
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE IVORY COAST

"Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at the present there is none; there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness . . . and darkness is not the subject of history."

That 1962 remark by Oxford's Hugh Trevor-Roper is often cited to show what little even scholars in the West knew of the "Dark Continent" until recently. As Michael Crowder notes in **West Africa Under Colonial Rule** (Northwestern, 1968), European colonists truly believed they were civilizing "a benighted people."

In the most complete survey of the subject in English, the two-volume **History of West Africa** (Columbia, 1972-73) edited by J. F. A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, Thurstan Shaw traces "the misfortune of Africa" to 3,000 B.C., when final drying out of the Sahara began.

The desert blocked the spread of the Bronze Age Egyptians' innovations—writing, mathematics, the wheel. Not until camel transport became common 3,000 years later did the Sahara barrier fall. Sub-Saharan Africa did have an Iron Age. It probably began in West Africa: Slag deposits—some in the Ivory Coast—testify to the making of metal farm tools and weapons. These allowed the rise of expansive societies—e.g., the Mali Empire, which peaked during the 14th century, and the Songhai Empire, which flourished in what is now Mali, Niger, and Nigeria until a 16th-century invasion from Morocco destroyed it.

As John Ralph Willis writes in **The Horizon History of Africa** (American Heritage, 1971), Islam, which Arabs brought to North Africa, was carried south of the Sahara by Mande-Diula traders. In the Ivory Coast, Bondoukou and Kong were founded as Muslim towns around the start of the 15th century. But Muslims did not bring civiliza-

tion. When they came, "a well-arranged system of commerce" was in place.

The Europeans, when *they* arrived, faced not only organized societies—such as the Ashanti and Dahomey kingdoms, founded during the 17th century—but also another foreign influence, Islam.

Yet, as Crowder notes in **Colonial West Africa** (Cass, 1978), the only West Africans to defeat the Europeans soundly in more than one major battle were the Ashanti in the Gold Coast, who won two of eight clashes with the British beginning in 1823. Tribal rivalries, poor weapons, and superstition (mostly, the Africans dared attack only by day) were fatal military flaws.

In **France and Britain in Africa: Imperial Rivalry and Colonial Rule** (Yale, 1972), edited by Prosser Gifford and Wm. Roger Louis, Gifford and Timothy Weiskel deal with colonial education.

Africans could not be Frenchmen: A 19th-century authority, Gustave Le Bon, said that "a Negro" will get "all the diplomas possible without ever arriving at the level of an ordinary European." So Africans were just taught to respect the French. Thanks to them, read one text, "the exertions of the little tyrannic powers have given way to the good works of regular and stable administration."

Other colonial histories are John D. Hargreaves' two-volume **West Africa Partitioned** (Univ. of Wisc., 1974); Edward Mortimer's **France and the Africans, 1944-1960: A Political History** (Walker, 1969); and Dorothy White's **Black Africa & De Gaulle: From the French Empire to Independence** (Pa. State Univ., 1979).

In **False Start in Africa** (Praeger, 1969), René Dumont forecast enduring poverty for the new nations. One cause: Africa's "balkanization" into many states, each with a "bourgeoisie of the civil service." West Africa alone had

“several hundred cabinet ministers, and several thousand members of parliament”—paid in six months what a peasant earns in a “lifetime of hard labor.”

Dumont’s forebodings proved all too accurate, suggests Martin Meredith’s **First Dance of Freedom: Black Africa in the Postwar Era** (Harper, 1985). A generation after independence, Africa’s future is discussed “only in pessimistic terms.” Its ills include “a form of personal rule exercised in an arbitrary and authoritarian manner.”

Most all the former French, British, Belgian, and Italian colonies had democratic constitutions. Yet, Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg note in **Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant** (Univ. of Calif., 1982), the nations’ economic woes and scant political experience made governance “more a matter of seamanship and less one of navigation—that is, staying afloat rather than going somewhere.” What arose was not Western democracy but leaders who had to devise “personal systems of governance in the absence of effective institutions.”

The authors define the prevalent leader type as the *Prince*—men such as Kenya’s Jomo Kenyatta and Senegal’s Léopold Senghor, who ruled via other oligarchs. A Prince presides; an *Autocrat*—the Ivory Coast’s Houphouët-Boigny, Zaire’s Mobutu Sese Seko—commands. “The country is his estate.”

Other leader types are the *Prophet* (visionaries, such as Guinea’s Sékou Touré, who seek to remake society) and the *Tyrant*. The latter has been rare, despite such despots as Equatorial Guinea’s Francisco Macías Nguema and Uganda’s Idi Amin, whose “state of blood” (1971–79) may have claimed 300,000 lives.

Crawford Young’s **Ideology and Development in Africa** (Yale, 1982)

examines the links between political style and economic success. As the 1960s began, many nations—Nigeria, Zaire, Cameroon, Malawi, the Ivory Coast—chose Western-style market economies, but the “African socialism” espoused by Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah and Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere got the attention. As that failed to bring progress, in 1969 Congo-Brazzaville’s military rulers set up a “Marxist-Leninist” regime. Somalia, Benin, and Madagascar followed, as did Angola, Mozambique, and other ex-Portuguese colonies.

Soon, nearly one in five African states were professing Marxist-Leninist ideals. Moscow became Africa’s major arms supplier. Still, notes Young, rapid growth remained elusive. The only black “Afro-Marxist” state to show “respectable” progress was Tanzania. The only countries to “stand out,” besides oil-rich Nigeria, were two “African capitalist” nations, Kenya and the Ivory Coast.

The ex-colonists’ ties to Black Africa are frayed. In **Decolonization and African Independence: The Transfer of Power, 1960–1980** (Yale, 1988), edited by Prosser Gifford and Wm. Roger Louis, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch finds that true even of France. It still sends aid, but “no longer has an obvious commercial interest” in Francophone Africa. The ex-colonies account for only two percent of France’s imports and four percent of its exports; only a third of their exports go to France. With the Ivory Coast now struggling with debts, the former French colonies seem no better off than their neighbors.

Even so, the Ivorian achievement stands. Twenty years ago, Zaire’s Mobutu toured the land and its plantations. “Now that I’ve visited Houphouët and his country,” said the man who had won power in a military coup, “I wonder which of us is the real revolutionary.”