European Imperialism within Africa:
A Story of Resistance, Power, and Oppression

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Abstract

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, European powers colonized Africa, profoundly changing the continent's social, cultural, and political landscapes. African societies retained significant forms of social and cultural power despite European dominance, as Rodney (2014) reported. Africans exhibited agency through various forms of resistance, including rebellion, discontent, and support for anti-colonial movements. Notable examples of resistance include the Maji Maji rebellion in Tanganyika. However, the European powers managed to maintain control by implementing systems of forced labor, taxation, and censorship, effectively suppressing dissent. Despite their best efforts, the African elites and urban classes struggled to navigate the colonial system and exercise agency. They remained under European control, and their influence was further undermined by the establishment of indirect ruling systems imposed by Europeans. Rural and middle-class Africans, exemplified by figures such as Nweke Okafor, also showed agency within the colonial framework but were subjected to European influences through education and religious conversion. European control was solidified as it manipulated established systems, resulting in enduring impacts on African history and present-day challenges. This review article highlights the duality of African resistance and European control, emphasizing the complexities and long-lasting effects of imperialism on the continent. African society's resistance and resilience were met with systematic oppression, which shaped Africa's historical trajectory and ongoing struggles.

Keywords: Cultural imperialism, Anti-colonial movements, Maji Maji revolution, European control

1. Introduction

Before the late 19th century, European powers held only small claims to coastal territories in Africa. They were unable to expand further inland because of various factors, including limited technology and weapons (Webster et al., 2024b). However, the industrial revolutions and increasing competition among major powers engendered a period known as "New Imperialism." During this time, nations like England, France, and Belgium scrambled to stake their claims across Africa, carving the continent into a "jigsaw" puzzle with borders that disregarded the existing populations, cultures, and social structures (Webster et al., 2024b).

Advances in weaponry and transportation, such as railroads, enabled European forces to conquer larger African armies with a relatively small number of soldiers (Webster et al., 2024b). Throughout their colonization, these powers established economic, political, and social systems designed to entrench their control over the regions they dominated.

This study investigates the mechanisms that allowed Europeans to maintain a strong grip on Africa into the 20th century, even after World War II. Additionally, it explores how African societies responded to these systems, examining how they could assert agency and resist European Imperialism.

2. Defining Power and Agency in the Context of Colonialism

This study employs two key terms, 'power' and 'agency,' to examine the dynamics of African resistance within European colonial rule. *Power* refers to the capacity of an individual or group to exert control or influence over others, often through established systems, resources, or force. Within the colonial context, European powers exercised dominance over African societies by leveraging military might, economic policies, and legal frameworks to maintain control (Rodney, 2014). In contrast, agency signifies individuals' or groups' ability to make independent choices, assert influence, or resist oppression within a system that limits their control. Therefore, African agency represents African communities' efforts to navigate or challenge colonial constraints, whether through organized rebellions, intellectual resistance, or subtle cultural preservation (Boahen, 1987). This study highlights the complex interactions between European-imposed systems and African efforts to assert autonomy by distinguishing between power and agency.

3. Forms of African Resistance

Although the external forces exerted by the elite and rural classes in Africa maintained a level of agency that challenged European power, demonstrating Africans' ability to exploit the colonial system, Europeans ultimately exerted control by regulating these groups and suppressing anti-colonial dissent. When the Europeans implemented new systems of forced labor and taxation on the working African people, many decided to unite and revolt against them (Boahen, 1987). One notable rebellion was the Maji Maji rebellion, which saw thousands of people over over 10,000 square miles unite to oust German colonial forces from Tanganyika (Boahen, 1987). Sparked in 1905, the Maji Maji rebellion originated in response to the oppressive forced cotton cultivation policies imposed by the Germans, which placed heavy labor demands on local communities and restricted their economic autonomy. African spiritual leaders encouraged resistance by promoting the belief that 'maji' (sacred water) could protect fighters from German bullets, strengthening morale and unifying diverse ethnic groups under a shared cause of expelling the colonial regime.

Despite the devastating response from German forces, who enacted brutal retaliatory measures leading to widespread famine and thousands of deaths, this rebellion demonstrated the resilience and agency of African communities in opposing foreign rule. *A Tanzanian elder's letter captures this spirit, stating, 'We are not slaves to the Germans; our spirits belong to this land, and we fight for our children.'* Such firsthand accounts underscore the deep-rooted determination of African communities to resist foreign oppression despite the overwhelming force of European militaries (Boahen, 1987).

The Maji Maji uprising, though ultimately subdued, left a lasting legacy of resistance that inspired later anti-colonial movements. It marked a significant instance of united African agency against colonial powers and underscored the severe human costs of imperialism on African society.

