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Sacred violence and spirited resistance: on war and religion in African history

Richard Reid

Faculty of History, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper surveys the relationship between warfare and religion in precolonial Africa, with a particular focus on Eastern Africa, including the Great Lakes region and the Ethiopian Highlands. It is argued that religion played a central role in the legitimization of violence as well as in its memorialization. In the Great Lakes region of East Africa, warfare involved spiritual observance as well as sanction, and in general the evidence suggests that religion involved the exercise of restraint in violence. However the irruption of external dynamics – specifically the introduction of new religions – involved heightened levels of violence in the late nineteenth century and beyond. Reinvigorated and repurposed cosmologies, moreover, often underpinned anticolonial resistance. In the case of Ethiopia, deep-rooted Abrahamic faiths facilitated greater levels of violence and a steady expansion in the scale and scope of the war, compared to local cosmologies further south. Ethiopian state-building projects involved warfare sanctioned by God against an array of non-believers.

KEYWORDS

War; religion; violence; East Africa; Uganda; Ethiopia

Parameters, methodological and conceptual

The relationship between warfare and religion is hardly uncharted territory in terms of modern writing on Africa. When the eminent Africanist Terry Ranger (1968) wrote of the role of spiritual belief in a wave of anticolonial rebellions at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, he posited an influential argument about the abiding power of God or gods in the waging of war and the exercise of violence in a continent which had long been wracked by it. Leaving aside, for the moment, a definition of terms – what is ‘religion’, or what is ‘war’? – it is clear enough that the practice and culture of organized violence on a large scale across Africa has long been understood with reference to spiritual convention and religious ideology. Recent examples include the pioneering and influential work done in the 1990s by Paul Richards (1996) on Sierra Leone, and Stephen Ellis (1999) in Liberia, where often horrendous levels of violence during the prolonged civil war took place within a spiritual framework which both drew on older patterns of religiosity and reinvented a set of transcendent reference points to recruit and cohere fighters, and legitimize violence. In recent years, too, the rise of militant Islam is

CONTACT Richard Reid  richard.reid@history.ox.ac.uk  University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 2JD, UK

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a topic on which much work has been done, both scholarly and journalistic – whether in the context of the Horn of Africa, where much analysis has been centred on the broken state of Somalia, or West Africa, notably in Nigeria with the rise of Boko Haram (Hansen 2013; Thurston 2018). The relationship between conflict and confession is a subject which has been impossible to ignore in modern African history and in analysis of socio-political culture. At the same time, however, some of the most interesting work has been done not by historians but by anthropologists – a long and illustrious scholarly genealogy that includes Lucy Mair (1934) in the 1930s, John Middleton and Edward Henry Winter (1963) and Paul Spencer (1965) in the 1960s, and, more recently, Richards (1996), noted above. The relationship between violence and religion requires in-depth fieldwork, for sure, but it is also true – while not for a moment suggesting that anthropologists are interested only in stasis – that grasping change over time in this sphere is perhaps more challenging, from a historian's perspective.

Certainly, the study of the precolonial African past is attended by a methodological challenge. In making use, as we must, of the accounts of late nineteenth-century missionaries and African converts, and more poignantly of colonial ethnographers and anthropologists in the first half of the twentieth century, we find throughout their writings an implicit or explicit link proposed between the afterlife, the 'spiritual', and the practice of violence: deities and ancestors, ghosts and visions, created the framework and the customs and conventions within which war might be fought, and violence legitimised. There is little doubt, in this literature, of the inviolable connection between political authority, military prowess and spiritual leadership and convention (including challenges to that convention) in Africa. And there could be little doubt, too, that much history-writing and memory itself – especially that around violence and killing and righteous struggle – was framed in spiritual terms, not least because the African authors who were able to find voice and a printing press were invariably prominent Christian (and occasionally Muslim) converts, who saw the world in precisely those terms: as Manichaean struggles between good and evil, and violence in pursuit of truth and, if necessary, blissful martyrdom.¹ One of the golden periods of African historical writing and investigation, and a critical period for the reconstruction of Africa's deeper past – a temporal viewing gallery, as it were, from which to survey a historical landscape which does not enjoy particular riches in terms of primary source material – was the 'moment' between roughly the 1870s and the 1920s. And it so happens that this was also a period in which the nature of the material produced is profoundly problematic. In our immediate context, the problem is that Africans were frequently seen as spiritual warriors, as superstitious creatures, by foreign observers; and indeed many African authors themselves came to self-identify as religious founders, as pioneers of spiritual truth – Christian and Muslim converts who often framed their own histories in exactly those terms.

In the long nineteenth century, much of Africa experienced something of a military revolution, an argument I have made elsewhere (Reid 2012, chap. 5). In essence, this involved the professionalization of military structures and processes, an escalation in levels of violence, and an expansion in the scope and scale of the political, socio-cultural and economic goals which that violence was deployed to achieve. In some regions, most notably the West African savannah, religious practice and reformism – especially in the context of Islam – played a central part in underpinning these revolutionary dynamics, and certainly in terms of legitimizing violence, enabling new forms of death and killing.

