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Symmetry and Affinity

Comparing Borders and Border-Making Processes in Africa

Paul Nugent

Some of the most contentious issues of our times are framed by international borders where acute asymmetries of wealth and power are reproduced through systematic practices of exclusion.¹ Such is the case along the external borders of the European Union (EU) at the interface with Africa and the Middle East, and on the border between the United States and Mexico. In these paradigmatic instances, we can see two kinds of border effect at work. On the one hand, there has been a leveling process on the more endowed side of the line as once neglected border towns and regions have benefited from their insertion into larger territorial constellations. On the other hand, material deprivation on the opposite side has been entrenched by hard lines of separation whose explicit purpose is to prevent people from crossing over. The border simultaneously serves to remake social boundaries between populations who are either favored or stigmatized through a process of profiling and filtering that is simultaneously gendered, racialized, and ethnicized. Although the processes of patrolling borders and defining boundaries takes place in other locations as well, most notably at airports, the effects tend to be especially evident at the physical margins.

In sub-Saharan Africa, stark asymmetries are rather exceptional in border regions. Although there are economic hotspots centered on resource extraction, standards of living generally tend to be comparable as between states. As is well known, the largest oil producers—Nigeria, Angola, and Chad—manifest some of the highest levels of poverty. Moreover, the enclave character of the oil industry means that relatively little employment is generated. The partial exception to the continental norm lies at the interface between South Africa and its neighbors. The mining

industry in the former historically drew heavily on migrant labor from neighboring states, but numbers employed in this area have greatly reduced since the 1990s—with severe consequences for labor-exporting countries like Lesotho, where rural populations depended on mine wages (Crush et al. 1991). Nevertheless, the diversity and relative strength of the South African economy has continued to lure migrants from neighboring countries, most notably Zimbabwe, in the direction of the main cities and farming areas like the Cape wine lands. But at the borders themselves, South African towns are almost as unprepossessing as the settlements next door. Across the continent, the manifestation of very similar modes and standards of living at the border reflects the reality that populations on either side fashion a living from its existence.

But for all the apparent symmetry, a closer examination does reveal significant border effects in Africa as well. Physical (in)security creates dynamics that are comparable to the effects of asymmetry where the border clearly delineates a zone of endemic violence from one where relative peace prevails. In these cases, the two sides of a border typically assume different physical aspects. Across Africa, borders also serve to differentiate populations in more or less subtle ways, albeit with much greater scope for negotiation. As I will demonstrate, the inscription of multiple social boundaries is intimately bound up with flows of people and goods through territorial borders. In this chapter, I deploy a reading of asymmetrical borders in other parts of the world as a foil for mapping out some of the variations across Africa, but with a view to distilling lessons of broader relevance. I take asymmetry to refer to disparities of wealth and power rather than to the numerical dimensions of the population living in the border zone, although I consider this as an important border effect that is worthy of closer consideration. By invoking affinity, I seek to escape a purely state-centered perspective and to focus upon some of the ways in which populations conceive of, and act upon, the relationships that cut across borders. Although border-making might appear to be quintessential state work, it may more accurately be regarded as the coproduction of an extended cast of state and non-state actors. And it is precisely for this reason that border- and boundary-making processes are so deeply entangled.

Framing Symmetry and Asymmetry

In order to prepare the foundations for a comparative discussion, I begin by teasing out four variations that are generally associated with the opera-

tion of asymmetrical borders. The first concerns uneven levels of state presence. Along highly securitized borders there is likely to be a high level of visibility regardless of whether there is relative parity between the parties (as was initially true of North and South Korea) or a clear asymmetry (as was historically the case with the Russian–Finnish border). But where asymmetry reigns there is typically an interest on the part of the more endowed country in enforcing its physical presence at the border, which may not be shared by the other party. This is clearly the case around the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa and on the US–Mexico border. Alongside the rather crude symbolism of border fences, there has been a re-enchantment with technological solutions to issues of surveillance. At the same time, a veritable “illegality industry” (Andersson 2014) has grown up around the spectacle of surveillance and control (De Genova 2012). The less-endowed countries sometimes feel the need to keep up the appearance of sovereign equality by mirroring the presence of state agencies on their side of the line, but they have less invested in regulating border flows—unless they have been incentivized by the dominant neighbor to cooperate.

The second variation turns on the proliferation of networks of evasion feeding off the rents that are created by the creation and enforcement of hard borders. The activities that steal the headlines involve networks that are oriented toward the infiltration of elements that wealthier states are intent on excluding at any cost—namely people and narcotics. As a general rule, the harder the border, the greater the risks associated with crossing it, the higher the rents, and the more hierarchical the networks. But clearly the nature of what is being transported also has a bearing on the configurations. Drug cartels in South and Central America are highly monopolistic in nature and have been maintained through the active threat of violence (Payan 2006). The trafficking of people and drugs across the Sahara is somewhat more loosely organized, although the “mafias” are closely connected to the cartels in South America (Scheele 2012: 94–124).

