



JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

<https://e-journal.uum.edu.my/index.php/jis>

How to cite this article:

Ali, N. N. S., Yusoff, K. Z. H., & Apandi, L. S. A. (2026). Boundaries as institutional artefacts: Historical institutionalism and the colonial construction of Brunei's boundaries, 1841–1958. *Journal of International Studies*, 22(2), 102-120. <https://doi.org/10.32890/jis2026.22.2.6>

BOUNDARIES AS INSTITUTIONAL ARTEFACTS: HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM AND THE COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION OF BRUNEI'S BOUNDARIES, 1841–1958

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Received: 7/5/2026

Revised: 2/7/2026

Accepted: 15/7/2026

Published: 31/8/2026

ABSTRACT

This article argues that Brunei's modern boundaries should be understood not simply as geographic lines or the legal residue of colonial diplomacy but as institutional artefacts produced and stabilised through colonial governance. Existing scholarship on colonial boundary-making has predominantly privileged inter-imperial explanations, treating boundaries as the outcome of negotiation, rivalry, and settlement between competing empires. Brunei presents a different configuration. Its territorial boundaries were shaped less by direct bargaining between rival imperial powers than by intra-imperial struggles and administrative processes within the British imperial system, involving the Colonial Office, the Brooke regime in Sarawak, the British North Borneo Company, and the Brunei Sultanate itself. Drawing on historical institutionalism, this article examines how critical junctures and path dependence transformed Brunei from a polity characterised by fluid frontiers, tributary authority, and overlapping zones of influence into a territorially bounded colonial state between 1841 and 1958. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative historical analysis and process tracing based on primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consist of archival documents from the British Foreign Office, Colonial Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office held in British and Malaysian archives, as well as maps and other relevant documents. These primary sources are complemented by secondary sources, namely academic journal articles and books on British- Brunei relations and Borneo history, to support interpretation and analysis. The findings show that British intervention in northern Borneo disrupted Brunei's indigenous territorial order and generated a path-dependent sequence in which protectorate rule, the Residential System, and successive boundary agreements progressively stabilised a reduced yet durable territorial form. The article contributes to Political Geography, Border Studies, and International Relations by advancing the concept of boundaries as institutional artefacts and demonstrating that colonial territorial formation may be driven not only by inter-imperial diplomacy but also by internal imperial politics, bureaucratic rivalry, and administrative consolidation.

Keywords: Historical institutionalism, institutional artefacts, intra-imperial boundaries, Brunei, British Empire.

INTRODUCTION

Territorial boundaries have long been recognised as a hallmark of the modern state system. Since the Peace of Westphalia, the notion of territorially bounded sovereignty has shaped the organisation of political authority by associating statehood with clearly demarcated spatial domains (Osiander, 2001). Within this framework, boundaries serve as the geographical limits of state power, marking where the jurisdiction of one political entity ends and that of another begins. This understanding is broadly consistent with classical political geography, in which boundaries are treated as legal or physical demarcations that define the territorial scope of sovereignty across land, maritime zones, and airspace. Boggs (1940), for instance, describes boundaries as lines delimiting the territorial extent of political units and regulating the exercise of authority within defined spatial limits, while Prescott (1987) similarly underscores their role as legally recognised lines separating one political entity from another. From this traditional standpoint, boundaries are perceived as relatively fixed spatial markers, established through diplomacy, legal arrangements or natural geographical features.

This traditional view, while foundational, tends to conceptualise boundaries as static and pre-given features of political space. In this regard, it privileges the boundary line as a finished product and does not fully engage with the processes through which such lines are produced, stabilised, and continually reproduced. This article goes beyond this perspective by considering boundaries not only as geographic lines but also as institutional artefacts. From this perspective, boundaries are outcomes of institutional processes, shaped by governance structures, administrative practices, legal codification, and historically contingent political choices. They are not passively imposed upon space but are actively constructed, maintained, and normalised through institutional practices.

This reconceptualisation draws on critical insights from international relations and political geography. Kratochwil (1986) argues that boundaries are not only spatial divisions but also constitutive elements of international systems that shape the identities and practices of political actors. Taylor (1994) likewise critiques the conventional “state-as-container” view, arguing that territorial space should not be understood as a set of fixed territorial units detached from wider political and economic relations. Instead, territory must be understood in relation to broader systems and processes. Newman and Paasi (1998) further develop this shift by conceptualising boundaries as dynamic social institutions that are produced and reproduced through political processes, discourse, and everyday practices. From this perspective, boundaries regulate inclusion and exclusion, organise territorial control and shape political identity. Paasi (2009; 2014) likewise stresses that boundaries are deeply embedded in historical and institutional contexts and evolve through administrative intervention, governance mechanisms and social reproduction over time.

These perspectives support the central argument of this article: boundaries should be understood as institutional artefacts. This conceptualisation foregrounds the role of institutions in boundary-making and directs attention to the ways in which territorial limits are produced through administrative decisions, legal arrangements, and governance practices rather than merely through spatial delineation. It shifts the analytical focus from boundaries as static outcomes to boundary-making as a historically contingent institutional process. This perspective is particularly useful in colonial contexts, where imperial authority frequently relied on bureaucratic, legal, and cartographic mechanisms to define, control, and stabilise territory.

