

From Empiricism to Theory in African Border Studies

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Both 'border theory' and indeed, border studies as a field owe their cross-disciplinary origins and development to scholars of the American Southwest. By the late 1990s, spurred by the rapid development of the European Union, Europeanist scholars had begun to contribute not only a wealth of empirical studies but also significant theoretical insights and concepts to border studies. In Africa and other regions of the World Formerly Known as Third, the day is (we trust) long past when We (the North/West) were theory and They (the South/East) were data. Many years ago, pioneers such as Anthony Asiwaju (1983, 1989, 1996) Paul Nugent (1996), M.A. Ajomo, P. O. Adeniyi, C.S. Momoh, Omolade Adejuyigbe (Asiwaju and Adeniyi 1989), and others were already making contributions to border theory that are difficult to supersede today.

Still, African border studies have suffered from some particular disadvantages. The seeming friability of African national states and their lack of a popularly rooted social identity or morality have been coupled with the notorious but overstated 'porousness' or more precisely negotiability of their borders. These borders were in any case conceived (not always accurately) as 'arbitrary,' divisions in the midst of powerfully self-identified pre-colonial polities or language groups. Such conceptions have helped to keep African borders on the scholarly as well as political periphery. Not surprisingly, the intensity of activity that characterizes these border districts, and indeed the dynamics of African state development itself, in time came to the notice of a range of talented Africanists from Europe, North America, and Africa itself. In some cases, these researchers had chosen to locate their field work in areas near or within local borderlands in pursuit of projects that (they thought) were quite unrelated to this geo-political reality. But then the festive bustle and *demi-monde* enterprise they encountered upon every crossing or visit to a border

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post led them to realize that this was where some of the most revealing and important forms of social and economic transaction were taking place. As a result, not a few Africanists who have studied borders, or more often, 'their' border, have done so by default, lured away from the calm of less transient interior communities by the mobile and shadowy attractions of sovereignty's klieg-lit stage.

Yet another result of this situation has been a rather myopic, empirical focus on one's 'own' border as a case, to the detriment of comparative or more broadly conceptual and theoretical studies. In this regard, contributors to this conference were encouraged to transcend specific cases and localities to an appropriate extent, in order for the whole to represent a demonstrable advance on previous empirical work and stake Africa's claim as a centre and not a periphery in border studies' broader analytical discourse. 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) was founded by the 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. In July 2008, the second ABORNE conference was held in Bayreuth, Germany, and featured not only formal papers but three workshops, including one focusing on the imperative to combine empirical case studies with a more conceptual and theoretical approach, providing a distinctive scientific profile of borderland studies by developing theoretical perspectives and methodologies based on African research findings.

To begin at the beginning, we might review a few comparative axes along which African borders might provide a contrasting or alternative ground for research. These include such well-worn observations that while borders are nowhere simply the product of geography, borders in North America and Europe were established by war, domination, and resistance, while in Africa

they are thought to be the ‘arbitrary’ product of the 1885 Berlin Conference. African borders scholars regularly repeat this assertion, but as Simon Katzenellenbogen demonstrates in his essay, “It didn’t Happen at Berlin” (Katzenellenbogen 1996, 22) 1) there were many other boundary-making processes and events; 2) the colonial powers did attempt in many cases to recognise or incorporate existing ethnic or other dimensions of division on the ground in drawing boundaries; and 3) territorial claims were not in fact recognized based on effective occupation as specified in the Conference’s Final Act. More significantly, almost 40 per cent of colonial boundary lines had some pre-existing political reality (Arrous 1996, 16). Strassaldo also points out, conversely, that all boundaries are in some sense artificial and that ‘African boundaries are in no way more artificial than European or other boundaries’ (Strassaldo 1989, 392). Nowhere are there ‘natural’ borders, since they may always be socially as well as politically contested. Yet the most important reality of all, is that whether originally ‘arbitrary’ or not, and intra-ethnically or politically divisive or not, African borders are often now an accepted, even actively reproduced ground of social and economic life for borderlanders. As Donna Flynn has observed:

Less thoroughly explored are the ways in which ‘arbitrary’ African borders have become entrenched and embedded in local communities that surround them. How is it that populations that had an international border imposed on them cannot now imagine their existence without it? How are borders perceived by those continually crossing them as corridors of opportunity rather than as divisions and barriers? (Flynn 1997, 313).

