

THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA: WHAT CHANGED BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW?

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Abstract: Africa, historically celebrated as the “Golden Continent,” has long been endowed with immense natural wealth (gold, diamonds, oil, cobalt, lithium, and more); however, it remains plagued by poverty, inequality, and political instability. This study draws on historical and contemporary evidence to argue that what Europeans coveted in the 19th century remains the focal point of foreign interest. From ancient civilisations such as Ghana, Mali, and Great Zimbabwe to the 19th-century Scramble for Africa, external powers have sought to control and exploit Africa’s resources. The colonial conquest restructured African economies into extractive systems to serve European industrialisation while dismantling indigenous governance and social cohesion. Despite political independence, these structures endure through modern neo-colonial mechanisms, including resource-backed debt, multinational corporate dominance, and aid dependency. This paper found that today’s competition for Africa’s critical minerals, driven by the global green energy transition, mirrors colonial exploitation with China, the U.S., and the EU securing long-term access under the guise of investment and development., which represent the new scramble for the continent, thus being marginally different from the old order or scramble highlighted by the Berlin Treaty of 1885. Therefore, the persistence of extractive systems underscores the need for African nations to reclaim economic sovereignty, pursue value-added industries, and strengthen intra-continental cooperation to transform resource wealth into sustainable development.

Keywords: *Colonialism, Economic dependency, Neo-colonialism, New Scramble, Old Scramble, Resource Curse.*



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Introduction

Long before the industrial era, Africa's wealth was globally recognised, as empires such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai flourished due to their control of gold-producing regions and dominance of trans-Saharan trade networks. Endowed with gold, salt, ivory, and other goods, cities like Timbuktu became legendary trade hubs connecting sub-Saharan Africa with North Africa and the wider Mediterranean (Matlosa, 2025). Egypt was the chief exporter of gold as early as 2000 BC, and ancient historian Herodotus marvelled at the abundance of gold in Ethiopia. He famously noted that: "The furthest inhabited country towards the southwest is Ethiopia, and their gold is found in great abundance from ancient times until now" (Harding, 2024). The continent's natural endowment made it a natural target for external powers seeking to grow their empires. What followed was the slave trade, territorial conquest, and economic plunder (Afigbo, 1987). The Berlin Conference gave European powers the green light to partition Africa, with no regard for indigenous cultures, languages, or governance structures (Otite, 1994). At its height, Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, and the Netherlands had divided nearly all of Africa, leaving only Liberia and Ethiopia as non-colonised states (Harding, 2024).

Notably, European powers with populations significantly smaller than the territories they occupied assumed control over vast lands in Africa. Belgium, with a population of only 7.5 million at the time, laid claim to the Congo Free State, which was 65 times larger than Belgium itself. Portugal, with a population of just over 5 million, colonised Angola and Mozambique, each about 21 times its size (Ashimolowo, 2007). These staggering figures underscore the audacity and greed of colonialism and highlight how Africa's resources were, and continue to be, the real attraction (Teperek, 2025). As such, these colonial templates, a mix of resource theft, political subjugation, and artificial borders, laid the foundation for persistent underdevelopment.

Independence did not bring liberation from exploitation. As Aja (2002) notes, while most African nations gained political freedom in the mid-20th century, economic dependence deepened. The new model of "development" promoted by the West reinforced dependency by tying African economies to extractive industries controlled by multinational corporations. Post-independence, new forms of control emerged, i.e., "Neocolonialism", through multinational corporations, foreign funding, and strategic trade agreements that target Africa's raw materials (Aja, 2002). Today, the fundamental drivers of exploitation remain intact, even as the rhetoric has shifted. Thus, Africa now supplies the world with materials critical for the green and digital economies, such as green energy and rare minerals; however, the continent continues to suffer from underdevelopment, conflict, and poverty. Cobalt from the Democratic Republic of Congo powers electric cars in the West; lithium from Rwanda fuels mobile phone production in Asia; and oil from Nigeria and Gabon feeds Europe's energy demand. Meanwhile, the countries providing these raw materials remain underdeveloped, facing infrastructure deficits, unstable governance, and persistent poverty (Schibli, 2025).

This enduring paradox is at the heart of this study, which posits that Africa's bounty continues to attract foreign intervention, and the patterns of extraction and economic marginalisation established in the 19th century persist to date. This paper explores these dynamics in detail, beginning with an examination of Africa's ancient wealth, through

the 19th-century colonial era, the scramble for Africa, and the contemporary structure of neo-colonial extraction. It draws upon historical data, contemporary economic statistics, and global geopolitical analysis, and posits that Africa remains poor not because nature has changed or the people are lazy, but because global systems are structured to extract, rather than to empower (Otite, 1994; Aja, 2002). To this end, the study also aims to challenge the prevailing narrative of African underdevelopment as a result of internal dysfunction. While acknowledging the role of corrupt governance and internal divisions, it demonstrates that these are often products of, or exacerbated by, external interventions. In view of these, this paper invites its readers to reflect on the long arc of history, to question modern global relationships with Africa, and to confront the uncomfortable truth that what Europeans found in the 19th century has not changed; the perceived difference is that the exploitation is now more discreet, more structured, and more systemic. Africa's natural wealth is unchanged; what has changed is who controls it and under which guise, replacing overt colonial conquest with systemic economic dependency.

Africa presents one of history's greatest paradoxes- as a continent endowed with abundant natural resources, from gold and diamonds to oil, gas, and critical minerals such as cobalt and lithium; yet it remains one of the world's most impoverished continents. This raised pressing questions: How can a continent so naturally wealthy remain so economically underdeveloped? Why does foreign interest in Africa continue to revolve around extracting its resources? Why has Africa remained the epicentre of foreign interest, extraction, and exploitation for centuries? The central thesis of this paper is that natural resources are the heart of foreign interference in Africa, as historical patterns of division, extraction, and underdevelopment established during colonialism persist, although in modern forms. The central argument is that the scramble for Africa, either in the 19th century, the post-independence period, or more recently, remains the same. The only difference is the newcomers from the Eastern Bloc, the scope of exploitation, and the masks of civility that the new scramble seems to adorn. Despite changing global contexts, foreign powers continue to covet Africa's natural wealth. The paper argues that Africa's predicament has shifted from overt colonial exploitation to seemingly benevolent development strategies, disguised in modern rhetoric such as aid, investment, and partnership.

