



Institutional obstacles to African economic development: State, ethnicity, and custom

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ABSTRACT

To account for the African growth tragedy and, in particular, for its causes rooted in governance problems, the institutional legacy that African countries inherited from pre-colonial and colonial times must be considered. Three aspects are examined here. First, the relationship between ethnicity and state performance is bi-directional: if strong ethno-regional identities prevent the emergence of modern citizenship, they themselves constitute an endogenous outcome of continuous state failures. Second, the persistence of informal rules and social norms causes legal dualism, which undermines the credibility of modern statutory law. Third, social customs and norms that hinder socio-economic differentiation and individual capital accumulation lower the performance of indigenous enterprises.

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1. Introduction

A well-known and troubling feature of economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) since the end of the second World War is the divergence of African incomes from those obtained elsewhere the southern hemisphere. Noting the statistically significant and negative effect of the African dummy in their cross-country growth regressions, Easterly and Levine (1997) have talked about a “growth tragedy” to characterize the long-term economic performances of the African region. In actual fact, average real income per capita for SSA as a whole barely increased between 1960 and 2000, an outcome largely resulting from the dismal performance of African economies during the 20-year period from roughly 1974 to 1994. As evident from the World Bank's Tables, a negative annual average rate of growth of income per head prevailed during the latter period whereas a very low average positive rate of less than 0.5 percent was observed during the subsequent years, until the beginning of

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this century.¹ It is, therefore, no exaggeration to say that African populations “missed out on the unprecedented economic transformation that took place in the rest of the developing world after 1950” (Ndulu and O’Connell, 2008, 17).

In accounting for the African growth tragedy, it is tempting to cite the geographic isolation of many countries in the region: more than a third of its population lives in countries that are both landlocked and poorly endowed with natural resources, as against a mere one percent for the other developing regions, where areas with unpromising opportunities have seldom become countries (Collier and O’Connell, 2008, 84). This explanation does not stand up to scrutiny, however: many of the worst performing African countries turn out to have abundant natural resources, whether oil, natural gas, diamond, or mineral resources (e.g., the Republic of Congo ex-Zaire, Nigeria, Angola, Sierra Leone). Moreover, another third of the African population lives in these resource-rich countries.

In fact, there is growing agreement that inefficiencies in African economies, and the consequently low returns on investment and aid projects, result from an impressive array of governance failures. It is especially worrying that, in contrast to measures of policy and political institutions, measures of the institutional environment showed no tendency to improvement in SSA during the 1990s. Worse, a number of indicators such as the ICRG indexes of government corruption, the rule of law, and the quality of the government bureaucracy suggest a deterioration, both in absolute terms and relative to other developing regions (Ndulu and O’Connell, 2008, 55–56). It is thus revealing that all the “anti-growth syndromes” singled out by the Africa Growth Project, the first comprehensive assessment by African research economists of the growth experience of SSA in the post-independence period, have their origin, to a significant extent, in serious governance problems.

These syndromes are (i) regulatory regimes that severely distort productive activity and reward rent-seeking, (ii) regimes of ethno-regional redistribution that compromise efficiency through resource transfers to sub-national political interests, (iii) regimes of intertemporal redistribution that transfer resources from the future to the present, and (iv) state breakdown, which refers to civil war or marked political instability (Collier and O’Connell, 2008, 89–96; Fosu, 2008). The picture that emerges is one in which SSA suffers not only from physical remoteness, but also from the so-called natural resource curse and varied sorts of rent-seeking, corruption, and subversion of political choices by ethno-regional forces (Collier et al., 2008a,b).

The central question addressed in this paper is the following: to what extent do the governance problems of SSA have something to do with the institutional legacy of the region? Africa’s bad performance on the level of its institutional environment must be somehow traceable to non-geographic factors specific to the region. The particular history of the continent, which includes the colonial experience and the manner in which its institutional environment has been shaped over the longer period, must take us some way towards gaining a better understanding of the present Africa’s growth tragedy.

The paper comprises three central sections. Section 2 starts with the widely accepted idea that failure of the state accounts for much of Africa’s difficulty to respond effectively to the challenge of modern economic growth. The question of whether such a failure has a cultural origin is specifically addressed. In particular, is it true that in SSA ethno-regional identity rooted in a deeply entrenched culture has prevented the emergence of modern citizenship and the bureaucratic (Weberian) state, or has the former been an endogenous outcome of continuous state failures that themselves need to be elucidated? In Section 3, attention is drawn to the persistence of informal norms and institutions, and the discrepancy between them and the modern law system. The consequences of this ‘legal dualism’ are explored, along with the possible role of religion as a bridge between tradition and modernity. In Section 4, another aspect of Africa’s ill-fated development is considered: the lack or low performances of indigenous enterprises. Again, an exploration into the possible cultural roots of this phenomenon is attempted. More specifically, to what extent do social customs and norms that stress collective well-being and traditional order based on status ranking hinder socio-economic differentiation and private capital accumulation? The role of religion will again receive special attention. In concluding the paper, Section 5 attempts a contrast between Africa and Asia.

It is argued that in SSA institutional and cultural traits such as ethnicity, kinship, redistributive norms, magical beliefs, and distrust of centralized state agencies tend to be reproduced over time and remain resistant to fundamental reshaping under conditions of decolonization and political liberalization. Since ethnicity/kinship is perhaps the single most important factor in the above list (bear in mind that redistributive norms operate only within a kinship network), the analysis proposed in this paper appears to go against the tide of recent econometric studies according to which ethnicity ceases to influence the probability of conflict and violence once material determinants such as per capita income, access to raw materials, and the like are duly controlled for (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). These works nonetheless suffer from a serious flaw inasmuch as they rely on a highly unsatisfactory measure of ethnicity, the so-called ethno-linguistic fractionalization index (ELF). Leaving aside the fact that a single index is under-equipped to capture the multidimensional quality of ethnic identities and that nationwide measures fail to capture variations occurring at the sub-national level,² a fatal weakness of the ELF is that it treats violence as random and is generated in a completely bottom-up fashion. It is therefore silent on the role of the state, and it overlooks the critical fact that violence is organized in most if not all instances of civil wars and conflicts.

Cederman and Girardin (2007) have tried to overcome the latter shortcoming by constructing an alternative index, the so-called index of ethno-nationalist exclusion, which introduces state-centric, rather than symmetric, ethnic configurations and postulates group-level, rather than individual-level, micro-mechanisms of mobilization. The underlying hypothesis is that escalation to violence is more likely where the dominant group is a demographic minority. What the authors show is that,

¹ In the early years of this century, economic performances have markedly improved in SSA. It is too early to say, however, whether present rates of growth are sustainable or are largely due to the rise of international prices of raw materials.

² When such variability is captured in the measurements, ethnic differences appear to be more significant (Murshed and Gates, 2003).

using essentially the same sample and the same controls as in the aforementioned studies, their index is highly significant; as such, they cast doubt on the rejection of ethnicity as an explanation of civil conflict. We need to remain cautious, however: as stressed by the two authors, it is actually hard to identify clearly distinct ethnic groups because over time ethnic and national identifications are endogenous to other political processes, including state formation and conflict behavior. As emphasized by (2008a, 133), ethnic conflict involves not a clash of cultures, but rather a struggle over access to resources.

This is precisely the perspective adopted in the following analysis, from which a complex picture emerges of self-reinforcing effects along a path-dependent trajectory. In SSA, the state is often perceived as alien to the citizens, and the modern statutory law is not taken seriously if it runs counter to the custom, which is nevertheless evolving under changing circumstances. A universe of personalized relationships remains dominant throughout the region, with its attendant obligations and solidarity ties, yet when faced with the task of accumulating capital and building capitalist firms, African societies do not rely on dense networks of kin relations for the purpose of sharing information and meting out sanctions so as to establish trust and enforce contracts. Here is perhaps one of the most paradoxical aspects of the African institutional fabric for which an explanation will be attempted. The above characterization does not imply that the institutional trajectory of SSA is mechanically determined. As will be illustrated with respect to religion, exogenous factors can bring about changes that disturb the existing dynamic equilibria.

2. Ethnicity and the failure of the African state

2.1. The historical roots of the relationship between state and ethnicity

That African kingdoms and even empires have prevailed in some parts of SSA during pre-colonial times is a well documented fact. They were often grounded in a sharp division between chiefly strata (of which there could be several layers superimposed on each other, as in the Ashanti kingdom), with popular strata comprising farmers, artisans, and traders.³ With the exception of Ethiopia, their form of administration was essentially patrimonial, implying the absence of a genuine professional bureaucracy. All major West African states (most notably, the ancient empires of Ghana, Mali and the Songhai), for example, were afflicted by the problem of “how a particular royal line, whose right to rule sprang from its descent from the founding ancestor of a particular kinship group, could preserve this right, and develop its power accordingly, as this group and its initial following of clients and slaves extended its control over other kinship groups which owed it no natural allegiance” (Fage, 1995, 286). The problem of securing and retaining the monopoly of power was especially acute when the rewards of power increased dramatically, such as happened in Lower Guinea during the 17–18th centuries when trading opportunities multiplied largely as a result of the European slave trade (ibidem).⁴

Power remained comparatively diffuse even in the most centralized and the most stable states. In many instances, African pre-colonial states and medieval empires exercised only a loose control over distant provinces. Typically consisting of a collection of smaller political units, they turned out to be rather short-lived structures or were eminently unstable (Goody, 1988, 19–20; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1985, 98–100; Austen, 1987; Davidson, 1991, Chap. 3; Fage, 1995; Vansina, 2004).⁵ In these circumstances, “most people pursued their economic, social and cultural lives with little interference from government”, and access to their means of subsistence was “effectively managed by authorities within the lineage” (Ajayi, 2000, 27). Local identities did matter a lot and, according to a Nigerian historian, this situation generally continues to prevail today:

Neither colonialism nor the post-colonial new states have so far succeeded in dissolving ethnicity. The pre-colonial polity, linguistic or cultural group, not the new nation, has remained the basis of solidarity contracts in Africa. ... The modern state with its precise boundaries, foreign inspired laws and judicial procedures, new basis of election and representation, have so far failed to displace ethnicity in the distinctive loyalties of people. ... ethnicity or traditional culture has been and remains the instrument of survival from the pressures both of colonial and neo-colonial external factors (Ajayi, 28).

Peter Ekeh (2004, 36) has gone further to elucidate the reasons underlying the persistence of local identities and ethnicity in SSA. For him, the root of the problem lies in individuals not trusting the state: “The bonds of mistrust between states and individuals in Africa are replaced with bonds of moral sentiments binding individuals who share a common ethnicity”. Such mistrust is a product of history, inasmuch as African states have been unable to provide reasonable security to their people

³ For example, the medieval kingdoms of the Niger bend, such as the kingdom of Abomey, were built up on the trade of salt, cloth, and beads that were brought south from the Sahara across to West Africa, on the one hand, and gold, ivory and slaves which were taken back to the Barbary coast and from there into medieval Europe, on the other hand (Goody, 1988, 23).

⁴ The exception confirms the rule, as attested by the example of the Ashanti union. This union was saved and preserved into the 19th century until the time of the British conquest because of the recruitment of a corps of professional administrators, police, army, and entrepreneurs who were totally unconnected with the traditional power structures in Kumasi or the other constituent kingdoms of the union. This contrasts with the standard pattern, obtained, for example, in the coastal states of West Africa, in which the power of the king depended entirely on the degree of support he received from the heads of the major lineages and families in the community (Fage, 1995, 283, 286–289).

