

# POLC42

# Topics in Comparative Politics

# African Politics

Week 2: Precolonial Africa

the

Measure

Welcome back!

*Please try to sit where you did last week*

GAME

# Recap



## Why study Africa

Economic, geopolitical importance

Interesting → empirical puzzles

Analytical opportunities



## Challenges

Practical

Ethical

# Approaches to studying African politics

## Chazan 1999:

- Modernization
- Dependency
- Statist
- Interactions
- Geography (“constraints upon choice”)
- History

## Institutions and institutionalism(s)

# Course assessment

## Participation and in-class involvement (10%)

- Kahoot!

## Assignments

- Map quiz (5%)
- Term test (15%)
- Research proposal (10%)
- Research essay (30%)
- Final exam (30%)

# Plan for today



Precolonial history of Africa



Contemporary impacts of  
historical processes

# Comparative politics of precolonial Africa

- Focus on two variables:
  - Centralization
  - Distribution of power

# Political systems in precolonial Africa



## Non-state polities

Low-cost governance structures:

- Common descent (lineage, clan)
- Place of residence
- Moiety
- Age ranking (age-set, generation-set)

Acephalous, polycephalous, and monocephalous



## States



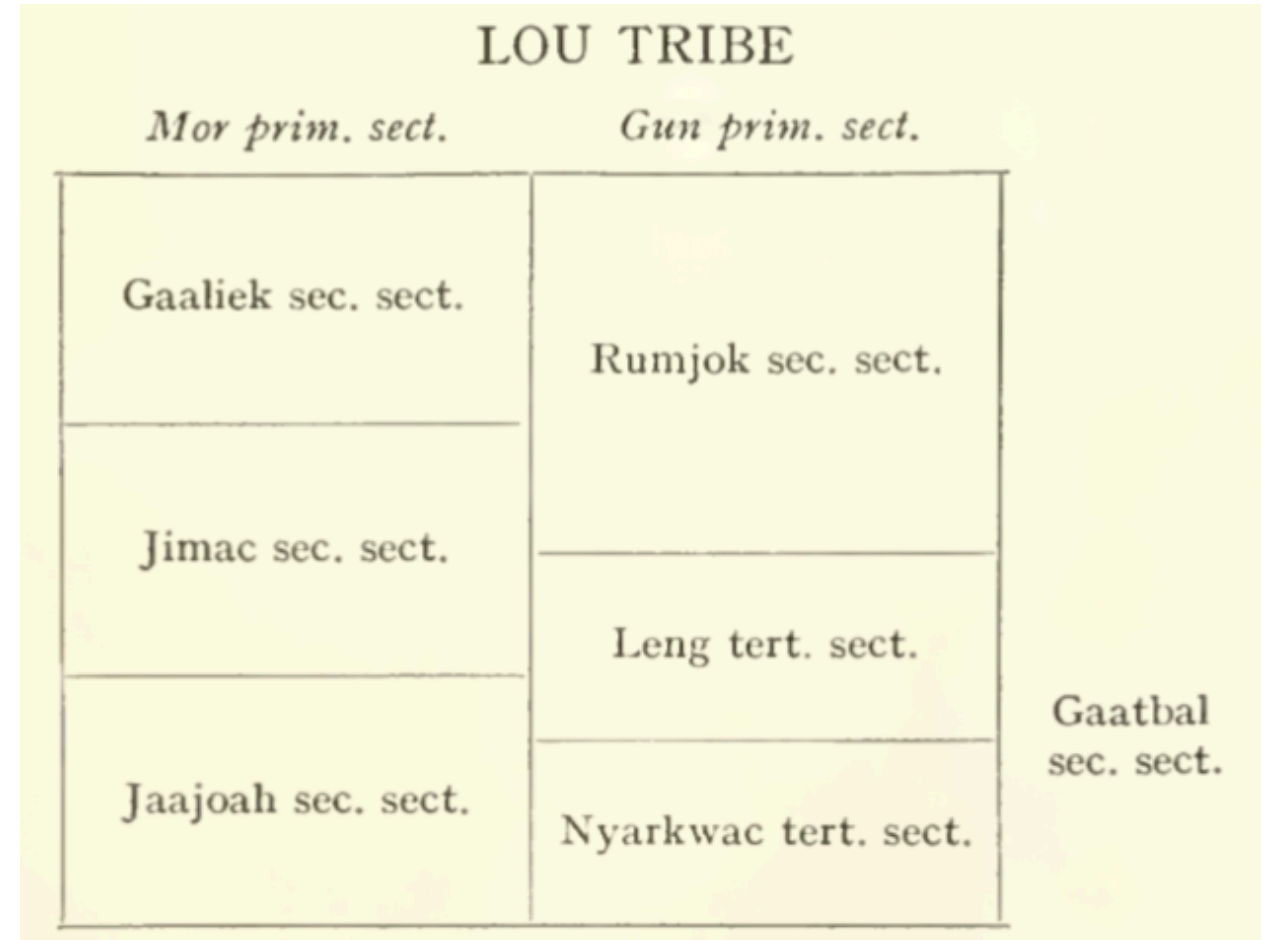
## Continuum of forms

Degrees of political centralization



# Non-state polities: Nuer

- Nuer tribes and primary, secondary, and tertiary tribal sections
- Age-set system and gender relations
- Leopard-skin chiefs and elders
- Acephalous governance system

