Africa as a Success Story: Political Organization in Pre-Colonial Africa*

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Abstract: We provide an overview of the explanations for the relative lack of state formation historically in Africa. In doing so we systematically document for the first time the extent to which Africa was politically decentralized, calculating that in 1880 there were probably 45,000 independent polities which were rarely organized on ethnic lines. At most 2% of these could be classified as states. We advance a new argument for this extreme political decentralization positing that African societies were deliberately organized to stop centralization emerging. In this they were *successful*. We point out some key aspects of African societies that helped them to manage this equilibrium. We also emphasize how the organization of the economy was subservient to these political goals.

Keywords: Political centralization, state formation, economic institutions, international relations

JEL Classifications: D7, N47, O55, P5

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1 Introduction

The emergence of politically centralized states has been viewed as one of the most significant events in human history. Research in economics has investigated the consequences of state formation, suggesting it is associated on average with enhanced public good provision and better development outcomes. This is true broadly (Evans and Rauch, 1999; Dincecco and Katz, 2017; Borcan et al., 2018), and within specific countries (Acemoglu et al., 2015; Dell et al., 2018). It is also supported by case study material particularly in the context of the East Asian growth miracle (Jones and Sakong, 1980; Evans, 1995).

Equal attention has been allocated to the origins of states and explaining the variation in political centralization. This literature has focused on the supply side and the material incentives of elites to construct states (Tilly, 1985; Olson, 1993). These motivations include the desire or necessity to fight wars (Tilly, 1990; Gennaioli and Voth, 2008; Dincecco and Onorato, 2017); the incentive to tax populations (Schönholzer and François, 2023); taking advantage of trading opportunities (Greif et al., 1994); and protecting or controlling valuable natural resources (Mayshar et al., 2022). It has also addressed the demand side where states emerge when people request public goods (Allen et al., 2023) (see Heldring (2023) for an overview of all these approaches).

It has long been recognized that the path of state formation took a different arc historically in Africa. Most saliently, Africa did not develop the type of large bureaucratized states common to Eurasia. Rather, political power remained largely decentralized. Southall, for example, remarked "Before they were cut short by the nineteenth-century onslaught of the Western imperial powers, the indigenous societies and autonomous polities of Africa had to be counted in the thousands" (Southall, 1970, p. 231).

Some scholars accounted for these patterns by applying Eurasian theories of state formation in reverse. For example, low levels of population density removed the incentives to create states (Stevenson, 1968; Goody, 1971; Herbst, 2000). Yet as long ago as 1940 in their seminal book on *African Political Systems* Evans-Pritchard and Fortes argued that "it would be incorrect to suppose that governmental institutions are found in those societies with greater [population] density" (Evans-Pritchard and Fortes, 1940, p. 7).

In this paper we make several contributions. First, we survey the literature on state formation in Africa showing that it both suggests that Africa is not simply the reverse of Eurasia and emphasizes many mechanisms which are missing from the mainstream economics literature.

Second, we systematically document for the first time the political organization of Africa

prior to the colonial period and quantify how decentralized it was. We provide a methodology for estimating the number of autonomous political units (polities) and we find that in 1880, at the time of the scramble for Africa with European colonization incipient, there were around 45,000. Importantly these polities were hardly ever ethnically based. In fact, less than 1% of them were organized at the level of ethnicity. In addition only at most 2% of these polities could be classified as states[1] and even though these were larger demographically, they include at most 44% of Africa's 1880 population.[2]

Our third contribution is to build on research in anthropology and history to provide an explanation for why Africa was so politically decentralized and most Africans in 1880 did not live in anything that could reasonably be called a state. Our starting point is the observation of Vansina (1990, p.119) that Central Africans "refused centralization" in order to safeguard "the internal autonomy of each community." Indeed, Vansina concludes that

> the ability to refuse centralization while maintaining the necessary cohesion among a myriad of autonomous communities has been the most original contribution of western Bantu tradition to the institutional history of the world (Vansina, 1990, p.237).

Though Vansina's argument is restricted to Central Africa, it implies that Africans *chose* to keep the political scale of their societies small. In his hypothesis however it is not clear why they cared so much about "autonomy." We provide a microfoundation for this based on basic ontological notions of African society, in particular the salience and importance of the community and its institutionalizations, and we argue that the mechanisms that this generates are common throughout the continent.

This perspective, that Africans achieved what they set out to do—to keep the scale of political society small—is radically different from most social science analyses of Africa. For example, as we noted, when examining the relative dearth of states in pre-colonial Africa, scholars have taken this to stem from the absence of factors which induced state formation in the western world. Africa appears as a failed version of western society. It never seems to occur to such scholars that Africans did not *want* to take that path. African intellectuals have argued that there are "multiple modernities" (Sarr, 2020) and that Africa deliberately constructed a non-western path into the modern world. But their research has not clarified what the different objectives

[1]This calculation includes what Murdock calls "large chiefdoms" as states since other evidence suggests that many of the polities in this bin, such as the Kuba kingdom or Asante, are reasonably classified as states.

[2]If we restrict attention to Murdock's definition of a state then only 15% of Africans lived in states in 1880 (leaving aside European impositions such as the Orange Free State or the Transvaal).

of Africans were other than preserving their identities and traditions and the mechanisms via which Africans achieved these alternatives have not been spelled out.

Our analysis implies that, thought of in terms of the political organization of society, Africa was not a failure, it was a *success*. Nevertheless, this success turned out to have a large number of unintended consequences and it is these which are primarily responsible for the role Africa played in what Pomeranz (2000) called the "Great Divergence." These include first the way in which Africa entered into the slave trade on the supply side after the demand for slaves in the Americas ramped-up (Nunn, 2008). An obvious connection between the political organization of African society and slavery was that, as Robinson (2026) demonstrates, the highly decentralized political system facilitated an intense non-cooperative interaction between African polities to supply slaves which led to a collectively disastrous outcome. Second, the political organization of Africa made it vulnerable to colonial expansion both militarily and via policies of divide and rule. The negative consequences of this for economic and political outcomes have been amply documented (Parsons, 1975; Bundy, 1979; Acemoglu et al., 2001; Michalopoulos and Papaioannou, 2016; Lowes and Montero, 2021a,b). Finally, the political geography of Africa made it difficult to build effective post-colonial "nation states" which led to economic decline (Bates, 1981), corruption and "patrimonialism" (Bayard, 1993), and institutional path dependence (Young, 1997; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; Cooper, 2019; Lee and Paine, 2024).

Our fourth contribution is to point out that Africans innovated novel ways of managing the relationships between 45,000 independent polities. Though little work has been done on the international relations of pre-colonial Africa, we point out how African societies were flexible in their treatment of outsiders and strangers in such a way as to help an inter-polity balance to emerge. This had implications for the nature, incidence, and consequences of conflict on the continent.

What about the economy? Our final contribution is to illustrate how the organization of the economy became subservient to maintaining the autonomy of the local community. As a result, Africa rarely developed market forces. This reduced competition and innovation, but also prevented the concentration of wealth and consequently political authority.

2 States in Africa: The Literature

The preponderance of research on the origins and consequences of states in Africa has mirrored the broader political economy work. Research has shown that the historical centralization of Africa is associated with better development outcomes today (Gennaioli and Rainer, 2007;

Michalopoulos and Papaioannou, 2013; Osafo-Kwaako and Robinson, 2013; Wilfahrt, 2022). Work on post-colonial states has tended to see the arbitrariness of these as being associated with worse development outcome (Alesina et al., 2011) and conflict (Michalopoulos and Papaioannou, 2016) (though see Paine et al. (2025)). Case study works turn the East Asian literature on its head and emphasizes the weakness of African states lying behind poor development outcomes. This is usually talked about in terms of Weber's ideas of "patrimonialism" (a classic reference in addition to the ones previously cited is Turner and Young (1985)).

In terms of the origins of state centralization, research has emphasized the low levels of population density (Alsan, 2015) and lack of potential for trade (Fenske, 2014) as inhibiting centralization. Scholars have also examined the Tilly-Olson channel showing how natural resource rents (Sánchez de la Sierra, 2020) or long time horizons (Henn et al., 2025) promote bandits to become stationary. A lot of research has additionally focused on the architecture of post-colonial states in particular studying how traditional institutions interact with national states and whether they promote or inhibit development (Boone, 2003; Acemoglu et al., 2014; Baldwin, 2016; Müller-Crepon, 2020; Henn, 2023; Nathan, 2023).

Nevertheless, this literature has also thrown up challenges for these approaches. Historical centralization is robustly correlated not just with development outcomes, but also with higher levels of conflict (Wilfahrt, 2025). Moreover, systematic evidence does not support the simple connection between either population density (Fenske, 2013; Osafo-Kwaako and Robinson, 2013) or warfare (Dincecco et al., 2019) and centralization.

As we elaborate on below, in contrast to these literatures in economics and political science, research on the origins of African states in anthropology and history has tended to emphasize more cultural factors. The recent authoritative overview by Parker (2023), for example, emphasizes the supernatural origins of political centralization. Before elaborating on this we establish some novel and basic facts which are essential to bear in mind when discussing the theoretical mechanisms.

3 Number of Polities in Pre-Colonial Africa

In Table 1 we estimate the number of polities in Sub-Saharan Africa in 1880. We begin with the list of ethnic groups compiled in Murdock (1967).

The data contains 763 groups in Sub-Saharan Africa that are distributed across five values of variable 33 in the Ethnographic Atlas, "Jurisdictional hierarchy beyond local community," as can be seen in Column (1). The dataset compiled by Murdock (1967) has the variable 33

missing for 373 groups.[3] Our research team went through ethnographic accounts of 205 of these groups to assign them a level of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community.

Column (2) uses historical population density from HYDE (Historical Database of the Global Environment) project (Klein Goldewijk et al., 2017) to calculate the 1880 population that lived in each category of jurisdictional hierarchy as presented in Henn and Robinson (2023).

We then combine this information with ethnographic evidence on the average population per polity type (Column 3) to estimate the number of polities in 1880 (Columns 4–9).

For categories 3 and 4 of jurisdictional hierarchy it is straightforward to estimate the number of polities. In these cases groups were organized into states or complex states at approximately the ethnic group level. Since there were 44 ethnic groups organized in such states and two in complex states we obtain a total of 46 polities for these groups.

For groups falling under category 2, larger chiefdoms, we make use of early ethnographic accounts of such groups to obtain the average size of these chiefdoms. Table A1 in the Appendix provides an overview of the data from 10 ethnic groups and their corresponding chiefdom sizes.