The third variation is a peculiar form of demography, as populations are drawn to specific nodes within the borderlands (Nugent 2012). Borderlands are sometimes characterized by low population densities, but elsewhere asymmetrical borders suck in aspirant migrants, only to redistribute them in an uneven fashion across border spaces. The twin cities that have sprung up along the length of the US–Mexico border provide the classic instances. Here wealthier, but relatively small, American cities such as El Paso have become a focus for Mexican populations seeking a

better life. Much larger “trampoline towns” like Ciudad Juarez have emerged on the Mexican side, replenished by fresh arrivals from across the country and even further afield. El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, or Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, are intimately connected despite the existence of a relatively hard border.²

Finally, a distinct politics of identity tends to play itself out in asymmetrical borderlands. For countries that seek to restrict immigration, it is often convenient to emphasize the “otherness” of those whom they seek to deny entry to. Hence at the southern borders of Europe, governments have asserted their right to restrict entry to migrants and refugees, whilst blurring the distinction between them—which is at least implicitly justified on the basis of religious and/or racial difference. At the same time, the phenomenon of the daily commute across the US–Mexico border demonstrates that governments can also create states of exception when it suits them. At the busiest crossing of all, between Tijuana and San Diego, some 90,000 people cross the border each day—many who live in the former and work in the latter. The flip side is that border populations may themselves claim a close bond with people on the other side of the line, subverting the state’s claim to a monopoly of defining the terms of belonging. Hence the racialization of Mexicans has its counterpart in claims to affinity between Mexican Americans and their cousins from across the line. As Jiménez (2010) demonstrates, Mexican Americans in the border states generally empathize with the desire of their counterparts from Mexico to find a better life—which is ironically justified with reference to the American dream—but they are able to revive their own ethnic identity through regular contact with immigrants. This is despite some ambivalence about the illegality that pervades the process of gaining entry to the United States in the first place.

Symmetry and Affinity in African Border Regions

Uneven levels of state presence

When it comes to matters of state presence, there is clearly considerable variation across Africa. One of the ironies is that the states with the least institutional capacity have typically been tasked with maintaining the longest borders. This is especially true of those located in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. Where forests or drylands have been deployed as a buffer, states have often maintained only a token presence at the physical border. The latter have provided ideal sites for the incubation of rebel

insurgencies that have deployed the terrain to good effect. This has been true, for example, of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sudan since the 1960s. Somalia is a singular case because the notional government does not control much territory outside of Mogadishu. But even states that might appear to have much greater capacity to control their borders have sometimes struggled to assert an effective presence when push has come to shove. The ease with which a combination of Tuareg secessionists fighting for the independence of Azawad, and Islamists affiliated with al-Qaeda, were able to cross borders and eventually overrun half of Mali in 2012 provides a pointed illustration of that reality. This is equally true of the manner in which Boko Haram established bases in the forest reserves of northeastern Nigeria and successfully beat back the Nigerian army over 2013/14. In this case, self-proclaimed jihadists claiming an adherence to Islamic State were able to exploit the lack of state presence in Nigeria as well as in the borderlands of Cameroon and Chad. In the process of defining a new moral community, and hence demarcating a social boundary, Boko Haram also identified Christians and most fellow Muslims as apostates who could justifiably be targeted for acts of violence. Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania have found it convenient to locate large refugee camps in close proximity to international borders not merely to physically contain refugees, but also to establish a physical presence in marginal zones where state control has historically been tenuous. Whereas Uganda has established rather open settlements, Tanzania has sought to restrict movement beyond the confines of designated camps—thereby underlining the alterity of refugees and restricting their access to sources of income. The irony here is that the creation of a social boundary, in which refugees are pointedly placed outside the category of potential citizen, is what has enabled the state to stake out its physical borders.

It would be misleading to think of the border wilderness as anything like the norm because the margins in Africa are often rather densely populated (see below). They characteristically pulsate with economic activity, which in turn ensures that state institutions are very present on the ground. The African continent is currently undergoing a process of “re-spacing” through the combined effects of regional integration initiatives driven by various regional economic communities (RECs) and large-scale investments in infrastructure pursued by African governments, international financial institutions, China, the EU, and to a lesser extent by private corporations (Nugent 2018). Transport corridors, which are sometimes accorded the more grandiose label of development corridors,

lie at the intersection of both of these sets of interventions. They typically have a seaport like Mombasa or Walvis Bay at one end and a capital city or a mining center at the other—with upgraded road and rail networks linking them together. There are, however, significant differences between the many corridors. Whereas investments in the Walvis Bay Corridors are heavily geared to the extraction of mineral resources (notably copper), the Northern and Central Corridors in East Africa are justified with reference to facilitating the flow of imported goods as well as non-mineral exports. The Abidjan–Lagos Corridor (home to some 35 million people) is different again, in that it is justified with reference to the vast sprawl stretching from Lagos along the coastline, which potentially creates synergies arising out of the agglomeration effects associated with urbanism.

