

# “Reputational Poverty Traps” & the reproduction of social inequality

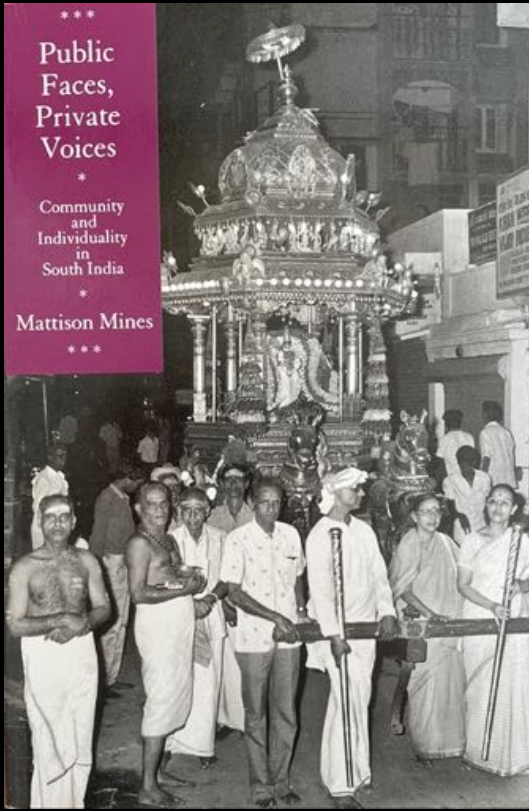
A research agenda



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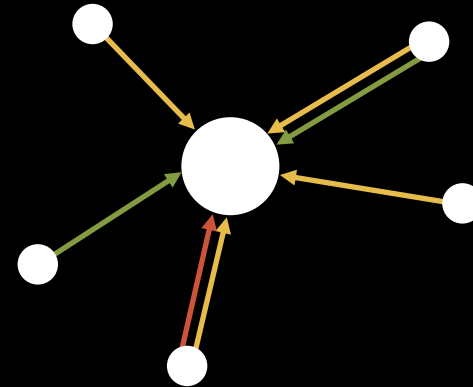
“A Tamil’s success in life vitally depends on maintaining good relationships and a good reputation within one’s community.”

(Mines 1994: 31)

# Reputation

Who in the village do you see as...

- Influential
- Giving good advice
- Generous
- Having good character
- Hardworking
- Being physically strong
- Devout
- Having ritual knowledge



