The Making and Unmaking of Modern Boundaries in Africa: From Berlin to Kigali

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Background

The continent of Africa consists of 55 states – three of which are Indian Ocean islands and another three Atlantic Ocean islands. The continent, therefore, accommodated 49 territories, 15 of which are landlocked (namely Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.

The others are all coastal, either adjacent to the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans, implying ancient trading connections with Romans and Arabs who were the first colonisers of Africa.

See Map 1 that reveals the existence of some of these pre-colonial states, normally in fertile regions with fresh water sources such as fast running rivers (the Nile; the Niger; the Congo and the Zambezi Rivers).

Fresh water lakes are found in the East African Rift valley (which is the sources of the River Nile that flows northwards into Egypt and the Mediterranean at the ancient city of Alexandria.

Maps 2 and 4 reveal the impact of foreign influences on post-traditional state formations in Africa: the spread of Islam since the 7th century AD (in northern and eastern Africa), followed by the Ottoman (Muslim) Turks between the 16th and 19th centuries.

The **Muslim era dates from the 7th century onwards** introducing theocratic political concepts into North Africa. The Muslims also introduced universities and a new system of laws. The oldest university in Africa, is Fez, established by the Arabs in Morocco in 859 AD. The old Mali, Songhai and Kanem states (11th century) were converted from African kingdoms into Muslim states. Then came the Turks of the Ottoman Empire – who were also Muslims and who consolidated state formation in North Africa. The Ottoman Empire lasted until World War I in 1918 (the so-called Muslim line – the barrier of the lethal tsetse fly (see below) stretches from Dakar in West Africa to Mogadishu in Somalia in East Africa).

The Muslims linked quite soon with Africa's trading kingdoms in West and Eastern Africa. This gave rise to more Arab-inspired urbanisation and city states, such as Zanzibar in East Africa. In West Africa, links were forged between the Arab north, and West African kingdoms on the banks of the Niger River. Muslim cities such as Kano and Timbuktu became important trading centres. The famous trans-Sahara trade route developed, while Arab

Muslims penetrated further south. But as their major transportation were camels. The **tsetse fly** prevalent in the tropical forests, prevented Muslim traders from occupying the coastal regions of West Africa. In West Africa, Muslims are not Arabs, but Islamised black Africans (see, Map 2).

The resource base of these Muslim states were often trade in slaves (trans-Sahara and Swahili coast – long before the European trans-Atlantic slave trade), agriculture and gold and silver. Territories were seldom conquered. Trade meant that costs aimed at the extension of power had to be avoided. One of the largest legacies of the Muslim penetration of West and East Africa was not only the Islamisation of the people, but also the **Arabisation** of the languages of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Northern Sudan and the formation of Swahili in east Africa which is an Afro-Arab language in Kenya, Tanzania and some islands.

Arabs from Arabia were big slave traders and sold slaves in India, China and even in Spain. The Turkish (or Ottoman) Empire that lasted until 1918 strengthened Muslim rule in North Africa till the present day.

By far the biggest Muslim state in Africa (at the time of the partition) was the Mahdist state, established in present-day Sudan by Muslim ruling classes at Omdurman on the banks of the River Nile (Map 1), during the last quarter of the 1800s. The British conquest of Sudan in 1898 led to the demise of the Muslim legacy of Islamic states in Africa.

Then followed the European patterns of penetration by the British, the French, the Germans, the Italians and the Portuguese. This was the beginning of the colonial era and the end of informal and shifting boundaries. It was on the insistence of the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck that all colonial powers were invited to Berlin in 1884 in order to make rules for the demarcation of new boundaries in Africa.

This overview hereunder will:

➢ demonstrate that the boundaries of the modern state in Africa was formed by colonialism;

➢ highlight the important role played by Bismarck during the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 in the partition of Africa; and

➢ explain why most African states are ethnically heterogeneous while colonial boundaries still remain.

The Berlin Conference, 1884/5

The contemporary pattern of states in Africa is based upon the colonial partition imposed on Africa during the relatively **short period from 1884 to 1904**. The only exceptions to this rule were to be found in North Africa (eg Egypt and Ethiopia) and Southern Africa (eg the Cape and Natal, that were British, long before those dates). In West Africa, Liberia (a "free slave state", since 1847) is the only exception.

In order to understand what had happened during this relatively short period of time, key concepts and the motives behind them, call for further explanation.

