

# CURRENT HISTORY

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*“Traditional chiefs have a special ability to organize collective responses to local problems in many communities.”*

## Chiefs, Democracy, and Development in Contemporary Africa

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**A**t the moment of independence, the institution of traditional chieftaincy appeared to be headed for the dustbins of history across sub-Saharan Africa. In Guinea, nationalist leader Ahmed Sékou Touré hurried to abolish chieftancies in 1957, followed by his counterpart Julius Nyerere in Tanzania in 1963. In Uganda, President Milton Obote ordered a military assault on the Kabaka, the traditional king of Buganda, sending him into exile in 1966. In Mozambique, the nationalist movement Frelimo first targeted traditional chiefs for assassination, then abolished them in 1978, just after independence from Portugal. Even in cases where such dramatic confrontations were avoided, post-independence governments reduced the legal powers of chiefs over local administration and justice systems throughout the continent.

Yet traditional leaders still have significant political authority today. Even as multiparty elections have been institutionalized over the past three decades in many African countries as a means of selecting presidents and legislators, chiefs have drawn increased interest from political leaders and policymakers.

Some of their most dramatic reversals in fortune occurred in Uganda and Mozambique in the 1990s. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni restored the Bugandan Kingdom, along with the property it

had owned before Obote sent the Kabaka into exile. In Mozambique, President Joaquim Chissano reversed Frelimo's stance toward traditional chiefs, giving them official recognition and authority over land, taxation, and policing in many communities. Traditional chiefs have not universally managed to resurrect themselves, but there are signs of their regeneration across the continent.

How widespread are traditional chiefs in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa? According to data collected by German political scientist Katharina Holzinger, about 84 percent of the population belongs to an ethnic group that has active traditional political institutions. In national public opinion surveys conducted by Afrobarometer in 18 countries, a majority of citizens say that traditional leaders have at least some influence in governing their local communities. Traditional chiefs tend to have greater authority in rural areas.

This has raised concerns among some observers that powerful chiefs could taint the democratic process. Traditional leaders are a varied group, distinguished from other political leaders by their association with customary governance practices. Although these practices differ across communities, chiefs typically are selected from within local ruling families, rarely are popularly elected, and frequently rule for life.

How democratic can a society be if unelected chiefs rule at the local level? How can political equality be achieved if women and migrants are accorded fewer rights than men and indigenous groups under customary law?

These fears are not limited to the implications of a residue of undemocratic rule obstinately maintaining itself below national-level democracy.

**Ways of  
Governing**

*Eighth in a series*

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Traditional chiefs could also reduce the democratic accountability of elected national governments if voters defer to decrees from their chiefs when deciding how to vote in presidential and parliamentary elections. Presidential candidates regularly visit the palaces of traditional chiefs to ask for their endorsements, causing consternation among many political observers. How democratic is a country if endorsements by hereditary chiefs can sway election outcomes?

These are important questions for anyone who cares about democracy on the continent. Fortunately, the institution of traditional chieftancy is more compatible with democratic politics than it appears at first glance. Concerns about chiefs corroding national-level democracy are largely misplaced.

### CHIEFS, NOT KINGMAKERS

In the run-up to Ghana's 2016 presidential election, the incumbent, John Mahama, visited the chief of Sunyani. This type of meeting between politicians and chiefs has become commonplace during election campaigns everywhere from Burkina Faso to Zimbabwe. The chief endorsed Mahama, confidently promising him 80 percent of the vote in his region of Brong Ahafo. However, when the votes were counted, a majority in the region and even in the chief's own area had supported Mahama's opponent, Nana Akufo-Addo. A majority of the national vote also went to Akufo-Addo, making Mahama the first president in Ghana's history who failed to win a second term.