The border towns that are dotted along the corridors have historically functioned as the choke points where customs, immigration, and police have conducted their formalities and regulated the passage of people and goods. The lengthy delays and corruption that are characteristic of border crossings have been widely cited as the reasons for the high cost of doing business in Africa. This has the greatest implications for the landlocked states of West and Central Africa, for whom transport costs amount to some 45 percent of the value of imports and 35 percent of the value of exports—as opposed to the global average of 5.4 percent and 8.8 percent respectively (Viljoen 2016). Much of the cost is directly related to the hours, and even days, wasted in crossing borders. Part of the reason is inadequate infrastructure, such as the lack of crossable bridges, but as important is the duplication of procedures. In the context of regional integration, the stated priority is to actively reduce barriers to the free movement of goods, but also to assist the mobility of citizens within a given REC. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been in the vanguard with respect to the freedom of movement of people since 1979, whereas the East African Community (EAC) has led the way in trade facilitation and infrastructural investment.³

Ironically, the emphasis on facilitating border flows has imparted a heightened significance to the state management of border crossings. The EU is seeking to export its own model of an integrated boundary management system that will enable state institutions at the border to share data between themselves. Other donors are involved in harmonizing record systems that will permit agencies, most notably customs, to create and access the same documents. At the same time, governments and donors are rolling out one-stop border posts where a range of state institutions

from neighboring countries can work alongside each other, thereby halving the bureaucratic formalities. These reforms necessarily presume a mirroring of institutions at border crossings and require an active presence from both states. The construction of new border facilities and information systems frequently runs up against the realities of erratic electricity supplies and inadequate telecommunications infrastructure. Hence it has often been necessary to improve the connectivity of border towns. This upgrading has attracted ancillary businesses, most notably banks and logistics companies. Crucially for our purposes, it has also meant that a wider range of institutions and private actors has become invested in the dynamics of border towns.

However, significant tensions have emerged with respect to the management of mobility in particular. One arises out of the efforts of the EU to physically transplant its efforts to restrict the flow of would-be migrants. The European border force, Frontex, has enlisted African governments in a campaign to stem illegal migration at source by patrolling the West African coastline, but also by intercepting potential migrants at border crossings in the Sahel—long before the latter attempt the Sahara crossing (Andersson 2014: 100–36). Whereas freedom of movement is guaranteed to all ECOWAS citizens, people from coastal countries who enter the Sahel are often detained on a presumption of intent to reach Europe illegally—even though no actual crime has been committed. At the same time, African governments have sought to deal with the threat of terrorism by profiling border-crossers in ways that are in tension with the principle of freedom of movement. This is effected in part for reasons of national security and also in response to requests from external actors, most notably the United States and France. Given the ongoing campaign of al-Shabaab against Kenya and Uganda, for example, travellers who appear to be Somali are often singled out for special treatment in East Africa. Not surprisingly, the technologies of surveillance have become more sophisticated in recent years (Frowd 2018). While it is true that the implementation is often uneven, as well as inconsistent, the biometric border has traveled from airports to land borders, where finger prints are routinely taken. The concerns surrounding illegal immigration and terrorism together render border surveillance a genuine priority for African governments. Because this happens to coincide with the agenda of Western countries, it has been rather easy to secure external assistance to pay for the necessary equipment and training. While the integrated border management agenda is justified with reference to the benefits associated with more efficient data

collection and sharing, it is clearly not devoid of political intent. It also complicates the regional integration agenda of RECs that have, for example, been seeking to dispense with passport requirements.

Networks of evasion

Networks of evasion are very extensive in most African border regions, relating more to the pursuit of trade than to migratory flows. Historically, there have been high levels of mobility within the continent, especially in West and Southern Africa. In the Senegambia region, for example, large numbers of migrants from Mali, Mauritania, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau have resided in Senegal, while the Gambia has been home to substantial numbers of Senegalese. Crossing borders has been considered mundane, and governments have not considered it prudent or necessary to interfere too much—except during moments of inter-state crisis such as that which followed the border clash between Senegal and Mauritania and which set off tit-for-tat expulsions in the early 1990s. The southward extension of Frontex has brought some of the networks of evasion in North Africa to the Senegambia itself. But it does not (yet) appear that there are highly organized human-trafficking rings operating across most of sub-Saharan Africa. The issue of child trafficking between African countries is often said to be pervasive, and immigration officials are specifically trained to detect its incidence at border crossings. But evidence of pervasive trafficking networks is limited. Indeed, it is difficult to detect a strong economic driver even for domestic labor, given that a large pool of vulnerable children exists in most African countries anyway.

By contrast, the economic logic behind the trafficking in smuggled goods remains as powerful as ever. For the first three decades of independence, African countries pursued competitive economic strategies that created abundant opportunities for smuggling. In West Africa, for example, the more substantial countries like Nigeria, Senegal, and Ghana attempted to build national industries—which were typically state-owned—behind the protection of tariff walls. Neighboring countries—most notably Togo, Benin, and the Gambia—functioned as archetypal *entrepôts*, that is as microstates that had very little industry of their own but got by on the basis of tapping international trade. They actively encouraged the import of consumer goods through their ports, which were then taxed and dispatched across borders in the shape of contraband. This undercut fledgling industries, such as textiles or sugar production, in the neighboring countries. Under structural adjustment programs, much of the protection for

