Seminario de Microeconomía Aplicada - African Origins of Development in the Colombian Pacific

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Abstract: This paper examines the effects of African ethnic institutions on economic development in the Americas through the lens of the Colombian Pacific lowlands. We trace the African origins of Afro-Colombians by linking a wealth of ethnographical sources with contemporary micro-level data on surnames, a strong marker for ethnic origins in the region. Exploiting discontinuities along arbitrarily-defined geographical boundaries of Afro-Colombian community councils (ACCs), we find preliminary evidence of a reversal of fortunes. First, in contrast to the view that slavery broke ethnic ties, African ethnic institutions predict contemporary community council institutions. Second, individuals whose ancestors came from more economically developed ethnicities — characterized by centralized governance but loose kinship ties — exhibit worse living standards today. Based on evolutionary anthropology insights, we hypothesize that institutional mismatch explains why opposite African ethnic institutions — decentralized governance and tight kinship ties — may have been more useful for adapting to their new environment.

About the exhibitor: Juan Sebastián Galán is a economist interested in the political economy of development. His research examines the historical and institutional factors of economic development and their relevance to current economic policy, particularly in Colombia and Latin America. He is currently leading projects on a wide range of topics, including state-building, conflict, inequality, agrarian reform, and industrial transformation.

Exposure time: 1 hora y 30 minutos

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