

AFRICAN
WORLD
HISTORIES

COLONIAL AFRICA

1884-1994

DENNIS LAUMANN

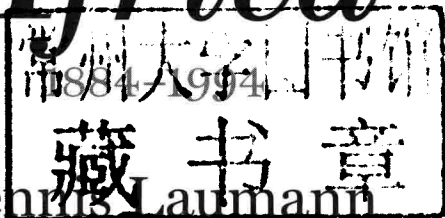


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AFRICAN WORLD HISTORIES

*Colonial
Africa*



Dennis Laumann

University of Memphis

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In memory of DeMadre Kareem Lockett

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About the Cover: *Colonie belge 2*, a painting by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu of present-day Democratic Republic of Congo, circa 1971. Tshibumba's work chronicles the tragic history of colonial and postcolonial Congo, such as this depiction of forced laborers being supervised by Force Publique soliders brandishing the dreaded *chicotte*.

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AFRICAN WORLD HISTORIES

Colonial Africa,
1884–1994

AFRICAN WORLD HISTORIES

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Trevor R. Getz, San Francisco State University

African World Histories is a series of retellings of some of the most commonly discussed episodes of the African and global past from the perspectives of Africans who lived through them. Accessible yet scholarly, African World Histories gives students insights into African experiences concerning many of the events and trends that are commonly discussed in the history classroom.

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Preface

This book is meant to provide a general overview of the European colonial occupation of Africa. Although what is regarded as the colonial period in African history was relatively recent and brief, a survey presents significant challenges. First, the generally recognized time span of colonial Africa, roughly 1884 to 1960, is not accurate for many parts of the continent. European settlement in southern Africa began in the seventeenth century, for example, and white minority rule did not end there until 1994. Second, the subject of African colonial history has generated a wealth of literature, especially of late, so giving readers a sense of all the various trends and developments requires a great deal of sifting. Third, and last, some specialists in particular countries, areas, or topics may rightly feel that their subject has not received adequate attention, but in a concise volume such as this one, which covers more than a century of history spanning an entire continent, it is impossible to analyze every aspect of colonial Africa. I therefore have attempted to address the major themes in this history, in a chronological fashion, by highlighting major and informative case studies throughout this book. A short list of references comprising some of the works cited as well as additional relevant, noteworthy texts is included at the end of each chapter. While my own opinions and findings make their way into the narrative, the purpose of this book is to present a balanced, readable, and comprehensive overview of how Africans experienced European colonial rule.

A number of people and institutions deserve recognition for the support they provided during the process of researching and writing this book. First and foremost, I thank series editor Trevor R. Getz for asking me to write it and generously guiding me with his advice. Likewise, thanks to Charles Cavaliere, our editor at Oxford University Press, for his enthusiasm and understanding throughout this project. It has been a pleasure working with our diligent and gracious assistant editor at Oxford, Lauren Aylward.

To help me complete this book, the University of Memphis awarded me a sabbatical in spring 2011, and my chair, Janann Sherman, offered research and travel support. While in Memphis,

I spent much of my sabbatical working at Rhodes College, thanks to my good friend Mark Behr. The African Studies Center at the University of Florida hosted me as a visiting research scholar in February 2011. I benefited enormously from its lively program of lectures as well as many informal get-togethers, especially conversations with historians Sean Hanretta, Susan O'Brien, and Luise White. I thank then-director Leonardo A. Villalón for extending an invitation to Gainesville and associate director Todd H. Leedy for arranging my visit. I also thank the people who reviewed the manuscript:

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My formal education as a historian of Africa began under the guidance of two remarkable teachers at Binghamton University, Ali A. Mazrui and Akbar Muhammad. That training continued in graduate school at UCLA, where Christopher Ehret, the late Boniface Obichere, and above all my advisor, Merrick Posnansky, imparted inspiration, knowledge, and precision, all of which I hope is manifested in this book.

As always, I am indebted to my family—especially my wife Rebecca, my son Max, my father Heinz, and my brother Thomas—for their love and support. I regret my late mother Renate could not hold these pages in her hands.

This book is dedicated in memory of a beloved student who left this world way too early but continually reminds me of why I teach African history.

