Zubairu Wai

*Epistemologies of African Conflicts: Violence, Evolutionism, and the War in Sierra Leone.*


**Of Discourse and Frontiers: A Review of Zubairu Wai’s *Epistemologies of African conflicts.*

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Africa was (may be still is), dubbed the “Dark Continent” not because the Sun and the Moon refused to shine their lights on her; certainly not because she is particularly difficult to reach by sea, land, or air; and not even because her solar panels are incapable of storing the Sun’s plentiful energy. She was named the “Dark Continent” precisely because her “darkness” was conceived in the Mind of the Global North. Even her geographical position, the Global South, was constructed by that same external Mind.

Thus, Western Discourse, which casts the West or the Global North as the site of “Civilized Order,” has always portrayed Africa or the Global South as the “Lawless Frontier.” Scholarly discussions by Africans about this unnatural conception, theorizing, and construction of Africa, African conflicts or, the African condition, are not new. One of the most prominent African scholars to have grappled with this is Valentin Y. Mudimbe, who in two of his many books, *The Invention of Africa* and *The Idea of Africa*, paints a compelling general picture of the situation. What is new is the way Zubairu Wai, among other things, neatly ties epistemology and power in a single knot, convincingly arguing that the Africanist forms of knowledge manufactured in the Western epistemological factory shape attitudes of the Global North to the African continent. While most in the Global North see knowledge production as an innocent intellectual exercise, Wai sees it as “a political, temporal, spatial, and ideological act.”

Zubairu Wai’s book, *Epistemologies of African Conflicts*, is not only a welcome voice in this conversation, but also a frank, brutally honest, well-substantiated, passionate and engaging work. While it speaks about the construction of Africa in general, the raw material for testing the reductive and problematic logic of Western Discourse on African Conflicts is the Sierra Leonean War. The book is a critical look at how the war has been accounted for--- the various and varied accounts of the conflict in Sierra Leone. The author’s goal, or at least one of his goals is, to interrogate interpretations of the Sierra Leonean war that are based on intellectual and ethical paradigms from outside. For Wai, the Sierra Leonean war was/is such a complex phenomenon that it defies monofocal interpretations such as those based on reductive logic and external paradigms. Thus, Wai testifies: “As I experienced it, the war was a labyrinth of contradictions
and paradoxes; of confusing tales of deceptions, subterfuge, and betrayal; of collective misinterpretations, conflicting narratives and contentious interpretations heightened by a multiplicity of competing, contradictory, and overlapping interests, paradoxes, and complexes.”

The complexity of the quoted sentence is itself a testimony to the difficulty of trying to capture in words the very complex nature of the war, and the incompleteness or inadequacy of any slice of experience regarding it. But more importantly, interpreting the war from outside, using external paradigms, is even more daunting and more likely to produce something very unfaithful to the reality of that war. That is why, Wai argues, that it will be shortsighted and unproductive to see the Sierra Leonean war as simply part of a larger space called “Africa,” a site filled with deformed political and social formations.

Zubairu Wai identifies three “clusters of theoretical approaches and explanatory models” that have been dominant and influential in the interpretation of the war in Sierra Leone:

1. The “coming anarchy” or “new barbarism and ethnic hatred thesis.” This explanatory model is championed by Robert Kaplan who argues that the end of the cold war succeeded in releasing the long-suppressed “ethnoidentitarian hatred” of God’s forgotten children in the Global South, leading to violent wars.

2. The crisis of patrimonialism, political disorder, warlord politics, and state failure model. This approach to explaining the war is championed by a commentariat made up of people like Paul Richards, William Reno, David Keen, Morten Boas, Michael Chege, and Christopher Clapham. This council of commentators, Wai argues, guided by the compass of Western ideology, and using the evolution of Western societies as the ideal template, interprets the war in Sierra Leone merely in terms of what they see as “the skewed internal political dynamics of the Sierra Leonean state that results in the crisis of predatory accumulation, patrimonial distribution, weak state structures, state failure, and warlord politics.”

3. The dualism of greed and grievance explanatory model. Proponents of this model, like Paul Collier, Neil Cooper, Mats Berdal and David Malone and others, see natural resources as the cause of the conflict. This economic theory of conflicts sees the Sierra Leonean war as a “modernist phenomenon” in which economic rationality is the primary motivation of actors. If this is the case, Wai argues, then “…diamonds become the main causal factor of the war in Sierra Leone, and Foday Sankoh and his followers become “rational” economic beings …”

Having identified these explanatory models, Zubairu Wai then makes an important observation that is at the center of his thesis: “If all these perspectives, in spite of their theoretical, conceptual, and methodological differences, seem to converge on the same phenomena, reaching similar conclusions about it, and if, in spite of their differences, they all point to the same policy direction and have in fact been instrumental in setting the agenda for a new Western attitude toward Africa and the Global South, then perhaps we should be suspicious about how this has come to be so.”

This convergence, Wai argues, cannot be coincidental. Thus, the need to investigate/interrogate the very foundations of the theories and the epistemological structures underpinning them, used to produce knowledge about, and of African conflicts, in particular, the Sierra Leonan conflict.
Interestingly, in Chapter 2, entitled, “The Idea of Sierra Leone,” Zubairu Wai indicts Sierra Leonean historians as part of the commentariat that help promote the “unreal” picture of Sierra Leone. He argues that the historiographical knowledge on Sierra Leone has been based on the “colonial library” and the ‘colonial historiography” that library produced. So when Sierra Leonean historians like the late Cyril Foray and Joe Alie agree with the colonial library that Sapies were the earliest inhabitants of Sierra Leone, and Joe Alie, in discussing the Mane invasions, states Sumba cannibalism not only as a fact of history but also as the reason for the success of the Mane invaders, Wai considers that as uncritical “scholarship” that only advances the interests of the colonial library.

How then can “truth” about Africa be told in credible discourses? Is it in fact possible to access “truths” about African societies? The answer to the above questions is couched in the final paragraph of the book:

It is precisely this point that Acille Mbembe makes when he suggests that whether produced by outsiders or indigenous Africans, the fact that we are dealing with an invented notion of Africa and we are seeking to understand it within the disciplinary frames of Africanism, discourses about the continent would necessarily always remain inapplicable to their object: “Their nature, their stakes, and their functions are situated elsewhere. They are deployed only by replacing this object, creating it, erasing it, decomposing and multiplying it. Thus there is no description that does not involve destructive and mendacious functions” (2001:242).

The language of the book is necessarily technical. The book is an interrogation of the ideology that underlies all the theorizing about, the philosophizing, constructing, and semanticizing of a continent. The book makes a compelling case for interrogating explanatory models of African conflicts, but even more compelling for rejecting notions of the Sierra Leonean war being a part of a constructed Africa with inherently deformed moral and political frameworks that make violence inevitable.

But Wai is not blind to, and naïve about the problems of Africans creating, nurturing and controlling credible discourses on their continent. The struggle, therefore, continues unabated. This is a book anyone interested in both the present and future of Africa, should read.