

# Wealth in People

Economics, Politics, and African Societies: TA 05

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***A gift of money is not equal in value to  
a gift of a person.***

—Yoruba proverb (Owomoyela, 2005)

## **Discussion Section**

*What are the consequences of Africa's social organization of wealth in people? Pay attention to the economic and social (redistribution, reciprocity, labor) as well as political consequences (state-society substitution).*

## **1. Discussion Section**

## **2. Bledsoe's Wealth-in-People**

Characterization and Logic

Gender implications

## **3. Clientelism or Latent Asset?**

Wealth in people and patronage

Spheres of exchange

Africa's Latent Asset

**What is Wealth in People?**

## “Wealth-in-People” (Bledsoe, 1980) in the Kpelle society

- Material and human possessions as means for relationships.
- Embedded in the political need of protection and in the economic means of production, this social process entails skillful manipulation of personal relationships, to the point of fictitious kin relationship with chiefs.
- It allocates legal rights of labor, reproduction, and property to a group or a person; filiation, wardship, pawnship, and (in the past) slavery are used to control the labor and allegiance.
- By this point in class you should understand that slavery in African societies works differently from chattel slavery in the Americas (Miers and Kopytoff, 1977).

## A “feudal” example (but not really)

*... a chattel, like land, may be subject to a cluster of rights held by different persons in terms of their relationship within the network of kinship ties.*

- Land is not freely available to anyone; demanders must seek permission from owners who have original, ancestral claims.
- Older members distribute farming privileges to loyal kins and “late comers” who were driven out of land because of warfare or poverty. Birth determines status, parallel to feudalism.
- But, status is driven by labor and allegiance, rather than on wealth in property or land.
- Property is important not merely for material value but as a way to “**symbolize relationships** between people.” (p. 51)



## Conventional sociological wisdom instrumentalizes the role of women

- Conventional wisdom in sociology portrayed women and marriage as means for wealth in people. “She also **symbolizes the relationship** between her natal and affinal kin” (p. 51).
- Men seek legal rights in women for economic and thus social surplus. Women are legally defined as having no rights in their labor, sexual services, or children, because men control these rights (Radcliffe-Brown and Forde, 1950).
- As labor is an ingredient in maintaining social stratification, wealth-in-people ascribes the control of women, hence marital decisions and reproduction, to the production of surpluses.
- Is it possible that men and women have different objective functions and incentives, as documented in kin tax preferences (Jakiela and Ozier, 2016)?

## Female agency adapted to the wealth-in-people system

- Despite legal barriers to independence and social relationships, women have subtle means of controlling people (Bledsoe, 1976).
- In the traditional Kpelle society, a mother with children of marriageable appeals to “moral obligation of [suitors and their family] to her as their affectionate, self-sacrificing mother. (clientship)
- “She does not directly control rights in her children, but she manipulates the disposition of these rights in ways most beneficial to her.” (p. 377)

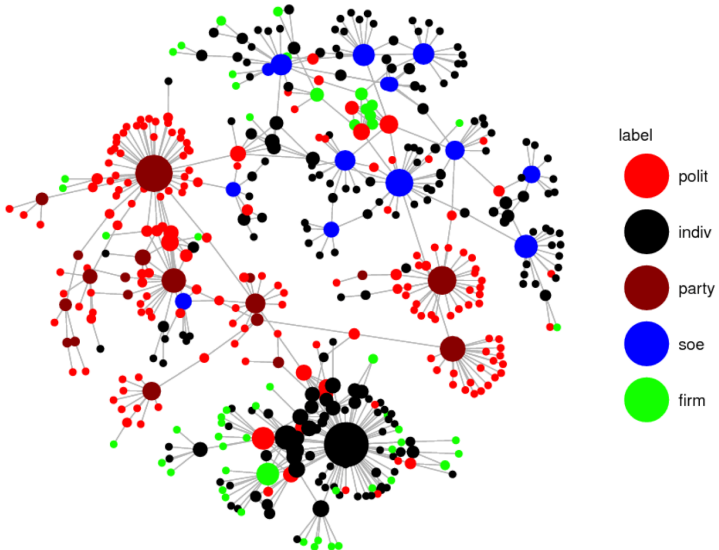
*The model woman of my argument, then, is not the affectionate daughter, hard-working wife, or loving mother who gets into trouble while making the best of a difficult situation, but the cold, calculating female who uses all available resources to control the world around her. My model woman seeks power: The capacity to determine her own and others' actions.*

**A political implication**

## Implications for social structure: patronage

- “People in Kpelle society find it necessary to have patrons” (54).
- Why? Protection from being denied access to farmland or women, sold into slavery to repay debts, or killed.
- “In West Africa, it was the masterless men and women who ran the imminent danger of having ... ‘their freedom’ turned into involuntary bondage of a much more drastic nature” (55).
- “A hierarchical series of patrons and clients: every adult [man] is a patron to lesser people, but a client to a more powerful person” (p. 55), describing the Gola but applicable to the Kpelle.
- Contrast this with the contractarian Western political tradition.

