Africa Since 1940

The Past of the Present

Frederick Cooper



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1

On April 27, 1994, black South Africans, for the first times in their lives, voted in an election to decide who would govern their country. The lines at polling stations snaked around many blocks. It had been over thirty years since African political movements had been banned, and the leader of the strongest of them, Nelson Mandela, had spent twenty-seven of those years in prison. Most activists and observers inside and outside South Africa had thought that the "apartheid" regime, with its explicit policy promoting white supremacy, had become so deeply entrenched and its supporters so attached to their privileges that only a revolution would dislodge it. In a world that, some thirty to forty years earlier, had begun to tear down colonial empires and denounce governments which practiced racial segregation, South Africa had become a pariah, subject to boycotts of investment, travel, and trade. Now it was being redeemed, taking its place among nations which respected civil rights and democratic processes. This was indeed a revolution - whose final act was peaceful.

Three weeks earlier, a part of the vast press corps assembled to observe the electoral revolution in South Africa had been called away to report on another sort of event in another part of Africa. On April 6, what the press described as a "tribal bloodbath" began in Kigali, capital of Rwanda. It started when the plane carrying the country's President, returning from a peace discussions in Arusha, Tanzania, was shot down. The government was dominated by people who called themselves "Hutu," which most of the press assumed was a "tribe" that had long been engaged in rivalry and eventually civil war with another "tribe," known as the "Tutsi." Indeed, a significant number of Tutsi had fled from periodic massacres over the previous decades, and a group of exiles were invading Rwanda from neighboring Uganda to fight for a place for Tutsi in Rwandan government and society. The Tanzanian discussions were an attempt to resolve the conflict. But on the night of the plane crash there began the systematic slaughter of Tutsi by the Hutu-dominated army, by local militias, and apparently by angry mobs.

2

The killing spread throughout Rwanda, and it soon became clear that this was more than an outburst of hatred; it was an attempt to destroy the entire Tutsi population, from babies to elders. When it ended, some months later, around 700,000 Tutsi had died, a large portion of the Tutsi population, as had numerous Hutu who had opposed the genocidal leaders. It only ended because the Hutu-dominated army, deeply involved in the genocide, became too demoralized to fight the invading army, which captured Kigali and moved to take control over the rest of the territory. The "Tutsi" military victory now produced a wave of "Hutu" refugees into neighboring Zaire. By the fall of 1994, many of the soldiers, militiamen, and thugs responsible for the genocide had joined fleeing children, women, and men in the refugee camps. The genocidal militias were intimidating other refugees into participating in raids on Rwanda. Violence would soon envelop the much larger country of Zaire as well.

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At first glance, these two events of April 1994 seem like opposites, as Africa's two possible fates - either dissolving into "tribal" or "ethnic" violence or uniting under a liberal democratic system. Certainly that is how newspapers and other media in the United States and western Europe portrayed the events at the time. Looked at as a snapshot, in April 1994, such a perspective is understandable. But if one looks to earlier periods in time, what happened in South Africa and Rwanda becomes more complicated, less easily decipherable. That South Africa has come to be governed by institutions familiar in the west - an elected parliament and a system of courts – does not mean that those institutions function in the same way as they do in western Europe or North America or that people do not form other kinds of affiliations, view their lives through other kinds of lenses, and imagine their society through categories distinct from those of the west. Nor is it helpful to think of the Rwandan catastrophe as the result of the age-old division of Africa into neatly separate cultures, each a distinctive and exclusive community with a long history of conflict with people who are "different," unable to function within western-style institutions because such institutions do not fit the reality of Africa. History does not inevitably lead all peoples of the world to "rise" to western political forms, or to "fall" into tribal bloodbaths.

This book explores the period when the rule of European colonial powers over most of the African continent began to fall apart, when Africans mobilized to claim new futures, when the day-to-day realities of life in cities and villages changed rapidly, and when new states had to come to grips with the meaning of sovereignty and the limits of state power faced



1 South Africa's first non-racial election, April 1994. A poster of Nelson Mandela, candidate of the ANC, behind a military vehicle – of the type typically used to control "township violence" – in the black township of Rammulotsi.



2 Genocide and looting, Rwanda, April 11, 1994. A looter removes a bedframe from a house whose murdered inhabitants lie on the ground behind him, Kigali, Rwanda.

with the social realities within their borders and their even less controllable position in the world economy and global power relations. It is a book about possibilities which people made for themselves as members of rural communities, as migrants to cities and as the builders of social organizations, political movements, and new forms of cultural expression. It is also about the ways many of those openings closed down.

