

## Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era

Edited by

PETER A. HALL AND MICHÈLE LAMONT

*"Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era* provides a powerful new theoretical and operational foundation for the analysis of neoliberalism and its implications for individuals, nations, and organizations. Hall and Lamont, together with the volume's distinguished contributing authors, seamlessly interconnect individual well-being with macro-level societal development, offering readers a wealth of fascinating findings. A must-read for social scientists in several disciplines, indeed for all those concerned to understand the contemporary era and its possibilities for human well-being – under often challenging conditions."

– Robert M. Fishman, University of Notre Dame

*"Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era* gives a comprehensive and original account of neoliberalism as an idea, together with its social effects and productive provocations for social scientists. The editors' introduction makes the key terms, issues, and stakes completely accessible, even for novice readers, leading the way to the contributors' analyses of diverse policy regimes and their challenges for individuals, communities, and societies. The "resilience" in the book's title reflects the other side of neoliberalism's consolidation of social security around market principles. The book neither assures nor laments; rather, it opens a conversation that invites an engaged continuation."

– Carol Greenhouse, Princeton University

*"The problematic of Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era* is nothing less than understanding the effects of neoliberalism on individuals, groups, communities, policies, and societies to uncover the sources of resilience in difficult times. This is a risky enterprise. Social scientists are often willing to salute the noble flag of interdisciplinarity in faculty meetings, but they are rarely willing to move outside their disciplinary comfort zones actually to engage in it. The results, when they are as probing as those in this book, prove that the risk is worth taking. Readers are left with sharply motivating ideas and new projects about how fundamental social issues can be better understood and explored."

– George Ross, University of Montreal

*This book is dedicated to Chaviva Hošek – visionary for a better society*



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## II

## Cultural Sources of Institutional Resilience

*Lessons from Chieftaincy in Rural Malawi*<sup>1</sup>

Ann Swidler

One of the great challenges of the neoliberal era is that of institutional capacity: the capacity of collectivities – from communities, to states, to transnational bodies – to create or sustain resilient social forms that embody collective purposes, enforce rights and obligations, and have the capacity to organize collective action.<sup>2</sup> Neoliberalism, both as ideology and as policy, has a love-hate relationship with institutions. On the one hand, as Evans and Sewell (see Chapter 1) make clear, neoliberal ideology has been defined by an attack on government – both public provision of welfare services and government regulation of the economy. Globally, one of the signature policies of the neoliberal era was structural adjustment, which forced government retrenchment and drastic cutbacks in government services throughout the Global South (Stiglitz 2002). At the same time, however, the collapse of the Soviet Union and attempts to establish functioning market economies in many formerly socialist states

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Gabi Abend, Eleni Arzoglou, Jane Collier, Arlie Hochschild, Louise Lamphere, Michelle Poulin, Lily Tsai, and Susan Watkins and seminar participants at Harvard, Yale, New York University, Princeton, Boston University, Brown, and Northwestern for helpful responses to earlier versions of this paper. I am indebted to Tom Pessah for valuable research assistance. I am also grateful to my colleagues in the Successful Societies Program, especially Peter Hall and Michèle Lamont, for their continuing advice and help.

<sup>2</sup> The question of how to define "institution" is complex. W. Richard Scott (2008) devotes several chapters to explicating this definition (8): "Institutions are comprised of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life." I discuss alternative conceptualizations below, but here it suffices to say that most authors see institutions as stable structures, precisely in Sewell's (1992) sense, in that they are continually reproduced as people instantiate cultural schemas using resources that in turn reproduce the schemas. In this sense, the enduringness of institutions is precisely a kind of resilience – the reproduction of an underlying pattern despite changes (see Jepperson 1991). Although some authors treat any stable forms as institutions, along with Scott, I hark back to an older tradition of institutional theory, associated with the work of Philip Selznick (1957) among others, that associates successful institutionalization of social forms – from marriage, to the university, to the nation state – with their ability to embody shared purposes and thus to evoke both loyalty and compliance.

have highlighted the need for effective institutions, both legal institutions to make markets work (Fligstein 2001) and government institutions capable of restraining ethnic antagonisms and providing social stability.<sup>3</sup>

Even as neoliberal theorists have decried excessive government, the neoliberal era has produced a welter of new or newly empowered institutions through which the world's business is supposed to get done. Indeed, the neoliberal era has fostered wide-ranging institutional innovation (Fukuyama 2004; Slaughter 2004). Alongside the frayed authority of nation states<sup>4</sup> and high-modernist Weberian bureaucracies have emerged more heterogeneous institutional forms: the profusion of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and transnational social movements that address human rights or the AIDS epidemic (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Callaghy, Kassimir, and Latham 2001; Calhoun 2008; Hammack and Heydemann 2009; Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan 2012); initiatives for decentralization and participatory governance (Baiocchi, Heller, and Silva 2008); and new or enhanced international organizations that regulate global trade, provide peacekeeping, or attempt to establish and enforce human rights (de Waal 2009; Sikkink 2009).

Contemporary thinking about institutions reflects many assumptions characteristic of the neoliberal era. Although economists, political scientists, and sociologists have become increasingly interested in institutional orders and where they come from (Skocpol 1979; North 1990; Hall and Taylor 1996; Thelen 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Greif 2006, among many others), most of the discussion centers on how the interests of actors lead them to commit themselves to binding rules. Often lost or overlooked is the role of institutions in producing collective goods, a crucial facet of all societies.<sup>5</sup>

I use the term "collective goods" rather than the economists' preferred term "public goods." Public goods are those – such as national defense or clean air – from which people cannot be excluded even if they fail to contribute and therefore that government may legitimately provide or require. The term "collective goods," as I use it, has a very different emphasis. It also refers to benefits that serve a whole community and from which it would be difficult or impossible to exclude people. But the reference of the term "collective goods" is wider. The term serves as a reminder of general interdependence, the degree

<sup>3</sup> In Africa, we come back to Samuel Huntington's (1965) insight about the barriers to economic development: without political development, most efforts at other sorts of development are likely to fail. Pritchett, Woolcock, and Andrews (2010) have recently raised this issue again, talking about "capability traps" that make the implementation of global policy initiatives impossible because governments lack the "capability" to implement them.

<sup>4</sup> Although the political assault on the authority and prestige of government has probably gone further in the United States than elsewhere, confidence in government has fallen across the modern democracies (Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997; Dalton 2005).

<sup>5</sup> For a notable exception, see the work of Elinor Ostrom and her collaborators (Ostrom 1990; Gibson et al. 2005; Brondizio, Ostrom, and Young 2009; Poteete, Janssen, and Ostrom 2010), who examine the institutional arrangements groups develop to regulate common pool resources such as water for irrigation.

to which we all depend on groups and organizations that require more of us and benefit us in ways that cannot be precisely measured, monitored, and rewarded.

Neoliberalism, in both theory and practice, has tried to narrow and monetize interdependencies, using markets to charge for externalities, for example, or advocating that individuals pay the full costs of their education, conceived as benefitting only themselves, rather than also benefitting the larger society. A focus on collective goods emphasizes a very different understanding of the human condition: that all of social life, from the informal ties in a workgroup; to the solidarities among neighbors or family members; to loyalty to professions or employers, nations, or religious communities, is infused with meanings and commitments to larger collective purposes. People contribute more than can be measured or monitored even as they depend on the help and support of their fellows.