Good Character: 4

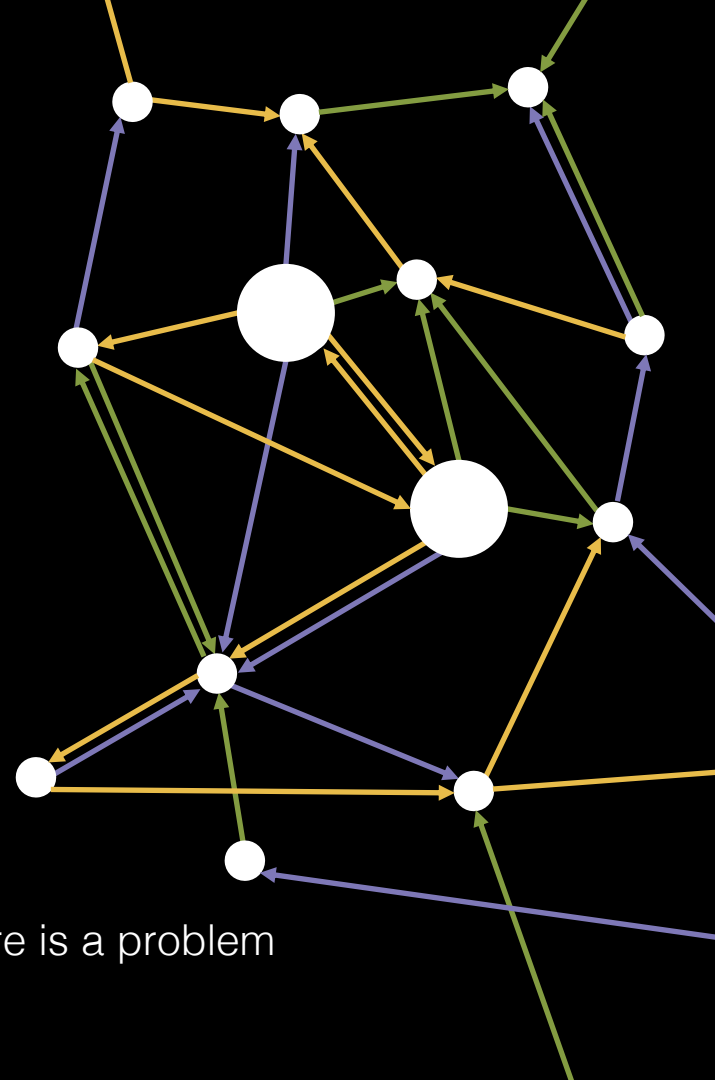
Generous: 2

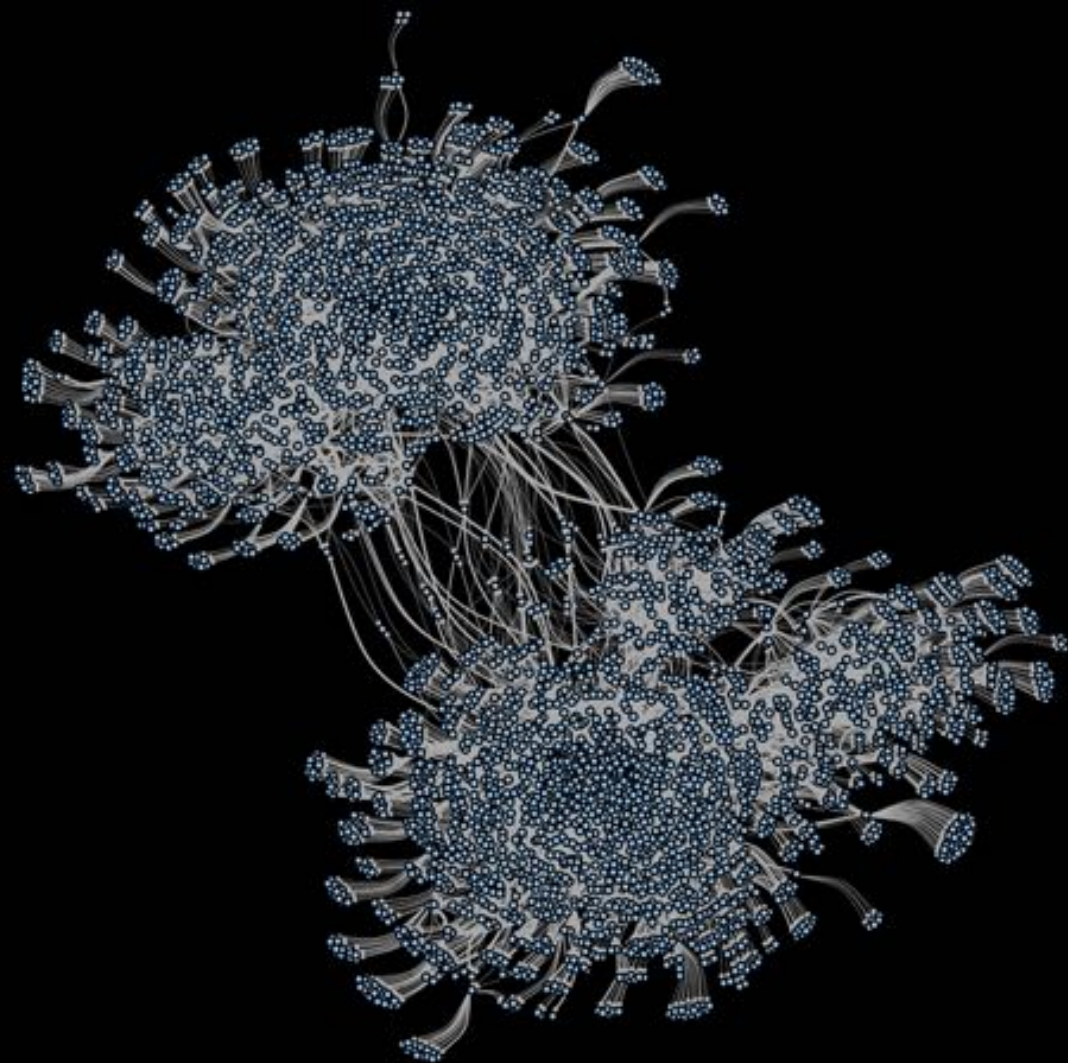
Influential: 1

# Social Support

## Who do you turn to for...

- Emotional support & companionship
  - Close friends, conversation partners
- Behavioral assistance
  - Borrow items, run errands, help watching children
- Financial assistance
  - Borrowing petty cash, bigger loans
- Guidance
  - Important matters, advice
- Vouched support
  - Help finding work, people in 'high positions,' aid if there is a problem





2013 data

# Alakāpuram

# Tenpaṭṭi

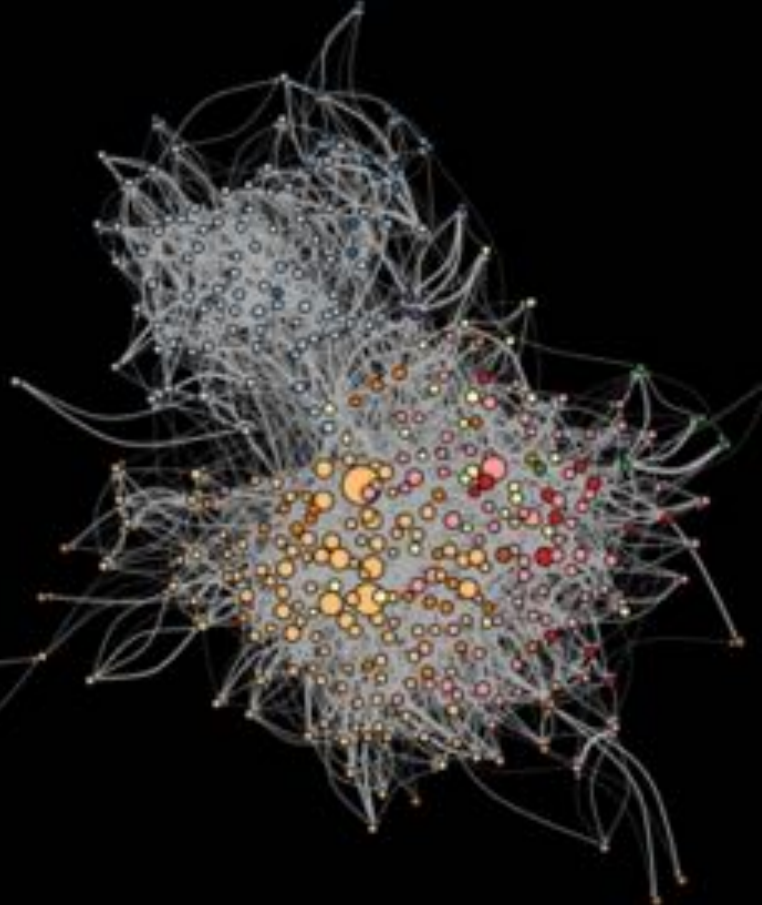
Caste (*jāti*) & Religion

## Hindu

- Ācāri
- Akamuṭaiyār
- Aruntatiyar
- Hindu Yātavar
- Kaḷḷar
- Kulālar
- Maṟavar
- Paḷḷar
- Rare