⁵ Regarding the savanna kingdoms, Iliffe thus wrote that “their authority diminished with distance from the capital, fading into a stateless penumbra” (cited from Fage, 1995, 70).

for a long period of time, going as far back as the end of the sixteenth century.⁶ Worse, after the fall of the Songhai empire at the hands of the Moroccan Arab invaders (1591), they have often collided with foreign powers to oppress and exploit, rather than protect, ordinary Africans. It is, therefore, not surprising that the responsibility of providing for individuals' basic security needs has been allocated to ethnicity and other forms of kinship (Ekeh, 23). Such an evolution has set SSA on a different path from Western Europe.

In Western Europe, indeed, when increasing economic prosperity during the 14–15th centuries brought expanded dangers and violence in its wake, limitations in the effectiveness of political order supplied by the private provision of protection created a demand for a better system of providing it (Bates, 2001; Bates et al., 2002). Kinship thus gave way to feudalism: with the collapse of clan institutions, people were compelled to seek protection by voluntarily placing themselves under the authority of a single powerful lord (Bloch, 1962; Ekeh, 2004). At a later stage, feudalism was succeeded by the nation-state, which is better equipped to serve the security needs of people in modern conditions. In areas where feudalism did not arise (e.g., Scandinavia, Scotland), kinship eventually lost significance when the modern nation-state proved superior as a security-provider.

In Africa, by contrast, "kinship has grown in stature with the development of the state. . . and has even grown in opposition to the state" (Ekeh, 2004, 28). It is to the history of the last four centuries, spanning the eras of the slave trade and European colonialism, that we must turn in order to understand why the African experience differs from that of Europe. According to Ekeh's analysis, the intensity of kinship expanded markedly during the epoch of the Arab slave trade (c. 950–1850) and the European slave trade (1450–1850), when loosely defined ethnic groups living either inside or on the borders of states that actively participated in the slave trade needed protection against devastating raids launched by the traders or their henchmen. On the other hand, as argued by J.D. Fage (1995, 268–276), kinship groups could become stronger when they were governed by traditional chieftains capable of seizing the new economic opportunities and acquire a large number of slaves and clients.⁷ Slaves were either sold to merchants against valuable commodities (including weaponry) or became integral members of the extended family or clan in which they were typically employed as agricultural laborers. Some of them became trusted traders, soldiers, and even court officials. Clearly, slave-trading would not have been possible without the active complicity of local rulers: Europeans rarely went far from their forts because slaves were brought to them by African chiefs and intermediaries. In some areas, the institution of slavery was already well established when the Europeans arrived. Thus, slavery and slave-trading were integral parts of the Ashanti state right from its inception, and for three centuries (from the 15th to the 18th), this was one of the largest slave-trading, slave-owning and slave-dealing states in West Africa (Perbi, 2004).

Kinship received a further major impetus under European conquests and colonialism, which made use of the same institutions as the slave trade. The definition of kinship was actually expanded, and multi-layered meanings came to prevail through a process of 'cultural imagining' based on real experiences when the primary form of kinship became too narrow to cope with the more demanding functions that emerged under the challenge of colonial rule (see also Berman et al., 2004, 46; Lentz, 1995; Bayart, 1989; Ndulu and O'Connell, 2008, 57).⁸ In particular, a dramatic expansion of kinship practices took place in cities whose new residents claimed common kinship just because they came from an area possessing some distinctive cultural features. In this way, enlarged ethno-regional networks using the language of kinship came to life; these could solve numerous problems, including security, encountered by migrants upon their arrival in unknown surroundings.

However, there has been another, more important channel through which colonialism has affected the social and political structure of African societies. This effect is an outcome of the indirect rule system used by colonial powers. As a matter of fact, colonial rulers have generally sought to increase the power of local-level authorities over communities at the expense of pre-existing centralized political institutions such as kingship. Enhancing the power of local authorities implied that they were charged with maintaining law and order (including the power to fine, conscript, imprison, and banish) on behalf of the colonial state to which they became directly accountable. It also implied that they were expected to advance the colonial economic agenda. The latter mission meant that local chiefs, 'strongmen', or so-called 'warrant chiefs' (who were sometimes 'straw chiefs' directly appointed by colonial authorities when indigenous chiefs did not exist or were deemed insufficiently compliant) were vested with discretionary powers in allocating resources distributed by the colonial state (e.g., through agricultural cooperatives or mutual aid societies created at the behest of the colonial administration, and ultimately directed by high-level European officials) as well as in mobilizing labor resources and collecting taxes on its behalf (see, e.g., Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1985, 115–127; 1999, 171–172; Austen, 1987, Chap. 6; Bayart, 1989, 99–101; Boone, 1994, 115–119).

It is not surprising that, in these conditions, local chiefs and big men quickly learned that "political power was absolutely crucial for economic advance" (Kennedy, 1988, 55). In addition, they often abused their privileged position by replicating the methods of colonial authorities (e.g., labor conscription), which were particularly brutal in the interior of Africa where the

⁶ For example, in the Nyiginya kingdom of Rwanda, particularly under the reign of Rwabugiri (second half of the 19th century), continuous internecine struggles caused great waves of cascading disgraces and massacres among aristocratic lineages and sub-lineages competing for royal favours and privileges (Vansina, 2004, 180–195).

⁷ In the coastal states, however, the situation was different. There, indeed, the expanding trade had typically the effect of dissolving the bonds which held African communities together under the influence of aggressive and ambitious traders who escaped the control of traditional authorities.

⁸ The primary form of kinship can be defined as a corporate body of persons who share a more or less precisely delineated area of land that has been putatively cleared by a common ancestor, who follow a common set of rules regarding land allocation and use, inheritance, marriage, funeral and other rites, and who jointly provide for their collective security and the settlement of internal disputes.

imperial irruption came suddenly after 1875. These methods often had the effect of victimizing ordinary Africans among the personal enemies of the chiefs or those against whom they held a grudge. Insofar as these local elites became accountable to the colonial administration rather than to their own people, traditional checks and balances on chiefly power were seriously undermined, giving rise to a form of ‘decentralized despotism’ (Kennedy, 1988, 52–55; Young, 1994, 278–279; Berman et al., 2004, 3).⁹

By awarding important prerogatives to local chieftains and headmen, the indirect rule system reinforced ethnic consciousness. It was thus convenient for colonial powers “to lump Africans into groups of rather uniform status for administrative purposes, [and] this was generally done by identifying people as members of a particular ‘tribe’ or ethnic group, and then assigning them to the control of an African official regarded as the tribal or village chief” (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, 158). There emerged a logic of ‘political tribalism’, whereby local leaders of ethnic groups became powerful patrons endowed by the colonial state with considerable resources and power:

Modern African ethnicities were shaped by a particular relationship with the institutions of the colonial state. Colonial bureaucracies played a key role in the construction of ‘tribal’ identities out of earlier kinship groups and political units, building upon indigenous power relations of clientage between big men and their supporters and dependants to forge terms of collaboration facilitating the typical pattern of indirect rule. . . The linkages of the chiefs and headmen and other local agents to the colonial state provided conduits of patronage resources of modernity as well as authoritative control over local land and labor, and made ethnic membership rather than any broader concept of citizenship the basis of rights and property. . . for ordinary individuals contact with the colonial state always contained an element of danger and uncertainty, requiring powerful patrons for protection and intermediation. . . (Berman et al., 2004, 5; see also Lonsdale, 2004, 78).

In some countries, most notably French and Belgian colonies, the ‘tribalization’ of African rural communities was pushed even further because the salaries that the local indigenous authorities obtained from the colonial administration bore an explicit relation to the size of the (adult male) working force under their control or the amount of export crops produced in their zone. Such a mode of remuneration encouraged local chiefs to extend their authority over as large a population as possible, and this often implied that populations were ‘ethnicized’ in the sense of being granted an ‘imagined identity’ or ‘metaphoric kinship’ to justify the claim made for their control (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1985, 1999, 125–141; Bayart, 1989; Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, 158–159).¹⁰

As a result of the above, Ekeh argues, an important tenet of modernization theory is disproven: it is not true in the case of SSA that the emergence of the nation-state causes the gradual disappearance of kinship ties because these ties lose their usefulness in the presence of an alternative, more effective provider of protection. As pointed out earlier, genuine nation-states enjoying widespread legitimacy and commanding the loyalty of their citizens have scarcely taken root in the African continent. The interesting question, however, concerns the direction of causality between the persistence of ethnicity and the non-emergence of the modern state. More precisely, has the logic of ethnicity worked to prevent the emergence of the nation-state, or is it the behavior of state agents that is responsible for the enduring role of ethnicity? If we follow Ekeh’s analysis, the second view is the most pertinent: the state has not succeeded in getting established because it has not met the legitimate aspirations and expectations of its citizens. Nevertheless, there is a basis for claiming that the influence of ethnicity has been sufficiently strong to pre-empt and subvert the incipient state system, at least during the post-independence era.

The ensuing discussion is devoted to assessing this converse manner of looking at the relationship between ethnicity and the state in SSA, but before embarking upon this task, it bears emphasis that the possibility of multiple institutional paths emerges as soon as we acknowledge the importance of the first view regarding the direction of the state–ethnicity relationship and that this outcome contradicts the modernization theory which predicts a unique development trajectory based on the Western European pattern. More specifically, societies in which ethnicity is weak may be unable to subvert the state while those where ethnicity is strong, such as the lineage-based societies of Africa, may succeed in doing so. This said, to explain the initial strength of ethnicity, historical explanations of the kind proposed by Ekeh are useful. Reality typically involves bi-directional causal relationships between state and ethnicity and these get reinforced over time.

⁹ In Liberia, for example, the republican government established by the Americo-Liberian rulers (the so-called settler government) reached a series of understandings with the local institutions of power so as to gain entry into local politics. As a result, some chiefs were granted formidable power that they had never wielded before. They thus became able to use traditional secret societies (such as mask societies originally devised to secure order and social cohesion in rural communities through elaborate ceremonies and initiation rituals), to commit killings without recourse to any judicial organ. In such cases, “a secret society came to represent less a council of local elders than the entourage of a local despot”, and it was gradually transformed into a genuine gangster organisation: a chief could get rid of all persons he considered undesirable, like possible competitors, and do whatever else he deemed convenient (Ellis, 1999, 239, 241, 248, 256).

¹⁰ In some instances, the colonial power has not ‘imagined’ ethnic categories, but has merely adopted a practice and a terminology they found on the spot. A good illustration is provided by Rwanda where the division between Hutus and Tutsis was institutionalized under the Nyiginya kingdom. The word ‘Hutu’ then became “a demeaning term that alluded to rural boorishness or loutish behaviour used by the elite”: to be a ‘Hutu’ came to mean being a servant, a non-combatant or a foreigner, even if the person belonged to the Tutsi ethnic group. The imposition of *corvée* labor on farmers and not on herders provoked “the definitive rift that was to divide society from top to bottom into two hierarchized and opposed social categories” (Vansina, 2004, 130, 134–139, 200).

In SSA, the inability of central authorities to protect people against both external and internal threats during slavery and colonial times has led to a consolidation and an enlargement of the role of ethnicity. In turn, during the post-independence period, strong ethnicity has prevented the modern state from becoming established, thereby creating a vicious circle or a perverted path of non-development for the Africa region. To quote [Bruce Berman et al. \(2004, 3\)](#) again, “African ethnicities are not atavistic, primordial survivals of archaic primitive cultures, but rather modern products of the African encounter with capitalism and the nation-state in the colonial and post-colonial eras”.