Existing scholarship on colonial boundaries has predominantly focused on inter-imperial dynamics. In much of the literature, colonial boundaries are treated as the product of diplomatic settlements between

competing powers. In Africa, for instance, borders are commonly analysed as the outcomes of treaties, rivalries, and imperial bargaining among European empires (Collier, 2007; Griffiths, 1986; Hargreaves, 1960; Khadiagala, 2010; Touval, 1966a, 1966b; Zartman, 1965). Similar assumptions are evident in studies of Asia and the Middle East, where the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 and the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 are often cited as classic examples of colonial territorial division through external negotiation (Lee, 1982; Tarling, 1998; Zou & Kumar, 2011). While such scholarship has generated important insights into inter-imperial colonial boundary-making, it tends to overlook the role of intra-imperial processes, specifically the ways in which boundaries were constructed and stabilised through administrative and institutional practices within a single imperial framework.

A crucial turning point in this regard is the work of Blais (2011), whose study of the border between Algeria and Tunisia shows that colonial boundary-making may also be shaped by intra-imperial processes. Her analysis demonstrates that the formation of boundaries within the French imperial domain was not simply a matter of conventional diplomacy between competing powers but was also significantly shaped by cartographic practices, internal administrative conflict, and strategies of governance. This insight calls into question the dominance of inter-imperial explanations and points to the need to analyse boundary-making as an internally driven institutional process.

Building on this perspective, Brunei presents an analytically revealing case. The British Empire largely institutionalised Brunei's boundaries during the first half of the twentieth century under a single colonial authority. Brunei's territorial configuration primarily resulted from intra-imperial administrative processes, unlike many colonial boundaries in the region that emerged from bargaining between rival empires. British metropolitan authorities, the Brooke regime in Sarawak, the British North Borneo Company, and the Brunei Sultanate all operated within a wider British imperial framework, yet pursued different territorial and institutional interests. Through legal arrangements, bureaucratic decisions, protectorate rule and governance reforms, British colonial authorities gradually restructured Brunei's previously fragmented and fluid territorial order into a bounded colonial state form (Tarling, 1971; Horton, 1986; Hussainmiya, 2006).

This raises an important analytical question: how should boundary formation be understood when territorial limits are produced through intra-imperial institutional processes rather than inter-imperial negotiations? More specifically, how do colonial institutions contribute to the construction and stabilisation of territorial boundaries? Addressing these questions requires moving beyond descriptive accounts of demarcation and focusing instead on the institutional mechanisms through which boundaries are produced and maintained.

To address this problem, this article adopts historical institutionalism as its analytical framework. Historical institutionalism is particularly useful because it explains how institutions shape political outcomes over time and highlights the importance of critical junctures and path dependence in structuring long-term developments (Steinmo et al., 1992; Thelen, 1999; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Steinmo, 2008; Fioretos, 2011). By integrating this framework with the concept of boundaries as institutional artefacts, the article reconceptualises territorial boundaries not as fixed spatial demarcations but as historically contingent outcomes of institutional processes.

Accordingly, the article makes two main contributions. First, it expands the study of colonial boundary-making by highlighting the importance of intra-imperial administrative processes and demonstrating how boundaries may emerge from internal governance practices rather than solely from inter-imperial bargaining. Second, it demonstrates the analytical value of combining historical institutionalism with

political geography and border studies to explain how boundaries are institutionalised and maintained over time. Through the case of Brunei, the article shows that territorial boundaries are not merely spatial markers, but institutional artefacts shaped by historically specific processes of governance, administration, and colonial ordering.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Boundaries as Lines to Boundaries as Institutions

Earlier scholarship on boundaries in political geography was largely concerned with classification, delimitation, and function. In this tradition, boundaries were considered the legal and political limits of territorial units, with analysis focusing on their forms, stability, and role in regulating relations between states. Such work remains valuable in clarifying the juridical and geographical meanings of boundaries, borders, and frontiers (Boggs, 1940; Prescott, 1987; Prescott & Triggs, 2009). However, this traditional political geography literature often treats territorial lines as settled outcomes rather than as historically contingent constructions. Its primary analytical approach focuses on the spatial location and operational functions of boundaries. This perspective is rooted in the foundational work of Boggs (1940), who approaches boundaries as objective outcomes of international treaties and utilises a taxonomy of lines to optimise administrative functions and reduce the costs of border disputes. Prescott (1987) further systematically analyses international boundaries based on Stephan B. Jones' model of allocation, delimitation, demarcation, and administration, thereby presenting a linear and legalistic approach towards a "settled boundary outcome." Extending this model, Prescott and Triggs (2009) incorporate international law and International Court of Justice precedents, reinforcing the conceptualisation of boundaries as finalised legal facts that maintain state sovereignty.

A recent study by Yuksel (2025) argues that boundaries are not only fixed legal demarcations but also serve a regulatory function in managing interstate conflict. Yuksel highlights that the effectiveness of border management depends on the clarity, stability, and acceptance of the legal framework governing boundaries. From this perspective, boundary studies can be understood as concerned not only with static legal lines but also with the products of power relations, administrative decisions, and institutional arrangements (Newman, 2006; Newman, 2017; Paasi, 2014). Rather than deriving solely from natural frontiers or diplomatic agreements, boundaries often evolve through political negotiation, bureaucratic governance, and legal codification. Boundaries have thus become central to international politics, shaping diplomatic relations, territorial governance, and the organisation of political space within the international system (Prescott, 1987; Newman, 2017; Prescott & Triggs, 2009). In the context of the international politics of borders, Aboyade (2018) demonstrates that a state's attitude towards its borders influences the success of regional integration. While pre-1945 European powers established the foundations for transboundary cooperation, post-colonial African integration remains constrained by nationalistic adherence to inherited boundaries, which are viewed as lines of division rather than corridors for cooperation. Taken together, these perspectives point to a broader conceptual shift from understanding boundaries as static legal lines to recognising them as active, institutionalised expressions of state authority.

