

Online Article

Whither ‘Sub-Saharan Africa’ Can We Use the Compass Instead?

Currently, there are few conversations about the term ‘Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)’ (L.T. 2019) and its continued use (Zezeza 2022; Daley and Murrey, 2022). An end to the use of this problematic term is long overdue, and African voices on this matter should be amplified. This contribution to the literature aims to offer a solid reference point to support discussions about the discontinued use of this virulent term due to its racist origins and racist undertones (Adébisi 2016; Chachage 2020; Ekwe-Ekwe 2012; Zezeza 2010). Through the voices of several prominent Africans, we explore the term’s invention, its scholarly (dis)advantages, and potential harm in its continued usage.

Keywords: Sub-Saharan Africa; SSA; terminology

The Invention of Sub-Saharan Africa (‘SSA’)

For non-historians, especially those who do not focus on African history, the term sub-Saharan Africa and its abbreviation SSA seem harmless. These terms are used persistently, particularly in such spheres such as public health, development work, academic engagements, and other areas of life that affect Africans (see Zezeza 2018; Welsh 1996; Adesina et al. 2013; Ngwa et al. 2022; Burchard 2022; Kabakama et al. 2022; and Kulu et al. 2022). ‘SSA’, as it is used officially, refers to the part of Africa south of the southern border of the Sahara Desert. Gloria Emeagwali, professor of History and African Studies at Central Connecticut State University puts it succinctly: ‘It presents a covert line of demarcation between the damned and the not-so-damned in an equation that is actually racist’ (Emeagwali, 15/07/2022, online interview). Vicensia Shule, a senior faculty member of the University of Dar es Salaam and adjunct professor at the Nelson Man-

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dela African Institution of Science and Technology, suggests that SSA ‘is used to categorise the continent, to exclude countries in the north for various reasons. South of the Sahara, to imply underdeveloped, to form classes and it comes with a negative connotation’ (Shule, 18/07/2022, online interview).

For Jenerali Ulimwengu, a senior media personality who spent some time in Algeria as a Pan-African Youth Movement Tanzanian representative, the term can thus be understood:

It’s based on geography and the population. Those from the north, came from the Mediter-

anean as well as from an invasion from the Middle East. The area is inhabited by mostly Arabs and Tuareg, from the Sahel. Having travelled over the area, you see a mixture of races and ethnicities. There are also indications of a cultural mix. While those living on the south of the desert are mostly darker skinned (Ulimwengu, 28/07/2022, phone interview.).

Others suggest that ‘sub’ Sahara implies that those in the indicated area are less than or of a lower class. According to Shule (18/07/2022, online interview.), ‘sub’ means less than, below ... and many associate sub-Saharan Africa with lower economic status. She asserts that ‘poverty has an African face, illegal immigration (due to poverty) has an African face’. Her interpretation of ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ is closer to one of the definitions of ‘sub’ offered by a major American English dictionary: ‘a) lower in importance or rank: lesser b) division or part of a subset’. While there are other definitions, this gives one food for thought (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.).

Paul Zeleza, has been publishing sustained historical critiques on defining Africa in terms of such demeaning demarcations.

The conflation of Africa with ‘sub-Saharan Africa,’ ‘Africa South of the Sahara’ or ‘Black Africa’ so common in discourses about Africa, “ultimately offers us a racialized view of Africa, Africa as biology, as the “Black” continent (Zeleza 2006:15).

According to this author, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), was one of the western intellectuals who were instrumental in this invention that has been carried on by his ‘intellectual descendants’ (Zeleza 2006:15). It was the influential Hegel who insisted that:

Africa must be divided into three parts: one is that which lies south of the desert of Sahara—Africa proper—the Upland almost entirely unknown to us, with narrow coast-tracts along the sea; the second is that to the north of the desert—European Africa (if we may so call it)—a coastland; the third is the river region of the Nile, the only valley-land of Africa, and which is in connection with Asia (Táiwò 1998:7).

Over the years, the Hegelian trichotomy gave way to a dichotomy. Out of this genealogy, a prominent African philosopher, Olúfẹ́mi Táiwò also notes that

all locutions concerning ‘Africa South of the Sahara,’ ‘Sub-Saharan Africa,’ ‘Black Africa/ are, in their different ways, reflective of the Hegelian insistence that the areas so designated are ‘Africa proper’ that must be deemed of no interest to World History (Táiwò 2018:13).

