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## **Contents/Articles**

- Major Historians of the Twentieth Century: An Assessment of the Themes, Methodology, and Response to Changing World Historiography. Dr. Paul Obiyo Mbanaso Njemanze, 1
- The Effects of "Permanent Migration" Within Eastern Nigeria on the Economy of Old Owerri Province, 1950-1967. Dr. Uchechukwu Igwe 17
- The Prevalence of Diabetic Retinopathy among Diabetic Patients in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. Agu G.C. & Ukaulo C. F. 27
- Women Empowerment (Breaking the Cycle of Poverty, Education and Training for Women). Dr. (Mrs.) Teresa C. Anyanwu 34
- The Consequences of the Scramble and Partition of Africa on Western European Powers, 1870-1914. Nwachukwu J. Obiakor, PhD 41
- 'Agbụ Ghị Isi Mkpe': An Igbo Translation of Jean De La Fontaine's Fable "LA Jeune Veuve". Ihechi Obisike Nkoro (Ph.D) 50
- Internet Dans L'Apprentissage Des Langues. Ihekuna Chidinma Ann 60
- Effect of Product Innovation on Sales Revenue and Profit of Organizations in Nigeria. Umeh, Christian Ikechukwu Ph.D 66
- Road Maintenance and Management System in Nigeria. Ihekuna, Stephen O. 73
- Management Strategies of Selected Transport Companies in Owerri for Sustainable Service Quality. Innocent Okoli, Ph.D & Poly A. Igbojekwe 89
- Insurgency and the Violation Settled Issues in Nigeria: Interrogating Boko Haram and the Clash of Civilization. Micheal Chinedu Dike (Ph.D) 103
- Appreciating the Equal Dignity of Every Human Person Being Dr. Emma Osonna Ugwulebo 113
- Obowo: A Historical Survey of an Igbo Civilization. Prof. U.D. Anyanwu 118
- Cultural Challenges in Managing International Projects: The Nigerian Perspective. John Inyanga, Ph.D 129
- Mergers, Acquisition and the Nigerian Experience in the Banking Industry. Otiwu, Kingsley Chukwudi 147
- Religious Syncretism among the Igbo: An Examination. Dr. Okafor Emmanuel Kelechi 155
- "You Shall Not Kill": Biblical Perspective of Sanctity of Life with a Close Reading of Exodus 20:13 in the Context of Security Issues in Nigeria. Clara M. Austin Iwuoha (Ph.D) & Obi Des. Obioma (Ph.D) 164

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE SCRAMBLE AND PARTITION OF AFRICA ON WESTERN EUROPEAN POWERS, 1870 - 1914

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the consequences of the European Scramble and partition of the African Continent, on the major Western European Powers between 1870 and 1914. It argues that the quest for raw materials, markets for industrial goods as well the desire to exert influence abroad led major European Powers to Africa. Consequent upon these, the race for Africa began. The bid to outweigh each other in the acquisition of African territories locked these major powers in conflict with one another. This work employed the thematic and chronological methods as well as the secondary sources in the collection and presentation of data. The paper observes that the conflict between the major European Powers inherent in their imperialist ambitions, not withstanding various peace conferences and agreements, led to the outbreak of World War one.*

### Introduction

The contact between Europe and Africa is as old human history. The Afro-European intercourse that culminated into the scramble for, and partition of Africa started as trade relations. During the slave trade era, Africans and Europeans engaged in trade in human beings. The trans Atlantic trade, otherwise known as the *triangular trade* because of the tripartite movement of the ships involved, on the Atlantic ocean, saw to the movement of at least ten million enslaved Africans from their homelands in Africa to destinations in Europe and the Americas from the 15<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>1</sup>. With the industrial revolution in Europe, the need for raw materials for industrial machines and markets for products of European industries arose, and Africa again became the port of call. The abolition of slave trade provided a 'legitimate' way of exploiting African resources by Europeans for their industries. In line with the above Sir Fredrick Lugard opines that: "The tropics were a gift of God to mankind, to be exploited by all who could, and not birthright of any group claiming to be indigenes"<sup>2</sup>.

