7 - Scramble for and Partition of West Africa

1. <u>The Scramble for Africa</u>

The Europeans had frequented the coasts of West Africa since the fifteenth century and established settlements along the coast in order to facilitate trade, in particular the transatlantic slave trade. There was, however, little interest in driving colonisation inland before the 1870s except in the Cape region (South Africa) and in Algeria that the French had turned into a settler colony, i.e. a colony where waves of European migrants often violently dispossessed the inhabitants of their lands. Forty years later, the situation would be radically different; in 1910, only Liberia and Ethiopia escaped European rule. What were the reasons behind Europe's Scramble for Africa and why did it happen so rapidly at the end of the nineteenth century?

- The Industrial Revolution

Many historians and economists have argued that the colonisation of Africa was the direct consequence of the Industrial Revolution in Europe. During the nineteenth century, most European powers experienced a dramatic growth of productivity caused by a number of technical innovations such as steam engines, steel furnaces or electric power. It meant that European countries produced more goods than they could sell. They were constantly looking for new markets because the Europeans did not consume enough to absorb the vast quantity of products made possible by new manufacturing techniques. This is the theory of European under-consumption.

This under-consumption led companies and states to look for trading opportunities around the planet. For them, the continent that they knew the least, Africa, needed to be open to trade. In exchange for tropical products in high demand in Europe, Africans would receive their manufactured products. The British, for example, wanted to obtain palm oil, cotton and rubber from the Gold Coast or groundnuts from the Gambia. Palm oil was used to create industrial lubricants, cotton to produce clothes, rubber to manufacture tyres and groundnuts were transformed into soap and wax. African products were thus at the centre of the Industrial Revolution.

Powerful capitalistic interests were therefore among the reasons which pushed the Europeans to send expeditions along the rivers of Africa in the second half of the nineteenth-century. This explains why the colonisation of Africa was often driven by chartered companies, i.e. European private investors receiving privileges from their

government to trade in territories outside of Europe. Some of these companies were instrumental in the creation of colonies as was the case for the Royal Niger Company in Nigeria. After years of transatlantic slave trade, industrialisation and what former slave trading European nations called "legitimate commerce" had thus become a strong motive reason for the European colonisation of the continent. This was then justified according to other pseudo-explanations, as we shall see below.

- European Scientific Developments

It could be argued that the Europeans could have invaded Africa before for the same commercial reasons. So why then did the colonisation of the continent take place at the end of the nineteenth century and not before? The reason might come from new technological developments of the Industrial Revolution.

New weapons enabled the Europeans to conquer vast swathes of lands in a very short period of time whilst African societies did not have the tools to fight efficiently. The British army's Martini-Henry breech-loading rifle could hit a target nearly a mile away, and could be fired 12 times a minute. The Maxim gun could fire 600 rounds a minute. In comparison, many Africans were fighting with single-shot muskets. Superior weaponry did not mean that many Africans were not able to defend themselves in a series of localised conflicts. Indeed many resisted European troops. For example, in modern-day Guinea, Sierra Leone, Mali and Ivory Coast, Samori Ture fought against the French until his capture in 1898. The Asante in modern-day Ghana also chose to fight against the British to defend the Golden Stool. The Bijagó of Guinea-Bissau resisted formal colonisation and hut taxes until the 1930s.

Samori Ture (c. 1830 – June 2, 1900). Wikipedia. Public domain.

Other tools also facilitated the European invasion at the end of the nineteenth century. The steamboat and the telegraph accelerated the pace of the colonial conquest as faster travel and communication meant that European armies could easily distribute troops in different corners of Africa for short periods. Tropical diseases were brought under control by scientific discoveries. Before 1860, Europeans in West Africa were 75% likely to die within 2 years, but the treatment of malaria with quinine saw the risk fall to 8% by 1900.

- Humanitarianism and Racism

Beyond material causes, the scramble for Africa required an ideological justification. The colonial conquest was based on the religious idea of a 'mission', the ethical idea of 'ending slavery', all inspired by racist ideas.

