

REVIEW ESSAY

Guns in African History: The Examples of Central Africa and Nigeria

TIM STAPLETON

Giacomo Macola. 2016. *The Gun in Central Africa: A History of Technology and Politics*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press. 249 pp.

Saheed Aderinto. 2018. *Guns and Society in Colonial Nigeria: Firearms, Culture and Public Order*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press. 300 pp.

Guns have played an important and deadly role in African History. Relevant themes include the gun-slave cycle of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the superiority of European firepower produced by new weapons such as the Maxim Gun during the “Scramble for Africa,” and the proliferation of small arms such as the ubiquitous AK-47 assault rifle in parts of post-colonial Africa. Moving beyond these well-known examples, historians Giacomo Macola and Saheed Aderinto have written books that seek to use the gun as a vehicle to explore broader aspects of the history of different parts of Africa.

Macola’s book looks at the development of a “gun society” in the interior of Central Africa, particularly the savannah region that now comprises Zambia, Malawi, and the southern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), during the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. According to the author, “a gun society is one in which firearms are put to momentous productive, military and/or other symbolic uses, over a sustained period of time and by a politically or numerically significant portion of the population” (p. 19). Macola criticizes previous works on the history of technology in Africa, particularly the few related to imported firearms, for engaging in technological determinism in that African societies are seen as passively receiving and being moulded by technological innovation. The recent work of William Storey, which looks at the relation of gun ownership and trade to the rise of a racial hierarchy in Southern Africa, is criticized for relying on colonial sources and therefore failing to explore the adoption of guns within African societies.¹ The central theme of Macola’s “culturally sensitive” (p. 163) study is that the different meanings and functions of guns adopted by people in Central Africa “were shaped by pre-existing sociocultural relations and political interests” (p. 30). The author intends to use the gun as an example of technology through which to observe important factors in the history of Central Africa. A secondary aim is to revive interest in pre-colonial African history which engendered a great deal of scholarship from the 1960s to 1980s, the decades immediately following decolonization, but which has faded in recent years.

Tim Stapleton is Professor of History at the University of Calgary. He has published eleven sole-authored books, the most recent of which are *Africa: War and Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2018) and *A History of Genocide in Africa* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2017).

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v18/v18i1a5.pdf>

Macola's book begins with an "unashamedly encyclopedic" (p. 30) survey to introduce non-specialists to the pre-colonial history of the interior and southern portion of Central Africa. The subsequent chapters focus on the history of the gun in specific areas. Chapter Two looks at the upper Zambezi River in what is now western Zambia where, during the 1800s, the Lozi Kingdom did not initially adopt imported firearms because of the late arrival of the Atlantic trade and the fact that the Lozi did not export slaves but utilized them internally. After several decades of rule by the invading Kololo who also did not use guns extensively, the re-established Lozi kings of the late nineteenth century sought to centralize control of firearms, which became symbols of royalty and modernity. Nearby, the decentralized Kaonde and Luvale people, during the late nineteenth century, began to use guns as tools for hunting, symbols of manhood, and a form of currency. Looking at why such communities prized apparently obsolete muzzle-loaders, Macola explains that these represented an "accessible technology" (p. 59) as they were made with soft iron that could be mended locally.

The third chapter looks at the Yeke state, located in what is now Katanga in southern DRC, which was founded by the upstart invader Msiri in the 1850s and 1860s and used imported firearms to engage in the slave and ivory trades. Macola explains that the Yeke use of guns for military and economic purposes gave them short-term success but that their failure to develop gunpowder manufacturing made them dependent on importation. While Yeke power was undermined by a rebellion of the hitherto victimized Sanga people who blocked the delivery of gunpowder, Yeke fortunes were revived by the arrival of the Belgian colonizers of the Congo Free State who employed them as military auxiliaries and provided guns and ammunition. For Macola, the example of the warlord Yeke state undermines the technologically deterministic approach as possession of guns did not guarantee success. This is a strong and well-researched chapter but the cultural approach falls away as it focuses on a "war and society" or "new military history" interpretation.

The next chapter examines the impact of colonial rule on gun domestication in what is now western Zambia and Katanga. Coming under British rule by treaty, the Lozi Kingdom retained its guns and procured new ones from Angolan gunrunners until the 1920s when the colonial state of Northern Rhodesia imposed laws that limited gun ownership and hunting. The possibility that this delay was caused by the First World War, which was fought in two nearby territories with the last German force surrendering in eastern Northern Rhodesia, is not discussed. For Belgian ruled Katanga, the Yeke continued as gun-armed colonial military allies until the 1910s when they entered wage labor in the area's mines which meant that guns became individual hunting tools and symbols of manhood. By the 1930s, difficulty in obtaining guns stimulated local manufacturing of old-style muskets from gun scraps, industrial products and local materials, and gunpowder was made from charcoal and imported saltpeter.