This book cuts across the conventional dividing point between colonial and post-colonial African history, a division which conceals as much as it reveals. Focusing on such a dividing point either makes the break seem too neat - as if colonialism was turned off like a light switch - or suggests too much continuity, positing continued western dominance of the world economy and the continued presence in African states of "western" institutions as a mere change of personnel within a structure of power that remains colonial. We do not have to make a dichotomous choice between continuity or change. Indeed, the institutions of colonial states, from crop marketing to law courts, did not operate as their designers intended, but were being appropriated, contested, and transformed even while European flags still flew over colonial capitals. Acquiring formal sovereignty was an important element in the historical dynamics of the last half-century, but not the only one. Family life and religious expression also changed substantially in Africa, but not necessarily in rhythm with changes in political organization.

Most important, one needs to understand how the cracks that appeared in the edifice of colonial power after World War II gave a wide range of people – wage laborers, peasants, students, traders, and educated professionals – a chance to articulate their aspirations, be they the hope of having clean, piped water in a rural village or of taking an honorable place in global political institutions. A distinguished Ghanaian historian, Adu Boahen, begins an article about the 1950s by writing "It was certainly great to be alive in those days..." – a phrase which conveys not only the excitement of being part of a generation that could shape its own future but also a sense that "those days" were better than the ones which followed.

The colonial state that failed in the 1950s was colonialism at its most intrusively ambitious, and the independent states that took over had to take over the failure of colonial development as well: even if the mineral and agricultural production of Africa had increased in the post-war years, the African farmer and worker had not become the predictable and orderly producer officials dreamed of. New African governments inherited both the narrow, export-oriented infrastructure which developmentalist colonialism had not yet transcended and the limited markets for producers of raw material which the post-war boom in the global economy had only temporarily improved. But now they had to pay for the increasingly ponderous administrative structure that 1950s colonial development had put in place and, more important, to meet the heightened expectations of people who now hoped that the state might really be theirs.

The historical sequence outlined in the first chapters of this book brought into being states that had all the trappings recognized around the world as "sovereignty." But the particular characteristics of those states were consequences of the sequence, not merely the sovereignty. Colonial states had been gatekeeper states. They had weak instruments for entering into the social and cultural realm over which they presided, but they stood astride the intersection of the colonial territory and the outside world. Their main source of revenue was duties on goods that entered and left its ports; they could decide who could leave for education and what kinds of educational institutions could come in; they established rules and licenses that defined who could engage in internal and external commerce. Africans tried to build networks that got around the state's control over access to the outside world and to build economic and social networks inside the territory which were beyond the state's reach. In the 1940s and 1950s, the formal channels of access to officially recognized economic channels, both inside and outside, seemed to be opening wider to Africans. Social, political, and cultural associational life within African territories became richer and links with outside organizations more diverse. The gate was becoming wider, but only so far.

The development effort of late colonial regimes never did provide the basis for a strong national economy; economies remained externally oriented and the state's economic power remained concentrated at the gate between inside and outside. Meanwhile, African leaders' own experience of mobilization against the state gave them an acute sense of how vulnerable the power they had inherited was. The mixed success of colonial and post-colonial development efforts did not give leaders the confidence that economic development would lead to a generalized prosperity for which they could get credit and flourishing domestic activity which would provide government revenue. Most rulers realized early on that their own interests were served by the same strategy of gatekeeping that had served the colonial state before World War II: limited channels for advancement that officials controlled were less risky than broad ones which could become nuclei for opposition. But the post-colonial gatekeeper state, lacking the external coercive capacity of its predecessor, was a vulnerable state, not a strong one. The stakes of controlling the gate were so high that various groups tried to grab it - officers or noncommissioned officers in the army, regional power brokers. A regime not so dependent on gatekeeping benefits from the fact that its opponents can afford to lose; they

have other avenues for wealth and other loci for power. Gatekeeper states are in danger for the simple reason that rulers temporarily in control of the gate want to stay there. Hence ruling elites tended to use patronage, coercion, scapegoating of opponents, and other resources to reinforce their position, narrowing the channels of access even further. By looking at the post-war era as a whole, one can begin to explain the succession of crises that colonial and postcolonial states faced, without getting into a sterile debate over whether a colonial "legacy" or the incompetence of African governments is to blame. Africa's present did not emerge from an abrupt proclamation of independence, but from a long, convoluted, and still ongoing process.

