



## Political centralization in pre-colonial Africa

Philip Osafo-Kwaako<sup>a,\*</sup>, James A. Robinson<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government, 79 John F. Kennedy Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, United States

<sup>b</sup> Harvard University, Department of Government, IQSS, 1737 Cambridge Street N309, Cambridge, MA 01238, United States

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 25 January 2013

#### JEL classification:

D7  
H1  
H4  
N27

#### Keywords:

State Formation  
Population Density  
Warfare  
Trade

### ABSTRACT

**Osafo-Kwaako, Philip, and Robinson, James A.**—Political centralization in pre-colonial Africa

In this paper we investigate the empirical correlates of political centralization using data from the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. We specifically investigate the explanatory power of the standard models of Eurasian state formation which emphasize the importance of high population density, inter-state warfare and trade as factors leading to political centralization. We find that while in the whole world sample these factors are indeed positively correlated with political centralization, this is not so in the African sub-sample. Indeed, none of the variables are statistically related to political centralization. We also provide evidence that political centralization, where it took place, was indeed associated with better public goods and development outcomes. We conclude that the evidence is quite consistent with the intellectual tradition initiated in social anthropology by Evans-Pritchard and Fortes in the 1940s which denied the utility of Eurasian models in explaining patterns of political centralization in Africa. *Journal of Comparative Economics* 41 (1) (2013) 6–21. Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government, 79 John F. Kennedy Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, United States; Harvard University, Department of Government, IQSS, 1737 Cambridge Street N309, Cambridge, MA 01238, United States.

© 2013 Association for Comparative Economic Studies Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

Most of the poor people in the world live in Sub-Saharan Africa (henceforth Africa). The income per-capita of the poorest countries such as Ethiopia or Sierra Leone differ from those of prosperous OECD countries by a factor of about 40 and these income differences come along with huge differences in welfare, health, economic opportunities and life chances. Two hundred and fifty years ago, before the ‘great divergence’ we know that these differences were much smaller. Parts of the world which have now very different levels of income per-capita were indistinguishable according to this metric in 1750. But how poor relatively was Africa compared to other parts of the world? Some, like Hopkins (1973), Thornton (1992), Jerven (2010) or Ehret (2012), see few historical differences in institutional dynamics and prosperity between Africa and the rest of the world. Others are more selective, arguing that while Africa may have been behind Eurasia it was ahead of the Americas (e.g. Inikori, 2012). Africa was certainly behind the rest of the world, even the Americas, technologically (Goody, 1971; Austen and Headrick, 1983; Law, 1980) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2010, 2012) argue that more generally it was economically

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [osafo@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:osafo@fas.harvard.edu) (P. Osafo-Kwaako), [jrobinson@gov.harvard.edu](mailto:jrobinson@gov.harvard.edu) (J.A. Robinson).

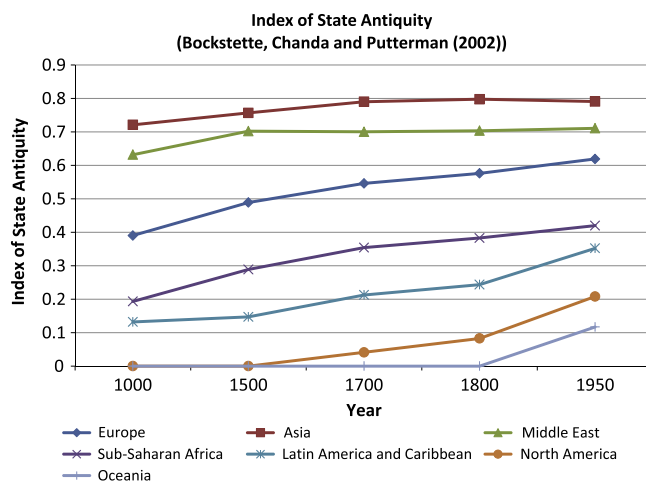
backward in many dimensions at the start of the early modern period, and in particular did not have the economic and political institutions necessary to generate modern economic growth.