At that time Europe was in the grip of nationalist fever, driven by the fervours of **mercantilism** and **imperialism**. Europe wanted to escape from the poverty of the era before industrialisation. This had precipitated the "Scramble for Africa", mainly led by France, but also pursued by the British, the Portuguese and the Belgian king (Leopold), and the Germans. It was the German Chancellor, Otto Von Bismarck, who realised this was a serious issue, that could unleash conflicts among the European powers. He therefore arranged for the Berlin Conference (1884/85) where the "rules for partition" could be agreed upon.

Fourteen **European states** (the above, and others), **plus the USA** participated. But America did not sign the final agreement.

In a sense, this was preventative diplomacy, preventing a European war over Africa. The motives behind these actions are still debated today. Lenin always claimed that imperialism was the highest form of capitalism and that the partition of Africa was therefore a logical outcome of the capitalist quest for wealth. Closer scrutiny reveals however that economic factors alone don't fully explain what took place. To be sure, there were also strategic, personal and nationalistic reasons. These may be reduced to the following:

➢ **economic motives**. This was perhaps the most important. A writer such as Thomas Pakenham (1991) says that colonialism was motivated by the four "C's": **Commerce**, Christianity, Civilisation and **Conquest**. Of those four, commerce and conquest were arguably paramount, as may be concluded from the kind of "occupations" that occurred since 1869, namely –

- the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley in **1869** which stimulated British interests;

- trading with India: the "Jewel in the Crown", and shortening the sea route between Europe and Asia;

- the opening of the **Suez Canal in 1869** which raised the stakes in Egypt (making the Middle East a strategic asset long before oil was discovered);

- the British occupation of Egypt in 1882-1885;

- the activities of **HM Stanley** (an American who became a Welshman, a ruthless trader; and somebody whose explorations were often supported by guns) in concluding many treaties on behalf of the Belgian King Leopold, securing the Congo River Basin as the King's private property;

- the competing activities of Borgnan de Brazza in securing treaties and territories for France, to the north of the Congo River; and

- the intervention by Bismarck in 1884/85 in organising the Berlin Conference as a means of regulating the "Scramble for Africa".

➢ strategic considerations, for example, the British interests in the **Suez Canal** – the link between Europe and India, in Egypt/Sudan and in the **Red Sea**; France's interest in **Djibouti**, which is strategically-situated at the Red Sea; and Italy's interests in Somali and Ethiopia, for the same reasons;

➢ personal ambitions, for example those of **Cecil J Rhodes**, **King Leopold** of Belgium, and those of the explorers who wanted to discover the source of the River Nile (**Livingstone** and **Stanley** searched for the source of the Nile). Treaty-makers (such as Stanley on behalf of King Leopold) also had personal ambitions because they worked for commission; and

➢ national prestige, for example Britain, that never wanted "the sun to set on the British Empire", and France, that was humiliated by the Prussians in the War of 1871, and who had a national obsession to compensate for this setback.

As mentioned, there was poverty in Europe and it was at the beginning of capitalism. This led to imperialism and the desire to conquer foreign territories for their wealth. But Africa's geography was daunting with huge territories and low population densities. Conquest would have inflicted high costs. It is therefore logical, that **high costs conquests would have been avoided** (Herbst, 2001: pp 28-29). However, the "Scramble for Africa" could turn out to be costly competition – even war among European powers, hence **Bismarck's** intervention.

The **Berlin Conference** then designed a colonial state system for Africa based on cheap conquest. Africa was then relatively peacefully carved up ("boundaries") and systems such as indirect rule (the co-optation of traditional leaders) were devised to combat high cost. Direct rule was not an investment in expensive governance either.

Key Concepts

The key concepts in the colonisation of Africa, ie pertaining to the division or partition of Africa (the "Berlin rules"), relate to the establishment of various European spheres of influence (mainly French, British, Belgian, Portuguese, etc), in the coastal areas, followed by the imposition of inland control through –

➢ the **occupation** of territories through the work of **chartered companies** that represented state and commercial interests in specific areas - the French (since 1766), the British (since 1886) and the Portuguese (since 1891); or alternatively through -

➢ the **possession** of territories by means of-

- **treaties**, for example concluded by HM Stanley on behalf of the Belgian King, Livingstone on behalf of the British, or De Brazza on behalf of the French; and

- **military conquest** by European armies, as in the case of Sudanese, Ashanti and Zulu territories. This was the last resort – costly and dangerous. (The signing of treaties was still the cheapest way of colonisation.)

