

## 4 Ending empire and imagining the future

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French and British rule in Africa collapsed not because of an all-out assault from a clearly defined colonized people, but because the imperial system broke apart at its internal cracks, as Africans selectively incorporated into political structures based on citizenship or self-determination seized the initiative and escalated their demands for power. Meanwhile, in the mid-1950s Portuguese and Belgian rulers, and the whites who dominated South Africa, were vigorously holding on to political power and appropriating economic gains for a tiny fraction of the population. However, they were slowly moving from being ordinary members of an international club where colonialism was the norm to being outliers in a new world where legitimacy was measured in terms of progress toward self-government and economic development (chapter 6). In the long run, neither Portugal, Belgium, nor South Africa could contain the pressures coming from neighboring territories or from the transformation of international norms, but it was the colonialism that identified itself with political reform and economic development that first proved unsustainable.

By 1956 or 1958 French and British governments knew that the colonial endgame had begun. But where could colonial governments set the limits on the kinds of politics allowed in the ambiguous space between colonial domination and territorial autonomy? What could the first generation of African political leaders allowed a measure of power do with their opportunities? In this period, French and British governments on the one hand and African movements and leaders on the other struggled with and occasionally fought each other, and ended up defining a certain kind of decolonization, one which opened up some political possibilities and shut down others. Supra-national possibilities – federations of more than one territory, and Pan-Africanist imaginings – were excluded from the political map. And as British and French governments came to realize that hanging on to power would be too painful and costly, they made clear that the responsibility for the consequences of these decolonizations would fall on African shoulders.

### **Redefining political space**

By the early 1950s, citizenship in French Africa was proving to be an immensely powerful construct, seized by African social and political movements to claim all of the equivalence that being French implied. Self-government in British West Africa was exploding out of the confines in which the Colonial Office had hoped to keep it. But how wide was the opening, and how did Nkrumah's generation wish to fill and expand it?

The core of the agenda for the new political class owed something to the post-war agenda of British and French colonial rule, but it was given a new twist. The development project, to colonial administrators, implied that the possessors of knowledge and capital would slowly but generously disperse these critical resources to those less well endowed. But to African political parties, development meant resources to build constituencies and opportunities to make the nation-state a meaningful part of people's lives. In the Gold Coast and Nigeria the politics of development began with marketing boards, particularly in cocoa. As noted earlier, British governments in West Africa had put these institutions in place as the sole purchasers of export crops from African farmers, first to placate African opposition to the European businesses that had monopolized such trade, then to use as a source of development funds, to be doled out (or accumulated) as British officials thought wise. The CPP or the Action Group in Western Nigeria (the cocoa-producing region) quite accurately saw the surpluses held by these boards by the late 1940s as a source of development funding, and British arguments that too rapid spending of the surpluses would cause inflation were seen, with reason, as self-serving.

As Leader of Government Business from 1951, Nkrumah was in a position to manage development in a new way. But he did not choose to change a crucial element of British policy: maintaining government control of marketing board surpluses. The farmer continued to get only a fraction of the world price; the government now used it more actively than had the British to promote government development initiatives. These took the forms of schools and roads – highly visible to a voting constituency – and industrialization, increasingly in the 1950s seen as the answer to economic dependence. The biggest industrial project backed by Nkrumah was originally a British one: building a dam on the Volta River to supply electricity to a hopefully industrializing economy and to power the smelting of the territory's bauxite into aluminum, making it a more valuable export and reducing dependence on cocoa.

Kwame Nkrumah told his followers, "Seek ye first the political kingdom." He captured the imagination of a wide range of followers, who now saw in the idea of building an African nation a means to combine their

personal ambition and idealistic goals, free of the constraints of colonial authority and an inward-looking traditional elite.

Nkrumah thus gave another inflection to the centralizing character of post-war imperialism. But his national focus quickly led to Nkrumah's first serious political conflict, and it came from advocates of regional autonomy and a weaker, federal state. People in the Asante region were not only conscious of the former power of the Asante kingdom, but they were among the leading cocoa growers and hence the most affected by the state's confiscatory policies toward cocoa wealth. Such revenue was vital to Nkrumah's national ambitions and, equally important, wealth in Asante hands constituted a danger to his ambitions, for such people were not dependent on the state for resources and were capable of financing political movements.

Asante nationalism, organized into a political party, the National Liberation Movement (NLM), was itself torn between a conservative elite – close to the leading chiefs who had exercised administrative power under the British system of indirect rule – and younger men who saw themselves as nationalists and modernizers, but identified “the nation” with the Asante people. Some NLM leaders, such as Joseph Appiah, had been early supporters of Nkrumah, but had come to fear that his centralizing thrust was the harbinger of a dictatorial one, and that the Asante were likely to be its victims. The movement oscillated between violence and constitutionalist opposition.

