



The Birth of Present-day Africa

Levels B1-B2

Historians gave this process several names. The Scramble for Africa. The Conquest of Africa. The Partition of Africa. In reality, all these expressions point out to the same historical fact: the division of the African continent by European colonialists starting from the late 1800s and ending for the most part in the 1960s. Only two countries in Africa managed to remain independent during this era. These were Liberia and Ethiopia.



It all officially started with the Berlin Conference in 1884 when the major European powers of the time met to establish rules that would facilitate the sharing of the African continent amongst themselves.

Before that, large parts of land had already been mapped by famous 19th century explorers such as David Livingstone, Henry Morgan Stanley, Richard Burton and John Speke. Thanks to their expeditions, the much sought-after sources of the Nile, Zambezi, Niger and Congo rivers had been found and traced.

The cake was big and the cherries on it even bigger. In Africa, Europeans found raw materials that could not be readily found in their homelands such as diamonds, gold, cacao, ivory, rubber, groundnuts, tea, palm oil and copper. They also found cheap labour in the form of native people that could work on the plantations of valuable cash crops throughout the year without having to share the benefits. Possessions in Africa were also a source of pride for the powerful European countries and the more colonies one country had, the higher status it acquired amongst its peers. Finally, Africa, with its huge population, was also an open market for the great powers who could sell their goods like cutlery, brass pans, basins, cotton cloth, gunpowder and guns.



Aerial view of the Congo River

The dreams of the colonial rulers were as big as the continent they had found. The British set their eyes on the land that stretched from Cairo in Egypt to the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa so as to secure the trade route to India. The French mostly pinned their hopes on the northern and western parts of the continent where they managed to acquire more than twenty possessions including present-day Mali and Algeria. Germans would mainly settle for portions in the African Great Lakes region and southern Africa, calling the places they grabbed German East Africa (Rwanda Burundi, Tanzania) and German South-West-Africa (Namibia and parts of Botswana). The Portuguese and the Spanish also had their share in the cake, not forgetting the Italians who snatched parts of contemporary Libya, Somalia and Eritrea.

The carving out of Africa did not happen seamlessly. First, there was a lot of tension between the European countries themselves. For example, in 1898, Britain and France nearly went to war over the control of the Upper Nile River in what came to be known as the Fashoda Incident. The First and Second Moroccan crises equally revealed a strained relationship between Germany and France regarding the sovereignty of Morocco. It is said that these conflicts partly triggered World War I in 1914. Another consequence of dividing the African continent was the expected revolt of the indigenous people. Reasons for discontent were many from the cruel treatment under colonial masters in the Belgian Congo Free State to the unabashed exploitation of natural resources that took place in the newfound lands during the entire years of occupation.



A cacao tree

It took almost half a century for the natives to reclaim their lands. In fact, the 1960s saw most African colonies gaining political independence from their colonial rulers. However, economic freedom was far from being acquired as the majority of these countries still had to struggle to meet the basic needs of their populations.

1. General Comprehension

- a. Give three expressions that refer to the partition of Africa by European colonialists.
- b. Name two countries that were not colonised.
- c. What were the names of the rivers whose sources were discovered by explorers?
- d. Give two names of famous explorers in the 19th century.
- e. Name four major powers that had colonies in Africa.
- f. Why was Africa colonised?
- g. Mention six natural resources that Europeans found in Africa.
- h. Give the names of six products that Europeans sold to Africans.
- i. Was the process of colonisation easy? Justify your answer.
- j. What was the Fashoda Incident?
- k. When did the natives gain independence for the most part?

2. Vocabulary: Explain the following words or expressions and use them in a sentence

- a. Scramble
- b. Mapped
- c. Much sought-after
- d. Raw materials
- e. A source of pride
- f. Cash crop
- g. Valuable

3. List of colonising countries in Africa

1. Britain

- Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, parts of Cameroon, Ghana, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, parts of Tanzania, parts of Botswana, South Africa, Swaziland, Lesotho, Mauritius

2. France

- Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Benin, Central African Republic, Djibouti, Gabon, The Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), parts of Cameroon, Comoros, Madagascar, parts of Togo, Mayotte, Seychelles, Reunion

3. Germany

- Namibia, parts of Tanzania, parts of Botswana, parts of Cameroon, parts of Togo, Rwanda, Burundi

4. Portugal

- Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape-Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe

5. Spain

- Western Sahara, Equatorial Guinea

6. Italy

Eritrea, Somalia, parts of Libya

7. Belgium

- The Democratic Republic of the Congo