

An Interpretation of African Development

James A. Robinson
University of Chicago

WIDER, Helsinki, March 22, 2019

Introduction

- To understand African development it's important to understand two principles:
 1. "Wealth in People"
 2. The radical egalitarianism (economic and political) of African society

As Mary Douglas in her seminal ethnography of the Lele of the Congo put it "Those who have had anything to do with the Lele must have noticed the absence of anyone who could give orders with a reasonable hope of being obeyed".

Mancala versus Chess



Wealth in People

- When we talk about “wealth” we think of material things – land, houses, physical capital and claims on it like stocks.
- In Africa “wealth” signified personal relationships, dependents, social ties, wives (even women used bride-wealth to acquire wives in several pre-colonial West African societies).
- “Accumulation” meant accumulating social ties, dependents, “people” and this was done historically through many types of institution – marriage, pawnship, wardship and of course slavery. It led to the emphasis on kinship. And of course material wealth can be used to create social ties.
- A historical response to; (1) the insecurity of life (people meant protection); (2) the fact that other assets like land were not scarce and also were not commoditized.

The Asante case

- Robert Rattray was the first head of the first Anthropological Department of Asante, now part of Ghana. As he put it in 1928,
“a condition of voluntary servitude was, in a very literal sense, the heritage of every Ashanti; it formed indeed the essential basis of his social system. In West Africa it was the masterless man and woman who ran the imminent danger of having what we should term ‘their freedom’ turned into involuntary bondage of a much more drastic nature.”
- By involuntary bondage of a “much more drastic nature”, Rattray of course meant slavery.
- The Hobbesian nature of West African society in the era of the slave trade and its aftermath meant that to be safe, you had to surrender your freedom and become a client, tied to someone more powerful. A proverb he wrote down said
“If you have not a master, a beast will catch you.”

Fictive Kinship

- In Tshiluba (the main language where I have been working in Kananga in the DRC for the past 9 years) there are four words to refer to kin, {father, mother, brother, sister} which are applied to everyone, including “fictive” kin.
- This is an example of a “classificatory kinship system” (many sub-classes, Tshiluba is a Hawaiian System) as opposed to a “descriptive kinship system” like the one we are familiar with in the US.
- Could it be that the simple and flexible Hawaiian system of the Luba/Luluwa makes it easier to form fictive kin relations and establish social relations with people who are not “blood (DNA) relatives”?

The Strange case of André Kasongo Ilunga

- In April 2007, the prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was assembling a new cabinet. He needed to find a Minister of Trade.
- He chose André Kasongo Ilunga, a member of the Union Nationale des Fédéralistes du Congo (UNAFEC), one of the smaller parties that made up the ruling coalition.
- There was only one hitch: Ilunga didn't exist.
- UNAFEC's leader had made him up and added him to his list of ministerial nominees in the belief that it would enhance his own chances of being appointed. His plan backfired when the prime minister opted to pick a man he knew nothing about and had (obviously) never met.
- Why did the PM do it?

Implications for Political Development

- Personalized power acquired through personal ties of loyalty like this is hard to pass on to successors compared to material wealth – so power and status are achieved (more like ‘Big Men’)
- As a basis for power it is also hard to scale up, so the size of polities based on it stays small.
- It also creates a politics of personalized exchange and redistribution, not a focus on public goods.
- The “neo-patrimonial state” is deeply rooted in the social logic of accumulation.

