

## Chapter 2

# Sarah's Globe and the (Un-)naming of Mobile Space

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**Abstract** Globes, maps, and gazetteers are not typically familiar with mobile spaces and places that have no fixed coordinates or precise limits. This chapter focuses on the mobility of Africa's social *and spatial* formations, past and present, and provides a conceptual critique of the normative equivalence between geographic fixity and toponymic recognition. Building on examples from North, West, and Central Africa, the chapter points out that African societies are not always where linear boundaries and conventional toponyms say they are. Common assumptions about the desirability and feasibility of toponymic standardisation are questioned.

**Keywords** Mobile spaces • Unconventional toponyms • Toponymic standardisation • Africa's geography • (Un-)official boundaries

Colonisers prospered throughout centuries from naming what they appropriated, and unnamings what hindered them.<sup>1</sup>

The Earth is a palimpsest, a graveyard of toponyms.<sup>2</sup>

Sarah, my 10-year-old niece, loves reading maps and learning new place names. She has a Moroccan mother, a Cape Verdean father, and they all live in Morocco. A globe, I thought, would make a perfect gift for her. So I got one and handed it to her father, who one day was passing through Dakar, my hometown. Things did not go easily. Sarah's father was stopped upon arrival at Casablanca Airport. There he was detained for several hours, not knowing why. Customs officers seized the globe, which he did not understand either. How could they not see that it contained neither drugs nor anything illegal?

Asked to come back the following day, he was finally informed that the globe could not enter the kingdom and had to be destroyed. There was nothing wrong

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<sup>1</sup>Kamel Daoud, *Meursault, contre-enquête* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2014), pp. 22–23.

<sup>2</sup>Christian Jacob, *L'empire des cartes: Approche théorique de la cartographie à travers l'histoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992), p. 309.

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inside it, but on it. The object of the offence was a yellow area bearing the toponym Western Sahara, just below the green area with the name Morocco. A dashed line, the standard cartographic convention for disputed borders, ran between them. From a Moroccan point of view, the yellow area belonged to the Southern Provinces of the green one and any other mentions or allusions, including toponyms, were banned. It did not really matter that most people outside Morocco refer to the disputed area as Western Sahara, its official UN name (see Fig. 2.1: map features the toponyms that are mentioned in this chapter). A ‘non autonomous territory’ in UN parlance, the former Spanish Sahara is a full-fledged member of the African Union, where it is known by the acronym DASR, or Democratic Arab Sahrawi Republic. Had the globe makers printed the latter name, things could have gone much worse for both Sarah’s gift and her father.

Western Sahara was the only unacceptable toponym. Fortunately, a sympathetic customs officer had the bright idea of erasing it with a razor blade. This was how, just as in Daoud’s first quote above, the hindrance to pleasing my niece was overcome: simply by unnamings it. So name suppression proved useful and could not be considered, contrary to what Daoud seems to imply, a colonial-specific operation.

Further erasure of the toponymic palimpsest would have revealed several layers of Spanish, Arabic, Hebraic, and Amazigh names – some of them dead, some not. A toponym may have many lives, depending on the purposes to which it can be put. For instance, the Western Sahara’s independence-seeking ‘Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro’ (POLISARIO) chose to name itself after the two ‘Spanish territories’ that once made the Spanish Sahara. The reuse of colonial toponyms here establishes an explicit frame of reference for decolonisation claims. On the other hand, the positional adjective ‘Southern’ for these territories in Morocco’s Southern Provinces involves some larger, encompassing space with a political centre of gravity further north. But the very name of Morocco (or its most common one, besides the Arabic *al-Mamlakah al-Maghribiyyah*, i.e. ‘Kingdom of the West’) derives from the Portuguese pronunciation (Marrocos) of the Almoravid-founded city of Marrakech, or Murwkush.<sup>3</sup> The Almoravids, a confederation of Sahrawi tribes from the area of today’s Mauritania, ruled over an empire that in the eleventh century stretched from central Spain to the shores of the River Senegal and included the whole of present-day Morocco.

<sup>3</sup>Marrakech is an Amazigh toponym with uncertain meaning(s). Allegedly based on the verbal root RKS (‘to hide’), derogatory meanings like ‘the place where [hidden] bandits attack caravans’ or ‘decamp quickly [and hide]’ were quite popular in colonial times. Current linguists rather focus on the Amazigh words *mur* (‘rescue’ or ‘protection’), *amur* (‘protected place’), *Kush* (grandson of Biblical Noah) or *akush* (‘divinity’) to reinterpret Marrakech as ‘land of God’, ‘mountain of Kush’, or a ‘blessed place [...] where respect of a divine pact excludes violence.’ See A. Toufik, ‘Marrakech: La signification du nom’, in Salem Chaker (ed.), *Encyclopédie Berbère* (Louvain: Peeters, 2010), vol. 30, pp. 4627–30.



