The silent encroachment of the frontier: A politics of transborder trade in the Semliki Valley (Congo–Uganda)

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A B S T R A C T

This article is about the frontier as a political place. Through a discussion of unofficial cross-border trade in the Semliki Valley (on the Congo–Ugandan border), it describes how people, despite the ruining effects of delocalization and state privatization, continue to reproduce their life worlds as places, which eventually makes them the matrix of new political constellations. This silent encroachment of the Congo–Ugandan frontier is marked in turn by a prolonged silent, and at occasions loud, advancement on existing power configurations that profoundly questions ruling modes of classification and standards of evaluation. In the article, this encroachment is illustrated mainly with regard to the imposition of tax and the control over people's mobility—both a quintessence of (post)modern state building. At the end of the day, the analysis of meanings and processes attached to this everyday life on the Congolese–Ugandan border illustrate quite clearly how people, notwithstanding the structural and technological forms that direct and mould their world, can also progressively challenge conventional notions of political and economic power, and simultaneously introduce new notions of where politics is to be found and what it is. It is probably this ambiguous role, of hidden smugglers with open official ties, of "rebel" entrepreneurs seeking high political protection, that sustains the transformation of politics at the Semliki border crossing. Contrary to previous wisdom however, such emerging regulatory authorities do not operate against the state, but are rather involved in different scales of political decision-making—particularly in the domain of cross-border taxation. Without demolishing the question of its power, such processes can eventually introduce a reconfiguration of post-colonial statehood that combines different and apparently contradictory legal orders and cultures, but which simultaneously give rise to new forms of meaning and action.

Introduction

This article concentrates on the issue of unofficial cross-border trade between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, two countries that have repeatedly been termed as "failed", "weak" and "collapsed". In the annual Fund for Peace index, for example, both Congo and Uganda figure among the first 35 alert-countries with serious internal governance problems. Particularly the DR Congo has historically summoned associations of chaotic and anarchic forms of governance that sometimes go as far as questioning the relevancy of Congolese statehood itself[1].

In the following article, I will both question this terminology and the idea that unofficial economic activity necessarily embodies an opposition to post-colonial statehood in Africa. Contrary to previous accounts, which primarily associate unofficial trade with political resistance,[2] recent analysis in African borderlands points at the high level of overlap and complicity that often exists between different systems of survival and regulation. In his seminal study on the Ghana–Togo frontier for example, Paul Nugent asserts that the practice of everyday life at the border may also serve to constitute power, notably by working on state institutions, community relations, and basic concepts of political

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[1] Different names have been invented to designate Congo's institutional quagmire, going from the apocalyptic *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1999), to more recent representations of "dinosaur" statehood (Braeckman, 1992), state "failure" (Lemarchand, 2001), state "collapse" (McNulty, 1999), and state disintegration (Breytenbach et al., 1999).

[2] Janet MacGaffey, for example, who writes about Zaire's (now DR Congo's) economy during the 1980s, describes unofficial economic activity foremost as "a political option, co-opted by political discourse" (MacGaffey, 1983, 1987, 1991). In similar vein, Azarya and Chazan (1987: 128–129) interpret the various "counter-cultures" and attempts to "beat the system" inherent to such economic practices as a potential realignment of power relations that are operated by collectivities the state itself claims to represent.
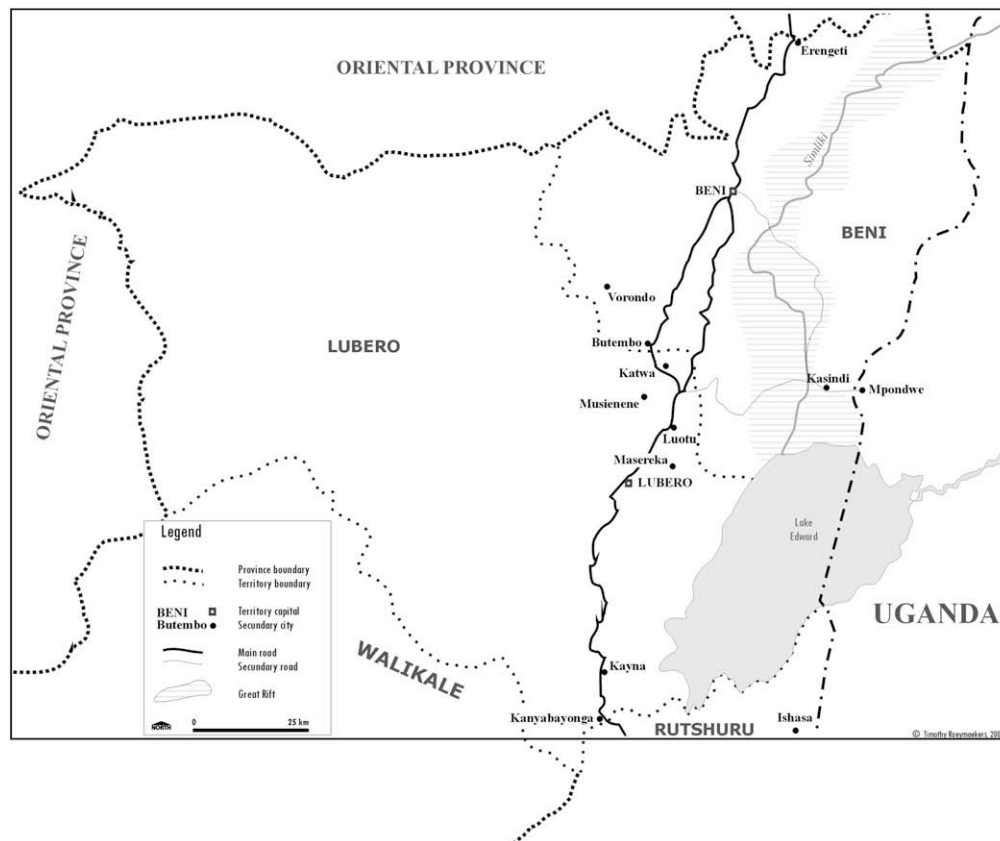
Fig. 1. The Semliki Valley.

