MAKING SENSE OF BORDERLANDS

RVI X-BORDER SYNTHESIS THINK PIECE • MARCH 2025

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This paper is an extract of a longer paper taking stock of the roughly 40 X-Border studies carried out between 2019 and 2025 under the auspices of the Rift Valley Institute's XCEPT programme.

INTRODUCTION

If we are to fully grasp conflict dynamics and related phenomena in borderland areas—whether that be in Africa or elsewhere—we must look beyond the region in question. Only then can we hope to understand what is (and is not) particular to that area, and so detect causal patterns.

With this in mind, this think piece proposes an analytical strategy based on three tenets:

- First, there is *little that is specifically 'African' about African borderlands*, as such areas will inevitably have shared characteristics with comparable areas (whether present-day or historical) around the world.

- Second, conflict dynamics in borderlands are embedded in *global historical forces*.

- Third, a focus on *borderland processes* allows for appraisal of causal dynamics and analytical processes without essentializing or 'containerizing' borderland areas.

- In elaborating on this latter tenet, four such processes are highlighted as being of particular importance: *paradoxical sites of state formation*; *territorialization*; *flows and frictions*; and *laboratories of techno-political experimentation*.

TENET 1: THERE IS LITTLE THAT IS 'AFRICAN' ABOUT AFRICAN BORDERLANDS

Borderland areas are marked by both dynamism and enduring structural features. As such, incorporating a broader set of historical and comparative case studies can cast new light on a particular area's structural features and borderland processes. For instance, a 'resource frontier' in the Horn of Africa has more in common (in terms of causal mechanics) with a comparable 'resource frontier' in South Asia than it has with other types of borderlands in the Horn of Africa.[1]

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1   Matthias Borg Rasmussen and Christian Lund, 'Reconfiguring Frontier Spaces: The territorialization of resource control', *World Development* 101 (2018).

Much of the Africanist area studies literature on borderlands and frontiers has, with some notable exceptions, been driven by empiricism 'to the detriment of comparative or more broadly conceptual and theoretical studies'.[2] Similar criticisms have been made of the borderlands literature concerning other regions across the world. Thus, when seeking borderland concepts, theories and frameworks, we should be careful not to confine ourselves to a narrow geographical region. The idea that the logics governing borderlands are either 'African' or 'European' or 'Asian' is erroneous. Contrasting a larger set of borderlands across time and space allows us to identify recurrent processes and situate single cases within them.

TENET 2: GLOBAL HISTORICAL FORCES ARE UBIQUITOUS

Rather than limiting ourselves to the observation that violence recurrently occurs in borderlands, it is important to understand the role played by global historical forces in reconfiguring centre–periphery relations,[3] and how this produces distinct manifestations of political violence in and around borderlands. Here, state formation and capitalist expansion are the two key global historical forces to reckon with.

In their often-cited review essay on the American Frontier, Adelman and Aron point to a historical process by which 'borderlands' became 'bordered lands'.[4] During the eighteenth century, imperial competition over borderlands produced 'fluid and "inclusive" intercultural frontiers'.[5] These were marked by ethnic alliances and intercultural relations between settlers and indigenous people, giving the latter a certain autonomy. Later, in the nineteenth century, with nation-states striving for 'exclusive domination over all territories within their borders', these social relations and hierarchies 'hardened' and 'rigidified'.[6] Although 'the prolonged weakness of nation-states left some room to maneuver' for borderland communities, states sought to formalize 'the flow of people, capital, and goods'.[7]

This 'master' historical process should not be seen as a rigid model that operates in teleological fashion. Rather, it is a reminder that the politics of border spaces are embedded in, respond to and sometimes precipitate specific forms of historically constituted authority. State formation dynamics, which are driven by a political 'core' or 'centre', are intimately linked to borderland processes and vice versa.[8] In other words: conflict and violence at the 'margins of the state'

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2   David Coplan, 'Introduction: From empiricism to theory in African border studies', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 25/2 (2010): 1.

