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Warfare in early modern Africa, *c.* 1450–*c.* 1850

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Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa was on the threshold of a new and violent era in the second half of the fifteenth century. The ensuing four centuries would see innovative forms of military organisation, novel cultures of militarism underpinning such systems, and new wars, as well as new ways of fighting them. There were often different factors at work in different regions; the presence of external drivers was a key distinction between Atlantic Africa and the rest of the continent, for instance. However, warfare across early modern Africa had much in common, in terms of the aim to control factor endowments, to maximise population, and to construct enduring ideological systems, whether territorially or culturally defined. In some ways – certainly in terms of the underlying trends and broad contours of Africa's military history – the existence or absence of external intrusion is a distraction, however significant it was in particular places at particular times. The outcome of the processes in motion between *c.* 1450 and *c.* 1850 was an expansion in military scale, the professionalisation of soldiery, the adoption of new weaponry, and the militarisation of the polity – whether 'state-based' or otherwise. The militarisation of African polities and societies was an ongoing process between the fifteenth and the nineteenth century, a period which in many ways witnessed the laying of the foundations of modern African political systems; this would culminate in a veritable military revolution in the nineteenth century, a transformation in the organisation and culture of violence, without which Europe's later partition of the continent cannot properly be understood.

We need to briefly consider Africa's enormous diversity – geographical, demographic, cultural, economic, political – in order to appreciate the contexts within which war evolved. (See Map 11.) To begin with, an understanding of different physical terrains is clearly critical. In the open grasslands of the great northern savannah, for example, armies tended to be combinations of cavalry

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and infantry, ranging over wide areas; the key challenge facing war-makers and would-be state-builders was to keep control of far-flung frontiers, and of their own horsed regiments which often resisted centralisation projects. South of the savannah, the presence of the tsetse fly – which spread trypanosomiasis, or sleeping sickness – meant that it was generally impossible to keep horses and other pack animals, with the exception of the far south (modern South Africa) and a handful of other pockets. Thus most sub-Saharan armies were dominated by infantry, with all the impediments associated with war waged exclusively on foot, not least in terms of supply and communication. In thick forest and woodland, armies generally had a narrower operational range. Nonetheless, in markedly fertile agricultural zones – the Ethiopian Highlands, the West African coastal forest, or the Great Lakes area of Uganda – large, centralised state-building projects were possible, and such states were able to field comparatively large armies over longer distances. In sum, agricultural surplus and political centralisation supported armed expansionism. In drier savannahs and grasslands – such as are found in parts of east and north-east Africa – pastoral societies dedicated to the keeping of livestock developed distinctive military systems based not on hierarchy and territorial conquest but on age-sets, in which young men were both warriors and herdsmen on behalf of the wider community. Clearly, distinct environments produced particular political forms, and thus in turn military systems which made best use of terrain and manpower. Across much of the continent, however, it was the concern to maximise population which drove a great deal of conflict: underpopulation in many areas led to continual processes of fission and fusion, as communities split and reformed, and as local migration led to the creation of new and frequently militarised frontiers between states and societies. It was the drive to master those frontiers – and conversely, the periodic march of the frontier on the centre – which was at the heart of much African warfare, in the early modern period as in more recent times.[1]

The changing patterns of African warfare, from the mid-fifteenth to the late eighteenth century

There are only a handful of regions for which we have anything approaching detailed source material on the nature of warfare for the fifteenth century, including the Ethiopian Highlands, Egypt, and the western savannah. In Christian Ethiopia, large (and often cumbersome) armies – comprising

1 Richard Reid, *Warfare in African History* (New York, 2012), esp. ch. 1.

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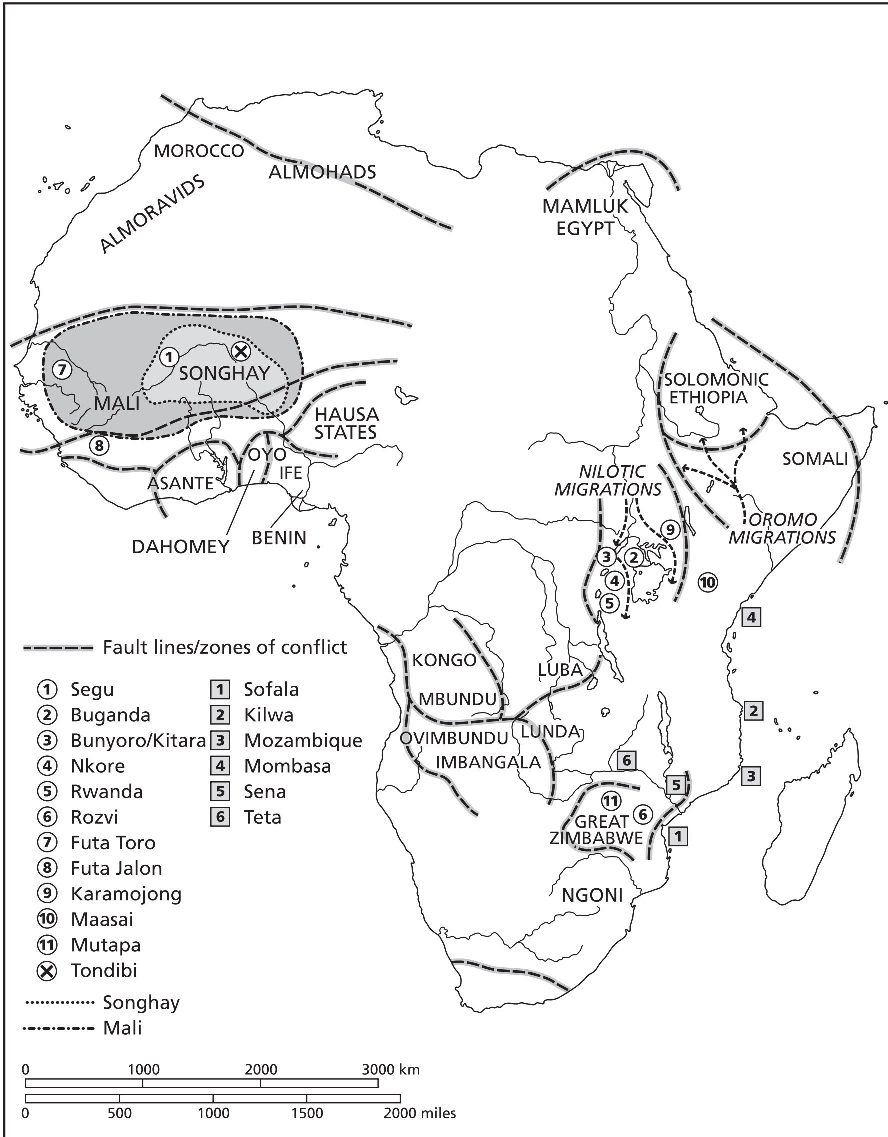