  (An example of chartered companies was Cecil John Rhodes' British South Africa Company (BSAC) that occupied Zimbabwe in 1890 and built the Cape Town/Bulawayo railway line.)

➢ **Boundaries**

Map 3 portrays one of the modern day dilemmas of Africa: the overwhelming impact of artificial boundaries on ethnic identities and statecraft in Africa. The point is: only a handful of African states are ethnically homogeneous (eg Swaziland, Lesotho, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia and perhaps Botswana). For them boundaries may matter. For the majority, however, "border management" will always be a hassle.

➢ **Legality of Treaties**

The signing of treaties however, created problems of its own. For example, the legality of these contracts has always been **highly questionable**. They were concluded in foreign European languages, the contents of which were neither well-understood nor adequately explained to illiterate African chiefs who "signed" them. Boundaries thus defined were imprecise, as these draftsmen usually had a very **poor knowledge** of African geography.

Significantly, many boundaries were not defined by these treaties, as they were drawn up in European capitals using straight lines on maps, expediting intra-European bargaining for land as the pace of partition hotted up. Through this kind of expedience, African groups were lumped together, or even worse, divided into various colonial entities as in the cases of the Bakongo (Angola/Zaire), the Owambo (Angola/Namibia), the Ewe (Ghana/Togo), and the Somali's (Somalia/Ethiopia/Kenya).

The drawing of controversial boundaries - irrespective of ethnic, cultural or natural conditions - became an important consequence of the Berlin Conference. It introduced a great degree of artificiality in "national" populations. (see, Map 3) Peoples of African, Arab, Christian and Muslim populations were often grouped together as in Sudan and Nigeria.

The Berlin rules, as well as the French *loi cadre* (in 1956), laid the territorial foundations for the creation of Africa's modern independent state system that came into being from 1956/57 onwards, when colonies in sub-Saharan Africa became independent. The **Organisation of African Unity recognised them in 1964**. The African Union persisted with this policy after 2001. The only deviation was the secession of South Sudan in 2011. (Eritrea became independent because it was never part of Ethiopia before: therefore not secession but postponed decolonisation.)

As it was not envisaged at the time of partition that these territories would become sovereign states, it is still understandable (in colonial terms) why

the colonists had violated historical considerations. **It remains an open question as to why the African nationalists, who had opted for independence since 1956/57, had not reconsidered inherited boundaries more carefully after independence.** One is reminded of Basil Davidson's arguments that until this legacy has been re-instituted, decolonisation will remain unfinished business.

This "unfinished business" is not only about artificiality and Berlin-made shapes and sizes, but also about the **human dimensions of border management** in the not too distant future of an anticipated future of a politically and economically more integrated Africa based on the Kigali Plan of 2018 that foresees a Continental Free Trade Area – the largest in the world, sometime in future.

The pan-African dream of a "United States of Africa" (with 55 political components headquartered from Addis Ababa, the seat of the African Union established in 2002) remains alive. This political bloc overlaps and simulates the European-inspired vision of a single market with single currency covering the continent, from the "Cape to Cairo" according to the thinking of Cecil John Rhodes, the greatest imperialist in Africa.

This complex web creates issues not fully debated yet. The mandate for this was the signing in March 2018 of the Continental Free Trade Agreement (CFTA) in Kigali (Rwanda). This Kigali Plan foresees a single African Customs Union, a single African Currency and African Economic Community by 2025 (six years from now). However, this is unlikely (See Map 6.)

But by 2063 exactly one century after the creation of the OAU in 1963, an African Political Union should also be fully established (unlikely), as mandated by Nepad's "Agenda 2063", as signed by Mbeki and Obasanjo in 2002. As indicated in Map 6, this will be the largest bloc in the world. Apart from trade disputes, border management will be problematic.

This also applies to the "free movement of people". How these softer borders will curb illegal migration is uncertain. (Many Mexico's in the making?) At least the South African Parliament is debating the Department of Home Affairs Border Management Authority Bill of 2017 that intends to combine seven departments stationed at the country's borders. One intention is to allow for the adequate deployment of the defence force at the border posts and that Home Affairs would know of every person in the country.

Presently there were "millions of undocumented people" in the country. The issue of "Smart ID cards" would improve border controls. The intention is therefore to curb illegal migration which seems to be at odds with the CFTA's vision of the free movement of African people by 2063. Will this turn the "soft border dream" into a nightmare?

