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Status and egalitarianism in traditional communities: An analysis of funeral attendance in six Zimbabwean villages*

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Abstract

This paper explores two hypotheses concerning the role of status in relationships between rich and poor in traditional communities by analyzing who goes to whose funerals in six Zimbabwean villages. Funerals allow status to be observed because non-attendance is a sign of disrespect. We find that the richer a household hosting a funeral, the less likely heads of neighbouring households are to attend. Thus, the status-for-insurance hypothesis – that the poor bestow status upon the rich in return for help in times of need – is rejected in favour of the egalitarianism hypothesis – that richer households are denied status.

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1 Introduction

The concept of status is often discussed in sociology and anthropology, but rarely in economics. However, economic and social behaviour do not happen independently of one another especially in traditional communities, i.e., small, agrarian communities in countries with weak, formal institutions. If, as many sociologists have proposed (Weiss and Fershtman, 1998: 803), status is seen as a social reward, it should enter individuals' cost-benefit analyses in the same way as economic rewards. Status then becomes a good that can be exchanged for more material things and disrespect and social ostracism, both means of status reduction, can be used as punishments since they are costly to the recipient. With this in mind, the role of status in the relationship between the poor and the rich in traditional communities could take two forms. First, the rich could provide something the poor want in return for the poor bestowing status upon them in a kind of gift-exchange. Poorer households are more vulnerable to the effects of negative shocks than their richer neighbours, so an exchange of status for insurance may be mutually attractive and would lead to a positive relationship between economic prosperity and status. We will refer to this below as the 'status-for-insurance hypothesis'. However, if egalitarian norms prevail and rule against individual accumulation, the rich might be subject to punishment in the form of social ostracism and status reduction. And this would lead to a negative relationship between economic prosperity and status. We will refer to this below as the 'egalitarianism hypothesis'. Both hypotheses are discussed in greater detail in Section 2.

Status is not directly observable. However, there are many occasions on which it is manifest in the way that people behave towards one another. In Zimbabwe, as in many countries, funerals are one such occasion. Funeral attendance is a sign of respect for the deceased and his or her household and failure to attend is a sign of disrespect. So, an investigation into whether people are more or less likely to attend richer households' funerals can provide an indirect test of the two hypotheses

described above. Further details relating to the traditions surrounding Zimbabwean funerals and how they might relate to status are given in Section 3.

Funeral attendance is relational in the sense that one household hosts a funeral and the members of other households decide whether to attend. For this reason, we derive our hypothesis testing strategy from the literature on dyadic regression analysis. Dyadic regression analysis was developed to investigate risk-sharing networks, i.e., who gives or receives assistance from whom, and has more recently been used to study group formation. However, it has not until now been applied to the study of funeral attendance. Our empirical model of funeral attendance is introduced in Section 4. We estimate this model using data on funeral attendance in six Zimbabwean villages that was collected specifically for this purpose. Section 5 describes the data and Section 6 presents the results of the analysis. We find that the richer the household of the deceased, the less likely are heads of other households in the same village to attend the funeral. This finding supports the egalitarianism hypothesis and leads us to reject the status-for-insurance hypothesis. Section 7 concludes and suggests some broader implications of this work.

2 Theory

2.1 The status-for-insurance hypothesis

The poor are more vulnerable to income fluctuations than the rich because, in bad years, they are more likely to fall below the level of subsistence. To them, while insurance is highly valued, self-insurance in the form of savings is likely to be out of reach. The theoretical literature shows that mutual insurance can be sustained as an equilibrium in a repeated game with self-interested agents (Ravallion and Coate, 1993). However, this equilibrium depends on there being no outside option, i.e., on self-insurance being out of everyone's reach. If individuals are able to accumulate wealth to a point where they can self-insure, they may be tempted to leave a mu-

tual insurance pool because self-insurance, unlike mutual insurance, can cover both idiosyncratic and covariate risks (Fafchamps, 1992). And this being the case, if the community wants to keep richer individuals in a mutual insurance pool, it must either offer those individuals additional benefits for staying in or ensure that the costs of leaving are high. If people care about status, the bestowing of status upon the rich may be sufficient to keep them in the mutual insurance pool.

