



# State history, historical legitimacy and modern ethnic diversity



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## ABSTRACT

How much does the antiquity of states, and the sometimes arbitrary nature of colonial boundaries, explain the modern degree of theory of ethnic diversity and income disthnic diversity? It is shown that states with greater historical legitimacy (more continuity between the pre-colonial and post-colonial state) have less ethnic diversity. Historical legitimacy is more strongly correlated with ethnic diversity than are the antiquity of states, genetic diversity or the duration of human settlement. Although historical legitimacy is particularly pertinent to Africa, the correlation also holds outside Africa.

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## 1. Introduction

The effects of ethnic diversity have been widely studied both in terms of economic growth (Easterly and Levine, 1997; Alesina et al., 2003; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; Posner, 2005; Collier and Hoeffler, 1998; Busse and Hefeker, 2007; Aisen and Veiga, 2013; Menkyna, 2014) and civil war (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Hegre and Sambanis, 2006; Wimmer et al. 2009; Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2005; Esteban and Ray, 2008). Over a period of decades (the typical time-span of such research), measures of the ethnic diversity of a state are effectively fixed, in the absence of unusual circumstances such as boundary changes, mass migrations or genocides. On a longer view, however, ethnic diversity as perceived today is not just a matter of genetic composition (Ashraf and Galor, 2013), but also of the history of statehood. The majority of the population of England defines itself today as English, but in 400 A.D., the ethnic structure of the country was very different. Exactly the same applies to Turkey. Moreover, in each of these cases the genetic composition of the population is dominated by the inhabitants who pre-dated the arrival of the invaders that gave the country its name and language; these original inhabitants are scarcely represented in the modern cultural ethnic map of these countries (Oppenheimer, 2006; Yardumian and Yardumian, 2011).

In organized states, the ruling language tends to expand at the expense of others, because of its official status and its association with power and wealth. This is most evident in the case of long-lasting empires, as can be seen from the history of China. The legacy of the Roman Empire is reflected in the predominance of Latin languages in Portugal, Spain, France and Romania, even though Latin was not spoken at all in these regions before their conquest by Rome. To cite another example, most of the population of North African countries defines itself as Arab, but none would have done so before the Arab invasions. In short, in perceived ethnic identity, history trumps genetics.

In this paper we explore further the relationship between history and modern cultural ethnic diversity. We capture the history of statehood using two measures, both of which are discussed in greater detail below: the state antiquity index of Bockstette et al. (2002), and an index of the state's historical legitimacy developed by Englebort (2000). We find that historical legitimacy in

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particular is significantly correlated with modern ethnic diversity, and these results hold even when we use an instrumental variables approach in order to overcome possible issues in previous research.

Two papers that are closely related to ours are Ashraf and Galor (2013) and Ahlerup and Olsson (2012). Ashraf and Galor (2013) hypothesize that “genetic diversity, determined predominantly during the migration of humans out of Africa tens of thousands of years ago, is a fundamental determinant of observed ethnic and cultural heterogeneity, as reflected by the number of ethnic groups and the levels of ethnolinguistic fractionalization and polarization within national boundaries,” and they provide robust empirical evidence to support this hypothesis. Ahlerup and Olsson (2012) present a simple model of hunter-gatherer societies that predicts an increase in ethnolinguistic diversity with the length of time since original human settlement. They supplement this with a second hypothesis that state formation changes this dynamic, which they test using the Bockstette et al. (2002) data on state antiquity. Their empirical evidence supports these hypotheses.

Neither of these papers investigates the role of the structure of colonial empires as captured by Englebert's measure of historical legitimacy. This is the contribution of our paper. Moreover the empirical evidence underlying the Ahlerup–Olsson model seems a good deal less impressive once it is recognized that the time since original human settlement has a correlation of 0.91 with a dummy for sub-Saharan Africa, since it took mankind a very long time to find a way across or round the surrounding seas and deserts. An alternative interpretation of their results would be not that time creates ethnic diversity, but simply that sub-Saharan Africa is different. In fact, as we show, if we omit sub-Saharan Africa from the sample, variables like the duration of human settlement and genetic diversity lose their explanatory power completely, whereas historical legitimacy does not.

