

BOOK REVIEW

Conflict in Africa: Concepts and Realities. Adda B. Bozeman. Princeton University Press, 1976. Pp. xiv + 429. Cloth \$33; Paper \$12.50.

Adda Bozeman's* Conflict in Africa is an attempt to account for the difference between conflict in the West and in Africa on the basis of culture. Cultural explanations of politics, however, have always been problematic, and her work is no exception. Bozeman's use of cultural variables such as norms, beliefs and values presents all the traditional problems associated with a cultural analysis of politics. These problems include such issues as whether or not there is any utility to be gained by a cultural explanation, how one can prove the existence of cultural norms and values, in what way can the cultural variables be connected to political behavior, and how one can demonstrate the persistence of these cultural norms. Aside from the problems typical of most cultural analyses, Bozeman's work faces an additional difficulty; both her conclusions and the style in which she presents them strike one as insulting to the African culture she studies.

The main thesis of Bozeman's work is that the Occident and Africa developed opposing "norms and suppositions" concerning conflict. The West sees conflict in black and white terms; either there is war or there is peace and there is nothing in-between. In contrast, African culture does not comprehend conflict along these lines. African's view their society as essentially based upon conflict. This conflict does not necessarily take the form of open warfare, but exists on a variety of levels. While the Westerner fears conflict, the African does not, for conflict is an integral part of his society.

Western social science has blinded itself to this other conception of conflict and has operated upon the assumption that everyone must fear conflict. This is a grave error, Bozeman states, for it is an "irrefutable fact that conflict and resort to violence are accepted in most areas outside the Occidental realm as normal incidents of life, socially legitimate tools of government and foreign policy making, or morally sanctioned courses of action" (p. 18). Bozeman calls attention to this "fact" by exploring the cultural chasm that separates Africa from the West and the effects it has on the realities of politics and conflict.

It is doubtful, however, whether there is any utility in Bozeman's cultural analysis. Bozeman assumes that if the existence of a cultural difference between the West and Africa over

the concept "conflict" could be shown, then it would be reflected in the real world of conflict. This assumption seems tenuous, even from Bozeman's own discussion of conflict (both in the West and in the rest of the world). For if one cannot find any relevant difference in the degree of actual conflict and war, then a cultural explanation of this difference would be of no use. But Bozeman is well aware of the fact that conflict has been (and still is) a "persistent motif" within the West (p. 12). The history of the West has been just as full of conflict as that of Africa. If Bozeman cannot effectively argue that the Occident has come closer to reaching peace than Africa has, then the explanatory variable of "culture" would serve no purpose.

Bozeman is also unclear as to what the West's cultural norms and values are regarding conflict. She argues that historically the West had accepted conflict as the norm "and that violence in the form of war was accepted as a legitimate, morally defensible mode of resolving conflicts that could not be composed by other means...peace is perforce limited in time and space" (p. 5). By the mid-twentieth century, however, a "failure of nerve" appeared in the West, which prevented an adequate exploration of war and conflict. Thus, it is only recently that the West has viewed conflict in terms of either peace or war (traditionally it had accepted situations of conflict on a variety of levels). What then separates the West's traditional attitude towards conflict from that of Africa's? Bozeman provides no real answer, and presumably she must argue that traditional African culture is more conflict-oriented or has more levels of conflict than the traditional culture of the West; neither of these answers are satisfactory.

How does Bozeman account for the African conception of conflict? She first writes that "African modes of thought about everything, including conflict and its control, have been shaped decisively by three separate but interlocking factors: nonliteracy, a concept of undifferentiated time, and tribalism" (p. 69). After much discussion, however, Bozeman concludes that nonliteracy is the decisive shaping factor of African culture (including their concepts of time and tribalism). It is the tradition of nonliteracy that allows us to speak of a common African culture. For a variety of reasons, over which Bozeman goes into much detail, African nonliteracy produced a culture based on conflict. One example is that the lack of writing skills limited social groups to small tribal units that were continually in conflict. Nonliteracy also created an essentially oral culture which institutionalized conflict through oral rituals such as oath-taking, cursing and verbal spells, rather than through such Western devices as the contract (requiring literacy) which excludes conflict as a solution.

Although the traditional norms and values concerning conflict are a result of Africa's nonliterate past, Bozeman sees them as part of contemporary African culture. "Thus it appears that literacy has not appreciably modified the basic nonliterate thought-ways, norms and values of the vast majority of Africans. Indeed...writing is readily reduced to magic, and ...literacy can be achieved without dramatically altering traditional beliefs" (p. 369). Africans have not, as of yet, abandoned their cultural traditions for those of the West.

