

Africa in world history

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World history began in Africa.¹ Most theories of human origins point to the emergence of our species in Africa, some 100,000 to 250,000 years ago and its dispersal from there. If one goes back far enough, we are all Africans.

The depth of Africa's past became an argument for its liberation in the twentieth century. When W. E. B. Dubois published *The World and Africa* in 1946, he placed Africa in the long sweep of world history. He described how Africans had mastered their environment and the creativity of political processes, going back to Egypt from 5000 BC onward, passing through Ethiopia, to the great African empires from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries, and the powerful states on the eve of colonial conquest. The history of Africa's peoples was not that of communities developing their own cultures in isolation, but of engagement with people, commodities, and ideas from across and beyond the continent. It was a story of Africa's contributions to humanity. Some of these themes had been articulated long before by African and African-American intellectuals, religious leaders, and political activists, going back to the days of North American slavery. Making the connection to Africa – and asserting the continent's place in world civilization – was one way for slaves or freed blacks to refuse to consign themselves to being chattel and nothing more. Many referred to themselves as Ethiopian, not because many slaves came from that part of Africa, but because, as Christians, they knew the stories of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and were inserting themselves into a grand narrative of Christian history. Some Africans and African Americans asserted that Egyptian civilization was rooted in Africa and hence that European civilization came out of Africa. For intellectuals like Cheikh Anta Diop in the 1950s, the claim that Africa had a place in the world's past was part of their demand for political liberation in the present.

1 The focus of this chapter is Sub-Saharan Africa, with occasional forays beyond.

The conundrum such thinkers faced, ever since the eighteenth century, was that the connection that was foremost in the minds of non-Africans – and which affected millions of Africans – was the slave trade. The assertion by the descendants of Africans of a past that was both proud and influential was a counter to two different conceits promoted by many people of European descent. For some Europeans, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Africans were the enslaveable other – exploitable at will. For others, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Africans were victims, a reflection of a European society given over to greed and aggrandizement. With the anti-slavery movement, the latter interpretation gained pride of place, but it did not so much restore, in European eyes, the honor of the victims of the slave trade as it signified that Africans had been tainted by enslavement and would have a long road to follow to make themselves capable of acting like free people in a competitive world. When advocates of colonization in the late nineteenth century wanted to convince more humanitarian-minded compatriots that conquest was a morally defensible act, they drew on images out of the slave trade debates: of Africans debased both as victims and as perpetrators of enslavement. We need both to see the place of such arguments in history and to look beyond them in our understanding of the slave trade, colonization, and – above all – the ways Africans sought to make their lives in the world throughout history.

The slave trade after 1750

Some of the most important recent studies of the Atlantic slave trade have focused on its origins and found them in the intersection of networks that connected different worlds – on, for example, a Mandinka trading network coming out of the fifteenth-century Mali Empire connecting to an Iberian network coming to the coast of Guinea-Senegambia via the Cape Verde Islands, giving rise in coastal ports to a mixed society whose economic basis was, increasingly, trade in slaves. In West Central Africa, what Linda Heywood and John Thornton call an “Atlantic creole” society emerged, but it was hardly a bounded social formation, as alliances and conflicts between armed Portuguese and African groups followed a shifting pattern.² Whether

2 Whether the word “creole” adequately captures the phenomenon is controversial, but the intersection of different networks and political structures and the cultural and racial mixing at the nodes is clear. Direct European military presence was important in Angola, but not in most of West Africa. Linda Heywood and John Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (Cambridge University Press,

such intersections functioned smoothly or gave rise to unstable patterns of conflict, the result was the production of slaves. In some cases, like Asante, a kingdom that had initially consolidated itself through control of agriculture and gold exports became more powerful in the mid-eighteenth century through the export of slaves. The overseas slave trade allowed the king to import firearms and commodities that could be distributed to his supporters. In others – notably the Aro Chukwo of what is now Nigeria – a less monarchical, more network-like system consolidated control of the enslavement process and linked itself to “houses” – lineages extended by the incorporation of clients, slaves, and ex-slaves – that controlled the sale of slaves to European ships. In other cases, the slave trade could not be so tightly controlled, leading to concentration of power for a time, followed by fragmentation as rivals gained access to slave markets. It would be a mistake to see all of Africa in the late eighteenth century as given over to the slave trade, but at this time the effects along the coast from Guinea to Angola, with tentacles reaching inland, were strong.

To some kings and merchants, participating in the slave trade made sense because both the obtaining and the disciplining of slave labor occurred externally to their power base. Rather than having to extract labor or income from “their own” people, they raided far afield and sold the people they captured, giving up the potential profits of exploiting labor directly while avoiding the risks of doing so – escape, rebellion, the forging of local connections by imported slaves. The difficulties African rulers had in systematically exploiting their populations *in situ* took on the tragic meaning it did because it coincided with one of the ugliest and most central dimensions of European history from the sixteenth century onward – the voracious appetite for labor in places, notably the Caribbean sugar islands, where indigenous populations had been killed off and where people with any choice in the matter did not want to go. Some African rulers and communities refused to sell slaves at times, but once one state in the region got into the slave-trading business, its capacity to make war and stage raids was increased. Whether, here or elsewhere, slaves were a by-product of political conflict or a cause, is something of a chicken-egg problem, for the availability of an outlet for captives and incentives that external markets provided shaped the nature of polities. It was in the Atlantic spatial system – at its height in the late eighteenth century – that the dehumanization of the slave trade reached an extreme. But it was also within the Atlantic that systematic opposition to the slave trade built up.

