Introduction: Writing African Elections

The constituency-level chairman and secretary of the party are busy men. We meet in a bar, where they have other appointments and business to pursue. The chairman's mobile phone rings all the time. He declines most of the calls; but still he is talking constantly, walking a little away from the table where we sit each time he decides to answer. The secretary is left to do most of the interview. Initially suspicious, he becomes more enthusiastic as he talks. He came into politics, he tells us, to 'serve my people'. Yes, he acknowledges with a smile, his party work has brought him personal benefits, though he receives no salary for it. Both Ghana's national president and the local constituency member of parliament (MP) are from his party and 'the more your party continues to stay in power, the more your aspirations will come to fruition'. But he is serious about service to his people. He proudly points to the improvements to the constituency under the current government and MP: new infrastructure projects have employed local labour and provided public amenities.[1]

Yet the constituency is not just one community, and as he talks it is apparent that he sees the population as comprised of multiple distinct groups, each with its spokespeople, all of whom must be listened to. Each little group must be rewarded for loyalty to the party. Fishermen are helped with fuel for outboard engines; small traders with loans and simple equipment; neighbourhoods with improved drains; parents with school transports for their children; and young people with an apprenticeship scheme. There are distinct scholarships for children from the Muslim community, as well as gifts of food for Eid; and there are donations to church-building projects. These men are so busy because elections are close – as the chairman complained in between phone calls 'when people see me, they ask for money'. The party office is full each day of people seeking help for their community, or personal support with school fees, or medical bills. These are not just requests, they are demands: if they are

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[1] Fieldwork notes, Cape Coast, Ghana, 1 September 2016.

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not met, the claim-makers will denounce him – and the MP – for being unwilling to help. The chair and secretary enjoy their status, but evidently feel constantly under pressure to show their virtue as patrons; as the chairman said, with a sigh, in a phrase that combined self-justification with naturalizing assertion, 'That is African politics!'

Election officials are also busy before elections. We meet one in his office in Kenya while his staff count bales of information manuals and handbooks that have arrived ready for distribution to polling station staff and party agents. This is not a public office; a police guard at the gate keeps casual visitors away. The walls are hung with organizational charts and information posters that denounce vote buying and encourage citizens to join the electoral register. The official's phone rings occasionally as we speak; the callers are junior officials reporting in on preparations. The official first trained as a teacher, and after temporary work as a polling station official applied to join the expanding staff of the electoral commission. He still thinks of himself as a teacher – educating people in their rights and duties as citizens. His work has taken him all over the country, and he is determinedly national in his outlook; the voters on his current area of work deserve the same treatment, and are under the same obligations, as those anywhere else. Like the party chairman and secretary, he sees himself as a servant of the public, but his public is more clearly national and undifferentiated. His role is to educate and guide them, not to attend to their particular problems: virtue, for him, lies in the proper performance of the processes that allow people to cast their ballot and to fulfil their duties as citizens.[2]

The election official and party organizer are both deeply committed to elections. The self-image of each is that of the moral actor: they make claims on others to behave properly, and they respond to such claims themselves. Yet they seem to have very different ideas of where virtue lies. In this, they are not unusual. The elections that we have studied are full of moral claims-making. Politicians, voters and public all make demands of one another in terms of how people should behave, of what it is to be a virtuous leader, a good citizen, or a righteous official. Such claims-making has been instrumentally employed to promote political projects: building the state, defending the community, pursuing individual or collective wealth and status. But those projects are nonetheless both represented and understood as moral ventures.

That point – that elections are a focus for multiple, discordant, appeals to morality and claims to virtue – is at the heart of this study of elections in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda. Such a starting point will seem strange to

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[2] Fieldwork notes, Kisumu, Kenya, 7 July 2017.

many readers. Elections, after all, are notorious for duplicity and for the ruthless pursuit of power, in Africa as elsewhere in the world. Electoral violence is always a lurking possibility, and sometimes a shocking reality. Yet elections are also full of claims and demands that are explicitly moral – by which we mean not that they are good in some objective way, but rather that people cast them in terms of what is right, and what should be done. A concern with virtue – one's own, and that of others – is part of the stuff of electoral behaviour. Yet virtue is contested – people may have different ideas of what it is to be good. *That the same individuals might be torn between, or feel the need to balance, different ideas of what it is to be good is central to our argument.*

