

# Informal Institutions and Personal Rule in Urban Ghana

Jeffrey W. Paller

**Abstract:** Contrary to expectations of modern democratic development, the establishment of liberal-democratic institutions in Ghana has not led to the demise of political clientelism. Instead, the underlying informal institutions of leadership—friendship, capitalist entrepreneurship, family, and religion—contribute to the persistence of personal rule in urban Ghana. Leaders amass political power by accumulating followers in daily life. The article provides empirical evidence to substantiate these theoretical claims in the form of two ethnographic case studies—a politician’s primary campaign and the screening of a football match in an urban slum. It proposes an alternative model for the study of democracy and political accountability that extends beyond the formal institutional realm to include informal mechanisms that shape political clientelism in a democratic environment.

**Résumé:** Contrairement aux attentes du développement démocratique moderne, la mise en place des institutions de la démocratie libérale au Ghana n’a pas conduit à la disparition du clientélisme politique. Au lieu de cela, les institutions informelles souterraines d’influence gouvernementale telles que les réseaux de connaissances amicales, l’esprit d’entreprise capitaliste, le patronage, la famille et la religion, contribuent à la persistance de la domination du principe de relation dans les centres urbains du Ghana. Les dirigeants accumulent le pouvoir politique en accumulant des adeptes rencontrés au cours de leur vie quotidienne privée. L’article fournit des preuves empiriques à l’appui de ces affirmations théoriques sous la forme de deux études de cas ethnographiques—la campagne d’un politicien pour les primaires, et la projection d’un match de football dans un bidonville. Il propose un modèle alternatif pour l’étude de la démocratie et de la responsabilité politique qui s’étendrait au-delà du domaine institutionnel formel, afin d’y inclure les mécanismes informels qui façonnent le clientélisme politique dans un environnement démocratique.

**Key Words:** African politics; democracy; personal rule; informal institutions; clientelism; Ghana

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During a recent community event in James Town, Accra, Ghana (Nov. 15, 2011), the man sitting next to me extended his hand and introduced himself: “I am Reverend Dr. Nii Owoo. I am the Head Pastor of this church, a renowned international ministry.” He proceeded to give me two business cards with his contact information. One was for the international real estate business he founded; the other was a laminated card labeled “Elite: Royal of the Nii Owoo Family.” He was proud of these three roles—preacher, entrepreneur, and principal elder—and explained that they were all important leadership positions that indicated his power in the community. When we finished talking he shook my hand and said, “If you ever need anything, you know where to find me. You are my friend now.”

This interaction illustrates how leaders accumulate power at the local level in urban Ghana. Leaders, including politicians and chiefs, gain power by extending their social networks, accumulating wealth, being family heads, and speaking the gospel—they are friends, entrepreneurs, parents, and preachers. Contrary to expectations of modern democratic development that emphasize increasing secularization, decreasing personalization of political power, and gradual liberalization of the legal system, personal rule persists in Ghanaian society despite the strengthening of its liberal democratic institutions. Local residents struggle for political power and economic resources through the accumulation of followers, the most important metric in determining personal power (Sahlins 1963). In this article I provide an institutional explanation, based on how leaders accumulate power in daily life, to explain the persistence of personal rule in an African democracy. This explanation helps account for the evolution of political clientelism in Ghana today.

While significant attention has been given to formal institutions of voting and leadership selection in Ghana, there is little research on how leaders actually build political support and power in daily life. This is especially important in Ghana, where, as scholars have demonstrated empirically (e.g., Lindberg 2010), a form of political clientelism has emerged despite the deepening of its democracy. Some scholars have even characterized Ghana’s democratic environment as one of “competitive clientelism”: the use of elections as a mechanism for the distribution of patronage and state resources to award politicians’ followers (Whitfield 2011; Idun-Arkhurst 2012). The strengthening of Ghana’s formal institutions and electoral accountability are not replacing this clientelistic behavior. Instead, formal institutions have become “fused” with informal duties and norms, contributing to political clientelism. This article argues that informal institutions of leadership that rely on relationships of reciprocity and direct exchange enable leaders to gain power and amass followers in daily life. This informal institutional environment explains why competitive clientelism persists despite electoral accountability.

### **Informal Institutions of Leadership**

Why does political clientelism persist in a country with steadily improving liberal-democratic institutions? Political scientists offer explanatory factors

that range from colonial legacies (Ekeh 1975), illegitimate state institutions (Englebert 2000), “perverse” machine politics (Stokes 2005), the inability of politicians to make credible commitments (Keefer 2007), the role of party brokers (Stokes et al. 2013), high levels of poverty and electoral competition (Kitschelt & Wilkinson 2007; Lindberg & Morrison 2008), and weak indigenous industries and easy state financing from foreign aid (Whitfield 2011).<sup>1</sup> These analyses have two drawbacks: they overemphasize the importance of formal institutions without accounting for the informal norms and duties that are attached to the political “rules of the game”; and they do not account for the historical development and cultural context of leadership in African societies that enable personal rule. This article, building on a large, interdisciplinary body of literature that emphasizes transactional, reciprocal, and social exchanges between leaders and their constituents (e.g., Scott 1972; Eisenstadt & Roniger 1980; LeMarchand 1981; Roniger 1994), provides an institutional explanation for the development of political clientelism through the persistence of personal rule at the local level.

