

CHAPTER 6

The Rise and Fall of East African States

I would annex the planets if I could; I often think of that.
It makes me sad to see them so clear and yet so far.

—CECIL RHODES, *last will and testament, 1902*

THE EAST AFRICAN conflict system is a specific and evolving political economy of violence that links pastoralists, militias, organized crime, political elites, markets, and changing climatological patterns. Its historical evolution illustrates elements of the catastrophic convergence—the collision of poverty, violence, and climate change—which is to say, the imbrications of neoliberal economic restructuring and Cold War militarism with the effects of global warming. The recent disruptions of the Intertropical Convergence Zone, for example, play out on a stage set by human history. Thus there can be no proper understanding of the social effects of climate change without some knowledge of the concrete history of the places where these climatological changes are happening. And no plans for adaptation or mitigation can be successfully developed or implemented without such history.

Returning to the whodunit question posed by the dead man, Ekaru Loruman, we might ask, Why is the Turkana region of Kenya awash in firearms? The short answer is this: Uganda, South Sudan, and Somalia

all have been, or still are, failed states. All hemorrhaged small arms into Kenya.

Next question: Why and how did these states form, transform, and collapse? This history shapes the current conditions of East African societies and thus informs their ability to adapt to climate change.

Creating Kenya

The British annexation of East Africa began in the early 1890s. The Berlin Conference of 1885 set off the European "Scramble for Africa." As part of this, Queen Victoria's government chartered the Imperial East Africa Company under Scottish shipping magnate Sir William Mackinnon, who then controlled more tonnage than anyone in the world. The company's task was to open what is now Kenya and Uganda to exploitation and possible settlement.¹ Beginning in 1888, the East Africa Company attempted to take hold of parts of what is now Uganda but quickly antagonized the local Kikuyu tribes along the way. When Sir Gerald Portal passed through the area, he blamed the company for provoking violence "by refusing to pay for things." He wrote that "by raiding, looting, swashbuckling and shooting natives, the Company have turned the whole country against the white man."²

The company failed and faced financial collapse. Colonization only began in earnest in 1895, when the British Foreign Office (and then the Colonial Office in 1905) took charge. London's main interest was strategic: controlling the Nile headwaters and thus, theoretically, supporting British interests downriver in Sudan and Egypt. Toward this end, a railroad was built from coastal Mombasa into Kisumu on Lake Victoria. Completed in 1901, the railway quickly opened the country to white settlement, commercial exploitation, and political pacification. A contemporary article explained, "The Uganda railway, in addition to the political effects of its construction, must have, and indeed already has had, a marked effect on the habits and mode of life of the natives. It has brought them into immediate contact with civilization, and opened up possibilities of trade. It has calmed inter-tribal animosities, and checked the feudatory raids of the aggressive races. It has opened up the whole of the countries lying near the

coast-line of the Victoria Nyanza Lake to comparatively easy communication with the sea and with Europe."³

In this regard, the railway, though a single line, acted as a socio-economic fence, enclosing and transforming the regions around it: local forms of economic production were destroyed, displaced, or incorporated as subsets of the growing international capitalist economy.⁴ By 1907, white settlers were pouring in. Through force of law, taxation, and economic might these settlers took possession of what are now the highlands of central Kenya. From 1895 to 1903, British forces conducted regular "punitive expeditions." This use of force was central to wresting land from African hands, though not necessarily in the direct fashion of, say, the Belgian campaigns of violent theft in the Congo. More often than not, the actual transfer of land from Africans to settlers involved legerdemain, haggling, cooperation, and co-optation, all conducted against the backdrop of violence. In the process, some African elites even made out well.

John Lonsdale, another doyen of East African history, describes the nuance as follows: "What transpired on the battlefield then, when the Hotchkiss or Maxim was assembled or the bayonet charge went in; when the thatch was fired or the cattle captured—all this was of fundamental importance in establishing a sense of mastery or subordination. But force was not power. Power comes not by a single act of confrontation but by repeated transactions within some ordered set of social relations; its costs and benefits must at least carry the possibility of calculation and prediction."⁵ In other words, states are born of violence, but they cannot be made solely of violence.

