International Journal of
Humanities, Education, and Social Sciences

e-ISSN : 3026-0892
p-ISSN : 3026-1422

Index: Harvard, Boston, Sydney, Dimensions, Lens, Scilit, Semantic, Google, etc

https://doi.org/10.58578/IJHESS.v3i3.7634

Scramble and Partitions for the Colonies of English, French, German, and Portuguese: A New Historicism Study of the African Continent

Abdulkarim Usman & Yusuf Ismail Imam
Federal Polytechnic Bauchi, Nigeria
ausmangns@fptb.edu.ng

Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Oct 6, 2025	Oct 28, 2025	Nov 10, 2025	Nov 15, 2025

Abstract

This paper examines the scramble and partition of West African territories by European superpowers during the final two decades of the 19th century—a period that marked a turning point in the political and historical trajectory of the region. Drawing on secondary sources, the study analyzes the geopolitical rivalries and diplomatic tensions among major European powers, particularly Britain and France, in their quest to assert territorial control. It highlights key episodes, such as the Anglo-French conflict over South Africa, the disputes surrounding Egypt and the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), and the broader imperial competition that fueled colonial expansion. The paper explores the underlying causes of the scramble, including economic interests, strategic rivalries, and national prestige, as well as the outcomes and consequences of the partition. Particular attention is given to the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, which formalized European claims and codified rules for territorial acquisition, and to African resistance movements that challenged colonial imposition. The study concludes that the scramble and partition had profound and lasting effects on the political boundaries, governance structures, and

IJHESS Journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

socio-economic development of West African states. It recommends the promotion of civic education, political reforms, and pan-African engagement as pathways to restoring and safeguarding the continent's autonomy and development, with specific reference to the Nigerian context.

Keywords: European Superpowers; Scramble and Partition; Colonial Rivalries; Berlin Conference; West Africa History

INTRODUCTION

Africa, before European domination in the mid-1800s, on the eve of the European domination of Africa, African peoples were divided into hundreds of ethnic and linguistic groups. The most African leaders were the traditional beliefs, while others converted to Islam and Christianity. These groups spoke more than 1,000 different languages. Politically, they ranged from large empires that united many ethnic groups to independent villages. The Europeans had established contacts with sub-Saharan Africans as early as the 1450s. However, powerful African armies were able to keep the Europeans out of most of Africa for 400 years. In fact, as late as 1880, Europeans controlled only 10 percent of the continent's land, mainly on the coast. Furthermore, European travel into the interior on a large-scale basis was virtually impossible. The Europeans could not navigate African rivers, which had many rapids, cataracts, and changing flows.The introduction of steam-powered riverboats in the early 1800s allowed Europeans to conduct major expeditions into the interior of Africa. The disease also discouraged European exploration. The Africans controlled their own trade networks and provided the trade items. These networks were specialized. The Chokwe, for devote themselves to collect ivory and beeswax in the Angolan highlands.

The Africa is first to be one of the most important for the commodities, its could supply directly to Europe, most notably palm oil and groundnuts from west Africa, ivory and other products, including a plantation-grown, spices, cloves, from east Africa. In west Africa Europeans were beginning to understand more about the interior and hinterland. The Senegal and Gambia rivers had become important arteries of trade. The route of the Niger and the fact that the 'Oil Rivers' were delta had been established by 1830. By the middle of the 19th century, the effectiveness of a medicine, quinine, to ward off malaria was well attested and Europeans were able to survive in west and other parts of Africa. In

southern Africa the slow advance of Europeans into the interior quickened dramatically in the 1830s when parties of Dutch farmers (also known as Afrikaners or Boers) decided to escape there some characteristics as they saw them of British rule (established when the British took the Cape from the Dutch during the Napoleonic Wars) by seeking new lands on the relatively healthy uplands further from the coast. In east Africa, more and more traders were anxious to exploit a growing trade in Indians from the west of India, Americans, French, British and Germans.

The middle of the 19th century was the era of the explorers. These explorers were a new breed, individualists who explored for a variety of different purposes. Some were missionaries who prospected Africa for Christian opportunity; others were geographers, naturalists, journalists or propagandists for imperial expansion. Most of them were linked to the geographical societies of their home countries. Since the late of the eighteenth century, geographical knowledge had been seen, together with related botanical and mineralogical knowledge, as crucial to Europe's discovery and exploitation of man's global environment.