After being responsible for the enslavement of [more than twelve million Africans between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries](#), the Europeans ironically justified their African conquests in the name of the abolition of slavery. At the end of the nineteenth century, the

slave trade became considered inhumane, and contrary to Christian values in the case of Britain and Republican values in the case of France. The 1889-90 Brussels anti-slavery conference perfectly illustrates this new vision of Africa where the Europeans considered themselves as the saviours of Africa – a vision which prefigures modern-day humanitarian interventions in Africa after natural or political upheavals.

For the British, Civilisation, Commerce and Christianity (often known as the 3 Cs) were the main reasons behind colonialism. For secular France, it was the 'civilising mission'. It had become a duty to bring peace to Africa to educate the Africans as they would be freed from the ills of war, disease and famine.

According to racist theories developed in Europe by the end of the nineteenth century, Africans were supposed to belong to an inferior race which had to be enlightened by Europeans. This racist justification of colonialism was backed up by pseudo-scientific theories which situated Africans at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Therefore, it was the 'white man's burden' to educate an inferior race. These theories materialised again as justification for Apartheid in South Africa.

- European internal politics and rivalry

Internal European politics might be responsible for the beginning of the Scramble for Africa. In 1870, newly-created Germany won a war against France. After this France tried to restore its national pride by competing with the Ottoman Empire and Italy for domination in North Africa and with the United Kingdom for commercial influence in West Africa. The new French colonial empire in West Africa presented an opportunity to show the strength and the values of the French Third Republic.

For the British, the Suez Canal was a crucial bridgehead for the sea route leading to India. Egypt was officially under the control of the Ottoman Empire but was experiencing a series of political and economic upheavals in the 1870s. Afraid of losing control of such an important economic and strategic asset, the British invaded Egypt in 1882. For the British, the occupation of Egypt marked the transition between the period of informal empire, i.e. the period when empires dominated strategically or commercially non-European regions without claiming the territories as their own and high imperialism, i.e. the period when European powers invaded non-European territories.

The rivalry between European powers was also one of the main drives behind the Scramble for Africa. In order to prevent each other from acquiring more territories, the Europeans carved up the African continent into colonies. Acquiring prestige by invading new territories was particularly important and the competition between the British and the French was responsible for the creation of most borders in West Africa.

2. <u>The Partition of West Africa</u>

Most African borders were created rapidly between c. 1900 and the end of the First World War by the Europeans. Why did it happen so quickly and how was West Africa partitioned?

- African territories at the end of the nineteenth century

Europeans imagined Africa as *terra nullius*: a vast land belonging to no none. *Terra nullius* was a legal invention of the Europeans to justify their encroachment on non-European lands. This was of course an absurdity which took no heed of the realities of complex African states and historical changes dating back to distant times. It was an invention of racist historians who knew nothing of Africa.

During the nineteenth century, there were many well-organised states in West Africa. For example, following the jihad of Usman dan Fodio at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Hausa-Fulanis created a caliphate which was the largest state in Africa at the time, and which had extensive textile industry and long distance trade. Meanwhile, the neighbouring kingdom of Borno was the heir of the sixteenth-century of the empire of Kanem-Borno, while in Guinea the Fuuta Jaalo state spread over a large area and conquered Kaabu's longstanding empire in neighbouring Guinea-Bissau in the 1860s.

While these larger states may have been the exception during the nineteenth century, smaller communities in West Africa also had a long history of trade and contact with the rest of the world. In the nineteenth century, West Africans lived in complex and varied political systems where authority could be exerted by men and women alike.

- The African reaction to the arrival of European troops

The difference between societies living in organised states and those living in non-centralised polities might explain why African men and women reacted differently to the arrival of colonial troops. Historians have tried to explain why some of them chose to fight while the large majority of them did not make or were not offered the same choice. In societies with little tradition of centralised government, traditions of local autonomy made submission to a colonial empire inconceivable (for example, the relatively small communities living in the Niger Delta, Nigeria or the Bissagos Islands, Guinea-Bissau).

Other larger societies in contact with the European for longer might have known the superior European firepower and accommodated themselves to the prospect of foreign rule

accordingly; their subjects were also used to accommodating to political power, so the larger states were easier to conquer – as the Spanish had found in the Americas in the sixteenth century.