Since African borders were most often established by colonial competition interacting with indigenous contexts on the ground, their study is powerfully influenced by some essential realities that follow. First, the history of border making itself has present relevance. In Africa this has usually to do with the historical construction of ethnic identities in relation to territorial claims. Second, newly independent African governments did not inherit functioning colonial states but only extractive administrations, out of which, as Julius Nyerere recognized, they were compelled to attempt to build, with mixed success, post-colonial nations. The OAU’s famous “glass houses” rule mandating the acceptance of boundaries at independence was part of this compulsion. Second,

neo-colonial powers, for whom globalisation is the latest instrumentality, have repeatedly attempted to reinstate imperial economic regimes. Third, concentrating power and wealth in the capital's public sector causes instability, so that most African wars are internal to state borders, in unstable states. Unfortunately these conflicts often spill over state borders, necessitating multi-state cross border cooperation, even beyond the continent. Fourth, the stability of African states can be enhanced by recognising areas of regional self-production and the centrality and trans-national utility of the border.

There are many characteristics of border management, border life, and borderlanders that operate at borders everywhere, to which African borders are no exceptions, and that indeed inform the comparative and analytical foundations of border theory. But we focus here on those that African borders if not uniquely at least greatly exhibit and contribute to these foundations. So while for example the performance (without necessarily the substance) of sovereignty and control is a high-profile feature of any border post, it is particularly salient at African borders where the substance may exist in inverse relation to the performance of the state. As elsewhere, exploitation of the issue of national security and fetishising the border as a locus of control is common in Africa. Many governments base their virtual border regimes on the false premise that liberalised border regulation would be to the exclusive benefit of citizens of neighbouring countries seeking economic advantages to the detriment of 'our country' and 'our countrymen'. In a severely divided society such as South Africa as well, economic immigrants may provide a unifying common enemy.

Again, there is the degree rather than the mere reality to which attempts to increase regulation at African borders fail (perhaps intentionally) to improve enforcement, but rather simply add to the opportunities to extract payment for yet another level of circumvention. In many ways, the border posts are themselves a form of business, with the conditions of the market producing the mode of operation. Many African borders feature 'friendly' posts where many legal

and logistical problems are worked out cooperatively on site between the officials of the two countries, and even between officials and members of the public. Accordingly, if the posts were adequately staffed, resourced, and technologically controlled, there would be far less opportunity to contravene regulations for a price. Conversely, if passport controls were greatly relaxed or withdrawn, there would be no reason to pay cash for the service. A system of illegal payments depends upon controls that are just inefficient and inconvenient enough to encourage payment to circumvent them, and this is indeed the form of operation virtually everywhere in place in Africa. Further, inconsistent enforcement encourages many travellers who do not possess or have failed to carry the required documents and permits to “try their luck” at crossing without them. This ensures that when officials do “spot check” or slow down ordinary operations to (inconsistently) enforce regulations they will catch a far higher percentage of violators than if such enforcement were regularly anticipated. Such violators serve as well the purpose of as sacrificial lambs, punished to demonstrate to travellers who pay to circumvent procedures just what it is they are paying for.

Another relationship key to how African borders and borderlanders operate is that between center and margin. For most African governments, central nation building is more important than incorporating borderlands and borderlanders, who experience central authority as oppressive. This is because national officials do not begin from the perspective of the border region itself, but rather make proposals that always negotiate *national* interests. But spatial justice requires that border people not be handicapped, in their daily lives, by their location (Strassaldo 1989, 393). And as Samuel Truett (2006, 8) writes, “Border people are not blank slates for the inscription of new national identities.” African borderlanders typically constitute their own cross-border society, and do not emphasize their citizenship of either state (Flynn 1997, 315). So as Donnan and Wilson (1999, 58-59) observe, border subjects produce their own border theory, rooted in social practice, one that dismantles the conventional imaginary of the state, and claim citizenships that transcend boundaries. Yet no African

country, in contrast to Mexico and some others, has authorized dual nationality for their citizens, despite the impossibility of preventing it. Regardless, cross-border family networks are the norm and migrant family members, including those of border officials, span the border and provide a base for common operations. A busy border post, such as that at Lesotho's Maseru Bridge, is a clear indication of advanced cross-border social integration. But such intensity of interaction, even when, as at Maseru Bridge, it is strongly asymmetrical, does not erase borders.

Typically, there is more business among African borderlanders and between them and the US, Europe, or the Far East than with their own interior, and communications and transport are better between "twin towns" on either side than with the next major settlement up or down the border. The twin towns also feature "periodic markets on both sides of the border to exchange goods, border warehouses where large quantities of goods are stored, and clusters of towns at the main points of passage across the border" (Igué, in Flynn 1997, 315). The national government is therefore viewed there as parasitic, a kind of contemporary colonial power. Borderlanders in Africa demonstrate "a growing distrust and suspicion of government – the interests of which are perceived as being opposed to border interests and that regularly infringe on the economic and political freedoms of border residents" (Flynn 1997, 313). Indeed one may ask what or whom, in Africa, do borders protect the citizenry from? Or is it only government that is protected? Smuggling, which often enough takes on an open and festive atmosphere at African borders, is after all only a crime against the state, and a response to taxation for which no services are provided in return. In contexts where the authority and the economy of the two bordering states are of equal weakness, the emphasis is on performance not control, gate-keeping and taxation not service. In Africa, borderlanders often have greater self-justification than elsewhere to identify with each other, to create a common border identity, and to work together to outwit the state.

