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Africa's wars of liberation Some historiographical reflections

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This essay offers some preliminary reflections on the ways in which scholars have considered African wars of liberation, that is to say organised, armed campaigns which have been widely perceived to have as their aim the establishment of some sort of collective assertion of self-choice in government, most often interpreted in terms of the rejection of authority wielded by foreigners, especially European colonialists. As with most subjects in contemporary history, it is not only professional scholars who are responsible for the extant literature on this subject, but also politicians, journalists and others who have influenced one another and have contributed to our overall understanding of liberation wars.

This is a topic on which Rob Buijtenhuijs has made a significant contribution, initially through his work on the 1950s Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya, and later through two books on the Frolinat-led insurgency in Chad¹. His most recently published works have concentrated on the political processes connected with the introduction of a multi-party system and formal elements of democracy in Chad². During the course of this work he has come to question the very notion that armed insurgents are primarily to be understood as people in rational pursuit of specific ideals, emphasising rather the elements of contingency and confusion which are prominent in times of armed insurrection or civil war³. This gradual shift in his thinking suggests that while Buijtenhuijs has maintained the interest in political emancipation which has been such a central feature of his work, he has over the course of time become somewhat disillusioned by the politics of armed struggle. If this is so, then he is certainly not alone in this regard, as we shall see.

For present purposes, a useful way of approaching this subject – which may at first sight appear tangential, but which is of great relevance – is to

1. Buijtenhuijs, R., 1971, 1978, 1987a

2. Buijtenhuijs, R., 1993, 1998b

3. Buijtenhuijs, R., 1996.

consider some of the general assumptions which have been commonly applied to African history and which have served as a framework for a great deal of writing about Africa, including in fields which are not concerned with historical reconstruction in the first instance but with other areas of academic inquiry, such as in sociology and political science. This inquiry constitutes the first part of the present paper. The second and third sections consider more directly some of the ways in which scholars have considered the historical significance and even the moral worth of those organised campaigns of violence which, ostensibly at least, have had as their goal the liberation of some part of the population. This discussion comes to the conclusion that there has for some years been a growing perception among writers on the subject that many self-proclaimed liberators in Africa have achieved rather little of what they promised. This scepticism is combined with an alarm in many quarters at the scale of violence in Africa in recent years, and also with an increasing difficulty experienced by many commentators in reaching a satisfactory understanding of the nature or purpose of some recent episodes of large-scale violence. Together, these doubts or uncertainties have resulted in a number of new approaches to writing on wars in Africa. The fourth and last section of the paper suggests some new trends in historical interpretation which have been applied to various parts of the world and which might, it would seem, be usefully applied to Africa as well.

Periods of African history

Although Africa is an ancient continent, in terms both of geology and human occupation, the writing of its history is a strikingly recent enterprise. In fact the systematic study of African history by professional historians – in short, academic history-writing – began only in the mid-twentieth century. To be sure, long before then both Africans and non-Africans had written chronicles, memoirs and travel guides or other texts containing some historical material, and it could be argued that recognisable histories of parts of Africa were being published already in the seventeenth century⁴. The nineteenth century in particular saw some notable attempts both by Africans and by others to write histories of various parts of the continent on conventional chronological lines, such as William Ellis's *History of Madagascar* (1833) or Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* (1897)⁵. Nevertheless, it remains true to say that the production by Africans of serviceable narratives of times past was done almost entirely by word of mouth until well into the twentieth century. Before that time there were rather few Africans who could read and write, and fewer still accomplished

4. Vansina, J., 1994, pp. 40-59.

5. Johnson, S., 1921, was completed in 1897 but published only later.

scholars with the leisure necessary for historical research. As for foreigners, few had the right combination of time, materials, and inclination to undertake a rigorous examination of the African past, although the early colonial period saw plenty of publications by European scholars and administrators of ethnographic material containing some historical data.

Only in 1948 was the first university post in African history created, at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and this event is generally considered to be the first clear evidence that African history was achieving at least a degree of recognition as a legitimate subject among professional scholars, although sometimes in the face of considerable reticence⁶. It was exciting to be one of the generation pioneering the academic study of African history; such, at least, is the impression gained from reading the memoirs of those European historians who were influential in the period and who could be regarded as having created space for African history in professional academic circles⁷. (What African scholars or other Africans thought of this great historiographical venture is less easy to determine since they have been less forthcoming in producing their autobiographies.) Collectively, a relatively small band of professional historians operating from universities in the third quarter of the twentieth century, African and non-African alike, was able to create the outlines of an academically respectable view of the past of what Victorians used to call the Dark Continent. A great deal of the work of the generation of academic pioneers continues to govern the way in which Africa's history is conceived among scholars of all disciplines and to find reflection in a wider body of opinion.

Perhaps the most basic of all the conventions established by the first wave of professional Africanist historians is the notion that African history may be divided into the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial or independent periods. At bottom, this is no more than an assertion that the establishment of colonial rule marked some sort of major feature in the course of African history, an observation so difficult to refute that even today, forty years after the independence of many African countries, most observers would almost certainly still agree with it. But the fact that it remains helpful to this day to suppose that it is possible to make some sort of meaningful distinction between colonial and precolonial periods of African history should not lead us to regard an intellectual convention as though it were itself a phenomenon of the same type as a specific historical fact. The unearthing of historical data and their attribution to periods of time which are deemed to have some sort of retrospective unity or coherence – the essential activity of academic historians – always tends to apply a layer of ideological interpretation to the actions of historical figures who may not have been aware that they were

6. Some US universities had previously had professional teachers of what would now be called African American studies and many black American intellectuals had drawn on African history in their work. Melville Herskovits is generally regarded as the first US academic Africanist to have had substantial influence outside the established tradition of African American studies. Cf. Zeleza, P.T., 1997.

7. Deschamps, H., 1975; Vansina, J., *op. cit.*; Oliver, R., 1997.

living in such periods and who, even if they were conscious of it, may have acted as they did in pursuit of objectives quite foreign to the preoccupations of later writers. Just as King Richard III was not aware that he was closing the period of English medieval history when he lay dying at the battle of Bosworth in 1485, so, to take an African example, the great Malinke warlord Samory Touré was not aware that he was creating a reputation as a proto-nationalist freedom fighter when he raided for slaves and forcibly converted tens of thousands of people to Islam through a wide swathe of central West Africa in the 1880s⁸. The imposition of any sort of intellectual order on a mass of historical data always involves some sort of theoretical or ideological assumptions... if, that is, we are to accept the existence of such things as clear historical facts at all, which some historians are loath to do on philosophical grounds⁹.