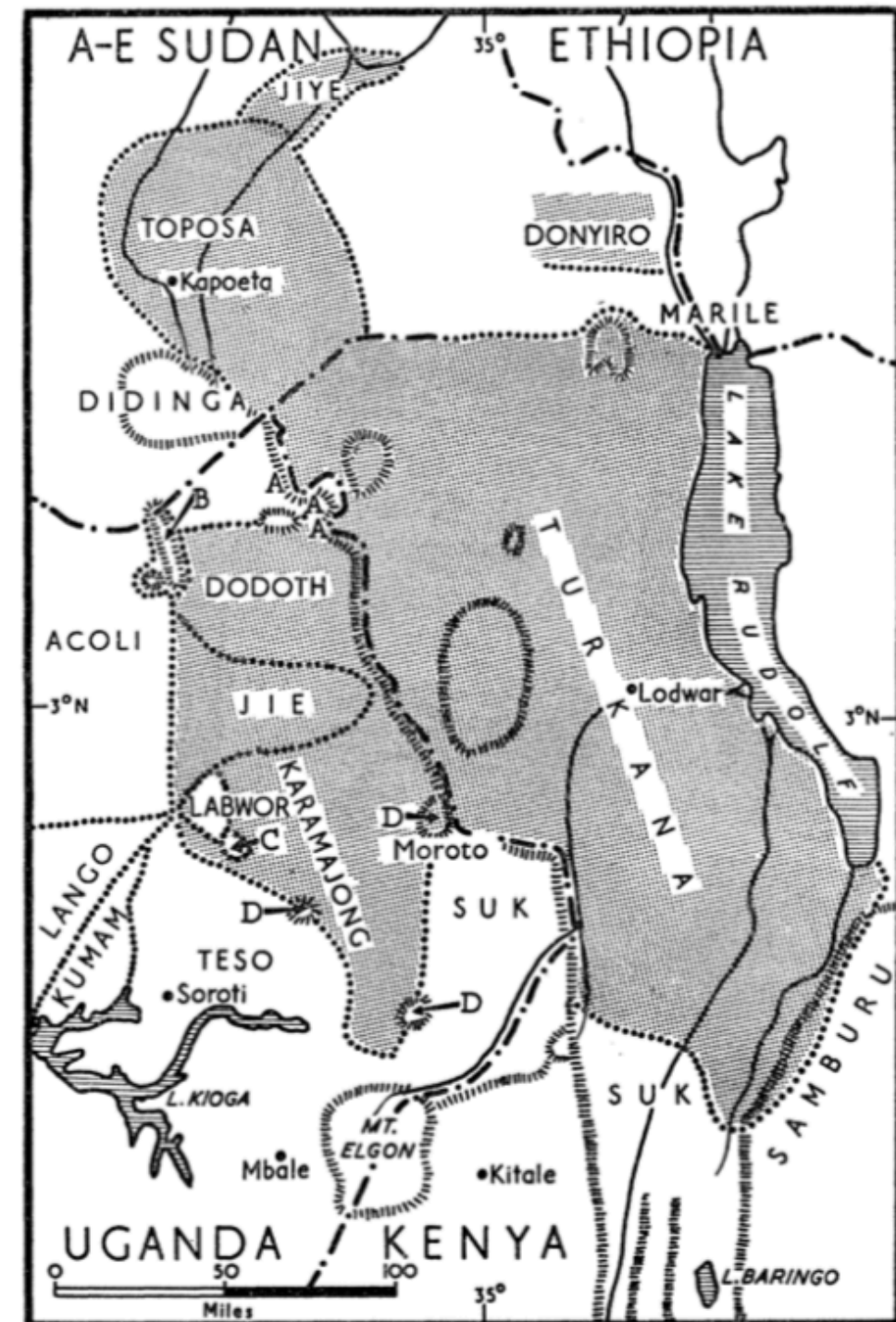


# Non-state polities: Nuer

- Effects of statelessness according to Robert Bates:
  - “Societies that rely upon households to enforce property rights are societies in which peace is secured by the fear of retaliation. As Evans-Pritchard’s account makes clear, such a system *can* work; after all, by his account, the Nuer did live peacefully, in spite of the temptation of theft. But what Evans-Pritchard fails to make clear are the high costs of this political system—costs that include the poverty of Nuer society.”