2.2. Capture of the state during the post-independence period (from the 1960s to 1980s)

Clearly, the legacy of the slave trade and colonial periods cannot be overestimated. In particular, the pervasive role of localized and personalized modes of political control, combined with an inordinately strong measure of autocratic paternalism, is a critical feature of colonial policy that was to have a profound and long-lasting impact on the social and political system of independent African states. Through marketing boards and other forms of state trading monopolies that took over positions held by European merchant houses in the colonial period, but also through agricultural cooperatives and a host of rural development projects including settlement schemes, post-colonial states pursued the earlier policy aimed at concentrating control of rural surpluses in the hands of bureaucrats, politicians, and other influential persons linked to new regimes ([Boone, 1994, 122–123](#); [Bates, 1981](#); [Gentil, 1986](#); [Bayart, 1989](#); [Platteau, 1990](#); [Young, 1994](#)). Thus, for example, rural cooperatives distributing cheap credit and subsidized inputs were typically formed by local units of the governing party so that access to such advantages was made contingent upon political loyalty. And where the institution of chieftaincy was abolished in response to popular discontent, the rural strongmen of the colonial period were replaced by rural administrators, party men, and local notables or merchants tightly linked to the new state apparatus. Of course, the ability of local strongmen, whether urban or rural, to secure access to state resources was a direct function of their ability to mobilize constituencies, followers, and communities ([Boone, 1994, 123–124, 128](#)).

What thus obtains is a logic of ‘politicized accumulation’ narrowly linked to the inclusionary and co-optive strategies of regime consolidation described by [Bayart \(1989\)](#), [Boone \(1992\)](#), and [Dool \(1998\)](#), among others. Successful people are political rather than economic entrepreneurs who divert their creative energies into rent-seeking activities. Moreover, the gradual emergence of an independent African bourgeoisie is retarded and discouraged, with the effect of stifling the development of a strong middle class able in due time to fight for liberal political rights and limit state power. Also, when accumulation of wealth is largely conditioned upon access to political power,¹¹ political instability tends to prevail. Unlike the situation during the colonial era when supreme power stood indisputably in the hands of a single agent, the colonial state, power in post-independence Africa has been continuously contested because “decolonization opened new struggles between and within loosely integrated, heterogeneous, and often multiple coalitions for control over the state apparatus itself” ([Boone, 1994, 121](#)). Contests took place at the upper echelons of the hierarchical networks of patronage ties through which state resources were continuously flowing. True, African elites who succeeded in capturing power have tried their best to revamp and extend the system of parochial political control that during colonial times had worked to fragment and isolate social forces. Furthermore, membership within the elite was relatively stable in many countries ([Van de Walle, 2001, 125](#); [Herbst, 2000, Chap. 6–7](#)). However, the very nature of the emerging state was bound to generate fierce struggles over the spoils of power (typically the rents created by state monopolies and government’s interventions in markets, including for foreign exchange), which would increase rather than mitigate antagonisms between the disparate groups contained within post-colonial regimes ([Sklar, 1979](#); [Hyden, 1983](#); [Young, 1986](#); [Bienen, 1987](#); [Boone, 1994, 126–127](#); [Bayart, 1986, 1989](#); [Kennedy, 1988](#); [Joseph, 1988](#); [Chabal and Daloz, 1999](#); [Bates, 2008a, 69–73](#)).

In particular, people competed for a share of the spoils by enlisting in factions defined with reference to their clan, tribe, ethnic group, or region of origin. Leaders of factions that were instrumentalized as “a technique of elite competition” could thus invoke traditional sentiments to reinforce their appeal and win solid popular backing. Clearly, clientelism has the effect of reinforcing loyalties to kith and kin ([Van de Walle, 2001, 119](#)), but since the notion of kinship tends to be opportunistically used by political leaders, the meaning of ethnicity is often flexible and elusive.¹² Referring to Somalia, [Dool \(1998, 284\)](#) thus pointed out that some members of the local elites, including the highly educated, do not hesitate to shrewdly talk about ‘fictitious ancient clan kingdoms’. According to him, “their intent and purpose is solely to establish an imaginary clan *supremo* ‘tradition’ to justify their aim to reign illegally over the people” (see also [Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1985](#); [Firmin-Sellers, 1996](#)). The case of Somalia is particularly interesting because Somalis form an ethnically homogeneous society in which politics largely takes place at the sub-clan level. It illustrates the possibility of intense factional struggle for power in societies which are *prima facie* ethnically homogenous and where factions form around subdivisions of an ethnic group.¹³ On the other hand,

¹¹ Revealingly, the 1976 Nigerian constitutional draft held that politics opened up the possibility of “acquiring wealth and prestige, of being in a position to distribute jobs, contracts, grants or gifts to one’s kin and political allies” ([Bayart, 1986, 123](#)).

¹² In fact, ethnicities have historically evolved, absorbing or being absorbed by other groups, resulting from the fission of larger entities or from the merging of smaller ones (see [Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1999, Chap. 4](#)). In fact, ethnicities have historically evolved, absorbing or being absorbed by other groups, resulting from the fission of larger entities or from the merging of smaller ones (see [Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1999, Chap. 4](#)).

¹³ Recently, the Islamic courts gained their initial support from the Hawiye clan that controls Mogadishu and felt under-represented in the transitional government.

factions are not always coterminous with ethnic groups or subdivisions of the same: patron–client networks may well cut across ethnic identities or comprise groups of people among whom ethnic and/or religious ties are not particularly salient. Lastly, individuals frequently have more than one cultural identity, and which one they invoke actually depends on the situational context (Tordoff, 1997, 92, 95, 106, 111; Posner, 2005).

The African political scene has thus been the stage of cut-throat competition between rival networks of patronage articulated around regional factions, cliques, or religious, ethnic, linguistic and economic groups. The merciless struggles for access to power and the wealth it secures to the winners made for weak states, despite the appearances to the contrary created by the authoritarian modes of conduct followed by many African rulers and by the concentration of coercive means in their hands. The problem comes from the absence of a well-established institutionalized mechanism for acceding to and maintaining oneself in power. All sorts of vicious political manoeuvres were permitted so that democratic procedures, when they formally existed, were just debased versions of the models imported from the West. As a consequence, political regimes were chronically unstable even when there was no change of leader, and the rulers' time horizon was very short. In the desperate hope of clinging to power as long as possible, rulers spent most of their resources and energy on bribing their opponents into their personal clique. If they failed, they did not hesitate to have recourse to graduated forms of intimidation that ultimately carried the threat of sheer physical elimination (Bayart, 1989; Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, 107).

As the recent history of SSA shows, in the worst cases political instability leads to secessionist movements and civil conflicts or wars. Indeed, when groups of people feel let down by the central power, they are tempted to form ethnic organizations able to confront the perceived threat to their own survival. To provide a single example, the Mayi-Mayi rebel movement, which was organized around customary chiefs in Congo, North Kivu province, is the outcome of intense frustrations and fears among people who felt their subsistence threatened. They then started to define themselves more sharply in ethnic terms, and they claimed the right to exercise state-like sovereignty on a territory that they perceive as a legitimate base of political and economic autonomy (Jewsiewicki and Buleli, 2004, 249–255; for other examples, see Reno, 1995; Collier and Sambanis, 2005). Above all, they claimed their rights as 'sons of the soil', demanding the return of properties sold to 'strangers', the Rwandans who settled in the district of Masisi during the colonial period (Bates, 2008a, 125–126).

Weakness of African rulers did not stem only from this climate of constant fear of being removed from power by rival factions, but also from their vulnerability towards their own supporters, who needed to be continuously rewarded to remain loyal (Fieldhouse, 1986; Booth, 1987; Brett, 2008). For that reason, and with the possible exception of resource-rich states that have been kept whole under a single rule (e.g., Mobutu's Zaïre), it is not correct to see African rulers as the all-powerful leaders of a truly totalitarian state. In all of what they do, they have to take into account the reactions and demands of their clients at various levels of their patronage network, lest they lose them to a potential or actual rival network: in African parlance, the patrons must ensure that those who support them will also 'eat properly', which implies that the former do not fail in their obligations of generosity (Chabal and Daloz, 1999, 36). Africa's heads of state are especially vulnerable to the higher level courtiers, relatives and supporters who surround them. Thus, "some presidents have actually been the captives of their entourages, to the point that they run a risk of being murdered if they go against the wishes of the cliques that appear to serve but in reality dominate them" (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, 141). Needless to say, ideology as reflected in the official programme of the party does not play any significant role in the mobilization of followers by political aspirants. It serves only as a cover for the ruling elite, which has always viewed its own material enrichment as the primary objective of political power (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, 37–39; Van de Walle, 2001, 124).

In the patronage logic, as we have learned from Scott (1976), the material prosperity and the privileges of the elite are not themselves reprehensible as long as the clients too can benefit from the patronage relationship. In SSA, there is thus remarkably little resentment or envy against the blatant display of wealth by a patron. On the contrary, ostentatious display of wealth by the leader, besides serving the function of demonstrating his power and impressing his would-be subjects,¹⁴ is part of the collective assertion of the ambitions of a given group or community. In the words of Jaiindi Kisero, a Kenyan journalist in the *Daily Nation* (Nairobi, December, 2000), "corruption is not incidental to politics, it is often the very reason for engaging in politics. . . Our political parties are bereft of platforms and ideology and are no more than institutions whose only reason for existence is the intention to divide the spoils of state among the ethnic communities that support them. These attitudes are captured well by the Yoruba saying that 'an elder who is brought a plate does not lick it clean, or he will not find young ones to run errands for him'. . . Instead of getting annoyed about cases of corruption, we Kenyans get more enraged when fruits of corruption are not shared out according to settled expectations" (cited from Berman et al., 2004, 49). It follows that, despite often glaring social inequalities, social class identities do not emerge in societies with pervasive clientelism: by reproducing ties of reciprocity and allegiance across class lines, patron–client networks and factions reinforce ethno-regional identities and undermine the development of class consciousness and conflict (Bourdieu, 1990, Chap. 8; Chabal and Daloz, 1999, 41–43; Van de Walle, 2001).¹⁵

¹⁴ In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, such demonstrative expenditures are "a kind of legitimizing self-affirmation through which power makes itself known and recognized", a form of self-officialization that constitutes a rudimentary form of institutionalization (1990, 125, 131).

¹⁵ Thus, Collier and Garg (1999) have found that in Ghana, public sector workers who are members of the locally dominant kin groups earn a 25 percent wage premium, controlling for other employee characteristics. This bias is not observed in the private sector, however.

To recapitulate, in the fluid political setup dominated by unregulated factional competition as well as by the instability of ruling coalitions composed of disparate elements recruited through co-opting and cajoling, many countries of SSA have appeared as deeply fragmented polities. The politicization of ethnicity is the product of manipulation by contending elites eager to capture power at the central level in order to propel their own economic betterment: “ethnic politics has focused on defining the terms of access both to traditional assets of land and labour and the material resources of modernity in both the state and the market” (Berman et al., 2004, 4). A typical pattern of political promotion thus consists of politicians seeking to build reputations for being able to defend rights to land of a particular group of people defined as an ethnic group. In most instances, these conflicts are exacerbated as an outcome of their politicization (see, e.g., Bassett, 1993, 143–147, for the Côte d’Ivoire; Saul, 1993, 87–88, for Burkina Faso; Bates, 2008a, 85–90, for Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda; Posner, 2005, for Zambia; Lemarchand, 2009, for Rwanda).

