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**IMPACT OF THE BERLIN CONFERENCE (1884 – 1885) ON EAC DEVELOPMENT:
140 YEARS AFTER THE DIVIDE OF AFRICA**

Hon. Dr. Rwigema Pierre Celestin, PhD, PGDE

*Former Member of East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), (2012-2022)
PhD & Masters Research Panelist – JKUAT, ULK*

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ABSTRACT

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, which led to the partitioning of Africa among European powers, left a profound and lasting impact on the East African Community (EAC) region, consisting of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda. This paper examines the legacy of the Berlin Conference and its influence on the EAC, focusing on the challenges and problems arising from the artificial borders, colonial governance structures, and economic exploitation. Prior to the conference, Africa was home to rich indigenous cultures, powerful kingdoms, and intricate political systems, which were disregarded by European powers in their quest for territorial dominance and resource control. The division of Africa, often along arbitrary lines, disrupted longstanding social, cultural, and political networks, leaving behind a fragmented continent. The key provisions of the Berlin Conference, such as the "effective occupation" clause, formalized the domination of African territories by European nations, with no regard for African sovereignty. These decisions exacerbated ethnic and political tensions, often forcing disparate groups to coexist within newly drawn borders, leading to conflicts and instability that persist to this day. The interests of the colonial powers, particularly Britain, Belgium, Germany, and France, were primarily driven by economic exploitation and the desire for strategic advantages in the race for global power. This led to the extraction of Africa's natural resources and the establishment of exploitative economic systems that have shaped the region's underdevelopment. The lasting effects of these colonial policies are still felt today in the EAC, where regional integration remains difficult due to the historical baggage of arbitrary borders, ethnic tensions, and economic disparities. Despite efforts to foster cooperation and regional integration through the EAC, challenges such as cross-border conflicts, power struggles, and the legacy of colonial rule continue to impede progress. This paper explores how these historical divisions have influenced political governance, economic policies, and social relations within the EAC region. It also examines current efforts to address these issues, including regional integration initiatives, conflict resolution mechanisms, and socio-economic development programs. The conclusion offers recommendations for overcoming the challenges posed by the Berlin Conference's legacy, focusing on the importance of promoting unity, good governance, and sustainable development within the EAC. These efforts are crucial for the region's stability and prosperity as it works to heal the wounds of its colonial past and build a more integrated and equitable future.

Keywords: *Berlin Conference, East African Community (EAC), Colonial Legacy, African Partition, Ethnic Tensions, Regional Integration, Economic Exploitation*

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INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885

The Berlin Conference, held between November 15, 1884, and February 26, 1885, was convened to address the escalating competition among European powers over African territories. Initiated by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the conference aimed to establish guidelines for the colonization and trade in Africa, thereby preventing conflict among European nations (Al Jazeera, 2025). Representatives from fourteen countries, including Germany, France, Great Britain, Portugal, and Belgium, attended the conference. Notably, no African representatives were present during these deliberations (Al Jazeera, 2025). The conference culminated in the General Act of the Berlin Conference, which formalized the principles of effective occupation and free trade in specific regions, particularly the Congo Basin (Britannica, 2025).

The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, also known as the “Congo Conference,” was a pivotal event in the history of African colonization. Convened by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the conference aimed to regulate European colonial ambitions in Africa to avoid conflict among the European powers. Held in Berlin, Germany, from November 15, 1884, to February 26, 1885, the conference was attended by representatives from fourteen European nations, including Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, and Belgium. The United States also participated, although it was not a colonial power in Africa. Importantly, no African representatives were included in the discussions, a decision that underscored the disregard for African sovereignty during this era of imperial expansion (Al Jazeera, 2025).

The primary goal of the Berlin Conference was to establish a framework for the division of Africa, as European powers scrambled to claim territories on the continent. In particular, the conference aimed to prevent conflict over African lands and resources, which had become increasingly contested due to the rapid industrialization in Europe. The key issue was the establishment of rules for the “effective occupation” of African territories. Under this principle, European nations could claim land only if they had a physical presence or control over the territory, which effectively legitimized their colonial pursuits (Neumann, 2024). The conference participants also agreed on the establishment of free trade zones in some areas, particularly the Congo Basin, where King Leopold II of Belgium had already established personal control over a vast region (Britannica, 2025).

The Berlin Conference is often seen as the formal starting point for the “Scramble for Africa,” the period during which European powers aggressively expanded their colonial holdings on the continent. The conference’s decisions led to the rapid partitioning of Africa, with European nations drawing arbitrary borders that often ignored ethnic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. These new borders fragmented African societies, creating tensions that continue to affect the political and social landscapes of many African nations today (The Africa Agenda, 2024). While the conference sought to establish order among European powers, it ultimately laid the groundwork for centuries of colonial exploitation, as it formalized the claim to African land and resources by foreign powers.

The conference also had a profound economic impact on Africa. The principle of free trade zones established at the Berlin Conference was particularly influential in shaping the economic relationship between Africa and Europe. For example, European powers gained control over African ports and trade routes, which facilitated the extraction of resources such as rubber, minerals, and agricultural products. Additionally, the Berlin Conference contributed to the exploitation of African labor through forced labor systems and the establishment of plantations and mines to support European economic interests (BlackPast, 2025). As a result, Africa’s economic structures were heavily shaped by European colonial policies, and much of the continent’s wealth was extracted to benefit the European powers.

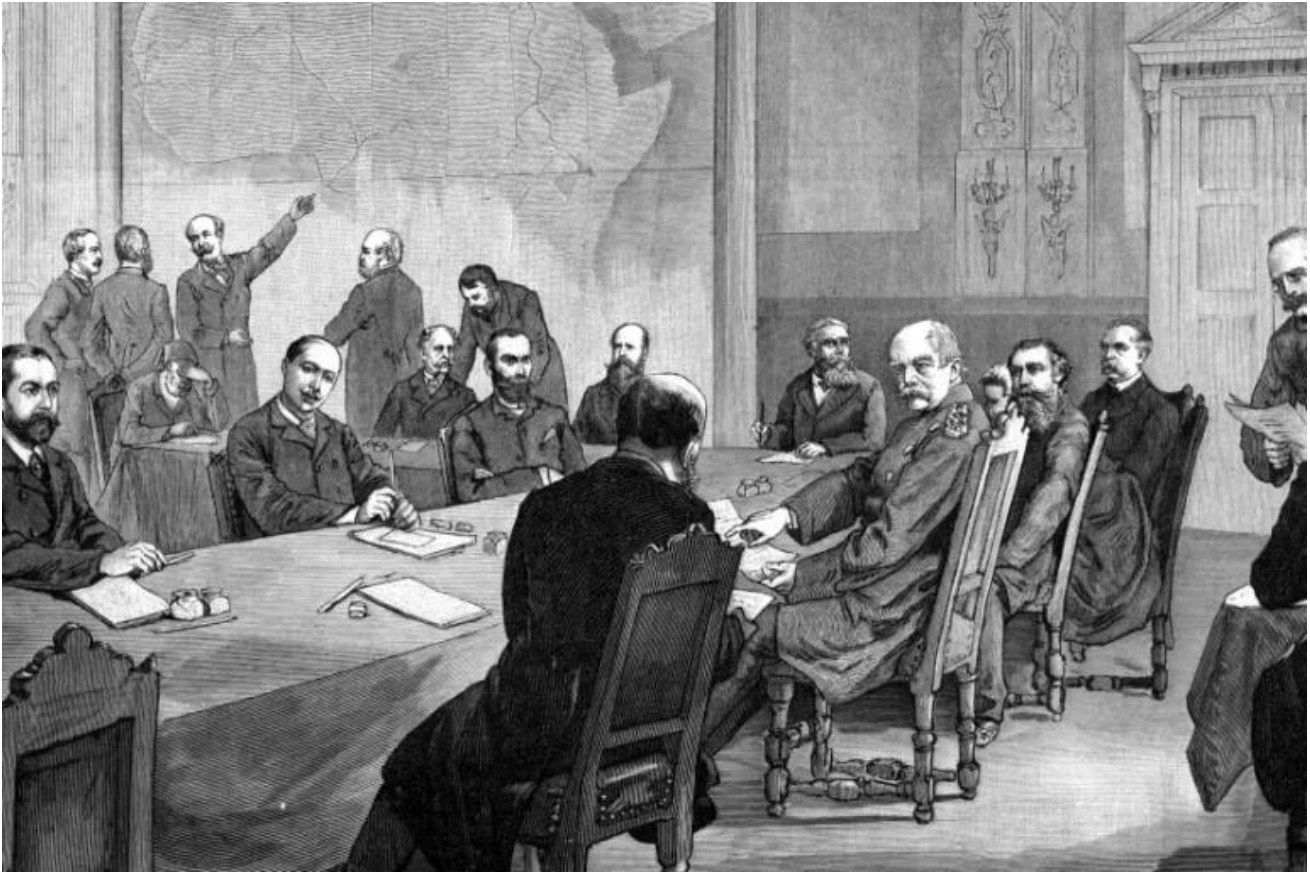


Figure 1: The conference of Berlin, as illustrated in 'Illustrierte Zeitung', 1884 [WikiCommons]

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 remains one of the most significant moments in the history of colonialism, marking the official beginning of the Scramble for Africa. Convened by the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the conference aimed to establish the legal framework for European powers to colonize Africa without conflict. Delegates from European nations, the United States, and the Ottoman Empire gathered to discuss the division of Africa, but notably absent were any African representatives. As Patrick Gathara (2019) describes, the conference legitimized the exploitation of Africa's resources, ignoring the sovereignty of African states and disregarding the interests of African people. The main agenda of the meeting, although presented as a humanitarian initiative, was to secure economic interests, ensuring access to Africa's wealth of resources for European nations. As the Lagos Observer (1885) put it, the conference was a "robbery on so large a scale," with its economic motivations overshadowing any consideration of African welfare.

While the Berlin Conference did not directly partition Africa, it laid the groundwork for the subsequent colonization of the continent by European powers. It set the rules for territorial claims, prioritizing European commercial and industrial interests while relegating the interests of African populations to the background. The conference's outcomes had long-lasting consequences, with Africa's borders being drawn without regard for ethnic, cultural, or political realities on the ground, which has contributed to ongoing conflicts in the continent. Uzoigwe (2019) emphasizes that Bismarck and the European powers saw the conference as a means of facilitating economic exploitation rather than addressing questions of sovereignty or native rights. As such, the legacy of the Berlin Conference remains a painful reminder of the deep injustices inflicted on Africa during the colonial period, with lasting impacts still felt in the present day.

The legacy of the Berlin Conference is still felt today, particularly in the form of Africa's colonial borders. The arbitrary borders drawn at the conference continue to create political and social challenges, such as interethnic conflicts and issues of national identity. Many of the current borders in Africa were a direct result of the

partitioning decisions made during the conference, and these artificial divisions have played a role in conflicts that persist in post-colonial Africa (Al Jazeera, 2025). Furthermore, the lack of African representation at the conference has had lasting implications for the continent's political and economic development, as the colonial powers that shaped Africa's future did so without the input or consent of its people.

Significance of the Conference on Africa's Colonial Partition

The Berlin Conference played a pivotal role in the partitioning of Africa, as it established the legal framework for European colonization. By endorsing the principle of effective occupation, the conference enabled European powers to claim vast territories without considering existing ethnic, cultural, or linguistic boundaries (BlackPast, 2025). This arbitrary division led to the creation of artificial borders that have had enduring impacts on the continent, contributing to political fragmentation and interethnic conflicts (The Africa Agenda, 2024).

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 played a pivotal role in the partitioning of Africa, fundamentally shaping the continent's political and geographical landscape. The conference was a key moment in the "Scramble for Africa," as European powers sought to formalize their colonial claims and avoid conflict among themselves. The outcome of the conference resulted in the arbitrary division of African territories, disregarding the pre-existing ethnic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. This division of Africa among European powers set the stage for decades of colonization that would severely impact the continent's future (The Africa Agenda, 2024). The legacy of these artificial borders remains one of the most significant challenges facing African nations today, contributing to ongoing political instability and interethnic conflict.

One of the most significant outcomes of the Berlin Conference was the establishment of the principle of "effective occupation," which allowed European powers to claim sovereignty over African territories if they could demonstrate a physical presence or control over the land. This principle justified the rapid colonization of vast areas of Africa by European nations, many of which had no previous territorial claims or interest in the continent. The division of Africa at the conference ignored the existing socio-political organizations and territorial alignments of African communities. As a result, many African nations were forced to operate within borders that grouped hostile ethnic groups together or divided culturally similar communities, fostering division and instability that persists today (Britannica, 2025).

