

## Was the Colonial Map of Africa a Bad Thing? and if so, what should be done about it now?

*Below are various views from scholars on African history:*

**Makau wa Mutua, Harvard University, Redrawing the Map along African Lines** [excerpts from his op-ed in the Boston Globe, 1996]

With the possible exception of the Americas, there is no other continent on which European influence has been so profound. Some of the most troubled lands such as Angola and Mozambique, were brutally colonized by the Portuguese for 300 years until the mid-1970s. The trauma of that history is evident today. The single most important event may have taken place in Berlin in 1885.

In that city, major European powers carved up a blank map of Africa by the strokes of a pen. They created more than 40 entirely new countries overnight without regard to existing political entities, ethnic boundaries, historical relationships and alliances and geographic and demographic variables.

Africans have to live within the new boundaries in completely alien political systems with contrived citizenry. These territorial units could not inspire loyalty because they were unnatural and forced. They dismally failed to forge new nationalistic identities. Although Africans fiercely struggled against colonialism, the postcolonial state they inherited continues to suffer from similar deficiencies: Its structures, demographic composition and boundaries are colonial.

Since citizens lack an instinctual and nationalistic bond to the state, those who become rulers pillage it. They resort to massive human rights violations to hold power and keep their fellow citizens down.

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*In 1997, Howard French, the NY Times reporter in West Africa, asked a group of African studies scholars, to help him write an article for the NY Times on whether the colonial boundaries were badly drawn and if so what should be done about it.*

*Below, are excerpts from that online discussion on "H-Africa," a free listserv on the Net which draws together scholars from around the world to discuss and clarify issues. At the end of the discussion, Howard French wrote his article which is attached.*

**Lowe, Chris. East Tennessee State University, October 23, 1997**

What do we mean if we say today's map is arbitrary? Two things, I think. One is that the divisions it inscribes produce conflict that seems unneeded. The other is that many particular communities of African people find the divisions and juxtapositions of the current map inconvenient, disruptive, threatening or oppressive. Many of the latter cases are not so much caused by where the lines are

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drawn as by how the governments behind them differentially treat communities and classes of people within them.

But there is a very profound way in which today map is not arbitrary, in the commonly understood sense of random. Rather, it has been arbitrated by history, a history of the international and imperialist (explicitly and unapologetically self-labeled as such, remember) exercise of power. One may be quite critical of that history and the power exercises involved. Yet the decision by the OAU [Organization of African Unity] to proceed on that basis recognized it as a fact.

**Fay, Derrick. Boston University, October 24, 1997**

The remapping exercise is a fairly dubious proposition, and is unnecessary as a way to demonstrate the arbitrariness of contemporary African borders. Certainly the point can be made well enough to convince most readers and students just by pointing out all the straight lines on the map and their lack of correspondence with any geographical features.

**Green, Kathryn. Cal State U-San Bernardino, October 27, 1997**

The OAU [Organization of African Unity] decided to forego the idea of redrawing the map of Africa due to the many other problems that the new nations faced.

What we should ask now is not what are the historical forces that created the political map that now exists in Africa--but is there a map that could be produced now that would be more beneficial for Africa now? Certainly we should be able to accept that the political map that Africa has been saddled with is a creation of the colonial powers. However, is there a better political map now? Something that would be more beneficial to Africa now?

**Thommason, Gordon. State Univ. of NY@ Broome, November 4, 1997**

It has well-defined (in terms of dark lines on a map contrast the way most atlases show the border areas between Yemen, Oman, and Saudi Arabia) borders around national (functional) regions, but within those we can map countless formal regions (using criteria such as language, ethnicity, and religion). Many of those groupings are what we might call shotgun marriages ñ colonial boundary-setting of functional units in clear disregard of formal criteria ñ grouping peoples together who at best have little in common and at worst have longstanding grievances against each other. And while a shotgun marriage may preclude the birth of a "fatherless" child, it does not prevent (and in fact might we predict) subsequent spouse abuse.

Geographers are frequently drawing lines around "formal" (or formally defined) regions on the basis of criteria such as ethnicity. Such formal regions are distinguished by definition from "functional" regions that have well defined boundaries (e.g.: political units). In contrast to functional regions, formal regions

are characterized using (with all due apologies to World Systems) a vocabulary of "Core" and "Periphery" with the clear and explicit recognition that as one moves away from the core toward the periphery the criterion being mapped will be more dilute or interspersed with non-comparable people.

Functional regions are ALL defined using non-human reference points (this surveyor's marker, that mountain peak, a fence placed to follow a line drawn upon a map whether to demarcate a farm or a nation). Formal regions, rather than mapping SPACE, map human populations, as they exist in space.

And human occupation patterns are, short of ethnic cleansing, not neat and clear-cut.

With regard to Africa, then, the problem as this thread has addressed it is that on the national level functional regions do not correspond with formal regions. In fact, except perhaps for a few island cultures with relatively homogenous populations (thinking Polynesia) it is very rare that political boundaries (defining a functional region) coincide with the formal regions mapped by cultural geographers according to some arbitrary factor.

**Fay, Derrick. Boston University, October 24, 1997**

There is the issue of ethnic consciousness and the problems 1) that many pre-colonial polities contained multiple linguistic and cultural groups and 2) that ethnicity is in many places a product of the reification of cultural differences and the creation of standardized written languages in the colonial period.

**Thornton, John. Millersville University, October 23, 1997**

The idea that somehow there is a "natural" division of Africa in language based tribes that has been violated by colonial rule and remains violated in post-colonial Africa, does not owe a great deal to our almost unthinking acceptance of the nineteenth century idea that there ought to be nation states composed of single linguistic communities, with a state for every language. Obviously this hasn't worked very well for Europe, and would probably work even less well in Africa with its hundreds if not thousands of mutually unintelligible languages.

**Limb, Peter. University of Western Australia, October 29, 1997**

The instability of internal borders during secessionist conflicts is another complicating factor in this grand cartographic exercise. For instance, in Southern Sudan the territories controlled by the warring parties have been changing almost monthly over many years. Any realistic map should indicate this, but how? Boundaries between Somalia and Ethiopia, and Cameroon and Nigeria, remain contested.

✓✓✓ Africa is not alone in possessing such fuzzy-areas, as witness the re-drawing the maps in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or the continuing ill-defined nature of boundaries in Kashmir, or the South China Sea. What does this say about the

correlation between effective political power and maps? In colonial times, maps often were fiction, drawn ahead of effective administration. Do we need post-colonial fictional maps?

**Morier, Eric. State University of NY, October 31, 1997**

Most changes which have taken place, and most desires to have further changes, have to do with state politics, state interest, etc. I would emphasize that it has little to do with people's desire. African people have (eventually) accepted the borders and now negotiate them on a daily basis, with quite some efficiency.

As far as I can gather from my own experience as well as readings, African peasants and workers have little concern and interest in making their country bigger. In other words, this desire to change borders on the ground is really just an elite fantasy.

*These excerpts were selected by Alison Dewey, under the direction of Barbara B. Brown. Ms. Dewey is a graduate assistant for the Outreach Program of the African Studies Center, Boston University.  
<[www.bu.edu/afr/Outreach](http://www.bu.edu/afr/Outreach)> email: [africa@bu.edu](mailto:africa@bu.edu) tel: 617-353-7303*