African History through the lens of Economics

Questions and Answers - Week 3

Tuesday February 15, Main Lecture 3: Social Structure [kinship, family, social relations], *with Nathan Nunn*

Wednesday February 16, Special Lecture 4: Understanding African Studies *with Awa Ambra Seck and Amma Panin:*

Please visit our course website to access the recorded lectures and slides of each session. Due to the high volume of questions received during the live Q&A, we have prepared this document, which addresses a selection of questions that were not possible to answer during the lecture.

Question 1: Is there a correlation between social structure and development in modern Africa? Is polygamy a measure of social prestige, wealth and the provision of labour? What is the effect of a large family and an extended family on development?

There is, indeed, a strong correlation between kinship relationships and development in Africa. The larger the family, for example, the more difficult it may be to cater for all the needs of all family members adequately. A large family may not educate its children to the best of the children's ability due to limited resources. Further, a family breadwinner may direct resources to members of their extended family, and not necessarily to the breadwinner's biological children. Polygamy, although no longer as widespread as it was in pre-colonial times, does still exist in some societies in modern Africa (and elsewhere). In many cases, it is an illustration of prestige; especially if the husband is a wealthy person, but it can also be problematic for others, who may not have the means to look after more than one wife. Polygamy is mainly practiced in societies whose main economic activity is agriculture, as the more wives and children one has, the easier it is to mobilise labour for farming purposes.

A great overview on African polygamy is by James Fenske; accessible here. A more generic review on family ties and development by Alberto F. Alesina and Paola Giuliano from the *Handbook of Economic Growth* is accessible here.

As for the role of family size in development and incomes per capita, this is a complex relationship. Question 2 below addresses some of the main ideas.

Question 2: What is the relationship between the number of children, fertility rates, population growth and development? Are certain African places and populations poorer because they have more children? Does the agricultural economy pressurise people to have more children in order to increase the workforce? What is the contribution of gender roles to higher fertility?

Discussion about the role of population growth, fertility and desired number of children in economic development is large and very old. There are many theories and potential mechanisms linking population, and population growth, to economic growth.

First, the neoclassical growth model (Solow-Swan), often used as the baseline model, emphasises that higher rates of population growth dilute resources and, in particular, capital stock, which may slow down development and lower incomes in the long run. In the contemporary world, there is, indeed, a negative correlation between fertility rates and GDP per capita, and countries with higher fertility rates tend to be

poorer, on average. But, as always, it's not straightforward to assert that higher fertility rates are a *cause* of poverty.

Second, in so-called new-growth-theory models, pioneered by Paul Romer (as well as Philipe Aghion, Peter Howitt, Elhanan Helpman and Gene Grossman) there are 'scale' effects, whereby higher population increases economic growth. Such positive effects may stem from a higher potential market size (spurring innovation, entrepreneurship and technology adoption), and from the fact that innovation (generation of ideas) is an increasing function of population. An interesting example of these effects is given in the paper by J. Henrich, where he analyses the case of Tasmania and how, after it was separated from the Australian continent by rising sea levels, technological sophistication began deteriorating; apparently due to small population size and weak scale effects. Indigenous peoples of Australia, on the other side the Bass Strait, had a much higher level of technological development by contrast.

The third – and oldest – theory linking population growth and economic growth is that originated by English 18th century economist Thomas Malthus. Malthusian theory holds that, as long as there are fixed factors of production, such as land (which is crucial in agricultural economies), any increase in incomes will be offset by a larger number of children; this subsequently decreases the average product of land, so incomes decline. The paper by Rogall and Yanagizawa-Drott shows that Malthusian mechanisms may still be operative: the authors focus on Rwanda and the dynamics of incomes and fertility after the genocide there. In particular, they show that villages which experienced higher levels of violence (where more people died in the genocide) have higher living standards, more assets per capita and higher fertility levels, but lower levels of standards of schooling. This suggests that, in Rwanda, a reduced population temporarily increased living standards, as predicted by Malthusian theory, and increased fertility rates (which decreased resources devoted to education).