The neoliberal view of interdependence embraces volunteering to help neighbors and friends even while it presses a skeptical view of institutions (see Margaret Thatcher's rhapsodic embrace of volunteering in the speech quoted by Jenson and Levi in Chapter 2). But volunteers cannot replace institutions: created by human groups but coming to stand over and outside those groups, infusing their members with a sense of meaning and purpose, sanctioning cooperation so as to sustain it. But in the neoliberal era, scholars of market economies have reduced the idea of institutions to the enforceable rules within which transactions take place. This flattened understanding of what institutions are leaves mysterious the question of how institutions are created, how they acquire their authority and their power over the imagination, and how they can be rebuilt or revised when they no longer serve collective purposes. This chapter draws on research on African chiefdoms to derive a richer set of answers to these questions.

### African Chieftaincy

In this chapter, I attempt to broaden the conceptual frame for thinking about institutions by analyzing the remarkably resilient institution of chiefs<sup>6</sup> or

<sup>6</sup> I use the terms "chiefdom" and "chieftaincy" interchangeably to refer to the chief systems that came to characterize much of Africa under colonial rule. These systems were in some places imposed; elsewhere they were the remnants of more formal, hierarchical polities after the indigenous rulers were defeated or subdued. In yet other places, there was considerable continuity between pre-colonial and post-independence chiefdoms. The classic treatment of pre-colonial African political systems, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's *African Political Systems* (1940) differentiates pre-colonial African political systems into "primitive states" versus "stateless societies." In primitive states, a chief is the administrative and judicial head of a given territory, often with final economic and legal control over the land within his boundaries. Everybody living within these boundaries is his subject, and the right to live in this area can be acquired only by accepting the obligations of a subject. He is the embodiment of the political unity of the society. In stateless or "acephalous" societies, on the other hand, people may compete for status and prestige in the lineage system through performance of ceremonial obligations, but there is no formal law or

chieftaincy (or sometimes elders, headmen, or simply “traditional leaders”) in many parts of Africa,<sup>7</sup> focusing especially on Malawi. I explore the ways culture in the broadest sense contributes to the functioning of the institution of chieftaincy in Malawi in order to explore the more general question of how culture sustains institutional forms, especially institutions that provide collective goods.

In doing so, however, I walk a fine line both empirically and theoretically. I do not argue that chiefs or other traditional leaders, or the institution of chieftaincy, provides the “best” system of governance for rural Malawians or other African villagers even though – given the current alternatives – villagers in many parts of Africa in fact prefer chiefs to legislators or government officials and repose more trust in them.<sup>8</sup> If they had wider choices, however, Malawian villagers like most Africans, would probably prefer to live in a modern nation state that provided physical security; rule of law; and basic social services such as schooling, health care, clean water, roads, and reliable electricity. (That does not mean that they would immediately adopt the notion that they or their relatives should behave in disinterested, universalistic ways rather than taking care of those to whom they have obligations of kinship, clan, or ethnicity [see Chabal and Daloz 1999; Chabal 2009]). They would almost certainly prefer paid employment in a functioning market economy to the unremitting toil and pervasive insecurity of subsistence farming. Nonetheless, the remarkable resilience of chiefdoms in contemporary Africa demonstrates the complex ways cultural meanings and practices are implicated in the effective functioning of institutions. The institution of chieftaincy recommends itself to close examination not only because it still plays such a vital role in Africa but also because

political authority, and no one person defines the political unity of the group. As Mamdani (1996) has pointed out, colonial systems imposed something resembling indirect rule everywhere, imposing what he calls a “decentralized despotism,” in which – within the authority of the formally dominant colonial state – a hierarchy of chiefs (or in West Africa, elders, marabouts, or other traditional leaders) effectively exercised – locally and only over native inhabitants – the forms of authority that Fortes and Evans-Pritchard describe for “primitive states,” but grounded in lineage ties that legitimated the chief’s rule. See, for example, Colson (1986) for Zambia or Geschiere (1993) for Cameroon on the ways colonial rule homogenized systems of chiefly rule.

<sup>7</sup> Although I focus only on African chiefdoms, the problem of understanding polities whose origins are kin, clan, or lineage based is a very general one (see Charrad 2001). American involvement in “nation building” in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as its difficulties in dealing with political systems such as those of Pakistan or Yemen, indicates how limited are the intellectual resources for thinking about what creates effective institutions in states where strong ethnic and kin-based groups challenge the formal sovereignty of nation states (Migdal 1988, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Surveys reported in Dionne (2012) for Malawi, Abotchie et al. (2006) for Ghana, Baldwin (2009) for Zambia, and Logan (2011) for several African nations show that villagers in various parts of Africa have more confidence in chiefs than in other political figures and that they believe that on the whole chiefs act on behalf of their people. Dionne (2012) also shows that the policy preferences of Malawian chiefs and village headmen correspond closely to those of villagers. Logan (2009) analyzes Afrobarometer data from across Africa to argue that most Africans do not see a conflict between rule by traditional authorities and democratic governance.

thinking about chiefdoms allows us to think about institutional resilience more generally.<sup>9</sup>

## Institutions

In a now classic paper, Hall and Taylor (1996) distinguish three varieties of “new institutionalism”: historical institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism. In this chapter, I focus on the limitations of much of the rational choice institutionalism that predominates in political science and economics, which analyzes institutional arrangements largely as if they were products of agreements by self-interested actors about the larger structure of rules, sanctions, and rewards that would facilitate exchange and (sometimes) cooperation.<sup>10</sup> Although I also see institutions as systems of rules and practices that specify rights and obligations, regulate conduct, and facilitate both exchange and cooperation, I follow the historical institutionalists in arguing that social groups do not produce institutions through agreements but almost always inherit them with a rich embedding in complex cultural meanings and that the meanings embedded in institutions themselves define identities and shape interests.

Chieftaincy is not an institution inherited unchanged from an ageless past (no more than “bureaucracy” or any other institutional form can be abstracted from the concrete context of struggles for power, interest, and advantage) but a set of deeply embedded cultural schemas that people draw on in complex

<sup>9</sup> Of course, chiefdoms and other related institutions often compete with and undermine, rather than strengthen, modern states. Joel Migdal (2001) makes the simple but essential point that “the very purposes for which leaders employ the state – seeking predominance through binding rules – automatically thrust it into conflict with other organizations over who has the right and ability to make those rules.” (65). Thus, tribes, clans, village elders, and so on compete to be the ones able to provide predictable answers to local people’s desire for secure rules that ensure their claims on resources (e.g., who enforces that this goat is really yours), people (e.g., who enforces that this husband or child is yours or who can give you a divorce), opportunity (e.g., who or what can get you a job, get your child into school), and reliable help.

