Africa's Assets

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Wheeler Institute Africa Course

Something New out of Africa

- You've heard a lot in this course about all the challenges in Africa.
- But history doesn't repeat itself, despite what Marx said.
- Remember, as Pliny the Elder put it

"there's always something new out of Africa".

- In fact there are a lot of success and a lot of potential. That's our agenda for today.
- First, a thought experiment.

China's terrible 200 years

- Put yourself in China in 1978. The country had had a terrible 200 years.
- In the second half of the 18th century the Qing fiscal system fell apart, the Grand Canal silted up, the granary system of famine relief collapsed and there was rampant corruption.
- In the 19th century the country was humiliated by European powers, forced to buy opium, and ravaged by the Taiping rebellion. Millions died.
- In the 20th century the Imperial state disintegrated, there was civil war, Communist Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, millions of people starved or were murdered.
- Who would have predicted what turned into the most rapid experience of economic growth in human history?

China's Latent Assets

- It turned out that underneath all that chaos, bad governance, corruption and institutional failures, China had important **latent assets**.
- An obvious one is the norm of meritocracy. Confucius said

  "promote those who are worthy and talented"
- China was the one part of the world where the pre-modern elite were selected via competitive examination.
- This is a very powerful sociological principle on which to base entrepreneurship, innovation and rapid economic growth.

Africa's Terrible 500 years

- As long as 500 years ago the Kingdom of the Kongo had already been warped by the Portuguese into a state based on slave exports.
- The organization of African society then made the continent vulnerable to a series of disastrous encounters with the forces of globalization
  - The negative impact of the slave trade on societies (trust) and institutions (states, judicial functions)
  - The negative impact of colonialism (creation of artificial states, land expropriation, racism)
  - The Cold War
  - Predatory mining companies (read the Africa Progress Report!)

Africa's Latent Assets?

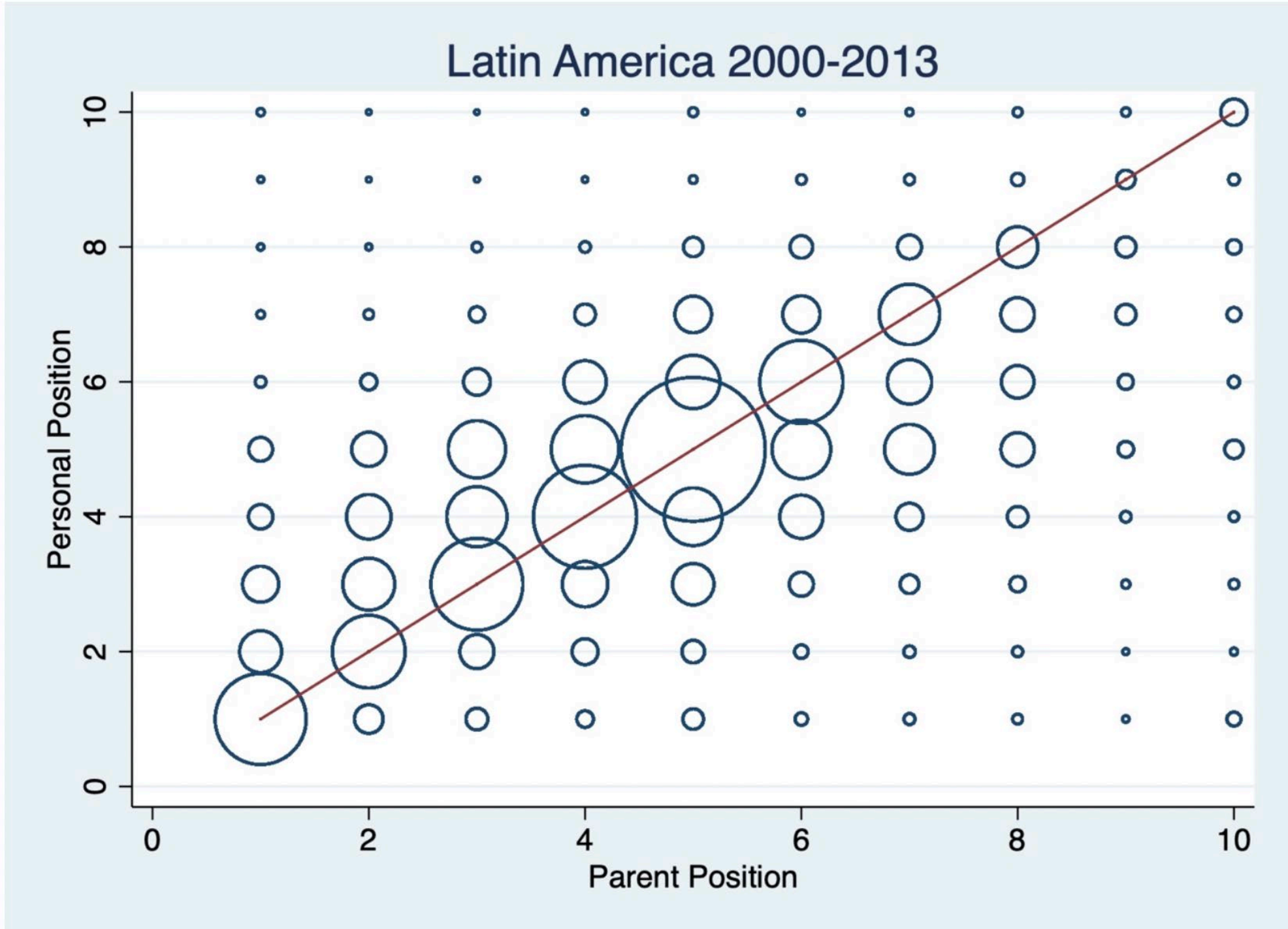
- Could it be that, like China, Africa has **latent assets** in the same way that China had?
- In this research we argue that the answer to this is **yes**.
- We emphasize three types of advantages that Africa has relative to many other parts of the world.

1. Unlike many hierarchical societies in south Asia and Latin America, African society is more **achievement based**. This is critical for entrepreneurship. It's not China but it's the type of sociological advantage China had.
2. Africans are **cosmopolitan**. They speak more languages than anywhere else in the world and because of the diversity of Africa they are used to dealing with differences (ethnic, linguistic, cultural). This gives them a huge advantage in negotiating a globalized world (relative say to English people!). (research of Katherine Kinzler)
3. Africans have a long traditional of resisting authority and are deeply **skeptical of power** (few support "charismatic populists" in Africa). This is a perfect basis for building inclusive and accountable political systems.

