

The Politics of State Scarcity

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."

¹ Lentz (2006, 61, 324), Awedoba et al. (2009, 52–53), Brankopowers (2017).

² Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006), Acemoglu and Robinson (2008), Acemoglu et al. (2014).

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.³ Into the 1980s, residents described the region as experiencing near "total neglect" from the state.⁴

State weakness in Northern Ghana parallels other hinterlands in the developing world, both within and beyond Africa.⁵ 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.⁶ This limited "territorial reach" often goes hand-in-hand with incapacity – the state's inability to act on its leaders' dictates.⁷ Building from Herbst (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.⁸ 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*,⁹ or instead study the norms and identities

³ Bob-Milliar (2011, 466).

⁴ Bob-Milliar (2011, 459).

⁵ O'Donnell (1993), Herbst (2000), Scott (2009).

⁶ Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg, and Wibbels (2018).

⁷ Mann (1988), Soifer (2008).

⁸ Such claims are common throughout the literature on African states (Ekeh 1975, Bayart 1993, Chabal and Daloz 1999, Englebert 2000).

⁹ Baldassarri and Grossman (2011), Acemoglu et al. (2014), Grossman (2014), Baldwin (2015, 2019a, 2019b), Baldwin and Mvukiyehe (2015), Gottlieb (2017).

that inform self-provision and collective action,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.¹¹ Others are increasingly focused on the present-day effects of precolonial societal institutions that pre-date the modern state altogether.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.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 *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”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

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.

¹¹ Fearon and Laitin (2003), Buhaug and Rod (2006), Elfverson (2015), Rudolfson (2017), Lewis (2020), Muller-Crepon et al. (2020).

¹² Englebert (2000), Gennaioli and Rainer (2007), Nunn (2008), Nunn and Wantchekon (2011), Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2013), Wilfahrt (2018), Kramon (2019), Paine (2019), Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2020).

¹³ Gennaioli and Rainer (2007, 185–186).

¹⁴ Mann (1988).

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 2010*b*). 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.¹⁶ Hinterlands are where the politics of state scarcity come into sharpest relief. Going out to the limit, to the weakest parts of a weak state, and still uncovering evidence of the state’s ability to transform society and politics can help illustrate the flaws in existing approaches to studying state-building.

I define the state as the set of bureaucratic organizations that acts out the orders of state leaders as they attempt to govern. Although standard in political science,¹⁷ this organizational conceptualization of the state is narrower than in more anthropological literature that focuses on the state as a social imaginary and process of political contestation, including by examining the roles that societal actors political scientists would typically label as “nonstate” can play in also performing state-like functions.¹⁸ This latter work is useful in suggesting ways that the state’s effects can extend beyond the physical contours of the state’s bureaucratic presence, but I maintain the simpler and standard definition here for conceptual clarity. And while a large literature focuses on the private incentives and principal–agent relationships that determine interactions among actors within the state – such as between local bureaucrats and national state leaders¹⁹ – these distinctions are outside the scope of my argument. I instead simplify and collapse to viewing the state as a unitary organ that follows its leaders’ directives. I focus on national state

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Skocpol (1985).

¹⁸ Mitchell (1999), Lund (2006), Blundo and Le Meur (2009), Hagmann and Peclard (2010), Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (2014). On nonstate provision in political science, see Cammett and Maclean (2014).

¹⁹ Berwick and Christia (2018), Hassan (2020).

| | | State's Relative Resource Advantage | |
|------------------|----------------|---|--|
| | | Low (non-advantaged) | High (advantaged) |
| State's Presence | Low (absent) | Example(s): Rural hinterlands controlled by drug barons or rebel militias | State scarcity Example(s): Typical rural hinterlands |
| | High (present) | Example(s): Urban areas and rural cash crop zones | Example(s): Poor rural areas with intensive state investment or policing |

FIGURE 1.1 Subnational regions defined by state presence and resource advantages. The state's presence and relative resource advantages define four categories of subnational region. The book primarily focuses on the condition of state scarcity in the top-right cell.

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.²⁰ State–society boundaries can be blurry in practice.²¹ In many African contexts, for example, traditional societal elites, such as chiefs, exercise forms of public authority separately from formal state institutions.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.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 *presence* and the extent to which the

²⁰ Mann (1988), Migdal (1988), Hassan, Mattingly, and Nugent (2022).

²¹ Mitchell (1999).

²² Lund (2006).

²³ Similarly, see Nugent (2010b).

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 informational²⁵ – 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.

²⁵ Evans et al. (1985), Levi (1988), Weber (1946 [1919]), and Scott (1998), respectively.

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.²⁹ 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 control 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.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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."

³⁰ Bates (1983, 2008).

³¹ Bates (1981), van de Walle (2001).

effects these states can have. Traditional conceptualizations focus on the state's role as an extractor – even a predator or bandit – that has resources only insofar as it takes them.³² But where the state's resource advantages are accumulated externally to a local society, it is more likely to become a *net provider*, giving out more than it takes back. In hinterlands where there is relatively little wealth worth attempting to extract, the short-run risk of increased taxation from contact with the state can be quite minimal; effects of the state are most likely from the resources it gives, not via society's attempts to avoid its extraction.³³

Viewed in combination, these two variables define four broad categories of subnational regions represented by the cells of Figure 1.1. These cells can be labeled by their combination of the two dimensions: {presence, resource advantages}. Most hinterland regions in the developing world, including the example of Lawra in Northern Ghana described above, fall within the top-right of Figure 1.1, in the {low, high}, or {absent, advantaged}, cell. These regions are zones of *state scarcity*: they correspond to underdeveloped rural areas in which the state has a limited formal presence, yet also has control over the distribution of resources that dwarf those otherwise available in the local economy.³⁴ Demand for the state's resources in society significantly outpaces supply, creating scarcity. Subnational hinterlands with scarce states are the primary focus of the book.

By contrast, diagonally across from these hinterlands in the bottom-left of Figure 1.1 are subnational regions in the {high, low}, or {present, non-advantaged}, cell. These are areas where the state is instead much more active and in which the private economy is more developed, reducing the gap in value between any resources potentially provided by the state and those that can be secured independently in society. This cell represents political and economic core regions of developing countries. The difference between the {absent, advantaged} and {present, non-advantaged} cells is not purely rural versus urban. Examples of the {present, non-advantaged} cell include both urban areas and rural areas

³² Or at least convinces society to give them to it. Levi (1988), Tilly (1990), Olson (1993), Scott (1998, 2009).

³³ This contrasts notably with the approach in Scott (1998, 2009).

³⁴ Limited economic development is endogenous to state scarcity. The economy is typically least developed where the state is least capable of providing economic infrastructure and enforcement (Besley and Persson 2009, Dincecco 2018). Meanwhile, state leaders often invest the least in expanding the state's presence in the first place in resource-poor regions with little economic potential (Boone 2003).

that are cash crop zones or other sites of high value economic activities (e.g., mining), where the state has incentives to invest in building up a presence to extract.