<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on rational agreement among autonomous, self-interested actors that is so central to rational choice institutionalism is, I would argue, a projection of the deeply entrenched Western (particularly American) cultural imagination in which social life is produced by the voluntary choices of autonomous individual actors (Bellah et al. 1985; Fischer 2010; Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010; Markus and Schwartz 2010). These assumptions impair even the most ambitious current work on institutions. A recent paper in the *American Economic Review* by Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein (2009), for example, analyzes a field experiment – run by an NGO and randomized to villages in post-conflict Liberia – designed to increase social capital. In the authors’ view, the greater willingness of villagers in the experimental villages to contribute the maximum in a public goods game demonstrates that “brief, foreign-funded efforts to build local institutions [can] have positive effects on local patterns of cooperation” [288, emphasis added]. Even though Liberia was recovering from a devastating civil war, however, the authors’ findings suggest that local institutions – chiefdoms – had survived the civil war and that it was the effectiveness of chiefs in pressing their villagers to contribute, not some newly implanted institutional capacities, that accounted for the experiment’s “success.”

ways, creating and recreating a seemingly familiar form to serve new purposes (Sewell 1992).<sup>11</sup>

African chieftaincy is especially fascinating not because it has endured unchanging but precisely because it has proved so adaptable and resilient. As recent observers note, "Since the beginning of the 1990s, a wave of what has been called 're-traditionalisation' seems to have reversed the previous policy of containing the chiefs as negative forces. In a large number of Sub-Saharan African countries, if not all, this wave has been expressive of a gradual resurgence and enlargement of the formal role of chiefs in local governance and development" (Kyed and Buur 2006: 1).

In Malawi, as in much of the rest of Africa, despite the distortion of the institution by colonial systems of indirect rule (Mamdani 1996), chiefs still retain much of their "traditional" legitimacy. The debate between those, such as Mamdani, who are most critical of postcolonial chieftaincy, and those, such as Collier (2004) or Oomen (2008) who stress the institution's resilience and its continuing ability to produce collective goods, rests in large part on how they assess Mamdani's claim that "from African tradition, colonial powers salvaged a widespread and time-honored practice, one of a decentralized exercise of power, but freed that power of restraint, of peers or people. Thus they laid the basis for a decentralized despotism" (48).<sup>12</sup> Collier and Oomen share Mamdani's understanding of the logic of chieftaincy but stress that the authority of chiefs is still very much dependent on "peers" and "people." Even in places such as the South African homelands, where chiefs were seen as collaborators with the apartheid regime, in the postapartheid period, chiefly systems have rebounded, growing in importance and influence (for South Africa, see Oomen 2000, 2008 and Ntsebeza 2008; for Mozambique, West and Kloeck-Jenson 1999; for Ghana, Abotchie et al. 2006; for Zambia, Baldwin 2009).

### What Do Chiefs Do?

In Malawi, as elsewhere, chiefs play a central role in the provision of collective goods. If villagers are to act collectively in their own behalf, the chief typically organizes that cooperation. If a village's paths need to be repaired (in Tanzania, "brushed," meaning cleared of brush), the chief calls villagers together and

<sup>11</sup> Rudolph and Rudolph (1967) made a similar argument about caste systems, and John Mohr and Harrison White (2008) have recently reinforced the point. See Oomen (2000; 2008) for a thoughtful, empirically grounded analysis of the changing vicissitudes of chieftaincy in South Africa.

<sup>12</sup> Mamdani (1996: 50) goes on to say that "European rule in Africa came to be defined by a single-minded and overriding emphasis on the customary... [which] was stretched to include land... Just as matters like marriage and inheritance were said to be customarily governed, so procuring basic sustenance required getting customary access to communal land. With this development, there could be no exit for an African from the world of the customary." But as Collier (2004) emphasizes, it remains true in much of Africa that "a chief does not rule land; he rules people." A bad chief is thus in danger of losing his people or of being forced out ("destooled" in Ghanaian parlance; "deposed" in Malawi).

requires them to contribute a day's work to the collective task. The same is true if the village needs to provide bricks or labor to attract an NGO project, to build a house for a Peace Corps volunteer, to repair a communal well, or to repair a school building.<sup>13</sup>

Anyone who has worked in an NGO project, in the Peace Corps, or for a faith-based organization in sub-Saharan Africa will recognize that one cannot even begin a project without clearing it with the local chief (or in West Africa, perhaps with the *Président des Jeunes*, the leader of the adult men), and it is the chief who calls the villagers together for a public meeting at which the benefits of the project, the procedure for electing leaders, or any other features of the project will be laid out. NGOs, development workers, and even government officials simply cannot get access to the village community without going through the chief.

Second, the chief, or the "royal family," literally embodies the name that gives the village its collective identity. In Malawi, the village does not exist as a village except insofar as it has a chief. In this sense, the chief is something like a Durkheimian totem, symbolically embodying in his (or occasionally her) own person the very existence of the community. In Malawi, the sentence "Traditional Authority Zulu [person] is the Traditional Authority [official title] of Traditional Authority Zulu [administrative unit]" is a perfectly coherent sentence, true by definition.<sup>14</sup> The village, or the group of villages, or the

<sup>13</sup> Chiweza (2007: 69–70) writes of chiefs in Malawi: "The planning system's stress on projects having 'community contributions' of at least 25 percent has been interpreted by village chiefs and many state officials as their having to have a cache of bricks to show when the project team arrives, so that they can be considered fit for funding." In a study of "town chiefs" in Malawi (who are less important and influential than rural village chiefs), Cammack, Kanyongolo, and O'Neil (2009: 18) describe the traits sought in a chief, suggesting that chiefs are chosen for their ability to provide collective goods:

Town chiefs are consistently chosen for having certain characteristics. Specifically, they are reportedly of 'good character', 'hard working', 'respectable' and 'quiet' people of 'good standing', who know 'how to stay with people', 'should understand the problems of the people', will 'help them', be 'good to them' and 'keep them well'. They have 'lived there a long time' and are well settled in an area, often making them 'homeowners'. They are neither quarrelsome, nor known 'drunkards' or 'womanisers'. They appear to be among the local economic elite – that is, they 'are self-reliant' or 'self-sufficient'. For instance, they are (retired) civil servants, teachers, civil society leaders (and heads of churches) or are businessmen (e.g., a building contractor, a restaurateur, a money-lender, a kiosk owner). Interestingly, we found that several town chiefs who were (s)selected are also members of (hereditary) chiefly families in their home areas, though they claim that their 'royal' status was likely unknown to those who chose them to lead in town – a claim that deserves further investigation.

....  
TCs are selected because they can represent the interests of their communities – that is, they are good 'public speakers' and 'influential'.

<sup>14</sup> David Maxwell (1999) notes the same taken-for-granted reality on the first page of his classic study of the Hwesa of Zimbabwe: "The territory which, like the dynasty and its chief, is also known as Katerere is the stage for an extraordinary social history" (1). Writing of southern

Traditional Authority (a key administrative unit) has its existence – and its name – because of its chief (and, of course, the chief has his name because it is the name of the administrative unit). Southern Malawi is largely matrilineal, and I once asked a youngish village-level chief whether he would move to his wife's village when he married. His cousin, standing next to him, cried out in horror, "Move? Move! He can't move! No chief, no village! No chief, no village!"

