

Conflicts in West Africa

Kenneth Omeje

Introduction: The Conceptual Issues

The history of post-independence West Africa, especially the past two decades, has been blighted by virulent conflicts.¹ These conflicts are of varying dimensions, durations, scales and intensities. Conflict triggers and catalysts are also multi-dimensional, ranging from historical animosities and colonial legacies, to factors rooted in the complexity of post-colonial realities, forces of globalisation and global governance, external agencies and the vagaries of the ecological system. In a region that accounts for a majority of the 20 poorest countries in the world following all the recent human development and human security indices published by the UNDP and the Human Security Centre (2005), the developmental and security consequences of armed conflicts cannot be over-stated – parlous economic disruptions and war-shattered economies, collapsed public infrastructures, attrition of state governing institutions, proliferations of small arms, light weapons, lawless militias and rebel groups; grinding poverty and hopelessness, poor life expectancy and quick mortality rate for all age groups, as well as crippling disorder and human rights disasters. The past two decades have been a particularly turbulent period in the political and economic history of West Africa and indeed the larger continent because of the devastating impact of the World Bank/IMF Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) on the resources and capacities of most states to meet developmental challenges and obligations to their citizens. The impact of SAP on sub-Saharan Africa, as many recent studies have shown, has demonstrated that declining levels of economic and human development correlate

¹ Conflicts in West Africa are not different in kind, but arguably in degree, from conflicts in the wider sub-Saharan Africa and probably the entire continent. Hence, the paper makes references to other parts of Africa and the entire continent to buttress some of the arguments.

strongly with high tendency and incidence of state failure and violent conflicts (cf. Hoogvelt, 1997; Abrahamson, 2000). Most war-affected and conflict-prone countries of Africa have been sorely affected by SAP-accelerated decline in economic performance (high inflation, volatile or collapsed exchange rate regime, overwhelming external debt burden and debt servicing obligation, regressive international trade and foreign investment profile, etc) and human development requirements (public health care, safe water and sanitation, housing; land access for rural people, agricultural production and food quality, education, human capital investments and job creation).

It is difficult to develop a clear-cut typology or classification of contemporary conflicts in West African, not least because of the multi-causal, multi-dimensional and inter-connected nature of most conflicts. However, based on the analyses of principal causalities and catalysts, many recent studies and leading schools of thought have highlighted conflicts of varied significance and consequences both within and across a range of proximate states. An influential and largely western-centric paradigm is one that perceives the proliferation of armed conflicts and wars in Africa as a primordial inevitability or an atavistic tendency rooted in the underlying phenomenological features and differences among the 'heterogeneous' communities and ethno-cultural groups arbitrarily bunched together to form sovereign states by colonial diktat. Some of Africa's federated ethnic communities and groups, primordialists argue, are age-old hostile adversaries with historical animosities that date back to the unrestrained pre-colonial wars of conquest and supremacy among various African tribes, chiefdoms, clans, kingdoms and empires. Contemporary wars and armed conflicts in Africa are therefore interpreted by proponents as a resurgence of the unrestrained warrior spirit, instincts and mentality of the pre-colonial era and given the patrimonial tendency for political mobilisation and competition in most African states to build on underlying primordial features, violent conflicts become seemingly inevitable and virulent (cf. Geertz, 1973; Esman, 1994; Hastings, 1997; Llobera, 1999).

Another leading school of thought, which could be branded the instrumentalist approach, focuses on the place of primordial identities in Afri-

can conflicts, in their relationships with domestic political structures and the role of human agencies. While acknowledging the existence of the so-called primordial features – tribalism, ethnic culture and religion – instrumentalists argue that these features on their own do not naturally result in violent conflicts. Primordial factors instigate and affect conflicts only to the extent that they are deliberately manipulated and politicised by political actors and local elites usually for their self-seeking advantages. In other words, it is not the ‘objective differences’ of tribal, ethnic or religious groups that inevitably translate into primordial or identity conflicts but rather the ‘subjective choice’ of the hegemonic power players and local elites (Barth, 1969; Olzak, 1986; Nnoli, 1995). The sentimentalisation and politicisation of primordial identity via the conscious actions and rhetorics of the observed intermediaries serve an expedient instrumentalist purpose in the sense that they help the latter to win cheap popularity, electoral victory, as well as to set and dominate the discursive agenda of politics within their various constituencies. Scholars like Lewis (1996) and Grugel (2001) blame this tendency on the neo-patrimonial nature of politics in most African states, which reflect the outward features of institutionalised administrative states, while operating along patron-client networks and trajectories rooted in historical patterns of authority and social solidarity. Neo-patrimonial politics blurs the modernist distinction between the secular and sacred, formal and informal, and most significantly, between public and private resources. In fact, patrimonialism essentially blurs the contemporary statutory distinction between public office, the office holder and public resources. Hence, state officials have little or no inhibition to use public offices for personal aggrandizement and to privilege cronies, kinsmen and ethnic loyalists usually placed in strategic positions to ensure regime survival. From the instrumentalist perspective, conflicts arise as local politicians and elites competing and struggling for state power and resources, often times by recruiting militias and private armies from their ethno-national constituencies to challenge, unseat (by what ever possible means) and replace the ‘prebendal state’,² but not necessarily to improve or trans-

² The African neo-patrimonial state has been reconceptualised by scholars like Richard Joseph (1987; 1996) as the prebendal state. According to the theory of prebendalism, state offices are regarded as prebends that can be appropriated by office holders, who

form it. Depending on how they are played out and the virulence of the key players, low, medium and high intensity conflict could ensue, ultimately culminating in the phenomenon of failed state, collapsed state and societal fragmentation.

