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Elite Persistence in Africa: Historical Perspectives, State of Knowledge and the Path Forward

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Elite Persistence in Africa: Historical Perspectives, State of Knowledge and the Path Forward

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In the 1960s and 1970s elite studies formed an integral part of the research agenda on newly independent African states. Commentators sought to predict the likely political and economic paths of independent African states based on the social backgrounds and political orientations of existing elites. Historians looked back in time, and debated the social continuities across the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial eras. But elite studies dropped off the research agenda in the 1980s and 1990s. This paper revisits earlier literature about elite continuity and change in Africa. It provides a broad sweep of the arguments about the origins of elites and sources of elite power across different epochs, and analyses the characteristics of the African 'top 1%' today using census data. It concludes by charting a research agenda that would enhance knowledge of the social origins and mobility paths of Africa's contemporary elites.

1. Introduction

As the main wave of decolonisation swept across Africa in the 1960s, many looked to the continent's emerging African elites to predict the political orientation of these young states.² Sociologists, political scientists and historians debated the nature of class relations in Africa and the basis of social power. Were these new states unencumbered by social rigidities and thus unusually meritocratic and progressive? Or was there a pre-existing African 'petit bourgeoisie', formed in the colonial era, which was already sufficiently entrenched to perpetuate the economic structures established under colonialism? Would ethnic leaders and brokers determine political coalitions, or would new forms of economic differentiation create novel political fault lines?

The more optimistic narrators argued that African societies were classless in a Marxist sense and held together by traditional social solidarities, which prevented class exploitation and facilitated a socialist policy path at independence (see discussion in: Arrighi & Saul, 1968). Others were less sanguine. Theorists associated with the dependency school began raising doubts already on the eve of independence about the incentives and motivations of Africa's vanguard to act in the national, collective best interest. Some concluded that Africa's weak and ethnically fractionalised elites were products of the political game, and played an intermediate role as facilitators of foreign capital interests rather than as economic actors in their own rights (Fanon, 1963; Saul, 1976).

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² This paper focuses on Sub-Saharan Africa specifically, but will use the shorthand, 'Africa'.

These academic debates generated a sizable empirical literature that placed elites under the spotlight, and studied their social origins, educational paths and political leanings (Kitching, 1980; Leys, 1975; Lloyd, 1966; Miller, 1974; Shivji, 1976). But by the 1980s, research on African elites had lost appeal. A global disenchantment with Marxist theory reduced academic interest in elite studies across the world. Ethnicity and religion came to be viewed as the crucial political cleavages in the African setting and elites were described as a product of ethnic competition and rural networks rather than economic accumulation (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). In tandem, concerns about poverty and its alleviation shifted the analytical focus from the top to the bottom of the income pyramid.

Only recently, with the recovery of economic growth in Africa the 2000s, has the language of class and elites begun to re-emerge in the academic and public discourse (Handley, 2024; Kroeker et al., 2018; Melber, 2016; Ncube & Lufumpa, 2015; Resnick, 2015). Others have rekindled older debates about Africa's unique paths to social mobility. In a recent article, Henn and Robinson (2023) argue that one of Africa's unexploited latent advantages is a comparatively merit-based social structure, a consequence of the continent's relationship- and network based social order that has historically rewarded talent and allowed for considerable social fluidity (Henn and Robinson, 2023, i16). Others have countered that African societies were not in fact that flat or mobile to begin with, and questions whether they are so today (Frankema et al., 2023).

This paper revisits historical studies and debates amongst historians about the basis of elite power in Africa and paths into elite occupations and positions across the 20th century. It considers how such paths to the top are likely to have influenced social mobility and its corollary, elite reproduction. This focus resonates with Bourdieu's concepts of elite capital (Bourdieu, 1997), the idea of social class as a multidimensional, where status and power can rest on different forms of resources: economic, social and cultural. The paper uses the term 'elite' in a loose sense, to denote those with outsized political or economic power or status, on account of holding high political office, important occupational roles, control of wealth, or commanders of exceptionally high incomes.

Guided by the historical literature, I organise the discussion around four, by no means mutually exclusive or exhaustive, 'routes to the top' in the 20th century. The first is traditional authority, particularly chieftaincy, a form of inherited political status and cultural legitimacy that gives access to resources and political influence; it arguably has a modern equivalent in the emergence of postcolonial political dynasties. I contrast this with accumulation and transmission of private, individually-owned wealth (land, real estate, financial assets), wealth sources that typically emerged during the colonial period, as private property rights were formalised or developed. Education, and human capital formation, is arguably the route that has afforded the greatest social mobility, although educational privileges can also be inherited. The last elite dimension is the role of outsiders, or non-indigenous minorities, often with greater economic and human capital than the indigenous population, international networks and community cohesion, that allows them to retain outsized economic power. The

questions I raise is how the different routes to economic power have ebbed and flowed in the postcolonial period; the extent to which they are mutually reinforcing and their memberships overlapping; and whether these routes to power or wealth strongly reproduce elites, or enable mobility. The last section introduces an analysis of contemporary elites, by examining the characteristics of household heads in the top 1% of the asset wealth distribution, using recent census data from eight countries.