The Berlin Conference's impact on the continent extended beyond just territorial division; it also had profound economic and social consequences. European powers sought to exploit Africa's vast resources to fuel their industrial revolution, often with little regard for the well-being of the local populations. The extraction of resources, such as minerals, rubber, and agricultural products, was facilitated by colonial policies that often relied on forced labor systems and the establishment of plantations and mines. This economic exploitation led to the underdevelopment of Africa and the destruction of local economies, while European powers reaped the benefits (Al Jazeera, 2025). Furthermore, the colonization process introduced foreign governance structures that disrupted existing indigenous political systems, contributing to a long-term dependency on European powers that continued even after decolonization.

Research Focus and Purpose

This paper aims to analyze the challenges and problems in the East African Community (EAC) region that have arisen from the legacy of the Berlin Conference. By examining the historical context and contemporary issues, the study seeks to understand how the arbitrary borders and colonial policies established during the conference have influenced political, social, and economic dynamics in the EAC member states. The objective is to shed light on the enduring effects of colonial partitioning and to explore potential pathways for addressing these challenges in the pursuit of regional integration and stability.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE BERLIN CONFERENCE AND THE PARTITION OF AFRICA

Pre-Conference Africa: Indigenous Kingdoms, Cultures, and Politics

Before the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, Africa was home to a vast array of indigenous kingdoms, empires, and cultures that exhibited considerable political, economic, and social complexity. The continent was far from the "unorganized" or "primitive" state that European colonizers often depicted in their narratives. The territories that would later form countries such as Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda, each had rich histories of governance, trade, and cultural practices. For example, the Kingdom of Buganda in Uganda was a sophisticated political entity with a centralized government structure and an established legal system. The Ganda people's system of governance, which included a hierarchical structure with a king (Kabaka) at the top, mirrored many pre-colonial African states in their political sophistication (Kiwanuka, 2023).

In Burundi and Rwanda, the Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa people had distinct roles in their societies, though their relationships were often less rigid than the colonial narrative suggested. The Kingdom of Rwanda, particularly, had a highly organized monarchy, and its governance was marked by a strong centralized system. Political leaders, like the Mwami (king), controlled a vast territory and exercised significant influence over trade, diplomacy, and conflict resolution. Similarly, in Kenya, the Kikuyu and Maasai people had well-established social structures and political systems. The Maasai, for example, operated as semi-nomadic pastoralists and had a governance structure based on age-set systems that regulated the community's social, military, and economic activities (Spear, 2024).

In South Sudan, before the arrival of European powers, the region was home to various ethnic groups, such as the Dinka, Nuer, and Shilluk, who had their own political systems and ways of organizing social life. These groups often engaged in cross-border trade, warfare, and alliances. The political systems were decentralized, with power often vested in local chiefs and elders, who were responsible for maintaining law and order and resolving disputes. In Somalia, the Somali people had long practiced clan-based systems of governance, which were central to their social structure. The pre-colonial history of these territories reflects diverse forms of political and social organization that European powers failed to recognize and disrupted during the colonial era (Lewis, 2024).

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (then the Congo Free State) was under the personal rule of King Leopold II of Belgium. Leopold established an extractive colony that exploited natural resources like rubber and ivory, severely impacting the Congolese population. The kingdom, initially a personal property of Leopold, was not part of any traditional African kingdom but was marked by brutal exploitation and mismanagement (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2024). The indigenous people had long been engaged in farming and trade, with complex local systems of governance, which European colonial powers failed to recognize or respect.

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 ultimately ignored these complex indigenous political structures and instead sought to divide the continent based on European interests and convenience, disregarding the existing cultural and political landscapes (Mazrui & Tidy, 2024).

Key Provisions of the Berlin Conference

The Berlin Conference, convened by Otto von Bismarck of Germany, was held to regulate European colonization and trade in Africa. The conference's primary aim was to establish clear rules for the partition of Africa among European powers, thereby preventing conflicts between them. One of the key provisions of the conference was the principle of "effective occupation," which required European powers to have a physical presence in African territories in order to claim them as colonies. This provision led to the creation of arbitrary borders that ignored ethnic and cultural groups and fragmented traditional kingdoms and empires (Baring, 2024).

Another important outcome of the Berlin Conference was the principle of free trade along the Congo and Niger Rivers, which were of significant commercial interest to European powers. This principle, while ostensibly designed to ensure equal access for all European nations, was essentially a mechanism to allow the Belgian King Leopold II to maintain control over the Congo Free State. The "Congo Free State" was effectively a private colony under Leopold's personal control, marking one of the most brutal chapters of colonial exploitation (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2024).

The conference also established that European powers could claim land in Africa simply by notifying other powers of their intentions. This led to the rapid partition of the continent, with no consideration for the established political entities. In addition to this, the conference's declarations ignored African sovereignty and disregarded the fact that the land being divided was already inhabited and governed by indigenous peoples with their own systems of governance. As a result, the Berlin Conference fundamentally altered the political landscape of Africa, with long-lasting impacts that continue to affect the continent today (Pakenham, 2024).

Furthermore, the conference did not account for the vast differences in climate, geography, and resources between the various African regions. This lack of consideration for the diversity of African lands led to numerous conflicts between European powers over control of specific territories. The borders created during the conference did not align with the natural divisions between African ethnic groups, which contributed to the emergence of ethnic and territorial disputes that continue to fuel conflict in post-colonial Africa (Mazrui & Tidy, 2024).

In summary, the provisions of the Berlin Conference reflected the desire of European powers to gain exclusive control over African territories while disregarding the sovereignty and rights of indigenous African nations. These arbitrary decisions would later contribute to the political and social challenges faced by African countries as they sought independence and struggled with the legacy of colonialism (Baring, 2024).

Colonial Powers and Their Interests

The colonial powers at the Berlin Conference were primarily motivated by a desire to expand their economic and geopolitical influence in Africa. European nations, including Britain, Germany, Belgium, and France, were driven by competition for resources, strategic locations, and new markets for their growing industrial economies. Britain, for example, was interested in controlling key trade routes and securing resources for its burgeoning industries. The British Empire's vast network of colonies in Africa, such as Egypt, South Africa, and Kenya, served as essential supply lines and markets for British goods (Pakenham, 2024).

Germany, a latecomer to the colonial race, sought to secure its place among European powers by acquiring territories in East and West Africa. At the Berlin Conference, Germany secured the colony of German East Africa, which included modern-day Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi. This was strategically important for Germany as it sought to expand its commercial and military influence in the region. The acquisition of these territories was also part of Germany's broader plan to build an empire that could compete with the colonial empires of Britain and France (Heiss, 2023).

Belgium's interest in Africa was particularly concentrated in the Congo, which became a personal possession of King Leopold II. Belgium was primarily motivated by the desire for resources, particularly rubber and ivory, which were highly valuable commodities during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The exploitation of the Congolese population under Leopold's rule was infamous for its brutality and resulted in the deaths of millions of Africans. Belgium's participation in the Berlin Conference provided the legal justification for King Leopold's control over the Congo, making it one of the most exploitative colonial regimes in African history (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2024).

France, on the other hand, focused on establishing a vast colonial empire in West and North Africa. The French interest in Africa was multifaceted, encompassing the acquisition of resources, the spread of French culture, and the securing of new markets for French goods. France's colonial expansion in Africa was also

driven by a desire to maintain its status as a major European power in the face of growing German and British influence (Wright, 2024). France's colonial rule in places like Algeria, Senegal, and Ivory Coast helped expand its political and economic reach, and its involvement in the Berlin Conference helped solidify its control over key African territories.

These European powers used the Berlin Conference to formalize their competing interests in Africa. While the conference was ostensibly designed to regulate colonization and prevent conflict between European powers, in reality, it led to the carving up of the African continent based on the desires of the colonial powers rather than the needs or interests of the African peoples themselves (Mazrui & Tidy, 2024). The Berlin Conference thus laid the groundwork for the centuries of exploitation, resource extraction, and social disruption that would follow for African countries under colonial rule.

The legacy of the Berlin Conference is evident in the ongoing struggles faced by many African countries today. The arbitrary borders drawn by colonial powers continue to fuel ethnic conflicts and territorial disputes. Additionally, the economic exploitation and political subjugation that began during the colonial era still shape the development trajectories of many African nations (Heiss, 2023). The Berlin Conference, therefore, not only marked the formal beginning of the "Scramble for Africa" but also set the stage for the enduring challenges of post-colonial Africa.

Building tribes: How administrative units shaped ethnic groups in Africa

The formation of ethnic groups in Africa is intricately tied to the colonial administrative structures established during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. European colonial powers, particularly the British, French, and Germans, drew arbitrary borders and created administrative units that often disregarded the existing ethnic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries of African societies. As noted by historians such as Mamdani (1996), colonial rule reshaped the political and social landscape of Africa by organizing territories into units that were more about managing resources and controlling populations than about representing indigenous communities. The imposition of these artificial borders led to the creation of new, often fragmented, ethnic identities. These identities were shaped and reinforced by the colonial state, which used these divisions for administrative convenience, thereby laying the groundwork for many of the ethnic conflicts and political challenges Africa faces today.

In many instances, colonial administrations categorized and grouped people based on superficial characteristics, such as language or religion, often ignoring deeper cultural, historical, or political connections between different groups. This process of "tribalization" was not only a result of the arbitrary divisions of colonial rule but also a strategic tool for governance. As Asiwaju (1985) argues, by dividing African societies into manageable units and recognizing certain groups over others, colonial powers were able to divide and conquer, reducing the potential for unified resistance. The legacy of these colonial administrative practices is still evident in contemporary Africa, where ethnic identities, often constructed or exacerbated by colonial powers, continue to play a significant role in political and social dynamics, sometimes contributing to conflict and instability.



Figure 2: African borders aligned with ethnic boundaries

IMPACT OF THE BERLIN CONFERENCE ON THE EAC REGION

The Berlin conference had a profound and lasting negative impact on Africa/ EAC legitimizing European colonization and the scramble for Africa leading to the arbitrary division of the continent into European colonies exploitation of resources and disruption of existing social and political structures.

Colonial Borders in the EAC

The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 laid the foundation for the arbitrary division of African territories by European powers, and the East African Community (EAC) region was no exception. The conference’s decision to draw borders without regard to ethnic groups, cultures, or historical kingdoms led to the creation of artificial political boundaries that continue to impact East Africa today. The present-day countries of Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi were all affected by the partitioning decisions made at the conference. For instance, the British took control of Kenya and Uganda, while Germany assumed control over what were Tanganyika, Ruanda- Urundi now Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi. These borders were drawn with no consideration for the indigenous peoples who lived across these regions. The EAC is composed of a mix of ethnic groups such as the Kikuyu, Maasai, and Luo in Kenya, the Baganda and Basoga in Uganda, the Sukuma, Wanyakusa Chaga and Maasai in Tanzania, the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa in Rwanda, and the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa in Burundi (Akumu & Muturi, 2025). These ethnic groups, which had long existed within distinct cultural and political spheres, were now placed under a single colonial administration that lacked regard for their traditional boundaries.

The impact of these arbitrary borders can be seen in the way indigenous groups were divided or forced to coexist with unfamiliar communities, which often resulted in tensions and conflict. For example, the Maasai, once a nomadic pastoralist society that moved freely across present-day Kenya and Tanzania, were separated by the border drawn by European powers. Similarly, the Tutsi and Hutu populations, who historically lived in Rwanda and Burundi, found themselves in Congo and Uganda at the mercy of the borders and governance systems established by the colonial powers (The Africa Agenda, 2024). These artificial divisions led to the disruption of longstanding social, economic, and cultural systems that had previously governed African societies for centuries. The colonial borders imposed by the Berlin Conference, which disregarded ethnic

affiliations, still influence political and social tensions in the EAC region today, often resulting in disputes over land, identity, and access to resources.