The British government pretended to referee the contest, but protecting minority rights was not their priority. The NLM, for its part, was both divided and unable to convince people from other regions that it represented something other than Asante privilege. The CPP won elections in 1954 and 1956.

Nkrumah's effort to preclude alternatives to his power went beyond Asante. Chiefs throughout the country were stripped of effective power, replaced by CPP loyalists, or co-opted into the CPP fold. Labor leaders, critical to Nkrumah's rise to power, were co-opted into a CPP-controlled union federation or else marginalized; the militant railway and mining unions were kept in check. Cocoa farmers, outside as well as inside the Asante region, were given little alternative but to market crops through state agencies and participate in CPP-dominated farmers' associations.

But except for many Asante, Nkrumah captured the imagination of a wide range of Africans; he understood their dislike of colonial rule, their sense that Africa's time had come, and their belief that a new, African state could improve the lives of its citizens. In 1957, the Gold Coast became independent and Nkrumah renamed it Ghana, after an old African empire that had been located to the north of the present territory. The festivities were exuberant; the joy palpable. And one of Nkrumah's first

acts as the head of an independent state was to ban all political parties organized on a regional basis – including the NLM.

In Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, the quest for state resources had important consequences for regional conflict from the early 1950s. The British had divided Nigeria into three regions, Eastern, Western, and Northern, and their vision of the future was of a Nigerian federation presiding over three regional governments with legislative power. This structure had the perverse effect of encouraging first a winner-takes-all quest for electoral power *within* each of the three regions, and then competition *between* the regions for power at the federal level. The civil service was regionalized in 1953: each region would control its bureaucracy and hence its patronage resources. But the three regions were not equivalent. The north was the most populous, but had the weakest educational system and was firmly ruled by a traditionalist, Muslim elite. The west, thanks to cocoa, was the wealthiest, and the capital city of Lagos was within its borders. The east had the best educated population, many of whom held clerical or skilled labor jobs in Lagos or in northern cities.

In each region, a party dominated by members of the majority ethnic group obtained office and used it to provide services and patronage within its bailiwick: the Igbo-led National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) in the east; the largely Yoruba Action Group (AG) in the west; and the Hausa–Fulani-led Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the north. In the early 1950s, British control of marketing board surpluses was a sore point, and a target of the regional governments elected in 1952. The regional governments soon competed with each other to show who could deliver the most to constituents, and what voters wanted above all was schools. Universal primary education became the goal in the eastern and western regions.

In each region, oppositions developed, to some extent (notably in the north) as populist challenges to governing elites, but most importantly among regional minorities. Each majority party had its patronage system and occasionally used thuggery to keep its control. The instability was greatest in the west, partly because of the ambiguous position of the federal capital Lagos, in and not of its region, and partly because of intense rivalries between Yoruba factions. The system encouraged corruption in each region, but Nigeria's agricultural exports in the 1950s were sufficient to allow politicians to play their patronage games while real progress was made in building educational institutions within each region. The NCNC was the most nationally focused of the parties (in part because easterners lived in all of the regions) and the NPC the most conservative, because of its domination by a traditionalist hierarchy.

Instead of allowing a wide variety of interest-groups to make claims on the Nigerian state, the federal system focused power on the three regions,

each governed by a party dominated by a single ethnic group and with the budgetary means to solidify its regional constituency. This structure fostered an unhealthy mix of ethnicity and regional patronage. The center remained important, for in an economy dependent on exporting primary materials and importing manufactured goods, ports, customs, and transportation – all “federal” jurisdictions – were lucrative. Easterners and westerners both wanted to use an active federal government to accomplish their developmental goals, but feared that the NPC would ally with one or the other to dominate the minority region. The disaster that was to envelope Nigeria was brewing by the early 1950s.

In French Africa, leaders such as Houphouët-Boigny and Senghor were very reluctant to step outside the framework they had used to build solid political machines in Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal and which they were using to make effective demands on the government of France. The nonracial labor code of 1952, guaranteeing important rights and benefits to all wage workers, was a good example of the powerful effects of a logic of citizenship combined with active campaigns to turn it into something concrete. In Senegal in particular a more radical opposition emerged in the mid-1950s, led by intellectuals like Abdoulaye Ly, who tried to move the BDS in a left direction and eventually split with it. Labor unions constituted a potential node of opposition, but Senghor was able to co-opt a considerable range of opinions into his fold, and his relationship with the Muslim brotherhoods gave him a base that was hard for anyone to crack. Houphouët-Boigny’s control was even tighter, and his status within the RDA had a dampening effect on anti-imperialist radicalism in other territories as well.