What can we learn from the Donald Trump experience with unwanted migrants on the Mexican border? An obvious answer is that the "free movement of people" (legal) is not the same as the "illegal migration" of

undesirables. But how to reconcile these extremities is one of the biggest issues of the plans for 2063 and beyond. Is security trumping trade? The making and unmaking of modern boundaries?

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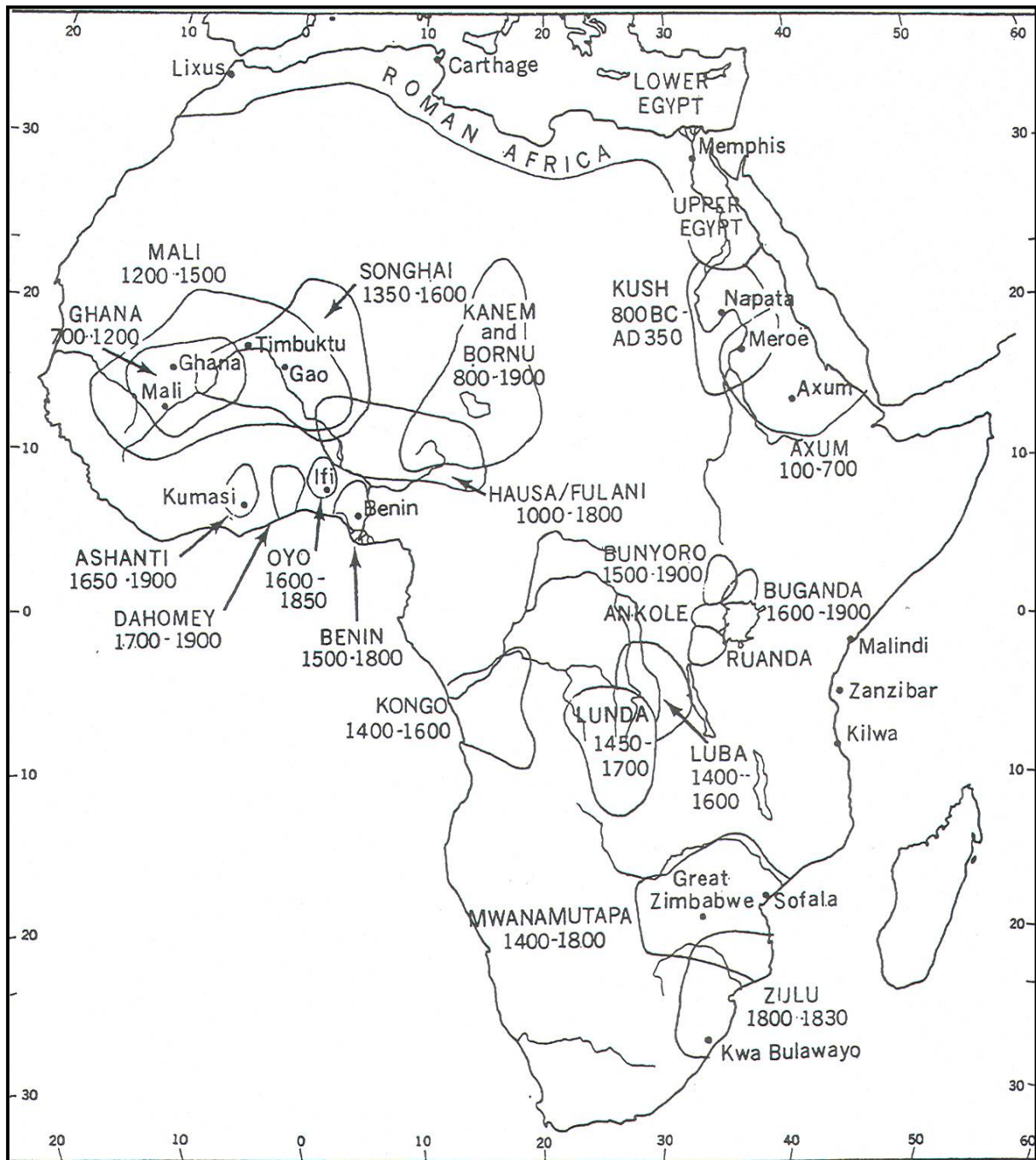Murdock, George P. 1959. *Africa: Its People and Their Culture History.* New York, McGraw.