The political geography of Africa is thus more often defined on ethno-regional lines than by economic sector or urban/rural location, and in many countries ethno-regional polarization poses a continuing challenge to effective governance. Together with the novelty of sovereignty for Africa (independence came to Africans much more abruptly than to the peoples in Asia and Latin America), political tribalism is largely responsible for the fact that belonging to ethno-cultural communities is far more meaningful for the majority of Africans than the abstraction of (universal) national citizenship (Ndulu and O’Connell, 2008, 42, 57, 65).

When inter-community or inter-regional relations are thus embittered by the game of ‘political tribalism’, moral norms are prevented from evolving towards a state in which their application is generalized to the abstract other. In Europe, moral constraints have been defined primarily in divine terms prescribed by a universalistic religion, or in terms of civic duties associated with the idea of law and implied by written codes promulgated by a national state. In Africa, by contrast, morality remains founded “purely upon the necessity for the reciprocal adjustment of the interests of the individual to the interests of the concrete others represented by relatives and fellow members of the native community” (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, 142, citing Wiredu, 1997). In other words, morality remains restricted to members of the reference group defined in ethnic terms, while the wider sphere of relations is conceived as the space of amorality where all sorts of tricks are allowed and the common good cannot prevail. Such a trend is continuously reinforced by the predominance of particularistic ties of individuals and factions in politics and the state apparatus defined by ethnicity, religion or region (Wiredu, 1995; Platteau, 2000, Chap. 7; Platteau and Abraham, 2002, 2004; Berman, 2004, 44; Jewsiewicki and Buleli, 2004, 247). Trust and civic values are then lacking at the level not only of the polity but also of the market, a theme that shall be pursued in Section 3.

At this stage, it is worth noting that amorality is especially evident in the practices followed by patrons who often are ruthless and violent men endowed “with a sense of self-seeking and personal enterprise which has few moral limits” (Ellis, 1999, 309). If needed to achieve their political aims and to establish their grip over juicy sectors of the economy, they may form genuine mafias in which their close followers are also expected to have few moral bounds and be ready to perform violent acts. In politically unstable contexts where central power is openly contested because no faction is in a position to assert its supremacy over rival factions, patrons easily transform themselves into warlords ruling over militias. It is not surprising that to many people African politics appears as the ultimate form of reckless individualism and boundless ambition “in which power and wealth are conjured out of nothing” (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, 154).

2.3. *The limits of democratization (from the 1990s to the present)*

According to Tilly (1985, 1992) and Bates (2001), non-representative governments in developing countries can persist by virtue of massive foreign aid and military assistance obtained against their allegiance to the main donor country. With the sudden collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, we expect an abrupt reduction of the leverage of these governments. By way of consequence, the bargaining power of the citizens of these countries ought to increase, civil society movements ought to get started or reinforced, and political systems ought to become more democratic. Such a prediction appears even more justified because governments of developed countries and international donor organisations have actually modified their aid policy vis-à-vis poor countries, essentially shifting to governance-based conditionality. This policy change has resulted in dramatic moves towards political liberalization in recipient countries, manifested in the emergence of a free press, opposition parties, independent unions, and diverse civic organizations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

If culture matters, in the sense that institutions are slow to change, political tribalism as practiced in SSA should not disappear under the impact of the new conditions imposed by the donor community, at least not quickly. This is the view of some prominent political scientists familiar with African realities. Thus, Chabal and Daloz (1999, 34–39) stress that old-style political leaders are quite adept at changing both the style and content of their discourse to adapt to new circumstances: the fashionable vocabulary of democracy, market liberalization, human rights, democracy and the like have easily replaced old appeals to anti-colonial sentiments, and the exploitation of Cold War rivalries. In reality, multi-party elections do not fundamentally change the rules of the game. What they do is to make much more visible and more vocal the rivalry between various challengers that was previously obscured within the single party political machine. New pretenders have also appeared to contest the hold over power of the old elite, yet because the basis of politics remains grounded in a logic of patronage, genuinely new contenders are few: if the big men of previous times have become less able to meet the demands of their supporters, it is difficult for the newcomers to challenge them, inasmuch as they typically lack significant resources. When they aspire to create a truly new style of politics, they are generally compelled to resort to old-style practices to have any

chance of acceding to power. For obvious reasons, such a constraint entails a high risk of subverting the new approach, as illustrated by the rise of Frederick Chiluba in Zambia.¹⁶

Interpreting present political transitions as the result of a strong democratic mobilization of the populace against existing ruling elites seems to be wide of the mark: “Most people are primarily worried about their everyday living conditions and are more concerned about finding new patrons (or old recycled elites) than about changing the complexion of the political order” (Chabal and Daloz, 1999, 44). Moreover, the fact that foreign donors have responded to the mismanagement of aid resources at the central state level by channelling more and more resources through decentralized or participatory development programmes does not essentially modify political practices. The political elite has shown a remarkable ability to manipulate the new system to its own advantage:

[A] large number of key political actors have now shifted their operations to the local level, which currently enjoys wide international favour and receives substantial assistance. . . a massive proliferation of NGOs . . . is less the outcome of the increasing political weight of civil society than the consequence of the very pragmatic realization that resources are now largely channelled through NGOs. . . Indeed, NGOs are often nothing other than the new ‘structures’ with which Africans can seek to establish an instrumentally profitable position within the existing system of neo-patrimonialism. . . Above and beyond the new discourse of NGO ideology. . . , the political economy of foreign aid has not changed significantly. (Chabal and Daloz, 1999, 22–24, 105; see also Platteau and Gaspard, 2003; Platteau, 2008)

For Van de Walle (2001), the movement toward multiparty electoral politics has not initiated a sharp historical discontinuity in the mode of governance throughout the African continent. Instead, it has heralded the rise of what he terms ‘illiberal democracies’. His diagnosis complements the views of Chabal and Daloz. As a consequence of the financial crisis of the African state, a growing number of politicians who were excluded from power and its perquisites started withdrawing their support for the government:

Although the political protests that spurred the democratization movement were typically initiated by students, civil servants, and an array of civic organisations, it is this class of excluded politicians that typically emerged during the transition to take control of new governments following national conferences and multiparty elections. . . They were often long-standing members of the state elite. . . who had had a falling out with the head of state and had been consigned to the political wilderness at some point in the 1980s (Van de Walle, 2001, 238–240).

The end result of this process is often the harassment of the press, the monopolization of the radio (overwhelmingly the most important medium by which Africans receive their news) by the state, weak interest aggregation institutions, factional infighting within a fairly narrow political class, corruption and impunity for the powerful due to the persisting dependence of the judiciary on key members of the executive branch, lack of parliamentary control of government, and continuation of the tendency toward strong presidential rule (as exemplified by countries like Kenya, Nigeria and Congo). As Nicolas Van de Walle (2001, 242–256) argues, there is no correlation between competitive elections and the level of political and civil rights, and there is apparently no correlation either with economic performance.

Of greater interest here is Van de Walle’s contention (2001, 260–261) that democratization in SSA has had the effect of exacerbating ethno-regional divisions. Indeed, while the old single party had usually sought nationwide support, the new government parties try to construct multiethnic coalitions able to gain an electoral majority, a dynamic that is promoted by the overwhelmingly ethno-regional nature of political parties and voting. For him, these are dangerous strategies liable to undermine national stability in the long term. Congruent with this diagnosis is the analysis by Bates et al. (2002, 620–621) that with the increased insecurity of their position as a result of political liberalization, incumbents began to prey upon the assets of their citizens as the level of public revenues plummeted and their time horizon became dramatically shortened under contested elections. In other words, political leaders responded to the prospects of losing power by plundering private wealth, they stopped protecting private property rights, and turned into outright predators. As for the members of the bureaucracy, they “began to feed themselves by consuming the time and money of those they once had served” (Bates, 2008a, 104). Furthermore, the rapid re-introduction of multi-party elections in SSA during the late 1980s and early 1990s have likely contributed to an increase in ethnic nationalism and political violence and a deterioration in the growth environment (see also Sisk and Reynolds, 1998; Bates, 2008b,c).

The above analysis confirms the theory of Jack Snyder (2000, Chap. 2), according to which ethnic nationalism is especially likely when pressure for mass political participation arises in conditions where state institutions are still in their infancy. Since they lack effective democratic or administrative institutions to mobilize the citizenry around the state, political entrepreneurs attempt by default to create loyalty through cultural attachments. They opt for a rigid definition of state interest and a nationalist ideology designed to protect and enhance the special position of the dominant ethnic group. Such a situation has the opposite characteristics of inclusionary civic nationalism that typically blossoms where representative political

¹⁶ Chiluba was elected with a reputation of an honestly disinterested person who always refused to be co-opted into the high power circles. Yet, his electoral success was possible only because he put together a patronage machine that could rival Kaunda’s, recruiting old-style big men. By 1994, he had named 43 members of parliament belonging to his party (the MMD, Movement for Multi-party Democracy) as deputy ministers (albeit without a cabinet status), in addition to the 23 ministers of government. The MMD became virtually a single party, and Chiluba’s regime was sullied by presidential authoritarianism, corruption and drug trafficking in high places (Chabal and Daloz, 1999, 34–35; Van de Walle, 2001, 164, 266; Fage, 1995, 536).

institutions are already strong when political participation starts to expand. When public revenues fall, one may add, ethnic nationalism risks causing a disintegration of the state. As attested by the dramatic collapse of the state in the Ivory Coast toward the end of the 20th century, indeed, the central government is then less able to manage ethno-regional tensions by directing sufficiently large resource flows toward regions and ethnic groups located on the periphery of the political system (Azam, 1994, 2001; Azam and Mesnard, 2003; Bates, 2008a, 107–108).

In the end, the really important question for SSA is how to shift from ethnic nationalism to civic nationalism. Change is difficult because a competitive electoral system in SSA resembles a Prisoner Dilemma: no contender has an incentive to propose an ethnically neutral political platform, lest other contenders exploit the move by sticking to ethnic politics. Each political leader, therefore, has a dominant strategy which is to play the card of ethnicity. Hence the pessimistic conclusion drawn by Bruce Berman (1984, 51): “Hopes that the development of civil society would be a force for democratization are particularly unrealistic. . . . With distressing frequency, the rhizomes of ethnic factionalism and patron–client politics reproduce themselves within [these] parties and associations, rendering them, like so much of the apparatus of state, into ideological and institutional façades covering the reality of business as usual”. Seen in this light, the problem is not that Africa has unchangeable political systems that are authentically African. It is that, like everywhere else, historical patterns of the *longue durée* change more slowly because they are grounded in expectations derived from long-term experience and able to support stable (Nash) equilibria.

3. Informal norms, religion and credibility of modern law

A state may be ill-functioning not only because it behaves partially (say, by controlling the judiciary with a view to influencing decisions in favour of its power circle and their clientele) or indulges in corruption on a wide scale, but also because it cannot enforce the law effectively. A situation of legal dualism then arises that undermines the credibility of state institutions.