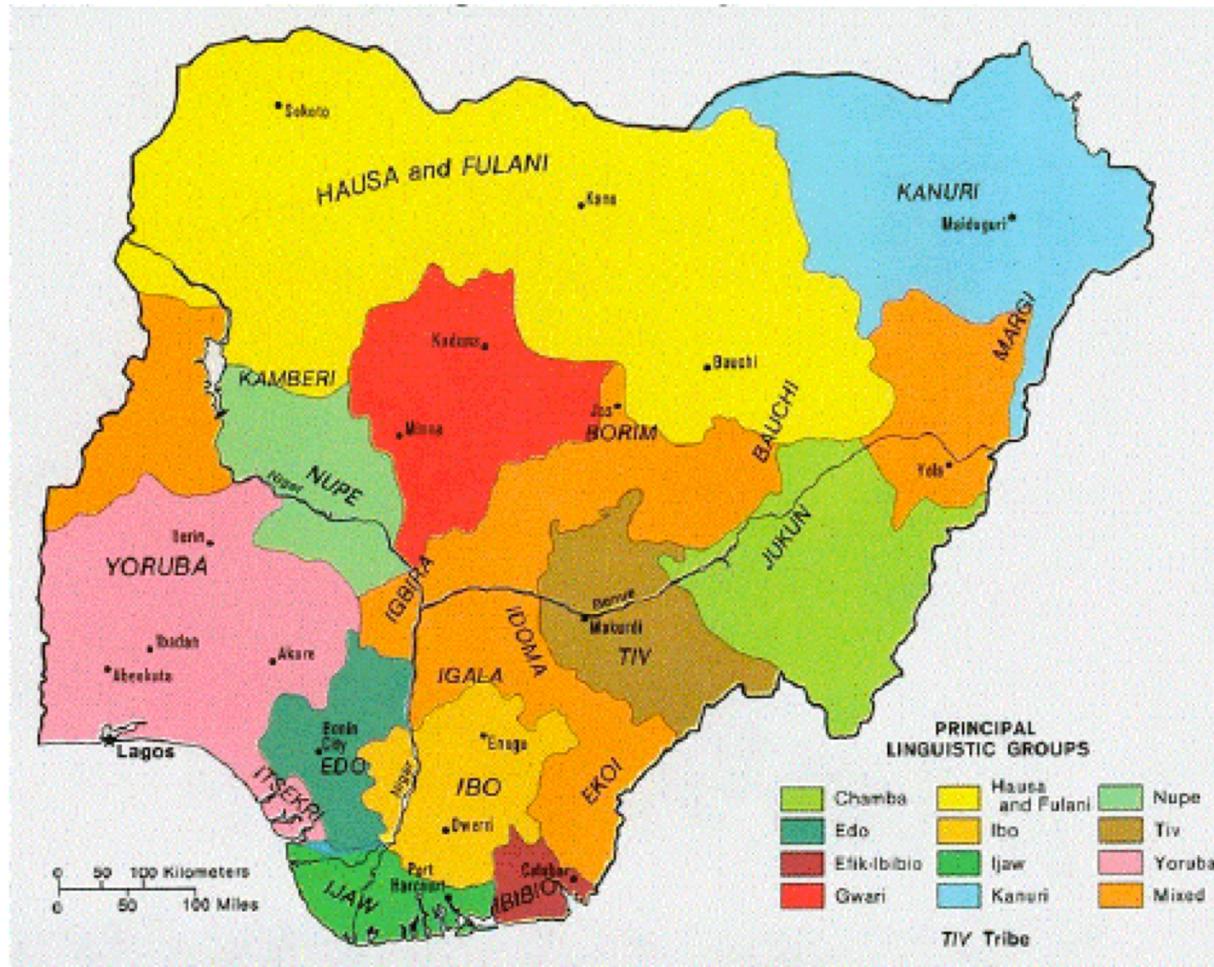
Egalitarianism

- African societies used many different mechanisms to avoid hierarchy and constrain it when it emerged.
- Let me develop the case of the Tiv in eastern Nigeria in a little detail.
- During the summer of 1939 a cult called Nyambua emerged in Tivland, Nigeria.
- At a shrine a man called Kokwa who sold charms to provide protection from mbatsav or “witches”.
- Tsav means “power”, particularly power over others. A person with tsav (it is a substance that grows on the heart of a person) can make others do what they want and kill them by using the power of fetishes and tsav can be increased by cannibalism.

“A diet of human flesh makes the tsav, and of course the power, grow large. Therefore the most powerful men, no matter how much they are respected or liked, are never fully trusted. They are men of tsav - and who knows?” (Paul Bohannan, 1958)

- The people will tsav belong to an organization - the mbatsav

Ethnic Groups of Nigeria



A Tiv Diviner



Paul Bohannan and Gary Seaman (2000) *The Tiv: An African People 1949 to 1953*, p. 158

