

## The Boundaries of an African Renaissance

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### Introduction

Since 1990 there have been 25 democratic elections in Africa. This has brought new leadership, a strong movement away from command economies, and an increasing role for Africa on the world political stage. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni first identified this phenomena as a “*decade of awakening*” but South Africa’s Deputy President Thabo Mbeki’s bolder catch-phrase, an “*African Renaissance*”, has won more headlines.

Indeed, the winds of change are blowing. More than half of the state economies in Africa are exceeding an annual growth rate of five percent. Hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign direct investment are entering African service and manufacturing industries. Dictatorships that once characterised more than half the continent are now shunned, isolated, and vulnerable, as illustrated by the fall of Mobutu. Africa can also boast of an Olympic bid, an African Secretary-General of the United Nations, and revitalised diplomatic efforts, for example mediation in the Zaire conflict and moves toward a seat on the UN Security Council.

Still there is one issue vital to this ‘rebirth’ that has not yet received adequate attention: the 80,000 kilometres of boundaries designed last century for European markets and ‘divide and rule’ politics. This colonial inheritance has contributed to endless wars, ethnic violence, failed states, and Africa’s reputation as the number one place for coups, refugees, and genocide (Griggs, 1994). Figure 1 illustrates some of the exclaves, enclaves, landlocked states, proruptions, trans-state nationalities, and intra-state nationalities that provide a structural basis for conflict.

Territorial units that are economically, culturally, and politically problematic could undermine an African renaissance. There are two main theories on how to meet this challenge:

- redesign African boundaries; and,
- de-signify the boundaries through regional integration.

The merits and demerits of each will be examined after a brief discussion on how African perceptions of boundaries could be the key to facilitating change.

### A Renaissance in Boundary Perceptions

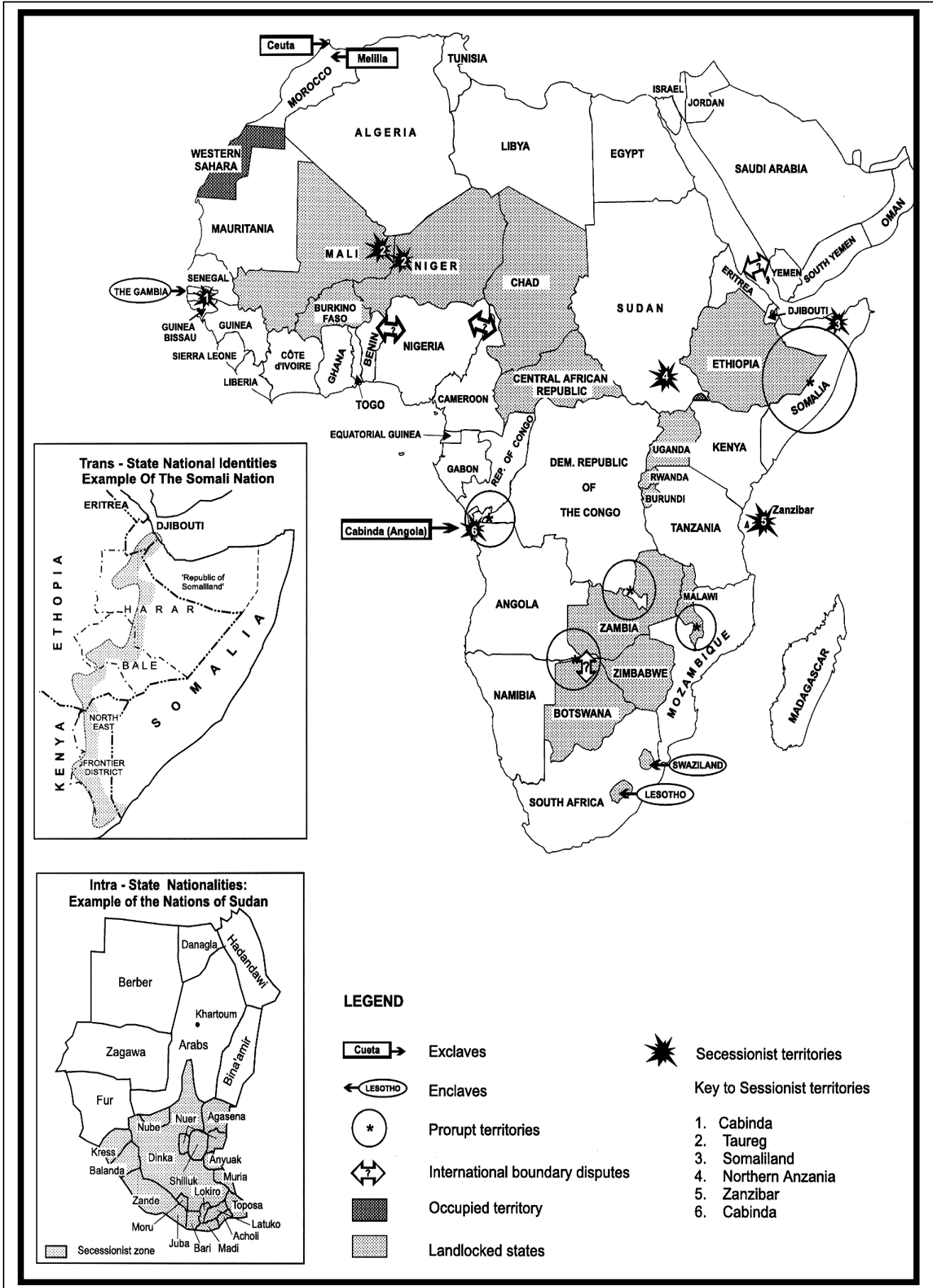
The boundaries designed and perceived by Europeans at the 1884 Berlin Conference have been perpetuated by African leaders since independence. From its founding in 1963, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) has steadfastly refused to host any discussion of modifying colonial boundaries. It is still widely perceived that a scramble for wealth and power would follow leading to instability.

