

Contemporary transnational circulation of goods in Africa: A form of legitimation of State borders

Karine Bennafla *

Abstract:

Trade mobilities have intensified on the continent over the second half of the twentieth century, in a context of dysfunctional state apparatuses, economic recession, and material poverty accentuated by structural adjustment plans. The trade is not all illicit and illegal; the flows are overwhelmingly of ordinary consumer goods. They attest to the continent's inscription into globalization and the reappropriation of State borders inherited from colonialism.

Key-words:

Trade mobility. Borders. Africa.

Resumo:

Mobilidades comerciais se intensificaram no continente ao longo da segunda metade do século XX, em um contexto de aparelhos estatais disfuncionais, recessão econômica e pobreza material acentuado por planos de ajustamento estrutural. O comércio não é totalmente ilícito e ilegal, os fluxos são, surpreendentemente, de produtos de consumo corrente. Eles atestam a inscrição do continente na globalização e a reapropriação das fronteiras do Estado herdadas do colonialismo.

Palavras-chave:

Mobilidades comerciais. Fronteiras. África.

* Lecturer in Geography at the Institut d'Études Politiques of Lyon
Member of the Institut Universitaire de France
Researcher at the GREMMO/Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, Lyon.
BENNAFLA, Karine. *Le commerce en Afrique centrale. Acteurs, espaces, pratiques*.
Paris: Karthala, 2002.
BENNAFLA, Karine et PERALDI, Michel (ed). *Frontières et logiques de passage*.
L'ordinaire des transgressions. Cultures et conflits, Paris: L'Harmattan, n°72, 2008.

The African continent continues to be marked by the persistence of a discourse, explicit or underlying, on the negative impact of the borders-inherited-from-colonialism. In journalistic, and at times academic circles, African borders are vilified almost automatically because of the original sin of colonialism. Some consider their revision necessary¹ and denounce the position of the African Union; others call for the overcoming of borders through the promotion of regional integration.² This linear partitioning, which fossilizes inter-imperial European power relations, has nevertheless gone mostly unchanged since the acquisition of independence. Successful secessionist movements, like Eritrea, Somaliland, and South Sudan, are rare, and it is still too soon to judge the reality and durability of the Tuareg territory, self-proclaimed in 2012 in the North of Mali by the Azawad National Liberation Movement.

In the era of globalization and “over/hyper-modern mobility”,³ African borders are striated and “worked” by multiple flows of people and goods. The continent is historically a land of mobilities. But in the contemporary period, African trade mobilities are sometimes interpreted, consistent with a posture of “victimhood”, as the expression of a refusal of “arbitrary and absurd lines” and as a strategy of resistance (or even revenge) on the part of ethnic groups “torn” between several State territories since borders were imposed.⁴ A more dialectic approach, of which my work is part,⁵ prefers to see in these transgressive practices the sign of instrumentalization and play with the distortions created by borders, and thus a mode of (re)appropriation of the inherited framework.

This article aims to describe trade mobilities in the post-colonial period in order to evoke the changing avatars of State borders, supporting the argument with examples drawn from West Africa, Central

-
1. SOYINKA, Wole. Bloodsoaked quilt of Africa. *The Guardian* (London), 17 May 1994. See also the map of Africa proposed the Kenyan jurist Makau wa Mutua, which appeared in the *Boston Globe* 22 September 1994.
 2. ASIWAJU, Anthony Ijaola, Capacity-building for governance across Africa’s international boundaries and borderlands: a Nigeria-Niger case-study. In: AKYINYELE, R.T. (ed.). *Borderlands and African Integration*. Abuja: Panf publishing Inc., p. 1-11, 2008.
 3. AUGE, Marc. *Pour une anthropologie de la mobilité*. Paris: Payot et rivages, 2009.
 4. IGUE, John O. *Le territoire et l’Etat en Afrique*. Paris: Karthala, 1995.
 5. NUGENT, Paul. *Smugglers, Secessionists & Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: the Lie of the Borderlands Since 1914*. Athens: Ohio University Press. Oxford: James Currey, 2002.

Africa, and the Maghreb.⁶ While they are not all illegal or outside normative frameworks, transborder movements of goods remain largely “informal” and under-registered. Should we conclude on that basis that they weaken or erase borders and are part of a process of territorial deconstruction? Do these flows, which delineate spaces of transborder exchange invigorated by markets, illustrate a process of “re-territorialization from below,” *i.e.* a reconfiguration of State territories, organized around new poles of growth and development? Several voices have underscored the normative decline of national territory, linked to the disengagement of the central State, which is in turn linked to its lack of resources and the promotion of other platforms for public action, through policies of decentralization and regional integration.⁷ But do we observe the beginnings of alternative territories, “border-states”⁸ founded on private commercial dynamics and capable of overshadowing national territories?

The ongoing intensity of commercial mobilities in the contemporary period

Forgotten goods? The predominance of studies of the mobility of people

In the French-language literature, numerous works have been devoted to transborder circulations in Africa with, in recent years, special attention being paid to mobilities of people and migrations.⁹ There