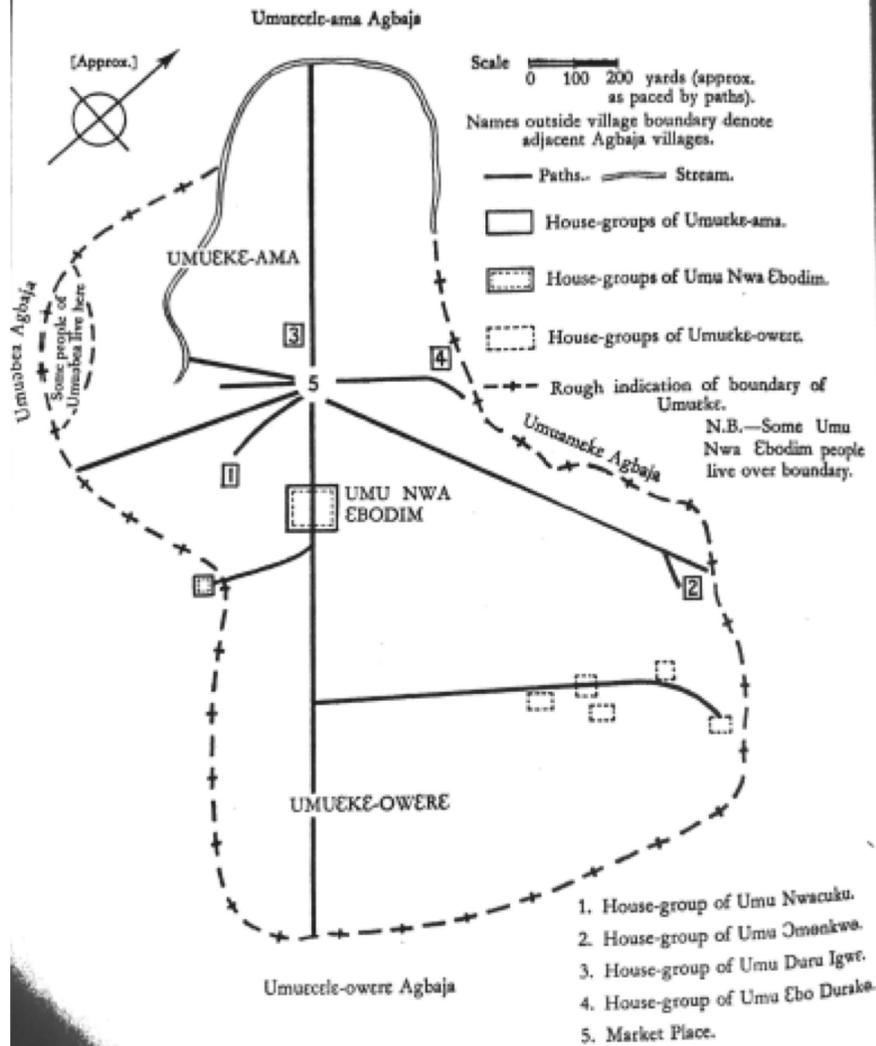
Whittling the Powerful Down

- In essence these religious cults were a way of stopping anybody becoming too powerful
- “Men who had acquired too much power ... were whittled down by means of witchcraft accusations.. Nyambua was one of a regular series of movements to which Tiv political action, with its distrust of power, gives rise to so that the greater political institutions - the one based on the lineage system and a principle of egalitarianism - can be preserved” (Bohannan, 1958)
- But to have a state someone has to become powerful, start giving orders to others who accept their authority.

