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Part Three

New States and the Continental Order

INTRODUCTION

In earlier historical periods, weak states could expect to be absorbed by stronger ones. By the twentieth century, this had become almost impossible, and as a result weak states could be virtually certain to survive. African states are a perfect example of that development, and Griffiths provides a geographical perspective on the origins and stability of their boundar-

ies. Beyond relying on the international order to maintain their boundaries, the new states of Africa tried to build institutions that would sustain both their sovereignty and their development. The main institution was the Organisation of African Unity. May and Massey, examining a particular episode, throw considerable light on the difficulties that the Organisation of African Unity encountered in its checkered history.

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The Scramble for Africa: Inherited Political Boundaries

IEUAN GRIFFITHS

The inherited political geography of Africa is as great an impediment to independent development as her colonially based economies and political structures. The colonial political geography derives from the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, which laid down the rules for the European partition of the continent. What were drawn as colonial boundaries have survived the transition from colonies to independent states and, more surprisingly, 25 years of African independence.

The boundaries themselves are only one aspect of Africa's inherited political geography. African states are territorially identical to the European colonies they replaced, for all their grotesque shapes and varied sizes. European colonialism lumped together peoples of diverse cultures and traditions, sometimes leading to secessionist movements and civil war. The creation of long and narrow states such as The Gambia and Togo meant that development concentrated on the short sea coast remote from up-country regions. Many African states are too small to make viable economic markets and are below the threshold of any possible industrialisation. Others are so large and diverse that effective government

becomes difficult. There are 14 landlocked states in Africa, more than in the rest of the world put together. They all face chronic problems of access varying according to local circumstance. Colonial capital cities located on coastal peripheries have become national capitals of independent states.

Despite the obvious drawbacks of such an anomalous and anachronistic geographical framework, opportunities to change it have largely been ignored in post-independence Africa. Financial cost, vested interests, inertia and lack of perception have been inhibiting factors. The political geography of colonial Africa had a rationale rooted in colonialism itself but each aspect of it now presents modern Africa with problems which, taken in conjunction with inherited economic and political difficulties, severely impede progress towards complete independence. This lecture concentrates on international boundaries, arguably the fundamental ingredient in Africa's political geography. Boundaries collectively divide the continent into its many states and individually divide people. They are a source of international conflict and affect the spatial pattern of economic development.

THE EVOLUTION OF AFRICA'S BOUNDARIES

The political boundaries of modern Africa emerged mainly in the 30 years after the Berlin Conference. They were drawn by Europeans, for Europeans and, apart from some localised detail, paid scant regard to Africa, let alone to Africans.

Prior to the Berlin Conference few of the present boundaries of Africa existed. Those that did were limited to settler territories, in the north between Algeria and Morocco, and in the south to protect Basutoland against Boer encroachment, around the South African Republic (Transvaal), and the enclave of Walvis Bay.

In the five years following Berlin the European powers made bilateral treaties with each other, covering all parts of Africa. Boundaries were drawn to define the different European spheres of influence, first as short lines made roughly at right angles to the coast. In East Africa the German sphere was distinguished from the British to the north and the Portuguese to the south. The same Luso-German Treaty separated South West Africa from Angola. In equatorial Africa the French sphere was defined between the Congo Free State and the Spanish sphere. In West Africa, French Ivory Coast was separated from British Gold Coast, Sierra Leone was defined in relation to Liberia and the two enclave colonies of The Gambia and Portuguese Guinea were defined from surrounding French territory.