Third, chiefs may adjudicate disputes in chiefly courts, advising, cajoling, and sometimes deciding matters ranging from marriage and divorce, to a lost or stolen goat, to inheritance claims. The power of chiefs to some degree rests on their role in chief's courts and the absence or expense of other legal routes for resolving disputes.<sup>15</sup> To varying degrees chiefs may also have authority over land, especially where land remains under communal control rather than having become alienable private property.

### Chiefs, Status, and Collective Goods

Chiefs also operate as reservoirs of pooled collective obligations and as informal account keepers, reinforcing the ties of reciprocal interdependence that are so central to African societies (Kaler and Watkins 2001; Swidler and Watkins 2007; Chabal 2009). The indirect ways that chiefs contribute to collective goods are thus even more important than their direct, formal roles. This indirect

Malawi (then Nyasaland) in the 1940s, J. Clyde Mitchell (1956: 110) remarks that "... the village headman is a representative of a corporate group, the village."

<sup>15</sup> Baldwin (2007: 7–8) describes the role and powers of chiefs in Zambia:

The power of chiefs stems from their control of land and law. Chiefs are the "custodians" of the land in Zambia: they are responsible for overseeing the distribution of customary land within their chiefdoms and they must give approval before land can be converted from customary tenure to leasehold tenure (Cap 83(8)(2)). In addition, they play an important role in law enforcement: they are empowered to "take reasonable measures to quell any riot, affray or similar disorder which may occur" (Cap 287(11)(1)) and to have their assistants "arrest without warrant any person upon reasonable suspicion of his having committed an offense in connection with [a] riot, affray or disorder and detain any person so arrested until he can be delivered into the custody of a police officer or brought before a competent jurisdiction to be dealt with according to law" (Cap 287).

In addition to these officially sanctioned powers, chiefs have a number of unofficial sources of influence. For example, almost every chief in Zambia has a traditional court to settle disputes between subjects. Although these courts are not officially recognized within the Zambian legal system, they are tolerated because the formal court system does not have the capacity to deal with all cases. In addition, the officially recognized courts are geographically and financially inaccessible to most rural residents, who have no real alternative but to take disputes to the chief's court. Finally, chiefs have influence in their communities by virtue of the trust people have in them. According to the 2003 Afrobarometer survey, 52% of Zambians trust traditional leaders a lot or a great deal; in contrast, only 32% of Zambians have this degree of trust in the ruling party and only 18% have this amount of trust in opposition parties. Furthermore, this figure masks the degree of trust in chiefs in some rural areas; for example, in Eastern and Luapula Province, more than 75% of people trust traditional leaders a lot or a great deal.

management of collective obligations continually recreates the link between a chief's status, his spiritual powers, and the well-being of the community.

Chiefs reward those who contribute to community life, and informally, they keep the accounts about who has (or has not) been public spirited. Chiefs then redistribute both spiritual and material goods to reward those who have helped their fellows (Collier 2004). Chiefs thus reinforce the general obligation of those who have more to redistribute to those who have less. I was told by the director of a Zambian AIDS hospice, for example, that when the hospice asked families to take in AIDS orphans, their requests succeeded only when the chief made the request. Taking in a relative's child may be obligatory, but it is the chief who often enforces, and perhaps later rewards, performance of that taken-for-granted obligation. A villager in southern Malawi, who had a modest cash income to supplement her subsistence farming, was asked by her chief to found a youth club to discuss AIDS. When, later, the chief had government-subsidized fertilizer coupons to distribute, he gave this widow not one but two.

A different example of how a chief indirectly provides public goods comes from northern Malawi. A young Malawian villager – intelligent, cheerful, and with good mastery of English – was asked by his chief first to be the liaison to a group of Peace Corps volunteers and later to volunteer to form a community-based organization (CBO), which was able to attract donor funding. After the chief realized "the goodness of CBOs," he asked the young man to help other villages to found their own CBOs, bringing in badly needed donor money (Swidler and Watkins 2009). When, later, the young man's mother died and he went to his uncle to ask for land, his uncle was very generous, giving him five hectares to farm. His chief declared that "it was a very good thing [his] uncle had done." So, in Malawi as elsewhere, "what goes around, comes around," and the chief provides a critical link in that process.

The chief recirculates the collective capacity for creating collective goods partly by recirculating status or honor. When a chief speaks at a funeral, for example, he can praise the deceased as having been a "worthy" man or woman, or indeed, as one informant described it, he can make a point of giving the funeral oration himself – rather than sending an underling – and thus communicate the deceased person's prestige (and thereby descendants' continuing claims on the community). Chiefs thus "store" and redistribute status and prestige, and they do so in proportion to contributions to the community.

### Chiefs and the Sacred

Chiefs also store up – and in some sense embody – sacred power. Their sacred power is connected to what are, or were, at least in the indigenous systems, specific ritual roles in communicating with the ancestors or ensuring the fertility of land, animals, and people (Mitchell 1956; Collier 2004). It is difficult, however, to distinguish a chief's prestige, which comes in part from traditional cultural roles, from his sacred or spiritual powers, which in turn both reflect

and protect the strength and health of his community. Chiefs' prestige in turn depends on their ability to access and contain sacred powers.

Chiefs in Malawi control burial grounds and thus connections to ancestors, where ancestors are a source of both danger and help. Indeed, to be forbidden to bury one's kin in the village graveyard would in essence mean having to leave the village. The intertwining of the chief's practical responsibility for funerals and his spiritual responsibility for protecting the community against witchcraft and other malevolent spiritual forces is evident in Cammack, Kanyongolo, and O'Neill's (2009: 23) description of "Town Chiefs" in Malawi:

The funereal tasks [chiefs] perform are social and economic in nature – they announce the death to the community and other chiefs, they 'open the graveyard' and have the grave dug, they permit mourning to begin and ensure funds and ufa (maize flour) are collected for the wake.

Historically death has been perplexing, and blamed on the intervention of malevolent spirits. It is partly this continuing belief in the inexplicable nature of death that makes funerals so important. Specifically, it is generally believed that the spirit (mzimu) of the dead survives the body and can cause misfortune for survivors. Therefore, 'funeral rites are designed to make the mzimu depart so that the living may forget the dead'. Immediately after a death the family reports to the chief. He will send young men to inform the population. No one is allowed to eat meat till after the burial as witches are thought to eat the flesh of the dead, so not eating meat is a way to show others you are not a witch. The chief must give permission for the body to be prepared for the grave, and he will lead discussions about the circumstances of the death. Is there anyone who caused the death? If relatives had not warned the chief that there was a serious illness in their family, a case might be brought and the burial cannot take place until the case is settled. A 'diviner' can be brought in to determine if the person was killed through witchcraft, though this happens less frequently nowadays since practicing witchcraft is against the law. Only when the case is settled will the chief order the body to be buried.