Achievement and Social Mobility

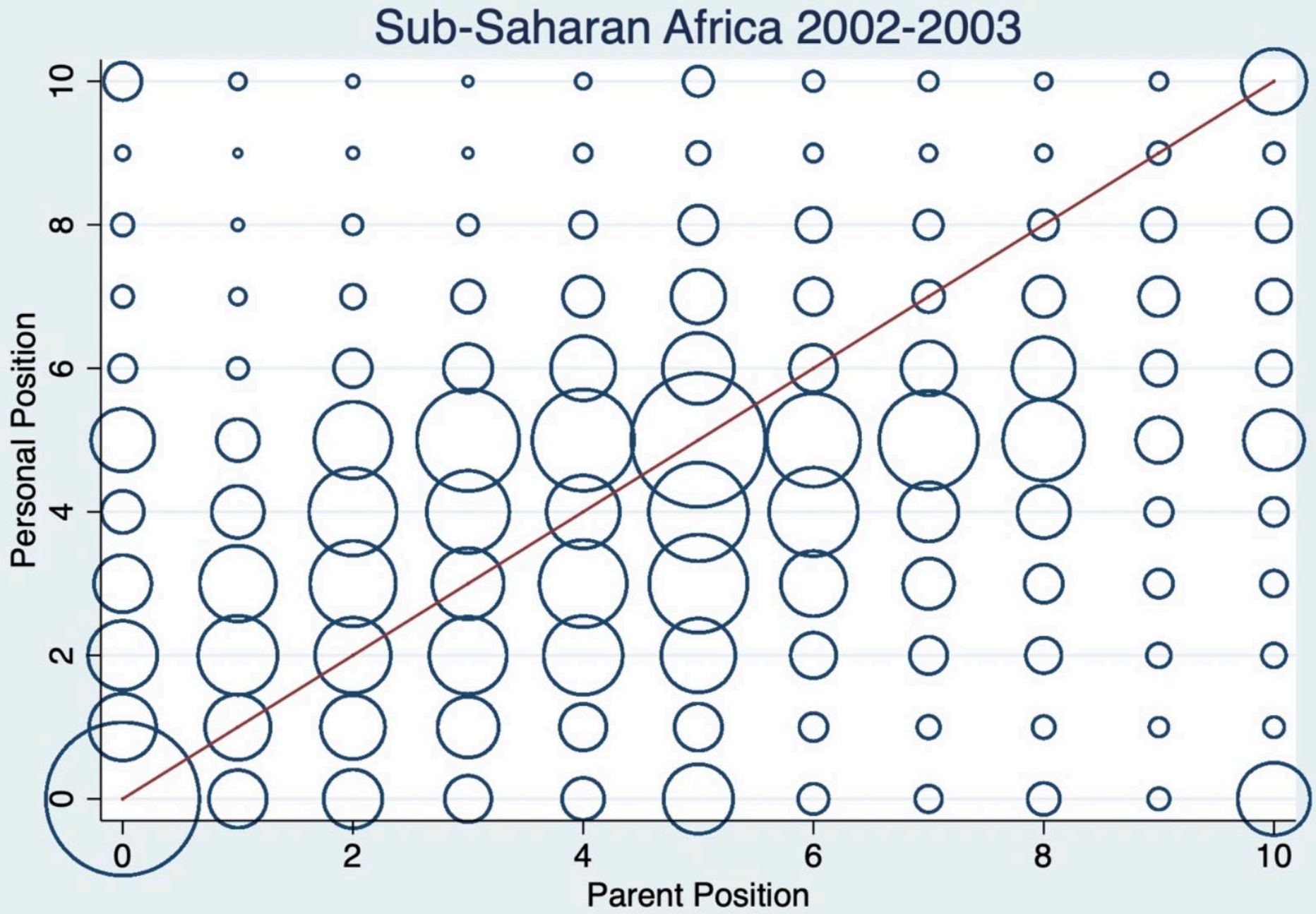
Cross-National Evidence

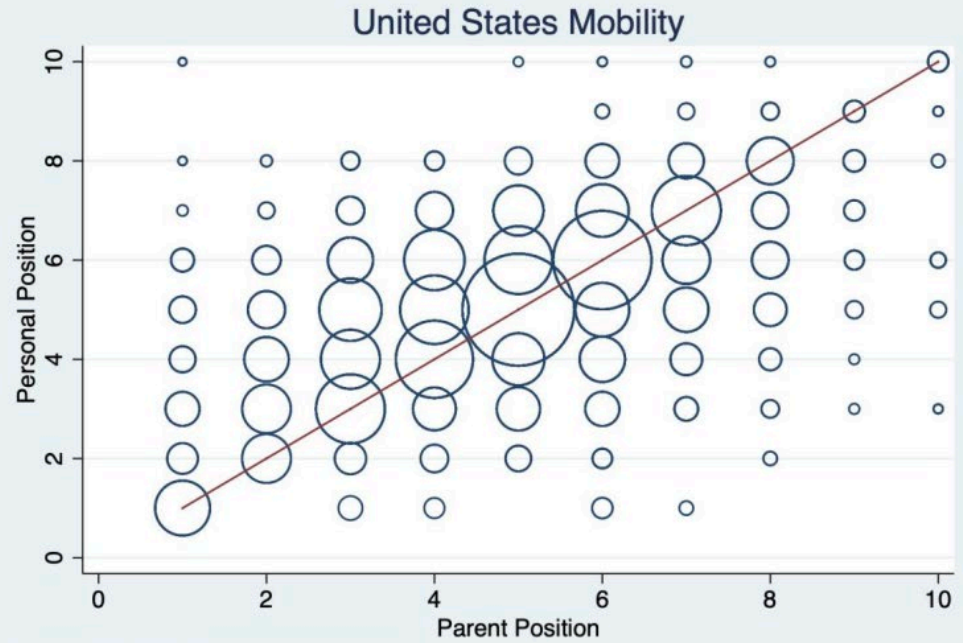
- We illustrate our first argument with some striking data on perceptions of social mobility and attitudes towards hard work.
- Since the work of Arthur Lewis in the 1950s, we've understood that entrepreneurship is a key part of growth. It is critical that people with ideas and creativity can get to the top and are not held back by barriers or hierarchy. Social mobility is a key underpinning of development.
- Many surveys, such as the Afrobarometer, Latinobarómetro, etc. contain comparable questions on people's perceptions of social mobility.
- People are asked to place their parents on an 0-10 income (Africa) (or 1-10 elsewhere) scale and then place themselves on the same scale. In a society with little social mobility, one would expect the observations to be on the 45 degree line.
- Somewhere like … Latin America.