For example, Yusuf (1974, p.206) writes about the Hausa:

> Famous among these are the traditional Seven City-States (Hausa Bakwai), each of which may have contained well above 50,000 inhabitants at the peak of its fame. [...] When Barth visited Katsina in 1851, he estimated that the town "must certainly have had a population of at least 100,000 souls" (Kirk-Greene 1962 : 93-94).

In the 19th century, Clapperton and Barth placed the size of Kano between 50,000 to 60,000 (Barth, 1962, pp.93-94). In other cases the information available is quite imprecise, for example, in the case of the Sukuma, for which De Bruijn et al. (2001, p.33) states: "In the late 1800s, prior to the arrival of German forces, the people today known as Sukuma lived in a number of chiefdom states varying in size from fewer than 2,000 to as many as 90,000 people." By the time chiefdoms were abolished in the 1960s, the Sukuma numbered 1.25m people in 50 chiefdoms which would suggest an average size of 25,000 (Bukurura, 1995). Some groups had considerably lower population per chiefdom with the Bamileke, Ndembu, and Luapula all having an average size around 4,000.

Putting this evidence together we assume large chiefdoms to comprise on average about 25,000 people (between the mean and median of the groups we found information for). With a population of 25 million people in 1880 living in large chiefdoms, this corresponds to 1,016

[3]Note that this number is higher than in Henn and Robinson (2023) as we are now including groups with missing data.

polities. Note that these ethnographic accounts are typically from the early twentieth century. Due to population growth between 1880 and the time of recording, the population size per polity is likely to be an upper bound leading the number of polities we obtain to be a lower bound.

We then turn to category 1, small chiefdoms, and again look at ethnographic evidence. A summary is presented in Table A5 in the Appendix. The range of the size of small chiefdoms is smaller than for large chiefdoms. For example, the Western Dinka have "tribes" ranging "from less than 1,000 to up to 25,000 members" (Lienhardt, 1958, p.102) while for the Acholi, Atkinson (1994, pp.275–282) counts 64 chiefdoms and estimates a 1900 population of 125,000 which means 1,953 population per chiefdom. We use an average population of 7,000 people per small chiefdom to obtain 3,337 polities.

For category "0" there is no jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community. In other words, every village, in some cases each hamlet, is its own polity. The Ethnographic Atlas has a question (v31) about the mean size of local communities, however it is missing for most groups that report no jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community. Table A7 in the appendix presents the non-missing data for groups in category 0 of jurisdictional hierarchy. We use the small subset of communities for which there is data to interpolate an average community size. Using the mid-point in each category (i.e., 25, 75, 150, 300, 700, 2,500, and 27,500) we get an average size of 1,730 and a median of 300.

We further look at ethnographic accounts of village sizes of various groups. For example, Tonga villages in modern Zambia and Zimbabwe had about 100 members with the largest having 500 (Jaspan, 1953). For the Lango in modern Uganda, each village was comprised of 10–15 huts (Butt, 1964). The Kpe in modern Cameroon lived in small villages of 50 people on average, larger ones had up to 1,000 and smaller around 15 (Ardener, 1956).

Given this range of village sizes in the data and ethnographic accounts we use three different assumptions to generate our estimated polity numbers: 1,000, 500, and 250 people per village. Using these values we estimate the number of village polities in groups with no jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community as 13,430, 26,860, and 53,720 respectively.

Lastly, we can now make assumptions about the groups with missing categories. This is the third largest category with 168 groups and an estimated population of 14m. If jurisdictional hierarchy is distributed the same way as in the rest of the groups and we use the same assumptions then there would be between 4,500 and 1,000 population per polity[4] (Using the average size of groups with known levels of hierarchy is likely an overestimate since there is plausibly

[4]Depending on the average population of a village.

more missingness among non-states). Using 4,500 as the average size of polities for groups with missingness would yield an additional 3,126 polities and using 1,000 as the average size would yield 14,069.

Putting all of these numbers together results in an estimated number of polities in Sub-Saharan Africa ranging from 20,955 to 72,188 depending on the assumptions made. We consider the estimate in column (8) which assumes an average village size of 500 and a polity size of 1,000 for groups with missing data to be the most reasonable. This yields an estimate for the number of total polities of 45,328.

In Figure 1 we map the ethnic boundaries and the variation in levels of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local level, and then plot the number of polities per group. The main fact that jumps out of these maps is that it is, perhaps intuitively, the most politically decentralized groups that have the densest concentrations of polities. Figure A1 in the Appendix plots the corresponding population density. While one can see some concentration in population density in areas with states, such as the Great Lakes, there is also considerable density in other parts, for example, Southern Nigeria, illustrating the fact that in Africa population density and centralization are not correlated (Osafo-Kwaako and Robinson, 2013). It is those dense areas with low levels of centralization that lead to a high number of polities.

Since some of the variation is difficult to see in the continent wide map, we zoom in to groups in the area of modern Nigeria in Figure 2. Northern Nigeria reveals some shortcomings of our estimation strategy. In the nineteenth century the Sokoto caliphate covered large parts of Northern Nigeria. However, the Ethnographic Atlas does not mark Sokoto as centralized. We further overestimate the number of Hausa city states. To look into whether we potentially systematically overestimate the number of polities we use every available ethnographic and historical account to see if we can find more precise estimates for the number of polities for certain groups. We are able to do so for 56 groups. For example, in modern Nigeria, we identify 58 polities for the Koro in Nigeria (our estimates were 65), the Hausa were organized in 7 city states (126), the main form of political organization of the Egede was through 14 sects (9), the Mama were governed by 4 clans (4), and more than 500 independent villages or village groups existed for the Igbo (472). Looking beyond Nigeria, in other parts of Africa, for example, we identify over 800 Tonga villages (166 in our estimates), 60 Dafi villages (66), 1 Ashanti kingdom (36), and 34 tribal families among the Hawiya (29). In the Figure we therefore replace the calculated number of polities with the more precise estimate when available. In Panel C we then plot all polities by splitting the Murdock (1967) groups into equally sized polygons depending

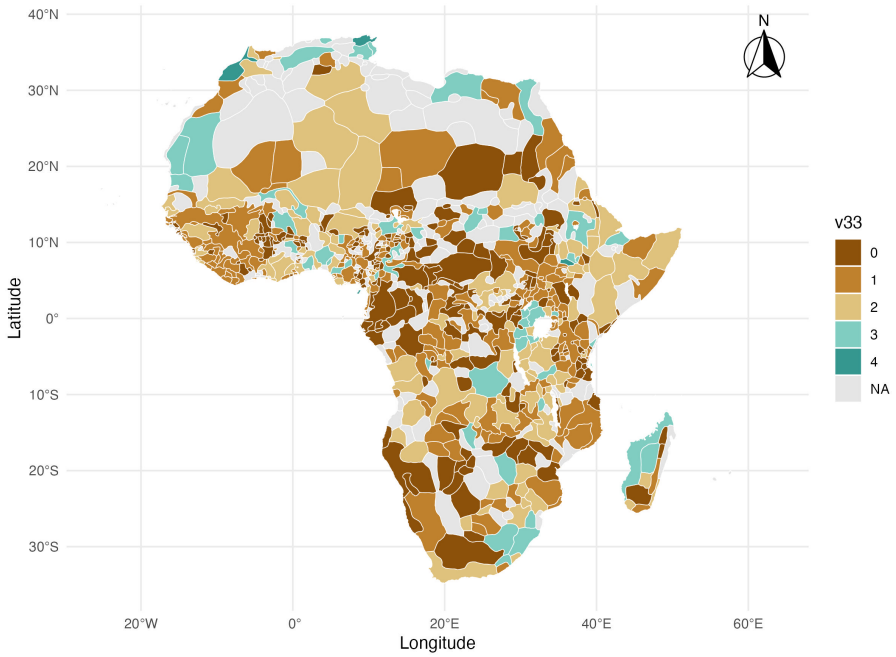
Table 1: Estimating the Number of Polities in Africa in 1880

Levels beyond local community	Type of polity	Number of groups	Population 1880	Population per polity	Estimates for the number of polities					
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Four	Complex State	2	168,388	84,194	2	2	2	2	2	2
Three	State	44	14,337,535	325,853	44	44	44	44	44	44
Two	Larger Chiefdom	121	25,395,464	25,000	1,016	1,016	1,016	1,016	1,016	1,016
One	Small Chiefdom	216	23,358,441	7,000	3,337	3,337	3,337	3,337	3,337	3,337
None	Village	212	13,430,063	250–1,000	13,430	26,860	53,720	13,430	26,860	53,720
Missing data	Unknown	168	14,068,790	1,000–4,500	3,126	3,126	3,126	14,069	14,069	14,069
Total		763	90,758,681		20,995	34,385	61,245	31,898	45,328	72,188
Assumptions										
Pop per village					1,000	500	250	1,000	500	250
Pop per missing					4,500	4,500	4,500	1,000	1,000	1,000

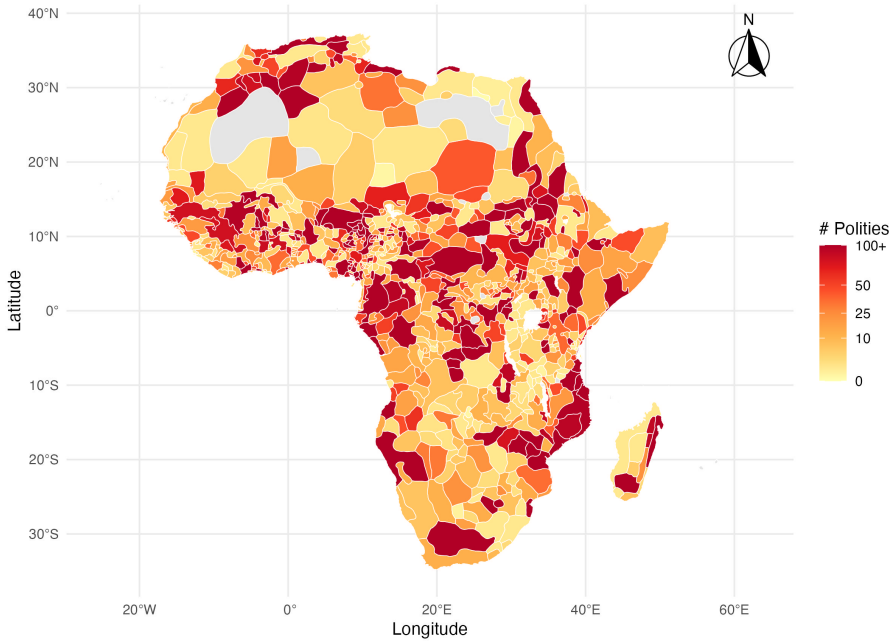
Notes: This table estimates the total number of polities in Africa circa 1880. It does so by separately estimating the number of polities for societies with different levels of jurisdictional hierarchies as compiled by Murdock (1967) (Column 1). Our research team used ethnographic sources to code a level of jurisdictional hierarchy for 164 groups with missing data in Murdock (1967). We overlay population density estimates from (Klein Goldewijk et al., 2017) to estimate the 1880 population in each category (Column 2). Next, we use ethnographic and anthropological sources, summarized in Section A, to estimate the population per type of polity (Column 3). Finally we divide the population by the population per polity to obtain a number of polities (Columns 4–9) using different assumptions for the population per village and population per polity with missing data.

