



Homicide Reduction among the Gebusi of Papua New Guinea - A Proposal for Primary Field Research

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Homicide Reduction and Conflict Management
In the Nomad Sub-District, Papua New Guinea

A Final Project Report

Submitted to The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation

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The present report describes the activities and results of primary research in 2017 on Gebusi violence and conflict management funded by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation as a follow up to research separately funded by HFG in 2016 (see previous 2016 final project HFG report). The project investigates the causes of homicide reduction among Gebusi of Papua New Guinea, who the PI documented to have one of the highest rates of homicide ethnographically known during the precolonial, colonial, and early postcolonial periods (Knauft 1985a, 2013) – following which there has been a now-confirmed reduction of homicide to zero, since 1989. The presently-described research was undertaken successfully in May-July 2017. Unforeseen circumstances included an intense La Niña cloudy and rainy season that reduced solar power and computer use in the field to a minimum along with other challenges that included closure of the nearest airstrip at Nomad; failure of all outside communications; difficulty of arranging flights in or out of the area at the beginning and end of fieldwork (there are no roads); deterioration of supplies stored locally in 2016; and various health difficulties. Despite these issues, fieldwork was completed very successfully, with dramatic new developments both reinforcing and extending the preliminary project results obtained in 2016.

Collaborative interviews held jointly by the PI and co-PI with individual Gebusi women as well as men allowed efficient real-time computer write-up of information as well as simultaneous cross-checking of informant accounts in both *tok pisin* by Malbrancke and the local Gebusi vernacular by Knauft. Consistently conducted semi-structured interviews (ranging between 40 and 200 minutes in length) concerning individual sorcery beliefs and opinions with eleven men, nine women, and one husband-and-wife couple interviewed jointly provided a revealing and fascinating tableau of attitudes and orientations concerning conflict and violence including across a wide range of subject positions.

Again this past summer, ongoing conflict and sorcery cases occurred among the target Gebusi population. This afforded further rich opportunity for documenting and analyzing cases of potential violence in real time. Completion of cross-checked

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case history accounts of all deaths in the community and its descendants from 1980 to the present (N=68) validated and confirmed the total absence of deaths from physical violence since one final killing in 1989. This establishes a homicide rate of zero for the past 28 years in a population among whom previously homicide accounted conservatively for at least 32.9% of all adult deaths (Knauff 1985a, 1987, 1991, 2002a, 2013). Indeed, opportunistic re-checking in the field of death inquests prior to 1980 confirmed that killings previously reported were indeed homicides and revealed, in addition, that other killings beyond those previously assessed had also occurred during the colonial and late pre-colonial period (c. 1960-1975). The earlier homicide assessments were thus re-validated to be conservative, and the precolonial rate of homicide likely accounted for closer to 40% of all adult deaths. This throws into further relief the decline of Gebusi homicide during the late 1970s and 80s, and the rate of zero since 1989. These results were further confirmed and complemented by the completion of systematic investigation of 71 Gebusi marriages during the same Gebusi target population from the late colonial period to the present (c. 1970-2017). These document the consistent rise of brideprice transactions – and the deferral of direct compensation through the *promise* of future brideprice. This supports, extends, and confirms our earlier conclusion that more *overt* and *assertive* negotiation of compensation in cases of non-sister-exchange marriage reduces the unmediated build-up of tensions and replaces more ultimate expression in homicidal violence – notwithstanding the associated increase in overt social conflict that contestation of brideprice also produces. As such, social *conflict* and *dispute* have not been reduced among Gebusi and in significant ways have increased at the same time that homicide itself has declined and has indeed been zero among Gebusi for the past 28 years.

The apparent and somewhat counterintuitive inverse relationship between socially expressed conflict and homicidal violence exposes larger analytic issues, including the commonly held tacit or active Western assumption that one of these is effectively a proxy or index of the other. Exposure and analysis of the importantly *variable* relationship between conflict in general and lethal violence in particular extends and recasts in a new way the PI's earlier suggestion that high or low rates of lethal

violence may be either hyper or hypo-cognized relative to the promulgated social self-perception of social life as violent or not (Knauff 1985a:351). Conversely, the incidence and self-perception of social conflict per se may be at odds or systematically divergent from the incidence of lethal violence and homicide per se.

