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The Challenge of State-Building in Africa

The history of every continent is written clearly in its geographical features, but of no continent is this more true than of Africa.

Lord Hailey, *An African Survey*

THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM facing state-builders in Africa—be they pre-colonial kings, colonial governors, or presidents in the independent era—has been to project authority over inhospitable territories that contain relatively low densities of people. Sub-Saharan Africa, with roughly 18 percent of the world's surface area, has always been sparsely settled. Africa had only 6 to 11 percent of the world's population in 1750, 5 to 7 percent in 1900, and only 11 percent in 1997.¹ Relatively low population densities in Africa have automatically meant that it always has been more expensive for states to exert control over a given number of people compared to Europe and other densely settled areas. As John Iliffe wrote, "In the West African savannah, underpopulation was the chief obstacle to state formation."²

In only a few places in Africa, including the Great Lakes region and the Ethiopian highlands, are there ecologies that have supported relatively high densities of people. Not surprisingly, these areas, with the longest traditions of relatively centralized state structures, have been periodically able to exercise direct control over their peripheries.³ However, ecological conditions throughout most of the continent do not allow high densities of people to be easily supported. More than 50 percent of Africa has

¹ Calculated from John D. Durand, "Historical Estimates of World Population: An Evaluation," *Population and Development Review* 3 (September 1977): p. 259 and World Bank, *World Development Report 1998*, p. 191.

² John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 70.

³ While hampered by very poor data, Robert Bates found that, in the African polities he was able to code, "the higher the population density, the greater the level of political centralization." See his *Essays on the Political Economy of Rural Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 35. See also Robert F. Stevenson, *Population and Political Systems in Tropical Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

inadequate rainfall; indeed, contrary to the popular imagination, only 8 percent of the continent has a tropical climate. Approximately one-third of the world's arid land is in Africa.⁴

In Africa, two other factors have aggravated the cost of extending power in the face of low population densities. First, African countries have quite varied environmental conditions. Ecological differences across provinces of a country in West Africa, which can be coastal, forest, savannah, or near-desert, are greater than in any European country.⁵ Therefore, the models of control an African state must develop for these highly differentiated zones are more varied, and thus more costly, than what a government in Europe or Asia must implement in order to rule over their more homogenous rural areas. Second, it is expensive to project power over distance in Africa because of the combination of a peculiar set of geographical features. As Ralph Austen notes,

The geography of Africa also presents serious barriers to long-distance transport. Water travel is limited by the small amount of indented shoreline relative to the size of the interior surface of the continent, as well as the disrupted navigability of most rivers, due to rapids and seasonal shallows. The wheel was introduced into northern Africa for overland travel during ancient times but then abandoned because the terrain and distances to be covered could not feasibly be provided with the necessary roads.⁶

The daunting nature of Africa's geography is one of the reasons the region was only colonized in the late 1800s despite its proximity to Europe. The Europeans found it easier to colonize Latin America hundreds of years before despite the much greater distances involved.

Why the particular pattern of population density occurred, given Africa's geography, is not within my competence to explain.⁷ Rather, this book examines how successive sets of leaders in Africa responded to a political geography they were forced to take as a given. This is not an argument for the kind of geographical determinism that has captivated scholars from Ibn Khaldûn to Montesquieu to Jeffrey Sachs.⁸ A variety of paths were open to African leaders as they confronted their environ-

⁴ W. Bediako Lamoussé-Smith and Joseph School, *Africa Interactive Maps*, CD-ROM, (Odenton, Md.: Africa Interactive Maps, 1998).

⁵ W. Arthur Lewis, *Politics in West Africa* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1965), p. 24.

⁶ Ralph Austen, *African Economic History* (London: James Currey, 1987), p. 20.

⁷ For a provocative thesis, see Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), chapter 19.

⁸ See Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 63; Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke, 1873), p. 255; and Jeffrey Sachs, "Nature, Nurture, and Growth," *The Economist*, 14 June 1997, pp. 19–23.

ments. However, the challenges posed by political geography, especially low population densities, could not be ignored by any leader. Such an approach offers a tremendous methodological advantage: by holding the physical environment “constant,” I can focus on the precise political calculations of different African leaders over time as they sought to design their states.

In this book, I argue that leaders confront three sets of issues when building their states: the cost of expanding the domestic power infrastructure; the nature of national boundaries; and the design of state systems. Understanding the decisions made regarding each is critical, and there are profound trade-offs inherent to different approaches. Africa’s political geography helped structure the responses that leaders adopted to each set of issues just as European decisions were influenced by the structural features of that region. The following two sections provide a comparison of Europe and Africa’s political geographies. I then develop the analytic tools that are central to this study.

The European Experience of State Consolidation

The African experience of politics amid large supplies of land and low population densities while confronting an inhospitable physical setting is in dramatic contrast to the European experience of state-building. In Europe, through the fourteenth century, population densities were not high enough to put immediate pressure on land and compel territorial competition. As Mattingly notes, “In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the continental space of Western Europe still impeded any degree of political organization efficient enough to create a system of continuous diplomatic pressures.”⁹

However, starting in the fifteenth century in Italy and later elsewhere, population densities increased. As a result, European nations began to compete for territory, a tendency that only makes sense if population densities are relatively high and vacant land is limited or nonexistent, so that the value of conquering land is higher than the price to be paid in wealth and men. In turn, there was significant pressure to strengthen states in order to fight wars. Charles Tilly notes that one of the central reasons for the creation of relatively centralized state apparatuses in Europe was the “continuous aggressive competition for trade and territory among changing states of unequal size, which made war a driving force in European history.”¹⁰ Wars of territorial conquest, as chapter four notes in much greater detail, have been central to the formation of particular

⁹ Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1955), p. 60.

