

PLS 343

Politics of Sub-Saharan Africa

Week 2, Lecture 1:
Precolonial Africa—political systems

Recap

- Opportunities:
 - Empirical puzzles
 - Inferential leverage
- Challenges:
 - Data quality and access
 - Ethics
 - Analysis

Plan for this week

- Comparative politics of precolonial Africa:
 - Political systems
 - Political centralization
 - Geographic reach
 - Contemporary impacts
- Slave trade and its impacts

Plan for today

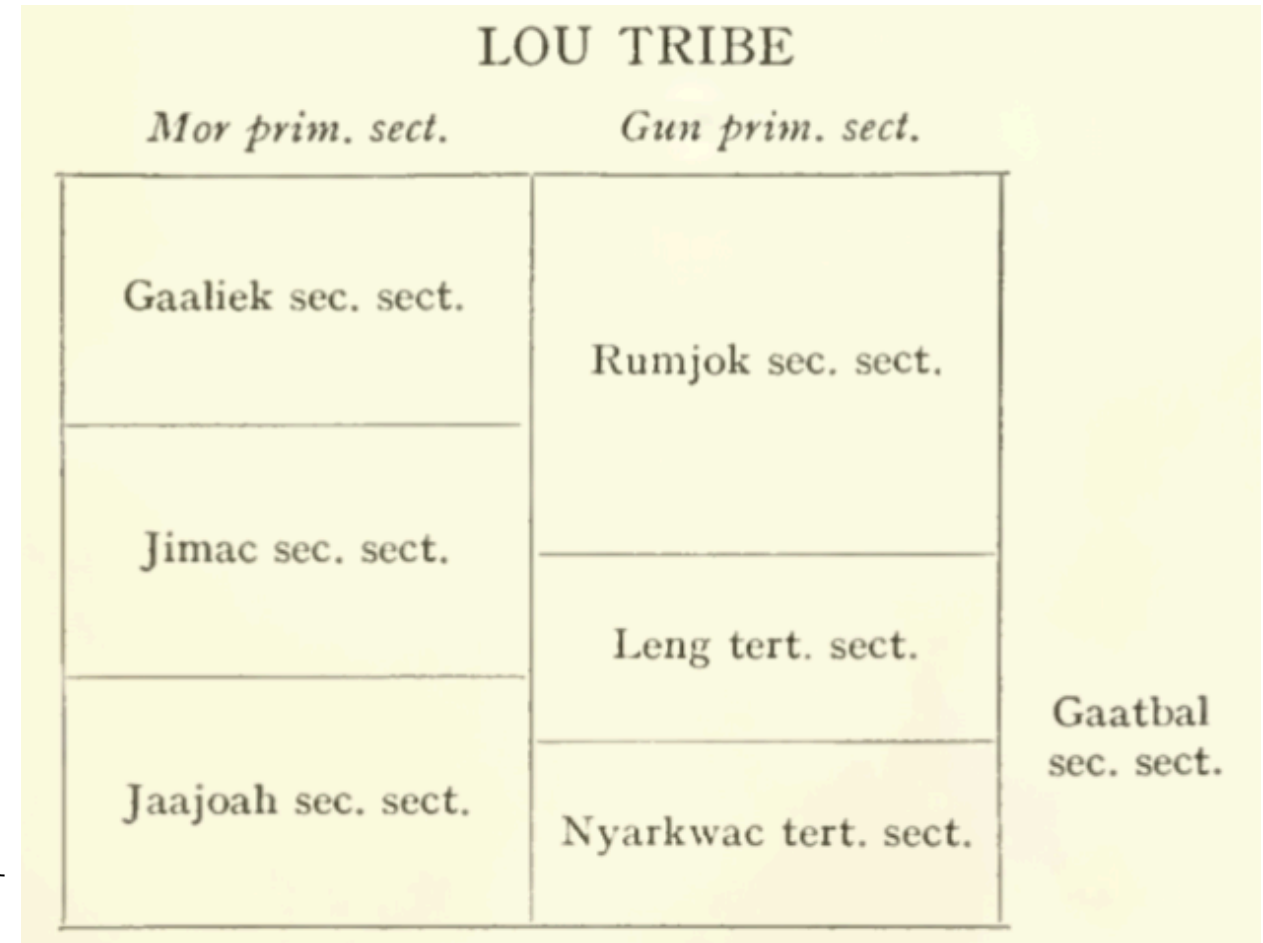
- Political systems of precolonial Africa:
 - Non-state polities
 - States
- Two key variables:
 - Political centralization
 - Geographic reach