Figure 1: Estimating the Number of Polities in Africa

Panel A: Jurisdictional Hierarchy



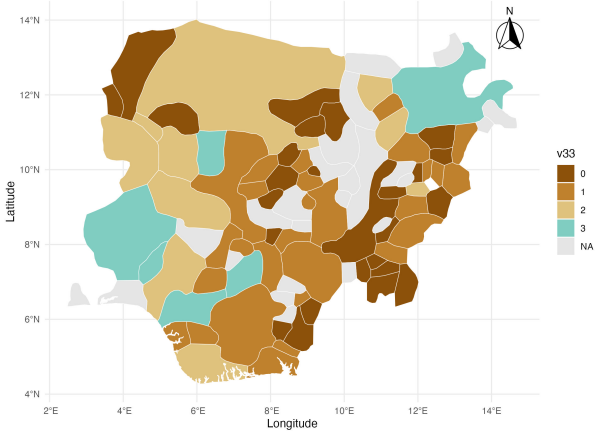
Panel B: Number of Polities



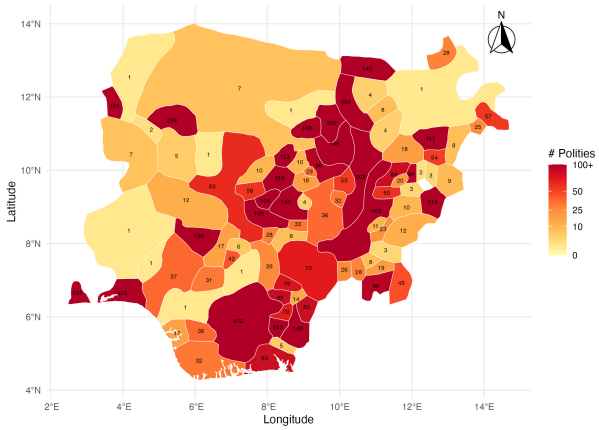
Notes: This figure shows the process of estimating the number of polities in Africa around 1880. Panel A shows the boundaries of the Ethnographic Atlas groups as collected by Murdock (1967) and digitized by Nunn and Wantchekon (2011) and the levels of jurisdictional hierarchy above the local community. Panel B plots the estimated number of polities per group using the population density and the levels of jurisdictional hierarchy. For visualization purposes the variable is winsorized at 100 polities.

Figure 2: Estimating the Number of Polities in Modern Nigeria

Panel A: Jurisdictional Hierarchy



Panel B: Number of Polities



Panel C: Plotting Polities

Notes: This figure shows the process of estimating the number of polities in modern Nigeria around 1880. Panel A shows the boundaries of the Ethnographic Atlas groups as collected by Murdock (1967) and digitized by Nunn and Wantchekon (2011) and the levels of jurisdictional hierarchy above the local community. Panel B plots the estimated number of polities per group using the population density and the levels of jurisdictional hierarchy. For visualization purposes the variable is winsorized at 100 polities. Panel C plots polities across modern Nigeria by splitting the Murdock (1967) groups into equally sized polygons depending on how many polities were estimated for each group.

on how many polities were estimated for each group. In Table A8 in the Appendix we estimate the impact of using the information on the maximum number of polities we can find (rather than the estimation strategy described in this section) on our estimates. By including the more precise number of polities for the groups where we have such data instead of their calculations we obtain similar numbers of total polities, ranging from 23,780 to 69,470 and our preferred estimation yielding 46,305 which is slightly more than we obtained in Table 1.

4 The Diversity Pre-Colonial African Polities

In the last section we divided African peoples into different bins depending on their levels of jurisdictional hierarchy. We use this section to emphasize that there were very large differences in the ways that African polities were organized within these bins. We separate this into less and more centralized societies, those with none or one levels of hierarchy above the community, and those with two or more levels, respectively. The latter category refers to what one might reasonably call states.[5]

A fact which complicates this discussion is that the ethnographic evidence we present is often discussed at the level of an ethnic group. Yet, as we just argued, most ethnic groups were not unified politically which logically allows for intra-ethnic variation in political institutions. One well documented case is the Igbo where there were multiple types of political institutions (this was immediately recognized by outside observers, see Talbot (1926)). In the cross-river area, for example, age sets took on a more important role as did secret societies like the Ekpeh (Ottenberg, 1971). Around Nsukka and Nike, political rulers were often the eldest men. In the west, there were even quite centralized states such as Onitsha and Oguta (Nzimiro, 1972). [6] To take this issue into account we try to be as specific as possible as to what group of people the evidence refers to.

Despite this political diversity the Igbo did have cultural elements in common. They were linked by a language, Igbo; by common religious ideas which involved a "big God" Chukwu and pan-Igbo deities such as Ala the earth deity; they had key shrines and oracles in common, such as at Aro Chukwu; and religious authorities at Nri provided key initiation services over eastern Nigeria. Nevertheless, it is unclear that anything like an Igbo ethnic identity existed until the colonial period, even if the escaped slave Olaudah Equiano does describe himself as an "Eboe" in his 1789 autobiography (Equiano, 2003, p. 32) (see Northrup (2000) and Korieh (2006)).

[5]Such a dichotomy was first advanced by Evans-Pritchard and Fortes (1940).

[6]This is not the only African society where this was true, see Evans-Pritchard (1940b) for another well documented example and the Akan had multiple different political systems also.

4.1 Less Centralized

In this category we leave out the most decentralized societies such as the San people of Botswana, the Hadza of Tanzania or the Mbuti of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). These societies, usually referred to as hunter gatherers represent a very small fraction of Africa's total population. For concreteness, from the bin with no levels we pick the Nuer from South Sudan and the Kikuyu from Kenya. With one level we examine the Igbo from eastern Nigeria and the Lele from the eastern DRC.[7]

The Nuer, most famously associated with Evans-Pritchard (1940a), who documented that the Lou and Gaawar Nuer were organized as a "segmentary lineage society" (Moscona et al., 2020). Such a society was organized around descent with extended kin groups arranged in a vast hierarchy tracing their ancestry back to a common ancestor. In this type of society (the Somali and Tiv we meet later are other examples) there was no organized government at all, no politicians, police or lawyers. Collective decisions were made by "segments" of lineages with a heavy influence of elders and disputes between segments were mediated by individuals with special powers, in the case of the Nuer called leopard-skin chiefs.

Contrast this organization to that of the Kikuyu. Though they also had important kinship groups and 9 clans (wa Thiong'o, 2020), society was not organized around them the way the Nuer used kinship. Rather, society and people were organized into an age grade system that spanned Kikuyuland (Moscona and Seck (2024) for the economic significance of these). At the time of circumcision, boys were initiated together into the *Muumo* grade, while girls were initiated into the *Kairitu* grade. Subsequently as they grew older, male and female age grades took on different tasks. Boys graduated to be *Mwanake* who were the warriors and eventually married. After this they could move to the highest grade of elder *Muthuuri* and "It seems clear that ... political office was held by the council of elders, *athuuri*, to which all adult men who held the grade of *Muthuuri* belonged" (Middleton and Kershaw, 1965, p.31). Women also moved into different grades, for example through marriage or childbirth. Thus in Kikuyu society the highest age grade governed the polity.

Though elements of the Nuer or Kikuyu social organization could be observed amongst the Igbo and Lele, these societies were organized differently. Though the Lega were highly decentralized with autonomous villages they had a form of collective organization called the "Bwami." This was a society which had multiple layers, the top of which was a form of pan-Lega government even if though it only had authority in limited domains. There were separate

[7] See Tait and Middleton (1958) for a discussion of the diversity of "stateless societies."

layers, one for men and one for women (Biebuyck, 1973). The Bwami was based on achievement in the sense that one bought ones' way up through the levels of the society. Though this was highly ritualized in effect a person paid the members of the higher level to which they aspired to gain a position.

The Igbo had important kinship systems, age sets and even titling societies akin to the Bwami and as we noted, the political institutions of Igbo polities, of which there were close to 500, were diverse. In central Igboland around Owerri, the cite of classic ethnographic studies, Igbo polities were mostly organized around councils (Forde and Jones, 1950). These usually existed at different levels. At the extended kinship group, the kindred, at the village, and then at a higher level often called the village group which represented all the kindreds and villages. This organization of village and village groups is why the Igbo count as a level one society in Murdock. These councils were open to all adult men historically and also adult women in many Igbo communities. Decisions were made by consensus (see Jones (1971) for an ethnographic description).

These examples show that simply looking at the levels of jurisdictional hierarchy tells one little about how polities were actually organized in Africa.

4.2 More Centralized - States

Just as less centralized societies were organized in different ways so were states.[8] For the sake of illustrating the variation here we pick five societies from the different bins. We ignore the highest bin because the only two states categorized in this class in Sub-Saharan Africa (the Bubi and Kafa) are small and not very representative. To make this comparison manageable we emphasize the different ways in which these societies were structured with an eye to controlling power. From level 3 we discuss the Asante of Ghana, the Kuba of the DRC and the Ngwato, the largest of the Tswana polities of Botswana. From level 4 we mention Buganda and Rwanda.