## Christian

- CSI Paraiyar
- RC Vellālar
- RC Yātavar



2013 data

# Alakāpuram

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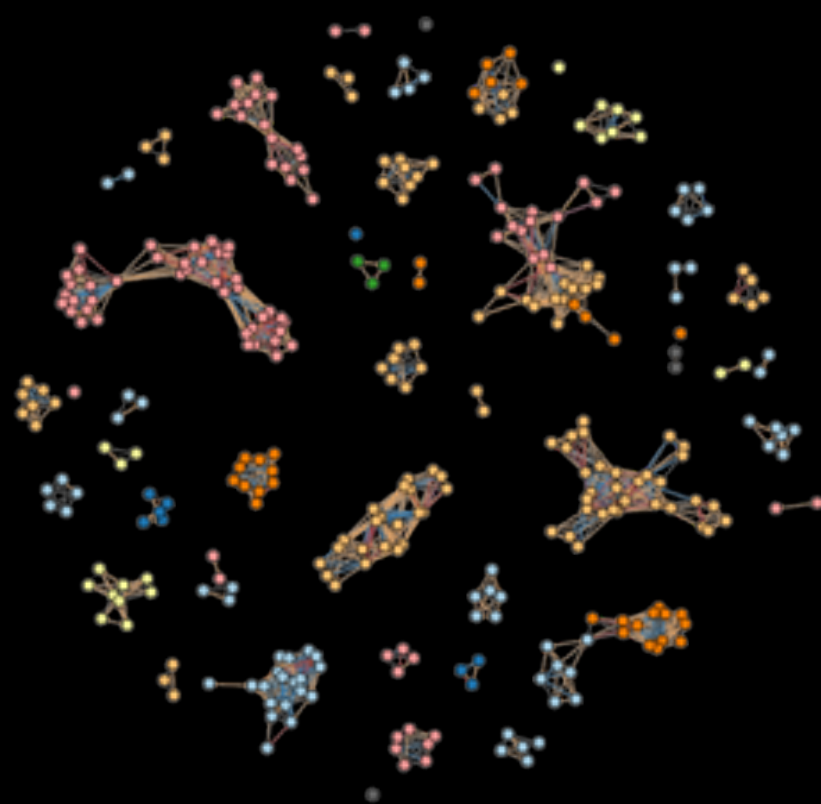
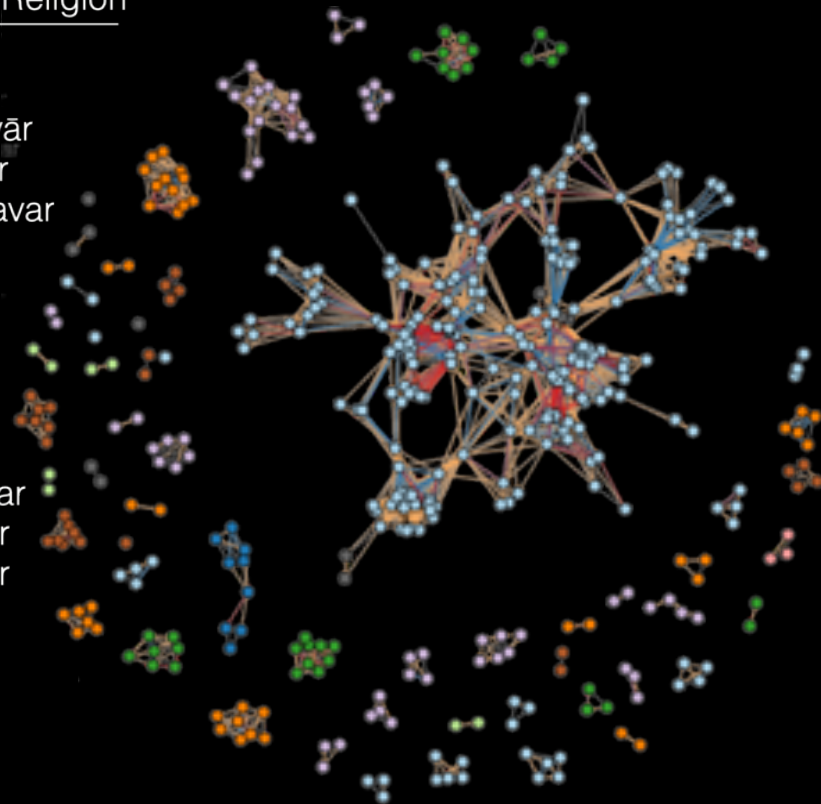
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2017 data



# Core focus: Social correlates of people's religious practice

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

**Evolution and Human Behavior**

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ehb](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ehb)

Original Article

**Discerning devotion: Testing the signaling theory of religion**

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**ARTICLE INFO** **ABSTRACT**

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Religious rituals often entail significant investments of time, energy, and money, and can risk bodily harm. In ritual giving evolutionarily insignificant, such costly religious acts have been argued to be honest signals of commitment to the beliefs and values of the community, helping individuals establish good reputations and foster trusting, cooperative relationships. Most work of this hypothesis has evaluated whether religious rituals are more prosocial, here I investigate whether signal receivers actually perceive religious rituals as such. I do this with data collected over 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in two villages in South India, where Hindu and Christian residents engage in different modes of religious practice, including dramatic acts of forswearing and self-sacrifice as well as the more subtle but consistent acts of membership of a church or temple trust.



nature human behaviour

LETTERS

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**Social support networks and religiosity in rural South India**

Eleanor A. Power\*

In recent years, scientists based in a variety of disciplines have attempted to explain the evolutionary origins of religious belief and practice. Although they have focused on different aspects of the religious system, they consistently highlight the strong association between religiosity and prosocial behaviour (acts that benefit others). This association has been central to the argument that religious prosociality played an important role in the sociocultural fitness of our species. But empirical work evaluating the link between effects\* These mixed results may be due in part to the artificial, anonymous context of many of these studies, which sacrifice the richness of real life for the ability to isolate the variable of interest and draw conclusions about causality. The few naturalistic, quantitative studies that have been done have found more consistent associations with generosity and cooperativeness, especially when it is directed to co-religionists, but these studies often still rely on economic games and anonymous donations to evaluate prosociality, rather than real-life behaviour.