This analytical shift challenges the assumption that territorial space is merely a neutral container of sovereign authority. Instead, boundaries have come to be understood as dynamic products of political practice, discourse, identity formation, and spatial ordering (Newman & Paasi, 1998). Yet even within this critical literature, the concrete mechanisms through which boundaries acquire durability are not

always clearly specified. If boundaries are institutions, what material, legal, and administrative processes stabilise them over time? This article addresses this question by advancing the concept of the “institutional artefact.” The term refers to territorial forms that emerge from cumulative institutional decisions and are continuously reproduced through governance. Thus, this article moves beyond descriptive accounts of boundary-making to explain how boundaries endure as institutionalised forms of political authority.

Colonial Boundary-Making and the Inter-Imperial Bias

Many modern state boundaries were significantly shaped during the colonial period. Colonial powers divided territories according to strategic, administrative, and economic considerations, often producing territorial configurations that later became the borders of independent states. In many regions, colonial boundaries emerged through negotiations, rivalries, and diplomatic agreements among competing imperial powers (Griffiths, 1986; Solomon, 1969; Lee, 1982; Tarling, 1998; Touval, 1966b; Lee, 2011; Zou & Kumar, 2011). The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, and the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 all exemplify colonial boundary arrangements established through strategic compromise among competing imperial actors. While this scholarship remains historically important, especially in cases where boundaries clearly resulted from bilateral or multilateral settlements among empires, its dominance has created what may be described as an inter-imperial bias. Colonial boundary-making is too often assumed to be primarily diplomatic in character, even in cases where the actual process was shaped more heavily by internal administrative ordering, bureaucratic contestation, and imperial governance.

Recent scholarship has begun to complicate this conventional picture by showing that colonial boundaries may also emerge from intra-imperial dynamics, including administrative restructuring, cartographic practices, and institutional conflict within a single colonial system. Blais (2011), for example, demonstrates how the boundary between Algeria and Tunisia resulted from intra-imperial rivalry within the French Empire’s domain in North Africa. This boundary reflected institutional tensions between the French Colony of Algeria and the French Protectorate of Tunisia, particularly over competing claims concerning administrative rights, colonial taxation, military surveys, and the control of mobile tribal populations within fragmented and ambiguous frontier zones. Surveying practices, bureaucratic procedures, and internal governance structures also shaped boundary-making in India. Research on the Radcliffe Line underscores the role of colonial mapping and administrative decision-making in shaping territorial boundaries (Pillalamarri, 2017). Fitzpatrick (2024), on the other hand, shows that boundary-making in colonial India was often embedded in internal surveying and administrative processes, challenging interpretations that high diplomacy was the primary driver of territorial definition. Ghadyalpatil (2026) further demonstrates that the Inner Line of India, established under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, was intended to manage an ambiguous frontier zone in northeastern Bengal. This border also functioned as an instrument of resource exploitation and control over indigenous populations. It demonstrates how the border functioned as an instrument of colonial governance and the organisation of space, highlighting the strategic nature of colonial territoriality and its intra-imperial logic. These studies broaden explanations of colonial boundary-making beyond treaty settlement and inter-imperial competition. They suggest that, to understand how boundaries are historically constructed, it is necessary to examine the internal administrative decision-making and institutional processes through which ambiguous territorial relations are transformed into durable jurisdictional lines.

Brunei and the Missing Theorisation of Intra-Imperial Boundary Formation

Historians have extensively discussed the case of Brunei in the context of British intervention, protectorate rule, territorial contraction, and relations with Sarawak. The works of Tarling (1971), Horton (1986), Hussainmiya (2006), Wright (1967), Saunders (2002), and others provide indispensable historical material on Brunei's nineteenth- and twentieth-century transformation. These studies establish the basic chronology of territorial reduction, the significance of protectorate administration, and the political consequences of colonial intervention.

They also illuminate the transformation of Brunei from a polity characterised by fluid frontier relations, tributary authority, and overlapping zones of influence into a reduced colonial territory. Before the nineteenth century, Brunei's authority over northern Borneo was not organised along fixed and mutually exclusive territorial lines. Instead, political control operated through tributary relations, riverine access, local allegiance, and variable recognition of Bruneian overlordship (Mail, 2006; Reece, 1988). In this context, frontiers were fluid, relational, and overlapping rather than precisely delimited. The later colonial boundary was therefore not merely a clearer version of an earlier frontier; it represented a fundamentally different territorial logic.

However, while the historical literature on Brunei is rich, it has not yet fully theorised Brunei as a case of intra-imperial boundary-making. Brunei is still too often approached mainly as a case of decline, territorial loss or imperial dependency rather than as a case through which to rethink how colonial boundaries are made. There has been insufficient conceptual attention to the ways in which protectorate arrangements, colonial administration, mapping, legal codification, and imperial policy collectively transformed Brunei from a polity organised around fluid frontier relations into a bounded territorial state form.

Literature Gap and Intervention

The literature gap is therefore twofold. First, colonial boundary studies have underexplored intra-imperial modes of territorial formation. Second, the Brunei literature has not yet fully connected its empirical richness to a broader theoretical argument about boundary-making as an institutional process.

