

# What do economists know about precolonial political centralization in Africa?

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African History through the lens of Economics  
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# Why “Precolonial” Political Centralization?

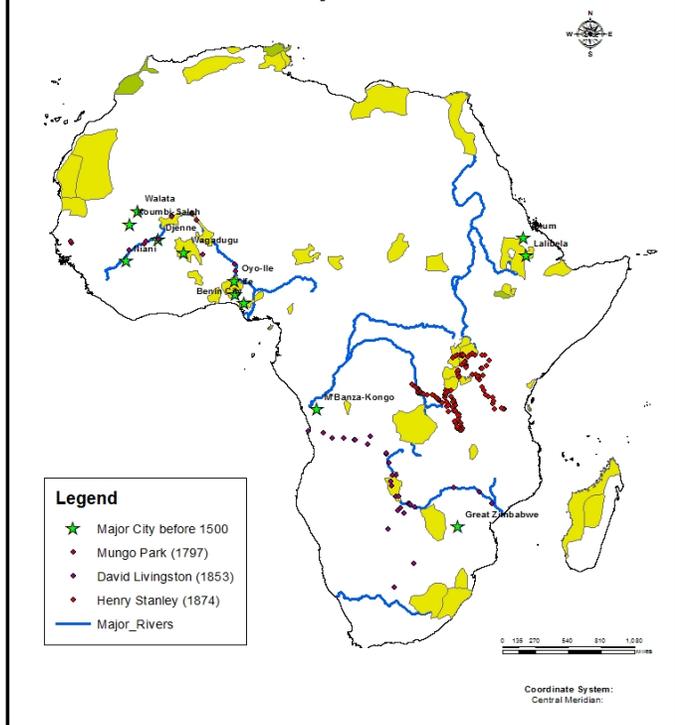
- Its an important context for economic development (taxation and the provision of public goods like protection of citizenry, control of immigration, infrastructure development, etc.).
- By the end of the “precolonial” era, Europe is more centralized than Africa. Might this help explain differences in income?
- Inside Africa, an index of “precolonial” political centralization is correlated with variation in the provisioning of public goods (roads) and income (light density) 100 years later!
- Path-dependence? Persistence? Legacy? History matters? Origins?

# What is this index of “precolonial” political centralization?

- A variable in Murdock, circa 1900
- Based on Swanson (1960), *The Birth of the Gods (executive power)*
  - “Jurisdictional Hierarchy... is derived from the codes on the number and typology of “sovereign organizations“ with which Swanson (1960) obtained highly illuminating results in his study of religion. Our definition of jurisdictional levels coincides closely with his definition of organizations characterized by sovereignty, i.e., by original and definitive jurisdiction over some sphere of social life in which the organization has the legitimate right to make decisions having a significant effect on its members, (George Murdock, *Ethnographic Atlas, Ethnology*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Apr. 1962), 265-286. p. 269).
- For a critique, see Susan Keech McIntosh (ed), *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa* (1999)
- Most important, “Precolonial” centralization is an outcome of a prior history!

# Economists don't know what that prior history is...

Late 19thC States (3 levels above village),  
Pre-1500 Major Non-Muslim Cities  
and Some Explorer Locations

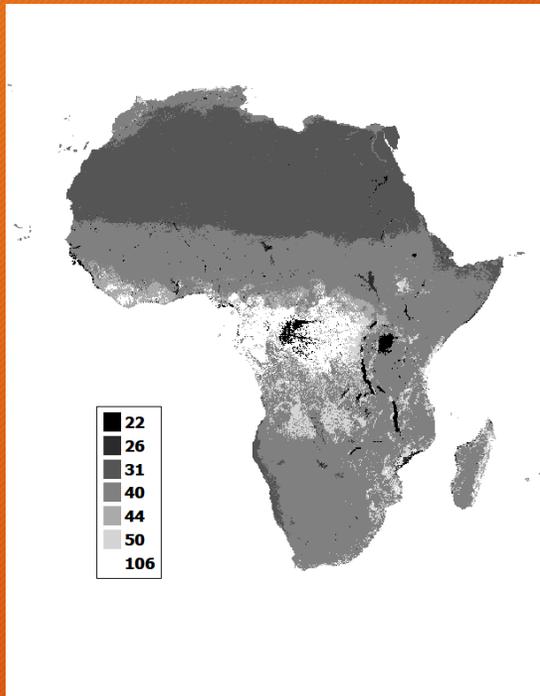


- Some major cities circa 1500 (From Chandler and Fox, *3000 Years of Urban Growth*, 1974)
- Political Centralization circa 1900 (From George Murdock, *Ethnographic Atlas*, digitized)
- No obvious correlation between early cities and later centralization, but some clusters.
  - Along Niger River and Bight of Benin, but nothing like we would expect (Ghana, Mali, Ife, Benin, etc)
  - A cluster along the Great Rifts from Axum to Zimbabwe (Murdock idea, copper zone, Explorer observations)

