

Meredith, Martin. The Fate of Africa: A History of the
Continent Since Independence. New York: Public Affairs, 2011.

INTRODUCTION

During the Scramble for Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, European powers staked claims to virtually the entire continent. At meetings in Berlin, Paris, London and other capitals, European statesmen and diplomats bargained over the separate spheres of interest they intended to establish there. Their knowledge of the vast African hinterland was slight. Hitherto Europeans had known Africa more as a coastline than a continent; their presence had been confined mainly to small, isolated enclaves on the coast used for trading purposes; only in Algeria and in southern Africa had more substantial European settlement taken root.

The maps used to carve up the African continent were mostly inaccurate; large areas were described as *terra incognita*. When marking out the boundaries of their new territories, European negotiators frequently resorted to drawing straight lines on the map, taking little or no account of the myriad of traditional monarchies, chiefdoms and other African societies that existed on the ground. Nearly one half of the new frontiers imposed on Africa were geometric lines, lines of latitude and longitude, other straight lines or arcs of circles. In some cases, African societies were rent apart: the Bakongo were partitioned between French Congo, Belgian Congo and Portuguese Angola; Somaliland was carved up between Britain, Italy and France. In all, the new boundaries cut through some 190 culture groups. In other cases, Europe's new colonial territories enclosed hundreds of diverse and independent groups, with no common history, culture, language or

religion. Nigeria, for example, contained as many as 250 ethnolinguistic groups. Officials sent to the Belgian Congo eventually identified six thousand chiefdoms there. Some kingdoms survived intact: the French retained the monarchy in Morocco and in Tunisia; the British ruled Egypt in the name of a dynasty of foreign monarchs founded in 1811 by an Albanian mercenary serving in the Turkish army. Other kingdoms, such as Asante in the Gold Coast (Ghana) and Loziland in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) were merged into larger colonial units. Kingdoms that had been historically antagonistic to one another, such as Buganda and Bunyoro in Uganda, were linked into the same colony. In the Sahel, new territories were established across the great divide between the desert regions of the Sahara and the belt of tropical forests to the south – Sudan, Chad and Nigeria – throwing together Muslim and non-Muslim peoples in latent hostility.

As the haggling in Europe over African territory continued, land and peoples became little more than pieces on a chessboard. 'We have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew exactly where they were,' Britain's prime minister, Lord Salisbury, remarked sardonically to a London audience. Britain traded the North Sea island of Heligoland with the Germans for Zanzibar, and parts of northern Nigeria with the French for fishing rights off Newfoundland. France exchanged parts of Cameroon with Germany in return for German recognition of the French protectorate over Morocco. By the time the Scramble for Africa was over, some 10,000 African polities had been amalgamated into forty European colonies and protectorates.

Thus were born the modern states of Africa.

On the ground, European rule was enforced both by treaty and by conquest. From their enclaves on the coast, officials moved ever deeper into the interior to proclaim the changes agreed in the chancelleries and country mansions of Europe. The task was a prolonged one: French claims extended over about 3.75 million square miles; those of Britain over about 2 million square miles. Many treaties were duly signed. The Basuto king, Moshoeshe, fearful of the encroachment of white settlers into his mountain terrain in southern Africa, appealed for the protection of Queen Victoria, imploring that his

people might be considered 'fleas in the Queen's blanket'. Several of his neighbours – the Tswana chiefdoms of Bechuanaland (Botswana) and the Swazi – followed suit.

