Introduction

Changes sweeping sub-Saharan Africa have rekindled interest in popular politics, local communities, and institutional reforms that might decentralize and democratize everyday political life. Activists and observers voice hopes for political devolution and forms of democracy that can empower ordinary citizens and producers. Yet on a continent where 50 to 70 percent of the population remains rural, such hopes are often tempered by skepticism about African rulers’ willingness to empower the rural masses, and uneasiness and ambivalence about the political impulses and potential of African peasant society. Do farmers and villagers really represent the core of African political community, “the inner strength of society”? Or is rural Africa reactionary and despotic, the mainspring of xenophobias and destructive subnationalisms? When we look at today’s villages of farmers, traders, and chiefs, do we see the democratic antithesis of the authoritarian state or local despotisms that have been reinforced – or even created – by modern forms of rule? These are questions about power, political capacity, and state institutions in rural Africa. They have implications for how we understand African state building, for formulating and justifying strategies for institutional reform, and for envisioning Africa’s economic future.

This book engages questions about power and political capacity in rural Africa. How is politics configured at the local level? How do rulers choose strategies for governing the countryside, and when do strategies change? Answers matter, for they can help explain the variation we observe in core-periphery relations within and across African countries. Answers can also

1 Sithole, in Ilonoibere 1996:140. See also Adeleji (1994:126), who writes that “[b]eneath the rickety frames of crumbling postcolonial states lie historically evolved structures that rest on trust, respect, and the involvement of people in decision-making.”
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inform approaches to reforming and strengthening the political institutions that link city and countryside, a goal now defined by many as one of Africa's top development priorities.

The main argument is that there are significant regional (subnational) variations in the political capacities and interests of rural societies and rural notables, and that much of the variation we observe in regimes’ strategies in governing the countryside is attributable to this fact. How power is distributed between center and periphery, and how these imbalances are institutionalized, are partly artifacts of the organization of power within agrarian society itself.

Much writing on African state formation has made the opposite argument. Work that tries to explain continuity, reform, or spatial variation in the political institutions that link rulers and rural subjects has typically focused on *exogenous* determinants of rulers’ choices. Scholars have emphasized the “importation” of administrative ideologies and structures from colonial metropoles, nationalist politicians’ political ideologies, or changes in international funding agencies’ ideas about progressive or efficient rural governance. These variables have been advanced to explain cross-country differences in centralization/decentralization of the state apparatus, regimes’ treatment of rural chiefs or old African aristocracies, or the amount of prerogative devolved to grassroots-level institutions and actors.

This book focuses on the same political variation, but identifies a different causal arrow. It argues that institutional differences are determined *endogenously*: spatial variations in institutional design and the extent of core-periphery powersharing are products of political struggles and bargaining that goes on within African society between rulers, their rural allies, and their provincial rivals.

It turns out that in Africa, as in most agrarian societies, there are significant spatial or regional variations in rural social organization and political capacity. This geographical unevenness helps explain why informed observers paint images of political society in rural Africa that differ so radically, and also why institution-building strategies aimed at incorporating rural societies into modern states have varied so starkly. Regional variations in agrarian sociopolitical organization, and in rural modes of production, have tended to be overlooked as a source of difference in African state-formation trajectories, considered in an asystematic manner, or analyzed in highly localized contexts. This, I submit, has led to an unwarranted emphasis on the exogenous determinants of variation in how modern state structures have been imposed and implanted in the African countryside.
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This study employs a political-economy approach to map out political contours and cleavages in rural Africa. A close read of histories of colonial conquest, the decolonization period, and the politics of regime consolidation since the 1950s reveals considerable variation in the capacity of peasant societies to bargain with, constrain, or challenge those at the center. I propose a political-economy model that highlights regional variation in the political capacities and interests of rural societies and rural notables, and argue that these differences have shaped the institution-building strategies chosen by governments trying to secure their own rule over the countryside. The result is striking unevenness in real patterns of centralization and decentralization of state power – that is, in the political topography of core-periphery linkage. Different configurations of rural authority have consequences for modern state-building trajectories, with enduring implications for the political autonomy of the local, the nature and accountability of rural elites, and the capacity of localities to organize for political engagement with the state. Possibilities for economic development and decentralized democracy are shaped decisively by these factors. They also shape prospects for sustaining the territorial integrity of Africa's postcolonial states.

