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Reframing Narratives of Peacebuilding and State- building in Africa

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Reframing Narratives of Peacebuilding and Statebuilding in Africa

'Funmi Olonisakin and Alfred Muteru¹

Introduction

This paper argues for a rethinking of approaches to peacebuilding and statebuilding in Africa. Current approaches to peace and state building rely on a dominant narrative that constructs statebuilding as a prerequisite to *peace*. Underpinning this is the assumption that a certain type of [democratic] state would produce peace. As such, interventions in societies affected by armed conflict focus on the transfer of a model of statebuilding that is expected to lead to peace and stability. We challenge this *if only we build “good” states, peace will come* approach on several grounds elaborated upon in the latter parts of this paper. Two of these are worth an initial mention here. One is that the underpinning assumption of this approach is inherently flawed. Rarely does the dominant discourse of peacebuilding construe the outbreak [potential or actual] of intractable conflicts, which sometimes [and paradoxically] threaten the very survival of African states and the efforts to reconcile affected societies as part of a continuum of statebuilding.

Second and related, those interventions are invariably guided by particular notions and forms of the “state” and of “peace” held by the interveners, which undermine prospects for stable peace. In theory, the ideals of peace espoused and driven by policy actors [beginning with Boutros-Ghali’s *Agenda for Peace*, 1992] responding to armed conflict in Africa and other regions was one of stable peace, where the foundations of peace are built and sustained.ⁱ In practice, contemporary approaches in peacebuilding have largely focused on ‘packaging’ efforts meant to transition post-conflict states from war to peace and into itemised ‘pillars’ and ‘timelines’ to be achieved in a specific timeframe.ⁱⁱ This has come to characterize institutional

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approaches of the United Nations and its partners. Rather than an approach, which facilitates a return to the non-violent pursuit (whereby the absence of violence is not a guarantee) of the state and/or nation building *conversations* which degenerated to violence, the need to end violence becomes an end in itself and it is assumed that this can be achieved by creating a particular type of state, which has been tried and tested elsewhere. Invariably, the challenge here lies in the application of an institutional approach that has come to be influenced by particular approaches to peace, which are not suited to the surrounding conditions in the target environments.

We therefore argue that *peace* in the form construed by current interventions is not an end in itself. Rather, peacebuilding should be conceived as part of the continuum of statebuilding in the affected societies. Many situations of armed conflict in post-independence and post-Cold War Africa are the result of statebuilding conversations taking place in the specific national contexts. And those conversations might require a distinctly different solution, process or time frame from the models offered in response by interveners. In pursuit of this argument, we examine a number of conflict situations in Africa, which ended through different forms of political or peace settlements. We draw a distinction between two types of violent/armed conflict settings. The first consists of those situations of armed conflict where violence ended on the battlefield and the post-conflict agenda was pursued locally without external participation [Ethiopia; Rwanda]. The second includes situations where the end of violence as well as post-conflict agenda was negotiated and facilitated by external interveners [Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Sierra Leone]. We suggest that an examination of these settings might enable us make better sense of the impact of internally and externally generated/ driven processes and the extent to which each helps to set conflict affected societies on the course of nation and statebuilding in ways that produce stable peace.

In this paper, which provides a background to the research project on the role of political settlements in peacebuilding and state building in Africa, we build on the arguments advanced above and propose a set of questions to frame the research. The paper is divided into five parts. The second part, which follows this introductory section, offers a brief guide to dominant narratives/ approaches of peace and state building in extant literature and their inherent gaps. The third part provides

justification for challenging this dominant approach by laying out the contexts in which “conversations” of peace and state building are taking place in Africa, highlighting the common trends in this regard. It argues that any attempt to build stable peace must return to those conversations rather than short circuit them through the imposition of particular models of statebuilding in ways that do not take into account the nature and content of the conversations taking place before those societies slid into violence. The fourth part essentially asks whether we can learn something from the experiences of two distinct contexts where such conversations led to violence or armed conflict and how the violence ended, hence the focus on peace and political settlements (used interchangeably). This section offers a definition of political/ peace settlements and clarifies its usage in this project. In the fifth and last part, we highlight the aims and objectives of this research as well as the core and operational questions which will guide this research, while outlining important next steps in the research process.

