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doi:10.1017/S0022278X23000150

Judge, landlord, broker, watchman: assessing variation in chiefly duties and authority in the Ghana–Togo Borderlands*

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to broaden the framework for understanding the many different roles that traditional leaders play in their communities in sub-Saharan Africa. Using data from an original public opinion survey along the Ghana–Togo border, we find that one of the most important roles of the chieftaincy is to maintain law and order: resolving disputes and keeping the community safe from crime. However, we also find considerable variation in what chiefs are expected to do, how effective they are performing their various tasks, and how much authority they wield in doing so – both over their own subjects as well as over local government

* The authors thank Lauren Maclean, Kate Baldwin and Erin Hern for comments on earlier drafts. This work would not have been possible without the research assistance of Koffi Amessou Adaba, Christian Emmanuel Bruku, Inoussa Darago, Najah Ntilam Fobil, Oreoluwa Runsewe and the excellent survey teams at Ipsos Ghana and CROP Togo. Funding was generously provided by the Vice President for Research and Partnerships' Junior Faculty Grant and a College of International Studies Faculty Support Grant at the University of Oklahoma. This research underwent human subjects review at the University of California, Berkeley (#2019-04-12106).

officials. We explore several potential sources for this variation, finding that chiefs in Ghana, a former British colony, are expected to do more jobs, are perceived to be more effective, and hold more upward power over local state officials compared with their counterparts in Togo, a former French colony.

Keywords – Chiefs, Ghana, Togo, historical legacies.

INTRODUCTION

Although traditional authorities have always played a central role in local politics across sub-Saharan Africa, political scientists largely downplayed their role in the early decades of independence, focusing instead on the realm of formal politics. This is no longer the case. Sparked by Mamdani's thesis that chiefs are 'decentralised despots' as well as the turn to electoral politics in the 1990s, which created new opportunities for chiefs to serve as political brokers, political scientists have gradually come to believe that understanding the chieftaincy is key to understanding local politics in many African states. An increasingly sophisticated body of work has turned the field's attention to the role of chiefs as political brokers for the central state (Koter 2016), custodians of land rights (Boone 2014), and as critical players in rural development (Bob-Milliar 2009; Baldwin 2016). Chiefs, this work shows, remain as relevant as ever.

Yet despite this renewed interest, much of the work on traditional authorities in modern Africa tends to be, understandably, focused on specific aspects of the chieftaincy, most often questions of land management, or chiefs' capacity to serve as political or development brokers. This article takes a step back to consider the nature of the chieftaincy in Africa more holistically, focusing empirically on the Ghana–Togo border. We engage in two tasks. First, we ask three inter-related descriptive questions: What is the full range of jobs that chiefs do in their communities? To what extent are local chiefs seen as effective at these jobs? And exactly how powerful and authoritative are chiefs within their communities? We disaggregate the concept of 'authority' to consider (1) a chief's coercive authority downward over villagers, (2) the downward authority they derive from including villagers in decision-making and (3) their upwards authority over local state officials.

Taken together, we show that even within the relatively small geographic space of the Ghana–Togo borderlands, there exists considerable variation in the extent of all three of these questions. We pair an original survey of 1000 rural citizens in 50 villages along the border with qualitative interviews with their chiefs¹ to gain insight into the relationship between the exercise and perception of chiefly tasks and authority. Not only do we find notable variation in terms of chiefly duties, but we also find that villagers most consistently view their chiefs through a lens of public order. While there is variation in the extent to which citizens believe their chiefs should manage land or act as a spiritual leader, chiefs are uniformly expected to adjudicate disputes and protect their communities from crime. Yet this topic is considerably understudied,

particularly in political science, which has yet to seriously engage with the idea that traditional authorities may be substituting for state courts or agents of law enforcement.² Further, although chiefs are seen as effective on average, we also uncover a surprising amount of variation in the tail end of ineffective chiefs. Finally, we find that while some village chiefs are unanimously seen as the most powerful figures in their communities, others appear to in fact have very little authority at all.

This variation brings us to a second, more tentative, task: Why do chiefly duties, effectiveness and authority vary across villages? We derive two axes of expectations from the literature. The first focuses on the structural location of chiefs. We consider the long-term effects of national institutions, particularly how colonial and postcolonial state building efforts engaged the chieftaincy, as well as their subnational location relative to the state. Second, we explore two individual attributes of a chief, notably, his reported relationship with local government as well as how he was selected into the chieftaincy, or in other words, the openness of this selection procedure (ranging from election to hereditary succession). Consistently, we find that the structural factors explain more variation in our data than attributes of individual chieftaincies. Specifically, relative to their Ghanaian counterparts, Togolese chiefs today are expected to do less in their communities, are less effective at doing these jobs, and hold considerably less upwards authority over local state officials. We also find that in villages located farther away from the state, chiefs tend to have fewer jobs and be less effective at doing their jobs, suggesting that chiefly authority and state power might be complements rather than substitutes. Individual attributes appear to only shape outcomes at the margins.

Our findings seek to reframe the agenda for studying the role of the contemporary chieftaincy in African political life. First, one of our main findings is that a core task of the chieftaincy is meeting bottom-up demand for the provision of order by resolving disputes and addressing crime. Although nearly every chief in our study was expected to fulfil this judicial role within his community, there is almost no literature on the topic in contemporary political science despite its implications for state-building and citizen welfare. Second, we echo recent work (e.g. Nathan 2023) that shows how chiefly performance varies substantially even within a circumscribed geographic space, reinforcing the idea that scholars and practitioners alike should exercise great caution when generalising across space. Finally, we suggest that scholars ‘break open’ the concept of traditional authority by considering different aspects of the power of the chief; while some chiefs have considerable ‘downward’ authority over their subjects, others possess ‘upward’ authority over local state officials. The implications of this variation matter quite a bit for understanding the capacity of individual chiefs to be effective across issue domains. For example, a chief with downwards authority may have a relative advantage in dispute resolution, whereas a chief with upwards authority may be a better development broker for his community. Future work would be enriched by considering this nuance.

We proceed by reviewing the dynamic literature on chiefs and traditional authorities within political science, as well as discussing the theoretical foundations of chiefly authorities within the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial contexts. We then introduce our research design and present descriptive statistics that illustrate the variation we find in chiefly duties, effectiveness and authority. Finally, we present our analysis of how this variation can be explained by both structural and individual differences between chieftaincies, before drawing out a series of implications that our findings hold for future research on customary authority in Africa.