Non-state polities

- Low-cost governance structures:
 - Common descent (lineage, clan)
 - Place of residence
 - Moiety
 - Age ranking (age-set, generation-set)
- Continuum of forms:
 - Acephalous
 - Polycephalous
 - Monocephalous

The Nuer

- Nuer tribes and primary, secondary, and tertiary sections
- Lack of enforceable regulations and legislative, judicial, and executive bodies
- Leopard-skin chiefs and elders
- Age-sets and gender relations
- Acephalous governance system

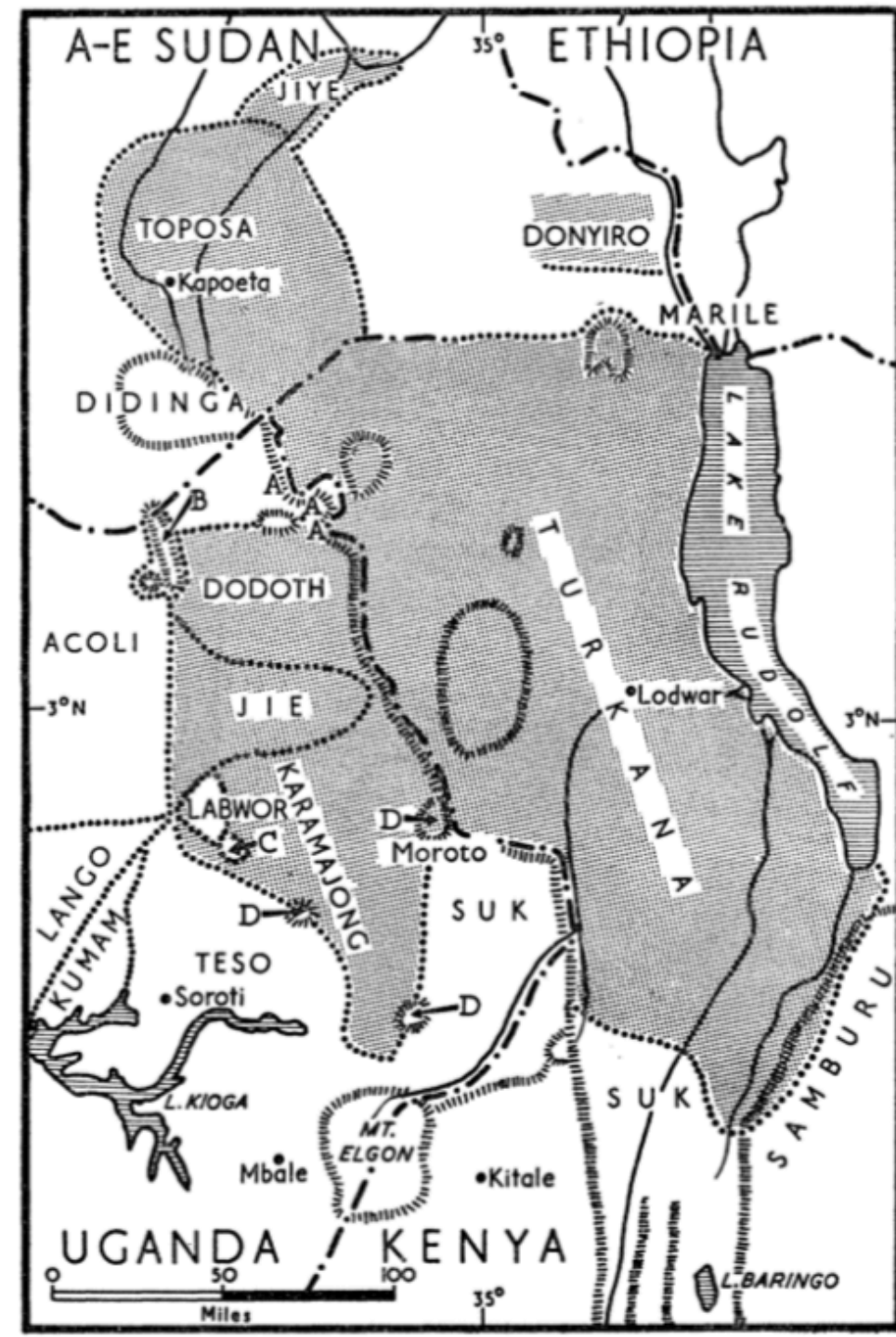


The Nuer

- Effects of statelessness and political decentralization according to 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*, 2nd Ed. New York: W. W. Norton.

