The Scarce State

States are often minimally present in the rural periphery. Yet a limited presence does not mean a limited impact. Isolated state actions in regions where the state is otherwise scarce can have outsized, long-lasting effects on society. *The Scarce State* reframes our understanding of the political economy of hinterlands through a multi-method study of Northern Ghana alongside shadow cases from other world regions. Drawing on a historical natural experiment, the book shows how the contemporary economic and political elite emerged in Ghana’s hinterland, linking interventions by an ostensibly weak state to new socio-economic inequality and grassroots efforts to reimagine traditional institutions. The book demonstrates how these state-generated societal changes reshaped access to political power, producing dynastic politics, clientelism, and violence. *The Scarce State* challenges common claims about state-building and state weakness, provides new evidence on the historical origins of inequality, and reconsiders the mechanisms linking historical institutions to contemporary politics.

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The Scarce State
Inequality and Political Power in the Hinterland

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Acknowledgments

As it goes to press, I have been working on this book, or at least thinking about it, for fourteen years. In some sense, it is still my first academic project.

I first traveled to Northern Ghana in 2008 to interview members of the Konkomba community for an undergraduate thesis about the violence that gripped the region in 1994 and 1995. My coursework had taught me to expect that the formal state would be “weak” and incapable in remote towns like Saboba, unable to project much authority. And it became clear quickly that the state’s presence there was limited. I still have a vivid memory of spending the dark pre-dawn hours of a July morning waiting at the Saboba bus station – with only one outbound bus a day, you really didn’t want to miss it – sitting with one of the lone employees of the district post office. Originally from Accra, far to the south, he complained about his misfortune of having been assigned to such a distant place. He confided that he spent as little time at his job as he possibly could – just enough to not get fired – and otherwise was back in the city with his family. That’s what he was waiting for the bus to go do. It would be easy to conclude from our conversation that the state couldn’t possibly be very powerful in a place where its (already few) employees shirked their duties to try to stay away.

But this view of the state clashed significantly with what my interview respondents in Saboba had kept trying to tell me during the preceding days. In their accounts, the state was absolutely central to what had happened during the 1994–1995 conflict: the state created the underlying grievances that generated conflict, its actions helped directly spark the
violence, and it was the state whose recognition and attention the competing parties were fighting over. Everything I heard kept boiling back down to the state and all the ways it had influenced and reshaped local communities. How could it be that the central state was both so limited in what it could do, and yet, in residents’ eyes, still the core causal force behind some of their most important political experiences?

Since 2008, two things have remained stuck in my mind: on one hand, how to explain the paradox that is at the heart of the book – how a state could both be “weak” in all traditional senses of the term and yet so clearly powerful in its ability to influence society; on the other hand, a desire to try to retell the story of the Konkomba and their neighboring communities more properly once I had the tools and skills to do better than a novice college student.

After I finished my first book, I pivoted back to this project to try give both my best shot. While the book’s scope has broadened, ideas dating to 2008 are still at its heart. I’ve now spent the last two years writing it in the midst of a pandemic, witnessing what the literature tells us is instead a “strong” state – my own, held up so often as the reference against which African states get lazily compared – fail repeatedly at basic tasks of state capacity. This has only deepened my conviction that something is off with how we political scientists think about state power and weakness, a theme I return to in the following pages.

I am indebted to many people who helped make this book possible. I thank all the Ghanaians who spoke with me in interviews over many years. I hope I have done their experiences some justice, though I’m sure I’ve also failed to understand things along the way.

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