

Book Review

Amadu Sesay's *Civil Wars, Child Soldiers and Post Conflict Peace Building in West Africa*, Lagos

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ABSTRACT

The end of the cold war triggered civil wars in West Africa and beyond. These wars were, in the first instance, caused by ethnic struggles for political supremacy, economic control of natural resources, issues of unemployment, poverty, etc. An immediate byproduct of all these civil wars was the ugly phenomenon of child soldiers (a combatant below 18 years) in the annals of African history. "*Civil Wars, Child Soldiers and Post-Conflict Peace Building in West Africa*" as edited by Amadu Sesay captures not only the phenomenon but their reintegration into civil society.

Chapter one, '*introduction*' by Amadu Sesay and Wale Ismail restates the collapse of central political authority in most West African countries, identifying collapse of communism and superpower withdrawal from Africa as the culprits. The Liberian (1989-2003) and Sierra Leonean (1991-2002) civil wars that ensued there caused untold consequences on sub-Saharan Africa: violation of the African Charter on the Right of the African Child, child soldier phenomenon and their atrocities, refugees resulting from internal displacement, a threatened sub-regional peace, etc (Omangi, 2007).

Child soldiering is a challenge to existing moral norms and regulations that guide the conduct of modern warfare. The reintegration of child soldiers and post conflict reconstruction and peace-building are practical issues that confront war-torn countries. However, post-war conflict management expressed by the international community and sub-regional peace providers had concentrated only on the concern for child soldiers and their atrocities without an effective programme of post conflict reconstruction and peace building (Barbara, 2006). For example, donor reluctance in providing money for disarmament and reintegration programmes sustained a fragile peace in Liberia. Donor reluctance constitutes the research question/problem of the chapter: "*Is there a relationship between the responses of the global donor community and effective peace building and reconstruction in post conflict societies?*"

The collapse of the cold war and the attendant eruption of violence and civil wars in parts of the world brought about an increased growth in the literature on child soldiering. The foremost attempt at global study of child soldiering was the UN setting up of the Machel (1996)'s expert study on the impact of armed conflict on children which noted that,

Armed conflicts in many parts of the world have turned into attacks on children, and it was shocking that thousands of young people are lyrically exploited as combatants.

In spite of the concerns expressed, child soldiering continued to pose a challenge because studies (e.g. Machel's study) failed to clearly identify different categories of child soldiers. The chapter made a clear distinction of categories A, B, and C in enabling a systematic understanding of child soldiering, especially as most child soldier reintegration efforts undermine the girl soldier (Mazurana and McKay, 2007). Conflicts in Africa account for nearly half of the global estimates of 300,000 child soldiers (*Khan, Child Soldiers*). Conflict statistics indicate that from 1960-1980 eight civil wars were fought in the continent and ten more occurred in the next decade (Marshall, 2008: 1946-2004).

The 1996 Machel study noted two modes of recruitment of child soldiers: (i) forced recruitment that entails raids, kidnapping, conscription of children, etc, from schools, orphanages, refugee camps, etc, and (ii) voluntary recruitment which involves the personal decision of children to enlist for service in either national or rebel forces. Both recruitment avenues were adopted in Liberia and Sierra-Leone civil wars. Child soldier voluntarism has been advocated for (Schmidt, 2007) and likewise contested. For example, the Graca Machel study argued that it is misleading to consider such action as voluntary, since their choice was not exercised freely. It is the social, economic, political and other circumstances that made soldiering attractive to children (Wessells, 2010).

Precedence and geography are often identified as instigating contagion effects on child soldiering, as it was in the Liberian and Sierra-Leonean crisis. Precedence refers to the known use of child soldiers in other or earlier theatres of war and the impact of such as a ready made example for subsequent recruitment of children for the war efforts either voluntarily or forcefully. Conversely, geographical contagion explains cross border recruitment or deployment of child soldiers. This is made possible by the close territorial proximity between two or more countries, theatres of conflict, loosely policed borders, regime disposition towards child soldiering, etc. These portend security paralysis in the West African region.

Celestine Bassey's (2003) authored Chapter Two, "*The Nature and Character of Civil Wars in West Africa in the 1990s*" provided a theoretical enablement to the text. The chapter argued that post-colonial states of West Africa lived next to civil conflicts, wherein ethnic cleansing, child soldiers, use of mercenaries, mass rape, starvation, etc, that were hitherto strange within the conflict arena of West Africa became commonplace in the 1990s. But what caused the numerous conflicts? Celestine Bassey identified interplay of internal factors (ethnic conflicts over power sharing, access to resources, collapse of social and economic structures, state failure, etc) and external elements (the cold war ideological rivalry) as the culprits. Elbadawi and Sambanis (*Understanding Civil War*) see solution in African conflicts through political freedom and molding a governance framework that accommodates Africa's social diversity.