The strongest effort to develop a decisively anti-colonial movement came from Sékou Touré in Guinea. He got his start in the trade union movement, first as a government clerk and organizer within the civil service, then as leader of the Guinean branch of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), the communist trade union federation. He became a hero for leading a general strike in Guinea in 1950, for playing a crucial role in the CGT’s campaign throughout French West Africa for the enactment of the labor code in 1952, and in 1953 for leading a long strike in Guinea over the implementation of the labor code. He made astute use of French assimilationist language to insist that African workers deserved the same pay and benefits as workers born in France, and he looked to allies – white, black, brown, and yellow – throughout the internationalist labor left.

Sékou Touré used his union base and his militant reputation to enter politics, running first for the territorial assembly, then for the French legislature, and eventually for the leadership of the Guinean legislature. In order to succeed, he had to broaden his appeal beyond the wage workers

who could directly compare themselves to French workers, and to do so he invoked his own illustrious ancestry while fashioning a rhetoric that increasingly contrasted French colonialism with African unity. Within the union movement, he repudiated by 1955–56 the alliance with the French left and insisted that African unions be strictly African. He and his collaborators wanted to drop “class struggle” from the language of African unionism, insisting that African workers should set aside their particular grievances and strive alongside peasants and others for the good of Africa as a whole. Within Guinea, he assembled a populist coalition of considerable breadth, drawing on tensions between commoners and chiefs in some regions and on the support of women shaking loose from patriarchal control.

Trade unionists, political leaders, and others had seized the openings of the post-war moment and made a variety of claims: for access to material resources, for their voices to be heard, for the exercise of power. The African leaders who were beginning to govern their territories did what political elites usually do: tried to eliminate certain kinds of demands and certain forms of organization from the realm of the possible. Amidst one of the great political openings of the twentieth century, the closures of a particular decolonization were becoming visible.

### **The reinvention of savagery and the boundaries of decolonization**

By 1951, the British government in the Gold Coast had grudgingly admitted that it could neither hold African political aspirations within the confines of “local government” nor decide which leaders claiming a national role were acceptable. Elsewhere, the struggles over limits and possibilities continued.

In Kenya, British officials attempted to draw the line against a movement they called “Mau Mau”, which they saw as a primitive, violent rebellion against order and progress. Before the war, officials tended to think of Africans as quaintly backward, but with the developmentalist ideology of the post-war era, any militant rejection of the “modern” world became an affront. The story of Mau Mau does not fit the British view – expressed by officials and the British press – of backward-looking rebellion, but neither was it just another modern mass nationalist movement. The ideology of the forest fighters, who eventually called themselves the Land and Freedom Army, was indeed anti-modern, rejecting more about developmentalist colonialism than the fact that it was colonial.

The root causes of rural anger were, above all, the entrapment of Kikuyu in the development initiatives of the post-war colonial state. In some districts, the issue was heavy-handed conservation policies which

forced Africans, especially women, to do anti-erosion work that did not increase yields. Most starkly affected were women and men who, for some decades before, had left crowded areas to move to white settler farms in the Rift Valley. There they became “squatters” and were allowed to grow some crops and keep some animals in exchange for providing family labor to the settler farms. After the war, the booming world market for agricultural goods encouraged settlers to farm more intensely, to mechanize, and to bring more land under export crops. They increasingly expelled squatters and employed wage laborers as needed.

The Labour Government of Great Britain was not pro-settler, but it was pro-development and convinced that settler agriculture provided needed revenues and an example of modernizing agriculture. It also eased restrictions on Africans growing some of the most lucrative export crops, including coffee. But this opening to African rural capitalism compounded the problem: expelled squatters, returning to Kikuyu settlements where they thought they had ancestral rights, were not welcomed by the Kikuyu elite, who were intent on using the land themselves. Meanwhile, the Nairobi labor market – reflecting British stabilization policy – was providing some Africans with more secure and better paying jobs, but leaving less place for those on the margins. Ex-squatters were caught between different forms of exclusion and marginality, whether in country or city. Development, for them, was catastrophic.

Many Kikuyu had eagerly entered mission schools in the 1920s and 1930s, but the missionaries’ efforts to get their converts to abandon a range of Kikuyu social practices (clitoridectomy most notorious among them) led to vigorous defense on the part of Kikuyu male elders of Kikuyu culture and a more quiet defense of their own role in cultural reproduction by female elders. In the 1930s, a strong movement among the Kikuyu to found independent schools and independent churches made it clear that it was possible to be Christian, western-educated, and Kikuyu at the same time.