Latin America 2000-2013
Personal Position
0
2
4
6
8
10
Parent Position
0
2
4
6
8
10

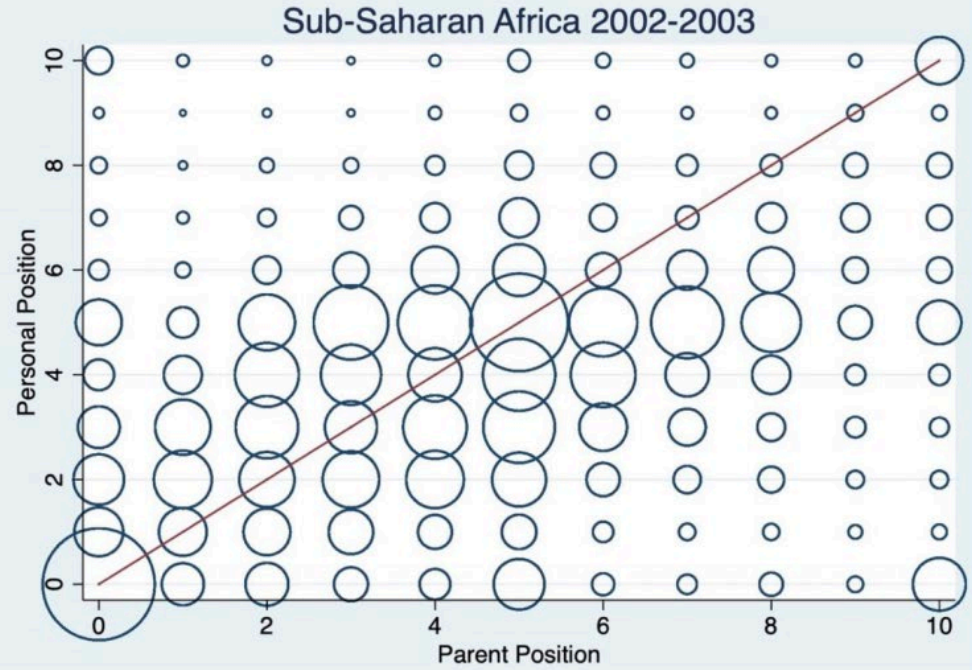
What about Africa?

- The picture is remarkably different. The data is spread around the figure off the 45 degree line.
- For Latin America, 52.3% of respondents view their economic score as the same as their parents.
- In Africa, this figure is only 20.5% - the data is not concentrated on the 45 degree line suggesting a very high degree of social mobility.
- How does this compare to other parts of the world? Remarkably, in this data, Africans report more mobility than anywhere else
  - In Asia and the Middle East 47.96% of respondents view their economic score as the same as their parents.
  - In the U.S. 40% of respondents view their economic score as the same as their parents (the number is 38% in Europe).
- We present this as evidence for our argument that African societies are achievement based.


Sub-Saharan Africa 2002-2003
Personal Position
Parent Position
0
2
4
6
8
10

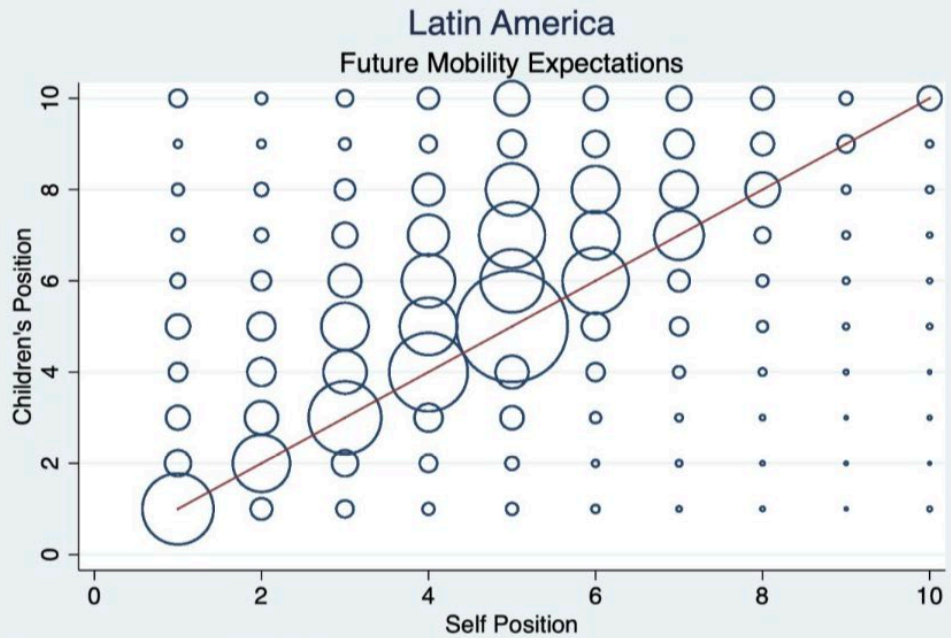


Source: ISSP 2009: Social Inequality Survey

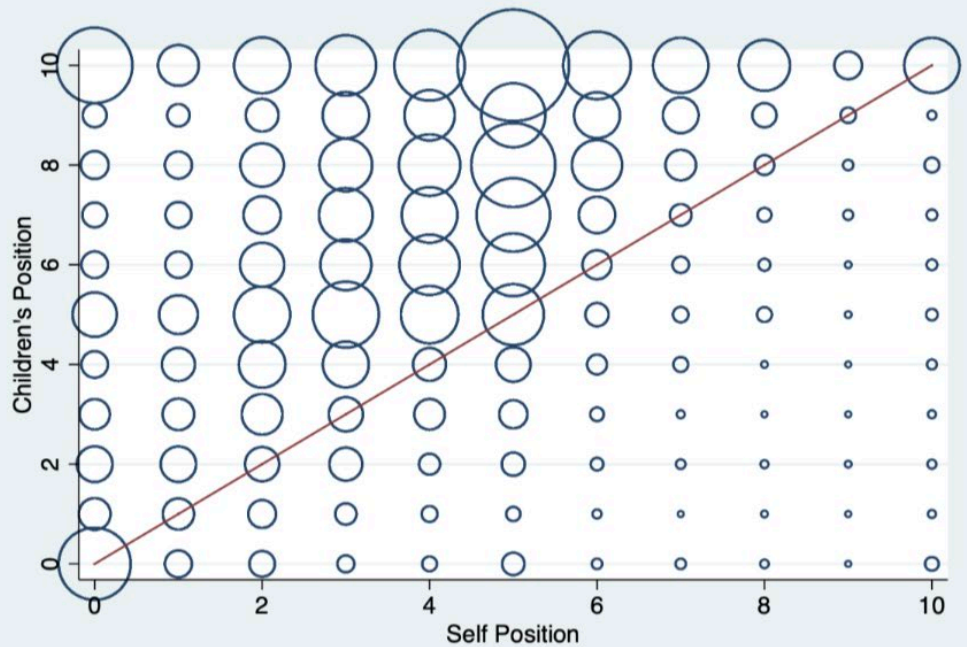


From Parents to Children

- These surveys ask similar questions about the expected mobility of children. This evidence is even more striking. Africa is remarkably distinct.
- What is the connection between expected mobility and actual mobility? Africans are over-optimistic relative to actual patterns of mobility.
  - But this is a characteristic of the United States too (Alesina, Alberto, Stefanie Stantcheva, and Edoardo Teso. 2018. "Intergenerational Mobility and Preferences for Redistribution." American Economic Review, 108 (2): 521-54.)
  - This paper also shows that peoples' expectations of mobility shape their policy preferences (so expectations matter, even if out of sync with reality).