Acutely cognisant of this racialist invention, the first president

of independent Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, cried: ‘There is a tendency to divide Africa into fictitious zones north and south of the Sahara which emphasizes racial, religious and cultural differences’ (Nkrumah 1963:188). He saw the Sahara as a bridge rather than a barrier. ‘The Sahara no longer divides us; it unites us’ became one of the slogans of the All African Peoples Conference that he convened in 1958, with half of the delegates coming from Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, according to St Claire Drake (1964:40). Nkrumah would categorically state (Chachage 2010): ‘To us, Africa with its islands is just one Africa. We reject the idea of any partition. From Tangier or Cairo in the North to Cape Town in the South, from Cape Guardafui in the East to Cape Verde Islands in the West, Africa is one and indivisible’ (Nkrumah 1963:217).

It is unclear how serious those who invented the term sub-Saharan Africa thought about it. Did they seriously analyse what it meant or what it conveyed? While there is an implication of a clear demarcation between the countries north of the Sahara, namely Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia, the Sahel belt is often confused with the Sahara. The Sahel – “shore” – is a crossroad between the desert and the rest of the African continent (Walther and Retailé 2010:3). As such, it is interconnected to the Sahara for they are ‘indeed bound by an old spatial legacy in which trans-Saharan roads and sedentary settlements are organised, from North to South....’ (Walther and Retailé 2010:4).

However, the geography and biology of the continent reveal no clear demarcation between the Sahel belt and those south of the belt.

Regarding geography, some countries have part of the Sahara desert partly within their borders. These include Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Senegal, Eritrea, and Sudan. Even Northern Nigeria falls within the Sahelian desert. As such, the ‘Sub-Sahara question’ is not only about physical geography but also about political geography. The division of Africa during colonial times led to territories that diverse ethnic groups inhabited. The colonialists carved most territories across Africa without following clear territorial limits (Welsh 1996; Chachage 2003). This resulted in fluid and fused boundaries, sometimes binding different ethnicities together while separating others of similar ethnicities. One example is how, throughout its late colonial history, the Western Sahara – the territory of the Sahrawi people – has been claimed by Spain, Morocco, and even Mauritania (Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.).

‘Yes’, notes Amy Niang (08/09/2022, pers. comm.), ‘I’m explicit about the ahistorical nature of the division between north/Sub-Saharan Africa and you can read this in most of my work on the Sahel’. Her work is particularly informative given that the Sahel, as Godwin Murunga, the Executive Secretary of Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) points out, has an element of its conceptualisation that is strictly a French colonial invention, yet, there is a conceptualisation of the Sahel as a zone of movement, dispersal, and adaptation. (Murunga, 29/08/2022, pers. comm.). In one of her notable works aptly entitled *Stateness and Borderiness in Mediation: Productions and Contestations of Space in the Sahel*, Niang critically revisits the role of the then colonial administration

in curtailing ‘Sahelian-Saharan’ mobility:

The French strategy to dealing with the Tuareg in particular was to restrict their capacity to navigate the desert by attacking contingents of camels and caravans, poisoning wells, executing prisoners, confiscating land, and exiling dissidents. The French also tied alliances with sedentary groups (Tuareg and non-Tuareg) as well as nomadic groups as proxy agents. By and large, colonial production of space fits into a unidimensional and linear scheme of ordering; in other words, it was an approach meant to render productive, to exclude, to discipline subsistence economies to service centralized authority. Furthermore, the colonial encounter was foundational in the crystallization, the naturalization, and the inscription of ethnic identities in territorialized structures (Niang 2018:7).

When describing the invention of the term sub-Saharan Africa, Ulimwengu (28 July 2022, Phone interview.) suggests that one reality is that, when grabbing land, the colonial powers ‘took no notice of indigenous people who were there’ since ‘for them, it was about pieces of land’. As a result, people of similar ethnic backgrounds live in different countries. These include the Mandingo (Mali, Guinea, Senegal, the Gambia, Ivory Coast and Guinea Bissau), the Maasai (Tanzania and Kenya), the Luo (Tanzania and Kenya), and the Yao (Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique), to name a few. The ‘Toubou’ or ‘Tubu’ are a Black African Saharan ethnic group inhabiting northern Chad, southern Libya, north-eastern Niger and north-western Sudan (Atlas of Humanity n.d.). It is therefore wrong to imply that Black Africans only inhabit the

territory south of the Sahara desert and the Sahel belt. One may be forgiven for thinking that Africa is divided between the northerners and the rest because of racist and economic ideas. According to Ulimwengu (28/07/2022, Phone interview) ‘Northern Africans consider themselves to be “Less African” than the rest of the continent.’ This, we contend, is partly due to the propagation of the term through colourism and racialism.