¹⁰ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, A.D. 990–1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), p. 54.

types of states because they create, quite literally, a life and death imperative to raise taxes, enlist men as soldiers, and develop the necessary infrastructure to fight and win battles against rapacious neighbors.

Because European states were forged with iron and blood, it was critical for the capital to physically control its hinterland. Tilly notes, “as rulers bargained directly with their subject populations for massive taxes, military service, and cooperation in state programs, most states took further steps of profound importance: a movement toward direct rule that reduced the role of local or regional patrons and places representatives of the national state in every community, and expansion of popular consultation in the form of elections, plebiscites, and legislatures.”¹¹ In particular, the constant threat of war and the need to protect valued territory meant that the physiology of the state forced leaders to place particular emphasis on control of remote areas that could be lost in battle. Again, Tilly notes: “Europeans followed a standard war-provoking logic: everyone who controlled substantial coercive means tried to maintain a secure area within which he could enjoy the returns from coercion, plus a fortified buffer zone, possibly run at a loss, to protect the secure area.”¹² These border defenses protected the state from its external competitors and, simultaneously, completed the job of internal consolidation. Thus, frontier fortifications have been, according to Frederick the Great, the “mighty nails which hold a ruler’s provinces together.”¹³ Lord Salisbury—a critical participant in the scramble for Africa, and the eponym for the capital of Southern Rhodesia—even said, in exasperation, that if his military advisers had their way, they would garrison the moon to prevent an attack from Mars.¹⁴

Successful European state development was therefore characterized by profound links between the cities—the core political areas—and the surrounding territories. Indeed, the growth of states was closely correlated with the development of significant urban areas. As Tilly has argued, “The commercial and demographic impact of cities made a significant difference to state formation. . . . The existence of intensive rural-urban trade provided an opportunity for rulers to collect revenues through customs and excise taxes, while the relatively commercialized economy made it easier for monarchs to bypass great landlords as they extended royal power to towns and villages.”¹⁵ Critically, for this study, he goes on

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹³ Quoted in John H. Herz, “Rise and Demise of the Territorial State,” *World Politics* 9 (1957): p. 477.

¹⁴ Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 23.

¹⁵ Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, p. 49. Similarly, Michael Mann notes that

to note, "Cities shape the destinies of states chiefly by serving as containers and distribution points for capital. By means of capital, urban ruling classes extend their influence through the urban hinterland and across far-flung trading networks."¹⁶ So profound have been the ties between the major cities and the countryside that the roster of great cities that have dominated the western world (Venice, Antwerp, Genoa, Amsterdam, London, New York) stand as excellent proxies to the rise and fall of national powers.¹⁷

Understanding African Politics

However, Europe's demographic history is not shared by many other parts of the world. It is quite remarkable that by 1975, Africa had only reached the level of population density that occurred in Europe in 1500. Nor is Africa's population density unusual. Many other regions of the world are also sparsely settled. As is clear from table 1.1, Latin America, North Africa, and the areas of the former Soviet Union have population densities that are historically much closer to Africa than to Europe.

The ramifications of lower population densities can be seen in the very different history of relations between capitals and their hinterlands. In Africa, in contrast to Europe, the current states were created well before many of the capital cities had reached maturity. Addis Ababa appears to be the only example of rapid urban growth in a designated capital not under the control of Europeans.¹⁸ Elsewhere in the precolonial period, even royal villages moved periodically as "soil become exhausted or buildings deteriorated or as bad fortune indicated that the old site had lost its virtue."¹⁹ Even most of the storied towns of West Africa were quite small until after colonial rule began. For instance, in 1901, Lagos had only eighteen thousand people and Accra about twenty-one thousand, while as late as 1931 only ten thousand people lived in Abidjan. At the turn of the century, only Ibadan, with two hundred thousand, had what could be considered to be a large population. Similarly, in 1906, the

for Europe, "The state loomed rather larger in the urban sector." *The Sources of Social Power: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D.1760*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 423.

¹⁶ Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, p. 51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁸ Richard Pankhurst, "Menelik and the Foundation of Addis Ababa," *Journal of African History* 2 (1961): p. 103.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Colson, "African Society at the Time of the Scramble," in *Colonialism in Africa, 1870-1960*, ed. L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 42.

TABLE 1.1
Comparative Population Densities over Time (People/Sq. Km)

<i>Region</i>	<i>1500</i>	<i>1750</i>	<i>1900</i>	<i>1975</i>
Japan	46.4	78.3	118.2	294.8
South Asia	15.2	24.1	38.2	100.3
Europe	13.7	26.9	62.9	99.9
China	13.4	22.2	45.6	91.1
Latin America	2.2	0.8	3.7	16.3
North Africa	1.6	2.2	9.4	14.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.9	2.7	4.4	13.6
Former U.S.S.R. area	0.6	1.6	6.1	11.6

Sources: Calculated from John D. Durand, "Historical Estimates of World Population: An Evaluation," *Population and Development Review* 3 (September 1977): p. 259; World Bank, *World Development Report 1992* (Washington, D.C.: 1992), p. 219; and Food and Agriculture Organization, *Production Yearbook 1993* (Rome: FAO, 1994), pp. 3–14.

