

STUDIES IN GLOBAL SOCIAL HISTORY  
STUDIES IN THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

AFRICAN THRESHOLDS:  
BORDERS AND PLACES  
OF PASSAGE IN AFRICA,  
C.1450 TO PRESENT

EDITED BY  
ETTORE MORELLI



BRILL

African Thresholds: Borders and Places of Passage in Africa,  
c. 1450 to Present

# Studies in Global Social History

VOLUME 56

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## Studies in the Social History of the Global South

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# African Thresholds: Borders and Places of Passage in Africa, c. 1450 to Present

*Edited by*

Ettore Morelli



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The open access publication of this book has been published with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Cover illustration: The threshold. Original caption: 'Sketch plan of an entrance gateway, by Mr. C. Punch', figure 190 in Roth, H. Ling, *Great Benin: Its Customs, Art, and Horrors*, F. King & Sons, 1903, 189.

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available online at <https://catalog.loc.gov>  
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025028601>

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: [brill.com/brill-typeface](http://brill.com/brill-typeface).

ISSN 2590-3144

ISBN 978-90-04-72696-3 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-72697-0 (e-book)

DOI 10.1163/9789004726970

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Tu non ricordi la casa dei doganieri  
sul rialzo a strapiombo sulla scogliera:  
desolata t'attende dalla sera  
in cui v'entrò lo sciame dei tuoi pensieri  
e vi sostò irrequieto.  
Libeccio sferza da anni le vecchie mura  
e il suono del tuo riso non è più lieto:  
la bussola va impazzita all'avventura  
e il calcolo dei dadi più non torna.  
Tu non ricordi; altro tempo frastorna  
la tua memoria; un filo s'addipana.  
Ne tengo ancora un capo; ma s'allontana  
la casa e in cima al tetto la banderuola  
affumicata gira senza pietà.  
Ne tengo un capo; ma tu resti sola  
né qui respiri nell'oscurità.  
Oh l'orizzonte in fuga, dove s'accende  
rara la luce della petroliera!  
Il varco è qui? (Ripullula il frangente  
ancora sulla balza che scoscende ...)  
Tu non ricordi la casa di questa  
mia sera. Ed io non so chi va e chi resta.<sup>1</sup>



---

<sup>1</sup> Eugenio Montale, 'La casa dei doganieri', *Le Occasioni*, Torino, Einaudi, 1996 [1939],  
114–117.



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## Preface

The idea of this book was in the making for some time, as it often the case. It originally developed from a deep interest in the concept of ‘frontier’ during the research for my Phd at the School of Oriental and African Studies. While working on the political history of the precolonial southern African highveld, in 2014 or 2015, I was drawn in long discussions with my patient supervisor, Wayne Dooling, over the – so I believed – clearly colonial nature of the ‘frontier’. Thanks to him, my militant simplicity and my blind refusal started to change into a more nuanced approach, which was committed into printing in 2019. Yet, the elaboration encapsulated in the thesis was bound to be only a first step, as it did not fully satisfy me.

In the following years, further discussions on the broad matter, and specifically on borders in precolonial Africa, kept this interest alive during my Postdoctoral fellowships. Pierluigi Valsecchi pushed back on many of my proposals on the existence of borders before colonialism, not in disagreement but because they were hardly novel. Much of what I said he had already heard, read, and in some cases written himself in the previous about twenty years of research on West Africa. Carolyn Hamilton and I, on the opposite, differed more substantially, at least about southern African history. How could there be borders, if people moved and mixed extensively, private land property did not exist, and sovereignty and territory were radically dissimilar to what we usually think of them? These combined objections shaped the elaboration of the present approach, which tries to find new solutions for old problems, and perhaps even to find new issues to be debated: such as, for example, movement as a central element in the conceptualisation and historical reality of the border.

The first attempt to put these ideas into writing was made in 2020 with a co-proposed panel ‘African *limen*: Drawing the Line, Crossing the Line in Pre-Twentieth-Century Africa’ at the European Social Science and History Conference (ESSHC), which was to be held in Leiden but was postponed to 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. There sedimented the decision to include a reflection on European borders and on the ‘modern state’ in this ongoing exercise. When the conference finally took place, I found in my co-panelists Pierluigi Valsecchi, Fernando Mouta and María José Pont Chafér similar musings on the present state of the literature on borders in Africa, and similar interests in the commercial, cultural, political, and diplomatic aspects of the matter. We agreed, pushed by the positive feedback we received by Stefano Bellucci at the Conference, to pursue the idea of a publication.

From the beginning, this book was conceived as spanning on a long period of history and focusing on selected cases without a pre-determined geographical structure to follow. Every author was free to pursue the themes and subjects that he or she knew the most, or on which he or she was doing new research, and to find an interpretation of the ideas of *limen*/threshold as place of passage, of the centrality of movement, and of the state as an historical actor in the making. Freedom at the border was another theme on which Pierluigi Valsecchi and I decided to direct further investigations, as part of our participation in the Italian PRIN ‘Genealogies of African Freedoms’, 2020–2023. These ideas were proposed at a subsequent African Studies Association of Italy (ASAI) Conference in 2022, where they strongly resonated with the research of Aimé Raoul Sumo Tayo. As the work on the conceptual backbone of this Introduction progressed, the elements of similarity with Giulia Casentini, who had already her own monograph on the subject, became obvious. With them, two strong perspectives ‘on the border’ and ‘from the border’ joined the project.

The first thanks, indeed, go to the authors of the chapters of the book Fernando Mouta, Pierluigi Valsecchi, María José Pont Cháfer, Giulia Casentini, and Aimé Raoul Sumo Tayo, who decided to entrust their excellent work to my cares with the understanding that, despite our deep specialisations, we all find something valuable in the central concept of this volume, the threshold. It is plain to say that, without its authors, a book simply would not be: it is less predictable that, with them, it would be a great book. I dare to affirm that all chapters improve greatly our knowledge in the respective fields in which they are located. In addition, together, they constitute the demonstration for the need to centre movement, places of passage, and passengers – and to decentre and marginalise states.

As to the central idea, the *limen* or threshold, its elaboration fundamentally benefitted from the wise and sharp judgement of my three mentors, Wayne Dooling, Pierluigi Valsecchi, and Carolyn Hamilton, who in three different moments and places faced the rambling brainstorm which would eventually be condensed in the pages of the Introduction to the volume. They tried their best to make it at least worth a read, and in this they succeeded, but their respondent was too obstinate to trim, straighten, and polish. He should be considered the sole responsible of anything this proposal is to be found wanting.

Among the people not directly involved in the writing of the book, Stefano Bellucci deserves to be acknowledged for hosting the first nucleus of this book at the ESSHC, for seeing the potential that the project bore, and for pushing us towards other drafts, a book proposal, and much more work. I thank him for his encouragement and his advice. Likewise, I thank the editors from Brill

I have been in contact with for their kind and professional guidance, and two anonymous reviewers for the important feedback they gave on the manuscript.