MAP 11. Warfare in early modern Africa, *c.* 1450–*c.* 1850.
Source: Richard Reid, *Warfare in African History* (Cambridge, 2012), map on p. xviii (military states in Africa, *c.* 1000–*c.* 1800). Reproduced with permission.

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a royal core bolstered by infantry and some cavalry forces raised in the provinces – waged a series of wars with the forces of the Muslim sultanate of Adal from the late fifteenth century onward. In the most devastating of these conflicts, between 1529 and 1543, an Adal army equipped with Turkish guns, composed of Somali convert soldiers, and inspired by the religious leadership of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim brought the Christian state to the brink of destruction. A rump Ethiopian force adapted quickly, emulating the mobility and the compact size of Adal units, and in the meantime benefited from the timely intervention of some Portuguese musketeers, part of a force recently arrived in the Red Sea area.[2] Ethiopia survived, and in the decades which followed underwent something of a military reorganisation – driven in part by the retrenchment necessary in the wake of the Somali assault, and in part by the large-scale immigration of groups of Cushitic-speaking Oromo pastoralists. The Oromo were noted horsemen, while their system of age-grade regimentation made them a readily mobilised armed force – as highland Ethiopians discovered to their detriment. Yet, while some groups clashed with the latter, other Oromo became absorbed into highland society and, in time, became key political players and reinvigorated the imperial military.[3]

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Ethiopian army had adopted firearms to some extent, but guns remained very much a secondary weapon for some time to come. Instead, infantry were predominantly equipped with spears and swords, and were increasingly deployed in conjunction with Oromo cavalry groups. Elsewhere in the same period, however, guns were deployed rather more effectively in actual combat. Egypt had for the previous two centuries been governed by one of the world's most impressive military aristocracies, the Mamluks; yet their horsed regiments, sufficient to see off Mongols and Christian crusaders alike in the thirteenth century, were overwhelmed by Ottoman firepower in 1517 in what was perhaps the earliest engagement using firearms on African soil. It is tempting to see this as representative of a fundamental shift in available technology. The same could be claimed for the battle of Tondibi, where in 1591 a Moroccan army used muskets and light cannon to send the Songhay army scurrying from the field. Songhay – its power resting on archery and the rapid deployment of cavalry – had for some time been the pre-eminent power of the West African savannah. It now entered a spiral of – prolonged – decline, which would eventually see the great empire consumed by the desert, although the

2 Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea: The Rise and Decline of the Solomonic Dynasty and Muslim–European Rivalry in the Region* (London, 1980).

3 Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia* (Oxford, 2000).

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invading Moroccan force did not, in the end, fare much better. In the years that followed, remnants of the army severed links with Morocco itself, and operated as mobile bands of raiders through the early decades of the seventeenth century before they were gradually absorbed by adjacent societies.[4] Meanwhile Songhay's own demise may have marked the temporary end to the great cavalry empires of the western savannah, but it did not denote the arrival of the firearm as the region's weapon of choice. Horsemen equipped with lances and, less commonly, bows remained the predominant military formation over the next 200 years or more, and it was only in the nineteenth century that guns had a significant impact on savannah warfare.

Meanwhile Atlantic Africa – defined here as reaching between the Senegambia region and Angola, and encompassing a sizable hinterland – arguably became the most overtly militarised zone anywhere on the continent during this period, owing in large part to the expansion of the slave trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet a process of militarisation across Western and Equatorial Africa, owing to gradual population increase and an attendant expansion in political and economic scale, is discernible over several centuries prior to this. In West Central Africa, notably, the available evidence points towards greater military cooperation across wider areas, the fielding of ever larger armies, and in general ever more destructive patterns of warfare. By the fifteenth century, the intensification of organised violence involved the organisation of young men into age-sets (discernible in central and coastal Angola, for example) and the use of an increasingly diverse array of weaponry: throwing and stabbing spears, body armour, throwing knives, and battle axes are all in evidence in the period prior to the escalation of the Atlantic slave trade.[5]

Yet the external slave trade unquestionably led to heightened levels of violence and militarisation across a vast area. In Kongo, an early participant in the slave trade following the arrival of the Portuguese in the 1480s, slave-raiding armies increasingly equipped with muskets – and sometimes accompanied by contingents of Portuguese musketeers – scoured ever wider areas in search of captives for export. Kongolese political culture incorporated a strand of militarism which had its echo in rebellious provinces, where

4 Lansine Kaba, 'Archers, Musketeers and Mosquitoes: The Moroccan Invasion of the Sudan and Songhay Resistance (1591–1612)', *Journal of African History* 22 (1981), 457–75.

5 Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (London, 1990); Jan Vansina, *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa before 1600* (Charlottesville, 2004).