Conceptual Delineations

Scramble for Africa and Territorial Partitioning

The Scramble for Africa historically refers to the period during the late 19th and early 20th centuries when European powers rapidly colonised and partitioned the African continent. This process was formalised by the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, where European states agreed on rules for territorial claims without African representation, leading to arbitrary borders that disregarded existing ethnic and cultural boundaries (Pakenham, 1991; Herbst, 2000). The colonial partitioning was driven by economic interests, geopolitical competition, and the desire to control resources and strategic territories (Pakenham, 1991).

The borders drawn during this period often split ethnic groups and combined rival communities within artificial political units, sowing seeds for future conflicts and governance challenges (Herbst, 2000). These colonial boundaries have largely

persisted post-independence, shaping national identities and political dynamics in contemporary Africa (Herbst, 2000; Englebert, 2009).

In the contemporary era, the "new scramble" for Africa involves renewed competition among global powers and multinational corporations for access to Africa's natural resources, markets, and geopolitical influence. While formal colonial rule has ended, patterns of economic dependency and external influence continue, often described as neo-colonialism (Taylor, 2014; Carmody, 2011). This new phase reflects continuity in external interests shaping Africa's political economy, albeit through more complex and indirect mechanisms such as foreign direct investment, debt, and security partnerships (Taylor, 2014; Akahome & Igwe, 2026).

Economic Exploitation

The Scramble for Africa was primarily motivated by economic exploitation, as European powers sought to secure access to Africa's abundant natural resources to fuel their industrial economies (Pakenham, 1991). Colonial administrations established extractive economic systems that prioritised the export of raw materials such as minerals, rubber, and agricultural products to Europe, while limiting local industrial development (Rodney, 1972). This created a pattern of economic dependency, where African economies were integrated into the global capitalist system as suppliers of cheap raw materials and consumers of manufactured goods from Europe. The imposition of monopolistic trade practices and forced labour further entrenched economic inequalities and underdevelopment. Thus, economic exploitation was central to the Scramble for Africa, shaping both colonial policies and the enduring structural challenges African countries face today (Rodney, 1972; Akahome & Igwe, 2026).

Political Control and Sovereignty Issues

The Scramble for Africa was a late 19th-century process where European powers rapidly colonised African territories, driven largely by economic interests and geopolitical competition. This led to the imposition of artificial borders without regard for existing ethnic or political divisions. Political control was established through military conquest and colonial administration, often undermining indigenous governance systems (Adetula, 2026). Sovereignty issues arose because these imposed borders and foreign rule disrupted traditional authority and created lasting challenges for post-colonial African states, which inherited contested boundaries and struggled with internal divisions. Additionally, sovereignty remains complicated by external influences and neo-colonial dynamics, affecting Africa's political autonomy today (Pakenham, 1991; Herbst, 2000; Krasner, 1999).

Post-Colonial Economic and Political Developments

The post-colonial period in Africa, beginning in the mid-20th century, marked a significant transition as newly independent states sought to assert political sovereignty and achieve economic development after decades of colonial rule. Politically, many African nations embarked on state-building efforts aiming to unify diverse ethnic groups within arbitrary colonial borders, often inheriting weak institutions and limited administrative capacity (Herbst, 2000). While independence raised hopes for democracy and self-governance, many countries faced challenges such as authoritarianism, military coups, and civil conflicts, partly due to colonial legacies of divide-and-rule and centralised power structures (Young, 1994).

Economically, post-colonial Africa grappled with transforming extractive colonial economies into diversified and self-sustaining systems. Many states adopted import-substitution industrialisation and state-led development models to reduce dependence on former colonial powers (Rodney, 1972). However, structural issues such as inadequate infrastructure, reliance on commodity exports, and fluctuating global markets hindered sustained growth. Furthermore, debt crises in the 1980s and the imposition of structural adjustment programs by international financial institutions led to economic liberalisation, privatisation, and austerity measures with mixed social and economic outcomes (Adejumobi, 2000).

Despite these challenges, there have been notable political and economic reforms in recent decades, including increased democratisation, regional integration efforts, and economic diversification in some countries (Adejumobi, 2000). Nonetheless, persistent issues like corruption, inequality, and external dependency continue to affect Africa's development trajectory.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted 'Dependency Theory,' which originated in the late 1950s and 1960s as a critical response to modernisation theory, primarily developed by Latin American scholars such as Raúl Prebisch, André Gunder Frank, and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023). It emerged to explain why many post-colonial countries remained underdeveloped despite global economic growth (Prebisch, 1950; Frank, 1967).

Dependency Theory posits that the economic development of peripheral (developing) countries is conditioned by their structural dependence on core (developed) countries (Adebanwi, 2026). This relationship results in the transfer of resources from the periphery to the core, thereby hindering autonomous development in the former. Underdevelopment is thus not a stage preceding development, but a condition actively produced and maintained by the global capitalist system through unequal exchange, exploitation, and political domination (Frank, 1967; Aja, 2002).

Key proponents include Raúl Prebisch, who highlighted the declining terms of trade for primary commodity exporters (Prebisch, 1950); André Gunder Frank, who emphasised the concept of "development of underdevelopment" (Frank, 1967); and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who analysed the political and economic structures sustaining dependency.

Major Propositions of the Theory

Structural Inequality: The global economic system is divided into core and periphery, where the core exploits the periphery through trade, investment, and political influence.

Unequal Exchange: Peripheral countries export raw materials and import manufactured goods, leading to unfavourable terms of trade and resource drain.

Historical Continuity: Colonialism established patterns of economic dependence that persist in new forms post-independence.