Emeagwali (15/07/22, online interview.) posits that the term provides ‘justification and ratification of Ottoman Turkish, Arab and British empire building enterprises that incorporated North and Northeast Africa after the 7th century’. It is not surprising, we may add, the use of the term Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has gained currency alongside variations of Middle Eastern and African Studies (MEAS). Hence, evolution-wise, its connotation and covert nature alerts the reader to unpack. Without such a critical unpacking, we argue, scholarly communities, development workers, research institutions, funding agencies and other relevant entities are not aware of the issues raised by such a demarcation and will continue to produce and structure data and information using the SSA truncation. This will undermine the work of knowledge producers working on Africa and limit the understanding of their readers.

The Politics of Using the Term SSA

There are bound to be reasons for the continued use of the term SSA in different spheres. Several times, we have called out people¹ and spurred discussions on Twitter² after certain academic personalities tweeted something

with ‘Sub-Saharan Africa’ as a title for a publication, event, or commentary.³ Few are keen to learn, and most are defensive or even derogatory. Some use it ‘deliberately’ while others use it ‘gullibly’.

Indeed, there are bound to be benefits in using the term, especially in development work and scholarship. Issa Shivji, Professor Emeritus at the University of Dar es Salaam, conjectures:

It (SSA) probably started as a descriptive geographical term but evolved into a political term. I guess because it is politically convenient and useful to certain geo-political interests particularly to Western imperialism and its institutions. Discourses are not innocuous. They are terrains of contentious interests (Shivji, 02/08/2022, pers. comm.).

This conjecture is not too different from that of Shule, who laughed when asked about the politics of using SSA and suggested that ‘it’s blatantly obvious during calls for proposals to apply for funds for “Sub-Saharan Africa”, then we feel blessed, but some countries like South Africa, do not like to be mixed with “Sub-Saharan” Africa due to their history with apartheid’ (Shule, 18/07/22, online interview.). Her take is partly informed by years of research on neoliberalism and foreign aid complexity (Shule 2013). ‘Most of the time’, she further notes, ‘the term is NOT used when we’re winning marathons, the Nobel Peace prize (hurray to Wangari Maathai and Abdulrazak Gurnah) or when hosting the World Cup’. She also thinks that suggesting to donors that those in ‘SSA’ need help could be ‘why donors are donating’ (Shule, 18/07/22, online interview)

There are numerous examples of advertisements for scholarships and funding for those purported to be located in 'SSA'. For instance, Howard University's Center for African Studies tweeted: 'Apply for a Virtual Student Federal Service (VSFS) internship! There are more than 500 options. Deadline: July 29. Example Internship: Research the history of U.S. relations with Sub-Saharan Africa'.⁴ Similarly, Harvard University's departments have issued this call for applications: 'The Departments of History and African and African American Studies seek to appoint a tenure-track professor in the History of Modern Africa (focus on sub-Saharan Africa, field open)'.⁵ SciDev.Net SS Africa has even included the term in its name and invoked it in its advertisements: 'Join our team of regional editors and experts tomorrow for <http://SciDev.Net>'s July readers' conference call. Theme: Cancer care in Sub-Saharan Africa'.⁶ Brown University's Department of Africana Studies/Rites and Reason Theatre has attempted to repackage the term by inviting 'applications for a tenure-track position at the rank of Assistant Professor specializing in regions of Africa that are south of the Sahara'.⁷

These few examples show that even those who work in African Studies use the term SSA in their work.⁸ Zeleza is somewhat sympathetic to Euro-American Africanists who use it while attempting to transcend its racialist undertones. However, he is wary of the framing limitations of such an attempt, given that it is limiting due to its racial legacy. 'To be sure', he notes, 'the language of race is now shunned by both Hegel's descendants and their adversaries, leaving the enduring abridged and racialized cartography of 'sub-Saharan Africa' to

serve as proxy' (Zeleza 2006:16). His critique of African scholars is as systematically sympathetic as it is sarcastically scathing:

The diminution and racialization of Africa is of course not confined to western scholars. Many African scholars, some of impeccable progressive credentials, also subscribe to it. Unlike Hegel, of course, many African scholars seek to invest, not divest, 'sub-Sahara' Africa with history and intellectual agency. But it is a limited maneuver for it reproduces Hegel's cultural mapping of Africa, in which 'Africa proper' excludes North Africa because of the region's purported extra-continental connections and Arabness, itself constructed in racialized terms despite the invocation of culture. The characterization of North Africa as exclusively Arab erases the history of the peoples and cultures that existed in the region long before the coming of the Arabs and Islam and the subsequent creation of complex creolized cultures (Zeleza 2006:16).