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violence escalated as the outcome of both demand for slaves from the coast and the predations of royal armies. In the course of the sixteenth century, Kongo descended into civil war. In the deeper interior, the trend was towards 'private' armies under entrepreneur warlords. In the area of modern Angola, for example, the Imbangala emerged out of slave-raiding violence in the late sixteenth century. Mobile bands of professional warriors, frequently serving as mercenaries in others' armies, they may have originated from a subversive faction of a local Ovimbundu army; in any case, they had soon overrun much of the Ovimbundu area, and in the 1570s and 1580s invaded the Atlantic coast. By the middle of the seventeenth century, there were several areas under the control of Imbangala bands stretching across central Angola. Imbangala armies had a ferocious reputation – theirs was a form of total war, involving widespread pillaging as well as the capture of people for sale – and they were organised along complex lines of command; boys were taken when young and trained up to be fed into the system. In the early seventeenth century, both the Portuguese and the kingdom of Ndongo used Imbangala mercenaries; famously, the defeated Ndongo queen Njinga Mbande underwent initiation herself as an Imbangala, and modelled a new community which replicated Imbangala militarism.[6]

While evidence relating to fighting formations is scant for the sixteenth century, it is clear that in the West African forest infantry forces fought in relatively tight formation – especially those which regularly encountered cavalry armies. Further south, in West Central Africa, somewhat looser formations are suggested by the evidence. But a general trend across the Atlantic zone was the deployment of archers as skirmishers in support of soldiers equipped with short spears, clubs, and knives whose main aim was to close on the enemy and engage the latter in hand-to-hand combat. There is no evidence of significant European influence on local tactics, at least in the sixteenth century, although some Portuguese were hired as mercenaries in Central Africa. Once again the impact of firearms was limited at this stage, as when they were deployed it was as missile weapons alongside bows, which were not displaced for some decades yet.[7] In any case, sixteenth-century guns – especially early 'trade guns', assembled specifically for African

6 John Thornton, 'The Art of War in Angola, 1575–1680', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30 (1988), 360–78; Linda Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen* (Cambridge, MA, 2017).

7 R. Kea, 'Firearms and Warfare on the Gold and Slave Coasts from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of African History* 12 (1971), 185–213; John Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa 1500–1800* (London, 1999).

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commerce – were less than reliable in tropical conditions. The damp heat caused gun barrels to rust, and powder and matches were of little use in the rainy season.

The Imbangala exemplified a new kind of restless, predatory military culture, one generated by the slaving violence of the age. But other, no less predatory, political forms emerged with direct links to the external slave trade, in particular new territorial states with increasingly complex military systems. The process is exemplified by the polities of the West African coast and immediate hinterland, encompassing modern-day Nigeria, Benin, and Ghana, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most of the major centralised and territorial states of the region deployed armies in a similar way and towards similar ends.[8] In Asante, which emerged in the course of the seventeenth century, the 'national' army was composed of contingents supplied by tributary chiefdoms. A large, permanent force, it underpinned further Asante expansion in the eighteenth century, during which time it was brought under the control of the king, the *Asantehene*, to an ever greater degree. The kingdom of Oyo, located in savannah land just north of the coastal forest, was capable of fielding armies of some 100,000 men – and its tsetse-free location meant that Oyo armies made extensive use of cavalry. While some cavalry units may have represented a 'standing army' – the professionalism invariably involved in the use of horses implies as much – most of Oyo's soldiers were part-time, drawn from the various provinces of the kingdom, and deployed as a 'national' force. The command structure was split between the *basorun*, commander of the metropolitan army, and the *kakamfo*, in charge of the provincial forces. Both office-holders represented considerable political authority, too, and each vied with the other as well as with the king himself, the *alafin*, for influence. By the late eighteenth century, it was the *kakamfo* who had emerged as the leading political as well as military figure.[9] More generally the army wielded enormous power in Oyo politics, no doubt owing to the fact that the slave-trading empire was dependent on military success for its commercial strength.

The army played a central role in the politics of Dahomey, too. Although Oyo drew tribute from Dahomey from the 1730s onward, the kingdom was a dynamic and expansionist state in its own right, its roots in the slave trade and organised around a predatory militarism. Dahomey fought wars for slaves, large numbers of which were earmarked for export, but slaves

8 Robert Smith, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa* (London, 1989).
9 Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford, 1977).

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intended for internal use were no less important. Dahomey's army comprised a series of well-drilled regiments increasingly equipped with firearms, in particular flintlock muskets. Each regiment made use of emblems and was sustained by a system in which young boys were assigned to soldiers for rigorous training. The head of the army, the *agau*, was assisted by two deputy commanders, the *zohenu* and the *fosupo*, and the army as a whole was divided into 'left' and 'right'-hand wings. As in Oyo, Dahomey's military leaders wielded considerable political influence, again underlining the central significance of the army in matters of state.[10] Further north, the Wolof states in the Senegal area likewise grew up in response to external demand for slaves, and organised themselves around the deployment of armies of royal slaves, or *ceddo*. Slave soldiers were prevalent elsewhere, too. In the early eighteenth century, on the upper Niger river, a young warrior named Biton Kulibali transformed his age-regiment into a highly effective force of armed slaves known as the *tonjon*. The kingdom of Segu resulted, embodying the increasingly professional organisation, the armed entrepreneurialism, and the ever more sophisticated cultures of militarism of the age.[11]

Across the region, the size of armies themselves doubtless varied from time to time even within particular polities. But along the Atlantic seaboard, armies were probably fairly compact: some of the smaller states fielded no more than a few hundred men at any given time, while Dahomey's forces probably ranged between 5,000 and 20,000. Oyo and Asante were capable of larger-scale mobilisation, and might field armies of between 50,000 and 100,000 – the latter figure representing, in all probability, an absolute upper limit, for few polities possessed the logistical or technological capacity to support such huge forces on the move. Logistical problems became more acute the further armies were from home. Most campaigns involved support systems of women and slaves carrying food and other supplies, but armies ranging further afield depended on foraging and requisitioning in enemy territory. These limitations meant that warfare was often outsourced: slaving states were frequently served by client polities which raided on their own accounts and passed slaves into the systems of the former. Beyond the forest, cavalry were crucial: in Oyo and Segu, for example, expeditions comprised horsed raiders supplemented by infantry, organised as the need or opportunity

10 Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550–1750* (Oxford, 1991).

11 Richard Roberts, 'Production and Reproduction of Warrior States: Segu, Bambara and Segu Tokolor, *c.* 1712–1890', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 13 (1980), 389–419.

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arose. In the savannah, these would have been more sweeping manoeuvres, characterised by somewhat looser formations. Ambush and more compact formations were favoured in forest and woodland. In Dahomey, carefully planned annual campaigns were favoured, involving the dispatch of armies towards well-established hunting grounds, especially to the north. The use of mercenaries, meanwhile, was increasingly common across the Atlantic zone through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, another indication of growing professionalism. Smaller coastal polities such as Allada and Whydah, for example, made use of Akwamu soldiers from the neighbouring Gold Coast region in the late seventeenth century.

