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From Empire to Nation: Comparative Paths of African Decolonization

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Introduction

This book asks a simple question with complex answers: why did Africa's decolonization produce such varied institutional outcomes—from centralized republics and enduring monarchies to fragile federations, one-party states, and hybrid regimes? The comparative puzzle is not only about regime type, but also about the texture of political life that followed the end of empire: the frequency and form of violence, the salience of borders, and the capacity of states to govern. By bringing political theory into dialogue with archival research, the chapters that follow examine how specific choices made during the waning years of colonial rule structured the possibilities of the postcolonial present. The argument situates constitutional design at the heart of decolonization and treats partition, federal bargaining, and state-building strategies as intertwined rather than discrete processes.

The comparative frame is anchored by close studies of Algeria, Nigeria, and Kenya—three emblematic but contrasting trajectories. Algeria exemplifies revolutionary rupture and the consolidation of a highly centralized republic in the wake of a brutal war; Nigeria's path highlights protracted constitutional negotiation, ethnic federalism, and the challenge of balancing oil wealth with pluralism; Kenya illustrates the politics of land, emergency, and executive dominance forged in negotiation under coercive conditions. These cases are read alongside a wider set of African experiences to test whether the mechanisms identified travel across contexts. The goal is not to reduce complexity to a single cause, but to specify how combinations of exit strategy, border politics, and resource bargains yielded divergent institutional orders.

Three claims run through the book. First, modes of exit—negotiated settlements versus revolutionary wars—shape the initial distribution of power and the legitimacy of constitutional texts. Where violence defined independence, strong executives often emerged tethered to wartime coalitions; where negotiation prevailed, federal or consociational arrangements were more likely to be inscribed, even if later contested. Second, border architectures—partition, federation, or union—condition citizenship, security dilemmas, and center-periphery relations. Partitions can freeze conflicts into territorial form, yet also produce long shadows of irredentism; federations offer voice and autonomy but require fiscal and security pacts to endure. Third, economic endowments—especially hydrocarbons and minerals—interact with these political bargains, strengthening centralization when revenues are easily appropriable, or encouraging decentralization when extraction depends on territorial cooperation.

Methodologically, the study combines process tracing with comparative historical analysis. Archival records from late-colonial conferences, cabinet minutes, intelligence assessments, and constitutional drafts are read against nationalist party documents,

trade union correspondence, and international mediation files. These sources are paired with oral histories and secondary scholarship to reconstruct decision sequences and counterfactual options considered at the time. Throughout, the analysis foregrounds African intellectuals, jurists, and activists who theorized the state in real time, contesting both imperial templates and local hierarchies.

Although decolonization is often narrated as a temporal moment, this book treats it as an institutional process with legacies that extend well beyond formal independence. The chapters trace reform waves—of military intervention and civilianization, of one-party consolidation and liberalization, of constitutional repair through term limits and judicial empowerment. Border politics are followed across decades: the afterlives of partitions in Sudan and the Horn, reunification in Cameroon, and unions in East Africa. Violence is analyzed not merely as breakdown, but as a repertoire shaped by organizational histories—of guerrilla movements, liberation fronts, and security services built under empire.

The comparative reach beyond the anchor cases is deliberate. Ghana's republican turn, Tunisia and Morocco's monarchical adaptations, Botswana's low-violence transition, and the divergent paths of Mozambique and Angola broaden the evidentiary base. Cases of delayed or internationally managed independence—such as Namibia—allow us to probe how global norms and Cold War alignments mediated constitutional possibilities. Hard cases of collapse and refounding, notably in the Congo/DRC, test the limits of institutional design under conditions of external intervention and internal fragmentation. In each setting, the book asks how constitutional texts were made meaningful—or hollow—by the political economies that sustained them.

The stakes are not only historical. Contemporary debates over decentralization, natural resource governance, judicial independence, and term-limit evasion are haunted by choices made at independence. Understanding why some federations held while others unraveled, why some borders pacified relations while others inflamed them, and why some executives were successfully constrained illuminates present reform efforts. By specifying mechanisms rather than rehearsing teleologies, the analysis offers tools for diagnosing institutional fragility and for imagining constitutional repair attuned to the region's diverse political ecologies.

Readers will find that the chapters proceed from theory to comparative cases and then to cross-cutting themes. The architecture is intentional: to move from explanation to evaluation, and from national frames to transnational dynamics that empires bequeathed but did not determine. If decolonization opened a field of possible futures, it also narrowed options in patterned ways. Charting those patterns—and the agency that worked within and against them—is the task to which this book is devoted.