A RESURGENT INTEREST IN THE ROLE OF CHIEFS

As pluralist elections began taking root across the continent in the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars began remarking on a ‘resurgence’ of African traditional authorities (for example, Engleburt 2002; Mamdani 1996). Traditional elites quickly adapted to the continent’s wave of political liberalisation. This has produced a dichotomised view of their role in African political life: chiefs are a legitimate source of social capital for new, democratic regimes (for example, ECA 2007) and are promising allies in local development initiatives (Voors *et al.* 2018), on the one hand, while on the other they threaten the democratic project and development initiatives by encouraging ‘consensus politics’ and marginalising the voices of minorities (Mamdani 1996; Ribot *et al.* 2008). For their part, citizen approval has proven quite resilient to the emergence of new political authorities. Using Afrobarometer public opinion data, Logan shows that assessments of leaders – traditional and democratic alike – are tightly linked. Chiefs and elected leaders can be thought of, she suggests, ‘as common players in a single, integrated political system’ (Logan 2009: 103).

Political scientists have focused their engagement with the chieftaincy in modern African politics in two domains: land management (e.g. Boone 2003, 2014; Honig 2022), and the interrelated process of the provisioning of public goods and acting as political brokers between local communities and the central state (Baldwin 2016; Nathan 2019; Brierley & Ofori 2021). One stream of this research, largely emerging out of the southern African context, has fixated on chiefs as agents of the state, highlighting the ways in which chiefs prioritise their own enrichment or advancement at the expense of citizens, most prominently by blocking votes for political parties (Ntsebeza 2005; de Kadt & Larreguy 2018). A second body of research argues that chiefs can advance the interest of citizens. Baldwin (2016), has argued that chiefs can serve as important development brokers, improving the responsiveness of elected leaders to rural concerns by serving to aggregate citizen interests. Public opinion data echoes this logic, with citizens viewing chiefs as having a critical role in promoting development in their communities (Logan & Katenda 2021).

As this literature has developed, political scientists have also begun grappling with the uneven efficacy and authority of chiefs. Arguably, the most dominant

expectation is that the nature of the colonial encounter shaped the chieftaincy. In general, the literature has found that colonial practices that most strongly interfered with precolonial institutions (primarily associated with French direct rule) permanently weakened the authority of traditional rulers. For example, Miles (1994) demonstrates a distinct divergence between Hausa chiefs in the Niger–Nigeria borderlands; while chiefs in Nigeria have largely retained their ceremonial role and remain the premier authority in the village, their counterparts across the border in Niger are clearly subordinate to central state authorities. Other work shows similar enduring colonial legacies on trust in traditional authorities (Lechler & McNamee 2018). Though classically studied as deriving from differences in French and British colonial rule (recently, Zimbalist 2021), others locate structural divergences in traditional authority strength in within-colony variation in the construction of the chieftaincy. Thus, Nathan (2019) shows that chieftaincies that were invented by the British in Northern Ghana perform worse than chieftaincies that predated colonial rule. Acemoglu *et al.* (2014) similarly find that chiefs in Sierra Leone are less accountable to citizens when the British concentrated the chieftaincy in a narrow set of families.

Several studies have also shown that postcolonial differences are also likely to matter. One prominent recent argument in this vein focuses on the role of formal institutions; countries that formally integrate the chieftaincy into their national constitution see more trust in the chieftaincy than in countries where no such formal integration exists. These formal arrangements then interact with physical proximity to the state itself to determine the degree to which chiefs act as a complement or substitute to the state (Henn 2022). Others focus on individual attributes; Bonoff (2016), for example, shows that an individual chief's ability to mobilise voters depends on their personal coercive and cultural authority.

Taken together, this small but growing literature is beginning to aggregate different ways in which individual and structural differences shape the modern chieftaincy. By using original cross-national survey data, we are able to ask a wide-ranging battery of questions about traditional authority that allows us to evaluate citizen attitudes about the chieftaincy in more depth than most existing work. We introduce these data and the study context below.

OVERVIEW OF STUDY CONTEXT AND DATA

Chiefs in the Ghana–Togo borderlands

We investigate popular perceptions of the chieftaincy in the Ghana–Togo borderlands, specifically in the footprint of former German Togoland, one of six German colonial holdings on the continent that was split between the British and French in 1914. We sampled horizontally within ethnic groups that lay on either side of the border across two geographic clusters in the north and the south of each country.

In the south, we look at the Ewe. In the precolonial era, the locus of political power in Eweland was the village. Although a few small-scale polities did coalesce, these remained loosely organised, and their composite towns and villages retained substantial autonomy (Nukunya 1997: 63). Thus, despite the Ewe's cultural and historical ties, rooted in their shared dispersal from the town of Notsie (present-day Togo) in the 16th century, for the most part, the population lacked hierarchical political authority beyond the village. Villages themselves were headed by chiefs who performed religious, military, political and judicial functions, but chiefly power itself was far from absolute; chiefs were advised by a council of elders and could be destooled for poor performance (Laumann 2005: 16–18). As argued by Nugent (1996: 206), Ewe chiefs *gained* authority in the colonial period compared with their more circumscribed authority prior to colonisation.

The second research cluster falls 300–400 kilometres to the north among the Gur-speaking populations. Here we have more ethnic heterogeneity, working in Bassar, Bimoba/Moba and Konkomba villages. Of these groups, the Konkomba are the best documented. Precolonial political authority among the Konkomba was divided into secular and religious domains. The former was assured by the oldest male member of the village or clan, while the latter was charged with maintaining a community's earth shrine (Talton 2010: 16). Similar trends hold for the Bassar (Dugast 1988) and Bimboba/Moba, for whom the clan is the most relevant political structure (Meij *et al.* 2007). Although a more centralised Bassar chieftom existed in central Togo, this remained a small polity, and villages to the west – where we worked – were not incorporated, presided over instead by lineage elders (De Barros 2012: 257). In contrast to the Ewe, where the colonial state strengthened the powers of the village chief, in these communities the colonial state more often radically redefined the position of chief or created it outright.

The outset of German colonisation was a pivotal moment for the chieftaincy. Even though German colonisation was quite short, German rule still intervened heavily, particularly amongst the Ewe, where the Germans attempted to centralise authority within villages by strengthening the chieftaincy (Laumann 2005: 23). These relationships were redefined again when German Togoland was divided between Britain and France in 1914, when French and British troops drove the German colonial administration out of the colony. While the Ewe and northern Gur-speaking groups had faced a shared fate under German rule, now they fell under two distinct modes of colonial governance as the British and French administered their respective Togolands as United Nations Mandate Territories.

British and French colonial rule has long been schematised as adopting two different approaches to the chieftaincy: while French statist ideologies arguably found more continuity with German colonial policies, the British were eager to empower local authorities in British Togoland. This sentiment is seen clearly in the speech of the Gold Coast's (now Ghana) Governor in 1926: 'If the peoples of the Gold Coast are ever to stand by themselves, it must be by the gradual development of their own institutions and customs' (quoted in Schuerkens

1995: 126). Indeed, many of the chiefs we interviewed noted that the British colonial state granted a fair amount of latitude to chiefs. Although most chiefs recounted the difficult imposition of tax and labour demands, chiefs were understood to have had substantial authority. ‘In the colonial days’, recounted one chief, ‘the colonial masters gave a lot of power to the local chiefs ... If the chiefs give an order and you did not obey, and they report to the colonial master you are in trouble ... They empowered the chiefs those days’ (Interview, Volta Region, 12 June 2019). In contrast, the prevailing view among Togolese chiefs is summarised by one interviewee as follows: ‘the French dictated orders that the chief had to impose on the population’ (Interview Savanes Region, 19 June 2019). All interviewees recognised that the colonial state gave orders to chiefs, therefore, but there were clear colony-specific trends in a chief’s autonomy over how to implement and impose that request.

