Introduction

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In the fall of 1945, about one-third of the world was living under European imperial or colonial rule. The United Nations, established less than two months after the end of World War II, gave a name to these unfree societies. They called them "non-self-governing territories." According to their calculations, there were 72 of them. They were mostly scattered across the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, and were home to roughly 750 million of the world's 2.1 billion people. Most of the Western European nations that claimed and administered these territories, including Great Britain, France, Portugal, Holland, and Belgium, swore they would not relinquish them. Despite having defended the idea of self-determination during the war, they recommitted themselves to their empires in their respective postwar declarations. But they could not have been more wrong. The next half century was an age defined by independence. More than 50 of the 72 non-self-governing territories won their freedom, forming 80 independent nations. By the year 1995, the UN counted only 17 remaining non-self-governing territories. These were mostly small island nations that were home to

just 2 million people, 3% of the world's population. Nowhere was this change more dramatic than in Africa. In the quarter century that followed World War II, forty nations won their independence on the continent, 18 of them in 1960, nicknamed "The Year of Africa."

The struggles for independence that took place across the world after 1945 led to the emergence of today's nation states. They are important moments, comparable to the American Revolution in the national consciousness of the peoples who now call these nations their home. And yet, when we think about the generation of independence leaders and freedom fighters who organized these struggles, we do not see the whole picture. We think mostly of men, such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, and, mostly famously, Nelson Mandela of South Africa. But women were also involved in these fights for independence. In fact, they were crucial to their success. Aside from participating alongside men in all aspects of these independence struggles, women could work for their nation's resistance movements in ways men could not because of colonizers' assumptions about sex and gender. In this module, we will meet three women who advanced their respective countries' struggle for independence after World War II by understanding colonial ideas about sex and gender and using them to their advantage. These women are Zohra Drif of Algeria, Wambui Otieno of Kenya, and Miriam Makeba of South Africa.

The arrest of Zohra Drif, 1957

Key Terms:

Sex

Gender

"Gender Frontier"

"Performing Gender"

Settler Colonialism

Resistance

Colonialism and Gender

In order to see how women like Drif, Otieno, and Makeba advanced their nations' struggles for independence, we first need to understand what colonialism is and how it relates to ideas about sex and gender. Colonialism is a system in which a political entity takes and maintains formal, governing control over an area outside of its existing borders. This is generally done against the peoples' will and through military force. The goal of colonialism is for the colonizing power
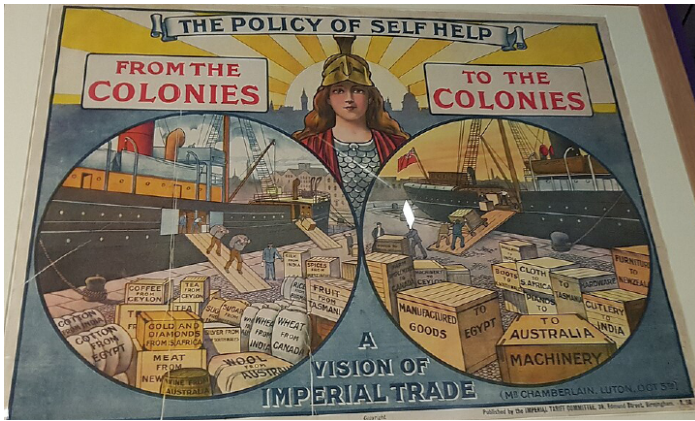
"The Policy of Self Help: A Vision of Imperial Trade," illustrating how raw materials are extracted from the colonies, manufactured in the colonial metropoles of Europe, and then shipped to colonial consumer markets.

to seize the resources of the colonized area—including its land, its raw materials, and its peoples' labor—and use them for the purposes of its own economic development. To do this, colonizers try to profit off colonized peoples twice. First, they turn them into producers of raw materials from the colonized society. Second, they turn them into consumers of *processed* materials from the colonizing society. Unlike imperialism, the colony is not absorbed into the political borders of the colonizing nation. It is administered as an external territory, and its inhabitants are treated as conquered subjects, rather than full citizens, of the colonizing nation. Although the motives of colonialism are economic, colonizers sell and justify this process to the public through a series of humanitarian narratives that depict the colonized as inferior, backwards, and sympathetic peoples who can be "improved" through exposure to the "benefits" of Western "civilization."