Dominant ideas of Statebuilding and Peacebuilding

The dominant narrative in extant literature constructs statebuilding and peacebuilding especially in contexts of armed conflict as separate but inter-related endeavours. Concepts of peace have, for example, over the last thirty years shifted from earlier Kantian [Immanuel Kant] ideas of *perpetual peace* that emphasised on centrality of states, to an ideal form of “liberal peace”, sometimes understood today as a process of post-conflict intervention and a move from peace to peacebuilding.ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, contemporary ideas of statebuilding – often considered as a separate agenda in the political development of states – have not only been predominantly founded on European experiences,^{iv} but have since the end of the Cold War and post 9/11 terror attacks in the United States, gone through a conceptual and pragmatic evolution by adopting aphoristic concepts such as “collapsed states”, to their subsequent corollaries, “failed states” and “weak states”.^v Equally today, “liberal peace” sets a standard by which “failed states” and “bad civil societies” are judged according to ethical, spatial and temporal markers.^{vi} The basis, though theoretical, of statebuilding, is founded on the central tenets of the state’s capability to perform functions or the ability to achieve specific outcomes.

The two functions and outcomes, which are important to highlight here are usually founded and advanced on a *Weberian*—Marx Weber—philosophy of coercive and non-coercive functions of the state.^{vii} The coercive functions are considered as the state’s capacity to monopolise the means of violence and thus the capability to enforce extractive functions such as revenue collection, taxation or exploiting resources, maintain law and order, and provision of security within a given territory.^{viii} The non-coercive functions mainly characteristic of modern states, are described in terms of the state’s provision of social goods and services, the durability and efficacy of a state’s governance structures and its social and economic redistributive functions.^{ix} To be sure, these concepts are widely held with reference to ideas of statebuilding in Africa both in theory as well as in practice.^x The premise therefore is that, a state that performs these functions is considered successful while those that

are unable to perform them are failed. The implication of this is that when violent conflict occurs in a state that is deemed to have “failed” the solution to that conflict must of necessity be found in constructing this ideal state. This approach to building peace has gained prominence in the last two decades.

Ideas of what constitutes success in peacebuilding have varied in theory and practice.^{xi} Contemporary thinking on *peace* as reflected in practice was not originally conceived within the context of statebuilding. Focus has largely been on responding to societal inequalities – perhaps a mirror of Galtung’s foundational ideas of negative and positive peace.^{xii} The need to connect these ideas became obvious in post-Cold War approaches of peacebuilding such as the *Agenda for Peace*, outlined by Boutros Boutros-Ghali and the idea of liberal states, when the realities of intractable armed conflict and relapse of war in post-conflict states became more apparent.^{xiii}

The argument here is that the conceptualisation of statebuilding and peacebuilding as well as its practice has a number of gaps, which have implications for statebuilding and peacebuilding approaches particularly in Africa. Five of those gaps are outlined here. Indeed, these gaps should be understood within a context in which the development of conceptual frameworks and academic research has been driven by policy and practice (at least since the end of the Cold War).