The post-war crisis cut to the heart of social life. To ex-squatters, their inability to gain access to resources – including land in villages they saw as theirs – was a denial of a chance to marry, in other words to attain full adulthood. But the older, better-off, Christian Kikuyu who opposed the rebellion also had their moral ideas, a point emphasized by the Kenyan historian B. A. Ogot. They were profoundly offended by the young men who went against their elders. They thought that their long effort to build African churches and African schools gave them legitimacy as defenders of Kikuyu integrity, and they resented being told they were stooges. The constitutionalist political party led by Jomo Kenyatta, the Kenya African Union (KAU), was dismissive of the aspirations of the marginal working

class of Nairobi and the increasingly radical labor leaders who were speaking for it.

It was among the excluded that a wave of agitation began in the popular districts of Nairobi, spearheaded by an organization of Kikuyu who were supposed to have passed the rituals of male initiation in 1940 and who faced the denial of masculine adulthood. They called themselves the 40 Age Group. They invigorated an earlier pattern of oath-taking: to swear loyalty to the Kikuyu ancestors, a classic tactic in ambiguous situations to get people to commit to one side. After the failure of the 1950 general strike in Nairobi, urban disorders, including assassinations of conservative African politicians, began. This spread to rural areas, and when an important Kikuyu chief was assassinated in 1952, in the midst of escalating raids on settler farms and government posts by guerillas based in the forests of central Kenya, the government declared an emergency.

The victims of post-war development confronted a moral and ideological edifice which defined them as primitive and their exploiters as progressive. The squatters were increasingly attracted to an ideology which harked back to a mystic sense of Kikuyu integrity, unsullied by the ambiguities of the past hundred years, evoked in the oath and in the songs and rituals of the forest fighters.

Mau Mau cost the lives of 95 Europeans and nearly 2,000 “loyal” Africans, plus – in official figures – 11,503 rebels. Around 30,000 Kikuyu were arrested or captured, with many placed in detention camps and put through psychologized rituals to cleanse them of their collective “insanity,” accustom them to healthy labor, and reinsert them into a purified Kikuyu society.

It is hard to understand the excess of government repression without appreciating the seriousness with which the post-war British governments took their self-definition as progressive, set off against African backwardness, reactionary settlers, and even the past record of the Colonial Office. In 1945 Phillip Mitchell, governor of Kenya, saw the issue in these terms: “the African has the choice of remaining a savage or of adopting our civilization, culture, religion and language, and is doing the latter as fast as he can.”

White settlers saw the rebellion as proof that the African could only be kept down by the sustained use of force – a position that offered London no hope for the future. The emergency hardened the conviction of top officials that the crisis of transition could only be solved if the Kikuyu were pushed through the dangerous middle ground, between their supposedly primitive political behavior and a modern electoral system, and to the other side. By the mid-1950s, the Kenyan colonial government was seeking in earnest to work with allegedly moderate politicians. Tom



Mboya, a young man from western Kenya who started out as a labor leader and became party leader while Kenyatta remained in jail, skillfully wove the specter of disorder before officials to make claims for more active social and economic policies and an increased share of power. Colonial officials, as Mau Mau was finally contained, fantasized about property-owning Africans sharing cities with stable, respectable workers, and sturdy farmers in rural areas giving employment to reliable agricultural workers. Class would replace race as the organizing principle of society. As late as 1959, officials could not predict when they could allow Kenya to become independent; the answer turned out to be 1963.

The costs of managing a developmentalist empire had become clear. In the Gold Coast and Nigeria, a combined fear of disorder and hope that “modern” Africans could contain the conflicts of their rapidly changing societies led officials to allow the move towards self-government to accelerate. In Kenya, protecting developmental colonialism meant abandoning white settlers and eventually abandoning colonialism in favor of developmentalism. In Central Africa, another version of developmentalist imperial policy came unstuck. In 1953, the British government had proclaimed the Central African Federation, uniting its three colonies of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland, hoping that this larger unit would foster economic planning and stave off South African ambitions to bring the region’s white settlers into its white-supremacist orbit. African political leaders saw the danger that the British policy of self-government would be captured by white settlers, most of whom lived in Southern Rhodesia, and used to dominate the entire region. The British promised “safeguards” for the indigenous majority which predictably proved inadequate. The regional economic strategy mainly benefitted Southern Rhodesia, where most industry was located, and agricultural expansion there meant encroachment on African lands and regulations on African herds. In Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, educated Africans saw their opportunities constricted by white dominance of federal institutions. In the Northern Rhodesian copper mines, the African Mineworkers Union had to fight not only for better pay, but also to get Africans into the supervisory and skilled positions zealously guarded by the union of white mineworkers. Meanwhile, white settler politics swung in an increasingly racist direction. The region seethed with tension. African political parties in all three territories became more militant and focused on breaking up the federation. In 1959, a state of emergency was declared in Southern Rhodesia and riots broke out in Nyasaland. African political parties were banned and leaders arrested.

