

# AFRICANA AGE

African & African Diasporan Transformations in the 20th Century

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## The Colonization of Africa

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#### Introduction

Between the 1870s and 1900, Africa faced European imperialist aggression, diplomatic pressures, military invasions, and eventual conquest and colonization. At the same time, African societies put up various forms of resistance against the attempt to colonize their countries and impose foreign domination. By the early twentieth century, however, much of Africa, except Ethiopia and Liberia, had been colonized by European powers.

The European imperialist push into Africa was motivated by three main factors, economic, political, and social. It developed in the nineteenth century following the collapse of the profitability of the slave trade, its abolition and suppression, as well as the expansion of the European capitalist Industrial Revolution. The imperatives of capitalist industrialization—including the demand for assured sources of raw materials, the search for guaranteed markets and profitable investment outlets—spurred the European scramble and the partition and eventual conquest of Africa. Thus the primary motivation for European intrusion was economic.

#### Section 1: The Scramble for Africa

But other factors played an important role in the process. The political impetus derived from the impact of inter-European power struggles and competition for preeminence. Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and Spain were competing for power within European power politics. One way to demonstrate national preeminence was through the acquisition of territories around the world, including Africa. The social factor was the third major element. As a result of industrialization, major social problems grew in Europe: unemployment, poverty, homelessness, social displacement from rural areas, and so on. These social problems developed partly because not all people could be absorbed by the new capitalist industries. One way to resolve this problem was to acquire colonies and export this "surplus population." This led to the establishment of settler-colonies in Algeria, Tunisia, South Africa, Namibia, Angola,

Mozambique, and central African areas like Zimbabwe and Zambia. Eventually the overriding economic factors led to the colonization of other parts of Africa.

Thus it was the interplay of these economic, political, and social factors and forces that led to the scramble for Africa and the frenzied attempts by European commercial, military, and political agents to declare and establish a stake in different parts of the continent through inter-imperialist commercial competition, the declaration of exclusive claims to particular territories for trade, the imposition of tariffs against other European traders, and claims to exclusive control of waterways and commercial routes in different parts of Africa.

This scramble was so intense that there were fears that it could lead to inter-imperialist conflicts and even wars. To prevent this, the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck convened a diplomatic summit of European powers in the late nineteenth century. This was the famous Berlin West African conference (more generally known as the Berlin Conference), held from November 1884 to February 1885. The conference produced a treaty known as the Berlin Act, with provisions to guide the conduct of the European inter-imperialist competition in Africa. Some of its major articles were as follows:

1. The Principle of Notification (Notifying) other powers of a territorial annexation
2. The Principle of Effective Occupation to validate the annexations
3. Freedom of Trade in the Congo Basin
4. Freedom of Navigation on the Niger and Congo Rivers
5. Freedom of Trade to all nations
6. Suppression of the Slave Trade by land and sea

This treaty, drawn up without African participation, provided the basis for the subsequent partition, invasion, and colonization of Africa by various European powers.

## **Section 2: The African Resistance**

The European imperialist designs and pressures of the late nineteenth century provoked African political and diplomatic responses and eventually military resistance. During and after the Berlin Conference various European countries sent out agents to sign so-called treaties of protection with the leaders of African societies, states, kingdoms, decentralized societies, and empires. The differential interpretation of these treaties by the contending forces often led to conflict between both parties and eventually to military encounters. For Europeans, these treaties meant that Africans had signed away their sovereignties to European powers; but for Africans, the treaties were merely diplomatic and commercial friendship treaties. After discovering that they had in effect been defrauded and that the European powers now wanted to impose and exercise political authority in their lands, African rulers organized militarily to resist the seizure of their lands and the imposition of colonial domination.

This situation was compounded by commercial conflicts between Europeans and Africans. During the early phase of the rise of primary commodity commerce (erroneously referred to in the literature as "Legitimate Trade or Commerce"), Europeans got their supplies of trade goods like palm oil, cotton, palm kernel, rubber, and groundnut from African intermediaries, but as the

scramble intensified, they wanted to bypass the African intermediaries and trade directly with sources of the trade goods. Naturally Africans resisted and insisted on the maintenance of a system of commercial interaction with foreigners which expressed their sovereignties as autonomous political and economic entities and actors. For their part, the European merchants and trading companies called on their home governments to intervene and impose "free trade," by force if necessary. It was these political, diplomatic, and commercial factors and contentions that led to the military conflicts and organized African resistance to European imperialism.

