The Political Economy of Africa

James A. Robinson
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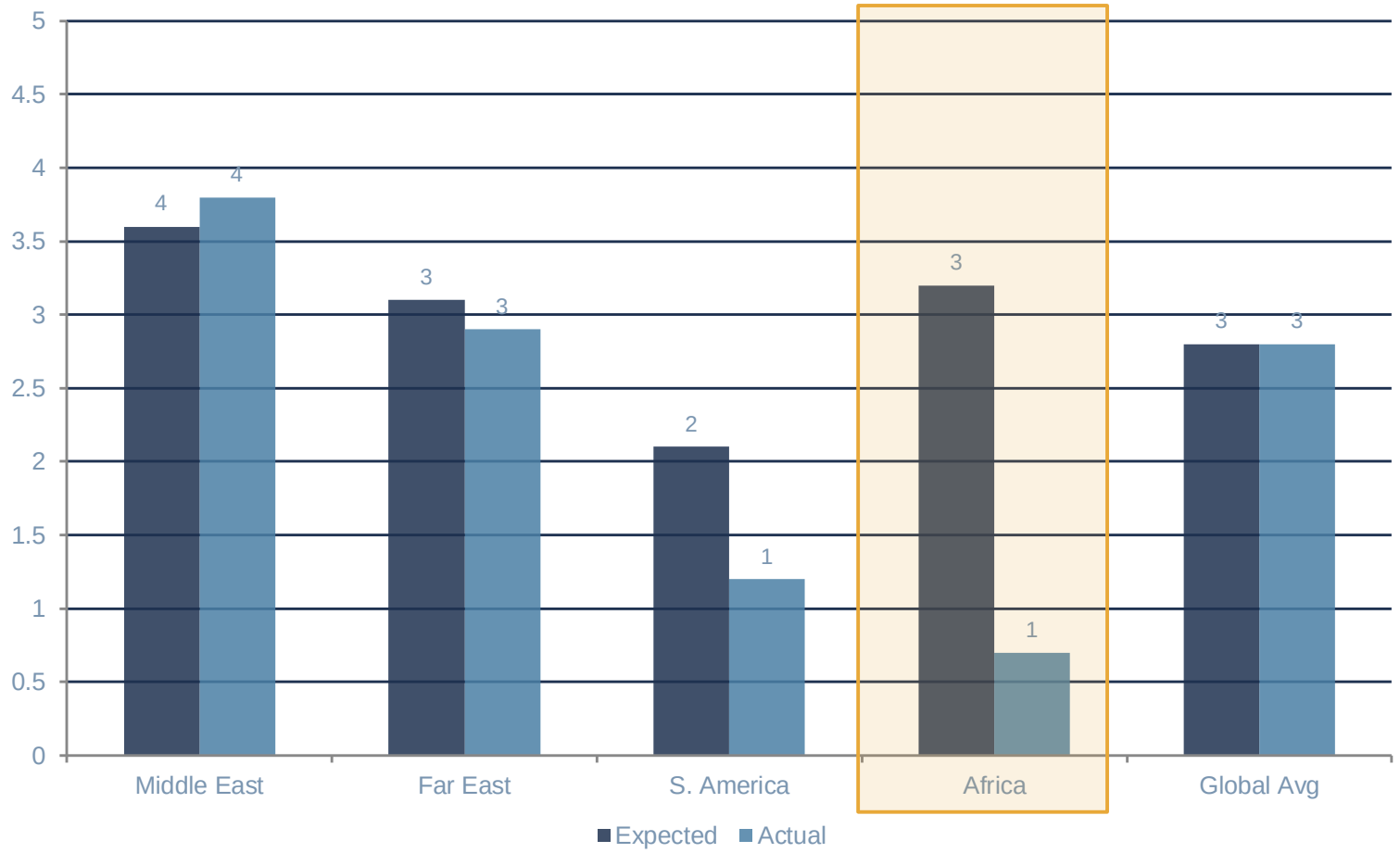
BREAD-IGC Lecture

November 10, 2026.

The African Peace Puzzle

Africa has 1/3 to 1/5 as many interstate wars as global frequencies predict

Lemke · Regions of War and Peace (2002) · Correlates of War data



⅓ – ⅕

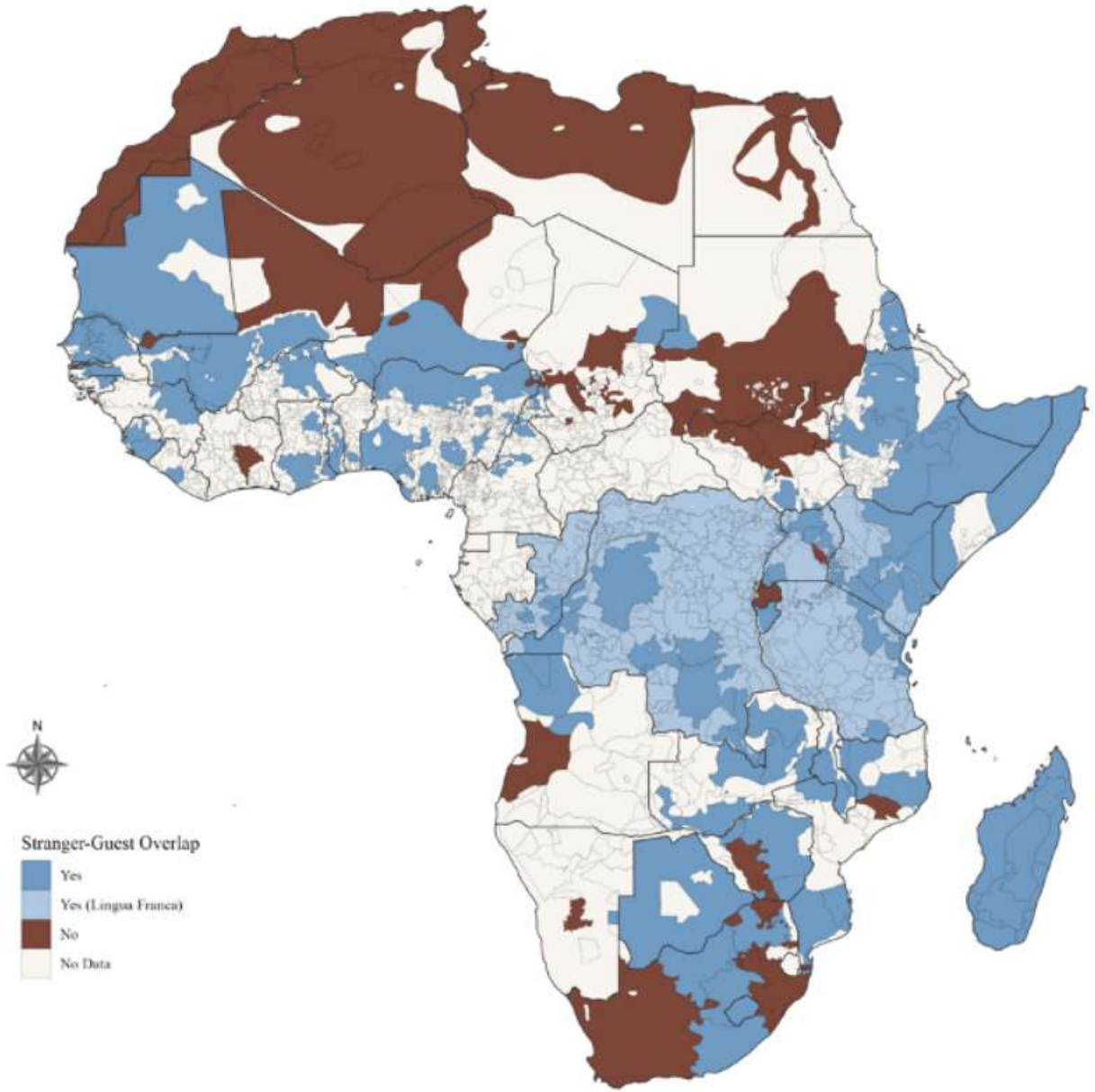
of expected wars actually occurred in Africa

1963

OAU founded — sovereignty & non-interference norms institutionalized

Douglas Lemke (2003) African lessons for international relations research, World Politics 56 (1), 114-138

Wars per 100 dyad-years, 1950–1992. Values illustrative of relative magnitudes reported in the literature.

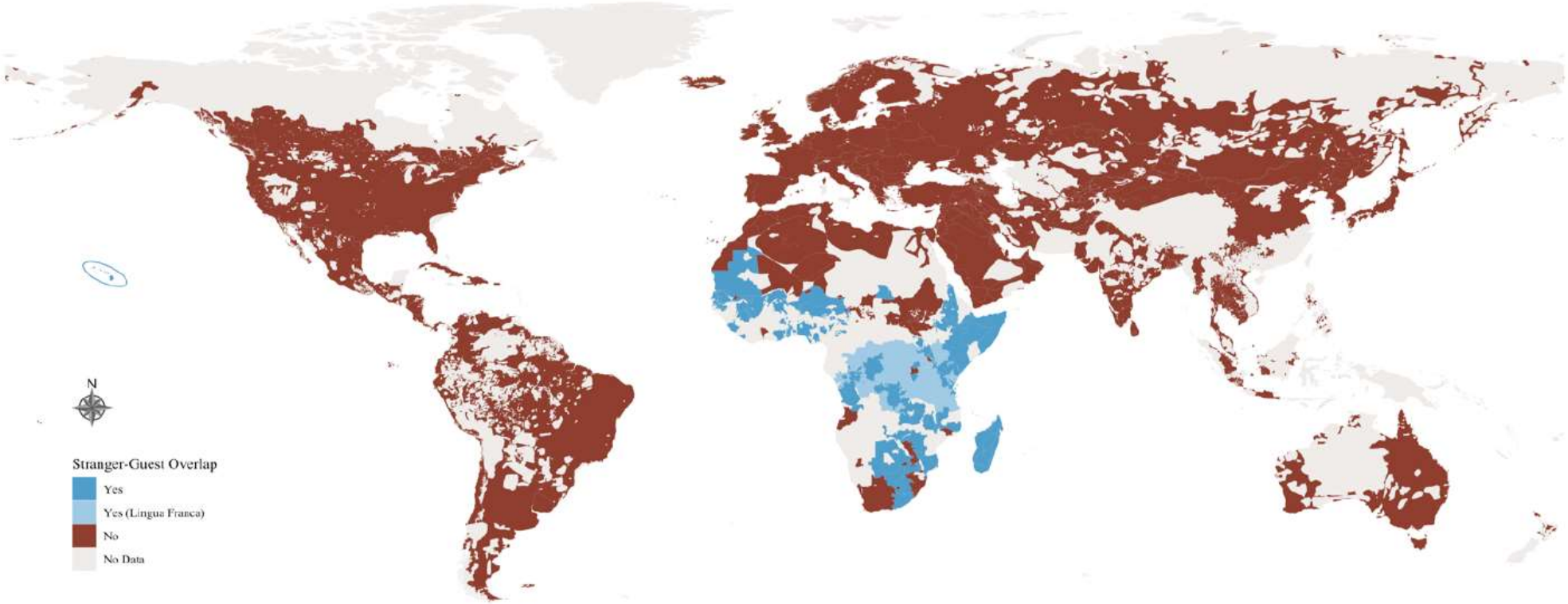


Guest and Stranger

Soeren J. Henn, James A. Robinson. 2026.
Africa as a Success Story:
Political Organization in Precolonial Africa.
Annual Review of Economics 18:447-471.

