

Africa's borders in colonial and postcolonial contexts

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ABSTRACT

This paper re-examines colonial borders as both a footprint of colonialism in Africa and an important analytical concept for understanding meanings of decolonization in the continent. A well-established view is that decolonization in the continent remains incomplete in the presence of borders that were created by, and for, former colonial powers. That view carries with it assumptions about colonialism which need to be tested against lived experiences and findings from research on border studies. This paper makes three observations that are crucial to discussions on the links between decolonization and borders in Africa. The first is that some of the assumptions about the coloniality of Africa's borders are based on ill-conceived notions of borders. Second, the obsession with national borders as the foundation for a colonial and postcolonial state marginalizes other important elements of colonial borders, namely, the creation of regions of empire and the roles of sub-national borders in colonial and postcolonial state-building exercises. Third, the environmental discourse which supports the creation of transborder environments has added a new dimension to the meaning and process of decolonization. The paper calls for a robust conceptualization of border changes in, and for, Africa.

Introduction

Research on borders has significantly enhanced our understanding of the emergence and disappearance of borders and the implications of borders on border communities, state power and sovereignty, the state system and international relations (Jones 2009; Newman, 2006). It has also been suggested that borders are implicated in the (re)ordering of the world and the creation of transnational citizenships (Scott, 2009). Thus, borders are understood in both material and non-material terms, and their functions are at one and the same time exclusionary and inclusive, depending on the purpose for which they are created and how they are managed. Our knowledge of borders can further be deepened by paying attention to the contexts under which borders and their meanings emerge and/or disappear. The

starting point of almost all discussions on borders in Africa is either the process or outcomes of colonialism, making the colonial context an important template in the analysis of Africa's borders. That context is clear from the commonly used descriptor of "Africa's colonial borders," which is found in almost every document and statement that refers to international borders on the continent. This begs the question about the coloniality of Africa's borders and how those borders are theorized. Given that colonialism as an ideology and process permeated and impacted various regions of the world, the question of what makes Africa's borders exceptional is intriguing. Nowhere is this exceptionality clearer than in assumptions made about the artificiality of Africa's borders, as the discussion below will show.

Re-examining Africa's borders in their colonial contexts is an important step toward understanding the nature of these borders in post-independence Africa and how they form part of the discourse on the postcolonial state in the continent. Two important questions arising from the postcolonial context are the ways in which Africa's borders assumed different meanings after independence and how notions of decolonization have been mobilized toward a political discourse which seeks to transform the African state and to resolve some of Africa's perennial problems. In fact, borders have become a prism through which the state in Africa and its possible futures can more appropriately be understood. In other words, a fully decolonized Africa is unimaginable without reference to changes in either the physical lines dividing the continent or the functions of those lines, or both. Whereas decolonization is generally concerned with the political, cultural and economic aspects of the colonized, the spatial expression of that process relates to, among other things, the need for radical changes on borders and the physical re-configuration of the nation-state. These changes are considered important in Africa, where colonialism used borders not only as instruments for delineating the properties of the empire, but also for creating bounded spaces on which Africans were to imagine themselves as nations.

My aim in this paper is to re-examine colonial borders in Africa in order to analyze the idea of decolonizing borders. It is not the intention of this paper to hold a post mortem on colonialism and its consequent bordering process. Rather, the paper subjects assumptions on borders on the continent to scrutiny in order to expose weaknesses in the conceptualization of borders. It observes, first, that some of the assumptions about the coloniality of Africa's borders are based on ill-conceived notions of borders. Second, the obsession with national borders as the foundation for a colonial and postcolonial state, as well as a source of some of the contemporary sociopolitical ills in the continent, marginalizes other important elements of colonial borders—namely, the creation of regions of empire and the roles of sub-national borders in colonial and postcolonial state-building exercises. The paper argues that bordering was not limited to the creation of nation-states, but was also meant to amalgamate nation-states into regions of the empire. Third, the

environmental discourse which supports the creation of transborder environments has added a new dimension to the meaning and process of decolonization. The paper calls for a robust conceptualization of border changes in, and for, Africa.

Colonialism and bordering

Africa was sliced up like a cake, the pieces swallowed by five rival nations—Germany, Italy, Portugal, France and Britain (with Spain taking some scraps—and Britain and France were at each other's throats. At the center, exploiting the rivalry, stood one enigmatic individual and self-styled philanthropist, controlling the heart of Africa: Leopold II, King of the Belgians (Packenham, 1991:xxiii).

