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A HISTORY OF
MODERN AFRICA

1800 TO THE PRESENT

Second Edition

RICHARD J. REID

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1800 to the Present

SECOND EDITION

Richard J. Reid

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The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Still for Anna, and now also for May

Contents

<i>List of Maps</i>	xiv
<i>List of Plates</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments for the Second Edition</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xviii
1 Introduction: Understanding the Contours of Africa's Past	1
A Brief History of the Study of Africa	5
Land	8
People	12
Part I Polity, Society, and Economy: Ingenuity and Violence in the Nineteenth Century	17
2 Western Transitions: Slave Trade and "Legitimate" Commerce in Atlantic Africa	23
States and Societies during the Atlantic Slave Trade	24
"Illegal" Traffic: The Nineteenth-Century Slave Trade	28
Mineral and Vegetable: "Legitimate" Commerce	32
Change and Continuity in Forest and Savannah	35
3 Eastern Intrusions: Slaves and Ivory in Eastern Africa	42
Commercial Horizons: Slaves and Ivory	43
Maritime Empire: Zanzibar	48
Statehood, Conflict, and Trade (1): The Lacustrine Zone	52
Statehood, Conflict, and Trade (2): Northeastern Africa	59

4 Southern Frontiers: Colony and Revolution in Southern Africa	65
African State and Society to around 1800	65
War, Revolution, and the Zulu Impact	67
Cape Colonialism: White Settlement and the “Native Question”	71
Voortrekkers: White Communities in the Interior	74
Balances of Power to around 1870	75
Part II Africa and Islam: Revival and Reform in the Nineteenth Century	77
5 Revival and Reaction: North African Islam	81
Old and New Identities: Brotherhoods of the Desert	81
Trade and Conflict in the Mediterranean World:	
Ottoman and European Frontiers	82
Changing Society (1): The Maghreb	86
Changing Society (2): Egypt	89
6 Jihad: Revolutions in Western Africa	94
Islam in Western Africa to the Eighteenth Century	94
The Wandering Fulani	96
Prophets and Warriors	97
7 The Eastern Crescent: The Islamic Frontier in Eastern Africa	103
Swahili Islam: Coastal Frontiers in the Nineteenth Century	103
Islam in the Central East African Interior	105
Cross and Crescent in Northeast Africa	106
Islam on the Nile	108
Part III Africa and Europe: Commerce, Conflict and Co-option, to c.1920	113
8 The Compass and the Cross	119
Interested Gentlemen and Learned Bodies: Explorers and Exploration	119
Creeping Hegemony and the Invention of Africa	123
European Missionary Activity in Africa to around 1800	125

Evangelical Humanitarians: Missionary Revival	126
The Christian Impact on Culture, State, and Society	129
Mission and Empire	134
9 “Whatever Happens . . .”: Towards the Scramble	139
Africa and Theories of Imperialism	140
Race and Culture	142
Disorder and Civilizing Violence: Political and Economic Justifications	145
10 Africans Adapting: Conquest and Partition	150
Explaining the “Conquest”	150
Spears and Water: Violent Resistance	155
Histories Old and New: Colonialism and Historical “Knowledge”	165
Realities Old and New: Colonialism and Political “Knowledge”	168
Bush Wars and Distant Shadows: Africa in Global War	175
Part IV Colonialisms	183
11 “Pax Colonia”? Empires of Soil and Service	189
Monopolies on Violence	190
Slaves and Labor	193
Cash Crops	194
White Settlement	199
Industry	201
Social Change and Emergent Crisis	204
Hearts and Minds	207
Environment and Medicine	210
12 Hard Times: Protest, Identity, and Depression	218
Making Tribes	218
Emergent Protest in the Islamic World	221
Salvation and Resistance: The African Church	223
Class and Tribe: The Industrial Complex	224
Cash Crops, Rural Crises, and Peasant Protest	227
Other Voices	230