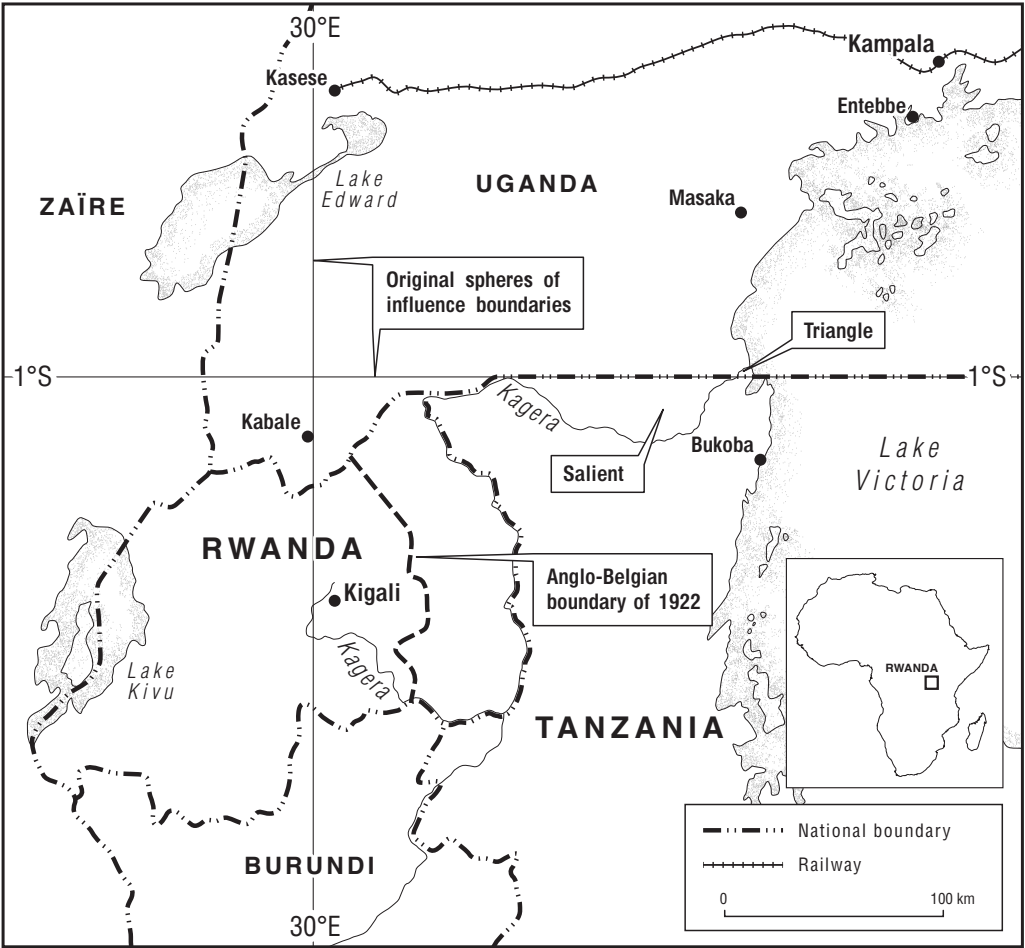
By the turn of the century almost the whole of southern Africa was divided in precisely the way it is today. The sole exception was the Anglo-Portuguese boundary where the powers could not agree. In north-east Africa lines were drawn separating the British, French and Italian spheres. The extent of the last was exaggerated because the arrogant European assumption that they were the only players on the board proved false when, on 1

March 1896, the Ethiopians defeated the Italians at Adowa. Ethiopia then indulged in its own empire building, to the lasting discomfiture of its neighbours. In the 1890s the Congo took shape and in West Africa the French defined their boundaries with Liberia and Sierra Leone and spent some time arguing with themselves over Ivory Coast, Guinea and Senegal.

By 1914 the partition of Africa was virtually complete. The only lines which remained to be drawn were: 1) in the Sahara, 2) the outstanding sub-divisions of the French colonial Africa, and 3) adjustments arising from the First World War. The Saharan boundaries were eventually resolved largely by the use of straight lines. Internal sub-divisions of the French empire came and went. Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) appeared in 1922, disappeared in 1932, and reappeared in 1948. Some boundaries between French territories were never quite completed and left thorny problems to be solved after independence, notably between Algeria and Morocco.

Changes consequent upon the 1914–18 war were several. Jubaland was given to Italy in 1924 but originally by the secret Treaty of London in 1915. The Portuguese took the Kionga (Quionga) triangle south of the Ruvuma estuary, a territory of 215 square miles, previously confirmed as German only in 1909 after long dispute. When Belgian ambitions for Portuguese territory near the mouth of the Congo had been thwarted, Ruanda–Urundi was separated from Tanganyika and placed under Belgian administration. In West Africa the Togo and Cameroon boundaries changed as the former German colonies were shared between France and Britain.

Other minor adjustments were made to suit the colonial powers: for example, the exchange between Belgium and Portugal in 1927 of the 3,500 sq km 'Botte de Dilolo' to Angola for 3 sq km in the Duizi valley near Matadi, to allow a cheaper and more convenient realignment of the Leopoldville railway.



Map 8.1. Boundaries between Rwanda and Tanzania and between Tanzania and Uganda.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AFRICAN BOUNDARIES

The boundaries of Africa owe their special characteristics to the fact that the continent was partitioned by Europeans who at the time had limited knowledge of it. Physical features were used in boundary definition where known, or even known about, and failing them, lines of latitude and longitude (astronomical lines) or other straight lines.

BOUNDARIES AND ETHNICITY

At the continental scale the widespread use of physical features and astronomical lines largely de-humanised the boundaries of Africa. Although sometimes based on treaties between Europeans and local rulers, only rarely did colonial boundaries coincide with tribal or culture areas. Every land boundary in Africa cuts through at least one. The Nigeria–Cameroon boundary divides 14, while the boundaries of Burkina Faso cut 21 culture areas.

The problems caused by the imposition of boundaries in a manner so insensitive to Afri-

can human geography would have been politically more serious had not the total number of culture areas been so large that most emergent states incorporated many complete culture areas as well as parts of others. In only a few states do divided peoples have sufficient influence to create international instability by attempting to re-unite themselves and in fewer still is there truly an irredentist movement.

The full impact of a divisive boundary is felt when it interferes with the daily routines of ordinary people. As long as people can obtain seed and implements, use traditional markets, choose spouses from neighbouring villages and send their children to the nearest school, irrespective of boundaries, all is well. It is when tribesmen are charged with smuggling, or of being illegal immigrants or are fugitives from one state's justice that discontent arises.

