

How has Africa's past shaped its present?

Learning objectives

- ▶ To identify the effects of European colonialism in Africa from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries.
- ▶ To consider how those effects have shaped Africa's present.

The history of European exploitation of Africa still influences the geography of the continent. Before 1860, Africa had a rich history and culture. It was divided into thousands of small areas and kingdoms, based on different languages and cultures, see Map C. In this lesson you will explore the damaging impact of the slave trade from the 1600s, followed by the colonisation of Africa by a range of European nations from the 1880s.

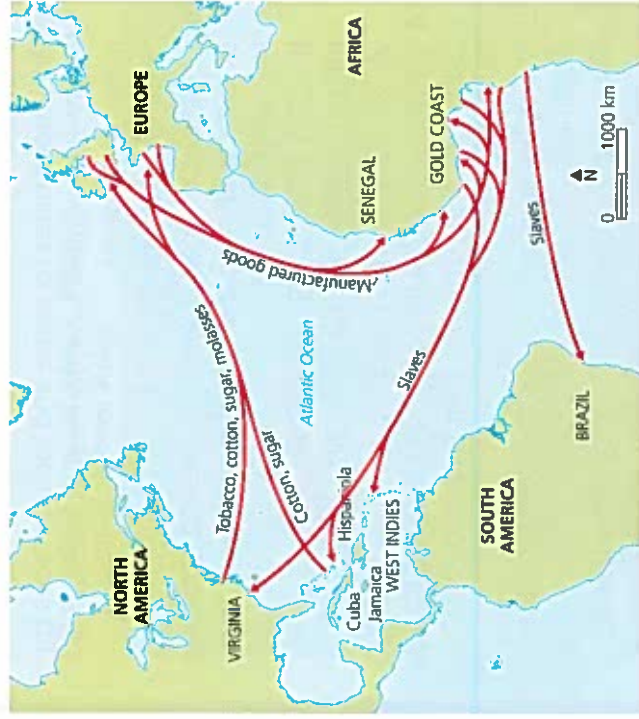
The slave trade

Between the 1600s and the 1800s, 12–15 million Africans were sold into slavery. Europeans bought people in West Africa in exchange for goods. Over the years a triangle of trade developed between Europe and the New Worlds, shown in Map A. After abolishing slavery from 1833, European nations began to develop a new form of exploitation of Africa, through colonisation.

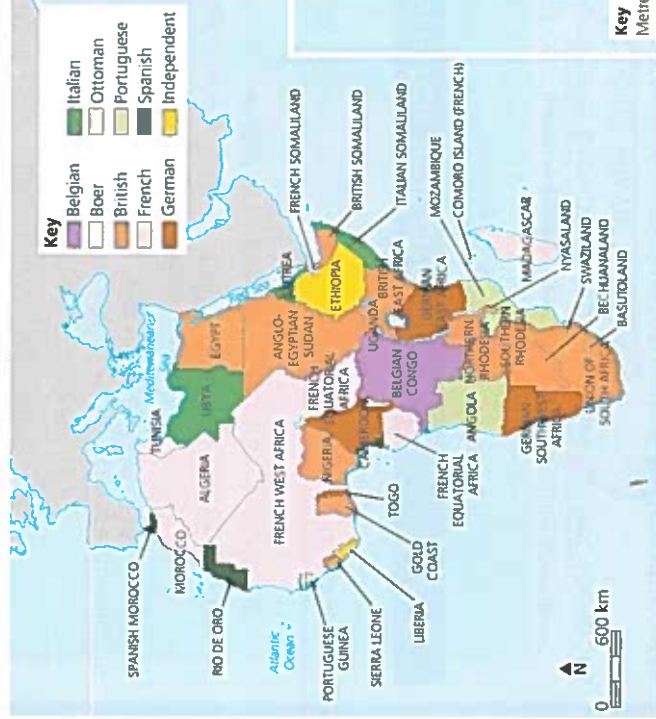
The Scramble for Africa

British explorers, such as David Livingstone, conducted expeditions to Africa and reported their findings to excited audiences at geographical conferences across Europe. As the Industrial Revolution developed in Europe, nations were keen to exploit the abundant natural resources and cheap labour of Africa discovered by these explorers. The new wealth of Europe also created a sense of superiority. Many believed they were bringing civilisation to a savage people. As the 'Scramble for Africa' got underway, it increased tension among the European imperialist nations, as they argued over new territories. To prevent conflict, fourteen European nations met at the **Berlin Conference** in 1884–85, dividing the continent among themselves, see Map B. They gave little thought to the existing ethnic or linguistic groups and no African ruler was involved. African resistance to the invaders was quickly overcome by force.

