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The Primacy of Structural Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Sub-Saharan Africa has been plagued by conflict for many decades now. The joy and hope that existed when the states of Africa burst free from the shackles of colonialism has long since faded against a backdrop of persistent war and conflict. Hampered by these ongoing conflicts, the expectations of the post-independence period have failed to materialise and the continent has not successfully moved forward and developed (Chabal,2009:p13). When statistics are examined it becomes clear to see just how frequent and devastating these conflicts have been. Between 1946 and 2002 there were 47 civil wars in sub –Saharan Africa resulting in 1.37 million deaths on the battlefield and an even larger number of civilian deaths (De Ree &Nillesn, 2009). In fact since the 1970's devastating warfare has been raging almost nonstop south of the Sahara (Laremont, 2002:p4) Conflicts also damage economies; and particularly violent periods in recent decades have lead to consistent economic decline in sub-Saharan African states; as a result of money spent on conflict and money lost as a direct result of conflict (Reno, 1998). Why then do these high levels of violence and conflict continue to occur? Some academics believe that it is structural violence, violence caused by social conditions and social structure, (Høivik, 1977: p60) that is the primary reason for the persistence of conflict in sub-Saharan Africa. This essay however, will argue that while structural violence plays its role, there are other factors that contribute heavily to the ongoing hostilities in the region, with two case studies (due to the short nature of the essay) being looked at in detail.

Structural violence was first discussed by Johan Galtung in 1969 who distinguished it from direct personal violence. Galtung (1969 p175) says that above all *"structural violence is defined by inequality, particularly when it comes to the distribution of power in a social structure"*. Personal Violence on the other hand, is simply physical violence directed from one human being or a group of human beings to another human being or a another group of human beings, ranging from hand to hand combat all the way up the use of advanced modern weaponry (Galtung, 1969 p174). When things that a society needs to survive such as access to healthcare and medicine; access to education, access to sufficient levels of food and water, are concentrated amongst just the upper classes or those in power, then that is structural violence (Høivik, 1977, p60). Therefore this kind of structural violence leads to economic underdevelopment and poverty amongst large sections of society. These structures can then lead to conflict as certain sections of the societal structure feel that they are worse off or need more and so blame other groups within society (Galtung, 1990 p292). As Fearon and Laitin (2003, p79) note *"Greater income inequality should be associated with higher risks of civil war onset"* and while many have gotten rich from oil and other commodity booms in sub-Saharan Africa; United Nations development report figures show that the per capita income ratio in Sub-Saharan Africa fell from ninth of that in OECD countries in 1960 to an eighteenth by 1998 (UNDP, 2001, p. 16).). Economic problems have entrenched poverty in the region, making conflict more likely as inequality grows and afro-pessimism becomes dominant (Clegg, 2010). With regards to sub-Saharan Africa, it is possible to discuss and analyse structural violence both at local, state and global level.

At the global level, many theorists on development would stress that structural violence, created by international institutions, powerful states and transnational corporations, is an important factor to consider when discussing reasons for the persistence of conflict in sub-Saharan Africa. Wallerstein's world system theory suggests that the global system of states follows a core- periphery model (Rupert, 2010, p165). The rich states at the core of the model exploit the poor states on the periphery which include those of sub-Saharan Africa, through economic and political

marginalisation, offering loans and by controlling international institutions. (Wallerstein 1979). As George (1990, p143) notes *"debt is an efficient tool. It ensures access to other peoples' raw materials and infrastructure on the cheapest possible terms".* According to those who subscribe to this school of thought, resources and commodities, which are often are controlled indirectly by the more economically developed world, are purchased at the lowest possible price, as poverty in the periphery is necessary to maintain high living standards in the core (Kok et al, 2009). Figures produced by the World Bank, the IMF and other Bretton Woods institutions will show that GDP in Africa is on the rise, but closer analysis shows that this growth is a result of mineral and oil exports, not as a result of wider improvements to economies (Chabal 2009: p150)

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is perhaps the most demonized of the Bretton Woods institutions, with many arguing that it creates structural violence and therefore causes conflict. The IMF gives more voting power to the rich industrialised states; the 47 Sub-Saharan African countries have a combined total of just 7 per cent of the vote and two out of twenty four executive directors (IMF, 2011). An interesting point considering the IMF has dealt with sub-Saharan Africa on a more frequent basis than any other region (Adepoju, 1993:p2). It is the institution's structural adjustment programme (SAP) that is forced upon states in exchange for short term debt relief that causes the structural violence (Adepoju 1993: p2). While these programmes help to deal with high levels of sovereign debt in the long term, their initial impact is often a reduction in public spending and typical features include privatizing state owned industry, shifting the terms of trade and increasing competition (Briggs & Yeboah, 2001).

