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Africa's Latent Assets

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Abstract

Despite the past centuries' economic setbacks and challenges, are there reasons for optimism about Africa's economic prospects? We provide a conceptual framework and empirical evidence that show how the nature of African society has led to three sets of unrecognised 'latent assets.' First, success in African society is talent driven and Africa has experienced high levels of perceived and actual social mobility. A society where talented individuals rise to the top and optimism prevails is an excellent basis for entrepreneurship and innovation. Second, Africans, like westerners who built the world's most successful effective states, are highly sceptical of authority and attuned to the abuse of power. We argue that these attitudes can be a critical basis for building better institutions. Third, Africa is 'cosmopolitan.' Africans are the most multilingual people in the world, have high levels of religious tolerance and are welcoming to strangers. The experience of navigating cultural and linguistic diversity sets Africans up for success in a globalised world.

Keywords: values, social mobility, African development
JEL Codes: J6, H11, O1, O11

1. Introduction

Supposedly, it is (Sub-Saharan) Africa's 'turn' (Miguel, 2009); it is 'emerging' (Radelet, 2010), 'rising' (Frankema and van Waijenburg, 2018) and full of 'Lions on the Move' (Kinsey, 2010). But are there real grounds for such optimism and if so what are they? Development economists have been wrong on Africa before. In 1961, Rosenstein-Rodan (1961), one of the founders of development economics, made some projections based on his understanding of the 'economic fundamentals.' He argued that 'prospects of good ... rates of growth seem to appear for Tanganyika, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and Ghana' (p. 111) indeed, higher than in Singapore, South Korea or Taiwan.

Since Rosenstein-Rodan wrote, Africa has had a tough time economically and socially.[1] In fact, Africa has not just had a bad 60 years; one could say it has had a bad 400 years. Since the ramping up of the Transatlantic slave trade in the 17th century, Africa has

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[1] Africa, of course, is not a country but a very heterogeneous continent with many cultures and traditions. In fact, this diversity, and its many benefits, is one of our key arguments. We present data that present the picture of Africa 'on average,' but we also try to explore as much of this heterogeneity as possible. We cannot do justice here to the large scholarly literature on all these topics.

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experienced sustained economic stagnation and many adverse changes in society. This was connected to slavery (Inikori, 1983; Nunn, 2008; Nunn and Wantchekon, 2011; Teso, 2019), colonialism (Mamdani, 1996, Young, 1997, Acemoglu *et al*., 2001, Michalopoulos and Papaioannou, 2016, Lowes and Montero, 2021), post-colonial realities of autocracy (Bates, 1981), the Cold War (Dube *et al*., 2011; Schmidt, 2013; Cheeseman, 2015) and possibly foreign aid (Nunn and Qian, 2014).

But prior to 1978, China had a very bad 200 years. By the second half of the 18th century, the Qing state was collapsing fiscally and wracked by corruption. The granary system of social insurance withered away, the Grand Canal silted up and China was convulsed by civil wars like the Taiping Rebellion that claimed perhaps 20 million lives. The Imperial state disintegrated; there was rampant warlordism, a communist revolution, the Great Leap Forward and then the Cultural Revolution. But despite all these calamities, it turned out that China has large latent advantages, or assets, on which economic prosperity could be built, even though apparently necessary institutions were missing in many dimensions. A central asset was a social norm that, as Confucius put it, one should 'promote those who are worthy and talented' Confucius (2003, p. 138). The norm of meritocracy turned out to be a powerful plinth on which to build an inclusive market economy and probably reaches back even further than Confucius (Pines, 2013).

In this essay we pose the question: if China could have a bad 200 years but still maintain, or even develop, latent assets, could the same thing be true about Africa? None of these mattered for economic prosperity in China until some basic issues of governance were solved, as they were by Deng Xiaoping and successive Chinese political elites. Such governance challenges certainly exist in Africa. But could Africa possess, have sustained or created such latent assets?

We argue that the answer to this question is yes and it is here that genuine optimism about African prosperity begins. To give a sense of where one might expect such assets, in the next section we provide a simple framework for thinking about African society based mostly on the relevant anthropological, historical and sociological literatures. African society was, and is, organised around networks. These networks are used to access economic resources and create political power and they can be invested in. Their focus is on people and personal relationships, and they imply a great deal of social mobility because links to more capable or talented people are more valuable. They bridge other social structures, even ethnicity, and were forged in historic periods of migration and movement which bred very flexible attitudes towards strangers (people, whoever they were, were always valued). The basis of political power in personalised networks combined with what Vansina (1990) describes as an intense desire to 'safeguard the internal autonomy of each community' (p. 119) to keep the scale of African polities small. They were based on networks and wary of the abuse of authority. This framework implies the presence of three sets of latent assets in African society.

The first asset is that, like China, the majority of African societies are built on achieved, not ascribed, status. Unlike in India with its religiously enforced caste system, or Latin America with its ingrained 'castas' and inequalities, in Africa anyone can get ahead. Like the type of meritocracy that has deep roots in China, the achievement basis of African society is also deep seated, if rarely institutionalised via an examination system. In historic Africa, even slaves who had the capacities got to the top. We illustrate this fact with several sources of information. First, survey data on perceived and expected social mobility show Africa to be the most socially mobile part of the world. Africans are also the most optimistic about future mobility. Perceptions are important because they determine people's actions and effort and also their policy preferences (Alesina *et al*., 2018). Nevertheless, we also show with data on observed educational mobility that Africa is more socially mobile than Latin America or South Asia and some countries in Africa are as mobile as Western Europe. What would be the basis for such optimism? Despite the cliché that Africa is a continent

of corruption where connections and social networks are critical to people's opportunities, in fact Africans are more likely to say that the way to get ahead economically is via hard work. Their opinions about this are similar to those of people in the United States. These beliefs manifest themselves in the types of attitudes they transmit to their children.

Although there is a great deal of corruption in Africa, so is there in China, yet in the Chinese case the incentives and opportunities created by the norm of meritocracy seem more powerful quantitatively. Why not in Africa?

The second latent asset we call 'scepticism of authority.' Unlike many societies in East Asia, Africa is much more like Western liberal democracies in its anticipation that political power will be abused. African oral history and political theory are full of the anticipation of miss-rule, often in the form of a 'drunken king' (de Heusch, 1982), and it generally lacks the notion of a 'redeemer' (Krauze, 2011) or charismatic personal rule so central to the emergence of populism in Latin America and elsewhere. This scepticism has of course not stopped power being abused in post-colonial Africa, but we argue that, just as in the United States at the time of the Constitution, this scepticism can provide the basis for building inclusive and effective political institutions. We illuminate this by presenting data on attitudes in Africa towards one-man rule, and we show how these are related to the history of political development in Africa.

The final asset we identify is 'cosmopolitanism.'[2] Because of the heterogeneous and small scale nature of African society, Africans endlessly have to deal with differences: different languages, different cultures and different histories. This history is reflected in African languages where the word for 'stranger' is typically the same word as for 'guest.' We argue that this makes Africans the most able culturally to cope with a modern globalised world; people who can deal with difference and adapt will succeed. Although much social science attempts to portray this diversity as a burden, which may be true in some specific contexts, we argue that it is in fact an asset. One way we illustrate this asset is by showing that Africa is the most multilingual continent in the world. Although it may not be specifically advantageous to speak Lingala or Kikongo in New York, London or Paris, we argue that the ability and willingness of Africans to master so many languages is indicative of the great suppleness of cosmopolitan African society and in line with a recent literature in social psychology it helps Africans to take and appreciate the perspectives of others (see Kinzler, 2020, for an overview).

Thus far, these assets are latent and we do not underestimate the challenges to building better institutions in Africa in the difficult context that colonial powers bequeathed. Moreover, the analogy to China is made complicated by the fact that unlike Africa, China has a long history of consolidated state authority with a common system of writing and something approximating a common culture. These features almost certainly helped Deng Xiaoping move the country onto a path of reform. Yet, these features also helped implement the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. It is not obvious that the type of challenges that Deng overcame are larger than those that face African leaders. Moreover, many doubt that the hegemony of authoritarianism is consistent with sustaining the prosperity that China has generated in the past 40 years. Here Africa may have systematic advantages over China.