  - “The political institutions of kinship societies impose a cruel trade-off: peace on the one hand and prosperity on the other.”
    - Robert Bates. 2010. *Prosperity and Violence: The Political Economy of Development*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New York: W. W. Norton.

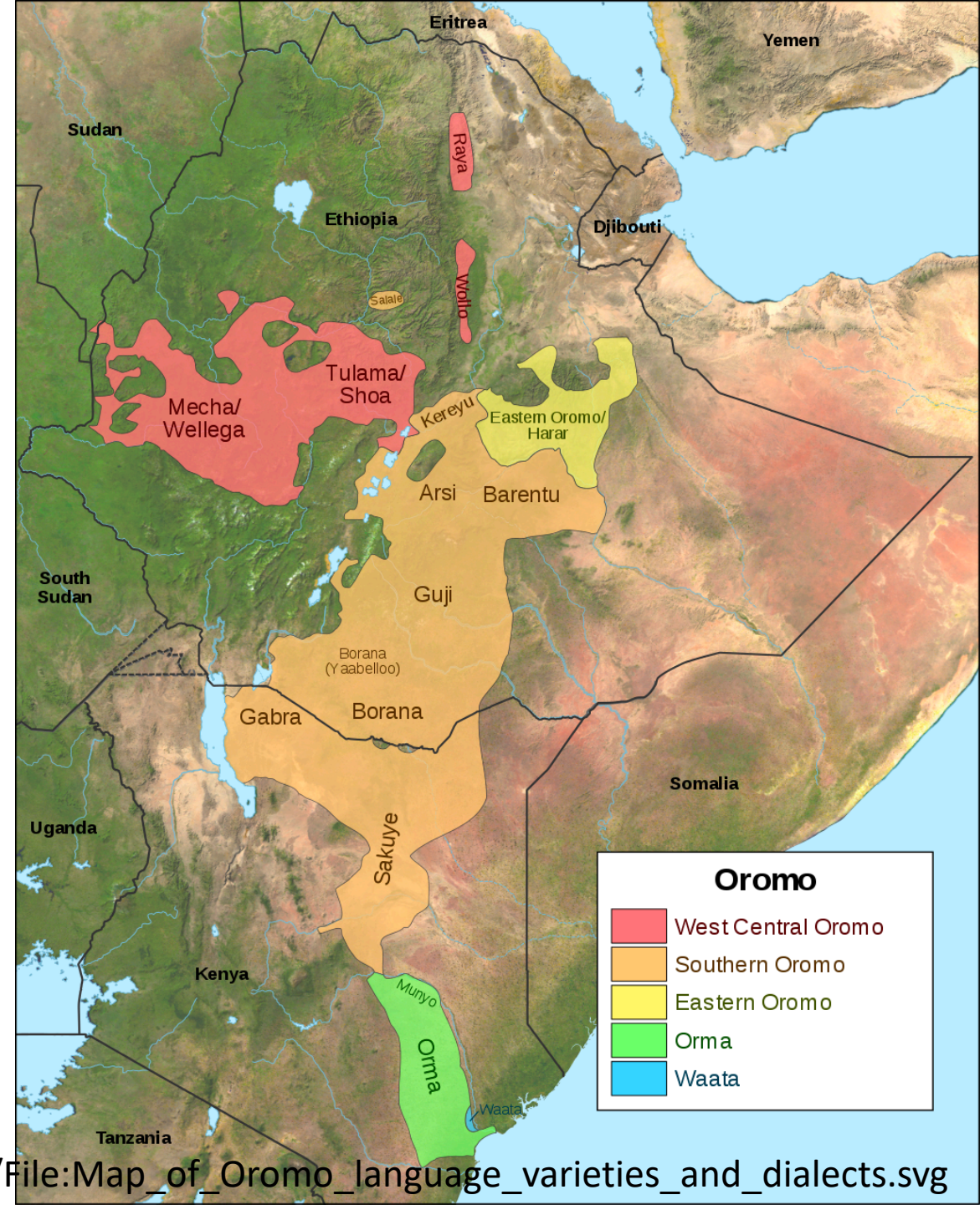
# Non-state polities: Ateker

- Multiple distinct ethnic groups and historically fluid ethnic identities
- Generation-sets and age-sets
- Quasi-acephalous, gerontocratic political system



