The Imperial British Strategy of Divide and Conquer in Africa

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Introduction

Divide and rule as explained by Emmanuel and Abiodun is a strategy used in the political and social fields to maintain power by disintegrating larger communities into pieces and empowering the individual pieces[1]. The breaking of power creates different centers and decentralizes the power thus making it easier to manipulate. The study further noted that implementing the strategy involves developing different structures of power, causing rivalry among them, thus resulting in discord. It is well documented that the divide and rule structures are mainly attributed to sovereigns, whose focus has been to rule for many years. A case example is the African context where divide and rule was used by colonialists as a strategy to overcome their well established structures and take over. Ilia wrote that the main focus of the divide and rule strategy was for sovereigns to expand territories[2]. It was highlighted that the British coming to Africa aimed at colonizing different territories. It is also envisioned that the strategy aimed at controlling resources from the different regions. However, from the available literature, divide and rule has not been explored in-depth in relations to specific colonies.

This paper presents the argument and discussion that by separating related ethnic, religious and tribal groups into different regions while merging dissimilar groups, the British subverted the social, religious, political and economic dynamics of many African countries and capitalized on the discord as a tool to maintain overall control. In this paper, the 'divide and rule' strategy as a political approach used by the colonialists to upend traditional rule in Africa will be discussed. The paper also discusses aspects of the history of Africa from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period. The major focus will be how divide and rule was implemented and how the

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[1] Emmanuel Jude and Abiodun Akinwale. "A Historical and Comparative Analysis of Colonial and Post-Colonial Bureaucracy in Nigeria". *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*. vol. 4, no. 2 (2014): 64-79.

[2] Ilia Xypolia. "Divide et Impera: Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of British Imperialism". *Journal of Socialist Theory*, vol. 44, no. 3, (2016): 221-231.

African continent was influenced by the European colonial powers thus disintegrating their social, religious, political and economic dynamics.

History of divide and rule strategy

The 19th century saw the British come to Africa with the interest of overruling the traditional ruling structures. The main idea was to come and dominate the region given that they had particular interests. As addressed in the research, it was apparent that the British wanted different resources and supplies from the region. Within the African continent, one of Britain's main interests was in trade with India, which it had come to dominate by the end of the 18th century. The British interest in Africa was incidental to this--ships bound to and from India had to pass along the African coast where they obtained supplies and occasionally became shipwrecked. Only a few spots in West Africa, like the Gold Coast and the Slave Coast (modern Nigeria), offered enough profit to make them attractive in their own right, so that by the end of "the Scramble" the British occupied only the Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and Nigeria. Naturally, the British also acquired extensive holdings elsewhere in Africa, notably in Egypt, Kenya and South Africa, but in West Africa, most of the territory went to the French.

The works of Emmanuel and Abiodun highlighted that when they came to Africa colonial governments has one major goal in mind, to overthrow the prevailing power structures. In this case, it was not easy to overpower the well established traditional structures among the African communities. As further explained in the previewed literature, for them to penetrate the different regions, the colonialists needed a way of separating the different structures and creating animosity between them. This was regarded as the only way of ensuring that they took over charge within the respective communities. The well-structured African continent already has

defined their authorities[3]. This means that these authorities had defined the hierarchy of power. From this perspective, they were governing the land with a united front. This being the case, weakening the structure needed a well thought strategy.

To approach the African continent, Felix highlighted that the colonialists could not use force. The colonialists had everything in possession, including the guns and other artillery. It meant that the new comers had the opportunity of trying the forceful way of overpowering the Africans. With the heavy artillery approach, Felix further observed that the Africans would have responded with force. This means that it would have been much difficult to convince them of their good will. It is therefore a major reason why the colonialists concealed their artillery. They had to disguise themselves as peaceful visitors who came in good will. Felix also noted that taking over power would not have come easy if the colonialists invited a revolt from the African governments[4].

Divide and Rule as a colonial policy

Research has indicated that the British, French, Germany and Belgium were among the major colonies that dominated Africa in the early 19th century. In the case of the German regime Mart observed that divide and rule took center stage in their rule[5]. One of such approaches was to place the Tutsi minority group in the country in positions of power. By doing so, the German aimed at conquering the domination of the group in the region. They had been a dominant power over many years and were controlling the land full of resources. To find a way of getting through the system, the German created new structures and lured support from the dominant groups by

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[3]Emmanuel Jude and AbiodunAkinwale. "A Historical and Comparative Analysis of Colonial and Post-Colonial Bureaucracy in Nigeria". *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*. vol. 4, no. 2 (2014): 64-79.

[4]Felix S. Bethke. "The Consequences of Divide-and-Rule Politics in Africa South of the Sahara". *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2012): 72-85.