Europeans colonized much of the world beyond their borders beginning in the late-15th century. However, their lack of knowledge about disease environments in Africa had prevented them from colonizing most of that continent until advancements in medicine were made around the middle of the 19th century. During this same time, the Industrial Revolution generated an incredible demand for resources that could only be obtained from tropical climates, including rubber for conveyor belts, palm oil for industrial lubricants, and coffee as a stimulant for factory workers. Colonizers employed many different strategies to take African land and force Africans to harvest these resources. They used military conquest to break the authority of existing powers; they recruited native police forces to punish violations of colonial laws; they established school systems to divide colonized peoples with processes of assimilation; and they implemented quota and tax systems to direct colonized peoples' labor towards the raw materials they desired.

How does all this relate to sex and gender? To answer this question, we first need to define these concepts. Sex refers to the biological category that someone is assigned at birth, typically "male" or "female," based on their anatomy. In contrast, gender refers to a society's ideas about peoples' behavior based on their presumed sex. Sex is a universal category, meaning that societies all over the world divide their members into groups they label as "male" and "female" based on their anatomy. Gender is a contextual category. What it means to "act"

like a "man" or a "woman," and the associations people attach to the categories of "men" and "women," change from culture to culture. Different societies place different expectations on men and women. For example, in Western Europe in the 16th century, agriculture was considered to be "men's work" while, among most indigenous peoples of West Africa in this same period, agriculture was perceived as "women's work." It is important to note that peoples have always existed who confounded these sex and gender binaries. And yet, societies throughout history have rarely if ever been structured around the experiences of intersex or non-binary people in a formal way.

Crucially, not all people identify with the gender their society associates with their sex. A person assigned "male" might identify more with their society's ideas about femininity, while a person assigned "female" might identify more with their society's ideas about masculinity. In this context, people make both conscious and unconscious decisions about when to adhere to their society's gender expectations and when to reject them, an act we call "performing gender." For example, a woman who aspires to serve in the army, but lives in a society that genders military service as masculine, might perform masculinity in the military to be accepted in that context.

When Europeans embarked on their widespread colonization of Africa in the late-19th century, they encountered what historians refer to as a "gender frontier." This occurs when two different cultural systems of gender come into contact with one another. In Western Europe, politics, commerce, agriculture, and manual labor performed outside of the home were gendered masculine and, therefore, viewed as "men's work." Managing the household and caring for children were gendered feminine and viewed as "women's work." Of course, there were many exceptions to these rules, as upper-class families broke them to maintain their power and lower-class families found themselves unable to meet their expectations. For example, due to European traditions of hereditary nobility, elite women were occasionally permitted to serve as monarchs, even though political governance was coded as masculine behavior. At the same time, poorer and working-class peoples lacked the means to meet their society's ideas about gender. As a result, poorer women often engaged in manual and agricultural labor outside of their homes to provide for their families. In other words, gender expectations were more of an ideal than a reality.

Madame Nwanyeruwa of Nigeria

In precolonial African societies, ideas about gender were very different than they were in Western Europe. To put it simply, more aspects of society were gendered feminine. Commerce and agriculture—and even politics and military service in certain instances—were seen as being appropriate work for women. Across the continent, women did the majority of agricultural labor. They also managed business and trade. In contrast to Western Europe, the marketplace was gendered as a feminine space and was run by women. Women such as Chief Alimo-

