

History essays - scramble for africa



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Can the 'scramble for Africa' be understood as a single process?

Nowadays the 'Scramble for Africa' may be remembered as a brief period, from around 1880 to 1900, of ultra-colonialism on the part of several European nations, in particular Germany, France and Britain but also Belgium, Portugal and Italy, in which the continent of Africa and the ten thousand or so polities it contained were partitioned between them (Brooke-Smith 1987, 1). It is also often cited as the cause of many of Africa's problems today (eg Harrison 1993, 45) and thus Ferguson (2003, 222) has suggested that 'Scramble of Africa' might be a more apposite term.

Although 'scramble' was early adopted as a description of what was happening, for example Keltie uses it in *The Partition of Africa* published in 1893 (eg 189, 444), as Betts (1966, vii) suggests it tends to promote a certain interpretation of events, emphasising both their haste and interconnectedness. However, as Koponen (1993, 117) observes, while much may be known about the events of the 'scramble', there remains no consensus on what forces drove it or its nature as a historical process. Was it a 'big bang' planned by the European powers at the Berlin Conference in 1884/85, an intensification of existing activity, a series of unplanned actions dictated by emergencies or a combination of these (Betts 1966, vii; Koponen 1993, 117)? This brief essay will attempt to discuss whether the 'scramble' can be understood as a single process with reference to the origins of the 'scramble' and the motivations that involved those that took part in it, whether strategic, economic or otherwise.

Historians and scholars have identified and explained the scramble and its causes and significance in many different ways and there are differences in perspective and in conclusions drawn. One example of this diversity would be the variety in causes of the scramble that have been suggested. For Robinson and Gallagher (1966, 38), whose account has been widely influential (Betts 1966, x; Cain 1980, 50; Illife 1995, 303), the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 began the scramble and fuelled it whereas for Keltie (1893, 161-2, 446) Bismarck and German colonial ambition in 1884 were the cause while Stengers (1966, 42) sees French actions in 1882/3 as the origin of the true initiatives of the scramble. The difficulty in identifying a beginning to the scramble, and indeed an end, illustrates a methodological problem in comprehending historical processes. Since a historical process is made up of interconnected events, the search for a beginning or cause may be to some degree irrelevant, in the sense that prior and contemporary actions always have effects and thus meaningful beginnings may not always be found. As Brooke-Smith (1987, 1) reminds us, the term 'scramble' is a metaphor applied to a period and was applied, as we have seen, by contemporary observers. In such a way, it is possible to understand the scramble as a single process, an intensification of relationships between Europe and Africa, whatever the myriad individual distinctions in motivation of all involved. Indeed, conclusions are a matter of perspective and simplistic approaches must be eschewed (Brooke-Smith 1987, 1).

It has been argued that the scramble is best seen as a single process stemming from a particular action, as Robinson and Gallagher and others have done (Chamberlain 1974, 44). Egypt had been part of the Ottoman

empire since 1517 but had come under the influence of France through the campaigns of Napoleon in 1798-99 and the French remained the dominant European power. It had then become important to Britain in the 1840s as a route to India. The British opposed the building of the Suez Canal for strategic reasons, which was thus completed with French capital and expertise.

Financial crisis and political instability followed its completion in 1869 and, following a period of Anglo-French dual financial control, at the request of the Khedive, after 1875, precipitated direct British intervention in and occupation of Egypt in August 1882. The particular fact that the British remained in occupation, thus ending dual control with France, has been suggested as the trigger for the chain reaction resulting in the partition of other parts of Africa by France in order to put pressure on London (Robinson and Gallagher 1966, 32; Chamberlain 1974, 44). The British were, according to Robinson and Gallagher, primarily interested in securing their strategic advantage with reference to India and the east through Egypt and the Cape. In this explanation, events in Africa caused intervention by Europeans, which in turn produces conflict between Europeans but played out in Africa.

On the other hand, it is possible to suggest that the scramble was not one process and that to see it as such hides much of its importance. It is quite possible, for example, to suggest that the scramble may have begun earlier with the personal ambitions of Leopold II of Belgium in the Congo, who, in Brussels in 1876, held a conference to discuss the exploration, civilisation and commercial opening of Africa attended by (non-governmental) representatives from many European nations (Keltie 1893, 117, 119, 130). Keltie (1893, 117-118) himself states that while this meeting may have sown

the seeds of partition, it was unlikely that Leopold had definite or precise plans as to the outcomes of any intervention, and this should be borne in mind of all parties when considering the scramble. The increased European interest in Africa in the 1870s also to some degree stems from the increased explorations by Europeans in the African interior, famously Livingstone and Stanley, the latter of whom later acted as agent for Leopold in the Congo (McEvedy 1980, 102-110). These were themselves made possible by the discovery or realisation in the 1840s and 50s that quinine could ward off malaria, and technological advances that allowed a more active European presence in Africa, which had previously not been possible.