One wonders, why in some instances, one can differentiate between North Africa and South Asia but refer to sub-Saharan Africa instead of using similar geographical representations. A case in point is a tweet from leading scholar Alice Evans: 'IF you are interested in my hypothesis about why Sub-Saharan Africa was historically relatively gender equal, and what undermined matrilocality...'⁹ Or this research question from the same scholar: 'How did Islam impact gender in Sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia?'¹⁰ Elsewhere she rhetorically asks: 'Is 'Sub-Saharan Africa' a useful concept? Comparing regions, people say 'SSA is lagging behind', on gender. But this regional average obscures

HUGE North-South variation, blinkering us to huge progress in Southern Africa [esp. on the matrilineal belt]'.¹¹ A textbook that one of us uses in teaching introductory classes on African Studies makes this poignant observation on the choice between the SSA term and other terms:

..... a comprehensive understanding of contemporary Africa requires a continental perspective inclusive of all five regions of the African continent. Specifically, one must focus on both North Africa, often referred to as Saharan Africa, as well as the four regions of Central, East, Southern, and West Africa, typically referred to as sub-Saharan Africa... Traditional studies of the African continent often focus exclusively on sub-Saharan Africa. This is due to the argument that several dimensions of contemporary North Africa, such as the greater influence of Arab culture and Islam, combine to make that region unique and, therefore, noncomparable to neighboring regions in the south... (Schraeder 2020:4)

The Myths about SSA

The continued use of the term is associated with some myths. These, Shivji notes, include believing that the Northern and other parts of Africa are divided by race. It is a myth because there are ethnic Black Africans in some north African countries such as Libya and Egypt. Shivji adds other myths: 'Another is that the Sahara is very difficult to cross therefore it cannot function as a means of communication. Third is that the division between the Arab North and the Black African South is immemorial' (Shivji, 02/08/2022, pers. comm.). For Emeagwali (15/07/22, online interview), the myth is that

using SSA is objective: ‘The presence is that it’s a very neutral term’. However, it is a geopolitical social construction.

Another myth implies that northern Africa has a higher financial status than the rest of Africa. The World Bank tends to use SSA in most of its data on Africa, but identifies only one country in North Africa – Libya – is identified as being in the upper middle income category, together with these other African countries: Botswana, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Mauritius, Namibia, and South Africa.¹² The World Bank classifies the remaining four North African countries – Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia – as lower middle income alongside the following in the ‘rest of Africa’: Angola, Benin, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Comoros, Republic of the Congo, Ivory Coast, Djibouti, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.¹³

The Call to Debunk Mythical ‘SSA’

The quest to debunk myths about SSA needs different approaches. Shivji offers this suggestion: “By constantly reminding ourselves and others through our writings and discourses that the term is harmful to our discourses and interests (Shivji, 02/08/2022, pers. comm.)”. While writing this article, it was refreshing to stumble on a tweet by Zubairu Wai, a professor of Political Science and Global Development Studies, that affirms the approach as follows: ‘I have always maintained Sub-Saharan Africa is an extremely problematic Hegelian construct that comes with all racist assumptions, precisely why I don’t ever use it in my writing’.¹⁴ He was responding to a tweet by Jemima Pierre, a professor of anthropology

called ‘Meet the precursor to ‘Sub-Saharan Africa’’¹⁵ who replied her support to his approach to the use of the term SSA.¹⁶

Shule also has a few suggestions: Using a Pan-African approach that is open resistance; running a global campaign to let the international community understand the consequences of continuing its use; and continuing doing the work in researching and dissemination, using various means (Shule, 18/7/22, online interview). While looking for interviewees for this article, we were asked what would be different from seminal literature, such as V.Y. Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and Zeleza’s *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises* (1997), which have aptly addressed the SSA question. As our engagement on social media and other platforms indicates, some, especially in medical and natural sciences or what is generally called science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), have never heard of critiques on the use of SSA in research. Our main aim is to magnify the voices in this debate that oppose the term and bring them to the attention of those who see no harm in continuing to use the term.

Some may hear, read about it, or be reminded about the negative connotation of using the term, but change takes time. However, continuing to use the term, which according to Emeagwali (15/07/22, online interview.), is ‘inaccurate and misleading with racist undertones built into it’, is ill-advised. It perpetuates flawed takes on Africa. Shivji elaborates on the flaws of continuing to use the term in our times:

I think the term is most divisive and runs against the ethos of Pan-Africanism. It is a term

which is insidious in that while it presents itself as a geographical term, it is politically loaded and carries with it racial connotations because apparently, the division is between the Arab North (of Sahara) and Black African (South of Sahara). In reality, this is not true because there are people of Arabic origin in countries South of Sahara as well as ethnic Black people in countries North of Sahara. In the pre-Vasco-da Gama period, Sahara was not a divide; rather it was a link and camel caravans travelled through Sahara between these two regions of Africa. I think Sahara is to Central and West Africa what the Indian Ocean is to Eastern Africa (Shivji, 02/08/2022, pers. comm.).