Africa is Distinct

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.

Africans: the most Universalist people in the world

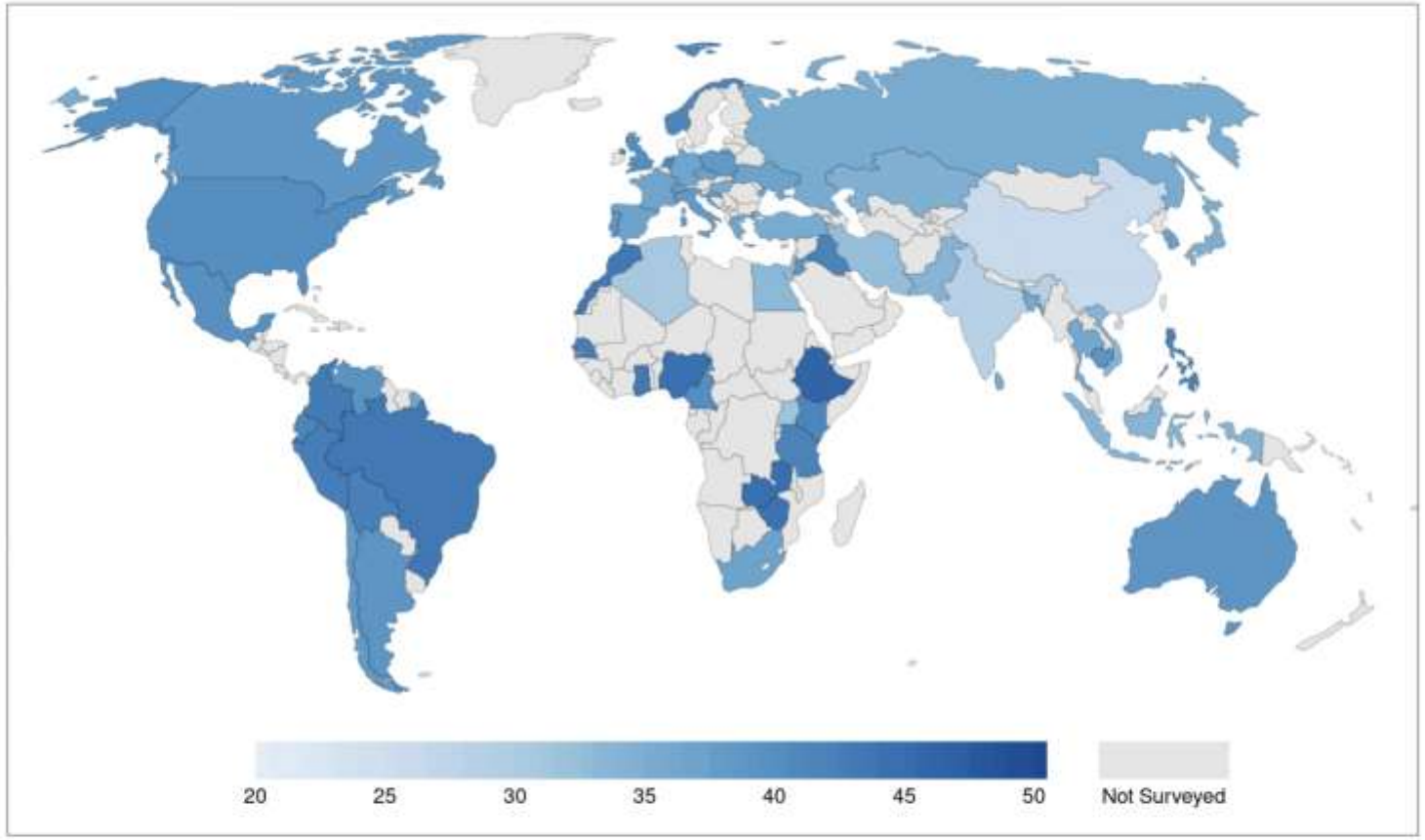
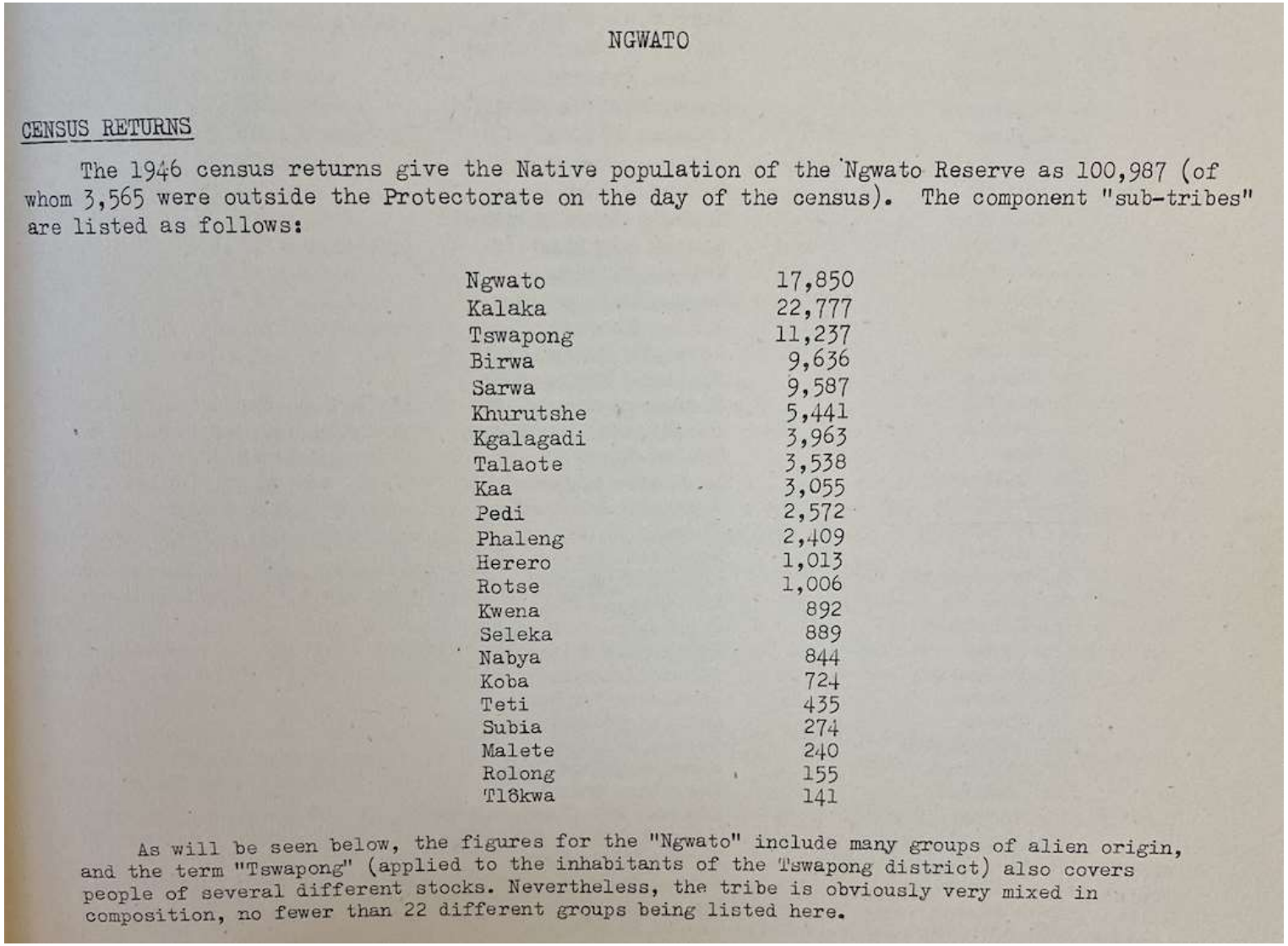


Figure 4: Global variation in composite universalism. The map shows the country level average of composite universalism, pooled across treatments. 0 means that all money is shared with the in-group, 50 captures equal splits (on average), and 100 that all money is shared with the socially more distant stranger.

Alexander Cappelen,
Benjamin Enke, and
Bertil Tungodden
American Economic Review,
2025, vol. 115 (1), pp. 43-76.

Integrating Strangers: Only 20% of the "Ngwato" in 1946 Botswana were Ngwato, the rest were strangers absorbed into the Polity.



NGWATO

CENSUS RETURNS

The 1946 census returns give the Native population of the Ngwato Reserve as 100,987 (of whom 3,565 were outside the Protectorate on the day of the census). The component "sub-tribes" are listed as follows:

Ngwato	17,850
Kalaka	22,777
Tswapong	11,237
Birwa	9,636
Sarwa	9,587
Khurutshe	5,441
Kgalagadi	3,963
Talaote	3,538
Kaa	3,055
Pedi	2,572
Phaleng	2,409
Herero	1,013
Rotse	1,006
Kwena	892
Seleka	889
Nabya	844
Koba	724
Teti	435
Subia	274
Malete	240
Rolong	155
Tlôkwa	141

As will be seen below, the figures for the "Ngwato" include many groups of alien origin, and the term "Tswapong" (applied to the inhabitants of the Tswapong district) also covers people of several different stocks. Nevertheless, the tribe is obviously very mixed in composition, no fewer than 22 different groups being listed here.