As we discuss more shortly, Africans were concerned about the negative effects that political centralization could have on their autonomy. But of course, there were incentives to create centralization and this arose in particular contexts. One reason could be trade potential, the traditional explanation for the rise of centralized states in the Niger bend. Africans tried hard however to combine the benefits of centralization (for example taxing or organizing trade) with institutions that would allow the state to be controlled. Compared to the polities of the last section, states did feature well-defined, often hereditary rulers. However, the different states

[8]There is no commonly accepted taxonomy of these, see Vansina (1962), Mair (1977) and Wilfahrt (2025) for different ideas.

used different strategies to control such people and create "limited jurisdictions" (Southall, 1953, p.234). One strategy, evident in the Asante case, is to make the ruler a "divine king" who was not an executive in the modern form. Busia (1951) described the nature of such a ruler in Asante. He noted the fundamental religious role of the chief and how

> From the moment the chief is enstooled his person becomes sacred. This is emphasized by taboos. He may not strike, or be struck by, anyone, lest the ancestors bring misfortune on the tribe. He may never walk bare-footed, lest when the sole of his foot touches the ground some misfortune befall the community. He should walk with care lest he stumble.(Busia, 1951, p.27)

Stumbling may also create a calamity. The list goes on, for example, his buttocks may not touch the ground. What was the key role of the chief in society? "Only the chief could bring all the lineages together and sacrifice to his royal ancestors on behalf of the community as a whole. To the people this was his most important function ... Chiefship in Asante is a sacred office" (Busia, 1951, p.36). Busia's remark here illustrates that though the Asante state emerged in the 18th century it did so not by abolishing the kinship structures of the pre-existing society but by integrating them into the state. It is an example of what Southall (1953) called a "segmentary state." Such features are very common in African states, and so are facets of divine kingship (see Parker (2023) for a recent statement). But there were other tools as well.

The Kuba king was made less threatening to society by elements of divinity but more in two other ways. First, the kingship was founded by Shyaam, a "stranger." Stranger kings, outsiders who were intrinsically weak, for example having no claim to land, was another state-building tool (Graeber and Sahlins, 2017). Second, the legitimacy of the state was moot, something preserved in the oral history by the story of how Shyaam cheated at a competition to determine which clan would be in charge of more centralized political institutions (Lowes et al., 2017; Robinson, 2025). This ambivalent legitimacy also made the state less threatening to the people.

The Ngwato polity features hardly any traces of these phenomena however. There the chief was neither divine nor a stranger and though he did have some residual supernatural roles in the 19th century, such as rainmaking, these were sufficiently marginal that they could be easily discarded. Rather, politics revolved around the *kgotla* an assembly which, like Igbo councils, operated at multiple levels by consensus (Schapera, 1938).

Buganda and Rwanda had many similar roots to the above states. Both were probably historically divine kingships and the Rwandan state was highly segmentary (see Newbury (1992a) for the Rwandan case and Chrétien (2006) for an overview of the "Great Lakes" kingdoms).

But they became far more despotic in the sense that their rulers freed themselves from most restrictions. As de Heusch pointed out in precisely this context "kingship ... always introduces a threat of tyranny ... The African societies that adjusted to sacred kingship in the Utopian hope of increasing their control over the forces of nature, remained ... always dimly conscious of the fact that they were playing with fire" (de Heusch, 1981, p.25). The reason for the emergence of this more despotic equilibrium differs between these cases. Wrigley (1996) argues that in the case of Buganda it was economic crisis and famine in the 18th century that allowed the king, the Kabaka, to re-invent his role and seize power. In the case of Rwanda this seems more likely linked to the invention of a particular strategy of rule based around cattle. In the institutions of *ubuhake* a gift of a cow created a patron client relationship which greatly facilitated hierarchical control of society. In the 19th century this was central to the enserfment of most of the rural population (see Maquet, 1961; Vansina, 2005).

5 The Objectives of African Societies

African polities likely stayed small for several different reasons, some of which have been discussed in the literature.[9] Here we advance a novel argument based on an overwhelming amount of ethnographic and historical evidence on the distinctiveness and rationale behind African institutions. In particular, a central way to provide microfoundations for the emphasis of Vansina (1990) on the preservation of the autonomy of the community is to note that "communalism" is a "core value" (Gyekye, 1987, p.43) in Africa. Gyekye notes about the Akan "Communalism insists that the good of all determines the good of each or, put differently, the welfare of each is dependent on the welfare of all" (Gyekye, 1987, p.156). Perhaps the most famous articulation of this is in terms of *Ubuntu*—"I am because we are" (Ogude, 2018, p.1). The Belgian cleric Tempels, whose 1959 book *Bantu Philosophy* (1945 in the first French edition) was the first systematic exposition by a westerner of African philosophical ideas. Basing his research amongst the Luba people of the DRC he observed "For the Bantu, man never appears in fact as an isolated individual" (Tempels, 1959, p.108) and is always seen in terms of relationships within the family or community. Tempels continues "the individual is necessarily an individual within the clan" (Tempels, 1959, p.108). Moreover, the African (or the Bantu as he put it) has "an ontological duty to preserve the clan." Ontology is a branch of metaphysics which concerns itself with "what there is" and with peoples' conceptions about reality. Tempels argued that Africans have "a duty towards that force which is superior to them"—the community as insti-

[9]For example the relative abundance of land, see Goody (1971); Hopkins (1973); Herbst (2000); Austin (2008), and see Fenske (2013); Osafo-Kwaako and Robinson (2013) for empirical problems with this view.

tutionalized in the clan conceived of as a collection of extended kinship groups or lineages. He concludes "It is consequently impossible for them to will the destruction of the clan" (Tempels, 1959, pp.152–153). Though Tempels clearly over-generalized it not even being clear amongst which Luba people he worked, this feature is frequently noted. For example, in his study of why the MbaDuku and Shangev MbaShaya lineages of the Tiv peoples of Nigeria remained acephalous and lacked political hierarchy, Paul Bohannan noted that their goal was to preserve their "greater political institutions" which were "based on the lineage system and a principle of egalitarianism" (Bohannan, 1958, p.11).

What could threaten or destroy the community or clan? Clearly the creation of political hierarchy and states.

6 Mechanisms for Preserving Autonomy

Africans innovated a plethora of mechanisms to preserve the autonomy of the community and the clan. In the case of the Tiv lineages Bohannan studied, for example "Men who had acquired too much power ... were whittled down by means of witchcraft accusations" (Bohannan, 1958, p.11). The key concept here is *tsav* which means power, particularly power to influence other people. *Tsav* can be natural, but it can also be acquired illicitly through witchcraft and it was suspicion of this that led to accusations. This system of beliefs stopped political hierarchy emerging in Tiv society. Someone with power and authority was suspected of being a witch.

Many institutional mechanisms were also devised. Let us go through some examples in the order of the societies we discussed in the last section. First, segmentary lineage societies. The relevant mechanisms have been best studied amongst the Somalis. As Lewis summarized his research amongst the Isaak clan family the "Somali political system has no chiefs to run it and no formal judiciary to control it. Men are divided amongst political units without any administrative hierarchy of officials and with no instituted positions of leadership to direct their affairs" (Lewis, 1961, p.2). The secret to combining the collective identity with the political decentralization is that, as Lewis observes "every ancestor in the genealogies is a point" not just "of unity" but also "of potential division" (Lewis, 1961, p.7). He points out how one can be "baffled by the shifting character of the nomad's political allegiance and puzzled by the fact that the political and jural units with which he acts on one occasion he opposed on another." It is exactly this opposition, this "potential division" which blocks any attempt to disrupt the autonomy of the lineage or clan.

Second, the Kikuyu and societies of East Africa based around age grades. The allocation of

political power in the same way was very common throughout the region. Amongst the Maasai, for example, power was also held by the most senior elders organized in an age set. Critically, they inevitably passed away and were replaced by a new age set. As Bernardi put it "Age Class systems are unique, for not only do they regulate the attainment of individual maturity and autonomy, but they regulate the distribution and rotation of all forms of power" (Bernardi, 1985, p.9). He says of the Maasai that "their age class system shows how the distributive nature of the system is assured against possible individual attempts at personal power" (Bernardi, 1985, p.9). Elsewhere he notes that these systems made sure that "no clan and no class, or no party, [can] stay in the limelight too long" (p.107) and that "it is likely that the succession of classes to power served as a check impeding the formation of a centralized state" (p.107).

That this was precisely the reason that East African societies were organized like this was argued by Kenyatta, using the Kikuyu example. Kenyatta used oral history to relate how historically there had been a despotic king in Kikuyuland but he had been overthrown in a revolution called *itwika*. He relates how "In order to run the new government successfully, it was necessary to have a constitution, so ... a revolutionary council ... was formed. Each village appointed a representative ... At the first meeting ... the following rules, which afterwards became law, were made" (Kenyatta, 1938, p.181). From our perspective the seventh clause of the constitution is the most significant. It states "In order to keep up the spirit of the *itwika*, and to prevent any tendency to return to the system of despotic government ... the government offices should be based on a rotation system of generations ... one generation should hold the office of government for a period of thirty to forty years, at the end of which the ceremony of *itwika* should take place to declare that the old generation had completed its term of governing, and that the young generation was ready to take over" (Kenyatta, 1938, p.182). Kenyatta therefore directly connects the political organization of the Kikuyu to the desire to avoid political centralization and despotism.

In the Owerri Igbo case we showed how society was typically governed by councils composed of the lineage groups that made up a polity (Afigbo, 2005). Given the rules such as decisions by consensus, creating more centralized political institutions would necessitate overthrowing the constitution of such a polity. To guard against this villages were often divided into two halves which were in "balanced opposition" to each other. Green noted in her ethnographic study of Igbo politics how "The working of village affairs was considerably bound up with the system of checks and balances and of institutionalized rivalry introduced by this dualism" (Green, 1947, p.16). Meek also noted that "the dichotomy of the group is due to political rather than kinship

causes" and "the Ibo find that a dual organization is a natural condition of society and an aid to its control" (Meek, 1937, p.94).[10]

As we already noted, when states did form they were often segmentary, in effect trying to preserve the kinship group and clan within the state. Tellingly, Newbury titles his book about the formation of neo-Rwandan rule on Ijwi Island "Kings and Clans" (Newbury, 1992b), note "and" not "or". The type of state that emerged in Rwanda itself was not a canonical Weberian state which replaced patrimonial authority with bureaucratic-legal authority. Indeed, there "was no central administration in the country except for the ritualists. The administrative structure of the realm was formed only by the conscription of the whole population into armies, on the one hand, and by the chains of patron-client relations whose supreme patron was the king, on the other" (Vansina, 2005, p.95). Vansina concludes, comparing the Rwandan state to a European ideal "Not a typical centralized government this one" (Vansina, 2005, p.123).

These incentives, values and mechanisms are, we argue, a primary reason why Africa was divided into 45,000 polities in 1880.

7 Relations Among Polities

Not only did African societies have strong internal mechanisms to ensure polities remained small scale, they also developed mechanisms to navigate conflict across societies. Small polities are inherently vulnerable to predation and absorption by larger ones. There would be little point ensuring domestic authority remains constrained to be then at the mercy of foreign authorities. In addition, warfare might create incentives to pursue centralization and state formation (Tilly, 1990; Besley and Persson, 2010) in itself. For African polities to be able to remain small and numerous, they must have been able to avoid large scale warfare or conflict must have been motivated by other goals than gaining territory.