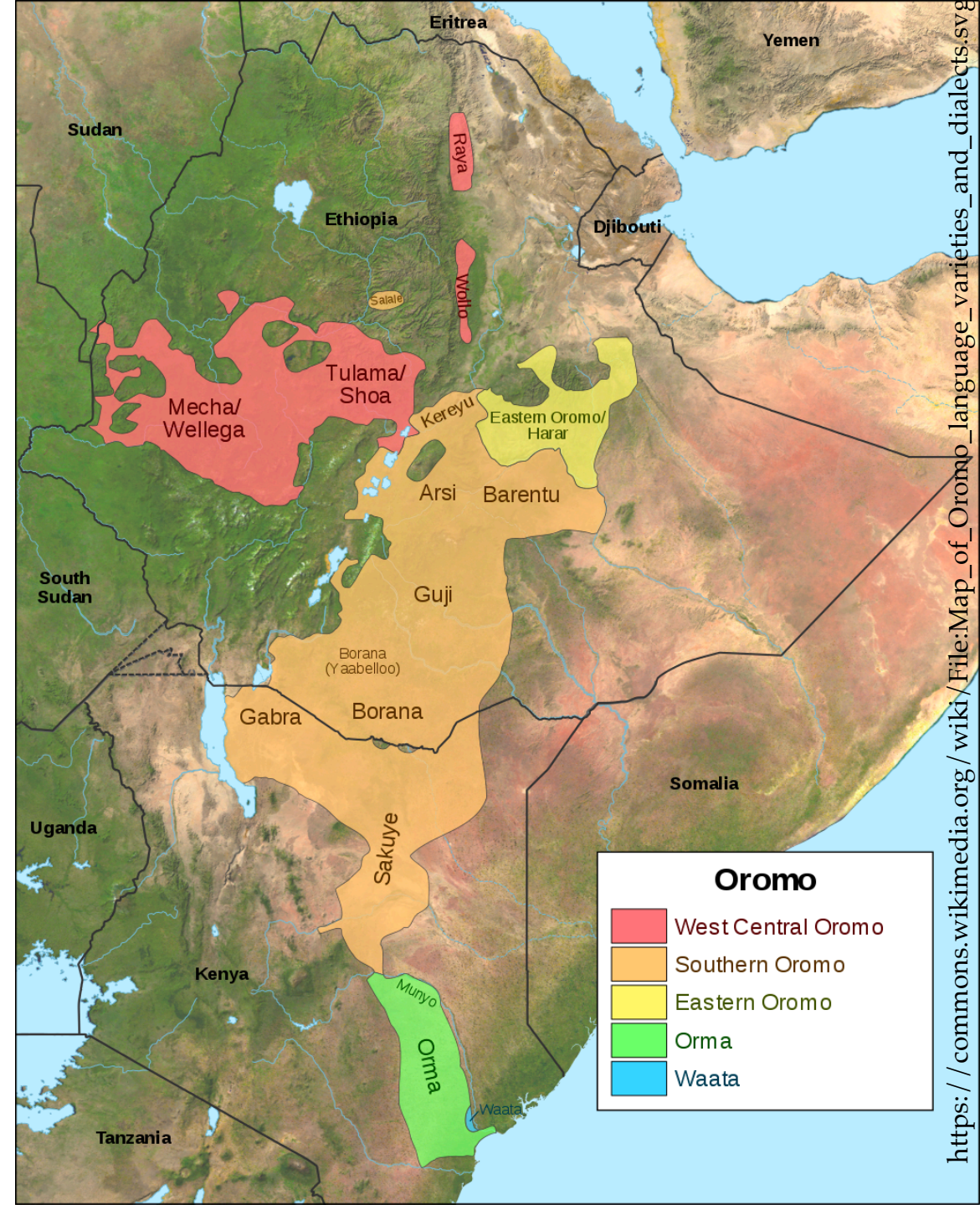
The Ateker

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



The Borana

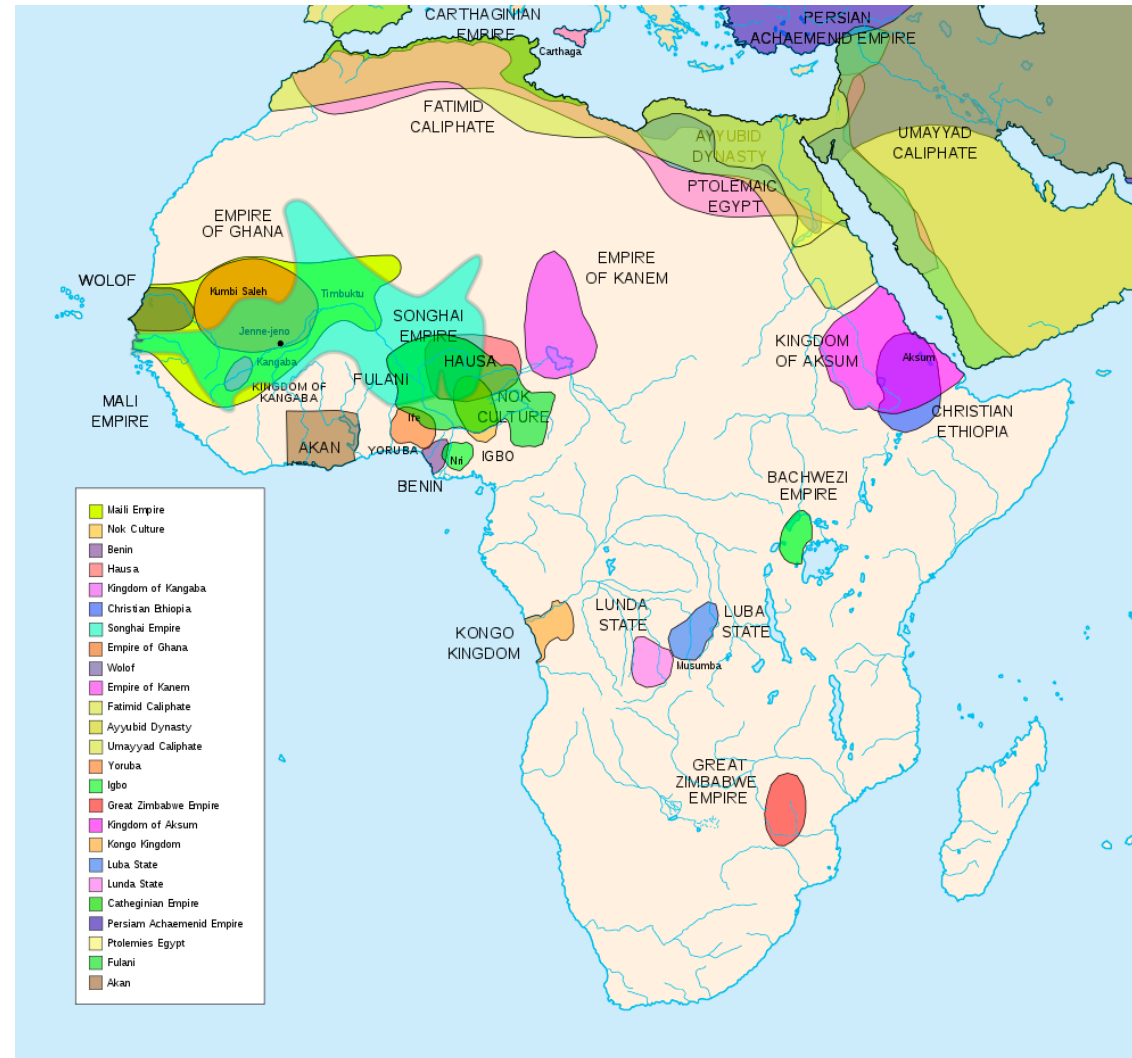
- Complex polycephalous polity
- Four pillars:
 - *Gadaa* generation-class system
 - Hereditary high priests
 - Segmentation into moieties, clans, sub-clans, and lineages
 - Hierarchy of assemblies and councils