2007); Toby Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300–1589* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The demographic impact of the slave trade is not easy to gauge. At least 10 million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic over four centuries (but especially the eighteenth and early nineteenth), and many more died as a consequence of the violence and disruption within Africa. Although the majority of people exported were male, the loss of reproductive power was considerable too. There was a redistribution of population within Africa as well, since some of the slaving states retained slaves (especially females), while areas along their frontiers lost people. Many people took refuge in locations that offered a measure of protection rather than the best opportunities for farming. Scholars debate the extent to which the introduction of new crops from the Americas – maize and cassava most notably – offset the demographic impact of the slave trade, but they clearly did not lessen its impact on security and political relationships.³

In Eastern Africa, the slave trade to the coast and then across the Indian Ocean was greatly expanded from the late eighteenth century onward, to some extent feeding new demand from European-held islands in the ocean but also extending the older pattern of slave exports to the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and South Asian regions. With less prior development of centralized kingdoms than in West Africa (except for Buganda, Rwanda, and some others), the East African slave trade produced an even higher degree of insecurity than its western equivalent, for today's slave seller was more likely to be tomorrow's victim. Some coastal people – Muslims, often of mixed Afro-Asian origin – established power bases inland, spreading the Swahili language along with the violence, insecurity, and shifting quests for patrons, protection, and profit. The trans-Saharan slave trade also continued into the nineteenth century, at a less frenetic pace than the Atlantic variant, driven by demand for slaves in North Africa, networks that transported slaves, and militarized polities south of the desert that captured them.

The ambiguities of connections in the nineteenth century

Looking at Africa over the course of the century, what stands out is the complex relationship of new connections to new boundaries, of integration

3 On this and other demographic questions, see John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 2007); he both uses and questions Manning's pioneering work on slave trade demography: Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

to marginalization, of inclusion to distinction-making. At least as important as the extent of connections across space was their unevenness.

Around 1800, the Atlantic slave trade was at its height. Then, the rules of long-distance commerce changed. Why Britain decided in 1807 to forbid its subjects to engage in the slave trade and to begin a long campaign to prevent other people from doing so (and abolished slavery in its colonies in the 1830s) is a subject of controversy, but the effects on Africa were not what abolitionists expected. With British naval vessels patrolling the West African – and later the East African – coast, slave trading was subject to new risks, but with Cuba and parts of Brazil demanding new slaves for developing plantation and mining economies, many took the risk. It was mid-century before the Atlantic trade died down.

But the very process lowered the price of slaves within Africa, while industrializing Europe's demand for tropical products increased the importance of agricultural slavery within the continent. In Dahomey (West Africa), the export of palm oil (increasingly in demand as a lubricant and an ingredient in soaps) enhanced the importance of the slave plantation; in northern Nigeria, a varied regional commerce made use of slaves, whose supply was augmented by regional warfare and the consolidation of an Islamic state system; in Zanzibar around mid-century, clove production – much of it destined for markets in South and Southeast Asia, but with linkages to Europe and North America – took off rapidly, fed by the increasing regional availability of slaves. Sugar production on European-controlled islands in the Indian Ocean added to the demand for slaves coming out of East Africa, and with British pressure against overt slave trading, buyers found ways to disguise what they were doing as “contract” labor.

The growth of the so-called legitimate trade did not alleviate the highly uneven distribution of political and economic power across Africa. Some powerful kingdoms, like Buganda, became more powerful amidst the shifts in external linkages. Others, like Asante, feared that losing the ability to export slaves would both hurt revenue and forfeit the surest means of avoiding slave revolt within the kingdom, but managed to weather the storm. And new sorts of state-building projects developed in the nineteenth century. One was the rise of the Zulu kingdom after 1818, perhaps influenced by pressures and incentives coming from coastal colonies, but whose patterns reflect local innovation. A man from a minor chieftaincy, Shaka, combined two sorts of innovation: one technical, the other social. He equipped his armies with a short stabbing spear, better suited to sowing terror than the long throwing spear. And he organized men into age regiments – based on the time of their

initiation into adulthood – cutting across the kinship groups of this Nguni-speaking society and creating loyalty to regiments directly controlled by the king. Success depended on continual warfare and the acquisition of booty to distribute. By associating a set of women with each age regiment, the monarchy extended its control to the realm of reproduction. Shaka was assassinated by a half-brother, but the kingdom lived on, and more importantly it sent shock waves throughout a wider region: some polities were defeated and incorporated, while others adopted Zulu tactics and inflicted terror on their neighbors, a process that reached as far as present-day Tanzania. The Zulu kingdom eventually was confronted with another new political development: the “trek” of Afrikaans-speaking white settlers from the Cape. The Zulus’ final undoing came, however, when the British army, on its second try after a humiliating defeat at the hands of Zulu warriors, conquered the kingdom in 1879 and broke it up into thirteen chieftaincies.

An even larger-scale development was the transformation of politics in the Sahel by a series of *jihads* beginning in the late eighteenth century. They had a basis in the political instability and insecurity across the region, affected both by the trans-Saharan slave trade to the north and the vagaries of the Atlantic trade to the west and south. But the inspiration came from connections among Islamic teachers and political elites influenced by them, spread by networks across the desert and along its southern edge among teachers and the development of the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya brotherhoods. The *jihads* were inspired by the quest for a more rigorous Islamic polity as opposed to the more mixed forms that had spread unevenly across the region. The most powerful of all, in what is now Northern Nigeria, was led by Fulani, whose mobility contributed to the expansion of the network, but it was not an ethnic movement so much as an expression of a universalistic type of Islam. Consolidation of the *jihadi* states entailed much violence and produced many slaves, but it ended in this region with a solidly established system of emirates looking for spiritual and political guidance to the *jihad*’s leader, Usman dan Fodio, and his successors centered in Sokoto. The appeal of this kind of Islamic movement made possible an expansion of scale elsewhere as well: an Islamic polity centered in Macina on the Niger River, and to the west the great state put together by El Hajj Umar in the 1850s and early 1860s.

