

Week I Abstracts

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PS-5180

25 August 2021

Introduction to Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa spans the region between the southern edge of the Sahara to the Cape of Good Hope. Demographically, it is distinct from North Africa, where Arabs are among the major ethnicities; on its own terms, it is an enormously heterogeneous region of wide diversity of language, culture, and religion. The grouping together of such vastly different peoples is an unfortunate result of European Colonialism, which in part erased the distinctions of the African peoples, but the aftermath of imperialism means that there is still some methodological utility in studying the region as a group of entities.

The geography of SSA has shaped the culture and politics of the region significantly. Even before the arrival of Europeans, the economies of African societies depended on natural vegetation and the protection of surrounding desert regions. In the industrial age, ecological exploitation erodes the ability of African people to sustain themselves in traditional manners, which in turn fuels political instability in sometimes fragile post-Colonial polities.

SSA countries are linguistically diverse (with some notable exceptions), but most have a *lingua franca* which was imposed by colonial rule. Rather than unify the national identity, however, the author writes that this has contributed to linguistic fragmentation, largely owing to colonial practices pitting ethnicities against one another as vicarious rulers over ruled. Religion is not a catalyst for social conflict (again, with notable exceptions); nearly half of SSA's population is Christian and a third Muslim.

Thomson, Introduction

Africa is an ideal region of study for comparative politics. It is important to jettison unhelpful preconceptions of Africa as a continent overwhelmed with corruption, disaster, and violence. The author reiterates that Africa is not a unitary, homogeneous region: it is just as diverse and varied as Europe, despite Europe being a much smaller region and population. No single political system could or should govern every state on the continent, and the history of coups, class struggle, nascent democracy, and ethnic conflict are not unique to Africa.

Thomson writes that three actors – the state, civil society, and external influencers – shape the course of politics in Africa, just as they do in other countries. The cleavage between inefficient patronage-networks and civil society arose after the external influence of European empire diminished in the 1950s and '60s.