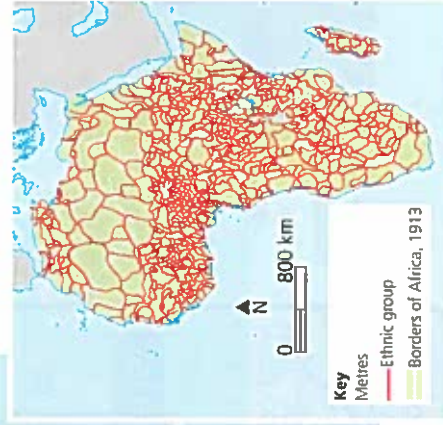
C Ethnic boundaries of African groups before the Berlin Conference



A Map showing the triangle of trade in slaves between Europe, Africa and the Americas



B African national borders agreed at the Berlin Conference in 1884–85



I do not want to miss a good chance of getting us a slice of this magnificent African cake.



To open to civilisation the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which hangs over entire peoples, is, I dare say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress.

D King Leopold II of Belgium

The Belgian Congo

King Leopold II of Belgium took control of a region of tropical rainforest in the Congo Basin, 75 times the size of Belgium. He promised to make a better life for Africans in the area. The reality was very different. With the development of the bicycle, worldwide demand for rubber boomed. Leopold encouraged companies to collect rubber from the many rubber trees in the rainforest, but these companies brutally exploited local peoples by forcing them to collect sap from the rubber trees. It has been estimated that as many as 10 million Congolese died due to the abuses inflicted during Leopold's rule.

E Tom Mboya, one of the founding fathers of the Republic of Kenya



Under colonial rule, little attention has been paid to the education, health, and training for Africans. Partition of Africa into separate colonies and the use of territories as sources of raw materials for the benefit and enrichment of the colonial powers have not allowed continental development.

The legacy of colonialism

African countries began to gain their independence from Europe in the 1960s. Still struggling with the legacy of colonialism, many have found the road to a strong and stable nation to be a difficult one. The political boundaries created at the Berlin conference have often led to the re-emergence of ethnic conflict. The wealth of natural resources continue to be over-exploited by European businesses. New countries are often still locked into old colonial trade, selling natural resources on the world market. The best agricultural land is still used to grow cash crops for export to rich countries; crops such as cocoa, coffee, sugar, peanuts, cotton, rubber, tea, palm oil, timber and tobacco, rather than growing crops to feed the growing population of Africa. Poverty often leads to a reliance on aid from the developed world.



F Cartoon entitled 'Gold diggers' *Play.org.uk*

Activities

- 1 Create an annotated timeline to summarise the events affecting Africa from 1600 to the 1970s.
- 2 Using the glossary to help you, define the words colonial and imperial.
- 3 Look at Map C. Explain what Africa was like before Europeans began to influence the continent.
- 4 You may have studied the slave trade in your history lessons. Use this knowledge, together with Map A, to write a paragraph describing how the slave triangle of trade worked.
- 5 What were the two main reasons why European nations began the Scramble for Africa?
- 6 What was the purpose of the Berlin Conference of 1884–85?
- 7 Compare Maps B and C.
 - a) Describe how Africa changed after the Berlin conference.
 - b) Create a rank order list to show which European countries controlled the largest areas of Africa.
- 8 Look carefully at D – two quotes by Leopold II.
 - a) One quote was said at a geographical conference and the other in private to a Belgian ambassador. Decide and justify which is which.
 - b) Consider the actions of Leopold in the Congo. What do you think was the main reason for the Scramble for Africa? Justify your answer.
- 9 Look at Cartoon F and Quote E.
 - a) What is the legacy of colonial rule today for Africa?
 - b) What is the viewpoint of the cartoonist?