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On Two Eras of African Archaeology: Colonial and National

Clea Koff

This paper examines the role of archaeology in the political agendas of both colonial and post-colonial African governments. Both forms of government have utilized selective interpretations of the archaeological record to further their political goals. The marriage between archaeologists and colonial administrations is examined in light of the temporal coincidence between the international rise of professional archaeology in the 1890s and the zenith of colonial occupation in sub-Saharan Africa. The concurrent nature of these two phenomena resulted in employment within colonial administrations for the majority of professional archaeologists. The archaeology of the post-independence era reflects a shift in paradigm, as evident in the kinds of questions asked by archaeologists. Interpretation of the archaeological record, however, has often remained within the service of government agendas.

In some African countries, archaeology is now heralded as a lubricant for extra-ethnic national unity. Meanwhile, the governments of other countries have suppressed archaeology, while they weigh its potential for fueling ethnic struggles as peoples gain 'evidence' for their ancient origins and subsequent rights to land. Examples of the role of archaeology in Africa are provided from various sites in the eastern, western, and southern regions of the continent.

Introduction

It is true that colonial-era archaeology in Africa served to justify and validate the colonial effort. It is also true that post-independence-era archaeology has effected a shift in interest areas and interpretations, and the primary aim of which is to bolster African nationalism. One aspect of African archaeology has remained constant, however, and that is the archaeological record. Indeed, many of the sites investigated during colonialism in Africa are the same sites investigated today. It is the interpretation of these sites that has changed, along with the explanatory powers of more recent scientific knowledge such as radiocarbon dating. Interpretations of the African archaeological record have reflected the paradigms of both the practitioners and the end-users, whether the latter be a South African settler community or a cohort of Afrocentric scholars.

As several authors (Thornton 1997; Trigger 1990; Ucko 1990) have observed, interpretation is only as thick

as an archaeologist's paradigm. In Africa two additional factors have played a role in the interpretation of the archaeological record: (1) the shift from amateur to professional archaeology in the late 19th century and (2) the funding and employment sources for archaeologists, from the colonial administrations to state universities or foreign institutions. The first factor brings to bear the rise in increasingly scientific and empirical archaeological investigations. The evolution of professional archaeology, particularly the "new" archaeology, constrains "socially induced fantasies" as it can provide an 'objective' mode of data collection and interpretation (Trigger 1990:318). Professional archaeology does not always succeed in deconstructing "fantasies" but it allows for a challenge that is more difficult to refute or ignore.

The second factor, funding for archaeologists, can often dictate, if not the interpretation of the archaeological record, at least the questions being asked by a given investigation.

Colonial-era funding came from within either the colonial administration or from European universities. Therefore, the questions asked were aligned with phenomena of interest or concern within European academia. Many post-independence African governments have, in turn, funded archaeological questions that speak to indigenous history and prehistory. Some African governments, however, have not transcended the European funding relationship, often because archaeology is not recognized as a discipline that can serve African needs. Therefore, government funds and even university majors are not allocated to the study of the past. Archaeology in those countries is still funded from European institutions.

Through site examples, this paper will illustrate how the three factors, paradigm, empirical research, and funding sources, have influenced African archaeology in the colonial and post-independence eras.

Myth-making and Hegemony: Colonial-era African Archaeology

The Diffusion of the 'White Man's Burden'

The governments of seven European countries colonized Africa during the late 1800s: Britain, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Spain (Figure 1). African response to the European "scramble for Africa" ranged from strategic acceptance, such as Rwanda's acceptance of Belgium over Germany, to armed resistance, such as Ethiopia's defeat of Italy. Colonial rule, however, was successfully imposed in every country save Liberia, regardless of the indigenous response. Particularly in the instances where there was resistance to colonization, colonies were settled through 'pacification'. The colonists sanctioned this use of force by claiming

to their subjects – both at home and abroad – their *innate* right to rule the colony. Propaganda of this nature encourages the support of the home constituency while also indoctrinating new generations born into the short end of the colonial stick who hear stories about 'how things used to be' but can see only 'how things are now.' Archaeology, then a fledgling field practiced by explorers and amateurs, played a role in this great persuasion.