Table was calculated using the midpoint of the population estimates that Durand presents.

two largest towns in East Africa were Dar es Salaam with twenty thousand and Mombasa with thirty thousand people.²⁰

The Europeans, after formally colonizing Africa in the late-nineteenth century, did create many urban areas. However, these cities did not serve as the basis of state creation in the same manner as occurred in Europe because the colonizers were not interested in duplicating the power infrastructure which bound city to hinterland in their homelands. Rather, the cities were mainly designed to service the needs of the colonizers. Particularly telling are the location of the capitals the colonialists created. By 1900, twenty-eight of the forty-four colonial capitals were located on the coast, demonstrating the low priority of extending power inland compared to the need for easy communication and transport links with Europe.²¹ Rather systematically, Europeans created capitals that moved power toward the ocean and away from the interior centers of power that Africans had slowly created and that had managed to exert control over parts of their surrounding territories. Thus, Lagos became the capital of Nigeria rather than Ibadan, Ife, or Sokoto; Accra the capital of the Gold Coast (Ghana) rather than Kumasi; and Bamako (with its good links to the Senegalese coast), the capital of Mali instead of Timbuktu. Some colonial capitals, including Lusaka, Nairobi, Salisbury (now Harare), and

²⁰ Walter Elkan and Roger van Zwanenberg, "How People Came to Live in Towns," in *Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960*, ed. Peter Duignan and L. H. Gann, vol. 4, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 655.

²¹ A. J. Christopher, "Urbanization and National Capitals in Africa," in *Urbanization in Africa: A Handbook*, ed. James D. Tarver (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 411.

Windhoek were created *de novo* outside of preexisting polities in order to service the logistical and health needs of the white conquerors. Many others, including Abidjan, Banjul, Dakar, and Kinshasa, were also newly established by the colonialists but quickly acquired an African veneer because they were not in settler colonies.²² In extreme examples of how African capital cities did not follow the European pattern of extending power, Mauritania and Bechuanaland (now Botswana) were actually ruled by capitals outside their nominal boundaries during the colonial period (Saint-Louis and Mafeking, respectively).

Accordingly, once the capitals were created, they did not immediately begin to effectively extend power throughout their extensive but sparsely settled territories. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch finds that “as of the beginning of the twentieth century, the colonial penetration had barely begun.”²³ W. Arthur Lewis concluded that prior to World War II, “The countryside had no continuous politics.”²⁴ Tellingly, it was only in the limited number of settler colonies, almost entirely in southern Africa, that the colonial state’s reach was extended in a comprehensive manner. In Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), the presence of a relatively large number of white settlers who saw themselves living permanently in Africa, in contrast to most colonialists who were transients, propelled the creation of a remarkably efficient and brutal state that protected the settlers from market forces while dispossessing many Africans of their land.²⁵ The fact that wars of liberation had to be fought in Africa’s settler colonies (e.g., Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia) was in good part a reflection of the simple fact that unlike the rest of Africa, where the transfer of power was astonishingly peaceful, those colonial states had the motivation and the ability to fight for power.

During the terminal colonial period, politics become national in many countries as nationalist movements emerged. However, neglect of the rural areas by colonial governments over decades, combined with organizational problems posed by a large peasant population atomistically dispersed across a vast hinterland that had few roads or telephones, deterred most politicians from investing heavily in mobilizing the rural areas. As a result, nationalist politics in the 1950s and 1960s were very much urban affairs. As Aristide Zolberg concluded:

²² See David Simon, *Cities, Capital, and Development: African Cities in the World Economy* (London: Belhaven Press, 1992), pp. 24–5.

²³ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Africa: Endurance and Change South of the Sahara* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 174.

²⁴ Lewis, *Politics in West Africa*, p. 14.

²⁵ See Jeffrey Herbst, *State Politics in Zimbabwe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), chapter 2.

But it is difficult to believe, on the basis of the evidence available, that under existing circumstances the capacity of these [nationalist] movements for “mobilization” extended much beyond intermittent electioneering and the collection of more tangible support in the form of party dues from a tiny fraction of the population. Although their ambition was often to extend tentacles throughout society, they were creatures with a relatively large head in the capital and fairly rudimentary limbs.²⁶

The nationalists received states that were appropriate to the way they had conducted their politics: primarily urban, with few links to the surrounding countryside where most of the population lived. In turn, they furthered the urban bias of their states by marginalizing peasant populations and by providing urban groups with privileged access to many of the resources allocated by the state. As Robert H. Bates documented, African politicians traditionally equated their political survival with appeasing their urban populations via subsidies even if the much larger, and poorer, rural populations had to be taxed.²⁷

After independence, many African countries made significant progress in extending administrative structures over their territories. However, African leaders still find physical control over substantial parts of the population to be a difficult issue. For instance, Goran Hyden argues that because African peasants depend primarily on rain-fed agriculture rather than on cooperative techniques of production, such as irrigation found in more densely settled areas, and because smallholders are less integrated into the cash economy than elsewhere in the world, the peasantry in Africa is “uncaptured.”²⁸ Hyden argues that because “the state does not really enter into the solution of his [the African peasant’s] existential problems” there is “a definite limit . . . to how far enforcement of state policies can go in the context of peasant production.”²⁹ Similarly, Michael Bratton has argued that “The essence of the postcolonial history of sub-Saharan Africa is therefore an unresolved political struggle: On one hand, political elites wish to extend the authority of the state over scattered populations, most of whom live in rural areas; on the other hand, peasants remain determined to preserve a realm of authority within which to

²⁶ Aristide R. Zolberg, *Creating Political Order: The Party-States of West Africa* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1966), pp. 34–5.