-
6. My remarks are based on fieldwork conducted in Benin (1991), Central Africa (between 1993 and 1999) and Morocco (2007-2009).
 7. DUBRESSON, Alain and RAISON, Jean-Pierre. « Dislocations et recompositions spatiales en Afrique subsaharienne ». *La Revue internationale et stratégique*. Paris, IRIS, n°46, p. 119-127, 2002.
 8. IGUE, John O. and ZINSOU-KLASSOU, Kossiwa. *Frontières, espaces de développement partagé*. Paris: Karthala, 2010.
 9. GONIN, Patrick (ed.). *Les migrations subsahariennes*. *Hommes et migrations*, Paris, n°1286-1287, 2010 et DAUM Christophe and DOUGNON Isaïe. *L'Afrique en mouvement*, *Hommes et migrations*, Paris, n°1279, 2009; BENSAAAD, Ali. *Le Maghreb à l'épreuve des migrations transsahariennes*. *Immigration sur émigration*. Karthala: Paris, 2009 ; BRACHET, Julien, CHOPLIN, Armelle et PLIEZ, Olivier. *Le Sahara entre espace de circulation et frontière migratoire de l'Europe*. In: *Hérodote*, Paris, n° 142, p. 163-182, 2011; BREDELOUP, Sylvie et PLIEZ, Olivier. « Migrations entre les deux rives du Sahara ». In: *Autrepart*, n° 36, Paris: IRD, p. 3-20, 2005 et PERALDI, Michel. *D'une Afrique à l'autre : migrations subsahariennes au Maroc*. Paris / Rabat: Karthala / Centre Jacques Berque pour les études en sciences humaines et sociales /

are two primary reasons for this focus. The first is the multiplication and the regionalization of armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War, which has resulted in waves of displaced persons and refugees,¹⁰ not to mention the circulation of mercenary troops in Africa, such as those mobilized by Colonel Kadhafi in 2011. The second is the transit function of the Sahel-Sahara States for migrants dreaming of Europe. While borders are opening themselves to flows of capital, information and goods, they seem to instead be closing where the movements of people and workers are concerned, particularly citizens of emerging countries such as those of Africa. A subject of significant media attention since its shift into the sphere of illegality in the course of the 1980s, human migration, as well as the apparatuses for controlling, filtering or barring it, have absorbed public authorities and are a point of convergence for current research.

It is striking that the circulation of goods attracts less attention. Yet, various works have underscored the manner in which mobilities of people and goods overlap and modes of transportation are often “mixed-use.”¹¹ The commercial and economic dimension of refugee camps, for example, is little-examined even though international food aid generates flows of goods. Worries over food security (beginning in the 1970s in the Sahel), or the politics of regional integration relaunched on the eve of the 1990s (CEMAC, UEMOA, *Union du Maghreb arabe, etc.*), stimulated a series of studies on the transborder movement of goods aimed at grasping the agro-pastoral or industrial complementarities between candidate countries for an economic and customs union. Beginning in the late 1980s, scholarly works emphasized the singular way in which commercial activities were clustered in the peripheries of State territories, creating economically dynamic transborder areas.¹²

Cooperazione internazionale Sud-Sud, 2011.

10. CAMBREZY, Luc *et al.* *L'Asile au Sud*. Paris: La Dispute / Snédit, 2008 ; Guichaoua, André. *Exilés, réfugiés, déplacés en Afrique centrale et orientale*. Paris: Karthala, 2004.
11. BRACHET, Julien. *Migrations transsahariennes : vers un désert cosmopolite et morcelé (Niger)*. Bellecombe-en-Bauge: Ed. du Croquant, 2009; CHOPLIN, Armelle and LOMBARD, Jérôme. « Migrations et recompositions spatiales en Mauritanie ». In: *Afrique contemporaine*, n° 228, p. 151-170, 2008 ; PLIEZ, Olivier. *Nomades d'hier, nomades d'aujourd'hui*. In: *Annales de géographie*, n° 652, p. 688-707, 2006 and Salloum (Égypte), une bourgade bédouine sur les routes de la mondialisation. In: *L'Espace Géographique*, vol. 38, p. 31-42, 2009.
12. IGUE, John O. *Le développement des périphéries nationales en Afrique*. In: *Tropiques: lieux et liens. Florilège offert à Paul Pelissier et Gilles Sautter*. Paris: Didactiques, ORSTOM, p. 594-605, 1989; GREGOIRE, Emmanuel and LABAZEE, Pascal (ed.).

The re-emergence of border and transnational commercial traffic beginning in the 1980s

For a continent officially on the margins of global trade, the intensification of commercial transborder mobilities in the course of the 1980s is surprising. The porousness of State borders and the deployment of “border tactics” were obvious during the colonial period.¹³ The new territorial order established by Europeans at the turn of the 20th century, with the apposition of a politico-administrative framework and the concern over stabilization of populations, embodies a break with the “itinerant territoriality” and fluid relationship to space of former times.¹⁴ But this border network neither rigidified space nor suspended mobilities: the paths and itineraries changed (for instance with the progressive abandonment of the caravan routes), in part due to the nautical-ization of exchange; trade networks reorganized themselves.

The 1980s were a turning point due to the intensification, proliferation, and new social scale of private “informal” exchanges in a context of crises in state supervision, economic recessions, and increased economic insecurity with the implementation of structural adjustment plans. Accessible to all due to the absence of a requirement for formal training—which by no means suggests the absence of a *savoir faire*—trade becomes a remedial, an escape hatch, a possible means of survival. This phenomenon equally concerns North Africa. In Algeria, economic and political liberalization (after October 1988), the drop in oil prices (1986) and State slogans encouraging people to seek a better life all contributed to both a broadening, socially speaking, and an unprecedented visibility of variegated commercial practices

Grands commerçants d’Afrique de l’Ouest. Paris: Karthala, 1993; BACH, Daniel C. Régionalisation, mondialisation et fragmentation en Afrique subsaharienne. Paris: Karthala, 1998; FANCHETTE, Sylvie. Désengagement de l’État et recomposition d’un espace d’échange transfrontalier: la Haute-Casamance et ses voisins. In: Autrepart, Paris: IRD, n° 19, p. 91-113, 2001.