It cannot be argued that colonial administrations relied solely upon archaeology to support their regimes, only that the interpretations of the archaeological record tended to conform to the dominant paradigm of a 'backward' Africa at the mercy of not-wholly-evolved peoples incapable of governing themselves (Holl 1995:193). This paradigm is manifested in the use of diffusion theories in early interpretations of the African archaeological record. Through such interpretive frameworks and selective presentation or recognition of archaeological data, archaeologists in the colonial era were not compelled to state their explicit support of a given imperial agenda, they had only to naturalize that agenda.

In Mali, which was part of French West Africa until 1960, one can see the filter of one archaeologist's paradigm in Jean Maes' 1924 interpretation of the megaliths of the Tondi-Daro site:

For he who knows the psychology of Negroes, one can surely ascertain that this undertaking was not executed by the representatives of the Negro race because it represents such a considerable amount of effort, without any immediate utility and bearing no relation to the regular requirements of feeding and reproduction, the only functions which are really appealing to the Negro (Maes in Holl 1997:62).

Maes' interpretation accomplishes several feats at once. It reaches into the past to indicate that peoples other than Africans were at Tondi-Daro in presumably ancient times, and yet, speaks to the present to characterize the African "race" as one in need of support to accomplish goals beyond somatic functions. This site is now interpreted as the material remains of a Malian agrarian ritual. The megaliths are associated with burials that date by radiocarbon to the first half of the 7th century A.D. (Connah 1987:109; Holl 1997:62).

The suggestion that Africans were not the original occupants of Africa is a theme that permeated colonial propaganda. This theme was a component of validation for the European *mission civilisatrice* that could then be characterized by colonists as a dutiful continuation of "the onerous task of their white forerunners" (Holl 1995:191). The "forerunners" were, among others, the Caucasian foreigners of Charles Seligman's Hamitic Hypothesis. Seligman (1930) contended that light-skinned, Hamitic speakers from the 'Near East' civilized Egypt and were responsible for any signs of culture in sub-Saharan Africa (Fagan 1997:52). The Hamitic Hypothesis (later known as the Hamitic Myth) was invoked in early archaeological explanations throughout Africa, at sites such as the royal Bacwezi complexes of Uganda and the Lobi stone ruins of Upper Volta (de Barros 1990:161; Schmidt 1990:256). As Trigger (1989:130) notes, "The role that was assigned to the prehistoric Hamitic conquerors bore a striking resemblance to the civilizing missions that European colonists had been claiming for themselves since the late nineteenth century."

Beyond the Hamitic Myth: Great Zimbabwe

The site of Great Zimbabwe exemplifies the evolution in archaeological interpretations from echoes of the Hamitic Myth to a recognition of indigenous African origins. Great Zimbabwe is represented by a series of stone ruins in central Zimbabwe¹. The ruins were first alluded to in sixteenth century Swahili statements gathered by Portuguese colonists in neighboring Mozambique (Trigger 1989:131). The first archaeology-minded visitor to the site was Carl Mauch, a German geologist-explorer, in 1871. Mauch's explanation for the stone enclosures and buildings lacks both dynamic and empirical sufficiency, although it is parsimonious with the prevailing views of Afrikaners:

I believe I do not err when I suppose that the ruin on the mountain is an imitation of the Solomonic temple on Mount Moria, the ruin on the plain a copy of the palace in which the Queen of Sheba dwelled during her visit to Solomon (Mauch in Mallows 1984:75).