Limited Autonomy: Peripheral states have constrained policy space due to external pressures and internal elite interests aligned with the core.

Need for Structural Change: True development requires breaking dependency through delinking from the global capitalist system or restructuring it fundamentally (Prebisch, 1950; Frank, 1967; Aja, 2002).

Application of the Theory to the Study

Dependency Theory provides a robust framework to analyse the continuities and changes (Uchendu, 2000) between the Old Scramble for Africa—characterised by direct colonial conquest and territorial partition—and the New Scramble, marked by neo-colonial economic penetration, foreign investment, and geopolitical competition. The theory helps explain how the legacy of colonial exploitation established structural dependencies that persist in contemporary Africa's economic and political relations with global powers.

In the Old Scramble, European powers imposed direct political control to extract resources and integrate African economies into the global capitalist system as raw material suppliers (Imobighe, 1998). Dependency Theory elucidates how this historical process created a pattern of underdevelopment and economic dependence that shaped African states' post-colonial trajectories. In the New Scramble, although formal colonial rule has ended, the theory highlights how multinational corporations, foreign governments, and international financial institutions continue to exert influence through investment, trade agreements, and security partnerships that maintain Africa's peripheral status.

Moreover, the theory's emphasis on unequal exchange and limited autonomy sheds light on how African countries navigate pressures from global actors while attempting to assert sovereignty and pursue development. It also frames the New Scramble as a continuation of structural dependency, albeit through more complex and indirect mechanisms such as debt, aid conditionalities, and geopolitical alliances.

Thus, Dependency Theory not only explains the historical roots of Africa's economic and political challenges but also provides critical insights into the evolving nature of external engagement with the continent. It underscores that while the forms of control and competition may have changed, the underlying dynamics of dependency and inequality remain central to understanding what has changed—and what has stayed the same—between the Old and New Scrambles for Africa.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative comparative historical research design to explore and analyse the differences and continuities between the Old Scramble for Africa (late 19th to early 20th century) and the New Scramble for Africa (post-colonial era to present). This design is suitable because it allows for an in-depth examination of complex historical and contemporary phenomena, focusing on political, economic, and social dimensions over time.

Major Areas of Qualitative Comparative Historical Research Design:

1. Comparative Historical Analysis

The study systematically compared the characteristics, actors, motivations, and consequences of the Old Scramble for Africa with those of the New Scramble. This

involves analysing colonial-era partitioning, imperial ambitions, and the geopolitical context of the 19th century alongside contemporary patterns of foreign investment, resource competition, and geopolitical influence in Africa today.

2. Document and Literature Review

A comprehensive review of primary and secondary sources was conducted, including historical documents, treaties, colonial records, contemporary policy papers, academic articles, and reports on post-colonial economic and political developments. This provides a rich empirical base to trace changes in actors (from European powers to global and regional players), strategies, and impacts on African states and societies.

3. Thematic Content Analysis

The study employed thematic content analysis to identify and interpret key themes such as territorial partitioning, economic exploitation, political control, sovereignty issues, and development challenges. This method elucidates how the nature of competition and control over African resources and governance has evolved.

4. Case Studies

To deepen understanding, selected case studies of specific African countries or regions affected by both the Old and New Scrambles were analysed. These case studies illustrate how historical colonial borders and legacies continue to influence contemporary geopolitical and economic dynamics.

Sources of Data

Data for the study were drawn from the following: Archival materials and historical records from colonial administrations and international treaties; Scholarly articles, books, and reports on colonial history and contemporary African geopolitics; Policy documents and analyses from international organisations and think tanks; and Media reports and expert commentaries on recent foreign investments and geopolitical manoeuvres in Africa.

Analysis of Africa's Wealth Before the 19th Century

Long before colonial borders and European interference, African civilisations thrived on the strength of their natural resources, vibrant trade networks, and sophisticated governance systems. These early societies demonstrated remarkable economic acumen and global connectivity, debunking stereotypes of primitiveness or isolation.

(1) West African Kingdoms and Trans-Saharan Trade

Between the 7th and 14th centuries, empires like Ghana, Mali, and Songhai rose to prominence through their control over the lucrative "Trans-Saharan gold and salt trade" (Lee, 2014). Ghana, established by the Soninke people in the 7th century, accumulated immense wealth by taxing caravans carrying salt, ivory, and kola nuts across its territory. The Mali Empire, succeeding Ghana, reached its zenith under Mansa Musa (1312–1337 CE), a ruler whose pilgrimage to Mecca distributed so much gold that it destabilised regional markets (Ashimolowo, 2007). The empire also fostered intellectual advancement by developing centres like Timbuktu and Djenné into renowned hubs for Islamic scholarship and learning. Following Mali, the Songhai Empire emerged as West Africa's largest state, continuing with the accumulation of wealth through trade along the Niger and Sahara. In West Africa, resource-rich

kingdoms utilised tax systems to enrich their state coffers and foster cultural development (Cartwright, 2024).

(2) East African Coastal Trade and Swahili City-States

Along the Indian Ocean western coastline, the Swahili city-states such as Kilwa, Mombasa, and Sofala thrived from approximately the 8th to the 16th century. Kilwa, for instance, became a powerful economic hub, exporting gold, ivory, and slaves to Arabia, India, and beyond, while importing luxury goods in return (Vernet-Habasque, 2024). These coastal cities were connected to inland African polities such as Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe, whose wealth derived largely from controlling gold fields and long-distance trade routes. The archaeological findings at Great Zimbabwe, including Chinese pottery, Arabian glass beads, and gold artifacts, attest to these sophisticated international trade links (Lee, 2014). Across East and Southern Africa, trade networks linked coastal city-states with inland societies, enabling prosperous commerce and wealth-sharing (Vernet-Habasque, 2024).

