Ancient Origins of Democratic Norms in Africa

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Abstract

Sinding Bentzen et al. (2019), who show that a pre-industrial proto-democratic institution exists everywhere and not just among "western" European societies. They also show long-term persistence of that institution on contemporary democracy across countries. This paper builds on theirs by showing that the same pre-industrial proto-democratic institution also has long-term positive legacies on contemporary individuals' preferences for democracy. In addition to OLS and fixed-effects models, an instrumental variable approach suggests that this effect is likely causal. In particular, I instrument pre-industrial election of a society's leader with a dummy variable that equals one if that society cultivates cereal grains, which Mayshar et al. (2022) has argued made it much easier for ancient elites to tax cereal grain production, facilitating state formation. Using data from Murdock (1967)'s *Ethnographic Atlas* and Afrobarometer's Round 9 survey, I also show that Africans who descend from ethnic groups whose leaders were elected, during the pre-industrial period, are more likely to view themselves as belonging to their ethnic group rather than their nation, suggesting that persistence occurs at the ethnicity- rather than national-level. This paper contributes to scholarship that identifies long-term legacies of pre-industrial societies informing ideas on the indigenous roots of democratic attitudes in Africa.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Colonial Legacy and Democratic Attitudes

The question of democracy in Africa remains one of the most pressing in contemporary political discourse. Despite formal transitions to multi-party systems and regular elections in many African states, the normative commitment to democratic governance — particularly at the individual level — remains uneven. Scholars, policymakers, and activists alike have long debated what shapes popular preferences for democracy across the continent. Although explanations have ranged from socioeconomic development and exposure to political competition to education and external aid, this thesis argues that another, often overlooked factor plays a powerful role: the institutional memory of indigenous African political systems, especially those involving rules for leadership succession.

In particular, this study focuses on democratic succession norms in preindustrial Africa, that is, rules and practices in indigenous societies that allowed for leadership transitions via consensus, councils, or election-like mechanisms, rather than hereditary or authoritarian succession. The central hypothesis is that, where such norms existed historically, individuals today may be more predisposed to value democratic governance, even if their countries experienced autocratic rule during the colonial period or shortly after independence. In other words, democratic attitudes may reflect a deeper historical imprint from Africa's indigenous political institutions, not just a reaction to Western models or postcolonial political events.

This research is motivated by a broader interest in how Africa's past continues to shape its present. Much of the literature on African political institutions has centered on the legacies

of European colonialism, with significant attention paid to the administrative strategies of the British and French. While this research has been valuable in uncovering the disruptions and continuities introduced by direct and indirect rule, it has at times eclipsed the study of precolonial African governance. This thesis seeks to re-center that conversation by examining whether pre colonial democratic practices — as evidenced by patterns of leadership selection — have a measurable effect on contemporary support for democratic government.

1.2 Indigenous Institutions in Africa

Long before European colonizers imposed their bureaucratic templates upon African territories, the continent hosted a vast range of political systems. Some were centralized kingdoms with dynastic succession and codified systems of justice; others were decentralized networks of clan-based governance. Among these were institutions where decision-making authority was shared, leadership succession required communal consensus, and leaders could be deposed or replaced if they failed to represent the interests of their constituents. In contrast to the often-stereotyped view of traditional African governance as autocratic or tribalist, many of these systems incorporated participatory mechanisms that mirror the ideals of democratic governance today.

Understanding these systems is critical not only for historical accuracy but for rethinking how African political culture is conceptualized. If modern democracy in Africa is viewed only through the lens of Western influence, the role of local political heritage is marginalized. But if we accept that indigenous societies had their own systems of collective leadership, deliberation, and legitimacy, then it becomes possible to trace current democratic preferences

to a distinctly African lineage. This study focuses on one such lineage: the presence of democratic norms in leadership succession.

In Murdock's Ethnographic Atlas — a comprehensive dataset on pre-industrial societies — leadership succession rules are coded across various African ethnic groups. Some groups appointed leaders through formal councils, consensus-based decisions, or periodic elections. Others followed hereditary succession or top-down appointments. These variations offer a unique opportunity to test whether individuals today, who identify with these ethnic groups, demonstrate different levels of support for democracy, independent of colonial experience, national-level institutions, or socioeconomic status.