Along with colonial administration from Britain, white settlers established their own local government of sorts, the Legislative Council, which worked with London, but also against it. At their height, some 350,000 whites lived in Kenya. It was they who most antagonized and directly exploited the native population.⁶ London and Nairobi bickered constantly about military expenses and the low economic productivity of the white farmers. "In its first nine years military costs swallowed nearly one-third of the Protectorate's budget; they exceeded local revenue, and were chiefly to blame for the tripling of the annual Imperial subsidy in the five years from 1896."⁷

Using Crisis, Seeding Crisis

Aiding British political consolidation—which is to say, the eventual formation of a modern state system in East Africa—was the ecological crisis of the 1890s, when drought, livestock diseases, and smallpox killed almost a quarter of the native people in central Kenya. The survivors were desperate for patrons both for defense against raids and for access to resources. “In the devastated areas of Kenya the British happened to be the best patrons available. . . . They had also come as conquerors.”⁸

As local modes of production spun into crisis, the settler class used its money to buy up land. But the white farms were often ineptly run and unprofitable. To protect themselves against economic competition, the settler-controlled Legislative Council imposed harsh economic handicaps on native farmers. For example, Africans were totally prohibited from raising coffee. On top of that, the settlers demanded and received subsidies from London, and thus the British economy as a whole.

The effect of these coddling, racist restrictions and subsidies was to retard development of a functional capitalist economy within the colony. The matrix of protection established by and for the settlers was only removed in the 1930s, when the buildup to World War II triggered a global commodity boom. Britain needed raw materials and food imports more than it needed a white African cowboy aristocracy. As Colin Leys has shown, when black farmers were finally allowed to compete for and produce a share of exports, Kenya’s economic growth took off.⁹

Kikuyu Pushback

By the 1950s, the Kikuyu, who had been deracinated from the highlands by white settlers, had nonetheless created something of a merchant, farming, and town-based intellectual leadership, and they began to agitate for greater political rights. This was met with repression, and soon many Kikuyu turned to guerrilla warfare.

The Mau Mau rebellion, as this uprising was known, provoked a brutal and sophisticated counterinsurgency. Whites called it “the Emergency,” and

the internal siege was replete with armed sweeps, terror squads, mass detention, torture, reeducation and the use of small, elite counterguerilla units. The official casualty figure was 11,503 killed; however, scholars now put the number much higher.¹⁰ David Anderson settles on 20,000. Caroline Elikin's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* estimates the dead to have numbered 70,000 or more.¹¹ The Mau Mau were crushed, but they put Kenya on schedule for full independence and the end for white minority rule in East Africa.

As decolonization approached, the authorities began negotiations with their former adversary, Jomo Kenyatta. During the Emergency, white officials had demonized Kenyatta as a madman, a Mau Mau, and a communist and put him under house arrest. In reality Kenyatta was a liberal nationalist, who, once released, acted as Britain's reasonable native interlocutor. The final arrangements of independence protected settler wealth and gave settlers who wished to leave the option to sell their property at market prices. To pay off these departing landlords, the new Kenyan government borrowed money from the United Kingdom. Acquired assets—land and businesses—were mostly distributed to a new Kikuyu ruling class, who were also heavily represented in Kenyatta's new government, and the Kenya African National Union, which was the ruling party until 2002. This dominant position partially explains—but in no way justifies—the pogroms against Kikuyus in 2007; once again, class antagonisms took ethnic form.

Decline of Old Raiding

By 1909 colonial administrators had established the Collective Punishment Ordinance that attempted to stop raiding by levying punitive fines on whole communities.¹² Colonial files at the National Archives in Nairobi are full of reports from District Officers detailing an endless flow of tit-for-tat attacks between the tribes. British officials routinely held hearings, issued reports, detained suspects, levied fines, pursued fugitives, and sternly admonished local subchiefs, who were usually leaders appointed by the British.

The historical trend of East African cattle violence is difficult to measure with total accuracy—the records are incomplete, skewed, and tainted—but there is evidence of a relative decline in raiding from about the late 1920s until the early 1970s. Steady expansion of the state's administrative capacity and the absorption of ever more people into the formal labor market seem to have cut down on the violence. The British created legally delineated "group ranches" designed to separate warring tribes and bring about the economic integration of pastoralists. As more of them became wage laborers and commodity producers, the importance of cattle theft fell away.

An increase in police, courts, taxes, wage labor, identification papers, conscription, jails, health care, water management, primary education, veterinary services, and livestock-improvement programs—in short the matrix of governance—quelled the traditional raiding, even as it sometimes gave rise to other, new forms of violence. The countryside was administratively *contained* and thus controlled. The Turkana and other pastoralists were partially absorbed into Kenyan society, and their traditional cultural modes were subsumed by capitalist economic relations and the state's general regimentation of society.¹³

Yet in postcolonial Kenya, the pastoralists of the North remained peripheral—for better and for worse—largely neglected, though operating within the half-present social and judicial confines of a modern state complete with schools, laws, clinics, roads, game parks, and a cash economy. But the state's administrative grip on these lands and populations would weaken considerably starting in the late 1970s, when a series of El Niño–Southern Oscillation–linked droughts began. With that, cattle raiding started to increase once again.

