

Are stateless societies more unstable than state ones?

In the absence of a state system, one might expect a stateless society to be liable to instability and collapse on three counts. Firstly since the non-state society has no formalised structure for resolving disputes – which could otherwise both confer legitimacy on the resolution and physically enforce the decision – that therefore internal conflicts over relationships, resources, etc are more likely than under the state to escalate from vendetta to blood feud to civil war, disrupting the stability qua physical integrity of the community. Secondly, one might expect that without the mechanisms of a state, a community would suffer instability because an inability to muster the symbolic systems of statecraft to inculcate an internal allegiance and solidarity would expose the community to internal factionalism. Without the “ideological rewards”¹ and sense of representation that a state can sustain, divisive discourses and identity-based claims may fragment group identity and raise transaction costs. This is instability qua identity. A third expectation one might have of stateless societies is that compared with state societies, they may be more vulnerable to encroachment or domination from external forces since, as a corollary to their underutilisation of ideological state apparatuses, their less stratified

¹ Henri J.M. Claessen, ‘State’, *The Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology*, ed. David Levinson, Melvin Ember (New York, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1996) p.1255

labour and their less systematised taxation, it is relatively difficult for them to maintain a trained standing army to defend their territorial integrity and fight for physical resources.

A state, according to Henri Claessen's entry for the *Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology* consists of the following:

[T]he state is an independent centralized socio-political organization for the regulation of social relations in a complex, stratified society living in a specific territory, and consisting of two basic strata, the rulers and the ruled, whose relations are characterized by political dominance of the former and tax obligations of the latter, legitimized by an at least partly shared ideology, of which reciprocity is the basic principle.²

Meyer Fortes and Edward Evans-Pritchard approach a definition of the state from a pragmatic numerical point of view arguing that whereas a kinship system or even a lineage system would seem incapable of uniting large numbers of people together "for defence and the settlement of disputes by arbitration"³, an administrative system is able to. It should be noted that the word "centralized" in the Claessen and Skalnik definition above subsumes important aspects of statehood. Practical evaluations of a state's functional existence depend upon the extent to which one institution within a given territory exercises a monopoly over sanctioning the use of coercive or deadly force, as well as the use of incarceration and taxation. As Fortes and Evans-Pritchard imply, the ownership of an authoritative sovereign locus of power ultimately determines whether a

² Claessen (1996), p.1255

³ Meyer Fortes and Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, 'Introduction', *African Political Systems*, ed. Meyer Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p.7

state can have recourse to judicial machinery to ensure the rule of law⁴. For them however, statehood is a binary condition rather than a continuum and they divide the eight African societies under examination into those which are states and those which are not. Under their categorising system, the Nuer join the Ngwato, the Bemba, the Banyankole and the Kede as peoples without states. Thus, the characteristics of statehood are: centralized authority, administrative machinery, and constituted judicial institutions, as well as the corresponding social stratification of authority, power, status and wealth.

Max Gluckman's description of the Zulu state of pre-colonial times depicts the kind of centralised authority that prompts Fortes and Evans-Pritchard to categorise it a group A (i.e. state) society. Three points will be noted. Firstly, the egalitarian nature of society in what comes to be Zululand for a century from the 1780s, initially under King Shaka, runs contrary to the dichotomy of statehood above, from which we would expect hierarchical status. Gluckman describes the egalitarianism as stemming from a parity of education and lifestyle as well as the absence of fetishised "luxury" goods⁵. It is said that anyone could take part in the chief's council or assist in judging a case and these lower status differentials perhaps merit consideration as a separate force for social stability.

The king received lavish prestations and was required by traditional norms to

⁴ Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1948), pp.14-15

⁵ Max Gluckman, 'The Kingdom of the Zulu of South Africa', *African Political Systems*, ed. Meyer Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p.45

dispense gifts upon his subjects, especially during times of drought. He was also required to grant his chiefs some influence over his decisions. It is said that Shaka did neither and for long enough that the otherwise phlegmatic Zulu were roused to assassinate him. Poisoning is also assumed to be the manner by which a chief who angers his people, his family and his *indunas* may be dispatched⁶. This threat of insurrection demonstrates that a state need not be structurally stable. Indeed, and thirdly, instability may be structurally inherent within this particular form of the state system. An early European visitor to Shaka observed that the policy of the king was to keep the chiefs in contention with one another in order to divide and rule⁷; and Fortes and Evans-Pritchard argue that in the eight African political systems they examine, conflict between the divergent interests of administrative divisions is common and often exploited by political functionaries in personal rivalries⁸. Whereas this court politicking is ultimately checked by the superordinate juridical or military organisation within a state society, in a stateless society, the stabilizing factor is the sum total of inter-segment relations since local segment rivalry equates to conflict between lineage segments⁹.