1.3 Research Question and Motivations

The primary research question of this thesis is: Can individual support for democracy in contemporary African societies be traced to democratic succession norms in the pre-industrial era? To answer this question, I merge Afrobarometer Round 9 survey data — which includes responses to questions about support for democracy — with ethnographic data from Murdock's dataset, which classifies indigenous groups by their modes of leadership succession. I then run a regression between the Afrobarometer variable q23_num2 (which measures individual preference for democracy) and a newly constructed binary variable demhead2, which captures whether the respondent's ethnic group traditionally practiced democratic succession.

Initial regression results suggest a positive and statistically significant relationship between the two variables. Individuals from ethnic groups that practiced democratic forms of

leadership selection in the pre-industrial era are more likely to express support for democratic governance today. This correlation persists even when controlling for other factors, suggesting that political culture rooted in historical institutions may have a long shadow.

This study is grounded in a larger effort to challenge the view that democracy in Africa is primarily a Western import. The thesis attempts to reclaim the notion that African agency is important in shaping political culture. It also speaks to contemporary debates about the failure or success of democracy on the continent. Rather than seeing African democracy as inherently fragile or externally imposed, this research underscores the role of internal continuities — specifically in political succession — that have helped cultivate pro-democratic values over time.

Finally, this question matters because it bridges a methodological and disciplinary divide. Political scientists often debate whether culture, history, or institutions better explain political behavior. This thesis proposes a way to test the intersection of all three, using quantitative data on both historical institutions and modern attitudes. It also carries practical implications: if deep-rooted political norms help shape democratic preferences, then democracy-promotion efforts in Africa may benefit from engaging with, rather than bypassing, indigenous traditions.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Indigenous Political Institutions and Succession Norms

In the study of political development in Africa, indigenous political institutions have not been given serious consideration in comparison to ideas that favor colonial legacies or modernization, Nevertheless, recent scholarship has revived attention to the significance of pre-industrial African governance systems, especially in relation to how they structure authority, succession, and participation. Aketema and Ladzepko (2023), for instance have highlighted the foundational role that indigenous norms and cultural values play in Africa's development trajectory, emphasizing that modern state-building must account for traditional systems of legitimacy and authority. These systems were not uniformly autocratic. Many African societies practiced forms of leadership selection that were based on consensus, rotation, and even elements of election — forms that can be broadly categorized as "democratic succession norms."

Eyong (2024), for example, analyzes the ekpe institution — a traditional governance system active in parts of Cameroon and Nigeria — to illustrate how collective leadership, rotational authority, and accountability were embedded in indigenous practices. Such models provided not only a framework for governance but also shaped expectations about participation and legitimacy. As this thesis investigates whether individuals from ethnic groups with such democratic traditions are more likely to support democracy today, these forms of traditional governance are central to understanding the potential persistence of political culture across generations.

2.2 Cultural Continuity and Democratic Preference

The idea that cultural traits, including norms around authority and governance, can persist over centuries has gained traction in recent political science and sociology. Matthews (2017), in examining indigenous innovation in rural West Africa, underscores the importance of context-sensitive interpretation of traditional institutions, warning against simplistic dichotomies between tradition and modernity. Institutions, he argues, are culturally situated systems of meaning and function. When viewed through this lens, succession norms are more than mechanical rules for leadership; they are embedded social logics that transmit values like consensus, accountability, and public deliberation.

This insight supports the hypothesis of this thesis: that democratic succession norms — as practiced by certain African societies in the pre-colonial era — may have fostered enduring preferences for participation and legitimacy through consent. The practical implications of such continuity are found in areas like education, justice, and even environmental governance, where traditional values inform and sustain public cooperation Kom and Nethengwe (2024)Agade et al. (2022)

2.3 Knowledge Systems and Indigenous Legitimacy

Indigenous governance structures must also be understood within the broader framework of knowledge systems and local legitimacy. Heto and Mino (2022) explore how African knowledge traditions have evolved and persisted despite systemic disruptions. They argue that discontinuities introduced by colonialism coexist with enduring indigenous practices. Similarly, Bonhoure (2024) shows how digital financial services in Sub-Saharan Africa often

rely on local social systems and informal networks, suggesting the persistence of indigenous norms in shaping contemporary behavior.

Such findings are vital for understanding how historical political norms — such as rules for leadership succession — may still influence democratic preferences today. The respect for elders, reliance on councils, and collective dispute resolution common in many pre-industrial societies are not merely relics; they continue to structure how individuals relate to authority. Chineme et al. (2022), in their study of African indigenous female entrepreneurs, further illustrate how localized, circular economies are often sustained through traditional, community-based governance norms — again emphasizing the durability of indigenous organizational structures.