This theoretical argument can also be extended to risk-sharing networks in which informal insurance does not happen at the level of an entire community, but between interconnected individuals or households within and sometimes between communities.[1] In this network view, the rich are attractive partners for the poor to form insurance links with, due to their greater wealth and consequent ability to cover shocks. However, the rich are unlikely to be interested in the poor as insurance partners and so need to be compensated in some other way. Thus, patron-client relationships in which the wealthier patrons receive prestige and power in exchange for the protection they offer may emerge (Fafchamps, 1992).

That the empirical literature on informal insurance networks finds a negative relationship between disparities in wealth or income between households and the likelihood of a risk sharing relationship existing between them calls this theory into question (Fafchamps and Gubert, 2007; De Weerdt, 2005). However, as yet, no attempt has been made to bring status into the empirical analysis.

2.2 The egalitarianism hypothesis

In stark contrast to the theory outlined above, Platteau (1996, 2000: Chapter 5, 2006) argues that the prevalence of egalitarian norms in traditional societies may lead to a negative association between status and economic success. This is because

[1] De Weerdt (2005), De Weerdt and Dercon (2006), Dekker (2004a), Dekker (2004b), Fafchamps and Lund (2003), and Fafchamps and Gubert (2007) all present evidence that risk-sharing occurs between dyads within networks rather than at the level of the community.

individual accumulation is viewed as a norm violation, punishable through status reduction.

Drawing on extensive sociological and anthropological literatures, Platteau proposes a number of reasons why egalitarian norms should be prevalent in traditional societies. In particular, egalitarian norms are closely associated with a worldview in which the fate of humans depends on supernatural forces and economic prosperity is a zero-sum game. So, economic success is attributable not to effort but to luck and good luck for one person implies bad luck for someone else. According to this view, it is unfair for a successful individual to keep the fruits of that success to himself and accumulation, especially, will arouse feelings of envy and even hatred as it will be perceived as enriching oneself at the expense of others. Further, individuals (or households) who are continuously successful over several years, will attract suspicion as persistent 'luck' is not normal and may be attributable to the malicious manipulation of supernatural forces, i.e., to the use of witchcraft (Platteau, 2000: Chapter 5.3). Thus, more prosperous households are likely to be subjected to status reduction.

Another reason why egalitarian norms may prevail in traditional societies is that they obviate a "positional arms race for status" (Platteau, 2006: 828) that could endanger village cohesiveness. In the literature on subjective well-being, it has been shown that people care about their relative economic status (Easterlin (1995), Stutzer (2004), Kingdon and Knight (2007)). Village life is characterized by frequent interactions between a limited number of people with highly personalized relationships; therefore, in small village societies, the enhancement of one's relative position is potentially a strong motivation for individual actions. If status were a positive function of prosperity, one individual's efforts to accumulate wealth would induce others to follow suit, stimulating competition and triggering a positional arms race. In this sense, "the very dynamic of modification of relative status positions is perceived as

a dangerous force susceptible of jeopardizing the fragile social equilibria typical of small-group societies" (Platteau, 2000: 197).[2]

Anecdotal evidence supporting this theory was provided by a member of one of the communities to which our funeral data relates. He said that "A woman from this village had a plough but no oxen. At first, she used to work with some of her neighbours when it came to ploughing. But, when she got high yields, the neighbours became jealous and stopped working with her... She then worked hard on her own and managed to buy oxen and other farming implements. Again people did not like her success and now they are saying that the woman was using magic so that she could get high yields. This magic weakened the neighbours, thus they do not work in their fields."[3] However, one anecdote is insufficient evidence upon which to base a conclusion. Thus, we turn to our statistical analysis.