(3) Southern African Economies and Early Complex Societies

The Great Zimbabwe’s economic foundation was rooted in control of regional gold sources and cattle-rearing businesses. Its elite structures, skillfully crafted in stone, symbolise the wealth and power of a highly organised society (Afigbo, 1987). The city’s reach extended across the Indian Ocean trade network via Swahili ports such as Sofala. These pre-colonial societies featured complex socio-economic structures. Africa’s pre-colonial trade enabled the spread of religion, technology, and knowledge. Mali became a centre of learning and Islamic jurisprudence, attracting scholars from across the Muslim world to Timbuktu and its famous Sankore University (Vernet-Habasque, 2024).

Table 1: Africa’s Wealth before the 19th Century

Empire/Kingdom	Wealth Source	Economic Influence
Ghana Empire	Gold and Salt Trade	Controlled trade routes and taxed caravans
Mali Empire	Gold, Agriculture	Massive wealth under Mansa Musa, scholarly centres
Songhai Empire	Salt, Trade Control	The largest empire in West Africa expanded commerce
Great Zimbabwe	Gold, Cattle	Regional trade hub, architectural sophistication
Swahili City-States	Ivory, Slaves, Gold	Traded with the Middle East, India, and China

Source: Vernet-Habasque (2024).

Table 1 above shows the diverse sources of wealth and economic roles of major African civilisations in the 19th century. The historical record shown in the table above illustrates that most African societies before European colonialism had a foundation of wealth, and they were far from passive or underdeveloped. They built powerful empires, structured complex economies, traded globally, and cultivated centres of learning and culture.

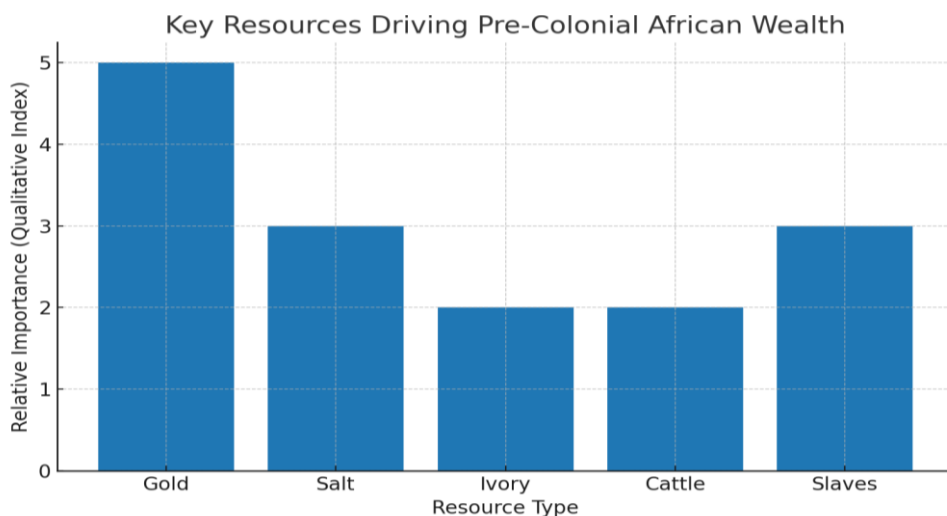


Figure 1: Key Resources Driving Pre-Colonial African Wealth

The chart illustrates the relative importance of different natural resources in building the economies of African empires. Gold still dominates as the primary source of wealth, as these civilisations dispelled the myth that Africa's decline resulted from preexisting backwardness. Instead, they remind us that contemporary underdevelopment stems not from lack of natural endowment or ingenuity, but from centuries of disruption and exploitation and the erasure of indigenous structures. In a continent where Nigeria flares off gas from reserves estimated at over 32 trillion cubic feet (with little domestic benefit), and where Zambia and Botswana export millions of tons of copper while struggling with basic infrastructure, the contradiction of Africa's wealth and poverty becomes clearer (Vernet-Habasque, 2024). Furthermore, foreign-backed armed conflicts, resource-driven civil wars, and political destabilisation remain common across resource-rich countries; a pattern too consistent to ignore.

Colonial Encounters and the 19th-Century Exploitation of Africa

The 19th century marked a critical shift in the relationship between Africa and Europe, characterised by exploration, imperial conquest, and the systematic extraction of African wealth. While European interests in Africa had existed for centuries, the 19th century witnessed formal colonisation under the guise of civilisation and commerce. European colonialism in Africa was not a mere political undertaking; rather, it was an economic operation designed to transfer wealth from Africa to Europe through calculated dispossession of land, minerals, and labour (Rodney, 1972; (Harding, 2024).

(1) The Scramble for Africa and the Berlin Conference

The Berlin Conference (1884–1885) formalised the partition of Africa among European powers, setting off a wave of territorial occupation. This event was not designed to benefit Africans but to regulate European rivalry while maximising resource extraction. Between 1880 and 1914, European control over African land increased from 10% to over 90% (Harding, 2024).

Table 2: Colonial Territories versus Population of Colonial Powers (circa 1900)

Colonial Power	Population (Millions)	Major African Colonies	Territory Size Relative to Home Country
Belgium	7.5	Congo Free State	65x larger
Portugal	5.5	Angola, Mozambique	21x larger
France	41.5	Algeria, Senegal, Mali, etc.	Approx. 20x larger collectively
UK	41.0	Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, etc.	Approx. 30x larger collectively

Source: Harding (2024).

Table 2 above demonstrates the disproportionate control of African territories by small European populations, emphasising the imbalance of power and scale of exploitation. Despite being a small European nation, Belgium, with a population of only 7.5 million at the time, gained control over the Congo Free State, a territory over 65 times larger. Under King Leopold II, the Congo was subjected to brutal extraction of rubber and ivory, leading to an estimated 10 million Congolese deaths (Harding, 2024). Similarly, Portugal, with just over 5 million people, assumed control of Angola and Mozambique, regions over 21 times larger than Portugal itself. These territories were rich in copper, cobalt, and oil, and served as raw material sources for Europe’s industrial growth. African resources became embedded in European development, while Africans were left with environmental degradation, displacement, and underdevelopment (Harding, 2024).