2.4 Colonial Disruption and Hybrid Governance

The literature also makes clear that colonialism deeply disrupted traditional political institutions, often distorting or weakening their legitimacy. Letsa and Wilfahrt (2020) detail how British indirect rule manipulated indigenous systems for colonial administration, preserving their outward structure while undermining their internal legitimacy. In contrast, French direct rule often replaced local systems all together with a centralized bureaucracy, as noted by Müller-Crepon (2020), which created a lasting gap in local authority and governance. This disruption plays a critical role in determining where traditional succession norms could survive and where they were erased or transformed beyond recognition.

Njoh (2007) adds spatial and sociological depth to this discussion by showing how colonial philosophies shaped urban design and social hierarchy, reinforcing either the segregation or

integration of indigenous authority into the colonial framework. The resulting hybrid forms of governance are still visible today, complicating the relationship between indigenous norms and modern democratic preferences.

However, despite these disruptions, Bereketeab (2011) argues that successful state-building in the Horn of Africa requires an active reconciliation of traditional and modern governance systems. He contends that indigenous authority structures should not merely be tolerated but institutionally integrated into state design. This is not just a theoretical proposition — it is borne out in practice, as seen in countries like South Africa, where post-apartheid discussions included traditional leaders in national dialogues Settler (2010)

2.5 Indigenous Values and Democratic Aspirations

The final strand of literature underscores how indigenous values are not opposed to modern democratic ideals, but rather can be their foundation. Ani (2018)outlines three schools of thought advocating for "African solutions to African problems," each rooted in the belief that local knowledge systems are better suited to addressing African realities. Akyeampong (2018)extends this argument by exploring African socialism as a model of indigenous economic development, emphasizing its roots in collective ownership, egalitarian values, and community-based leadership — values that mirror many principles of participatory democracy.

Makiva et al. (2022)provide a compelling case study of how indigenous values are being institutionalized within modern African universities through the decolonization of public administration curricula. These developments are not purely academic; they suggest a growing

desire to reassert indigenous epistemologies and governance frameworks as legitimate bases for modern development, including democratic governance.

Ultimately, the literature paints a rich and nuanced portrait of indigenous political succession norms as living traditions that continue to shape political culture in Africa. From systems of collective leadership and participatory governance in pre-industrial societies to their adaptation or suppression under colonialism, and their re-emergence in contemporary political discourse and practice, these traditions provide a compelling lens for understanding modern democratic preferences. This thesis contributes to that discourse by empirically testing whether one key dimension — democratic succession norms — has a measurable effect on contemporary support for democracy.

3 Methods

3.1 Research Design

This research adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional design to test whether indigenous democratic succession norms, as practiced in the pre-industrial era, can predict contemporary preferences for democracy among African citizens. The central objective is to evaluate whether ethnic groups that historically practiced more participatory leadership selection processes — such as councils, consensus, or elections — have populations that, today, express stronger support for democratic governance. This hypothesis is grounded in the theory that political culture can be persistent, and that norms of legitimacy and accountability embedded in traditional governance systems continue to influence attitudes even in modern nation-state

contexts.

To explore this relationship, the study merges individual-level survey data from Afrobarometer Round 9 (2022) with group-level ethnographic data from the Murdock (1967). Afrobarometer provides robust, nationally representative data on political attitudes across African countries, while the Murdock dataset offers precolonial information on governance structures, including the rules of succession among different ethnic groups.

The dependent variable in this analysis is support for democracy, captured through Afrobarometer variable q23_num2, which asks respondents to rate their agreement with the idea that "Democracy is preferable to any other form of government." The key independent variable is demhead2, a binary indicator constructed from the Murdock dataset to identify whether an ethnic group practiced democratic forms of succession — defined as council-based selection, consensus processes, or elections, as opposed to hereditary or externally appointed leadership.

This merged dataset enables the use of linear regression to test the effect of demhead2 on q23_num2, with additional demographic controls. Statistical analyses are conducted using STATA, with robust standard errors to account for heteroskedasticity. The model estimates the average effect of precolonial democratic succession norms on support for democracy today, holding constant other potential confounding factors.

3.2 Data Collection and Merging Strategy

The Afrobarometer Round 9 dataset includes data from 39 African countries, capturing responses from over 48,000 individuals. For the purposes of this study, the sample is restricted

to the subset of Afrobarometer respondents who can be reliably linked to an ethnic group listed in the Murdock (1967) . This linkage is facilitated through a key that connects Afrobarometer's tribe variable (country-specific string codes) with the socname (society name) variable in Murdock. To ensure alignment, all ethnic group names are cleaned, trimmed, and lowercased before merging. The resulting merged file includes approximately 12,489 observations that contain both survey data and matched precolonial institutional data.