Similarly, many in the higher class used their greater wealth and influence outside European systems to support these causes through different forms of media, such as plays, novels, pamphlets, and cartoons (Boahen, 1987). One such cartoon published in the *West African Pilot* depicts a Giant, labeled "The African," sleeping while a person, labeled "The European," says, "Gad! If he should wake up!" (Lasekan, 1944). On the side, a caption read, "When he yawned… Gold Coast leaders demanded self-rule. He yawned again, and Sherboro sought autonomy for Sierra Leone… If he should wake, what will Europe… say ?" (Lasekan, 1944). With these yawns, the author depicted small uprisings across Africa; however, the author's rhetorical question at the end raised the possibility that if Africa "wakes," a continent-wide rebellion would occur; they have collective power and can overthrow their European colonizers.

4. European Methods of Control (this section should be expanded.)

The effects of such laws on African communities were significant, as they limited freedom of expression and curtailed political participation. *For example, in the Gold Coast, the sedition laws were used to prosecute members of the African intelligentsia, like Nnamdi Azikiwe, who faced charges for publishing a newspaper advocating for local rights and questioning British authority.* This case exemplifies how colonial governments used sedition laws to silence

African elites attempting to assert influence within the legal system (Johnson, 2010). Furthermore, the legal system was restructured to exclude traditional African laws in favor of Europeanized courts, where indigenous customs were often deemed 'repugnant' or 'uncivilized' by colonial standards. In Kenya, for instance, local land ownership practices were overridden by British property laws, which facilitated the takeover of communal lands and forced many rural communities to wage labor on European-owned plantations.

Beyond restricting elites, these legal changes deeply impacted rural Africans. *Many Kenyan communities, facing the confiscation of their ancestral lands, were compelled to accept labor contracts with colonial authorities, fundamentally altering their way of life.* These disruptions extended to family structures, as men often left their villages to work on plantations, resulting in economic strain and a breakdown of social traditions. Such legal frameworks not only entrenched European dominance but also eroded indigenous systems, sowing discontent and fostering conditions for future resistance movements.

Additionally, in the legal systems, the Europeans did away with previous customs in the courts and "Europeanized" them, bringing the European ways and means into their colonies. Such a legacy of Europeanization can be seen in Ghana, where the English forced their legal system and customs on them. For example, while they allowed some indigenous law to remain under a "duel legal system," they added "repugnancy clauses," which excluded aspects of the Ghanaian customs or cultures that the British considered "appalling," "ridiculous," or "unhelpful" to maintaining Christian ideals (Johnson, 2010). Additionally, while there were Indigenous judges on the benches of the lower courts to maintain power over the judiciary, the English placed their power on the Supreme Court (Johnson, 2010).

5.   African Agency within the Colonial System

During New Imperialism throughout Africa, the elites and those in urban areas exercised many forms of agency and power within the system established during colonization (and had many reasons to do so); however, the Europeans maintained a degree of control over them by utilizing these systems to their advantage. In many instances, elite members found themselves accused of crimes committed by European prosecutors (Johnson, 2010). However, within the legal system, many defended themselves and even emerged victorious with an innocent verdict, as demonstrated in the case of Nnamdi Azikiwe. He gained an acquittal from his alleged crime of publishing a seditious document under the European statute, which prohibited acts that "bring hatred or contempt… against… His Majesty [or] … bring about change in the sovereignty" (Johnson, 2010). The prosecutor could not prove that he was the editor of the paper on the day it was published (Johnson, 2010). Additionally, within certain jobs and positions in society, there was an opportunity to obtain upward social mobility. For example, an administrative assistant in Africa, whose job was to act as a correspondent between the locals and his superiors, amassed large amounts of wealth and status (Moukouri, 2014). Nevertheless, he always remained subordinate to his European superiors and was prevented from attending many "high-class" events, such as a gala that he had to enter covertly (Moukouri, 2014). These restrictions limited the reality for many (such as clerks) of being equal to Europeans and obtaining full agency within the imperialist system. Moreover, the Europeans undermined and diluted their governmental influence and power by establishing an indirect ruling system for their colonies. This system of European-appointed leaders and chiefs, who masqueraded as independent rulers separate from Europe, excluded elites from the government to their anger (Rodney, 2014). Such exclusion was likely done to prevent the accumulation of power by the elite class, whom the Europeans deemed a threat, on many occasions, to the stability of imperialism. This led to growing anti-European sentiments within the class, which remained long after colonialism.

Occasionally, there were instances of those in the rural or middle classes exercising their agency within European systems; however, similar to the elites, Europeans still exerted great power over them. For example, Nweke Okafor's story encapsulates how rural Africans exercised their agency within a system. Ezeuno, who wanted to gain the favor of his superior, Mr. Onwuzuligbo, offered to send his "brother," Nweke, to a British school (Okafor-Omali, 2014). It is important to recognize that Ezeuno and many other workers valued this path of "favors" because it provided a sense of "protection" from their coworkers' "maltreatment" by their superiors (Okafor-Omali, 2014). This sense of "protection" embodied Ezeuno's agency, as it enabled him to believe in or even exert control over his circumstances.

