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The Impact of Colonial Borders on Modern African Countries and Integration

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Abstract

Colonialism began in 1884-1885 when the Berlin Conference initiated the "Scramble for Africa." At that time, the continent was divided among colonizers that had little understanding of ethnicities, languages, and politics of people living there. Some scholars think that geography and pre-colonial political systems also influenced the creation of boundaries between colonies. However, historical research proves that colonizers established borders that did not correspond to ethnic and political divisions. This paper analyses how boundaries inherited from colonial times affect political, economic, and social relations in Africa, a continent comprising 54 countries. Using the results obtained in various fields of study, it demonstrates that ethnic partitioning leads to civil conflicts, separatism, distrust in governments, economic underdevelopment caused by disruption of historical trade routes and lack of access to water, social problems associated with separation of people with shared culture into several independent states. After analyzing existing literature on the subject, conducting a qualitative analysis based on the theory of artificial states and path dependence, the author concludes that maintaining old boundaries despite their negative impact became the reason why post-colonial states did not fight each other in 1964 (as proposed by the Organization of African Unity).

Keywords: *Artificial States, Berlin Conference, Colonial Borders, Conflict, Regional Integration*

INTRODUCTION

Many of Africa's current political borders originated from agreements among the European nations during the late 1800s. From 1884 to 1885, representatives from fourteen European nations gathered at the Berlin Conference and formulated the rules for the partitioning of the continent, signaling the start of the so-called "Scramble for Africa" (Pakenham, 1991). Within three decades, virtually the whole continent was divided into territories, borders were delineated in Europe, and there was hardly any participation of Africans in the process. After achieving independence in the mid-1950s and 1960s, African states opted to retain their existing inherited borders based on the concept of uti possidetis juris, as stipulated in the 1964 OAU Cairo Declaration, so as to prevent conflicts over disputed borders (Touval, 1972). Therefore, the current 54 African states have managed to retain their boundaries that had been imposed from outside and not developed organically.

With the passage of time, debates on these borders have gained complexity. Previous theories pointed out that the borders were randomly drawn, cutting through ethnic groups and merging different ethnic groups within one territory, which eventually resulted in instability post-independence (Alesina et al., 2011; Englebert, 2000). Nevertheless, recent researches present a more elaborate approach and have found that European administrators often took into consideration the existing political demarcations and physical barriers like rivers and lakes while drawing boundaries (Paine & Qiu, 2024). Paine and Qiu (2024) argue that almost 62% of Africa's international borders were shaped based on previous political borders, while about 63% used rivers as prominent landmarks. However, the principal objective of dividing up the continent was to meet the objectives of the Europeans politically and economically instead of reflecting the reality of Africa's social and political dynamics. As a result, the process of dividing Africa not only resulted in division but also united diverse communities into one colonial territory (Monteh, 2024).

In this study, emphasis is put on the legacy of these boundaries in modern Africa. The existing boundaries have continued to affect the political, economic, and social landscapes of the continent. Politically, the mismatch of the state institutions and national identity has been cited as the

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major factor causing weak governments, separatism, and vulnerability to civil unrest in Africa (Englebert, 2000; Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2016). The existence of ethnic groups spread across several states, for example, Somali in Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti; Ewe in Ghana and Togo; Afar in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti; and Yoruba in Nigeria and Benin complicates governance and security challenges further. Economically, the existing inherited borders have disrupted trade routes, created 16 landlocked countries, and created barriers such as tariffs and different currency. These problems persist in today's trade in Africa, with intra-Africa trade accounting for less than 18% of total trade in the continent in 2024 (African Union, 2024). Socially, the colonial boundaries created artificial nationalities in groups of people whose identities had been based on ethnicity, language, or religion, resulting in persistent conflict over citizenship, resource allocation, and political participation.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section reviews key theories and existing studies on colonial borders and state formation in Africa. This is followed by an examination of empirical research on the effects of these borders. The study then identifies gaps in the literature before presenting its theoretical approach, which combines Artificial States Theory and Path Dependence. After explaining the research method, the paper discusses its findings across political, economic, and social areas. Finally, it concludes with key insights and policy recommendations, along with a list of references in APA 7th edition format.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly inquiry into the impact of colonial borders on African states spans political science, economics, history, and geography. Three dominant thematic strands emerge in the literature:

(a) The process and logic of border formation during the Scramble for Africa,
(b) The political consequences of "artificial" borders for state legitimacy and conflict, and
(c) the economic and social consequences for development, integration, and identity.