Without the chief, a death cannot be dealt with practically – arranging the burial, spiritually – avoiding the potential danger that comes from the spirits of the dead, or intellectually – resolving what caused the death. Because village chiefs also control the burial grounds, their role in funerals and in managing the critical relations with ancestors more generally is of paramount importance for the village community.<sup>16</sup>

In Botswana, I attended a rural funeral, and as three pastors from different denominations conducted the burial service, the chief three times interrupted the funeral, cutting off the pastors in midsentence, to have his headman, speaking through a megaphone attached to his small white truck, demand that

<sup>16</sup> Clyde Mitchell, in *The Yao Village* (1956), describes how the founding of a new village in what is now southern Malawi depended on the chief's communication with the ancestors and on the chief's own sexual substance and how the ritual for installing a new chief involved the symbolic "reincarnation" of the former chief, with the "important implication that the headman is immortal. He shares this characteristic with the group of which he is the leader" (121).

the assembled mourners press more closely around the graveside to comfort the bereaved mother, then that they sing with more verve, and finally that they stop gossiping and pay greater attention to the proceedings. Although the pastors conducted the funeral ritual, the chief was responsible for the cohesion of the community, which, at least symbolically, took priority.

Finally, a chief also protects his community against witchcraft – an ever-present danger. In part, this is direct: I was told that if a chief lacks spiritual power, his people will be more subject to witchcraft from surrounding villages. But the chief also contains witchcraft by trying to resolve sources of envy and resentment and damp down conflict within the community. Because witchcraft is particularly likely when there are unresolved sources of envy and resentment or when people have failed to live up to their obligations to one another, the chief's role in trying to avoid or smooth over conflict is critical to the overall health of the community.

The chief's prestige – his control of spiritual and material resources (Collier 2004) – plays both practical and sacred roles. Indeed, these cannot really be separated because a chief who does not watch out for the practical well-being of his community loses some of his spiritual power as well as his prestige. A chief who does not accumulate control over material and spiritual resources becomes less "sacred," less prestigious, and thus less able to provide collective goods for his community, both in the material and spiritual realms.

### Why Can Chiefs Create Collective Goods?

What can we learn from the specifics of the ways chiefs operate in Malawi about why culture matters for the ways institutions function? Why are chiefs able to coordinate the provision of public goods, but other authorities, not grounded in local cultural traditions and practices, are not able to do so? Chiefs have substantial sanctioning power: they are often responsible for allocating small benefits, such as coupons for a government fertilizer subsidy program or blankets that an NGO provides for orphans; chiefs' courts may adjudicate local disputes about marriage and divorce and conflicts over property or petty crimes; chiefs also have residual control over communal lands; and in extreme cases, a chief can drive a recalcitrant villager out of the village. On the other hand, most chiefs try to govern by consensus, and chiefs who behave in selfish, corrupt, or morally reprehensible ways can be deposed.

Apart from their control over concrete rewards and sanctions, chiefs' authority over funerals is also a source of substantial power. In societies where relations to ancestors are important and also potentially dangerous and where lineage relations define identities and thus the obligations of one person to another, chiefs' authority over burials reinforces relationships of inheritance and continuing obligations among the living. A chief's ability to define when a witchcraft accusation is legitimate and how it should be dealt with is also a source of both practical and cultural power. In a world where witchcraft is a



pervasive danger and therefore no one can feel safe either from witchcraft itself or from the possibility of a witchcraft accusation, even the chief's ability to treat an accusation as meriting serious attention is significant.<sup>17</sup>

Given some sanctioning power, however, what keeps the chiefs committed to the welfare of their communities? First, some chiefs are not. Some take advantage of the perquisites of their status; their reputations, their ability to win cooperation from their people, and the community's ability to produce collective goods suffer accordingly. Nonetheless an Afrobarometer survey across a number of countries in Africa finds that although levels of support vary, traditional leaders are trusted more than either government officials or elected politicians (Logan 2011). Many chiefs thus appear to maintain considerable commitment to securing public goods for their people (see also Baldwin 2007, 2009).<sup>18</sup> Malawians sometimes offer a simple explanation. When asked, for example, why fertilizer coupons distributed by the chiefs mostly reached their intended recipients, although a similar program in which extension agents from the ministry of agriculture distributed the coupons resulted in almost all of the coupons being stolen, their answer was simple: the chiefs live in the village, so they have to see the villagers every day.

Chiefs have high status, and their sense of what enhances their own status is a major goad to public spiritedness. The ability of institutions to confer status honor is probably a general mechanism that helps institutions produce public goods. Lily Tsai (2007a, 2007b) studied public goods provision in more than 300 Chinese villages. She found minimal influence of village wealth or village governance structure (top-down bureaucratic controls or formally democratic village institutions) on the provision of collective goods such as roads, elementary school classrooms, and running water. What predicted public goods provision was instead whether or not the village had a traditional cultural association – a village temple committee or a village-wide lineage group – that both “encompassed” and “embedded” village officials. Tsai's argument is that these traditional cultural associations provided a place where officials could receive status for accomplishments that benefitted the village as a whole, and this status in turn provided resources with which to win cooperation from other members of the village community for collective projects.

<sup>17</sup> Adam Ashforth (1998, 2005) has written of the “spiritual insecurity” that characterizes African life: a world in which malevolent forces – never predictable, never tameable – are a constant danger. Witchcraft does not follow rules, and it cannot be definitively diagnosed or reliably prevented; witches always deny their deeds, and the only evidence is the illness or death they have caused.

<sup>18</sup> Chiefs' responsibility to provide public goods can conflict with their responsibility to help the poor in their communities, as in the following story from my field notes, related by a colleague: “One of the S – chiefs laughed with his interviewer about the fact that GoM [Government of Malawi] instructed him to distribute fertilizer subsidies to the poorest households, making the point to the interviewer (something like), ‘But who is going to help you build a school when you need him to?’, meaning, you need to take care of the labor force (and those who are better off) in your village.”

Tsai's findings about rural China echo those of Steve Cornell and Joseph Kalt (1997, 2000) on American Indian tribes. Using systematic data on 225 tribes and more focused case studies of 67 of those tribes, Cornell and Kalt (2000) show that the economic well-being of American Indian groups is unrelated to their natural resources or local labor market conditions but depends instead on how well governed they are. Good governance in turn is most strongly related to the “cultural match” between tribes' current governing institutions and the structures of their governing institutions at first recorded contact with European settlers. Thus, Cornell and Kalt, like Lily Tsai, find that something about cultural continuities affects the effective functioning of social institutions and thus the provision of collective goods.

As in rural China or in American Indian groups, status allocation in chieftaincy systems keeps their incumbents focused on public goods provision, especially where chiefs must compete for status. In Malawi, village headmen, group village headmen, traditional authorities, and paramount chiefs do not simply “have” status. Rather, chiefs are also always competing to increase their status – by becoming one of the counselors to a higher chief, by moving up in the hierarchy of chiefs, or by being granted one of the symbols of chiefly prestige (in the traditional Yao system in what is now southern Malawi, for example, marks of rank such as the size of one's entourage, the right to hold certain initiation ceremonies, or the right to wear a scarlet headband [Mitchell 1956: 90–107]). Jane Collier (2004) has described the perpetual competition for power, prestige, and rank in the lineage hierarchy (because genealogies are continually revised to reflect current prestige) as fundamental to chieftdom systems. And a chief increases his rank by drawing followers to himself and increasing the number and the well-being of his followers.