The net product of the chapters that follow is a framework and a set of hypotheses for exploring differences in the political trajectories of rural Africa, and for tracking spatial and temporal variation in the geography of state making. In this approach, institution building and reform in the African countryside are viewed not as technical or administrative problems to be solved, but rather as highly political processes. Decisive struggles take place within rural society, and between rural interests and the state. One broad implication is that the African state is more deeply grounded in indigenous rural society than many previous accounts have suggested. Another is that the outcome of current efforts at institutional and economic reform in the countryside is highly dependent on local-level political factors that vary a great deal across space.

The research question is framed as a problem of institutional choice. This makes it possible to propose a theory or model of rural state formation in Africa that is more parsimonious than many other historical and sociological accounts, and that resonates widely with large macrosociological and choice-theoretic literatures on state formation in agrarian societies. In framing the analytic question in these terms, I seek to avoid false debates between choice-theoretic and social-structural approaches. The theory emphasizes the class, communal, and economic structures that demarcate
general parameters within which narrower theories of “choice” and collective action must operate, and within which they take on substantive meaning.

I. State Institutions in the Countryside

Institutions linking state and countryside in Africa, as in virtually all developing countries, have formal mandates to promote development and national integration. They structure prices and other economic incentives, distribute political power and authority, and establish formal rules of the game to govern political process. Yet as political actors and analysts have long been aware, there is often acute disjuncture between the formal rules that define institutional structure and functions, and the real politics of how government agencies work. International planners and financial agencies who advocate reforms that will “get the institutions right” ignore this at their own risk, for the effects (and effectiveness) of reform are determined largely by broad features of the political-economic context in which reform is carried out.

This point is especially salient in rural Africa, where sweeping reform of the institutions structuring state-society relations and everyday economic life has come to be seen as the highest development priority. Yet here as in Mexico, the Philippines, and elsewhere in the last two decades, change in formal rule structures has not always produced the desired effects. Decentralization does not necessarily empower local citizens, and can simply strengthen local powerbrokers or state agents instead. Freer markets can lead to retrenchment rather than expansion of export-crop production. Legalization of political opposition does not always protect a regime’s opponents from reprisals or broaden the local political arena. Broad institution-building mandates are interpreted and implemented in locally specific ways, often with geographically uneven and contradictory effects. In these ways, official attempts in the 1980s and 1990s to restructure political and economic institutions in Africa’s rural areas mirror those of earlier decades. One lesson is that to explain, assess, and attempt to predict, analysts must take seriously the political and socioeconomic context of institutional choice. Informal power relations, communal divisions

Consider for example Fox 1990; Rubin 1996; Crook and Manor 1995, 1998; Ottoway 1997; Agrawal and Ribot 1999.

See Berry 1993.
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or solidarities, and underlying economic arrangements can constitute real parameters of institutional change and choice.

In arguing that “institutions are created to vest the interests of the powerful,” proponents of a positive theory of institutions are in perfect accord with most analysts of state-society relations in postcolonial Africa. Few observers of the early postcolonial years question the idea that rulers created state institutions designed to entrench their power and enhance the state’s extractive capacities. Power-consolidation strategies – originally conceived as means to higher ends – quickly became ends in themselves. State institutions in rural Africa seemed to exemplify the process. As Robert Bates has argued, scholars on the political left and right of the 1970s development debates gradually converged on the argument that rural development agencies in much of sub-Saharan Africa could be understood as institutions of rural political control and taxation.6

The state-society relations literature offered rich analyses of the state-centered factors shaping institutional choice in rural Africa. Official drives for administrative decentralization, centralization, political mobilization, party building, and nation building – which appeared in local variants such as animation rurale, ujamaa, and harambee – could be understood in terms of rulers’ attempts to entrench their advantages in the political struggles that pitted states against peasants, urban against rural, and center against periphery.

Depiction of the state itself as predatory Leviathan had a powerful effect on discussions of governmental institutions in rural Africa. The state-centered approach identified a dominant, “rational” (self-serving) actor in institution-building politics – the regime itself. Rulers’ interests were defined as the short-term pursuit of power and state hegemony, rather than development, poverty alleviation, or most of the other formally stated goals of state action. Little room was left for accounts that described marketing boards, official credit agencies, settlement schemes, and provincial administrations as politically neutral or as benevolent initiatives of the state.6 Yet so compelling was the image of the state as Leviathan, and so striking were the generalizations about the exploitation and political disempowerment of

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5 Bates 1991; see also Williams 1981; and Munro 1998.
6 As Michael Bratton (1987:175) writes, “Political expediency plays a formative role in policy choice, with leaders using the distribution of resources as a device to attract political support, nullify opposition, and remain in control.”
rural producers, that rural Africa was often depicted – often by default – as homogeneous and uniformly alienated from national politics, capable at best of retreating into local communities and local associational life.

