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The Seeds of State Capture: Merit and Patrimonialism in the Colonial Bureaucracy

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Bureaucracies vary in the extent to which hiring is meritocratic versus patrimonial. Such outcomes are typically seen as the result of politicians' behavior. However, politicians often delegate hiring to existing bureaucrats. When political leaders are socially distant from communities they seek to govern and these areas are peripheral to politicians' core interests, bureaucrats' private preferences can dominate hiring decisions instead. Colonial and other forms of external state-building typify cases where patrimonialism created by bureaucrats, not politicians, can emerge. Digitizing individual-level records across six decades of British rule in Ghana, we find evidence of patrimonialism rather than meritocracy in the hiring of African staff, with large inequities across ethnic groups. Our results demonstrate the underexplored agency of local bureaucrats in state-building and highlight conditions under which bureaucrats' preferences, rather than only political principals', shape state institutions. They also challenge conventional wisdom about why, and when, newly-independent African states became "neopatrimonial."

INTRODUCTION

Whether the bureaucracy is staffed on merit or through patrimonialism has major implications for governance (Pepinsky, Pierskalla, and Sacks 2017; Rauch and Evans 2000; Weber [1919] 1949). A vast literature assumes politicians choose between these equilibria, weighing the benefits of a more competent state against the rents available from raiding state institutions (Brierley 2026; Egorov and Sonin 2011; Geddes 1994; Grzymala-Busse 2007; Shefter 1977; 1994). Once merit-based institutions have been formally adopted, scholars typically focus on the strategies that *politicians* adopt to regain control over hiring (Colonnelli, Prem, and Teso 2020; Peters and Pierre 2004; Pierskalla and Sacks 2020). But in practice *bureaucrats* are intimately involved in hiring decisions, either as a result of formal delegation or via informal processes (de Juan, Haass, and Pierskalla 2026). Bureaucrats can use these opportunities to hire staff based on their own preferences, which may deviate from politicians' (Hassan, Larreguy, and Russell 2024). Accordingly, hiring represents a principal–agent problem.

This principal–agent problem is magnified when politicians govern (i) societies from which they are socially distant and (ii) territories beyond their core interests. In such contexts, bureaucrats' preferences over hiring are likely to predominate because they are better informed about applicants and have stronger preferences over whom to hire than principals. These two conditions hold across a broad set of colonial (Garfias and Sellars 2026; Herbst 2000), external (Barkey 1996; Lee 2022; Matsuzaki 2019), and subnational (Boone 2003; Nathan 2023) state-building scenarios in which existing theories may misattribute bureaucrats' agency in producing patrimonial versus merit-based bureaucracies to their political superiors.

Colonial-era development of central state bureaucracies in Africa often exemplified such dynamics. These central bureaucracies were distinct from the local governments ("Native Authorities") associated with indirect rule (Afigbo 1972; Lange 2009; Mamdani 1996).[1] While initially tiny, central ministries oversaw increasingly complex service delivery and infrastructure portfolios in the later decades of colonial rule (Cogneau, Dupraz, and Mesplé-Somps 2018; Lange 2009; Young 2004). As incipient civil services grew, colonial leaders looked to fill positions with locals rather than Europeans. "Africanization" policies

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[1] The separate local bureaucracies built for indirect rule are outside our analysis.

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resulted in the hiring of the African bureaucrats who then served in state institutions inherited upon independence (Johnson-Kanu 2021). European leaders hired agents from societies about which they lacked deep knowledge, while operating under monitoring constraints. In colonies that were neither vital to the colonial project nor in sustained revolt, European principals may have lacked strong preferences over which specific Africans to hire. In contrast, existing African bureaucrats possessed deep knowledge of their own societies and likely had strong recruitment preferences given both the high value of state employment and social pressures to reward family or co-ethnics with scarce opportunities (Ekeh 1975).

Applying our theory suggests a reassessment of bureaucratic development in postcolonial states. Canonical literature argues that the rapid onset of mass politics can incentivize patrimonialism (Huntington 1968; Shefter 1977; 1994). In Africa, colonial hiring into central state bureaucracies is often argued to have been meritocratic—with hiring predicted by access to education (Lange 2025; Mazrui 1978; Ricart-Huguet 2021); (neo) patrimonial practices within the central state are often said to have only emerged once postindependence governments faced new pressure to build winning coalitions (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Collier 1982; Lange 2009; van de Walle 2001; Young and Turner 1985; Zolberg 1966). However, most of these claims lack hard evidence about the alleged meritocracy of colonial hiring against which to compare postindependence developments. We instead propose that patrimonial hiring was already commonplace *during* colonial rule—driven by the actions of initial African bureaucrats—despite colonial leaders' claims to have established meritocratic practices.[2] Consequently, in some cases, independence-era politicians may be better described as responding to *existing* (neo)patrimonialism than creating it.

To assess our theory of bureaucrat-led hiring, we turn to data from Ghana. We use ethnically-biased hiring as a proxy for patrimonial practices. Similar to Johnson-Kanu (2021) for Nigeria, we digitize bureaucrat-level records of the colonial civil service from the British National Archives. Our main data span 1897–1955—the eve of Ghana's independence. We identify 11,702 unique bureaucrats, including 4,805 Europeans and 6,879 Africans (Ghanaians). Leveraging the universe of names of all 13.8 million contemporary Ghanaian adults (registered voters as of 2015) geocoded against highly-localized ethnicity data from the 2010 census, we distinguish European from African (Ghanaian) bureaucrats and code the (likely) ethnicity of every Ghanaian bureaucrat based on their names.[3]

We document persistent hiring inequality throughout the colonial period. From the outset of African employment, two small ethnic groups—the Ga (~3% of the population) and Fante (~11%)—dominated the bureaucracy, consistently overrepresented and occupying over 70% of public sector positions until independence. We then focus our main attention on evaluating competing explanations for why this inequality emerged and, especially, persisted. Consistent with a logic of bureaucrat-led insider capture, we show that once any group gained a foothold within senior ranks in any state department (ministry), the chances that others from that group were hired in that department rose sharply. Rather than meritocracy, the formal policy asserted by British principals, our evidence suggests patrimonial practices by ethnic groups who held first-mover advantages within the bureaucracy. The Ga and Fante could capitalize the most because they were the first to reach senior bureaucratic positions.

We use additional data to further demonstrate the insider capture mechanism and rule out three alternatives more commonly used to explain ethnic imbalances in incorporation into colonial states. First, we geolocate all schools starting from the 1890s, generating granular measures of both access to and the quality of education per ethnic group over time. Even though early advantages in education help explain the very initial hiring of small numbers of Ga and Fante bureaucrats in the nineteenth century, we demonstrate that the sustained dominance of these groups during Ghana's main Africanization period in the 1930s through 1950s cannot be explained by education: even many decades after other ethnic groups had caught up in educational opportunities, Ga and Fante bureaucrats continued to dominate new hiring. Employing individual-level results on civil service examinations to test directly for meritocracy, we also show that Ga and Fante applicants were favored far beyond their supply of qualified candidates.

Second, we rule out that Ga and Fante dominance could be explained by their geographic proximity to state offices, showing their advantages extended to both desk jobs in the capital and field positions far from their home regions, and also that Ga and Fante bureaucrats were hired well out of proportion with the presence of state employment opportunities in their home areas. Third, we cast doubt on the presence of strategic British preferences to favor these groups, demonstrating instead that the persistent patterns we document most likely resulted from hiring pressures internal to the bureaucracy itself.

We make several contributions. Theoretically, we advance insights about why bureaucrats are a crucial, but often-overlooked, actor in the development of merit-based or patrimonial bureaucracies (Anzia and Trounstine 2025; Hassan, Larreguy, and Russell 2024) and suggest how bureaucrats' personal—as opposed to political—connections to other bureaucrats play a role in hiring (de Juan, Haass, and Pierskalla 2026; Harris et al. 2023). While we focus on a single case, we suggest that bureaucrats' preferences should be similarly important for understanding bureaucratic development across a broader range of examples of external (Herbst 2000; Lee 2022; Matsuzaki 2019) or peripheral (Boone 2003; Nathan 2023) state-building. Our theoretical approach also advances an emerging literature

[2] Interestingly, the parallel hiring of European officers was also at times non-meritocratic, shaped by political ties in the metropole (Xu 2018).

[3] While similar hiring records exist for other British colonies, only in Ghana do we have access to the additional data needed to classify bureaucrats' ethnicity at scale.

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exploring how the micro-dynamics of state-building under colonial rule shaped initial distributions of power in the postcolonial period (Harkness 2018; Johnson-Kanu 2021; Kuipers 2025; Lange 2025; Nathan 2023; Ricart-Huguet 2021; 2022) and implies that African employees may have had more agency in aspects of colonial state-building than typically understood.

Methodologically, by linking the universe of adult names in a country to geocoded census data, we introduce a new approach to code ethnicity from names—a common task for scholars of bureaucratic politics (e.g., Hassan 2020; Kuipers 2025).[4] Our method offers advantages over existing dictionary-based, machine learning, or hand-coded approaches that have been used in other contexts in the Global South (Bird and Michuda 2025; Chaturvedi and Chaturvedi 2024; Harris 2015; Kasara 2013). Importantly, our approach (or one similar to it) can be used in any context in which researchers have access to local ethnic census data and the names of large numbers of individuals linked to approximate locations.

Our rich data also open a long-standing "black box" in the study of African states, with political scientists and historians united by the near-total absence of hard data on the hiring of local staff into colonial central bureaucracies.[5] Most studies have been confined to data on only a single state agency (e.g., Ray 2012) or instead to making broad generalizations about how indigenous populations were incorporated into states (e.g., Apter [1955] 1963; Lange 2025; Rathbone 2000; Shaloff 1974; Tignor 1993). Opening this black box also creates opportunities to re-interpret the origins of the political cleavages that continue to shape African politics today. Consistent with Ray (2019), Kuipers (2025), and Lange (2025), we show how colonial-era inequities in hiring fed postcolonial demands on politicians to engage in ethnic favoritism to correct them.

THEORY: BUREAUCRATIC HIRING IN THE PERIPHERY

Most literature assumes that politicians' incentives and actions determine variation between meritocratic versus (neo)patrimonial (patronage-based) bureaucracies. Politicians are commonly theorized as facing a "politicians' dilemma" or "loyalty versus competency trade-off," in which they weigh the temptation to use state jobs as clientelist spoils to build support against the benefits of improving state capacity from hiring on merit (e.g., Brierley 2021; 2026; Egorov and Sonin 2011; Geddes 1994; Grzymala-Busse 2007; Hassan 2020; Shefter 1977).

But even after merit-based institutions have been adopted, politicians largely delegate the mechanics of hiring to bureaucrats. Despite the practical role bureaucrats play, they remain an under-theorized actor in state hiring (de Juan, Haass, and Pierskalla 2026). Scholars recognize that *de jure* merit-based procedures can be evaded, but almost exclusively focus on *politicians'* rather than bureaucrats' efforts to evade them (Peters and Pierre 2004; Pierskalla and Sacks 2020). For example, literature on patronage typically focuses only on connections between politicians and potential state employees, with little attention to relationships between existing bureaucrats and new recruits.[6] Yet public administration scholars and economists have found that nonpolitical connections to other bureaucrats can be more important in hiring and career advancement in some contemporary bureaucracies than connections to politicians (Cardoso et al. 2025; Harris et al. 2023). Nonetheless, Harris et al. (2023, 956) explain that nonpolitical connections are a topic most "existing studies of connection-based hiring disregard."

Bureaucrats have hiring preferences that differ from politicians' (Hassan, Larreguy, and Russell 2024). Independent of politicians' incentives, existing bureaucrats sometimes prefer meritocracy. When faced with widespread political interference, bureaucrats are incentivized to seek an insulated, meritocratic public sector to protect job security (Anzia and Trounstine 2025; Shefter 1977). Moreover, bureaucrats may be individually "mission-driven" (Honig 2024) or possess an *esprit de corps* in support of meritocratic principles (Evans and Rauch 1999; Weber 1978).

Alternatively, bureaucrats may prefer to hire coworkers and subordinates on the basis of social connections, with little regard for merit (Hassan, Larreguy, and Russell 2024).[7] This is often motivated by social obligations. Ekeh (1975) famously describes social pressure to divert resources to family members and co-ethnics that many African state employees faced in the independence era. Such behavior is rational for bureaucrats, as failure to recognize one's corporatist responsibilities can result in social, psychological, and/or financial distress, as Price (1975) shows in postindependence Ghana. In many settings, social obligations are defined in terms of kinship and ethnicity.

Beyond an explicit sense of obligation, preferences for group-based hiring can also be a function of social networks: individuals are more likely to interact and reciprocate friendship with people with whom they

[4] There is already a vibrant methodological literature on how best to derive race from individual-level voter address data in the United States (Enos 2016; Imai and Khanna 2016; Imai, Olivella, and Rosenman 2022; Lee and Velez 2025). We add to this literature in a non-U.S. context and develop an approach more suited to a broader range of settings where individual location data for the target population of names are absent.

[5] Johnson-Kanu (2021) is the notable exception, but focuses on a different research question—path dependence between aggregate colonial-era hiring and Nigeria's modern bureaucracy—rather than variation *within* colonial rule.

[6] Indeed, common use of the term "patronage" in political science has narrowed over time from its original focus on discretionary hiring by a broad range of potential patrons, including bureaucrats (Grindle 2012), to a focus only on the behavior of politicians (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Oliveros 2021; Stokes, Dunning, and Nazareno 2013).

[7] Relatedly, Ashraf and Bandiera (2018) summarize an organizational economics literature on this behavior among existing employees who influence hiring in firms.

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share identities, such as ethnicity (Wimmer 2013a); if they then favor their own social ties in hiring as a result, ethnically-segregated social networks will produce ethnically-biased hiring, even in the absence of explicit discriminatory preferences. Beyond ethnicity, social networks may be defined by, for example, shared partisan or religious identities, which may similarly influence bureaucratic hiring preferences (Wirsching 2026).[8] Of course, some bureaucrats may also be motivated by explicit taste-based discrimination, which would produce observationally equivalent homophily in hiring (Wimmer 2013a).

Whatever bureaucrats' motivations, unconstrained hiring based on social obligations or personal connections leads to the overrepresentation of recruits who share salient social identities with the incumbent bureaucrats who influence hiring decisions. These existing bureaucrats can become patrons to new recruits who attain positions through their largesse, a form of patrimonialism.

Divergence in preferences between politicians and bureaucrats results in a principal–agent problem. Bureaucrats can use privileged information they gain over vacancies and roles on hiring and interview boards to wield influence. Hiring outcomes depend on how much politicians are willing to invest to overcome this principal–agent problem. At one end of the scale, where politicians care deeply about who gets hired (or how; e.g., via merit), they are incentivized to develop costly processes to monitor bureaucratic agents' compliance. But in other situations, politicians may prefer a particular type of bureaucracy and invest some resources to promote compliance, but not enough to overcome bureaucrats' own incentives to deviate from politicians' instructions. In these cases, rarely explored in the existing literature, even if politicians do not cede *de jure* control of hiring to bureaucrats, bureaucrats' preferences can still take *de facto* precedence.[9]

Figure 1 conceptualizes two dimensions that magnify this problem. Bureaucrat-led hiring is most likely in state-building scenarios exemplified by the top-left cell (1), where principals' costs of monitoring compliance are highest and incentives to invest in monitoring are lowest.

