The Political Demography of Conflict in Modern Africa

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Abstract:

Sub-Saharan Africa has shifted from having a low population density and no population growth in the 19th century to an extremely high population growth today. We argue here that an important cause behind contemporary civil conflict has been this rapid demographic shift. Specifically, we show that low population densities in Africa historically contributed to communal land rights and the creation of large states. In the post-colonial era, however, these two variables have combined with high population growth rates, low levels of urbanization and rural-rural migration flows to produce large amounts of 'sons of the soil' conflict over land. Evidence from contemporary civil wars in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo supports our theory.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The politics of population growth in contemporary Africa has largely been a neglected topic in political science. While there is growing interest in the long-term causes and consequences of Africa's historically low population density,[1] there remains relatively little interest in assessing the impact of demographic change on conflict in contemporary Africa. Indeed, this lacuna remains striking considering both the high levels of conflict in Africa and the continent's shift from a state of population stagnation in the 19th century to one of the largest growth spurts in human history today. Moreover, what scholarly interest does exist on the relationship between population growth and conflict has failed to answer the question of why Africa in particular suffers so much from civil conflict.[2]

In this paper we thus focus on establishing a link between civil conflict and demographic change in Sub-Saharan Africa. We argue that historically low population densities in Africa have indirectly provided mechanisms for conflict via the existence of communal land-holding structures and large states. More recently population growth and low levels of urbanization have encouraged internal rural-rural migration, which has combined with these two variables to produce 'sons of the soil' conflict over land. The preponderance of these conflicts between migrants and natives across contemporary Africa, which has drawn growing attention from scholars in recent years,[3] can thus be traced to a large and very quick shift from low population densities to high population growth over the past century and a half.

The paper thus builds on previous frameworks for understanding the relationship between demography and conflict, in particular Goldstone's seminal analysis of the role of population growth in promoting political upheavals in early modern China, England, France and Turkey.[4] He argued that developing countries today would suffer similar fates if they continued to suffer from inflexible institutions, the resultant unequal distribution of resources, 'urban bias' (or perhaps more accurately a bias against agriculture) and rapid urbanization.[5] The analysis below similarly emphasizes the role of population growth, inflexible institutions and the unequal distribution of

resources in sparking conflict in contemporary Africa. However, we differ from Goldstone in focusing on rural rather than urban population growth as a key causal mechanism, whereby low levels of urbanization contributed to rural-rural migration and subsequent 'sons of the soil' conflict.

The paper is structured as follows. First we explain how Africa's historic low population densities have resulted in communal land rights and large states. Second, we detail how high population growth from the 1920s onwards has impacted African states negatively through these two processes, with attention to the way population growth contributed subsequently to the closing of the land frontier, migration and conflict in the late 20th century. For empirical evidence we turn to examples from Darfur in Sudan and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Finally we conclude with some wider thoughts on political demography and conflict in Africa.

2. THE CONSEQUENCES OF LOW POPULATION DENSITY IN MODERN AFRICA

Debates have raged among historians as to the causes of Africa's low population density: while some have suggested that Africa was sparsely populated due to 'ancient rocks, poor soils, fickle rainfall, abundant insects and unique prevalence of disease,'[6] others have placed more emphasis on the role of the intercontinental slave trade in extracting people from the continent.[7] Regardless of the causes, there is almost universal agreement that pre-colonial Africa's population density was low and, due to large population growth elsewhere, sharply decreasing relative to other regions by the beginning of the colonial period in the late 19th century. The political and economic consequences of low population density have not, however, drawn as much attention. Here we focus on two major consequences for pre-colonial and colonial Africa, namely the development of a communal system of land rights and the creation of large states, each of which we examine in order.

2.1. Communal Land Rights

Pre-colonial Africa's low population density meant that labor was much scarcer than land, which contributed to a set of agricultural practices which can be collectively described as a system of communal land rights. This system was marked by three particular aspects, namely a lack of private property rights, high labor costs and high levels of migration. First, the concept of private property was often absent while laws regulating labor, marriage and cattle-ownership were regularly highly detailed and intricate. Far from being inefficient at the time, various economists have suggested that this system made perfect sense since the benefits of private property were outweighed by their enforcement costs.[8] Thus land was so abundant that it had little to no economic worth in itself; in 19th century Zimbabwe, for instance, 'land was abundant and labor scarce, so that land with no labor on it had little value.'[9] Moreover, the contrast with Rwanda, which had a population density in 1900 some 15 times higher than the African average, is striking: the *ibikingi* land tenure system, for instance, was 'created in response to increased scarcity of lands' in central Rwanda where population densities were at their highest.[10]

Second, low population densities meant that labor costs were high, leading to a subsequent reliance upon labor-saving, land-extensive agriculture.[11] Indeed, historians generally agree that Africans practiced 'extensive agriculture over large areas and shifting settlements when soils were exhausted.'[12] Thus, for example, a British diplomat in 1913 described the shifting nature of pre-colonial agriculture in French Equatorial Africa (the region which would later become Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon and the Central African Republic) as follows:

> The native farmer… is, like his brother of the Belgian Congo, nomadic in his operations; after he exhausts the soil in one place he simply cultivates another, and the transfer often involves the erection of new huts on the new area miles from the last farm, which is left to be soon again buried in dense bush. His ignorance of a scientific rotation of crops, and the ease with which he secures virgin soil, with the correspondingly more abundant crops, operate formidably against any fixity of tenure and the reduction of jungle to permanent arable land.[13]

Third, Africans not only migrated because of soil exhaustion but also for political reasons. Indeed, in sharp contrast to later periods 'strangers' were welcomed into pre-colonial African

societies inasmuch 'they enhanced the prestige and often the labor force of the head of a household, kin group or community.'[14] This pattern of constant migration led one scholar to call Africa a 'frontier continent,' inasmuch as Africans were both pushed to the frontier by political and social change and pulled by the prospects of settling new land.[15]

This system of communal land rights had a profound effect on the manner in which European colonialists extended their rule over rural Africa. More specifically, upon their decision to utilize 'indirect rule' as an inexpensive means to rule over the African countryside European administrators thus created 'traditional' or 'customary' land rights. These new colonial laws both vested land rights in tribal chiefs and regulated labor movements outside Africans' designated tribal territories in the worry that migrant Africans would become 'detribalized' and thus politically dangerous. The result of these laws was to preserve the idea of non-private land ownership but at the cost of ethnicizing land such that 'natives' had privileged access over 'strangers.'[16] While some moves towards promoting private property rights after World War II took place in such colonies as Kenya, Nyasaland (Malawi), Tanganyika (Tanzania) and Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), over 80% of all land across Africa remained in customary tenureship,[17] in part because of the political disruption such a shift could cause at the local level.