Isaac Schapera (1955) *The Ethnic Composition of Tswana Tribes.*

Wealth in People

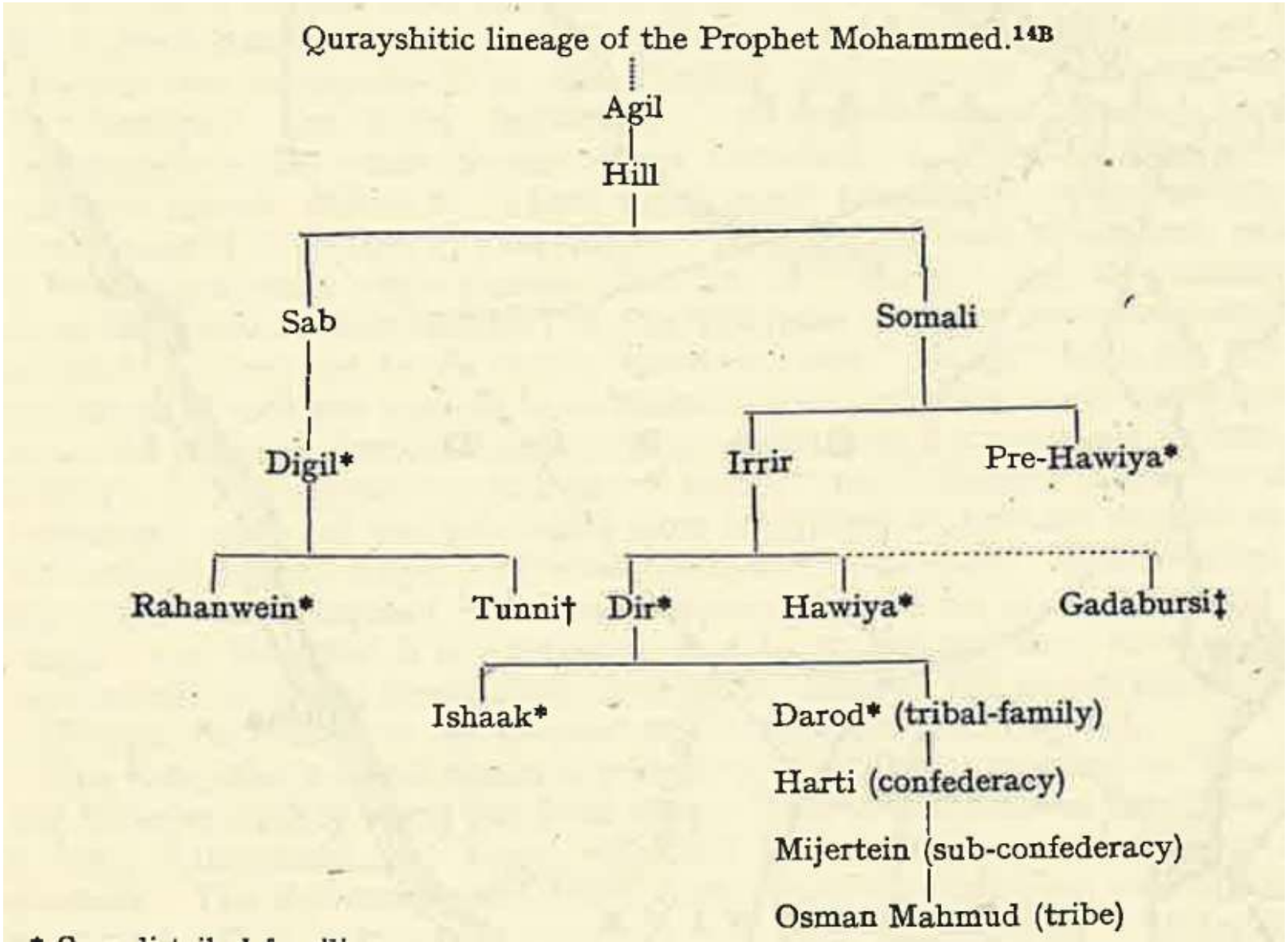


"A gift of money is not equal in value to a [gift of a] person" – Yorùbá proverb.

