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*From Empiricism to Theory
in African Border Studies*

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Introduction: from Empiricism to Theory in African Border Studies

David Coplan *

This special issue represents a small milestone in the crossing of Africa into the sovereign territory of border studies. In June 2007, a first step in this direction was taken at the workshop on “African Borderlands Research: Emerging Agendas and Critical Reflections” at the African Studies Centre of the University of Edinburgh. There, the “African Borderland Research Network” ABORNE (www.aborne.org) was founded by fifteen participants as an interdisciplinary network of European, American and African scholars who seek to integrate history, anthropology, development, migration, and refugee studies in a broad field of African border research. The publication of this set of articles by ABORNE members in such a distinguished journal in the field represents both a recognition and a product of progress since then.

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Neither Arbitrary nor Artificial: Chiefs and the Making of the Namibia-Zambia Borderland

Wolfgang Zeller*

Abstract

In the late 1990s a separatist movement emerged in Namibia's northeastern Caprivi Region. In the aftermath of an armed uprising in 1999 speculation emerged regarding a possible link between the Caprivi secessionists and Lozi separatists across the border in Zambia's Western Province. The Lozi heritage certainly has continuing relevance for Caprivi's population. Through language, kinship relations and economic exchange it serves as an integrative factor of everyday life in the Namibia/Zambia borderland. But the Caprivi secessionists had no intentions of re-creating a united Lozi kingdom. The present-day positions of authority by the "traditional" leaders of the Fwe (the support base of the secessionists) and other groups in Caprivi were, in fact, created by the territorial separation and system of indirect rule imposed by the German colonial authorities. Thus, the colonial border served vested interests in Caprivi from the outset. Rather than reverting to an imagined pre-colonial past, the secessionists' territorial claim emerged from a more recent legacy of pre-independence state formation: The apartheid regime's attempt to create a Caprivi Bantustan. As in the case of the colonial boundary, this legacy caused new political realities and vested interests to emerge on the ground in Caprivi. Today, informal cross-border business ventures in the Namibia/Zambia borderland are flourishing. The border is once again at the center of vested interests of those who live in its proximity. To call this border "arbitrary" or "artificial" therefore ignores the fact that in nearly 12 decades it has very much become part of the socioeconomic and political landscape of Caprivi.

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On the Border to Chaos: Identity Formation on the Angolan-Namibian Border, 1927-2008

Gregor Dobler*

Abstract

Borders are places where, in everyday interaction, collective identities are shaped by comparison and contrast. Slight differences in practice are often used to construct huge differences in identity, especially if they can be linked to the legitimacy of political domination. Today's border between Namibia and Angola has been the frontier of Portuguese and British/ South African colonialism since 1915. The South African colonial administration has always constructed Portuguese rule in Angola as the contrast which let South African rule appear as benign, just and ordered, thus justifying South African colonial domination. After Angolan independence and the advent of MPLA rule, the border turned from a border to sloppy colonialism into a fortification against communism and terrorism – a Barbary fence against wild hordes trying to undermine the empire. After Namibian independence and the end of the Angolan wars, the contrast between the two realms has been transformed into a difference between two economic and political regimes – safe, democratic and ordered Namibia on the one hand and wild, patrimonial, chaotic Angola on the other. The article will embed three concrete case studies from the colonial period, the war situation and the postcolonial economy into a history of South African/ Namibian identity construction on the border. It will show how it has been linked to domination and legitimacy, highlighting the role of the border as preconceived boundary of practices and spheres of domination.

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The Construction of Internal Borders in a Borderland Region of Central Mozambique

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Abstract

Modern Mozambique is characterised by well-known political and economic imbalances inherited from its recent and less recent history. The north, the centre, and the south are still as disconnected from each other as they were during the first half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the same areas are structurally and culturally linked to neighbouring territories, which form part of other states, through what are now called “transnational social networks” across particularly “porous” borders. The Mozambican state has also inherited smaller but equally significant internal divisions within each Province, even within each District, of the country. The last phase of colonial rule developed or consolidated local differences in the political economy of the territory, and this process was linked to the growth and consolidation of the international/“transnational” networks. Second, new internal borders (between the recently delineated “rural communities”) are being constructed in the context of the implementation of the state reforms and development programmes on decentralisation, land, and management of natural resources in the post-war period.

