# The Partitioning of Africa

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## 1. Introduction

During the first phase of the colonial period the African continent was partitioned into more than 50 countries. This creation of nation states had very important long-term consequences. The process of carving up the continent and creating nations-states determined, for example, which entirely unrelated societies would, from then on, live together and share a nationality. It determined which societies were left intact and which were separated by international boundaries. And, importantly, it determined the *size* of the nations. Sometimes very large and diverse areas and peoples were all merged into one large state, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo. In other instances very small states were created, such as the Gambia. In order to understand why Africa was colonised at the time that it was, and how states were created, we need to understand the process of partitioning.

European countries only began to establish any formal control over the African continent after 1880. Yet, commercial ties had connected Africa and Europe as early as the 15$^{th}$ century when the Portuguese landed on the coast of West Africa. This contact intensified with the rise of the slave trade, which was at its height in the 1700s until the mid-1800s. The 19$^{th}$ century also brought missionaries and explorers to Africa with the aim of discovering unknown territory and converting souls. Various coastal trading posts and forts were established, mostly in West Africa. But African societies effectively prevented Europeans from extending their presence into the hinterlands up until 1880. Hence before the start of colonial expansion, Europeans knew very little about the continent's interior. This all changed rapidly at the end of the 19$^{th}$ century with the partitioning of Africa.

The aim of this chapter is to explain how the partitioning of Africa evolved and to look at the role that both Africans and Europeans played in the process. We will start by discussing the technological factors that enabled the European powers to conquer Africa. This will be followed by an overview of the process of partitioning, discussing the involvement of both Africans and Europeans. The chapter ends with a discussion of the various theories in the literature that have traditionally explained the partitioning of Africa.

## 2. The technological factors that enabled European colonial expansion

Until well into the second half of the 19th century, African societies successfully guarded their continent against unwelcome European invaders. However, in the decades leading up to the 1880s, a number of rapid technological developments took place that shifted the balance of power in favour of the Europeans. This enabled the Europeans, for the first time in history, to expand into the African interior.

*Quinine*

Until the first half of the 19th century, the environment in parts of Africa was exceptionally hostile to Europeans. Out of every 1000 European individuals travelling to tropical Africa between 250 and 500 would die, mostly as a result of contracting malaria. While malaria was not as deadly for Africans, who possessed some resistance to the disease due to a genetic trait called sickle cell, the tropical parts of Africa were not considered a suitable or attractive place for European settlement. This changed, in 1840, with the discovery of the anti-malaria drug *quinine prophylaxis*. The death rate from tropical diseases dropped substantially in the decades that followed. Thus it was quinine that first made possible the presence of Europeans on the western coast. Matters improved once again in 1901-02 when Europeans discovered that mosquitoes were the source of malaria and other tropical diseases. Armed with this information they launched vast anti-mosquito campaigns which further reduced the number of deaths.

*Iron metallurgy: better and cheaper weapons*

During the 19th century, the technology used to produce iron improved substantially. In Africa, the most significant impact of these improvements was in the supply of better and cheaper firearms. Europeans initially held most of these weapons and, naturally, this gave them a military advantage. The development of the *Maxim-gun*, a semiautomatic weapon, later proved a crucial factor in the establishment of European military superiority. Due to its increased speed of firing, and the fact it was relatively light to carry, it became the standard machine gun of Europeans in Africa.

Between 1880 and 1920, the disparity in military power between Africans and Europeans was at its height. Nevertheless many African societies possessed firearms, sometimes in large quantities. Most guns were initially obtained in return for trading slaves. All West African states owned substantial quantities of firearms, and some states in the interior of modern Tanzania and Uganda, and Ethiopia also possessed large arsenals of weapons. However, most of these were old and heavy firearms, and rarely included machine guns. Moreover, many African armies initially lacked any training in how to handle firearms. The

military advantage meant that the conquest of territory was relatively easy and comparatively cheap for Europeans.

*Steamboat*

Another important technological discovery that preceded the partitioning was the invention of the steam engine. The steam engine had transformed industrial production and the transportation of goods over land in Europe. It also revolutionised the transport of goods by sea. In the second half of the 19$^{th}$ century, European ports – previously used for the trade of slaves and manufacturing goods – evolved into havens for the trade of manufacturing goods and tropical foodstuffs such as groundnuts, cacao, and palm oil. These steamboats, carrying goods between Africa and Europe, also transported a new generation of explorers. The most famous of all was David Livingstone. Exploring large parts of the unknown interior of tropical Africa, he was the first to demonstrate that quinine was the key to surviving the continent's hostile disease environment.

