

What They Built, What They Defended

African Civilization and Resistance at the Berlin Conference — and the Pan-African Tradition That Followed (1884–1900)

Track	Contribution
Era	ERA I — Papal Authorization & Transatlantic Foundation (1452–1600)
Lens	Secular & Political
Content Warning	Yes — military violence, genocide (Herero/Nama) described
NC Connection	Yes — FSU / pan-African scholarship; Bakongo genealogical connection
Research Status	Needs citation review
Paired Entry	Entry 5 — The Berlin Conference: The Partition of Africa

The Berlin Conference proceeded on the assumption that Africa was ungoverned or governed in ways that did not constitute recognizable sovereignty. That assumption was false. The Sokoto Caliphate governed 10 million people with a professional judiciary. Ethiopia’s Menelik II would defeat an Italian invasion force at Adwa in 1896. And from the ashes of Berlin came the pan-African intellectual tradition that would eventually win independence for a continent.

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WHAT THE CONFERENCE IGNORED

Sovereign states the delegates knew existed and partitioned anyway

The civilizations the Berlin Conference partitioned were not unknown to European delegates. The Sokoto Caliphate in what is now northern Nigeria governed an estimated 10 million people with a professional judiciary operating on Islamic law, a system of provincial emirs, and extensive trans-Saharan trade networks — a state more sophisticated than many European principalities of the same era. The Kingdom of Dahomey maintained a standing army including the Agojie, an elite corps of female soldiers, and had conducted diplomatic and commercial relations with European trading companies for two centuries. The Zulu Kingdom had defeated a British force at Isandlwana in January 1879 — just five years before the Conference — the worst defeat of the British Army by an African force in the colonial period.

The Ashanti Empire had successfully resisted four British military campaigns before being formally annexed in 1902. The Ethiopian Empire under Menelik II was the only African state to force European recognition of its sovereignty through military victory. Ethiopia’s independence throughout the colonial period — with the single exception of Mussolini’s 1935–1941 occupation — stands as the definitive proof that African military resistance to colonialism was not inevitably futile.

DOCUMENTED RESISTANCE — SELECTED CASES

Adwa row highlighted — first decisive post-Conference African military victory

Battle of Adwa 1896	Ethiopia	Emperor Menelik II defeated Italian invasion force of 17,500 with Ethiopian army of 100,000. First decisive African military defeat of a European colonial army post-Berlin. Ethiopian independence maintained throughout colonial period.
Herero & Nama 1904–1908	German South West Africa	Rose against German colonial land seizure. German response: Vernichtungsbefehl (Extermination Order). Approximately 65,000–80,000 Herero killed. First genocide of the 20th century. Germany formally acknowledged it in 2021.
Maji Maji Rebellion 1905–1907	German East Africa (Tanzania)	More than 20 distinct ethnic groups united against German colonial rule. Suppressed by military force and engineered famine. Est. 250,000–300,000 killed, majority from famine.
Chimurenga 1896–1897	Zimbabwe	Shona and Ndebele peoples rose against British South Africa Company rule. Spirit medium Nehanda Charwe Nyakasikana executed 1898 — became founding figure of Zimbabwean national consciousness. Her name invoked by liberation fighters 80 years later.
Yaa Asantewaa War, 1900	Gold Coast (Ghana)	Ashanti queen mother Yaa Asantewaa led the final Ashanti resistance when British Governor demanded the Golden Stool — sacred symbol of Ashanti sovereignty. Her resistance delayed British annexation and became a founding symbol of Ghanaian national identity.

“The independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of Africa.” — Kwame Nkrumah, March 6, 1957

THE PAN-AFRICAN RESPONSE — FROM BERLIN TO INDEPENDENCE

1900 to 2021: the unbroken thread from Berlin to reparations

1900	First Pan-African Conference, London	Organized by Henry Sylvester Williams. Attended by W.E.B. Du Bois. Direct response to Berlin Conference logic applied globally.
1919–1945	Pan-African Congresses (I–V)	Du Bois convenes five congresses building intellectual and political infrastructure of African independence.
1957	Ghana Independence	Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana first sub-Saharan African country to achieve independence. "The independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of Africa."
1958	Things Fall Apart published	Chinua Achebe's novel gives the colonial period its definitive literary documentation from the African perspective. Now one of the most widely read African novels in the world.
1972	How Europe Underdeveloped Africa	Walter Rodney provides foundational economic analysis proving African underdevelopment is produced, not natural.
2004	Nobel Peace Prize — Maathai	Wangari Maathai receives Nobel Prize for Green Belt Movement connecting environmental restoration to colonial land dispossession.
2021	AfCFTA launched	African Continental Free Trade Area — largest free trade zone by number of countries — structural attempt to rebuild intra-African trade networks the partition disrupted.
2021	Herero/Nama reparations	Germany formally acknowledges Herero and Nama genocide and agrees to reparations — first formal colonial reparations agreement in history.

The Berlin Conference catalyzed the first Pan-African movement. Every entry in this table is a direct consequence of the resistance tradition that the Conference's logic provoked. The Herero/Nama reparations agreement of 2021 — the first formal colonial reparations agreement in history — is cited by advocates for Belgian, British, French, Italian, and Portuguese reparations. The anti-colonial moment is not over. It is entering a new phase.

NC LOCAL LENS · CUMBERLAND COUNTY / FAYETTEVILLE

FAYETTEVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY · THE PAN-AFRICAN TRADITION IN CUMBERLAND COUNTY

Fayetteville State University, the HBCU in Cumberland County founded in 1867 to educate the formerly enslaved, engages directly with the pan-African intellectual tradition documented in this entry. The scholars who documented the Berlin Conference's destructive effects — Walter Rodney, Kwame Nkrumah, Chinua Achebe — are part of the African American studies curriculum that FSU and HBCUs across the country teach. The Bakongo-descended African American community in Cumberland County are the physical descendants of people whose sovereign kingdom — the Kingdom of Kongo — was assigned to Portuguese colonial administration at the Berlin Conference. The resistance tradition documented in this entry is their ancestors' tradition.

CITATIONS · CHICAGO STYLE

1

Marcus, Harold G. A History of Ethiopia. Updated ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

2

Rodney, Walter. How Europe Underdeveloped Africa. Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1972. Reprint, Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1981.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

3

Du Bois, W.E.B. "To the Nations of the World." Address to the First Pan-African Conference, London, 1900. In W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader, edited by David Levering Lewis. New York: Henry Holt, 1995.

Primary Source

4

Achebe, Chinua. Things Fall Apart. London: Heinemann, 1958.

Reputable Secondary

5

Elkins, Caroline. Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire. New York: Knopf, 2022.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

6

Maathai, Wangari. The Challenge for Africa. New York: Pantheon Books, 2009.

Reputable Secondary

PAIRED PERSECUTION ENTRY

5

The Berlin Conference: The Partition of Africa and the Legal Framework for a Century of Extraction (1884–1885)