In Africa, the colonial state passed laws that were directly borrowed from the metropolis, possibly contradicting local norms and practices. In such instances, the custom continued to prevail and modern laws, such as those providing for the registration of individual land titles and forbidding the marriage of girls below the age of puberty, were ignored (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, 142–149, 161–162; Colin, 2004, 291–295). Many of them were not rescinded by the post-colonial state, so the discrepancy between formal rules and informal norms has persisted. Local customary authorities have remained important guides for the behavior of ordinary people, and many laws, lacking legitimacy, have failed to arouse respect among African populations. The attitude adopted by the officialdom charged with the enforcement of statutory law has generally been to turn a blind eye on current practices so as to avoid confrontation with these authorities or to seek a compromise.

Laws regarding inheritance provide a good illustration. In many West African countries, they have been inspired by the French civil code, prescribing that all children, boys and girls alike, should inherit equal shares of the family land at the death of the father (Platteau and Baland, 2001). According to the tribal custom, however, girls are denied such a right (in patriarchal societies) while, following the Islamic law embedded in the Koran, daughters are entitled to inherit half the share of their brothers (see King and Mason, 2001, 117–118, for other examples). When people choose to refer to the statutory law because it is in their private interest to do so (Firmin-Sellers, 1996; Laurent, 2003), the judge does not apply the law strictly. Typically he prefers to consult with customary authorities in search of a common understanding (Colin, 2004, Chap. 12).¹⁷ Such appeals to the modern law in matters of inheritance, it must be stressed, remain quite infrequent except in areas close to cities and where land pressure is quite high.

As a result of the accommodating attitude of modern courts, the custom may change, but only slowly and gradually (Aldashev et al., 2008). When clear violations of the custom occur, it is usually because the social and economic environment has been transformed in such a way that traditional norms become increasingly irrelevant or cause differences of interest and opinion within village communities.¹⁸ Violations then force the norms to evolve, a situation vis-à-vis which elders often feel helpless. When informal norms and rules spontaneously evolve in the direction of the formal law, the latter becomes more pertinent and official enforcers more credible. On the whole, however, attempts by the state, since colonial times, to impose new codes of law and norms of behavior have largely failed, and the corresponding formal institutions are usually voided of power (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, 108). Thus, laws prohibiting excessive fragmentation of land property upon inheritance collide with a well-entrenched custom in patriarchal societies according to which all sons should inherit a portion of the father's land. Consequently, the law is ignored (see, e.g., André and Platteau, 1998). When applied to non-agricultural assets, the custom leads to the breaking up of business estates, an adverse effect that is not usually observed in the Levantine business community, for example (Kennedy, 1988, 48).

Religious institutions have been far more effective than statutory laws and state institutions in propagating new ideas, values, and modes of conduct, both through their religious activities as such and, in the case of Christian churches, through

¹⁷ Thus, Jean Ensminger (1992, 161–162) pointed out that, among the Orma pastoralists of Kenya, women increasingly defer to the administrative chief rather than the elders to settle domestic problems such as wife beating and threats of divorce. However, the former remains anxious to convene the latter before taking a position on the issue raised. We have observed the same kind of phenomenon in Mali (Koutiala area).

¹⁸ See, for example, the case study of Ensminger (1992, 178–179), in which divergences occur between junior and senior villagers as a consequence of the growing income independence of the former.

their prominent role in the promotion of education (Ellis, 1999, 299). Not surprisingly, African presidents have often been eager to assume the role of religious leaders and to adopt the posturing of stern fathers who, like the God of the Old Testament, demand strict obedience and submission. In fact, the political elite are deeply suspicious of religious movements or organisations and, like what they do with potential political rivals, they try to subvert, co-opt, infiltrate or control religious leaders.

In the Ivory Coast, for example, Houphouët-Boigny was always keen to be seen as a devout believer, and the myth of a prophetic president and political messiah was a central element in the manifestation of his personal power and personality cult: he was a guide rather than a representative of the Ivorian people, and accounts of his actions and decisions were to be given only to God. He identified with the Christian church (particularly in the 1980s), yet at the same time developed particular friendship relations with some prominent marabouts. Behind the many cathedrals and mosques that he helped to build lay his will to tame opposition and, in particular, to suppress any attempt at political autonomy in the Muslim South (Miran, 2006, 144–186). In Congo, Mobutu co-opted the Kimbanguist church first, and all the Protestant churches later, for fear that his monopoly of power would be threatened by economic or religious entrepreneurs able to accumulate economic or spiritual goods outside of the party-state's control (Jewsiewicki and Buleli, 2004, 242). In Liberia, to take a last example, the influence of presidents as religious leaders (Tolbert became the president of the World Baptist Alliance) “was constantly mixed with the requirements of their politics” (Ellis, 1999, 299; Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, 101, for other examples).

The monotheistic religions are all the more acceptable by ordinary African people as they have displayed a capacity to accommodate traditional practices, including magical rituals and miracles (Ellis, 1999, 245). This is especially true of Protestant sects, such as the Pentecostal church, which propose a manichean theology and an apocalyptic vision of warfare between good and evil that match traditional fears of sorcery (Lonsdale, 2004, 94).¹⁹ In Liberia, Christian and Muslim ideas have penetrated the thinking of indigenous religious traditions to such an extent that, nowadays, even officials of the old sodalities (especially the Poro secret societies based on the cult of the masks) are often also Christians and may even hold office within the Christian church, for example as deacons (Ellis, 1999, 225).

There are nonetheless obvious limitations to this blending of traditional and imported religious elements. This is attested by the prohibition of dowry, polygamy, and Islamic inheritance prescriptions in the Christian doctrine (yet not in the Islamic law); the prohibition of the ancestors' cult, sacrifices and witchcraft in both religions; or the prohibition of alcohol consumption and spendthrift habits in the Islamic doctrine (see, e.g., Miran, 2006, 447; Fancello, 2006, 103–104). But this is, in fact, good news inasmuch as these limitations can be an engine capable of driving changes of behavior that are conducive to capital accumulation and productive effort: for example, polygamy and alcohol consumption discourage savings and productivity, and they tend to encourage conflicts whose resolution is time-consuming.²⁰ Religion thus appears to have far more influence on people's behavior than formal rules and state institutions, providing a useful bridge between tradition and modernity. At the end of Section 4 below, when the role that religion can play in overcoming traditional growth-inhibiting norms is considered again, an important caveat will be added.

4. Kinship ties as an impediment to entrepreneurship

4.1. Redistributive norms as a brake on capital accumulation

In tribal societies that are pervaded by highly personalized relationships and where a tradition of social mobility does not exist (differentiation is based on rigid distinctions of age, sex, rank, and status), everybody tends to care more about relative than absolute position. Many accounts of everyday life in SSA thus stress the constant harassment of successful individuals by envious and jealous members of the kinship group or the community (Klitgaard, 1990, 254).²¹ Behind such resistance also lies the fear that assertion of wealthy individuals will introduce a competitive spirit that will sooner or later undermine communal cohesiveness. In particular, there is the belief that, if left free to choose, individuals with a high realized income will be tempted to evade their solidarity obligations and opt out of mutual insurance networks (since, by accumulating their surplus income, they can self-insure effectively). Those left behind may then end up worse off since a solidarity pool is less able to spread risk when its size is reduced (Fafchamps, 1992, 160–163).

To counter this danger, lineage-based societies such as those found in SSA have adopted strong redistributive norms that enjoin economically rising individuals to share their surplus with their kith and kin. These norms are backed by the belief that success is due to ‘luck’ rather than to personal effort, risk-taking and talent. While transient luck is believed to result from the ordinary course of natural events, persisting or exceptional luck is attributed to the obscure manipulation of supernatural forces. This sort of accusation is extremely grave inasmuch as witchcraft is thought to cause the treacherous exploitation of other villagers and to jeopardize the survival of the entire group. Since they can easily degenerate into active hatred unless

¹⁹ Revealingly, the descent of the Holy Spirit in the Pentecostal doctrine is described as a trance, and the believers continue to think that witchcraft is powerful but are persuaded that they are now protected by a superior, divine power (Fancello, 2006, 105–106, 113).

²⁰ Fancello (2006, 128) reports the interesting story of a Burkinabé woman who ran away from an arranged marriage by converting to the Pentecostal church that served as a place of refuge. Under the protection of the pastor, she became integrated into the new community of ‘brothers and sisters in Christ’, and was now allowed to choose a husband according to her heart.

²¹ As pointed out by Horowitz (1985, 60), there is no clear boundary between kinship and ethnicity, “especially in societies where the range of recognized family relationships is wide and the importance of kinship ties is great”.

assuaged by corrective gifts, the aversive emotions of envy and jealousy are instrumental in bringing about a redistribution of income between (presumably) lucky and unlucky individuals. The hatred of fellow community members is something that successful people try to avoid because it is liable to cause psychological oppression and physical harm (Jewsiewicki, 1993).

Witch-beliefs thus constitute a conservative force that helps to sustain a rough egalitarianism, or a given distribution of ranks and status, by acting as a check on undue individual effort (Elster, 1989, 261; Thomas, 1973; Ter Haar, 2007). A rich man knows that if he is stingy with his relatives or fails to dispense generous hospitality to all, he is likely to be spoken of as a witch. As Evans-Pritchard (1940) explained on the basis of his research on the Nuer tribe of Sudan, the evil 'soul' of witchcraft is set to work by anti-social feelings such as envy, spite, jealousy, anger and hatred. If these feelings are absent, the witchcraft remains 'cool' and harms no one (see also Badini, 1994, 141, for the Mossi of Burkina Faso). According to many accounts, far from diminishing, witchcraft accusations and practices continue to play an important role in repressing individual acquisitiveness and mobility in African (rural) societies, and the belief in occult forces is very common at different levels of education and among various religious affiliations (Kohnert, 1996, 1348).

René Bureau (1996, 123–124) speaks about "a massive resumption of witchcraft accusations" in the coastal area of Cameroon where the immense majority of those accused of being *balamba* [sorcerers] have an enviable place, function, fortune, or influence. In Cameroon, South Africa, Benin and other African countries, as many new opportunities for economic differentiation arise, successful people are said to be sorcerers able to transform their victims into kinds of zombies whom they force to work at night in their invisible plantations in order to enrich themselves. The victims complain of waking up in the morning feeling extremely tired (Rowlands and Warnier, 1988; Fisiy and Geschiere, 1991; Geschiere, 1997, 175, 192–198; Geschiere, 1995; De Rosny, 1981, 1992; Ardener, 1970; Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, 123).²² In Rwanda, Tanzania, Ghana, Zambia and Uganda, there have been reports of growing incidence of witchcraft accusations and poisoning threats. Rich individuals are accused of possessing obscure powers and entertaining privileged relations with the invisible world that enable them to appropriate wealth from others (De Lame, 1996, 183; Platteau, 2000, 202; Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, Chap. 5; Ter Haar, 2007). Recent changes in economic conditions are said to arouse people's spite because nobody accepts that someone else surpasses him in wealth (according to a traditional healer of rural Rwanda interviewed by Migeotte, 1995).

South Africa bears out the above diagnosis: there, indeed, witchcraft practices seem to be flourishing more than ever before, and social and economic differentiation provides fertile ground for suspicion and accusation when the well-to-do fail to fulfil the expectations of poorer neighbours and kin for support. In Tiko village, for example, witchcraft is feared by almost everybody, and it includes the use of poisons and other dangerous substances or 'medicines' that bear a special local name (Golooba-Mutebi, 2005, 939–944). Elsewhere, those named and killed as witches were often doing nicely, jealousy appearing as the most common motivation for the killings (Niehaus, 2001a,b). Increasingly, young people, who were not traditionally allowed to accuse others of witchcraft, are making accusations against older, typically richer persons (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, 152).