Subsequent research has shown that population and development affect each other in more complex ways, and that the relationship depends on the stage of development of the society or country. Higher population growth may spur more new ideas and boost both supply and demand for innovations (so-called 'Boserupian growth'), but higher population is still a constraint on average returns to labour. Once education becomes crucial for earnings and coping with technological change, families may begin shifting the balance between child quantity and 'quality' towards quality; i.e., towards more educated and less numerous children. This process can ultimately trigger demographic transition and sustained growth in living standards. For an overview, see the contributions of Oded Galor, David Weil and co-authors in the Unified Growth Theory; EconPapers: From Stagnation to Growth: Unified Growth Theory (repec.org).

For empirical findings from Africa, consult the works by Roland Pongou; e.g., Mabeu_JMP.pdf - Google Drive, as well as a broader overview in *Fertility Transition: Is sub-Saharan Africa Different?* on JSTOR (brown.edu).

Question 3: What is the role of colonisation in introducing certain cultural practices, such as ethnicism, kinship, individualism and commodification, into social structures in Africa? Did Islam play the same role as Christianity in changing social structures?

Colonisation has had a marked impact on the African continent. Just as in Europe, where the church was instrumental in discouraging certain practices (such as polygamy and cousin marriage) in the Middle Ages, so, too, was the case in Africa during the colonial period. Practices that were discouraged by Christian missionaries included polygamy, widow inheritance and others. Islamic teachings also had an impact on the cultural practices found in Africa.

For specifics on the measurement of kinship ties, etc., see a great paper by Ben Enke here. For the effects of missionary activities in Africa on education, fertility and other outcomes, see the questions below that discuss the role of Christian missions. (There will be an in-depth discussion of Christian missionary activity in week 6.)

Question 4: Is bride price a cultural or religious practice? Is no bride price paid in matrilineal lineages? Does bride price vary based on the level of education attained by the bride? Does bride price mean less happiness for the wife, as the husband may think he owns the wife as property?

Bride price is a cultural, not a religious practice, although the advent of Christianity and Islam may have added other accompanying practices during the process of negotiation and subsequent payment. Yes, bride price is paid in both matrilineal and patrilineal forms of marriage. In matrilineal marriages, however – especially in rural areas – payment may be in the form of labour, where the husband-to-be may be required to work in the farm of the bride's family for a certain period of time (say, three farming seasons).

In modern times, education has come to feature remarkably in negotiations for bride price. So, level of education does indeed play a significant role in the determination of bride price in many families. The fact that a bride price is paid, however, does not mean that a wife has been bought. Bride price is a token of appreciation given by the husband to the wife's family for raising a wife for him. It's an appreciation given to the wife's family, in advance, for the children who will be born out of the new marriage.

You may want to browse Nathan's paper with Nava Ashraf, Natalie Bau and Alessandra Voena, *Bride Price and Female Education*, which was commented on during the lecture, here

Question 5. What is the role of kinship and ethnicity in political processes and appointments across African countries?

We would refer you here to the references from the Q&As in weeks 1 and 2, where we discussed papers on ethnic politics, tribalism and related topics. See below for a shorter list:

- Desmet, Ortuno-Ortin, and Wacziarg (2012). *The political economy of linguistic cleavages*
- Alesina, Michalopoulos, and Papaioannou (2016). *Ethnic inequality*
- Posner (2009). *Coethnicity: Diversity and the Dilemmas of Collective Action*
- Galor et al. (2020) *Diversity and Conflict*

For research on favouritism and discrimination (or lack thereof) across social cleavages, such as race, ethnicity and religious adherence, see:

- Franck and Rainer (2012). *Does the Leader's Ethnicity Matter? Ethnic Favouritism, Education, and Health in Sub-Saharan Africa*
- Kramon and Posner (2016). *Ethnic Favoritism in Education in Kenya*
- Kasara and Kimuli (2007). *Tax Me If You Can: Ethnic Geography, Democracy, and the Taxation of Agriculture in Africa*.

