

The Scramble for Africa

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Summarized by Timothy Doran

African history is marked by processes of expansion, conquest, and integration. Through these processes, Africans became exposed to, and invested in, broader horizons. However, Zimmerman cautions us that a focus on the death of Africans silences their voices and makes them victims. Both for understanding the richness of African history as well as for giving agency to individual Africans, this is a counterproductive focus and a useless approach. For example, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is used sometimes to argue that everything imploded with the European arrival. But it is important to note that some characters in the book are attracted to, and gain very real benefits from, certain aspects of colonialism. For example, persons in African society who are traditionally **outcasts** gain, with the arrival of Christianity, the opportunity to succeed and further themselves. Imperialism in Africa, like imperialism in general, should not be seen as a simplistic, moralistic tale of “good versus evil.” It’s important to not oversimplify it into a scenario in which Europeans are the ‘bad guys’ and Africans are the ‘good guys.’ For Europeans would not have been able to colonize the continent without collaboration from Africans.

European influences in Africa prior to 1880s were limited to the coasts. South Africa is an exception, as is Sierra Leone, founded by freed slaves after the abolition of the slave trade after the British abducted ships in the Atlantic and put them in Sierra Leone, regardless of the slaves’ origins. It was a British crown colony. Liberia emerged from the ‘back to Africa movement’ for Free Men of Color. The colony was backed by American religious interests and philanthropic groups. Its capital, Monrovia, was named after President Monroe. While some exchange across the Atlantic had occurred before the Scramble for Africa, the **Berlin Conference of 1884** begins the true Scramble for Africa. Spain and Portugal already had empires that were falling because of malfeasance, a dependence on opulence, and slow industrialization due to their dependence upon mineral wealth. Great Britain and France were taking over the globalization of the world; Belgium wanted in, as did Germany which had just reunited in 1871. Bismarck invited European leaders to come to a conference in 1884. No African leaders were present. They set it up to ‘assuage competition, stop proxy wars, and stop unfettered domination of regions in Africa.’ Spheres of influence were arranged this meeting, and became formal colonies: article 35 stated that an occupier of a coastal possession had also to demonstrate that it possessed sufficient authority there, to protect existing rights, freedom of trade and transit. The argument was that one must have *effective occupation*. In 1885 – 1902, parallel treaties were also set up with local peoples who probably didn’t know what they were signing. The conference was made to stop war. Some of these directly signed off sovereignty.

The causes and justifications for the scramble were several:

a.) New markets were sought by merchants who made had overstepped their boundaries or made cultural errors with local people and then needed a military to come and save them.

b.) Some merchants endeavored to transition to selling legitimate goods. For example, in France in 1789, slaves still existed, but in 1848 slavery was abolished; Britain outlawed slavery in 1842/3, Portugal happened a bit later. These merchants had ships and needed something to trade.

c.) Legitimate goods that fed the industrial revolution included gum arabic, rubber, diamonds, gold, and palm oil, and these are not necessarily located on the coast, necessitating trips into the interior, which required more manpower and organization than coastal pick-ups and drop-offs.

d.) Social Darwinism: Herbert Spencer took Darwin's ideas of evolution and applied them to social systems and people. Europe was thought of as the highest form of civilization: there is only one railroad track, the end of which is Europe. Everyone is somewhere on that line, but Europeans are at its end: a very non-multiculturalist approach.

e.) Missionaries believed that they had a civilizing mission.

f.) European Balance of Power: by the late nineteenth century, Europe needed something to prevent a civil war in Europe.

g.) African merchants perhaps did not wish to trade with Europeans and that forced Europe's hand and led to military conquest.

h.) Greed: people wanted more markets, more products, more disposable land and cheap, local labor, as well as ores, gold, and diamonds.

Europe was able to move into Africa so quickly at the end of the nineteenth century for several reasons:

a.) Europe had already long since organized itself into nation-states. Nationalism was a significant force in nineteenth-century Europe, but not in Africa. What unified kingdoms or nations that existed in Africa in the late nineteenth century could not command anywhere near the same resources as European nations could, particularly industrial investors and modern armies. Also – as is typical in situations in which small societies vie against each other for dominance and huge powers make themselves available to help – European powers were probably invited in by African leaders to help eliminate their African rivals.

b.) Europe's financial and material resources were immense as opposed to Africa's. Europe had ship-building technology. Most of Africa had only coastal and river vessels. North Africa had camels for transport. All over Africa, boats were poor, and diseases such as sleeping sickness meant that large livestock did not exist. This absence suppressed expansive trade across tropical Africa.

c.) Europe had more technology, including navigation, writing and mail. Communication was thus assisted, which helps to organize efforts. Africa had never developed these systems, and mutually unintelligible languages made communication very difficult.