Cecil Rhodes, the progenitor of the British South African Company, and for whom Zimbabwe was named prior to independence in 1980 (Southern Rhodesia), embraced Mauch's interpretation. Rhodes had already led settlers into the interior of the country to search for gold while suppressing African resistance with force (Trigger 1989:131). The British South Africa Company commissioned the first scientific study of the stone ruins. The goal was to find more evidence to bolster Great Zimbabwe as "a symbol of the justice of European colonization, which was portrayed as the white race returning to a land that it had formerly ruled" (Trigger 1989:131).

J. T. Bent was the first archaeologist to conduct excavations at

Great Zimbabwe in 1891. The excavations yielded trade materials only several hundred years old in the midst of Bantu occupation sites. Perhaps under the combined weight of a dominant diffusionist paradigm, employment by the British South Africa Company, and "unscientific selection of architectural and stylistic features," Bent concluded that Great Zimbabwe was constructed by a "northern race coming from Arabia ... a race closely akin to the Phoenician and the Egyptian" (Fagan 1997:52; Trigger 1989:131).

Bent was followed by Richard Hall, who was also appointed by the British South Africa Company as Curator of Great Zimbabwe in 1902. Hall, an amateur archaeologist, also interpreted the ruins as those of a Phoenician colony that later degenerated. Hall, however, was dismissed in 1904 after other archaeologists decried Hall's destruction of archaeological evidence at the ruins through disposal of stratified deposits he described as "the filth and decadence of the Kaffir occupation" (Trigger 1989:133).

The archaeological criticism of Hall ushered in a new era of investigation into Great Zimbabwe despite Southern Rhodesia's continued status as a British colony. Indeed, well within the colonial time frame, several archaeologists excavated at Great Zimbabwe and emerged with incontrovertible evidence for its African origins. David Randall-MacIver excavated in 1905 and interpreted the ruins to be of medieval African origin. In 1926, Gertrude Caton-Thompson utilized new stratigraphic techniques that culminated in the interpretation that "... all the existing evidence, gathered from every quarter, still can produce not one single item that is not in accordance with the claim of Bantu origins and a medieval date" (Caton-Thompson in Mallows 1984:77). In

contrast to Mauch and Hall, both Randall-MacIver and Caton-Thompson were professional archaeologists trained by Flinders Petrie (Mallows 1984:76-7).

Trigger (1990:312) notes that the interpretations of an African origin for Great Zimbabwe were accepted by professional archaeologists both in Africa and beyond. For example, Conqah (1987) states: "There was never any doubt about its African origins in the minds of those who really understood the archaeological evidence." Yet, many settlers and amateur archaeologists in Rhodesia wholly refuted such interpretations. Richard Hall (1909) went so far as to publish *Prehistoric Rhodesia* as a challenge to Randall-MacIver's interpretation. Hall's book "made explicit for the first time the racial theories that were implicit in excluding Africans from the consideration of Zimbabwe's past"². (Trigger 1989:134).

The strong negative reactions to interpretations of Great Zimbabwe as originating in African culture suggests that while archaeology may be given free rein to support a colonialist ideology, it shall not so easily be allowed to challenge it. Accordingly, some archaeologists involved with the Great Zimbabwe site could no longer compromise their integrity as colonial tools and registered their discontent through speaking out and resigning from their posts. For example, Peter Garlake, Inspector of Monuments since 1964, resigned after the government of Southern Rhodesia released a "secret order ... that no official publication should indicate that Great Zimbabwe had been built by blacks" (Trigger 1989:134). In contrast, one professional archaeologist who worked at Great Zimbabwe after 1950, succumbed, "against his own better judgment," to settler demands for a

supportive reading of the past (Trigger 1989:135).

Nonetheless, by 1993, Great Zimbabwe is introduced in archaeology books as a site "renowned as the place where the indigenous southern African tradition of drystone architecture reached its most impressive achievement" (Phillipson 1993:231). Great Zimbabwe has been referred to as "a mystery" (Mallows 1984) but as Connah (1987:184) states, "the only 'mystery' ... connected with this site is why it should have taken archaeologists so long to recognize it for what it is."

