The difficulty of examining ‘postcolonial Africa’ in relation to ‘colonial Africa’ is the complexity of what lies in between. Decolonization was not simply a moment dividing a neat ‘before’ from a clear ‘after’, but a process. The possibilities and constraints of the ‘after’ were shaped not only by the fact of colonialism, but by the process by which it was challenged, by the responses of the colonial state to those challenges, and by hopes, fears, and traumas unleashed in the course of struggle. Just after independence, historians and political scientists looked back on recent African history as a build-up to independence: everything Africans did became part of the rise of African nationalism and the quest for a state that was truly African. Decades later, intellectuals had become disillusioned, and everything in the colonial past was now looked at as an explanation of why independence was a failure, why either the trauma of colonization or something deep in African culture prevented its people from achieving democratic polities. At the present time, postcolonial theory tends to posit a very general coloniality, located somewhere between 1492 and the 1960s, which gave rise to an equally general postcoloniality. The path between the two is easily reduced to an inevitability, missing the paths not taken, the choices made, the constraints that appeared amidst the openings.¹

Both views subordinate the past to the future and by doing so may misread the future as badly as they misread the past. My goal in this chapter is to look at a crucial period in African history, the decade and a half after World War II in a more dynamic fashion, to look at possibilities that opened up and possibilities that shut down. In the aftermath of war, the two most powerful colonial powers, Britain and France, needed both to expand the economic utility of their African territories and to reinforce the legitimacy of holding colonies to a world in which such claims were becoming increasingly con-
tested. For both economic and political reasons, colonized people could no longer be regarded as passive subjects. If they were to remain in the imperial polity, the basis of their belonging would have to be taken seriously: as active contributors to economic development, as people with legitimate interests in raising their standard of living and levels of education, and as participants in political institutions. The political possibilities that the postwar situation opened up were something that the French had tried to contain within narrow boundaries and the British to dismiss altogether – the colonized population as citizens of an imperial polity. If citizens have obligations to a political unit, they also have rights and they make claims. But – and here my argument differs from nationalist historiography – the claims made in the name of citizenship focused not only on would-be nations but on actual empires.

The citizenship idea was crucial to a lively period of African politics. But citizenship was not the only framework within which Africans mobilized and acted politically. The danger posed by other forms of collective action that seemed to lie outside the realm of politics as Europeans saw it – and which they could condescendingly label as ‘primitive’ or ‘atavistic’ or as demagogic or revolutionary – put colonial authorities in a bind. Hoping to encourage politics inside the familiar channels of parties and legislative elections – and fearing that Africans might not stay there – they had to ensure that making claims within those channels would to a significant extent pay off. The power of such claims threatened French and British governments with having to pay the bill: even if administrations could contain anticolonial movements and local rebellions, they would be faced with demands for social and economic resources in the same language with which France and Britain asserted the legitimacy of imperial rule.

Later, the possibility of an active, claim-making citizenry would threaten African political leaders themselves, who understood very well the force of the political movements they were trying to ride to power. In most newly independent African countries, political elites felt the temptation to shut down the possibilities that had opened in previous years. This view of African history between 1945 and, say, 1965, is a tragic one: of a democratic opening giving way to antidemocratic closures. But it is not a story of inevitability, for neither African culture nor the trauma of colonization prevented Africans, for a time, from acting as citizens. The possibility remains.

The sub-Saharan Africa that became independent since 1957 was indeed an Africa of nation-states, small, economically weak, but with the institutions and the international status of sovereignty. Yet that was not the Africa that most

---

2 I have limited discussion to these instances for reasons of space and because these experiences seriously affected the options of other actors, but the catastrophic decolonization of the Belgian Congo and the late and violent decolonization of Portuguese Africa complicate the picture.