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The democraticness of traditional political systems in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Traditional political systems (TPS) are an important part of the political landscape in Africa. They govern subnational communities and differ from nation states, both in their institutional set-up as well as in their legitimacy. Yet, we have little comparative knowledge on these political systems and, in particular, whether they can be described as democratic. In this article, we analyse the democraticness of TPS based on a new expert survey. Using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), we show that the more than 140 ethnic groups we analyse vary meaningfully in their democraticness. Measures of public preference input and of political process control contribute particularly to a latent measure of democraticness. Furthermore, we find some indication for regionally interdependent institutions, with slightly more democratic systems in Southern Africa and less democratic systems in West Africa. Yet, no such interdependence exists between the state and the group level. Finally, we find that more hierarchically organized political systems, kings, and chiefs, as well as those organized in segments, are on average less democratic, while the presence of elders is associated with higher levels of democraticness.

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KEYWORDS Africa; traditional institutions; democraticness; survey research; measurement; latent variable; confirmatory factor analysis

1. Introduction

Can traditional political institutions be considered democratic? And how can we assess their democraticness? In this article we examine traditional political systems (TPS), which are a common feature of the political landscape in contemporary Africa. TPS comprise political authorities that govern subnational ethnic groups and territories based on traditional legitimacy. Particularly in rural areas and in issues of land, conflict management, and culture, they are an important reality to the majority of African people.[1] TPS, therefore, practice state functions in parallel to the state.

Political systems of traditionally organized communities vary on many dimensions. For instance, the political systems can be structured hierarchically – like the Buganda Kingdom in Uganda – or have a horizontal organization – like the Guurti clan elders in

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Somaliland.[2] Despite an ongoing debate whether these group-level institutions can be considered democratic and compatible with state-level democracy[3] and a growing body of literature that assesses the effects of traditional institutions and their institutional constraints on various outcomes,[4] we still know little about groups' political systems from a comparative perspective. In particular, we lack a systematic assessment of whether and how democracy in the context of TPS can be measured.

In this article, we fill this gap by assessing the democraticness of these political systems. The literature on the conceptualization and measurement of state-level democracy has progressed rapidly in recent years.[5] We capitalize on these developments by applying them to TPS. First, we conceive of democracy in TPS as a continuum with different degrees of democracy, which we label democraticness here. Second, we start from the proposition that we cannot observe democraticness in TPS directly, but only through its manifestations – it is a latent variable.[6]

Specifying and operationalizing these manifestations and applying them to TPS is, therefore, the central element of this study. As we still know little about TPS' democraticness, we start from a broad perspective. We derive eleven components of democracy that are structured around the dimensions of *equal empowerment*, *preference input*, and *process control*. In doing so, we rely on common indicators of state-level democracy while including TPS-specific knowledge.

To measure the observable manifestations of democraticness, we present a new group-level dataset on contemporary TPS in Africa. To date, there is no comparative data on African TPS. The only existing data on group-level institutions so far are recorded in Murdock's[7] *Ethnographic Atlas*, which features information on precolonial institutions with few dimensions of institutional variation. Although some contemporary data has been collected, for example, by the Afrobarometer surveys, these focus on individual-level information on contact and ratings with traditional leaders, thus lacking an institutional component.

To collect the data, we ran a web-based expert survey, in which almost 300 scholars of anthropology, history, ethnology, and political science shared their knowledge on 159 ethnic groups in Africa, based on the population of the Ethnic Power Relations data.[8] The data advance our knowledge on both the prevalence and the variation in TPS and their democratic attributes in Africa. It reveals that about 90% of the surveyed ethnic groups in Africa maintain some degree of traditional political organization, substantiating the need to better assess the inner workings of these institutions.

Following the seminal work of Bollen,[9] we use confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the latent concept of democraticness for TPS. We find that the rule of (customary) law, participation, and transparency are among the most important components of democraticness in TPS. These elements of democratic process control and preference-input emphasize procedural variables over leadership selection and how many people are involved in the final decision-making. Another key finding is that the principle of separation of power and political rights seem not to be associated with the latent concept for TPS. Our findings underline our intuition that it is essential to start from a broad and explorative conceptualization of democracy when examining the democraticness of TPS.

We analyse patterns of TPS democraticness further. From the CFA we predict a unidimensional scale of democraticness and find that our score correlates highly with subjective measures of democracy given by experts. Furthermore, there is a high variation in democraticness across TPS, thus we test whether spatial patterns can explain parts of

this variation. While democraticness varies across the African continent, our evidence suggests that there are some patterns of spatial clustering of democraticness within the African regions – with Southern African groups averaging higher on our democraticness score and Western African groups scoring lower. Yet, we find no such patterns between the level of democraticness and the specific states that host TPS. The latter finding suggests that there is no correlation of group-level democraticness within states and thus no immediate interdependence between group-level institutions and (post-independence) states.[10] An additional case study of Namibia and its traditionally organized groups and their democraticness is provided in the Appendix (section 8).

Finally, we examine whether institutional features – such as hierarchy and particular political offices – can be within-system explanations of the variation in democraticness of TPS. We find that both more hierarchical systems as well as the presence of chiefs and kings, and the societal organization in segmentary lineages are associated with lower levels of democraticness while the presence of elders as political officers seem to be related to higher levels of democraticness.

2. Traditional political systems and democracy

2.1. Traditional political systems in Africa

The origins of contemporary TPS in Africa pre-date today's states as well as European colonization, before which their institutions were the central governance structure. Despite colonial attempts to abandon or curtail traditional political power through direct or indirect rule, traditional authorities did not wither away and many survived the struggle for independence and post-independent politics[11] – although they may have changed their institutional set-up.[12] Today, hereditary chiefs, councils of elders, or age-set structures of nomadic tribes are still immanent features of African politics.

Prominent examples of current TPS in Africa are the Kingdom of the Zulu in South Africa or the Ashanti Chiefs of Ghana. Less hierarchical TPS – for example, the Tswana of Botswana or the Nuer of South Sudan – organize in kinship and age-set systems, which work as social stratification, defining alternating age groups with specific cultural and political tasks.[13] The continued prevalence of and variation in TPS on the African continent[14] begs for a better understanding of whether and how TPS can be described along a democracy-autocracy dimension.[15]

Coinciding with the third wave of democratization,[16] which also saw a so-called resurgence of TPS across Africa,[17] a debate around TPS and democracy emerged in the (late) 1990s. The so-called *neo-liberal* approach[18] argues that TPS, by their very nature, contradict the idea of (liberal) democracy, for their constituents are regarded as subjects rather than citizens.[19] From this viewpoint, today's TPS have significantly departed from their origins due to colonization and persist with "decentralized despotism" of the colonial state,[20] disregarding democratic values such as civil liberties and gender equality. Contrarily, the so-called *neo-traditionalist* standpoint views traditional authority as compatible with democratic governance. Advocates of this branch frequently argue that TPS comprise inherently democratic elements such as consensual decision-making and public participation, [21] which can be related to consensual, deliberative, as well as participatory ideals of democracy.

Some authors acknowledge that across and within TPS, democratic limitations and democratic elements coexist.[22] Empirical studies using individual-level survey data [23]

or single-case studies[24] find evidence for both the *neo-liberal* and the *neo-traditional* views. Following up on this debate, we argue in this article that the political systems of traditional communities can be analysed like other political systems and, as such, will vary across different political communities. In consequence, TPS cannot be described as inherently democratic or autocratic but can be assessed where they fall between these endpoints based on their systemic attributes.