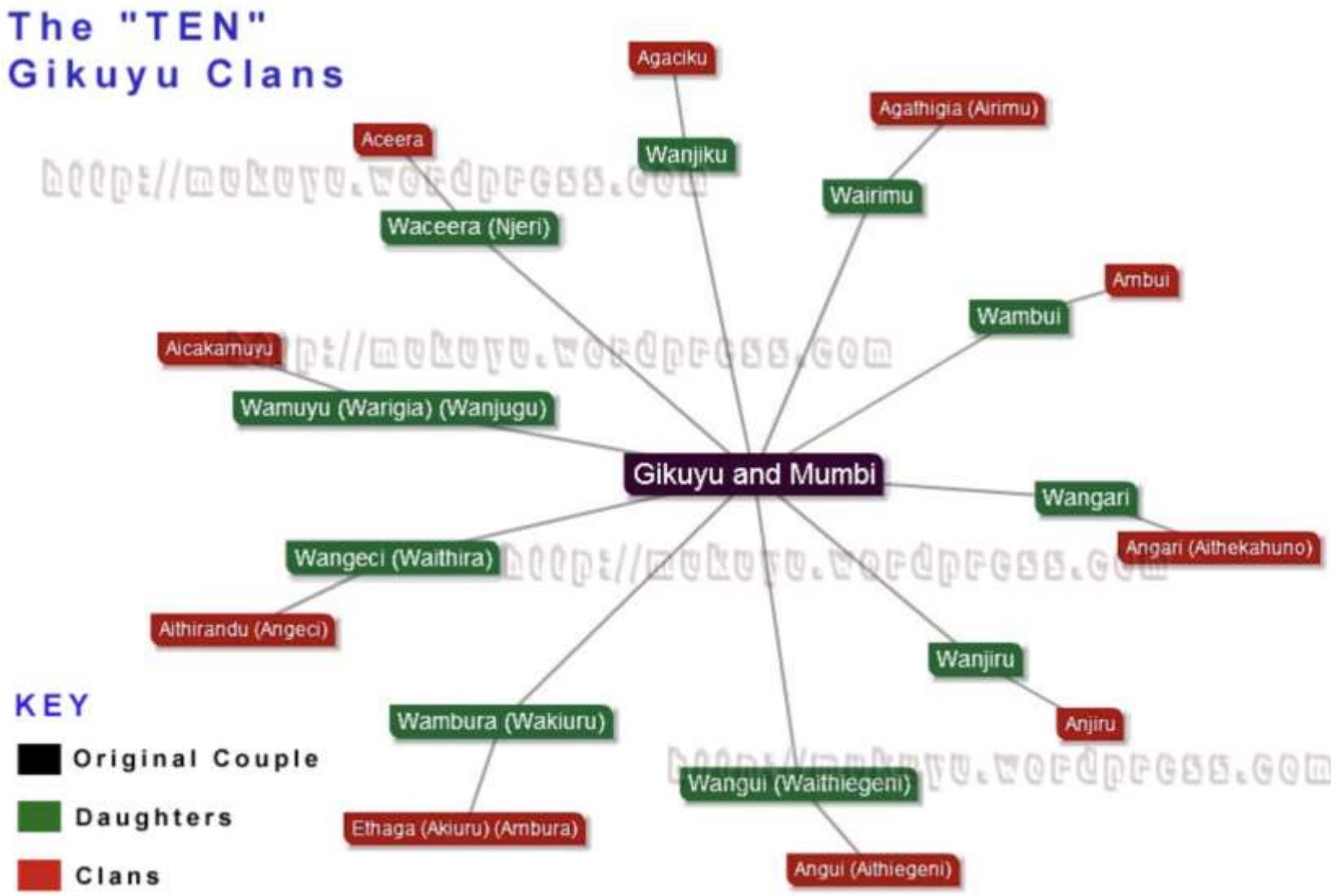
The Eurasian Model: Wealth in Territory



Institutionalizing Wealth in People: Somali clans



Institutionalizing Wealth in People: Gĩkũyũ clans

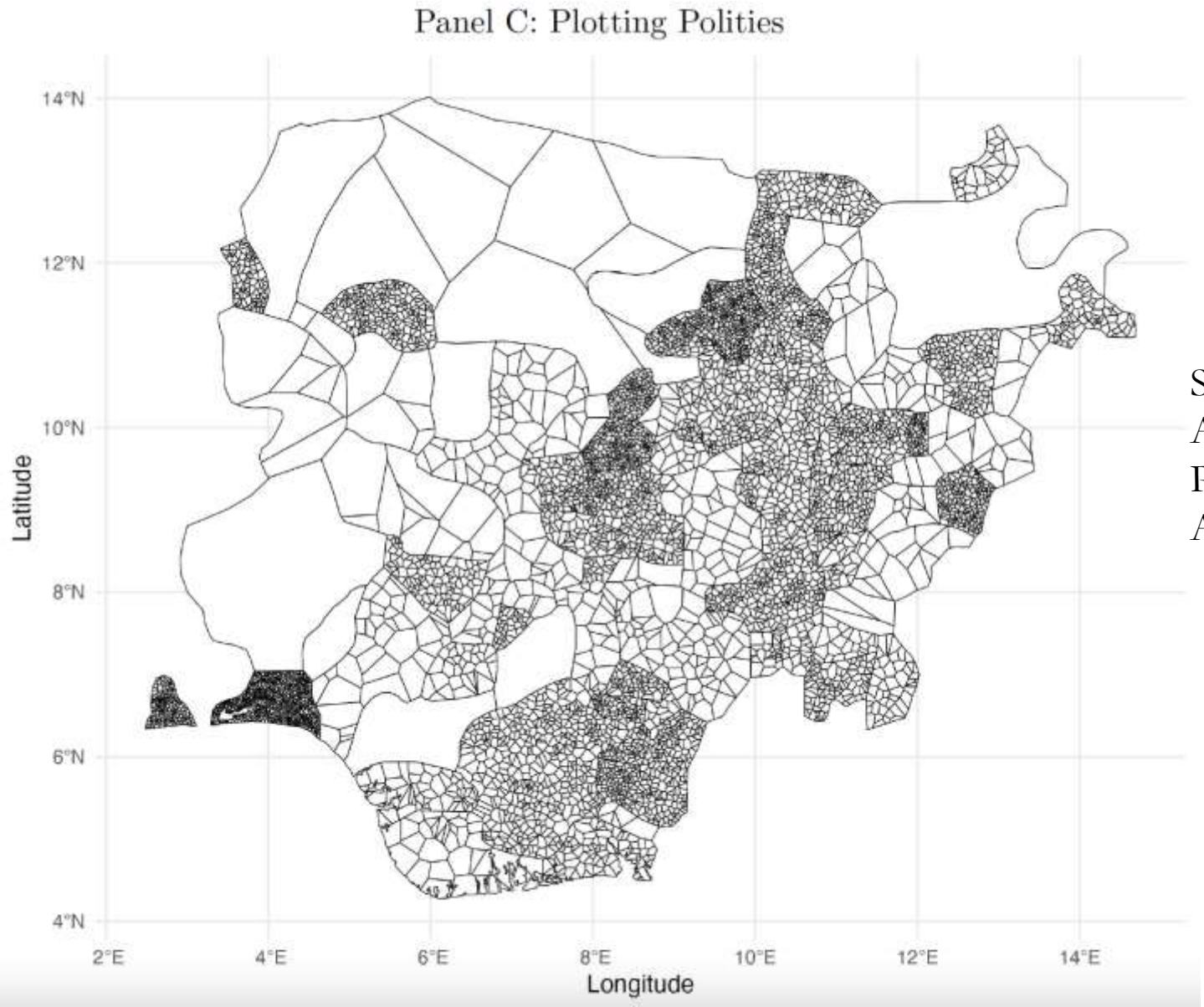


Institutionalizing Wealth in People: Gĩkũyũ age grades

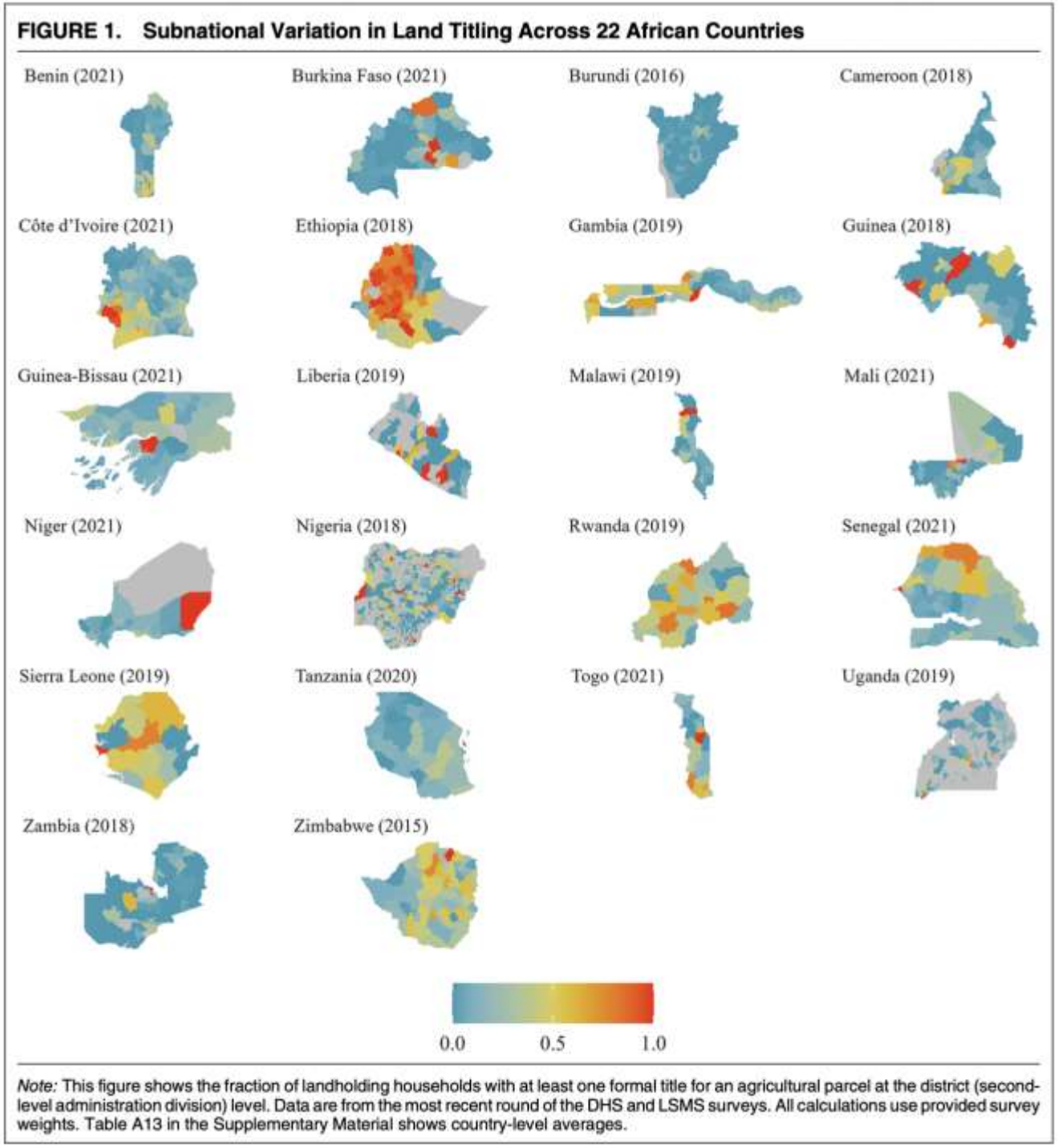




Political Consequences (for example in Nigeria)



Soeren J. Henn, James A. Robinson. 2026.
Africa as a Success Story:
Political Organization in Precolonial Africa.
Annual Review of Economics 18:447-471.



Economic Consequences – form of property rights

-in DHS and LSMS data 15.2% of people had a title.

Ribar, Matthew K. "Land, power, and property rights: The political economy of land titling in sub-Saharan Africa." American Political Science Review 120, no. 2 (2026): 399-418

TABLE 2
SUMMARY STATISTICS

VARIABLE	OFFICEHOLDERS Mean	OFFICEHOLDERS Standard Deviation	NONOFFICEHOLDERS Mean	NONOFFICEHOLDERS Standard Deviation	|t|
Plot-level data:					
Profit × 1,000 cedis/hectare	649.10	2,374.87	580.59	6,864.34	.11
Yield × 1,000 cedis/hectare	1,490.32	2,850.93	1,615.14	7,353.06	.18
Hectares	.48	.62	.31	.30	4.26
Labor cost × 1,000 cedis/hectare	651.39	1,155.59	883.14	2,223.01	1.11
Seed cost × 1,000 cedis/hectare	282.12	612.24	243.08	719.98	.45
pH	6.36	.71	6.34	.75	.22
Organic matter	3.22	1.06	3.13	1.08	.67
Last fallow duration (years)	4.83	4.23	3.93	2.65	2.60
Length of tenure (years)	16.13	16.10	7.32	9.47	7.26
Plot same *abusua* as individual	.66	.47	.56	.50	1.79
Plot obtained via commercial transaction	.25	.43	.30	.46	1.17
Observations	122		484		
Individual-level data:					
Gender (1 = female)	.11	.32	.40	.49	3.73
Age	51.92	13.47	40.08	12.21	5.41
Average assets × 1,000 cedis	1,475.52	1,767.18	620.39	902.57	4.71
Years of schooling	7.56	6.98	7.09	4.92	.50
1 if mother was a trader	.09	.29	.24	.43	2.23
1 if mother was a farmer	.89	.32	.72	.45	2.35
1 if father was a farmer	.82	.39	.79	.41	.46
1 if father was an artisan	.07	.25	.11	.31	.76
1 if father was a civil servant	.09	.29	.09	.29	.02
1 if father was a laborer	.00	.00	.00	.07	.46
1 if first in village of family	.11	.32	.23	.42	1.82
Years family or respondent has been in village	64.80	41.63	53.50	39.44	1.72
Number of wives of father	2.82	1.71	2.14	1.20	3.18
Number of children of father	12.04	7.32	10.84	6.51	1.10
Parity of mother in father's wives	1.71	1.47	1.30	.64	2.94
1 if fostered as a child	.58	.50	.69	.46	1.46
Size of inherited land	.62	.83	.13	.39	6.10
1 if mother had any school	.04	.21	.12	.32	1.43
1 if father had any school	.16	.37	.31	.46	2.09
Observations	45		207		

Economic Consequences - productivity

Goldstein, Markus, and Christopher Udry.
"The profits of power: Land rights and agricultural investment in Ghana." Journal of political Economy 116, no. 6 (2008): 981-1022.

Wealth in People and Slavery



PENGUIN CLASSICS

OLAUDAH EQUIANO

THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE AND OTHER WRITINGS

Crest of
King Agaja
of Dahomey



TABLE II

ESTIMATED TOTAL SLAVE EXPORTS BETWEEN 1400 AND 1900 BY COUNTRY

Isocode	Country name	Trans-Atlantic	Indian Ocean	Trans-Saharan	Red Sea	All slave trades
AGO	Angola	3,607,020	0	0	0	3,607,020
NGA	Nigeria	1,406,728	0	555,796	59,337	2,021,859
GHA	Ghana	1,614,793	0	0	0	1,614,793
ETH	Ethiopia	0	200	813,899	633,357	1,447,455
SDN	Sudan	615	174	408,261	454,913	863,962
MLI	Mali	331,748	0	509,950	0	841,697
ZAR	Democratic Republic of Congo	759,468	7,047	0	0	766,515
MOZ	Mozambique	382,378	243,484	0	0	625,862
TZA	Tanzania	10,834	523,992	0	0	534,826
TCD	Chad	823	0	409,368	118,673	528,862
BEN	Benin	456,583	0	0	0	456,583
SEN	Senegal	278,195	0	98,731	0	376,926
GIN	Guinea	350,149	0	0	0	350,149
TGO	Togo	289,634	0	0	0	289,634
GNB	Guinea-Bissau	180,752	0	0	0	180,752
BFA	Burkina Faso	167,201	0	0	0	167,201
MRT	Mauritania	417	0	164,017	0	164,434
MWI	Malawi	88,061	37,370	0	0	125,431
MDG	Madagascar	36,349	88,927	0	0	125,275
COG	Congo	94,663	0	0	0	94,663
KEN	Kenya	303	12,306	60,351	13,490	86,448
SLE	Sierra Leone	69,607	0	0	0	69,607
CMR	Cameroon	66,719	0	0	0	66,719
DZA	Algeria	0	0	61,835	0	61,835
CIV	Ivory Coast	52,646	0	0	0	52,646
SOM	Somalia	0	229	26,194	5,855	32,277
ZMB	Zambia	6,552	21,406	0	0	27,958
GAB	Gabon	27,403	0	0	0	27,403
GMB	Gambia	16,039	0	5,693	0	21,731
NER	Niger	133	0	0	19,779	19,912
LBY	Libya	0	0	8,848	0	8,848
LBR	Liberia	6,790	0	0	0	6,790
UGA	Uganda	900	3,654	0	0	4,554
ZAF	South Africa	1,944	87	0	0	2,031
CAF	Central African Republic	2,010	0	0	0	2,010
EGY	Egypt	0	0	1,492	0	1,492
ZWE	Zimbabwe	554	536	0	0	1,089
NAM	Namibia	191	0	0	0	191
BDI	Burundi	0	87	0	0	87
GNQ	Equatorial Guinea	11	0	0	0	11
DJI	Djibouti	0	5	0	0	5
BWA	Botswana	0	0	0	0	0

Slave Exports

Nathan Nunn, The Long-term Effects of Africa's Slave Trades, The Quarterly Journal of Economics, Volume 123, Issue 1, February 2008, , Pages 139–176

Slave Exports and Under-development

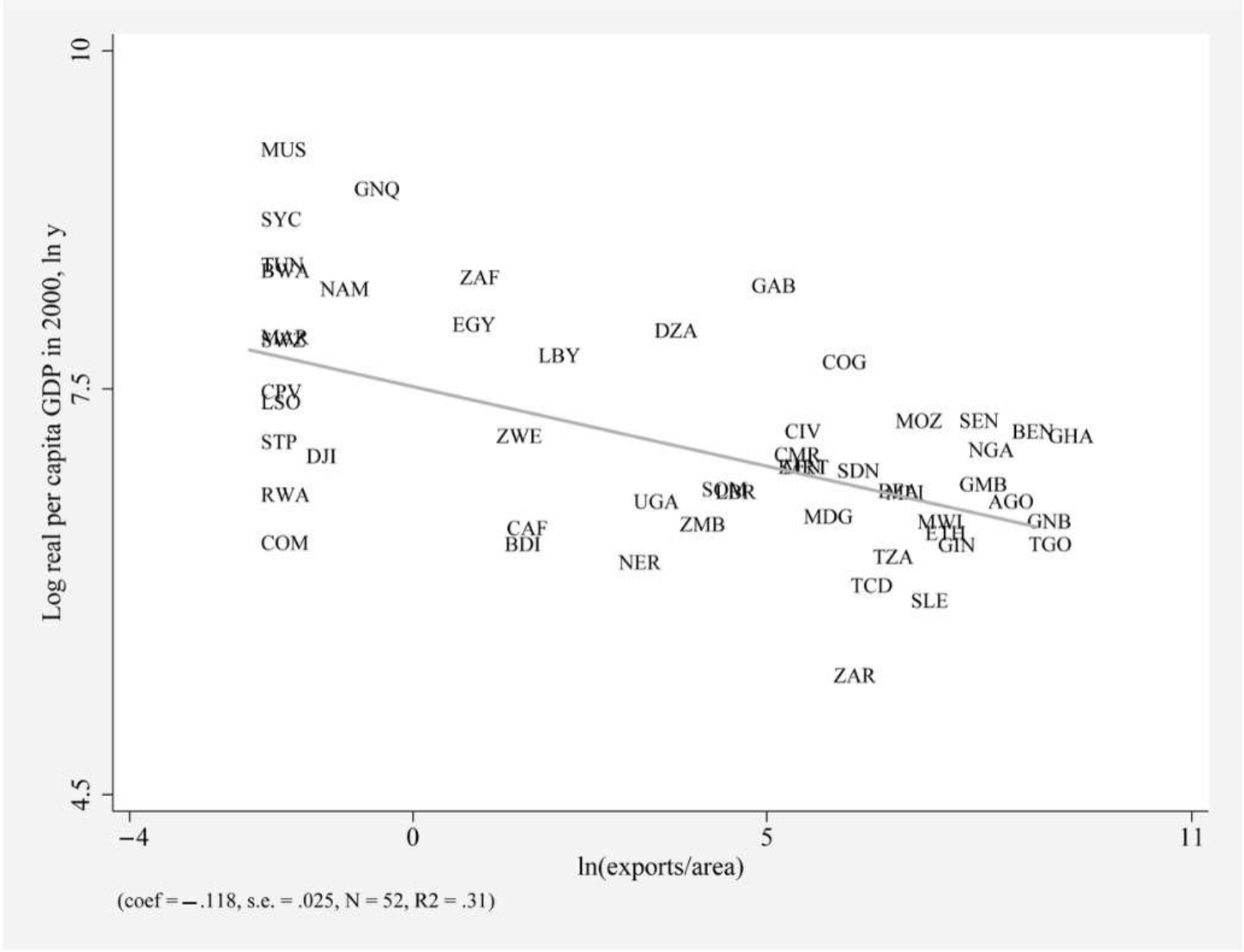


FIGURE III
Relationship between Log Slave Exports Normalized by Land Area, ln(exports/area), and Log Real Per Capita GDP in 2000, ln *y*

