The Colonial Map and Its Consequences

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — What colonialism actually built

What Was Created: The Colonial State

The colonial territories that emerged from the Scramble were not natural political communities. They were administrative units, designed for the convenience of the coloniser, not the colonised. Their borders reflected the balance of power among European states at the moment of partition, not the political, cultural, or ethnic realities of the African peoples within them. Their administrative systems were designed to extract resources efficiently, not to govern justly or build political community.

The colonial state had several defining characteristics. It was, first and foremost, an extractive entity: its primary function was to ensure the flow of raw materials, labour, and tax revenues from African communities to the colonial power. Every other function — education, healthcare, law, administration — was secondary to this extractive mission, and was provided only to the extent that it served extraction.

The colonial state was also, by definition, a racially organised state. Political power was held exclusively by Europeans. Africans could not vote, could not stand for election, could not hold senior administrative positions, could not serve as commissioned officers in colonial armies, and in most territories could not own land in the most fertile areas. The legal system distinguished between 'citizens' (Europeans) and 'subjects' (Africans), with subjects enjoying far fewer legal rights and protections.

The colonial state imposed taxes on Africans — hut taxes, poll taxes, labour taxes — and then required Africans to earn the cash to pay these taxes by working for European employers or growing European-designated cash crops. This was not incidental to the colonial economy: it was the mechanism by which the coloniser forced Africans into the wage labour and cash crop economy on European terms. Those who refused to pay taxes or refused to work for Europeans were imprisoned, beaten, or had their villages burned. Coercion, not consent, was the foundation of colonial labour relations.

The Economic Architecture of Underdevelopment

The colonial economic system was designed not to develop Africa but to extract from it. This distinction is fundamental. A development-oriented economic system invests in education, infrastructure, industry, and technology in ways that increase the productive capacity of the territory and the living standards of its people. An extraction-oriented system does the opposite: it takes out more than it puts in, prioritising the flow of raw materials to the metropole over any local economic development.

The colonial powers built railways in Africa — but the railways ran from the mining areas and agricultural zones to the coast, not between African cities. They were designed to move raw materials to ports for export, not to connect African communities with each other or to facilitate internal African trade. The transport infrastructure of colonial Africa was, architecturally, a system for draining the continent.

The colonial powers introduced cash crop agriculture — requiring African farmers to grow cocoa, coffee, groundnuts, cotton, and sisal for export rather than food crops for local consumption. This restructured African agriculture around the needs of European markets, making African farmers dependent on world commodity prices they could not control and that fluctuated wildly. Colonial administrations actively suppressed African industry and manufacturing: where African craftsmen produced textiles, iron tools, or pottery that competed with imported European manufactured goods, the colonisers used tariffs, regulations, and outright prohibition to drive them out of the market. The result was the deliberate creation of African economic dependency on European manufactured imports — a dependency that persists, in transformed but recognisable forms, today.

The Scramble for Africa: Territorial Division by 1914
Britain: Nigeria, Gold Coast (Ghana), Sierra Leone, Gambia, Kenya, Uganda, the Rhodesias (Zambia, Zimbabwe), Nyasaland (Malawi), Bechuanaland (Botswana), Basutoland (Lesotho), Swaziland, South Africa, Sudan, Egypt (effective control), Somaliland.
France: Algeria, Tunisia, part of Morocco, Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Dahomey (Benin), Niger, French Sudan (Mali), Mauritania, Chad, Ubangi-Shari (Central African Republic), French Congo, Madagascar, Djibouti, French Somaliland.

The Scramble for Africa: Territorial Division by 1914
Belgium: the Congo Free State (later Belgian Congo / DRC) — Leopold II's personal property until 1908.
Germany: Togoland, Cameroon, German South West Africa (Namibia), German East Africa (Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi) — lost after World War I.
Portugal: Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe.
Italy: Libya, Eritrea, Italian Somaliland — Ethiopia never colonised.
Spain: Spanish Morocco, Spanish Sahara (Western Sahara), Equatorial Guinea.
Independent: Ethiopia and Liberia (though Liberia was effectively a US client state).

Key Takeaways

The colonial state was an extractive, racially organised entity, built to move Africa's resources, labour, and tax revenue toward European metropoles rather than to develop the territories it governed. Its railways ran to ports, not between cities. Its cash crop economies displaced food production. Its tax and labour systems relied on coercion, not consent. By 1914, this system covered ninety percent of the continent, and its structural legacies — economic dependency, arbitrary borders, extractive institutions — are the direct inheritance of post-colonial Africa. The next lesson brings this module's ideas together and looks ahead to what colonial rule actually felt like on the ground.