The vertical axis captures the degree to which political principals overseeing new bureaucracies are ethnically distinct from the populations from which they recruit agents. Principals' *social proximity* to bureaucrats (e.g., speaking the same language, knowing the context, and having close relationships to local elites) makes internal hiring processes more legible and less costly to monitor. Proximity is high when principals are from the same society from which they hire agents (cells 3 and 4). Cells 1 and 2 instead capture situations in which principals are outsiders, and a costly monitoring problem emerges in which locally-embedded bureaucrats know much more about potential recruits than principals. Cells 1 and 2 may apply uniformly at the national level in cases of colonial rule or "external state-building," as foreign powers (re)build state institutions in conquered territories (Lee 2022; Matsuzaki 2019; Migdal 1988). Elsewhere, cells 1 and 2 arise subnationally as central leaders, social insiders in their home regions, instead expand the state out into socially-distinct peripheries (Barkey 1996; Boone 2003).

The horizontal axis of Figure 1 instead indicates the *intensity* of principals' preferences to construct a particular type of bureaucracy: how much principals care about seeing through a particular hiring outcome, both in an absolute sense and, especially, in comparison to the intensity of bureaucratic agents' own preferences. High preference intensity (cells 2 and 4) is often taken as given, especially when democratic elections incentivize politicians to use public sector jobs to increase state capacity or instead buy off local support to ensure their own political survival (Geddes 1994; Grzymala-Busse 2007; Shefter 1977). In non-electoral contexts, preference intensity can also be high in territories with high levels of unrest that threaten to depose or eject the principal.

In contrast, low preference intensity (cells 1 and 3) should be especially common when principals seek to expand state institutions into territories that are not essential to their own political or economic interests—and thus that pose little accountability threat to principals' hold on power. This is magnified in the absence of electoral competition, as well as where either social unrest or economic value are low. With lower stakes, principals have less reason to invest extensively in monitoring bureaucrats' hiring decisions.

Many cases of Africanization of central colonial bureaucracies, especially in nonsettler colonies, exemplify cases where European principals' high social distance from the communities they governed should have created high costs to monitoring agents' compliance with hiring directives, and in which principals' preferences to hire specific local agents were potentially weak relative to existing bureaucrats' (cell 1). European state-builders were constructing bureaucracies within local societies about which they often had limited knowledge. Meanwhile, colonial subjects could exert little accountability pressure on leaders, except through exceptional unrest. And while European firms certainly profited from extractive trade, few colonies were particularly essential to European economies.[10] As long as unrest was low and minimum levels of bureaucratic competence to extract were maintained, European principals may have seen it unnecessary to invest scarce resources in carefully monitoring compliance.

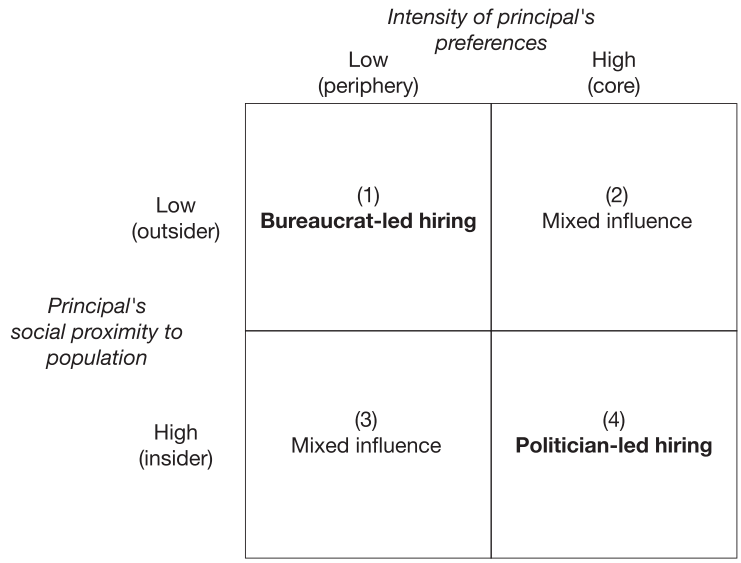
[8] Bureaucratic preferences to hire in-group members may also stem from expectations of perceived gains to personal productivity from working with socially-close colleagues (Bozcaga Forthcoming; Hjort 2024). This could also mean expectations of being better able to collude (corruptly) within homogeneous teams (Neggers 2018).

[9] Alternatively, Hassan, Larreguy, and Russell (2024) instead provide an example of institutions that explicitly delegate *de jure* independence to bureaucrats in some hiring decisions.

[10] European governments invested correspondingly limited resources in local governance (Herbst 2000); before WWII British and French colonies were expected to be economically autonomous (Cogneau, Dupraz, and Mesplé-Somps 2018).

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FIGURE 1. Scope Conditions for de Facto Hiring Influence of Politicians versus Bureaucrats



Meanwhile, initial African bureaucrats likely had strong incentives to prefer hiring based on their own social obligations and connections, rather than merit. Most African employees of colonial states sought these jobs because they were among the most secure, and best remunerated formal sector options in fledgling local economies. There is little reason to expect most would be especially "mission-driven," or committed to the success of the broader (racist and repressive) colonial project. Under these conditions, social obligations and connections should be expected to drive bureaucrats' private hiring preferences, consistent with Ekeh (1975). *De facto* bureaucrat-led hiring shaped by existing bureaucrats' private imperatives could then have quietly become rampant, in spite of colonial leaders' public pronouncements declaring adherence to meritocratic principles (Cooper 1996; Price 1975).

By contrast, in settler colonies, the presence of European residents increased direct political accountability of colonial leaders to (segments of) the population and also increased risks (to Europeans) from mismanaging African discontent. This should have increased the intensity of principals' preference for merit-based criteria to improve performance (even if only performance at repression). Moreover, settlers reduced social distance between colonial leaders and potential employees, and likely created a further interest among European leaders in merit-based procedures that would disproportionately benefit local Europeans, given their advantaged education.

Even though they lacked elections, settler colonies may thus better correspond to more standard models of politicians' preferences over hiring, best captured by cell 4 of Figure 1, where politicians are better-informed about and have strong political incentives to control hiring. Off-diagonal cases (cells 2 and 3) instead capture situations in which hiring outcomes reflect mixed influence of both politicians and bureaucrats. These include external state-building in territories vital to the center's economic interests, or prone to very threatening unrest; although monitoring challenges persist, politicians have clearer incentives to invest in costly oversight (cell 2). Similarly, autocratic state-building in contexts where locals share ethnic ties with the principal—reducing social distance—but exert little to no accountability pressure may also generate mixed patterns of influence (cell 3).

In this article, we seek to establish that cell 1 exists by focusing deeply on a single case where new data sources provide a window into bureaucrat-led hiring that previous studies have missed. While the lack of similar data in other cases means that it is not possible for us to examine variation across all cells of Figure 1, the figure offers a broader theoretical map of how the social proximity and strategic commitment of political principals should change the structure of bureaucratic hiring across cases.

THE COLONIAL STATE AND AFRICANIZATION

Our argument also suggests reinterpreting classic claims about African states. By the end of Africa's postcolonial era (~the 1990s; Young 2004) a broad consensus characterized central state bureaucracies as "neopatrimonial," rife with ethnic patronage and limited merit in hiring (Bayart 1993; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Englebert 2000; van de Walle 2001; Young and Turner 1985).[11]

This stands in contrast to common claims about the central bureaucracies of colonial states. In many countries, central bureaucracies inherited at independence had already begun Africanization. While many scholars

[11] This consensus was not without critics (Mkandawire 2015; Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston 2009).

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describe indirect rule, a core strategy of *local-level* colonial governance, as inherently patrimonial (Lange 2009; Mamdani 1996), scholars frequently suggest that management of *national-level* state agencies in the colonial period instead more tightly fits Weber's bureaucratic archetype (Weber 1978, 220). Young and Turner (1985, 27), for example, write that "colonial authoritarianism [in Africa] was exercised through *an autonomous, impersonal bureaucracy*."[12] Lange (2009, 4) describes that "central legal-administrative institutions in indirectly ruled colonies were relatively bureaucratic," explicitly referencing Weber's "bureaucratic" type (35).[13] Van de Walle (2001, 134) observes that "meritocratic hiring and promotion policies…were directly undermined by governments *in the years after independence*," implying their greater presence under colonialism.

Existing accounts mostly portray (neo)patrimonialism in central state ministries as something postcolonial leaders did, not inherited.[14] For example, Young and Turner (1985) describe a "distinctive" shift toward patronage after independence (27). Chabal and Daloz (1999) date the emergence of neopatrimonialism to "after independence" (51). Van de Walle (2001) writes that, "[t]he *first blows* against state capacity came *early after independence*" (133) dating "the *first step* in the politicization and loss of professionalism of the civil service" to postcolonial presidents (134). Lange (2009, 108) describes Sierra Leone similarly.

Colonial central bureaucracies often had *de jure* trappings of meritocracy. However, assertions that hiring was *de facto* meritocratic still remain unsubstantiated—tantamount to simply taking colonial officials' word for it. Beyond the senior-most ranks, relevant data simply have not been available (e.g., Shaloff 1974). Lacking the data we analyze, Rathbone (2000) observes, for example, that analysis of African hiring beyond the most elite strata of bureaucrats is difficult because "the exact figures are hard to come by" (71). Others, such as Lange (2009, 39), reference that hiring into central bureaucracies was not fully "inclusive" of societal groups, but lack any data with which to empirically assess why or how much. And, critically, such a lack of inclusivity could still be consistent with meritocratic hiring as long as there were inter-ethnic inequalities in access to education (Kuipers 2025).

Our argument suggests instead that despite adopting impartial institutions, colonial leaders likely had little incentive to ensure African hiring was truly meritocratic. Exploiting information asymmetries and the well-documented unwillingness of colonial principals to make costly investments in colonial states, initially-hired African bureaucrats could have had wide latitude to engage in patrimonial practices that created limited inclusiveness. Wherever Africanization predated independence, the well-documented behaviors of Africa's postcolonial leaders vis-à-vis their central states may then have been a response to patrimonialism and ethnic biases *already* pervasive within state institutions they inherited, not a new bureaucratic politics emerging after independence.

THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN THE GOLD COAST

Ghana's pre-independence state, the Gold Coast, provides an ideal case for understanding hiring of African bureaucrats for several reasons. First, similar to many other African colonies, the Gold Coast had a "bifurcated colonial [state] based on two radically different organizational principles" (Lange 2009, 4), combining indirect rule through local elites as the main method of local governance in the countryside with a nominally-Weberian national-level civil service, our focus here.

Second, the central bureaucracy experienced significant colonial-era Africanization, with over half of senior- and mid-level positions already filled by Ghanaians by independence. This is roughly comparable to other major African colonies, such as Nigeria, where 61% of senior civil service posts had been Africanized by independence (Lungu 1980), or Botswana, where Africans occupied 39% of senior- and middle-level posts in 1964, two years before independence (Goldsmith 1999, 538). Similarly, Africans filled between one quarter and one third of middle- and high-level public service positions in Kenya, Tanganyika, and Uganda (Simson 2017, 28). In some other settings, however, there were much lower shares of African recruits.[15] Third, similar to most other colonies (Young 1994), central bureaucracies built under colonialism continued largely uninterrupted, becoming the postcolonial central state. And fourth, significant ethnic competition over positions within these bureaucracies, consistent with neopatrimonialism, occurred after independence (Asante and Gyimah-Boadi 2004).

Ghana had contact with Europeans at trading forts along its southern coast since the fifteenth century. In 1821, the British took control of these forts, setting the stage for establishment of a larger colony in 1874, which continued until 1957. The colony only comprised coastal areas until the end of the nineteenth century, when the British finally conquered Asante and expanded throughout the interior. While the Gold Coast was fiscally successful, especially relative to other African colonies (Austin 2008, 1011), the climate ensured it remained a nonsettler colony. The British initially invested relatively little in administration and sought to keep expenditures and European staffing low (Sederberg 1971), but the central bureaucracy expanded greatly in size in the final decades of the colonial period, as

[12] Emphasis added here and to subsequent quotes in this section.
[13] Lange (2009, 31) explicitly contrasts "patrimonial institutions in peripheral regions" created via indirect rule to "central state institutions… organized bureaucratically."
[14] This narrative dates as far back as Zolberg's (1966) account of immediate independence-era politics (Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston 2009).
[15] At the senior ranks, Africans occupied only 4% of positions in Zambia (Lungu 1980). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, there were only *three* Africans in the top three civil service categories (compared to 4,642 Europeans) (Young 1966, 34). Both colonies nonetheless employed large numbers of Africans at lower ranks.

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the British belatedly took on a more "developmentalist" outlook, especially after WWII (Young 2004). As the central state grew, locals with Western education eventually filled the gap in staffing.

Supply of African Bureaucrats

On the supply-side, the pool of potential African recruits was initially produced by efforts of European merchants and then Christian missionaries, typical of many British African colonies (Frankema 2012). Merchants established schools as early as the 1600s within the trading forts. With few students until the nineteenth century, fort schools mainly educated children born to European merchants and coastal women (Graham 1971). Enrollment only began to climb after the British takeover in 1821, when the Crown began funding some coastal schools and missionary schools also began to rapidly proliferate beyond zones of British control (Graham 1971).

The early concentration of schools around Cape Coast meant that the Fante—a sub-group within Ghana's plurality Akan—had a head start in education before colonial rule. The presence of European firms around the forts increased jobs available to locals and spurred enterprise, and with it class differentiation (Arhin 1983). By the 1830s, a "genuine mercantile class" (Arhin 1983, 16) of Fante elites had emerged (Kelly 1959). Many members of this emerging Fante intelligentsia bore European surnames, owing to their descent from early European traders. The Ga in Accra, another site of trading forts, also enjoyed precolonial education access. Similar to the Fante, a new Westernized elite of clerks and merchants had emerged by the 1820s, educated in schools at or near the forts (Parker 2000, 32–3).

For the very earliest periods of British state-building in the nineteenth century, Fante and Ga communities thus enjoyed an advantage in the supply of potential job candidates. But by the early twentieth century, before significant African hiring into the state had occurred, these advantages had already begun to recede, and many ethnic groups had large numbers of school graduates eligible for state employment. The nineteenth-century expansion of mission schools meant access to education already began to equalize throughout Southern Ghana around the turn of the century. School access then expanded rapidly into the interior in the early twentieth century, generating an "extremely broad primary base" (Austin 1964, 13). This is shown in Figure 2 based on geolocating annual lists of schools published through the early 1930s. Only the Northern Territories—modern-day Northern Ghana—were persistently neglected (Nathan 2023). Crucially, expansion of the education system meant that access was already relatively equal across many groups *decades before* Africanization of the central bureaucracy occurred (1930s–1950s).[16]

Demand for African Bureaucrats

At the apex of the state was the (British) Governor, under whom sat advisory Executive and Legislative Councils with some elite African participation (Price 1967; Ward 1966). Under these councils sat the civil service, the core national bureaucracy, divided into departments (ministries or agencies). The number of departments and civil servants increased over time as the state became more complex, with especially steep growth after WWII, similar to many other colonies (Lange 2009, 42). Separately, local governance occurred via indirect rule, eventually formalized through the creation of much smaller bureaucracies of local clerks to provide support to district-level local governments headed by chiefs. Our focus throughout is instead on the central civil service.