In short, we should not forget that the fundamental chronological categories which historians create or identify and subsequently use are in fact later impositions on masses of historical facts. They acquire their significance only with the benefit of hindsight. In practice, however, these classifications tend to gain the status of established truth as they are used and re-used by authors and teachers and their readers or students. To take an obvious example, the widely-used European convention that there exist ancient, medieval and modern periods of history clearly represents some sort of supposition that each of these three periods of time had (or has) some definable qualitative difference, some property peculiar to its own time, which makes it possible and meaningful to distinguish one period from another. To inquire what these properties may be is to plunge into an intellectual current which goes back some two hundred years, characterised by a view that the world has progressed over the centuries towards a higher plane, in the fields of human social and economic organisation as well as in the evolution of species. This has become such a fundamental tenet of belief among most people in the industrialised countries of Europe and North America that it is sometimes assumed to be almost a law of nature.

It is important to note, however, that not all people and not all societies hold a general belief in the progress of humankind. On the contrary, some cultures have tried to keep their world as nearly static as possible¹⁰, and others have believed that humankind has in fact degenerated through the centuries or that history is cyclical. The idea held by most Europeans and North Americans today that there has been progress from antiquity through the middle ages to the modern period has been an essential underpinning to virtually all categories of Western thought, perhaps since the Enlightenment, and most certainly since the mid-nineteenth century¹¹. So firm is this chronological bedrock, and the idea of linear progress contained in it, that it

8. Person Y., 1968-75. The first president of Guinea, Ahmed Sékou Touré, claimed descent from Samory Touré.

9. Jenkins, K., 1991.

10. Cf. Cohn, N., 1993.

11. Pomper, P., Elphick, R.H., and Vann, R. T., 1998, esp. the essay by William Green on pp. 53-65.

is hardly possible to think in terms of ancient, medieval and modern periods of history without simultaneously evoking the idea that humankind (or at least Europeans, for whom and in respect of whom this chronology was originally constructed) has progressed over the years in some sense. If more people today than a hundred years ago might question the notion that Europe has seen a moral improvement over time, the vast majority of Europeans would no doubt still subscribe to the notion that an increase in wealth, life expectancy and technological capacity represents progress of some sort.

When the academic pioneers of African history formalised the division of African history into precolonial, colonial, and independent or postcolonial categories, they were endowing their subject-matter with many of the implications of such a linear, chronological categorisation of their material. This is not to imply that these historians were necessarily naive or blinkered for, as one French historian wrote at the time, any history based on chronology in the European tradition inevitably carried certain implications for Africa's insertion in the world. The creation of such a history, Henri Brunschwig noted, "offers to all peoples a rational and critical construction... If Africans wish to create a history today, it is a sign that they wish to enter into a global system of interactions, the rules of which have to a large extent been written in the West¹²". It is more than coincidental, then, that the creation of a new history of Africa by an elite of professional historians in the 1950s and 1960s was taking place at the very moment that sovereign states were being created in Africa as full members of the recognised family of nations: the historiographical and political elements were connected. A continent which had previously been regarded by Europeans as having no history worth knowing was now claiming its full place in the literate, intellectual, historical imagination of the world. It was not only African leaders and intellectuals or foreign Afrophiles who were keen to see more extensive research and publication on African societies and their history, but also university funding committees, research institutes and others in the world's richest countries.

As perhaps the most popular of Africanist historians put it, in a book full of optimism published in 1959, Africa's history was beginning anew with the proclamations of independence¹³. But not all Africanist scholars, by any means, were enthusiasts for the victory of nationalism in Africa, since there were some who regarded the colonial achievement with considerable respect¹⁴. Many of the new foreign specialists in African studies in European universities were former colonial administrators themselves, who could hardly be expected to renounce half their life's work, like the historian Hubert Deschamps in Paris, or they came from colonial families, like his London counterpart, Roland Oliver¹⁵. Nor were all Africanist historians primarily concerned with the study of what was becoming known as "the

12. Brunschwig, H., 1962, pp. 874-5.

13. Davidson, B., 1970, pp. 266-8.

14. E.g. Gann, L., 1993.

15. Deschamps, H., *op. cit.*; Oliver, R., *op. cit.*

colonial period", and in fact one of the most important achievements of the first generation of professional academic historians of Africa was to produce studies of the distant African past, of a time long before the creation of European colonial administrations¹⁶. Nevertheless, even a specialist in ancient history like Cheikh Anta Diop, famous for his theories on the African heritage from ancient Egypt¹⁷, was operating within the conventions governing the modern Western division of historical knowledge into chronological series, subscribing to a common set of rules concerning the nature of historical reality and of time. Once again, these are not universal norms, since other societies have used other ways of conceiving of what their ancestors did. (We may note in passing that the exploration of how oral histories were constructed in Africa was in fact another of the notable achievements of the early academic historians of Africa¹⁸.)

Thus, European, American or (increasingly from the 1950s) African historians ; specialists in ancient history or writers on present times ; historians, political scientists or other scholars : all of these, using basic Western scientific concepts concerning time and change, tended to subscribe to certain common assumptions about the African past. Prominent among these was that the colonial period had a deep historical meaning in the sense of forming some sort of dividing line in Africa's historical development. Exactly what the historical significance of colonialism might be was a matter for debate, but all commentators were convinced that it marked a watershed of some sort. The concepts of Africa's precolonial, colonial and postcolonial history were established.

The liberation of Africa

History, while making a crucial intellectual contribution, was probably not the most significant academic discipline which interested itself in emerging new fields of study in Africa from the mid-twentieth century onwards, as Africa became the site of over 50 new sovereign states. Nor were historians by any means the only academic observers who developed an interest in, and often a personal sympathy with, the emerging African nationalist movements which, from the mid-1950s onwards, were acquiring control of these sovereign states in the act of independence or

16. At its inception in 1963, the Organisation of African Unity issued a call for the publication of a comprehensive history of Africa, an initiative which was to lead to the UNESCO African history series, authored largely by Africans, which eventually finished publication in 1993. See Vansina, J., 1993. Other institutions and even individuals have also attempted to write comprehensive histories of Africa, such as the eight-volume *Cambridge History of Africa*, begun in 1965 and completed in 1986. On the latter, Oliver, R., *op. cit.*, pp. 294-6.

17. Diop, C.A., 1960.

18. The pioneering work was Vansina, J., 1961.

decolonisation. Political scientists, naturally enough, were centrally concerned to investigate the nature of these new phenomena, and so too were sociologists and many others, while anthropology remained the discipline most specialised in the analysis of African societies.