space (Nugent, 2002: 232). Janet Roitman comes to a similar conclusion in her work on the "border and bush" economy of the Chad Basin, from where she demonstrates the often extremely ambiguous relationship that exists between the state and the non-state, "formal" and "informal" systems of regulation. Although the effective authority of non-state actors over certain domains—such as economic redistribution and the determination of rights to wealth—might lead us to conclude that they stand in 'opposition' to the nation-state, she says, the relationships between both are often antagonistic as they are reciprocal and complicitous (Roitman, 1998, 2001, 2005).

Instead of artificially separating the state from the non-state, the formal from the informal, or the personal from the political, therefore, we ought to leave room fluidity, porosity and overlap (Nugent and Asiwaju, 1996). In other words, there is a dire need for deconstructing the dominant ideal model of the state as being strong or weak, failed or functioning by specifically demonstrating the interconnectedness between several dimensions of political space and action, which gather their specific expression in everyday practices of survival and regulation. As Nick Megoran concludes in a similar study published in this journal, political anthropology can serve this task of questioning the idea of the state as a "thing", which apparently floats above people's heads in abstract and dominant fashion. Rather, the practices at the border show how political power is constantly "demonstrated, projected and contested" (Wilson and Donnan, 1999: 155) by ordinary citizens trying to organize and project their lives. As Megoran asserts, the constant reordering of space in the world's border areas is not a product of nations, but is creating them (Megoran, 2004: 636–637). Mainstream accounts often leave out a set of important boundary conditions and exchanges which not merely influence

political constellations in the "periphery", but essentially make the state to what it is.[3]

Theoretical background

The literature that informs my argument comes both from political ethnography and social geography. Geographers, political scientists and anthropologists have increasingly started to collaborate in the field of borderland studies, which has known an unprecedented rise in the last few years. Over the past three decades, many studies have been put forward that go from world systems and geopolitical studies to more 'post-modern' approaches hat analyse the border as social representations and mirror of identity construction. What these studies have in common is a clear wish to move from the purely empirical to a theoretical reflection on what borderlands essentially are, and how they relate in turn to the political "centre".[4] In general, such studies favour a historical analysis that concentrates on the effects of (inter)national boundaries on the formation and spatialization of political forms, and vice

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[3] A similar study on Afghanistan also illustrates this decidedly non linear process of state building, in a process described by the author as sequences of punctuated equilibria (Goodhand, 2008). As the author shows, the borderland is often central to the (his)story of state building in Afghanistan since it essentially "makes the centre what it is" (see also Scott, in press).

[4] Since borderland studies are still emerging as a field, broad theoretical reflections are still missing. Nonetheless we can refer to the works of Baud and Van Schendel (1997), Newman and Paasi (1998), Wilson and Donnan, 1998, 1999), Paasi (2005), and Kolossov (2005), apart from the rich case study material on for example the American-Mexican border. Specific to Africa is the work of Nugent and Asiwaju (1996), which is also quoted as a reference for other regions.