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## Africa: Imperialism and the Present

As African nations won their independence in the 1960's there was much optimism that, freed from their colonial yoke, they would blossom into modern, economically dynamic nation-states. That has not largely occurred, and, today, much of Africa can be characterized as a region of failed states, disease, ethnic conflict, and environmental devastation. Yet the continent houses some of the oldest and richest civilizations, possesses vast resource wealth, and its young population has great potential. The central theme of this reading is to document the role that imperialism played in contributing to the problems of present-day Africa.

### Discussion Questions

1. What has been the legacy of “indirect rule,” “hasty decolonization,” and “decentralized despotism” for today’s African states?
2. What specific examples of European imperialism are presented in the reading and which African countries are highlighted? Are these countries still seeing the long-term effects of the policies put in place by the Europeans during the imperialist period?
3. What is meant by “the iron grid of colonialism,” and what does it mean for today’s Africa?
4. How is Africa’s imperial experience similar and different from that of other regions of the world mentioned in the reading?

5. How would you answer the question raised in the reading by Kenyan scholar, Makau wa Mutua, who asks how Europeans would have reacted “if an African imperial army had marched into Europe in the Middle Ages and required Germany, France and England to live together by force of arms?”
6. How helpful is it to “play the blame game” when it comes to examining the impact of imperialism on the present situation in Africa? If you were sitting in judgment of the New Imperialism, would you find it guilty of wrongdoing to Africa (and the rest of the world for that matter)?

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## The African Question: Who Is to Blame?

By the late 1960's, scarcely a decade after Africa's great independence wave had begun, many of the continent's new political creations had already begun to resemble disasters. With no ready answers to their problems, many African leaders struck upon a new strategy for explaining their failings to impatient populations while simultaneously drawing more outside aid: blaming the European colonizers for Africa's seemingly intractable difficulties.

But if this approach was at least temporarily successful in many cases, the increasing stridency of the claims made against the West, set against the backdrop of the growing despotism of the new leaders, quickly backfired, as both foreign sympathy and assistance dwindled.

For the next two decades or so, conventional wisdom largely rejected African assertions of outside responsibility for the continent's problems, and many in the West argued, often with a growing vehemence of their own, that Africa's bad leaders were primarily to blame rather than any European legacy.

In the closing years of this century, though, historians, political scientists and other students of African affairs have begun a searching re-examination of the continent's recent past. Increasingly they have concluded that many of its most persistent curses — from the plague of ethnic hatred widely known as tribalism to endemic official corruption — have powerful roots that are at least partly traceable to European subjugation and rule.

Among the writings that helped forge this reconsideration are works like “Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism,” by the Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani. Mr. Mamdani's 1996 book draws extensively on colonial records to show how Europeans administered their new subjects through a deliberately authoritarian form of indirect rule — for which the author coined the term “decentralized despotism” — that greatly reinforced or even created notions of ethnicity, helping set the stage for the tribal conflict that wracks the continent today.

Another work, Basil Davidson's "Black Man's Burden Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State," depicts the European process of decolonization in Africa as one of hasty, even offhand decision-making filled with a disdain for Africans and their history and an unquestioning arrogance that assumed that the political structures of the West were appropriate for Africans even when they had been given no preparation for making them work.

In these and other scholarly works, African specialists have made the point that the example left by European rule was one of politics by sheer domination and not democracy. Then, as is so often the case now, African states were run with little thought to the benefit of their subjects.

Perhaps no country in Africa today displays the consequences of Europe's African past as harshly as Congo, where the three-decade-old Mobutu dictatorship was violently overthrown in 1997, only to be followed by a bumbling new authoritarian figure, Laurent Kabila, and more recently by a succession of new rebellions that are tearing his vast country apart.

Shortly before suddenly granting independence in 1960, amid a wave of simultaneous African independence ceremonies, Belgian colonial planners still spoke dreamily of holding onto their possession—a country 77 times as large as their own—for decades more.

At independence, Congo entered the modern era, nominally at least, with only a few score high school graduates and less than 500 miles of paved road. The country's first university had been created by the Belgians only six years before.

"The colonial history of the Congo has inclined that country in a more tragic direction than even most other African countries," said Zine Magubane, a South African professor of sociology and African studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana. "The Belgians had no

interest in establishing any sort of permanency or any true state. The country was instead run by a series of companies that had a free hand at pillaging the land."

Other African scholars place an emphasis even further back, on the last decades of the 19th century, when Europe's imperial powers divided up the continent and defined the borders that remain today.