Some of the foreign writers most full of enthusiasm for the new political order in Africa employed their talents, in a spirit of deliberate political engagement, to create a scholarship which they intended to be supportive of African nationalism. Basil Davidson, for example, probably did more than any other individual to popularise in the English-speaking world a heroic view of the African past strongly coloured by his nationalist sympathies¹⁹. As for Africans themselves, some outstanding intellectuals actually became leading politicians, such as the anthropologists Jomo Kenyatta and K.B. Busia or the poets Léopold Sédar Senghor and Agostinho Neto.

If we can understand why many intellectuals, African and non-African, were inclined to see nationalism as a form of progress, it is even more easy to see why the governors of newly created African states might have been interested in the creation of academic historical accounts which could serve as charters of sovereignty and support their claim to respectability in Western intellectual circles. Nor is it hard to understand why, given their use of nationalism as a mobilising force, they often wished to emphasise their anti-colonial credentials. More difficult to trace is the influence of the accounts of African nationalism which began to circulate in academic books and journals on the various popular narratives which circulated among African populations who, as in the past, continued to form their historical views largely on the basis of oral tradition. The dialectic between official and popular historical narratives is certainly a field worthy of further study. What influence nationalist historiography had on the mass of Africans remains open to question.

The development of a new academic vision of African nationalism, sensitive to the claims of African nationalists themselves, called into question some views which were then current in European seats of learning. At bottom, the point being contested between enthusiasts for the new vision of African history and others who were less persuaded of its validity was the real meaning of colonialism. Until the 1960s it was widely accepted among European historians that the imposition of colonial rule marked some sort of progress for Africa in the sense of a decisive break with all that had gone before. Those Africans who took up arms to resist the imposition of colonial rule were therefore easily conceived of by imperial historians as having acted in defence of a traditional way of life which was doomed to disappear. Representative of this view was, for example, the account published by Robinson and Gallagher, two eminent British historians of empire, in *The New Cambridge Modern History* in 1962²⁰. They considered that the

19. Basil Davidson has published over 20 books on African history and politics and was also the presenter of a successful BBC-TV series. For some short autobiographical elements, see Davidson, B., 1994, pp. 97-102.

20. Robinson, R., and Gallagher, J., 1962.

establishment of colonial rule marked a rupture with previous periods of African history so complete that the nationalism which eventually replaced colonialism could only be interpreted as a force without substantial indigenous roots, developed by a new generation of African politicians and intellectuals who had been formed by the colonial powers themselves and who had thereby learned how to operate the colonial systems to their advantage. They were deemed to have little in common with the first generation of resisters of colonial rule, those of the late nineteenth century who had opposed alien rule not in the name of a modern political force but in the cause of tradition.

The most influential criticism of the conventional European notion that African nationalism was a force created by colonialism itself, in the image of the coloniser, was conveyed in a series of works by Terence Ranger, a British historian who had worked in colonial Rhodesia. Expelled from Rhodesia on account of his African nationalist sympathies, this prolific writer and lecturer went on to head the most dynamic school of Africanist historiography within the continent, in Dar es Salaam, before eventually taking a chair at Oxford. A seminal conference on African history held at Dar es Salaam in 1965 resulted in publication under Ranger's editorship of a series of papers on emerging themes in African history, several of which pointed to the significance of armed resistance to colonial rule²¹. Ranger published on his own account a two-part essay on armed resistance to colonial rule in the *Journal of African History*²² which became an instant classic. In it, he connected the history of what had happened when Europeans first imposed colonial rule on Africa with what occurred two or three generations later at the time of independence, when modern nationalist movements emerged in opposition to colonial or settler rule. Both sets of events he saw as part of one long process of confrontation between African societies and the forces of colonialism. Ranger began his article in the *Journal of African History* with an attack on Robinson and Gallagher, who had represented early resistance to colonial rule as "romantic, reactionary struggles against the facts", in contrast to modern independence movements which they termed "deft nationalisms", since they were "operating in the idiom of the Westerners²³." Ranger, rather than emphasising the contrast between older and newer forms of resistance, preferred to see all forms of resistance to colonialism as essentially similar. All were related to nationalism, itself the flowering of the tradition of independence. He labelled the early resisters of colonial rule as organisers of "primary resistance", and later generations as proponents of "secondary resistance". One of the principal tasks for historians was to trace the precise relationship between the two, which would also have the effect of tracing the roots of modern African nationalism back into the nineteenth century.

The view of the historical roots of nationalism sketched by Ranger and

21. Ranger, 1968a.

22. Ranger, 1968b.

23. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 437.

others in the late 1960s soon became an orthodoxy among the new generation of politically engaged Africanists who often acted in the spirit of what one acute observer, himself a former member of the history department at Dar Es Salaam, called a "Committee of Concerned Scholars for a Free Africa²⁴". There were always a substantial number of scholars who remained sceptical of the notion that there existed such a pure nationalist strain of African resistance to colonial rule²⁵. This was particularly so among French-speaking scholars, for example²⁶.

If a full-blooded nationalist interpretation of the colonial period gained such popularity in the late 1960s and 1970s, it was perhaps less because of its intellectual persuasiveness than because it gave precise form to a notion much more widely held in society at large, as is often the case with historical orthodoxies. In this particular case, the idea that militant nationalism was the fruition of a spirit of resistance which had been present throughout the colonial period, and which now emerged to claim the leadership of African countries as sovereign members of the international family of nations, chimed with a widespread perception that the emergence of African nationalism as a political force marked some sort of progress. Since Africanist historians construed resistance to colonialism to be an act in tune with history itself, those who fought against the imposition of colonial rule in the late nineteenth century, or shortly after, came to appear as proto-nationalists, sometimes visionary, always on the right side of history. And since colonial rule, in the view of many scholars working on Africa from the 1950s onwards, was self-evidently an injustice, and at the very least an idea whose time had gone, it was tempting to consider Africans who had worked enthusiastically with colonial administrations as "collaborators", a word loaded with reference to Nazi-occupied Europe, as was noted by a French communist who had lived through the German occupation of France²⁷.

The creation or identification of a nationalist history could hardly be other than a politically charged act in the years when African countries were gaining their independence, just as its opposite (that is, the denial that such a history existed) would also have been politically charged, if any scholar of standing had been foolhardy enough to undertake the task²⁸. Most of Africa after 1960 could take satisfaction in the knowledge that colonial rule proper had gone, but much of southern Africa in particular still awaited its liberation. Since the colonial and settler regimes of that region refused to concede majority rule by negotiation, military campaigns generally referred

24 John Lonsdale, quoted in Cooper, F., 1994, p. 1520

25. See e.g. Denoon, D., and Kuper, A., 1970.

26. Cf. Coquery-Vidrovitch, C. (1997), who believes that francophone scholarship on Africa has been rather poor in comparison with anglophone production.