In sum, witchcraft accusations appear as a powerful means of ideological intimidation aimed at suppressing deviance in general and economic self-advancement in particular. It is within the kinship group that witchcraft is summoned with special force since jealous feelings are more intense as relations between people are closer: the gravest accusation against a successful individual is that he is ready to sell his parents in order to accumulate riches.²³ Repressive measures are also observed in tribal societies built on a ranked hierarchy of constituent groups that possess a strongly centralized structure focused on the chief. Thus, in many African villages, the chief or the elders do not easily accept that the rank and file rise above them by acquiring new or ancient symbols of wealth and status. All efforts to accumulate such symbols are unavoidably viewed as conscious attempts to overturn the existing social order (in which chiefs and elders are richer but also stand as the main agents of redistribution), and they immediately arouse insinuations or open accusations of sorcery (Geschiere, 1995, 210; Peters, 1994, 32; Bruce, 1993, 39–40; Colin, 2004, 284–285).²⁴ Witchcraft accusations against social superiors are unthinkable inasmuch as the latter are thought to be protected by powerful spirits able to launch effective counter-sorcery (Evans-Pritchard, 1964, 243; Geschiere, 1995, Chap. 4; Niehaus, 2001a, 198).

From the above discussion, it follows that chieftains and other privileged members of the traditional elite are the most likely to turn into prosperous big men or new bourgeoisie, implying that socio-economic differentiation is based on existing inequalities (Kennedy, 1988, 42). This is because they are shielded from witchcraft accusations, at least as long as they act as genuine patrons or public benefactors who take care of their followers, thereby continuing community loyalty and preserving erstwhile customs of solidarity vis-à-vis the poor and deprived. By thus acting as 'social providers' of their community, the entrepreneurs/patrons deserve praise and recognition (Hart, 1975). In the intra-elite struggle for political leadership at a

²² Among the Douala, people believe that witchcraft powers are acquired in an ultra-secret society admittance to which is conditioned upon the killing of a person, preferably a close relative such as a mother or a son. The most common way to harm people consists of removing their 'soul of life' and to reduce them to slavery after their funeral. The victims then work for the sorcerer on mythical mountains (Bureau, 1996, 107–108).

²³ Sometimes, however, the feelings of jealousy, rivalry and covetousness that give rise to witchcraft affect competition beyond the sphere of family relations, say among tribes, clans and villages for attracting development projects. The belief is then that the tribe, clan or village that wins a project does so because its spirits won a decisive battle against the spirits of rival tribes, clans or villages (Geschiere, 1995, 197–198; Platteau, 2000, 199–200).

²⁴ In a village of Cameroon, a man who accumulated wealth and used part of it to buy a new local suit was severely rebuked by the local chief to whom he was forced to hand over his new garment. No compensation was paid since "he should not have displayed such a luxury while the chief had to go without it" (Geschiere, 1995). For other examples, see Platteau and Abraham (2002, 2004).

higher level, however, they become vulnerable to magical attacks, which explains why all over Africa the use of experts in occult forces as high-ranking councillors of heads of state is so widespread. In fact, many African political leaders are persuaded that the ultimate source of power lies in the invisible world, which makes them all the more prone to follow a religious creed and to consult with an infinite variety of intermediaries, including marabouts, soothsayers, priests and heartmen (Ellis, 1999, 309; Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004; Kohnert, 1996, 1348–1353).

In some instances, religious dignitaries themselves form the emerging business elite. A striking illustration is provided by the marabouts of the Sine-Saloum (Senegal), who belong to the Mouride confrérie (brotherhood) in which they play the dual roles of religious leaders and dynamic patrons exercising authority over highly submissive disciples-cum-clients (Cruise O'Brien, 1971, 1975; Boone, 1992, 106–109). Since colonial times, marabouts have used their influence and control over cooperatives to consolidate and enlarge their personal followings and to accumulate wealth through the expansion of groundnut cultivation. Through their expenditures on ceremonies, mosques, pilgrimages, gifts, the organization of the confréries, and so on, they reinvested much of their acquired wealth in attracting and retaining followings, whom they in turn used in expanding their business activities (groundnut production, commerce and real estate). Leading marabouts have thus accumulated some of the largest personal fortunes in Senegal.²⁵

Afraid of being killed by envious local witches or of being accused and harassed as witches themselves (because they have acquired their wealth by using occult powers), ordinary people are generally reluctant to start accumulating wealth and deviate from customary norms of behavior.²⁶ This is all the more so as the police is usually unable to investigate and punish witchcraft-related crimes because local people refuse to reveal the names of the perpetrators out of fear of ostracization (Golooba-Mutebi, 2005, 947, 951). As long as impersonal markets have not developed that allow business transactions to take place without reference to the community of origin, capital accumulation and entrepreneurship will thus be held in check (Kennedy, 1988, 146–147).²⁷ However, for those dynamic individuals who are strong enough emotionally to break from the traditional society, two strategies are nevertheless available: migration and religious conversion. Both involve distancing from the pressures of community life.

4.2. First escape route: migration and estrangement

To escape the incriminatory and jealousy-ridden atmosphere that pervades many African villages, entrepreneurial individuals may choose to move a comfortable distance from their kith and kin. However, even migration to cities will not necessarily enable them to start-up a business and earn profits they can use for themselves rather than to support “an endless string of social parasites” (Poewe, 1989). They also need to sever their ties with relatives, neighbours and friends so as to prevent them from settling in their new home and drawing on their incomes. Accordingly, they will seldom return to their native area to evade customary rules of greeting and extended family pressures for showing generosity and compassion. If these strategies are not effective enough, there remains the possibility of concealing their personal assets. This may involve substantial transaction costs.²⁸

Interesting evidence supports the above observation. To begin with, there are few African firms that can be labelled as genuine family businesses. As argued by Kennedy (1988), there is marked reluctance on the part of African entrepreneurs to establish pooling arrangements with partners from the family for fear that relatives will seize opportunities to cheat. Any ‘disappearance’ of their money into a common fund tends to be regarded as evidence that the main partner has squandered or stolen their assets. In addition, they are almost as unwilling to delegate authority to kin-related supervisors and managers as they are to share ownership, again due to deep distrust about people’s honesty.

More generally, involving relatives in one’s business undertakings, whether as supervisors or workers, gives rise to intractable problems and tensions. On the one hand, relatives do not respond to the same discipline as other employees because they usually demand special treatment, causing discontent among the workforce. Also, being jealous of the owner’s success and resentful of his authority, they are more prone to dishonest and unreliable behavior in the workplace. On the other hand, the owner tends to be overwhelmed by continuous kinship obligations, such as requests for cash donations or gifts, demands to finance the education of nephews, nieces and younger siblings or provide more or less permanent support for widowed or deserted sisters. True, family connections may help in the early stages by providing start-up capital, yet this advantage is largely outweighed by the above shortcomings. If they are strong enough, entrepreneurs will therefore resist demands to provide jobs for a wide range of kin, irrespective of their qualifications. They know that a business cannot grow unless a clear separation exists between the business and the kinship spheres (Kennedy, 1988, 166–170; see also Nafziger, 1977, 192–193).

²⁵ In 1967, 27 of the 29 largest landholders in Senegal were marabouts and 20 of them were Mourides (Halpern, 1972, 113–115).

²⁶ As expressed by an inhabitant of a South African village, “You build a beautiful house. They say that you are a witch. They come and burn it down. They say they are burning a witch’s house. You buy a car. They come and shoot you, just because you are working and they are not” (Golooba-Mutebi, 2005, 947).

²⁷ The use of witchcraft is not a peculiarity of Third World societies in general and of African societies in particular. The same practices played a similar role in traditional European societies, and according to some authors, they have become particularly widespread during the phase of transition from the egalitarian mutually dependent village community of pre-industrial times to the more individualistic and socially differentiated structure of market-based societies (see, e.g., Macfarlane, 1978, 59).

²⁸ In Burkina Faso, affluent individuals take wife and children outside of their home to eat so as to avoid unwelcome visitors (Platteau, 2000, 210).

Asians and Levantines, whose undertakings have typically taken the form of family firms, have apparently done much better than Africans.²⁹ Two factors explain their relative success. First, since colonial times, these two groups have lacked political power and occupied a position of social and cultural marginality, so that business offered them the only real opportunity to succeed in life. Much like the Levantines of West and Central Africa, the Asians in East Africa were willing to operate at low profit margins and had a high propensity to save. Many of them were also ready to live in rural outposts for long periods, taking the trouble to learn the vernacular and operating at low levels of turnover. The second factor is more directly relevant for the above discussion: by virtue of being strangers, Levantines and Asians are not subject to the institutions and customs that stifle the initiative of enterprising natives of their adopted country. In particular, they are not subject to extended family pressures for redistribution. Moreover, magical repression does not work against them since they do not believe in the same spirits as the indigenous population. However, they tend to be widely resented by the local population who see them as strangers usurping the business opportunities that rightfully belonged to indigenous people (Kennedy, 1988, 47–49; Platteau, 2000, 224).

The family firm provides stranger entrepreneurs of Africa with a low-cost, disciplined, and trustworthy labour force whose members all have a direct interest in the success of the joint endeavours (Kennedy, 1988, 48). The fact that immigrants from the Middle East and Asia belong to small families (formed essentially around monogamous parents and their children) rather than to the extended kinship units typical of low density African societies implies that the moral hazard-in-team and the incentive dilution problems that plague collective undertakings is relatively moderate in the former. The above diagnosis has been largely confirmed by recent studies of indigenous and non-indigenous (immigrant) firms located in certain African countries, and based on detailed interviews of a sample of trading and manufacturing firms (see Fafchamps, 2004, and Fafchamps, forthcoming, for a synthesis). The central results are as follows:

- (i) Kinship or place of origin play little or no role in the formation of business networks: individuals from the same village constitute a minute portion of the suppliers and clients reported by African manufacturers (Bigsten et al., 2000; Fafchamps, 2003). Buying from and selling to family members is rare and, in a survey of 58 firms in Accra and Kumasi (Ghana), no sales on credit to relatives were recorded (Fafchamps, 1996, 2004, 454). This contrasts sharply with findings for Asia (Hayami and Kawagoe, 1993). In SSA, the relationship between ethnicity and business networks is quite loose even when the latter are ethnically concentrated, in the sense of being located in areas dominated by one ethnic group (Fafchamps, 2004, 307). More specifically, once networks are controlled for, the measured effect of ethnicity on access to supplier credit falls dramatically (Fafchamps, 2000). In other words, business networks with strong returns essentially result from interaction among simple business acquaintances, and commercial relationships are nurtured through business meetings and socialization outside of work. Ethnic concentration “seems to result from nothing else than historical accident and socialization patterns that are reinforced by the practice of business itself” (Fafchamps, 2004, 308; Fafchamps and Minten, 2002). Such a conclusion also follows from the examples cited by Moore (1997) where it appears that successful African businessmen have used personal connections developed at an earlier stage of their professional career, yet outside the sphere of their kith and kin relations (often as salaried employees of European firms).³⁰
- (ii) Not only is trade with relatives and friends extremely rare in SSA but, whenever it happens, it harms firm performance. Entrepreneurs complain that it is difficult to keep business with relatives within the confines of an economic transaction. For example, it is hard to collect payment from relatives whether for a loan or delivery of a good. In fact, borrowers do not feel morally obliged to repay debts incurred from a prosperous relative, for example, because they tend to view non-compliance as a legitimate manner of redistributing income from lucky to unlucky individuals tied through solidarity obligations (Platteau, 2000, 210). Also, firms buying from family and friends encounter more late delivery problems (Bigsten et al., 2000). Involving relatives in business is, therefore, considered to be “the surest way to go out of business”, while selling on credit to relatives and neighbours amounts to “signing the death warrant of the firm” (Fafchamps, 2004, 173).
- (iii) Family background has some effect on start-up working capital, yet this effect is small, and no systematic effect of family networks on factor accumulation after enterprise creation can be discerned (Fafchamps and Minten, 1999; Fafchamps, 2004, 325–326). By the same token, relations based on family, friendship, or ethnicity/kinship make it easier for firms to solve disputes, yet they also raise the incidence of contract non-performance. This may result from the Africans’ preference for non-confrontational methods of dispute resolution, which often end up in face-saving compromises. And if it is highly risky to sell on credit to relatives, this is essentially because of obstacles to exerting pressures on them (Fafchamps, 2004, 104, 109, 173).
- (iv) There is no evidence of systematic mechanisms whereby information about clients’ trustworthiness is shared among African manufacturing firms other than direct recommendation by common acquaintances (Fafchamps, 2004, 173, 256–257, 295). Among agricultural traders, too, trust-based relationships constitute the dominant contract enforcement mechanism, implying that trust is established primarily through repeated interaction with little role for referral

²⁹ Interestingly, some of the mulatto descendants of European traders who operated from the ports and towns of the southern Gold Coast in the mid-nineteenth century were competing successfully with Europeans (Kennedy, 1988, 34–35).