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Research

**Collective ritual and social support networks in rural South India**

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The scholarship on religion has long argued that collective worship helps foster social cohesion. Despite the pervasiveness of this contention, rigorous quantitative evaluations of it have been surprisingly limited. Here, I draw on network data representing the ties of social support among Hindu residents of a South Indian village to evaluate the association between collective religious ritual and social cohesion. I find that those who partake in collective religious rituals together have a higher probability of having a supportive relationship than those who do not. At the structural level, this corresponds to denser connections among co-participants. At the individual level, participants are more

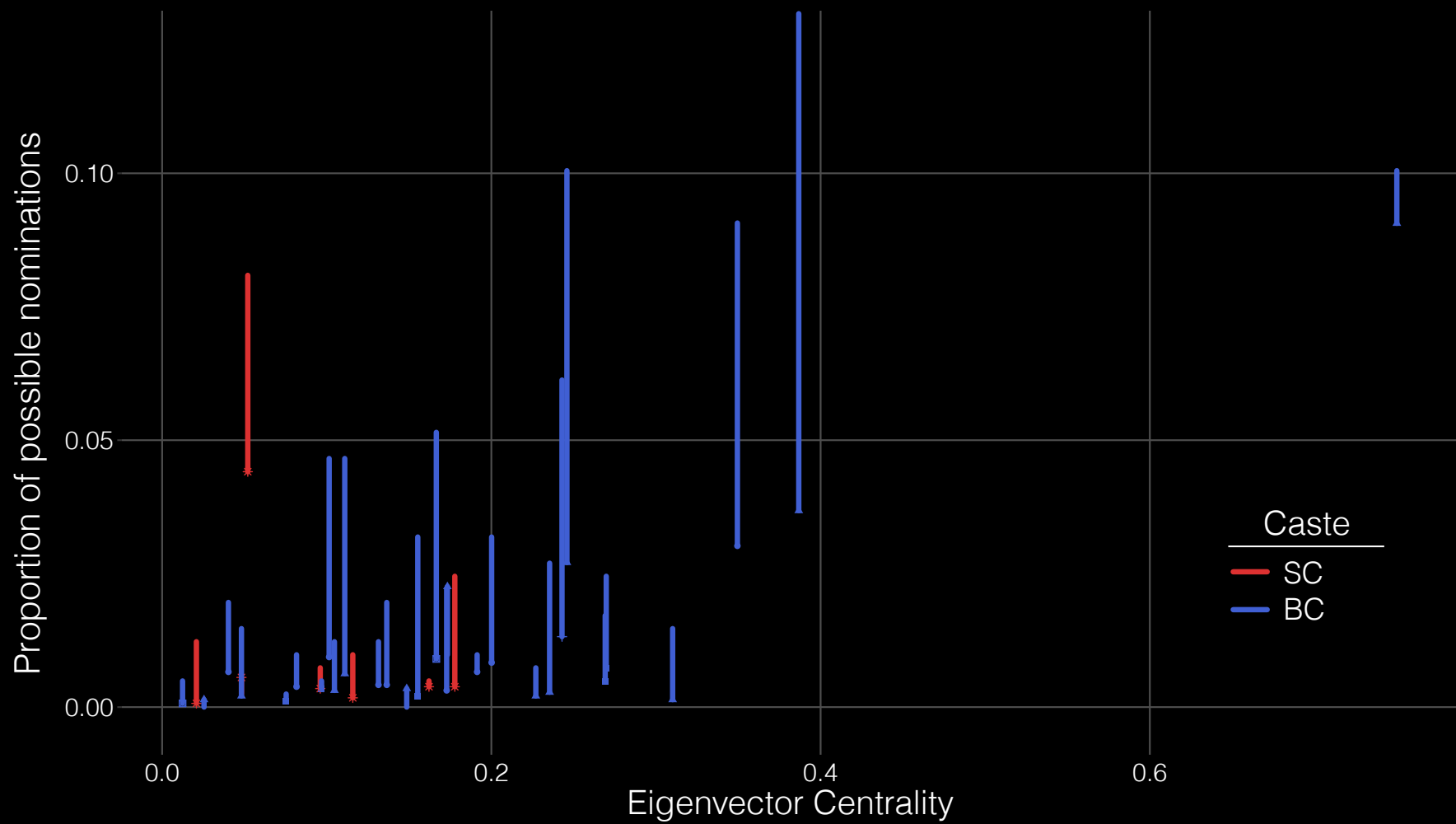
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# Gender, Caste, and “Reputational Poverty Traps”

# A “reputational poverty trap”?



“

Suppose, it might have happened to me. I'll say, definitely. If I had fallen down, what would the world say of me? What a bad name! [...] Suppose I had fallen down! It might have happened. But people would talk very low of me, isn't it so? They talked that much for a mere burn. If it had happened like that, what would they say? Looking at it like that made me pull back somewhat.

”