Evidence on inter-polity conflict in Africa prior to colonialism is sparse. One of the only systematic tabulations of conflict events across the world has been compiled by Brecke (1999) which has been used to study African conflict (Besley and Reynal-Querol, 2014; Dincecco et al., 2019). This data, plotted in Appendix Figure A2, shows considerably lower levels of conflict in Africa compared to Europe in Asia.

How did African polities avoid frequent conflict? We argue that the same forces that led to the decentralized structure of polities created a system of international relations which favored mutual respect and co-existence. These are manifested in the Igbo morning prayer that believers

[10]The spelling Igbo is now held to more accurately capture the word for the ethnic group than Ibo.

of the Igbo traditional religion are meant to recite every day. The prayer finishes: "Let the kite perch, and let the eagle perch, Whichever says that the other must not perch, let its wing break off" (Arinze, 1970, pp.26–27). This is a vision of mutual respect and co-existence: the kite has its place, the eagle has its different place and if someone tries to disrupt this, let its wing break off!

Furthermore, when conflict arose between polities, it was typically not about gaining territory and subjugating the other polity as was common in Eurasian conflicts. For example, Smith (1976, p.30) finds that "in West Africa territorial aggrandizement was by no means the necessary or normal sequel to victory in . . . wars." Thus, while other issues may have sparked conflict between African polities, warfare did not by and large change the configuration of polities and did not lead to the emergence of larger states. While notable examples exist, such as the Asante, Rwanda, and the Zulu state in the 19th century, overall the evidence suggests that historical warfare in Africa did not have the same centralizing effects as in the rest of the world (Dincecco et al., 2019).

These facts have been observed by several scholars of Africa but never studied systematically. Diop for examples notes how in a conflict "the annexation of a city or a neighboring territory was unthinkable" attributing it to the decentralized nature of African religion since "one could not govern a conquered city because one was a foreigner in the eyes of its gods" (Diop, 1987, p.22) (see also the discussion in Turnbull (1976)). Diop's discussion suggests another interesting mechanism—African traditional religions were not proselytizing and there was immense toleration for other deities and religions.

8 Stranger-Guest

This culture of mutual respect and co-existence goes beyond reduced conflict, but also leads to an acceptance of outsiders and an openness to "others" (Henn and Robinson, 2023). Language can be a useful indicator of cultural tendencies (Kinzler, 2020). Fourshey et al. (2018) point to a telling feature of many African languages: they use the same word for a "guest" and a "stranger." We provide the first systematic evidence of this fact.

Using dictionaries and GoogleTranslate, we establish whether languages around the world have one word that can be used to mean "guest" and "stranger."[11] We collected information on 144 languages outside of Africa and 114 African languages, covering at least one language in all but three countries in Africa. Figure 3 plots the resulting variation. Panel A focuses on

[11]We also consider whether the word for "guest" is the same as the word for "foreigner".

the African continent. In Africa, 92 out of 114 (82%) languages for which we were able to find dictionaries use the same word. Panel B maps all languages for which we have data across the world. Across all languages 93 out of 258 languages or 36% uses the same word for "guest" and "stranger". However, there is a stark difference between Africa and the rest of the world. Outside of Africa, only one language, Hawaiian, uses the same word for the two concepts.

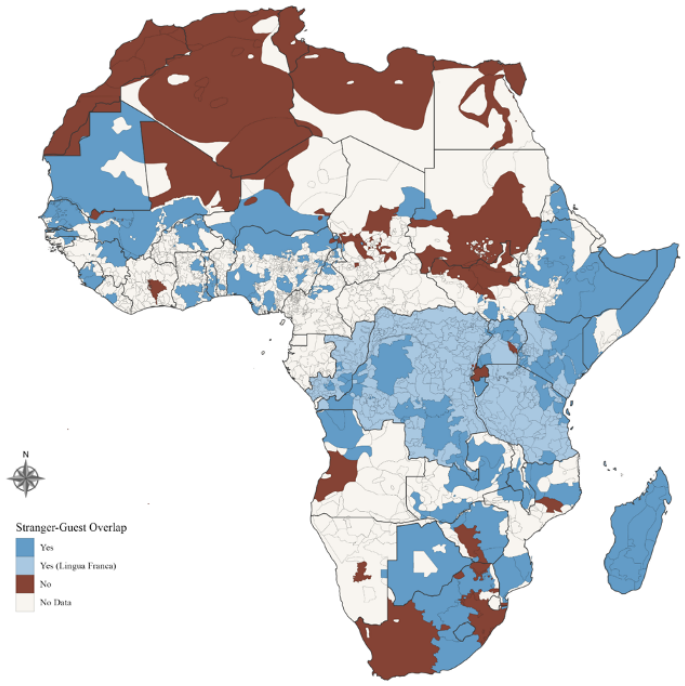
In Africa our data covers 72% of the continent's population, based on Ethnologue data. In addition, we consider three countrywide lingua francas, Kiswahili, Lingala, and Kituba. This increases our coverage of population to 81%. By population, 61% of our African data have the same word for "guest" and "stranger" which increases to 65% when including lingua francas. When only looking at Sub-Saharan Africa these percentages increase to 84% and 86% respectively.

We believe that the connection between stranger and guest, the willingness to accept stranger kings and the existence of mutual respect and lack of territorial aggrandizement emerged from a historic equilibrium of mobility and migration. This is perhaps most famously embodied in the Bantu expansion. This was not an invasion (Klieman, 2003). Kopytoff argued that African societies were "frontier societies" and "African social groups ... show consistently a tendency to fisson and segment" (Kopytoff, 1987, p.18). The focus on "wealth in people" rather than wealth in things (Guyer, 1993) naturally led to mobility. As the Bohannans noted in the context of property rights in land amongst the Tiv "Association of the genealogical map with specific pieces of ground is of brief duration only; a man or woman has ... "farm tenure", that is, precise rights to farm during the time it is in cultivation ... However, a man always has rights in his "genealogical map" of his ... lineage, wherever that lineage may happen to be on the terrain" (Bohannan and Bohannan, 1968, p.80).

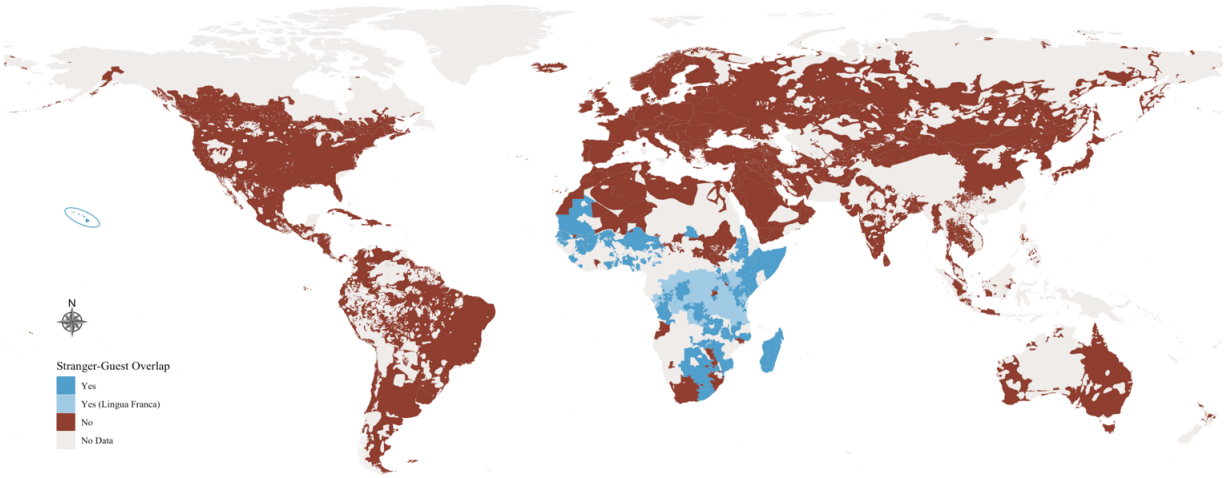
Apart from the language used to refer to strangers, Africans innovated many types of institutions which allowed them to integrate peoples into their societies. A powerful example of this comes from the Ngwato people of Botswana. Amongst social scientists the Tswana are currently renown for being "ethnically homogeneous." But the data gleaned from the 1946 census by Schapera (1952) belies this. We reproduce this data as Table A9 of the Appendix. In fact less than 20% of the people in Ngwatoland were Ngwato. The others came from all over southern Africa. The Tswana integrated many other peoples into their polities and they did this via the structure of their political institutions which were not based on origin but rather whether or not they accepted the political authority of a particular Tswana chief (Schapera, 1938, p.5). The Tswapong, for example, which appear as the third largest group by population

Figure 3: Stranger-Guest Across Africa and the World

Panel A: Africa



Panel B: World



Notes: This figure maps languages using information from the Ethnologue. Languages that use the same word for "guest" and "stranger" are marked in dark blue, those that do not in dark red. Lingua franca, Kiswahili, Lingala, and Kituba, are marked in lighter colours in the areas where they are spoken if there is no data for the local language. Panel A plots African languages while Panel B plots the whole world.

in the census were a heterogeneous group of peoples who acquired their name by being settled in the Tswapong hills by the Ngwato state (Motzafi-Haller, 1993). Parsons (1973) estimates that the Ngwato were made up historically of as many as 50 different groups. There are numerous other examples (see Colson (1970) for Zambia). In 1937 the reigning *Mukama*, the king of the Nyoro state in Uganda, wrote personally about the obligations of kingship and listed his coronation oaths. Amongst these was that "the *Mukama* swear(s) that he will never frighten his nation, he, must rule his people peacefully, he must admit foreigners to settle in his country" (K.W., 1937, p.291).

Other evidence supports our arguments here. Habyarimana et al. (2007)'s data from behavioral games shows that at least in anonymous situations, Ugandans show no tendency to favor those more proximate socially to those further away and Oppedal Berge et al. (2020) find the same thing with citizens of Nairobi. Relatedly Cappelen et al. (2025) find that many Africans, including Ethiopians, Nigerians and Zambians are more universal, moralistically, than North Americans. This micro work is consistent with our claim that while Africans do have ethnic identities, at least today, the continent has also featured a deep history of mobility, merging and mutual respect. Of course, these identities can be mobilized politically (Eifert et al., 2010).

9 Economic Institutions

It wasn't just political institutions that were structured to limit political scale. Economic institutions were often designed with this end in mind as well. They were not necessarily intended to maximize the efficiency of resource allocation, but to stop power being accumulated or centralized and to strengthen the community. Though there is a lot of heterogeneity, a broad generalization is that there were no factor markets in pre-colonial Africa. Moreover, property rights to land, the most important asset, were not individualized and typically land was owned by kinship groups.[12] One got access to land via one's kinship group and the same group was mobilized to provide labor. These institutional facts were kept in place by many norms, practices and values.

