

TIMES PAST
1960

When Africa Broke Free

Many of the continent's successes and struggles today can be traced to one momentous year, when 17 African nations gained independence from European colonial rule BY MICHAEL WINES

Nigerians celebrate election results in 1959 in a run-up to independence the following year.



When British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan took the podium in Cape Town, in February 1960, to address South Africa's parliament, he knew how unstoppable Africans' longing for freedom was.

Macmillan had spent the previous month trekking through Africa to talk to leaders about the future of the continent, which had been kept under

European rule for nearly a century. Now, he was sending a message to the world: The days of Britain's empire—and those of France, Belgium, and other European nations—were numbered.

"The wind of change is blowing through this continent," he said. "This growth of national consciousness is a political fact."

It turned out to be not a wind but a hurricane. In 1950, only four nations in

Africa were independent, but by the end of 1960, 27 were. In that single year, 17 nations—which accounted for 198 million Africans, or 70 percent of the continent—suddenly gained control of their destinies. It was a time of wild celebration and boundless hope.

"My major life's work is done," said Nnamdi Azikiwe, an American-educated journalist and politician who became Nigeria's first president, as his nation gained independence that October. "My country is now free."

 Download the U.N. declaration on colonialism at upfrontmagazine.com

Colonizing a Continent

European rule in Africa and dates of independence

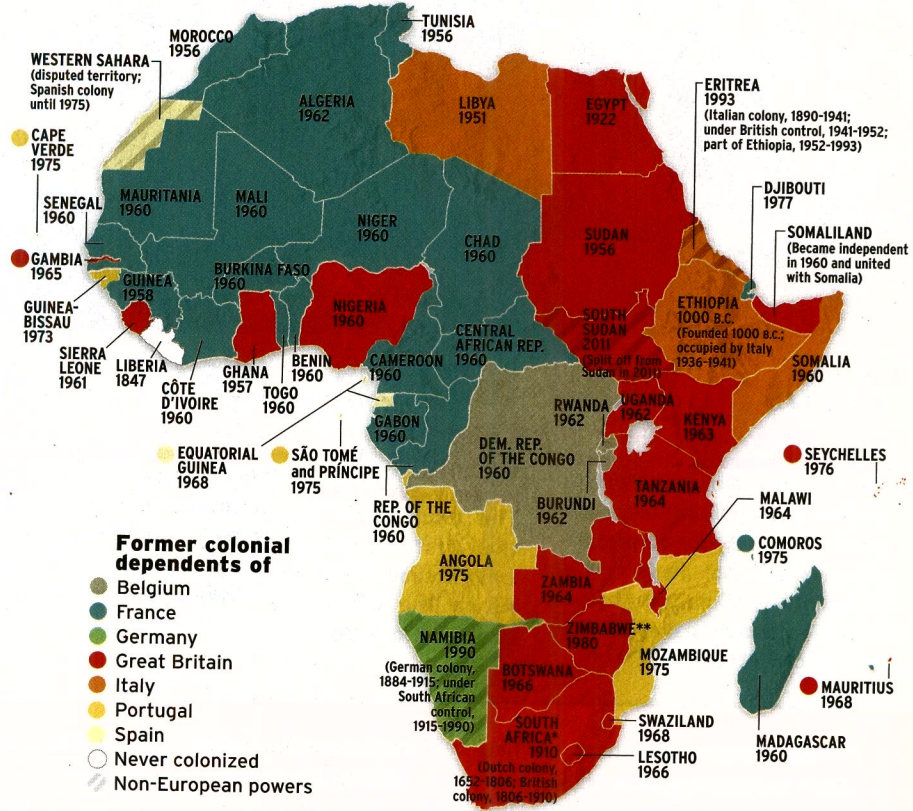
But many of the hopes of leaders like Azikiwe—for stable, prosperous societies, honest governments, and peace—proved elusive in the succeeding decades. The social and political structures that European colonizers left behind made it difficult for newly independent nations to thrive: stunted economies limited to raw-material and crop exports; roads that led only to mines and farms, not to villages; and governments designed to keep the state secure rather than improve people's lives.