[5] Mart, Cagri. "British colonial education policy in Africa". *Internal journal of English and literature*, vol. 2, no. 9 (2011): 190-194

feigning to give them power over the others. Similarly, in the case of the Britain in East Africa, the focus was to create a socioeconomic divide in the region among the dominant groups.

Mart further wrote that between 1900 and 1960, the British gained access in Nigeria, one of the strongest power structures in the African region. The first initiative by the British was to reclassify the administration of the region. The British capitalized on the existing conflict between the Hausa and the Igbo in an effort to create different strongholds and manipulate the administrations. By creating two centers of power, the British managed to divide and rule the region. It was not the usual stronghold in the traditional rule within the country. But the communities were divided in interests and fought against each others. Such demarcations are regarded to as the strong pillars of divide and rule in the African continent. Divide and rule was predetermined by the colonial governments. It was prearranged over a long period of time given the hostilities they experienced. Were it not for the divide and rule, the Igbo and the Hausa would have had a united front that the British would not be able to penetrate.

Further research observed that the colonialists promoted ethnological, political, religious, racial, and tribal barriers to divide Africans[6]. In this case, it was necessary to create demarcations that would segregate the African continent. Besides the political segregation, the idea of divide and rule was to create social distances. As it has been noted, African societies have strong social bonds that brought them together. They had rules that defined their governance. For any foreign power to take over, one such strategy that would work was to create social distances among the communal groups. The study by Felix described social distances as separating the norms and beliefs accrued by the different societies. With the different groups aligned with particular social concepts, it would easily conflict with the other. Therefore, the element of unity was distracted

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[6]Ilia Xypolia. "Divide et Impera: Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of British Imperialism". *Journal of Socialist Theory*, vol. 44, no. 3, (2016): 221-231.

and controlled by the colonialists. As highlighted by Mart, having the Africans divided meant that there would be no organized resistance. Like in the case of the British colonialists in Kenya, they had earlier experienced major difficulties in overpowering the then strong Mau-Mau regime[7]. This was a united front that had established strong resistance in the country. To ensure that the Mau-Mau did not united and organized the resistance, the British colonialists separated the powerful fronts. They lured some of the powerful kings by assigned them in positions in the newly established administration. Therefore, they ultimately weakened the organized resistance.

How divide and rule was used in the colonial times

Territorial separation was the key strength of divide and rule in the African context. The colonialists created boundaries among the united tribes, for example, those of Nigeria[8]. As noted by Felix, the freedom fighters had strongly come together in an effort to drive the colonialists away. The fighters used heavy force and weapons to attack the newly formed administrations by the colonialists. This had indicated the strong unity among the Africans. Therefore, the British highlighted the need to wage this unity and create divisions. Such strategies that the British used in India were the creation of different army fronts. The British knew clearly that with different forces conflicting against each other they had an easier route to colonizing the land. Across the research a major example given is that of the Sikhs & Gurkhas that were two strong armies in India. The research indicated that these armies were not formed by accident. It was after the 1857 revolt of the Indians against the British that the colonizers felt the need to separate the united army. Anietie and Manasseh also wrote that the British administration removed the Brahmins and upper class Muslims from the army in order to ensure that they did not have control.

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[7] Emmanuel Jude and AbiodunAkinwale. "A Historical and Comparative Analysis of Colonial and Post-Colonial Bureaucracy in Nigeria". *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*. vol. 4, no. 2 (2014): 64-79.

[8] Mart, Cagri. "British colonial education policy in Africa". *Internal journal of English and literature*, vol. 2, no. 9 (2011): 190-194.

From a different perspective, Felix observed that separate electorates were also used massively by the British colonizers as the divide and rule strategy. In the early 20th century, there were two strong pillars of power, including the Muslims and the Hindus. During this time, the respective group would elect their own and rally behind in support. The British did their research and realized that these were two conflict fronts and they capitalized on it as a point of weakness. The idea was to make sure that India could not establish itself as one nation. It was to make sure that the region experienced unrests over time, which would make sure that no one concentrated on chasing away the colonialists. Felix wrote that it was in the interest of the British colonialists to create local unrest and conflicts that would divert the people from the focus on the colonialists.

Research indicates that partition of Bengal can be referenced as another strategy that the British used in the divide and rule across India[9]. It was recorded that Bengali Hindus had risen into great positions of power having come from the upper caste and educated in the best universities in the country. After realizing that the Bengali Hindus would become a huge force in the country and lead a revolution, Lord Curzon led the 1905 partitioning of the group using the religious concept. The British leader led a movement which ensured that the people were divided into religious groups and conflicts arose in the region. After the division, India experienced increased protests among the different groups with claims of discrimination.

