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Editorial: The African Border Paradox - A Necessary Curse or a Missed Benediction?

Jama Musse Jamaⁱ

In July 1964, the founding fathers of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) gathered in Cairo to make a decision that would define the destiny of a continent. Faced with the chaotic potential of overlapping ethnic, linguistic, and historical claims, they adopted the principle of *uti possidetis*: the recognition and preservation of the borders inherited from the colonial era for sake of preventing interstate and community conflicts. For decades, scholars have debated whether this was a moment of supreme African statesmanship or a fatal surrender to a colonial architecture designed for extraction rather than coexistence. To understand the modern African state, we must ask: why did our forefathers maintain these lines, and what price are we paying for that stability today?

The Pragmatic Trap: Why the Forefathers Chose Maintaining the Status Quo

The decision to uphold colonial borders was not a "benediction" born of affection for European cartography; it was a survival tactic. Leaders like Julius Nyerere and Jomo Kenyatta understood that the "scramble for Africa" had been a reckless vivisection of the continent, but they feared an even more violent "scramble by post-independent African nations" for the remains.

The consensus in 1964 was driven by the fear of a vacuum: if one border were questioned, every border would be questioned. The founding fathers chose the 'geographic cage' of the colonial state to avoid a 'political abyss' of secessionist wars, prioritizing the preservation of the state entity over the organic cohesion of the nations within. In their view, a flawed stability was preferable to a just chaos, hoping that a shared flag and a seat at the UN would eventually forge a common identity. Yet, beneath this pragmatic

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caution lay a profound and defiant hope. Their vision in establishing the OAU was anchored in a faith that transcended the immediate fear of choice; they believed in a spirit of togetherness that would eventually render these colonial scars obsolete. For them, the ultimate destiny was not a continent of divided countries, but a united Africa where these artificial lines would dissolve, replaced by a single continental horizon.

The Human and Structural Cost: The Colonial Scar

However, the problems birthed by this "pragmatism" are profound and persistent. Colonial borders were rarely drawn with geography, ecology, or anthropology in mind. They were lines of administrative convenience and imperial competition.

The Linguistic and Ethnic Vivisection: Perhaps the most painful legacy is the slicing of homogeneous communities into multiple states. Groups like the Somali, the Saaho, the Afar, and the Ewe found themselves citizens of three or four different countries. This created "transborder identities" that modern states often view with suspicion. Instead of being seen as bridges between nations, these communities are often treated as security risks, leading to what we might call a "standardization bias," where central governments suppress regional linguistic and cultural nuances in favor of a singular, often artificial, national identity.

Economic Strangulation: Structurally, these borders were designed for extraction toward European ports, not for intra-African integration. This is why, even in 2026, it is often more expensive to trade between two neighboring African cities than it is to ship goods to Europe or Asia. The borders have become economic bottlenecks that stifle regional markets and prevent the continent from achieving the economies of scale necessary for industrialization.

Why the Topic is Timely: The 2026 Geopolitical Shift

Why revisit this now? The year 2026 marks a period of profound global realignment. The "Westphalian" model—the idea of a rigid, centralized state with absolute control over its borders—is under immense pressure from both within and outside.

The Failure of the Centralized State: In many parts of the continent, the state's inability to provide security or economic opportunity within its colonial "cage" has led to marginalisation of minorities and in turn a revival of regionalism and local identity movements. The supranational governance models that lent support and legitimacy to the unitary state, United Nations are themselves facing increasing challenges both in funding and recognition of merits of their role in past cold war world. We are seeing a global move toward multipolarity and transactional diplomacy, where regional or even individual country agency is replacing the old multilateral rules in pursuit of national or group interest.

The Case for "Incremental Recognition": Somaliland offers a unique modern case study. Ironically, those opposed to Somaliland's self-declared independence found themselves in a dilemma because, Somaliland's quest for international recognition is based on the maintenance of colonial borders—specifically the British Protectorate lines—rather than their destruction. Somaliland's independence pursuit is indeed re-engineering of the Somali union that was wrongly created by amalgamating two very different colonial administrative and geographic entities on ethnicity lines. By arguing for the sanctity of its 1960 borders, Somaliland suggests that the path to stability is not found in ignoring the 1964 OAU principle, but in applying it consistently with no exceptions. This challenges the continent to rethink how we define "territorial integrity" in an era where functional governance matters more than technical status.

Conclusion: From Curse to Integration

Colonial borders are a "necessary curse" that Africa has yet to fully transcend. They provided the skeleton for modern governance, but they have also become "cognitive borders" that limit the African imagination. The challenge for the next generation is not necessarily to redraw the lines with ink, but to render them irrelevant through deep integration.

Through initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the embrace of digital sovereignty, we can move toward a future where a border is a porous membrane for trade and culture rather than a brick wall for the soul. The

benediction of the future will not be the borders we inherited, but the connections we choose to build in spite of them.

When Clare Bath agreed to edit this special issue of *Dhaxalreeb*, "Contested Sovereignities: Legitimacy, Power, and the Negotiation of Postcolonial Borders," the editorial board seized upon the opportunity for a timely debate, and we are grateful to her for bringing together seven comprehensive contributions that place this highly relevant topic under the magnifying glass of academic debate.

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