13 Battles Home and Away: Africa in Global War (Again)	236
The War in the Continent	236
Shifts in Politics and Society	241
Part V The Dissolution of Empire	245
14 The Beached Whale: Colonial Strategies in the Postwar World	251
Postwar Africa and the International Climate	252
Economic Policies and Visions, c. 1945–50	253
Political Plans, c. 1945–50	256
15 Conceiving and Producing Nations	259
The Widening Horizons of Belonging	260
Tensions and Transitions: From Political Consciousness to Political Parties	261
Irresistible Force and Immovable Object: Nationalists and Settlers	268
A Time of Contrasts	273
16 Compromising Conflict: Routes to Independence	276
Debate and Debacle: “Constitutional” Transfers of Power	276
Violence: Growth, Form, and Impact	286
From Suez to Sharpeville, and Beyond: The End of High Imperialism	291
Part VI Legacies, New Beginnings, and Unfinished Business	297
17 Unsafe Foundations: Challenges of Independence	303
Building the Nation (1): Economy and Society	303
Building the Nation (2): Polity	310
Political Stability and Islam	316
Crowded House: Africa and the Cold War	320
18 Violence and the Militarization of Political Culture	328
The Military in African Politics	328
The Politics and Cultures of Insurgency	332
Expanding Military Horizons	337

19 Rectification, Redemption, and Reality: Issues and Trends in Contemporary Africa	339
Africa and the Post-Cold War World	339
Democracy and Authoritarianism: Trends in Governance	343
New Wars, Old Problems	349
Body and Mind	352
Economic Predicaments: Assessing “Growth” and “Development”	355
 <i>Further Reading</i>	 363
<i>Index</i>	365

List of Maps

Map 1	Main vegetation zones of Africa	9
Map 2	Physical Africa	10
Map 3	Africa in the nineteenth century: key peoples and places	19
Map 4	Atlantic Africa in the nineteenth century	25
Map 5	Central Africa in the nineteenth century	27
Map 6	West Africa c.1865	29
Map 7	Eastern and southern Africa in the nineteenth century	44
Map 8	East Africa c.1870	47
Map 9	The Horn of Africa in the nineteenth century	60
Map 10	Southern Africa in the nineteenth century	68
Map 11	North Africa in the nineteenth century	85
Map 12	Egypt and the Nile Valley c.1800	90
Map 13	The early phase in the partition of Africa, to c.1887	154
Map 14	The partition continued: Africa c.1895	159
Map 15	Partition complete: Africa c.1902	164
Map 16	Colonial economics (1): areas of European farming	195
Map 17	Colonial economics (2): mineral exploitation and railways	203
Map 18	Political boundaries (1): 1914	247
Map 19	Political boundaries (2): 1939	248
Map 20	Decolonization	279
Map 21	Post-colonial cash-crop economies	305
Map 22	Post-colonial mineral exploitation	306
Map 23	Modern African nation-states	307

List of Plates

Plate 1	Ruler of a kingdom in transition: King Gezo of Dahomey, with Prince Badahun, in 1856	37
Plate 2	An aspect of Kumasi, capital of Asante, in the 1820s	39
Plate 3	An East African ivory porter in the mid-nineteenth century	49
Plate 4	Commercial pioneers: Seyyid Barghash, Sultan of Zanzibar (1870–88), with his advisors	50
Plate 5	Slaving violence in East Africa: the massacre of Manyema women at Nyangwe, c.1870	51
Plate 6	The state-builder: Mirambo of the Nyamwezi, in the early 1880s	57
Plate 7	Mutesa, kabaka of Buganda (c.1857–84), with his court, late 1870s	59
Plate 8	Vision of African genius: Shaka, king of the Zulu, c.1816–28	70
Plate 9	Romanticized Africa: Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt portrayed in <i>The Battle of Heliopolis</i> , by Leon Cogniet (c.1850)	83
Plate 10	Cairo in the mid-nineteenth century	92
Plate 11	Ethiopian depiction of the battle of Adwa, 1896	152
Plate 12	“The aftermath at Omdurman,” from the <i>Illustrated London News</i> , 1898	161
Plate 13	New order in Uganda: the young Kabaka Daudi Chwa at Namirembe Cathedral, Kampala, 1902	173
Plate 14	Lord Lugard and Northern Nigerian chiefs, London Zoo, c.1925	174
Plate 15	Imperial relations: the king of Asante and the governor of the Gold Coast, 1935	186
Plate 16	African view of the colonial order: Congolese wood carving from the 1920s	229
Plate 17	Urban idyll: Freetown, Sierra Leone, c.1960	232
Plate 18	For the empire? West African troops in action in Burma, c.1943	240