Other societies were also profoundly divided and used the Europeans in their internal struggle. Africa like other continents was not a monolithic block and the idea of a continental-wide African resistance to colonialism would be anachronistic. Africans were thus divided when European troops conquered the continent. For example, the British became players in a civil war in Northern Nigeria and backed one side against the other. This was the pattern of divide and rule which had long been used by European imperialists, since the sixteenth century. In 1903, the conquest of Kano was thus undertaken with the help of its own inhabitants, just as the conquest of Mexico City by the Spanish had been undertaken with the help of Native American allies from Tlaxcala.

- The military conquest of West Africa

The conference of Berlin in 1884-85 set the rules for the partition of the whole of Africa. Strangely, it recognised the Congo Free State as the personal possession of Leopold II, the king of Belgium. Leopold II had been one of the instigators of the formal European land and power grab, and was personally rewarded for this role; the result would be the creation of one of the most inhumane of all the European colonial systems established in Africa.

The Berlin Conference by Gartenlaube, 1884. Wikipedia. Public domain.

Otherwise, the conference did not create borders in West Africa. Rather it allowed free navigation on the Congo and Niger Rivers.

The conference of Berlin stipulated that in order to claim a colony in Africa, treaties needed to be signed with local rulers. The years following the conference of Berlin saw the multiplication of expeditions which aimed at signing treaties. However, these treaties were often misunderstood by local rulers who did not know that they would lose their authority. These were also expeditions backed by strong military force, which gave the rulers little choice other than to agree.

To have their conquests recognised by the other colonial powers, the Europeans introduced the concept of effective occupation. Effective occupation meant that the Europeans needed to send troops to different corners of Africa to occupy 'spheres of influence'. The concept of 'effective occupation' resulted in a series of localised conflicts in West Africa which can be described as regional scrambles instead of a general Scramble for Africa. These regional scrambles unfolded rapidly between the conference of Berlin and the First World War.

For example at the end of the nineteenth century, the Portuguese wanted to link their colonies of Angola and Mozambique across the continent. Their dream of a united empire was broken by the British businessman Cecil Rhodes who wanted to connect the British Cape Colony to Cairo and ultimately created the colonies of Southern and Northern Rhodesia. These opposing visions of empire could also be found in the Lake Chad area which was heavily disputed between France, Germany and the United Kingdom at the end of the nineteenth century. The three countries sent troops to the region and only reached a final agreement in 1902.

Beyond these military escapades, the African participation to the European colonial conquest is significant. The continent was indeed conquered by European armies but most soldiers came from different regions of Africa. Centuries of the slave trade and the creation of powerful warrior aristocracies had created deep divisions. The Europeans were ready to exploit the internal divisions of the continent and recruited soldiers in their colonial possessions in order to invade and control their newly-conquered colonies. It was the classic imperial strategy of divide and rule.

- The creation of boundaries
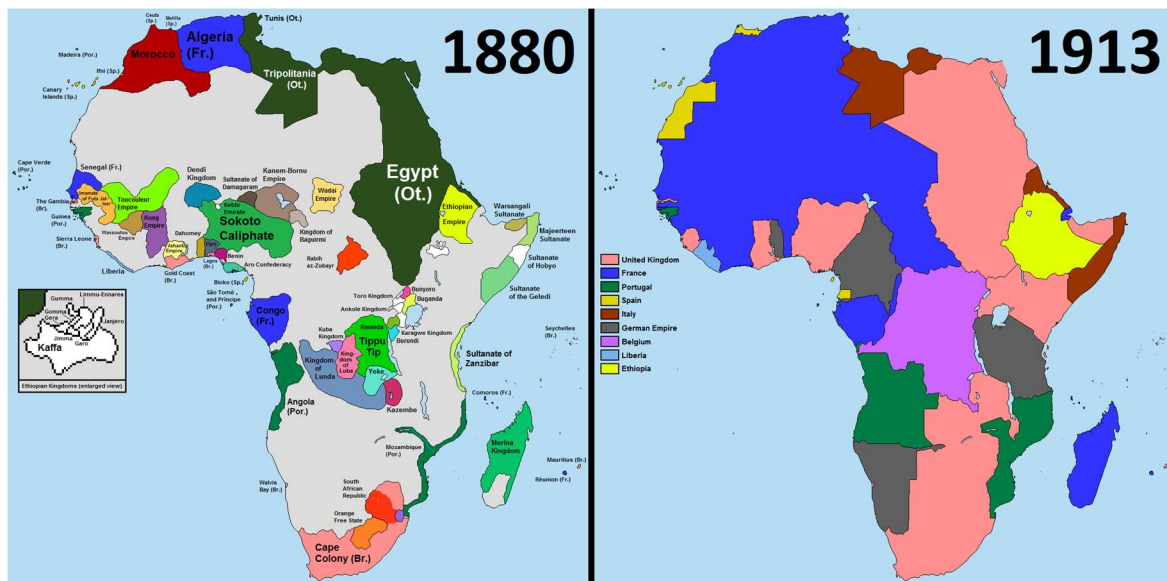
Comparison of Africa in the years 1880 and 1913. CC BY-SA 4.0. Wikipedia.