Nathan Nunn, The Long-term Effects of Africa's Slave Trades, The Quarterly Journal of Economics, Volume 123, Issue 1, February 2008, , Pages 139–176

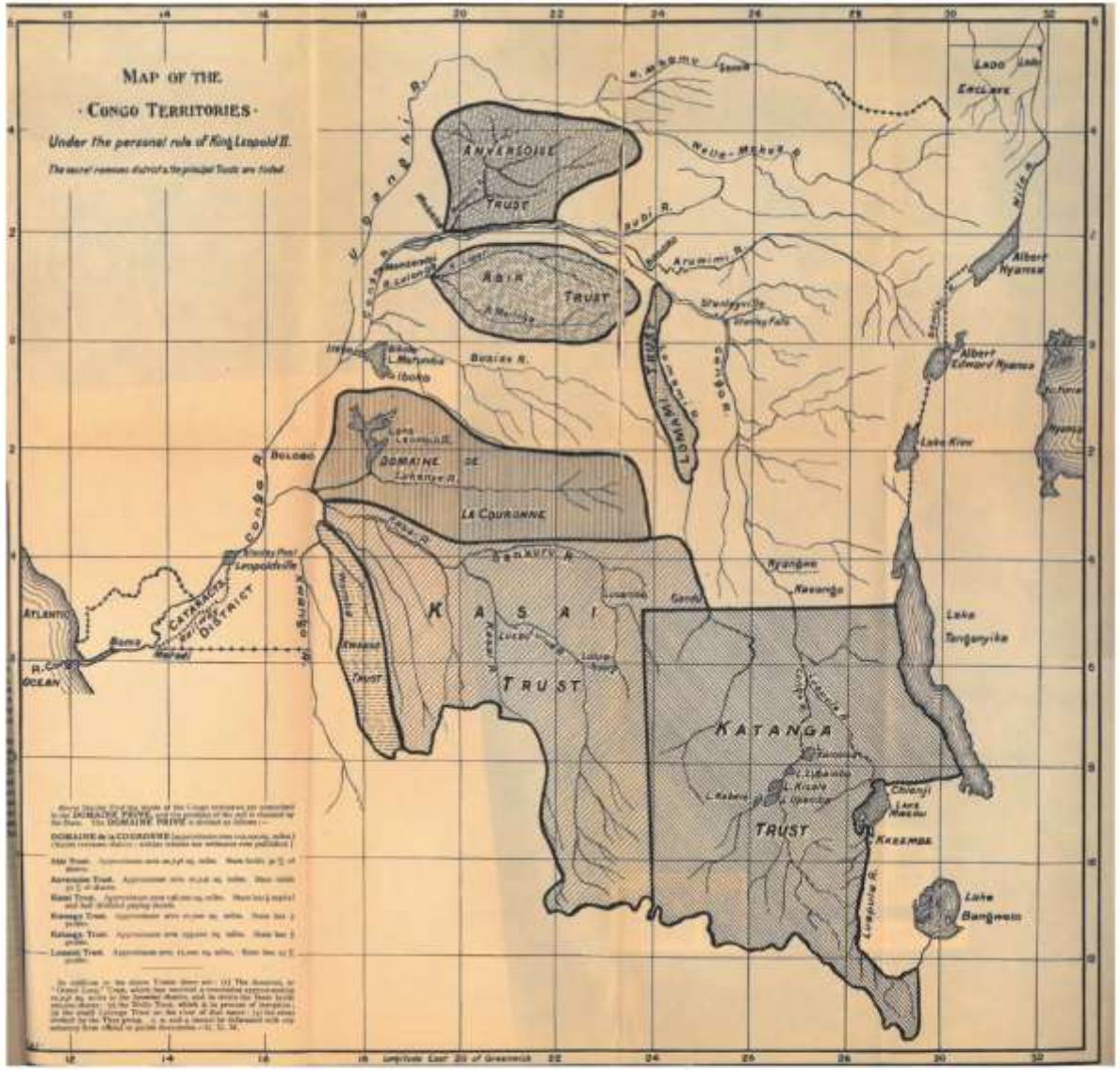


FIGURE I

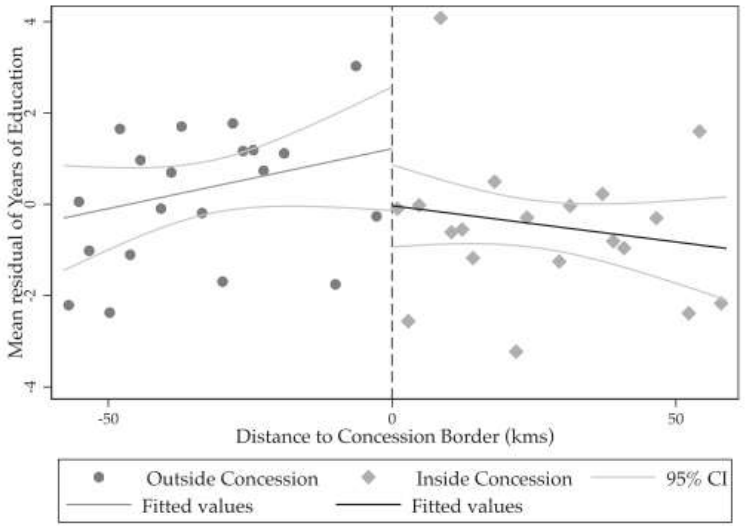
1904 Map of Concessions Granted by Leopold II

The two most northern concessions are Anversoise and Abir. This map was published in Morel (1905, insert following page 266). The digital image is from a copy in the Harvard Library.

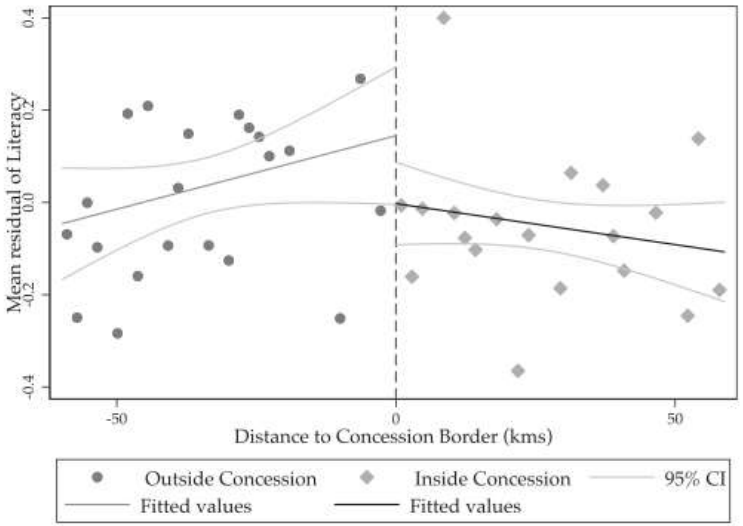
The Legacies of Colonial Extraction

Sara Lowes, Eduardo Montero, Concessions, Violence, and Indirect Rule: Evidence from the Congo Free State, The Quarterly Journal of Economics, Volume 136, I ssue 4, November 2021, Pages 2047–2091.

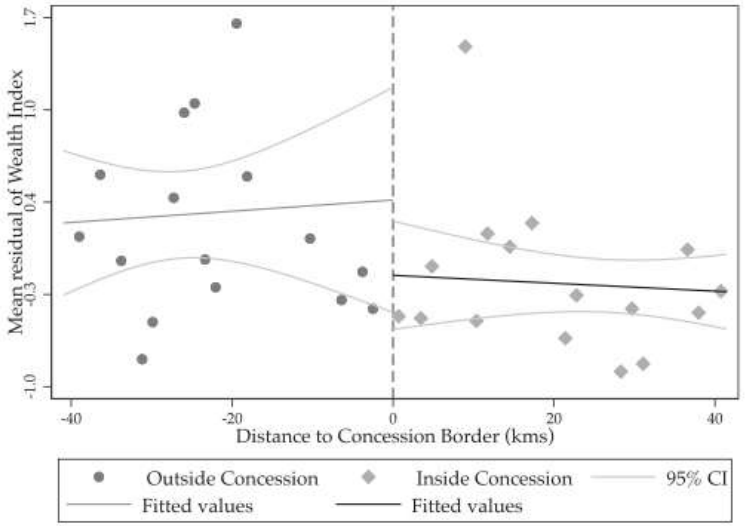
Impact at the Boundary of the Concessions



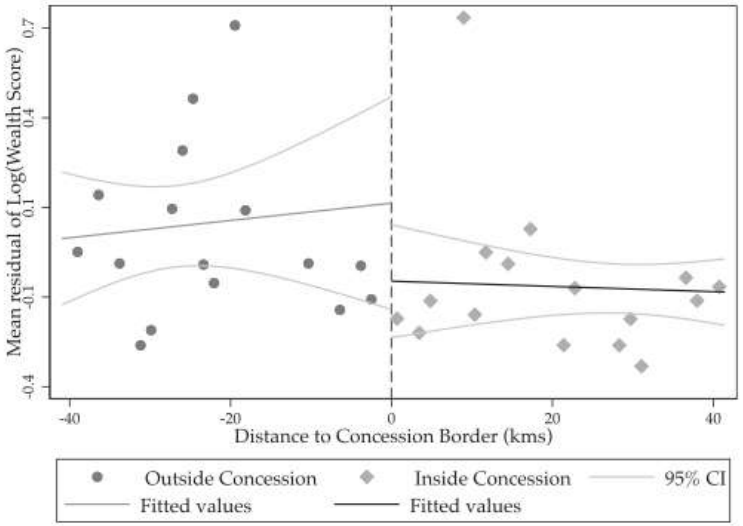
(A) *Years of Education*



(B) *Literacy*



(C) *Wealth Index*



(D) *Log(Wealth Score)*

Many other mechanisms to explore: Colonial divide and rule in Uganda

The referendum on the Lost Counties

Wednesday, August 08, 2012 — updated on January 22, 2021



Map of bunyoro showing Buyaga and Bugangaizi - the lost counties earlier given to Buganda. COURTESY MAP