*Towards an Alternative History:
The Wane of Colonial Power*

Compounding the pull of colonial administration employers and adherence to dominant paradigms, it must be considered that many of the early colonial-era archaeologists were often cliques of like-minded individuals who, although producing archaeological histories 'by night,' by day were an "interconnected, overlapping, and tightly knit [network] of ... soldiers, teachers, and civil servants who were obliged in their daily tasks to enforce, directly, or indirectly, colonial policies and ideologies" (Holl, 1995:193). Some archaeologists, therefore, initially validated the imperial and ethnocentric colonial exercise. In turn, governments could more easily employ selective interpretations of the archaeological record. This is evidenced in this 1967 South African Bureau of Information publication:

South Africa has never been exclusively a Black man's country. The Bantu have no greater claim to it than its white population. Bantu tribes from Central and East Africa invaded South Africa at the time when Europeans landed at the Cape [1652] (*South African Yearbook in Gawe and Meli 1990:100*).

This story is in direct contradiction to contemporaneous interpretations of a Bantu presence in southern Africa from at least the sixteenth century, if not significantly earlier. However, like Garlake at Great Zimbabwe, not all archaeologists during this time period subsumed empirical evidence to the pressures of creating a support for colonialism. Holl (1997:58) notes that Henri Lhote argued in 1952 for an ancient African origin for iron technology in West Africa despite the ubiquity of the diffusionist explanation at that time.

Archaeologists were able to argue minority opinions such as Lhote's with greater strength towards the end of the colonial era in part due to the "rising tide of African nationalism" (Fagan 1997:53) and to the development of an absolute dating method. Radiocarbon dating allowed for an objective, scientific fact to stand on its own, either in glaring contrast to or in glorious harmony with prevailing dates attributed to a site. Indeed, debates such as the antiquity of Great Zimbabwe were settled in one swift motion. Radiocarbon dating "not only confirmed the accuracy of Caton-Thompson's medieval chronology for Great Zimbabwe but also showed that iron-using farmers had been living in most parts of tropical Africa for at least 2,000 years" (Fagan 1997:53).

Trigger (1990:309) argues that "archaeology has played a significant role in helping to promote the decolonization of Africa" as its "often unanticipated findings have altered entrenched interpretations of African history" in spite of the external influences (i.e., colonial ideology, European hegemony) on the discipline. The question then becomes, does archaeology play a role in the promotion of nationalism or do unanticipated findings alter those interpretations as well?

Out of the Frying Pan?

Post-independence Archaeology

By 1980, almost all countries in Africa had won independence from their colonizers (Figure 2). The exceptions were 14 square miles of Spanish North Africa, several islands, and South Africa (if apartheid is considered "colonialism of a special type") which gained majority rule only in 1994 (Gawe and Meli 1990:98; Griffiths 1995:71-2). Along with the ubiquitous name changes (i.e., Belgian Congo became Zaire), there was a shift in the dominant ideology from imperialism to nationalism. Archaeology, however, did not turn this corner at the same rate in every country. Where some independent governments recognized an opportunity for advancement of their agendas in archaeological discoveries, others feared that they would have a disunifying effect on the local populace and archaeological investigations were discouraged. In addition, some archaeologists were wary of nationalist agendas to incorporate archaeological evidence into the promotion of a "glorious past," for they knew too well the academic shortcomings of other agenda-driven 'evidence,' such as Seligman's Hamitic Hypothesis (Thornton 1997:56).

Phillip de Barros (1990:165) notes that by the 1970s the diffusionist paradigm "was seriously questioned," particularly as excavations "brought the first tangible archaeological evidence that sub-Saharan African civilization was much older than once believed." Some archaeologists continued to argue for a short African history, including Munson who in 1971 eschewed paleobotanical evidence of an indigenous origin for a West African sorghum domesticate in favor of a diffusionist explanation (De Barros 1990:165). The majority of

archaeologists and Africanists, though, were swept with the "winds of change" and embraced a new paradigm under the encouragement of developing independent governments.