A major theme in African studies is the role of ethnicity in creating social and economic cleavages, and the grievances this generates. This is probably one of the most studied dimensions of elite structure in African country contexts (Francois et al., 2015; Lindemann, 2010; Raleigh & Wigmore-Shepherd, 2022). This paper, however, takes a vertical perspective on social stratification by examining inequality between social groups, and considers the basis for status and economic power independently of ethnic identity. How such forces of stratification create, exacerbate or interact with ethnic cleavages is an important matter with serious political reverberation. However, I start from the assumption that ethnic inequality is a consequence, more so than a cause, of the forces that stratify societies. This paper purposely shifts the emphasis away from ethnic difference and towards the underlying mechanisms of social (re)production.

2. Historical Sources of Economic Power in Africa

There is a long tradition of literature that describes African societies as comparatively flat and mobile, and sees growing social differentiation as a consequence of colonial penetration and commercialisation in the early 20th century (Bigsten, 2015). Measures of top income shares suggest that colonial era inequality was largely a function of extraordinary income differentials between foreign, expatriate or settler communities, and the African majorities (Alvaredo et al., 2021), although recent work based on social tables also revealed meaningful inequality within African societies (Hillbom et al. 2024). Yet others have warned that this overlooks social differentiation based on other sources of elite capital than those that are easily observable in colonial archives (see Frankema et al., 2023 for a recent review of this literature). Linguistic evidence and oral histories from Eastern Africa points to well defined and evolving concepts of poverty and wealth that long precede the colonial era (Stephens, 2022).

Some historians and anthropologists have, however, pointed to a different basis for economic power in Sub-Saharan Africa than in Europe and Asia. Many have characterised Africa as land abundant and labour scarce, as across much of the continent, and until the late 20th century, the availability of arable land exceeded the number of people who could productively farm it (Austin, 2008; Hopkins, 1973; Ki-Zerbo, 1981). As land was in abundance, property rights over land were, and in many regions remain, underdeveloped. Wealth, power and status was defined by the ability to control and command labour, be it enslaved or coerced workers, or an extended family network, rather than ownership of physical capital. Gluckman (1941) first introduced the anthropological concept of *wealth in people* to characterise such a social

structure, where power rested in command of people rather than ownership of landed estates or taxation rights over a defined region (a concept later developed by Miers and Kopytoff (1977) and explored by Guyer (1995)). In more centralised polities, the powers over labour and the allocation of resources often rested with ruling lineages, ensuring social reproduction through inherited political rights and religious powers. One manifestation of this was vast inequality in family size, with the number of wives and children marking the power of the (male) household head (Geschiere, 1993).

There were exceptions to this; in the more centralised and urbanised states of the Sahel inequalities in wealth rested on command of strategic long-distance trade routes. In areas of circumscribed fertile agricultural land, such as the highlands of Ethiopia, and the great lakes region, there were pockets of densely populated regions with stronger land rights institutions and greater social stratification (Henn and Robinson, 2023, i12). But by and large, wealth in much of Africa was defined by control over labour and (in the Sahel and highlands) cattle.

Inequality is thought to have reached new heights with the intensification of the Atlantic Slave Trade in West Africa in the 18th century, and the Indian Ocean trade in the 19th century (Frankema et al., 2023). This increased the share of the population in enslavement (Manning, 2021), and consequently the wealth of those rulers, chiefs and merchants who owned the enslaved. Consequently, intergenerational transmission of status rested on a different calculus: it could include inherited property rights over labour and cattle, but also on continuation of a large family and clan line and/or the legitimacy vested in hereditary political offices. Whether a social structure built on social networks and enslaved labour is more or less fluid than one based on command of land and physical wealth remains understudied. Henn and Robinson (2023) have recently argued in the affirmative, that network-based societies afford greater mobility and rest more on individual talent, but empirical evidence either for or against such a thesis is in short supply.

A second and related qualifier is that environmental obstacles to infrastructural investments and urbanisation placed an upper limit on early-modern capital accumulation in much of Africa. Notwithstanding important forms of (rural) capital investments (livestock, fruit-bearing trees, terracing of land, building of canoes and mining pits, for instance), capital on the whole was scarce and depended largely on past labour inputs and thus indirectly on wealth in people (Austin, 2008, p. 594). Consequently, inherited fixed capital is likely to have had less influence on the production function, and therefore on social stratification, than in Europe and Asia.

The 19th and 20th century ushered in a series of major political and economic upheavals that undermined or changed the economic structure and power base of rulers and merchants. As demand and supply of enslaved people ebbed after a series of European abolitions of the slave trade, it gave way to the export of cash crops over the course of the 19th century, primarily palm oil, gum, cotton, rubber, nuts and later cocoa, produced for the rapidly industrialising European markets. Towards the end of the 19th century, the rapid conquest of

the African interior by European colonizers brought the vast majority of Africa's population under Imperial rule. Did elites of earlier eras survive these gyrations, or was the growing intra-African differentiation of the colonial era fundamentally new?