# Non-state polities: Borana

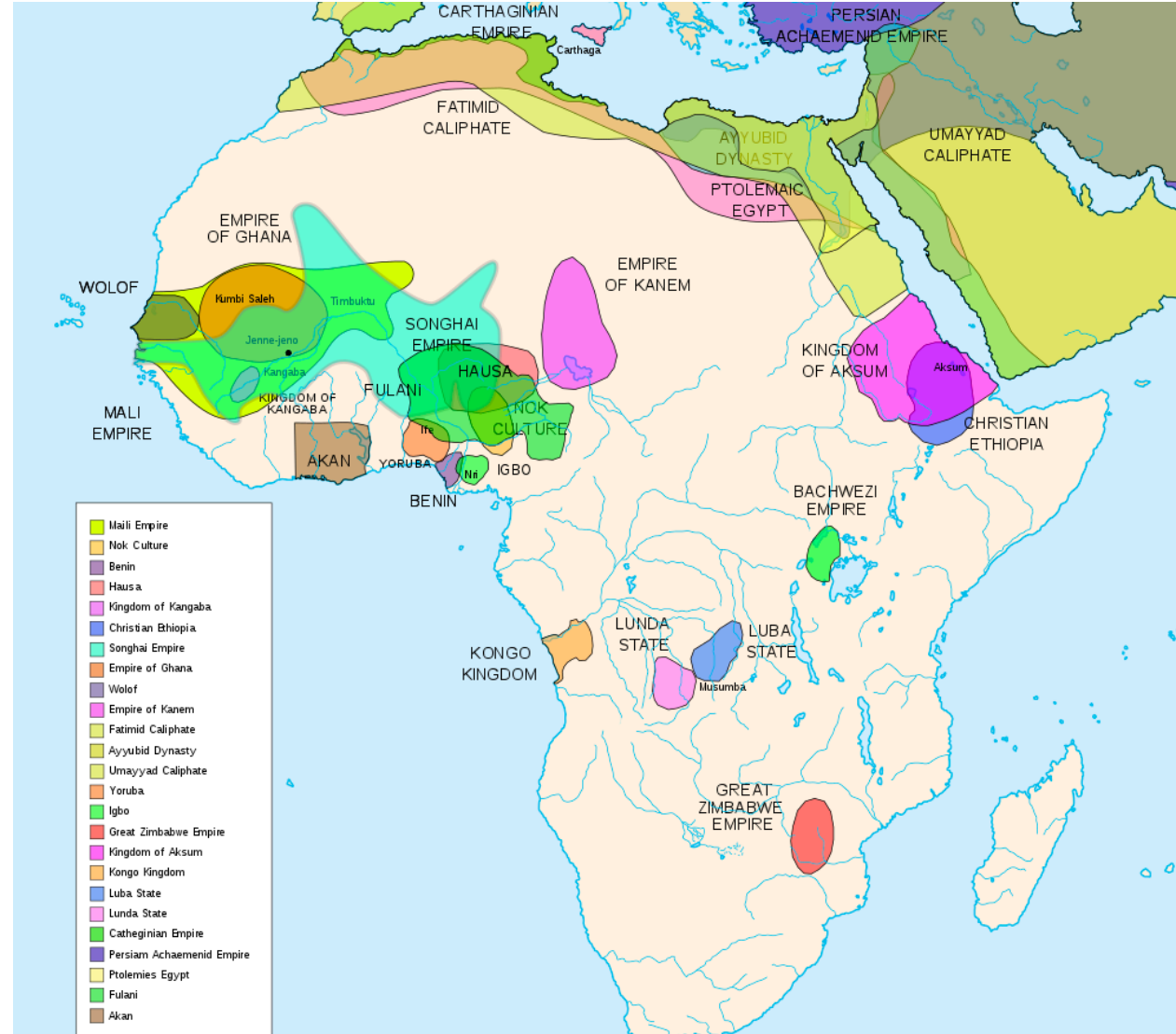
- Complex polycephalous polity
- Four pillars:
  - *Gadaa* generation-class system (with elected *gadaa* officials)
  - Hereditary high priests
  - Segmentation into moieties, clans, sub-clans, and lineages (with their own leaders)
  - Hierarchy of assemblies and councils



# Non-state polities

- Monocephalous polities:
  - Chiefdoms, statelets, and states
  - → Colonial indirect rule

# States



# States

- A typology of precolonial African states (by Jan Vansina):
  - Federations
  - Aristocratic kingdoms
  - Incorporative kingdoms
  - Regal kingdoms
  - Despotic kingdoms
    - Vansina, Jan. 1962. "A Comparison of African Kingdoms." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 32 (4): 324–335.

