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Comparing colonial water provision in British and French Africa

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ABSTRACT

Water is a notoriously slippery commodity in contemporary African cities, prone to governance shifts, price fluctuations, and unequal and intermittent accessibility. Many of these present-day problems have significant historical components. The colonial experiences that created urban water systems varied considerably across the African continent, with important differences between British and French cities. This paper compares colonial urban planning and water provision in British East Africa's Dar es Salaam and Nairobi and French West Africa's Dakar and Niamey. In spite of differences in colonial urban planning ideology, we see striking similarities in the urban waterscapes of these four cities. Both the British and the French colonial governments emphasized shared public standpipes as the preferred water delivery method for African neighborhoods, though the level of provision was quite different. European neighborhoods received household water taps in all case study cities. For French and British colonial planners in African cities, water was more than just an urban service that was provided differently to various population groups. Water served as a tool of commerce, pacification, and boundary mediation, ultimately embodying larger colonial ideas of superiority and empire.

Many water supply systems in urban Africa date back to the colonial era when Europeans designed and constructed piped water networks. The quality and coverage of these networks varied considerably. Some cities saw fairly even coverage while others saw commercial areas and European residential zones prioritized for service over African areas. Regardless of the level of service, one generality existed across colonial Africa: the prevalence of communal standpipes in African areas as opposed to the direct household connections found in European areas. Africans received different levels of water provision than Europeans, though some variations existed between African cities. It is important to understand these past levels of service since African urban water networks have seen few expansions and improvements since independence.

This paper explores the differences in the urban colonial water supply networks found in British East Africa and French West Africa. Using case studies of Dar es Salaam and Nairobi from British Africa and Dakar and Niamey from French Africa, this paper links the ideological differences between British and French Africa to different schemes of water provision. Whereas the British government tended to privilege certain areas over others, the French government took a more comprehensive approach to water provision. Despite these differences, water provision remained inequitable in all of these cities.

The British and French approached colonial rule in Africa in vastly different ways and these ideological differences ultimately led to some noticeable differences in urban water provision. The British implemented a system of indirect rule that established different laws and living standards for Africans and Europeans.[1] For example Africans required permission to be in certain spaces during nighttime hours while Europeans did not face such restrictions.[2] The British also established different forms of administration, with the goal of native administration to maintain order and protect European interests rather than to improve living conditions in African residential areas.[3] Thus native administration was more about controlling Africans than actually representing

[1] For an explanation of how this worked in Tanganyika, see J. Brennan, *Taifa: Making Nation and Race in Urban Tanzania*, Athens, 2012.
[2] Brennan, *Taifa*.
[3] A. Burton, Adjuncts, agents, intermediaries: the Native Administration in Dar es Salaam township, 1919–1961, in: A. Burton (Ed), *The Urban Experience in Eastern Africa c. 1750–2000*, Nairobi, 2002, 98–118.

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them in the colonial government. The French implemented a system of assimilation that purported the equality of all people and established one set of rules and treatment for everyone. This system started with the somewhat contradictory assumptions that all men are equal and that any differences could be overcome by French education and assimilation into French civilization.[4] The place of Africans within French colonies varied, with the Dakaroise considered citizens of France who had representation in the French parliament. Indigenous residents elsewhere, including in Niamey, lacked this citizenship and were instead viewed as subjects.[5] Even if there were theoretical differences on the ground, the French had the goal, if not the actual realization, of political and cultural integration. Within assimilation there was only one administration and authority – that of the French. There was no native authority nor were there officially separate laws or justice systems for Africans though in practice indigenous legal structures continued. Although variations certainly existed within these colonial spheres, the emphasis on either hierarchy or equality created different water systems. The French goal, if not its universal realization, of political and cultural integration differed greatly from the British creation of multiple authorities, laws, and amenities.

In seeking to explore this link between colonial history and water provision, this article fits into the wider literature on the historical geography of urban water. Several themes emerge from this literature to highlight the inequity of the colonial water landscape. Water provision differed significantly between developed and developing world cities. The municipal water systems implemented in developed cities were never fully replicated in colonial cities because of the lack of funding for large-scale engineering projects.[6] The differences that emerged between cities are what Graham and Marvin described as splintering urbanism. They suggest that infrastructure, including water, was 'developed along a highly selective trajectory' that served to meet the needs of the colonizer not the colonized.[7] Colonial cities sought to meet the developed world ideal of an orderly and unified space filled with networked infrastructure but instead experienced 'spatial apartheid'.[8] Not only did colonial cities receive less infrastructure and water provision than developed world cities, but provision within these colonial cities was inequitable. In cities such as Jakarta, Bombay, and Guayaquil, indigenous neighborhoods routinely received more expensive water, but in lower quantities, than European neighborhoods.[9] Ultimately what emerged were socio-spatially stratified water systems and exclusionary water policies that discriminated against indigenous residents and spaces. Not only did water access reflect social inequalities, it served to reinforce these differences, which were also highly contested in local contexts.[10] Using extensive archival documents, supplemented with secondary sources, this article builds upon this historical geography of water literature and traces how colonial ideologies influenced water networks in four African cities.