Of course, the most important tactical innovation of this era was the increasingly widespread adoption of firearms. The fusil, or flintlock musket, was standard in European armies by the late seventeenth century, and by the early eighteenth century it was likewise displacing older matchlocks among the armies of Atlantic Africa. However, an immediate qualification is needed here: the flintlock's impact was very much limited to littoral societies and those just a little way inland. Savannah armies north of the West African forest generally eschewed guns for much of this period, cavalry forces preferring javelins, swords, and bows. And, although guns did reach the markets of the Central African interior, they were not generally deployed in battle. Extant armouries and tactics remained intact, with clubs, throwing knives, and short stabbing spears being used in hand-to-hand combat. Elsewhere, however, fusils had a major impact. In some areas, bows and arrows were almost completely displaced over the course of the eighteenth century. Along the Slave Coast – dominated by the Dahomeans, who adopted flintlocks with especial skill and vigour – guns were widely used, as they were too along the adjacent Gold Coast, evidenced by the hiring of mercenaries from that area on account of their shooting abilities. Firearms influenced battlefield formation, as the close formations of the seventeenth century sometimes gave way to more open, fluid deployments in the eighteenth, often involving smaller and more mobile units. Several African armies now sought to avoid close combat altogether, and amassed musketeers at vantage points from which fields of fire were designed to overwhelm enemies at distance. Exceptions to this loosening up of battlefield formation were to be found in the frontier zones between forest and savannah, where infantry armies were accustomed to facing enemies on horseback. Dahomean and Asante armies, for example, maintained close order and concentrated rates of fire, having observed that

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horses (such as those of Oyo) tended not to charge down such hostile obstacles.[12]

Similar, if not identical, processes of militarisation can be discerned in other parts of the continent, notably in East and South Africa, over much the same period, even if the effects appear somewhat less dramatic than in the Atlantic zone. In the south-east, Mutapa – the successor state to Great Zimbabwe – dominated the central Zambezi valley and adjacent coastal lowlands, under the rule of the *Mwene Mutapa*, a chiefly title indicating 'conqueror'. Its armies drew in tribute from a wide area, and protected the export of gold to the coast. In East Africa, several small chiefdoms had merged by the middle of the fourteenth century to form the kingdom of Kitara, soon to be succeeded by another military power, Bunyoro, in the foundation of which an immigrant clan from the north played a key role. These were the compact, militarised monarchies characteristic of the Great Lakes region of East Africa, capable of fielding sizable armies of part-time soldiers.[13] In the course of the sixteenth century, Bunyoro was joined by other states – Buganda, Toro, Nkore, Rwanda, and Burundi – which took advantage of the fertile arc between lakes Victoria and Tanganyika. While there was variation in the detail, each boasted a capacity for rapid military mobilisation and built traditions of martial prowess into their social and moral edifices. Kings needed to be war leaders, capable of protecting their peoples from outside attack but equally able to command regular campaigns aimed at territorial expansion and resource extraction.[14]

Across East Africa between 1500 and 1700, then, entrepreneurial leaders built up networks of clients – often through the distribution of cattle – which could be mobilised for military service, service which underpinned expanding political authority.[15] Military expeditions were probably longer-range than previously, involving men equipped with spears, bows, and the long shields characteristic of the region, and were aimed at both the extension of political territory and the extraction of neighbours' resources. Such campaigns were essentially predatory raids, but raids which sustained ambitious and increasingly complex polities. These were centralised political systems, but there were other models of militarism in the area, including those of decentralised

12 Kea, 'Firearms and Warfare'; Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa*.

13 David Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, a Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Oxford, 1998).

14 Roland Oliver, 'Discernible Developments in the Interior, *c.* 1500–1840', in Roland Oliver and Gervase Mathew (eds.), *History of East Africa*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1963), vol. 1.

15 Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*.

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pastoral peoples – the Karamojong and Maasai, notably – whose age-regiments facilitated a distinctive form of military service. Young men equipped with spears as tall as themselves could be mobilised over wide areas in defence of cattle and community.[16]

Ever more enhanced military states emerged during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from the Ethiopian Highlands to the South African Highveld. Ethiopia had survived the trials of the sixteenth century and now consolidated its position around the new capital of Gondar from the 1630s: Gondar's lack of fortification suggested, perhaps, a greater sense of security than had been the case for many decades. Oromo units (both cavalry and infantry) were increasingly co-opted into the imperial army, and Oromo chiefly lineages wielded ever greater political power, rooted in their command of large numbers of soldiers. In particular, emperors created new Oromo units under their direct command in the attempt to counteract the military power of regional magnates. Ethiopian armies comprising contingents from several provinces might number between 50,000 and 100,000 infantry and cavalry, further swollen by enormous logistical corps. But the perennial problem of centrifugalism remained, as provincial overlords sought to utilise their own military strength to challenge central authority.[17] In the course of the eighteenth century, armed districts and hostile frontiers successfully eroded imperial authority to the point – by the 1770s and 1780s – that Ethiopia as a unified polity had effectively ceased to exist. A cycle of wars had begun which would last to the middle of the nineteenth century, fought by sizable provincial kingdoms competing over both resources and imperial ideology. Guns, meanwhile, were certainly available, especially in the northern districts which were more closely connected to the Red Sea trade, but they were only gradually having a significant impact on battle formations.[18]

Further south, Buganda's economic growth enabled it to make a bid for hegemony over the northern Great Lakes region, by fielding relatively large, well-fed armies of part-time soldiers recruited by provincial chiefs with an interest in a successful expansionist state. That expansionist state was directed by an increasingly powerful kingship which, in the course of the eighteenth century, was able to reward military loyalty and prowess with land and

16 See various contributions in Thomas Spear and Richard Waller (eds.), *Being Maasai: Ethnicity and Identity in East Africa* (Oxford, 1993).

17 Crummey, *Land and Society*.

18 Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes* (London, 1968); Richard Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in Northeast Africa: Genealogies of Conflict since 1800* (Oxford, 2011).