The presently concluded field research puts this awareness into concrete experiential, ethno-psychological, and humanistic terms via our 21 in-depth interviews concerning individual beliefs, attitudes, and opinions concerning sorcery. More generally, these interviews revealed the locally perceived acceptability, conditions, and causes of violence and/or its absence, as well as the variable perception of whether the key conditions of enmity and discord in the community have increased, decreased, or stayed largely the same, especially in relation to virulent attribution of sorcery, from the late colonial period to the present. A large and dramatic diversity and range of variation among Gebusi were revealed concerning attitudes about sorcery, the propriety or acceptability of violence, and the conditions under which violence, especially associated with sorcery beliefs, practices, and inquests, is considered acceptable. Summary designators of these differences of attitude and orientation have been heuristically configured for further analysis. For purposes of the present funded project, the key ethnographic finding of these interviews is that contrary to what might be expected, beliefs in sorcery and in the propriety and acceptability of physical violence against sorcerers did *not associate predictably* with *any* of the following factors or subject positions:

- male vs. female
- level of education; e.g., no schooling, primary grade education, or high school education (no Gebusi have yet entered much less completed university education)
- degree of Christianization and intensity of demonstrated Christian commitment (e.g., regular attendance at church, participation in church programs and activities, etc.)
- Level and type of past or present employment (or its absence)
- Exposure to and/or participation in government programs or development projects

- Exposure to or involvement with government agents of social control or constraint (e.g., police, courts; magistrates, PNG defense force)

These apparently conflicting or 'negative' findings are themselves highly consequential. In particular, they document and reinforce a striking *lack of consensus* concerning the effective conditions, trends, and implications of sorcery-mediated conflict and violence.

Since strong belief in sorcery persists, lack of consensus concerning how and under what conditions to pursue violence against sorcery suspects emerges as a major factor in the reduction of Gebusi violence. Given their firm and continuing social and residential organization in resolutely *multi-clan* settlements, Gebusi violence has historically been galvanized, abetted, and reinforced by mechanisms such as sorcery inquests and spirit seances that in principle and very often in fact produced what was taken as firm if not incontrovertible public evidence that a given person was guilty as sorcerer responsible for death from illness in the community – and that the suspect to be intimidated, tortured, and ultimately killed for the good of the community. Since then, even amid the ongoing *absence* of any police or other agents of outside coercive control, impacts of change have *differentially* become ramified through diverse personal experiences. This includes individual's experiences and interpretations of current and ongoing conflict cases, and the virulent attribution of sorcery. This in turn reinforces the larger tendency for lack of consensus in individual cases to validate or otherwise provide or create conditions in which pursuit of physical violence is considered feasible and practically doable.

Thus, while Gebusi *belief* in sorcery and in the propriety of violence directed against suspected sorcerers remains strong, its conditions of effective actualization are greatly mitigated and reduced. This both because of the demise of public spirit séances and publicly legitimated sorcery inquests (e.g., Knauft 2002), and also because agents and aspects of social change have become diversely experienced and influential in the community, depending in the mix on individuals' personal experience, personality, and contextual disposition.

In relation to this work, and complementing our original proposal and initial period of project work in 2016, further poignant incidents and entailments of conflict in summer 2017 included the following:

- The son of a sorcery suspect who was publicly executed in late May 2016 by Bedamini people – and who was himself subject to attempted homicide as sorcery accomplice but escaped – paid PGK 600 (approximately \$200 USD) to the killers to forestall their continuing attempts to kill him, and to finish his dispute with them. In the process, the village of the victim and his son split. In particular, the village's Bedamini members (who were both the perpetrators and the victims of the violence) moved out and the village, the remainder of which has begun reconstituting itself as an all-Gebusi village in a new location closer to the nearest other large Gebusi village. This entailment confirms the contrast between Gebusi and Bedamini patterns of sorcery and violence, with much greater capacity for large-scale collective legitimation and pursuit of violence by Bedamini. Scores of Bedamini men from other villages reportedly flooded into the target village to validate and conduct the initial execution – just as large Bedamini war parties in the precolonial era consistently raided Gebusi, who were unable to amass sizable groups of men themselves for either defense or revenge attacks.
- In our primary community of Gasumi, the wife of the elected Council died during our time away, in November 2016. The ensuing sorcery accusation against a prominent senior man in the community – and prime owner and resident of the community's collective meeting longhouse – split the community when the man in question left with his extended family, closed the longhouse, and moved to a different Gebusi community (Yehebi). The entailments of this case, which we documented during our fieldwork this summer (2017), revealed how, in contrast to the Bedamini case, the potential for lethal violence against the sorcery suspect (and his wife and son) was effectively foreclosed even though many people believed they were guilty and they effectively fled the community, both out of fear of being slain and anger at their accusers.

