

Councils and Indirect Rule in British Africa

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March 11, 2025

Abstract

How did Western colonial rule affect political institutions in Africa? We study the institutional makeup of local political regimes under colonial rule, in particular the role of chiefs and the institutional constraints exercised by councils. We present two main findings, based on analyzing originally compiled data on both the precolonial and colonial eras for nearly 500 subnational units across British Africa. First, legally recognized councils with independent powers were widespread in British Africa. Second, variation in colonial councils reflected precolonial precedents, although not through simple continuity mechanisms. Africans pressured British officials to (re)introduce councils throughout historically decentralized regions and areas with constrained precolonial rulers. By contrast, authoritarian subnational institutions were mostly confined to the relatively few areas with precolonial authoritarian states. These findings inform widespread debates about colonial indirect rule and counter the routine characterization that Africans lacked agency. British administrators were unable to uniformly wipe away precolonial conditions on the ground by permanently installing authoritarian chiefs everywhere.