"What you had before the imposition of this great iron grid of colonialism was an extraordinarily variegated network of cultures," said Rene Lamarchand, a professor emeritus of the University of Florida at Gainesville and a lifelong student of Africa. "That certainly included some rather extensive and elaborate kingdoms—take the case of Ashanti, of Buganda, of Kongo or of the Zulu.

"When the iron grid was removed," he continued, "what resurfaced were residues of traditional systems, and in many cases precolonial antagonisms resurfaced."

What is worse, many Africanists say, colonial subjugation brutally ended Africa's sovereign evolution toward modern nation-states, a gradual process of conquest and agglomeration that has occurred throughout history around the world.

In the Americas, native populations were exterminated by arriving Europeans or saw their cultures marginalized by the makers of new states. In India and many other parts of Asia, conquering Europeans imposed their new colonial order on states that had already begun to coalesce to one degree or another around an idea of national identity.

In Africa, meanwhile, Europeans carved out new frontiers as a function of the existing power balance among themselves, giving an occasional nod to natural features of the continent, like broad rivers, but almost never paying heed to the chosen identities of Africans themselves or to the political systems already in place.

"The example I like to think of is if an African imperial army had marched into Europe in the

Middle Ages and required Germany, France and England to live together by force of arms,” said Makau wa Mutua, a Kenyan scholar who teaches law at the State University at Buffalo. “It would have unleashed untold mayhem, and not to excuse the villainies of Africa’s subsequent leaders, that is precisely what happened when Europe did this to Africa in the span of 30 years by destroying Africa’s existing political structures, some of them powerful and far-ranging kingdoms, and imposing its own borders, religions and administration.”

In cataloguing and later registering their African subjects, Europeans everywhere reinforced and sometimes completely invented ethnic distinctions that Africans themselves had hitherto managed with far greater suppleness.

The most famous case of this now is that of the Hutu and Tutsi who predominate in Rwanda and Burundi and are a small minority in Congo. For centuries the two groups had coexisted peaceably, marrying, sharing a language and a king. When Belgium imposed its administration, however, it glorified the minority Tutsi peoples for their supposedly more European features, creating a de facto ethnic underclass of the majority Hutu and sowing the seeds of the cycles of mass killings that have afflicted the two groups since.

Similarly, almost every time the Europeans created a state, ethnic groups or previously existing African polities were split by the new borders, undermining the new states’ claims to legitimacy in the eyes of their inhabitants.

The emerging African nations’ first brush with legitimacy came with the independence movements that swept the continent in the 1950’s. But in the case of Congo, as with many other countries, the nationalism of the leader who best channeled pro-independence sentiment, Patrice Lumumba, was quickly seen as a threat by Belgium and by a cold-war-driven United States.

Both countries worked to undermine and ultimately overthrow Lumumba, who was subsequently assassinated under murky circumstances. The man they helped replace him with was Mobutu Sese Seko, the dictator who ruled ruinously over Africa’s third largest country with strong Western backing for 32 years. For most of that period Mobutu loomed over his country and over the continent’s affairs. The West had decided that Zaire, as he renamed his country, with its borders with nine other African countries, was of strategic importance. And acting on behalf of his foreign sponsors, Mobutu Intervened freely in his neighbors’ affairs.

With the end of the cold war, however, Western interest in propping up Mobutu, indeed Western interest in Africa generally, evaporated. It was then, through the collapse of Mobutu and the crumbling of a dozen or more countries that the myth of the modern African state began to crumble.

For Mobutu the end came quickly at the hands of Mr. Kabila, long an obscure and inconsequential rebel leader who this time had the critical backing of Rwanda and Uganda, two neighbors that decided to pursue their own security interests in Congo aggressively.

Shorn of foreign assistance, the Mobutu Government, a creation of the West, could not pay its civil servants, equip its army or even move its ill-disciplined troops from one part of the Country to another when war came.

Now Congo, which owed its definition and preservation to the outside world, is being dismembered by its neighbors while the West averts its suddenly disinterested gaze.

The first to feast on Central Africa’s largest piece of real estate have been Uganda and Rwanda, two of Africa’s Western favorites now.

Following the lead of these two nations, which have already carved out large spheres of interest for themselves in the country’s eastern

regions, other neighbors, some less favored by the West, are aggressively asserting their interests too.

Zimbabwe and Angola, Congo's southern neighbors, have rushed to Mr. Kabila's defense, invoking the principle of territorial integrity as they position themselves to profit from the country's immense mineral wealth.

