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Trends. The Inside and Outside of Boundaries: The Aftermath of European Colonialism in Africa

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Today it is quite common to largely attribute political and economic dysfunction in many African nation-states to European colonialism. An especially insidious impact is attributed to the decisions leading to the present boundaries between these nation-states. As the story goes, an almost total ignorance of or imperviousness to already-existing tribal, cultural, social, ethnic, and linguistic groupings led to boundary-making that reflected mostly the balance of power amongst the colonizers and to a lesser degree some geographical factors. If a more sophisticated analysis of the above groupings had been effected, not only would today's African nation-states differ in number and boundaries, but the frequency and severity of political violence and economic disaster would be drastically reduced.

Not necessarily. Although the unfortunate, political boundary-induced conjunctions of ethnicity and the like have certainly been implicated in Africa's misfortune, social psychology yields significant data suggesting that there would be plenty of other causal candidates to engender tragedy. Boundaries arise from within as well as from without. In fact, those within may claim a more robust linkage with social behavior. The many seemingly intractable conflicts--not just in Africa but also within Northern Ireland, East Timor, and the United States seem to bear this out. The part of human nature that creates and maintains boundaries does so for good and for evil. Before this developmental phenomenon, the external boundaries of colonizers may be of only secondary interest. (See Bibeau, G. (1997). Cultural psychiatry in a creolizing world: Questions for a new research agenda. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 34, 9-41; Coover, G.E., & Godbold, L.C. (1998). Convergence between racial and political identities: Boundary erasure or aversive racism? *Communication Research*, 25, 669-688; Gullestad, M. (1997). A passion for boundaries: Reflections on connections between the everyday lives of children and discourses on the nation in contemporary Norway. *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research*, 4, 19-42; Phillips, T.L. (1996). Symbolic boundaries and national identity in Australia. *British Journal of Sociology*, 47, 113-134; Rothbart, M., Davis-Stitt, C., & Hill, J. (1997). Effects of arbitrarily placed category boundaries on similarity judgments. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 33, 122-145.) (Keywords: Africa, Boundaries, Colonialism, Conflict, Europe.)