Baldwin and Holzinger[25] are the first to compare contemporary traditional leaders around the world with regard to their selection and accountability mechanisms and argue that non-electoral accountability may be more important in TPS's democraticness than elections. They induce this from the observation that "traditional leaders perform better than would be theoretically expected given the limited role of elections in selecting and sanctioning them". [26] The implication from this finding is that in order to see what drives democraticness in African TPS, a more encompassing and exploratory approach is required. Before we turn to the components of democraticness in TPS that we consider the basis of our exploratory analysis, we discuss the implications of concepts and measurement of democracy on the state-level, for TPS.

2.2. Concepts and measurement of democracy

While there has been no systematic assessment of democraticness in TPS, the literature on both the conception and measurement of state-level democracy is vast. There is no general definition of democracy beyond government "by the people", in fact, democracy is an "essentially contested concept".[27]

Existing understandings of state-level democracy broadly vary on two dimensions: first, they vary in what the concept of democracy entails, and second, how such a concept can be measured. With regard to conceptualization, "thin" (minimalist) understandings that focus solely on the institutional, election-related aspects of democracy[28] stand in contrast with "thick" (maximalist) understandings, that regard democracy as a comprehensive set of democratic dimensions, including, for instance, political rights and pluralism.[29] A third way is advanced by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project that disaggregates democracy into different theoretical conceptions of democracy, such as liberal or deliberative, and their corresponding components.[30]

Moreover, these conceptualizations also determine the measurement required. In particular, more encompassing concepts of democracy demand the collection and aggregation of a variety of indicators that, as a result, will lead to a scale of democracy, rather than a dichotomy. On the one hand, additive indices are created. Such "formative" indices regard their indicators as *causes* of the aggregate phenomenon.[31] In consequence, formative indices necessarily have to be based on a strong theory that justifies the formative quality of the indicators. Yet, such indices have been criticized on methodological grounds, in particular with regard to their aggregation and inexplicit weighting rules.[32]

On the other hand, democracy can be measured by assuming that it is a latent concept, which can only be observed through its measurable manifestations.[33] Conceived in this way, indicators are not a cause of democracy, but a *measurable effect*. This allows for analyses of democracy that factor in measurement errors and make explicit which measured aspects correlate with the latent variable to what degree. Such "reflective" indices are useful in cases when there is no established theory, as, in our case, for democraticness of TPS. Still, the measurable manifestations have to be defined before the

analysis and, in consequence, we start from a broad conception of democraticness and subsequently explore which indicators matter for the democraticness in TPS.

3. Democraticness in TPS and its manifestations

In this article, we explore the possibility of measuring the democraticness of political systems that differ quite profoundly from state-level institutions. A conceptualization of how democraticness in TPS manifests itself empirically, therefore, requires an explorative and broad approach, covering an array of democratic components. Treier and Jackman argue that "in selecting the number of indicators, researchers tend toward 'minimalist' definitions using only a few variables, which are often insufficient to separate out different gradations of democracy".[34] While it may be the case that the political leaders in many African TPS are not selected via formal voting, there is some evidence that consensus decision-making seems to be deeply rooted in many societies.[35] A strict focus on electoral democracy, for instance, would therefore categorically preclude some TPS from an analysis of their democratic features.

We structure our operational components[36] of democraticness around three dimensions: equal empowerment, preference input, and process control. While many typologies of democratic dimensions exist, many broad conceptions of democracy include three similar dimensions.[37] Thereby, we leverage knowledge on state-level democracy, while leaving room to integrate that on TPS.

The first three components are concerned with the equal empowerment of all members of the community. First, *equality* demands the absence of discrimination and the uniform treatment of all members of the community by the customary law. The second component enquires whether the customary law foresees *political rights* for the members of the group, such as the right to express and associate themselves freely. The third component assesses whether *access to offices* is restricted to a selected circle of persons (for example, a royal family) or open to each member of a group. While many traditional leaders inherit their post – such as chiefs or kings – other positions and systems – such as age-sets – give certain political roles to many if not all societal members.

The second dimension is concerned with the input of preferences by the people. We identify four components in this dimension. *Leadership selection* is the vertical accountability of leaders and representatives through the ability of community members to (de-)select them. Beyond articulating their preferences through leadership selection, community members may partake in all other stages of the decision-making process. This includes *agenda-setting*, *participation* in the discussions on the agenda topic, as well as in the final *decision-making* itself. These three components capture the participatory elements of community members also found in participatory and deliberative democracy principles[38] and are often linked to democraticness in TPS.[39] *Agenda-setting* is the capacity of community members to put specific issues for discussion in the decisive political arena, but also remove or prioritize topics. Agenda-setting can therefore be understood as "direct discussion-making" as differentiated by Teorell.[40] Such political discussions are an important part of the phase before the decision can be made, which we refer to here as *participation*. This includes attending public meetings, voicing opinions to convince others, contacting a public official, or partaking in political discussions.[41] Participation seems particularly feasible and crucial when it comes to local-level democracy and can be regarded as comprising the most deliberative elements.[42] Concerning the final step in the decision-making process, we consider

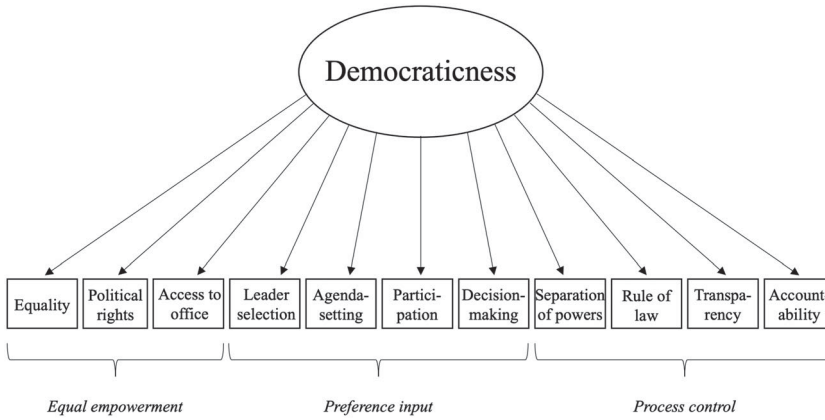

Figure 1. Theoretical concept: manifestation of TPS' democraticness in eleven observable components.

how many persons are involved. Again, *decision-making* can be based on consensual elements involving all or many group members, restricted to few participants, or can be highly centralized to one political figure, such as a king or chief.

The third and final dimension encompasses the means of process control over those endowed with power. First, we take horizontal control into account. The *separation of power* ideally facilitates a system of checks and balances in which the relatively autonomous branches of government mutually constrain one another. Concerning TPS, this would require independence, for instance, between customary judges and executive leaders, such as chiefs. Second, the *rule of law* guarantees rule-based governance, a check on the abuse of power, and fair and public hearing through impartial courts. The third component of process control is *transparency*, which is particularly salient in the decision-making process. This can both mean that there is no censorship and unlimited access to information and that meetings in decision-making bodies are open to the public. Fourth and finally, besides open communication, non-electoral *accountability* through community members overseeing and voicing critique towards leading authorities is an important feature of process control. In a democratic political system oversight and critique should lead to reactions and consequences. In particular, with regard to TPS, Baldwin and Holzinger note that "accountability mechanisms backed up by social pressure would appear more important than the periodic election of leaders".[43]

These eleven components form the basis for our theoretical understanding of the manifestations of democraticness in TPS (see Figure 1). All of the components are assumed to be equally important, and no ordinal order or minimal conditions are specified. Together, the components are thus considered to be sufficient but not univocally necessary for the democraticness of TPS. The more democratic components are stored within a TPS, the more democratic is the traditional system.