To fully exploit African resources and maintain an economic sphere of influence and trade monopoly; exerting political control was considered to be necessary. The different European manufacturing and trading companies felt that such protection would enable them enjoy sole access to the sources and supply of raw materials which they needed for the industries, as well as a ready market to sell the manufactured goods<sup>3</sup>.

The scramble involved European governments, manufacturing and trading companies, and individuals scheming in different styles to grab as much territory as they could. The latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw to the transition from the

informal imperialism of control through military influence and economic dependence to that of direct rule<sup>4</sup>.

At the peak of the scramble, a conference known in history as the Berlin Conference of 1884/85 was convened at the instance of the German Chacellor, Otto von Bismarck to discuss the modalities for the sharing (partitioning) of African territories among European powers. This conference was meant to check rivalry among European powers over Africa. The expansion of European powers after the Berlin Conference brought them into frequent collisions at remote points all over Africa. International relations of this period were bedeviled with disputes and tensions between European powers. These disputes between European powers over Africa in no mean way contributed to the outbreak of the world war one<sup>5</sup>.

### **The Scramble and Partition of Africa**

Scramble for African territories was the struggle among European nations for territorial acquisition in Africa, while partition was the actual division of African territories among the European nations. The scramble was the struggle among European nations to take possession and exercise political control over African territories. The scramble or the race for Africa saw to the proliferation of conflicting European claims over African territories between 1870 and the outbreak of world war one in 1914<sup>6</sup>. By this, most African states became part of Europe's colonial empires. The scramble is in most cases used in describing the frenzied claiming of African territory by half a dozen European countries that resulted in nearly all of Africa becoming part of Europe's colonial empires<sup>7</sup>. The Scramble began slowly in the 1870s, reached its peak in the late 1880s and 1890s, and tapered off over the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Between 1885 and 1900, European powers were at each other's neck laying claims to African territories. Prior to this period, apart from the cape colony in South Africa occupied by Britain and Algeria which France was struggling to bring under her control, Europeans settled in slave trading depots located mostly along the African coast areas<sup>8</sup>. Most Africans resisted being taken over and ruled by foreigners. The scramble reflected a concern for acquisition of military and naval bases for strategic purposes and the exercise of power on the international scene<sup>9</sup>. The scramble for Africa, according to Michael Crowder;

*took place when it did because the mutual suspicions of interested European powers of each others intentions had reached such a pitch that none of them was willing to hold off the undesirable for fear their own interest might be pre-empted by another<sup>9a</sup>.*

The ability to influence events in the international arena was largely dependent upon new weapons. Thus, much of the latter part of the scramble involved European armies using modern weapons to crush opposition and install authority over the continent's inhabitants. Defence bases were as well needed for the protection of sea routes and communication lines, vital to European powers, like the suez canal.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans had only claimed selected areas of Africa, mainly along the coasts. High death rates from malaria and yellow fever kept

Europeans from bringing armies and conquering large areas of Africa; nor were they inclined to do so in this period. Aware of the cost of maintaining colonies, the most powerful European nations preferred either to keep trade open to all, relying on their commercial advantage, or to reserve small productive areas for the trade of their own citizens. Of all the major European powers, only Britain was politically and economically viable. The British government had to adopt a free trading policy both at home and in her overseas territories<sup>10</sup>. Britain possessed its Cape Colony, strategically located at the southern tip of Africa. It also protected a few West African commercial enclaves and held a colony of Sierra Leone, which was populated by slaves of African descent intercepted from a slave ship in the Atlantic Ocean after the abolition of slave trade.

