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Revolutionary Africa

Historical Patterns of Transformative Rupture

Richard Reid

I

What do African revolutions look like? Do they have any distinctive features? Has the continent had any globally significant revolutions? These questions were prompted by the symposium at the University of Miami marking fifty years since the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia in September 1974. *Those* events most definitely did seem to constitute a veritable moment of revolutionary rupture, recognized at the time by both local actors and outside observers (Kebede 2008; Thomson 1975).[1] There might be some debate about the duration of the revolution itself, of course: when it started and how long it went on. After all, revolutions are never singular events. Ethiopian army officers moved in stages against the aging emperor in the course of 1974, a little tremulously at first, partly because of their uncertainty about how the wider populace would receive such maneuvers. They did so against a backdrop of heightening socioeconomic discontent and political protest which had been in the gestation a long time. But the first shots were fired across the bows of *l'ancien regime* quite a few years before, in December 1960, when a contingent of radicalized and idealistic soldiers had attempted to overthrow Haile Selassie's government while he was abroad. It was crushed within a matter of hours.[2] Yet—as in tsarist Russia in 1905—the survival of the regime didn't mean an end to the underlying challenges. The eventual ouster of Haile Selassie was only the beginning of the revolution—best understood here as a process rather than an event—for the advent of the Provisional Military Administrative Committee (PMAC, or *Derg*, Amharic for "committee") involved the far-reaching and violent transformation of Ethiopian state, society and economy deep into the 1980s, and the country's geopolitical repositioning in a Cold War context, leading to significant Soviet military aid (Halliday and Molyneaux 1981; Tiruneh 1993; Schwab 1985). This particular revolution, however, soon converged with another—or, perhaps more accurately, a series of regional revolutions on the part of Tigrayans, Eritreans, Oromo, and Amhara, who ultimately combined to remake Ethiopia (and independent Eritrea) in new ways (James et al., 2002; Tareke 2009). Perhaps, it might be argued that these were simply different stages in a prolonged period of revolutionary tumult, with which Ethiopians are in fact still living.

The Ethiopian Revolution, moreover, produced genuinely far-reaching, indeed global reverberations. Here, after all, was the bringing down of arguably the continent's most celebrated and ancient state system, which had administered a singular and distinctive civilisation for centuries. Imperial Ethiopia had been the lodestar of Black pride and anticolonial struggle throughout the long European century—uncolonized, save for a brutal Italian interlude in the late 1930s, and the source of inspiration for a host of subversive identities in the Caribbean and North America (Sorenson 1993; Carnochan 2008; Howe 1998; Clarke 1986). Ethiopia would retain real influence across the Global South, but the dispatch of Haile Selassie into the historical gloaming created ripples of distress among many around the world, even if for many others in Africa his regime was seen, privately at least, as a dreadful relic in the age of modernity and decolonization.

And so, here is an African revolution of apparently considerable significance, both temporal and spatial. But where does it sit in the attempt to understand the history of revolution in Africa more broadly?

II

The global history of revolution seems—with a couple of exceptions—to have its center of gravity in Europe and North America. In a recent, generally excellent survey history of the phenomenon by the eminent scholar Jack Goldstone, Africa figures hardly at all (Goldstone 2014). Most of the references to the continent are concerned with the "Arab revolutions" of 2011, including Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. There is a mention of Egypt in antiquity and of the 1952 nationalist revolution leading to the creation of the Egyptian republic. Otherwise, only Mozambique, Algeria, Angola, South Africa, and Ethiopia itself get fleeting mentions. This is hardly unusual. In David Armitage's superb exploration of the concept of civil war, "revolution" is inevitably discussed at some length, but largely in the context of European and North American modernity (Armitage 2017).