If one accepts that Africa lagged the rest of the world in term of developing basic economic institutions and public goods which might have stimulated technological change or adoption in the early modern period what might have been behind that? This question has been answered in many ways. [Easterly and Levine \(1997\)](#) argued that the great ethnic fragmentation of Africa was one reason for its relative poverty, [Sachs and Warner \(1997\)](#) suggested Africa had adverse geography, while [Inikori \(1992\) and Nunn \(2008\)](#), following a large literature in Africa studies, focused instead on the deleterious impact of the slave trade. Other scholars have instead emphasized more recent factors potentially causing poor economic performance in Africa, such as the arbitrary nature of post-colonial national boundaries ([Englebert, 2000](#)).

One thing that everyone seems to agree on is that state institutions have been dysfunctional in Africa. Much of the political science literature saw economic decline after independence as being closely related to states that were unable or unwilling to provide public services or encourage economic activity ([Callaghy, 1984; Turner and Young, 1985](#), on the totemic case of Zaire, [Young \(1994\)](#) for a synthesis). Moreover, the lack of effective centralized states is clearly a potential factor not just in explaining poor economic performance in Africa since 1960, but also over a much longer duree. Whatever the impact of the colonial period might have been on state formation in Africa, at a factual level the evidence seems to suggest that Africa developed centralized states later than the rest of the world. Though Africa certainly did have states and quite a few emerged and consolidated in the 18th and 19th century, this process seems to have definitely lagged behind Eurasia and at least parts of the Americas (Central America and Andean South America). One can get some quantitative picture of this via the data coded by Louis Putterman and his collaborators ([Bockstette et al., 2002](#)). [Fig. 1](#) plots their state antiquity index from 1000 to 1500. This captures the extent to which a country in the world has been under the control of a centralized state. It shows that though Africa did have greater state antiquity historically than the Americas or Oceania, it lagged behind the rest of the world, particularly Eurasia.

A large literature in social science places the functioning of the state at the heart of economic development. Ultimately this view comes from the work of Max Weber and recent comparative work has claimed that the difference between developmental successes and developmental failures is indeed that the former have effective states while the latter do not (see for example [Evans \(1995\)](#), or the recent literature by economists: [Acemoglu, 2005; Acemoglu et al., 2013, 2011; Besley and Persson, 2011](#)). In the context of Africa the most ambitious version of this argument is due to [Herbst \(2000\) and Bates \(2001\)](#). Indeed, as we discuss in Section 2, the case study literature in Africa does indeed suggest that the absence of centralized state authority is a potent source of poor economic institutions and the absence of public good provision, potentially helping to explain lagging economic development of Africa.

But what could explain the differential development of centralized states in Africa? This topic has been researched at least since the famous volume edited by the social anthropologists [Evans-Pritchard and Fortes \(1940\)](#) and has taken two broad lines. Many scholars, for example [Diamond \(1997\)](#), [Herbst \(2000\)](#), [Bates \(2001\)](#) and [Reid \(2012\)](#), take what they see as the successful models which have supposedly explained political centralization in Europe and apply them to Africa. Here the key would be the absence of the factors which led to the formation of states in Europe, usually warfare, high population density and trade. For example, factors unique to Africa such as a very adverse disease environment or lack of domesticable plant and animal species kept population density low which retarded the development of states. Other scholars, exemplified even by [Evans-Pritchard and Fortes \(1940\)](#) and more recently by the essays in [McIntosh \(1999a\)](#) particularly [McIntosh \(1999b\) and Vansina \(1999\)](#), deny the applicability of Eurasian model to explain the dynamics of political institutions in Africa. Their main point is that it is not simply that there is less political centralization in Africa, but that the development of



**Fig. 1.** Index of state antiquity (from Bockstette et al. (2002)).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5092255>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5092255>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)