

Richard J Reid, *Warfare in African history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-521-19510-2 (hardback), 978-0-521-12397-6 (paperback), 188 pages. Recommended price of paperback edition in South Africa: R270.

According to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies' authoritative publication, *The military balance* (London, 2012), most post-Cold War conflicts have taken place in Africa, with more people consequently dying in conflicts in Africa than anywhere else in the world; for example in Burundi (215 000; 1993-2006), Sudan (more than 2 million since 1982), Somalia (362 000; 1991), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (3 685 000; 1996), Ethiopia and Eritrea (50 000; 1998-2000) and in Libya (30 000; 2011). For many people in Africa, war is indeed not abstract: it is something very palpable in the here and now, constantly evolving, part and parcel of daily existence, reaching some way into the past, and – it would seem – for some distance into the future.

How must Africans (and students of the history of Africa) deal with the continent's present and past conflicts? Whereas generations of Europeans (in Europe, and elsewhere in the First World) have recently grown up with only the celebration or commemoration of conflicts (and are looking forward to the centenary of the Great (First World) War, from 2014 onwards), and with a considerable narrative of the role of war in their histories close at hand, millions of Africans have no such cultural and intellectual equipment at their disposal as yet. The story of war is still unfolding around them (as attested, for example, by the conflict in Mali in 2012, and its consequences) – often in the most horrific of ways.

Richard J Reid, a Reader in the History of Africa in the Department of History at the University of London's prestigious School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), has tackled the above-mentioned issues in his latest book – *Warfare in African history*. In the Preface he explains the purpose of the book by saying, *inter alia*, that “Zulu spearmen charging down British guns in Southern Africa in 1879 and the ragged members of the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda in the 1990s may appear to have little in common, but in fact they embody two of the key stereotypes of African warfare, as perpetrated by the Western mainstream. One is the bravely honourable, but doomed 'primitive' warrior, the 'noble savage', dying heroically but tragically before the inexorable march of modernity; the other is the raddled, bloodthirsty brute, rolling around in the ditches that line the road of progress [...]. The aim of this book is to tell the story of African war beyond these crude but enduring images. [...]. The objective is to do so *la longue durée*, and to make sense of violence as a force for both construction and destruction – and therefore to better enable readers to place modern conflict in context.” (p. x).

In Chapter 1, Reid draws “The contours of violence” as he explains the role played by the environment, the economy and polity in African warfare – including factors such as terrain and population, culture and society. Having

considered the broad themes germane to the study of African warfare, Reid then describes and evaluates African warfare chronologically, from “Arms in Africa’s antiquity: patterns and systems of warfare, to the early second millennium CE” (Chapter 2), via “The military foundation of state and society, to circa 1600” (Chapter 3), “Destruction and construction, circa 1600 to circa 1800” (Chapter 4) and “Transformations in violence: military revolution and the ‘long’ nineteenth century” (Chapter 5), to the final chapter, “Revolutions incomplete: the old and the new in the modern era” (Chapter 6).

Reid concludes that “African war [...] must be understood in a global context, not as some primordial, perennial aberration, but as representative, in some of the most challenging environments on earth, of a struggle for development as yet unfinished” (p. 182). He has indeed clearly indicated that war is never destiny, but the product of particular circumstances. And he has placed the wars that have raged over the centuries in Africa in their historical context (where historical context must indeed be regarded as the most precious tool in any scholar’s kit).

Warfare in African history is a highly readable but also well-researched scholarly book that effectively integrates the seemingly bewildering array of recent conflicts in Africa into a longer historical narrative about African social life. The book is a necessary corrective to simplistic and ahistorical understandings of violent conflict in contemporary Africa. It humanises Africa’s histories of violence, and can thus contribute to changes with regard to how we think about African social, cultural and military history; thereby opening exciting new avenues towards including Africa in global military histories. In his comprehensive historical survey of African warfare, Richard Reid places this warfare fully in its social and ecological contexts, pointing out the ties between war and state formation, the slave trade, and modern state functioning.

Reid correctly points out that Africa has been no more violent than any other region, averaged out over the aeons of human history; but it has, nevertheless, been an extremely violent continent at times; and in many respects, parts of it are so at present. He succeeds in explaining violence, both at a micro- and a macro-level, and imbues the issue with historical depth.

Students and scholars of military history (or war studies, as it should rather be referred to), as well as interested general readers, will all profit from Richard J Reid’s excellent *Warfare in African history*. The book is highly recommended.

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