AFRICA 27.03.2017 | Uzo Madu

Hidden histories

The EU at 60: How its birth had everything to do with Africa

60 years ago, on 25 March 1957, the predecessor of today's European Union was born - the European Economic Community (EEC). The Treaty of Rome (the legal basis of the current European Union) signed by Belgium, the Netherlands, West Germany, France, Italy and Luxembourg ushered in a new era of European co-operation. However, what is gravely overlooked in the grand histories of the European Union is that Africa was one of the greatest stakes in its creation. Fearful of the growing anti-colonial movements across the breadth of its colonies, Europe's 'very foundations were built upon the pivotal premise of securing its colonial interests.' Europe was in fact also seeking its re-emergence from the ruins of the Second World War, to become a counterweight to the economic and political leadership of the US and Soviet Union. And Europe needed Africa to do this.

The Treaty of Rome established a customs union, dismantling tariff barriers, but not only within European borders. Through the incorporation of French departments in Algeria and the association of overseas countries and territories, largely on the African continent, over 90% of the EEC's common market was in Africa, while less than 10% was in Europe. Over 20 largely French colonies and departments situated on the African continent were party to the Treaty of Rome. A 581 million EUR European Development Fund (EDF) was also made available for investments in all associated overseas countries and territories. German Chancellor, at the time, Konrad Adenauer attempted to deny the European Development Fund had anything to do with the colonial administration. However, in the Treaty of Rome negotiations, both Germany and the Netherlands were reluctant to make such a financial commitment when they were not being asked to participate in their administration – a colonial administration. This financial burden-sharing was particularly important at a time when post-war Europe's economy was in tatters and the management of its colonies became increasingly burdensome.

Securing colonial interests

Europe was losing grip on its Asian colonies and between 1945 and 1955, France had lost control in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and French India, whilst the UK lost its colonies in India, Burma (Myanmar), Palestine and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Moreover, anti-colonialism sentiment was growing globally, following the Bandung Conference of Asian and African states in April 1955, where principles of political self-determination, mutual respect for sovereignty were agreed with a view to empowering those still under colonial rule to become independent. Alignment on these principles were becoming influential in the United States and the United Nations, not only because of the Bandung Conference, but also to align themselves with the Third World to create allies in the Cold War competition. Europe, however, sought to prevent this wave of decolonisation making its way to African shores, through intra-European cooperation and France was to be the driving force.

During early Treaty negotiations, the French government submitted that it would not enter the European Common market without the incorporation of their colonies and departments. France was not willing to 'sacrifice its African vocation for its European one.' By late 1956, Belgium and France were working closely together on the incorporation of overseas territories and countries in the Common Market and in February 1957, a month before the Treaty signing, Paul Henri-Spaak, Belgian Foreign Minister explained that the importance of the EEC lay in creating a community of the same size and scale as their empires.

Incorporating these territories and countries as colonies into the Treaty of Rome, reflects a distinct interest in continuing colonial ambitions rather than a convenient consequence. Moreover, the association was ultimately a unilateral decision made by European Member States, without a formal consultation procedure suggesting a distinct need to entangle colonial relations up with the new phase of European co-operation. Regardless of this association being couched in development terms throughout the final Treaty text.

Creating a Third World power

Devastated by World War II, post-war Europe became a weary shadow of its former self. Meanwhile the US and the Soviet Union became the lead actors on the global stage, ushering in a new international order. Europe was desperate to make itself great again and reclaim its leadership crown by becoming a counterweight in the new global regime. To do this, Europe needed resources, resources that were abundant in many of its, largely African colonies.

An even earlier iteration of the European Union, the organisation of Western Europe, founded in 1948, saw the consolidation of colonial interests in Africa as means to create a 'Third World Power' that would achieve parity with both the US and the Soviet Union thanks to overseas raw materials in its African colonies. This consolidation became a reality, in the Treaty of Rome and in the working documents of the negotiations, in reference to African territories, in particular that its 'sources of raw material, variegated and abundant... are likely to ensure for the entirety of the European economy ...the indispensable foundation for an expanding economy.' And on the eve of the Rome treaty negotiations, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer sought to convince his cabinet to embrace the association arrangement by marketing France's hidden wealth in the Sahara and Equatorial Africa, to his cabinet. All of which, plus much more, according to Paul Henri-Spaak, Belgian Foreign Minister, 'Europe would have access to, which would be necessary for its sustainability'.

Forgotten Histories

The European Union's integration story silences the role of Africa. Neglecting its influence in shaping the path towards what we now know as the EU. This is intentionally misleading. The only way to comprehend the deep structures of the current European Union and salvage a way forward at its current inflection point, is to bring this history to life. One that might not so comfortably sit with its founding principles of peace, democracy, solidarity, freedom and equality – but one that tells the whole story.



Uzo Madu
London

Uzo Madu is founder of the website and current affairs programme *What's in it for Africa*, where she monitors and analyses EU-Africa political issues. She has written for African Business Magazine and Borderlex.eu, featured on BBC World News and CNBC Africa, and in

Forbes Afrique, Deutsche Welle and RFI Internationale. With over 6 years' experience in EU Public Affairs, she holds a Law degree and is studying an MA in EU External Relations.