# States: Ashanti Empire

- Federation:
  - Council of elders
  - King as the *primus inter pares*





# States: Kongo Kingdom

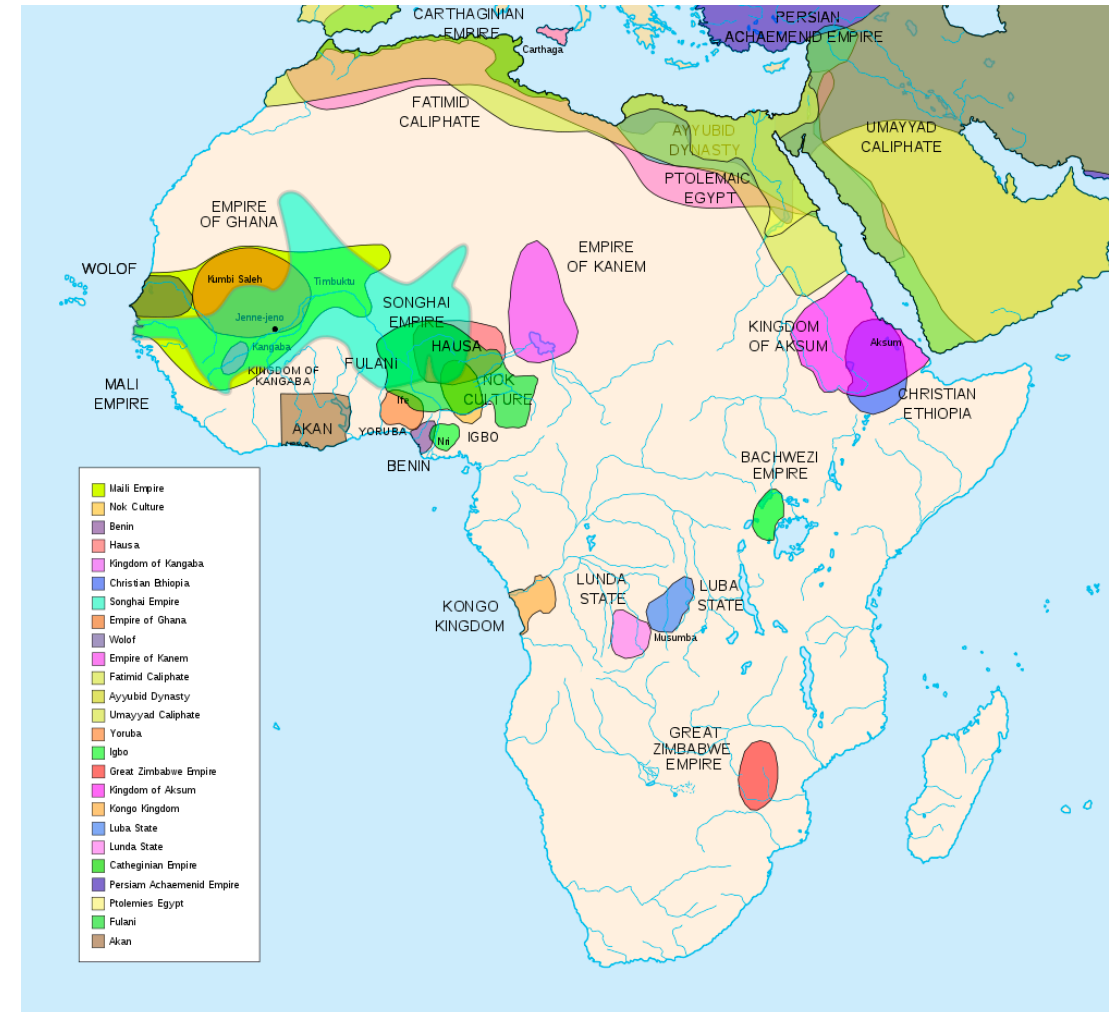
- 'Aristocratic kingdom'
- Projection of central state power limited to collection of tribute
- Territorial administration by chiefs / local notables



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:KingdomKongo1711.png>

# States: Luba and Lunda

- ‘Incorporative kingdoms’
- Double system of administration:
  - Hereditary, pre-state formation chiefs
  - Central-state ‘overseers’