This book was thought, made, and written between London, Cape Town, Pavia, and Basel, sometimes on buses and planes, more often on trains – possibly as often as while sitting behind a desk. In the process, it crossed borders countless times. It was there when border guards walked by, when they asked where I was going, where they asked for my ID. It was there when they did the same, but less gently, with the people sitting next to me who had a different complexion, a different accent, a different document, or no document at all. When they were stopped and rejected. The fact I found myself writing a book on borders in the privileged position of somebody who can cross them at ease might have had an implicit impact on aspects of the argument here proposed. I will leave to the reader the pleasure to find them. As for the explicit impact, this book is dedicated to the passengers who are not allowed to pass. To all those whose life faded at the threshold. May your spirits guard those who will come and pass, today and tomorrow.

In the years that saw me writing this and other things, while moving between places, my home remained in Milano, where I was born and where my family is. Having a place that we can call home, a place to go back to, and where to find love, warmth, and shelter is indeed the greatest of privileges. The winds of war are howling and every day reminds us more painfully than the previous one that no place is truly safe in this world. Somewhere not too far away homes become graveyards in the blink of an eye. While we contemplate this predicament, as the poet Eugenio Montale did overlooking a ruined custom house on the steep cliffs of Liguria, I urge us to ask ourselves: who comes, and who stays? Is the gap here? *Il varco è qui?*

*Milano, 15 October 2024*

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## Notes on Contributors

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*Pierluigi Valsecchi*

is Professor of African History at the Università di Pavia, where he teaches courses on West Africa and on early modern colonialism. He holds a PhD from the Scuola Normale Superiore. He is the author of *I signori di Appolonia* and of *Power and State Formation in West Africa*, he is the editor of *Africa tra Stato e società*, in addition to multiple articles and book chapters of the history of Ghana ranging from intellectual history, the history of slavery, and the history of borders. He is the Director of *Africa. Rivista semestrale di studi e ricerche* and a member of the *Accademia Ambrosiana* of Milan.



# The Threshold

*Ettore Morelli*

## 1 Drawing the Line, Crossing the Line

Borders are made to be crossed. This book argues that the main meaning and function of a border is to connect and to regulate the passage, not to divide and to keep out, as the most common view of such a well-researched topic holds. We focus here on a particular section of the border line, the threshold, which is put forward as the original component of the theoretical and practical infrastructure of borders. The Introduction elaborates on the concept of threshold by exhuming it from the pages of *Les rites de passage* by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, where it appeared a hundred years ago in its original Latin shape as *limen*. In conversation with the disparate perspectives of historians and political theorists such as Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju, Marc Bloch, Mark Bolak Funteh, Allen Howard, Igor Kopytoff, Canute Ambe Ngwa, Paul Nugent, Peter Sahlins, Julia M.H. Smith, and Raimondo Strassoldo, this Introduction is a historical and theoretical essay on the various facets of the concept of threshold as abstracted from van Gennep's writings and discussed through a series of historical fragments from the history of Africa and Europe. These include the borders of ninth-century Carolingian Francia, the walls of fifteenth-century kingdom of Benin, a millennia-old megalite on the Alps. The Conclusion of the volume will bring us to a cave in the tenth-century settlements of the Tsodilo Hills, in the Kalahari Desert.<sup>1</sup>

Seen in the perspective of the threshold, the border is a place of passage. This realisation is a fundamental component and an analytical tool for the diverse historical contexts discussed in the chapters of the book. These cover areas and periods of African history as disparate as the Senegal and Gambia Rivers in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, the middle Orange River in the seventeenth to eighteenth century, the Tano and Bia Rivers lagoon complex in the eighteenth to nineteenth century, the Upper Volta River in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the Oti River in the nineteenth and twentieth century,

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<sup>1</sup> All dates in the book adopt the ce calendar for simplicity. BCE dates are signalled when necessary.

and the Lake Chad in the twentieth century. More on these cases will follow in a moment.

The selection of specific case studies is partly motivated by the expertise of each author, who specialises in the region and the approach studied in their chapters. More in general, however, studying borders in an African context is relevant and proper under many respects. African borders have been a commonplace in border studies for decades and scholars have arguably been attracted by their great difference from European ones. On the opposite, this book aspires to suggest that some of its theoretical proposals, while elaborated on African cases, are valid in a much broader sense beyond the continent. In other words, despite their historical variance, no essential difference between European and African borders is here proposed. Borders in Africa are instructive for the understanding of borders everywhere.

Aspects of the conceptual proposal made in the book are not completely new, but even in its general form this goes against the common wisdom on what a border is and how it functions. In the established view, a border is usually conceived as a man-made – but historically well motivated – line drawn between strong political actors, the states, to define their respective areas of sovereignty. From this original act a series of consequences follow, cascading upon various actors at various levels of the social and political hierarchy. A border divides one ruler from their rival or ally. It separates national from foreigner and, more often than many would like, friend from foe. Indeed, expanding its borders is often among the objective of a warring state, at least as often as defending them. Borders provide rights and duties to those within, and negate the very same to those without. Very often the border marks a change in the language spoken, less so it requires a shift in the divinity worshipped.

Border studies have done much in the past half a century or so to first elaborate and then problematise, enrich, and criticise such state-centric perspective on borders. Many scholars have argued that the supposed weakness and failure of borders in specific times and periods of human history is likely the consequence of their intended functioning and should not be measured against the paragon of a handful of European states taken in their late nineteenth – and early twentieth-century configuration. In fact, African states have been systematically pointed out as weaker or essentially different machineries from Euro-American ones, starting from their precolonial manifestations to today's internationally-recognised UN member states. Large parts of Africa before colonialism were declared stateless. Precolonial African states were often not considered as territorial entities, but described as based on forms of personal allegiance partly derived from a situation where land was – supposedly – plenty. Colonies were by definition non-states, that is, they lacked sovereignty by superior design; among other aspects, their borders were defined by

the distant metropolitan and imperial state, not by the local population or the local political centre. Postcolonial states, inheriting so-called unnatural borders from the colonial period, would be a chimaera that proves over and over unable to comply with the minimal requirements of a modern state. Choosing a setting where the state is not considered to be as solid and cumbersome as in Europe is therefore a good stratagem to sideline or problematise it more easily, and to focus on different perspectives on the border. In African studies, previous outcomes of these efforts have been the appreciation of the 'porous' nature of borders in Africa and the acknowledgement that borders are made on the margins of states as much as if not more than in their centres. Elements of these scholarly approaches will be discussed below in this Introduction and in passing throughout the following chapters.