Borderlands create a “border culture” as well: a landscape that emerges from and transcends the history of political boundary making, defined by the social interactions from which it is built up. Borders “are constructed by much more than the institutions of the state which are present there, of which the border’s framework is a representative part.... More than idealized locations for the instantiation or performance of the state under the gaze of its other, borders are also meaning-making and meaning-carrying entities, parts of cultural landscapes which often transcend the physical limits of the state and defy the power of state institutions” (Donnan and Wilson, 1999, 4). For border residents, such cultures constitute “ways of life and forms of meaning which they share only or principally with other borderlanders, on the same or the other side of the legal state demarcation” (*Ibid*). Still, I am concerned that, as Donnan and Wilson have noted, “culture is the least studied and least understood aspect of the structures and functions of international borders....Although scholars in a variety of fields have recognised the role of culture in the creation and maintenance of borders and borderlands, few have directly tied culture to their analyses of statecraft at, across, and as the result of borders” (Donnan and Wilson *Ibid.*, 11). But if the border possesses a transnational identity of its own, it is one that has no stability as a cultural marker. National identity in Africa is a political and economic matter: there is no customs station for customs.

Borders facilitate cultural exchange just as they equilibrate the disparities of value of commercial exchange, disparities that are reflected in culture and in social contestation. The economic equality that characterizes both sides of so many (but not all) African borders make for a border identity quite solid and not shifting and ‘hysterical’ as in inequitable situations like that of Mexico and the United States (Flynn 1997, 313). Indeed, many African borders are simply not monitored or attended to by the central government at all. So Africa is a leader in the de-nationalisation of identities, because African nationality has been de-territorialised: nationalism and its fictions are bankrupt, and they cannot erase or assimilate local identities,

which are everywhere increasingly self-constructed. In many senses, therefore, the border becomes “less a boundary dividing them into two nations than a bridge linking them in mutual dependence” (Ibid.). As Flynn explains,

...by centralizing their marginality in their economic strategies and through common border experience, [African borderlanders] have constructed a strong, transnational identity around their sense of deep territorialization in the borderland.... In a very literal sense, locals *embody* the border: they conceive of their cluster of [border] communities... as constituting the international boundary. The “border” is not merely an arbitrary line dividing two nations; it is a social grouping based on historical, residential claims...to the region... In other words, the “border” exists where notions of “deep placement” meet cross-border exchange and all its surrounding social, political, and economic relations (Ibid., 315).

Even so, the communities living in a bi-national space are not homogenized. As a Gambian, whose country is all borderlands, once explained to me: Our Wolof brothers in Senegal are French; we are English. We cannot join with them.”

European, American, and African Africanists, male and female, young and old, come from disciplines that include political science, history, sociology, anthropology, the archive, cartography, even epistemology! They work in universities from Scotland to Italy to Switzerland to Finland to Lisbon to America to South Africa, Nigeria and Cameroon. The point is that scholars (including that most hated subcategory, editors) working within the self-focused borders of the Anglo-American academic empire can benefit from encountering the continentals (both European and African) when they write back.

Paul Nugent, ABORNE founding father and Chair, sets the standard with his theoretically sophisticated but intriguing empirical comparisons between the Ghana-Togo and Senegal-Gambia borders. He discovers, unsurprisingly, that a “light touch” as opposed to a heavy-handed approach to border management in Africa serves officials and governments as well as border residents more effectively. Wolfgang Zoller, the young German from the ice flows of coastal Finland, spent ten months in Namibia’s hot, dry Caprivi digging out the complex history of strategies of a century of border chieftaincy. His detailed account

demonstrates that far from being arbitrary or “artificial,” this border has for the whole of this period functioned very much as part of the socioeconomic and political landscape of Caprivi. Further, amidst a presently revitalised debate over the ‘return of the chiefs’ in African area studies, Zeller demonstrates how incumbents of the chieftaincy have used their positions to negotiate political and economic empowerment from early colonial times until now. The other member of Zeller’s duo in the singing network, ABORNE, Gregor Dobler, shows how, after 1915, the South African colonial administration constructed Portuguese rule in Angola as the contrast which let South African rule appear as benign, just and ordered, justifying its colonial occupation. Later periods are woven into a history of South African/ Namibian identity construction on the border shaped by power and legitimacy, highlighting the role of the border as a preconceived boundary of practices and spheres of domination. Borders are spaces of meaning-breaking (‘di-visions’) but also zones of plural cultural production and meaning-making (‘pluri-visions’). This highlights the complexity of the border as both a cognitive and experiential space where a number of b/ordering practices are articulated. Such practices are designated on maps through cartographic icons that are the visual, territorial projection of an imaginative socio-cultural order. Accordingly, the border can be investigated as a laboratory of identities, where group identity is reshaped through the process of bordering itself.