Theoretical Framework

The scramble of the 1880s, the ideological scramble was not a European competition to carve up the continent, but an international struggle between the USSR, the US, France, and the UK to convince African leaders and peoples of their plans for the future. The first phase of the colonial period, between 1880 and 1914, the African continent was partitioned into more than 50 colonies. The process of carving up the continent and creating new political loped a large scale, centralized bureaucratic apparatus and established new rules and laws to govern their colonial territories. Furthermore, they established a much firmer control of geographical boundaries than had previously existed in the region. The creation of new geographical entities determined which previously independent states and societies would, from then on, live within the same geographical boundaries. It also determined which societies were left undivided, and which were cut across by international boundaries. And it determined the size of the new entities. Sometimes very large and diverse areas and peoples were incorporated into one large colony, such as Nigeria. In other instances, very small colonies were created, such as the Gambia. In order to understand why Africa was colonised at the time that it was, and how colonies were created, we need to understand the process of partitioning. That Prior to the

establishment of formal control after 1880, commercial ties had connected Africa and Europe from as early as the 15th century when the Portuguese landed on the coast of West Africa. This contact intensified with the rise of the slave trade, which was at its height in the 1700s until the mid-1800s. To facilitate trade, Europeans established various coastal trading posts and forts, mostly along the West African coast, but also in Northern and Southern Africa. Over time, some of these posts developed into proto-colonies, or colony-like entities. The Cape Colony in Southern Africa for example, came under colonial control already in the mid-17th century. Further, small colonial administrations were established during the first half of the 19th century along the coast of Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) and Algeria. Still, Africans effectively prevented Europeans from extending their presence into the hinterlands up until 1880. Hence, before the start of colonial expansion, Europeans knew very little about the continent's interior. This all changed rapidly at the end of the 19th century with the partitioning of Africa by European colonial powers.

The historicism is derived from the theory of historical knowledge which was formulated by historically oriented thinkers in the nineteenth century who did not actually use the term. The German Historical School, as it developed at the universities of the nineteenth century, was founded on these assumptions.12 Leopold Ranke very early distinguished between what he called a historical from a philosophical approach.

Historical Background

The scramble for African territory had begun in early about 1880s. At that time, the French began to expand from the West African coast toward western Sudan. The discoveries of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1886 in South Africa increased European interest in colonizing the continent. No European power wanted to be left out of the race. At first sight it may seem surprising that Europeans did not successfully penetrate Africa until the late nineteenth century, for Africa is after all Europe's nearest neighbour, and the first continent with which Europe had established contact, both in the ancient world and at the beginning of the modern period. North Africa was a most important part of the Roman empire, as the great Roman remains of Libya, Tunisia and Algeria, as magnificent as any in Rome itself, testify. When Spain and Portugal began tentatively to explore south and west in the fifteenth century in their efforts to outflank the power of Islam in the Mediterranean, inevitably their first contacts were with Africa. The Spain established a

number of small colonial enclaves in north Africa which she holds to this day. In the sequence of voyages associated with the school of navigation of Prince Henry the Navigator the Portuguese felt their way round the African Atlantic coast, established themselves on offshore islands and at one or two points on the mainland, all this before Columbus set out on his epic voyage for the Americas.

Africa has sometimes been depicted as no more than a giant barrier to the real objective of Europeans in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Asia. But Africa was a vital part of the Portuguese design. For many centuries African gold—from the region of the modern country of Ghana—had appeared in north Africa, brought by the Moors across the caravan routes of the Sahara. On the east coast, Muslims traded gold from Zimbabwe, sending it to the Middle East and India. The Portuguese wished to divert this trade into their own hands, for they needed gold to pay for the spices they sought in south India and elsewhere in the East. One of the first Portuguese settlements on the west African coast was called, rather hopefully, El Mina, the mine. In east Africa they succeeded by the late sixteenth century in penetrating the Zambezi region and establishing settlements and trading posts on the highlands of the modern Zimbabwe. But these efforts to secure the African gold trade to themselves failed. Not only did they never actually reach the sources of the gold, their position was always a very weak one. In the course of the seventeenth century they were subjected to constant revolts, and in the 1690s all their positions in the interior of south-central Africa were destroyed.

By 1880, the eve of the Partitions, the European penetration of Africa and the African states and its peoples had been taken a variety of new forms. Some rulers, mainly in the north, had fallen deeply into debt to European creditors. Others had become a prey to concession-seekers, who sought concessions to build railway lines, harbours, telegraph systems, and to conduct trade. Many African rulers had decided to use Europeans to introduce modern administrative or military methods to their states and perhaps help them to establish power over their neighbours.