*Administrative capacity.*

Improvements in the 'technology of government administration' also played a role in the conquest of Africa (Curtin, 1995: 401). Since the 15$^{th}$ century, Europeans had been strengthening their administrative powers. This development accelerated first in France, following the French revolution and during Napoleonic rule. Later also in Britain and other parts of Europe, where successive administrative reforms were implemented. As a result the major powers in 19$^{th}$-century Europe were better able to administer an overseas empire and could set up a colonial government more efficiently than in the past. Within Europe, there was great confidence in the ability to manage and rule large overseas empires.

*Racism, racial superiority, regeneration of African peoples.*

The confidence in ruling overseas areas was part of a more general European attitude towards the world. Driven by its material prosperity and supremacy, Europe reassessed its position towards the rest of the world. This was combined with a firm belief in a 'natural order of things', an idea that gained prominence with the appearance of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin's work was understood by some to provide scientific confirmation of the supremacy of the white race. Thus Europeans felt entitled to rule others. The conquest of the 'backward' races by the 'superior' race was seen as part of an inevitable, natural process. Racism flourished during the period, peaking between 1880 and 1920. This had a profound influence on how the

colonial regimes were organised. In this view, colonisation was also seen as a form of imperial responsibility, which provided a justification for colonial conquest.

### 3. The process of colonisation

Although the above set of factors were in place at the end of the 19th century, it is still not straightforward to determine the moment at which partitioning officially began. It is perhaps best understood as an evolutionary development in which various African and European interests and actions interacted in what seemed an unstoppable process. What started as commercial contact led to increasing influence of European powers in various coastal regions in Africa. Map 1, below, indicates the regions in which European powers were present prior to the partitioning, and in which direction they advanced to seize territory.

*Map 1: European presence in Africa prior to the partitioning*



Source: http://faculty.unlv.edu/gbrown/westernciv/handouts/africa1.jpg
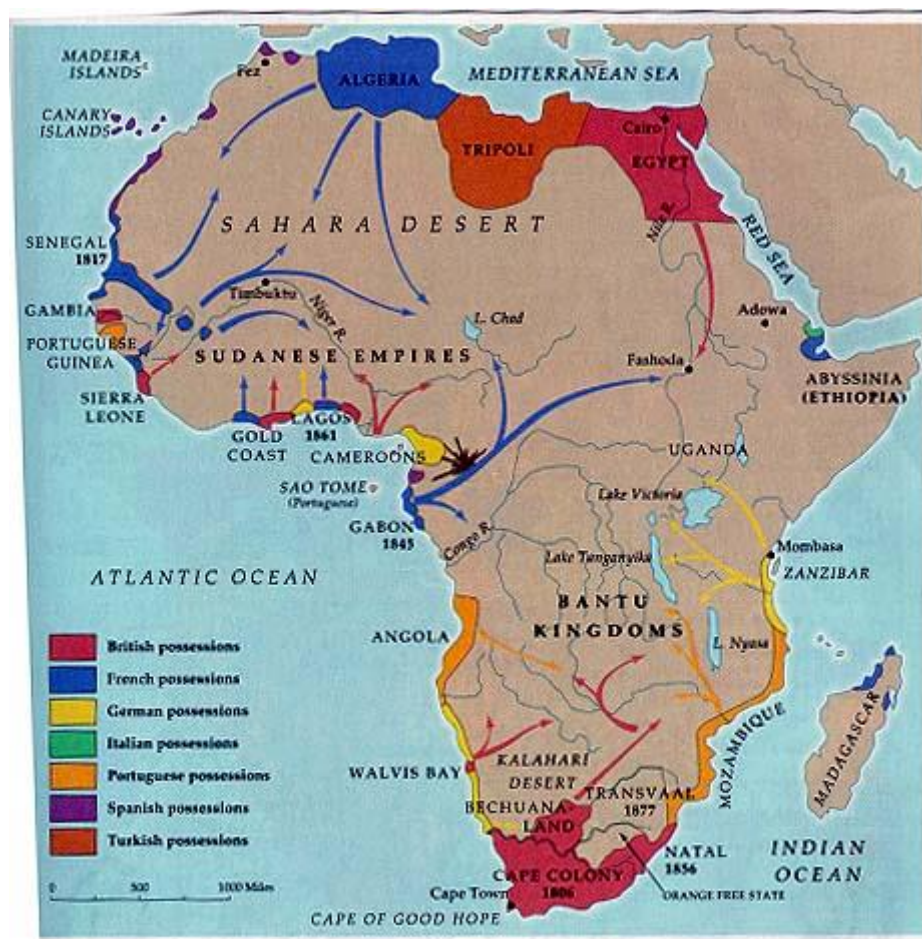
Initially the European annexation of territory developed most rapidly in the northern and the southern parts of the continent. In South Africa the Dutch had founded the Cape Colony in 1652. From the early 19th century onwards, the British started to take over control of the region. The discovery of diamonds in the 1860s and 1870s increased the pace at which Britain annexed

territory. The balance of power that had previously been established between the Africans and the Europeans came under pressure. The Zulu in particular, and also the Xhosa, put up such determined resistance that the British were forced to halt their expansion, at least temporarily. In 1879 the Zulu even defeated the British in the battle of Isandhlwana. However, some months later a reinforced British army eventually defeated and destroyed the Zulu kingdom. In the meantime, the struggle between the British and the Dutch Boers for power in the region intensified. This ultimately led to the Anglo-Boer wars at the end of the 19th century. In 1910 the British eventually defeated the Boers and established the Union of South Africa.