Notwithstanding considerable variation across time and space, many historians have cautioned against treating the upheavals of the 19th century as truly revolutionary. The rise of cash crop production in West Africa in the 19th century and in East and Central Africa in the 20th century – in palm oil, groundnuts, rubber, cocoa and cotton - had lower entry costs and allowed smaller peasant producers to partake in the production for export, and therefore acted as something of an equalizer (Hopkins, 1973). Nonetheless, case studies also suggest a considerable elite resilience through the continued monopolisation of the trade in such goods, as well as the diversion of the labour of the enslaved from the Americas and to African soil (Law, 1995). In the Ashanti Kingdom, chiefs proved remarkably adept at translating their traditional powers into wealth derived from the cocoa boom of the early 20th century, in part by exploiting their roles as custodians of land (Austin, 2005; Bates, 1983). In some places the continuities were obvious, as former slave traders redirected enslaved labour towards the domestic production of 'legitimate' goods (Law, 1995).

Furthermore, in many settings, colonialism proved a blunt political rupture. In British colonies, the colonial authorities sought to govern through pre-existing chieftaincies when possible, to reduce resistance to colonial rule and lower the administrative costs of the colonial state (Gardner, 2012, p. 28), an approach later famously defined as the 'doctrine of indirect rule' by Lord Lugard. The British strategy has conventionally been compared with a more direct form of rule under the French, with governance through appointed chiefs. The French formally espoused an assimilationist ideology, that established routes to elite education that fostered a separate class of African *Évolués*, with command of French and with different legal rights to the majority of the population. However, many have challenged this easy dichotomy. Like the British, the French and other colonial powers found it expedient to work with and through existing elites when possible (Crowder, 1964; Geschiere, 1993). Both the British and French looked to custom and tradition to legitimize chieftaincy. Thus in many colonies the imperial conquest empowered or at least perpetuated, rather than undermined, pre-existing political elites. Slavery was replaced by labour tribute, chiefs earned considerable colonial salaries or shared in the locally raised revenue, and were well placed to influence postcolonial political developments and land redistributions.

A comparative capital scarcity also meant that colonial governments relied heavily on foreign capital and partial and selective property rights regimes, that vested formal property rights primarily in foreign settlers and colonial governments rather than indigenous African households. An unusually high share of African national wealth therefore was, and remains to this day, foreign-owned (Manning & Drwenski, 2016). Land markets emerged in some parts of colonial Africa through policies that circumscribed land, typically for use by European settlers, and created an artificial land scarcity that forced Africans into wage labour (for instance in Kenya, Rhodesia and South Africa). An important question in the historiography is

whether outside actors, such as foreign or multinational corporations, creditor nations, former colonial metropolises and non-indigenous minorities, retained power after independence in ways that left the national or indigenous African elites weak and sidelined. The widespread nationalisation of banks and industry in many parts of Africa in the 1960s has been read by many as a response to this over-reliance of 'foreign' capitalists, and an ambition to Africanise the economy (Akyeampong, 2018; Mkandawire, 2009). Quantitative studies of this process of Africanisation of wealth, however, are in short supply, and comparative data on the ownership of African wealth stocks are not currently produced in most countries.

This raises important questions for the present. Do social networks and cultural legitimacy still determine social standing to a greater extent than in other contexts, and if so, how are such networks perpetuated? As African population densities increased in the second half of the 20th century, land scarcity is increasingly replacing land abundance and pressure to formalise land rights is increasing – particularly so in urban and peri-urban areas. To understand contemporary elite formation, we need to consider how and who has come to benefit from such property markets, and whether they are undermining or complementing other forms of elite power.

3. Routes into the Postcolonial Elite

3.1. *Western Education*

Although colonial rulers often collaborated with pre-existing African elites, colonialism also accelerated the pace at which people passed through one increasingly important route to social mobility: western-style schools. Early educational investments in Africa in the first half of the 20th century were not driven by the colonial state so much as by independent religious missions, for whom education was a means of spreading the gospel. This educational diffusion, particularly in British Africa, rested heavily on African initiative; primary education was by and large provided by African teachers in the vernacular with limited state support and under the auspices of Christian missions, who often had an uneasy relationship with rural elites (Bolt & Bezemer, 2009; Frankema, 2012). This gradually expanding primary school system fed into a very skeletal system of secondary and tertiary schooling, which only expanded in any serious sense in the post-WWII period. In French colonies the mission schools gave way to a more regulated state education system earlier in the colonial period, with instruction in French, but served a very narrow segment of the population (Cogneau, 2014).

As domestic and international pressure to decolonise increased in the post-WWII era, both the British and French responded, belatedly, with attempts to Africanize the public service, introduce elected local government councils in British Africa, and in the French case, through the election of African representatives to the National Assembly in France. Consequently, the small cadre of high academic achievers who had risen through the mission school or state school system were the first to benefit from higher education and the most obvious candidates for senior public sector posts and political offices.

Most of Africa's independence leaders of the 1960s – Julius Nyerere in Tanganyika, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, Leopold Senghor in Senegal, Felix Houphouët-Boigny in Cote d'Ivoire – were among the most highly educated members of their societies, and most held tertiary degrees from European universities. Julius Nyerere was the only Tanganyikan with a post-graduate degree at independence. Leopold Senghor was the first African to gain the highest teaching qualification in France, while Sekou Toure of Guinea held less status within the regional political movements, because his educational qualifications only reached the level of a *certificat d'études* (Akyeampong, 2018, pp. 78-79). Members of Parliament more broadly, were (and remain) drawn from an upper educational strata; in the early days of decolonisation literacy requirements ruled out most adults from standing in parliamentary elections.