2. A simple framework

There is a great deal of agreement amongst scholars of Africa about some basic elements of African society that are relevant to our arguments. African society is built around personalised networks and was mostly organised in small scale polities.

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[2] We borrow this word inspired by Appiah (2007), but we use it in a positive sense, not as a normative ideal as he proposes.

2.1. African society is built around flexible networks

African society was, and is, highly personalised and organised around networks. These included not only genetically related kin but also fictive kin. In many contexts wealth was measured in 'people' (Miers and Kopytoff, 1977; coined the expression 'wealth in people' to describe this) as much as in material form—a person was rich if they had a lot of social connections (Bledsoe, 1980, and Guyer, 1993, are seminal studies). This priority is manifested in proverbs. For example, a Yoruba one states: 'A gift of money is not equal in value to a [gift of a] person' (Owomoyela, 2005, p. 292).[3]

The networked nature of African society is not a historical curiosity but rather provides a framework for understanding its contemporary nature. Smith (2004, p. 227) notes in his ethnography that 'The enduring salience of these "wealth in people" proverbs in contemporary Nigeria reflects the continued importance of "having people" in a different kind of political economy' and that 'very striking in the interviews and observations of peoples' daily lives was the continued importance of "having people" as the means through which individuals, families, and communities gain access to social resources in an economic context based on patron-client ties' (p. 233).[4]

These networks were related to and interwoven with social structures (lineages, clans) that shape networks and the types of links that form, but do not determine them in a rigid way (Gulliver, 1971; Glazier, 1985; Berry, 1993). The same seems to be true of the other important set of issues surrounding status (see Smith, 1966, and Southall, 1970, for overviews). Here too, a key feature seems to be the fluidity with which one could change one's social position. For example, historically, slavery in Africa was radically different from chattel slavery in the Americas. Slaves were quickly absorbed into kinship systems and became part of one's 'people.' Tuden and Plotnicov (1970) discuss how amongst the Ila 'slaves were introduced ... as types of kinsmen' and 'The bondage period itself was temporary and the inferior position transitory' (p. 13) and they go on to conclude 'the Ila represent the general conditions of slavery in Africa' (p. 13).[5]

Outside the institution of slavery, there certainly were more rigid systems of caste stratification that appeared in parts of Africa, notably the Sahel (Tamari, 1991; Conrad and Frank, 1995) and the Great Lakes region, particularly Rwanda (Maquet, 1961) and surrounding polities like Ankole with similar institutions (Doornbos, 1978). Ethiopian 'feudalism' also diverged from the general pattern (Crummey, 1980). But quantitatively, these do not seem to be large relative to other parts of the world. Tuden and Plotnicov (1970) conclude their overview of systems of stratification in Africa societies by making a similar observation 'In most, mobility is both great and rapid, but there are also distinct exceptions, such as ... Rwanda' (p. 7).

The thrust of this literature therefore is that, while social structure and status may influence ones' options, they interact with networks that are flexible and endogenous to peoples efforts, hence the emphasis on 'big men.' Networks may 'tax' people and redistribute, but they also provide opportunities and people invest in them (Parkin, 1972; Berry, 1989). In our view this model of fluid and responsive networks is the theoretical basis to expect African society to be achievement based today.

These mechanisms applied to women as well as men. Women were deeply involved in economic activities, particularly agriculture (Boserup, 2007, Chapter 1), and this spread into trade. In West Africa, for example, market trade was dominated by women

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[3] The concept also appears centrally in Yoruba Ifa Divination Verses. Number 131–1 tells the story of Ajaolele who 'had become an important person' because he had 'become someone with a following' (Bascom, 1969, pp. 369–371).

[4] This model of African society is at the root of concepts such as 'patrimonialism' and 'prebendalism' heavily used by political scientists to describe post-colonial African states, for example, Turner and Young (1985) and Bratton and van de Walle (1997).

[5] See also Lovejoy (2000) and Klein (2009).

(Boserup, 2007, Chapter 5; Achebe, 2020, Chapter 3).[6] Women were valuable members of networks and were just as capable as building them as men.

Because people were wealthy, outsiders or 'strangers' were welcomed (Miers and Kopytoff, 1977, p. 14). These attitudes are again heavily represented in proverbs. A Yoruba one states: 'The visitor's host is the visitor's father' (Owomoyela, 2005, p. 339). In Fourshey et al.'s (2018) account, the African pattern went along with the emergence of norms of hospitality and reciprocity.

This merging of peoples is clear from well-documented ethnographic work. Schapera (1952, p. 65) for instance noted that in the Ngwato reserve of Botswana, a mere 20% of people were Ngwato. The rest were strangers who had been integrated into the polity (see Wilson, 1979 for other similar examples). In the Tswana case political institutions facilitated this integration while in other cases strangers started new clans. Often they were merged into the kinship system even when 'no kinship is known to exist' (Colson, 1970, p. 42). In the Tonga case Colson studied this was done by the 'placing of a person within the clan system' (p. 42).

It might seem surprising that a network based society would have survived the spread of markets, commercialisation and 'modernisation,' but the evidence is overwhelming that it has and that networks have flexibly re-formed and spread to cope with change and new challenges (see Berry, 1993, p. 159, 165).

2.2. Historical African polities were small scale

The networked nature of African society is connected to perhaps the salient political fact of historical African polities: they were small scale. Southall (1970) notes that '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' (p. 231).

A quantitative sense of the extent to which Africans were living historically in small scale societies can be gained by combining the classification of political institutions according to 'levels of jurisdictional hierarchy' in Murdock's Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1967) with estimates of historical population sizes. Murdock coded a variable which ran from 1, meaning 'No levels (no political authority beyond community)', 2 ('petty chiefdoms'), 3 ('larger chiefdoms'), to 4 'Three levels (e.g., states)' and finally 5 'Four levels (e.g., large states)'. Using the estimates of population in Africa in 1880 from the HYDE (Historical Database of the Global Environment) project, we can calculate the proportion of Africans that lived in states in 1880. We present these findings in Table 1. If one takes as states ethnic groups in the Murdock dataset that are coded as having 4 or 5 levels of jurisdictional hierarchy then only 30% of Africans were living in polities that had a state in 1880. If one takes the more restrictive definition of large state, then the proportion is only 4.4%. Either way, a large majority of Africans were not living in states in the pre-colonial period.

There are many mechanisms that can account for this small scale,[7] but one is likely the networked nature of society. Political power based on personal connections, similar to the big man notions we have mentioned, based on accumulating followers and 'wealth in people,' is intrinsically difficult to scale up. Moreover, it cannot be managed at a large scale and inhibits the concentration and institutionalisation of power.

This is not the only reason for small political scale. Perhaps the most influential argument is that of Vansina (1990) who suggests that 'Africans grappled in an original way with the

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[6] Clark (1994, 2010) on market women in Ghana is particular testament to their abilities to take advantage of opportunities and the potential for social mobility.

[7] Political scientists like Herbst (2000) have focused on structural features of Africa, such as low population density and the lack of inter-state warfare, see Osafo-Kwaako and Robinson (2013). Goody (1971) instead emphasised how state formation was inhibited by the presence of the tse-tse fly that made it impossible to use cavalry in much of Africa—Alsan (2015) for evidence.

Table 1. African Population in 1880 by Judicial Centralisation

Number of levels beyond local community	Number of groups	Population 1880	Percentage of population
Missing data	50	8,599,348	10.05
None	114	9,075,557	10.60
One	173	20,489,696	23.94
Two	101	22,109,596	25.84
Three	45	21,521,027	25.15
Four	4	3,784,628	4.42
All	487	85,579,852	100

Notes: This table shows the African population in 1880 by historical centralisation. Data on historical centralisation come from the Murdock Ethnographic Atlas that codes up the levels of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the community level. We overlay the boundaries of these communities with 1880 population density data from HYDE to calculate the 1880 population of each ethnic group.

question of how to maintain local autonomy paramount, even while enlarging the scale of society' (p. 101).

