

*Research Article*

# Pre-colonial Africa and traditional social evolutionary theories of state formation and civilization

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**One of the most frequently repeated claims in the social history literature is that good government and democracy were radical Western departures from traditional forms of premodern governance that were mired in autocracy. The prevailing Western theory of human social evolution has been one source validating this kind of Eurocentric and progressivistic thinking. Yet, recent empirical investigations and a turn to new theoretical frameworks challenge the prevailing social evolutionary theory. Data on pre-Colonial state formation in sub-Saharan Africa, that had been largely ignored or misinterpreted by social evolutionists, has been one stimulating source for this rethinking.**

**Key words:** Premodern state formation in Africa, government, democracy, collective action, traditional social evolutionary theory, cross-cultural comparison

## INTRODUCTION

Good government, thought to be the essence of contemporary democracy, has been understood as a recent contribution of the Western world to humanity (as Charles Tilly expressed it (1975), democracy “moved from the West to the rest of the world”). Western theories of human social evolution have validated this Eurocentric and progressivistic thinking, based on the assumption that premodern states remained mired in autocracy until the advent of Western-inspired political enlightenment. I describe recent challenges to progressivistic social evolutionary theory, but my main objective is to argue that data from pre-Colonial sub-Saharan African state formation, that had been relegated to a “primitive” and unimportant stage of social evolution, has been and will continue to be a valuable source for new theory.

### Traditional social evolutionary theory

Mid- and late-twentieth century social evolutionary theorists (“neoevolutionists”), such as Elman Service (1975), theorized about how small-scale and highly egalitarian societies of the Neolithic were transformed into larger and more complex societies governed by powerful chiefs or rulers. In their top-down scheme of political transformation, the question of how some individuals or factions gained power over a

subaltern was key, but they noted two distinct contexts for the centralized accumulation of power, “primary” and “primitive” (or “secondary”). In their view, the primary (or “pristine”) archaic civilizations, Mesoamerican, Central Andean, Chinese, Indus Valley, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian, represented early pathways to eventual political modernity. In these regions, causal forces internal to society and local environment were the foundations of endogenous social change. These included, variously, the abilities to organize a vast redistributive (centralized) economy, to build and manage large-scale irrigation systems, and to control valuable agronomic resources under conditions of population pressure. Their theory also assumed that an emergent despotic elite easily subordinated a poorly organized subaltern class who were mystified by elite ideologies such as sacred kingship.

The “primitive” context saw the evolution of what neoevolutionists termed “secondary” chiefdoms and states, in which they included sub-Saharan Africa. Primitive, from the neoevolutionist’s vantage, implied the absence of the endogenous social change forces found in the archaic civilizations. Instead, the forces bringing social change were imposed from outside by more complex and highly evolved civilizations. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, influences they posited were those emanating from the Nile Valley or from Islamic and European sources. External influences included the intrusive conquest of passive settled agricultural populations by militaristic nomadic

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pastoralists, but also included entanglements with interregional and global exchange systems (Goody, 1971; Service, 1975).

### The decline of neo-evolutionist theory and the turn to new directions based in collective action theory

World-wide, archaeological and historical research carried out during the latter half of the twentieth century and into this century has led us to question progressivism and the efficacy of the proposed causal factors underlying the growth of the archaic civilizations (summarized in Blanton, et al., 2008), while at the same time demonstrating that interregional exchange systems must be figured into theories of social change whether “primary” or “secondary” (Blanton, et al). Recent critics of neoevolutionist theory have also questioned the assumed passivity of subalterns in processes of past social change (Thurston, et al., 2021). These findings not only challenge traditional causal theories, they also blur the proclaimed differences between archaic civilizations and the so-called secondary states.

This rethinking has convinced researchers, among them Africanists (Chirikure 2018, 2020; McIntosh 1999; Monroe, 2018) to investigate the possible utility of alternative theories of social change. As part of this movement, I, along with my coauthors and other researchers, have questioned the assumption that powerful governing elites would necessarily have provided the principal engine of past political change (Blanton, 1978). My turn away from traditional theories was influenced by cooperation theorists, most importantly Margaret Levi’s *Of Rule and Revenue* (1988). Her work convinced me to consider the possibility that polity-building, even in premodernity, and outside the sphere of Western history, might in some cases have involved cooperation between social sectors rather than dominance by an elite few. To date, this new a research direction has shown considerable promise (Blanton, et al., 2008, 2016, 2020, 2021; Fargher, et al., 2016; Carballo, et al., 2016).