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political appointments. Ganda armies equipped with spears and body-length shields were dispatched to raid for livestock and slaves, or were deployed to annex new districts blessed with especially desirable factor endowments. In this way Buganda incorporated tracts of good farmland and pasture, occupied areas rich in iron ore and wood for weapons, and began to reach southward to meet the global trade networks emerging towards the end of the eighteenth century. War, meanwhile, underpinned a thriving military culture at home, and a set of martial values according to which 'good citizenship' was measured. Yet there were constraints to the reach of Ganda armies, which became increasingly cumbersome owing to the large logistical corps which attended them – corps which ironically were designed to enlarge Ganda military capacity. And as its soldiers were mostly part-timers, whose labour was critical to the domestic economy, the kingdom waged war according to agricultural timetables.[19]

In Southern-Central Africa, similarly militarised state-formation processes are discernible, although the Maravi state at the south end of Lake Malawi proved rather less durable than those in the northern lake region. Between *c.* 1600 and *c.* 1650, under Masula of the Kalonga dynasty, this dynamic polity drew revenue from the ivory trade to sustain large and readily raised armies; but, in a pattern often replicated, the state barely outlived its charismatic leader. After Masula's death, politics became fragmented, leaving the region open to the predations of small-scale private armies. Something similar transpired south of the Zambezi, where in the seventeenth century the Mutapa state deteriorated to be replaced by a new, highly militarised polity under the leadership of the *Changamire*, whose army, the *Rozvi* ('destroyers'), dominated the northern part of the Zimbabwe plateau. Like the Mutapa forces before them, the *Rozvi* were not a standing army, but there is evidence of military reform in terms of the organisation of distinct regiments and ever greater use of firearms, imported from the Portuguese on the Mozambican coast. Yet it was their disciplined battle order rather than new technology which gave the *Rozvi* their decisive edge. They were able to rapidly mobilise relatively small forces of around 2,000 men, who carried out punitive and extractive expeditions against outlying districts, and protected the increasingly important coastal commerce. This was a highly professional outfit; and an ethos of professionalism was in evidence in the nearby Zambezi valley, too.

19 Richard Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda: Economy, Society and Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2002).

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Here, Portuguese *prazos* – land grants, originally created for white settlers – were increasingly dominated by Afro-Portuguese warlords, or *prazeiros*, the product of local intermarriage and a hardy, militarised frontier culture. In the course of the eighteenth century, these warlords led armies of slave-soldiers (known as *Chikunda*) not dissimilar in form and ethos to those of the West African hinterland, who spent much of their time feeding off burgeoning trade, raiding neighbours for tribute, and hunting. Like the *Rozvi*, the *Chikunda* made increasing use of muskets.[20]

East African pastoralists such as the Maasai, meanwhile, developed a somewhat different system whereby youthful aggression might be harnessed in the interests of the larger community: age-grades enabled the speedy mobilisation of small units of spearmen (perhaps numbering no more than a few dozen at any given time) who were deployed to raid neighbours' cattle and secure good pasture. A distinctive culture of militarism resulted, whereby young men were simultaneously herdsmen and warriors: the roles were indelibly intertwined. There were clear similarities with the Oromo in the Ethiopian region, and indeed with the Ngoni in the South-East African lowveld. Yet there was an important difference, for while the Maasai eschewed 'state'-formation in the conventional sense, Ngoni age-regiments underpinned a process of political centralisation. Among the Ngoni, age-regiments equipped with assegais and trained in rapid manoeuvre and close combat were increasingly harnessed by political elites who sought armies to consolidate political authority and protect economic resources. By the late eighteenth century, several centralised polities had emerged in the Ngoni region – highly militarised, and founded on a distinctive, professional military ethos – paving the way for a remarkable political-military transformation in the early nineteenth century involving the Zulu, as we will see below.[21]

Meanwhile, across the three centuries under review here, there was a gradual expansion of European military activity in Africa, mostly involving the Portuguese. From the early 1500s, Portuguese galleons armed with cannon moved along the Indian Ocean coast and subdued one Swahili city-state after another, culminating in the submission of Mombasa in 1589. The

20 Edward Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa: Changing Patterns of International Trade to the Later Nineteenth Century* (London, 1975); Richard Gray, 'Portuguese Musketeers on the Zambezi', *Journal of African History* 12 (1971), 531–3.

21 John Wright, 'Turbulent Times: Political Transformations in the North and East, 1760s–1830s', in Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard Mbenga, and Robert Ross (eds.), *Cambridge History of South Africa*, vol. 1: *From Early Times to 1885* (Cambridge, 2010).

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defence policy of the Swahili states, insofar as one can be discerned, had long focused on the land; attack from the sea had never been seriously contemplated. Having established a garrison at the mouth of the Zambezi, the Portuguese looked inland, capturing the Swahili trading posts of Sena and Tete in the 1530s. But beyond this their ambitions were thwarted by African military capability and malaria. Attempted Portuguese invasions of Mutapa in 1571 and 1574 were calamitous failures, demonstrating in the starkest terms that Europe's military technology proffered no clear advantage. They had a rather greater impact in Kongo – where Portuguese musketeers sometimes attached themselves to local slaving expeditions, and were sufficiently admired for their combat skills to be hired as mercenaries – and in Ethiopia, where their intervention against Ahmed ibn Ibrahim's Somali forces in the 1540s was ultimately successful. Elsewhere, Cape Colony at the Cape of Good Hope – founded in 1652 – was rapidly becoming one of the most violent and militarised of Afro-European frontiers. Here, Dutch settlers' seizure of Khoisan cattle prompted Khoisan counter-raids, and led to significant conflicts in 1659–60 and in the mid-1670s. Armed initially with matchlocks and then with flintlocks, the Dutch, or Boers ('farmers'), expanded onto Khoisan land from the late seventeenth century onward, compelling dispossessed Khoisan into a life of hunting and raiding. The Boers themselves would counter the growing Khoisan threat by forming militia units known as commandos, in what represented an escalation of frontier violence. Across the eastern borderlands of Cape Colony, too, the Boers were engaged in cyclical conflict with the Xhosa, who represented a rather more robust obstacle to their seemingly inexorable advance than the Khoisan. Prolonged warfare, waged between Boer and Xhosa raiding parties, was fought over the *Zuurveld*, Xhosa grazing land. This began in the 1770s and 1780s, and periodically erupted throughout the nineteenth century. The Boers would increasingly look to the British, in charge of Cape Colony from the 1790s, for assistance in these frontier wars; but British reluctance to expend money and manpower in pursuit of the Xhosa would give rise to new tensions within the territory.[22] Overall, the European military presence was clearly increasing – in West Central Africa, in Cape Colony, and along the eastern seaboard; and although its significance during this era should not be exaggerated, the nature of the encounter offered enough harbingers to suggest a rather more violent relationship in the decades to come.