Eurocentrism endures around the idea of epoch-defining transformation. When we think of those critical moments of revolutionary rupture, we perhaps more often than not think of events in the Global North—particularly when it comes to the overthrow of ancient monarchy. Even where monarchy ultimately survived the tumult, fundamental shifts in the political landscape involved new, constitutionally constrained, iterations of it. The English Revolution of the mid-seventeenth century culminated in the execution of Charles I in 1649 which was followed by a turbulent interregnum. Monarchy was restored in 1660—the British, it seems, couldn't quite do without it—but it was the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, leading to the defeat and exile of the Catholic James II, which offered a blueprint for the creation of constitutional monarchy, in this case under William III (Hill 1975, 1980; Miller 1991). Arguably of even greater global significance was the American Revolution, characterized by a revolutionary republicanism at the core of which was the eschewal of the British monarchy and the creation of a wholly novel political order. George III's ejection from the so-called New World supposedly marked—at least according to a longstanding interpretation—the beginning of one

of the most remarkable experiments in rebirth in global history (Brogan 1985: chs 10 and 11). Soon after, the French Revolution likewise involved the overthrow of cloying monarchy and (for a time at least) the installation of republican radicalism (Sutherland 1985). Events in both France and the United States drew inspiration from a century or more of intellectual rumination of the nature of society, political culture, freedom, and human agency (Porter 2000). The French Revolution in particular is noteworthy, too, for supposedly marking the beginning of the "modern era," with 1789 being regarded by many as the point from which all must measure their embrace of, or progress toward, "modernity." In general, these transformative ruptures have been heralded by political scientists of a particular hue as signposting the way toward global stability and economic growth, whereas those "revolutions" elsewhere which lack those key characteristics—inclusive institutions and unfettered markets—have nowhere near the same impact or import (Fukuyama 2011). In one account, the abject failure of Egypt's revolution in 1952 to fundamentally change people's lives for the better (and the lack of interest on the part of its leaders in even attempting to do so) is explicitly juxtaposed alongside the English and French revolutions, which can thus be posited as representing "successful" and globally meaningful ruptures (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012: 4–5, 458–9). Perhaps for that reason, events in Russia in (and immediately after) 1917 are viewed a little more skeptically, although when the Soviet Union was in its apparent pomp—between the 1950s and the 1970s, say—1917 looked a little more significant (Figes, 1996). Indeed it was the collapse of the USSR at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s—prompted in part by a series of democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe against a hollowed out authoritarian system—which allowed many analysts to celebrate the triumph of liberalism and the free market (Fukuyama 1992; Garton Ash 1990). Still, some analytical breathing space has been granted to revolutions beyond the North Atlantic world and Western Eurasia—in particular, the Meiji Revolution/Restoration in Japan in 1868, seen again to be the triumph of constitutional principles and the "rule of law" on Western lines (Jansen 2002) and, less clear-cut perhaps and certainly more troubled over the longer term, the republican revolution which demolished the Qing dynasty in China in 1911 (Mitter 2011).

Thus, we have a pageant of globally legible, visible transformations—even without venturing into the realms of those longer-term revolutions (Industrial, Agricultural, and Military) likewise rooted in the Global North—against which all others are measured. In the broadest possible terms, and with considerable variability in apparent rates of success and durability, they represent the stumbling, halting but inexorable progress of humanity toward constitutional and accountable government, individual freedom, happiness, and material well-being.

III

Where, we might wonder, is Africa in all this? What is the African contribution to global histories of revolution? The overthrow of Haile Selassie was but one instance of revolution in a region, the greater Horn of Africa, convulsed by them between the 1960s and the 1980s. The nomenclature of "revolution" has certainly been used fairly

liberally by scholars and observers to describe the insurgencies which have shaped the region in the modern era. In Eritrea, the journalist and activist Dan Connell was in no doubt that in the late 1970s and 1980s he was chronicling a veritable revolution led by the EPLF at the core of its struggle for independence against Ethiopia (Connell 1997; Connell 2003, 2004). In the same period, the anthropologist Jenny Hammond similarly believed she was witness to a revolution in Tigray, in the vanguard of which was the TPLF (Hammond 1999). John Young would likewise define the TPLF's struggle as a "peasant revolution" (Young 1997). Gebru Tareke, the noted scholar of war and rebellion in the region, characterized the entire era—that of the *Derg* and the numerous regional insurgencies against it—as one of revolution, culminating in the emergence of the EPRDF and the independence of Eritrea (Tareke 2009). There can be little doubt that the leadership of the EPLF and the TPLF did indeed see themselves as revolutionaries, in social and political terms as well as in military terms, seeking (they claimed) the fundamental re-ordering of society and economy in pursuit of social justice and the remaking of the political landscape of the Horn.[3] Perhaps, owing to both more limited objectives and the relative inarticulacy or at least illegibility of local actors' goals, for the same reason earlier insurgencies in the Ogaden in the early 1960s, Bale in 1963, and Gojjam in 1968 were not, and have not been, defined as "revolutions"—but rather as "revolts" (e.g., Tareke 1991). In this sense, they seemed to belong more to the tradition of popular local unrest and even banditry, as defined by Hobsbawm (2001) and Crummey (1986).[4]