In many ways, postcolonial history deepened the differential legacies of colonial rule (Young 2012). In Ghana, the role of the chieftaincy has been clearly stipulated in each of the country’s four constitutions and higher chiefs have an institutionalised body in the House of Chiefs. Although the Ghanaian state has at times intentionally weakened the chieftaincy (Rathbone 2000; Lange 2009: 173) – for example, Nkrumah amplified district and regional political centres at the expense of the chiefs – these efforts proved short-lived. As Nugent (1996: 212–15) documents for Volta region, the state decay of the 1970s and 80s reanimated the village as the locus of local development, allowing chiefs to create a ‘reconstituted role’ for themselves as they helped mobilise local labour and development efforts. The chieftaincy remains a powerful institution in Ghana that is politically relevant both vis-à-vis the state and vis-à-vis citizens; over 80% of the country’s land is held in trust for citizens by their traditional authorities, for example (Bob-Milliar 2009). Ubink (2008: 22) characterises Ghana as an example of *association*, whereby the government stipulates a clear role for traditional authorities in the modern state.

Togo is closer to what Ubink calls *subordination*. The postcolonial state under Gnassingbé Eyadema, and his son Fauré, has integrated chiefs under the political control of the central government. Echoing French colonial policy, government *arrêts* pertaining to the chieftaincy clearly stipulate chiefly functions as a civil servant subordinate to the central government (van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1996: 42–4). In contrast to Ghana, where the early postcolonial state challenged the chieftaincy only to develop a more mutually beneficial relationship over time, the inverse has been true for Togo. Throughout the 1980s, Eyadema’s regime relied on chiefs for the state’s modernisation efforts, reinforcing in the process the idea of a ‘traditional’ basis for chiefly authority; indeed, the country’s constitution stipulates that traditional chiefdoms are ‘guardians’ of custom. However, challenges to the regime throughout the 1990s undermined this relationship, and as the state retracted its support for chiefs – fiscal and otherwise – their authority waned (Piot 2010: 6–7). This does not mean that the chieftaincy is now irrelevant in Togo; Togolese report high levels of

confidence in their chiefs and view them as important social actors (Ekoutiamé *et al.* 2021). But Togolese chiefs were cognisant of the difference between their own role and those of their counterparts in Ghana, as summarised by one respondent:

when we go to Ghana, we feel sorry for ourselves. Because there is a consideration for royalty [in Ghana]. If the government came now, I'm going to get up. I should rather be seated and the President of the Republic will come and greet me. It is he who must come and knock at the door, and I will tell him to come in ... This is what I told you earlier that the Togolese government robbed the chieftaincy of its power to dominate it. In reality, we are not traditional chiefs, we are chiefs ... when we say traditional chief, this is service chief ... Otherwise, Faure was not going to say that we should come and sit down before he arrives, he is the one who must sit down before we arrive. It's like that. There is a difference. (Interview, Plateaux Region, 12 June 2019)

Even a small geographic area such as the Ghana–Togo borderlands has seen substantial political challenges to the chieftaincy since colonisation. By zooming in on one area, we hope to gain leverage on how the nature of the chieftaincy varies today by comparing groups we would otherwise expect to have been highly similar prior to colonisation. This research design provides specific analytic advantages therefore, but we acknowledge its shortcomings as well. The majority of the area we study was historically stateless in the precolonial period, with no hierarchical governance structures.³ Precolonial levels of centralisation have been shown to be consequential for the behaviour of contemporary chiefs (e.g., Nathan 2019), but we hold this potential driver of variation in the contemporary chieftaincy constant. This allows us to explore whether the colonial state-building project put the chieftaincy on distinct trajectories, but it simultaneously imposes an important scope condition for our findings: communities that were home to strong precolonial chieftaincies may exhibit distinct patterns of authority in the present that we are not able to capture with these data.

Data collection

One of the major advantages of this study is that it is based on an original survey specifically focused on understanding traditional authority in the broadest sense. Much of the existing literature either uses indirect proxies for chiefly effectiveness, such as measures of public goods, or relies on two core questions from the Afrobarometer: how often a respondent has contact with traditional authorities and how much they trust them. We were able to ask a broad battery of questions about chiefly duties and effectiveness as well as a series of more nuanced questions about their authority. We worked in 50 villages along the border, conducting an original survey of villagers and qualitative interviews with village chiefs. Twenty-five villages were surveyed in Ghana, clustered in Volta and Northern regions, as well as 25 villages in Maritime, Plateaux, Kara

and Savanes departments in Togo.⁴ The villages were matched in pairs across the border with the intention of capturing similar populations and ethnic composition and were within 10–15 kilometres of the border.⁵ We fielded an original public opinion survey in these villages between July 2019 and February 2021.⁶ Within each village, 20 households were selected for interviews by a survey team of enumerators native to the region and fluent in the appropriate languages.⁷ One thousand respondents were interviewed in total.

The survey asked respondents a range of questions. In addition to basic demographics, respondents were asked about life in their villages, the village's public goods, and their responsibilities as citizens. Most pertinent to our purposes here, all respondents were asked a host of questions about their village chief that ranged from their own experiences with the chief as well as their perceptions of the chief's job and his performance. The following section describes three core sets of questions designed to better understand variation in (1) what jobs chiefs are expected to do within their communities, (2) how effective they are at doing them, and (3) how much authority they hold within their community.

Before survey enumeration began, a research team visited each village in order to interview the village chief and/or the elders of the village as well as to ask permission to field our survey.⁸ These interviews asked about the history of the village, what the village is like today, and the village chief's role in managing the affairs of the village. Data from these interviews were systematically coded and are paired with the survey data as introduced below.

A SNAPSHOT OF THE VILLAGE CHIEFTAINCY

We begin by illustrating the large amount of variation in chiefly duties, effectiveness and authority across all villages within the sample. First and foremost, we wanted to understand what ordinary citizens expect from their chiefs. We therefore asked respondents how important six different tasks were for their chief's job: managing local disputes, allocating land within the village, keeping the village safe from crime, acting as a spiritual leader, promoting local economic development, and building a close relationship with local government officials (the District Chief Executive in Ghana and the Préfet in Togo).⁹ **Figure 1** presents the country averages for Ghana and Togo as well as the total sample. The full variation by village is displayed in Appendix B (supplementary material).

