

Colonisation of Africa and the Rationale for Empire



History

KEYWORDS : Colonisation, Africa, Empire

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to study the process of discovery and European colonisation of Africa and the underlying socio-economic motivations which made it possible; European colonisation had profound ramifications for Africa and drew the borders of most of the latter's nations.

*While sea routes around Africa had been discovered by the 15th century, most of Africa was colonised relatively late, in the last quarter of the 19th century. What were the reasons behind the sudden explosion of interest in colonisation of Africa? The reasons seem to be chiefly the rise of new nation states in Europe. Religious and cultural excuses were used extensively by all colonial powers to justify the rapid colonisation and its associated expenses, both monetary and human. Proselytisation and the white man's burden were the *raison d'être*, especially for the colonisation of Africa. It is interesting to understand how such reasons were used to colonise even where economic benefit was marginal or nonexistent and the monetary expense of colonisation was clearly unjustified.*

Portuguese explorer Prince Henry, known as the Navigator, was the first European to methodically explore Africa and the oceanic route to the Indies. From his residence in the Algarve region of southern Portugal, he directed successive expeditions to circumnavigate Africa and reach India. In 1420, Henry sent an expedition to secure the uninhabited but strategic island of Madeira. In 1425, he tried to secure the Canary Islands as well, but these were already under firm Castilian control. In 1431, another Portuguese expedition reached and annexed the Azores.

In 1455 and 1456 two Italian explorers, Alvise Cadamosto from Venice and Antoniotto Usodimare from Genoa, together with an unnamed Portuguese captain and working for Prince Henry, the Navigator, of Portugal, followed the Gambia river, visiting the land of Senegal, while another Italian sailor from Genoa, Antonio de Noli, also on behalf of Prince Henry, explored the Bijagós islands, and, together with the Portuguese Diogo Gomes, the Cape Verde archipelago. Antonio de Noli, who became the first governor of Cape Verde (and the first European colonial governor in Sub-Saharan Africa), is also considered the discoverer of the First Islands of Cape Verde¹

In 1488, Bartolomeu Diaz and his pilot Pêro de Alenquer,² after putting down a mutiny,³ turned a cape where they were caught by a storm, naming it Cape of Storms. They followed the coast for a while realizing that it kept going eastward with even some tendency to the north. Lacking supplies, they turned around with the conviction that the far end of Africa had finally been reached. Upon their return to Portugal the promising cape was renamed Cape of Good Hope.

Portuguese presence in Africa soon interfered with existing Arab trade interests. By 1583, the Portuguese established themselves in Zanzibar and on the Swahili coast. The Kingdom of Kongo was converted to Christianity in 1495, its king taking the name of João I. The Portuguese also established their trade interests in the Kingdom of Mutapa in the 16th century, and in 1629 placed a puppet ruler on the throne. The Portuguese (and later also the Dutch) also became involved in the local slave economy, supporting the state of the Jaggas, who performed slave raids in the Kongo.

Beginning in the 17th century, the Netherlands began exploring and colonising Africa. While the Dutch were waging a long war of independence against Spain, Portugal had temporarily united with Spain, starting in 1580 and

ending in 1640. As a result, the growing colonial ambitions of the Netherlands were mostly directed against Portugal.

For this purpose, two Dutch companies were founded: the West Indies Company, with power over all the Atlantic Ocean, and the East Indies Company, with power over the Indian Ocean. The West Indies Company conquered Elmina in 1637 and Luanda in 1640. In 1648, they were expelled from Luanda by the Portuguese.⁴ Overall the Dutch built several forts in Africa, including Gorée in Senegal, partly overtaking Portugal as the main slave-trading power.⁵

The Dutch left a lasting impact in South Africa, a region ignored by Portugal that the Dutch eventually decided to use as station in their route to East Asia. Jan van Riebeeck founded Cape Town in 1652, starting the European exploration and colonisation of South Africa. Almost at the same time as the Dutch, other European powers attempted to create their own outposts for the African slave trade.