22 Noel Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (London, 1992).

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The transformation of warfare in the nineteenth century

The trend across the continent was clearly towards more overt and more sophisticated militarisation, and the increasingly efficient organisation and deployment of armed force on the part of polities of various hues. There had been, in sum, a marked expansion in the scale of warfare. But these dynamics became all the more intense in the first half of the nineteenth century, making it possible for us to talk of an African military revolution in this era. In West Africa, for example, the collapse of the Oyo Empire led to several decades of military reform among the Yoruba. Fortified city-states, the most powerful of which was Ibadan, were dominated by armed entrepreneurs who commanded private and highly professional armies of young men (known as 'war boys') armed with matchlocks and, increasingly, flintlock muskets. They demonstrated the primacy of military might in Yoruba politics. Drilled, disciplined, and trained in battlefield manoeuvre and in the use of firearms, these forces hired themselves out to the highest bidder and attracted the displaced and uprooted as they did so, symbolising a socioeconomic as much as a military revolution.[23] In this era of the 'illegal' slave trade (which had been abolished, at least at the European end, in the early years of the nineteenth century), there were plenty of commercial opportunities for well-armed, well-led, and cohesive bands of men, seeking material, social, and sometimes political advancement. The privatisation of violence and the social, political, and economic transformation it involved can be discerned across the continent. The Ovimbundu and Chokwe in west-central Atlantic Africa developed similarly entrepreneurial armies, again dedicated to the capture of slaves, whether for export or for domestic usage. Trading-and-raiding polities led by powerful, charismatic figures grew up in the Zambezi valley, too, a region in which the slave trade was actually expanding. Among the Yao of Malawi, Mozambique, and southern Tanzania, opportunistic but highly effective professional militaries emerged on the back of the Indian Ocean slave trade, with use often being made of slave soldiers. A distinctive, but not dissimilar, harnessing of youthful aggression by warrior leaders in search of economic and political opportunity can be seen among the pastoralist Maasai and Turkana in the East African grasslands.[24]

23 Ade Ajayi, 'Professional Warriors in Nineteenth-Century Yoruba Politics', *Tarikh* 1 (1965), 72–81; Robert Smith and Ade Ajayi, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1971).

24 John Lamphear, 'Brothers in Arms: Military Aspects of East African Age-Class Systems in Historical Perspective', in Eisei Kurimoto and Simon Simonse (eds.), *Conflict, Age and Power in North East Africa* (Oxford, 1998).

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In some areas, men-at-arms were coupled to new state-building projects. Later in the nineteenth century, in the 1860s and 1870s, East Africa witnessed a transformation in the organisation and uses of violence. Among the Nyamwezi and the Kimbu, notably, dramatic economic change brought about by the growth of long-distance commerce, the predations of the slave trade, and the resultant erosion of older social ties and forms produced new forms of military leadership and private armies of displaced young men who formed the backbone of new polities. These new communities were sometimes transient, but they demonstrated remarkable military dynamism. Known among the Nyamwezi of northern Tanzania as *ruga ruga*, young fighters might be bandits and criminals, preying off commercial highways, or they might be harnessed by charismatic leaders such as Mirambo, who was known for his military skill. Mirambo's armies fought with flintlock muskets, and were noted for their speed of deployment and manoeuvre; as communities became increasingly 'urban' and fortified their settlements for protection, Mirambo developed siege tactics accordingly, and sought to absorb the defeated into his 'empire'. The state he created was unstable – it disintegrated shortly after his death in 1884 – but it was a remarkable political and social experiment while it lasted, representative of a broader trend across the region; namely, a marked expansion in political scale underpinned by new forms of warfare and military organisation. Among the neighbouring Kimbu, the war leader Nyungu-ya-Mawe sought to do much the same thing.[25]

Arguably, however, the most noted instance of this military revolution was among the Ngoni of South-East Africa, where heightened economic competition, a tendency towards political centralisation, and the increasing militarisation of the age-regiment system produced the imposing Zulu state. In the course of the 1810s, a remarkable commander named Shaka – who was in some ways exceptional, but in other ways represented a broader trend across much of sub-Saharan Africa – developed a highly militarised polity with a view to using war for both economic ends and social reconstruction. The Zulu regiments (*amabutho*) honed skills and tactics which had been developed in the second half of the eighteenth century, and fought in close formation with *assegais*, using rapid flanking manoeuvres to crush ponderous and unprepared enemies. Young men served in these regiments for many years before being released and permitted to marry, giving rise to a ferociously martial identity which succeeded in absorbing many non-Zulu. Yet the resultant turmoil – known as the *mfecane*,

25 Norman Bennett, *Mirambo of Tanzania, 1840?–1884* (New York, 1971); Richard Reid, *War in Pre-Colonial Eastern Africa: The Patterns and Meanings of State-Level Conflict in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2007).