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- Two additional major cases of mediated conflict in Gasumi took place and were documented in summer 2017– a marital dispute in a new marriage, and a drunken rampage by a young unmarried man. Together with two cases of formally-mediated conflict observed and documented the previous summer, the four cases reveal an important and generally consistent means through which open conflicts in the community are mediated and to a significant extent resolved. In all four cases:
 - Dispute mediation works fairly well without any formal government awareness or outside presence (including no police presence or ability to enforce proclaimed outcomes).
 - Mediators are elected Councils (or 'Committees') of the wards, though they are not judicial officers and have no enforcement power and their resolutions are upheld only by consensus.
 - From local perspective, the government is present through the Councils ("We're the law and order," said one Council).
 - Mediation is held following sufficient time so that all significant disputants and parties to the conflict are physically present and willing to talk.
 - Disputants are allowed uninterrupted time in turn to present their own side and experience of events (which makes mediation a protracted public affair that typically takes at least an hour or two).
 - The Council or other party as designated mediator redirects questions not in an accusatory way but to elicit further conditions and context of the case and, especially, to make as sure as much as possible that otherwise unstated or lingering/festered discontents associated with the case are expressed (that is, so the conflict is less likely to re-emerge later in a new guise).
 - The mediation proceeds until all parties accept a resolution – and often or typically one that has been informally agreed to by some spokespersons or go-betweens for the principals ahead of time.
 - Women typically stay on the physical periphery of the meeting but are highly important and the mediator takes care to coax out their

opinions and disagreements. Indeed, in three of the four mediations, one of the major initiatives of the mediator was to draw out the discussion and decision so that women who were upset were listened to and their views registered at length –even though the ultimate decision may not have taken their concerns fully into account or promulgated a result that female parties only grudgingly accepted. The importance of female antagonism and attempted resolution of same constitutes a major contrast to airing of grievances and discussion of disputes as observed among the prior Gasumi community in 1980-1982.

- The mediation ends generally with parties, including and especially principals and women in the dispute, snapping fingers (like shaking hands – *tukala*) as a public indication and social fact that the dispute is finished (*hasum-da*) and that the associated anger is finished (*forgop*).
- Conclusions to disputes typically entail the dismissal of the dispute as not needing further action or recompense (two cases) or monetary compensation (two cases).

In all, means of conflict mediation that both bring conflicts to public deliberation and effectively manage or resolve such conflicts, appear to be successfully pursued in the absence of any legitimate government agents or agents of potentially coercive social control, such as police. Significantly, however, the most serious case of community conflict – the accusation of the community's longhouse owner as a sorcery suspect – was deemed not ready or appropriate for finalizing conflict mediation. By the end of our field research, the suspect's family had built a new house in the settlement to which they had fled/relocated, and it did not appear that they would be effectively repatriated to Gasumi any time in the near future. And yet, violence against the suspect and his family was effectively resolved.

This pattern throws into higher relief the significance of Gebusi conflict management, including during and after cases of sickness and death from illness. As

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gruesome executions of suspected witches and sorcerers are widely assessed to have become more frequent across parts of Melanesia as well as other world areas in recent years – e.g., Forsyth and Eves 2015; Jorgensen 2014; Eves 2000; Russell 2015; Davidson 2016; Pearlman 2016; Stewart and Strathern 1999 – the practical relevance of how Gebusi have managed to forestall such violence is particularly striking.

Our findings suggest key implications for alternative analytic and theoretical understandings of violence reduction. These are delineated and updated in boldface sections below.

