

Making and Unmaking Nations

War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa

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Cornell University Press

Massive Violence in Africa – We Need to Understand it and Act.

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This article draws heavily from a new book: *Making and Unmaking Nations*

War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa by Scott Straus, Cornell University Press.

Introduction

“South Africa Ignores its Obligations to Justice,” trumpeted The Financial Times in an editorial headline on June 16, 2015.

The previous day, while South Africa’s high court was preparing a possible arrest warrant on behalf of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Sudan’s President Omar el-Bashir departed for home in his presidential plane from a South African military airport. He had attended a meeting of the African Union – a body which has long decried the ICC and which has gone to lengths to protect African leaders who have been accused of massively murdering their citizens and, as in the case of el-Bashir, of genocide.

Enormous brutality has been a hallmark of many African nations. Right now, thousands of Africans are fleeing their home countries to cross deserts, hostile territories and the Mediterranean Sea to find refuge in Europe. They are desperate people knowing that their journeys may bring death, but certain that to stay home will mean, at best, intolerable lives.

Mass violence in such countries as Ethiopia, Somalia, Mali, Chad and Uganda, let alone genocide in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and el-Bashir’s Sudan, continue to influence sub-Saharan Africa’s image.

African leaders for the most part have refused to acknowledge the problem sufficiently, as highlighted by the actions of the South African government in ignoring its own courts and enabling el-Bashir to escape. More broadly, the African Union, the United Nations and Western governments have too often stood on the sidelines as tragedies unfold in Africa as if there is nothing that they can do.

The vulnerability to violence and civil war in Africa damages development and international support. There is an all-too pervasive sense that genocide is built into the fabric of African nations. A better understanding of the realities could strengthen international engagement in the region, curb extreme violence and forge human and national security.

Corruption, tribal rivalries, power grabs by ambitious soldiers and myriad other factors have unleashed civil wars and insurgencies. Time and again the potential of these situations exploding into genocide seems real. Yet, an intense examination of a range of country situations

shows that many countries have held back from the brink of massive slaughter, while a few have not.

Nyerere and Mandela

National leaders, such as Julius Nyerere in Tanzania in the 1960s and Nelson Mandela in South Africa in the 1990s, were acutely aware of the risks of mass violence in the countries. They dedicated themselves to building inclusive, pluralistic nations that promoted peace, security and stability. Sadly, they are the exceptions in modern African history. More than one-third of the region's more than 40 nations have experienced episodes of mass violence since they gained independence from colonialism.

The vulnerability to violence and civil war has damaged development and international support. The twin genocides in Rwanda and in Sudan's western Dafur region evolved while Western powers stood aside. Those powers either concluded that intervention was too risky, or that the events were not core to their strategic interests. And, perhaps, some policy-makers in Western capitals may have also taken the view that genocide is just part of the African fabric. The greatest blight on President Bill Clinton's tenure in the White House was U.S. passivity as more than 500,000 Tutsis were murdered by the Hutus in Rwanda in 1994.

While many African countries have been embroiled in civil wars and large-scale violence, most have not gone down the genocide path. At crucial times those in power have shown restraint, rather than order the massacre of their enemies.

Professor Scott Straus at the University of Wisconsin has devoted the last 20 years to researching conflict in Africa. His latest book - *Making and Unmaking Nations – War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa* – from Cornell University Press, explains why genocide is not the inevitable outcome in African conflicts and why those who generalize about African violence need to deepen their understanding of the history and conditions from one country to another.

Genocide is rare in Africa – at least if one accepts the lucid definition that Straus provides. Genocide is a deliberate, sustained policy that stems from a process of decision-making. It is a distinctive form of political violence. Genocide is an attempt to destroy or inflict maximum damage upon a civilian category within a territory. It is intentional group destruction. It is not indiscriminate violence, rather it involves strong group selection. It is sustained violence. Genocide does not seek to change the behavior of others, rather it seeks permanent change in the population balance.

Rarely if ever do governments that come to power have a genocide plan in their hip pockets. The Nazis on taking power in Germany in the early 1930s did not have a clear plan to murder all Jews, neither did the Hutus as they moved to grab power in Rwanda have a set plan to annihilate all Tutsis. Genocidal plans take shape slowly, according to Straus's detailed research.

Moreover, such plans can only be implemented when the ruling powers have close to total control and can count upon at least the passive, if not the active support, of the great majority of the population outside of the target group that is to be killed. Genocide demands close collaboration between national and local actors.