In the 1960s, countries such as Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, and Zambia included archaeology as a course of study within the newly developed universities. This led to employment for professional expatriate archaeologists and training for indigenous students. As with the colonial administrations before them, "the nationalist governments that provided for the infrastructure of education and research also took an interest in supporting archaeological research that would serve its needs ... to locate and document a precolonial history for the continent" (Thornton 1997:55). The paradigm at work was one that promoted equality of Africans in both the past and the present, to counter the earlier myths of an ahistorical people and a continent that was "unprogressive and lacked complex societies" (Stahl 1996:17).

The Place of Archaeology in Nationalist Africa: Center or Periphery?

Paul Sinclair (1990) details a Mozambican example of archaeology within the post-colonial paradigm and nationalist institutions. Mozambique gained independence from Portugal in 1975. Prior to this time, colonial archaeologists all but ignored Mozambican prehistory, preferring to focus on early colonial sites. The few children who attended secondary school (less than one percent of 12 million) were not taught non-Portuguese prehistory (Sinclair 1990:152). Immediately after independence, however, President Machel directed the (renamed) Mondlane University to focus on sciences and humanities relevant to Mozambicans. This focus led to the

establishment of a Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at the university that has prioritized the role of archaeology in creating a post-colonial cultural identity. The excavation of the Manyikeni site in south central Mozambique is an example of a collaborative effort between archaeologists and local residents. Sinclair (1990:154) notes that Manyikeni's "national significance ... was reflected in the issue of postage stamps and the change of the locality name to the name of the archaeological site."

In contrast to the Manyikeni excavations, regional archaeological investigation in Kenya has been suppressed outside of the paleoanthropological work of the Leakeys and the British Institute in Eastern Africa. Schmidt (1995) ascribes this selective investigation of the past to the Kenyan government's attempt to subdue the land claim struggles of the several ethnic groups that live in Kenya, such as the Luo and Kikuyu:

Archaeology, if allowed to flourish at the regional level, can easily be identified with an attempt to valorize the history ... of one ethnic group at the perceived expense of others. The state's deep investment in [paleoanthropological studies] has been an ideal way to neutralize regional histories ... in an enterprise that is extra-ethnic: it focuses on a 'population' devoid of ethnicity—indeed, devoid of humanness. State investment in this perspective creates a national identity from a period of history so remote that it imitates mythological time. Using a belief that is globally endorsed, the state can draw on the neutrality of ancient nonhumans to provide Kenya with a new universal myth of origin (Schmidt 1995:128-9).

Ann Stahl (1996) echoes Schmidt's recognition of archaeology as a tool in an evolutionary scheme that

places importance on who arrived where first, particularly in regions where there is no written history: "Ethnic groups, like nations, seek historic charters, and archaeological evidence plays an important role in creating charters that legitimize claims to land and power" (Stahl 1996:17). Peter Robertshaw encounters this "dilemma" in Uganda, "where both the government and the president have repeatedly invoked the notion of a Cwezi empire in the pre-colonial era as a symbol of Uganda's glorious and united past" (Robertshaw 1996:8). Robertshaw's own archaeological research, however, suggests a Cwezi 'empire' made up of several polities. Although he has not been stopped from carrying out his research so far, his public lectures and interviews have been objected to by listeners. Robertshaw identifies "the challenge [as maintaining] scholarly integrity, but also without undermining the government's laudatory efforts to use the past to promote national unity" (Robertshaw 1996:8).