This book chooses a slightly different path by arguing, first, that all borders are meant to be porous and to let people pass and, second, that despite being margins, borders are made of centres, too. The centre of the border is the threshold, the section which is properly speaking made to be crossed and to let pass: a place of passage. This Introduction argues that the threshold is the foundation of the border, which is constituted and radiates in two directions from such place of passage. It argues that a threshold arises on a difficult and dangerous crossing such as – geographically – a river, a mountain pass, a forest, a desert, or – socially, and ideally – a marriage, a translation, a conversion, a conquest. The threshold stays on even when such danger is long removed or forgotten. In its essence, a threshold is a line: a line conceptualised, drawn, and made to be crossed. By whom? The book argues that the threshold is originally and essentially made by travellers, people on the move, people in transit, and only later – at least analytically, if not historically – subsumed by states and their machineries. It is made by those who pass as much as by those who stay, by those who come and go as much as by those who guard and enable. Borders are made by the people who cross them and by those who make people cross.

In 2019, the Cameroonian scholars Canute Ambe Ngwa and Mark Bolak Funteh proposed to go back to a fundamental yet currently uncommon question in border studies: the 'question of the "why of borders"', which lies at the core and goes beyond the current deep interests in their functioning. In their edited book, *Crossing the Line in Africa*, they proposed to look at the 'immanent powers of the b/ordering of space' which would be visible by looking at the Self 'not as a stand-alone entity, detached from territory or society, but [as] a socio-spatially or imaginarily constructed and hence always dynamic configuration of personalised social relations and networks'.<sup>2</sup> The threshold is our

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2 Canute Ambe Ngwa, Mark Bolak Funteh, 'Introduction', in Canute Ambe Ngwa, Mark Bolak Funteh, eds., *Crossing the Line in Africa: Reconsidering and Unlimiting the Limits of Borders*

reply to their question of why borders exist: because the passage exists, and has to allowed and regulated, both socio-spatially and imaginarily.

The book, then, offers the very opposite of a state-centred perspective on borders. States are here acknowledged as one of the important actors involved in the shaping of the meaning and practices of borders in human history, but they are by no means celebrated or criticised as the only ones, or even main ones. In a way or another, all chapters deal with histories of border-making which sideline states in part or completely. It is the movement of people, things, or ideas, that constitutes the main driving force in the examples discussed in the book.

Admittedly, these statements go very much against the common wisdom of what makes a border. Outside African studies and border studies, and even more so outside academia, the border is still the precinct and the hallmark of the state. It would be short-sighted if not hypocritical not to acknowledge the fact that states do exercise a dominant role in the functioning of borders today, when so many lives are stopped identified searched rejected beaten shot at murdered drowned hungered starved frozen at state borders. Yet, this book will hopefully provide an additional outlook by reminding us that this has not always been the case, everywhere and all the time in human history. By reassuring that people will keep moving, coming, and crossing. And by recalling that borders obtain their essential meaning as places of crossing, where the conceptual infrastructure is organised to facilitate and enable the passage, despite a practical configuration that can be shaped to prevent as many as possible to go through.

In this book, we seek to study and understand such places of passage in selected periods and regions of the history of Africa. In the first chapter, Fernando Mouta discusses well-established practices of cross-border integration of foreign traders, clerics, and adventurers in the riverine western African periphery of the old Mali empire by looking at the specific example of early Portuguese presence on the Senegal and Gambia Rivers, between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this chapter, the line is not drawn between competing sovereignties, but between different and distant societies and value systems. Political state borders are intentionally left on the background as the focus is on the well-established granular social mechanisms which integrated strangers into local societies and networks.

In the second chapter, I study the arid hinterland of the middle Orange River, bordering the southern reaches of the southern African Kalahari Desert

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*within a Contemporary Value*, Mankon, Langaa Research & Publishing CIG, 2019, IX–XXI, XVI–XVII.

and yet connected to distant commercial entrepôts in Mozambique, Angola, and Cape Town. The chapter focuses on the Gyzikoa, a 'twin' or 'mixed' 'Hottentot-Bantu' community of traders who lived in a strategically crucial location along such long distance trade routes. After revisiting previous ethno-racial interpretations and after reconstructing the making of a nineteenth-century 'boundary of race' in the region, the Gyzikoa are here reappraised as a threshold-community. The chapter deals with three aspects of the threshold in the case study: the practical element of facilitating and enabling long distance movement and trade across inhospitable ground and dangerous waters; similar to the first chapter, the social and cultural dimension of marriage, lineage, and language which made these traders a socially connected node and familiar place in a much larger settlement network; and the political ambitions of the distant African rulers who sought and sometimes managed to control them, occasionally establishing a state border across the drylands and turning the commercial and environmental threshold into a political one.

In the third chapter, Pierluigi Valsecchi revisits the making of a colonial border across the forests and coastal lagoons in the late nineteenth century Gold Coast and Côte d'Ivoire, a supposedly typical example of externally defined border which was crafted by European empires during colonialism. Instead, the chapter reconstructs 'a long history of bordering', that is two centuries of transformations and confrontations between local actors, among which the African states of Nzema and Sanwi eventually emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. At the centre of older and newer confrontations there was a small strip of land connecting – or dividing – two lagoons, and a place of passage of great commercial and spiritual significance across the coastal forests. The chapter also applies both the concepts of cultural frontier and *limes*, or fortified border, to analyse the changing aspect of the borderland in precolonial times, eventually demonstrating that the modern colonial border, far from being imposed, was sought after by local rulers as a way to finally reach an agreement on their respective areas of influence.