Pelewura and Madame Nwanyeruwa from what is today Nigeria, for example, were not just prominent merchants but political authorities who controlled local commerce in the marketplace. Pelewura held the official title of Ìyál'ọ̀jà, a Yoruba word that translates to "Mother of the Market."
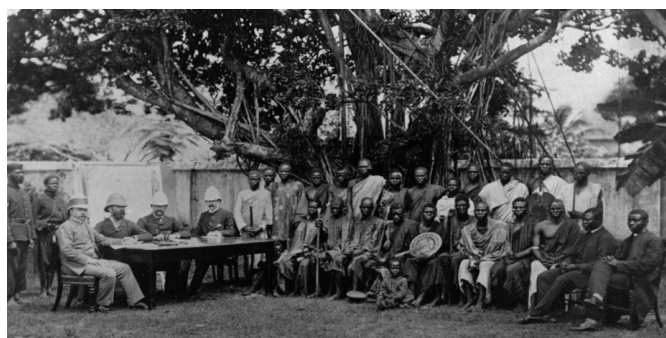

Photograph of the Mino from Dahomey in Paris in 1891

Women in many parts of Africa were also more involved in politics and the military than their counterparts in Europe. Queen Mothers of large kingdoms, for example the Asante-hemaa of Asante, advised the king on questions of domestic governance and foreign relations. Some societies even encouraged women to serve in the military. Women such as Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba in what is today Angola, and Taytu Betul, of what is today Ethiopia, led soldiers in battle against foreign aggressors like the Portuguese and Italians. Perhaps the most well-known example of African women in military service comes from the Kingdom of Dahomey in what is today the West African nation of Benin. The *mino* or *ahosi* were all-women regiments whose name roughly translates to "our mothers" or "wives of the king." One of these regiments, the Agojie, was recently depicted in the 2022 film *The Woman King.*

When European colonists arrived in Africa, they not only brought their own ideas of gender with them, but they embraced and rejected African ideas of gender as suited their purposes. Viewing politics, commerce, industry, and education as "men's work," they were humiliated by the thought of engaging with women as equals and so retained their own prerogative to deal only with men. They refused to negotiate with women in matters of trade or the signing of treaties and largely excluded them from the industrial mission

Igbo men delivering calabashes of palm oil to the European factor in the "Oil Rivers" region of southeastern Nigeria, c. 1900.

schools they created. Desiring to have African leaders play an intermediary role in colonial administration—a policy the British called "indirect rule"—they elevated men with lower status over women with more authority. In all places where versions of "indirect rule" were implemented, colonizers selected men to be what they referred to as their "warrant chiefs." This was true even in situations where certain women had higher status in society based on their previous political roles. These decisions comforted European colonizers while also serving the imperatives of the colonial project by dividing Africans along family lines.

British Colonial officers meeting with male African chiefs from the interior of Lagos, Nigeria, early 1900s
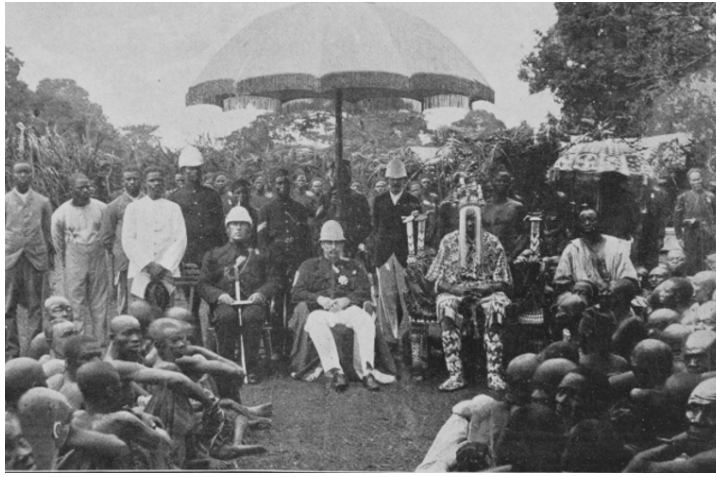
The British governor of Lagos and the King of Ejayboo, 1899