27. Suret-Canale, J., 1982 I am not sure who first applied the term "collaborators" to Africans who worked with colonial governments, but it seems to date from about 1960.

28. When a leading Oxford historian referred disdainfully to Africa's past in 1963 as the "unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes", he was understandably treated to the scorn of all Africanists. See Fuglestad, F., 1992, esp. pp. 311-12.

to, as "armed struggle" began to take place, There was an obvious and simple relation between the sense of history and the moral justification for armed struggle against continuing colonial or settler rule²⁹.

Postcolonial Africa

Some of the fundamental elements of an intellectually viable view of African nationalism, as sketched in the previous few paragraphs, were easy enough to accept during the first two decades of independence in most of Africa, since the the new nationalist governments were, for the most part, bringing a recognisable system of political order and relative prosperity to their populations and pursuing a commitment to a strategy of economic development which had broad international support. The idea of a triumphant nationalism, poised to move forward, gave succour both to African governments and their international partners ; it was in harmony with the international consensus operative after 1945 on the need to govern the world through sovereign political units usually defined by reference to nationality; it appeared to be evidence of progress ; and it seemed to explain the rapid speed of decolonisation in the 1950s. As long as these conditions applied, then nationalist historians such as Ranger could hold their own not only against European conservative critics but, more importantly, against those radical pessimists who, in the spirit of Frantz Fanon, regarded African nationalism as a European creation as much as an African one, a vehicle for the transmission of neo-colonial interests³⁰.

All of these factors tended to deflect attention from the historical shortcomings of what was, by the 1970s, the orthodox nationalist view of resistance to colonialism. The central weakness of this theory was the danger inherent in the proposition that Africans who took up arms to oppose the imposition of colonial rule at its inception, generally around the end of the nineteenth century, were "primary resisters", so called because they were forerunners of the "secondary resisters" or modern nationalists. This made it all too tempting to read history backwards by implying that, since modern African leaders were nationalists, then earlier opponents of colonial government must have been proto-nationalists. This supposition did some disservice to the historical data. In the first place, many early resisters of colonial rule were most probably unaware of the existence of such things as national states, and so it is hardly accurate to consider them as nationalists of any sort. The retrospective identification of them as forebears of modern nationalism is based on an absence of careful consideration of exactly what

29. South Africa had technically been an independent state since 1910, but its condition bore such an obvious similarity to colonial rule that the South African Communist Party considered apartheid to be "colonialism of a special type".

30. Ranger, T., 1968a, p. XXI .

they themselves thought they were doing when they took up arms. More prosaically, a number of people who emerged at the time of independence as nationalist leaders had in fact worked closely with the colonial authorities at various stages of their careers, typically as government officials, as soldiers, or in receipt of official patronage such as scholarships, all of which calls for a nuanced understanding not only of their relationship to the colonial authorities but also that which they had with less privileged strata of the African population. Furthermore, there are many examples of African nationalist leaders of the mid- to late twentieth century claiming as proto-nationalist forebears social groups or sociological strata with which they actually had little connection. This is related to the fact the anti-colonial struggle itself was rather less than a substantial threat to colonial rule in many cases. Outside Algeria and southern Africa, there were in fact strikingly few cases of anti-colonial armed movements forcing the path to decolonisation. Where such movements did occur after 1945, such as in Madagascar, Cameroon and Kenya, they were defeated before independence and those who led them in the field rarely tasted the fruits of power. In short, the practice common among African nationalists of postcolonial times, of claiming to be the descendants of a long line of doughty fighters for liberation, often looks suspiciously like a revival of the old practice of manipulating genealogies.

This is not to deny that some parts of Africa witnessed constant acts of resistance to colonial rule throughout the sixty or seventy years for which colonial government generally lasted, nor to deny the validity of seeing such episodes as part of a longer sequence of events. Our suggestion is, however, that it is possible to construct such a sequence in various terms other than as a narrative of African nationalism. It is at least theoretically possible in many cases to see episodes of armed resistance to colonial authority as fitting more convincingly into a history of banditry, for example³¹, or at least of some form of localised political action, or as a means of economic accumulation or as a cultural phenomenon³². Conversely, it is possible to trace the history of nationalism other than as a story of resistance to colonialism. Nationalism could be construed, for example, primarily as a discourse concerning the centralisation of power or the formation of social classes, as it sometimes was by Marxist scholars³³, or as a process of imagining³⁴. Underlying such perspectives is the question of whether it is most convincing to consider modern African nationalism primarily as the climax of three or more generations of struggle against colonialism. It is a rather pedestrian thought, but perhaps one actually entertained by substantial numbers of Africans today, that modern African politicians might be most accurately viewed primarily as skilled manipulators of power rather than as people driven by a romantic attachment to a particular ideology, and that it

31. Crummev, D., 1986, and especially the essay by Ralph Austen on pp. 89-108.

32. Cf. Glassman, J., 1995.

33. Leys, C., 1996, esp. pp. 143-63.

34. E.g. Mbembe, A., 1991.

is their pursuit of power which sometimes causes them to invoke aspects of the past, real or fictitious or mixed³⁵. Approaches of this type could be used to construct an alternative interpretation of the events which, to observers in the 1960s, were most persuasively seen as evidence of the forward march of African nationalism.

If such a change of perspective has some explanatory power, it also underlines some of the risks inherent in the difficult, but necessary, task of writing contemporary history, when historical data are sometimes difficult to determine and, above all, when placing them in coherent sequences or patterns carries risks of misidentification. In retrospect, it appears that a tendency to suppose that nationalism was an unstoppable force, combined with a sometimes uncritical acceptance of the forms it took, blinded Africanist scholarship as a whole to the many cases in which substantial segments of Africa's populations, and legitimate African political interests, were full of foreboding for a future under the particular brand of nationalism which was actually emerging. Some of the events of recent years compel us to reconsider these. Burundi, for example, was only one of several African countries in which a substantial section of organised political opinion in the 1950s argued against an immediate granting of independence which it feared would be dominated by a minority group, as is clear from the document known as the Manifeste des Bahutu. In the light of Burundi's postcolonial history, the fears of what the authors of this text termed "Tutsi colonialism" cannot be said to have been wholly misplaced. Substantial sections of the population in other countries also had reason to fear their fate under political systems which had inherited the colonial organisation of power into formidable monopolies, as comparable movements in Ghana, Cameroon and Madagascar indicate³⁶. Those Africans who, on the verge of independence, actually faced the prospect of government by the particular groups and individuals who had acquired or seized power in the name of the nation, all too often had reason to fear the hegemonic aspirations of their new leaders. The foreign Africanist intellectuals who were so influential in creating the historiography of nationalism, on the other hand, generally had less reason for fear: in most cases, unlike African intellectuals, they were not threatened by the darker side of a Sékou Touré or a Kamuzu Banda or by any of the armed corporations which came to proliferate throughout the continent.