In short, the green area on Sarah's globe stands for a country whose name somehow stems from the remote ancestors of those who, in the yellow area, ask that the dashed line between green and yellow be made again as solid as when it marked an inter-colonial boundary between two other colours. That is, beige-tinted Spain (half of which they once ruled), and France in light purple (who held the green area as a protectorate from 1912 to 1955). If a scratched globe says anything about names and borders, it is their shared symbolic importance. Names and borders have become, at all latitudes, key attributes of a territory. The most enduring colonial legacy in this regard, the one with the most far reaching implications, is the delineation of continuous spaces as a prerequisite to naming.

The scraped off yellow area on the globe was never a territory unified under a single authority. It was part of different linguistic, social, and economic spaces that varied in extent and overlapped. Its structuring (physical) elements such as trade routes, market places and stopping points, shaped adaptive networks with changing configurations and varying levels of control by various groups in various alliances. Even when prominent tribes extended *beya* (allegiance) to the Sultan of Morocco, or also to the Dey of Algiers or to Songhai rulers to the south, the remaining space contained the largest area and was commonly known as *bled es-Siba*, or 'land of dissidence.' No erasure of whatever globe could reveal this generic *bled es-Siba*, for the simple reason that it refers to an ever-changing space with no fixed limits. Globes, maps, and more generally our ways of thinking and representing space have become unfamiliar with this kind of geography.

On the mural map in her classroom, Sarah has learnt to locate every subdivision of Morocco. When asked for the Al-Haouz Province for instance, or for the Ghrab Region, she identifies the relevant administrative boundary first, and then she follows it with her index finger in a circular movement. She is not expected to know that *gharb* ('west', as in *maghrib*) and *hawz* ('environs', 'vicinity') had long been a very broad division of the Atlantic plains between coastal areas and their hinterlands, nor that *Hawz* later came to refer to the hinterland of every city of importance. This imprecision remained unproblematic at least until the late sixteenth century, when the Council of Portugal, who ruled over most of the Atlantic coast and harbours, began pressing for toponymic disambiguation.

Delineation and disambiguation enabled colonial inventories of the world. They contributed to the cartographic, then political, closure of hitherto open spaces, where most African societies, not only nomadic ones, used to expand, retreat, or simply move depending on political, economic and environmental conditions and circumstances.

The notion of fixed borders was alien to pre-colonial entities. Even those which had linear boundaries, such as the Great Lakes kingdoms in Central Africa, conceived them as intrinsically mobile. Their movement in Rwanda was codified through a dynastic cycle of four kings, two of whom had a duty to conquer new lands, while the other two were confined to 'sacred places' and forbidden to wage war – their responsibility was to restore peace and consolidate the enlarged kingdom. Consequently, a same hill or village could receive different names at

different moments in the dynastic cycle, according to its spatial and symbolic integration within fluid borderlands.<sup>4</sup>

Mobile spaces and changing toponyms may be more relevant to the understanding of Africa's geography, past and present, than the classical distinction between nomadic and sedentary peoples or the cartographic and toponymic grids against which we are educated to report movements. The seasonal movements of those we unthinkingly call 'nomads', in and around the Sahara or elsewhere, actually take them to more or less the same places year after year. Their social and material practices thus produce quite stable spaces. On the other hand, many of the peasant societies we consider 'sedentary' have been living off itinerant agriculture for centuries and are indeed much more 'geographically' mobile. Acknowledging not only physical migrations from one named place to another named place, but the spatial mobility of identities and cultures, including the dynamic reconfigurations of linguistic, religious and ethnic areas, is basically a matter of time scales. African societies, in other words, are not always where official boundaries and affixed toponyms say they are.

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To name a place is to differentiate it, to single it out from a broader spatial continuum. Nowadays this involves the mental mapping of discrete geographical entities – a cognitive operation that we perform without effort, anytime we mention a place or one is mentioned to us. Even in cases of name dispute, as Southern Provinces vs. Western Sahara on Sarah's globe (or the Falklands vs. Malvinas, or Judea and Samaria vs. Jordan's West Bank, etc.), we tend to focus attention on social, political or cultural narratives and significance, i.e. on conflicting constructions of placeness, but one name or the other evokes for all parties a single geographic location.