BALLOTS

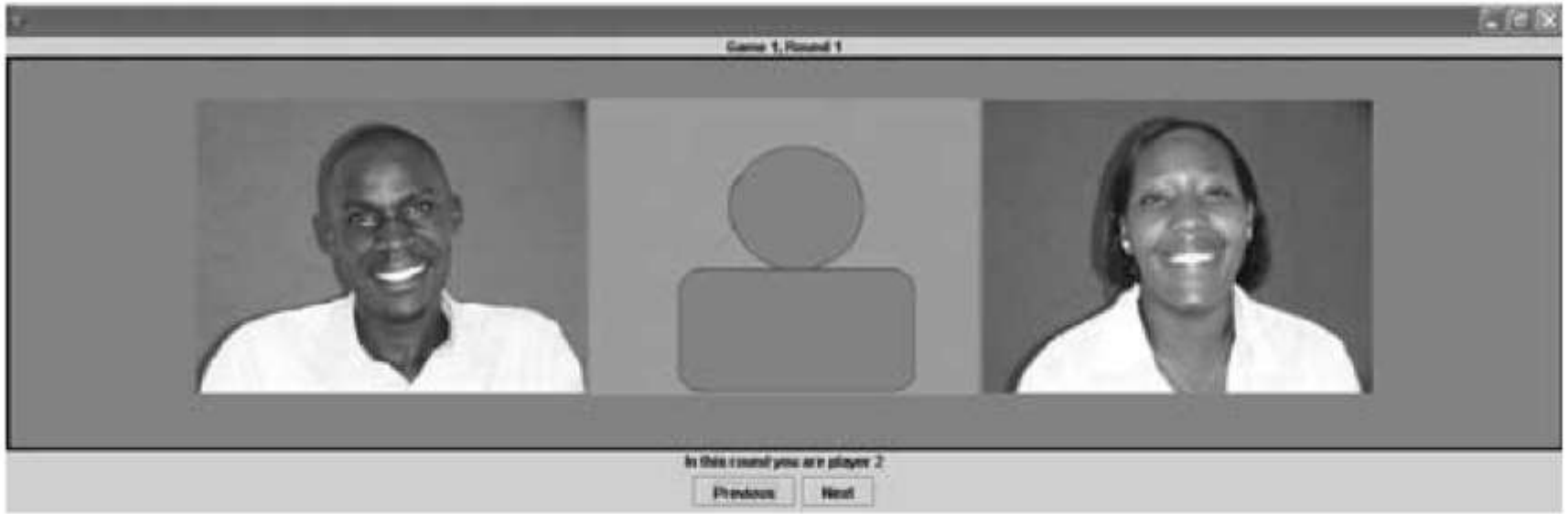
BUNYORO	VOTE
Buyaga	8,327
Bugangaizi	3,275
BUGANDA	VOTE
Buyaga	1,289
Bugangaizi	1,289

The Future does not have to be like the past

- The organization of society around wealth in people creates all sorts of advantages in the modern world.
- It also influences the way public policy and institutions should be structured.
- First let's discuss a stereotype:

Sharing Money in Uganda

FIGURE 2. Public Information Box with Anonymous Offerer



Note: Player 2, the offerer, is anonymous. Note that the images used in this figure are for illustration purposes only and are not the images of our subjects.

James Habyarimana, Macartan Humphreys, Daniel N. Posner and Jeremy M. Weinstein. "Why Does Ethnic Diversity Undermine Public Goods Provision?" American Political Science Review. 2007;101(4):709-725.

FIGURE 1. Public Information Box with Nonanonymous Offerer



Note: Player 2, the offerer, is "seen" by all players. Note that the images used in this figure are for illustration purposes only and are not the images of actual subjects.

Results

- The main result is that people do not discriminate in favor of their co-ethnics in the anonymous game, but they do when they can be seen.
- No 'primordial' favoring of your own ethnic group at all.
- Their interpretation is that you tend to live closer to co-ethnics, interact with then more, be engaged in social networks and reciprocal relations with them. These networks entail helping each other out so there is a norm which when applied to the game situations says you should favor your co-ethnic.
- all about the networks...

TABLE 3. Discrimination Rates in the 500 USh Dictator Game with Anonymous Offerer

	Benchmark Co-ethnicity		Subjective Co-ethnicity	
	Ethnicity	Region	Ethnicity	Region
In-group member	−0.03	0.06	0.08	0.08
	(0.10)	(0.08)	(0.16)	(0.14)
Observations	222	354	122	160

Notes: ***Significant at 1%; **significant at 5%; *significant at 10%. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Discrimination game analysis is limited to games in which players play with exactly one in-group member and one out-group member and discrimination is observed. Each column reports the marginal effect of co-ethnicity/co-region from a probit estimation. Group fixed effects are included and disturbance terms are clustered across the individual actions of offerers in a given game.

TABLE 7. Discrimination Rates in the 500 USh Dictator Game When Offerers Are Seen

	Benchmark Co-ethnicity		Subjective Co-ethnicity	
	Ethnicity	Region	Ethnicity	Region
In-group member	0.12	0.14	0.29	0.25
	(0.07)*	(0.06)**	(0.14)**	(0.11)**
Observations	406	608	188	272

Notes: ***Significant at 1%; **significant at 5%; *significant at 10%. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Discrimination game analysis is limited to games in which players play with exactly one in-group member and one out-group member and discrimination is observed. Each column reports the marginal effect of co-ethnicity/co-region from a probit estimation. Group fixed effects are included and disturbance terms are clustered across the individual actions of offerers in a given game.

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- It also influences the way public policy and institutions should be structured.
- First let's discuss a stereotype:
- Now let me discuss
  1. **Advantages**
     - Wealth in Children
     - Combining individualism with communalism.
     - (Don't forget the African Peace)

Wealth in Children

"One never arrives at the home of the *ayò* game without finding children" – Yorùbá proverb.


How
to play
Ayo
(Olopon)

Wealth in Children

"One never arrives at the home of the *ayò* game without finding children" – Yorùbá proverb.

- Oyekan Owomoyela's interpretation of this is "A prayer for a blessing of children in abundance."
- Here is another:

"A person who has children has prospered."

In 2100 40% of the people in the world will be Africans

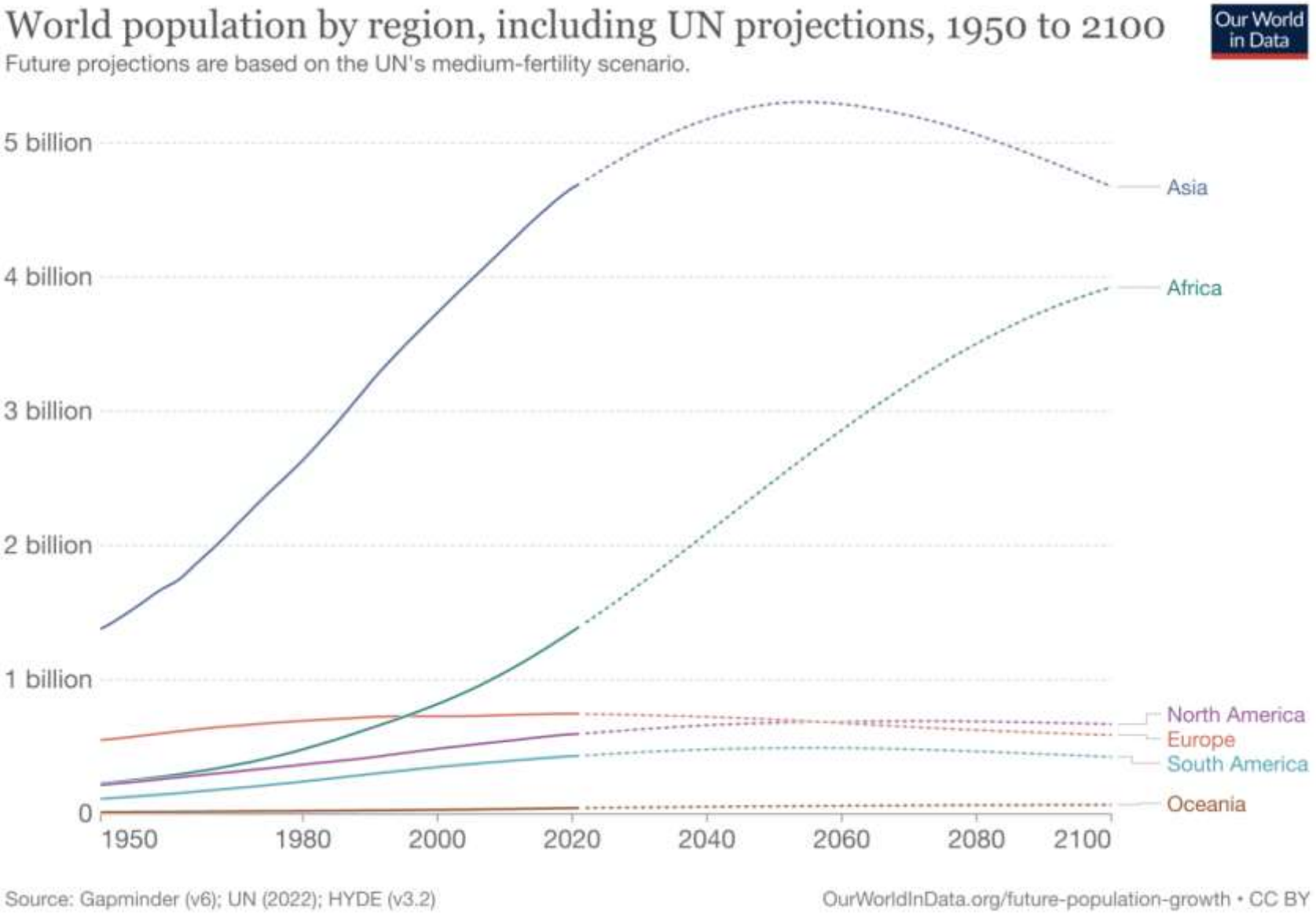


TABLE 1—SUMMARY STATISTICS FROM BASELINE SURVEY OF WIVES

	Mean	SD	Observations
Wife's age	28.24	5.45	14,607
Husband's age	38.26	11.54	14,051
Wife reports husband is polygamous	0.45	0.50	14,609
Muslim	0.64	0.48	14,597
Wife has no formal education	0.83	0.37	14,605
HH has access to electricity network	0.01	0.12	14,607
HH has a radio	0.48	0.50	14,603
HH has a toilet	0.43	0.49	10,022
HH has a cement/tiled floor	0.47	0.50	9,920
Fertility			
Number of pregnancies before baseline	3.51	1.84	12,543
Wants another child	0.92	0.27	14,609
Wants another child in next 2 years	0.35	0.48	13,931
Total number of children desired	6.00	1.87	13,212
Exposure to contraception			
Ever heard of contraception/methods to delay births	0.91	0.28	14,602
Ever used modern contraception	0.46	0.50	14,595
Currently using modern contraception	0.31	0.46	14,590
Share of implant users (lasting for 3–5 years) among current users	0.59	0.49	4,589
Share of injectable users (lasting for several months) among current users	0.32	0.47	4,589
Distance in km between visited CSPS (baseline coord.) and village (final coord.)	6.20	4.58	14,609
Has unmet need for contraception	0.38	0.49	14,596
Could not afford contraception if ever wanted to use it	0.41	0.49	13,240

The Negligible Effect of Free Contraception on Fertility: Experimental Evidence from Burkina Faso P. Dupas, S. Jayachandran, A. Lleras-Muney, P. Rossi American Economic Review, 115,. 8 2659–88.