# What we do know is that the slave trade era intervenes, circa 1500 - 1860

- Warren Whatley, “How The International Slave Trades Underdeveloped Africa, *Journal of Economic History* (forthcoming, June 2022)
  - Not particularly focused on the impact of the slave trades on political centralization, but on the overall transformation of African economies and societies.
  - I investigate how African social structures and cultures responded to exposure to *capture and trade*.
  - Some effects on political centralization, but different by region.
  - The most interesting finding is how exposure to the slave trades spread bundles of institutions, one of which is sometimes centralization.

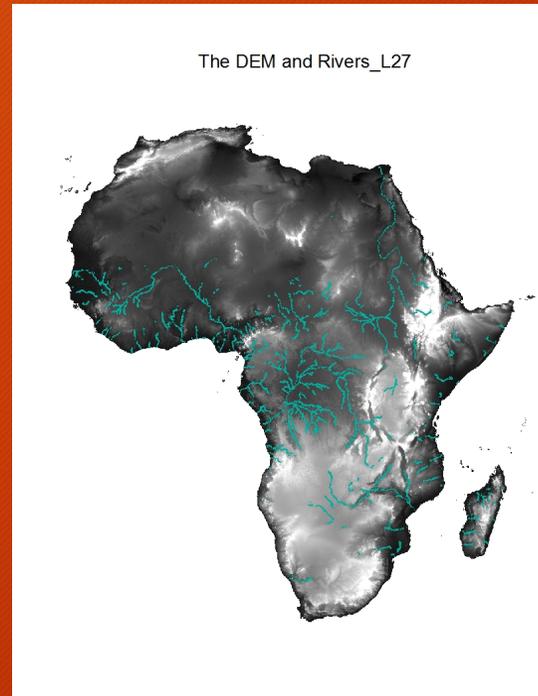
# Travel time to nearest slave port captures exposure to international slave trades (GIS)