Source: Latinobarometro 2000-2013

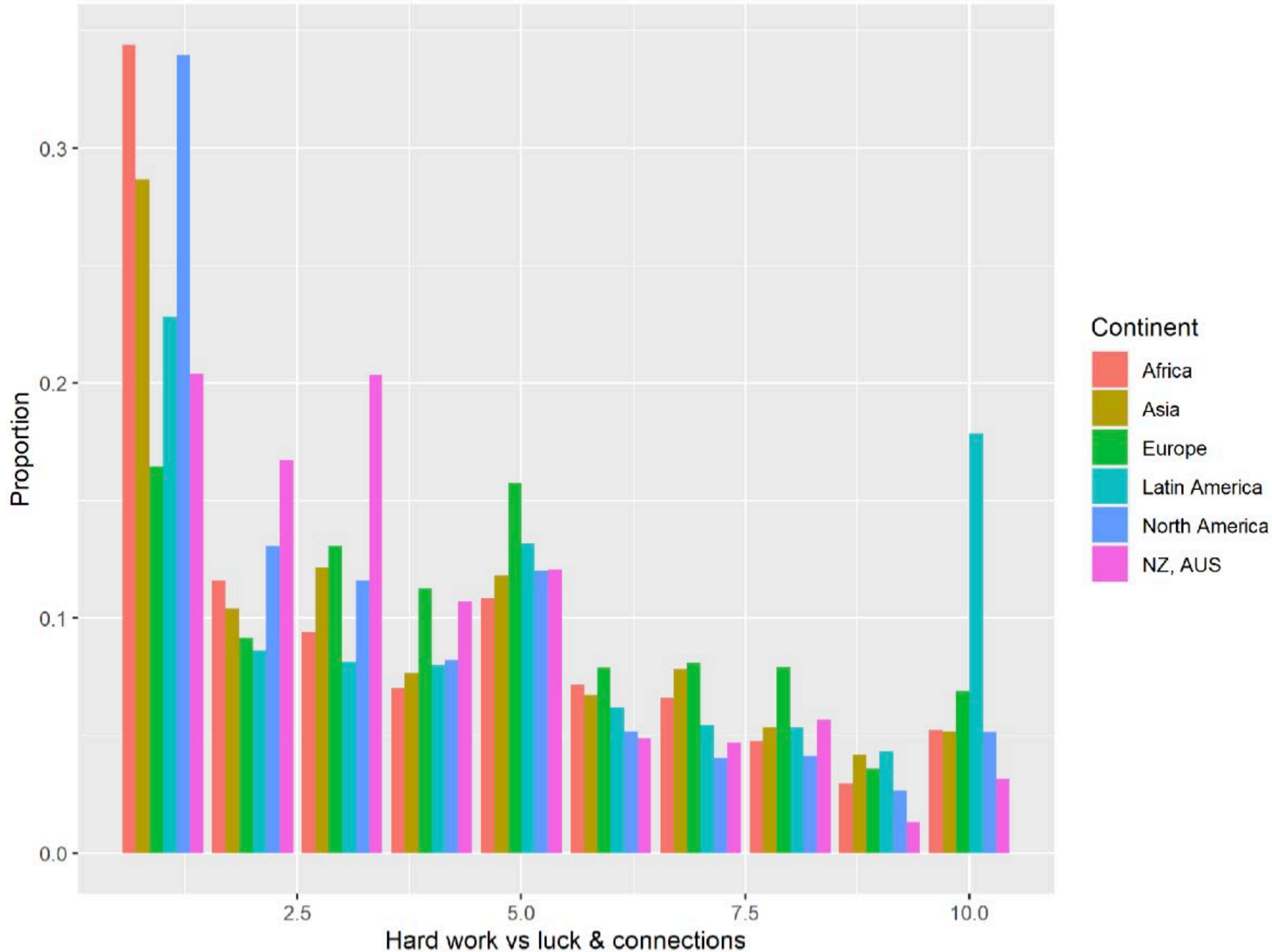


Source: Afrobarometer 2002-2003

Africa Future Mobility Expectations

The Return to Effort

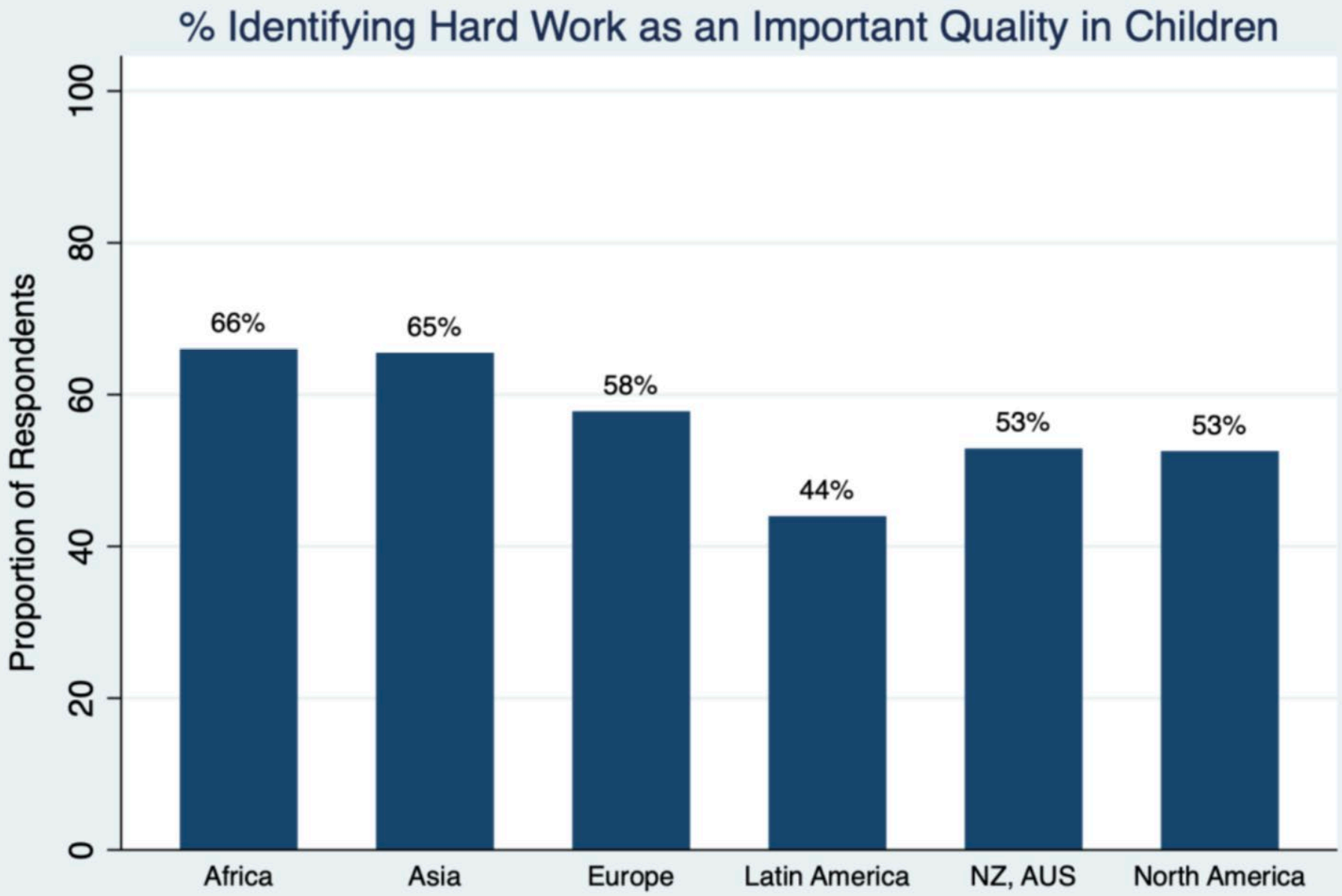
- Evidence highly consistent with the social mobility data comes from the World Value Survey which asks respondents to choose between "In the long run, hard work usually brings a better life" and "Hard work doesn't generally bring success—it's more a matter of luck and connections". Below we plotted the distribution of answers by continent (1=hard work brings a better life; 10=it's more luck and connections).
- We see that a higher proportion of Africans report 1 than anywhere else in the world, including the United States.
- Africans think the way to get ahead is not via connections, but hard work.


Proportion
0.3
0.2
0.1
0.0
2.5
5.0
7.5
10.0
Hard work vs luck & connections
Continent
Africa
Asia
Europe
Latin America
North America
NZ, AUS

What values to inculcate in your children?