About the Author

Dennis Laumann is associate professor of history at the University of Memphis. The author of the forthcoming *Remembering the Germans in Ghana* (Peter Lang) and other publications on West African history, Laumann received his doctorate from UCLA in 1999. He is president of the Ghana Studies Association and a Fulbright Scholar. He also is the recipient of numerous teaching honors, including the Thomas W. Briggs Foundation's Excellence in Teaching Award.

Series Introduction

The African World Histories series presents a new approach to teaching and learning for African history and African studies courses. Its main innovation is to interpret African and global experiences from the perspectives of the Africans who lived through them. By integrating accounts and representations produced or informed by Africans with accessible scholarly analysis at both local and global levels, African World Histories gives students insight into Africans' understandings and experiences of such episodes as the Atlantic slave trade, the growth of intercontinental commerce and the industrial revolution, colonialism, and the Cold War. The authors in this series look at these episodes through the lenses of culture, politics, social organization, daily life, and economics in an integrated format informed by recent scholarly studies as well as primary source materials. Unlike those of many textbooks and series, the authors of African World Histories actively take positions on major questions, such as the centrality of violence in the colonial experience, the cosmopolitan nature of pre-colonial African societies, and the importance of democratization in Africa today. Underlying this approach is the belief that students can succeed when presented with relatively brief, jargon-free interpretations of African societies that integrate Africans' perspectives with critical interpretations and that balance intellectual rigor with broad accessibility.

This series is designed for use in both the world history and the African history/studies classroom. As an African history/studies teaching tool it combines continentwide narratives with emphases on specific, localized, and thematic stories that help demonstrate wider trends. As auxiliary texts for the world history classroom, the volumes in this series can help to illuminate important episodes in the global past from the perspectives of Africans, adding complexity and depth, as well as facilitating intellectual growth for students. Thus it will help world history students not only understand that the human past was "transnational" and shared, but also see how it was understood differently by different groups and individuals.

African World Histories is the product of a grand collaboration. The authors include scholars from around the world and across Africa. Each volume is reviewed by multiple professionals in African history and related fields. The excellent team of editors at Oxford University Press, led by Charles Cavaliere, put a great deal of effort into commissioning, reviewing, and bringing these volumes to publication. Finally, we all stand on the shoulders of early giants in the field, including Cheikh Anta Diop, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Jan Vansina, and Roland Oliver.

— **TREVOR R. GETZ, SERIES EDITOR**

Introduction

What is colonialism? The word is often used without an understanding of its precise definition. We speak of the colonial world or the colonial experience or colonized minds, but what exactly do we mean? Colonialism generally refers to the seizure and occupation of territory (colonization) belonging to one group of people (the colonized) by another group of people (the colonizers). Sometimes colonization results in the actual settlement of the territory by the colonizers, but more often (especially in the case of European colonial rule in Africa) it only leads to the exploitation of the colony through minimal alien administration. The words *colonialism* and *imperialism* also tend to be used interchangeably and so have become confused. While imperialism is the essential basis for colonialism, the latter does not always follow the former. Imperialism is the process of one group of people extending its economic, political, or social power over other peoples. A nation can be imperialist by waging wars with neighboring and faraway states or undermining and dominating the economies of weaker nations without necessarily colonizing them. Yet, colonialism frequently is an extension of imperialism, as certainly occurred when European imperialists colonized Africa.

This book covers the history of the colonial era in African history, during which the entire continent (with the exceptions of Liberia and Ethiopia, which enjoyed varying degrees of independence throughout the period) was seized and occupied by Europeans. The colonization process gradually began in the mid-nineteenth century, a period of what scholars call informal colonialism but that accelerated and expanded dramatically in the 1880s. The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, during which the European powers plotted their division of Africa among themselves, is normally considered the start of the colonial period. Within a decade or two, what European imperialists called the pacification of Africa was relatively speaking complete, though some areas of the continent were not fully colonized until the beginning of the twentieth century and resistance to colonial rule everywhere never ceased. The actual experience of colonialism in

many parts of Africa was short-lived, however, as popular anticolonial movements exploded after the Second World War. By 1960, most Africans had regained their independence, as European colonists departed and new African nations were declared. Other Africans, particularly in southern Africa and in the Portuguese colonies, had to resort to armed struggle to win their independence, which came only in the last decades of the twentieth century. Our survey ends in 1994, when the apartheid regime in South Africa was replaced by a democratic, nonracial government headed by the first African president, Nelson Mandela. Thus, the colonial period lasted not even one century in most of Africa and far less in many parts of continent, although, as will be shown, far longer in both South Africa and Algeria.