state industries was removed, but a stimulus was provided to other forms of trade across borders (Walther 2014: 194–5). In the current era of regional integration, the harmonization of customs values and internal taxes has reduced many of the economic rents that formerly sustained smuggling. But the continued existence of different currencies, the retention of consumer subsidies (for example on petroleum products), and the remaining vestiges of industrial protectionism have all meant that smuggling remains a highly profitable business. Nigeria has, for example, delayed the implementation of a common external tariff and has insisted on upholding a list of prohibited imports and imposing high tariffs on “strategic” commodities, such as rice. The net effect has been to extend a renewed lease of life to the contraband trade centered on the port of Cotonou. Benin has embraced the logic of regional integration by promoting a rail link to Mali, but at the same time it has continued to function as a classic *entrepôt* state. Much of the smuggling across the continent is transacted in items of everyday consumption, such as wheat flour, Thai rice, and Chinese batteries. But there are also some items to which some value is attached and which require greater levels of organization within the supply chain. The attempt to sever the links between diamond mining and violent conflict through certification under the Kimberley Process has fueled smuggling across international borders—with the DRC being a major supplier of illicit diamonds to the rest of the world. Much of the trafficking in ivory for the Asian market, and skins used in Chinese medicine, takes place by road for the simple reason that these are easily concealed amongst other consignments and are difficult to detect without functioning scanners—which are a rare occurrence at most of Africa’s land borders. The rerouting of the South American drugs trade, and in particular cocaine, through West Africa is a case of the internationalization of criminal networks (Klantschnig 2013)—with profound consequences for Guinea-Bissau, where it has become deeply entwined with the politics of the country. Although much of the narcotics trade has been routed through airports, improvements in the technologies of detection in countries like Ghana and Nigeria have meant that drugs have also entered Europe by boat and along land routes through the desert.

One of the distinctive patterns of cross-border trading in Africa is the role of ethnic and religious networks in cementing essential bonds of trust, both between partners of an equivalent size and between larger merchants and smaller traders. Long-distance trade has historically been associated with particular ethnic groups, such as the Dyula and Hausa of

West Africa, who remain deeply invested in cross-border trading to this day. But the emergence of lucrative seams of commerce since the 1970s has also facilitated the emergence of novel networks. A case in point would be the so-called Nana Benz of Togo, the market women who came to dominate the cloth trade from the Grand Marché in Lomé. After independence, Dutch and British wax prints were imported through the port by multinational trading firms and then distributed by the Nana Benz throughout the sub-region (Sylvanus 2016). Much of the cloth was sold into Ghana, whose own factories came close to collapse in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The lucrative textile trade was controlled by wealthy female traders, and in particular by Minas who originated from eastern Togo rather than from Lomé itself. They were, in turn, suppliers to a much larger group of middling and smaller traders. As the counterfeit cloth trade with China took off around the turn of the millennium, a much greater range of actors entered the field, and the Nana Benz forfeited their de facto monopoly. What stands out in this instance is the convergence between international commerce and cross-border flows on the one hand, and the demarcation of an entirely female domain that is spatially embodied within the urban landscape of Lomé on the other.

A rather different instance is that of the Mouride trading network of the Senegambia—which is Muslim, primarily Wolof in terms of its ethnic composition, and dominated by men. The Mourides are a Sufi religious order that was initially closely associated with the expansion of groundnut production in Senegal before its adherents turned their backs on farming and became heavily urbanized from the mid-1970s onward. The Mourides stand out from the other Muslim orders in the sub-region by virtue of an internal structure that is simultaneously hierarchical, being centered on the relationship between a religious *cheikh* and his *talibés* (followers), and yet flexible enough to facilitate its extension as a network. After independence, the Mouride capital of Touba was granted an exceptional status, likened by Senegalese to the Vatican, where state institutions like the police were absent from the scene. The Mourides became deeply implicated in the contraband trade with the Gambia in the 1970s, where they accessed Asian goods that sold more cheaply in Senegal than both the French equivalent and the products of local factories. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Mourides controlled much of the illicit trade across the greater Senegambia region and they remain prominently placed to this day—even if smuggling through the Gambia has lost much of its rationale as Chinese goods have entered directly through the port of Dakar. What was originally

a village expanded rapidly, in large part by virtue of the commercial advantages that the unique status conferred, with the result that Touba grew to become Senegal's second city. The Mourides also moved in large numbers to Dakar, and subsequently became heavily invested in international migration, especially in the direction of France and Italy, where they became closely associated with street trading.

If we compare the Nana Benz and the Mourides, we can discern some of the complex ways in which border- and boundary-making have become intertwined. The Nana Benz carved out a distinct identity that was gendered and largely ethnic in character, and that depended on the reproduction of international borders and the economic rents associated with them. The space that they claimed as their own was physically concentrated at the commercial heart of the Togolese capital. At an earlier point in history, the Mourides created their own center that was deliberately located away from the colonial capital of Dakar. The religious network was built upon absolute allegiance to a *cheikh* who acted both as a religious interlocutor and a social protector. The Mouride order greatly expanded in numbers and influence when its adherents embraced the commercial advantages that came with cross-border trade and subsequently the opportunities for migration to Europe. The financial flows back to Senegal, which sustained both the religious leadership and extended families, have enabled the Mourides to adapt to changing circumstances. Today, there are multiple layers to the social identity of the Mourides. It is strongly associated with being Senegalese, and yet it actively embraces a worldliness that is threatened by stricter European immigration regimes. It is associated with Islam, but with innovations that make it distinct even from other Sufi orders in Senegal. And while the public perception of the Mourides emphasizes close solidarity between young men, they clearly have a substantial female following.