3 Funeral attendance as a proxy for status

The principle innovation that enables us to test these hypotheses is to use funeral attendance as a proxy for the bestowing of status. In Zimbabwe, the rituals following death are of great cultural importance due to the central role occupied by the spirits of the dead in the system of beliefs. As Bourdillon (1987) notes: "the spirits of the dead are so much part of Shona life that they can aptly be called spirit elders, the senior members of the community who now act as spirits (p.199)". To mark the passing of an individual into this state, the Shona perform two ceremonies. The first is the funeral, during which the body is buried. This takes place within twenty-four hours of the death. Relatives and neighbours are expected to attend and pay their last respects to the deceased, although funeral attendance is mandatory for family

[2] Although this means that economic differentiation must stay low, greater prosperity - within strict limits - will be acceptable for some (Platteau, 2006: 827), presumably those in positions of leadership.

[3] Told in Shona, collected and translated by Nyaradzo Dzobo in 2001, one of a series of short accounts relating to the use of social sanctions for the punishment of norm and informal contract violations. For an analysis of the complete series see Bourdillon and Shambare (2003).

only. Because the funeral is expected to take place within twenty-four hours, non-attendance due to absence from the village is excusable. However, non-attendance by individuals who are present in the village is taken as a sign of disrespect. A funeral consists of a procession to the grave, graveside rituals, and a simple meal back at the home of the deceased that is shared with all those who attended the funeral. The second, much more elaborate ceremony, is the "kurova guva", the settling of the spirit. This takes place a year after the funeral. It is a feast requiring the preparation of large quantities of beer and food, to which all attendants - kin, friends, and fellow villagers - are expected to contribute (Bourdillon, 1987: 199-223).

We focus on attendance at funerals and not "kurova guva" for three reasons. First, following so quickly after the shock of death, the funeral cannot be planned and the decision about whether to attend has to be made quickly. Second, the "kurova guva" is associated with a larger and more complex set of material costs and benefits. The feast may benefit poor attendants, while the need to make contributions may not. The poor may be excused from contributing and the rich may be expected to contribute more, but this may then reflect on the status of the attendants rather than the hosts. Given the data, an analysis of these and other considerations would be fascinating. However, in the absence of such data, the funeral, involving only a simple meal made out of whatever is to hand, provides a much more focused and, so, readily interpretable signal. And third, the "kurova guva" is not performed for children or for adults who die childless, and is not always performed for women (Bourdillon, 1987: 47, 53).

If, as the anecdote presented above suggests, richer households are subjected to status reduction, then an analysis of funeral attendance should reveal a negative correlation between the economic prosperity of the households of the dead and attendance at their funerals. However, if the status-for-insurance hypothesis is correct, the analysis should reveal a positive correlation between the same two variables.

4 Analytical Framework

4.1 The Model

For six villages in Zimbabwe we have data on who attended each of the funerals that occurred between the start of 1993 and the end of 1999. We analyze this data using a model in which each observation corresponds to one individual and one event. The individual is the head of a household and the event is a funeral hosted by a different household. The dependent variable g_{ij} takes the value 1 if household head j went to funeral i and is zero otherwise.[4] The variable g_{ij} is relational in the sense that it indicates whether the head of one household attended a funeral hosted by another household and directional in the sense that one household head attending another household's funeral does not necessarily imply that the head of the second household also attended a funeral hosted by the first. A number of dyadic analyses have been conducted for directional dependent variables indicating who gave assistance to whom in times of need (e.g. Fafchamps and Gubert, 2007; De Weerdt and Fafchamps, 2008; Dekker, 2004a).[5] However, in all of these studies the is and js identify households and the set of all is is identical to the set of all js. Thus, each ij-pair enters the observation sample exactly twice, once with the dependent variable equal to g_{ij} and once with it equal to g_{ji}, and in the resulting datasets the matrices of dependent variables are square. In contrast, the dependent variable matrix in our dataset is rectangular with the number of rows equal to the number of funerals that took place in the six villages during the study period and the number of columns equal to the number of household heads in the villages.

[4] We focus on the attendance of household *heads* because their behaviour is likely to provide the strongest status-related signal. Further, the attendance of any or all other household members is indicated by a single variable for each household rendering it incomparable with the data on household head attendance. To incorporate this data in the analysis would require the estimation of a multinomial logit model in which the various possible combinations of household head and other household members attending would make up the categorical dependent variable. The results of multinomial logits are always hard to interpret and it is unlikely that any additional insights could be drawn.