The influential state-versus-society models of the 1980s tended to convey an image of much of rural society as cohesive, largely self-governing, and oppressed uniformly by the state. The countryside was often represented as the political antithesis of the ineffectual and decaying state. In “deep Africa,” community was supposed to prevail over power, opportunism, and zero-sum relationships.

This view of rural life informed the sweeping calls for reform that were made in the 1980s and 1990s. North American and international development agencies, and many prominent African and European scholars and public intellectuals, justified calls for downsizing central government and for institutional decentralization on the grounds that these changes would promote local political participation and harness grassroots forms of democracy. The accent was on rural Africa’s democratic potential.

With some hindsight it is perhaps obvious that the “democratic decentralization” initiatives of the 1980s and 1990s were bound to produce uneven, contradictory, and often disappointing results. In some cases, the reinvigoration of local despotisms, outbreaks of violence, or even outright decay of core-periphery linkages contradicted the most fundamental rationales for the state reform projects of the day. One problem was that the expectations of reform often were not premised upon concrete and nuanced analyses of the rural settings in which reform was being carried out, or of existing topographies of national integration and political control.

II. Countryside as Strategic Context

Mahmood Mamdani argued forcefully in Citizen and Subject (1996) that the state-versus-society approach in African studies did not focus much on political tensions and conflicts within the rural areas, on how state authority was imbricated in patterns of everyday village politics, or on uneven distributions of power within rural society. Mamdani is right: in fact, very little

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7 Work sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development, USAID (for example, Blair 1996), is often a good example.
8 See Vengroff 1987; Crook and Manor 1998; Barkan and Chege 1989; Ribot 1999; Munro 2001.
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analysis has been devoted to charting out and explaining regional and local variations in these aspects of rural life. This book is premised on the idea that such analysis could help to explain why the actual implementation and effects of broad liberalization initiatives have varied so much across regions and localities, and why they have often been so ambiguous in their effects.

Theorists and practitioners need analytic frameworks for describing difference in rural African political contexts and for hypothesizing about the sources and effects thereof. One step in this direction is a better understanding of the political forces and interests shaping actual configurations of state power at the regional and local level. That is the objective of this book.

I have framed the analytic problem as one of explaining regional variations in the design and functioning of state institutions that were built in the countryside during Africa’s “first independence” period, roughly from the late 1940s through the 1980s. Institution building is viewed as a contested process, driven forward and undone by struggles between regimes, rural elites, and farming populations. I ask: What explains variation in the course and outcome of these contests? In efforts to tax and govern peasantries, why did regimes’ institution-building strategies differ? The analytic task can be defined as one of developing a theory of “institutional choice” in rural Africa.

The 1950s were years of rural political mobilization and foment in much of sub-Saharan Africa. Intense renegotiations of power and privilege, both within rural society and between city and countryside, persisted into the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond. For the new governments born of the peaceful transfers of power, the immediate goal was to consolidate the political dominance of the center, and to sustain or intensify the taxation of rural producers – and to do so without provoking revolt, or driving peasants out of export-crop production. Nationalist leaders had to impose their political hegemony by demobilizing the rural populations that had been brought en masse into the anticolonial movements.

The rub was that in the regions, localities, and villages, there were established rural elites – chiefs, aristocratic families, religious authorities – who had a stake in defending and enhancing power already achieved. Ordinary farmers were interested in protecting themselves against corrupt and arbitrary rule at the local level. They also wanted to retain a larger share of the wealth they produced. New regimes sought to transfer resources out of agriculture in order to fund consumption and investment in the cities. So it was that two core issues of the day – central versus local authority and
rural taxation – created conflicts of interest both within rural societies, and between rural actors and the state. In a recent study of Ghana, Rathbone (2000:161) refers to this as “the battle for control of the countryside.” Across the continent, these battles would bear decisively on the form and prospects of the postcolonial state.

In the 1960s the mobilizational politics of the nationalist era gave way to a politics of consolidation, centralization of power, and state building. Everywhere, there was steady movement toward updated forms of authoritarian rule. Colonial institutions linking state and countryside were reformed and rebuilt, and new institutions were created. To demobilize rural masses and consolidate the center, regimes sought to alter distributions of power between central authorities and rural elites.

As the chapters that follow will show, rulers adopted strategies that differed significantly across subregions within a single national territory. In some regions, nationalist politicians shared power with rural chiefs and aristocrats. In others, they sought to destroy the foundations of neotraditional power. Some zones were governed intensively, through tight, top-down control, while others were left to their own devices, granted extensive autonomy, or simply neglected and not incorporated into the national space. The chapters that follow construct a typology of these “institutional strategies,” and propose a theory about the conditions under which rulers are likely to chose each one. Cases from West Africa are used to test the propositions and sketch out their implications for development, democracy, and the cohesion of contemporary states.