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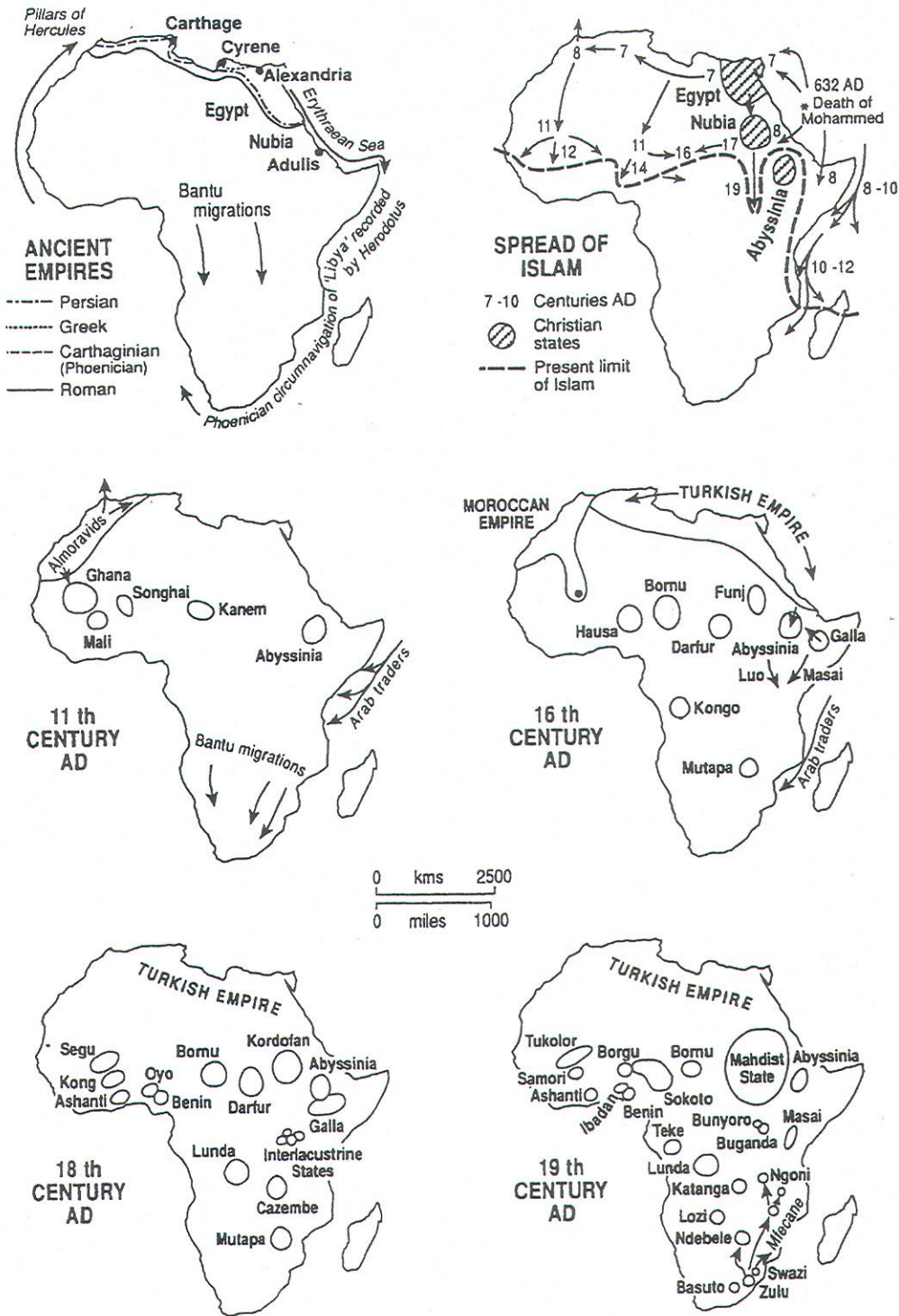Versi, Anver. 2018. "Celebrate the CFTA". *New African*, April 2018.