- The WVS also asks about what values you would like your children to have: Independence; Hard work; Feeling of responsibility; Imagination; Tolerance and respect for other people; Thrift, saving money and things; Determination, perseverance; Religious faith; Unselfishness; Obedience; Self-expression.
- People can mark any five of these they think are important.
- Let's look at 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.

Source: World Value Survey

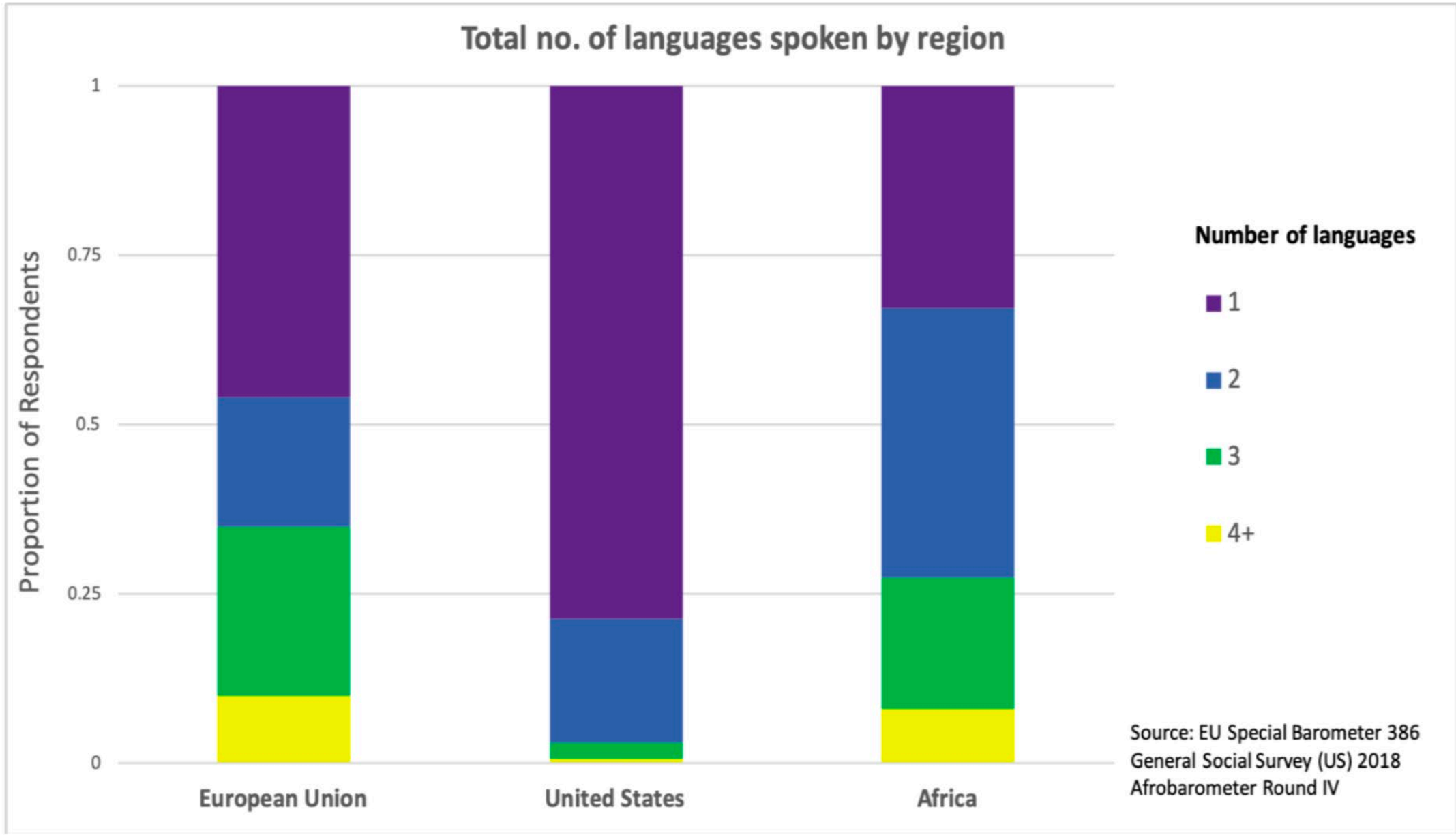


Source: World Value Survey

Cosmopolitanism

- A fundamental fact about Africa is its political, cultural and social diversity.
- Africans are used to dealing with, negotiating and respecting differences.
- One consequence is **multilingualism**. There are fewer monolingual people in Africa than anywhere else in the world.
- Maybe it's not so useful globally to speak Lingala or Igbo, but …
- Who is better equipped to deal with a globalized and polycentric world than people used to learning multiple languages and endlessly negotiating cultural differences?