The *jihadism* leading to the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate is an obvious case in point, and this is true of other Islamic reformist movements elsewhere in West Africa, including the Tukolor state of the 1850s and 1860s (Last 1967; Smaldone 1977). This was less overt in Eastern Africa, with the notable exception of Ethiopia, where Christianity was at the heart of a dramatic transformation in the organization and ideological underpinning of warfare (and violence more generally) from the 1850s under Tewodros. This was a project pursued with equal vigour if slightly more diplomatic finesse by the enraged Tewodros's successors, Yohannes and Menelik. In Ethiopia, to which we turn below, war involved the heightened use of violence against enemies defined by religious difference, and by the threat they posed to the natural moral and political and historical order. However, I have conceptualized this transformation in the culture and practice of violence in largely secular terms: while granting that military professionalization by no means necessarily meant military secularization, it seemed to me that gods had very little to do with the idea of an expansion in the scale and ambition involved in violence itself. That still seems to me to be the case. It is possible, but the evidence is inconclusive, that the escalation of the slave trade and slaving violence in East Africa, for example, was underpinned by ideas about the inferior belief systems of those being enslaved (Burton 1860; Mackay 1890; Médard and Doyle 2007). War might be justified through the differentiation of enemies in spiritual terms – although one of the features of East African warfare (and of African warfare more broadly) is its ultimately comparatively close-range nature, meaning that armies did not travel that far, and thus rarely crossed cosmological frontiers: their enemies often shared the same spiritual reference points, and the same deities, even if the latter may have been differently prioritized and may have occupied different positions in the historical record. Still, the nineteenth-century revolution certainly was characterized by an escalation in the ferocity of the violence, and in the death toll which resulted. The 'Ngoni' groups in Tanzania – offshoots of the Zulu revolution earlier in the century – were seen to be beyond the pale in their exercise of extreme violence in the 1870s and 1880s, as conflict there reached its zenith. This at least implicitly involved a flagrant disregard for local spiritual conventions.² In the course of the nineteenth-century military revolution, religion might be harnessed to pursue expanded socio-political and economic goals, underpinned by greater levels of violence; but likewise, established religion might be disregarded by violent entrepreneurs who pursued the war with a new kind of vigour which was, if not exactly secular, then unconstrained by extant spiritual sanctions and norms.

As Africa's own military transformation was unfolding, it intersected with an equally dramatic surge in armed expansionism from the direction of Europe: the two, indeed, are indelibly intertwined, and fed off one another in interesting ways. We lack the space to explore this in detail, and in any case, it would be a digression: however, what is notable is that European imperial violence itself was on a certain level profoundly 'spiritual' in its provenance and legitimization. Wars on savage heathens were sanctioned by God, and indeed violence was necessary to bring the barbaric peoples of the earth to order: as Joseph Chamberlain, zealous architect of imperial expansion, put it, 'you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs'.³ This was a religious war, of a kind, underpinned by a highly, if evolving, racialized view of the world. Bloody conquest may not always have been overtly crusading, but God was never very far from the battlefields of late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Africa. Moreover, while precolonial gods may have restrained the exercise of force, the new Christian God brought with

him much greater levels of violence than had been seen previously. That violence was carried forth both by European army officers and company soldiers, but more frequently by Africans themselves. Still, it was clear in the minds of most of those involved that this was righteous Christian violence: Rudyard Kipling exhorted the young to sacrifice themselves for the greater good, as part of their manly Christian duty to the benighted peoples of the earth,⁴ and the military theorist Col. Charles Callwell produced a hugely influential book, *Small Wars: their principles and practice*, in which he emphasized ways in which timorous, fetish- and magic-fearing primitives peoples might be most efficiently brought to heel (Callwell 1906). Indeed in some ways, Callwell's work anticipated the idea during the colonial period that ethnographic knowledge could be used to control supposedly unruly peoples, as in the case of Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940). This was an era – the era of the 'scramble' for Africa – in which God as the expression of military superiority was pitted against superstition and idol, the latter the spiritual manifestation of Africans' innate material backwardness. Terry Ranger's classic argument about the nature of 'secondary resistance' to the colonial order involving the mobilization and revitalization of spiritual realms – unlike 'primary resistance', which was mainly secular and concerned with the defence of sovereignty in the first instance – is not as persuasive as it once was, not least because the supposed boundaries between the political and the spiritual are no longer clear (Ranger 1968). But there can be little doubt that the religious arena was a crucial one in which violence was played out in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; this was the era of expanded African use of spiritual sanction in the waging of rebellion, or the continuation of long-standing wars in novel settings. The Maji Maji revolt in German East Africa in 1905 involved a spiritual network across a wide area, and the belief in a time to come in which Africans might be delivered from the clutches of colonial rule – at least according to some interpretations (Iliffe 1967; Gwassa 1972; Redmond 1975; Becker 2004). In the Northern hills of Rwanda and Southwest Uganda, the Nyabingi cult involved the revitalization of a long-standing spirit complex in resistance to European administration (Hopkins 1970).⁵ Spirits were summoned into service in pursuit of alternative political futures. The response could be fierce: the Nyabingi cult posed little in the way of a serious military threat, but the Maji Maji insurgency brought an almighty wave of counter-violence from the Germans, which resulted in tens of thousands of African dead. The Mahdist revolt in Sudan, 1884–1898, also invited (eventually) a ferocious response from the British – though here, at least, their Muslim enemies were accorded perhaps a little more respect, if not less force (Churchill 1899). Where missionaries failed to win over their hearts by peaceful means, armed force blessed by Christ would blow bodies apart and compel Africans toward modernity and civilization.

In the course of the nineteenth century, as Victorian racism hardened in an age of imperial expansion, Africans (and millions of others across the Global South) were increasingly seen as trapped in a primordial mire of superstition, far from God and, just as important, Europe. That sense of mindless, slavish spiritual adherence permeated all walks of life, in European eyes: political governance, social custom, economic wellbeing. It was also evident in the practice of violence, too, for wars – insofar as they could be described as 'proper wars' at all (most European observers would not credit Africans with such an achievement) – seemed to be entirely contingent upon the intercession of a panoply of deities, although it is more appropriate to see this as a negotiation. Conversations