1. Reliance on Weberian or neo-Weberian perspectives in understanding the contemporary state tends to obscure the social and political realities in these countries, thereby failing to capture the important conversations taking place between ordinary people and the ruling elite no matter how unstructured these conversations are.^{xiv}
2. The role, and link of peacebuilding to statebuilding, particularly in countries affected by intermittent violent conflict, remains discordant and underexplored.
3. Contemporary peacebuilding practices, such as internationally or regionally sanctioned multi-dimensional peacekeeping operations— are highly institutionalised in their approaches and often tend to be inflexible, limited and unable to address several peacebuilding dilemmas like developing adaptable and context specific rapid responses as well as inability to handle possibilities of relapse into conflict. Consequently, the solutions prescribed

by policymakers have been hasty institutional reforms, building state capacities.^{xv}

4. Statebuilding and peacebuilding have previously and consistently been criticised for using a top-down approach that more often ignores local contexts, informal actors and initiatives which if brought on board could lead to longer-term, sustainable, context specific programmes as well as end up in better outcomes. The manner in which the approaches are sequenced and promoted is seen as an ‘imposed’ phenomenon from the outside.^{xvi} Therefore, the responses tend to be conceived with do no harm assumptions, which presume that African countries are trapped in perpetual institutional failure hence, they require more support.^{xvii}
5. Finally, the evolving discourses of statebuilding and peacebuilding that almost focus the agenda on practical application exclusively on post-armed conflict situations alter the narrative that ought to see peacebuilding as part of a statebuilding continuum.

Statebuilding “conversations” at the root of armed conflict –

Identifying common trends

In this study, we take the position that many of Africa’s post-independence and post-cold war conflicts are in part, “conversations” about nation and statebuilding taking place in the specific national contexts. The notion of *conversation* advanced here is not restricted to structured, overt and delineated dialogues, discussions or exchanges that occur between a variety of actors within society. Rather, we are particularly interested in the wide-ranging interactions among groups in society – however unstructured, unseen and inexplicit – and their resulting signifiers. We see these as particular forms of conversations, which occur especially in situations where power asymmetry is rife not least between populations and those in positions of authority, who preside over them.

These conversations can be said to be about statebuilding when certain types of issues are at the heart of those conversations and when there is an indication that they are occurring between particular segments of society. For example, existential

issues, where the physical or material survival of a group might be at stake; the functioning of state institutions and the degree to which they are responsive to the needs of the larger population; access to channels of power and resources, among many other things. As such, when citizens create alternative systems of response to needs deemed to have been neglected by their governments or those in authority, there is an important conversation to be found therein. This is notwithstanding that the absence of a satisfactory response system has not been explicitly stated or requested. These conversations might be occurring between particular groups and their government; between groups with competing demands in terms of access to state resources; and typically, elite groupings struggling for the control of machinery of government, among various other things.

By their very trajectory, the vast majority of African states are the product of many difficult conversations first between colonial elites and African peoples and societies; and in the post-independence period, between Africa's *inheritance* elite and their people. Some of the earlier conversations, which led to political independence for the societies concerned, were necessarily violent. And not surprisingly, in the absence of deliberate, structured dialogue about the terms on which groups in the newly independent societies would live together, some of the conversations between the post-colonial rulers and their people are not dissimilar. Some of these conversations have concerned among other things, issues of (in)security, (in)justice and their enablers, which reflect the diversity of interests in society and as such are invariably gendered, creed or belief-driven, age-based or fraught with other identity patterns not least ethnicity and class. These conversations occur violently or not, at various levels in these societies between elite groupings and/or between ruling elites and segments of society sometimes struggling for control of the machinery of state.

We suggest that by their very nature, these conversations are part and parcel of the processes of state and/or nation building in the post-independence period. If formal conversations or dialogues between inheritance elite and their people did not precede the creation of those states, the very fact of their co-existence within a set boundary was bound to produce forms of interaction in their new situation. There are naturally, competing interests and demands, which require mediation while people also demand to have a say in the systems that govern their daily lives. The place of

power and power holders in the mediation of the competing demands in these spaces cannot be overstated. Perceived or actual exclusion from sources of power and alongside this, a perception that the demands of certain groups are given more priority can lead to open conflict. Failure to achieve meaningful participation in the creation of systems that can effectively address these differences has produced various forms of responses within society.