4. Data: expert web survey

To measure the components of democraticness in TPS on the group level, a web-based expert survey was designed and run in 2014. Survey research offers a systematic, standardized approach to collect information, of which expert web surveys[44] are a specialty

due to their predefined, non-randomized samples of interviewees. They offer a unique opportunity to collect information on topics that have not been analysed systematically, such as TPS.

The survey questionnaire for this study encompasses three main sections: first, information about the characteristics of TPS, second, the democraticness components, and third, the relationship between TPS and the state. Since most traditional systems correspond to a specific and distinctive ethnic group, these are the unit of analysis. The population is based on the EPR dataset.[45 46] The EPR codes ethnic groups considered to be politically relevant where "at least one political organization claims to represent it in national politics or if its members are subjected to state-led political discrimination".[47] Political relevance is consequently not synonymous with political power. In total, the EPR dataset (Version 2.0) records 207 politically relevant ethnic groups in 40 African states for the year 2009.

Experts were selected based on their publications on single or comparative case studies of a respective ethnic group in Africa: 298 experts participated in the survey answering questions for 159 groups across the continent.[48] Multiple expert answers were aggregated.[49] The initial survey question asked experts whether the group currently had an operating TPS. The survey indicates that about 90% of the ethnic groups in Africa covered by the survey organize in TPS, underpinning their significance in present-day Africa.[50] Only if the answer to this question was positive, experts received questions about the characteristics and democraticness components of the TPS. Overall, this resulted in a population of 142 groups.

For each of the groups that maintain TPS, we enquired about their democratic components through a battery of survey items, listed in their original wording in the Appendix, section 1. As some components build on multiple items in the survey, the items had to be recoded and aggregated.[51] All components are interval-scaled from 1 (least democratic), 2 (medium category), and 3 (most democratic). Table 1 provides summary statistics for all eleven components.

5. Analysis: current democraticness of TPS in Africa

The analysis proceeds in four major steps. We first use CFA to assess which of the components that we identified and subsequently measured in the survey actually correspond to the latent variable of democraticness. Based on the CFA, we construct a democraticness index for all groups in the survey. Using the index, we then examine the variation of democraticness in TPS, as well as their geographical clusters across

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for components of democraticness.

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Equality	2.32	0.55	1	3
Political rights	2.34	0.47	1	3
Access to office	2.03	0.52	1	3
Leadership selection	2.12	0.52	1	3
Agenda-setting	2.45	0.55	1	3
Participation	2.10	0.59	1	3
Decision-making	1.96	0.54	1	3
Separation of powers	1.65	0.64	1	3
Rule of law	2.14	0.51	1	3
Transparency	2.14	0.51	1	3
Accountability	2.32	0.46	1	3

Africa. Finally, we analyse whether the level of democraticness correlates with specific types of leadership (for example, kingships and elders) and institutional hierarchy (that is, centralized versus decentralized institutions).

5.1. Confirmatory factor analysis

To examine the democraticness of TPS in Africa, our first step is to perform a CFA. As laid out in the previous sections, we derived eleven components that may be linked to the latent variable democraticness. Empirically, however, this might not be the case for all of the components and not all of them may be equally important. A CFA estimates the strength of the relationship between the components and the latent construct – the factor loadings. Thereby, the CFA allows us to evaluate if the eleven components are measuring a single latent construct and thus perform an empirical test that lays ground for an index of democraticness. We use full information maximum likelihood estimation that uses information also from those observations that contain missing values and thus prevents listwise deletion.[52]

Table 2 displays the results of the CFA. In model 1, we include all components. Ten components load positively on the latent variable democraticness, of which the respective

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis.

	Model 1 (full) IoD 11	Model 2 (main) IoD 8	Model 3 (parsimonious) IoD 4
Equality	0.30***	0.28***	
	(0.10)	(0.10)	
Political rights	0.16		
	(0.10)		
Access to office	0.39***	0.39***	
	(0.09)	(0.09)	
Leadership selection	0.20*	0.19*	
	(0.10)	(0.10)	
Agenda-setting	0.37***	0.38***	
	(0.10)	(0.10)	
Participation	0.51***	0.50***	0.47***
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.10)
Decision-making	0.16		
	(0.10)		
Horizontal separation of powers	−0.12		
	(0.11)		
Rule of law	0.68***	0.69***	0.79***
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.10)
Transparency	0.65***	0.65***	0.62***
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.10)
Accountability	0.45***	0.46***	0.41***
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
N	142	142	137
RMSEA	0.06	0.07	0.09
pcclose	0.20	0.17	0.21
CD	0.73	0.73	0.74
LogL	−1066.41	−750.58	−352.30
AIC	2198.82	1549.16	728.60
BIC	2296.36	1620.10	763.64

Note: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors are in parentheses. Goodness of fit statistics: Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), Probability RMSEA ≤ 0.05 (pcclose), Coefficient of determination (CD), Log likelihood (LogL), Akaike's information criterion (AIC), Bayesian information criterion (BIC).

coefficients of eight components are statistically significant on the 10%-level with medium strength (0.20–0.68). The process-control components *transparency* and *rule of law*, as well as the preference input component *participation*, make the largest contribution.

However, the coefficients of *political rights*, *decision-making*, and *separation of powers* do not reach statistical significance, with the latter even having a negative sign. This means that these items might not be associated with the latent variable of democraticness of TPS,[53] which also suggests that these components do not have a strong correlation with the other eight components in our model. If democraticness means to score high on the eight significant components, there may be deeper underlying processes that bring about those variables but not political rights, decision-making, and separation of powers.

A tentative conclusion from this could be that these components – although potentially relevant for state-level democracy – are not constitutive for democratic rule in TPS. It seems that accumulation of offices (no separation of power) in TPS is not necessarily associated with a loss in democraticness: While a chief may also act as a judge, this power might be sufficiently limited through transparent politics and non-electoral means of accountability. Concerning political rights, research has yet to explore more fully the role and protection of individual rights in TPS.[54] However, our evidence suggests that – in the way interrogated in our survey – individual political rights do not seem to be of significant importance for TPS democraticness, yet basic equality does.

We run a second model leaving out the components that did not reach statistical significance. The coefficients of the remaining components remain stable and significant at the 1%-level, except for leadership selection at the 10%-level. The ability to (de-)select traditional leaders makes the smallest contribution, whereas the process-control components *rule of the law*, *transparency*, and non-electoral *accountability,* as well as preference-input via *participation,* have the strongest correlation with democraticness.