with spirit mediums were ongoing, as the latter translated cryptic messages from the supernatural world, African political elites deliberated the various options before them, and then army commanders proceeded on the appropriate course of action. Violence, in other words, was entirely mediated through religious culture; gods influenced strategy and even tactics. Women, meanwhile – for men it was who were normally in the battle – spent their time at home placating deities until the safe return of their menfolk. It was all a grossly racialized distortion, of course; an exercise in the objectification of the putative ‘Dark Continent’ which was necessary to the juxtaposition of rational, enlightened Europe (Brantlinger 1985). It presents us with something of a methodological and conceptual conundrum. Many of the sources for the relationship between war and religion in Africa’s deeper past are produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the era of racialized distortion of the societies under examination – and often produced by Christian missionaries and religious pioneers in the form of explorers. It goes without saying that these sources must be read with the utmost caution (Said 1978). There has long been a recognition of the cultural and racial prejudice inherent in these texts, and the ways in which they sought, consciously or otherwise, to project a certain image of Africa (Curtin 1964; Mudimbe 1988). But since the emergence of Africanist historiography in the 1950s and 1960s, it has also been accepted that they can be enormously informative in terms of contemporary observation, especially when used in conjunction with other sources (Miller 1980; Vansina 1985), and that they remain vital to the reconstruction of the deeper African past (Thornton 2005); occasionally, for some places, they are all we have. Used judiciously, they can help us address the fundamental questions underpinning this modest intervention.

Case notes, 1: the Lake Region of East Africa

In the precolonial era, spiritual sanction and observance was clearly critical in the decision to go to war, in the practice of actually fighting, and in the memorialization of war after the fact. Shrines were dedicated to deities imbued with military specialization, and the counselling and blessing of spirit mediums representing those deities were crucial in the award of legitimacy to military campaigns. This is demonstrable, for example, across a range of states and societies in the Great Lakes region of East Africa – in Nkore, Bunyoro, Buganda, Karagwe. Yet of course the relevance and utility of the spiritual realm were highly variable – a close reading of a range of sources often reveals tensions between the spiritual and the secular in prosecuting a war, and indeed in other spheres of life – and pragmatism often governed actual policy, into which spirit mediums were then co-opted as ideological support (Roscoe 1911). Even the insurgent Mirambo, the Nyamwezi warlord who revolutionized warfare and politics in late nineteenth-century Tanzania, took care to placate the spirit world in attempting to consolidate his earthly gains, and in seeking additional insurance for military campaigns already decided upon.⁶

One of the core ideas which emerges from the relevant source material – and, again, caution is needed in dealing with this – is that non-, or pre-, Abrahamic religion in essence *restrained* the exercise of violence owing to the significance of ritual and custom in governing behaviour, and the fear of taking life unnecessarily. Religion in war, in other words, meant restraint in war, and in many ways militated against the pursuit of ‘maximum force’ or what we might describe in other contexts as ‘total war’. We must take care not to

exaggerate this, nor to misunderstand the nature of apparent restraint – war in precolonial sub-Saharan Africa was constrained by all sorts of factors, not least logistics and environment – while it is also true, paradoxically, that the nineteenth century witnessed something of a revolution in military affairs which did lead to a dramatic escalation in the use of force. But it is probably broadly true that spiritual observance governed at least some of the ‘rules of war’, including the need for cleansing and healing after killing, and *probably* placed constraints on its more brutal excesses. In the kingdom of Nkore in Western Uganda, for example, returning soldiers who had taken a life were essentially quarantined from others until they had been ‘purified’ (Roscoe 1923, 161). This is in part because of the need for cooperation and reciprocity, as much as fear of any supernatural sanction, across and between communities. Much spiritual process was concerned primarily with the preservation of life, and the maximization of fertility and productivity, rather than destruction and death. War was accepted as a necessary, even sometimes desirable, activity, but its practice and outcomes were carefully circumscribed and there was, in general, no sense that death in war was anything other than a tragic loss. Related to this, it is clear that the seizure of women was one of the core objectives in war in the Great Lakes region. While there is little evidence of sexual violence in combat, women were routinely captured and taken home by campaigning armies, usually to be absorbed into royal and chiefly households as concubines and domestic servants. This is demonstrated in the case of Buganda by the increasing number of women attached to the king in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although in the later nineteenth century some were exported as slaves to coastal traders (Kagwa 1971; Gorju 1920; Reid 2007).

Spiritual licence prior to, and during, war was one thing; but just as important, if not more important, was spiritual legitimization and appropriation – the production of sacred histories – around the political order and ownership of land and people *after* the war itself. When we think about war and religion in the deeper past of sub-Saharan Africa, we need to think about History, and the mobilization of the past, which involved the utilization of the supernatural – the dead, and their relationship to the living. Central to ethnic, social and communal identities was the location and control of shrines, for example; and the deities to which those shrines were dedicated were often historical figures – Kibuka, for example, in the case of Buganda, who was an early martyr in war with neighbouring Bunyoro – or were entities which were widely *assumed* in oral tradition to have been actual historical figures (Kagwa 1971, 126–129; Reid 1997). And so the past was spiritual, related to the moral order and national identity, and spirits were historical, their roles cast as potential guarantors of prosperity and repositories of wisdom and the best of humanity, rather than as eschatological lodestars, pointing toward some kind of final judgment. Judgment was continual, and a question of negotiation and reinterpretation: in other words, the dead governed, but they were in constant dialogue with the living. And it *was* a dialogue, not superstitious and passive obedience, which is how missionaries read the relationship. It is worth noting that a similar situation can be described for West Africa, where divination and ritual preceded war, the legitimacy of which involved negotiation with ancestors. Battlefields, and the dates of battles, were also selected for their propitiousness wherever possible.⁷

Two sources, in particular, exemplify, in the Ugandan context, the methodological conundrum to which I referred earlier. The Rev. John Roscoe was a missionary of the Church