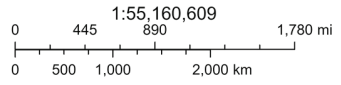
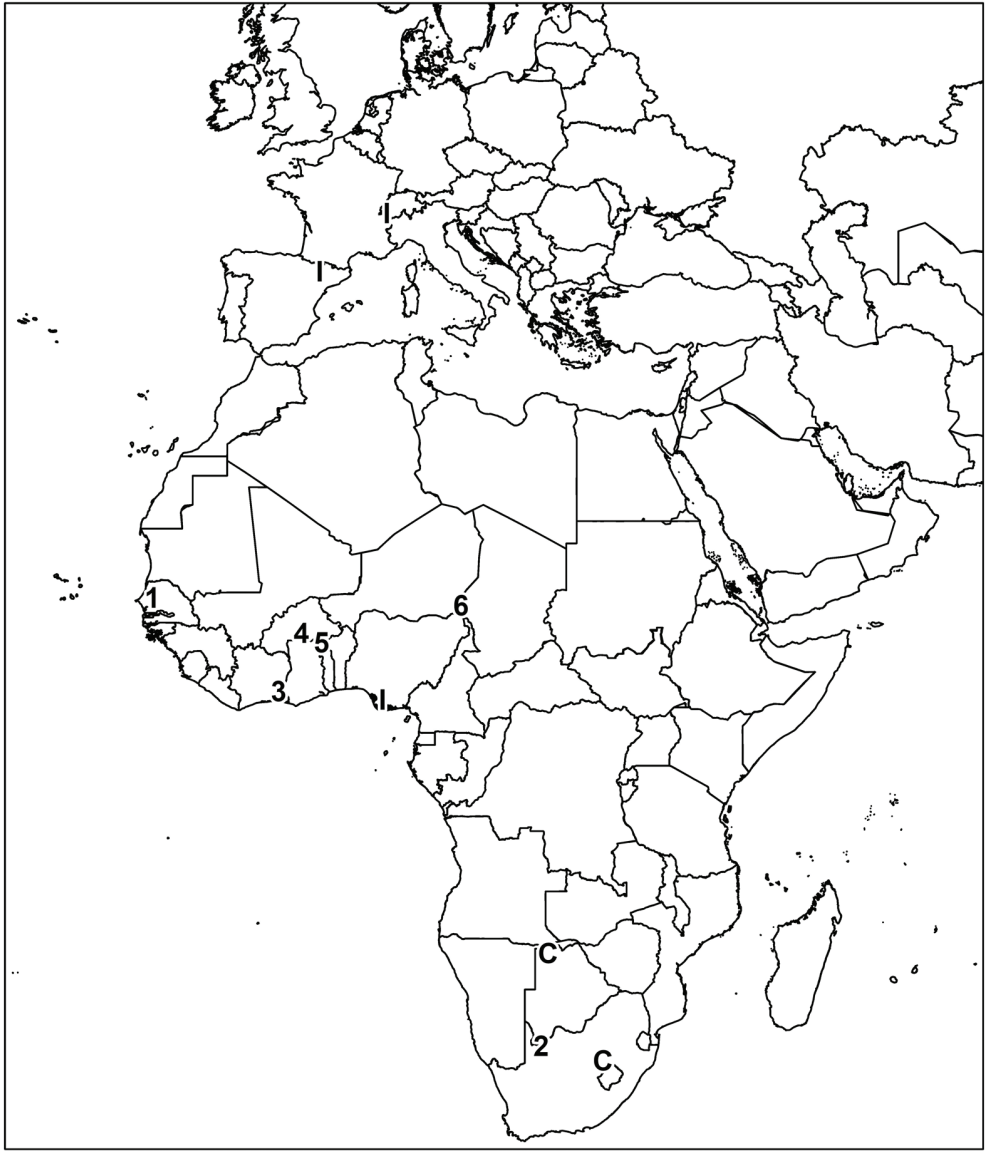
In the fourth chapter, María José Pont Cháfer reassesses the famously successful history of the cowry, the 'shell money' of the slave trade, in the perspective of wide-ranging small change currency circulation in precolonial West Africa. She argues that the great spread of the cowry was at least partially due to the lack of monetary border control by precolonial African states of the Niger River basin, coupled with a monetary system based on multiple denominations and suffering from the progressive disappearance of large gold – or silver-based currencies. She then discusses the puzzling survival of such small change currency in parts of late colonial, early – to mid-twentieth century Volta River hinterland, despite all efforts of the colonial powers to eradicate it and to

replace it with imperial currencies. The chapter proposes that the creation of an Anglo-French colonial border between the Gold Coast and Upper Volta, and of the consequent different and competing colonial monetary regimes, played an unexpected role in giving the cowry a new life.

In the fifth chapter, Giulia Casentini studies the weakness of a closely located colonial border, that between nineteenth – and twentieth-century northern Ghana and Togo. The focus here is not much on commerce and currency as on social relatedness and cross-border family networks, a recurring theme from chapters one and two. In her analysis, the difficulties in enforcing the border experienced by the colonial powers were the manifestation of older perceptions of the territory and overarching social connections by the local Konkomba communities, a supposedly 'stateless' society which is here reappraised as organised in a 'diffuse power' political system. The chapter highlights a history of community making, relatedness, and mobility across a shared landscape centered in the Oti River, which had been turned into a dividing border by colonial powers, but had remained a central connecting feature for the Konkomba living on both sides of the water. In this case study, the colonial border is a heartland and a strategic resource that can on occasion be exploited to escape from colonial retribution.

Finally, in the sixth chapter, Aimé Raoul Sumo Tayo addresses the apparent complete failure of postcolonial borders in the contemporary Lake Chad basin by hinting at an older history, when the area was under a single sovereignty, the Kanem-Bornu state. Today like yesterday, the large region is characterised by a great variety of communities living on various sides of the shrinking watershed, while environmental and political crises push some and then others to relocate and reconnect to the people on the other side. Crucially, Sumo Tayo makes a strong case for considering a policy of 'borderities', that is of unrestricted border crossing, as a legitimate and even necessary component of the border as a concept and as a historical reality – according to those who live next to it. On the shores of the Lake Chad as elsewhere, border communities make the border much more than the states claiming to control its functioning.

In the case studies of the book, therefore, the threshold is a line that can be crossed through marriage strategies, adoption into lineage, and language proficiency (Mouta, Morelli), but also thanks to a deep knowledge of the environment (Morelli); that is negotiated and fought for by African rulers, and their emissaries (Morelli, Valsecchi); a line drawn to let people and their shell money pass (Pont Châfer) and which often let migrants cross unrestricted, but other times is fortified (Valsecchi); a line that keeps uniting families and an entire people despite all attempts to tear them apart (Casentini); a line that provides to the people who live by additional strategies to cope and to exploit a volatile social and political context. (Sumo Tayo).



MAP A.1 Locations of case studies  
Legend: 1-6 = chapter numbers; I = Introduction; C = Conclusion.  
SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE

Let's pause a little longer on the theory and literature surrounding borders and places of passage, since this is fundamental to discuss the concept of threshold throughout this Introduction and to locate the book with respect to the existing works. The first reference is bound to be the complex, detailed, and varied proposal on the political geography of Africa which was made by Allen M. Howard, Richard M. Shain, and the authors of their collective book *The Spatial Factor in African History*, published in 2005.<sup>3</sup> In particular, by advancing a conceptual framework based on 'Nodes, Networks, Landscapes, and Regions', Allen Howard updated the toolkit of scholars who adopt a geographical approach to the social, economic, and political history of the African continent.<sup>4</sup> The present book owes much to some of their propositions. The analytical disaggregation of the landscape in its composing elements is among these propositions, and a fundamental one. This book focuses, after all, on one element of the landscape.

A second proposition drawn from *The Spatial Factor* is the mature abandonment of the 'state vs stateless' dichotomy, which has informed African studies since the publication of *African Political Systems*, by Meyer Fortes and Eduard Evan Evans-Pritchards, in 1940.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the authors of the present book focus on cases where political power is understood as in constant flux in human history. The state is a process, or as Paul Nugent wrote, 'all states remain a constant work-in-progress'.<sup>6</sup> Historical change in forms of precolonial and colonial political power are fundamental for the analysis of Giulia Casentini, while the postcolonial state is targeted by an eccentric gaze in the work of Aimé Raoul Sumo Tayo. More in general, however, this also means that the state is not the protagonist of our studies, but rather only one of the actors that participated in the history of the border in the cases considered.<sup>7</sup>

The choice of multiple levels of analysis is a third proposition echoing Howard's and Shain's work. The chapters of the book adopt a regional and local approach, covering key studies located within a broad region each:

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3 Allen M. Howard, Richard M. Shain, eds., *The Spatial Factor in African History: The Relationship of the Social, Material, and Perceptual*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2005.