The two other off-diagonal cells in Figure 1.1 are relatively less common but still exist in subnational pockets in some developing countries, providing an opportunity to consider broader implications and scope conditions of my theory. The {low, low}, or {absent, non-advantaged}, cell represents a second, more extreme, type of hinterland in which private societal actors have come to control resources that rival those of the state itself. Contemporary examples include areas dominated by drug cartels, rebel militias, or mafias, such as the sections of rural Colombia controlled by paramilitaries or the broad swaths of rural Mali and Somalia controlled by militants. Similar to the state's resource advantages in {absent, advantaged} hinterlands, the private resources of these societal actors often also emerge exogenously to the economies of local communities, drawn from illicit international markets or military arms and financing provided by external powers.³⁵ While hinterlands in the {absent, non-advantaged} cell may be particularly salient in the popular imagination, they are more exceptions than the rule. In Africa, for example, the vast majority of rural areas, even if not entirely peaceful, do not have powerful rebels or militias who rival the state. This is true even within conflict-prone countries.³⁶ My primary focus is on more typical hinterlands that better fit in the {absent, advantaged} cell.

The final set of subnational regions characterized by Figure 1.1 are areas in the {high, high}, or {present, advantaged}, cell. These are regions where the state retains its resource advantage over society – for example, because they are not zones of major economic activity – and yet in which the state has nonetheless decided to invest in a relatively substantial presence. This may be because the region is strategically vital for a potential inter-state conflict, such as some border regions. Alternatively, it may be because state leaders face an especially pressing political threat, despite the area's underdevelopment, and reduce the state's scarcity to ensure

³⁵ For example, Lee (2020). Alternatively, as discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 9, the advantages of private actors in this cell of Figure 1.1 may emerge from past actions of the state itself.

³⁶ In conflict event data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project (2016), no rebel activity between 2015 and 2020 was reported in 55 percent (25 of 46) of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In those that had rebels, the median case had rebel activity in just 17 percent of its second-tier administrative units, leaving large swaths of the rural periphery unaffected.

compliance.³⁷ I consider examples of these off-diagonal cells – {absent, non-advantaged} and {present, advantaged} – in Chapters 2 and 9.

1.2 THEORY: THE LARGE EFFECTS OF SCARCE STATES

The theory explores how the relative resource advantages of scarce states allow them to transform society and politics, having large effects even where existing accounts assume the state should be inconsequential. The central focus is thus on the effects of state action *within* regions in the {absent, advantaged} cell. More broadly, however, I also suggest that the effects of most individual state actions may in fact be largest in these regions compared to the other cells of Figure 1.1. In the aggregate, across multiple state actions, this implies that it is not necessarily true that the state will have had its smallest effects on society where it is persistently absent and has the lowest capacity.

By state effects on society, I mean the causal effect of the state: a state with large effects changes pre-existing societal institutions and hierarchies in major ways through its actions. This concept is related to existing notions of state power. Building from Dahl (1957), Lindvall and Teorell (2016) argue that a state is only “powerful” insofar as it can make societal actors do things that they would not otherwise do. A state with large effects on its society is certainly a state that makes society do things it would not otherwise do. But many conceptualizations of power, including Mann’s (1988), also incorporate intent: can the state make society do what the state wants it to do?³⁸ My focus is instead broader, on a more latent or implicit type of power: I recognize that the state’s most meaningful impacts on society in hinterland regions may at times come through unintended consequences of policies adopted for other reasons, or that were not executed as planned. In this view, the state can have large effects on society – with the state’s actions fundamental to understanding why society has come to be the way that it is – even where the state is quintessentially weak and does not have significant power in any traditional sense.

I consider state effects in two stages. First, I focus on effects on society, both direct and indirect. I then focus on downstream effects of the societal changes induced by the state on competition for political power. I summarize each set of claims here and develop them further in Chapter 2.

³⁷ Boone (2003).

³⁸ For a broader discussion of state power, see Kashwan et al. (2019).

1.2.1 Direct and Indirect Effects on Society

When states with resource advantages act, they step into society with a huge weight behind their footsteps. Their actions can leave large imprints – with cascading distortionary effects over time – even if their policies are not executed as intended, and especially if they are scarce and only attempt a few policies overall. Indeed, that scarce states only attempt few interventions into society is itself what helps make those actions so impactful. State effects can be both direct – with state resources reordering social hierarchies and institutions – and indirect – with the possibility of accessing state resources incentivizing society into endogenous, bottom-up responses.

The most direct manifestation of scarce states' impact on hinterland regions may be their ability to create new forms of socioeconomic inequality, both within and between rural communities. When the state intervenes in these regions, it typically confers some of its resources on the population, giving out more than it takes back. This creates winners and losers: benefits accrue to some people or places, but not others. Building a local public good like a clinic or road benefits the communities in its catchment area, but not elsewhere. Hiring local agents to provide services or delegating tasks to local intermediaries delivers a private benefit to those selected to perform the work that does not similarly extend to those not selected. Moreover, by virtue of the incapacity caused by the state's limited presence, any benefits are unlikely to be evenly or widely distributed. Instead, the more absent the state is, the more likely the winners of its actions are to be narrowly concentrated.

Because the state's resources dwarf those in society, beneficiaries of state actions gain a new advantage. Privileged contact with the state becomes an economic *windfall* potentially far more valuable than what could otherwise be accumulated. This is true regardless of whether the state confers a private benefit to individuals or a local public good to specific communities.

Economic windfalls from the state create new socioeconomic inequality on two time scales. In the short run, inequality emerges because winners of state action gain resources relative to losers. Longer term, this new inequality sticks and becomes entrenched *if* the state remains scarce and takes few subsequent actions that allocate further windfalls to new recipients. Continued state scarcity magnifies the state's earlier actions, giving them long afterlives; inequality compounds over time when early access to state resources provides an economic head start that sets early winners of state action off on a better trajectory. There are often few nonstate paths

to wealth accumulation in the {absent, advantaged} cell of Figure 1.1, leaving early losers little outside opportunity to catch up.³⁹ Breaking out of this path-dependent divergence between the initial winners and losers of state action requires either substantial changes to the local economy that create new private sector paths to wealth accessible to those initially left behind or instead a dramatic subsequent increase in the state's presence, and resulting distribution of new state resources to new recipients.

When a scarce state acts is thus important for understanding the effects it has. Early interventions into a resource-poor society with limited baseline economic stratification can have long-lasting effects even if the interventions are quite small. New actions that occur later must be comparatively larger to have similarly sized effects; the baseline level of stratification and wealth in society will have risen as a result of earlier state action. To close socioeconomic gaps that its earlier actions have opened, the value of any new resources delivered by a state later on must be greater than the initial windfalls; simply providing the same benefit later will not necessarily undermine the compounded inequality that has emerged. The result is that as long as the state remains relatively scarce, its very first steps into hinterland regions are likely to have had the comparatively most important implications for the subsequent trajectory of society.