Statement of the Research Problems

The European may faces difficulties in Africa in terms of geography, climate and disease. It is true that Africa has few navigable rivers; it is true that in the west Europeans on the coast were separated from the interior by forest, and in the south and east both by arid areas just inland from the coast and by the escarpment that forms the edge of the high

plateau of east, central and southern Africa; it is also true that Europeans suffered high mortality rates through fevers, and, more importantly perhaps, found it impossible to use draught animals like the horse and the ox to penetrate Africa because none could survive the sickness borne by the tsetse fly. But Europeans in other continents faced very considerable difficulties which they were able to overcome.

MATERIALS & METHODS

The research used secondary sources of data collection, and especially journal articles, text books, newspapers and magazines, among others. Qualitative study is flexible, wordy, extensive and explorative (Cresswell, 2012; Leavy, 2017; Saris & Gallhofer, 2007; Bernard, 2006). It (qualitative) is thus, suitable for this paper. It focuses on the roles of Berlin Conference for the scramble and partition of Africa in the 19th century.

Literature Review

The Berlin Conference of 1884–85 was organized by Otto von Bismarck, the chancellor of Germany. The purpose of the Berlin Conference was to regulate European colonization and trade in Africa by identifying which European nations would be allowed to control which parts of Africa. The Berlin Conference was seen as the beginning of the "Scramble for Africa." The "Scramble for Africa" was the invasion and colonization of African territory by European powers between 1881 and 1914. During the Berlin Conference, the European nations literally divided Africa up between themselves, often creating quite artificial states that divided cultural, linguistic and ethnic groups. No Africans were invited to the Berlin Conference and no Africans took part in deciding how the continent would be "carved up." In 1870, only 10 percent of Africa was under European control; by 1914 it had increased to 90 percent of the continent. By 1914, only Ethiopia and Liberia were independent African nations not under the control of European powers.

The Cecil John Rhodes was a British imperialist, businessman, mining tycoon, and politician in South Africa. He was a strong advocate of British colonialism and imperialism. Rhodes was the founder of the southern African territory of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe and Zambia), which was named after him in 1895. Rhodes also founded the De Beers diamond company which eventually controlled 90% of the world's diamond production. His master plan was to establish a Cape-to-Cairo railroad line linking British colonial interests in Africa between Egypt and the Cape. This 1892 depiction of Rhodes as "The Rhodes Colossus,

Striding from Cape Town to Cairo," became a common image of British imperial power in Africa.

Conceptualize of Berlin Conference of Scramble and Partition of Africa

The Berlin Act was an important messages change of ideas in an international affairs. It created the rules for "effective occupation" of conquered lands, ensuring that the division of Africa would take place without war among the European powers. Through the Berlin Act, the European powers justified dividing a continent among themselves without considering the desires of the indigenous peoples. While this appears extremely arrogant to us now, it seemed to them to be the obvious extension of their imperialism. The Berlin Conference is one of the most clear examples of the assumptions and preconceptions of this era, and its effects on Africa can still be seen today."The Scramble for Africa: Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 to Divide Africa - Meeting at the Berlin residence of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1884, the foreign ministers of fourteen European powers and the United States established ground rules for the future exploitation of the "dark continent." Africans were not invited or made privy to their decisions."

Conceptualising Africa's post-war international history as an 'ideological scramble' for hearts and minds enables us to think about Africa not just as a Cold War problem, but as a 'crowded house' with many different actors who had diverging interpretations of Africa's international issues. Some key concepts such as the ideological scramble itself, but also psychological modernisation, cultural assistance, informational diplomacy, public diplomacy, panAfricanism, decolonisation, Third World and Cold War are defined in this section.

The French dominated most of West Africa, and the British East and Southern Africa. The Belgians acquired the vast territory that became The Congo. The Germans held four colonies, one in each of the realm's regions. The Portuguese held a small colony in West Africa and two large ones in Southern Africa. The Congo Free State, conceived as a "neutral" zone to be run by an international association in the interest of bringing science, civilization, and Christianity to the indigenes, received the Berlin Conference's blessings. Belgium's King Leopold II (far left) soon took control, reaping fabulous personal profits through the sale of land and development rights. Leopold exploited Congo's resources and contributed to up to 10 million deaths.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Berlin Conference of 1884–85 was a European conference. And, although black South Africans participated in it, the Boer War was largely a European war. Europeans argued and fought among themselves over the lands of Africa. In carving up the continent, the European countries paid little or no attention to historical political divisions or to the many ethnic and language groupings in Africa. Uppermost in the minds of the Europeans was the ability to control Africa's land, its people, and its resources.

