

CHAPTER 3

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF STATE FRAGILITY

This chapter explores whether state fragility in Sub-Saharan Africa has a shared historical origin, because a stylised fact survives all the theoretical disputes around the definition and measurement of fragility¹: Sub-Saharan African countries always account for most of the group of fragile states. The rich diversity of institutional developments in the region suggests that a common historical root of state fragility does not operate in isolation – but is closely intertwined with country-specific dynamics. This chapter does not provide a detailed account of the factors that make individual Sub-Saharan African countries fragile and does not represent a substitute – or shortcut – for a thorough analysis of the local context. Still, it offers relevant insights for effective external engagements in situations of fragility.

The Scramble for Africa, spurred by European countries at the end of the 19th century, is a natural candidate for the historical origin of the fragility plaguing many Sub-Saharan African countries. This historical experience unifies most of the region, and the colonial period has proven to have long-lasting consequences on the pattern of institutional development during the period.² While state institutions can be fragile even in countries such as Ethiopia and Liberia, which were not affected by the Scramble for Africa, European colonialism may still have prevented stronger state structures in the region.

Although the colonial experience marked a watershed in the region's history, it covered only a short period. Thus, this chapter also explores the possibility, along the lines drawn by Herbst (2000), that fragility relates to more deeply rooted regional characteristics, which have made – and still make – it hard to follow a path of institutional development conducive to legitimate and effective states.

This does not soften the argument about the relevance of the colonial experience in influencing the institutional development of postcolonial states. But it frames it in a broader perspective.³ The Scramble for Africa did not occur in an institutional vacuum. The formation of colonial states interacted with preexisting institutional features of the colonised countries, which – rather than being static and time invariant – were significantly influenced by the colonial period.

1. SPECIFIC DRIVERS AND COMMON UNDERLYING FACTORS

Sub-Saharan African countries share some distinctive symptoms, but “there is little to hold state fragility together other than its symptoms: poverty, insecurity, proneness to conflict, corruption⁴.” Though the regional dimension of fragility should not be overlooked, state fragility is most likely to be determined by country-specific driving factors, which confer on the group of fragile countries the heterogeneity depicted in chapter 2. A thorough understanding of what led a country along a downward spiral, with the capacity and legitimacy of its state institutions progressively eroded, can hardly be gained by analyses that aim for broad-based conclusions.

Still, the geographical clustering of fragile states hints at some common regional factors, which are likely to interact with country-specific factors in determining the fragility of state institutions. If we can credibly establish common factors contributing to the occurrence – and to the persistence – of fragility, this would lay the ground for a broader analytical framework, which could then contribute to organising and understanding the crucial role of country-specific factors.

Most of the debate around state fragility – both in academia and in the development community – leaves aside the historical roots of fragility. But bringing the historical dimension of fragility to the forefront can enhance the soundness and credibility of European engagements to support state-building. Europe can hardly expect that its engagement can be perceived as neutral or merely technical, because the perception that Europe is to blame for the fragility of state institutions is widespread across Sub-Saharan Africa. Some authors have actually argued that this engagement is a nuance of the old *mission civilisatrice* that supposedly backed the European colonisation at the time of the Scramble for Africa⁵. Thorough analysis of the role of European countries is thus a precondition for effective European support to state-building.

¹ Bertoli and Ticci 2009.

² For example, Acemoglu et al. 2001; Lange 2004; Angeles and Neanidis 2009.

³ As Robinson (2002) observes, assessing the relative influences of different historical factors is still an unsettled empirical issue.

⁴ Briscoe 2008, p. 7.

⁵ Paris 2002.

2. IS FRAGILITY A COLONIAL LEGACY?

European countries – which for centuries had strongholds along the African coastline – gained political control of most of Sub-Saharan Africa within a few decades between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The colonial experience marked African history, though less than a century elapsed from the Berlin Conference to the independence of the Portuguese colonies in the mid-1970s.

At least three elements are necessary to support the argument that state fragility ranks among the legacies of the colonial experience in Africa. We need to identify the salient features of colonial states – and their process of formation – that resemble the distinctive traits of fragile state institutions. Once the similarity has been established, we need to understand why political independence from the former colonial powers did not remove or at least significantly alter these institutional features. Then, we need to describe the factors that contributed to their persistence in postcolonial states, as more than half a century has passed since the Gold Coast gained independence from Great Britain in 1957, paving the way for decolonisation in Sub-Saharan Africa.