There were few attempts deliberately to draw African boundaries along traditional lines. One such was between Rwanda and Tanganyika (see map 8.1). It came late in the colonial period and demonstrated the ameliorating effect of the League of Nations on European imperialism. Both territories had been parts of German East Africa, given in 1919 as League of Nations Trust Territories to Belgium and Britain respectively. In 1922 the League approved the territorial division proposed by Belgium and Britain and separate administrations were set up. The agreed boundary line was influenced by a British notion to build a railway through the district to connect Uganda and Tanganyika. Almost immediately Belgian missionaries in Rwanda protested to the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League emphasising 'the social, political, and economic harm [to the Kingdom of Rwanda] caused by the imposition of this arbitrary division'. Belgium and Britain were persuaded to accept the Kagera river boundary in 1923 although problems of demarcation through the Kagera swamps delayed implementation until May 1938. Without the League of Nations to which to appeal, it is unlikely that the boundary adjustment would have taken place and a typically imperialist consideration of a tentative and anachronistic strategic railway route

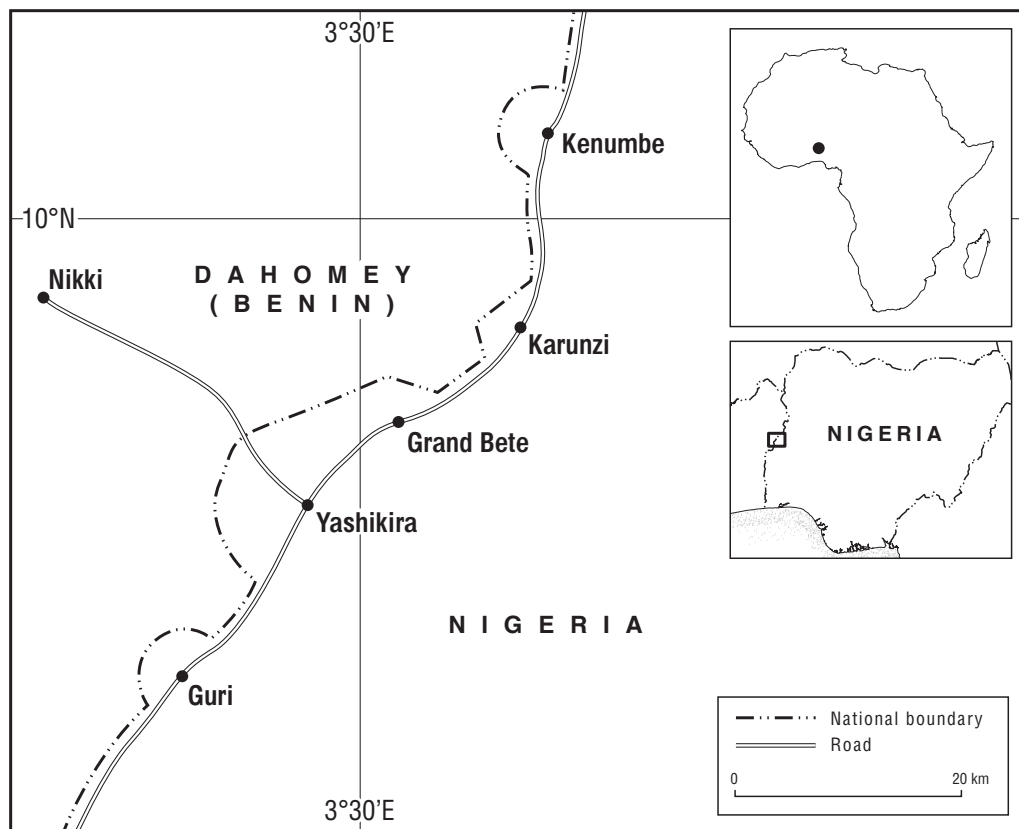
probably would have prevailed. The final irony is that the Kagera boundary, far from being a natural cultural divide, actually cuts across four small culture areas: Ha, Hangaza, Haya and Zinza.

AFRICAN INFLUENCE ON BOUNDARIES

It cannot be claimed that no attention was paid to Africans in the partition process because rival European claims to territory were frequently supported by treaties made with local rulers. Nevertheless, it was only when a European power concerned decided so, were treaties [with Africans] taken into consideration in connection with the territorial settlements. Sometimes local treaties became a currency for territorial bargaining between European powers. Even where tribal lands were agreed to lie within one sphere rather than another, boundary definition was a matter for Europeans who were quite capable of deciding, for example, that the boundary of Barotseland ran for 390 miles along astronomical lines. This arbitration by King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy in 1905 was perhaps the only occasion on which a traditional African kingdom was defined by astronomical lines. Although the arbitration favoured Britain rather than Portugal, the Foreign Office was later scathing about the 'arbitrary meridians and parallels adopted'.

