
Introduction

One warm evening in 1963, hundreds of Nigerian citizens crowded outside the largest theater in Lagos. They were there to cram their way into the show advertised on posters overhead, “The British Council brings you *Macbeth!*” At the same time but several streets away, a group of ten men clustered around a market stand. Inside, the owner slowly tuned a transistor set, stopping only when the BBC world news began to fill the stand. Meanwhile, a hundred miles west, the same broadcast played in the Oxford University Press office, where an editor worked late. He was finishing his notes on a manuscript by the Nigerian author Wole Soyinka, the press’s latest discovery and proof—the editor believed—that there was still a place for British publishing in Africa.

Together these snapshots capture the prevalence of British culture in one of Britain’s former colonies. Three years after independence, one might expect Shakespeare plays and the BBC news would be rare in Nigeria. Yet, instead of disappearing, British plays, broadcasts, and books not only remained but drew large audiences, like the crowds and listeners described above. Was this the encore to empire—a short performance of goodwill before a graceful stage exit? Or was it meant to be another act of a play that showed no sign of ending? Whatever British promoters imagined, the answer really depended on their audience—the playgoers, readers, and listeners across cities, towns, and villages in Britain’s former colonies. Were they on their feet, clapping and calling out for more? Or perhaps they had attended out of a mixture of curiosity and habit but now wished the performance would end so they could get on to other things. When taken all together, these questions and their answers exemplify the history this book explains, namely, how a cultural version of the British Empire took root and sustained itself far beyond the formal end of political rule.

LOCATING THE CULTURAL PROJECT
OF THE LATE EMPIRE

Imperial Encore traces British cultural relations, British broadcasting, and British publishing in Africa between the 1930s and the 1980s, a half century that contains the last decades of British colonial rule and the first decades of African national rule. However, the cultural project of the late British Empire would always bear the imprint of the moment in which it began. This story begins in the interwar years, which stand in British imperial history as yet another occasion when officials exalted the empire as a solution to their national problems. Whether addressing the political demands of recently empowered groups or the trio of war debt, unemployment, and a tilted balance of trade, British officials sought to resolve—or at least deflect—internal pressures through stronger ties between Britain and its overseas territories. A stronger British world-system, they reasoned, would provide a resounding retort to anyone who dared raise the possibility of relative decline.¹ But exactly how they might accomplish such a mission depended on where in the empire they turned.

To begin with, there was a group which believed Britain's strongest future lay with its white dominions, where they envisioned a cohesive community of nations centered around Britain. This vision, termed the Third British Empire, took visible form in the late 1920s.² To preserve imperial unity, Britain was willing to cede constitutional control; in this light, the Montagu Chelmsford reforms in 1919, the Balfour Declaration of 1926, and the Statute of Westminster in 1931 signaled political strength, not weakness, in the imperial system. Meanwhile, the adoption of imperial preference and the emergence of the sterling bloc sustained the economic needs of the empire.³ But political and economic strategy alone cannot sufficiently capture the dynamic of this stage of British imperialism. Instead, the imperial system rested upon cultural self-confidence, or a series of powerful assumptions constructed around British ideals and practices. British cultural ties between itself and the white dominions were institutionalized through bodies such as the Empire Press Union, the Imperial Relations Trust, and the BBC Empire Service.⁴ In London, officials described dominion status as a reconciliation between national autonomy and imperial identity, but they clearly believed the synthetic power of the relationship would always stem from Britain.⁵ In sum, the operating principle of the Third British Empire was the shared supremacy of British culture.

The champions of the diasporic cultural empire took the view that their Britishness was a privilege, to be shared among those who shared the same race and language.⁶ In turn, they constructed institutions and networks that fostered cohesion by practicing exclusion. To give an example, the BBC Empire Service that started in 1932 broadcast only in the English language. Moreover, if people wished to tune in to the chimes of Big Ben or a soundscape from rural England, they needed to

own or have access to a wireless set with a powerful receiver. In another example and another medium, Oxford University Press demonstrated similar priorities in mapping where to open its branch offices. By this period, the press had branches and editorial departments in cities such as Melbourne, Toronto, and Cape Town, but none in the Caribbean, East or West Africa, or Southeast Asia.