(2) The Exploitation of Minerals and Agriculture

Colonial economies were designed around monoculture and mineral extraction, such that in West Africa, British and French colonisers redirected local agriculture to focus on cocoa, groundnuts, and palm oil; products valuable to European industries. In Southern Africa, minerals like gold and diamonds were extracted in massive quantities, particularly by British-owned corporations like De Beers (Mamdani, 1996). In Nigeria, the British implemented a cash-crop economy that disrupted traditional systems of food production and created long-term dependency on imports. Meanwhile, natural gas and oil fields in the Niger Delta, estimated to hold over 32 trillion cubic feet of gas, were commercialised primarily for export, leaving behind communities plagued by environmental damage and poverty (UNEP, 2011; Offor, & Udeuhele, 2021).

Table 3: Key African Resources Exploited in the 19th Century

Resource	Region/Country	Colonial Usage
Gold	South Africa, Ghana	Currency reserves, jewellery, and finance
Copper	DR Congo, Zambia	Industrial manufacturing
Rubber	DR Congo	Tire and industrial goods production
Palm Oil	Nigeria, Ghana	Soap, lubricant, and candle industries
Ivory	Central Africa	Luxury goods in Europe
Oil	Nigeria, Angola	Fuel and industrial power

Sources: Harding (2024).

Table 3 shows the widespread extraction of valuable natural resources across Africa, serving European industrial expansion while local populations remained impoverished. The Democratic Republic of Congo, now recognised for having over 1 million metric tons of cobalt, which is critical for modern electronics, was similarly plundered for copper, rubber, and palm oil during colonial rule further reiterates that these extractions enriched colonial powers and laid the groundwork for the modern global digital economy (Harding, 2024).

(3) Justifying Exploitation: Racism and the Myth of Civilising Africa

Colonial expansion was rationalised through racist ideologies that portrayed Africans as inferior and in need of European “civilisation”. Such narratives justified slavery, forced labour, and political domination; hence, by dehumanising Africans, Europeans legitimised theft on a continental scale (Ngang, Iloh & Yuni, 2025). This attitude was visible in policies such as forced taxation and the creation of “customary” authorities that displaced indigenous governance structures. These systems not only eroded African identity but also created elite classes loyal to colonial interests; structures that remain embedded in post-independence politics (Ngang, Iloh & Yuni, 2025).

European colonisers constructed roads, railways, and ports, but not for African development. These infrastructures, according to Ngang, Iloh and Yuni (2025), were purposefully built to link mines and plantations to ports for export. For instance, the railway from Katanga (DRC) to the Atlantic Coast was designed exclusively to transport copper and cobalt to Europe (Schibli, 2025). The educational and healthcare investments were minimal and strategically restricted to a few schools that existed then. These institutions focused on training Africans to become clerks and intermediaries, rather than professionals or entrepreneurs. As such, colonialism engineered a system of economic and intellectual dependence (Ngang, Iloh & Yuni, 2025).

(4) Legacy of the 19th Century Exploitation

The colonial resource drain created profound structural inequalities, as Ngang, Iloh & Yuni (2025) posit that, despite being the source of global commodities, Africa became an underdeveloped periphery. It is noteworthy to say that the wealth extracted from Africa translated into modernity and industrialisation in Europe, while Africa was left impoverished and politically fragmented. In recent years, the continuity of this exploitation has been discussed under the concept of “Neo-colonialism”, where global corporations and international institutions dominate African economies, often using debt and trade agreements to enforce dependency (Bond, 2021).

Thus, the 19th century colonial encounters with Africa were not historical accidents but calculated operations of exploitation. The mineral and agricultural wealth that had sustained African civilisations for centuries was reoriented toward European needs (Schibli, 2025). For Africa, colonisation destroyed indigenous economies and instituted systems of inequality that persist today. This paper posits that the same resources, gold, oil, cobalt, and copper, that drew Europeans to Africa in the 19th century continue to attract foreign powers under modern economic guises. It appears that nature may not have changed; rather, what Europeans found in Africa in the 19th Century is what they are still searching for.

The Post-Colonial Legacy: Continuities and Contradictions

While the end of colonialism in the mid-20th century ushered in political independence for African states, the economic and structural legacies of colonialism have persisted. This section explores the paradox of independence without sovereignty over economic resources, the continuation of extractive patterns, and the contradictions embedded in Africa's post-independence political economy. The question remains that if nature has not changed, why has Africa not prospered with its vast wealth?

(1) Continuity in Economic Exploitation amid Africa's Critical Role in Global Energy

Africa's strategic significance is underscored by its control of critical raw materials as Africa holds nearly 30% of the world's mineral reserves, including: Platinum group metals in South Africa and Zimbabwe; Lithium in the DRC, Mali, and Zimbabwe; Rare earth elements in Burundi and Madagascar; Bauxite and manganese in Ghana and Guinea; Natural gas and oil in Nigeria, Angola, Algeria, and Mozambique (Etteng, 1994). Despite formal independence, most African nations continue to export raw materials while importing finished products, a colonial economic structure originally designed to benefit the colonisers. DR Congo supplies more than 70% of the world's cobalt, a mineral essential for manufacturing lithium-ion batteries used in electric vehicles, smartphones, and renewable energy storage systems (Schibli, 2025). With the global push toward a green energy transition, cobalt has become as geopolitically valuable today as oil was in the 20th century (Schibli, 2025).

The extraction-export model persists, with global corporations and former colonial powers continuing to dominate the mining, oil, and agricultural sectors (Teperek, 2025). Nigeria has over 32 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, yet widespread gas flaring continues, and electricity shortages persist. Even though DR Congo holds over 70% of the world's cobalt reserves, 70% of its population lives below the poverty line (World Bank, 2024). The global race to secure these resources has led countries to re-establish strong diplomatic and economic footprints in Africa. According to a 2024 UNCTAD report, over 40% of Africa's extractive industries are under partial or full foreign ownership, particularly from China, the EU, and the U.S. (World Bank, 2024). Foreign multinational corporations (MNCs) such as Glencore, TotalEnergies, and Shell still dominate Africa's mineral and energy sectors, repatriating profits while leaving minimal local benefits. According to Ohs (2025), "Africa's post-colonial economic framework is still largely determined by global commodity markets and foreign investors; an extension of the colonial extractive logic posture". This continuity, therefore, perpetuates underdevelopment, dependency, and economic vulnerability.