This book represents an attempt to theorize the competing conceptions of virtue that come to the fore during elections in the three countries that we study, and to understand their significance. In making this argument, we take inspiration from previous work that has foregrounded the importance of morality – and the limits of moral domains – in public life in Africa (such as Ekeh 1975; Lonsdale 1992a; de Sardan 1999). But we do not see what we call the moral economy of elections – a term unpacked at greater length in the first chapter – as a static form that provides a culturalist explanation of how elections function that is distinctive to Africa. Rather we use this term to describe a dynamic public process of claims-making in which more than one idea of virtue – that is, of morally proper behaviour – is in play. Our aim here is to identify the main ideas of virtue – or registers, as we call them – that are deployed around elections in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda, and to investigate the way that these shape how individuals think about elections and their relationship with the state.

We do not think that the registers that make up this moral economy are uniform across Africa; indeed there is variation even within our three cases. Nor do we think that the presence of a moral economy is unique to Africa. Representative politics everywhere involve claims-making (Saward 2006), and those claims have everywhere a moral aspect (Brunk 1980; Wolff 1994). As others have argued of Thailand (Walker 2008), the Philippines (Schaffer 2002, 2007b), the United Kingdom (Haste 2006) and the United States (Prasad et al. 2009; Skitka and Bauman 2008), electoral politics draws on ideas of virtue. What changes is therefore not the existence of a moral economy, but the way that ideas of virtue are expressed. Paying attention to this moral economy, and the registers that animate it, is important because, without it we are left with an impoverished understanding of what elections mean to candidates, officials and voters. In turn, this blind spot undermines our ability to explain some of the most interesting questions about elections in Africa and beyond. Why do many people invest so much time, effort and

resources in elections, even those that are clearly not going to be free and fair? Why do the numerous and expensive voter education programmes funded by international donors do so little to discourage candidates from handing out money and other private goods? Why, when many candidates clearly believe that handouts are an effective electoral strategy, do those who spend the most sometimes lose? Does participation in elections actually turn voters into democrats? In the pages that follow we argue that attempts to answer these questions without engaging with the moral economy of elections, and with how the various claims that are made during campaigns shape popular experiences of the polls, will ultimately be unsuccessful. It is only when we recognize that elections are the sites of multiple moral projects that we can fully understand how they may contribute to – or undermine – efforts to build certain kinds of states and certain kinds of people.

Elections by secret ballot and adult suffrage, we argue, are always a way to pursue a particular kind of state-building – to persuade people that they should understand themselves as citizens, owing loyalty to a state that treats each citizen-voter equally, and able to make claims to, and about, virtue in those terms. That was the aim of the election official described earlier – and of many others like him around the world. Such demands have had a disciplinary, at times coercive, edge. Election officials insist on listing and ordering; they demand that citizen-voters see themselves as dutiful, numbered subjects. The moral claims-making pursued by elections, then, has been a way to create power. These efforts are often overlooked in the rush to highlight the multiple failures of elections and in some cases to suggest that elections are not suitable ways to select governments in the African context. Yet we argue – in contrast to Ekeh (1975) who explicitly contrasts moral and immoral publics on the continent – that the understandings of virtue asserted by the electoral official are every bit as 'African' as those of the branch chairman.

Around those state-building projects, with their emphasis on good citizenship, swirl multiple other projects of personal power or collective advancement in which very different moral claims are made. When campaigning politicians claim to be virtuous leaders, they may talk in national terms, of citizenship and the state. Yet they may also signal their virtue in other ways: as champions of local interest against outsiders, or against the state itself; as ethnic patrons willing to reward 'their' people; as big men (or more rarely women) willing and able to help out neighbours. Voters similarly press moral claims. Very often, they insist on a politics of presence and personality, demanding that leaders acknowledge them and treat them with respect.

