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WAS THERE ANYTHING GOOD ABOUT THE BRITISH EMPIRE?

Abstract. Influences of British colonialism still persists even in the 21st century, and many debates on whether such influences of the British Empire were fundamentally beneficial or not exist. To contribute to this debate, we'll measure the effects of British colonialism on political boundaries, education, and socio-economic relationships in British Africa and India to determine if there was anything good about the British Empire.

Keywords: British Empire, colonialism, political boundaries, education, trade, British Africa, British India.

People used to say ‘the sun never sets on the British Empire’ because it was the largest land empire in human history. The British Empire (1601–1997) was an international system of colonies, protectorates, and other territories that operated under the sovereignty of the monarch of Great Britain and the administration of the British government. The impact of imposed artificial land boundaries, educational development support, and socio-economic influences by the British on Africa and India eliminates the possibility that there was anything good about the British Empire. Here I use the definition of ‘good’ from the Cambridge Dictionary Online, which defines the word as “having a positive or useful effect”.

Colonialism occurs when dominant economic and military powers bring relatively underdeveloped and vulnerable societies under control. How the British Empire imposed institutional structures and foreign languages upon the land they “discovered” then controlled serves as an example of colonialism. Some argue that British colonialism provided its colonies with a positive basis for its economic growth that persisted through imposed boundaries. Indeed, for a society to become rich, its land must be used productively, and markets must be created. In flat areas, for example, square borders allow secure property boundaries and standardization for market trades because of their uniformity. Such demarcation was

used in the Canadian Dominion Lands and South Australia; metes and bounds demarcation was used in the Southern American Colonies, New South Wales, Tasmania, Queensland, and Western Australia (see Appendix I). Most of these former members of the British Empire are economically successful, but this correlation is not seen in Africa.

Imposed boundaries in British Africa did not have positive effects. During the Scramble for Africa, which began at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 and lasted until the turn of the 20th century, Europeans partitioned Africa into spheres of influence and colonies. The British Empire was heavily involved in this process and designed African borders when Europeans had barely settled, lacking extensive knowledge of the people or the region. These boundaries remained even after the colonial era, and as a result, populations belonging to the same ethnic group were separated across different states (see Appendix II). The artificial boundaries split ethnic groups, leading to ethnic discrimination and wars. As stated by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, British colonies with straight borders or rectangular demarcations have historically performed worse, as they have a larger share of the population belonging to ethnicities in neighboring countries. This conveys that the demarcations set by the British Empire were not beneficial to its colonies at all.

The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) indicates that military interventions from adjacent countries are more common in the homelands of ethnically split groups compared to border areas where non-split groups live. ACLED data also show a pattern of political violence caused by rebel groups who have attempted to establish a national state through violent acts. This pattern corroborates with the Uppsala Conflict Data Program

Georeferenced Event Dataset (UCDP-GED) records deadly events associated with civil wars. In other words, there is no connection between ethnic partitioning and riots and no connection between partition and conflict between non-state actors. These results suggest that partitioned groups face discrimination from the national government and often rebel to counter repression. Furthermore, population displacements across the border are more common within split groups. These flows, however, could change the ethnic composition in bordering countries, causing conflicts. In fact, 31% of civil wars and 57% of ethnic wars involve people of a regional ethnic group that consider themselves indigenous and recent migrants from other parts of the country. An example is the Alur, a group partitioned between the Belgian Congo and the British Protectorate of Uganda during the 1910 to 1914 Scramble for Africa. When the Congolese politician Mobutu Sese Sékou subjugated several minority groups in the Congolese state Zaire, many Alur refugees escaped to Uganda, which generated opposition and conflict from Buganda in Uganda. Ultimately, imposed boundaries set by the British Empire did not just lead to socio-political conflicts but also racial segregation.

According to Ambe J. Njoh, Professor of Government and International Affairs at the University of South Florida, town planning was used by British colonial officials in sub-Saharan African countries to “foster the colonial social objective of racial, spatial segregation.” The rationale of wanting to protect the health of Europeans was used to employ racially-driven residential segregation policies in West African

towns. This rationale was caused by two malaria control experiments conducted in Sierra Leone in 1899 and 1900, which concluded that the anopheles mosquito did almost all of its infection at night. Based on this thought, racial residential segregation was used as a measure for protecting the British colonial officers from malaria. This spatial strategy, which created a distance between the races that was too great for the malaria mosquitos to traverse, became the official policy in British tropical colonies and later in other parts of British Africa as well. In British Nigeria, a large amount of attention was paid to town planning so that European settlements were located at least 440 yards from the indigenous population, even though there were no significant European settler populations in West Africa. The nature of colonial town planning in Nigeria, which ensured better health conditions for the European colonial officials, highlights how the British Empire’s imposed boundaries were “racist in orientation and segregationist in practice.”