13. BEAUVILAIN, Alain. Nord-Cameroun: crises et peuplement. Notre-Dame-de-Gravenchon: A. Beauvilain, 1989; Gallais, Jean. Pôles d’Etats et frontières en Afrique contemporaine. In: Cahiers d’Outre-Mer, n° 138, p. 103-122, 1982; Mills, L.R. The development of a frontier zone and border landscape along the Dahomey-Nigeria boundary. In: The Journal of Tropical Geography, n° 36, p. 42-49, 1973; ROITMAN, Janet. The Garrison-Entrepôt. In: Cahiers d’études africaines, n° 38, p. 297-329, 1998.
14. KKOPYTOFF, Igor. The African Frontier. The reproduction of Traditional African Societies. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

going under the terms *tbazniss* or *trabendo*.¹⁵ A variation on the Spanish *contrabando*, this form of trade, the roots of which lie in colonial transnational peddling, also flourished in Tunisia and Lybia at the end of the 1980s, notably through the back and forth transit with Italy.¹⁶

The (re)animation of borderlands

The amplification of commercial mobilities is legible spatially: in certain interstitial border zones demographic growth and the attractiveness of certain marketplaces has generated, like the swing of a pendulum, a kind of reversal of centralities through the ascension of margins that were previously considered “useless” by the colonial power or neglected in favour of the capital and coastal zones in terms of public investment. The commercial dynamics that affect borderlands constitute, in the majority of cases, a turning inside out (“*retournement*”) of post-colonial space through the renewal of margins, for example between Guinée, Mali, and Sénégal.¹⁷

The boom of the Mbaiboum market, located at the eastern edge of Cameroun, almost exactly at the intersection of the borders with Chad and CAR, illustrates the commercial dynamism on the borders, which upsets the hierarchy of places inherited from the colonial episode. Situated at the Eastern extremity of the Province of North Cameroun (in the Mayo-Rey Department), the rural community of Mbaiboum experienced spectacular development beginning in 1987 by positioning itself as a relay-station for the distribution of merchandise between Nigeria and the countries of central Africa. The improvement of rural tracks and the construction or rehabilitation of bridges (by the Camerounian cotton company Sodecoton on the Cameroun side, and by the State of the Central African Republic across the border river) were decisive for the launch and expansion of commercial activities.

-
15. BOUMAZA, Zoulikha. Le “trabendo” comme phénomène social et ses effets spatiaux : l'exemple de Constantine. In: *Dynamique des territoires et des sociétés*, Caen: Les Documents de la Maison de recherche en sciences humaines de Caen, 2005, p. 287-300.
16. PERALDI, Michel. *Aventuriers du nouveau capitalisme marchand. Essai d'anthropologie de l'éthique mercantile*. In: ADELKHAH, Fariba and BAYART, Jean-François (ed.) *Voyages du développement : Emigration, commerce, exil*, Paris: Karthala, Recherches internationales, p. 73-114.
17. MBODJ, Faty B. *Boom aurifère et dynamiques économiques entre Sénégal, Mali et Guinée*. In: *EchoGéo*, n° 8, 2003, <http://echogeo.revues.org/11034> (Consulté janvier 13, 2012); NINOT, Olivier. *Vie de relations, organisation de l'espace et développement en Afrique de l'Ouest : la région de Tambacounda au Sénégal*. Thèse de doctorat en géographie. Université de Rouen, 2003.

Organized over three days each week, the Mbaiboum market became the principal resupply point for consumer goods for the capital of the Central African Republic, Bangui, situated approximately 400 km away. Mbaiboum, an unassuming village of fishermen inhabited by a few hundred people at the beginning of the 1980s, had more than 10,000 inhabitants one decade later. This mushrooming is connected to the settlement of traders and transporters who attracted diverse service activities in their wake (restaurants, shoemakers, water carriers, prostitutes, *etc*) and a population of variable size. Mbaiboum is a meeting point for men and women of distant origins (from Gambia, Ghana, Congo) who, attracted by the work opportunities, come to try their luck at the border: their stop is part of a complex and fragmented migratory trajectory. Frequented by traders mainly from CAR (the “Bouba” region), Nigeria, Sudan, Chad and Congo, the border area is colourful and multilingual. In the street and shops, Pidgin and French rub shoulders while Sango and Lingala alternate with Fulfulde and Arabic. Situated on the territory of the Fulani Chieftainship of Rey Bouba, the Mbaiboum market was characterized in the 1990s by the predominance of the “Baba” (customary chief) in matters of policing, justice and taxation.¹⁸

An overview of maps of markets in Africa points to the spatially selective character of the ferment of trade, with the boundaries of territories benefitting unequally from the crystallisation of markets. Spaces endowed with privileged situations are preferred. These include triple or quadruple intersections of borders; narrow corridors (the extreme north of Cameroun, Upper-Casamance) and the “piano-key” countries (Togo, Benin), marked by their proximity to several international borders; zones of monetary contact, in particular with the CFA France zone, or which present sharp regulatory contrasts linked to political choices (the prohibition or restriction on the importation of certain products, for example). A demographic and industrial giant, Nigeria possesses an inconvertible currency (the Naira), which is not valued by black market money changers. These economic, demographic and monetary factors explain the garlands of markets strung out along the borders between Nigeria and countries within the CFA Franc zone.

In a manner that structures transborder regions, markets are located at greater or lesser distances from the border; natural conditions, the distribution of communication corridors and transloading points impact their distribution. In the Malian and Algerian Sahara,

18. BENNAFLA, Karine. Mbaiboum: un marché au carrefour de frontières multiples. In: *Antrepart*, Paris: IRD, n° 6, p. 53-72, 1998.

locations referred to as *gawarīj* play the role of warehouses, hostels, and stores.¹⁹ Some markets are anchored in pre-existing villages or towns with diverse functions (Melilla, Malanville in Benin), others are created *ex nihilo* or correspond with old caravanserais. The distribution of market places sometimes obeys a logic of twinning, with the border serving as a mirror (*e.g.* between Benin and Nigeria; Upper-Casamance and Gambia; Cameroun and Chad). This often signals that the flows are complementary. Certain markets are supply points specialized in the provision of one or several goods, such as rice at Yagoua (north Cameroun/Chad), fresh foods at the south-Camerounian market of Abang Minko'o (on the border with Gabon), or petrol at the Kerawa market (extreme north of Cameroun/Nigeria).

