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Central Africa and the Political Psychology of Borders

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Abstract. This article describes psychological meanings of borders, the political consequences of these meanings, and policy recommendations for Central African political leaders.

The first borders arise through psychological development and constitute the demarcation of self from other. At first, self is what is experienced as good, other what is experienced as bad. With further development and differentiation, most humans are able to experience good and bad both within the self and within the other. There are individual differences in how much good and bad can be experienced in self and other, as well in how permeable the border between self and other may be. In addition, there is a further individual difference in how situationally specific or transituationally consistent the above individual differences are. In many ways, the continual vicissitudes of psychological borders are necessarily conflictual and the isomorphic expressions of these vicissitudes configure externalized conflict in interpersonal behavior. And so is born the psychodynamic of acting out.

In international affairs, the substance and permeability of borders often are themselves the most salient political issues or are primary, secondary, or tertiary factors along with other issues of politics. As one can infer through studying many international border conflicts, an operative conflictual dynamic is often a sense of psychological violation--even when, or especially when, military incursions, natural resources, or cultural imperialism are at issue. This sense of psychological violation arises spontaneously and may be exacerbated through methods of political propaganda. As with many examples of psychological violation, the behavioral response often appears more intense, more emotional, less logical, and less rational than warranted in the eyes of observers who view political conflict as the mere strategic-moral calculus of issues.

Over the past few years in Central Africa--viz., the former Zaire, the Congo Republic, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Angola, and Tanzania--international and intranational political borders have figured prominently in violent conflict. Not only is the sense of psychological violation a prominent factor, but so is the creation of modern political borders by colonial powers. While the psychology of borders--as a substrate of human personality--may prove intractable to modification, the same is not necessarily the case for political borders. Much has been made of the purported autonomy that some Central African leaders seem to be developing in settling their own political conflicts. What could better substantiate such an effort than for these leaders to consensually redraw colonial-mandated borders into new ones less prone to transduce political into military conflict? Such a collective self-efficacy might contribute to at least one section of Africa finally becoming all it can be. (See Echabe, A. E., & Gonzales, Castro, J. L. (1996.) Images of immigrants: A study on the xenophobia and permeability of intergroup boundaries. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 26, 341-352; Espin, O. M. (1996.) Leaving the nation and joining the tribe: Lesbian immigrants crossing geographical and identity borders. *Women and Therapy*, 19, 99-107; French, H. (October 18, 1997.) New rules in Africa: Borders aren't sacred. *The New York Times*, pp. A1; A6; Vila, P. (1997.) Narrative identities: The emplotment of the Mexican on the U.S.-Mexican border. *Sociological Quarterly*, 38, 147-183.)(Keywords: Borders, Boundaries, Self, Other.)