Informal institutions of leadership can be defined as the socially shared rules that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels and that enable leaders to gain power in daily life.<sup>2</sup> While informal institutions are closely related to culture, a distinctive feature of institutions is that they include a sanctioning mechanism that enables some behaviors and constrains others (North 1990).<sup>3</sup> In urban Ghana, the informal institutions of leadership, specifically the historical form of what has been termed the “big man” (Sahlins 1963), have been reshaped to fit the contemporary context of multiparty democracy. These informal institutions extend beyond ethnic lines, class divisions, and political affiliation, suggesting that these “rules of the game” are a defining characteristic of Ghanaian political life.

Personal rule has a long history in African politics (Vansina 1990; Lonsdale 1981; Bratton & Van de Walle 1997), and Ghanaian politics in particular (Owusu 1971; Price 1971). In Ghana this tradition of “big man” political authority privileges the public demonstration of power, generosity, and consumption of expensive goods. “Big man” rule penetrates all levels of society and has become an institutionalized pattern of expected behavior and a defining feature of daily life. The “big-man small-boy” phenomenon, characterized by a perceived relationship between wealth and virtue, is especially powerful and has been used to explain national-level politics (Nugent 1996).

The tension between personal rule as a regime type versus personal rule as a political form in a particular society or culture has not been adequately scrutinized. In the original conception of the “big man,” Marshall Sahlins describes him as “thoroughly bourgeois, so reminiscent of the free enterprising rugged individual,” someone who attempts “to show a standing above the masses that is product of his own personal manufacture” (1963:289). A big man’s goal, borrowing from Malinowski’s (1921) theories, is to amass a “fund of power” and extend local-level politics as much

as possible in order to widen his social sphere. Another way to conceptualize this is that the local big man amasses what might be called a “fund of followers” in order to grow his authority from the ground up. Jackson and Rosberg (1984), by contrast, introduced a model of the big man that treats personal rule as a regime type. According to their paradigm, personal rule is an institution of power in which rivalries and struggles among powerful men shape political life. In this way, personal rule is distinctly elitist and inherently antidemocratic. Significantly, it is this second conception of personal rule and big-man politics—as a national-level feature of political life—that has tended to dominate the political science literature (i.e., Ake 1996; Joseph 2008; Diamond 2008; Erdman & Engel 2007; Pitcher et al. 2009). The overall consensus is that personal rule is a major threat to democratic politics.

But the case of Ghana shows that democratic politics and personal rule can in fact coexist, albeit in unconventional ways. The focus on personal rule as a regime type and on national-level institutions obscures the important ways that leaders relate to their followers and amass power in daily life. Instead, the informal institutions of leadership that underlie democratic governance in Ghana shape the clientelistic behavior that has entered multiparty politics. The role of the big man in Ghanaian society that Price and Owusu document, in addition to the “big man” concept that Sahlins describes, were not replaced by “impersonal institutions” during the era of multiparty democracy. Rather, the informal institutions of leadership perpetuate personal rule by enabling Ghanaian politicians and actors to accumulate a “fund of followers” in order to amass political power. This can undermine electoral accountability because leaders are expected to reciprocate—often by directly distributing goods and services to their followers.

### **Friend, Entrepreneur, Parent, Preacher**

The first informal institution of leadership that frames urban African life is friendship. In African cities, the accumulation of friends and the establishment of social networks built on reciprocity and trust are important assets that may reduce economic vulnerability and expand socioeconomic opportunities (Hanson 2005; Simone 2004). In urban slums, friendship generated by shared experience and mutual knowledge, rather than ethnicity or citizenship, often serves as the basis of trust (Hart 2000). Further, social capital is produced through informal working relations, customer friendships, and preexisting networks and intermediaries (Lyons 2000). In contexts of weak security apparatuses, friendship is a key form of personal security (Simone 2004). Leaders also offer protection through their vast social ties. Leaders must have friends in powerful places. Friendship determines access to resources and opportunities; individuals must be “linked up” to those in power. The more friends that leaders have—across ethnic group, class divisions, regional membership, and political affiliation—the more power they have.

The second informal institution of leadership that frames African urban life is capitalist entrepreneurship—this leads to wealth and the provision of jobs, two key components of personal rule. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (2000) argue that Africa has entered a historic new age in which capitalism presents itself as an avenue to transform the lives of the marginalized and the disempowered. Claims to individual creativity through entrepreneurship are an important new pathway to success for urban youth (Shipley 2009). The entrepreneur holds not only financial resources, but also the potential political influence to transform his or her society or community. The ability to offer jobs to youth is a powerful asset. For example, in Benjamin Kwakye's novel *The Clothes of Nakedness* (1998), the local Accra "big man" Mystique Mysterious explains that he can deliver what other authority structures cannot: jobs. He pronounces to a future employee, "I offer you something that will put food on your table, not from your wife's income, but from your own pocket. I offer you the opportunity to walk proud and confident, knowing that you are bringing in a wage. Bukari, my friend, I know you are a driver and I am offering you a job" (12). In urban centers, big men are an important source of job creation.