When understood in time perspective, the two stories of April 1994 illustrate the openings and possibilities and the closures and dangers of politics in Africa during the last half-century. Let us start to look backward at the history behind the more painful of the two, Rwanda. The murderous violence that erupted on April 6 was not a spontaneous outburst of ancient hatreds; it was planned. It was prepared by a modern institution, a government with its bureaucratic and military apparatus, using modern means of communications and modern forms of propaganda. The hatred in Rwanda was real enough, but it was hatred with a history, not a natural attribute of cultural difference. Indeed, cultural difference in Rwanda was relatively minimal: Hutu and Tutsi speak the same language; most are Catholic. Rwandans and westerners often think that there are ideal physical features of each group – Tutsi tall and slender, Hutu short and broad. But in fact appearance poorly distinguishes them.

Indeed, one of the horrifying features of the genocide was that militias, unable to tell a Tutsi when they saw one, demanded that people produce identification cards that listed their ethnic group and then killed people who were labeled Tutsi or who refused to produce a card. In the years before the mass killings, a shadowy organization of elite Hutu, connected to the government leaders, had systematically organized a propaganda campaign – especially over the radio – against Tutsi. Apparently, many Hutu still had to be convinced that there was a Tutsi conspiracy against them, and social pressure had to be carefully organized, village by village, to bring people into line. Thousands of Hutu did not accept this, and when the genocide began Hutu judged to be overly sympathetic to Tutsi were themselves frequently killed, while other Hutu acted with courage to save Tutsi neighbors.

One has to push back further. There was a "Tutsi" threat – to the government, at least. It had its origins in earlier violence. In 1959 and again the early 1970s, there were pogroms against Tutsi which caused

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thousands of them to flee to Uganda. Some of them became allies of the Ugandan rebel leader Yoweri Museveni, as he worked in the 1980s to take over a state submerged in the chaos left by the dictatorship of Idi Amin Dada and his brutal successors. President Museveni was grateful for their assistance, but eager that they go home. The Rwandan Patriotic Army trained in Uganda, attacked Rwanda in 1990, and attacked more vigorously in 1993; whether their objective was to take over Rwanda or to be reintegrated into "their" country was in dispute. In 1994, mediators from inside and outside Africa tried to settle the conflict and devise a power-sharing arrangement that would provide security to both Hutu and Tutsi. That was why President Habyarimana took his fatal flight in April: he had attended discussions aimed at resolving the conflict. He may have been killed by "Hutu Power" extremists for fear that he would compromise and in order to provoke an already-planned slaughter. Within hours of the crash, the hunt for Tutsi had engulfed the capital, and it soon spread. Whenever local people and local officials weren't enthusiastic enough in their bloody endeavor, the Rwandan army stepped in to run the killing machine.

We need to push back further. The radio campaign did not build up hatred from nothing. Rwanda had been a Belgian colony since 1918, having been originally colonized by Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, then turned over to Belgium after Germany lost World War I. Belgian officials conceived of Tutsi as natural aristocrats, as less "African" than the Hutu. Only Tutsi were accepted as chiefs under colonial supervision; missionaries were more likely to welcome them into schools and convert them to Catholicism. Belgian officials decided that they needed to know who *was* Tutsi and Hutu, and so they classified people into one or the other and made them carry identification cards. It took work to turn difference and inequality into group boundaries, into ethnicity.

We can push back still further. German and Belgian understanding of Rwandan history was inaccurate, but it was not made up out of whole cloth. Rwanda, like other kingdoms in the Great Lakes of East Africa, was highly differentiated. There was much movement of peoples in Rwanda's fertile hills and a blending of people who lived by hunting and gathering, by keeping cattle, and by agriculture. Some, largely European, versions of Rwandan history have Tutsi pastoralists migrating as a people from the north and conquering agricultural peoples, but there is little evidence to support such a story. More likely, a variety of migratory streams intersected and overlapped, and as particular kinship groups claimed power, they developed their myths of origin and historical narratives to justify their power. Rather than a history of conflict following from the fact of distinction, social distinctions were a product of a complex history.

Several kingdoms developed in the area. Most royal families were Tutsi – although most Tutsi were not rulers – but royal men married women who were both Tutsi and Hutu, so that genetically the categories meant less and less, if they ever meant much at all. Wealthy people owned cattle, and the wealthiest claimed to be Tutsi, but many Hutu became cattle owners and many of them began to think of themselves and be accepted as Tutsi. The nearest English word to describe what Tutsi meant in pre-European Rwanda is "aristocracy" – but it was an aristocracy linked to ordinary people via marriage, cattle-exchange, and a common way of life. This does not mean it was an egalitarian society; the difference between owning many cattle and owning few was important. Nor was it a peaceful society. Violent conflict, however, rarely pit Tutsi against Hutu, but took place between rival kingdoms each of which consisted of both Tutsi and Hutu.