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First Meets Third: Analyzing Inequality along the US-Mexico and South Africa-Lesotho borders

David B Coplan*

Where there is no inequality there is no need for borders.

- Thomas Torrans, *Forging the Tortilla Curtain*

Abstract

The literature of the US-Mexico borderlands constitutes a cross-disciplinary theoretical platform for border studies as a field. In border studies elsewhere, however, very few scholars have carried their investigations beyond their “own” chosen borderland. Viewing the matter from the margin of Africa’s deepest South, however, the centrality of the US southwest provides an unavoidable comparative challenge that must be faced. Still, a comparative analysis of international borderlands as separate in space and situation as US-Mexico and South Africa-Lesotho may appear to be fetched from far too far. In response the paper bases its argument on the reality that a crucial analytical variable, inequity, is present in both cases: The US-Mexico and SA-Lesotho borders are two of the only borders in the world where vastly different levels of development meet. If, hinged on this variable, the door to comparison of two such distant and different borderlands can be opened, then quite possibly some generalisations, both small and large, might be admitted into border theory. This paper marks an initial attempt to both to advance African border theory at the ethnological level, and to link border studies in Africa with the established and critical heartland of border studies.

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Mobile Livelihoods—The Players Involved in Smuggling of Commodities across the Zimbabwe-Mozambique Border

Nedson Pophiwa*

Abstract

The study is spatially located on the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border and is thematically inclined towards smuggling as a form of mobile livelihood. It explores the rise of smuggling in the post-colonial era through engaging the different roles played by the state agents and borderland communities as actors involved in smuggling. An attempt is made to zero in on the actual processes at work by exploring the four main actors and their activities regarding smuggling across the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border, paying particular attention to the experiences of the Penbalonga and Nyaronga communities. It is argued that the cross-border transactions carried out by the traders in these communities were a means of livelihood and in some instances wealth creation.

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Sources for the History of the Southern Border of Mozambique: Preliminary results of a project on the archives of the *Portuguese Commission of Cartography*¹

Ana Cristina Roque*

Abstract

Although the Portuguese presence in Mozambique dates back from the 16th century, it was only after the Berlin Conference in 1885 that Portugal felt pushed to an effective occupation of a territory historically considered under Portuguese sovereignty or influence. Commissions were then created for the discussions and agreements to be made mainly with the English and the Germans, as they were also disputing the possession or the influence over the same areas. Africa was to be split between the European nations, the new African countries were sketched according to non-African perspectives and border lines were drawn to bound artificial physical spaces disregarding the local models of occupation and livelihood. As for other African territories, in southern Mozambique the demarcation of the frontier went along with the cartographical surveys in view of the mapping of the all area. These surveys were assigned to the Portuguese Commission of Cartography since 1883 and frequently the Commission team was requested to participate in the negotiations regarding border issues. The archives of this Commission – maps, photos, reports, official correspondence... – belong today to the Tropical Research Institute and provide specific and detailed information on the history of the Southern border of Mozambique, mostly unknown because only recently organized and inventoried. In this sense, the main purpose of this article will be to inform about this corpus of documents and of its importance to all those working or interested on the late 19th century History of Mozambique and of Southern Africa.

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Towards an Approach to Borders and Mobility in Africa

Timothy Mechlinski*

Abstract

As the interdisciplinary field of migration studies has tended to ignore borders, and studies of borders are unevenly developed across regions of the world. In general, they are poorly elaborated for the case of people moving across the African continent. Based on the notion that borders are socio-economic, cultural, and political formations, and that they are experienced differently by people of different statuses, this paper argues for an approach to studying borders and cross-border movement in Africa. Combining a review of the migration and borders literatures, with ethnographic evidence gathered traveling over 10,000 miles in four West African countries, and observations of 169 security checkpoints in the region, this paper reveals some of the unique aspects of how Africans experience border crossings. A primary contribution is considering how borders function for migrants traveling longer distances, not only for borderlanders, on whom the literature on African borders is most often based.