Informed to Act

Even then, today the perpetration of genocide also involves a passive stance by foreign governments, including the United Nations, who may be able to intervene and ensure restraint. Today, thanks to the existence of civil society and courageous media reporters in almost every country in Africa, news of mass violence spreads very rapidly across the world. The U.N., the African Union, and foreign governments cannot claim they are ignorant of the unfolding horrors. Straus's new book is important in large measure because it forces us to acknowledge that we can not only understand the forces that build towards genocide, but foreign governments have the ability to act before it is too late.

Straus examines conditions during civil wars in Mali, Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal, which did not lead to genocide, with those that did in Rwanda and Sudan. There were times in the civil war in Cote d'Ivoire when the government and ruling military could have unleashed genocide and yet, as Straus notes, "They retreated from the brink." Similar potentially dire situations have ended in a similar way in other countries, such as Mali and Senegal. Why?

In Cote d'Ivoire, for example, almost all the conditions that could have unleashed genocide came together: acute political instability, widespread armed conflict, economic decline and increasing poverty, an increasingly nationalistic/ethnic public discourse that built on historic resentments and created an identity category for discrimination. Moreover, militias tied closely to security forces were strongly armed. Yet, an assortment of restraints showed themselves, key decisions by the government and French government engagement. But, as Straus writes, that is not the whole story

The crucial divider between those African nations that have gone down the genocide route and those that have not rests in the core governing narrative that prevails in these countries. In great detail, the author examines conditions and civil wars in each country, with a particularly detailed focus on the public speeches over many years by national leaders – speeches that through their repetition over time created dominant national governing narratives. In most African countries the governing narrative evolved after colonialism on independence, or after the fall of authoritarianism, such as in South Africa.

The Governing Narrative

While many specific factors in each country demonstrate the differences between them and their histories with violence, the issue of the national governing narrative comes through this thoroughly researched volume with profound force. Félix Houphouët-Boigny was President of Cote d'Ivoire from late 1960 through 1973 and consistently promoted dialogue, multiethnicity and inclusion. His economic policies, apart from the substantial graft among his cronies, was even-handed. This narrative lived on to influence all the leaders of the country, despite fights for power.

The risks of genocide in Mali in the early 1960s and in 1994 were substantial, but here too the dominant national governing narrative, writes Straus, "emphasized democracy, multiethnic inclusive citizenship and nonviolent dialogue." The same emphasis is to be found in Senegal. By contrast, the study of both Sudan and Rwanda in this book shows a consistently blunt nationalist narrative in each country. In Sudan, the government, especially that of President Omar al-Bashir, who has been in power since 1993, has avowedly promoted Arab-Islamic nationalism and decried all those who did not adhere to this view. There were many causes of the violence in western Dafur, but for more than a year relentless attacks on the non-

Arab population saw more than 200,000 deaths. The state coordinated the attacks on the non-Arabs. The excuse was that an insurgency had to be put down, but the mass murder went far beyond that objective.

In Rwanda, the Hutus built and sustained a narrative of being the true citizens of the country subject to ruthless feudal lords, the Tutsis. The once persecuted Hutus saw themselves as the legitimate rulers of the country and the encouragement of mass slaughter was pursued to ensure that never again would the Tutsis have control. Straus's research suggests that between 500,000 and 800,000 people were killed.

Is genocide inevitable in countries where the governing narrative places blame on a distinct minority over many years and when political, military and economic conditions all combine to promote civil war and insurgency?

Conclusion

The details in this book underscore how complicated it is to find a good answer to this question. Yet, Straus argues convincingly that we need to draw lessons from African experiences with mass violence, recognizing the factors that build such situations and the risks, stimulated by national governing narratives, that can turn such violence into genocide. A message that I draw from this study is that opportunities for foreign governments and international organizations to intervene and restrain those who would perpetrate genocide almost always exist – if we understand the dynamics and ideology driving the situation and respond early enough, and forcefully enough, to prevent massive tragedies.

A deeper understanding of the dynamics of violence and power in today's Africa should lead Western governments to more pro-active roles. This could not only curb the propensity for genocide in some countries, but it could contribute to building conditions that enable citizens to stay at home and seek better opportunities for themselves, than flee into the hands of human traffickers and smugglers and drown in the Mediterranean. At the same time, African leaders need to stop protecting peers who have perpetrated crimes against humanity, such as el-Bashir, and demonstrate that they believe in justice and that they side with the victims of oppression.