If we look back far enough, then, we see that "difference" is part of the story that led to April 1994, but we do not find a long history of "the Tutsi" in conflict with "the Hutu." Interaction and differentiation are both important. When did polarization become acute? The answer appears to be, in the 1950s, as the political structures of the colonial era unravelled. Belgian favoritism toward Tutsi, and particularly Tutsi chiefs, was increasingly complicated when Belgium began to be challenged on its own terms by Rwandans who had a western education, who were Christian, and who were asking why they should be excluded from a voice in their own affairs. Because schools had discriminated in favor of Tutsi, the anticolonial movement began among people so classified. Belgium, and also the Catholic Church, began to favor Hutu, who were now alleged to represent an "authentic Africa" against the pretentious Tutsi. In 1957, a "Hutu Manifesto" accused Tutsi of monopolizing power, land, and education. The riots of 1959 were part an uprising of peasants with genuine grievances - who were most likely to be Hutu - and part ethnic pogrom. Belgium did little to prepare a peaceful transfer of political institutions into the hands of Africans. But French and British colonies were moving rapidly toward self-government and independence, and Belgium could not escape the trends – a topic which will be the focus of much of this book.

The independence of Rwanda in 1962 was for most Rwandans an eagerly sought moment of liberation from colonial rule. But many Tutsi feared that they would now become a minority group, in danger from a resentful Hutu majority, whose representatives had won the first elections. Many Hutu, on the other hand, feared that Tutsi were conspiring to keep by devious methods that which they could not retain through free elections. The pogroms and the elections chased Tutsi leaders from the political scene and created the first wave of Tutsi exiles.

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From colonies to Third World

The ensuing Rwandan regime, like many others in Africa, was highly clientelistic and focused on delivering state-controlled assets to supporters. Like other regimes of that era, it was ineffective and insecure, and it was thrown out in 1973 in a military coup led by Juvenal Habyarimana, who would remain in power until his murder twenty-one years later. This regime proved to be as corrupt and ineffectual as its predecessor, but it received considerable support from France and other donors. When export crop prices fell and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) made the government tighten its belt in the 1980s, government supporters felt they were not getting the spoils they deserved. Some groups tried to organize opposition, but Hutu extremists linked to Habyarimana scapegoated Tutsi and worked harder to exclude them from Rwandan society. Then came the invasion of a Tutsi refugee army in 1990, itself the consequence of past waves of killings and expulsions of Tutsi. The government army (aided by France) grew in response, and Hutu extremists instigated killings, organized local militias, and generated anti-Tutsi propaganda. International organizations tried in 1993 to engineer a peace settlement. Whereas some Hutu leaders, perhaps including Habyarimana himself, entered negotiations hoping that power sharing would ease a desperate situation, others were thinking of another, final, solution.

In the neighboring Belgian colony of Burundi, a similar power struggle within a similar social structure had taken place, but there it was a Tutsi minority who emerged on top. Large-scale killings occurred in Burundi, and there it was Hutu who were the main victims and who often became refugees. In both cases, the decolonization process brought to power governments that were insecure and anxious: in Rwanda led by a section of Hutu, in Burundi by a section of Tutsi. In both cases, oppressive government action and widespread anxiety were cross-cut by often close relationships across the Tutsi–Hutu divide and by uncertainty over who, exactly, was a Tutsi and who a Hutu. In the months before April 1994, the sowers of hatred still had work to do.

I have begun by looking back, step by step, to see the layers of historical complexity leading up to the events of 1994. We began with what might look simple (and did to most foreign journalists) – a tribal bloodbath, old hatreds coming to the surface. We have found something more complicated: a history of interaction as much as of distinction, and a murderous trajectory that was less a burst of ethnic enmity than a genocide organized by a ruling clique.

Let us look back into South African history, briefly now, but in more detail in chapter 6. One can trace the peaceful revolution of 1994 back to the founding of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912 and find a durable thread: the belief that multiracial democracy was the ideal polity

for South Africa. But the negotiated end of white power emerged not just from principled, democratic opposition, but also from a wave of violence that neither the ANC nor other African political groups could control, notably from the mid-1980s to the very eve of the 1994 election, as well as from a range of political movements, not all of which fit the liberal democratic mold. The white regime also turns out to be more complicated than simply die-hard racists from a by-gone era. The apartheid regime was pragmatic and sophisticated, and in the era when late colonial and independent governments elsewhere in Africa were striving - with mixed results - to achieve "development," it presided over the most thorough industrialization of any African economy, producing great wealth and a European standard of living for its white population. These South African pasts will not easily be consigned to history, for the linkage of wealth for some to the impoverishment of many remains very much a part of post-1994 South Africa, even if a portion of the once-excluded African population is now in a position of authority and affluence.