African military resistance took two main forms: guerrilla warfare and direct military engagement. While these were used as needed by African forces, the dominant type used depended on the political, social, and military organizations of the societies concerned. In general, small-scale societies, the decentralized societies (erroneously known as "stateless" societies), used guerrilla warfare because of their size and the absence of standing or professional armies. Instead of professional soldiers, small groups of organized fighters with a mastery of the terrain mounted resistance by using the classical guerrilla tactic of hit-and-run raids against stationary enemy forces. This was the approach used by the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria against the British. Even though the British imperialists swept through Igboland in three years, between 1900 and 1902, and despite the small scale of the societies, the Igbo put up protracted resistance. The resistance was diffuse and piecemeal, and therefore it was difficult to conquer them completely and declare absolute victory. Long after the British formally colonized Igboland, they had not fully mastered the territory.

Direct military engagement was most commonly organized by the centralized state systems, such as chiefdoms, city-states, kingdoms, and empires, which often had standing or professional armies and could therefore tackle the European forces with massed troops. This was the case with the resistance actions of the Ethiopians, the Zulu, the Mandinka leadership, and numerous other centralized states. In the case of Ethiopia, the imperialist intruder was Italy. It confronted a determined and sagacious military leader in the Ethiopian emperor Menelik II. As Italy intensified pressure in the 1890s to impose its rule over Ethiopia, the Ethiopians organized to resist. In the famous battle of Adwa in 1896, one hundred thousand Ethiopian troops confronted the Italians and inflicted a decisive defeat. Thereafter, Ethiopia was able to maintain its independence for much of the colonial period, except for a brief interlude of Italian oversight between 1936 and 1941.

Another example of resistance was the one organized by Samory Touré of the emergent Mandinka empire in West Africa. As this new empire spread and Touré attempted to forge a new political order he ran up against the French imperialists who were also trying extend their territories inland from their base in Dakar, Senegal. This brought the parties into conflict. Touré organized military and diplomatic resistance between 1882 and 1898. During this sixteen-year period, he used a variety of strategies, including guerrilla warfare, scorched-earth programs, and direct military engagement. For this last tactic he acquired arms, especially quick-firing rifles, from European merchant and traders in Sierra Leone and Senegal. He also established engineering workshops where weapons were repaired and parts were fabricated. With these

resources and his well-trained forces and the motivation of national defense he provided his protracted resistance to the French. Eventually he was captured and, in 1898, exiled to Gabon, where he died in 1900.

### **Section 3: A Period of Change**

It is quite clear that most African societies fought fiercely and bravely to retain control over their countries and societies against European imperialist designs and military invasions. But the African societies eventually lost out. This was partly for political and technological reasons. The nineteenth century was a period of profound and even revolutionary changes in the political geography of Africa, characterized by the demise of old African kingdoms and empires and their reconfiguration into different political entities. Some of the old societies were reconstructed and new African societies were founded on different ideological and social premises. Consequently, African societies were in a state of flux, and many were organizationally weak and politically unstable. They were therefore unable to put up effective resistance against the European invaders.

The technological factor was expressed in the radical disparity between the technologies of warfare deployed by the contending European and African forces. African forces in general fought with bows, arrows, spears, swords, old rifles, and cavalries; the European forces, beneficiaries of the technical fruits of the Industrial Revolution, fought with more deadly firearms, machine guns, new rifles, and artillery guns. Thus in direct encounters European forces often won the day. But as the length of some resistance struggles amply demonstrates, Africans put up the best resistance with the resources they had.

By 1900 much of Africa had been colonized by seven European powers—Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. After the conquest of African decentralized and centralized states, the European powers set about establishing colonial state systems. The colonial state was the machinery of administrative domination established to facilitate effective control and exploitation of the colonized societies. Partly as a result of their origins in military conquest and partly because of the racist ideology of the imperialist enterprise, the colonial states were authoritarian, bureaucratic systems. Because they were imposed and maintained by force, without the consent of the governed, the colonial states never had the effective legitimacy of normal governments. Second, they were bureaucratic because they were administered by military officers and civil servants who were appointees of the colonial power. While they were all authoritarian, bureaucratic state systems, their forms of administration varied, partly due to the different national administrative traditions and specific imperialist ideologies of the colonizers and partly because of the political conditions in the various territories that they conquered.

### **Section 4: Colonial Domination: Indirect Rule**

In Nigeria, the Gold Coast in West Africa, and Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika in East Africa, for example, Britain organized its colonies at the central, provincial, and regional or district levels. There was usually a governor or governor-general in the colonial capital who governed along

with an appointed executive council and a legislative council of appointed and selected local and foreign members. The governor was responsible to the colonial office and the colonial secretary in London, from whom laws, policies, and programs were received. He made some local laws and policies, however. Colonial policies and directives were implemented through a central administrative organization or a colonial secretariat, with officers responsible for different departments such as Revenue, Agriculture, Trade, Transport, Health, Education, Police, Prison, and so on.

