PART I

INTRODUCTION
In 2020, Anthony Karbo was the Member of Parliament (MP) for Lawra, a town in Ghana’s far northwestern periphery. Beyond his role as MP, he doubled as the country’s Deputy Minister of Roads and Highways, with influence over a vital resource for his hinterland region. He is not the first member of his family to become a powerful elite. His father, Edward Puowele Karbo, is Lawra’s paramount chief, the area’s most senior traditional leader. His father’s uncle, Abeyifaa Karbo, was the previous chief, serving for almost three decades. Before that, Abeyifaa had been Lawra’s most influential politician, elected as the area’s first ever MP in 1954 while Ghana was still under colonial rule. Abeyifaa’s own father, Jorbie Akodam (J. A.) Karbo, was chief from 1935 to 1967. Before him, J. A.’s brother Binni was chief as well.¹

To many scholars, a central governance challenge in developing countries is the existence of what the Latin Americanist Guillermo O’Donnell (1993) famously termed “brown areas” on the map: subnational regions in which societal elites capture entrenched power in place of an absent state, leveraging their wealth or status to engage in clientelist politics that distort accountability, or even undermining state sovereignty through the private provision of violence.² In the words of Migdal (1988), poor governance outcomes in these regions arise from the ability of “strong societies” – and the elites like the Karbos who lead them – to dominate “weak states.”

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Lawra lies within a region of persistent state weakness that has long been an afterthought to state leaders. Across the colonial period and successive post-independence regimes, they kept the state’s footprint light in Northern Ghana, the hinterland to the north of the country’s more prosperous forest belt and coast. Fearing little political threat from the population, and with little wealth to extract, the state made consistently limited investments. The communities surrounding Lawra exemplify this experience at the state’s margins. Remote and seemingly cut off from the rest of the country for most of the twentieth century by a low quality road network, residents used to refer to the area as “overseas” and joke that they were “going to Ghana” when traveling south to the country’s cities. Into the 1980s, residents described the region as experiencing near “total neglect” from the state.

State weakness in Northern Ghana parallels other hinterlands in the developing world, both within and beyond Africa. Weakness is most immediately visible in hinterlands through the state’s limited presence: the formal trappings common to any state – its administrative offices and physical infrastructure – are often simply not there, with basic public services distant and hard to reach. This limited “territorial reach” often goes hand-in-hand with incapacity – the state’s inability to act on its leaders’ dictates. Building from Hersbt (2000), it is often assumed that regions of limited state presence are where the state is least impactful – least able to change society or displace pre-existing realities of governance.

This long-standing assumption that weak states in the rural periphery are subordinate to society continues to inform major research agendas on African politics, with parallels in related literatures on other developing regions. Those seeking to explain local public goods provision in rural areas like Lawra now often probe the role of nonstate societal elites like the Karbos, or instead study the norms and identities

3 Bob-Milliar (2011, 466).
8 Such claims are common throughout the literature on African states (Ekeh 1975, Bayart 1993, Chabal and Daloz 1999, Englebert 2000).
that inform self-provision and collective action,\textsuperscript{10} rather than explore the direct actions of the state itself. Scholars of political violence explain conflict in hinterlands as a function of the state’s absence and inability to police grievances in society.\textsuperscript{11} Others are increasingly focused on the present-day effects of precolonial societal institutions that pre-date the modern state altogether.\textsuperscript{12} The assumption underlying much of this latter research is that pre-existing societal institutions persist and explain modern outcomes because the weak state has been incapable of displacing them.\textsuperscript{13} Overall, each set of scholarship reasons that if the state is so weak in peripheral rural areas, we must look elsewhere to understand key features of politics.

This book pushes back against this reasoning. I propose a new approach to the rural periphery in Africa and beyond, departing from existing research in two key ways. First, I challenge the common assumption that a state’s limited physical presence indicates an inability to have large effects on society and politics. In many peripheral regions, states are not merely absent, they are \textit{scarce}. The economic language of scarcity – rather than more common terms like “limited state presence,” “limited territorial reach,” or the vague “state weakness” – provides a more appropriate metaphor for understanding the impacts of these states. Their actions and the resources they control are in short supply relative to demand for them in rural society. Much as the scarcity of a good in a marketplace increases its price, the scarcity of the state increases the relative economic weight that its isolated actions can have. The result is that even very absent and seemingly incapable states with limited “infrastructural power”\textsuperscript{14} and limited autonomy from societal elites – the most common definitions of state weakness – can still be incredibly impactful states. Because a scarce state’s actions have outsize effects in places that otherwise have limited contact with the state, relatively absent states may be...

\textsuperscript{10} Miguel and Gugerty (2005), Habyarimana et al. (2007, 2009), Cammett and Maclean (2014), Larson and Lewis (2017), Wilfahrt (2018). Paller (2019) extends a similar research agenda to urban areas.


\textsuperscript{13} Gennaioli and Rainer (2007, 185–186).

