Robert W. Strayer

Ways of the World: A Brief Global History with Sources
Second Edition

Chapter 18
Colonial Encounters in Asia and Africa, 1750–1950
I. Industry and Empire

A. Colonies as suppliers of raw materials and food: As the British and other European economies began to specialize in industrial production, they had an increased demand for specific raw materials from the tropical world such as metals, oils, and cotton or rubber. Colonies would serve as captive and cheap sources of these commodities.

B. Colonies as markets: Conversely, colonies could be captive markets for European exports such as British cotton textiles. Indeed, when the British began importing mass-produced cotton textiles to India, they reversed a centuries-long trade imbalance: A previously poor Europe had been desirous of Asian goods with little to offer in return.

C. Colonies as investments: As Western industrialization in the nineteenth century was closely tied to a new and expanding phase of capitalism, colonies naturally served as sources for investment.

D. Nationalism and imperial expansion: With the rise of nationalism in Europe, average citizens suddenly felt they had a stake in imperial expansion. Viewing the struggles of European empires in Africa and Asia as a great game, they felt pride in acquiring more territories and hated seeing real estate go to a rival empire.
E. The tools of empire
F. Technological superiority as racial superiority
G. Social Darwinism

I. Industry and Empire

E. The tools of empire: Technological advances made new imperial expansions possible. Faster steamships, better guns, and global communication networks gave Europeans a marked tactical advantage over pre-industrial societies. Medical developments, such as using quinine to prevent and treat malaria, allowed the fragile European body to enter and (hopefully) survive in the tropics.

F. Technological superiority as racial superiority: For many European observers, the idea that technological superiority indicated some sort of larger racial superiority was axiomatic. A variety of pseudo-scientific theories were developed to explain the power differential between the industrial West and the pre-industrial East and South.

G. Social Darwinism: Racist justifications of empire hijacked and bastardized the work of Charles Darwin, arguing that competition among white nations and people of color was a natural occurrence and the victors should not feel guilty.
II. A Second Wave of European Conquests

A. New European players in Asia and Africa: The first wave of European colonialism saw the Iberian expansion in the Americas, followed by English, French, and Dutch colonization in the region. In the second wave, Germany, Belgium, Italy, the United States, and Japan joined the competition to annex lands in Asia, Africa, and Oceania.

B. European military superiority: Central to any imperial expansion is military power. Thanks to industrialization, Europeans enjoyed a major technological advantage with weapons such as the Maxim gun, an early machine gun used against lightly armed Africans and Asians.

C. Slow imperial creep in India and Indonesia: In South Asia and the islands of Southeast Asia, the older East India engaged in a slow and unplanned but steady expansion of territory that culminated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Millions of Asians in vast stretches of real estate were brought under the control of the British Raj and the Dutch East Indies.

D. The Scramble for Africa and rapid expansion elsewhere: In Africa and certain Asian colonies, the European invasion and conquest was unexpected, sudden, and devastating. Unable to understand European motives and techniques, various kingdoms were completely overwhelmed by the imperial invaders. Yet in other places, such as in the French conquest of Samori Toure’s empire in West Africa, it took many years of difficult fighting to subdue a state.
II. A Second Wave of European Conquests

E. Settler colonialism and mass death in the Pacific: In Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii, isolated populations were invaded by white settlers and their diseases. Within a few generations, the indigenous population became impoverished and displaced minorities in their own lands.

F. American and Russian expansion: The United States of America and the Russian Empire both engaged in expansion across vast stretches of continental land, displacing indigenous Native Americans and Central Asians or Siberians, respectively. The United States would also expand into the Caribbean and Pacific Ocean, seizing Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines as part of the Spanish-American War.

G. Japanese colonization in Taiwan and Korea: In East Asia, a newly industrialized Japan flexed its muscle by annexing the island of Taiwan and the Korean peninsula and then engaged in a style of colonialism similar to the European examples.