Focusing on the lopsided extractive structure and fragility of most post-colonial economies, some theorists have tended to emphasize competition for control of natural resources by various local political factions as a major factor that instigates and/or exacerbates armed conflicts and wars in Africa. The cases often cited by exponents to buttress their theory include the Jonah Savimbi-led rebel war in Angola, especially the post-Cold War phase of the campaign, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) war in Sierra Leone, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) rebel war in Liberia, Niger Delta conflict in Nigeria and the long-drawn-out internecine war in Congo DR. It is common knowledge that most African economies are weak rentier economies built around the exploitation and export of one or a combination of strategic natural resources such as diamond, gold, uranium, cobalt, copper, rock phosphate, timber and oil resources. Protagonists of the resource-based conflict school like Homer-Dixon (1994:5-25; 1998), Karl (1997), Watts (1999) and Collier & Hoeffler (2000) essentially conceptualise African conflicts as predatory conflicts while the politics of who controls the strategic natural resources and the accruing revenues as either the conflict-instigating factor or principal catalyst. Homer-Dixon in a Neo-Malthusian structural ecologist explanation, for instance, emphasises the virulence of inter-group and inter-state competition for 'scarce environmental resources' and how it precipitates conflicts. Collier & Hoeffler argue that 'greed and opportunities' rather than 'genuine grievances,' account for the proliferation of predatory and militant groups in many conflict-affected countries of Africa and the Third World, and that the prevalence of lootable natural resources like diamond, cobalt, etc, is likely to increase the duration and intensity of armed conflicts, as well as the chances of a relapse to war in the post-conflict dispensation. Offering a post-structuralist account, Karl and Watts, on the other hand, highlight

use them to generate material benefits for themselves and their constituents and kin groups (Joseph, 1987; 1996).

the role of global corporations and extraverted structures of capital accumulation in instigating and aggravating conflicts in Africa and the global south.

There are both merits and drawbacks in some of the above explanatory paradigms. The instrumentalist approach, for instance, offers a thoughtful account of the disfunctionality of the political economies of many post-colonial states of Africa and the role of the local elites in the systematic deterioration of inter-group relations (albeit not only primordial groups but also social classes and gender) and escalation of violent conflicts. The primordialist approach and Collier & Hoeffler's 'greed versus grievance' theory on the other hand, tend to offer a largely essentialized pathological view of African states as one inherently predisposed to 'irrational' and predatory conflicts. It is this discursive paradigm that has in many years made Africa a flashpoint of 'tribal and communal wars' in the international media. While manifestations of predation and communal feud exist, it is important to stress that these are secondary factors encouraged by and, for the most part, epiphenomenal of neo-patrimonial decline and state failure.

The real problem with the theories attributing causality to primordialism/predation and similar western-centric constructions is that given the embeddedness of the so-called primordial features in Africa, for instance, coupled with the inability of most African states to conform to neo-liberal notions of statehood based on the conventional Westphalia benchmark, these theories entertain the tendency to castigate all African states as irredeemably conflict-prone and conflict-ridden. More significantly, analyses of this nature can hardly inform constructive or appropriate conflict intervention policy remedies. Little wonder some of the western neo-liberal scholars and protagonists of pathological constructions of African conflicts like Linklater (1996: 108) and Helman and Ratner (1993: 12) in reference to the 'failed states' in Africa have made proposals for 'benign recolonisation'. These scholars advocate a 'reformation of decolonisation' through 'new instruments of global stewardship' or 'some forms of international government' akin to the mandate system of the defunct League of Nations over 'failed states and failing states and weak states', 'not able to stand on their feet in the interna-

tional system.' Helman and Ratner (1993: 12) argue that these forms of 'guardianship and trusteeship' are 'a common response to broken families, serious mental or physical illness or economic destitution' and thus should be invoked on the plight of failed states, preferably by the UN.

It suffices to say that African conflicts are part of the challenges of state formation and state-building and given the peculiar and limited history of sovereign statehood in Africa, the transformation of African states from the original 'client state' 'created by the colonialists for conquest' (cf. Ayoob, 1995; Mamdani, 1996) to a people-centred 'developmental state' (see Evans, 1995) could not have been a smooth ride. Arguably, the history and transition could have been much smoother in many states. It is important to recognise in this context that while state-building has evolved over centuries in Europe, the Westphalia project of juridical statehood (as opposed to empirical statehood) imposed on Africa at independence is not yet six decades old and has evolved in a very different way and changed the international environment (Francis, 2005: 8). Contemporary forces of globalisation and imperial supervision and governance that define the international environment in which post-colonial states operate have in diverse ways contributed to the political and economic malaise of these less privileged states.

Towards a Typology of Contemporary Conflicts in West Africa

It is important to reiterate that a simple classification of conflicts in West Africa is problematic because of the evident multi-causal, multi-dimensional and inter-connected nature of most conflicts. However, for analytical convenience, it will be helpful to discuss the various conflicts under different thematic frameworks. It is pertinent to note that these frameworks are not mutually exclusive given the interconnectedness of many conflicts. In addition, the following typology is not designed to present an exhaustive portrait of all shades and categories of conflicts in the West African region. It is basically an attempt to analyse the major conflicts that tend to menace national, regional and human securities.

Colonial Legacy

Colonial history bequeathed to Africa at least three legacies that have contributed to shaping the structure of conflicts in the region. The first is the arbitrary international boundaries principally determined by the resource exploitation and commercial interests of the colonial powers and which left Africa divided into more sovereign states than the continent probably needed. More disastrously, colonialism obliterated and reversed the emerging historical trajectories of state formation in Africa and in their stead imposed an artificial construction and configuration of states that have left Africa as the continent with the largest number of what many scholars have differently described as 'weak', 'micro', 'client', 'quasi' and 'shadow' states. Most of the international boundary disputes in post-independence Africa (e.g. Nigeria-Cameroun, Senegal-Mauritania, Ghana-Togo, etc) are directly or indirectly related to the artificiality and arbitrariness of the inherited colonial boundaries.