"States which are more stable and can project more economic or military power are going

to interfere more readily in the affairs of their neighbors," Mr. Mutua said.

A century after Europe created the edifice of African nation-states many observers of the continent's affairs say they foresee a potentially perilous period in which the structure progressively crumbles, with no one quite sure what to expect next.

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## Imperialism: Africa

The debate on the impact of European imperialism on Africa continues today. This reading sheds light on the experiences of the Bamoun people in present-day Cameroon, who created a 600 year-old culture and kingdom prior to German, then French control.

### Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the kingdom of Bamoun and its king, Njoya, before the arrival of the Europeans?
2. What do some of the speakers in the article identify as the “major colonial damage” done as a result of European imperialism? Were there any positive interactions between the Africans and the Europeans?
3. African intellectuals ask, “what if” the kingdom’s indigenous culture had not been destroyed by the Europeans. What is your opinion?
4. How does the example of the Bamoun people help to expand our understanding of African history before, during, and after the European imperialism of the late 19th century?
5. Along with the reading, “The African Question: Who Is to Blame,” what lessons does this example of imperialism suggest for Africans today?

## Inheritors of an African Kingdom, Come and Gone

Surrounded by praise-singers who strive to outdo one another in chanting his virtues, court attendants who wave fans to preserve him from the heat and musicians who blow shrill six-foot-long trumpets toward an incandescent sky, Sultan Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya takes half an hour to walk the stone's throw from the central mosque to his imposing palace.

The spectacle is repeated every Friday at the end of the midday Muslim prayers in this town, tucked in equatorial mountain country where pine trees outnumber palms. But people of the Bamoun ethnic group still enthusiastically crowd the path for the entire 200-yard route, bowing or ululating as their sovereign slowly passes, a serene smile his only acknowledgment of their salute.

Aside from the introduction of Islam early in this century, the rituals of the Bamoun people would seem little changed in the 600 years of recorded history of their royalty. But for many visitors here, what is most impressive about this culture is not the colorful ceremonies repeated week after week, or even the longevity of the royal line, but the intellectual and historical treasures proudly guarded inside the palace.

There, under the impassive gaze of the current sultan's grandfather, the first King Ibrahim Njoya, who is immortalized in a huge black-and-white photograph, are housed the achievements of a small but impressive civilization. These clash sharply with common stereotypes of a continent's dark and savage history.

By almost any standard, the original Ibrahim Njoya was a Renaissance man who, Jeffersonlike, drew up plans and oversaw construction of a three-story mud-brick palace

of vaulted ceilings and elaborately engraved wooden shutters.

Historians say the building was first envisioned in 1904 after King Njoya visited the German governor's mansion in the coastal city of Buea and insisted that his culture could produce better.

The cavernous interior, which now serves as a museum, houses King Njoya's meticulously kept administrative records and legal codes. A poetic treatise on esthetics providing nearly 200 criteria for appraising the beauty of women, an elaborate volume on pharmacopoeia and a detailed history of the Bamoun Kingdom were all written by the ruler.

By itself, the creation of such works in turn-of-the-century equatorial Africa would be remarkable. But the brightest jewel in the collection is not a document at all. It is an alphabet and writing system unique to the Bamoun, who number 570,000.

The first Njoya was born into the Bamoun royal line in 1875. Twenty years later, when the country that would become known as Cameroon had just been named a German protectorate, Njoya, responding to a dream, began work on one of the rare sub-Saharan writing systems that do not borrow from Arabic or Roman characters. Known as Shumom, it evolved during his 32-year rule from a sprawling system of ideographs to a concise syllabic alphabet.

As the use of written documents spread, mostly in the court and administration, Njoya built a printing press, and soon a royal library of works in Shumom began to grow.

"He was one of the first sub-Saharan Africans to build a museum," said Dayirou Ngouchemo, a palace guide. "He created a writing system when he was 25 years old. This man was a genius to

whom Cameroon and Africa owe a great deal.”

Njoya’s creations did not escape intact from the colonial collision of European and African cultures.

When France took over most of what is now Cameroon from a defeated Germany after World War I, the French sought to impose their language and administration throughout the territory. They were suspicious of the astute sultan, who they feared might form an alliance with the part of the country controlled by the British.

It was, inevitably, an uneven match. And although the French takeover of the Bamoun Kingdom was relatively peaceful, indigenous schools were destroyed, the printing press was smashed and, in 1931, King Njoya was exiled to the city of Yaounde, where he died, humiliated, two years later.

