Peace and Conflict in Africa

Reviewed by Sara Meger


One of the persistent frustrations for peace researchers is the often simplistic approach taken to understanding conflict in Africa. All too frequently, the dynamics of these conflicts are reduced to primordial arguments of ancient hatreds or over-reliance on ‘weak governance’ as an explanation for state failure and internal conflict. What makes David J. Francis’ edited volume, Peace & Conflict in Africa unique is that Francis assembles a collection of essays that aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of the causes of conflict in Africa. The book is presented as the first comprehensive overview of peace and conflict across the African continent and is promoted as an introductory text to key themes in conflict studies, including: conflict resolution, peacebuilding, security, and development. The book aims to introduce the reader to these key concepts and debates and to emphasize indigenous African approaches to addressing conflict and building peace in war affected African societies. Thus, the collection is set up in broadly two sections: the first is comprised of seven chapters focused primarily upon discourses and concepts for understanding conflict in Africa; the second section contains five chapters on specific issues, such as transitional justice, democratisation, globalization and human security.

Francis’ aim with this volume is an attempt to provide a more nuanced understanding of the causes of conflict in Africa. Francis argues in his introductory chapter, and quite correctly, in my opinion, that an approach to understanding the context and politics creating the conditions for wars on this continent requires the “dehomogenization of African politics” (p. 1) while still acknowledging the common features. This dehomogenization, in the opinions of the authors of this volume, which I share, is largely a conceptual project of the West. Thus, in many ways, this volume seems directed at Western scholars of African politics to make room in the discourse for a more accurate representation of African countries, without relying on tired explanations that essentialize the continent. This edited volume, though pragmatic, shows a general optimism for the capacity of African states to implement home-grown solutions to conflict.

What is interesting about Francis’ approach is also his criticism of patrimonialism as an explanatory model for understanding conflict in Africa. Works on neo-patrimonialism in Africa (c.f. Bayart 1993; Bayart et. al. 1999; Reno 1998; Berdal and Malone 2000) have contributed a focus on economic interests in the shaping of African politics, argued to be the “core feature of post-colonial politics in Africa” (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 3), including the informalization and privatization of governance institutions and the supplantation of colonialism with similar structures of patron-client relationships from within the country. In his introduction to the volume, however, Francis is quick to defend the examples of African leaders who have transcended the appeal of neo-patrimonialism, which he uses to downplay the continued influence of patrimonialism in African politics. In doing so, Francis denies the extent of external influence that encourages the systematic and large-scale fraud and smuggling and economy of plunder that plagues many African states, mentioning only the Cold-War era dictatorships of Mobutu of Zaire and Bokassa of Central
African Republic. Though he acknowledges that this external influence exists, his approach attempts to integrate internal and external social, economic, political, cultural, developmental, and security factors, which dilutes the importance of post-colonial economic influences by which the West continues to exploit African countries through unequal exchange, unfavourable trade terms, and support of patrimonial regimes.

As well, by taking such a grassroots approach, this volume at times ignores the practical questions of policy implementation. For example, Isaac O. Albert’s contribution to the volume, “Understanding peace in Africa,” takes a ‘bottom-up’ approach to understanding African approaches to peace, arguing for the need for more engaging peacebuilding models that incorporate indigenous African models of conflict management with dominant Western models. His argument is informed by cultural relativism, a theoretical framework that argues that the validity of any practice must be evaluated from within its cultural context and that there is no one right approach or solution to a given problem. Thus, Albert surveys meanings of peace in different cultures in Africa and draws upon various cultural traditions, which he argues are still vibrant and relevant for making, building and keeping peace on the continent. He believes it is the erosion of traditional approaches and traditional authority in many states that contributes to ongoing conflicts in Africa. While Albert contributes an interesting philosophical framework of conceptualizations of peace in Africa, the broader question of how to successfully implement policy based on these conceptualizations is not addressed.

In attempting to ‘Africanize’ the discourse through this bottom-up analysis of conflict in Africa, I feel this volume overlooked the important role that globalization and Western economic interests play in influencing the course of politics in the many resource-rich nations of Africa. This collection focuses too heavily on domestic factors that it neglects discussing the large degree to which African leaders are restricted from acting by larger international forces. In Kenneth C. Omeje’s chapter, for example, “Understanding conflict resolution in Africa,” he quickly surveys ‘conflict goods theories’ relating to the role of economic interests in perpetuating conflict in African states, but dismisses it as a pathological view of “African states as inherently predisposed to ‘irrational’ and predatory conflicts” (p. 73). However, it is not necessary to view African politics as ‘irrationally’ shaped by economic interests; rather, it would be more useful if the author had, rather than ‘Africanized’ his discussion, ‘globalized’ it to look for the common influences in what have been described as predatory economic wars. There is little use in discussing state-building and democratic reform in Africa without a thorough examination of the global processes that act to prevent this.

Similarly, in his chapter on “Africa and globalization,” Jim Whitman takes a rather conservative approach to his understanding of the influence of globalization on African states and their development. He recognizes the appeal of African states’ vast resource wealth to other states, and advises of the danger of selling off these resources too cheaply. According to Whitman, African states may be motivated by a desire for a quick solution to impoverishment and underdeveloped infrastructure and overlook their ‘competitive standing’ in the international system by which to advance their longer-term goals. He mentions the role of ‘globalized configurations of interests’ only in passing, admitting its influence on “initiating and sustaining patterns of violent conflict” (p. 193), but ultimately holds the individual states of Africa responsible for their own human and economic security within the globalized system of states. Like Francis’ introduction, Whitman ultimately concludes that the fault and responsibility for the exploitation of African resources and the underdevelopment of African states lies with individual African leaders. Whitman mistakenly assumes an even playing field in the international system, on which each African leader has the capacity to negotiate for their interests vis-à-vis Western states and vis-à-vis corporations, a view I argue is not entirely realistic. Whitman and the other authors of this volume too quickly overlook are the structures of international relations that construct and maintain power imbalances between the West and lesser developed nations.

Despite the above criticisms, the strengths of this volume should not be underemphasized. Peace and Conflict in Africa, while contributing to a growing field of discourse on these issues as they specifically relate to the continent, provides an important and largely overlooked dimension to the literature: traditional
African responses to conflict and justice. However, as this review has outlined, this text falls short of contextualizing much of the volume’s contributions in terms of policy formation for the modern African state; the reader is left to wonder how a specific traditional cultural approach to conflict can be generalized and incorporated into a larger conflict resolution policy approach that transcends cultural groups.

Peace and Conflict in Africa is quite a dense, academic volume, written primarily by and for academics. The most receptive audience would likely be found in scholars of peace studies, development studies, and those interested in African studies more generally. However, this latter group is stated with reservation, as the historical content provided in each chapter is minimal and the surveys of conflicts may seem superficial to readers interested in a more politically analytical text. This book may also appeal to policymakers attempting to address post-conflict justice and reconstruction for the theoretical foundation provided in the early chapters and as an introduction to thinking about ways of incorporating indigenous and traditional mechanisms for peace in the formation of post-conflict policy and institutions.

References


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