**1960: Africa's Year of Freedom**

In one momentous year, 17 African nations gained independence from European colonial rule

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At the stroke of midnight on Oct. 1, 1960, at a racecourse outside Lagos, a crisp green and white flag climbed a giant flagpole, replacing the British Union Jack. As fireworks lit up the sky, tens of thousands of people roared collectively and sang the words of a new national anthem. After a century of British rule, Nigeria had become an independent nation.

Its first Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, sounded a hopeful but somber note that morning. "Having been accepted as an independent state, we must at once play an active part in maintaining the peace of the world and in preserving civilization," he said. "We shall not fail for want of determination."

Balewa might have been speaking for the entire continent. At the end of 1950, there were just four independent nations in Africa—Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia, and South Africa, which was ruled by a white minority. By the end of 1960, there were 27, with 17 gaining their independence that year alone, as Britain, France, and Belgium all but dismantled their colonial empires in Africa.

European engagement in Africa began in the mid-15th century when Portuguese traders came in search of gold. By the end of the next century, they were trading in African slaves (with many ultimately sent to America), but large-scale colonization didn't occur until later. In the late 1800s, explorers uncovered the riches of the continent's interior, including diamonds, rubber, and iron, setting off what became known as the "scramble for Africa."

**Carving Up A Continent**

In 1884, the European powers gathered for a conference in Berlin to carve up the continent: Britain, Germany, and Portugal would be primarily in southern and eastern Africa, with France in the west and north, and Belgium in the Congo. By 1900, 90 percent of Africa was under European control.

Colonial rule brought some benefits, including many roads, railroads, and educational and governmental institutions that survive today. But it was also riddled with abuses. Africans hired to oversee the colonies often ruled cruelly, and direct European control could be even worse: In the late 19th century, Congo's first colonial ruler, Belgium's King Léopold II, boosted production at rubber plantations and mines by ordering managers to hack off the hands of laggard workers.

In addition, the territorial borders created by the European powers—often arbitrarily and without regard to tribal relationships or geographic considerations, with many still in place more than a century later—are responsible for much of the ethnic turmoil and fighting in Africa today.

After World War II, a bankrupt and ravaged Europe faced increasing demands for freedom from its colonies. In some cases, such as Kenya, independence movements turned violent, as guerrilla fighters attacked colonial governments; in others, like Ghana, African political leaders championed self-determination and rallied support with little or no bloodshed.

In Nigeria, freedom came gradually: In 1946, Britain acceded to demands for Nigerian representation in the colonial government; eight years later, it granted regional assemblies more power, which ultimately led to the end of colonial rule in 1960; nine more British colonies—including Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania, and Kenya—followed in the next six years.

The French had a tougher exit from Africa. They fought a brutal eight-year war to hold onto Algeria, finally giving up in 1962. And 10,000 Africans were killed when French forces put down a revolt in Cameroon in 1955.

Exhausted, the French were ready to give up most of their empire by the end of that decade: Fourteen of the 17 nations granted independence in 1960 were French colonies, including Mali, Niger, and Madagascar.

**Cold War Backdrop**

These changes in Africa played out at the height of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The U.S. and its allies were intent on thwarting the spread of Communism, and Africa became a Cold War battleground, as did Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America.

But decades of colonial rule left some African leaders suspicious of the democratic West. "We in Africa have had experience of French colonialism, of British colonialism, of Belgian and Portuguese," one Guinean told *The New York Times* in 1960. "We can worry about Russia later. First we must rid this continent of the colonialism that still exists here."

Congo was one of the African nations where the Cold War played out. It gained independence in 1960 after Belgian forces fled in the face of rioting. The country soon fell into a civil war, during which Colonel Joseph Mobutu, the army's chief of staff, seized control. Years later, it was revealed that the U.S., fearing that Congo would become Communist, secretly aided the anti-Soviet Mobutu, who became known as Mobutu Sese Seko and turned into one of Africa's most savage and corrupt dictators.

Most of Congo's 50 years of independence have been marked by brutal repression under Mobutu and vicious wars among tribes battling to control its mineral riches. And Congo isn't alone among former colonies where independence brought more misery than hope.

Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, became independent from Britain in 1965, but white rule over the majority black population continued until 1980. Today, after 30 years of authoritarian rule by President Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe has gone from being a top exporter of wheat and beef and one of Africa's strongest economies, to an economic basket case in which many of its people are starving in the face of runaway inflation.

Sudan, freed by Britain in 1956, was wracked by civil war for decades, during which 2 million people died. And since 2003, ethnic violence by Arab militias against blacks in the Darfur region has claimed 300,000 more lives and turned 3 million people into refugees—a toll so great that the conflict has been called a genocide.

**Can Nike Help?**

A half century after the rush to independence, Africa remains the world's poorest continent, and it suffers from high rates of illiteracy and disease—particularly AIDS, which has ravaged many nations in southern Africa. But there are bright spots as well *(see* [*Opinion*](http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/upfront/features/index.asp?article=f041910_kristof_africa)*)*. A democratic Mozambique is growing rapidly. Mali, after years of dictatorship, has become a resilient democracy. Rwanda is increasingly attracting foreign investment. And almost two decades after it emerged from apartheid, a system of rigid racial segregation, South Africa continues to be the continent's model for democracy and a vibrant free-market economy.

For the most part, according to Dorina Bekoe of the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, African countries have moved beyond the legacy of colonialism.

"In the large scheme of things, 50 years is really not a long time," she says. "While there are some very formidable challenges, I do see very positive trends."

One is the growing realization that Africa needs to focus less on foreign aid and more on attracting foreign investment, which will help develop the continent's economy for the long run.

"Instead of talking to USAID [the American aid agency], I'd rather be talking to a company like Nike," says M. Nathaniel Barnes, Liberia's former finance minister. "Having a partner like that means jobs and economic growth, and you just don't get that from aid."

That theme was echoed by Rwanda's President, Paul Kagame. "We need to encourage private investment," he says. "In the end, that's what's going to decide our future."

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