In 1940, segregation, denial of political voice, and economic disenfranchisement did not distinguish South Africa from colonial Africa. But in the 1960s, South Africa had become a pariah in much of the world. It took a great deal of political and ideological labor to make colonial domination appear abnormal and unacceptable to people who did not live under its yoke, and it was this process which began the isolation of South Africa's white regime. After 1994, the social and economic inequalities of South African society appear all too normal, and the question of whether the extremes of poverty and inequality throughout Africa will become a burning, world-wide concern, as did colonialism and apartheid, remains open.

Nothing in South Africa's past determined that it would one day be governed by a non-racialist, democratically elected party. When the ANC was founded in 1912, its program of peaceful protest, petition, and the evocation of democratic principles was one of several ways in which Africans expressed themselves. Alongside this liberal constitutionalist conception of freedom was a Christian one, profoundly influenced by a century of missionary activity, and part of that tendency, influenced by African-American missionaries, linked Christianity to racial unity and redemption. Others operated within the frameworks of Xhosa, Zulu, and other ethnicity-based African political units seeking, for example, to mobilize behind a chief who would represent the solidarity of what people perceived to be their community. By the 1920s, the back-to-Africa politics of Jamaican-born, US-based Marcus Garvey linked South Africa to a Black Atlantic world via black sailors who stopped in South African ports, while other versions of Pan-Africanism came out of educational and cultural linkages to African Americans. A single rural district in the 1920s might witness all these varieties of political mobilization.

Even as the ANC successfully linked its struggle to that of labor unions and militant city dwellers in the post-war years - and with renewed vigor in the 1970s - migrant workers with less permanent roots in the cities, often dependent on rural brethren and rural chiefs for access to land when they returned, sometimes espoused militant ideologies of "tribal identity." By the 1980s, the clashes were not simply between different ways of thinking about solidarity, but between different networks of people, rival organizations. In Johannesburg "comrades" - youth associated with the ANC - sometimes fought, with bloody consequences, "impis" - young men associated with the Zulu cultural/political organization Inkatha. In South Africa, as in Rwanda, "tribal" rivalries were not part of the landscape; they were a product of history, of the realities of ethnic connections and their manipulation by the South African regime. Much as one might think of racism as forcing all Africans into a single category and producing a united struggle which reached its successful climax in April 1994, the struggle generated rivalries as much as affinities, internecine killings as much as armed struggle against the apartheid regime.

Looking backwards from 1994, the peaceful election appears even more remarkable than it did at first glance. Elections do matter: they channel political action in certain ways, and if that in some sense narrows the possibilities of how people act together, it can discourage some of the more deadly forms of rivalry, too. But the history of how resources – land, gold mines, factories, urban real estate – got into the hands of particular people and the consequences of such unequal access is a deep one, and that history did not suddenly turn a new page on April 27.

The many Africas: locating a space

At any one moment, Africa appears as a mixture of diverse languages and diverse cultures; indeed, linguistically alone, it is the most varied continent on earth. It is only by looking over time that "Africa" begins to appear. But what is it that emerges? As a land mass, Africa goes from the Cape of Good Hope to the Nile Delta, embracing Morocco as much as Mozambique. But many people in that continental space, as well as most Americans and Europeans, do not think of it as unified, and make a clear distinction between "North Africa" and "Sub-Saharan Africa" or "Black Africa." The dividing line is often seen in racial terms: Africa is the place where blacks are from. The Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has posed the question of how one conceives of "Africa" if one doesn't accept the validity of classifying the world's population

into racial groups - something biological scientists see as without basis. Africans are as different from each other as they are from anybody else, and it is only by elevating skin color to supreme importance that one can stipulate that Africans are a unique race. But can all of the people who live south of the Sahara Desert be considered a people, if not a race? Or does the fact that about a third of these people are Muslim mean that, after all, they should be classified together with their fellow Muslims of North Africa, whether or not the latter perceive themselves as Africans? Does the alleged strength of kinship ties among Africans, the widespread respect people from the Zulu to the Wolof give to elders and to ancestors, and the centrality of face-to-face social relations in village settings, define a cultural collectivity that is continent wide - and which has influenced peoples of African descent in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States? Or is what all Africans share with each other also shared with most "peasant" communities? Does what people call "culture" in Africa or elsewhere represent durable and shared traits or continually changing patterns of adaptation to new circumstances?