Map 1   Pre-Colonial States

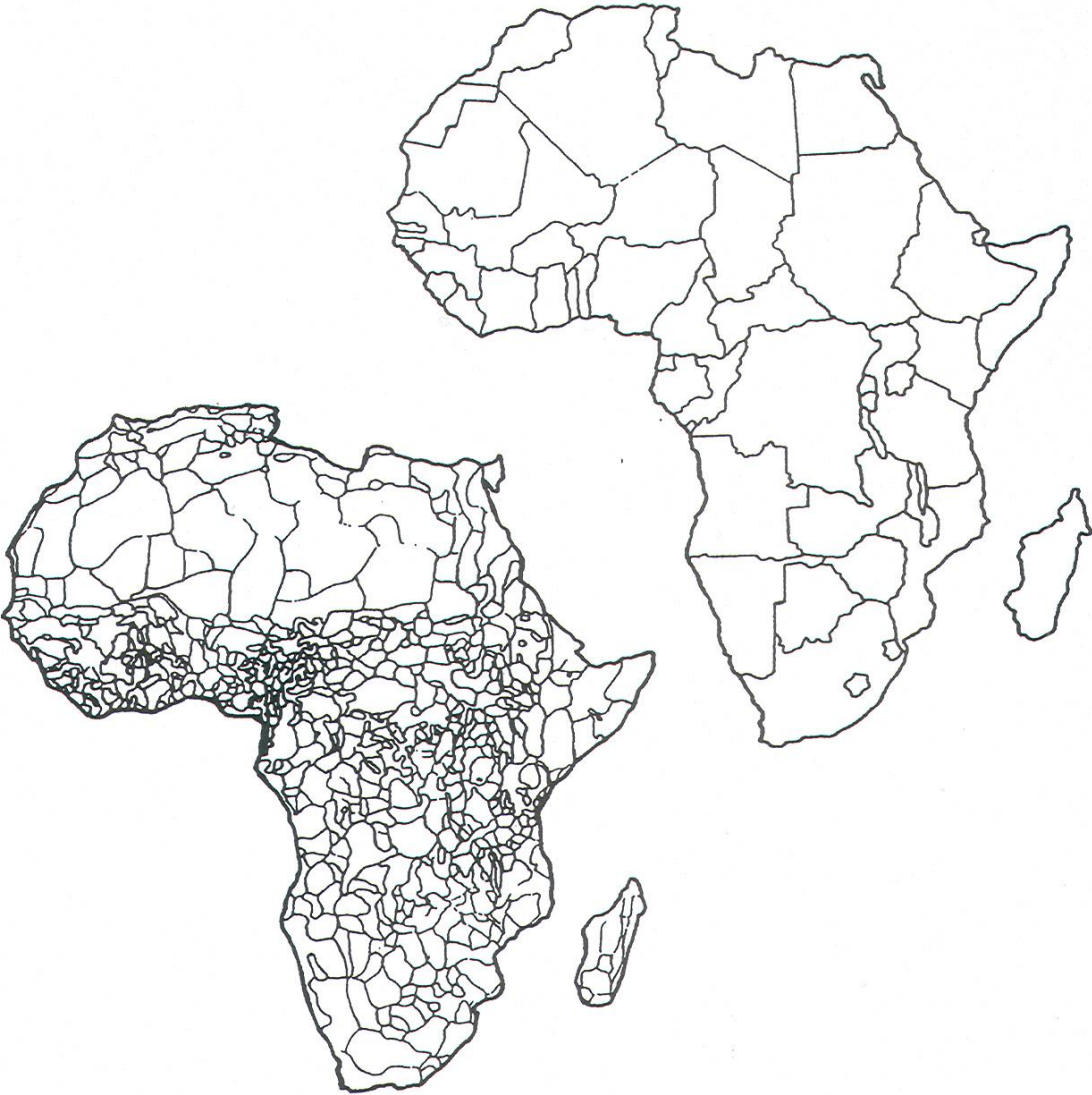**Source:** Best, Alan & Harm de Blij. 1997. *African Survey*. New York, John Wiley, p 64.