But episodes of resistance occurred in parts of nearly every African colony. Some were settled by short, sharp actions. The powerful Muslim emirs of the Sokoto Caliphate, ruling from crenellated palaces of red clay on the edge of the Sahara desert, soon came to terms with a small British expeditionary force sent to incorporate them into northern Nigeria. But other episodes were more prolonged. After occupying the Asante capital, Kumasi, the British were besieged there for four months until reinforcements suppressed resistance. Elsewhere in West Africa, Samori Ture, the founder of a Mandingo empire, waged an eight-year campaign of remarkable tenacity and military skill against the French. In Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) the Ndebele and Shona fought ferociously against white settlers who had seized large areas of land. In Kenya, the Nandi bore the brunt of six punitive expeditions by British forces. In German East Africa (Tanganyika) and South West Africa (Namibia), German administrations inflicted fearful repression to stamp out rebellions, annihilating more than three quarters of the Herero people and half of the Nama people between 1904 and 1908. In Angola Chief Mandume of the Ovambo mustered an army of forty thousand to defy the Portuguese.

Scores of African rulers who resisted colonial rule died in battle or were executed or sent into exile after defeat. Samori of the Mandingo was captured and died in exile two years later; the Asantehene, King Agyeman Prempeh, was deposed and exiled for nearly thirty years; Lobengula of the Ndebele died in flight; Behazin of Dahomey and Cetshwayo of the Zulu were banished from their homelands.

In the concluding act of the partition of Africa, Britain, at the height of its imperial power, set out to take over two independent Boer republics, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, and incorporate them into the British Empire, assuming that a war of conquest would take at most a matter of months. It turned into a gruelling campaign lasting three years, required nearly half a million imperial troops to finish it, and left a legacy of bitterness and hatred among Afrikaners that endured for generations. Faced with guerrilla warfare for which

they were unprepared, British military commanders resorted to scorched-earth tactics, destroying thousands of farmsteads, razing villages to the ground and slaughtering livestock on a massive scale, reducing the Boers to an impoverished people. Women and children were rounded up and placed in what the British called concentration camps, where conditions were so appalling that some 26,000 died there from disease and malnutrition, most of them under the age of sixteen. All this became part of a Boer heritage passed in anger from one generation to the next, spawning a virulent Afrikaner nationalism that eventually took hold of South Africa.

Small-scale revolts against colonial rule continued for many years. The Baoulé of Côte d'Ivoire fought the French village by village until 1911; the Igbo of Nigeria were not fully defeated until 1919; the Jola of Senegal not until the 1920s; the Dinka of southern Sudan not until 1927. In the desert wastelands of Somaliland a fiery Muslim sheikh, Muhammad 'Abdille Hassan, dubbed by his adversaries the 'Mad Mullah', led Dervish warriors in a holy war against the British for twenty years until his death in 1920. Bedouin resistance against Italian rule in Libya ended only in 1931 after nine years of guerrilla warfare. By the 1930s, however, the colonial states of Africa were firmly entrenched; they had, moreover, acquired a legitimacy in the eyes of their inhabitants.

A reshuffle of territory occurred as a result of the First World War. German colonies were shared out among Britain, France, Belgium and the Union of South Africa, a British dominion founded in 1910. Tanganyika was handed over to Britain; South West Africa to South Africa; the tiny territories of Rwanda-Burundi were passed to Belgium; and Togoland and Cameroon were divided up between Britain and France. As a reward for Italian support in the First World War, Britain gave Jubaland to Italy to form part of Italian Somaliland, moving the border of Kenya westwards. But otherwise the boundaries of Africa remained fixed.

Only one African state managed to stave off the onslaught of European occupation during the Scramble: Ethiopia, an ancient Christian kingdom, once ruled by the legendary Prester John. In 1896, when the Italians, with 10,000 European troops, invaded

Ethiopia from their coastal enclave at Massawa on the Red Sea, they were routed by the emperor, Menelik. The Italians were thus forced to confine themselves to occupying Eritrea. Forty years later, however, the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, took revenge. Determined to construct an East-African empire, he ordered the conquest of Ethiopia, using half a million troops, aerial bombardment and poison gas to accomplish it. After a seven-month long campaign, Italian forces captured the capital, Addis Ababa; the emperor, Haile Selassie, fled into exile in England; and Ethiopia was turned into an Italian province to add to Italian possessions in Eritrea and Somaliland.