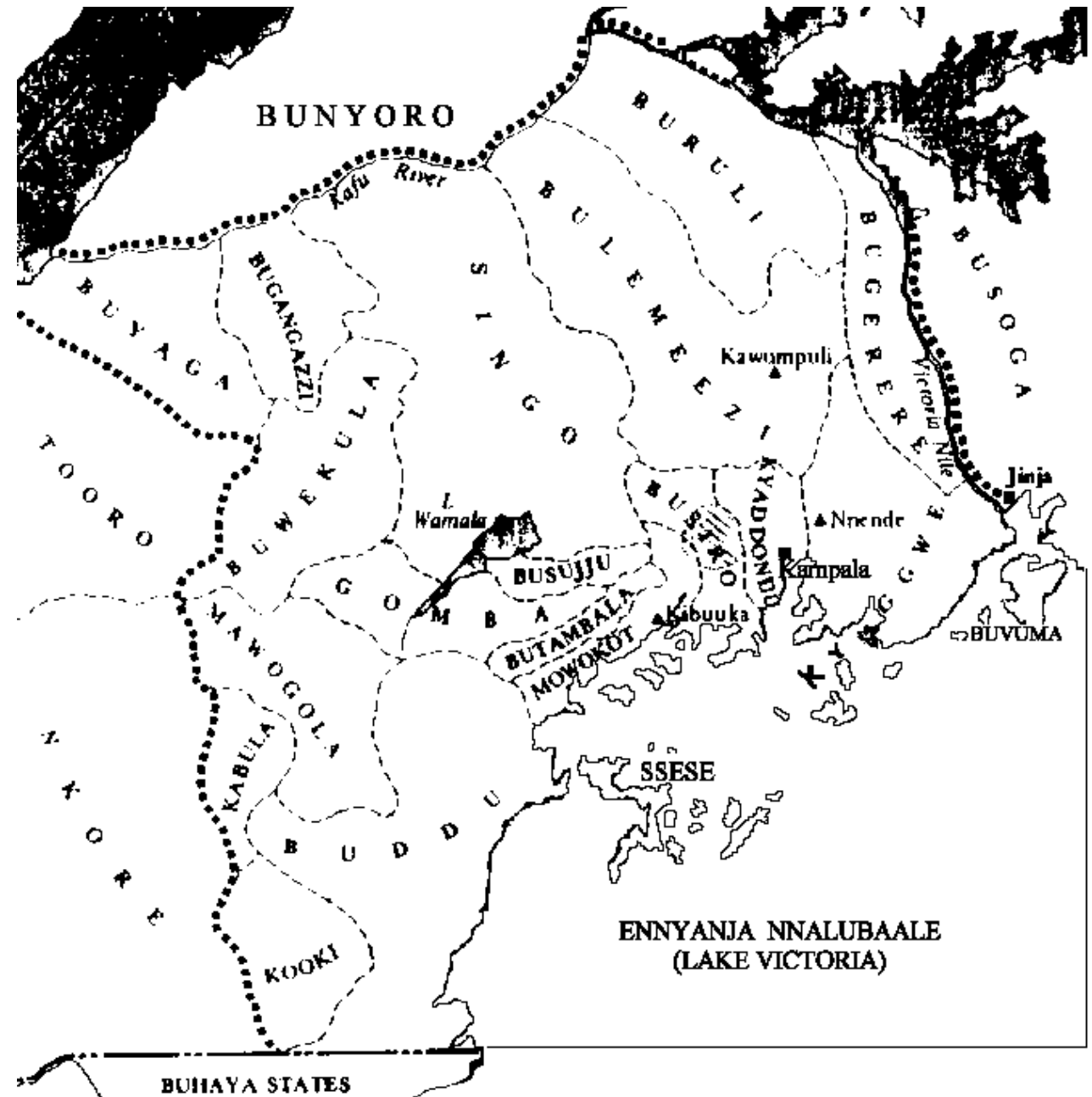
# States: Burundi

- 'Regal kingdom'
- Kinship relations between the king and chiefs
- Transfer of provincial control at the time of royal accession



# States: Buganda

- 'Despotic kingdom'
- Absolute royal control over state territory



# Comparative politics of precolonial Africa

- Which of the polities are most decentralized and centralized?
- Which of them have the most and least concentrated distribution of political power?

What explains the variation  
in precolonial political systems?

# Political power in precolonial Africa

- Herbst:
  - Power “as a series of concentric circles radiating out from the core.”



# Political power in precolonial Africa

- Herbst:
  - “[S]tates rose and fell, expanded and contracted, largely in relation to the amount of coercion they were able to broadcast from the center.”