Multilingualism



Cosmopolitanism and the Bantu Expansion

- An fascinating piece of evidence is the nature of the Bantu expansion which was the historical migration of people (and institutions and technologies) from western Nigeria and Cameroon, throughout central and southern Africa.
- This process was not coercive, but Bantu peoples merged with locals, respecting the land rights of the autochthones, separating political and ritual authority.
- Very different from Eurasia: Chess versus mancala.
- Reflecting this, in most African languages the words for "guest" and "stranger" are the same and often the same as "foreigner". Outsiders are welcome bringers of ideas, technologies …

Mancala versus Chess





Language	Country	Word for "Stranger"	Word for "Guest"	Word for "Foreigner"
Swahili	Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda	mgeni	mgeni	mgeni
Amharic	Ethiopia, Eretria	inigida	inigida	yeba'idi āgeri sewi
Hausa	Nigeria	baƙon	baƙon	baƙon
Yoruba	Nigeria	àlejò	àlejò	àlejò
Igbo	Nigeria	onye ọbịa	onye obia	onye obia
Zulu	South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Eswatini (formerly Swaziland)	isihambi	isivakashi	idebe
Xhosa	South Africa	umntu wasemzini	undwendwe	owasemzini
Somali	Somalia	ajnabiyad	marti	ajnabiyad
Shona	Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana and Mozambique	mutorwa	muenzi	mutorwa
Afrikaans	South Africa, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe	vreemdeling	gas	buitelander
Nyanja	Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe	mlendo	mlendo	mlendo
Malagasy	Madagascar	vahiny	vahiny	vahiny

Colour Legend	
Green	Words are the same
Yellow	Words are similar

Stranger= Guest= Foreigner in African languages (well not Afrikaans…)

Wealth in People

- This cosmopolitanism is part of a much deeper humanistic ontology and inclusiveness.
- In Africa people are more valuable than things. As a Yoruba proverb has it

"A gift of money is not equal in value to a [gift of a] person"

- Fundamental to Igbo ontology, for example, is the notion that everyone and everything is interdependent.
- Everyone has value and is good at something and this is respected.
- As proverbs have it

"the tall man is needed when hanging the roof of a building"

"If one thing stands, another thing stands by it"

"The human being answers calls; wealth does not"

"let the kite perch and let the eagle perch"

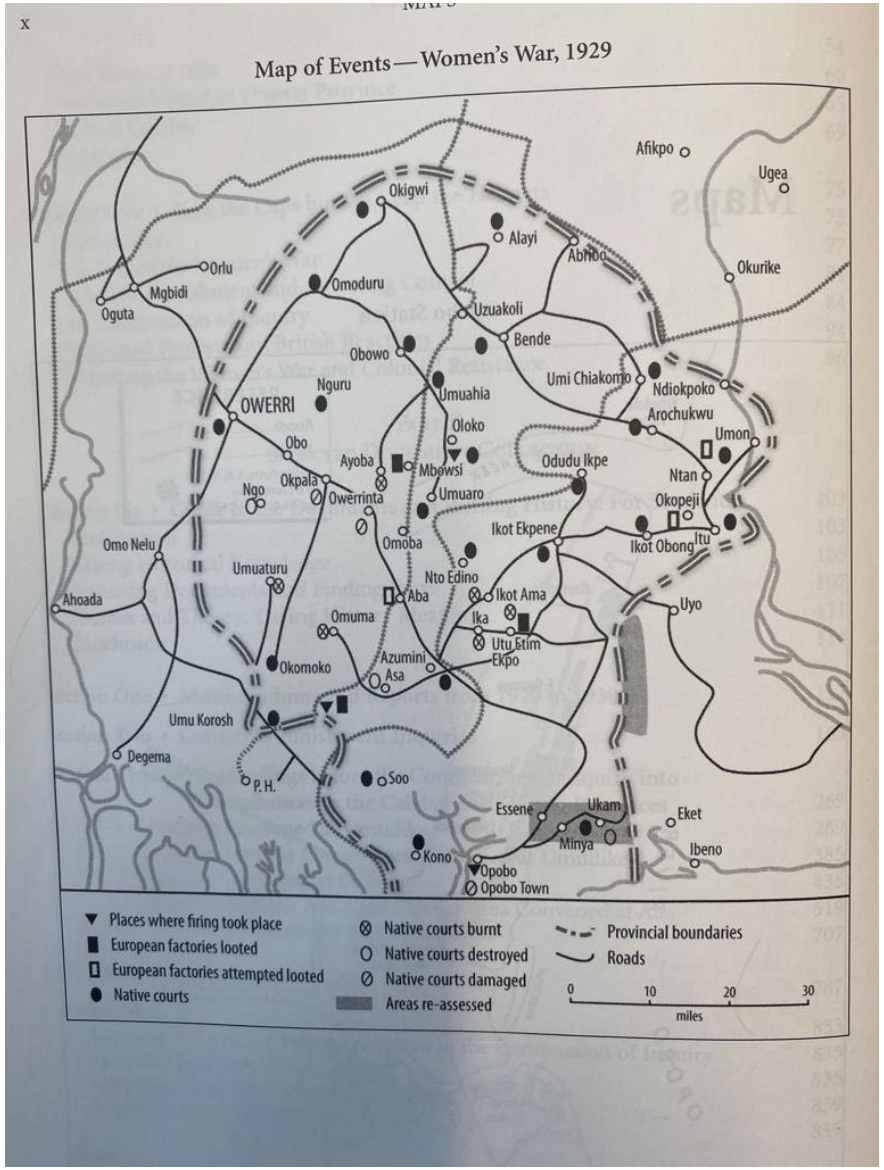
Radical Inclusivity

- This is reflected in the emphasis on decision-making by consensus in the political sphere.
- This is an almost unimaginable task in western society, but is is how African communities daily make decisions.
- In Igbo society if you have to divide something the youngest person chooses the division. But then the oldest person takes the first pick, then the second oldest picks … finally the youngest.
- It's a recipe for egalitarianism.

The Power of Women

- In Southern Nigeria women are so empowered that they fought the 1929 Aba Women's War against British colonialism and forced the abandonment of the system of indirect rule.
- This region also created so called "Dual Sex"' political systems whereby there were parallel political institutions for men and women with a male king (*Obi*) and a female queen (*Omu*) who was completely un-related (not his wife or kin).
- The literature by anthropologists and historians on this empowerment brings many new ideas onto the table about the sources of female empowerment and dis-empowerment.
- Let us give you some examples.