Plate 19	Military tradition: officer and men of the Kings African Rifles, Uganda	240
Plate 20	Kwame Nkrumah, first leader of independent Ghana	265
Plate 21	Hastings Banda, first leader of independent Malawi	266
Plate 22	The cost of violence: funeral of the victims of the Philippeville massacres in Algeria, 1955	277
Plate 23	Response to insurgency in Kenya	283
Plate 24	Nelson Mandela and associates at the Treason Trial, South Africa, 1956	289
Plate 25	Anarchy in the Congo, 1960: Patrice Lumumba is arrested by Mobutu's soldiers. © Bettmann/CORBIS.	293
Plate 26	Power in the post-colonial state: President Mobutu of Zaire (Congo), 1984	317
Plate 27	New alliances: Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt	323
Plate 28	Victims: famine in northern Ethiopia, mid-1980s	325
Plate 29	Victims: a father brings his wounded daughter to an EPLF hospital, Eritrea, early 1980s	335
Plate 30	Protesters gather at Tahrir Square in Cairo, April 1, 2011	340
Plate 31	Irresistible momentum: Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk of South Africa	346
Plate 32	Humanitarianism or neo-imperialism? A US soldier in Mogadishu, Somalia, 1992	351

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1 Introduction

Understanding the Contours of Africa's Past

The stories of entire continents cannot adequately be told in single-volume histories. It is a matter of debate, indeed, why individual (or groups of) historians actually do what they do, and even more so, what it is that they aim to achieve. But in a volume such as this, the aim is – indeed, can only be – to grasp key ideas, and apply them broadly; to appreciate thematic coherence while equally recognizing discord in this regard; to identify overall processes while paying due attention to the individuals and whirlpools which make up the great flow of human history. It is a sad but inevitable truth that in writing wide-ranging survey histories of peoples – even where, as in this one, the timeframe is carefully capped – the number of individual lives which are mentioned is infinitesimal, *vis-à-vis* the millions of lives which are actually lived. Yet above all the aim in a book like this is to do justice to Africa and Africans. If this is even approached, then the author can be, if not content, then at least somewhat relieved.

This book is concerned with the past two centuries, a timeframe which is not simply a matter of organizational convenience: rather, the central idea is that Africa's twentieth century cannot be understood in isolation from its nineteenth century, and that transformative processes – political, social, and economic – span the entire period under examination, and are distinctive to it. We return to this later. More broadly, it is important, at the outset, to elucidate some of the core themes which run through the narrative, whether explicitly or implicitly. The continent remained underpopulated until the second half of the twentieth century, and thus a host of states and societies were concerned first and foremost with the maximization of numbers. As a result African ideologies were frequently centered around the celebration of fertility, and myths of creation around the carving of civilization out of wilderness, and its subsequent defence against Nature. Fertility and reproductive capacity were sought through polygamy; control of people – frequently through the practice of slavery, for example – was more significant as

a feature of social organization than control of land, which was plentiful, with a handful of important exceptions, as we shall see. Thus, for example, West African history is characterized by frequently violent competition for women, because women underpinned male status, worked land, and produced children who would do likewise. Across the continent more generally, intergenerational conflict among men over women was common. Marriage was very much a public rather than a private affair, involving alliances between lineages; the distribution of women represented socio-political arrangements. Of course the status of women themselves varied greatly across the continent, ranging from low and exploited, to respected, influential, and economically independent.

One of the major challenges for ruling elites across the continent – in the nineteenth century as in more recent decades – was the construction of permanent systems of governance by which large numbers of people might be controlled. Underpopulated regions in particular were often characterized by the instability of the polity, and by the failure of would-be state-builders to extend their control beyond the “natural” limits imposed by demography and geography. In underpopulated areas, discontented people might rebel against the existing order – forming an “armed frontier” which might march on the center, or otherwise consume it – but they might just as easily migrate beyond the reach of that order, in so doing often causing its very downfall. This constant cycle of violent fission and fusion drove much political and social change in Africa, and it was an increasingly violent process in the nineteenth century with the emergence of new polities and social systems. Territorial states with ambitions beyond the immediate community had to overcome the problem of how to ensure loyalty across a wider area, and how to create supra-provincial identities. The problem is exemplified by the situation in the West African savannah, where states and empires have historically been confronted with localism and segmentation. The savannah was characterized by countless local communities, groups of villages which formed miniature states, known as *kafu*; the *kafu* symbolized the localism of African politics, and empire-builders had both to construct their polities around them, and to dominate them through military force and control of wealth. Again, this is as true in the colonial and post-colonial eras as it was in the nineteenth century. Throughout the book, then, we are concerned with the emergence of identities, local, regional, even continental, over time, and the dynamics involved in the shaping of those identities.