3   Here, 'centre–periphery relations' are defined as how the political centre of power within a geographical territory or state interacts with its geographical, economic and/or political peripheries.

4   Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, 'From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History', *The American Historical Review* 104/3 (1999).

5   Adelman and Aron, 'From Borderlands to Borders', 816.

6   Adelman and Aron, 'From Borderlands to Borders', 816–817.

7   Adelman and Aron, 'From Borderlands to Borders', 840.

8   Robert Braun and Otto Kienitz, 'Comparative Politics in Borderlands: Actors, Identities, and Strategies', *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (2022); James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia,* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.

reflect evolving state formation dynamics.[9] As the X-Border studies highlight, this process is omnipresent in the Horn of Africa's borderlands.

A similar logic applies to the extent to which borderlands are included in—or excluded from—global finance, trade and market relations. Present-day borderland conflicts can be understood as lying at the intersection of, on the one hand, a given borderland's particular features and, on the other, the state formation and market logics playing out in those borderlands. While the latter are often mediated by national governments, they involve a broader set of transnational actors and interests including telecommunications, mobile money and logistics firms, armed groups or diaspora networks.

TENET 3: FROM BORDERLANDS TO BORDERLAND PROCESSES

Rather than conceiving of border areas as neatly defined 'containers' or, worse, exotic peripheral spaces that somehow operate beyond the 'normal politics' of the nation-state, it is more useful to focus on what may be termed 'borderland processes'. These processes—that is, the specific causal logics operating in borderlands—encompass mobility and migration; economic exchange; cultural hybridity and identify formation; state–society relations; and contested territorialization. Moreover, they are multi-scalar, interactive and liminal, simultaneously shaped by inclusion and exclusion, connection and division. In short, borders have a dual role as both barriers and conduits for economic and social exchanges.

Four recurrent borderland processes—which can take on different empirical forms in different border spaces at different times—are particularly noteworthy. These are explored below.

Paradoxical sites of state formation

Borders and, by extension, borderlands are paradoxical in that they both 'inscribe the exclusive powers of the nation-state' and concomitantly 'reveal the limitations of the state'.[10] As a result, while borderland communities may sometimes strive for inclusion in the nation-state (for example, to obtain citizenship), at other times they will attempt to evade often predatory (central) state authorities seeking to 'incorporate' such communities by making them 'legible' and 'governable'. This polarity is a key causal mechanism animating interactions between borderland communities, border elites and national elites, helping explain why borderlands frequently alternate between resistance, co-optation and integration.[11]

Territorialization

Territorialization is a process of remaking space—of bordering and re-bordering—whereby relations between people, as well as between people and land, are rearranged.[12] It involves the division of territories into 'complex and overlapping political and economic zones', the rearrangement of 'people and resources within these units', and the delineation 'how and

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9   Veena Das and Deborah Poole, eds., *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2004.

10   Braun and Kienitz, 'Comparative Politics in Borderlands', 307.

11   Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, 'Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands', *Journal of World History* 8/2 (1997).

12   Robert D. Sack, 'Human territoriality: a theory', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 73/1 (1983).

by whom these areas can be used'.[13] In other words, 'Territorialization is about excluding or including people within particular geographic boundaries, and about controlling what people do and their access to natural resources within those boundaries'.[14]

In frontiers and borderlands, territorialization processes are particularly vibrant, often combining (state) coercion with indigenous or exogenous commodification.[15] Contested boundary making, resource appropriation and revenue accumulation in borderlands all arise from competing ideas of 'territory' and 'territoriality'.

