

Editorial

The Baggage and Visage of 2011

In 1911, the geographical map of Africa shows only three “independent” regions, Abyssinia, Liberia, and Morocco. The rest of Africa fell under one or other “superpower” European countries of the period (Figure 1). What difference one hundred years makes! And what have we done with the hard earned “freedoms?”

In terms of health, the major diseases that ravaged Africa in 1911 continue to do so in 2011. More than a million Africans die from Tuberculosis and Malaria each year. But now, we have added AIDS, respiratory diseases, various forms of gastroenteritis, injury from transportation, cancers, and major wars.

In terms of environmental conditions, there is much similarity between 1911 and 2011, especially with respect to the major climes and landscapes. The magnificent Sahara desert, the tropical rainforests, and the East African Savannahs still inspire a sense of awe. But then much has changed with respect to human impacts on these natural systems. Africa now sports several cities inhabited by a million or more people, sometimes under the most depressing conditions of extreme population density and poverty, decaying infrastructures and inadequate supply of water, electricity, and food; and polluted air.

In 1911, even in the most affluent countries in the world, life expectancy at birth was generally under 55 years. In 2011, life expectancy for most groups in these countries approach 80 years. Whereas in Africa, we still see this wide range of life expectancies depending on the country or region of the continent. Like the two-headed African “Janus” (Figure 2), we look back at year past and hope to correct profound mistakes and shed the baggage of colonial heritage. Yet, we also look forward to build on our successes.

Much historical and political baggage greets this New Year, 2011. But there is hope in the year’s visage. African countries are more or less better organized, environmental systems have been mapped and sensitive places have been placed under protection by international agreements. The new threats from climate change and population displacement persist. And these promises and challenges will reflect our visage for the foreseeable future. Science and technological development are the tools we need, not to borrow from other regions, but to cultivate earnestly on African soil.

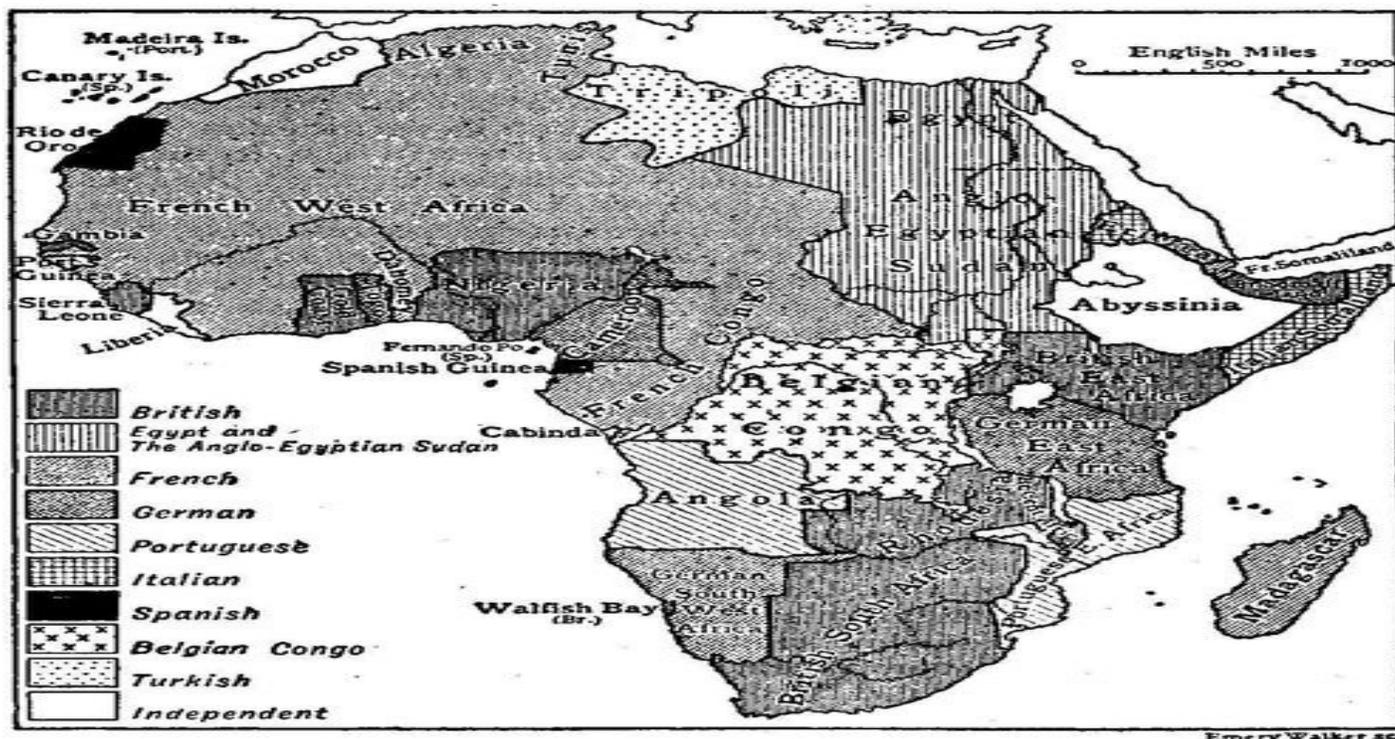


Figure 1. Map of Africa in 1911. By courtesy (<http://www.zonu.com/detail-en/2009-11-09-10980/Africa-map-1911.html>).



Figure 2. Janus *Nanfari* Mask in Bronze. Origin: Bamana Tribe, Mali. Composition: lost wax-cast bronze. Age: 19th century. By courtesy of Andrew and Ethan Rider. Please visit: <http://www.sujaro.com/index.shtml> and <http://africa.com/>.

Oladele A. Ogunseitan, Ph.D., M.P.H.
Program in Public Health & School of Social Ecology,
University of California, Irvine,
CA 92697, USA.
Editor-in-Chief.