The citation above narrates a common view of borders in the continent, namely, that Europeans divided up the continent and shared it amongst themselves with no regard to Africa and its citizens. The fragmentation of the continent and the emergence of colonial borders were, however, not as straightforward as the citation suggests. Africans were not passive victims of the scramble and the whole colonial project, but rather responded to the partition of their continent and European penetration in various ways, including struggles for land and other natural resources. The Maji Maji Rebellion of 1905 over the Rufiji basin in colonial Tanzania is one such example (Iliffe, 1967). They even contested the actual process of demarcating borders on the ground, as was the case with the Shabe Region on the Benin-Nigeria international border (Flynn, 1997) and the Maro Naba in present-day Burkina Faso (Ginio, 2006). It has been suggested that, though Europeans took the final decisions concerning partition, Africans participated in the making of colonial borders through treaties that were concluded between Europeans and African rulers during the scramble. Hertslet (1967) has documented the various treaties that gave shape to the current map of Africa.

A point can still be made, though, that the participation of African rulers in the making of colonial borders does not make those borders less colonial, because Europeans had the monopoly over treaties—from designing treaty forms to the validation of signatories. Though African rulers did not fully grasp the meanings of treaties or understood the imperial plans behind such treaties, they nevertheless tried to use them to their own advantage and to play off European powers, where this was possible. For example, the emir of Yola appealed to, and signed a treaty with, the Royal Niger Company in order to secure protection against the French expedition, but later signed an agreement with the French in order to reduce the company's interference in its affairs (Touval, 1966). Some African rulers used the partition and

negotiations associated with the process to press for ancient polities, as suggested by the Ethiopian Emperor Minilik's circular of 1891 to European powers, which reads:

While tracing today the actual boundaries of my empire, I shall endeavor, if God gives me life and strength, to re-establish the ancient frontiers of Ethiopia...if powers at a distance come forward to partition Africa between them, I do not intend to be an indifferent spectator (Foreign Office, 1897).

Nugent (1996) has suggested that colonial borders were not made for unsuspecting Africans. Instead, local communities in the Ghana/Togo border reinforced borders through trade, especially the exploitation of differences in the price of goods on both sides of the border.

These observations and the whole process of boundary making in colonial Africa have generated the debate on aspects of Africa's borders. First, questions have been raised about the generalization that Africa's colonial borders were drawn in Berlin, as was intimated above. It has been argued that the process of drawing borders was a protracted one involving negotiations both at the Berlin Conference and bilateral agreements before and after that conference. Although most of the parts of the present map were drawn between 1885 and 1904, the entire process was not completed until 1919 (Herbst, 1989). Accordingly, Katzellenbogen (1996) has claimed that the Berlin Conference was a stage in the creation of borders in the continent, and the Conference refrained from setting precise borders, as was the case with territorial borders around the Congo. In his view, the agreement between the International Congo Association or the Independent Congo State and European powers were not about precise borders. The southern border developed as a straight line and was a result of lack of concern and ignorance of the region's geography by imperialists. This observation not only calls for a careful analysis of the trajectories of borders in the continent, but also confirms the complex ways in which colonialism deployed multiple agents on various sites in its wake.

Second, the commonly held view that African borders are artificial is based on a false assumption that there are natural borders. All state borders are artificial in the sense that states are not natural creations (Grundy-Warr and Schofield, 1990). Even when natural features such as rivers and mountains are used to mark borders, the role of these features as borders are ascribed to human interests and actions. In this context, there is nothing special about the artificiality of African borders. The call for border changes on the basis of their artificiality is therefore not a sufficient reason because the new borders are bound to be artificial as well. The distinction between the two (i.e., old and new borders) would simply be a matter of origin, namely, artificiality emanating from imperial Europe or post-independence Africa.

Third, Touval has argued that the claim that Europeans drew borders in Africa with disregard to local conditions and circumstances is not a universal truth because:

the task of examining local conditions was usually assigned to a demarcation commission, which surveyed the border and marked it on the ground. Modifications recommended by such commissions were of a minor nature, but they nevertheless constituted an attempt to take local conditions into account and thus to diminish the arbitrariness of the border (1966:292).