The scarce state's actions can also have significant indirect effects on society. In regions of persistent state scarcity, the losers who do not benefit from initial windfalls – and end up on the bottom of emerging socioeconomic hierarchies – must consider several possible responses. They may simply cope with the state's neglect, self-providing resources in its absence.⁴⁰ They may violently resist the state, pushing back against the new inequality it has brought.⁴¹ But where the state's relative resource advantages are high, neglected communities may instead face the strongest incentives to respond by proactively seeking the state out, taking steps to attract it to their communities in the hopes greater contact will bring windfalls to themselves. New societal elites and institutions that best facilitate improved access to the state can emerge endogenously, as communities shift their behavior on their own. The state's mere presence

³⁹ Alesina et al. (2019) find persistently worse intergenerational economic mobility in subnational regions in Africa in which state investment has been most limited over time.

⁴⁰ Cammett and Maclean (2014).

⁴¹ Scott (1998, 2009).

as a reserve of resources more valuable than what is available in society can be powerful enough to incentivize bottom-up social changes that alter the basic structure of society, even without the state's intent.

An additional implication of this argument is that the societal effects of the same specific state actions may, counterintuitively, be smaller in other subnational regions. Where the state is less resource advantaged relative to society, any individual action it takes is less likely to have the ability to reorder existing distributions of wealth and political power in the short run. In turn, where the state is more present, the long-run effects of any individual action will be smaller because the state is more likely to soon take additional actions that distribute new windfalls to additional recipients, offsetting earlier actions. In the {present, non-advantaged} ({high, low}) cell of Figure 1.1, representing a country's core regions, both dynamics are at play. In the aggregate, even if the state takes many more actions overall in regions where it is less scarce, it is not necessarily the case that the state's overall impact on society will be greater compared to where the state nominally appears weaker.

1.2.2 Political Consequences: Capture, Clientelism, and Violence

In turn, the societal changes brought about by the state's scarcity reshape the politics of hinterlands. The distribution of economic resources affects how contests for power unfold, defining the tools available to societal actors as they seek political authority. While political effects can appear across multiple domains, I focus on three salient examples for many developing countries: elite capture, clientelism, and political violence.

First, isolated state actions in hinterlands create conditions for elite capture. The new elites who emerge from early state windfalls gain economic advantages that allow them to dominate politics, with economic inequality manifesting as political inequality. During autocratic periods, state-created elites can use their new local advantages to muscle aside rivals and attract further rents from state leaders. In electoral periods, these same elites can use their advantages to buy voters' support. Elite capture rooted in state-generated inequality may take the form of *dynastic politics*, in which politicians from the same small sets of families wield quasi-oligarchical power across generations.⁴²

⁴² Dal Bo et al. (2009), Chandra (2016), Jensenius (2016), Querubin (2016), Smith (2018).

Second, state-generated economic inequality sustains clientelism. In addition to candidates and officeholders, elites placed at the top of new socioeconomic hierarchies by the state's actions can become clientelist brokers, coordinating and delivering local votes in return for further state resources.⁴³ If the elites acting as brokers have influence over community members' political behavior, but are not accountable to those community members to hold onto their own positions of power, they may exploit their role as intermediaries for private gain, trading away community members' votes while capturing many of the benefits. This becomes more likely where these elites were elevated artificially by state actions, lacking organic, deeply-rooted social accountability to community members.⁴⁴ In this way, clientelism that emerges from state-created inequality may also help further undermine democratic accountability in hinterlands.

Third, the societal changes caused by scarce states can also produce political violence. Contrary to common claims, this violence is not an outcome of the state's incapacity, but emerges because the state's actions fuel new grievances. Where many residents view the state as a net provider, this violence will often not explicitly target the state, as in a civil war, but instead take the form of nonstate communal conflicts in which actors within society compete for the state's attention. Violence becomes a tool to improve one's relative position in the hope of increasing the odds of securing valuable state resources for yourself. Violence emerges between separate communities or ethnic groups, with those that see themselves as the losers of isolated state actions rising up against the new dominance of neighboring winners. Alternatively, intra-communal violence erupts as residents contest the new intra-ethnic hierarchies emerging from the state's isolated distribution of resources.

1.3 CONTEXT: NORTHERN GHANA AND THE MODERN AFRICAN STATE

I examine this argument in the context of the modern African state. I follow Young (1994) in defining the modern state as beginning at the onset of colonial rule, in contrast to the premodern, precolonial states that preceded it. Postcolonial state institutions in many African countries evolved directly from their colonial analogs. Young (1994) observes that "the colonial state lives, absorbed into the structures of the independent

⁴³ Baldwin (2015), Holland and Palmer-Rubin (2015), Koter (2016), Mares and Young (2016), Gottlieb (2017).

⁴⁴ Acemoglu et al. (2014), Gottlieb (2017).

polity”; it is “deeply embedded within its postcolonial successor.”⁴⁵ My focus on continuities across the colonial and postcolonial periods also echoes Herbst (2000) in recognizing that although the identity (and normative legitimacy) of state leaders changed, their state-building task remained similar. Whether state leaders are European or African does not change the ability of isolated state actions to reshape hinterland regions.⁴⁶

Existing characterizations of the modern African state present an enigma. The same states are portrayed as disastrously weak, unable to govern or deliver services, and yet also capable of having major impacts. The modern African state is a “mirage” and “facade,” “vacuous” and “institutionally feeble,” and cannot control or act separately from its society.⁴⁷ It is persistently unable to project power across its territory, with “limited ambitions” for rule, administering society “on the cheap” in a way that has failed to displace precolonial realities of governance.⁴⁸ It is barely even “empirically” a state,⁴⁹ minimally touching the lives of citizens in the rural periphery.⁵⁰ And yet, it is also a “crusher of rocks”;⁵¹ the origin of new social identities and modes of social control;⁵² a “vampire” sucking its society’s blood,⁵³ whose policy choices and institutional structures profoundly affect citizens’ behavior.⁵⁴ At times, the state appears to straddle both worlds within the same study. Although Migdal (1988) principally describes the Sierra Leonian state as captured by society, his historical account also implicitly suggests it was also more than powerful enough to have radically remade key elements of that society. My argument helps resolve these competing characterizations of the modern

⁴⁵ Young (1994, 2, 10). More recently, Young (2004) suggests that the period from the 1990s onward may represent an end of the “postcolonial” state, given changes to state authority wrought by democratization and structural adjustment. While important, this distinction is not directly relevant to the argument here; my main analyses all focus on state actions prior to the 1990s. Moreover, to whatever extent structural adjustment weakened the state’s ability to intervene further in society, it only magnifies the importance of understanding the long-term effects of earlier state actions.

⁴⁶ Moreover, this focus on historical continuity addresses a key shortcoming Hagmann and Peclard (2010) identify in some other political science work on the African state – that state “weakness” is viewed from too ahistorical a lens.

⁴⁷ Chabal and Daloz (1999, 8, 16, 1, and 2, respectively). Migdal (1988) makes a related set of claims.

⁴⁸ Herbst (2000, 73 and 75, respectively).

⁴⁹ Jackson and Rosberg (1982).

⁵⁰ Zolberg (1966), Hyden (1980).

⁵¹ Young (1994).

⁵² Vail (1989), Mamdani (1996).

⁵³ Frimpong-Ansah (1991).