# How can we explain these patterns?

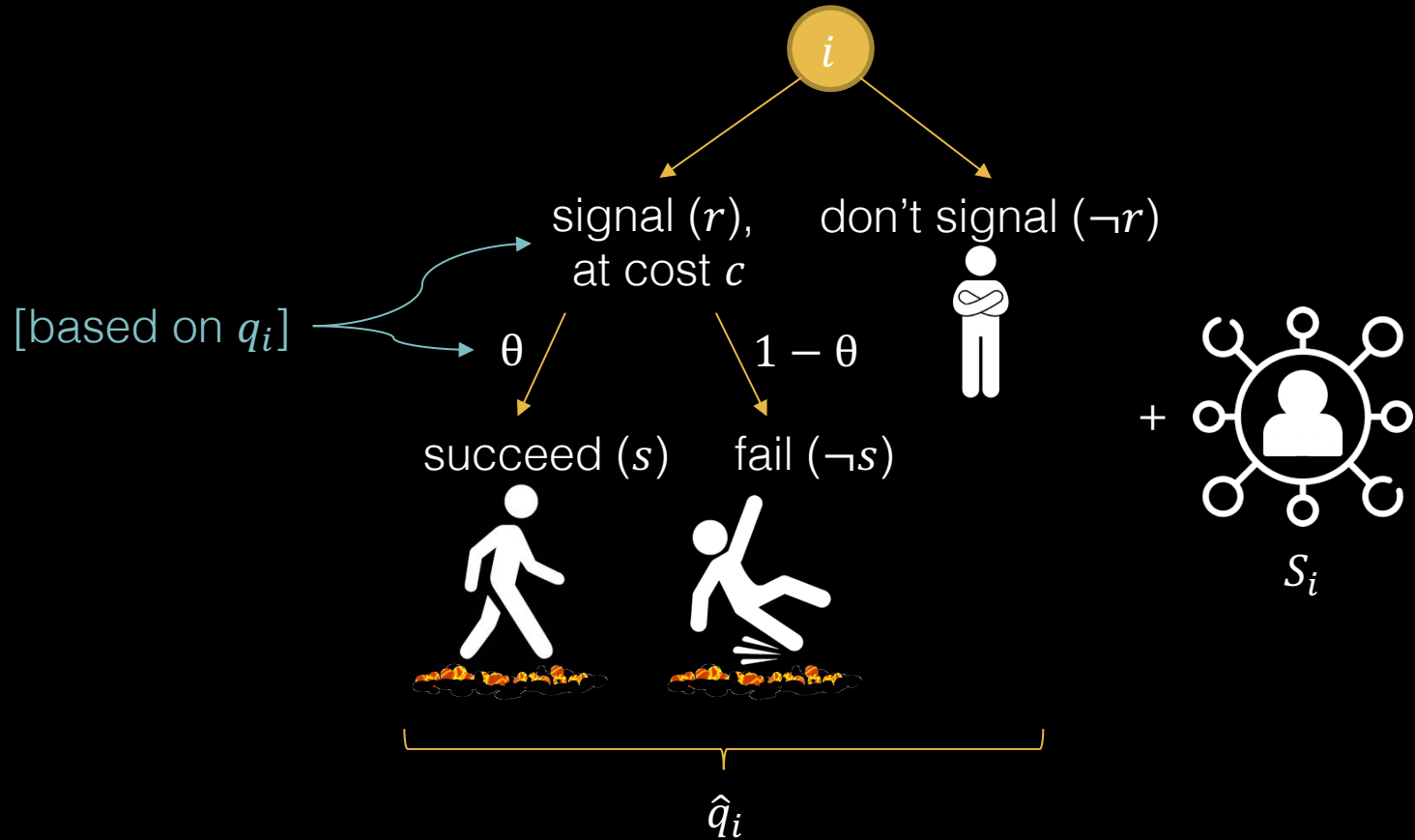
- All else equal, religious acts are associated with greater reputational standing (*EHB* 2017) and greater social support (*NHB* 2017).
- *But*, there appear to be important caveats to this:
  - Caste- and gender-based differences?
  - Cumulative advantage?
  - A “reputational poverty trap”?
- I posit that there is an intervening role of social prominence and social capital.

# Modelling it

- Collaborative work with Marion Dumas and Jessie Barker
- First, an analytical model, based on classic signaling models, extended to include social prominence/capital.
- Then, an agent-based model to explore the structural outcomes of the strategies found with the analytical model.



# Signalling Model



# How does social prominence/capital enter in?

- Mechanism 1: Altered prior.

The deference or support a person has is seen as an indicator of quality. Observers use this social information alongside direct observation to inform their inference of quality.

- Mechanism 2: Altered payoff.

The costs are less or the benefits greater for signalers with greater prominence or social capital.

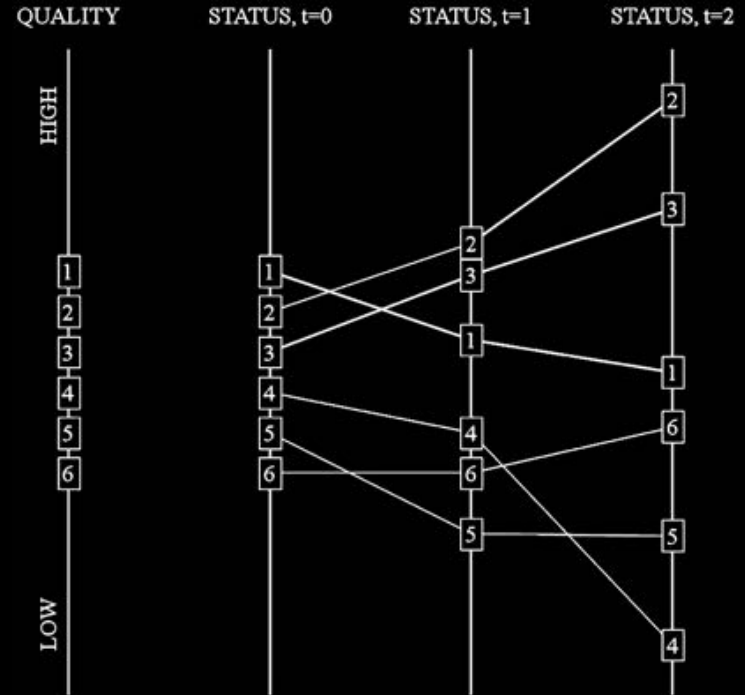
- $S_i$  is our generic term for social prominence/capital.

Altered prior could be more readily associated with prominence and altered payoff with social capital.