At the same time, Haile Selassie wasn't the only African monarch to lose their throne in an age of nationalist revolution, particularly in North Africa (Choueiri 2000). In Egypt in 1952, Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser led the revolution which swept away King Faruq who had long squatted atop a broadly unpopular, immoral political order, and followed up with a series of thoroughgoing reforms (Mansfield 1969: esp. ch. 2 Choueiri 2000: 179*ff*). In 1969, in Libya, another charismatic army officer, Col. Muammar Qaddafi, set in motion his idiosyncratic revolution with the overthrow of the long-reigning, pro-Western Sanusi King Idris (Vandewalle 2012: esp. ch. 4). In that sense, the events which led to Haile Selassie's ouster belonged to a pattern of revolutionary nationalism which saw the dispatch of monarchs associated with a cloying, "feudal" era that had overseen intolerable concessions to the imperial West and which heralded a fundamental re-ordering of systems of governance and a reinvigorated sense of national identity (Reid 2015: 262*ff*).

Nationalist revolution more broadly defined the middle decades of the twentieth century. The Algerian revolution, and specifically the armed struggle of the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) between 1954 and 1962, was both emblematic of the era and a source of inspiration for many across the continent (McDougall 2017: ch 5; Ottoway and Ottoway 1970). The FLN's war and its political mission heralded a new kind of armed revolution against colonial rule. It was no coincidence that one of the FLN's most potent and articulate spokesmen was Frantz Fanon, who himself wrote about an "African Revolution" in a collection of essays published posthumously in 1964 (Fanon 1988). The notion of an African revolution encapsulated anticolonial struggle and decolonization, driven forward by nationalism and novel forms of identity. A new generation of educated activists, imbued with revolutionary fervor, sought to tap into

popular discontent in pursuit of a renovated political, social, and economic landscape (Cooper 2002: chs 3 and 4; Hodgkin 1956). Meanwhile, an intellectual revisionism—which was nothing short of a scholarly revolution—developed rapidly in parallel (Falola 2001: ch. 6). A host of armed liberation movements, especially across eastern and southern Africa, comprised this "revolutionary moment" between the 1960s and the 1980s and would lay claim to the concept of revolution in what they were aiming to achieve: in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, Uganda, Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa (Isaacman and Isaacman 1983; Museveni 1974). Many such movements, in creating guerrilla armies, drew on Maoist principles of revolutionary war (Clayton 1999: 43, 52–3).

The term "revolution," of course, was also applied to specific events. In 1964, Zanzibar, for example, witnessed the overthrow of an "Arab" aristocracy which had dominated the island's economic and political life since the early nineteenth century (Lofchie 1965). Deeper into the postcolonial era, and comparable to early-1970s Ethiopia, radicalized soldiers sometimes embraced the concept of revolution to justify their seizures of power and to elevate their claims to rupture from the past and thoroughgoing remodeling of society. Jerry Rawlings' latest *coup d'etat* in Ghana in 1981 was attended by the proclamation of a revolution and an apparent embrace of a political and socioeconomic radicalism which seemed to owe much in inspiration to events in Ethiopia. In 1983, Thomas Sankara, an idealistic, left-leaning army officer, seized power in Upper Volta which he renamed Burkina Faso ("Land of the Virtuous People") and instigated a series of unconventional reforms and initiatives which for a time captured the imagination of much of the continent. Sankara was assassinated in 1987, and in many ways he remains a heroic martyr figure to many on the Left; but crucially, as Paul Nugent crisply put it, "[i]n neither instance did the 'revolution' take root" (Nugent 2004: 258; also Decalo 1990). The underlying theme which emerges from such events is that *coups* might be dressed up as revolutions, but they rarely *were* revolutions, at least as conventionally (and, again, globally) understood, in terms of the change they actually achieved.