The limited influence of the chief of Sunyani exemplifies the weak electoral power of traditional chiefs. It is rare for a chief to sway the result of a presidential or parliamentary election with his (or, in rare cases, her) endorsement. Chiefs can be cunning in hedging their bets, offering statements of support to multiple candidates. But even when a chief clearly endorses one candidate, this is unlikely to have significant electoral impact. Most people are aware that voting is conducted by secret ballot. More than three-quarters of Africans say it is unlikely that powerful people could find out how they voted, according to the Afrobarometer survey. Traditional chiefs may be accorded great respect in cultural and social settings, but this does not directly translate into political influence.

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*Traditional institutions and customary law are more fluid than they are often imagined to be.*

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My own research in Zambia shows that traditional chiefs' endorsements have limited influence on voters, even in cases where chiefs retain significant social standing. I spent close to a month in each of three different chiefdoms. The first two, Kashiba and Lubunda, are in Zambia's Luapula province. These are areas that in the precolonial period were part of the powerful Lunda confederation, a central African commonwealth that, at its peak in the nineteenth century, covered a territory the size of Italy. Even today, traditional institutions in these chiefdoms are very hierarchical, with chiefs Kashiba and Lubunda serving under the senior Lunda chief, Mwata Kazembe.

This contrasts with the third chiefdom, Ndake, in Zambia's Eastern province, where power is more decentralized. Chief Ndake does not report to a higher chief. Although at the time of my research the chief was a respected leader, he interacted with other community members on a relatively equal footing.

Each area had a relatively new member of Parliament, elected just two years earlier. I was interested in learning about the effect of the chiefs' political opinions on other community members' views of these representatives. I first interviewed each chief about his opinion of his member of Parliament. These opinions were not widely known at the time, since the research was conducted well in advance of the next election, and parliamentarians' performance was not yet a salient topic of local discussion.

With a team of research assistants, I also conducted a survey of a representative sample of adults in each chiefdom. I shared the local chief's opinion with half of the respondents, and assessed the effect of chiefs' endorsements on public opinion by comparing respondents' stated support for their member of Parliament depending on whether or not they were informed of their chiefs' views. Again, this was long before the next parliamentary election, so the research did not interfere with an election campaign.

My findings indicate that only a small subset of voters consider their chiefs' political views when forming their own opinions about politicians. Interestingly, the findings are remarkably similar across the hierarchical Lunda chiefdoms and the more egalitarian Ndake chiefdom. Zambian chiefs are not the electoral kingmakers they are some-

times made out to be. Like the chief of Sunyani in Ghana, they have limited electoral influence.

But if this is the case, why do politicians visit chiefs so regularly? Why have chiefs received renewed political attention since the post-1990 wave of democratization in Africa? The answer lies not in their electoral importance but in their developmental importance. Traditional chiefs have a special ability to organize collective responses to local problems in many communities.

## EPIDEMIC RESPONSE

One dramatic example of a problem that requires a collective response is an epidemic. The worldwide spread of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 has put traditional chiefs on the front lines of the fight against this disease in many communities. The responses of traditional chiefs in Sierra Leone during the West African Ebola epidemic between 2014 and 2016 provide insight into the important role these leaders can play in the current pandemic.

Ebola is a deadly viral disease passed between humans through physical contact with the bodily fluids of an infected person. The spread of the disease from the first sites of outbreak was linked to funerals of prominent community members, at which large numbers of mourners paid their respects by carrying and touching the bodies of the dead in preparation for burial. Another group at major risk of infection was family caregivers who could contract the disease while nursing and comforting sick relatives in their homes.

This made Ebola a brutally difficult containment challenge, requiring major changes in how communities conduct funeral rituals and how families care for sick members. It also required effective quarantines and contact tracing of those exposed to infected individuals, both of which depend on high levels of cooperation and monitoring within communities.

The Jawei chiefdom in eastern Sierra Leone was one of the first in the country to be affected, with confirmed cases in late May 2014. It was also one of the hardest hit. Among the earliest victims was the wife of Paramount Chief Musa Kallon. The chief's daughter, who had cared for her mother during her illness, also subsequently died of Ebola.