Monocephalous polities

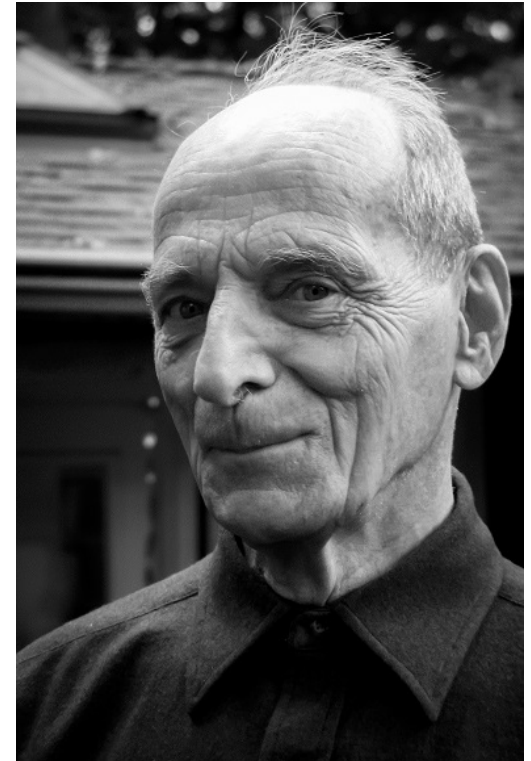
- Chiefdoms
- Statelets
- States

States



States

- Jan Vansina's typology of precolonial African states:
 - 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.



