



Researching
Conflict
in Africa

INSIGHTS AND EXPERIENCES

EDITED BY

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Introduction

Eghosa Osaghae and Gillian Robinson

Africa has the uncanny reputation of being the world's leading theatre of conflict, war, poverty, disease, and instability. Therefore it is not surprising that scholars of ethnicity and conflict management regard it as a major laboratory for experimentation and theory building. Notwithstanding the exaggerations and oversimplifications that sometimes attend the claims and findings, including the tendency to lump all states in the continent together as suffering from the tribalism disease, Africa generally has not disappointed and, in a manner of speaking, has lived up to its billing. This is certainly true of the turbulent post-Cold War period in which Africa has experienced persistent violent and seemingly intractable conflicts.

The notorious genocide and ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and to some extent Burundi, civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire and Somalia, minority uprisings in Nigeria, and separatist agitation in Cameroon and Senegal, represent reference points of the turbulence in the African continent. In addition, conflicts of varying magnitudes, mostly local but no less state-threatening have ravaged many other countries including Ghana, Zambia, and Benin which were regarded for a long time as peaceful and less prone to deadly conflicts. Although the conflicts generally have deep historical roots that date back to the colonial and even pre-colonial periods, they became more prevalent and destructive in the post-Cold War period.

As expected, the wind of violent conflicts blowing across Africa has attracted the attention of scholars. Two aspects of the conflicts have

been of particular interest to researchers, namely the explanation of the deterioration of the conflict situation and the management of the conflicts. Those who consider the explanation of the increase in prevalence and intensity of conflict to be the main priority of research have identified a range of key precipitants, such as the contradictions of globalization and the attendant intensification of identity-based struggles for control of power and resources, contradictions of simultaneous economic and political reforms, difficulties in transition, flawed democratization, declining state capacities and diminishing resources and the proliferation of small arms. Yet, although we now know a lot about the “causes” and nature of conflicts, they remain intractable and difficult to predict and to deal with. This has implications for the management of conflict, which has been the other area of research interest.

Although some of the notable and fairly successful cases have been highlighted, the South African “miracle”, Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism, Botswana’s democratic stability, sub-regional approaches to conflicts via the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Southern African Development Community (SADC), and more recently the African Union (AU), a dismal picture of inability, failure, and hopelessness generally is painted.

Indeed, some analysts have given up and gone ahead to advocate “rethinking” the state in Africa, including the dissolution or disintegration of so-called troublesome and unviable states, as possible alternatives (Clapham, 2001). Others have called for creative and innovative approaches, including the adaptation of traditional models and practices (Zartman, 2000). The problem, however, is that the management of conflict literature does not adequately reflect or acknowledge the efforts made in a number of countries to deal with conflicts. It is probably true that the overall state of war, crisis, and instability overwhelms whatever successes may have been recorded, but the point nevertheless remains that there are management dimensions and interventions that have yet to be fully interrogated. These would hopefully show that conflict management in Africa is not altogether the “hopeless case” that is painted in the mostly pessimistic perspectives that dominate the literature.

One point that emerges from this brief overview is that although extant research on ethnic conflicts in Africa has covered a lot of ground, a lot more work still needs to be done. In fact, the new and evolving forms and patterns of ethnic nationalism and conflicts that have characterized the post-Cold War period, notably the upsurge of minority agitations, aggravated politics of difference and contested citizenship, and the importance of issues of globalization, resource control, environmental justice, and state reconfiguration have thrown up new challenges to conventional

wisdoms that demand innovative and alternative prisms and perspectives. Fortuitously, scholars have risen to the challenge as the field has been reworked and new paradigms and approaches to the explanation of conflict and management of conflict have emerged within the larger framework of research on transitions and African development (Himmelstrand et al., 1994; Joseph, 1999; Osaghae, 1995, 2004; Zeleza, 1997).

With specific regard to ethnic conflict, several methodological issues, some new and some not so new but previously taken for granted or ignored by researchers have come under scrutiny as analysts try to capture and explain the changing scenarios of violent societies. These range from such old but basic fundamentals about the actual nature of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts in terms of whether identities are constructed or “natural” and whether conflicts that are termed ethnic are masks for more underlying (class, religious, and economic competition-based) conflicts, to gender dimensions of conflict, and the roles of the state, civil society, the international community, and forces of globalization in the instigation and management of conflicts, peace-building, and state reconfiguration.

The nature of recent conflicts and interventions to manage or resolve them has also made ethical considerations a key methodological issue. Ethical considerations are of course not new in researching conflicts in violent societies. Researchers involved in or doing participatory/action research, participant observation, peace-building/conflict resolution, and humanitarian assistance, normally are required to observe the rules of confidentiality, especially with regard to disclosures, in order to maintain objectivity and accountability. But although these rules are fairly well known and researchers try hard to abide by them, a number of ethical dilemmas remain and have in fact become more pressing with the outburst of violent conflicts requiring “outsider” intervention.