The main principles and mechanisms at work are best communicated with one well documented ethnographic example. We discussed earlier how Tiv social norms were designed to stop anyone accumulating power and threatening the organization of the community. They were extremely successful in this and by the time the Tiv were colonized by the British they had no state institutions at all. Rather the society was organized politically by descent groups and

[12]There were some exceptions to this, such as Ethiopia and Rwanda, Meek (1946) is useful for an overview of former British African colonies.

lineages.

The word used by the MdaDuku and Shangev MbaShaya Tiv for a territory occupied by the descendants of a single ancestor is a tar. Within the tar there were elders who exercised what little authority there was in Tiv society. The tar was a specific piece of land, but as we noted in our discussion of the mobility of African people, individuals identified more with other people than specific pieces of land. Members of a tar's genealogical map gave them rights to use the land controlled by the tar. But there were "no factor markets—that is to say, land, labor and capital" (Bohannan and Bohannan, 1968, p.7) and while individuals had user rights to land, nobody could buy or sell land.

If you had access to a piece of land how did you farm it? The basic unit of production was a married couple and their unmarried children who formed a part of the tar so that "the people of a compound form a basic work group" (Bohannan and Bohannan, 1968, p.70). If additional work was needed then one called on "the men of the lineage or an age-set who are accustomed to working together" (Bohannan and Bohannan, 1968, p.70). We encountered age sets earlier when we described the political institutions of some East African peoples.

Though there were some sorts of markets for produce the Bohannans concluded that

> Perhaps the most characteristic feature of the Tiv market is that it is extraordinarily constrained and shows little tendency to invade the other institutions of society (Bohannan and Bohannan, 1968, pp.240–241).

The Tiv didn't have free markets, they had *constrained markets*. These were organized into different spheres. Within a sphere one could trade and sometimes even haggle and barter, but this was not possible across spheres. The most fundamental spheres were those of subsistence goods and prestige goods.

The subsistence sphere was the most flexible. It allowed for the exchange of foodstuffs and subsistence goods, prices were flexible and subject to haggling. Trading in such markets was also adapted to the availability of modern money which came into Tivland in the colonial period.

In contrast prestige goods could not be exchanged in a market. These goods included cattle, horses, a special type of white cloth known as tugudu, medicines, magic, and brass rods. Money was not used in this sphere and prices were fixed and not flexible but there were "equivalences" between these different goods. For example, the price of cattle in terms of brass rods and tugudu cloth. There could be "exchange" between these goods but this did not involve money and the terms of trade were strictly fixed and unchanging.

The Tiv recognized that acquiring subsistence goods could be the fruit of hard work, but the

acquisition of prestige goods was something different, it took "more than hard work, it takes a "strong heart", by which Tiv mean both courage and attractiveness" (Bohannan and Bohannan, 1968, p.233). Indeed, the Tiv tried to stop someone acquiring prestige goods because such a man "is both feared and respected ... he is feared as a man of special, potentially evil, talents (tsav)" (Bohannan and Bohannan, 1968, p.237).

Here we have returned to tsav and one of the key political concepts in MbaDuku Tiv society we met earlier. There we mentioned how the concept of tsav was key to stabilizing the political structure of the society. Someone with tsav was suspicious. Attempting to acquire prestige goods then becomes another incidence where tsav was on display. This made people hesitant to try to convert from one sphere to another lest they be accused of witchcraft.

The complete situation is well summed up by the Bohannans when they state "To the Tiv a market is not merely . . . a place to buy and sell . . . It is a political institution of major importance because in a society that is dominated by the lineage principle it is a means of overriding that principle" (Bohannan and Bohannan, 1968, pp.146–147). This is the reason that markets had to be constrained.

Our main point here is that the economic institutions of the Tiv were subservient to the broader collective goal of maintaining the small scale political structure. The Tiv of course were somewhat extreme. They were an acephalous society completely lacking political centralization. Our argument is that part of the explanation for this is the organization of economic institutions. But there were many other types of polities in Africa (Osafo-Kwaako and Robinson (2013) show that economic institutions varied systematically with political centralization in Africa). Gyekye, for example, using the far more centralized Asante case to make generalizations in his chapter on "Economic Values" argues that African society "evolved and practised capitalist values and attitudes; acquisitive elements were nurtured in the African character" (Gyekye, 1996, p.100) (contrast with Bohannan (1955)). Other "acquisitive" societies would include the Bamileke, Igbo or the Kikuyu. Moreover, there are well documented examples of more specialized production, for example in textiles (Kriger, 2017). Long-distance trade also took place even before the expansion of European commerce in the 16th century (see Gray and Birmingham, 1970). This was important in West Africa (organized by corporate groups like the Hausa merchants (Lovejoy, 1980) and most-obviously the trans-Saharan trade (Austen, 2010).

Our emphasis on the Tiv is because key elements of their economic organization were typical in Africa, particularly the absence of factor markets and the existence of separate spheres and many of the related practices and norms in African economies are extremely well documented

(see the essays in Bohannan and Dalton (1962) for many examples). Recent studies in the same spirit include Ferguson (1994) and Shipton (1989).

Labor was not only mobilized via kin groups but through other institutions too. In a few states, such as Ethiopia and Rwanda, this included institutions that some have called "feudal" (Crummey and Stewart, 1981). Slavery was also was a common source of labor. Nevertheless, since the work of Miers and Kopytoff the basic view of scholars of African slavery is that "In Africa, then, the kinsmen, the adopted, the dependent, the client, and the 'slave' abutted on one another and could merge into one another" (Miers and Kopytoff, 1977, p.23) (see also (Lovejoy, 2000, p.13) and (Stilwell, 2014, p.62)). Thus slavery in Africa merged into the logic we have sketched here.

10 Conclusion

In this essay we have reviewed economic approaches to the formation of states and their application in Africa. We argued that while most scholars have been content to apply theories of state formation developed for studying Eurasia, there are good reasons for being cautious about their applicability. Not only are their empirical puzzles, but Africanist scholars in history and anthropology have advanced very different mechanisms. We surveyed these and established a novel fundamental fact about the political geography of Africa: it was extremely decentralized politically with possibly 45,000 distinct polities in 1880. These were rarely organized along ethnic lines. Moreover, less than 1% or 2% of them could be classified as states. We then argued that this decentralization arose because Africans were highly averse to living in politically centralized communities. They saw state structures as antagonistic to maintaining the valued institutions of the local community, particularly kinship structures. We documented several mechanisms that were devised to block centralization and showed that even when states emerged they were often "segmentary" combining kinship structures with more centralized institutions. We argued that the decentralized nature of political institutions was aided by norms of mutual co-existence.

Though the literature in social science portrays Africa as a failed version of western modernity, when seen in its own terms, until recently, we believe this evidence suggests that Africa was actually a success. Africans developed their own priorities and achieved, at least until the late nineteenth century, what they set out to achieve.

In this historical equilibrium the organization of the economy was made subservient to the wider collective goals. This plausibly meant that economic institutions were not organized to maximize the efficiency of resource allocation or to foster accumulation (Austen and Headrick,

1983). Africans prioritized other goals than economic development. Nevertheless, the costs of this in a pre-modern world before the industrial revolution were relatively small. The extreme comparative under-development of Africa today is mostly accounted for by the fact that the historical organization of Africa turned out to make it very vulnerable to the pernicious effects of the expansion of European mercantile capitalism and political projects in the form of the slave trade and colonialism. These have had path dependent effects with which Africans are still grappling.

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Appendix for: "Africa as a Success Story: Political Organization in Pre-Colonial Africa"

Soeren J. Henn James A. Robinson

December 2025

A Information About Data Construction

A.1 Anthropological Evidence on the Size of Large Chiefdoms

In this section we go through various groups listed as having large chiefdoms in Murdock's (1967) Ethnographic Atlas. We will provide quotes from historians and anthropologists about chiefdom sizes or total population and the number of chiefdoms. The data is summarized in Table A1.

Table A1: Size of Large Chiefdoms

Ethnic Group	Chiefdom Size	Total Population	Number of Chiefdoms	Year of Data	Source
Sukuma	25,000	1,529,917	50	1957	Bukurura (1995)
Hausa	75,000	525,000	7	1851	Yusuf (1974)
Tswana	25,950	259,500	10	1946	Schapera (1952, p.1)
Akyem	22,500	270,000	12	1901–1948	Simensen (2000, p.2)
Azande	75,000	50,000–100,000	1	1929	Evans-Pritchard (1971, p.137)
Bamileke	4,099	438,641	107	1950s	Tardits (1960, pp.111–113)
Ndembu	3,669	18,346	5	1950–54	Turner (1957, p.17)
Thonga	15,185	91,108	6	1904	Junod (1905, p.224)
Luapula	3,910	58,648	15	1940–1950	Cunnison (1959, p.22)
Nyamwezi	14,598	452,523	31	1957	Abrahams (1967, pp.1–3)
Average	26,491				
Median	18,842				

Sukuma

Prior to German arrival information is sparse with De Bruijn et al. (2001, p.33) writing:

> In the late 1800s, prior to the arrival of German forces, the people today known as Sukuma lived in a number of chiefdom states varying in size from fewer than 2,000 to as many as 90,000 people.

Bukurura (1995) writes:

> In 1957 the Sukuma featured as the largest group with 1,245,908 people living in the districts of Kwimba, Maswa, Mwanza, Geita and Shinyanga. In 1967 the Sukuma numbered 1,529,917 while the Nyamwezi were 405,976.

> Before chiefdoms were officially abolished in 1963, there were some 30 chiefdoms in Nyamweziland and some 50 in Sukumaland.

We will use the latter information of 1,245,908 people living in 50 chiefdoms to obtain an average size of 25,000. Note that this is likely an overestimate of the population per chiefdom in the late 19th century as population has likely increased since then.

Hausa

Yusuf (1974, p.206) writes:

> Famous among these are the traditional Seven City-States (Hausa Bakwai), each of which may have contained well above 50,000 inhabitants at the peak of its fame. [...] When Barth visited Katsina in 1851, he estimated that the town "must certainly have had a population of at least 100,000 souls" (Kirk-Greene 1962 : 93–94). In the 19th century, Clapperton and Barth placed the size of Kano between 50,000 to 60,000

We will use 75,000—the midpoint between 50,000 and 100,000—as our estimate.