“We had our own culture, our own script, our own army and our own institutions,” said Adamou Ndam Njoya, a Cameroonian opposition politician and lawyer descended from the exiled King. “The Germans didn’t have enough time to destroy our civilization, but when the French arrived, they abolished everything.”

In less than 100 years, from the time of widespread European penetration to formal colonialism early in the century, similar bouts of destruction doomed impressive civilizations throughout Africa.

The names of some of the larger nation-states, places like Ashanti, Benin, Kongo and Dahomey, still carry an echo of grandeur for some. But outside a small circle of experts, few are aware of the extent of their accomplishments—from postal systems and tax imposition to uniformed police forces, diplomats and courts of law—or of the violent end they met at the hands of Europeans with a supposedly civilizing mission.

For many African intellectuals today, there is a bitter twinge of conjecture that lingers, an eternally unanswerable “what if;” that looks at a continent scarred by misery and war, and asks whether much of Africa would not be better off if its home-grown institutions had not been destroyed by outsiders.

As Maurice Tadadjeu, a Cameroonian linguist, put it: “The major colonial damage is that, after the destruction of what we were building, Africans were brainwashed to the point where they looked down on their past as nothing more than backwardness. Why should we even bother with something like Shumom? It is to remind ourselves that we have many things to be proud of.”

“Believe it or not,” he added, “until 1972 we had a national anthem that said, ‘In the time of our ancestors, we lived in barbarism.’”

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## Revolution in Modern Latin America

Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba in 1959 signaled the beginning of a new stage in Latin America's struggle for independence from the developed Western nations—especially economically. Stimulated by Marxist ideas during the Cold War, Castro attempted to participate in what he thought was a global fight for freedom by the less-developed countries from economic exploitation by the “rich countries.”

### Discussion Questions

1. What does Castro see as the motivating force for the invasion by European countries into the Americas?
2. What have been the results of Western imperialism in Latin America and the rest of the world?
3. What does Castro think are the foundations of revolution in the Americas?
4. Why does Castro think that the revolution by the poor and exploited will be successful?

## Fidel Castro: Second Declaration of Havana, 1962

**T**he Cuban Revolution of 1959 was a broadly based nationalist revolution against a corrupt government. It was a revolution facilitated by the long Cuban revolutionary tradition. [There had been major disturbances in the Ten Years' War (1868-1878), a failed attempt to break with Spain; during the war of independence that began in 1895 but which resulted only dependence on the U.S.; and the revolution of 1933, which tried to restore constitutional order and democracy.] In the 1933 events Fulgencio Batista, an army sergeant, emerged and he dominated Cuba for decades. Cuban nationalists, with some reason, blamed U.S. foreign policy for Cuba's problems.

The revolution in 1959 was led by Fidel Castro's. He apparently had the support of most Cubans in his broad based "provisional government". Castro turned to Cuban Communist Party for support in internal struggles. By 1962, after the US began to give "covert" assistance to Cuban exiles opposing the revolution, Castro had adopted Marxism Leninism as the ideology of the Cuban Revolution. This can be seen in the Second Declaration of Havana, delivered on February 4, 1962.

What is Cuba's history but that of Latin America? What is the history of Latin America but the history of Asia, Africa, and Oceania? And what is the history of all these peoples but the history of the cruelest exploitation of the world by imperialism?

At the end of the last century and the beginning of the present, a handful of

economically developed nations had divided the world among themselves subjecting two thirds of humanity to their economic and political domination. Humanity was forced to work for the dominating classes of the group of nations which had a developed capitalist economy.

The historic circumstances which permitted certain European countries and the United States of North America to attain a high industrial development level put them in a position which enabled them to subject and exploit the rest of the world.

What motives lay behind this expansion of the industrial powers? Were they moral, "civilizing" reasons, as they claimed? No. Their motives were economic.

The discovery of America sent the European conquerors across the seas to occupy and to exploit the lands and peoples of other continents; the lust for riches was the basic motivation for their conduct. America's discovery took place in the search for shorter ways to the Orient, whose products Europe valued highly.

A new social class, the merchants and the producers of articles manufactured for commerce, arose from the feudal society of lords and serfs in the latter part of the Middle Ages.

The lust for gold promoted the efforts of the new class. The lust for profit was the incentive of their behavior throughout its history. As industry and trade developed, the social influence of the new class grew. The new productive forces maturing in the midst of the feudal society increasingly clashed with feudalism and its serfdom, its laws, its institutions, its philosophy, its morals, its art, and its political ideology...