Combining the individual with the community

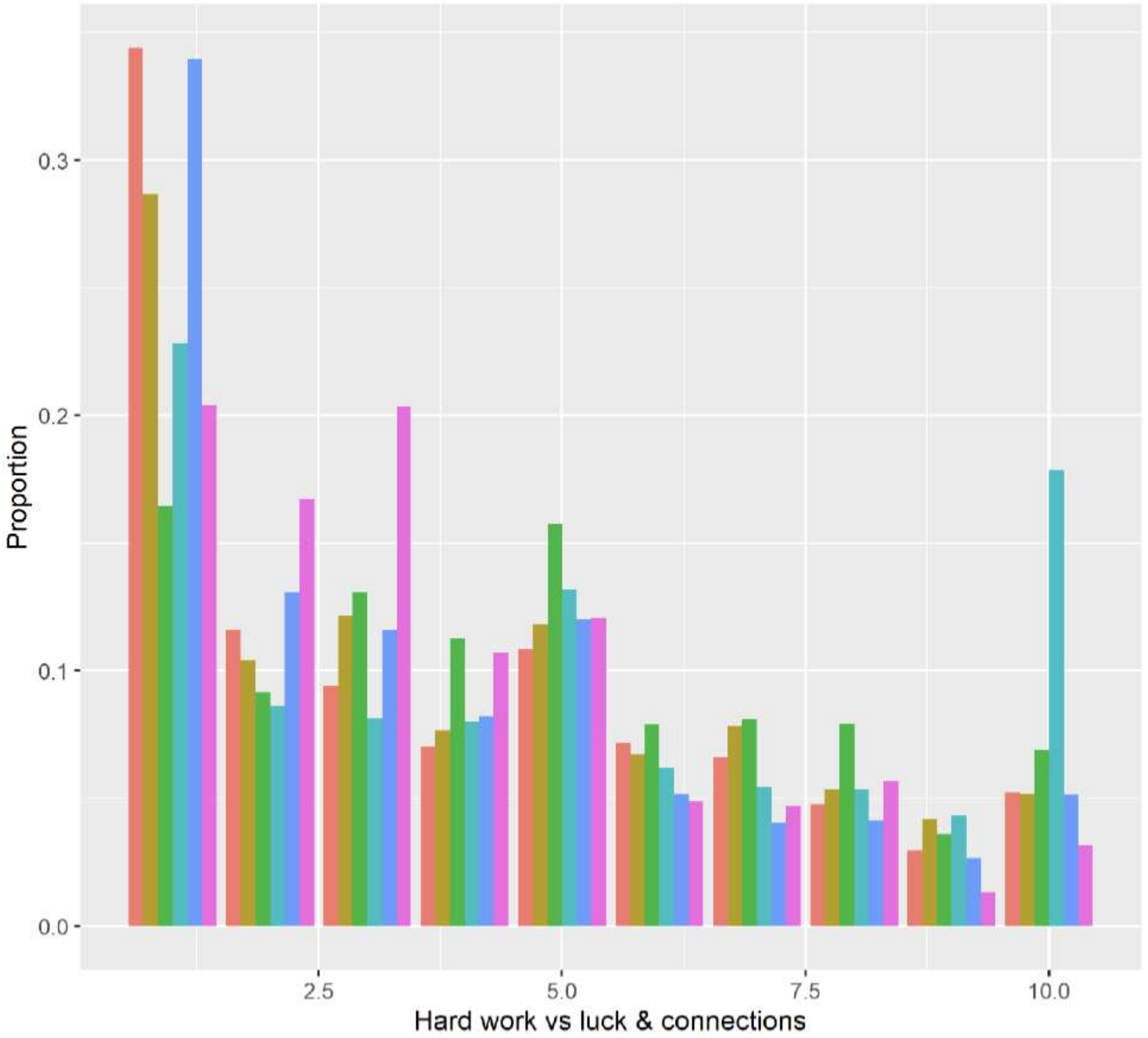


The Akan Siamese Crocodiles

"Stomachs mixed up, crocodiles' stomachs mixed up, they both have one stomach but when they eat they fight because of the sweetness of the swallowing"
– Akan proverb

Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/1139656001

How to get ahead? Hard work, or luck and connections?



Henn, Soeren J., and James A. Robinson. "Africa's latent assets." Journal of African Economies 32, no. Supplement_1 (2023): i9-i32.

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- First let's discuss a stereotype:
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  1. Advantages
     - Wealth in Children
     - Combining individualism with communalism.
     - (Don't forget the African Peace)
  2. **African Institutions**
     - The structure of democracy (for example in Botswana)
     - Implementing public policy in Rwandan
     - Age versus Kinship based Societies.

Incorporating Tradition: The *Kgotla* of Botswana







Imihigo in Rwanda

← See all Homegrown initiatives

Imihigo

ECONOMY

As part of efforts to reconstruct Rwanda and nurture a shared national identity, the Government of Rwanda drew on traditional practices in Rwandan culture to adapt its development programmes to the country's needs and context.

Overview

How the Imihigo performance contracts work

Entities preparing, monitoring and evaluating Imihigo

Level	Imihigo Preparation	Monitoring	Evaluation
Village	Village Executive Committee	Village Executive Committee	Executive Council of Village and Executive Secretary of the Cell
Cell	Cell Executive Secretariat	Cell Executive Secretariat	Cell Council and Sector Executive Secretary
Sector	Community Development Committee and Sector Executive Secretary agreed with the Sector Joint Action Development Forum	Community Development Committee and Sector Executive Secretary agreed with the Sector Joint Action Development Forum	Cell Council and Sector
District	Community Development Committee and District Executive Administrator	Community Development Committee and District Executive Administrator agreed with the Sector	



Table 1: Summary Statistics: Development Outcomes before and after Imihigo

Sector	Outcome	Pre	Post	Projects
Nightlights	Night-light index (log index)	0.28	0.67	N/A
Social Protection	Consumption per adult equivalent ('000 RWF)	297	384	1,337
Water & Sanitation	Travel time to water source (minutes)	21.7	12.7	350
	Piped water into dwelling (share)	0.02	0.09	124
Energy	National-grid lighting (share)	0.05	0.25	161
	Off-grid lighting (non-grid households) (share)	0.00	0.63	102
Private Sector & Youth Employment	Household has a business-expansion loan (share)	0.05	0.14	22
	Main job paid and off-farm (age 16+) (share)	0.13	0.24	121
Health	Travel time to health centre (minutes)	67.2	53.9	97
	Household insured through CBHI (share)	0.40	0.73	159
Agriculture	Household sold crops (share)	0.70	0.67	238
Education	Adults who can read (15+) (share)	0.58	0.72	159
	Attended school, age 18 or under (share)	0.83	0.90	109
Transport	Travel time to all-weather road (minutes)	17.5	8.0	155
	Travel time to market (minutes)	60.6	52.8	71
Urbanization & Rural Settlement	Lives in a planned settlement (share)	0.19	0.57	139

Heldring L, Robinson JA.
Problematizing state capacity:
the Rwandan case.
Journal of Institutional Economics.
2023;19(3):401-425.

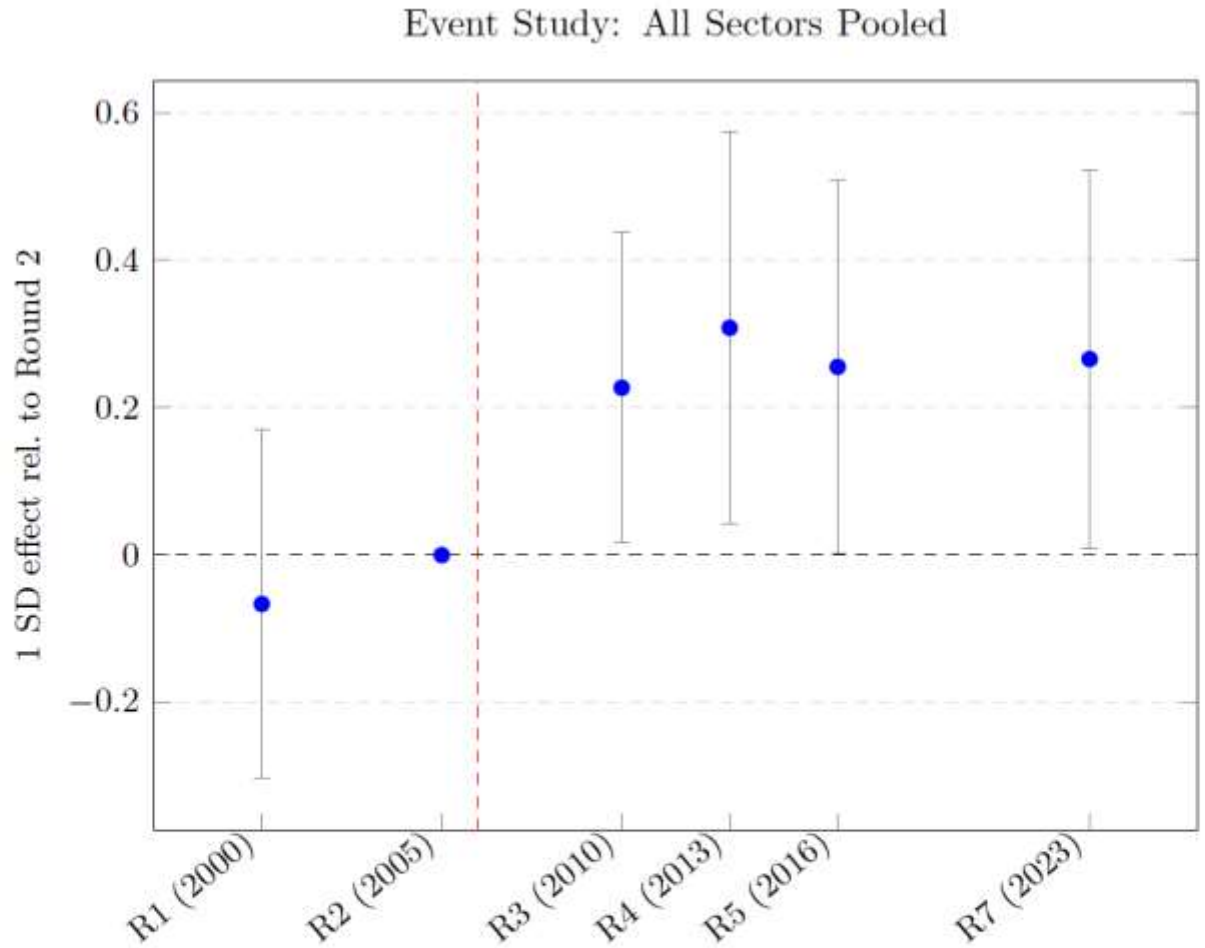


Figure 3: Event Study: All Sectors Pooled. All Types and sectors pooled (with Nightlights and Consumption), main specification (Dist#Type, Dist#Round, Type#Round fixed effects): the effect of a 1 SD increase in Ln projects per capita in each EICV round, in outcome standard deviations (coefficient and SE times the SD of Ln projects per capita), relative to Round 2 (2005, shown at 0); 95% confidence intervals, SEs clustered by district × Type; x-axis spaced by survey year; red dashed line = 2006, the start of Imihigo. The Round 1 coefficient is -0.07 (SE 0.12, p = 0.58).