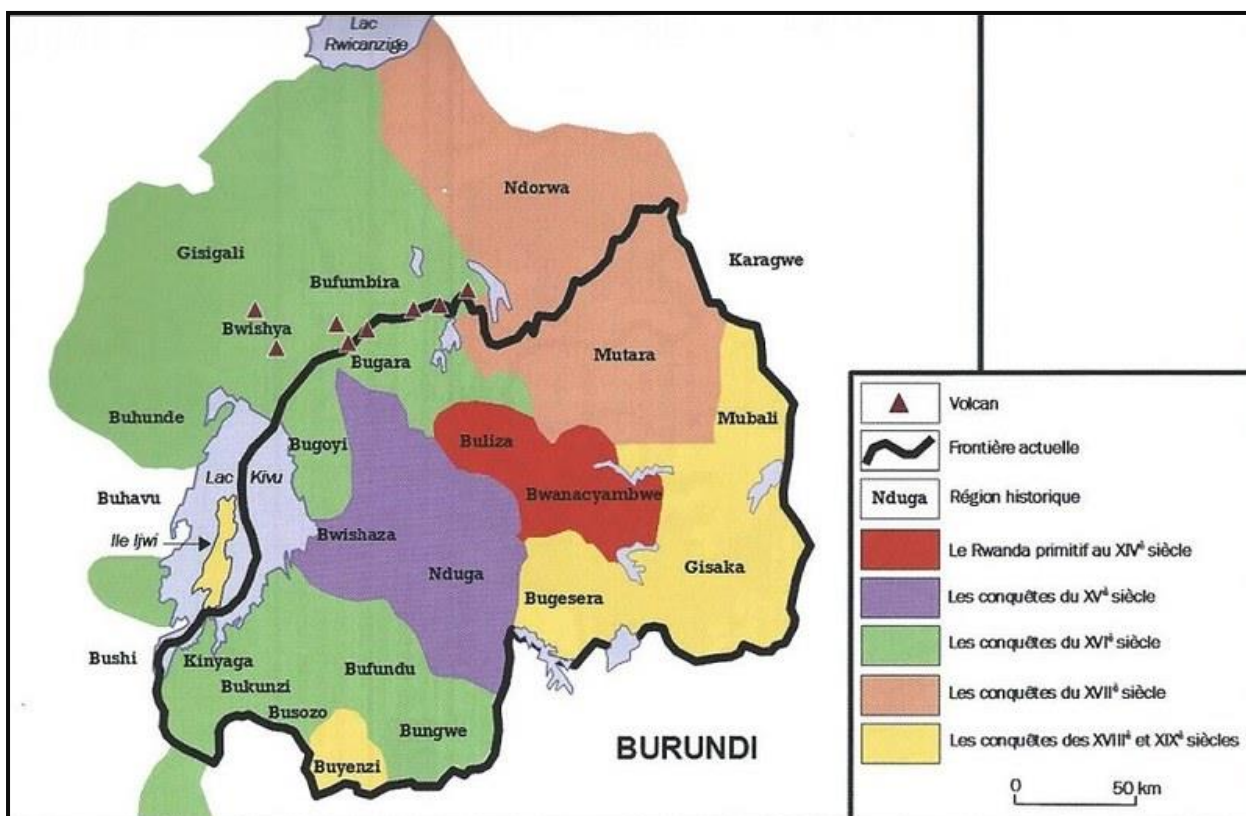


Figure 3: Map of Rwanda Before Berlin Conference

The 1884 Berlin Conference, which led to the partitioning of Africa, dramatically altered the territorial boundaries of many African nations, including Rwanda. Initially, Rwanda's territory spanned 168,608 km², but following the arbitrary decisions made during the conference, this was reduced to just 26,338 km², a drastic territorial loss that had lasting implications for the region. This reduction in size was a direct result of the colonial powers' decisions to divide Africa according to their economic interests, without consideration for indigenous ethnic groups, cultures, or pre-existing political structures (Pakenham, 1991). Rwanda, along with its neighbors, found itself drawn into borders that were not reflective of its historical boundaries or indigenous governance systems. The new borders, which also included parts of neighboring territories such as Uganda and Burundi, effectively diminished Rwanda's economic and strategic capacity, limiting its access to key natural resources and fertile land, particularly the land that had been historically crucial for the agricultural activities of the Tutsi and Hutu populations (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002).

This territorial loss and the partitioning of Rwanda under colonial rule, initially by Germany and later Belgium, significantly influenced the socio-political landscape of the region. Rwanda's reduced territory contributed to a scarcity of resources, heightening ethnic tensions and economic disparities between the groups that would continue to shape the political dynamics of the country for years to come. The colonial imposition of artificial borders did not take into account Rwanda's social and cultural fabric, and this led to increased competition for land and resources. In particular, the territorial changes exacerbated the ethnic divisions between the Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa populations, which were manipulated by colonial authorities to maintain control over the region (Reyntjens, 2009). This division sowed the seeds for later conflicts, including the 1994 genocide. The reduction of Rwanda's territorial size and the creation of artificial borders is a poignant example of how the Berlin Conference's decisions continue to shape the modern geopolitical and ethnic realities of East Africa.

The 1884 Berlin Conference, which led to the partitioning of Africa, significantly altered the geography and political landscape of Rwanda, with long-lasting effects that are still felt today. Rwanda, originally a unified kingdom, saw its territory dramatically reduced when the colonial powers decided to divide the African continent according to their interests. Rwanda's territory, which had previously spanned 168,608 km², was reduced to just 26,338 km², with parts of it being transferred to neighboring Congo (DRC) and Uganda. As a result of this partition, the Kinyarwanda-speaking people, who were indigenous to Rwanda, were separated by artificial borders and found themselves living in the current territories of the DRC and Uganda. This forced displacement contributed to the fragmentation of communities, which were once united by common language, culture, and heritage. The establishment of these borders did not consider the social, cultural, or ethnic ties between the populations, leading to tensions that have persisted for generations (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002).

The arrival of European colonizers had a profound negative impact on Rwandan culture. The colonial powers sought to impose foreign systems of governance and authority that undermined local traditions, values, and social structures. The Belgian colonial administration, in particular, introduced the policy of "divide and rule," which exacerbated ethnic divisions and weakened the social cohesion that had existed in Rwandan society. The Belgians favored the Tutsi minority over the Hutu majority, granting them access to power and privileges, which deepened social inequalities and fostered resentment. As a result, the colonizers destroyed the ethical values and taboos that had guided Rwandan society for centuries. Traditional social structures, such as the clan-based organization and community solidarity, were disrupted, leaving behind a legacy of mistrust, division, and tension among Rwandans. This divisiveness persisted well beyond the colonial period, ultimately contributing to the social and political upheavals in the country, including the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 (Des Forges, 1999).

The effects of the colonial legacy are particularly evident in the North Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where ethnic tensions between the Banyarwanda and the Bahunde have created a "cycle of violence." The Banyarwanda, who make up about 85 to 90% of the population in North Kivu, are Kinyarwanda speakers who were historically part of Rwanda but were separated by the colonial borders. The Bahunde, a minority ethnic group, have controlled most of the political and governmental apparatus in the region, creating power dynamics that exacerbate ethnic tensions. The political landscape in North Kivu is heavily influenced by the power struggle between these two groups, with the Banyarwanda often marginalized and depicted as outsiders, despite their deep-rooted historical and cultural ties to the region. The Bahunde-dominated provincial government in North Kivu has, for political reasons, portrayed the Banyarwanda as refugees, even though they are Congolese citizens. This narrative has been used to justify the exclusion of the Banyarwanda from political power and the denial of their rights, further deepening the ethnic divide (Vlassenroot & Huggins, 2005).

The provincial government's refusal to recognize the grievances of the Banyarwanda in North Kivu has resulted in further alienation and distrust. The Banyarwanda, despite being the majority in the region, face discrimination and are often portrayed as outsiders or threats to the Congolese state. This situation is compounded by the political interests of local elites, who use the ethnic divide to consolidate their own power and maintain control over resources. The Bahunde, who hold significant influence in the provincial government, have failed to acknowledge the historical and cultural ties of the Banyarwanda to the region, instead opting to frame them as a destabilizing force. This has prevented meaningful dialogue or attempts to address the root causes of ethnic tensions and has led to repeated cycles of violence and instability in the region (Reyntjens, 2009).

In the larger context, the conflict in North Kivu and the broader Great Lakes region highlights the enduring legacy of the Berlin Conference and the artificial borders that were imposed on African societies. These borders did not take into account the ethnic, cultural, and historical realities of the people living within them, leading to a series of conflicts that have plagued the region for decades. The political manipulation of ethnic

identities, coupled with the failure to address historical grievances, has contributed to ongoing instability and violence. The situation in North Kivu serves as a stark reminder of the destructive consequences of colonialism, particularly the "divide and rule" policies that continue to shape the political and social dynamics in the region (Pottier, 2010).

The borders also complicated trade and economic interactions between the various groups that had previously shared regional markets and resources. Prior to colonial rule, the people of East Africa had free movement across the territories, allowing for the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures. However, with the imposition of colonial borders, local economies were disrupted as trade routes were blocked, and economic exchanges were restricted (BlackPast, 2025). These borders not only isolated communities but also created new political divisions that shaped the development of national identities, often at the cost of indigenous unity and cooperation.

Furthermore, the division of African territories at the Berlin Conference led to the creation of new administrative regions that did not reflect the historical, political, or cultural realities of African societies. The impact of this division in the EAC region is still felt today in the form of cross-border conflicts, migration issues, and disputes over resources. The creation of these arbitrary borders has left a legacy of political and social challenges that continue to hinder regional integration and cooperation (Neumann, 2024).

Political and Social Fragmentation

The legacy of the Berlin Conference has had a profound impact on the political and social structures of the East African Community (EAC) region. The colonial powers, particularly the British and Germans, introduced governance systems that were alien to the indigenous populations of East Africa. The imposition of European-style centralized bureaucracies in place of traditional African forms of governance resulted in the undermining of local political institutions and cultural norms. For example, in Kenya, the British established a system of indirect rule that recognized and co-opted local chiefs, often exacerbating divisions among ethnic groups (BlackPast, 2025). This system not only reinforced colonial control but also deepened ethnic rivalries and fostered a culture of corruption that persists in many parts of East Africa today.

Similarly, in Uganda, the British introduced a system of ethnic-based governance, which granted power to the Baganda people over other groups in the country, creating a political hierarchy that contributed to ethnic tensions that would later fuel political instability (The Africa Agenda, 2024). In Rwanda and Burundi, the colonial authorities empowered the Tutsi minority over the Hutu majority, sowing the seeds for future ethnic conflicts, culminating in the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 (Neumann, 2024). These decisions left behind a political structure that ignored the social fabric and traditional power dynamics of African societies, creating divisions that continue to shape the region's political landscape today.

The social fragmentation caused by colonial rule in East Africa is evident in the way communities in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi have been divided along ethnic lines. These divisions were not just a product of colonial governance structures but were actively promoted by European powers through policies that favored certain groups over others. The manipulation of ethnic divisions became a tool for maintaining control, leading to long-term effects on the social cohesion of the region (Akumu & Muturi, 2025). The legacy of these policies is still visible in the modern-day EAC, where ethnic identities continue to play a central role in politics, often influencing elections, resource distribution, and national unity.

In addition to the ethnic fragmentation, the Berlin Conference's legacy also influenced the formation of national identities. As the colonial powers constructed borders that cut across ethnic groups, the people of East Africa were forced to form new political identities based on the nations created by colonialism rather than on shared ethnic or cultural ties. This artificial construction of national identities continues to affect the EAC, where integration efforts often face challenges related to regional identities and the lack of a shared vision of unity (Neumann, 2024). The political and social fragmentation caused by the Berlin Conference's division of

Africa has had lasting consequences for governance in East Africa, contributing to instability and conflict in the region.

Economic Exploitation

The economic exploitation of East Africa during the colonial period was one of the most significant legacies of the Berlin Conference. The colonial powers were primarily interested in extracting resources from their African colonies to fuel the industrialization of Europe. In East Africa, this meant the large-scale extraction of agricultural products, minerals, and other resources. The British, for example, established a plantation economy in Kenya that relied on the forced labor of Africans to grow crops such as tea, coffee, and tobacco for export to Europe (Akumu & Muturi, 2025). Similarly, in Uganda, the British introduced cash crop farming, which displaced traditional subsistence farming and made the region dependent on European markets. These policies fundamentally altered the economic landscape of East Africa, making it increasingly reliant on the colonial powers.

Economic exploitation in East Africa was not limited to the extraction of natural resources; it also involved the exploitation of African labor. Colonial governments implemented systems of forced labor, particularly in the construction of infrastructure like railways and roads, which were designed to benefit European interests. The infamous Uganda Railway, which connected the Indian Ocean to the interior of Uganda, was built using the labor of Africans who were subjected to poor working conditions, resulting in thousands of deaths (BlackPast, 2025). The economic policies introduced by colonial powers were designed to extract as much wealth from the region as possible while minimizing the benefits to local populations. This exploitation laid the foundation for the region's underdevelopment and economic inequality.