Chad is another country which provides interesting food for thought on the nature of armed struggle in postcolonial Africa and its relation to nationalist historiography, and since it is also the main field of study of the sociologist Rob Buijtenhuijs, it is useful to consider the Chadian case briefly. The territory marked on the map as Chad did not correspond to any stable or well defined political entity in the nineteenth century but was one of many territories in Africa which acquired the contours of its current political definition in the act of colonisation. It was actually the site of some

35. Cf. Toulabor, C., 1986; Mbembe, A., 1992.

36. Raison-Jourde, F., 1997.

of the longest lingering resistance to French colonial rule, with expeditions of military conquest or pacification still being launched against armed opponents until well into the twentieth century. When Chad became independent, at the same time as most other African colonies of France in 1960, it was no more than three decades after all parts of the country had submitted to *la paix coloniale*. Just five years later, in 1965, a series of risings began which soon came to be identified as a campaign led by the National Liberation Front or Frolinat, an organisation which claimed to be fighting for the liberation of the country. Frolinat, allied to radical nationalist governments in Algeria and Libya, was opposed to the Chadian government led by François Tombalbaye which had been supported by France since independence and which Frolinat qualified as neo-colonial. Frolinat thus purported to be fighting not merely for Chad's formal independence from colonial rule, which had already been attained, but for a political dispensation which would bring a different type of liberation, one identified with freedom from the set of relationships known as neo-colonialism and with victory over the various elements of the Chadian population who supported that arrangement.

The Chadian struggle went largely unstudied by scholars, other than by Buijtenhuijs and a handful of others, and little remarked by journalists, at least until violence hit the capital of Chad in the late 1970s, by which time Frolinat had advanced to lay siege to the central organs of the state. Thereafter, the victory of Frolinat, or at least of some of its offspring, set an interesting precedent as it became the first armed movement with a relatively broad social base (as distinct, that is, from a faction in the armed forces launching a classic coup d'état) to take power, not from a colonial government, but from a postcolonial African one. This feat was achieved by Hissène Habré, himself a former protégé of the colonial administration like so many nationalists in the first flush of independence, in 1982.

The significance of Habré's seizure of power escaped widespread notice at the time, largely, no doubt, because of Chad's relative obscurity and because of the major role played in the country by foreign powers, especially France, Libya and, later, the USA. It was only when Yoweri Museveni repeated Habré's achievement four years later, by overthrowing the existing government in Kampala, that significant international attention was turned to the new phenomenon of a broad-based armed movement liberating an African country from a home-grown despot rather than from colonial rule. The tortured history of Uganda, the huge attention which the tyrannical Idi Amin had earlier received from international news media, Museveni's own political and intellectual dexterity, and the gradual ending of the Cold War, all combined to make Uganda appear a new paradigm of how an oppressed African people could free itself from a home-grown dictatorship³⁷.

This gave a new twist to the historiography of nationalist wars of liberation. For, by the time Museveni came to power in 1986, Mozambique,

37. Cf. Hansen, H.B., and Twaddle, M., 1991.

Guinea-Bissau and Angola had been freed from Portuguese colonial rule, and Zimbabwe's liberation movements had overthrown the settler government of Ian Smith. The only places remaining for liberation from European colonial or settler rule were Namibia and South Africa. The apogee of African nationalism – the liberation of a whole continent – was nearing its zenith. This was not, however, cause for unalloyed joy, for it was apparent that the commitment of a whole generation of politicians and intellectuals to the idea of the liberation of Africa had not resulted in the progress that had been hoped for, and which indeed was implicit in the very notion of national liberation. In retrospect, one of the most far-sighted essays published in the late 1980s was one by the British historian Michael Crowder, who wondered, concerning the commonly held nationalist view, "whose dream was it anyway³⁸?" Throughout the continent there were signs of a growing disillusion with various nationalist leaders and parties whose sparkle had faded once they were in power, a disillusion so widespread that it could not simply be ignored or explained away with platitudes, as ideologues of nationalist regimes had done so often in the past. Algeria, an inspiration for earlier African nationalists, still ruled by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), was engulfed by serious rioting, amounting almost to a popular insurrection, in 1988. By this time there was a widespread perception, including among African intellectuals, that the giants of African nationalism who had had the good sense to engineer their own retirement, most notably Senghor and Nyerere, had been more far-sighted than those who were still in power, like Kaunda, Banda or Houphouët-Boigny, whose reputations were fast becoming tarnished as their earlier achievements began to appear in a different light. In these circumstances, Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army in Uganda seemed to indicate to some observers the possibilities offered by a new type of armed struggle, one freed from some of the illusions or immaturity of the previous generation, endowed with a more thoughtful and educated leadership and a more useful analysis of what precisely needed doing to secure a better future for Africa.

Those who were inclined to view certain movements of armed opposition to postcolonial African governments as new forms of national liberation, were essentially basing their case on an updated identification of who, or what, was the factor inhibiting Africa's progress towards the higher form of political life implicit in the notion of national liberation. Whereas a slightly earlier generation had considered colonialism to be the enemy, the target had shifted to neo-colonialism: substantially the same enemy, but in a different guise. This corresponded to a view of Africa's political economy which was fashionable in the 1970s among many political scientists, namely the "dependency theory" which held that countries of the third world, being on the periphery of a capitalist economic system which reached throughout the globe, could not hope to advance to any higher stage of political or economic development unless they could decrease their dependency on the

38. Crowder, M., 1987.

industrialised core countries³⁹. While dependency theory was in high retreat from academic lecture halls in the West by the time Museveni took power in Uganda, it remained popular among many African intellectuals and continued to inspire a degree of support from Marxist analysts in the face of the neo-liberal theories which were then sweeping through Western academies of learning. Other commentators were beginning to see Africa's fundamental problem as lying in the institutional forms of power, largely inherited from the colonial period. This, according to a prominent strand in Africanist thinking, had imposed on Africa an ill-adapted form of government⁴⁰. If it were true that Africa was struggling under the weight of imported institutions of government, then it was logical to seek better-adapted forms which were home-grown. Hence, despite the unhappy precedents already set by African leaders (most notably, Mobutu Sese Seko) who had claimed to have discovered an authentically African way of doing things, President Museveni of Uganda was very successful in recruiting international support for his no-party system of government on the grounds that this was a genuinely Ugandan alternative to non-African systems of democracy.