In 1869 the Suez Canal, an important route towards India, was completed in Egypt. In the following period the French and British presence in the area rapidly increased and they started to control Egyptian finances. In 1882 the British felt they had to defend the Suez Canal from Egyptian Nationalists. Fearing that France would establish itself as Egypt's rulers, the British decided to take over control of Egypt's territory. This sparked intense competition between France and Britain over the Nile valley.

Although annexation occurred most forcefully in the northern and southern parts of Africa, there were other parts of Africa in which the pressure of competitive annexation was felt before the beginning of the partitioning. Since the 1870s, King Leopold of Belgium had been fascinated by the potential prestige and profitability of creating a Belgian empire in Africa. He was convinced that the future of the Belgian economy depended upon acquiring an overseas market and resources. In his quest to realise this he hired the American journalist turned explorer Henry Morton Stanley to explore the Congo. The goal was to obtain extensive economic concessions from local African rulers. At the same time, a French-Italian naval officer on leave, de Brazza, had been exploring the area of Gabon and northern Congo, and signed a number of treaties with chiefs in the Congo basin in the name of France. Competitive annexation meanwhile also reached Algeria, the western Sudan, and Madagascar.

Due to the escalation of the Egyptian crisis between France and Britain in 1884, chancellor Bismarck of Germany began to fear that those two countries would claim all territory in Africa. Although unconvinced of the usefulness of colonies, Bismarck claimed protectorates over Togo and Cameroon and German West Africa. At the same time, he called for an international conference in late 1884 to discuss the increased tensions over Africa. In what became known as the Berlin Conference[1], the ground rules for the rest of the European conquest of Africa were established. At the conference, two major decisions were made: first, Leopold's presence in the Congo Basin was recognised in return for free trade in the area; and, second, any European power could prohibit others from challenging certain territory by bringing it

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[1] The official name of the 1884-85 Conference in Berlin was the 'West Africa Conference'.

under effective control. Preferably, control should be established by signing treaties with African chiefs or alternatively by military conquest.

## 4. The Involvement of Africans: resistance and adaptation

During this era of increasing intrusion by the Europeans, the invaders faced a large number of different opponents. Map 2 gives an idea of where various important political entities were located on the eve of the partitioning.

*Map 2: Political entities prior to the partitioning*
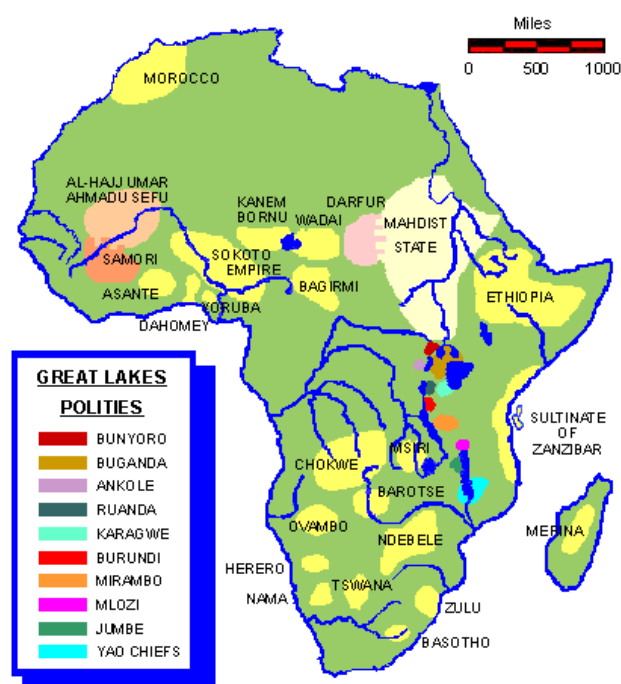


Source: Source: Adapted from R. O. Collins, J. M. Burns, and E. K. Ching, eds., *Historical Problems of Imperial Africa* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1994), 6D. Original grey scale map copyright University of California, Santa Barbara, Geography. Alterations and colouring made with by Jeffrey S. Gaydish, 1998.

These societies were not submissive bystanders during the partitioning. Indeed, various strategies were employed to deal with the invaders. Some societies fought colonial rule from the onset and resisted until the end; other societies fought and only surrendered when defeat was inevitable; still others tried to bargain the terms of cooperation; and, finally, some societies used the colonial presence to their own strategic advantage.