Tswana

Schapera (1952, p.1) describes the Tswana tribes as

> Before the establishment of the Protectorate in 1885, the tribe could be defined for all practical purposes as a group of people managing their own affairs under the leadership of a chief who was independent of any higher authority.

He provides the following population estimates for the Tswana Tribes in 1946:

Table A2: Population of Tswana Tribes

Tribe	Population (1946)
Ngwato	101,000
Kwena	40,000
Tawana	38,700
Ngwaketse	38,600
Kgatla	20,100
Malete	9,500
Tshidi-Rolong	5,300
Khurutshe	2,900
Tlokwa	2,300
Seleka-Rolong	1,100
Total	259,500
Average	25,950

Source: Schapera (1952, p.1)

We will use the average of 25,950 as our estimate. Again this is likely to be an overestimate since the data stems from 1947.

Akyem

Simensen (2000, p.2) writes:

> The population in 1948 was about 270,000. Before the British took formal control of the inland districts in 1901, Akyem was an independent kingdom with 12–13 divisional chiefs under the Paramount Chief, Omanhene, in Kyebbi.

We divide the 1948 population by 12 to obtain an average chiefdom size of 22,500.

Azande

Using census data from 1929–30, Evans-Pritchard (1971, p.137) discusses the size of the Gbudwe kingdom which ruled the Azande people prior to European arrival:

> It is impossible to estimate with any degree of accuracy the size of its population. One can only suggest, on the basis of such censuses as we have, that it was somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000.

We use the midpoint of 75,000 as our estimate.

Bamileke

Tardits (1960, pp.111–113) in 1960 lists 107 Bamileke chiefdom with a total population of 438,641 living in them. This gives an average population of 4,100 per chiefdom.

Ndembu

In 1957 Turner (1957, p.17) uses data from the early 1950s to show the population in 5 Ndembu chiefdoms to be 18,346 as listed in Table A3. This gives an average population of 3,669 per chiefdom.

Table A3: Population of Ndembu Chiefdoms

Chiefdom	Population
Ikelenge	6,972
Nyakaseya	3,614
Mwininyilamba	978
Kanonghesha	3,476
Chibwika	3,351
Total	18,346
Average	3,669

Source: Turner (1957, p.17)

Thonga

Writing in 1905 Junod (1905, p.224) says the Thonga can be divided into 6 groups: Ba-Ronga, Ba-Hlanganu, Ba-Djonga, Ba-Nwalungu, Ba-Hlengwe, and Nwanati. He estimates 91,108[13] Thonga in the Transvaal which leads to an estimate of 15,185

[13]He says 82,825 Thonga live in Transvaal and estimates that 10% needs to be added for young men that are away.

Luapula

In 1959 Cunnison (1959, p.22) lists 15 Luapula chiefdoms in Northern Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo with a total population of 58,648 (we use the 1946 population for the Belgian Congo to be comparable to Northern Rhodesia and we drop Nshimba chiefdom). This gives us an average chiefdom size of 3,910.

Table A4: Population of Luapula Chiefdoms

Chiefdom	Population
Kazembe	10,242
Kambwali	3,766
Kanyembo	5,006
Lukwesa	7,571
Lubunda	5,340
Kashiba	4,001
Mulundu	3,869
Katuta	2,454
Nkuba	1,979
Kashobwe	1,664
Kabimbi	926
Nkambo	2,593
Kampombwe	1,764
Chikungu	3,208
Chisamamba	4,265
Total	58,648
Average	3,910

Source: Cunnison (1959, p.22)

Nyamwezi

Abrahams (1967, p.1) writes about "Unyamwezi" as the :

> area of the Western Province in which the Nyamwezi are, for the most part, both the politically dominant and the numerically preponderant tribe. This area consists of the Tabora and Nzega Districts and the eastern half of Kahama District (see Fig. 1). It is divided into thirty-one mutually independent chiefdoms under the control of Nyamwezi ruling families, and it is in this sense that the Nyamwezi may be said to be politically dominant in the area.

and on page 3:

> According to official census figures, the total African population of Unyamwezi numbered 452,523 in 1957.

Dividing the total population of 452,523 by the number of chiefdoms (31) gives an average chiefdom size of 14,598.

A.2 Anthropological Evidence on the Size of Small Chiefdoms

In this section we go through various groups listed as having small chiefdoms in Murdock's (1967) Ethnographic Atlas. We will provide quotes from historians and anthropologists about chiefdom sizes or total population and the number of chiefdoms. The data is summarized in Table A5.

Table A5: Size of Small Chiefdoms

Ethnic Group	Chiefdom Size	Total Population	Number of Chiefdoms	Year of Data	Source
Western Dinka	13,000			1958	Lienhardt et al. (1958, p.103)
Yao	12,448	205,755	11	1945	Mitchell (1956, p.13)
Kpelle	4,222	211,081	50	1960	Fulton (1972, p.1220)
Mende	8,286	580,000	70	1931	Little (1947, p.8)
Yalunka	10,000			1890	Elliot (1894, p.82)
Ila	1,500	34,135	80	1915	Smith and Dale (1920, p.299)
Gogo	4,500	150,000		1914-1918	Rigby (1969, p.396)
Lugbara	4,000	240,000	60	1968	Middleton (1963, p.82)
Angas	12,200			Est.1880	Temple (1919, p.8)
Ancholi	1,953	125,000	64	1900	Atkinson (1994, pp.275–282)
Average	7,211				
Median	6,393				

Dinka

Lienhardt (1958, p.102) writes about the Western Dinka

> The largest divisions of the Dinka people are some 25 named tribal groups, each with its own well-defined territory ... tribal groups occupy continuous stretches of Dinkland which tend to be distinctly separated from each other by natural boundaries ... their total populations of the tribal groups vary from under 3,000 people in the smallest to well over 150,000 in the Rek group, which is much the largest. The tribal groups I have here called the "Western" Dinka are the western Luac, estimated at some 14,000 people, the Rek (156,000), Abiem (13,800), Paliet (4,370), Malwal (37,640) and the Palioupiny (8,530).

and on page 103:

> Tribes vary much in size, from less than 1,000 to up to 25,000 members.

We will take the midpoint of this range, 13,000 as our estimate.

Yao

Mitchell (1956, p.13) writes about Yao chiefdoms in 1946:

> From the 1945 Census. These areas are Kawinga, Liwonde, Nyambi, Jalasi and Malemia. Other Machinga chiefdoms are Mponda (18,701), Kalembo (11,260), Nsamala (11,582), and Ntumanje (17,467), but in these I have spent only a few days and I do not include them in the main analysis. I also spent some time in Katuli area (12,245) in Fort Johnston district, and Ntaja arca (17,195) in Blantyre district, but these are not Machinga Yao, and only refer to them to illustrate points.

We use the median population of the chiefdoms provided which is 12,448. Note that Mitchell notes considerable population growth from 1931 to 1945, therefore this is likely to be an overestimate.

Table A6: Population of Yao Chiefdoms

Chiefdom	Population
Jalasi	40,287
Katuli	12,245
Kalembo	11,260
Nyambi	7,335
Liwonde	12,176
Malemia	12,448
Ntaja	17,195
Mponda	18,701
Nsamala	11,852
Ntumanje	17,467
Kawinga	44,789
Total	205,755
Median	12,448

Source: Mitchell (1956, p.13)

Kpelle

Fulton (1972, p.1220) writes:

> Each of the several Kpelle chiefdoms (there were between thirty and fifty in the late nineteenth century) is largely pyramidal in internal organization (Apter 1965:92-93), denoting a decentralization of powers with similar functions being performed at each level.

And on page 1219:

> They are the largest tribe in Liberia, the most recent and accurate estimate being that of the 1962 government census which places their number at 211,081.

Due to the late date of the population estimate we will divide it by the upper bound of the number of chiefdoms which results in an average size estimate of 4,222.

Kapsiki/Higi

Mende

Little (1947, p.8) writes:

> The Mende people occupy an area of something like 10,000 square miles in the central and south-eastern part of the Sierra Leone Protectorate. Comprising nearly 70 chiefdoms, they numbered, at the time of the last official census (1931), some 580,000 persons, including about 10,000 resident in the Colony.

Dividing the total population by 70 leads to an average chiefdom size of 8,286.

Yalunka

Elliot (1894, p.82) writes:

> The Yalunka people at Falaba and the various villages from this place to Farana on the Niger, are the remnants of a tribe which appear to have once been both numerous and powerful. The villages above referred to appear to have been before the advent of the Sofas large and populous town; the ruins of some are at least a mile in diameter, and at least four must have been once inhabited by 10,000 people each.

We will use 10,000 as the estimate.

Ila

Smith and Dale (1920, p.299) write:

> The whole of the Ila country is distributed among these communities, which number about eighty. They vary in size and population, the largest being Kasenga with about 3000 people ; others have no more than 100, some even less.
>
> The rule of the communities is in the hands of chiefs and headmen, all of whom have the name bami (sing, mwami). The tendency now is to call the latter bankoshi, a foreign term, and so distinguish between them, but the Bvila usage is to put them more or less on an equality ; the chief is more primus inter pares. Each chishi has its chief, and each village, or each segment of the large villages, has its headman. The chief and headmen form a council which settles disputes and judges cases. There are evidences that in former times many of the mashi were grouped under one supreme chief (see Chap. XXII.), but to-day there are no chiefs with the authority that Munyama and Malumbe wielded. Each chishi is entirely independent. Where, as at Kasenga, there is a chief over a number of small communities, his authority outside his own village is little more than nominal.

We will use the midpoint here at 1,550.

Gogo

Rigby (1969, p.396) writes:

> the population of any Gogo ritual area seldom exceed 4,000 to 5,000 persons.

Lugbara

Middleton (1963, p.82) writes:

> A sub-tribe averages about 4,000 people, living in a territory of some twenty-five square miles. There are some sixty sub-tribes in Lugbara.

Additionally, the text notes that each sub-tribe has one rain-maker. "In the traditional system, before the creation of chiefs by the European administration, there were no authorities higher than the elders except for rainmaker." Hence, it can be assumed that the sub-tribes are the highest level of social organization analogous to chiefdoms.

Angas

Temple (1919, p.8) gives only the population of one tribe of the Angas:

> Tal, who are a tribe of Angas with a population of 12,200.

Ancholi

For the Ancholi, Atkinson (1994, 275–282) counts 64 chiefdoms and estimates a 1900 population of 125,000 which means 1,953 population per chiefdom.

B Additional Tables and Figure

Table A7: Ethnographic Atlas v31: Mean Size of Local Communities

Mean Size of Local Communities	Number of groups
Missing	76
Fewer than 50	5
50-99	9
100-199	6
200-399	11
400-1,000	4
1,000 w/o towns over 5,000	1
Towns of 5,000-50,000	2

Notes: This table tabulates the values of variable 31 of the Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1967) which considers the mean size of local communities. The analysis is subset to groups with no level of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local level as indicated by variable 33.

