

## Resolving Sub-Saharan African Conflict

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Volume 24, numéro 2, 2004

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs24\\_2re02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs24_2re02)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

### ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce document

O'Connell, S. (2004). Resolving Sub-Saharan African Conflict. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 24(2), 159–163.

## **Resolving Sub-Saharan African Conflict**

Uwazie, Ernest, ed. *Conflict Resolution and Peace Education in Africa*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2003.

Eltringham, Nigel. *Accounting for Horror: Post-Genocide Debates in Rwanda*. London: Pluto, 2004.

Nhema, Alfred G., ed. *The Quest for Peace in Africa: Transformations, Democracy and Public Policy*. Utrecht, Netherlands: International Books, 2004.

For many, sub-Saharan Africa has today become synonymous with poverty, inequity, and conflict. Unfortunately, this perception is not altogether false, for it stems from the many sad realities that most African countries have endured during and since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, most sub-Saharan countries now find themselves at the bottom of the UN's yearly Human Development Index and violent conflicts have affected, and continue to affect, West Africa, the Sudan, the Great Lakes region, as well as many other areas on the continent.

Although, the recently ended conflicts in Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, and Sierra Leone give rise to hope and are a testament to the usefulness of striving and persisting to resolve Africa's many wars and armed conflicts, the inequities and bad governance from which these conflicts arose persist. If these are not addressed, through real democratization, development, and comprehensive peace-building processes, renewed fighting is a very real possibility.

In 2003, according to the University of Hamburg's Working Group on the Causes of War, armed conflicts and wars continued to rage in the following African countries: Algeria, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of Congo (Ituri), the Ivory Coast, Liberia, Nigeria (Niger Delta), Senegal (Casamance), Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda.

Sub-Saharan Africa's many problems have a long history. In the "Scramble for Africa," which began with the Berlin Conference of 1884, European countries partitioned Africa among themselves without any consideration of its diverse cultures or ethnic boundaries. Ethnic groups were divided, unified geopolitical entities were separated, and groups that had traditionally opposed each other were joined together. Also, human supply and migration routes were disrupted and blocked by arbitrary borders. When African countries began to acquire their independence in the 1960s, the political fragmentation of the continent was already well entrenched.

These and other issues are at the root of the horrors that took place in many areas of the continent. In recent times, one of the hardest hit areas has been Africa's Great Lakes region. In 1994, the Hutu-dominated Rwandan Army orchestrated the massacre of at least half a million people, most of them Tutsi. These events were foreshadowed by the 1972 massacres in Burundi, where approximately 100,000 Burundians, mostly Hutu, were slaughtered. After the Rwandan genocide, ethnic conflicts involving hundreds of thousands of refugees spread into eastern Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) as the Zairian army and Tutsi Banyamulengue entered the fray. At the time of writing, despite recent peace agreements, conflicts are again threatening to engulf Burundi and eastern RDC in violence.

Thankfully, many African and non-African social scientists, NGO workers, politicians, and others are constantly trying to find solutions to Africa's many conflicts. These last few years have seen a regular output of publications which contribute an essential theoretical element to the continued trend of practical conflict resolution and peace promotion in Africa. The consensus, which seems to be emerging from most contemporary studies, is that if we are to see real positive changes in the conflicts that have been plaguing the continent, indigenous African forms of peace-making must be developed, and implemented. Most of the essays in *Conflict Resolution and Peace Education in Africa* fit within this trend.

While furthering the positive trend of serious scholarship on African conflict resolution, this collection of essays adjoins a domain that is of paramount importance, that is peace education. However, as often happens when a book is the result of a conference, many of the essays do not explicitly deal with its principal themes, but all of the chapters that do not deal with these two themes directly, do so indirectly. For example, Peter Wanyama Madaka's essay deals mainly with US policy in central Africa, but he does so in order to make a case for the urgent need of implementing conflict prevention mechanisms, in the form of an emergency response plan for the region.

This book is the result of the eighth annual Africa conference of the Centre for African Peace and Conflict Resolution at California State University, Sacramento, which was held in 1999. It has twelve chapters, which are the edited versions of presentations made at the conference. The collection is edited by Ernest Uwazie, director of the Center and professor of Criminal Justice at California State University.

One of the best essays in the collection is certainly Susan Shepler's critical analysis of the rehabilitation programs of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone. In this chapter Shepler exposes the vicious circle in which those who strive to rehabilitate and reintegrate the war-affected children in the region find themselves. Her findings suggest that the Sierra Leonean education system (which was inherited from the West and therefore ill-adapted to the country's real needs)

creates the awareness of a severe lack of opportunities for the country's youth. This lack of opportunities, which Shepler links to the structural violence of poverty, in turn creates a "crisis of youth" that was partly to blame for the civil war in Sierra Leone. Now, most of the rehabilitation and reintegration programs, which have been put into place, are modeled on the same Western educational modes that created the violence generating alienation in the first place.

Shepler concludes that instead of imposing a Western, and thus alien, psychological model upon post-war rehabilitation programs, we should look toward indigenous forms of rehabilitation, for African "communities have their own frameworks for understanding and addressing the distress they have suffered as a result of war." (p. 70)

This collection of essays does, however, contain certain shortcomings. For example, I was quite disappointed by Rose Acholonu's chapter on the role of Igbo women as peacemakers. In this chapter, Acholonu conceives peace as familial and social orderliness. In a way, her essay is an apology of the traditional Igbo polygamous marriage and, according to her, in pre-colonial times Igbo women played a role in peace-making as passive objects of currency. She thus presents Igbo women as the "symbols" of peace in the conflict resolution process, not as active agents of positive change. Despite these and other shortcomings, *Conflict Resolution and Peace Education in Africa* will surely become a useful reference tool for the peacemakers and peacebuilders of sub-Saharan Africa.