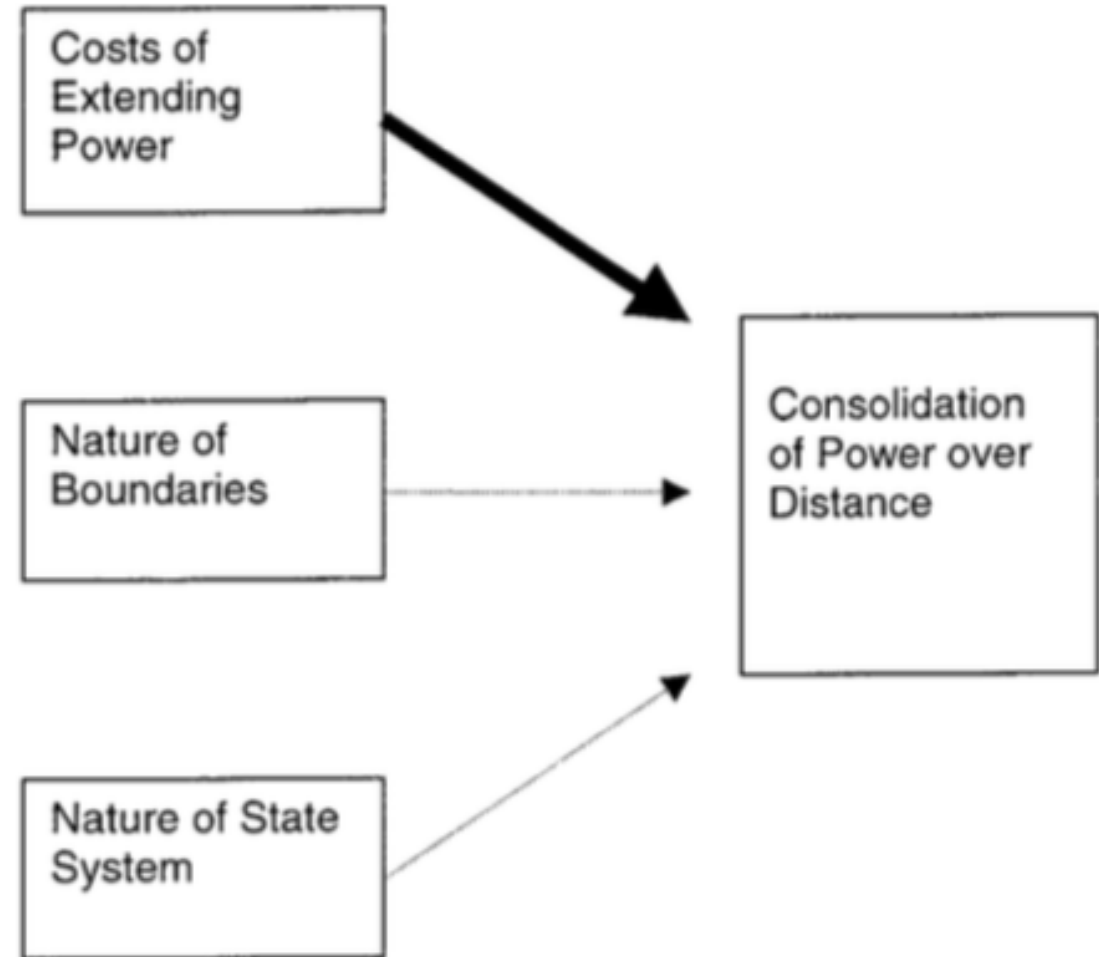


Figure 2.1. Paths to State Consolidation in Precolonial Africa



Kahoot!

# Contemporary impacts of precolonial centralization

- Large literature showing robust positive association between precolonial centralization and contemporary provision of:
  - Public goods / services:
    - E.g. Michalopoulos, S., and E. Papaioannou. 2014. “On the Ethnic Origins of African Development: Chiefs and Precolonial Political Centralization.” *Academy of Management Perspectives* 29 (1): 32–71.
  - Private goods:
    - E.g. Bandyopadhyay, Sanghamitra, and Elliott Green. 2016. “Pre-Colonial Political Centralization and Contemporary Development in Uganda.” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 64 (3): 471–508.