The second legacy is the dependent and lopsided nature of the economies of most states which makes these economies revolve around the production and export of one or two agricultural and natural resources. The limitations, negative externalities and international constraints of this dependency structure and how it precipitates or exacerbates economic crisis and political turmoil in Africa have been well researched and documented by many experts of international political economy (cf. Mamdani, 1996; Hoogvelt, 1997).

The third legacy is the unbalanced and inequitable pattern of economic, political and social development promoted by the various colonial regimes in Africa. One of the most horrendous expressions of this phenomenon is the negative privileging and convenient empowerment of members of a preferred ethnic-cultural group against others (in terms of education, recruitment into the public service and the security forces, career advancement, etc) practiced by different colonial administrations. This process laid the foundation for a large number of the ethnically-motivated discrimination, exclusion, marginalisation, violence and re-

pression championed or perpetuated by some of the elite factions that inherited the colonial state apparatuses in the post-colonial dispensation.

The Regionalised Civil Wars

The first major regionalised war in post-colonial West Africa was started by the Charles Taylor-led NPFL that attacked Liberia in 1989 through the northern Ivorian border. Within a few years, the Liberian war directly and indirectly affected the rest of the Mano River Union (MRU – Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea) and accentuated the destabilisation of the sub-region beyond the Mano River states (Cote d'Ivoire inclusive), making the sub-region a zone of high intensity conflict. Like most of the West African states, states in the war-affected sub-region were plagued by decades of neo-patrimonial misgovernance, blatant corruption and nepotism, economic decline, widespread disenchantment and impoverishment of the vast majority of the populace, large armies of unemployed and disgruntled youths, political instability, as well as repression and intimidation of political opposition. In addition to these factors, the war-affected Mano River region is particularly characterised by 'micro-states' (in terms of size, population and most importantly economic performance and weakness of state governing institutions), plundered by corrupt leaders whose ill-equipped and demoralised security forces could scarcely withstand the vast array of security vulnerabilities and threats they face (cf. Ampleford *et al* 2002; Francis, 2005:7). These factors demonstrated the parlous dysfunctionality of the post-colonial state systems and also created a fertile ground for the political insurgencies and rebel wars that followed.

With logistic support from Burkina Faso, Libya and Cote d'Ivoire, Charles Taylor's NPFL rebel campaign to oust the dictatorship of Samuel Doe in Liberia quickly gathered strength and culminated in a vicious civil war that in its first phase lasted from 1989-1997. Doe committed several atrocities and hideous human rights abuses in his bid to hang on to power, and to promote parochial ethnic interests, which included his attempt to replace settler domination (by the Americo-Liberians) with domination by his indigenous Krahn ethnic population (Ebo, 2005: 4).

The war spawned a host of other vicious rebel and civil militia groups, proliferated the use of small arms, light weapons, child soldiers and mercenaries in Liberia and the sub-region, produced tens of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees, and inflicted mortal atrocities on all sections of the civilian populations. From 1989 when the war started, Taylor and his NPFL predated the Liberian timber economy and exported large quantities of timber through Cote d'Ivoire (HRW, 2005).

While the war in Liberia raged, Charles Taylor aided the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led by Foday Sankoh in nearby Sierra Leone with the aim of destabilising the unfriendly beleaguered state whose government had previously denied the NPFL leader the use of the country's territory as a base for cross border incursions into Liberia. More significantly perhaps is the fact that Charles Taylor was interested in plundering the diamond economy of its beleaguered neighbour to help fund his rebel campaign at home. Through Charles Taylor's NPFL, RUF also received significant logistical support from Libya and Burkina Faso (USIP, 2002). Whilst the Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, who sees himself as a revolutionary and pan-Africanist, has had a long history of sponsoring anti-establishments 'revolutions' against regimes he perceives as puppets of Western imperialists, the interest of Blaise Compaore, President of Burkina Faso, seems to be more in propping his cronies to power and exploiting the war economies of the two countries (see Kamara, 1999). The RUF campaign quickly gained momentum and became popularly embraced by large sections of disgruntled youths in the hinterland provinces of the country. Charles Taylor ultimately achieved his goal of not only destabilising Sierra Leone but also he was able to gain access to the strategic diamond resources he desperately coveted as soon as RUF rebels established control over the Kono diamond mines. Taylor, as is well-known, profited a great deal from the war in Sierra Leone through his notorious 'diamond-for-gun' deal with the RUF.

To contain the rebel war at its inception in the early 1990s, the military government in Sierra Leone hired combatants from a Liberian rebel

group, the United Liberation Movement for Democracy (ULIMO)³ and provided them with logistical support to fight the RUF rebels at home and to attack the NPFL in Liberia (HRW:2005:6). Later in May 1995, the teetering government of Captain Valentine Strasser contracted a South African private military corporation (PMC) known as Executive Outcome (EO), to help it fight off the RUF rebels, which had come close to seizing the capital city of Freetown (see Fabricius, 2004:53). EO was contracted at the cost of \$ 2 million per month (payable through partial ownership and exploitation of diamond resources) to provide 150 – 200 fully equipped soldiers and helicopters, train Sierra Leone army, and lead in the war to combat the RUF (Selber & Jobarteh, 2002:91). EO was part of a larger diamond business network in war-torn Sierra Leone that was comprised of multinational mining companies like Diamond-Works and Branch Energy (Musah, 2002). EO fighters were mainly members of the ex-Apartheid South Africa Special Forces, but despite their unsavoury antecedents, these mercenaries acquired a nice reputation for humane treatment and protection of vulnerable civilian populations hitherto brutalised by RUF rebels. When in 1998 the ANC government in South Africa promulgated a new law (Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Act) to regulate the involvement of South Africans in private military services abroad, EO was disbanded. Sandline International, a British PMC believed by most analysts to be a reincarnation of EO and one that also scored military successes in the anti-rebel war, succeeded the EO in Sierra Leone (Fabricius, 2004:54). Sandline was ultimately compelled to withdraw from Sierra Leone in 1999 when regular multinational peacekeepers of both ECOWAS and the UN deployed extensively to stabilise the situation.