These multiple kinds of claims-making and virtue signalling sometimes conflict, and sometimes coincide. People – voters, politicians, officials – live between and across different moral possibilities. The characters described earlier may, at first glance, be considered ideal types: the party official to embody a patrimonial politics in which personal ties and presence are central; the election official epitomizes a civic virtue that foregrounds bureaucratic process and national citizenship. As contrasting ideals, those are good to think with. Yet as people, both these characters live the messiness of human subjectivity. As we will argue, the history of the elections that we have studied suggests that any individual is susceptible – to varying degrees – to quite different kinds of moral demands, and able to make quite different moral claims. Sometimes, these may clash; sometimes they may be mutually reinforcing. As Adebayo Olukoshi (1998) and Richard Banégas (2007) have argued, the moral claims of clientship and electoral citizenship, or ethnic consciousness and civic identity, are not always incompatible. The branch chairman may on occasion speak the language of national citizenship and duty; the election official will not be immune to the affective power of ties of ethnicity and localism. There are different possibilities of virtue, and people live across them, and sometimes have to choose between them, as they justify what they do, and make demands on others. In contrast to a literature that has tended to emphasize the authorizing capacity of patrimonial ties and the lack of affective power of civic institutions and ideals (Chabal and Daloz 1999), we demonstrate that both resonate deeply with officials, citizens and leaders – and that the complex interplay of the two has profound consequences for the impact of elections.

I.1   Understanding Elections

Understanding elections in this way can help us to rethink the answers to recurring questions about elections that are relevant well beyond the three countries studied here, and beyond Africa.

The first relates to the vigour of elections. Why is it that, even where national power does not change hands, and there is widespread domestic and international scepticism about the integrity of the electoral process, incumbent regimes – and individual politicians – pour resources and time into elections, and why do voters often turn out in such large numbers? In Africa, this question seems especially pressing in the face of a persistent strand of scholarship that has suggested that the oppositional politics of multi-partyism, or the secret ballot – or both – are fundamentally unsuited to an African political culture of collectivism and consensus (see for example Lumumba-Kasongo 2005; also Anyang' Nyong'o 1988; Adedeji

1994; Owusu 1992). Yet both levels of popular engagement and survey work suggest that multiparty democracy is popular (Gyimah-Boadi 2015; Cheeseman and Sishuwa 2020). It is no doubt true that the use of coercion and financial inducements explain some electoral participation (Ninsin 2006). Yet research in our case studies suggests another reason: elections enable voters and politicians to make moral claims and present themselves as virtuous actors, and this both encourages and strengthens their participation.

The second, linked, question is about the widespread persistence – across the world – of behaviours that contravene the law, and international electoral norms. Why have practices such as what is often called 'vote buying' proved so durable in the face of repeated interventions – from a host of domestic and international actors – to promote very different norms? Our case studies suggest that, as has been argued for elections outside Africa (Schaffer 2008), behaviours that are formally illegal may be compatible with – or even demanded by – conceptions of virtue that exert a powerful hold over the popular imagination. To put this another way, deviation from official electoral rules is sustainable not simply because it is in an individual's best interest to do so, but because it is often possible for such actions to be justified, both to oneself and others, in terms of virtue. As we will set out in greater detail subsequently, popular understandings of what is justifiable – or even expected – are then shaped by socio-economic conditions, local experience, political structures and broader debates about what it means to be a good leader and a good citizen, which may vary both across space and across time.

At the same time, our work demonstrates the shortcomings of reductive frameworks that solely view African politics through the lens of ethnicity and patrimonial politics (for a critique see Aapengnuo 2010). Indeed, a third question that underpins our study is why, given the obvious importance of communal identities to voting patterns in many countries, aspiring leaders – particularly those vying for national office – spend a great deal of time during their campaigns emphasizing their commitment to the national good. Rather than being used to simply push a small sectional agenda, large rallies and television appearances are often used to extol the virtues of the rule of law and development for all (on rallies, see Paget 2019b). It is easy to be cynical, and dismiss these statements as insincere words designed either to placate international donors, or to try to curry favour with other communities whose support might be needed to win an election in multi-ethnic states (Arriola 2013). If this was the case, however, it would not make sense for candidates operating in less high-profile races in more homogenous constituencies to adopt this approach – and yet they do. We argue that the moral economy of elections

provides a much more compelling explanation of why campaigns are framed in this way. Leaders go to great lengths to balance patrimonial promises to their own groups with classically civic appeals because this is how they like to think of themselves – as responsible leaders who can deliver to both nation and community – and because this is what members of *their own* community and broader constituencies demand. Failure to achieve this balance leaves candidates vulnerable to being accused of 'tribalism' – a particularly dangerous criticism – and of being seen as unfit for public office. Thus, despite the overriding focus on ethnicity around elections, political leaders ignore civic virtue at their peril.