Since the end of the Second World War, the Latin American nations are becoming pauperized constantly. The value of their capita income falls. The dreadful percentages of child death rate do not decrease, the number of illiterates grows higher, the peoples lack employment, land, adequate housing, schools, hospitals, communication systems and the means of subsistence. On the other hand, North America investments exceed 10 billion dollars. Latin America, moreover, supplies cheap raw materials and pays high prices for manufactured articles. Like the first Spanish conquerors, who exchanged mirrors and trinkets with the Indians for silver and gold, so the United States trades with Latin America. To hold on to this torrent of wealth, to take greater possession of America's resources and to exploit its long-suffering peoples: this is what is hidden behind the military pacts, the military missions and Washington's diplomatic lobbying...

Wherever roads are closed to the peoples, where repression of workers and peasants is fierce, where the domination of Yankee monopolies is strong est, the first and most important lesson is to understand that it is neither just nor correct to divert the peoples with

the vain and fanciful illusion that the dominant classes can be uprooted by legal means which do not and will not exist. The ruling classes are entrenched in all positions of state power. They monopolize the teaching field. They dominate all means of mass communication. They have infinite financial resources. There is a power which the monopolies and the ruling few will defend by blood and fire with the strength of their police and their armies.

The duty of every revolutionary is to make revolution. We know that in America and throughout the world the revolution will be victorious. But revolutionaries cannot sit in the doorways of their homes to watch the corpse of imperialism pass by. The role of Job does not behoove a revolutionary. Each year by which America's liberation may be hastened will mean millions of children rescued from death, millions of minds, freed for learning, infinitudes of sorrow spared the peoples. Even though the Yankee imperialists are preparing a bloodbath for America they will not succeed in drowning the people's struggle. They will evoke universal hatred against themselves. This will be the last act of their rapacious and caveman system...

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## Fidel Castro: On The Export of Revolution

To the accusation that Cuba wants to export its revolution, we reply: Revolutions are not exported, they are made by the people...

What Cuba can give to the people, and has already given, is its example.

And what does the Cuban Revolution teach? That revolution is possible, that the people can make it, that in the contemporary world there

are no forces capable of halting the liberation movement of the peoples.

Our triumph would never have been feasible if the Revolution itself had not been inexorably destined to arise out of existing conditions in our socio-economic reality, a reality which exists to an even greater degree in a good number of Latin American countries.

It inevitably occurs that in the nations where the control of the Yankee monopolies is strongest, the exploitation of the oligarchy cruelest, and the situation of the laboring and peasant masses most unbearable, the political power appears most solid. The state of siege becomes habitual. Every manifestation of discontent by the masses is repressed by force. The democratic path is closed completely. The brutal character of dictatorship, the form of rule adopted by the ruling classes, reveals itself more clearly than ever. It is then that the revolutionary explosion of the peoples becomes inevitable.

Although it is true that in those underdeveloped countries of America the working class is generally relatively small, there is a social class which, because of the subhuman conditions in which it lives, constitutes a potential force that, led by the workers and the revolutionary Intellectuals, has a decisive importance in the struggle for national liberation—the peasants...

In our countries are two conditions: an underdeveloped industry and an agrarian regime of feudal character. That is why, with all the hardships of the conditions of life of the urban workers, the rural population lives in even more horrible conditions of oppression and exploitation; but it is also, with exceptions, the absolute majority sector, at times exceeding seventy per cent of the Latin American population.

Discounting the landlords, who often reside in the cities, the rest of that great mass gains its

livelihood working as peons on the *haciendas* for the most miserable wages, or work the land under conditions of exploitation which in no manner puts the Middle Ages to shame. These circumstances determine that in Latin America the poor rural population constitutes a tremendous potential revolutionary force.

The armies, built and equipped for conventional war, which are the force on which the power of the exploiting classes rests, become absolutely impotent when they have to confront the irregular struggle of the peasants on their own terrain. They lose ten men for each revolutionary fighter who falls. Demoralization spreads rapidly among them from having to face an invisible and invincible enemy who does not offer them the opportunity of showing off their academy tactics and their braggadocio which they use so much in military displays to curb the city workers and the students.

The initial struggle by small combat units is incessantly fed by new forces, the mass movement begins to loosen its bonds, the old order little by little begins to break into a thousand pieces, and that is the moment when the working class and the urban masses decide the battle.

What is it that from the beginning of the struggle of those first nuclei makes them invincible, regardless of the numbers, power, the resources of their enemies? It is the aid of the people, and they will be able to count on that help of the people on an ever-growing scale.