In Touval's (1966) view, Africa's borders are not as arbitrary as they are thought to be. According to this argument, borders were delimited and demarcated on the basis of rational choices, including taking local conditions into considerations. Examples of such local conditions include the boundary proposals which considered communication lines on the Niger-Nigeria border and on the border between Kenya and Uganda; the need for access to watershed (Uganda) and rivers (Caprivi); and the use of Ndiang stream as an ethnic and economic boundary in Rio del Rey (Touval, 1966).

To return to the point about borders as a rational choice, a counterargument can be made by questioning whether such rational choices were possible, given that there was lack of knowledge about the areas being claimed and demarcated. Lord Salisbury's comments clearly show such lack of knowledge:

We have been engaged in drawing lines upon maps where no white man's foot ever trod; we have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by a small impediment that we never knew exactly where the mountains and rivers and lakes were (cited in Herbst, 1989:674).

Moreover, the evidence that the aspirations of the locals were incorporated into conclusions by boundary commissions is thin, given that inherited colonial borders hardly reflect the political and social realities of precolonial Africa (see Asiwaju, 1985; Flynn, 1997). However flaccid his argument might be, Touval raises an important question which relates to the point of reference in the arbitrariness of Africa's borders. There is a view which holds that current African borders are not arbitrary because they were—and are—useful to those who created and maintained them. A distinction should be made about whether the borders were and are arbitrary for colonialists or the colonized. For colonists "the boundary system developed in 1885 represented a rational response by the colonists because it served their political needs" (Herbst, 1989:692). The view that colonists did not have knowledge of the geography of the areas they divided up amongst themselves (see Katzellenbogen, 1996) therefore does not make the demarcation of colonial borders an innocent exercise. Colonial powers had clearly articulated goals, namely, owning a piece of Africa and the wealth of the continent. In the process, borders not only marked the number and size of pieces of the continent owned by a European country but also

became zones of frictions between competing European nations. The nature of this friction is clearly shown by the Caprivi Strip on the Angola-Namibia border, which symbolizes the competition between the Germans and Portuguese (Hangula, 1993),¹ and by Gambia as an intrusion to Senegal. Fierce competition for colonies between the British and the French in West Africa resulted in that region being the most fragmented in the continent.

From the perspective of the colonized, colonial borders were—and still are—arbitrary because they ignored local realities and aspirations, as hinted above. Any meaningful process of decolonizing borders should therefore be attentive to the nature and meanings of arbitrariness. As will be discussed in detail below, more emphasis on decolonizing borders is understandably placed on the arbitrariness of borders from the perspectives of the colonized.

Writers on the Berlin Conference and the consequent partitioning of Africa have focused on borders around colonies and the post-independence African state at the expense of the regionalization of colonies. There are therefore some silences about Africa's colonial borders. These include little or no discussion concerning the colonialists' attempts to use borders in curving out regions by using individual colonies as a stepping stone, and the nature and role of sub-national borders within each colony. I argue in this paper that colonialists were not interested in small pockets of territories, and their conceptions of borders were influenced by their desire for creating larger territories than nation-states. This goal was clear among British imperialists such as Cecil John Rhodes, whose vision was to amalgamate British colonies from the Cape to Cairo, a plan that was launched from southern Africa. The initiatives toward this goal included creating the federation, the Central Africa Territories, through the amalgamation of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi) in 1939. The official reasons for a political association among the three countries were that the three colonies were economically vulnerable individually; their economies were complementary; and they needed an effective central authority to take major economic decisions in the interest of the whole area (Colonial Office, 1953). Another initiative toward the enlargement of colonies through amalgamation was the attempt to incorporate the High Commission Territories (present-day Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland) into the Union of South Africa in order to create what Prime Minister Jan Smuts called a greater South Africa (Smuts, 1940). In fact, the Union Act of 1909 on which apartheid South Africa was built made provision for the incorporation of South Africa's neighboring countries into the Union and its space economy. These pan-African ideals were in line with the imperialists' vision of Africa rather than the quest for African unity espoused by indigenous pan-Africanists. The point here is that, in the colonizer's view, colonial borders were not designed to create nation-states but were, instead, part of a process of creating larger territories in the form of regions. This observation implies that colonial borders existed at different scales

which are all equally important in the discussion on Africa's borders and their future, and the whole idea of decolonization.