The fourth important question that our approach opens up is the unpredictability of electoral outcomes. Although sitting presidents in Africa win 88 per cent of the elections that they contest (Cheeseman 2015a), sub-national elections are extremely competitive and incumbents often lose either at the primary or general election stage. More broadly, elections in authoritarian contexts may still involve real competition and often see heated campaigns and close outcomes (Sjöberg 2011). This raises the important question of what makes a candidate successful. If elections are – as some have argued – all about coercion and/or the transfer of money and forms of clientelistic exchange (Odukoya 2007), why does the biggest spender not always win? Our answer is that what legitimates a candidate is not simply the amount that they give out, as sometimes implied, but how effectively they present this as virtuous behaviour, and what else they are believed to have done, and are regarded as likely to do, to protect and promote the interests of their constituents broadly understood. As others have argued, election gifts offer a public demonstration that a candidate has various qualities – generosity, accessibility, resourcefulness – that are important to voters (Kramon 2017). But this only works, we argue, if a candidate's broader reputation sustains the claims that they make during elections. Someone seen to be a liar or a sellout may find that their handouts are interpreted not as gifts but as illegitimate bribes, and so do them as much harm as good (Lockwood 2019b).

Beyond these issues, we are also interested in a fifth question: do elections contribute to what some would call democratic consolidation? Staffan Lindberg's claim (2006) that holding repeated elections, even those not of a high standard, leads to an increase in the quality of civil liberties has been repeatedly questioned. Both Lindberg and his critics have made their case through cross-national quantitative analysis (see for example Bratton 2013b; Greenberg and Mattes 2013). We approach this question from a different angle. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data and looking at constituency-level politics, we ask whether elections change political subjectivities – how individuals think

about themselves and their relationship to the state – in a way that makes these align with international norms of liberal democracy. Our answer is that they may, but that there is nothing inevitable about this. Instead, our three cases suggest that elections often simultaneously reinforce conceptions of virtue that both support and challenge the liberal democratic project, with complex and often unpredictable implications for national politics. This moral economy has played out differently in each of our three countries. Taking a similar analytical approach elsewhere would no doubt reveal further variations, both in terms of the dominant registers of virtue and in terms of the way that they play out.

Finally, we engage with the debate about what is required for effective democratic consolidation in the African context. In part because the problems facing African political systems are often said to result from the way that patrimonial networks dominate and undermine formal state institutions (Chabal and Daloz 1999), there is a latent assumption in much of the literature that strengthening democratic bodies, and so consolidating democracy, requires the eradication of patrimonialism (see for example Lindberg 2010). Against this we suggest that at times patrimonial claims-making may be productive for democracy. While the eradication of patrimonialism might lead to greater confidence in the electoral system and a number of other positive gains such as reducing the tendency of elections to encourage corruption (Cheeseman 2015a), it might also undermine many of the affective ties that currently bind citizens to political leaders and hence the political system itself. This would risk not only engendering apathy but might also weaken the constraints on leaders by eroding their moral accountability to their communities. If this is true, then fostering more stable and rooted systems of democracy depends not on eradicating patrimonialism, but rather on channelling it in ways that harness its affective power while minimizing its corrupt and divisive potential.

As should already be clear, this is not a book about who wins elections, nor is it intended as a litany of electoral failings. Our concern is with the moral work that is done during election campaigns, and the broader impact that this has. What we are really interested in, in other words, is *the role that elections play in authorizing and constraining political action*.

I.2   Theorizing African Elections

In approaching these questions, we have followed in the footsteps of many other scholars who have written on elections, particularly in Africa. But our predecessors have not established a single path, and our work is shaped by studies that fall into three broad camps. One branch of

literature has been concerned with elections as projects of state authority. A second track has concerned itself with the way that elections are shaped by existing cultural forms and ideas of identity; in this literature, ballots are always fundamentally about local projects of influence-building or advancement. A third path – now by far the most heavily trodden – understands elections as a journey to 'democratization' and has, as Dickson Eyoh (1998) dryly observed, 'a strong proclivity to combine analysis and prescription'. Where it is judged that democratization has not been reached, the central question becomes 'why elections fail?' (Norris 2015) – not what they do. The divisions between these paths have been characterized less by argument than by non-communication; they have largely proceeded separately, with little attempt to share reference points. But they are perhaps more complementary than this lack of engagement might suggest.