In an analysis of the Africans included in East Africa's 'Who is Who' of 1965, high educational achievement is the most defining feature of this nascent occupational and political elite. The 'Who is Who in East Africa', produced by a private publisher in the 1960s,³ offers a rare insight into the educational and professional backgrounds of prominent members of East African society, as identified based on high earnings (>£1,000/annum), high professional status or social or political influence (political office, unions and civil society leaders). The source underrepresents wealthy farmers (for whom income data would not have been readily available), but is otherwise a fairly systematically selected sample of the formal sector elite. In both Kenya and Uganda, roughly a third of the 'Who's Who' sample were university educated, and a further 20% in Kenya and 37% in Uganda held a post-secondary certification, at a time when less than 2% of men reached their final year of secondary school.⁴ Most had studied at a small network of the earliest established secondary schools in East Africa. Elite origins then, was largely a story of educational first-mover advantages, as those communities and families that sought out western education, and where the region had attracted mission stations or state investment in the first place, rose to the pinnacle of the income distribution.

To what extent was this educational mobility route monopolised by the children of pre-colonial elites? The British famously founded schools specifically for sons of chiefs, such as Bo School in Sierra Leone, and King's College Budo in Uganda. In these settings, sons of chiefs stood a much higher chance of receiving education than those from more humble beginnings (Dupraz and Simson, 2024). Early mission schooling, however, was not strongly targeted at members of the elite (Wantchekon et al., 2015). Furthermore, by the late colonial period, the rate of educational expansion was rapid enough to absorb students from across social strata. By the 1950s, students at King's College Budo were by no means only drawn from the pre-existing elite. Most students had farming backgrounds, while 8% had chiefly backgrounds and

³ Three editions of 'who's who in East Africa' were published in Nairobi in 1964, 1966 and 1968, by Marco publishing, run by Evelyn and Gordon Wilson, two Canadian former colonial civil servants in Kenya.

⁴ These calculation draws on unpublished work by the author, building on a digitized set of data from the 1965 'Who is Who in East Africa'.

21% had fathers in the civil service or missions (Taylor, 1958, cited in Goldthorpe, 1965). While still a skewed selection pattern, it nonetheless suggests some degree of mobility.

Other evidence from Uganda tells a similar story. A study using Anglican marriage records, which recorded occupations of grooms and their fathers, has been used to study social mobility patterns within one Anglican community in Kampala over the course of the colonial and postcolonial eras (Meier zu Selhausen et al., 2018). It shows that of the grooms in higher professions (doctors, accountants, chiefs, clergy etc.) observed between 1895-1962, 40% had fathers who themselves worked in higher professions, and an additional 16% had fathers from lower professions (teachers, businessmen, traders etc.). Across Buganda at large, these two occupational categories probably comprised well below 2% of the population in the late 1950s.⁵ Over time, however, as the number of Africans in the higher professions increased, the parental background of these higher professionals did grow more diverse and increasingly included children of mission workers, clerks and other lower-level skilled or semi-skilled professions. In the 1950s and 1960s in particular, a large share of grooms had higher status professions than their fathers, while the dominance of chiefly fathers among the highest ranked professionals declined sharply.

Studies of the social backgrounds of secondary and tertiary students also suggest that the school system grew more inclusive as it expanded in the 1950s. Surveys of secondary school graduates from 1960s from Kenya, Uganda and Ghana found only a weak association between father characteristics and the respondent's educational and occupational outcome (Currie, 1977; Foster, 1963; Olson, 1972). The majority of what was still a very narrow, secondary school-educated class, came from families without exceptionally high educational or occupational attainment.

Measures of educational mobility thus depend in part on perspective. Pre-existing elites clearly had privileged access to education for their children and were able to ensure a high degree of intergenerational transmission of educational privilege. But by the 1950s, the rapid expansion of formal employment opportunities and even more rapid growth in schooling meant that the system could also accommodate a large number of new-comers, who quickly dwarfed the old-comers. In the words of John Iliffe, 'colonial regimes gave privileged education to sons of chiefs in many colonies and some ruling classes were quick to appropriate schooling ... Generally, however, education expanded so quickly that even where privilege was transmitted, most pupils were nevertheless of relatively low status.' (Iliffe, 2017, p. 240). Many others have concurred, painting a relatively mobile early independence tableau (Lloyd, 1966; Tuden and Potnicov, 1970).

⁵ Fallers (1964) gives estimates of government employment in 1954 (~5,000) (p.128 & 134), which would have accounted for the majority of professionals. In 1959 there were roughly 560,000 adult men in Masaka and Mengo (the two main Buganda districts) (De Haas, 2022, Appendix A1). If we assume that the total number of higher and lower professionals was double that of the entire public service (~10,000), this puts it at less than 2% of the adult male population.

Has educational mobility fallen since? A set of recent intergenerational educational mobility studies give mixed answers (Alesina et al., 2021; Dendir, 2023; Narayan et al., 2018). A recent study using coresident samples from 22 African censuses finds moderate intergenerational educational persistence levels, but with clear evidence of declining educational mobility in the decades since independence (Dendir, 2023). A study of regional inequality in university attainment in nine African countries shows growing regional inequities in university access since the 1980s (Simson, 2021).