Appiah's answer does not depend on a correspondence between African cultures – however similar or different from each other – and skin color. He argues that the notion of Africa does in fact have a meaning, and that meaning is historical. From the sixteenth century, European slave-traders began to treat various African ports as places to buy slave labor and the physical features of the slaves served as a marker of who, on one side of the Atlantic, could be bought and who, on the other side, could be presumed to be enslaved.

But if Africa was first defined by the most horrific aspect of its history, the meaning of "Africa" began to change in the African diaspora itself. Enslaved people and their descendants began to think of themselves as "African," not just other people's property; they were people who came from somewhere. In the United States, some Christians of slave descent began to call themselves "Ethiopians," not because their ancestors originated from that part of Africa, but because it evoked Biblical histories of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. "Ethiopia" or "Africa" marked their place in a universal history. Later, some African-American intellectuals began to claim that the ancient Egyptians were black Africans, and that, via Egypt, Africa had contributed centrally to Greece, Rome, and world civilization. Whether the evidence supports such a contention, and the very issue of what "heritage" or "descent" actually means, are not what is at stake here. The point is that "Africa" emerged as a diaspora asserted its place in the world. This book approaches Africa as defined by its history: its focus is on the African continent south of the Sahara Desert, but in the context of the connections, continental and overseas, that shaped that region's history.

From colonies to Third World

Studying networks that crossed the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and the Sahara Desert, or which criss-crossed the African continent itself, gives a different picture of Africa from the stereotypes of African "tribes." Muslim scholars in Sahelian West Africa crossed the desert to North Africa or went to Egypt and Saudi Arabia as students and pilgrims; similar Islamic networks extended down the East African coast and inland to Lake Victoria and Lake Tanganyika. Within Africa, some kingdoms or empires incorporated culturally diverse populations, sometimes assimilating them, sometimes allowing considerable cultural autonomy while demanding obedience and collecting tribute. In some regions, kinship groups recognized affinity with relatives living hundreds of miles away.

That there was cultural diversity is true; that cultural specificity sometimes crystallized into a sense of being a distinct "people" is to an extent also true. But distinctiveness did not mean isolation, and it did not extinguish interconnection, relatedness, and mutual influence. The cultural map of Africa is marked by gradations of difference and lines of connection, not by a series of bounded spaces, each with "its" culture, "its" language, "its" sense of uniqueness. To be sure, a political entrepreneur trying to organize "his" people to fight for their interests had some shared group feeling to draw on, but so too did a political or religious organizer trying to bring together people across short or long distances. Which tendency would prevail was a matter of historical circumstances, not something determined by a supposed African nature of racial unity or cultural distinctiveness.

In the mid-twentieth century, the political meaning of Africa could be defined in different ways. To a Pan-Africanist, the diaspora was the relevant unit. For Frantz Fanon, politics were defined by imperialism, and he deprecated the idea of black nationality in favor of a conception of the unity of people oppressed by colonization. When Gamal Abdel Nasser, president of Egypt, challenged British, American, and Israeli power in the Middle East, he became a symbol for many Africans of a truly national leader. In the 1950s, the shared struggle against colonial powers, for the building up of national economies, and for national dignity, gave rise to a militant conception of the "Third World" – neither capitalist nor communist, uniting Asia, Latin America, and Africa against "the North" or "imperialist" powers. Still others sought a specifically African unity, limited to the continent. Other political leaders divided themselves into ideological blocks and formed alliances with power blocks led by the United States or the Soviet Union.

Long-distance connections were not just a matter for political activists. Africans – seeking education, developing careers in the UN and other international organizations, or migrating to European economies which now wanted their labor in their own territories – became a presence in

Europe, the Soviet Union, and the United States. They sometimes interacted with indigenous inhabitants, sometimes formed relatively selfcontained communities of origin, and sometimes interacted more intensely with other migrants of African descent.