The last two chapters shift the focus to the Ngoni who originated from Southern Africa and moved into what is now eastern Zambia and Malawi in the middle 1800s. Macola sees the Ngoni rejection of firearms not as a result of isolation from trade or of a failure to militarily adapt but as a deliberate choice informed by sociocultural factors. For the Ngoni, Macola claims, guns represented a threat to masculinity and social advancement, which were related to demonstrating prowess in hand-to-hand combat with edged weapons. After a bloody conquest by the British, which Macola recounts in traditional military history style,

the Ngoni sense of honor was reinvented as a desire to join the colonial military where their symbol of manhood changed from the spear to the gun. In this view, the Ngoni attraction to the colonial military led to them being defined as a “martial race” by British officers.

Macola’s interesting book suffers from major problems. Although the author warns that he is not writing a “technical compendium,” some explanation of types of guns such as flintlocks, percussion muskets, muzzle-loaders, breach-loaders, and rifles would have been useful as these terms appear repeatedly throughout the text. More seriously, some of the most important contentions are based on very limited or no evidence. This is particularly apparent with the claims that the Lozi kings used guns as symbols of modernity, and that Ngoni concepts of honor and manhood were the primary factors prompting their initial rejection of firearms and their subsequent alleged flocking to the colonial army. The possibility that the late nineteenth century Lozi kings adopted guns to prevent another Kololo-like conquest is not taken seriously enough. While honor may have been a factor in the Ngoni reluctance to use guns, tactical and environmental adaptations were also likely very important. In the same period, in East Africa, the decentralized Maasai and the Kingdom of Rwanda developed effective tactics against musket-armed raiders but these methods proved disastrous against much better armed colonial invaders who arrived suddenly.² The claim that the Ngoni dominated the ranks of British military units in the region is in some cases speculative (p. 151), exaggerated or not contextualized. With reference to Ngoni reasons for joining the colonial army, the entire cultural argument is based on a passage in a single colonial memoir (p. 154, note 78), and no Ngoni sources were used and no fieldwork was conducted in contemporary Ngoni (or for that matter Lozi) communities, which would have been accessible. After describing how colonial conquest left Ngoni communities shattered, the author unconvincingly dismisses poverty and hunger as instigators for military enlistment. Historians who conducted extensive oral and documentary research on African motivations for joining later colonial militaries, Timothy Parsons on Kenya and I on Zimbabwe, are set up as strawmen and criticized for ignoring “profound historical processes” (p. 154) and presenting a “lopsided perspective” (p. 156).³ Macola would have benefited from reading Timothy Lovering’s well researched PhD thesis on African soldiers in colonial Malawi which discusses the Ngoni and other ethnic groups such as the Yao who used guns in the nineteenth century, enlisted in the colonial army and were characterized as a martial race.⁴

Macola engages in considerable speculation. Jumping about thirty or forty years of history, he guesses that the Yeke’s historical association with firearms informed their enlistment in Katanga separatist forces during the 1960s Congo Crisis (p. 114). There is nothing about possible Yeke military enlistment from 1910s to 1950s. While the book’s conclusion recommends that modern policymakers apply a deeper historical and cultural approach to the problems of militia violence in eastern DRC, an area slightly outside the scope of the book, not much is mentioned besides the well-known nineteenth century warlord Tippu Tip.

While Macola hopes to inspire new interest in pre-colonial history, the book deals mostly with the conquest and early colonial eras and employs just three oral interviews all of which are related to the Yeke case. In fact, the book represents a clear illustration of why Africanist historians have unfortunately shied away from pre-colonial history as the evidence is limited, it is difficult to address the period before 1800, and oral traditions are eroding and probably never focused much on social and cultural issues that currently

interest academic historians. If not for the detailed and well documented sections on military and colonial history, the book's pretentious, speculative, and thinly supported cultural approach would be fragmentary.

Using guns as a "window" into the history of colonial Nigeria from around 1900 to 1960, Aderinto differentiates between a gun society and a gun culture. For him, a gun society is one that "cannot do without firearms in its daily social, political, cultural and religious life" (p. 7) and a gun culture exists within a society in which guns are used for any purpose. Given his definitions, and in contradiction with Macola's view that a gun society existed in Central Africa and Storey's cautionary approach to the term, Aderinto maintains that no gun society existed in Africa before the twentieth century as firearms were restricted to certain groups and used for "empire building and slave-gathering" (p. 7). Aderinto's main point is that Nigeria became a gun society during British colonial rule when the liberalization of gun ownership became transformative. During this period more Nigerians possessed firearms than ever before and, more importantly for the author, guns influenced Nigerian society at different levels.