The paper is structured as follows. Previous research is reviewed in Section 2. Hypotheses are presented in Section 3, and data are discussed in Section 4. The main results are presented in Section 5, with further discussion in Section 6. Conclusions are presented in Section 7.

## 2. Literature review

A significant strand of literature focuses on ethnic politics and the impossibility of enforcing a stable democratic regime when ethnic cleavages are present in the country (Horowitz, 1985; Huntington, 1991). When voters and politicians find it efficient to build their electoral support along ethnic lines, citizens lack confidence in political institutions (Norris and Mattes, 2003). As a result, ethnic divisions lead to political systems which “benefit few citizens at the expense of many” (Keefer and Khemani, 2005). Empirical research shows that ethnic diversity is particularly high in Africa, and ethnic politics seems to be more crucial in African countries (Mattes and Gouws, 1999; Mattes and Piombo, 2001; Norris and Mattes, 2003). This is because of the prevalence of poor institutions across Africa, which tends to amplify the problems typically associated with fractionalization (Easterly, 2001).

It is possible, however, that there are deeper characteristics of Africa that explain both its current ethnic diversity and its weak politics and institutions. Ashraf and Galor (2013) show that genetic diversity strongly predicts contemporaneous ethnic diversity across countries. Both genetic diversity and ethnic diversity are particularly high in Africa. Michalopoulos (2012) argues that geographical factors, as reflected by variations in land quality and elevation, contributed significantly to ethnolinguistic fractionalization in Africa. Ahlerup and Olsson (2012) find that the timing of initial settlement by modern humans can explain a large fraction of existing differences in ethnic fractionalization, though they also report a strong effect of modern states (i.e. state formation after 1800) on ethnicity.

In a separate strand of research, many authors have stressed the arbitrariness of African state boundaries that were established in the colonial period (e.g. Ajala, 1983; Asiwaju, 1985; Barbour, 1961; Bello, 1995; Brownlie, 1979; Davidson, 1992; Kum, 1993; Nugent, 1996; Touval, 1969). The effect of the colonial “Scramble for Africa” on current national African states has also been emphasized by Englebert (2000). Englebert argues that African states may be perceived as illegitimate because of the lack of historical continuity between the pre- and the post-colonial period. “*The variations in the extent to which post-colonial state institutions clash with pre-existing ones largely account for what differentiates state capacity and economic growth across the region. The greater the incongruence between pre- and post-colonial institutions, the greater the relative power payoffs to domestic elites of adopting neo-patrimonial policies over developmental ones*” (Englebert, 2000: 7). He uses this idea to construct an index of state legitimacy based on historical continuity (HL) which, he argues, significantly explains the poor performance of African states in terms of development. Essentially, states that have been colonized are regarded as historically legitimate only if the post-colonial state conforms closely with pre-colonial political entities. Englebert and Tull (2008) suggest that lack of historical legitimacy also accounts for the number of failed states in Africa.

A somewhat different idea is captured by the index of state antiquity (SA) developed by Bockstette et al. (2002). This is a measure of how long national (non-tribal) states have been in existence (whether colonial or not). Chanda and Putterman (2007) and Putterman and Weil (2010) show that this variable is correlated with current economic development, whilst Ang (2013a,b) demonstrates that it is also robustly related to institutions and financial development, which could serve as alternative mechanisms linking the effects of statehood to economic well-being. State history may matter because of cultural and institutional development over time, so that states with a longer history have better institutions, and so experience less civil conflict. In fact historical legitimacy and State Antiquity are less highly correlated across countries than one might expect (the correlation coefficient is 0.26), because the former focuses on the continuity between tribal and national states, while the latter only considers the period during which current national states have been in place. Of course, European states, which Englebert (2000) considers as legitimate, are also among the most antique national states in Bockstette et al. (2002), but the variation across former colonies between the two sources is quite different, so the two concepts are by no means identical in practice.

The importance of state formation and state continuity has long been debated in political science, mainly with regard to the process of national identity, which is considered essential for the legitimacy and sovereignty of the state. Gellner (1983) considers

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