LOCAL BOUNDARY ADJUSTMENTS

It would be likewise wrong to assume, though many do, that European-drawn boundaries invariably ignored local human geography. There was an agreement between Britain and



Map 8.2. Detail of boundary between Nigeria and Benin—place names rendered according to the Anglo-French agreement of October 19, 1906, and accompanying maps.

France which describes in detail what is now the Benin–Nigeria boundary (see map 8.2). Villages were allowed a 4 km semi-circular indentation into the boundary line which ran parallel to the road. Small towns warranted an 8 km indentation, an early practical recognition of an aspect of central place theory.

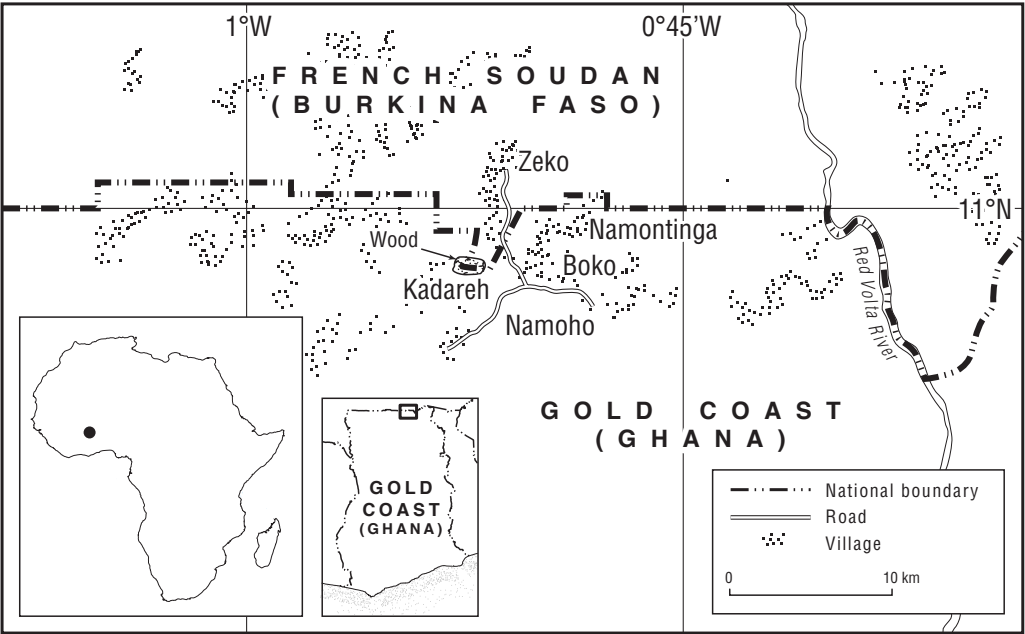
There was similar attention to local detail on the boundary between what are now Ghana and Burkina Faso (see map 8.3).

The detail of African boundaries is complex and often belies the simplification inherent in large-scale maps, let alone in attempts to classify boundaries on the basis of such maps. The astronomical line section of the boundary between modern Ghana and Burkina Faso shown in most atlases as a straight line is in fact only loosely based on the 11th parallel North. The arbitrariness of the original line

was modified, in a stylised way, in response to local human factors. It is not a point to labour, rather one to counter the sweeping assertions so frequently made about the universal insensitivity to local conditions of European-drawn boundaries in Africa.

BOUNDARY PROBLEMS

The boundaries of Africa nevertheless do cause problems. Their arbitrariness divides people and in other ways results in absurd situations, their ambiguity and lack of definition make for differences of interpretation and opinion,