Bozeman's examination of the old tribal societies of sub-Saharan Africa is detailed and comprehensive. She draws her examples from a wide range of ethnic groups to substantiate her belief in a common African culture. But her examples do not always support the point she is trying to make. One difficulty is brought about by the evidence used to prove the existence of certain, uniquely African cultural norms and values. For instance, Bozeman argues that the African culture of nonliteracy creates a society concerned only with the present, and unable to look to the future (as do the Western literate societies). She attempts to prove the existence of norms by citing the Africans' inability to save and work for the future. "For example, the idea of saving cannot be substantiated easily in African economies, because no value attaches to work per se in the traditional social order. One worked to satisfy immediate needs, not in anticipation of distant goals. Continuous labor thus formed little or no part of tribal training, and leisure rather than effort emerged on the value scale as the mark of the prestigious man" (p. 93). It is very unlikely, however, that what Bozeman is describing here has anything to do with an African culture of nonliteracy. Working for the present instead of the future is common to all pre-industrial societies. This was the case in the literate-West before industrialization, where the transition from the traditional "work-for-the-present" society to the contemporary one was long and arduous (note such reactions to the change as Luddism). An attitude towards work and savings similar to that described by Bozeman is found among the traditional peasantry of today's Arab World, who are literate, yet have not assimilated the notions of saving and working for the future. There is no reason to believe that the African way of thinking about savings and work are any proof of the existence of certain African norms and values arising out of the culture of nonliteracy.

One of the basic premises of Conflict in Africa is that there is a connection between the cultural variables studied and political behavior (especially international relations), and that the latter is dependent upon the former. Accordingly, Bozeman writes "that there is an organic relation between the inner normative order of a given society and that society's approach

to its external environment; or, to put it differently, that the conduct of international relations is, in the final analysis, a derivative of values, dispositions, and institutions that control domestic life. This means that the latter must be comprehended before the former can come into view" (p. 66). Since Bozeman thinks nonliteracy is the decisive shaping factor of African culture, political actions must eventually be traced back to this source. Yet, it would be almost impossible to find any one, direct connection between nonliteracy and political behavior. This makes for a very weak connection between "culture" and politics. Thus, Bozeman supplies a wide variety of explanations for political conflict, all based upon nonliteracy. Political conflict is sometimes manifested by the contempt of outsiders, which is an outgrowth of the kinship system engendered by small tribal units, which are the products of nonliteracy. Or, political conflict may be the result of the personal 'style' of African rulers (which is also brought about by nonliteracy). In the final result, the culture of nonliteracy is too vague and used in too many ways to be a satisfying explanation of political behavior.

Bozeman's argument flounders most when she tries to demonstrate that modern African culture is fundamentally the same as the traditional African culture of the last several hundred years. In her view, modernization and independence did not change anything. In fact, Bozeman believes that the transition to the modern world has strengthened the grip of the old African culture. "With special regard to Africa...the...complex quest for identity, through which present generations try to reach the authentic, essentially pre-European, African past has been steadily gaining in intensity since the attainment of independence" (p. 60). Bozeman attempts to justify herself on a number of grounds, despite empirical evidence which appears to run counter to her position.

The first type of evidence used to prove the persistence of old cultural norm is the verbal recognition of this phenomenon by "African themselves." As Bozeman states, "the new intellectual and political elites freely affirm the continued validity of Africa's cultural heritage as the inescapable and most invigorating source of reference in the search of personal identity, as well as in the furtherance of an all-African unity" (p. 214). She also employs the same method to reveal the desire of the Westernized elite "to return to sources" (p. 61). The unquestioned acceptance of the vocalizations of "responsible spokesmen," however, can never serve as proof of one's argument. One should not believe all that one hears. Bozeman herself makes this clear when it concerns the statements of Africans that disagree with her own position. Consequently, she writes that "the present modes of politically relevant behavior are understood best if

past patterns are known, even if the latter are repudiated by the living" (p. 66). In addition, she shows a great deal of naivete if she is really convinced that the call of the elite for a return to sources means that such a return to the earlier culture has either transpired or is on its way. If one looks around the world for similar declarations in favor of a return to "ethnic roots," one generally finds these outcries to contain more of a symbolic meaning than any actual prediction of a return to a past culture. Oftentimes, there is a call to a past that never existed for the present population of the country. Such is the case in Latin America where the symbolic emphasis on Indian roots is applicable to only a minority of the population. Even in a country whose present population has a clearly identifiable past culture, as does Ireland, the attempts to bring back the past have almost totally failed. Quotations from the African elite regarding a supposed return to the past therefore appears as a poor means of substantiating that claim.

Another method used to disclose the continuation of the traditional African culture is the anecdote. There are a wide variety of short incidents related that all propose to show the "primitiveness" of even today's seemingly modern African. One example offered is that of the Congolese guerillas who were indoctrinated Maoist guerillas yet "persisted in trusting their own war charms and rites, and in obeying those specialists in occult practices who were attached more or less officially to various armed units..." (pp. 216-17). Kwame Nkrumah is submitted as another example who, although "a nominal Christian and avowed Marxist, is said to have sought reassurance for the continuity of his life and power from both pagan soothsayers and Islamic preachers and shrines..." (pp. 139-40). But just as in the previous instance of citing certain statements made by Africans as evidence, one must differentiate between the symbolic and the truly meaningful. Even if it were true that Congolese guerillas and Nkrumah consulted African ritual specialists, it is a far jump from there to the assertion that the Congolese rebellion or Nkrumah's Ghana were run according to the dictates of this ritual. Such a statement would be analogous to the claim that the Western world is run by the Pope or Billy Graham because the Western leaders sought advice and blessings from them.