Once again, repression only underscored the untenable nature of the situation. Regional development for all races was an illusion, and maintaining the federation would be a very expensive illusion. Britain accepted

the end of its Central African dream, allowed Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia to move toward independence as distinct countries (Malawi and Zambia) and temporized with the white leaders of Southern Rhodesia until the latter, unable any more to defend racial privilege within British colonialism, defended it by declaring their own version of independence in 1965, dragging out the story of this ugly decolonization for another fifteen years at the cost of much human life (see chapter 6).

France committed its share of violent and repressive acts; the Madagascar revolt of 1947 (chapter 3) brought out a repressive excess comparable to that witnessed in Kenya. The Cameroons witnessed a later attempt to exclude a political party deemed too radical. The Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC) had started out much like any other party in this colony (once a German possession) which France ran under a mandate from the United Nations. Cameroon had given much less space to *évolué* politics, to trade unions, or to the development of an associative life than had Senegal, and when the same electoral law was applied to it, politicians had less to draw on. As in French Equatorial Africa (chapter 3), electoral politics created its own logic: politicians used what cultural capital they had – ethnic associations, ties to the Catholic church, and above all positions within the colonial bureaucracy – and successful ones immediately turned office into a basis for mobilizing supporters.

In the late 1940s, one party tried to get away from this form of politics – the UPC. It had a regional base in the Bassa region near the southern coast, but tried to make itself national. It was close to the left-wing trade union movement, and it tried to articulate a clear program of social reform and assertiveness at the national level. At first it hesitated to take a clear position against the French Union and for independence. The UPC did poorly in the elections of the late 1940s, and without anything concrete to offer its supporters it moved toward increasingly radical positions on social and political questions. The French government disliked the UPC from the start and worked against it. What officials could not abide was its call for independence for Cameroon; they did not know that within a decade, French policy itself would be moving in that direction.

The government did what it could to disrupt campaigns and rig election results. The UPC was pushed further into marking its distinctiveness. At home, it set itself apart by its increasingly radical positions, and overseas, it embarrassed France by its criticisms before the UN, the supervisor of France's mandate. In 1955, the UPC's public meetings became increasingly militant, its trade union allies launched a series of strikes, and police repression escalated too, culminating in urban riots. The French government then banned the UPC. The RDA, then cooperating with France, disassociated itself from its one-time affiliate. After trying to regain legal status, the UPC under Ruben Um Nyobé went underground and began a

guerilla struggle in southern Cameroon. This was harshly repressed and Um Nyobé was killed. That left the field to the more ordinary political parties, each balancing its ethnic base, its access to government resources, and its efforts to find just the right degree of militance and collaboration with the government to keep its supporters engaged and anticipating results. The party of Ahmadu Ahidjo prevailed; its conservative policy of co-operation with the French complemented the conservatism of Ahidjo's regional base in the hierarchical Islamic societies of North Cameroon.

Colonial officials could not often draw the line where they wished but they could try, and in Cameroon and Kenya they showed that movements which were too radical or too anti-modern could be destroyed. Still, Kenyatta had once been identified with the forces of darkness and Nkrumah dismissed as a demagogue. Both forced colonial regimes to move the boundaries of the permissible; they, too, helped to define a certain kind of decolonization.

### **The end of empire and the refusal of responsibility**

In Eastern Nigeria, the government of Nnamdi Azikiwe had made social development the cornerstone of its program. But by 1955, British officials were convinced not only that the ministers were corrupt, but that the key social program, Universal Primary Education, exceeded the region's ability to pay. Given its policy of devolving power to self-governing regions, it could neither kick out the politicians nor alter their policies – unless it suspended the painfully negotiated constitution. The governor told London, “Inevitably the people are going to be disillusioned, but it is better that they should be disillusioned as a result of the failure of their own people than that they should be disillusioned as a result of our actions.” Here we have a frank statement of British thinking on the eve of decolonization: defining the structures in which the move toward self-government would take place, while preparing to place the blame for the failures of the process squarely on African shoulders.

In 1957 Prime Minister Harold Macmillan asked his officials to give him “something like a profit and loss account for each of our Colonial possessions.” The Colonial Office had not dared to ask such questions before. The answers that came back revealed a cold calculation that the benefits and costs of continuing colonial rule had to be set against the economic and political advantages of good relations with ex-colonial states. If defending colonial rule would be prohibitively expensive, the key to policy was managing the transition: “during the period when we can still exercise control in any territory, it is most important to take every step open to us to ensure, as far as we can, that British standards and methods of business and administration permeate the whole life of the territory.”

Officials' best hope was thus that ex-colonies would become western-style nations. But country-by-country analyses were not optimistic. In Nigeria, "Barbarism and cruelty are still near the surface . . . [w]e are unlikely to have long enough to complete our civilising and unifying mission." The Colonial Office did not see "any prospect in the foreseeable future of . . . relinquishing control" in all three East African countries.