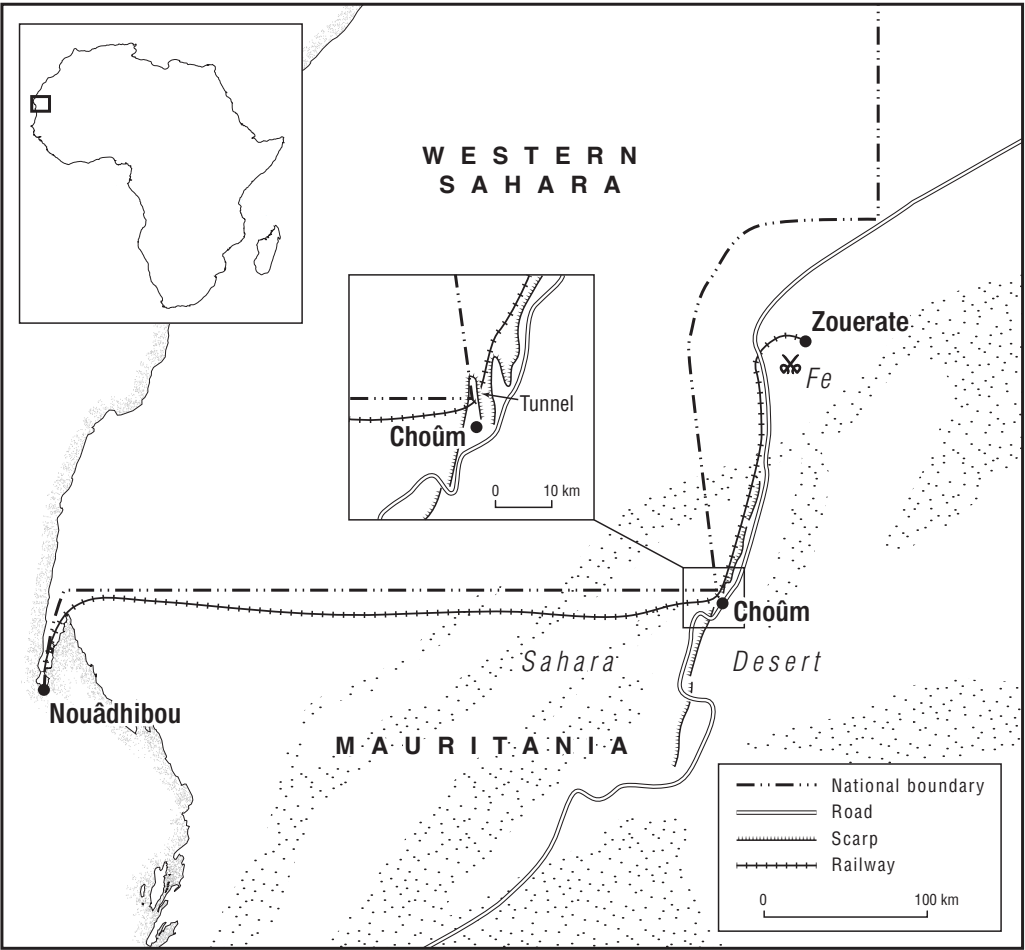
Map 8.3. Detail of boundary between Ghana and Burkina Faso—place names rendered according to the Anglo-French agreement of October 19, 1906, and accompanying maps. Modern country names have been added. The colony of “French Soudan” at times encompassed Senegal, Niger, Benin, Burkina Faso, and Mali. The location shown here is in contemporary Bukina Faso.

and their inconsistency in the use of physical features, taking for instance, the thalweg, either bank, or the median line where a river forms the boundary, creates further uncertainty. It all adds up to the fact that there are ‘weak’ boundaries throughout Africa. They do not represent perpetual problems but are time-bombs waiting for a change of political circumstance to ignite the fuse. Should the political context change, a point of weakness can become significant and provide a focal point for international antagonism, often leading to military conflict. The post-independence experience has been that, overall, few points of weakness have been eliminated and as a result many disputes involving boundaries have occurred. These disputes have weakened African states in general by diverting scarce resources to the military—sometimes merely in anticipation of frontier incidents.

THE MAURITANIA–WESTERN SAHARA BOUNDARY: THE RAILWAY TUNNEL TO NOWHERE

The boundary between Mauritania and Western Sahara (see map 8.4) consists of geometrical lines most of which are astronomical. From Cape Blanco the boundary runs along the 21° 20' North parallel for 260 miles into the Sahara to the intersection with the 13° West meridian. From this point, the boundary assumes a straight line approximately 6° west of north for 95 miles. Geometrical lines might be adequate means of defining desert boundaries but in this case the point where the boundary turns through 84° (Choum) is on the spur of a mountain range which otherwise lies entirely within Mauritania.

In the early 1960s French development of the Zouerate iron ore mines necessitated a



Map 8.4. The boundary between Mauritania and Western Sahara.

railway link with Port Étienne (Nouadhibou). It was built along the Cape Blanco peninsula but not directly towards the mines, because the Franco regime imposed unacceptable conditions for granting permission for the line to cross the Spanish Sahara boundary. The long deviation was tedious but the real problem was encountered at Choum where the railway engineers were left with no alternative but to tunnel for two kilometres through the granite spur, in effect into and out of the same side of the main mountain ridge, simply to keep inside French territory. The Choum tunnel is a monument to European stupidity in Africa

and contrasts with the Botte de Dilolo deal between Belgium and Portugal.

THE BOUNDARIES OF NAMIBIA

Unless good sense prevails before independence, Namibia will inherit colonial boundaries more problematic than any others in Africa. Geographically the most obvious of these

is the potential problem of the 187km long Caprivi Zipfel or strip. First agreed by Britain and Germany in 1890 it represents a German wish to have direct access to the Zambezi. It well illustrates European ignorance of African geography at the time, for a more difficult route to the Zambezi than through the Zipfel would be hard to find. It is cut by two major perennial rivers, the Okavango and the Cuando-Chobe, many seasonal rivers, and a large area of swamp between the Chobe and Zambezi. The Zipfel also cuts ethno-linguistic areas, the 16,000 people living in the strip being related to groups in Zambia and Botswana rather than to those in Namibia proper.

German forces in Caprivi were defeated by Rhodesian troops in 1915. The 6,722-square mile Zipfel then disappeared as it was administered as part of Bechuanaland Protectorate. But in 1929 it was returned to South West Africa, seven years after South Africa had assumed formal administration of that territory under League of Nations Mandate. The Bechuanaland connection was understandable because the Zipfel is remote and costly to administer from Windhoek.