CHAPTER ONE: Theories of Decolonization and Institutional Choice

Decolonization looked less like a clean curtain falling than like a library of blueprints scattered by a sudden draft, each page snatched up by different hands. In the span of a few decades, the map of Africa was replotted with lines inherited from cartographers who never intended nations to live inside them, and with forms of government that ranged from royal courts to one-party command posts to courts of law still wearing wigs in the tropical heat. The puzzle is not why independence happened, but why its institutional harvest was so uneven. Some exits produced centralized republics armored by war, others federal bargains stitched together in midnight conferences, still others monarchies quietly preserving old thrones beneath new flags. The variance is too persistent to be noise. It invites explanation.

Theories of decolonization have often treated the end of empire as a temporal hinge, a moment when colonial weakness met nationalist momentum and something called the state slipped into being. That image captures drama but misses architecture. Institutions do not simply crystallize from the chemistry of crowds or the charisma of leaders, though both matter. They are negotiated under constraints: coercive balances, revenue horizons, and legacies of law that pre-date the flag. To compare Algeria, Nigeria, Kenya, and their peers is to see that the form of political life after empire depended on how the last bargains were struck, which threats were credible, and which resources could plausibly sustain a center. Decolonization was less a birth than a difficult, contested incorporation.

One influential line of argument treats decolonization as a sequential process in which colonial powers transferred power in stages to tame its risks. From this vantage, institutions were chosen to minimize uncertainty for rulers who feared both chaos and losses of prestige. Constitutional designs acted as insurance, offering nationalists enough control to accept restraint while reassuring colonial elites that their interests would not evaporate. The metaphor of managed transition suggests a rational script: hand over the keys, preserve the locks. The evidence is more unruly. Even where transfers appeared orderly, the underlying distributions of force and revenue were erratic, and agreements unraveled in ways that transformed federal blueprints into unitary citadels or turned constitutional monarchies into presidential monopolies.

A different tradition emphasizes violence as the forge of political order. Where armed struggle dominated, so the story goes, centralized command structures survived the battlefield and migrated into the state, producing strong executives and weak parliaments. This claim travels well in comparative perspective, yet it risks flattening

the organizational texture of conflict. Not all wars are alike, and not all centralized states emerge from them in the same way. The Algerian case shows how a war forged a presidency intolerant of internal challenge, but also how international pressures and oil revenues shaped its capacities. War mattered, but it mattered in combination with other mechanisms: the sequencing of truces, the design of referenda, and the politics of who returned from exile with guns and legitimacy in their pockets.

Scholars interested in negotiation have long stressed the role of constitutional conventions as sites where interests were translated into institutional form. These approaches highlight the craft of drafting itself: the sequencing of electoral rules, the allocation of fiscal powers, and the definition of citizenship. The premise is that where adversaries had time and information, they built institutions that reflected their relative weights, even if those arrangements later proved unstable. The difficulty is that negotiation rarely occurred on a level field. Colonial officials retained information and legal powers that skewed outcomes, while nationalist factions varied in their ability to mobilize or to threaten disorder. Constitutionalism under such conditions was less a contract freely signed than a temporary settlement written in disappearing ink.

Border politics add a further twist. Where decolonization meant partition, choices about where lines would be drawn produced durable effects on citizenship, security, and economic exchange. Partitions froze conflicts into territorial form, yet they also created irredentist longings that outlived independence itself. Federations promised voice and autonomy, but only when fiscal and security pacts gave them teeth. Unions and mergers promised scale economies, yet often masked asymmetries that erupted in later crises. These spatial architectures were not background conditions. They were institutional choices with feedback loops: they changed who could ally with whom, and what resources could be pooled or hoarded.

Economic endowments enter the story not as simple determinants but as amplifiers of institutional bargains. When revenues from hydrocarbons or minerals could be easily appropriated by a central gatekeeper, the incentives to consolidate power intensified. When extraction required cooperation across territories or with external firms, decentralizing deals became more plausible. These patterns help explain why some federations held together while others frayed, and why unitary republics in resource-rich settings proved both powerful and brittle. The interaction between revenue streams and institutional forms shaped the very meaning of sovereignty after empire.

Methodologically, this book leans on process tracing and comparative historical analysis rather than on large cross-national correlations alone. Archival records from colonial cabinets, constitutional committees, and intelligence assessments are read alongside nationalist memoranda, trade union bulletins, and international mediation files to reconstruct what actors thought they could do, and what they feared. These sources are paired with oral histories and secondary scholarship to trace causal sequences and to evaluate counterfactual claims that circulated at the time. The aim

is not to settle debates about intention once and for all, but to show how different mechanisms plausibly interacted in specific settings.