In his theory of Central African political development, people created institutions in order to 'safeguard the internal autonomy of each community' (p. 119), and though familiar pressures such as population growth, or the need to provide public goods, did lead to the 'birth of some chiefdoms, even kingdoms,' it mostly 'led to the birth of new forms of association to safeguard the autonomy of the basic community in a time of expansion' (p. 119). In Vansina's account, the type of lineages of a people like the Tiv, which we discuss shortly, or the societies of the Igbo, both arose as 'a defensive reflex for the autonomy of small groups against the growing centralisation and at the same time a mechanism to defend the advantageous positions gained ... within such a structure' (p. 154). In other words, because Africans were concerned that state institutions would be abused at the expense of local communities, they devised political institutions that would stop this. The desire to 'safeguard ... autonomy' is everywhere evident in the ethnographic literature (e.g., Bohannan, 1958; on the Tiv, Green, 1947; Henderson, 1972; on the Igbo). Gulliver (1971), while he observed the presence of Big Men, also noted that 'they were not so ambitious that they sought to acquire authority' because that would 'defeat his own ends' given that 'His neighbours would have reacted strongly against the suspicion of authoritarianism, or pretension to it' (pp. 244–245).[8]

The Igbo case is particularly interesting because it foregrounds the role of women in preserving autonomy. As Achebe (2020) puts it 'Authority was divided between men and women in a dual-sex political system in which each sex managed and controlled its own affairs. The Igbo had two arms of government, male and female' (p. 96). The power of women disciplined male authorities (van Allen, 1972) and was also central in opposing colonial rule, leading to the Aba Women's War of 1929 that forced the British to dismantle the hated and ineffective Warrant chief system (Achebe, 2005). In fact Greens' (1947) study (and Leith-Ross, 1939) was motivated by a desire on the part of British colonial authorities to understand the unexpected power of Igbo women.

The role of women is central to understanding the nature of African polities. This is obviously so when they assumed political office, as in Mendeland (Day, 2012) in Sierra Leone, amongst the Mamprusi of Ghana (Brown, 1975) or the Lovedu of South Africa (Krige and Krige, 1947), but it is more subtly and broadly true when they assumed complementary political offices, what Achebe calls a system of 'joint sovereignty' (p. 71). Emblematic examples of this are the Queen Mothers of Swaziland or Asante (Aidoo, 1982;

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[8] The institutionalization of Vansina's 'defensive reflex' took many forms including the types of age class systems common in East Africa (see Bernardi, 1985).

Stoeltje, 1997) or the Mammy Queens of Temneland in Sierra Leone (see Achebe, 2020, Chapter 2, for many other examples).

This account of African political development and philosophy illustrates the depth of the scepticism towards authority in the continent; indeed it is central to its political history.[9] It is also intimately related to the networked nature of African society.

2.3. Effects of colonialism on African society

Whatever the nature of social, economic and political institutions in the late 19th century, colonialism and the independence period clearly had large effects. However, as we outlined above, research suggests that some key aspects of African society, like its networked nature, have been highly persistent. In terms of achieved status colonialism clearly unleashed many mechanisms. On the one hand, the African frontier was decisively closed. Models of indirect rule and colonial governance may have distorted traditional mechanisms of accountability and solidified elites (Mamdani, 1996). In settler colonies, Africans were expropriated en masse, losing their land and being forced into wage labour on European farms or in mines. Even before the permanent arrival of Europeans, the Atlantic slave trade in the 17th and 18th century intensified and transformed slavery and institutions (Lovejoy, 2000). On the other hand, in non-settler colonies, greater market integration allowed for considerable upward mobility in the production of export crops, for example in Nigeria (Berry, 1975; Hogendorn, 1978), the Côte d'Ivoire (Bassett, 2001) and Ghana (Hill, 1963; Austin, 2008). The spread of markets, particularly the emergence of a labour market, also created new options for young men who could escape gerontocratic authority (Peel, 1983; Berry, 1985). In addition, to the extent that slavery retarded mobility, it was abolished. New types of status appeared, though these often had pejorative connotations, like 'verandah boy' in Ghana, or *évolué* in the Congo, these were clear instances of social mobility, even if only for a few (these and many other mechanisms are discussed in Southall, 1961; Cohen and Middleton, 1970; see also Berry, 1989).[10]

These mechanisms impacted both men and women, though often in different ways. Colonial regimes changed laws, for example, with respect to marriage or property rights that negatively influenced women (see Berger, 2016, Chapter 1; Robertson, 1984; Allman and Tashjian, 2000, for detailed studies). But similarly in places like West Africa women were very well positioned to take advantage of economic opportunities, for example in cocoa and export agriculture.

Relevant here is the empirical literature that studied the emerging post-colonial elite as well as the pre-colonial one. The thrust of this work tends to support the studies of Fallers that emphasised the extent of social mobility into this elite (see for instance, Smythe and Smythe, 1960; Clignet and Foster, 1964; Lloyd, 1966; Vincent, 1968). Nugent (1996) makes a direct connection between pre-colonial notions of wealth and social mobility and the post-colonial political elite, making use of the big man metaphor (see also Barber, 1991).

Ultimately it is an empirical question what the net effect of all these mechanisms has been on African society and to what extent the types of mechanisms we identified which facilitated social mobility, for example, remain operational today. Tuden and Plotnicov's (1970) early synthesis noted about the post-colonial elite that, 'the picture appears to show ancestral backgrounds that are highly heterogeneous' and that 'The development of a

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[9] Even apparently heroic state builders like King Shyaam of the Kuba are morally ambiguous. Shyaam created the Kuba state by cheating in a contest where contenders for power had to throw iron axes into Lake Iyool with the winner being the person whose axe floated. Shyaam made a fake axe out of wood to ensure victory (Vansina, 1978, pp. 48–49).
[10]   See Selhausen *et al*. (2018) for evidence that the net effect was positive in Uganda.

modern elite ... in Africa has taken place under conditions ... of rapid upward mobility' (pp. 21, 23–24).[11]

We now move to examine the data. The main purpose of this section was to present a simple model of African society that we believe is consistent with our three latent assets: an achievement based society, scepticism of authority and cosmopolitanness.

3. A continent of achieved status

Our first latent asset is immediate in the above framework. The fluidity and endogeneity of networks and attitudes of achieved status, even amongst those of lower 'status,' implicit in the idea of big men (and big women) suggest a high degree of social mobility on average, though clearly there will be considerable heterogeneity between countries and regions. Vansina's (1990) model of the historical evolution of society in Central Africa begins with communities led by 'big men' who 'achieved rather than inherited their status' (p. 73). He characterises what he calls the 'ancestral social tradition' as having an 'emphasis on leadership by achievement' (p. 55). Although much has changed since the period for which Vansina developed this model, our analysis above suggested that many of the mechanisms he and other scholars identified may still be relevant. Has this ancestral tradition survived the eras of colonialism and the economic decline of the post-independence period?

The achievement basis of African society today is easy to illustrate empirically. Panel A of Figure 1 uses data from the Afrobarometer that collects information on social mobility. People are asked to place their parents on a 0–10 income scale and then place themselves on the same scale. In the figure, we use the size of the sphere to capture a larger number of data points—the larger the sphere, the more people report that particular pair of values. In a society with little social mobility, one would expect the observations to be clustered onto the 45 degree line. For example, in the analogous question for Latin America in the Latinobarometro shown in Panel B, 52.3% of respondents view their economic score as the same as their parents. One sees that the largest spheres, the preponderance of the data, are on the 45 degree line. In Africa, this figure is only 20.5%—the data are not at all concentrated on the 45 degree line, suggesting a very high degree of social mobility. Most Africans do not report that their economic outcomes are similar to that of their parents.