In a set of ingenious experiments, Willer (2009) has shown how status rewards provide a solution to collective action problems. By simulating varying levels of contribution to a group task, Willer shows that higher contributions are perceived by other members of the group as representing greater commitment to the group and are rewarded with status. Members perceived as higher status can also elicit greater cooperation and eventually are also treated more generously by others. In turn, “status rewards for contribution to collective action encourage greater giving in the future” (Willer 2009: 37). Willer notes that status allocation provides at least one answer to the question of how societies and social institutions manage to exist despite the many temptations to purely self-seeking behavior. He notes:

The status solution fits the collective action problem well in a few ways. The status incentive system does not require central, formal organization. The incentives rest in the regard members have for one another. This means that the system is not easily destroyed or undermined and does not require any explicit management or leadership to be maintained. Also, status incentives, unlike material ones, increase as the collective action becomes more difficult. As tasks require greater sacrifice from group members, contributing indicates even greater concern for the group (40).



The awarding and the receipt of status are fundamental to the ways institutions work. In some ways, this point is obvious – as anyone who has taken on extra obligations, performed onerous committee work, or accepted a demanding but prestigious position in the academic profession will recognize. Bourdieu and his followers (Bourdieu 1986, 1996; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) see status as valuable because it can be converted into other kinds of “capital,” but an equally good argument can be made that status is an end in itself – providing the emotional energy at the end of “interaction ritual chains” (Collins 2004) and, as Hall and Taylor (2009: 93) argue, enhancing people’s “capabilities” by serving as “an all-purpose social lubricant conditioning the cooperation one receives from others” and providing the “social recognition” that is an important source of self-esteem, confidence, and “self-efficacy.” Status is thus one of the major rewards collectivities offer those who are seen as contributing to the group’s purposes, and the sense of what one’s own status requires is both a goad to effort and an inhibitor of certain sorts of selfish or destructive behavior.

### Legitimacy and Norms

One of the most obvious but also most theoretically unfashionable arguments about culture and institutions is that institutions function best where they are legitimate and where institutional actors are both motivated and constrained by norms that support the institution. Such arguments have long been out of favor in the social sciences, not because anyone really doubts that legitimacy and norms make a difference but because there seem to be so many counter examples where social groups maintain patterns of behavior that they themselves claim to regard with disapproval (see Smith 2006 on corruption in Nigeria and Hirsch et al. 2009 on marital infidelity in Africa) or where individuals seem to find a way to justify even reprehensible behavior as normative. Indeed, there are so many problems with the concept of “norms” that many sociologists abandoned the idea.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, if the concept of norms is moved from the arena of subjective, internally sanctioned behavior to the public social arena of agreements about what behavior will be seen as wrong, discrediting, or worthy of sanction, the idea of norms again gathers force.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Cancian (1975) analyzes one of the basic difficulties: if norms are the ideals that people articulate verbally, then there is very little correlation between norms and action. If, on the other hand, norms can be read from actual behavior, then norms can hardly be said to be the cause of that behavior. Because one of the important aspects of norms is that they are socially shared, it becomes even more difficult to separate the idea of what is normative from some idea of what is normal or typical.

<sup>20</sup> Various more systematic ways of treating norms have emerged in recent scholarship. These salvage the idea of norms by relocating them from inner subjective states that regulate individual conduct by comparing it to an internalized ideal, instead seeing norms as community standards backed by the (potentially measurable) willingness of a community to enforce those standards (see, e.g., Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002 on “collective efficacy” and Greif

In chiefdoms, as in other governance institutions where face-to-face relationships play a major role, norms matter. Good leaders are expected to be civil and respectful and to consult with their influential followers even as they exercise authority over them (Collier 2004; see also Karlström 1996 on contemporary Uganda and Schaffer 1998 on Senegal). Mamdani (1996: 44) offers a wonderful example of the mutual incomprehension about the nature of African chiefs’ authority as officials from the Cape Native Laws and Customs Commission in 1881 questioned a former Zulu king:

144. As the king of the Zulus, was all power invested in you, as king, over your subjects?

– In conjunction with the chiefs of the land.

145. How did the chiefs derive their power from you as king?

– The king calls together the chiefs of the land when he wants to elect a new chief, and asks their advice as to whether it is fit to make such a man a large chief, and if they say “yes” the chief is made.

146. If you had consulted the chiefs, and found they did not agree with you, could you appoint a chief by virtue of your kingship?

– In some cases, if the chiefs don’t approve of it, the king requires their reasons, and when they have stated them he often gives it up. In other cases he tries the man to see whether he can perform the duties required of him or not.

147. In fact, you have the power to act independently of the chiefs in making an appointment, although you always consult them?

–No; the king has not the power of electing an officer as chief without the approval of the other chiefs. They are the most important men. But the smaller chiefs he can elect at his discretion.

Chiefs in Malawi are expected by their followers to represent the community and to act on its behalf. Behaving unfairly, failing to redistribute goods that flow into the community, or failing to act when village projects are needed subject a chief to gossip, grumbling, public repudiation, and the possibility of being deposed.

A village headman who was driven out of his village in a particularly humiliating way – the women of the village surrounded his hut jeering and hurling insults – was described by an informant as someone who if the roads needed repairing would say he saw no need, but if there were a training in the nearby district capital for which he would receive a per diem, “he would be there at nine sharp.” As dissatisfaction with the chief’s leadership grew, he retaliated by expanding the village graveyard so that it encroached on a dissident family’s land. This unjust use of his powers precipitated his being deposed and driven from the village.

2006:143–52 on norms and rule enforcement). By this logic, as Harding (2010) has argued, norms are less effective where there is “cultural heterogeneity.”

The effects of norms can be understood as simply raising the cost – internal and external sanction – of less socially acceptable behaviors. Avner Greif (2006) has tried to model exactly how much likelihood of sanction is needed to enforce a practice like the repayment of debts in a trading network. But in functioning institutions, the whole point is that internal sanction, public disapproval, and the possibility of actual sanction – such as getting a reputation as a bad person from whom others withdraw cooperation – are interconnected and tied to the purposes of the institution. Indeed, much of what we normally think of as “morality” – from fidelity in marriage, to honesty in business dealings, to evaluating academic peers in terms of their scholarly competence – makes sense only in terms of the meanings that organize institutions.

Chiefs in Malawi talk as if they feel, or know that they are supposed to feel, an internal sanction to care for their people’s welfare. They repeatedly insist that they “love” their people and “care for them,” providing examples of how they go out of their way to help those in need and to divide benefits so as to spread the wealth and reduce the chances of envy or conflict.

Cornell and Kalt (1997, 2000) see one effect of normative legitimacy as discouraging “destructive rent seeking”: “When political culture – as described by these four normative dimensions [the structure, scope, location, and source of authority] – supports institutions as legitimate, the private rewards and penalties of the ‘social sentiments’ are triggered by the social networks within which individuals are embedded in ways that inhibit free riding and defection vis-à-vis those institutions. Numerous examples from fieldwork in Indian Country illustrate the ‘policing’ role of culturally founded legitimacy” (Cornell and Kalt 1997: 265).