While earlier scholarship emphasized arbitrariness, recent work introduces nuance regarding the role of precolonial states and geography. This review organizes the literature by theme to identify areas of consensus, debate, and omission across all 54 modern African countries.

THE FORMATION OF COLONIAL BORDERS: ARBITRARY VS. ENDOGENOUS VIEWS

For a long time, the dominant view of how African borders were created described the process as largely random and disconnected from local realities. Davidson (1992) argued that European officials at the Berlin Conference simply drew boundaries on maps with very little understanding of the people living in those areas, leading to the formation of states without strong historical or cultural unity. This idea was later supported in economic studies by Alesina et al. (2011), who described many African countries as "artificial," noting that a large proportion of borders follow straight lines of latitude and longitude and often divide ethnic groups. Englebert (2000) further argued that this disconnect between colonial boundaries and precolonial political systems weakened the legitimacy of African states after independence.

However, more recent studies offer a more balanced perspective on this issue and refute the notion of the random nature of border-making. According to Paine and Qiu (2024), based on extensive geographical analysis and diplomatic records, pre-colonial African political boundaries played a role in the establishment of some contemporary borders. The authors estimate that 62% of all shared borders have been formed in this manner. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Europeans usually negotiated with the Africans concerning their existing borders. In addition, natural features such as rivers and lakes played a major role, forming the main basis for roughly 63% of borders, while straight-line boundaries accounted for a smaller share and were mostly found in desert regions with less strategic value. Based on this evidence, Paine and Qiu (2024) argue that African borders cannot be described as entirely random, as both geography and precolonial political structures had some influence.

Taking a middle-ground perspective, Herbst (2000) explains that although borders were not completely arbitrary, they were mainly designed to serve European interests. These interests included controlling trade routes, gaining access to resources, and avoiding conflicts among European powers, rather than maintaining existing African political systems. Asiwaju (1985) also identified more than 190 cases where ethnic groups were split across borders, showing the widespread impact of partitioning. Overall, current scholarship suggests that while African geography and political structures did play some role, colonial borders were largely shaped by European goals and still resulted in significant division of pre-existing societies (Monteh, 2024).

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES: STATE LEGITIMACY, CONFLICT, AND SECESSIONISM

Much empirical evidence links colonial borders and political instability in post-colonial Africa. According to Englebert (2000), states with borders that did not coincide with past political systems were at risk from an acute "legitimacy gap," rendering them prone to authoritarianism, coups, and civil wars. His empirical study indicated that countries with borders congruent to their past had more stability and economic development compared to those with incongruous borders. Along the same lines, Alesina et al. (2011) calculated the extent to which states have "artificial" borders and discovered that such states have had higher rates of conflict, poor delivery of public services, and lower income per capita.

Going further into detail, Michalopoulos & Papaioannou (2016) explored the effect of colonial borders on particular

*Corresponding Author: **Gideon, N. Esther.**

ethnic groups by looking at historical ethnic territories compared with national borders. Their study revealed that ethnic groups divided by borders are about 40% more likely to experience civil conflict than those that remain within a single country. These divided groups also tend to have lower levels of education and income. Importantly, these patterns remain consistent across different parts of Africa, even after accounting for geography and historical conditions, reinforcing the idea that splitting ethnic groups contributes significantly to conflict.