The war in Sierra Leone, which started in 1991, officially came to an end in 2002 following a series of peace agreements. A national election was also held in the same year. With more or less similar consequences as the Liberian war, the Sierra Leone civil war was exceptionally notorious for producing a large community of amputees whose limbs were brutally severed by RUF rebels. The rebels perpetrated horrifying atroci-

³ This rebel movement later split into ULIMO K and ULIMO J, named after their respective faction leaders (see Ebo, 2005:5).

ties and war crimes against vast sections of the civilian populations, especially vulnerable women and children. Rape, arson, pillage and abduction and forceful induction of children into rebel soldiering were widespread in Sierra Leone.

Furthermore, by the end of the 1990s, the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia had pumped nearly a million refugees, rebels and civil militias into neighbouring Guinea, a phenomenon that destabilised the deeply divided and beleaguered country in diverse ways. Cross border attacks between the Guinean security forces on the one hand, and the various warring factions in Sierra Leone and Liberia (including fleeing militias and rebels across the Guinean borders) on the other hand, precipitated intermittent conflicts of varied intensities in 2000 and beyond. Presently, only a fragile peace exists between Guinea and its war-ravaged neighbours and occasional cross-border attacks have continued to erupt, especially in the Yenga district of Sierra Leone's border with Guinea, a territory that Guinean authorities have more violently claimed since the end of the RUF rebel war. Ampleford *et al* (2002: 20) captured the desperate situation in the war-torn Mano River sub-region, especially its impact on children, as follows:

The unfortunate convergence of systemic poverty and alienation, a large youth cohort and widespread availability of light weapons, enabled children as combatants. Often provided with drugs and alcohol, and under threat of brutal punishment for errors or desertion, children were conditioned into obedience to undertake fearless killings. Many were forced to commit atrocities against their own families and communities, and others forced to act as sexual slaves – young girls were raped and became pregnant by their captors. Childhood was literally stolen from many youngsters in the sub-region during the past decade, and the yet unknown psychological effects of their experiences will likely have an enduring impact.

Following the intervention by regional peacekeepers, the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group or ECOMOG deployed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) under Nigeria hegemony, and at a later state in cooperation with UN peacekeepers (an observer mission in the case of Liberia's first phase of civil war), the rebel wars gave way to a fragile peace in both countries. In Sierra Leone the democratically elected government of the embattled President Tejan

Kabbah was re-elected in the first post-conflict national election of 2002 while the NPFL warlord Charles Taylor was swung to power in Liberia in 1997 through a democratic election. Whereas Sierra Leone embarked on a steady post-conflict reconstruction and reform under President Kabbah, the regime of terror, vendetta, and kleptomania instituted by Charles Taylor precipitated new rebel coalitions and militias, notably the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), that took up arms against Taylor. LURD and MODEL rebels were predominantly of the indigenous Mandingos and Krahn ethnic groups respectively. Because LURD rebels were mostly ethnic Mandingo, an ethnic group that straddles the Liberian-Guinean borders, the rebel group was able to operate and recruit freely from the Guinean side (see Zabadi, 2005: 125). Both ECOWAS and the UN were to intervene again in Liberia with major peacekeeping deployments.

In addition, Taylor's continued provision of arms and other logistical support to the RUF rebels in Sierra Leone in exchange for diamond war resources earned his government limited international sanctions and opprobrium, which compounded the domestic economic and political decline in Liberia. It was on account of his Sierra Leone war exploits and subversive activities that Taylor was later indicted by the UN-supported Special Court for Sierra Leone. Embattled at home and indicted abroad, Taylor had little option but to resign his position as president in August 2003 and left for a life in exile in Nigeria.

The outbreak of war in neighbouring Cote d'Ivoire in 2002 triggered by the divisive politics of succession following the death of Houphouët-Boigny – the country's first and only post-independence leader for over three decades (1960-1993) – did not come to many critical observers as a surprise. Robert Kaplan had earlier in his February 1994 thought-provoking journal article, *The Coming Anarchy*, published barely three months after the death of President Houphouët-Boigny, predicted the likelihood of a catastrophic conflagration in the post-Boigny's Cote d'Ivoire. As Kaplan (1994) then coalesced the scenario: 'Ivory Coast faces a possibility worse than a coup: an anarchic implosion of criminal violence – an urbanized version of what has already happened in Soma-

lia. Or it may become an African Yugoslavia, but one without mini-states to replace the whole.'