However, by the late 1980s the very notion that an African country could be liberated from an oppressive political regime by force was being challenged as a result of a number of factors at least as important as the demise of certain theories of political economy. Parts of Africa were now home to movements which had many of the hallmarks of guerrilla armies, and could demonstrate at least a fair degree of popular support, but which were difficult to classify. One of these was the União para a Independência Total de Angola. For most Africanist scholars, Jonas Savimbi's UNITA organisation could not be considered a liberation movement since it was opposed to a government which was already held to have liberated Angola, and in any case Savimbi was allied to the illegitimate apartheid regime and the US secret services. Nevertheless, UNITA refused to go away. It constituted an uncomfortable reminder that not all large-scale armed movements could automatically be regarded as forces of liberation even when, like UNITA, they had at least some degree of popular support. This was also a consequence of a strategic choice by the US government under Ronald Reagan (1980-88), or by elements within it, to fight the Cold War by sponsoring a new wave of anti-Marxist guerrillas wherever appropriate, by encouraging movements like UNITA in Angola or the Nicaraguan Contras. How was a person intent on Africa's liberation to distinguish genuine movements of emancipation from bogus ones? By reference to their political programmes? The problem was that such movements invariably claimed that their ultimate goal was some sort of freedom. In practice, observers ended up by judging the merits of various armed movements by reference to their external allies, thus binding African liberation movements

39. Leys, C., *op. cit.*, pp. 107-96.

40. E.g. Davidson, B., 1992. A similar view in French political science is expressed in Badié, B., 1992. An influential recent variant is Mamdani, M., 1996.

inextricably into the politics of the Cold War. This was one reason why Ethiopia posed the biggest puzzle of all : for who were the liberators in a war, growingly severe throughout the 1980s, in which several different guerrilla movements, many having both Marxist and nationalist credentials, were opposed to a home-grown African government, and a Marxist-Leninist one at that ?

The burgeoning number of armed movements in Africa seemed increasingly to suggest that the continent was in need not so much of liberation from dependence on the West, as of some form of politics which was marked by real power-sharing, and not merely by the seizure of power by one armed group from another. Even RENAMO, the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana, in Mozambique, considered by Marxist-influenced scholars to be a-political in the sense of representing a form of banditry rather than any constituency with real roots in Mozambican society, or used as a simple front for the South African Defence Force, came to be included in the literature which called out for rethinking on the nature of Africa's liberation from colonial rule, particularly after the pathbreaking study by the French anthropologist Geffray had revealed that Renamo gained support from substantial peasant grievances⁴¹.

Moreover, seismic shifts in global society and politics were changing some previous ideological positions. The astonishingly rapid collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989 raised fundamental questions about the viability of concepts such as liberation and revolution which had been common currency in African political ideology for decades. A wave of political contestation within Africa itself, leading to the overthrow of one-party regimes through largely or entirely non-violent means in Benin and Mali, and the removal from power by constitutional means of the founding father of the nation in Zambia, gave powerful incentives to rethink the particular idea of liberation which had become current since Africa's decolonisation thirty years earlier, and most particularly the frequent supposition that true liberation required force of arms.

In the excited atmosphere of late 1989 and early 1990, with the fall of the Berlin wall and the release from prison of Nelson Mandela, some influential outside observers were keen to apply to Africa what they believed to be lessons learned from the triumph of capitalism and democracy. Among the most important of those acting thus was the World Bank, which called for the political reform of African countries in a report published, by chance, at the same time that the Berlin wall was breached⁴². The simultaneous end of the Cold War and the collapse of African one-party states offered to aid donors, so influential in a continent where most governments and even states had become dependent on official loans and grants for their survival, an opportunity to reinforce the programmes of political and economic reform which the main donor agencies had come to believe were necessary for Africa's well-being. It is not irrelevant to note that a substantial part of the

41. Geffray, C., 1990.

42. World Bank, 1989.

academic research done on Africa is financed by these same donors, not merely in the vague sense that many universities in Europe and North America receive funding from their national governments, but in the form of contracts for specific items of research offered by donor institutions to both Western Africanists and African scholars, the latter often trying to survive in universities starved of funds. The foreign ministries and aid administrations of Western governments, developing an interest in such concepts as democracy and civil society in pursuit of their mission to manage the process of change in Africa, invested in research on these subjects and had a considerable influence on some emerging Africanist debates.

The significance of this last observation is to underline that, just as an earlier generation of writers had been inclined to construct a nationalist historiography which could be enlisted in the causes of state-building and nation-building, there were now numbers of consultants, scholars and others interested in examining democratisation and the role of civil society in Africa and re-interpreting Africa's recent past in the service of their purpose, even though writing or rewriting history was not usually their primary objective. Thus, in the early 1990s, democracy was often deemed to hold out the promise of what was sometimes called a "second liberation" of Africa. This time around, liberation was no longer to be from colonial rule, but from national oppression. To many observers, the struggle to liberate Africa, often clothed in the vocabulary of development, now appeared to require not so much armed force as a combination of parliamentary government, press freedom and civil liberty, the whole compatible with the proposition that an economic revival could be based on free trade⁴³.

The demise of Marxism as both political force and analytical tool, and the fashion for liberal theories of democracy and civil society, alas, did not mark the end of political violence in Africa. On the contrary, war in Liberia after 1989 and Sierra Leone after 1991, civil war in Somalia culminating in the disastrous US/United Nations intervention of 1992-4, and, especially, the Rwandan genocide of 1994, all marked major new epicentres of violence. It was now clear to observers of every shade of opinion that armed movements, even where they had some degree of organisation and popular support and claimed to be liberating some group or other, could not automatically be regarded as forces for emancipation or progress as so many writers had been inclined to believe in earlier decades. To be sure, there was an important current of pan-Africanist revolutionary thought which continued to hold that armed struggle still had a place in the emancipation of African peoples, and which even underwent something of a revival under the inspiration of Museveni's achievement. The Seventh Pan-African Congress held in Kampala in 1994, for example, expressed this in a statement to the effect that the first phase of the African revolution had

43. Buijtenhuijs, R., and Rijnierse, E., 1993, and Buijtenhuijs, R., and Thiriot, C., 1995, provide useful surveys of much of this literature. This research was financed by the Netherlands Ministry of Development Cooperation.

ended with the overthrow of white domination of South Africa, but that this had not solved the basic needs of the people, which required further struggle⁴⁴. But many armed struggles were hugely destructive and appeared to some commentators to have no coherent political programme whatever. Many analysts began to adopt a more anthropological approach to some campaigns, which suggested that some at least might better be understood as complex social phenomena rather than campaigns in support of modern political ideologies⁴⁵. It was not only in Africa that war, in the confusing new world of the 1990s, seemed to have left the realm of political and military studies. A leading British historian in 1993 infamously described the war in Bosnia as "a primitive, tribal conflict only anthropologists can understand⁴⁶," a remark rich in implications.