The potential problem arising from the continued existence of the Caprivi Zipfel concerns the long-mooted development of north-western Botswana by exploiting the juxtaposition of an area of water surplus, the Okavango swamp, and an area of water deficiency, the Kalahari desert. Namibia will be an additional interested party in the potential scheme and her concerns and priorities will have to be taken into account. Relations with Botswana could become strained should Namibia be seen to affect deleteriously Botswana's long-nurtured ambitions.

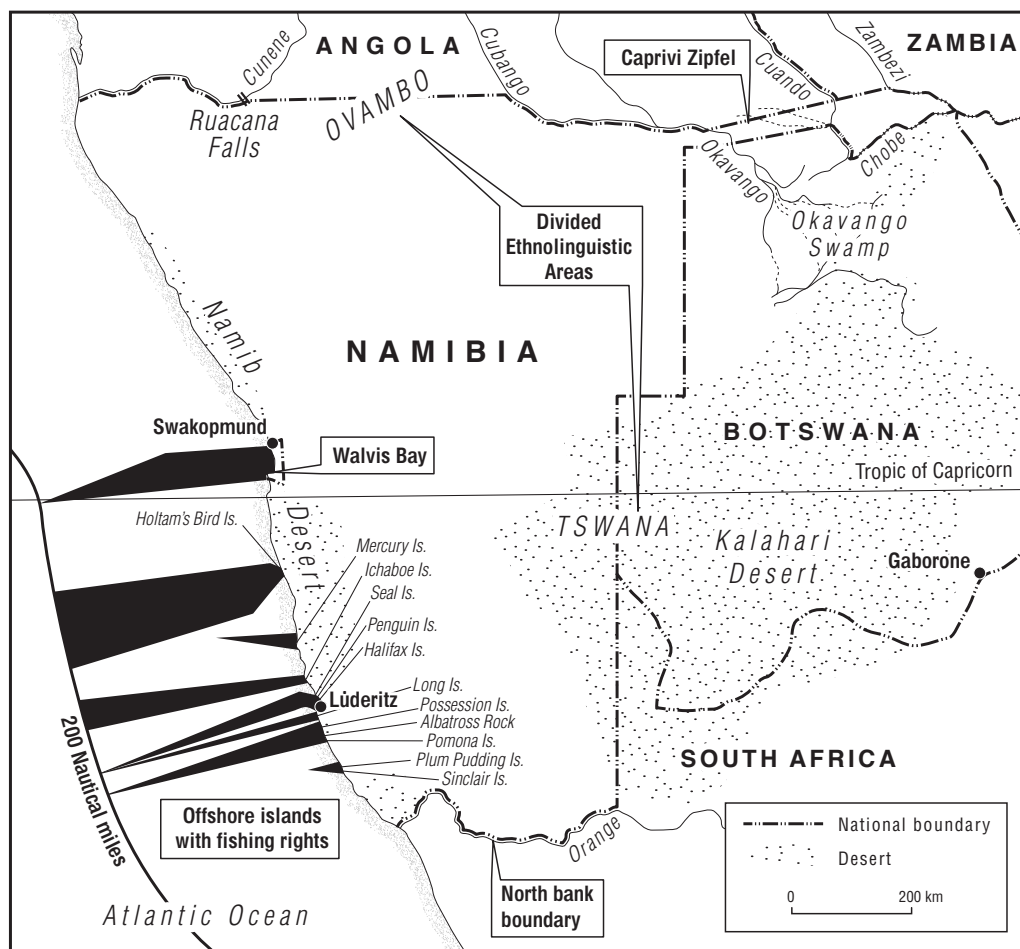
There are enough potential sources of friction between the two countries besides this example because the long astronomical line boundary between the two countries cuts across other culture areas. In particular, one small group of Tswana people live within the eastern boundary of Namibia (see map 8.5).

The urge to tidy up the map of Africa also prevails when considering the division of Ovamboland by the frontier with Angola. The

parallel selected for the boundary is 17° 23' 23.73" South, its precision determined by the location of the Ruacana Falls on the Cunene River. Agreed in principle in 1886, but not demarcated until 1931, the boundary divides a large featureless plain which is home for a million Ovambo, the majority in Namibia. The idea of an independent Ovambo state has been mooted by those seeking alternatives to Namibian independence. Not surprisingly it has attracted no support from SWAPO (South West African People's Organisation) or from Angola, but a post-independence Namibian government may well regard the question of reuniting the Ovambo people differently. Their division has been emphasised during the Namibian conflict by a fence erected by the South African military. On gaining independence there will be a natural urge to tear down this symbol of oppression and perhaps for SWAPO, who have operated among Ovambos on both sides of the border, a desire to seek unity for their people.