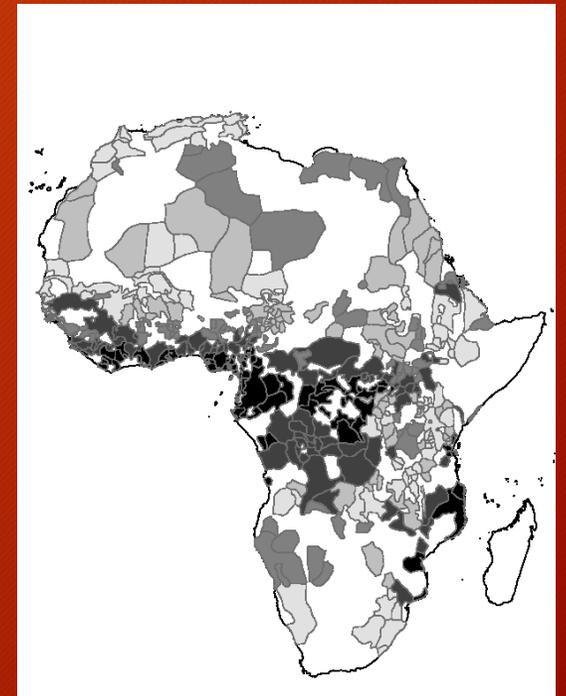
Walking and headload



Canoe and river velocity

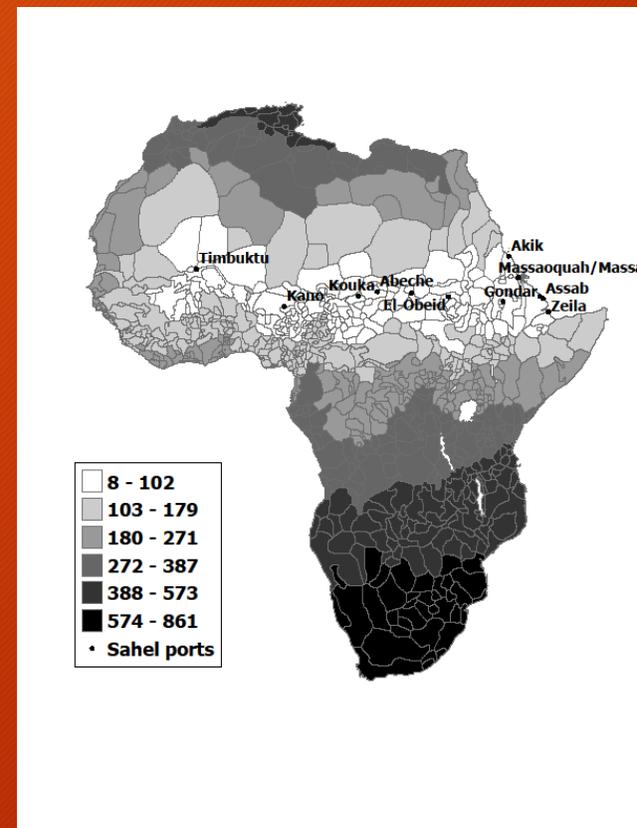
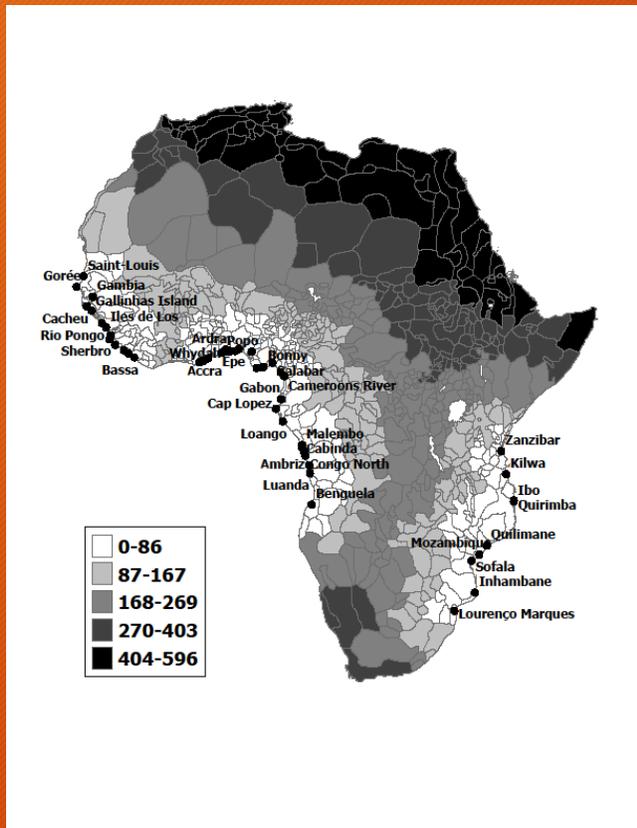


Up and down hills



Tsetse fly suitability  
Horse and camel

# Average travel time to nearest slave port for societies in the Ethnographic Atlas (hours)



# Exposure to international slave trading?

- The capture of slaves creates slave wealth.
- How did the trade of this wealth to international slave ports impact the institutional structure of societies and economies along the way?
- To address this question I estimate the impact of proximity to the nearest international slave port on the probability that a society was organized around the preservation of slave wealth.