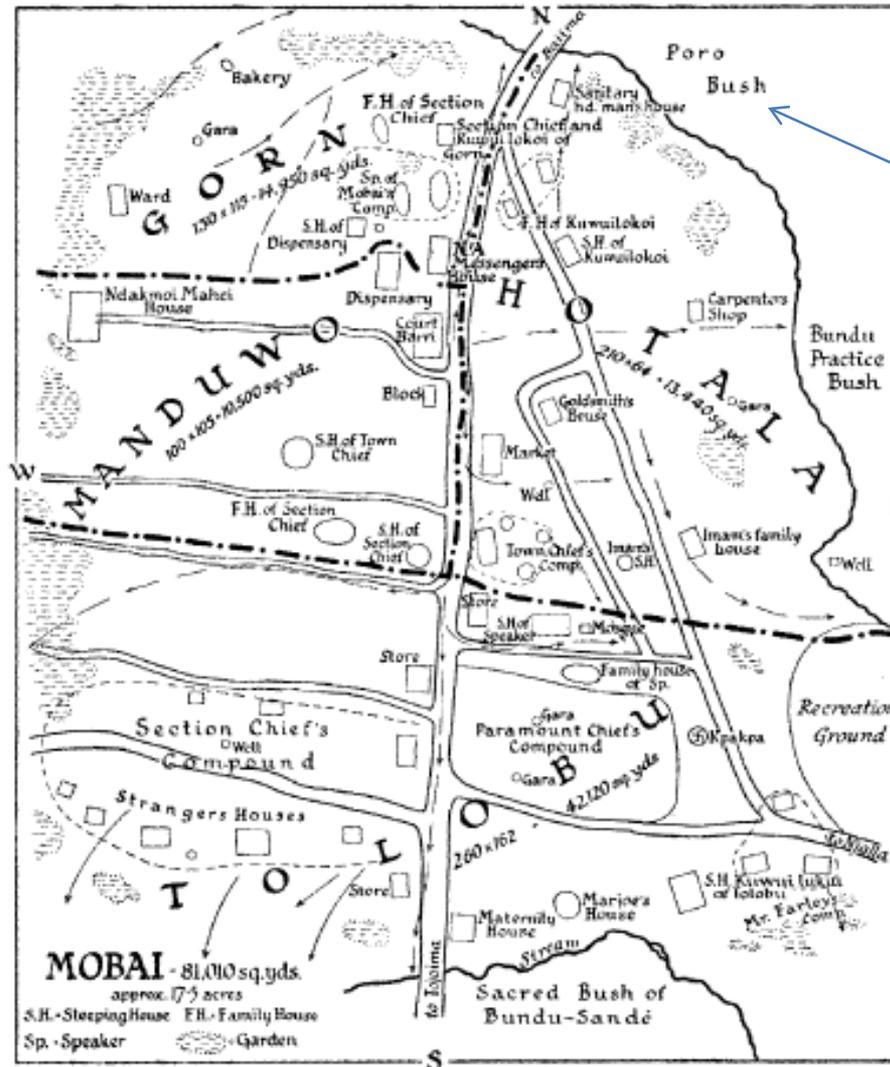
Other Strategies for preserving Egalitarianism

- The Tiv (and others) used witchcraft accusations. But there are many alternative solutions to the problem of how to preserve egalitarianism.
- In East Africa societies like the Samburu or Maasai organized via a series of age grades means that political power is always rotating and cannot be monopolized by a family or clan.
- Lineage societies like the Nuer or Somali used balanced opposition between lineage segments (“me and my brother against my cousin”)
- Even societies where geography or the village was the basic political unit, like the Mende of Sierra Leone or the Igbo of Nigeria controlled power via balanced opposition (division in Igbo villages), through the channeling of ambition into non-political domains (titling societies), secret societies (Mende).

ROUGH SKETCH MAP OF THE VILLAGE OF UMUEKE AGBAJA



Margaret Green (1947)
Ibo Village Affairs,
 p. 260



Poru Bush

PLAN OF MOBAI

Source: Kenneth Little (1951) *The Mende of Sierra Leone*, London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, page 68.