Edmund Leach's ethnography of the Kachin highlands area of north-east Burma complicates matters by elaborating local social structure as part of an ongoing process of

⁶ Gluckman (1948), p.42

⁷ *ibidem*

⁸ Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1948), p.13

⁹ *ibid.*, p.14

historical flux. Ecology, culture and social structure do not correlate well in the Kachin highlands, but the pattern which Leach posits is that of a cyclical shift between two forms of social structure – one more state-like than the other. The *gumsa* communities conceive of themselves as being ruled by chiefs who are members of a hereditary aristocracy; whereas the *gumlao* reject all notions of hereditary class difference¹⁰. The *gumlao* ideology motivates against statehood and yet resonates well with fundamental contradictions within the *gumsa* system of ultimogeniture and the *taungya* system of land segmentation which together are antithetical to the consolidation of power by a Kachin chief¹¹. *Gumlao* systems meanwhile have a tendency to develop the lineage system characteristics of *gumsa*-type communities¹². Leach sees the mountain ridge of Hpalang in 1940 as being in the process of changing from a *gumsa* to a *gumlao* community and argues that far from being a stable equilibrium which would consolidate towards centralisation, the *gumsa* system was an unstable equilibrium that every influential leader in Hpalang would have gladly changed, but for want of better alternatives¹³.

The Nuer as described by Evans-Pritchard have no real state structure – neither is there a system of law: “There are conventional compensations for damage, adultery, loss of limb, and so forth, but there is no authority with power to adjudicate on such matters or

¹⁰ Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (London: Athlone Press, 1954), p.198

¹¹ Leach (1954), pp.262-3.

¹² *ibid.*, p.227

¹³ *ib.*, p.87

to enforce a verdict”¹⁴. Is this then a situation of anarchy – a Hobbesian state of nature in which superior force prevails? Political rules do apply. In the case of homicide, vengeance is a duty for the agnates of the dead man. In instances where the parties are neighbours, the security problem of potential fighting can even be prevented by the immediate gift of a cow¹⁵. Smaller sections are unlikely to fight since they share grazing land, but between larger groups blood feuding does occur and fighting is also likely to break out over shared interests – commonly territorial – with tribal sections making successful land grabs for grazing land using sheer force¹⁶. Fighting between individuals may occur with spears – for example during the inter-village courtship revels – but quarrels involving adultery or an insult can be settled in single combat with clubs¹⁷. This lessens the risk of loss of life and as such seems to be a pragmatic norm. Disputes may also be settled either by stealth theft of cattle or through the mediation of the leopard-skin chief¹⁸. Whilst the role is ceremonial with no right to command obedience, the ostensible reluctance to compromise exhibited by parties involved invariably masks compliance and a desire to avoid bloodshed without loss of dignity – the leopard-skin chief is the only

¹⁴ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: a description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), p.162

¹⁵ Lucy Mair, *Primitive Government* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1962), p.45

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ib.*, p.41

¹⁸ Evans-Pritchard (1940), p.172

person who can end a blood-feud¹⁹. Although the tribal identity of the Nuer finds expression in many gradations of smaller tribal sections each of which defines itself in opposition to the others on its tier – wherein familiarity of contact appears to breed contempt²⁰ – when the tribes raid the Dinka, these sectional divisions are subsumed within a wider political identity. For the Nuer of Evans-Pritchard's ethnography, the issue of lacking a professional army is not the cause of instability that it could otherwise be since the men of fighting age are capable of overpowering the Dinka when required.

To conclude it is neither true to say that stateless societies are universally less stable than state societies, nor to assert that state societies are always more stable. The reign of Shaka in Zululand illustrates how the concentration of power within state structures can give rise to instability – and how egalitarian ideology could promote stability. Whereas a state society is stabilised when the administrative structure checks regional dissent, the same factionalism in a stateless society is typically checked by inter-lineage segment relations. Leach's ethnography of the Kachin *gumsa* hierarchical system exemplifies how a political system which marks out a ruling class can also contain within its kinship system the seeds of its own downfall. Finally, the Nuer of Evans-Pritchard's ethnography bear witness that although disputes may escalate into

¹⁹ *ib.*, p.173

²⁰ *ib.*, p.150

more widespread instability where the rule of law is not imposed by a centralised authority, this does not preclude the existence of grassroots counterbalancing tendencies and plural loci of arbitration. State apparatuses are not necessary for the maintenance of a stable group identity in opposition to an other – and neither does the absence of divided labour prove a fatal military disadvantage in tribal warfare. However, securing wider geopolitical stability for themselves is not within the grasp of these stateless societies.

Bibliography

African Political Systems, ed. Meyer Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (London: Oxford University Press, 1948)

Claessen, Henri J.M., 'State', *The Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology*, ed. David Levinson, Melvin Ember (New York, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1996) p.1255

Evans-Pritchard, E.E., *The Nuer: a description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940)

Leach, Edmund R., *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (London: Athlone Press, 1954)

Mair, Lucy, *Primitive Government* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1962)

Parkin, Robert, 'Ladders and Circles: Affinal Alliance and the Problem of Hierarchy', *Man*, 1990, pp.472-488