Typically, those with access to power and channels of redress or expression openly contest control of the spaces. Others retreat from mainstream to pursue alternative channels of responding to their needs. For example, the manifestations of this on issues of security are visible in several areas. One is that ordinary people, far removed from access to the protection offered by state security establishments then retreat to seek protection from non-state systems, which are able to purchase their loyalty. Another is that those who feel excluded might be willing to pay for the services of security providers outside of state arrangements. Yet another manifestation and perhaps a more significant one for our purposes is where those who as a result of such perceived exclusion seek to wrest away the machinery of state control from current occupiers of the space. These are ways in which statebuilding conversations have escalated into violence. Invariably, these conversations remain confined to this elite class/interest group such that the rest of society becomes disconnected from the larger conversations. Yet they are affected by the impact of those violent conflicts, which typically render them displaced, injured or migrating. Trends across Africa reflect the dominance of this last scenario. We have thus seen many instances in the post-independence and post-Cold War period, where these struggles between segments of power holders or elite have battled it out openly. Examples include Nigerian civil war, Ethiopia, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau and most recently Mali and South Sudan.

It is therefore expected that peacebuilding interventions in such settings might seek to transform the dynamics between ruling elite and local populations, thus setting them on a common course of nation building. Of the identity patterns mentioned above, that of gender is rarely elevated to the top of mainstream conflict resolution strategies while issues such as ethnicity, and religion often receive considerable

attention even if in ways, which lack authenticity. Overall, however, much of the effort in peacebuilding has been focused on bargaining between elite groupings without a fundamental re-ordering of elite mindset and approaches in favour of a collective, citizen-centred national agendas. Peacemakers have tended to focus an inordinate amount of attention on the need to bring the attendant violence to an immediate end. In so doing, they may have inadvertently ensured a relapse of violence at a future date.

Post-conflict peace and state building efforts in Africa have emerged largely from several scenarios: one in which the violence ended through a military solution on the battlefield. This does not preclude various shades of external support for one side or the other; another in which external intervention helps achieve a peace settlement; and yet another in which the arranged peace was the product of externally facilitated negotiations between the parties to the violent conflict. Whether or not these scenarios offer a chance to bring about a transformation in the internal dynamics and thus achieve stable peace by returning affected societies to a collective conversation about the terms on which they will live together peacefully within a viable state is a concern at the heart of this study. It must be stressed however that the practical application of statebuilding agendas, has focused almost exclusively on post-armed conflict situations. Indeed, it is arguable that this near complete focus on post-armed conflict situations is what fundamentally alters the narrative from one that ought to see peacebuilding as part of the state building continuum to one, which sees peacebuilding as the fundamental objective of statebuilding.

The classical peacebuilding dilemma i.e., the likelihood that a violent conflict will recur in affected societies within ten years of the end of armed conflict, is perhaps what has spurred continued interest in this subject globally. While the factors underpinning the recurrence of conflicts are varied, research has focused on the nature of the peace process and the eventual peace agreement. Globally, studies indicate that there has been an increasing trend of conflicts, especially after the cold war, ending through negotiated settlements than through victories as an entry point for peacebuilding.^{xviii}

The table below is an initial attempt at categorization of the trends that have been apparent in responses to armed conflict in Africa.

	Militarily Solution	Ach'd Negotiated Settlement
Nature of Statebuilding	Led by victor	Led on an agreed terms of engagement
Inclusivity	Entrenched by victor	Engineered by parties
Enforced	Dominant party	External party
Ending of violence	Military victory	Political/peace settlement
Durability	Not definite	Determined by agreement