How does this compare to other parts of the world? Africa is certainly more socially mobile than Latin America, but what about Asia or the United States? Remarkably, comparing the Afrobarometer to comparable data, Africans report more mobility than anywhere else in the world. In Asia, 47.96% of respondents view their economic score as the same as their parents (Panel C). In the United States, 40% of respondents view their economic score as the same as their parents (the number is 38% in Europe).[12]

But this is perceptions of mobility that possibly is too subjective. Perhaps people systematically miss-perceive or miss-represent their social mobility and this problem could be exacerbated in Africa where levels of education tend to be lower than elsewhere in the world. Empirical evidence on realised intergenerational mobility in Africa is mixed. The most comprehensive study comparing income and educational mobility across the world finds average mobility lowest in Africa though with some signs of recent improvement (World Bank, 2018). However, intergenerational mobility in Africa varies starkly by country (Beegle *et al*., 2016). Recent work by Alesina *et al*. (2021) calculates intergenerational mobility in 27 African countries using census data. They find high levels of variation in mobility between and within countries, with some African countries (e.g., South Africa and Botswana) exhibiting levels of educational mobility as high as developed countries.

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[11] Ricart-Huguet (2021) provides some systematic empirical evidence linking post-colonial political elites to colonial era educational investments.
[12] These numbers come from the ISSP's Social Inequality Survey from 2009.

Panel A: Africa
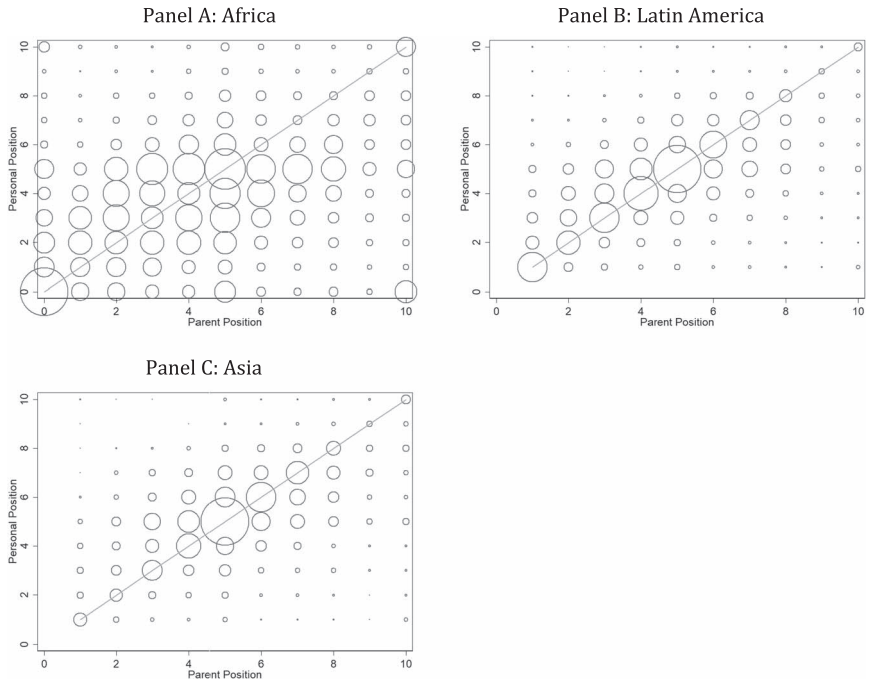
Panel B: Latin America

Panel C: Asia

Figure 1. Perceived Mobility by Region. *Notes*: This figure shows the perceived mobility of respondents by region. Respondents are asked to rate their own economic position from 0 to 10 (y-axis) as well as their parents' economic position (x-axis). The data for Sub-Saharan Africa come from Round 2 of the Afrobarometer (Panel A), data for Latin America come from Latinobarometer 2000-13 (Panel B), and data for Asia come from the Asian Barometer Wave 4 (Panel C). A list of the countries included in each survey can be found in Appendix Section A.

Additionally, social mobility varies by ethnicity and religion (Alesina *et al.*, 2020). These recent studies add much needed breadth to the literature on mobility in developing countries, which was previously limited to select cases due to data availability (for a review see Iversen *et al.*, 2019). Previous studies have found high levels of mobility in some African settings such as Senegal (Lambert *et al.*, 2014), Ghana and Uganda (Bossuroy and Cogneau, 2013) and Ethiopia (Hertz *et al.*, 2007) and low levels of mobility in other contexts such as Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Madagascar (Bossuroy and Cogneau, 2013).

To investigate this Figure 2 shows data on actual social mobility in education using data from the World Bank's intergenerational mobility database. For each country with available data, the World Bank calculated the average correlation between the educational outcomes of parents and their children.[13] A correlation of 1 would imply complete immobility while a correlation of 0 would be complete mobility (parental education has no predictive power for the subject's education). Here, we plot the distribution of these country-level values of educational persistence by region. According to this measure, as Panel A shows, Africa is less socially mobile than high income countries, or East Asia, or Europe and Central Asia. One sees this in the figure because the mass of the distribution for Africa is to the right of the other distributions—concentrated more towards higher correlations. Yet Panel B shows that observed mobility in Africa is higher than South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa,

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[13] The database offers different options to calculate this correlation. We use the *average* education of the parents (instead of the max or only the father's or mother's) and the educational outcome of *all* their children (instead of just the sons' or daughters' outcome).
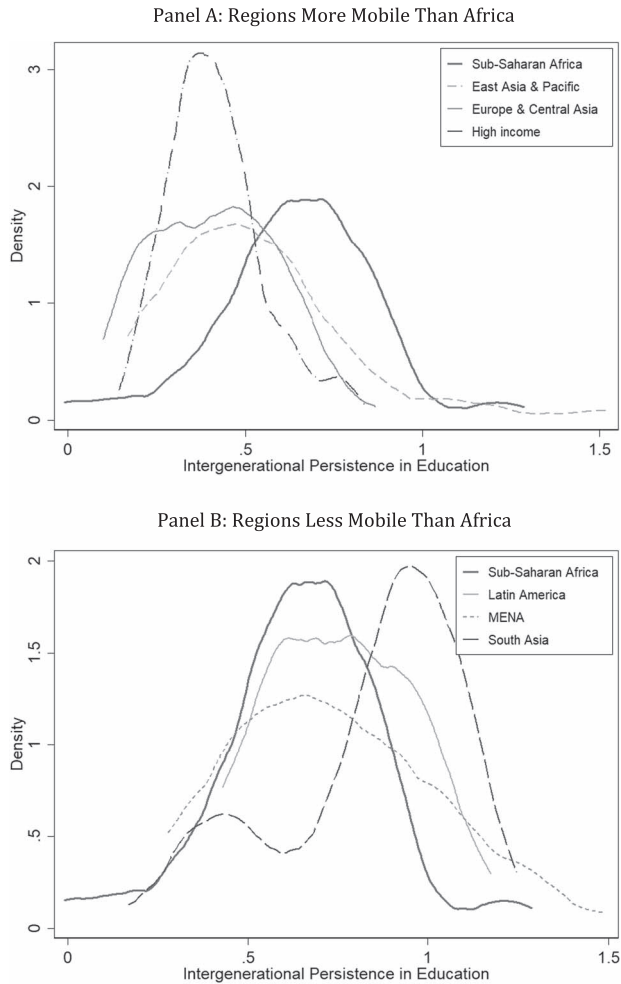
Panel A: Regions More Mobile Than Africa

Panel B: Regions Less Mobile Than Africa

Figure 2. Educational Mobility. *Notes*: This figure shows the distribution of intergenerational persistence in education across countries according to the World Bank Intergenerational Mobility Database 2018. Panel A plots regions with a lower level of intergenerational persistence in education and Panel B plots regions with higher persistence. A list of countries included in the data can be found in Appendix Section A.

and Latin America. Interestingly, a number of African countries, such as Botswana, Kenya, Mauritania and Cape Verde, have rates of educational mobility as high as high income countries.