The meanings we attach to places are by contrast too volatile to be captured, let alone stabilised, in a single toponym. Meanings evolve as intricate outcomes of events big and small, memory constructions and contextual subjectivities, while toponyms rarely change outside major political shifts. Place names provide historians with benchmarks regarding the name givers, the language they spoke, the social and power relations that shaped their times – but they do not say much about what the named places mean to whom. Rather, toponyms serve as supports of, and stimuli for, geographical imaginations, allowing different people to invest the same portion of Earth with different meanings – thus making it different places at the same time.

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<sup>4</sup>Christopher C. Taylor, 'Fluids and Fractals in Rwanda: Order and Chaos', in Mark S. Mosko and Frederick H. Damon (eds), *On the Order of Chaos: Social Anthropology and the Science of Chaos* (New York, Berghahn Books, 2005), pp. 136–165.

Multiple names would seem a natural way of dealing with multiple meanings. They are widely regarded as anomalies. Multiple names are a nightmare for gazetteer editors, and remain last resort exceptions to the ‘one place, one name’ principle. Or, more exactly, to the established standard of ‘one *specific* location, one *fixed* name.’

All named places, in other words, are implicitly understood as having stable geographic coordinates. If *nomen est numen* (to name is to know), as the Latin adage goes, then both familiar and exotic places, once given names, are knowable by their location on maps. Without even a vague idea of where they are, the simple fact of using toponyms indicates that they exist somewhere, as mappable entities. This eases interpersonal communication and other aspects of social life, ranging from mail delivery to land titling and tax recovery, not to forget GPS navigation. The reverse side is that places with imprecise or moving positions – and many such places are meaningful to many people – remain below the radar of toponymy.

Places are acknowledged as being places when they are named. And they are named when we can map them in a steady position. As tautological as it appears today, the normative equivalence between named and mappable places long remained unnecessary in most parts of the world. A byproduct of the European Renaissance, it gradually came about with the turbulent decline of the Holy Roman Empire, where popes and kings claimed a right over people, and the development of secular states that asserted a right over land.

The territorialisation of sovereignty, the development of land measuring techniques and survey methods, and the expansion of a Eurocentric mercantile world-system, converged towards a paradigm of geographic permanency. Space was made a supposedly inert canvas on which the movements of history could be daubed. Well beyond state borders, the endless search for stable divisions has affected all scales of geographic imagination, from our pseudo-evident five- to sevenfold continental system to babushka-like structures, at sub-state levels, of nested regional and local governance.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, the notion of fixed territories spread to Africa first as a colonial prescription, then as a condition for the possibility of decolonisation.

What were decolonised peoples supposed to do with colonial borders? To keep them, erase them, or renegotiate them on a case-by-case basis? Their official freezing, after heated debates, proved tantamount to renewing a basic form of coloniality<sup>6</sup> or a distinctively colonial way of shaping African social formations. New flags were raised, new anthems sung, and new names given to a number of countries, cities, streets, airports and other symbolic places. But who belongs to what society, who decides so, who participates in collective identity formation (and transformation), turned out to be burning and conflict-generating issues.

<sup>5</sup>Martin M. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997); Achim von Oppen, ‘Bounding villages: the enclosure of locality in Central Africa, 1890s to 1990s’ (unpublished habilitation thesis, Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, 2003).

<sup>6</sup>Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2013).

The problem was not so much where borders are placed. It was, and still is, how people conceive sameness and otherness (i.e. placeness and distance) and above all how they conceive limits. As separating walls, or bridges? As thick lines fitting an all-encompassing territory? As identity gradients running through overlapping spaces? As an immutable given or varying constructs?

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Algerian writer Kateb Yacine<sup>7</sup> asked what the very name of his country could mean to non-coastal populations: ‘*Ldjazair*, what’s that name? Ever seen a country named “the islands?”’ Kateb’s target was an “arrogant [...] brand of Arabo-Islamism” that placed all Algerians in a reductive identity through the Arabisation of not only French names, but of Amazigh toponyms too, which obscured or actually concealed their ‘real and deeper African dimension.’<sup>8</sup>

Renaming the landscape, whatever language is being used, is an act of power and an intrinsically divisive exercise.<sup>9</sup> It proves all the more disruptive when a plurality of peoples speaking different languages have historically interacted without thinking of themselves as being members of clear-cut entities, and ‘intermingled to such an extent that intermarriages, linguistic and cultural exchanges resulted in the emergence of [large clusters] of distinct but interconnected peoples.’<sup>10</sup> This observation was made in a Southern African context but it could also apply to North or West and indeed all parts of Africa where inter-societal relations have historically ‘formed not a mosaic of more or less autonomous communities, but rather genuine “chains of societies.”’<sup>11</sup>

