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‘British colonial institutions, pre-colonial ethnic centralisation and contemporary education in Africa’

Literature has recognised the effect of institutions and moreover historical institutions on economic development in Africa. As a quarter of the global illiterate population resides in sub-Saharan Africa (UN, 2018), it is necessary to understand the long-term effects of historical institutions on present day education. Our paper argues that contrary to previous findings present-day education outcomes in Africa cannot be attributed to colonial or pre-colonial ethnic institutions independently. We propose that it is the complementarity or contention between British colonial institutions ‘inherited’ by countries and pre-colonial ethnic institutions that result in literacy outcomes we observe today.

Using geolocated literacy data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) (ICF, 2017), ethnicity data from George Peter Murdock's Ethnographic Map (Murdock, 1969) we evaluate the effect of being a former British colony given the ethnic institutional setting on present-day education outcomes of individuals in four Western African countries, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria. We consider the degree of pre-colonial centralisation as a measure of political complexity in historical ethnic regions. Borrowing from Gennaioli and Rainer (2007), ethnic groups that lack political integration above local community level and petty chiefdoms are classified as fragmented. Groups that have more than two levels of jurisdictional hierarchy, with political reach and authority beyond the local community level, such as larger chiefdoms (two) and states (three) are classified as centralised. To account for spatial autocorrelation on ethnic and country level, we estimate a linear regression with multi-way clustered standard errors using methodology developed by Cameron, Gelbach and Miller (2011).

Our findings point out that whilst British rule is positively associated with literacy in fragmented ethnic regions, and ethnic political centralisation is positively associated with the likelihood of being literate in former French colonies, the interaction between British rule and ethnic centralisation is associated with a decrease in literacy by approximately 7 per cent. In politically complex ethnic regions, indirect British rule may not have prompted cooperation in the implementation of education policy which affected the supply of education in these regions.

Findings contribute to insights regarding variation in education outcomes amongst former British colonies and within countries. Our paper furthermore contributes to literature on the long-term effects of ethnic and colonial institutions moving beyond country-level analysis.