As early as 1530, English merchant adventurers started trading in West Africa, coming into conflict with Portuguese troops. In 1581, Francis Drake reached the Cape of Good Hope. In 1663, the English built Fort James in Gambia.⁶ One year later, another English colonial expedition attempted to settle southern Madagascar, resulting in the death of most of the colonists. The English forts on the West African coast were eventually taken by the Dutch.

The French *Compagnie de l'Occident* (Company of the Occident) was created in 1664.⁷ This company expelled the Dutch from Senegal, making it the first French domain in Africa. France also put her eyes in Madagascar, the island that had been used since 1527 as a stop in travels to India. In 1642, the French East India Company founded a settlement in southern Madagascar called Fort Dauphin. The commercial results of this settlement were scarce and, again, most of the settlers died. One of the survivors, Etienne de Flacourt, published a History of the Great Island of Madagascar and Relations, which was for a long time the main European source of information about the island.⁸ Further settlement attempts had no more success but, in 1667, François Martin led the first expedition to the Malgassy heartland, reaching Lake Alaotra. In 1665, France officially claimed Madagascar, under the name of Île Dauphine. However, little colonial activity would take place in Madagascar until the 19th century. In 1657, Swedish merchants founded Cape Coast in modern Ghana, but were soon displaced by the Danish, who founded Fort Christiansborg near modern day Accra.⁹

In 1677, King Frederick William I of Prussia sent an expedition to the western coast of Africa. The commander of the expedition, Captain Blonk, signed agreements with the chieftains of the Gold Coast. There, the Prussians built a fort named Gross Friederichsburg and restored the abandoned Portuguese fort of Arguin. But in 1720, the king decided to sell these bases to the Netherlands for 7,000 ducats and 12 slaves, six of them chained with pure gold chains.¹⁰

Overall, European exploration and colonisation of Africa in the 17th and 18th centuries was very limited. Instead they focused on the slave trade, which only required coastal bases and items to trade. The real exploration of the African interior would start well into the 19th century

The occupation of Egypt (1798–1803), first by France and then by Great Britain, resulted in an effort by the Ottoman Empire to regain direct control over that country. In 1811, Mehemet Ali established an almost independent state, and from 1820 onward established Egyptian rule over the eastern Sudan. In South Africa, the struggle with Napoleon caused the United Kingdom to take possession of the Dutch settlements at the Cape. In 1814, Cape Colony, which had been continuously occupied by British troops since 1806, was formally ceded to the British crown.¹¹

Meanwhile, considerable changes had been made in other parts of the continent. The occupation of Algiers by France in 1830 put an end to the piracy of the Barbary States. Egyptian authority continued to expand southward, with the consequent additions to knowledge of the Nile.

In the mid-19th century, Protestant missions were carrying on active missionary work on the Guinea coast, in South Africa and in the Zanzibar dominions. Missionaries visited little-known regions and peoples, and in many instances became explorers and pioneers of trade and empire. David Livingstone, a Scottish missionary, had been engaged since 1840 in work north of the Orange River. In 1849, Livingstone crossed the Kalahari Desert from south to north and reached Lake Ngami. Between 1851 and 1856, he traversed the continent from west to east, discovering the great waterways of the upper Zambezi River.

Nyasa had been reached by the confidential slave of António da Silva Porto, a Portuguese trader established at Bié in Angola, who crossed Africa during 1853–1856 from Benguela to the mouth of the Rovuma. A prime goal for explorers was to locate the source of the River Nile. Expeditions by Burton and Speke (1857–1858) and Speke and Grant (1863) located Lake Tanganyika and Lake Victoria.¹² It was eventually proved to be the latter from where the Nile flowed.

By the 19th century the colonisation and domination by Europeans of Non-Europeans was the most noticeable international phenomenon. This domination took many forms ranging from economic penetration to outright annexation. No area of the globe, however remote from Europe, was free of European merchants, adventurers, explorers or western missionaries.