In fact, it was these regions—the so-called tropical colonies—that spurred an alternate vision of an enduring empire. This vision granted a central role to colonial development, or to the idea of investing in infrastructure and industry in the colonies. The idea emerged in Britain during the early decades of the century, when officials presented it as a neo-mercantilist solution to problems such as high unemployment in Britain.⁷ Such efforts soon suffered setbacks, however, as colonial living conditions exacerbated social unrest and threatened Britain's hold on its territories in areas such as the Caribbean and Africa during the 1930s.⁸ Global recession followed by global war forced Britain to take seriously for the first time the labor conditions and standards of living in its colonies, particularly those in Africa, which were seen more and more as an essential part of the empire. Britain responded to these new urgencies by shoehorning questions of welfare into the category of "development," beginning with the commitments of the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940. Here the colonial government committed metropolitan resources to education, health, housing, and infrastructure with the aim of producing a healthier, more efficient, and more dependable workforce. Perhaps predictably, it did not attempt to diversify the export-based colonial economies.⁹ Nonetheless, with the advent of such policies, the number of administrators, planners, and experts that comprised the colonial state jumped dramatically from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, a period that some scholars later termed the "second colonial occupation."¹⁰

Although studies of colonial development have focused mainly on political and economic interventions, British officials recognized there was a cultural component to development that could cement their values in the colonies. British development projects exhibited new confidence in the potential of a modern empire that was peculiarly British and rooted in the individualism, democracy, rule of law, and capitalism that Britain produced and relied upon. There was still the matter of devising development that could successfully accomplish the work of liberal modernization. As economic and political conditions around the empire became more contentious than ever, so the British turned to culture. Among the projects that received colonial development and welfare funds in the 1930s and 1940s, the Gold Coast Broadcasting Service, the East African Literature Bureau, and the Colonial Film Unit are but a few examples that demonstrate how British cultural forms were increasingly incorporated into development aims.

Therefore, describing *when* the ideas behind the cultural project took shape is intrinsically tied up with *where* Britain saw the future of its empire. The vision of

a diasporic cultural empire and the practice of colonial development coexisted as separate frameworks for thinking through the future of Britain's empire until the mid-1950s. It was not until the prospect of African decolonization and the subsequent pressures of the Cold War that the two separate visions started to come together. In the following chapters, I trace when and how imperial institutions such as the British Council, the BBC, and private publishing firms like Oxford University Press expanded their work into Africa. As they did, their efforts to reach African audiences were aided by the colonial development initiatives that had since become increasingly vital for overarching imperial interests. What I term "the cultural project of the late British empire" is set in Africa because over this period it became clear to Britons that Africa was where Britain's chance to maintain its empire lay. A major narrative arc in this history, then, is British cultural agencies' discovery of African audiences, followed quickly by how those audiences became essential to Britain's future after empire.

EXTENDING THE HISTORY OF EMPIRE

Britain's discovery of African audiences is interwoven with the history of decolonization. The unremitting empire that I depict in this book does not square with the field's prevailing image of the British Empire as a thing that stopped with the transfer of power. Overviews of the British Empire traditionally tell a story of rise and fall, and choose to cut off the fall at a moment in the 1960s.¹¹ Along the way, as they describe, Britain tried to hold on by linking itself to the dominions, but it could not withstand the rise of the United States or the loss of India, each of which accelerated the pace of the British Empire's decline. Africa is the glaring hole in that narrative. By the middle of the twentieth century the British Empire had reconstituted itself around Africa. In the 1940s and 1950s Britain believed African labor and resources could fill the void left by India—that was precisely why the Colonial Office was willing to invest so many resources and personnel on the continent. The variety that Britain saw in its African possessions allowed for different colonies to occupy different parts of the British imagination. Compare, for example, territories like Southern Rhodesia and Kenya, which offered Britain another chance at a settler empire, with colonies like Nigeria and the Gold Coast, where Britain could most easily measure the success of experiments with development. Even as British administrators received more and more scrutiny from the populations they governed, renewed migration from Britain and a recommitment to the notion of modernizing trusteeship demonstrates that Britain did not see its empire ending any time soon.¹²

Over the 1950s, Britain finally started to see cracks in its empire. The first signs came amid the evolution of the Anglo-American relationship and were quickly followed by reverberations of anticolonial nationalism. The United States had

cast a shadow over Britain's practice of empire for a while, but Britain had been able to hold off US disapproval until the middle of the 1950s. Even Suez was not the end-all to America's support of British imperialism, as events in the African colonies would show in the next decade. In other ways, though, the Suez Crisis exhibited how Britain's different attempts to relegitimize imperialism were not working.¹³ Now, when Britain looked at its African colonies, it saw the super-powers' rising influence, as well as a series of options open to African leaders. The ideological and cultural contest of the Cold War unfolded across an array of media forms, including the performances, books, and broadcasts examined here, as well as other media, such as artwork, periodicals, and film. In addition, there were individual exchanges—artists, writers, students, professionals—criss-crossing the globe under the banner of diplomacy, but against a Cold War background. In the history that follows here, however, the Cold War largely stayed in the background, while Britain's liberal empire and its discontents remained at center stage.