The third informal institution of leadership that frames African urban life is the family, both literally and figuratively. Leaders are expected to be the patriarchs not only of their biological families, but also of a broader constituency (Schatzberg 1993; 2001). They can be the head of a voting constituency, as Lindberg (2010) describes in reference to MPs, the head of a royal family, or simply the head of a group of followers who perceive their leader as a father figure. Parents—both the biological and figurative kinds—are expected to provide for their children: to distribute food, pay for school fees, and lend money. In contemporary politics local leaders attempt to build large political families, and they use the familial language to legitimate their support.

The fourth informal institution of leadership that frames African urban life is religion, specifically the church. Leaders have the incentive to present themselves as preachers—or at least to align themselves closely with preachers—in order to accumulate spiritual power, religious followers, and "God's blessing" (Meyer 2004). The process of democratization has coincided with the rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. In the context of the financial struggles of the state in the 1980s and '90s, Pentecostals and Charismatics presented themselves as an alternative to state power. The liberalization and commercialization of the media created further space for Pentecostals to "go public" (Meyer 2004). As Ghana has established liberal-democratic institutions and constructed modern state institutions, the public sphere has thus become dominated by religious authorities (Meyer 1998; Gifford 1994a; De Witte 2008).

This development is perhaps not surprising, since Pentecostalism and Charismatic churches themselves build off of a model of personal power (Van Dijk 2001). The churches have adopted the "big man" model and many are run by pastors who "under[stand] their job primarily in terms of

their own power, status and wealth" (Gifford 1994b:520–21). The importance of leadership is further exemplified by the way that preachers understand their role in society: they see themselves as leading African societies out of the depths of colonialism, poverty, and corruption. For these reasons, preachers are more than simply religious figures; they are important political actors as well. Establishing churches provides them with the opportunity to accumulate a fund of followers that directly translates into political power.

The empirical data that I use to substantiate these theoretical claims were drawn from one year (August 2011–August 2012) of ethnographic work in three Ghanaian slum communities: Old Fadama, Ga Mashie, and Ashaiman. I attended community meetings, followed political campaigns, discussed politics with residents, and observed daily political behavior. This strategy produced a large dataset of observations that highlight the processes, networks, and spontaneity of decision-making that underlie democratic governance in urban Ghana. In the following two sections, an ethnographic case study of an MP aspirant's primary campaign shows how the informal institutions of religion and the family shape multiparty politics. The third section is based on the viewing of a televised football match with residents in Ghana's largest squatter settlement.

### **The Vanderpuye Primary Campaign: Politics and the Church**

On February 5, 2012, the Missions to Nations Church, a building that had recently been converted from a cinema in "Old" Accra, was filled with excitement for the Sunday prayer service. The choir joyously sang "This is your season: It's time to shine again," words that inspired the audience and framed the event as a celebration of the recent primary campaign victory of Nii Lantey Vanderpuye, the National Democratic Congress's (NDC) parliamentary aspirant for Odododiodio Constituency. The campaign had promoted the event as a "Thanksgiving Service" to thank God for bringing victory to Vanderpuye in the election. But the event also provided inspiration and blessings for Vanderpuye for the upcoming political season: it would be "his season" and his time "to shine," as the introductory song previewed. The event was sponsored by the recently formed Odododiodio Network of Churches, an organization of pastors and churches within the local electoral constituency. One of the host pastors explained that they had adopted the same name as the political constituency because it allowed the pastors to reach out to potential church members (interview with Nii Kwatelei Owoo, Accra, July 5, 2012). The pastors were taking advantage of popular interest in party politics to build their own churches.

After a series of songs and prayers, the host for the event introduced Vanderpuye with words that emphasized the host's affection for and familiarity with the MP: "He has done so much. He is a teacher, a mentor, a friend and a father to me." Vanderpuye took the podium to loud applause. "I am not a pastor, so don't be deceived," he declared, comically. "I thank

the Almighty God for a peaceful primary devoid of rancor. The rain God honored me. I asked for 75 percent but God said that is not enough for you. That is not enough to see your glory. He gave me more than I asked for myself.” He then asked for God’s help in “making a better Ododiodio,” the same language he had used when he picked up the nomination forms and claimed that he was “ordained by God” to be Minister of Parliament for Ododiodio Constituency (*Ghana News Agency* 2011). Vanderpuye then directed his comments to the pastors in the room. “I will not be the MP,” he proclaimed. “You pastors, you the ministers of God will be the MPs of this constituency. It is you, the pastors, who share the obligation. You must mentor me, teach me, and call me back if I am not fulfilling my mandate. If I fail, it’s the failure of you pastors. It’s the failure of the Church.”