Menelik II, emperor of Ethiopia employed the 'fight from the onset' strategy most successfully. In the famous battle of Adwa, in 1896, Ethiopia defeated the Italian invaders and escaped colonial rule, with the exception of the brief Italian occupation between 1935–1941.

Figure 1: Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia



Other African states did not escape colonial rule, but some managed to survive within the colonial structure. Various African rulers managed to retain their power by timely surrender and collaboration with the Europeans. For example, in northern Nigeria, Rwanda, and Burundi, the old ruling class remained in power throughout colonial times.

Given that the Europeans had better weapons, one of the defence strategies employed by African societies was guerrilla warfare. This proved a very effective strategy, occupying European troops for years. However, these tactics were not broadly applied, as most local economies could not afford this kind of warfare: feeding and supporting a full-time army was often beyond their economic means. Moreover, the guerrilla tactics could even ruin their economic capacity. For example, Samori (ruling the Madinke empire in western Africa) employed scorched earth tactics. While very effective in slowing the advance of the French, these tactics also destroyed the region's agricultural resources. This put at risk the empire's ability to feed and support its own communities and army.

*Figure 2: Samori*
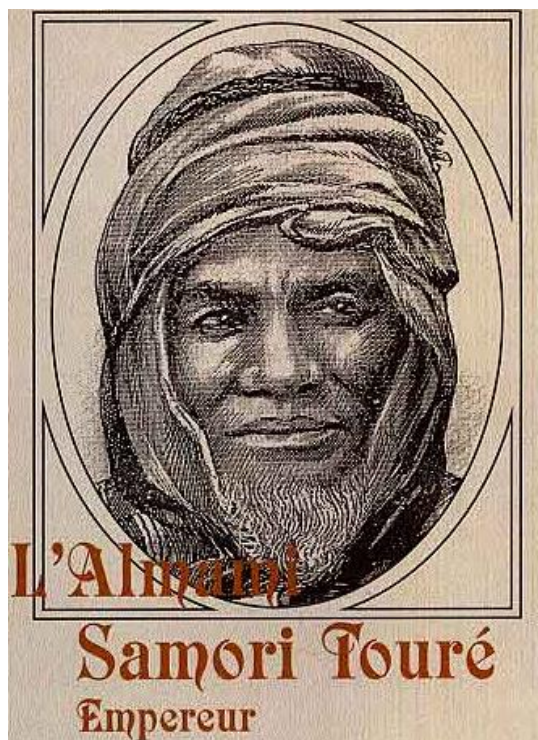


In other areas, African societies exploited local rivalries and used the European presence to their own advantage. When the British tried to establish influence over the Buganda Kingdom and the surrounding areas, the Buganda elite used the British assistance to strengthen its own position. During the early 1890s, the Buganda elite offered both military and political assistance to the British in the subjugation of surrounding and rival kingdoms such as the Toro, the Bunyoro and the Ankole. In return, they received a favoured status within the protectorate.

Europeans also exploited local rivalries. When rival states did not combine forces to meet the invaders, the Europeans would face one opponent at a time. For example, the British in Western Africa first fought the Yoruba, in 1892-93. Then they fought the centralised state of Benin, in 1897. And, finally, in a longer war they took on the Sokoto Caliphate. Due to pressure from various sides, every emirate (province) of the original Caliphate had to fight alone which was much easier for the British. Eventually the whole Caliphate fell in 1903. Similarly, the French exploited the rivalry between the Tukulor and the Mandinke empires when they extended their presence into the western savannah (coming from Senegal). The French first made a series of treaties with both the Tukulor and Mandinke. The rulers of the empires saw these treaties as guarantees against French attacks. The Tukulor even helped the French in their campaign against the Futa Bondu in the mid-1880s. Nevertheless, at the end of the 1880s the French still attacked both empires, conquering the Mandinke in 1893 and the Tukulor by 1898. The Portuguese also exploited intra-African conflicts, and increased their influence on modern Mozambique and Angola by letting African armies do the fighting. In Angola, however, the

Portuguese themselves also had to face those armies and it was not until well into the 20th century that the Portuguese could claim control over the territory.

Some of the most successful challenges to colonial rule came from various stateless societies. These societies had no central authority that could function as a main contact for negotiation or, indeed, that could formally surrender. It took the British until 1910 before they managed to defeat the Igbo of Southern Nigeria. Similarly it took them years to conquer the Tiv of the Benue valley. The French, in turn, needed 20 years to subjugate the array of decentralised communities in the forests of the Cote d'Ivoire.