Still, leaving aside the issue of questionable terminology, these various revolutions and ruptures have been understood in distinctly modernist terms—of late colonial and early postcolonial modernity or the failure of that modernity. They were the hallmarks of botched decolonization and postcolonial dysfunction. They were characterized by debates about political equality and inclusivity, democracy, social justice, gender relations, land redistribution, education, and economic development. In that sense they *looked* modern. They involved the eschewal of so many *anciens regimes*, of old sociopolitical orders, of long-standing patterns of marginalization and oppression and exclusion, whether based on class, faith, gender, or ethnicity.

IV

Yet it would be wholly wrong to see "revolution" in Africa as a peculiar symptom of colonial or postcolonial modernity, or struggles with it. Reaching into the deeper past, we can identify the patterns of a revolutionary tradition, or traditions, across the

continent which help us to position Africa much more centrally in a global framework and to understand the more recent past in context. We could do no better than to begin in the thirteenth century, where we espy two of the great revolutions in Africa's early history, each of which fundamentally changed the political landscape with far-reaching spatial and temporal implications. In the West African savannah, the great warrior Sunjata led the Malinke revolution which led to the creation of the empire of Mali in the 1230s (Levtzion 1977: 378*ff*). In fact, Sunjata's endeavors represented perhaps the most spectacular instance of a long-standing pattern (which continued long after the eventual demise of Mali itself) of revolutionary insurrection in the Sahel region. A few decades later, likewise offering a blueprint for revolutionary rupture in the Ethiopian Highlands, the Shewan leader Yekuno Amlak overthrew the Zagwe regime, establishing the Solomonic empire which only ended—as we noted at the beginning—with the ouster of Haile Selassie (Tamrat 1972). It is noteworthy that in each of these cases, the result—alongside dramatic political rearrangement—was two of the continent's greatest cultural masterpieces: in West Africa, the Epic of Sunjata, told and retold in various iterations in the centuries since; and in Ethiopia, the *Kebra Negast* or "Chronicle of the Glory of the Kings," long seen as Ethiopia's national epic (Innes et al. 1999; Brooks 1995), although this perspective has been subject to serious challenge in recent years.

A combination of external enticements and local armed entrepreneurship led to the rapid emergence of a number of remarkably energetic, revolutionary new polities during the era of Atlantic commerce. Dahomey, the creation of the Fon people, was the outcome of the violent energy produced by the slave trade and new internalized ideologies around militarism and the bearing of arms (Law 1986). The Atlantic slave trade facilitated—and in its turn was facilitated by—a marked level of dynamic reformism, entrepreneurialism in both political and economic terms, across a host of African societies and cultures (Inikori and Engerman 1992; Klein 1990; Reid 2012: ch. 4). That reformism, that entrepreneurialism, was resourceful and creative, the frequently brilliant manifestation of African agency amidst transoceanic, indeed global, forces for change. It was also brutal, and inherently violent, and engendered or exacerbated existing patterns of volatility and instability. New forms of military organizations led to the militarization of society more broadly and the production of cultures which celebrated violence in its various forms. Polities were increasingly organised around the practice of violence against nearby populations, creating interstitial zones and volatile frontier spaces as well as displaced communities which were compelled to continually adapt and reform. Armies became central to political authority, or complementary centers of power, which might in turn foment political challenge and insurgency. Groups of gifted, charismatic soldiers with evolving visions of political and economic could rapidly attract followers and either overthrow existing orders or migrate to create new ones. Such volatility was characterized by remarkable ingenuity and energy; it also, by necessity and indeed design, tended to perpetuate instability in that rules of succession were often fragile at best or even nonexistent. Across a vast region in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such armed revolutions were replicated in a pattern of creative volatility and the production of warrior-heroes. It was a pattern encapsulated in sculpture, as in the case of the