⁵⁴ Bates (1981, 1983, 1989, 2008), Maclean (2010).

African state by suggesting that the state's very weakness – as evinced through its scarcity – may often be what helps magnify the impacts of its actions.

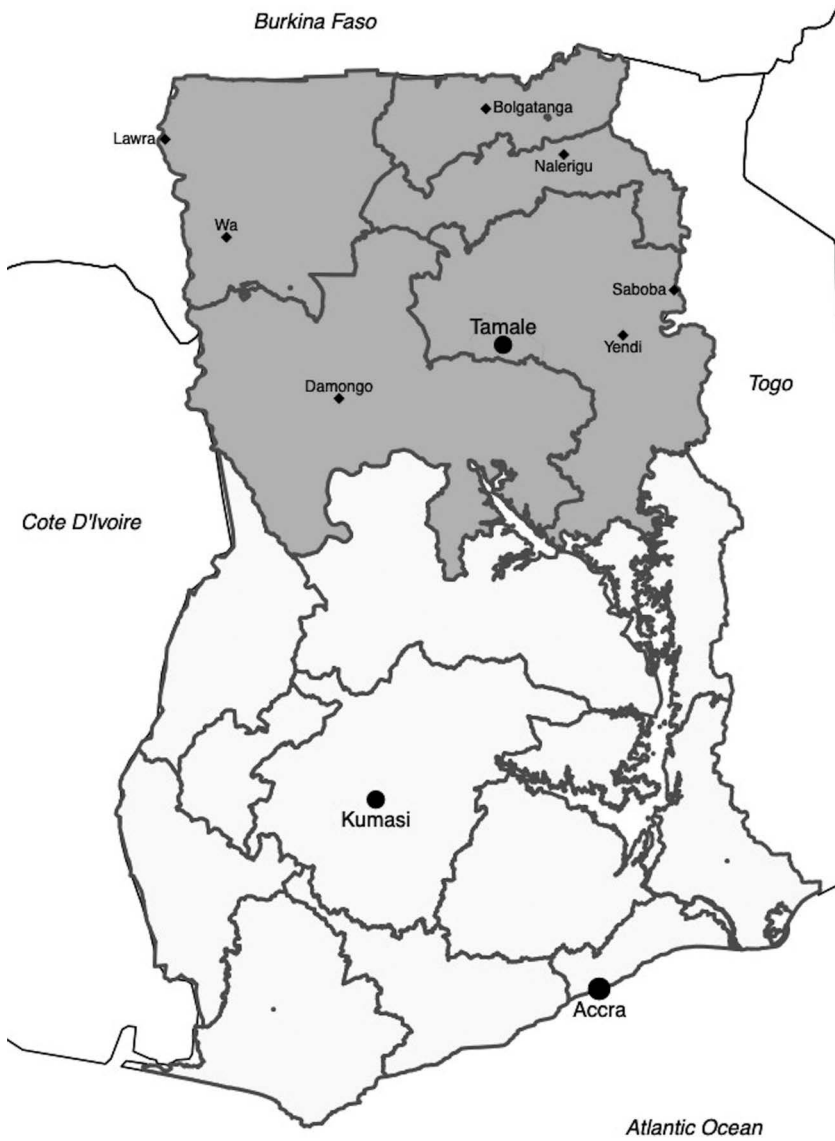
I demonstrate this by focusing empirically on a modern African state with a large hinterland in which that state was persistently scarce. Formerly the British Gold Coast, Ghana is a nation of over 30 million people with an economy historically dominated by cash crops (primarily cocoa) and gold mining. Southern Ghana spans the country's coastal regions, including the economically booming national capital Accra and the cash crop zones in the central forest belt surrounding Kumasi, capital of the precolonial Ashanti Empire. Northern Ghana – the shaded region in Map 1.1 – instead comprises the less populated and poorer areas north and east of the Black Volta River.⁵⁵ This region has 17 percent of Ghana's present-day population – now approximately 5 million of 30 million. Unlike the more densely populated, forested, and fertile South, the country's North is mostly flat, low-density savannah extending to the lower fringes of the Sahel. The Northern hinterland is highly diverse, with over thirty indigenous ethnic groups. In the precolonial period, it was a mix of *acephalous* societies – without political centralization – and small kingdoms that were peripheral vassal states of Ashanti.

The North's marginalization has continued under both British and independent rule, with the state maintaining a persistently limited presence. In the colonial period, it was governed separately from – and far more minimally than – the rest of the country, set aside as the separate Northern Territories of the larger Gold Coast colony. The British made “only the feeblest of efforts” at institution-building and economic development in the North;⁵⁶ with no cash crops or natural resources, the region was not a priority for the colonial regime, colonized more to prevent other European powers from colonizing it than for its economic value to the Empire. By the 1920s and 1930s, this territory roughly the size of Virginia was overseen by a skeleton staff of as few as thirty British officers, of all types, thinly spread across fewer than a dozen towns.⁵⁷ Until World War II, there were as few as 100 European residents at any

⁵⁵ This is the Northern, North East, Savannah, Upper East, and Upper West Regions. From 1983 to 2018, these were the Northern, Upper East, and Upper West Regions.

⁵⁶ Ladouceur (1979, 44).

⁵⁷ In the 1921 census, two decades into colonial rule, there were twenty-seven British officers resident in the Northern Territories and just thirty-six non-African residents *total*.



MAP 1.1 Map of Ghana. Northern Ghana is the shaded region. The western, southern, and eastern borders of this region are framed by the Black Volta River, Lake Volta, and the Oti River, respectively.

time.⁵⁸ Missionary activity was sharply limited to a few outposts until the 1950s. Data on the geographic footprint of the colonial state introduced in Chapter 3 suggests that by 1945, residents of over 87 percent of Northern Ghana's towns and villages would still have had to walk more than 10 km (6.2 miles) to reach *any* formal state office, police post, or other administrative station where they could have direct contact with state officials. The British left this hinterland, in their own words, "more than half a century behind the South."⁵⁹

The North remained politically and economically subordinate to the South after independence in 1957, with state leaders continuing to maintain a limited presence in the region. In the immediate postcolonial period, Northern Ghana serves as one of Boone's (2003) examples of a peripheral region in which state leaders intentionally kept the state away, delegating power to existing local elites rather than deconcentrating the state's bureaucratic presence in a serious attempt to govern more directly. Decentralization reforms first adopted in 1988 and gradually accelerated after democratization in 1992 have only recently created a more meaningful grassroots state apparatus. The combined result of nearly a century of state scarcity is that Northern Ghana has received dramatically lower investment in basic infrastructure and services than Southern Ghana. Even as Ghana has experienced rapid economic development over the last several decades, a substantial overall North–South gap in poverty and infrastructure remains.⁶⁰

1.3.1 Three Interventions: Chiefs, Schools, and Property Rights

Despite its minimal overall footprint, however, the modern state did make three interventions in Northern Ghana over the course of the twentieth century that are the core empirical focus of the book. I highlight these three actions because they are each, by far, the most significant efforts that the state undertook to conduct three of the most central governance activities attempted by all states: administering the population, distributing services, and providing the rule of law. The first action involved delegating authority to administer society cheaply. The second was the provision of public education. The third was a belated decision about whose property rights over land to legally recognize.