²⁷ Robert H. Bates, *Markets and States in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 33.

²⁸ Goran Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 9–18. See also Stephen G. Bunker, *Peasants against the State: The Politics of Market Control in Bugisu, Uganda, 1900–1983* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 5.

²⁹ Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania*, pp. 23–4.

make decisions about their own lives.”³⁰ It is hardly surprising that in a United Nations’ survey, African governments were more likely to express unhappiness over their population distributions than governments in any other regions of the world.³¹

Further, the long economic crisis that many African countries have experienced since the late 1970s has caused a profound erosion of many governments’ revenue bases and, consequently, their ability to project power. Instead of African states gradually consolidating control over their territories as time progresses, even the most basic agents of the state—agricultural extension workers, tax collectors, census takers—are no longer to be found in many rural areas. The Economic Commission for Africa lamented that, because of the poor state of the road systems, “whole areas are practically cut off from capital cities.”³² This is an especially important problem in Africa because about 69 percent of the population, on average across the continent, still live in rural areas compared to 61 percent for all low and middle income countries.³³ Some states are increasingly unable to exercise physical control over their territories. William C. Thom, U. S. Defense Intelligence Officer for Africa, has written that

Most African state armies are in decline, beset by a combination of shrinking budgets, international pressures to downsize and demobilize, and the lack of the freely accessible military assistance that characterized the cold war period. With few exceptions, heavy weapons lie dormant, equipment is in disrepair, and training is almost nonexistent. . . . the principal forces of order are in disorder in many countries at a time when the legitimacy of central governments (and indeed sometimes the state) is in doubt.³⁴

For instance, a parliamentary report of Zimbabwe’s army—long thought to be one of the more competent militaries on the continent—found that the force had only 5 percent of its vehicles in working order, monthly pilot training had been abandoned, and 70 percent of the troops in one brigade had been off duty for a year or more, on forced leaves in order to save money.³⁵

³⁰ Michael Bratton, “Peasant-State Relations in Postcolonial Africa: Patterns of Engagement and Disengagement,” in *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World*, ed. Joel S. Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 231.

³¹ United Nations, *Concise Report on the World Population Situation in 1993* (New York: United Nations, 1994), p. 36.

³² Economic Commission for Africa, *Survey of Economic and Social Conditions in Africa, 1991–2*, (Addis Ababa: Economic Commission for Africa, 1994), p. 117.

³³ World Bank, *World Development Report 1998*, p. 231.

³⁴ William G. Thom, “An Assessment of Prospects for Ending Domestic Military Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *CSIS Africa Notes* 177 (October 1995), p. 3

³⁵ “Zimbabwe: Report Cites UK Paper on ‘Ominous’ State of Defense Force,” *Harare*

Even the wave of democratization that swept Africa in the 1990s has not breached the center-periphery divide. The revolts since 1989 against African authoritarianism were largely urban affairs, with little participation by any organized rural group.³⁶ Not surprisingly, few if any of the political parties that have come into existence since 1989 have strong rural roots.³⁷ It still appears too difficult to organize the peasants qua peasants, despite the fact that spatial location is an excellent determinant of life chances in much of Africa.³⁸

An appropriate capstone to the comparison between Africa—precolonial, colonial, and independent—and Europe is their strikingly different traditions involving the most dramatic action typically associated with a state: warfare. Due to low population densities and the large amount of open land in Africa, wars of territorial conquest, as chapters two, three, and four will discuss at length, have seldom been a significant aspect of the continent's history. In precolonial Africa, the primary object of warfare, which was continual in many places, was to capture people and treasure, not land which was available to all. In contrast to European states that, at least at some points in their histories, needed to mobilize tremendous resources from their own populations to fight wars and were therefore forced to develop profound ties with their own hinterlands, precolonial African leaders mainly exploited people outside their own polity because the point of war was to take women, cattle, and slaves.³⁹ Thus the slave trade, especially in the eighteenth century, should be seen

Zimbabwe Standard, 11 May 1998, cited in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report: Sub-Saharan Africa*, 12 May 1998.

³⁶ Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, "Toward Governance in Africa: Popular Demand and State Responses," in *Governance and Politics in Africa*, ed. Goran Hyden and Michael Bratton (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992), 1992, p. 31.

³⁷ Henry Bienen and Jeffrey Herbst, "Economic and Political Reform in Africa," *Comparative Politics* 29 (October 1996), p. 36.

³⁸ In Ghana, 80 percent of the poor and almost all of the poorest are in the rural areas outside of Accra. Similarly, in a survey of Côte d'Ivoire, researchers found that while 59 percent of all Ivoirians live in the rural areas, 86 percent of the poorest 30 percent of the population and 96 percent of the poorest 10 percent of the population live outside the cities. See respectively E. Oti Boateng et al., *A Poverty Profile for Ghana, 1987–1988*, Social Dimensions of Adjustment in sub-Saharan Africa Working Paper no. 5 (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1990), p. 14, and Paul Glewwe and Dennis de Tray, *The Poor during Adjustment: A Case Study of Côte d'Ivoire*, Living Standards Measurement Survey Paper no. 47 (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1988), p. 13.