Political discussions, populist speeches and academic analyses have largely ignored colonial borders at the sub-national level because these borders are seen as peripheral to discourses of decolonization. It is argued in this paper that sub-national colonial borders were constitutive of the colonial state. They demarcated units such as districts that were used for purposes of control and administration. Whereas the outer borders (i.e., national borders) gave shape to the colonial state, sub-national borders not only determined the character of that state, but also fundamentally configured its power geometry along race, ethnicity and so on. It was within boundaries around sub-national units that ethnic consciousness was situationally induced and sustained under the British policy of divide and rule. The units also provided the platform on which a bifurcated colonial state was created (Mamdani, 1996). Against this backdrop, attention should be paid to sub-national borders under colonialism if we are to gain a comprehensive understanding of the colonial state and its borders in the continent.

Borders and the remaking of the African state

It is generally understood that the territory of the contemporary African state is a replication of that of the colonial state. The result is a weak foundation on which the postcolonial state in the continent is built. Analysts ascribe that weak foundation to colonial structural determinants (Chazan, Motimer, Ravenhill, and Rothchild, 1988; Doornbos, 1990), the destruction of indigenous African states and the denial of Africa's history (Davidson, 1992; Mazrui, 1980). Of relevance to the present discussion is the place of colonial borders in the making of the African state. Most analysts agree that colonial borders remained unchanged in post-independence Africa for various reasons. First, it has been argued that colonialists and post-independence African leaders shared a common view and response to the constraints imposed by demography and ethnography. These two groups see colonial borders as a rational way of creating international norms of territorial integrity in the state system, despite the origin of these borders from a colonial history (Herbst, 1989). Second, borders have remained intact because the principle of self-determination upheld by the Organization of African Unity in post-independence Africa was severely limited. For example, the right to self-determination was applied to colonies but not to individuals and groups who wanted to disassociate themselves from existing colonial territories. Also, it did not accommodate the right to make changes to territorial borders existing at the time of independence. One of the earliest tests to the principle of self-determination was Somali's claim that the populations in the Northern Frontier District of Kenya should be allowed to exercise

their right to self-determination. In response the Kenyan delegate affirmed the OAU's position by arguing that "the principle of self-determination was inapplicable to people living in an independent state and that the redrawing of borders on ethnic grounds would affect many African states" (Touval, 1967:115). Third, the newly elected African leaders embraced colonial borders because they feared that redrawing them would lead to violence that could threaten their own positions and interests. Fourth, since the struggles for independence were fought on a territorial basis, it was difficult to relinquish the control of such territories after independence. Fifth, one of the immediate problems arising from independence was the simmering of border disputes in the continent. For instance, King Hassan of Morocco boycotted the Summit Conference of Independent African States that was held in Addis Ababa in May 1963 in protest against the participation of Mauritania,² and Somalia pressed for a discussion of its territorial claims with Ethiopia and Kenya at the same summit. The OAU responded to these and subsequent border disputes by placing a moratorium on the re-drawing of borders.

The explanations above do not account for why African leaders failed to radically change sub-national borders as colonial creations. In Anglophone Africa the colonial system created four main sub-national units, namely, provinces/regions, districts, native authority areas and the areas under the chieftaincy. Post-independence leaders dealt with these units in two main ways. They devalued the role of ethnic grouping in these units as part of their nation-building efforts and as a political strategy to concentrate power at the center of the state (Coleman, 1994). The other way was to keep sub-national units as building blocks for the new state, as in Botswana. Either way, radical changes to sub-national borders have been minimal in most parts of Africa. For example, in the early years of post-independence Zambia, Kay observed:

the district and provinces have remained unchallenged as the more important divisions of the country in spite of the coincidence of their boundaries with those of former Native Authority Areas and their association with tribal groups (1968:34).