Scaling up? From Secret Societies to Masonic Temples in Makeni, Sierra Leone



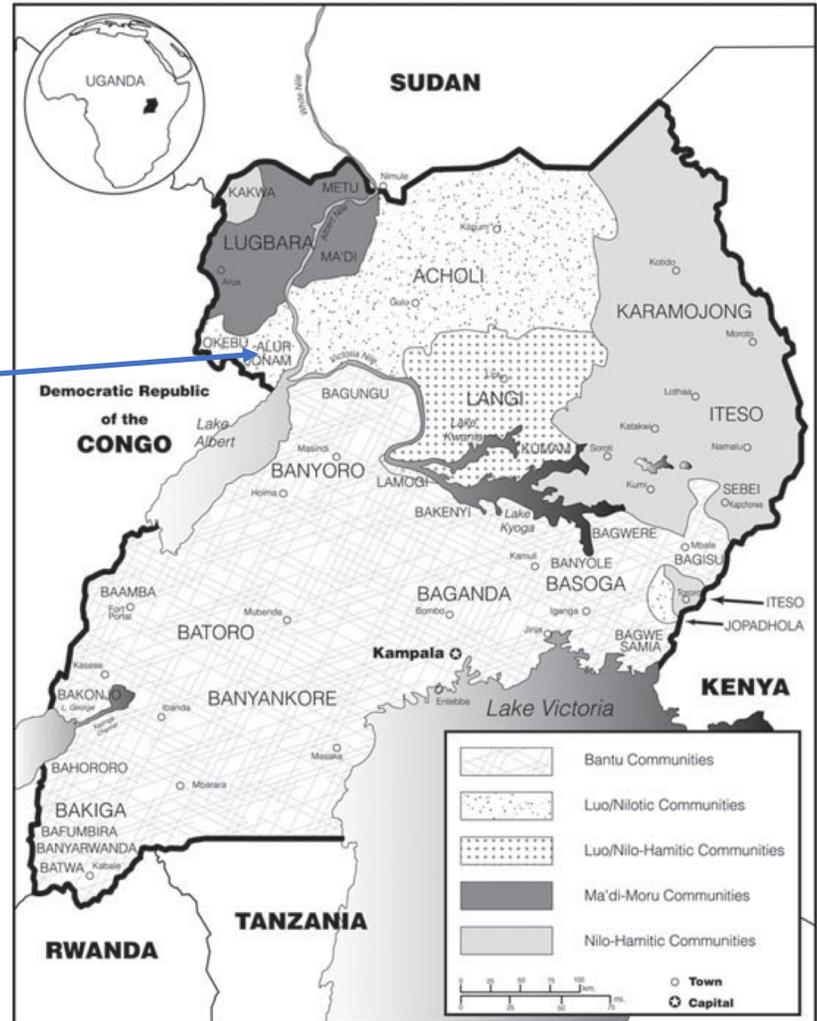
Stranger Kings: The Alur

- How do you take advantage of the benefits that political centralization can bring but make sure you control power?
- A common strategy in African history is that you bring in outsiders.
- A classic example is that of the Alur in modern Uganda and Eastern DRC. The Alur had kings who resolved disputes and were rainmakers.
- Stateless societies to their west brought them in to rule them to take advantage of their key two skills.
- Intrinsically limited: they were “strangers” who had no rights to land.

Alur King His Majesty Olarker Philip Raunii III addressing his Chiefs at the Royal Palace in Nebbi municipality. He has rejected a split of the Kingdom



ETHNOGRAPHIC UGANDA



Based on Minority Rights Group International's 'Ethnic Groups and Tribes of Uganda', Uganda: The Marginalization of Minorities (2001). Boundaries are not definitive but are intended to show traditionally inhabited areas.

Reinterpreting Mobutu?

- Mobutu resolved disputes and claimed supernatural powers.
- In his palace at Gbadolite there was supposedly a secret room where there was a living statue of the president. The Mobutu which appeared in public was only a simulacrum.
- His former propaganda chief alleged that Mobutu drank the blood of people he had killed; dumped tons of “mystical products” into the Congo river; and banned imported beer so he could doctor that water used to make local beer.
- He was “married” to twin sisters Mobutu married Bobi and Kossia Ladawa.
- He provided few other services, like the Alur kings.
- Of course he extracted rents too, the types of mechanisms for controlling power which worked in an Igbo village, say, didn’t scale up to colonially created nations.

Djalelo

*Today we are going to admire the Guide Mobutu
If you see him, admire him,
If everyone sees him, let them admire him,
The country is called Zaire,
The money is also called Zaire,
Kinshasa is the creation of Sese Seko,
Shaba is nothing more than the work of Kuku Ngendu [Mobutu],
The MPR is the party of Zaire,
The country is the heritage of our ancestors.⁸*