As this event shows, Christianity has emerged in Ghana as a powerful way to mobilize a political constituency. During the campaign Vanderpuye also visited and prayed with the Muslim leaders and received their blessings. The participation of the church and the promotion of Vanderpuye as a father figure were central to the campaign strategy of his electoral team. On January 20, 2012, for example, Vanderpuye held a late-night prayer service at the Missions to Nations Church with the goal of gaining “spiritual support” (interview with Emmanuel Nii Tackie, Accra, Jan. 18, 2012). One woman from Ga Mashie who attended explained that while the candidate’s education and occupation are important, “what he really needs, what really matters, is the spiritual vote” (informal conversation with Ga Mashie resident, Accra, Jan. 18, 2012). Politicians thus have the incentive to evoke religious language to garner political support; they must present themselves as being close to God to bolster their electoral chances and be seen as viable leaders in the community.

Vanderpuye’s support network extends deep into Ododiodio Constituency’s religious bodies, and pastors and the clergy engage in politics by praying for candidates, offering their blessings, and attending (and organizing) thanksgiving services. But while they work to support a campaign, pastors also bolster their own church attendance as well as their political and economic power in the community; as the head pastor of the Love Chapel in Accra admitted, “it is true that some political parties are using pastors as a platform to get members. . . . When you see somebody [a pastor] following [a politician] with all their might, it means envelopes [of money] have been exchanged. Handshakes have been exchanged” (interview with James Addo, Accra, July 4, 2012). Nii Kwatelei Owoo, the pastor mentioned at the beginning of this article, is also involved in politics; the NDC Constituency administrative secretary said that “he is always in Vanderpuye’s office” (informal conversation with Lena Addo, Accra, Jan. 24, 2012). According to Owoo,

If a pastor says he is not a politician, he may not know what he is doing. All pastors are politicians. And pretending does not bring us anywhere. I educate my people. I advise them on the right choices that they must choose.



I advise them on democracy. When I look at the political parties, I preach my mind. As regards for Nii Lantey [Vanderpuye], I see what he can do. I see brilliant things in this man. I tell my people they must make the right choice. (Interview, Accra, July 5, 2012)

Owoo is currently involved in a court case in which his family is suing a prominent school for land that was acquired from his ancestors in 1921. While Owoo said that Vanderpuye has not actually given him money, he has assisted with the case: “I sent him documents to give the President. . . . He is helpful with relations to the President.” Nevertheless, Owoo was clear about his own role and priorities: “I am advocating for Christ Jesus. I am a politician for Christ Jesus.”

The Reverend Robert Esmon Otorjor of Shekinah Praise Chapel also mentioned his close ties to Vanderpuye—he bragged that the politician’s cell phone number is on his contact list and explained that a pastor has two roles: to “win souls and help in bringing development to the community” (interview, Accra, June 27, 2012). Otorjor is a member of the local unit committee (an administrative position dealing with community development issues) and an executive member on the Odododiodio Constituency NDC. He has ambitions to be the Constituency Chairman or a Regional Executive in the NDC in the future. He does not see a conflict of interest. “Church and politics work together,” he said, beginning with the implementation of multiparty democracy in 1992 which allowed churches to flourish.

Formerly we did not have plenty of Bible schools. There are a lot coming up now. It paved the way for more and more people to have the calling. There is more freedom in the church. Because we are in a democratic era, more and more people can open their own church. Formerly it was not easy for a young guy to open his own church. The people would say you need to be 45 years of age, but today you see 18 year olds preaching. The system has changed.

He also spoke frankly about how his role in the church helps his quest for political power:

I personally had a call to go into politics. Just like Reverend Jesse Jackson. And the President in Germany, a former Lutheran minister, and the Vice President of Zambia. Adding politics to my pastoral duties has opened an avenue—politics sometimes can be rough and violent. There is a need for us to inject peace and that temperament into the process. [Politics] has opened a lot of chances for me. . . . The Bible doesn’t stop any pastor from doing politics. When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice.

Isaac Okai, the youth pastor of A Beautiful Way, another local church, also emphasized the symbiotic relationship between politics and religion (interview, Accra, June 27, 2012). Politicians like Vanderpuye support the



church financially while the church provides spiritual support to candidates and a forum to preach and gain popularity.

We have to pray that they will rule in the rule of God. Honorable Nii Lantey Vanderpuye is a trustee here. He comes often to preach. He makes sure that everything in the Church comes into place. Our Bishop prays for him. One time, in the last four years, he had a problem. The Bishop of this house was with him physically and spiritually. He told him not to give up and when the time comes it will be the time of the Lord.

Okai saw nothing improper about the material and political benefits that flowed to him in return, and indeed he looked up to his Bishop as a role model.

He's a Big Man. He's a prophet of God. Normally they reveal things that will happen—people like him and will dash him. People appreciate his potential and his gift—that's what makes him a Big Man. A lot of politicians come to him for revelations—even the President once before. People came for him for counseling and prayer. He's my mentor, my spiritual father, my everything. People always say I'm a photocopy of him.