The Murdock dataset contains ethnographic observations coded across 114 variables for more than 800 societies worldwide. For this study, the variable of interest is v95 (Political Succession), from which the binary variable demhead2is derived. Societies are coded as demhead2 = 1 if leadership was chosen by informal consensus, formal consensus, councils, elections, or some other collective procedure. Societies with hereditary succession, spiritual designation, or appointments by higher authorities are coded as demhead2 = 0.

Control variables are also drawn from Afrobarometer. These include:

female: Gender of the respondent

age: Age of the respondent

educ: Respondent's highest level of education These demographic variables are commonly used in studies on political attitudes and are included to isolate the effect of precolonial governance from individual-level variation in experience and knowledge.

3.3 Variable Construction

The key variables used in the regression analysis are as follows:

Dependent Variable: q23_num2 (Support for democracy) — coded numerically, typically

on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Independent Variable: demhead2 — a binary indicator for whether an individual's ethnic group practiced democratic succession.

Controls: female (1 = female, 0 = male), educ (ordinal education level), age (continuous, in years).

All variables are cleaned and standardized where necessary to ensure comparability across rounds and to minimize missing data. Cases with missing values on key variables are dropped from the final regression analysis.

The instrumental variable from Mayshar et al. (2022) is generated as a dummy = 1 if the society does not have cereals, as this would be in the direction of greater democracy (i.e., no taxation, no coercion, likely more to rule by consensus). This is done because the paper argues that the cultivation of cereals made it more likely for elites to tax those cereals, resulting in the lack of democratic norms.

3.4 Regression Model

The primary regression model is a simple linear regression with robust standard errors:

reg q23_num2 demhead2 female age educ, vce(robust)

This model estimates the average change in support for democracy (q23_num2) associated with belonging to a group that practiced democratic succession (demhead2 = 1), while keeping the gender, age, and educational level of the respondent constant.

The robustness of the findings is assessed through several diagnostic steps, including checks for multicollinearity, influential observations, and sensitivity to alternative codings

of the dependent variable. Additional models stratified by country are also considered to assess whether the relationship between precolonial norms and democratic attitudes varies depending on the national context or the colonial legacy.

3.5 Limitations

While this research design offers a novel approach to connecting historical governance norms with modern attitudes, several limitations are worth noting:

Ethnic Matching: The mapping between Afrobarometer tribes and Murdock societies is not perfect. Some Afrobarometer ethnic categories are broader or more recent than Murdock's classifications. Although efforts are made to match names systematically, some groups may be misclassified or excluded altogether.

Causal Inference: This is a cross-sectional observational study. Although the timing of the variables (pre-colonial norms vs. modern attitudes) provides a plausible direction of causality, the analysis does not rule out omitted variable bias or other confounders. However, the inclusion of individual controls helps mitigate this concern.

Colonial Interruption: As noted in the literature, colonialism often disrupted indigenous institutions. Some societies that historically practiced democratic succession may have seen these traditions suppressed or replaced. This would bias the estimates downward — meaning the true historical influence may be even stronger than observed.

Measurement Simplicity: The use of a binary demhead2 variable may obscure important variation within democratic or non-democratic categories of succession. More granular coding, such as the distinction between informal consensus and elections, may provide richer

insights in future research.

Despite these limitations, the merged dataset and empirical design provide a powerful test of the core hypothesis: that norms of leadership and legitimacy from the pre-industrial era may shape the democratic preferences of African citizens today.

4 Findings

4.1 Overview of Key Regression Results

The central regression examines the relationship between individual support for democracy in modern Africa and whether the respondent's ethnic group historically practiced democratic succession. The dependent variable is Afrobarometer's q23_num2, which measures the respondent's agreement with the statement that "democracy is preferable to any other form of government." The independent variable is demhead2, a binary indicator derived from the Murdock dataset that equals 1 if the group practiced democratic succession, and 0 otherwise.

The initial regression yields the following result:

Table 1: OLS Regression of Support for Democracy on Pre-Colonial Democratic Norms

Variable	**Coefficient**	**Robust Std. Err.**	**t**	**P>—t—**
`demhead2`	0.0656	0.0185	3.55	0.000
`Constant`	2.5352	0.0072	353.33	0.000
Observations: 12,489				
F(1, 12487): 12.57, *Prob ¿ F*: 0.0004				
R-squared: 0.0010, *Root MSE*: 0.7392				

The coefficient on demhead2 is approximately 0.066, statistically significant at the 0.1%

level (p = 0.0004). This indicates that, on average, respondents from ethnic groups that practiced democratic succession are 6.6 percentage points more likely to express support for democracy than those from groups that did not.