A multitude of ordinary goods... despite the criminalization of flows

To a large extent, the commercial bustle of border areas rests on transactions in ordinary goods and products for daily use: clothes washing powder, crockery and dishes, lengths of cloth, fabric and clothing, flour, sugar, oil, matches, appliances, electronics, audio, spare car parts, etc. The expression “*lahda* fraud,” which designates trade between Algeria, Mali, and Niger through reference to a brand of Algerian powdered milk, goes a long way to suggest the important place occupied by banal products of daily use, be they manufactured or agro-pastoral. There exist certain flagship products in commercial trade, due to the profits they generate, their importance in the local economy (petrol, cement, cattle, textiles) or their interconnectedness with an international flow. Examples might include the used (or stolen) cars, nick-named “*congelées*” (frozen) or “*au-revoir-la-France*,” sent from Europe (France or Belgium) to Lomé, Cotonou or Dakar and redistributed in the sub-region, or the trafficking of American cigarettes, imported through Cotonou, Lomé or Dakar and sent up towards Niger (Agadez) in order to be sold off towards Algeria or Libya.²⁰ Already in the 1980s and 1990s descriptions of transborder African trade emphasized the role of “South-South” circulations, through the diffusion of products from China (green tea, enamelware) and other Asian countries (rice from Thailand, Indonesian batteries), Cuba, or

-
19. SCHEELE, Judith. « Tribus, États et fraude: la région frontalière algéro-malienne ». In: Etudes rurales, Paris, EHESS, n° 184, p.79-94, 2009.
20. GREGOIRE, Emmanuel. Sahara nigérien : terre d'échanges. In: Autrepart, Paris: IRD, n°6, p. 91-104, 1998.

Brazil (sugar); the multiplication of markets called “*Souq Libya*” in Sudan, Lybia, Niger and Tunisia; or direct connections established with Istanbul or Dubai (e.g. the creation of of *Souq Dubai* in Khartoum). The 1990s saw a revitalization of trans-Saharan circuits—sometimes reactivating pre-colonial pathways—and the shift of African trade toward the Asia Pacific region, via the Arabian Peninsula. These phenomena give way, in the 2000s, to analyses centred on the growth in ties between China and Africa and India and Africa.

The emergence of unlawful “trafficking economies” in the context of the “criminalization of the State”²¹ has resulted, to some extent, in the the preponderant ordinary border flows being relegated to the background. The increase of cannabis cultivation,²² the role of continent as a hub in cocaine trafficking,²³ the flourishing of trafficking of counterfeit medication, precious stones, Coltan (DRC), or protected animal species illustrate the scale of this “shadow economy,” as does the consolidation hero-figures whose path to making it big was crime, like the Camerounian *Feymen*.²⁴ The unprecedented development and generalization of illicit phenomena on the continent represents, according to Roger Botte, a novel form of inscription into globalization, inaugurating a new historical cycle.²⁵ Meanwhile, the rise of policing and security discourses and considerations during the decade of the 2000s—the struggle against terrorism, irregular migration, arms and drug trafficking—has displaced the politico-media focus onto the rise in illicit trafficking (of humans, drugs, arms) and resulted in an amalgamation of various types of traffic. The consequences include the negative re-categorization of traders, mobility, and certain African regions. The regionalization of criminality singles out the whole of the Sahel-Sahara, and border zones (particular conflictual ones), as the shadow or grey areas of the planet within a framework of a global geography of risks and threats.

21. BAYART, Jean-François, ELLIS, Stephen and HIBOU, Béatrice. *La criminalisation de l'État en Afrique*. Bruxelles: Éd. Complexe, 1997.

22. LANIEL, Laurent and PEREZ, Pascale. *Croissance et... croissance de l'économie du cannabis en Afrique subsaharienne (1980-2000)*. In: *Hérodote*, Paris, n° 112, p. 122-138, 2004.

23. JULIEN, Simon. *Le Sahel comme espace de transit des stupéfiants. Acteurs et conséquences politiques*. In: *Hérodote*, Paris, n° 142, p. 125-142, 2011.

24. MALAQUAIS, Dominique. *Arts de feyre au Cameroun : Figures de la réussite et imaginaires politiques*. In: *Politique africaine*, Paris, n° 82, p. 101-118, 2001.

25. BOTTE, Roger. *Globalisation et illicite en Afrique. Vers un Etat légal-illégal ?* In: *Politique Africaine*, Paris, n° 93, p. 7-20, 2004.

Without denying the growing of criminal trafficking, maritime piracy and internal struggles between armed groups for the control over trafficking (e.g. the nickname “Godfather Malboro” given to one of the heads of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), it is important to recall that “informal” flows of goods represent the principal means for low income African populations to access standard consumer goods.

The challenges of categorization

The plethora of words and expressions for designating border trade is not only revealing of a difficulty in naming, but further, of the futility of a dichotomous approach based on the categories formal/informal, legal/illegal, licit/illicit, official/parallel or clandestine. The legal/illegal classification is flexible; it varies according to the places of jurisdiction and through history (e.g. slavery, the opium trade), not to mention that a large part of border trade has nothing illegal about it. The distinction between “formal” and “informal” trade circulation is impossible, since the means for moving the goods are often hybrid and composite. It is now readily accepted that the opposition between a sector of “formal” activities, rationalized and subject to taxation, on the one hand, and a sector of “informal” or even illegal activities, which escapes state control, on the other, is fiction.²⁶ In Africa, as elsewhere, the overlap, collusion and even interdependence of these two sides of the economy, on the level of practices, actors and circuits, have been underscored countless times.²⁷ Roger Botte suggests the expression “trade poly-traffics,” while Judith Scheele speaks about families who “do a little bit of everything”²⁸ and youth who sometimes start trafficking cocaine in order to obtain startup capital that they reinvest into trade in consumer goods. The public visibility of traffic of ordinary

26. HIBOU, Béatrice. L’Afrique est-elle protectionniste ? Les chemins buissonniers de la libéralisation extérieure. Paris: Karthala, 1996; VALLEE, Olivier. La construction de l’objet corruption en Afrique. In: Afrique contemporaine, Paris, Agence française de développement, n° 220, p. 137-162, 2006 ; ROITMAN, Janet. Fiscal Disobedience. An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa. Princeton: Princeton University Press, Oxford, 2005.