3. COLONIAL STATES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Four facets of the formation of state institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa can be related to state fragility.

- The first is their artificial character – the creation of colonial states introduced an element unrelated to the social, institutional and cultural characteristics of the colonised territories.
- The second is the extractive nature – the structure of state institutions was designed to transfer resources to the colonial power, not to foster local development.
- The third is their inherent extraversion – the state established tight economic links with the colonial power, in a relationship of political dependence.
- The fourth relates to indirect rule – a system of colonial administration initiated in the British Empire,⁶ but which was also used by Belgium and France in their colonies.⁷

European colonial powers transplanted institutional structures that were extraneous to the local context.⁸ The development of state institutions in precolonial times moved along different lines from those followed in Europe.⁹ Colonial states did not emerge from a time-consuming process consolidating informal institutions and mediating conflicting interests within society. Instead, they were externally imposed by the overwhelming military power of European countries. “The state [is] in most of Africa an essentially artificial one, ‘suspended above’ a society that would never have produced it and did not demand it”.¹⁰

The artificial character of state institutions contributed to their detachment from society.¹¹ The reliance on indirect rule does not subtract from this argument, as only the lowest layers of the colonial administration could be attributed to local people. Though most of them were traditional or customary chiefs, their roles – and most notably their relationships with the local communities – were reshaped by the colonial power.¹² The argument by Kaplan (2009) resonates with a line of reasoning that has been put forward in the development economics literature: Myrdal (1972) attributed the weakness of the state structure in the postcolonial period precisely to the exogenous introduction of state institutions, which instilled in the citizens an enduring sense of opposition to them, and a reluctance to abide to their rules.

Artificial colonial state structures were meant not to support the economic development of the colonised territories but to suit the economic interests of the colonial powers. The pursuit of these interests did not take the form of a vent for surplus mechanism. Instead, the colonial powers extracted natural resources and tax revenues from their colonies, which had to endure extremely high levels of taxation, which promoted local infrastructure development to a limited extent.

The extractive character of the colonial state is intertwined with its extraversion, oriented towards the colonial power.¹³ A powerful symbol of this orientation is the location of the capital cities along the coast. “Rather systematically, Europeans created capitals that moved power toward the ocean and away from the interior centres of power that Africans had slowly created”.¹⁴ For instance,

⁶ Lugard 1922.

⁷ Lange 2004.

⁸ Kaplan 2009.

⁹ Herbst 2000.

¹⁰ Luling 1997, p. 288-289.

¹¹ Kaplan 2009.

¹² Ranger 1983, p. 211-262; UNECA 2007.

¹³ Clapham 1996.

¹⁴ Herbst 2000, p. 16.

Accra became the capital of the Gold Coast rather than the inland Kumasi, which had been the centre of the Ashanti Empire, while Bamako replaced Timbuktu as the political core of Mali. The limited inward orientation of colonial states is also reflected in the poor road development that characterised the colonial period. Infrastructure was neglected where it did not lead directly to a financial return. Railroads, for example, were built to ferry raw materials from the interior to ports, but rarely to connect inland territories.

The high rates of mortality facing Europeans in Sub-Saharan Africa also shaped colonial rule, limiting the opportunities for extensive direct settlement.¹⁵ Colonial powers – notably Great Britain, but also, though to less extent, Belgium and France – settled in the colonies to a very limited extent, and resorted to indirect rule to administer them. The upper layers of the colonial administration were retained by colonists, while the colonial powers relied on traditional and customary institutions to maintain order outside the capital¹⁶, because the colonial administration had a very limited direct outreach in the rural areas.

The system of indirect rule fuelled decentralised despotism,¹⁷ as the colonial powers reshaped the relationship between the customary chiefs and the communities. In precolonial times, communities could dislodge chiefs from power, but only the colonial administration could confer or remove that power.¹⁸ This system greatly reduced the accountability of traditional and customary chiefs to their communities, who could wield their local authority to accumulate personal wealth, laying the ground for the subsequent privatisation of the state.¹⁹