These tumultuous events were bound to have an effect on historiography by causing writers to re-evaluate the meaning of earlier historical events. For, while the world after the Cold War was turning out to be a more violent place than many had hoped or expected, some old champions of national liberation in Africa were still in power. Some movements, and some leaders, whose claim to have liberated their country in earlier times had been widely accepted, were now beginning to look uncomfortably like oppressors in their turn, in some cases as much so as the colonisers whom they had replaced. This raised a series of questions which had previously been largely avoided in the historical literature about the nature of liberation as a political and social process. Who *precisely* had been liberated by ZANU in Zimbabwe in 1980, for example? A series of pogroms launched by Prime Minister Robert Mugabe in Matabeleland in the mid-1980s, in which thousands of Matabele people were killed on the grounds that they were potential supporters of the political opposition, raised the uncomfortable thought, in a country which had been a shop-window for the cause of national liberation, that the identification of those liberated might be partly couched in ethnic terms.

This last suspicion – that the fruits of power in independent Africa had been distributed partly according to ethnic criteria – opened up a vast Pandora's Box which nationalist ideology had to a large extent managed to keep closed, concerning the exact relationship between nationalism and ethnicity in Africa⁴⁷. Not only was the impartiality of postcolonial governments open to question on ethnic grounds, but some even wondered about their good faith in regard to the concept of development, which had always been claimed as one of the great goals of nationalist policy. Hence, the Nigerian writer Claude Ake wondered whether African governments had ever believed in the notion of development in the first place, or whether they had not just cynically used this notion as a slogan which permitted them

44. Essack, K., 1994.

45. E.g. Bazenguissa-Ganga, R., 1999.

46. John Keegan, quoted in Mazower, M., 1999, p. XIV.

47. A recent summary is Berman, B., 1998.

to pursue their real agenda, that of acquiring and manipulating power⁴⁸.

Just as Ake questioned the use which had actually been made of the idea of development, so did other observers question other major aspects of the old paradigm of liberation. Some analysts of earlier liberation wars, like Rob Buijtenhuijs, disturbed by the growing violence of the continent and struck by the poor record in power of so many former liberation movements, turned their hopes towards peaceful political change. For them, the second wave of liberation would no longer be through the barrel of a gun, but through the ballot-box. In a similarly prudent vein, the Marxist scholars John Saul and Colin Leys, veteran opponents of apartheid, were concerned in a book on Namibia to ask questions concerning the incoming government formed by the South-West African People's Organisation, Swapo, which had been guilty of terrible abuses of human rights even before it came to power⁴⁹. Some scholars have come to interpret new political-military campaigns in Africa as forms of warlordism or other types of combat less uplifting than romantically conceived struggles for liberation⁵⁰. In the field of strictly historical study, while Zimbabwe continues to provide one of the richest literatures on nationalist guerrillas, a new note has been sounded by Norma Kriger in her description of the coercive element in nationalist violence. New studies of the apparently inchoate violent movements of the 1990s, such as in Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Liberia, are also appearing⁵¹.

Although Africanist scholars during the 1980s and 1990s have tended, rather more than the previous generation, to question the credentials of would-be liberators, the vestiges of the earlier notion that Africa could be freed by a liberation movement which marked a radical break with the past have not disappeared, even if the suggestion often made in earlier literature to the effect that this was achieved most fully by force of arms, has now become less prominent. In an exquisite irony, the notion that African societies may be liberated by radical political action, earlier identified with Marxism, has now been assumed by certain Western administrations responsible for giving financial aid to Africa. Influential US media especially have entertained the notion that there has arisen a generation of new leaders in Africa, of whom Yoweri Museveni is generally seen as the archetype, who have taken power in their own countries by force of arms from postcolonial governments, notably in Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and who are using their conquest of power to rebuild states along capitalist-friendly lines⁵². The idea of a progressive, US-friendly, second wave of liberation has been enthusiastically taken up by the president-in-waiting of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, who has turned the notion of an

48. Ake, C., 1996.

49. Leys C., and Saul, J., 1995.

50. E.g. Clapham, C., 1998; and Reno, W., 1998.

51. Kriger, N., 1992; Richards, P., 1995; Ellis, S., 1999; Human Rights Watch, 1999.

52. Cf. Ottaway, M., 1999.

African Renaissance into a corner-stone of his politics⁵³. In truth, this was a grotesque proposition even before several of the much-vaunted new leaders of Africa launched a particularly murderous new round of wars in the Horn and in central Africa in 1997-8. Many of those very same new leaders who were courted and praised by the US State Department, the Pentagon and the World Bank are former Marxists who in fact still head political organisations run along recognisably Marxist-Leninist lines : the militarism of Museveni, Afewerki, Meles, Kagame and others suggests that they still retain a robustly Leninist belief in the merits of force. Money may these days come from the West, but power in Africa still comes all too often from the barrel of a gun.

Many of the finest African scholars these days have found jobs abroad, in the USA especially, where they tend to become subsumed in US domestic debates, particularly those concerning multiculturalism and the politics of identity. Some of the best African political thinkers or analysts, including some who previously worked on the historiography of national liberation, have become immersed in the field of postcolonial studies, where some African expatriates have endeavoured to explore aspects of Africa's political ideologies, often in ways distinctly unflattering to the idea of African nationalism⁵⁴. Postcolonial discussions of memory, representation and cultural invention all leave a rather uncomfortable historical question concerning who actually created the earlier nationalist ideologies, in which so many of the most academically influential works were penned by non-Africans, or in fact more precisely by British and Americans. It raises the haunting question to what extent African nationalism has been, in part, a foreign creation at well as an African one, as Ake thought of Africa's commitment to development. If at least one of the cherished ideologies of African politics could be called into question so brutally as it was by Ake, could not others ?

