Communal violence and the legacy of pre-colonial states

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Abstract

Keywords—

The level of violence in non-state societies is qualitatively different from that within states with rates of violence often being several orders magnitude higher in the former (Pinker 2011++; LeBlanc 2003; Diamond 2012). Part of this can be explained by that states' primary objective and defining characteristic is to solve the security dilemma (Lake and Rotchild 1996; Hobbes Leviathan). Several states in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa are judicially effective, but empirically less so (Jackson and Rosberg 1982). This has resulted in pockets where resolution of violent conflicts is mainly left to local traditional mechanisms without a neutral arbiter to mediate or enforce peace should things get out of hand. There might be important variations in this semi-anarchic situation, however, as some areas have a long pre-colonial legacy of statehood which previously addressed the security dilemma between ethnic groups. Some claim that the existence of precolonial states has caused legal ambiguities that are important causes of intergroup violence (Eck, 2014), others hold that remnants of precolonial institutions directly (Herbst, 2015; Wig & Kromrey, 2018) or indirectly reduce the overall number of inter-ethnic (non-state) conflicts.

1 How conflicts are prevented or resolved without the state

In order to explain how areas where pre-colonial states existed reduce communal violence today, we first outline mechanisms regulating inter-communal conflicts in contexts of weak statehood, before we investigate how precolonial states might moderate these. While the literature has focused much on the type of issues that can trigger conflict between groups (Döring, 2020; Eck, 2014; Elfversson, 2015; Fjelde & Østby, 2014; Fjelde & von Uexkull, 2012; Hillesund, 2019; Theisen, 2012), we believe that a deeper understanding of the structural characteristics of the state is central, some of which the existence of precolonial states affect. With the lack of an overarching authority to arbitrate between groups or provide physical security, strategic interaction between groups arises in which physical security is paramount. Problems related to interpersonal crime or competition over resources are ubiquitous both within and between groups, but such banalities are often the trigger of communal conflicts. Strategic interactions make otherwise mundane problems of criminal punishment or competing policy preferences potential triggers of intergroup violence (Diamond, 2012; Eaton, 2008; Fearon, 1995; Fearon & Laitin, 1996; Lake & Rothchild, 1996). Since conflict is costly, however, there should be a rational interest in a bargained solution short of violence (Fearon, 1995), but the problem is, when strategic dilemmas arise, such bargained solutions are hard to establish and uphold. Three related phenomena – information problems, commitment problems, and the security dilemma – are each sufficient in causing armed conflict, but very frequently co-occur (Lake & Rothchild, 1996, p. 46).

1.1 The information problem

Within ethnic groups, dense networks facilitate the exchange of information through gossip, rumour and formal (e.g. churches) or informal institutions. This prevents opportunistic behaviour towards kin, as individuals can be identified and punished (Fearon & Laitin, 1996, p. 719). In cross-ethnic interactions, identifying individuals is often much harder due to less frequent interactions, thinner networks, and cultural differences that makes it harder to identify opportunists than among coethnics.[1] The cross-ethnic information problem renders individual punishment of non-coethnic criminals difficult. Similarly, while it may be collectively rational to reveal private information to counterparts as part of a bargain to avoid conflict, groups can have strategic incentives to withhold, information particularly if revealing it make them vulnerable to an early confrontation from the other group[2] or make them more vulnerable in the future. This can cause bargaining to crash and conflict to start. Generally, information problems tend to grow more acute with increasing state weakness (Fearon, 1995; Lake & Rothchild, 1996, p. 46f).

1.2 The commitment problem

A second problem is that ethnic groups cannot credibly commit to mutually beneficial agreements. At least they cannot be certain that other groups stay true to their promises. The fear of being cheated against may make groups prefer to attack early than being victimized at a later occasion. Thus, formal or informal agreements between ethnic groups are often premised on a supra-ethnic authority and they are often initiated by the weaker group that have most to fear from unregulated interaction (see below on intragroup policing as an example) (Lake & Rothchild, 1996, p. 50). In the absence of such working arrangements, the information problem causes chronic insecurity about the other group's intentions with conflict representing a realistic alternative (Lake & Rothchild, 1996, p. 51).