Turner and Young, p. 170

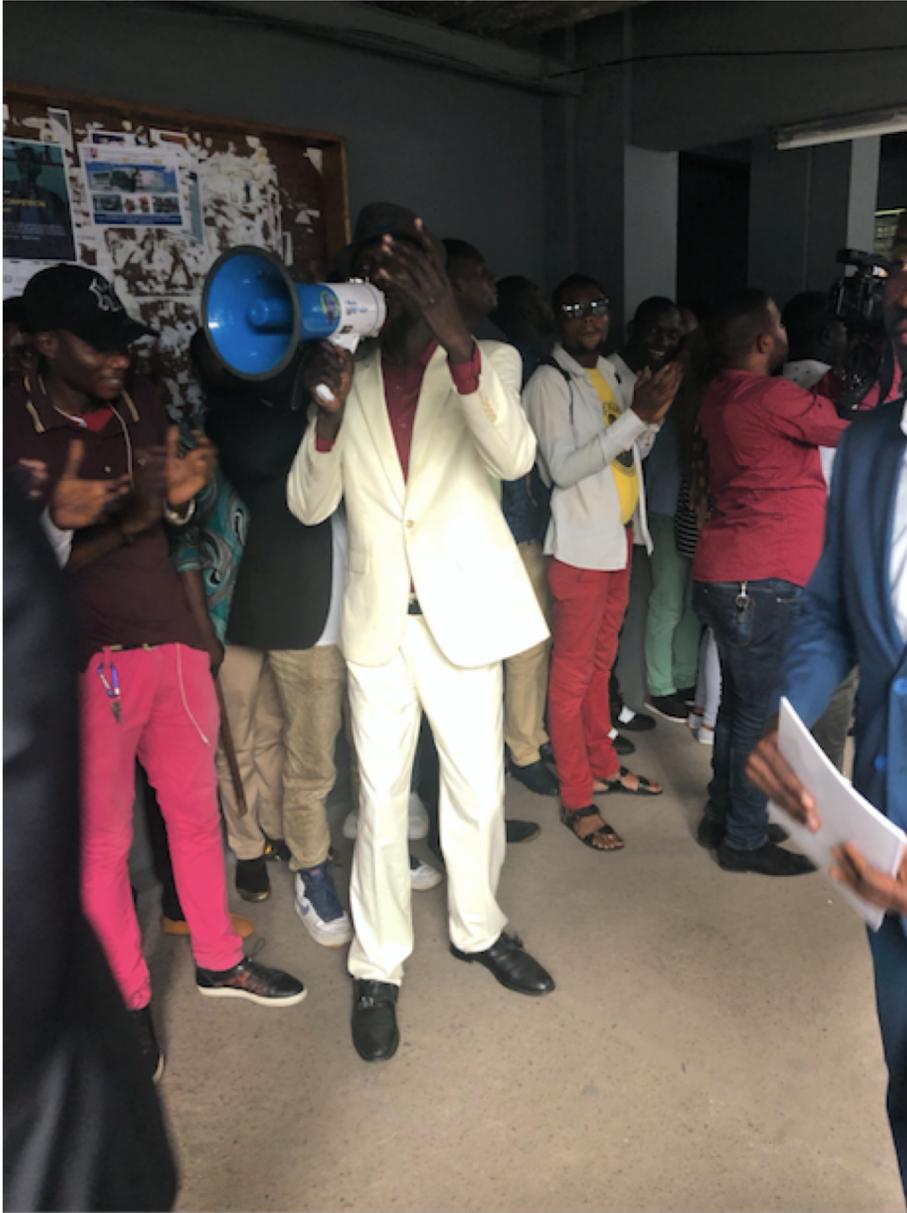
The steenbok of Sowa stood,
the duiker of Semoana stood alert;
when it got to the Nata River
it stood alert, stretching out its neck
5 and cocking its ears, the young duiker.¹
The cry was raised for the Maletamotse,
and after that for the Masokola.
What a commotion!
We met; Khama's son made us meet,
10 Semane's son, the Leletamotse.²
The lion roared in wonder at Tshekedi,
for it saw the chief challenge it,
MaMphakere's and Bonyerile's brother challenge it.³
The wind pierced the young men's bones,
15 it pierced the young men's joints;
those born in Serowe were overcome,
there remained those born in Palapye;
Tshekedi alone did not shiver,
he, the Leletamotse, did not shiver.⁴
20 The lion roared at Tshekedi in the veld,
it roared at him when with his junior.
They were shooting all day, the Maletamotse;
Tshekedi shot with Radiphofu,

Praise poem to
Tshekedi Khama
(Seretse Khama's
uncle)

Isaac Shapera
(1965)

*Praise Poems of
Tswana Chiefs*, p.
226

PM Matata's Praise Singers, Kinshasa February 2018



The Absent President of the Cameroon



Biya spent a third of the year abroad in 2006 and 2009. The Intercontinental Hotel in Geneva is his favorite destination.