The reluctance to address the damage that ensued from the scramble for Africa partly rests on the perception of boundaries as immobile lines in the dirt that act as containers of wealth and authority. Boundaries have not been seen as mobile products of our needs and perceptions that require constant monitoring and management. Fixed ideas promote static boundaries so it is useful to reflect on the perceptions that inform us.

**Figure 2: A few effects of human boundaries**

| Bio-physically | Economically               | Culturally                        | Politically       |
|----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| coastline      | trade zones                | nationality                       | countries         |
| parks          | tax bases                  | ethnic neighbourhoods             | wards             |
| timberline     | economic organisations     | outfields and infields in cricket | regional councils |
| gardens        | central business districts | parish                            | provinces         |
| traffic lanes  | customs posts              | dominant cuisine                  | capital cities    |

A boundary is the interface that humans perceive or create between two phenomenon in order to organise our activities in the world. Boundaries may be created through mental categories (e.g., yours and mine), delimitation (representation on a



map), or demarcation (e.g., drawing a line on the ground). Such processes begin soon after birth because we must distinguish between ourselves, others, and our environment for self-preservation and advancement. Thus boundaries are not dead lines but integral to our survival. Figure 2 indicates just a few of the uncountable ways that boundaries help us to order and make sense of our world.

Unfortunately, the active association between boundaries and human survival has escaped our notice to a dangerous degree. The limited perception of boundaries as lines in the dirt that divide administrative realms helps account for the human propensity to adjust inappropriate boundaries only after they have caused severe problems (e.g., massive drought, collisions at a traffic intersection or the outbreak of war). Perceiving boundaries as fixed also promotes conflict situations since adjustments are integral to our biological functioning and security at all scales. Figure 3 shows how opposing viewpoints on bounded space can create conflict and even general hostility toward the idea of boundary adjustments.