Two principal factors accounted for the implosion of the Ivorian state once celebrated in the West as the 'Paris of West Africa'. The first as Kaplan (1994) rightly argued is the collapse in the 1980s of the cocoa economy in which the national economy rested due to downward trends in international prices and demand for the product. In the heydays of the cocoa boom, Cote d'Ivoire attracted the largest number of guest workers (from all over the sub-region) and French expatriate officials in West Africa. The second factor is that the political stability hitherto enjoyed by Cote d'Ivoire was built around the personality cult of the father-figure and legendary President Houphouët-Boigny, without any underpinning and sustainable democratic institutions and culture. Hence, after the demise of Houphouët-Boigny top national politicians and military officers resorted to pernicious intrigues, politicisation of citizenship and ethnic identity, insurrection and coup d'état, framing and persecution of opponents, rebel insurgencies, etc – all in a bid to seize and retain political power – they were simply acting true to the fears and theories of many. What seemed, however, under-estimated in most forecasts of the Ivorian implosion was the aggravating impact of sub-regional political upheavals and civil wars next door, as well as the complicity of external actors, especially that of an under-estimated African country like Burkina Faso. The latter has been seriously linked to supplying arms to the Patriotic Movement for Cote d'Ivoire (MPCI), the main rebel group that launched the armed uprising of September 2002 in which the Ivorian military leader General Robert Guei was killed and has since then remained in control of most of the northern part of the country. Burkina Faso accounts for the largest number of immigrants in Cote d'Ivoire (about 2.2 million). President Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso denies complicity in the Ivorian civil war and accuses the Ivorian government of using state security forces and the government-backed militias, the Abidjan Death Squads, to target Burkinabe immigrants and settlers in the war-torn country for killings and other human rights abuses (SRI, 2003a).

The war in Liberia provided a massive opportunity for all factions in the Ivorian war (i.e. the Ivorian government, MPCl, the Popular Movement for the Greater West [MPIGO], the Movement for Justice and Peace [MPJ], among others) to recruit combatants from Liberia and Liberian refugees in Cote d'Ivoire. It also made Liberia a retreat haven for some of the Ivorian rebel factions and militias that fled government forces and other intervention forces, including the French troops intervening to safeguard their country's neo-colonial interests and peacekeepers of ECOWAS and the UN. Between 2002-2003, Charles Taylor, then President of Liberia, reportedly sent Liberian fighters to support the MPIGO and MPJ insurgency against the Ivorian government ostensibly because these rebel groups comprised western Ivorian of mainly the Yacuba ethnic group that straddle the Liberia-western Ivorian borders and who had previously fought on the side of Taylor as mercenaries against the LURD rebels in Liberia (HRW, 2005; SRI, 2003a). The Ivorian government, in turn, deployed a large number of state-sponsored militias, many of whom were recruited from Liberia, to fight the insurgency groups in western Cote d'Ivoire.

The complex nature of the regionalised civil wars originally started by the Charles Taylor's NPFL in 1989 could be clearly discerned from the forgoing analysis. Four related factors helped to spread and sustain this regionalisation of wars. The first is the perceived economic opportunities and practical empowerment created by war for all categories of combatants, especially for the youths and child soldiers who hitherto lived in abject deprivation and hopelessness. For this category of combatants described by HRW (2005) as 'regional warriors', fighting in the front-line not only guaranteed an unprecedented wage, but also an opportunity to loot, rape and kill to avenge for the loss of their loved ones in the war. The second is the unrestrained flow of arms and combatants across the fluid borders of the countries concerned, coupled with the willingness of governments in the region to support the actions of insurgent groups and government militias in neighbouring countries. The third is the large-scale commercialisation of war through the use of both professional and vulnerable mercenaries and exploitation of war economies. Being multi-dimensional conflicts with extensive humanitarian crisis and civilian

causalities, these wars are described as ‘complex political emergencies’ (see Francis, 2005).

The fourth is the flawed nature of conflict intervention, especially the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants and child soldiers implemented in the sub-region by ECOWAS, UN and other external agencies. In both Sierra Leone and Liberia, conflict intervention and peacekeeping placed great emphasis on peace enforcement for understandable reasons but this was done at the expense of strategising for how the various local conflict stakeholders could be meaningfully involved in winning the peace, post-conflict peacebuilding and in sharing the peace dividend. The result is that salient islands of exclusion, disaffection, and victimisation are reproduced and perpetuated in the post-conflict phase. This was especially the case in Liberia after the first civil war that installed Charles Taylor as President in 1997, and to a lesser extent, in Sierra Leone. The quick withdrawal of the multinational peacekeeping force compounded the situation in the case of Liberia.

On DDR, the DD component was largely successful in Sierra Leone but not the ‘R’ or what has presently been extended to two or three ‘Rs’ (Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration) as the case may be. In Liberia the entire DDR projected was grossly under-funded and botched up both at the end of the first civil war in 1997 and the second civil war in 2003. For instance, in the more critical second phase of the UN-sponsored Liberian DDR programme of 2003-2005, a severe funding shortage of US \$39 million was reported, a shortage that left over 40,000 combatants at risk of missing out on job training and education, and made them more vulnerable for re-recruitment to fight in future armed conflicts (HRW, 2005:2). A large number of these disaffected and disillusioned Liberian ex-combatants are presently selling and using their militia skills to fight in the Ivorian conflict.

Citizenship Politicisation, the Indigeneity Complex and Low Intensity Communal Wars

There are a rising number of conflicts in contemporary Africa associated with or complicated by the variability of the concepts of citizenship and indigeneity in both constitutional and empirical terms. Firstly, regarding citizenship, the core problem is the deliberate politicisation of citizenship and the correlated rights by sections of the political elite based on their self-serving interests as exemplified by the recent political history of Cote d'Ivoire.