Foregrounding African jurists, intellectuals, and activists is not mere inclusion. It is a corrective to accounts that treat constitutional imagination as something imported, with local actors merely reacting. Figures who drafted alternative constitutions, argued over the rights of customary courts, or warned about the perils of centralized emergency powers were theorizing the state in real time, often under conditions of censorship or exile. Their interventions shaped what was thinkable, and sometimes what was doable, when the ink on independence documents was barely dry. Their debates echo in contemporary struggles over term limits, judicial review, and the meaning of citizenship itself.

One recurring claim in this chapter is that modes of exit structured the initial distribution of power and the legitimacy of constitutional texts. Where violence defined independence, executives forged in war often captured the commanding heights of the state, justified by the need for stability and the aura of sacrifice. Where negotiation prevailed, federal or consociational arrangements were more likely to be inscribed, even if later contested or subverted. These patterns were not destiny. They were initial conditions that set the terms of subsequent political combat, shaping who could challenge whom and with what tools.

A second claim holds that border architectures conditioned citizenship and center-periphery relations in durable ways. Partitions could lock groups into minority status across new frontiers, while federations offered institutional channels for voice that could defuse or delay conflict. Yet federations required fiscal bargains and security pacts to endure, and many did not survive the first decade. Unions promised solidarity but often concealed centralizing ambitions. These spatial choices were entangled with demographic anxieties and economic calculations, making them hard to revisit once flags were raised and armies repositioned.

A third claim emphasizes that economic endowments interacted with these political bargains to tilt institutional outcomes. When revenues flowed from points easily controlled by the center, the lure of centralization intensified. When extraction depended on territorial cooperation or external guarantees, decentralizing deals became more attractive. Resource politics did not simply reward the strong; they reshaped the strategies of actors trying to build, break, or reform states in contexts of scarce information and competing claims.

Theories of decolonization must also reckon with the role of external actors whose own institutional templates competed for influence. The United Nations, Cold War patrons, and regional organizations carried ideas about federalism, human rights, and electoral order that could embolden some actors and constrain others. These external influences were not omnipotent. They worked through domestic alignments,

amplifying certain options while making others costlier. Yet they mattered enough that any comparative study must treat decolonization as a transnational process rather than a series of national epiphanies.

Time is another variable too often flattened in accounts that treat independence as a single event. Decolonization was a process with a before, a turbulent middle, and an after that stretched well into the era of coups, reforms, and civil wars. Constitutional texts were not frozen at midnight; they were reinterpreted, suspended, and rewritten under pressure. The institutions that emerged were layered composites: colonial laws lived alongside nationalist decrees, customary courts contended with modern codes, and emergency powers became routine. This layering shaped the texture of political life long after formal transfers of power.

Violence in this account is not merely background noise or a sign of failed negotiation. It was an organizational repertoire that shaped information flows, coalition formation, and the credibility of commitments. Where armed struggle dominated, organizations with military wings had privileged access to state offices. Where negotiation allowed civilian factions to maneuver, institutional choices reflected their ability to mobilize constituencies through ballots, petitions, and strikes. The organizational map of late colonialism thus influenced which blueprints survived the transition and which were discarded.

The concept of institutional choice requires care. Actors rarely sat down with a menu of regime types and ticked options. They bargained under uncertainty, with incomplete information about who would rally, who would defect, and where the money would come from. Choices were iterative, often forced by crises that compressed time and narrowed options. Yet patterns of choice can still be discerned by comparing sequences: who convened, who drafted, who ratified, and who enforced. These sequences reveal power rather than merely recording preferences.

Constitutionalism in this period was both promise and predicament. The promise was that rules could tame power, protect minorities, and channel conflict into predictable forms. The predicament was that rules written under conditions of coercion or haste could become traps, limiting future maneuver and provoking backlash. Comparing Algeria, Nigeria, and Kenya shows how similar constitutional devices—federalism, emergency provisions, presidentialism—produced different outcomes depending on how they were embedded in prior bargains about force, borders, and revenue.

By examining these dynamics, this chapter lays the groundwork for the empirical chapters that follow. It does not aim to settle debates about whether violence or negotiation was superior, or whether federalism or unitarism was inherently more stable. Instead, it identifies mechanisms—exit strategies, border architectures, and resource bargains—that interacted to produce particular institutional combinations. Subsequent chapters test whether these mechanisms travel across cases, and how

they were recombined in settings as diverse as Sudan, Cameroon, and Tanzania.