4 Allen M. Howard, 'Nodes, Networks, Landscapes, and Regions: Reading the Social History of Tropical Africa 1700s-1920', in Allen M. Howard, Richard M. Shain, eds., *The Spatial Factor in African History: The Relationship of the Social, Material, and Perceptual*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2005, 21-140.

5 Eduard Evan Evans-Pritchard Meyer Fortes, eds., *African Political Systems*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1940.

6 Paul Nugent, *Boundaries, Communities and State-Making in West Africa: The Centrality of the Margins*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 12.

7 For a similar approach on this topic, see Ambe Ngwa, Bolak Funtah, *Crossing the Line in Africa*.

Senegambia in western Africa (Mouta), the Orange River in central southern Africa (Morelli), Lake Chad in central Africa (Sumo Tayo) are analysed as individual regions, whereas the west African forest and savanna belts are studied as a macro-region by the combination of three different chapters on specific regional units, the Volta River (Pont Cháfer), the Tano and Bia Rivers lagoon complex (Valsecchi), and the Oti River (Casentini). More specifically, both Casentini and Valsecchi make use of Howard's distinction between 'formal region' and 'functional region' in their case studies.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, a fourth proposition followed in this book is the centering of movement as object of historical investigation. Movement of people and goods in the landscape is a fundamental aspect in all chapters, be that the case of merchants and brokers as in Mouta and Morelli, currency and migrant labour as in Pont Cháfer, family and enemies as in Casentini, breakaway communities and armed forces as in Valsecchi, and smugglers and military insurgents as in Sumo Tayo. As it was already mentioned and will be discussed more at length, movement itself is proposed as a constitutive component of the border. Where this book differs most is in the choice to focus on one particular element of the landscape which is widely present but not equally central in *The Spatial Factor*, the border, and to read movement in networks and regions through the specific conceptual lenses of transition, crossing, and passage of and at the border.

Understandably, these aspects are fundamental components and are among the main subjects of a well-established research enterprise, the ABORNE or African Borderland Research Network. A few points of contact with the present work exist and could be productively highlighted here. One of the founders of ABORNE, Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju, has been studying West African borders since the 1980s, making among others the case for their existence before colonialism. As he wrote in 1982, whereas the 'frontier as boundary was virtually unknown [...] before European partition', African societies across the entire continent possessed a desire for 'precisely demarcated boundaries', which often found a manifestation in natural and human-made features of the landscape. This desire, he added, was shared also by mobile communities of

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8 Pierluigi Valsecchi already proposed to consider the Nzema region as both formal and functional in Pierluigi Valsecchi, 'Di storia, politica e altro. Note al confine', in Pierluigi Valsecchi, ed., *Africa tra Stato e società. Scritti in omaggio a Gianpaolo Calchi Novati*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2009, 147–166. Giulia Casentini elaborated on the regional framework proposed by Howard in her Giulia Casentini, *Al di là del fiume. Storia e antropologia di un confine africano (Ghana e Togo)*, Roma, Viella, 2015, 22–23. The distinction between functional and territorial borders was proposed by Raimondo Strassoldo, 'Confine', in Franco Demarchi, Aldo Ellena, Bernardo Cattarinussi, eds., *Nuovo dizionario di sociologia*, Edizioni Paoline, Roma, 1987 [1976], 499–511, 503.

hunters and herders, such as the quintessential hunters, the southern African 'Khoisan'.<sup>9</sup> African boundaries, however, were not 'widthless line[s] of demarcation between States', but were mostly 'frontier zones' and 'border regions'.<sup>10</sup> The conceptual and historical tension between linear and zonal borders is among the points of contact with the present book, and emerges particularly from the chapter by Valsecchi on the Nzema region. In the mildly tautologic perspective adopted in this Introduction and throughout the book, the border region or borderland is the region where multiple border lines are drawn, by multiple actors and/or in progressive historical periods. The lines themselves might be very thin, although perhaps not 'widthless', but their accumulation on the landscape finally evokes the zonal meaning of the border. The process, however, is here understood also as potentially taking place in the reverse, when a zonal border is thinned by historical events and actors until it becomes a line. All chapters deal with borderlands, but the nature, value, and extent of the lines crossing these region vary from case to case.

Secondly, Asiwaju pushed for a substantial use of comparative history to dispel enduring myths on African borders.<sup>11</sup> One such myth is their artificiality. All borders are artificial as human-made, but only African borders are usually considered so – that is the 'paradox of African boundaries' as he called it with Paul Nugent. Moreover, Europe is considerably more 'partitioned' than Africa, being a smaller continent divided in more states, and regardless of the claims of modern nation-states, European partition followed historical processes which forced and manipulated local identities, or disregarded them entirely.<sup>12</sup> An oft-referred touchstone of this comparative method, the county of Cerdanya in the context of the Early Modern border disputes between the

9 On 'Khoisan' territoriality, see David B. Coplan, 'People of the Early Caledon River Frontier and Their Encounters', *African Historical Review*, 44, 2, 2012, 55–77.

10 Arthur I. Asiwaju, 'The Concept of Frontier in the Setting of States in Pre-Colonial Africa', *Présence Africaine*, 3/4, 127/128, 1982/1983, 43–49.

11 The first part of Asiwaju's and Nugent's *African Boundaries* is titled 'Arcs and Lines: Myths and Realities'. In Paul Nugent, Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, eds., *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities*, London, Cassell, 1996, 19.

12 Paul Nugent, Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, 'Introduction: The Paradox of African Boundaries', in Paul Nugent, Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, eds., *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities*, London, Cassell, 1996, 1–17; Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, 'Borderlands in Africa: A Comparative Research Perspective with Particular Reference to Western Europe', in Paul Nugent, Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, eds., *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities*, London, Cassell, 1996, 253–272. On the artificiality of African borders, see also Camille Lefebvre, 'La décolonisation d'un lieu commun. L'artificialité des frontières africaines : un legs intellectuel colonial devenu étendard de l'anticolonialisme', *Revue d'histoire des Sciences Humaines*, 24, 1, 2011, 77–104.

kingdoms of France and Spain on the Pyrenees, makes an appearance in this Introduction, too, albeit in a particular perspective. These aspects are crucial for the chapter of the book which more prominently deal with the historical period of the partition of Africa, the work on the Nzema region by Valsecchi, and for the cases where 'artificial' borders were drawn across previously united regions, such as the Lake Chad basin in Sumo Tayo and the Oti River region in Casentini. Additionally, all cases dealt with in the book are somewhat centred on a regionally important body of water, be it a lake, a lagoon, or a river. This might arguably be considered an involuntary testament to the artificiality of borders, for what is more artificial, but at the same time meaningful and pleasant, than to draw lines on water?