There is also literature on institutional innovation to cope with ethnic diversity, such as:

Francois, Rainer, and Trebbi (2015). *How is Power Shared in Africa?*

Burgess, Jedwab, Miguel, Morjaria, and Padró i Miquel (2015). *The Value of Democracy: Evidence from Road Building in Kenya*

The recent paper by Amodio, Chiovelli and Hohmann (2021) uses changes in representativeness of ethnic groups in political power in 15 African countries to show that having an 'ethnic party' representative elected to the national parliament increases employment prospects for the members of the ethnic group. This result is driven by the 'exchange of favours' between politicians and traditional leaders. This paper is probably the most appropriate in terms of analysing kinship-ethnicity-appointments interactions.

Question 6. What is known about the relationship between culture and policies in Europe, in western countries, and globally? Does it differ from the African context?

There is a large and growing literature in economics on culture and economic performance, looking across all continents and many countries and settings. We recommend three review articles, summarising the efforts by academic economists to shed light on the interplay between cultural norms and development, broadly defined.

1. The recent piece by Nathan Nunn, based on his lecture at the American Economic Association, provides a great summary.
2. A broader overview of various linkages between culture and economic performance can be found in a detailed summary by Raquel Fernadez.
3. Regarding the interaction of culture and institutions, which matters for economic efficiency, you may want to browse a great review by Alberto Alesina and Paola Giuliano, Culture and Institutions | NBER (brown.edu).

However, the evidence on the interplay between culture and institutions is at a relatively early stage. Some of the evidence points at the complementarity between good policies and institutions and culture – historical exposure to higher-quality institutions makes culture more aligned with pro-growth behaviours. For example, recent research by Becker et al. (2016) find this in the context of the Habsburg Empire in Europe: people engaged in less corruption and displayed higher levels of trust in government institutions in regions exposed to historical institutions of the Empire. Moreover, Dell et al. (2018) find that, in the context of Vietnam, longer exposure to strong institutions of the Dai Viet state, with its reliance on villages as basic administrative units, led to better cooperation, public-goods provision and redistribution today.

At the same time, findings of Lowes et al. (2017) suggest a more complex picture. Strong institutions can also 'crowd out' local civic norms. The authors have shown that, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) today, descendants of people who lived under the rule of the Kuba Kingdom (a strong centralised state with well-functioning courts, police and other institutions) demonstrate more 'cheating behaviour' and display lower pro-social norms and behaviours.

For more on how policies may (and may not) work in the African and development context more generally, see Rethinking economic development (harvard.edu)

Question 7. Is there really evidence showing that culture affects (or prevents) growth in African countries?

There is evidence on the role of trust (as one of the most important cultural traits) in promoting development overall; for a broad picture see *Trust and Growth* by Paul J. Zak and Stephen Knack. *Keeping It in the Family: Lineage Organization and the Scope of Trust in Sub-Saharan Africa* by Jacob Moscona, Nathan Nunn and James A. Robinson shows that societal organization based on segmentary lineages may reduce trust in strangers, thereby reducing growth prospects. Moreover, lack of interpersonal trust in certain African countries and populations may be the result of the history of European trading of enslaved people. Evidence from The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa (harvard.edu) by Nunn and Wantchekon shows that individuals whose ancestors were most heavily affected by the slave trade are less trusting today.

Some of you asked about the role of broader identity, so-called 'bridging' social capital, and readiness to cooperate with strangers, etc. Given the high levels of ethnic diversity and 'tribalism' of many African countries and regions, fostering broader identity can be challenging (see references in Q&As for week 1). There is a great book by Daniel Posner, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa*, that talks about these issues. Moreover, there is a growing literature on 'nation-building' in Africa and elsewhere. Recommended texts include Bazzi et al. (2019) Unity in Diversity? How Intergroup Contact Can Foster Nation Building | NBER (brown.edu) on local-level diversity and polarisation; Depetris-Chauvin et al. (2020) AER-2018-0805_manuscript.pdf - Google Drive on the role of shared experiences in fostering a broader identity (football), and Green (2020) Ethnicity, National Identity and the State: Evidence from

Sub-Saharan Africa | British Journal of Political Science | Cambridge Core on the role of elections and power affecting who identifies with the ethnic group and who identifies with the nation.