In France, similar issues were debated in public. In 1956 a popular journal published an article on French Africa which insisted that one must ask about each colony, "What is it worth? What does it cost? What does it bring in? What hopes does it allow? What sacrifices does it merit?" Aware that France had just lost a colonial war in Indochina and was fighting another in Algeria, the author argued that African demands for self-government were growing and could not be blocked: "It is necessary to transfer as fast as possible as much responsibility to Africans. At their risk and peril." In private, officials were assessing their decade-long development drive and finding that labor costs had shot upward, that backward infrastructure had choked on the new material coming in, and that the private sector had failed to invest where the public sector had pioneered. In the post-war context, colonialism on the cheap was no longer possible: the investments of the development years were not rapidly paying off, and the social costs were escalating. The Africa that colonial officials had fantasized creating was not to be. They faced the difficulties of ruling Africa as it was.

For British officials, self-government presented a way out: each colony would be led step by step along a path that increased the power of the elected legislature and eventually resulted in the appointment of elected members to cabinet positions, including eventually a prime minister. Meanwhile, officials realized how little had been done to Africanize the bureaucracy, and programs were hastily put in place.

It was not so apparent how France could devolve power without abandoning the centralizing and assimilating structure of the French Union. The union consisted of federations – French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa most importantly – with all citizens electing a legislature in Paris; French policies since the war had tilted away from treating Africans as "different" and toward defining everyone as equivalent in social and political terms. So devolution would imply repudiating an old policy. In 1956 the French government did precisely that.

Confidential files of the government make clear how much officials felt trapped by the ever-escalating demands made within the framework of French citizenship. Discussion of education, health, wages, and urban services invoked metropolitan France as a reference point. By 1956, confronted with the war in Algeria and the dangers of social equivalence with the metropole, French officials came up with a new concept:

“territorialization.” Each territory – Dahomey, Chad, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire – would be given the power to set its budget, under French overview, and to administer much of its domestic affairs. France would maintain responsibility for defense and foreign affairs. If African leaders still wanted to push the logic of equivalence, regarding civil service salaries or health facilities, the costs would fall not on “France,” but on the taxpayers of each territory, to whom the politicians looked for votes.

Pierre-Henri Teitgen, who had helped to draft the new law, asserted that Africans had taken assimilation to mean “well, give us immediately equality in wages, equality in labor legislation, in social security benefits, equality in family allowances, in brief, equality in standard of living.” And that, Teitgen said, demanded a sacrifice that French people would not accept. This enactment – known as the framework law (*loi cadre*) of 1956 – was a big step towards decolonization, if not in so many words.

The *loi cadre* was passed in Paris at a time when the language of autonomy and of the nation was increasingly spoken in Africa. Even the trade union movement was falling into this in 1956, despite the gains that had been made by referring to the wages and benefits of French workers. The shift did not come from the rank and file; it was the union leadership that spoke in the name of “autonomy,” of finding means of expressing African cultural distinctiveness, of speaking with solidarity in the name of the nation.

Intellectuals, Senghor foremost among them, had long spoken of African cultural integrity, but had argued that this contributed to the larger entity that was the French Union. Senghor could carefully conjugate the interplay of cultural assertiveness and the language of rights and equality within the Union. But the language of equivalence meant less and less to an expanding electorate; in 1956, for the first time, elections were conducted with universal suffrage. A railway worker on the Dakar–Niger line might compare his benefits to that of someone working the Paris–Marseille line. But such a comparison would make little sense to a peasant living five miles from the track. As political leaders – even those whose springboard came from the labor movement – looked toward stitching together broad constituencies, they had to look beyond the language of equivalence within imperial citizenship.

It was in this context that a rhetoric of “autonomy” and of “African unity” was increasingly heard. By the time of the *loi cadre*, Sékou Touré had already abandoned the quest for equality with French standards and was calling for a radical break with French imperialism and the unity of all Africans in the struggle. He, too, had to build his political movement step by step, and he did so effectively. In the first elections after the *loi cadre*, Sékou Touré became the head of the council and so, in effect, prime

minister of Guinea. African party leaders in the other territories of West and Equatorial Africa similarly stepped into positions of authority.

In the case of Guinea, Sékou Touré's insistence that all Africans, from the peasant to the skilled worker, should unite turned from an appeal to something like a compulsion. As he told his former allies in the labor movement in 1958, a strike against colonial employers was progressive, but against an African government it was "historically unthinkable . . . The trade union movement is obligated to reconvert itself to remain in the same line of emancipation." As Guinea became independent, strike movements were suppressed, the trade union movement was subordinated to the political party, and union leaders who advocated different positions were arrested.