³⁹ The classic statement is by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "The Political Economy of the African Peasantry and Modes of Production," in *The Political Economy of Contemporary Africa*, ed. Peter C. W. Gutkind and Immanuel Wallerstein (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1976), p. 105. Compare to Charles Tilly "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschmeyer, and Theda Skocpol, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 183.

as part of the process by which African states grew: by capturing people rather than by gaining control over territory.⁴⁰

In the colonial and independence periods, Europeans and Africans have gone to elaborate lengths to prevent wars of conquest from occurring in Africa, a series of efforts that were strikingly successful compared to the war-torn history of Europe and other regions throughout the twentieth century. The consequential role that war played in European state development was not replicated in Africa, or in Latin America for that matter.⁴¹ In particular, African states have never had the security imperative to physically control the hinterlands in the face of competition from hostile neighbors. Since the external imperative for capitals to consolidate authority was largely absent, African leaders have had to devise an entirely different set of strategies to exert control over their territories.

The Extension of Power in Africa

How those who sought to create African states responded to the continual problem of extending authority over distance, given a particular political geography, is the focus of this book. This question goes to the very essence of politics because, as Weber and others have repeatedly noted, the signal characteristic of a state is its monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force in the territory it is said to control.⁴² It is also an issue that has been analyzed almost entirely by focusing on Europe.⁴³ Scholars have concentrated on the European experience when trying to understand state development despite the fact that Europe contains only a small percentage of the states formed throughout history. In part, this myopia is due to the fact that the rise of European states is well documented. Of course, concentrating on Europe, the taproot of the nation-state, appears logical because today all states worldwide do have the form of the nation-

⁴⁰ James L. Newman, *The Peopling of Africa: A Geographic Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 129–130.

⁴¹ See the paper of my colleague Miguel Angel Centeno, “Blood and Debt: War and Taxation in Nineteenth Century Latin America,” *American Journal of Sociology* 102 (May 1997): pp. 1565–1605.

⁴² Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” reprinted in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 78.

⁴³ Representative books include Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*; Brian M. Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change: Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Mann, *Sources of Social Power*; Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966); and Hendrick Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and its Competitors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

state as theorized and executed by the Europeans. Indeed, the analysis of the creation of many third world states is, by necessity, intertwined with accounts of European imperialism and colonialization.⁴⁴ There was also a long-term western project of delegitimizing nonwestern sovereignty that was critical to the colonial project and that, inevitably, seeped into the academic literature.⁴⁵

However, the European experience does not provide a template for state-making in other regions of the world. As S. E. Finer has noted in his monumental work on the history of government, “the development of states in Europe is—in a world-historical perspective—highly idiosyncratic.”⁴⁶ Many other regions of the world share the African experience of having significant outlying territories that are difficult for the state to control because of relatively low population densities and difficult physical geographies. For instance, Gledhill notes that in Mexico, “The hills are associated with wildness, violence, and political freedom, the plains with docility, pacification, and susceptibility to repression, a contrast which contains an element of truth.”⁴⁷ Similarly, the idea of the anarchic northern frontier that presented the opportunity to escape from the state is an integral part of old Russian political mythology.⁴⁸ In Southeast Asia, the divide between center and periphery is also often pronounced: “In many senses, the capital *was* the state, and its power radiated from center to the periphery.”⁴⁹ Of course, there is also a long historical tradition of examining the American frontier and the political consequences of open spaces.⁵⁰

Similarly, the study of international relations, which has much to say

⁴⁴ I am grateful to Deborah Yashar for this point.

⁴⁵ David Strang, “Contested Sovereignty: The Social Construction of Colonial Imperialism,” in *State Sovereignty as Social Construct*, ed. Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 34.

⁴⁶ S. E. Finer, *The History of Government from Earliest Times*, vol. 1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5.

⁴⁷ John Gledhill, “Legacies of Empire: Political Centralization and Class Formation in the Hispanic-American World,” in *State and Society: The Emergence and Development of Social Hierarchy and Political Centralization*, ed. John Gledhill, Barbara Bender, and Mogens Trolle Larsen (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 317.

⁴⁸ David Z. Scheffel, “‘There is Always Somewhere to Go . . .’ Russian Old Believers and the State,” in *Outwitting the State*, ed. Peter Saklnik (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989), p. 115.

⁴⁹ Emphasis in the original. Donald G. McCloud, *Southeast Asia: Tradition and Modernity in the Contemporary World* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), p. 71.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), and Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, ed., *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). Of course, both these books examine how colonialists or whites have dealt with the frontier, rather than the perspectives of the indigenous populations.

about the nature of state development, has had an almost exclusive focus on Europe despite the presence of state systems elsewhere in the world that have had radically different operating assumptions. The focus on Europe has been continually bemoaned in the international relations literature although little has been done to correct the problem that almost the entire study of international relations is really an extended series of case studies of Europe. As Gilpin notes, "There is a need for a comparative study of international systems that concentrates on systemic change in different types of international systems."⁵¹

However, to understand the extension of power in Africa, the traditional tools of political science that stress leadership decisions, institutional structures, and systemic considerations can continue to be used. In the analysis that follows, I suggest that state consolidation in Africa can be understood by examining three basic dynamics: the assessment of the costs of expansion by individual leaders; the nature of buffer mechanisms established by the state; and the nature of the regional state system. Only by understanding all three levels is a complete analysis of the consolidation of power in Africa possible. I disregard the boundaries between comparative politics and international relations because a more holistic analysis is necessary to understand the consolidation of power in Africa, or other areas for that matter.

