Communal violence and the legacy of precolonial 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 (Diamond 2013, Steven A. LeBlanc 2003, Pinker 2012). Part of this can be explained by that states' primary objective and defining characteristic is to solve the security dilemma (Hobbes 2005, Lake & Rothchild 1996). Several states in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa are judicially effective, but empirically less so (Jackson & 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 precolonial 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 2014, 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 precolonial 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 2017, 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 2013, 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, 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, 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, 46).

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, 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, 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 (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, 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, 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, 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, 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, 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, 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?

Precolonial 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 2012, 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, 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, precolonial 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] For example the assimilation of the Haussa-Fulani ethnic group under the Sokoto Caliphate.

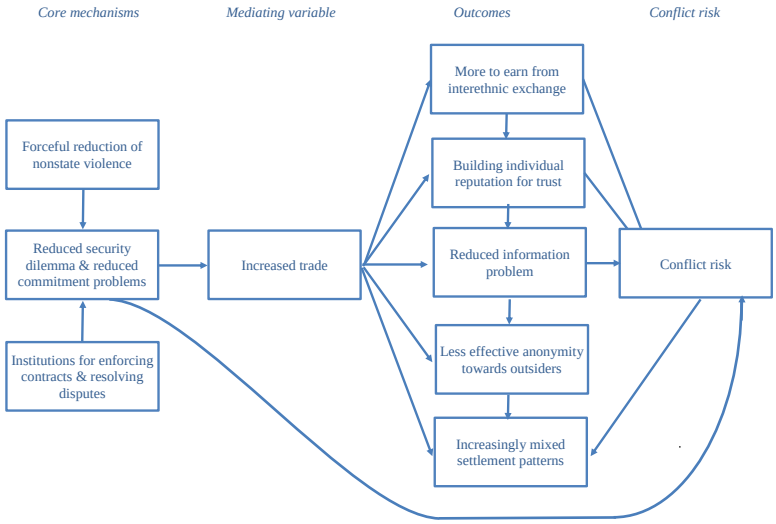

Figure 1: Causal diagram

4 What lingering effects do precolonial states have today?

In the postcolonial period, we expect there to be a general reduction in communal violence over time, in all areas, as they are now under the control of a state that tries to assert a monopoly of violence. Similarly to how precolonial states have reduced communal violence, the (national) state resolves the security dilemma, commitment issues, and gradually reduce information problems over time. However, there are a few key differences. We assume that postcolonial states are generally more multiethnic than precolonial states, due to their larger average size. Simultaneously (especially in the initial period after indipendence) they are relatively lacking the capacity to project force (equally) across its whole territory.[7] We argue that areas differ both in their initial level of communal violence (as outlined in the following paragraph), but also in the rate at which new national governments have been able to reduce it further.

[7]Keep in mind that unlike a multiethnic precolonial state like Kanem Bornu, the multiethnic state of Kenya never used its *own* instruments/institutions of power to establish its borders, and incorporate its various ethnic groups.

4.1 The leftover effect

We argue that in areas with a history of precolonial statehood there is a 'leftover effect' from its time as an independent state. Because the virtuous cycles that reduce the information problem over time have been in effect for a relatively longer period, these areas start at a lower relative level of communal violence in the postcolonial period. Because the establishment and consolidation of states is what has had the most direct effect on suppression of raiding and feuding (Pinker 2012), we argue this is the main avenue through which precolonial states affect postcolonial levels of communal violence.

4.2 Ease of integration

Areas above a certain minimum level of precolonial state presence generally had some existing institutions (formal or informal) and at the very least vertical social networks that could be leveraged by colonizers. This facilitated integration into the framework of colonial administration through systems of indirect rule, whereby local kings, chiefs and leaders retained their position at the local level with the colonial power placing itself on top. Even in the case of more direct forms of rule, in which local rulers were replaced, integration was probably relatively easier than in places with little to no experience of statehood. The difference being the relative difficulty of replacing one hierarchy with another relative to building a hierarchy were non had previously existed. Additionally, areas outside the reach of precolonial states were so for a reason. Usually due to the effective distance (in travel time) from areas able to produce a large enough surplus of food to provision armies. The relative differences of such conditions had not fundamentally changed despite European and more modern armies greater ability to reach such remote areas. Integrating remote areas was still relatively more difficult. Being better integrated into the colonial administration, and subsequently the nation state, means that the conflict reducing mechanisms of state, outlined above, continue to work and even at a higher level (of colony and nation state).

On the other hand, higher levels might be more difficult to integrate directly, which usually resulted in indirect rule during the colonial era, and more local autonomy in the post-independent era. This increased local autonomy implies that such areas are less integrated into modern states than areas of more moderate levels of precolonial state presence, and thus enjoy less of the modern states conflict reducing effects. However, they do start at a higher level of intercommunal interaction (larger 'leftover effect'), therefore we argue the overall effect of precolonial state presence should remain positive.[8]

[8]This lack of integration is perhaps evident in the finding that such areas are more frequently engaged in violent conflict with the central government, especially in areas of high precolonial state presence far from the capital (Wishman Forthcoming).

4.3 Local institutions

Whether formal or informal, or considered part of indirect rule or not, precolonial states often left behind institutions in the territories they ruled (Wig 2016, Wig & Kromrey 2018). These institutions should generally be more closely tailored to local conditions than ones created by colonial administration or an often remote modern state. By being aware and understanding of local traditions, customs and culture, such institutions might also prove more effective. Precolonial states may for example have left specific mediation mechanisms such as councils or courts for dealing with potential triggers that exist between two communities. Additionally, by tying agreements to its own institutions, the breaking of which would jeopardize the institutions themselves or, if tied to formal (though not necessarily state recognized) institutions, contract-breaking would require that the very same institution overturn its own previous decisions. Such institutions make inheritor groups more credible partners (Wig & Kromrey 2018).

A more general institution that frequently transfer from precolonial states into the postcolonial period is leadership. Sometimes they were officially incorporated as part of the state apparatus (as in the case of Rwanda [DOUBLE CHECK]), sometimes recognised as official ceremonial leader or at times not recognised by the state at all. Nevertheless leaders can influence the level of communal violence in at least two ways. Leaders occupy a unique role that allow them to act mediators. Both preventing conflicts from escalating to violence and help bring an end violence once it is a fact. Even ceremonial leaders have acted as key mediators in national level events as in the case of the Mogho Naba, who played a key role in brokering the return of civilian rule to Burkina Faso following a military coup in 2015 (BBC). Leaders are also uniquely placed to make more credible commitments as they are better placed to prevent and punish potential spoilers (Wig 2016).

4.4 Economic development?

5 Observable implications

5.1 Communal violence

5.2 Mixed settlement

5.3 Interethnic trust

5.4 Norms of hospitality and conformism in nonstate societies (observable?)

This creates cultures that encourage nosiness in coethnics affairs, and norms of thick-skinedness, extreme self-restraint, generosity, hospitality and politeness towards outsiders[9], and strongly discourage hot-headedness. In the words of Colson (1974, 37) cited in (Cohen & Vandello 2004, 199) '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, 723f).

[9]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.

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