However, in contrast to other systems, such as education, Europeans used schooling to exert ideological and even religious control over pupils. When Nweke returned from his time at an English School, he converted to Christianity and refused to participate in the village's home religion (Okafor-Omali, 2014). Looking back at missions in Latin America throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, this "New Imperialist" situation was analogous to the European conversion efforts of those colonized. In this new form, they utilized the systems built through the years—in this case, schooling—to exert their will and force conversions on students. Europeans also used the schooling system to impose other ideas on pupils. For example, a German school examination in which one question asked, "What good things have the Europeans brought us [the Africans]?" (Worger et al., 2010). This question represented Eurocentric ideas and concepts that Europe imposed on students. By instilling these ideas, Europeans further justified and cemented their power in Africa.

6.   Long-term Impacts of Imperialism

Remnants of imperialism far outlived European African colonies. One of the most visible and problematic legacies is the map of Africa itself (The New York Times, 2011). When overlaid with Africa's ethnolinguistic groups, it becomes evident that colonial borders disregarded these cultural and ethnic distinctions, often grouping disparate communities within artificial boundaries or dividing cohesive ones across multiple countries. This disregard for natural, cultural boundaries has contributed to ongoing conflicts, as seen in Sudan's protracted ethnic struggles and eventual split into Sudan and South Sudan in 2011 (Worger et al., 2010). Similar ethnic tensions persist in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Ethiopia, where rival groups continue to struggle for power within these imposed frameworks.

Beyond ethnic conflicts, the economic structures established during colonial rule continue to shape Africa's economies. European powers prioritized extractive industries, focusing on resource extraction rather than sustainable local development. This pattern persists today, with many African economies still heavily dependent on exporting raw materials—contributing to economic instability and hindering industrialization efforts across the continent. For instance, countries like Nigeria and Angola remain reliant on oil exports. In contrast, others, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, rely on mining precious metals, often under exploitative conditions that echo colonial-era labor practices.

Colonial influence also lingers in Africa's political and legal systems. European-imposed legal frameworks, once used to control and marginalize African communities, have left many nations with judicial and political institutions that struggle to adapt to local customs and needs. For example, remnants of the British legal system still influence contemporary governance in Ghana, occasionally clashing with traditional African jurisprudence. This dissonance complicates efforts to establish cohesive national legal identities and contributes to ongoing challenges with justice and governance.

Examining these colonial legacies makes it clear how the structures and policies established under European rule continue to impact Africa's present-day social, economic, and political landscape. Understanding these connections provides a critical context for addressing modern challenges like ethnic tensions, economic dependency, and legal system reform.

7.   Importance of the Study

The importance of the "New Imperialism" and how it shaped modern Africa is unmistakable. Understanding this era in Africa is essential to obtain a full picture of modern-day issues, ranging from disparities between groups of people to international relations. Many minute issues are rooted in colonial history, which, by understanding their background can help scholars obtain a more comprehensive assessment. For example, as mentioned above, conflict and violence in Sudan and South Sudan have deep ties with the colonial past. Additionally, African countries' complex relations with the West can be attributed to colonialism. By understanding these legacies and how they function in the present, scholars can provide a better analysis of the situation. This study offers a glimpse into the impact of colonialism on the people of Africa and explores how Europeans exerted control and how Africans exercised agency.

8. **Suggested Further Reading and Areas for Future Study**

Understanding the legacies of European imperialism in Africa benefits from a deeper exploration of historical narratives and colonial rule's socio-cultural impacts. Readers interested in further studying these dynamics may consider foundational works like Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (2014), which offers a critical examination of Africa's economic exploitation and its enduring consequences. Another valuable text, Boahen's *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (1987), presents a detailed view of African responses to European imperialism, focusing on resistance and adaptation within colonial systems.

Further areas for study could explore how colonial administrations used education and religion to entrench European control and reshape African society. A closer look at the impact of colonial education systems on African social structures and traditional beliefs would shed light on ideological shifts during this period. Additionally, examining how religious conversions were employed as tools of control and exploring the varied African responses to these efforts would reveal complex dimensions of cultural influence. Another key area of inquiry involves the long-term effects of colonial judicial reforms on contemporary African legal and political systems, providing insights into how colonial legacies continue to shape modern African institutions.

Engaging with these subjects can enhance comprehension of the cultural, religious, and educational aspects of colonial impact, contributing valuable perspectives to the study of African resistance and agency.

9. **Conclusion**

Many areas of colonialism in Africa are covered in this study; however, I believe that there are two areas in which further research is needed. These are how religion and education were used to exert control over the colonized. It would be interesting to examine how they responded to these efforts, whether the Europeans were successful at using religion or education in the ways they wanted, and to what extent the Europeans altered or changed the customs of those they colonized.

In the colonies of Europeans in Africa, the power dynamics were relatively fluid in some respects but rigid in others. In many instances, Africans were able to find ways to exert agency, whether they were within or outside the systems; yet, they were unable to wield power, as the Europeans methodically prevented them from gaining such power. The Europeans harshly punished those who worked outside the system and dared to oppose. Additionally, the control exerted by Europeans helped solidify their grasp over the African continent and its people through oppression and restriction. This idea, combined with several other factors, can help explain the longevity of imperial colonies within Africa.

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