While transparency and the rule of (customary) law facilitate the control of political powerholders by members of the community, (non-electoral) accountability ensures that such control and critique do not go without consequences for the political elite. Both transparency and participation also facilitate the flow of information and open discussions before political decisions are taken. It seems that such procedural aspects are more important for democraticness in TPS than other formal acts, such as leadership selection through voting. Also, having the final say (*decision-making*) does not contribute significantly to democraticness in contrast to processes that lead up to the decision (*participation*). Hence, TPS's democraticness seems to be functioning based on mechanisms that facilitate participation and deliberation.[55] These processes allow for the voicing of critique upon which leaders react (that is, non-electoral *accountability*), while active participation in discussions is facilitated (that is, *participation*) and information is freely accessible (that is, *transparency*). Consensual models of decision-making may be seen as a result of deliberation,[56] which we may find more frequently in the more democratic TPS. Indeed, consensual leadership selection is regarded as the more democratic form of tradition in some TPS vis-à-vis hereditary appointment.[57]

We run a third, parsimonious model, that includes only those four components that make the largest contribution. The coefficients and significance levels remain stable, with the rule of law making the largest contribution. The parsimonious model underlines that the basic procedural variables of process control and preference input are the

most important correlates of our latent index. However, our more extensive model 2 shows that adding more substantive variables – including equality, access to office, and agenda-setting – nonetheless helps us in measuring the democraticness of groups. To factor in the variation of the other significant variables, we proceed with model 2 as our main model.

Comparing log-likelihood, Akaike's and Bayesian information criteria across models shows that overall, we achieve a good model fit: the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is smaller than 0.08 in models 1 and 2, and the coefficient of determination (CD / R^2), with 0.73–0.74, is substantial.[58] While AIC and BIC improve their fit from model 1 through 3, the RMSEA increases at the same time, which supports our decision for model 2.

In summary, the CFA suggests that procedural variables of process-control, rule-based governance, and broad participation are drivers of democraticness in TPS. Some indicators we typically look for in states, such as formal voting, (final) decision-making, or the separation of power, seem to be less important. While procedural aspects seem to dominate, more substantive components including equality and access to office also play a role in TPS democraticness.

5.2. An index of democraticness for TPS

To arrive at a single measure of democraticness for each group, the democratic components are formed into a unidimensional scale. We do so by predicting the score for each observation based on the CFA estimation.[59] This post-estimation technique naturally factors in weights, using the factor loadings of each democraticness component from Table 2. The result is the mean of the latent variable democraticness based on each group's observed manifestations. Such factor-weighting is the empirical advantage of using CFA to build an index.[60]

For the index, we rely on model 2 in Table 2 that leaves out *separation of power, political rights,* and *decision-making,* which did not load significantly on the latent variable. Hence, the index is based on the factor scores of the remaining eight variables.[61] Figure 2 displays the distribution of the resulting Index of Democraticness (IoD8). The values of the index vary between −3.06 and +2.54,[62] with higher values indicating higher levels of democraticness.[63] The distribution is almost normal around a mean of 0 and with a standard deviation of 1.26.[64] Following up on the debate whether TPS are democratic or not, we can now provide a more nuanced answer: there are more and less democratic elements in TPS, with the majority being in the middle of that range. This underpins our point that TPS can be analysed like other political systems and that there is substantive variation in their democraticness.

We use a subjective measure of democraticness as a validity test of our index. In addition to the individual items in the web survey, we asked experts to subjectively assess the groups' TPS on a five-point scale from undemocratic (1) to democratic (5). No definition of democracy was given on purpose. The correlation is medium-high (0.53), and regressing democraticness on the subjective assessment yields a positive coefficient of 0.66 with $p < 0.01$ (see Appendix section 5a). Hence, the effect amounts to a little more than a standard deviation in the IoD. Moving from the minimum to the maximum in the subjective democracy assessment, increases the index by 2.64, representing one-half of the IoD's range. Furthermore, the subjective assessment can explain 28% of the variation in the IoD. This alignment between our

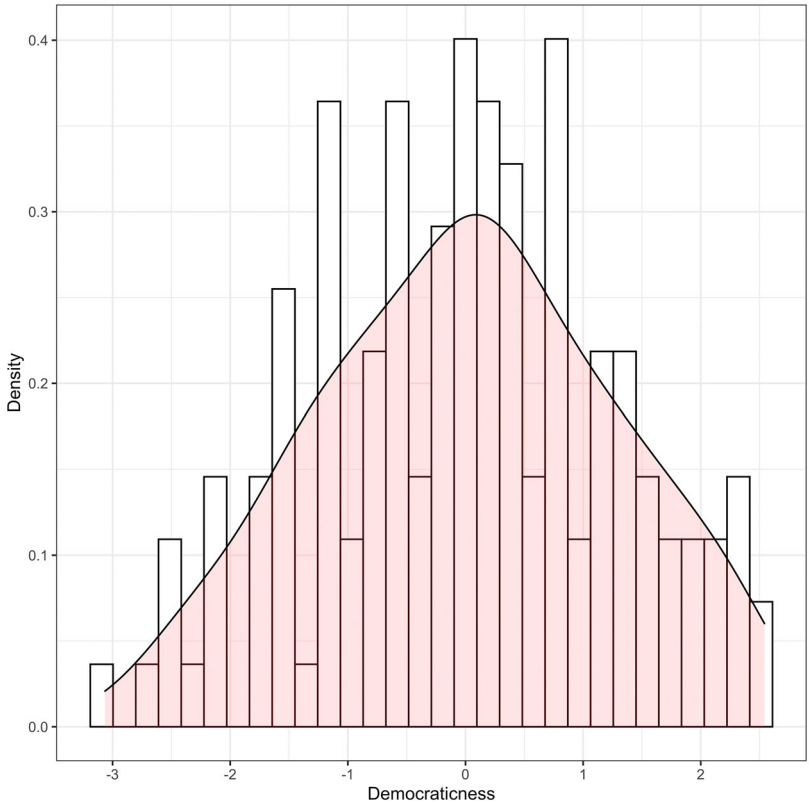

Figure 2. Kernel density plot and histogram of Index of Democraticness (IoD 8, n = 142).
Note: Appendix 4c discusses the model-based outer bounds, which range from −4.72–3.27 in the IoD 8.

reflective index and the subjective assessment strengthens our confidence that our measure actually captures the democraticness of TPS. We also test the effect of precolonial elections of headmen[65] on democraticness today, but find no significant relationship (see results and discussion in Appendix 5b).

We list the seven most democratic and undemocratic TPS in Table 3, with the Birwa of Botswana at the top and the Nuba of Sudan at the list's bottom. To illustrate how the eight components of the index feature in these groups, we display them in radar charts. Each group's values are shown, with less democratic values closer to the centre of the chart (minimum=1) and more democratic values closer to its edge (maximum=3). None of the most democratic groups reaches the highest scores on all components and covers the whole space of the chart (Figure 3). Similarly, the most undemocratic TPS are not without democratic features (Figure 4).

Take, for example, the Somali (Ogaden) in Ethiopia (Figure 3) who have the 4th highest score based on the coding of three experts. The Somali are a pastoral society organized in a segmentary clan structure and, therefore, highly decentralized with no hierarchical superstructure. Political authority and decision-making are wielded by elders based on their customary law and social contract *xeer*.[66] The *xeer* is essential for coordination between clans and has a high value in the social organization, which

Table 3. Most (un)democratic traditional political systems.