Table A8: Estimating the Number of Polities in Africa in 1880 when Incorporating Known Polity Numbers

Levels beyond local community	Type of polity	Number of groups	Population 1880	Population per polity	Number of polities (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Number of polities known		56	11,936,418		5,239	5,239	5,239	5,239	5,239	5,239
Four	Complex State	2	168,388	84,194	2	2	2	2	2	2
Three	State	41	12,614,100	307,661	41	41	41	41	41	41
Two	Larger Chiefdom	108	19,258,957	25,000	770	770	770	770	770	770
One	Small Chiefdom	192	21,129,462	7,000	3,018	3,018	3,018	3,018	3,018	3,018
None	Village	196	11,582,566	250–1,000	11,583	23,165	46,330	11,583	23,165	46,330
Missing data	Unknown	168	14,068,790	1,000–4,500	3,126	3,126	3,126	14,069	14,069	14,069
Total		763	90,758,681		23,780	35,362	58,528	34,722	46,305	69,470
Assumptions										
Pop per village					1,000	500	250	1,000	500	250
Pop per missing					4,500	4,500	4,500	1,000	1,000	1,000

Notes: This table estimates the total number of polities in Africa circa 1880. It does so by separately estimating the number of polities for societies with different levels of jurisdictional hierarchies as compiled by Murdock (1967) (Column 1). We overlay population density estimates from (Klein Goldewijk et al., 2017) to estimate the 1880 population in each category (Column 2). Next, we use ethnographic and anthropological sources, summarized in Section A, to estimate the population per type of polity (Column 3). Finally we divide the population by the population per polity to obtain a number of polities (Column 4). In contrast to Table 1, the first row counts the number of polities for groups where ethnographic accounts offer a more precise estimate of the number of polities.

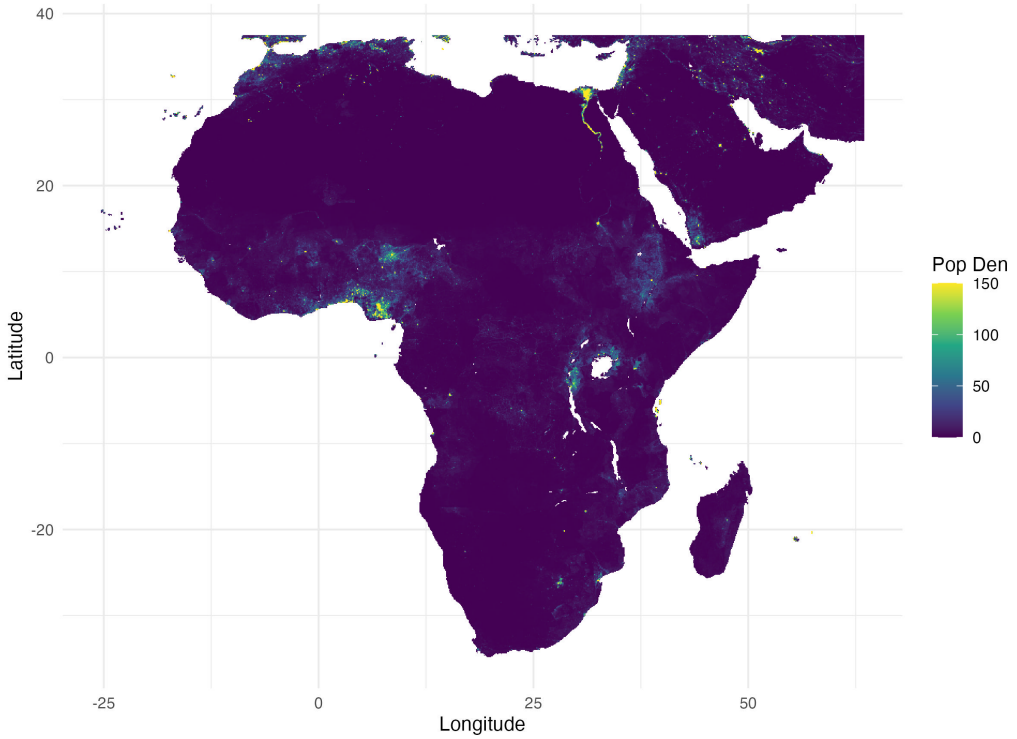
Table A9: Population of the Ngwato Reserve

Tribe	Population (1946)
Ngwato	17,850
Kalaka	22,777
Tswapong	11,237
Birwa	9,636
Sarwa	9,567
Khurutshe	5,441
Kgalagadi	3,963
Talaote	3,538
Kaa	3,055
Pedi	2,572
Phaleng	2,409
Herera	1,013
Rotse	1,006
Kwena	892
Seleka	889
Nabya	844
Koba	724
Teti	435
Subia	274
Malete	240
Rolong	155
Tlôkwa	141

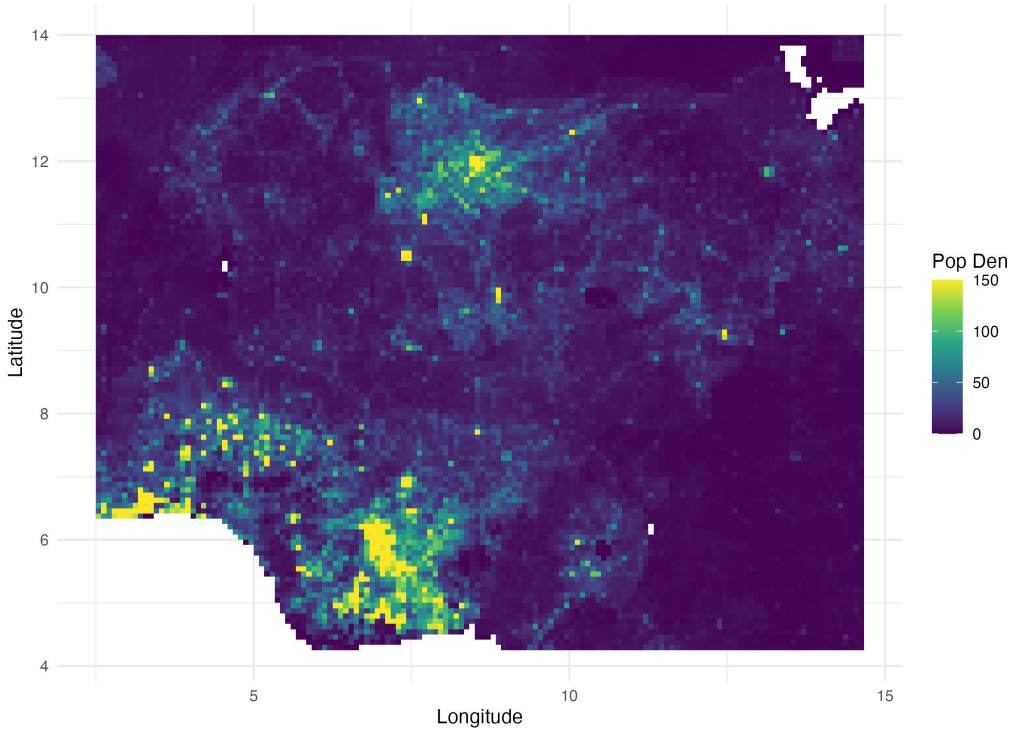
Source: Schapera (1952, p.65)

Figure A1: 1880 Population Density

Panel A: Across Africa

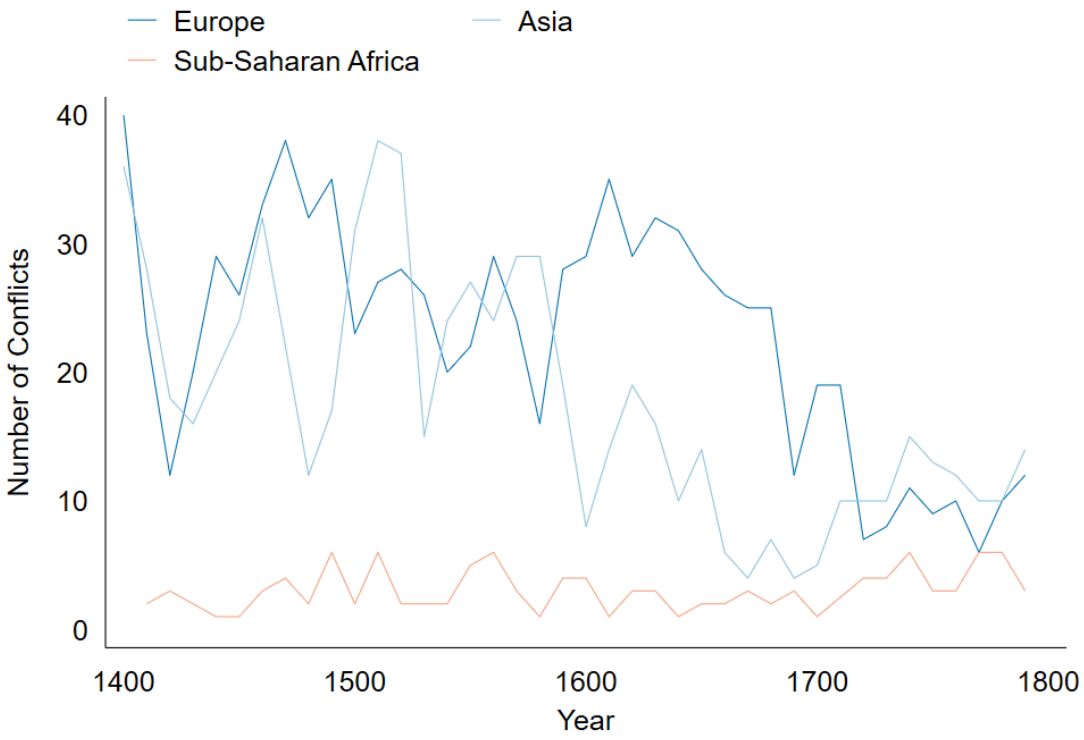


Panel B: Acrosss Modern Nigeria



Notes: This figure plots 1880 population density estimates from Klein Goldewijk et al. (2017). Panel A shows all of Africa and Panel B zooms in to modern Nigeria.

Figure A2: Conflict Over Time



Notes: This figure plots conflict across in Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and Asia from 1400 to 1800 as documented by Brecke (1999). Conflict between African and European polities is removed from the Africa category. This data source has its limitations and coverage is certainly worse for societies without written records.

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