27. MAC GAFFEY, Janet. The Real Economy of Zaire. The Contribution of Smuggling and Other Unofficial Activities to National Wealth. Londres / Philadelphie: James Currey / The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991; SAVIANO, Roberto. Gomorra : Dans l’empire de la camorra. Paris, Gallimard, 2009 ; MEAGHER, Kate. Identity economics : social networks & the informal economy in Africa. Oxford: James Currey, 2010.

28. SCHEELE, Judith. Circulations marchandes au Sahara: entre licite et illicite. In: Hérodote, Paris, n° 142, p. 143-162, 2011.

goods, like the carboys and other bottles of Nigerian petrol laid out on the edge of the road in Benin, make the adjective “clandestine” inadequate. In Algeria or at the northern border of Morocco (Oujda), *trabendo* is a generic term that equally applies to “*commerce à la valise*” (suitcase commerce) with Europe, Turkey, *etc.*, the resale of imported goods in the street (characteristic of a “bazaar economy”), and overland contraband from the Spanish enclave of Melilla.²⁹ Other expressions have been suggested to designate trade involving actors who attempt to go around norms, taxes and laws, be it during production, purchase, transport or sale of the merchandise. These include “real economy” (Janet Mac Gaffey), circumvention flows, contraband (on prohibited products), and fraud, the latter term suggesting ruses or arrangement with State representatives in order to pay less and acquire a semblance of legality. The criterion of local acceptance (or non-acceptance) of the traffic by the majority of the population may lead to distinguishing, on the one hand, informal trade considered legitimate and locally accepted as a means of earning one’s living and, on the other hand, criminal or illegal trafficking that is considered illegitimate, often controlled by organized crime or armed groups. Thus, Judith Scheele underscores the difference made between *frūd hallal* (on consumer goods) and *frūd harām*³⁰ (which concerns drugs) by trading families at the Algeria-Mali border.

On the ground, the local terms used for designating transborder exchanges are rarely pejorative, insofar as this type of activity plays a key socio-economic role at the local, regional or even national level, allows a considerable number of people to live, and provides work to a unemployed youth. For small countries with few natural resources, border trade may constitute a pillar of a national economy, based on transfer and re-exportation. Gambia, Benin and Togo are the most well-known models of “warehouse States”,³¹ and this function is for the most part legal or tolerated. While cotton and peanuts are resold illegally at Gambian *loumo* (weekly markets), Senegalese customs agents allow isolated border populations to supply themselves with manufactured products and cereals imported from Gam-

29. MAC MURRAY, David A. In and Out of Morocco. Smuggling and Migration in a Frontier Boomtown. Minneapolis / London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

30. A categorization of frauds according to the Arabic terms for religiously licit (hallal) and illicit (haram).

31. IGUE, John O., et BIO G. Soule. L’Etat-entrepôt au Bénin commerce informel ou solution à la crise ? Paris: Karthala, 1990.

bia.³² At the regional scale, certain distant territorial margins, such as North-Chad—which lies in the commercial orbit of Libya—the eastern province of Morocco, or the extreme north of Cameroun are almost exclusively driven by border trade, which provides jobs and ensures a supply of consumer goods. From Nouadhibou (Mauritania) to Kousséri (N'Djamena's Camerounian twin-city), Porto-Novo (located on a tongue that touches Nigeria), Oujda (Morocco), Maghnia (Algeria) or Al-Khalil (North Mali), the towns or cities of Africa that live from a contraband economy or from border trade or transit are numerous. In the far north of Morocco, the tax-free ports of Ceuta and Melilla,³³ occupied respectively since the 16th and 15th centuries (during the Reconquista), today are warehouse-cities and beachheads for a commercial trade that irrigates the whole of Morocco and the east of Algeria. Contraband is the first source of Nador's wealth, which sheds light on its national ranking in terms of bank deposits, second only to Casablanca in the official statistics of the High Commission for Planning.³⁴

Resting on the mobile and multi-layered structure of pre-colonial spaces criss-crossed by networks of kinship, religion and exchange, contemporary trade mobilities in Africa have been described as peaceful contestation of borders on the part of populations that have been “victims” of colonial partitions, and as the manifestation of the primacy of primordial attachments (in particular, cultural) over national ones. Social pragmatism toward borders suggests a different interpretation.

Borders, appropriated as guarantors of opportunity and resources

Border differentials as motors of exchange

A place of separation and a zone of contact between distinct politico-legal systems, State borders are in a position to encourage

-
32. FANCHETTE, Sylvie. La Haute-Casamance à l'heure de la régionalisation. Enjeux fonciers et territoriaux. In: DIOP, Momar-Coumba (ed.). La société sénégalaise entre le local et le global, Paris: Karthala, p. 307-355, 2002.
33. DRIESSEN, Henricus. On the Spanish-Moroccan frontier : a Study in Ritual, Power, and Ethnicity. New York: Berg, 1992.
34. BERRIANE, Mohamed, et HOPFINGER, Hans. Nador. Petite ville parmi les grandes. Tours: Ed. de l'URBAMA, 1999; GALMOT, Caroline. En Afrique, des frontières de l'Europe. In: La pensée de midi, Marseille, n° 10, p. 31-39, 2003.