This article intervenes at the intersection of these two gaps. It argues that Brunei's modern boundaries were produced not primarily through external imperial diplomacy, but through protectorate rule, administrative restructuring, surveying, legal codification, and institutional reproduction within the British imperial order. In doing so, it contributes both a conceptual advance—understanding boundaries as institutional artefacts—and an empirical demonstration of why internal imperial politics are relevant to the formation of colonial territories.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM AND BOUNDARIES AS INSTITUTIONAL ARTEFACTS

Historical institutionalism is the most suitable framework for this study because it explains how institutions structure political outcomes over time, how earlier decisions constrain later alternatives, and how institutional arrangements become durable through repetition and increasing returns. In this approach, institutions are not limited to formal organisations but also include legal rules, administrative

routines, governance practices, informal conventions, and standard operating procedures that shape political action and produce long-term effects.

Two concepts are especially important in this article: critical junctures and path dependence.

Critical Juncture

A critical juncture signifies a period of increased uncertainty when existing arrangements become unstable, allowing for the emergence of various alternatives. Decisions taken during such periods matter disproportionately because they establish trajectories that later become difficult to reverse. In Brunei's case, the critical juncture was not a single isolated event but a linked sequence of transformations: the rise of Brooke authority in Sarawak from 1841; the successive territorial losses by Brunei; the Protectorate Agreement of 1888; and, above all, the introduction of the Residential System in 1906. Together, these developments displaced an older political order based on tributary relations, fluid frontiers, and overlapping authority and replaced it with a colonial logic of bounded, legible, and administratively governed territory.

Path Dependence

Path dependence explains how the consequences of those early decisions became progressively entrenched. This does not imply historical inevitability. Rather, it means that once administrative, legal, and political investments accumulate around a particular territorial arrangement, the costs of reversal increase while the practical benefits of maintaining that arrangement grow. In Brunei, once its reduced territorial framework had become embedded in district administration, land regulation, customs, jurisdiction, and resource governance, alternative configurations became increasingly difficult to pursue. Brunei's territorial form persisted not because it was natural or optimal, but because colonial institutions repeatedly reproduced it (Pierson, 2000).

This article uses historical institutionalism not merely as descriptive language but as a causal explanation. Its core claim is that Brunei's modern boundaries are best understood as institutional artefacts because they were produced through a three-stage sequence: first, the disruption of the previous frontier-based order; second, the lock-in of early territorial decisions through path-dependent institutional development; and third, the reproduction of those arrangements through layered colonial governance. This framework makes it possible to move beyond descriptive accounts of territorial shrinkage and explain instead how contraction was translated into a durable territorial form.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative historical case study and process tracing to explain how Brunei's modern boundaries were constructed and institutionalised under British rule. Brunei is selected as a theory-building case for its analytical value rather than its representativeness. Its significance lies in the fact that it exposes a form of colonial boundary-making that remains underemphasised in the literature, specifically the formation of territorial boundaries through intra-imperial institutional processes rather than the classic inter-imperial bargaining that dominates existing scholarship on colonial boundaries.

To examine the process of intra-imperial boundary-making in Brunei, this study employs process tracing as its analytical method. Process tracing enables a comprehensive reconstruction of historical

sequences and causal mechanisms by examining how decisions, administrative practices, and institutional arrangements gradually contributed to the path dependence of Brunei's territorial boundaries. This method is particularly suitable because it enables the identification of incremental changes in territorial contraction and governance, rather than treating boundary-making as a single event. Accordingly, this study adopts document analysis and draws on two types of sources: primary and secondary. The primary sources consist of archival documents from the British Foreign Office, Colonial Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, accessed through British and Malaysian archives, as well as treaties, maps, and other relevant documents relating to Brunei, Sarawak, and North Borneo. Such sources are valuable for this study because they capture the institutional and administrative processes through which territorial governance was conceptualised, negotiated, and implemented. Colonial archives provide direct evidence of how legal arrangements, bureaucratic routines, and imperial governance practices contributed to the processes of boundary-making and territorial consolidation in Brunei. These primary sources are complemented by secondary sources, including scholarly books and journal articles. The secondary literature provides critical context and historiographical understanding of Brunei's colonial governance and practices. It also facilitates triangulation by enabling the interpretation of archival findings within broader academic discussions.

Methodologically, the article proceeds through process tracing, organised around three historical phases:

- (1) the pre-colonial and early intervention phase;
- (2) the phase of territorial contraction; and
- (3) the phase of institutional consolidation under protectorate and residential administration.

This structure allows the study to identify critical junctures, trace path-dependent sequences, and examine how institutional layering gradually stabilised Brunei's territorial form. The aim is not simply to narrate what happened but to specify the mechanisms through which colonial institutions transformed fluid frontier authority into a bounded territorial state.