   If African societies are achievement based, then contrary to all the stereotypes, the way to get ahead is not via connections, but hard work. In fact, this is what the data suggest people believe. The World Value Survey (henceforth WVS) asks respondents to choose between 'In the long run, hard work usually brings a better life' and 'Hard work doesn't generally bring success—it's more a matter of luck and connections.' We plot the distribution of answers by continent (1 = hard work brings a better life, 10 = it's more luck and connections) in Figure 3. The values in between 1 and 10 are meant to allow the respondents to report intermediate values. Fully 35% of Africans report a value of 1, the most definitive emphasis
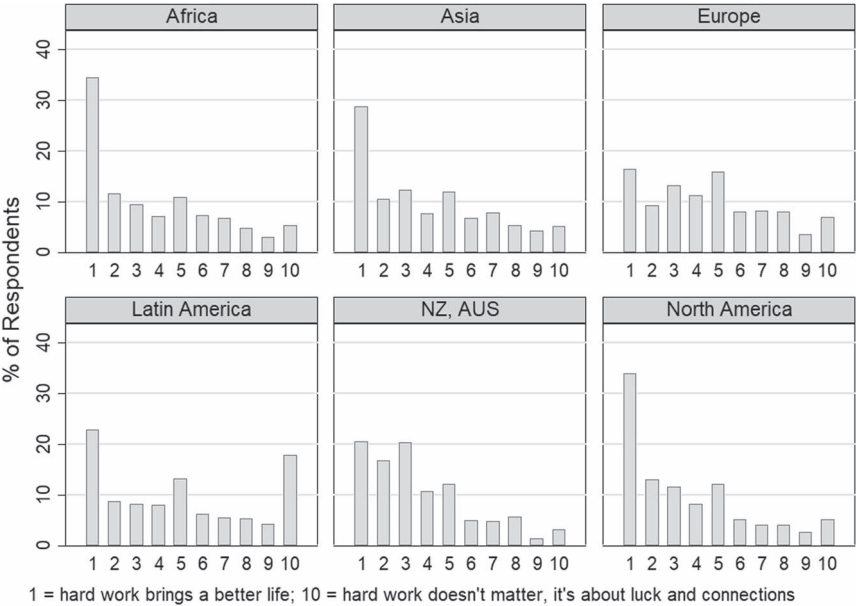
1 = hard work brings a better life; 10 = hard work doesn't matter, it's about luck and connections

Figure 3. Importance of Hard Work vs. Luck & Connections by Region. *Notes*: This figure shows the perceived importance of hard work vs. luck and connections across regions. The data come from Round 6 of the World Value Survey. Respondents are asked on a 1 to 10 scale, whether they believe "in the long run, hard work usually brings a better life" (1) or "hard work doesn't generally bring success—it's more a matter of luck and connections" (10). A list of the countries included can be found in Appendix Section A.

on the importance of hard work. In Europe, less than 20% of people give this answer while even in the United States and Asia it is lower than Africa.

None of these findings would be surprising from the perspective of the ethnographic or sociological literature we discussed in the previous section. Lloyd (1974) sums up his investigation of Yoruba social mobility by stating that 'he sees his own attainment of an enhanced status lying in his own efforts' (p. 219). Although this literature also suggests a great deal of variation, even within Nigeria (e.g., Le Vine, 1966), our data suggest that on average the situation is one of high rates of mobility.

How can this evidence be reconciled with the overwhelming evidence and logic that in networked-based society connections are important? Our answer is that both things can be true because networks are endogenous and if you work hard you can create more advantageous networks.

Although there is certainly evidence for the persistence of identities and the social consequences of slavery in particular contexts (e.g., Bellagamba *et al.*, 2012), the data we present show that slavery in Africa does not seem to have had the negative legacy for social mobility as it seems to have had in the United States or elsewhere in the Americas. Tuden and Plotnicov (1970) perhaps identify the reason when they state 'Although slavery in Africa was widespread, it was an ephemeral and transitory status. Is has had no major influence on the systems of stratification that have since emerged' (p. 15). They argue that this was because slavery in Africa 'lacked a strong ideology of status inferiority' and 'the abolition of slavery ... was accompanied by only minor shifts in the structuring of society' (p. 15).

The distinctiveness of patterns of social mobility in Africa becomes even more striking when we look at the data in the Afrobarometer about people's expectations about the incomes of their children. We plot these data in Figure 4 Panel A. On the horizontal axis,
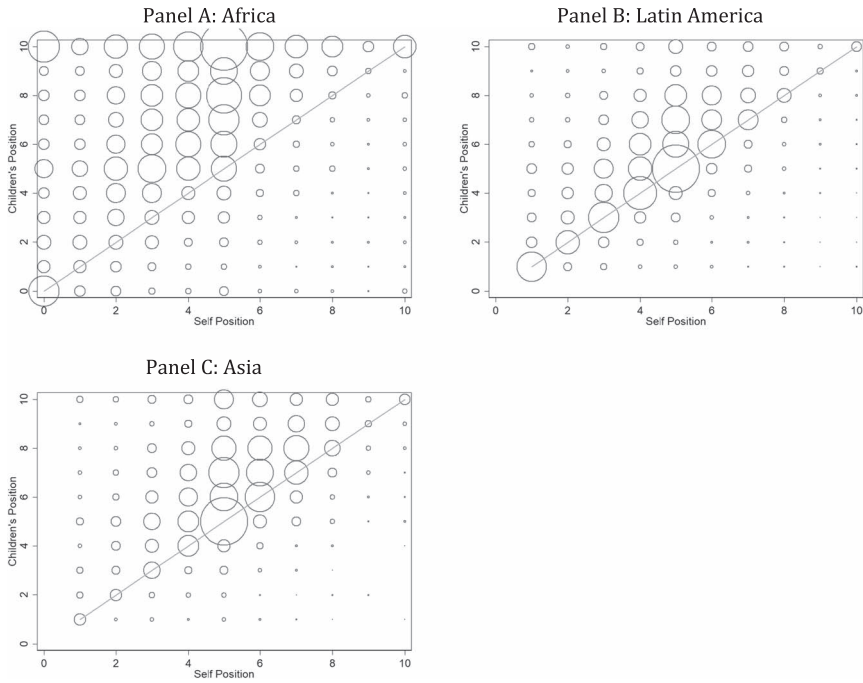
Figure 4. Future Mobility by Region. *Notes*: This figure shows the perceived future mobility of respondents by region. Respondents are asked to rate their own economic position from 0 to 10 (x-axis) as well as their expectation for their children's economic position in the future (y-axis). The data for Sub-Saharan Africa come from Round 2 of the Afrobarometer (Panel A), data for Latin America come from Latinobarometer 2000- 13 (Panel B), and data for Asia come from the Asian Barometer Wave 4 (Panel C). A list of the countries included in each survey can be found in Appendix Section A.

we plot the parents' own reported income, the same as we used in Panel A of Figure 1 while on the vertical axis we plot the respondents' reported expectation of their children's income on the same scale. In Panel A the mass of the data are above the 45 degree line showing that a vast majority (in fact 81%) of Africans anticipate that their children will have higher incomes than they will. Panel B shows that this is not true in Latin America while Panel C shows that, while Asians are more optimistic, they are far less so than Africans.

It is worth emphasising here something we mentioned in the introduction. Although this survey evidence is about perceptions and expectations, the literature finds that these actually influence behaviour and policy preferences.

How will the children of Africans enjoy such economic mobility? Via hard work is part of the answer again. The World Value Survey also asks people about what values they would like their children to have from a list of independence; hard work; feeling of responsibility; imagination; tolerance and respect for other people; thrift, saving money and things; determination, perseverance; religious faith; unselfishness; obedience; and self-expression. People can mark any five of these they think are important. Figure 5 plots the cross-regional data on the proportion of people who mark 'hard work.' Africa leads the world in the proportion of people who mark hard work as a value that they think is important in their children.

The evidence is overwhelming that Africans experience high rates of social mobility and, perhaps even more interesting, anticipate very high rates of social mobility. This may come as a surprise for many given the long periods of economic stagnation in post-independence
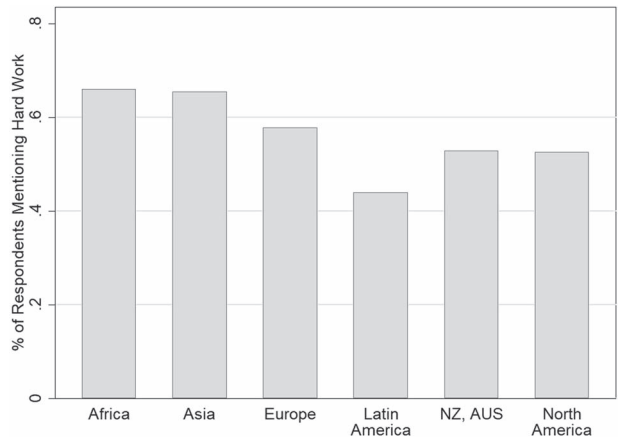
Figure 5. Important Qualities for Children: Hard Work. *Notes*: This figure shows the percentage of respondents to the World Value Survey across regions who think hard work is an important quality for children to learn. The data come from Round 6 of the World Value Survey. Respondents are asked two identify up to 5 qualities which they believe are especially important to teach children. A list of the countries included can be found in Appendix Section A.