### **The Vanderpuye Primary Campaign: Politics, the Family, and Patronage**

The institution of the family is also crucial to local-level politics in urban Ghana. Family lineage continues to shape politics for the indigenous Ga people, and the traditional Ga Mashie community is a crucial voting bloc of Odododiodio Constituency. While Vanderpuye's campaign tried to withdraw publicly from engaging in chieftaincy struggles, family lineage continues to influence voters and confer legitimacy on candidates. For example, Vanderpuye's campaign highlighted that he comes from a very powerful clan, Lante Djan-We (interview with Isaac Adjei, campaign manager for Nii Lantey Vanderpuye, Accra, Dec. 17, 2011), even though some members of the opposition claimed that he is really from Otubluhom, a different quarter of Ga Mashie (interview with Nii Lankai Lamptey, Accra, July 3, 2012). The Lante Djan-We clan is steeped in tradition—it was the first clan to celebrate the Homowo Festival, the Gas' most important annual ceremony, and its members continue to celebrate the festival two weeks before other clans do.

Since multiparty democracy emerged in Ghana in 1992, family lineage has continued to influence the choice of candidates in Odododiodio formal politics. For example, in 1996 the New Patriotic Party (NPP) MP candidate, Samuel Odoi Sykes, struggled to overcome the handicap of his family origins in La (i.e., outside of Ga Mashie). His opponent, Nii Okaidja Adamafo, who narrowly won the election, is from Gbese (in Ga Mashie), and publicized the message broadly until, according to one politician, it “caught up with people” (interview with Nii Ayi Bonte, Accra, June 8, 2012).

In 2000 Nii Ayi Bonte was selected as NPP's candidate and won the election largely because he is from Gbese, his father was Chief of Gbese from 1959 to 1978, his great-grandfather was Chief of Gbese from 1911 to 1940, and the acting Chief is his father's first cousin. As he told me frankly, "You are an indigene, you are the Chief's son, so they voted for me" (interview with Nii Ayi Bonte, Accra, June 8, 2012).

In the by-election of 2005, the NDC considered similar family dynamics when choosing its parliamentary candidate. The NPP's candidate, Anis Mankattah, was an "Asafoatse"—a traditional Ga leader who is a marshal of war. In response, the NDC selected Jonathan Nii Tackie Komme, who is a royal king. The NDC's reasoning—that the king trumps the captain of war—proved to be correct. As one man told me, "It worked—you follow the king" (interview with Isaac Adjei, Accra, Dec.17, 2011). In 2008 the NPP candidate, Adjei Sowa, lost to Tackie Komme. As former MP Nii Ayi Bonte explained, Adjei Sowa "did not have support because of his name. He comes from Teshie. They look at names. Tackie Komme used this against him" (interview, Accra, June 8, 2012). In this way the institution of family—in contrast to government performance, ideology, or programmatic ideas—continues to influence leadership selection, contributing to the persistence of political clientelism even within electoral politics. Family lineage has particular influence not only among the elderly, with their traditional values, but also among the youth. Vanderpuye's metaphor of a "new political family" is especially influential among younger voters who see him as a benevolent leader who can feed and provide for the community. In a focus group of Ga Mashie youth (Accra, June 20, 2012) two participants explained that they view him as the "father" of the community because he is a vocal leader who provides jobs and opportunities. Creating a "new political family" was strategic for Vanderpuye in his campaign against the incumbent Nii Tackie Komme, who, as we have seen, draws significant support from his traditional family ties.

Vanderpuye built this new political family in various ways. He pays the school fees for children in the community. In an informal conversation (Accra, Jan. 9, 2012) his administrative secretary told me that he had "brought over 300 cedis last week" to pay for the school fees of one resident. He attends and financially supports funerals and birthday parties of influential and politically connected residents in the community. A different member of Vanderpuye's campaign team explained, "This is how it works here. You have to pay for these personal things so that people see what you do" (interview with Latif Osman, Accra, Dec. 7, 2011). Vanderpuye has used his personal and professional connections to the president to submit letters of support for constituents for jobs or educational opportunities. According to the NDC Constituency administrative secretary, he provided a group of women with loans to support their businesses (informal conversation with Lena Addo, Accra, Jan. 24, 2012). He hands out rice, clothes, and other gifts to constituents at various rallies and events, as he did on January 2 for the New Year's celebration. He paved the alleyway

in front of his family home and claimed that he would do the same for the entire community if he was voted in as MP. At a campaign rally in the slum of Old Fadama (March 4, 2012) he reached out to the women by saying, “You are all my wives. You are all part of my family.” Similarly, when he picked up his nomination form he called upon “my brothers from Old Fadama” to join him on stage.

Vanderpuye’s strategic use of the family metaphor in his campaign would have been quite familiar to his constituency, since local leaders accumulate followers using similar techniques. For example, on May 2 the fetish priest Nana Odupon Okomfo Abeka Sikafo II, who has been an NDC insider since former President Rawlings staged his first coup d’état in 1979, celebrated his fiftieth birthday party. Sikafo is the father of sixteen children with ten different wives, and his birthday party also celebrated his role as father figure. While various women cooked large bowls of rice, stew, and chicken, he was in charge of distributing the food and making sure that all visitors were attended to. His numerous children brought the plates out to the important visitors from the community. This activity held symbolic power: as a leader, he feeds his followers. Significantly, to honor the traditional leader and to thank him for his valuable support, Vanderpuye donated 500 cedis for his birthday party—thereby strengthening social support for the priest and also benefiting, even indirectly, from the image of paternal bounty that the priest conveyed.