To summarize, Africa's pre-colonial low population densities contributed to a communal land rights system generally marked by a lack of private property rights, high labor costs and extensive migration. In the colonial period this led to the colonial creation of 'customary' land rights that encompassed the vast majority of land across the continent, whereby land was vested in tribal chiefs who governed over supposedly ethnically homogenous areas with sharply controlled migration flows.

2.2. Large States

Africa's low pre-colonial population densities also had a profound effect on the size of the continent's states. In the pre-colonial era indigenous states were overwhelmingly small due to their inability to project their power across large territories, with large parts of the continent ruled only at the village level.[18] European colonialists, however, had no problem in conquering Africa with their sophisticated medicines and militaries, and were able to divide up the continent between them in only a quarter-century.

These colonists were in large part driven by claims that Africa contained 'the world's last great untapped reservoir of markets, resources and possible investment opportunities.'[19] In particular much of the speculation about Africa's market potential revolved around estimates of its supposedly large population. To take one example, France was interested in obtaining the West African interior as a 'substitute India' around 1880,[20] in part because it was assumed that the area comprised 'an inexhaustible new market' of some 80 to 100 million people according to the then French Naval Minister.[21] However, upon closer inspection European colonists found that their new colonies contained far fewer people than they initially thought; to take the most extreme example, only 6 million inhabitants lived in what would later become Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Mauritania in 1900,[22] or less than a tenth of earlier estimates.

Not only were these small populations disappointing to European merchants but they also led to the creation of large colonies. More specifically, due to the ability of settlers at avoiding taxes, colonial governments instead had to rely upon head taxes as the primary source of government revenue, which itself meant that colonies with small populations could not be self-sustaining except in coastal areas close to international trading routes. Combined with intense concerns about the need for colonial self-sufficiency back in Europe, colonial governments thus created large colonies in Africa's large low density areas, with smaller colonies in higher density areas such as the Great Lakes Region or coastal West Africa.[23] Figure 1 makes this relationship clear.[24]

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Indeed, due to ongoing concerns about the paucity of government revenues the colonial period was marked by repeated attempts by European administrators to create even larger colonies, such as the short-lived Central African Federation in southern Africa, the abolition of the French colony of Upper Volta between 1932 and 1947 and the aborted British East African Federation. As a result most African colonies emerged at independence as unusually large states. Thus, despite Sub-Saharan Africa being 2.4 times larger than Europe, the two continents today contain the same number of sovereign states. Moreover, as seen in Table 1 the median former colony in Africa is larger than in Asia or Latin America and the Caribbean, whether or not island states are included.

[Insert Table 1 here]

3. AFRICA UNDER HIGH POPULATION GROWTH

The low population density which did so much to contribute to communal land rights systems and the creation of large states has not, however, been a constant factor throughout African history. As noted in Tables 2 and 3,[25] Sub-Saharan Africa had a higher average annual population growth rate than Asia, Europe or the global average for the first 1600 years of the Common Era, and actually had a larger population than Europe between the 14th and 18th centuries. After experiencing negative population growth between 1600 and 1900 – possibly the only region in the world to do so over this period[26] – since 1900 Africa has suddenly experienced one of the largest growth spurts ever recorded in human history.

[Insert Tables 2 and 3 here]

The cause for this shift is simple: Africa is the last region of the world to enter the demographic transition, whereby societies move from a high birth/high death equilibrium to a low birth/low death equilibrium via a high birth/low death transition phase. More specifically, the demographic transition leads to high population growth in this intermediate period where mortality remains low and fertility rates have yet to decline to replacement levels.[27] As with earlier episodes of mortality decline, the late 20th century African decline in mortality was arguably exogenous in that it was a result of medical breakthroughs such as the creation of DDT and penicillin alongside new vaccinations and treatments for such diseases as cholera, measles, smallpox, tuberculosis and yellow fever.[28] What is remarkable about the transition in Africa is that the continent is experiencing large increases in population despite the fact that, thanks to war, HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, mortality still remains relatively high compared to other parts of world.

The evidence suggests that, in part due to the political stability and western medicine introduced by colonialism after World War I, African fertility and population growth rates rose for decades to peak in 1983 and 1990, respectively.[29] Yet, at a Total Fertility Rate of 5.1 children per woman, African birth rates remain more than twice that of Asia (2.28) or Latin America and the Caribbean Asia (2.30); while it will certainly decline over the following decades, it will still continue to be the highest in the world through the end of the 21st century according to the latest UN projections.[30] The result of this slow decline has also meant the presence of a large "youth bulge" in Africa, whereby the median age in most Africa countries declined over the course of the late 20th century to a nadir below 17 years in such countries as Angola, Malawi, Niger and Uganda.[31] This extraordinary quick shift from negative population growth in the early 19th century to a peak of around 3% a year in the late 20th century has given Africans very little time to adjust to the very different political, economic and social conditions brought by rapid population growth. Thus we now return to the two outcomes of low population density, namely communal land rights and large states, and examine their interaction with high population growth and subsequent migration in the post-colonial era.

