helpless. At the same time, the reality in Sierra Leonean society is cast as a struggle between murderous villainy and wretched victimhood. Sierra Leone, writes Greg Campbell in *Blood Diamonds*, for example, is "a writhing hive of killers, villains and wretched victims" (2002: 32).

Like media representations, scholarly reflections and policy debates also give credence to these disturbing and perverse images in accounting for the conflict. In academic discourses, a number of different theoretical approaches and explanatory models have emerged to explain the conflict, all of which have been preoccupied with looking, in the words of Mark Duffield, "for causes and motives, and like Victorian butterfly collectors, construct[ing] lists and typologies of the different species identified. Ideas based on poverty, communication breakdown, resources competition, social exclusion, criminality, and so on are widely accepted among strategic actors as providing an explanation. At the same time, various forms of collapse, chaos and regression are seen as the outcome" (2001: 13).

With specific reference to the war in Sierra Leone, three clusters of theoretical approaches and explanatory models have been especially dominant and influential.¹

The first of these approaches is the "coming anarchy" or "new barbarism and ethnic hatred" thesis largely credited to Robert Kaplan (1994, 2000). As will soon be evident, this approach is a crude, cultural reductionist and environmental determinist perspective that stresses the anomic nature of conflicts. Arguing that the end of the so-called Cold War has created an opportunity for the catalytic exertions of long-suppressed ethnoidentitarian hatred into violent and intractable conflicts, especially in the Balkans and Africa, new barbarism conflates neo-Malthusian postulates with notions of culture clash fanned by ethnic hatred and resource competition. With respect to Sierra Leone, where this coming anarchy has supposedly already taken hold and where we hence find the archetypical example of this new type of barbarism, this perspective paints an apocalyptic image of demographic distress and resource scarcity