seventeenth-century Luba leader Chibinda Ilunga, later laid claim to by Chokwe craftsmen (Bastin 1978: 287, 1982: 31*ff*; Gillon 1991: 296–7). In the context of Central Africa, Chibinda Ilunga embodied the armed revolutionary spirit which was the product of an age of commercial expansion and political and cultural flux, fission, and fusion. In the Western Sudanic region, a similar revolutionary pattern involved the production and reproduction of warrior states, including Segu Bambara and Segu Tukolor (Roberts 1980, 1987). In the southern Congo basin and the area of present-day Northeast Zambia, various iterations of the Kazembe state likewise demonstrate the capacity for revolutionary reinvention (Thornton 2020; Macola 2002). These distinctively African revolutions shaped the Atlantic world and increasingly the Indian Ocean world too, representing the vibrant intersection of local political dynamism and external forces of commercial change. They were defined by trade and characterized by a new militarized politics.

This was particularly true of the long nineteenth century, an era in which various forms of transformative rupture proliferated dramatically. This, indeed, was truly Africa's age of revolution.[5] Exemplifying the nineteenth-century phenomenon was the West African jihadist revolution, under the leadership of the Fulani Muslim cleric Uthman dan Fodio, between 1804 and 1810. Various drivers can be identified, most obviously a desire to re-energize the Islamic faith in an area in which Hausa urban elites were seen to be Muslim in name only; there were also socioeconomic factors (pastoralists felt persecuted and unjustly taxed) and some degree of ethnic cohesion (the predominance of Fulani in the revolt). The outcome was one of the most remarkable states anywhere on the continent in this era, the Sokoto Caliphate, a sprawling theocracy which in its turn exported ideas about righteous Islamic insurrection across the wider region (Lovejoy 2016; Last 1967; Johnston 1967; Smaldone 1977). A series of Islamic revolutions, at least some of whose leaders drew inspiration and succour from Sokoto, erupted in West Africa later in the century, though not all would prove as enduring as Sokoto itself (Robinson 1975, 1985; Klein 1972). Importantly, even as they transformed their political and theological landscapes, each of these movements belonged to a deeper pattern of Islamic reformism across Western and Northwest Africa, which stretched back over several centuries (Robinson 2004). At almost exactly the same time as Sokoto was forming, a political and military revolution of extraordinary significance was underway among the Ngoni-speaking population of the southeast lowveld, in the vanguard of which were the Zulu. Climatic and demographic changes combined with rapid commercial expansion through Delagoa Bay created a febrile environment in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The resultant Zulu state, rooted in an energetic and militarized corporate identity, transformed the political environment of what would become South Africa and indeed had a profound influence on the shape that later colonial entity would take (Wright 2010). And like Sokoto, it would have much wider implications: as a consequence of the *Mfecane*, militarized communities moved across central and eastern Africa in the course of the 1830s and 1840s, taking with them the war skills and forms of political structure that had characterized the rise of the Zulu themselves (Omer-Cooper 1966; Hamilton 1995).

Ngoni offshoots, settling in the region between lakes Tanganyika and Victoria, may have provided at least some of the inspiration for the Nyamwezi revolution, although

this was largely the product of rapid commercial and social shifts beginning in the 1840s and culminating in the 1860s and 1870s. Mirambo, its leader and most visible figure, seized burgeoning commercial opportunities and harnessed new cultures of social aspiration to create a remarkable new polity from virtually nothing and fundamentally changed the ways in which politics and warfare were done—and in the process, forged, or at least consolidated, a new ethnic identity, albeit one which was loosely defined and contingent (Bennett 1971; Kabeya 1976). This was a revolution which shaped the region and which had a profound effect on the Western Indian Ocean economic world, demonstrating once again the intersection between vigorous African agency and those global forces driving change. Around the same time, Tewodros II of Ethiopia drew on a highly militarized vision of the past—despite the fact that he has often been framed as a "modernizer," his revolution was very much rooted in historical consciousness—in reinventing and reimagining the highland polity. He instituted a range of innovations in political, military, and economic terms, and even though he ended his days—by suicide—at the edge of the escarpment, his empire disintegrated and surrounded by enemies—he laid the basis for a reimagined "Ethiopia" which endures still, including many of its inherent and violent flaws (Crummey 1969, 1972, 1988; Orlowska 2006).

