

# Endogenous Colonial Borders: Precolonial States and Geography in the Partition of Africa

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May 18, 2021

## Abstract

We challenge the accepted wisdom about border formation in Africa. Existing accounts highlight that Europeans unilaterally drew arbitrary international borders in ignorance of local conditions. We instead show that African border formation was a dynamic process that lasted for decades, and propose that self-interested Europeans faced incentives to learn about and adjust to realities on the ground. The rough boundaries of precolonial states and salient geographical features (rivers and lakes) created focal points for Europeans to form borders and settle disputes, and also created leverage for African chiefs to influence colonial borders. After reanalyzing statistical correlates of ethnic partition, we present findings based on grid-cell units and original spatial data on precolonial states. We uncover several systematic correlates of partition: precolonial states were infrequently partitioned, areas with rivers and lakes were frequently partitioned, and straight-line borders are mostly confined to desert areas. We also compiled extensive data from treaties and diplomatic correspondences to show direct evidence of the mechanisms. We conclude that the colonial *states* were largely artificial with respect to historical and geographic antecedents—yet the *borders* between these states were not.

**Keywords:** Africa, borders, colonialism, geography, precolonial states

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