These four features of colonial states in Sub-Saharan Africa – rather closely intertwined – resemble some distinctive features of state fragility. The artificial character of their formation detaches state institutions from society, hindering the political processes that can bring the expectations of the citizens and state capacity into equilibrium. The limited development orientation of fragile states resonates with the extractive character of the colonial states, while their inability to mobilise domestic resources can be related to the extraversion of state institutions established in the colonial era. And a bifurcated state structure reinforced by indirect colonial rule could have laid the ground for the neopatrimonial stance of some fragile states in Sub-Saharan Africa.²⁰

4. DECOLONISATION

With the exception of the Portuguese colonies, which went through a long and violent struggle for independence, and the South African colonies, the other Sub-Saharan African countries obtained the political independence from the former colonial powers in a few years after 1957, when the independent Ghana arose from the British Gold Coast. The peaceful transition from colonial rule to political autonomy was a clear opportunity for getting rid of the detrimental institutional features of colonial states. But the political elites of these new countries seldom went beyond a mere Africanisation of the bureaucracy, not coupled with substantial institutional change. Why did the institutional development of Sub-Saharan African states not experience a substantial shift at the time of independence?

A reduction of the artificial character would have required the indigenisation of state institutions, which could have reduced the mismatch between the formal and informal institutions. But several distinct factors hindered such a development. First, the administrative structures – and the power outreach – of several colonial states were rather weak. This induced national political leaders to be cautious about making big changes in an institutional structure that they aimed at consolidating. “They needed to take over a machinery of government in working order, rather than seek to create one from scratch within the unimaginable confusion produced by a simultaneous achievement of independence and reordering of the entire political structure”.²¹

Still, overly westernised legal, governance and education systems precluded local communities from taking advantage of their own resources, capacities and social networks and created unnecessary conflict between formal and informal institutions. Highly centralised governing structures in countries where formal state bodies remain ineffective and where alternative sources of income remain few force groups to compete for scarce state resources, accentuating political fragmentation in the process.

Furthermore, the leaders of many newborn states had been educated in Western countries – Julius Nyerere in the United Kingdom, Léopold Sédar Senghor in France and Kwame Nkrumah in the United States. And the leaders trained in African countries – such as Milton Obote or Félix Houphouët-Boigny – did so in academic institutions strongly supportive of western political values

¹⁵ Acemoglu et al. 2001.

¹⁶ Lange 2004.

¹⁷ Lange 2004.

¹⁸ Lugard 1922.

¹⁹ Bayart 1999.

²⁰ Mamdani 1996.

²¹ Clapham 1996, p. 35.

and institutions. They saw the indigenisation of state institutions as a return to precolonial political structures, detrimental to development.²² Traditional institutions had contributed to the functioning of the colonial states, which hindered relying on them to reduce the detachment between state structures and local cultural and political values.²³

The extractive character of state institutions in the colonial period was clearly detrimental to the development of Sub-Saharan African countries, but it could still suit the self-serving interests of political leaders. Acemoglu et al. (2001) argue that “in many cases where European powers set up authoritarian institutions, they delegated the day-to-day running of the state to a small domestic elite. This narrow group often controlled the state after independence and favoured extractive institutions”.²⁴

The extraversion of the states could not be removed instantaneously at the time of independence, because the dependence on external sources of revenues reflected deeply rooted features of Sub-Saharan African countries. For example, the road network was meant to connect with foreign countries, not to promote local economic development. Moreover, the extraversion could be in the interests of the political elite. Collier (2009a) suggests that Mobutu Sese Soko – who built his personal wealth from the revenues from exports of natural resources out of Zaire – had no interest in reducing the dependence on external sources of revenue.²⁵ That would have had to be matched by introversion in generating state resources. A greater reliance on taxation would have spurred a circle – virtuous for the society, vicious for him – of greater demand for accountability to citizens and a progressive strengthening of state institutions.

The lack of political willingness to increase domestic resource mobilisation was matched by a severe capacity constraint. Increasing taxes is challenging for a poorly developed state structure, which found it hard to broadcast its power outside urban areas, while most of the population lived in sparsely populated rural areas.

So, the political independence attained by Sub-Saharan African countries did not mark a substantial change in the development of state institutions. Hence, the second ring of the chain that is needed to relate current state fragility to the colonial experience is robust. There are solidly grounded bases that can be relied on to justify why the political independence attained by Sub-Saharan African countries did not produce a substantial shift in the development of their state institutions.

5. INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT AND CONTINUITY

Political independence was not matched by institutional development. Still, more than three decades have passed since the conclusion of decolonisation, so we need to complement the arguments about the lack of a substantial shift in institutions with factors that explain the persistence of some key institutional features. Although Sub-Saharan Africa itself presents notable experiences of successful institutional development, such as Botswana, they are the exception rather than the rule. Why?

Independent states in Sub-Saharan Africa were formed by “the stroke of an international pen,” as they immediately obtained recognition from the Security Council of the United Nations.²⁶ This is how “the states in the Bottom Billion came into existence,” with little attention to their economic or political viability. On their economic viability, Collier (2009a) observes that several newborn states were pint-sized, as the limited time span of the colonial experience had prevented the citizens of colonial territories to coalesce around a shared national identity.

The independence of South Asia from the British colonial rule produced just two independent countries in 1949, India and Pakistan, from myriad distinct precolonial political entities. But French West Africa split into several small countries, whose borders had been arbitrarily drawn. These countries were too small to be a state, meaning that their limited size prevented them from delivering security and accountability.²⁷ The arbitrariness of the colonial borders created “populations made up of disparate – and often incompatible – identity groups,” compromising the political viability of postcolonial states.²⁸

While the disparate tribal and ethnic identities clearly predated the colonial period, the colonial administrations determined the “immobilisation of populations, reinforcement of ethnicity and greater rigidity of social definition”, while precolonial Sub-Saharan Africa was not characterised by a “single ‘tribal’ identity, as most Africans moved in and out of multiple identities”.²⁹ Ranger (1983)

²² Clapham 1996.

²³ Note that the perception of the backwardness of informal institutions was matched – soon after independence – by a reliance of the political elites on customary and traditional chiefs as a source of political support. This attitude, while not reducing the mismatch between formal and informal institutions, contributed to the persistence over time of the detrimental side effects of the colonial system of indirect rule.

²⁴ Acemoglu et al. 2001. A similar argument is developed in Mamdani (1996).

²⁵ Collier 2009a.

²⁶ Collier 2009a.

²⁷ Collier 2009a.

²⁸ Kaplan 2009, p. 2.

²⁹ Ranger 1983, p. 248.

explicitly refers to “the invention of tradition in Colonial Africa”, showing that some distinctive features of postcolonial African societies, such as the relevance of ethnic or tribal affiliations, are *not* a legacy of the precolonial period, but rather arose – or were substantially strengthened – at the time of the colonial rule.

To provide a telling example of this dynamic, Newbury (1998) recalls that “the Belgian administration in Rwanda [. . .] sought to structure social order, to rationalise and standardise heterogeneous social relations [. . .]. In the 1930s, they issued identity cards that indicated a person’s ethnic category. [. . .] such measures did not create ethnicity; instead they served to mould its social salience. Thus, in colonial Rwanda, the Hutu came to be classified as second-class citizens. This was starkly illustrated in the allocation of new colonial social and economic resources”.³⁰ This example suggests that divided groups – around ethnic and tribal identities – were often the product of colonial rule, no less than the state structure is.

Newly born Sub-Saharan African countries were thus plagued by two structural problems – political identity fragmentation and weak national institutions – that together precluded the formation of any robust national governing system, severely undermining the legitimacy of the state and producing political orders that are highly unstable and hard to reform. Political fragmentation and weak governing bodies fed on each other, undermining attempts to build a legitimate and effective state. Ethnic divisions – and, for that matter, religious and clan divisions, as well as geographic and socioeconomic forms of political fragmentation – prevented the formation of “one of the most important requirements for making states work [. . .] the creation of apolitical bureaucratic structures (civil service, judiciary, police, army) supported by an ideology that legitimates the role of neutral state authority in maintaining social order through prescribed procedures and the rule of law”.³¹

Whereas many cohesive groups with long common histories have developed sophisticated political, economic and societal systems that maintain stability and foster economic progress, divided populations have no such mechanisms. Fragmented societies, when combined with the weak governmental structures, tend to gravitate towards “a suffocating miasma of vicious circles” whereby, as Putnam notes, “defection, distrust, shirking, exploitation, isolation, disorder and stagnation intensify one another”.³² Once such dysfunctional, unproductive patterns of behaviour come to predominate in a society, they will persist because, as North explains, the high degree of path-dependency of a given institutional framework provides “disincentives to productive activity [by creating] organisations and interest groups with a stake in the existing constraints,” which “is an important factor in explaining persistent low growth rates in developing countries”.³³

Nunn (2007) presents a model with multiple equilibria, demonstrating that an externally introduced institutional setting with insecure property rights and a low level of production, where the state extracts resources from the economic system, can persist even after the external source of extraction has been removed. “The society remains trapped in this suboptimal equilibrium even after the period of external extraction ends”, so political independence does not result in the removal of a socially undesirable institutional setting³⁴.