Following the death of Houphouët-Boigny in 1993, a bitter power struggle ensued between Henri Konan Bedie, the then President of the National Assembly who also provisionally assumed office as President and his main rival, Alassane Ouattara, the then Prime Minister. Bedie further consolidated his grip on power following the 1995 presidential election but the politics dramatically changed when Ouattara announced his intention to run for president in the run up to the October 2000 election and proceeded to rally the support of his northern ethnic region. Anti-government protests were already building up from various ethnic communities of the predominantly Muslim-populated northern region in connection with some of the policies and discriminatory practices of President Bedie. The relative stability of Cote d'Ivoire started to unravel under President Bedie, as he incited xenophobia and greatly marginalized Ivorian immigrants and their descendents (especially Muslims residing in the north with Burkinabe roots) by prohibiting land ownership and voting by non-natives of Cote d'Ivoire (SRI, 2003b). Bedie increased the discontent and opposition of the northern Ivorians when in his desperation to stop his main rival, Alassane Ouattara, from contesting the presidential election he labelled Ouattara a foreigner on the grounds that one of his parents was a Burkinabe. Bedie subsequently constitutionalised this dubious reinterpretation of citizenship and thus denied both citizenship and political rights of any one whose both parents were not Ivorians. It was chiefly the discriminatory politics of citizenship introduced by Bedie and the correlated ethnic polarities and violence it engendered that precipitated the first successful military coup in

Ivorian history, which brought General Robert Guei to power in December 1999. In spite of all the rhetoric, both General Guei and the current President, Laurent Gbagbo, are yet to depoliticise the issue of citizenship or abolish the obnoxious discriminatory laws and practices that underlie the tragic civil war that has bitterly divided and devastated the country. The role and factional preferences of external actors, in particular, France and Burkina Faso have undeniably affected the civil war in some adverse ways.

The indigeneity complex is comparatively a more widespread conflict-instigating and aggravating factor in West Africa and the problem is often related to inter-group competition over environmental resources and economic opportunities, but which also in most cases articulate with other wider conflicts of interests (e.g. race, ethnicity, micro-culture, religion) to lead to intermittent and protracted conflicts (Moritz, 2004: 1). In other words, conflicts that, for instance, started as a struggle over environmental resources or what many environmentalists call 'green wars' might end up as ethno-religious conflicts and vice versa. There are two related and often overlapping strands of the conflict, namely, the indigene-settler conflict and the herder-farmer conflict. In West Africa, the vast majority of these conflicts are intra-state. However, inter-state dimensions have occurred in some areas where the conflicting groups straddle the borders between two or more countries, a good example being the conflicts over access to wells between the Tubu, Arab and FulBe (also called Fulani) herders in the Diffa district of Niger which spilt into and complicated the political turmoil in Chad where the three ethnic communities are also substantially represented (Thebaud & Batteredbury, 2001; Moritz, 2004). Elsewhere in Senegal, Mauritania, Mali and Burkina Faso, northern Nigeria and northern Cameroun, occasional hostilities between nomadic pastoralists (mostly of FulBe extract) and sedentary farming communities have often intersected with structures of ethnicity and religion to provoke devastating intra-state and inter-state communal conflicts in recent years (cf. Homer-Dixon, 1999; Turner, 2004). These conflicts do not only cause significant human casualties and displacement of local populations, but also largescale destruction of properties and agro-pastoral economies.

One of the most virulent manifestations of the indigeneity conflict in West Africa is the perennial indigene-settler conflict in many Muslim-dominated States of northern Nigeria, a conflict which by articulating the ethno-religious divide between the indigenous Hausa-Fulani Muslim populations and the southern Christian migrant settlers is often simply reported as religious or tribal wars. The religious dimension of the conflict has undoubtedly gained added momentum since the introduction of the radical Islamic penal code known as Sharia law in 12 of the 19 northern States of the federation. Actions and rhetorics of religious clerics and community leaders, as well as policies and pronouncements of sub-national governments and local politicians scheming for cheap electoral advantages often exacerbate the indigene-settler conflict.

In some of the north-central States of Nigeria (also known as the Middle Belt) where there are large indigenous ethnic communities that are predominantly Christians, the indigene-settler conflict takes a different twist. The settler minority populations in most of the volatile communities are pastoral nomads of Hausa/Fulani ethnic origin often accused by locals of destroying their farmlands with pastoral activities, usurping some of their fallow lands for settlement, and upsetting the community culture with Islamic culture. Since the inauguration of Nigeria's fourth civilian republic in May 1999, indigene-settler feuds have resulted in a montage of communal wars and reprisal killings in many parts of Nigeria, leading to more than 10,000 deaths (Omeje, 2005).

Beyond the indigeneity complex, there are a considerable number of low intensity communal wars in various parts of West Africa, between the Ijaw, Itsekiri and Uhrobo in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the Tiv and Junkun in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, the Lorma and Mandingo in Liberia, the desert Tuareg nomads and their more dominant rival ethnic communities in the northern Mali, Niger and Chad, etc. Many communities and ethnic groups have also repeatedly imploded with intra-group communal feud such as the internecine wars associated with land and chieftaincy disputes in the northern Ghana ethnic communities of Mpaha, Bunkurgu, Yendi and Bimbilla. These conflicts have more or less entrenched structures and are characterised by sporadic outbreak of violence. They are related to a combination of factors ranging

from historical animosities and disputes over land to struggle for natural resources, competition for economic opportunities, culture conflicts and contestation for political representation and access to the limited state resources.

