

Out of Africa



This is part of a map drawn by Thomas Jeffreys and published in London in 1766. On the full map, in English, Nigrita is rendered "Negroland." This is simply an English translation of the Arabic "Bilad as Sudan" (The Land of the Blacks). The West African coast is known as the Guinea coast. This may be a corruption of the word "Ghana" or the "Land of Gold" known to Arabs and Portuguese from the 8th Century A.D. Central Africa is termed vaguely "Ethiopia," but "Nubia" and "Abyssinia" are differentiated.

Yesterday's maps, today's tragedies

ATTITUDES and consciousness about Africa are much shaped by the borders between its nations, peoples and other resources. Thus, the history of the cartography of Africa informs us not only about the continent's past, but much of what constitutes its present and, perhaps, its future.

The immense precolonial history of Africa shows us a very different Africa from today. Probably one of the oldest maps of Africa is one drawn during the time of the pharaohs. It shows the geography of heaven and how to get there! It is likely that the next oldest map indicated the route to Nubian gold mines, used heavily during the age of the Egyptian New Kingdom. But ancient maps of the Nile were rare, since it was almost impossible to lose your way on this great river, whose source was unknown.

The next major contribution to African cartography seems to have occurred during the reign of Pharaoh Necho II, who not only made the first canal connecting the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, but also is credited with hiring Phoenician sailors to conduct the very first circumnavigation of Africa, in a three-year voyage some seven centuries before Christ. This adventure was known to the Greeks, but was forgotten by medieval Europe, and was not rediscovered until 1487.

Most remarkable was the achievement of the Greek from Libya, Eratosthenes, in the Third Century B.C. while he was the famed head of the Library of Alexandria. His solar calculations in that city, and in Aswan and Nubia, were the first to prove that the Earth was round and the first to determine its circumference with great precision.

Only when the Romans managed to rout Carthage in the last Punic War did Africa begin to get the name we now apply to the continent.

The knowledge of medieval Africa relied on the so-called Ptolemaic maps, drawn based on the travels of Arab cartographers. European awareness of Africa only began in a substantial way during the voyages of Portuguese sailors inspired by Prince Henry. Even Christopher Columbus sailed along the shores of Africa before his epic voyage to the New World.

After rediscovering that Africa was circumnavigable, the mission was to accurately record the coastline so that Africa's wealth could be extracted.

Strategic, economic and religious interests in Africa became significant. Europeans knew West Africa as the Grain Coast, the Pepper Coast, the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast and tragically, as the Slave Coast. It was not until the 18th and 19th centuries, however, that European explorers began the trek to Africa's vast interior. The travels of Mungo Park, Clapperton, Landers, Stanley, Livingstone ("I presume"), Burton and Speke are among the most celebrated.

At last, the coast and the interior of Africa were linked in the knowledge of the Europeans. The origins of the Niger, Congo and Nile rivers were at last known, and the great lakes of the Mountains of the Moon were identified.

These additions to basic geographical knowledge were to launch a new age in Africa with profound consequences. By the winter of 1884-1885, the leading European powers of the day met in Berlin to partition the African continent and thereby initiated the great age of European colonization in Africa. Americans were invited to observe this process. But Africans were left out of these discussions, which carved up their lands.

It should come as little surprise that the boundaries drawn, with foreign interests at stake, and with no African role,

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would cut ethnic groups into pieces, overlook natural features and transcend polities that had evolved over the millennia of pre-colonial Africa. Certainly, Africa was not free of conflict before Europeans arrived, but the imposition of colonial borders presaged much of Africa's current conflicts.

Africa's longest war, in the Sudan, has taken a horrible toll in lives since 1955. Not the least among many and complex issues is the underdevelopment of the southern Sudan, which was carefully separated from the north by a British policy of divide-and-rule that separated linguistic and religious groups. In neighboring Chad, similar rivalries between north and south were cemented in a comparable French colonial template. And Somali peoples were nationally dismembered by the British, Italians and French.

Wars of secession in Katanga (in Zaire) and Biafra (in Nigeria) emerged in post-colonial Africa, partly because of boundaries that had dubious relevance to local ethnicities. The splitting off of a "Spanish" portion of Morocco likewise led to years of war in the Western Sahara and great loss of life, as well as regional instability. The French wish to claim Algeria as an organic part of Europe was similarly bloody until the nation finally gained its independence.

The 30-year struggle in Eritrea, with its separate colonial experience under Italian rule, is another example of nation-formation over a boundary conflict. The present tragedy and chaos in Rwanda and Burundi, now spilling into neighboring Zaire, largely descend from colonial policies and boundaries that sought to divide the Tutsis and Hutus. The colonial Belgians hoped to benefit from the divisions between these peoples.

* The nations of east, central and southern Africa (especially Kenya, the "Rhodesias" and South Africa) had been selected for white settler rule and institutionalized racism. In each case, fierce and

costly wars resulted, as it became clear that the colonial boundaries did little to stop conflicts, and probably helped to foster them. And much remains to be undone regarding the borders of South Africa's "Bantustans" before nation-building can take deep root in that long-troubled land.

For many years, the policy of the Organization of African Unity was to recognize, and adhere to, the imperfect and inherited colonial boundaries. Although these lines did not fit comfortably on African terrain, they provided a *modus vivendi* and a sense of detente.

However, for better or worse, it now appears that some boundaries in Africa are being redrawn. The Paris-based humanitarian relief group Doctors Without Borders has already discovered in its practical service that colonial frontiers make little sense. The post-colonial era has already seen numerous shifts in the new names of African nations, such as to Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe and Benin. And now that many countries on the continent are shifting to multi-party democracies, one can imagine new referenda in the 21st Century that may redefine African borders as expressions of national restructuring.

What should be the policies of international bodies toward these boundary changes? Will future maps of Africa be redrawn by processes similar to those of eastern Europe and central Asia today?

Those interested in perusing the issues and perceptions regarding past and present borders in Africa are invited to view an exhibition on the history of Africa as seen through maps. This show runs until Dec. 21 at the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and Museum, 202 Washington St., across from Trinity Theater, in downtown Providence. Call (401) 751-3490 for more information.

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