While most postcolonial states in Sub-Saharan Africa had limited economic and political viability to begin with, the political map of the region has not been altered since the end of decolonisation. “Since 1945 no state has disappeared as a result of military action by a neighbour”.³⁵ These countries have not been subject to an external military threat, crucial in the strengthening of European states.³⁶

Quoting Collier (2009b) at length, “decolonisation occurred following the most appalling international war in history and in the context of nuclear rivalry. Unsurprisingly, there was a sense that it was no longer an acceptable part of government behaviour: it was too costly and neighbourhood wars might escalate into global war. As a result of international pressure, including international mediation through the United Nations and regional groups such as the Organisation of African Unity, the incidence of international war radically diminished. [. . .] The Darwinian process by which strong states absorbed weak states, whereby Germany had reduced from over 300 states to one, completely ceased”.³⁷

External military threats had created the need for the introversion of the state, which needed to levy taxes to finance the military apparatus that was needed to face these external threats. The state’s need to mobilise domestic resources induced citizens to demand that it be held accountable for its uses of fiscal resources, thus imposing restraints on its actions. Moreover, the need to raise resources induced the states to introduce development-oriented institutions, such as securing property rights, because domestic resource mobilisation was crucially connected to the strength of the economic system. External threats also consolidated a shared national identity and strengthened the political process mediating the interests of the state and of society.

³⁰ Newbury 1998, p. 11.

³¹ Easterly 2000, p.12.

³² Putnam 1993, 177.

³³ North 1990, 99.

³⁴ Nunn 2007, p. 173.

³⁵ Collier 2009b, p. 4.

³⁶ Tilly 1990.

³⁷ Collier 2009b, p. 4.

Although the Sub-Saharan African states were not subject to external threats, they were highly insecure, but the threat was from internal rebellion, not neighbouring states.³⁸ The viability of rebellion was connected to the small size of the new states, increasing the chances of the rebels to defeat the army and seize power, while “big is safe”.³⁹ Protection from an external threat, a public good, leads the interests of the political elite and of society to coincide. But protection from an internal threat does not. Repression of an internal threat is a private good that parts of the society might not support. Nor does it contribute to strengthening a shared national identity.

Internal threats do not pose a severe threat to the stability of a government, as it has been estimated that just one of every five attempts at internal rebellion succeeds in overthrowing the government. Hence, the most severe threat for Sub-Saharan African ruling elites was the army, as coups had much better odds of success than rebellions.⁴⁰ This also hindered the functioning of the core mechanism in consolidating state institutions in Europe: strengthening the army. Mobutu Sese Soko deliberately weakened and divided the Zairian army across several lines to reduce the risk of a coup. This ended up with the paradoxical outcome of tiny Rwanda invading neighbouring Zaire in the 1990s.⁴¹

So, state fragility in Sub-Saharan African countries served well-defined interests of the local political elite. The enduring weakness of state institutions in the postcolonial period was also in line with the interests of the former colonial powers.⁴² Once they abandoned political control, they wanted to retain economic control – to keep extracting valuable resources from former colonies.

Aid from donor countries could also have consolidated the extraversion of postcolonial states, weakening the incentives for a more effective mobilisation of domestic resources. The aid selectivity criterion in the Monterrey Consensus was to reward recipient countries having an enabling domestic environment vital for mobilising domestic resources and making effective use of international investment and assistance.⁴³ But there is widespread concern that aid could have an adverse effect on this crucial facet of strengthening state institutions.