Moreover, the colonial powers reshaped the economic structures of East Africa by introducing a monetary system that benefited European economic interests. The introduction of European-style taxes, markets, and currency led to the dismantling of indigenous economic systems and trade networks. Traditional African economies, which were based on barter and subsistence farming, were replaced by cash-based economies that were highly dependent on exports. The long-term effect of these changes was that East Africa's economy became oriented around the production of raw materials for export to Europe, rather than the development of local industries or the diversification of the economy (Neumann, 2024). This has left East African countries with economies that are still highly dependent on agriculture and resource extraction, which makes them vulnerable to fluctuations in global commodity prices.

Finally, the division of Africa at the Berlin Conference created economic rivalries and territorial disputes that persist in the EAC region today. For example, the borders drawn by the colonial powers led to competition for resources and land, which have remained sources of tension between Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and their neighbors. The legacy of this economic competition can be seen in modern conflicts over resources such as water, minerals, and fertile land. Additionally, the colonial emphasis on resource extraction has hindered the development of local industries and infrastructure, leaving East African economies dependent on the export of raw materials rather than the development of a more diversified, industrial economy (The Africa Agenda, 2024). The economic exploitation of East Africa during the colonial period has had long-lasting effects on the region's economic development and continues to shape its economic policies and priorities today.

The Imperialism and Ethnic Division

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 solidified the imperial control over Africa, and its impact on the East African Community (EAC) region, comprising Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda, has been profound and enduring. The arbitrary borders drawn by European powers fragmented indigenous societies, dividing ethnic groups and creating tensions that continue to shape national identities and political conflicts in these countries. In Kenya, the British partitioning and the displacement of the Kikuyu, Luo, and Maasai peoples, for instance, resulted in long-standing rivalries, while Rwanda and Burundi saw their ethnic groups, the Hutu and Tutsi, forced to

coexist under colonial rule, fueling future genocidal violence. Similarly, in Somalia, the colonial powers split the ethnic Somali population across different territories, creating territorial disputes that persist to this day. The same issue is evident in Uganda, where the British divided ethnic groups like the Baganda and Basoga, which led to the complexities of governance post-independence. The impact of these borders on the region is deep-rooted, creating political fragmentation and entrenched ethnic divisions that hinder cooperation and stability in the present.

This imperialist legacy of ethnic division still manifests in ongoing conflicts and power struggles across the region. The DRC, for instance, faces severe inter-ethnic clashes as a direct consequence of the colonial-era practices of divide and rule. These ethnic divisions were exacerbated by the economic exploitation and unequal access to resources, leading to disputes over land, power, and wealth. In South Sudan, the splitting of tribes and clans by artificial borders played a significant role in the internal conflicts that led to its civil war, particularly after independence in 2011. These ethnic tensions, fostered under colonial rule, have prevented effective governance, triggered violent conflicts, and have contributed to significant instability in the region. The colonial legacy has thus not only divided ethnic groups but has also established an environment in which identity politics and ethnic nationalism dominate national discourse and shape contemporary political and social outcomes.

Economic Disparities

The Berlin Conference's division of Africa resulted in significant economic disparities that have shaped the economic landscapes of the EAC region. European powers prioritized resource extraction, focusing on the wealth of the continent, including minerals, agricultural products, and labor, while neglecting the development of local economies and infrastructures. In Kenya, for example, British settlers took control of fertile lands for agriculture, effectively disenfranchising the indigenous communities, while Uganda became a key source of cash crops like coffee. These practices left countries in the EAC with economies structured around the extraction of resources for European benefit, creating long-term underdevelopment. Similarly, in the DRC, Belgium's exploitation of rubber and minerals resulted in economic dependency, while Rwanda and Burundi's economies were tightly controlled by colonial powers, leaving them with limited avenues for autonomous development post-independence. The colonial extraction systems and unequal development models left behind a legacy of poverty, underdevelopment, and economic dependency that persists today across much of the region.

The economic disparities also perpetuated social inequality and concentrated wealth in the hands of European settlers and a small local elite. In Tanzania, under German and later British rule, the economy was geared toward supporting the colonial administration and export of resources, without a significant investment in building local industries or infrastructure. After independence, the countries of the EAC struggled with the remnants of these economic models, where agriculture remained the backbone of many national economies, but industrial development and technological advancement were slow to emerge. South Sudan and Somalia faced challenges of economic underdevelopment due to their colonial histories and the absence of sufficient infrastructure and human capital. Even as the region has worked toward integration and economic cooperation, these disparities—created during the colonial period—continue to hinder collective economic progress. Addressing these disparities requires significant efforts to redistribute resources, promote industrialization, and build infrastructure to close the gap between the developed and underdeveloped areas within the EAC.

Dependency on Western Powers

The legacy of the Berlin Conference also fostered a deep dependency on Western powers, which continues to impact the EAC region's political and economic systems. The colonial powers not only controlled Africa's resources but also shaped the political and economic structures to serve their interests, embedding a relationship of dependency that persists into the post-colonial era. Countries like Kenya and Uganda were

economically dependent on Britain for trade, with the colonial system oriented around the export of raw materials to Western markets. After independence, these countries continued to rely heavily on foreign aid, trade, and loans from Western countries, perpetuating their dependency. This dependency model has shaped economic policies and governance in the region, limiting the ability of EAC countries to chart an independent development path. South Sudan, for example, remains heavily reliant on oil exports to China and other Western countries, while Rwanda and Burundi, despite economic growth, are still dependent on international aid.

This dependency is further exemplified by the economic policies imposed by Western institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which have shaped development strategies in the region. Structural adjustment programs and neoliberal economic policies have often prioritized debt repayment and economic liberalization over domestic development. In Tanzania, for example, the push for privatization and market reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, supported by Western powers and financial institutions, led to the erosion of public services and economic insecurity for many citizens. The continued reliance on Western financial and political support limits the sovereignty of the EAC countries in making independent decisions regarding their economic futures. The challenge for the region is to diversify its economic partners and reduce reliance on Western powers to achieve true economic independence and self-sufficiency.

Forced Labor and Human Rights Violations

The Berlin Conference and subsequent colonial rule introduced the exploitation of African labor on an unprecedented scale, resulting in the widespread use of forced labor and significant human rights violations across the EAC region. In countries like Kenya and Uganda, forced labor was used extensively in the construction of infrastructure such as railways and plantations that benefitted the colonial powers. The British, for instance, used Kenyan labor to build the Uganda Railway under brutal conditions, leading to thousands of deaths due to poor working conditions, malnutrition, and diseases. Similarly, in the DRC, the Belgian colonial regime forced the indigenous population to work in the rubber plantations under the threat of violence, resulting in one of the most brutal exploitations in colonial history. This exploitation severely disrupted African communities and created a legacy of trauma, poor labor rights, and deep social inequalities that continue to affect the region.

The human rights violations extended beyond forced labor to include physical abuse, land dispossession, and the denial of basic rights to African peoples. In Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda, colonial powers employed policies of suppression and forced assimilation that decimated indigenous governance systems and cultures. In South Sudan and Somalia, the colonial powers also disregarded the social and political rights of local populations, favoring settlers and foreign businesses over the indigenous peoples. These human rights violations not only harmed the immediate generation but also left a legacy of social and political dysfunction, affecting governance and the development of legal and labor systems in these countries. The long-term effects of these violations continue to be felt today in the form of weak institutions, mistrust between governments and their citizens, and a history of civil unrest and conflict in many EAC nations.

Economic Underdevelopment

Colonialism's impact on economic development in the EAC region is one of the most profound legacies of the Berlin Conference. The European powers deliberately structured economies around resource extraction, leaving the indigenous populations with limited opportunities for industrial or agricultural development. In Kenya, for instance, the British concentrated land in the hands of settlers, leading to a lack of access to fertile land for the indigenous Kikuyu people. This economic exclusion and the prioritization of export-oriented agriculture left these nations with economies largely dependent on primary products, such as coffee and tea, which were vulnerable to global price fluctuations. This economic model, based on extraction rather than

development, resulted in a lack of infrastructure, technological advancement, and economic diversification, which still impacts the region today.

In the DRC, the economic underdevelopment caused by Belgian exploitation of mineral resources, without the establishment of a proper industrial base, has left the country struggling to build a sustainable economy. Similarly, in countries like Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda, the legacy of colonialism has left them with few manufacturing industries and a reliance on agriculture, despite their rich natural resources. The economic underdevelopment in the region is also compounded by the absence of adequate education, healthcare, and industrial infrastructure, which limits human capital development. In South Sudan, despite being rich in oil reserves, the lack of infrastructure, investment in human capital, and reliance on global oil markets has left the country vulnerable to economic instability. For the EAC to overcome the economic underdevelopment caused by colonialism, it must invest in industrialization, diversify economies, and focus on human capital development.

Long-Term Instability and Conflicts

The division of Africa by the Berlin Conference, and the subsequent imposition of artificial borders, has had a long-lasting impact on political stability and conflict in the EAC region. Countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda have witnessed the persistence of ethnic-based conflicts, many of which have their roots in the colonial era. In Rwanda, the Hutu-Tutsi divisions were exacerbated by the Belgian colonial administration's preferential treatment of the Tutsi minority, which ultimately contributed to the Rwandan Genocide in 1994. Similarly, the instability in Uganda, which has seen a series of military coups and civil wars, can be traced back to the colonial administration's inability to foster inclusive governance structures. South Sudan's secession from Sudan in 2011, though framed as a victory for self-determination, also illustrates the deep-rooted ethnic and territorial tensions that were exacerbated by colonial borders. These conflicts, fueled by political and ethnic rivalries, continue to destabilize the region, hampering efforts toward peace and cooperation.

In addition to ethnic tensions, the long-term instability in the region can be attributed to the weak institutions left behind by colonial powers. The artificial borders created by European powers ignored traditional governance systems and created countries with little regard for the existing ethnic and cultural divides. This lack of cohesive national identity and governance has contributed to fragile state structures that are prone to political instability, corruption, and conflict. The ongoing violence in the DRC, driven by competition for resources and control over territory, exemplifies the continuing instability in the region. While the East African Community (EAC) has made efforts to promote peace and stability, the legacies of colonialism still present significant challenges to conflict resolution and governance in the region. Addressing these conflicts requires not only regional cooperation but also a critical examination of colonial legacies and the implementation of reforms that promote inclusive governance and social cohesion.

Disease and Mortality Increase

The legacy of colonialism in the East African region had profound implications for public health, leading to increased disease burden and mortality rates. Colonizers introduced new diseases such as smallpox, malaria, and sleeping sickness, which devastated indigenous populations. In regions like Uganda and Kenya, the imposition of foreign diseases exacerbated mortality rates and weakened the indigenous healthcare systems. The introduction of exploitative labor systems during the colonial period, coupled with inadequate sanitation and healthcare infrastructure, contributed to high mortality rates. For instance, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), forced labor under King Leopold's regime led to the decimation of local communities through diseases and brutal working conditions (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2020). The neglect of public health during the colonial period left lasting impacts on the healthcare systems of post-colonial states, as governments struggled to deal with the burden of preventable diseases in populations already weakened by years of exploitation and neglect.

In the post-colonial era, the EAC region continued to face significant health challenges, many of which can be traced back to the colonial legacy. For example, in South Sudan and Somalia, the lack of access to adequate healthcare and resources continues to contribute to high mortality rates. The establishment of poorly planned colonial borders further exacerbated these challenges by creating fragmented healthcare systems that struggle to provide consistent and equitable services. Mortality rates across the region remain high in comparison to global standards, with factors such as malnutrition, poor sanitation, and the prevalence of diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria continuing to impede progress. Addressing these health disparities is a direct challenge stemming from the colonial past, which prioritized the interests of the colonizers over the wellbeing of indigenous populations.

Cultural Disruption/Loss of Cultural Identity

Colonialism deeply impacted the cultural identities of African societies, particularly in the EAC region, where the imposition of European values and systems marginalized indigenous cultures. The colonial powers, including Britain, Belgium, and Germany, enforced their language, religion, and educational systems upon the local populations. In Kenya and Uganda, for example, the British promoted English as the dominant language, diminishing the status of indigenous languages such as Kikuyu and Luganda. Additionally, the imposition of Christianity often displaced traditional African spiritual practices, eroding indigenous belief systems and cultural rituals. In Rwanda and Burundi, the colonial administration further exacerbated ethnic divisions, with the Belgians instituting a system of Tutsi and Hutu differentiation, which led to deep social rifts that continue to affect these societies today (Mamdani, 2020). This cultural disruption has led to the gradual loss of native customs, traditions, and languages, leaving many African societies struggling to preserve their heritage in the face of modern globalization and the lingering influence of colonial legacies.