Initial state institutions in the nineteenth century relied heavily on African staff. Von Hesse (2024) documents how Euro-African merchants among the precolonial Ga and Fante elite were in fact "co-architects" (5) of initial colonial institutions, helping to personally fund and physically build the first outposts of the colonial government in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1850, James Bannerman—an educated Ga merchant—even served as the interim Governor of the Gold Coast, "the only British colonial governor of known African ancestry" across the British empire (von Hesse 2024, 3). Later on in the nineteenth century, educated Fantes began to dominate the lower ranks of the very nascent civil service, serving as aides to British officers (Kelly 1959, 33), while a small set of educated Euro-African Fante and Ga elites rose to senior state positions alongside British counterparts. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, racist British policies against promoting Africans solidified and the vast majority of top positions were reserved for expatriates (Shaloff 1974).

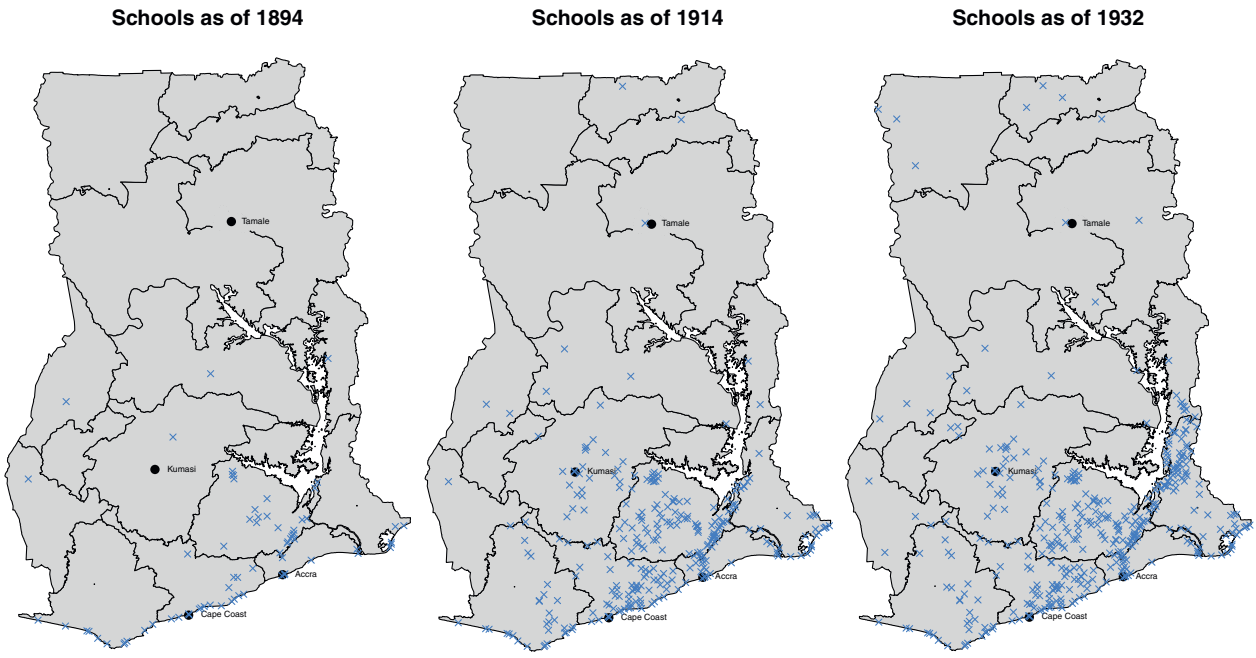
It was only under Governor Guggisberg (1919–27), in 1926, that an official Africanization scheme was first adopted, justified in terms of ethical need for local representation, and especially for saving costs because Africans were paid less. Yet despite the new scheme, there continued to be little recruitment of Africans into senior positions. Foreshadowing the agency loss we examine below, European bureaucrats resisted their principal's order to Africanize in the interwar years for "equal parts of racism and self-interest" (Shaloff 1974, 494), seeking to protect their own jobs.[17] However, as we show below, outside the frame of reference of the existing historical scholarship (e.g., Shaloff 1974), Africanization became extensive in the 1930s at more junior ranks. During the 1930s and early 1940s, British civil servants pleaded with their superiors that hiring Africans into the senior-most positions was impossible because an insufficient number of well-trained candidates was available (Rathbone 2000; Shaloff 1974), but there was already a large *oversupply* of eligible African

[16] Moreover, we show in Figure 9 below that school quality was also relatively equal.

[17] Note that this dynamic itself already suggests the presence of bureaucrat-led hiring against principals' wishes.

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FIGURE 2. Location of All Schools, Primary and Secondary (1894–1932)



school graduates for mid- and lower-tier positions. Civil service jobs were scarce and highly-valued among the local population (Hutchful 1985).

Africanization of the top ranks finally took off after WWII. Between 1949 and 1954, the share of Africans in senior positions rose from 14% to 38% (Cooper 1996, 448). Over the 1950s, the rate of Africanization accelerated, such that just after the Gold Coast gained independence, 69% of the 2,864 senior posts were held by Africans (Rathbone 2000, 80). Importantly, this final wave of hiring occurred after Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's independence leader, won an election in 1951 and gained control of internal affairs before independence in 1957.

DATA SOURCES

We unpack potential ethnic hiring in Ghana's colonial bureaucracy using data from multiple sources. First, we digitize data on the colonial civil service between 1897 and 1955 from the British National Archives. These staff lists provide names, positions, salaries, and appointment dates for central state employees, including headquarters and field staff of each ministry or agency.[18] Figure 3 displays an example extract.

The composition of staff lists changed over time and availability is inconsistent across years. The lists fall into three types: (1) Senior Staff Lists (SSLs), (2) African Staff Lists (ASLs), and (3) Hybrid Staff Lists (HSLs).[19] The SSLs provide information about the higher ranks of the civil service (e.g., department and section heads and deputies), both European and African, and are available from 1897 to 1946. Between 1936 and 1945, we also have ASLs—listing only Africans, but spanning all ranks. ASLs offer a detailed snapshot of African representation across various bureaucratic roles, but do not allow for tracking trends across the full colonial period. After 1946, the government altered its reporting format, effectively creating a third, middle-tier list we refer to as the HSLs.[20] The range of positions included in SSLs expanded to encompass a broad cross-section of mid-ranking officials. Many positions previously found only in the ASL appear in the HSLs, although the lowest-ranking employees were excluded.

Using these lists, we identify 11,702 unique bureaucrats: 4,805 Europeans and 6,879 Africans (Ghanaians).[21] Figure 4 shows nationalities among senior bureaucrats in the SSLs and HSLs between 1897 and 1955, illustrating the Africanization that began in the late 1920s and rapidly intensified from 1947. For our data, see Brierley et al. (2026).

[18] These lists exclude employees of Native Authorities, the colonial army, and low-wage manual laborers, such as hired in large numbers by the Railways and Harbor Administration (Jeffries 1978).

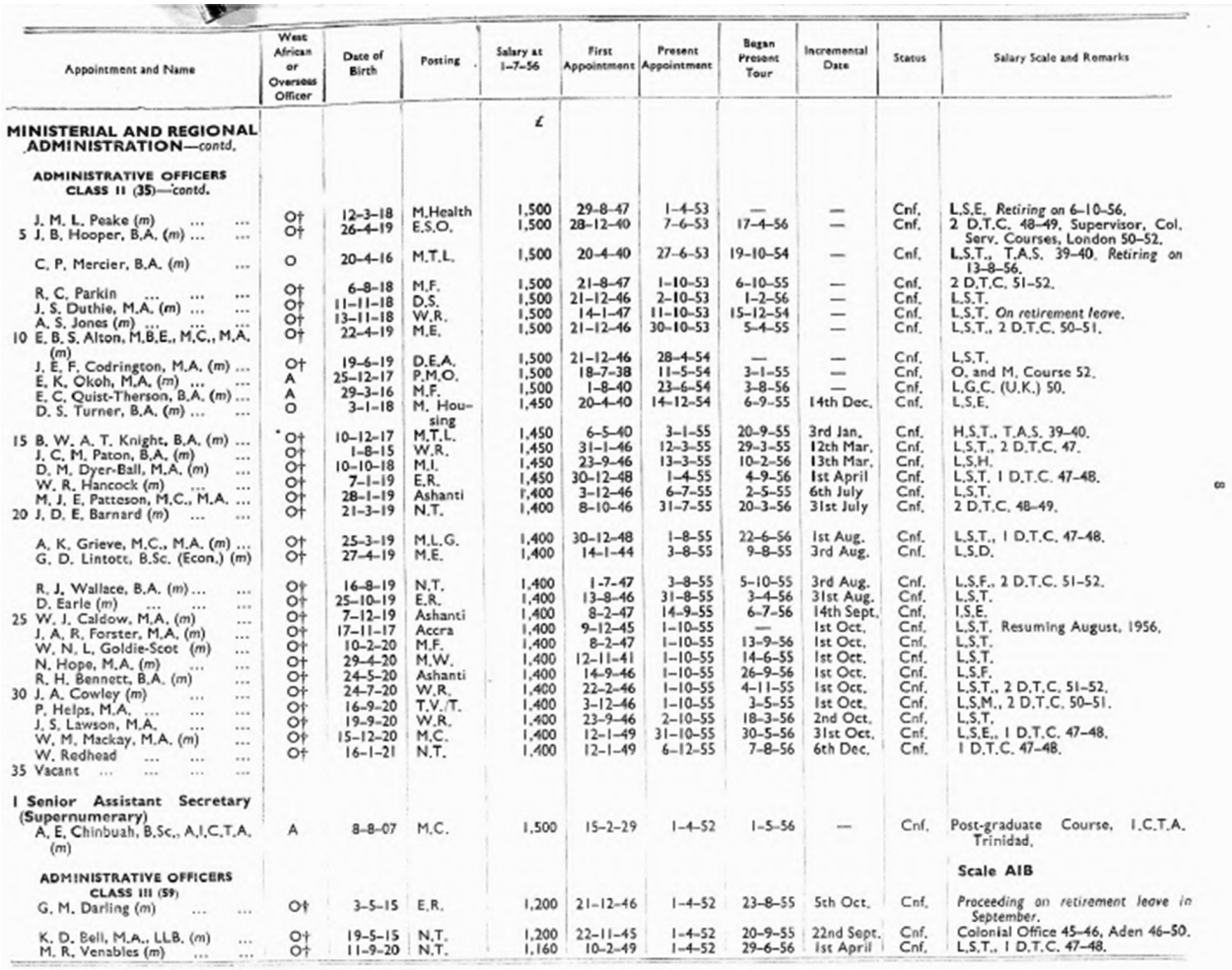
[19] Section S1 of the Supplementary Material shows coverage of each type.

[20] These were still labeled "Senior Staff Lists," but we prefer "Hybrid" to reflect the positions included.

[21] We code race based on either a name appearing in the ASL, explicit classifications of race included in the HSL, or school information provided in the SSLs. Race is only ambiguous for 18 bureaucrats.

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FIGURE 3. Example Extract from the 1955 Hybrid Staff List