In understanding the continent’s history over the past two centuries, moreover, due emphasis needs to be placed on the *longue durée* as well as on dramatic change; there has been much continuity as well as upheaval between the eighteenth and the twenty-first centuries, and in many respects colonialism – the focus of the bulk of Africanist scholarship in recent decades – constituted a mere “moment” in time, with a variable impact across the continent. Firstly, Africa’s nineteenth century was a period of violent reformation, of political destruction and reconstruction, and the effects of this prolonged transformation continued to be felt deep into the twentieth century and beyond, especially during, and in the wake of, decolonization. Secondly, these internal processes of change need to be understood at least partly against the backdrop of emerging patterns of external economic relations – in essence, between Africa and the northern Atlantic economies – in the course of the nineteenth century. In many

respects, colonial rule was only the latest manifestation of a Westernized commercial system – fundamentally disadvantageous, in terms of modern ideas about development, to African producers, though not necessarily to the elites who governed them – which long pre-dated it. Colonialism, then, was clearly significant in its own terms, as will be demonstrated in the course of the story which follows. Arguably, it had the greatest impact through the manner of its departure, in the sense that it left much of the continent ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of independence. But colonial rule must be contextualized: with regard to internal political development, it was in many respects co-opted into ongoing African processes of change, while in terms of external economy it represented only the latest stage of a system which had been a long time in the making. What came after it – the era of the “post-colony” and the “new” international order – must be understood in terms of what preceded it. What is certainly clear is that colonial rule was in many ways as African as it was European, and cannot be understood as some great unilateral imposition: Africans shaped their own societies in the age of foreign rule much more effectively than any colonial official or European government could, even in the face of – and to a large extent in response to – an aggressively extractive external economic system.

Social, political, and economic change, moreover – as with every other human community – was represented in African art and material culture. This is not a subject to which this volume has been able to devote much space, unfortunately; nonetheless, suffice to observe here that aesthetic endeavors often provide vital clues to African political as well as culture life. Art was a mediation between the living and the dead, and thus often underpinned political power, as well as attempting to ensure agricultural prosperity; sculptures represented – as with story-telling – social and political commentary and critique. Belief in the supernatural and the afterlife shaped Egyptian art and architecture, as it did along much of the Nile valley, notably in Nubia; Christianity spurred artistic achievement in the Ethiopian highlands, and Islam did the same along the east African coast and across the western African savannah. African craftsmen – working in terracotta, gold, copper, brass, bronze, wood, and stone – told stories of the formation of kingship, the struggle against Nature, and the quest for fecundity; they produced material cultures which were both aesthetically pleasing and had socio-political utility, as they projected ideas about group cohesion or reinforced hierarchy. The spread of artistic styles, moreover, was the result both of political upheaval – population movement on the back of the slave trade, for example, or of widespread conflict – and commercial interaction. Traders brought culture as well as commodities, and networks of artistic exchange opened up in the pre-colonial era just as trading systems did. Africans borrowed from one another, and adapted styles accordingly; and so too did external influence come to have an important impact on local art forms. Islamic input, again, is evident in Swahili architecture, notably, and later European colonialism influenced the form which African artistic expression took in certain areas.

Indeed, another of the core issues that arises in a study of Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the continent’s relationship with the rest of the world in general, and of course Europe in particular. Readers of this book need to appreciate, from the outset, the degree to which Africa has been judged, or measured, by the

