

How anarchist was Africa?

Precolonial statelessness may have been a sign of success, not failure

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Photograph: Getty Images

In a game of chess two states go to war, the pawns dying to save the king. In mancala, a board game popular in Africa, all pieces are alike, and players try to win them over. That shows how societies think about politics, argues James Robinson, a political scientist at the University of Chicago. If powerful states were rare in precolonial Africa, that was because Africans did not want to build them. Statelessness was a sign of success, not failure.

At least that is his contention in a recent paper with Soeren Henn of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. They estimate that there were roughly 45,000 polities in Africa in 1880. Perhaps 2% of those were “states”, which ruled some 44% of people. Most Africans were living in chiefdoms of a few thousand or in even smaller units.

Unlike in Europe, where war made states, African polities found ways to rub along, the paper claims. The authors found that of 114 African languages, 92 used the same word for “guest” as for “stranger”.

The usual explanation for the weakness of African states is that the continent was sparsely populated; if leaders became too greedy, their followers would simply move away. Mr Robinson made his name arguing that institutions explain inequality between countries. Now he says that cultural differences matter, too. But that does not explain why states did form in some parts of Africa and not in others.

Whatever the answer, do such different political patterns still matter today? Martha Wilfahrt, of the University of California, Berkeley, thinks so. She argues that where

precolonial power was despotic, there is more conflict today. Places once ruled by looser federations fare better.

Messrs Henn and Robinson think that decentralisation made Africa more vulnerable to slave traders and colonial conquest. Enduring suspicion towards states might explain why it is hard to raise taxes today. But African traditions have also bequeathed societies sceptical of authority, open to difference and socially mobile, they argue. Build better institutions, and that could be the basis for future prosperity.

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