	Appointment and Name	West African or Overseas Officer	Date of Birth	Posting	Salary at 1-7-56	First Appointment	Present Appointment	Began Present Tour	Incremental Date	Status	Salary Scale and Remarks
	MINISTERIAL AND REGIONAL ADMINISTRATION—*contd.*				£						
	ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICERS CLASS II (35)—*contd.*										
	J. M. L. Peake (*m*)	O†	12-3-18	M.Health	1,500	29-8-47	1-4-53	—	—	Cnf.	L.S.E. *Retiring on 6-10-56.*
5	J. B. Hooper, B.A. (*m*)	O†	26-4-19	E.S.O.	1,500	28-12-40	7-6-53	17-4-56	—	Cnf.	2 D.T.C. 48-49, Supervisor, Col. Serv. Courses, London 50-52.
	C. P. Mercier, B.A. (*m*) ...	O	20-4-16	M.T.L.	1,500	20-4-40	27-6-53	19-10-54	—	Cnf.	L.S.T., T.A.S. 39-40. *Retiring on 13-8-56.*
	R. C. Parkin	O†	6-8-18	M.F.	1,500	21-8-47	1-10-53	6-10-55	—	Cnf.	2 D.T.C. 51-52.
	J. S. Duthie, M.A. (*m*)	O†	11-11-18	D.S.	1,500	21-12-46	2-10-53	1-2-56	—	Cnf.	L.S.T.
	A. S. Jones (*m*)	O†	13-11-18	W.R.	1,500	14-1-47	11-10-53	15-12-54	—	Cnf.	L.S.T. *On retirement leave.*
10	E. B. S. Alton, M.B.E., M.C., M.A. (*m*)	O†	22-4-19	M.E.	1,500	21-12-46	30-10-53	5-4-55	—	Cnf.	L.S.T., 2 D.T.C. 50-51.
	J. E. F. Codrington, M.A. (*m*) ...	O†	19-6-19	D.E.A.	1,500	21-12-46	28-4-54	—	—	Cnf.	L.S.T.
	E. K. Okoh, M.A. (*m*)	A	25-12-17	P.M.O.	1,500	18-7-38	11-5-54	3-1-55	—	Cnf.	O. and M. Course 52.
	E. C. Quist-Therson, B.A. (*m*) ...	A	29-3-16	M.F.	1,500	1-8-40	23-6-54	3-8-56	—	Cnf.	L.G.C. (U.K.) 50.
	D. S. Turner, B.A. (*m*)	O	3-1-18	M. Housing	1,450	20-4-40	14-12-54	6-9-55	14th Dec.	Cnf.	L.S.E.
15	B. W. A. T. Knight, B.A. (*m*) ...	O†	10-12-17	M.T.L.	1,450	6-5-40	3-1-55	20-9-55	3rd Jan.	Cnf.	H.S.T., T.A.S. 39-40.
	J. C. M. Paton, B.A. (*m*) ...	O†	1-8-15	W.R.	1,450	31-1-46	12-3-55	29-3-55	12th Mar.	Cnf.	L.S.T., 2 D.T.C. 47.
	D. M. Dyer-Ball, M.A. (*m*) ...	O†	10-10-18	M.I.	1,450	23-9-46	13-3-55	10-2-56	13th Mar.	Cnf.	L.S.H.
	W. R. Hancock (*m*)	O†	7-1-19	E.R.	1,450	30-12-48	1-4-55	4-9-56	1st April	Cnf.	L.S.T. 1 D.T.C. 47-48.
	M. J. E. Patteson, M.C., M.A. ...	O†	28-1-19	Ashanti	1,400	3-12-46	6-7-55	2-5-55	6th July	Cnf.	L.S.T.
20	J. D. E. Barnard (*m*)	O†	21-3-19	N.T.	1,400	8-10-46	31-7-55	20-3-56	31st July	Cnf.	2 D.T.C. 48-49.
	A. K. Grieve, M.C., M.A. (*m*) ...	O†	25-3-19	M.L.G.	1,400	30-12-48	1-8-55	22-6-56	1st Aug.	Cnf.	L.S.T., 1 D.T.C. 47-48.
	G. D. Lintott, B.Sc. (Econ.) (*m*)	O†	27-4-19	M.E.	1,400	14-1-44	3-8-55	9-8-55	3rd Aug.	Cnf.	L.S.D.
	R. J. Wallace, B.A. (*m*)	O†	16-8-19	N.T.	1,400	1-7-47	3-8-55	5-10-55	3rd Aug.	Cnf.	L.S.F., 2 D.T.C. 51-52.
	D. Earle (*m*)	O†	25-10-19	E.R.	1,400	13-8-46	31-8-55	3-4-56	31st Aug.	Cnf.	L.S.T.
25	W. J. Caldow, M.A. (*m*) ...	O†	7-12-19	Ashanti	1,400	8-2-47	14-9-55	6-7-56	14th Sept.	Cnf.	I.S.E.
	J. A. R. Forster, M.A. (*m*) ...	O†	17-11-17	Accra	1,400	9-12-45	1-10-55	—	1st Oct.	Cnf.	L.S.T. Resuming August, 1956.
	W. N. L. Goldie-Scot (*m*) ...	O†	10-2-20	M.F.	1,400	8-2-47	1-10-55	13-9-56	1st Oct.	Cnf.	L.S.T.
	N. Hope, M.A. (*m*)	O†	29-4-20	M.W.	1,400	12-11-41	1-10-55	14-6-55	1st Oct.	Cnf.	L.S.T.
	R. H. Bennett, B.A. (*m*) ...	O†	24-5-20	Ashanti	1,400	14-9-46	1-10-55	26-9-56	1st Oct.	Cnf.	L.S.F.
30	J. A. Cowley (*m*)	O†	24-7-20	W.R.	1,400	22-2-46	1-10-55	4-11-55	1st Oct.	Cnf.	L.S.T., 2 D.T.C. 51-52.
	P. Helps, M.A.	O†	16-9-20	T.V./T.	1,400	3-12-46	1-10-55	3-5-55	1st Oct.	Cnf.	L.S.M., 2 D.T.C. 50-51.
	J. S. Lawson, M.A.	O†	19-9-20	W.R.	1,400	23-9-46	2-10-55	18-3-56	2nd Oct.	Cnf.	L.S.T.
	W. M. Mackay, M.A. (*m*) ...	O†	15-12-20	M.C.	1,400	12-1-49	31-10-55	30-5-56	31st Oct.	Cnf.	L.S.E., 1 D.T.C. 47-48.
	W. Redhead	O†	16-1-21	N.T.	1,400	12-1-49	6-12-55	7-8-56	6th Dec.	Cnf.	1 D.T.C. 47-48.
35	Vacant										
	1 Senior Assistant Secretary (Supernumerary)										
	A. E. Chinbuah, B.Sc., A.I.C.T.A. (*m*)	A	8-8-07	M.C.	1,500	15-2-29	1-4-52	1-5-56	—	Cnf.	Post-graduate Course, I.C.T.A. Trinidad.
	ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICERS CLASS III (59)										**Scale A1B**
	G. M. Darling (*m*)	O†	3-5-15	E.R.	1,200	21-12-46	1-4-52	23-8-55	5th Oct.	Cnf.	*Proceeding on retirement leave in September.*
	K. D. Bell, M.A., LL.B. (*m*) ...	O†	19-5-15	N.T.	1,200	22-11-45	1-4-52	20-9-55	22nd Sept.	Cnf.	Colonial Office 45-46, Aden 46-50.
	M. R. Venables (*m*)	O†	11-9-20	N.T.	1,160	10-2-49	1-4-52	29-6-56	1st April	Cnf.	L.S.T., 1 D.T.C. 47-48.

Classifying the *Most Likely* Ethnicity of Each Bureaucrat

To establish the ethnic identity of each African bureaucrat, we combine census data containing the ethnic composition of small communities with voter register data that lists names of individuals within these communities. We classify each bureaucrat into one of 10 categories, which represent important national-level ethnic cleavages (Asante and Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Nathan 2019).[22] We validate our ethnicity coding below. However, we also stress that no classification process is perfect: some names are simply not very ethnically distinct. Similarly, we cannot systematically identify ethnically-mixed individuals.[23] Yet without being able to interview colonial-era bureaucrats to ascertain their ethnicity directly, we believe our approach provides a best-case scenario for extracting ethnic information from names. We outline the general procedure below; a formal definition is in Section S3 of the Supplementary Material.

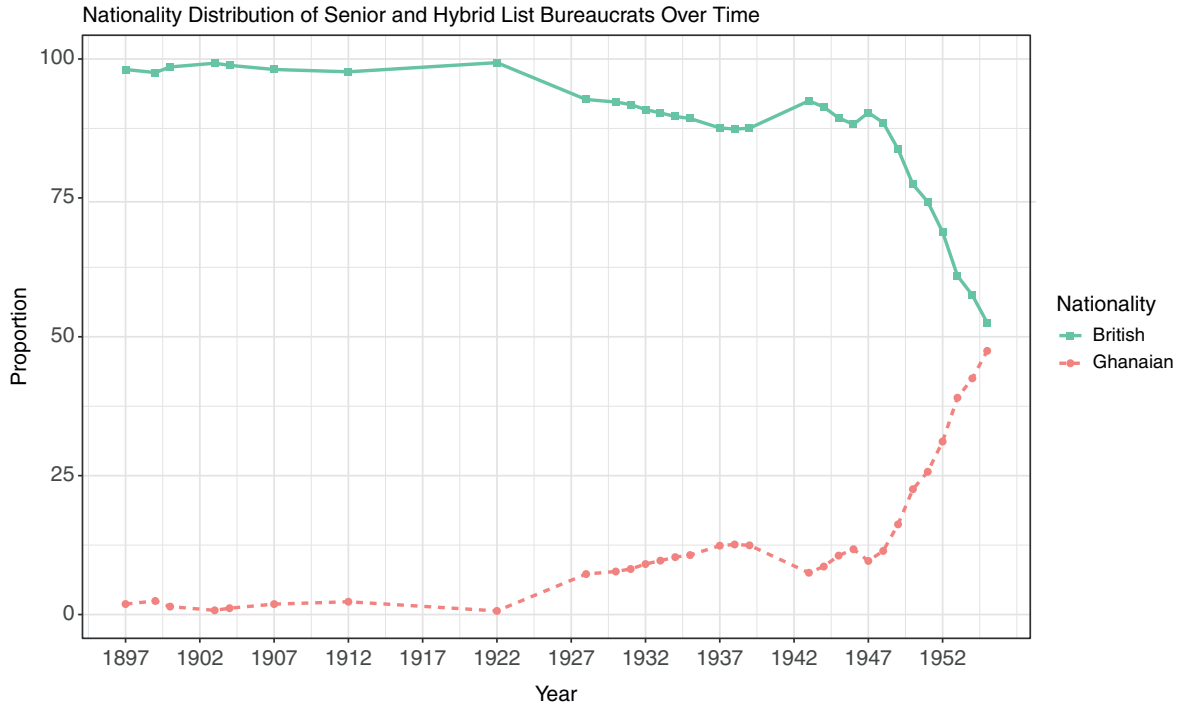
We use data from Ghana's 2015 voter register, which contains a near-universe of names of contemporary adults (13.8 million individuals) (ECG 2015). Each voter is assigned to a polling station. We combine these names with Ghana's 2010 census (GSS 2013), measuring ethnic composition within Enumeration Areas (EAs, or tracts). Geolocating each polling station to these EAs, we split each name registered at each station into constituent fragments (e.g., "Samuel Okudzeto" becomes "Samuel" and "Okudzeto") and assign each

[22] We distinguish among Akan sub-groups—the Asante, Akyem, Akuapem, Fante, and Other Akans—and also classify the Dangme, Ewe, Ga, Guan, and a category for all Northern groups. See Section S2 of the Supplementary Material for justification of this classification.

[23] Based on data in Section S4 of the Supplementary Material, we expect only a tiny proportion of colonial-era bureaucrats had mixed heritage.

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FIGURE 4. Bureaucrat Nationality in the Senior and Hybrid Staff Lists (1897–1955)



fragment the ethnic population proportions of that station. Summing the frequency of fragment appearances across stations, we compute an average vector of ethnic proportions for each of Ghana's 1.1 million unique name fragments.

We then calculate each fragment's ethnic *distinctiveness*, defined as the distance between the fragment's average group proportions and the base rate of ethnic group proportions in Ghana's overall voter population. Name fragments that carry meaningful ethnic information (high distinctiveness) will exhibit average ethnic distributions that deviate from the national base rates, concentrating more heavily on a particular group. In contrast, names that are widely used across groups —"John" or "Mary"—do not deviate much from the base rate of ethnic group proportions (low distinctiveness). Without accounting for distinctiveness, such widely-used names would disproportionately (and erroneously) be assigned to the most populous ethnic group nationwide. We use distinctiveness scores as weights to ensure that more informative fragments contribute more heavily to classification of each individual; in the example of "Samuel Okudzeto," "Samuel" is common and ethnically uninformative, while "Okudzeto" strongly signals Ewe ethnicity. Our method accordingly upweights the surname's information and classifies him as most likely Ewe.

Our approach builds on methods from Kasara (2013) and Harris (2015) that infer ethnicity from names in Kenya. These methods construct group-specific dictionaries from similar voter registration data by focusing on homogeneous polling stations—for example, those with over 90% of voters from a single group (Kasara 2013)—assuming names there are broadly representative of that group. This assumption easily may not hold. Our strategy instead enables classification of individuals even with names used by multiple groups, while also incorporating classification uncertainty in the form of our distinctiveness score.

Validating Our Measure

Validating whether our approach correctly identifies ethnicity requires access to a large set of names linked to self-identified ethnicities. Fortunately, a survey from Brierley and Nathan (2021) includes both full names and self-reported, sub-group-level ethnicities for a large sample of Ghanaian respondents (N = 1,151). Our method performs well in recovering self-identified ethnicities when name distinctiveness is moderate to high. For example, for names in the top quartile of name distinctiveness in the survey, we recover self-reported ethnicity 90% of the time. However, as can be expected, our performance declines for names with low distinctiveness (Section S4 of the Supplementary Material).[24]

[24] This tests against contemporary names, but there could also be concern naming conventions have evolved over time. For further validation, see Section S4 of the Supplementary Material.

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Rather than indicating a flaw, our difficulty classifying low-distinctiveness names highlights a key feature of our task: names with low distinctiveness convey limited information, as each fragment is widely used across multiple groups. Accordingly, no alternative method—whether algorithmic like ours, machine learning-based, or hand-coded—could reliably extract ethnicity from such names. Indeed, we show that the common alternative of hand-coding names based on local research assistants' knowledge introduces even worse measurement error (Section S5 of the Supplementary Material).

Moreover, recent machine learning approaches such as Chaturvedi and Chaturvedi (2024) cannot be applied in our or many other contexts due to the lack of a sufficiently large and statistically-representative training dataset. Machine learning approaches also introduce statistical uncertainty when estimating ethnic labels for names not in the training data. But because we start with the universe of Ghanaian names, over 98% of bureaucrats have a name fragment that matches to the voter register exactly. We thus do not need to infer ethnicity based on similarly-spelled name fragments.

Given the inherent limitations classifying low distinctiveness names, the analyses below drop all bureaucrats scoring in the bottom quartile on our distinctiveness score, removing observations among whom it is especially difficult to ascertain ethnicity. To demonstrate that this specific cutoff does not bias our conclusions, we repeat all tables and figures instead using other cutoffs, as well as when not dropping any observations (Section S7 of the Supplementary Material). All key patterns are robust to these alternatives. In fact, Figure S7.1 in the Supplementary Material shows that the central pattern in our results persists impervious to any cutoff for how many low-distinctiveness names to drop all the way up through dropping the full bottom half of our data and is thus very unlikely to be due to measurement error.[25]

ETHNIC IMBALANCE IN THE COLONIAL CIVIL SERVICE

Two patterns are evident when disaggregating the bureaucracy by ethnicity. First, two groups—the Ga and Fante—dominated African hiring at both senior and junior levels of the civil service. Second, this dominance persisted over time, both before formal policies of Africanization began in the late 1920s, and as African hiring ratcheted up from the late 1940s. Accordingly, postindependence leaders inherited a civil service that had long been deeply ethnically-imbalanced.

Figure 5 shows ethnicities of African bureaucrats in the SSL and HSL over time. The senior bureaucracy expanded after 1900, increasing from 106 posts in 1897 to 906 senior bureaucrats in 1928. Between 1928 and 1948, buffeted by the Great Depression and then war, senior-level hiring stalled for two decades; total senior bureaucrats remained below 1,010 and only 5.6 new Ghanaian officers were hired to senior positions on average annually across departments—a small, but steady trickle into top ranks. Across this period, the Ga and Fante continued dominating, accounting for an overwhelming 83.1% of senior Ghanaian bureaucrats by 1948 (Ga 54.2% and Fante 28.9%), far in excess of their respective 3% and 11% of Ghana's population.[26] After WWII, African hiring into the senior-most ranks picked up dramatically; from 1949 to 1955, there was an average increase of 166 new Ghanaian officers into the senior- and mid-level ranks every year. As this happened, Ga and Fante dominance remained.

Figure 5 also shows from the late 1930s a small increase in representation of some other ethnic groups. For example, the Ewe went from 7.6% of senior bureaucrats between 1928 and 1945 to plateauing to around 11% between 1946 and 1955. The Asante began having some representation in the late 1940s, but still reached just 5.8% by 1955. But these groups were still underrepresented relative to their size: 13% and 16% of Ghana's population, respectively. Northern groups, representing 29% of the population, were most severely underrepresented, never accounting for more than 2.4% of senior- or mid-level bureaucrats any year.

Although we only have complete data on junior positions for a more limited period—1936–45—a similar pattern of Ga and Fante dominance emerges (Section S6 of the Supplementary Material). Across 1936–45, Ga and Fante bureaucrats held the large majority of these positions, with Gas on average 43.0% and the Fante 28.3%. There is virtually no change in any group's percentages year on year. While the Ewe hold steady around their share of the national population, the Asante, other Akan sub-groups, and Northerners are all heavily underrepresented.