³⁰ It is odd, therefore, that Moore uses those examples to criticize what he calls the ‘family/kin drag’ thesis, thereby confusing kinship with other types of social connections.

by other traders. Information on bad clients does not circulate widely, which severely limits collective punishments for opportunistic breach of contract (such as non-payment). African-managed firms face more cases of non-payment than other firms, and they also complain more frequently about deficient quality (Fafchamps, 2004, 92, 109, 117, 135). Their transaction costs are consequently higher. Thus, the overwhelming majority of Malagasy traders (in Madagascar) and their clients respond to quality risk by inspecting each and every purchase since the task is “virtually never delegated to family helpers, employees, or collecting agents” (Fafchamps, 2004, 117). In other words, many African-managed firms fall back on a ‘flea market’ mode of transacting: “inspect the good on the spot, pay cash and walk away with it” (Fafchamps, 1996, 441–444). Firm size and firm growth are unavoidably restricted in such circumstances.

In contrast, within alien communities, information circulates rather freely and client referral is a common practice. As a result, non-indigenous firms operating in SSA are at an advantage. In Kenya, for example, it is only within the Indian community that first-time customers are able to obtain trade credit from the date of their first purchase. Moreover, indigenous firms (in Kenya and Zimbabwe) are less likely to socialize with suppliers, and they have more restricted knowledge about them and their supplies, than the immigrant firms, suggesting that ethnic barriers are more limiting for the former. Since better business contacts allow firms to enforce contracts and economize on screening costs, immigrant firms tend to be more profitable (Fafchamps, 2004, 252–253, 258, 300; 1997).

- (v) Foreign firms hesitate to enter into business relations with indigenous firms that they generally deem unreliable. In particular, they find fault with African managers for continuously trying to renegotiate delivery and payment terms *ex post* (Fafchamps, 2004, 110). This bad reputation of unreliability and dishonesty seems to date back to colonial times (Kennedy, 1988, 41, 46).

In the light of the finding reported under (iv) above, it bears emphasis that the multilateral reputation mechanism which, according to Avner Greif (1994), characterizes so-called ‘collectivist cultures’ is conspicuously absent in SSA. What we find, instead, is the bilateral reputation mechanism typical of ‘individualistic cultures’. This is a rather paradoxical conclusion, yet it is perfectly congruent with our contention that in this region kinship/ethnic ties and their associated obligations are more an impediment to private capital accumulation than a social capital susceptible of reducing transaction costs.

4.3. Second escape route: religious conversion

To escape from the moral and social proscriptions against self-enrichment, willing entrepreneurs need not necessarily leave their native area physically. They can become ‘native outsiders’ (Hagen, 1975, 279), distancing themselves radically from their native network so as to be able to disregard the attendant obligations without much fear of hostility. Such a transformation occurs when they symbolically adopt a kind of ‘stranger’ status by converting to a different religion: “this places them effectively under an alternative set of obligations and links them to a spiritual community whose members encourage private accumulation and economic experimentation whilst providing resources such as technical knowledge, credit or labour” (Kennedy, 1988, 141–142). In the new spiritual community, emphasis is put on virtues of self-restraint and consumption moderation (e.g., abstaining from drinking alcohol and gambling), and on the need concomitantly to do away with traditional feasts where lavish expenditures on food, drinks, and other goods are the rule.

In most cases, it is conversion to Islam or Christianity that provides the necessary escape from community loyalty. For example, among the Fra Fra people of northern Ghana, when successful individuals are unwilling to share their profits generously with members of their ethnic group and simultaneously keen to avoid the grave accusation of being ‘swindlers’, they convert to Islam or Christianity, which removes the need to move to an impersonal city (Hart, 1975). In the Serenje District of Zambia, Jehovah’s Witnesses were disproportionately represented in the commercial farmer and shopkeeper categories, although they were somewhat younger and with less urban experience than their economic rivals. They also tended to live outside the traditional matrilineal village in their own independent settlements, and in their spare time they practiced such trades as bricklaying, carpentry or tailoring from which they earned extra cash (Long, 1968, 146). In addition, they systematically avoided hiring kinsmen-workers who did not share in the ownership of the farm or its equipment because their employment “is likely over time to lead to difficult farmer/worker relations which centre around the problem of reconciling the rights and obligations of matrilineal kinsmen with their role as workers on the farm”. ... [The fact of the matter is that Jehovah’s Witnesses] “have little interest in traditional status criteria and espouse an ethic which emphasizes the spiritual and moral dangers of associating too freely with non-believers, even if kin, ...” (Long, 1977, 138–139). In their struggles to disentangle themselves from the demands of the matri-kin, they can rely on religious justification, spiritual protection and practical assistance provided by their church, thus improving their ability to concentrate on their business and nuclear family interests (Kennedy, 1988, 142).

Parkin’s study of the Giriama people of coastal Kenya (1972, chaps. 2–5) provides another vivid illustration which shows, *inter alia*, how God can be summoned to defeat witchcraft. As aptly summarized by Kennedy:

... the conversion of some young entrepreneurs to the Islamic faith might follow a long period of psychological tension and physical illness induced by the possibility of conflict with the elders whose status and power were threatened by the younger men’s activities. Such ‘illness’ could be diagnosed as caused by powerful Islamic spirits whose appeasement required nothing less than the religious conversion of those unfortunate enough to become possessed. Once this had occurred, the Islamic ban on the consumption of alcohol and certain foods, as well as the need to follow a partly

separate ritual and social life, all provided the opportunity for entrepreneurs to reduce their level of involvement in traditional society. Yet this behaviour no longer incurred community displeasure since it was now judged to be religiously determined rather than the result of selfish individualism. At the same time, the converts were still reasonably close to community affairs and so could use their social connections with the elders in order to gain access to land, reliable information, business contracts and so on (Kennedy, 1988, 142).

In Burkina Faso, a dynamic individual who had converted to the Pentecostal church expressed the view that “If people see that someone is going to fare better, they use magic tricks to kill him, and this is something that inhibits our development because jealousy is great. . . there are those who want to harm me, but I also know that, thanks to my love for God, they are made powerless since the power of God surpasses that of the evil local spirits” (Fancello, 2006, 124). Conversion to Islam or to God's Assemblies also proved to be the most effective weapon available to a youth group who wanted to embark upon a development project in their (burkinabé) village, but were subject to threats of magical attacks manipulated by local elders (Laurent, 1998, 108–109). Among the Orma pastoralists living near the Tana River (Kenya), likewise, it seems that the first shopkeepers and traders were young Islamic converts who chose to challenge the authority of the elders and who found in Islam codes of law and behavior particularly conducive to sound business relations (Ensminger, 1992, 48–62). Poewe (1989) offers a similar analysis of the motives underlying the spread of evangelical churches in Zambia (see also Shillington, 1989).

If the religious sodality or association serves as a business network, the convert enjoys a double advantage: besides becoming immune to the demands of kinsmen, friends and neighbours, he is able to economize on the transaction costs due to availability of effective contract enforcement mechanisms. This is because the sharing of the same faith ensures that people abide by the same codes of behavior, adopt the same rituals, and use the same language, resulting in a common identity grounded in the same symbolic universe. If the brotherhood is sufficiently small for information transmission to be effective, the mutual trust that it nurtures and the repeated interaction framework that it provides allow the members to solve many incentive problems (of the moral hazard and adverse selection kinds) arising in commercial relationships. Moreover, religion performs the function of signaling or identifying members. In fact, the religious association works as a club: entry into it involves a fixed cost (the initial fee) under the form, useless for outsiders and therefore not transferable, of learning the language as well as the doctrine and the rituals. It replicates a gift exchange relationship by a group of agents and is effective to the extent that any violation of the standard of behavior (honest trading) within the club is punished by the termination of club membership (Aoki, 2001, 64–67).

In West Africa, for example, long-distance trading communities or ‘trading diasporas’ dating back to the 13–14th centuries have been built on elaborate and successful networks. An important feature of these networks is their openness to new entrants on the (obviously restrictive) condition that they shared or accepted the essential cultural requirements for participation in the moral community that distinguished the members from the host society: Islam and the appropriate trading language (Austin, 1993, 115).³¹ The adoption of Islam thus spurred the economic integration of West African regions and their integration into trans-Saharan trade thanks, in part, to increasing safety of the caravans and smaller contract enforcement costs (Cohen, 1969, 1971; Hopkins, 1973, 58–65; Levzion, 1973; Brooks, 1993, 117). To enforce contracts and rules of commerce along the Juula and Hausa inland networks, as well as at the Sahelian entrepôts along the Niger bend, a parallel diaspora of clerical specialists, both judges (*qadis*) and legal scholars (*muftis*), was created. Interestingly, however, they did not always demand strict religious adherence on the part of the local lay Muslim community (Lydon in this issue; see also Launay, 1992, 191, for the Dyula of Ivory Coast).

Especially worthy of note is the flexibility shown regarding the most growth-limiting Islamic rules, such as the law of commercial partnerships, which limited enterprise continuity and inter-generational persistence, and inheritance prescriptions, which encouraged wealth fragmentation and restrained capital accumulation (Kuran, 2003, 2004a,b). Descent could thus be manipulated so as to avoid dispersion of business assets by selecting one unique successor among slaves/clients (rather than relatives) recruited into the trading organisation as junior partners. In fact, specific arrangements depended almost entirely upon arrangements made within what Ralph Austen (1987) called “a modified version of the secular kinship idiom” (43).³² The major social function of Islam was, in fact, “to provide merchants with an identity which reinforced their occupational role”. Muslim merchants of Sudan acted as “representatives of a cult that had material and spiritual connections to a universe larger than the parochial world of local villages, or even savanna empires” (Austen, 1987, 43). This helped them to gain respect from other West African peoples. As is evident from the processes of formation of the Juula and Hausa groups, the Sudanic identity of Muslim merchants was based on multiple levels of ethnicity “beginning with their use of specific West African languages and receding into their consciousness of descent from various population groups strategically placed to enter the occupation of trade” (Austen, 1987, 42).