3.1. Communal Land Rights

As noted above, upon independence African states had land tenure systems that were largely communal and governed according to separate 'customary' rules for each tribal area. The effect of these policies were to tie land and ethnic identity together, such that members of the ethnic group assigned to the relevant tribal area could acquire local land as 'natives' while others, including their fellow citizens from neighboring communities, were considered 'foreigners' or 'strangers' and thus ineligible for local land acquisition. During the colonial period those strangers who migrated outside their tribal areas could appeal to European administrators for legal protection, inasmuch as colonial development programs often supported migration for select industries,[32] but after independence this recourse was no longer available. Moreover, the ethnic identities encouraged by colonial 'indirect rule' policies helped to encourage resources for collective action, specifically through the existence of ethnic norms and institutions that enforce cooperative behavior.[33]

The post-colonial period gradually also saw population densities in some regions grow to the point where many rural Africans could no longer access enough land in their 'tribal' areas. Efforts that had previously focused on expanding the amount of land under cultivation, which was easy with low population densities, had thus largely run their course by the 1980s as farm sizes declined across the continent and the land frontier began to close in such places as Kenya, Niger and southern Senegal.[34] Indeed, as one scholar put it at the time,

> Due to high population growth and the low carrying capacity of much of the land in Africa, there are now far fewer empty areas into which people can move… The land frontier has all but closed. The specter of a land shortage is a dramatic development because as late as two generations ago Africa was characterized by small concentrations of people surrounded by large amounts of open land.[35]

Thus migration became an increasingly viable option for many Africans, especially to other regions which had still had good quality farmland available. Many of these labor migrants who had

the ear of the central government could now access nationalized land in these new areas, and, as the labor migrants often came from areas which were more densely populated and had therefore developed higher human capital levels than the natives of areas to which they migrated,[36] resentment and sometimes rebellion developed amongst the indigenous populations. Inasmuch as these natives have in various places styled themselves as 'sons of the soil,'[37] such conflicts between natives and state-supported migrants over the control of local resources are now called 'sons of the soil' conflicts.

3.2. Large States

An extant set of literature has already drawn a link between large states and civil wars. For instance, Englebert et al. find a direct relationship between state size and civil war in a cross-sectional analysis of African countries,[38] while Buhaug and Rød similarly find that distance from a country's capital is positively correlated with the outbreak of civil war in a set of panel data from post-colonial Africa.[39] Finally, using a global panel dataset Buhaug finds that state size is strongly correlated with separatist or territorial civil wars.[40] In all of these studies the plausible causal mechanism is the inability of large states to police their peripheral territories adequately.

Within the African context there is also evidence that large states have indirectly promoted the outbreak of civil wars in Africa, inasmuch as they have allowed for greater amounts of internal migration. More specifically, before independence colonial regimes promoted large-scale migration across their colonies, such as from Angola to São Tomé and Príncipe, from various British colonies in southern Africa to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa, and from French Sudan (Mali) and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) to Côte d'Ivoire. These migration flows were created through the highly-regulated use of forced labor laws and taxation in order to alleviate the problem of low population densities.

However, colonial independence marked the end of this period of cross-border migration as African states enforced border controls and expelled foreigners, inasmuch as 'the achievement of independence provided several countries with an opportunity to get rid of [foreign] 'strangers' in their midst.'[41] Many countries suffered from high levels of youth unemployment in large part due to the "youth bulge" mentioned above.[42] As a result numerous countries expelled Africans from neighboring states *en masse* in order to ease unemployment and enforce their new international boundaries, as in Niger in 1964, Cameroun and Senegal in 1967, Côte d'Ivoire in 1968, Ghana in 1969, Uganda in 1982, and Nigeria in 1983, among others.[43] In other countries restrictive laws were imposed on immigrants which led to large exoduses of foreign workers: in Gabon, for instance, a 1994 law forced foreigners to register and pay residence fees, while in Côte d'Ivoire annual residence fees for foreigners were tripled in 1998.[44] Finally, post-independence regimes in countries which had previously supplied South Africa with a great deal of migrants subsequently barred citizens from doing so as part of their anti-apartheid policies, which coincided as well with a decreased demand for migrants within South Africa due to growing levels of unemployment.[45]

However, these restrictions on international migration were not accompanied by a similar decrease in internal rural-rural migration. Instead, as part of their post-independence nation-building policies, most regimes nationalized communal land ownership, with some states like Ethiopia, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zambia going so far as to nationalize private land as well. Undertaken partially for reasons both political (undermining the power of traditional authorities) and economic (the need to allocate land productively for economic development), one significant effect of these reforms was to remove the power of local chiefs to prevent the acquisition of land by internal migrants. Indeed, by abolishing the legal ties between ethnic identity and land ownership, the new governments thus gave internal migrants the freedom to acquire land outside their former tribal areas.

Thus in countries like Kenya 'with political freedom came freedom of [internal] migration, no more Passes to be carried and absolutely no restriction of movement whether to the urban areas

or to any other rural places of choice.'[46] Yet urbanization, while not legally restricted, was not available as an option to many Africans who could not access employment opportunities in the city. More specifically, African countries have failed to create formal sector jobs in their cities while also often explicitly expelling the urban unemployed or underemployed to rural areas.[47] As a result African urbanization has thus proceeded slower from the same starting point than it did in Latin America, the Middle East and East Asia, which means that levels of urbanization remain the lowest in Africa among all continents and is not predicted to surpass 50% until at least 2030.[48]

4. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

To repeat, the above analysis shows how a combination of initial low population density and subsequent high population growth can contribute to the outbreak of rural conflict over land. First, the legacy of 'customary' land rights from the colonial period led to the ethnicization of land ownership, whereby 'natives' enjoyed easier access to land than 'strangers,' while simultaneously also encouraging the formation of clear ethnic boundaries between natives and strangers. Second, large states meant that migration from areas of higher density towards lower density areas took place within countries rather than between them. High population growth combined with relatively low levels of urbanization amplified demand for rural resources, including land, and increasingly led to migration from areas where the land frontier had closed. Land nationalization policies allowed migrants to legally acquire land outside their tribal areas, despite previous norms privileging natives, and the stage was set for violent conflict over land between natives and strangers across large parts of the continent. As a result numerous authors have noted the increasing frequency of conflicts characterized by a 'sons of the soil' discourse or cognates such as autochthony, regionalism or 'territorial politics.'[49] Moreover, some like Boone date the beginning of this upsurge to the late 1980s while others date it to early 1990s,[50] dates which correspond to the closing of the land frontier discussed above.

To demonstrate the effect of the interaction between low pre-colonial population densities, our two intervening variables of communal land rights and large states, and conflict we choose a case study methodology here, for two reasons. First, the causal story involves several variables which evolve over time from the pre-colonial period to the present. Thus the analysis is not entirely dissimilar from the historical sociological approach to conflict employed by Michael Mann,[51] who also employs case studies to examine origins of modern ethnic cleansing. Second, as noted above our dependent variable here is not civil war but rather 'sons of the soil' conflict, of which there are no available cross-country data sets.[52] We could, of course, construct such a dataset here but it would be problematic not only in deciding whether or not to code individual conflicts as 'sons of the soil' but also in the use of other conflict statistics, which are notoriously unreliable (especially in Africa).