Having expended so much effort on acquiring African empires, Europe's colonial powers then lost much of their earlier interest in them. Few parts of Africa offered the prospect of immediate wealth. Colonial governments were concerned above all to make their territories financially self-supporting. Administration was thus kept to a minimum; education was placed in the hands of Christian missionaries; economic activity was left to commercial companies. The main functions of government were limited to maintaining law and order, raising taxation and providing an infrastructure of roads and railways. There seemed to be no need for more rapid development. Colonial rule was expected to last for hundreds of years.

In much of Africa, therefore, the colonial imprint was barely noticeable. Only a thin white line of control existed. In northern Nigeria, Frederick Lugard set out to rule 10 million people with a staff of nine European administrators and a regiment of the West African Frontier Force consisting of 3,000 African troops under the command of European officers. By the late 1930s, following the amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria into one territory in 1914, the number of colonial administrators for a population of 20 million people was still less than 400. The Sudan Political Service consisted of 140 officials ruling over 9 million people. The whole of French Equatorial Africa in the mid-1930s was run by 206 administrative officers. French West Africa, comprising eight territories with a population of 15 million, was served by only 385 colonial administrators. The whole of British tropical Africa, where 43 million people lived, was governed by 1,200 administrators. Belgium ran the Congo

in 1936 with 728 administrators. Scattered across vast stretches of Africa, lone district administrators became virtually absolute rulers of their domain, functioning simultaneously as police chief, judge, tax collector, head of labour recruitment, special agent and meteorological-observer. In French Africa they were known as *rois de la brousse* — kings of the bush. A veteran native commissioner in Southern Rhodesia remembered being told that his duties as a district officer were to: 'Get to know your district, and your people. Keep an eye on them, collect tax if possible, but for God's sake, don't worry headquarters.'

With so few men on the ground, colonial governments relied heavily on African chiefs and other functionaries to collaborate with officials and exercise control on their behalf. The British, in particular, favoured a system of 'indirect rule', using African authorities to keep order, collect taxes and supply labour, that involved a minimum of staff and expense. The model for indirect rule was devised by Lugard in northern Nigeria where Fulani emirs had governed in accordance with Islamic traditions of law and discipline stretching back for centuries. Lugard posted British Residents at their courts but allowed the emirs to continue to police, tax and administer justice on their behalf much as before. Similar methods of indirect rule were adopted in Buganda, in Loziland and in other parts of Britain's African empire.

In many cases, however, African chiefs came to constitute no more than a new class of intermediaries paid to transmit government orders. As agents of colonial rule, the role they played was far removed from their traditional position at the apex of authority, balancing many diverse interests. Some chiefs were members of old royal families carefully selected for their willingness to collaborate; others had no traditional legitimacy at all. The *chefs de canton* appointed by the French were effectively administrative officers chosen from the ranks of the more efficient clerks and interpreters in government service. In some cases where chiefs did not exist, as among the acephalous village societies of the Igbo of southern Nigeria, chiefdoms were invented. In other cases, 'traditional' chiefs were left bereft of all functions.

Year by year the new colonies gradually took shape. Railway lines

snaking into the interior from the coast reached Lake Victoria in 1901, Katanga in 1910, Kano in northern Nigeria in 1912 and Lake Tanganyika in 1914. New patterns of economic activity were established. African colonies became significant exporters of minerals and agricultural commodities such as groundnuts, palm oil, cotton, coffee, cocoa and sisal. By 1911 the Gold Coast (Ghana) had become the world's leading exporter of cocoa. In the highlands of eastern and southern Africa and along the Mediterranean coast of Algeria and Tunisia, European settlers acquired huge landholdings, establishing the basis of large-scale commercial agriculture. In Kenya the fertile White Highlands were designated for their exclusive use. In 1931 half of the entire land area of Southern Rhodesia was stipulated for the use of white farmers who at the time numbered no more than 2,500. In South Africa some 87 per cent of the total area was declared white land.