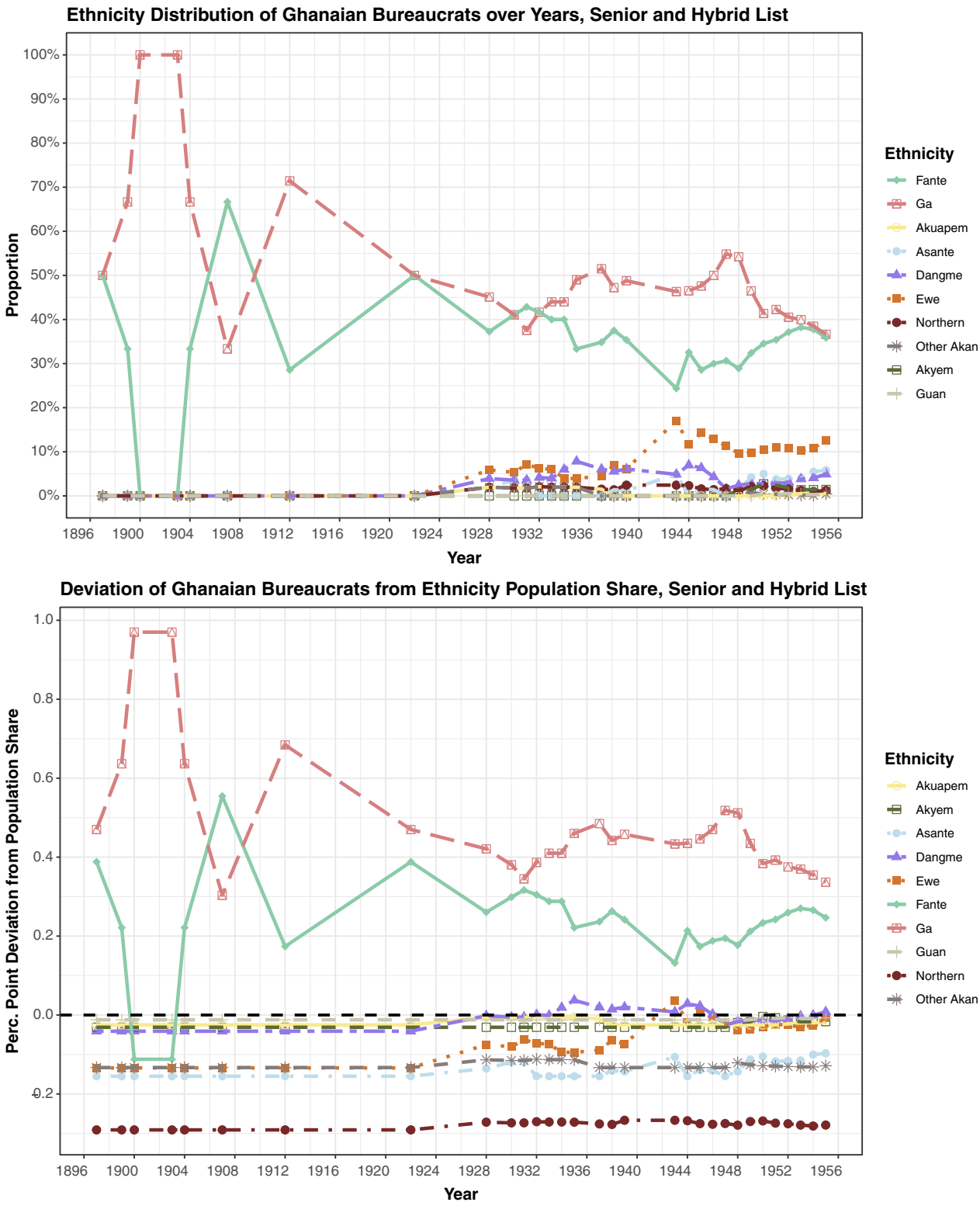
We also identify African bureaucrats holding top positions within their departments. We use salary information to classify top bureaucrats, focusing on salaries in the top 10th percentile in each department (Section S6 of the Supplementary Material).[27] The vast majority (over 80%) of high-salaried African bureaucrats are either Ga or Fante throughout the entire period in which Africanization was occurring. As we describe further below, this likely provided officials from these groups with the ability to influence hiring within their departments. Other groups, such as the more populous Asante and Ewe, had few similarly well-placed high-ranked officials.

[25] Section S3 of the Supplementary Material also confirms that distinctiveness is not correlated with ethnicity in ways that could bias our results.

[26] Lacking historical data on sub-group sizes, we use 2010 census figures as a proxy. Usefully, de Graft-Johnson (1969) reports disaggregated figures from the 1960 census for a few sub-groups, and these closely align with the 2010 proportions, supporting the validity of using 2010 data to measure historical group size.

[27] Job titles are too inconsistent between departments and across years to use them to classify ranks. All salaries are inflation-adjusted to a consistent value, following Richards (2002).

FIGURE 5. Bureaucrat Ethnicity among Ghanaians in Senior and Hybrid Staff Lists



Note: The top panel shows the raw ethnic distribution, and the bottom panel shows the deviation from respective population shares. 2010 population proportions were: Asante (15.5%), Fante (11.2%), Akyem (3.1%), Akuapem (2.5%), Other Akan (13.3%), Ga (3.0%), Dangme (4.1%), Ewe (13.4%), Northern (29.1%), and Guan (1.2%). The figure drops all observations below the bottom 25th percentile in name distinctiveness.

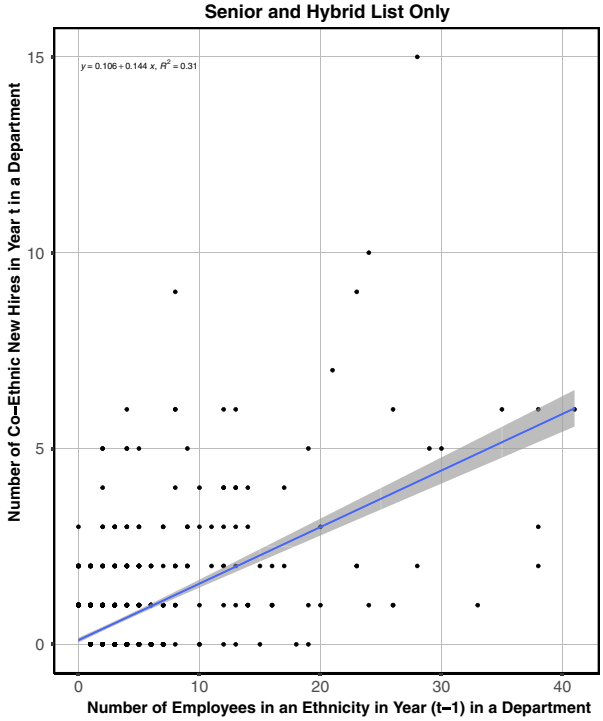
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Ethnic "Lock-In" within Departments

Many studies note that some ethnic groups gained disproportionate access to state employment in former colonies (e.g., Lange 2025; Ricart-Huguet 2021). Conventional explanations for this dynamic are examined below and do help explain the very *initial* dominance of Ga and Fante bureaucrats. But we argue that *persistent* Ga and Fante overrepresentation was instead sustained through to independence via a previously unexplored process of patrimonial bureaucrat-led hiring, resulting from existing African bureaucrats' private preferences to hire co-ethnics. We show that this is the most likely explanation by triangulating across a series of analyses.

Our first piece of evidence is the self-replication of ethnic hires within departments (ministries). Disaggregating by ethnicity, we analyze who gets hired each new year (time t) compared to the ethnic composition of existing staff (time t–1) in that same department. Figure 6 displays a strong positive association between the number of existing senior or mid-level staff each year from a given group and the entry of new senior- or mid-level staff from the same group in the same department the following year. This implies that wherever an ethnic group gained a foothold in senior ranks of a department, it used its position to hire (or promote) other co-ethnic applicants.

FIGURE 6. Current Employees and Co-Ethnic Hires in Each Department–Year



Note: The *X*-axis is the number of bureaucrats of a given ethnicity employed in a given department in the preceding year; the *Y*-axis is the number of new hires from that group in the same department in the following year. Each dot represents a department–year–ethnicity observation. Subset to the Senior and Hybrid Staff Lists. Drops all observations below the bottom 25th percentile on the name distinctiveness score.

Figure 7 repeats Figure 6 broken out by ethnic group. Crucially, it shows a similar positive correlation both among the Ga and Fante *and* among most other groups too.[28] In fact, the serial correlation between prior and new hires within departments is even stronger among some other groups, such as the Asante and Ewe, than for the Ga. The ethnic lock-in pattern in Figure 6 is thus not unique to the Ga and Fante: many groups replicated themselves within departments once they had an initial foothold of senior staff. However, such behavior disproportionately favored the Ga and Fante because they had footholds in most departments the earliest.

While the lock-in pattern is already evident from these descriptive statistics, we also demonstrate path dependence using a regression pooling across list types. In Table 1, the dependent variable is the count of new hires at any rank in year t for group g in department d and the independent variable is the count of existing employees at the senior- or mid-level ranks of the same department from that same group, but in year t–1. We also include a measure of the population-weighted average distance of group g to colonial schools as of 25 or 30 years earlier, to proxy for the group's education access as of the time a new hire in year t would have been starting school.[29] By controlling for this, our results are independent of potential selection effects that result from inequality in education access. We also include fixed effects by ethnic group, department, and year, controlling for group-specific, department-specific, and year-specific patterns, to examine how marginal changes within groups and departments in the presence of senior bureaucrats and/or in (lagged) education access reflect in marginal changes in subsequent hiring. Standard errors are clustered by group, year, and department—the most conservative specification. We restrict to 1928–55, the only years for which we have a large number of African hires.[30]

The pattern in Table 1 is again clear: each additional bureaucrat among the senior- or mid-level staff from a given ethnic group in a given department in a given year predicts an additional 0.06–0.24 members of that group were hired into that department (at any rank) the subsequent year. This pattern is suggestive of relatively senior African bureaucrats influencing their agencies to hire group members. Importantly, this result does not depend on the group fixed effects (column 1 vs. column 6), suggesting it is not specific to the Ga and Fante

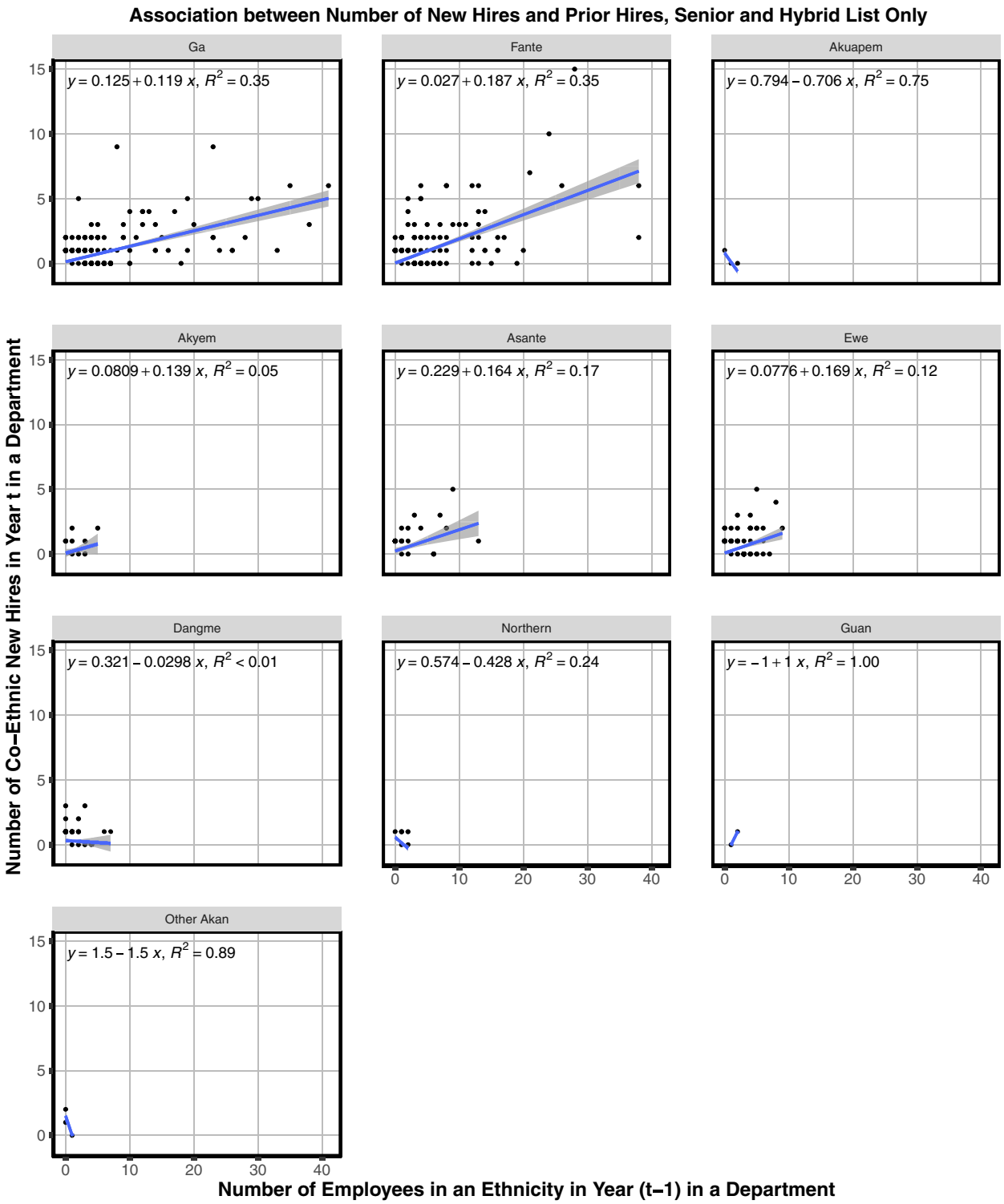
[28] Except for the Dangme, all other groups deviating from the general pattern in Figure 6 had such negligible numbers of senior employees to begin with that it is difficult to even observe whether such a correlation exists.

[29] We introduce this measure in more detail in the next section, as well as in Section S10 of the Supplementary Material.

[30] In column 3, as a robustness test, we instead restrict to 1936–55, the periods during which we either have both the SSL and ASL (1936–45) and/or have the HSL that includes mid-ranked positions (1947–55).

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FIGURE 7. Current Employee and Co-Ethnic Hires in Each Department–Year by Group



Note: Drops all observations below the bottom 25th percentile on the name distinctiveness score.

alone, but a more general pattern. Moreover, changes in group-specific exposure to education at the time bureaucrats likely began schooling are consistently uncorrelated with marginal changes in future hiring, including when put in alone as a predictor (columns 4 and 5). This suggests that shifts in hiring patterns are not explained by shifts in education access—discussed further below.

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TABLE 1. New Hires against Existing Senior Staff and Lagged School Access

Outcome: New hires from group in year *t*	1	2	3	4	5	6
Bureaucrats from group among senior staff (year *t*–1)	0.079**	0.080**	0.061			0.241*
	(0.019)	(0.018)	(0.034)			(0.086)
Avg. distance (km) to school for group (year *t*–25)	–0.008		–0.080	–0.003		–0.013
	(0.010)		(0.083)	(0.005)		(0.013)
Avg. distance (km) to school for group (year *t*–30)		–0.008			–0.007	
		(0.006)			(0.005)	
Years included	1928–55	1928–55	1936–55	1928–55	1928–55	1928–55
Ethnic group FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Department FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
N	5,929	5,929	4,301	7,161	7,161	5,929
adj. R^2	0.197	0.197	0.202	0.144	0.144	0.176

Note: $^{\dagger}p < 0.10$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; and $^{***}p < 0.001$. The unit is the ethnic group–department–year. Column 3 restricts to years for which both Senior and African Staff lists (1936–45) and/or the Hybrid Staff list (1947-) are available. OLS regressions with standard errors clustered by ethnic group, department, and year. Results in row 1 with two- or one-way SE clusterings have smaller *p*-values. Under three-way clustering, the *p*-value for the coefficient in row 1 of column 3 is 0.104, but this becomes highly statistically significant when using one- or two-way clustering (e.g., by department and ethnic group). Note, however, that the more restricted data in column 3 are technically too sparse for three-way clustering, which results in an automated regularization of the standard errors that varies based on which R package is used. All bureaucrats in the bottom 25th percentile of name distinctiveness are dropped in all columns.