Further support comes from studies of separatist movements across the continent. Examples include Biafra in Nigeria (1967–1970), Katanga in the Democratic Republic of Congo (1960–1963), Somaliland's long-standing separation from Somalia since 1991, as well as movements in Casamance (Senegal) and Cabinda (Angola) (Zeller, 2013). Touval (1972) explained that the Organization of African Unity chose to maintain colonial borders in 1964 to avoid widespread territorial disputes. While this decision helped prevent wars between countries, it also deepened internal tensions by limiting the ability of certain groups to pursue self-rule (Clapham, 1996). Similarly, Monteh (2024) argues that many civil conflicts, political crises, and separatist efforts across Africa can be traced to unclear or problematic borders.

However, not all scholars agree that borders alone determine political outcomes. Nugent (2002) emphasized the role of leadership, institutions, and national policies in shaping stability, pointing to relatively peaceful and diverse countries such as Tanzania and Botswana. Young (1994) also noted that colonial rule helped create new national identities that sometimes reduced the importance of ethnic divisions. Even so, most researchers agree that while colonial borders do not automatically lead to instability, they have significantly increased the likelihood of political challenges in many African states.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES: FRAGMENTATION, TRADE, AND IDENTITY

Indeed, empirical evidence shows that ethnically split societies record light intensity at night that is 25% less compared to those without split communities. According to Jerven (2010), colonial boundaries are associated with infrastructure disruptions whereby roads and railways end abruptly at national boundaries and do not connect economic hubs. Indeed, according to the African Union (2024), intra-African trade stands at 17.6% of total trade due to border formalities, non-tariff barriers, and infrastructural deficiencies emanating from the colonial era.

The economic literature emphasizes how colonial borders fragmented precolonial trade networks and created structural disadvantages. Prior to colonization, long-distance trade routes connected the Sahel, Savanna, and forest zones, and coastal-inland linkages facilitated regional economies (Hopkins, 1973). Colonial borders imposed customs, currencies, and transport systems oriented toward Europe, severing these networks. The creation of 16 landlocked states including Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Central African Republic, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Lesotho, and Eswatini imposed permanent transport costs and dependence on neighbors (Collier, 2007).

Socially, colonial borders divided culturally homogeneous groups and aggregated unrelated groups, forcing new national identities onto diverse populations. Asiwaju (1985) documented the social costs for partitioned communities, including restricted mobility, split families, and divergent legal systems. The Ewe, for example, were divided between British Gold Coast and German Togoland, later Ghana and Togo, creating differences in language of instruction, legal codes, and political culture (Nugent, 2002). The Somali are split among Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti, fueling irredentist claims and the "Greater Somalia" concept that contributed to the 1977–1978 Ogaden War (Lewis, 2002).

INTEGRATION EFFORTS AND BORDER MANAGEMENT

Since independence, African states have recognized border problems and pursued integration. The OAU's 1964 Cairo Resolution froze borders, but the AU's 2007 African Union Border Programme (AUBP) seeks to delimit, demarcate, and manage borders to promote peace and integration (African Union, 2013). Monteh (2024) argued that African states have made "formidable efforts through the Organisation of African Union (OAU) and later African Union (AU) and at regional and sub-regional groupings to promote economic, social and political integration". Regional Economic Communities such as ECOWAS, SADC, EAC, and COMESA have protocols on free movement and trade, while the AfCFTA (2021) aims to create a single continental market.

In sum, the literature establishes that colonial borders were shaped by European interests with partial reference to African geography and politics; that they correlate with political instability, secessionism, and legitimacy challenges; and that they fragmented economies and identities while creating imperatives for integration. Debates persist on the degree of arbitrariness and the extent to which postcolonial agency mitigates border effects. These debates inform the empirical review that follows.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON BORDER FORMATION

The newly emerging research questions the earlier assumption of lack of a discernible pattern in the formation of African borders by analyzing the elements influencing their creation. According to Paine and Qiu (2024), an elaborate analysis was done using a gridded dataset of Africa whereby every square was made up of half degrees by half degrees, indicating the presence or absence of international borders. The information was used together with the historical maps of precolonial states by Müller-Crepon et al. (2022) and geographical data such as rivers to analyze the probability of the formation of borders using statistical models. It is evident that there is a 3.1

*Corresponding Author: **Gideon, N. Esther.**

times higher chance of forming a colonial border in regions that have a preexisting political frontier compared to those without preexisting boundaries with high statistical significance ($p < .01$). Furthermore, geographical elements had an even stronger influence on borders; thus, natural waterways increased the probability of having a border by approximately 4.7 times. An evaluation of 107 joint borders indicated that about 62% of them were shaped by preexisting political boundaries, 63% followed the natural watercourses, and 37% had linear forms.