Costs

All leaders face costs when trying to expand their writ of authority. Given the lack of a security imperative, which forced European state-builders to place assets at the frontier at a loss, African statemakers were able, within certain constraints and given historical circumstances, to make much more nuanced calculations about the costs and benefits of broadcasting power. Of course, the extension of authority always costs something given the need to deploy soldiers and administrators. The exact nature of the costs leaders face depends, in part, on how far power is being broadcast: if a state is making an incremental step beyond its central base that can be achieved using existing capabilities, costs will be lower than if authority is being projected to an area far beyond the base, as this requires mobilization of an entirely new set of resources. Of course, consolidation of rule is also a function of how the state system defines territorial control. Consolidation may only be the investment in enough security assets to secure an area physically, while other states may have to make extensive investments in such areas as roads, telecommunications, and

⁵¹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 43.

local government in order to integrate a peripheral area into the overall economy. Thus, African leaders seeking to extend their power face a variety of costs: some inescapable in the short-term associated with conquest; some that are contingent on the scale of the changes being brought about; and some that can be postponed to the long-term that are largely associated with the consolidation of authority.⁵²

The implications of understanding, from the perspective of the state-maker, the extension of authority as a series of different types of costs that have to be met are significant. For instance, the cost calculations of African leaders were radically different than those made by Europeans: in Africa, conquest and consolidation must be understood as different processes, with different cost structures, because wars were primarily not over territory and the end of wars did not leave the organizational and infrastructure residual that was typical in Europe. As a result, as chapter five discusses at length, the desired characteristics of a state in Africa are different from those traditionally valued in Europe.

Boundaries

The second major dynamic the book examines is the politics of boundaries. Understanding boundary politics—broadly defined as attempts by states to mediate pressures from the international system through the use of buffer mechanisms to maximize their authority over territory—is obviously an important component of analyzing the extension of authority. States can and do lower the costs of controlling a territory by developing a set of boundary institutions that insulate them from possible economic and political threats while enhancing the capabilities of the center. As William J. Foltz has noted, “Who studies systems studies boundaries” because effective boundaries “increase the collective power of those within them by providing the potential for organization and preventing the diffusion of effort and energy.”⁵³

The particular institutions that mediate the pressures from the international system become of special concern to weak rulers who do not have clear control over their territory; therefore, examining them may be especially informative in understanding the politics of African state development. In many ways the most consequential buffer mechanism is the

⁵² Here I am borrowing from W. Arthur Lewis’s excellent discussion of fixed costs in his *Overhead Costs: Some Essays in Economic Analysis* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1970), p. 9.

⁵³ William J. Foltz, “Modernization and Nation-Building: The Social Mobilization Model Reconsidered,” in *From National Development to Global Community*, ed. Richard L. Merritt and Bruce M. Russett (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 39.

territorial boundary that mediates political pressures, including threats of intervention, from rivals. The traditional view of African boundaries is that they are a critical weakness of African states because they have remained unchanged despite the fact that the original colonial demarcations were done in a hurried manner that often did not account for local political, sociological, economic, or ethnic factors. As Jackson and Rosberg argue, "The boundaries of many countries, particularly but by no means exclusively in French-speaking Africa, were arbitrarily drawn by the colonial powers and were not encouraging frameworks of unified, legitimate, and capable states."⁵⁴ Similarly, Davidson regrets that those who recognized that "the colonial partition had inserted the continent into a framework of purely artificial and often positively harmful frontiers" did not come to the fore at independence.⁵⁵ Or as Bentsi-Enchill argues, "the nineteenth century partition of Africa by the European colonial powers was not made with any attention to the boundaries of these traditional polities . . . the newly independent African states, are, in general, territorially composite and have inherent problems of domestic boundary demarcation and maintenance between the traditional polities and jurisdictions of which they are composed."⁵⁶

In fact, the system of territorial boundaries, as this book demonstrates in detail, has been critical to the particular patterns of African state consolidation and has been seen as a tremendous asset by African leaders, both in the colonial and independence periods. Far from being a hindrance to state consolidation, African boundaries have been perhaps the critical foundation upon which leaders have built their states. In addition, the territorial boundaries help shape other buffer institutions that also insulate polities from international pressures. These other buffer institutions vary considerably but include currency exchange mechanisms (which define the means of conversion between domestic and international units of money) and citizenship rules (which determine the difference between citizens and foreigners). Chapters seven and eight demonstrate that these boundary systems have also had significant effects on African state consolidation.

Understanding the precise manner in which pressures from the international system are mediated by state structures offers a way to move

⁵⁴ Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, "The Marginality of African States," in *African Independence: The First Twenty-Five Years*, ed. Gwendolen M. Carter and Patrick O'Meara (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 46.

⁵⁵ Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (New York: Times Books, 1992), p. 163.