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alluding to violent upheaval – forced many communities to migrate away from the epicentre of the Zulu revolution. Some of these were scattered through modern-day Zimbabwe and Malawi by the 1830s and 1840s; other offshoots had reached northern Tanzania by the 1850s, where they undoubtedly influenced the Nyamwezi and Kimbu, noted above. Wherever they went, they brought with them Zulu military tactics and ethos; and many of those who came into contact with them sought to emulate the Zulu in turn. Thus for example the Swazi, Ndebele, Sotho, Bemba, Hehe, Bena, and Sangu – stretching from modern KwaZulu Natal to central Tanzania – became highly militarised polities in the original Ngoni mould, albeit with some local flavour. From mid-century, especially, these armies adopted firearms, which had been unavailable to (or, at any rate, had been eschewed by) Shaka himself.[26]

Across the West African savannah, religious ideologues harnessed local military cultures in pursuit of theocratic states, and reorganised their armies accordingly in the name of Islam. This was a pattern which in fact dated back to the early and mid-eighteenth century, with jihadist movements in Futa Jalon and later in Futa Toro making particularly effective use of archers. In both cases, early victories bred confidence and provided momentum. An even more spectacular jihad erupted in 1804 among the Fulani and Hausa of present-day northern Nigeria, led by the reformist cleric Uthman dan Fodio. It initially involved amassed infantry, which achieved what may have been a 'chance' victory at the battle of Tabkin Kwotto, where the jihadist forces' archers formed what seems to have been an impromptu square and drove the enemy cavalry from the field. Thereafter the insurrection grew in confidence, and the square became its defensive cornerstone; but cavalry forces were quickly developed as the offensive wings of the jihad, with horsemen wearing padded quilts and chainmail and equipped with lances and swords. Infantry, meanwhile, continued to use bows, and only in the mid-nineteenth century were firearms adopted with any vigour. By 1810, what became known as the Sokoto Caliphate had been established – and it would prove a durable creation.[27] Others across the region would draw inspiration from this militarily and ideologically dynamic entity. In the 1850s, the Tukolor jihad of al-Hajj Umar Tal made use of a highly regimented army equipped with firearms and

26 Elizabeth Eldredge, 'Sources of Conflict in Southern Africa, *c.* 1800–30: The "Mfecane" Reconsidered', *Journal of African History* 33 (1992), 1–35; Carolyn Hamilton, '"The Character and Objects of Chaka": A Reconsideration of the Making of Shaka as "Mfecane" Motor', *Journal of African History* 33 (1992), 37–63.

27 Joseph Smaldone, *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1977).

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some small artillery pieces seized from the French in the Senegal area; Tukolor infantry and cavalry operated in tandem, and the army was noted for its capacity to undertake large-scale manoeuvres in formation. A little later, Samori Ture in the 1870s and 1880s would play down the jihadist element in his own state-building project, but would make effective use of professional soldiers on horseback as well as on foot, carefully organised into regiments. The Sokoto Caliphate had been launched in the 1800s by archers, and consolidated by horsemen with no interest in (or knowledge of) firearms; but, by the 1880s, Samori's men were increasingly equipped with modern guns, and they could repair guns, too, and make ammunition.[28]

Longer-established states, too, embarked on programmes of military reform, or expanded their military operations significantly. Following the collapse of Oyo, Dahomey expanded its slaving activities eastward into Yoruba territory, and thrived on the 'illegal' slave trade down to the 1850s, famously making use of an apparently new regiment of female fighters. Even after it embraced so-called 'legitimate commerce' (i.e. exporting agricultural produce rather than human beings), Dahomey's was one of the most deeply rooted military cultures anywhere in the continent; and war, of course, was necessary too to supply the slaves needed for the domestic economy.[29] In East Africa, Buganda had militarised its political establishment by the early nineteenth century, creating a series of new military chieftaincies which further underpinned a sophisticated and pervasive militarism which had much in common with that of Dahomey. Ganda ambition expanded significantly as long-distance commercial traffic built up around Lake Victoria, and the kingdom aspired to control of both land and lake trade routes. With those ends in view, Buganda became one of the largest importers of firearms in the region from the 1860s, although the 'gun culture' at the royal capital was arguably detrimental to actual battlefield performance: untrained but privileged young men armed with muskets increasingly enjoyed a prominence in Ganda armies which was disproportionate to their actual skill. Meanwhile, in order to offset the limitations of war on land, the Ganda developed a fleet of war canoes on Lake Victoria, designed to extend the kingdom's commercial as well as political reach. It was only partially successful, but the navy represented one of the most dramatic exercises in military reform anywhere in the region.[30] It was neighbouring Bunyoro, however, which arguably undertook even more effective military reforms by creating *barusura*,

28 Martin Legassick, 'Firearms, Horses and Samorian Army Organisation, 1870–1898', *Journal of African History* 7 (1966), 95–115.
29 Smith, *Warfare and Diplomacy*. 30 Reid, *Political Power*.

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regiments of young men equipped with rifles. During the reign of Kabalega in the 1870s and 1880s, Bunyoro enjoyed something of a resurgence as a result.[31]

Firearms and military professionalism characterised Ethiopia's resurgence, too, although here violence was honed as a result of several decades of almost continual war between the 1770s and the 1850s following the collapse of the medieval Christian state. Entrenched cultures of militarism, new forms of military leadership, a greatly swollen military 'class', and ever more efficient deployment of armed force characterised the fierce commercial and ideological competition between the ethno-regional polities of the highlands, until a particularly gifted tactician, Kassa Hailu, won a decisive series of pitched battles between the mid-1840s and 1850s. Kassa had encountered the deadly efficiency of modern firepower while fighting the Egyptians on the north-west Ethiopian frontier in the 1840s, and dedicated his career to professionalising his army and acquiring that weaponry. In 1855, he was crowned Emperor Tewodros of a putatively 'reunified' Ethiopia, but spent most of his reign on campaign against his own subjects. He had sought to regularise his army, to pay his soldiers regular salaries, and to curb the natural inclination of highland troops to raid and ravage; in this he was unsuccessful, for the repeated challenges to his legitimacy led to Tewodros resorting to widespread, often shockingly punitive, violence against rebel soldiers and suspect communities alike. He killed himself in 1868, faced with a British expedition which had been dispatched to rescue some Europeans whom Tewodros had taken hostage; but his short reign, and those of his successors – Yohannes and Menelik – laid the foundations for a highly militarised polity, modern Ethiopia, and demonstrated the transformative power of violence in pursuit of political and economic goals. Later in the nineteenth century, Menelik in particular used Ethiopian military might – and an enormous arsenal of modern firearms acquired over many years of trade – to famously see off an Italian invasion, and to expand the boundaries of his empire to the south and east of the highland plateau.[32]

Tewodros, Yohannes, and Menelik each sought to acquire foreign military technology, and to some extent emulate the military modernity exhibited by European and Egyptian armies. It was a pattern discernible elsewhere, too, notably across North Africa, where exposure to European armaments was all

31 Shane Doyle, *Crisis and Decline in Bunyoro: Population and Environment in Western Uganda, 1860–1955* (Oxford, 2006).

32 John Dunn, '"For God, Emperor, and Country!" The Evolution of Ethiopia's Nineteenth-Century Army', *War in History* 1 (1994), 278–99; Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London, 1976); Reid, *Frontiers of Violence*.