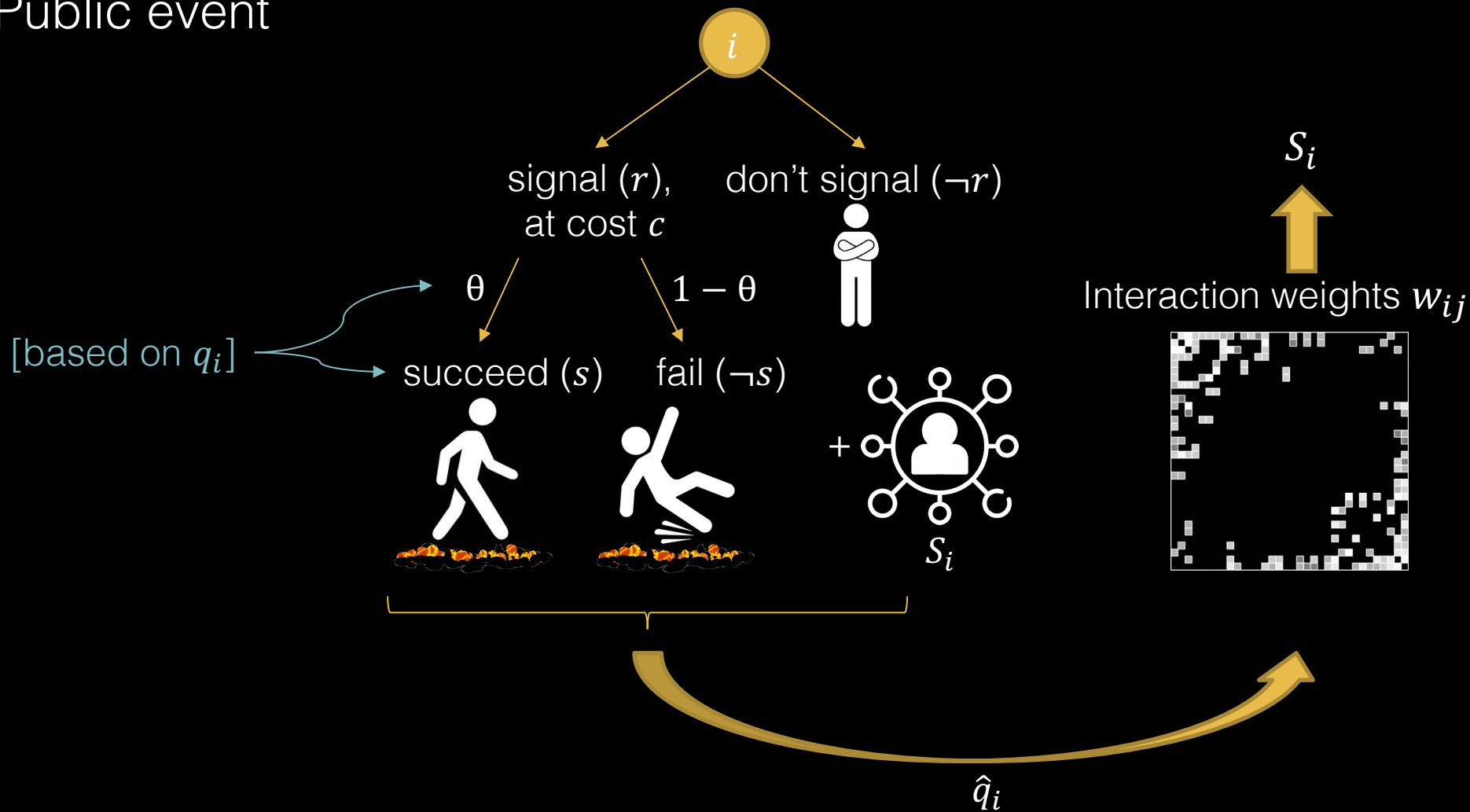


# Agent-based Model

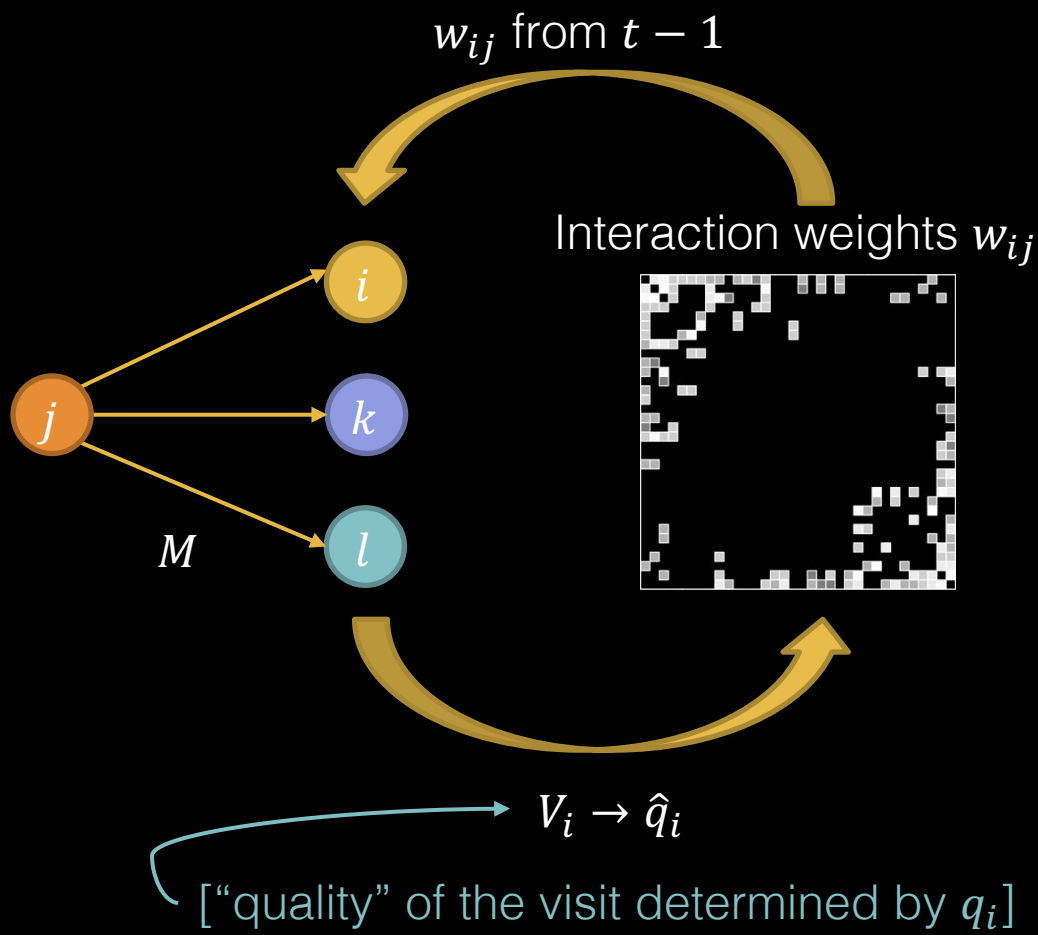
- Want to study not only strategies, but also their structural outcomes.
- Linking signaling theory to sociological work on status.
- Even with strategic signaling, do we find that reputation can become decoupled from underlying “quality”?