Traditional African culture is also supposedly manifested in the actions and personalities of today's African leaders. "However different the characters of individual national leaders--for example of Kenyatta, Kaunda, Nyerere, Mobuto and Amin--all reflect, albeit in varying degrees, the general African psycho-cultural order and thought world that has brought them forth" (pp. 39-40). This psycho-cultural order consists, in part, of the broad discretionary powers held by African leaders. Bozeman believes that the freedom of choice that Africa accords its heads

of state has its origins in the tribal unit. There is no reason to assume along with Bozeman, however, that the powers held by today's African leaders have anything to do with the tribal culture of days-gone-by. Broad discretionary powers are typical of Third World leaders in general, not only those of Africa. Bozeman's analysis, as it concentrates on African tribal culture, does not draw any parallels between the African nations and other developing nations. The "uniqueness" of Africa and its culture is stressed, even when there is no reason to do so.

By stressing the uniqueness of Africa, Bozeman seeks to convince her readers that what is common to the rest of the world cannot be expected in Africa. While elsewhere in the world change takes place over time, Bozeman presents Africa as a timeless continent. That being so, she states "that our development norms imply deeply rooted concepts of time that have no equivalents in the African milieu..." (p. 52). Neither modernization, industrialization, nor independence are assumed to have made any difference in African culture (if anything, they have increased the people's reliance upon the traditional culture, because of the insecurities they create). This willingness to accept Africa as something of an anomaly allows Bozeman to judge Africa on a different set of standards than the rest of the world (certainly the West) and ultimately leads to a set of conclusions that smack of racism.

One of Bozeman's conclusions is that Africa's culture of conflict tolerates violence and murder on a grand scale. "The records indicate that physical violence in human relations has been and continues to be accommodated on a prodigious scale in Africa without offending customary values and norms, and that one or another kind of warfare is generally accepted...as an essential aspect of the community's jural and moral order" (p. 180). This fact is noted and seen by Bozeman as something "that requires exploration" (p. 31). Nowhere in the book, however, does one get the sense that there is anything morally wrong with this situation. Since Bozeman claims to examine conflict and violence from a supposedly African cultural perspective which allows violence, she takes no stand on the matter. At times she appears to condone the violence by her indifference. Death and murder are seen as normal elements of African society. Thus she quotes an African writer: "death is indeed an exercise in pan-Africanism. We have known to kill each other partly because we belong to each other. We kill each other because we are neighbours" (p. 224). As with her general treatment of culture, Bozeman also seems to create two categories of death, one Western, the other African; while the former is a tragedy, the latter is often portrayed as a neighborly act.

Although Bozeman's work purports to be an objective cul-

tural study of Africa, the manner in which she presents her evidence inclines one to believe otherwise. A case in point is Bozeman's description of a 1959 Tanzanian football game in which ritual magic was used by the team members. She cites this case to prove (as she tried to do with the examples of Nkrumah and the Congolese guerrillas) that Africans have never given up their traditional culture. Although Bozeman's argument is of dubious quality, it is not her argument but rather her description of the events that is of interest to me. Throughout her discussion, she maintains an image of taking these "magical precautions" seriously. But she does so in a way that makes the football players (and Africans in general) appear ignorant and superstitious. After describing the magical practices of one team in detail, she writes that "the opposing team had not taken such good precautions and when they came to play, they lacked the energy and spirit to hold their own" (p. 177). She then goes on to discuss the merits of book magic, concluding: "But whenever people face serious trouble--and this may well include competition in a football field--it is definitely outclassed, as it were, by the magic of plants..." (p. 178). Bozeman's style, in this example and throughout the book, is to dwell on the "superstitious nature" of the Africans to a point that extends well beyond the needs of her argument. Her tone is condescending, not objective, which detracts from her credibility as an African analyst, independent of the intellectual quality of her arguments.

In short, Conflict in Africa fails as a cultural explanation of African conflict. The book is neither useful, nor well argued. There is no convincing reason to believe, along with Bozeman, that traditional African culture rules modern Africa. It appears that this belief is due more to her insistence on the "uniqueness" of Africa than on any empirical evidence. The conclusions she arrives at, based upon her cultural assumptions, perpetuate certain stereotypical images of Africa and often border on the racist. Bozeman's disposition to treat Africa differently from the rest of the world ultimately undermines her credibility along with the image of the book as an objective political-cultural study.

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