Table 1 Typology of Political Settlements

The role of political settlements in peace and state building efforts

Our interest in *political settlements* in this study stems from the assumption that the way an armed conflict is brought to an end is likely to determine the extent to which that post-conflict society can achieve stable peace within a viable state. In this regard, two distinct contexts of armed conflict form the focus of our attention. The first concerns situations of armed conflict where armed violence ended on the battlefield; and where the post-conflict agenda was developed within that society without massive outside facilitation. Specifically, we consider the experiences of Ethiopia and Rwanda here. The second includes armed conflict situations where violence was brought to an end through external facilitators who also negotiated and supervised the post-conflict agenda as has been the case with Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, and Sierra Leone. There is however a slight nuance that needs to be made in relation to the Kenyan example. External actors facilitated the negotiations between the parties to the conflict. But implementation of the agreement did not experience the type of large scale external participation, which the extensive armed conflicts in

Cote d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone experienced. We suggest that an examination of these settings might enable us make better sense of the impact of these forms of settlements and the extent to which each helps to set conflict affected societies on the course of nation and statebuilding in ways that produce stable peace. In these contexts, we would be interested in knowing, for example:

- Whether the post- (armed) conflict agendas (referring to the dominant frameworks around which target societies coalesced to rebuild their states e.g. peace agreement, vision document, decrees, etc.) sustained the dominant narratives and approaches to peace and statebuilding or whether they support the alternative narrative emphasised in this study.
- Whether these agendas address conversations in society before the war – not just between elite groupings but those involving the whole of society.
- In particular, whether post-conflict agendas include conversations between elite and whole of society and how.
- The extent to which these post-conflict conversations are producing markers of stable peace.
- What differentiates the two contexts and what lessons can be learned from them.

Objectives of this research

Two underlying assumptions, which will guide this study, are i) that peacebuilding is essentially part of the continuum of state making and statebuilding; and ii) that the way a violent conflict terminates is likely to determine the degree of sustainability of peacebuilding and statebuilding.

This research therefore has four key objectives:

- To draw new and comparable insights about the trajectory of countries that pursued their statebuilding conversations in part through violent conflict.
- To refine conceptual understanding about peacebuilding and statebuilding in Africa.
- To draw lessons for peacebuilding processes in countries undergoing violent conflict in the course of statebuilding; and in particular for actors seeking to intervene in those contexts.
- To deepen the knowledge of next generation academics and researchers on this subject – through participation in this research and development of curriculum for the study of peace and statebuilding processes in Africa.

In this study, the terms “political settlement” and “peace settlement” are used interchangeably. And for the purposes of this study, a political settlement is not seen as a process or a continuum but as an activity, event or decisive action, which marks the end of armed conflict or a transition from violent conflict to the pursuit of conflict by non-violent means. The role of political settlement however goes beyond this milestone setting role. It essentially sets the tone for a particular kind of future, which might be one in which a new agenda or framework is set or in which another agenda is excluded with the intention of paving a different path toward to building stable peace and a viable state. Whether or not certain types of settlements lead to peaceful outcomes, uneven stability within states or indeed whether they lead to another round of conflict while producing more viable states is part of the insight that we seek to gain from this study.

Research questions

This research seeks to address one central question:

- What forms of political settlements have demonstrated potential for success or sustainability in terms of peace building and state building?

In addition, the research will address the following operational questions:

- What key features separate one form of peace settlement from others?
- How has the conduct and management of the conflicts in the target countries transformed statebuilding discourses and processes – for good or bad?
- Have the political settlements led to reconciling society, returning them to the core issues at the heart of state building conversations before the war? Or have the settlements reversed the national conversations and trend, doing more harm than good?
- Which markers of identity and inequality (e.g. gender, ethnicity, class) have been taken into consideration in state building? What balance of attention has been given to these different markers? Have political settlements altered the discourse? What are the (range of) normative positions on how different identity and inequality issues should be addressed? Do opinions on these questions vary between (a) stakeholders in a single setting; (b) between settings?
- To what degree have the political settlements contributed to redressing the imbalance in the quality of attention given to gender inequities in society vis-à-vis other identity issues that underline national conversations in statebuilding?
- What types and degrees of legitimacy and societal trust underpinned each form of political settlement? Was there widespread support for the leading proponents and actors? What impact did this have on the peace efforts?

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