COLONIAL GOVERNANCE AND BOUNDARY FORMATION IN BRUNEI

Pre-Colonial Brunei and the Frontier Logic of Authority

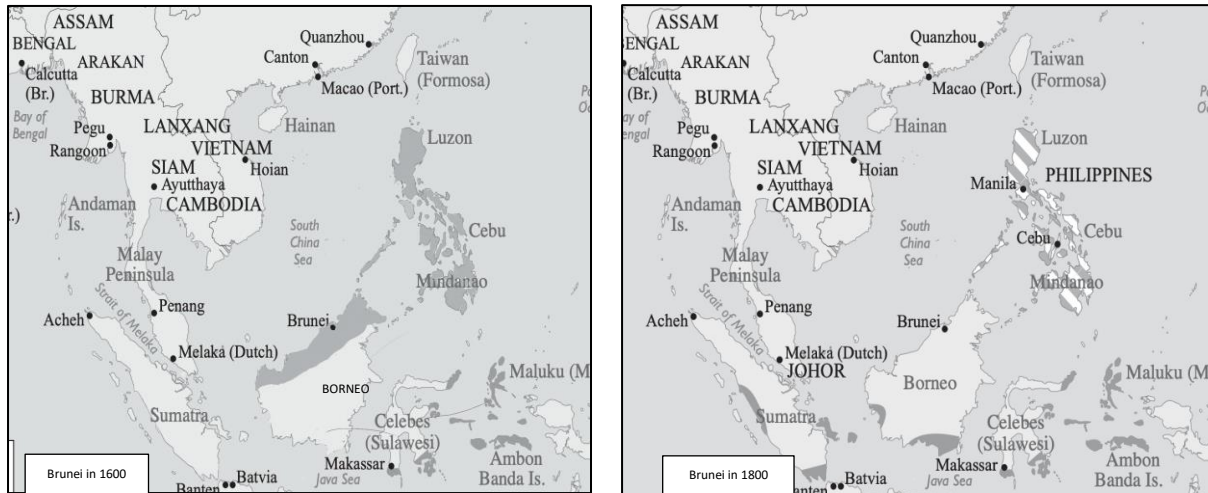
Before the nineteenth century, Brunei exercised authority over northern Borneo without fixed, mutually exclusive territorial boundaries. Instead, it was conceptualised through notions of *negeri* (state) or *kerajaan* (rule or rulership). In the context of the Malay polity, *negeri* was not strictly understood as a fixed territorial political entity. According to Gullick (1958), *negeri* was often regarded as the largest unit associated with river systems, while Bonney (1974) describes "*negeri dan jajahan takluknya*" (a state and its dependencies or tributaries), encompassing principal river basins and their tributaries. Territoriality therefore remained fluid. As Anderson (1990) observes, "Territorial extension of the state is always in flux. What matters is the amount of power concentrated at the centre" (p. 41). Power or the sphere of influence rested on the ruler's control over the *isi negeri* (people), rather than on territorial control (Bonney, 1974). However, this sphere of influence fluctuated over time.

During its peak in the sixteenth century, Brunei's political power extended from Luzon in the north to Mindanao in the south and northwestern Borneo, now Sarawak (Brown, 1969). However, Brunei's power began to decline from the seventeenth century onwards; Luzon and Manila came under Spain control, while Mindanao and the east coast of northern Borneo came under the influence of the Sulu Sultanate. Figure 1 shows Brunei's sphere of influence from 1600 to 1700. This contraction of political power was not unusual in the Malay polity, where territorial control was not the primary concern; rather,

control over people was more important. Nevertheless, the extent to which a ruler could exert influence from the centre over tributaries at the periphery depended on various factors, including the accessibility and continuity of river systems and the strength of local allegiance. As Leys and Pringle (1968) observed in Brunei, “It was abundantly clear that a member of the Brunei ruling class did not concern himself about owning land, any more than a fisherman concerns himself about owning water” (p. 41).

Figure 1

Brunei's Sphere of Influence in 1600 and 1800



Notes. Adapted from *Southeast Asia in world history* (p. 95), by Lockard (2009), Oxford University Press. Copyright 2009 by Oxford University Press.

However, rivers were not regarded as boundaries. In colonial correspondence between Mr. Birch and the High Commissioner, Sir F. Swettenham, it was noted:

A river was never regarded as a boundary; the recognised division of authority begun the watershed of the river... for all practical purposes, the watershed being distinctly marked by ranges of hills, dividing the rivers of the north from the south. (Foreign Office, 1901)

A similar observation was reported by Col. O. Cavenaugh:

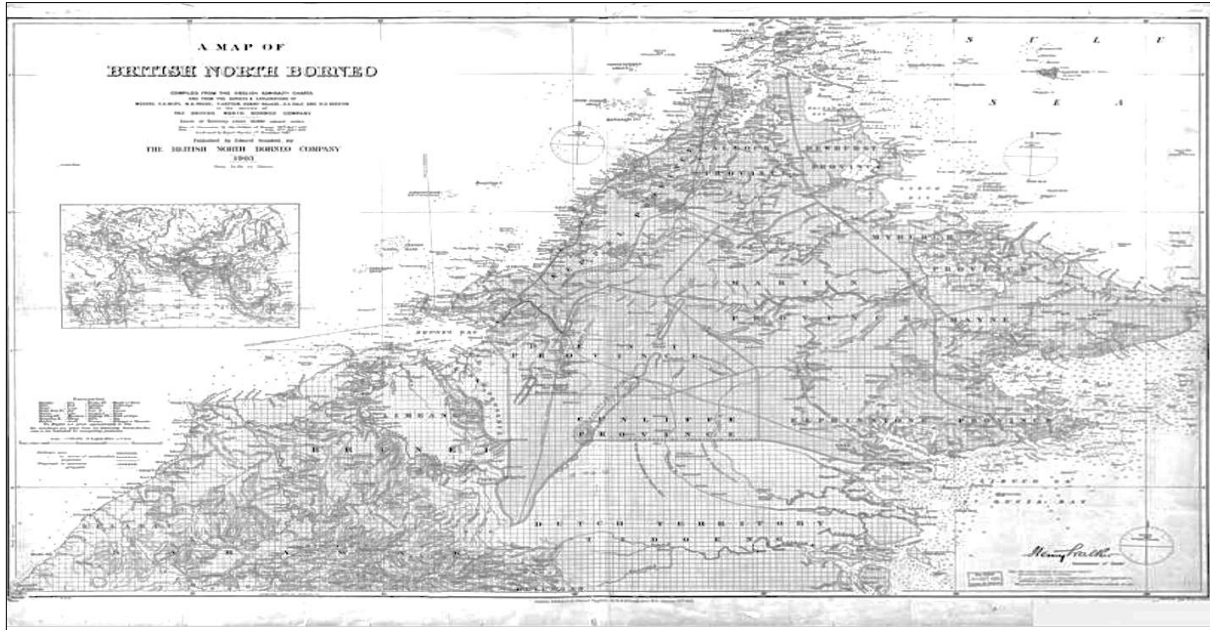
The inland limits of the southern frontier of Sarawak were unclear; rather, the inhabitants of the rivers arbitrarily belonged to the appanage lords or *pangirans*. (Foreign Office, 1863)