(2) Modern Neocolonialism: Aid and Economic Dependency

Modern neo-colonialism represents the continued economic, political, and cultural domination of African states by former colonial powers and global financial institutions (Mireille, Alain, & Adejare, 2024). This form of indirect control ensures that Africa's rich natural resources are continually extracted with limited benefits for the continent's people. Although most African countries achieved political independence in the mid-20th century, many remain entangled in exploitative trade relationships, mounting external debts, and heavy reliance on foreign aid and multinational corporations. A major manifestation of modern neocolonialism is the perpetual cycle of 'Aid dependence', where African countries receive grants and loans

from Western nations or institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. They often provide such aid with policy strings attached, governing how African nations should manage their economies, education, and governance. A 2024 World Bank report showed that 71% of donor funding to Africa is tied aid, meaning it must be spent on products or services from the donor country. This paper posits that such aid often comes with the extraction of more resources, as clearly illustrated in Table 5 below:

Table 4: Aid versus Illicit Financial Outflows from Africa (in USD Billions)

Year	Aid Received	Illicit Outflows	Net Resource Loss
2015	47	70	-23
2018	50	85	-35
2022	45	89	-44

Sources: Mireille et al., (2024); World Bank, (2025).

The table shows that Africa consistently loses more resources than it gains through aid. Despite receiving billions in development aid, illicit financial flows driven by tax evasion, profit repatriation, and corruption lead to a net loss, sustaining dependency and underdevelopment. In 2022 alone, Africa received \$45 billion in aid, yet over \$89 billion was lost through illicit financial flows, profit repatriation, and tax evasion (UNECA, 2023). Consequently, aid has often served as a tool to maintain economic leverage, rather than genuine development.

The mounting debt crisis is also one of the most evident manifestations of neo-colonialism. African nations, burdened with infrastructure gaps and budget deficits, often turn to international lenders such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and bilateral creditors. It is affirmed that these loans are frequently conditioned upon economic reforms that prioritise foreign interests, reduce government spending on social services, and open domestic markets to external investors. Thus, the structural adjustment programs (SAPs), which were introduced in the 1980s, forced most African countries to cut education, health, and public sector spending, while prioritising debt repayment (Mireille et al., 2024). The outcome was a weakened state apparatus and increased poverty, as clearly demonstrated in the chart below:

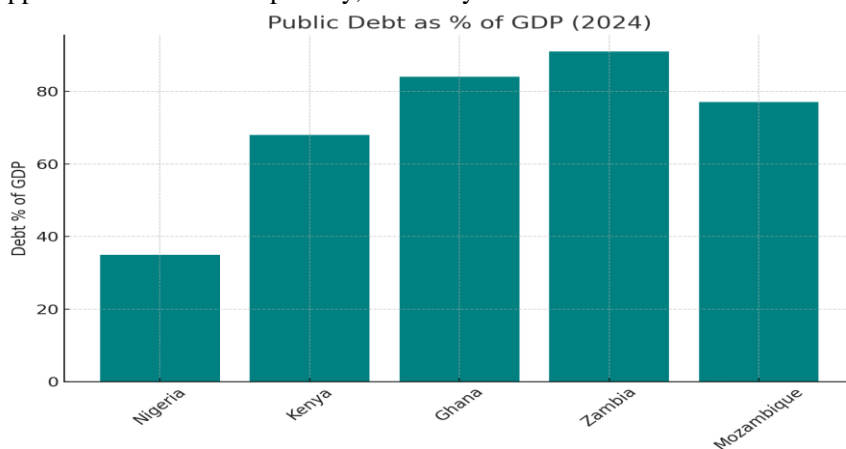


Figure 2: Public Debt as a Percentage of GDP in Selected African Countries

The chart shows the growing debt burdens of countries like Zambia, Ghana and even Mozambique, indicating how external borrowing has created a dependency cycle reminiscent of colonial economic exploitation (African Development Bank, 2023). Debt is utilised as a tool of control, and according to the African Development Bank (2023), over 60% of African nations are either in debt distress or at high risk of it. Many of these debts are tied to infrastructure projects financed by Chinese and Western creditors. In some cases, resource-backed loans force countries to repay with oil, cobalt, or bauxite, locking them into contracts that resemble colonial concession agreements. These levels of indebtedness compromise national sovereignty and economic autonomy, forcing governments into conditionality dictated by international lenders.

(3) Political Fragmentation, Division, and the Resource Curse

The division of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 created arbitrary national boundaries that ignored ethnic, cultural, and linguistic realities. Ngang, Iloh and Yuni (2025) affirm that this continues to haunt Africa’s post-colonial politics, resulting in ethnic rivalries, civil wars, and weak national cohesion. These nations possess immense natural resources yet face persistent economic hardship, political instability, and external exploitation. Through their histories, we trace how colonial legacies, neo-colonial interventions, and poor governance contribute to the ongoing underdevelopment of resource-rich African countries.

Take countries like Nigeria, Sudan, and the DR Congo, for example; they have experienced prolonged internal conflicts rooted in colonial boundary-making and unequal resource allocation. As Ngang, Iloh and Yuni (2025), argue, colonial boundaries produced states without nations, leading to post-colonial governance crises”. The fragmentation has weakened continental solidarity, making it easier for external actors to exploit resources by pitting communities, militias, or political elites against each other. This tactic, called “Divide and Extract, is not new; rather, it was used by colonial rulers and is still visible in conflict zones around mineral-rich regions like Katanga in DR Congo or the Niger Delta in Nigeria.