It is often forgotten that the colonization of Africa by Europeans happened relatively recently in history. In fact, generally speaking, Africa was the last continent to come under European colonial rule. Most of the Americas were conquered by European powers, first by Spain and Portugal in the early sixteenth century, while by the late eighteenth century, Australia was effectively occupied by the British. And though many parts of Asia remained independent of European rule, large areas of the continent, including much of present-day India and parts of China, were colonized by Europeans as early as the eighteenth century. While it is true there were several small European colonies along Africa's coastlines—such as France's settlements in North Africa and West Africa, Portugal's enclaves in Central Africa, and Britain's Cape Town in the south—what we refer to as the colonial period in African history, again, did not start until the late nineteenth century. Until then, Europeans did not possess sufficient technological advantages, including military, to take over Africa; neither did they have the desire or need to, since economic relations between European and African powers were, for the most part in the centuries before colonialism, mutually beneficial.

So, what changed in the nineteenth century? For the first time in history, Europeans surpassed Africa in technological superiority. Inventions such as the steamship and the railway, products of the industrial revolution spurred by the development of capitalism, allowed Europeans to extend their reach into the interior of Africa. Previously, European traders were not only restricted to their coastal forts and bases by the edicts of African rulers, but they simply did not have the means to sail up river or traverse vast land distances. Once they established themselves in the interior, the telegraph, another invention of the time, allowed efficient and secure communication

between far-flung stations. In the 1850s, the discovery that quinine, a medicine derived from the bark of a tree, helped prevent and treat malaria (so much the scourge of Europeans in West Africa that it was known as the “white man’s graveyard”) and led to a gradual growth in the numbers of European traders, missionaries, and so-called explorers in Africa. Finally, Europeans created a powerful, brutally effective new weapon, the machine gun, which gave them an enormous military advantage over African armies in their own territories. As will be shown in chapter 1, it was not just that this new technology made colonization possible, but by the mid-nineteenth century, Europeans imperial powers actually had the desire and need to colonize Africa for economic and political reasons.

STUDY OF THE COLONIAL PERIOD

In light of these facts, that the colonization of Africa occurred quite recently in world history and lasted only several decades in many parts of the continent, we must assess the colonial period’s importance in Africa’s history. Several questions, each generated by different interpretations of the colonial period, can guide our assessment. For example, was the colonial era just a brief, even insignificant “episode,” as the Nigerian historian Jacob Ade Ajayi proclaimed, considering that the long history of the African continent stretches back from human origins to the present? After all, why should we place so much emphasis on several decades, the 1880s to 1960s in most parts of Africa, in a history covering thousands and thousands of years? And, then, does it make sense to divide up this immense period into pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods when almost all of African history occurred in the first category (and which we further could split up innumerable ways, such as ancient, classical, medieval, etc.)? Historians who embrace a more Afrocentric perspective tend to argue this point.

Or was colonialism such a transformative era, one that so dramatically and irreversibly changed Africa’s economic, social, and political institutions that it should continue to be afforded a special status in African history? In other words, is Africa after colonial rule so different from what it was before the colonial era that the aforementioned pre- and post- eras should remain blanketed around the colonial period? This is the more conventional understanding of the colonial period, one reflected in most scholarship.

Or is there a third possibility, lately proposed by historians of Africa, that colonialism was more of a continuum in African history? Yes, they argue, colonial rule undoubtedly was the imposition of foreign political rule and economic domination, but its impact was uneven across the continent and it did not fully prevent the continued development of African institutions within and beyond the colonial state. Furthermore, they propose, Africans were instrumental in the colonial process, too, not simply the bystanders or victims of colonial rule, but active shapers of colonialism, people who frequently viewed colonialism as an opportunity.