**Figure 3: Perspectives relating to bounded space**

| Pejorative      | Neutral          | Positive           |
|-----------------|------------------|--------------------|
| incarcerated    | confined         | secured            |
| restricted      | administered     | protected          |
| desolate region | uninhabited area | wildlife sanctuary |
| cut-off         | divided          | freed              |
| refugee         | migrant          | traveller          |
| outsider        | neighbour        | insider            |

Not even international boundaries are static and fixed on the ground. As boundary specialists recognise, the boundaries that separate states are actually permeable and invisible planes that extend from the earth below ground (i.e., mineral rights) to the airspace overhead. Most undergo constant change (e.g., the boundary between Namibia and South Africa has been affected by the flow of the Orange River), overlap (e.g., a belt of copper runs underground between Zambia and the Congo) and become perforated by human economic activity (e.g., transport corridors across states).

Boundary monitoring and management could be the political equivalent of preventative medicine, both of which are too frequently ignored. As one example, consider how climatic change or population pressure might require a drought-prone state to respond years in advance by negotiating new 'water' boundaries with neighbouring states (e.g., Southern African Development Community

(SADC) cooperation on developing the Zambesi River). Thus, proper boundary monitoring and management can save lives, crops, and economies.

A shift in how boundaries are perceived could facilitate an 'African Renaissance' by encouraging boundary monitoring and management rather than the defence of fixed boundaries. The starting point is both educational and institutional. Considering all the woes these lines have caused the continent, boundaries should be an independent object of study, teaching, and research rather than afterthought or an adjunct to some other field. The institutional aspect is addressed below.

### The Argument for Boundary Adjustments

The first argument of those in favour of boundary adjustments is to point out that *maintaining* Africa's rigid international boundaries has created as much instability as stability. Collapsed states (e.g., Liberia, Somalia), rampant genocide, and some 100 coups since 1950 point to a weak system of boundary monitoring and management. No continent on earth has suffered more bloodshed arising from territorial disputes than Africa (Griggs, 1994, 1995a, 1995b).

'Nation-building' is not easily achieved in Africa because most states are multi-national. Nations also extend across interstate boundaries. This mismatch between nations and states is the single biggest factor contributing to instability, civil war, and acts of genocide in Africa (Griggs, 1995a). The largest refugee movements in the world occur in Africa because of nationalities that resist assimilation or ethnic groups that seek to dominate the others (e.g., the Hutus who have fled Rwanda and Burundi or the Tuareg who have fled Mali).

Poorly-designed boundaries also limit access to resources vital for development. Through the luck of the European pen, some states are vastly wealthy in terms of land and resources (e.g., Democratic Republic of Congo) but others are just too small to be independently viable (i.e., the seven micro-states: Burundi, Rwanda, Swaziland, Lesotho, Gambia, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea). Fifteen landlocked states are disadvantaged in trade because the tariffs and red-tape required to access sea-transport reduces the value of exports (Figure 1).

The economic costs of Africa's boundary problems are beyond measure but certainly exceed the expenditures on development. The purchase of armaments is the equivalent of foreign aid (some US\$15 billion per year in sub-Saharan Africa). Expensive border patrols and refugees place an

additional strain on state economies. In South Africa, three to six million illegal aliens are draining the economy and slowing development. As a result, 700 million rand (c.US\$155m) of the annual budget is now being spent on border protection in terms of patrols, electric fencing and deportations. Add to that the competition for resources and one can easily see that the cost is many billions of rands.

The political, cultural, and economic mayhem related to Africa's political geography led Nigeria's political scholar and Nobel prize-winner Wole Soyinka to state flatly,

*"We should sit down with square-rule and compass and redesign the boundaries of African nations"* (Economist, 1994).

Newly designed states could provide better access to resources (including land to relieve population pressures), more sensible divisions between ethnic groups and speed up development. For example, Walvis Bay became the focal point of Namibian development after South Africa's 1994 cession.