"All of those were built to serve colonial interests, not the interests of African citizens," says Jennifer G. Cooke, who heads the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. "So many of today's problems were embedded and created during the colonial era."

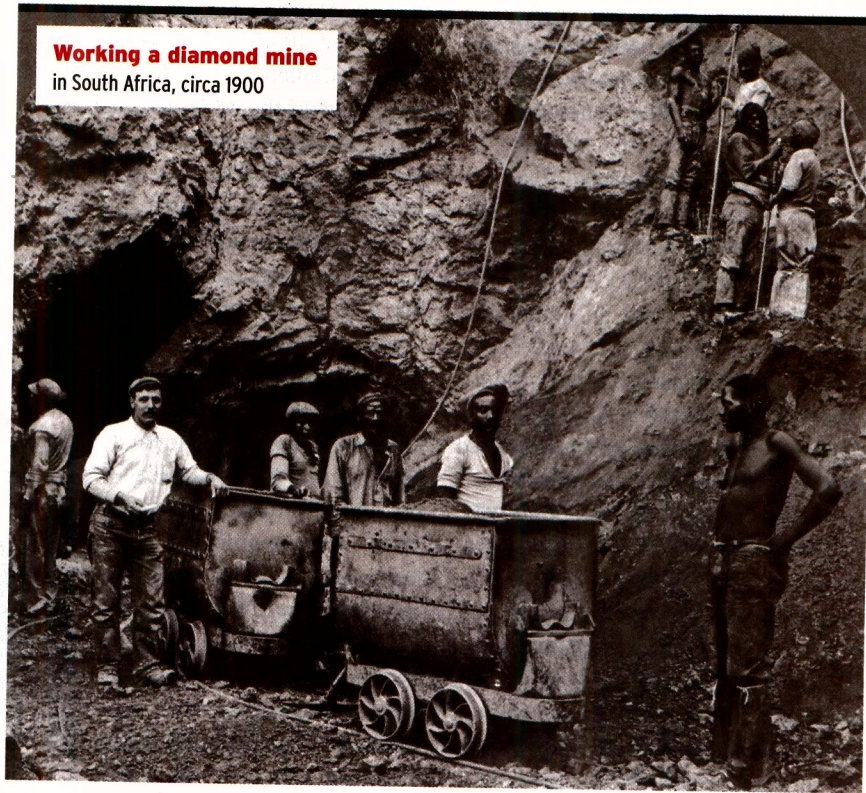
'Scramble for Africa'

European involvement in Africa began in the mid-15th century when Portuguese traders arrived on the continent looking for gold. By the end of the 16th century, they were trading in African slaves (with many sent to America), but colonization on a large scale didn't occur until much later. In the late 1800s, when explorers uncovered the riches of the continent's interior, including diamonds, rubber, and iron ore, the "scramble for Africa" began. In 1884, the European powers gathered for a conference in Berlin to carve up the continent: Britain, Germany, and Portugal would be primarily in southern and eastern Africa, with France in the west and north, and Belgium in the Congo. By 1900, 90 percent of Africa was under European control (see map).

Colonial rule brought some benefits: roads, railroads, and educational and governmental models that still survive. But it was riddled with abuses. Africans hired to oversee the colonies often ruled cruelly, and direct European control could be even worse: Congo's first ruler, Belgium's King Leopold II, boosted production at rubber plantations and

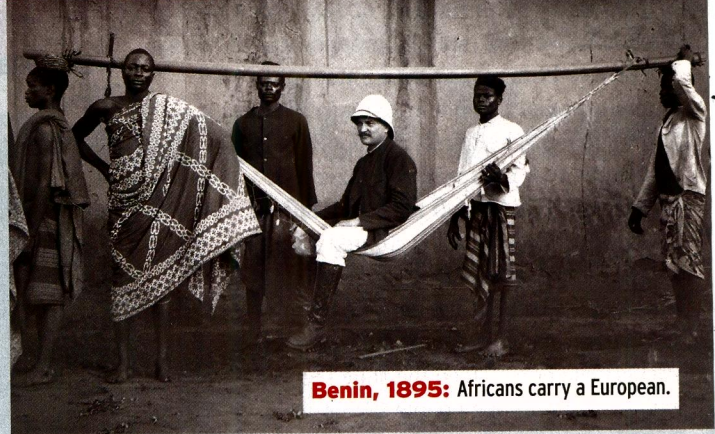


*After independence, South Africa continued to be ruled by a white minority until 1994.
**Formerly Rhodesia. It declared independence in 1965, but wasn't recognized until 1980.