Marginalisation and Political Exclusion

Complaints and protests against marginalisation and political exclusion (real or perceived) by diverse social groups and communities are a major conflict-instigating and aggravating factor, which exists in virtually every West African country. Conceptions and practices of marginalisation and political exclusion are usually formed around the infrastructure of primordial social differences and other empirical identities, especially ethnic nationality, religion, and perhaps increasingly gender. There are overlapping boundaries in the formation of social identities and structures of conflict, but a major factor in conflicts associated with marginalisation and political exclusion is the link with state power. Marginalised and excluded groups and communities have almost invariably attributed their predicament to the control and use of state power by rival groups to exploit, impoverish, undermine, intimidate, repress and victimise them. In other words, the state is usually perceived as a major protagonist and prosecutor of the conflict – a perception and feature that complicates the resolution and management of the conflict. The virulence of prebendal and neo-patrimonial politics in many African countries tends to lend credence to allegations of political exclusion and the state's complicity, which are often denied by the dominant groups and state officials. Depending on the historical specificities and prevailing circumstances, incidents and notions of marginalisation may articulate with other compelling social and natural forces to generate conflicts of varying intensities and magnitude. Discourses of marginalisation and political exclusion and persecution of salient ethnonational communities feature prominently in some of the recent civil wars in West Africa, especially the wars in Chad, Liberia, Mali, Cote d'Ivoire, and the Casamance region of Senegal. They have also critically informed recent

uprisings and insurgencies in Guinea, Togo, Niger and the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

In the 22 year Casamance war in southern Senegal (1982-2004), for instance, grievances of felt marginalisation and exclusion by the central government in Dakar, forced some radical leaders of the Diola ethnic group, the largest ethnic community in the Casamance region to launch a violent separatist campaign under the Casamance Movement for Democratic Forces (MFDC) led by Father Diamacoune Senghor. The national government in Dakar is dominated by the Wolof, Senegal's largest ethnic group. Separatist sentiments in Casamance were further encouraged by the physical separation of the region from most of the Wolof-dominated northern Senegal by the territory of the former British colony of the Gambia. A more significant factor is fact that the Senegalese authorities responded to earlier grassroots protests by Casamancais in the early 1980s over some apparently legitimate concerns with brutal and widespread military crackdown. The protesters, which included large sections of women populations, demonstrated against discrimination in public sector jobs, infrastructural neglect and the demographic pressure of increased migration to the more fertile Casamance region by loads of more privileged northern Wolofs and alienation of traditional peasant cultivators based on the pro-capitalist state's agrarian reform policies (Harsch, 2005:2). It was mainly the poor and high-handed management of these earlier protests that resulted in the descent into rebel insurgency and prolonged civil war.

The army of neighbouring Guinea-Bissau was the main source of weapons and ammunition for the MFDC in the pro-independence war, which also produced large numbers of refugees, cross-border rebel activities and instability in Guinea-Bissau. The climax of the destabilising impact of the Casamance war on Guinea-Bissau came in 1998-1999 when an attempt by the government of Guinea-Bissau to dismiss an army commander accused of selling arms to the MFDC precipitated a brief civil war in the country as MFDC hardliners in the southern front joined the opposition forces while Senegal dispatched 2,500 troops to support the embattled government (Doyle, 2004; Harsch, 2005). It took the intervention of regional peacekeepers (ECOMOG) to restore peace to Guinea-

Bissau. The Casamance war ended with the signing of the 30th December 2004 peace agreement between the MFDC leader and President Wade of Senegal. The Casamance-Senegal peace process has been largely home-grown and remains fraught with significant logistical challenges, not least the issue of ensuring an effective DDRR for ex-rebel combatants, repatriation, resettlement and rehabilitation of refugees and displaced people, as well as reconstruction of collapsed public and community infrastructures.

In the case of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the negative externalities of oil operation (notably oil spillage and gas flaring) coupled with cumulative developmental neglect of the past and the deteriorating economic conditions associated with SAP have in recent years fuelled strong anti-oil sentiments and protests among local populations and the civil society in the Niger Delta and beyond. The dominant rhetoric of the anti-oil campaign in the Delta is anchored on the peoples' misgivings that they have for long been collectively marginalised, exploited and suppressed by the combined forces of the state and oil industry, two powerful forces dominated by the an unstable coalition of neo-patrimonial elites from Nigeria's major ethnic groups. From the perspective of the Niger Delta public, the latter thrives on the ruins and at the expense of the local oil-bearing communities, essentially because of their minority status in the federation. Under Nigerian laws, ownership of oil resources is vested in the federal government and the latter retains a lion's share in the distribution of national revenues (mostly oil-derived) between the various layers of government in the federation. Sub-national governments and the civil society in the oil-rich Niger Delta demand greater control of oil resources at the local levels, a campaign otherwise known as 'resource control' in Nigeria.

Since the early 1990s, the anti-oil campaign has spawned a wide range of radical ethnic militia groups that have increasingly obstructed oil operations in the Niger Delta and also made a significant part of the oil region ungovernable. Some of these ethnic militia groups include the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Pan Niger Delta Revolutionary Militia (PNDRM), Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), Movement for the Emancipation of

the Niger Delta (MEND), Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEN), Niger Delta Oil Producing Communities (NDOPC), Delta-Bayelsa Freedom Fighters, etc. The militias adopt diverse violent strategies, including vandalism of oil pipelines and installations, hostageing and kidnapping of oil workers for a ransom, extortion of money from contractors working for different oil companies, seizure and occupation of oil premises, and so forth. In addition, the Niger Delta is inundated with impulsive communal violence over such oil-related issues as disputes concerning ownership of oil-bearing land, sharing of monies paid off by oil prospecting companies for land acquisition or as compensation for ecological damage, and provision of local vigilante security services to oil companies and sharing the accruing emoluments. The well armed ethnic militias form the bulk of the combatants in the various communal feuds.