⁵⁸ For example, the 1931 census records 107 total non-African residents, many of whom were Lebanese and Indian traders, not British officials.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Bening (1990, 255).

⁶⁰ Abdulai and Hickey (2016).

In line with the claim above that state scarcity often emerges through an intentional choice of state leaders, rather than as a simple outcome of limited capacity,⁶¹ each of these actions was undertaken with the explicit intention of facilitating state absence: delegating authority allowed the state to keep its formal staff small; education was initially provided only inasmuch as it made delegating authority more effective; and the state reallocated property rights to reduce its need to provide its own oversight. Moreover, on their own, each intervention initially struggled to achieve its intended objectives, indicative of the scarce state's consistently limited capacity. Yet they all eventually combined to have large, mutually reinforcing effects on society and politics. I outline each in turn here.

First, operating with such a minimal staff, the British quickly turned to administering society through local intermediaries instead. Delegating authority to local elites, including traditional chiefs, would soon become a common strategy across British colonies in Africa.⁶² It represents a widely applied approach adopted by many state-builders in peripheral regions around the world, even far beyond the examples of African colonialism or the policies formally labeled "indirect rule."⁶³

The British faced a challenge, however: not all communities had existing leaders to whom they could delegate authority. The region's precolonial kingdoms had well-established chiefs; among these already-centralized ethnic groups, such as the Dagomba, Gonja, and Mamprusi, the British co-opted and reinforced pre-existing leadership structures. But these kingdoms account for only approximately one third of the region's population. The remaining population was instead acephalous, without an existing authority structure that reached beyond individual extended families. From as early as 1902, just a year after formal colonial rule began, British officials instead set about inventing new chieftaincy institutions from scratch in many acephalous communities.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Boone (2003).

⁶² Young (1994).

⁶³ Gerring et al. (2011), Slater and Kim (2015). Matsuzaki (2019) details that the delegation of authority to local intermediaries has also been a common feature of state-building in Southeast Asia (and twenty-first-century Iraq and Afghanistan). Mamdani (1996) and Boone (2003) argue that commonly discussed differences between British "indirect" and French "direct" rule in Africa are overblown – in practice, the French also relied on various similar local intermediaries in many subnational regions of their African colonies.

⁶⁴ I use the word "invention" to refer to the creation of new forms of traditional chieftaincy in a non-normative sense in line with the substantial historical literature on the topic that uses this term. See Ranger (1983), as well as Spear (2003) (for a critical reappraisal).

Intervening in societies about which they know very little, British decisions about who to appoint as chiefs were often deeply ad hoc, arbitrarily installing families into offices that could potentially become hereditary across subsequent generations. The imposition of these new political institutions was not immediately successful – many new chiefs only very gradually amassed social authority and legitimacy in their communities over the coming decades.⁶⁵ But over the colonial period, as the scope of their authority gradually increased, opportunities eventually emerged for chiefs and their families to receive windfalls from their privileged link to the scarce state.

Crucially for my analysis, the British only imposed chieftaincy institutions among a subset of acephalous ethnic groups. Others were left without their own state-recognized local leaders, placed instead under the nominal control of neighboring ethnic groups while defaulting in practice to pre-existing clan and family leadership. The difference between these two sets of ethnic groups – those with invented chiefs and those without them – was largely due to an arbitrary colonial border briefly in effect at the outset of the colonial period (see below and Chapter 4).

Overall, this initial variation in the delegation of authority to chiefs represents a *critical juncture* that set ethnic groups in Northern Ghana on three distinct, path-dependent trajectories of state–society relations over the next century: there are societies in Northern Ghana that *always* had chiefs, dating to the precolonial period; societies with colonially *invented* chiefs, with new elites imposed in the early twentieth century; and those that were *never recognized* as independent ethnic groups by the state and left largely without independent chiefs into the postcolonial period. Consistent with the argument above about path dependence and historical sequencing, this first state intervention became the most significant overall of the three, and correspondingly receives the most focus in the subsequent chapters, because it came first and changed baseline conditions in society in ways that the state's subsequent actions would then have to grapple with.

The second major intervention was the halting creation of a public education system, the main public service that the state extended to the North throughout the twentieth century. Between 1945 and 1960, the education

In some ways, this was more an “imposition” than an invention, though there was also considerable African participation and agency over time in the design of these new institutions (Spear 2003).

⁶⁵ Lentz (2006), Grischow (2006).

system in Northern Ghana expanded from just 17 primary schools and 0 secondary schools to 216 primary schools and 2 secondary schools. Although this meant that fewer than 6 percent of Northern communities had schools and enrollments remained very low, schools became the most present state institution in the North by a wide margin.

For the small first generation of students able to attend school, education served as a windfall from the state. School “pioneers” received a head start in human capital accumulation relative to the rest of the population.⁶⁶ These benefits nested on top of the state’s first major intervention – the imposition of chieftaincy – because of chiefs’ role as the main point of contact between their communities and the state. Chiefs were central in lobbying for and building schools, such that more schools were built in communities with chiefs than those left without these leaders. In turn, chiefs were given significant input into early enrollment decisions, allowing their own children to attend before children from other families. This allowed colonially imposed chiefs to use advantages originating from the state’s first major action to disproportionately capture the benefits of its second.

The third major state intervention occurred deeper in the postcolonial period. It again nested on top of the first by increasing the advantages of the earliest winners of state action – chiefs. Under British rule, the state claimed ownership of all land in Northern Ghana, but did little with it. Colonial-era land policies continued after independence. In the majority of Northern ethnic groups, especially those that had been precolonially acephalous, land remained *de facto* controlled at the community level by an earth priest – known as a “tendana” – not a chief.⁶⁷ But in the late 1970s, state leaders formally devolved land ownership to chiefs in an attempt to buy their political support.⁶⁸

As with the first two interventions, the state initially lacked the presence and capacity on the ground to fully enforce or implement this new policy. But land reform opened up new opportunities for local actors to leverage their contact with the state to extract economic windfalls. The new policy increased the economic value of chieftaincy positions and *de jure* dispossessed ethnic groups who lacked their own hierarchies of state-recognized chiefs – the *never recognized* groups described above – from the land they had farmed for generations.

⁶⁶ Wantchekon et al. (2015), Ricart-Huguet (2021a).

⁶⁷ Rattray (1932), Tait (1961), Ladouceur (1979), Lund (2008).

⁶⁸ Baldwin (2014) shows that this was a common tactic by state leaders in post-independence Africa to shore up support in rural areas.

1.3.2 Observing the State's Impact

The subsequent chapters trace out how these three state actions had mutually reinforcing effects on society and politics. These actions changed society both directly, by producing new socioeconomic hierarchies and inequality, and indirectly, by incentivizing communities to change their own internal social institutions to seek out more contact with the state.