Africa and the perception that most growth has been narrowly concentrated and driven by commodity exports. What it shows is that despite the many economic challenges the average African undoubtedly faces they are extremely creative and entrepreneurial at finding niches and opportunities in whatever context they find themselves, even if in the rural or informal sectors, or via migration to urban areas or different countries. The fact that this mobility is evident everywhere is shown by our break-down of the mobility data from the Afrobarometer between urban and rural that we present as Figure A1. One sees the same patterns as Figure 1 and Figure 4 in both urban and rural areas. While perhaps these beliefs about children are hard to square with observed mobility, the fact that Africans are so optimistic about their children's future is actually an important fact because it undoubtedly influences behaviour.

Even more important, A2 shows that, in line with our theoretical expectations, our findings so far apply to women as well as men. Reported social mobility and expected future mobility amongst women in the Afrobarometer is very similar to that of men.[14]

4. **Scepticism of authority**

Our second latent asset we capture with the notion of 'scepticism of authority.' Any society faces severe principal agent problems in building political institutions. Hierarchy must be constructed and controlled and often, for example with respect to taxation, the quid is long separated from the pro quo. We argue that there are interesting cultural differences in the expectations that people bring to this relationship. The western tradition, at least since the time of Locke, has been deeply sceptical of the use of authority. After arguing that government was desirable relative to the state of nature that lacked third party dispute resolution, Locke immediately, and sceptically, noted 'remember that absolute monarchs are but men; and if government is to be the remedy of those evils, which necessarily follow from

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[14]   Although we do not report figures, it is also true that women have very similar attitudes towards hard work and the inter-regional pattern of realized educational mobility is similar, though African women are actually more mobile than men when compared to Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa and South Asia. Women also have similar opinions to men about the importance of various qualities for their children.
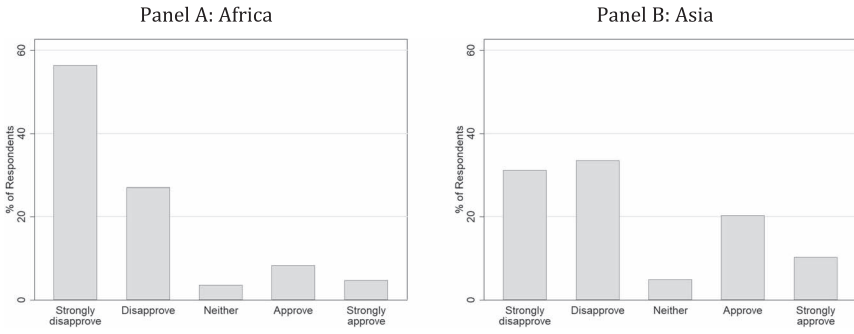
Panel A: Africa   Panel B: Asia

Figure 6. Scepticism of Authority: Feelings Towards One-man Rule. *Notes*: This figure shows the attitudes towards one-man rule in Africa and Asia. Respondents were asked whether they approved or disapproved with the statement "Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything." Data on Africa come from Round 7 of the Afrobarometer (Panel A). Data on Asia come from Wave 4 of the Asian Barometer (Panel B). A list of the countries included can be found in Appendix Section A.

men's being judges in their own cases, and the state of nature is not to be endured; I desire to know what kind of government that is, and how much better it is than the state of nature.' (Locke, 2003, p. 105).

This scepticism was a defining feature of the process that led to the creation and implementation of the US Constitution. In Federalist 51 Madison wrote, 'If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.' (Madison *et al.*, 1987, p. 94).

The Federalists like Madison were sceptical about the incentives of those in control of a central state, and the anti-Federalists, who forced the Bill of Rights to be adopted, were sceptical that the solutions the Federalists had developed were sufficient to stop the abuse of power.[15]

This attitude of scepticism is very different from attitudes towards authority common in Chinese or eastern political theory. Here rule is regarded as far more virtuous and subject to perfection. Confucius put it in the following way: 'Ji Kangzi asked Confucius about governing ... Confucius responded, "In your governing ... One who rules through the power of Virtue is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars"' (Confucius, 2003, p. 8). The literature on the political economy of western countries sees this scepticism as a distinct advantage in creating a political equilibrium where the state works in the interest of society. Our point here is that the African attitudes to authority are much closer to western attitudes than eastern ones.

We can illustrate this scepticism, so evident in the ethnographic literature we discussed above, using cross-national survey data. Figure 6 plots data from both the Afrobarometer, Panel A, and the Asiabarometer, Panel B, on people's attitudes towards one-man rule. Respondents are asked whether they would approve or disapprove if 'Elections and Parliament/National Assembly are abolished so that the President/Prime Minister can decide everything.' Almost 60% of Africans strongly disapprove of such one-man rule. In Asia, this is just over 30%, about half. These numbers are systematically reflected in related questions in the WVS which can be seen in the Appendix Figure A3.

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[15] There is a vast literature on this topic, but Holton (2008) is a representative recent historical account that is consistent with our emphasis. See also the synthesis in Acemoglu and Robinson (2019).
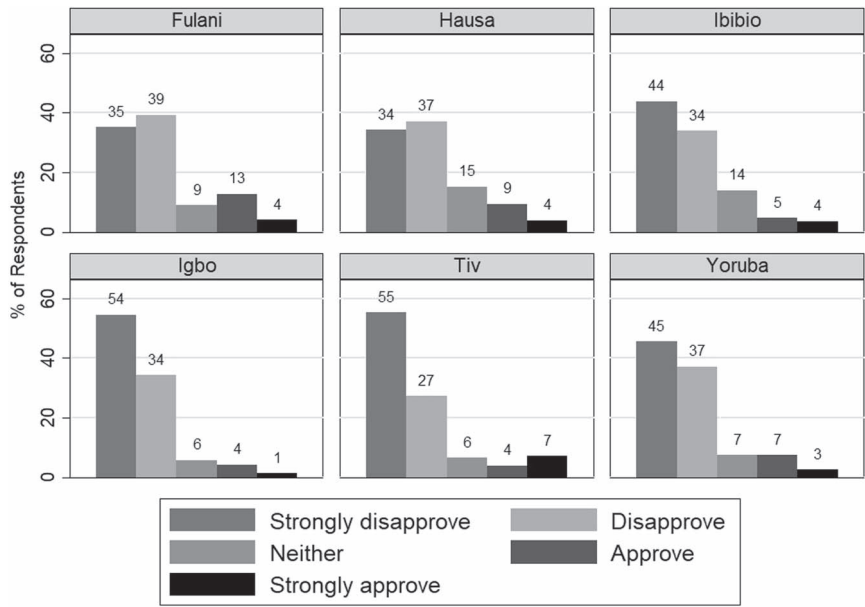
Figure 7. Scepticism of Authority: Feelings Towards One-man in Nigeria by Ethnic Group. *Notes*: This figure shows the attitudes towards one-man rule in Nigeria by ethnic group. Respondents were asked whether they approved or disapproved with the statement "Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything." Data come from Rounds 4 to 7 of the Afrobarometer and include 5,821 respondents.

