

Troubles in Africa

During the decades following World War II, many African nations formerly in the grip of European colonialism, gained independence. Yet many of these newly independent states faced potentially destructive challenges throughout the 1960s to the end of the century.

During the colonial era, Europeans affected their African subjects in many ways. They established European political systems, customs and values, machinery, industry, railroads, fashion, even sports games. But in many respects, these extensions of European civilization had been superficial.

Once Europeans left Africa, most African societies found themselves still agrarian and steeped in tribal traditions. And they remained connected to the West, their limited economies still reliant on imports from Western powers.

The newly independent African nations based their governments on different political and economic philosophies. Some, such as Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo (previously the Belgian Congo), nations which gained their independence in the early 1960s, supported economic systems based on Western capitalism. Others, such as Ghana (1957), sought "an African form of socialism."

In nearly every newly independent African state, nationalism ran high. Yet many of the colonial-drawn boundaries of these African nations had been artificial creations, each typically including the peoples of different tribes, customs, religions, and languages. Zaire, for example, was home to over 200 different family groups speaking 75 different languages.

To counter the differences and divisiveness found among the many peoples of Africa in the early 1960s, a unification movement to unite the continent began, known as the Organization of African Unity (OAU), organized in Ethiopia in 1963. The goal of the OAU was pan-Africanism, a concept which sought a common identity for Africans which deemphasized their differences.

The OAU established goals for Africa which were intended to create an Africa of the future, one founded on principles of freedom, justice, equality, unity, and dignity for all peoples, while continuing to recognize the territorial integrity of all African countries and their governments. The dream of pan-

Africanism did not become reality, however.

In addition to the strong tribal identities held by many Africans, there were many differences between Africans which made pan-Africanism seemingly impossible to achieve. With wide gaps among Africans in education and income, African democracy faced a difficult future. Between 1957 and 1982, the African continent was torn apart by 70 violent coups to remove African leaders from positions of power. By 1984, most African nations were ruled by military dictators. (That year, only 7 of 41 major African countries recognized opposition political parties.)

Other problems have continued to plague the African continent since the end of colonialism. Many nations have remained poor, agrarian, and underdeveloped. Overpopulation has stretched available resources, resulting in the starvation of millions. Diseases such as AIDS currently ravage the continent where, in sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that one-third of the entire population is infected with the virus.

With the highest population growth rate of any continent today, home to 18 of the world's 20 poorest countries, with starvation, disease, and ongoing revolution, the future for the African continent seems uncertain.

Review and Write

1. What types of problems did newly independent African nations face during the 1950s and 60s?
2. What are some of the major problems facing African nations today?