That last point is especially revealing as it marks a departure from traditional scholarship on colonialism, which tended to divide Africans into “collaborators” and “resisters.” In this view, Africans either benefited from colonial rule at the expense of their fellow Africans or they fought against European domination through various peaceful and violent means. Today, scholars realize that the moral choices individuals faced usually were not that clear-cut and that it is simplistic to label Africans in one category or the other. For instance, should we consider a Lunda man who entered the Belgian colonial service in order to improve his status and provide for his family but who also, in the evenings, attended services at an African church where Europeans were depicted as vampires and anti-colonial sentiments were expressed a selfish collaborator? Or, on the other hand, was the Mande soldier who fought against French colonization in West Africa as part of an army that also captured and enslaved other Africans a heroic resister? This does not mean that there were no obvious cases of collaboration or resistance, but the reality of colonialism was far more complex to warrant the attachment to such acute, rigid dichotomies.

These perspectives on the colonial period are reflected in the origins, development, and current state of the historical literature on the subject. The creation of African history as an academic field outside of Africa coincided with the widespread end of colonial rule on the continent and the prevailing global anti-colonial sentiment following the Second World War. Whereas during the colonial era imperial powers were motivated to learn about the people they colonized in order to more effectively control them, some have argued that when the independence era began (and perhaps continuing until today) Africanists (specialists on Africa) played a similar role in helping to “make sense” of Africa to a Western audience. In the 1960s, the first courses in African history were taught in Europe

and the United States, not in Africa where the legacy of colonial, Eurocentric education was entrenched and where there were few established universities. Nevertheless, a group of African historians, men who studied in Europe during the colonial era, began producing books on Africa's past. At first their work largely bypassed the colonial era—perhaps it was considered too recent and maybe even humiliating to examine—as historians focused on the precolonial era, especially the trade and politics of African states. In part, this coincided with the effort to highlight the glories of Africa's past, not only as an anecdote to the racist, colonial-era notion that Africa had no history before European rule but also as a precedent for the newly founded African nations. If the colonial era was simply a short episode of foreign domination, it was argued, Africa's leaders should look to the precolonial era for authentic, indigenous examples of leadership and administration.

Later in the 1960s, historians began studying colonialism more extensively, and two distinct approaches emerged. The first approach, carried out mainly by conservative, Western scholars, analyzed colonial administration and stressed what they believed to be the positive aspects of colonialism. In other words, the studies they produced examined the policies and procedures of European colonial officials and the infrastructure they built and the services they provided. In many ways, this literature carried on the “imperial history” of the colonial era, which focused on the lives of Europeans in Africa but barely mentioned Africans. The second approach, pursued by radical scholars, many based in Africa, concentrated on African resistance to colonialism. To counter the pro-imperialist literature and in their effort to show African agency during the colonial era, they wrote about the various ways Africans opposed European rule and fought for their independence. These historians distinguished between what was termed “active” and “passive” resistance as well as the localized armed uprisings of the early colonial period and the mass-based, nationalist, anti-colonial movements of late colonialism. This body of work was very influential in our understanding of the colonial period and in many respects formed the foundation of subsequent scholarly research.

The late 1960s also witnessed the growth of scholarship influenced by Marxism, which sharply criticized and rejected any positive portrayal of colonialism. In general, Marxist historians focus on the economic factors and motives in history rather than on cultural influences and emphasize the role of class in shaping relations within

societies. To these scholars, then, the colonization of Africa was rooted in economic changes and pursuits of the time and the exploitation of Africa also had a class dimension in that African elites participated and emerged in the colonial project as well. A classic work from this perspective is Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, a popular and powerful survey of the history and impact of African-European relations. Although Marxist scholarship is less prominent today, it was extremely influential throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s by challenging traditional interpretations of colonialism, analyzing the colonial economy and its legacy in postcolonial Africa, and pointing the way to new areas of study for historians.

Over the past three decades, the study of the colonial period has become more nuanced and refined, since historians were able to move beyond the once basic agenda of countering pro-imperialist rhetoric or asserting Africa's place in world history. Moreover, the topics explored and the arguments presented in earlier scholarship raised further questions that needed to be addressed. As a result, the current state of the field of African history is the reverse of what it was at its inception—that is, more scholars specialize in the colonial period and fewer in precolonial African history. The first marked departure from earlier studies of colonialism was the growth of literature focusing on women and gender in colonial Africa, mostly produced by female scholars who were influenced by the women's rights movements of the 1970s. These historians sought not only to recover and highlight women's voices and roles but also to interrogate the part played by gender in colonial society. While today it may seem quite ordinary to study women's history and gender issues, until recently these subjects were largely absent from the historical literature of all areas and time periods of world history.