*Accounting for Horror: Post-Genocide Debates in Rwanda* belongs to the ever-evolving field of genocide studies. The author, Nigel Eltringham, who holds a PhD from the London School of Oriental and African Studies in social anthropology and now lectures at the University of Sussex, is very well versed in the existing literature on the subject, which appears prominently in the endnotes and very good bibliography. The book deals specifically with finding ways to "account" for the horrors of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the subsequent massacres of refugees that were committed in eastern DRC.

Eltringham's main aim is to counter the myths and untruths, about ethnicity and history, which have been circulated and used to perpetrate and justify genocidal acts. He does this remarkably well, first by presenting the results of interviews which he conducted with Rwandans in Rwanda and in Europe, and then by thoroughly examining the genocidal propaganda, media coverage, and the historiography of Rwanda and the Rwandan genocide.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first one deals with the issue of Rwanda's ethnic debate, a very complex and thorny one, which the author manages to disentangle remarkably well. In the second chapter Eltringham discusses how Rwandans have perceived and categorized the episodes of ethnic violence that took place in Rwanda in the 1950s and 1960s. In the third, fourth, and fifth chapters, the author presents a comparison of the Rwandan and Nazi genocides,

the issue of collective guilt, and a possible end to the culture of impunity. The book closes on a discussion of how Rwandan historiography has been used by the perpetrators of the genocide and with an appeal for a “non-absolutist” history of Rwanda.

The author’s field experience as an NGO worker in post-genocide Rwanda provides a true insight into the subject matter of this study. What he presents is therefore not a mere abstract analysis about why the genocide occurred and how it has been perceived, but a work anchored in his first-hand knowledge of the topic.

Although *Accounting for Terror* is not about conflict resolution or peace-building *per se*, it does, however, offer interesting and insightful ideas about how a reckoning of the crimes against humanity that have plagued Africa’s Great Lakes region, and an end to its culture of impunity, would help in healing the rifts that divide the area’s diverse groups.

Eltringham takes for granted that his readers are familiar with the general timeline of the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath. This is *Accounting for Terror*’s only drawback. Although the author states that the aim of his book is not to present a history of the Rwandan genocide, for he assures us this has been done elsewhere, more background information would indeed help the reader better understand his narrative and analysis.

Despite this minor omission, this is a very important book. This new trend of introducing a more critical element into studies on the Rwandan genocide should be developed; if only to counteract the globalization of guilt according to ethnic identity, which is being put forward by certain writers, governments, and organizations. Other researchers, it is hoped, will follow in Eltringham’s steps and further develop this critical and moral approach to peace-building. *Accounting for Horror* is thus a superb addition to Rwandan ethnography and historiography, as it pertains to the Rwandan genocide, and with any luck it will stimulate renewed interest in genocide studies in the Rwandan context.

Also the result of a conference, the third book reviewed here, *The Quest for Peace in Africa*, is a much larger and scholarly volume. It seems to have benefited from much more editorial work than *Conflict Resolution and Peace Education in Africa*. The 29 papers found in *The Quest for Peace in Africa* (edited by Alfred Nhema, executive secretary of the Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa – OSSREA – and author of *Democracy in Zimbabwe: From Liberation to Liberalization*) were first presented at the seventh congress of OSSREA, held in December 2002, in Khartoum, Sudan. Although the presentations deal with the wider theme of African conflict resolution, their main focus is how peace and development can be achieved through changes in public policy.

Indeed, *The Quest for Peace in Africa*’s major contribution to the field of peace studies is its plea for a rethinking of public policy in Africa. Namely, the

importance of developing mechanisms that would ensure “that salient tensions do not develop into full- scale conflicts” (p. 19) is a recurrent theme throughout many of the chapters. This state of affairs is echoed by George N. Ayittey, in *Conflict Resolution and Peace Education in Africa*: “Two factors underlie Africa’s never-ending political violence and civil wars: the absence of mechanisms for peaceful transfer of political power and for the peaceful resolution of conflicts.” (p. 47)

One of the better studies in *The Quest for Peace in Africa* is Barbara Lakeburg Dridi’s excellent chapter on child-soldier rehabilitation and reintegration programs in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Mozambique. Like Susan Shepler’s essay, it is another welcome addition to the literature on the subject. In this essay, Lakeburg Dridi explains how the psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs of former child soldiers must be dealt with by skillful counselors through psychological support programs. If this is not done, she shows through a critique of current rehabilitation and reintegration programs, the danger of renewed warfare will be very high.

Many of the ideas found in the three books reviewed here are of a very practical nature. It is my belief that the policy makers and leaders of sub-Saharan Africa, as well as those who are working to resolve conflicts and build the peace, should follow them up and put them into practice. These three publications are thus valuable additions to the field of peace and conflict studies in Africa. It is hoped that they will, directly (by playing a key role in peace-making) and indirectly (by encouraging more research on the subject), help those who would make this vast continent a more peaceful place; through the peace-building insights and prescriptions that they contain.

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