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Rebirth of a Strategic Continent?: Problematizing Africa as a Geostrategic Zone

Abstract

At a time when the U.S. Department of Defense is putting the finishing touches to the establishment of a military command for Africa (known as AFRICOM) and the People's Republic of China's influence on the continent seems to be on the rise, a detour through the history of America's past geographical imaginations of Africa appears as a necessity. This is especially crucial since the current constructions of the African continent as a strategic place in both policy and military circles seems to echo the geodiscursive representations of Africa during the Second World War. In fact, it was in the early 1940s that Africa publicly ceased to be the place of safari that past or sitting American presidents toured and became a continent endowed with a strategic significance. I argue in the lines that follow that American geographer-diplomats and politically-minded cartographers played a key role in this shift. More significantly, I suggest that global historical forces and developments provided the context to understand this attitudinal change among American decision-makers, geostrategists, and academics. Finally, I recommend that Africanist geographers in academia engage the many (past and present) parallel geographic epistemologies regarding Africa, including the ways of seeing and the body of cartographic knowledge about the African continent that military and/or intelligence services and institutions have produced over the years, both in times of war and peace.

Keywords

Africa, geostrategic zones, cartography, Unites States

Disciplines

African Studies | Diplomatic History | History

REBIRTH OF A STRATEGIC CONTINENT?: PROBLEMATIZING AFRICA AS A GEOSTRATEGIC ZONE

Abou B. Bamba

What, then, of our adaptation to Africa? We shall need to unlearn some of our old geography and to learn some new geography relating to Africa.

Samuel W. Boggs (1943)

Geography is first and foremost a strategic knowledge which is closely linked to a set of political and military practices; these practices demand that extremely different, at first sight heterogeneous pieces of information should be brought together.

Yves Lacoste (1976)

At a time when the U.S. Department of Defense is putting the finishing touches to the establishment of a military command for Africa (known as AFRICOM) and the People's Republic of China's influence on the continent seems to be on the rise, a detour through the history of America's past geographical imaginations of Africa appears as a necessity. This is especially crucial since the current constructions of the African continent as a strategic place in both policy and military circles seems to echo the geo-discursive representations of Africa during the Second World War. In fact, it was in the early 1940s that Africa publicly ceased to be the place of safari that past or sitting American presidents toured and became a continent endowed with a strategic significance. I argue in the lines that follow that American geographer-diplomats and politically-minded cartographers played a key role in this shift. More significantly, I suggest that global historical forces and developments provided the context to understand

this attitudinal change among American decision-makers, geostrategists, and academics. Finally, I recommend that Africanist geographers in academia engage the many (past and present) parallel geographic epistemologies regarding Africa, including the ways of seeing and the body of cartographic knowledge about the African continent that military and/or intelligence services and institutions have produced over the years, both in times of war and peace.

The importance of geographic expertise in wartime has long been recognized. Such acknowledgement was particularly productive among Anglo-American strategists in the twentieth century (Stephenson 2003; Heffernan 1996). During the Second World War, for instance, geographic knowledge and cartographic know-how allowed the British army to produce maps that eventually became crucial in winning the war. As a contemporary writer put it, “More maps than were ever needed in any other conflict [were] required to fight World War II.” In fact, “Every branch of [British] fighting forces require[d] special maps. [...] Paratroopers were supplied with maps that glow in the dark, so that they don’t have to use light ... which might give them away to the enemy.” In the same vein, British amphibious forces were given “maps that show[ed] high and low water areas, cliffs, and particular beaches that [were] likely to be slimy and slippery at low tide.” Even more impressive was the practical geographic knowledge during the battle of North Africa during which General Archibald Wavell used “special maps which showed the probable movement of sand dunes during certain seasons” (*Science News-Letter* 1945, 199).

With such descriptions, there is little doubt that geographic/cartographic expertise remained highly valuable during the war. Historians of American geosciences have

painstakingly examined the multifaceted relations between war mobilization during World War II and what would eventually come to be known as the Military-Industrial-Academic-Complex (Clarke & Cloud 2000; Leslie 1992). As we will see below, however, the significance of geographic knowledge in wartime was not limited to cartography or the British. No other instance proved this better than the American strategic discourse on Africa during World War II. In closer scrutiny, the conjuncture of the last major global war appears as the birthplace of the incorporation of Africa into U.S. strategic discourse. This, to be sure, required that Americans began a critical process of distancing themselves from conventional geo-cartographic epistemologies regarding Africa.