As public sector expenditure in sub-Saharan Africa has been falling ever since the widespread adoption of structural adjustment programmes in the 1980's and 1990's, the average citizen now has less access to education, healthcare and employment than ever before (Crisp&Kelly, 1999). This intensifies poverty amongst the poor, and further concentrates wealth amongst local elites (Mamdani, 1996, p179). Sierra Leone, DR Congo, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Malawi, Rwanda and Zimbabwe amongst others have been forced to adopt these programmes (Adepoju 1993. Storey, 1999). When the majority of a society's wealth is situated amongst just a small percentage of the population, and the few public services the poor have are taken away, then life expectancies lower and disease becomes more prevalent (Høivik, 1977:p60). Complex regulations and behind closed door procedures implanted by the IMF make information more difficult to access and sections of civil society become out of the loop, further empowering local elites. (Hirsch,2001:p101). In some cases as Reno (1998:p1) notes, *"economic development is abjured when it threatens to put resources into the hands of those who might use them to challenge rulers position, consequently anxious elites will contract a wide array of economic roles to outsiders"* , many locals simply do not know what is going on and so are ill equipped to deal with this form of structural violence. It could be argued that this economic underdevelopment is structural violence in its purest and most destructive form.

In effect rich 'core' states, whether by controlling the terms of trade or by forcing austerity programmes on sub-Saharan Africa are forcing a drop in living standards in the countries affected. Figures produced by the World Bank, the IMF and other Bretton Woods institutions will show that GDP in Africa is on the rise, but closer analysis shows that this growth is a result of mineral and oil exports, not as a result of wider improvements to economies (Chabal 2009: p150). Thus conflict is more likely to occur in the periphery as states that have high levels of inequality and of poverty are more likely become engulfed in violent conflict (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). Inequality on such a grand scale leads to increased crime rates, so the rich in society increase their levels of security and live behind high walls and armed guards, further separating the social classes and entrenching inequality. (Fearon and Laitin 2003) The conflicts increase tensions between ethnic groups in society, waste money that could be spent on healthcare, education or infrastructure and so creates more structural violence and conflict which then leads to personal violence in what is known as a conflict trap (Galtung, 1969). When literature on structural adjustment programmes and conflict in sub-Saharan Africa is read, it is noticeable that there was an increase in conflicts during the so called 'lost decade' when the programmes were being implemented (Luiz 2006, Storey 1999, Crisp&Kelly,1999) However it is also obvious to note that both intra state and interstate conflicts were prevalent in the years before the IMF imposed structural adjustment programmes were in place, and many would argue this has been due irreconcilable ethnic and cultural differences between different groups (Laremont, 2002:p4).

It is important to remember when studying conflict in sub-Saharan Africa that the region has only been free from its colonial shackles for just over half a century. Previously almost all of the states of sub-Saharan Africa had been

subject to colonial rule from one of the European powers. The late 19th century saw the so called 'scramble for Africa' in which the European powers quite literally carved up as much territory as they could in order to secure valuable resources for their growing empires (Mamdani, 1996). The European empires created states along natural geographical boundaries that they thought would be easy to govern, and straight lines on the map of Africa are a startling legacy of colonialism. The creation of these artificial territorial political units to serve the geo-political and geo-economic interests of Europe, arbitrarily divided established communities and cultures on the one hand and united old enemies and rivals on the other (Laremont,2002:p4). The map of African states looks very different from a map of Africa that shows nations, assuming that nations are a cultural group bound together by a common history and culture (Brown, 2005). This forced creation of states meant that process of creating an efficient state and of building a national identity has been most unnatural and has lead to a lot of very unstable states in sub-Saharan Africa (Laremont,2002:p5).