By the mid-1950s it was evident African populations were not all seduced by the promises of European development. In turn, Britain felt pressure to accelerate the route to self-government in colonies such as the Gold Coast. In other British colonies, such as where there was a settler population to protect, Britain was forced to declare the extent to which it was willing to go to hold on to key colonial possessions. This was on display very clearly in the security regime and protracted violence it imposed on the Kenyan population during the mid-1950s.¹⁴ And by the end of the decade there was no doubt Britain's plans for imperial unity and modernizing trusteeship had not worked out in the ways it had intended. Indeed, confrontations such as Mau Mau and Suez were determinant in both how and when Britain gave up political rule in Africa.

But I want to emphasize that there was a whole other story going on too, in that cultural initiatives did not relent—and were in fact strengthened—during the events that marked the waning and then formal end of empire. Throughout the state of emergency in Kenya, for example, British cultural work proceeded apace. British organizations published schoolbooks on East African oral histories, staged plays in the British Council's center in Nairobi, and transmitted educational and cultural programs over the BBC. For their proponents, these moments were not the signs of a failing empire, but of a reinvigorated one—one that would be marked by a renewed commitment to building a thriving public sphere.

Suez and Mau Mau might appear in most imperial histories as crises, or moments when the jig of empire was up, but these moments also led to new overtures to nonwhite populations in Africa and other parts of the world. After Suez, in 1957, the British government granted funds for the BBC to broadcast in African languages and for the British Council to expand its drama export to the developing world. After Mau Mau, in 1960, the BBC posted a permanent correspondent

to Nairobi for the first time and signaled that African audiences now took programming priority over European settlers. These activities are what I mean when I say that the cultural project of late empire accelerated during decolonization. The initiatives were informed by and intersected with the political and economic circumstances of late colonialism, but they were not confined to the period of British rule. Instead, with renewed strength, they continued past it.

What all of this is to say is that the political history of the end of the British Empire must be realigned with a cultural history of reinvigorated imperial ambition. Political histories of British decolonization have explained that by 1960 both sides of the political spectrum in Britain agreed that Britain should grant independence to its West and East African colonies. The left had adopted the language of self-determination in addition to international cooperation, while the Conservative-led government portrayed African independence as the logical fulfillment of Britain's imperial mission.¹⁵ Even in this telling, African independence was not predetermined. Rather, it fell out of the complicated interplay between Britain's adherence to the principles of self-government, the construction of popular legitimacy in an African nation, and divergent ideas about what Britain's role in postcolonial Africa would be.¹⁶ Nor would independence end this interplay. In what has been called the "imperialism of decolonization," the same process continued into the postcolonial period when Britain and other international powers wielded great influence over African decision-making.¹⁷ In a way reminiscent of the cultural self-confidence behind the Third British Empire, British officials recognized that decolonization could make room for a new type of empire to take shape. Britain did not expect to drop out of the picture after transfer of power in Africa, but instead saw itself as having a head start over its international competition. Britain's confidence that it would retain a role means that the history of the British Empire should not end just because the Union Jack came down.

TRACING THE CULTURAL PROJECT ACROSS INSTITUTIONAL AND NATIONAL BOUNDARIES

In short, Britain used the domain of culture to maintain its imperial influence after the end of formal political rule. It worked through the institutions at the center of this study: the British Council, the BBC World Service, and Oxford University Press. To be sure, as these are long-lasting and wide-reaching institutions, plenty of histories trace the evolution of each of them. Many of the aforementioned volumes are either presented as official histories or are authored from within, with all relying heavily on how the institution and its employees defended their work and understood their impact in the world.¹⁸ Meanwhile, in a separate literature, social scientists and policy makers have examined agencies such as the

British Council and the BBC under the label of cultural diplomacy and Britain's use of "soft power."¹⁹ As different as they may seem, official histories and the social science studies share a similar fixation on identifying the uniqueness of each institution and proving the contribution it has made and continues to make to British public diplomacy.

