Introduction _____

THIS BOOK examines state creation and consolidation in Africa over the last several hundred years. It does so by examining the fundamental problem confronting leaders of almost all African states: how to broadcast power over sparsely settled lands. The topic is easy to justify. As James Fessler wrote, "Distribution of governmental authority is one of the oldest and most abiding problems of society. By our solutions of this distributive problem we determine whether the government will be stable or unstable; whether it will be a dictatorship . . . whether we shall have the rule of law, the rule of men, or the rule of men under law."[1] The African experience is particularly important to developing a truly comparative perspective on state consolidation because a plurality of the world's states are in Africa. However, African states have been omitted from the developing scholarly literature on state creation and consolidation. Instead, this literature is dominated by writing concerned with the small number of states on the European landmass. The failure to account for the African experience is unfortunate because state creation and consolidation in Africa, and in many other parts of the world, proceeded in a radically different manner than it did in Europe. In particular, as chapter one makes clear, African political geography poses a completely different set of political challenges to state-builders compared to the problems European leaders faced.

At the same time, the consolidation of states in Africa remains a central political issue. The fundamental assumption undergirding this study is that states are only viable if they are able to control the territory defined by their borders. Control is assured by developing an infrastructure to broadcast power and by gaining the loyalty of citizens. The failure of many African states to consolidate their authority has resulted in civil wars in some countries, the presence of millions of refugees throughout the continent, and the adoption of highly dysfunctional policies by many leaders. Yet international society, by dint of the granting of sovereignty, still assumes that all African countries are able to control all of the territory within their boundaries. The gap between how power is exercised in Africa and international assumptions about how states operate is significant and, in some cases, growing. State consolidation in Africa is not merely an academic issue but is, instead, critical to the future of tens of

---

[1] James Fessler, *Area and Administration* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1949), p. 1.

millions of people who are at risk from the insecurity that is the inevitable by-product of state decline and failure. Therefore, this book discusses not only the history of state creation and consolidation but also evaluates different policy alternatives that might address some of the fundamental political challenges African states face today.

The method adopted by this book is, by necessity, much more controversial than the topic. To answer the questions posed regarding the nature of state-making, it is important to examine the entire sub-Saharan region. Of course, this is a vast area that contains different peoples, regions, and states. However, sub-Saharan Africa has a large number of entities that still can be compared because they share similar, although by no means identical, population structures, levels of technological development, and stocks of material wealth. Sub-Saharan Africa also has been organized as a particular international regime for more than a century and the rules adopted by colonialists and independent African leaders have had a profound effect on how states have been consolidated. Thus, I am making what Charles Tilly has called "huge (but not stupendous) comparisons" within a particular state system.[2]

At the same time, it is necessary to analyze the problems of state consolidation in Africa over several hundred years: from the precolonial period, through the short but intense interlude of formal European colonialism, to the modern era of independent states. In particular, it is critical to understand the continuities in state consolidation over the centuries. Here I am responding to Harry Eckstein's challenge to return to historically grounded comparative politics.[3] Of course, an argument in favor of historical depth would be banal if the subject was European state development given the obvious continuities over time in that region. However, a similar argument regarding Africa is unconventional because of the almost universal assumption that colonialism changed everything, for the better or worse, depending on the biases of the individual author. I argue that it was impossible for the Europeans to have changed "everything" in the few decades that they ruled Africa. They also had to take Africa's political geography as a given because they were unwilling and unable to change the landscape.

Therefore, this book spans a vast geographical landmass and hundreds of years. Inevitably, it glosses over or misses the nuances that differentiate various regions, societies, and countries. Put another way, I ignore a vast number of trees in order to see the forest. I am aware of these costs. I have spent much of my career arguing for a greater appreciation of the

[2] Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), p. 74.
[3] Harry Eckstein, "Unfinished Business: Reflections on the Scope of Comparative Politics," *Comparative Political Studies* 31 (August 1998): p. 520.

increasing heterogeneity of Africa and have suggested that more care be given to understanding the particular problems and opportunities that individual states must confront. Throughout this book, wherever possible, I have tried to qualify the argument to take into account the enormous variations across both time and space in Africa. I have also tried to develop new sources of information and new ways of looking at African politics (e.g., by mapping countries, by classifying relationships between states and chiefs, and by delineating citizenship regulations) in order to understand the variations within the processes I am analyzing.