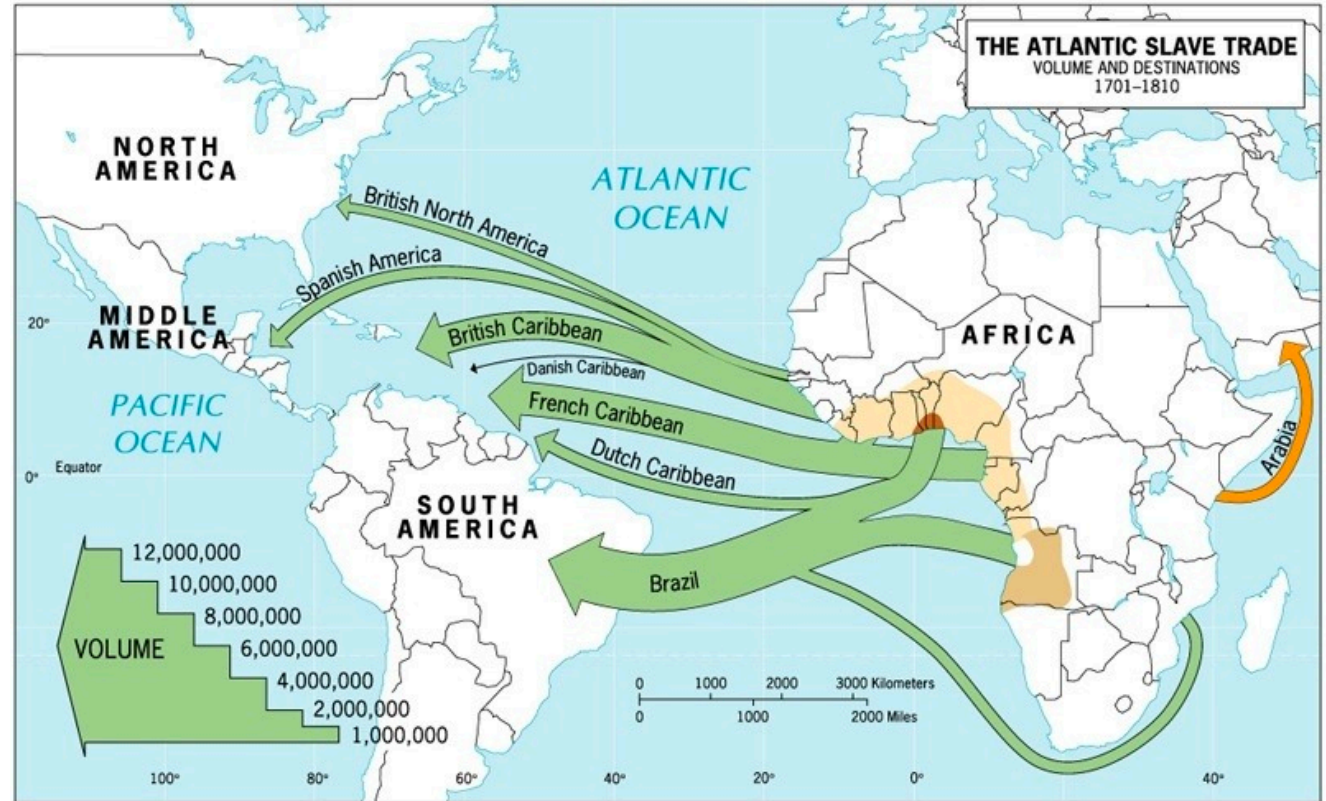
What explains the contemporary impacts of precolonial centralization?

# Contemporary impacts of precolonial centralization: mechanisms

- Development persistence: centralization = development
- Local legitimacy and accountability
- Centralization = strong identities → facilitation of cooperation
- Centralization → strong leaders capable of negotiating with national governments
  - But: what is those strong leaders do not comply with national demands?
    - Archibong, Belinda. 2019. “Explaining Divergence in the Long-Term Effects of Precolonial Centralization on Access to Public Infrastructure Services in Nigeria.” *World Development* 121: 123–40.

# Slave trade

- Intra-African slave trade
- Arab slave trade:  
~14 million people, 7<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> c.
- Atlantic slave trade:  
~8-20 million (12.8 million according to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database) people, 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> c.



What have been the impacts of slave trade?

# Impacts of slave trade

- In Africa:
  - Population reduction
  - Insecurity
  - Institutional disruption
  - Reorientation (and potentially stagnation) of local economies
- Elsewhere:
  - Industrial Revolution
  - Trajectories of economic and political development in the Americas
  - Racism



# Contemporary impacts of slave trade

- “If the slave trades had not occurred, then 72% of the average income gap between Africa and the rest of the world would not exist today, and 99% of the income gap between Africa and other developing countries would not exist.”
  - Nunn, Nathan. 2008. “The Long-Term Effects of Africa’s Slave Trades.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123: 139-176.
- Strong negative relationship between the intensity of the slave trade among one’s ethnic ancestors and an individual’s trust in others today
  - Nunn, Nathan, and Leonard Wantchekon. 2011. “The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa.” *American Economic Review* 101 (7): 3221–52.



What are the mechanisms?