Under conditions where trade is characterized by high risk, whether by virtue of the nature of what is being traded or the insecure environment in which it is carried out, the networks tend to be more hierarchical and densely configured. While cigarette smuggling by boat between Libya and Egypt involves groups of young men who are connected through "tribal" ties, the trafficking in arms, people, and drugs between Libya and the Sahara is dominated by close-knit and heavily armed networks that do not hinge on kinship solidarities (Hüsken 2017: 907–9). The same is true of the "mafias" operating on the border between Mali and Algeria, which are based on personal ties rather than the established religious-

cum-commercial networks, and are surrounded by a distinct aura of unsociability (Scheele 2012: 123). In regions where there is a high risk of banditry, militia attacks, or irregular seizures by state and quasi-state actors (it is not always so easy to tell them apart), merchants have to provide their own military security—or purchase it elsewhere. In the trade between the eastern DRC and its neighbors, where the risks are especially acute, a small number of players has come to dominate the most lucrative lines of trade. In the wake of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, and the flight of Hutu populations across the border, North and South Kivu became highly volatile regions of the DRC. Endemic insecurity did not sever trade, and indeed created its own war economy of sorts (Jackson 2006), but it did change the ways in which trust operated. Raeymaekers (2015) has explored the logics of a protection economy in which large merchants depended on the security afforded by military enforcers, but increasingly set the rules of the game themselves—thereby creating what he depicts as a hybridized system of governance. In a separate study of trade between the DRC and Uganda, Titeca (2012) similarly identifies the consolidation of economic power in the hands of a small group of well-connected “tycoons.” In the Great Lakes region, the pervasive threat of spoliation is what enables the most lucrative commerce to remain concentrated in the hands of the few who possess the means to defend their interests. The effects are, therefore, broadly similar to the ways in which the high risks associated with trafficking across asymmetrical borders promotes hierarchical and highly concentrated networks.

Demography

As I have already indicated, border regions are frequently amongst the most densely populated, especially in West Africa, Central Africa and the Great Lakes region (Soi & Nugent 2017). Indeed, Africa has its own variants of the twinned towns and cities phenomenon. And much like on the US–Mexico border, the pattern is one of uneven growth between urban settlements. The cities of Kinshasa and Brazzaville provide the only instance in the world where two capital cities face each other across an international border defined by the Congo River.⁴ In this case, Kinshasa is several times larger than Brazzaville. Together, they are home to some 13 million people, many of whom make a living in one way or another from trade across the dangerous river boundary. This is not likely to change, given that the prolific expansion of Kinshasa is predicted to continue unabated over the next three decades. Indeed, according to some projec-

tions Kinshasa will overtake Lagos and Cairo by 2025, with a projected population of 16.8 million people. In addition, a large number of Africa's capital cities are either located on an international border—typically along a navigable river—or within 50 kilometers of one. In several cases, capitals like Bangui and N'Djamena face smaller towns on the other side of the border which derive much of their vitality from the proximity between them. Finally, there are innumerable instances of border towns that have grown up in an intimate relationship with one another. In East Africa, there are several towns that share the same name: such as Busia, Uganda and Busia, Kenya, or Moyale, Kenya and Moyale, Ethiopia. In almost every case, the factors behind the consolidation of these urban clusters involve some combination between the selection of an administrative headquarters and the opportunities that derive from the existence of the border. A particularly fascinating example is Lomé and its Ghanaian neighbor, Aflao, whose border crossing literally opens into the downtown area of the Togolese capital. Aflao already existed in the seventeenth century, whereas Lomé was founded by smugglers seeking to escape British Customs duties after the declaration of the eastern border of the Gold Coast in 1879. After independence, Lomé expanded rapidly as the Togolese capital, but also as the epicenter of the contraband trade (see above). Aflao was an important partner in and beneficiary from this trade, which is reflected in the reality that its population grew significantly more quickly than other towns in Ghana. There is a close affinity between the populations of these settlements—given that specific quarters of the Togolese capital trace their origins to Aflao—but they have both drawn in populations from much further afield, including the Mina, who I have mentioned above.

Patterns of urban growth have also been shaped in significant ways by the security imbalances that have already been identified. Across Africa, high rates of urbanization are closely correlated with patterns of sustained violence—Angola being the classic case of a country that has experienced rural depopulation as a consequence of decades of civil war. Much of this urban growth is reflected at the geographical margins, where populations have a greater chance of seeking sanctuary across the border. Although the existence of large-scale refugee camps is well known, a pattern characteristic of relatively low-level insurgencies is one in which populations relocate to the more secure side of the border during times of trouble. Hence Gambian border towns have accommodated large numbers of people from the Casamance whenever the secessionist insurgency in Senegal has heated up, but then there has been a reverse flow when a sem-

blance of normality has returned. These movements are based on established relationships, cemented by kinship and religious ties, between towns on the two sides of the border. Needless to say, these are towns where the livelihoods of much of the population revolves around the opportunities for cross-border trade.