[5] For analyses of undirectional relationships see De Weerdt 2005, Barr et al. 2008, Arcand and Fafchamps 2008.

Taking g_{ij} as our dependent variable, we estimate a model with following form

$$g_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1 x_i + \beta_2 x_j + \gamma d_i + t_{ij} + v_{ij} + u_{ij}, \tag{1}$$

where x_i and x_j are vectors of characteristics relating to the funeral hosting household and the household of the potentially attending household head at the time of the funeral respectively. The economic prosperity of the households is included in these vectors as the independent variable of principle interest. d_i is a vector of characteristics for the deceased individual. t_{ij} is a vector of annual fixed effects capturing any common, year-on-year differences in behaviour and v_{ij} is a vector of fixed effects capturing time invariant, village-level unobservables.[6]

Note that in equation (1) the characteristics of both households appear in levels. This specification is preferred to the more commonly applied one that incorporates differences and sums for two reasons. First, while the insurance-for-status hypothesis can be restated in terms of a positive relationship between funeral attendance and the difference in economic prosperity between the household hosting and the household attending the funeral, the egalitarianism hypothesis cannot. This is because whether a household has violated an egalitarian norm by becoming too prosperous depends on its prosperity and not the individual prosperity of each of its potential punishers.[7] And second, the power of our hypothesis tests can potentially be improved by including the characteristics of the deceased individual in the model and these can only be presented in absolute terms as they are not defined for the attending household.

[6] Technically, the question of interest could have been addressed with a non-relational, linear regression taking the number of funeral attendants (as a percentage of village population) as the dependent variable and the hosting household's economic prosperity as the independent variable of interest. However, a relational approach has the advantage of allowing us to identify explicitly the effects of attending households' characteristics at the same time and this can provide additional insights relating to the mechanisms under investigation.

[7] It may depend on the average level of prosperity in the village as a whole, but in our analysis this effect will be absorbed by the village fixed effects.

We estimate equation (1) by applying a logit and account for heteroskedasticity and the possible non-independence between observations relating to any given hosting or attending household or village, by clustering at the village level (following Arcand and Fafchamps (2008)).

4.2 Determinants of Funeral Attendance

Our hypotheses relate to the sign and significance of the coefficient on one particular element in x_i, namely the economic prosperity of the household hosting the funeral. We use the natural log of household crop income for the year preceding the one in which the funeral took place as a proxy for economic prosperity. However, to isolate the effect of this variable it is important to control for any other characteristics of the hosting household that may be correlated with income and status. Thus, we include the gender, age and level of education of the household head and the size of the household as control variables. Status is acquired with age and education. And education is positively associated with income and can also be used to the benefit of less educated neighbours, possibly, within the context of a help-for-status gift exchange. Household size is likely to be correlated with income and may or may not be independently associated with status. And traditionally women are of lesser status. The vector of variables relating to the attending household, x_j, is identically defined.

The role of the vector d_i is to increase the power of our hypothesis tests by controlling for the effects of factors other than the status of the hosting household on attendance. Thus, it includes a number of proxies for the status of the deceased individual - age, gender, and whether they were household heads - as well as indicators of whether they were residents in or just visitors to the village, whether they were buried in the village, and whether their death was considered unnatural.

5 Data

Our data originates from six villages that were created during the Zimbabwean land reform programme of the early 1980's. The villages are located in the Sengezi resettlement scheme, south-east of Harare near the small town of Wedza in Mashonaland East. This region is classified as having moderate agricultural potential (Kinsey et al., 1998: 91) and the households in our sample earn the large majority of their income through rain-fed farming. During the 1990's they experienced two droughts, a severe one in 1991/1992 and another in 1994/1995 (Hoogeveen, 2001: 34).

The six villages are part of the Zimbabwe Rural Household Dynamics Study (ZRHDS), a long-running panel study discussed in detail in Kinsey et al. (1998), Gunning et al. (2000) and Hoogeveen and Kinsey (2001). With few exceptions, all of the households in each of these six villages were included in the panel sample. And this completeness is why these villages were selected for the additional survey on funeral attendance, designed specifically to provide a proxy for social status.