The Yao were instrumental in transforming the economic and social landscape of a swathe of central-eastern Africa (Alpers 1975). In the prolonged aftermath of the collapse of Oyo, the Yoruba epitomized the violent, transformative spirit of the age in remaking the political, military, social, and cultural environment of present-day southwest Nigeria between the 1840s and the 1890s, with profound implications for the Atlantic world and for later colonial map-makers and administrators (Akintoye 1971; Ajayi and Smith 1964). In Northeast Africa, Muhammad Ali remade Egypt, and Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdi, did the same for Sudan (al-Sayyid-Marsot 1984; Vatikiotis 1969; Holt 1958). Their endeavors—different though they were—were transformative, and though they may have been short-lived in terms of the specific polities originally envisaged, their legacies were enduring in various ways and shaped not only their immediate environs but the external projects that intruded upon those environs. These were often socioeconomic revolutions as much as—if not more than—they were political or ideological. There were transformations in the ways in which commerce was organized and material aspiration and social mobility were facilitated, albeit invariably rooted in the coercion and subjugation of others. The Zanzibari Hamed bin Muhammed, known as "Tippu Tip," created a remarkable "empire" in the eastern Congo basin between the 1860s and the 1880s, a dynamic, volatile, mobile entity based on raiding and trading, which did more than anything to establish the experiential parameters of that vast region (Smith 1963: esp. 288–95; Sheriff 1987; Bennett 1986). In West Africa in the same period, Jaja in the Niger Delta would take advantage of commercial shifts—particularly the demand for palm oil—to purchase his own freedom from slavery to set up his own trading state of Opobo (Cookey 1974; Ofonagoro 1978). He was the exemplar of a veritable commercial revolution which fueled, at least in part, the Western European industrial revolution.

Africa's long, unstable nineteenth century was the age of insurgency and innovation. In many scenarios—on both the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean-facing sides of the continent—insurgency was at least in part the outcome of intensifying

global interaction, which placed new pressures on existing political orders and raised the material stakes involved in reformist challenges to those orders. But global cultural, intellectual, and economic exchange was not always involved, at least not initially, even if these factors invariably come into the story eventually. In other scenarios, existing cultures of internal challenge, reformism, and contestation—characteristic of Africans' centuries-long quest to settle land, maximise resources, and build enduring polities and communities—were at least as important, if not more so. These contests deepened in the course of the global nineteenth century. While some insurgencies were primarily about political power—sometimes incorporating novel or rejuvenated ideological and theocratic elements—others were essentially economic, or commercial, in nature, and were the result of material aspiration into which political (and, again, sometimes ideological) considerations were incorporated. In some cases, violent contestation and long-established patterns of fission and fusion led to the creation of new states and, in others, the reformation of older ones, as a result of contested succession and the absence of what we can broadly term the "peaceful transfer of power." Everywhere, there emerged new forms of political leadership, often based on merit rather than mere inheritance, in which especial value was placed on political vision, military skill, material ambition, and the organizational prowess to realize it. The decades preceding the era of partition were characterized by creative, often violent, volatility across the continent.

V

The escalation of global forces in the nineteenth century and various European ethnicities' armed, nationalist expansionism intersected with the transformation of a multitude of communities across the African landmass. This was an epoch of revolutionary politics in both continents—in Europe, the aftermath of the Enlightenment and the rise of the nation-state; in Africa, the new military and political forms forged as a result of demographic and economic change. "Warlords" and entrepreneurs of violence in both Africa and Europe were the outcome of an expansion in political scale and the intersection of political dynamics emanating from both continents. In both Africa and Europe, a military revolution underpins wider societal and political change, and fundamentally alters the scale and aims of warfare as well as the culture and practice of other forms of violence. These transformations need to be fully understood in order for us to grasp the meaning and context of the "Scramble for Africa"—the period between the 1870s and the 1910s normatively understood as the "conquest" of the continent and frequently understood in terms of impulses and forces coming out of Europe.[6] An understanding of the "moment" of partition between the 1870s and the 1910s simply isn't possible without an appreciation of Africa's "revolutionary tradition"—and nor is a comprehension of the continent's long twentieth century.[7]