In its final phases, colonial rule developed or consolidated local differences in the political economy of the border districts, linking this process to the elaboration and extension of “transnational” networks. Today, we witness a secondary process through which new internal borders (between the recently delineated “rural communities”) are being constructed in Mozambique in the context of the implementation of the state reforms and development programmes on decentralisation, land, and management of natural resources. In the post-colonial as in the colonial era, smuggling constitutes a nexus for African borderland research, as it engages the different roles played by state agents, who condemn smuggling yet continue

to facilitate it for their own purposes, and borderland communities, who have fashioned smuggling into an enterprise based on the cross-border equilibration of commodity values.

Rejoining Paul Nugent, his image contrasting the European idea of political space as being a kind of “checker-board in which every state shared borders with others of its kind” with the West African map which “looked more like a raisin bun with centres of political power interspersed between no man’s lands and scatterings of decentralized polities” (Nugent 1996, 39) has proved a compelling one for other scholars. So widely differing regions of the subcontinent have a long historical record of representing “interstitial” zones in relationship to the state powers that have surrounded it. One question concerns the extent to which this interstitial status has influenced the transformations that these regions have undergone since colonial integration into the world of checker-boards. Other questions involve the African experience of inter-state conflict over and resolution of border demarcation disputes. In a surprising number of these, disputes have been settled amicably, even generously by one or both sides. These cases include the South African withdrawal from Walvis Bay in favour of Namibia, the award of the oil-rich Bokassi Peninsula by Nigeria to Cameroon, and the settlement of a dispute over similarly endowed border districts between Sudan and South Sudan.

Timothy Mechlinsky, an important new American voice in the field, observes that the majority of studies of African borders (my own work excepted!) focus on the lives of borderlanders rather than on the border itself and how it functions in the lives of longer-distance migrants and travellers. His work offers as well observations on the differences between West African borders and the US-Mexico case, paradigmatic in border studies. Mechlinsky posits that borders are “negotiations” in which border crossers engage and succeed differently based on their social positioning. Joining him in exploring the Africa (in this case South Africa-Lesotho) US-Mexico comparison, my own work is based on the reality

that these are two of the only borders in the world where vastly unequal 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. My own recent work thus 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. Others have examined the transformation of statehood in Africa in the context of globalization. Worldwide, a national border is the hegemonic project of a dominant class, and represents their faith in modernity. But the modernism of borderlanders is regional and transnational: the border reaches out to affect the entirety of the two countries and the world beyond.

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? Are these orders able to substitute the state in the long run? Can the strength and persistence 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? In posing these and other global questions, African border scholars hope to both correct certain misconceptions about African borders, both within and without the academy, such as that African borders are both 'arbitrary' and *de facto* not borders at all. More importantly, we hope to show that African border studies have more to contribute to the field than just other borders heard from, and to assist significantly in the making of border theory in the new century.

Finally, Africa's contributions to border theory and border studies more broadly include ventures into the multi-layered, multi-perspectival landscape of the performative and

the post-structural, where nothing is as it seems. At the base is the yawning abyss between the rhetoric and symbolic performance of state responsibility and function and the reality of patrimonialism, parasitism, and dependency, and the one that follows between official discourses and those of commentators who accurately assess the cut of the Emperors' new clothes, at the risk of expulsion from the body politic, also affect African border studies. In this world, state institutions and legal regimes exist as virtualities while the strategies and actions of state actors are the only actualities. At the periphery, where the centre parades its spent force, sovereignty and structure are turned into commodities that make their way on the backs of immigrants to the new borderlands demarcated in the very centre of capital cities. This is twilight pitch where migrants, indigenes, and state agents engage in a serious game employing shifting identities, citizenships, entitlements, inclusions and exclusions as both goal and tactics. It is this game that now occupies a central field for the work of African border studies scholars. This is a playing field where policy is reduced to rhetorical instrument, identities are self-constructed, the rules are deliberately made to be broken, answers are the only sure guide to the right questions, and appearances deceive us, but always in the same ways. Research in this land of make others believe in your made-up self is the current frontier in African border studies' and their contribution to border theory. Driven by ABORNE, it promises to yield deep insights indeed.

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