Again, the most developed empirical literature examines whether partitioned ethnic groups experience different outcomes. Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2016) merged George Peter Murdock's Ethnographic Atlas of 843 African ethnic homelands with contemporary national borders to identify 229 partitioned groups, representing 45% of Africa's surface area. Using within-country and within-ethnicity designs, they found that partitioned ethnic homelands experience 42% more civil conflict events from 1997–2013, based on ACLED data. The effect is robust across West, East, Central, and Southern Africa and holds when comparing partitioned versus non-partitioned segments of the same ethnic group. They also found partitioned areas have 25% lower satellite nighttime light density and 18% lower educational attainment.

For secessionism, Englebert et al. (2002) coded all secessionist movements in Africa 1960–1999 and found that 78% occurred in states with high scores on the "artificiality index," which combines partitioned groups, straight-line borders, and landlocked status. Examples span the continent: Casamance in Senegal, Cabinda in Angola, Somaliland in Somalia, Anjouan in Comoros, and Caprivi in Namibia. South Sudan's 2011 secession from Sudan is the only successful case of postcolonial border change, and it followed decades of war linked to the colonial aggregation of Arab north and African south (Johnson, 2011).

In the same vain, qualitative studies provide depth on mechanisms across all regions. For West Africa, Nugent (2002) conducted ethnography on the Ghana-Togo border and found that Ewe communities maintain cross-border kinship, trade, and festivals, but face different school curricula, legal systems, and currencies, producing "borderland" identities distinct from national ones. In East Africa, Feyissa and Hoehne (2010) documented how Somali clans span Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya, and how colonial borders enabled clan-based insurgency and complicated counterterrorism.

In Central Africa, Willame (1997) showed that the DRC's borders combined over 200 ethnic groups, contributing to state weakness and the First and Second Congo Wars (1996–2003). In Southern Africa, Zeller (2013) analyzed the Namibia-Angola border and found that while states assert sovereignty, Ovambo and Herero communities treat the border as porous for grazing and trade, creating a "border paradox." In North Africa, Ali (2014) argued that Sudan's colonial unification of Arab-Muslim north and African-Christian/animist south created structural conflict, culminating in South Sudan's secession.

The African Union Border Programmes has produced empirical audits showing that as of 2022, only 35% of Africa's 83,000 km of land borders are demarcated, and 28% are disputed (African Union, 2022). Monteh (2024) reviewed 51 years of OAU/AU policy and found that while border conflicts declined after 1964, intrastate conflict in border regions increased, supporting the substitution hypothesis.

Although extensive scholarship has examined the origins and consequences of colonial borders in Africa, four critical gaps remain that limit a comprehensive understanding of their impact on all modern African countries.

First, there is a regional imbalance in empirical coverage. Quantitative studies on ethnic partitioning and conflict, notably Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2016) and McCauley and Posner (2015), rely heavily on data from sub-Saharan Africa, with limited inclusion of North African states. Yet colonial borders also reconfigured North Africa, aggregating diverse Berber, Arab, and Saharan populations in Libya, Algeria, and Sudan. The political and economic effects of borders in North Africa remain under-theorized, creating an incomplete continental picture. Similarly, small island states such as Comoros, Seychelles, Mauritius, and São Tomé and Príncipe are rarely incorporated into border-effects models, despite being products of colonial territorialization.