**“UNLEARNING” EUROCENTRIC GEOGRAPHIES:
SNAPSHOT ON AN AMERICAN HEGEMONIC PROJECT**

Historians of U.S.-Africa relations have indiscriminately argued that the African continent has remained a backwater of U.S. global strategic thinking. While valid in many regards, such characterization does not always capture the rather long interest of the United States in African strategic spaces as during the 19th century when the U.S. government stationed a fleet off the coast of West Africa to enforce the ban of the slave trade (Duignan & Gann 1984, esp. chp. 4). Such an interest remained alive in the 20th century, especially as the world readied itself for the second global war of the century. Even before its official entry into the conflict, the United States had hinted that access to territory would be determinant in bringing about the final outcome of the war. Thus in mid-1940, the Department of State disapproved the territorial concessions that the French colonial authorities in Indochina had made to imperial Japan, which had made it easier

for the Japanese troops to attack China (Hull, September 7, 1940, 196-97; *Department of State Bulletin*, September 28, 1940, 253). At the same time, the United States was taking geopolitically motivated measures to consolidate its hemispheric hegemony in Latin America and the Caribbean. With a view toward reaching this goal, American diplomats signed various conventions with the appropriate European colonial powers for the “provisional administration” of their colonies and possessions in the Americas while at the same time Washington strengthened its bilateral cooperation with the neighboring nation-states south of the Rio Grande (*Department of State Bulletin*, October 12, 1940, 309; *Department of State Bulletin*, August 13, 1944, 159; *Department of State Bulletin*, December 12, 1948, 743). The centrality of geopolitical and cartographic concerns in these agreements is as striking as it is revealing. As one perceptive analyst has skillfully pointed out, it showed that the coming of the American Century was graphed both on a geographical understanding of U.S. global power and a normative reading of the cartographic tradition that American geoscientists were putting in place (Smith 2003).

The same concerns that motivated American officials to sign cartographic treaties with the Europeans and Latin Americans also led U.S. geographer-diplomat Samuel W. Boggs (1943, 194) to argue that the African continent was as much “complementary” to the United States as it was to Europe. In this context, Boggs urged his compatriots to “unlearn some of our old geography and learn some new geography relating to Africa.” Going even beyond this exhortation, which might have remained otherwise mere wishful thinking, the Chief of the Division of Geography and Cartography at the Department of State sketched a new map [cf. Fig. 1] which purported to demonstrate that Africa would be closer to the United States if a mapmaker substituted an equidistant map design for the

popularly used Mercator projection (Boggs 1943, 194-95). Cartographers have long known that the representation of three-dimensional earth on a two-dimensional map is a process fraught with distorting perils (Monmonier 1991; Pickles 2004). But Boggs's comments and cartographic militancy assumed more. In fact, his representational strategy and practice betrayed the willingness of the Department of State to get closer to a continent whose strategic importance was being tested on a daily basis on the war fronts of the Second World War (*National Geographic*, July 1942; Renner 1948, 408-415).