Borders are, by definition, on the margin. State borders, in particular constitute the further edge of the central power's reach and sovereignty. Countering the tendency to devote more attention to the nucleus of political and social formations, and to consider margins as elements which are centrally determined, Paul Nugent proposed to 'centre the margins'. This implies recognising borderlands as historical actors in their own right, beyond the dichotomy of passive respondents to state authority and unruly subordinate units. In this sense, the border is made in the borderland as much as it is drawn in the capital's mental or physical maps.<sup>13</sup> The chapters of the present book centre the margins as much as they decentre the old Eurocentric state perspective. This is perhaps best represented by the concept of 'borderities' which structures the contribution by Sumo Tayo. In a further move, however, centring the margins also means pointing out that margins have centres, too. These centres are the places of passage, the points where the road meets the border, as it will be discussed below.

This book reaches this point by following some further suggestions. African borders, it has been said, are 'permeable' or 'porous': they let people pass.<sup>14</sup>

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13 Nugent, *Boundaries, Communities and State-Making in West Africa*, 1–45. This perspective is not entirely novel. Fabio Viti wrote of 'potere centrale' and 'potere periferico', power of the centre and power of the periphery, and Pierluigi Valsecchi of 'al centro della periferia', at the centre of the periphery, in Fabio Viti, 'Centro e periferia negli Stati dell'Africa pre-coloniale', Pierluigi Valsecchi, 'Di storia, politica e altro. Note al confine', in Pierluigi Valsecchi, ed., *Africa tra Stato e società. Scritti in omaggio a Gianpaolo Calchi Novati*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2009, 13–32; 147–166.

14 Ieuan Griffiths, 'Permeable Boundaries in Africa', in Paul Nugent, Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, eds., *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities*, London, Cassell, 1996, 68–83. The notion of 'confini porosi' was elaborated among others by Viti, 'Centro e periferia negli Stati dell'Africa pre-coloniale', 'Di storia, politica e altro', in Valsecchi, *Africa tra Stato e società*, 13–32; 147–166.

Some scholars have stressed that this can or should be considered a feature, rather than a failure of borders in Africa. Ieuan Griffiths noted that ‘about 45 per cent of Africa’s boundaries follow rivers of watersheds’, but most of these rivers are seasonal and easy to cross, and ‘watersheds are barely discernible on the ground’. The other half of the total length of borders in Africa ‘are straight lines or arcs of circles or related to roads’, which are even easier to cross.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, people did move across borders during colonialism, much to the displeasure of colonial states. They did so to avoid taxation, to find an employment, to smuggle goods, to avoid retribution, or to relocate with their family or herds.<sup>16</sup> Sumo Tayo, in the present book, emphasises that ‘the porous nature of these border [on the Lake Chad Basin] is not pejorative’ because ‘as pores make the skin breathe, ports, bridges, and other border crossing points are the routes of exchange with the outside’.<sup>17</sup>

It would be rather a paradox to think that borders let people pass only in Africa. Raimondo Strassoldo, an Italian scholar native of the north-eastern borderland of Friuli – which was the theatre of many a border war and several invasions into the peninsula from antiquity to modern day – has proposed since the 1970s that borders could be both a ‘barriera’ and a ‘cerniera’, both a barrier and a junction; that is, in Europe, too. His nuanced ‘sociological theory of the border’ was eventually picked up by Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju and Paul Nugent and should be considered an important intellectual root to many contemporary border studies. The border, to Strassoldo, is ambiguous.

Spatial boundaries have ambiguous features: they divide and unite, bind the interior and link it with the exterior, are barriers and junctions, walls and doors, organs of defence and of attack and so on. Frontier areas (borderlands) can be managed so as to maximize either of such functions. They can be militarized, as bulwarks against neighbours, or made into areas of peaceful interchange.<sup>18</sup>

15 Griffiths, ‘Permeable Boundaries in Africa’, 68–83.

16 See for example Casentini, *Al di là del fiume*; Paul Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists, and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Life of the Borderlands since 1914*, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2003; Isabella Soi, Paul Nugent, ‘Peripheral Urbanism in Africa: Border Towns and Twin Towns in Africa’, *Journal of Borderland Studies*, 32, 4, 2017, 535–556; Mouhamadou Mustapha Sow, ‘Ordre colonial et désobéissance indigène au Fouladou (1883–1910) : l’impôt de capitation dans les relations entre Mousa Molo et la France’, *Africa. Rivista semestrale di studi e ricerche*, 1, 2, 2019, 5–20.

17 Aimé Raoul Sumo Tayo, Chapter 6, ‘Borderities and Freedom in Colonial and Post-colonial African Borderlands: A Case Study of the borders in the Lake Chad Basin’ in the present volume.

18 Raimondo Strassoldo, ‘Border Studies: The State of the Art in Europe’, in Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju, P.O. Adeniyi, *Borderlands in Africa: A Multidisciplinary and Comparative Focus on*

Strassoldo features also in Giulia Casentini's own monographic study *Al di là del fiume*, where she discussed the unifying features of the colonial border on the Oti River and elaborated further that the border is 'ambivalente', bivalent: 'É insieme chiusura e apertura, barriera e cerniera, esclusione e contatto, *limes* e *limen*, dissociazione e associazione, separazione e articolazione'.<sup>19</sup> The book argues that this ambiguous and bivalent potential is the essential characteristic of the place of passage that is the threshold.<sup>20</sup>

The remaining of the Introduction will look at it in historically grounded case studies. Before, however, a short detour in abstract drawing is necessary to highlight some conceptual elements of this proposal. In abstract, as if on a white sheet of paper, a threshold is the intersection between a line drawn to be walked and a line drawn to be crossed. The first line originates, its bidimensional black body runs straight from point to point, until it finally protrudes to its end: surely the destination, for the curious finger who is following its itinerary on the sheet of paper. The end point may be a prestigious capital city, a wealthy market town, a sacred temple, a much desired harbour, a florid spice port, a bountiful mine, a greener pasture, a famed treasure, or one's own grave – depending on the seriousness of the context, and the irony of the narrator. The various points that this line touches, may be: lesser cities or villages, smaller fairgrounds, local stations of worship, insecure bays, derelict havens, exhausted veins, plains of parched grass, the offensive remains of looted riches, and somebody else's graves – family or foes. The point of departure, or origin, is often considered of little interest and the line usually takes its name

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*Nigeria and West Africa*, Lagos, University of Lagos Press, 1989, 383–395, 393. Also quoted in Nugent, Asiwaju, 'Introduction', 1. Further studies by Strassoldo on the matter include Raimondo Strassoldo, *From Barrier to Junction: Towards a Sociological Theory of Borders*, supplement to *Informazioni – bollettino dell'Istituto di Sociologia Internazionale di Gorizia*, Gorizia, Institute of International Sociology, 1971; Raimondo Strassoldo, 'Da barriera a cerniera: il ruolo dei confini e delle regioni di confine nella teoria sociologica', *Le Panarie. Rivista friulana*, 4, 1, 1971, 52–58; Raimondo Strassoldo, 'Boundaries in Sociological Theory: A Reassessment', in Raimondo Strassoldo, Giovanni Delli Zotti, eds., *Cooperation and Conflict in Border Areas*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 1982, 245–271; Raimondo Strassoldo, 'Confine', in Franco Demarchi, Aldo Ellena, Bernardo Cattarinussi, eds., *Nuovo dizionario di sociologia*, Edizioni Paoline, Roma, 1987 [1976], 499–511, 503.