The British colonies were often subdivided into provinces headed by provincial commissioners or residents, and then into districts headed by district officers or district commissioners. Laws and policies on taxation, public works, forced labor, mining, agricultural production, and other matters were made in London or in the colonial capital and then passed down to the lower administrative levels for enforcement.

At the provincial and district levels the British established the system of local administration popularly known as indirect rule. This system operated in alliance with preexisting political leaderships and institutions. The theory and practice of indirect rule is commonly associated with Lord Lugard, who was first the British high commissioner for northern Nigeria and later governor-general of Nigeria. In the Hausa /Fulani emirates of northern Nigeria he found that they had an established and functional administrative system. Lugard simply and wisely adapted it to his ends. It was cheap and convenient. Despite attempts to portray the use of indirect rule as an expression of British administrative genius, it was nothing of the sort. It was a pragmatic and parsimonious choice based partly on using existing functional institutions. The choice was also partly based on Britain's unwillingness to provide the resources required to administer its vast empire. Instead, it developed the perverse view that the colonized should pay for their colonial domination. Hence, the choice of indirect rule.

The system had three major institutions: the "native authority" made up of the local ruler, the colonial official, and the administrative staff; the "native treasury," which collected revenues to pay for the local administrative staff and services; and the "native courts," which purportedly administered "native law and custom," the supposedly traditional legal system of the colonized that was used by the courts to adjudicate cases.

In general, indirect rule worked fairly well in areas that had long-established centralized state systems such as chiefdoms, city-states, kingdoms, and empires, with their functional administrative and judicial systems of government. But even here the fact that the ultimate authority was the British officials meant that the African leaders had been vassalized and exercised "authority" at the mercy of European colonial officials. Thus the political and social umbilical cords that tied them to their people in the old system had been broken. Some astute African leaders maneuvered and ruled as best they could, while others used the new colonial setting to become tyrants and oppressors, as they were responsible to British officials ultimately.

In the decentralized societies, the system of indirect rule worked less well, as they did not have single rulers. The British colonizers, unfamiliar with these novel and unique political systems and insisting that African "natives" must have chiefs, often appointed licensed leaders called warrant chiefs, as in Igboland, for example.

### **Section 5: Colonial Domination: Assimilation**

The French, for their part, established a highly centralized administrative system that was influenced by their ideology of colonialism and their national tradition of extreme administrative centralism. Their colonial ideology explicitly claimed that they were on a "civilizing mission" to lift the benighted "natives" out of backwardness to the new status of civilized French Africans. To achieve this, the French used the policy of assimilation, whereby through acculturation and education and the fulfillment of some formal conditions, some "natives" would become evolved and civilized French Africans. In practice, the stringent conditions set for citizenship made it virtually impossible for most colonial subjects to become French citizens. For example, potential citizens were supposed to speak French fluently, to have served the French meritoriously, to have won an award, and so on. If they achieved French citizenship, they would have French rights and could only be tried by French courts, not under *indigénat*, the French colonial doctrine and legal practice whereby colonial "subjects" could be tried by French administrative officials or military commanders and sentenced to two years of forced labor without due process. However, since France would not provide the educational system to train all its colonized subjects to speak French and would not establish administrative and social systems to employ all its subjects, assimilation was more an imperialist political and ideological posture than a serious political objective.

In terms of the actual administrative system in its various African colonies—Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco in North Africa, and Senegal, French Guinea, French Sudan, Upper Volta, Dahomey, and others in West Africa, and Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, Ubangi-Shari in Central Africa—the French used a system of direct rule. They also created federations in West Africa and Central Africa. In the colonial capitals the governors were responsible to the minister of colonies in Paris. Most laws and policies were sent from Paris, and the governors who ruled with general councils were expected to enforce them in line with France's centralist traditions. The colonies were also subdivided into smaller administrative units as follows: cercles under commandant du Cercles, subdivisions under chef de subdivisions, and at the next level, cantons were administered by African chiefs who were in effect like the British warrant chiefs.

While France tried to maintain this highly centralized system, in some parts of its colonies where it encountered strongly established centralized state systems, the French were compelled to adopt the policy of association, a system of rule operating in alliance with preexisting African ruling institutions and leaders. Thus it was somewhat like British indirect rule, although the French still remained committed to the doctrine of assimilation. In the association system, local governments were run with African rulers whom the French organized at three levels and grades: chef de province (provincial chief); chef de canton (district chiefs), and chef de village

(village chief). In practice, the French system combined elements of direct administration and indirect rule.

In general, the French administrative system was more centralized, bureaucratic, and interventionist than the British system of colonial rule. The other colonial powers— Germany, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, and Italy—used varied administrative systems to facilitate control and economic exploitation. However, no matter the system, they were all alien, authoritarian, and bureaucratic, and distorted African political and social organizations and undermined their moral authority and political legitimacy as governing structures.

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