Incidence of demography on the reduction of lethal violence. Traditionally, a reinforcing cycle developed between frequent sickness death at any stage of life and the difficulty of explaining how people in the prime of life could die, either suddenly or from wasting sickness. Short life expectancy was overdetermined by very poor hygiene, poor diet, high residential instability, no access to medication, high anxiety about residential stability, and inability to dependably invest substantial labor per unit of land given shifting residence patterns and tendency to flee to the bush under conditions of external threats or epidemic sickness. By contrast, with village aggregation and increased access to healthcare, better nutrition, increased use of canoes and water transport as people moved downstream, larger and more numerous houses and gardens (steel axes and knives), mortality has reduced dramatically, as well as the frequency with which people died (particularly at earlier ages). As a result, the objective conditions under which sorcerers would be accused and executed have been reduced. At the same time, as life expectancy increased, the percentage of deaths that were associated with very old people, largely seen as potential sorcerers themselves or as not needing to be avenged through sorcery accusation, increased. The kinds of deaths that occurred were thus less likely to be those that resulted in accusations and execution of sorcerers, even independently of other factors. The decline of frequency of divination séances that traditionally led to the accusation and execution of a suspected sorcerer contributes to further reduced impetus to conduct divination itself. This relates to a major shift from public and

collection divination séances to private dream divinations as means of identifying the cause of a sickness or death, as discussed further below.

Modern incitement of explicit demands in disputes. Among Gebusi, contemporary practices incite the greater and more systematic expression – and management – of tensions and conflicts that were traditionally kept implicit and unstated, potentially building up unabated over time. This is especially the case in requests for marital compensation by the bride-giving lineage, whereas in the pre-colonial and early colonial eras, monetary or material compensation – in lieu of direct or sorcery-mediated violence – was not considered an option (e.g., there were few pigs and no money). Now, by contrast, large amounts are openly requested for brideprice (or as compensation when a woman gets pregnant but the man will not marry her). This does not mean that brideprice will be paid in full, but its demand appears to defuse unexpressed anger and frustration that previously accompanied animosities in cases of unreciprocated marriage that previously correlated highly with the execution of sorcery suspects. As against this, even partial payment of the requested amount now helps forestall greater discontent. The growing pattern of publicly demanding compensation does cause conflict but does not, upon all the accumulated evidence, build tension to the point of lethal violence. This pattern contrasts with the traditional build-up of antagonisms until a structural earthquake of homicidal backlash. This pattern dovetails with the defused way that sorcery investigations following sickness deaths are now handled. By way of illustration, at the funeral feast in late May 2016, demands were not kept private in festering discontent but made directly to the deceased's family for money and an ax that had been owed by not paid to others by the deceased. Though payment was not made immediately, the family members in question agreed in principle to comply at a later time.

Cultural reinterpretations of what constitutes balanced exchange. This hypothesis, in tandem with that abovementioned, has proven highly valuable. Increasing recourse to brideprice or bridewealth – money and goods given from the husband to the bride's relatives – appears to have mitigated the demand for exact

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person-for-person exchange in so-called sister-exchange marriage. Historically, lack of reciprocity through sister exchange in marriage was highly correlated with violent sorcery attributions between in-laws following sickness deaths in subsequent years. Though the incidence and desirability of sister-exchange marriage remains high, the promise of increasing amounts of brideprice in future years appears to forestall or mitigate antagonisms between in-laws. As Kelly (1977) has suggested for the nearby Etoro people, marital exchange obligations can sometimes be extended and interpreted later to satisfy the demands of exchange marriage. That promises of brideprice, which were historically nil, are increasingly allowed to be renegotiated and finally completed years later, appears to assuage the potential hostility of wife-givers incrementally over time – rather than reciprocation being effectively “all-or-nothing” at or close to the time of the marriage itself. In the colonial and precolonial past, when monetary wealth was nil and brideprice nonexistent, money or other resources, such as a pig, were not considered adequate exchange for a woman given in marriage.

Though the increase and escalating inflation of brideprice in parts of Melanesia entails its own problems (e.g., Lynch 2014; Galbraith 2011; Wardlow 2006; Eves 2006; Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1997; Jolly 1994; Jorgensen 1993), the advent of brideprice and its local increase to PGK 1,000 or more (c. U.S.D 350) among Gebusi appears to have forestalled rather than increased violence between in-laws, at least to the present (see Malbrancke 2016a for similar findings in a different region of the country). It also appears that a period of five or even ten or more years is typically acceptable for adequate monetary compensation to be given, with lowered expectations and increased actual payments tending to reach a mutually acceptable accommodation during this period. These findings underscore the importance of assessing the implications of contemporary socio-economic and related developments in their specific cultural and local historical context.