# Public event



# Pairwise interactions



## Four scenarios:

- The sociological “cue only” model (everyone’s  $S_i$  is revealed)
- “Altered prior” mechanism
- “Altered payoff” mechanism
- Both mechanisms combined

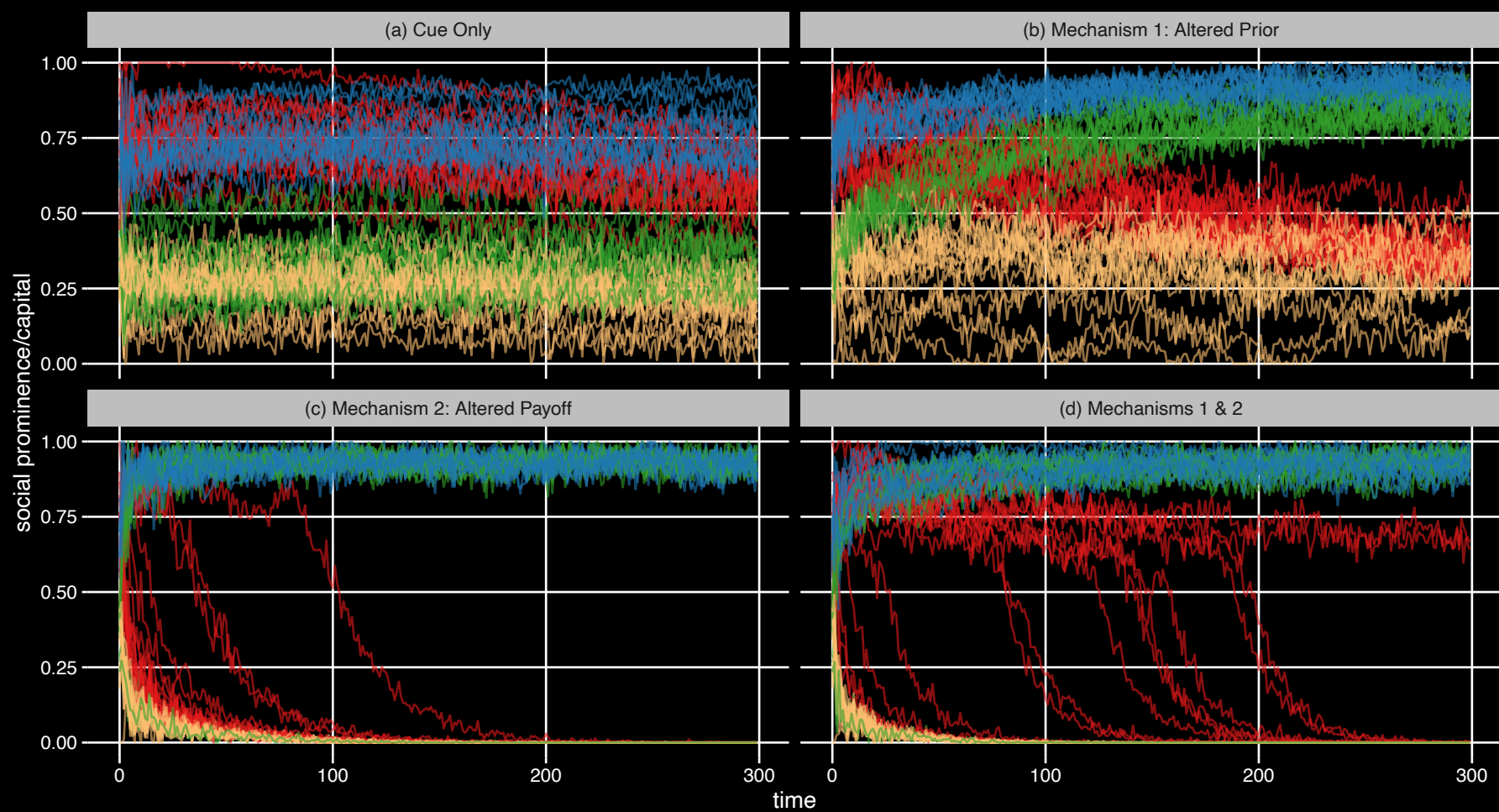
## Comparing throughout:

$q = 0$ , initial  $S_i = low$

$q = 1$ , initial  $S_i = low$

$q = 0$ , initial  $S_i = high$

$q = 1$ , initial  $S_i = high$



$q = 0,$   
initial  $S_i = \text{low}$

$q = 0,$   
initial  $S_i = \text{high}$

$q = 1,$   
initial  $S_i = \text{low}$

$q = 1,$   
initial  $S_i = \text{high}$

# Summary

- On average, these signal acts are informative and revealing.
- *However*, we find a “reputational shield” (where low-quality individuals can “pass” thanks to high  $S_i$ ) and a “reputational poverty trap” (where high-quality individuals cannot improve their standing, thanks to low  $S_i$ )
- Notably, this disjuncture between quality and reputation is happening even though individuals can strategically signal.
- This is a higher bar than the sociological models, where it’s full social construction with very little agency on the part of actors.

# Summary

- The public act we model is practically the simultaneous production of a *costly signal* (of  $q_i$ ) and an *index* (of  $S_i$ ).
- So, we have a multi-component, multi-modal, multiplex signal.
- Attending to  $S_i$  can be seen as using public, social information.
- Work in behavioral ecology has suggested that:
  - (1) Multimodal signals should generally be more reliable
  - (2) Social information should generally increase accuracy
- On average, that's probably true, but the field hasn't focused on the consequences of the exceptions.