Figure 1 shows that there is divergence in which jobs citizens ascribe to their village chiefs.¹⁰ We find that managing disputes was the most common job expected of chiefs, followed by a tie between building relationships with the government representative and keeping the village safe from crime. When averaging the responses of all respondents within a village, 37 out of 50 villages collectively scored 'managing disputes' as the chief's first or second most important job. Twenty-seven villages collectively scored crime-fighting as his first or second most important job. Further, these two functions are interlinked;

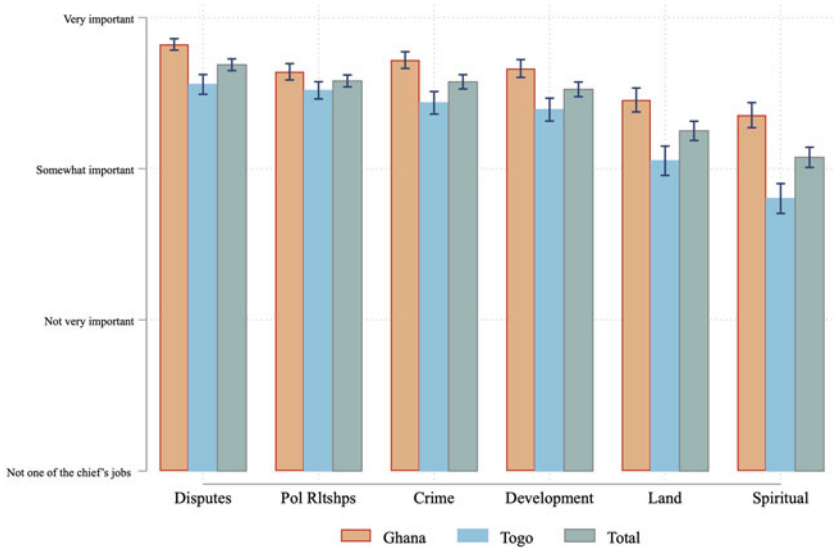


Figure 1. Is managing this issue an important part of your chief's job? Sample averages with 95% confidence intervals. Issue areas listed on x-axis.

crime is often tied to dispute resolution, and if a dispute is not adjudicated to satisfaction, retribution – property damage or violence – may be the result. In contrast, only five villages prioritised the spiritual role of chiefs and in nearly half of our surveyed villages (23) this role averaged the least important. Similarly, in only 10 villages was allocating land the first or second most important duty, on average. In 17 villages, respondents collectively ranked it last.

We also found that while some village chiefs are expected to wear a lot of hats (their villagers viewed all six tasks as important for their chief's job) other villages had much lower expectations. Most respondents view their chief as having 3–4 particularly important jobs. In general, Ghanaian respondents expect more from their chiefs than Togolese.

Our interviews with traditional authorities in the surveyed villages echo these trends, as seen in Table I. Nearly half of our interviewees noted that their core responsibility was resolving disputes or keeping peace in the village; this was the number one job mentioned by the chiefs themselves. A further 37.5% mentioned community development as their most important job. Other related duties not asked in our survey include passing information to citizens from the government and holding village meetings as well as more generic responses such as 'solving the village's problems' and 'making sure everyone has a good life'.

This is surprising; recent work on the chieftaincy has focused almost exclusively on the jobs of land allocation, economic development and political brokerage (e.g. Bob-Milliar 2009; Boone 2014; Baldwin 2016; Koter 2016; Honig 2022). Yet our data suggest that only about 56% of the population

TABLE I.
 Chiefs' self-reported most important roles in village

	Manage disputes/ maintain peace	Allocate/ Manage Land	Keep village safe/ protect from crime	Spiritual health of village/ maintain customs	Facilitate community development	Build/ maintain relationships with administrators/ politicians	Maintain public goods/ organise labour	Pass information/ hold village meetings	Solve local problems	Maintain well-being of community
%	47.9	0	4.2	4.2	37.5	8.3	29.2	20.8	29.2	8.3

Responses coded from interviews with village chiefs and their delegates. Chiefs often reported more than one central role, each of which is coded into the relevant category.

views land allocation as a ‘very important’ job of their chief, and a full 12% of the sample says it is not one of his jobs at all. Our qualitative interviews revealed similar trends. Not a single chief directly mentioned land allocation or management as their most important job, though most did report that the most common disputes they were asked to resolve involved land (78.5%).¹¹ Promoting economic development and building relations with local government leaders are also generally seen as important duties of these chiefs, though there is more discrepancy between chiefs and citizens for the latter. While citizens see building political relations as one of the most important duties of their chiefs, only 8.3% of chiefs listed it. Few chiefs or citizens spoke of a spiritual role for the chieftaincy – perhaps reflecting the advent of charismatic Christianity in many of their communities.

Overall, this has important implications for the study of the modern chieftaincy in the region and suggests that researchers ought to turn their attention to the ways in which local chiefs fulfil the judicial roles of the state, as opposed to complementing or substituting its economic obligations alone. Chiefs are indeed acting as local judges and law enforcement agents more than anything else, supplementing a weak state where formal courts and police stations are inaccessible to most rural citizens.

Second, for each of these jobs, respondents were further asked whether the chief was effective at doing this job.¹² These measures produced many different kinds of variation. On the one hand, chiefs tend to be better at some things than others and this tracks quite closely to how important the job itself is viewed. Just as dispute resolution and crime prevention are collectively ranked by villagers as the chief’s most important jobs, chiefs were also ranked as being the most effective in these two jobs (71% and 65% reported they were ‘very effective’ at these jobs, respectively). In contrast, only 49% of the full sample reported that their chief was effective at either building a relationship with the DCE/Préfet or acting as a spiritual leader.

Not only do the data present collective variation across these jobs, but they also reveal considerable variation in the effectiveness of individual chiefs. The full range in this variation is displayed in [Figure 2](#), where the chief’s average effectiveness score for each of these six jobs is plotted in vertical arrays along the x-axis. Each vertical array represents one of the 50 villages. The villages are ranked in order from the least effective chief to the most effective. Although some chiefs tended to rank similarly across all jobs, [Figure 2](#) reveals that in many villages there were major discrepancies in a chief’s perceived effectiveness in his different roles. So, for example, while the villagers of one Ewe village in Ghana collectively ranked their chief as being highly effective at preventing crime (79% of the villagers said he was ‘very effective’), far fewer villagers said he was ‘very effective’ at being a spiritual leader (38%), promoting development (47%), or building a relationship with the local DCE (50%). In fact, around a third of villagers reported that the chief was *ineffective* at these jobs.