For instance, should the protection of members of vulnerable groups (women, children, the aged, and the physically challenged) be at the expense, as it were, of fighting soldiers who may be and frequently are victims themselves, but are held to be instigators or gladiators in conflict and war situations? Should human rights considerations, which have now formed a part of the global ethical code of good governance, sway the researcher to the side of just struggles of oppressed minorities against state and majoritarian tyranny? Stated in terms like these, ethical considerations ought to be central to conflict research in Africa, but so far they have not received the attention they so clearly deserve. The consequences of the resultant absence of “responsible” research can be well imagined. It may very well be that the inability of research to impact proactively and positively on conflicts in Africa, lead instead to complicating interventions as in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which are explicable in these terms.

These are some of the emerging themes that were taken up at the workshop on ethical and methodological issues in researching violent societies held at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, in February 2002 and from which papers in this volume have been selected. The workshop was part of an ongoing series of work into the issue of “Researching Divided Societies” based at INCORE (International Conflict Research) at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, and brought together researchers on African conflicts from inside and outside the continent to address the various issues and challenges of researching violent societies in the post-Cold War period and how they may be tackled. By bringing the workshop to Africa, the organizers hoped to provide an opportunity for researchers on the continent to engage recent and ongoing methodological debates and dialogues. This was a deliberate response to the unfortunate trend in African studies that allows researchers on the continent to be bypassed and ignored in the production of knowledge about their societies (Zezeza, 1997). In addition, it was also an opportunity to begin the mainstreaming of ethical issues and dilemmas in the research agenda of African scholars. As noted above, ethical issues are undeveloped in African conflict studies, having been neglected or taken for granted all along. This state of affairs, it goes without saying, is no longer tenable if we hope to respond adequately to the many challenges posed by the pervasive regime of violent conflicts on the continent.

The book covers many issues and represents case studies from indigenous researchers’ experiences together with accounts of the experience of “outsider” researchers. Many of the issues are common to research in any divided society but are magnified in the African situation. In Part 1 Marie Smyth focuses on insider-outsider issues and is followed by Albrecht Schnabel who explores how we ensure conflict research actually impacts on policy and on the prevention of conflict. Part 2 presents the case studies. In Chapters 3–7 indigenous researchers from across Africa raise key questions. Bolanle Adetoun begins by identifying key roles and responsibilities for research and the researcher in a divided society. Drawing on a case study of the Niger Delta region, she argues that research that is properly planned, executed, disseminated, and utilized is vital for divided societies. Dominic Agyeman takes the argument further by calling for a Convention on Conflict Studies to guide researchers involved in conflict studies. Isaac Olawale Albert in his chapter discusses the sensitive issue of studying militia movements and raises serious ethical issues that form a thread running through the book. Arsène Mwaka Bwenge drawing from his experience in the Democratic Republic of Congo stresses the need to use “living techniques” to allow the actors and witnesses involved in the change to speak. The importance of research into and involving children living in divided and violent societies

is raised by Jacqui Gallinetti who argues that it is our duty as researchers to ensure the child's voice is heard. Part 2 concludes with two chapters from outsiders who have conducted their research in Africa. Zoë Wilson demonstrates the dangers of exclusion of people from the research process and Erin Baines highlights the importance of inclusive gendered analyses.

Finally, Elisabeth Porter reflects on the directions of research in Africa in the conclusion.

The contributors to this volume and the Researching Divided Societies programme continue to explore these complex and important issues. The topic was also the focus of a seminar and workshop in Bogota, Colombia in 2003 and we hope to convene further meetings elsewhere. We conclude, as we did in our earlier book (Smyth, 2001: 11): "Researchers working in the field bear the responsibility of conducting research in the most effective and ethical way possible, in order that such learning can be maximized, and perhaps some future violence avoided. There can be little work that is more crucial".

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Parts of Africa experience persistent violence and seemingly intractable conflicts. These generally have deep historical roots dating to colonial periods and before, and many of them have become more destructive in the post-Cold war period.

These violent conflicts have drawn researchers seeking to determine and explain why conflicts are prevalent, what makes them intensify and how conflicts can be resolved. However much of the literature on research methodology does not address the complexities of conducting research in the midst of violent conflict and massive ethno-political disputes.

This book directly addresses these issues. It examines the ethical and practical issues of researching within violent and divided societies. It provides fascinating and factual case studies from Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Africa. The authors provide insights about researching conflict in Africa that can only be gained through fieldwork experience.

This book is of interest to all researchers interested in Africa and to those involved in research about, and within, societies experiencing conflict and violence.

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