Ashanti Empire

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



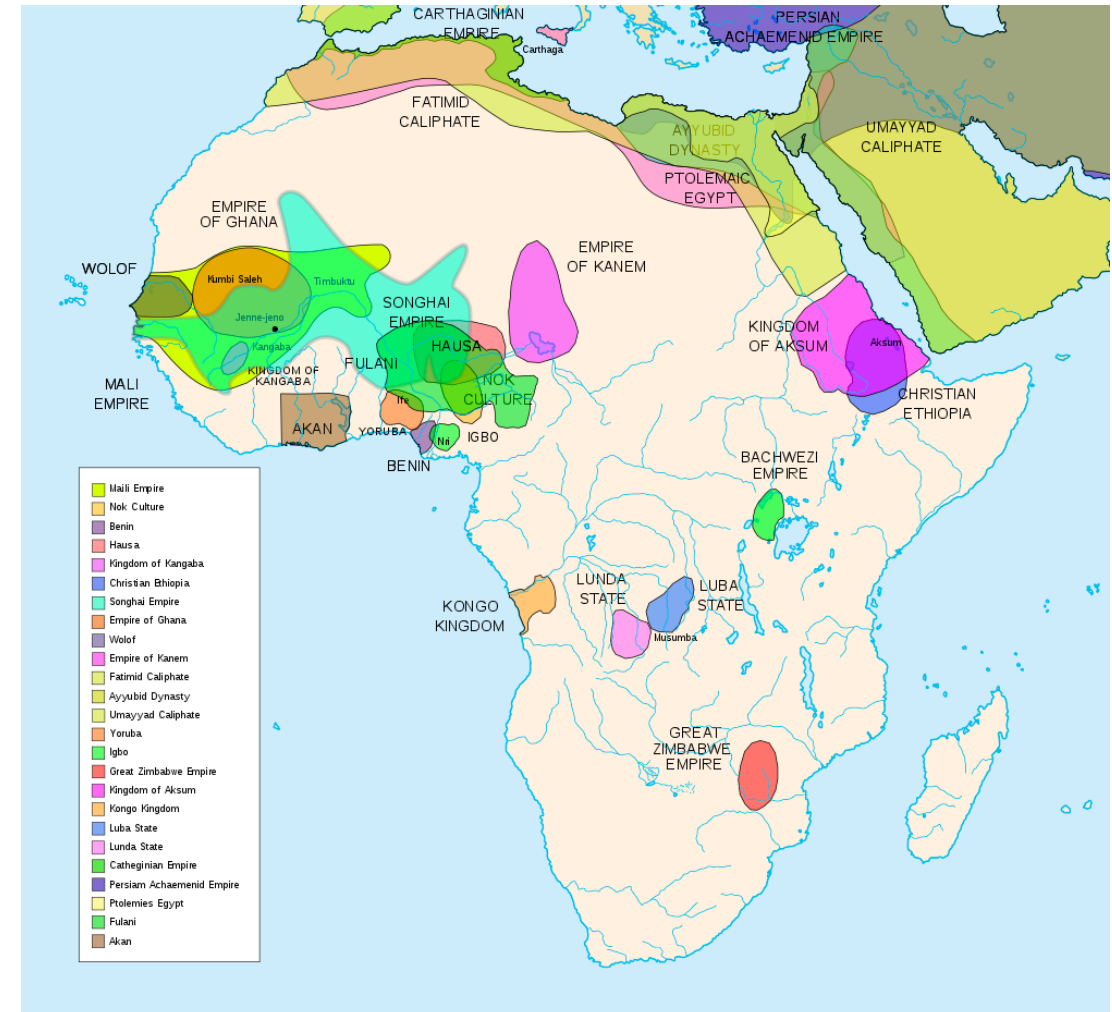
Kongo Kingdom

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



Luba and Lunda

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



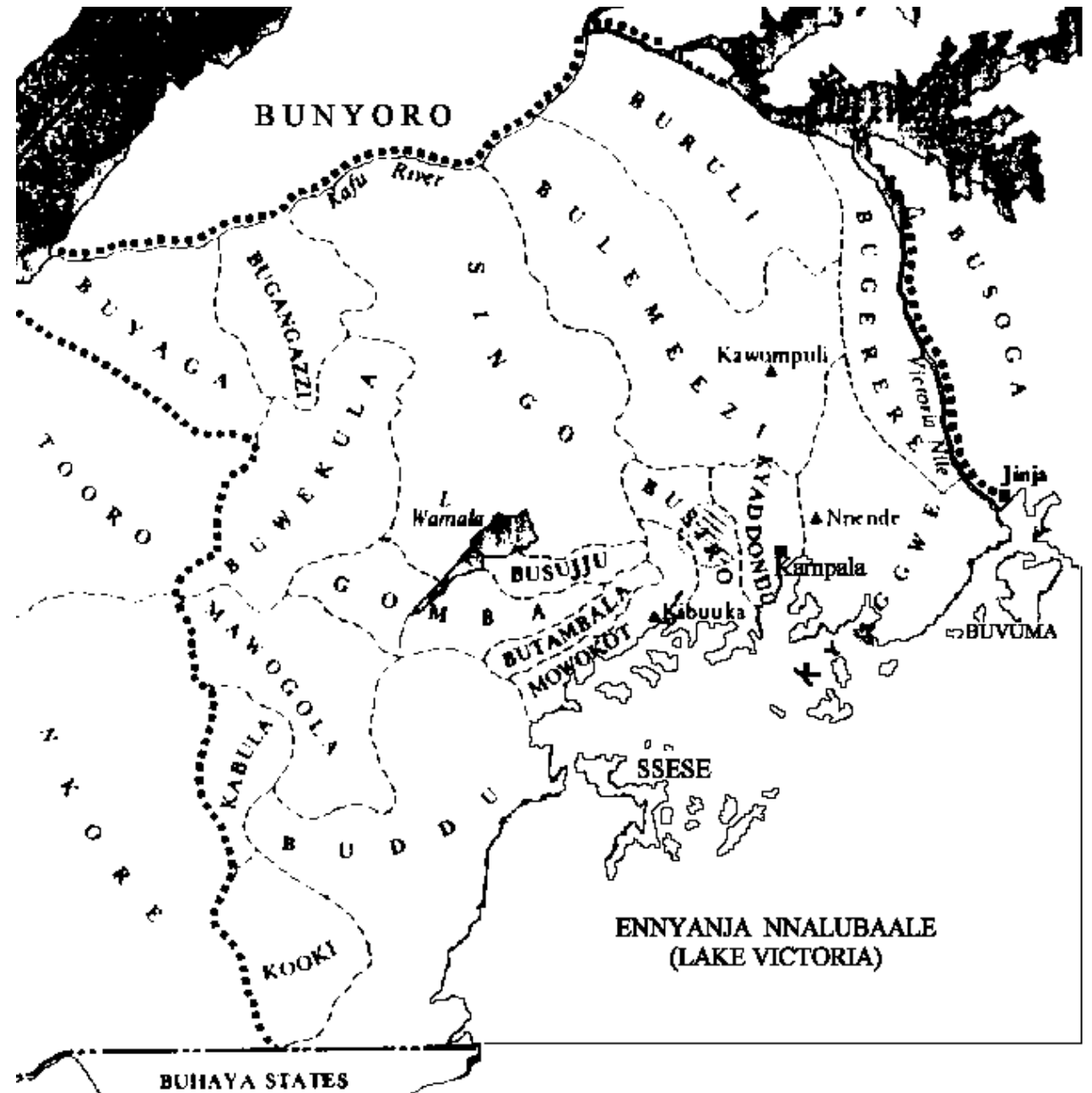
Burundi

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



Buganda

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



Takeaways

- Variation:
 - Governance systems
 - Levels of centralization
 - Geographic reach
- Mostly limited capacity to govern