More recent work on colonialism has investigated a wide spectrum of new topics, including popular culture, gossip and rumor, fashion, medicine and disease, and ecology. In line with the argument that the colonial experience varied greatly from place to place, over time, and among individuals, these studies shed light on how Africans understood, shaped, and remember the colonial period. And while earlier scholarship was primarily regional or continental in scope, historians have since become cognizant of the peculiarities of colonialism in specific places for a variety of reasons, such as culture and environment, and now have a tendency to focus on localized studies. This turn to more narrow topics and locations is a reflection of ideological and theoretical trends in academia and beyond, but it also

attests to the achievement of several generations of historians in tackling the difficult work of finding and using sources for the colonial period.

SOURCES ON AFRICA'S COLONIAL HISTORY

From the onset of its establishment as an academic field, historians of Africa have faced many challenges in their work. First and foremost, they had to counter the widespread ignorance and misrepresentation, specifically in the West, of Africa's past. It often seems we continue to fight this battle since lack of knowledge of African history remains pervasive not only within the general public but even within institutions of higher education. Second, they had to reconstruct that past without the benefit of a large body of written documents, the traditional source material for historians. While there are numerous examples of literate societies that produced written documentation, ranging from ancient Egypt in North Africa to the medieval kingdom of Mali in West Africa, most African societies historically tended to privilege oral means of recording their history, customs, and laws. The third challenge, then, was to convince non-Africanists of the usefulness and reliability of oral traditions (among other sources) for reconstructing the past. A pioneer in this effort was Jan Vansina, one of the leading figures of African history, who presented his case and laid out methodological strategies in *Oral Tradition as History*. In the process of confronting these challenges, Africanists not only produced cutting-edge, interdisciplinary scholarship; they also influenced other fields of study. Today most historians of Africa collect, interpret, and discuss a wide range of sources, such as oral history, written documents, linguistic data, and archaeological evidence, in the course of their research.

Writing colonial history, moreover, presents special challenges. In contrast with the pre-colonial period in most of Africa, there is a wealth of written documents produced during colonialism. The authors of these texts, of course, were primarily European colonizers, although many Western-educated African men also generated a written record, including personal letters, newspaper articles, petitions, and scholarly books. Historians always must carefully consider the backgrounds, biases, and agendas of the author of any source material, not just written documents, so naturally these various texts must be understood as reflections of the views of a small group of people

who experienced the colonial period, whether as European colonial officials or missionaries, for example, or African elites in the legal or medical field. How, then, do historians find and incorporate the perspectives and experiences of the majority, namely, African women, peasants, workers, and others who were not literate?

The most obvious source is oral history, since there are many Africans (though a decreasing number in much of the continent) who witnessed colonialism firsthand. Scholars differentiate between oral tradition, which refers to events that occurred before one's birth, and oral history, which encompasses one's lifetime. Certainly there are far more people with vivid and comprehensive memories of life under Portuguese rule in a country like Mozambique, which only regained its independence in 1975, than in Libya, where independence from Italy was declared nearly a quarter of a century earlier, in 1951. While historians always must be aware of the challenges presented by oral history, like any source material it allows us to study people's understandings of their own histories, particularly the interpretations of those, such as women, whose voices are often silent in the written historical record. But even written documents can be used to present African voices, as historians have interrogated European colonial records, such as court transcripts, to identify African viewpoints. Social historian Luise White, for example, has shown how African gossip and rumor mentioned in colonial documents help us understand changing colonial policies in East and Central Africa. Thus, by collecting oral history from Africans themselves and reading written records "against the grain," scholars have sought to present African viewpoints on European colonial rule.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In many ways this book is the result of all the aforementioned debates, developments, and challenges, as it represents a synthesis of our current understanding of the colonial period in African history. The pages that follow will explore the colonial period of African history in a thematic and roughly chronological way. Chapter 1 (Economics) focuses on the foundations of colonialism, from the changes taking place in African-European trade during the nineteenth century to the actual conquest and occupation of Africa by Europe through the First World War, an era of outright brutality and plunder. Despite the rhetoric of colonialists, the main motivation for the colonization of