The chief port of Namibia, Walvis Bay, is not legally part of Namibia but is a South African enclave which was annexed by Britain in 1878 and passed to the Cape Colony in 1884. When South West Africa became a South African mandate the South African Parliament passed an Act in 1922 to administer Walvis Bay as part of South West Africa. That Act was repealed in 1977 when Namibian independence seemed imminent and Walvis Bay reverted to South Africa. There the matter rests while the future of Namibia is decided. Namibia has no viable alternative port but OAU insistence on the integrity of colonial boundaries does extend to enclaves. However, Cabinda, an exclave attached to Angola, and likewise Ceuta and Melilla on the north Moroccan coast are not vital integral parts of the surrounding state as is Walvis Bay. Should good sense not prevail a Goa-India situation could develop with the important difference that the colonial power is adjacent and militarily powerful.

A similar colonial history accounts for the potential problem of Namibia's offshore islands. Possessed by Britain prior to German

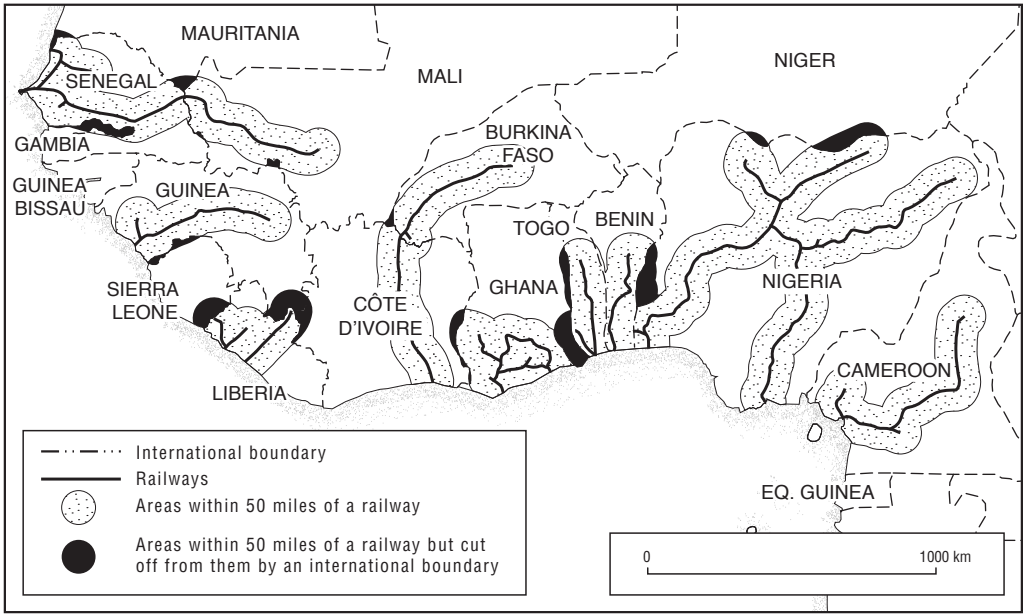


Map 8.5. The potential boundary problems of Namibia.

annexation of South West Africa and passed to the Cape in 1884, they are uninhabited islets, some within yards of a desert coast swept by the cold Benguela Current. The abundance of fish which first brought Europeans to Walvis Bay attracted millions of sea birds to the islands. In their wake came guano diggers, and initial British interest was based on this resource. Today the islands are significant because they give South Africa fishing rights off the Namibian coast. The twelve islands are carefully mapped and underlined in red on modern South African maps with the note: 'Islands with names underlined form part of the territory of the Republic of South Africa'.

Elsewhere in Africa Spain holds small islands off the north Moroccan coast but fishing rights there are less important.

Namibia's fifth potential boundary problem is on its southern frontier with South Africa. The boundary is unambiguously the Orange River, but is the north (Namibian) bank, rather than the thalweg or median line. The potential problem relates to water rights which are of particular significance because the waters of the Orange are used extensively by South Africa, not just for irrigation in the Orange River valley, but for diversion through the tunnels of the Orange River Project to the Eastern Cape Province. As matters stand, Na-



Map 8.6. Railways and international boundaries in West Africa.

mibia has no rights over the waters of the Orange River. The Liberia–Ivory Coast boundary is similar except that the chief issue concerned navigational rights, which made it easy for common sense to prevail even though the actual boundary was not changed.

BOUNDARIES REPEL
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Boundary configurations of course strongly influence the distribution of economic activity. On a national scale, they largely determine what is core and what is periphery. A border region, by definition geographically marginal within a state, is also likely to be economically marginal unless it has some outstanding attribute, such as mineral wealth or a natural harbour, and the marginality of such areas is emphasised by poor infrastructural devel-

opment. In West Africa modern transport is largely in self-contained national systems. Few railways or tarred roads cross international boundaries, and most end well short of any frontier. The only international railways are Senegal–Mali and Ivory Coast–Burkina Faso. The north-eastern two-thirds of Ghana and 85 per cent of Ghana’s frontiers are more than fifty miles (eighty kilometres) from a railway. In Ivory Coast 60 per cent of the state but over 90 per cent of its boundaries are more than fifty miles distant from the single north-south railway which bisects the country. In West Africa as a whole, over 90 per cent of frontiers are more than fifty miles from a railway. On the other hand, because of the elongated shape of some states, several areas within fifty miles of a railway are denied access to it because of an international boundary (see map 8.6).