### Ritual and Narrative

Status can motivate contributions to collective well-being, but shared cultural traditions provide the ritual occasions and the face-to-face contexts where status can be awarded and where the links between status and collective purposes can be publicly articulated. At funerals, as I have described, chiefs praise the worthy and reinforce communal ideals by articulating what behaviors are praiseworthy. Chiefs and other leaders can also use funerals to criticize unworthy behavior, as when a village headman and a sheikh each used the funeral of a well-known prostitute who had died of AIDS to warn against sexual immorality (see Watkins and Swidler 2009: 15).

This role of funerals in chiefdoms suggests a larger role of ritual in institutional resilience. Shared cultural traditions provide recognized ritual occasions at which prestige is bestowed (or withheld) and the virtues of valued members praised.<sup>21</sup> Ritual occasions vary in texture and in the richness of the

shared meanings they carry. Sometimes the assertion of rank seems to constitute the entire meaning of the ritual, as when a meeting between African chiefs and NGO officials turns out to be, from the point of view of the chiefs, mainly about the short speeches each chief offers in reverse order of precedence. Other rituals, such as weddings or funerals, may be freighted with many layers of meaning, but even so, the ritual itself will provide many opportunities to enact who is near or distant kin, who is deferred to in seating arrangements or opportunities to speak, or who is important enough to play central ritual roles. Indeed, one of the uncomfortable things about rituals is that they are so semiotically rich – they both permit and require manifesting in publicly visible ways who matters to whom and how. In our own society – and indeed in many of our own work lives – annual banquets, award ceremonies, or prizes demonstrate the role that shared cultural meanings play in the status processes that tie individuals to institutional purposes and reward their commitment.

Considering an organization’s annual banquet, a sports team’s award ceremonies, or even a typical retirement party immediately suggests another way ritual occasions promote institutional resilience. Ritual occasions highlight and often magnify contributions to the collective good, and they also, crucially, reinforce a narrative about the value of the collectivity and the efforts those honored are making on its behalf. Such narratives not only suggest that those contributing to collective purposes are worthy and perhaps merit as-yet-unspecified reciprocity in the future. They also reinforce an image that others are contributing to the collectivity, reducing defections and free riding by highlighting those who are cooperating. The whole cultural complex involved in granting, symbolically affirming, and celebrating status reinforces the understanding that the collective good exists, that others are contributing to it, and that one’s own contributions will be noticed and acknowledged.

Rituals also, as Michael Chwe (2003) has noted, provide the occasions when commitments, alliances, and loyalties can be publicly acknowledged and rehearsed. Thus, a shared repertoire of cultural forms, such as those that govern funerals, public meetings, and celebrations, can provide a ready way of generating common perceptions, including perceptions of the enthusiasm, obedience, or cooperativeness of others (Wedeen 1999). Such knowledge in turn facilitates the coordination of collective action. When a chief calls a meeting – to announce a government program, to resolve a dispute, or to remind people of an obligation – the simple presence of villagers at the meeting is a token of their willingness to accept his authority and to participate in collective tasks.

were vital for creating the “virtuous circle” in which village authorities’ contributions to collective goods could be rewarded with status, which in turn encouraged the production of more collective goods. In a very different context, Zhou and Bankston (1998) make a very similar point when they explain the high academic performance of very poor Vietnamese American high school students in part by the pressure Vietnamese immigrant parents feel at the community banquets where parents receive awards for the academic achievements of their children.

<sup>21</sup> Theorists such as Sewell (1996) analyze the role of powerful ritual moments in the transformation of social structures, and classical anthropology saw ritual as crucial for the preservation of social patterns. In the villages Tsai (2007a, 2007b) studied, traditional cultural associations

When a chief announces a decision that is greeted with laughter, ululating, and delighted clapping (as when a group village headman in southern Malawi announced that he had removed a corrupt headman), the shared emotional response reinforces the common knowledge that facilitates coordinated action, as does the indifferent silence that greets less welcome announcements. But the entire array of ritual occasions – from funerals, which are major occasions in Malawi and throughout Africa, to dances, to the now rare but still known rituals in which chiefs lead villagers in beseeching ancestors for rain – provide the cultural resources that make chieftom a resilient institutional form.

### Resilience and Collective Action Schemas

How “shared” does culture need to be in order to sustain resilient institutional forms? Economists and political scientists have long argued that social communities produce more public goods when they have fewer ethnic, religious, or communal divisions.<sup>22</sup> But what is striking about chieftaincy in much of Africa – and suggestive for broader theories of institutions – is that chieftaincy is often a solution to problems of conflict and cultural heterogeneity, resilient far outside the confines of small, homogeneous villages. The development of “town chiefs” in areas of heterogeneous in-migration, far removed from the village context, shows the way a culturally recognized institutional form can be transposed and reconstituted to serve new functions in new contexts. In Malawi, Cammack et al. (2009: 36) describe town chiefs as a “hybrid” social form:

Firstly, traditional chieftaincies are themselves an institutional hybrid as a result of the historical process of state formation. Secondly, institutions similar to those of traditional chiefs may underpin town chiefs, but these are being adapted to urban conditions (e.g.

<sup>22</sup> The classic study showing that ethnic fragmentation reduces public goods is Easterly and Levine (1997). Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly (1999) find a similar negative effect of ethnic fragmentation on public goods for U.S. cities and counties. Lieberman’s (2009) analysis of national responses to the AIDS epidemic shows that sharp ethnic boundaries reduce national effort to combat AIDS. Recent research has, however, added complexity to the argument. Lieberman (2009) argues that it is not underlying ethnic or racial differences, but the cultural strength of boundaries that matters, so that, for example, “in Brazil... the weakly institutionalized category of race was not politicized for most of the history of AIDS, making possible a politics of national solidarity,” but in South Africa, “discussions of risk, and a politics of blame and denial, broke down along racial lines, lowering demand for a supply of aggressive AIDS policies” (22). Miguel (2004) reports that cultural and institutional efforts to strengthen national identification can weaken the effects of ethnic divisions: villages in Kenya and neighboring Tanzania have similar variations in ethnic fragmentation, and in Kenyan villages, ethnic heterogeneity is indeed associated with poorer provision of public goods. In Tanzania, in contrast, policies of active nation building have eliminated the tendency of ethnic heterogeneity to reduce public goods provision. Recent research by Baldwin and Huber (2010) also shows that between-group economic inequality reduces public goods, but cultural fractionalization and ethno-linguistic fractionalization unrelated to economic inequalities do not.

absence of state recognition, cultural heterogeneity, etc.) and to specific demands arising in each locality. The hybrid nature of town chiefs is further influenced by the complexity of parchment institutions arising from legal innovations and inconsistencies and their various interpretations. Town chiefs are best described as hybrid governance modes resulting from an indigenous adaptation of an existing hybrid institution to a modern environment.

....

Town chiefs, therefore, help groups to overcome collective action problems through being supported by overlapping norms that: (i) enable them to bridge and create a sense of belonging and cohesion amongst disparate individuals; and (ii) endow them with authority and effective sanctions to impose rules. This enables town chiefs to contribute to the provision of important public goods, [including]: (i) justice and reconciliation; and (ii) security and order (mundane and spiritual). Both are fundamental public goods that are particularly important for generating belonging and cohesion in urban settlements where the lack of planning and funds, and weak state capacity lead to unmet needs.