The resilience of colonial borders is also clear from the demarcation of borders in South Africa, where establishing a post-apartheid order is akin to the process of decolonization. Some of the crucial sub-national territorial units created under apartheid have been incorporated into the post-apartheid state with minimal changes to the borders around those units. By way of example, old traditional authority areas and development regions have remained intact despite the political aim to eradicate the vestiges of apartheid completely (African National Congress, 1994). In the countryside, the borders of traditional authority areas and related institutions of power have remained the same despite changes in local government. In other words,

the creation of municipalities did not change the borders of areas under traditional authority in part because of the ambiguity of traditional institutions in a modern state (Ramutsindela, 2007a). Disappointingly, South Africa's current nine provinces are almost a replication of apartheid development regions for reasons that have been explained elsewhere (see Muthien and Khosa, 1995; Ramutsindela, 1998). In support of this observation, Mare concluded:

the new Province of KwaZulu-Natal is not simply the old apartheid order in new disguise. What Buthelezi and his backers attempted to establish during the 1980s—the wider notion of region—has now in part been ensured through the new form, the province of KwaZulu-Natal (1996:41).

To return to the point, it is not sufficient to explain the failure of African leaders to change colonial borders on the basis of international borders and the state system of which they are part. There is a need to be attentive to sub-national territories and the implications they have on nation-building and the whole process of recreating the African state. The need is pertinent given that colonial sub-national units were meant to perpetuate indigenous cultural cleavages within the colonies. As the case of South Africa shows, sub-national units and their borders are crucial for defining whether the state is unitary, federal or quasi-federal. To be precise, the debate on South Africa's regions and municipalities were and continues to be underpinned by ideas about the nature of the envisaged state.³

It follows that, by voluntarily retaining national and sub-national colonial borders, African leaders have actively participated in the external and internal configuration of the postcolonial state. Nationalists saw colonial borders as instruments for nation-building, as the following comment by veteran of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, Joshua Nkomo, makes clear:

the territories of each of the peoples in the land were defined only by custom: their vagueness led to raids and counter-raids in search for cattle, food and women. Now there was no reason why all of us should not unite and develop an unquestioned national identity (1984:7).

Nkomo's view suggests that colonial borders played an important role in cementing disparate African groups into nations. Expressed differently, territorialization of Africa by colonialists was an important step toward the creation of post-independence nations in Africa. In this sense, colonial borders fostered a pan-territorial association of different groups. Such an association was in line with the two main objectives of nationalist movements, namely, to achieve self-government and to create a cultural or political sense of nationality and unity within the borders of the nations to be (Coleman, 1994). Nevertheless, Nkomo's view is in sharp

contrast to a well-established argument that colonial borders are a source of conflict in Africa because they forced distinct groups into an imagined nation while at the same time dividing people belonging to the same group (Asiwaju, 1985; Gakwandi, 1996). In fact colonial powers were neither interested in promoting national unity within their colonies nor in creating modern self-governing democratic states in the continent.

Whereas African leaders—with the exception of pan-Africanists—defended colonial borders in the past and continue to do so in the present, international security concerns have reinvigorated the need to strengthen inherited colonial borders. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S., Africa was quickly securitized despite the claims that the Al Queda cells had more links with countries of the north than sub-Saharan Africa. In terms of the theme of this paper, Africa's "failed states" and their porous borders are seen as free trade zones for the underworld and a breeding ground for terrorists (Abrahamsen, 2004). This sentiment is clear from the British Foreign Office Minister, Kim Howells, who commented that Kenya's porous borders keeps East Africa wide open for Al Queda operatives and drug cartels ("Kenya corruption 'threatening' UK," <http://news.bbc.co.uk> accessed Jan. 21, 2010).

Porous borders are a source of what the 1996 U.S. National Security Strategy toward Africa calls "ungoverned areas" through which terrorists cross from one country to another (Ploch, 2009). As dominant security discourses would suggest, these ungoverned areas can be eliminated by either strengthening existing borders (rather than trying to change them) or promoting a regional dispensation that takes care of ungoverned areas. The security establishment in the U.S. has adopted a regional approach to dealing with sites of instabilities and "terror." For example, the U.S. Department of Defense's command structure for Africa is divided into geographic regions, such as the Horn, Sahara and the islands (Comoros, Madagascar and Mauritius). I argue that security concerns constitute a new rationale for strengthening Africa's colonial borders individually or collectively. The argument here is not that ungoverned areas are a new phenomenon in borderlands in the continent. In fact, most borders in Africa have been porous since their creation (see Nugent and Asiwaju, 1996). Rather, it is to suggest that porous borders have recently drawn international attention due to security concerns and have subsequently been incorporated into a contemporary security discourse. International security concerns imply that the debate on Africa's borders is no longer confined to the impact they have on the state and citizens in the continent, but has also been elevated to a global political platform.