19 '[The border] is at the same time closure and opening, barrier and junction, exclusion and contact, *limes* and *limen*, dissociation and association, separation and articulation'. My translation. Raimondo Strassoldo, 'La teoria del confine', in *Temi di sociologia delle relazioni internazionali, Quaderni dell'ISIG*, 5, Gorizia, 1979, 133–202, quoted in Giulia Casentini, *Al di là del fiume. Storia e antropologia di un confine africano (Ghana e Togo)*, Roma, Viella, 2015, 44. See also Chapter 5, 'Border crossing, strategies of resistance and colonial violence: narratives from Northern Ghana and Togo (1920s–1940s)' in this volume.

20 For a recent view on the bivalence of borders in Africa, see Ngwa, Funteh, 'Introduction', IX–XXI.

from where it heads to, not from where it heads from. It is of course possible to follow the line backwards, the finger running against the flow of the ink, but this is not what the line does. The line moves forward. We call this line an itinerary, a trade route, a pilgrimage, a navigation, a prospection, a transhumance, a treasure hunt, or more simply, life itself. In a well-walked metaphor, this line is the road.

There is another line. After it starts, it runs in circle from point to point until it reaches an end, which however coincides with its beginning. The points here might correspond to stones, poles, beacons of various type. Instead of an origin and a destination, such points define an inside and an outside and form a perimeter. Some tracts of this line might be faded, almost invisible, with only the scratches of the pen into the paper still barely perceivable to the finger if not to the eye – or is the line just so thinly penciled? Perhaps some points of the perimeter have all but disappeared. Sometimes large parts or even all the perimeter has faded out. Other tracts might be doubled, bold black bodies into the white expanse. We call this line a boundary because it binds what is inside, and a border line, because it forms an edge with what is outside.<sup>21</sup> When faded, we often refer to it as a frontier; when bold, as a barrier, a fortified border, or with an old word, a *limes*. Ideally, this line can be represented as a circle, but in practice its shape is very much irregular and varied.

The two sets of lines coexist on the white paper. That above-mentioned capital city, or that sacred temple, might be somewhere within the border line, and in this case the road line moves from point to point following the itinerary towards its destination into the perimeter. Easy? Not quite. The more speculative finger pauses right where the two lines meet, and the two inks mingle. What happens here? Let's leave this waiting, for the moment, and go back to the bigger picture.

Truth be told, the sketch is still too simple. Neither the border line nor the road line are singular. A plethora of other perimeters and itineraries exist side by side, are contiguous and overlap one with another. Smaller itineraries flow into larger ones, joining one another in important points on the road. Others form crossroads – a good place to meet other travellers, thieves, a protective spirit, or the devil. In many cases, an itinerary is doubled over by another one running to the opposite direction. Sometimes, however, the return road has to be altogether different, be that because of the regular tides and winds of the deep blue sea, or due to the moody currents of the human spirit. The resulting

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21 'Border', verb and 'border', name, in *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessible online at [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/border\\_v?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/border_v?tab=meaning_and_use), [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/border\\_n?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use#16496257](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/border_n?tab=meaning_and_use#16496257) (last accessed on 17 Nov 2023).

line might look circular, at best, or labyrinthic, at worse: pilgrims walk surely towards their holy destinations, but may enjoy a bargain on the side, and *νόστοι* are full of temptation, treachery, and loss. Now, the sketch is rather complex. As a whole, road lines reticulate until they form a network: a device that both facilitate and ensnares travellers, persuading them to walk the line instead of stepping into the white void.

In this composite drawing, the network of the road lines is the weave, but the alveolar complexity of border lines is the warp. Border lines are typically considered to be contiguous, rather than overlapping. That is, sections of one perimeter are shared with one or more perimeters, as the tiles of a mosaic, but this is often not the case. Is the border line continuous, faded, or bold? The latter occurrence is perhaps the first one which comes to mind, although not necessarily the simplest one. A *limes* can be built on both sides, but historically this does not happen frequently: often only one side takes the burden to build the wall, the other tries to scale it, or to breach it. Somewhat more frequently, the frontier fades away in both directions, as two perimeters seem to disappear one into the other. The best example, perhaps, is the watery horizon of the sea: an indefinite region on which is possible to lay claims, but on which is impossible to exercise control; which sometimes and in some places can be blockaded; but which more often remains a distant line where ships can vanish or suddenly emerge from. Seas of sand, grass, and ice work in the same way, as regions where lines are drawn and redrawn by the tireless wind, or blown away forever. Such void spaces could also stand in between two or more distant and clearly defined lines. Overlap of claim and perspective exists in these circumstances, if not of control. Border lines, however, always overlap when encompassing more than one dimension: for example, that of the believers of a particular divine; that of the names by which that divine is called; and that of the practices with which that divine is worshipped are dimensions which very easily form an inextricable tangle of overlapping perimeters. And yet, the road finds a way into most, if not all of them.

Moving from city to market town, from pasture to hunting grounds, from wedding to funeral, the road inevitably crosses over many border lines of various kind. This is where the finger is now pausing, right where the two lines meet, and the two inks mingle. If the border line is particularly faded, the road line might go through without even perceiving it, or otherwise enjoying the ease of the pass, practically unrestrained across great plains, arid deserts, perilous waves, morbid marshes, rigid tundras, or luxuriant forests. This is usually held to happen in frontier situations. If, however, the border line is particularly bold and thick and corresponds to an actual a fence, a wall, or a fortified *limes*, the travellers, be them single individuals or larger groups, might find it

impassable. In such cases, the itinerary is broken and the section of the road line beyond the perimeter fades out and vanishes, leaving only its memory and its traces behind, or the idea of a potential destination which might one day be reached by more lucky travellers.