The funeral attendance survey applied a specially designed group interview method. First, a grid containing one row for every funeral and one column for every household was created for each village using data from the panel survey corroborated during brief interviews with the senior members of every household. Each row was labeled with the first and household name of the deceased as well as the year of their death and their age and gender. Second, the cells in the grid were filled in with codes indicating who from each household attended each funeral using responses supplied by senior, usually female, members of the potentially attending households and corroborated by a number of senior, usually female, neighbours. And third, in the few instances where a respondent for a potentially attending household could not be found, we relied on the corroborated recall of neighbours.

We knew that this task would take some time, so we scheduled it for a period when the womenfolk in the villages would be shelling groundnuts and beans ready for storage. Because these manual tasks are dull and time consuming, women tend

to undertake them in groups, so they can chat and keep one another amused at the same time. Within this context the funeral attendance survey was seen as a new source of entertainment and an opportunity to recall old gossip.

In this way, over a period of several weeks in 2001, our sole field researcher, Nyaradzo Dzobo, was able to construct a complete dataset relating to all of the funerals that had taken place in each of the villages between 1983 and mid 2001.

To conduct the analysis, the data from this specialized survey was merged with data on household incomes and sizes and the characteristics of the household heads drawn from the ZRHDS. However, due to inconsistencies in the questions relating to income and the sporadic nature of the survey in its early years, at the point of merger, we chose to restrict the analysis to funerals occurring between 1993 and 1999.

Table 1 summarizes the attributes of the funeral hosting and the funeral attending households, as well as those of the deceased. From a total of 94 funerals recorded in the dataset we get 1500 dyadic observations.[8] An additional 193 observations are lost due to missing income data for either the hosting or the attending head's household and 220 observations are lost due to missing data on the education and age of the household heads. This leaves 1111 observations relating to 78 funerals hosted by 48 households (an average of 1.6 funerals hosted by each), and 100 potentially attending households.

The first row of Table 1 shows that household heads usually attend the funerals in their villages: the overall attendance rate was 90%. The mean income of the hosting households was \$1,968 Zimbabwean Dollars per year evaluated at 1992 prices and the mean of logged income was 6.89. The mean income of the potentially attending heads' households was \$2,014 Zimbabwean Dollars per year, and the mean of their

[8] This excludes the observations in which a household head attends a funeral that he or she is hosting and those in which the potentially attending household head is absent from the village at the time of the death and funeral.

Table 1: Attributes of the deceased and hosting and potentially attending households

	Mean/Prop.	Std. Dev.
Funeral attendance	90.01%	
Attributes of the funeral hosting household		
Income Zim $ per year at 1992 prices	1967.569	2210.291
Log of income	6.898	1.563
Age of the head	60.060	11.241
Education of the head	4.527	3.245
Household head female	20.43%	
Household size	9.593	4.653
Attributes of the potentially attending household		
Income Zim $ per year at 1992 prices	2014.127	2173.590
Log of income	7.046	1.418
Age of the head	56.815	12.197
Education of the head	5.007	3.015
Household head female	19.89%	
Household size	8.455	0.719
Attributes of the deceased		
Cause of death believed unnatural	19.53%	
Age at death	36.251	23.501
Female	40.59%	
Village resident (not a visitor)	83.98%	
Buried in village	92.80%	
Household head at time of death	18.99%	
Number of Observations	1111	

logged income was 7.05. A t-test indicates no significant difference in incomes between the hosting and attending households indicating that deaths are not associated with income in this sample over this period.

6 Results

Column (1) in Table 2 presents the estimated coefficients and corresponding z statistics relating to model (1). To test the robustness of the results reported in Column (1) we re-estimated the model with attending household fixed effects. This estimation is based on only 64% of the sample used to estimate model (1). The 393 dropped observations relate to the 40 household heads who attended all the funerals in their villages. So, this second estimation relates to the decisions made by the 60

household heads who attended some but not all of the funerals in their villages and controls for all cross-funeral-invariant attending household attributes. That these household heads go to some but not all of the funerals in their villages is consistent with them being either more judgmental or more willing than others to express their judgments relating to the status of the funeral hosting households. If this is the case, whichever result we see in the first estimation will be stronger in the second. [9] The estimated coefficients and corresponding z statistics for this second model are presented in Column (2) of Table 2.