This "dilemma" may parallel concerns of archaeologists during the colonial era, such as Garlake at Great Zimbabwe, in that they recognize the conflict between their expert investigations and the 'party line' spread by the government institutions. Both situations involve the manipulation of archaeology to support government policy. Yet, where it appears clear that colonial policy aimed to suppress African individuality, it is not so clear that the "unifying" policies of Uganda are so detrimental. As Robertshaw notes, "What, then, should be done when archaeological results seemingly contradict the version of the past being promulgated by a democratically elected government ... aimed at the promotion of national pride and ethnic reconciliation?" (Robertshaw 1996:8).

Beyond pride and reconciliation, some governments have seen in

archaeology possibilities for social reform. Peter Schmidt (1995:132-6) describes the initial peripheralization of archaeology in Tanzania in the 1970s at the hands of Marxists at the University of Dar es Salaam's School of History. When N. J. Karoma, an archaeologist at the university, proposed a curriculum in archaeology, "he was greeted with derision and challenged on the grounds that archaeology was not relevant to the socialist experiment." Schmidt theorizes that the rejection of archaeology as a bourgeois undertaking was grounded in an interpretation of archaeological empiricism as "the collection of facts which themselves are produced under the aura of 'science' and therefore take on a false objectivity." In addition, the Historians queried, "Does archaeology produce food?"

Over the course of a decade, however, archaeology was elevated to its own curriculum, primarily due to a visit to China by representatives of the Tanzania National Scientific Research Council and the Ministry of Culture in 1978. In China, the Tanzanians "observed firsthand the power of antiquities in building a national socialist state, particularly through Chinese emphasis on the contributions of worker-artisans to remarkable royal sites" (Schmidt 1995:136). By 1986, archaeology, bolstered by non-profit funding, assumed its place in Tanzanian academia as a useful discipline.

The Role of the "New" Archaeology

Post-colonial archaeology has also experienced a methodological evolution akin to that which resulted from the radiocarbon breakthrough during the colonial era: the "new" archaeology. Trigger (1990:316) cautions that the "new" archaeology is not a panacea for all times and all

places, but in Africa its methodologies "helped to create a new African history that principally aimed at understanding what happened to particular peoples and regions at specific times." A site from Cameroon exemplifies the alternative interpretations that were enabled by the emergence of the "new" archaeology.

During the colonial era, archaeology of the Cameroonian Grassfields relied heavily upon sporadic surface collections and interpretations of oral histories to establish a picture of recent settlement by immigrants from the North (Holl 1997:54). Under the influence of the "new" archaeology, however, excavations began in 1974 and their results have shown habitation of the grassfields since A.D. 1000, with iron technology from the third or fourth century. Holl (1997:64) sums up that "the nature of the ironworking sites, the technologies used, and the scale of production achieved all contradict the colonial stereotype, according to which African peoples lacked any kind of technological skill and initiative, a stereotype given credibility by the fact that the first Europeans to travel there observed highly dispersed, small-scale smelting operations."

The colonial-era interpretation of the grassfields conformed to the paradigm that viewed Africans as incapable of technological development. Empirical investigation, although fallible at the interpretative level, at least allows the question, "what was the cause of change at the grassfields?" This question, in turn, led investigators to recognize the processes of trade destabilization that led to the social structure that early Europeans encountered (Holl 1997:65).

Conclusion

Janette Deacon (1990:47) characterizes the legacy of colonial-era

archaeology in Africa in the following manner: "... the colonialist attitude of denigration of things non-European persisted in British academic circles well into the 1970s. The sin, as Howells (1985:24) phrased it, 'seems to have been mere inattention.'" "Inattention," perhaps, but only so far as one's paradigm does not allow one to perceive "unexpected data" (Barker, 1989). Do shifting paradigms alone explain the change in interpretations of the African archaeological record – or even the explication of just one site, such as Great Zimbabwe? Or have more rigorous empirical methods engendered less biased interpretations?