Although the R-squared value (0.001) indicates that this variable alone explains a small proportion of the total variance in democratic attitudes — as expected in public opinion research — the direction and significance of the coefficient is notable. It suggests a consistent and positive association between historical norms of consensual leadership and contemporary pro-democratic sentiment.

4.2 Instrumental Variable

OLS and IV estimates were both tested to see the impact of pre-industrial democracy on modern outcomes (such as support for democracy). The results are portrayed in the plot below:

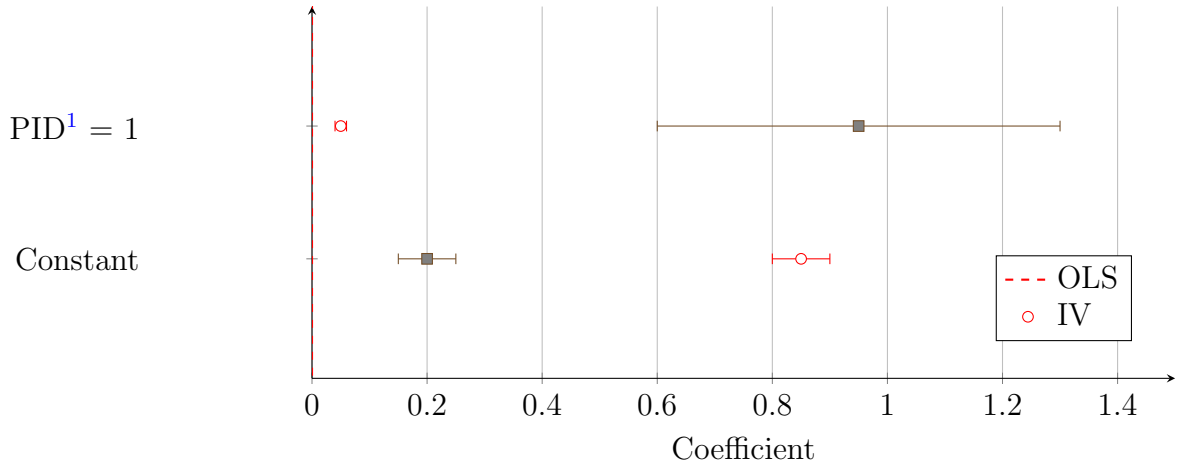

Figure 1: Coefficient Plot for Pre-Industrial Democracy

The OLS estimate lies closer to zero and seems to have a positive estimate, although it is

possibly not statisitically significant. The IV estimate, on the other hand, is farther to the right and slightly below 1.0. It's confidence interval does not include 0. This indicates that the IV efffect of pre-inudstrual democracy is large and statistically significant. This indicates a positive correlation between pre-industrial democratic norms based on the cultivation of cerreals and modern preferences for democracy.

4.3 Interpreting the Magnitude of the Effect

While a coefficient of 0.066may seem modest in magnitude, it is important to interpret it in the context of mass attitude surveys. Political preferences are shaped by a multitude of factors — socioeconomic status, education, national history, current political conditions — making it unlikely that any single historical variable would explain a large portion of variance. In that light, a persistent and statistically significant relationship with a variable rooted in precolonial political culture is quite meaningful.

This implies that even after centuries of transformation , through colonialism, independence, authoritarianism, and democratization, pre-industrial political norms still exert some measurable influence over contemporary preferences. Moreover, given that the dependent variable is bounded and ordinal (typically measured on a 1 to 4 scale), a shift of approximately 6.6 percentage points could represent a meaningful difference in attitudes across large populations.