⁵⁶ Kwamena Bentsi-Enchill, "The Traditional Legal Systems of Africa," in *Property and Trust*, vol. 6, *International Encyclopedia of Comparative Law*, (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1976), pp. 2-138.

beyond grand theorizing to developing concrete propositions that analyze the relationship between the international and domestic systems. There is today something of a scholarly consensus that the international system is important to understanding politics in African countries, but that even third world states have a degree of autonomy, which necessitates examining purely political factors and avoiding the economic determinism that characterizes dependency theory. Accordingly, the next logical step is to better specify how international pressures are mediated by state institutions to affect domestic politics. Such a specification will be especially useful at the end of the millenium because international forces—be they international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the even more impersonal forces of international capital markets—are perceived as having an increasingly profound effect on the domestic decisions of leaders in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world.⁵⁷ The analysis that follows demonstrates that much of this conventional wisdom is incorrect.

State Systems

Finally, the study will concentrate on the state system that successive African leaders constructed in order to further their own efforts at state consolidation. One of the reasons that Tilly's analysis is so successful for Europe is that he develops a convincing picture of the international context of state development by focusing on the continual threat of war that all nations faced. There is a similar need to understand the international context African states face, although it is radically different from Europe. It is particularly important to recognize that the international system was not simply a given for even the weak leaders who successively ruled African states. Repeatedly, this study will report that rulers in Africa created a particular type of state system in order to help them confront the peculiar difficulties they were having in exercising their authority across the territories they were said to control. Cooperation, rather than continual conflict, has characterized Africa during the last century of state-making, a vision that directly challenges traditional realist assumptions about the anarchical nature of international society and the importance of the threat of force.

An appreciation of the importance of being able to manipulate the state system immediately allows for an understanding of why simple cost models of state expansion are wrong. For example, Richard D. Auster

⁵⁷ Barbara Stallings, "International Influence on Economic Policy: Debt, Stabilization, and Structural Reform," in *The Politics of Economic Adjustment* ed. Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 43.

and Morris Silver develop a model of state development where the state expands until average costs are rising, an adaption of venerable cost models in economics.⁵⁸ However, this model ignores the fact that by changing the nature of the international system, states can profoundly alter the costs of gaining and consolidating control over land. Since international society determines what state control actually means, to not investigate the nature of the state system is to fail to grasp the fundamental dynamics of state consolidation. Of course, pure economic models of state expansion cannot incorporate such overarching design considerations because they are based on the assumption that states are system-takers, just as firms are assumed to be price-takers, and therefore unable to affect the economic system within which they operate.⁵⁹

That African states, perhaps best known in the literature as colonial creations and among the weakest in the world, were still strong enough to affect the state systems they operated within is critical to note because scholars have too often taken the international system as simply the background to the drama of domestic state development. One of the unfortunate implications of the division between comparative politics and international relations is that while scholars in the latter discipline have been quick to point out the effect of international forces on domestic politics, the impact of state development on international relations has sometimes not been fully appreciated. In examining how leaders affect the design of the state system, this book thus examines what Robert Gilpin has called the most fundamental type of change in the international system: "change in the nature of the actors or diverse entities that compose an international system."⁶⁰

Costs, Boundaries, and State Systems

Maximum analytic leverage is gained when the interplay between the cost of state expansion, boundary mechanisms, and the state system can be understood. For instance, the cost of territorial expansion can be manipulated by states by changing the international understanding of what it means to control territory. Similarly, particular types of buffer mechanisms increase or reduce the cost of territorial expansion. Likewise, the nature of the international system affects what kind of buffer mechanisms

⁵⁸ Richard D. Auster and Morris Silver, *The State as a Firm: Economic Forces in Political Development* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), p. 30. See also Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, p. 106.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 27.

⁶⁰ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, p. 39.

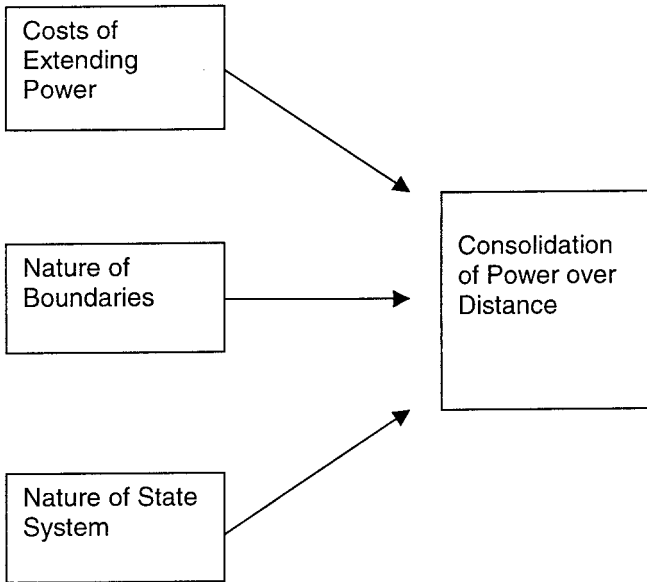


Figure 1.1. Possible Paths to State Consolidation

states can establish. Chapters two, three, and four explain the overall development of African states in the precolonial, colonial, and postindependence periods using this model. Chapters five and six then examine internal design questions to illustrate in greater detail the ramifications of the cost calculations that leaders have made. Chapters seven and eight explain the impact of different types of boundaries on state consolidation. Finally, chapter nine explains the overarching trajectory of African states and develops alternatives to the status quo that might allow states to broadcast power in a more effective manner.