1.3 The security dilemma

The semi-anarchic situation found in areas of weak statehood induces groups to apply self-help strategies, as they cannot credibly commit to agreements of not applying force to each other. The information problem renders groups chronically uncertain about others' true intentions, making defensive moves by one group look suspicious causing other groups to safeguard themselves. Subsequently this makes all groups less safe, in particular when there are clear advantages to use

[1] This should depend on the degree of interethnic interaction, which in turn can be facilitated by states – see discussion below.

[2] For instance, Eaton (Eaton, 2008) notes that pastoral groups in East Africa are reluctant to invite members from adversaries to peace negotiations in their territories as they may use the opportunity to scout for future raids.

pre-emptive tactics[3], as Lake and Rotchild puts it 'Fearful that the other might preempt, a group has an incentive to strike first and negotiate later' (Lake & Rothchild, 1996, p. 53).

2 Non-state solutions to the problems of interethnic relations

2.1 In-group policing

Since minor frictions can cause costly interethnic violence, attempts at creating inter-ethnic institutions are quite prevalent, despite problems of credible commitment. Under so-called in-group policing (IGP) (Fearon & Laitin, 1996, p. 723), groups use their superior within-group information to punish individuals in their own ranks that have committed crimes against outsiders. The victim's group refrain from collective reprisals, as they are reasonably certain of internal punishment, making the institution quite robust to smaller infringements. For IGP to be effective, the information about punishment must be received by the offended group. This both signals that the reciprocal agreement of punishing one's own bad apples is upheld, but also good intentions by taking punishment seriously (Fearon & Laitin, 1996). An alternative to IGP, is when the perpetrator's group help the victim's group apprehend the culprit or simply hand him over [insert from Eaton on this]. More institutionalized forms of IGP is frequently found where some form of overarching authority is present, such as in pre-modern Europe and empires (Fearon & Laitin, 1996, p. 728). Independent of this, when relations between groups are particularly important, such as when trade ties are central, IGP is also more likely and those dependent on them have a particular interest in developing IGP to prevent conflict (Fearon & Laitin, 1996, p. 730).

2.2 Peace in the threat of feud

IGP has often evolved as a consequence of another conflict preventing mechanism – the sheer fear of feuding. Here if outsiders commit crimes, the victim's group applies violent reprisals in which all members of the perpetrator's group are legitimate targets.[4] Its indiscriminate nature and likelihood of triggering counter-reprisals from the other group makes it apparently irrational, but with the information-problem preventing individual punishment, the alternative to collective retaliation to infringements by individual (or collectives of) outsiders is no punishment at all signalling an inability or unwillingness to defend group members. Collective retaliation must be sufficiently likely and

[3]Since mobility increases the advantages of offensive relative to defensive tactics, one expectation could be that pastoralist groups whose livelihoods depend on mobility are more likely to resort to preemptive tactics and therefore see more violence in the end.

[4]Whether all member or e.g. all adult male relatives or some other collectively derived criteria makes member of the perpetrator's group legitimate targets depends on the context, but secondary to our argument. The point is that retribution is based on collective characteristics.

brutal to work as a credible deterrent, making this mechanism of fear much less robust to smaller incidents (Fearon & Laitin, 1996). An earned reputation for ruthlessness, even in the face of superior groups, can therefore work to uphold the peace.

2.3 Blood money

One way of further raising the costs of spiralling and thereby adding to its deterrence, is very high compensation rates once parties to the conflict finally agree to end the violence. When as much as 50-100 heads of cattle is required for compensating the killing of one man or, it requires a collective effort to pay, in which many members of society have to contribute. This makes the commitment both more credible but also signalling a collective will to break the spiral and uphold peace. Thus, prospective collective compensation costs create an additional incentive to prevent small misunderstandings, offenses, and other minor infringements that often cause spiralling.