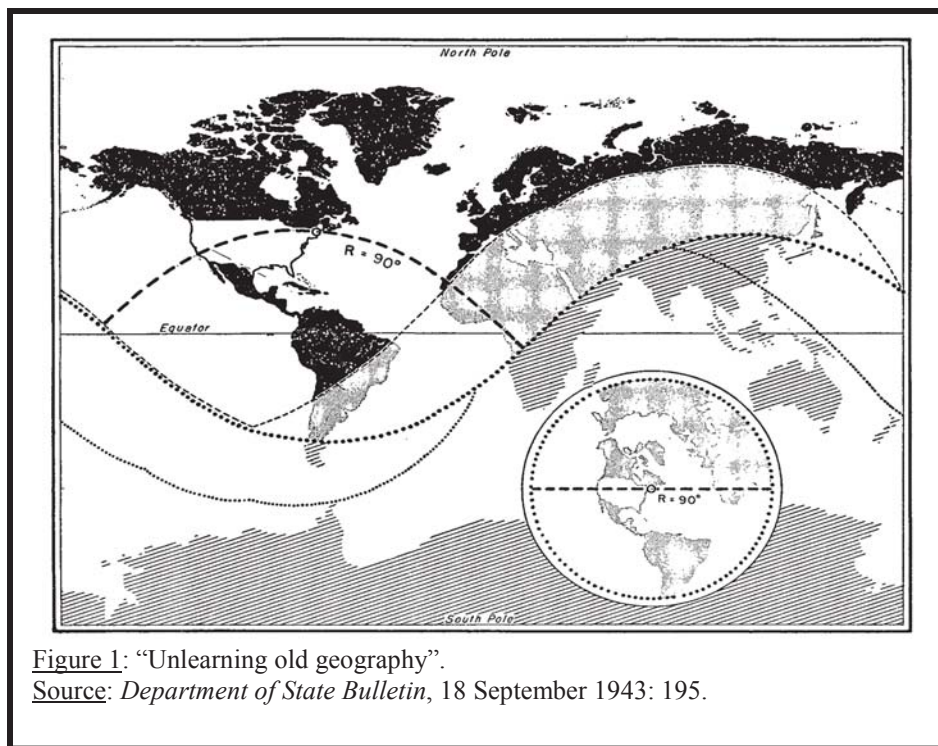


Figure 1: “Unlearning old geography”.
Source: *Department of State Bulletin*, 18 September 1943: 195.

In a context marked by a “great stream of vital raw materials coming out of Africa and a vast network of strategic air services crossing the continent,” Boggs’s cartographic discourse also revealed the anticipation that filled most American discussion of Africa.

To be sure, the resourcefulness of the region was not lost on the American whom colleagues appreciatively referred to as an “expert” on military geography and an “ardent” cartographer (Alexander 1958; Weaver 1955). “The mineral endowment of Africa is very great,” Boggs argued; “and it is important to the rest of the world.” Mustering the available statistical data of the time, he further elaborated: Africa was responsible for 98 per cent of the global production of diamonds and 90 per cent of the cobalt. Copper too was in large reserve on the continent. In an ever “shrinking world,” the geographer-diplomat continued, and the likelihood of “intensification of rivalries” over resources, the place of Africa in international geopolitics was self-evident. What was not so obvious were the adjustments that Americans were willing to make to overcome antiquated cartographic traditions (Boggs 1943, 191-94).

Boggs was not the only person among Washington’s foreign policy elite to push for a new spatial imaginary while asking for a reconsideration of Africa’s cartography with regard to world geopolitics. In fact, his colleague and senior geographer at the Department of State, Isaiah Bowman, had earlier in 1942 suggested that the map of Africa be redrawn to accommodate the idea of international trusteeship so dear to President Roosevelt (Louis 1978, 171-74). More radical than either of these proposals, if less influential, was George T. Renner’s (June 6, 1942, 14-16, 28) argument that Africa’s political cartography be remade in a spirit that would appease the expansionist desires of the European powers, including Germany and Italy: “A glance at any political map of Africa,” the geoscientist noted, “should completely muddle the average reader.” Then Renner added: “It is a bigger mess even than the present map of Europe. Grandmother’s crazy quilt was simplicity in comparison to the results of Europe’s scramble for colonies

in Africa.” The cartographer’s solution was to redraft this “crazy-quilt” whereby “all colonial holdings” would be “consolidated into large units.” In this scheme, Germany “should receive a large block of territory in central Africa to include what is at present French Gabon, Belgian Congo, Portuguese Angola, and western British Northern Rhodesia” (Renner June 6, 1942, 16). As it could have been anticipated such a scheme was rejected because it was considered far too alienating to the American president, despite both Renner’s thorough, if detached, knowledge of African colonial geopolitics and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s own “well-known liking for political geography” (Percy, 1958; Renner, November 1945, 34-35 & 134-37; Renner 1948, 393-407; Louis 1978, 150-51).