A priori, as the education system expands, competing forces will influence the degree of social mobility. As the share of the population with secondary and tertiary education grows, so does the gap between the educational advantages such parents can bestow on their children, relative to those that uneducated parents can provide, which will tend to increase intergenerational educational persistence. In the 1960s, very few of Africa's secondary students had parents with secondary education, so elite and non-elite students competed on a comparatively level playing field, as neither could rely on guidance and coaching by their parents. Today the gulf in knowledge, confidence and ability to navigate education systems, between children from highly educated elite families, and children of the working class, has likely widened. However, pushing in the opposite direction, rapid educational expansion has increased the sheer number of opportunities for absolute upward mobility, and simultaneously reduced skills premia, so the private returns to education have fallen (Frankema and van Waijenburg, 2023). Consequently, educational advantage may matter less for income inequality than in the past. Either way, the empirical evidence tracing relative educational mobility in Africa remains in short supply, and the consequences of (possible) calcification of the educational route to high status, has barely been studied.

3.2. *Traditional Authority*

How, then, has this 'modern', educationally-oriented elite engaged with traditional sources of authority and political legitimacy? Have chiefly lineages, for instance, coexisted or fused with the educational elite? The relationship between western educated (political) elites and traditional authorities has varied considerably across time and space. Colonial governments often supported traditional authorities as bulwark against the demands of early nationalist independence movements, which were typically spearheaded by a mission-educated 'new' elite (Geschiere, 1993, p. 156). Many early independence leaders were hostile to traditional authorities and moved to clip or remove their political rights. In Ghana and Uganda for instance, Presidents Nkrumah and Obote sought to wrestle control from what many saw as illegitimate collaborators with the colonial state and increase the central government's reach over taxation and resource allocation.

Yet the formal and informal powers of traditional rulers were rarely extinguished entirely. In several countries traditional authorities have had powers restored to them since the 1980s, whether this be limited to ceremonial and cultural roles (e.g. Uganda), or political powers, including over land and other resources (for instance Ghana, South Africa, Zambia, Cote

d'Ivoire) (Baldwin, 2014, p. 255). Opinion polls from the early 2000s suggested that in many countries, traditional authorities commanded greater legitimacy and trust than elected officials (Logan, 2009, p. 113). Modern-day chiefs, moreover, are often highly educated, thus there is no obvious trade-off between formal education and traditional authority.

In recent work with Yannick Dupraz (2024), I examined the postcolonial persistence of chiefly lineages in Sierra Leone, a country where the power of the chieftaincy remained unusually strong in the postcolonial period. In the early 20th century the British codified a set of 'ruling houses' in the Sierra Leonean protectorate, who's members have the right to stand in chieftaincy elections; holders of rare chiefly names signals a likely membership or association with these lineages. We found that these chiefly name-holders remain significantly overrepresented among members of parliaments, local councillors, and among holders of diamond mining licences today. Their overrepresentation in educational and skilled occupations, however, was comparatively small. This points to a form of status persistence strongly driven by continued appeal to (local) political legitimacy and social networks, particularly in rural areas. It suggests that Sierra Leonean elites can transmit and exploit forms of social capital, vested in a custom and tradition.

However, the Sierra Leonean case study also highlights a tension between family size and educational advantage; in the early independence period, the large size of chiefly families and their rural location may have placed barriers on educational achievement (for a similar argument in the case of Cameroon, see Geschiere, 1993, p. 157). Furthermore, large families also make the definition of a traditional elite quite malleable today; in Sierra Leone, almost 20% of the rural adult population claim the rights to stand in chieftaincy elections, suggesting that formally inherited political rights are only a weak determinant of subsequent social success.

3.3. *Modern Political Dynasties?*

Political theorists have long drawn connections between historical modes of rule in Africa, resting on long-established ties of loyalty, norms of reciprocity and cultural legitimacy, and postcolonial national political leadership, which similarly rests on rural embeddedness and clientelist relationships (Bayart, 1993; Chabal & Daloz, 1999). Anecdotally, it does appear that the political elites that emerged at the time of independence, whether of chiefly extraction or not, have proved markedly enduring. Daloz has remarked on the number of political dynasties in Africa, where sons replace politician-fathers, and noting 'how few genuinely new top political figures have emerged in ways other than through military coups' (Daloz, 2018, p. 247). Daloz attributes this primarily to the importance of accumulation of wealth and social capital, vital for political survival, which gives incumbents disproportionate advantage. Furthermore, as African electorates are still majority rural, and electoral malapportionment in Africa typically favours rural voters (Boone & Wahman, 2015), politicians may still require strong rural networks and associations with sources of traditional legitimacy, that weaken the national appeal of urban-based elites. Empirical tests of such hypotheses, and whether

urbanisation is affecting the longevity and tenacity of political elites, are fertile ground for further study.

3.4. *Minority Advantages*

Another clear correlate of postcolonial elite membership in Africa is racial or minority identity. Even a cursory look at the pattern of capital control, and 'rich lists' from across Africa, suggest that some ethnic or racial minorities have retained outsized economic roles after independence, even where they were political persecuted or vulnerable.