Another visible indication of the underdevelopment of frontier regions is the high proportion of game reserves to be found in such areas throughout Africa from the Kruger National Park along almost two hundred miles of the South Africa–Mozambique border to

the Parcs Nationaux du 'W' which spread out from the tripoint boundary between Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger.

THE SURVIVAL OF AFRICA'S BOUNDARIES

As the European-drawn boundaries of Africa cause so many problems it is perhaps surprising that they have remained sacrosanct in the post-independence period. The answer lies with the OAU. By Paragraph 3 of Article III of the 1963 Charter of the OAU, all member states pledge 'respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each state'. The OAU meeting in Cairo in July 1964 elaborated: 'Considering that border problems constitute a grave and permanent factor of dissension . . . all Member States pledge themselves to respect the borders existing on their achievement of national independence.'

The OAU did set up machinery for the peaceful settlement of boundary disputes, implying that solutions other than the status quo were acceptable. Actual OAU involvement has been rare and mainly to negotiate a cease-fire as in the Algeria–Morocco border war of 1963. The OAU called for a cease-fire in the Burkina Faso–Mali skirmishes of 1985 in the Agacher strip but it was actually negotiated by the regional defence organisation. Also the dispute had been put before the International Court of Justice at The Hague prior to the outbreak of hostilities and so was not being considered within the 'strictly African framework' called for by the OAU. No boundary change has ever emerged through OAU action, and no pair of member states has ever received OAU endorsement of mutually agreed change, although in 1982 the government of Swaziland apparently sought and obtained, from the then President of the OAU, approval for boundary changes inherent in the abortive 'land deal' with South Africa.

The net result is that, apart from one change agreed after independence but before the OAU Charter was signed, the colonial boundaries of Africa have survived intact. Boundaries in Africa are by no means a dead issue but the apparent hope of the OAU remains that if the line is held long enough the tendency to dispute boundaries will fade into universal acceptance of the status quo. That view could yet be right, but on the other hand the ostrich is indigenous to Africa.

The OAU position is ineffective. It has not prevented border disputes or frontier wars and has inhibited, if not obstructed, sensible pragmatic change such as that between Mali and Mauritania which pre-dated the 1964 resolution. The perceived blanket embargo on boundary changes interrupted a process of politically mature rationalisation of frontiers almost before it had begun.

SOLVING BOUNDARY DISPUTES

The practical suggestions that follow may be excessively optimistic, especially with regard to any meaningful role for the OAU. Success in any individual dispute is more likely from intervention by regional organisations but to gain acceptance for the view that positive steps should be taken to resolve the continent-wide boundary problems of Africa the OAU has to be involved.

SOLVING THE PROBLEMS OF DIVIDED CULTURE AREAS

The divided culture areas of Africa present continent-wide problems which rarely flare into armed conflict but none the less cause

inconvenience for millions. One difficulty in coming to grips with this matter is to convince central governments of the need to ameliorate social and economic conditions in peripheral regions. Many national politicians would regard attempts to unite culture areas as pandering to tribalism and as being diametrically opposed to their central task of nation building.

Simple new-line solutions are not always possible because peoples are often intermingled and sometimes geographically spread over more than one boundary. Even where new-line solutions are appropriate central governments will be reluctant to surrender sovereignty. They will not want their action to be perceived as weakness. Above all, they will wish to avoid giving away something of value, for example, an undiscovered mineral source. With such considerations in mind a possible solution nevertheless does exist based on a precedent of over eighty years of success.

In 1899 the boundary between Egypt and the Sudan was fixed as the parallel 22° North. Inevitably, it cut across culture areas but unusually this was recognised and acted upon by local administrators. The use of administrative boundaries avoiding transfer of sovereignty would go some way towards easing Africa's problem of divided culture groups.

SOLVING THE PROBLEMS OF FRONTIER REGIONS

The problem of economic marginality of frontier regions requires other solutions: cooperation between states on a bilateral or, where necessary, trilateral basis; the allocation of resources from central governments; cooperation at local level between regional and local government authorities across any given international boundary. Organisations best placed to assist are those created for the purpose of international economic cooperation but on the limited scale of, for example, the Mano River Union. Specially created bi- or tri-lateral international authorities financed in the first instance by the member states might be most effective. The whole question of scale is vital to success which ultimately will depend on international cooperation at the local or regional level, whether it be in river valleys or culture areas. Investment in integrated frontier region schemes would compensate for the underdevelopment caused by the accident of colonial boundary alignment.

Africa's colonial boundaries set the basic political framework of the continent and in so doing create problems simply as boundaries. For 25 years post-independence Africa has chosen not to face these problems positively and has lost opportunities to eliminate potential and real points of conflict. A new approach is long overdue.