We have many case studies from which we could choose which exemplify our story, including the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire, election violence in Kenya, civil violence in Nigeria and civil conflict in western Uganda, among others. Indeed, a number of scholars have already spelled out some of the causal links between communal land rights, large states, high population growth, internal migration and 'sons of the soil conflict' in these cases.[53] However, to choose such cases merely because they fit our theory would open up our analysis to accusations of selection bias. Instead, we deliberately choose two cases which have been *not* been previously claimed as 'sons of the soil' conflict by most scholars, namely the Sudanese civil war in Darfur since 2002 and the civil war in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since 1996. In both cases much of the literature has suggested strong causal roles for natural resources, center-periphery relations and external intervention, with little attention to the causal mechanisms described here. Indeed, only one scholarly source has identified the Darfur conflict as a 'sons of the soil' conflict,[54] while Bøas, Dunn and Jackson have been the only scholars to identify the Congolese civil war as such.[55] Thus our goal here is to demonstrate that both conflicts can be explained by our political demography theory.

4.1. Darfur

The Darfur civil war in western Sudan has been widely reported and examined by scholars since it erupted in 2003. However, most of the analysis of the conflict has focused on the role of external intervention, the violent attempts of the Khartoum government to control its periphery and the role of racism and global warming. For instance, one noted historian has summarized the conflict as 'the latest and most tragic episode in the forty-year conflict for control of the Chad basin in which neither Chad, Libya nor Sudan possess the human and material resources to dominate Darfur.'[56] Scholars such as Prunier have instead emphasized the role of the Government of Sudan in suppressing a rebellion which 'threatened the centre of the system, not its periphery.'[57] Finally, many journalists and policy makers such as UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon have suggested that racism and/or global warming are responsible for the conflict.[58] Indeed, these macro-level analyses have naturally contributed to discussions about the role of the African Union, the United Nations and the International Criminal Court in helping to bring an end to the conflict.

However, evidence also suggests that the civil war has specific micro-level origins along the lines suggested above. Indeed, at the onset of colonialism Sudan had a particularly low population density of only 7 people per square kilometer of potentially arable land, or lower than the already-low African average of 8 people per square kilometer.[59] Thus, with large amounts of available land, farmers such as the Masalit of western Darfur 'would farm an area of land until productivity declined and then move on to establish a new community.'[60]

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the British consolidated the borders of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, which was more than ten times larger than the UK and would become the largest state in Africa upon independence. They also instituted an indirect tribal administration in Darfur, where each *dar* (province) was created to serve an individual ethnic group. More specifically, this system meant that land was communally administered by local paramount chiefs, who would

allocate land rights over tribal land, or *hawakeer*, to their ethnic brethren. Yet, far from being demographically static, low population densities for most of the 20th century meant that in Darfur 'there was sufficient free land' such that a 'very substantial settler population' from northern Sudan and Chad could move into the area through the 1970s without any problems.[61]

This migration, which continued into the 1980s and beyond, was largely the result of three factors. First, Sudan's far north was historically 'an overcrowded area with few opportunities;'[62] the added pressure of decades of low rainfall leading to a southward shift in the desert climate thus led northern pastoralists to migrate southwards. Second, President Gaafar Nimeiry's government nationalized 99% of all land in Sudan in 1970, thereby allocating land rights to higher levels of government. This law thus not only led to the acquisition of land in Darfur by non-Darfuris but also contributed to growing inequalities in land ownership as politicians, soldiers and bureaucrats from central Sudan acquired land at the expense of the politically powerless. Third, Nimeiry's government also centralized local government power in its Regional Government Act of 1980, thereby taking away power from the tribal chiefs who had previously prevented internal migration and giving it to increasingly Islamist cadres allied with Khartoum.[63] Moreover, post-Nimeiry efforts at restoring traditional administration under the Native Administration Act in 1986 failed to stem this tide, especially as the government created many new chiefdoms for landless Arab leaders.[64]

As a result of this migration alongside high fertility rates, Darfur's population increased from 1.1 million in 1956 to 6.5 million in 2003, or an annual growth rate of 4.0%, 1% higher than Sudan's already-high population growth rate over the same time period. This large increase in population would not have posed a problem if it had been accompanied by large-scale urbanization, but poor urban infrastructure and economic underdevelopment meant that Sudanese cities were unable to provide jobs for urban migrants and thus many stayed in the countryside instead.[65] In particular Darfur suffered from a paucity of investment in manufacturing, inasmuch as it had the lowest levels of industrial production, capital investment and number of manufacturing workers

among all provinces of Sudan in the early 1970s.[66] Moreover, desertification pushed up population densities on arable land even higher, with farmers responding by expanding the size of their plots to compensate for the decreased rainfall and an increased population.[67] In particular millet, the staple food of Darfur, saw increasing cultivation (including into areas with unsuitable soil) but decreasing yields per acre over this time period.[68] These patterns thus led to the closure of many nomadic migratory routes and increasing conflict between pastoralists and farmers.

Additional government policies only exacerbated the situation. First, Nimeiry attempted to build Sudan into the 'Breadbasket of the Middle East' by acquiring large tracts of land for mechanized agriculture in the 1970s, such as in Sag al-Naam in North Darfur. While successful in the short term, this policy had more serious longer-term consequences of promoting even more land inequalities, displacing farmers and pastoralists from their land and adding to the country's growing problems with external debt and inflation. The resultant economic collapse of the late 1970s was only exacerbated by a structural adjustment policy imposed by the World Bank and several years of drought, leading to chronic food shortages and the outbreak of famine in Darfur in the early 1980s.[69] Second, Nimeiry and his successors contributed to an increase in Arab supremacism in Sudan, which led to an increased emphasis on 'Africanism' by the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) rebel leader John Garang and other supporters of a 'new Sudan' not dominated by Arabs. This increasing polarization thus helped to promote ethnic/racial differences between 'Arab' migrants and 'African' natives in Darfur despite the fact that these differences had little to no historic basis in the region. As such many Fur 'started to talk about Darfur "being for the Fur," and that the Arabs were foreigners who should leave.'[70]

Various clashes between various migrant and native groups that had started in the 1970s – as noted at the time by Adams and Howell[71] – continued through the famine and beyond a brief Arab-Fur conflict in the late 1980s.[72] The new government of Omar al-Bashir strengthened the rights of the government to acquire land;[73] in Darfur ongoing efforts to destroy the Fur and their army led to the gerrymandered creation of three provinces in the region in 1994, each of which was deliberately

designed to avoid a Fur majority.[74] This and other efforts at Arabization across Sudan, combined with government indifference to growing land conflicts in Darfur due to a belief that such conflicts were 'inherent to the region,' inevitably led to the formation of militias among locals concerned about defending their land against armed nomads.[75] These militias then later became the Sudanese Liberation Movement (SLM), whose leaders deliberately copied their name and ideology of the 'New Sudan' from the SPLM of southern Sudan, and also similarly expanded the scope of their operations by creating ties with Chad and Eritrea.