Some would argue that the British Empire left a legacy on education in its colonies. However, the enrollment data before 1950 from the annual colonial blue books suggest otherwise. These sources indicate that from 1900 to 1938, the development of African education was most likely the result of efforts by Christian mission schools, which provided for more than 95% of the total increase in primary school enrollment. However, it should be noted that the mission schools in British African colonies were mostly institutions run by African converts and not foreign missionaries. For example, in 1938, 8456 African and 285 European teachers taught in Uganda’s primary schools. According to Ewout Frankema, professor and chair of Rural and Environmental History at Wageningen University, the “mission school expansion was more of an African, rather than Western, undertaking”. He states that the development of primary education “did not depend on the passive acceptance by Africans of [British] culture and religious values ... Africans took initiative to” develop the infrastructure needed for education. Furthermore, the

mission schools were funded primarily by African parents and villagers, not British church members nor colonial governments. The colonial government in East and Central British Africa hardly spent money on education until the mid-1920s. In Nyasaland, for example, the government spent 1000 pounds on education in 1913. The budget only rose to 21500 pounds in 1938 after two authoritative reports on education in British Africa by the Phelps-Stoke committee ensured the colonial offices in London raised education budgets. However, this increase is still under 2 shillings per student. Since educational development was mainly supported by the native Africans until 1940, it could be argued that the British Empire had almost no beneficial impact on the educational development of its African colonies.

During the same period when the British imposed policies and instituted educational reforms in their holdings in Africa, similar processes were introduced in the Indian subcontinent. The British Empire introduced professional skills, British education, free trade, and foreign investment to India through colonialism. The British Empire introduced technical education to India to acquire a cheap labor force. However, according to the former member of the Constituent Assembly of India, Syama Prada Mookerjee, this “did not contemplate any large-scale industrialization of the country”. He explained that the British colonial government did not coordinate trade, commerce, and industries in India, so “whatever little technical education provided proved ineffective”.

The education system was introduced to India by the British Empire so that the government could train Indians to help administrate the country since it would be cheaper to hire Indians than Europeans to do so. The system was dissociated from the colony’s native cultural and educational traditions, making English the key to education. However, by using English as the medium, the British Empire failed to build a national education system based on the language and culture of the Indian people. In addition, British education in India was to be confined to

the upper class and filtered for the rest. The British colonial government only opened schools and colleges in important towns and district headquarters. Mookerjee stated that in British India, “four villages out of five are without a school; three boys out of four grow up without education, and only one girl in forty attends any kind of school”. This sheds light on how the British Empire’s introduction of British education created a socio-economic disparity between the urban elite who spoke English and the millions of rural Indians who did not. Up to 1912, there were only five universities in India: Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Punjab, and Allahabad. They were modeled after the University of London but were all examining and not teaching universities. No tutorial work was done in these universities; they were confined to prescribing syllabi and holding examinations. Thus, these universities established by the British Empire did not contribute to the advancement of knowledge. The British Empire did not create significant primary, secondary, or tertiary educational development in India.

Through colonialism, the British Empire established free trade in India. However, free trade was simply used to justify its economic drain in India. From 1757 to 1813, the East India Company gained a monopoly by selling Indian finished goods at low prices to England and Europe. Along with the Charter Act of 1813, the monopoly had ended free Indian merchants’ private trading, resulting in the collapse of native industries. From 1813 to 1858, the British Empire converted India into a reservoir of cheap raw materials. But while British merchants and their industries prospered, Indian handicraft industries could not compete with British machine-made goods. This meant that the introduction of free trade ultimately harmed India during British rule.

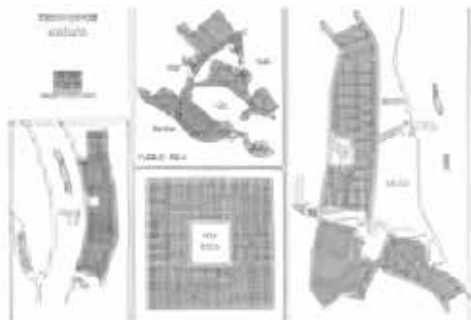
Most of India’s economic growth accompanied its independence from the British Empire. It accelerated as quantitative restrictions and the import license system imposed by the British were removed. Post-independence reforms that led to the reduction of tariff and protection rates set by the British have

brought positive changes to the flow of capital and reduced poverty. In a modern political sense, the most enduring impact of British rule over India is that it created an Indian nation. The consciousness of being one people with common traditions, a people different from the colonizers, inspired them to achieve political unity against the British Empire and gain independence. But while it unified the country under one political authority, the departure of British control also fostered separatism between Indians and Pakistanis, something that is still present. Thus, the British Empire did not play any role in India's economic development and unification, as its poli-