Despite efforts to revive and preserve indigenous cultures, the scars of cultural disruption are still evident across the EAC region. In countries such as Tanzania and South Sudan, the loss of cultural identity has been linked to a post-colonial struggle for social cohesion and national unity. For instance, the introduction of colonial education systems often disrespected local traditions and norms, resulting in a generation disconnected from its roots. In South Sudan, ethnic groups such as the Nuer and Dinka faced cultural erasure during colonial times, which left long-term scars in terms of identity (Johnson, 2021). Moreover, modern education continues to prioritize Western cultural values, leaving indigenous cultures underrepresented in educational curricula. The struggle to reclaim cultural identity and revitalize traditional practices remains a major challenge in post-colonial East Africa, as societies attempt to balance modernization with the need to preserve and celebrate their diverse cultural heritage.

Disruption of Traditional, Political, and Social Structures

Colonialism fundamentally disrupted the traditional political and social systems of African societies, including those in the EAC region. Before colonization, African communities operated under indigenous governance structures that were often based on consensus, age, and community participation. In countries like Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, tribal chiefs or elders played a significant role in local governance, maintaining social harmony and stability. However, colonial powers dismantled these systems in favor of centralized, often authoritarian structures that were aligned with colonial interests. The imposition of foreign legal and political systems created a disconnect between the state and the people, with indigenous leaders sidelined and traditional decision-making processes disregarded. In Rwanda and Burundi, the introduction of colonialism also exacerbated the division between the Hutu and Tutsi communities, leading to long-lasting political instability and violence (Hintjens, 2018). The dismantling of these traditional systems not only eroded indigenous power structures but also created a dependence on external political models that were not suited to the social fabric of local communities.

The lasting effects of colonialism are still felt today, as East African countries struggle to rebuild functional political systems that resonate with the diverse cultures and communities within their borders. In South Sudan,

the fragmentation of traditional governance structures contributed to the country's civil conflict, as various ethnic groups fought for control of the state apparatus. Similarly, in Somalia, the lack of a strong centralized government since the collapse of Siad Barre's regime has been partly attributed to the failure of colonial powers to establish effective governance models during the colonial period (Samatar, 2020). Even in relatively stable countries like Kenya and Tanzania, post-colonial governments continue to struggle with issues of ethnic-based politics and the legacy of authoritarian colonial rule. The disruption of traditional governance structures has created challenges for these nations in achieving political stability, social harmony, and effective governance.

Loss of Sovereignty and Self-Determination

The Berlin Conference and subsequent colonization led to the loss of sovereignty and self-determination for African nations, a challenge that remains relevant to this day. The arbitrary borders drawn by European powers disregarded the cultural and political realities on the ground, forcing diverse ethnic groups into single political entities that were often ill-equipped to govern themselves. This loss of sovereignty was particularly evident in the case of countries like Kenya and Uganda, where indigenous peoples were subjected to foreign rule without their consent or participation. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the exploitation of natural resources under King Leopold's rule stripped the local population of control over their land, leading to centuries of violence and exploitation. The establishment of colonial administrations imposed European systems of governance, forcing African nations to adopt foreign laws and political systems that undermined their ability to self-govern effectively. This loss of self-determination created deep-seated resentment, as African leaders and communities were denied the right to control their political and economic futures.

Even after gaining independence, the legacy of colonialism continues to hinder Africa's ability to fully exercise sovereignty and self-determination. In the EAC region, the persistence of foreign economic influence and the continuing dominance of Western powers in trade and investment policies suggest that true independence has yet to be fully achieved. Countries like South Sudan, which gained independence in 2011, continue to face challenges in asserting control over their political and economic systems due to lingering international influence and internal divisions. Additionally, the continued presence of foreign military bases and interventions in countries like Somalia and Uganda raises questions about the extent to which these nations can truly govern themselves without external interference. Sovereignty remains a contested issue across the EAC region, as nations strive to break free from the remnants of colonial control while navigating the complexities of globalization.

Cultural Resilience

Despite the deep cultural disruption caused by colonialism, the indigenous peoples of East Africa have displayed remarkable resilience in preserving and revitalizing their cultural practices. In countries like Kenya and Tanzania, communities have managed to retain their traditional languages, dances, and music, which serve as a means of connecting with their cultural heritage. For example, the Maasai in Kenya and Tanzania continue to uphold their pastoralist way of life and maintain their traditional social structures despite external pressures. In Rwanda and Burundi, despite the devastating effects of colonial rule, many cultural practices have been passed down through generations, particularly in rural areas. Traditional ceremonies, such as those performed by the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, have remained integral to community life, reinforcing social cohesion and continuity. The resilience of African cultures in the face of colonial oppression highlights the importance of maintaining cultural identity in the pursuit of national unity and social development.

This cultural resilience is also reflected in the growing movements across the region to revive indigenous languages, crafts, and traditions. In South Sudan and Somalia, the struggle to preserve traditional cultures is particularly important, as these countries have faced ethnic conflict and a loss of cultural identity due to colonial-era divisions. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the revival of indigenous art and music has been central to reclaiming a sense of national identity after years of colonial exploitation. Efforts to

integrate traditional African values into modern education systems and national policies are slowly gaining traction across the region. Cultural resilience, therefore, plays a crucial role in the process of healing the wounds of colonialism and fostering a sense of pride and unity among African communities in the EAC region.

Social and Cultural Transformation of African/EAC Societies

The colonial era was a period of immense social and cultural transformation in the EAC region, with the imposition of foreign systems reshaping indigenous societies in profound ways. Colonial policies disrupted traditional social structures and forced African communities to adapt to new ways of life dictated by their colonizers. In countries like Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, the introduction of Western education, religion, and governance structures led to the erosion of local customs and social practices. The spread of Christianity in particular had a deep impact on traditional spiritual beliefs, leading to the displacement of indigenous religious practices. Similarly, the European-style education systems established by colonial powers replaced traditional methods of learning, often deeming local knowledge and languages inferior. This cultural transformation, however, was not entirely one-sided, as African societies began to engage with these new ideas and adapt them to their own contexts, often blending Western influences with indigenous practices.

The post-colonial period in the EAC region has seen a continued evolution in social and cultural structures as countries attempt to reconcile their colonial past with the demands of modernity. In Tanzania, for instance, the legacy of Julius Nyerere's vision of African socialism sought to blend indigenous communal values with socialist principles, aiming to create a society that balanced modernity with tradition. In South Sudan, the cultural transformation was marked by a resurgence of ethnic identity after the long period of marginalization by colonial and subsequent Sudanese governments. Today, African societies in the EAC region continue to grapple with the tensions between modernity and tradition as they strive for social progress while maintaining cultural integrity. The transformation of social and cultural structures continues to shape the political and social landscapes of East Africa, influencing everything from governance to individual identity.

Rise of Nationalism

Nationalism in East Africa grew significantly during the colonial period, as indigenous communities began to demand autonomy and independence from their European colonizers. The struggle for independence was particularly pronounced in countries like Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, where nationalist movements emerged as responses to the oppressive systems imposed by colonial rulers. In Kenya, the Mau Mau uprising was a major example of armed resistance against British colonial rule, with the Kikuyu people leading the charge for self-determination (Ochieng, 2021). Similarly, in Tanzania, Julius Nyerere's leadership of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) championed the cause of African self-rule, eventually leading to independence in 1961. Nationalism in these countries was often fueled by the desire to reclaim control over resources and governance systems that had been taken by colonial powers.

In the post-colonial era, nationalism continued to play a significant role in shaping the political landscape of East Africa. In Rwanda, for instance, the rise of Hutu nationalism led to the eventual overthrow of the Tutsi monarchy, with a resulting shift in the balance of power. Nationalism in South Sudan was a driving force behind the country's eventual independence in 2011, as ethnic groups united against the dominance of Sudanese Arabs. Even in the DRC, where nationalist movements were initially suppressed by colonial powers, the independence struggle in the 1960s saw the rise of leaders like Patrice Lumumba, who advocated for the sovereignty and dignity of the Congolese people (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2020). Today, nationalism remains a potent force in the EAC region as countries continue to assert their independence and identity in the face of globalization and regional challenges.

Legitimization of Colonialism

The colonial period in East Africa was characterized by the legitimization of colonial rule through various ideologies and practices. Colonial powers used a range of tactics to justify their presence in Africa, often

portraying themselves as benevolent rulers bringing civilization, Christianity, and Western values to "uncivilized" peoples. This justification was particularly evident in the case of Kenya and Uganda, where British colonial administrators emphasized the civilizing mission of their rule, portraying it as a moral duty (Mamvura, 2018). Similarly, the Belgian administration in Rwanda and Burundi used paternalistic rhetoric to legitimize their control, framing themselves as protectors of the native population. Colonial powers also sought to legitimize their rule through economic exploitation, arguing that their control over African resources and labor was essential for the development of both Europe and Africa.

However, this legitimization of colonialism masked the exploitation and violence that underpinned the colonial system. The African population in the EAC region was subjected to forced labor, land dispossession, and systemic discrimination, all of which contradicted the supposed benevolence of colonial rule. In South Sudan and Somalia, for example, colonial administrations exploited local resources without investing in the development of infrastructure or social services, leading to long-term socio-economic challenges. In contemporary Africa, the legacy of colonial legitimization continues to be debated, as many Africans question the extent to which their nations truly gained independence or merely swapped one form of domination for another.

LEGACY OF THE BERLIN CONFERENCE IN THE MODERN EAC REGION

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 played a pivotal role in shaping the modern political and economic landscape of East Africa. The conference, convened by European powers, resulted in the arbitrary partitioning of the African continent into colonies, with little regard for the existing ethnic, cultural, and political boundaries. The impact of this partitioning is still evident in the East African Community (EAC) region today. The borders drawn during the colonial era placed various ethnic groups under one colonial power, leading to tensions and conflict that have persisted long after independence. For example, in Kenya, the Kikuyu, Kalenjin, and Maasai were placed under British rule, leading to a legacy of ethnic competition and political unrest, which has continued to influence the country's political dynamics (Odhiambo, 2020).

Moreover, the Berlin Conference and the subsequent colonial policies disrupted traditional governance structures and introduced European legal, economic, and educational systems that were often alien to local communities. This disruption has had long-lasting effects on the social and political development of EAC countries. In Rwanda, for instance, the introduction of ethnic identities by the Belgian colonizers, who favored the Tutsi over the Hutu, sowed the seeds of division that ultimately led to the 1994 genocide. Similarly, in Uganda, the British colonial practice of indirect rule, where they relied on local chiefs to administer the colonies, created deep divisions and entrenched ethnic hierarchies that have contributed to political instability post-independence (Mamvura, 2018). These colonial legacies continue to shape governance challenges in the EAC region, where ethnic identity often plays a significant role in political mobilization.

The economic legacies of the Berlin Conference also persist in the modern EAC region. The colonial powers exploited African resources for their benefit, creating economies that were heavily reliant on raw materials and agriculture, often with limited investment in infrastructure or industrialization. This model of exploitation has left many countries in the EAC with economies that are still largely dependent on primary sector exports, limiting diversification and growth. Additionally, the economic inequalities created during the colonial era, where a small elite benefited from the exploitation of resources while the majority remained impoverished, have contributed to the uneven development seen in the region today (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2020). Thus, the legacy of the Berlin Conference continues to influence not only the political boundaries but also the economic and social development of East Africa.

Post-Colonial Political Challenges

The legacy of the Berlin Conference continues to affect the political landscape of the East African Community (EAC) region long after independence. The arbitrary borders created at the conference left newly independent states struggling to consolidate power and establish stable governments. In many East African countries, the

colonial powers had put in place systems of governance that were not only foreign to the indigenous people but also inherently divisive. These structures often created an imbalance of power between different ethnic groups, laying the groundwork for political instability in the post-colonial period. For example, after Kenya gained independence in 1963, the political system favored certain ethnic groups, particularly the Kikuyu, which led to feelings of marginalization among other groups like the Luo and Maasai. This imbalance was a direct consequence of the way colonial powers had manipulated the political landscape during their rule (Maupeu, 2025).

Similarly, in Uganda, the legacy of colonialism left deep political fissures. The British had divided power between the Baganda, the dominant ethnic group in Uganda, and the other ethnic groups in the region. This led to a power struggle between ethnic groups when Uganda gained independence in 1962, resulting in the eventual rise of political leaders like Idi Amin, who relied on military power to stabilize the country. The tensions between ethnic groups in Uganda, particularly between the Baganda and the other ethnic groups, were exacerbated by the colonial divide-and-rule policies that favored one ethnic group over the others (Brown, 2024). These challenges of establishing unity and stability in post-colonial East Africa were compounded by the fact that the colonial powers had not set up any structures to promote national unity, leaving newly independent states to grapple with the complex legacies of partitioned societies.