H. Defiant Ethiopia and diplomatic Siam: The two leading exceptions to the wave of imperialism were the East African nation of Ethiopia, which defeated Italy at the 1896 Battle of Adowa and Siam (presently Thailand), which used diplomacy and accommodation to avoid imperial annexation.
III. Under European Rule

A. Cooperation and Rebellion

1. Soldiers, administrators, and local rulers: With relatively few Europeans in the tropical colonies, the empires had to rely on various groups of collaborators. Soldiers, often recruited from groups deemed to be “martial races,” were essential for conquests, pacification, and putting down revolts. The colonial bureaucracy increasingly used “native” clerks in its lower administration. Various local rulers from Indian rajas to African chiefs served as a key source of exercising indirect power over colonial societies. Each of these collaborating groups expected some form of reward for their service and loyalty to the conquerors.

2. A small Western-educated elite: An essential, but often frustrated segment of society, was the small percentage who attained a Western education. While they were much needed to run the colony, the colonizers often viewed them with suspicion and disdain and the colonized might view them as having thrown their lot in with the conquerors.

3. Indian Rebellion, 1857–1858: Colonial rule was characterized by numerous revolts, both small and large. One of the most important was the Indian Rebellion of 1857 when large numbers of Sepoys (Indian troops fighting for the Raj) mutinied. While the spark that set off the conflagration was the use of bullets greased with cow and pig fat (offensive to both Hindus and Muslims), there were a wide variety of grievances that motivated the rebels. The revolt was brutally crushed within a year, but bitter memories remained, and the British hardened racial boundaries between colonizer and colonized.
III. Under European Rule

B. Colonial Empires with a Difference

1. Racial boundaries: Unlike earlier forms of colonialism, the nineteenth and twentieth century used “scientific racism” to justify the firm racial barriers between colonizer and colonized. There were substantially fewer interracial unions in this era than in the Iberian colonial world.

2. Settler colonialism in South Africa: In South Africa and other settler colonies where there were larger populations of white settlers, more elaborate systems of racial exclusion were developed to institutionalize racial separation and white access to cheap native labor in mines and farms. In South Africa, this eventually evolved into the system known as Apartheid.

3. Impacts on daily life: Unlike previous forms of colonialism, there was a much more profound impact on the daily life of the colonized subjects. More efficient means of tax collecting, transportation, and communication, as well as more invasive changes to landowning, economic systems, administration, and public health, meant that the foreign presence was felt much stronger than in earlier forms of empire.
III. Under European Rule

B. Colonial Empires with a Difference

4. “Traditional India” and “tribal Africa”: In an effort to understand and to control their colonized peoples, the colonial empires developed systems and sciences such as anthropology to study, organize, and control colonial societies. This process served to create an idealized version of the society in question and to condemn other variations. In India, the result was the British creation and support for an understanding of India as a classical and unchanging society structured by Brahminism and the caste system. Forms of modernity were scorned as inauthentic. In Africa, the colonial system looked for and supported “chiefs” as the ideal tribal rulers. This condescending strategy allowed them to look down upon much of Africa as barbaric and politically simple and to pursue divide-and-rule tactics, which pitted tribe against tribe.

5. Gendering the empires: This era saw a great importance placed upon gender. White men were to be virile and hyper-masculine, while colonized men were typically effeminized unless they fit into a useful category of “martial race.” White women were placed on an elite pedestal and had to be protected from the assumed sexual threat of “native” men.

6. Political contradictions and hypocrisies: As all the European powers, but especially France and Britain, were becoming increasingly democratic at home they ruled the colonies as dictatorships. The colonizers were also loathe to modernize and thus potentially destabilize the societies they governed; hence, they preferred what they understand as tribal, traditional, and rural communities. The result was a sharp contrast between governmental practice and ideology at home and in the colonies.
IV. Ways of Working: Comparing Colonial Economies

A. Economies of Coercion: Forced Labor and the Power of the State

1. Unpaid required labor on public works: The colonial states regularly required the colonized population to supply unpaid labor to road- and rail-building projects. This labor tax was greatly resented and conditions were often cruel.

