The Promises and the Disappointments

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — What independence delivered, and what it did not

What Independence Was Supposed to Mean

African independence was not merely a change of flag and a change of faces in government buildings. It was a promise — a promise of transformation that animated the millions of ordinary Africans who had supported the independence movements. The promise was comprehensive: political freedom, economic development, education for all children, healthcare for all citizens, land for the landless, dignity for the historically humiliated. It was the promise of a fundamental reversal of everything colonialism had done.

In the first years of independence, the promise seemed reachable. School enrollment soared across independent Africa. Healthcare infrastructure expanded. African professionals, previously excluded from senior positions, flooded into government, the civil service, and the professions. The economy grew. African languages began to be used in public life. African culture experienced a renaissance — music, literature, film, and visual art flourished in the new atmosphere of possibility. Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958), Wole Soyinka's plays, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's early novels, the music of Fela Kuti, Miriam Makeba, and Hugh Masekela — all emerged in this period of extraordinary creative energy, an African voice suppressed for generations now speaking at full volume to the world.

Why the Promise Was Broken

But the promise was broken — in too many places, too quickly. By the late 1960s and through the 1970s, a pattern had emerged across much of Africa: military coups replacing civilian governments, one-party states eliminating political competition, corruption draining the public resources that should have funded development, and Cold War interference ensuring that any African leader who pursued genuinely independent policies was vulnerable to externally backed removal.

The reasons for the failures of early independence are multiple and contested. Some were structural: the African states that emerged from colonialism inherited economic systems designed for extraction, not development; bureaucracies designed for administration, not governance; borders that created artificial states without strong national identities. The infrastructure of colonialism was not designed to be inherited by successor states and run in the interests of African peoples — it continued to serve external interests even after the formal colonial relationship had ended.

Some failures were the result of neo-colonialism — the continuation of economic and political dependence through new mechanisms. The French policy of Françafrique — the maintenance of French military bases, currency systems, and business interests across Francophone Africa after formal independence — ensured that many French African territories remained effectively under French control. The CFA franc, pegged to the French franc and later the Euro, gave France effective control over the monetary policy of fourteen African countries long after their formal independence.

Some failures were the result of Cold War intervention: American and Western intelligence agencies backing coups against left-leaning leaders — Lumumba in Congo, Nkrumah in Ghana, and others in a pattern that repeated globally — and installing and supporting brutal but compliant dictators such as Mobutu in Congo and Bokassa in the Central African Republic, ensuring that genuine African economic independence remained impossible.

And some failures were internal — the result of poor governance, ethnic favouritism, personal enrichment, and the failure of African leaders to build the democratic institutions and the rule of law that their own peoples needed. It is possible to acknowledge the structural constraints of neo-colonialism and Cold War interference — both real and devastating — while also holding African leaders and African ruling classes accountable for the choices they made and the systems they built or failed to build.

The First Wave of Coups: Independence Betrayed
1960 — Congo: Lumumba deposed and killed; Mobutu installed with US and Belgian backing.
1963 — Togo: Sylvanus Olympio assassinated — Africa's first post-independence coup.

The First Wave of Coups: Independence Betrayed
1966 — Nigeria: first military coup; four years later, the Biafra War kills up to 2 million.
1966 — Ghana: Nkrumah overthrown in a CIA-backed coup while on a peace mission to Hanoi.
1969 — Libya: Gaddafi deposes King Idris in a military coup.
1971 — Uganda: Idi Amin deposes Milton Obote — begins eight years of terror.
1974 — Ethiopia: a military junta deposes Emperor Haile Selassie; years of repression follow.

The Permanent Achievement: The Psychological Liberation

Despite the coups, the dictatorships, the neo-colonial economic structures, and the Cold War manipulations, African independence achieved something that cannot be reversed: the psychological liberation of a people who had been told, for generations, that they were unfit to govern themselves.

The generation of Africans who grew up after independence grew up knowing that Africans could lead nations, command armies, run hospitals, pilot aircraft, adjudicate in courts of law, and hold the highest offices of state. This knowledge, once established, cannot be colonised again. The damage done by centuries of colonial education was not erased overnight, but it was fundamentally challenged. Pan-Africanism — the idea that Africans everywhere, on the continent and in the diaspora, share a common identity, a common history, and a common destiny — was mainstreamed by the independence movements. The Organisation of African Unity, founded in 1963, gave this idea institutional form. It was not yet the powerful, unified voice that Nkrumah had dreamed of. But it existed, and its existence changed what was politically possible.

> *"I am not African because I was born in Africa but because Africa was born in me. Independence did not give us Africa. It reminded us that Africa had always been ours."*
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> **— Kwame Nkrumah, Africa Must Unite**

Key Takeaways

Independence brought a genuine surge of educational, cultural, and professional advancement, but the promise of comprehensive transformation was broken in too many places by a combination of inherited extractive economic structures, neo-colonial mechanisms like Françafrique and the CFA franc, Cold War-backed coups against independent-minded leaders, and, in some cases, the failures of African governance itself. What could not be reversed was the psychological liberation independence achieved — the demonstrated fact that Africans could govern, lead, and build. The final lesson in this sequence brings this module's ideas together and looks ahead to the battle of ideas over what a free Africa should actually build.