Finally, we also collected survey data on the extent of a chief’s power within his community. On average, chiefs are generally authoritative. Logan (2013: 364)

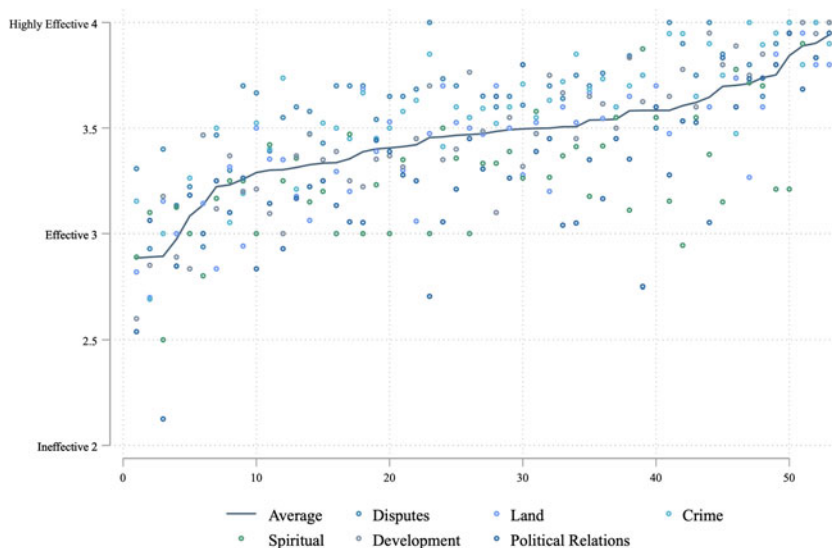


Figure 2. Variation in perceived effectiveness of chief by village. The y-axis reports average issue-area and composite scores by sampled village on the x-axis. Responses on a four-point scale range from highly effective (4) to not at all effective (1).

notes this finding when highlighting cross-national variation in the Afrobarometer data. Indeed, in our own data, when asked the open-ended question, ‘Thinking of this village specifically, in your opinion, who in this village has the most political authority?’, 75% of the entire sample named the village chief. However, the general veneer of authority belies significant variation between villages. On one extreme, in 10 of our villages, every single person interviewed named the chief as the most powerful authority in the village. On the other extreme are 8 villages in which less than 50% of respondents named the chief. In one northern village in Ghana, only one person of the 20 respondents mentioned the chief – two-thirds of the respondents in that village instead mentioned a specific party official, while most of the rest named the village’s assemblyman. Figure 3 presents the village-level average for each village in the sample. The data make clear that the power of the chief must not be taken as an assumption when considering his role and the effect of his role within his community.

We push beyond this generalised question of authority by looking at three distinct types of power that a chief may wield: a chief’s coercive authority over his subjects, the legitimacy that he derives from listening to them when making decisions for the village, and finally his upward authority over local government officials.¹³ The first two measures capture the main focus of the literature – the chief’s downward authority amongst his own people. Authority over villagers helps us better understand the extent to which a chief can mobilise villagers to, for example, participate in collective labour, vote for a preferred candidate,

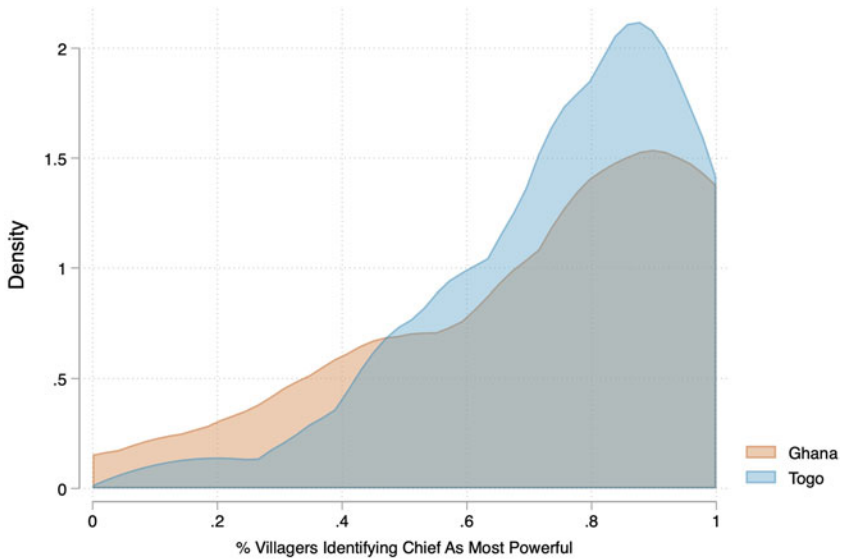


Figure 3. Density distribution of per cent of the village sample identifying the chief as most powerful figure in village.

or obey the rule of law. In general, we find that chiefs tend to have far more downwards authority (both coercive and inclusive) than they have upwards authority.

To measure coercive capacity, our survey asked each respondent, ‘If the chief of this village asked you to do something to help out the village and you didn’t do it, would you be worried about being punished?’ Overall, a sizeable majority of the full sample reported that they would, indeed, fear punishment; 64% of all respondents would be ‘very worried’, 21% would be ‘somewhat worried’, 5% would be ‘not very worried’ and 10% would be ‘not at all worried’. Although the survey doesn’t specify what ‘punishment’ entails, our interviews with the chiefs suggested a range of options. Many chiefs indicated that they have never had to punish anyone because no one has disobeyed them before, but those who had issued punishment primarily cited fines, for example buying drinks, plastic chairs, kola nut, or even animals for the chief, often for ceremonial purposes. For more difficult cases – or when someone refused to pay a fine – village chiefs indicated that the defendant would be passed on to a canton or paramount chief or even the police. Other chiefs (33%) mentioned more informal sanctions – for example, refusing to let the villagers bury a deceased relative in the village,¹⁴ or refusing to help them in the future if they needed something.¹⁵

To measure downward authority derived from perceived inclusivity (as opposed to coercion), we asked respondents, ‘When the chief of this village makes important decisions about the village, would you agree that he

takes into account the opinions of people like you?'. Again, most people seem to believe that their chief listens to them, at least somewhat. Within the full sample, 57% of all respondents 'strongly agreed' with the statement, 31% 'somewhat agreed' and only 11% 'somewhat' or 'strongly disagreed'.

Finally, the third form of authority relates upwards to the state. To what extent does the chief wield authority over local government officials? This type of authority has not been considered as extensively in the literature, but is key to studies such as Baldwin (2016), who notes that Zambian elected officials are eager to curry the favour of traditional authorities, who they view as essential for both mobilising voters and executing development projects. In other words, some state officials may defer to the authority of chiefs, while in other cases, the chief may be obliged to defer to the state. Our survey measures this form of upward authority by asking each respondent, 'Who is really in charge? Is the DCE [Ghana]/Préfet [Togo] in charge of the chief, is the chief in charge of the DCE/Préfet, or are they more like partners?'. when forced to specifically compare the chief with the DCE or Préfet, perceptions of the authority of the average chief diminishes considerably. Only 28% of respondents indicated that the chief was in charge of the DCE/Préfet, while a further 26% said they were partners. In contrast, a surprising 46% of respondents indicated that the DCE/Préfet was in fact in charge of the chief, suggesting that chiefly authority primarily derives from his authority amongst the people in his village, as opposed to upward authority over the state.