“outside world”; this has happened to a remarkable degree, and continues to happen in much the same way, both subliminally and more consciously, down to the present day. Clearly, important external influences have been brought to bear on African cultural, economic, and political development. Islam was the most important such influence before the nineteenth century, first coming to the continent through Egypt and the Red Sea, from whence it spread across the Maghreb, as well as travelling up the Nile valley into northern and central Sudan; it would become established in the Horn, too, in the Somali plains and the Ogaden. From northern Africa it would move via trade routes into the Sudanic belt and across West Africa, where it remains the dominant faith today. In sub-Saharan East Africa, too, Islam was a critical component of Swahili civilization. Overall, Islam would shape African culture and society, linking swathes of the continent to a dynamic and expanding Muslim world. The coming of Islam also involved the emergence of a long-distance slave trade, across the Sahara and linking the continent to the Middle East, the Arabian peninsula, and the Indian Ocean. European influence, arguably, was much less than that of Islam before the nineteenth century, certainly in terms of direct cultural and political change: missionary activity, for example, beginning with the Portuguese in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, had limited success, and white settlement was negligible outside the Dutch colony at the southern Cape. Europe was largely restricted to trading posts and forts on the coast. Europeans did, however, introduce new crops to Africa from the Americas, and cassava, maize, groundnuts, and tobacco became central to many African agricultural economies. Europe’s greatest impact on the continent prior to about 1800 came through the Atlantic slave trade, which began in the early sixteenth century and reached its height in the seventeenth and eighteenth. Initially it was dominated by the Portuguese, but later they were edged out by the Dutch, the Danes, the French, and the British, who transported millions of Africans – the precise figure is a matter of contention – to the Americas.

Yet these were no unilateral impositions; they were, rather, complex and multi-faceted interactions, involving mutual borrowing and adaptation. The influence of ancient (pre-Christian) Egyptian – and, by extension, upper Nile valley – culture and civilization on the Hellenistic world is undeniable, for example, despite European attempts to sever Egypt from the rest of Africa through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Later, the Islam that came to Africa was adapted to local needs and conditions, and the global faith would be greatly enriched through its Africanization; and Europe itself – in ways which we perhaps do not yet fully appreciate – would be fundamentally changed by its relationship with Africa, in economic, cultural, and perhaps political terms, during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. At the same time, moreover, by placing too much emphasis on the supposed “external,” we not only run the risk of oversimplifying processes of historical interaction, but we also risk losing sight of the key notion of *internal dynamics*. And these internal dynamics include the force of “people power”; processes of social formation; economic ingenuity and innovation; cultural and political creativity; the playing out of revolution – and, indeed, the reverse of the same coin, the establishment and broader acceptance of a given status quo. Kings are “bad,” sometimes, and sometimes internal structures do not work; at other times “external” things are “good,” and are adopted. This is true throughout history, and of all peoples and cultures; above

all, of course, change is ongoing, and experiential. It is also important to remember, even as we seek to identify the ways in which Africa has been objectified by the outside world, that history itself objectifies: the very discipline of the study of the past is an exercise in objectification. We need to keep this in mind when at times we rely on historical studies which have themselves been dependent upon “objectifying” European sources, especially for the nineteenth century.

Above all, emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a cogent timeframe for close examination, and one which encompassed clear lines of continuity as well as dramatic change. In many respects, the nineteenth century constituted something of a “golden age” of African political, economic, and cultural creativity; but it was also an extremely violent era, as “golden ages” often are, and the violence itself was routinely misunderstood at the time, and has continued to be since. Colonialism, again – enormously significant though its impact was in certain key respects – was in many ways absorbed into *African* patterns of change, while the postcolonial era has borne witness to the resurgence of unfinished business, much of it dating to the pre-1900 age. All this, meanwhile, must be understood against the backdrop of a global economy several centuries in the making and increasingly inimical to Africa’s own development. It is critical to stress the importance of Africa’s *longue durée*, as otherwise particular patches of the continent’s history – not least the most recent past, often viewed in curiously ahistorical isolation – simply will not make sense, and are certainly vulnerable to misapprehension.

A Brief History of the Study of Africa

African history as an academic discipline is relatively young. As recently as the early 1960s an Oxford scholar could famously dismiss the continent’s past as “the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes”;¹ but even as he did so, new approaches to the study of African history were being developed. What we mean here, of course, is the application of an intellectual “modernity” to Africa; needless to say, Africans have long understood the histories of their own societies on their own terms. Since the middle of the twentieth century, however, European historical methodology in the Greco-Roman tradition has been utilized, for better or for worse, in the attempt to reconstruct the African past. In the 1950s and 1960s, professional historians and social scientists in a range of other disciplines, many of them based at African universities – Ibadan in Nigeria, the University of Ghana, Dar es Salaam in Tanzania – began to treat African history as a field for serious study; and it is no coincidence that this took place when most of Africa itself was gaining independence from European colonial rule. With newly rediscovered sovereignty came new interest in Africa’s deeper past: history, indeed, was seen as an essential part of the nation-building process. The past, of course, has long been used – or, more commonly, abused – by politicians, guerrillas, statesmen, and would-be builders of nations of every hue, and in Africa, as elsewhere, these would become less enthusiastic and more cynical about history as time went on. But the “nationalist history” of the 1960s launched a vigorous new academic discipline which continues to challenge racist, Eurocentric

assumptions about the world and to reconstruct and interpret the historical journeys of the myriad of peoples and communities that make up the vast region we know today as “Africa.”