Societies with Age Sets

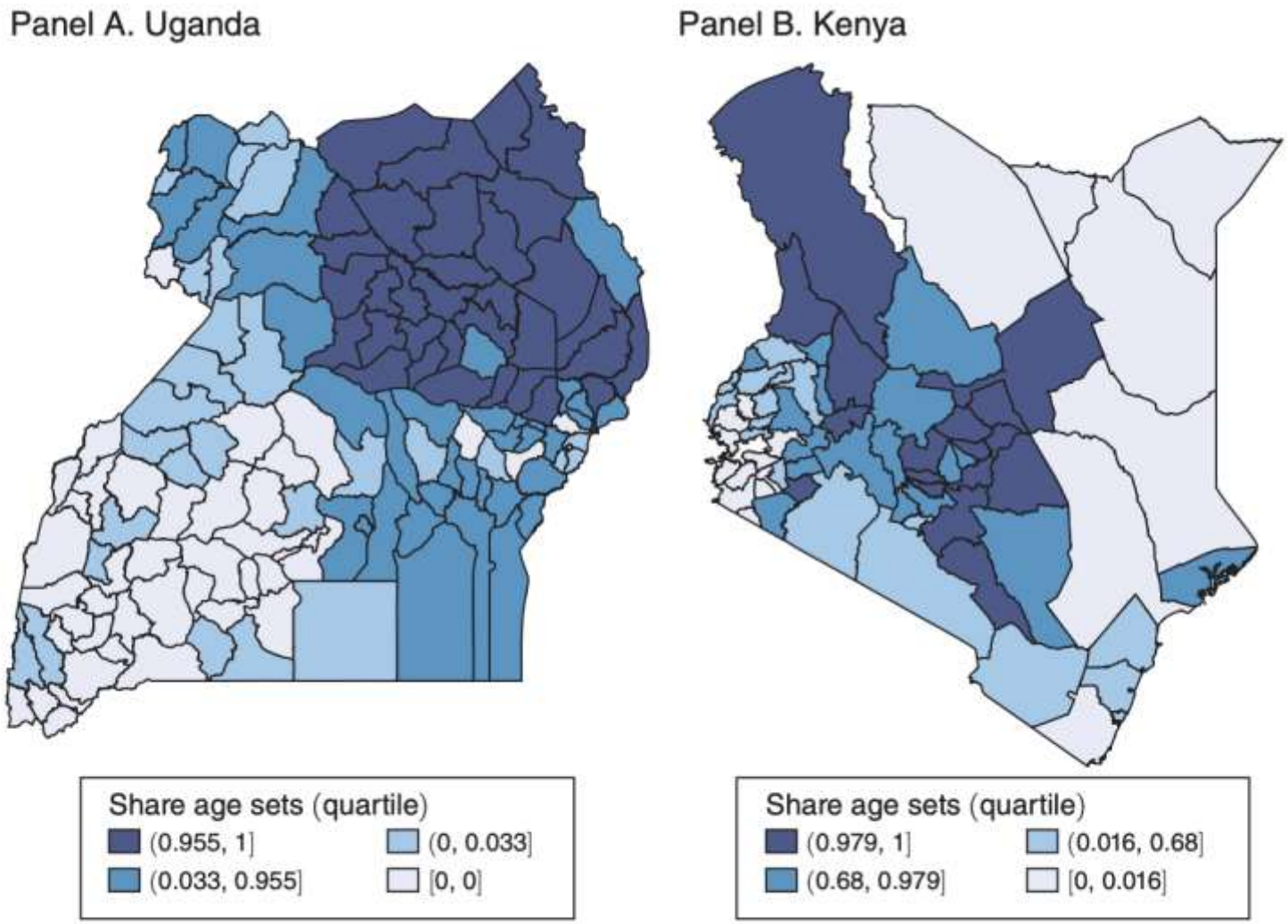


FIGURE 1.

Moscona, Jacob, and Awa Ambra Seck. 2024. "Age Set versus Kin: Culture and Financial Ties in East Africa." American Economic Review 114 (9): 2748–91.

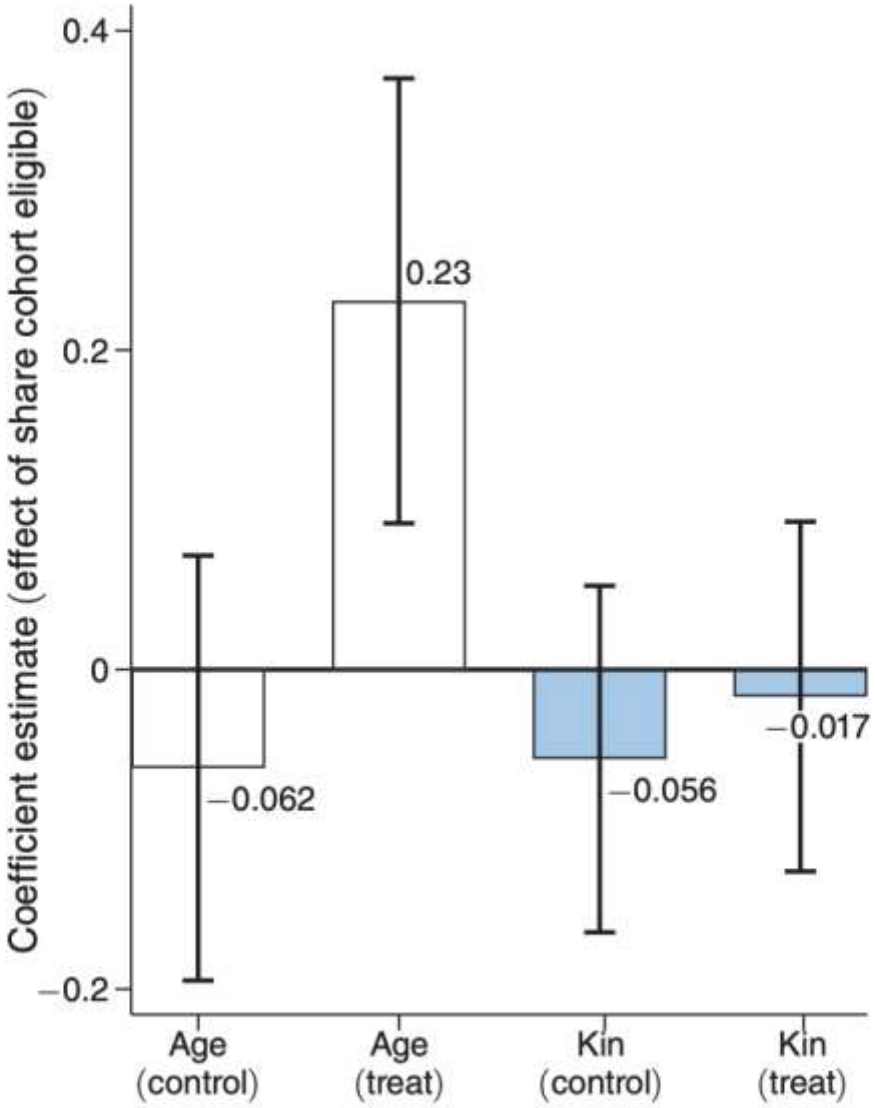


FIGURE 4. COHORT-LEVEL ELIGIBILITY AND CONSUMPTION, SEPARATELY BY TREATMENT STATUS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

In Age-Based Societies your Cohort, not your kin benefits

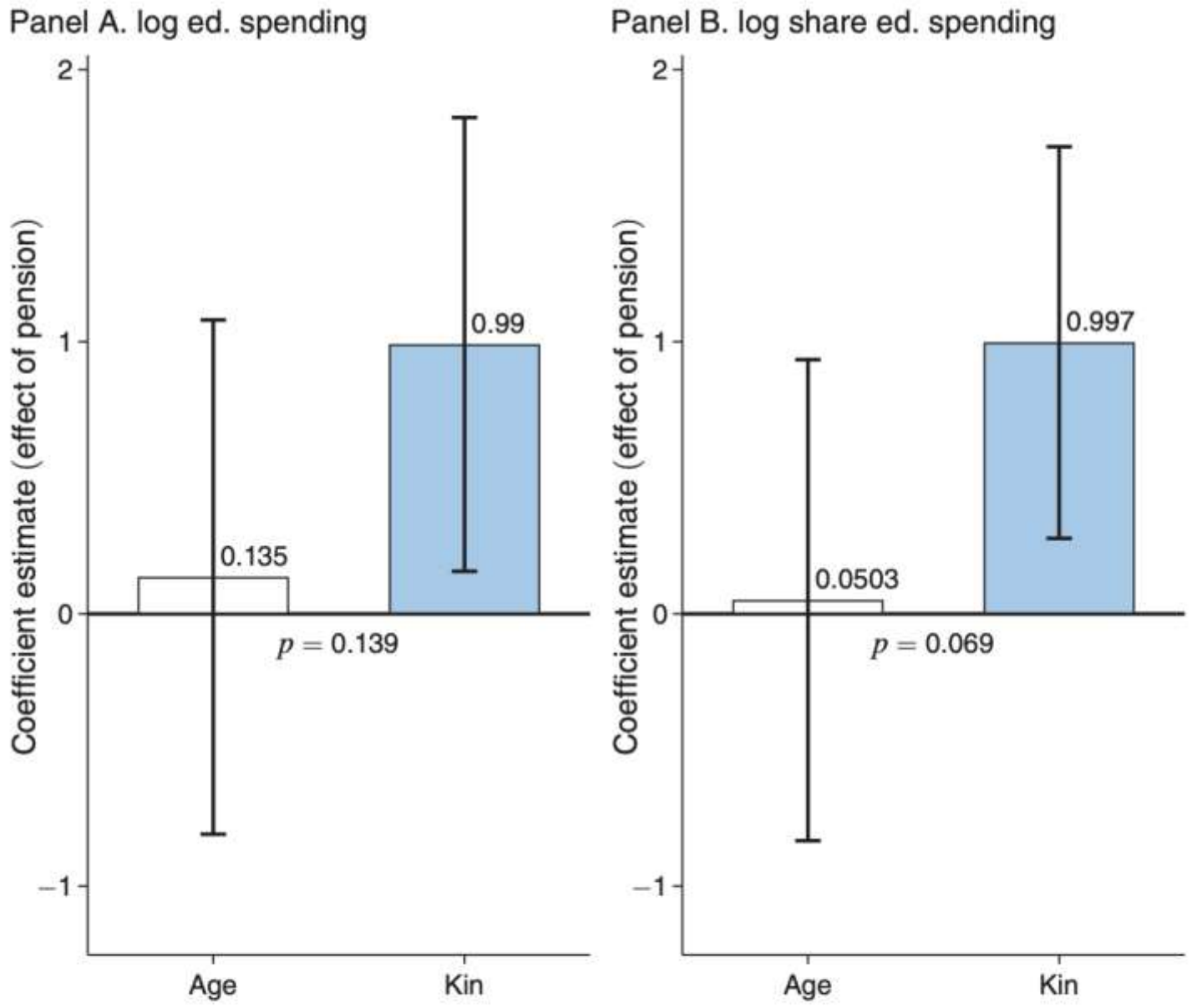


FIGURE 6. PENSION GRANTS AND INVESTMENT IN CHILDREN: AGE SET VERSUS KIN

In Kinship, not Age-Based Societies Children Benefit

Conclusion

- While the organization of African society might have had some serious negative unintended consequences in the early modern and modern world, this is not necessarily the case going forward.
  - Not only are the major success stories of Africa (Botswana, Rwanda, Somaliland …) deeply rooted in the culture
  - Public policy is more effective when it takes that culture into account (Family planning, Imihigo, Age versus Kin societies)
  - And many aspects of Wealth in People offer Africa distinct development advantages in the future.



Sankofa – “It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten”
- Akan Proverb