Through the efforts of Christian missionaries, literacy and primary education were slowly introduced throughout Africa south of the Sahara. By 1910 about 16,000 European missionaries were stationed there. With government support, a handful of secondary schools were established, becoming the nurseries of new African elites: Achimota College in the Gold Coast; the Ecole Normale William Ponty in Senegal; Makerere in Uganda; Kaduna in Nigeria; Lovedale and Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. North Africa's first Western-style university opened in Cairo in 1909.

The small educated elites that colonial rule produced in the 1920s and 1930s were preoccupied primarily with their own status, seeking to gain for themselves a role in administration in preference to the chiefs whom they regarded as rivals for power. They paid little attention to the welfare of the rural masses. Few espoused nationalist ambitions.

In 1936 Ferhat Abbas, a political activist and writer, who had studied pharmacology at Algiers University, summed up his view on Algerian nationalism in a weekly publication he had founded:

If I had discovered an Algerian nation, I would be a nationalist and I would not blush for it as though it were a crime. Men who die for

a patriotic ideal are daily honoured and regarded. My life is worth no more than theirs. Yet I will not die for the Algerian homeland, because such a homeland does not exist. I have not found it. I have questioned history, I have asked the living and the dead, I have visited the cemeteries; no one has told me of it . . . One does not build on the wind.

A prominent Northern Nigerian, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who was destined to become the first federal prime minister, remarked in 1948: 'Since 1914 the British Government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country, but the Nigerian people themselves are historically different in their backgrounds, in their religious beliefs and customs and do not show themselves any signs of willingness to unite . . . Nigerian unity is only a British invention.' In a book published in 1947, the Yoruba leader, Obafemi Awolowo, who dominated Western Nigerian politics for more than thirty years, wrote: 'Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no "Nigerians" in the same sense as there are "English", "Welsh", or "French". The word "Nigerian" is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria and those who do not.'

The Second World War, however, brought profound change to Africa. Showing a purpose and vigour never seen on the continent before, colonial governments built airports, expanded harbours, constructed roads and supply depots and demanded ever greater production of copper, tin, groundnuts – any commodity, in fact, useful in the war effort. Bases such as Freetown, Takoradi, Mombasa and Accra became a vital part of the Allied network. Thousands of African troops were recruited for war service. From British territories, some 374,000 Africans served in the British army. African units helped to defeat the Italians in Ethiopia and to restore Emperor Haile Selassie to his throne. African regiments were sent to India and fought with distinction in Burma. In India and Burma, African soldiers learned how nationalist movements there had forced promises of self-government from the British government even though their populations were mainly poor and illiterate.

From French Africa some 80,000 African troops were shipped to France to fight the Germans. But for France the war brought the spectacle of a nation not only defeated but divided into opposing camps – Free French and pro-Vichy – which fought each other for the loyalty of the empire. Much of French Africa sided with the Vichy regime. But French Equatorial Africa, responding to General de Gaulle's appeal for help in exile, rallied to the cause of the Free French. For two and a half years, Brazzaville, a small town on the north bank of the Congo river, became the temporary capital of what purported to be the government of France.

The war also threw up decisive shifts in power, away from Europe and its colonial powers. As European influence declined, the emerging superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, competed for ascendancy. For different reasons, both were anti-colonial powers. When Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt drew up the Atlantic Charter in 1941, supporting the right of all peoples to choose their own government, Churchill had in mind self-determination only for the conquered nations of Europe, not for British territories. But Roosevelt was adamant that postwar objectives should include self-determination for all colonial peoples. Roosevelt's views about British rule hardened considerably during the war, when, on his way to the 1943 Casablanca conference, he stopped briefly in Gambia. Appalled by the poverty and disease he witnessed there, he wrote to Churchill describing the territory as a 'hell-hole'. About the French he was even more scathing. To the indignation of the French, when Roosevelt subsequently reached Casablanca, he made the point of telling Sultan Mohammed V that the Atlantic Charter applied to Morocco as well as to all other colonies, giving impetus to the idea of Moroccan nationalism.