The Guns of Uganda

The British also controlled Uganda until the early 1960s. During the late 1970s it was from independent Uganda that the first flood of guns would enter the Turkana region and much of northern Kenya. What is now Uganda once comprised the former kingdom of Buganda plus a few other African principalities and feudal states, all of which had fallen under

British suzerainty through a mix of coercion, cooperation, and economic might.

By the mid-1950s, Uganda's old native elite and educated middle classes were watching the progress of the Kenyan Mau Mau, and the brutal campaign against them, with keen interest. The Kenyan rebels served as a cautionary tale for both Africans and white authorities. When Ugandans began agitating for greater political participation and full independence, British authorities wisely made preparations for a scheduled decolonization that began in the late 1950s. Uganda remained a British protectorate until 1962 but thereafter was an independent state.

The first president was an old African aristocrat, Sir Edward Mutesa, who had once been a regional king; his prime minister was the left-leaning nationalist Milton Obete, who nationalized large parts of the economy but was also known for corruption. In 1971 the infamous military officer Idi Amin Dada seized power, and there began a slide toward chaos.¹⁴

Born in about 1925 in northern Uganda, as a boy Amin went to primary school and tended his family's goats. In 1944, he enlisted in the Kings African Rifles, a British colonial regiment that served in East Africa and, during the world wars, elsewhere. Amin saw action in Burma and returned a corporal. He went on to become the local military heavy-weight-boxing champion, participated in punitive expeditions against restive tribes in northern Uganda and, in 1953, fought the Mau Mau. Upon his return from Kenya in 1957, preparations for independence were under way in Uganda, and as a prominent noncommissioned officer, Amin was groomed for high rank in the Ugandan Army. By 1964, he was a top commander and ran secret missions into Congo/Zaire in support of the Simbas, a group of pro-Lumumba rebels fighting against the emerging kleptocracy of Mobutu Sese Seko. But mostly, Amin seems to have used his time in Congo to vacuum up ivory and gold.¹⁵

As soon as Amin had political control of Uganda, he began to threaten neighboring Tanzania.¹⁶ Domestically, Amin's regime was marked by medieval savagery and modern weaponry. At first his repression had a political logic: violence was directed toward specific socioeconomic ends and

served the dominant economic interests. But Amin was, ultimately, insane: a big, roly-poly, smiling, cherubic, khaki-clad sociopath in charge of what would become one of sub-Saharan Africa's largest armies. The Ugandan state quickly became personalistic, clique ridden, peculating, bribe taking, and vicious. In seven short years, Amin's Uganda would epitomize and foreshadow the kleptocracy that would dishonor much of postcolonial Africa. It was the worst of Mobutu-style, Big Man politics in which a leader's obligations are "first and foremost, to kith and kin, their clients, their communities, their regions, or even to their religion"—but not to the nation as such.¹⁷

Prior to 1971, Uganda had exported reasonable amounts of cotton, copper, sugar, and various other agricultural products. All that began to decline due to the military government's idiotic mismanagement and looting of the public sector. Soon state repression had spun out of control. In 1972 Amin attacked and expelled the country's South Asians, in a smash-and-grab pogrom called Operation Mafuta Mingi. The soldiers at the heart of the state now owned expropriated Asian businesses but did not manage them in any formal sense.

The regime's one concrete goal, in addition to the personal enrichment of its officialdom, was a colossal military buildup. The Soviets gave Amin generous aid toward that end, just as Western companies made money selling him weapons and training. It was a seemingly strange, but not unheard of, form of Cold War competition in which both camps courted the same client. As we shall see, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Afghanistan, to name but a few, enjoyed similarly mixed patronage.

Under Amin, Uganda's roads, ports, warehouses, farms, and factories fell into dilapidation. As *The Economist* wrote, "Expenditure to maintain the social and economic infrastructure, let alone to develop it, was reduced to a trickle. Scarcity and inflation were the harvest the regime reaped in a short period."¹⁸ Labor strikes followed and were savagely repressed. The regime became increasingly isolated and vulnerable.

Finally, a horrified US Congress moved to impose economic sanctions. The Carter administration, despite a stated commitment to human rights, opposed the idea. Congress prevailed, nonetheless, and in October 1978 the

United States imposed a trade embargo on Uganda. In retaliation, Amin told American expatriates that they could not leave—essentially taking them all hostage.¹⁹ As the Ugandan economy shrank further, the officer corps, fat on economic carrion, took to squabbling among themselves. To appease his henchmen, Amin created ten militarily run provinces, but these fiefs only weakened the state further. As the provincial governors smuggled coffee and stole revenue, the vaults of the central government emptied. By summer 1978, even soldiers were going unpaid. There were coup attempts and small mutinies, in which even the defense minister was implicated.