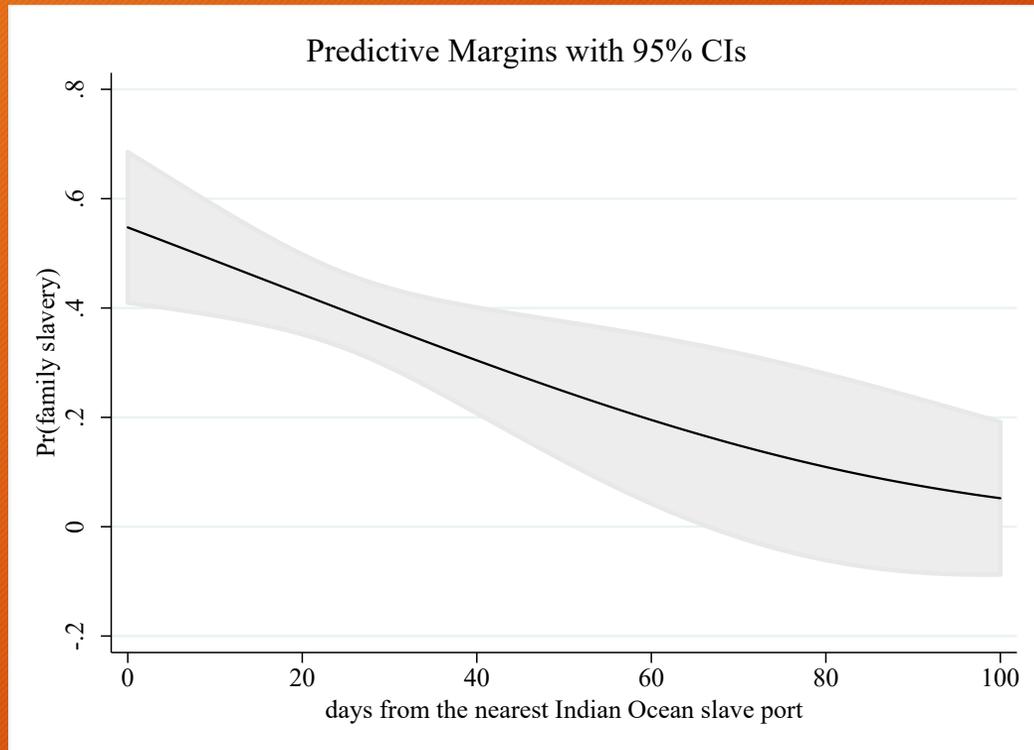
# Bundles of Rights

- Slavery as a property right over people (slavery).
- Polygyny as a property right over women as wives (polygyny).
- Inheritance rules that favor the retention of wealth within the nuclear family, as opposed to the clan or tribe (family-based wealth).
- Hereditary succession in local politics (landed aristocracy).
- Political centralization beyond local politics (centralization).

# Some Findings on singular rights

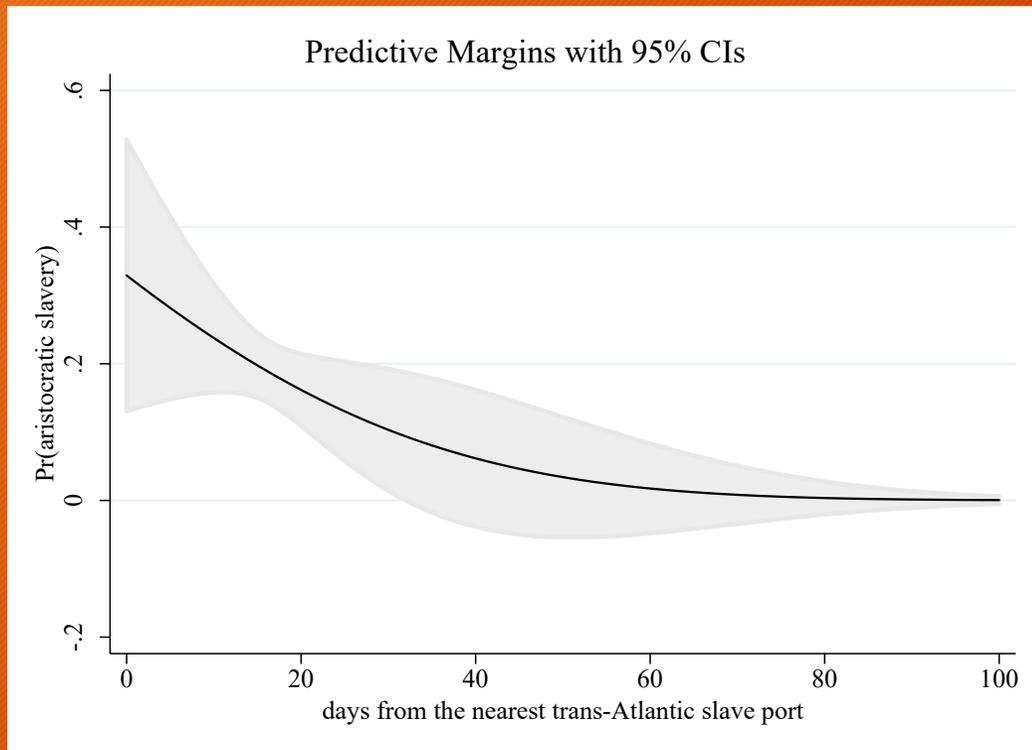
- For all of Africa, exposure to slave trading spread African slavery.
- For all of Africa, exposure to slave trading spread African slavery and polygyny together. Very strong result! Tied together.
- Proximity to trans-Saharan slave ports *reduced* political centralization, especially in West Africa.
- No systematic effect on political centralization along the Indian and Atlantic oceans.

