

UNIT TWO

Africa and the Colonial Experience (1880s – 1960s)

Introduction

This unit covers significant historical developments in Africa from the 1880s to the 1960s, with a focus on European colonization. The main topics include the process of colonization, African resistance, and colonial administration.

The Era of “Legitimate Trade” and Colonial Empires

The Birth and Expansion of ‘Legitimate Trade’

- **Illegitimate Trade:** Refers to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which involved human trafficking.
- **Legitimate Trade:** Emerged after the abolition of the slave trade, focusing on goods like palm oil, gum, and groundnuts.
- Despite the end of the slave trade, the new trade did not significantly improve the conditions for most West Africans. European goods like cloth and firearms weakened local industries and did not benefit the majority of Africans.

The Infrastructure and the Ideology of New Imperialism

- **New Imperialism:** Period of intensified European expansion, beginning in the late 19th century.
- European countries, driven by economic crises and technological advances, competed to colonize Africa.
- The **Berlin Conference (1884-1885)** formalized the partition of Africa among European powers. It established rules for claiming and occupying African territories, leading to intensified colonial control.

The Partition of Africa: Motives and Processes

- **Scramble for Africa:** European nations rapidly acquired African territories for resources and markets.
- **Berlin Conference:** Held to organize the division of Africa without African input. Major outcomes included the formal recognition of territorial claims and the requirement for effective occupation.

Summary

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, European powers transitioned from exploiting Africa through the slave trade to establishing colonial empires. This period, marked by the "Legitimate Trade" and the "Scramble for Africa," was characterized by competitive colonization driven by technological advancements and economic motives. The Berlin Conference played a crucial role in formalizing European control over African territories, shaping the political and economic landscape of Africa for decades.

African Resistance Against Colonial Expansion

Key Concepts:

- **Colonialism:** The practice of acquiring and maintaining colonies or territories by a foreign power.
- **Resistance:** Efforts made by the colonized people to oppose or fight against the colonizers.
- **Scorched Earth Policy:** A military strategy where all resources and infrastructure are destroyed to prevent the enemy from using them.

African Initiatives and Responses to Colonialism

African Resistance Overview: African societies resisted European colonialism through both peaceful and violent methods. Although there were various forms of resistance, Africans generally aimed to protect their sovereignty and independence. The intensity of resistance varied by region, and resistance was often hampered by the Europeans' superior military technology and organization.

Samori Toure and the Wassoulou Empire:

- **Background:** Samori Toure (c. 1828 – 1900) was a significant African leader who founded the Wassoulou Empire in West Africa, encompassing parts of present-day Guinea, Mali, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso.
- **Resistance:** Toure resisted French colonization fiercely. Despite successfully repelling French attacks initially, he faced setbacks, including the refusal of the British to support him and the eventual defeat by the French in 1898. His resistance demonstrated the determined efforts of Africans to defend their lands and sovereignty.

The Ashanti Empire:

- **Formation:** The Ashanti Empire, established in the 17th century in modern Ghana, grew powerful through gold trade and military organization.
- **Resistance:** The Ashanti resisted British advances between 1823 and 1873. However, after several conflicts, including a major rebellion in 1900, the British conquered the Ashanti Empire in 1902, incorporating it into the Gold Coast colony.

Urabi Pasha's Rebellion in Egypt:

- **Background:** Ahmed Urabi, a leader in the Egyptian army, led the Urabi Revolt (1881–1882) against British and French control in Egypt.
- **Outcome:** The revolt aimed for social justice and Egyptian independence but was suppressed by British forces. Urabi was exiled but later returned to Egypt, where he was celebrated as a nationalist hero.

The Mahdist Movement in Sudan:

- **Leader:** Muhammad Ahmad, who declared himself the Mahdi (a savior figure), led the Mahdist movement starting in 1881.
- **Resistance:** The Mahdists achieved notable victories and established an Islamic state in Sudan. However, after their defeat by British-Egyptian forces in 1898, Sudan was occupied and governed by the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium.

The Maji-Maji Rebellion:

- **Background:** The Maji-Maji Rebellion (1905–1907) occurred in present-day Tanzania as a response to German colonial oppression, including heavy taxes and forced labor.
- **Resistance:** The rebellion involved the use of magical water (Maji-Maji) believed to protect against bullets. Despite its initial success, the rebellion was eventually crushed by the Germans, leading to widespread devastation and famine.

Summary

The resistance against colonial expansion in Africa involved various strategies and was marked by significant figures like Samori Toure, the Ashanti rulers, Urabi Pasha, and the Mahdist leaders. Despite their efforts, the overwhelming military advantage of European powers often led to the eventual suppression of these resistances. The diverse forms of resistance illustrate the resilience and determination of African societies to maintain their sovereignty and cultural integrity in the face of colonial aggression.