Berlin Conference divides Africa, the competition was so fierce that European countries feared war among themselves. To prevent conflict, 14 European nations met at the Berlin Conference in 1884–85 to lay down rules for the division of Africa. They agreed that any European country could claim land in Africa by notifying other nations of its claims and showing it could control the area. The European nations divided the continent with little thought about how African ethnic or linguistic groups were distributed. No African ruler was invited to attend these meetings, yet the conference sealed Africa's fate. By 1914, only Liberia and Ethiopia remained free from European control. Demand for Raw Materials Shapes Colonies When European countries began colonizing, many believed that Africans would soon be buying European goods in great quantities. They were wrong; few Africans bought European goods. However, European businesses still needed raw materials from Africa. The major source of great wealth in Africa proved to be the continent's rich mineral resources. The Belgian Congo contained untold wealth in copper and tin. Even these riches seemed small compared with the gold and diamonds in South Africa. Businesses eventually developed cash-crop plantations to grow peanuts, palm oil, cocoa, and rubber. These products displaced the food crops grown by farmers to feed their families. Three Groups Clash over South Africa South Africa demonstrated the impact that Europeans had on African peoples. The history of South Africa is a history of Africans, Dutch, and British clashing over land and resources. Although the African lands seemed empty to the Europeans, various ethnic groups had competing claims over huge areas. The local control of these lands, especially in the east, had been in dispute for about 100 years. Zulus Fight the British From the late 1700s to the late 1800s, a series of local wars shook southern Africa. Around 1816, a Zulu chief, Shaka, used highly disciplined warriors and good military organization to create a large centralized state. Shaka's successors, however, were unable to keep the kingdom together against the superior arms of the British invaders. In 1879, after Zulu king Cetshwayo refused to dismiss his army and accept British rule, the

British invaded the Zulu nation. Although the Zulus used spears and shields against British guns, they nearly defeated the great European army. In July 1879, however, the Zulus lost the Battle of Ulundi and their kingdom. The Zulu nation fell to British control in 1887.

The African societies were not submissive bystanders during the partitioning. Indeed, various strategies were employed to deal with the invaders. Some societies fought colonial rule from the onset and resisted until the end; other societies fought and only surrendered when defeat was inevitable; still others tried to bargain the terms of cooperation; and, finally, some societies used the colonial presence to their own strategic advantage.

The Colonization of the Continent by European Super Powers, "The Berlin Conference was Africa's undoing in more ways than one. The colonial powers superimposed their domains on the African continent. By the time independence returned to Africa in 1950, the realm had acquired a legacy of political fragmentation that could neither be eliminated nor made to operate satisfactorily." Matt Rosenberg, (2015). In 1884 at the request of Portugal, German chancellor Otto von Bismark called together the major western powers of the world to negotiate questions and end confusion over the control of Africa. Bismark appreciated the opportunity to expand Germany's sphere of influence over Africa and desired to force Germany's rivals to struggle with one another for territory. At the time of the conference, 80% of Africa remained under traditional and local control. What ultimately resulted was a hodgepodge of geometric boundaries that divided Africa into fifty irregular countries. This new map of the continent was superimposed over the one thousand indigenous cultures and regions of Africa. The new countries lacked rhyme or reason and divided coherent groups of people and merged together disparate groups who really did not get along. Fourteen countries were represented by a plethora of ambassadors when the conference opened in Berlin on November 15, 1884. The countries represented at the time included Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Norway (unified from 1814-1905), Turkey, and the United States of America. These fourteen nations, France, Germany, Great Britain, and Portugal were the major players in the conference, controlling most of colonial Africa at the time. The initial task of the conference was to agree that the Congo River and Niger River mouths and basins would be considered neutral and open to trade. Despite its neutrality, part of the Congo Basin became a personal kingdom for Belgium's King Leopold II and under his rule, over half of the region's

population died. At the time of the conference, only the coastal areas of Africa were colonized by the European powers. At the Berlin Conference the European colonial powers scrambled to gain control over the interior of the continent. The conference lasted until February 26, 1885 - a three month period where colonial powers haggled over geometric boundaries in the interior of the continent, disregarding the cultural and linguistic boundaries already established by the indigenous African population. Following the conference, the give and take continued. By 1914, the conference participants had fully divided Africa among themselves into fifty countries.