A cooperation approach to political transformation starts with the question: How is it possible to increase the proportion of persons in a society willing to cooperate, for example, by paying taxes or providing public goods, given that some, especially the governing elite, will see little value for themselves in cooperative actions? The key, in the case of state formation, is the construction of institutions that build and sustain a social bond between the leadership and a broadly conceived group of taxpayers. Levi’s theory emphasizes the importance of fiscal economy as a spur to the state-taxpayer bond. Where a state’s revenues are derived primarily from a broad base of taxpayers, what we call internal revenues, leaders and their factions will be successful to the degree that they provide the elements of good government in the sense of Rothstein (2011). This includes recognizing limits to their own authority while building and fiscally supporting the governing capacity required to monitor and punish malfeasance among their administrative agents and to equitably allocate tax burdens and benefits, such as public goods, across society. Taxpayers, on their part, are assumed to be rational social actors who are more likely to comply with obligations if they have confidence that governing institutions are effective, if they perceive that most other taxpayers are carrying their fair share, and if social actions counter to group benefit, among both the governing elite and taxpayers, can be identified and punished. According

to the theory, good government is less likely to be provided if the leadership has discretionary control over resources (what we call external revenues, that is, external to the main body of taxpayers) and is thus less dependent on taxpayers to fund the state.

## METHODOLOGY

### A comparison of states

To evaluate collective action theory as it might apply to premodern contexts (that is, not influenced politically by concepts of Western democracy), I, with Lane Fargher, conducted a comparative cross-cultural analysis of thirty states from a global sample (Blanton and Fargher, 2008) (Figure 1). To evaluate the degree of collective action policies and practices, we coded for twenty-one measures of good government, grouped by comparative degrees of public goods, bureaucratization (the degree to which bureaucratic procedures were consistent with predictions of collective action theory, for example, open recruitment to positions of governing authority), and control over governing principals, in particular, the degree to which leaders have discretionary control over state resources.

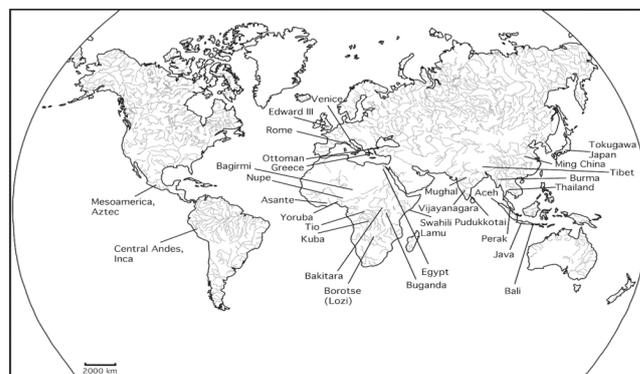


Figure 1. Polities included in the thirty-society sample.

A key selection criteria for including a polity in the coding was that sources provide information on the relative importance of different types of revenues (a variable we call “Resource Emphasis”). From these data, we were able to categorize each polity as to whether revenues were primarily internal or primarily external, even though all the coded states had both internal and external revenue streams. The following revenue types were coded as internal: (a) taxation of ordinary commercial transactions; (b) taxation of basic agricultural and craft production; (c) labor tax; (d) taxation of other production (e.g., mines); and (e) other internal levies, including inheritance tax, poll tax, land tax, and estate tax. External revenues derived from: (a) direct ruler of control of mines, feudal estates, palace lands, or similar categories of land that were recognized as a legally distinct categories; (b) revenues from external warfare and/or empire that were directly controlled by ruler; (c) monopoly control of internal and foreign trade and its tax revenues; (d) degree of direct control of the labor of categories of persons distinct from the ordinary labor levies of taxpayers (for example, palace slaves). To summarize, internal revenues are drawn broadly from most of a polity’s population, while external revenues typically are drawn from a much narrower subset of the population, from spot resources such as mines, or from foreign sources directly controlled by the ruler or other principals.