In March 2018 he held his first cabinet meeting for two years.

What is going on?

Organizing the Economy

- The organization of the economy was very synergetic with these two principles.
- Factor markets were absent and land and labor was accessed via kinship/descent groups or social networks.
- The Tiv economy was separated into different ‘spheres’
 1. Prestige goods
 2. ‘commodities’
- Prices were fixed and only commodities could be exchanged for means of exchange (cowries in the pre-colonial period).
- Some trying to ‘convert’ from commodities to prestige goods risked being accused of being a man of *tsav*.
- Large prevalence of a “zero sum” model of the economy, where someone’s gain was someone else’s loss. (Wealth in people has a zero sum flavor..)

Contemporary Africa

- Maybe your reaction to these arguments is that this was all true of historic Africa but it's not true today?
- A labor market did emerge during the colonial period
- But land is still primarily accessed through kinship or traditional structures (great deal of variation, landowning families in Sierra Leone or Yorubaland, “stools” in Asante).
- Moreover, new instruments have emerged to substitute for the loss of control of kin groups over young men with new outside opportunities (“women palaver” in Sierra Leone).
- Let me give you two very contemporary examples or the relevance of my ideas.

Witchcraft in Modern Soweto

- A very contemporary example of the persistence of these ideas is Adam Ashford's 2005 ethnography of witchcraft in Soweto (*Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*).
- He shows that fear of witchcraft is endemic and that any illness or death is treated as potentially caused by it (like the Tiv).
- It is caused by jealousy based on a “zero sum” model of the world.
- Anyone can use witchcraft (very egalitarian) to attack anyone else who can hire “diviners”, of whom there are thousands in Soweto, to understand the cause of the problem and the cure.

The Bovine Mystique and the World Bank

- James Ferguson's 1995 ethnography of Lesotho, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, starts with the puzzle of erosion and over-grazing on the open range of Lesotho.
- Too many cows and the tragedy of the commons says the World Bank. But their interventions have no effect.
- You have to understand the social situation. The men are in the mines in Johannesburg, they accumulate cows for three reasons; (1) separate spheres, their wives could spend money but they cannot sell a cow; (2) if you are not married cows are critical for bridewealth, (3) cows can be lent out to establish social relationships and build "wealth in people" which is critical for when you retire from the mines.