6. THE PATH-DEPENDENCE OF INSTITUTIONS – DETACHMENT AND EXTRAVERSION

The pattern of colonial settlement produced a strong and long-lasting influence on measures of current institutional quality.⁴⁴ The theoretical argument backing the empirical analysis – not restricted to Sub-Saharan Africa – is that the mortality rates facing the European colonisers had a strong influence on their pattern of settlement. Colonies where Europeans settled to a very limited extent – because of the high mortality rates – were less likely to adopt the legal and institutional framework of the colonial power. Such a framework was transferred to the colonies where European settlers demanded it, because they had a direct interest in replicating the development-oriented institutional framework that characterised European countries. But where settlement was limited – as in most of Sub-Saharan Africa, with the minor exceptions of the Portuguese colonies – the institutional framework of colonial states was most likely to have an extractive character.⁴⁵

It is not just the size of the direct settlement in the colonies that matters – it is also the system of colonial rule.⁴⁶ A study of 30 British colonies, half in Sub-Saharan Africa, tests the hypothesis that indirect colonial rule was detrimental to postindependence institutional development. The extent of indirect rule – defined as “the number of colonially recognised customary court cases in the total number of court cases in 1955” – has a significant influence on several measures of institutional quality, such as bureaucratic effectiveness, state regulatory burden, rule of law and lack of government corruption.⁴⁷ This evidence – though limited to former British colonies – is in line with the arguments advanced on the adverse legacy of indirect rule in Sub-Saharan Africa.

So far we have lent support to the idea that the colonial period had a role in laying the ground for the fragility of state institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa. One can even assert that the arguments here strengthen a specific interpretation of state fragility in Africa: that the region’s states failed before they formed.⁴⁸ Indeed, “the evidence is overwhelming that most of Africa’s collapsed states at

³⁸ Collier 2009b.

³⁹ Collier 2009b.

⁴⁰ Collier 2009b.

⁴¹ Collier 2009a.

⁴² Wallerstein 1975.

⁴³ Dollar and Levin 2006.

⁴⁴ Acemoglu et al. 2001.

⁴⁵ The long-lasting effects of the pattern of colonial settlement have been recently confirmed by Angeles and Neanidis (2009), who show that this influences the current development-orientation of the ruling elite, and – through this channel – the effectiveness of foreign aid.

⁴⁶ Lange 2004; Acemoglu et al. 2001.

⁴⁷ Lange 2004.

⁴⁸ Anderson 2004 quoted in Englebert and Tull 2008.

no point in the postcolonial era remotely resembled the ideal type of the modern Western polity".⁴⁹ This is why the *term failed state* – which often substitutes for the term *fragile state* without a clear shift in the underlying meaning – can be highly misleading.⁵⁰ State fragility has recently plagued countries that had long been regarded as success stories of economic and institutional development in the region, such as Côte d'Ivoire and Zimbabwe. But it is undeniable that state fragility – highly persistent over time – was manifest mainly in countries that had never benefited from effective state institutions.

Still, it is fair to say that this observation reinforces a puzzle that relates the limited time span of European colonial rule. Though one need not downplay the colonial legacy on the institutional development of postcolonial states, it is important to analyse whether – and eventually how – colonial rule interacted with some preexisting and more deeply rooted factors.

Herbst (2000) convincingly argues that the reach of colonial power in Sub-Saharan Africa remained little more than notional for decades. The Berlin Conference "enabled the Europeans to conquer Africa while doing as little as possible to control it".⁵¹ "In 1939 the average British district commissioner was responsible, with his staff of Africans, for an area roughly the size of Wales. Ruling over the roughly 43 million people in British tropical Africa in 1939 were a grand total of 1,223 administrators and 938 police. Similarly, there were 3,660 officials to govern 15 million Africans in French West Africa, 887 to govern 3.2 million in French Equatorial Africa and 2,384 to govern 9.4 million in the Belgian Congo in 1938".⁵²

These figures provide a telling measure of the limited ability of colonial states to broadcast their administrative authority over the vast territories they were supposed to control, which – besides the tiny size of the administrative staff – was further impaired by the poor development of roads in the colonial period.

Why did colonial powers not opt to consolidate their control over Sub-Saharan Africa? The most convincing answer relates to capacity rather than to willingness. The challenge posed by Sub-Saharan Africa to the European countries was not different from the one faced by "precolonial rulers in Africa [who had] struggled over the centuries to extend their power".⁵³ The author argues that "the fundamental problem facing state-builders in Africa – be they precolonial kings, colonial governors or presidents in the independent era – has been to project authority over inhospitable territories that contain relatively low densities of people".⁵⁴