Directly, the state's invention of chieftaincy and introduction of education combined to create persistent intra-ethnic, intra-village economic inequality across rural Northern Ghana. In particular, I show in Chapter 4 that the *invented chiefs* ethnic groups – acephalous communities that experienced the colonial imposition of chieftaincy in the early twentieth century – have substantially more internal economic inequality today than the *never recognized* communities. The central mechanism underlying this effect is the educational opportunities that became differentially available to chiefs' children as the education system expanded in the mid-twentieth century.

More indirectly, the state's interventions unintentionally pushed *never recognized* communities to begin creating chiefs of their own in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Chapter 5 details the origins and mixed success of this bottom-up grassroots effort to attract more resources from the state. Recognizing that they had become the losers left behind by earlier state actions, and could now securely own land only if they also had traditional chiefs, these communities have begun doing to themselves what the colonial state did decades earlier elsewhere in Northern Ghana: inventing “traditional” institutions from scratch, in a major attempt to reorganize internal social structures.

In turn, these changes to society have combined to have each of the political effects described above. Chapter 6 documents how the specific families elevated by the invention of chieftaincy in the early twentieth century have remained the region's political elite over time, dominating access to elected office from Ghana's first elections in 1951 through to the present day. I show how these high levels of elite capture and dynastic politics have their origins in the windfalls bestowed on chiefs' families through their privileged access to human capital in the mid-twentieth century.

Chapter 7 then details how the invention of chieftaincy created conditions in which clientelism could thrive. Chiefs have used their privileged connections to the state to become clientelist intermediaries – community-level brokers who coordinate community votes on behalf of allied politicians and political parties. Chiefs whose authority stems from artificial

state-imposed institutions are less accountable to community members today than those whose positions are rooted in institutions that evolved more organically within communities. As a result, more deleterious forms of brokered clientelism are common among the *invented chiefs* ethnic groups – where chieftaincy was imposed exogenously by the state – than in the *always chiefs* or *never recognized* communities.

Finally, Chapter 8 explores effects on political violence. I detail how endemic conflicts in the hinterland were caused directly by the scarce state's actions, which generated new grievances in society, rather than simply emerging as a side effect of the weak state's absence and inability to police its frontier. The imposition of chieftaincy institutions combined with the growing economic rents and political power available to chiefs to cause a series of intra-communal, even intra-family, violence over appointments and succession. At a larger scale, emerging inter-ethnic inequality, reinforced by the 1979 land reform, led to major inter-ethnic conflict between *never recognized* and *always chiefs* communities in the 1980s and 1990s. The violence was sparked by communities who were the losers of earlier state actions seeking to take matters into their own hands to acquire scarce state resources for themselves.

1.4 DATA AND METHOD

I demonstrate these effects by drawing on a range of micro-level data, a multi-method design, and extended field research dating to 2008.⁶⁹ The quantitative data includes a series of new datasets on chieftaincy institutions and appointments, historical school enrollments and locations, and other types of early state activity coded from archival sources. I also use highly localized community- and individual-level census data from three national censuses – 2010, 2000, and 1960. The 2010 data includes individual-level returns located to each individual community, creating a dataset of up to 2.5 million observations.⁷⁰ The 1960 data has been digitized and geo-coded for the first time.

The qualitative data includes archival materials and over 110 in-depth interviews.⁷¹ Elite interviews were conducted with politicians, including

⁶⁹ The main data collection occurred in 2018 and 2019.

⁷⁰ This is a 10 percent representative, random sample of individual records within every tract, or Enumeration Area.

⁷¹ More details on these interviews, including sampling and questionnaires, are in the Appendix.

a random sample of 20 current MPs, as well as other government and political party officials and civil society leaders. In addition, I draw heavily throughout the book on oral history interviews conducted with chiefs, *tendanas* (earth priests), and other community elders in twelve rural communities spanning the three main categories of ethnic groups introduced above. A relatively uncommon source in the literature on state-building, the oral histories allow me to anchor my analysis in community members' own narratives and collective memories, as well as to include their voices throughout the following pages. Central elements of my theory arise directly from participants' own explanations of how the state has impacted their communities.

The research design primarily relies on process tracing of the over-time effects of state actions within a single hinterland region, focusing on the {absent, advantaged} cell of Figure 1.1. I devote careful attention to concerns over both internal and external validity. Regarding internal validity, many of the central analyses are “large-N” subnationally. At the heart of the research design is a natural experiment. For a brief 15-year period at the outset of colonial rule, roughly one quarter of Northern Ghana was part of a neighboring German colony – Togoland. It was then absorbed into the British Gold Coast during World War I. The initial Anglo-German border split the region's population in a highly arbitrary manner – indeed, British officials themselves referred to this border as an “arbitrary boundary.”⁷² It serves as the critical juncture that assigned communities originally placed on each side to different subsequent trajectories of state–society relations. Most importantly, almost all precolonially acephalous communities initially under British rule experienced the imposition of chieftaincy – becoming the *invented chiefs* groups described above – while otherwise similar communities under initial German rule did not – becoming the *never recognized* groups. Because the next two major state actions – education and land reform – nested on top of this initial assignment of communities to chiefs, the 1899–1914 Anglo-German border provides a plausibly exogenous source of leverage with which to estimate the effects of state actions across time.

I detail the external validity and scope conditions of the main argument by drawing on shadow cases. The most direct comparison is to the parallel experiences of Southern Ghana, where the state was both much more active and less resource advantaged versus society than in the North. The South's urban areas and rural cash crop zones serve as the most natural

⁷² *Northern Territories Annual Report for 1917* (1918, 11).

comparison to Northern Ghana in the {present, non-advantaged} cell of Figure 1.1, allowing me to vary the two main dimensions in the argument above while holding state leaders and institutions fixed. In addition, in Chapters 2 and 9, I include additional shadow cases that capture the two less common, off-diagonal cells of Figure 1.1, exploring state-building in the rural hinterlands of Peru and the Philippines. These additional cases demonstrate that the two variables highlighted above – the state’s presence and resource advantages – serve as the principal scope conditions for my theory.

1.5 CONTRIBUTIONS

This book challenges common claims about the state. I show that scholars need to rethink the concept of state weakness to better explain the politics of developing countries, especially in their rural hinterlands. The book also provides new evidence about the origins of economic and political inequality in the postcolonial world, reconsiders the mechanisms linking historical institutions to contemporary politics, and refines existing theories about traditional leaders’ role in modern African politics.

1.5.1 The State and the Rural Periphery

Even amidst substantial urbanization,⁷³ rural hinterlands remain critical to understanding the politics of the developing world. Many of the most pressing political and economic challenges in developing countries – poverty, elite capture, clientelism, violence, and limits to service delivery and the rule of law – are often most extreme in the hinterland. Accurately diagnosing why these challenges persist requires closely examining the politics of peripheral regions.

Scholars who do so often start from the premise that the most central characteristic of hinterlands is the state’s relative absence – that hinterlands are where the state matters least. At the extreme, to Scott (2009), hinterlands are “ungoverned” spaces beyond the state’s reach. They are O’Donnell’s (1993) “brown areas” on the map that the state cannot penetrate. In the study of African politics, exemplified by Herbst (2000), hinterlands are often seen as spaces where modern states have consistently projected the least power from the outset of the colonial period to the present day. These types of claims underlie a significant body of research

⁷³ Nathan (2019).

on both rural Africa and other rural regions of the developing world, encouraging scholars to look beyond the state to explain contemporary rural politics.

