

# After the Scramble: State Formation in Africa

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## Abstract

States are the fundamental building block of the contemporary international system. Nonetheless, despite substantial research on building state capacity, relatively little social-scientific research examines how and why particular states were formed in the Global South. We focus on Africa, where the conventional wisdom is that the contemporary states are almost entirely a product of choices made in European boardrooms in the late nineteenth century by statesmen with scant knowledge of local conditions. We show instead that European-led state formation was a dynamic process that continued throughout the colonial epoch, even after World War II. The average size of a colonial state grew steadily for decades even after most of the continent was claimed by Europeans, in contrast to shrinking average state size elsewhere in the world. The reason is the continual process of merging smaller African colonial states into larger ones, which satisfied the colonizers' goal to achieve benefits of scale. But the merger process was not unlimited, as precolonial states and white settlers constricted the set of available options. Although many early, smaller colonial states founded upon precolonial states were merged into larger states, white settlers usually failed in their quest to absorb larger African populations. These local influences are vital for understanding the size and shape of states in Africa today.

**Keywords:** Africa, colonialism, geography, precolonial states, size of nations, state formation

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