Besides the strategic motivations of the British and the individual motivation of Leopold, some have argued that the French used colonialism as a vent for their frustration at defeat in Europe, making Tunisia a protectorate in 1881 as well as advancing in Senegal and Gabon (McEvedy 1980, 110). Even so, in Senegal and western Africa generally, Person (1985, 255-256) has pointed out that colonial boundaries were only completed in about 1900 and could not have been foreseen by those involved and that there had generally been a lack of design in how the area was drawn into the world market. Lack of unity of purpose on the part of the European nations in the scramble for Africa has been emphasised by Lonsdale (1985, 680) who has commented that 'alien rule seemed to impose on Africa a crushing uniformity of ruler's intentions.' Certainly it is questionable that the scramble was caused and driven by the British being in Egypt since the French and others were already active in other parts of Africa and German colonial policy is not accounted for and it fails to explain British actions in western Africa and the long interest in

Sierra Leone, which seem to have been economic and commercial and partially resulting from defending the interests of British traders and Africans against other European interests (Brooke-Smith 1987, 25). The economic motivations for the scramble may best be applied to local areas rather than Africa as a whole since as Iliffe observes 'Africa was not central to European economies'. Nonetheless, private money making initiatives, such as by Rhodes, became extremely important politically.

It has now become common to see in the scramble at least two phases, the first in which Africa was divided on paper in Europe and the second phase in which interventions increasingly took place - partition then conquest (Lonsdale 1985, 680-681; Oliver and Fage 1975, 192-193). These continued after 1900. British conquests after 1895 may have been rationalisations of earlier actions (Cain 1980, 50) with the conquest of northern Nigeria in 1901-1903 and Sudan/Uganda in 1909 (McEvedy, 1980, 116). In south west Africa, the Germans almost wiped out the Herero and Nama between 1904-1907 in response to local conditions while the Ovambo were only brought into the colonial sphere in 1915 (Marks 1985, 464-465). The Italians invaded coastal Libya in 1911-1912 but did not fully occupy the interior until 1928 while Morocco remained contentious between France and Spain until its division by treaty in 1912 (McEvedy 1980, 116-118). In 1898 British and French forces came the closest to coming to blows over southern Sudan at Fashoda, although conflict was avoided and the two nations moved towards eventual entente (Brooke-Smith 1987, 87-99). This would suggest that both local issues of control and issues of prestige in Europe were played out in Africa.

In conclusion, it is largely a question of perspective as to whether the scramble for Africa can be understood as a single process. Certainly from the 1870s there was an increasing European interest in Africa, but this was due in part to practical reasons of its accessibility, quinine and technological progress, and the longstanding relations between Europe and Africa. There were a variety of motivations for the scramble, personal in the case of Leopold, perhaps a reaction to internal pressures on the part of Bismarck, who also seems to have viewed Africa as an extension of the European political arena. For the British too, there were strategic concerns as well as the need to be seen to defend commercial interests and later to compete with the other powers. On the ground, the processes that began during and even before the classic scramble period caused a variety of actions, reactions and decisions based on local requirements and the requirements of higher policy. From a European perspective at least, the scramble may be understood as a single process, a period different and distinct from those before and after for the intensity of concern with and activity in Africa, although it was a process in which many parties played a variety of roles, dependent on a variety of specific individual, local and international motivations, such as traditional interest, strategic interest, economic interest and prestige, at particular times, sometimes made explicit, for example in the Berlin Conference; while at the same time being part of a longer process of interrelations between Europeans and Africans, Europeans and Europeans and individuals and individuals. Alien rule should not impose unity of purpose and action on this period, even though it may to some extent be usefully seen through the singular metaphor of 'scramble'. This is especially the case since such a mindset was evidently present at the time which itself would

have, to some degree, influenced actions. Keltie was right to place the scramble in the context of historical intervention in Africa and neatly stated: 'what seems an unaccountably sudden event or catastrophe is simply the natural and inevitable result of forces that have been accumulating and growing in intensity over a long period of time' (Keltie 1893, 162).

Presumably he would have seen the events of the early twentieth century as part of the same process.

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