2. King Leopold II’s Congo Free State: Also known as the Belgian Congo, this was the worst case of forced labor and cost millions of African lives. State-backed private companies used a variety of abusive tactics, including mutilation, to force the local population to collect ivory and rubber. Eventually the abuses became public, and the Belgian government took control of the colony in 1908.

3. Cultivation system in the Dutch East Indies: In the islands of Southeast Asia such as Java and Sumatra, the Netherlands forced peasants to devote 20 percent of their land to cash crops such as coffee and sugar and to sell them at a low fixed price to government contractors. The Dutch made huge profits by selling these crops on the global market for much higher prices. The system indebted many peasants to moneylenders and resulted in a series of famines in what was a very productive land.

4. Resistance to cotton cultivation in East Africa: In German East Africa and Portuguese Mozambique, the colonial state tried to force cotton cultivation. However, there was widespread resistance and
the projects never succeeded despite the heavy use of force.
IV. Ways of Working: Comparing Colonial Economies

B. Economies of Cash-Crop Agriculture: The Pull of the Market

1. Encouragement of existing cash cropping: In many colonies, there were centuries-old systems of cash cropping that the colonial state sought to encourage with expanding markets, public works, and labor migration.

2. Rice in the Irrawaddy and Mekong deltas: In British Burma, the lower Irrawaddy became a major rice exporter thanks to public works and immigration from India and upper Burma. Burma saw several decades of a rising standard of living. In French Vietnam, the expansion of rice fields in the Mekong Delta had a negative impact on various fish and shellfish and hurt the local diet.

3. Cacao in the Gold Coast: In West Africa, cacao farmers took the initiative and expanded production to meet new market demands. However, the labor shortage resulted in immigration from the north, which caused ethnic conflicts.
IV. Ways of Working: Comparing Colonial Economies

C. Economies of Wage Labor: Migration for Work

1. Internal migrations to plantations, mines, and cities: The establishment of European-run enterprises in the colonies created large movements of laborers in search of employment. Perhaps after losing their land or facing heavy taxes or loans, workers would leave their homes for work in mines, plantations, or construction sites in the cities. Others might try to earn a living as servants or clerks. Life for the lower rungs of colonial society in the mines, plantations, and cities was difficult with low wages and often brutal managers.

2. International migrations of Indians, Chinese, Japanese, and others: Filling the labor void after the end of slavery, some 29 million Indians left their homeland to work as plantation laborers and miners in British colonies from East Africa to Jamaica. A smaller wave of South Asians made a living as merchants, especially in British East Africa. In addition to movement within a colony or within a specific colonial empire, large numbers of Asians moved into the colonial world by crossing international boundaries. Some 19 million Chinese sought a new life in Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean Basin, and the Pacific region. Malaysian rubber plantations and tin mines were staffed primarily with Chinese and some Indian workers.

3. “Native” labor in settler colonies: In colonies with significant white settler communities such as Algeria, South Africa, and the Kenyan highlands, the local population was frequently pushed off the land as the colonial state gave vast tracts of real estate to the Europeans. Many of these “natives” were directed toward reservation-style settlements where they could seek out work on European farms or mines. Others tried to stay on their land, but were viewed as squatters and not given full protection of the law.
IV. Ways of Working: Comparing Colonial Economies

D. Women and the Colonial Economy: Examples from Africa

1. Men grew cash crops while women grew food
2. Labor migrations separated husbands and wives
3. Women became heads of households

While there was much variation in the colonial economies of Africa, some patterns can be discerned. Frequently men would turn to growing more prestigious cash crops for the market, leaving women to handle subsistence food production.

Labor migrations to mines, cities, or farms often separated families for lengthy periods.