In East Africa, despite discrimination and outmigration, the Asian community, which expanded across the region in the early 19th century, as people arrived from the Indian subcontinent as traders, public servants and other white collar employees, remain economically important. A study from Kenya showed that most private manufacturing firms remained in Asian hands in the 2000s (Wairire, 2015, p. 266). A controversial thesis by Himbara held that Kenya's Asian community were the country's true 'national bourgeoisie' (Himbara, 1994, 1997). Recent work on Kenya's wealth elite using probate records to study the characteristics of wealth-holders, shows that Asian name-holders remain highly over-represented amongst Kenyans leaving estates at death (Simson, 2024). In West Africa, the smaller Lebanese merchant community dominated trade and services in many countries in the first decades of independence (Leighton, 1974), although their influence may now be waning.

Migrant communities from within Africa have also proved strongly upwardly mobile in some settings. Somali communities, which inflated with the eruption of civil conflict in Somalia, have proved successful traders in Kenya and Southern Africa. Regional trading diasporic communities, such as the Fulani or Fula, have been described as highly upwardly mobile in Sierra Leone today (Dupraz & Simson, 2024; Jalloh, 2007).

The success of such communities align with theories of diasporic advantage; because such groups are small and politically-vulnerable, in an (often) hostile host country, they possess greater within-group trust and can access international financial and trade networks, providing them with advantages in commerce (Casella & Rauch, 2002). Such models have been applied to explain the success of Jewish trade networks in medieval trade (Greif, 1989), and the Chinese in Southeast Asia (Lim & Gosling, 1983), amongst others. Domestic politicians may also lean on these groups, as they pose less political threat due to their vulnerability as outsiders. Kenya's President Arap Moi supported and improved the investment conditions for Kenya's Asian business community, in part to restrict the economic power of the rival Kikuyu economic elite (Cowen & MacWilliam, 1996). Successive Liberian and Sierra Leonean presidents relied on Lebanese financial support, as this community was unlikely to furnish any direct political competition.

3.5. *Capital in Africa's 21st Century*

The disproportionate economic power of expatriate or non-indigenous communities also raises questions about indigenous wealth accumulation in postcolonial Africa. The limited African ownership of 'the means of production' generated considerable academic and policy debate in the early independence period (see discussion in Mkandawire, 2009), but has spurred surprisingly little research since.

Piecemeal evidence suggests at least some Africanization of wealth since independence, given the rapid appreciation of urban property, and emergence of more active land markets in at least some countries (Simson, 2024). But the nature of this wealth accumulation may look quite different to other 20th century settings. Rural land registration in countries where agricultural production is primarily under small-holder production, may spur some increased rural stratification, but is nonetheless spreading formal asset ownership quite widely across a swath of rural producers. Land inequality in Sub-Saharan Africa is considerably lower than in Latin America and on par with levels in Asia, albeit with considerable country variation (Bauluz et al., 2020, p. 17; Lipton, 2009, Fig 7.2), and the average farm size has fallen rapidly over time as inherited plots are subdivided amongst heirs.

Nonetheless, there is some evidence that land commercialisation is leading to land accumulation within a certain social substrata. Jayne et al. have documented a substantial rise in the number of medium-sized land owners in Africa, often urban-based and frequently working in the public sector, who are investing savings from the non-agricultural sector in agricultural land (Jayne et al., 2014).

However, access to property in urban areas, otherwise the areas of the highest rates of mobility and income growth, are severely hampered by underdeveloped mortgage markets, meaning that these higher value assets are likely to be very unequally owned (for a theoretical discussion, see Collier & Venables, 2014). Many African cities have seen rapid urban property price appreciation in the 2000s, arguably setting in before a widespread property-owning middle class came into existence. Across Africa's largest cities, urban residents typically rent, rather than own, their homes, putting a damper on the emergence of a 'patrimonial middle class' of homeowners, as conceptualised by Thomas Piketty in Europe, and, presumably, amplifying urban wealth inequality (Piketty, 2014).

Another concern of the writers of the 1960s, was whether African wealth accumulation would be driven by a form of 'primitive accumulation of capital', the unjust, and frequently illegal, appropriation of property by the politically connected. Many continue to see African capital accumulation as fundamentally linked to political power or bureaucratic control, and use of state-levers to enrich individuals (Kayange, 2020, Ch.11). Across the continent, there is a sharp correlation between wealth and office holders, although causation runs in both directions - political office generates opportunities for enrichment, and wealth is needed to win elections. But clearly not all asset accumulation in postcolonial Africa can be characterised as political appropriation. In many countries, particularly in the early independence period, legal and comparatively transparent sales of public land and housing allowed a more broad-

based strata of income-earners with access to mortgages to invest in urban property, and favourable loan conditions similarly enabled some to purchase or build firms (Hake, 1977).

How to quantify the importance of this political route to enrichment and elite entrenchment, and whether politically-acquired riches are as easily lost as gained, is harder to determine. A related question is whether a second generation of inheritors of politically-acquired fortunes are themselves compelled to remain politically active, or are shifting their orientation towards the private sector instead. Some have argued that Africa's 'middle class' is today less characterised by public service than in the 1960s through 1980s (Lofchie, 2015, p. 42; Simson, 2020). But whether Africa's top wealth-holders are less beholden to the state than in past decades, remains debated.