Ethnic group	Country	IoD
Birwa	Botswana	+2.54
Southwestern Anglophones (Bakweri etc.)	Cameroon	+2.49
Luo	Kenya	+2.35
Somali (Ogaden)	Ethiopia	+2.29
Baya	CAR	+2.28
Diola	Senegal	+2.24
Afar	Djibouti	+2.13
Bamileke	Cameroon	−2.15
Asante (Akan)	Ghana	−2.28
Luba Shaba	DRC	−2.42
Northern Groups (Mole-Dagbani, Gurma, Grusi)	Ghana	−2.43
Azande[a]	(Southern) Sudan	−2.51
Zaghawa	Sudan	−2.62
Nuba	Sudan	−3.06

[a]The data collection is based on the EPR version 2.0 from 2009. The Azande are therefore coded as Sudanese group, whereas they belong to Southern Sudan since 2011.

underpins the high score on the rule of law measure in our survey. The central decision-making body *shir* is open to all (married) men, which is why the Somali social organization is often described as egalitarian.[67] This is reflected in the high score on our equality measure. As a patriarchal society, such decision-making, however, excludes women, which may have affected the lower scores on access to office, participation, and leadership selection. Based on such observations, anthropologist I.M. Lewis famously called the Somali a "pastoral democracy".[68]

Figure 4 displays less democratic groups, which all score low on most categories, yet also have medium to high values on at least one category. For instance, the political system of the Nuba of South Sudan – also decentralized – lacks democraticness concerning process control (transparency and rule of law) and access to office, yet it offers agenda-setting rights, and its customary law grants equality. The more hierarchical and centralized political system of the Azande of South Sudan is rated as particularly weak concerning

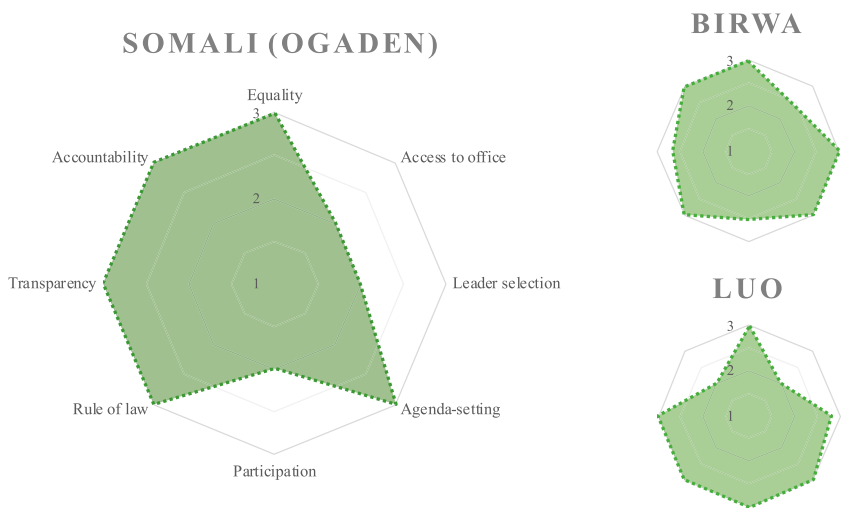

Figure 3. Radar charts of democratic traditional political systems.

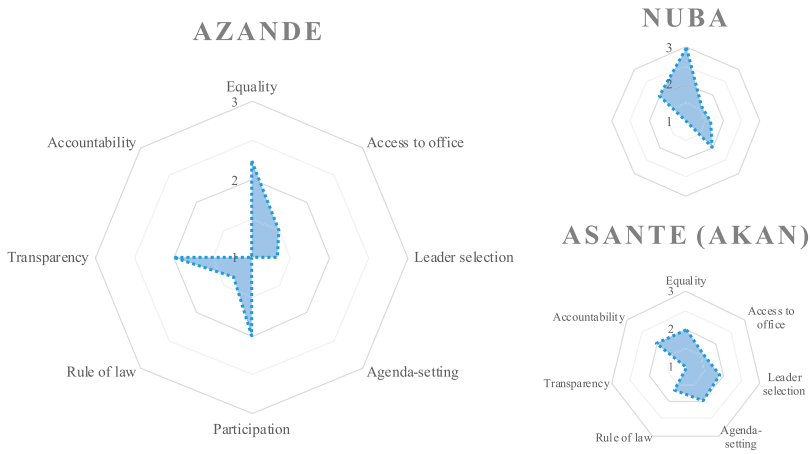

Figure 4. Radar charts of undemocratic traditional political systems.
Note: The Asante (Akan) are missing a value on the participation component.

accountability by the experts, of whom one states that the system has no formal impeachment mechanisms and that criticizing "the leadership may cause a member of the Azande to lose the support of the Chief when he/she needs it most". Finally, the TPS of the Asante (Akan, also: Ashanti) of Ghana is structured around the king – Asantehene – who delegates power to the paramount and divisional chiefs.[69] While chiefs are accountable to the Asantehene, who also has the power to depose them, Osabu-Kle[70] also reports instances of the Asantehene being held accountable by the citizenry. In the context of our case study on Namibia (Appendix section 8), we discuss the Ovambo and Nama – both with medium scores on the IoD – in greater detail.

5.3. Assessing spatial clusters of TPS's democraticness

After having considered the democratic components of TPS and the overall variation of democraticness, we now move on to examine if there are spatial clusters of democraticness. The underlying idea is processes of interdependence and diffusion, as well as historical and geographical factors, may give rise to institutional similarities between TPS, as has been documented for state-level democracy[71] may also play a role for TPS's democraticness. Broadly, such interdependence can both stem from horizontal processes between groups or vertical processes between the group and their hosting state.

We plot the spatial distribution of groups in our survey and their respective democraticness score on the map in Figure 5. The map shows that both democratic and undemocratic traditional systems are present across the African continent. The map also shows that there is some regional clustering with higher levels of democraticness in Southern Africa and lower levels in Western Africa.

To examine whether there is statistical evidence of regional clusters, we run a linear regression with the IoD as the outcome and the African sub-regions as explanatory factors (Table A9 in Appendix 6a). The *F*-test reports if we can reject the null hypothesis that democraticness and region are independent of each other. As it is significant ($p < 0.05$), we can reject the null hypothesis: democraticness and regions are not

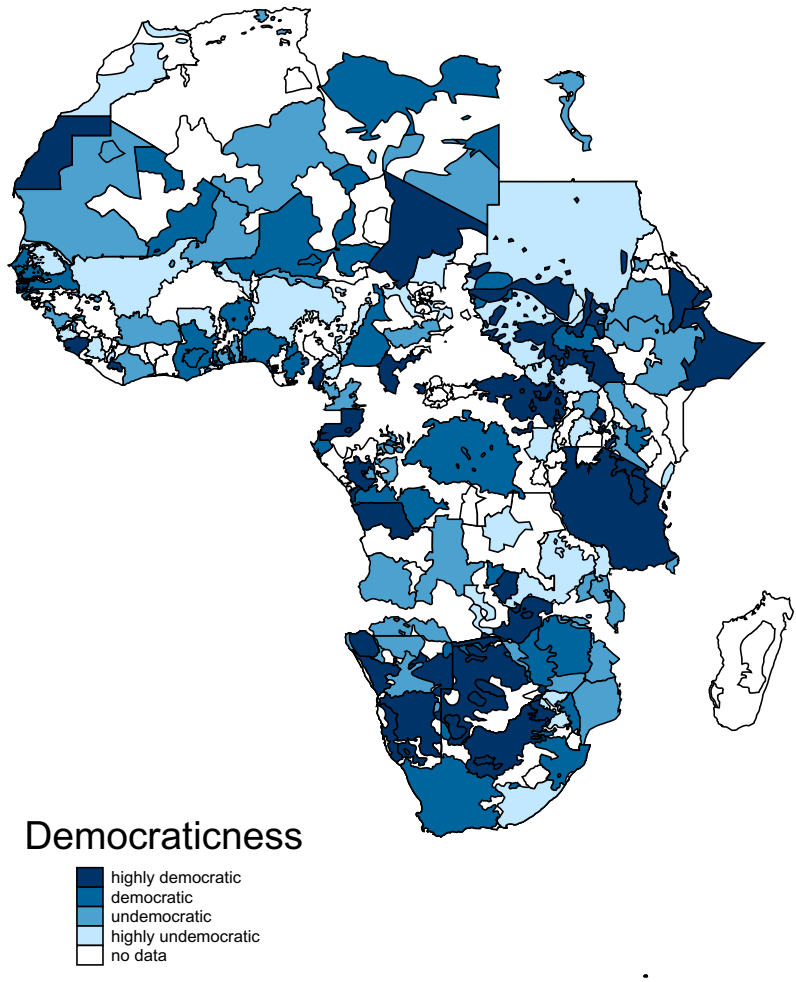

Figure 5. Map of TPS's democraticness.