The idea that elections are, above all, ventures in state authority lay at the heart of the rapid expansion of the franchise in late-colonial Africa: this was part of what David Apter (1955) called 'institutional transfer'. Academic commentators, some of them doubling up as policy advisors to colonial governments, did not necessarily expect elections in Africa to replicate those in Europe or North America: as British political scientist William Mackenzie observed with unsettling prescience 'in the future we shall hear much about how elections have failed in Indonesia, or failed in Southern Sudan' (1957: 255). But he and others all shared the assumption that elections by adult suffrage were powerful mass events that could attach popular sentiments to 'symbols which comprehend the entire nation' (Shils 1960: 287; also Coleman 1960). Elections, that is, taught a citizenship that accepted and bolstered the state. The rapid abandonment of multiparty politics across much of the continent after independence led some academic observers to conclude that, in fact, Africa's politicians, or voters – or both – were unready for the responsibilities of the secret ballot (Morgenthau 1964; Huntington 1965; Zolberg 1966, 1968; Owusu 1971). But others pointed to the persistence of elections, even under single-party and "no-party" regimes, and argued that even 'elections without choice' did important political work: they produced and reproduced state power, even when they did not allocate it (Hermet, Rose and Rouquié 1978; Lavroff 1978). Elections were, in Guy Hermet's memorable phrase, 'both educational and anaesthetic' (1978: 14): they encouraged people to internalize a sense that they were subject to the authority of the state whose officials listed and registered them and made them queue (Bayart et al. 1978; Bayart 1978; Hayward 1987).

The argument that elections are primarily about the production of state power has persisted in at least some scholarship since multiparty elections returned to sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s (Odukoya 2007; Young 1993). Some have argued that – in Africa and elsewhere – multiparty elections have been promoted by the United States and others to ensure political continuity and so perpetuate neoliberal economics (Lumumba-Kasongo 2005; Robinson 2013). In other words, on this view multiparty polls are the device of a Gramscian 'passive revolution' (Abrahamsen 1997: 147–151) that has allowed the maintenance of national and international forms of power through what Mkandawire (1999) has called 'choiceless elections' (see also Bayart and Ellis 2000: 225–226). The implication of this literature is that multi-partyism is irrelevant, or even inimical. While some argue that only dramatic economic change can bring 'comprehensive democratisation of the state' (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2006), others follow Claude Ake's suggestion that liberal democracy is too focussed on the individual at the expense of 'collective rights' (Nasong'o and Murunga 2007: 6). Even some of the scholars who recognize that multiparty elections have the potential to produce genuine change have nonetheless argued that too often they become a tool of authoritarianism, suggesting that a 'corrupt and irresponsible African elite' (Ihonvbere 1996: 344; see also Ninsin 2006) has stripped elections of their transformative potential (Levitsky and Way 2002). In its most pessimistic version, this argument suggests that even where plural elections lead to a transfer of power, the result is no more than – as Osaghae (1999: 21) has put it – 'a drama of circulation of elites'.

The scholarship discussed so far has been only intermittently engaged with research on how people understand elections in terms of non-national identities and values, and what happens at a local level. A very different literature also began with the study of late-colonial elections, with perhaps the most high-profile strand offering a culturalist critique of elections by secret ballot and adult suffrage. In its classic form, this literature claimed that multiparty politics was unsuited to African political cultures that were concerned not with aggregating individual decisions through competitive processes, but with group consensus and the defence of what a later literature called a 'moral matrix of legitimate government' (Schatzberg 1993: 451; also Gray 1963; Ake 1991, 1993; Karlström 1996; Ayittey 2006).

This work raises important questions about political subjectivities and about the nature of emotion and affect, topics that have been explored from a range of perspectives in more recent scholarship. As Peter Pels (2007: 107) has pointed out, elections may seem to be top-down projects of discipline, but popular involvement may have quite different drivers. A series of studies have asked why people vote or involve themselves in