Flows and frictions

While borderlands are often spaces where migration and cross-border flows are interrupted, stopped, re-directed or suppressed, they are also sites of mobility for people, goods, capital and ideas across borders. Encompassing both 'flow(s)' and 'friction(s)', borderlands connect rural with main markets, highlands with lowlands, consumers with producers, conflict zones with safe havens. This duality is taken advantage of by actors who generate revenue and gain authority by facilitating, overseeing or taxing the flow of 'values' (labour, commodities, capital) across boundaries. The social, political and economic organization of both the 'circulation' and 'capture' of cross-border flows thus constitutes a key borderland process.[16]

Struggles arising from cross-border flows and frictions take various forms, encompassing spatially concentrated natural resources (e.g. minerals, timber, khat);[17] spatially defused resources and bodies (e.g. livestock, displaced, migrants, militarized labour);[18] finished products traversing through borderlands (e.g. consumer goods, electronics);[19] and—potentially—immaterial values (e.g. information, data, money transfers).[20] The ability to make values flow across boundaries ('breaking out' or 'into' the borderlands),[21] or alternatively to insert friction into such flows, offers a means of securing an income in borderland areas.

Laboratories of techno-political experimentation

Because they operate at the geographical margins of global economies, borderlands have often been venues for techno-capitalist innovation, whether this be the use of new weapons

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13   Peter Vandergeest and Nancy L. Peluso, 'Territorialization and State Power in Thailand', *Theory and Society* 24/2 (1995), 387.

14   Vandergeest and Peluso, 'Territorialization and State Power', 388.

15   Benedikt Korf, Tobias Hagmann and Rony Emmenegger, 'Re-spacing African drylands: territorialization, sedentarization and indigenous commodification in the Ethiopian pastoral frontier', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 42/5 (2015).

16   Tobias Hagmann and Finn Stepputat, eds., *Trade Makes States: Governing the Greater Somali Economy*, London: Hurst, 2023; Peer Schouten, Finn Stepputat and Jan Bachmann, 'States of circulation: Logistics off the beaten path', *Environment and Planning D* 37/5 (2019).

17   See, e.g. Sahra Ahmed Koshin, 'Khat and COVID-19: Somalia's cross-border economy in the time of coronavirus', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2020.

18   See, e.g. Nicki Kindersley, '"The Fuel is Us": Water, oil and debt on the Sudan-South Sudan borderlands', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2025.

19   See, e.g. Peer Schouten, 'Paying the Price: The political economy of checkpoints in Somalia', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023.

20   See, e.g. Ahmed M. Musa, 'Transborder Mobile Money Platforms in the Greater Somali Economic Space', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023.

21   Nicki Kindersley and Joseph Diing Majok, 'Breaking out of the Borderlands: Understanding migrant pathways from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, South Sudan', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2020.

and surveillance methods; resource extraction (prospecting and drilling); humanitarian interventions; or telecommunications and finance. As such, borderlands can be viewed as laboratories of experimentation where innovative (in the sense of *new*, rather than *great*) forms of technology and politics emerge.

This includes novel forms of capitalism 'from the margins', by which peripheral spaces not only insert themselves into global commodity and finance flows, but produce idiosyncratic forms of capitalism (e.g. the Somali finance and telecommunication sector).[22] Similarly, the fusion of 'formal' and 'informal' rules, 'contracts' and 'trust', as well as global and local norms, procedures and regulations, are all part of this experimentation, producing governance arrangements that 'work' in the borderlands. This raises the question of whether positive innovations emerging from borderland spaces can be expanded to political centres rather than vice versa.

CONCLUSION

In detailing the three tenets and four borderland processes outlined above, this think piece has set out its case for a particular understanding of borderlands that goes beyond a narrow area studies logic. Much of the Africanist borderlands literature has suffered from a lack of theorizing and comparison. Instead of considering centre–periphery, frontier and borderland dynamics as idiosyncratic, there is a need to see them in light of historical and global borderland patterns. It is only by contrasting and juxtaposition with a broader set of cases that the 'true nature', i.e. the specific causal logics, of particular African borderlands become apparent. As this think piece has argued, such an analytical strategy not only opens new avenues of investigation, but provides a much needed reality check of the complex realities governing borderlands.

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22   Hagmann and Stepputat 'Trade Makes States'.

CREDITS