Note: Highly democratic if IoD > 1; democratic if 0 < IoD < 1; undemocratic if −1 < IoD < 0; very undemocratic if IoD <−1.

independent of each other. In particular, Southern and West Africa are different. Figure 6 reports the mean score and 95%-confidence bounds of democraticness scores in groups with TPS across African regions. Southern Africa's mean score of democraticness is significantly different from 0 with more democratic TPS; Western Africa seems to have slightly more undemocratic TPS (yet the *p*-value in the regression falls just below the 10% threshold). We take this as first evidence that there may be spatial clustering of democraticness, which could be caused by factors affecting the whole region or due to horizontal processes between TPS.

If there are region-specific clusters, could there be vertical, country-specific, clusters of democraticness, too? If so, contemporary TPS could have developed common democratic features within countries through processes of adaption that occurred post-independence (and thus the creation of most contemporary African states). For

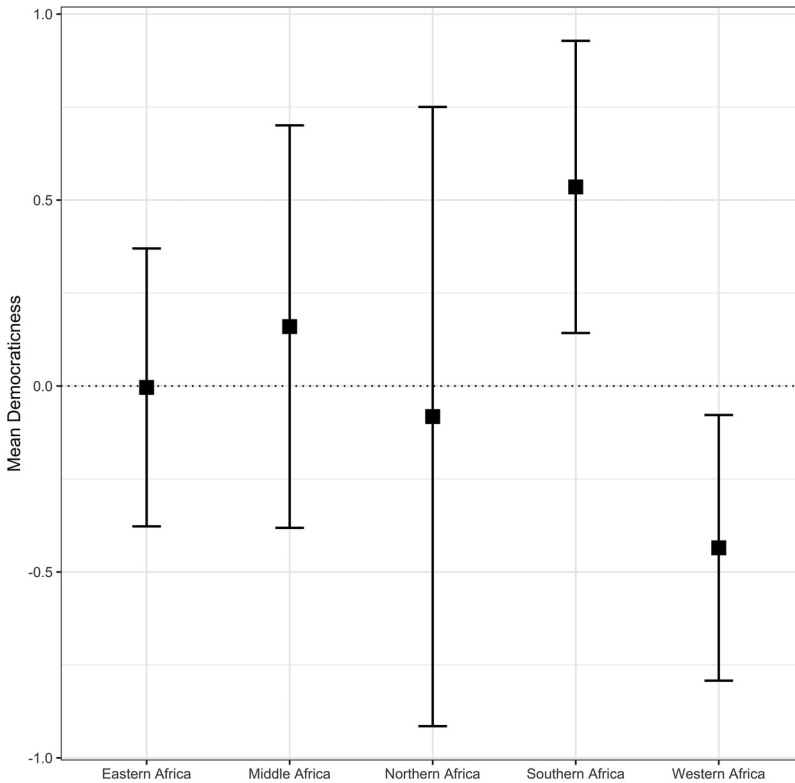

Figure 6. Mean democraticness of TPS in African sub-regions.

Note: 95%-confidence intervals. Region assignment follows UN Stats (available at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/).

example, in Namibia, some TPS have responded to state legislation by adapting their institutions and in consequence, became more hierarchical (see our case study in Appendix section 8). We repeat the test for independence using linear regression, replacing regions with countries (see Appendix 6b). In this case, the null hypothesis that there are no country-specific clusters cannot be rejected as the *F*-test is statistically insignificant. None of the country dummies reaches statistical significance. Although further research is required on vertical processes between state and group institutions, this first evidence suggests that there are no within-country processes that cause convergence of democraticness between groups.

We examine the within-country variation of democraticness more closely. Of those countries where our survey could cover more than 60% of the ethnic groups, two countries have only relatively democratic TPS (Botswana and Tanzania), and three countries have only relatively undemocratic TPS (Malawi, Mauretania, and Mozambique). All other countries have a higher variation on the IoD.

Cameroon, Ghana, and Senegal are good examples to illustrate this variation (Figure 7). All three countries have relatively democratic and relatively undemocratic TPS. While the Bakweri in Cameroon and the Diola in Senegal belong to the most democratic TPS in the whole sample (IoD values 2.49 and 2.2, coloured dark blue),

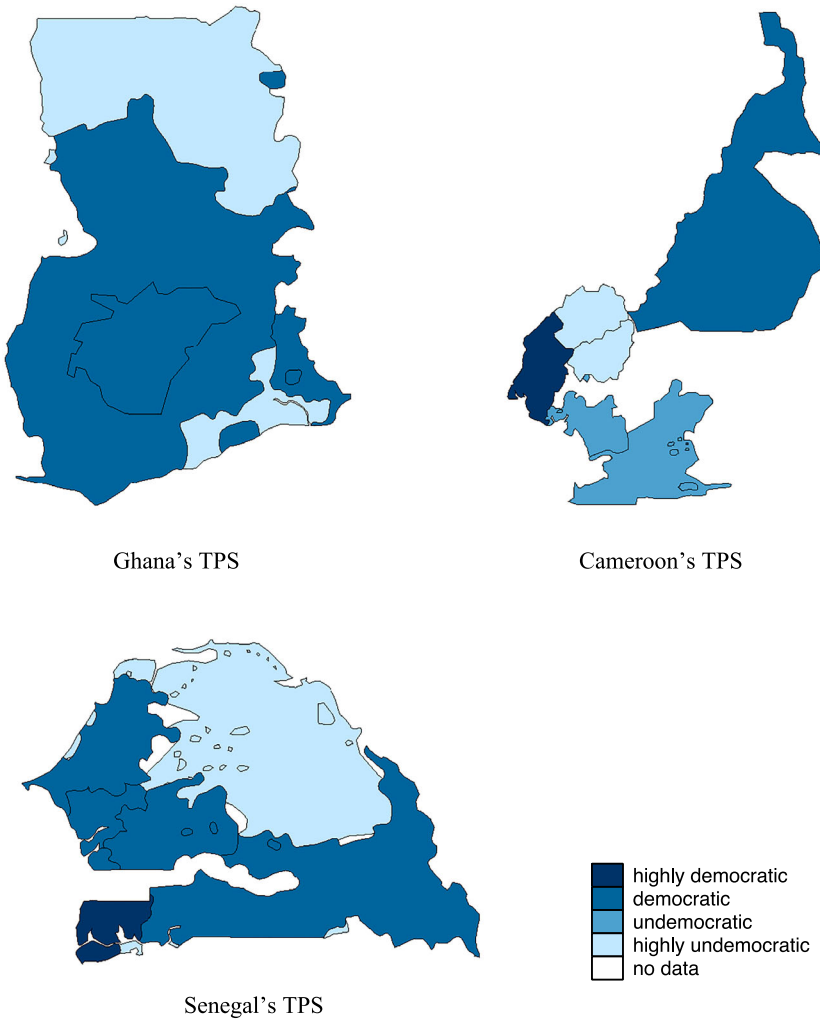

Figure 7. Democraticness of groups in Ghana, Cameroon, and Senegal.
Note: Maps are not on the same scale.