We also endeavoured to re-estimate the model with hosting household fixed effects. However, here, we reached the limit for our data. This estimation would have been based on a respectable 68% of the sample used to estimate model (1). However, in this case, the 345 dropped observations would have related to the 26 funerals that were attended by all of the household heads in the corresponding villages. Thus, we have lost the upper end of our hosting household status distribution. [10] This still leaves 52 funerals hosted by 27 households that were not attended by all the household heads in the corresponding villages. However, 17 of these households hosted only one funeral each, leaving only 10 households who hosted two or more funerals over which their income may have varied. This is not sufficient for a reliable test of our hypotheses in the presence of hosting household fixed effects.

Before reporting the results relating to our hypotheses it is useful to note a few other results that are robust across the two specifications. First, the significant, positive effects of the deceased being resident and buried in the village are reassuring with respect to data quality. More interesting are the significant, positive coefficients on the age of the deceased, the gender of the deceased and the gender of the potentially attending household head: older people's and women's funerals are more likely to be attended and female household heads are more likely to attend any given funeral. Even more interesting still is the significant, positive coefficient on

[9] The mean attributes for this sample are reported in the Appendix, Table A.1.

[10] Interestingly, the mean household income for these dropped observations is significantly lower than the mean for the remaining sample. This is consistent with the egalitarian hypothesis.

Table 2: Logit analysis of funeral attendance (Dependent variable = 1 if household head j attended funeral i)

	(1) Basic Model	(2) With attending household fixed effects
ATTRIBUTES OF THE HOSTING HOUSEHOLD		
Log of income	-0.423***	-0.629***
	(-4.94)	(-3.02)
Age of the head	0.030	0.044*
	(1.36)	(1.72)
Education of the head	0.195**	0.264**
	(2.33)	(2.21)
Household head female	0.025	-0.196
	(0.04)	(-0.21)
Household size	0.012	0.047
	(0.24)	(0.79)
ATTRIBUTES OF THE POTENTIALLY ATTENDING HOUSEHOLD		
Log of income	0.202	0.378*
	(1.54)	(1.72)*
Age of the head	0.042*	-0.117
	(1.87)	(-0.96)
Education of the head	0.106	0.020
	(1.22)	(0.12)
Household head female	0.629*	1.030*
	(1.65)	(1.65)
Household size	-0.065	0.006
	(-1.55)	(0.20)
ATTRIBUTES OF THE DECEASED		
Cause of death believed unnatural	0.816*	1.001
	(1.65)	(1.23)
Age at death	0.047**	0.070**
	(2.06)	(2.04)
Female	1.282***	2.054***
	(2.67)	(2.85)
Village resident (not visitor)	1.557***	2.489***
	(3.98)	(3.36)
Buried in village	3.872***	5.461***
	(3.95)	(4.67)
Household head at time of death	-0.877*	-1.473
	(-1.75)	(-1.11)
Constant	-6.004***	-4.170
	(-3.60)	(-0.64)
Village and year f.e.s included	yes	yes
Attending hh f.e.s included	no	yes
Hosting hh f.e.s included	no	no
OBSERVATIONS	1111	718

Notes: estimated Logit coefficients reported; corresponding, robust z statistics in parentheses: * significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

the hosting household head's education. That funerals hosted by households with more educated heads are better attended is consistent with the idea that funeral attendance proxies for status.