d.) Europeans knew more about Africa and its interior, appearance, terrain, economy, and resources than many Africans did. Europeans had older accounts that gave them a larger picture of what the continent was. Africans didn't know much about Europeans; and if they did, they did not publish and republish studies about Europe whereas in the nineteenth century, David Livingston's diaries were consumed avidly by many Europeans.

e.) Military superiority, exemplified by but not limited to the Maxim rapid-repeating Machine-Gun adopted in 1889, as celebrated in the famed Hillaire Belloc couplet. Africans didn't even have much in the way of metal-working technology. They used knives, spears, adzes, and had some guns through trade. They certainly had no rapid-repeating weapons.

f.) The prophylactic use of quinine to combat malaria. The conquest of interior could not have happened without the discovery of quinine, from the cinchona tree in South America.

Africans responded variously to the European attempts at conquest. Passive resistance occurred. Collaboration and alliance occurred. Armed resistance occurred. Asymmetrical military resources in violent confrontations often ended in disaster for the Africans; one notable exception was the battle of Adwa in 1896 in Ethiopia.

The types of European colonies are divisible, very generally speaking, between those in which direct rule was employed, and those in which indirect rule was employed.

a.) **Direct rule** was used by the French, Belgians, Germans, and Portuguese. It involved a centralized bureaucracy, assimilation of Africans as part of the civilizing mission, and a policy of dividing and ruling the Africans in order to weaken indigenous power networks and institutions. The administrative and military model for French colonies in Africa was several layers of French bureaucracy and then Africans on the bottom of the administrative branch. This was part of France's paternalistic *mission civilatrice*. Its goal was to make Africans act French. African chiefs were allowed to be local leaders if they supported the French cause.

b.) **Indirect rule** was the British Administrative model. Invented by Frederick Lugard in Uganda, it was applied generally to other British colonies in Africa. used indigenous institutions such as kingdoms. Money is saved if you have only one or two layers of British and two or three levels of Africans below them. This is more cooperative and less expensive. It assumes that Africans have hierarchical social and political institutions, but there are also acephalous societies. The village idiot may be called king. The structures of medieval Ghana, Mali, and Songhai empires were gone by the time Europeans were interested in Africa. By the late nineteenth century, they had been replaced by competing African religious and ethnic states.

Various new life-ways were introduced by the Europeans and changed African societies profoundly.

a.) Ethnic boundaries in Africa could not be maintained by the European rulers, who cut many straight lines though ethnic and linguistic boundaries.

b.) New languages and technologies arrived in Africa.

c.) A shift of trade occurred from the interior toward the coasts as the economy became extractive.

d.) New cash crops were introduced, new labor industries, and monetary economies.

e.) New power structures based upon unfamiliar cultures came in.

f.) African merchants were taxed by new entities and their exchange networks were monitored. New taxes were introduced including hut tax or property tax, and head tax.

g.) New people moved in, especially British people who began taking fertile land in East Africa. The most fertile land was given to settlers, and this was justified by saying that Africans never owned land to begin with: their notions of ownership were different from European notions, and some of their agricultural practices such as slash-and-burn were difficult to mesh with the practice of land ownership.

Not all Europeans supported colonialism in Africa. Satiric caricatures from *Punch*, a British humor magazine, often critiqued colonialism. But the discovery of diamonds in Africa changed its role in the world economy forever. The British investment in the diamond rush is best represented by Cecil Rhodes. While making a fortune mining diamonds in South Africa, he acquired Northern and Southern Rhodesia, named after him (now renamed Zimbabwe and Zambia). Rhodes died after the British-Boer war, leaving the famous Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford.

The historical consequences of natural resource extraction, and of colonialism by Europe more generally, are highly important. This applies particularly in the case of South Africa. British, Boers, and Africans worked the mines, partly to pay off taxes but also to strike it rich, and for other reasons. Africans migrated from rural areas, for years on end, to the mines. Shanty towns were set up around these mines. Zimmerman argues for a relation between this history of long-term migration and the AIDS epidemic.

Colonialism had mixed results. Had South Africa not been colonized, it would not have been able to host the World Cup, for it is now the most industrialized nation in Africa. The internal wars across Africa with their atrocities continue to trouble us, but Zimmerman points out that post-colonial Africa is young. Senegal, for example, only became a nation in 1960. Consider that the United States, a similar number of years after it became a nation, had a great, highly murderous civil war just as many African nations have also had. As to the question of how post-colonial African nations may have undergone what may be termed 'improvements' in terms of the fortunes of their inhabitants, Zimmerman says that this question is hard to answer because measuring improvements is a difficult process.