The book treats decolonization as an unfinished process rather than a closed chapter. Its institutional legacies linger in contemporary constitutional repair, in struggles over natural resources, and in the afterlives of borders that still shape mobility and belonging. Understanding why some states consolidated while others fragmented requires looking backward to moments when pathways diverged, often in conference rooms, on battlefields, and at negotiating tables where the future was sliced and apportioned in haste. These choices set the terms of political life for generations.

If decolonization opened a field of possible futures, it also narrowed options in patterned ways. Charting those patterns—and the agency that worked within and against them—is the task of this book. The chapters that follow move from theory to cases and then to cross-cutting themes, tracing how constitutional forms were made durable or fragile in the crucible of late empire. Before that, however, the theoretical terrain must be mapped with enough precision to guide comparison without flattening complexity.

One challenge is avoiding the lure of teleology, the sense that outcomes were inevitable because empires always die and states always rise to take their place. The reality was messier. Contingent decisions, missed signals, and opportunistic alliances shaped trajectories as much as any grand logic. The Algerian war could have ended with a negotiated federation rather than a centralized republic; Nigeria's federal bargain might have unraveled earlier or held longer; Kenya's executive dominance was not preordained but emerged from bargains struck under emergency and land pressure. Counterfactuals are not idle speculation. They highlight which variables were decisive.

Another challenge is resisting the temptation to treat African decolonization as a single family of cases defined only by their shared colonial past. The region's diversity matters. Portuguese late colonialism diverged sharply from British indirect rule; Belgian extraction left different institutional residues than French assimilationist policies. These differences shaped what kinds of bargains were possible and which actors could credibly threaten or promise. Comparisons must be sensitive to these starting points while still identifying common mechanisms.

Theories of decolonization must also account for how legal continuity was manufactured. Colonial laws did not vanish at independence. Many were preserved, repurposed, or selectively repealed. This continuity provided stability but also constrained innovation. Courts inherited dockets and precedents; police inherited ranks and routines; land registries inherited boundaries and inequalities. Decolonization layered new institutions atop old ones, creating hybrid orders that could appear modern at the summit and customary at the base.

These layered legacies complicate any simple story about rupture or rebirth. Even where revolutionary war defined independence, as in Algeria, colonial administrative maps, fiscal tools, and security doctrines persisted in adapted forms. Where negotiation appeared smooth, as in parts of Anglophone Africa, colonial legal frameworks often constrained how radically new institutions could differ. The result was a patchwork of institutional inheritances that shaped what postcolonial leaders could actually do.

The concept of state-building after empire must also be decoupled from notions of linear progress. Capacity expanded in some domains while contracting in others. New armies could secure capitals but struggle with borders; new ministries could collect revenue yet fail at service delivery; new constitutions could proclaim rights while practice lagged. These asymmetries were not signs of failure alone, but of institutional reconfiguration under constraints. Comparing cases helps us see which configurations lasted and which proved brittle.

A final conceptual point concerns the relationship between decolonization and democracy. The era is often narrated as a missed democratic opportunity, but such accounts underestimate the illiberal temptations of the time. The availability of violence, the lure of resource control, and the weakness of horizontal accountability all pushed toward centralization. Democratic institutions were not merely delayed; they were actively contested by actors who saw them as risks or irrelevancies. Understanding why requires examining the payoff structures of late colonial bargains.

These conceptual foundations guide the chapters ahead. Each case study will revisit the mechanisms outlined here—exit strategies, border architectures, and resource bargains—while adding layers specific to its context. Algeria will show the interplay of war, oil, and referendum politics; Nigeria will test how federalism interacts with ethnic pluralism and hydrocarbon revenues; Kenya will illustrate how land and emergency shaped executive dominance. Together they form a comparative core from which broader patterns can be drawn.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that humor and irony are not out of place in this history. The grand plans drawn in distant capitals often collided with stubborn local realities, producing outcomes that were equal parts tragedy and farce. Pretension was met by improvisation, solemn treaties by informal deals struck in bars and back rooms. The institutions that emerged bore the scars of these collisions, sometimes looking more like jury-rigged contraptions than rational designs. Recognizing this does not diminish their significance; it clarifies how they actually functioned.

With these arguments in place, the stage is set for deeper empirical investigation. The mechanisms of exit, borders, and resources will be tested across cases, and their interactions traced through sequences of decisions, crises, and reforms. The goal is

not to reduce Africa's decolonization to a single formula, but to explain variation in institutional outcomes with enough precision to illuminate both history and its enduring consequences. From there, the book moves to the imperial legacies that structured the field of possibility for those who would build nations from fragments of empire.

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