Conquest: How Africa Was Taken

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Treaties, war, and division

The Treaty Fraud

The Berlin Conference established the legal framework for the partition of Africa, but the actual imposition of colonial control required the physical conquest of African peoples who had not agreed to be colonised. This conquest was accomplished through a combination of fraudulent treaties, military violence, and divide-and-rule diplomacy — methods whose dishonesty and brutality the colonial powers went to great lengths to conceal from their domestic audiences.

The primary legal instrument of colonial conquest was the treaty — a written agreement between a European power and an African ruler, supposedly establishing a protectorate or ceding sovereignty. Hundreds of such treaties were signed across Africa in the 1880s and 1890s, and the overwhelming majority of them were fraudulent. African rulers were often presented with documents in European languages they could not read, signed under varying degrees of coercion, whose actual content bore no relationship to what they were told they were signing.

Cecil Rhodes sent his agents to obtain a concession from Lobengula, the King of the Ndebele, in 1888. The Rudd Concession was presented to Lobengula as a limited mining agreement; it was written to cede complete sovereignty over his territory. When Lobengula discovered the truth, he repudiated the treaty, sent messengers to London to protest, and wrote directly to Queen Victoria. He was ignored. Rhodes used the fraudulent concession as the legal basis for the colonisation of what became Rhodesia. Frederick Lugard, the British colonial administrator who would later articulate the doctrine of Indirect Rule, openly acknowledged that African rulers who signed treaties 'in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred' had no idea what they were signing — an acknowledgment that was never allowed to undermine the legal fiction that the treaties were valid.

Military Conquest: The Wars of Resistance

Where fraudulent treaties failed or were repudiated, the European powers used military force — force made overwhelmingly effective by the technological advantages described in the previous lesson. The conquest of Africa involved hundreds of military campaigns across the continent. It was not a peaceful process. African peoples fought back with extraordinary courage, and in some cases — notably Ethiopia — with success.

Conflict	African Resistance & Outcome
Anglo-Ashanti Wars (1824-1901)	The Ashanti Confederacy fought five wars against British expansion, winning several early engagements; Britain ultimately prevailed with superior firepower, and the Ashanti king was exiled.
Battle of Adwa (1896)	Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II led 100,000 troops against an Italian invasion force and won decisively — the only African victory that ended in continued independence.
Mahdist War (1881-1899)	Muhammad Ahmad, declaring himself the Mahdi, led a successful uprising expelling British-Egyptian forces from Sudan for 13 years, before Kitchener reconquered Sudan at Omdurman in 1898.
First Chimurenga (1896-97)	The Ndebele and Shona peoples of Rhodesia rose simultaneously against Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company; the uprising was suppressed and its leaders executed.
Herero and Nama Genocide (1904-08)	The Herero and Nama peoples of German South West Africa revolted against land seizures; Germany responded with the first genocide of the 20th century.
Maji Maji Rebellion (1905-07)	Over 200,000 people across southern Tanganyika rose against German rule; German forces suppressed it with a scorched-earth campaign that killed 200,000 to 300,000, mostly by famine.

Ethiopia: The Exception That Proves the Rule

Among all the African states that faced the European colonial onslaught, one stood alone in successfully defending its independence: Ethiopia, under Emperor Menelik II. Italy had established a colonial presence in Eritrea and was determined to extend its control over the Ethiopian highlands. The Treaty of Wuchale (1889) contained a critical ambiguity: in the Italian version, it appeared to make Ethiopia an Italian protectorate; in the Amharic version, it contained no such provision. When Italy began acting as though Ethiopia was its protectorate, Menelik repudiated the treaty and prepared for war.

What Italy encountered at Adwa on 1 March 1896 was not the disorganised resistance of a 'primitive' people. Menelik had spent years modernising his army, acquiring Russian and French rifles and artillery, and training his troops. When an Italian force of approximately 17,500 advanced into Ethiopian territory, they met an Ethiopian army of approximately 100,000 soldiers, brilliantly led and fighting for their homeland. The Italian force was surrounded and destroyed; approximately 7,000 Italian soldiers were killed and 3,500 captured. It remains one of the most decisive military defeats in colonial history.

The consequences of Adwa rippled far beyond Ethiopia. It proved that an African army could defeat a European power in open battle. It inspired African nationalists and Pan-Africanists across the continent and the diaspora — Kwame Nkrumah spoke of it, Marcus Garvey invoked it, and when Rastafarianism emerged in Jamaica in the 1930s, it was Haile Selassie of Ethiopia who became its central figure, precisely because his nation had never been colonised.

Divide and Rule: The Strategy of Fragmentation

Military conquest was expensive, risky, and, as Ethiopia demonstrated, not always successful. European colonial powers therefore supplemented military force with a strategy of political manipulation: divide and rule. By identifying, deepening, and exploiting existing tensions between African ethnic groups, kingdoms, and factions, the colonial powers were able to conquer Africa with far less direct force than would otherwise have been required.

In Rwanda and Burundi, the German and then Belgian colonial administrations took what had been a relatively fluid social distinction between Hutu and Tutsi and hardened it into a racial hierarchy, issuing identity cards that permanently fixed individuals in one category or the other. This Belgian racial engineering created the conditions for the catastrophe that occurred there in 1994. In Nigeria, the British consciously played off Muslim north against Christian south, Hausa-Fulani against Yoruba against Igbo. In Sudan, a deliberate 'Southern Policy' separated the predominantly African and Christian south from the predominantly Arab and Muslim north, contributing directly to decades of civil war. Across Africa, the colonial powers recruited soldiers from one ethnic group to police another, elevated some groups as 'martial races,' and denigrated others — damage to African political cultures that was profound and lasting.

Key Takeaways

Colonial conquest was accomplished through fraudulent treaties African rulers did not understand, military campaigns made overwhelming by the Maxim gun, and divide-and-rule strategies that deepened African divisions for colonial convenience. Ethiopia's victory at Adwa stands as the sole exception — proof that African resistance could succeed, and a lasting symbol of Pan-African pride. The final lesson in this sequence examines what kind of state colonialism actually built, and the economic architecture it left behind.