One noted current historian, Niall Ferguson has argued that the British Empire probably accomplished more positive good for the world than the last generation of historians, influenced by Marxism, could or would concede. Ferguson has argued that the British Empire was a “liberal” empire that upheld international law, kept the seas open and free, and ultimately benefited everyone by ensuring the free flow of trade.¹³ In other words, Ferguson would

find little reason to contradict the young Winston Churchill’s assertion that the aim of British imperialism was to:

“Give peace to warring tribes, to administer justice where all was violence, to strike the chains off the slave, to draw the richness from the soil, to place the earliest seeds of commerce and learning, to increase in whole peoples their capacities for pleasure and diminish their chances of pain.”¹⁴

The other great school of thought about Imperialism is, of course, Marxist. For example, Marxist historians like E.J. Hobsbawm argue that if we look at the 19th century as a great competition for the world’s wealth and resources, there were clear winners and losers. Among the winners were the British, French, Americans, and Japanese all successful colonisers. Among the losers were Punjabis, Zulus, Chinese, Egyptians, Crow, Sioux and hundreds of other Non-European tribes and ethnic groups.¹⁵ The period of ‘New Colonialism’ has a couple of peculiar characteristics:

Firstly, much of it occurs during the last 30 years of the 19th century; it is during the years 1870 to 1900 that much of Africa and Asia falls under the direct control of one European power or another. It should be remembered that apart from the traditional European powers, even the United States, is clearly an economic and cultural outpost of Western Europe and the Americans are enthusiastic players in the Imperial sweepstakes; For the most part, at the expense of Spain, thus the term ‘New Imperialism’ (as the old imperial expansion of the 14th-15th Century was led by Spain and Portugal)¹⁶

Secondly, this entire period of colonisation and empire building is very intense but brief; for example the whole period of acquiring colonies, exploiting colonies, and finally decolonisation roughly falls into one human lifetime. Winston Churchill was born in November 1874 and died in January 1965.¹⁷ He grew to adulthood during the height of the Imperialist craze, fought as a young man in the Sudan and South Africa, and lived to supervise the dismantling of the British Empire.

Given the later popularity of colonial expansion, it is surprising to see just how futile colonies seemed before 1850. For example, Adam Smith had argued that the burdens of colonialism outweighed its alleged benefits; Liberal reformers favored *laissez faire* economics and colonies tied to the mother country did not seem to fit the model of global free trade. The liberal party leader William Gladstone expected the whole British Empire to dissolve in the end, and in 1852 Benjamin Disraeli, who agreed with Gladstone in little else, made his famous declaration that, “These wretched colonies will all be independent in a few years and are millstones around our necks.”¹⁸

The experience of the Spanish in the Western Hemisphere also seemed to suggest colonial empires were on the way out. Spanish colonial rule from Mexico to Argentina was overturned by a series of revolutions. There was a widespread feeling in Europe that colonies were more trouble than they were worth and the sooner or later colonies would revolt and fight for independence. Between 1775 and 1875, owing to all the successful revolutions in North America and Latin America, Europeans lost more territory than they acquired.¹⁹

But, rather suddenly, at the beginning of the 1870s, the British, French, and German popular attitudes towards colonies changed radically. The British Tory Party under

Benjamin Disraeli adopted an imperialist platform and the "Little Englanders", as critics of the empire called them, lost both parliamentary seats and popular influence. In 1876 Disraeli persuaded parliament to bestow the title of "Empress of India" upon Queen Victoria. The Queen appeared in public for the first time in 15 years adorned in huge, uncut jewels from India. For two generations of British subjects, India became "the Jewell in the Crown." India became a symbol of exotic climes, healthy and profitable adventure, and British Imperial greatness. Authors like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) began to write popular tales of adventures on the frontiers of the British Empire. These few lines from Kipling's poem 'Gunga Din' sum up the Imperial attitudes towards the subject races:

Now in India's sunny clime,
Where I used to spend my time
Aservin' of 'Er Majesty the Queen.
Of all them blackfaced crew
The finest man I knew
Was our regimental bhisti, GungaDin.

So I'll meet him later on
At the place where 'e is gone Where
it's always double drill and no canteen
'E'll be squatin' on the coals
Givin' drink to poor damned souls,
An' I'll get a swig in Hell from Gunga Din!