Archival Evidence of Bureaucrat-Led Hiring

Ethnic "lock-in" within departments was likely facilitated by how hiring was structured. We examine the extensive correspondence among British officials about African hiring in Ghana's National Archives, spanning the 1930s through early 1950s. These materials establish three important facts. First, many hiring and promotion decisions for Africans were decentralized to departments. Second, as a result, incumbent bureaucrats had points of discretion to shape hiring. Third, these bureaucrats sometimes abused these powers—and the British were aware of the problem.

Evidence of decentralization comes from materials that show that prospective employees were instructed to apply directly to departments, without a centralized screening process.[31] The archives include a large volume of handwritten letters from African applicants to top British officials asking about vacancies, with attached originals of exam certificates and (again often handwritten) reference letters. While unqualified applicants were rejected outright, most instead received a curt letter returning their documents and stating that they must write to each state department separately to inquire about jobs.[32] An exception applied to African clerical staff (First and Second Division Clerks), a narrow stratum of the total civil service, appointed, promoted, and rotated among departments by a central Selection Board (or Promotion Board) staffed by three senior British officials.[33] But memoranda from this committee demonstrate that these British officers had little independent information about most prospective African clerks, appearing to mostly act on recommendations of department heads, recommendations in turn based on qualitative evaluations relayed upward from conversations with subordinates within each department.[34]

This largely decentralized process should have provided discretion to existing Africans within departments to influence future hiring and promotions by helping to identify and screen potential recruits, as well as in subjective advice and performance evaluations about candidates provided to department heads. As one example, a 1947 memo to customs collectors explicitly instructs that "*they should obtain [African] recruits themselves*" [emphasis added] for their individual customs offices, and were provided with a list of job applicants who had written to the department head and told to make contact with them "when vacancies occurred" without first working through the head office.[35]

The need to apply to individual departments should have facilitated existing bureaucrats' discretion by ensuring that information on vacancies was fragmented. These bureaucrats could presumably provide privileged information about vacancies in their departments to preferred recruits. Indeed, that so many applicants painstakingly compiled their documents by hand and wrote directly to central British officials to ask about vacancies, only to be immediately informed this was an invalid way to apply for jobs in the first place, suggests

[31] See GH/PRAAD/CSO.2/7/130, file 1680/30/S33 ("Candidates for… appointments to the African pensionable staff, other than clerical… are selected by Heads of Departments"); and also, for example, folios GH/PRAAD/CSO.2/8/184, GH/PRAAD/CSO.2/8/193, and GH/PRAAD/CSO.2/8/195.

[32] For example, folios GH/PRAAD/CSO.2/8/184, GH/PRAAD/CSO.2/8/193, and GH/PRAAD/CSO.2/8/195.

[33] The Colonial Secretary, the head of the Education Department, and the head of the Department of Native Affairs.

[34] See Section S13 of the Supplementary Material for more details.

[35] GH/PRAAD/CSO.2/8/640/671.

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that full information about vacancies did not circulate widely, even among these educated Ghanaians. And the need to then apply across several dozen departments separately, attaching originals of your references and school and exam certificates in the hope there might be a vacancy, erected time-consuming barriers to entry for applicants who lacked inside information.

Finally, the archival materials show that bureaucrats were known to exploit this discretion to achieve hiring outcomes at odds with British intentions. The Colonial Secretary observed in a 1938 bulletin: "Cases have been known to occur in the subordinate ranks of the service in which an African officer's colleagues required or received from him on his first appointment or promotion a sum of money, gift, or entertainment."[36] Although the reason attributed to bureaucrats' actions in this quote is a distinct, but related motivation for corruption than what we propose (rent extraction vs. social favoritism), the statement exemplifies the same principal–agent dilemma: a top principal explicitly admitting that African agents within departments were using their influence to deviate from merit-based procedures when selecting and promoting other African staff.

Evidence of Ethnic Bias Conditional on Merit

Further evidence consistent with bureaucrat-led ethnic favoritism is that Ga and Fante applicants appear to have been favored over applicants from other groups even when they performed similarly on formal examinations for entry into the bureaucracy.

Between 1906 and 1930, Gold Coast colonial yearbooks list names of individuals who passed civil service examinations to qualify as teachers and agricultural trainers and (often) their rank scores relative to others who passed.[37] We digitize these lists to obtain data on 111 unique exam sittings by 2,423 unique qualifiers. We assign each qualifier a most likely ethnicity and match against our staff lists, observing which qualifiers were subsequently hired into the central bureaucracy. Unsurprisingly, the most common state posts were as teachers (52%) or agriculture officers (8%), but we also find that 40% of those subsequently hired were employed across a wide range of additional departments. Successful examinees were eligible for many positions, as a teaching exam certification was listed among the formal educational qualifications for broader civil service employment.[38] We take individual performance on these exams as a general indicator of merit—an indicator the British themselves created for this purpose—and explore subsequent hiring.[39]

Figure 8 visualizes the pool of exam candidates, disaggregated by ethnic group, indicating both exam ranks (scores) and whether each examinee subsequently appeared in staff lists (highlighted by ▲). The horizontal bars indicate the average exam rank of hired bureaucrats from each group. These data can help draw conclusions about supply- and demand-side explanations for hiring.

On the supply side, Figure 8 indicates a clear overrepresentation of Ga and Fante among successful examinees (total number of dots by group). Among those who passed exams across these years, 35.0% were Fante and 17.8% were Ga, significantly higher than their 11% and 3% of the population. It is unlikely that this overrepresentation is merely the result of greater access to schooling; while the Ga and Fante initially had greater education access, other groups who later experienced rapid increases in school access never caught up in success on these exams. Gas and Fantes comprise 58.2% of successful examinees in the 1900s, 55.5% in the 1910s, and still 50.4% in the 1920s. Over these decades, the Ga and Fante had stopped being any nearer to schools than, for example, Akyems and Akuapems. However, the proportion of Akyem and Akuapem among successful examinees instead fell, from 4.2% in the 1900s to just 1.7% in the 1920s, even as school access increased. Similarly, the proportion of Asante examinees declined from 6.7% in the 1900s to 5.7% by the 1920s, despite steadily increasing school access.[40]

One potential explanation for this oversupply is the development of cultural norms such that members of some groups particularly aspired to gain state employment. Such norms could have been culturally-reinforced by a history of early access to schooling or state jobs. Alternatively, they may have been due to differences in outside economic opportunities. For example, the Ewe may have been particularly overrepresented among successful examinees, while the Asante were particularly underrepresented, because Ewe areas largely lacked cash crop agriculture, while educated Asante (and Akyem and Akuapem), living in the heart of colonial Ghana's cocoa economy, may have had less overall need to seek state employment.[41]

But regardless of why some groups became oversupplied among test takers, evidence on hiring demand is where support for ethnic favoritism within the

[36] GH/PRAAD/CSO.2/7/130/19. The statement continued that this was forbidden, but did not state what, if anything, might be done to try to stop it.

[37] The lists of exam candidates unfortunately do not include the names of individuals who did not pass. These yearbooks also mention other civil service exams were held for other positions, but we could not locate similar individualized results lists.

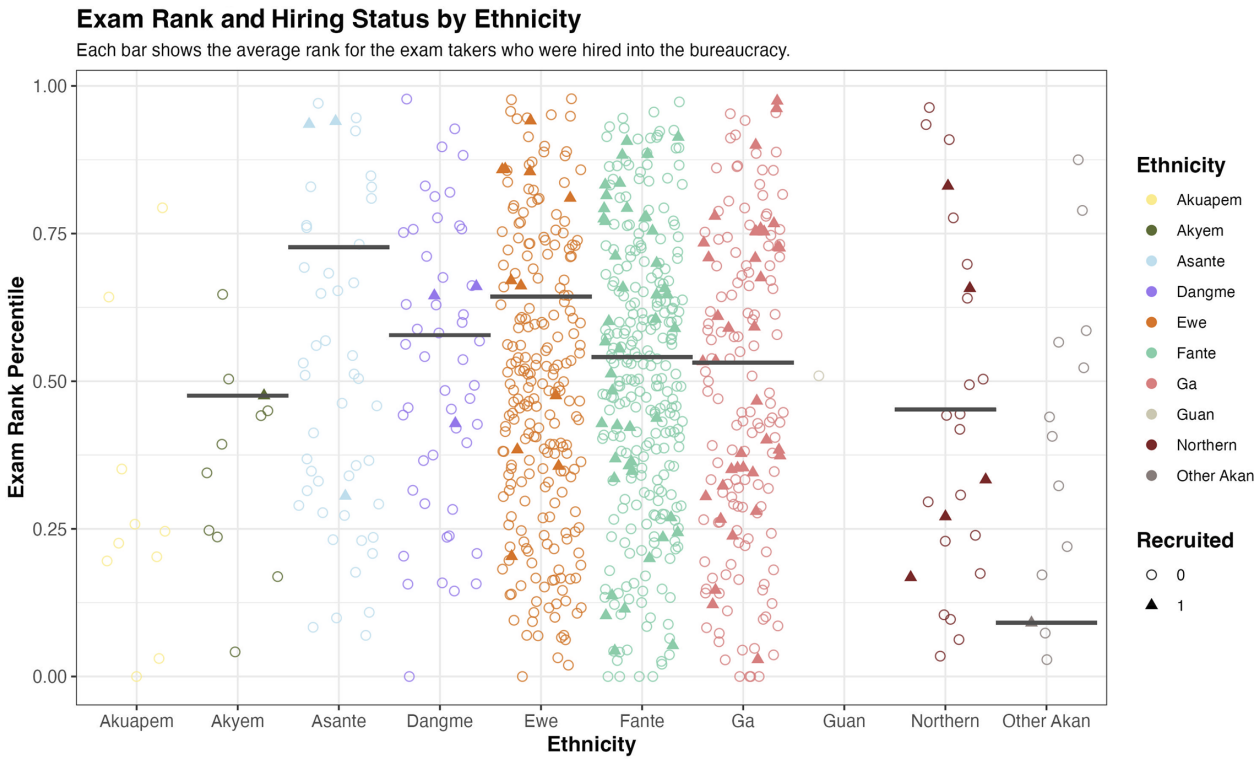
[38] For example, see GH/PRAAD/CSO.2/7/129/18a. Until the creation of Ghana's first university in 1948, teacher training colleges were essentially the only tertiary institutions; teacher trainees (the main pool of examinees in these data) pursued many state positions.

[39] Successful examinees were also qualified to teach at mission schools. However, mission teachers were typically paid less than government teachers (or other civil servants), such that government employment was more desirable and should still correlate with exam rank if state hiring were meritocratic.

[40] This over-supply of Gas and Fantes was also not simply because training colleges and testing centers were only located in Ga- or Fante-dominant areas. See Section S8 of the Supplementary Material for further details. We unfortunately do not know the hometowns of exam takers.

[41] Arhin (1983) links other differences in the underlying structure of local economies to Asante versus Fante norms around Western education in the precolonial period as well.

FIGURE 8. Distribution of Exam Ranks (1906–30) and Subsequent State Hiring Status by Group



Note: Each dot is an exam candidate; triangles are those matched to a subsequent staff list. Horizontal bars indicate the average (mean) rank of hired candidates. Note that these means are calculated from very few observations in groups that experienced little hiring.

bureaucracy becomes most apparent. The exam data show that demand for Ga and Fante to enter the public sector is disproportionally high *even conditional on exam performance.* The Ga and Fante represent a startling 31.0% and 43.3% of successful examinees eventually hired, an additional 13.1 p.p. and 8.3 p.p. above their already overrepresented share of those passing the civil service exams. By contrast, and consistent with significant hiring bias on the demand side, despite comprising 25.9% of successful examinees between 1906 and 1930, the Ewe are just 10.5% of hired examinees, a drop of 15.4 p.p. and apparent evidence of significant hiring discrimination. The Asante too had 3.2 p.p. fewer bureaucrats hired, even relative to their small 5.5% of passing examinees. This bias conditional on exam performance persists equally among examinees hired as teachers and agricultural workers, and across those hired into various other state departments. It also cannot be explained by the locations of jobs, such as teaching positions at government-run schools (Section S12 of the Supplementary Material).

Analyzing each exam candidate's performance relative to their cohortmates at the same exam sitting further emphasizes demand-side bias. The median Ewe hired after passing an exam ranked at the 67th percentile in their exam sitting; the median Asante ranked at the 94th percentile. By contrast, the median Fante hired ranked at the 59th percentile and the median Ga hired ranked at just the 53rd percentile, showing that more mediocre Ga and Fante candidates received jobs over more qualified Ewe and Asante candidates. Most other groups in Figure 8 had so few (or none) of their successful examinees even hired (e.g., just one Akyem, and zero Akuapem) that a comparison of exam ranks among hired bureaucrats is uninformative.

Overall, these data suggest exam performance did not purely guide selection, supporting the idea that nominally-meritocratic institutions were exactly that: examinations gave an appearance of meritocracy, consistent with the *de jure* priorities of British principals, but in fact, selection was based on other attributes.

Nepotistic Hiring among Euro-African Families

Another piece of evidence for insider capture comes from the further overrepresentation of particular families within the Ga and Fante. As noted above, the earliest opportunities for Western education in the precolonial Gold Coast (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) were for Africans with mixed European descent, creating high-status families within Ga and Fante society who maintained European surnames into subsequent generations.[42] Historical sources make

[42] Unlike other colonies with culturally-separate mixed-race populations, having a European surname as a legacy of (potentially centuries-old) patrilineal descent from a European did not on its

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clear that these Euro-African families were the very first to be hired into the colonial state in the nineteenth century (Parker 2000; von Hesse 2024). To the extent that any African officials had the ability to use an initial foothold in the colonial state to then employ their own relatives or other close social ties in further positions through nepotistic insider hiring, it was these families.

In Section S9 of the Supplementary Material, we document just this: each additional Ga or Fante bureaucrat from a Euro-African family at a senior- or mid-level position in the past year is a strong correlate of an additional new hire from a Euro-African family within that same state department in the next year, consistent with socially-driven hiring among job seekers from the same narrow social stratum.

ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENTS

Support for our interpretation that ethnic "lock-in" results from bureaucrat-led hiring also emerges from ruling out three major alternative explanations. First, unequal education could explain hiring. Second, these patterns may reflect proximity to physical offices of the state. Third, these patterns could reflect principals' strategic preferences to prioritize certain groups. However, all three possibilities cannot account for the above patterns.