Meanwhile, at the factories and trading depots colonizers established on the coasts to extract raw materials, they employed men and negotiated almost exclusively with male merchants, upending local social and political norms. At the same time, European colonizers understood that they needed women's labor in the fields to plant, harvest, and prepare these products for export. And so, whereas farming was viewed as improper work for women in Europe, and interpreted as evidence of their oppression, Europeans did not think of African women as being "women" in the context of the plantations they created in their African colonies. In this case—conveniently for their own goals—they adhered to precolonial African gender norms and allowed women to form the majority of the agricultural workforce. Similar to the working conditions of enslaved peoples in the American South, African women were forced to work all day in groups on white-owned plantations. They harvested a variety of cash crops like cotton, tea, peanuts, and palm oil from Mozambique and Kenya to Senegal and Ghana. Hoping to maximize their number of field laborers, colonizers also assigned African men to agricultural work. This had the added effect of feminizing them, forcing them to perform what they perceived to be "women's work."

African women with her child picking coffee on a white settler's estate on the Central Highlands of Kenya Colony, 1936.

Women harvesting pyrethrum in the town of Loldiani, Kenya Colony

Colonialism and Postwar Resistance

Although Africans had long resisted attempts by Europeans to exploit their societies, the era of World War II became a major turning point in African resistance to colonialism. There are a number of reasons for this. First, millions of Africans participated in World War II as combatants and non-combatants. Their wartime experiences gave them new perspectives on their oppression. Seeing widespread death in Europe dispelled the ideas that colonizers had long asserted about European superiority; receiving wartime wages, rations, and amenities, as well as experiencing life in European societies that were not organized around racial oppression, accustomed them to expect more from their colonial powers after the war ended; and finally, acquiring military training and equipment prepared them to better resist colonialism after they were demobilized. In this context, postwar Africans pushed European colonial powers to grant freedom to their colonies by waging both non-violent protests and violent wars for independence across the continent.

World War II soldiers marching from the Congo to Ethiopia to assist in the Allied liberation of Ethiopia from Italian occupation, 1941.

Second, Africans fueled their claims for independence after the war by calling out the hypocrisy of the Allied nations that retained colonies all over the world. World War II was defined by the imperial expansion of the Axis powers—namely Germany, Italy, and Japan—across Europe and Asia. To distinguish themselves from these fascist aggressors, the Allied powers issued a series of new proclamations reaffirming their supposed commitments to the principle of "self-determination": the right of all peoples to determine their own government. Even though these powers included states that had colonies in Africa, like Great Britain, France, and Belgium, they did not intend for these proclamations to apply to their own colonial possessions. This fact did not stop Africans from pointing to their language after the war to emphasize the hypocrisy of colonial states and strengthen their demands for independence. At the same time, fighting in the European theater of the war had left the colonial metropoles ravaged and indebted. When they proposed a plan for their own economic development, known as the Marshall Plan, Africans once again seized an opportunity to take colonizers at their word. Citing their service to the Allies during the war, they demanded that planned postwar economic development be extended to Africa as well as Europe.