Though I've belted you and flayed you,
By the livin' Gawd that made you,
Your a better man than I am GungaDin!²⁰

The popularity of imperialism was simply one superficial explanation for a remarkable process of colonial expansion. In the year 1800, Europeans controlled or occupied 35% of the land surface of the globe; By 1878 this figure had risen to 67% and by 1914 to over 84%. Between 1884 and 1915 alone, about 1/4 of the land surface of the world was divided up among the colonial powers of Europe.²¹

How the European powers managed to accomplish this in the 19th Century is a relatively easy question to answer. Europeans enjoyed a decisive technological and military advantage. Many famous colonial fights were literally battles matching 12th century weaponry against the most modern weaponry that European science could produce: rifled percussion muskets, later on, breech loading repeaters, Gatling guns, Maxim machine guns and powerful field artillery. Indigenous peoples, be they Sioux at Wounded Knee,²² Zulus at Rourke's Drift,²³ or Sudanese Dervishes at Omdurman stood no chance against vastly superior firepower. Even vast spaces and the interior of the American or African continents gave little shelter since European armies built their railways as they came or relied on steam powered riverboats with light cannons to push their way up the Yangtze, or the Congo, or the Nile. On 7th January 1841, one British steamboat, the H.M.S. Nemesis sank most of the naval forces of the Emperor of China in one afternoon.²⁴ Only extremely warlike peoples like the Afghans or the Ethiopians, sheltered among their inhospitable hills blunted the drive of Western imperialists. The Ethiopians defeated a large army of Italians at Adowa on 1st March 1896.²⁵ Neither the British during the 1880s nor the Soviets a century later had much luck in subduing the Afghans.

Perhaps the greatest display of western military superiority came in the Egyptian Sudan, at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898 when in one morning the Maxims and Lee Enfield ri-

fles of Lord Kitchener's army killed 11,000 dervishes for the loss of 48 of their own British regulars.²⁶ Young Winston Churchill was there and participated in the last successful Cavalry charge in British history.²⁷ Battles like Omdurman demonstrated that the West enjoyed a military superiority equivalent to the productive and economic domination which their factories and technology gave them. The global dominance of the West, implicit since the days of Christopher Columbus now knew few limits. Great Britain ruled India and fought several border wars in India and Afghanistan with a few volunteer regiments; a force of only 75,000 European troops. Between 1870 and 1914, the best defence native peoples enjoyed against European military superiority were the limited protection of very inhospitable climates and the susceptibility of Europeans to tropical diseases like Yellow Fever and Malaria.

However, it is more difficult to explain the reasons why, the European powers went about the exercise of colonisation. A famous British economist, John Atkinson Hobson, and following him, Lenin, attributed the colonial expansions of these years to special new economic forces at work in the most industrialized nations of western and central Europe. This economic explanation of the urge to imperialism is usually taken to mean that the basic motives were also the basest motives and that, whatever political, religious, or more idealistic excuses might be made, the real impulse was always one of capitalistic greed for raw materials, advantageous markets, good investments, and fresh fields of exploitation.

The argument, in brief, is what Hobson called "the economic taproot of imperialism"²⁸ was excessive capital in search of investment, and that this excessive capital came from over saving made possible by the unequal distribution of wealth. The remedy, he maintained, was internal social reform and a more equal distribution of wealth. "If the consuming public in this country raised its standard of consumption to keep pace with every rise of productive powers, there could be no excess of goods or capital clamorous to use imperialism in order to find markets."²⁹ It is undeniable that the search for lucrative yet secure overseas investment played a part in the European urge to acquire colonies at the end of the nineteenth century.