As British anthropologist Paul Richards has documented, Paramount Chief Kallon responded quickly and effectively to the outbreak. He organized 52 young men to form an anti-Ebola task force responsible for educating the public, track-

ing cases, and burying the dead according to a safe protocol. He orchestrated the passage of bylaws restricting movement within the chiefdom, mandating the reporting of cases, and prescribing safe burial practices.

These measures were remarkably effective. By the end of July 2014, just two months later, the outbreak had ebbed in the chiefdom. Its bylaws became a national model, inspiring the National Council of Paramount Chiefs and the Ministry of Local Government to order similar measures across all chiefdoms in Sierra Leone that August.

Paramount Chief Kallon's effectiveness in containing Ebola within his chiefdom was not simply the result of a well-reasoned policy approach. As a powerful paramount chief, he also had the authority to enforce control measures, many of which citizens were initially reluctant to follow. The strength of traditional institutions allowed the paramount chief to communicate regularly with sub-chiefs and village headmen to monitor local movements and to sanction those who tried to break quarantine. Traditional hunting groups still carried social prestige in the chiefdom, allowing the chief to draw on this paradigm in recruiting for his Ebola task force. Across Sierra Leone, chiefdoms with more powerful ruling families were consistently more effective in lowering the death toll from Ebola, as demonstrated by the research of Dutch political economists Peter van der Windt and Maarten Voors.

## DEVELOPMENT BROKERS

The critical role of traditional chiefs in organizing effective collective responses to community problems is underscored during extraordinary times, such as the Ebola epidemic. But chiefs often play a role in organizing more mundane development projects as well. Community participation is critical to the success of a wide variety of projects in rural communities, from school construction to road maintenance to sanitation campaigns. In areas where traditional chiefs still exist, they are often well placed to ensure that community members do their part by contributing to these projects.

In Zambia, traditional chiefs play two complementary roles in organizing local development projects. First, they request contributions from community members, who are frequently asked to volunteer labor or materials for infrastructure projects. If a primary school needs to be built, the chief or headman will often be the one to ask each household to contribute a set number of bricks.

If a path needs to be cleared through the brush, a traditional leader will typically organize a work gang to take care of it.

Second, traditional chiefs act as brokers between their communities and the government, serving as spokespersons and lobbyists for local needs. The most effective chiefs are in frequent contact with their areas' district commissioners and members of Parliament, who may rarely visit rural chiefdoms in person. Active chiefs often remind these officials of local infrastructural needs and alert them immediately when new problems arise.

Government administrators note the challenges faced by chiefdoms without a sitting chief. Such vacancies can occur if the previous officeholder has recently died and a successor has not yet been installed—or, worse yet, if the succession is contested by multiple contenders. My own research shows that chiefdoms obtain significantly fewer infrastructure projects in the years immediately following the death of a chief. In Zambia, the impact of such a vacancy is immediate and material: without a chief in place, fewer new classrooms are built and fewer water boreholes are drilled in the local community.

Why do chiefs expend effort on organizing these projects to the benefit of their communities? Not all chiefs do. Some take advantage of their positions to sell off community assets, like communal land and natural resources, for their own private gain. But chiefs who have strong social connections to their communities and who expect to rule them for a long time have an incentive to broker local development with broader benefits.

Thus, from Sierra Leone to Zambia, traditional chiefs play a vital role in mobilizing community members to solve collective problems. Chiefs can draw on long-standing local organizations and traditional legitimacy to organize collective action. In many rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa, no other leader can rival a chief in this capacity.

But a chief's ability to organize development projects does not directly translate into the ability to mobilize votes. If a chief asks for contributions to a development project, this is usually considered a legitimate request, and compliance is easily observable. But directing voters to support a candidate endorsed by a chief is not typically viewed as legitimate, and individual voters' compliance with such a directive is not verifiable.