Missionary Society (CMS), who first arrived in the kingdom of Buganda in 1884. He lived in what became the British-ruled Uganda Protectorate for the next quarter-century, travelling widely among various groups, especially the Ganda, and gathering a range of data on pretty much every conceivable aspect of African life. He gathered this information for James Frazer, the Cambridge anthropologist, who was particularly interested in magic and ritual in primitive societies (Richards 1994, 158ff). And so Roscoe's writings reflected this particular predilection, which no doubt he shared. They are encyclopaedic in their coverage, but unquestionably written with a view to describing primordial culture before the enlightening effects of British governance. In arguably his most famous book, *The Baganda: an account of their native customs and beliefs*, there is an entire chapter dedicated to the waging of war and the organizing of armies, which leans heavily on the idea that the Ganda were a markedly superstitious bunch, constrained by deep-rooted custom and ritual. By the end of it, one can be left in no doubt that Buganda is truly a kingdom governed by the dead, its people living alongside the afterlife in quotidian ways (Roscoe 1911, chap. 10; Rowe 1967).

Roscoe worked closely with our second example, Apolo Kagwa, *Katikiro* or 'prime minister' of Buganda from 1889 until his ignominious removal from office in 1926. He towered over Ganda politics for a generation, a generation which exhibited immense courage in guiding the kingdom through anti-Christian pogroms, from putative precolonial savage despotism to enlightened modernity at the apex of the British colonial order. He used the writing of history to cement his political pre-eminence, including his most famous work, *Basekabaka ba Buganda* ('The Kings of Buganda'), first produced in Luganda on Kagwa's own printing press in 1901. In this text – a core source for all historians of Buganda – the kingdom's wars are presented in biblical style, replete with trial and tribulation, the overmighty brought low and the righteous ultimately triumphant. It was written, obviously enough, from the perspective of the great Protestant pioneer; Kagwa and his cohort tended toward a particular view of the precolonial past, one which sought to reconcile two apparently contradictory impulses: to celebrate and assert national history as critical to identity at a time of turbulent change; and to believe, essentially, in the linear progression inherent in Christian belief, and in the narrative which conceived of Buganda's long journey from precolonial barbarism to Christian truth and modernity (Kagwa 1971; Rowe 1969–1970; Reid 2014).

How much influence the military imagery of the Mission – Christian soldiers fighting the good fight, angry Old Testament God smiting enemies – may have had on African converts' own views on the exercise of violence can only be glimpsed in the sources, although it seems safe to suggest that such influence was indeed present. It was there in new forms of religiously-sanctioned war. In Buganda, a civil war raged between 1888 and the early 1890s, fought ostensibly between Christian and Muslim factions, the former themselves split into Protestant and Catholic elements (Wright 1971; Twaddle 1988). Violence was increasingly part of this newly politico-religious culture: both Christian and Muslim converts had known awful martyrdom – in the mid-1870s, Muslims were put to death by an enraged Mutesa, and a decade later dozens of Christians died at the whim of Mwanga. As is well attested, however, these new religious communities held fast, faced down death and briefly united to remove the unstable Mwanga, in 1888. But in the years that followed, religious factionalism erupted, and Christians and Muslims waged bitter war for the control of the kingdom. The Protestant faction,

buttressed by the nascent British presence with its machine gun and Sudanese soldiers, came out on top (Ashe 1889, 1894). But did these events actually indicate intensified ideas about violence around faith? Had new gods initiated new ways of waging war, or heightened levels of violence? Possibly; but on the other hand, martyrdom reflected deeply-rooted ideas about honour and dignity in Ganda society, which were not novel in the late nineteenth century (Iliffe 2005), although it is possible that explicitly *Christian* martyrdom itself did represent a new interpretation of 'honour'. Meanwhile, new faiths may only have introduced an extra layer of legitimization into long-standing practices of violence directed at unstable and transgressive monarchs, and political struggles which had long been a feature of life at the royal court (Southwold 1966). But of course, the two things are not mutually exclusive: new creeds might conveniently intersect with old patterns of conflict, but they could also infuse those conflicts with new vigour, and destructive passion. This certainly appears to be the case in the Anglo-Ganda invasion of Bunyoro in the course of the 1890s. Christian Ganda leaders allied themselves with the small British force under Lugard to launch a ferocious assault on the stubbornly resistant Nyoro, under Kabalega, who clung to their old gods and who deserved the severest punishment as a result (Colville 1895, chap. 7).⁸ That kingdom was laid to waste, launching it on a spiral of decline from which it has not yet recovered.

Case notes, 2: Solomonic Ethiopia

So much for a region in which Abrahamic faith was introduced relatively late. The Horn of Africa offers a rather different scenario. Ethiopia's history – at least according to a particular interpretation – is defined by war, and that violence has been defined by faith in the most fundamental of ways. For some, famously, Ethiopia is the great 'exception' in African history – hardly African at all, perhaps.⁹ Ethiopia, indeed, tends to throw everywhere else into the shade in this respect, so vividly, even theatrically, was its use of violence linked to the religious identity which lay at the very core of the polity itself. In the highlands and adjacent lowlands, the practice and culture of war were dramatically influenced by religious belief. In that respect, one of our key questions seems answered unambiguously: that the presence of Abrahamic faiths, both Christianity and Islam, fundamentally increased levels of violence, enhanced the capacity for and legitimacy of killing in war, and created enduring frameworks of celebration and remembrance of war. Solomonic Ethiopia – named after the dynasty which seized power in the late thirteenth century and which claimed descent from King Solomon, the famed tenth-century BCE ruler of Israel – practiced Holy War and rooted its political identity in a fervent Christian militarism. The dynasty itself – founded by Yekuno Amlak in c.1270, and lasting until the overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974 – sponsored the creation (or at least the redaction) of a sacred text, the *Kebra Negast*, or 'Chronicle of the Glory of the Kings' (Brooks 1996). The *Kebra Negast* posited Ethiopia as the New Zion, founded by Menelik I (the offspring of Solomon and Makeda, the Queen of Sheba/Saba), with a covenant with the Almighty in the form of the Holy Tabernacle, a bloodline to Christ himself (according to Matthew's genealogy of Jesus), and a mandate to spread fire and devotion among the supposedly savage peoples surrounding them. This ideological struggle intensified in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with the countering of Ethiopia's militant monasticism by ever more muscular Islamic polities coming up the Awash valley and from the Somali plains