If the rebels were concerned about land, so were members of the government-supported militia, the *janjawiid,* who were largely unemployed youth without access to land and were thus spurred on as much by the prospects of gaining control over resources as any other motive.[76] After the Khartoum government began arming the *janjawiid* in 2003 the conflict quickly spiraled out of control, with internal ethnic divisions within the SLM only further halting cease-fire efforts. Nonetheless, the fact that the SLA claimed in the 2005 peace talks that 'the *hawakeer* [traditional tribal land tenure] system must be entered into Sudanese law, failing which there will be no peace' suggests the high level of importance the rebels gave to excluding landless migrants from their land.[77]

Without wishing to ignore the various other factors that contributed to the Darfur conflict, including the external intervention of Chad and Libya and intra-Arab conflict, it is thus clear that the Darfur conflict is very much an example of a 'sons of the soil' conflict. To summarize, Sudan's historic low population densities encouraged the creation of communal land rights and a large state during the colonial period, while subsequent high population growth and desertification promoted migration into Darfur. Ongoing economic decline, low levels of urbanization, land inequalities and increased polarization between 'Arabs' and 'Africans' thus all contributed to the outbreak of conflict in 2003.

4.2. Eastern DRC

As with Darfur, the civil war in the eastern DRC has drawn a great deal of attention from scholars, with a similarly overwhelming focus on macro-level factors. Many analyses have emphasized the role of natural resources like coltan, diamonds and gold in both inspiring rebellion and prolonging civil war and violence.[78] Similarly, other scholars have pointed to the role of external actors, especially Rwanda and Uganda but also Angola, France, the US and Zimbabwe, in their attempts to control these natural resources.[79] However, analyses that have incorporated discussions of population growth and migration have been very rare; even those few scholars who have identified the DRC civil war as an example of a 'sons of the soil' conflict have attributed settler/native conflicts not to demography but rather to the 'ontological uncertainty' of postmodernity and the global promotion of decentralization, democratization and liberalization.[80]

Yet, as with Darfur, there is a good deal of evidence that the DRC civil war is not only a 'sons of the soil' conflict but one which fits well into the story told above. To return to the pre-colonial era, in the Kivu areas of eastern DRC – located west of Lakes Edward and Kivu across the border from Rwanda and Uganda – population densities were low enough that the private alienation of land was non-existent and migration could take place without any serious land pressures. Indeed, while a land tenure system known as *kalinzi* existed in pre-colonial times, rents were free due to the abundance of land.[81] Similarly, one British diplomat noted in 1907 about the Katanga region that

> It may be probably be safely said that individual property in land does not exist. The existence of collective property, however, cannot be doubted… Village communities are continually on the move. These frequent changes are due to a variety of causes, the chief of which is probably the comparative poverty of the soil… After three or four years' cultivation the yield decreases and villages clear and plant new lands.[82]

In the colonial period the Belgian King Leopold II took control of the Congo Free State, a region which was more than 75 times larger than Belgium and which today encompasses two time zones, the only African country to do so. The Belgians codified customary land laws but only for land 'already under the practical control of traditional authorities,' with all other land henceforth

declared property of the colonial state with the goal of using these vast amounts of virgin land for coffee plantations and wildlife parks.[83] This policy, of course, was formed due to a lack of understanding about pre-colonial migration patterns, with one British diplomat noting in 1908 that the policy had the effect of confining 'the activity of the natives to the smallest areas, and stunted their economic development.'[84]

Due in part to the mass deaths of Congolese under early Belgian colonial rule in addition to decreasing national fertility levels, the Belgians encouraged Rwandan migration to the Belgian Congo after acquiring Burundi and Rwanda from Germany after World War I. Indeed, large as the Congo already was, the Belgians increased its size and population by merging its three African colonies in 1925 into the single administrative entity of *Congo belge et le Ruanda-Urundi*.[85] While the Rwandan migrants were welcomed by plantation owners, they were viewed as foreigners by local Congolese despite the fact that many Kinyarwanda speakers had lived in the DRC before colonialism. Thus Belgian attempts at creating a Banyarwanda (ethnic Rwandan) chiefdom in North Kivu province in 1936 failed due to local opposition.[86]

The eastern provinces were already a site of high population density relative to other parts of the DRC due to higher fertility rates and the higher quality soil that drew internal and Rwandan migrants. By the 1950s fertility rates had stopped growing in the eastern DRC but started to sharply increase elsewhere; as a result population growth across the DRC took off after 1950 and was accompanied by internal migration and the clearing of new lands in rural areas.[87] Indeed, the 'unrelenting population growth' in the Kivus was thus even higher than other parts of the DRC at more than 4.0% annually between 1948 and 1970 compared to a Congolese-wide growth rate of 2.6% over the same time period.[88]

After independence President Mobutu enacted a wide range of nation-building policies, which among them included the General Property Law of 1973 which abolished customary land and declared all land the property of the state. Henceforth those Congolese who had been able to access education during the colonial period and thereafter gain favor in Kinshasa such as the Banyarwanda

in the North and South Kivu provinces were therefore able to take advantage of these land laws to acquire land.[89] (It is no accident that the chief writer of the General Property Law was a Tutsi of Rwandan descent.)[90] Thus already by the early 1980s there was evidence of 'resentment against "intruders"' in the Kivus, where a local judge claimed 'he [would] do everything to ensure that ancestral land does not pass into "foreign" hands.'[91]