# Summary

- Think, too, of work in cultural evolution on social learning strategies.
- For example, Henrich & Gil-White (2001: 167-168):  
“The above implies that the most skilled/knowledgeable models will, on-average, end up with the biggest and most lavish clientele, so the *size* and *lavishness* of a given model’s clientele (the *prestige*) provides a convenient and reliable proxy for that person’s information quality.”
- Again, it’s worth considering the exceptions & their consequences!
- Those consequences are seen most acutely with the “reputational poverty trap”



# Summary

- Recall the motivating case and the role that caste seemed to play.
- Any systemic inequities in social prominence/capital can be readily amplified by the feedbacks explored here.
- There are *many* contexts in which this could readily occur. For one close to home, consider academia:
  - Ample evidence of the Matthew Effect (Merton 1968+)
  - Growing evidence of systemic bias on the basis of gender and race/ethnicity (e.g., Dworkin et al 2020, Bertolero et al 2020)
  - These two are not unrelated! (And fixing the latter means reckoning with the former)

# Rep<sup>2</sup>SI: Reputation and the Reproduction of Social Inequality

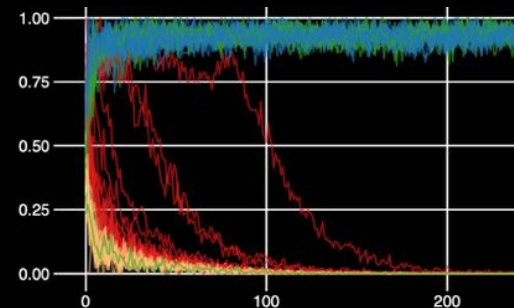
Ethnography



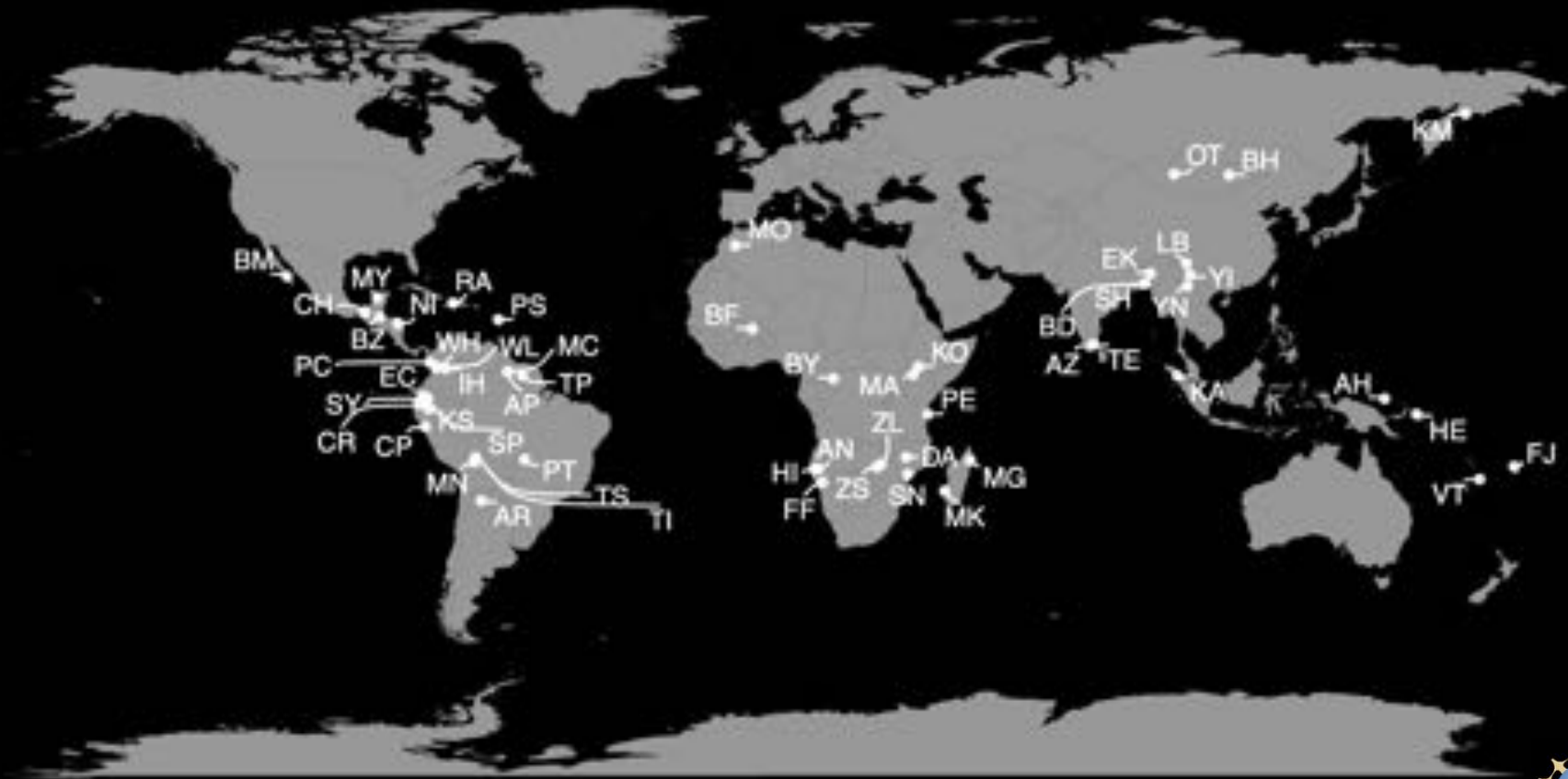
Games



Modelling



# The ENDOW project



# The ENDOW project



*~50 communities, ~30 countries.*

*Mix of horticulture, agriculture, pastoralism, fishing, wage labour, foraging*

Thanks – நன்றி

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