The process of nation-building in post-colonial East Africa was not only about political consolidation but also about creating a national identity. With ethnic groups that had been historically divided or even pitted against one another by the colonial rulers, the process of forging a unified national identity proved to be difficult. In Tanzania, for instance, the leadership of Julius Nyerere emphasized the idea of Ujamaa (African socialism) and sought to build a collective national identity that transcended ethnic divisions. However, the vestiges of colonial rule persisted, and the national unity that Nyerere envisioned was difficult to fully achieve due to the deep ethnic and political divisions caused by the Berlin Conference's arbitrary boundaries (Kagira, 2025). These post-colonial political challenges are still evident today in many countries in the EAC, where ethnic tensions continue to shape political dynamics and governance structures.

Ethnic Tensions and Conflicts

One of the most lasting impacts of the Berlin Conference on the East African region is the ethnic tensions and conflicts that arose as a result of the arbitrary division of African territories. The colonial powers, in their efforts to control African societies, often manipulated local ethnic divisions to maintain dominance. These divides were exacerbated by the Berlin Conference, which did not account for the complex ethnic, cultural, and political realities of the African continent. In Kenya, for example, the British colonizers created artificial borders that split the Kikuyu people, who had once lived in a unified territory, into different colonial entities. This sowed the seeds for ethnic tensions that continue to influence Kenya's political landscape (Maupeu, 2025). The same can be said for Uganda, where the Baganda were given preferential treatment under British rule, leading to long-standing conflicts with other ethnic groups, particularly after Uganda's independence (Brown, 2024).

In Rwanda and Burundi, the colonial legacy is perhaps most tragic. The Belgian colonizers broke the existing social cohesion between the Tutsi and Hutu populations, favoring the Tutsi minority for administrative roles, which fostered resentment and ethnic rivalry. This political favoritism and the division of people along ethnic lines contributed to the violence that eventually erupted into the Rwandan Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, where hundreds of thousands of people were killed in ethnically charged violence (Neumann, 2024). In Burundi, similar ethnic tensions between the Tutsi and Hutu populations also led to cycles of violence and political instability in the post-colonial era. The colonial strategy of divide and rule left a deep scar on the social fabric of these nations, and ethnic tensions remain a source of conflict in both countries today.

The impact of these ethnic tensions is not only felt in violent conflicts but also in the political sphere, where ethnic identities often dominate the political discourse. In the EAC region, political parties are frequently

aligned along ethnic lines, and elections often become a contest between rival ethnic groups rather than political ideologies. This has led to a culture of clientelism and patronage, where politicians seek to mobilize support by appealing to ethnic groups rather than offering policies that address national concerns. Ethnic tensions and conflicts continue to undermine the prospects for regional integration within the EAC, as countries struggle to overcome internal divisions and build broader, inclusive political systems (Kagira, 2025).

Economic Disparities

The economic disparities between and within the countries of the East African Community (EAC) are another significant legacy of the Berlin Conference. Colonial powers extracted wealth from the region, primarily for the benefit of European industries, leaving East African nations with economies that were ill-prepared for post-colonial development. During the colonial era, the economic policies implemented by the European powers prioritized the extraction of raw materials, such as agricultural products and minerals, with little regard for the development of local economies. This created an economic structure in East Africa that was heavily reliant on the export of primary commodities, with limited industrial development or infrastructure (Akumu & Muturi, 2025). The disparities in economic development between the various countries in the EAC are a direct result of the colonial emphasis on resource extraction, rather than on building sustainable local economies.

The economic inequalities between the countries of the EAC are also shaped by the differing colonial experiences of the region's nations. For instance, Kenya, which was a British settler colony, experienced a higher level of infrastructure development, including the establishment of a railway system and agricultural export industries. In contrast, Tanzania, which was a German colony before becoming a British mandate, experienced less economic development during the colonial period. This has contributed to the uneven economic development between the countries of the EAC, where Kenya remains one of the more economically advanced countries in the region, while Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi continue to face challenges in terms of poverty and infrastructure development (Kagira, 2025).

The legacy of colonial economic policies is also evident in the social and economic inequalities within the countries of East Africa. The distribution of wealth and resources in many of these countries remains highly unequal, with a small elite controlling the majority of resources, while large portions of the population live in poverty. This inequality is a direct result of the colonial system, which privileged a small group of settlers and local collaborators while marginalizing the majority of the population. In Kenya, for example, the colonial period saw the displacement of indigenous peoples from their land to make way for European settlers, leading to persistent land inequality that has contributed to ongoing social unrest (Akumu & Muturi, 2025). These economic disparities continue to be a major challenge for post-colonial governments in the EAC, as they seek to address historical injustices while also promoting economic growth and stability.

In addition to the internal economic disparities, the legacy of colonialism has also hindered the ability of the EAC countries to cooperate economically. The artificial borders drawn by the Berlin Conference disrupted trade routes and created barriers to regional integration. These borders have made it difficult for countries to collaborate on regional development projects and have impeded the free movement of goods, people, and services. While the EAC has made strides in promoting economic integration, the legacy of colonialism continues to shape the region's economic policies and practices, creating obstacles to the creation of a more unified and prosperous East Africa (Neumann, 2024). The economic legacy of the Berlin Conference is a critical issue that the EAC must address in order to achieve sustainable economic development and regional integration.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN THE EAC REGION (140 YEARS LATER)

Cross-Border Conflicts and Disputes

The legacy of the Berlin Conference continues to manifest in cross-border conflicts and territorial disputes within the East African Community (EAC) region. One of the most evident consequences of the colonial

boundaries drawn at the conference is the continued contestation over borders that separate ethnic groups, kingdoms, and historically unified territories. For example, the border between Uganda – 54 tribes and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) a nation of 450 tribes has been a source of tension due to the vast resources along the border, including valuable minerals and access to Lake Albert. This dispute is complicated by the fact that both countries share numerous ethnic groups, and the colonial borders failed to account for these longstanding ties. The international community has repeatedly intervened to mediate these disputes, but the roots of these conflicts trace back to the arbitrary division made by colonial powers (Gahunde & Hurst, 2024).

Similarly, the border between Kenya and Somalia has been a longstanding issue, with both countries contesting the ownership of the maritime boundary in the Indian Ocean. This dispute centers around potential oil reserves and strategic shipping routes. The Berlin Conference disregarded the socio-political and geographical realities of local communities when it drew these borders, leading to the conflict we see today. The Somalia-Kenya maritime dispute has led to diplomatic tensions and has hampered regional cooperation efforts, with Somalia accusing Kenya of violating its maritime rights (Mugabi & Ndung'u, 2025). In addition to this, the unresolved border dispute between Tanzania and Burundi over Lake Tanganyika's water resources continues to fuel animosity, illustrating how colonial borders, often drawn without regard to existing cultural and political landscapes, contribute to contemporary conflicts.

In South Sudan, the artificial borders created by the colonial powers are also part of the region's ongoing struggles. South Sudan, having been part of Sudan during the colonial era, inherited its boundaries after gaining independence. The south-north division, created by colonial powers with little regard for the ethnic composition or geographical connections, exacerbated tensions. These tensions boiled over into a brutal civil war between 2013 and 2016, where the divisions were framed along ethnic lines, resulting in large-scale displacement and loss of life. These divisions were made more complex by colonial policies, which placed disparate groups under one central government structure, neglecting their distinct ethnic and cultural identities (Bala, 2024). The separation of the two regions did not resolve these underlying tensions but rather led to further conflicts.

Moreover, in regions such as the Great Lakes and along the borders of Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda, there are still significant security concerns that have been shaped by the arbitrary boundaries established during the Berlin Conference. The ethnic divisions, deepened by the colonizers particularly between the Hutu and Tutsi populations, have led to conflict that continues to be influenced by the legacies of colonial partitioning. The 1994 Rwandan Genocide and subsequent regional conflicts illustrate how colonial borders continue to be a flashpoint for ethnic violence in the region (Neumann, 2025). The legacy of these borders exacerbates ethnic tensions, leading to cycles of violence and preventing efforts at long-term reconciliation.

Integration and Cooperation within the EAC

Promoting regional integration and cooperation in the East African Community (EAC) is a complex endeavor, in part due to the enduring legacy of colonialism. The Berlin Conference's arbitrary border divisions and the resulting fragmentation of ethnic groups and resources have created challenges in fostering strong regional cooperation among EAC member states, which include Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda. The colonial partitioning resulted in mismatched governance systems, economies, and social institutions across the region, making it difficult to align national interests with the collective goal of regional integration. The lack of infrastructure and historical mistrust between countries that were once governed by different colonial powers further complicates the process (Chambers & Tetrault, 2024).

For example, Tanzania and Kenya, which share a border but were previously under separate colonial rule—Kenya as a British colony and Tanzania as a German and later British mandate—have often faced challenges in aligning their economic and political policies. Similarly, Rwanda and Burundi, although geographically close and historically linked, were subjected to different colonial experiences: Both Rwanda and Burundi were

under German colony, and then after Belgian control. These distinctions created divergent administrative practices and conflicting legal systems, which hindered post-colonial cooperation between these nations. Furthermore, the economic policies of each country have been shaped by its colonial past, with some countries focusing on agricultural export economies and others prioritizing mineral resource extraction, adding another layer of complexity to regional integration efforts (Chambers & Tetrault, 2024).

The presence of historical grievances, such as the Tutsi-Hutu divide in Rwanda and Burundi, and political distrust among post-colonial governments, has made it difficult to establish a sense of shared regional identity. These divisions have often led to conflicting national interests, undermining the ability of the EAC to present a united front in negotiations and policy-making. Moreover, the economic disparities across the region, which are legacies of colonial resource extraction policies, have prevented effective collaboration between EAC member states. For instance, Kenya's relative economic strength compared to other member states has sometimes led to resentment, as less developed countries feel marginalized in regional decision-making processes (Gahunde & Hurst, 2024). The challenge of creating a harmonized economic zone that balances the interests and macro-economic convergency of all member states remains a significant hurdle in achieving true integration.

The ongoing instability in South Sudan further complicates regional cooperation, as the country's internal conflicts impede its ability to contribute meaningfully to the EAC's development and integration efforts. South Sudan's colonial legacy, marked by its division from Sudan, has resulted in a fragile state struggling with internal power struggles, ethnic divisions, and resource-based conflicts. This instability undermines regional cooperation, as South Sudan's inability to provide political or economic stability affects the broader region's cohesion (Bala, 2024). In this sense, the EAC's integration efforts are often thwarted by the fragility of some member states, which stems directly from the colonial legacy of artificially drawn borders and ethnic divisions.

Colonial possessions of Africa in 1914 and their modern-day populations (OC)

In 1914, at the peak of European imperialism, Africa was predominantly divided among several colonial powers, with only Liberia and Ethiopia remaining independent. The British Empire controlled vast portions of Africa, including Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, and large territories in West and East Africa, comprising modern-day Ghana, Nigeria, and Tanzania. The French Empire held large swathes of West and Central Africa, including modern-day Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, and Chad, alongside territories in the Horn of Africa such as Djibouti and Somalia. The Belgian King Leopold II's personal control over the Congo Free State (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) was notorious for its brutal exploitation of resources and human labor, while Germany had colonial holdings in areas that today include Namibia, Tanzania, and Cameroon. Italy, Portugal, and Spain also maintained colonies in Africa, with Italy controlling modern-day Libya and parts of the Horn of Africa, while Portugal held Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau (Berman, 2018).

Today, the modern populations of these countries are a result of complex histories of colonial exploitation, migration, and cultural amalgamation. For instance, Kenya, once a British colony, has a population exceeding 50 million people, influenced by the British colonial-era introduction of the railway system and the establishment of settler economies. Nigeria, one of Britain's most prominent African colonies, has grown into Africa's most populous country, with over 200 million people, representing a vast array of ethnic groups and languages. Similarly, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which endured decades of exploitation under Belgian rule, now has a population of around 95 million people, making it one of Africa's largest and most diverse nations. These modern populations reflect the enduring legacy of colonial boundaries and demographic shifts instigated during the imperial era (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002).

The populations of former colonies in Africa today are marked by continued ethnic, cultural, and political complexities that trace back to the boundaries set during the colonial period. For example, the partitioning of

Sudan by the British and Egyptians has led to ongoing tensions and eventually the secession of South Sudan in 2011. In West Africa, the legacies of French colonialism persist, with countries like Ivory Coast, Mali, and Burkina Faso grappling with ethnic and political conflicts that were exacerbated by colonial borders and governance strategies. These challenges are evident in countries such as Somalia, where the legacy of Italian and British colonial rule has contributed to decades of instability and conflict. Modern African populations, while diverse and rich in culture, continue to contend with the socio-political fragmentation and economic challenges stemming from the colonial legacy (Mamdani, 1996).