This distinction is important because it clarifies that Brunei's modern boundaries did not emerge from a pre-existing territorial template that was simply waiting to be formalised. Instead, they represented a fundamentally different kind of territorial order. The ruler in Brunei exercised authority through tributary relations, riverine access, and shifting allegiance, producing fluid and overlapping frontiers (Mail, 2006; Reece, 1988). The later colonial intervention, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, reduced Brunei's territorial reach and altered the logic of political space by progressively substituting bounded territorial jurisdiction for indigenous forms of territorial organisation.

These successive cessions and processes of territorial consolidation gradually reduced Brunei's political dominance from a regional empire to a small and fragmented polity. This contraction was not merely quantitative; it also represented a qualitative transformation that amounted to a process of deterritorialisation. The earlier mode of authority, based on allegiance and control over people, was increasingly displaced and supplanted by competing colonial jurisdictions.

Figure 3

Territorial Loss to North Borneo, 1878 – 1902



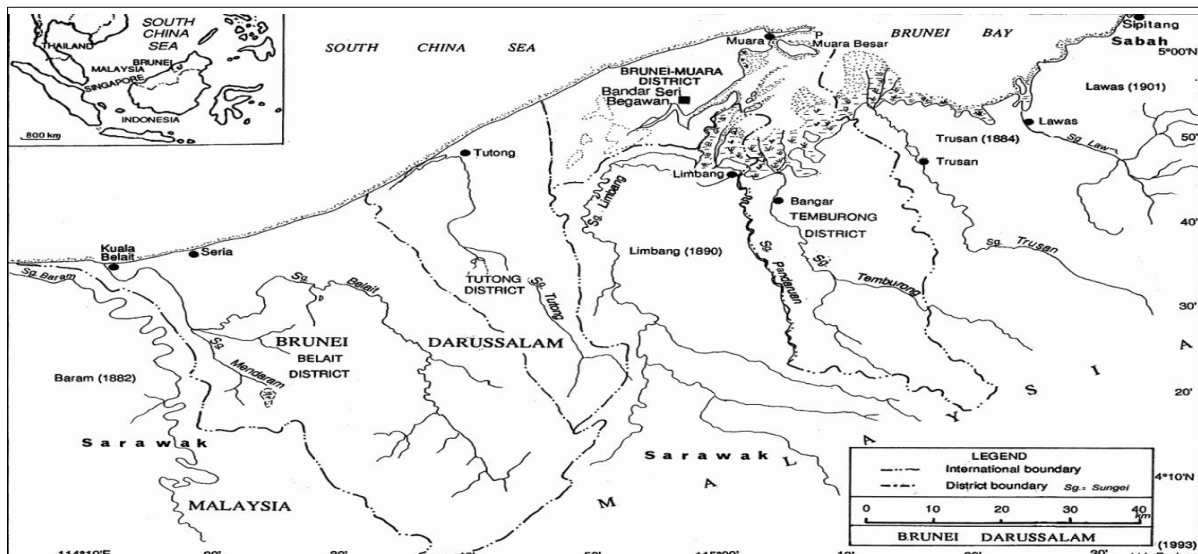
Notes. Reprinted from *Map of North Borneo* by Edward Stanford Ltd. & British North Borneo Chartered Company (1903), Library of Congress. (<https://www.loc.gov/item/2007630434/>). Copyright 1903 by Edward Stanford for the British North Borneo Company.

Yet territorial contraction alone does not explain the emergence of Brunei's modern boundaries. Many pre-modern polities lost territory without becoming bounded territorial states in the modern sense. What made Brunei distinctive was that territorial contraction occurred simultaneously with a colonial process of institutional reordering. British authorities increasingly sought to render Brunei's remaining territory legible through protectorate arrangements, administrative oversight, districting, and legal codification (Saunders, 2002). In this sense, contraction became a precondition for a new form of territorial statehood, but only because colonial institutions translated political loss into a stable administrative form.

The annexation of Limbang in 1890 was especially significant because it divided Brunei into two physically separate territories, leaving Temburong isolated from the main body of the state, Belait, Tutong and Muara (Wright, 1967). This fragmentation was more than a cartographic inconvenience. It represented a pivotal movement in the reorganisation of Brunei's political geography. It also increased the need for clearer administrative and territorial demarcation and contributed to the later colonial concern with defining jurisdiction more precisely. Figure 4 shows a modern map of Brunei.

Figure 4

Map of Modern Brunei



Notes. Reprinted from *The Brunei-Malaysia dispute over territorial and maritime claims in international law* (p. 53), by R. Haller-Trost (1994), International Boundaries Research Unit, University of Durham. Copyright 1994 by International Boundaries Research Unit.

Protectorate Rule and the Shift towards Administrative Territoriality

The Protectorate Agreement of 1888 marked an important turning point, as it formally placed Brunei under British protection alongside Sarawak and North Borneo. Although the Sultan retained nominal sovereignty, British influence over external affairs and territorial matters became more pronounced (Saunders, 2002). While the protectorate did not immediately create fully fixed boundaries, it significantly altered the institutional context within which territorial issues were addressed. The annexation of Limbang by Sarawak in 1890 clearly demonstrated this shift. In response, the Sultan of Brunei petitioned the British government for the return of the territory. His petitions were largely ignored; instead, the British government continued to favour the expansion of Sarawak, ultimately recognising the annexation of Limbang as part of Sarawak's territory (Crisswell, 1971; Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1971).