(Beckingham and Huntingford, 1954; Crummey 2000). It culminated in the declaration of jihad in the 1520s by Ahmed Gran, who led an army of Somali and others into the highlands and into the very heart of the Christian state itself. Ethiopia just about survived – helped a little by the arrival of some Portuguese musketeers in the mid-1540s – and thereafter sought to recover, which it did, slowly. Over the next 300 years, Ethiopia refined its vision of itself as the spiritual fulcrum of civilization, its often vicious wars with external enemies – Muslim as well as pagan – legitimized by an abiding sense of religious righteousness, the episodic necessity of worldly compromises notwithstanding.

The *Kebre Negast* was written to glorify the new dynasty, and is replete with illustrations of divine violence; it was produced to bathe the new state in military glory and is concerned with how Ethiopians carried their faith, which is superior to other forms of Christianity, through fire and sword to pagans across the Highlands and beyond. There is some anti-Semitism in the text, too, and the epic is infused with a sense of racial righteousness, for the Ethiopians are superior, though in order to achieve that status they must continually compare themselves with Judah. The Christian faith imbued kings in the *Kebre Negast* with supernatural strength and superhuman qualities as they vanquished and conquered – notably, for example, King Dawit II, coming after Menelik I, who blooded the new nation (Brooks 1996, 127). The book emphasizes total and terrible violence which is justified by God and the Covenant: there is much bloody slaughter, much ‘laying waste’ to enemies and their land, the flattening of resistant communities and the building of churches within them. The essential tone and message of the *Kebre Negast* are replicated in later royal chronicles, in which again kings are awarded remarkable qualities in battle. Chronicles were centrally concerned with war and struggle – foreign invasions, righteous campaigns of civilizing expansion sanctioned by God – and represent chapters in the grand narrative, the ‘journey’, of the Ethiopian people through triumph and disaster. War and religion thus fundamentally underpin and define Time itself, as well as national identity, which is almost time/less. More generally, much art – just as in the literary epics and chronicles – was concerned with bloody struggle and great battles (for example Magdala and Adwa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). In earlier visual art, dating to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, scenes depicting the intimate connection between spiritual piety and martial strength were common (Fogg 2001).

Amda Tsion (1314–1344) was particularly important as the Christian warrior, for he consolidated the Solomonic state in the early fourteenth century. His chronicle depicts this dramatically: he is violent and brutal, and even appoints ‘non-Semites’ to rule over rebellious provinces to humiliate them. But he is also merciful: when an enemy leader is captured at one point in the chronicle, his soldiers bay for blood, but Amda Tsion merely imprisons him. The Solomonic state expanded through a potent alliance of monarchs, military overlords and monks, the latter providing the spiritual succour to violence and building a series of monasteries which formed the front line, in many ways, in the advance of the empire (Huntingford 1965). Hagiographies and the lives of saints, notably in the case of Takla Haymanot, demonstrate the quotidian struggle against Nature and Paganism, which often involved physical violence as well as the performance of miracles. In these texts, a heavy emphasis is placed on notions of heroism (Tamrat 1972, chap. 5; Ullendorff 1973, 143; Henze 2000, 62–63). The military alliance between Church and State was strengthened in the ensuing centuries, underpinned by the *Fetha*

Negast, the 'Law of the Kings', which underlined the king's righteous power and linked the violence at the king's disposal with spiritual sanction (Tzadua and Strauss 1968).

Zara Yaqob (1434–1468) revived imperial military strength after a period of military hiatus, and did so in part by expanding the Church into a 'national' institution. In this period, Christian Ethiopia was sharply defined against a range of enemies, and Zara Yaqob himself – a prolific writer, or at least sponsor of texts – referred to 'pagans and Muslims' surrounding Ethiopia in his own theological work, *Mashafa Birhan* ('The Book of Light'). He was famously, and virulently, intolerant of backsliders, and paganism risked the death penalty ('if you see anyone sacrificing to Satan, kill him with a spear, or with a staff, or with stones'); this era has been seen as a kind of reformation in which violence was habitual and often random. It was an era characterized by forced conversions, and the chronicles describe his reign as one of great terror, and the 'severity of his justice'. It was a historical 'moment' of religious violence – and not coincidentally, one in which Zara Yaqob either wrote himself or oversaw the writing of some of the basic texts of the Ethiopian orthodox faith (Jones and Monroe 1935, 56–58; Ullendorff 1973, 141–144).