Against this general background of constantly ongoing societal reconfigurations and mobile spaces, UNESCO’s commitment to ‘urgently achieve a system of norms and standards for African [...] toponyms’<sup>12</sup> would seem at least contradictory with the organisation’s very mission to foster peace through culture. There have been

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<sup>7</sup>Yacine was his first name and Kateb his family name. He insistently asked to be known as Kateb Yacine. Reversing the usual name order was, in his view, a way of mocking the colonial civil system.

<sup>8</sup>Kateb Yacine, ‘C’est africain qu’il faut se dire’ [reprint of a 1987 interview with Tassadit Yacine], in *Le Poète comme un boxeur: Entretiens 1958–1989* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), pp. 101–120 (pp. 101, 109).

<sup>9</sup>Maoz Azaryahu and Arnon Golan, ‘(Re)naming the Landscape: The Formation of the Hebrew Map of Israel 1949–1960’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 27, 2 (2001), pp. 178–195.

<sup>10</sup>Denis-Constant Martin, *Sounding the Cape: Music, Identity and Politics in South Africa* (Somerset West: African Minds, 2013), p. 350.

<sup>11</sup>Martin, *Sounding the Cape*, p. 350.

<sup>12</sup>UNESCO, *Ethnonymes et toponymes africains*, Histoire générale de l’Afrique: Etudes et documents, 6 (Paris: UNESCO, 1984), p. 9.

many contentious attempts at stabilising place names since independence,<sup>13</sup> all of them grounded in questionable assumptions regarding the desirability and feasibility of toponymic standardisation.

One single place may have different names, such as ‘Lake Victoria’ (which originated in colonial times after the British queen), which Burundians know as ‘Nyanza’, Tanzanians as ‘Ukerewe’, and Ugandans as ‘Nalubaale.’ Different places may bear one same name, as the many Ife-s established throughout West and Central Africa by Yoruba migrants, or the many Touba-s – such as in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d’Ivoire, and Gabon – named after the spiritual capital of the Mouride brotherhood, in central Senegal, from where migrant disciples spread the message of their Sufi order.<sup>14</sup> This is aside from the countless districts known as ‘Little Touba’, because of high Mouride ‘visibility’ in among other places Rome, Paris, New York and Hong Kong.

*At-tūb* (‘sun-dried mud-brick’) or *tūbā* (‘felicity’, or also the ‘tree of paradise’<sup>15</sup>), the usually considered Arabic etymologies, allow Mouride and non-Mouride inhabitants of these various Touba-s to imagine themselves within or outside a larger and mobile Mouride space. In the same vein, the acceptance of multiple possible etymologies for Timbuktu – a ‘hollow’ in Songhai, in reference to the depression where the city stands; or, in Tamasheq, the ‘place’ (*tim*) or the ‘wall’ (*tin*) of either a ‘small dune’ (*buktu*) or of a woman named *Butu* – allows for its inclusion within different cultural spaces simultaneously, irrespective of the changing state of community relations.

With all-encompassing territorial reforms backed by international donors’ support, toponymic debates and grassroots participation in local naming commissions are now becoming an increasingly accepted norm throughout Africa.<sup>16</sup> A supposedly-essential ingredient in democratic governance, they look very good but, if the places and territories to be named or renamed have been mapped in advance, they rarely achieve more than pouring old wine into new calabashes. Once again, the ways we think about space determines the places to be named. Even in cases when the reconfiguration of territorial units is left for discussion, as happened in Mali since the mid-1990s, an imposed criterion of spatial continuity limits the significance of the whole process.

<sup>13</sup>Atoma Batoma, ‘African Ethnonyms and Toponyms: An Annotated Bibliography’, *Electronic Journal of Africana Bibliography*, 10, 1 (2006), see <http://ir.uiowa.edu/ejab/vol10/iss1/1/> (visited 28 December 2014).

<sup>14</sup>See, respectively: Eva Krapf-Askari, *Yoruba Towns and Cities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 8; Eric Ross, ‘Marabout Republics Then and Now: configuring Muslim towns in Senegal’, *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara*, 16 (2002), pp. 35–66.

<sup>15</sup>Eric Ross, ‘Touba: A Spiritual Metropolis in the Modern World’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 29, 2 (1995), pp. 222–259 (pp. 223–224).