\textsuperscript{14} Mann (1988).
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potentially even more impactful at re-shaping society than in subnational regions where the state is less scarce and more capable. Simply counting a state’s physical footprint – its offices, infrastructure, and bureaucrats – does not provide a strong measure of its potential impact.\(^{15}\)

Second, I argue that a state that appears weak relative to a “strong society” can still have had such a large impact that it can be, paradoxically, the actor who forcefully made that society what it is, creating the very societal elites and institutions who now dominate it. Even in so-called brown areas – where the state appears weakest subnationally – society is not a pristine entity free of the state’s effects; these areas cannot be studied independently from the history of the state’s actions, however isolated and limited in scope those actions might appear. Taking these two claims together, the book implies that rather than zones of near statelessness, as Herbst’s (2000) framework suggests viewing rural regions with limited states, these areas are instead where the footprints of the state’s actions may be most visible in society and politics.

At the heart of this theory is the observation that the state’s scarcity – the fact that the state has so few points of contact with society and makes so few attempts at governing – is itself what allows the isolated actions that the state does take to have outsize effects. In regions with limited economic development, even very absent states still regularly control the allocation of resources far more valuable than those otherwise available in society. When such a state acts, it typically distributes some resources to society. But because the state is limited and incapable, these resources are often targeted narrowly – to small sets of beneficiaries – rather than reaching society at large. These beneficiaries receive economic windfalls that elevate them in socioeconomic status relative to everyone else.

Crucially, if the state remains scarce and takes few new actions that benefit new beneficiaries, the advantages created by earlier state actions compound over time. Seemingly minor and isolated state actions can then have large long-term effects on socioeconomic inequality, creating new elites and sparking substantial changes to societal institutions. In turn, state-generated inequality affects how societal actors contest with each other for political power. By contrast, and counterintuitively, in

\(^{15}\) This echoes a broader observation from literature on the African state outside political science that the state’s substantive effects can diverge from the state’s concrete “materiality,” or the simple sum of its physical parts, including because of the endogenous ways that societies respond to state absence (Hagmann and Peclard 2010, Nugent 2010b). Also see Mitchell (1999).
subnational regions where the state is more active, less resource advantaged relative to a more developed private sector, or both, the same specific state actions will be less impactful on society and politics. In line with the metaphor above, reductions in state scarcity give the state’s actions less substantive weight, or value.

The book explores this argument through a multi-method study of Northern Ghana, an archetypical hinterland in Africa, and also extends the theory to cases from other developing world regions, including Peru and the Philippines. Drawing in part on a natural experiment, the main analyses process trace the causal pathways through which Northern Ghana’s contemporary societal and political elite emerged, linking actions of the scarce modern state to new forms of economic and social stratification and then demonstrating how these socioeconomic changes determined access to political power, the nature of clientelist politics, and patterns of contemporary political violence.

I show that elite families like the Karbos of Lawra are very much creations of the modern state, not pre-existing societal actors who maintain power in spite of it. In an early attempt to keep the state’s footprint small, state leaders delegated grassroots authority, arbitrarily selecting families like the Karbos to serve as new “traditional” intermediaries in communities like Lawra. Simply gaining privileged contact with the scarce state set up this narrow group of families to benefit from future distributions of state resources, especially with the introduction of the public education system decades later. In turn, economic advantages from early access to state resources allowed these families to sustain political dynasties and consolidate power. This all occurred in a context in which the state was persistently weak in most ways the concept is defined, and despite the few actions it took not being implemented successfully by an incapable bureaucracy. Yet by delivering windfalls of resources more valuable than those in society, the state’s few actions had large, at times unintended, effects, helping to create the “strong societies” that later seemed to overpower the weak state.

This is a book about the politics of state scarcity. Rather than stopping at the observation that the state has a limited presence, immediately assuming it has had a limited impact, and looking elsewhere to explain rural society and politics, I take the state’s scarcity as my starting point and explore that scarcity’s consequences. I push back against common assumptions about the nature of state weakness in the developing world and question how scholars typically conceptualize the politics of the rural periphery. I also suggest new approaches for understanding the origins of...
economic and political inequality and studying the historical legacies of colonial and precolonial institutions.

1.1 INTRODUCING CONCEPTS: SCARCE STATES IN THE HINTERLAND

I focus on state–society relations in the hinterland. Hinterlands lie at the state’s periphery. While this is often the geographic periphery – distant from the capital and major cities – the periphery is better defined through a region’s political and economic relationship to the central state. I view hinterlands as economically marginal rural areas where the state makes limited attempts to project authority. In many cases, geographic, political, and economic peripheries overlap. But there are exceptions – geographically distant regions that are “core” to a state’s political attention and economic interests – such that geography alone cannot define the hinterland. Pierskalla et al. (2019) show that distance from the capital does not always account for where African states historically projected the most authority subnationally.

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17 Skocpol (1985).


leaders – whether autocrats or elected politicians – as the decision-makers guiding the state’s behavior.