Cultural influence of Christian and government values. Our current work suggests that some Gebusi attribute their ongoing absence of homicide and lack of violent retribution against sorcerers – despite their continuing belief in sorcery itself

– to the influence of the local Catholic and Evangelical Protestant Churches. As the elected Councilor of Gasumi Corners proclaimed, “If there are police but no Church, there *will* be killing. [But] if there is Church but no police, there *won’t* be any killing.” At a gross level of value-based or ideological explanation, Christian belief and the power of divine intervention by God do appear to be important reasons of continuing homicide absence among Gebusi. This stands in partial contrast to Bedamini, some of whom in outlying areas most prone to violence have not adopted Christianity.

By itself, however, this explanation seems insufficient, since Gebusi who are actively Christian and who eschew the idea of sorcery practice in general are still quite prone to suspecting or accusing persons of sorcery when their own close relatives become severely ill or die from sickness. The aged mother of the foremost lay local leader of the Catholic Church is herself (with her son’s understanding and approval) the one person in Gasumi whose spiritual opinion is still sought to diagnose or reveal cases of sorcery. In all, Christian belief seems to a significant extent a generalized or post-facto explanation for lack of violent sorcery attributions and homicide among Gebusi rather than a sufficient cause of homicide reduction. In some cases, including that of a Gebusi Evangelical church pastor, the belief in Christianity and in a higher authority of divine judgment itself is taken to justify at least the idea of killing someone, like a sorcerer, who self-evidently does not follow the rules of the church. As such, it appears that religious belief combines with other more pragmatic economic and social organizational factors in accounting for the highly reduced rate of killing among Gebusi (compare with Malbrancke 2016b for an assessment of the limited impact of Christianity on sociocultural change among another New Guinea group).

New or resuscitated modes of dispute mediation. As underlined above, Gebusi now have recourse to their own elected “Council” in cases of dispute meditation. However, it turns out in fact that Councils have no enforcement power. All police have left the Nomad area and there is no presence or effectively available representative of State force or coercion. More significant in cases of sorcery

attribution specifically is for disputes to be individuated and “de-collectivized” by changes in the way that sickness and death investigations are conducted – and suspicions of sorcery attributed.

In particular, the customary pattern of collective spirit séance divination publicly led by a community spirit medium or shaman has been replaced by so-called “dream divination,” in which the cause of sickness or death is sought individually from a “seer”. Though the resulting pronouncements may be similar to those customarily made, they are individually paid for and rendered to the primary person aggrieved rather than voiced in public address to the multi-clan community. As such, the *collective* basis for generating stigma and mounting retributive violence against the sorcery suspect is forestalled. This was confirmed by full investigation and tabulation of known sickness deaths in previous years as well as by following up on the dramatic cases that happened to take place during our previous fieldwork in 2016.

“Second order” magic on the rise. As opposed to taking direct action against a suspected sorcerer, it is now more common to contract retribution with a more distant (and harder to trace) third party, thus displacing the revenge against sorcerers to outsiders. In the mix, revenge is not direct physical violence but spiritual as revenge sorcery through magic (*puli puli*). In cases of revenge sorcery, death is interpreted retrospectively as caused by a spirit sent to kill the alleged sorcerer by means of sickness. Traditionally, by contrast, so-called death contracts (*to map*) entailed the contracting of third parties, typically Bedamini, to physically stalk and physically execute the suspected sorcery, that is, by direct violence. Not uncommonly, the suspected sorcerer’s village as a whole would be attacked and decimated by Bedamini warriors. Though the possibility of taking “spiritual” revenge was also present, it was a traditional but minimal and undeveloped aspect of sorcery retribution, against which direct physical action was considered preferable and more definitive.

The shift from corporeal to spiritual vengeance is paralleled by the cultural export of curing practices to neighboring groups, as evidenced in three cases in which a dancer from the distant Kubor tribe was invited and conducted a curing dance in a Gebusi village.