This mixture of unstable states, artificially created borders and mixing of different nations has created many problems for sub-Saharan Africa in the years since independence from the colonial power. Many in fact argue that the state in sub –Saharan Africa is no more than a pseudo-Western facade (Chabal and Daloz, 1999) The role played by colonialism in the massive amount of ethnic conflict, tribal conflict and even genocide in sub-Saharan Africa over the past 50 years is crucial. (Scherrer, 2002:p364). Euro-centric ideas laid waste to pre- colonial ideas of conflict resolution and respect for your neighbours (Chabal, 2009:p10. Scherrer, 2002:p364). Of 26 conflicts in the region between 1963 and 1998, 19 were internal civil wars; as a result of ethnicity, power-sharing and factional rivalries (Luiz 2006: p633). While different ethnic groups and tribes had traditionally warred over things such as land and livestock, such skirmishes were usually on a relatively small scale and for the most part different tribes interacted and traded with each other peacefully (Young, 1986). Colonial rulers however, would more often than not put a particular ethnic group (the most sympathetic and conforming) in to power, and control the rest of the state through this ethnic group (Young, 1986). Other groups within in society began to resent the ruling ethnic groups, particularly after independence when they often filled the power vacuum left by the colonial administration (Reno, 1999). As Fearon and Laitin (2003) note, civil conflict is much more likely to occur when a state has a several large ethnic groups, but only one group has power.

A classic example of how the colonial legacy can cause conflict in sub-Saharan Africa is that of Rwanda. Rwanda was colonised first by the Germans and then by the Belgian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. The ruling colonial regime favoured the Tutsi ethnic group, who accounted for about 15% of the population, over the Hutu group who accounted for about 85% (Storey,2002:p45). The Germans settlers employed the Tutsi as a colonial ruling class, giving them greater access to resources, employment and power; they then further enforced this ethnic inequality by introducing ethnic identification cards, strengthening their indirect colonial rule. (Storey, 2002:p45). Rwanda became an authoritarian state that Scherrer (2002 p365) calls an "ethnocracy". Upon decolonisation these roles were reversed and the Hutu group sought revenge against the Tutsi, beginning with a series of pogroms and then marginalising the Tutsi population in all walks of public life (Storey, 2002:p47). Tutsi in exile created a rebel army know as the Rwandan Patriotic Front, and tried to take back control of the country in 1990, leading to full blown civil war, and a genocide resulting in the deaths of over 800 000 people (de Ree and Nillsen, 2009:p301). Many now agree that this genocide was a result of ethnic identity construction during colonial rule (Nzongla-Ntalaja,2002:p92). Galtung (1990) has argued that culture and symbolism can and has been used to legitimize violence in its structural form many times in Africa.

Similarly, the Democratic Republic of Congo (formally Zaire), has experienced conflict en masse as a result of colonialism. As with many African states, its creation was an entirely artificial one, the Belgian colonisers simply creating one large state in order to make it easier to administrate and control its rich mineral resources (Scherrer,2002 p329). Vast numbers of different nations all lumped together under one 'state' has lead to regions declaring autonomous sovereignty, conflict over rights to resources and five catastrophic civil wars (Kok et al 2009). As a result of or partly as a result of Colonial legacy: Sierra Leone, Burundi, Uganda, Sudan, The Ivory Coast and although a slightly different case study, Liberia have all suffered from internal conflicts. (Reno,1999. Mamdani, 1996. Scherrer, 2002).

It is obvious to see that sub-Saharan Africa has suffered at the hands of conflict caused by structural violence. As

discussed earlier, the IMF, while most probably well meaning, has played its role in creating social structures that arguably kill and maim as effectively as any gun or knife. Although not discussed in this essay due to its short nature, the same arguments could be made against the World Trade Organisation, The World Bank and all of the powerful states who trade with Africa. Perhaps it is a blind faith in neo-liberal institutionalism and neo-liberal economics that create the structural violence, or perhaps it is something more sinister. South East Asia which is now relatively conflict free, with increasingly high levels of equality, healthcare and environmental regulation, certainly did not follow the same path to development as is being prescribed for sub-Saharan Africa.

Equally it would be naive and one dimensional to blame the high levels of conflict in the region purely on structural violence. The legacy of colonialism and the social construction of ethnicity and identity have undoubtedly resulted in many conflicts. While not discussed in this essay the resource curse, the patrimonial nature of politics in the region and freak weather events have also caused problems. Mills (2010) said that sub-Saharan Africa is poor because its leaders choose it to be, and it is certainly true that a series of corrupt war mongering regimes have had a pre-disposition towards conflict. Conflict in sub-Saharan Africa is a real problem, some of it caused by structural violence globally and locally, a reduction in this would help to improve stability and reduce conflict, allowing other issues to be tackled.

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