Chapter two deserves two observations. First, except for a specified reading audience, the vocabulary is high-sounding and may not be written in free-flowing prose. Second, the chapter has a total of thirty indented citations that made reading laborious. The other contributors makes far fewer indented citations and also far in between. For unexplained reasons the curious reader would wonder why Amadu Sesay, the editor, in his concluding chapter made only a sentence reference to an in-depth and rich literature laden chapter as chapter two; whereas he committed more than a full paragraph to summarize the other chapters in the text.

Charles Ukeje's Chapter Three, "*State Disintegration and Civil War in Liberia*" recounts the collapse of central government under Samuel Doe by forces loyal to Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). Expectedly, Charles Taylor won the follow-up presidential election in July 1997. The new political dispensation was a welcomed respite for the citizens of Liberia that survived the civil war and ECOWAS member states that invested heavily on the Liberian peace project.

ECOWAS was an interested party in the Liberian peace process for obvious reasons: the interrupted fragile peace of the sub-region, heinous human rights abuses, and unprecedented subversion of global norms of civility during combat, notoriety for natural resource plunder, wanton destruction of social amenities, etc (*Kahn, Child Soldiers*). The option of peace accords only paid-off after the Yamoussoukro IV Accord of October, 1991, the Geneva II Peace Conference of June 1993 and the Abuja Peace Initiative of August 1995 were consummated, though, with a glaring lack in child soldier integration component (Barbara, 2006). Liberia Peace owes its enthronement and sustenance to the ECOMOG, the military wing of ECOWAS.

As an intervention force, ECOMOG operations were decimated by a pre-intervention trust from the various warring factions in Liberia. This was so because the interventionist states constituting the ECOMOG lacked the key four attributes of "legitimacy, resource capacity, sub-regional doctrine formulation and transparency required in interventionist roles". Despite the shortcomings of ECOMOG operations in Liberia, it could not be denied the credit of ending the long era of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states of the African Union. It also succeeded in moving ECOWAS from an economic co-operation to a peacekeeping organization that ensures Monrovia remained a safe haven for those fleeing from the country sides.

Liberia's civil war had a contagion effect on her neighbor, Sierra Leone. Charles Ukeje's discourse on state failure in Chapter Four, "*Sierra-Leone: The Long Descent into Civil war*" recounts RUF's devastating invasion and the reechoing success in Sierra-Leone. Like Liberia, interplay of external interests especially from Charles Taylor's NPFL and internal discomforts; ethnic suspicions, ethicised military hierarchy, unemployment, and even greed (Mateos, 2011) triggered RUF invasion on Sierra-Leone. However, the Sierra-Leone crisis took a departure from the Liberian crisis. The external "support" the RUF got from Libya's Muammar Gaddafi (*Day, 2011*), Charles Taylor, and mercenaries from Burkina-Faso, etc, are open secrets (Zoli et al., 2011). Peace was, however, restored in Sierra-Leone by the intervention of Nigerian and Guinean forces. Troop contributions from Guinea and Nigeria were compelled by subsisting bilateral defence pacts they had with Sierra Leone. Though a devastating war, the intervention of ECOMOG and UNAMSIL troops secured the

needed peace (Jaye and Amadi, 2011).

Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years”. Thus, child soldiering is the “*inclusion or use of any person below the age of eighteen in any kind of regular or irregular force in any capacity including, but not limited to: cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups other than family members. It includes girls and boys recruited for forced sexual purposes and forced marriage*” (UNICEF). The phenomenon not only contravenes Article 1 but also constitutes a threat to society in generating present and future agents of political instability. Their effective rehabilitation into civil society is a vital task to avoid unpleasant consequences (Wessells, 2010).

Though there are international and regional legal provisions prohibiting child soldiering, it remains a global threat (Khan, 2013).

Amadu Sesay and Wale Ismail in Chapter Five, “*The Phenomenon of Child Soldiers in Armed conflicts in Liberia and Sierra-Leone*” advance (i) a feeling of insecurity, (ii) poverty, (iii) the element of revenging the death of loved ones, family relations, (iv) the technological revolution in manufacture of small arms since 1945, and (v) a contagion effect, etc, as reasons that encouraged child soldiering in both Liberia and Sierra Leone conflicts. However, Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) argue that abduction ranks highest as a motive for child soldier participation in civil wars in Sierra Leone.

In Africa, the sanctity of children is expressed in the family, community and in the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR). Child soldiering is a direct outcome of political highhandedness, poor management of state resources, abuse of power, and the collapse of economic and social structures. These elements account for the civil wars and phenomenon of child soldiers in Liberia and Sierra-Leone. Osman Gbla from a traditional dimension in Chapter Six titled, “*Conflict and Postwar Trauma among Child Soldiers in Liberia and Sierra-Leone*” state that Africa-specific rehabilitation measures of child soldiers are more germane vis-à-vis Western approaches that are not only perpetrator-based instead of victim-based but also ignorant of local cultures, their families and communities (Wamba, 2004; Kaplan, 2005; Edward and Honwana, 1999).