Ethnic Inequality in Education

Many scholars argue ethnic inequality in colonial hiring was a consequence of inequality in Western education (Johnson-Kanu 2021; Lange 2025; Mazrui 1978; Ray 2018; Ricart-Huguet 2021).[43] Education reached groups unevenly because of differences in proximity to the coast and other zones of investment (Ricart-Huguet 2022), as well as differences in the spread of missionaries (Frankema 2012; Jedwab, Selhausen, and Moradi 2022). With ethnic differences in the supply of qualified candidates, inequality in employment can still be consistent with meritocracy (Kuipers 2025).

This surely accounts for at least one pattern in Figure 5: the enormous underrepresentation of Northerners cannot be separated from the near-total absence of schools throughout the Northern Territories until the 1950s (Figure 2 above; Grischow 2006; Nathan 2023). Evidence that education accounts for other groups' hiring is less compelling. As detailed above, the Ga and Fante enjoyed the greatest *initial* education access in the nineteenth century and before, which partly explains why they were the very first to be hired at these earliest moments of state-building. But these groups' early advantages are causally overdetermined. The Ga and Fante also initially benefited from their especially fortuitous locations, proximate to the earliest zones of formal British control. For example, Euro-Ga elites already were "in on the ground floor" of the colonial state in Accra from the 1850s in a quite literal sense: they were the British government's landlords, leasing their homes for state offices and residences (von Hesse 2024, 4). Meanwhile, regardless of education, at the start of our data in 1897, groups like the Asante mechanically could not have had similar access to jobs because they were not formally incorporated into the colony for another few years.

But the *continued* dominance of the Ga and Fante deep into the twentieth century remains more puzzling. The exam data above already clearly show that ethnic differences in hiring cannot be fully accounted for by the supply of qualified candidates per group. Moreover, combining the schools data in Figure 2 with geolocated ethnic census data, Table 2 displays the population-weighted average distance of each group to schools between 1894 and 1932.[44] Using birth dates, we calculate that the typical civil servant was hired in their mid-to-late 20s. Accordingly, we use the availability of primary schools 25 years before a hiring decision to proxy for the supply of educated candidates. Multiple other ethnic groups in Southern Ghana caught up in education access in the early twentieth century. But state hiring never updated, even as the vast majority of African hiring occurred between the 1930s and 1950s.

Table 2 shows that while the Ga and Fante had the best school access in 1894, this advantage soon dissipated. By 1909, the Akyem and Akuapem had become almost as close to schools. By 1921, the Akyem had pulled even, and by 1927, when many bureaucrats hired in the 1950s would have begun school, schools were more numerous in Akyem territory than Ga or Fante areas. The typical member of every other group except Northerners and Other Akans was, on average, now within walking distance of a school. And yet, there is little evidence in Figure 5 or Section S6 of the Supplementary Material that future hiring kept pace, a descriptive pattern we already confirmed above via multivariate regression (Table 1). For example, by 1954, 45 years *after* the Akyem had reached virtual parity with the Ga in proximity to schools, just 1.4% of Africans in the HSL were Akyem, compared to 38.5% Ga, even as the groups have identical population sizes (both 3% nationally).

In addition, in Figure 9, we also rule out that differences in hiring could be due to differences in school quality. Digitizing annual Education Department reports available from 1906 to 1932 that provide exact enrollment numbers and total operating budgets for primary schools, including the mission schools,[45] we calculate *expenditure per pupil* across the schools in each ethnic group's home region to proxy for school

own indicate being phenotypically distinct from (or a lack of integration into) Ga or Fante society.

[43] For example, Ricart-Huguet (2021, 2459) argues that "districts [within African colonies] with more primary education became more represented in the civil service" as a "byproduct of education-based recruitment into the colonial state."

[44] We discuss how these figures are constructed in Section S10 of the Supplementary Material.

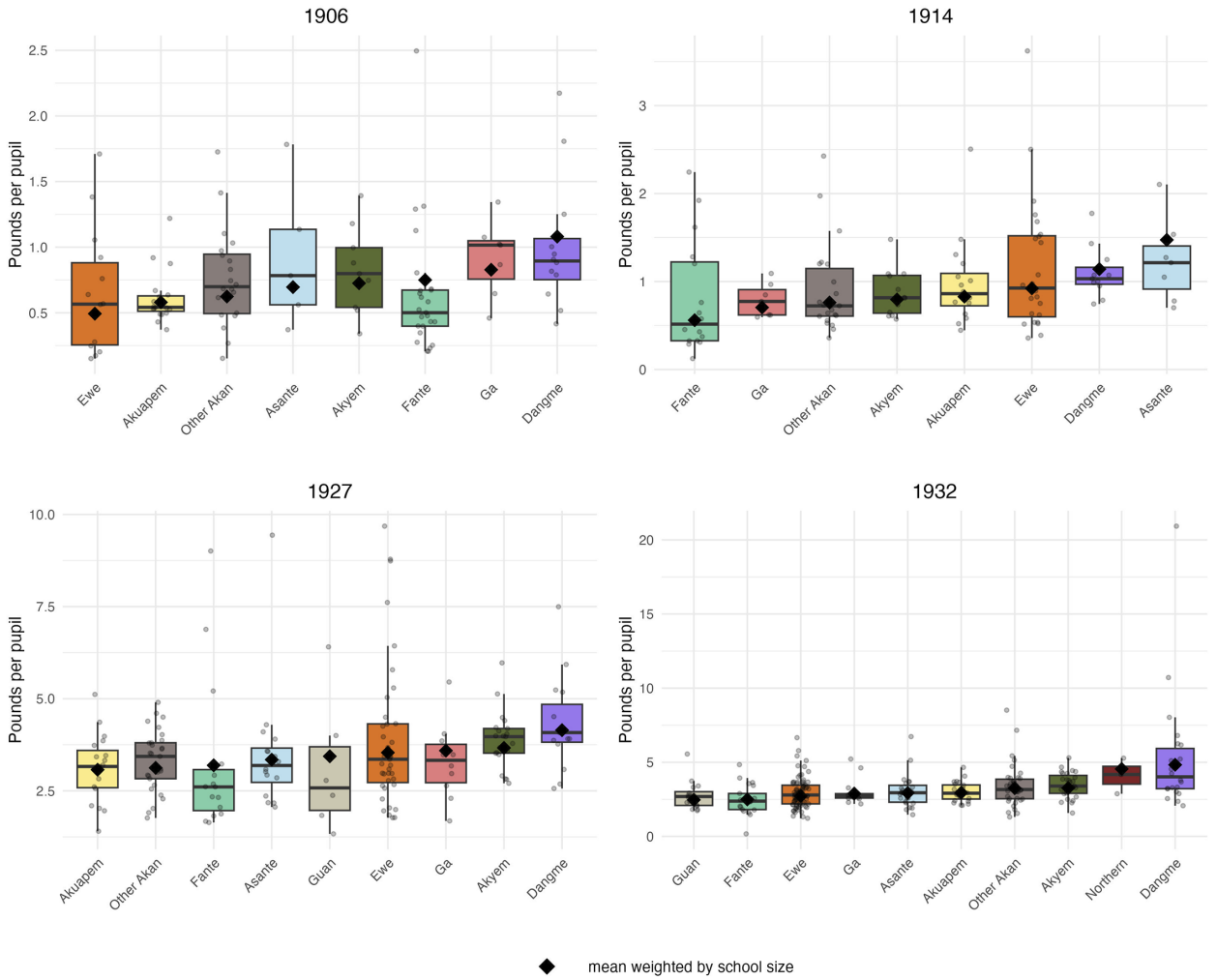
[45] This budget includes both the portions contributed by the mission society and by the state. Mission schools operated independently, but were heavily state subsidized (Frankema 2012). Figure 9 focuses on primary schools. Secondary schools were largely boarding institutions; only among primary schools can we interpret expenditures at schools located in a group's home area as investments in the education of that specific group.

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TABLE 2. Approximate Average Distance (km) to the Nearest Primary School by Ethnic Group

Ethnic group	1894	1906	1909	1914	1921	1927	1932
Akuapem	15.73	6.19	5.56	5.55	4.85	4.75	4.53
Akyem	17.01	4.05	3.47	3.47	3.29	2.87	2.77
Asante	45.32	12.88	9.57	9.37	8.78	8.56	8.12
Dangme	12.36	8.34	7.52	7.16	6.76	6.60	6.34
Ewe	25.19	13.78	10.92	10.80	9.15	7.53	6.46
Fante	11.02	3.66	3.28	3.28	3.24	3.20	3.17
Ga	6.04	3.24	3.19	3.19	3.19	3.19	3.18
Guan	56.42	21.42	16.47	16.47	10.19	6.39	3.70
Northern	248.95	248.95	82.14	71.23	38.06	33.43	31.68
Other Akan	36.84	23.42	17.82	16.96	14.83	13.15	12.34

FIGURE 9. Expenditure (Quality) by School Location



Note: British pounds per enrolled student at primary schools at four snapshots in time. Each individual school (gray dot) is geolocated and categorized by the local ethnic majority in that community. The central bar in each box plot shows mean expenditure *per school* per ethnic group; the black diamond instead weights the mean by school size, to show mean expenditure *per pupil* per group.

quality. There is no evidence that Ga and Fante areas had systematically better schools, even very early in the twentieth century. School quality instead appears quite similar across groups, and, if anything, the Fante had among the colony's worst-funded schools despite dominating civil service hiring.

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Geographic Proximity to State Offices

Another possible explanation concerns distances to state offices. A challenge in explicitly assessing a proximity mechanism is that virtually all staff lists we digitize list job titles, not locations. However, we can cast doubt on this possibility in several ways.

First, the capital shifted from Cape Coast to Accra in 1877, along with most state jobs (Parker 2000, 121). As indigenes of Accra, it may seem natural that the Ga would have become overrepresented among state employees. However, the same is not true of the Fante, whose main population mass (around Cape Coast) lies further from Accra than those of several other groups, such as the Akyem, Dangme, and Akuapem that already had similar education access prior to the main Africanization period.[46] These groups are more proximate, yet remained underrepresented.

Second, Ga and Fante bureaucrats were also vastly overrepresented in *both* desk-based jobs in Accra and field-based jobs that would have been spread elsewhere throughout the colony. Without location information in the staff lists, we classify job titles in terms of whether they were likely desk-based or field-based jobs.[47] Examples of field-based jobs include teachers, postal workers, and nurses. On average, there are more Gas and Fantes in desk-based than field-based jobs, which suggests proximity influenced hiring at least to some extent: 74.8% of desk-job holders are Ga or Fante compared to 56.9% of field-job holders. Yet the extremely large share of Ga and Fante workers in field jobs relative to their combined population size (14%) still strongly implies that a proximity-based explanation remains insufficient.

Third, in Section S12 of the Supplementary Material, we can directly compare the geographic location of jobs to the ethnicity of state employees for the hiring of government teachers in a way that we cannot for other types of civil servants. We confirm that Ga and Fante government teachers were hired in excess of the proportion of government schools located in Ga and Fante communities, providing clear evidence that hiring did not simply reflect the ethnic breakdown of workplace locations.

Finally, the colonial state expanded significantly in complexity and geographic footprint over time, with new departments coming online and new state institutions (e.g., clinics and post offices) opening continually further into the interior. If jobs were a function of location, we should expect a strong upward trend in employment of non-coastal groups. But Ga and Fante dominance remains virtually constant (Figure 5 and Section S6 of the Supplementary Material).

British Ethnic Preferences

A final possibility is that British principals had strategic preferences for Ga and Fante employees, potentially perceiving them as more loyal or competent. For example, Ray (2018; 2019) and Lange (2025) suggest that British colonial leaders often favored historically weak, especially precolonially non-centralized, ethnic groups for key posts to offset the existing strength of groups that had precolonial states.

We cast doubt on this possibility in several ways. Most directly, Ray (2018; 2019) and Lange's (2025) theory of British strategy would explicitly *not* predict the Ga and Fante dominance we observe: unlike some other Ghanaian groups (Nathan 2023), both the Ga and Fante were centralized in the precolonial period; the Fante, in particular, came from a well-established state. To our knowledge, historical literature on Africanization in the Gold Coast also does not document such a preference (e.g., Rathbone 2000; Shaloff 1974). We also found no evidence of it in the materials on hiring in Ghana's National Archives: it is notable that across the many hundreds of documents we reviewed discussing African hiring and promotions, we found *zero* mentions of anyone's ethnicity. If the British did have an explicit and sustained preference for these groups, it is reasonable to expect they would have discussed it internally.[48]

More indirectly, we assess observable implications of such a preference. First, the archival documents described above demonstrate that senior British officials took an active role in hiring and promotion decisions for the minority of African employees who were First or Second Division Clerks, while leaving other decisions decentralized to individual departments. But in Section S13 of the Supplementary Material, we show that the Ga and Fante are still heavily overrepresented across positions for which hiring was not handled centrally and also that the overrepresentation of Fante bureaucrats, in particular, is *higher* for jobs not directly selected by top British leadership, seemingly inconsistent with this bias only occurring due to these same officials' top-down directive.

Second, if a top-down directive existed, hiring should have been sensitive to changes in the principals overseeing the process. Until 1951, Africanization was conducted under the ultimate command of British officials. Starting from 1952, before independence in 1957, senior authority passed to Kwame Nkrumah's new CPP government. The CPP leadership primarily came from other ethnic groups, and Nkrumah (an Nzema; "Other Akan") viewed existing African civil servants (the large majority of whom were Ga or Fante) as part of his opposition (Zolberg 1966, 71), such that he had little incentive to continue favoring Ga or Fante hires. Yet in Figure 10, we find no sharp discontinuity in ethnic hiring across the 1951–52 transfer in power: the right panel shows that Ga and Fante were similarly overrepresented as a proportion of new hires regardless of which principal led the process.[49] This relative

[46] Cape Coast (the biggest Fante town) is 125 km from central Accra, further than Kibi and Koforidua (the main Akyem towns, 60–75 km away), the Akuapem ridge (35 km away), and major Dangme settlements ringing the city (20–40 km away).