Public Goods, Bureaucratization, and Ruler Control are aggregate variables we derived by summing the scores assigned to each of their respective component elements (Blanton and Fargher 2008). We then tested Levi's fiscal theory by determining the statistical relationships among the causal (independent) variable Resource Emphasis, and the dependent variables Public Goods, Bureaucratization, and Control over Ruler. Table 1 shows the consistently positive correlations resulting from this analysis, that provide empirical support for the arguments of collective action theory as applied to pre-modern states, namely, that when revenues are mostly internal, leaders will more likely to provide the elements of good government.

**Table 1.** Values of r and Spearman rank order correlation are in the right cells (Spearman values in brackets), statistical significance for the bivariate correlations in the left cells, with bracketed values indicating the correlation values based on the Spearman rank order method. For the dichotomized Resource Emphasis variable, the table shows statistical significance based on t tests of differences of means splitting external and internal revenues.

	Resource emphasis	Public goods	Bureaucratization	Control over ruler
Resource emphasis	-----	0.79	0.61	0.44
Public goods	<0.0001	-----	0.68 (0.7)	0.4 (0.31)
Bureaucratization	0.0005	<.0001 (<0.0001)	-----	0.76 (0.490)
Control over ruler	0.026	0.08 (0.099)	0.0003 (0.0055)	-----

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The importance of sub-saharan african pre-colonial polities for a discussion of good government

Long before I did comparative research based on collective action theory, even as a graduate student, I had been increasingly dissatisfied with neoevolutionism. Although my main research focus has been on pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, I was fascinated by the literature on pre-Colonial sub-Saharan African chiefdoms and states. I felt an imperative to familiarize myself with this abundant literature because it is, in my estimation, the world's richest on this subject-matter. My efforts in this regard eventually proved transformative for my thinking about the growth and decline of past polities because sub-Saharan African state-building often did not align with neoevolutionist claims. This reality was entirely ignored by them even though much of the basic research on Africa I drew from was published long before the peak of neoevolutionist influence during the middle and latter twentieth century. I especially took note of sources such as Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), Beattie (1967), and Lloyd (1965) who pointed to a persistent African pattern in which there was a recognition of mutual obligations between rulers and ruled, and that the "political elite represent, to a greater or lesser degree, the interests of the mass of the people" (Lloyd, 1965). These insights point to the presence of political systems that have more in common with contemporary democracies than with the perceived despotic polities of the premodern past.

### How different was pre-colonial sub-saharan africa?

The results of the comparative study of premodern states have been highly revealing in a number of respects, including the finding of a notable degree of collective action in the pre-Colonial African sample (which included 10 cases) that challenges the idea of African "primitivity." Given the high degree of correlation between the good government variables for the sample as a whole (Table 1), I summed them to develop a measure called "Collective Action Total." Of the thirty-society sample, the group with scores in the bottom one-third of the summed measure, that is, with the least evidence of collective action and good government, included four African societies (Banyoro/Bakitara, Nupe, Tio, and Bagirmi) along with three from Southeast Asia (Aceh, Perak, Bali), fourteenth-century England, and Tokugawa Japan. Three other African societies scored very close to the numerical mean of the thirty-society sample (Swahili Lamu, Yoruba, Buganda), while two African societies, Asante and Lozi, scored in the upper one-third, alongside Mughal, Aztec, Roman High Empire, Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, Renaissance Venice, and Classical Athens. In line with the findings of Evans-Pritchard, Beattie, Lloyd, and others, these two African cases scored exceptionally high on stated moral expectations for the principal leadership and on the degree of institutional constraints imposed on their actions, especially Asante and Lozi, but this was true also for Swahili Lamu. In fact, the scores in this regard for these three are similar to those of Classical Athens and Renaissance Venice. The other non-African societies in the highest-scoring group (Rome, Aztec, Ming, Mughal) showed considerable evidence for bureaucratization and public goods, but their monarchical systems resulted in scores lower than the African cases (or Athens and Venice) on controls exercised over governing principals.

### Rethinking the secondary state

That African societies were secondary social formations with origins owing primarily to the intrusive forces of external conquest and trade needs to be revisited in some important respects. It is true that the African societies were shaped to varying degrees by outside forces, but research has shown that what we call "macroregional" or "world-system" phenomena are more of cross-cultural and cross-historical constant than an African peculiarity (Blanton, et al.). As elsewhere where we see the evolution of chiefdoms and states, the picture in Africa is not simple, but I suggest it reveals a pattern that is of considerable theoretical and practical political science interest. First, it is important to note that the degree of external influence in sub-Saharan Africa was highly variable. While the Swahili coast and Banyoro/Bakitara kingdoms, among others, were deeply invested in an external commercial economy, albeit with extremely different social outcomes, other pre-Colonial African societies in our sample remained relatively apart from external influences during the pre-Colonial period, and this group included some that scored relatively high on measures of collective action and good government, including Yoruba, Buganda, and Lozi.