At one level, the French government's calculation had worked: the semi-sovereign African governments installed after the 1956 elections resisted the escalating demands for social and economic parity that had been the hallmark of politics since 1946. But with Sékou Touré, officials badly miscalculated. His anti-European rhetoric was not a mere political stratagem. He meant it, and he meant what he said about African unity, even if he imposed his vision on other Guineans.

The French government thought it could make its system of semi-self governance, with each territorial administration having authority over the budget, endure. In 1958 Charles de Gaulle, newly installed as the French president, preoccupied with the war in Algeria and eager to insure stability in Sub-Saharan Africa, tried to firm up this position. He offered each African territory a choice in a referendum between autonomy within the French Union or immediate and absolute independence. He calculated that the political leaders were deeply enough entrenched in the current system – with possibilities of French aid, of privileged entry of export commodities into French markets, of access to French systems of higher education – so that continued participation in "Greater France" would be attractive. For the most part he was right. But the campaign was open and the debate serious. The strongest voice for voting no on the referendum was that of Sékou Touré, who was convinced that African territories had to make a decisive break and become independent nation-states. In the end, only Guinea voted for immediate independence.

The French government responded vindictively; Guinea was cut off from aid, and departing French officials reputedly removed equipment needed for a functioning bureaucracy. Guinea was left to its fate. Yet only two years later, France would itself decide that the cord needed to be cut to all of its Sub-Saharan colonies.

Everywhere, elected African leaders welcomed their power within the territories, and the parties that won the elections of 1956 and 1957

moved quickly to establish their authority. But some, notably the civil service unions and leaders like Senghor, realized the costs. The French government was devolving power to individual territories and weakening the federations of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa. Dahomey, Niger, Senegal, Gabon, and so on were becoming the units in which decisions were made, in which politicians built constituencies, and on which demands were focused. Whereas in 1946 the RDA had looked beyond individual territories towards a wider confrontation and engagement with France, juxtaposing a language of equality with a critique of imperialism, now everything was focusing on the territory. The irony was that a language of "African unity" was becoming abstract at the very moment it seemed to be triumphant. Senghor warned in 1956 against the "balkanization" of Africa, a division of the Franco-African federations into units too small to be economically viable, too weak politically to challenge former imperial powers. Indeed, the French strategy of divide-and-cease-to-rule was separating a leader like Houphouët-Boigny, who presided over a rich territory and could use its resources for the people whose votes he depended on, from the leaders of the arid, landlocked countries in the West African interior, such as Upper Volta, French Soudan (Mali), and Niger, and from Senghor, whose country stood to lose by the diminished importance of the headquarters of French West Africa in Dakar.

Even Senghor was trapped in the "balkanization" against which he warned. Each African government had come to power through the mobilization of its own set of followers. Senghor had worked through the leadership of Islamic brotherhoods in Senegal even as he had appealed to intellectuals, trade unionists, and other constituencies. On the eve of independence, he tried to negotiate a smaller-scale federation with neighboring French Soudan, soon to be renamed Mali. But both he and Mali's Modibo Keita had to face the fact that they had built their constituencies in their own ways. They feared that in a single unit, each would make inroads against the other, Keita using a unified party structure and Marxist social policies to undercut Senghor from the left, and Senghor using his affiliations with Islamic networks and his good relations with France to offer pragmatic policies to Mali's citizens. The brief attempt at a new federation failed, and the territories of once-centralized French Africa went their separate ways.

The French government was not only devolving power, but also disavowing the central tenets of its post-war policy and imperial ideology. It was pulling back from the implicit offer that incorporation into the French Union would mean that all imperial citizens could aspire to French standards of living, French levels of social services, and French education. It

was conceding something to claims – as much those of Senghor as Sékou Touré – for forms of cultural expression distinct from those of France, but most important it was abdicating responsibility for the material welfare of Africans. This move was softened by the continued provision of aid, but this was now foreign aid, a gift rather than an imperial obligation; and it would be hardened by French political intrigue and military support for Africans it deemed friendly against those it believed acting contrary to its interests. But sovereignty would have its consequences.

In British Africa, meanwhile, the flag had come down first in Ghana in 1957. Nkrumah's coming to power marked for colonized peoples all over an event of great symbolic importance, and this was one of the main reasons why France had to look beyond its regime of semi-autonomy after 1956. In 1958, Nkrumah held his All African People's Congress in Accra, and this became the occasion for making Ghana's independence into an assertion of a universal right to self-government and sovereignty for all African nations. Even South Africa's oppressed political organizations were present, and the occasion allowed them to associate their struggle with the successes of African nationalism. Nkrumah was trying to oversee the rebirth of Pan-Africanism, forgotten for a time in the preoccupation of political leaders with institutions that were giving them a measure of power. But it was becoming a Pan-Africanism of independent states, and it would prove to be an elusive goal. In any case, within English-speaking Africa, the events of 1957 symbolized that devolution had been established and would become inevitable. No matter what the concerns among officials might be about the "readiness" of particular territories for independence, independent they would become.