Not all areas became the subject of battles. The Europeans obtained some regions through treaties with African chiefs. The African chiefs typically regarded these treaties as pacts of friendship. Or they considered them as safeguards from attack. The Europeans, meanwhile, took these treaties back to Europe as proof of their effective occupation of a territory. For example, Leopold hired the explorer Stanley to explore the Congo river and to obtain extensive economic concessions from local African rulers. During the Conference of Berlin these treaties formed the basis upon which King Leopold claimed the area of the Congo Free State. At the same time de Brazza, who explored the area of Gabon and northern Congo and signed a number of treaties with chiefs in the Congo basin did the same for France. He founded Brazaville in 1880, and thereby gave France a gateway to the heart of Africa. And in Eastern Africa, Karl Peters signed treaties with African chiefs on behalf of Germany. In 1885 Germany declared the protectorate over Tanganyika.

Another form of European occupation was giving the rights to rule an area to private companies. These companies acquired territories both by signing treaties with local rulers and by fighting. In the lower Niger, the Royal Niger Company ruled on behalf of the British government, and the Imperial British East Africa Company was active in the area north of Lake Victoria and in British East Africa (later Kenya). In Tanganyika the German East Africa Company was given the responsibility of ruling the area on behalf of Germany. And in Southern Africa, the British South African Company (BSAC) occupied territory initially in Shona territory and later also defeated the Ndebele kingdom. Both areas became part of Rhodesia. Later, the BSAC would also occupy the territory of modern Malawi.

In many areas, the rule of these companies was met with fierce resistance and European governments were forced to take over. In Tanganyika a number of serious uprisings against the German East Africa Company forced the German government to send in reinforcements and take over direct control in 1889. Nevertheless, fighting in the area continued. The Hehe in the South fought until the end of the 1890s, and the Maasai resisted German rule in the North. The most famous resistance in the area, the Maji Maji revolt, was launched in 1905. And in

Rhodesia, after an initial defeat the Shona and the Ndebele rose in resistance to colonial rule under the BSAC. The uprising was so fierce that the colonists were nearly fought off the territory. Only when the BSAC received reinforcements from the Cape Colony ruled by the British did the revolt end.

The era of partitioning officially ended in the early 1900s. Yet, some areas were never really controlled by colonial governments – such as parts of Central Africa. In other regions, resistance continued for at least another decade, such in Angola and Somalia. Moreover, it took until the 1920s to settle all the colonial boundaries. The boundary between Nigeria and Cameroon, for example, was subject to various negotiations, as were the borders between Ghana and Togo, and between Kenya and Tanzania. The British sought information on indigenous settlement patterns and on several occasions tried to adjust the border to reunite political groups as it understood them. The border between Ghana and Togo was redrawn a number of times after World War I to reunify the states of the Dagomba and the Mamprusi which had originally been partitioned in the North. In other instances claims for reunification, from the Ewe for example, were dismissed.
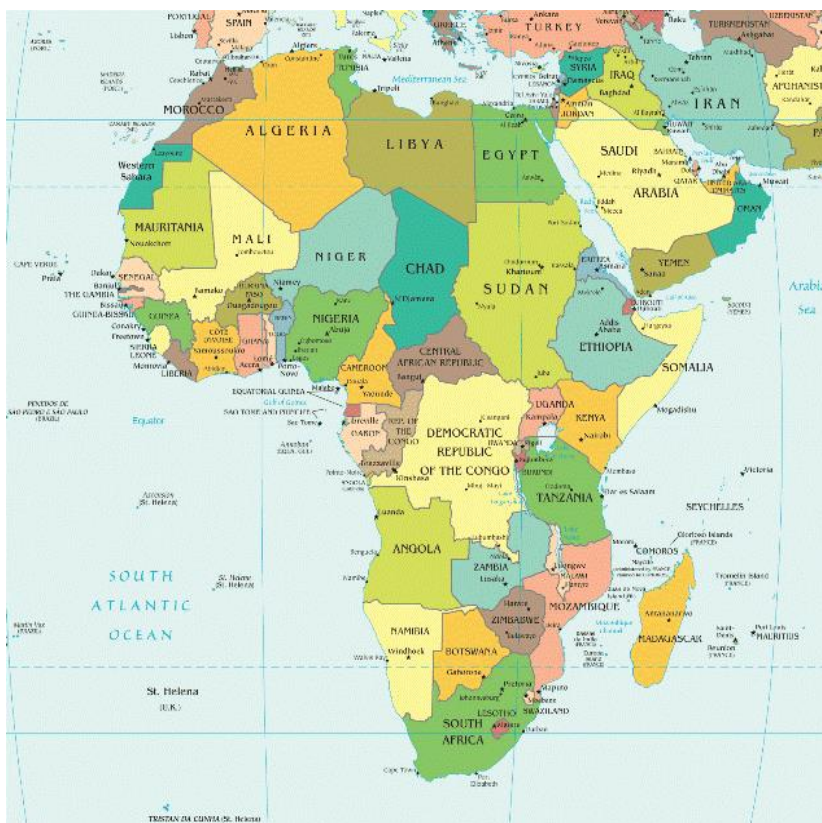
When the partitioning was completed the British possessed African territories stretching from Egypt to South Africa, divided only by German East Africa. In West Africa, British diplomacy initially proved no match for French military action in the upper Niger basin. France extended its rule from Senegal far into Central Africa. Still, the British claimed the Niger river mouth, and a substantial part of the hinterland to form present Nigeria. Looking at the map of West Africa it is clear that the British experienced difficulties competing with the military strength of the French, as most of the British coastal possessions lost much of their hinterland. Moving eastwards though, the hinterlands claimed by Britain became increasingly large. Finally, Portugal obtained large territories on both the East and West coast of the African continent. Indeed, the countries created then are the countries that exist today. This can be seen clearly when comparing the map of Africa in 1914 (map 3) with the map of Africa in 1965 (map 4).