Fear of Leviathan. In contradistinction to Pinker's (2011) original thesis concerning the world-historical reduction of homicide – as discussed and critiqued in our original proposal – recent fieldwork has confirmed that no police or other coercive government presence exists in any meaningful way among Gebusi or in neighboring areas. Underscoring this in cases of homicide, there is no expectation (or hope) that police will eventually come to investigate the public execution of a sorcery suspect by Bedamini that occurred in May 2016. There remain no government officers or officials at the Nomad station, which has effectively been closed (the airstrip was also closed in 2017). Yet more poignantly, when an armed policeman accompanied an election patrol to a remote Kubo village in 2017 – to protect the ballot boxes – he was himself effectively taken hostage along with the rest of the patrol and forced to pay K800 to avoid being killed outright – or subject to sorcery attack – due to local anger concerning the lack of government presence or services in the area. Gebusi continue to say that the government has “died” (*golom-da*). Even projected fear of government presence or retribution remains minimal to non-existent. When the Governor of the Province made a brief surprise visit to Nomad by plane in mid-June 2016 – attempting to take credit for privately-funded air shipments of rice food aid – he was caustically confronted and bitterly criticized by the local population for having neglected to supply any government services to the Nomad Sub-District.

The absence of police or official state presence raises the analytic import of other factors mentioned further above in the continued reduction of Gebusi violence.

At larger theoretical issue are conditions of collective action that persist or are reduced under conditions of modern social change. Bedamini have a long history of aggressive collective action against Gebusi – as reflected in patterns of asymmetric and largely unilateral raiding and homicide by Bedamini against Gebusi during the

precolonial and early colonial era (Knauft 1985:ch 8). In these actions, Bedamini amassed much larger numbers of men for armed confrontation or combat than Gebusi were able to do. In 1981, the PI observed a corollary circumstance in which a large number of men from distant Bedamini villages marched into the Gebusi settlement and summarily demanded payment of a large pig lest they outright kill an older man in the settlement for having caused sorcery against them. Gebusi were fully submissive to this unanticipated intrusion and immediately provided the pig in question, which was taken straightaway by the intruders. Bedamini now appear to continue this pattern among themselves, though less so inter-tribally against Gebusi. In the 2016 Bedamini homicide case, scores of Bedamini from five different Bedamini settlements were said to have descended *en masse* to validate and witness the public execution of a Bedamini sorcerer. This indicates continuing Bedamini ability and willingness for large-scale collective action, including for purposes of violent retribution.

Among Gebusi themselves, the apparent reality of continuing Bedamini sorcery – and revenge against sorcerers – easily fuels the persisting belief in the reality of sorcery in their larger area even though the actual killing of those suspected is rare and nil since 1989.

Conclusions

Our research suggests that individuation of sorcery inquests is a key factor in local homicide reduction among Gebusi, in partial contrast to Bedamini. Individuation of antagonism is also reflected in the striking diversity and lack of consensus of present Gebusi beliefs concerning the conditions and propriety of taking action against suspected sorcerers, including in cases of current active dispute. Christianization appears largely to be a post-facto explanation or rationalization as to why violence against sorcery suspects has declined. More materially significant factors include increasingly explicit monetization of compensation demands. Claims to and payment of money in disputes and in marriage make disputes more openly contended and directly negotiated over time, sometimes over years. This provides a non-violent

way to accommodate traditional norms of direct reciprocity, whereby the life of the executed sorcerer should be taken directly in reciprocity for the life of the person believed to have been killed by sickness-sending.

The research sheds significant light on dramatic and sustained homicide reduction in a richly documented and much-cited case – and compares this to contrastive patterns in a neighboring tribal group. These dynamics throw into relief larger patterns of violence and its potential reduction in other parts of Papua New Guinea and in other developing nations. In rural areas of many developing nations, modern cultural development includes increasingly explicit demands for monetary compensation in cases of dispute, along with de-collectivized individuation of grievances. Though these patterns may generate or exacerbate transient conflict, our research suggests that they may nonetheless help to reduce grave physical violence and homicide especially as this is assessed relative to early colonial and precolonial patterns. A more refined understanding appears to be needed concerning the role of money and material compensation in either alleviating or escalating the potential for violence. This point deserves consideration in further comparative research. More generally, our research underscores the importance of nuanced ethnographic and empirical assessment of theories that stress the role of internally developed dispute mediation, conflict management, and differences of personal experience and opinion vis-à-vis externally imposed constraints.

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