A study by Lowes and Montero (2021) on colonial concessions and economic development highlights that colonial concessions in the Congo Free State changed the local culture, which adversely affects education and wealth outcomes today. The authors argue that culture and institutions can serve as substitutes, and that the culture of strong pro-social norms which emerged inside the concessionary boundary may undermine long-run development, because leaders who are less effective and less accountable retain power.

Question 8. Can we draw clear lines between kin-based and age-based societies? Don't they intersect? And should we expect the age-based effects to operate mostly for men? How do different types of societal organisations matter in terms of resilience to shocks and safety nets?

In coding the age-set variable, we tried to be careful in distinguishing between groups that are "predominantly organised with age sets" and groups that are "predominantly organised via kinship", but we recognise that our measure is only a proxy and reality might be more complex.

And yes, age sets apply to men more than to women. However, in the DRC (where Nathan conducts research), women also have age sets. Male age sets are much more common, but certain villages/ethnic groups also have female age sets. Reasons for this variation are not clear so far.

One way of thinking about the role of safety nets is that different social networks create pockets of vulnerability. In age sets, they are age cohorts and in kin groups they are families. When there is a negative economic shock to a cohort, age-set groups will not be very effective at insuring that group (consider military shocks, for instance). On the other hand, where an extended family has a negative shock, age sets might be better at attenuating the shock than kin-group societies, since members still redistribute among their cohorts).

Question 9. What are the broad patterns in the relationship between religion and economic development?

Literature on religion, religiosity and growth is relatively new but growing.

- One strand of research examines correlations between religiosity and proxies of income/wellbeing, education, health and self-reported happiness. See, for example, the works of Robert Barro and Rachel Mc Clearly, such as https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/3708464. For specific channels, such as innovation and dynamism, see Religion and Innovation - American Economic Association (brown.edu).
- Another strand of research examines correlations between religiosity by religion and broad patterns of economic growth. See, for example, Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales' paper People's Opium? Religion and Economic Attitudes. However, we should stress that cross-country correlations do not have a causal interpretation and are far from ideal in trying to identify causal mechanisms.
- Another stream of research takes an historical viewpoint. For a recent overview of historical effects of religion (focusing on Christianity, Islam and Judaism), see Religion in economic history: A survey - ScienceDirect (brown.edu).
- Yet another stream of research looks at Islam and its institutions. A good introduction is Timur Kuran's overview, Islam and Economic Performance: Historical and Contemporary Links (JEL 2018).
- Many studies zoom in on the role of the Protestant Reformation in industrialisation in Europe, as in the seminal work by German sociologist Max Weber, who attributed the spur of commerce, innovation, human capital and entrepreneurship to the "Protestant Ethos" of capitalism.

Influential empirical works on the Reformation in Europe include Becker and Woessmann and Cantoni, Dittmar and Yuctman, among many others.

- In Africa, Christianity spread via Catholic, Protestant and other Christian sect missions, which often provided basic schooling.
    - In the special lecture of week 6, we will zoom in on the role of Christian missions in Africa, discussing case-study and pan-African evidence. (You may want to go over some of the readings in the syllabus).
    - In particular, works by Nathan Nunn – Gender and Missionary Influence in Colonial Africa | Nathan Nunn (harvard.edu) and Religious Conversion in Colonial Africa (harvard.edu) – show that the effects of Christian colonial missions persist, and that Protestant and Catholic missions exerted positive effects on education (Catholic positive effects were mostly seen in males; whereas Protestant positive effects were mostly seen in females).
    - Elias and Stelios, together with Alberto F. Alesina and Sebastian Hohmann, have a recent paper, *Religion and Educational Mobility in Africa*, documenting non-negligible differences in education across religious affiliations in 20 African countries and more than 2,000 African regions, using census data. The paper also shows the role of missions.
- There are also many other empirical papers looking at specific aspects of religion; for example:
    - The recent paper on Catholic religious festivals in Mexico by Montero and Yang shows how religious practices can be harmful for development under certain circumstances, but not harmful under others.
    - One of the clearest empirical studies on the role of evangelical religion is Randomizing Religion: the Impact of Protestant Evangelism on Economic Outcomes* | The Quarterly Journal of Economics | Oxford Academic (brown.edu) by Bryan et al. (2021).
    - Amma Panin, who joined us in the guest lecture, has exciting and important work zooming in on Africa; you can access it here.

