

## ***Reviews Section***

*IS VIOLENCE INEVITABLE IN AFRICA? THEORIES OF CONFLICT AND APPROACHES TO CONFLICT PREVENTION*, BY CHABAL, PATRICK, ENGEL, ULF, & GENTILI, ANNA-MARIA,

Leiden: Brill, 2005, ISBN 9004144501, Series and Series Number AGIS001,  
EUR 50.- / US\$ 70.-

A Review by Tatashikanda Kahare

Largely due to Achille Mbembe's incisive writings, it has become customary – especially outside Africa – to refer to a conspicuous and widely shared set of African experiences today under the heading of 'the postcolony'. The expression has come to suggest an aggregate convergence of ills, from state decay to uncontrolled violence and civil war; and from intercontinental subservience and exploitation, to extreme poverty. This is the common image of Africa in the North Atlantic, in other continents, increasingly even in Africa. As a self-fulfilling prophecy this image's negative effects on the future of Africans and of Africa cannot be overestimated. The flight into universalism among some of Africa's most brilliant philosophers, and alternatively – including others equally brilliant – the insistence on the liberating force of a less-than-universal *African* philosophy, can only be understood against the background of the challenges that Afropessimism poses.

But is this negative image reliable? Is the condescending fatalism that the media and decision makers in the North Atlantic often base on it, indicated by the facts? Taking out of the aggregate package of Afropessimism one salient topic, the book under review addresses the incidence of violent conflict in Africa, and scans both the Africanist descriptive literature, the contributors' own rich African data, and the fast growing theoretical and comparative literature on conflict and violence, so as to give a provisional answer to the question posed in the book's title: *Is violence inevitable in Africa?* According to the editors' own excellent summary

“This volume is an attempt to analyse the causes of conflict in Africa, to review the various approaches to conflict prevention or conflict resolution and to discuss some of the practical difficulties in ending violence. It brings together a wide range of scholars and practitioners, with specialist knowledge of a large number of African countries. (...)

The Intention here is to provide, within a single volume, a survey of the various approaches to conflict in Africa, a systematic discussion of some of the root causes of violence, as well as case studies on the consequences of violence and the effects of conflict resolution. The book is in four parts. The Introduction develops a political analysis of violence in Africa. Part I discusses a variety of theories of conflict and outlines the main approaches to conflict resolution. Part II presents case studies of conflict management and resolution. The Conclusion reviews the literature and offers an original way forward.”

This book successfully reflects the sustained efforts, on the part of Brill publishers, Leiden, the Netherlands, to become a major name in African Studies publishing, and thus to complement their excellent reputation built up over the centuries (!) in the fields of Asian studies, linguistics, religious studies specifically of Islam and Judaism, and the Ancient Near East in general. The cast of editors and contributors is intercontinental, featuring senior researchers from Europe along with the veteran North American Africanist political science Donald Rothchild, and from the Muslim world Shamil Idriss, an intercontinental peace negotiator so globalised that not even a specific location can be tagged to him in the list of contributors (p. 238); meanwhile, he excelled as a post-conflict negotiator in Burundi.

Dedicated to a question so absolutely vital to Africans today; to a question moreover that addresses African self-esteem and identity so directly (for instance, in Anna-Maria Gentili’s balanced and comprehensive chapter on ethnicity and citizenship); and produced at a moment in history when there is no longer a lack of Africans who in terms of publication record and international reputation can compete with North Atlantic Africanists, one would have preferred to see far more African contributors in this book. Yet the background and the academic stature of the first editor, Patrick Chabal, for one, guarantees that the book is largely free from the estranging and condescending othering vis-à-vis Africa, still so often found in this genre of writings. Chabal’s emphasis on dominant strands of rationality and modernity in African situations today (pp. 10f) is certainly well-taken.

However, this does not prevent that the *politics of North-South knowl-*

*edge production* receive little explicit attention in this volume. If the range of possible sources of inspiration for the book's arguments is somewhat wider than usual, it is because of the repeated reference made to 'consultants' reports' (to be sure, to complement, not to replace, more fundamental and professional academic research) – rather than because of any extensive epistemological and, in general, philosophical reflection on such points as:

- the nature of society and of conflict,
- the nexus (far from self-evident) between conflict and violence,
- the place of violence not just in 'the' African 'postcolony' but in *any* state regardless of space and time.
- what rights and what duties do (the representatives of) other states, even from other continents, have to intervene in African conflicts, and on what systematic and fundamental grounds
- how does such intervention (with its potentially liberating, but also potentially hegemonic implications) relate to the epistemological assumption, underlying the present book, that North Atlantic knowledge production on Africans and Africa is largely unproblematic and self-evident – in other words, how can we prevent that scholarly knowledge production naïvely paves the way for military control (like in the old anthropological debate on counter-insurgency research),<sup>1</sup> – and how can our research, on the contrary, help to differentiate between North Atlantic expansionism and genuine (and justified) humanitarian intervention.

The reader will look in vain for a fundamentally theoretical, philosophical underpinning of the kind of political and social theories underlying the specific social and political science arguments in this book. Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Marx, Weber, Derrida, Bataille, Arendt, Sartre, Girard, Levinas and

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Buytenhuys, R., 1972, 'Defeating Mau Mau: Some observations on "Counter Insurgency Research" in Kenya during the Emergency', *Sociologische Gids*, xix, no. v/vi (1972), pp. 329-339. For a general introduction to the work of this lamented pioneer student of violence in Africa, see: Konings, P., van Binsbergen, W., & Hesselink, G., eds., 2000, *Trajectoires de libération en Afrique noire* (Festschrift Buytenhuys), Paris: Karthala. I derive the 1972 reference from that book's bibliography.