The need for boundary adjustments may be less questionable than whether it *can* be done given entrenched political interests, the official policy of the OAU, and the explosive issue of redistributing resources and power. Certainly a paced and sensitive response is required. This is why 'regionalisation' is often suggested as the real companion of an African renaissance – to *soften* the boundaries between states rather than change them.

### **Regionalisation and an African Renaissance**

Cross-boundary cooperation does seem to offer an appealing escape from the scary, and tedious task of horse-trading territories between states. Theoretically, the creation of regional trading communities pools political and economic resources making boundary changes less important. The bigger market would attract large capital flows and build a cooperative basis for industrial development. A spin-off of industrialisation would be less dependence on the 'First World' and the construction of the middle class vital to sustaining democracy.

Can regional integration provide the basis for an African renaissance? With a coordinated plan for sharing resources across boundaries, Africa has the energy, resources, and work-force to become an economic giant. However, the process of regionalisation in Africa encounters some big stumbling blocks that do not relieve us of the need to re-consider boundaries.

Some 200 institutions for regional cooperation are in place, some since independence, yet only one has achieved a common currency (i.e., the West African Economic Community). Regional communities have either failed altogether (e.g., the 1977 collapse of the East African Community composed of Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya) or achieved very little. The result is fragmented markets that capture only about 5% of the global movement of capital.

Regionalisation is impeded by both economic and political factors. The colonially induced trap of exchanging raw materials for First World manufactures has left most African states too much in debt and too hungry for foreign currencies to kick-start regional economies. Another sticky political problem is that breaking out of the trap requires some development aid (and debt relief) from the countries that benefit from Africa's cheap raw materials.

Two other handicaps relate to political boundaries. Some African leaders, stuck on the notion of states as bounded containers of wealth and authority, fear the loss of sovereignty that accompanies the development of regional institutions. More importantly, the mixed sizes of African states means that one big state usually dominates the economic community. For instance, South Africa derives as much as 67 times the trade benefit as some of its smaller partners in the Southern African Development Community. Since Africa's boundaries produce differential access to resources and trade, anger, bitterness and squabbling follow.

The most basic theory of regionalisation insists on relative equality between states *before* integration takes place. Otherwise the disadvantaged states suffer from negative flows of capital and people while the larger states must contend with an uncontrolled influx of migrants.

### **Back to Basics**

Fortunately finding solutions to boundary problems is not a zero-sum game: either redrawing boundaries or pooling resources across boundaries to even out development.

What is required is active boundary monitoring and assessment informed by a long-term vision for Africa. Appropriate spatial planning is not drawing immobile lines in the dirt. A variety of bounded spaces may emerge over time ranging from city-states to confederations based on the pragmatic needs of the historical moment.

An important step toward making boundaries mobile and responsive to African needs is to establish an African boundary institute composed of regional specialists and geographers who can centralise information on African boundary problems, assess problems, and help to arbitrate disputes. It should be seen as the geographic equivalent of a reconciliation commission, except the focus is on the spatial structure of Africa's 53 states.

This advisory institute would also help monitor and assess the make-up of existing African regions to work out appropriate states for regional blocs according to geographic, cultural, economic, social, and political criteria. The 200 different organisations for regional cooperation must be rationalised to six or seven building blocks on a pan-African plan that eliminates negative forms of competition and duplication of effort.

The only suitable organisation for setting up an institution for Africa-wide boundary management is the OAU. This organisation should call for a conference to reconsider Africa's political geography from a management point of view. Thus, a second 'Berlin' Congress (the first formal consideration of boundaries in Africa!) would not be a blueprint for immediate application but a management plan for the future. Any changes would be debated, informed by the work of the boundary institute, time-managed, and take into account the vast array of security and strategic issues.

Once such a conference is called it will be a signal that Africa's new leadership is serious about a renaissance because it is willing to resolve the Achilles heel of African development – its boundaries. It is also a critical step because Africa cannot afford more dashed hopes and certainly dreams of an African renaissance may be condemned unless this issue is comprehensively addressed.

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## References

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