Of course, much of this appeal is also based on conventional patronage politics. According to an article in *The Enquirer* (Jan. 19, 2012),

Nii Lantey Vanderpuye is seen generally as a good and generous politician by the constituents and is credited with the beautification of the Zongo Lane area with concrete slabs and the sponsoring of some Muslims to Mecca which forms the reason for which countless party members besiege his office at around the Central Business District for assistance on a daily basis.

As one resident told me (Accra, Dec. 19, 2011), “If Vanderpuye wins, I get the chance to make more money before the elections. If Tackie Komme wins, I get nothing.” The last week before the primary election, especially the last night, is particularly expensive for the candidates. The NDC Odododiodio constituency administrative secretary explained, “From what I hear, they [all three candidates] are saving their money for Friday. People change their minds so quickly that you have to be the last one to convince them” (informal conversation with Lena Addo, Jan. 24, 2012). The night before the election Vanderpuye sponsored a big dinner at the local pool hall.

Vanderpuye was particularly effective at reaching out to the youth, who felt that the incumbent did not provide employment opportunities for them. Isaac Adjei, Vanderpuye’s campaign manager, mentioned, as one example, the differences that young boys were noticing in the student body

of the police training academy located in the community; in the early 1990s “they would see people from their community, young men they grew up next to. But now, they do not see anybody they know. These people want positions, but they are not getting them” (interview, Accra, Jan. 11, 2012). Vanderpuye established youth groups, “keep-fit” clubs (athletic training teams), and social clubs to formally organize disparate clusters of youth throughout Odododiodio Constituency. The campaign placed banners throughout the region with emblems such as: “Striker’s Fan Club Votes Nii Lantey Vanderpuye for MP of Odododiodio Constituency.” On January 18, 2012, a group that calls itself the NDC Concerned Youth of Odododiodio Constituency held a press conference at a local pool hall to express their disappointment with the incumbent. Vanderpuye’s campaign invited the media and, as is standard practice in Ghana, provided the usual “financial allowance” for them to cover the event. Several media outlets were in attendance and reported on the press statement issued by the conference, which accused the incumbent of misallocating funds and not serving the interests of the youth. “We need somebody to lobby for us, not someone who sits in Parliament and does nothing,” the president of the group stated. After the event, one of the participants explained, “The youth do not want money. We do not even want jobs directly from the MP. We want the MP to lobby for us. To make a call for us. To connect us with those who matter” (interview with Ga Mashie resident, Jan. 18, 2012). Another resident explained, “It is not that he is rich, but he has a link. He’s all around. When you go to Brong Ahafo, he has friends. Go to Western, he has friends. Go to the North, he is known there” (interview with Rev. Robert Esmon Otorjor, Accra, June 27, 2012).

Nii Lantey Vanderpuye’s successful primary campaign thus demonstrates the ways that informal institutions underlie the democratization process in urban Ghana. Vanderpuye has built political support from networks of friends, pastors, entrepreneurs, and family heads, and he legitimates his power with metaphors drawn from these informal institutions. But the primary campaign also demonstrates how citizens demand accountability from below through the “rules of the game” established by informal institutions, and not simply through the electoral channels emphasized by formal institutions. This tendency in turn contributes to the clientelist networks that are embedded in democratic politics.

### **Champions League in an Urban Slum: Friendship and Entrepreneurship**

The second ethnographic case study demonstrates how the informal institutions of friendship and capitalist entrepreneurship shape everyday power relations in an urban slum. It is based on a detailed analysis of the screening of the Champions League Final football match in 2012. The case study suggests that formal citizenship and government organizational structures are embedded in informal networks of friendship and capitalist entrepreneurship. Specifically, the case shows how political leaders gain power

by accumulating friends and growing their own businesses; this provides them with a base of support for entering multiparty politics.

At 3:00 p.m. on May 19, 2010, in Old Fadama, Accra's largest squatter settlement, residents had one thing on their mind: the upcoming football match between Chelsea and Bayern Munich for the Champions League Final. There had been pouring rain two hours earlier, but this did not stop the residents from gathering outside a local mosque in anticipation. Dozens of people wore blue Chelsea jerseys and waved stitched scarves. A young woman wrapped herself in a Chelsea flag; men chased her and they flirted. The electricity had been off since the storm—the Electricity Company of Ghana often turns off the power for safety reasons (wires are connected haphazardly and falling wires have caused electrocutions in the past), and residents debated where they would watch the game if the power did not come back. Some people even complained that the cinema owners who possess generators had colluded with the power company so that residents would be forced to watch the game at their establishment.