Working a diamond mine in South Africa, circa 1900

Key Dates AFRICA, THEN & NOW



Benin, 1895: Africans carry a European.

1500s

African Slave Trade

The Portuguese begin trading African slaves; other European powers follow. By the time the slave trade is abolished in the 19th century, 15 million Africans have been sold as slaves—half a million to the U.S.

1652

Cape Town Colony

The Dutch establish their first colony in what is today South Africa. The British take over in 1806.

1867

Diamonds

Diamonds are discovered in what is today South Africa. A mad rush for Africa's riches begins.

1884

Berlin Conference

Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, and Belgium meet to divide up much of Africa.

1922

Egypt Freed

Egypt, which had been colonized by the French and then the British, gains its independence.

mines by ordering managers to hack off the hands of laggard workers.

In addition, the territorial borders created by Europeans—often arbitrarily and without regard to tribal relationships or geographic considerations—are responsible for a good deal of the ethnic turmoil and fighting Africa still endures today.

Fights for Independence

After World War II, a broke and ravaged Europe faced demands for freedom from its colonial subjects across the globe, including those in Africa. In some cases, independence movements turned violent, as guerrilla fighters attacked colonial governments; in others, African leaders championed self-determination and rallied support with relatively little bloodshed.

For Nigeria, freedom came gradually: In 1946, Britain acceded to Nigerians' demands for representation in the colonial government; eight years later, it granted regional assemblies more power, which led ultimately to the end of colonial rule. In 1960, Britain granted independence to Somalia as well; in the next five years, eight more British

colonies—including Uganda, Zambia, and Tanzania—also became free.

An exhausted France, which had become bogged down in a guerrilla war in Algeria in the mid-'50s and had killed 10,000 Africans in a 1955 revolt in Cameroon, gave up most of its empire: 14 of the 17 nations set free in 1960 were French colonies, including Mali, Niger, and Madagascar.

These changes in Africa played out at the height of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The U.S. was intent on thwarting the spread of Communism around the globe, and Africa became one of many battlegrounds.

Because of the continent's history, many African leaders viewed the democratic West with suspicion, and Communism with an open mind. "We in Africa have had experience of French colonialism, of British colonialism, of Belgian and Portuguese," one intellectual from Guinea told *The New York Times* in 1960.

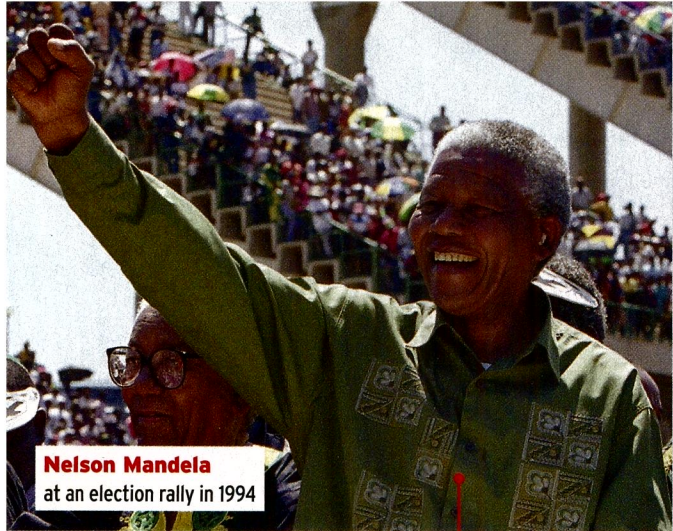
"We can worry about Russia later. First we must rid this continent of the colonialism that still exists here."