But it would be a mistake to substitute for the misleading notion of an Africa of isolated tribes a picture of an Africa immersed in an infinite web of movement and exchange. Internally, Africa's population was spread unevenly over a large space, meaning that movement was possible but transport expensive. It paid to exchange high-value commodities not found in certain regions, but less so to build dense networks of varied forms of exchange and connection. African leaders could find places for their people to prosper, but there were other places where people could flee and survive, making it difficult for power to be consolidated and exploitation to be intensified, in contrast to Europe in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Overseas exchanges tended also to be quite focused, most horrifically in the case of the slave trade. Specific centers of production – of gold or palm products, for instance – or specific trade routes - the ivory traders who connected the interior of East Africa with the coast – functioned very well. But what they did was to forge specific, focused linkages from inside Africa to economies outside of Africa, not to develop a diverse and dense regional economy. Colonial economies, after the European conquest, built their railways and roads to bring out copper or cocoa and send in European manufactured goods, and they directed the movement of goods, people, and ideas to the metropole, not outward to the world in general. Colonial regimes based much of their power on their ability to control key nodal points, such as deep-water ports, in a relatively narrow system of transportation and communication. Africans tried to forge their own kinds of linkages - from trade routes within the continent to political relationships with other colonized peoples - with at least some success, but when the colonial empires fell apart, African leaders also faced the temptation to strengthen their control of narrow channels rather than widen and deepen forms of connections across space. This is a theme to which I will return.

The many Africas: marking a time

African historians sometimes divide the continent's history into "precolonial," "colonial," and "post-colonial" eras. The first and the last, in such accounts, are marked by the autonomy of African societies. The first was a period of kingdoms, empires, chiefdoms, village councils, kinship systems, and the last a period of nation-states, each with its own flag, passport, stamps, currency and other symbols of sovereignty, and its seat in the United Nations, its claims to regulate and to tax production and commerce within its borders.

The Nigerian historian J. Ade Ajayi called the middle period the "colonial episode"; others refer to the "colonial parenthesis." Ajayi's argument came directly from a nationalist conception of political life: he wanted to emphasize the direct connection of "modern" African states to an "authentic" African past, allowing the new rulers of Nigeria, Kenya, or Dahomey to assume the legitimacy of the kings and elders of the past. More recently, disillusionment with independent African governments has led some scholars to make the opposite point: that "the state" is a western imposition, a direct determination of the post-colonial by the colonial and a complete effacement of the pre-colonial.

In such arguments, history is not a dead past, but a basis for making claims that are very much of the present. But both sides, in trying to use a particular version of the past, may miss much of the past's dynamics. It may be that the ballot box is a "European" institution, but that does not mean that the way it is used in Ghana has the same meaning and consequences as the way it is used in Switzerland. Even if one can demonstrate that "kinship" is as important to present-day Tanzanians as it was to people who lived within such a space in the early nineteenth century, that does not mean that kinship groups mobilize similar resources or that their members seek similar ends. To leapfrog backwards across time – to find in the 1780s or the 1930s the cause for something happening in the 1990s – is to risk missing the way change lurches in different directions.

This book bridges one of the classic divisions of African history, between the "colonial" and the "post-colonial." It does so in part so that we can ask just what difference the end of empire meant, as well as what kinds of processes continued even as governments changed hands. Some argue that the end of colonialism meant only that the occupants of government buildings changed, that colonialism gave way to neo-colonialism. It is indeed essential to ask just how much autonomy the governments of new states – many of them small, all of them poor – actually had, and whether states from the North (the United States as well as the former colonial powers) and institutions such as international banks and multinational corporations continued to exercise economic and political power even when formal sovereignty was passed on. But one should not substitute a hasty answer for a good question.

One needs to examine as well the extent to which African political leaders, ordinary villagers, and city-dwellers took some of the assertions of colonizing powers and turned them into claims and mobilizing ideologies of their own. In the 1940s and 1950s, colonial governments claimed

that their scientific knowledge, experience in running modern states, and financial resources would enable them to "develop" backward countries. Such claims were quickly turned into counterclaims: by African trade unions asserting that if the African worker is to produce according to a European model, he should be paid on a European pay scale and benefit from adequate housing, water supplies, and transportation; and by political movements insisting that if African economies were to be developed in the interests of Africans, it was only Africans who could determine what those interests were. One can thus follow the development idea from colonial project to national project and can ask if the national project reproduced certain aspects of the colonial one – such as the belief that "experts" should make decisions for others – and if the national project contributed to the building of new kinds of economic possibilities.

Static visions of dynamic societies: colonial Africa in the 1930s

One striking feature of colonial societies on the eve of World War II was the extent to which colonial ideologues and officials imposed a static conception on societies in the midst of considerable change. What is, after all, a colony? Rule by conquering outsiders was not unique in either Africa or Europe: African kingdoms often expanded at their neighbors' expense. In Europe the territorial struggles and brutalities of two world wars, the dictatorial and racist regimes of Hitler and Mussolini, and the survival of dictatorships in Spain and Portugual into the 1970s suggest that democracy and self-determination were not something that came with being European. Colonial empires differed from other forms of domination by their effort to reproduce social and cultural difference. At some level, conquest implied incorporation: the loser had to be taught who was the boss and to behave accordingly. But colonial conquest emphasized that the conquered remained distinct; he or she might try to learn and master the ways of the conqueror but would never quite get there.