The African Union (AU) has not been very vocal about urging to discontinue the use of SSA because, according to Shule (18/07/22, online interview.), ‘a lot of issues went into the transition from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), into AU, several issues were changed. During OAU, the concept was to unite the continent. With the AU, the understanding was that the focus was more on building the economy after being united’. While some Pan-Africanists have lived through the struggle for independence or have been part of it, most of us born after independence do not have the experience of colonialism, and others may not have felt the direct brunt of racism. However, the majority would agree on the importance of an African Union devoid of racial undertones.

The Alternatives to ‘SSA’

It is vital to develop regional names devoid of racial undertones, misleading economic connotations, or any kind of ‘othering’. Some people who have stopped using the term SSA are already using other names

or are in the process of suggesting a better term to describe the space that is south of the northern African countries. However, even among the few prominent Africans interviewed for this piece, not all agree that we should have a new term. Ulimwengu (28/07/2022, phone interview.) pointed out that he did not see the need to stop using the term because, according to him, ‘there are economic realities e.g. Eastern Congo considers itself closer to Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda etc.’ He asserts it is the reality that most African countries, aside from the northern five, are in the low income category per World Bank classification¹⁷ hence ‘if the shoe fits, wear it’. It is curious to compare this current view with a view he expressed over a decade ago:

If we could, as some have suggested, admit more states, we could have established the nucleus of a united state eventually to morph into a sub-Saharan United States of Africa. A dream, you will say, but not a pipe dream (Ulimwengu 2011).

However, the rest of those interviewed, some of whom have published writings on this issue, agree that the term SSA should no longer be used. There is a need to devise for an appropriate alternative term. Shivji (02/08/2022, pers. comm.) suggests: ‘I just saw someone using “SSA” to mean South of Sahara Africa. While it is attractive as an alternative but the same abbreviation would not serve well the purpose of getting away from sub-Saharan Africa discourse. But then do we have to divide Africa in relation to the Sahara? Why not just North Africa, Central Africa, West Africa, East Africa South Africa – the terms used by I think AU’. Shule, who has also worked at the AU, says that we should ‘use Africa, or use the regional bodies to

address the specific area you want to focus on’. She notes:

People have stopped using it in institutions that are for Africa, by Africa. The African Union [AU] recognises Africa’s regional bodies instead of one whole block that is south of the Sahara. Therefore the continent itself has focused on regional bodies. ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States], IGAD [Intergovernmental Authority on Development in Eastern Africa ...], EAC [East African Community], [Southern African Development Community] SADC, etc (Shule, 18/07/22, online interview).

Emeagwali is adamant that we should specify the location of the region that we are talking about geographically. She insists: ‘Use the compass! It’s easy to do so’ (Emeagwali, 15/07/22, online interview). We concur with her. Indeed, why can’t we use the compass and easily refer to different parts of Africa the same way areas on other continents are referred to?

Notes

1. https://twitter.com/search?q=%40udadisi%20sub-saharan&src=typed_query.
2. https://twitter.com/search?q=%40udadisi%20ssa&src=typed_query&f=top.
3. https://twitter.com/search?q=%40udadisi%20%23SSA&src=typed_query&f=live.
4. <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1550165964469174272>.
5. <https://academicpositions.harvard.edu/postings/11513>.
6. <https://twitter.com/scidevnetssa?lang=en>.
7. <https://africana.brown.edu/news/2022-08-08/assistant-professor>.
8. <https://africana.brown.edu/news/2022-08-08/assistant-professor>.
9. https://twitter.com/_alice_evans/status/1474079264567930886.
10. <https://www.draliceevans.com/>.
11. https://twitter.com/_alice_evans/status/1228943905082822657.
12. World Bank, “Upper middle income,” <https://data.worldbank.org/income-level/upper-middle-income>.
13. World Bank, “Lower middle income,” <https://data.worldbank.org/income-level/lower-middle-income>.
14. <https://twitter.com/ZubaWai/status/1557034219615969284>.
15. <https://twitter.com/grosormone29/status/1557032827970932737>.
16. <https://twitter.com/grosormone29/status/1557035857965903874>.
17. <https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=XD-XT-XP-XN-XO-XM>.

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