Continuities in African Politics

By examining the different answers that leaders over centuries have given to the dilemmas of state consolidation, I am also offering an approach to confront the fundamental problem of studying African politics. The major difficulty scholars have is that almost all would agree with Patrick Chabal that the colonial interlude was relatively brief and that it is necessary to study lines of continuity between precolonial politics and the modern era.⁶¹ At the same time, attempting to place colonialism within the context of the continuities of African history has been stressed by

⁶¹ Patrick Chabal, *Political Domination in Africa: Reflections on the Limits of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 3.

historians who note colonial rule's artificiality, Africans' role in modifying it through protest, and the long history of intergroup conflict in Africa that predates the Europeans.⁶² However, most scholars would also agree with Crawford Young that the imposition of colonial rule changed everything:

The colonial state in Africa lasted in most instances less than a century—a mere moment in historical time. Yet it totally reordered political space, social hierarchies and cleavages, and modes of economic production. Its territorial grid—whose final contours congealed only in the dynamics of decolonization—determined the state units that gained sovereignty and came to form the present system of African polities.⁶³

Similarly, Naomi Chazan and her colleagues justify beginning their study of modern African politics with the creation of the colonial state by stating simply: “The basis of the postcolonial state in Africa is the colonial state.”⁶⁴ Or, as the manifesto of the Belgian-Congolese elite claimed in 1956, “In the history of the Congo, the last eighty years have been more important than the millenniums which have preceded them.”⁶⁵

Faced with the intuition that African politics must have deep continuities but aware of the profound disjuncture in form and practice caused by colonialism, scholars have generally been unsuccessful in developing a view of African politics that takes the precolonial period seriously while still acknowledging the traumas created by white rule. Thus, most textbooks on African politics begin their substantive discussions with the colonial state while only making the briefest of acknowledgments regarding the possibility of continuities with the precolonial era.⁶⁶

However, the continued failure to fully understand the course of African politics is unacceptable. As is argued in the following chapters, there are broad continuities in African politics that become apparent when the approach of successive leaders to the same political geography is exam-

⁶² See, for instance, J. F. A. Ajayi, “Colonialism: An Episode in African History,” in *Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960*, ed. L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 508.

⁶³ Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 9–10.

⁶⁴ Naomi Chazan et al., *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1988), p. 40.

⁶⁵ “Manifesto of the Belgian-Congolese Elite, 1956,” reprinted in *The Political Awakening of Africa*, ed. Rupert Emerson and Martin Kilson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 99.

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Chazan et al. *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa*; William Tordoff, *Government and Politics in Africa*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan Press, 1993); Richard Hodder-Williams, *An Introduction to the Politics of Tropical Africa* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984).

ined. Given that, as chapter three discusses, the colonial and postcolonial states are such recent creations, it is also hard to believe that the political traditions developed over the centuries have not had an effect on politics since 1960. It would seem, for instance, relatively easy to make the case that precolonial traditions, still vibrant in the early part of the twentieth century in most parts of the continent, have a resonance in modern Africa compared to the rather heroic efforts Robert Putnam undertakes in order to suggest that developments in the Italian peninsula beginning around 1100 A.D. structure modern Italian politics.⁶⁷ Thus, one of the operating assumptions of this study is that Pliny the Elder was wrong: there is often nothing new out of Africa.

As some African states break down and the facade of sovereignty that was erected in the early 1960s begins to crumble, it also becomes more important to understand the past in order to foresee a better future for Africa.⁶⁸ This is not to engage in misty-eyed nostalgia, believing that somehow political formations developed hundreds of years ago can be replicated today. Basil Davidson is correct in arguing that “the pre-colonial past is not recoverable.”⁶⁹ Nor should it be. However, it does seem reasonable to understand what the colonialists did and did not change several decades ago if a more indigenous alternative to the nation-state as theorized, designed, and imposed by the Europeans is to be developed. Certainly, such investigations are already beginning. For instance, Ali Mazrui looks to the African past in proposing models of dual sovereignty that would include both civilians and representatives of the security forces in a new type of parliament.⁷⁰

Conclusion

For a truly comparative study of politics to develop, the great but incomplete drama of African state creation must be understood. This drama is as important to analyze as the processes that led to the creation of France, Germany, and their neighbors. By examining both the environ-

⁶⁷ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 121. For another argument that state structures are highly path dependent, that is, they reflect events that occurred hundreds of years ago, see Thomas Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 317–8.

⁶⁸ Christopher Clapham, *Africa in the International System: The Politics of State Survival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 30.

⁶⁹ Davidson, *Black Man's Burden*, p. 315.

⁷⁰ Ali A. Mazrui, “The African State as a Political Refugee,” in *African Conflict Resolution: The U.S. Role in Peacemaking*, ed. David R. Smock and Chester A. Crocker (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1995), p. 18.

ment that leaders had to confront and the institutions they created in light of their own political calculations, the entire trajectory of state creation in Africa can be recovered. I will demonstrate that, fundamentally, there is nothing exotic about African politics. Rather, as elsewhere, political outcomes are the result of human agency interacting with powerful geographic and historical forces. And, as is the case in other parts of the world, the viability of African states depends on leaders successfully meeting the challenges posed by their particular environment.