The Aba Women's War



Omu Martha Dunkwu of Okpanam



Animona Man of the Year



Women's Power in Igboland

- Igbo society prior to colonization was very decentralized and lacked any political authority above the village level.
- The exception was in the west (Anioma) where the *Omu* institution emerged.
- Elsewhere political power was allocated to councils, age grades (male and female), societies and associations (male and female), according to age (male and female). Power was also given to lineages and secret societies.
- The extent of heterogeneity is immense. Let us give you some examples.

Women's power in Lejja

- Lejja in Enugu state is made up of a group of 33 villages.
- There is a council which is the main executive/judicial body of the villages.
- It is composed of men and women.
- There are 33 men each of whom is the eldest man in their respective village - the *oha*. The oldest of these *ohas* is the *Eze Lejja*.
- Each village is made up of several extended kinship groups. Each of these groups nominates a daughter to sit in the council (so there are more women than men).
- The senior women - the *Eze Ndiom*a - is a daughter from one particular village only. The position is held for life and rotates between the kinship of groups in that village.

The Council place in Lejja, Enugu State



The Market Shrine in Lejja, where women solve disputes



Women's Power in Nnobi

- Ifi Amadiume wrote about the political power of women in her book on Nnobi in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*.
- As the title of her book emphasizes she puts a lot of emphasis on how gender was culturally constructed - women could take other women as wives and daughters could take on male roles.
- Politically the village was organized around kinship groups headed by the *okpala*, first son, and *ada*, first daughter.
- The most powerful political role was the *Agba Ekwe*, the oldest women in the Ekwe society.
- The most powerful man was the *Eze Agba* who was the most senior man in the ozo title society, but inferior to the *Agba Ekwe* who was the priestess of the river Goddess Idemili.
- Titled men and women made up two separate councils.

Why are women so Empowered?

- The literature and our fieldwork suggests a number of inter-related ideas (there is no one master variable but many re-enforcing factors).
- Pro-nouns are not gendered in Igbo.
- Many deities in Igboland are female (there is a clear correlation between female political power and the strength of supernatural forces).
- Separate spheres in the economy - women control their own crops (cocoyams, casava), their own money and the market.
- Amadiume emphasizes that "Favorable matriarchal ideologies guaranteed an important position for women in the central political structure" (67) and "the culture glorified maternity" (79).

Women Grow Cocoyams



Men grow Yams



De jure and de facto Empowerment

- These underlying factors empower women both in the de jure sense (the *Omu*; the council in Lejja; the separate council for titled women in Nnobi) but also in a de facto sense.
- Perhaps the most powerful women's organization in Igboland is the *Umuada* the organization of daughters of a village.
- They meet to bury all men who pass away and are involved in dispute resolution and judicial procedures.
- One could attribute their collective power to some of the factors we have listed, such as their control of the market (for example in Lejja), but "The power and authority of daughters were the result of a cultural construct, not of economic achievement" (Amadiume, p. 190).
- Her claim is that the empowerment of women in Igboland is a consequence of different cultural ideas about gender and women that sharply deviates from that of western societies.



FIGURE 3.

The dead man's clan-sisters, *umuada,* circle in the village square and curse, furious about the elders' verdict.

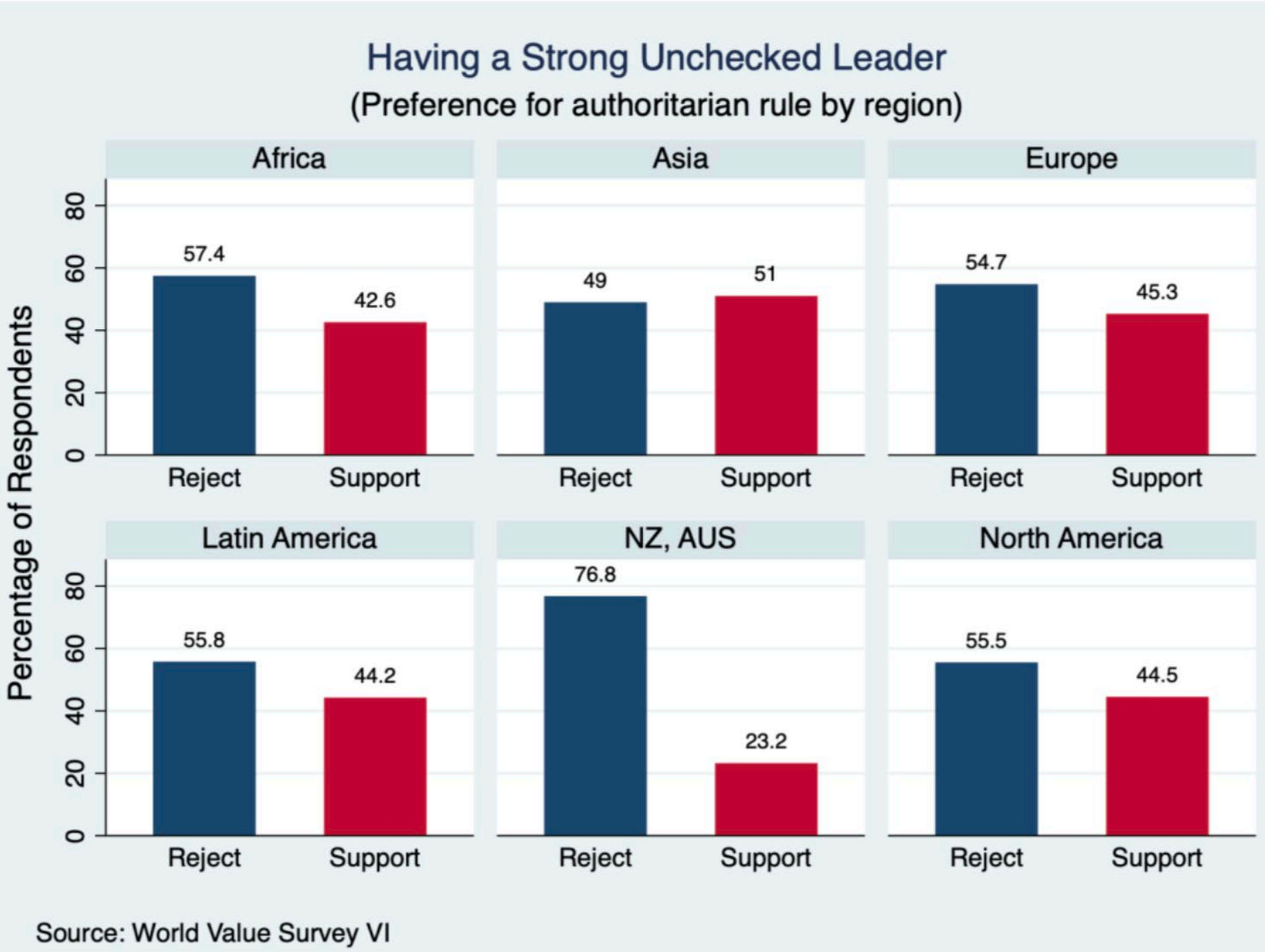
Skepticism of Power

"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".