Three local “big men” stood out: Alhaji, Chief, and Boss, along with Boss's youthful followers, including Arwal and Mohammed (these are pseudonyms). The three older men laughed with one another as their young followers huddled around. Alhaji, Chief, and Boss are the most powerful landlords and community leaders in the neighborhood. While the road through the slum was very muddy and most people's clothes were wet and dirty, Alhaji looked particularly fresh and pristine. His clothes were also more expensive and trendier than those of the other residents, signaling his wealth and status in the community; he wore a bright white English national team jersey, as opposed to the generic jersey that most of the residents wore, and his dark blue jeans were stylish and ironed. As an older man, a Mallam who was probably in his sixties, walked by, Boss pulled out a ten-cedi bill from his pocket, gave it to Arwal (a young, university-educated “boy” who serves as his “deputy secretary”), and indicated that he should chase after the Mallam and hand him the money. The man stopped and turned back; Boss smiled and waved and the Mallam smiled appreciably and waved back. Boss's public gesture of “donating” to the Mallam demonstrated his generosity and contributed to his personal power. Everybody who observed the interaction saw him as the wealthy man who cares for his community, including the important religious leaders. In slums like Old Fadama, religious figures and traditional authorities depend on the big men for financial sustenance. In return, the big men gain their respect and their symbolic support.

Boss was similarly solicitous of his youthful followers. After rejecting the *jollof* rice that many men in the crowd had purchased from a woman vendor, he sent another one of his young protégé's to fetch rice for a group of youth. According to Arwal, “People should have what is due to them. His [Boss's] main aim is to get the people who suffered to get government into power to get them what they want. He is very disappointed with government for not doing this” (informal conversation, Accra, Nov. 21, 2011).

Boss is generally perceived as a fair and honest man—"a straight shooter," as one resident described him (informal conversation, Accra, Dec. 7, 2011). This perception is shared by Chief, an opinion leader in the community, who explained that while other leaders do not always pay people on time for the jobs they do, "this does not happen with Boss. He makes sure these things are fair." Along with the young men in Boss's inner circle, Chief hails from Boss's hometown, lives in the slum territory that Boss controls, and benefits from being closely aligned to him. Mohammed and Arwal both have aspirations to be entrepreneurs one day—they want to own transport businesses—and they hope to gain support from people like Boss who can link them up with friends in powerful positions. And in an illegal settlement like Old Fadama that does not provide basic public security, residents also rely on figures like Boss for personal protection.

Boss was once a controversial figure. Known as a "Rawlings boy"—a term given to supporters of former President Jerry John Rawlings—he is closely aligned with the NDC and was suspected of aiding them illegally in political mobilization in the 2000 elections (informal conversation, Accra, April 18, 2012). After the NPP government assumed power, they issued a warrant for his arrest and he fled to Libya. He returned in the mid-2000s and sought refuge in Old Fadama, where he would be hard to find. His status in Old Fadama increased after the 2008 elections when the NDC regained power and the NPP party activists in the community were forced to flee.

Boss had been one of the first squatters in Old Fadama, first settling there in the early 1990s when only about fifty to one hundred people lived there. In squatter settlements early arrival greatly enhances a leader's ability to amass power. Boss became an active force in Old Fadama when an MP from his hometown of Tamale in the North, wishing to bolster his ties in the capital city, opened an NGO, paid for some basic services, and handed out cash and contracts to mobilize and organize the youth. This patronage relationship politicized the residents of Old Fadama—it solidified the community as an NDC stronghold and potential NDC vote bank for politicians from the North—and also provided Boss with employment and an important formal link to NDC politics.

On the day of the Champions League Final, Alhaji, Boss, and Chief were the big men in charge. Alhaji is one of the few residents in the community who has a government job, currently with the Department of Urban Roads. Like many politicians and government workers, he also has his own general contracting business (Al-Alhaji Salama Enterprise), which is officially registered with the Registrar General. Through his links with the government, he has secured at least five small contracts. His current contract, which is for cleaning sewers, provides employment for eight youth from Old Fadama. In other instances he has secured a contract and then sold it, taking a 10 percent cut of the profit. Securing the current job from the government was not easy. He spent 2002–8 as the secretary for the NDC Special Ward. This gave him exposure to the top hierarchy of the



party. When the NDC won the 2008 elections and became the governing party, many low-level positions in the ministries and other government agencies were given to party loyalists and activists like Alhaji. But not all party members got jobs, and Alhaji benefited from his close friendship with his hometown MP, who is the vice chairman of the NDC. Alhaji explained, “I’ve worked with him for a very long time. In politics, we went round to rallies with him and talked to people. Getting linked up is very important” (interview, Accra, June 30, 2012).

The government job gives Alhaji great power in Old Fadama. He is close to the Director of Urban Roads and also the Minister of Roads and Highways. He explained, “People from the community and people from outside come to me to help them get contracts. Some from Tamale, some from the NPP regime. When NDC came to power they [the NPP activists] lost jobs because of their party. I was able to get them to keep their jobs.” In other words, Alhaji’s social network extends beyond ethnic, political, and hometown lines. He is able to employ people from his hometown, residents of Old Fadama, and other members of his social network; this brings him great respect and contributes to his following. Alhaji has helped Boss secure contracts for his youth followers, and the Dagomba Youth Chief relies on Alhaji to link him up with government officials to secure contracts. He hopes that all of his community connections will help him gain political office one day: “I want to be a politician, to be a DC or constituency chairman back in the North—back home” (interview, Accra, June 30, 2012).