Map 2   Chronology of African States

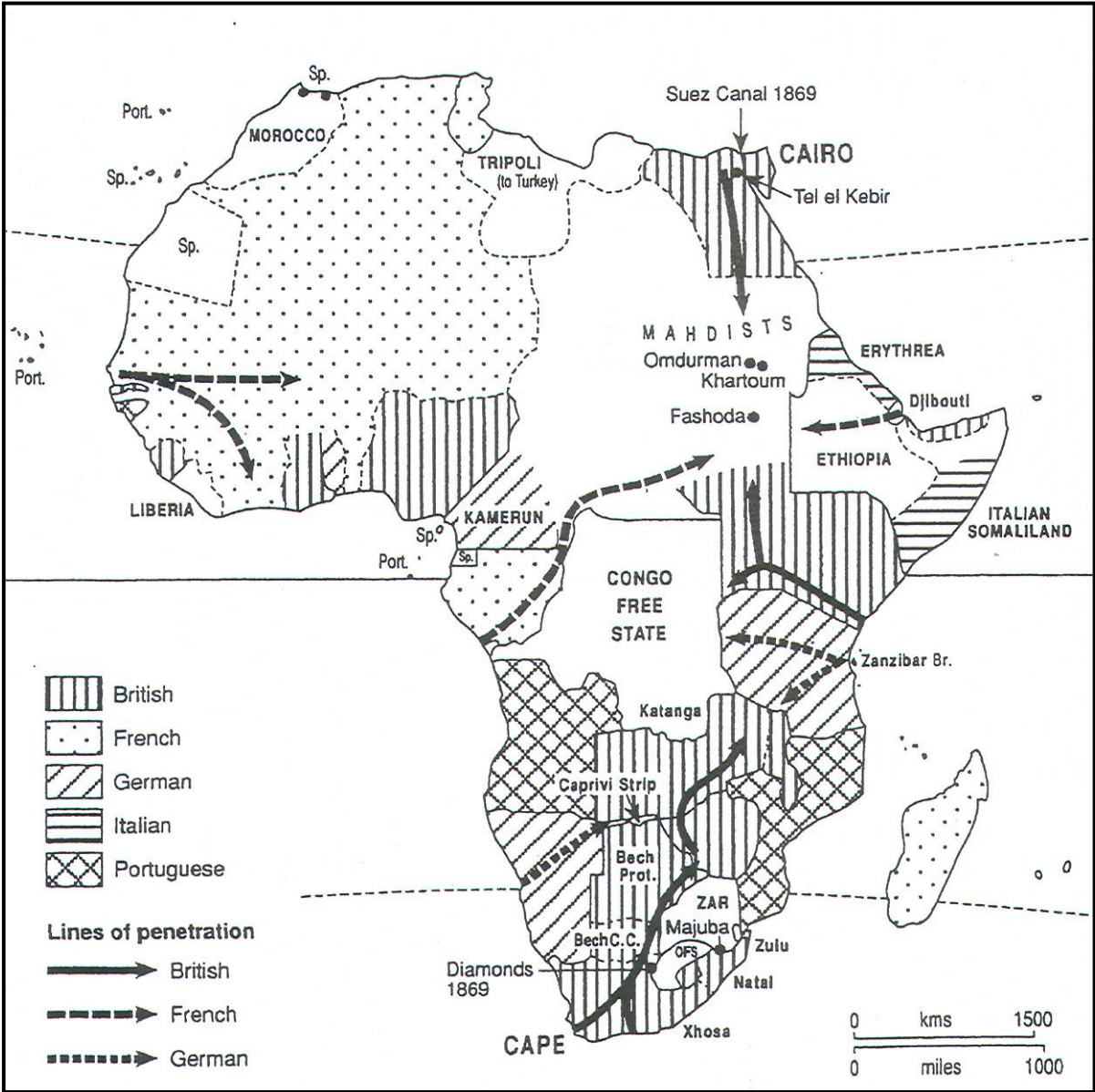**Source:** Griffiths, IL. 1994. *An Atlas of African Affairs.* 2nd ed. London, Routledge, p 39.

Map 3   Boundaries and Ethnic Distribution

Source: Murdock, George Peter. 1959. *Africa: Its People and their Culture History*. New York, MacGraw.

Map 4   Patterns of Penetration: The Occupation of Africa

Source: Griffiths, ILL. 1994. *The Atlas of African Affairs*. 2nd ed. London, Routledge, p 49.