This period was also contemporaneous with a stagnation in Congolese urbanization rates, which remained at a level of 30% between 1970 and 2000.[92] As in Sudan and elsewhere in Africa this low level of urbanization was a direct result of the failure to create formal sector jobs in cities, which itself was linked to the nationalization of industrial assets in 1973 and subsequent mismanagement. Indeed, by the 1980s the Congolese economy started to collapse, with an increased acceleration after 1990 as the end of the Cold War led to both a drop in international aid to Mobutu's government and to the abandonment of the International Coffee Agreement which had previously helped to secure good prices for local coffee growers. Thus, combined with increasing Banyarwanda purchases of the former colonial plantations after 1973 and ongoing rural population growth, freely available land ownership thus continued to diminish rapidly over the course of the 1990s.[93]

In response to land pressures local politicians from non-Banyarwanda ethnic groups thus initiated violence against the Banyarwanda in 1993. The Rwandan genocide in 1994 only increased local population densities and pressures on land as two million refugees fled to North and South Kivu; it also heightened ethnic differences between non-Banyarwanda on the one hand and Banyarwanda and their ethnic Banyamulenge brethren in South Kivu on the other, leading the former to style themselves as *autochthon* and accuse the latter of being 'foreign' or *allochton*. After Laurent Kabila launched his rebellion that overthrew Mobutu's regime in 1997 this split manifested itself violently between different rebel factions, with the Banyarwanda and Banyamulenge initially represented by the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) and later by the RCD-Goma splinter group, while the non-Banyarwanda were supported by the Congolese government and Mai Mai

rebels and later by the RCD-ML splinter group. Despite an official end to the civil war in 2003, however, conflict over land has persisted, in part because people who had fled the civil war are now returning home and attempting to regain their land.[94]

A similar story can be told for another part of eastern DRC, namely the Ituri province to the north of the Kivus and on the western shores of Lake Albert. The province is split demographically between various ethnic groups, including Hema and Lendu, both of whom originally migrated into the area in the seventeenth century.[95] In the post-colonial period the province saw more migration as ethnic Nandes moved in from the Kivus. In 1999 landowners started expelling squatters in Djugu territory, the most densely-populated territory in Ituri province, which led prominent Lendu to organize into self-defense groups.[96] At the same time the aforementioned RCD-K/ML rebel group moved its capital to Bunia in Ituri, whereupon its leadership was assumed by a Nande who then named a migrant as governor of Ituri province. As a result the Hema-dominated rebel movement *Union des Patriotes Congolais* (UPC) began to talk about 'Ituri for Iturians' and divided Ituri inhabitants into *originaires* (Hema) and *non-originaires* (Lendu, Nande and other migrant groups) on local radio stations.[97] The conflict quickly spiraled out of control, with UPC attacks on Lendu and Nande groups coupled with Ugandan and Rwandan intervention contributing to the deaths of some 60,000 people in the area before UPC leader Thomas Lubanga was arrested by the International Criminal Court in 2006.

The DRC civil war thus demonstrates how demographic factors can interact with politics, economics and ethnicity to produce 'sons of the soil' conflict. It would of course be remiss to dismiss altogether analyses of the war that have emphasized the role of natural resources and external actors, but it should be clear by now that the neglect of political demography in previous accounts is a major lacuna. Thus it is only appropriate to suggest that future analyses of the conflict do a better job at incorporating these various causal mechanisms.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have argued that Africa's historical low population density left it with a legacy of communal property rights and large states upon independence. High population growth, low levels of urbanization and subsequent internal rural-rural migration since the mid-20th century have interacted with these two legacies and produced large amounts of rural 'sons of the soil' conflict over land. Empirical evidence from conflicts in Darfur and the eastern DRC both gave supporting evidence for this argument.

As with other recent scholarship,[98] this article thus suggests that a neo-Malthusian direct relationship between population growth and conflict is implausible.[99] However, it also suggests that the general neglect of demographic factors by many scholars has not been helpful in furthering our understanding of African conflict. Indeed, as already noted there is considerable evidence that the causal mechanisms outlined above played a major role in instigating contemporary conflicts in a variety of other African countries. It is thus possible that too much attention to oil and other natural resources as a cause of conflict has overshadowed the way the same mechanisms have led to violence in such countries as Angola and Nigeria, both of saw 'sons of the soil' conflicts in the 1960s contribute to full-scale civil wars after independence.

The analysis here also lends itself to five possible policy suggestions, several of which are contentious. First and most obviously fertility decline should be a target, inasmuch as high fertility has encouraged rural-rural migration. Indeed, in contrast to the cases examined here there is evidence that one of the main sources behind Mauritius's great economic and political success has been a population policy which helped to produce the lowest population growth rate in post-colonial Africa.[100]

Second, inasmuch as communal and nationalized land ownership remains a problem within Africa the redistribution of land rights towards cultivators could alleviate much rural conflict as well as spur economic growth. It is notable that extensive 'land to the tiller' reform is often seen as one of the major spurs behind many of Asia's 20th-century economic and political development

success stories.[101] It is also significant that Goldstone as well as scholars and policy makers in places like the DRC and Sudan have explicitly argued for a focus on land rights while warning against a return to the ethnicized land rights that existed before the land nationalization policies of the 1970s.[102] However, good land reform is obviously much easier said than done, as when land reform provides incentives for land invasions it can accentuate rather than alleviate conflict.[103]

Third, African states could do a better job at controlling flows of internal migration. Indeed, it is notable in this sense that China's *hukou* system of labor-migration regulation was explicitly designed to 'maintain social peace and order' during a period of rapid industrialization, a goal which it has largely managed to accomplish over the past half-century.[104] China's strict control over internal migration contrasts strongly with countries like Uganda, where successive governments have instead promoted internal migration as a means to alleviate high population densities only to later face localized 'sons of the soil' conflicts as a result.[105] Of course, the fact that China is not a democracy means that labor movement restrictions are easier to impose than in Africa, which necessarily complicates the picture considerably.

Fourth and related, Africa still suffers from relatively low levels of urbanization. In a UN survey from 2009 asking governments around the world whether they wanted to raise, maintain or lower levels of rural-urban migration, 81% of African governments wanted to lower migration while 48% wanted to raise urban-rural migration; in both cases these were the highest percentages among any region of the world.[106] This concern with rapid urbanization is indeed odd considering when we recall that the fastest rate of urbanization in the contemporary world has taken place in Botswana, which was 3.8% urban in 1950 but 61.1% urban in 2010.[107] Arguably as a result Botswana has not only failed to suffer from the 'sons of the soil' conflicts which have afflicted other African countries but instead became Africa's greatest post-colonial success story, in part due to the way 'the urban experience… contributed to the creation of a unifying national identity on the part of Botswana's citizens.'[108] Indeed, greater concern to urbanization could also help to focus more attention on rural population growth as distinct from population growth in general.