From the other side of the continent, Sandra Barnes (1986), in a classic study of a suburb of Lagos, Nigeria, with more than one million in-migrants, shows that when new urban residents sought political recognition they adapted the chieftom form, creating a system of chieftaincy that helped them access such necessities as “jobs, housing, schooling, loans.” The suburb’s political leaders sought and eventually won political recognition in the form of “chieftaincy titles” (184–200). Barnes explains the “anachronism” of a chieftaincy system arising between the 1950s and the 1970s as having both “cultural and pragmatic” sources:

So far as culture was concerned, Yoruba-speaking peoples dominated the privileged stratum from which local leadership emerged. Despite the fact that the structure of chieftaincy systems varied widely throughout Yorubaland, the one element of political culture most of Mushin’s leaders held in common—the one element which, despite foreign rule and the rise of an educated ruling class, remained open to ordinary citizens, be they educated or uneducated, rich or poor—was chiefship and the idea that certain political rights and opportunities in the wider community could be derived from holding a title. The models for a chieftaincy system surrounded the new District of Mushin, and thus, when its leaders were in a position to bring cultural content to political aspiration, chiefship was a logical choice.

In pragmatic terms, politicians wished to secure the support of chiefs in political campaigns. Each title-holder was the centre of a political arena consisting of kinsmen, clients, friends, and followers, and therefore each one presided over a natural and organised constituency from which politicians could seek votes and other forms of political backing. Politicians also saw personal benefits in the institution of chieftaincy. Titles gave legitimacy to political action, security of tenure, access to the centre, and, last but not least, honour and renown. Titles were not simply hollow markers of status, but resources which could be used profitably in the quest for political power and advancement (pp. 97–8).

Chieftaincy, like other resilient institutions, provides a very general model that people can use to organize diverse aspects of social life.<sup>23</sup> Precisely because establishing patron–client ties and using those ties to claim chiefly title can be tried in many situations, with a variety of supporters, and to achieve varied purposes, the structure keeps reemerging. Patron–client structures have tended to erode formal democratic and bureaucratic governance in much of Africa (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Chabal 2009). Nonetheless, others argue that “developmental patrimonialism” in Africa has sometimes led to better economic outcomes than the more “orthodox” good-governance strategies insisted on by Western experts (Kelsall and Booth 2010; Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2011). Similarly, many NGO and donor programs in sub-Saharan Africa “work” precisely because they provide resources that can be converted into patron–client ties (Smith 2003; Swidler 2009; Swidler and Watkins 2009), often by chiefs, who are crucial intermediaries in such programs.

In *Talk of Love* (Swidler 2001), I argued that societies’ collective schemas for understanding the way action is organized – such as the American myth of “voluntarism” (that social groups emerge from freely chosen cooperation of individuals pursuing common goals) and its correlative assumption of the autonomous individual actor – endure for a reason. I called these myths “collective action schemas,” arguing that they retain their cultural power precisely because they embody the shared “default option” for solving collective problems: what everyone knows that everyone else knows about how social action can be organized. Such collective myths – really formulas or codes for describing group formation – are very hard to change even in the face of repeated failure or other contradictory experience because it takes powerful, shared collective experience – a cathartic convulsion or a collective ritual transformation in Sewell’s (1996) formulation – to enact an alternative vision and constitute a new myth, to signal publicly that everyone knows that everyone knows that there is now a new basis on which people can act together to address collective problems. Michael Chwe (2003) has made a similar argument in rational-choice terms, pointing to the importance of ritual occasions in allowing everyone to see that everyone else has seen that a pattern of collective action is intact or has changed.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Biernacki (1995) offers another example of the resilience of even nearly moribund social forms. In explaining why “labor” became commodified very differently in Germany versus England, Biernacki asks what institutional frameworks were available in each country at the time industrialists were creating textile factories and recruiting labor, constituting labor as a commodity. German industrialists, when they needed to recruit factory labor, modeled their understanding of what labor was on the *corvée* labor systems of feudal agriculture and thus saw themselves as paying for labor time or effort directly because they did not have the developed commodity and labor markets that made labor-as-embodied-in-the-product seem the natural way to structure payments to workers. British employers, who already had developed commodity and labor markets, saw labor as embodied in the product, paying laborers not for their labor time or effort directly but for cloth of varying density and complexity of weave.

Such a formulation would pick up on elements of arguments by Frank Dobbin (1994) and others about how certain approaches to solving policy questions keep reappearing in national contexts because they reinforce collective understandings of how the nation has solved important problems in the past. Beliefs about what has “worked” in the past, of course, depend not simply on actual history but on various forms of collective memory. Collective memory of capacities for collective action may be retained as historical narrative, but it can also be retained in more general forms as people, institutional forms, and general images of collective life are imbued with a sense of the sacred (Feierman 1999). Clifford Geertz (1968: 44) argued that enduring institutional forms embody differing conceptions of “the mode in which the divine reaches into the world” – through the holy charisma of an individual leader in Moroccan Islam or through the ordering of an “exemplary center” in Java’s “theater state.” This capacity of culture to “store” and “release” collective energies in the form of sacred power is very evident in the case of Malawian chiefs. This is not simply a matter of belief in legitimacy or of beliefs about whether it is right or obligatory to obey one’s chief. Even a Malawian who despised her chief and ignored his wishes would see chieftaincy as embodying powerful, if dangerous forces. This sense of sacred power – in the Durkheimian sense in which the collectivity embodies the sacred – is another reason why embedded cultural meanings and practices encode collective capacities without which it is difficult for institutions to succeed in engaging their members and sustaining the provision of collective goods.

## Conclusion

Awareness of interdependence is inevitably greater in a very poor country such as Malawi, with its underdeveloped labor and credit markets, unpredictable rainfall, and sometimes feckless government (Swidler and Watkins 2007). There people cannot maintain even the illusion that their achievements are all their own doing; that their resources belong exclusively to them; and that they depend on no one but themselves for security, opportunity, and purpose. But the lessons from Malawi very much apply in the advanced economies as well. The ability to manage complex markets, the interdependencies between, for example, educational, welfare, employment, and retirement systems depend on effective, resilient institutions (Hall and Soskice 2001). As the challenges of global interdependence grow, with an interlinked global economy and looming ecological crisis, the question of how to maintain the vitality of existing institutions and build new ones has never been more urgent. Although I have not presented anything like a complete theory here, I have emphasized the ways cultural meanings contribute to resilient institutions. Status rewards sustain the meanings that evoke commitment from an organization’s members; rituals enact and reproduce those meanings; narratives of shared purpose reduce defections and make more extensive cooperation possible. Institutions are justified by claims about the larger collective purposes they serve, and they remain

resilient as long as the reward systems they generate reinforce rather than subvert their claims to purpose and their assessments of value (White and White 1965). It is precisely in the irreducible interdependencies of social life that the capacity of institutions to evoke commitment resides. For institutions to be infused with meaning and purpose, they must also be seen to serve collective ends. Collective goods – from social peace to functioning markets to effective climate policies – are both the product of resilient institutions and their *raison d'être*. We neglect those goods at our peril.

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