The Niger Delta resource-based conflict is particularly aggravated by the state's reliance on punitive measures and its refusal to make far-reaching resource transfer and developmental concessions to the people. Military reprisals have been relentlessly applied against the various resistance movements and anti-oil protesters in the Delta region. In recent years, the government has launched a range of joint security task forces aimed at combating the anti-oil militias in the region. Some of these task forces include the River State Special Task Force on Internal Security, Operation Andoni, Operation HAKURI and Operation Restore Hope. Since early 2004, the federal government has deployed over 2,000 troops across the Delta region under the Brigadier General Elias Zamani-led Operation Restore Hope with a special mandate to monitor and shoot any unauthorized persons moving near oil installations and pipelines (*Vanguard*, 2004). From a security point of view, the Nigerian state's approach to the complex resource-based struggle in the Niger Delta region seems to be one of 'domestic peace enforcement'.

Democratic Deficits and Instability

A greater part of the post-independence history of West Africa has been characterised by varied levels of dictatorships (both military and civilian), which have over the years entrenched an authoritarian political culture in most countries. Neo-patrimonial aggrandisement of power and public resources in the context of unstable and poor economic performances accelerated the need for political leaders to institute and entrench authoritarian methods of governance over impoverished and restive sections of the populace. Crackdown on opposition, sequestration of civil society and gross human rights violations not only became part of the stylistics of governance, but also instrumental devices to prolong the lifespan of inept and discredited regimes. In nearly all the West African countries, this tendency precipitated military coups d'état, and in some tragic cases, bloody counter-coups and prolonged military dictatorships.

Even though there has been a remarkable progress in the establishment of elected civilian governments in West Africa and the rest of the continent since the mid-1990s – thanks to the political conditionalities of SAP – it is observable that many of the elected civilian governments in the continent have dubious democratic credentials. Elections have been hardly free and fair in many countries and the tendency by many incumbent leaders (both military and civilian) to perpetuate their political tenure through electoral fraud and liquidation of opposition remains high. In one of such typical examples, the Guinea Leader Lansana Conte after seizing power in a military coup following the death of the country's first president Sekou Toure in 1984 ruled for nine years and attempted to legitimise his rule by organising multi-party elections in 1993. During the course of this election, which as expected was won by President Conte, the main opposition candidate, Alpha Conde, was arrested, charged with attempting to invade and destabilise the country and imprisoned. Lansana Conte was re-elected in 1998 and 2003.

Apparently, the sit-tight inclination and tendency towards liquidation of opposition by many incumbent leaders in the fledgling democratic dispensations of various African states are all part of the dangers and chal-

lenges of trying to graft liberal democratic norms and institutions onto a political landscape whose dominant features are neo-patrimonial whilst the underpinning economic structures remain manifestly neo-colonial. In this respect, democratic transitions could in the short-term prove to be more conflict-prone than stable autocracies.

Harmful Traditional Practices

There are pervasive structures and patterns of socio-cultural violence embedded in human institutions and cultures in diverse communities in West Africa and the rest of the continent otherwise known as Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs). HTPs are often reinforced by structures of poverty and they impact adversely on underprivileged people, especially rural women, children and youths. Examples include female genital mutilation and infibulation, widowhood rites, nutritional taboos, early marriage and early child bearing, mandatory initiation into pernicious secret cult systems in some local communities; caste stratification, segregation and oppression, as well as sexual slavery and exploitation of girls and women devoted to some fetish gods otherwise known as cult prostitution. Because girls and women are, for obvious reasons, more disproportionately affected by HTPs, core aspects of the phenomena have been recognised in various international documents and instruments of rights as 'discrimination' or more aptly, 'violence against women' (OAU, 1981; UN, 1981, 1999). Since the 1980s, many African countries have adopted legislations against different HTPs, prohibiting practices and spelling out penalties against violations (Imam *et al*, 1997; Omeje, 2001:47). The direct effect of legislation in eradicating HTPs remains doubtful. More often than not, violations persist in remote villages where there are hardly any law enforcement agencies and, more dismally perhaps, where the state scarcely has any institutional arrangements for monitoring violations and enforcing prohibitions. In addition, the state inadvertently leaves the onus of reporting violations on victims and grassroots subjects, but this is practically unrealistic in the context of the local people's poor knowledge of the law and their rights, coupled with their fear of local sanctions. This tendency invariably works to the ad-

vantage of the local potentates of a given HTP regime, who often capitalise on the fear and ignorance of the people to perpetuate the practice and their privileges.

Conclusion: Challenges and Opportunities Presented by Conflicts in West Africa

The problem of conflicts in West Africa, as the preceding analysis demonstrates, is extensive and complex. But it is a problem that also presents far-reaching challenges and opportunities for conflict resolution, management, and prevention, as well as security sector reform and peace-building. To this end, there is the need for context-specific, multi-layer and multi-track processes of third party intervention involving robust partnership and cooperation between local, (sub) regional and international actors and stakeholders. Depending on the specific nature and dimensions of the conflict and issues at stake, intervention could:

- Be focused on regional, sub-regional, national, sub-national, and local community levels and concerns.
- Involve building and strengthening the capacities of African institutions, personnel and agencies and establishing new systems and structures for diverse peace support and security-related activities.
- Involve mobilisation, sensitisation and networking of conflict stakeholders to negotiate and develop a more desirable system and state of affair.
- Require political and legal reforms, capacitation of the legal and justice sector and a new regime of transitional justice to deal with previous acts of inhumanity and problems of impunity.
- Entail strategic investment in and partnership between international and local agencies with a view to, among other things, revive, capacitate and utilise functional indigenous institutions, agencies and resources to complement the performance of the official top-down processes of governments and inter-governmental organisations in such critical areas as conflict reso-

lution, management and prevention, social rehabilitation of child soldiers and ex-combatants, transitional justice, and so forth.

To be legitimate and efficient, there should be sufficient local stakeholders' buy-in, ownership and participation in conflict intervention systems and processes, as well as in sharing their benefits.

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