Abstract

Africa's true postcolonial period ended in the last quarter of the previous century. Since then, Africa has entered on a new chapter of its history, as defined by the manner of its insertion in world affairs. This has implications both for understanding Africa's place in the contemporary world and for the academic disciplines used in studying it.

Introduction

Historians commonly use chronological periods as a way of arranging the data they retrieve from records of the past. They discern the outlines of a given period by identifying a set of conditions that distinguishes a particular era from its predecessor. It is when this set of conditions changes significantly that a given period may be considered to have come to an end, and a new one to have begun in which the fundamental nature of historical change must be defined anew.

Historical periods are thus artefacts, which can be brought into being only in retrospect, but they are not arbitrary. At the moment people are actually making history they can never be sure of the exact nature of the times they live in – this becomes clear only when they see the consequences of their actions, by which time it is too late to go back and do things differently. Grand names for past historical periods are thus the artificial creations of historians, journalists, or others who attribute meaning to events long after they have happened.

In the case of Africa, it is conventional to regard the key periods in its history as precolonial, colonial and postcolonial. Really, this trinity amounts to a suggestion that the entire history of the world’s oldest continent, where people have been living for tens of thousands of
years, is given shape and meaning only by the period of formal colonial rule. Yet in most of Africa colonial rule actually lasted for no more than perhaps three generations. It is therefore a bold proposition indeed to attribute such enormous importance to this period. There is an added risk in using the colonial period not only as the hub around which Africa’s history is considered to turn, but also as the point of reference for specifying the nature of what preceded it by using the term ‘precolonial’. This label derives meaning only from the colonial rule that we know to have been imposed subsequently, and yet it is routinely applied to the great mass of Africa’s history before the late nineteenth century. The description of what happened before the late nineteenth century as ‘precolonial’ verges on teleology, the practice of interpreting past events only in light of what happens subsequently, which is regarded as a poor exercise of the historian’s craft. For, while historians indeed interpret the past in the knowledge of how things eventually transpired, they also try to understand matters as contemporaries did, by attempting to penetrate the thoughts of people who lived in a previous era. By assuming that everything happening before the partition of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 was precolonial, we imply that people alive at earlier periods were somehow aware that they existed in the precursor to the colonial period and that they acted in the consciousness of a future event that they could not actually have known would occur.

If the colonial period appears so central to Africa’s history, it is because it was a point on which both colonial rulers and their nationalist successors could agree. It is easy to understand how colonialists, in an age of social Darwinism, when Europe dominated world affairs, might believe that their assumption of formal control over Africa represented a new phase in the continent’s history. The argument that government by Europeans meant progress, generally described as ‘the civilizing mission’, was the main justification offered for Africa’s colonisation. Less immediately obvious is why African nationalists should have agreed with them on the importance of colonial rule. But this was in fact just one among many items of colonial ideology and practice that was assimilated by African nationalists, who frequently assimilated colonial ideas or prejudices and simply turned them upside down. Thus, the generation of pioneering African nationalists who animated debates on matters of state in the mid-twentieth century attached great significance to the imposition of colonial rule, but in a negative sense, experiencing it as humiliation and oppression.