Wars with Islam were also increasingly important, and there is much emphasis on this in Amda Tsion's chronicle, especially his wars with Ifat – the ruler of which is like the Devil, whereas Amda Tsion is 'strong like Samson, a great warrior like David' (Huntingford 1965, 53). These wars were undoubtedly bitter, though in fact commerce between Christians and Muslims thrived in this era and it is by no means clear whether these conflicts witnessed greater levels of violence than those against pagans closer to home. The escalating struggle between Christians and Muslims meant the positioning of Ifat in contemporary chronicles as the perpetual enemy. The rise of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, a messianic jihadist, meant the emergence of a much more aggressive Islam, especially in the Somali territories; holy warriors believed they could take back Ethiopia from the unbelievers through bodily self-discipline and abstinence, and they were bolstered in the cause by foreign missionaries from Arabia. The great jihad, between 1529 and the mid-1540s, witnessed a series of crushing defeats on Ethiopian Christian highlanders, and the near-extinction of the state itself; significant numbers of Christians were apparently killed or forcibly converted.¹⁰ The episode had an enormous impact on the national historical imagination, and would be recalled centuries later.¹¹ Ahmad was only defeated with Portuguese help in 1543. Meanwhile, perhaps not coincidentally, 'hordes of Muslim Oromo' (to use the common characterization in chronicles and later European writing) expanded into the highlands in the course of the sixteenth century from the South. This was a process of economic migration which was famously described in terms of fear and loathing by the monk Bahrey in 1593: the Oromo were the 'Anti-Ethiopians', and were represented as taking violence to whole new levels, vicious, bloodthirsty, frighteningly uncivilised; and yet they were also perhaps admired in some respects.¹² Wars were fought with the Oromo wars throughout the sixteenth century, especially under Sarsa Dengel who sought to reinvigorate the Solomonic myth as an ideological rallying point (Halévy 1907).

Notably, the seventeenth century witnessed religious wars between Catholic converts, the outcome of the presence of Portuguese Jesuits who were increasingly influential at the imperial court, and 'traditionalist' Orthodox Christians. The emperor Susenyos converted to Catholicism, and there were major anti-Catholic rebellions in 1617–1618.

Violence escalated during the 1620s, and in the chronicles converts are routinely caught and hanged. In the final great battle in the province of Lasta in 1632, between Susenyos's army and the Orthodox forces amassed against him, 8000 people supposedly died (Lobo 1789, 107; Gobat [1851], 1969, 81–83). Under Fasilidas (1632–1667) the Jesuits were expelled and Christian orthodoxy was upheld. The ensuing 'Gondarine' period (named after the royal capital, Gondar) was brought to an end by the *Zemene Mesafint* ('The Era of the Princes') as war broke out between assimilated and non-assimilated Oromo, and emperors became much-diminished puppets by the 1760s and 1770s (Blundell 1922; Pankhurst 1967, 140–142; Abir 1968). The *Zemene Mesafint* is very much depicted in terms of religious violence, and the term itself was a direct reference to the Old Testament Book of Judges, 21:25: 'In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes'. The wording has its echo in contemporary chronicles. It was another era in which levels of violence were seen as unparalleled and illegitimate.

The early decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the renaissance of the Solomonic ideal, given physical form in the rise of Kassa Hailu, the disinherited member of a minor aristocratic line later crowned as Emperor Tewodros (Crummey 1969).¹³ Educated in the monastic tradition, he was nonetheless also critical of the established Church; his religious zeal arose in the course of his experience in the 1840s as a *shifita*, or outlaw: nineteenth-century *shifitanet* was a distinctive culture of armed resistance in the Ethiopian Highlands broadly akin to noble banditry. He regarded himself as a bringer of change but he also sought 'continuity', or at least 'restoration', and rooted his ideas in the ancient past, deliberately evoking visions of ancient Ethiopia's putatively massive territorial extent and justifying his extreme violence by pointing to manifold existential threats. This could lead to religious transgression – Tewodros brought the condemnation of the Church on himself after his attack on churches in Gondar in 1866: the great religious zealot was no supporter of what he saw as the flaccid, parasitic clergy, unwilling to support him in his great reform of the state. In the months before his dramatic suicide in 1868, the extremity of his violence was seen to have crossed all normal limits in the eyes of the established religious order. His brutality toward enemies shocked chroniclers as much as foreign observers: the bloody slaughter of entire districts which resisted him; the destruction of churches seen as dens of iniquity; enemies (including Oromo and Muslims) physically mutilated, buried alive, defaecated on, thrown off cliffs, and so on. Tewodros deliberately and increasingly maniacally drew on a distinctive religious-historical narrative to justify new levels of violence, underpinned by righteous anger, against religious and pagan enemies. Here again, as so often in Ethiopian history, was a scenario in which new forms of supposedly unparalleled violence emerge at the same time as a resurgence in religious consciousness, and the pursuit of a divinely-appointed mission (Pankhurst 1967, 151; Stern 1862, 122; Blanc 1868, 5).

Tewodros killed himself at Magdala in 1868 in face of a British invasion. His eventual successor, Yohannes, also drew on the memory of Ahmed ('Gran') Ibrahim and the Muslim incursions of the past, and self-consciously created a 'new Solomonism' rooted in the idea of Ethiopia as Christian island in a savage Muslim ocean – a potent historical narrative (Portal 1892, iv). Yohannes was also brutally intolerant of Islam, using violence, for example, to force the conversion of Muslims in Wollo province. Islam was certainly on the rise in nineteenth-century Ethiopia: many Oromo were becoming Islamicised, notably. In Wollo, Shaikh Muhammad Shafi, a Qadiriya Sufi, increasingly preached jihad,

although he remained on peaceable terms with political leaders in Wollo (Ahmed 2001). For Orthodox Christians this was the era in which the connection was emphasized between ‘*Ethiopian-ness*’ and *Christianity*: Muslims, in other words, could not be *true Ethiopians*. At the same time, by the 1880s there emerged a very real threat in the form of Mahdism in Sudan under Muhammad Ahmad (Yohannes himself died fighting the Mahdist army). All in all, the events of the nineteenth century confirmed in the minds of Christian elites the need to guard against growing Muslim enemies in the region. Thus did Menelik (1889–1913) aggressively expand the Amhara empire into the Southern regions: for example, his nephew *Ras* Mekonnen (father of Haile Selassie) raided into the Somali Ogaden, and raiding quickly became conquest and systematic economic expropriation. Elsewhere, non-Semitic groups were treated as inferior savages, a status often directly linked to their perceived distance from pure Ethiopian national identity, rooted as it was in Christian orthodoxy (Bulatovich 2000; Berkeley 1902).