Colonial urban planning in British and French Africa

The British and French used different styles of rule in their colonies and these differing ideologies influenced colonial urban planning. Though pre-colonial cities certainly existed, the colonial period marked the beginning of an urban transformation across the African continent, ushering in a period of rapid urbanization.[11] Europeans set out to make and remake cities across the African continent, and they did so according to European visions of modernity in Africa.[12] These visions included the presumed racial and cultural superiority of white Europeans, the transformation of extant social and political institutions, and the development of the built environment according to European ideals.[13] Colonial urban spaces reflected and articulated these ideas to both European and indigenous populations and became part of the social and spatial production of cities and subjects.[14] As centerpieces of the colonial project, cities became spaces where Europeans consolidated and articulated their power through both spatial layouts and the built environment.[15]

Though French and British colonial urban planning differed, the majority of urban plans in Africa were centered on the ideals of 'the separation of living quarters according to status, the preoccupation with public health and hygiene, strengthening the security of the … "European town," and the quest for practical modernism and a vision of the future of urban development.'[16] The desire for, and achievement of, segregation is of particular importance to water provision. Njoh argued that in spite of ideological and philosophical differences in policies and planning between British and French colonial Africa, urban segregation manifested itself in very similar ways.[17] France operationalized socioeconomic factors and cultural practices in their ordering of the colonial city, while the British focused more often on racial differences. The end result, however, was segregated urban spaces, and the case studies below outline how Europeans achieved segregation in four specific instances. Water infrastructure helped create segregated spaces, building differential access into the fabric of the colonial city.[18]

In British East Africa, the exploitation of labor resources became a central part of the colonial project and an important driver of settlement and urbanization.[19] The government constructed new neighborhoods for these indigenous workers.[20] Myers explained

[4] M. Crowder, *Senegal: A Study in French Assimilation Policy*, London, 1962; M. Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule*, Evanston, 1968.

[5] L. Bigon, 'Garden City' in the tropics? French Dakar in comparative perspective, *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012) 35–44.

[6] M. Gandy, The bacteriological city and its discontents, *Historical Geography* 34 (2006) 14–25.

[7] S. Graham and S. Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities, and the Urban Condition*, London, 2001, 82.

[8] Graham and Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism*, 82.

[9] See for example M. Kooy and K. Bakker, Splintered networks: The colonial and contemporary waters of Jakarta, *Geoforum* 39 (2008) 1843–1858; M. Zérah, Splintering urbanism in Mumbai: Contrasting trends in a multilayered society, *Geoforum* 39 (2008) 1922–1932; E. Swyngedouw, *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water*, Oxford, 2004; M. Bell, Historical political ecology of water: Access to municipal drinking water in colonial Lima, Peru (1578–1700), *The Professional Geographer* 67 (2015) 504–526.

[10] M. Bell, Historical political ecology; L. Bigon. *A History of Urban Planning in Two West African Colonial Capitals*, Mellen, 2009.

[11] O. Goerg, Domination colonial, construction de "la ville" en Afrique et dénomination, *Afrique & histoire* 5 (2006) 15–45; C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, Villes coloniales et histoire des Africains. *Vingtieme siecle. Revue d'Histoire* (1988) 49–73.

[12] A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkley, 2001.

[13] A. Stoler, Rethinking colonial categories: European communities and the boundaries of rule, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31 (1989) 134–161.

[14] E. Soja, The socio-spatial dialectic, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70 (1980) 207–225.

[15] G. Myers, *Verandahs of Power: Colonialism and Space in Urban Africa*, Syracuse, 2003.

[16] K. Attahi, D. Hinin-Moustapha, and K. Appessika, Revisiting urban planning in Sub-Saharan Francophone Africa, in: UN-Habitat (Ed), *Revisiting Urban Planning: Global Report on Human Settlement*, New York, 2009, 29.

[17] A. Njoh, Colonial philosophies, urban space, and racial segregation in British and French colonial Africa, *Journal of Black Studies* 38 (2008) 570–599; A. Njoh, Urban planning as a tool of power and social control in colonial Africa, *Planning Perspectives* 24 (1909) 301–317.

[18] M. Gandy, Rethinking urban metabolism: water, space and the modern city, *City* 8 (2004) 363–379.

[19] Myers, *Verandahs of Power*.

[20] P. Curtin, Medical knowledge and urban planning in tropical Africa, *The American Historical Review* 90 (1985) 594–613.