Land Politics

Land Politics examines the struggle to control land in Africa through the lens of land titling in Zambia and Senegal. Contrary to standard wisdom portraying titling as an inevitable product of economic development, Lauren Honig traces its distinctly political logic and shows how informality is maintained by local actors. The book’s analysis focuses on chiefs, customary institutions, and citizens, revealing that the strength of these institutions and an individual’s position within them impact the expansion of state authority over land rights. Honig explores common subnational patterns within the two very different countries to highlight the important effects of local institutions, not the state’s capacity or priorities alone, on state building outcomes. Drawing on evidence from national land titling records, qualitative case studies, interviews, and surveys, this book contributes new insights into the persistence of institutional legacies and the political determinants of property rights.

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How Customary Institutions Shape
State Building in Zambia and Senegal

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This book is about the very local decisions that determine the expansion of state authority and the resilience of customary land institutions within the modern state. It draws upon insights shared by thousands of Senegalese and Zambian citizens who took the time to participate in surveys, focus groups, and interviews. I express my deep appreciation to the smallholder farmers, customary authorities, and bureaucrats in these two countries who contributed in a variety of ways to this project. The book would not have been possible without their willingness to share with me their experiences with land rights and customary institutions. Further, members of civil society organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and government agencies working in the domains of land and agriculture generously shared their time, shapefiles, reports, databases, and expertise. Confidentiality was a condition of these interactions, particularly given that land was a highly sensitive topic at the time in these two countries. I have preserved their anonymity in these pages but recognize that their contributions made this research possible.

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