In Congo, freed that year, Belgian forces fled in the face of rioting, and the country soon fell into a civil war, during which Col. Joseph Mobutu, the army's chief of staff, seized control. It was revealed many years later that the U.S., afraid that Congo would become Communist, had secretly aided the anti-Soviet Mobutu, who would become one of Africa's most savage dictators.

Indeed, for many former colonies, freedom's blessings have been tempered by bloodshed and suffering. South Africa

Al Shabab fighters during a military exercise in Somalia, 2010





Nelson Mandela
at an election rally in 1994



A fashion show
in Lagos, Nigeria, 2013

1960

**Africa's
Year of
Freedom**

1994

Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela becomes South Africa's first black president. The nation had gained independence from the British in 1910, but a white minority ruled until 1994.

1994 & 2003

Genocides

In 1994, Rwanda's Hutus kill nearly 1 million Tutsis in just 100 days. In 2003 in Darfur, a region of Sudan, the Janjaweed begin targeting African ethnic groups. At least 400,000 have died.

TODAY

Growth & Terrorism

Africa has some of the fastest-growing economies in the world. At the same time, terrorist groups like Al Shabab and Boko Haram pose growing threats across the continent, and security concerns for the U.S. and the West.

gained its independence from Great Britain in 1910, but white minority rule and apartheid—a brutal system of discrimination against the black majority—lasted until 1991. Three years later, Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first black president. (Mandela died in 2013.)

In Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia), which declared independence from Britain in 1965, white rule over the majority black population continued until 1980. Once one of Africa's top agricultural nations, it has become one of its hungriest under its autocratic ruler, Robert Mugabe. Sudan, freed by Britain in 1956, has been wracked by decades of civil war that's killed 2 million people. Rwanda, which gained independence from Belgium in 1962, was shattered in 1994 by a politically driven genocide that killed 800,000 people in just 100 days (see "From Rwanda to Harvard," p. 14). More recently, Islamic extremism has become a problem in countries like Nigeria, Kenya, and Somalia, with terrorist groups like Boko Haram and Al Shabab creating instability in the region and a growing threat to the U.S. and the West.

Many African states are still struggling

to overcome their colonial legacies. But lately, more nations seem poised for economic and social transformation.

Africa Rising

Continent-wide, Africa's economy is growing twice as fast as the worldwide average. Nations like Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Rwanda, Ghana, and Ethiopia are among the fastest-growing economies anywhere. The continent is embracing technological advances at a staggering pace—1 in 5 Africans use the Internet today, compared to 1 in 40 a decade ago; 7 in 10 have a cellphone subscription.

Nairobi, Kenya's capital, has been dubbed the "Silicon Savannah" for its innovative apps, from health care to banking.

Economists predict that 100 million people will join the middle class in the next five years. In 2012, when the World Bank ranked nations in order of their success in creating better conditions for investment, 5 of the top 10 were in Africa.

Most important, perhaps, corrupt and incompetent governments are slowly

giving way to smarter and more honest leadership. Ghana has become a model of a developing democracy after years of autocratic rule; Nigeria, once legendary for corruption, is slowly remaking its near-uninhabitable capital, Lagos, into a stable, livable city. Investments in education in Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria have spawned a new, more educated young generation.

Kweku Mandela, a grandson of Nelson Mandela, believes that Africa's youth is

driving many of the positive changes on the continent. He co-founded the organization Africa Rising to help carry on his grandfather's legacy and promote a positive image of Africa.

When people think of Africa, they "tend to focus on things like famine, civil war, poverty, and disease," he says. But "a lot of young Africans with access to information and better education [are] starting to transform the continent." •

Michael Wines is the former Johannesburg bureau chief for The Times. Additional reporting by Veronica Majerol.

IN LEFT: AP/WIDEWORLD IMAGES (NELSON MANDELA); PER-ANDERS PETTERSSON/LAIFREDOX (FASHION SHOW); JOAO SILVA/AP IMAGES