Much as instability has been confined to the Casamance side of the Senegal–Gambia border, Uganda has experienced long periods of acute instability in a way that Kenya has not. Amidst the privation of the Amin years, when basic consumer goods ceased to be available in Uganda, a flourishing contraband trade with Kenya sprang up. This imparted a particular significance to the relationship between the two Busias. Smugglers from Busia, Uganda, often using bicycles, ran the gauntlet of military surveillance, but continued to take the risk because of attractive financial returns. However, because of the dangers associated with exhibiting wealth in Uganda at a time when the military was not bound by any rules, very little investment was evident. Most of the demographic growth and physical construction (especially well-stocked stores) was manifested in Busia, Kenya, a difference that was further magnified when the latter was elevated to an administrative center. When peace returned to the Ugandan side of the border, Busia, Uganda, assumed the role of a truck stop on the route from Mombasa. In recent years, however, Busia has acquired its own minor position within the Ugandan administrative hierarchy, and a range of businesses, including banks and filling stations, have grown up around the one-stop border post. There is a perception that property is more expensive in Kenya, while much of the electoral violence in recent years has played itself out in Busia, Kenya. This means that traders are much more likely to invest in Busia, Uganda, than before. The net consequence has been a narrowing of the gap between the towns with respect to both population and the quality of the built environment.

In the eastern DRC, a rather different pattern has taken shape based on the permanent displacement of rural populations toward the border. Goma has progressed from the status of a modest provincial town to a metropolis of more than 1 million people, while Bukavu is estimated to harbor a further 832,000. This is not a matter of the bright lights so much as a reflection of the reality that the city provides a relatively safe haven at a time when the rural hinterlands of North and South Kivu are rife with armed militias that routinely target civilian populations. The existence of the border provides a source of income for the many men and women who trade, transport goods, cook food, change money, and do all the other

things that are associated with busy border crossings. What is striking is that the Rwandan towns of Gisenyi and Cyangugu, which face Goma and Bukavu across the border, have not expanded to anything like the same degree—despite the much greater level of physical security. The Rwandan administration clearly has no interest in encouraging Congolese settlement, with all the problems that this might entail. But it is equally true that displaced populations need to find a way of making a living, and this is easier in Goma than in Gisenyi, where economic activities are more closely regulated by the Rwandan state.⁵ Despite the greater incidence of daily crime in Goma, border workers generally choose to reside there in preference to the more “orderly” Rwandan towns next door. The pattern that I have identified from the Uganda–Kenya border is therefore reversed in an interesting fashion.

The politics of identity

As has been widely noted, a discourse of autochthony has come into play across the continent over recent decades (Bøås & Dunn 2013; Geschiere 2009). In fact, there have been earlier iterations of something very similar, most notably with the expulsion of foreigners from Ghana in 1969 and from Nigeria in 1983, and the excision of the Ugandan Asians in 1972. In countries like Cameroon and Congo-Brazzaville, the struggle has really turned on claims to ownership of particular spaces, including specific urban *quartiers*, rather than arguments about national citizenship. But in Côte d’Ivoire and South Africa it has also been about defining the boundaries of national belonging, in which state categories and vernacular discourses of belonging have become closely intertwined. Inevitably, it has also involved some contestation over the ways in which national borders have been superimposed upon ethnic ones.

In the Ivoirien case, the political crisis turned on whether most northerners were actually Burkinabe. For southern activists seeking to advance the claims of putative autochthons, northerners were almost by definition suspect. The context was one in which a quarter of the population were immigrants by the 1990s, a large proportion of whom had been attracted to work on the cocoa farms of the forest belt. The complication in this case is that the borders of colonial Upper Volta changed several times over, enabling some supposed Burkinabe to make a historic claim to being Ivoirien at an earlier point in their history. Others laid claim to being Ivoirien on the basis of having been born in Côte d’Ivoire to parents who migrated decades before. And finally, most northerners insisted they had

always been Ivoirien and had a right, as citizens, to reside, work, and acquire land in any part of the country. For the supporters of the former president Laurent Gbagbo, the invocation of a foreign threat was largely an exercise in seeking to reduce the number of northern voters, through exclusion from citizenship, rather than seeking to redraw the borders of Côte d'Ivoire.

In South Africa, the pressure to tackle illegal immigration has led the South African authorities to actively police urban spaces where foreigners reside in large numbers, and to resort to mass deportations—amounting to no fewer than 300,000 in 2007 alone (Landau 2010: 215). One of the cruel ironies of the recurring xenophobic attacks has been the targeting of South African Tsonga and Venda populations, who are collectively labeled as Shangaan. Because these groups straddle international borders, the assumption is that they are most likely foreigners who have crossed over from neighboring countries (Tafira 2011: 118). In this way, certain ethnicities are deemed to be unproblematically part of the nation while others are treated as alien or at least highly suspect—with language proficiency often providing the litmus test in any given, often charged, situation. The populations who are targeted, on the other hand, contend that their forebears were *in situ* before the borders were drawn.