Fifth and finally, if Africa's large states contribute to conflict then one consideration is to encourage the creation of new, smaller states, especially by recognizing already extant break-away states such as Somaliland and 'derecognizing' states such as the DRC and Sudan which are unable to control their territories, as has already been suggested by Englebert and Herbst.[109] Indeed, if internal migration remains more difficult to control than international migration then the creation of smaller states would help to stem migration flows and thus alleviate native/settler conflicts. Of course, such a suggestion goes against the grain of pan-Africanist thought as well as scholars such as Paul Collier who argue that Africa already has too many small landlocked states.[110]

In any case, further research into this area is important in order to refine our conclusions. Certainly more analysis of the causes and consequences of internal rural-rural migration is badly needed, especially considering its general neglect relative to studies of urbanization and international migration. The relationship between historical levels of population density and their impact on modern institutions and states could also be examined in more detail. Indeed, while our analysis here adds to a growing literature on the institutional legacies of historical population densities in the developing world,[111] this field remains quite small. Finally, more historical analysis of the long-term relationships between demographic change and different types of conflict would be helpful in understanding better the phenomena discussed here.

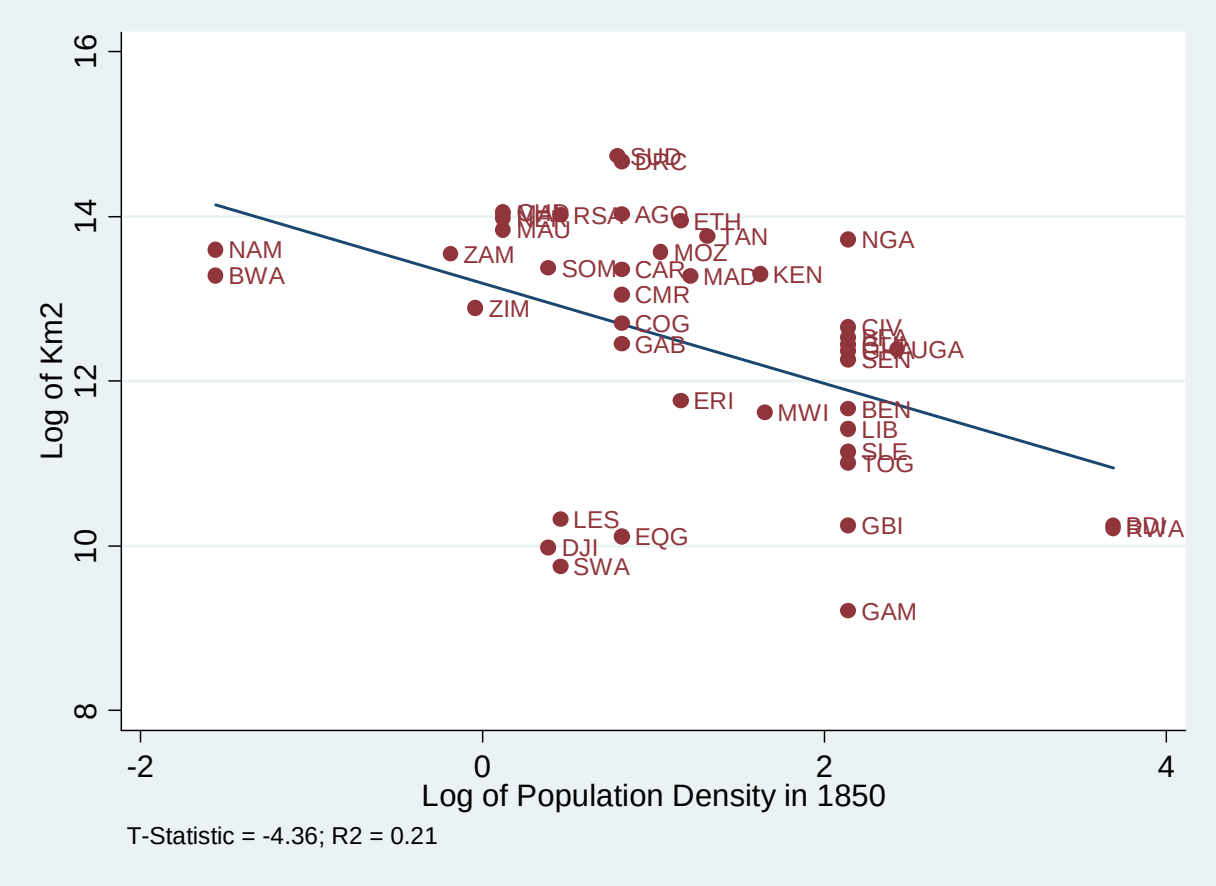

Figure 1: State Size and Population Density per Km2 in 1850

Name		Size (in km^2)	Number
Latin America and Caribbean	108,890	33	
Asia	181,035	25	
Sub-Saharan Africa	270,873	48	

Table 1a: Median Former Colony Size by Region (including island states)

Name	Size (in km^2)	Number
Asia	185,180	20
Latin America and Caribbean	235,685	20
Sub-Saharan Africa	322,460	42

Table 1b: Median Former Colony Size by Region (excluding island states)

	Sub-Saharan African Population	Africa/Europe*	Africa/World
1300	60 million	85.7%	13.9%
1400	60	115.4	16.0
1500	78	116.4	16.9
1600	104	116.9	18.0
1700	97	102.1	14.3
1800	92	63.0	9.6
1850	90	43.1	7.3
1900	95	32.2	5.8
1950	180	45.8	7.1
2000	680	133.3	11.2
2050**	1,761	346.0	19.2

* Excluding ex-USSR
** UN Projection (Medium Variant)

Table 2: Sub-Saharan African Population and Ratios, 1300 – 2050

	SS Africa	Asia	Europe*	World
0-1600	0.14%	0.04%	0.07%	0.05%
1600-1900	-0.03	0.33	0.40	0.35
1900-2050**	1.95	1.18	0.37	1.15

* Excluding ex-USSR
** UN Projection (Medium Variant)

Table 3: Average Annual Population Growth Rates, AD 0 – 2050

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[4] Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion* (note 2).