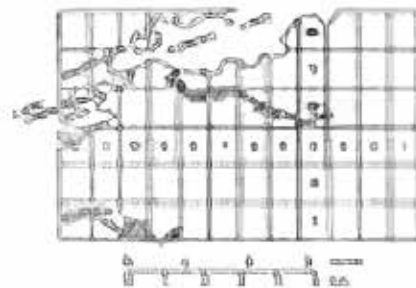
cies only decelerated India's growth and catalyzed ethnic conflicts.

Although the British Empire introduced beneficial elements, such as demarcation, primary/secondary/tertiary education, and secure trade policies, none proved to have a positive or useful effect on its colonies in the African continent and the Indian subcontinent. Instead, they led to political instability, racial segregation, socio-economic disparities, and the destruction of native industries. Considering these factors, there was nothing good about the British Empire, as all its influences on its African and Indian colonies were either negative or useless.

Appendix I



18th Demarcation, New England Townships



18th Demarcation, Ontario, Canada



18th Demarcation, South Australia



18th Demarcation, New South Wales

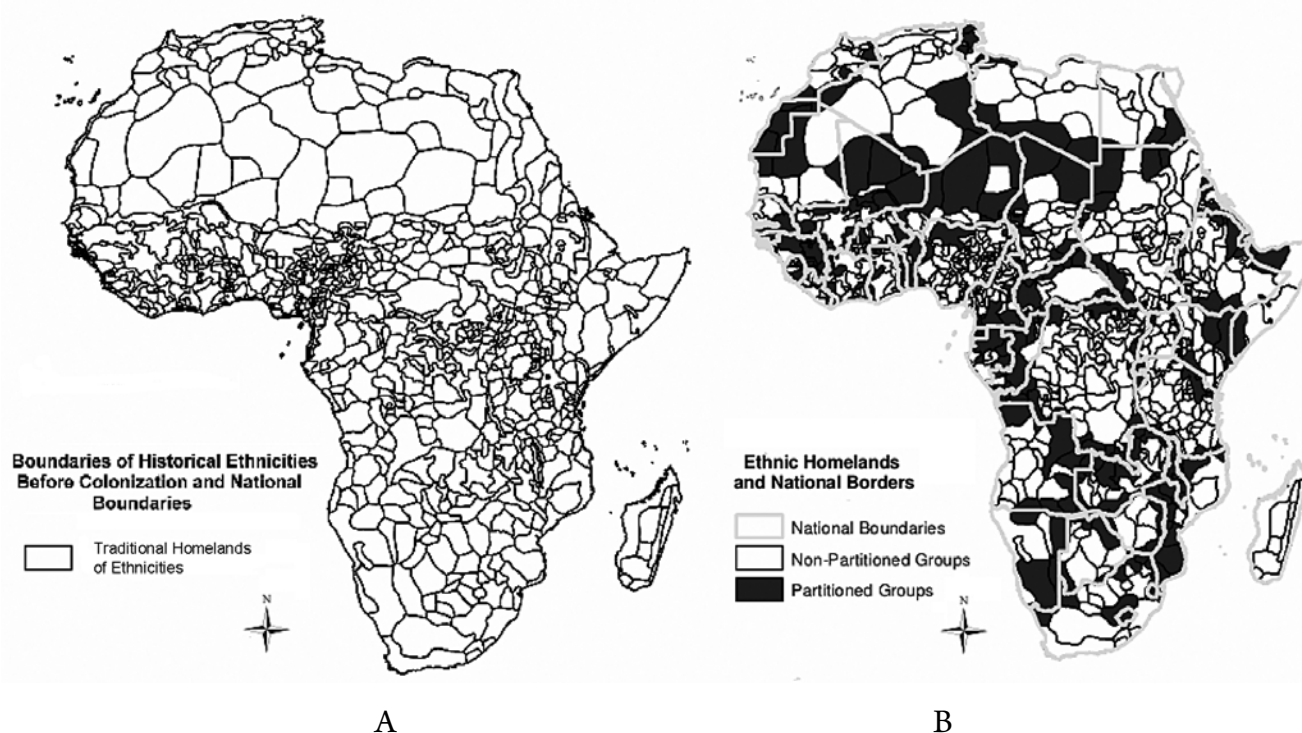


18th Demarcation Victoria, Australia



18th Demarcation, New Zealand

Appendix II



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