

Geography In The News™

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Lineback



50 YEARS PAST COLONIALISM

The world is a better place without colonialism. Although nearly half a century has passed since most African countries obtained their independence from European colonial powers, residual effects of colonialism continue for some.

Ghana achieved its independence from the British in 1957 and has been among the most successful at overcoming its past colonial legacy, according to the *Christian Science Monitor* (March 6, 2007). Nonetheless, even its progress has been limited by the politics and economics remaining from its colonial years.

There are 54 countries on the African continent or on adjacent offshore islands. At one time or another all but one were colonies of other countries. Only Ethiopia has never been successfully colonized. Seven European countries have held colonies in Africa, including Belgium, Britain, France, Germany (before WWI), Italy, Portugal and Spain. The French and British were the dominant participants, together holding more than two-thirds of the continent as colonies.

Colonization of Africa really began in the 1400s, as the Portuguese sought an ocean route around the continent to access trade goods from the Orient. Shortly after the Portuguese sailed around the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, Columbus sought trade goods from the Orient by sailing westward in 1492. Soon all of Europe joined in a rush toward colonial expansion. Although the New World was the focus of colonialism throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, Africa soon became the focus of slave trade to provide labor to European settlements in the Americas.

During the 1700s, the French, British,

Dutch and Portuguese formed the majority of the slave traders, funneling huge numbers of Africans from West and East Africa to the United States, the Caribbean and Brazil. This lucrative slave trade encouraged these European countries to increasingly colonize parts of Africa in order to maximize the flow of slaves to the New World.

By the 1800s, the colonization process had overtaken almost all of Africa. By the time the slave trade came to an end around mid-century, other important economic products were flowing out of the African colonies, including food stuffs, wood, wool, cotton, minerals and gold.

After the two world wars, African countries began to seek independence from their colonial powers, some by insurrection and others by negotiation. The European powers increasingly found that maintaining their colonies in the face of growing demands for independence was becoming too costly.

Although in a few countries, the transition to independence went relatively smoothly, most of the new leaders were untrained in administration. Consequently, military coups, corruption and social and political unrest were common. Most of the means of production had been in the hands of white colonialists. Independence was accompanied by a mass exodus of whites, leaving governments with few trained workers.

Of all the European colonial powers, the French and British provided for the best transition for independence, but even their leadership was often unsuccessful. The entire independence process was fraught with political missteps and corruption, as despots such as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe gained power in the political vacuum.

Now, 50 years later, many African countries still suffer from the affects of colonialism. Europeans drew country boundaries with little regard to cultures. They left plantation economies that were unsustainable under African control. And they left largely uneducated populations to fend for themselves at the crucial time of independence.

At a time when other former colonies in South and Southeast Asia, for example, are registering exceptional economic growth, most African countries are still struggling to deal with basic political and economic issues. Debates are raging among African "experts" about how to "fix" these countries' economies. More aid and freer trade have not changed things radically, leading to the conclusion that new strategies must be developed. Among the more promising is the eradication of endemic debilitating diseases, which currently impact productivity and economic growth across most of the continent.

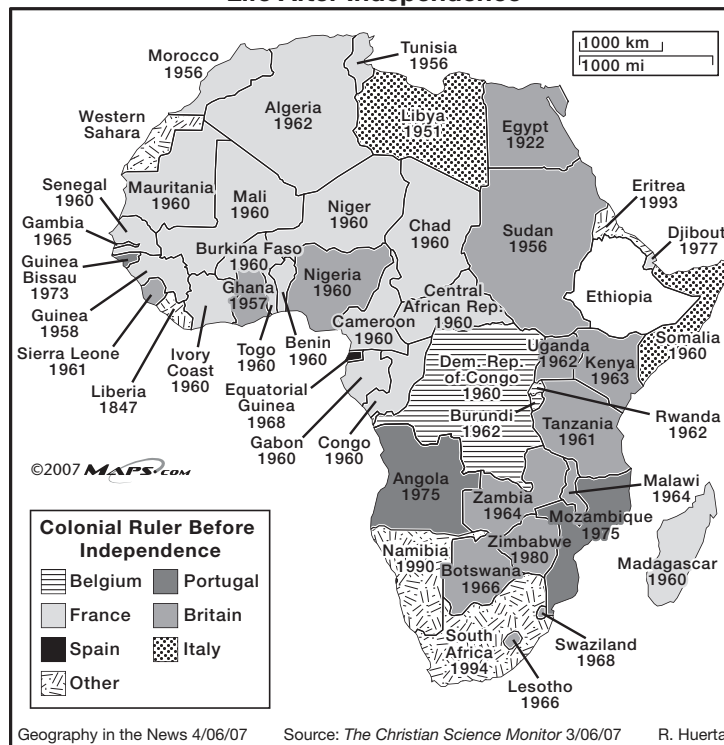
All in all, African governments must create their own conditions for economic development by eliminating corruption, cronyism, the chasm between

the wealthy and the poor and exponential population increases.

And that is *Geography in the News*™. April 6, 2007. #879.

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Life After Independence



Sources: Baldauf, Scott et al, "For post-colonial Africa, hopes deferred," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 6, 2007; <http://www.africaguide.com/country.htm>; and <http://www.voanews.com/english/Africa/2007-03-12-voa55.cfm>.

A few African countries gained their independence early, as did Liberia in 1847, Egypt in 1922, Libya in 1951, and Morocco and Tunisia in 1956. When British Ghana obtained its independence in 1957, however, it opened a floodgate across Africa. Over the next 10 years, fully two-thirds of the continent claimed independence.