the Bamileke in Cameroon and the Asante in Ghana, discussed above, have been found to be very undemocratic (IoD values −2.15 and −2.28, coloured light blue). The variation in the democraticness of the TPS within the three countries is on average larger than 2.14 units on the IoD. On average, Senegal has rather democratic TPS (IoD = 0.43), and Ghana (IoD = −1) and Cameroon (IoD= −0.19) rather undemocratic traditional systems.

In summary, while there does not seem to be an effect of post-independence states on the democraticness of TPS and generally we observe a high variation of democraticness in many states, there is qualitative evidence of convergence processes (Appendix 8). Furthermore, we find that there are regional clusters of democraticness. More research is needed, to get a better understanding of the mechanisms giving rise to institutional similarity, for example, diffusion, geographical, or political factors.

5.4. Correlates of democraticness of TPS

In the final step of our analysis, we ask whether the democraticness of TPS can be explained by particular features within their political systems. So far, we have only looked at democratic components, such as participation and decision-making processes. Yet, there may be intrinsic attributes of TPS that affect their likelihood to be democratic. As mentioned at the outset of the study, TPS can vary on multiple dimensions. One of these dimensions is the jurisdictional hierarchy of the systems, that is, how many layers of political authority are present within the political system. TPS can be decentralized, like tribes or bands, or highly centralized. This resembles Murdock's[72] variable of precolonial centralization beyond the village level, which we measured for today's TPS (0: no centralization – 4: large states). A second dimension is the political leadership offices that can be held within the political system. Most prominently, such offices can be that of the king or queen, the chief, or a reign through elders. All offices are binary indicators. Definitions of the variables are listed in Appendix section 7a. The level of hierarchy, as well as particular political offices, might relate to the varying level of democraticness.

To examine if there are correlations between democraticness, leadership, and hierarchy, we run OLS regressions with IoD as the outcome. Table 4 reports the results. To account for possible heterogeneity and lack of normality, we use robust standard

Table 4. Multivariate regression for democraticness of TPS.

	Model 1	Model 2
Jurisdictional hierarchy	−0.29**	
	(0.13)	
Chief		−0.79***
		(0.28)
King		−0.53**
		(0.25)
Elders		0.58**
		(0.25)
Segment		−0.47*
		(0.24)
Kinship		0.34
		(0.24)
Age-set		−0.29
		(0.28)
Lineage		0.27
		(0.25)
Council		−0.11
		(0.23)
House		0.00
		(0.26)
Court		−0.01
		(0.24)
Group size	−0.17	−0.40
	(0.51)	(0.52)
Formalization of TPS	−0.02	0.03
	(0.04)	(0.05)
Constant	0.53*	0.05
	(0.29)	(0.29)
N	138	138
R^2	0.05	0.21

Note: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Number of observations held constant across all models.

errors. All models are also checked for multicollinearity computing the variance inflation factor. We control for the *size* of the groups[73] as well as the degree of *formalization* of the group in itself, that is, how many offices exist within the group.

The first model shows the relationship between jurisdictional hierarchy and democraticness. The relationship is significantly (on the 5%-level) negative. Substantively, a one-unit increase in the hierarchy (on a scale from 0 to 4) corresponds to a decrease in democraticness by 0.29 (on a scale from −3.06–2.54). Hence, more hierarchically organized TPS are on average less democratic (see Appendix 5b for the same relationship with precolonial jurisdictional hierarchy).

This also resonates with the finding in model 2, which introduces specific institutions and leadership positions: kings/queens and chiefs – which may be associated with more hierarchical forms of governance. The presence of either a king or a chief decreases TPS's democraticness by 0.79 (more than half a standard deviation) or by 0.53 respectively. Interestingly, the same accounts for TPS that are organized through segmentary lineage. Segmentary societies are characterized by fairly autonomous lineage groups, which have also been associated with violent conflict.[74]

The only indicator associated with increased democraticness in TPS is the presence of elders in the group's leadership. Councils of elders can, on the one hand, be described as a check on the power of chiefs, sometimes having the power to approve laws.[75] On the other hand, elders and their councils can be associated with open discussions and inclusive decision-making processes – as in the above-mentioned case of the Somali (Ogaden) – that is, the democraticness-important preference input. Ayittey quotes Nelson Mandela, who wrote that "[t]he council (of elders) was so completely democratic that all members of the ethnic group could participate in its deliberations".[76]

For other forms of offices based on age-set, lineage, or kinship we do not find an effect on democraticness which is significant on at least the 10%-level. Neither do we find significant effects for institutions such as councils, houses of chiefs, or courts. As we found evidence for a relationship between regions and the democraticness of groups, we run robustness tests with standard errors clustered at the regional level. The findings that kings decrease and elders increase democraticness are robust (Appendix 7b).

The results of the regression point to systematic variation within TPS that have to do with both structure and political leadership. The pattern that emerges is that more centralized systems are associated with less democratic institutions in TPS. Checks on power through elders as well as participatory elements seem to be more democratic when looking at TPS.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we addressed questions to what degree TPS are democratic and how we can assess such democraticness in political systems that are inherently different from sovereign nation-states. To answer our questions, we have argued that we need a broad, explorative approach to democraticness that does not preclude systems that do not engage in electoral competition but feature other democratic attributes, such as consensual grassroots decision-making.

For this purpose, we have collected data on politically relevant ethnic groups across the African continent. In the spirit of Bollen[77] and of reflective indices that assume indicators to be the manifestations of a latent variable – as in contrast to the cause of democracy – we have analysed which components are correlated with the latent variable of democraticness

in TPS using CFA. Among eleven components that we used to explore democraticness, we have found three not to be significantly associated with the latent variable of democraticness: horizontal separation of powers, political rights, and decision-making. However, components conducive to *preference input* and *process control*, seem to play an important role, in particular when it comes to facilitating deliberative and open discussions. That is, participation, transparency, free and public trials, and non-electoral accountability are important factors contributing to democraticness.

Based on the CFA, we have built an index, allowing us to depict the large variation of TPS across the continent. This coincides with our intuition that TPS vary, just like states, and cannot be described as either inherently democratic or autocratic. In fact, all of the traditional systems incorporate democratic and undemocratic elements.

Looking at spatial clustering, we find evidence that democraticness clusters regionally, yet, there is no evidence that our measure of democraticness is related to the host country of the group. Finally, we have run group-level regressions with democraticness as an outcome and find that more hierarchical systems, as well as the presence of kings and chiefs as political offices, decrease democraticness, while the presence of elders increases the level of democraticness.