In some of the African societies we studied, external commercial interactions did have authoritarian outcomes, for example Dahomey in the context of the Atlantic trade (Monroe,

2014). This kind of external causal process evidently was also at play in the rise of the Banyoro/Bakitar kingdom (one of the coded societies). However, the period for which we had codable information (19th century) had been preceded by a relatively egalitarian phase of state-building that began around 1500 C.E. (known primarily from archaeological research). Yet, by the nineteenth century a royal monopoly had been imposed over the growing slave and ivory export economies that provided “external” revenues. The monopoly became a source of funds to support a highly autocratic system with few or no public goods or economic or other controls exercised over kings (Robertshaw, 2016). Further, the resulting social system was highly stratified, with the Bahuma pastoralists and the ruling nobility dominating the much poorer Baheru cultivators, the latter referred to by Roscoe (1923) as serfs.

However, external entanglements in macroregional and global economic circuits did not have autocratic outcomes in all cases, for example, among the Swahili coastal polities (Swahili Lamu was chosen for detailed coding in the comparative sample). This region of East Africa was strongly influenced by macroregional commerce, and Lamu was one of the port towns mediating the interior African-Indian Ocean-Red Sea trade. Unlike the Banyoro/Bakitar kingdom, however, the stresses posed by growing wealth and ethnic diversity were moderated by the construction of institutions that allowed for political participation across social sectors, that distributed political power, and that prevented civic leaders from benefitting economically during their terms of office. Lamu’s central political institutions consisted of two governing councils, each representing major kinds of stakeholders. Council members were elected from the general population, and the two council leaderships held the polity’s central authority, which was rotated between the councils every four years (Prins, 1967, 1971; Ylvisaker, 1979).

Asante also illustrates the highly variant outcomes of external commercial involvement. Although its population was involved in the pan-African and European commerce, the wealth those generated did not underpin the growth of autocracy. While commercial success by citizens was highly regarded and was considered crucial to the success of the polity (the state at times even provided seed money to budding entrepreneurs), at the same time the state gained an important source of revenues from a substantial inheritance tax on wealthy entrepreneurial households (McCaskie, 1995). At the same time, an institutionally complex system of governance provided assurance that the leadership and its bureaucracy can be responsive to commoner needs in a way that would transcend the limitations inherent in government by a hereditary aristocracy. The key features of this system included: rulers governed in concert with higher and lower councils (Wilks, 1975) and could be rebuked for amoral action (Rattray, 1929); rulers could be impeached (ibid)(one was impeached for taking treasury funds for personal use (Wilks, 1975), and if impeached they were held accountable after leaving office (Rattray, 1929); office-holding could not be a path to personal wealth or political advantage because private gain was prohibited for officeholders and rulers had no personal control of or access to state revenues (Wilks, 1975). Additionally, the Asante system

did not result in a highly stratified society. Although slaves constituted an important source of population growth, rather than bringing a caste-like system of free and unfree, slaves had considerable potential for upward social mobility and typically would become free members of society (Wilks, 1978, Blanton, et al., 2021).

## CONCLUSION

What is most astounding to me is that Western social evolutionary theorists were so committed to their primitivist view of Africa they failed to appreciate its diverse political forms and to realize the potential this diversity represents as a source for new theory-building regarding political transformations. For example, from the vantage of a collective action theorist, I find it fascinating but not well understood that some of the pre-Colonial African polities were deeply involved in macroregional and global exchange networks, yet productively managed the influx of wealth by using it in part to fund responsive and legible systems of government. They also devised institutions to inhibit the potential for official corruption and to foster economic and social egalitarianism. The highly variant ways that polities address problems that ensue from an influx of wealth deserves research attention even to this day. We know that autocracy may result when institutional weakness gives a ruling elite discretionary control over resources, including from petroleum and mineral exports, as described by Jensen and Wantchekon for contemporary African states (the “resource curse” (Ross 2015)).

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