trade mobilities and to create dynamic interfaces. Demographic contrasts, distortions in terms of natural resources, different choices by State powers in terms of economic, fiscal and monetary policy or regulation generate disparities between the two sides of the border. Some examples of these catalytic differences include the following. In Gabon, State ownership of oil, forest and mining rights has led the authorities to neglect agricultural development, such that this forested country is dependent on importation of foodstuffs from its neighbour, Cameroun, which has essentially the same agricultural potential. Consisting mainly of perishable goods, border trade is controlled by traders from the Camerounian region of the Grassfields (Bamiléké, Bamoun) and involves Camerounian resellers, the *bayam-sellam* (pidgin for “those who buy in order to resell”), who acquire products in Douala or Yaoundé and resell them at border markets. Between Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana, differences in purchase price of cacao beans from the producer combine with differences in currency valuation (between the Cedi and the CFA Franc) to determine which way the beans flow as contraband, toward one or the other of the two countries depending on the conjuncture of factors.³⁵ The massive outpouring of Nigerian products toward the countries of the CFA Franc zone is determined by the availability of petrol (nicknamed “Federal”), the diversity of Nigerian factories, the economies of scale (achieved through its population of 150 million), and above all a logic of “siphoning” CFA Francs:³⁶ Nigerian businessmen seek to obtain CFA currency because it is convertible at a fixed rate into Euros. Also rich in petroleum, Libya and Algeria have policies of subsidizing basic staple goods, which feeds transborder trafficking toward the Sahel countries, or even as far as the Great Lakes region in the case of petrol (nicknamed “Kadhafi”).

Under such conditions, borders are not experienced as a constraint or a burden, but as a resource that creates opportunities for commerce and profit. The border is valuable and populations are by no means interested in its abolition. No border, no customs agent, no risk, and no profit. This equation has been suggested more than once, in Africa as elsewhere. The disappearance of the border and the

35. STARY, Bruno. Rentes et ressources frontalières : le cas des échanges Ghana-Côte d’Ivoire. In: Bach, Daniel (ed.). Régionalisation, mondialisation et fragmentation en Afrique subsaharienne, Paris: Karthala, p. 243-256, 1998 ; SPIRE, Amandine. Lomé, ville post-frontière. In: *EchoGéo*, n° 14, 2010. <http://echogeo.revues.org/11974> (Consulté janvier 24, 2012).

36. HERRERA, Javier. Du “fédéral” et des “koweitiens” : la fraude de l’essence nigériane au Cameroun. In: Autrepard, Paris: IRD, n°6, p. 181-202, 1998.

levelling of space would signify the loss of a resource and can lead to a decline. For instance, the handover (in 1969) to the Moroccan State of the enclave of Sidi Ifni—former capital of Spanish Western Africa—undermined one of the pillars of the urban economy, namely contraband of Spanish consumer goods, which disappeared along with the tax-free status of the port. The impoverishment of Sidi Ifni beginning in the 1970s is in large part connected to the erasure of the political and customs border. In West Africa, one better understands, in this light, the lobbying on the part of large traders against the ephemeral Senegambia Confederation (1982-1989), since the erasure of the borders threatened their activities.

Unless it is mined and militarized (like between Chad and Lybia from 1973 to 1994), the closure of a border does not signify either its sterilization or the end of exchange: profit increases with the increase in risk. Nigeria is textbook case. Between 1984 and 1986, the closure of the country's land borders was accompanied by the establishment of a No Man's Land—a 20 km wide border zone aimed at combatting (in the literal sense) contraband. This decision produced a spike in border trafficking, primarily of cereals (rice, corn, wheat flour), which were at that time prohibited for import into Nigeria. The episode resulted in the establishment of several commercial fortunes in North Cameroun. The example of the land border between Algeria and Morocco is also eloquent³⁷: since its official closure in 1994, contraband has resumed with greater intensity, and diversity, as the disconcerting absence of gas stations and pharmacies in the regions of eastern Morocco attests.

*From the unemployed to customs agents, various actors
instrumentalize and profit from borders*

Transborder trade mobilities open opportunities for wide range of actors, who exploit and play with differentials, each in their own way and with varying results: traders, transporters, brokers, escorts, smugglers, money changers or exchange brokers, guides/interpreters, warehousemen... but also police, customs officers and other representatives of the State who have to be, depending on the local term, “watered” (Togo) or given “sugar” (Chad). All have an interest in maintaining the border and its asymmetries in order to take advantage of them. If we consider petrol resellers, the proliferation of “clandos” (unlicensed

37. SUZANNE, Gilles. Oujda ou l'arrière-pays de l'économie transméditerranéenne. In: *Espaces et sociétés*, Paris, Fondation de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, n° 128-129, p. 71-184, 2007.

taxis), real estate investments, or banking, it is clear the benefits of the border are felt not only in the vicinity of border itself, but have an equal if not greater impact inside the territory.

The people who move across borders have varying profiles in terms of age, professional experience, financial backing, and cultural background. They include Camerounian peasants who go to Chad to sell their cotton; young men from Benin who fill up on Nigerian petrol (nicknamed Kpayo in the Gun language); Ghanaian women (the “*bonnes femmes*”) who sell food goods in Lomé; Chadian women who bring back sugar from Kousséri by crossing the Ngueli bridge on foot or sending a taxi driver; medium or large traders, sometimes established for several generations such as the Alhazai of Maradi, or the “*grands patrons*” (big bosses)³⁸; low-ranking civil servants or retired employees in the Maghreb who invest in *trabendo* to supplement their income; African students living in the Maghreb, *etc.* Trafficking can be engaged in opportunistically or as a primary occupation, as a means of survival, an additional income on the side, or as the central means by which a large trader, a military man, or a wheeler-dealer politician accumulates wealth.