I suggest that this is the wrong analytic framework for these regions. Even as they are the zones where the state's formal footprint is small, hinterlands may in fact be among the *easiest* areas for the state's actions to transform because this is where the state's relative resource advantages over society are often most extreme. I show that in Ghana's northern hinterland, understanding the large impacts of the state's historical steps into society is necessary to explain essentially all major facets of contemporary politics – in spite of that state's sustained absence and incapacity.

Most broadly, this demonstrates an important theoretical imprecision in widespread characterizations of developing states as “weak.” As commonly used in the literature, “state weakness” confuses cause and effect, collapsing underlying features of states with outcomes of state leaders' contingent choices.⁷⁴ I show that knowing that a state is scarce, has limited infrastructural or coercive power, or is bureaucratically incapable does not imply weakness in all other dimensions, especially an inability to fundamentally transform society. In fact, I show that the state's ability to reorder society may be what helps first create the very phenomena that often then get cited as evidence of state weakness: elite capture, clientelism and its associated limits to service delivery, and political violence. These are better viewed as *outcomes* of a scarce state's strong effects on society. As a result, when scholars such as Migdal (1988) or Chabal and Daloz (1999) categorize the African state as a “mirage” or “facade” by pointing to elite capture and the state's lack of autonomy from society, they risk underplaying the degree to which the state itself is a powerful cause of what they observe.

The book also suggests an alternative understanding of the legacies of colonial and postcolonial state-building. Existing research on colonial rule, especially recent quantitative scholarship, overwhelmingly focuses on how colonial regimes and their affiliated actors affected long-run political and economic outcomes in the subnational regions in which they were *most active*: the effects of colonial rule are typically studied by observing impacts on the main places where the plantations, railroads, missionar-ies, and other institutions of occupation and extraction *were* – not where they were not.⁷⁵ By contrast, I show long-run effects of early state actions

⁷⁴ Lindvall and Teorell (2016).

⁷⁵ Nunn (2010), Cagé and Rueda (2016), Jedwab and Moradi (2016), Lowes and Montero (2018), Roessler et al. (2020), Ricart-Huguet (2021b).

even in a subnational region where colonial rule was at its *most absent* – finding large impacts within an area typically only studied as the control condition against which most analyses evaluate more intensive state interventions elsewhere.⁷⁶ Contrary to Herbst (2000), this demonstrates that the African colonial state could still very much be Young’s (1994) “crusher of rocks” even in subnational regions in which its power to change precolonial realities of governance has been most dismissed.

Similarly, through my examination of public education and land reform, I show how the actions of the postcolonial state also continued to significantly reshape society even where post-independence leaders otherwise strategically chose to project the *least* state authority. In particular, even in the depths of Africa’s late-twentieth-century economic crisis – at a point when the postcolonial state had essentially bottomed out in its formal capacity⁷⁷ – the 1979 land reform in Northern Ghana helps demonstrate how *de jure* state policies could still have powerful effects despite poor implementation. Rather than viewing independence as a hard break that radically changed trajectories of state-building, my findings reemphasize Young’s (1994) call to study the postcolonial African state as a continuation of its colonial predecessor, able to reshape society for similar reasons and in similar ways.

1.5.2 The Origins of Political and Economic Inequality

In addition, the book provides new evidence on the origins of economic and political inequality, and the close relationships between them. A key focus is to explain who – down to the level of specific families like the Karbos in the opening example – becomes a socioeconomic and political elite, and why. While the qualitative historical literature provides rich examples of the connections between colonial policy and elite formation in Africa,⁷⁸ existing literature has rarely explored elite origins so systematically as an outcome variable.

Many scholars instead take the existence of societal and political elites as a given and build theories out from there.⁷⁹ But this presents an inferential problem if these elites emerged through the same political and economic processes being explained. At the extreme, some explicitly view

⁷⁶ For example, Roessler et al. (2020).

⁷⁷ Chazan (1982), van de Walle (2001).

⁷⁸ For example, Schatzberg (1980) on the paths to elite status in colonial Lisala, Congo, or Tignor (1976) on elite formation in colonial Kenya.

⁷⁹ For example, see Slater (2010) and Riedl (2014).

economic stratification as exogenous and antecedent to state-building: Boix (2015) assumes that economic stratification develops separate from the state and that initial state institutions then emerge as responses to the crises of social order produced by that inequality; Olson (1993) similarly puts the causal arrow from economic conditions to demand for the state. I show instead that for the postcolonial world, bottom-up demands for the state in society are often a second-order outcome of the inequality and distributional conflicts that the state's own earlier actions have generated. Studies that primarily focus on societal responses to state-building through the lens of grassroots resistance, such as Scott (1998, 2009), may significantly understate the degree to which residents of regions of state scarcity have incentives instead to actively seek the state out and make themselves more legible to it so they can also benefit from its resources and rise in the new social order it is creating.

Moreover, empirical literature on the origins of economic inequality in Africa overwhelmingly explores the impacts of colonial rule on overall inter-regional or inter-ethnic inequalities, such as between entire subnational jurisdictions subjected to different government policies.⁸⁰ We have a large body of evidence, for example, for why Northern Nigeria is poorer than Southern Nigeria and other similar regional disparities. Little scholarship has instead established the degree to which colonialism and later post-independence state actions created micro-level, intra-ethnic stratification between and within individual rural communities,⁸¹ empirically documenting, as I do, why some villages became more egalitarian than others, why some families became wealthier, or how either effect persists.⁸²

This focus on the long-run legacies of state action also helps understand the origins of micro-level political inequality, especially elite capture in the form of dynastic politics. Recent scholarship on dynasties focuses overwhelmingly on how the legislative incumbency advantage sustains families in power in modern democracies.⁸³ But I show that much deeper sources of advantage – long pre-dating democratization – may also explain which families dominate modern elections, especially where economic mobility is otherwise limited.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Huillery (2009), van de Walle (2009), Archibong (2018), Roessler et al. (2020), Ricart-Huguet (2021b).

⁸¹ Nugent (2010b, 37), in particular, has directly called for more research on this topic.

⁸² Wantchekon et al. (2015) and Meier zu Selhausen et al. (2018) are partial exceptions discussed in Chapter 2.

⁸³ Dal Bo et al. (2009), Chandra (2016), Querubin (2016), Smith (2018).

⁸⁴ Jensenius (2016).