In this definition, state and society are separate but in constant interaction, with each attempting to control and alter the other.\textsuperscript{20} State–society boundaries can be blurry in practice.\textsuperscript{21} In many African contexts, for example, traditional societal elites, such as chiefs, exercise forms of public authority separately from formal state institutions.\textsuperscript{22} But it is still analytically useful to focus on a more parsimonious division between formal state leaders and bureaucrats, on one side, and actors within society who may at times assist or complement the state’s activities, on the other.\textsuperscript{23} This is in part because the interview subjects featured in the remainder of this book themselves make this distinction, referring to societal elites like traditional chiefs as part of a shared “us” – members of their own communities – while labeling state leaders and bureaucrats as a distinct and distant “them” from which their communities demand resources.

Figure 1.1 situates hinterlands relative to other subnational regions using two core variables: the state’s \textit{presence} and the extent to which the

\textsuperscript{21} Mitchell (1999).
\textsuperscript{22} Lund (2006).
\textsuperscript{23} Similarly, see Nugent (2010\textsuperscript{b}).
state holds resource advantages relative to society. States are only minimally physically present in some subnational areas, with few officers or administrative outposts that could even begin implementing state leaders’ policies. Herbst (2000) focuses on the limited presence of African states, observing the few officials they post to peripheral regions and the constraints low road density and difficult geographies have created for their ability to reach far-flung populations.\(^{24}\) The state’s capacity – whether bureaucratic, fiscal, coercive, or informational\(^{25}\) – will typically be lower where the state is less present: where there are many fewer officials, the state will generally be less able to execute leaders’ directives. In turn, low capacity makes it more difficult to expand the state’s presence into new territories.

But presence and capacity are still theoretically distinct.\(^{26}\) The stereotypical bloated urban bureaucracy controlled by a machine party represents an incapable, but very present state – with (too) many offices and employees, even if ineffective at implementing policies amidst corruption and clientelism. More importantly, the state’s relative absence in a given territory is often a strategic choice, not simply an outcome of limited capacity. Herbst (2000) suggests that limited state presence primarily results from the cost of projecting power across distance – that it is too hard for weak states to extend across difficult terrain. But Boone (2003) demonstrates that postcolonial African leaders often kept the state much more absent than they were capable of in some regions as a form of bargaining with local elites.\(^{27}\) States remain especially absent in some hinterlands because state leaders see little political or economic benefit from making the state more present, not because it is too far.\(^{28}\) In the absence of natural resources or cash crops, there may be too few economic rents to extract from the local economy to justify new state investment. Alternatively, the lack of a serious political challenge may render a region not worth actively coopting or coercing.

\(^{24}\) For other examples, see O’Donnell (1993), Acemoglu et al. (2015), Soifer (2015), Muller-Crepon et al. (2020), and the many studies of African politics using distance from the capital as a proxy for state strength.
\(^{26}\) Capacity and territorial reach form separate dimensions within Mann’s (1988) “state infrastructural power” (Soifer 2008).
\(^{27}\) Other scholars similarly document African leaders’ strategic manipulation of their states’ presence across territory by choosing where to draw administrative boundaries and site offices. For example, Grossman and Lewis (2014), Hassan (2016), and Hassan and Sheely (2017).
\(^{28}\) Outside the African context, see Slater and Kim (2015).
The second dimension in Figure 1.1 is the state’s resource advantage relative to society. States in the developing world are often what Chandra (2016, 33) labels “dominant states,” with control over economic resources that significantly exceed those in the private market. By resources, I mean that states retain discretionary control over a wide range of economically valuable private and local public goods. States have the ability to decide which areas receive infrastructure investments and access to basic services like health and electricity, as well as to allocate private goods to individuals such as employment, land rights, and opportunities to develop human capital through public education. What is crucial to Figure 1.1 is not that the state has control over a large absolute amount of resources, but that it is relatively advantaged versus its society — that the ratio between the economic value of what contact with the state can provide to what is otherwise available in the private market is high.

Even as many states in the developing world appear poor from a cross-national perspective, they still regularly control resources far greater than in their local economies. A central feature of political competition in many developing countries, especially in Africa, has long been that the state serves as an incredibly valuable prize to compete to control because that control provides access to economic returns not available elsewhere. In the postcolonial world, the infrastructure of the modern state mostly emerged exogenously to society, endowed from the start with significant external resource advantages. In Africa, postcolonial states inherited many of the colonial state’s advantages and then were able to sustain them despite limited fiscal capacity through access to natural resource rents, relatively easy to enforce taxes on exports, and external development assistance. In addition, the sources of the state’s resources can be highly concentrated in space: extraction is often focused subnationally on more prosperous regions, while remaining relatively minimal elsewhere. The result is that in less developed subnational regions, such as many hinterlands, the state can have far more resources to spend than are present in society.

That many developing states’ relative resource advantages have emerged exogenously to local societies is important for understanding the

29 Alternatively, in the words of Bates (1983), these states disproportionately control the scarce benefits of “modernity.”