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the more intense. Egypt is both exceptional, in terms of the scale of its attempted military revolution, and also the exemplar of a larger process. Under Muhammad Ali, who from 1805 governed the ostensibly Ottoman province as an autonomous state, Egypt embarked on a remarkable series of reforms – economic, political, and military – which were at least partly inspired by Europe, while also aimed at preventing further European incursion. Building up an army of some 200,000 well-armed and disciplined troops, Muhammad Ali expanded southward into Sudan and the Red Sea, and seized control of the Hijaz; it was an exercise in military expansionism which was partially financed by a greatly expanded cotton industry. Yet some of the money also came in the form of European loans, ironically, while Muhammad Ali also sought to make use of European expertise as he saw fit. But when he invaded the Levant and Syria in the 1830s, an increasingly nervous European coalition intervened to cut him down to size. Defeated, Muhammad Ali's forces were reduced to some 18,000 men, while the great economic projects designed to sustain the Egyptian renaissance were placed under close foreign supervision.

Events in Egypt demonstrated that Europe would respond decisively and aggressively to perceived threats emanating from the continent, or to protect local interests, but more broadly European armed incursions in the first few decades of the nineteenth century were piecemeal and not supported by any great political enthusiasm. By mid-century, the French were waging aggressive, if 'low-level', war in Algeria, and the British were sporadically engaged in frontier wars in South Africa; but elsewhere, armed encounters between European and African forces were relatively rare. The British fought the Asante in the 1820s and again in the 1860s, in the attempt to protect and stabilise their 'Gold Coast' possessions; the 1867–8 campaign against Ethiopia was something of an anomaly. From their base in Senegal, the French were engaged with Umar Tal in the 1850s and 1860s. Usually these 'local' wars, dealing with recalcitrant 'tribes', as Europeans saw it, were a nuisance, and were entered into with great reluctance. This fact notwithstanding, however, by the 1850s and 1860s such armed encounters did indeed demonstrate growing European military power, and the widening gulf between African and European capability. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the rough parity between European and African militaries (and even, in some places at certain times, African superiority) was being superseded by clear European technological advantage. Firepower was obviously important: by the 1860s, Europeans had access to breech-loading rifles, which few Africans were able to get hold of, although there were exceptions. But just as significant was

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Europe's organisational power: in the realms of communications and logistics, Africans could not compete. And although in the middle decades of the nineteenth century the idea of a 'scramble for Africa' was unthinkable – both in military and, more importantly, in political terms – the technological, organisational, and tactical advantages necessary to make it happen were already in place.[33]

Conclusions: Towards the age of high imperialism

It is not within the scope of this chapter to discuss the 'scramble' for Africa in any detail.[34] Nonetheless, three points can be made in this respect by way of conclusion. The first is that the African military revolution described above involved, self-evidently, a dramatic escalation of armed competition between polities across the continent, providing small European-led forces with critical leverage over a number of states and societies. In many respects, accordingly, their influence was disproportionately heightened, vis-à-vis their actual size and military efficacy. In other words, the transformation of violence in Africa in the nineteenth century, and the expansion in the scale of warfare across the continent, facilitated Europe's own armed incursions in the later part of the century – which can in turn be considered something of an extension of Africa's military revolution.

Second, and related to this, the upheavals of the nineteenth century produced the swell of manpower, and the skills and knowledge of warcraft, on which European officers absolutely depended. War had generated, across the continent, pools of uprooted and dislocated young men (and women), armed entrepreneurs with a range of skills and local knowledge, which could be tapped into by Europeans, using a combination of luck and dexterity – just as they had been periodically tapped into by local warlords. The nineteenth century had engendered cultures of mercenary professionalism in violence, and it was these cultures which ultimately facilitated the European partition of the continent. Again, it is important to stress that the 'scramble' for Africa would never have been possible without African agency: for all its military advantages, Europe had neither the will nor the ability to impose itself on Africa without utilising local troops and expertise. And thus again, the era of

33 Douglas Porch, *Wars of Empire* (London, 2001); Bruce Vandervort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa, 1830–1914* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998).

34 John Lonsdale, 'The European Scramble and Conquest in African History', in Roland Oliver and George Sanderson (eds.), *Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 6: *From 1870 to 1905* (Cambridge, 1985).

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the ‘scramble’ needs to be seen as at least partly the outcome of Africa’s own prolonged period of revolutionary upheaval.

Finally, the violence in Africa described in this chapter – during the nineteenth century, in particular, but also throughout the era under examination – was consistently misunderstood by European observers and was used, ultimately, to justify European imperialism. Perceptions of African warfare became increasingly racialised; outside observers did not see the socio-political creativity, or the developmental potential, of African war, but only violent disorder which was symptomatic of African backwardness and needed to be brought to an end. As European discourse around the continent became increasingly couched in the language of race, and as the European ‘civilising mission’ took shape, centred on ideas about development and primitiveness, the ‘savage barbarity’ which was espied everywhere in Africa – not least the persistence of the ‘illegal’ slave trade – was used to validate armed intervention. It may not have been a direct *cause* of the partition, but it provided the essential cultural and moral framework within which imperialism was deemed not merely possible but necessary. This was a chronic misapprehension of what had been momentous events across Africa; and it is a view which has persisted to the present, in various ways. The late nineteenth-century interpretation of much African violence as fundamentally barbaric and illegitimate has proven robust, and has frequently prevented more nuanced understanding of the role and practice of warfare in the continent’s early modern history.

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