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The Paradox of Traditional Chiefs in Democratic Africa

The Paradox of Traditional Chiefs in Democratic Africa shows that unelected traditional leaders can facilitate democratic responsiveness. Ironically, the undemocratic character of chiefs gives them a capacity to organize responses to rural problems that elected politicians and state institutions lack. Specifically, chiefs' longer time horizons encourage investment in local institutions that enable the provision of local public goods. This is the paradox of traditional chiefs in democratic Africa: elected politicians can only respond effectively to rural constituents through institutions constructed and maintained by local leaders who are not worried about electoral terms. Furthermore, the critical role played by chiefs in brokering local development projects forces us to reassess how we understand the basis of their political influence during elections. This book examines the effects of traditional leaders on the electoral connection in Africa through a multimethod approach that combines qualitative research, surveys, and experiments, with particular attention to the Zambian case.

Kate Baldwin is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Yale University. She has conducted field research in Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Her work has been published in leading journals in political science, including the *American Political Science Review*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, *World Politics*, and *Comparative Politics*. An article based on the research in this book won an award for the best article published in the *American Journal of Political Science*.

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Kate Baldwin
Frontmatter
More information

Contents

List of Figures *page* xi
List of Tables xii
Acknowledgments xiii

PART I TOWARD A NEW THEORY OF CHIEFS
1 The Paradox of Chiefs 3
2 Conceptualizing Chiefs 20
3 Traditional Leaders and Democracy 53
4 Chiefs as Development Brokers 65

PART II CHIEFS, DEVELOPMENT, AND ELECTIONS IN ZAMBIA
5 Introduction to Zambia 85
6 Chiefs and Local Public Goods Provision 101
7 Electoral King Makers 121
8 Chiefs and the Voters' Calculus 140

PART III TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN AFRICA AND BEYOND
9 Chiefs and Government Responsiveness across Africa 159
10 Development Brokers Revisited 178

Appendix A: Cross-National Data Set of Chiefs' Power 189
Appendix B: List of Interviews and Interview Protocols 197
Appendix C: Data Set on Local Public Goods and Chiefs 201
Appendix D: Survey of Chiefs and Chiefdom-Level Data Set 207
Appendix E: Household Survey and Experiment 213
References 217
Index 231

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Kate Baldwin
Frontmatter
More information

Figures

1.1	Model of electoral responsiveness	*page* 7
2.1	Procedures for selecting headmen in precolonial Africa	24
2.2	De jure and de facto checks on chiefs in precolonial Africa	25
2.3	Powers of chiefs in precolonial Africa	27
2.4	Powers of chiefs in contemporary Francophone and non-Francophone Africa	38
2.5	Powers of chiefs in contemporary rural and urban Africa	40
2.6	Influence of chiefs by perceived responsibility for land administration	42
2.7	Influence of chiefs by perceived responsibility for dispute resolution	43
2.8	Standard terminology for positions in traditional hierarchy	47
3.1	Democracy and constitutional protections for chiefs	56
3.2	Democracy and the devolution of power to chiefs	59
4.1	Vote brokers versus development brokers	80
5.1	Map of the chiefdoms in Zambia	88
5.2	Embeddedness of chiefs and requests for private goods	93
6.1	Chief deaths and health facilities (1987)	111
6.2	Chief deaths and health facilities (2004)	112
6.3	Effect of chiefs' deaths on coproduced local public goods	113
6.4	Effect of chiefs' deaths on schools by chiefdom hierarchy	116
6.5	Effect of chiefs' deaths on non-coproduced goods	117
8.1	Effect of chiefs' opinions on vote choice	150
8.2	Robustness of effects of chiefs' opinions by concerns about coproduction	152
8.3	Effects of chiefs' opinions by coproduction concerns within demographic strata	155
9.1	Rural versus urban assessments of government performance by chiefs' power	173

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-12733-3 - The Paradox of Traditional Chiefs in Democratic Africa
Kate Baldwin
Frontmatter
More information

Tables

2.1	Powers of Chiefs in Contemporary Africa	*page* 33
4.1	Comparing the Predictions of the Vote-Broker and Development-Broker Theories	81
5.1	Complaints against Chiefs by Embeddedness	94
5.2	Summary of Zambian Data	98
6.1	Effects of Absent Chiefs, Aged Chiefs, and New Chiefs on Schools and Boreholes	119
7.1	Effects of Candidates' Relationships to Chiefs on Incumbent Vote Share	125
7.2	Effects of MP-Chief Connections on Infrastructure Provision	135
7.3	Effects of MP-Chief Connections on Level of Collaboration	138
8.1	Attributes of Individuals Most Likely to Vote with the Chief	147
8.2	Who Thinks Chiefs and MPs Are Both Important?	154
9.1	Contribution Rates by Involvement of Various Actors in Projects in Sierra Leone	166
A.1	Summary Statistics for the Constitutions Data Set	191
A.2	Summary Statistics for the Land Devolution Data Set	192
A.3	Status of Traditional Leaders Controlling for Time Period	193
A.4	Multivariate Analysis of Status of Traditional Leaders in Constitutions	194
A.5	Multivariate Analysis of Protection of Traditional Leaders in Constitutions	194
A.6	Multivariate Analysis of Devolution of Power Over Land	195
A.7	Multivariate Analysis of Devolution of Power Over Land with Country Fixed Effects	196
B.1	List of Interviews and Interview Protocols	198
C.1	Variable Construction for the Local Public Goods Data Set	202
C.2	Balance Statistics for Chief Deaths, 1994–1998	206
D.1	Variable Construction for the Chiefdom-Level Data Set	208
E.1	Balance Statistics for Experimental Assignment	214
E.2	Construction of the Key Conditioning Variables	215

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-12733-3 - The Paradox of Traditional Chiefs in Democratic Africa
Kate Baldwin
Frontmatter
More information

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When I first arrived in Zambia as a graduate student, I was not planning to conduct research on traditional chiefs. Instead, I was broadly interested in the institutions people used to gain access to state resources in rural communities. As a political scientist by training, my initial instinct was to look at how institutions such as political parties and state bureaucracies mediated the relationship between voters and the central government. However, on arriving on the ground in Zambia, I found these political institutions to be largely absent from the day-to-day operation of rural villages. Political parties rarely had active branches in rural areas, and bureaucratic agencies also had little presence. Who governed these communities instead? On a day-to-day level, they were governed by traditional leaders. If rural citizens had a problem, the first person they typically approached was their local headman or possibly the traditional chief above him. If they had a dispute with someone in their community, they took it to the traditional court system. A whole hierarchy of traditional institutions existed in parallel with the formal state.

Traditional institutions have largely been ignored by political scientists. Indeed, social scientists more generally have written little about how traditional institutions interact with formal state institutions and political processes. But I found these parallel institutions both fascinating and potentially politically important. The fact that these hereditary leaders maintained significant local power bases appeared at first glance to be deeply concerning, suggesting a real limit to the extent to which democratic practices and democratic accountability could take root. Thus began my concern with understanding the impact traditional institutions have on the practice of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, a preoccupation that has lasted almost a decade.

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More information

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