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[9] Ilia Xypolia. "Divide et Impera: Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of British Imperialism". *Journal of Socialist Theory*, vol. 44, no. 3, (2016): 221-231

It is discussed in different research studies that the British colonialists also engaged in indirect rule using local Chiefs, Emirs, and the Obas[10]. In both Nigeria and Kenya, Felix wrote that the British first gained access to the lands by identifying and luring the most influential individuals in the region. These included the chiefs who were highly respected as part of the administration in the African communities. By having close ties with such powerful individuals, the British structure was effectively trickled down within the society. Having control over these individuals meant that they would also be able to control the communities. As explained in other studies by numerous researchers, the district chiefs played a critical role in the Gambian administration during the British rule. The research further indicated that during this time, the British administration favored the illiterate chiefs over the educated elite in the region. By doing so, the British colonialists integrated the indirect rule system. This was a system that Felix refers to as the rule of Africa by the colonialists using the local chiefs and administrators. It was noted that by having no adequate communication infrastructure, the British had to depend on the local agents in ruling the respective countries. The local chiefs were promised huge resources and favors, which is why they fell into the trap and inclined to supporting the colonialists.

Research by Aniette and Manasseh also indicated that the British colonialists were well aware that the elite within their communities would be the drivers of change. This meant that the best way to approach the African continent was separating the elite from their communities. The elite as noted by Ilia were highlighted as a threat to the colonial administration. It therefore meant that by separating them by detention, it would be much easier to colonize their communities. These are individuals who were well endowed with information about the sovereignty of their countries having adequately been exposed to the world. They therefore were

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[10] Felix S. Bethke. "The Consequences of Divide-and-Rule Politics in Africa South of the Sahara". *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2012): 72-85

enemies of the British administration and would not allow colonization. In fact, as noted by Ilia, majority of these individuals were the drivers and authors of independence movements. The British were well aware that the elite would form strong resistance against them. Therefore, they knew that the best way was to detain them and threaten any other parties that would follow their agenda. Felix gave major examples of the elite among them Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya and Nelson Mandera in South Africa. The two had to be detained by the colonialists given that they were among the elite who led freedom movements. By detaining them, the colonialists instilled fear among the others who had similar motives. This can therefore be regarded as one of the major divide and rule strategies that worked in retaining the colonialists in power across the African continent.

The works of Anietie and Manasseh reflect on the British application of different developmental policies for the regions for strategic reasons[11]. In this case, it is discussed that the British were well aware that implementing similar policies to govern the entire region would unite them. The most effective approach in this case was to divide the people by ensuring that they were subjected to different policies[12]. Different policies were therefore implemented in the economic, political, and social governance of the region. It meant that individuals from one region would not integrate with others because of their diversity. It also meant that the British would have control over the different communities, which sustained their governance over the years. Therefore, this was also considered as one of the most effective divide and rule strategies adopted in by the British in their time when they colonized different parts of Africa.

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[11] Anietie A. Inyang and Manasseh EdidemBassey, "Imperial Treaties and the Origins of British Colonial Rule in Southern Nigeria, 1860-1890", *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 5., no. 20 (2014), 53-91.

[12] Iliffe, John. Africans: The History of a Continent. Cambridge University Press (New York, United Kingdom).

5. Conclusion

By separating related ethnic, religious and tribal groups into different regions while merging dissimilar groups, the British subverted the social, religious, political and economic dynamics of many African countries and capitalized on the discord as a tool to maintain overall control. The literature accessed and discussed in this research paper explains that divide and rule was an effective political strategy for the colonial masters. By using ethnic and religious characteristics of people to divide their unified population, or merge dissimilar groups, colonial masters planted or orchestrated division and chaos. Tribal, religious and ethnic differences or hatred or potential hatred were exploited by the colonial masters to promote or maintain their own overall power. A major strategy used by the British was the replacement of traditional authorities with new administration appointed by colonial masters. This ensured that the British would enact controlled much easier. By dividing the people, the British prevented a united front that would establish a strong resistance against their regime. It is discussed in different research studies that the British colonialists also engaged in indirect rule using local Chiefs, Emirs, and the Obas. These were the strong pillars that the colonialists used to engage indirect rule. The British would give excess powers to the appointed rulers and led an autocratic regime.

Research also indicated that the British colonialists were well aware that the elite within their communities would be the drivers of change. This meant that the best way to approach the African continent was separating the elite from their communities. It was a strategy that worked effectively in preventing resistance. Territorial separation was also a key strength of divide and rule in the African context. The colonialists created boundaries among the united tribes, for example, those of Nigeria. Much of what has been discussed in the paper is the fact that, divide and rule strategy by the colonialists was well crafted by the British. It was well implemented and

executed in order to overpower the existing hierarchy of power in the traditional systems. Generally, the main focus of the divide and rule strategy was for sovereigns to expand territories. It was highlighted that the British coming to Africa aimed at colonizing different territories. It is also envisioned that the strategy aimed at controlling resources from the different regions.

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