The assumption that the contours of international borders neatly conform to ethnic boundaries is, of course, one that runs entirely counter to the view that populations were arbitrarily dissected by colonial borders. A.I. Asiwaju, who may fairly be regarded as the father of African border studies, edited a seminal volume in which he helpfully provided a checklist of partitioned ethnic groups (Asiwaju 1984: 252–9). The list is extensive, but even then it is incomplete. The Agotime who straddle the Ghana–Togo border, for example, are not included in the checklist, seemingly because they are bundled into the Ewe category. But such problems of classification also illustrate the difficulties of assuming clearly bounded ethnicities in the first place. Colonial borders helped to shape the way in which ethnic groups were classified, and the manner in which ethnicity was subsequently expressed. Hence the Agotime have tended to be assimilated to the Ewe category despite being an Adangbe splinter group with close links to the Ga of what is now coastal Ghana. On the Kenya–Uganda border, closely related populations do not deploy the same ethnonyms, although they are well aware of the affinities between them. The point nevertheless remains that closely related populations frequently live on two sides of a border, with the multiple ambiguities that this entails. The

trap lies in conceiving of borderlanders as purely the victims—intended or otherwise—of a dispensation conjured up by external agents. Border populations have been equally adept at instrumentalizing borders and enlisting the support of states in the process. Elsewhere, I have examined the ways in which litigants involved in land disputes on the Ghana–Togo border deliberately conflated international borders with the borders between chiefdoms in order to stake contentious claims and to delegitimize those of their opponents (Nugent 2002). Similarly, Dereje (2011) has revealed how the Anywaa have sought to entrench the Ethiopia–Sudan border in a way that casts pastoralist Nuer populations, with whom they have been struggling over land, as foreigners. These instances demonstrate that borderlanders are as invested in the making of borders, and are often as adept at deploying the language of citizenship as the state and non-state actors are.

But there are also other ways in which populations relate to borders. As I have already indicated, border towns are often rather cosmopolitan places that suck in strangers from further afield. Hence, the visible presence of Igbo and Yoruba traders from southern Nigeria in towns on the northern Benin–Nigeria border (Walther 2014: 196), of Igbos trading in Gabonese border towns (Bennafla 2002: 137) and of Hausa traders operating in Agotime. The paramount chief of Afiao is distinctly proud of the fact that his town hosts migrants from across West Africa, and he speaks especially highly of the way in which the “Maliens” (the largest group) have organized themselves.⁶ However, it is also true that border populations may also lay claim to the border as a resource that belongs primarily to notional indigenes. As Flynn (1997) has demonstrated for the Benin–Nigeria border, locals may claim co-ownership of border spaces with the state by imposing their own controls and levies on what passes through. At the one-stop border posts on the Uganda–Kenya border it is striking that money changers insist on the right to operate inside the perimeter fence on the grounds that the facility is built on “their land.” Such assertions of local ownership are, in practice, compatible with the presence of strangers who specialize in particular lines of commerce that indigenes have less of an interest in, or specialist knowledge of.

A rather different, but hardly contradictory, response is the assertion of a close affinity between people across the line. Borderlanders routinely intermarry, patronize rotating weekly markets, attend each other’s schools and health clinics, and engage in joint religious observances. But it has not always been so easy to turn such daily interactions into an expression of a

common identity. Governments tend to be acutely suspicious of efforts to discursively transcend the border because they regard it as a slippery slope to secessionism. Cross-border festivals afford a convenient way of making statements about the ties that bind, but in a manner that does not appear overtly threatening—especially when state actors can be drawn into the performance. The chief of Aflao is proud of the fact that his annual festival, *Godigbe*, attracts participants from Togo and as far afield as Benin. The festival therefore makes a statement about connectivity and affinity across two sets of borders. The Agotime have worked hard at promoting their own annual festival, *Agbamevoza*. During the three decades after independence when relations between the two sets of authorities were distinctly tense, it proved impossible to hold any public events in common, but the slow thaw from the mid-1990s provided an opportunity that Agotime leaders seized upon with alacrity. *Agbamevoza* is a week-long series of events that seeks to unify the Agotime around a shared sense of a place in history and their virtuosity in the production of the highest-quality *kente* cloth (Nugent 2019: 502–6). Whereas the events used to be held on the Ghana side of the border only, these days the festival shuttles back and forth across the line and involves the participation of state officials from both sides.

Ironically, however, because the border has been a hard one for so long, what it means to be Agotime in Ghana is not the same as what it means to be Agotime in Togo. As one informant explained, it is the “Ghanaians”—by which he also meant Ghanaian Agotime—who like to wear *kente* cloth on special occasions, whereas the Togolese prefer to don suits and wax prints. The Agotime seem to have succeeded in reminding the authorities that they are one people divided by an international border. The challenge now is to agree on what “Agotimeness” itself consists of. This conscious attempt to alter the meaning attached to the border is not to be confused with secessionist claims that have been on the rise across the continent. In subtle ways, festivals may even serve to reinscribe rather than challenge the legitimacy of the borders in question. But what they also do is to open up a space for negotiation about how the border is managed, much as they do in Laredo and Nuevo Laredo along the US–Mexico border.⁷