Still, the fact that chiefs can act as development brokers partly explains why they have received renewed attention at the same time that multiparty

elections have become institutionalized in sub-Saharan Africa. Elections have provided governments with new incentives to deliver development projects to rural voters, who still make up a majority of the electorate in most sub-Saharan African countries.

Their role as development brokers may give chiefs some indirect influence over how community members vote. Voters concerned with how well political candidates will perform in delivering development projects may give weight to their chief's ability to work with those candidates when deciding how to cast their ballots. But this influence over elections is indirect and limited, whereas chiefs' influence over local development projects is direct and extensive.

## POLITICAL INTERFERENCE

These findings undercut many concerns about chiefs' compatibility with democracy. Traditional chiefs do not corrode national-level democracy. Since they have limited influence over how voters cast their ballots, they do not break the chain of accountability between voters and their elected representatives. But chiefs can play an important role in brokering development projects, and in doing so, they may help elected governments respond to rural citizens' needs.

Instead of traditional chiefs endangering democracy, the larger danger might be that competitive elections encourage politicians to undermine the legitimacy of traditional chiefs. Despite chiefs' limited electoral influence, politicians frequently make efforts to co-opt incumbent chiefs and impose new ones in their efforts to secure any electoral advantage possible.

It has become common practice for governments to increase the salaries of chiefs in the run-up to an election. In one recent example, Zambian President Edgar Lungu more than doubled the monthly salaries paid to traditional chiefs immediately before the 2016 election, from 4,000 Kwacha (\$400) to 10,000 Kwacha. This probably did not give him a large bump in his vote share, even if it improved some chiefs' opinions of him. However, large salary raises risk making chiefs more dependent on the state than on their communities, undercutting their ties to local citizens.

More damaging are government efforts to impose appointments and even create new traditional leadership positions. In Zambia, Lungu's predecessor Michael Sata tried for years to influence the selection of the Bemba paramount chief, Chitimu-

kulu, inciting a feud with the candidate preferred by the Bemba traditional council. Ultimately, Sata's administration was successful in delaying but not overturning the installation of the council's preferred candidate. The current Chitimukulu was installed in July 2015, a full three years after the death of his predecessor. (Sata himself had died in October 2014.)

President Joyce Banda of Malawi also intervened widely in traditional affairs, creating new chieftaincy offices as a means of bestowing patronage on particular leaders. In the two-year period before the 2014 Malawian elections, tens of thousands of traditional leaders were given higher ranks: village headmen received the status of group village headmen, sub-chiefs gained the status of chiefs, and so on. Across all regions of the country, close to half of all officially recognized traditional leaders were likely promised promotions during this period, along with the associated increased salaries and perks of office.

This strategy of buying off traditional chiefs did not yield large electoral benefits for Banda. She was in a weak position going into the election, having ascended to the presidency from the vice presidency after the death of President Bingu wa Mutharika, and she was no longer a member of Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party. Even so, it is noteworthy that despite the widespread promotion of traditional leaders during her tenure, she lost the 2014 presidential election by a wide margin, taking just 20 percent of the vote.

Although the strategy of elevating chiefs had limited electoral benefits, it harmed the strength and legitimacy of traditional institutions. Many chiefs and chiefly families objected to the new appointments, creating tensions among traditional leaders. Following the 2014 election, the new administration appointed regional committees to investigate the Banda-era promotions, overseen by paramount and senior chiefs. Numerous appointments were overturned.

This evidence shows that political interventions into traditional leadership appointments are a counterproductive strategy. These interventions bring limited electoral gains. More importantly, such meddling harms the government's ability to work with chieftaincies to deliver development projects because it undermines the institutional

capacity and legitimacy of traditional leaders at the local level.

I do not want to overstate the orderliness of power transitions in traditional institutions in the absence of contemporary political interventions. Even in the precolonial period, political authority was fiercely contested due to both competition between different lineages within chiefdoms and conflicts between societies. Colonial administrations intervened extensively in chieftaincy successions, in some cases inventing new traditional chiefs. As a result, not all chiefs enjoy local legitimacy, even if present-day politicians restrain themselves from intervening in chieftaincy affairs.