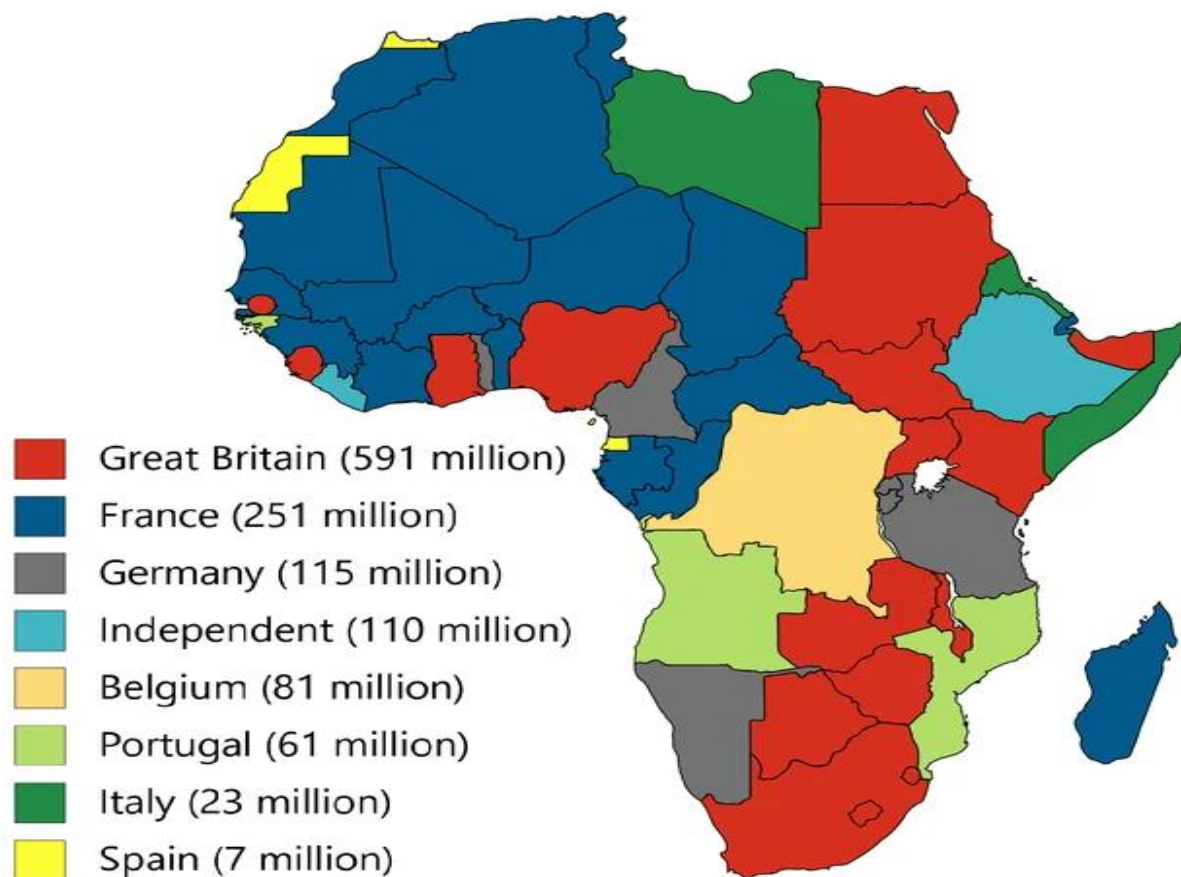


Figure 4: Colonial possessions of Africa in 1914 and their modern-day populations (OC)

Colonial Borders in Africa: Improper Design and its Impact on Borderland Communities in the East African Community (EAC) Region

Colonial borders in Africa, particularly in the East African Community (EAC) region, were drawn without regard for the indigenous political, ethnic, or cultural landscapes of the continent. European powers, primarily Britain, Belgium, and Germany, drew these borders during the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) with the primary goal of maximizing control over Africa's resources, often neglecting the complex social and political structures that existed prior to colonization. In countries such as Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, these arbitrary borders split closely-knit ethnic groups, creating lasting tensions. For example, the borders between Uganda and Kenya divided the Kikuyu people, while the divisions between Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC split the Banyarwanda ethnic group, leading to identity crises and cultural fragmentation (Mamdani, 1996). These divisions have perpetuated ethnic and political conflicts, especially in regions such as North Kivu in the DRC, where Banyarwanda and local groups such as the Bahunde have clashed over political control and territorial identity (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002).

In addition to the social fragmentation caused by colonial borders, economic challenges arose as resources were often divided unevenly across borders. For instance, in the case of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, the colonial administration used borders to control resources such as fertile agricultural land and mineral deposits. This led to the displacement of local communities from their traditional lands, which were now controlled by colonial governments for extraction purposes. Moreover, some communities that depended on cross-border trade and cultural exchanges were hampered by the newly drawn borders. The creation of artificial borders disrupted traditional economies and led to the exploitation of local communities, whose economic opportunities were confined by colonial policies that prioritized resource extraction over indigenous development (Tordoff, 2002). This economic disintegration compounded the negative impacts of colonialism, leaving many EAC nations grappling with development disparities that persist today.

The legacy of colonial borders continues to haunt the EAC region, as tensions between ethnic groups and national governments have escalated into violence and political instability. The colonial practice of “divide and rule” played a key role in fostering these divisions, as European powers favored certain ethnic groups over others, exacerbating conflicts. In post-independence East Africa, these historical grievances have been used by political elites to stoke ethnic and regional conflicts for personal or party political gains. For example, in the DRC and Uganda, the division of resources and political power along colonial lines has contributed to long-standing civil wars and border disputes. These colonial legacies have also influenced the formation of political alliances and have impacted efforts at regional integration within the EAC. Thus, the improper design of colonial borders remains one of the primary challenges to peace, stability, and economic cooperation in the East African region today (Bennet, 2018; Nyong'o, 2007).

Table 1: Colonial Borders in Africa: Improper Design and its Impact on Borderland Communities in the East African Community (EAC) Region

Country	Colonial Power	Colonization Date	Colonial Borders Impact	Impact on Borderland Communities
Burundi	Belgium	1916 (from Germany)	Divided ethnic groups such as the Hutu and Tutsi	Ethnic tensions and divisions heightened, particularly between Hutu and Tutsi populations.
Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)	Belgium	1908 (Congo Free State to Belgian rule)	Divided indigenous kingdoms and groups, such as the Banyarwanda and Bahunde	Banyarwanda in North Kivu became marginalized by local groups, contributing to cycles of violence in the region.
Kenya	Britain	1895 (East Africa Protectorate)	Artificial borders split the Kikuyu and other ethnic groups	Rift between communities, especially between settled and pastoralist groups, leading to tensions over land and resources.
Rwanda	Germany (until 1916), then Belgium	1884 (German East Africa), 1916 (Belgian rule)	The Banyarwanda people were divided between Rwanda, Uganda, and Congo	Banyarwanda faced identity crises and displacement, especially after colonial borders fragmented their territory.
South Sudan	Britain/Egypt	1899 (Anglo-Egyptian Sudan)	The Sudanese border split ethnically and culturally similar groups	South Sudanese people felt alienated from the Sudanese state, leading to secession and civil war.
Somalia	Britain (North), Italy (South)	1884 (British Somaliland), 1889 (Italian Somaliland)	Borders combined different Somali clans, dividing them between British, Italian, and French control	Division of Somali clans into different colonial territories led to post-independence conflicts and claims for greater unity.
Tanzania	Germany (until 1916), then Britain	1884 (German East Africa), 1916 (British rule)	Division of various ethnic groups such as the Zaramo, Sukuma, and Chaga	Unification under colonial rule was unstable, with tensions between ethnic groups and regional authorities.
Uganda	Britain	1894 (Uganda Protectorate)	Borders split various ethnic groups such as the Baganda and Bakiga	Ethnic and regional divisions between central and peripheral groups, particularly over political representation.

Challenges in National Unity

The legacy of the Berlin Conference has had a profound and lasting effect on the national unity of East African countries, contributing to ongoing ethnic, political, and social challenges. The colonial borders not only fragmented the region but also imposed foreign governance systems that did not reflect the indigenous political and social realities of the people. This has made the process of building cohesive national identities and governments after independence particularly challenging for countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. In Kenya, the forced unification of diverse ethnic groups under a single nation-state created tensions

that still persist today, as different ethnic groups vie for political and economic power. These tensions are often exacerbated by the legacy of colonial policies that privileged certain groups over others (Mugabi & Ndung'u, 2025).

In Uganda, the colonial-era divisions between the central Baganda and the peripheral ethnic groups have continued to manifest in political tensions and struggles for power. Following Uganda's independence, the Baganda, who had enjoyed political dominance under British rule, found themselves in conflict with other groups, contributing to the political instability that plagued the country in the post-colonial period. The power struggles between ethnic groups have hindered the formation of a truly unified Ugandan national identity, as different groups continue to assert their rights and demand political representation (Brown, 2024). The challenge of integrating various ethnic identities into a coherent national framework is a direct consequence of the colonial legacy that ignored the existing ethnic boundaries and governance structures.

In Rwanda and Burundi, the issue of national unity is particularly poignant, given the legacy of ethnic polarization between the Hutu and Tutsi populations, which was exacerbated by colonial rule. Belgium's preferential treatment of the Tutsi minority created a system of ethnic stratification that contributed to the outbreak of violent conflicts, including the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. Although Rwanda has made significant strides in rebuilding its national unity, the deep scars left by the genocide and the colonial legacy of ethnic division continue to affect its social fabric. Similarly, in Burundi, the Hutu-Tutsi divide remains a source of tension and conflict, affecting national cohesion and stability (Neumann, 2025). These ethnic tensions, rooted in colonial-era divisions, present significant challenges to fostering a unified national identity in both countries.

South Sudan, which was carved out of Sudan in 2011, faces similar challenges in building national unity. The country's diverse ethnic groups, which had been separated by colonial borders and the subsequent division of Sudan, continue to struggle with a lack of integration and political cohesion. South Sudan's post-independence civil war, rooted in ethnic and political divisions, reflects the ongoing difficulties in forging a unified national identity. The country's challenges are exacerbated by the legacy of colonial rule, which failed to establish a cohesive national structure, leaving the country deeply divided along ethnic and political lines (Bala, 2024). The enduring ethnic tensions in South Sudan illustrate how colonial borders continue to shape the national unity of East African states.

EFFORTS TO ADDRESS THE BERLIN CONFERENCE'S LEGACY IN THE EAC

EAC's Role in Promoting Regional Integration

The East African Community (EAC) has made significant strides toward fostering regional integration among its member states, which include Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda. These countries, once divided by the Berlin Conference's arbitrary borders, are working to overcome the colonial legacies that have shaped their political, economic, and social landscapes. A key initiative in this regard is the establishment of a common market, which aims to enhance free movement of goods, services, capital, and people across the region. The EAC has also worked on the harmonization of trade policies, tariffs, and regulations to facilitate smoother transactions and encourage economic cooperation. As a result, the EAC has seen an increase in intra-regional trade, particularly in agricultural products, minerals, and manufactured goods, which has contributed to the economic growth of member states (Cohen, 2024).

Additionally, the EAC has made efforts to align its member states politically, emphasizing the importance of democratic governance and human rights as foundational pillars for regional stability. This political alignment includes advocating for free and fair elections, the rule of law, and good governance practices among member states. While political challenges persist, particularly in countries like South Sudan and Somalia, the EAC has taken steps to mediate political tensions and encourage peaceful resolutions. The presence of peacekeeping

forces and political mediation within these states demonstrates the EAC's commitment to addressing the challenges posed by the colonial legacy and fostering political unity (Tayari & Mwanza, 2023).

Security cooperation is another critical area of EAC integration. The creation of regional security frameworks, such as the East African Standby Force (EASF), reflects an increasing recognition of the importance of collective security in addressing both internal and external threats. These initiatives aim to mitigate the effects of colonial-era divisions, where borders often failed to account for the movements of ethnic groups, thereby contributing to ongoing cross-border security challenges. Joint military exercises and intelligence sharing between member states have been vital in countering regional terrorism, organized crime, and militia movements that destabilize the region. The EAC's progress in fostering regional integration is an ongoing process, with member states continuing to work together to overcome the barriers left by colonial rule (Gahunde, 2024).