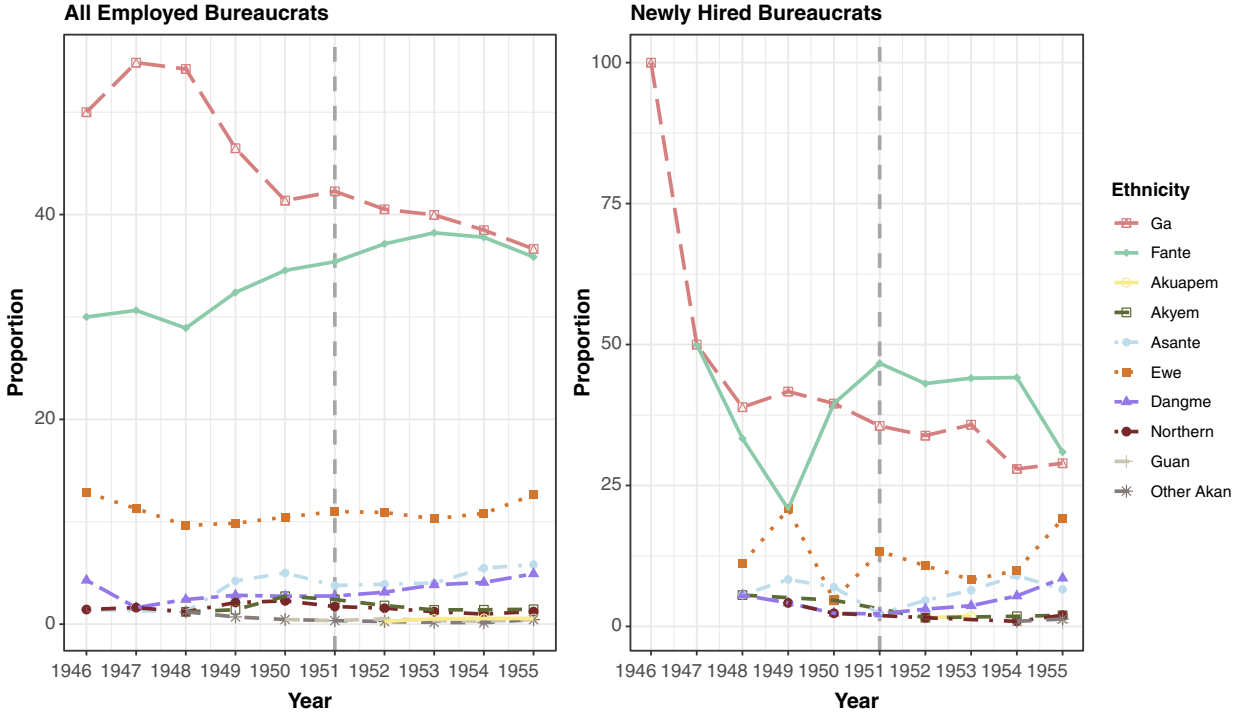
[47] Coding rules are in Section S11 of the Supplementary Material.

[48] These documents are mostly private memoranda, with little reason to have hidden such a preference if it existed.

[49] Fisher's exact tests comparing proportions of new hires from each ethnic group just before versus just after the change in power fail to reject a null hypothesis of no significant change in proportions of new hires from each group when comparing any of the 1, 2, 3, or 4 years before versus after Nkrumah's election to each other.

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FIGURE 10. Distribution of Ethnicity among Ghanaian Bureaucrats around 1951



Note: Drops all observations below the bottom 25th percentile on the name distinctiveness score.

stasis in new hiring meant little meaningful aggregate shift in the years after Nkrumah took internal power in the overall proportion of Ga and Fante in the central bureaucracy (left panel), inconsistent with their overrepresentation having been due to top-down British orders to favor them.

Third, other accounts of strategic efforts to favor specific groups in hiring suggest such preferences should be visible in variation across positions, departments, or time. For example, groups perceived as inherently more loyal should be privileged for key security or administrative posts (Harkness 2018; Hassan 2017; 2020; Ray 2012), or assigned to higher-rank jobs. Similarly, assuming British leaders' most pressing local threats must have evolved across our long time series, we would expect the groups favored in hiring to have changed as well (Hassan 2020).

Yet in Figure 11, we see no systematic pattern in other groups' presence across departments of varying strategic importance, while the Ga and Fante dominate across the board.[50] Ga and Fante bureaucrats are not differentially concentrated in core security or administrative departments most vital to law and order or political governance. They were also actually *less* overrepresented in departments concerned with agricultural production and customs—the primary revenue streams sustaining British rule—than in other less vital parts of the state.[51] Ga and Fante dominance also holds across both senior (Figure 5) and junior (African staff list; Section S6 of the Supplementary Material) roles, and at all tiers of the salary distribution—a pattern inconsistent again with British prioritization of groups thought most competent for higher-rank positions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POSTINDEPENDENCE POLITICS

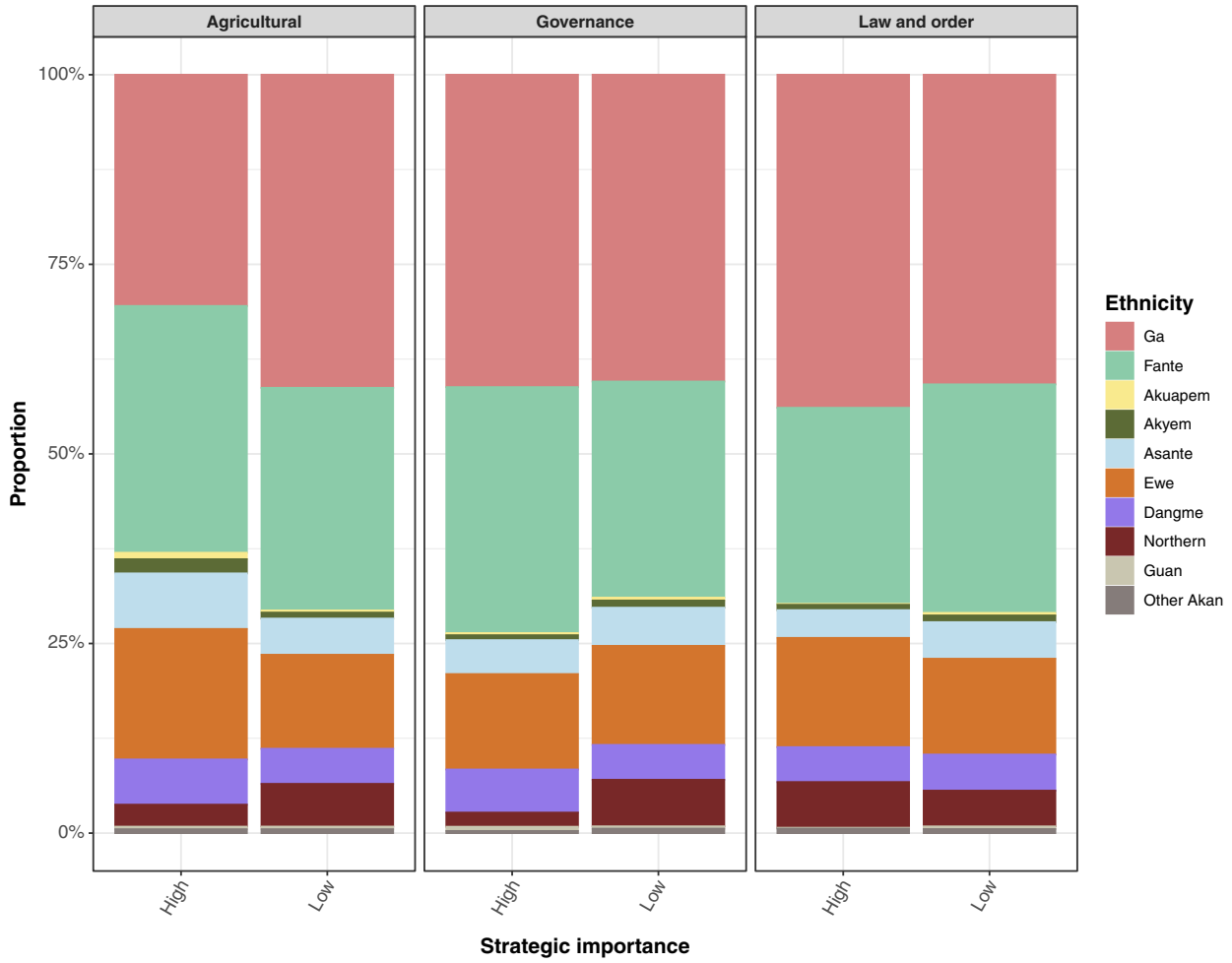
Similar to many other postcolonial settings in which ethnic grievances sparked by uneven colonial state-building led to postcolonial competition and conflict (Kuipers 2025; Lange 2025; Ray 2018; 2019;

[50] We code strategic importance in three areas: agriculture, governance, and law and order. For agriculture, Agricultural and Customs were coded "high," others "low." For governance, we classified as high: accountant general, audit, administrative, commerce, customs, governor, income tax, judiciary, political administration, and supreme court; for law and order: police, prisons, and regiment. Results by department appear in Section S14 of the Supplementary Material, where we likewise find no coherent pattern for other ethnic groups.

[51] As discussed below, the colonial army (not in our data) had relatively more Northerners at low ranks (Harkness 2018) and Ewes at high ranks (Hutchful 1985) than the civil service. To the extent that literally arming one's subjects reveals preferences about perceived loyalty (Ray 2012; Roessler 2016), it is notable that the British did not favor the Ga and Fante in this separate institution.

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FIGURE 11. Distribution of Ethnicity among Ghanaian Bureaucrats by Strategic Importance of Department



Note: Drops all observations below the bottom 25th percentile on the name distinctiveness score.

Wimmer 2013b), the already ethnically-captured and non-meritocratic central state inherited at independence created challenges for Ghana's immediate postindependence leaders, who struggled to dismantle existing hiring practices and create more diverse institutions.

Ethno-regional opposition parties quickly formed partly in response to their exclusion from state institutions, centered around three disadvantaged groups. Anticipating marginalization under a strong postindependence government, the Asante-led, pro-federalist National Liberation Movement (NLM) emerged in 1954, also drawing support from other major Akan groups (e.g., the Akyem). The NLM was sustained at the grassroots by educated, but underemployed Asante who were frustrated by their exclusion from both traditional power structures and the civil service (Allman 1990; 1993). Similarly, the Northern People's Party (NPP) pushed for greater Northern inclusion in national institutions, while Ewe elites established the Togoland Congress and Anlo Youth Association, mobilizing around (ultimately failed) 1956 UN-sponsored referendum on secession of Togoland, the core Ewe area (Austin 1964; Skinner 2015).

Confronted with these widespread ethnic grievances, Ghana's new leaders attempted to address imbalances in state institutions. In the early 1960s, Nkrumah's government pivoted toward explicitly recruiting more personnel from then-marginalized groups (Adei 2008), especially the Akan, into both the bureaucracy and military (Harkness 2018)—efforts at rebalancing that future scholars would instead (erroneously in our view) cite as examples of *new* ethnic patrimonialism (e.g., Adei 2008; Zolberg 1966). Nonetheless, given the large accumulated stock of Ga and Fante bureaucrats, their advantages proved fairly durable, as suggested by a 1968 staff list produced a decade after independence (Republic of Ghana 1968).

Ethnic imbalances in the central state also had implications for political stability, as disgruntled, educated

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youths unable to find central state employment instead joined the army, an institution where Ga and Fante advantages were less entrenched. While the army's rank-and-file was predominantly Northern (Ray 2012, 565), a consequence of British assumptions that uneducated Northerners made better soldiers (Harkness 2018, 146), the officer corps was more diverse. Educated Ewe, in particular, had joined the army in large numbers in the 1950s. Consistent with our exam data above, Hutchful (1985, 168) notes that "an important factor that made the Army appealing to Ewe… was the limited opportunities for educated youth," as other "government departments" could not "offer employment that met the aspirations of [Ewe] school leavers." In response to the resulting ethnic imbalances, Nkrumah attempted to diversify the officer corps by also incorporating more Akan (including Asante) officers (Harkness 2018). Yet this strategy backfired, as the new Asante and Ewe officers ultimately (briefly) united to depose him (Asante and Gyimah-Boadi 2004). Ghana then cycled through multiple further military coups and purges from the state.

Thus, despite Nkrumah's efforts at ethnic inclusion, entrenched patterns of dominance contributed to instability, and sparked further struggles for ethnic rebalancing. After the Asante and Ewe coup plotters fell out and Asante elites consolidated control in the late 1960s, new attempts to increase Akan representation sparked fears of exclusion among other groups. Under the Busia government (1969) more than 560 civil servants—predominantly Ewe and Ga—were dismissed in an effort to reverse their bureaucratic power, another case cited as evidence of *new* patrimonial practices in the bureaucracy (Asante and Gyimah-Boadi 2004).

The exact manner in which legacies of patrimonialism in colonial-era hiring shaped postindependence politics is no doubt a function of a wider set of factors that varied across African cases. Among others, this includes the overall extent of Africanization prior to independence, the resulting level of ethnic (im)balance in hiring, whether the initial postcolonial leader was from the same group(s) favored or excluded from the colonial bureaucracy, and how these distributions of power corresponded to overall demographic and economic conditions. But the Ghanaian experience elucidates the broader insight that the manner in which the nascent bureaucracy was staffed in the colonial period cannot be separated from our understanding of a country's immediate postindependence political contestation over who controlled the state.

CONCLUSION

This article theorizes public sector recruitment and argues that bureaucrats' preferences in hiring will outweigh those of politicians when politicians lack social connections to the communities they govern and have relatively low intensity preferences about who to hire. Both social distance and weak preferences exacerbate principal–agent problems in recruitment by making it more difficult for politicians to overcome information asymmetries with existing bureaucrats. Digitizing colonial records of bureaucrats in Ghana under British colonial rule and using a novel method to link individuals to ethnic groups, we reveal the overwhelming dominance of bureaucrats from two small ethnic groups. We argue that this dominance was the result of first-mover advantages combined with bureaucrat-led insider capture, with groups with more existing bureaucrats at high ranks within state departments able to hire more of their own regardless of formal policies of meritocracy.

Our work is not the first to observe ethnic disparities in colonial hiring (Johnson-Kanu 2021; Kuipers 2025; Lange 2025; Ray 2012; Ricart-Huguet 2021). But our key contribution is to propose a novel explanation for *why* this imbalance occurred. In addition to arguing that imbalances resulted from strategic British preferences (e.g., Harkness 2018; Lange 2025), the most common explanation in existing literature is that colonial inequality in access to education drove colonial hiring (Johnson-Kanu 2021; Kuipers 2025; Lange 2025; Mazrui 1978; Ray 2018; Ricart-Huguet 2021). We suggest, however, that when using richer data than previously available to unpack dynamics in hiring within the colonial period against dynamics in the development of colonial education systems, this common explanation may not always retain the power its proponents claim. Even in settings with stronger ethnic educational inequalities than Ghana, particularly those that were non-settler colonies, our theory suggests bureaucrat-led ethnic lock-in may have played a previously-unexplored role in explaining ethnic imbalances. We leave it to future work to investigate evidence for bureaucrat-led ethnic lock-in across other cases.

Our results also suggest the need to update conventional wisdom about postcolonial leaders as the chief orchestrators of ethnic packing within the central state after independence. Postcolonial central bureaucracies were not blank slates upon which new leaders built. Instead, many leaders inherited packed bureaucracies. They then faced the challenge of both building the public sector and dismantling existing biases. As they did so, postcolonial bureaucracies sometimes became less ethnically homogeneous over time (Hassan 2020), challenging standard accounts of rampant postcolonial favoritism.

More generally, fruitful avenues for future work also include developing a deeper understanding of the strategies that bureaucrats take to informally influence hiring outcomes. We also hope that our analysis stimulates further research using contemporary data to classify the relevant social identities of bureaucrats in prior periods, thereby developing a deeper understanding of how historical events may continue to shape modern states.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055426101993.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/SDH31B. Limitations on public availability of three raw datasets are discussed in the Supplementary Material (Section S15).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors affirm this research did not involve human participants.

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