Osman Gbla identifies anxiety, depression, aggressive behaviour, bed-wetting and recurrent nightmares as visible symptoms of child soldiers (Beach, 2008; Briggs, 2012; ICRC, 2013). But achieving this feat requires the “services of traditional healers and local artisans” that would enable ex-child soldiers to undergo spiritual cleansing in their respective communities to appease their community spirits and thus heal their land. Osman Gbla was quick to indicate that child soldiers traditional reintegration are impeded by the non-acceptance of ex-child soldiers by communities that look at them as cannibals, the problem of dislocated families and communities ex-child soldiers return to, the abject poverty that pervade the communities, the poor state of infrastructure, etc (Zack-Williams, 2006; Atri and Cusimano, 2012).

In Chapter Seven, “*Multilateral Agencies and Post-conflict Peace Building in West Africa: Lessons from Liberia and Sierra-Leone*”, Osman Gbla reiterates the destructive effects of the civil wars on not only Liberia and Sierra-Leone but which also manifest in the destruction of human and material resources, the dislocation of economies, state failure, the spill over effects of the conflicts on the West African sub-region, etc (Lacina, 2006). Post-conflict peace-building efforts must, therefore, emphasize initiatives that will restore sub-regional stability and trust among West African leaders (Ero and Temin, 2004). Osman Gbla urged international (e.g. the AU, UNO) and multilateral agencies (e.g. World Bank, UNDP) working for peace in Liberia and Sierra-Leone to galvanize their efforts to ensure sub-regional peace in West Africa. However, the operations of multilateral agencies are constrained by the lack of effective co-ordination with local institutions, inadequate knowledge and understanding of local conditions, the late provision of logistics and finance, and the limited mandates of most agencies.

Amadu Sesay’s Chapter Eight, “*Conclusion*” indeed concluded the text. It presents a chapter-by-chapter synopsis of the entire text which not only gave a fair chance for a casual reader to have an insight to what the text is all about but also highlighted: (a) that there is no alternative to transparency and accountability in governance towards entire populations and not sections of it, (b) that corruption does empower but such empowerment is transient, (c) that it was worthwhile for ECOWAS to fashion out a protocol on Democracy and Good Government for the sub-region, and finally (d) that there is nothing more fundamental as in seeking for self-help (as demonstrated by the ECOMOG initiative in Liberia and Sierra Leone) when external help seems more of an illusion (Forman and Patrick, 2000). It was little wonder Amadu Sesay (2003: 220) observed in his concluding remarks that,

While the chief cold war warrior; the United States of America and its Western European allies were quick in restoring law and order in the former communist states of Eastern Europe. They have not been so enthusiastic in responding to the dire needs of countries in other parts of the world, and most especially, those in Africa. This is to be expected, since the Cold War premium that was placed on African countries also evaporated with its end. Thus, Liberia, once considered an important Cold War listening and spying out-post for America, could be easily and rather callously disowned after the cold war by Washington D. C as an African problem that required an African response.

The various chapters in the text are all identical in offering and explaining similar causes of civil war in Liberia, Sierra Leone and the rest of West Africa. However, it is never enough to identify only the causes of civil wars in these countries without proffering alternative options and actions to overcome such crises. Thus, the book is pronounced in explaining causes but proffering no alternative options and actions (Collier and Bannon, 2003).

Refugee militarisation is one subject-matter in peace and conflict discourses. It is a dangerous trend that usually emerges from the acquisition of small arms and light weapons among refugees and non-combatants (Whitman, 2000). The Sierra-Leone civil war was a direct outcome of refugee militarisation from Charles Taylor's NPFL. But refugee militarisation and internally displaced persons (IDPs) as key issues were not elaborately assessed and addressed in the entire book (Muggah, 2008). However, only Charles Ukeye's Chapter Three, "*State Disintegration and Civil War in Liberia*" devoted a paragraph (see pp.100-101) to refugee matters.

Apart from chapter two, the themes on child soldier recruitment and history of Liberia and Sierra-Leone are repeated in all other chapters. However, relevant to the development of the various chapters, but their repetition in all of the other chapters is monotonous to the reader.

Finally, the book has several abbreviations some of which are acronyms. These abbreviations and acronyms are not explained. A section on index is vital in enhancing easy accessibility to information in the text. Again, a cardinal interest of the book was on post conflict peace-building in West Africa. No contribution was so pronounced on suggestions on ending civil wars in war-torn countries.

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