Figure 4 visualises the average level of authority ascribed to chiefs in Ghana and Togo; here, all four measures have been standardised to range from 0–4 (low to high) for comparability. Village specific results, located in Appendix B (supplementary material), reveal in more depth the wide variation in the data. While most chiefs are seen as broadly authoritative, some are authoritative on all four dimensions, while others see their authority cluster on only two or three dimensions.

EXPLAINING VARIATION IN THE JOBS, EFFECTIVENESS AND AUTHORITY OF CHIEFS

What drives this variation? Although we do not attempt to offer a definitive answer to this question, we examine two axes of expectations in the existing literature. The first dimension pertains to structural factors tied to geographic location. The most well-known arguments about structural location are those on the influence of the colonial and postcolonial states across country borders. If the French were more interventionist with the chieftaincy in Togo than the British were in Ghana, as is often argued, then we might reasonably expect that chiefs on the Togolese side of the border will have fewer jobs and be seen as less effective at these jobs than their counterparts in Ghana. This logic would also expect Togolese chiefs to hold more downwards, coercive authority over their subjects, but less upwards authority over local government officials to whom the French statist tradition subjugated them. More recently,

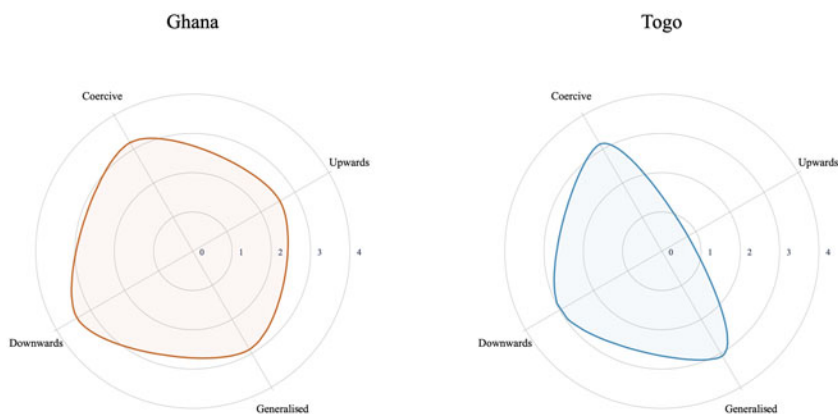


Figure 4. Country averages on all four dimensions of chiefly authority. Question responses standardised to range 0–4 (low to high) for ease of comparison.

scholars have emphasised how chiefly authority varies subnationally (Logan 2009). If chiefs are *complements* to the state, then those who are physically farther from the state would be expected to have fewer jobs and do these jobs less effectively. If chiefs are *substitutes*, then proximity to the state might crowd out the chief's duties and authority.

The second axis of our expectations pertains to recent arguments about the role of individual attributes of a chief or chieftaincy. First, drawing from Baldwin (2016), we should expect that chiefs who report having a close relationship with government officials should be particularly effective on development-related dimensions and to be seen as having more co-equal power relations with these government officials. Second, following the recent findings of Acemoglu *et al.* (2014), we also examine the impact of chieftaincy selection procedures. The authors find that economic developments are worse but social capital is higher among less-competitive chieftaincies or where the chieftaincy is concentrated in a smaller number of families. We might therefore expect that chiefs selected through more open procedures (for example, elected by their communities) might be seen as more effective, though predictions about jobs and authority are less clear.

These dimensions are not exhaustive, but our aim with this exercise is to begin exploring the variation we presented in the previous section and articulate potentially lucrative areas for future research. We offer tentative tests of these explanations by looking at whether a respondent's evaluation of their chief's duties, effectiveness and authority covary with (a) whether they reside in Togo or not; (b) whether respondents are from our northern clusters, which are both culturally distinct and are further from coast, where colonial and postcolonial state power has concentrated; (c) the logged distance (km) to the nearest district capital, a measure of proximity to the administrative

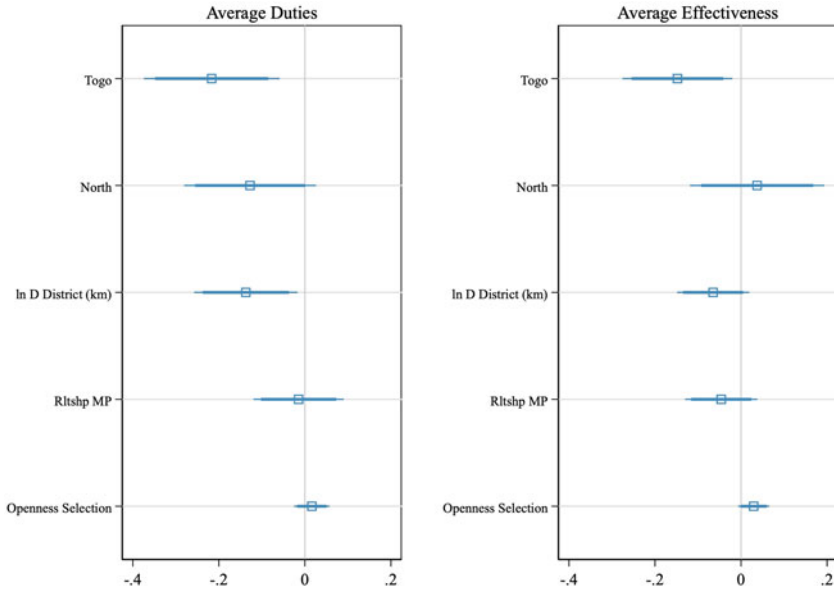


Figure 5. Explanations for variation in the average importance of duties ascribed to a chief (left panel) and his average effectiveness at those tasks (right panel). Dependent variable is average score for how important the following are for the respondent's chief's duties/how effective the chief is at it: managing disputes, allocating land, crime prevention, spiritual matters, development and building political relationships outside the village. All responses on a 4-point scale. Coefficients are from OLS models with standard errors clustered at the village; 90% and 95% confidence intervals reported.

state apparatus; (d) how strong a relationship their chief reports having with their member of parliament/deputy to the national assembly (no real relationship, a fine/neutral relationship, or a good or productive relationship); and (e) how closed the chieftaincy selection process is.¹⁶ The latter variable ranges from 1–8, where 1 means that the chief is elected among all villagers and 8 represents a chieftaincy that is within a single family with the Paramount or Canton chief choosing who within the family will be chief, an extremely closed selection system. Descriptive statistics of these five measures can be found in Appendix C (supplementary material).

