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.

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The Paradox of Traditional Chiefs in Democratic Africa

KATE BALDWIN
Yale University
For Kiran and Alden
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Acknowledgments

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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