Scrambling for Africa

In the mid-nineteenth century the increasingly industrialized, wealthy countries of Western Europe were able to get raw materials from Africa

via commercial networks. The choices that European powers confronted were not between colonizing Africa or having no relationship with its diverse polities. Why, then, in the last quarter or so of the century did a scramble for African colonies ensue – one which left virtually all of the continent, except for Liberia and Ethiopia, as a colony or protectorate of one or another European power? To begin with, economic access could be choked off at nodal points as well as enhanced by the development of commercial networks. Europe was divided into rival polities; power in Africa was highly uneven. Put the two together, and one can comprehend the anxiety that officials in London, Berlin, or Paris felt toward the possibility that rival European powers could form exclusive trading relationships with powerful African rulers, depriving their countrymen of access to the region's resources. Germany's rise as an industrial power helped to precipitate the process by challenging British predominance in overseas trade and naval strength. The scramble for Africa was, above all, pre-emptive colonization, and that is why it happened so rapidly; as soon as one European power made a move, its rivals had to follow (Map 21.1).⁴

The notion of pre-emptive colonization helps to explain why the scramble for Africa was so intense and why, once colonized, the European powers did relatively little with the territory that they had taken over. Conquest was easier than administration, given the vast spaces, linguistic and ethnic diversity, and well-entrenched kinship groups and commercial, religious, and other networks in Africa. Colonial armies, with advanced military technology – notably the machine gun and the telegraph, as well as the use of quinine against malaria – could concentrate forces, terrorize populations, and move on. When it came to continuously running the show, they had to look to indigenous leaders to collect taxes and round up labor – kings, chiefs, kinship elders. Sometimes the “chief” was a European invention, but the most useful was one who had some sort of legitimacy, some sort of capacity to give orders within a local framework. In a few areas – where there were mineral resources or the possibility of settling European farmers, and in urban areas – colonial administration could be tighter and more directly oppressive.

Colonial rule and global connections

Was colonization a step toward – or away from – integrating Africa into global circuits – of goods, capital, people, and ideas? European powers

⁴ This argument is put in the context of a *longue-durée* history of empires in Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2010).



Map 21.1 The partition of Africa

hoped that colonization would give them surer access to a range of commodities, but their success in this regard was mitigated. Colonizing powers could by a mixture of coercion and incentives get Africans to grow certain crops desired elsewhere, but the quest for reliable production of, for example, cotton was often frustrated. Some of the biggest success stories of “colonial” agriculture – cocoa in the Gold Coast, for example – occurred outside of colonial control, as African farmers took shoots brought by Swiss missionaries, mobilized the resources of kinsmen and clients, and built an agricultural enterprise that the colonial state benefited

from but had neither created nor shaped. At times, compulsion played a durable role in agriculture – cotton or sugar cultivation in Mozambique, for example. In some instances, colonial regimes supported the land-grabbing and labor-hungry actions of white settlers, while getting most of their revenue from the crops or animal skins brought in by those Africans outside the zones where settlers demanded labor. Agricultural incorporation remained a patchwork.

Meanwhile, colonization had disaggregating effects. The trade routes that pre-dated the scramble often crossed the borders between what would become French, German, British, Belgian, and Portuguese empires in Africa, and state officials impeded such communication, even if they could not stop it. Some groups living near colonial frontiers became specialists at organizing the movement of goods or people across them – for a price. The European firms that moved crops out of Africa were only partially integrating producers into global markets; they were subject to “imperial preference,” to differential tariffs intended to keep trade intra-imperial, to the social networks and preferences of trading firms that sought to turn colonies into “*chasses gardées*” where they could have monopoly privileges. The railroads that colonial powers built were not like the networks that tied together various parts of Europe, or even India. They were drainage networks, mostly single-track, narrow-gauge lines linking interior points with a coastal port.

Africans living near the line of rail had an advantage in marketing crops. Others found it hard to earn cash and often had to seek wage labor in more propitious places. Such migratory patterns developed in many variations: from the interior of West Africa to the African-run farms of the Gold Coast, from regions adjacent to the Copperbelt of Central Africa to the mine towns of Northern Rhodesia or the southern Congo, from a wide area of southern Africa – including Portuguese Mozambique as well as British colonies – to the gold mines of South Africa, from many countrysides to many cities.⁵

Migration was not limited to laborers. “Trade diasporas” had, long before colonization, harnessed social ties to make effective long-distance trading networks, and such forms of ethnic specialization – among peoples known as

5 In some cases migration was coerced – to white farmers in the Côte d'Ivoire until the abolition of forced labor in 1946, to a significant extent in southern Africa or in central Kenya – but in others the initiative to undertake and organize long-distance movement came from Africans, a point emphasized by François Manchuelle, *Willing Migrants: Soninke Labor Diasporas, 1848–1960* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997).

Hausa or Dyula, for instance – continued to foster regional trade in ways colonial regimes did not understand. Trade diasporas also brought non-Europeans to Africa: South Asians to East Africa, in a pattern that pre-dated the colonial presence but which was accentuated under British imperial rule; Syrio-Lebanese to both French and British West Africa. Such networks – because of their extra-African connections and because they avoided some of the burdens of social ties to impoverished local communities – often took a privileged place in the commercial mechanisms that brought imported commodities to African towns and villages, fostering access to low-cost items but making it more difficult for locals to break into such market niches.⁶

Colonization brought an increased presence of mission schools – and, until late in the game, a limited effort by the state at education – seemingly giving a segment of the African population access to the literatures, journalism, legal traditions, and scientific publications of the rest of the world. But the parsimony of colonial educative projects meant that they divided people as much as brought them together, giving a few a high premium on their skills. Considered on a family basis, however, the picture is more complicated: a single family might include literate and illiterate members, young men who spent time working in cities and older men and women who stayed in the villages.