Ideology and history

All ideologies, it is said, share "the widespread virtue that identifies History with the winning side⁵⁵". This ideological insistence on maintaining an interest only on those ideas which are with hindsight deemed to have been winning ones was a characteristic of historiography generally during the Cold War, and certainly not just of writing on Africa. A recent attempt to retrace the history of Europe in the twentieth century as far as possible without viewing it through any particular ideological prism, viewing the

53. There appears to be no full study of South Africa's African Renaissance. See e.g. *Indicator South Africa 1998*.

54. Notably Mbembe, A., 1992.

55. Ignazio Silone, quoted in Mazower, *op. cit.*, p.XI.

present as "just one possible outcome of our predecessors" struggles and uncertainties, rather than as the inevitable progress of some great historical idea such as democracy or national liberation, is illuminating⁵⁶. It would be useful to apply the same technique to the history of Africa's decolonisation and of the various contests which have been called armed struggles or wars of liberation. In this last section we will briefly consider some possible approaches towards re-reading the late colonial and postcolonial period of African history with a similar lack of any ideological prism.

Perhaps it is first necessary at least to acknowledge the limits of such an approach, for all history-writing, we have said, carries within it suppositions about rationality and time which could be said to be of an ideological nature. This does not, however, mean that all history writing is condemned to be ideological in a narrower sense, or that historians cannot redress their own biases. In fact, they always have the option to resist to the best of their ability the temptation to extend contemporary ideas or concerns back into the past in a single-minded manner. They can strive to recreate the context in which previous generations lived and acted. They can give due attention to those undercurrents of earlier history which were important at the time, but which are neglected by more ideological investigations interested single-mindedly in results. Just as Europe's own tortured history can be better seen as "a story of narrow squeaks and unexpected twists, not inevitable victories and forward marches⁵⁷", so might it be profitable to see the last fifty years of African political history other than as the triumphal progress of liberation from colonial rule and of nationalism.

In fact, it requires little demonstration to show just how far Africa's recent history has been something less than a triumph, since the period since the 1970s is so widely acknowledged to have been a difficult one. While there are no remaining colonies or white settler regimes in Africa, and in that sense African nationalism may be said to have attained one of its main goals, the heroic vision of African nationalism, connected as it is to the notion of progress, could not be expected to escape the recent travails of African states. This indeed calls for a view which pays full attention to what may earlier have seemed the pools and eddies of history, movements and ideas which did not actually attain power, turning-points where history failed to turn. Perhaps the current vogue for historical studies of culture, subjectivities, identities and everyday life may help in the long run inasmuch as they throw light on the nature of politics "from below".

If we are to gain a new understanding of what actually occurred in self-proclaimed wars of liberation in the past and in the present, above all more empirical research is needed on how Africans view the historical experience of their societies in the circumstances of distress or even trauma which obtain in places such as Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone or Somalia, but also in less blighted countries like Nigeria. There is evidence that many people in these countries, while regarding the present period as a difficult one and the

56. *Ibid.*, p. XII.

57. Mazower, M., *op. cit.*, p. XII.

future with trepidation, regard its place in history primarily in religious terms⁵⁸. Here historians can benefit from a rich literature on the study of religion in Africa. They can also learn from writers on war in other continents and periods, some of whom have noted the need for new historical research on earlier campaigns of armed struggle, or at least for new ways of thinking about published data. This is so partly because war itself has changed⁵⁹, and scholars need new tools to study it. It has been noted that debates on the origins of the American revolution, for example, tend to focus on socio-economic groups while neglecting the role in events of military formations, a subject left to specialist military historians. This seems to stem from a notion that war and revolution, on the one hand, and social and economic developments, on the other, are best understood as separate things requiring separate study. This may have some justification for vast military campaigns like the First World War, but surely one of the main lessons of modern wars is the major effect they have on economics and society. Conversely, those interested in political revolutions need to pay greater attention to the role of armies in those revolutions. To take one example, whereas historians have been quite inclined to interpret forms of public violence which occurred during colonial times as forms of anti-colonial protest, thus constructing a chronological series of data whose outcome is national independence, recent examples of pillaging in African cities might cause one to re-examine some earlier bouts of violence in light of a logic of predation and plunder⁶⁰. We may agree with David Keen on the importance of seeing war as a form of economic activity, for example⁶¹.

One conclusion which can be drawn from a consideration of the historiography of nationalism, then, concerns the desirability of studying Africa's previous wars in a wide context of social, economic and political history, and not merely with a single-minded concern to assess only their contribution to particular ideologies of nationalism or revolution. With hindsight, it is notable that some of the most striking insights into the questions raised by the exercise of violence, and indeed by the experience of nationalism and independence more widely, have actually come from the pens of novelists rather than those of historians or even of scholars more generally⁶². Perhaps this is because so many of the crucial developments in those decades have occurred in the realm of the imagination, one which historians have, until recently at least, found it more difficult or less interesting to explore than the more concrete sphere of human activity. If is indeed the case, as we have suggested, that political ideas in Africa today are often embedded in religious forms of expression, then it suggests that

58 Ellis, S, *op cit*.

59 Van Creveld, M., 1991

60. On the looting of cities, see e.g Bazenguissa-Ganga, R, *op. cit.* ; Ellis, S., *op.*

cit.

61. Keen, D., forthcoming.

62. I am grateful to Frederik van Gelder of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt, for pointing this out to me using the example of Coetzee, J., 1980. I would add to this other examples, such as Kourouma, A., 1970 ; Achebe, C., 1966, and 1983.

historians might fruitfully continue a tendency of recent years to investigate the workings of the imagination. Certainly nationalism, the constitution of imagined communities, lends itself easily to such a project.

Most probably too, historians who consider nationalism will need to reformulate one of the most enduring paradigms used by analysts of Africa, namely the perceived contrast between Africa and the outside, and between what is authentically African and that which is imposed or borrowed from the rest of the world. This has proved a resilient idea, which continues to inform much analysis of Africa and to provide material for reworking by African politicians, as we have suggested. But the observation that African societies have historically been more remarkable for their porous boundaries rather than their strict rules of exclusion, and that political power has for centuries, even before the colonial period, been connected to the successful manipulation of external connections, surely suggests the usefulness of seeking other models which are less dualistic in nature⁶³. These are all lines of approach which may in time help us to reinterpret Africa's liberation wars.

While scholars may react in these and many other ways to the unfolding of events in Africa and in the rest of the world, one effect has already been to weaken the consensus which previously existed concerning the "meaning" of the colonial period in African history and to dent the notion of nationalism as a heroic project whose armed struggles, however regrettable, were inevitable or necessary. Those who write on African politics, or on the history of nationalism, are generally considerably more cautious than they once were, since they are now aware that nationalism was unable to realise all of its promises, or even that nationalism may well be in need of reinterpretation in the light of other, wider patterns in African societies. Yet still, the very spread of the notion of a postcolonial condition inevitably implies the existence of a postcolonial historical period, whatever we may think of the quality of that period, whether heroic or other. In other words, we are still left with the now-classic division of African history into three periods defined by their relationship to colonial rule : precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa.

63. Bayart, J.-F., forthcoming.