Second, the literature has under-examined contemporary institutional responses to border legacies. While Monteh (2024) and the African Union (2022) document the AU Border Programme and Regional Economic Community initiatives, few empirical studies test whether post-2000 integration mechanisms particularly the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) since 2021 mitigate the border penalties identified by Storeygard (2016) and Limão and Venables (2001). The time lag in data means most econometric work ends before 2015, leaving the current phase of African integration unassessed.

Third, there is a scarcity of gendered and subnational analysis. Existing work treats partitioned ethnic groups and states as unitary actors, but colonial borders also divided gendered labor systems, matrilineal versus patrilineal land tenure, and women's cross-border trade networks (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997). Border studies in Africa seldom disaggregate outcomes by gender or examine how border management affects informal female traders who constitute up to 70% of cross-border commerce in West and Central Africa (UNECA, 2021). The social consequences of borders are therefore not fully captured.

Fourth, African agency and borderland resilience are under-conceptualized. The dominant narrative emphasizes borders as constraints, but ethnographic work by Nugent (2002) and Zeller (2013) shows borderland communities actively exploit, negotiate, and redefine borders. This agency is rarely integrated into large-N studies, producing a structural determinism that overlooks how societies adapt to and

*Corresponding Author: **Gideon, N. Esther.**

transform colonial geographies. Path Dependence theory suggests that while borders create initial conditions, subsequent choices matter, yet few studies operationalize this for African border regions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In an attempt to understand how borders created in the 1880s still influence the politics, economy, and society of each contemporary African state, this research employs two different theories: Artificial States Theory (Alesina et al., 2011; Englebert, 2000) and Path Dependence Theory (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2004). These two theories together help to comprehend not only the impact itself but also the process of how it was initiated and sustained.

ARTIFICIAL STATES THEORY

Artificial State Theory contends that states with territorial borders that do not coincide with preexisting ethnic, linguistic, or political communities experience difficulties in achieving legitimacy, coherence, and effective governance. Alesina et al. (2011) measure a state's artificiality with the help of three factors: (a) extent of straightness of a state's borders, (b) percentage of the population that belongs to partitioned ethnic groups, and (c) whether the state is landlocked owing to its border structure. According to them, the artificiality of a state is costly for nation-building as the rulers have to govern a disparate community lacking common identity and possibly owing allegiance to their ethnic kin residing outside the state.

Englebert (2000), building upon the theory, identifies "state legitimacy" as being at the crux of incongruence between the state and its pre-colonial political institutions. He recognizes two kinds of state legitimacy – horizontal, which refers to congruence between the state and its pre-colonial political institutions, and vertical, which pertains to congruence between the state's rulers and its population. The colonial era borders resulted in horizontal incongruence by breaking up centralized pre-colonial states such as the Sokoto Caliphate, Buganda, and Ashanti into several colonies and uniting stateless societies with kingdoms within.

PATH DEPENDENCE THEORY

The Path Dependence Theory, emerging from historical institutionalism, posits that the choices made at crucial turning points lead to institutional arrangements that are expensive to alter, despite the availability of superior alternatives (Mahoney, 2000). According to Pierson (2004), there are four self-reinforcing processes: increasing returns, sunk costs, coordination effects, and adaptive expectations. Once the path is chosen, individuals adjust themselves to it, making any form of alteration gradual rather than revolutionary.

The 1884-1885 Berlin Conference and later bilateral treaties can be considered a critical juncture in Africa's history. The boundaries demarcated at this point involved sunk costs, such as administrative structures, maps, treaties, and international recognition. The 1964 OAU Cairo Resolution on uti possidetis juris was an example of a reinforcing event: African leaders opted for path dependency to prevent interstate conflict, hence institutionalizing the colonial borders (Touval, 1972). As states formed bureaucracies, armies, and economies based on the existing territories, coordination effects emerged. Finally, citizens, entrepreneurs, and foreign entities expected the boundaries to persist, forming adaptive expectations. Path Dependence does not imply determinism. Mahoney (2000) distinguishes between reactive sequences, where each event triggers the next, and self-reinforcing sequences, where institutions reproduce themselves. Colonial borders initiated reactive sequences: ethnic partitioning - secessionist claims - state repression - civil war, as in Nigeria and Sudan. They also initiated self-reinforcing sequences: landlocked status - high transport costs - underinvestment in infrastructure - continued marginalization, as in Chad and Central African Republic.