*Map 3: Africa in 1914*



Source: http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/students/curriculum/m10/activity3.php
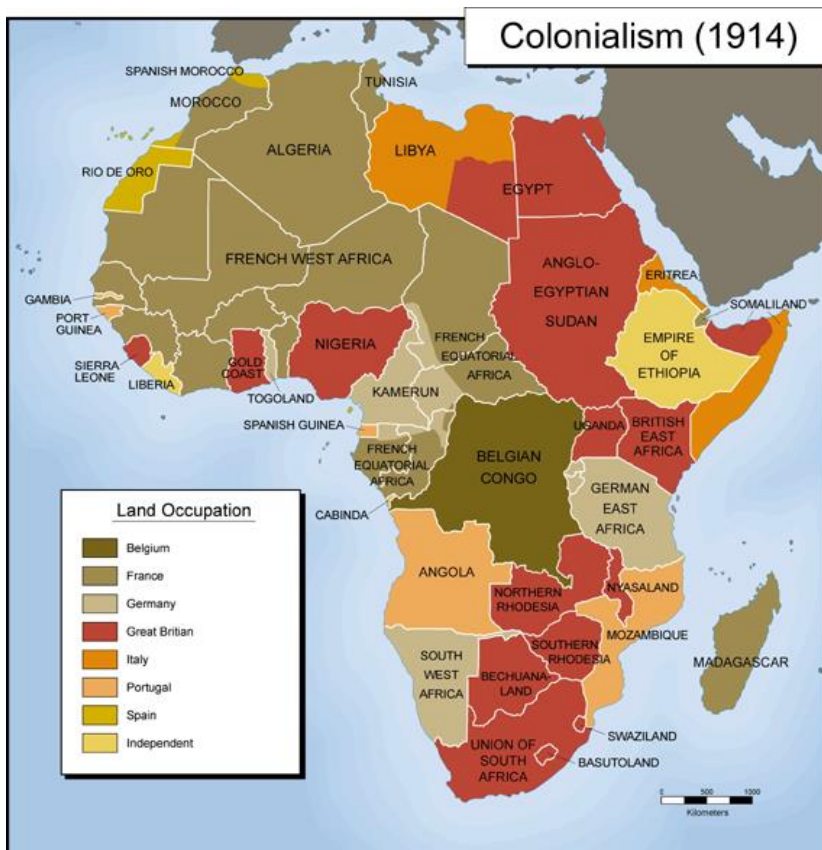
*Map 4: Africa around 1965*



Source: http://75sunny.blogspot.nl/2010_08_01_archive.html

**5. Theories on the colonisation of Africa**

Now that we understand the major technological factors that enabled the colonial conquest, and how the process of partitioning unfolded, we can turn to the question of *why* Africa was colonised. In the literature various, sometimes conflicting, explanations are offered. In the remainder of this chapter we will discuss the most important theories, and evaluate their validity in the light of the process of partitioning discussed above.

*The African Dimension*

The African Dimension theory focuses on the role of Africans in the partitioning of Africa. It suggests that the European colonial conquest was provoked by two related phenomena. The first was the abolition of the slave trade. This enforced a shift to legitimate trade, primarily of cash crops. As a result both exports and imports began to decline. The indigenous rulers that had become rich through predatory activities such as the slave trade, adopted reactionary attitudes. They started to resist increasing European influence. Their resistance, in turn, provoked European reactions and ultimately hastened the actual military conquest.

The second phenomenon was that during the second half of the 19th century, instability increased due to conflicts between those African elites that exercised informal European control, and the African movements that opposed European incursion. Opposition movements used imported weapons to fight the old elite. As these weapons became more widely available, more people became involved in the struggle for power. Thus, local conflict and instability intensified. This instability was not only bad for trade, but it also created a possible foothold for European rivals. These developments also advanced European military conquest.