The book's first chapter discusses the arrival of guns in Nigeria through trade with Europeans and Arabs and looks at how the firearms trade evolved from a regular feature of the Trans-Atlantic system of the 1600s and 1700s importing single-shot muzzle-loaders to a restricted trade in the late nineteenth century when machine guns were used in colonial conquest. From the 1890s to 1920s, as the next chapter shows, the early colonial state regulated gun ownership to reflect social status with common people permitted to own old-fashioned muzzle-loaders popularly called Dane Guns, educated Africans possessing slightly more advanced shotguns, and Europeans and eventually some African elites monopolizing control of the most lethal firearms including revolvers and breach-loading rifles. In this growing Nigerian gun society, by the 1920s, firearms were not only used for hunting a dwindling amount of wildlife and defending against thieves but increasingly for firing salutes during important public events.

While the British did not want Nigerians to access the most deadly firearms with which they could resist colonial rule, the proliferation of the Dane Gun presented an opportunity for the colonial government and businesses to profit, as Nigerians were dependent upon huge quantities of imported gunpowder. During the Second World War, as Aderinto's third chapter discusses, the British supplied gunpowder to Nigerians in exchange for critical wartime materials such as rubber and palm oil. The next chapter looks at the importance of firearms in maintaining colonial rule. For Europeans in Nigeria, and elsewhere in colonial Africa, using rifles in hunting and sport shooting, and belonging to racially exclusive Rifle Associations symbolized imperial domination over Africans and the African environment. In a chapter on the role of firearms in public disorder, Aderinto re-interprets the shooting to death of twenty-one miners by the police during the 1949 Enugu Colliery strike as resulting not from a labor dispute but from the police trying to secure a store of explosives that they feared could be seized by the radical Zikist movement. Furthermore, he discusses how, in the decolonization era of the 1950s, guns were not just employed by the colonizers but that they began to feature within Nigerian political violence. Guns became institutionalized in everyday Nigerian life, which meant that armed robbery rose in tandem with the cash economy, and widespread hunting and celebratory shooting caused more firearm accidents that were often interpreted in a local context.

Gun ownership was not uniform thorough colonial Nigeria and the last chapter reveals that firearms were proliferated in the conservative Muslim north by Christian southerners who, from the early twentieth century, moved there to work or conduct business. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, with the rise of the nationalist movement, the colonial regime completely deregulated the ownership of Dane Guns, which were seen as unthreatening but tightened up rules around possession of shotguns and precision firearms among educated Nigerians who were at the forefront of calls for independence. In his epilogue, Aderinto discusses the demise of a gun society in post-colonial Nigeria where a succession of military governments strictly limited legal gun ownership and publically executed armed robbers by firing squad, and where hunting declined with the extermination of wildlife and celebratory gun salutes became less fashionable. Ironically, at the same time the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) and conflicts in neighbouring Liberia and Sierra Leone led to a spread of illegal and highly lethal military weapons across Nigeria which, in the context of state and economic failure, were (and are) commonly used by criminals and insurgents.

Aderinto has written a solid history. His statements are supported by ample evidence collected from the three branches of the Nigerian National Archives (Ibadan, Kaduna, and Enugu), colonial newspapers, memoirs and some oral interviews conducted in western Nigeria. The richness of Aderinto's research shows why historians of Africa have gravitated to colonial and post-colonial topics. It would be difficult to write such a detailed and insightful history on the same theme focusing entirely on pre-colonial Nigeria. In addition, the book is clearly written and contextualized while addressing sophisticated ideas and an array of specific examples. Usefully, the author gives concise explanations of the relevant types of firearms at the start of the text. It is a relief that Aderinto recognizes but does not belabor the idea that the gun (like other weapons) became a symbol of masculinity in Nigeria as guns have taken on this role in almost every part of the world. My main criticism of the book is that it might be too sweeping to claim with absolute certainty that a gun society, the definition of which varies, did not exist anywhere in Africa before the twentieth century, as research on this theme is relatively new and the evidence is limited. Historiographically, it is tempting to ask if the different definitions of a gun society put forth by these books originate, to some extent, from the authors' personal experience; did Macola's location in gun-shy Britain influence his narrower definition and did Aderinto's position in the gun-loving southern United States widen his view?

Notes

1 Storey 2008.

2 "Mr. J.M. Hildebrandt" 1877-78, p. 448; Kagame 1963, p. 174.

3 Parsons 1999; Stapleton 2011.

4 Lovering 2002. For the military enlistment of Malawians in Southern Rhodesia see Stapleton 2006, p. 36.

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