Turning now to the result of principle interest, the relationship between funeral attendance and the income of the funeral hosting household is negative and significant (one percent level) in both models and as expected the magnitude of the coefficient is greater in the model with attending household fixed effects.[11] This finding provides strong evidence against the status-for-insurance hypothesis, while supporting the egalitarianism hypothesis. Evaluated at the mean, a one percent increase in the hosting household's income is associated with a 1.1 to 1.4 percentage point decline in the probability of another household head attending the funeral. This effect appears small until we recall that funeral attendance is generally very high (sample proportion of 90 percent). Further, it is important to bear in mind that only the very richest households are likely to be subject to this effect at the margin. If we evaluate the estimated marginal effect at one standard deviation above mean income (all the other variables held at the mean) a one percent increase in the hosting household's income is associated with a 2.5 to 2.7 percentage point decline in the same probability. Finally, when we include attending household fixed effects in the estimation we identify a positive relationship between the income of a household and the likelihood of the household head attending any given funeral. This finding is also inconsistent with the status-for-insurance hypothesis.

Before concluding, it is useful to consider a number of reasons why our findings might be spurious. Omitted variable bias is always a concern. One potentially important variable that was omitted from our analysis was kinship. At the time of writing, data on kinship was not available for the period 1993 to 1999. As kinship is likely to be associated with funeral attendance, the omission of this variable could have biased the test of the egalitarianism hypothesis towards significance if kinship

[11] If one conducts the analysis including hosting household fixed effects, notwithstanding the concerns about degrees of freedom, the coefficient on the hosting household's income remains negative and significant.

were also negatively correlated with the hosting household's income. This would be the case if richer households tend to have smaller extended families. However, this seems unlikely. Under certain conditions, the omission of another variable, namely membership in funeral societies could be biasing the negative relationship between the income of the deceased's household and funeral attendance towards significance. This would be the case if funeral attendance depends on funeral society membership and the poor are more likely to be members of funeral societies than the rich. However, this would be inconsistent with the findings of Dercon et al. (2006) that, in Ethiopia and Tanzania, funeral society membership is not a function of economic prosperity and poor and rich tend to be members of the same groups.

7 Conclusion

Our objective in this paper was to test two hypotheses concerning the role of status in relationships between rich and poor in traditional communities. The status-for-insurance hypothesis stated that there is a positive relationship between economic prosperity and status because the poor bestow status upon the rich in exchange for help in times of need. In contrast, the egalitarianism hypothesis stated that there is a negative relationship between economic prosperity and status because the rich are denied status as a punishment for violating the egalitarian norm.

Our principle innovation was to use data on funeral attendance in six Zimbabwean villages to infer the status of funeral hosting households. We, then, analyzed this data in conjunction with data on household income and other household attributes using a dyadic approach.

The resulting estimates indicated that the richer a household hosting a funeral, the less likely heads of neighbouring households are to attend. This finding provides strong evidence against the status-for-insurance hypothesis and in favour of the egalitarianism hypothesis.

This finding has potentially important implications for the way in which we view economic stagnation in rural, sub-Saharan Africa. If more prosperous individuals and households are punished by being denied social status, individuals and households are less likely to strive to become more prosperous. This suggests that interventions designed to support improvements in prosperity at the level of the community rather than the individual or household may be more effective.

Of course, it is important to bear in mind that this study was based on data relating to an unusual sample of villages: they were all newly formed communities in the early eighties. Whether replications of this study in non-resettled communities would lead to the same finding remains to be seen. Future work might also endeavour to control for some of the variables omitted from our analysis such as kinship, co-membership in funeral societies and other associations, leadership, and assistance giving and receiving.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Attributes for the sample used in the attending household fixed effects analysis

	Mean/Prop.	Std. Dev.
Funeral attendance	85.52%	
Attributes of the funeral hosting household		
Income Zim $ per year at 1992 prices	1893.491	2062.300
Log of income	6.895	1.473
Age of the head	59.316	11.395
Education of the head	4.553	3.388
Household head female	26.60%	
Household size	9.553	4.321
Attributes of the potentially attending household		
Income Zim $ per year at 1992 prices	1954.477	2158.809
Log of income	7.045	1.336
Age of the head	56.862	12.988
Education of the head	4.702	3.019
Household head female	19.08%	
Household size	8.865	3.774
Attributes of the deceased		
Cause of death believed unnatural	19.50%	
Age at death	37.099	23.434
Female	38.86%	
Village resident (not a visitor)	81.48%	
Buried in village	90.11%	
Household head at time of death	20.75%	
Observations	718	