How well does this theory explain what happened during the partitioning of Africa? The explanation focusing on opposition movements turning against the old elite originates from an analysis of the Egyptian developments during the 1880s. Hence it fits that situation well. It can also to some extent explain what happened in Tunisia and Zanzibar. Yet, it is only partially applicable to Anglo-Boer relations in South Africa, and it cannot explain the battles between the Zulu and the Xhosa and the British. Moreover, it cannot explain the French expansion in the Niger Sudan, as the Muslim states usually went to great lengths to avoid war. Furthermore, the exploratory and treaty signing activities employed by Leopold and de Brazza in the Congo basin do not fit this theory well. Finally, the territory acquired by Italy in Somalia, and by Germany in West and East Africa formed part of areas where the informal influence had actually been British, not German or Italian.

*Political and Strategic theories*

Among the most powerful imperialist theories are the political and strategic explanations for the partitioning. The start of the partitioning of Africa is often associated with how the balance of power within Europe evolved during that period. Wars and rivalries between European nations had brought the balance of power in Europe under pressure. Any actions by one European nation required an immediate response from other countries to keep the balance. In order to preserve the power and diplomatic balance at home, European powers felt that carving up the African continent to settle conflicting interests in Africa was the only option.

The desire to own African colonies was also a matter of European national *prestige*. The French, for example, had lost territory during a war with Germany and sought to compensate for that loss in Africa. The Portuguese, having had historic connections to Africa dating back to the 15$^{th}$ century, felt the British ignored their 'historic claim' on Africa. In response, they started claiming control over very extensive territories both on the west and east coast of the continent. Finally, Germany's chancellor, Bismarck was frustrated with British behaviour in Africa. The British policy at the time was to exclude other powers from any political influence over territories, even when the British did not occupy or had any legal claim themselves. Moreover, due to the intensifying competition between France and Britain after the events in Egypt, Germany was worried it could lose out in claiming territory in Africa. In response, Bismarck claimed territory in West Africa and at the same time organised the Berlin Conference. Finally, even the British, whose dominance in the world had started to decline during the 1880s, began to become deeply concerned about their national prestige and credibility as a great power.

In addition to national prestige, personal prestige was also involved. European's in Africa, as 'men on the spot', sought to extend control, for their own esteem, to further their own career, or for the prestige of the country they served. This often happened independently of the desires of the country they served. It was especially relevant for the Niger and Sudan region where troops were staffed at outposts that had survived from the slave trade era. Without clear missions and lacking regular communication with their home country in Europe, these troops grew increasingly anxious and restless. Combined with military supremacy, thus having the power to simply overtake neighbours, it was tempting to annex alien societies across the frontier. In various cases, they started to conquer land on their own. A well-known case is de Brazza's exploring activities in the Congo Basin, which he embarked upon on his own initiative. There were also 'men-on-the-spot' in the Gold Coast, Senegal, and South Africa who worked on their own initiatives because they felt that the governments at home were too slow or ignorant of what was happening on the ground. This uncontrolled occupation of territory, which

in some cases mounted to the occupation of significant areas, is often cited as one of the triggers for competitive European annexation.

The need to protect strategic European interests was another factor driving the partitioning of Africa. The global strategy view of imperialism argues that the partitioning of Africa originated from proto-nationalist movements within Africa that were threatening European interests elsewhere. In 1880, the British were not particularly interested in acquiring territory in Africa as they were preoccupied with protecting the empire they already had in India. Thus, in 1882, they engaged in military action to defend the Suez Canal, a key route towards India, from Egyptian nationalists. However, this explanation seems too circumstantial to the two cases of Egypt and South Africa, to be generally applicable to explain the grand partitioning of Africa.

The main criticism of this theory is that for European rivalries, prestige, and strategy to be convincing explanations for the partitioning, there must have been something (economically) valuable at stake. Why would European countries quarrel over land if there were nothing to be gained from it in economic terms? Hence, the underlying notion in Europe during the run-up to the partitioning was that there was at least some (potential) gain to be made.

*Economic theory*

The (potential) economic gain from acquiring colonies has indeed been very powerful in explaining the rapid expansion of European countries into Africa after 1880. According to this theory of imperialism, Europe needed Africa for new markets for selling their industrial products, for obtaining raw materials for production and for investing their surplus capital (an argument often associated with work of Hobson, and later Lenin).

During the 19$^{th}$ century Europe underwent rapid industrialisation. However, at the end of the century Western Europe in particular found itself in a long depression, leading to decreased consumption and overproduction. Instead of reducing production, industrialists looked for new markets. In the same vein, the factories needed raw materials for production. And finally, European capital owners were looking for a field for investment of surplus capital. For the first time, Africa was considered an important factor for the development of European economies.