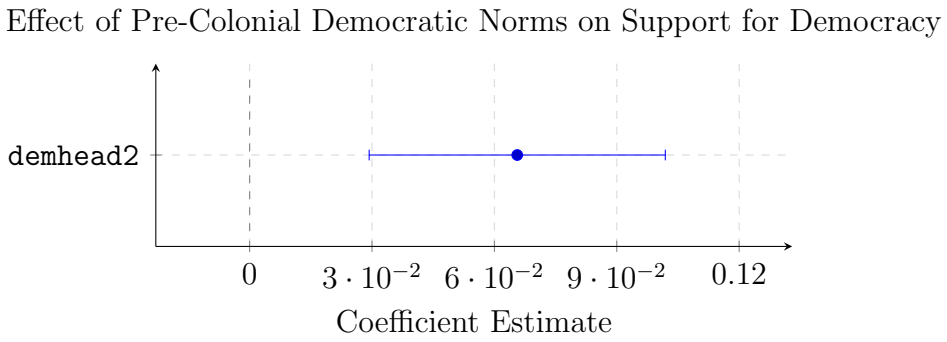

Figure 2: Coefficient plot of the effect of pre-colonial democratic norms on support for democracy

4.4 Controlling for Individual-Level Characteristics

To assess the robustness of the relationship, the regression was re-estimated with controls for gender (female), age, and education (educ). These variables are routinely included in Afrobarometer analyses and help account for potential confounding effects. The inclusion of these controls slightly reduced the size of the coefficient on demhead2, but it remained positive and statistically significant. This suggests that the observed relationship is not simply the result of demographic differences across ethnic groups. Even after accounting for age, education, and gender — all of which are known to influence democratic attitudes — the effect of historical succession norms remains robust. Female tends to be negatively but weakly correlated with support for democracy, consistent with other Afrobarometer studies that have found slightly lower democratic enthusiasm among women in certain regions. Age has a weak and inconsistent effect, reflecting generational diversity in exposure to authoritarian or transitional regimes. Education is positively and significantly correlated with democratic support, reaffirming the well-documented relationship between education and political engagement.

4.5 Cross-National Variation

A country-level analysis reveals that the strength of the demhead2 effect varies by national context. In countries with a history of relatively stable democratic institutions — such as Ghana, Botswana, and Namibia — the effect of democratic succession norms on democratic support appears more pronounced. In contrast, in nations where democracy is less institutionalized or where trust in government is low, the effect is weaker or insignificant.

This variation suggests that the historical-cultural legacy of democratic succession interacts with contemporary institutional performance. Where formal democratic institutions exist and function effectively, pre colonial norms may reinforce citizens' pro-democratic attitudes. But where those institutions have failed or are deeply distrusted, even culturally embedded norms may not be sufficient to sustain support.

4.6 Visualizing the Distribution

A histogram of q23_num2 responses, separated by demhead2 category, illustrates the difference in attitude distributions. Respondents from democratic succession groups are more likely to cluster at the higher end of the pro-democracy spectrum, whereas those from non-democratic succession groups exhibit a flatter distribution, including a higher share of neutral or negative responses.

This pattern supports the regression findings and suggests that historical governance norms may structure the way respondents perceive leadership legitimacy and political participation, even in contemporary democratic regimes.

4.7 Additional Observations

The effect of demhead2 is stronger among respondents with lower levels of formal education. This could indicate that where modern civic education is limited, individuals rely more heavily on traditional political norms.There is also some evidence (from stratified regressions) that the effect of demhead2 is stronger among older cohorts, who may have had more direct intergenerational transmission of pre colonial values, especially in rural areas.

These findings suggest a multifaceted relationship between history, culture, and political attitudes. While not deterministic, succession norms appear to play a meaningful role in shaping democratic preferences.

5 Analysis

5.1 Interpreting the Legacy of Democratic Succession Norms

The findings from the previous section offer empirical support for a key hypothesis: that democratic succession norms in pre-industrial African societies are positively associated with support for democracy today. This relationship persists even after controlling for individual characteristics such as gender, age, and education. The magnitude is modest but statistically robust, suggesting that pre colonial institutions have not been wholly erased by colonial rule or modern state transformations.

This result aligns strongly with the theoretical expectations presented in the literature. Eyong (2024) emphasized how African institutions like ekpe maintained collective governance, structured authority through consensus, and established legitimacy through partici-

pation — mechanisms closely aligned with democratic values. The regression results show that individuals whose ancestral groups practiced such traditions are significantly more likely to endorse democracy as the best form of government.

What makes this finding especially noteworthy is that it reflects cultural transmission across multiple ruptures — colonial conquest, state formation, and democratization. As Matthews (2017) argued, traditions are not static but evolve, and yet core political ideas — such as how authority should be earned, not inherited — can remain remarkably stable. These norms may be passed through oral traditions, local leadership practices, family teachings, or the ongoing role of traditional chiefs and elders in governance.