Historians of Africa have made use of a range of sources. The identification of usable sources was particularly important for the pre-colonial past, as few societies – with the exception of the Arabic north and the Ethiopian highlands – left behind written records. Archeology was used to chart material and cultural change over the longer term, while linguistic change and spread could also be employed in discerning social, economic, and political metamorphosis. Historians have also had to make use of the written sources of foreigners, beginning with those of the Arabic-speaking travelers and traders from the Middle Ages onward, and after the sixteenth century those of European missionaries, traders, and explorers; in the twentieth century, extensive use of a vast array of colonial records has supported new avenues of historical research. Yet scholars have also been able to utilize the recorded indigenous oral histories and traditions which are the heart of all communities, and the testimonies which have been recorded in the course of the twentieth century. Clearly, each of these types of source has its limitations as well as its contribution to make. Studies of archeology and language generally permit the historian to glimpse only very approximate timescales, and only very broad patterns of change; the written words of foreigners are riddled with the cultural and social prejudices and misunderstandings characteristic of outsiders, though some are more problematic and insensitive than others. Indigenous oral histories themselves were prone to change and distortion over time, and as a general rule favoured the authors’ particular lineage as well as reflecting current political circumstances. Nonetheless, used with caution, these sources have proved invaluable, and their utilization in the 1950s and 1960s reflected a new respect for (and indeed empathy with) Africa’s past.

Why had there been no attempt to reconstruct Africa’s past systematically before this time? The answer, hopefully, can be found at various junctures in the course of this book. But suffice to say here that by the beginning of the twentieth century, by which time most of the continent had been brought under European colonial rule, there existed a firm belief that Africa did not *have* a history. This “truth” persisted through much of the colonial period: Africans were perceived as “primitive,” “savage,” and lacking in political, cultural, and technological sophistication. Europeans in this period possessed a deeply rooted belief in the superiority of their own civilization, and vast swathes of the non-European world, Africa included, were regarded as “inferior” on numerous levels. Concepts of inferiority were vital in that they justified colonial rule itself; and thus Africans were depicted as lacking history, a benighted people without a past, and with no future either, unless “rescued” by Europe from the fate assigned them by biology. Moreover, most African societies, outside the Islamic zone and the Ethiopian highlands, were non-literate, and Europeans argued that a people without writing, without documentation, could not possibly have a history. Africa’s “history,” according to this view, began only when Europe introduced literacy to African elites – for most, only after the 1880s and 1890s. As for literate Muslims and Abyssinians (Ethiopians), these were slightly higher up the scale of civilization, but not much: their barbarity was inherent, their written languages merely expressions of semi-civilization.

Not only were these ideas worked into the narratives of colonial power, but they also shaped Europe's perceptions of Africa's pre-colonial past. Where evidence did exist of "civilization" – the state of Great Zimbabwe north of the Limpopo, for example, or the monarchical states of eastern and northeastern Africa – Europeans decided either that Africans were not ultimately responsible for it, or that the particular peoples involved were not actually *African* in any case. External, usually lighter-skinned, influences must have created such cultures: thus were the marvellous stone buildings of Great Zimbabwe the handiwork of a mysterious, vanishing white race, and "Ethiopians" possessed of Caucasian ancestry. In South Africa, racist presumptions of this kind had profound political consequences: twentieth-century *apartheid*, notably, rested in part on the conviction that white settlers had discovered an "empty land" in the seventeenth century, a land given to them by God, and inhabited by a few "blacks" who were in any case not too far above animals in the grand scheme of things. These ideas were influential through much of the twentieth century, and during that time Africa was represented largely through European cultural prisms. One of the key challenges for students of modern African history is to consider in what ways – if at all – this has changed in our own era.