Question 10. What is the impact of traditional norms and religion-related attributes on economic development?

Traditional religions are often ignored in the broader literature. There has been some research by Boris Gershman (see his work on witchcraft beliefs witchtrade.pdf (borisgershman.com) and witchcraft.pdf (borisgershman.com)), showing a negative association between the prevalence of witchcraft beliefs and multiple measures of trust and social capital. Moreover, in Sub-Saharan Africa, representatives of ethnic groups which were more heavily exposed to the Atlantic slave trade in the past are more likely to believe in witchcraft today – another negative consequence to be added to the long list of negative consequences of the slave trades in Africa's past.

Rossignol et al. (2022) have recently extended the analysis of traditional supernatural beliefs using the field experiment in the DRC. They have found that participants, who within the experiment were matched with strong believers in witchcraft, acted less pro-socially. Moreover, antisocial behaviour is more acceptable when 'playing' against witchcraft believers.

Another scholar who does research on these topics is Joseph Henrich. (Joseph will be giving a lecture in this course).

Question 11. Are poverty and other social maladies behind the rise of the Pentecostal church in Africa? Is the church seen as providing psychological support in hard times? Does the church generally act like insurance?

The spread of religiosity is a very important research area and we have only recently started to accumulate evidence on this. Those interested can consult recent research by Jeanet Bentzen et al.; see

https://web2.econ.ku.dk/bentzen/BentzenReligiosityDisasters.pdf and In crisis, we pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 pandemic - ScienceDirect (brown.edu), which emphasise the role played by disasters, hardships and the 'search for comfort and explanation' in religion.

Other work by Michalopoulos et al. (2018) studies the role of geography and trade in the spread of Islam. The idea here is that populations living under certain geographic conditions are especially likely to benefit from the more egalitarian and redistributive rules implied by certain Islamic laws. Moreover, as trading occurred over trade routes connecting the early Islamic regions to the rest of the world, ideas and norms spread with the trade.

Regarding the church as insurance, there is evidence that supports this view. Historically when states were underdeveloped, religious organisations provided some basic public goods, including some form of social insurance. Recently there has been interesting empirical work shedding light on the connection between religion and social insurance, looking at various settings and religions. These studies look across the world, including Africa. They include:

- In the lecture by Amma Panin, we heard that the paper by Amma and co-authors documents how the existence of alternative insurance may lower an individual's contributions to the (Pentecostal) church in Ghana. This indicates that at least part of the church's value is in its (perceived or actual) insurance provision.
- Ager and Ciccone (2018) show that, in the US historically, places with higher agricultural risks, as measured via risks associated with rainfall, had a higher share of population organised in religious communities. The more dependent a given place on agriculture, the stronger was the link between rainfall risk and religiosity.
- Chen (2010) shows that, in Indonesia, negative price shocks caused by the Indonesian financial crisis increased adherence to religious (Islamic) practices. Moreover, credit availability reduced the effect of economic distress on religious adherence, suggesting (as above) that formal and religious institutions may act as substitutes in terms of insurance provision.
- Belloc, Draggo and Galbiati (2016) connect historical earthquakes in Italy in the Middle Ages to the strengthening of the church and institutional transformations towards more autocratic regimes. Essentially, political leaders exploited earthquakes as 'acts of God' to build social order and strengthen their own rule.

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