This outcome indicates that imperial governance increasingly shaped Brunei's territorial future, rather than independent frontier relations or regional diplomacy. The protectorate did not establish a final territorial map; rather, it placed Brunei within an institutional structure through which subsequent territorial decisions would be negotiated, implemented, and normalised. It was only after the Supplementary Treaty of 1906 that Brunei's territorial limits began to be more decisively defined, marking a clear consolidation of its remaining territories under the oversight of the British Resident.

The Residential System as the Decisive Critical Juncture

The decisive institutional break came with the introduction of the Residential System in 1906. Earlier territorial losses had weakened and reduced Brunei, but they had not yet fully produced a stable territorial state. With the appointment of a British Resident, territory became a matter of routine administration: it had to be negotiated, legally defined, regulated, and governed (Horton, 1986). Upon

his appointment as British Resident in Brunei in 1906, Sir McArthur expressed concern about protecting Brunei's remaining territory, including the Pandaruan River, one of the main rivers in the Limbang confluence, from further encroachment by Sarawak and North Borneo (Colonial Office, 1906). In 1907, Brunei's Land Code was introduced to centralise land under state authority and reclaim holdings from the Sultan, wazirs, and private landlords (*tulin*) under state control, thereby preventing further territorial encroachment by Sarawak and North Borneo (Mail, 2009). The Land Code of 1907 also addressed outstanding landownership claims. Seventy of 105 outstanding claims were settled, involving approximately 500 sub-claims, some of which were found to be fraudulent (Colonial Office, 1910). Between 1910 and 1912, Brunei reclaimed five streams in the northeast of the Temburong River from Sarawak and inserted a clause establishing a provisional boundary between Limbang (Sarawak) and Temburong (Brunei). Disputes with Sarawak concerning the frontier along the Pandaruan River were subsequently addressed through agreements concluded on 21 May 1912 and 4 February 1920 (Horton, 1984).

These reforms constituted a critical juncture in the institutionalisation of Brunei's boundary-making, transforming its political geography from a legacy of contraction into an object of active colonial arrangement. Territory was no longer conceived as a fluid sphere of influence tied to personal authority but as a bounded administrative unit subject to bureaucratic control. Administrative practices such as negotiation, land administration, taxation, jurisdictional enforcement, and local governance all reinforced the same principle: namely that territory was to be made legible, bounded, and governable.

Legal Codification

Once the Residential System was established, boundary-making became a more systematic administrative process. Colonial officials actively engaged in a series of agreements, particularly with Sarawak. Following the settlement of the Pandaruan River dispute in 1920, several boundaries were subsequently fixed, including the Belait–Baram boundary in 1931, the Temburong–Trusan boundary in the same year, the Limbang–Bukit Gadong boundary in 1933, and the extension of the Belait–Baram frontier from the Pagalayan Canal to Teraja Hill in 1939 (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1971). As these frontiers were progressively delineated, they became increasingly difficult to contest.

At this point, the boundaries acquired the characteristics of an institutional artefact. Legal codification reinforced this process, as boundary agreements and administrative orders served two connected purposes. First, they reduced ambiguity within the British imperial framework itself, particularly in relation to Sarawak and North Borneo. Second, they established a stable jurisdictional framework for taxation, governance, and subsequently, resource administration (Haller-Trost, 1994). What mattered, therefore, was not only the existence of agreements but also their embedding within a wider system of territorial governance.

Oil, Strategic Value and the Reinforcement of Territorial Integrity

The discovery of oil in Seria in 1929 significantly increased the value of territorial clarity. Petroleum transformed Brunei from a declining protectorate into a strategically and economically important territory (Sidhu, 2000). Significantly, a series of legal instruments were introduced, including the Mining and Oil Mining Enactment of 1951, Brunei's Proclamation of 1954, the Sarawak and North Borneo Order-in-Council (1954); and the 1958 Orders-in-Council defining the boundaries between Sarawak, North Borneo, and Brunei (Colonial Office, 1954; Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1974). These measures underscored the growing need to regulate the maritime jurisdictions. As a result, precise

boundary delineation acquired heightened significance. Boundaries now mattered not only as instruments of governance but also as mechanisms for securing control over valuable resources. The delimitation of maritime boundaries during this period laid the foundation for Brunei's contemporary territorial and resource governance.

However, oil should not be treated as the sole explanation for Brunei's territorial form. By the time petroleum transformed Brunei's strategic significance, its reduced and fragmented territorial framework had already been substantially institutionalised through protectorate rule, district administration, and legal arrangements. Oil intensified British incentives to preserve Brunei's territorial integrity, but it did not originate the institutional path on which Brunei's modern territoriality had already been established (Mukoyama, 2024).

Path Dependence and the Stabilisation of Brunei's Territorial Form

Historical institutionalism helps explain why Brunei's unusual territorial shape endured. Once Brunei's reduced territorial framework had been embedded in administration, districting, cadastral records, customs, transport arrangements, legal jurisdiction, and resource governance, reversal became increasingly costly (Pierson, 2000). This is the essence of path dependence. Colonial institutions generated increasing returns from maintaining the existing arrangement while simultaneously raising the political and administrative costs of pursuing alternatives.