Decolonization and its implications for Africa's borders

The political ambition for decolonizing Africa continues to inform debates on the future of Africa's borders. There are three main ideas on decolonizing Africa and its borders, the first being that a fully decolonized Africa could be achieved through the redrawing of inherited state borders in accordance with the demography of the continent. In practice, this means either drawing borders around each major linguistic group or creating regional states that subsume groups into a "nation" (see Ramutsindela, 2000). Traditionalists argue for the redrawing of borders along those of precolonial Africa and still consider the precolonial state, rather than the colonial state, as a proper foundation for the modern state (Bello, 1995).

Second, there is an idea that colonial borders can significantly be changed by means of regional integration—a process that would realign existing borders to new political ideals. The view holds that regions would redefine colonial borders without disrupting the state system, while at the same time removing the social and economic constraints imposed by inherited borders (Gakwandi, 1996). This form of decolonization is supported by the Treaty of the African Economic Community of 1991 and recent developments such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and its international sponsors, who see regions as viable political institutions for economic development in the continent. In contrast to proposals for creating regions on economic rationales, the idea of a regional state was advanced by gradualists who envisioned that Africa could be decolonized by amalgamating existing countries into larger political units under one political authority, as exemplified by the short-lived East African Federation constituted by Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.⁴ Against this background, the use of regions as a vehicle for decolonization is the continuation of an old approach toward transforming colonial borders. While regions are important for creating conditions for a decolonized Africa, they could also be used as a platform for neo-colonialism. Former colonialists remain interested in the constellation of their former colonies. Britain and France strongly support Anglophone Africa and Francophone Africa, respectively. For example, although the Franc Zone in Africa represented 2% of French external trade in 1998, the zone received 50% of French Official Development Aid in the same year (Renou, 2001). It has been suggested that contemporary international competition for Africa's resources is based on targeting parts of Africa on a regional basis and that external powers are involved in shaping the regional formations and alliances in the continent. For example, the top ten African countries engaged in a two-way trade with China between 2006 and 2008 came from southern Africa, western Africa and North Africa (Naidu, Corkin, and Herman, 2009).

The third idea of decolonizing Africa's borders comes from nature conservationists who are interested in either preserving the ecological integrity of

existing ecosystems or recreating those which have already been disrupted. Their focus is on ecological systems that exist along or between international borders. Such ecological systems, they argue, can be protected by amalgamating conservation areas that straddle state borders so as to be managed as an international entity. A full analysis of these conservation areas has been provided elsewhere (see Ramutsindela, 2007b). For our discussion here, it suffices to point out that nature conservationists and environmentalists reason that colonial borders have bisected ecosystems and that the way to mitigate the effects of these borders on nature is by decolonizing them. Such a decolonization involves softening state borders to allow, say, the free movement of wildlife and connectivity of landscapes and habitats across state borders (Bennett, 2003; Westing, 1998). In their view and plans, the colonial map of Africa can be changed by creating cross-border nature conservation areas that straddle state borders, as the following quotes make clear:

Political boundaries are the scars of history. In southern Africa, national borders partition ecosystems, block animal migration routes and divide ethnic communities. One such scar was healed on May 12, 2000, with the formal opening of Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, uniting South Africa's Kalahari Gemsbok and Botswana's Gemsbok National Parks (Godwin, 2001:11).

In some case[s] people with the same ethnic identity were separated by colonial boundaries. This was then exacerbated by the creation of national parks along those boundaries that further separated communities. The creation of a [transborder conservation area] with linked communal areas and management structures can assist in a cultural re-linkage of such people (Hall-Martin and Modise, 2002:11).

Though the evidence on the ground suggests that people are being removed rather than reunited, the rhetoric of colonial borders permeates cross-border nature conservation projects as a marketing strategy with political relevance. Metaphorically, and in the context of Africa, cross-border conservation areas represent a process by which colonial borders are redefined while at the same time respecting the sovereignty of states. In fact, the preamble to every treaty on cross-border nature conservation area in southern Africa begins with a reaffirmation of the sovereignty of the states involved. Here the decolonization of the border assumes an entirely different meaning to that of the political ambition for reconfiguring the African state through either region or unified continental territory (such as the United States of Africa) or curving out smaller territories out of existing states, as noted above. They are said to increase the cooperation between and among states by reducing the role of the border as a barrier. Despite their decolonizing rhetoric,

cross-border nature conservation projects could potentially become instruments for neo-colonialism. This is so because they rely heavily on external donor funding, involve the displacement of local populations and are strongly influenced by non-governmental organizations (Ramutsindela, 2007b).