Despite these complicated histories, many traditional leaders are able to play constructive roles as development brokers. It is important to safeguard their ability to do so, especially in states that lack well-functioning bureaucracies.

Traditional institutions have some tools for resisting political intervention. In certain cases, they can simply wait out elected leaders, as chiefs in Zambia and Malawi were able to do with the Sata and Banda administrations. Still, I see a greater danger in vote-seeking politicians undermining chiefs than in chiefs undermining

national-level democracy.

## LOCAL DESPOTS?

Even if traditional institutions are not a significant threat to national democracy, they undeniably incorporate undemocratic practices into local governance. Traditional chiefs are rarely elected and often rule for life. Women and ethnic minorities are frequently underrepresented in traditional councils, and customary law often enshrines gender and ethnic inequalities. Customary justice frequently emphasizes the restoration of social order above the protection of individual rights. What can be done about these undemocratic aspects of traditional institutions?

One proposed solution is to introduce elections for traditional chiefs. But this is akin to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. In areas with no tradition of electing chiefs, holding such votes effectively replaces traditional leaders with a new class of political leaders who cannot draw on traditional institutional capacity or legitimacy to organize collective responses to local problems.

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*How democratic can a society be if unelected chiefs rule at the local level?*

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What can be done to democratize local traditional leadership without undermining its effectiveness? Rather than fully replacing traditional political institutions, it may be possible to draw on their inclusive aspects to encourage reform from within.

To the extent that these institutions allow for popular participation and accountability, they have typically done so through deliberative rather than electoral processes. Historically, traditional leaders ruled as members of councils, and chiefs depended on the advice of councilors in their decision-making. Ugandan anthropologist Mahmood Mamdani has shown how colonial administrations empowered chiefs without giving corresponding recognition to their councils, thereby weakening deliberative processes that checked the power of traditional leaders.

Even so, traditional councils have demonstrated institutional resilience in many communities. Katharina Holzinger recently conducted an expert survey on contemporary traditional political institutions around the world, and found that advisory councils remain active in most groups. Chiefs are expected to consult advisers before rendering decisions and to justify their actions to these councils.

The importance of deliberative processes to decision-making in traditional institutions presents both an opportunity and a challenge. At their best, deliberative processes allow for dynamic popular participation in articulating social issues and finding collective solutions. However, if key constituencies cannot participate in deliberative processes on an equal footing, their interests may be ignored in decision-making. The limited rights of women and ethnic minorities in some traditional institutions is a major concern in this regard.

Fortunately, it may be possible to make deliberative processes within traditional institutions more inclusive. As American political scientist David Stasavage has argued, political leaders have incentives to include councilors in decision-making in contexts where councilors have access to information the leader lacks. This suggests the possibility of encouraging traditional leaders to broaden their consultative practices by amplifying the value of information held by marginalized groups within their communities.

American-Congolese political scientist Eric Mvukiyeye, Zimbabwean geographer Shylock Muyengwa, and I have conducted research that shows the promise of this approach in Zimbabwean villages. We examined what happened when local civil society leaders who were not part of traditional governing circles were given information by a local nongovernmental organization on laws and policies related to village-level governance. We found that this made them valued advisers to village chiefs, and gave the chiefs an incentive to consult more broadly and govern more inclusively. We specifically found that village chiefs could be encouraged to consult more women, indicating that traditional practices are often malleable and that some discriminatory practices can be mitigated.

Concerns about traditional chiefs being at odds with local-level democracy are often well founded. Many customary legal systems need to make progress in improving gender and ethnic equality before the law. But traditional institutions and customary law are more fluid than they are often imagined to be. The question for ongoing debate is how traditional leaders can be encouraged to act as development brokers on behalf of their communities while mitigating the discriminatory features of local-level traditional governance. ■