The clearest example is Limbang. Brunei repeatedly protested its loss, but the arrangement was not revisited because it had become consolidated within Sarawak's administration and the wider territorial logic of British rule. Over time, the long-standing governance of Limbang as part of Sarawak made reversal increasingly impractical. The same applies to Temburong's position as an exclave. What may initially have appeared to be awkward contingency gradually became normalised as governance adapted around it through district administration, communication routes, legal arrangements, and bureaucratic routines (Haller-Trost, 1994).

Brunei's territorial form therefore survived into the post-colonial period not because it was historically inevitable, but because colonial institutions repeatedly reproduced it until it came to appear natural and fixed. Path dependence does not imply that alternative outcomes were impossible at the outset. Rather, it shows that once a particular arrangement became entrenched in administrative and legal practice, reversing it became progressively more difficult.

DISCUSSION: BOUNDARIES AS INSTITUTIONAL ARTEFACTS

Why Brunei Matters Theoretically

The Brunei case illustrates that diplomatic negotiations between rival empires alone cannot adequately explain colonial boundary-making. Instead, boundaries may also emerge through intra-imperial institutional dynamics involving bureaucratic rivalry, administrative compromise, legal codification and agreement, and colonial governance. Brunei's boundaries were formed through the interactions of multiple actors within the British Empire, each pursuing distinct agendas. The Colonial Office increasingly sought to preserve Brunei as a viable polity; Sarawak and the British North Borneo Company often favoured territorial expansion or administrative rationalisation; and Brunei's rulers sought to resist further contraction while adapting to imperial control (Tarling, 1971; Hussainmiya, 2006). Boundary-making was therefore not a single, coherent, top-down project. Rather, it was the cumulative product of competing interests mediated through institutions.

Boundaries as Institutional Artefacts

This is why the concept of an institutional artefact is useful. Brunei's boundaries were not simply drawn and left behind as abstract legal lines. They were produced through repeated institutional acts and reproduced through routine governance. Protectorate agreements established imperial authority; the Residential System restructured the practice of governance; boundary agreements translated ambiguity into spatial precision; land regulation and districting embedded territorial divisions in administrative life; and resource governance reinforced incentives to preserve those arrangements. The durability of the boundary therefore lay not in a single diplomatic moment, but in the ongoing institutional reproduction of territorial order.

Why Alternative Explanations are Insufficient

Several alternative explanations might be offered for Brunei's territorial configuration, but none is sufficient on its own.

A purely geopolitical explanation would emphasise British strategic interests in northern Borneo. Such interests certainly mattered, but they do not fully explain why Britain ultimately preserved Brunei as a reduced polity rather than allowing it to disappear altogether. Strategy alone cannot explain the specific institutional form that Brunei assumed.

A purely legalist explanation would focus on treaties and agreements. Yet treaties alone did not produce durable boundaries. They became effective only when implemented through surveying, mapping, district governance, land law, and jurisdictional practices.

A purely resource-based explanation would emphasise oil, particularly after 1929. Petroleum undoubtedly strengthened British interest in preserving Brunei's territorial integrity, but it cannot explain why Brunei's basic territorial framework had already become institutionalised before oil transformed the territory's strategic significance.

This article does not claim that law, strategy, or resources were irrelevant. Rather, it argues that their effects were channelled through institutions, which mediated, translated, and stabilised them in territorial practice over time.

Broader Implications

The Brunei case has three broader implications. First, it supports the argument that boundaries should be understood not simply as geographic or legal lines but as institutional artefacts whose durability depends on their continuous reproduction through law, administration, mapping, and governance. Second, it demonstrates the value of bringing historical institutionalism into closer conversation with Border Studies and Political Geography. The concepts of critical juncture, path dependence and institutional layering provide a richer explanation of territorial formation than approaches focused solely on diplomacy or rivalry. Third, it challenges the assumption in International Relations that territorial boundaries are always the product of interactions among sovereign states. Internal imperial politics and administrative restructuring in colonial contexts may also produce and institutionalise boundaries.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Brunei's boundaries should be understood not as natural or pre-given spatial divisions, but as institutional artefacts produced through colonial governance. Brunei's contemporary territorial configuration emerged through a long historical process involving British intervention, territorial contraction, protectorate rule, administrative reform, legal codification, and institutional reproduction.

Historical institutionalism makes it possible to explain this transformation more rigorously. First, critical junctures disrupted Brunei's earlier frontier-based and tributary political order and introduced a colonial logic of bounded territoriality. Second, path-dependent mechanisms locked in the territorial consequences of early decisions, making reversal increasingly difficult over time. Third, institutional layering transformed Brunei into a territorially bounded state by superimposing colonial administrative and legal practices onto an indigenous political order that formally remained in place.

The article has also shown that Brunei represents an important case of intra-imperial boundary-making. Unlike many colonial boundaries that resulted primarily from negotiations between rival empires, Brunei's boundaries were largely produced within the British imperial system itself through the interactions of metropolitan authorities, concessionary powers, colonial administrations, and the Brunei Sultanate. This finding broadens the study of colonial territorial formation by showing that internal imperial politics and administrative struggles could be as important as conventional diplomacy.

More broadly, the study suggests that boundaries should be analysed as historically contingent institutional outcomes. They are not merely lines on a map, but durable products of political decisions, administrative practices, legal instruments, and territorial governance. Brunei's modern territorial configuration was neither natural nor inevitable. It was an institutional achievement of colonial rule, reproduced over time until they came to appear fixed and normal. Future research could apply this perspective to other colonial cases in Southeast Asia and beyond to examine how internal imperial dynamics shaped the territorial foundations of modern states.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors.

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