³¹ The non-fulfilment of this condition explains why European (French) merchants failed to make inroads in cattle trade within what is now the republic of Niger: they were unable to participate as equals in indigenous systems of guaranteeing credit and enforcing contracts that emphasize a common religion (Islam) and language (Hausa) (Austin, 1993, 117).

³² Sophisticated financial instruments such as letters of credit and bank drafts do not appear to have circulated farther away than the northern entrepôts of the Sahara itself, not a surprising finding since most Sudanic Muslim merchants remained functionally illiterate despite some training in Quranic liturgy (Austen, 1987, 41, 43).

As pointed out in Section 3, the spread of Christianity and Islam may play a progressive role by overcoming traditional barriers to change in SSA. Not only do the imported religions emphasize the need to fight against alcoholism, drug use, cheating at university exams, prostitution, corruption, nepotism and delinquency, but they also refuse to recognize ethnic identities and the customary obligations that are associated with them, especially when they involve lavish expenditures. In the words of Aboubacar Fofana, an influential reformist Muslim cleric of Ivory Coast, “what matters is not where an individual comes from, but what he or she does” (cited from [Miran, 2006](#), 450—my translation). Muslim brotherhoods put emphasis on personal merits and engagement, not on social status and ethnic identity: they are based on elective membership ([Miran, 2006](#), 472–473). Generalized morality, without which an effective market and polity are hard to develop, precisely requires that the ability to see things from another’s viewpoint be based on identity or loyalty feelings toward a large reference group that is accessible to all ([Platteau, 1994, 2000](#), Chap. 7).

An important caveat must be mentioned. New growth-conducive norms of behavior do not necessarily prevail in all areas (of West Africa) that were Islamized before they became colonized by Western European powers. This is because acceptance of Islam may have been superficial, and societies that are apparently Islamic may have fundamentally retained their erstwhile kinship structure and organization. For example, strongly organised polities, such as the kingdoms of the Mossi, Dagomba and Akan, in which central power was firmly based on the kinship organisation of the people, resisted infiltration of Islam in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and “continued to maintain the old Sudanic traditions of government which might use but which were never wholly committed to the new religion” ([Fage, 1995](#), 194–195).

Across the Hausa lands (in what is now northern Nigeria), the conquest by the Fulanis, who adhered to a rather strict version of Islam and possessed a highly developed class of Muslim clerics (*torodbe*), had quite different effects, depending upon the strength of local political organizations and their ability to resist outside influences. In the Songhai empire of Gao, bureaucracies might appear to have been Islamized, but the principles of Sudanic royal power has remained pagan. The same holds true for the central Saharan Berbers who, despite Islamization, still cling to their language and many of their customs and have succeeded in absorbing the Arab groups as tributaries into their own tribal system. As for the Massassi (of mixed Soninke and Fulani descent), although they had Muslim clerics in their entourages, they acted in distinctly Islamic ways but only when it suited their interests ([Fage, 1995](#), 187–189, 192, 196–208).³³

Under superficial Islamization, appeals to strict interpretations of Islam may be the way chosen by disgruntled individuals or social groups to emancipate themselves from the customs of the dominant society. A striking illustration is found in the attacks of Wahhabites on the relatively tolerant forms of Islam represented by the Sufi orders and practiced in the towns of Maradi (Niger) and Koko (Nigeria). The younger educated elite who espouse this puritanical version of Islam are attracted by its asceticism and its proclaimed rejection of any ostentatious redistribution of wealth. They want to set their members apart from the older Islamic community by rejecting the authority of local scholarly traditions and adopting distinctive behaviors and rituals ([Launay, 1992](#), 104–131; [Gregoire, 1993](#), 109–110; [Cooper, 1997](#), 130–134). The appeal of a strict Islam also seems to be strong for groups that were either excluded from the traditional socio-political structure or felt that their position in it was, on the whole, disadvantageous. For these groups, indeed, pure Islam “provided a means by which the legality of the traditional system might be challenged” since this system could be shown to be “a denial of the essential brotherhood and equality of man, irrespective of his ethnic and social origins” ([Fage, 1995](#), 195).

Clearly, the authenticity of an act of religious conversion depends largely on the position of an individual or a group in the existing social and political structure, as well as on the opportunities and constraints for change that are perceived in particular historical circumstances. Hence, that no significant and robust relationship between religious affiliations and economic growth performance emerges from cross-country econometric studies, or that Islam, or Protestantism, sometimes appears to have a negative effect, is not surprising. The way of measuring these affiliations is so crude that no reliable result can in any way come out of this kind of quantitative exercise ([Platteau, 2008](#)).

An additional complexity arises when *whole* communities or societies, rather than marginalized or oppressed groups or individuals, convert to a new religion. The existing social structure is then likely to be simply replicated under the new system, and the consequences will become less evident. This is all the more so if religious conversion is imposed on a people by foreign invaders. For example, after the Fulani conquest, the Hausa peasantry remained submitted to the rule of powerful landlords, but since the new landlord class was, initially at least, an alien one less subject to the dictates of local custom, its erstwhile rights were less effectively protected. However, “both landlords and peasants were now Islamized and operating within a framework of general law and principle, which militated against arbitrary oppression, and made for greater security and efficiency” ([Fage, 1995](#), 207–208). As a result, thanks to the expansion of trade and industrial activities, prosperity increased in the Hausa cities after the Fulani-led *jihad*.³⁴

³³ Rather than pursuing the aim to propagate Islam (that is, to preach and establish the truth of the one God and of the universal brotherhood of man subordinate to his will alone), the Massassi wanted to convert the clan and age-grade structures of traditional Bambara society into associations of serfs and clients subordinate to their will as war-leaders ([Fage, 1995](#), 189, 194).

³⁴ In the Futa Jalon, where the *jihad* actually started, Muslim Fulani leaders succeeded in completely overturning the existing socio-political structure. Indeed, local Jalonke chiefs initially had the right to tax Fulani herders and to control the allocation of land to them. By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, as a result of the Fulani Islamic upheaval, they had become tributary to Fulani overlords throughout the territory. Moreover, they ultimately converted to Islam and became accepted members of Fulani society ([Fage, 1995](#), 199–200).

5. Conclusion

From the literature dealing with Asia, we have learnt that rent-seeking has been a pervasive feature of practically all Asian countries, including those that have performed best during the last four or five decades. What distinguishes them is not the incidence of rent-seeking as such, but the organization of rent-seeking and the identity of rent seekers. The differences have historical origins going back to colonial times. In particular, the ‘fragmented clientelism’ afflicting the Indian subcontinent (India, Bangladesh and Pakistan), colonized by the British, seems to have been much less conducive to economic growth and efficiency than the pattern of coordinated and centralized patron–client flows found in South Korea and Taiwan, colonized by Japan. While in the former area, there existed decentralized centres of organizational and political power that had the ability to demand or protect redistributive rents effectively, in the latter countries, the central leadership of the state could use a carrot-and-stick strategy to induce learning but also block feather-bedding. As a result, in South Korea and Taiwan the rents of the emerging capitalists were protected only in so far as their use was in conformity with the calculations and interests of the political leadership, whereas in the Indian subcontinent they were guaranteed by independent political factions purchased by these capitalists and unconcerned with the productive use of the rents (Khan, 2000, 91–98; Kohli, 2004). Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore, stand somewhere in between these two forms of clientelism (Studwell, 2007).

In SSA, the rent-seeking process looks more like the fragmented clientelism of the Indian subcontinent than the more centralized patronage observed in South Korea and Taiwan. In fact, most African countries seem to suffer from the disadvantages of fragmented clientelism to an even more serious extent than do India, Pakistan and Bangladesh because centrifugal tendencies born of ethno-regionalism are especially strong in a continent with weak political institutions and incipient states. Where ancient African kingdoms existed, their boundaries were not coterminous with those of the independent states that Africans inherited at the end of the colonial period. This lack of correspondence prevented the consolidation of these ancient structures into modern states. It also gave rise to severe political and social conflicts at the time of independence (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1985; Austen, 1987; Tordoff, 1997; Herbst, 2000, Chap. 4).

That an inclusionary national development project is conspicuously lacking in most African countries follows from the above conditions of ethnic nationalism: the political elite have not fulfilled the popular expectations aroused by the nationalist leaders in the run up to independence (Fage and Tordoff, 1995). While in India, for example, the problem was not the absence of a national industrial policy but the inability of the central leadership in charge of its elaboration and implementation to discipline poor performers and reallocate resources rationally due to the political opposition of powerful excluded groups, in SSA there is typically no centrally defined industrial policy or development strategy. This deficiency is reflected in the high dependence vis-à-vis foreign aid that African countries have learned to live with. The problem of low capital accumulation is further compounded by the tendency of African elites to spend their rental incomes largely on lavish consumption rather than investing them in productive sectors with high monopoly rents or put their savings in foreign bank accounts or assets rather than at home.

The spread of universal religions with a powerful God as figurehead may hold in check the forces that undermine the accumulation of productive capital in SSA. Their beneficial effects may be felt at two distinct levels. First, by nurturing feelings of loyalty and identity towards a large reference group that exceeds ethnic boundaries, they may gradually help to establish the basis for a generalized morality and a civic polity backed by pan-lineage and pan-ethnic institutions. Second, by instilling values and norms that violate customs with adverse effects on capital accumulation and entrepreneurship, they contribute to behavioral changes that encourage economic growth. In particular, they provide a formidable shelter against redistributive pressures emanating from kith and kin, and they emphasize values such as frugality, honesty, and hard work that encourage saving, risk-taking and improved contract enforcement and flexibility.³⁵

Religion can produce those effects only in so far as adherence to its tenets is sufficiently genuine and when conversion affects the existing social structure by raising the position of people who occupied low ranks in the previous system. In many areas of West Africa, old kinship-based organizations and customs have persisted throughout the pre-colonial Islamization period because the commitment to Islam remained superficial and opportunistic. Regarding Islam, the best situation probably obtains when (i) the ideals of universal brotherhood and equality are pursued with enough commitment to undermine ethno-regional identities and redistributive norms, and (ii) sufficient flexibility is allowed to circumvent the main growth-limiting Islamic rules, particularly those concerning inheritance.

In spite of what has just been said, the recent flowering of pentecostal churches and other revivalist movements born outside the ambit of established churches is not necessarily a welcome change for Africa. It might just reflect the ability of unscrupulous and cynical entrepreneurs posing as inspired preachers or prophets to exploit the gullibility of poor illiterate people who are especially vulnerable to charismatic leadership in times of prolonged economic and political crisis. Far from the ascetic morality that characterized mainline churches a few decades earlier, the new evangelists tend to be people who, by cunning and trickery, have succeeded in becoming immensely rich while deceptively promising to their followers that the same luck is soon going to befall them. Their success has much to do with their professed belief in the active presence of the

³⁵ As pointed out by Ellis and Ter Haar (2004, 138), “Christianity in Africa has always had an association with social success and economic advancement, and it grew so rapidly during colonial times in part because it was associated with material advancement through schooling, learning European languages, and employment in the state sector, just as Islam all over Sub-Saharan Africa has historically been associated with successful trading”.

Holy spirit. Indeed, for people brought up in magical universes inhabited by spirits who are represented as real individual beings and with whom some form of effective communication is possible and essential, this feature offers almost irresistible attraction (Laurent, 2003; Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, Chap. 3, 137).

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