Habermas, and most of their heirs in political philosophy today, both inside and outside Africa, are almost entirely absent (although one welcomes a reference to Wamba-dia-Wamba on p. 44, to Giddens on p. 228 – not deemed worthy of inclusion in the book’s Index – and especially to Foucault as the *deus ex machina* leading on to an alternative research agenda, pp. 226f).

The book’s arguments (plural) suggest a sympathetic and somewhat hopeful ‘*not really, not under all circumstances*’ as the answer to the book’s central question (*Is violence inevitable in Africa?*). However, the book’s empirical orientation (with excellent case studies of Angola by Christopher Cramer, of Congo by Theodore Trefon, and of Mali by Gerti Hesselting and Han van Dijk) has at least one weakness. It takes rather for granted current social science (including political science) discourse, without indicating the epistemological boundary conditions of the implied claim of validity of such discourse. From the perspective of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, this means that the impressive array of data and theories, brought together in this book (so as to offer a justified and timely critique of a central tenet of Afropessimism; and so as to guide intercontinental peace interventions as well as the latter’s counter-hegemonic critics), will have to be further developed in a philosophical direction, in a discussion process especially involving many more senior African participants, before the book’s conclusions can be given the full weight they yet deserve. In a way, of course, the book’s suggesting a Foucaultian alternative research agenda implies, self-reflexively, the existence and the acknowledgment of such boundary conditions, but if the book had been truly coherent to the extent claimed by the editors in their Preface (p. vii), such an afterthought had been allowed to inform the actual contributions in this book much more centrally.

The ideal book of this nature would perhaps also have managed to avoid certain other blind spots. One would have liked to see much more central attention for such social technologies of conflict management and conflict resolution as are so highly developed and – at the grassroots level – so conspicuous in African societies; in particular, we need to understand why, time and time again, it has proven to be impossible for these mechanisms to be taken from the local and regional level, and to be implemented at the national and international level, without totally losing their earlier effective-

ness.<sup>2</sup> Of course, a book of this nature is bound to touch on South Africa and its relatively recent transition towards majority rule, which especially features in Donald Rothchild's piece on power-sharing and democratization as crucial elements in a two-phase peace implementation process, in the time-honoured American tradition of political science (pp. 147-170). *Quest* readers have had the privilege of familiarising themselves (see *Quest* volumes XV and XVI) with some of the cultural embedding, in Southern African societies, of non-violence through a normative and cosmological system recently reformulated under the heading of *ubuntu* ('being human') philosophy; and have also grown familiar with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as one of the more successful strategies to usher one particular African post-colonial state through an episode of heightened violence risk. But not all readers of this book can be expected to be similarly privileged, and a more extensive treatment of the South African case would certainly have enhanced this book's width and depth.

Meanwhile, let us not pretend that philosophers exercise the monopoly over some magic stone that brings them substantially closer to truth and relevance than members of other academic disciplines. Philosophers, particularly, have not always been Africa's most perceptive and most self-critical observers, either; and since Plato, and despite the latter's own views, we have known that, in general, it is a disaster to have philosophers leading the state. It is only fair to say that African Studies, also when pursued by scholars in the North Atlantic, constitutes an established and honourable discipline in its own right, which may well claim the room needed to operate its own concepts and theories, without constantly having to feel the hot breath of more fundamental theory in its neck – however wholesome such a breath is occasionally.

As a sample of ongoing research, especially in Europe, on African violent conflict, this book is a considerable achievement. The synthetic and comparative chapters by Klaas van Walraven on African conflict resolution

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the work of my adoptive kinsman, van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2003, 'Reconciliation: Ideas and procedures constituting the African social technology of shared and recognised humanity', in his *Intercultural encounters: African and anthropological lessons towards a philosophy of interculturality*, Berlin/Muenster, LIT, pp. 349-374, also at [http://www.shikanda.net/african\\_religion/reconcil.htm](http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/reconcil.htm).

(albeit only *above* the grassroots level), and of Andreas Mehler on area studies, conflict analysis and preventive practice, are highly useful in their comprehensiveness and subtlety. Also Ulf Engel's concluding chapter is a commendable piece of work, both in its review of the literature and in its attempt to formulate an alternative research agenda.

Although the book does not appear to be an initiative of the Leiden African Studies Centre, the sheer prominence of that one institute's members among the contributors (Mirjam de Bruijn, Han van Dijk, Klaas van Walraven, Gerti Hesselning), and the weight of their pieces in the book as a whole, suggest the prominent place of that institution in North Atlantic African studies today – especially in the sense of addressing, in its research programmes, topical issues that are of considerable relevance for the lives of Africans today, concentrating on major structural themes in action, and doing so in a comprehensive research effort that reaches from the grassroots level (the 'perspective from below' offered in de Bruijn and van Dijk's paper on 'Natural resources, scarcity and conflict') to the intercontinental level of northern interventions in violent conflicts on African soil. Considering the extensive institutional and personal link which that institution entertains with African researchers and organisations (e.g. CODESRIA), one would have wished for an even greater impact of the Leiden crowd on the present book.

If theoretically-orientated research of this quality could join hands with philosophers (especially African philosophers) working on violence, conflict and the state in Africa, from their respective disciplinary and identitary positions, we could make a major step out of the Afropessimist nightmare.