At the time Europe found itself in the depression, the reports of explorers on the African continent that reached Europe never failed to emphasise the riches of the continent. By the 1880s, the general belief in Europe was that Africa was '[…] the world's last great untapped reservoir of markets, resources and possible investment opportunities [.]' (Sanderson 1985: 103). Yet, Europe's commercial interests in Africa were still mainly limited to certain areas in

the West coast. Actual trade between the continents represented only a fraction of the total trade for most European countries. So it was the potential, rather than the actual gain, that made Africa so attractive and motivated the partitioning.

Finally, the idea that there was a need to invest excess capital has lost its explanatory power during recent decades as it now clear that investments outside South Africa and Egypt were marginal.

The precise timing of the partitioning is not explained by theory. Why did the partitioning not occur a few years earlier or later? For Britain, which was really the only industrialised power until well into the 20th century, its informal empire in Africa would have been sufficient for some time. France and Germany, which both rapidly industrialised after the First World War, had not experienced significant problems in growth that needed to be solved by the establishment of an African empire. And Portugal, a country with great colonial ambitions, was virtually a pre-industrial power in the 1880s and yet took control over very extensive territories in West and East Africa that, for long, remained a heavy burden on the country's underdeveloped economy.

*Civilisation/Christianity*

In many regions, formal colonisation of Africa was preceded by and to a large extent coincided with the increase in missionary activities. It is sometimes suggested that the activities of the missionaries were responsible for starting the partitioning of Africa. But although missionaries were often the first Europeans to enter a country, the eventual coloniser was often from a different country than the missionaries. Only in a few cases is there is a clear connection between missionary activity and colonial occupation. In the case of the Buganda kingdom, the British government was initially very reluctant to annex the kingdom. The cost was considered too high. However, the missionaries demanded annexation because without formal occupation they feared expulsion from the area. The missionaries won the bid for the public opinion and the British government, although not keen, permitted the annexation of the Buganda Kingdom and its surrounding areas. Later this would become the Uganda Protectorate. In Nyasaland, again, the British government was averse to occupying the area because the only convenient access to the sea was through Portuguese Mozambique. But the British government was afraid of losing the Scottish vote if they allowed the Scottish missionary presence in the area be taken over by Portuguese Catholics. Thus, eventually the British occupied the area.

Generally, the direct missionary influence on partitioning was limited. It has been argued, however, that Christianity invoked a broader missionary and humanitarian impulse within European society that aimed to enlighten and civilise the African peoples. Moreover,

missionaries supported colonialism out of the conviction that European control would facilitate missionary activity in Africa. So while the missionaries probably did not actually cause the partitioning, their support for colonialism certainly played a vital role in legitimising colonial occupation among Europeans.

To summarise, it seems that some explanations are applicable to certain regions and periods while others seem more adequate for other cases. Together, the combination of all these motives seem be exhaustive in explaining the partitioning of Africa. There is no agreement in the literature as to which is the most important, although the combination of strategic/political and economic theories seem to prevail. Together, these factors constituted a series of triggers. If one of the triggers had not gone off, a combination of the others may well have sufficed to bring about the same result. How the eventual partitioning evolved was the result of the interplay between European objectives and actions, and African reactions and adaptation strategies.

## 6. Concluding remarks

As we have seen, medical innovations made the presence of Europeans in Africa possible, and European military superiority enabled the relatively rapid partitioning of Africa. But there is no one clear reason *why* Europe colonised Africa in the first place. A combination of motives ranging from economic gain and national prestige to African provocation all interacted in what became an unstoppable process. How this process subsequently evolved was in turn shaped by a combination of actions and reactions of both Africans and Europeans.

The conquest initially developed most rapidly in both North and South Africa, for historical reasons, but also because the environment was less hostile for Europeans. Within a few decades the entire continent was under colonial rule. Even though the number of Europeans that eventually went to Africa to settle was very low, the colonial period had major consequences. European powers carved up the continent, established nation-states and started to develop national economies. However, as there were so few Europeans actually there, it was the Africans that worked in construction, agriculture, and industry. Hence it was the Africans that built up the colonial states, and paid the taxes to maintain it.

All the countries became independent halfway through the 20th century and kept the same boundaries that were drawn during the partition. The creation of these countries had important long-term consequences. It determined not only the location, shape, and size of nations but also which societies, from then on, shared the same nationality. Hence the creation of countries during colonial times decided the geographical and ethnic basis of African countries today.

**Study Questions:**

1. Name three technological developments that enabled the European partitioning of Africa

2. In which African regions did the annexation of territory initially develop most rapidly, and why?

3. Name two strategies employed by African societies to confront European invaders. Can you give an example of societies that followed those strategies?

4. Give two explanations for why Europe colonised Africa. Which one seems the most convincing to you?

5. Name some of the long term consequences of the partition. Can you give an example of how it affects your life today?

**Suggested further reading**

Curtin, P.D., S. Feierman, L. Thompson and J. Vansina (1988) *African history*, New York: Longman, chapter 15 – 17, pp. 398 – 468.

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