# East Africa: Polygynous family-based slavery



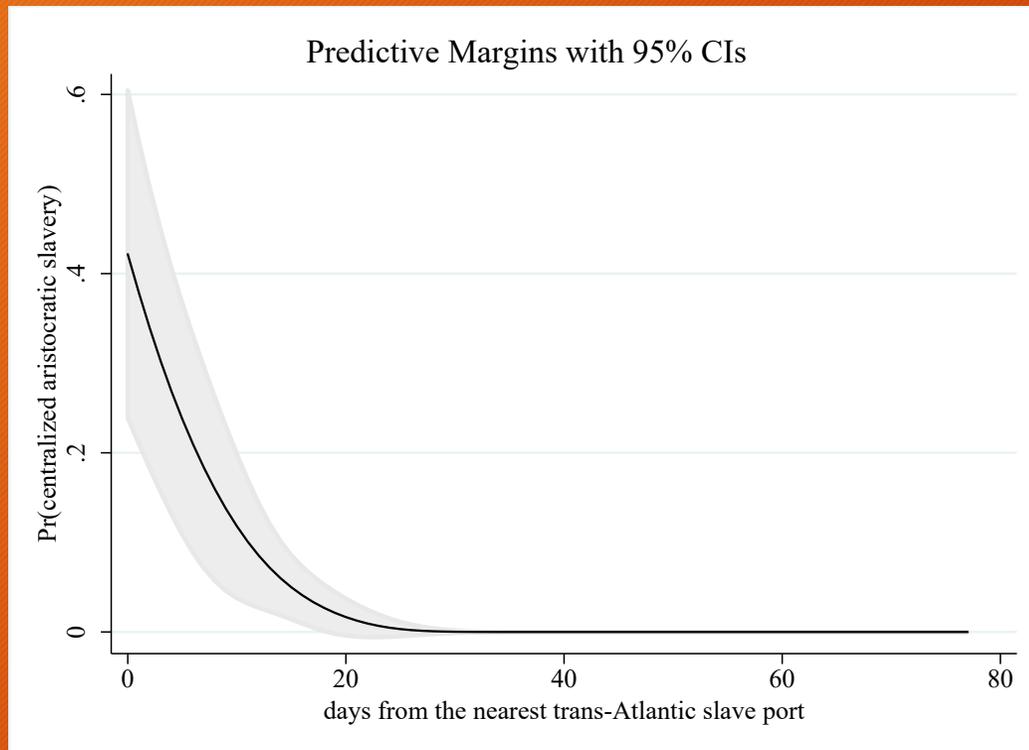
- Bundle of institutions:
  - Slavery
  - Polygyny
  - Family-based inheritance of wealth
- 60% probability if adjacent to port.
- 40% probability 20 days out.
- Declines slowly (few coastal ports; dhow ships, Swahili coastal trade diaspora all facilitate exposure).

# West Africa: Aristocratic family-based polygynous slavery



- Bundle of institutions:
  - Slavery
  - Polygyny
  - Family-based inheritance of wealth
  - Hereditary succession in local politics (aristocracy).
- Family-based polygynous slavery only shows up under the protection of a local aristocracy.
- 35% probability if adjacent to a port.
- 10% probability 20 days out.