4. Contemporary Elites in Africa: Initial Observations

This paper has outlined several trends in social stratification in 20th century Sub-Saharan Africa, including education, wealth and traditional authority, but quantifying the impact of these determinants on social structure and elite reproduction is hampered by lack of data. Household surveys typically under-enumerate households at the top, which limits our understanding of the characteristics of the elite, and alternative surveys focusing specifically on elite sources of income and wealth are few and far between.

To provide some stylistic impressions of contemporary elites in Africa I conduct an analysis of the characteristics of the 'top 1%'. This is a mechanical definition of elites, limited to economic differentiation, and will probably overemphasise urban versus rural forms of capital, but it has the advantage of simplicity and comparability. Table 1 builds on an index of socioeconomic status derived from housing characteristics and asset ownership⁶ and compares characteristics of household heads in the top 1% of this asset distribution versus the bottom 99%. It is constructed from recent census data from eight African countries (Benin, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Uganda), available from IPUMS International. By using census data, rather than surveys, it reduces the risk of biases driven by elite under-enumeration in household surveys.

What then characterises the top 1%? Perhaps the most defining characteristic of this socioeconomic elite is its educational attainment; across the sampled countries, between 40-70% are university educated, compared to only 2-6% across the bottom 99%. This top strata is also far more likely to live and have been born in the largest urban centre; roughly a fifth to a third were born in these main urban metropolises, while 50-80% lived in these cities at the time of the census, relative to 10-15% for the bottom 99%. They are also more likely to hold formal sector employment. A fifth to a quarter are employed in the public sector, considerably higher than across the bottom 99%. However, today private sector employees are in fact a

⁶ Index constructed using PCA. I let the basket of 'assets' vary by country (the index is unique to the country), based on available variable, and seek to include assets that are likely to be owned only by the very top strata, such as ownership of a computer, broadband subscription, air-conditioner etc.

larger share of the elite total than public employees in most countries, which suggests some change since the early independence period when skilled African workers were heavily concentrated in the public sector (Simson, 2020).

In some countries, a sizable share of those in the top percentile are foreign-born; in Kenya the foreign-born represent 12% of this top strata, in Uganda and Benin 14%, and Senegal 23% (Rwanda's unusually high share, at 39%, is driven by the return of Ugandan-born Rwandese after the genocide). This highlights the continued importance of expatriates and non-indigenous communities to the wealth elite. The Ugandan census provides a rare insight into the national origin of non-Ugandan top percentile, which shows that many are from other African countries (40%), and a further 30% from Asia.

Across countries, roughly half of the top 1% own their home. In some countries, this level is lower than for the bottom 99%, but this reflects ambiguities around definitions of ownership in contexts of informal housing construction in rural areas, while urban residents in Africa are much more likely to be renters.

Lastly, we consider two metrics that shed light on intergenerational status persistence. The first indicator measures that share of household heads who report that their father is alive, a measure of the health - and indirectly wealth - status of the parental generation. This shows that the top percentile household heads are less likely to have deceased parents, suggesting that the parental generation is also economically advantaged, although we cannot exclude the possibility that the health status of the parent is a consequence of the economic success of their children.

The second measure compares the mean educational attainment (years of schooling) of the mother of the household head, for the small share of households where the mother resides with her (adult) child. These co-resident samples are small, and the decision for the mother/child to live in the same household may introduce sampling biases (for discussion of co-residency biases see: Alesina et al., 2021; Dendir, 2023). Nonetheless, in the absence of alternative sources, this offers a useful perspective. The results suggest that today's elites come from families where parents had markedly higher educational attainment than the national mean. In Kenya for instance, mothers of the top 1% have on average 5.7 years of schooling, versus 1.2 years for the bottom 99%. The differences are of similar stark across the other countries sampled (Table 2 uses a logit model to test for statistical significance).

Table 1: Selected characteristics of household heads in top 1% versus bottom 99%

Country	Wealth percentiles	University education	Foreign-born	Living in largest city	Born in largest city*	Public emp.	Private emp.	Home ownership	Father alive	Mother's ave yrs of schooling (obs)**	Male	Obs	Year of Census
Benin	Top 1%	68%	14%	55%	26%	19%	43%	49%	38%	4.0 (60)	84%	1,772	2013
	Bottom 99%	6%	5%	9%	6%	2%	8%	30%	37%	0.4 (8,817)	76%	178,522	
Ghana	Top 1%	40%	4%		27%	25%	28%	56%		7.2 (217)	71%	3,964	2010
	Bottom 99%	3%	2%		10%	7%	8%	47%		1.8 (19,691)	65%	542,694	
Kenya	Top 1%	45%	12%	62%	18%	18%	42%	45%	46%	5.7 (255)	80%	8,704	2009
	Bottom 99%	2%	1%	11%	2%	6%	20%	68%	43%	1.2 (12,320)	68%	868,142	
Rwanda	Top 1%	68%	39%		18%	28%	50%	54%			87%	2,387	2012
	Bottom 99%	2%	3%		4%	3%	65%	80%			71%	240,074	
Senegal	Top 1%	65%	23%	82%	35%			57%	31%	3.9 (48)	75%	1,268	2013
	Bottom 99%	6%	4%	14%	9%			68%	24%	0.2 (20,234)	78%	143,625	
Sierra Leone	Top 1%	46%	8%		33%	26%	21%	48%	29%		78%	1,211	2015
	Bottom 99%	3%	1%		7%	7%	5%	71%	26%		72%	125,315	
Togo	Top 1%	50%	17%					56%	26%		81%	1,211	2010
	Bottom 99%	5%	8%					29%	32%		74%	119,902	
Uganda	Top 1%	58%	14%					46%	46%	5.1 (142)	79%	7,279	2014
	Bottom 99%	3%	2%					73%	39%	1.3 (9,211)	76%	723,128	

