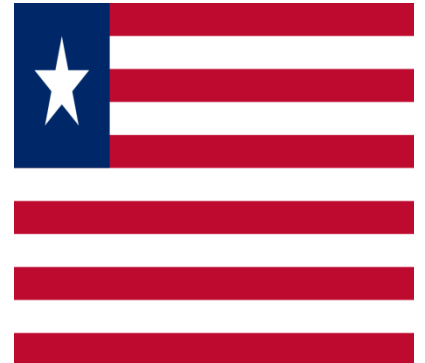


# Colonialism or the scramble for African resources

Present-day Africa is much a product of colonialism and the “scramble for Africa” that formally began in the late 19th century and ended for the most part in the 1960s.

Did you know that Liberia and Ethiopia were the only countries that remained independent during what is historically known as the 'partition of Africa' by European powers in the late 1800s? Are you also aware of the fact that Russia briefly owned a colony called Sagallo on what is modern-day Djibouti, before being stripped off of its imperial ambitions in Africa by France in 1888?



**The flag of Liberia**

At the end of the 19th century, the sharing of Africa's cake officially began with the Berlin Conference of 1884, which helped to establish the rules under which the African continent was to be divided amongst the most powerful countries of the time. Colonialism was slowly and surely becoming a reality in Africa.

Prior to this period, huge tracts of land had been mapped by well-known explorers such as David Livingstone, Henry Morgan Stanley, Richard Burton and John Speke. Thanks to these expeditions, though often controversial for their ill-treatment of natives, the sources of the Nile, Zambezi, Niger and Congo rivers had been found and traced; vast amounts of resources discovered while technological and medical progress made it easier for Europeans to travel, settle and expand in the said areas.



**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 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 was also a source of pride for the powerful European countries and the more colonies one country had, the higher status it acquired



A cacao tree

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.

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.

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.

Below are a few more facts about the 'Conquest of Africa':

## **Fact # 1: Britain emerged as the winner in the scramble for Africa**

The British Empire possessed at least 30% of the lands in Africa during the partition. These areas included modern South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. Most of the times, protectorates were first established before colonies were formally instituted with direct rule.

## **Fact # 2: The Congo Free State was Belgian King Leopold II's personal possession**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo was once owned by King Leopold II of Belgium as a private possession. On the surface, he promised to uplift the lives of the native population through philanthropic activities while in reality he exploited the natural resources of the Congo Basin. For instance, the indigenous people worked on his rubber plantations on which many had their hands cut off for failure to meet the production demands of the King.

## **Fact # 3: Colonialism and the birth of Federations**

Many colonised lands were lumped together in a federation to make it easier for the colonial government to administer the areas. Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi belonged to the federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland while French West Africa comprised eight whole territories including Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Mali.

## **Fact # 4: The Herero and Namaqua Genocide**

This is believed to be the first mass extermination of a people in the 20th century. This happened in German South-West Africa between 1904 and 1907 as German colonialists tried to suppress a revolt by the Herero and Nama people. Death occurred through direct war, starvation, forced labour and disease. Prisoners were sent to Shark Island Concentration Camp where the death toll was 80%.

## **Fact # 5: Colonialism did not only bring negative consequences to Africa**

European colonialists did not only bring chaos and destruction to Africa. They also brought technological and human advances to the continent such as medicine for the notorious tropical diseases, electricity, infrastructure and education. They were also able to put a stop to a number of archaic cultural malpractices such as the killing of twins among the Igbo tribe in Nigeria. The frequent and violent intertribal wars were also curbed thanks to the military interventions of the colonial powers.

### ***Last but not least: Quotes on colonialism by African writers***

**"The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."**

~Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 1958

**"The real tragedy of our postcolonial world is not that the majority of people had no say in whether or not they wanted this new world; rather, it is that the majority have not been given the tools to negotiate this new world."**

~Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 2006

**"It's bad enough...when a country gets colonized, but when the people do as well! That's the end, really, really, that's the end."**

Tsitsi Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions*, 1988