This argument suggests that it could hardly be expected that European countries could have succeeded – in a few decades – to consolidate state institutions where precolonial rulers had largely failed – or not even attempted – to do so. Some features of colonial states can be related not only to the postindependence states, but also to the characteristics of the political entities in precolonial times, suggesting an even stronger path-dependence and persistence of institutional development in the region. The detachment between the rulers and society was reflected in what Herbst (2000) labels as "the primacy of exit" once the interests of the rulers and some social groups could not be reconciled. Exit took the form of mobility, as "migration to escape from social or political problems was [. . .] common among the Yoruba, the Edo, the Fon and many others".⁵⁵ Mobility resulted in a weakening of the rulers, as Barfield (1993) observes for the tribes of Southern Sudan: "The powers of the Dinka chief were weak [. . .] because rather than submit to his authority, dissident groups could move to a new territory if they were dissatisfied".⁵⁶

The prospect of exit through migration considerably reduced the opportunities for rulers to raise resources from the ruled community, as "scattered and mobile people are likely to generate neither the resources on which permanent government institutions rely, nor the social structures and values needed to uphold them".⁵⁷ This inherent difficulty determined the extraversion even of precolonial institutions, which gathered resources from the outside, through long-distance trading. Precolonial extraversion took its most distinctive form in the slave trade. Slaves to be sold were obtained either within the community, where people could be sentenced on the basis of alleged charges arbitrarily put forward by the judiciary institutions,⁵⁸ or from raids against neighbouring communities, breaking down trust and social capital.

This tragic form of precolonial extraversion produced long-lasting institutional consequences for Sub-Saharan African countries, which – once more – can be related to the current fragility of their state institutions. Nunn (2008) demonstrates that the slave trade hindered the economic development of Sub-Saharan African countries, and this effect goes through its detrimental effect on state institutions. Slave trade favoured the distrust towards state institutions and the consolidation of highly localised ethnic identities, which impede the smooth functioning of the relationship between the state and the society when the former is weak to begin with.⁵⁹

⁴⁹ Englebert and Tull 2008, p. 111.

⁵⁰ Cammack et al. 2006.

⁵¹ Herbst 2000, p. 72.

⁵² Herbst 2000, p. 78.

⁵³ Herbst 2000, p. 35.

⁵⁴ Herbst 2000, p. 11.

⁵⁵ Herbst 2000, p. 39.

⁵⁶ Barfield 1993, p. 38.

⁵⁷ Clapham 1996, p. 28.

⁵⁸ Nunn 2008.

⁵⁹ Collier 2009b; Kaplan 2009.

A recent contribution by Nunn and Wantchekon (2009) also demonstrates that slave trade exerted a long-lasting detrimental impact on social capital, as “individuals’ trust in their relatives, neighbours, and local government is lower if their ancestors were heavily threatened by the slave trade”,⁶⁰ which can act as a magnifier of the adverse effects of state fragility. Nunn and Puga (2009) show that slave trade transformed the ruggedness of the terrain into a blessing in disguise for Sub-Saharan African countries: while its direct effect is to hinder economic development, its indirect – and more relevant effect – was to protect the population from the raids of slave traders.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The geographical clustering of fragile states in Sub-Saharan Africa hints at some shared root causes of fragility that interact with country-specific driving factors. The arguments reviewed in this chapter lend support to the existence of historical factors that have laid the ground for the fragility of state institutions. The formation of colonial states at the time of the Scramble for Africa introduced some institutional features that still surface in the state structures that prevail nowadays. Neither the attainment of political independence nor the decades elapsed since that time have significantly altered the highly path-dependent evolution of Sub-Saharan African states.

Though it probably played a crucial role, the colonial period does not exhaust the historical factors that affect the fragility of state institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa, for the precolonial era also exerted an influence on the future institutional development of the region. Both the precolonial and the colonial periods did produce long-lasting effects not just on the formal structure of state institutions, but even on other social factors that determine the fragility or soundness of a polity. Specifically, the definition of ethnicity was deeply shaped both by slave trade in the precolonial era, and by its tightening and increased social salience by the colonial administrations.

While history matters for fragility, the analysis in this chapter does not allow for any deterministic shortcut from the history of Sub-Saharan Africa and the diffuse current state fragility. The diversity of the country-specific development of state institutions suggests that effective states can arise even in a context where the odds can be reduced by historical or geographical factors, though one should not impose on the strengthening of Sub-Saharan African states overly optimistic expectations.

⁶⁰ Nunn and Wantchekon 2009, p. 43.