The followers of Karl Marx were especially eager to prove that imperialism was economically motivated because they associated imperialism with the ultimate demise of capitalism. V. I. Lenin (1870-1924) elaborated the argument, in his famous pamphlet "Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism" (1916). According to Lenin, as the capitalist system concentrates wealth in fewer and fewer hands, the possibility for investment at home is exhausted, and capitalists have no choice but to invest abroad, establish colonies, and exploit small, weak nations. In the backward colonial peoples, argued Lenin, capitalism had found a new proletariat to exploit; And from the enhanced profits of such imperialism it was able to bribe at least the more skilled workers at home into renouncing revolutionary fervor and collaborating with the bourgeoisie. There could be no cure for imperialism aside from the destruction of capitalism. At the same time, the destruction of colonial empires must be intimately involved with the great, inevitable revolution against capitalism itself.³⁰ Cecil Rhodes, the founder of the Rhodes scholarships and a leading British imperialist, seemingly agreeing with Lenin, argued that colonies helped to ensure social peace and prevented socialist revolution at home by taking the minds of the working class off their misery: "He who would avoid civil war must be an imperialist."³¹

Today, few historians or economists take the simplifications of Lenin very seriously. For one thing, colonies were not a major source of investment. The British, the foremost colonizers of all, invested far more capital in North America, South America and Australia rather than in Africa, India or China. Many colonies acquired were economically useless; British New Guinea or the German Cameroons offered little economic incentive to European countries. It was not so much a matter of investment following annexation as the other way around. The Germans invested far more money in Latin American than in their own African colonies. This is not that there was no economic advantage from colonies. The British got gold, copper, and rare minerals from South Africa. The Belgians made efforts to exploit the mineral resources of the Congo, but there is no denying the fact that most of the new colonies cost more than they returned to the mother country.

There is a better explanation for 19th century Imperialism that still has its roots in the world economic structure. This explanation stresses the importance of the unification of Germany in 1870 and the emergence of the new German Reich as a major economic and military factor. During the late 19th century tensions between the great powers of Europe increased; More to the point, there was a military component to all this in the form of a military and naval arms race. It became more convenient to play out the European rivalries in the colonial sphere than at home in the form of open warfare. At the same time, as war in Europe began to seem more likely, all governments became more interested in dominating strategic territories and favorable locations for military and naval bases. Suddenly the Cape of Africa and the coastal cities of China seemed to be of enormous strategic significance. The British government in particular began to see the British Empire more in terms of a possible strategic asset in case of war. Colonial outposts like Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, and Hong Kong all become more important as military and naval bases than as symbols of empire. They were now vital as links in the strategic lifeline to India. In short, European nations acquired colonies for reason of national security, because having an empire was very popular with the voters, and because governments came to see colonies as necessary to great power status.

Nationalist intellectuals in all European powers argued that national greatness meant seizing colonial territory. Once the scramble for colonies began, failure to enter the race was perceived as a sign of weakness, totally unacceptable to an aspiring great power. Imperialists like Joseph Chamberlain in Britain, Conservative Party Colonial Secretary, argued that the empire also provided a training ground for new leaders and a great economic unit should a collision with Germany come. The German historian Heinrich von Treitschke, for example, maintained that "all great nations in the fullness of their strength have desired to set their mark upon barbarian land and those who fail to participate in this rivalry will play a pitiable role in time to come."³² The French political scientist Paul Leroy Beaulieu justified French expansion in Africa because:

"Colonies are a matter of life or death for France: either France will become a great African power or in a century or two she will be no more than a secondary European power and will count for as much in the world as Greece or Rumania."

For all these reasons, by the end of the 19th century colonialism like nationalism developed into a masscult. Colonies were symbols of national greatness and nationalists of eve-

ry economic class were proud of them.

The very symbol of imperialism was the modern, armored, steam powered warship. If a great power by definition, possessed colonies, she protected those colonies by building a modern fleet. Great Britain had always relied on her Royal Navy and by the 1890s many countries decided to follow the British example and invest in a fleet of steel battleships. In the new German Empire, in particular, the new German Emperor William II envied British world power, which he believed rested on her navy. He determined that Germany must have its fleet as well:

"Germany is a young and growing Empire. She has a worldwide commerce to which the legitimate ambition of patriotic Germans refuses to assign any bounds. Germany must have a powerful fleet to protect that commerce and her interests in even the most distant seas. Only those powers, which have great navies, will be listened to with respect, when the future of Pacific comes to be solved; And if for that reason only, Germany must have a powerful fleet."³³