However, while regional integration has seen notable progress, there remain challenges rooted in the legacies of colonialism, such as economic disparities, lack of infrastructure, and mistrust between neighboring states. For instance, the legacy of uneven development continues to influence the pace at which some countries, particularly those with historical conflicts or internal divisions, are able to integrate fully. Moreover, the colonial legacy of ethnic tensions, especially in countries like Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda, has made political integration more complicated (Gahunde & Hurst, 2024). Despite these hurdles, the EAC's role in promoting regional integration represents a concerted effort to heal the divisions imposed by colonial borders and build a more unified East Africa.

Cross-Border Projects and Conflict Resolution

One of the most significant efforts to address the Berlin Conference's legacy in the East African Community is the implementation of cross-border projects and conflict resolution initiatives. The legacy of arbitrary colonial borders has contributed to numerous cross-border disputes, ethnic conflicts, and resource-based tensions. To mitigate these issues, the EAC has initiated several projects aimed at enhancing cross-border cooperation, peace-building, and conflict resolution. The EAC has focused on establishing mechanisms for managing shared natural resources, such as Lake Victoria, which is bordered by Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, and Lake Tanganyika, which is bordered by Burundi, DRC, Tanzania, and Zambia. Collaborative efforts have included joint management of fishing rights, environmental protection, and water resource management, which have helped reduce tensions and promote cooperation among member states (Mutabazi & Rutaganda, 2024).

Another key initiative is the creation of the EAC Conflict Prevention and Management Framework, which seeks to address the root causes of conflict within the region, including ethnic tensions, political instability, and economic disparities. This framework provides a platform for dialogue and mediation between member states, encouraging peaceful resolutions to disputes. In Burundi, for example, the EAC played a pivotal role in mediating the political crisis that erupted in 2015, helping to prevent the escalation of violence and offering a path to peaceful negotiations. Similarly, in South Sudan, the EAC, in collaboration with other regional organizations, facilitated peace talks that led to the signing of a peace agreement in 2013 and subsequent stabilization efforts (Chambers & Tetrault, 2024).

Cross-border infrastructure projects, such as the Northern Corridor Integration Project, also play a vital role in fostering cooperation and reducing tensions. This initiative involves the construction of railways, highways, and energy infrastructure that link several EAC member states, promoting trade and economic interdependence. By improving connectivity and fostering economic ties, these projects not only contribute to regional prosperity but also reduce the likelihood of conflict by increasing cooperation and mutual dependence among neighboring states (Mugabi, 2024). However, these projects are not without challenges, particularly regarding the equitable distribution of benefits and the potential for local conflicts over land rights and resource allocation.

In addition to economic initiatives, the EAC has worked on improving diplomatic relations and managing cross-border tensions through peacekeeping and joint military cooperation. The East African Standby Force (EASF) is a key component of the EAC's peace-building efforts, providing rapid-response capabilities to address conflicts and humanitarian crises in the region. The EASF has been deployed in Somalia, where it has helped stabilize the country amidst the ongoing conflict with the Al-Shabaab militant group. By fostering security cooperation and enhancing regional solidarity, the EAC's conflict resolution efforts aim to overcome the legacies of colonial border divisions that often left ethnic and political groups in conflict across national borders (Bala, 2024).

Despite these efforts, challenges persist in overcoming the colonial legacy of conflict. Border disputes, such as the longstanding tensions between Kenya and Somalia over maritime territory, continue to hinder deeper cooperation. Additionally, ethnic and political tensions within member states, fueled by colonial policies of divide and rule, often spill over into regional conflicts. However, the EAC's concerted efforts in cross-border projects and conflict resolution represent a significant step towards healing the divisions created by the Berlin Conference and creating a more peaceful and integrated East Africa (Mugabi & Ndung'u, 2025).

Reconciliation and Cultural Revitalization

Reconciliation and cultural revitalization are vital components of efforts to address the historical injustices and divisions left by colonial rule in the East African Community (EAC). The Berlin Conference's arbitrary borders and the colonial policies of divide and rule disrupted indigenous cultures, social structures, and governance systems. These divisions have left deep scars, particularly in countries like Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda, where colonial powers exacerbated ethnic divisions that later led to violence. In response, the EAC has supported various initiatives aimed at healing these divisions and promoting cultural understanding and national unity.

In Rwanda, the government has made significant efforts to foster national reconciliation following the 1994 genocide against Tutsi. These efforts have included the establishment of community-based justice systems, such as the Gacaca courts, which encouraged the public acknowledgment of crimes and the rebuilding of trust between ethnic groups. Additionally, Rwanda's national unity and reconciliation policy emphasizes the importance of healing societal wounds through education, dialogue, and community engagement. Rwanda's approach to reconciliation has also included promoting the idea of a shared national identity, focusing on unity rather than ethnic differences. This model has been praised for its success in transforming the country from a post-genocide society to one that is widely regarded as a model of peace and stability in Africa (Neumann, 2025).

Similarly, in Burundi, efforts have been made to address the legacy of ethnic divisions through the promotion of a shared national identity. The 2000 Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, brokered with the assistance of the international community, aimed to bring an end to the country's civil war and promote the peaceful coexistence of Hutu and Tutsi populations. While Burundi has struggled with political instability in recent years, the cultural initiatives aimed at reconciliation have focused on fostering a sense of belonging and unity among all ethnic groups. These efforts have been supported by both the Burundian government and civil society organizations, which have engaged in dialogue and education programs aimed at reducing ethnic animosity and promoting peace (Neumann, 2025).

Education and cultural awareness play a crucial role in the reconciliation process across the EAC. The EAC's emphasis on regional education initiatives, such as the East African School of Diplomacy, aims to promote understanding and cooperation among young people from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds. These programs encourage dialogue, tolerance, and mutual respect, helping to bridge the divides created by colonial policies. Additionally, cultural exchange programs and the celebration of shared East African heritage help to strengthen regional unity. These efforts also emphasize the importance of remembering the region's history,

acknowledging the injustices caused by colonialism, and fostering a collective vision for a peaceful future (Mutabazi & Rutaganda, 2024).

However, reconciliation efforts are not without their challenges. The colonial legacy of ethnic polarization and economic inequality continues to affect the region's social fabric, making it difficult to achieve lasting peace. In countries like South Sudan and Somalia, ongoing political instability and violence continue to hinder efforts at national unity and reconciliation. Nonetheless, the EAC's commitment to cultural revitalization and reconciliation represents a crucial step toward overcoming the historical divisions left by colonialism. Through education, dialogue, and the promotion of a shared East African identity, the region is working to heal the wounds of the past and build a more cohesive and peaceful future (Bala, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 left an indelible mark on the East African Community (EAC) region, shaping the political, social, and economic landscapes of countries such as Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda. One of the primary challenges arising from the Berlin Conference was the arbitrary drawing of borders, which disregarded existing ethnic, cultural, and political divisions. This division often resulted in long-standing tensions, conflicts, and struggles for identity among the diverse groups within these nations. Moreover, the imposition of colonial governance structures disrupted pre-colonial political systems, leaving many African states with weak institutions that were ill-equipped to manage post-independence challenges.

The conference also exacerbated the exploitation of Africa's natural resources, particularly in countries like the DRC, which suffered under King Leopold II's brutal rule. The colonial powers prioritized economic gain over the welfare of African people, leading to economic disparities that persist today. The legacy of these colonial policies continues to affect regional integration, as the countries of the EAC grapple with the effects of exploitative economic systems and lingering distrust among neighboring states. While the EAC has made strides in fostering regional cooperation and integration, the historical legacy of colonialism still poses significant challenges in achieving full unity and sustainable development across the region.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Looking ahead, the EAC faces both opportunities and challenges in overcoming the historical impact of the Berlin Conference. The process of regional integration, while advancing in areas such as trade, security, and political alignment, remains hampered by the historical divisions created during the colonial era. The borders drawn by European powers continue to be a source of conflict, and ethnic and territorial disputes are still common in several EAC member states. Furthermore, the legacy of economic exploitation means that many EAC countries are still struggling with poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment, despite their rich natural resources.

In the future, the EAC will need to confront these issues head-on, promoting greater unity and cooperation among member states to bridge the gaps created by colonial borders. However, regional integration efforts will require a nuanced approach that considers the unique political, economic, and cultural contexts of each member state. Additionally, addressing the ongoing legacy of colonialism will demand a focus on social justice, reconciliation, and sustainable development, ensuring that the benefits of integration are shared equitably among all citizens of the region.

These are not limited to:

- ✓ **Continued Ethnic Tensions:** The artificial boundaries drawn during the Berlin Conference continue to exacerbate ethnic tensions and political instability in the EAC region, with ethnic identity often influencing political allegiance and social dynamics.

- ✓ **Challenges to Regional Integration:** The legacy of colonial borders creates difficulties in promoting regional integration and cooperation within the EAC, as historical conflicts and disputes between neighboring countries persist, hindering efforts to foster a unified economic bloc.
- ✓ **Economic Dependency:** The resource extraction model established during the colonial era remains ingrained in the economies of the EAC countries, contributing to ongoing economic dependency on raw materials and limiting the diversification and industrial growth needed for sustainable development.
- ✓ **Social Disparities:** The unequal distribution of resources and development across the EAC region, resulting from colonial-era exploitation and marginalization of certain communities, continues to perpetuate poverty, underdevelopment, and social disparities among member states.
- ✓ **Opportunities for Reconciliation and Healing:** While the colonial legacy poses significant challenges, there is potential for the EAC countries to work together toward healing the wounds of the past through shared cultural initiatives, political reforms, and inclusive governance, fostering greater unity and peace across the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges arising from the Berlin Conference's legacy, it is essential that the EAC adopt a comprehensive approach that includes governance reforms, enhanced regional cooperation, and economic development initiatives. Strengthening regional institutions and promoting good governance practices will be crucial in mitigating the impact of colonial borders and building the trust necessary for deeper integration. Establishing effective conflict resolution mechanisms and fostering cross-border dialogue will help address territorial disputes and ethnic tensions that persist in the region.

Furthermore, economic development should be prioritized, with a focus on sustainable resource management, diversification of industries, and the creation of inclusive economic policies that reduce inequality. The EAC should also invest in education and awareness campaigns to promote social cohesion and understanding of the region's shared history, helping to heal the wounds caused by colonialism. Finally, fostering partnerships with international organizations and other African regional bodies will be essential in overcoming the challenges of the Berlin Conference and advancing the long-term goals of the EAC. By building on the progress made thus far and addressing these key issues, the EAC can chart a path toward greater stability, prosperity, and unity in the years to come.

REFLECTING ON THE FUTURE THROUGH THE MAP OF AFRICA WITHOUT BOUNDARIES EAC REGION

Reflecting on the future of the East African Community (EAC) region through the lens of an Africa without boundaries offers an opportunity to reimagine a continent that has been shaped by colonial-imposed borders. The arbitrary lines drawn by European powers during the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 divided ethnic groups, cultures, and communities, creating barriers to free movement, trade, and cooperation across Africa. In an ideal scenario, if the continent were to be free of these borders, the EAC region could experience unprecedented levels of unity and economic cooperation. Countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan could collaborate more seamlessly, strengthening regional integration through the free flow of goods, services, and people, without the hindrance of colonial borders. This would create a dynamic marketplace, promoting economic growth and shared prosperity across the region, while also fostering greater cultural exchange and unity among East African communities that have long been divided by arbitrary lines.

In a future where Africa is unified and the boundaries between EAC nations disappear, the region could potentially overcome the long-standing political and social tensions that have resulted from colonial-era divisions. The history of ethnic conflict and competition for power, as seen in areas such as North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) or the tension between the Bahunde and the Banyarwanda

communities, could be reduced or eliminated. Cross-border cooperation on issues such as infrastructure development, environmental sustainability, and regional security would be more feasible without the restriction of national borders. Shared resources, such as the Nile River, could be better managed, allowing the countries in the EAC to jointly address issues related to water usage, agricultural productivity, and conservation efforts. The economic interdependence of the countries within the region would foster peace, and the focus could shift toward sustainable development goals that benefit all members of the East African community, rather than the competition for limited resources within divided territories.

However, the removal of borders also brings forth new challenges and complexities that must be addressed for true unity to be achieved. The cultural, political, and economic differences between countries and communities are deeply ingrained, and a shift toward pan-Africanism would require the careful balancing of these differences. Moreover, regional and global powers may resist such efforts, fearing the loss of influence and control over the region's resources. Despite these challenges, envisioning a future where East Africa is free of colonial borders offers hope for a more cohesive, prosperous, and peaceful future, where the citizens of the EAC region can thrive together without the hindrance of the artificial divisions created during the colonial era. Through continued efforts in political cooperation, economic integration, and social transformation, the vision of a unified East African community is within reach.

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