Further, in order to make the comparative work viable, "Africa" in this study refers to the countries south of the Sahara. While much of the analysis also applies to Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, and Morocco, those countries have radically different precolonial and colonial histories, operate predominantly in the state system of the Middle East, and are significantly richer.[4] South Africa also does not feature in the sample of countries under study because of its different history, although I occasionally make reference to it. Finally, I exclude island Africa (Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, São Tomé, and Seychelles) because an understanding of the role of land boundaries in the consolidation of states is critical to the study.

However, there is not enough space to make all of the qualifications necessary to completely describe every region, society, and country, and to do so would fatally distract from the central argument: that African leaders across time and space have faced certain similar issues when trying to rule and have often come to similar conclusions on how to solve the problems they have faced. I focus on "the forest" partly because I believe that the structural argument regarding state consolidation is both powerful and relatively well defined. Finally, I believe that the benefits of such an approach outweigh the costs. I agree again with Tilly when he counsels against despairing that we will never have enough knowledge to accurately describe long-term social processes: "Historically grounded huge comparisons of big structures and large processes help establish what must be explained, attach the possible explanations to their context in time and space, and sometimes actually improve our understanding of those structures and processes."[5]

The unwillingness of many Africanists to generalize has its origins in the need to differentiate countries on the continent in the face of racist perceptions that Africa is a homogenous region that is in constant tur-

---

[4] Average per capita income for the five North African countries is approximately (there is considerable uncertainty concerning Libya's income) $1,827. Per capita income for sub-Saharan Africa averages $500. World Bank, *World Development Report 1998* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 190–1, 232.

[5] Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes*, p. 145.

moil. I understand the regionalists' desire, after the analytic disasters caused by the homogenizing tendencies of both modernization and dependency theory, to hew closely to the empirical facts. However, failure to examine the broad continuities over space and time has meant that Africa has been excluded from the political science mainstream because overarching arguments about the trajectory of the continent do not exist to compare with the well developed models of how political order was constructed in Europe, Latin America, and other regions. By attempting to describe the African state-building experience, I hope to join the ambitious academic project well described by Wong: "those of us who spend most of our time laboring on so-called non-Western parts of the world should make greater efforts to offer analyses that engage arguments about historical change in European history systematically . . . to generate the elements of well-grounded comparative history that can . . . create a new basis for building social theories to replace the great nineteenth-century efforts limited in large measure to European foundations."[6]

The failure to develop more powerful generalizations is also increasingly hurting the study of Africa itself. For instance, the effort that came to full life in the 1960s to study the history of Africa before the Europeans has not had the impact that it should have had because commentary almost always has been devoted to one polity or one region. Similarly, the study of relations between capitals and chiefs has, but with a very few exceptions, been developed on a country-by-country basis with no hint of a comparative effort. As a result, the study of African politics has sometimes been in accord with the critiques of area studies: more a jumble of accumulated facts than a clear scholarly project that has sought to continually test facts against hypotheses. It is possible to answer those critiques without abandoning the study of African states *qua* African states. To do so requires the development of an analytic perspective that allows the African experience to be understood in comparative perspective.

This book does not provide all of the answers to the big questions posed herein. However, I do hope that it initiates a debate that is long overdue about state consolidation in Africa and in other parts of the world. Such a debate should flourish if it is possible to recognize both the enormous variation within Africa and the possibilities of overarching similarities. To understand, then, what is apparent to anyone who goes to Africa.

Soon after taking power on 17 May 1997, Laurent Kabila changed the name of Zaire to Democratic Republic of the Congo. This book refers to

---

[6] R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. ix.

the country as "Zaire" while it was ruled by former President Mobutu Sese Seko and as "Democratic Republic of the Congo (D.R.O.C.)" for the post-May 1997 era.

This book has its origins in 1982 when I went to Nigeria to research my senior thesis as an undergraduate in Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School. I woke up in the morning when my plane was over West Africa, looked out the window and remarked to myself that there appeared to be very few people on the land. That observation has, to one degree or another, haunted me for the last fifteen years and is the original impetus for this book. As a student, I was fortunate to have as teachers Henry Bienen, Michael Doyle, and Robert Tignor, among others, who cultivated my growing interest in African politics.