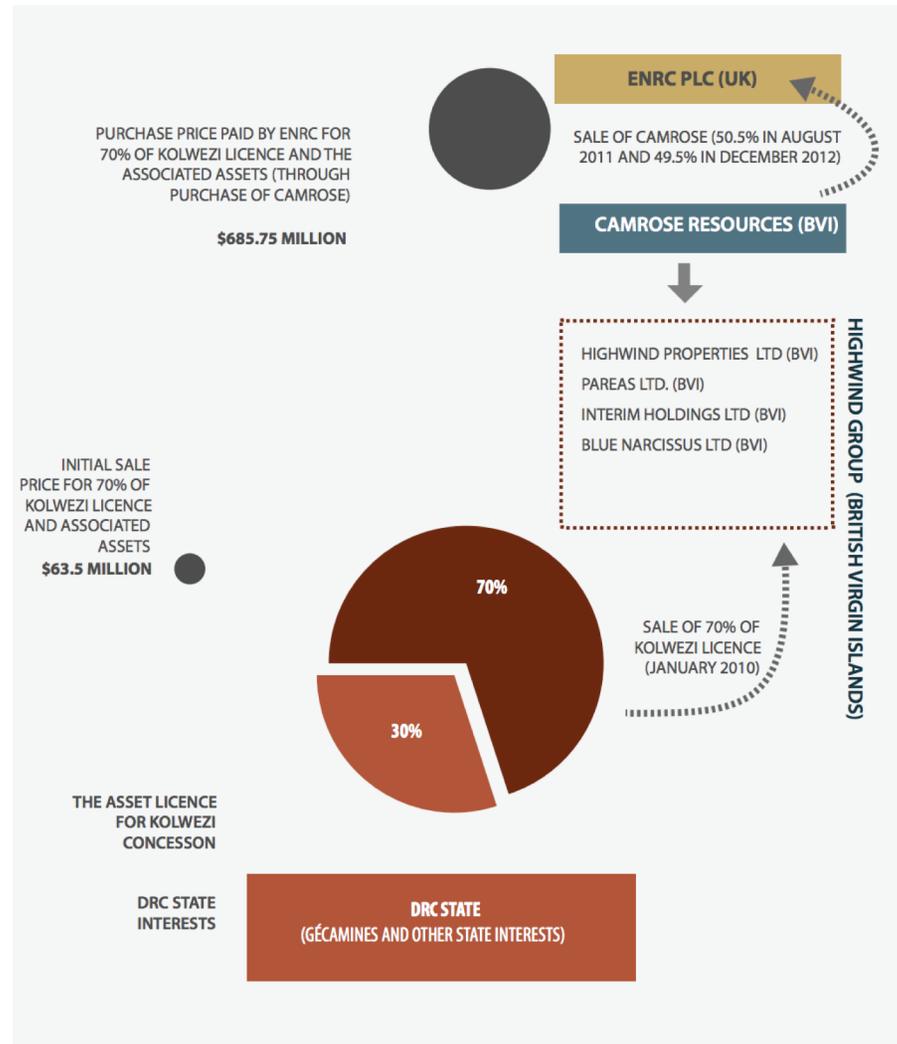
Historical Consequences

- I think these two principles explain a lot about African development. Think about the slave trade. African society was already based on control of people and social relations. Once demand appeared on the coast it was easy to supply dependents as slaves.
- Colonial rule: Africans were used to being ruled by outsiders (not to say they didn't rebel when they figured out that this was qualitatively different..)
- African rulers also tried to engage in personal relations with Europeans by signing treaties etc.

Historical Consequences: Postcolonialism

- Hard to scale up the tools used in stateless societies to control modern states. The attempt to do so has been responsible for many of the economic problems since independence (Ghanaian industrialization – Tony Killick’s *Development Economics in Action*)
- “lack of state capacity” is the consequence of; (1) wealth in people (patrimonialism); (2) the persistent logic of the “stranger kings” equilibrium; (3) the reticence of people to conceded authority and resources to national elites they cannot control.
- Predatory nature of post-colonial governments reinforced the logic – hard to expropriate non-commodified land.
- Personalized relationships carries on taking a big toll on Africa...

KOLWEZI PROJECT



Source: Company documentation cited in Annex 1

Exceptions to the Rule

- Rwanda. We don't know if Ndori was a stranger king in the sense he was invited in, but he certainly was an outsider. But a military revolution (emergence of hereditary military regiments) allowed the king to grab the land (very anomalous).
- Botswana. They managed to scale up their local political institutions far more effectively than most societies – the *kgotla* (spatial distribution of population).
- They also benefitted from some quite amazing leadership – King Khama the Great's decision to abandon his role as witchdoctor (he banned people from celebrating the traditional ceremonies), cattle clientelism (while the Rwandans were making it hereditary and more intense..) and appoint regional governors.

Conclusions

- I tried to argue that two simple principles explain a lot about African political and economic development.
- Though much has changed in the last 100 years, they remain highly significant.
- But there are many plusses here. Africa society is much more about achieved status than Latin American or Indian society. That's crucial for entrepreneurship and economic growth.
- If Africans can find ways to adapt their local political institutions to the national level (like Botswana did- though there are downsides with this model) there is the promise of relatively egalitarian and fluid societies (at least outside of the places with heavy European settlement like South Africa - though the ANC, for all their recent problems, are trying).

Why is Africa Different?

- The literature from historians (Iliffe), ecologists (Diamond), to political scientists (Herbst) to economists (Sachs) is obsessed with the geographical view of African development.
- What I am suggesting here is that African society got into a different equilibrium in terms of political and economic and social institutions. I don't believe that this was pre-determined by geography.
- Maybe Africans were just better at innovating ways of controlling power or they saw how to complement this with economic institutions to make it more effective.
- Unfortunately this turned out to be a very disadvantageous way to organize society in the ears of the slave trade, colonialism and post-colonialism.