Africa was divided without consideration of local populations or pre-existing cultural groups. The result was that most African borders were the products of European geopolitical rivalries rather than West African history. This explains why most West African borders were created in European chancelleries and followed astronomical, mathematical or geographical lines (see factbox).

It was not the first time that the Europeans created boundaries outside of Europe. In Latin America or South-East Asia, the Europeans had already created boundaries between their colonies. When African boundaries were negotiated in Europe, they were considered as part of a large-scale bargain for territories. The British and the French, for example, traded territories in West Africa (Los Islands in Guinea and upper Gambia), South-East Asia (rights to colonise territories surrounding Thailand), the Pacific (Vanuatu), and fishing rights in the Atlantic to seal their alliance called the *Entente Cordiale* in 1904.

Most boundaries were created to satisfy the geopolitical ambitions of European diplomats who wanted to protect or affirm their respective spheres of influence. Rivers were considered especially worthy economic resources during this period, which explains how the borders of a colony such as Gambia were carved along the Gambia River.

The Portuguese who had been present on the coasts of Africa since the fifteenth century played a particular role in the creation of borders. They collected and published numerous documents on the history of their possessions in order to justify their presence in Africa. Historical precedents were particularly sought after in a period where written documents were used as legal evidence.

The border treaties signed between Europeans were often very vague and needed to be adapted on the ground. The lack of geographical knowledge of Africa on the part of the Europeans meant that precise borders needed to be delimitated with the help of African populations. So, at the scale of West Africa, most borders were traced in Europe but, at a

local level, African populations could influence the creation of the colonial borders. This can be seen in the boundary between the Sokoto Caliphate and Borno which were used by the British and the French in their negotiations to separate Nigeria and Niger.

After the defeat of Germany during the First World War, its West African colonies of Togo and Cameroun were divided between the British and the French under the aegis of the League of Nations. It was an opportunity for the Ewe populations of Togoland to be reunited with other Ewe speakers in the British colony of Gold Coast. The First World War was thus the last opportunity to redraw borders in West Africa.

Conclusion:

At the end of the nineteenth century, no one knew that colonial rule would last until the 1950s in the case of Togo and Ghana, the 1960s for most other colonies in West Africa or the 1970s for the Spanish colony of Western Sahara or for the Portuguese colonies of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. For many Africans at the turn of the twentieth century, the European presence was only temporary.

The Scramble for Africa had tremendous political, economic and cultural consequences for African men and women. Even if it lasted two or three generations, the colonisation of the continent had an enduring effect on African peoples and societies.

At the moment of their creation, African borders were not conceived as rigid state boundaries but as administrative colonial limits. They have become the symbol of the colonial past for many twenty-first century Africans, who often call them the scars of colonisation.

Factbox:

In 2018, African borders are 83,500 kilometres (51,884 miles) long. Apart from the cases of Liberia and Ethiopia, most African borders were defined in Europe in a very short period of time between the end of the nineteenth century and the end of the First World War. Nearly 44% of them were defined after astronomical lines (meridians and parallels), 30% after mathematical lines (arcs and lines) and 26% after geographic landmarks (mainly rivers and mountains). France is behind the creation of 32% of African borders, the United Kingdom 26.8%, Germany 8.7%, Belgium 7.6%, Portugal 6.9%, the Ottoman Empire 4%, Italy 1.7% and Spain 1.5%.

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