The aftermath of the war brought frustration and restlessness, in Africa as much as in other parts of the world. African elites took the Atlantic Charter to constitute some form of official encouragement to demand political rights, yet faced obstruction. Ex-servicemen returning home with new ideas and skills, wider experiences and high expectations about the future, many believing they had earned the right to demand some share in the government of their own

countries, found few openings. In the towns there was a groundswell of discontent over unemployment, high prices, poor housing, low wages and consumer shortages. In the wartime boom the towns had swollen. Around cities such as Lagos, Accra, Dakar, Nairobi and Léopoldville (Kinshasa), shanty-towns, slums and *bidonvilles* proliferated as a constant flow of migrants arrived from rural areas in search of work. Labour unrest was common. In many African towns there was an air of tension. Tribal disciplines were weakening; old religions were losing ground. The spread of primary school education, particularly in West Africa, created new expectations. A new generation was emerging, ambitious and disgruntled. In Accra and Lagos 'youth' movements and African newspapers blamed every social ill on the authorities, denounced the whole colonial system and demanded self-government. The colonial authorities dismissed these critics as a handful of urban 'agitators' without popular support, confident that local chiefs and hence the bulk of the population remained loyal. Yet a tide of events had begun to flow that would eventually sweep away the African empires that Europe so proudly possessed.

In 1945 there were four independent states in Africa: Egypt, nominally independent, headed by a corrupt monarch, but subject to British political interference and obliged by treaty to accept the presence of British military forces; Ethiopia, a feudal empire newly restored to Haile Selassie after five years of Italian occupation; Liberia, a decaying republic founded on the west coast in 1847 for freed American slaves, the only African state left untouched by European colonial rule, but in reality little more than a fiefdom of the American Firestone Company, which owned its rubber plantations; and the Union of South Africa, the richest state in Africa, holder of the world's largest deposits of gold, given independence in 1910 under white minority rule. The rest were the preserve of European powers, all confident about the importance of their imperial mission.

Britain was the only colonial power even to contemplate the possibility of self-government for its African territories, having established precedents in Asia. It nevertheless expected to hold sway there at least until the end of the twentieth century. In the postwar era, partly for

reasons of self-interest, but also because a more enlightened mood about the conduct of colonial affairs prevailed, it embarked on major programmes of development, of agriculture, transport, education and health services. Universities were opened in the Gold Coast, Nigeria, Uganda and Sudan. But with plans for political advancement, the British government was far more cautious. A long apprenticeship was envisaged. There would be no short cuts. Africans needed to be introduced to the business of government with careful preparation, step by step. To give the colonies their independence, said one senior Labour politician, Herbert Morrison, would be 'like giving a child a latch-key, a bank account and a shot-gun'.

Each of Britain's fourteen African territories was governed separately. Each had its own budget, its own laws and public services. Each was under the control of a governor powerful enough in his own domain to ensure that his views there prevailed. Britain's West African territories were the most advanced. In the Gold Coast, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, the black professional elite — lawyers, doctors, teachers and merchants — had been given some role to play in ruling institutions since the end of the nineteenth century. During the Second World War, Africans had been admitted to executive councils advising governors and, in the case of the Gold Coast, a few had been elevated to the senior ranks of the administration. After the war, new constitutions were introduced for the Gold Coast and Nigeria, providing for elections for a handful of members of legislative councils. These constitutions were expected to satisfy political aspirations for the next decade.