**LEGACIES OF GEOPOLITICAL VISIONS:
TOWARD A CRITIQUE OF ARMCHAIR CARTOGRAPHY**

Despite the farfetched nature of some of these discourses as exemplified by Renner’s “scandalous” proposal (Debres 1986), the cartographic discussions among American geographers and policymakers yielded practical results on the battlefields in Africa. Since the northern coastal areas of the continent served as some of the key theaters of operation during the war, West Africa became strategically important for the belligerents. In this context, the U.S. government signed an agreement with Liberia in late December 1943 to ensure the construction of a port and some other landing facilities to be used by the allied forces (*Department of State Bulletin*, January 8, 1944: 38; Duignan & Gann 1984, 304). The strategic importance of Liberia was further confirmed when U.S. war industries came to rely on the West African country’s supply of rubber after the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia (Villard, July 23, 1944: 102).

If the war brought West Africa into the geographic purview of American diplomats and projected U.S. power in the region, this attention resulted in the production of some rather broad, and even speculative, sketches and scripts of Africa's geopolitical atlases which was best epitomized by Renner's cartographic *Brave New World*. Emanating from a group of elite men with hegemonic aspirations yet largely detached from the human reality of Africa, the maps proposed by Renner, Boggs, and their peers had little to say about the peoples inhabiting the various socio-cultural landscapes that the cartographers were discussing. Nestled in the comfort of their offices in Washington, D.C. and New York, the American geographers rarely understood the anthropological complexities and the human tragedy (cf. military conscriptions, crop requisitions, forced cultivation and collection) that the war brought on to the continent, or if they did, they decided to turn a blind eye on them. Maybe this is the very nature of military cartography. Still, as recent studies conducted in the field of critical geopolitics have suggested, representational practices deployed by geopoliticians are as much about "recording the 'realities' of the earth (or international politics)" as they are implicated in the "the legitimization of territorial forms of reasoning and claims to territory and resources" (Dodds 1994: 275).

In the specific case of Africa, as it turned out, those territorial claims to strategic spaces and resources became even more important in the postwar years when the onset of the Cold War redefined the Third World as a new battleground to recruit converts to capitalist or communist modernities. Keen historically-informed geographic research is needed to unpack the modalities of these modernities and their operations in Africa (Westad 2005; see also Cloud 2002). For now, it is clear that both the invention of the

African continent as a strategic place and its eventual incorporation into American geopolitical thinking does confirm the insight among critical geographers that the craft of the geo/cartographer, whether it be scientific or otherwise, is always a hegemonic practice. In this light, the maps of Africa that American geographer-diplomats and politically-minded geographers produced during the Second World War and shortly thereafter were far from being “innocent tools” that simply helped locate a place. Rather, they were key instruments that reinforced the knowledge-power nexus that informed the rise of the American Century (Crampton & Elden 2007; Smith 2003; Tuathail 1996).

**CLOSING REMARKS:
A CALL FOR CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT**

As debates about the establishment of AFRICOM heat up, it might be insightful to revisit the making of past Africanist geographies and their attendant truth claims. Perhaps that would put us in a better position to see that the current surge in American interest regarding a strategic Africa has a long genealogy. Equally, we might better understand that such interest has far more to do with the continent’s strategic position in the current “War on Terror,” the paranoia vis-à-vis China’s rising role in Africa, and America’s new search for oil security than it has to do with any humanitarian motive that the Department of Defense is exhibiting to the general public. Some concerned scholars have begun to raise the alarm clock over what is likely to become a “blanket militarization” of American relations and aid vis-à-vis the continent (Moseley, July 31, 2009. See also Amosu 2007, 711-713). With a keen familiarity with the spatial historical scholarship on Africa and a renewed engagement with parallel geo-cartographic ways of seeing Africa, academic geographers/cartographers will undoubtedly play a critical role

in the public debates about the place of the continent in an ever globalized world. With their grounded knowledge of Africa, it is imperative that Africanists come down from the Ivory Tower and be a part of these debates, lest they be sidelined once again when the history books are written to narrate the story of the rebirth of a strategic continent.

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