France had annexed Algeria in 1834 and protected trade along the Senegal River and at two ports east of the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana); it also held an outpost at Gabon in west central Africa<sup>11</sup>. Portugal claimed territory in Angola and Mozambique. The foreign power with the largest African territory was the weakening Ottoman Empire, which clung to lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea from Tunisia through Egypt, up the Nile, and down the west Coast of the Red Sea<sup>12</sup>. On the eve of the Scramble, Western Europe was a century into the Industrial Revolution and clearly, the most powerful and technologically advanced portion of the globe. Firearms, transportation, and communication technologies were developing at an astonishing pace. National pride was also growing in each of the European countries. Furthermore, advances in medicine enabled Europeans to spend longer periods in the tropics, free of illness. Industrial production was reaching such high levels that Europeans worried about over-production and finding consumers for all the goods that European industries were turning out. An economic downturn in the early 1870s brought some Europeans to look towards the non-industrial world. They viewed these countries as both markets for their products and as suppliers of natural resources to fuel the industries. In addition, the strongest European countries became apprehensive of what would happen to the balance of power if their rivals acquired colonies in Africa. National pride was thus at stake. So was Christianity; because the famous Scottish missionary /explorer, David Livingstone, had whet the public appetite for a Christian "civilizing" mission in Africa where non-Christians inhabit and also torn by slave trading<sup>13</sup>.

All these resulted in the Scramble for Africa. It began with slow territorial acquisition through the early 1880s, followed by a competitive rush to claim African lands after the Berlin Conference (1884-1885). The final stage of the Scramble was characterized by slower occupation of territories and overcoming of African resistance through the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By 1912 all of Africa was in European hands except Liberia and Ethiopia. The period of colonial rule that followed brought social, political, and economic distortions across the continent.

### **European Rivalry over Africa**

European competition over African territories in the 1870s increased immediately the Belgian king, Leopold II got involved. Merchants under French government

protection had been advancing up the Senegal River with an eye towards connecting the river with the Niger by rail<sup>14</sup>. This connection would open a vast market in West Africa's interior. At the same time, British palm oil merchants were pushing up the Niger River by steamer, and Anglo-American explorer Henry Morton Stanley was exploring through the Congo River<sup>15</sup>. In his journeys, H.M Stanley had discovered that the river's upper reaches were open to trade. For 20 years the wealthy ruler had aspired to creating a Belgian colonial empire. In 1876 he established the International African Association, an organization that had stated scientific and humanitarian goals<sup>16</sup>, but was truly a front to further Leopold's imperial ambition. Then, in 1879, when Britain ignored Stanley's offer to open Central Africa and channel its trade to the mouth of the Congo, Leopold employed Stanley to execute the task. By 1880 the explorer was back in the lower Congo, building road and river access to connect the Atlantic Ocean with Stanley Falls, located about 2300km (about 1400ml) upstream<sup>17</sup>. Across the river in the early 1880s, French explorer Pierre Savorgnan De Brazza was exploring and negotiating treaties for France, forcing Stanley to obtain treaties for Leopold. Stanley concluded treaties with several African chiefs and by 1882 obtained over 900,000 square miles of territory, the Congo Free State<sup>18</sup>. Their claims appeared to overlap near the mouth of the Congo, a land area claimed by Portugal as well.

### Suez Canal Crisis

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, France and Britain were the dominant powers in Europe and they maintained a balance of power; on the land and in the sea respectively. The equal division of power between the duo continued until the emergence of Otto Von Bismarck after the unification of Germany in 1870<sup>19</sup>. This development weakened France's strength because Alsace and Loraine, her industrial hubs were annexed by Germany and thus her prestige in Europe waned. Bismarck knowing the gravity of the injury he inflicted on France by his actions looked for an opportunity to compensate France. He was also apprehensive of an Anglo-French alliance against him which will destroy his achievement of the unification of Germany, wanted to create conflict between the duo of Britain and France and at the same time compensate France<sup>20</sup>.

Between 1850 and 1870, British and French business interests and engineers built the Suez Canal and Egyptian railroads. According to L.O. Nnoli "The lavish foreign loans obtained to maintain this westernization put the Khedive Ismail, the Egyptian leader at the mercy of Britain and France"<sup>21</sup>. The recklessness and indebtedness of Khedive Ismail and his consequent abdication brought Britain and France together to reorganize the Egyptian finances. To this end, a Joint commission was set up by the duo to execute this task<sup>22</sup>.