Source: calculated from: IPUMS International, Minnesota Population Center.

Notes: Percentiles constructed using a set of asset and housing characteristics, indexed using principle component analysis, only household heads included in sample. For Uganda, foreign-birth is proxied by a non-Ugandan 'ethnicity'. Private employment includes employment in non-profit organisations and foreign governments.

*Measure born in the largest city excludes foreign-born from denominator.

** For co-resident parent-child samples, where 'child' is the designated household head.

Table 2. Logit regression: Mother's years of education on log-odds of top 1% household head

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Household in top 1%				
VARIABLES	Ghana	Kenya	Benin	Senegal	Uganda
years of schooling of mother of household head	0.195*** (0.0107)	0.274*** (0.0131)	0.269*** (0.0250)	0.325*** (0.0287)	0.265*** (0.0178)
Age control ('child')	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender control ('child')	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	19,908	12,575	8,877	20,282	9,353

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

This evidence suggests that contemporary elites are first and foremost educational elites, and from comparatively privileged backgrounds, at least in educational terms. Nonetheless, it also suggests the need to temper assumptions about the absolute level of wealth of this privileged strata. Many of the household heads in the top percentile are first generation migrants to the urban metropolises who may have yet to put a foot on the urban housing ladder. This analysis also highlights the complication of defining the African elite. Many in this bracket are likely to be professionals working for firms or international organisations, living in rented accommodation in the capital city, without obvious access to power. Whether the median top percenter wields meaningful political or economic power remains an open question.⁷ Lastly, this source of data cannot tell us much about how educational advantages have been conditioned by other types of social privilege: what determined high educational attainment, historically and today? In light of this preliminary evidence, how can we make more progress on mapping elite origins, persistence and change in African contexts?

5. Charting a Research Agenda

To gain a better, quantitatively underpinned, understanding of social origins and economic orientations of African elites, more empirical work is needed. African elite studies would benefit from more quantitative analysis, that defines elite boundaries and subsequently studies its structure and characteristics. A particular challenge in all elite studies is to offer readers a sense of significance and magnitude. Members of Parliament, for instance, may be an exceptionally wealthy group, but are they a small sub-section of the wealth elite, or do they dominate it? As just discussed, is it conceptually useful to study the top 1% along some dimension of wealth or income, or will such a measure mostly capture educationally-high achieving professionals?

Prosopography, a form of collective biography that systematically records characteristics of a defined social group, offers one potentially productive approach to understand the mobility routes of a small number of the very wealthiest members of African societies. This method would identify a set of the most economically or politically powerful actors in a given country (based on wealth or office), and study their family and career backgrounds. To map the characteristics of a broader upper class, based on a relative or absolute measure of income or occupational status, survey instruments need to be redesigned to better capture the top. Surveys need to actively oversample high income strata to give meaningful sample sizes, and introduce questions about parental educational, occupational and social characteristics.⁸ Furthermore, unconventional sources could open up new avenues for research, such as name analysis, that in aggregate provide traces of how different family backgrounds condition entry into elite positions (Clark, 2014).

⁷ Handley (2024, p.5) provides a nice discussion of how the defining characteristic of an elite is 'meaningful agency; they are capable of making key interventions that may shift the direction of their domain'.

⁸ A few African surveys do ask questions about parental characteristics, and have been studied by Bossuroy & Cogneau (2013).

A complementary approach is to start from the position of theory, and study expected elite routes in greater detail. As illustrated in this paper, historical literature and contemporary observation offer a set of fruitful questions that could be interrogated qualitatively and quantitatively. Existing research on educational development in Africa, for instance, as well as a now quite rich body of literature on the reemergence of traditional authority, could be studied comparatively, to establish how they have shaped elite membership across different countries.

One further glaring omission from our body of knowledge concerns the continent's capital stocks and its structure of ownership. Despite marked price appreciation for urban land and housing across many urban centres, there is remarkably little known about property ownership and its inequality consequences in Africa, nor the relative and changing importance of foreign ownership of African wealth. Piketty's mapping of the resurgence in private wealth and its significance for inequality is in part the inspiration for a renewed interest in social class and elites (Savage, 2021, Ch.3). Historically, Africa's stock of private wealth differed in important respects from that in Eurasia, but that wealth stock has likely changed in composition and size since 1960 as land has been increasingly circumscribed and urban centres have grown. How it is owned today lies at the heart of any meaningful interrogation of elite power.

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