It is not easy to ascertain exactly where these perceptions originated – their roots lie deep in Europe's own historical development – but there can be little doubt that the growth of the Atlantic slave trade was accompanied by the rise of European racism toward Africa. Between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Africans came to be seen as "natural" slaves, the products of undeveloped societies and cultures, and "blackness" thus became associated in the "Western" mind with servitude and savagery. We will deal with some of these issues in greater detail in the early part of the book, but it is worth noting here that in the course of the eighteenth century there emerged in Europe a public debate around the slave trade, a debate which would have a profound influence on perceptions of Africa and which in some ways continues to resonate today. One group was opposed to the slave trade, the abolitionists, and another defended it, the apologists, but they shared certain basic assumptions about African society itself. The apologists argued that because Africa was a savage and backward place, a kind of "living hell," the slave trade was a form of blessed release, taking Africans from their cursed environments and landing them in the Americas, a new beginning. Moreover, they argued, Africa produced slaves in any case, through endemic warfare; there was nothing to be done to stop this. The abolitionist position was that because Africa was a savage and backward place, it was in need of European intervention which would introduce to it what became known as the "three Cs" – Christianity, Commerce and Civilization. The slave trade caused violence and suffering; Africans must be saved, from slave traders as well as from themselves. The two groups had in common a belief in African backwardness, their differences a matter of interpretation. It was the abolitionist position which prevailed, in terms of both tangible outcome – the slave trade was indeed "abolished," Denmark and Britain leading the way – and ethos, in that their view of Africa prevailed through the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, the argument held sway that only through European rule would Africa ever develop – economically, politically, and culturally. Africans were children who could only be

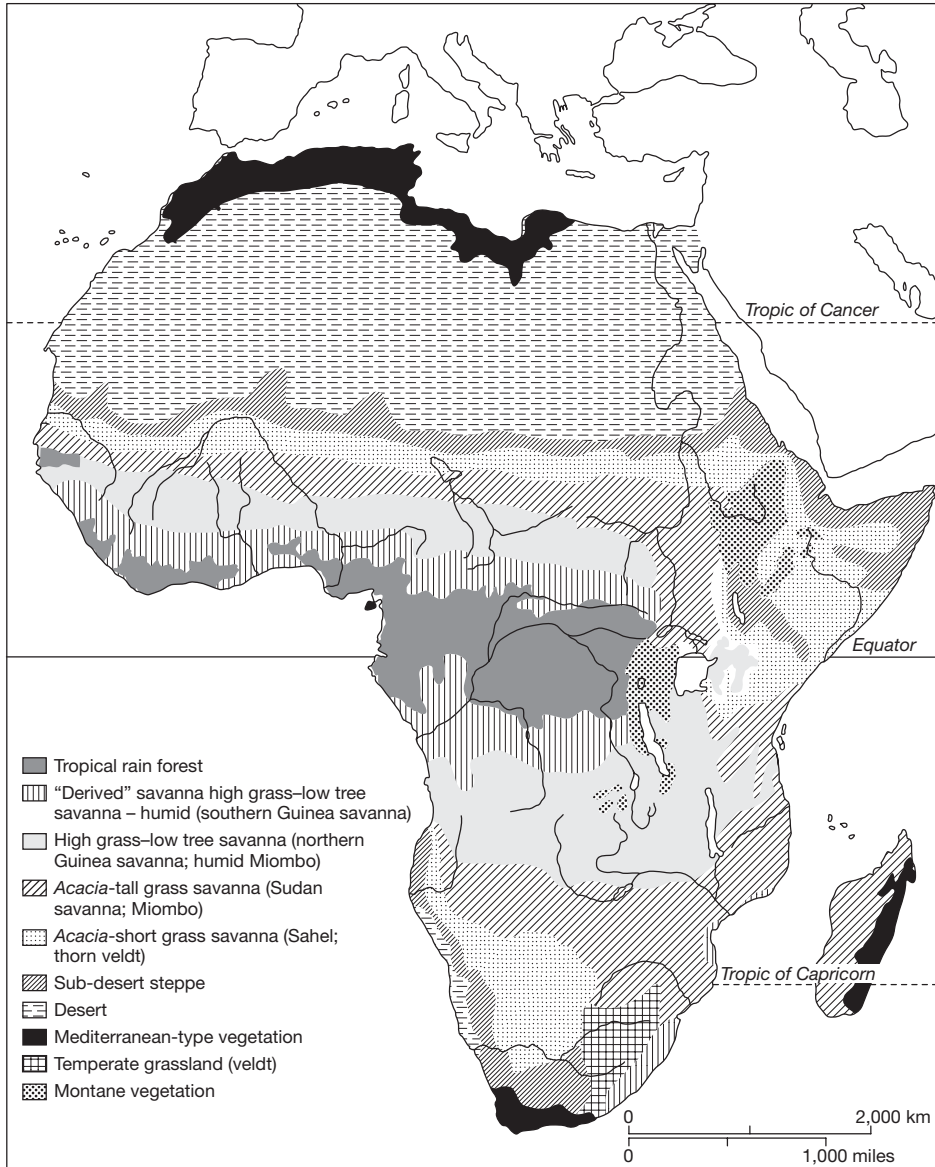
helped by European parental guidance. This, at least, would become the public justification behind colonial rule.

