

## Debating the African state

One of the key issues for historians of Africa when dealing with the period since the transfer of power is why so many African states have found it difficult to achieve political stability and sustained economic development. One school of thought that was particularly prevalent in conservative circles in the West in the 1970s was that the fault lay with the political elites in African states, who abused power and squandered development aid in order to enrich themselves and the cliques that had gathered around them. Accordingly, it was argued that the answer to Africa's problems was to reduce the state sector in the economy and let future development be shaped by market forces. While accepting that the exercise of power has been seriously flawed, other observers have noted that this tendency was not an arbitrary development, but rather one rooted in the legacy of colonial rule and the continuation of neo-colonialism. For example, David Fieldhouse has argued, in his *Black Africa 1945–80: Economic Decolonization and Arrested Development* (London, 1986), that one of the key errors committed by the new leaders was to continue the colonial policy of regulating the export of cash crops through marketing boards.

Other writers have gone even further in their analysis of the colonial state and the way in which it shaped the policies and politics of the new states. Crawford Young, in *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven, CT, 1994), has outlined the importance of the autocratic nature of the colonial state, arguing that this has played a crucial role in encouraging the centrality of the bureaucracy and intolerance of opposition. Conversely, Mahmood Mamdani, in *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), has argued that the legacy of colonialism was a weak rather than a strong state. Mamdani has pointed to the problems caused by indirect rule, which helped to exacerbate the tendency towards tribalism in Africa and thus widened the urban–rural divide. Jeffrey Herbst, in *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), has taken this idea even further, noting that state formation in Africa has been blighted by the problems caused by the difficulty of extending control over countries with relatively low population densities. This, in turn, has meant that the attempt to construct states in line with the traditional European model has been enormously problematical.