These various revolutions must be understood as a fundamental part of the story of the "partition" of Africa. Ultimately, the "lines on the map" which create the territorial parameters for future African nation-states may be "arbitrary" in many cases (though

by no means all), but the colonial order they purportedly represent is also the outcome of a century or more of essentially local political thought and military development and of the ways in which those local dynamics intersected with exogenous impulses. Africa's military revolution, its social and political flux and creativity, produced the manpower and the "sub-imperialism" necessary to the creation of colonial order (Vandervort 2012; Lahti and Moyd 2020; Killingray 1989; Osborne 2024). Men were propelled into colonial service as a result of commercial and political upheaval across their respective regions over many decades, and colonial regiments were therefore in fact the direct outcome of Africa's own revolutions. Predictably, this was all framed as an aspect of the civilizing mission by later colonial architects and theorists: Africa was a violently backward place and therefore not only did Europe have the right, the *responsibility*, to intervene, but placing some Africans in uniform would becalm their savage inclinations and teach them discipline, structure, and obedience (Lugard 1923: 17, 574*ff*).

Africa's political and military revolutions, moreover, produced the so-called "sub-imperialism" necessary to the creation of colonial order. The ebb and flow of African politics, in other words—the revolution in warcraft, the economic transformation, the resultant social and intellectual upheaval—opened up space for leverage both within and between polities, and often the key to European success was the identification of local allies among rival groups for whom the arrival of European armed expeditions was little more than the latest opportunity to secure advantage (Roberts 1962; Ochonu 2014).

Moreover, it is worth noting that in a classic survey of commerce and production in British West Africa from 1926, Allan McPhee referred to an "economic revolution" (McPhee 1926); but of course that revolution had largely been made possible by the continent-wide entrepreneurialism and innovation we noted earlier. African endeavors formed the bedrock of what became known as the "cash crop revolution" of the colonial era (Tosh 1980). The commercial revolution had begun in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and the most important component was not the mapping of "superior" technology onto Africa, stimulating though that frequently was in certain places in a later period, but rather the cultures of innovation which characterized millions of Africans' engagement with the global economy throughout the previous century (e.g., Law 1995).

Ultimately, what we call the "Scramble for Africa" was the culmination of revolutionary dynamics in both Africa and Europe, which was certainly made possible by events in Africa itself in the course of the long, revolutionary nineteenth century. Recognizing that those events were at least in part the direct consequence of revolutionary dynamics within the continent itself, intersecting with global forces, means that we should reframe the long twentieth century differently: as an era in which those reformist, transformative dynamics reassert themselves in new ways. We cannot understand Ethiopia's convulsions in 1974 without a full comprehension of the country's deep past and its revolutionary tradition; and likewise we cannot begin to understand African revolutions in the twentieth century more broadly if we do not appreciate the transformative dynamics which characterized its political and material cultures in the deeper past.

VI

Ethiopia in 1974 unquestionably exhibits a number of distinctive elements. There is the issue of the polity's celebrated antiquity, apparently unrivaled anywhere outside Egypt, with a discernible political and cultural entity in existence in the Central and Northern Highlands since at least the early centuries CE—though for sure its supposed "trajectory" since Axum was often less continuous than often imagined.[8] In the course of the twentieth century, Ethiopia became the lodestar of African identity, venerated within the continent and beyond it as the living, thriving exemplar of glorious African civilization (e.g., Asante 1977). At the same time (and somewhat paradoxically), Ethiopia had long practiced an imperialism of its own and had a long history of turbulent empire-building which in certain respects had few parallels elsewhere in Africa, at least in the modern era.[9] The 1974 revolution itself seems in many ways to be the product of "modernity," involving citizens from across various walks of life who had attained a certain level of education, ironically often owing to the interventions of the modernizing state itself; the adaptation of a distinctively modern ideology (specifically, Marxism); and sophisticated means of organization, articulation, and communication, including the use of print media and telecommunications. And the role of the modern world is clear enough: Ethiopia in 1974 cannot be analyzed in quarantine from the global Cold War context within which these events transpired and certainly not in terms of Soviet interventions in the years that followed (Westad 2007: ch. 7).