The term ‘Resource Curse’ refers to the paradox where countries rich in natural resources experience poor economic growth, weak institutions, and widespread corruption. Many African nations fall into this category because instead of fostering development, resource wealth often leads to elite capture, rent-seeking, and weakened accountability. Equatorial Guinea is an empirical example where oil accounts for over 90% of its GDP, yet 76% of the population lives in poverty. Similarly, Angola is Africa’s second-largest oil producer, but wealth inequality remains among the highest in the world (Ngang, Iloh and Yuni, 2025).

Nigeria is Africa’s largest economy and holds the continent’s largest reserves of natural gas (32 trillion cubic feet) and oil. Oil accounts for over 90% of Nigeria’s export earnings (Imobighe, 1998). Yet, the country grapples with high unemployment, widespread poverty, and underdeveloped infrastructure. Corruption and poor management of oil revenues have led to what is known as the ‘resource curse’ (Ngang, Iloh and Yuni, 2025). Regions like the Niger Delta suffer environmental disasters due to frequent oil spills and gas flaring. Mozambique is rich in natural gas, coal, rubies, and titanium, with the discovery of offshore gas fields attracting international investment worth billions of dollars. However, large-scale exploitation has not

translated into significant local development; the Cabo Delgado region, where much of the gas is located, has been plagued by insurgency as poverty/unemployment remain widespread (Ngang, Iloh and Yuni, 2025). Thus, resource-rich regimes often concentrate wealth and power in the hands of political elites, undermining democratic development, creating a situation where foreign companies partner with authoritarian regimes to access resources in exchange for bribes, royalties, or arms rather than development investments.

Table 5: Natural Resources and Poverty Rates in Selected African Countries

Country	Key Natural Resource(s)	Poverty Rate (%)
Nigeria	Oil, Gas	40.1
DR Congo	Cobalt, Copper, Diamonds	72
Equatorial Guinea	Oil	76
Angola	Oil, Diamonds	52
Zambia	Copper	54.4

Sources: Ngang, Iloh and Yuni (2025).

These statistics evidently illustrate the 'resource curse' where African countries rich in resources still experience high poverty rates. This contradiction highlights failures in governance, unequal distribution of wealth, and continued external exploitation.

(4) Persistence of Extractive Infrastructure and Technology

Infrastructure in Africa is largely tailored toward extraction and export rather than internal development. Cartwright (2024) emphasises that railways, roads, and ports were built to serve mines and plantations, connecting them directly to ports, not communities. Cartwright (2024) affirms that post-independence governments have often expanded this infrastructure, rather than reconfiguring it to serve national development goals. Thus, the colonial economic geography remains largely intact, whereby port cities dominate economies while hinterlands remain disconnected. The lack of intra-African trade and regional integration perpetuates dependency on Europe, China, and the U.S. Today, China is building roads, railways, and pipelines, mostly focused on resource corridors rather than rural transformation (Cartwright, 2024). Table 6 depicts how the built infrastructures focus on creating corridors for mineral extraction:

Table 6: Major African Mineral Resources and Foreign Interest

Resource	Country	Key Foreign Players	Strategic Use
Cobalt	DR Congo	China, USA	Batteries, Electric Vehicles
Lithium	Zimbabwe, Mali	China, EU	Green Energy, Tech Devices
Oil & Gas	Nigeria, Angola, Algeria	USA, France, China	Energy Production
Rare Earths	Madagascar, Burundi	China, USA	Electronics, Military Tech
Copper	Zambia, Botswana	China, Glencore	Electrical Wiring, Infrastructure
Uranium	Niger, Namibia	France, Russia	Nuclear Energy

Source: Boafo, Obodai, Stemm, & Nkrumah, (2024).

As shown above, Table 6 highlights the most sought-after minerals in Africa and the global powers involved. It reveals that China, the USA, and European countries continue to dominate extraction and supply chains for resources essential to modern technology and energy. African governments, as a result, are often caught in debt traps due to overreliance on foreign contractors and financiers.

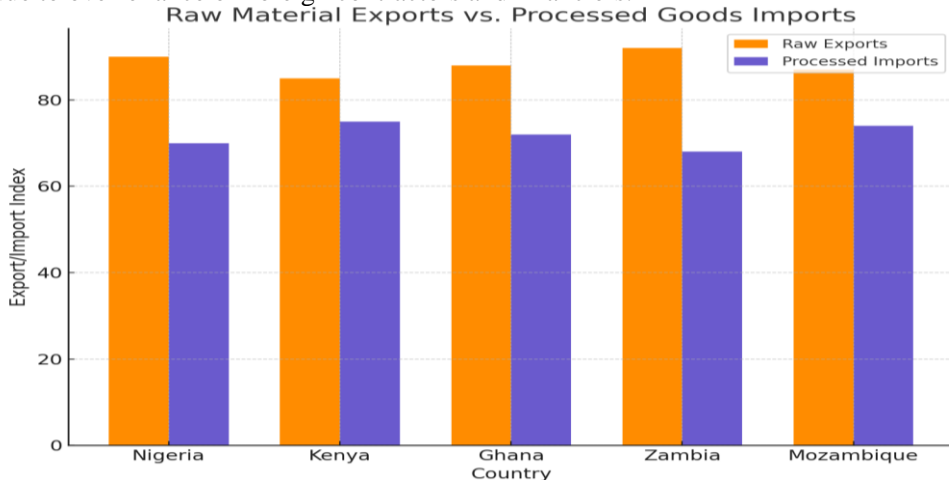


Figure 3: Raw Material Exports versus Processed Goods Imports.

As demonstrated in Figure 3 above, Africa remains a net exporter of raw materials and importer of refined goods as the terms of trade continue to disadvantage African economies. The imbalance shown highlights how African countries continue to export unrefined natural resources while importing expensive finished goods. This dependency replicates colonial trade patterns, stifles domestic industrialisation, and limits value addition within the continent. The 19th century patterns of exploitation-extraction without value addition, division without integration, wealth without welfare have remained shockingly persistent. Though the actors have changed (from colonial empires to aid providers and foreign investors), the logic remains intact. Africa remains the most resource-rich yet underdeveloped continent, not due to a lack of endowments, but because of systemic global and internal structures that perpetuate dependency and exploitation.