How enthusiastic European publics were for colonies was also not so clear, despite large colonial lobbies that tried to make empire fashionable. Jacques Marseille argues that it was the weaker French firms that lobbied for treating colonies as a protected zone for their benefit, whereas the strong ones favored more open markets and sometimes thought of colonization as risky adventurism. In England, mission lobbies favored a form of empire that gave space to Christian conversion and to encouraging Africans to become self-reliant small-scale producers. In France, proponents of the "civilizing mission" helped to reconcile people who believed in a democratic, secular state to the practice of empire, although they were often embarrassed by the sordid actions of fellow imperialists.

From colonies to Third World



In both countries, proponents of conversion and civilization had to argue with their own countrymen, who looked at Africans as units of labor to exploit by whatever means possible. Although there were principled critics of empire from liberal and leftist camps, some people who saw themselves as progressive favored empire as a means to save indigenous peoples from their tyrannical rulers and backwardness, or even of bringing revolution and socialism to Africa.

Empire in early twentieth-century France and Britain was politically viable because some influential people wanted colonies very much and the others were not strongly convinced one way or the other. The two major colonizing powers insisted that each colony balance its books; they committed little in the way of metropolitan investment before the 1940s. In the 1920s, both rejected "development" plans that would have entailed the use of metropolitan funds, even though the plans promised more effective exploitation of colonial resources in the long run. Critics

argued that money was best invested at home, but also that too much economic change in the colonies risked upsetting the state's unsure hold over African populations.

By the 1920s, the ambitious attempts of colonial rulers to remake African societies – by trying to turn peasants or slaves into wage laborers, for example – had petered out, as colonial governments realized the limits of their own power. Colonial officials were convincing themselves that their policy should not be to "civilize" Africans, but to conserve African societies in a colonizers' image of sanitized tradition, slowly and selectively being led toward evolution, while the empire profited from peasants' crop production or the output of mines and settler farms.

What was happening was far more complex than "timeless" African tradition. In the 1920s, West African cocoa and peanut farmers were migrating in order to open up new land, and Hausa and Dyula traders were covering long distances; Central African miners were moving back and forth between villages and mining centers; near cities like Nairobi, farmers were linking up to urban food markets as well as to markets in export crops. Yet European conceptions of Africa crystallized around the idea of "tribes," bounded and static. In part, this reflected the difficulties colonial regimes had in directing social change in ways they sought. In part, it was also a reaction to its opposite: many Africans, in the aftermath of World War I, in places like Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya (and in a different way, South Africa) were acting like "citizens," insisting that their service in the war and their educational and economic achievements entitled them to a voice in their own affairs. The British conception of "indirect rule" and the French idea of "association", both emphasized in the 1920s, were attempts to put a positive light on colonial failure to remake African societies and to confine politics to tribal cages. Educated Africans and African workers became "detribalized natives," identifiable only by what they were not. During this period the expansion of ethnological research, and the increased interest colonial officials took in it, were part of this process of imagining an Africa of tribes and traditions.

During the world depression following 1929, the idea of tribal Africa carried all the more appeal, for the social consequences of economic decline could be sloughed off into the countryside. But with the beginnings of recovery in 1935, the edifice began to crack. That is where the next chapter will take up the story.

This was not the only way of imagining Africa in the 1930s. In Paris Léopold Sédar Senghor – born and raised in Senegal, educated in France in philosophy and literature, one of the best poets in the French language – met people of African descent from the Caribbean and acquired a new sense of what "Africa" meant within the French empire. Senghor, along with the West Indian writer Aimé Césaire, helped to found the "négritude" movement, which sought to capture and revalue a common cultural heritage, one which deserved a place in a broad conception of humanity. Senghor and Césaire used the French language for their own purposes and they fully participated in French institutions – when they saw their democratic potential. They refused the dualist conception of colonial ideology, which starkly opposed "civilized" and "primitive" people. But instead of reversing the dualism with a rejection of everything "European", they sought to reject dualistic thinking with a conception of cultural and political engagement that recognized the diverse heritages of humanity. Senghor's négritude, as critics within Africa pointed out, simplified, romanticized, and homogenized African cultural practices, and it only indirectly addressed issues of power and exploitation within colonized spaces. But it was one way of pointing towards a future that built on a painful past.

SUGGESTED READINGS

A full bibliography for this book may be found on the website of Cambridge University Press at http://uk.cambridge.org/resources/0521776007. It will be updated periodically.

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