Chapter 2 proposes an institutional-choice theory to explain variation in institutional outcomes. Strategic choice theorists define the most generic elements of such a theory: models of bargaining or competition over institutional choice should specify actors’ choice sets, interests, resources, and relative bargaining power. State-centered analysis in African studies concentrated almost exclusively on rulers’ interests, often implying that rural actors and interests were simply overwhelmed by regimes’ coercive and bargaining power. A strategic choice model draws attention to what is underspecified in this equation: existing theories do not go far enough in specifying the rural interests, resources, and bargaining strengths that constrained regimes’ power and strategies, and that thus played a role in shaping institutional outcomes. Studies of modern African state building have been insufficiently attentive to the fact that regimes sought to impose their rule on rural societies that differed considerably in their capacity to shape the terms of their integration into national political economies.
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There were differences in rural Africans’ ability to use state power to serve local purposes and to contest the hegemonic and extractive drives of new regimes. New politicians in the cities found themselves locked in negotiations and confrontations with rural elites over the distribution of power, political prerogative and authority, and rural wealth. Rural elites, meanwhile, tried with varying degrees of success to wield power and influence over the ordinary farmers who were their followers, clients, kinsfolk, and subjects. The intensity and nature of the rural political challenge to new African regimes varied by region, shaping and constraining possibilities for collaboration between regimes and rural notables. I offer a social-structural theory of these patterns in rural politics, and argue that they have had systematic political (institutional) effects.

In defining the strategic context of choice, I propose a model that captures two social-structural sources of variation in the interests and political capacities of rural elites. It predicts that variations in class and communal structure will produce different patterns of political battling and bargaining between regimes and rural elites. Regimes “choose” the institution-building strategies that maximize their advantage in particular political contexts. Different institutional configurations – different ways of distributing power and administrative prerogative – are the result.

The analytic strategy is similar to that employed by Margaret Levi (1988) and Barbara Geddes (1991, 1994), who analyze institution building as if it were a strategy of “rational” rulers seeking to tax society and to reproduce their own power. By assuming (imagining) that all rulers have similar interests, and that a regime can be taken as a unitary actor, the focus of analysis can be shifted away from the state itself. This allows for more focused analysis of the societal sources of variation in political outcomes.

An institutional choice approach is useful given the purposes of this study. We can push to the limit the argument that state-building strategies differ because rulers face different challenges and opportunities – rulers operate within different structural or strategic contexts. The proposition is not so improbable

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9 Contributors to a new literature on center-region bargaining in what Treisman (2001) calls “territorially divided states” adopt similar logics. What is needed is a definition of who the decisive regional actors are (who are the leaders?), and then some theoretical specification of (1) their willingness to challenge the center and (2) their capacity to do so. On the former Soviet Union, see Bunce 1999, Treisman 2001, and Stoner-Weiss 2001, who specify these variables in different ways. For another way of giving substance to the same logic, this one focused on explaining cross-national unevenness in patterns of decentralization in Latin America, see Willis, Garman, and Haggard 1999.
or far-fetched. It is consistent with the basic logic advanced by Charles Tilly, Barrington Moore, Robert Brenner, Perry Anderson, and Margaret Levi in explaining variation in European state-building experiences.

As a partial test of this logic, this book offers case studies of institution building in six main regions. They are Senegal's groundnut basin, the Casamance region of Senegal, southern Côte d'Ivoire, the Korhogo region of northern Côte d'Ivoire, the Senegal River Valley, and the Asante region of southern Ghana. Taken together, these regions display strong variation in rural class and communal structure. From these six case studies, distinctive patterns of institutional choice – distinct institutional outcomes – emerge. My argument is that the state-centered factors that are often invoked to explain cross-case similarities and variations fall short in explaining the patterns uncovered here. The observed institutional outcomes cannot be explained without reference to local-level configurations of power and interest.

Analysis of the cases will show that societal constraints, so conceived, explain much of the variation in the rural institution-building strategies that are described here. The empirical material also shows that we still need more refined theories of rural political capacity, of resource constraints that can force regimes to make interregional tradeoffs, of how rulers can play one region off another, and of factors that can shift regimes' assessments of the political risks of exploiting, or not exploiting, certain regions. The usefulness of this book, I submit, is that it offers a theoretical base for building more refined and extended models. Such theories can contribute to thinking about politics in Africa, and about processes of national integration, in more nuanced and empirically grounded ways.