Holl (1995:185) cites Thomas Kuhn in arguing that new interpretations do not necessarily reflect greater truth:

What occurs during a scientific revolution is not fully reducible to a reinterpretation of individual and stable data ... Given a paradigm, interpretation of data is central to the enterprises that explore it. This enterprise can only articulate a paradigm, not correct it. Paradigms are not corrigible by normal science at all (Kuhn 1970:121).

Trigger (1990:309) notes that many archaeologists adhere to the concept that objectivity is elusive, but are concerned by "hyper-relativist" assertions that "archaeological interpretations are nothing more than a reflection of subjective factors," a position that "[undermines] an independent role for archaeology as a source of insight into human history and behaviour" In keeping with this sentiment, Trigger maintains that "the most constructive contribution that archaeology can make to African development is to determine as precisely and objectively as possible what happened in the past" (Trigger 1990:318).

"Precision" and "objectivity" are themselves constrained by the "received wisdom of [the] times" (Ucko 1990:xiii). One is left with the simple, yet significant, recognition that the relationship between archaeology and the political revolutions in Africa over the last century is complex, influenced by both external forces and internal filters.

ENDNOTES

¹Phillipson (1993:231) notes that "The word *zimbabwe* in the language of the Shona, means either 'stone houses' or 'venerated houses'." Southern Rhodesia was named Zimbabwe after gaining independence from Britain.

²In *Prehistoric Rhodesia*, Hall "maintained that the 'decadence' of the Bantu is a 'process which has been in operation for very many centuries [and] is admitted by all authorities', attributing this process to a 'sudden arrest of intelligence' that 'befalls every member of the Bantu at the age of puberty'" (Trigger 1989:134).

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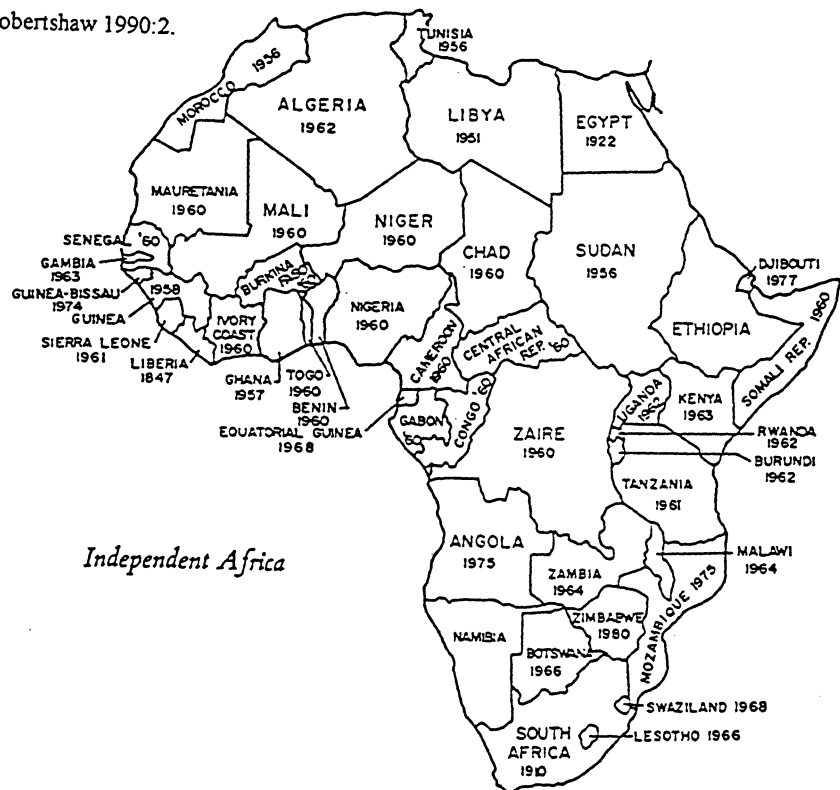
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APPENDIX



Africa under colonial rule 1924

Figure 1: from Robertshaw 1990:2.



Independent Africa

Figure 2: from Robertshaw 1990:2