Causes and Nature for Scramble & Partition of Africa

The Scramble for East Africa was the desire and rush for colonies or areas for control in east Africa, by the European super powers. In east Africa the major competitors were: Britain and Germany. Partition, on the other hand refers to the process of dividing up or sharing of the East African countries between Germany and Britain. The partition of East Africa took place in Europe following the Berlin conference of 1884-1885. During the partition of East Africa, Germany took over Tanganyika mainland, while Britain got Uganda and Kenya. When East Africa was partitioned, effective control followed. The reasons for the scramble and partition of East Africa were: East Africa was partitioned due to political, social and economic reasons. It was part of the struggle that had its roots in Europe itself. The emergence of Germany as a major power in Europe that upset the balance of power. The search for consumer market for the goods produced by the Europeans. The East Africans were supposed to provide ready market for commodities like clothes, gun powder, and glasses among others. The need for raw materials for their industries, ie: the coffee, cotton and sisal among others, encouraged the Europeans to come to East Africa. There was also need to invest their excessive capital in trade, plantation and so on. The East Africa was of strategic importance to many European super powers. " our lives were the pieces on the board being manipulated by a man-made fate" Tsiga (2010, p 39).

In Eastern Africa, Karl Peters signed treaties with African chiefs on behalf of Germany. In 1885 Germany declared the protectorate over Tanganyika (now Tanzania). Another form of European occupation was giving the rights to rule an area to private companies. These companies acquired territories both by signing treaties with local rulers and by fighting. In the lower Niger, the Royal Niger Company ruled on behalf of the

British government, and the Imperial British East Africa Company was active in the area north of Lake Victoria and in British East Africa (later Kenya). In Tanganyika the German East Africa Company was given the responsibility of ruling the area on behalf of Germany. And in Southern Africa, the British South African Company (BSAC) occupied territory initially in Shona territory and later also defeated the Ndebele kingdom. Both areas became part of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Later, the BSAC would also occupy the territory of modern Malawi.

The actually of its size, surface, features, climate, resources, and strategic importance, Africa had became a prime candidate for conquest by ambitious of European empires. Although Africa is physically remote from the power centers of Europe, North America, and Asia, it is surrounded by water and can therefore be reached easily from the other continents. This meant that the Europeans needed to establish rules for dealing with one another if they were to avoid constant bloodshed and competition for African resources. The Berlin Conference established those ground rules. By the mid-nineteen century, Europeans had established colonies all along the African coast and competed for control. The push for overseas territories was made even more intense by the Industrial Revolution and the need for cheap labor, raw material, and new markets. The competition between the Europeans often lead to violent conflict.

CONCLUSION

The major scramble and the partition of Africa is the Berlin conference which was held in Berlin between November 15, 1884 and November 26, 1885, under the leadership of German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. Although controlling the slave trade and promoting humanitarian idealism were promoted as the focus of the conference, the conference only passed empty resolutions about the ending of slave trade and providing for the welfare of Africa. In truth, the result of the Conference was a method of dividing the continent of Africa between the European powers.

The article no 34 and 35 of the Berlin Act states that any European nation that took possession of an African coast, or named its as “protectorate” of one, had to inform the other powers of the Berlin Act of this action. If this was not done then their claim would not be recognized. This article introduced the “spheres of influence” and "effective occupation" doctrine, the control of a coast also meant that they would control the

hinterland to an almost unlimited distance. It also determined that in order to occupy a coastal possession, the nation also had to prove that they controlled sufficient authority there to protect existing rights such as freedom of trade and transit. This was called the doctrine of "effective occupation" and it made the conquest of Africa a less bloody process.

Recommendation

The research also recommended on behalf of its concerned the deep of explored about the scramble and partition of Africa which is the genesis of the Berlin Conference on quater to the end of the 19th century. The study recommended that the partitioning of African societies but nothing is the European interest to controlled the socio-economic and political aspect of Africa by the Europeans super power.This work was supported by the General Project of Philosophy and Social Science Research in Colleges and Universities in Nigeria.

REFERENCES

John M. MacKenzie, (2005). The Partition of Africa 1880–1900 and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century.

Gerits k, (2014). The Ideological Scramble for Africa The US, Ghanaian, French and British Competition for Africa's Future, 1953-1963

Matt Rosenberg, (2017) Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 to Divide Africa Adapted http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Berlin_Conference_of_1884-85

http://historyproject.ucdavis.edu/ic/image_details.php?id=13906

J. A. (1999) A Brief History of the Berlin Conference.

Boahen, A. Adu. (1971) The Horizon History of Africa. United States: American Heritages Publishing Company.

General Act of the Berlin Conference on West Africa, 26 February 1885

Ismaila A. Tsiga, (2010) Apartheid and the Rise of Black Autobiography Tradition in South Africa.

Uzoigwe, G. N. (1985). European Partition and Conquest of Africa: an Overview, in: Boahen, A. A (ed.) General History of Africa – VII: Africa under Colonial Domination 18801935, pp. 19-44.

Jutta Bolt (2012) The History of African Development and The Partitioning of Africa Groningen University.

Xiaotang Lyu. (2021) An Introduction to New Historicism.