Figure 91: PEP network Big Island (47%) in Liberia



## Consequences for patronage politics

- The political science literature defines **clientelism** as reciprocal, dyadic, repeated relationship between hierarchical individuals, in which **patronage** being specific to “the use of resources and benefits that flow from public office (patron) to citizens (client).” (Hicken, 2011).
- Some use the terms clientelism/patronage interchangeably (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007).
- Scaling wealth in people to national politics, patronage typically operates across ethnic lines, evermore salient during elections.
- What sustains vote-buying? Internalized reciprocity (Finan and Schechter, 2012) or political brokers (three-tier patronage) (Duarte et al., 2019; Ravanilla, Haim and Hicken, 2018).

## Political economy of clientelism (Robinson and Verdier, 2013)

- Clientelism solves two-sided commitment problems.
- Politicians face commitment problems because they don't really care to *ex post* implement vote-inducing policies, thus offering policies *only* in exchange for political support.
- Citizens also might wish to commit to actions that are not *ex post* optimal, e.g. choosing political opponents if given  $> \$$
- What is clientelism, e.g. patronage (job-for-vote)?
  - Credible: employments in bureaucracy is an easier rent generation process than taxation/corruption. Rent is then transferred to specific voters. (Remember Bates?)
  - Selective and reversible: tying voter's continuation utility to a politician's success.



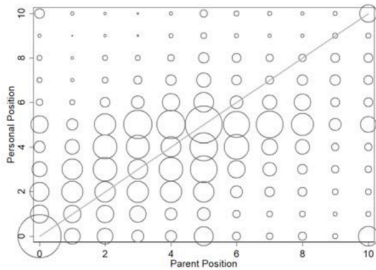
# Spheres of exchange and contemporary economics?

- Wealth in people operate in hierarchy of goods and status.
- “These rights in people give access to the goods that people produce. Wealth in material goods may then be converted into relationships that bring rights in people” (p. 51).
- “Wealth in people” elasticity of demand: as wealth (status) increases, demand for subsistence goods fall (*inferior*), materials increase less than proportionately (*necessity*), people/cattle increase more than proportionately (*luxury*).
- Different spheres of exchangers: transaction between people of equal status (*allotment*), between social unequals (*exchange/gifts*), and the most demeaning when superiors give to inferiors with no expectation of reciprocity (*clientship*) (56)
- **BUT...**

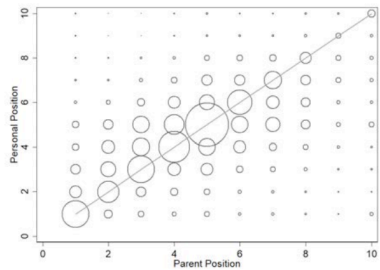
- Different from “poverty trap” (Balboni et al., 2020), clientship and social structure do not determine outcomes in rigid way.
- Social relationships are made of fluid and responsive networks.
- Argument for how Africa is meritocratic, and wealth in people to be the “theoretical basis to expect African society to be achievement based today” (Henn and Robinson, 2021).

Figure 1: *Perceived Mobility by Region*

Panel A: Africa



Panel B: Latin America



Panel C: Asia

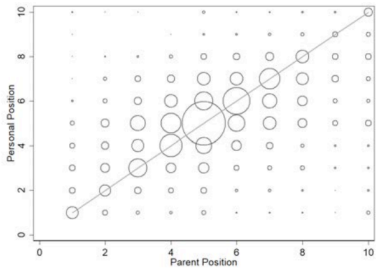
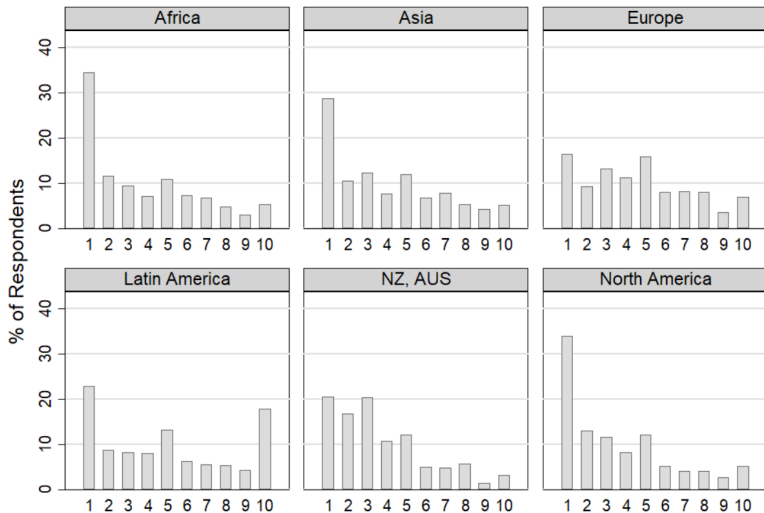


Figure 3: *Importance of Hard Work vs. Luck & Connections by Region*



1 = hard work brings a better life; 10 = hard work doesn't matter, it's about luck and connections

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