The Afrobarometer allows us to delve more deeply into this issue and relate it to some of the arguments we made above about the nature of African society and political development. The ethnographic evidence from Nigeria discussed previously suggests that people like the Tiv or Igbo, who prior to colonialism lived in societies without a centralised state, ought to be even more sceptical about one-man rule than say the Hausa or Fulani who did live in states. Figure 7 therefore breaks down the responses to the same question amongst these four Nigerian ethnic groups where we also add the Ibibio, another previously stateless society, and the Yoruba, an intermediate case, who lived in city states but with quite elaborate mechanisms of accountability compared to the Fulani or Hausa. The data confirm the ethnography: amongst Nigerians the Tiv and Igbo are far more likely to respond that they strongly disagree with one-man rule. Both Hausa and Fulani people are about 20 percentage points less likely to choose this answer. The Yoruba and Ibibio are intermediate but are generally significantly more likely to disapprove of such rule compared to the Hausa or Fulani. In the Appendix Figure A4 we show a very similar pattern of answers to the question about whether presidents should not be term limited. Ibibio, Igbo and Tiv are far more likely to think that this is a bad idea.

Figure 8 extends this argument to the continent. We again take the variable in Murdock's Ethnographic Atlas that codes an ethnic group's political institutions according to 'levels of jurisdictional hierarchy' we used earlier. Groups like the Ibibio, Igbo, and Tiv score 2, while the Hausa and Fulani score 4. Splitting the sample into ethnic groups that score 1–3 and those that score 4–5 ('states') and merging the data with answers to the Afrobarometer by ethnicity, we see that those peoples from societies without states are distinctly more strongly disproving of one-man rule.

So far, we have stressed that this scepticism of one-man rule is far more similar to western political thought than eastern traditions. But if this is the case why is it that Africa has
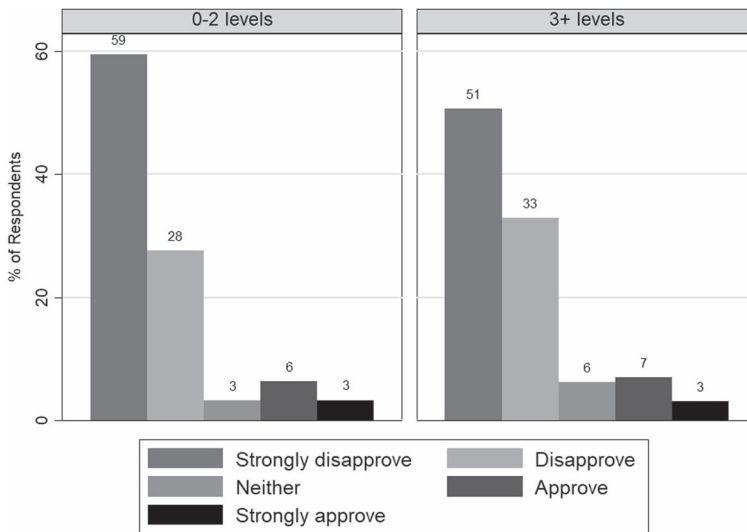
Figure 8. Scepticism of Authority: Feelings Towards One-man Rule in Africa by Historical Centralisation.
Notes: This figure shows the attitudes towards one-man rule in Africa by historical centralization. Respondents were matched to the Murdock Ethnographic Atlas. Results are shown separately for ethnicities with no or little state structures (Panel A) and those with 3 or more levels of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the village level (Panel B). Respondents were asked whether they approved or disapproved with the statement "Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything." Data come from Rounds 4 to 7 of the Afrobarometer and include 42,009 respondents.

suffered so much from single-party and one-man rule since independence? We would argue that this is not because Africans are happy with this situation, but because they have not been able to stop it. As we delve into more in the next section, the type of mechanisms we have identified here resulted in the preponderance of African polities remaining small historically. From a continental perspective, the experience of the Ibibio, Igbo and Tiv is more representative than that of the Fulani and Hausa. This created an enormous problem at independence of aggregating all of the diverse and often contradictory institutions into a post-colonial social contract. The result, often aided by departing colonial powers, was a vacuum at the centre that allowed for the rise of dictators and autocrats.

Yet the type of polities we have been discussing do create some optimism about the potential for building such contracts in the future. Schapera (1938) noted of the Tswana, 'single persons or families may similarly change their tribal affiliation … membership of a tribe is defined not so much by birth as of allegiance to the Chief' (p. 5). African polities were defined politically, not ethnically, and the flexible mechanisms that were and are available for incorporating people can be the basis for more effective social contracts.

Despite the connection to Locke and Madison, one could argue that the sceptical attitude of Africans to authority now makes it difficult to build more effective states. Africans are rightly nervous about what they might do. We do not underestimate the difficulty of this problem, but Figure 9 presents some evidence that show that this scepticism also has a participatory aspect which does bode well for institution building. We again use data from the Afrobarometer (pooled rounds IV to VII) at the ethnicity level in Nigeria. Here one sees that Ibibio, Igbo and Tiv people are more likely to say that they attended community meetings. The political cultures of these societies were not only sceptical of authority, but they went along with very dense and broad political participation, likely an asset in building inclusive and effective state institutions.
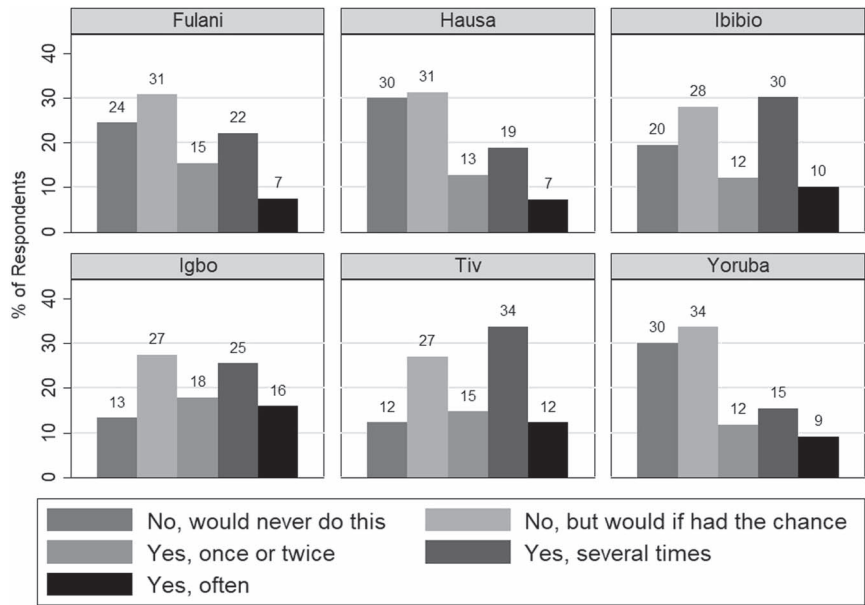
Figure 9. Scepticism of Authority: Community Participation in Nigeria by Ethnic Group. *Notes*: This figure shows community participation in Nigeria by ethnic group. Respondents were asked if they "attended a community meeting." Data come from Rounds 4 to 7 of the Afrobarometer and include 6,073 respondents.

5.   Cosmopolitanness

Scepticism of authority is one of the reasons African society has historically been organised in small scale polities. This small scale organisation has led to an impressive degree of 'cosmopolitanness' in African societies. These societies featured different institutions, different social structures and customs and different languages. Africans continually moved, migrated and traded, frequently coming into contact with each other. They had to learn to negotiate higher levels of difference and diversity than anyone else in the world. Although Medieval Europe might have had hundreds on polities, they had a lingua franca in Latin and religion in common. Africans have neither, though some languages like Swahili, Lingala and various types of Creoles (Krios) emerged to facilitate trade and commerce.

As a result, Africans have had to learn to navigate these differences. This has led to a high degree in flexibility and tolerance. We start by looking at language. It quickly becomes apparent that Africa is the most multilingual part of the world. Panel A of Figure 10 shows the percentage of Afrobarometer respondents who speak one, two, three and four or more languages. Panel B shows the results for the Eurobarometer. The percentage of the population in Europe who speak only one language is just less than 50%. In Africa, this fraction is about 25%. For comparison, according to the American Community Survey in the United States, more than 75% of the population speaks only one language (English).