We estimate the impact of these potential explanatory variables on a simplified set of dependent variables, looking at the average importance of all six of a chief's jobs described above and their average effectiveness at those jobs. We present question-specific results in the Appendices (supplementary material). Figure 5 reports coefficients from OLS models, which include additional controls for the respondent's age, gender, level of education, socioeconomic status, with standard errors clustered at the village.¹⁷ The coefficient plots below present the estimated effects of the five variables described above.

Figure 5 supports the idea that a chief's structural location matters more than his individual attributes. Indeed, we find the most consistent difference is driven by what side of the border a village falls on. Compared with Ghanaian chiefs, Togolese chiefs are expected to do significantly fewer jobs. Holding all else constant, the difference in these expectations is approximately a quarter of a point on a four-point scale, equivalent to half a standard deviation, from 'very important' job of the chief to 'not one of the chief's jobs'. Togolese chiefs are also perceived to be less effective at doing these jobs. All else held equal, the gap in average effectiveness across the border is approximately a third of a standard deviation, at 0.14 on a four-point scale ranging from 'very effective' to 'very ineffective'. These results are disaggregated by composite measures for both panels in Appendix B (supplementary material). The disaggregated results are highly consistent, though a chief's structural location does not appear to covary with his role in allocating land or building political relationships as a chief's duty or in his effectiveness at the former.

Even though the communities we surveyed represent similar ethnic groups in close proximity, one clear conclusion is that the effect of living on the Ghanaian side of the border has systematically driven Ghanaian chiefs to be more active in their villages and to be perceived as more effective in doing all the jobs they are expected to do. Interestingly, chiefs who are located farther from the district capital seem to do less, suggesting complementarities between chiefs and the state are strongest when they are in closer proximity. We find no statistically significant difference between respondents in the northern and southern zones of our sample. Further, neither chiefs who report stronger relations with their MPs/deputies nor chiefs selected through more open processes are seen as having more important duties or being more effective.

We replicate these models for the authority measures in Figure 6. Here the findings are more ambiguous for our structural variables. Although country does significantly predict whether a respondent views the chief as having more *upward* authority over the local administrator (Ghana) or vice versa (Togo), the only other statistically significant difference is that Togolese citizens perceive their chiefs as less likely to listen to opinions like theirs at the 10% level and hence as possessing less *downward* authority. Our measure of coercive authority (chief punishes) and outright authority (chief has most authority) do not appear to be systematically shaped by cross- or sub-national variation. However, the estimate of the country finding in the final model is quite large. On a three-point scale, where 1 represents the belief that the chief is in charge of the DCE/Préfet and 3 means the DCE/Préfet is in charge of the chief, Ghanaian chiefs, on average and with all else held equal, score 2.60, compared with Togolese chiefs, who score 1.71. Neither distance from the state nor the individual characteristics of the chief have a significant correlation with any form of authority within these communities.

The data indicate that Ghanaian and Togolese chiefs appear to have generally the same amount of downward authority over their subjects. What substantively differentiates them is their relationship with local government. These findings

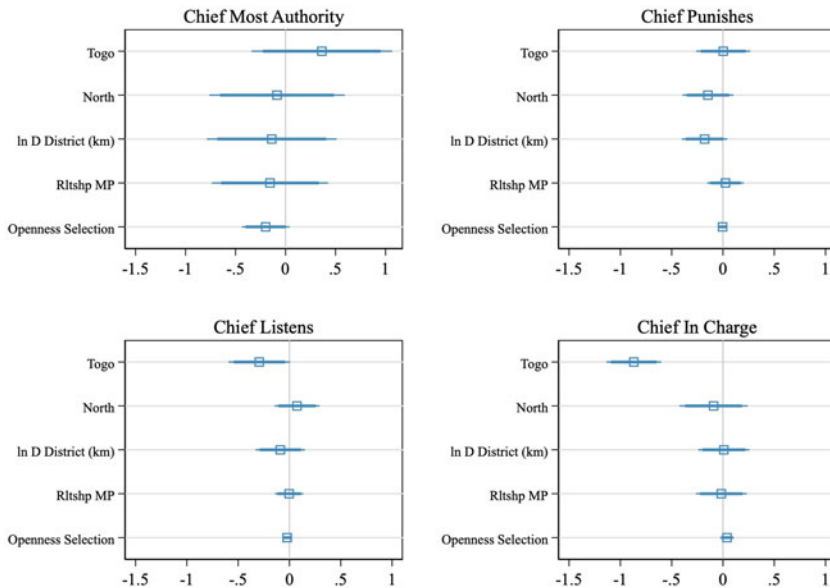


Figure 6. Perceptions of a chief’s authority in the village. Results from logit (chief most authority) and OLS (all others) regressions, grouped by dependent variable, with 90% and 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors clustered at the village; 90% and 95% confidence intervals reported.

are interesting given the widespread tendency of the chiefs we interviewed to report important differences in chiefly authority across the border. Togolese chiefs often noted that they thought Ghanaian chiefs were better respected and had more authority (e.g. ‘there is a big difference. The chiefs in Ghana have more authority than us’¹⁸) while Ghanaian chiefs perceived Togolese chiefs to be the spokesmen of the government and not a more organic representation of the people. One Ghanaian chief explained this at length:

For instance, in Togo, the chiefs derive their authority from government and not the local people ... If you are very influential in Togo and you don’t come from the chieftaincy line, within a short time you may be declared as a chief ... But in Ghana, right from colonial days, you ought to be selected by the kingmakers, enstooled by kingmakers according to your traditional practice. Outdoored by your practice and recognised by your people. The government only gazettes you. But in Togo, till today, if you can manoeuvre yourself to be gazetted as a chief, then you have your easy way But there is one thing about them, once they recognise you as chief, there is no wavering. He is representing the governor there. You don’t have the right to disobey him. (Interview, Volta Region, 12 June 2019)

It appears that although both Togolese and Ghanaian chiefs are seen as authoritative amongst their villagers, Togolese chiefs seem to derive this authority from the government, to whom they are more subservient. Ghanaian chiefs seem

instead to derive their authority from sources outside of the state. On the one hand, this finding is not surprising. Because the British (in comparison with the French) were more likely to devolve power to the chiefs, and because the post-colonial states in these countries largely reproduced these different legacies, we see that chiefs today in the former British colony are considerably more active and effective than their counterparts next door, and that the chiefs in former French colony tend to derive their communal power from the government. However, on the other hand, the results are surprising to the extent that none of the other proposed explanations from the literature seem to carry much weight in explaining variation along the Ghana–Togo border. It appears, perhaps, that more distant chiefs do less in their communities, but otherwise distance from the state, relationship with the government, and succession procedures of the chieftaincy bear little weight in explaining the observed variation.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Drawing from an original public opinion survey conducted in 50 villages along the Ghana–Togo border paired with interviews with the chiefs of these villages, this paper has sought to interrogate common assumptions about traditional authority in political science. Specifically, we asked both chiefs and their subjects what their jobs and duties were within the village, the extent to which they exerted authority in doing these jobs (both downwards over their subjects as well as upwards over local state officials) and assessed the sources of variation in this authority. Based on these data, we make three key claims.