This development made Britain and France plan a joint naval invasion in 1882. though internal developments in France prevented her from participating in the invasion, the British naval force invaded Alexandria in 1883 and took over the control of Egypt<sup>23</sup>. France was embittered, and saw this development as an insult on her national prestige. France which also had a significant financial stake in Egypt and had shared "dual control" of Egypt's finances with Britain since the mid-1870s



was left without influence. Neither France nor Germany was content with Britain taking over Egypt, but each expressed approval to gain British support for its own colonial actions. France boasted that with her occupation of Senegal and some other African territories, would facilitate her plan to link up her territories in North Africa with those in West Africa, and construct a huge dam across the Nile thereby making it impossible for the waters of the Nile to reach Egypt as a result of which the British would be compelled to vacate Egypt<sup>24</sup>. It was fast becoming a game of European diplomatic wrangling with African nations as pawns.

### **Berlin Conference (1884/85)**

While Britain, France, and Belgian King Leopold were advancing their aims in Africa, Europe's fastest-rising military and industrial power, Germany, was biding its time. Its leader, Otto von Bismarck, appeared content to allow the others to expend diplomatic energy on African initiatives while Germany concerned itself with her domestic issues. However, as pressures mounted from German merchants wanting a share of any potential African market, Bismarck realized German interests might best be served by his taking control of the diplomatic struggles involving Africa. Thus, in the summer of 1884 Bismarck declared German protectorates over three African territories – Togo land (comprising present-day Togo and eastern Ghana), Cameroon, and South-West Africa (present-day Namibia)<sup>25</sup>. Then, he joined France in calling for a conference of colonial powers which later held Berlin. The stated goals of the conference were to be the settling of Congo claims between Britain, France, and Portugal, and of Anglo-French rivalries along the Niger River. The intensity of the competition among the various interests in Africa was reaching the point where Europeans feared a war on Africa. There were numerous conflicts over various parts of Africa among Europeans<sup>26</sup>. In addition, however, European powers recognized that rules and rationalizations were needed for the seizing of African territories, especially for seizures that held potential for an European conflict.

The Berlin Conference of November 1884 to February 1885 involved representatives of 14 European countries and the United States. The Ottoman Empire, facing the loss of territory on all sides, was not represented at the conference. Portugal's claim over the Congo territory and river supported by Britain and opposed by France and Belgium precipitated the conference at the instance of Bismarck to stop the rivalry from degenerating into an open war. The main aim of the conference according to G.I.C Eluwa was to "discuss in peaceful manner, European claims to African territories and to agree on the modalities for the partitioning of the African continent"<sup>27</sup>. Much of the conference work took place outside Berlin, as envoys moved between London, Paris, and Brussels negotiating which European power could rightfully lay claim to a particular African territory. By the time the conference ended, Leopold had secured ownership of the Congo Free State, a state fifty times the size of Belgium; France saw acceptance of its claims to French Congo; Portugal lost most of its Congo claims; and European powers recognized Germany's new protectorates<sup>28</sup>. The European nations declared free trade along the Congo and free navigation on the Niger, stated lofty goals as their mission in African colonies, and

set out rules for additional territorial grabs<sup>29</sup>. The most significant of these rules stated that colonial powers were obligated to notify each other when they claimed any African territory. Furthermore, subsequent "effective occupation" of the claimed area was necessary for the claim to remain valid. Through it all, as Europeans negotiated their rights to African territory, not a single African was present<sup>30</sup>. At the end of the conference, it was clear that a European Scramble for African territories was underway. However, the European competitors ignored the rules when convenient and on several occasions war was only narrowly averted<sup>31</sup>.