One of the most durable divisions colonization instilled was linguistic. Africans spoke many languages – 800 by some counts – but they were also used to communicating across them, and some languages had become *lingua franca* – Swahili, Hausa, Mandinka, Wolof – used by traders over vast spaces. With colonial regimes demanding that Africans interact with them in the imperial language and with clerical employment in the colonial apparatus becoming a desirable aspiration, Africa was being divided into anglophone, francophone, lusophone, etc. blocks.

Some scholars have argued that colonization sharpened distinction-making, as colonial regimes worried about low-level officers or civilian employees forgetting which side of the racial divide they were on. Miscegenation was a particular concern – more so in the late nineteenth century than it had been earlier on, as imperial powers became more conscious of their bourgeois social structure and sought to preserve it overseas. Colonial masculinity could take a variety of forms, from insistence

6 The literature on trade diasporas throughout the world owes much to the pioneering work of Africanist anthropologist Abner Cohen, “Cultural strategies in the organization of trading diasporas,” in Claude Meillassoux, ed., *Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa* (Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 266–284.

that a man was entitled to impose his will on African women and choose to recognize or not recognize his offspring to a notion that sexual restraint was a part of building a durable colonial order.

World order and colonial rule

Research is increasingly revealing just how unstable the place of colonies – and how uncertain the place of Africa – was in the world order. To a significant extent, scholarly trends have reversed themselves. Post-colonial critique – itself following years in which colonialism was considered a mere sidelight to national histories – tended to treat colonial rule as an all-embracing grid of power imposed on Africans, underscored by strong racial hierarchy. More recent perspectives do not diminish the brutality of colonial rule – if anything the weakness of colonial administrative regimes and the macho sensibilities of many colonizers rendered them all the more prone to extreme violence. But colonial ideology now appears a good deal less coherent than postulated and colonial power more fragmented and uncertain.

Although Britain and France, most notably, made gestures early on toward reforming Africa, they quickly realized the difficulty of either remaking African societies in a European image or systematically exploiting them. On a formal level, both powers forced African societies to abolish slavery, but they had trouble understanding, let alone changing, the varied relations of personal dependence that former masters were able to work out with their ex-slaves. Officials realized soon their dependency on the very elites whose backward or tyrannical ways had justified European colonization. British leaders eventually named this practice “indirect rule” and the French called it “association” but such practices were as old as the imperial form throughout the world. Chiefs or family heads who began to grow export crops could in some circumstances, despite low prices offered by European export firms, acquire a modest prosperity and a reason to give their contingent accommodation to the colonial system. Where young men – or people of slave descent – detached themselves from their “traditional” villages or migrated away from regions where slaveholders held sway, they created both opportunities for colonial economies to obtain cheap labor or for new patrons – such as the peanut-growing Islamic leaders of Senegal – to acquire clients. But they also worried officials who feared the dangers of masterless men or, worse still, masterless women.

Colonial governments barely knew the populations they governed and varied greatly in their curiosity. Some sought to channel the discoveries of

anthropology into a more knowledgeable – and presumably effective – form of local administration, but others thought that the white administrator who “knew his natives” had more to offer than scientific observers. Officials usually thought of Africans not as individuals in direct relation to the state but as members of collectivities – “tribes” – to be commanded through the vertical channels leading from white officials through chiefs (Fig. 21.1). There were virtually no systematic censuses until after the Second World War, so the numbers, let alone the composition, of colonial populations remained largely unknown, and official estimates may well have been off by orders of magnitude. Not until the late 1940s were colonial governments able to measure – or even be interested in measuring – overall economic output, although they did care about export earnings and tax revenues. When economists tried to estimate investment in British Africa in the 1930s, they found that there was relatively little of it, in comparison to investment in the dominions, in other European countries, or in other empires. And British and French governments alike rejected in the 1920s (and in the French case again in the 1930s and early 1940s) proposals for using metropolitan revenue to stimulate economic development.



Figure 21.1 French administrator and African notables, c. 1920
(Roger Viollet/Getty Images)

The Depression of 1929 deepened the rigidity of colonial economies, even as it revealed yet again that remote parts of Africa were affected by events halfway across the globe. With the decline of exports, Africans in commercial centers were pushed back into the countryside to face the problems that had made them seek wage labor in the first place. Governments, losing revenue from export taxes, leaned harder on chiefs to collect head taxes. The Depression thus accentuated rural poverty, but the tensions were diffused enough through the large spaces of rural Africa that colonial governments could contain them. It was during the recovery from depression in the second half of the 1930s, as workers returned to cities, mine towns, and railroad depots with wages kept low, no new housing, and no better social services, that tensions, particularly in the British colonies, mounted to a point where officials had to take notice.

The most notable exception to the thinness of administration and weakness of investment in pre-1940s Africa was South Africa. There were two reasons for its path to a certain kind of capitalist development, inflected by race. One was its long history of white settlement, by Dutch settlers going back to 1652, and by a mixture of Europeans after the British took over in the early nineteenth century. By the late nineteenth century, South Africa had a white population of 10–15 per cent. That meant a degree of supervision over Africans could be exercised – by farmers or industrial employers, and by the state via police and administrators. The nineteenth century witnessed the suppression of the autonomy of African polities – from the chieftaincies of the eastern Cape to the once-powerful Zulu kingdom. Settlers took over much land, but in general they lacked the means to farm it using wage labor and preferred instead to keep Africans as tenants, forcing them to pay a rent in kind, money, or labor. Some Africans found that mission communities – with significant landholdings – offered a measure of protection against settlers, particularly Afrikaners (descendants of Dutch settlers) whose “commandos” sometimes enslaved Africans or imposed a particularly harsh order on them.