This book aims to break British cultural relations out of the institutional and diplomatic boundaries to which it has been confined so far. My approach emphasizes that what are sometimes seen as separate topics, like the histories of broadcasting and publishing, actually unfolded in quite similar manners and became interwoven with one another over the period. By bringing them together in a single study and positioning their history within the complicated interests of decolonization, this book underlines that these British institutions operated as part of a broader, systematic effort to spread British values and the English language around the world. At the same time, the cultural project of empire was indeed a *project*—an ongoing and loosely defined aim pursued by an array of individuals and agencies through a collection of different forms. The initiatives that I describe relied on both new and old media. New media such as radio offered Britain the ability to spread language and traditions of expression across a vast space cheaply. Within colonial development, the media was a crucial part of the message and reflected Britain's specific vision of modernity. Yet, when deciding how to use their resources and personnel, the British used old standbys—the traveling theater troupe and small print-runs of books—just as often as they used new media. It is important to put those histories in the same study, because only then can I show how the same group of cultural artists and even the same relatively small canon dominated British cultural outreach to Africa. For example, during the 1960s William Shakespeare's plays were produced and distributed around Africa in performance, book, and broadcast forms, most particularly *Julius Caesar*, which was translated into at least seven African languages. The same can be said of the works of African literary figures such as Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who enter the story partway through the period. The cultural project spread across agencies and media forms, but it can be understood as a single project: a combined effort to forge cultural connections between Britain and Africa.

THE LASTING POWER OF BRITISH CULTURE

Anyone who writes a book on "culture" and "imperialism" is following in well-known footsteps. When Edward Said published *Culture and Imperialism* during the mid-1990s, he presented a critique of cultural imperialism that he and others had already been making for decades.²⁰ Even when formal colonial rule ended, Said reminds us, imperialism lingered—in economic, ideological, and social practices, and especially in cultural forms.²¹ Among other critics of cultural

imperialism, the most important for the particular history I tell here are those whom Said terms “the post-imperial writers of the Third World,” referring to esteemed authors such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Tayeb Salih, who were born and educated in British colonial Africa and started publishing literary works during the years of African independence. As Said describes, these postcolonial writers “bear their past within them . . . as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory reclaimed as part of a general movement of resistance, from the colonist.”²² Like Said, these authors’ powerful insights highlight the gap in British imperial history. Their writing reminds us of the importance of understanding how British cultural imperialism unfolded both during and after the formal end of the British Empire.

The experiences of African authors such as Ngũgĩ and Achebe did not just frame this history, they were at its core, while the authors themselves offered a significant means through which British cultural agencies sought to gain more legitimacy. During decolonization, British publishers and broadcasters recognized that African independence could put an end to their designs in Africa. As part of their effort to prove their usefulness to African states and publics—and thus ensure Britain’s continued presence—British agencies set out to show how they encouraged and supported African culture. Therefore, the first time an author such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o is mentioned in this history is when British publishers identified him as a useful figure for Britain’s cultural aims. British publishers had their reasons for publishing Ngũgĩ—and for continuing to do so, despite the fierce indictments of imperialism and colonialism that Ngũgĩ penned. In one of his strongest condemnations, *Decolonising the Mind*, the Kenyan wrote about the brute totality of imperialism and condemned the alienating persistence of the English language in Britain’s former colonies—precisely the structures and language that British publishers relied on for their global profits.²³ Ngũgĩ denounced his publishers for being exploitative through their structures and language—and yet, they still saw reason to publicize his words widely. British cultural agencies believed that figures such as Ngũgĩ brought a new level of authority to their long-standing imperial mission.

CENTRAL ARGUMENTS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

The above discussion showcases the two interconnected arguments in this book. First, this book challenges when the history of the British Empire should end. My work is significant for the larger study of empire because it examines the period after formal British rule—that is, a period largely absent from traditional histories of empire. As studies of development and overseas aid increasingly show, the handover of political power was by no means a bookend to many of the

ways Britain engaged with Africa.²⁴ But Britain's engagement in Africa extended beyond development and overseas aid. After the colonial government left, British cultural agencies used conditions and advantages from the colonial period to delineate new and lasting roles for themselves in the postcolonial setting. The reconfiguration was more gradual than political independence (when most imperial histories choose to end), and it did not resort to relocating decolonization to the metropole (as histories of migrants and race in Britain often do.) Still, the success of these efforts helped ensure Britain continued to influence the politics and attitudes of people in newly independent states and afforded Britain greater prestige in global politics than would otherwise be the case. Put simply, this book joins the call for extending the timeline of British imperialism beyond the formal dissolution of the empire.