European colonial powers found themselves in new circumstances after World War II. The United States and the Soviet Union had emerged from the war as the world's dominant economic and military superpowers. During an event known as the Suez Crisis of 1956, the US and USSR made it clear to the historical powers of Western Europe that they disapproved of the old model of colonialism and would not support their attempts to hold on to their colonial possessions in Africa or elsewhere. Meanwhile, colonial states could not afford and did not want to pay for the economic development demanded by colonized peoples. They found themselves faced with the prospect of violent independence struggles that would cost them money, lives, and international reputation to suppress, and they were pressured by a new generation of African leaders, educated mostly in the West, who utilized new technologies like television and radio to mobilize political parties across ethnic lines. Weighing these less-than-ideal options, most colonial powers opted to acquiesce to African calls for independence and push the burdens of economic development off onto this first generation of African leaders. Believing that a large enough group of Africans had been assimilated to Western consumerism, and that the most profitable economic networks that tethered Europe to Africa had already been established, colonizers calculated that they would be able to continue exploiting their former colonies in a post-colonial world.
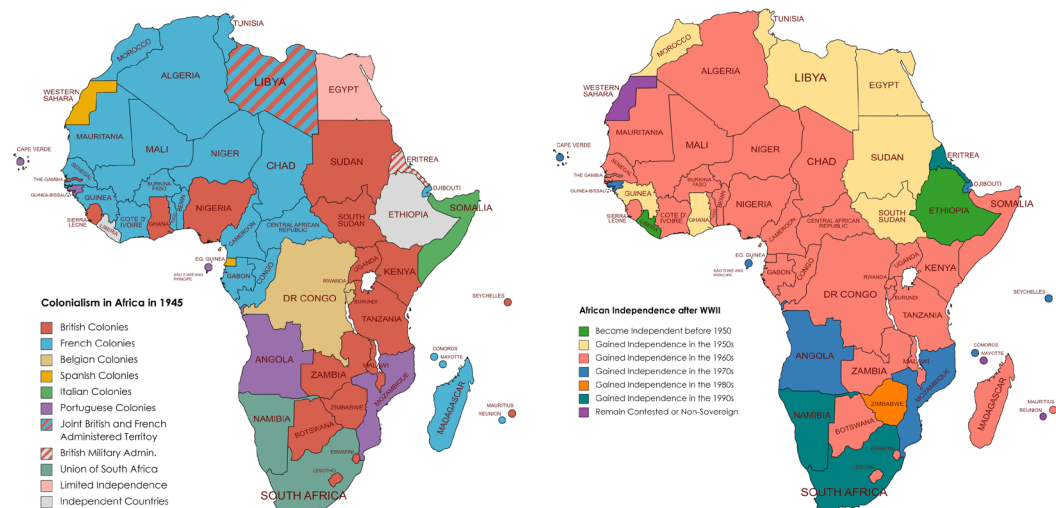
Colonial map of Africa in 1945 (left); Map tracing independence in Africa after World War II (right). Note that modern national borders are shown and not historical borders.

As a result of this calculation, the vast majority of European territories in Africa decolonized after World War II *without* violent struggles for independence. Actual wars for independence were the exception, not the rule. To understand why violent resistance broke out in some places and not others, we need to understand a concept called "settler colonialism." In the non-settler form of colonialism, which is sometimes called extractavist or administrative colonialism, the colonizing country sends a handful of people to the colony to facilitate the harvesting and extraction of raw materials for their nation's own economic development. These people are almost entirely male bureaucrats, functionaries, and merchants. By contrast, in settler colonialism, the colonizing state encourages the emigration of settlers who intend to make the colony into their new, permanent home. These settlers include entire families of men, women, and children. They claim ownership over the most fertile agricultural land and construct a legal system that marginalizes the colony's native peoples, turning them into wage laborers and subjects rather than citizens.

Photo of a woman harvesting tea at the Tole Tea Estate in Cameroon, 1959

Settler colonies were important to European empires for a variety of reasons. Like administrative colonies, they allowed colonizing nations to profit through claiming strategic regions, extracting raw materials, and creating overseas markets where they could sell goods they manufactured. European nations competed with one another for these claims. In addition to these advantages, settler colonies allowed colonial states to release pressure from their societies back home. They gave colonizing powers a place where they could dispose of the most troublesome residents of their countries, including the poor, restless, and unemployed. People who had little prospect of success at home, who were prone to become a burden or threat to the state, could be shipped off to settler colonies. Once there, they could serve the economic needs of the colonial power while, at the same time, serving themselves. Settler colonies gave European migrants both opportunity and mobility. Access to "free" African land and labor allowed settlers to raise their social station and achieve wealth and status that were out of reach back home in Western Europe.

In the decades after World War II, colonial powers could easily wash their hands of their extractavist or administrative colonies. They could give up formal governing authority over these colonies, and transition them to independence, simply by recalling the colonial governor and signing authority over to indigenous leaders. In settler


Women harvesting tea in Limum, Kenya Colony, 1963

colonies, by contrast, European states could not decolonize without abandoning the white settlers they had sponsored to move to the society and call it home.