All this changed beginning in 1866 with the discovery of diamonds near Kimberley. Miners descended on the region. Although Africans were refused the right to prospect directly, thousands were employed. When competition for labor was reduced by the near-monopoly established by the De Beers company and by state policing, the mines instituted a rigid system of control that became a model for South Africa: keeping men on contract, confining them to compounds, and keeping control of the movement of men by requiring them to keep at all times a pass-book – an internal passport. But laborers flocked from much of the region, including Portuguese

Mozambique, attracted by the possibility of being able to bring back money saved from wages (low as they were) and, in some cases, to escape forced labor nearer to home. When gold was discovered in the Witwatersrand in 1886, similar methods were used to control labor, but the scale was now much larger – 100,000 mineworkers at times. White miners were a significant factor too, and they tried to defend a superior status and working conditions. The food needs of the mines and accompanying industries and services expanded the market for maize and encouraged farmers to shift to a more capitalistic form of agriculture, expelling tenants, buying equipment, and hiring wage workers as needed.

The British government and Afrikaner elites – who had organized themselves into republics under the imperial umbrella – clashed over the state's increasingly intrusive form of government, climaxing in the so-called Anglo-Boer War, won with considerable difficulty by the British in 1899–1902. The government then set about “Reconstruction,” laying out a segregated spatial order, in which Africans were supposed to live in “reserves” under indigenous chiefs except when they were working for whites. Afrikaner elites soon found a prosperous place in the system – what has been called the “alliance of gold and maize” – and by 1910 the British government was confident enough in their incorporation into an economy linked to British and international capital that it allowed South Africa to become a self-governing dominion within the British Empire. Under the leadership of former Afrikaner generals like Jan Smuts, such an alliance managed to preserve the common interest of English and Afrikaans-speaking elites. The government went to considerable efforts to appease – mostly at the expense of Africans – Afrikaner workers or small-scale farmers, for whom Afrikaner nationalism had strong appeal.

A mere 13 percent of the land area of South Africa was designated for African farming – under systems of communal land tenancy – and Africans were forbidden from owning land or renting it (except as labor tenants) in the rest. The system had enough niches and leaks for some Africans to find spaces of relative autonomy in African areas of cities and sometimes in rural areas that were relatively neglected or where a white owner was relatively lax, but the screws were tightening, and with the reserves becoming overpopulated, ecological disaster was piled upon economic and political oppression.

Elsewhere in Africa, the race question was not so clear-cut and not so tightly woven into daily practices, not least because there were often few whites around. The argument that colonial rule, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, had as its ideological concomitant a form of “scientific racism” has been questioned by recent scholarship.

Helen Tilley shows that there was no scientific consensus in the twentieth-century British Empire on the biological basis of race. Some dismissed racial categorization altogether; others insisted on a scientific basis for distinguishing human populations physiologically but denied that races could be ranked. Others sought to demonstrate that whites had superior capacities of one sort or another. In France as well, some scientists presented a neat vision of racial hierarchy, but their views were contested by other established figures.

French legislators, with some exceptions, tried to avoid giving race legal sanction. The distinction they preferred was of status, between a subject and a citizen. In principle, under an 1865 law aimed mainly at Algeria, subjects were French nationals but could only become citizens if they gave up their status under Islamic or “customary” law, came under the French Civil Code, and convinced officials that they were following French ways. Few wanted to do so; fewer still were accepted. Subject status implied not only lack of political rights, but being exposed to extra-judicial punishments at the whim of an administrator and at times to forced labor. Some political leaders of the French Third Republic (1870–1940) agonized over the inconsistency with republican ideals, but the distinction remained in place and with the conquest of Sub-Saharan Africa from the 1870s, new peoples were incorporated into the status of subject. Only in the four older enclave colonies of Senegal, the Quatres Communes, were French officials so concerned to have more people on their “side” that they allowed the original inhabitants to have at least some of the rights of the citizen, including the vote, while having their personal affairs come under the jurisdiction of Islamic courts.

If invidious distinction was a daily reality for Africans and a source of ambivalence among rulers, how to change Africa remained a source of controversy. Missionaries posited Africans as malleable, as people who could be converted and instructed, although perhaps not to attain equality with white people. Farmers and mine owners saw them as objects to exploit, but missionaries sometimes opened up scandals over the abuses of exploiters, most notoriously in the attack mounted against the predatory companies that operated under the aegis of King Leopold II of Belgium in the Congo of the turn of the twentieth century. Some officials would have liked to see a more dynamic economy – in which Africans might play more varied roles – but feared above all else disorder, and were often beholden to settler lobbies, especially in Algeria, Kenya, and the states of British southern and central Africa. Africans, most Europeans felt, were poor because they were primitive.

That point of view became harder to sustain in the mid-1930s, largely because the social conflicts that emerged then were empirewide, and not so easily attributable to the nature of the African. Between 1935 and 1938, a series of strikes, demonstrations, and riots erupted in the British West Indies – including Barbados, Jamaica, Guyana, and Trinidad – involving plantation and oil field workers among others, and official investigations made clear they reflected deep-seated resentment over low wages, poor social services, discrimination, and lack of opportunity, in short, poverty. But the West Indies had been British for centuries, and Britain had taken pride in decreeing the emancipation of slaves in the 1830s. Indeed, the government canceled celebrations of the centenary of emancipation in 1938 for fear of bringing out the anger of people who had mainly poverty to show for their freedom. In the same period, there were major strikes in Northern Rhodesia, Kenya, Tanganyika, the Gold Coast, and other colonies. Taken together, a pattern seemed to be emerging, a problem on an imperial scale. In Africa, the first official reports tried to blame the disturbances on men taken out of their “tribal” milieu, but that explanation did not work for the West Indies. Thinking about the empire as a world-spanning phenomenon forced officials in London to rethink the poverty question.