In Britain's colonies in east and central Africa, political activity revolved around the demands of white settlers for more political power. In Southern Rhodesia the white population, numbering no more than 33,000, had won internal self-government as far back as 1923. In Kenya they had vigorously pursued the same aim. But Britain, having set the Rhodesian precedent, then stuck to the notion that African interests should be properly protected. In practice this did not always amount to much. Because of their much later contact with Europe, the African populations of east and central Africa were considered to be several generations behind West Africa. The British

government took the view that future prosperity there depended largely on encouraging white communities. White immigration soared in the postwar era; in Southern Rhodesia and Kenya the white population doubled. In the White Highlands of Kenya more farming land was made available to former British soldiers, even though African land grievances were mounting. Bolstered by rising numbers and foreign investment, white politicians in Salisbury (Harare) and Nairobi confidently set their sights on establishing new white-led British Dominions in the heart of Africa.

The French, too, embarked on major development programmes in the postwar era and introduced political reform, giving African populations greater representation. Unlike the British, the French regarded their colonies not as separate territories but as part of *la plus grande France*. Political advancement thus meant according Africans a higher number of representatives in the French parliament. Since the nineteenth century, African residents in four coastal towns in Senegal had exercised the right to participate in the election of a representative to the French parliament. The first African deputy elected from Senegal arrived in Paris in 1914 and rapidly rose to the rank of junior minister. In 1945 the number of deputies from French Africa elected to represent African interests was raised to twenty-four. Local assemblies were also established for each territory, and federal assemblies for the two federal regions of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa. Nevertheless, however much French Africa benefited from political and economic development, the central objective of the 'Union Française', as the postwar Empire was called, was to bind the colonies tightly to metropolitan France. The links were said to be *indissoluble*.

Of the two other colonial powers, neither Belgium nor Portugal permitted any kind of political activity in their African territories. Belgium regarded the Congo essentially as a valuable piece of real estate that just required good management. The Congo's affairs were directed from Brussels by a small group of Belgians who simply passed down edicts to officials on the ground; neither Belgians living in the Congo nor the Congolese had a vote. Portugal, the poorest country in Europe, remained in the grip of Salazar's dictatorship which dealt

ruthlessly with critics and dissidents of any kind. Anyone suspected of agitation in Africa was either jailed or sent to a penal colony or into exile.

The advent of the Cold War introduced a new factor to the African equation. In 1948, after the communist seizure of power in Prague, Western governments became convinced that communists were embarked upon a campaign of world mastery in which African colonies were prime targets. When, a few days later, riots erupted in the Gold Coast, hitherto regarded as Britain's 'model' colony, the governor, Sir Gerald Creasy, who had only recently arrived from London, was quick to detect what he believed was a communist conspiracy. In radio broadcasts, he referred to the danger of a communist takeover and of new forms of terrorism.

A commission of enquiry into the riots found little evidence of communist subversion, but pointed instead to profound political and economic grievances and recommended swift political advancement as the solution. The British government concurred. A new governor, Sir Charles Arden-Clarke, was despatched to the Gold Coast in 1949, with the warning that 'the country is on the edge of revolution' and with instructions to implement a new constitution giving Africans not only increased legislative responsibilities but executive power, in order to avert it.

The new system of government was regarded as being in the nature of 'an experiment', one that could be carefully controlled and monitored, and delayed and halted if something went wrong. The reality, however, was different. One senior British official involved in the Gold Coast experiment later described the process as 'like laying down a track in front of an oncoming express'.

This book follows the fortunes of Africa in modern times, opening in the years that it sped towards independence and encompassing the half-century that has since passed. It focuses in particular on the role of a number of African leaders whose characters and careers had a decisive impact on the fate of their countries. It examines, too, the reasons why, after the euphoria of the independence era, so many hopes and ambitions faded and why the future of Africa came to be

spoken of only in pessimistic terms. Although Africa is a continent of great diversity, African states have much in common, not only their origins as colonial territories, but the similar hazards and difficulties they have faced. Indeed, what is so striking about the fifty-year period since independence is the extent to which African states have suffered so many of the same misfortunes.

PART I