Three hours before the football match, Chief was busy setting up a generator. He sent two youths on a motorbike to buy petrol. Chief has two televisions where people hang out throughout the day while he sells phone credit. He planned to show the Champions League match there and charge a small fee. Chief’s hangout spot helps him consolidate power in the community because people come to eat and talk politics and sports. He has been living in Old Fadama “on and off” for five years. When he arrived in Accra he worked as a security guard for a big company. But his move to Old Fadama provided the opportunity to be an entrepreneur: he now sells phone credit and rents out structures for businesses and homes. He says, “Now I work for myself. I am not a slave to anyone” (informal conversation, Accra, Feb. 10, 2012). Mohammed commented on Chief’s position in the community as “under Boss, but when he comes out to cause trouble, you cannot stop him. He fights a lot. He is usually right, but the problem is that he takes justice in his own hands. He does justice himself” (informal conversation, Accra, Dec. 28, 2011).

Chief’s “base” has strategic importance in Old Fadama. Hundreds of people walk through the space each day because it is located directly next to the largest mosque in the area. On Fridays Chief personally cleans the space so that residents can pray there—the mosque is not large enough to accommodate all those who wish to attend the Friday prayer service. Three NDC party branches meet within fifty meters of this spot, and Boss’s NDC Agboglobshie Youth Office, one of the few permanent structures in the



area, is right next to it; this means that when politicians visit the community they will surely pass by. In fact, the NDC Special Ward Chairman amassed great wealth by informally selling land and shacks behind the base. For these reasons, the base is a physical center of NDC patronage in the community and Chief himself is in a position of power.

The football game finally started at 6:45 p.m. The televisions were not turned on until ten minutes into the game because it was prayer time. But the seats in front of the screens were full, with few people entering the mosque. Approximately seventy-five people watched the game. The most important people sat in plastic chairs up front, while the youth followers sat on benches behind them. The rest of the viewers stood and watched. Chief collected fifty peswas from the viewers. At one point, one of the young men refused to pay. Chief turned off the sets and people collectively groaned. The young man was immediately embarrassed, stopped complaining, and paid. Only people like Arwal and Mohammed did not pay: they are part of Boss's social and political network. Mohammed explained, "We don't pay. I will never pay here. This is my spot." Chief was only charging "outsiders."

In the middle of the match Boss joined the group watching the game. He was loud and animated and adorned in a Chelsea jersey. A man sitting in one of the chairs immediately vacated it so that Boss could sit in front. People paid attention to Boss's reactions to the game. They laughed when he yelled, thinking that one team was about to score. They cheered when he cheered. A young boy, no more than five years old, sat beneath him, between his legs, and Boss acted like a gentle and loving father to this surrogate son. When Chelsea scored, young men slapped hands and said, "We praise God. We praise God!"

### **Conclusion: Personal Rule and the Study of Democracy**

This article shows how local struggles for political power in urban Ghana occur outside of formal institutional channels. By uncovering the informal duties and norms associated with the institutions of friendship, capitalist entrepreneurship, parenthood, and religion, it illustrates how local leaders and elected officials draw on these institutional resources to build followings, amass political power, legitimate their authority, and stay in office. Leaders are personal rulers and "big men" who rely on relationships of reciprocity and direct exchange to garner support; they are expected to reward their followers with jobs, contracts, government-provided loans, and other private goods. They use a language of faith, individual prosperity, and parenthood to legitimate their rule.

The evidence presented in this article confirms and provides an explanation for a puzzling empirical finding: that political clientelism is deepening alongside the strengthening of liberal-democratic institutions. This calls into question the conventional wisdom that personal rule and democratization are mutually exclusive. Instead, the role of informal institutions

and the persistence of personal rule are enduring and defining characteristics of Ghana's democracy, and its study should not be limited to the realm of national regime type. These institutions extend beyond categories of identity, ethnicity, class, and political affiliation.

While the evidence presented in this article pertains to local-level democratization in urban Ghana, other scholars have described similar phenomena involving personal rule and political clientelism in rural Ghana (Lentz 1998), Indian slums (Boo 2012), and Argentinean shantytowns (Auyero 2001). The challenge for scholars is to place the informal institutions of leadership in a comparative perspective to examine whether these different contexts have similar institutional environments that shape democratic politics. In other words, there is a need for more empirical research on the informal institutions that underlie democratic governance (see MacLean 2010), especially relating to the different ways that leaders in new democracies amass funds of power and accumulate followers at the local level. Without this, the study of politics remains incomplete, and the real sources of political struggle in African societies may continue to fuel political clientelism—despite the continuing success of formal institutional development.

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## Notes

1. For a good summary of the political clientelism literature, see Hicken (2011).
2. Informal institutions are "socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels" (Helmke & Levitsky 2004).
3. By contrast, culture is best conceived as "semiotic practices," or the processes of meaning-making in which agents' practices interact with their language and other symbolic systems (Wedeen 2002). The key difference is that culture does not include a sanctioning mechanism that shapes human behavior.