The result was a turning point in colonial policy: the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940. It provided metropolitan funds – although not many until after the Second World War – for projects to encourage production, but above all to provide social services, including housing, education, urban facilities, and transportation. Scientific research received a boost as well. France took up a similar program after the war. Portugal also jumped on the development bandwagon, but its program brought in whites from European Portugal to the African colonies, where they filled the roles of skilled or semi-skilled workers that went to Africans in British or French Africa. Belgium, at least in the copper-rich province of Katanga, had pioneered the provision of minimal social services to wage workers, but its continued refusal to deny trade union or political rights to workers would eventually separate it from French and British actions (see below).

The development paradigm in part reflected economic thinking and practices elsewhere – Keynesian economics, dam building, soil conservation schemes, public health measures, and later the Marshall Plan. But by applying such measures – and systematizing them into a colonial doctrine – the postwar initiatives changed the nature of the game on a global scale: development slowly became the way to think about the place of colonies and

ex-colonies in world order – a place defined by a state of “underdevelopment” that had to be recognized, defined, and overcome. Meanwhile, continued agitation by workers forced French and British officials to think about labor as a specific social problem and – once they realized that keeping workers out of cities was impossible and dysfunctional – to try to shape an urban working class that could, over generations, be acculturated and socialized to new ways of life under the watchful eyes of teachers, nurses, and labor inspectors (and even union organizers), accepting that such a policy implied paying higher wages and providing better benefits. But Africans, where they could get new resources, often used them in unintended ways: financing marketing activities by workers’ wives, building up the lineage of a “big man.” Even more migrants came to cities than could enter such “stabilized” employment, so that the urban landscape became a complex one of formalized and irregular employment and, increasingly, young men and women with little chance of a job, open to joining anti-colonial political movements, support networks of politicians, or gangs. Cities became volatile places, loci of cultural creativity and political tension.

Decolonization: toward a world of nations?

One of the central narratives of world history, conventionally told, recounts a grand transition from empire to nation state, going from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century. The end point appears evident: we now live in a world of nearly two hundred states, each proclaiming its sovereignty. But there is a danger of projecting such a view backward. In 1945, only some Africans wanted or expected such an outcome. Others thought liberation would take other forms: pan-African unity, world revolution. Still others, particularly in French Africa, thought liberation could take place within empire by breaking the distinction between subject and citizen and pushing for equality among citizens. If we assume that the national order of things was natural, we might not even ask how so many people ended up in the 1960s with a political form they had not desired in 1945.

The international context had changed. France’s loss of Indochina and the Netherlands’s of Indonesia to the Japanese, followed by Japan’s defeat, left a vacuum that revolutionary movements led by Ho Chi Minh and Sukarno immediately filled. France and the Netherlands would have to recolonize their Southeast Asian colonies, and they never fully succeeded in the face of growing movements for independence in those countries. India achieved a negotiated decolonization in 1947. Such revolutions marked alternatives of

which both colonial rulers and political leaders in Africa were aware. Meanwhile, colonial ideologies became less convincing in metropolises as well as in the colonies, as Nazism and the war discredited the smug self-confidence that many in Europe once had in white man's rule.

Reconciling Europe's need for African resources – greater than ever – with the political necessity of putting a progressive face on empire, created an opening for demands on European powers, to which development initiatives were one response. South Africa was buffeted by some of the same emancipatory winds as the rest of Africa, but after the victory of Afrikaner nationalists in the election of 1948 it took a different direction: toward aggressive economic development combined with draconian policing of African activities, tighter control over land, sharper differentiation among categories of Africans, and tighter control over Africans' movement between country and city.

While formally organized political parties were not the only locus of political mobilization by Africans, they brought together different modes of protest, crossing the line between literate elites and peasants and workers. In Nigeria and the Gold Coast older, elite organizations turned into mass parties, not simply enrolling individuals but linking networks and organizations. In French Africa, the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*, organized in 1946, was notable for grouping political parties in individual territories to act on the level of French Africa as a whole. Both the RDA and its rivals, including the Senegalese party led by Léopold Senghor, focused on claiming the rights of the French citizen. Although only a few Africans were included in the legislature that wrote the new French constitution of 1946, they, with allies, skillfully pushed to extend citizenship to all inhabitants of the "overseas territories," as colonies were renamed. The hated distinction of subject and citizen was abolished, as were the separate judicial system and forced labor. But Africans were a minority in the French legislature, while the assemblies in each territory had little power. Suffrage was not universal. Turning citizenship into a reality was the focus of political mobilization in the 1940s and 1950s: for social and economic equality for all citizens and for autonomy in governing each territory while participating democratically in a larger ensemble – of the French Empire transformed into a federation or confederation of equals.

In British Africa, politics was more territorial. Officials had hoped to channel political activism into local councils, a rejuvenation and reform of indirect rule. But they failed; political movements focused quickly on the center of each colony, demanding that legislative councils become true

legislatures and that Africans acquire executive power. In Belgian and Portuguese Africa, virtually all political action was blocked, but this could only delay and render more violent decolonization, not prevent it.