This would be a recurring theme through the twentieth century, and beyond. Still, in Ethiopia, where God had inspired a famous victory over Italy at the battle of Adwa in 1896, there would soon be doubt as to what the nineteenth century – that violent epoch – had truly meant in terms of Ethiopia’s putative modernity. The imperium remained imbued with faith, and the Orthodox Church stood at the centre of a nation that owed much to sacred violence; but by the time of Haile Selassie, some would begin to wonder just how far the warrior Christ had got them (Zewde 2002).

Some conclusions

The spiritual and the historical had long been indelibly intertwined. Among the African converts who became historians in the early years of the twentieth century, the history and memory of violence were highly charged; the history of the war was framed by the new faith. Local scholars in Uganda, notably, wrote their histories of the violent nineteenth century through the prism of their Christian belief, and in the 1930s, several of them sought to remind a younger generation of the great struggles for truth in the 1880s and 1890s.¹⁴ These texts were grand projects in memorialization; the precolonial past was not infrequently depicted as a time of awful tribal barbarity, leading inexorably to the triumph of the Gospel. Something similar can be seen in the writings of the Rev Samuel Johnson on the Yoruba in Nigeria – though as the debates among Zulu writers (and readers) in the early years of the twentieth century demonstrate, these were emphatically not celebrations of European modernity but were rather fitted to the purposes of nascent African nationalism (Johnson 1921; la Hausse de Lalouviere 2009).

In the more recent past, however, projects of political rebirth and religious radicalism have often been in direct conflict. This has been an era in which religious violence has increased markedly, and in which faith has fuelled ever more ferocious forms of violence. But it is also one in which new forms of aggressive, even evangelical, secularism have bred equally powerful cultures of violence, and systems of authoritarianism which see all forms of alternative authority – including, and especially, those based on eschatology and higher beings – as fundamental threats, indeed potentially if not actively disloyal, and to be tightly controlled, if not crushed outright. A series of revolutionary, and ostensibly secular, armed liberation fronts emerged across East and Northeast Africa (and beyond) from the 1960s onward – most powerfully in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Uganda. Similar

movements are also much in evidence in central and Southern Africa. They were emblematic of a fundamental paradigmatic shift in African liberation politics, one rooted in a putative ideological rejection of existing postcolonial norms and narratives, and in a belief in the primacy, indeed the necessity, of armed force in addressing basic political, social and economic challenges. They saw themselves as forging a decisive break from the past, and from cloying and 'reactionary' political culture and social structure. As a result, such movements generally had a troubled or at best ambivalent relationship with religion, and certainly with established religious orders. Revolution was secular, or at least anti-clerical; priests were unwelcome in a world of revolutionary struggle and sacrifice, and they represented not just alternative forms of authority and belief beyond the struggle for the nation itself, but ideas about hierarchy and deference on which so many *ancien régimes* had based themselves and kept 'the masses' oppressed as a result. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) exemplifies the phenomenon (Connell 1997).¹⁵ The reality, of course, was a little more complex: witness the need for the Marxist warriors of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) forces in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe in the 1970s to engage with local spirit mediums in rural areas in order to win recruits among a wary and hard-pressed peasantry (Lan 1985); or the decision among Tigray People's Liberation Front cadres in Tigray in Northern Ethiopia in the 1980s to use Orthodox Christian priests to communicate their revolutionary programme to a sceptical (but deeply religious) populace (Young 1997, 174–178). At some point in the early 1980s, Yoweri Museveni, leader of the NRA guerrillas in Uganda and self-appointed political modernizer, had visited the shrine of the Ganda war-god Kibuka – perhaps an act of public performance, perhaps a hedging of bets; either way, an indication of how significant these shrines and their deities remained.¹⁶

At the same time, faith was mobilised, often violently, to resist oppressive, unitary and secularist regimes. The responses to the hegemonic, authoritarian political orders which resulted from prolonged struggles over nation, citizenship and ideology were often themselves deeply religious. In Northern Uganda, the insurgency of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) from the late 1980s rooted itself in a combination of extant cosmology and a radical reading of the Old Testament (Behrend 2000; Green 2008; Allen and Vlassenroot 2010). Elsewhere, Islamic reformism intersected with, and sometimes contributed directly to, ostensibly new forms of violence, generally subsumed under the label of 'terrorism'. The leaders of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda and elsewhere were all too aware, of course, of how easily mobilized was religious violence: each had direct experience, by the 1990s and 2000s, of modern terrorism, 'radicalisation', and the deployment of *jihad* against infidel regimes. In Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda, Somalia and Kenya, new nations failed to be inclusive of substantial minorities – sometimes on their physical borders, often right at the very centre of the polity itself – and these minorities were often Muslim. Thus did radical reformism find fertile ground in which to emerge, or re-emerge in the case of the Horn of Africa, to challenge the very legitimacy of the nation itself, and to simultaneously make connections beyond national borders (de Waal 2004; Rotberg 2005). Such forms of purist revivalism were also important in Somalia, a predominantly Muslim nation, whose collapse at the end of the 1980s reignited longstanding debates about the role of Islam in public life, especially when confronted by a dysfunctional post-colonial order and a distant, indifferent international one (Menkhaus 2005). And so from the 1960s and 1970s onward, we see the emergence of religious 'extremism' on the

physical and conceptual edges of national communities; of movements organized by Muslim leaders representing long-marginalized peoples, espousing religious radicalism and exhorting violence which could draw on deep historical roots, in many places, but which were now given renewed fervour by the political and economic claustrophobia of the postcolonial state; of new forms of transnational and global connectivity – *al-Shabaab* in Somalia, for example, could eventually ‘join’ *al-Qaeda*; and of course, by access to new forms of weaponry in a violently globalized and post-Cold War world.¹⁷