- Mary Douglas (1963) *The Lele of Kasai*, Oxford University Press, p. 1.
- Why was political society so small scale in Africa?
- We think one salient reason for this is the skepticism of political power.
- Images of political misbehavior are prominent in African oral history in the form of the **Drunken King**.
- No concept of what Mexican historian Enrique Krauss calls the **Redeemer** in his history of Latin American populism.

Skepticism: Some Evidence

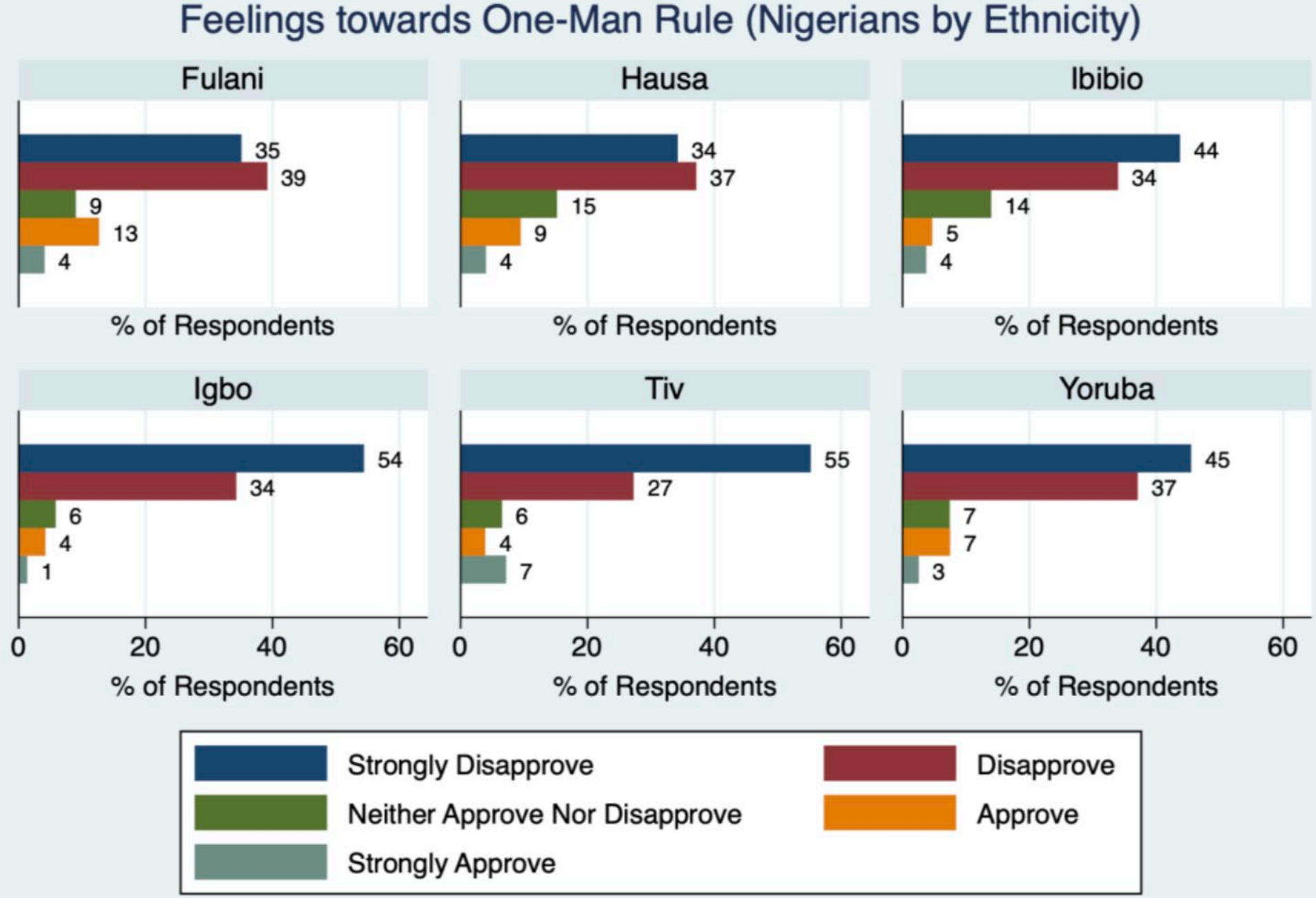
- When people around the world were asked how they felt about living under a strong leader who does not have to bother with elections and parliament, Africans were more likely to reject unchecked leaders than North Americans, Europeans, Latin Americans and Asians!
- Similarly, comparing feelings towards one man rule between East Asia and Africa in the representative regional barometers we find only 13% of Africans would approve of a political system with no elections and parliament (compared to a third of Asians!).
- Africans consistently and overwhelmingly reject authoritarian systems and show strong strong support for holding leaders accountable, more so than any part of the developing world and even most parts of the developed world.


Having a Strong Unchecked Leader
(Preference for authoritarian rule by region)
Africa
Asia
Europe
Latin America
NZ, AUS
North America
Percentage of Respondents
0
20
40
60
80
57.4
42.6
49
51
54.7
45.3
55.8
44.2
76.8
23.2
55.5
44.5
Reject
Support
Source: World Value Survey VI

Historical Social Contracts

- This skepticism towards authority is deeply rooted in African "social contracts" and it is one reason the Jos Plateau looks the way it does.
- To see this we break down the answer to the question about attitudes towards one-man rule in Nigeria by ethnicity.
- One sees that groups like the Igbo, Tiv and Ibibio, which historically were stateless, disapprove much more strongly about one man rule than groups like the Fulani or Hausa which had more centralized state institutions.
- As the proverb has it: "Igbo enwe eze"

"The Igbo have no king"



Source: Afrobarometer Rounds IV-VII

[N=5821]

Conclusions

- We think this provides a different way to think about African development instead of focusing on the litany of usual suspects.
- The usual suspects (bad governance, lack of accountability, corruption …) are important and need to be addressed ...
- But Africans have a long history of developing hybrid solutions to both economic and political institutional problems.
- We need to understand better how to tap into the continent's latent and actual assets.
- Let us flag: the **autonomous/political** role of women; **Ubuntu** and the collectivist and inclusive nature of society.
- Africa's real assets are not its gold, oil, copper … they are its people and their unique history, attitudes, culture, creativity, energy and institutions.