That leaves Belgian and Portuguese Africa, and, of course, South Africa. The latter two would try to prevent the winds of change from blowing their way, but they too would soon be caught up in the fact that independence was happening all around them. I will return to this theme later on. In the Belgian Congo, independence came via a stunning reversal, and it was so ill-prepared that its failure was immediate and tragic. Only in the 1950s did Belgium begin to send Congolese to higher education, and only after 1954 did it allow parties to act openly. Belgian scholars in 1955 proclaimed that independence was at least thirty years away.

Up to then, the most important associations permitted were those formed along ethnic lines, so that when the stakes of politics suddenly rose, ethnic difference was accentuated. The Bakongo party, Abako, centered in the capital of Leopoldville, emerged in 1954. It represented above all the urban *évolué* outlook of the Bakongo population of the city. In the copper-mining province of Katanga, a new party, Conakat, focused on regional autonomy and on the ethnic tensions in a region where high





Map 3 Decolonizing Africa

labor immigration seemed about to swamp long-term inhabitants. Abako and Conakat would provide the platforms for two of the important political actors of the early 1960s debacle, Joseph Kasavubu and Moïse Tshombe; the latter was the closest Congolese ally of European interests. It was Patrice Lumumba, from the eastern side of the country, who attempted to put together a party that was truly national, and the others regarded him as dangerous to their power bases for just that reason. His *Mouvement National Congolais* articulated a radical critique of Belgian colonialism and looked toward the forging of a Congolese nation.

The Belgian government saw Lumumba as the most threatening of Congolese politicians. But it realized how difficult it was to control the

situation when the rest of Africa was rapidly moving toward decolonization. When riots broke out in Leopoldville in 1959 – in a context where no one had experience in orderly political processes and where religious, ethnic, and other tensions were ripe – the government panicked. Perhaps it cynically calculated that an ill-prepared independence would result in continual dependence on Belgium, but if that were the case, officials misread the eagerness of other international actors to meddle, too. The ensuing “Congo Crisis” that began in 1960 at virtually the moment of independence (see chapter 7) would reveal that decolonization was more complicated than tearing down the flag of an oppressor and raising the flag of a new nation. Belgian’s abdication of responsibility for its brutal colonization and inept decolonization opened the way to the United States, the Soviet Union, France, and the United Nations to inject their own interests, while allegedly trying to bring order to a land whose people had never been allowed to enjoy the riches their country possessed.

Alongside the extreme irresponsibility of Belgium, decolonization French and British style mixed a certain political cynicism with a different kind of political imagination. At the end of World War II, the idea that independent nation-states would rule in Africa was to European officials conceivable only in a hazily defined future, detached from their views of actual African leaders as apprentices in need of training or demagogues who had to be restrained. Ordinary Africans needed to learn how to behave in cities, or how to run simple organizations and local governments, or else they could participate in small numbers but in institutions where they would represent but not decide.

By the early or mid-1950s in both British and French Africa, the “modern African” – in the workplace, in an urban neighborhood, or in a government office – was an imaginable being. Officials might ignore the connectedness of such individuals to the rest of Africa. The very idea of “stabilization” in labor policy, for example, emphasized that the urban worker must be separated from village life. But the repeated emphasis on the modern quality of city life, on the imperatives of the modern bureaucracy, on the need for modern enterprises and modern forms of labor administration, opened up to Africans a set of possibilities which many were able to seize. Colonial officials now defined those Africans who followed the script as if they were a-cultural, a-social beings, embodiments of modernization, and they now saw Africans who refused to enter such roles as dangerously recalcitrant, as stubbornly primitive. As for the vast majority of people who did not live such a dichotomous life – their place in the colonial vision was unclear.

This imaginative leap, with the enormous reality that it obscured, allowed French and British officials to think of an Africa which they did not

rule. They could still think that the modern Africans that they had created would willingly and even eagerly embrace the modern institutions open to them, that they would continue relations with the Europe that had taught them so much about science, technology, literature, and statecraft, and that they would maintain their integration into world markets. France and Britain transformed their colonial development apparatus into a foreign aid system, with the crucial difference that it reaffirmed generous superiority while denying responsibility for the social and political consequences of economic change. Other figures on the world scene, including the US and the USSR, began to look at the disintegrating colonial empires as spaces that were being internationalized, still at the bottom of a developmental hierarchy, but now the object of concern of all “advanced” nations. Africa would become the world’s project for uplift, and also a magnet for power politics and exploitative interest.

#### SUGGESTED READING

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