



Pre-colonial Institutions and Peace in Africa

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Many researchers have focused on how the institutions of the nation-state can help build peace. Though useful, this focus can often ignore how institutions older than those of the nation-state can contribute to peacebuilding processes.

Can the introduction of “right” institutions facilitate peace in fragile states? Conflict researchers grappling with this question have mostly focused on the institutions of the nation-state. From this perspective, states can exit the conflict trap by introducing fair elections, capable national bureaucracies, independent judiciaries and constitutional protections against misrule. However, this state-centric perspective ignores the reality that national political institutions are far from the “only game in town” in many of the world’s most conflict prone states. Recent research suggests that institutions older than those of the nation-state can contribute to peace.

African pre-colonial institutions

A powerful example of how non-national political institutions contribute to peacemaking is found in the case of pre-colonial “customary” institutions in Africa. As students of African history should know, post-colonial national institutions were layered on top of a pre-existing mosaic of kingdoms and state-like entities, many of which have roots to the pre-colonial era.

Consider the Ashanti Kingdom in Ghana. This political structure existed prior to colonialism, endured numerous conflicts with British colonizers, and was eventually recognized as a subnational political entity with special prerogatives. Today, after decolonization, several Ashanti institutions remain, such as the

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King, the customary court system and the council of elders. These institutions of the Ashanti Kingdom have served as an important platform for bargaining with the Ghanaian state, as well as in dispute resolution between conflicting parties in Ashantiland. A similar pattern is found in the Buganda Kingdom in Uganda, where Buganda pre-colonial institutions have been incorporated into the constitution and serve as the main focal point for interactions between the Buganda ethnic group and the government.

While some have pointed to customary institutions in Africa as a source of ethnic tension and conflict, this view is not correct. Recent research suggests that customary institutions play important roles as arbiters of conflict in state peripheries where central governments are weak. In a [recent article](#) in the *Journal of Peace Research*, I argue and demonstrate that this is an instance of a more general relationship. In Africa, where customary institutions are plentiful and many states have low capacity, strong pre-colonial institutions can serve as tools for peaceful bargaining and thus conflict reduction.

To evaluate this claim, I collected data on the pre-colonial institutional affiliation of over 243 politically relevant ethnic groups as listed in the [Ethnic Power Relations database](#). The data was collected from the ethnographic atlas, a collection of comparative ethnographic data on over 800 ethnic groups. Combining these data sources enabled a comparison of the degree to which contemporary ethnic groups inherited centralized pre-colonial political institutions such as kingdoms, chieftaincies and empires.

Within this sample of ethnic groups, I investigated whether groups that were excluded from political power – which a decade of research suggests are the most conflict-prone ethnic groups – were less likely to experience armed conflict if they had inherited strong pre-colonial institutions. The results clearly

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show that ethnic groups who are excluded from power, but inherit pre-colonial institutions, are less likely to be involved in civil conflict in the period between 1945-2010. This is consistent with the claim that these groups can rely on their pre-colonial institutions to bargain with governments, avoiding armed conflict.

Reasons for the success

Why are ethnic groups with inherited political structures more adept at avoiding conflict? I argue that strong centralized customary institutions improve their capacity to engage in non-violent bargaining that avoids costly conflict. When groups have centralized customary institutions they can make their promises to respect agreements more credible by enshrining them in centralized political authorities, such as the Ashanti King (in Ghana). When agreements are guaranteed by a customary institution, such as a king or a traditional legislature, this raises the cost of violating the agreement, since renegeing will have reputation costs for the customary institutions themselves, and since customary authorities can sanction violators. Furthermore, having strong centralized authority in customary institutions minimizes the risk of “spoilers” to an agreement, i.e. factions of the given ethnic group that will not abide by the will of group leaders.

For these reasons, groups with decentralized customary institutions face greater constraints on their bargaining credibility since no preeminent authority can be used to guarantee that agreements will be respected. This is exemplified in the roles of centralized customary authorities in striking non-violent bargains with central governments in Africa. In Uganda, the institutions of the Buganda kingdom, such as the traditional authority of the King himself and the traditional Buganda legislature, have been relied on in deals made with the Ugandan regime. In Ghana, the Ashanti Kingdom has been pivotal in

brokering with the Ghanaian state, and has used its centralized customary court system to ratify land-rights acts and to adjudicate land-disputes in Ashantiland. In South Africa, Zulu authorities have used their customary institutions, such as the office of the Zulu king, to extract concessions from the South African government, regarding their role as traditional rulers in Kwazulu province.

Conclusion

This research on pre-colonial institutions has implications for how we approach the link between political institutions and peacebuilding in fragile states. First, it prompts the recognition that political institutions *other* than those related to national governments are vital to ensuring civil peace at the local level. Instead of seeing national institutions as the most vital to peace, we should see them as one category of a rich institutional mosaic. Crucially, in states where national institutions fail to penetrate the periphery, customary political institutions will be more central to building peace and good governance. Second, it shows that traditional or “customary” institutions in Africa should not be seen as obsolete remnants of a forgotten era, but as vital parts of Africa’s institutional mosaic when it comes to building peace. Instead of inducing conflict and fueling ethnic antagonisms, these institutions play vital roles in containing conflict. Their local presence and importance to peace should be recognized by policymakers and scholars alike.

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