<sup>16</sup>Frédéric Giraud, Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch and Sylvain Guyot, ‘Au nom des territoires! Enjeux géographiques de la toponymie’, *L’Espace géographique*, 37, 2 (2008), pp. 97–105.



Mali is indeed a revealing illustration.<sup>17</sup> The basic form of spatial grouping prior to colonisation was the *diamana*, a networked space with hazy borders and varying centralities. French colonisation established a rigid territorial structure, where the smallest unit directly headed by a colonial officer was the *cercle* (the French word for 'circle', conveying the idea of circumscription). Each *cercle* was named after, and centered on, a fixed *chef-lieu* (literally a 'chief place') and consisted of several *cantons* (from the verb *cantonner*, meaning 'to confine' or 'to station') that fell under the delegated authority of colonial-appointed chiefs. The *cercle* system was maintained at independence, except that *cantons* came to be called *arrondissements* (same principle of 'encircling') and the colonial chiefdom gave way to local delegates of the ruling party. Hundreds of new local communities have been recently created through inter-village consultations. The overwhelming majority of them are named after their (democratically chosen) *chef-lieu*, which more than anything attests to 'the difficulty of devising alternatives' to the model of the steady-space-having-a-steady-centre.<sup>18</sup> Names of former *diamanas* come in second position, thus escaping the notion of fixed centralities but not that of fixed delineation.<sup>19</sup> It would seem in this regard that the Earth is less a graveyard of toponyms than of toponymic models, i.e. of ways of thinking and naming space.

To conclude, one final remark about Sarah and her Cape Verdean father. Like many people of Sephardic descent, my niece has a family name that is also a Portuguese toponym – a symbolic form of mobile space, one that Jewish families carried with them on their expulsion from Spain and Portugal 500 years ago. Sephardic 'toponymic patronyms', a reminder of past home places in the Iberian Peninsula, are now common across West Africa, principally in the former Portuguese colonies of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, in southern Senegal and some coastal areas of the Gulf of Benin – without most bearers being aware of

<sup>17</sup>Now a landlocked country, Mali takes its name from the Mali Empire, one of the most powerful and most mobile polities in West African history. Ancient Mali at its height, in the fourteenth century, encompassed about half the current Malian territory, stretched across present-day Mauritania and Senegal to the Atlantic Ocean, and had its capital in present-day Guinea. Toponymic displacement is a pronounced phenomenon in Africa – the prime example being Ifriqiya/Africa itself (once a Roman province centered on modern Tunisia), along with, inter alia, Libya, Mauritania, Ghana and Sudan. As Lewis rightly points out, however, the 'migration of place names [...] taking on different meanings as they are translated and as basic geographic conceptualizations change' is not that surprising, since 'change is intrinsic to language itself.' Martin W. Lewis, 'The Migration of Place Names' (2011), [www.geocurrents.info/historical-geography/the-migration-of-place-names-africa-libya-ethiopia-eritrea-and-sudan](http://www.geocurrents.info/historical-geography/the-migration-of-place-names-africa-libya-ethiopia-eritrea-and-sudan) (visited 28 December 2014).

<sup>18</sup>Stéphanie Lima, 'L'émergence d'une toponymie plurielle au Mali', *L'espace politique*, 5, 2 (2008), <http://espacepolitique.revues.org/1115> (visited 22 January 2015).

<sup>19</sup>Still regarding Mali, another great paradox was the NMLA's (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) proclamation of a breakaway (and unrecognised) state in April 2012. The Tamasheq word *azawad* translates to 'land of transhumance' and it basically refers to an open area, one whose fuzzy borders vary according to climatic conditions, community relations, and other factors of uncertainty. By contrast, the NMLA conception of Azawad as being the northern half of legal Mali derives from, reflects and even reproduces the very territorial model that has long caused Tuareg rebel groups to take arms.

any Jewish ancestry. Recent government decisions, in both Spain and Portugal, to facilitate the restoration of citizenship for the descendants of expelled Jews have led to the publication and publicising of lists of Sephardic names that can be used to apply for naturalisation.<sup>20</sup> These lists, whatever their impact on Jewish diasporic spaces, and their possible help to African candidates for a European nationality, constitute one more instance of varying geographies and toponymic displacement. Both Sarah's globe, an emblematic object of Iberian circumnavigations, and Sarah's name, a symbol of mobile spaces, call for a critical reassessment of our toponymic standards and formats.

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<sup>20</sup>Compiled lists available on <http://my.ynet.co.il/pic/news/nombres.pdf> (visited 28 July 2015).

Place Names in Africa

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