As much as this is a history of continuity, it is also one of reinvention. As it lost its empire, Britain reinvented the culture that it projected to the world. At the beginning of the period of study, the British officials I examine held a narrow view of British culture that celebrated its prestige and fixedness. However, decolonization forced those officials to replace that understanding with one oriented around a plural group of values and practices, such as disinterested news and high editorial standards. What remained constant throughout the period, however, was how British actors continued to cast themselves in the position of handing down a specific culture to Africans. Moreover, as this history demonstrates, British officials believed their success at demonstrating the universality of British cultural work hinged on the degree to which they could demonstrate African buy-in. Therefore, proponents of British cultural imperialism set out to incorporate a select amount of postcolonial culture and recast it as the evolved global British culture they now promoted. In their willingness to provincialize how they had once seen British culture, British actors also revealed the colonizing impulse that remained a core part of British cultural imperialism. The reworking of British cultural imperialism, therefore, was also about the cultural extension of imperialism.

That brings the discussion to the second main argument in this book, which is that the postcolonial critique did not disarm British cultural imperialism—in fact, it ran alongside and sometimes even strengthened it. As the act of publishing Ngũgĩ demonstrates, British cultural agencies sometimes found reason to encourage criticism—even when they were the target. During the years after African independence, agencies such as the BBC and British publishing firms boasted about fostering African input and encouraging dissenting voices as a means of proving that they served an important role in postcolonial societies. The fact that British agencies now competed against a chorus of thought and were able to persist nonetheless thus gave a new, powerful legitimacy to the British cultural mission more broadly.

THE AFTERLIVES OF EMPIRES AND ARCHIVES

As Christopher Lee declared in a volume on the aftereffects of the 1955 Bandung Conference, there is a fundamental challenge to writing a history of decolonization because it is an experience that is “at once uniquely individual in scope . . . and in retrospect seemingly universal.”²⁵ Even when confining a study to one imperial power and one continent, as I do here with the British in Africa, the course of decolonization is still protracted and uneven. When confronting the challenge of writing a history of decolonization in British Africa, I had to make decisions about which archives to visit, which threads to pursue, and which case studies to select. As a guiding principle, I aimed to highlight distinct experiences that would demonstrate the overall shape of British cultural activity in Africa while simultaneously recognizing the range of encounters and varied realities of individual communities and nation-states. Therefore, in what follows I draw from examples from East and West Africa that are broadly illustrative of British agencies’ concerns, the challenges they faced, and the responses their work provoked.

The six chapters that follow are divided into two parts, with the first examining the late colonial period and the second examining the decades after African independence. The three chapters in part 1 demonstrate how British agencies sought to spread British culture by sending British drama performances, books, and broadcasts into colonial Africa. The opening chapter, “Shakespeare in Africa,” examines Britain’s official cultural diplomacy body, the British Council, and shows how the council’s officials and advisers confidently decided which performers and performances to send overseas under the banner of British national culture. Chapter 2, “Bringing Books to Africans,” looks at publishing and shows how missionaries, development agents, and commercial publishers all used the rhetoric of a civilizing mission to build a book publishing industry in East Africa that complemented the metropolitan industry in Britain. Then, chapter 3, “This Is London . . .” shifts to the field of broadcasting and examines the debates between colonial officials and BBC broadcasters over the types of British content they should transmit to Africa.

If the first part of the book focuses on the efforts by British officials to construct a framework that would convey their culture, the second part examines how they ensured it would last. The chapters in part 2 all begin in the early 1960s, or the moment captured by the snapshots that began this introduction. These chapters mirror the first half of the book and carry forward the history that began in the late colonial period. First, chapter 4, “. . . Calling Africa,” continues the history of the BBC in postcolonial Africa, when British broadcasters faced a competitive field for the first time and looked for ways to make their broadcasts appeal to African audiences. Chapter 5, “Patrons of Postcolonial Culture,” shows how British publishers set out to demonstrate their usefulness to African states and African writers. The ways in which British cultural agencies shifted how they understood