Conclusion

In this chapter I have deployed the asymmetrical border in other regions of the world as a foil for understanding the ways in which borders function

and interact with social boundaries in Africa. I have avoided the temptation to draw overly sharp distinctions between Europe and the Americas on the one hand and Africa on the other, despite some very obvious differences. To be sure, along the familiar asymmetrical borders there are strict controls on migration, whereas the norm has been an acceptance of high levels of mobility across most of Africa, which is now formally sanctioned by regional integration agreements. Moreover, there are relatively few securitized borders in Africa—the heavily militarized Ethiopia–Eritrea border providing the obvious exception. Again, the development of hierarchical networks of evasion geared to the trafficking of people and narcotics has been a distinctive feature of asymmetrical borders. But as Europe has pushed its own border policing southward, and as much of the cocaine trade has shifted to Africa, some of the same dynamics are now present south of the Sahara. In addition, the phenomenon of twin cities and towns is widespread and underlines the transformative role of border flows and blockages. Whereas on the US–Mexico border peripheral urbanism is driven by the migration imperative, in Africa it is the economic opportunities that are encrusted around borders that draws people toward them. But even this has some parallels with the operations of the informal economy at the US–Mexico border.

I have gone on to argue that chronic insecurity creates effects that are similar to those we associate with evasion along asymmetrical borders. High risks to life and capital in the pursuit of cross-border commerce are conducive to the consolidation of hierarchical networks involving the primacy of political connections, fewer players, and tight-knit relationships based on something other than kinship. Insecurity is also closely bound up with demographic growth in border regions, although the patterns differ significantly by region. When it comes to affinities, one needs to be equally nuanced in thinking through the larger comparisons. Although it is common to conceive of the Mediterranean as marking a cultural boundary, it has historically functioned more as a crossroads between North Africa and southern Europe (Clancy-Smith 2011). And clearly, there are close affinities between Mexican Americans and their kinsmen across the southern border which have been revalorized in the context of the resurgence of white American nativism. Conversely, culturally similar populations in African border regions have not always made much of an effort to embrace their apparent similarities.

In unlocking the precise relationship between borders and boundaries, I have subjected four dimensions to closer investigation. When it comes to

state presence, I have pointed to the challenges that some states have faced in controlling remote border regions that have provided a fertile breeding ground for insurgencies. I have also underlined some of the tensions between a regional integration agenda, which seeks to facilitate the freedom of movement of citizens of member states, and a security agenda which seeks to impose more effective regulation. The efforts of the EU to tie African states into measures designed to restrict migratory flows has added a further layer of complexity. The net effect has been to forge new strategies of surveillance and practices of selective exclusion.

Secondly, I have demonstrated that networks of evasion have proliferated in African border regions by virtue of the economic rents that conflicting economic policies have generated—and which migration controls are currently reinigorating. Cross-border trade has often been associated with particular ethnic groups whose niche has been cemented over many years. But illicit trade has also spawned new networks as well as transforming older ones. I have compared the case of the Nana Benz of Lomé—whose location at the epicenter of a regional trade in contraband textiles helped to cement their dominance over the urban marketplace—with that of the Mouride brotherhood which began with deep roots in groundnut farming and subsequently mutated into a transnational network, with one foot in contraband and another in international migration. In both cases, the demarcation of a social boundary was closely bound up with participation in cross-border exchange.

This is closely related to the third point concerning the demography of borderlands. Border areas have often witnessed amongst the most sustained growth, by virtue of the livelihoods that grow up around trade but also because of the relative safety that urbanism provide in unstable regions. Border towns and cities are typically cosmopolitan, as they suck in populations of diverse national and ethnic origins.

In the final section on the politics of identity, I have pointed to the many ambiguities surrounding the ways in which international borders are exploited, challenged and internalized by local populations. While some actors have sought to exclude or target particular groups on the principle that their ethnic affiliation necessarily renders them foreign, borderlanders have not been above invoking state actors in defense of their own territorial claims. Even where groups such as the Agotime seek to transcend the border and rekindle a shared sense of community, they cannot escape the fact that the border has engendered a sense of difference over time. This is illustrative of the ways in which borders have served to

inscribe social boundaries in a more general sense. In this, as in other respects, the African patterns are not so very different from those in other parts of the world. Or at least, there are enough commonalities to render the work of comparison potentially rewarding.

Notes

1. Some of the research for this article, especially the sections dealing with transport corridors and regional integration, was conducted as part of a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant for a project entitled “African Governance and Space: Transport Corridors, Border Towns and Port Cities in Transition (AFRIGOS)” (ADG-2014-670851), for which I am the principal investigator. In East Africa, the research was conducted alongside Dr. Isabella Soi of the University of Cagliari, an affiliate of the project, whose insights I am grateful for.
2. Tijuana and San Diego are atypical in that the latter is slightly the larger city.
3. ECOWAS brings together the West African anglophone countries of Nigeria, Ghana, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, with the francophone countries of the West African Monetary Union (UEMOA), consisting of Senegal, Mali, Cote d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Togo, Niger, plus Guinea-Bissau. Guinea is a francophone member of ECOWAS, but is not part of UEMOA. In East Africa, the EAC is made up of Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan.
4. The Vatican is embedded in Rome, but this is clearly an exceptional case.
5. I am grateful to Hugh Lamarque for this insight.
6. Interview with Togbe Amenya Fiti V, Aflao, August 26, 2017.
7. I am grateful for having had the chance to read some of the drafts of a forthcoming book by Elaine Peña that deals with an annual festival in which a meeting on the bridge between the two Laredos is a highly symbolic moment.

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