However, economic reasons were often supported by religious and cultural arguments, which were used to sell the idea of colonialism to the people. Indeed, it was religious and cultural reasons, which had the greatest appeal to the masses as the economic reasons were not easily comprehended in their entirety by the common man. The most common argument was that colonialism benefited indigenous peoples by bringing them the benefits of higher civilisation. King Leopold of Belgium rushed enthusiastically into the race for territory in Central Africa: "To open to civilisation the only part of the globe where it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which envelops whole populations, is a Crusade worthy of this century of progress."³⁴

President McKinley justified intervention in the revolt of the Philippines against Spain because, "We must help our little brown brothers".³⁵ Some imperialist took a more religious humanitarian approach to empire. They argued that Europeans (and Americans) had a Christian and moral responsibility to educated ignorant peoples into higher culture and Christianity. To many Europeans and Americans, the proselytising mission seemed as important as the prospect of expanding prestige and profit. The humanitarian argument found its classic expression in Kipling's famous poem, *The White Man's Burden*:

Take up the White Man's Burden,
Send forth the best ye breed.
Go bind your sons to exile,
To serve your captive's needs;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild,
Your new caught
sullen peoples,
Half -devil and half -child.³⁶

If Kipling's idealistic view of British Imperialism is obvious, however, so is his patronising attitude towards the colonised people and his arrogant assumption of White racial superiority. Imperialism was also tied to the growth of racist and Social Darwinist thought. Social Darwinists believed that in the struggle between races and nations, the fittest are victorious and survive. Superior races must inevitably dominate inferior races by military force to show how strong and virile they are. As one British academic put it in 1900:

"The path of progress is strewn with the wrecks of nations; Traces everywhere to be seen of the [slaughtered remains] of inferior racesYet these dead people are, in very truth, the stepping stones on which mankind has arisen to the higher intellectual and deeper emotional life of today."³⁷

Another English imperialist was equally blunt: "To the development of the White Man, the Black Man and the Yellow must ever remain inferior."³⁸ Europeans of all imperialist nations readily accepted the racist notion of the superiority of the Christian west; German imperialists spoke of the greatness of German *Kultur* (culture) while French colonialists discussed the "French civilising Mission." Many felt that missionary activity alone was a sufficient justification in itself. In India, the sons of Brahmin families were taught British history and Shakespeare but forbidden membership in White society.³⁹ One textbook written to educate Vietnamese and Black children in French history began with these words: "Our ancestors, the Gauls, were a fair-haired race."⁴⁰

Nevertheless, there were some benefits to the colonised peoples as a result of the influx of Western science and technology. An example of the benefit of European Empire building was the abolition of slave trade. The Royal Navy controlled most of the key maritime trade routes and enjoyed unchallenged sea power from 1814-1914,⁴¹ and was superior to any other two navies in the world combined which resulted in a de facto state of 'Pax Britannica' (Latin for British Peace). This resulted in the effective clampdown on slave trade.⁴² The term was based on 'Pax Romana' (Roman Peace), which was the long period of relative peace and minimal expansion by the Roman military force experienced by the Roman Empire after the end of the Final War of the Roman Republic and before the beginning of the Crisis of the Third Century.⁴³ This alone was considered justification enough for the British Empire by many evangelicals at home. There were other benefits too. For example, European medicine cured or at least controlled ancient epidemic diseases like Yellow Fever. On the other hand, such medical interventions also upset the delicate environmental demographic balance and contributed to a global population explosion that is still underway.

Europeans built railways and modernized harbor facilities. Colonial peoples received European style educations and a lucky few even entered Oxford and Cambridge or the Sorbonne. Impressive architecture was erected to house European governors and the bureaucrats who administered the colonies. Naval bases, military bases, coaling stations and mining towns appeared in the jungles of the Congo. Cities like Saigon and Cairo acquired broad European style avenues and impressive restaurants, opera houses and department stores. Nevertheless, the belief that the superiority of their civilisation obligated them to impose modern industry, cities and new medicines on supposedly primitive peoples was another form of racism.

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