White settlers identified culturally with the colonizing country and their privileges were based on access to colonial markets and protection by the colonizing state's military. Settlers feared living under indigenous African governments. They believed that such governments would redistribute their privileges to the broader population, and they worried they would be punished because they had exploited native peoples for so long. In addition, many settler families had powerful political connections in the colonial metropoles of Europe, cities like London, Paris, Brussels, and Lisbon. They used these connections to pressure the colonial state to resist independence in places where it might have otherwise decolonized without violence. In the years after World War II, there were seven major settler colonies in Africa: Algeria, Kenya, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Angola, and Namibia. Violent struggles for independence were waged in all of them. In the remainder of this module, we will look closely at three of these struggles.

Before we dive into these three case studies, it would be helpful to outline the general strategies Africans used in their resistance to settler colonialism. Partly because they had served alongside Europeans in the two World Wars, Africans of the 1950s knew the power of their colonial rulers. They understood that they were up against some of the wealthiest, best equipped militaries in the Western world. As such, they knew they would not win their independence by defeating colonial armies in a direct confrontation. Instead, their primary objective was to demonstrate to colonizers the high cost that they would have to pay if they wanted to keep colonial rule. By using strategies like sabotage, surveillance, guerilla warfare, and protest, rebels would force European colonizers to commit resources to their colonies. They would teach colonial nations that maintaining control over their territories in Africa was possible, but it would cost money, lives, and maybe even their reputations in the eyes of the international community. To demonstrate this cost of rule, Africans brought the fighting to the settlers themselves. They exploited European ideas of race and gender to disguise themselves and infiltrate settler spaces. They then killed settlers' cattle, uprooted their crops, burned their properties, and bombed their neighborhoods. Using strategies like these, they provoked paranoia in the settler community, prompted lockdowns called "States of Emergency," and turned the dream of colonial life into a nightmare for settlers and governments alike.
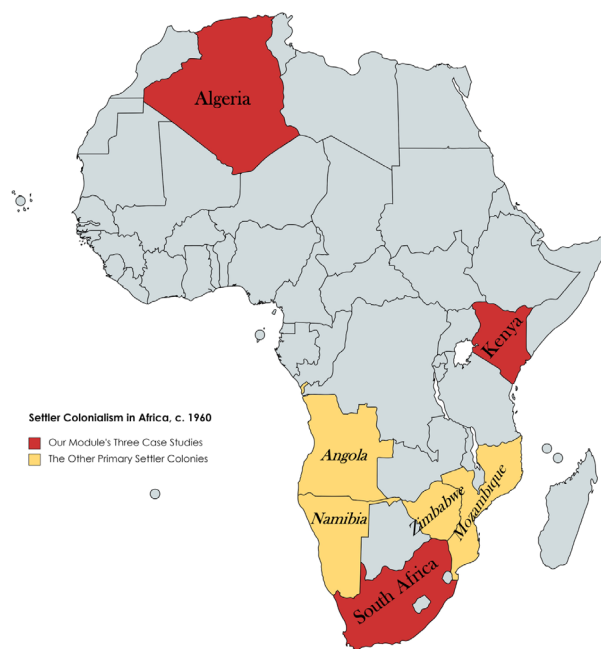
Map of Settler Colonialism in Africa, c. 1960. Note that modern country names are provided for former settler colonies.

In the remainder of this module, we will look at how African women fought settler colonialism in the 1950s and 1960s. We will learn about three case studies that span the continent: Kenya, a British settler colony in East Africa; Algeria, a French settler colony in North Africa; and the Union of South Africa, an independent settler state in Southern Africa. We will focus on the actions of three young women who were raised in these colonies and joined their independence movements after World War II. As we will see, Wambui Otieno, Zohra Drif, and Miriam Makeba used colonial ideas about sex and gender to advance their respective nations' resistance movements. By performing settler stereotypes of African or European femininity, they were able to serve in ways their male counterparts could not. For example, by acting "naive" "sexual," or "harmless," they found ways to spread awareness about the resistance to foreign audiences and plan attacks, smuggle weapons, and gain intelligence by infiltrating enemy spaces undetected. Such "women's work" was carefully designed and crucial to the success of African independence.

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