2.4 An example from East Africa

Societies where the threat of spiralling is ubiquitous create security dilemmas even at the individual level with 'a large temptation to defect on purpose since a breakdown is likely anyway' (Fearon & Laitin, 1996, p. 724). Frequent cattle-raiding between pastoral societies in Eastern Africa is a case in point. Most groups rely on quite similar livelihoods, with limited mutual benefits from economic exchange. Typically, the majority favours peace, but individuals can benefit substantially in the short term from taking the cattle (violently or not) from outsiders. However, this jeopardizes the peace. The victims can choose to ignore the infringement knowing that redress is difficult, or ask the locals where tracks are found for help. If this entails asking for help in a different community, chances are low, as groups practice 'kimuk ekile' covering their man, thus, even thieves normally despised of, when having stolen cattle from another community, are covered. Due to insecurity, language issues, and a lack of information, the pursuers are likely unsuccessful on their own. If assisted and apprehending the cattle or getting compensation, then peace will hold. This represents a very crude parallel to IGP. When not granted help, the situation is ripe for asymmetric retaliation against anyone in the thief's community, which in turn is likely to spiral (Eaton, 2008, p. 104ff). When the threat of raids from outsiders driven by sheer opportunism looms large, even should one's coethnics uphold the peace, expected future gains of peaceful relations are reduced and so is the inclination to uphold them. High benefits of defection, a substantive risk of the other group opportunistically breaking the peace combined with the low level of economic interdependence between groups could go some way in explaining the higher frequency of communal violence in this region. This also illustrates that for spiralling to deter defection, interethnic interaction cannot be too infrequent and/or too superficial relative to the costs of defection, lest there is simply less to lose from defection (Fearon & Laitin, 1996).

3 How did precolonial states reduce these three dilemmas?

Pre-colonial states had roughly the same overarching core aims as modern states — increasing economic prosperity[5] and, to attain this, reducing the level of violence unrelated to state enforcement of power. This was achieved by increasing state military and policing capacity, but also by softer measures such as constructing institutions for resolving peaceful disputes and settling violent ones, and the enforcement of contracts. Evidence of the success of this can be seen in the dramatic decline in the incidence of killings when societies moved from non – state to state – based societies (Pinker, 2011, p. 64ff). By both clamping down on interethnic feuds as well as providing means of resolving them peacefully or at an early stage of escalation, precolonial states reduced (if not resolve) two of the three dilemmas that plague interethnic relations, namely the security dilemma and the commitment problem respectively. In turn, the reduction of these led to an increase in interaction, economic and other, which helped reduce the information problem, as individuals could travel into other groups territory without risking one's life. Over time, this increased the long-term individual gains for cross-ethnic cooperation relative to the individual gains from defecting today. Since the frequency of interethnic interaction affects the proclivity to behave nicely towards outsiders (Fearon & Laitin, 1996, p. 721), more frequent cross-ethnic interaction implied more chances of building an individual reputation for trust; more to gain from trade; and less effective anonymity for outsiders of one's own ethnic community. For the fear of spiralling to be effective, immediate gains from cheating must be lower than (potentially lost) future gains from cooperating. Conversely, substantial immediate individual gains from cheating outsiders and limited future gains from cooperation, increases the risk of cheating. For instance, Olsson argues that three decades of drying removed the basis for trade between different livelihood groups in Darfur causing markets to collapse. As groups became more autarkic, the division of resources became less mutually beneficial and more conflictual, laying the ground for appropriative conflicts from the mid-1980s onwards (Olsson, 2016). Over time this also led to mixed settlements, and in some cases assimilation into and consolidation of new ethnic group through state building (Anderson, 2006)[6]. In short, by reducing the security dilemma and commitment problems between ethnic groups, pre-colonial states set about virtuous cycles that increased interaction and interdependence. Figure 1 below gives a schematic overview of this process.