Introduction

Burkina Faso, 2003: shortly after the rebellion in Côte d'Ivoire divided the country, I repeatedly heard stories of the treatment returned migrants received at the hands of border and mobility control agents as they traveled to and from Côte d'Ivoire. Their everyday transportation experiences were graphic, sometimes harrowing. One young respondent, a second-generation migrant born in Côte d'Ivoire, described himself as being situated between life and death as he tried to reach his parents in Côte d'Ivoire for a visit. He recalls the uncertainty he faced every time he boarded a bus to or from Côte d'Ivoire. But he also describes, always finding a way to make it where he was going. Sometimes migrants negotiated their security interactions with cunning, trickery, or logic, and other times they relied on the support of fellow travelers or transportation workers. Either way, they always seemed to arrive at their destinations, despite the gantlet of difficulties.

As complex institutions develop in West Africa governing intra-regional migrations with and against the law of particular states (Mechlinski, forthcoming) the question of how migrants actually cross borders in the region emerges. With one of the highest proportions of mobile people of any region in the world (van Dijk et al. 2001), West African nation-states are continually crisscrossed by seasonal, circular, and transit migrants. Elaborating on the process by which these individuals actually cross borders in the region has important policy implications, which I have explored elsewhere (Mechlinski, forthcoming), but also important theoretical implications that are the focus of the present analysis. In that sense, this paper responds to the questions: What *are* borders in the West African context? What exactly is their role in the intra-regional movements of migrants the area?

The Border and Migration Theory

Reflecting on the stories of my informants and the relationship between movement and borders, I was struck as others have been by the relative lack of focus on border and mobility control in migration studies. As Aristide Zolberg (1989, 405) remarked: "In retrospect, it is quite strange that classical migration theory altogether ignored borders and their effects." In his estimation,

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Emerging Forms of Power in two African Borderlands A Theoretical and Empirical Research Outline

Thomas Hüsken & Georg Klute *

Abstract

The transformation of statehood is a frequently debated topic in studies dealing with globalization. This is particularly true with regard to the African continent; here, the “building” of the nation-state has been confronted, more than anywhere else, with a number of challenges. At times and in certain areas, state structures even collapsed, and thus transformed contemporary Africa into the symbol of state failure. In particular the peripheries and borderlands of many post-colonial states in Africa contribute to the emergence of local stateless forms of power, which seem to suggest the end of the globalized statehood utopia. Are these new forms of political organization only a reaction to uncertainty caused by the weakness or even the absence of state structures? Will these orders be able to substitute the State in the long run? Or are global processes confronted with persisting local representations and practises of order and rule, indicating that stateless societies can resist the overwhelming power of the “Leviathan”? Can the longevity of local political models lead to the transformation of the state as the only and unique model of organised power? Or do they foreshadow a specific form of interlacement between non-state actors and the state that will lead to heterarchical political settings in Africa and elsewhere? And finally: in which respect do borderland-situations contribute to these processes?

Introduction

The colonial expansion and the subsequent global implementation of statehood seemed to support the idea that the modern bureaucratic state of western origin is the teleological mode of political organization for human societies. Since the end of the cold war, the crisis and the factual erosion of the state in the former USSR and in Africa initiated a debate on the transformation of statehood. Apart from generalizations such as “weak” or “failing states,” transformations of statehood are nowadays labelled with numerous additional attributes, such as “network state” (Züricher/Koehler 2001), a term referring to interconnections between the state and networks of non-state actors, or “cunning states” (Randeria 2003) describing weak states that rely on development cooperation and international aid in order to endure.

In the last two decades, Africa has experienced deep changes resulting in new social and political settings almost everywhere on the continent. The end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, multi-party democracy in Tanzania and Benin, the achievement of peace in Mozambique and Angola, civil wars in Somalia, Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the Rwanda genocide, or the regionalisation of conflicts, are well known examples of a political setting that becomes more and more heterogeneous. These processes not only chased many of Africa’s military or dictatorial regimes away, they also fragmented organised state structures and administration or led to their collapse. In Africa the crisis of statehood seems to be deeper than anywhere else in the world, and Africa today serves as a particular symbol of state failure. The term heterarchy, as opposed to hierarchy, seems appropriate to describe resulting differentiated distributions of power-foci in many African countries (Chabal / Feinman / Skalnik 2004; Bondarenko / Grinin / Korotayev 2004).

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