Importantly, Path Dependence allows for contingent change at new critical junctures. The creation of the African Union in 2002, the AU Border Programme in 2007, and the AfCFTA in 2021 represent potential junctures where African states attempt to "layer" new institutions over colonial paths without redrawing borders (Streeck & Thelen, 2005). The theory thus predicts that colonial border effects will persist unless new institutions alter incentive structures enough to overcome sunk costs.

METHODOLOGY

The chosen research methodology is a qualitative desk research approach, which utilizes descriptive statistical analysis. This approach is suitable for this study due to the nature of the research questions, which focus on long-term historical phenomena and general trends at the continent-wide level, which can neither be controlled nor experimented with. In addition, the colonial borders' impact is analyzed using academic literature data sets and government statistics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The use of a desk research methodology is justified by three considerations. First, the unit of analysis is the nation-state and the borderlands, and the data to be used include treaties, colonial maps, ethnographic borders, conflict incidents, trading figures, and policies issued by the AU—all of which are either publicly accessible or appear in peer-reviewed journals. Second, the theoretical underpinning demands a history of pivotal moments and path dependency, which is possible only through a qualitative content analysis of secondary sources (George & Bennett, 2005). Finally, considering the paper's 7,000-8,000 word limit and an April 20, 2026 submission date, conducting primary research in several countries is impractical, while a review of previous research would yield fresh results.

The research also adopted a comparative and cross-sectional design involving all African Union nations, with case-study process tracing for selected examples in each sub-region: Northern (Sudan, Libya), Western (Nigeria, Ghana/Togo), Central (DRC, Cameroon), Eastern (Kenya/Somalia/Ethiopia), and Southern (Zimbabwe, Namibia).

Secondary data is obtained from the following categories:

*Corresponding Author: **Gideon, N. Esther.**

1. Official records and documents: Texts of the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference General Act, bilateral colonial treaties classified by Paine and Qiu (2024), OAU/AU resolutions, and REC protocols. They determine the critical juncture as well as subsequent institutional layering.
2. Datasets used by academics: (a) Dataset of 843 ethnic homelands overlaid with modern-day borders compiled by Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2016) for measuring partitioning, (b) artificiality index developed by Alesina et al. (2011), (c) scores for legitimacy compiled by Englebert (2000), (d) the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database of conflict incidence between 1997 and 2025, and (e) the World Bank's World Development Indicators database and data provided by the African Development Bank for GDP, trade, and infrastructure. All these datasets span entire Africa or at least most of its countries.
3. Peer-reviewed literature: Articles and books found during the Literature Review and Empirical Review stages, sourced from JSTOR, Science Direct, and institutional library databases. The selection criteria include the following: (a) publication date between 1985 and 2026, (b) subject relevance (Africa and its borders and related issues), and (c) description of methodology used. On average, 35-40 works will be cited.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The evidence reviewed in Sections 3 and 4, interpreted through Artificial States Theory and Path Dependence Theory, indicates that colonial borders operate as a persistent structural variable in the trajectories of all modern African countries. The discussion is organized around the four research questions posed in the Introduction, addressing political, economic, and social impacts while accounting for regional variation and postcolonial agency.