And yet exceptionalist arguments only take us so far. The contemporary African context helps us understand Ethiopia in the early and mid-1970s as part of a process in which the "postcolonial" order was being defined and, in many cases, remade. 1974, in fact, was arguably the beginning of Ethiopia's ongoing struggle to *decolonize*, in line with what was happening across much of the continent at the very same moment. And there is a deeper temporal context here still. It is important to recognize those historical patterns in Africa which allow us to more fully appreciate what the Ethiopian experience represents. Ethiopia belongs to a distinctively African revolutionary tradition, in which political and cultural communities have frequently been the produce of virtuous armed insurgency, aimed at fundamental reformation and transformation. Often, such revolutionary rupture has, whether consciously or otherwise, drawn on selected elements of an imagined past. But renewal and liberation have long been at the heart of political thought in African societies which are the outcome of transformative insurrection. Thus, certain core themes echo through time and space, including the direct assault on a cloying, outdated political and cultural order no longer seen to be operating to the benefit of the wider community. Then, there is the contest between centrifugal and centripetal forces, the former pulling away from and defying the center and the latter seeking to capture and remake it. Economic pressures, meanwhile, led to new forms of organized protest and resistance. And there were social pressures building, too: changing demographics, increasing levels of social and material aspiration, leading to hunger for change, new forms of radicalism, and heightened levels of political activism. And we also have the increasing power of the army in politics—long a key theme in understanding Ethiopian and African political culture (Reid 2011b). Further, we have ideological dynamics and

impulses, increasingly global in scale and reach but with distinctive local resonance and interpretation. A long-standing theme in Africa's revolutionary tradition has been the vibrant, often violent intersection of the local and the global, and the outcome has invariably been explosive, if not always to wider social benefit.

In surveying revolutionary patterns in African history, I have deliberately adopted a long-term perspective. One of the most famous misquotes in this context is attributed to Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, who, supposedly asked in the early 1970s what he thought the impact of the French Revolution was, remarked "too soon to tell." Everyone thought it was extraordinarily wise and reflected the deep-time perspective of Chinese political thought and worldview. In fact, he was answering a question about the 1968 disturbances in Paris. Be that as it may, this is an approach which allows us to appreciate the extent to which revolutionary, transformative rupture in Africa, including Ethiopia, is not purely the product of some form of colonial or postcolonial or ideological "modernity." Above all, viewed over the *longue durée*, it is evident that those myriad revolutions have shaped the world, as well as the continent itself.

Notes

1 Also, perhaps most famously—or notoriously, depending on one's perspective on its author—Kapuscinski (2006), first published in Polish in 1978 and in English translation in 1983.
2 One of the best accounts remains Greenfield (1965): Part V.
3 For example, 'EPLF Programme", in Cliffe and Davidson (1988: 205–13).
4 As a category of historical action, "banditry" was distinguished by Hobsbawm from "revolutionaries", who were examined in a separate volume (Hobsbawm 2007)—although it is worth noting that he did discuss the intersection between the two, in Hobsbawm (2001): ch. 8. As people who challenged the existing social order, bandits at a particular point in time had to choose between criminality and revolution, and certainly much banditry could be characterized as the precursor to revolution. For the application of some of these ideas and categories to an African context, drawing inspiration from both Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson, see Crummey (1986).
5 I have sought to develop and present this argument over a number of years now: Reid (2011a, 2012: ch. 5, 2014, 2021, 2025).
6 There is, obviously, an ocean of scholarship on this period and the processes which defined it. As an indicative sample, see Lonsdale (1985); Pakenham (1991); Wesseling (1996); Chamberlain (2010); Boahen (1987).
7 For a relatively succinct elaboration of the argument, see also Reid (2021).
8 The "continuity" thesis is best captured in Marcus (2002).
9 Until relatively recently, this was seen as an essentially benign project: for example, Levine (2000).

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