Without the male head of the household, many women became the head of the household, giving them new-found agency and some independence.
IV. Ways of Working: Comparing Colonial Economies

E. Assessing Colonial Development

1. Jump-start or exploitation?: There remains much debate on the role of colonialism in the world’s economic development. Proponents and apologists argue that it set key processes in motion while critics point to exploitation and uneven development. Despite the debates, three points remain clear.

2. Global integration: For better or worse, colonialism did speed up global economic integration.

3. Some elements of modernization: Various degrees of modernity did trickle into the colonial world.

4. No colonial breakthrough to modern industrial economy: No colony developed a complete industrial transformation as Japan did.
V. Believing and Belonging: Identity and Cultural Change in the Colonial Era

A. Education

1. The door to opportunities: Western education provided a variety of new opportunities and privileges for those that were lucky enough to receive schooling. Wealth, employment, and a higher status came with literacy in the colonizers’ language.

2. Adopting European culture: Many educated elite adopted various aspects of European culture, including dress, speech, marriage ceremonies, and housing.

3. Modernity?: Some saw collaboration with the European conquerors as a path toward modernity for their societies and a way to eliminate injustices and abuses enshrined as traditional.

4. Colonial glass ceiling: Unfortunately, many willing colonial collaborators found that Europeans would not treat them as equals. Racism and a condescending view of “native” culture as primitive and backwards ensured that they were never equal partners.
V. Believing and Belonging: Identity and Cultural Change in the Colonial Era

B. Religion


2. Religious conflicts over gender and sexuality: Conversion to Christianity was not without its cultural conflicts. Debates over gender roles, sexual practice, and traditions such as female “circumcision” produced serious disputes. Missionaries were concerned about Christians who practiced pagan and tribal traditions and saw them as “backsliders.”

3. Colonial definition of Hinduism: In India, the British were overwhelmed by the varieties of religious practice and sought to establish a clear and codified definition of the local faiths as a single religion. The scholars and missionaries who studied South Asian religion promoted the idea of an orthodox form of Hinduism. Some Indians adopted this definition of theory and ritual as a way of reforming their faith.

4. Colonial identification with Islam: In India, the British also did much to inadvertently forge a sense of Muslim unity. By establishing two laws of inheritance, one for Hindus and one for Muslims, the colonial state put the diverse Muslim community into a situation of self-identifying as Muslim and NOT Hindu. Furthermore, as early nationalists began to speak of India as a Hindu nation, some Muslims felt defensive about their minority status. This set in motion a process that would grow throughout the twentieth century.
V. Believing and Belonging: Identity and Cultural Change in the Colonial Era

C. “Race” and “Tribe”

1. Rise of an African identity
2. Pan-Africanism
3. Colonial creation of “tribes”

1. Rise of an African identity: Prior to the Scramble for Africa, few people saw themselves as Africans. Rather, they were part of a village, a kinship group, a language group, a city, a kingdom, or an empire. Yet the shared experience of European colonialism and racism led some to see themselves as part of a larger continental community. This led some scholars to argue for the existence of African traditions and the influence of Africa on the rest of the world.

2. Pan-Africanism: With colonial systems of transportation, Africans and those of African descent in the Americas came into contact with each other. Some such as W. E. B. Dubois and Marcus Garvey argued for a pan-African identity that transcended the white boundaries of colony and nation-state.

3. Colonial creation of “tribes”: As the Europeans conquered the continent, they found linguistic and material similarities between various communities, leading them to define and group them as tribes. While often a European creation, many African communities adopted the tribal identity as their own and used it as a communal identity.
V. Reflections: Who Makes History?

A. Colonizers’ efforts to shape the colony: Those who argue that the winners make history might point to the colonizers who conquered and tried to rebuild colonial societies according to their vision.

B. Colonized people’s agency: Yet the colonized people interacted with what the colonizers brought and often made it their own, seen in the Africanization of Christianity.

C. “History from below”: By examining colonial history from the perspective of the colonized, in addition to the colonizer, we can get a fuller and more complete understanding of the colonial encounter.