First, not all chiefs have the same jobs, but the one job that most people see as their most important – from both the chief’s perspective as well as their subjects’ perspective – is the resolution of local disputes. Based on this finding, we contend that the literature – which has been largely focused on the developmental role of chiefs – also spend more time considering their role promoting the rule of law. The fact that most citizens view the primary function of their chiefs as complementing or substituting the courts and police holds important implications for bottom-up demands for state-building that deserve our attention.

Second, there is considerable variation in the amount of authority that different chiefs wield within their communities. Because cross-nationally chiefs are some of the most trusted leaders in Africa, much of the literature has taken their authority and legitimacy for granted. Although our data also support the claim that chiefs are generally popular, this is far from universally the case. We further break down the concept of ‘authority’ to highlight its dichotomous dimensions: chiefs’ authority can both be *downward* over subjects and *upward* over local state officials. Critically, these dimensions may not move together.

Finally, we offer tentative evidence that more of the variation in the nature of the chieftaincy we document can be explained by a chief’s structural location than their individual attributes. Most notably, we build on others to show that international borders have placed otherwise similar ethnic groups on what are at times dramatically different trajectories in the modern period (Miles

1994; MacLean 2010). We suspect – and many of the chiefs we interviewed confirmed – that these differences are rooted in distinct patterns of state-building that began in the colonial period. As we show, the authority of Ghanaian chiefs is not seen as primarily derived from the state – with Ghanaian citizens far more likely than Togolese to report that their chief is a partner of or is in charge of local government officials – and they are broadly seen as responsible for more tasks, and more effective at doing these tasks. Despite these differences, Togolese chiefs are far from irrelevant. They remain important in their communities and are just as likely to be named by villagers as the most authoritative person in the community. But the nature of their authority is qualitatively different than their counterparts in Ghana.

Though we think these differences are relevant to much of the rest of the continent, we recognise that they may be different in cases where precolonial institutions were more hierarchical or where postcolonial politics radically undid the effects of colonial rule. First, as noted earlier, we would expect that the nature of precolonial institutions may play an important role in the nature of traditional authority today, though much work remains to be done on this question (see Nathan 2019 for an exception). Second, French and British colonial rule were far from homogeneous across the continent, and where the British were more interventionist – for example in settler colonies such as Kenya – or where the French were less interventionist – such as Northern Cameroon – variation between chieftaincies may be less attributable to colonial legacies. Finally, while the postcolonial Ghanaian and Togolese states largely maintained colonial orientations towards traditional authorities, this was certainly not the case everywhere. We would expect to find that colonial legacies on the chieftaincy would be muted in contexts where postcolonial policy radically differed, for example in Guinea or Tanzania.

Nonetheless, building on these three findings, we challenge the literature to further consider the variation uncovered in this study. We do not believe, however, that this means scholars need to resign themselves to this complexity, as Rathbone (2000: 4) suggests when he writes that the ‘chieftaincy can never be more than a neat way of expressing considerable variety’. We concretely suggest that instead of assuming uniformity of duties or authority of chiefs, these factors should be built *into* our theoretical models and research designs alike. In particular, we should be hesitant about mapping claims derived from research with one ethnic group or one country onto the entirety of the continent. The findings from this study suggest that we need more work understanding what drives differences among chiefs both within and across countries. Finally, we urge scholars to unpack the idea of authority when evaluating chiefly power, by asking: power over whom to do what?

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X23000150>.

NOTES

1. Because some chiefs were unavailable or ill, some interviews were conducted with the chiefs' appointed representatives. When possible, we also spoke with elders who had knowledge of the village history.
2. A recent exception is Reardon (2022).
3. There are two exceptions in our survey sample of 50 villages. First, one village is majority Konkomba, a head-less group, but has a Dagbani chief, a legacy of the colonial appointment of the centralised Dagbon over the Konkomba in Ghana. A second village is majority Dagbani.
4. In order to protect the confidentiality of our interviews, we have anonymised the names of all villages reported in this paper.
5. Balance statistics can be found in Appendix A (supplementary material).
6. All of the Ghanaian surveys were completed in July 2019 along with 140 of the Togo surveys. Unfortunately, the survey was halted in Togo before its completion because of an administrative issue with Togo's Ministry of Territorial Administration. It was then further delayed by the outbreak of Covid-19. Once research was possible, data collection was completed in February 2021. Because we are investigating the historical roles of traditional authorities, we do not believe that our findings would be significantly altered by the gap in data collection.
7. English, French, Ewe, Bimoba, Konkomba, Dagbani, Bassar, Lamba, Tchamba and Kabye.
8. Usually, but not always, accompanied by one of the authors.
9. We selected these two officials as more-or-less equivalent local agents of the state because both operate at similar levels of local government, both hold similar levels of power (especially over development spending), and neither is elected. Both officials are appointed by the President, although in Ghana, once appointed, they must also be approved by a two-thirds majority of the District Assembly. Both officials are meant to be the chief representative of the central government within their district (prefecture) and are charged with overseeing the executive and administrative functions of the central state within their district or prefecture.
10. Logan (2013: 359–62) presents similar findings from Afrobarometer, though due to the nature of the data, she does not present any within-country variation, focusing instead on national-level averages. Further, the question she analyses frames traditional authorities against local and central government, thus obscuring the substantial role that traditional authorities may play in the co-production of these services.
11. The next most common form of disputes involved family quarrels (what most chiefs characterised as 'lovers spats') at 40.5%, then crime (12%) and water disputes (5%). One chief reported that he also dealt with witchcraft accusations.
12. Respondents who reported that the job was definitively not one of the chief's responsibilities were not asked the follow-up question about effectiveness.
13. See Appendix D (Supplementary Materials) for a discussion of two common measures of authority in the literature: reported trust in the chief and his influence on vote choice.
14. Interview with village chief, Alomé Netsi (12.6.2019).
15. Interviews with village chiefs, Efieyi (19.6.2019) and Evadji (20.6.2019).
16. We reproduce these models with two alternative measures in Appendix E (supplementary material), replacing whether a respondent falls in the north or not with the logged distance to the national capital and a measure of the chief's reported relationship with the DCE or Prefet, a more local political authority than the MP. Results are consistent.
17. Socioeconomic status is a factor variable with four parts: the respondent's household's fuel type, weekly meat consumption, the quality of their home's physical materials (roof, walls and flooring) and an asset index (radio, television, car or truck, motorbike, mobile phone, laptop, flush toilet, refrigerator, bike, animal cart, passport and bank account).
18. Interview, Kara Region (13.6.2019).
19. Further support for this is found in the results from Wald chi-square tests, which indicate that while locational variables (alone and in combination) significantly improve model performance, a chief's relationship with the MP and the local selection process of appointing chiefs do not.

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