Political Impacts: Legitimacy, Conflict, and the State Across Africa

The first research question asked how colonial borders influenced political stability and conflict incidence. The data support the proposition from Artificial States Theory that incongruence between colonial territories and precolonial political systems generated legitimacy deficits that persist. Englebert's (2000) cross-national analysis and Michalopoulos and Papaioannou's (2016) ethnic-homeland data both demonstrate that states with higher shares of partitioned ethnic groups experience significantly more civil conflict. This pattern holds across subregions: in West Africa, the Ewe partitioned between Ghana and Togo and the Yoruba between Nigeria and Benin have been associated with irredentist claims and cross-border political mobilization (Nugent, 2002); in East Africa, the Somali divided among Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti contributed to the 1977–1978 Ogaden War and ongoing al-Shabaab insurgency (Lewis, 2002); in Central Africa, the aggregation of over 200 groups in the DRC created a state that Clapham (1996) termed "inverted," where the center cannot project authority to borders; and in North Africa, the colonial unification of Arab and African communities in Sudan produced structural conflict that resulted in South Sudan's 2011 secession (Johnson, 2011).

Economic Impacts: Landlockedness, Fragmentation and Integration

The second research question concerned economic integration and underdevelopment. The empirical record shows three mechanisms linking colonial borders to economic outcomes. First, border design created 16 landlocked states, a condition that Collier and O'Connell (2008) found reduces annual growth by 1.5 percentage points. The effect is visible across the continent: Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and CAR in West/Central Africa; Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Botswana in Southern Africa; Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and Ethiopia in East Africa; plus Lesotho and Eswatini. All were denied coastlines by colonial boundaries, increasing dependence on neighbors for trade and raising transport costs (Limão & Venables, 2001).

Second, borders fragmented precolonial market areas. Hopkins (1973) documented trans-Saharan and trans-Savanna trade networks that colonial boundaries severed. Jerven (2010) showed that colonial railways and roads ran from interior mines/plantations to coastal ports, not between colonies, producing infrastructure discontinuities that persist. Storeygard (2016) quantified this: cities 500 km apart in different African countries trade 80% less than equidistant cities within the same country. The result is that intra-African trade remained at 17.6% in 2022, compared to 69% in Europe (AfDB, 2023).

Third, borders imposed regulatory divergence. Each colonial territory adopted the metropole's currency, legal system, and commercial code French civil law versus British common law, CFA franc versus national currencies creating non-tariff barriers. Asher and Novosad (2020) found that populations within 50 km of borders have lower wealth and education, indicating that border regions are economically marginalized rather than hubs of exchange.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to provide a critical evaluation of the effect of colonial borders on modern Africa in terms of their political, economic, and social consequences. Through analysis grounded in Artificial States Theory and Path Dependence Theory, alongside an integration of findings from various studies conducted in all 54 member states of the African Union, the analysis shows that these borders remain influential on the continent's developmental path.

Politically, colonial borders resulted in disconformity between state structures and precolonial polities and therefore created legitimacy crises, which, in turn, contributed to increased likelihood of civil conflict, secessionism, and state formation problems (Alesina et al., 2011; Englebert, 2000; Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2016). Whereas the uti possidetis juris rule upheld at the 1964 OAU summit has helped prevent inter-state conflicts, it has inadvertently led to

*Corresponding Author: **Gideon, N. Esther.**

intra-state conflicts due to partitioned ethnic groups and aggregate communities. This trend can be seen from Casamance in Senegal all the way to Cabinda in Angola, from the Somali region of the Horn to the Ewe people in West Africa, and from the Tuaregs in the Sahel to the separatists in Comoros. Path Dependence explains how these borders survived through the years – the costs already incurred, coordination problems, and adaptive expectations meant political impossibility in changing these borders after gaining independence.

Economically, the colonial borders led to fragmented trade routes, 16 landlocked nations, and infrastructure designed for Europe and not for African integration (Collier & O'Connell, 2008; Jerven, 2010). This resulted in high cost of trade, infrastructural discontinuity within borders, and African intra-trade which remains below 18% (AfDB, 2023). The borders are consistently poor and less-educated compared to the countries' interiors, pointing to marginalization effects (Asher & Novosad, 2020). While efforts have been recently done in terms of institutional layering by the AU Border Programme and AfCFTA, it still remains true that the colonial economic geography influences results.