Gumption, boldness, ability to adapt and flexibility are required in order to manoeuvre and bounce back in unstable and risky environments. There is no shortage of risks, related to banditry, bribes, the seizure of merchandise by customs agents, anti-contraband operations (such as the destruction of places where items are sold), swindles, extreme weather events, political upheavals, changes in regulation, *etc.* Travel in groups (in order to negotiate a rebate on taxes, the way the Central African Boubanguéré or the Garoua “stuntmen” do), the diversification of activities and investments, the widening of one’s social capital, affiliation to professional groups or the mobilization of family, clan, tribal or religious networks are all common means in order to minimize risks, earn the confidence of partners, obtain credit or gain access to information. Individuals belonging to an ethnicity, a tribe or a family that is divided between several State territories have special advantages for crossing the borders and therefore may not perceive the partition of borders as something tragic. They master the local language(s) and dress codes, have a network, can more readily mobilize various identity-groups, blur the lines of national identity

38. GREGOIRE, Emmanuel. « Les chemins de la contrebande : étude des réseaux commerciaux en pays hausa ». Cahiers d’études africaines, n° 124, vol. 31, p. 509-532, 1991; WALTHER, Olivier. Affaires de patrons : villes et commerce transfrontalier au Sahel. Bern / Berlin / Bruxelles: P. Lang, 2008.

when crossing the border—often without proper identity papers—and negotiate with the authorities. Examples of such groups include the Ewe (between Togo-Benin and Ghana), the Fang (between Gabon, Cameroun and Guinea) or the Hausa (Niger Niger-Nigeria). Similarly, Tuareg or Arab tribes' (Zaghawa, Toubou) knowledge of the terrain allows them to convert nomadic know-how into trade know-how: such vernacular transborder networks are nowadays often mobilized in this way, including by major international traffickers.³⁹

The transposition of borders and of a territorial model, with its ideal of rootedness, has been accompanied by the stigmatization of cross-border roaming and of mobile actors (nomadic animal-raisers, migrants, private traders labelled as “smugglers”), who are considered subversive since they challenge the State’s capacity for control.⁴⁰ This has generated a number of false antitheses (smuggler/State; tribes/State) that mask the direct or indirect involvement of State agents in the system of trade mobilities. This involvement may take many forms: complicity or corruption of customs officers or police; military escorts provided to traders in order to protect them from roadblocks (Niger, Cameroun, CAR); direct participation in trafficking, sometimes to the extent of making illegal practices the norm (Chad) or by lightening the tariff burden (as the the State of Central African Republic did with respect to the Boubanguéré, in order to promote a national merchant class); the official relaxation of border transit formalities on market days (Cameroun), *etc.* Thus, while founded on or initiated by private market dynamics, border trafficking is by no means conducted outside of the State, weak though this institution may seem in Africa. Through its policy of intervention on the borders of its territory, the Camerounian State provides an example of a domestication of its borderlands. The success of border markets provoked a tightening of the administrative net through the opening of a customs, police and phytosanitary control point (at Mbaiboum); permanent marketplaces were erected at the border by the Ministry of Commerce in order to supervise and better control exchange (*e.g.* at Mbaiboum in 2011 and at Abang Minko’o in 1992). The distribution of roles can also become

39. BOESEN, Elisabeth et MARFAING, Laurence. Les nouveaux urbains Dans l’espace Sahara-Sahel : un cosmopolitisme par le bas. Paris: Karthala, 2007; RETAILLE, Denis et WALTHER, Olivier. Guerre au Sahara-Sahel: la reconversion des savoirs nomades. In: L’Information géographique, Paris: A. Colin, n° 75, p. 51-68, 2011.

40. It is noteworthy that this stigmatization of transborder mobility, which is often considered to be revelatory of Africa’s “maldevelopment,” is not always observed elsewhere: for instance, European migrant workers, who play with distortions created by borders, are not the objects of a negative discourse.

fuzzy at the border, for example when customs officers or soldiers try their hand at trade or “rent” their khaki uniforms at the end of the day in order to permit others to tax the crossings.

Economic subversion of the border does not exclude the agents of the State, who are one of the centrepieces of the circumvention system. Their challenge is to find a (delicate) balance, squeezing the border without choking all traffic, so that it remains lucrative. The narratives of traders or carriers point to the relationships of acquaintance or connivance with the representatives of the State, their status as “subscribers,” and the crafty game that is played with them, by hiding (part of) the goods or taking side roads.

The border is place of multiple forms of play (with differentials, identities) and pragmatic positioning since it constitutes an apparatus that allows a plethora of actors to capture income. Even companies that claim to be victims of contraband themselves participate in the border markets by sending a truck on market day or setting up a temporary point of sale (for example, at Mbaiboum a cement company sold its product out of a shipping container). The commercial exploitation of borders is a testament to their interiorization. Indeed, feelings of national belonging, forged over time, express themselves vigorously, and not just at football matches. The national collective overlaps with other circles of collective belonging (family, village, lineage, clan, tribe, ethnicity, Islamic brotherhood or church), which are themselves also mobilized according to situation and needs. The example of Sidi Ifni in South Morocco is interesting since it reveals that, even though erased for several decades (since 1969), the old Spanish colonial border is imprinted in the memory of inhabitants, who refer to it and invoke it calculatedly, either to obtain an easing of migratory (visas) or naturalization requirements from the old “metropole,” or, inversely, to feed into a discourse protesting the abandonment of this periphery by the Moroccan State (between 2005 and 2008) and demanding public funds for development, which were granted in 2009.

Instrumentalized, manipulated, transgressed, subverted, State borders have thus been reappropriated. Their economic subversion nevertheless raises certain fears. Transborder trade mobilities appear to some to be a predatory form of economic dynamism since they result in lost tax revenue, because they thrive on the decreasing capacity of States to control their territory and defy their authority, and because the distribution of contraband goods has resulted in some cases in the bankruptcy of national industries (textiles in Chad or Senegal). In this vision of things, the recomposition of places of exchange in favour of border hubs presages a risk of territorial disintegration. However,

an examination of the structure and functioning of borderlands that have been energized through trade makes this scenario of breakup seem quite unlikely.

