The Saylor Foundation’s “Africa at the Crossroads: The Mid-Nineteenth Century”

It is difficult to discuss the history of the African continent as a single entity. The continent’s past is so rich and diverse, and draws on such an aged set of traditions and such a diverse series of cultures that—viewed from a distance—important individual events stand out with almost no pattern. And yet, clearly, the history of Africa is, to a certain extent, unified by a set of long-term trends.

• The movement of peoples and technology, beginning with the exodus from the Sahara to North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. These migrations occurred in long processes and successive waves, with the migrants not only teaching and overcoming existing peoples, but learning from them as well. In the process, groups of migrants and older populations would create new, hybrid societies.

• The formation of more and more complex societies—from small hunter-gatherer groups to kafu and other micro-states to large states and empires.

• Nevertheless, for most Africans, the clan, extended family, lineage group, or village remained the most important organizing factor in their lives up to the end of the period covered by this class.

Each of these innovations must be seen largely as the development of African cultures and societies based on the ideas and actions of Africans and their understanding of their environment. However, through the course of their history, the theme of African interaction with the outside world has become more and more evident as our studies have focused on later and later dates.

• First, the give-and-take between Egypt, North Africa, the Red Sea coast and the rest of the Mediterranean world, which included interaction with the Greek, Phoenician, Roman, and Islamic worlds.

• By the eighth century, traders—especially Muslims—were interacting with Africans along the Indian Ocean coast, and soon after in the interior of West Africa.

• After the fifteenth century, Europeans—seeking to outflank the Muslim powers of North Africa—revolutionized Africa’s interaction with the outside world by using sail technology to explore the African coastline and round the Cape.

• By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while many Africans actively and successfully resisted outside intervention or used it to their advantage, the Atlantic and Indian Ocean slave trade marked a particularly heinous episode of exploitation of Africans by Europeans and Arabians. At the same time, much of North Africa came under the control of the Turkish Ottoman Empire.
By the beginning of the nineteenth century, much of Africa was in a state of some crisis. Although the Atlantic slave trade was gradually being abolished, beginning with the British in 1807, the previous centuries had seen the destabilization and partial depopulation of large regions, such as Angola, Mozambique, and the Bight of Benin. In other areas, large states such as Kongo and the Jollof Confederation had collapsed under the weight of the slave trade, while wars broke out throughout the continent, perhaps aided by new European weapons and the demand for slaves.

All of this was part of a crisis that shapes the central dynamic of nineteenth century African history: the accelerating incorporation of the continent into the international capitalist economy. Even after the slave trade began to decline, European and—to a lesser extent—Asian demand for African goods such as palm and peanut oil, foodstuffs, ivory, and other luxury goods meant that commerce between Africa and other regions continued to increase.

The context for this was the industrialization of Europe—especially Britain—which had the power, technology, and wealth (partly created by African slaves who labored for Europeans in the New World) to control the development of industry. Their strategy was to use Africa as a source of raw materials, but to keep the profits of commerce generally for themselves. As a result, the early nineteenth century witnessed another phase of interaction between Africa and the outside world—the development of European settlements and colonies in Africa.

1. On the northern end of the continent, the French invasion of Egypt in the 1790s, (despite their subsequent expulsion), led them to expand into Algeria in the early nineteenth century.

2. The Afrikaners and British competed to control territory and people in southern Africa.

3. The Portuguese intensified their colonization of Angola and Mozambique on either side of central Africa.

4. The British and French began to spread slightly from their settlements in West Africa.

Some scholars have suggested that the era of colonialism in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which Europeans completed the conquest of most of Africa, was a direct and unavoidable result of the European expansion of the nineteenth century. However, this argument ignores the fact that the early nineteenth century, especially around 1830, was also a period in which Africans reacted to the crisis of the Atlantic slave trade and foreign intervention by melding new ideas and technologies, with purely African ideals, in an attempt to determine for themselves the future of Africa. While they may not all have seen their actions in this wide a light, Africans did begin to look more widely at their identity as Africans than ever before, and to see in this the possibilities of unity.

Two principal forces are responsible for this wider perspective, and ironically, although they were appropriated by Africans, they were two foreign forces—Islam, and Western ideas of race, nation, and Christianity. In the West African interior, Islam in the
early nineteenth century gave voice to the oppressed, becoming the language of resistance to local tax-hungry rulers and to the Atlantic slave trade. The Jihadist states built by the Fulani in Futa Jallon, Futa Toro, and Sokoto quickly attracted people of a wide variety of ethnicities, who subsequently saw their identity as Islamic rather than purely ethnic.

The success of Usman dan Fodio’s Sokoto Caliphate represented perhaps the greatest of these Islamic revolutions, incorporating ancient states such as Ilorin and parts of Bornu, pastoralists such as the Fulani, and cultivators from the Hausa city-states.

Following dan Fodio’s death in 1817, his disciple Ahmadu Lobo moved to the Niger River—the home of ancient states such as Mali and Ghana—which had become the raiding grounds of coastal slave traders who enslaved its Fulani, Mandinka, Soninke, Bambara, and other inhabitants and spirited them to European traders. Here, Ahmadu Lobo led a successful jihad in the 1820s, establishing once again a great African state (known as Masina) here in this heartland of civilization.

At the same time, a number of African leaders, seeing Europe’s military and technological strength, decided that the way for Africans to free themselves was to learn from or adapt the ideas of Europeans. The greatest of these innovators was Mohammed Ali, who had been appointed by the Ottoman Emperors to rule Egypt for them. He was expected to continue the Ottoman traditions of stealing from the Egyptian people to enrich both the sultan in Turkey and the continuing Mamluk aristocracy within Egypt. Instead, in 1811 he invited the Mamluks to a feast and massacred them, ridding the country of a despised ruling class. Mohammed Ali proceeded to rebuild Egypt’s army along European lines, using Egyptian citizens rather than slaves or mercenaries. By 1820, he had expanded Egypt once again into the Sudan area. He built hundreds of schools to teach Egyptian peasants, and set up a European-style administration.

Mohammed Ali never managed to transform Egypt from an agricultural society to an industrial one, but he made Egypt a great power that could resist foreign intervention, for a period at least.

Along the West African coast, other African people began to adopt European style and ideas—especially the idea of the nation-state. These people were led by two educated groups:

- The Euro-Africans—descendents of European traders and officials and African women.
- Slaves returned from the Americas or freed by anti-slavery squadrons.

Chief members of these two groups were the inhabitants of Sierra Leone and Liberia, in western Africa.

Sierra Leone had been founded in 1792 as a home for black Americans who had fought on the British side in the Revolutionary War, and by 1808 they were joined by slaves freed by British anti-slavery patrols, and later by rebellious slaves exiled from Jamaica. Liberia, on the other hand, had been founded in 1821 by an American “charity” that believed in sending freed slaves back to Africa. In both places, educated leaders of these immigrant communities embraced Christianity and European-American
industrial beliefs, and called for the formation of Western-style democracies. Some few, the wisest among them, realized that these democracies should incorporate some traditions of the indigenous African people as well.

In other regions, however, it was clear to indigenous people that European intervention was, at least at that point, a destructive process, and it was resisted. In Senegal, French attempts to establish plantations were met by the resistance of a coalition of Euro-Africans who wanted to ensure they made trading profits (rather than sending all the profits to Europe), chiefs and aristocrats who opposed European intervention, and Muslim leaders. Perhaps the most striking examples of resistance come, however, from southern Africa, where by the 1830s Nguni people, such as the Xhosa and Zulu, were locked in war with both the Afrikaners moving into the interior and the expanding British state.