# West Africa: Politically centralized aristocratic family-based polygynous slavery

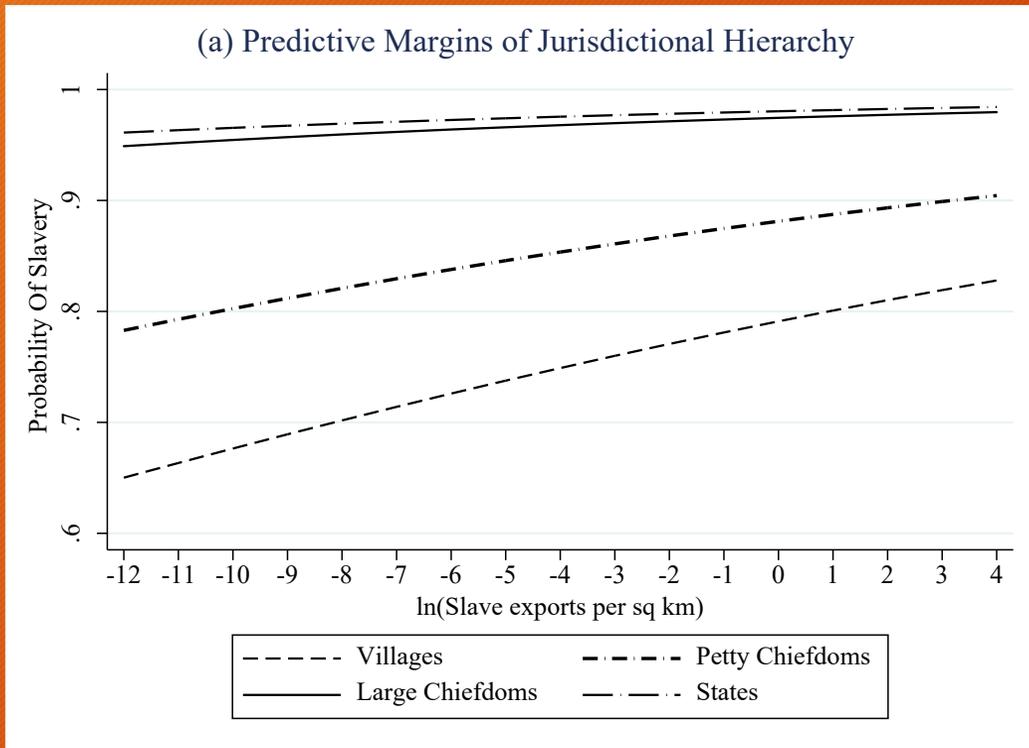


- Bundle of institutions:
  - Slavery
  - Polygyny
  - Family-based inheritance of wealth
  - Hereditary succession in local politics
  - Political centralization beyond the local level
- 40% probability if adjacent to a port.
- 0% probability 20 days out.

# Possible explanations for regional differences

- Settlement export enclaves in East Africa: While African trade in the Indian Ocean dates from the Middle Ages, according to Lovejoy (1983, 226-251) the major transformation in East African slavery dates from the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the expansion of European, Omani and Swahili slave plantations on the mainland and its islands.
- Indigenous lineage slavery in West Africa: Europeans did not settle and produce in West Africa. Slave systems evolved out of long-term exposure of lineage systems, first to the trans-Saharan slave trade and then to the explosive trans-Atlantic slave trade.

# Effects of exposure to capture on the spread of African slavery



- Use Nunn and Watchenkon (2011) data on the origins of exported captives.
- Use travel time to estimate how many exported captives can be explained by their proximity to closest port.
- Look to see if this estimate of exported captives is correlated with the probability of the people adopting slavery.
- Results:
  - Centralized are slave regardless of exposure to capture
  - Decentralized adopt slavery to defend against further enslavement.
  - Substituting Euclidean distance for travel time misses all of this!

# Some examples of catchment effects

- Whatley and Gillezeau (2011) model captures the general geopolitical history of the Guinea Coast during the 18<sup>th</sup> century expansion of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the emergence of centralized interior slave-raiding states like Asante (Wilks 1975), Dahomey (Law 1989), Futa Djallon (Lovejoy 2016), Oyo (Law 1977) and the Sokoto Caliphate (Lovejoy 2005).
- Diouf (2003) discusses how decentralized societies fought back.
- Hawthorne (2001, 1999) and Klein (2001) on Balanta transformation
- Harms ( 1981) on the Bobangi
- Roberts (1980, 1987) on Bambara and Segu transformation

# Conclusion and lessons

- Centralization means something different regionally
- Zulu region in SE Africa is the only centralized region without slavery! Mfecane?
- The histories of centralization in Europe and Africa are not independent of each other. Not a sequence in the development process.
- Going forward: Centralization in West Africa is closely tied to slavery, polygyny, inheritance patterns and landed aristocratic control.
- Context for:
  - Use of unfree labor under colonial occupation?
  - Establishment of “Customary” authority under colonial occupation?

*Look for my forthcoming book...*

*The Making of the Other: How Black Africa Became the Mirror  
Image of White Europe  
By Warren C. Whatley*

# The slave trades made them more different

- Freedom
- Monogamy
- Individuality
- Centralization
- Democracy
- Rule of Law
- Patriliney
- Racism
- Development



The Slave Trades

- Slavery
- Polygamy
- Ethnic identity
- Decentralization
- Aristocracy
- Customary Authority
- Matriliney
- Ethnic stratification
- Underdevelopment

Thanks and I look forward to your questions.