Many arguments have been advanced in favour of the benefits of multilingualism. Our argument is not that it is directly useful to speak Tshiluba or Lingala. Rather, the fact that multilingualism, the way of life in Africa, is indicative of a much broader openness and cultural nimbleness. Many mechanisms link multilingualism to better outcomes, for example, cognitive development (see Diamond, 2010 and Antoniou, 2019). More relevant for us is a great deal of recent evidence in social psychology that suggests that multilingual people and societies have many advantages over monolingual people and societies (see Kinzler, 2020, for an overview of this literature). For example, evidence suggests that people
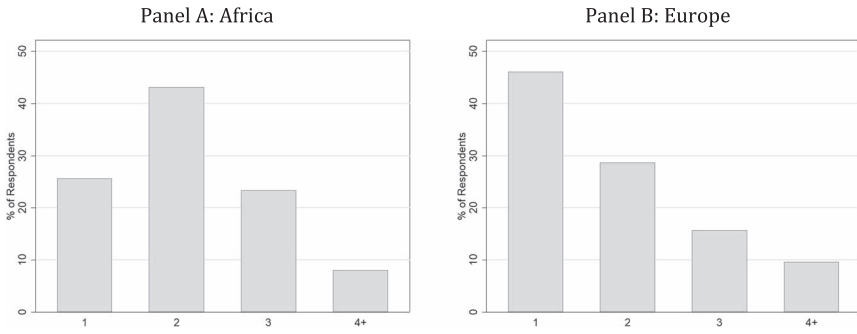
Panel A: Africa　　　　　　　　　　　　　　Panel B: Europe

Figure 10. Cosmopolitanism: Numbers of Languages Spoken. *Notes*: This figure shows the numbers of languages spoken by respondents in Africa and Europe. Data for Africa come from Round 4 of the Afrobarometer (Panel A). Data on Europe come from the Special Eurobarometer 386 (Panel B). A list of countries included in the data can be found in Appendix Section A.

are more rational and less emotional in a second language. This facilitates more rational private behaviour (Keysar *et al*., 2012) and assessments of collective situations (Costa *et al*., 2014). More fundamentally, as Kinzler argues, language is the most important way that humans use to sort themselves into in-groups and out-groups. Her research has persistently found language to be more important than race (e.g., Kinzler and Dautel, 2011), and she argues that 'Raising children in an environment that values multilingualism can expand their horizons ... and may create a world in which mutual understanding allows people to unite across borders ... Even just being exposed to a second language can make us better problem solvers and better at social understanding' and maybe even be 'part of the key to stopping bias—linguistic or otherwise—in its tracks' (Kinzler, 2020, p. 152,161). Indeed, a study by Fan *et al*. (2015) illustrates that bilingual children are better able to see things from another child's perspective. It is important to emphasise that these findings are not about specific languages; they are about multilingualism in general.

Africans are also used to dealing with high levels of religious diversity. Not only did different African societies have their own religious beliefs, but Muslim raiding and trading from the North and East also resulted in the spread of Islam and colonial missionaries competed for influence and introduced a variety of Christian faiths. The notoriety of groups like Boko Haram has led to the perception of Africa as being a hotbed of religious intolerance. Yet, we argue that this case and others like them, for example in Somalia, are the exception. In fact, diversity in religious beliefs has led to high degrees of religious tolerance across the continent. Respondents in the Afrobarometer are asked 'whether they would like having people from a different religion as their neighbours, dislike it, or not care.' Figure 11 shows the percentage of Afrobarometer respondents who would not object to having a neighbour of a different religion. Across Africa on average, 11% object and only in four countries is the number higher than 20%.

Openness and tolerance are not new features of African societies, but likely date back at least to the Bantu and other frontier expansions as we noted in Section 2. Migrant people were generally absorbed into existing populations peacefully, who in turn largely welcomed the newcomers. A remnant of this openness can be found in African languages. Many African languages have the same word for stranger/foreigner and guest (Fourshey *et al*., 2018). We have collected the names for stranger/foreigner and guest in the 32 most widely spoken African languages and 91 non-African languages using GoogleTranslate and dictionaries. Twenty out of 31 (65%) African languages have the same words for
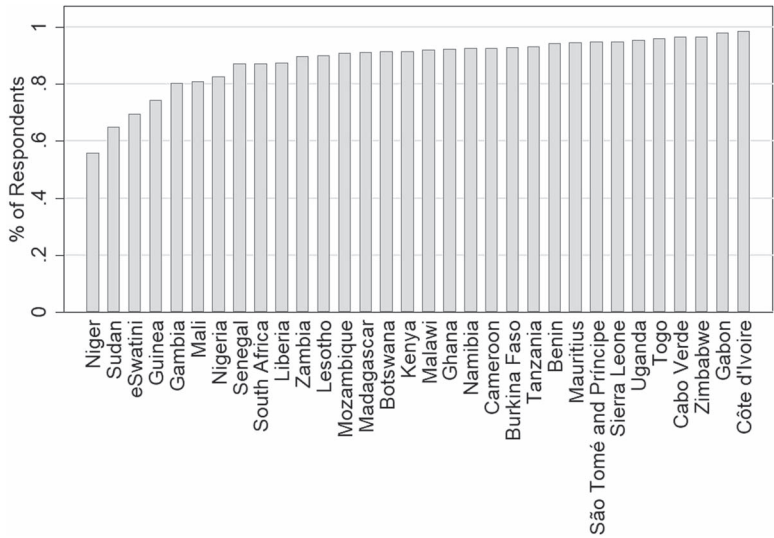
Figure 11. Cosmopolitanism: Religious Tolerance in Africa. *Notes*: This figure shows religious tolerance by country in Africa. Data come from Round 7 of the Afrobarometer. The figure shows the percentage of respondents who would not object to having a neighbor of a different religion.

stranger/foreigner and guest, while only one non-African language, Hawaiian, out of 91 has the same feature. The full tables can be found in the appendix (Tables A3–A5).[16]

Cosmopolitanness is deeply rooted in the history of Africa and the development of African societies, kinship systems and languages. In contrast to the evolution of Europe, with its nationalistic antagonisms, wars of religion and fixation with monolingualism, Africans have found a far more consensual and fluid way of relating to each other. We argue that in the intensely globalised world that we now find ourselves in, and which is unlikely to recede, this gives Africans a significant advantage. They are the most instinctively globalised people.

6. Statistical significance

So far our presentation of the data attempting to establish the presence of Africa's latent assets has been intuitive. We now present some slightly more formal hypotheses tests in order to justify the use of the word 'significant' that we have avoided thus far. In Table A1, we conduct some simple *t*-tests of difference in the means of our main variables of interest between Africa and the various other parts of the world we have discussed in the text.

Africans perceive significantly more social mobility than Asians or Latin Americans, and they anticipate significantly more social mobility for their children than either. They are significantly more likely to believe that hard work is more important for getting ahead than luck and connections. Politically, they are also significantly more opposed to one-man rule than Asians. They are significantly more likely to speak more than one language than Europeans (and indeed, more likely than in any other part of the world), and it is significantly more likely that the word guest will be the same as the word for stranger in an African language compared to the languages of any other part of the world.

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[16]   These observations only scratch the surface of the important differences African languages can make. For example, Bantu languages have neither gendered nouns nor gendered pronouns (no distinction between his and hers), thus providing less of a basis for gender distinctions and discrimination, see Jakiela and Ozier (2019).

Table A2 conducts a similar exercise using first the distinction between Tiv and Igbo versus Hausa and Fulani, and then the breakdown across Africa between people who formally lived in societies with 0–2 levels of jurisdictional hierarchy as opposed to those who lived in societies with 3–4 levels. The pattern in both rows of the table is that Africans who today are associated with formerly stateless societies are significantly more likely to strongly disapprove of one-man rule.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have proposed a new way of thinking about African prosperity by focusing on its latent assets. We have argued that as of yet, these assets have not borne fruit because, as in China, in order for this to happen, some basic institutional problems have to be solved. We do not underestimate the task of building better institutions in Africa. But it is also not clear to us that these problems are more insurmountable than the problems facing Chinese political elites in the 1970s and 1980s.

Acknowledgements

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Journal of African Economies* online.

Data Availability

All data used in this paper is posted at https://voices.uchicago.edu/jamesrobinson/ and https://soerenhenn.com/.

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