1.5.3 The Persistent Effects of Past Institutions

The book also contributes to our understanding of the legacies of historical institutions. Drawing on Murdock's (1967) atlas of ethnic groups, there is now widespread evidence of correlations between societies' precolonial characteristics and modern outcomes.⁸⁵ Much of this work focuses on long-run effects of precolonial political centralization.⁸⁶ A key open question in this research agenda is to better identify the mechanisms linking precolonial centralization to contemporary conditions. Many scholars argue that these relationships are due to the direct effects of institutions that persist in some form today. The assumption is that institutions dating to the precolonial period still have active, contemporary effects.⁸⁷ But most studies cannot directly unpack the channels of transmission from past to present because the available cross-national data does not allow them to systematically observe how ethnic institutions have evolved over time. In Austin's (2008) phrase, they are left to "compress history," viewing before and after, but not what has occurred in-between.⁸⁸ The actions of the postcolonial state, in particular, often simply drop out of the analysis.

By diving deeply into a single case, where "decompressing" history becomes more possible, the book calls into question whether these correlations truly represent the *effects of persistent institutions* or instead the *persistent effects of past institutions*. These are very different mechanisms.⁸⁹ In the latter, precolonial institutions may have changed long ago, but still predict contemporary outcomes indirectly through their downstream effects on other variables, especially how societies with initial institutional differences were then treated by the modern state.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Englebert (2000), Wig (2016), Kramon (2019), Paine (2019), Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2020).

⁸⁶ Osafo-Kwaako and Robinson (2013).

⁸⁷ Gennaioli and Rainer (2007), Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2013), Wig (2016), Kramon (2019), and Houle et al. (2019) all claim that the main mechanism underlying their findings arises from a direct effect of institutions that still exist.

⁸⁸ Wilfahrt (2021) offers a related critique.

⁸⁹ Wilfahrt (2018, 2021) makes a similar distinction for Senegal: precolonial institutions do not correlate with contemporary outcomes because they still exist, but because they led to the formation of strong social identities that persist even without the institutions that first birthed them.

⁹⁰ Beyond Africa, Dell (2010) provides a vivid example of this latter category of mechanisms: forced labor in colonial Peru ceased centuries ago, but still predicts contemporary development indirectly through its prior effects on migration and economic investment.

I show that ethnic groups' internal institutions changed *massively* through contact with the modern state. The common claim that precolonial institutions persist does not withstand close scrutiny in this region. Many of Northern Ghana's precolonially acephalous groups are not acephalous at all today, but have state-created chieftaincy institutions that can be just as (or more) powerful as those in precolonially centralized groups. Moreover, groups that still remain officially acephalous now have their own nascent chieftaincy institutions, emerging only in the last few decades. Even chieftaincy within Northern Ghana's precolonially centralized kingdoms does not reflect an unbroken legacy of precolonial politics.⁹¹

Correlations between precolonial institutions and present-day outcomes may not reflect anything specific about those institutions themselves, but more that groups with different initial institutions were set out on different long-run trajectories of state–society relations when they first came into contact with the modern state. This has exposed them to different bundles of state policies over time that have cumulatively created their modern conditions.⁹² To understand why ethnic groups in Africa with different precolonial institutions experience different governance today, we must avoid the trap Austin (2008) warns of and closely examine what the state has done in-between, not write off the state's power, bracket decades of colonial and postcolonial state-building, and assume that precolonial institutions themselves still affect modern politics.

1.5.4 Traditional Governance

Finally, the book speaks to several debates about the role of traditional leaders in modern Africa. First, in contrast with Baldwin's (2015) argument that most traditional chiefs have consistent incentives to act as "development brokers," representing community interests in their pursuit of resources from politicians, I suggest that whether chiefs' role as electoral intermediaries is beneficial for their communities is highly contingent on the institutions of social accountability that connect chiefs to

⁹¹ Chapters 7 and 8 describe how, in efforts to resolve succession disputes and exert political control, both the colonial and post-independence states have altered key features of these institutions.

⁹² Archibong (2019).

their subjects. Internal accountability can vary greatly across groups,⁹³ depending on how state actions reshaped societal institutions.⁹⁴

Second, Mamdani (1996) famously describes the deleterious consequences of the new forms of traditional authority – or “decentralized despotism” – imposed by colonial rule. Yet other scholars have suggested that the impact of the colonial imposition of chieftaincy is overstated,⁹⁵ including by arguing that many artificially imposed chiefs lost their political influence after independence and have not become deeply embedded in society.⁹⁶ In one sense, the evidence in the subsequent chapters provides strong support for Mamdani’s (1996) view, detailing how these new institutions have had persistent political effects over time. I demonstrate a key mechanism – preferential access to early schooling for chiefs’ descendants – by which these effects could persist in society irrespective of the present-day political influence of chiefs themselves.

But in line with Spear (2003), the book also suggests that there was much more variation and African agency in the imposition of chieftaincy institutions than Mamdani’s (1996) account of a monolithic colonial state allows. The extent to which chiefs fit within Mamdani’s categorization of “despots” varied – and continues to vary – greatly at the local level. The extent to which these institutions were pure impositions, rather than shared creations of local communities, also varies; many local populations came to embrace artificial chieftaincy institutions, even where the state lacked the ability to install them by force. Moreover, the invention of chieftaincy is not purely a colonial story, but remains active to the present. In response to the incentives created by the state’s scarcity, some communities are still hard at work inventing new “traditional” institutions of their own design.

1.6 ROADMAP FOR THE BOOK

In the remainder of Part I, Chapter 2 develops the book’s core argument about the potential for scarce, resource-advantaged states to have large effects. Chapter 3 introduces the Northern Ghanaian case. The chapter focuses on the three main state interventions into society described above.

⁹³ Baldwin and Holzinger (2019) richly document such variation across sub-Saharan Africa.

⁹⁴ Acemoglu et al. (2014) similarly tie the behavior of contemporary chiefs in Sierra Leone to early colonial intervention in institutions governing the selection of chiefs.

⁹⁵ Spear (2003).

⁹⁶ Tignor (1976), Koter (2016).

The empirical analysis begins in Part II, exploring the societal effects of state action. Chapter 4 examines the direct effects of the scarce state on inter- and intra-ethnic economic inequality, focusing on how the invention of chieftaincy combined with the introduction of formal education to produce persistent micro-level socioeconomic stratification. Chapter 5 explores the indirect effects of state scarcity, documenting a bottom-up, very modern movement among communities from the Konkomba ethnic group – the largest *never recognized* group – to impose chiefs on themselves.

Part III then examines the downstream political effects of these societal changes. Chapter 6 focuses on elite capture and the emergence of dynastic politics, showing how the families of early colonial chiefs continue to dominate access to elected office. Chapter 7 explores modern-day clientelism, often facilitated by traditional chiefs, and connects historically rooted modes of social accountability that have emerged between chiefs and their community members to the distributive impacts of contemporary electoral competition. Chapter 8 links the history of intra- and inter-ethnic political violence to the state's three interventions into society.

Part IV considers the broader implications of the book's theory and findings. Chapter 9 switches focus to shadow cases – Southern Ghana, Peru, and the Philippines – that exemplify the other cells of Figure 1.1 in order to demonstrate the external validity and scope conditions of the argument. Chapter 10 concludes by presenting a paradox suggested by the book's findings: that many features of developing states often viewed as evidence of their inherent limits may instead be endogenous outcomes of the state's significant ability to have transformed society, potentially making the state the forceful creator of its own weakness.