In October 1978, Amin resorted to the lowest trick of statecraft: he went to war. His invasion of Tanzania was, however, swiftly repelled, and Amin's army—a modern, motorized, state-of-the-art shambles—collapsed.

The Tanzanians and their anti-Amin Ugandan exile allies soon occupied Kampala.²⁰ A *New York Times* correspondent described the victory: "It did not take long for Uganda's liberators to discover that the dictator had left little behind. There was \$200,000 in foreign exchange in the central bank, along with \$250 million in foreign debts. There were mass graves throughout the land that held an estimated half million dead, most of them men who had been suspected of opposing Amin. It was a country of widows and orphans with no economy to speak of; a place of ruin."²¹

Armories Plundered

The capital was under occupation, but in the rural northeast no one was in charge. As the army melted away, the well-stocked Moroto Garrison near the Kenyan border and a smaller one in Kotido were looted by Karamojong and Jie tribesmen, who acquired "for the first time a significant supply of automatic weapons and ammunition." Many of these guns flowed into Kenya and on to other parts of the pastoralist corridor.²² One report described Karamojong warriors looting a military armory in 1979, stealing 20,000 assault rifles and 2 million rounds of ammunition; more guns were dumped by fleeing soldiers.²³ A year into liberation, the *Times* described the crisis in Karamoja: "The natives stormed an army barracks in the town of Moroto during the revolution and took 15,000 automatic weapons. But

Karamoja has its own special tragedy. . . . For centuries the men among them have made their living with spears, stealing one another's cows, but with the acquisition of weapons, the cattle-raiding changed from spear-point to gunpoint."²⁴ Another press report called parts of Uganda "virtual war zones." "Bands of raiders, sometimes numbering in the hundreds and usually armed with automatic rifles, sweep into Ugandan and Tanzanian villages, kill those who resist and make off with livestock—the villagers' most valuable possessions."²⁵

Thousands were displaced and hundreds killed before the new Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni could begin to restore some semblance of order. Today the Small Arms Survey estimates there are four hundred thousand illegal weapons in Uganda alone. And war continues there even today, now prosecuted by the sociopaths of the Lord's Resistance Army.²⁶

Enter El Niño

Just as northeast Uganda was flooded with guns, a severe drought descended on the whole region. Famine swept the Karamoja, killing people and livestock. By the summer of 1980, *The Economist* described the crisis thus: "A disaster of huge proportions has hit northeast Africa. Hundreds of people, mainly children, are dying from starvation every day. In Somalia and Ethiopia, in northern Uganda and Kenya, in tiny Djibouti and in vast Sudan some 10 million people are at risk. All, to some degree, are victims of drought, but three million of them are also refugees from war and civil strife."²⁷ The preceding two decades had seen a series of droughts across the Sahel, and in the Horn of Africa, there had been famines in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia. According to experts, most herders in the region lost up to 80 percent of their small stock and half of their cattle to starvation and disease.²⁸

From 1980 to 1982 the weather got even more intense as one of the two worst El Niño events of the century occurred. By the end of it, the Karamojong's cattle holdings were only half what they had been in 1962; yet, their human population had doubled. As one press report explained: "The women stay behind and plant corn beside creeks. Last year, however,

there was no rain and the creeks went dry. Cholera and famine spread quickly, and by late June of this year, an estimated 20,000 Karamojong had died." A UN relief program stopped after a few months because a food convoy was attacked.²⁹

False Solutions

On the Uganda-Kenya border, the looted weapons provided the Karamojong with a social remedy to their ecological problems: large-scale raids against the agricultural Iteso. In short order, Karamojong gunmen took most of the Iteso's cattle. "Occasional raiding was a familiar enough experience, but the scale and consequences of these attacks were without precedent."³⁰ In revenge, the Iteso violently evicted those Karamojong who had settled in their area. Similar depredations befell other tribes, and with guns so cheap and plentiful, the cattle violence that had been in decline began a new upward trend. Some two thousand hungry and often armed Ugandans crossed into the Turkana region of Kenya in search of food and cattle.³¹ Though relative stability has returned to most of Uganda, the country remains a source of illegal guns and ammunition for Kenyan tribesmen. And the damage of the late seventies and early eighties mayhem was never undone.

A greater source of instability to the whole region is, of course, Somalia, the textbook failed state. Today, Somalia is an anarchic warzone from which flow weaponry, piracy, and ethnic and religious radicalism. It supplies the Horn of Africa's bandits, raiders, militias, and guerrillas with guns, sanctuary, and markets. So, let us now address the history of Somalia's collapse—for it is a central element in the catastrophic convergence.