(5) The Modern Scramble for Africa: Strategic Interests and 21st Century Resource Competition

The turn of the 21st century marked a shift in the manner in which global powers engage with Africa. The post-colonial contradiction is that Africa gained political independence without economic sovereignty (Ngang et al., 2025; Ohs, 2025; Mireille et al., 2024). As a result, many African nations are free in theory but still controlled by external economic interests, leaving their natural wealth untransformed into human development. While colonialism has formally ended, the continent remains a hotspot of global competition, particularly for strategic natural resources. The “New scramble for Africa” involves a complex web of bilateral agreements, multinational investments, soft power diplomacy, and covert operations, all aimed at securing access to critical minerals, oil, gas, and other commodities indispensable to modern industrial economies. Today’s competition mimics the original 19th-century scramble, albeit with

sophisticated tools and players, including China, the United States, the European Union, Russia, and emerging powers such as India and Turkey.

Perhaps the most conspicuous player in the modern scramble is China. It is through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that China has invested billions in African infrastructure projects ranging from ports, highways, railways, and power plants. In return, China secures long-term mining concessions and favourable trade terms. For example, in Zambia, Chinese firms control significant shares of copper production (Emegha & Offor, 2019). In the DRC, a resource-for-infrastructure deal signed in 2008 saw Chinese firms granted mining rights in exchange for building roads and hospitals. Critics argue that these engagements reflect a new form of neocolonialism where Africa swaps sovereignty for loans and infrastructure (Okonkwo, 2011). Debt distress, opaque contracts, and environmental degradation have characterised many of these partnerships. Yet some African leaders defend Chinese involvement as an alternative to exploitative Western financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank. As China uses state-owned enterprises and diplomacy, the West relies heavily on multinational corporations, with oil giants like Shell, TotalEnergies, and ExxonMobil dominating Africa's energy sector. Tech companies, including Tesla and Apple, are directly or indirectly linked to mining operations in the DRC, often through intermediaries accused of child labour and environmental abuse (Moyo, 2023).

Conclusion

This paper has argued and posited that Africa's abundant resources remain the factor in the interminable quest for fortunes by both Europeans in the 19th century and their counterparts and newcomers from North America and the Far East in the 20th and 21st centuries. The scramble for Africa thus has two phases- the old and the new, with the old representing the direct colonial occupation, and the new being the economic invasions veiled in humanitarian interventions and political help.

Tracing the historical arc from ancient African kingdoms like Egypt and Ethiopia, renowned for their gold and knowledge, to the devastating intrusion of European colonial powers in the 19th century, and finally to the present-day neocolonial scramble for Africa's vast mineral wealth, the patterns seem different, but the soul and intent are not. The findings across the sections of this paper demonstrate a disturbing continuity: what Europeans found in Africa (gold, oil, copper, cobalt, lithium, uranium, and human labour) continues to fuel global capitalism while leaving Africans impoverished and divided. Africa stands today as it did centuries ago: rich in natural resources, strategically significant in geopolitical terms, and deeply coveted by foreign powers. What has changed is not the continent's wealth, but the mechanisms of its exploitation; the difference today is that exploitation now comes through multinational corporations, unfair trade agreements, and resource-backed loans that perpetuate dependency and debt.

The continent's abundance remains intact, but exploitation will continue until the continent reclaims ownership politically, economically, and intellectually. History need not repeat itself if African nations unite around common values of sovereignty, sustainability, and shared prosperity. Africa's condition raises a fundamental paradox: How can a continent so abundantly blessed continue to suffer such levels of poverty, inequality, and political fragmentation? This contradiction underscores that Africa's

problem is not a lack of wealth, but a lack of power over that wealth. Until Africa takes ownership of its resources, controls its trade terms, strengthens intra-continental cooperation, and radically restructures its political economy, the continent will remain the warehouse of the world and not the workshop of its own future.

Recommendations: Africa's Path towards Reclaiming Sovereignty and Wealth

The historical exploitation of Africa's immense natural wealth has resulted in centuries of economic underdevelopment, political instability, and cultural dislocation. These recommendations focus on pragmatic pathways for African nations to reclaim agency, redistribute wealth internally, and challenge the modern structures of dependency. Africa must not only recognise its wealth but strategically mobilise it for the benefit of its people.

(1) Strengthening governance and transparency: Africa must invest in Anti-corruption institutions that are legally empowered and free from political influence. Transparent mining contracts are quintessential for citizens to know what their governments agree to on their behalf and hold them accountable.

(2) Building value-added industries: Africa should adopt a regional industrial policy to prevent resource-rich countries from competing destructively, but instead collaborate on infrastructure and processing zones. Also develop in-country refineries and support local entrepreneurs in mining regions with access to training, technology, and capital to enter processing industries.

(3) Regional integration and collective bargaining: African states remain fragmented in trade and diplomacy; hence, stronger negotiation power can be gained through regional integration and collective bargaining.

(4) Reduced reliance on foreign intermediaries: Intra-African trade currently accounts for only 16% of the continent's exports compared to 70% in Europe. If Africa can boost this, it will reduce the need to seek markets abroad.

(5) Education, innovation, and indigenous knowledge: For true independence, Africa must invest in knowledge-based economies. Exporting raw materials but importing knowledge creates a dependency loop. STEM-focused education systems must be prioritised to produce local engineers, data analysts, and geologists. Partnerships with diaspora researchers can also bridge the technology gap, as African scholars abroad remain underutilised in local development.

(6) Revitalisation of indigenous knowledge: Traditional ecological practices should be further adopted in agriculture and natural medicine. Investment in indigenous knowledge can create eco-friendly and culturally appropriate solutions to sustainability and governance.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethics Statement

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.