Social action was necessarily political and political action invariably had social implications. In the 1945–1950 strike wave, trade unions in French Africa kept turning around French assertions of the unity of empire into demands that all workers receive the same pay and benefits. Although political leaders saw workers as a constituency and unions saw political action as useful to their cause, a tension between the idea of equivalence among workers – white or black – and solidarity among Africans grew. Similarly, one must look at a wide variety of movements among peasants – against the intrusiveness of colonial agricultural projects, over land issues, against below-market prices paid to farmers by colonial crop marketing boards – in all their specificity, but recognize the potential that every success any movement had for contributing to a sense of empowerment.

Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Senghor, and other leaders could draw on a wide range of grievances against the colonial state – from its inequities to its humiliations – to build constituencies for their varied political programs. France and Britain sought to contain political and social movements within carefully constructed boundaries. In certain brutal ways, they succeeded, notably in the French repression of an insurrection in Madagascar (1947) and Cameroon (late 1950s), and in the British suppression of the “Mau Mau” rebellion in Kenya (1952–c. 1957). They set certain limits to who could make claims and for what: not for independence before regimes were ready to hear them and not in the name of movements officials regarded as communist or as “primitive.” But neither power could bound political activity the way it wanted. Both unleashed waves of mobilization, campaigning, and escalating demands for fuller participation and for material resources.

The holding of elections in British and French Africa itself fostered attempts to mobilize whatever social ties politicians could draw upon. In Nigeria, the Gold Coast, or Senegal, teachers, civil servants, and wage workers already constituted a base to build upon. The first generation of politicians used patronage resources to build clienteles. Since such vertical ties tended to link politicians with people to whom they had a regional or ethnic tie, electoral politics fostered an ethnicizing logic. By the early 1950s, even the limited power the African politicians could acquire in territorial legislative bodies was becoming attractive.

Meanwhile, other forms of political connection – from pan-Africanism to Muslim brotherhoods – received no such representation, no such

encouragement, within evolving colonial regimes. The very interest of Great Britain and France in excluding “extremists” gave the “moderates” more room to maneuver, and people like Nkrumah and later Jomo Kenyatta successfully combined enough mass support with enough demonstrated respect for existing economic and political institutions to shed, in official eyes, the label of dangerous demagogue for that of responsible moderate.

The spirit of claim making – by workers for wages equal to those of workers from Europe, by war veterans for equal pensions, by students for equal access to educational opportunity, by farmers for a fair share of the world market price for their crops – trapped Britain and France in a spiral of demands. As early as 1951 or 1952, officials in France and Great Britain were complaining of disappointing results of the development drive: public expenditure was failing to lead to private investment; the inadequate infrastructure was choking on the new supplies of construction materials coming in; lack of trained personnel and the strength of African trade unions in ports, mines, and railroads were driving up labor costs; and African societies were being stubbornly resilient in the face of new-found colonial aspirations to change the way they produced and lived. In fact, this was the great era of expansion of exports – copper, cocoa, coffee – from Africa, the most impressive of the colonial era. But the dynamism of African economies was more chaotic and conflictual than the Eurocentric image of development which officials had in mind. The development project did not do the political work expected of it: development efforts created new points of conflict rather than producing satisfied populations. When white or black farmers used land more intensely, they cracked down on tenants – a major cause of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya. Even the success stories of the era – prosperous West African cocoa farmers or operators of transportation fleets – used their gains to challenge European-owned firms or to support political activity critical of colonial rule.

By 1956 or 1957, French and British governments and elements of the press were doing something they had not done before: coldly calculating the costs and benefits of empire. The two governments began to think about extricating themselves. Part of the postwar thinking about development eased the imaginative transition: development (unlike civilization) had come to be defined as a universal possibility, open to people of diverse origins and cultures, so that European elites could convince themselves that Africans aspired to follow a pathway toward a “modern” society even without direct, colonial control. They hoped and expected that Africans would remain in a close relationship to Europe. But there was an element of cynicism too: a desire that African governments, not European ones, take responsibility for complications.



Map 21.2 The decolonization of Africa

The Gold Coast led the way among the colonies of Sub-Saharan Africa to independence in 1957, followed by Nigeria. The leading politicians of French Africa tried until the summer of 1960 to work out some kind of federal structure with France, but they could not agree among themselves over how to do so and ended up in bilateral negotiations with France for independence, trying to preserve for a time by treaty some of the rights which Africans had previously had as French citizens, including the right to move to France (Map 21.2).

In international circles, decolonization created new norms, with countries like India that had gained independence early on using the United Nations and other world fora to chip away at the normality of colonial empire. Political movements in mandated territories like Cameroon or Tanganyika got access to these fora even before independence, and as more countries left empires, those states added a collective voice to anti-colonial politics, expressed at the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the All-African People's Congress in Ghana in 1958.

With empire no longer what it was, whites in Southern Rhodesia now had to defend their supremacy in national terms, declaring independence from Britain in 1965. They fought an ugly war against African guerrilla movements until 1979. Portugal was a dictatorship at home and had no qualms about suppressing political initiatives by Africans, but colonialism in particular territories was hard to sustain in the face of armed struggle supported by already independent neighbors. Portugal was liberated from dictatorship in 1974–1975 through the failure of its African counter-revolution. With the end of colonial rule, France, Britain, Belgium, and Portugal, like their former colonies, became more *national* than they had ever been before.

South Africa's version of white domination had for many years been well within the spectrum of imperial ideologies. But as Britain and France officially repudiated such doctrines and sought legitimacy through fostering development and a degree of political inclusion after the Second World War, South Africa diverged, especially after Afrikaner nationalists acquired effective power in the 1948 elections. The African National Congress (ANC) valiantly fought for an inclusive and democratic society through mass demonstrations, boycotts of transport and rent payment, and public statements of principle.