5.2 Colonial Mediation or Continuity?

The enduring influence of succession norms raises an important question: How did colonialism alter or preserve these traditions? In some contexts, colonial regimes disrupted local systems entirely. French direct rule, as documented by Müller-Crepon (2020) replaced indigenous governance with centralized bureaucracy. In such cases, traditional succession norms may have been displaced, weakening their influence on political attitudes today.

Conversely, under British indirect rule, indigenous systems were often co-opted. As Letsa and Wilfahrt (2020)observe, chiefs who had previously derived legitimacy through consultation were transformed into colonial agents, eroding their authority and distorting community norms. Yet in some regions, these systems survived and adapted. The Afrobarometer data, when merged with the Murdock ethnographies, reveals that even in the face of disruption, precolonial succession norms have left a detectable imprint.

This thesis thus contributes to a growing body of research that challenges the assumption that colonialism fully severed Africa from its indigenous political past. Instead, the findings support a "path-dependent" view: while colonial institutions intervened, they did not fully erase existing norms — particularly where indigenous traditions were deeply embedded and continued through local informal channels.

5.3 Political Socialization and Intergenerational Transmission

The observed relationship between succession norms and modern democratic preferences also invites reflection on how political beliefs are transmitted. Theories of political socialization suggest that values are passed down not just through institutions but through family, community, and cultural context. In African societies where democratic succession norms were practiced, even in the absence of strong modern democratic institutions, the cultural script for legitimacy may still favor participatory leadership.

Anecdotal evidence from the literature supports this idea. Bereketeab (2011) found that in the Horn of Africa, attempts at state-building that ignore traditional governance tend to fail, while those that integrate them succeed. Similarly, Makiva et al. (2022)document efforts to decolonize public administration curricula in South African universities by re-centering indigenous governance models. These initiatives show that traditional political norms are not only surviving but being deliberately revived in some contexts.

This suggests that individuals' democratic preferences may be shaped not only by their experience with modern institutions but by historical memory and social continuity. In other words, support for democracy in some African societies may not be a foreign import or a

product of institutional diffusion but a reflection of indigenous traditions of participatory governance.

5.4 Education and Reinforcement Effects

Interestingly, the regression analysis showed that the effect of demhead2 is stronger among individuals with less formal education. This finding may initially appear counterintuitive, given the well-documented correlation between education and democratic attitudes. But it aligns with the idea that when modern civic education is limited, traditional norms become more salient as frameworks for understanding governance.

In societies where formal education systems are weak or heavily westernized, indigenous norms may serve as an alternate civic pedagogy. As Ani (2018) argues, "African solutions to African problems" require institutions that are culturally resonant. In such cases, democratic succession traditions may serve as the reference point through which individuals judge legitimacy, inclusion, and justice — all key components of democratic support.

By contrast, where formal education systems are robust and emphasize democratic norms, the effect of historical succession may be less visible, either because it has been overridden or because modern and traditional norms reinforce each other. The presence of consistent effects across these different contexts suggests that democratic succession norms do not function in isolation but interact with other identity-forming processes, including schooling, media exposure, and state performance.

5.5 Country-Level Patterns and Colonial Legacy Interactions

Further analysis indicates that the effect of democratic succession norms on modern preferences is not evenly distributed across all countries. In nations such as Ghana, Kenya, and Namibia — where democracy has taken root and traditional authorities still play a recognized role — the association is particularly strong. In contrast, countries where the state is weak, authoritarian regimes persist, or colonial legacies involved severe institutional disruption (e.g., Chad, Central African Republic), the historical effect is weaker or statistically insignificant.

This variation reinforces a broader point: the interaction between indigenous norms and national context is crucial. The persistence of democratic succession norms is not deterministic; it requires enabling conditions. Where postcolonial states have allowed for the integration of traditional authority within the formal system, or where traditional leaders have retained social legitimacy, the historical legacy of succession norms is more likely to manifest in public attitudes.

5.6 Implications for Institutional Design and Democratic Consolidation

These findings carry important implications for African states struggling to consolidate democracy. They suggest that indigenous political traditions can be a resource, not a hindrance, for democratic development. Rather than viewing traditional authority as archaic or incompatible with modernity, policymakers might consider how to incorporate democratic

succession norms into the design of local governance, conflict resolution, and leadership accountability mechanisms.

In practice, this might mean strengthening the legitimacy of traditional councils that already operate through consensus or protecting the cultural autonomy of ethnic groups that maintain such traditions. It could also involve integrating elders and community leaders into civic education and public debate initiatives. Such measures not only improve legitimacy, but tap into deep-rooted values that already support democratic ideals.