To conclude, TPS are an important reality of the political landscape in today's Africa and this study has made a first attempt to comparatively assess the democratic attributes within these political systems. Yet, there are many important avenues for future research. For instance, is there a relationship between democraticness in TPS and state-level democracy? What would the causal direction be? Furthermore, does democraticness play a role in the way traditional leaders can cooperate with the state? And finally – with all our knowledge on the benefits of democracy for a wide set of social outcomes on the state level – how does local democraticness of TPS affect such outcomes?

Notes

1. Englebert, "Patterns and Theories of Traditional Resurgence"; Logan, "Selected Chiefs".
2. Renders, "Appropriate 'Governance-Technology'?"
3. e.g., Logan, "The Roots of Resilience"; Osabu-Kle, *Compatible Cultural Democracy*; Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*; Ntsebeza, *Democracy Compromised*; Myers and Fridy, "Formal versus Traditional Institutions"; Cummins, "Democracy or Democrazy?"
4. e.g., Acemoglu, Reed, and Robinson, "Chiefs"; Bentzen, Hariri, and Robinson, "Power and Persistence"; Wig and Kromrey, "Which Groups Fight?"
5. Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy*; Treier and Jackman, "Democracy as a Latent Variable".
6. Bollen, *Structural Equations with Latent Variables*; Treier and Jackman, "Democracy as a Latent Variable".
7. *Ethnographic Atlas*.
8. Kromrey, "Traditional Political Systems"; EPR: Cederman, Wimmer, and Min, "Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel?"; see also Wig and Kromrey, "Which Groups Fight?".
9. "Liberal Democracy".
10. cf. Gilardi, "Transnational Diffusion".
11. e.g., Logan, "The Roots of Resilience".
12. See Appendix sections 5b and 8 for quantitative and qualitative evidence of institutional change, respectively.
13. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, *African Political Systems*.
14. Englebert, "Patterns and Theories of Traditional Resurgence"; Logan, "The Roots of Resilience".
15. Holzinger, Kern, and Kromrey, "The Dualism of Contemporary Traditional Governance".
16. Huntington, *The Third Wave*.
17. Englebert, "Patterns and Theories of Traditional Resurgence".

18. The term neo-liberal is commonly used in the literature on traditional systems, but it does not directly and theoretically relate to the idea of neoliberalism.
19. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*; Ntsebeza, *Democracy Compromised*.
20. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*.
21. Ani, "On Traditional African Consensual Rationality"; Osabu-Kle, *Compatible Cultural Democracy*.
22. Skalník, "Authority versus Power"; Sklar, "Premise of Mixed Government".
23. Logan, "The Roots of Resilience".
24. Buur and Kyed, *State Recognition*.
25. Baldwin and Holzinger, "Traditional Political Institutions".
26. Ibid., 1749.
27. Skaaning, "Democracy".
28. e.g., Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*.
29. e.g., Diamond, "Promoting Democracy".
30. Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy*.
31. Hair et al., *Multivariate Data Analysis*, 728–29.
32. Munck and Verkuilen, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy"; Treier and Jackman, "Democracy as a Latent Variable".
33. Bollen, *Structural Equations with Latent Variables*; Bollen, "Liberal Democracy"; Treier and Jackman, "Democracy as a Latent Variable".
34. "Democracy as a Latent Variable," 202; see also Munck and Verkuilen, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy," 10–12.
35. Ani, "On Traditional African Consensual Rationality," 343.
36. see also Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy*, 40.
37. see, in particular, Lauth, "The Internal Relationships of the Dimensions of Democracy," 608.
38. Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy*.
39. Skalník, "Authority versus Power".
40. "Political Participation and Three Theories of Democracy".
41. Schonfeld, "The Meaning of Democratic Participation".
42. Lyon, "Political Decentralization".
43. Baldwin and Holzinger, "Traditional Political Institutions," 1763.
44. Two prominent dataset examples that are of direct importance to this study were generated using expert data: the V-Dem Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy*. and the EPR dataset Cederman, Wimmer, and Min, "Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel?".
45. Cederman, Wimmer, and Min, "Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel?"
46. As experts were free to add any ethnic groups in the survey, our final sample includes four EPR groups not coded as "relevant" at the time and two non-EPR groups. We run robustness tests excluding these groups (Appendix section 4, Table A3, models 6–7). The results are consistent with our main findings.
47. Cederman, Wimmer, and Min, "Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel?," 99.
48. The timeliness of the information of course depends on the time our experts have last updated their knowledge or conducted fieldwork. To ensure collecting contemporary information, we communicated our interest in current institutions.
49. For details on how we aggregated experts to groups, as well as items to attributes, see the Appendix (section 2). For full dataset see Kromrey, "Traditional Political Systems".
50. Some experts disagree on the first question if there is currently any form of traditional political system. Throughout the article, we analyse the answers for groups where more than 50% of the experts indicated that a TPS is present. In Appendix section 3 we show the distribution of the aggregate variable where we also discuss implications of expert disagreement. We provide robustness tests with a stricter definition of 100% agreement in Appendix sections 4a and 4b, Table A3, models 4 and 5. The findings are consistent with our main analysis.
51. We run reliability tests for each component and its respective items and take the average for each item for the final value of the component (for more details see Appendix section 2).
52. Yet we remove all observations with complete missingness on the democratic components and only include groups with expert agreement of ≥ 0.5 on the initial variable if the groups have TPS.
53. Hair et al., *Multivariate Data Analysis*, 674–75.
54. cf. Baldwin and Holzinger, "Traditional Political Institutions," 1766.

55. cf. Osabu-Kle, *Compatible Cultural Democracy*, 96.
56. Ani, "On Traditional African Consensual Rationality," 363.
57. Bentzen, Hariri, and Robinson, "Power and Persistence".
58. Hair et al., *Multivariate Data Analysis*, 780.
59. We use predict after structural equation models in Stata to arrive at the index scores. See Bollen *Structural Equations with Latent Variables*..
60. For the same reason, we can only interpret the democraticness scores relative to each other, and the single scores have no substantive meaning beyond being positively or negatively related to the latent variable.
61. We compare the index with the indices built based on the CFA models 1 and 3. As the prediction includes the strength of the factor loadings of all single components (as weights), the indices are highly correlated and do not differ heavily from each other (see Appendix section 4b).
62. To ease interpretation, we multiplied the original scores (between 0.306 and 0.254) by 10. This does not change the interpretation, as scores are interpreted relative to each other.
63. We assess and discuss the outer bounds of our indices in Appendix section 4c using out-of-sample prediction based on the respective CFA model. In this index, none of the groups reach the outer bounds (-5.38 – 3.61).
64. Note that the normal distribution around 0 is due to the prediction after the CFA and thus the range differs from our original 1–3 scale.
65. Murdock, *Ethnographic Atlas*.
66. Hagmann, "Bringing the Sultan Back In"; Renders, "Appropriate 'Governance-Technology'?"
67. Hagmann, "Bringing the Sultan Back In".
68. Renders, "Appropriate 'Governance-Technology'?," 443.
69. Osabu-Kle, *Compatible Cultural Democracy*, 87.
70. Ibid., 88.
71. cf. Huntington, *The Third Wave*; Gilardi, "Transnational Diffusion".
72. *Ethnographic Atlas*.
73. taken from Cederman, Wimmer, and Min, "Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel?"
74. Moscona, Nunn, and Robinson, "Segmentary Lineage Organization".
75. Ayittey, "Traditional Institutions," 1187.
76. Ibid., 1186.
77. "Liberal Democracy".

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