By the late 1950s, influenced by events elsewhere in Africa, the Pan-African Congress was campaigning for a specifically African claim on political power. Both movements were forced underground in 1960 after the brutal massacre of peaceful demonstrators in the town of Sharpeville. Because of the relatively full development of capitalist enterprise, South Africa was much better able than Rhodesia or the Portuguese colonies to maintain its economy even as it became a pariah nation. But its relatively affluent white population, thinking themselves the representatives of Western, Christian civilization, had difficulty accepting that the world did not accept them on such terms. South African businesses were missing out on access to markets elsewhere in Africa and began to have trouble raising capital. Violence – whether part of the ANC's underground campaign to make South African cities

“ungovernable” or the result of social tensions in a deprived population – was by the 1980s having a demoralizing effect on the minority’s sense of self. This combination of pragmatic calculation and moral crisis led by the early 1990s to the government’s willingness to make a deal with the ANC and Nelson Mandela, under which elections would be held, majority rule installed, and rights – notably that to property – of minorities protected. The ultimate defense of whites’ place in society came to be what the state had denied for many years to Africans – a rights-based regime.

Africans flocked to the polls for the first time in April 1994, bringing to power Mandela and the ANC. Since then, an affluent African elite has emerged, as has a middle class, largely through government employment. Formal equality in access to jobs, wages, and schooling has been instituted, and significant progress has been made in providing electricity and water to urban and periurban communities largely inhabited by impoverished Africans. But South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. Fuller integration into world markets has made some of South Africa’s industries uncompetitive, while the mining sector remains all-important. That the creation of a landless proletariat went much further in South Africa than anywhere else in Sub-Saharan Africa has translated into a high rate of unemployment. Perhaps the possibility, greater than in many African countries, of becoming rich without being in government, will encourage South African elites to maintain their at least formal commitment to democratic governance.

For most of Africa, the problem that France and Britain confronted in the 1940s and 1950s – and could not solve – remains: how to overcome structural obstacles to social and economic development. As colonial regimes came to an end, the United States and the USSR tried to capture the development ideal for themselves, to seek clients among newly independent states and demonstrate the superiority of capitalist or communist models. For a time, such processes gave elites in post-colonial states room to maneuver: to assert a predominantly national interest in the development process and seek to balance old colonial powers and new world actors against each other.

A world of nations?

Decolonization – emerging out of local and global political struggles – redefined the meaning of sovereignty worldwide. But it also had its limits. Decolonization did not end social or political inequality or the uneven power to determine the categories of political analysis. It would be a mistake either

to see “colonialism” as a phenomenon that could be turned off like a television set – with all problems instantly turned into “African” responsibilities – or to define a colonial “legacy” that determined Africa’s fate. The anxieties – and the brittle repressiveness – of new African governments reflected as much their appreciation and fear of the diverse movements they had mobilized against colonial rule as their internalization of colonial authoritarianism. Africans had heightened expectations of what citizenship in a sovereign country would bring them, and Africa’s new rulers had reason to fear that they could not meet those expectations. Both colonial regimes and their successors were gatekeeper states, facing great difficulty routinizing the exercise of power outside of capital cities, communications links, and commercial or mining centers, best able to manipulate the interface between inside and outside. They feared that social movements would draw on connections independent of the regime. Post-colonial gatekeeper states were perhaps better able than colonial states to forge relations of clientelism with local power brokers – and they could try to obtain foreign patrons – but without external, coercive power they were vulnerable to any attempt to contest access to the gate itself. Cycles of coups and military governments – and also of repression of citizen action – began shortly after decolonization.

African states nevertheless had their accomplishments in the 1960s and 1970s: modest but positive rates of economic growth, rising levels of literacy, declining infant mortality, and rising life expectancy. Africa’s high rates of population growth put great strain on productive resources.⁷ The world recession of the mid-1970s exposed the fact that virtually none of them had achieved their goal of economic independence, particularly from the vagaries of world markets in primary agricultural and mineral products. Vulnerability was compounded by international financial organizations which, in exchange for bailing out states on the financial brink, imposed conditions of “structural adjustment” that undercut efforts at education and health services that might, in the long run, have made African economies more resilient. In southern and parts of eastern Africa the AIDS epidemic reversed the trend toward higher life expectancy; that health services had sometimes been nearly dismantled

7 Most scholars agree that much of Africa has had, in the second half of the twentieth century, among the highest rates of population growth in the world, but precision is hard to come by, since earlier figures are largely backward projections and not all of the censuses taken since the 1940s are reliable. GDP figures remain problematic and trends in per capita income thus hard to pin down. See Morten Jerven, *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do About It* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

under structural adjustment made a response to the epidemic all the more difficult, and foreign donors were more likely to focus on the issue of the moment than on rebuilding underlying state capacities. Since 2000, statistics on economic growth in a significant number of African countries have turned favorable – in some cases strikingly so – above all due to the increased demand from China and other emerging markets for Africa's mineral and agricultural resources. There is some evidence of broader economic growth and reduction in poverty, but it is too soon to tell if Africa is experiencing another cycle of export growth or more profound structural change.

In looking back on the last several decades, it is important to keep in mind that few people in 1945 imagined how much and how rapidly Africa's place in the world would change. In less than two decades after the Second World War, colonial empires went from an ordinary fact of political life to the embodiment of illegitimate power, and the idea that Africans could rule themselves went from inconceivable to ordinary. It is equally important that in the course of these decades, political activists imagined different futures, different forms of liberation, different ways of addressing the inequalities among and within states. Perhaps the opening of possibilities in those years tells us something about Africa's future as well as about its past.

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