### **Fashoda Incident of 1898**

Southern Africa became a much more important element in the Scramble a year after the Berlin Conference. At that time, word spread of the world's largest known deposits of gold in the Afrikaner-controlled South African Republic (Transvaal). Western miners and industrialists flocked to Southern Africa to exploit the resources. Among those involved in finance and operation of the mines was British magnate, Cecil Rhodes, a leader of diamond mining in the Cape Colony. Rhodes was a believer in the "civilizing" mission of British colonialism – he dreamed of a British African empire stretching from the Cape of Good Hope to Cairo, Egypt<sup>32</sup>. Thus, hoping to still find more gold north of Transvaal in 1890, he led a "pioneer column" of settlers north. These prospectors overcame African opposition and carved out the new British colonies of Southern and Northern Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe and Zambia).

Most European powers were not content to let a chance at claiming further territory slip. France may have had the grandest territorial desires of any nation. Its major advances were eastward from the Senegal River and down the Niger from its headwaters. French armies slowly overcame opposition from the powerful Tukulor Empire and advanced on the ancient city of Timbuktu. Italy, too, laid claim to Eritrea, on the Red Sea, and then announced a protectorate over a large portion of Somaliland along the Indian Ocean.

A French force under Jean-Baptiste Marchand arrived first at the strategically located fort at Fashoda, soon followed by a British force under Lord Kitchener, commander in chief of the British army since 1892. The deadlock at Fashoda brought Britain and France to the brink of war with public opinion in their home countries reacting wildly and irresponsibly. After a standoff, the French force withdrew, and continued laying claims to other posts in the region<sup>33</sup>. In March 1899 the French and British agreed that the source of the Nile and Congo Rivers should mark their frontier between their spheres of influence. At this time, mutual suspicion and tension was increasing among European colonial powers in Africa.

### **Moroccan Crises**

North Africa was the scene of the Scramble's final events. After years of rivalry that sometimes verged on open hostilities, Britain and France signed the Entente Cordiale in 1904. The "friendly agreement" quietly gave France a free hand to take Morocco while it officially removed the obsolete Egyptian "dual control" system and

left Egypt to Britain. In 1905, Germany announced her support for Moroccan Independence. The British defended the French, and war was averted by an international conference in Algiers in 1906 which allowed France make Morocco a French Protectorate<sup>34</sup>.

In 1911, five years after the first crisis, a second Moroccan crisis started when Germany sent a warship *Panther*, to Agadir in protest of French supremacy in Morocco, claiming the French had violated the agreement at Algiers<sup>35</sup>. Britain again rose in defence of France and gave Germany stern warnings. Germany agreed to concede Morocco to France in exchange for part of the French Congo. The British support for France during the two Moroccan crises reinforced the Entente between them and added to Anglo-German estrangement, deepening the divisions which finally culminated in World War One.

### Conclusions

The quest for industrial raw materials, market for finished products, national pride and prestige, (nationalism), humanitarian<sup>36</sup> among other factors necessitated the scramble for, and partition of Africa. With the abolition of slave trade and the introduction of the "legitimate trade" as a result of industrial revolution in Europe, the stage was set for the annexation of African territories by European powers. Industrial Revolution gave rise to capital accumulation and increased economic power resulting in the emergence of formidable monopolies and international cartels<sup>37</sup>. Peacock in consonance with this development opines that; "These concerns were compelling by their very nature to seek wider and wider markets for their products and more and more sources of essential raw materials"<sup>38</sup>.

The motive for the scramble is obvious and is premised on Europeans' thirst for cheap raw materials and ready market for European industrial commodities. It was in the bid to outweigh each other in acquisition of exploitable territories that locked the European powers' heads against each other. The French occupation of Tunisia in May 1881 convinced Italy to join the German-Austrian Dual Alliance in 1882, thus forming the Triple Alliance<sup>39</sup>. On the other hand, the British abandonment of the 'splendid isolation' in 1902 and signing of the Entente Cordiale with France in 1904, and in 1907, the Triple Entente which included Russia, thus pitted against the Triple Alliance<sup>40</sup>. Several measures were adopted for the peaceful partitioning of Africa. These included the Berlin Conference of 1884/85, various alliances and peace agreements were entered into by conflicting powers. These notwithstanding saw the European powers bitterly against each other in a bid to satisfy their imperialist ambition, which ultimately led to the outbreak of the World War One.

### End Notes

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