Map 5   Patterns of Independence

Independent states

Independent states with minority rule

1950

1956

1958

1960

1970

1990

0   kms   2500

0   miles   1000
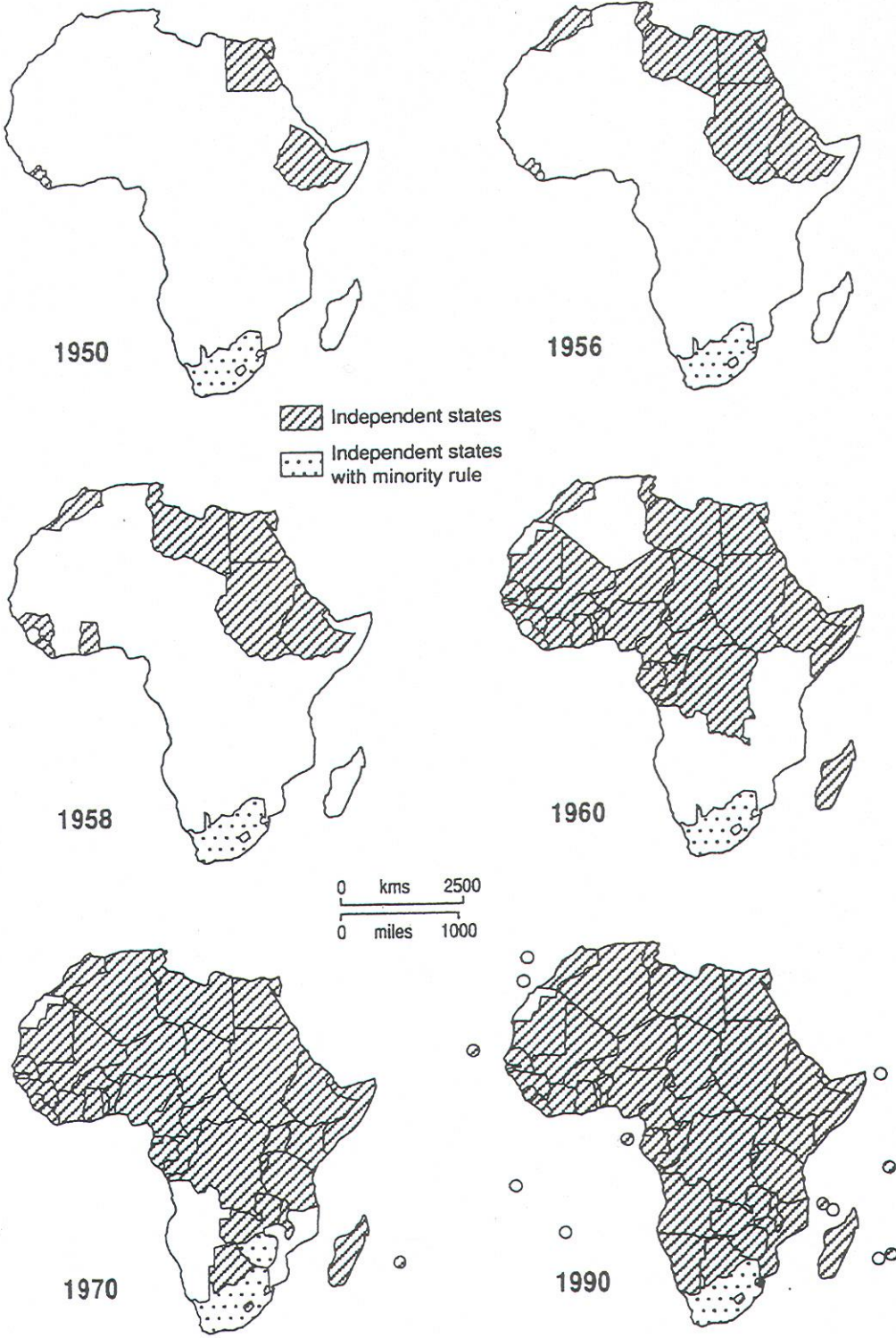
Source: Griffiths, ILL. 1994. *The Atlas of African Affairs.* 2nd ed. London, Routledge, p 57.

Map 6: Relative Size of Africa

Africa has an area of 11,700.00 sqaure miles, twhich, as shown here, is bigger than the United States, India, Europe, Japan and New Zeeland put together

Map 7

Continent without borders
African Continental Free Trade Area

Casablanca
Tripoli
Alexandria
Cairo
Niamey
Khartoum
Dakar
Kano
Addis Ababa
Abidjan
Lagos
Accra
Kampala
Mogadishu
Kigali
Kinshasa
Dar es Salaam
Luanda
Harare
Johannesburg
Cape Town
Durban

500km

55
member states of the African Union intend to take part in the free trade area

1.2-billion
Africans will benefit from the free trade agreement

Borderless trade could increase intra-African trade by more than half by 2022 compared with 2010
52%

Graphic: JOHN McCANN Data sources: AU, UNECA