Transborder trade mobilities engender neither de-territorialization nor re-territorialization but space-networks

For several decades, commercial effervescence on borders have been creating points of territorial anchoring, which are referred to in a variety of ways: “informal border regions”, “national peripheries” (John O. Igué), “places of real exchange” (Pascal Labazée and Emmanuel Grégoire). These regional synergies, which sometimes coincide with historic zones of exchange (for instance in the Sahel-Sahara zones), have nevertheless not constructed auxiliary territories, if by territory we mean a closed space, protected by a border, and a space that has been appropriated. One of the principal reasons is that trade spaces are changing and flexible. The markets and access paths that would be capable of constituting the hubs and the axes structuring a transborder territory are changing and unstable. Flows of goods are augmented, inverted, or interrupted depending on regulatory changes, border closures, policies or control, or regional geopolitics. Thus, the resolution of the Aozou strip conflict in 1994 through its restitution to Chad following a decision by the International Court of Justice resulted in the withdrawal of the Libyan military, the reopening of the land border, which had been frozen for 30 years, and the resumption of long distance trans-Saharan traffic, promoted by Colonel Kadhafi’s policy of intensifying ties with Subsaharan States. The transport pathways leading to the border fluctuate depending on checkpoints, adverse road conditions (a broken bridge or ferry), excessive resurgences of banditry or taxation, construction work on roads, geopolitical tensions, etc. For example, the Darfur conflict and the tightening of Libya’s immigration policy (the closure of the Sudan-Libya land border in 2003) led to the abandonment of a major trans-Saharan route between Libya and Sudan and the partial shift of the traffic to airfreight. This instability of routes and fluctuation of flows of goods effects markets, causing their importance to oscillate.

The dynamism of border markets thus depends on the quality of access and their connections with supply centres in the interior: a road ceases to be used because it has become too dangerous, because another one has been tarmacked, or because the customs or tribal tolls have reached an unsustainable level, and the market lying along the corridor declines. In the medium term, many border markets are

of only passing attraction, as the flourishing of trade never ceases to move along the border. Thus Mbaiboum dethroned the formerly attractive market of Ngaoui (100 km to the South) due to road rehabilitation policies; since 2005, Nouadhibou has seen its transit decline following the reinforcement of the Frontex border surveillance apparatus and the bypassing of the city by the Nouakchott asphalt road, in 2004. While border cities such as Oujda (Morocco) have witnessed new construction through the dividends of contraband, numerous are the markets situated on borders that are mere rudimentary camps, constructed of temporary materials (corrugated metal, dried earth, plant materials), deserted outside of market days. On the border site itself, in the absence of continual and lasting activities, tangible, permanent investment are infrequent: traders rarely reside on location, preferring to (re)invest and build in cities of the interior, the permanence of which is certain. Many markets thus have trouble in becoming veritable towns, and content themselves with the role of depot and transfer points.

Because they are evanescent constructions and their buildings are temporary, because the decision-making centres are located elsewhere, because they are driven by the strategies of individual actors, commercial spaces laid out at the edges of territories cannot easily contribute to re-territorialization. Territory supposes a certain duration, a political and social appropriation with the creation of a sense of belonging. In fact, no transborder authority has appeared (even if there are instances, from time of time, of transborder institutional cooperation between Benin and Nigeria) nor any local discursive reference to a new territorial frame. The example of the Mbaiboum market demonstrated the role of the Fulani Chieftainship of Rey-Bouba in regulating land ownership, taxation and trade—all by agreement of the office of the President of the Republic of Cameroun.

Cartographic representation of border trade zones as circles or continuous 2-dimensional surfaces punctuated by border markets is misleading: they obscure the pathways of connection and articulation of markets with ports, warehouse-cities and interior supply or consumption hubs, often located far from the border lines. Spaces of border trade are above all axial regions, reticular spaces of which the frameworks consist of roads and transport pathways. Grounded on circulation, they require that we “free ourselves from a geography of the fixed” in order to conceive of them as space-movements in the Braudelian sense. The markets on the edges of territories are but circumstantial transfer points of these circulatory spaces. “Discreet spaces of globalization” as opposed to the Supermarket-cities (Dubai,

Istanbul, Yiwu), these places of border trade are simply moving links in very extensive transnational routes.

Playing on border differentials, the fringes of national territories are places of trade, trafficking and contraband that nest into wider circulatory spaces, grafted onto the checkerboard of national territories. From that standpoint, they in no way participate in a process of de-territorialization. Their functioning is nothing like that of an enclave or a tax-free zone, cut-off from the national territory, insofar as their dynamism rests on the mediating role between domestic and foreign space. The vitality and success of a border market depends fundamentally on the quality of its connections with the towns and ports of the interior, which organize and finance the exchanges. In that sense, the budding of border markets rather signals a process of national integration and the reinforcement of internal territorial cohesion of the State where they are located.

While Africa is the seat of increasing criminal trafficking, it is important to avoid reducing contemporary trade mobilities to illicit and illegal traffic, or stigmatizing the actors en masse by regarding them all as “traffickers” and/or a source of danger. Numerous individuals in Africa take advantage of the opportunities of the border in order to make a living, survive, or get rich, and it would be incorrect to see in this a form of maldevelopment or an anomaly. Economic subversion and commercial instrumentalization of African borders are proof of a social recognition of the inherited grid. This play on and with borders does not weaken them. Nor, for that matter, does it occur in opposition to the State. The various forms of involvement of representatives of the State, and certain public actions taken on borders, repel the idea of *désétatisation* of border spaces in favour of international actors. Transnational trade mobilities that operate “from the bottom” are good for rethinking territory, from a “united spatial tissue inducing necessarily stable behaviour” to a “whole of hierarchized placed connected to a network of itineraries.” Combining State and non-State actors, trade space-networks in Africa illustrate a form of globalization from below. Approaches based on re- or de-territorialization cannot account for the symbiotic link that binds national territories and circulatory spaces of exchange. The latter function alongside national territories and because of them. A State territory, encircled by Westphalian borders—illusory though they are—remains a frame of reference among others, but one which is indispensable to the establishment of the traffic and trade that are a part of the everyday lives of many Africans.