[5] Ibid. pp.470-472.

[6] Iliffe (note 1) p.1.

[7] Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990); Nunn (note 1); Tukufu Zuberi, Amson Sibanda, Ayaga Bawah and Amaduo Noumbissi, 'Population and African Society', *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003), pp.465-486.

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[21] H.L. Wesseling, *Divide and Rule: The Partition of Africa, 1880-1914* (Westport, CT: Praeger 1996) p.179.
[22] Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones, *Atlas of World Population History* (New York: Penguin 1978).
[23] Green (note 1).
[24] These results are robust to various controls, sub-samples and measures of state size from various points of the colonial and post-colonial periods. Moreover, this link between population density and state size does not hold for former European colonies in other parts of the world, where, in contrast with Africa, colonial government revenues were less reliant upon head taxes due to higher profits from mining, government monopolies and cash crop plantations. Source: Green (note 1).
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[27] For more on the demographic transition, see Livi-Bacci (2007). Massimo Livi-Bacci, *A Concise History of World Population* (Oxford: Blackwell 2007).
[28] Goldstone (Note 2) pp. 27-31; Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson, 'Disease and Development: The Effect of Life Expectancy on Economic Growth', *Journal of Political Economy* 115/6 (2007) pp. 925-985.
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[31] Richard Cincotta, Robert Engelman, and Daniele Anastasion, *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict after the Cold War*. (Washington, DC: Population Action International, 2003); United Nations (note 30).
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[38] Pierre Englebert, Stacy Tarango and Matthew Carter, 'Dismemberment and Suffocation: A Contribution to the Debate on African Boundaries', *Comparative Political Studies* 35/10 (2002) pp.1093-1118.
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[40] Halvard Buhaug, 'Relative Capability and Rebel Objective in Civil War', *Journal of Peace Research* 43/6 (2006) p.691-708.
[41] Margaret Peil, 'The Expulsion of West African Aliens', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 9/2 (1971) pp.205-229.
[42] Cincotta et al. (note 31).
[43] Herbst (note 1) p.229; Peil (note 38).
[44] Hania Zlotnik, 'Migrants' Rights, Forced Migration and Migration Policy in Africa', paper prepared for Conference on African Migration in Comparative Perspective, Johannesburg, South Africa, June 4-7, p.13.
[45] Aderanti Adepoju, 'Linkages Between Internal and International Migration: The African Situation', *International Social Science Journal* 50/157 (1998) p. 394. Since the end of apartheid South Africa has also dramatically increased the number of immigrants it has expelled, especially those from Mozambique and Zimbabwe.
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[47] James R. Brennan, 'Blood Enemies: Exploitation and Urban Citizenship in the Nationalist Political Thought of Tanzania 1958-1975', *Journal of African History* 47/3 (2006) p.403; Bill Freund, *The African City: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Freund 2007) p.43.
[48] United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects, the 2009 Revision* (Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division 2010). It is true that urban population growth is very high in contemporary Africa;

however, due to high rural population growth the percentage of Africans living in urban areas has grown at a relatively slow pace.

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[50] Boone (note 3) p.62; Bambi Ceuppens and Peter Geschiere, 'Autochthony: Local or Global? New Modes in the Struggle over Citizenship and Belonging in Africa and Europe', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005) p.386; Englebert (note 3) p.207; Geschiere and Jackson (note 3) p.1.

[51] Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005).

[52] Fearon and Laitin (2011) do examine "sons of the soil" conflicts that appear within their civil war dataset, but note that a database on "sons of the soil" conflicts that includes non-civil war violence does not yet exist. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, 'Sons of the Soil, Migrants and Civil War', *World Development* 39/2 (2011) pp.199-211.

[53] Boone (note 3); Green (note 3); Kahl (note 2); Kraxberger (note 3).

[54] Fearon and Laitin (note 48).

[55] Bøas (note 3); Dunn (note 3); Jackson (note 3).

[56] Robert O. Collins, *A History of Modern Sudan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008) p.299.

[57] Gerard Prunier, *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide* (London: Hurst 2007) p.105.

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[63] Leif Manger, 'Resource Conflict as a Factor in the Darfur Crisis in Sudan', paper presented at the conference on The Frontiers of Land Issues: Embeddedness of Rights and Public Policies, Montpellier, p.7.

[64] Jérôme Tubiana, 'Darfur: A War for Land?' in Alex De Waal (ed.), *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace* (London: Justice Africa 2007) pp.81-82.

[65] Osman Suliman, *The Darfur Conflict: Geography or Institutions?* (New York: Routledge 2011) p.56. For instance, the largest cities in North and South Darfur, namely El-Fasher and Nyala, only began to operate commercial airports in 1990 and 2000, respectively. Road and railroad networks have long been similarly poor. As is typical in conflict environments Nyala's population has grown tremendously in recent years due to the influx of IDPs from surrounding areas; thus in 2008 it was designated a municipality by the Government of Sudan, one of only four in northern Sudan.

[66] Abdul A.M. Farah, 'Demographic Intermediation Between Development and Population Redistribution in Sudan' in John I. Clarke (ed.), *Population and Development Projects in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985) p.227.

[67] Martin E. Adams and John Howell, 'Developing the Traditional Sector in the Sudan', *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 27/3 (1979) p.509. This desertification is linked with a decline in rainfall in the 1970s; however, there has been a flat trend in rainfall patterns since then. Michael Kevane and Leslie Gray, 'Darfur: Rainfall and Conflict', *Environmental Research Letters* 3/3 (2008) pp.1-10.

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[69] Bilsborrow and DeLargy (note 56); Collins (note 52).

[70] Manger (note 59) p.19. Mamdani (2009) similarly notes the popularity of the "Dar Fur for Fur" slogan among Fur intellectuals. Mahmood Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics and the War on Terror* (New York: Pantheon 2009) p.234.

[71] Adams and Howell (note 63) p.510.

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[74] Collins (note 52) p.284.

[75] Tubiana (note 60) pp.75, 84.

[76] Mamdani (note 66) p.156; Tubiana (note 60), p.75.

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[80] Dunn (note 3); Geschiere & Jackson (note 3).
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