[5] Or simply to maximize tax revenue for the state, according to the 'stationary bandits' argument of Tilly (1985) and Olson (1993). The outcome of reducing the level of non-state violence remains.

[6] Examples include the assimilation of the Haussa-Fulani ethnic group under the Sokoto Caliphate.

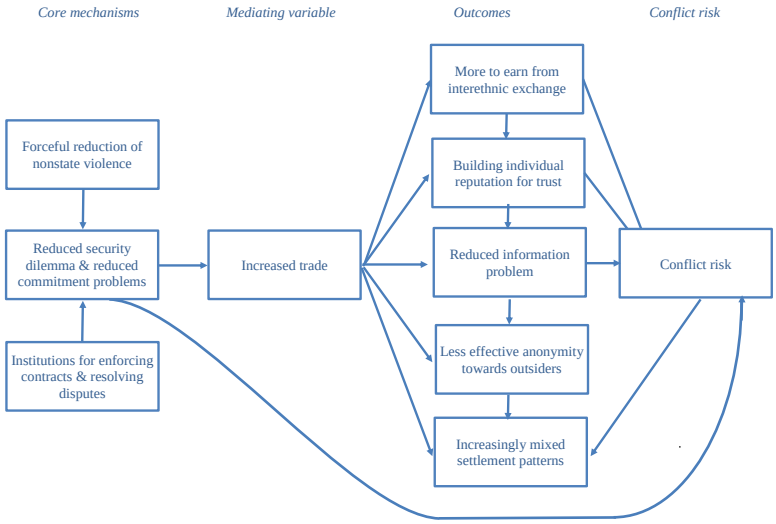

Figure 1: Causal diagram

4 What lingering effects do precolonial states have today?

States tend to assimilate populations through state-building (Anderson, 2006). In some cases this results in the consolidation of new ethnic groups, but in other instances it serves to make the boundaries between ethnic groups softer facilitating increased peaceful interaction in the form of trade, mixed settlements, and increased cross-group marriages. These effects of previous statehood have a conflict-dampening effect on the mechanisms described above.

- interethnic interaction
- mixed settlements
- decreasing the information problem - individual reputation - understanding of cultural codes
- economic development
- precolonial structures made it easier for colonial masters to successfully integrate and develop colonized areas through more effective indirect rule - the lack of statehood and subsequent development I South Sudan - the lack of a head chief prevented land rights for certain groups in Darfur, causing trouble when ecological changes forced these groups to stay longer on others' lands (as they had no land on their own)

5 Observable implications

5.1 Norms of hospitality and conformism in nonstate societies

This creates cultures that encourage nosiness in coethnics affairs, and norms of thick-skinedness, extreme self-restraint, generosity, hospitality and politeness towards outsiders[7], and strongly discourage hot-headedness. In the words of Colson (Cohen & Vandello, 2004, p. 199f; 1975, p. 37 cited in) 'people live in what appears to be a Rousseauian paradise because they take a Hobbesian view of their situation...' going out of their way to avoid those single acts of aggression they fear will cause long spirals of violence. However, as the strong emphasis on norms of 'niceness' towards outsiders in peacetime reflects, these societies are found to be much less effective at containing violence once cross-ethnic disputes occur as the failure to retaliate violently would reduce the credibility of this deterrent strategy (Fearon & Laitin, 1996, p. 723f).

6 Research design

6.1 Main analysis

6.1.1 Dependent variable

6.1.2 Independent variable

6.1.3 Controls

6.2 Settlement patterns

6.3 Afrobarometer on trust

7 Preliminary Results

References

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[7]Thus the first section of the main text Hávámal on Norse norms, literally 'the guest's section' (Gestaþáttr) of Hávamál contains maxims allegedly given by the head deity Odin to men for proper conduct in a nonstate society inducing almost sacred norms of hospitality and reciprocity towards stranger guests, but also patience and cautiousness on behalf of the visitor.

8 Appendix