It was an ethos, as we have observed, that would only be seriously challenged in the middle decades of the twentieth century, during the twilight of colonialism and the dawn of African independence. The struggle for the present – the achievement of national sovereignty, stability, prosperity – also became the struggle for the past, as Africans and a new generation of Western scholars sought to overturn an array of cultural and historical distortions. The struggle continues, despite the inevitable sloughs of cynicism and the occasional blind alley. At the present time, when Africa apparently staggers from one crisis to the next along its post-colonial path, and people in the “developed” world seek “solutions” in much the same way as their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors did, the deeper history of the continent has never been more relevant. Unfortunately, “presentism” is dominant: despite some doubtless honorable intentions, Africa is too often treated ahistorically by policy-makers and humanitarians, who frequently ignore, or have little interest in, the full force of Africa’s history. Nonetheless, in an era of civil conflict, famine and drought, economic underdevelopment and mismanagement, corruption and political oppression, the search for Africa’s way forward must begin in its past.

Land

Africa is the second largest continent in the world, and encompasses enormous diversity in terms of geography and climate from the Mediterranean to the Cape of Good Hope. Clearly, this natural diversity cannot be separated from the history of the continent’s inhabitants: environment and human history are indelibly intertwined, and nowhere is this more demonstrable than in Africa, where disease and poor, thin soils have obstructed the growth of human settlement in many regions. The history of Africans is in large part the struggle to adapt to hostile environments. Arguably the single most important disease in African history, for example, has been trypanosomiasis, or “sleeping sickness,” spread by the tsetse fly and prevalent in forested and woodland areas. Its influence was particularly keenly felt in societies which relied heavily on animals, for example those employing horses and cattle across the Sudanic belt. Outbreaks of sleeping sickness, which often occurred when bush or vegetation encroached on formerly cleared areas, were attacks on society itself, while the prevalence of the tsetse fly in forested areas was a major influence on state-formation: horses, for example, could not be used in this environment. It is important to consider these disease dynamics in understanding social and economic change.

Physically, Africa has a strikingly regular coastline, with relatively few natural harbours in the form of deep bays and peninsulas; along other stretches of coast, maritime activity is inhibited by sand-bars. This has meant that Africans have not had the same opportunity as Europeans and Asians for maritime travel or exploration; with the exception of the coastal Mediterranean peoples, Africans have had frequent and intense contact with other continents only in comparatively recent times. This is not to suggest, again, that African society did not absorb external influences when these presented



Map 1 Main vegetation zones of Africa. From M. Crowder (ed.), *Cambridge History of Africa*. Vol. 8: c.1940–c.1975 (Cambridge, 1984), p.194, Map 5; © 1984 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.

themselves, but rather that until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, African development was relatively self-contained; combined with difficult terrain and a low level of transport technology, this meant that African civilization was in some important respects essentially insular in development and outlook.

We can divide the continent's physical geography into eight approximate zones. First, we have the northern coastal lands of the Mediterranean: similar in climate to southern



Map 2 Physical Africa. From J. Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge, 1995), p.2, Map 1. © 1995 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.

Europe, though usually warmer and drier, this zone is a coastal belt, varying in width, encompassing the northwestern part of the continent – the “Maghreb” (literally “the west” in Arabic) – where the belt is at its widest and covers the northern parts of modern Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Mediterranean and Atlantic winds across the Atlas Mountains in Morocco and Algeria generate moisture, and the area is noted for the fertility of its soil.