There is no doubt as to the importance of spiritual sanction in the prosecution of war and the organization of violence through much of Africa’s deep past, and down to the present. Ultimately, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Abrahamic faiths, at least in the scenarios examined here, represent a much wider and deeper set of justifications for killing and destruction than locally rooted cosmological and spiritual orders and cultures. The Horn of Africa, especially Ethiopia, presents a remarkable case, in some ways: here, Abrahamic faiths introduced new levels of heightened violence and martyrdom and destruction. This is *not* to argue that religion further South was somehow ‘pacific’: it was not, and it was needed, and used, to justify and sanction and bless war. In the Great Lakes region, for example, religion *did* expand the parameters and legitimising space within which war could happen. In the aftermath of war, dead leaders might become deities – which is not quite Abrahamic eschatology, but similar processes were at work in terms of remembrance, and post-war ideas about faith and identity which underpinned social cohesion and political authority. Spiritual cultures generally reflected the political, social and economic imperatives of their communities: restraint, protection, security, fertility. In the deeper past, spiritual process and sanction, in its various forms, may actually have constrained violence and controlled war. Levels of violence and the scale of violent conflict did indeed increase between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, as I have argued elsewhere (Reid 2020). But this was not usually driven by local theology, which instead was compelled to adapt, to catch up, with political and economic change. In part, however, it *was* driven by the irruptions of global economic and military dynamics. This has its spiritual parallel, perhaps, in Ethiopia, where new religious forces from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries drove new levels of violence. But the essential elements were already present in the Ethiopian Highlands, where an Abrahamic God had long since given his divine blessing to the new Zion and its various endeavours, with predictable outcomes.

On the other hand, of course, one *might* argue in Ethiopia, too, political and economic change had nothing to do with God: that the same struggles as elsewhere – over land, the nature of political authority, control of the economy and of economic change – are ‘simply’ framed more overtly in terms of faith and eschatology. Nonetheless, it is the case that in the basic tenets of Old Testament ideology Ethiopia had ready access to justifications of large-scale violence and death which were not apparent in the Great Lakes area (before the arrival of Abrahamic faiths there, too, in the second half of the nineteenth century). Still, in some ways the modern EPRDF regime in Ethiopia has merely replaced the *Kebre Negast* with a ferocious developmentalism, ostensibly secular, which does much the same thing as Menelik’s Biblical imperialism.

In essence, then, gods don’t make people violent; people make their gods to fit their purposes and circumstances, and levels of violence, or indeed restraint, follow accordingly. Equally important was the role of historical memory and historical culture which

was often a deeply embedded part of the relationship between religion and war; indeed the intensity of historical memory was one of the abiding components of spirituality, because it awarded war temporal as well as spiritual value. And so, did religion increase violent conflict, legitimize it, introduce new ideas about martyrdom and the actual exercise of violence? It is a complex picture, and not necessarily a strictly linear one. Later, however, religion did widen the scope and scale of war: in the context of, firstly, the nineteenth-century military revolution, in which some polities mobilized faith in pursuit of larger political and economic goals; secondly, the political claustrophobia and marginalization resulting from colonial rule; and finally, more globalized notions of religiously-sanctioned violence, which enabled holy warriors to be transnational in their loyalties, and to reject the legitimacy of 'infidel' or otherwise oppressive and exclusive states.

Notes

1. From the East African kingdom of Buganda, for example, see B.M. Zimbe, *Buganda ne Kabaka* ('Buganda and the King'), c.1939, a translated manuscript of which is housed in Makerere University Library; and James Miti's 3-volume 'History of Buganda' (c.1938), held in SOAS Library Special Collections. An example from West Africa is Samuel Johnson (1921). See also a number of the contributions in Peterson and Macola (2009).
2. Archives of the White Fathers (Rome), St-Marie Bukune, Journal du Pere Lourdel, 10 June 1884.
3. Joseph Chamberlain, 'The True Conception of Empire' (1897), in Boehmer (1998, 213–214).
4. Rudyard Kipling, 'The White Man's Burden' (1899), in Boehmer (1998, 273).
5. Fort Portal District Archives (Uganda), Report by the District Commissioner 310.1/16, 22 December 1914.
6. Archives of the White Fathers (Rome), St-Marie Bukune, Journal du Pere Lourdel, 10 June 1884.
7. I am grateful to Richard Rathbone for this point: email correspondence, 9 November 2018.
8. Nyoro accounts are offered in Petero Bikunya (1927) and, in English translation, John Nyakatura (1973). See also the eminent anthropologist John Beattie's (1971) poignant account of these traumatic events from the perspective of the 1950s, when he was doing his fieldwork.
9. It is an idea with deep roots: in the aftermath of the Battle of Adwa, for example, see Berkeley (1902) and see also John Sorenson (1993) and W. B. Carnochan (2008).
10. For a contemporary account – written from the side of the jihadists – see Arabfaqih (2005).
11. For example, UK National Archives (London): FO 1/27B Yohannes to Queen Victoria, 10 August 1872.
12. For insights into *Abba Bahrey's* 1593 chronicle, 'History of the Galla', see Beckingham and Huntingford (1954).
13. Biographical details are also offered in numerous contemporary European texts, whose authors were transfixed by the man: for example, W. C. Plowden (1868), H. Rassam (1869), and C. R. Markham (1869).
14. Miti, 'History of Buganda'; *Kabaka* Daudi Chwa, 'Education, Civilisation, and Foreignisation in Buganda' [1935], in D. A. Low (1971).
15. See also Eritrean People's Liberation Front, 'National Democratic Programme', March 1987, in Cliffe and Davidson (1988).
16. Author's field notes and informal interviews, Kampala, 6 August 2010.
17. 'Somalia's al-Shabab join al-Qaeda', BBC News, 10 February 2012.

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