On the societal level, colonial boundaries both split homogeneous groups and amalgamated heterogeneous ones, making it necessary to undertake difficult processes of nation-building across the entire continent (Asiwaju, 1985; Mamdani, 1996). The former will experience issues of citizenship, provision of services, and identity, and the latter will need to manage diversity as never before. However, borderlanders have agency and use the border to construct new mixed identities and exploit its economic and social opportunities (Nugent, 2002; Zeller, 2013).

The paper concludes that the impact of colonial borders is probabilistic rather than deterministic. They have increased the probability of political instability, economic fragmentation, and social complexity for all post-colonial African nations, with regional integration and leadership moderating the severity of such impacts. Botswana and Mauritius have proven that good governance can reduce the influence of borders, while DRC and Somalia illustrate the opposite effect. In other words, borders form the primary conditionality of national development.

There are three major limitations that should be discussed. The first one relates to the fact that the use of secondary data prevents capturing sub-national differences in large countries. The second one deals with insufficient coverage of North African and small-island countries in some data sets, which may distort the results when calculating the average value on the continent level. The third limitation concerns the fact that the research period ends in 2026, which precludes assessing the long-term impacts of AfCFTA and other integration programs.

To summarize, colonial boundaries are firmly rooted in the current social, political, and economic realities in Africa. It is vital to understand them both as barriers and contexts if one wants to change their impact without changing boundaries per se.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the finding that colonial borders function as persistent structural variables shaping political, economic, and social outcomes across all modern African countries, this study advances two sets of recommendations: (a) policy actions for the African Union, Regional Economic Communities, and national governments, and (b) directions for future research. The recommendations are guided by the theoretical insight that while colonial paths are costly to reverse, institutional layering and contingent agency can mitigate negative effects without resorting to border revision.

i. Accelerate and deepen implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Given that border-induced fragmentation and landlockedness impose measurable trade costs (Limão & Venables, 2001; Storeygard, 2016), AfCFTA protocols on tariffs, rules of origin, and customs cooperation should be fully domesticated by all 54 states. Priority should be given to one-stop border posts, harmonization of standards, and digital customs platforms to reduce delays that disproportionately affect landlocked countries such as Chad, Zambia, and Rwanda. The African Union Commission should publish annual scorecards to create peer pressure for compliance.

ii. Prioritize cross-border infrastructure under the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA). To overcome colonial-era infrastructure discontinuities (Jerven, 2010), national budgets and multilateral financing should target transport and energy projects that link economic centers across borders rather than only to ports. Examples include the Lagos-Abidjan Corridor, the North-South Corridor from DRC to South Africa, and the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor. Infrastructure should be complemented by joint border governance agreements to prevent new facilities from being underutilized due to administrative barriers.

iii. Institutionalize cross-border cooperation for partitioned ethnic groups. Following the AU Border Programme, states should establish Joint Border Commissions with legal mandates to manage shared resources, pastoralist corridors, and service delivery for groups such as the Somali, Ewe, Afar, Tuareg, and Maasai. This includes mutual recognition of identification documents, cross-border health and education arrangements, and conflict early-warning systems. Such measures address the legitimacy deficits identified by Englebert (2000) without challenging territorial integrity.

iv. Mainstream gender and informality in border policy. Because women constitute up to 70% of informal cross-border traders (UNECA, 2021), simplified trade regimes, gender desks at borders,

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and protection from harassment should be mandatory components of AfCFTA implementation. This addresses the gap in literature and ensures that integration benefits are inclusive.

v. Disaggregate border effects subnationally and by gender. Future studies should use geocoded household surveys and administrative data to test whether border penalties vary within countries and between men and women, addressing the limitation of state-level datasets noted in Section 7.

vi. Evaluate AfCFTA and AU integration post-2026. Longitudinal research should assess whether institutional layering attenuates the correlations between artificiality and underdevelopment identified by Alesina et al. (2011) and Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2016). This requires panel data from 2021–2035.

vii. Examine borderland agency quantitatively. Building on Nugent (2002) and Zeller (2013), researchers should develop measures of "border elasticity" or "cross-border social capital" to test when and how communities overcome structural constraints, balancing Path Dependence with human agency.

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