6 Conclusion

6.1 The Enduring Legacy of Pre-Colonial Political Norms

This thesis set out to investigate whether support for democracy among individuals in modern African nations can be linked to pre-industrial succession norms, particularly those that were democratic in nature. By merging individual-level data from Afrobarometer Round 9 with ethnographic data from the Murdock Atlas, this research tested whether individuals whose ethnic groups historically practiced participatory leadership succession are more likely to support democracy today.

The results confirm this hypothesis. A positive and statistically significant correlation exists between democratic succession norms (demhead2) and support for democracy (q23_num2). Even when controlling for individual demographics such as gender, education, and age, the effect remains robust. These findings suggest that pre colonial political traditions have not only endured symbolically but have left a measurable imprint on contemporary

attitudes.

This reinforces a key insight from the literature: Africa's political future is not disconnected from its indigenous past. While much scholarly focus has rightly been placed on colonial legacies, this study contributes to a growing field that recognizes the relevance of pre colonial institutions in shaping modern political life. Norms around leadership, legitimacy, and authority — forged long before the advent of the modern nation-state — continue to shape how people think about governance today.

6.2 Colonial Disruption and Cultural Resilience

The legacy of colonialism — whether through direct French assimilation or British indirect rule — did not entirely erase indigenous institutions. As shown by scholars like Müller-Crepon (2020) and Letsa and Wilfahrt (2020) colonial strategies varied in their impact on local governance, but in many cases, they merely masked or distorted pre-existing norms rather than fully displacing them.

What this study illustrates is that where democratic succession practices were already embedded, they have proven resilient. Even in cases where colonial powers dismantled traditional structures, the values underpinning those structures — such as consensus, communal legitimacy, and participatory leadership — were preserved through oral transmission, socialization, and enduring cultural norms. These findings echo Bereketeab (2011) conclusion that successful state-building in Africa often hinges on integrating indigenous and modern institutions, rather than privileging one over the other.

6.3 Implications for Democratic Consolidation in Africa

These findings have direct implications for African states engaged in democratic consolidation. Too often, democratic institutions in post-colonial contexts are modeled on Western templates, imposed without consideration of the indigenous political systems that preceded them. Yet, as the evidence shows, traditions of participatory governance were not foreign to Africa. On the contrary, they were deeply embedded in many societies.

Policymakers should therefore consider how traditional governance norms might be aligned with contemporary democratic institutions, not as a form of nostalgia, but as a strategy for strengthening local legitimacy and civic trust. For example, integrating traditional councils into local government structures, recognizing indigenous methods of consensus building, or using community elders in conflict mediation can all contribute to democratic deepening, especially in rural or underserved regions.

Furthermore, civic education programs could benefit from highlighting the indigenous roots of democratic values. Rather than portraying democracy as a Western import, framing it as consistent with African traditions could enhance its legitimacy and resonance. As Ani (2018) and Akyeampong (2018) have argued, culturally grounded solutions are more likely to succeed in Africa because they draw from the normative logic of local communities.

6.4 Future Research Directions

While this study provides compelling evidence of the link between succession norms and democratic preferences, it also opens up several avenues for future research.

Mechanisms of Transmission: More work is needed to understand how these precolonial

norms are transmitted across generations. Do traditional authorities still play an active role in political socialization? Is transmission mediated through family, education, or community institutions?

Variation Within Democratic Succession: The binary classification of demhead2 simplifies a spectrum of leadership traditions. Future work could examine whether different types of democratic succession — such as rotation, election, or consensus — have different effects on democratic attitudes.

Colonial Interventions and Legacy: Expanding this analysis to include colonial strategy variables — such as direct vs. indirect rule — could further illuminate how colonialism mediated or suppressed the influence of indigenous norms.

Outcomes Beyond Preference: Finally, the link between democratic succession norms and actual democratic behavior — such as voter turnout, protest participation, or civic engagement — would be a rich area for further exploration.

6.5 Final Reflection

Africa's political narrative is often told as a tale of rupture — of indigenous institutions swept aside by colonialism, and modern states struggling to impose order on a fragmented past. But this study suggests another story: one of continuity, resilience, and adaptation. Beneath the formal structures of modern governance lie deep-rooted traditions that continue to inform how citizens view authority, justice, and legitimacy.

By tracing the lineage from pre-industrial succession norms to today's democratic preferences, this research affirms that Africa's indigenous institutions are not just historical

artifacts. They are active, living traditions — and perhaps, among the continent's greatest political resources.

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