Concluding remarks

It is unlikely that the political geography of Africa or the nature of national loyalties will change to such a degree that African leaders will feel compelled to make significant boundary changes...it is difficult to see how changes in population distribution might occur and make border changes more politically desirable to national elites (Herbst, 1989:691).

Herbst's assertion not only points to the persistence of a narrow view of border changes, which associates the decolonization of borders with the redrawing of physical lines, but also suggests the need for conceptual clarity on the links between borders and decolonization. Such clarity is important, given that contemporary borders are a product of colonialism. Indeed, those who argue that decolonization would be incomplete if inherited borders remain intact (Mazrui, 1993) appear to be preoccupied with physical lines rather than a broad conception of border transformation. Research has shown that current international borders have acquired new meanings and have also become a locus of power for border communities. As Flynn (1997:313) has correctly argued, "African borders have become entrenched and embedded in the local communities that surround them," as in the Shamba region (Benin-Nigeria border) where such communities have become a border through which movements and economic activities are controlled by the locals. This is possible because many major market centers are located along borders. The consequent transborder solidarity suggests that colonial borders could as well represent theaters of opportunities (Nugent and Asiwaju, 1996).

African borders have experienced a silent encroachment by which ordinary people have advanced their struggles for survival against those in power (Raeymaekers, 2009). These solidarities and transformations beg the question of how decolonization should capitalize on postcolonial border experiences to engender a pan-Africanist vision rather than imposing new sets of artificial borders. In short, the question of what border change means for the postcolonial state requires clear answers if we are to understand what a decolonized Africa might look like in spatial terms. Scholars on African borders will do well to move away from narrow and recycled debates which equate the decolonization of borders with redrawing lines physically to encompass new meanings of border and border changes. Conservationists have demonstrated how functions of inherited borders

could be reconceptualized to allow for the re-establishment of ecosystems through transborder conservation. Removing fences for purposes of creating transborder conservation areas speaks volume about the need to distinguish between changing borders and changes on the border. In no way does this paper endorse transborder conservation areas as instruments for decolonization. Reference to these areas is made to demonstrate different ways in which colonial borders are infused into environmental discourses and how the discourses in turn promote certain views of border changes.

This paper argues that decolonizing borders should (and need) not be limited to international borders and the redrawing of physical lines, but should also encompass the reconfiguration of colonially imbued power dynamics within the state and the spatiality in which those dynamics are embedded. Even if international borders were to be drawn for purposes of creating regional states or the envisaged United States of Africa, the current internal configuration of the state would still impact those polities, as local identities, territoriality and the like cannot be abandoned at the stroke of a pen. Expressed differently, any meaningful process of decolonization should engage with the lived spaces of the majority of the citizens in the continent.

In sum, I suggest that border changes do not necessarily mean redrawing lines on the map, especially if we understand borders also as institutions and symbols (Paasi, 1999). A border might be a symbol of histories invoked to promote certain practices. A useful point of departure on decolonizing borders in Africa would be to develop conceptual clarity on notions of decolonization and the border, as well as the links between the two. It is in these links that the analysis of the border in Africa could make a significant contribution to border research globally.

NOTES

¹ The boundary between the countries was settled through the Convention on the Angola-Namibian Boundary, which was signed by the German Ambassador in Portugal, Richard von Schimidthals, and the Portuguese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Henrique de Barros Gomes, on December 30, 1886 (Hangula, 1993).

² Morocco insisted that Mauritania was part of Moroccan territory.

³ During the negotiations for a post-apartheid political dispensation in 1991–1992, the debate on the nature and functions of regions revealed various conceptions of the nature of the envisaged post-apartheid state. Fifteen years after liberation, the debate on the future of regions (current provinces) and municipalities is also informed by ideas about South Africa as a developmental state.

⁴ The concept of a regional state is used here to refer to an enlarged state created through the amalgamation of existing states. The gradualists are African

leaders, including Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, who became known as the Monrovia Group for support of the use of regions as a launch-pad for unity in the continent. The group was opposed to Nkrumah's radical call for a United States of Africa modeled along the lines of the United States of America.

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