In most circumstances, however, the itinerary line meets the border line in a common point of a particular kind. Looking more closely, this locality is actually made of two twin points and an additional line connecting them. This line is a *limen*: a threshold. The pair of points and the line might be a bridge, a mountain pass, a gate in the city walls, or at the airport, a toll station on the highway, a pier, the heavy cast door of a temple or the inner diaphragm of the sancta sanctorum, the imposing rocky arch of a painted cave or the shadowy voracious hole of the mine and, at least in some parts of the world, a much smaller cavity large enough to house one's physical remains. The line might actually appear painted, engraved, printed, or otherwise signalled, but the *limen* retains its functions even when it is not so blatantly defined. In order to cross it, a varying series of acts must or ought to be performed, from the most mundane such as paying a ticket, to the most bureaucratic such as obtaining a stamp on the passport – the object which grants to its bearer passage through the port, or door – to the most sacred such as any gesture connecting the human to the divine. For these are the main functions of the threshold, to connect and to regulate the transfer where the road meets the border. Such is the theoretical concern and the specific subject of the present book. What happens on that place of passage, that section of the border that we call here a threshold?

## 2 The Passage, the Passport, and the Passenger

More than a hundred years ago, on 12 October 1915, a man was expelled from the Swiss Confederation and was therefore forced to leave the Canton of Neuchâtel, where he lived, and the University of Neuchâtel, where he taught. His mugshot was published on the *Moniteur suisse de Police*, Number 264, 11 November 1915: he wore thick mustaches, a white shirt, and a dark suit and tie.<sup>22</sup> The *Moniteur* provided a more detailed description of his physical features including moles and scars, and made clear that he had to be denounced and arrested, in case he was to be found again on Swiss land. The man relocated

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22 Published in Pierre Centlivres, Philippe Vaucher, 'Les tribulations d'un ethnographe en Suisse. Arnold van Gennep à Neuchâtel (1912–1915)', *Gradhiva: revue d'histoire et d'archives de l'anthropologie*, 15, 1994, 89–101, 93.

to France, one of the two countries of which he held citizenship during his life – the other was Germany, the country where he was born. He settled at Bourg-la-Reine, a suburb in the southern *banlieu* of Paris, where he spent the rest of his days. He died in 1957, at 84 years of age. That man was Arnold van Gennepe, the author of *Les rites de passage*, among other books, essays, and articles. His name and the name of his main work are today mentioned in anthropology textbooks, although they are perhaps not among the most frequently quoted in current research.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically in retrospect, in one of the first pages of *Les rites de passage*, published in 1909, van Gennepe had very differently analysed the materiality – or



#### Expulsion de la Confédération.

Par arrêté du 12 octobre 1915, le Conseil fédéral suisse a expulsé du territoire de la Confédération, en application de l'article 70 de la Constitution fédérale:



9001. Kurr, Charles-Marie-Alfred-Eugène-Guillaume-Arnold, dit van Gennepe; Arnold, fils de Karl Alfred Kurr et de Maria Christine van Gennepe, né le 23 avril 1873 à Ludwigsbourg (Wur-

temberg), précédemment ressortissant allemand, actuellement Français naturalisé, professeur; 167,8 cm, cheveux châtain-foncé, grisonnants, yeux de III<sup>e</sup> classe, barbe châtain-roux, se ronge les ongles, légère cicatrice à cavité supérieure de 1 cm horizontale à 1 cm en dessous de la 2<sup>e</sup> jointure de l'index gauche postérieur externe, léger nævus à 7 cm en dessus du cubital droit postérieur externe, léger nævus à 0,5 cm en dessus du milieu de la paupière gauche, léger nævus à 6 cm en dessous du lobe gauche.

Si cet individu venait à rentrer en Suisse, les agents de police suisses sont requis de l'arrêter en vue de sa condamnation pour rupture de ban à teneur de l'art. 63a du Code pénal fédéral, du 4 février 1853, et de faire immédiatement rapport au Département suisse de justice et police à Berne.

#### Mandats d'arrêt.

##### Bâle-Campagne.

9002. Siegrist-Bücheli, Fanny, née le 24 juillet 1888, de Rünenberg (Bâle-Campagne); condamnée par le Conseil d'Etat du canton de Bâle-Campagne, pour inconduite, à 6 mois de maison de travail.

La conduire à la Direction de police du canton de Bâle-Campagne à Liestal, pour exécution de jugement.

##### St-Gall.

9003. Blatter, Johann Jakob, fils d'Albert, né en 1887, d'Oberegg, journalier; condamné le 29 juin 1915 par le Tribunal du district de l'Oberrheintal, pour actes impudiques graves en présence de mineurs et autres délits de mœurs, à 6 mois de maison de travail, 40 frs. d'amende, et 301 frs. 10 cts. de frais. Le conduire à la Préfecture du district de l'Oberrheintal à Altstätten, pour exécution de jugement.

9004. Sutter, Heinrich, né en 1883, de Niederglatt-Oberruzwil, charretier; 169 cm, cheveux et sourcils noirs, yeux châtain, moustache châtain, dents incomplètes, visage allongé, teint pâle, mains grosses; et

9005. Dieffenbacher, Fritz, né en 1878, de Glaris; 174 cm, corpulence forte, cheveux et sourcils blonds, front grand, bombé, yeux gris-vertâtre, nez pointu, petite moustache rousse, dents complètes, blanches, pointues, visage allongé, étroit, ongle de l'index droit difforme, extrémité d'un médium ankylosée; portaient lors de leur fuite des vêtements de détenus; se sont évadés de la maison de travail de Bitzi près Mosnang, soit lorsqu'ils travaillaient en plein air.

Les reconduire à la Direction du dit établissement.

FIGURE A.1 *Moniteur de police*, Van Gennepe's mugshot of 1915

SOURCE: PIERRE CENTLIVRES, PHILIPPE VAUCHER, 'LES TRIBULATIONS D'UN ETHNOGRAPHE EN SUISSE', 93

23 Ugo Fabietti, *Storia dell'antropologia*, Bologna, Zanichelli, 2011 [1991], 46–48. More on the influence of van Gennepe in anthropology is discussed in the fourth section of this Introduction, 'The threshold'.

rather, the immateriality – of borders in the ‘civilised regions’ of the beginning of the century, where ‘the passage is free’ and only on rare occasions a passport was needed.

Afin de fixer les idées, je parlerai d’abord du passage matériel. De nos jours, et sauf pour les rares pays qui ont conservé le passeport, ce passage est libre dans les régions civilisées. La frontière, ligne idéale tracée entre des bornes ou des poteaux, n’est visible que sur les cartes, exagérément. Mais le temps n’est pas si éloigné où le passage d’un pays à l’autre et, à l’intérieur de chaque pays, d’une province à l’autre, auparavant même d’un domaine seigneurial à un autre, s’accompagnait de formalités diverses. Ces formalités étaient d’ordre politique, juridique et économique; pourtant il en était aussi d’ordre magico-religieux, par exemple les interdictions pour les chrétiens, les musulmans, les bouddhistes, d’entrer et de séjourner dans la partie du globe non soumise à leur foi.<sup>24</sup>

Five years after the publication of the *Rites*, the *Belle Époque* came to a bloody end in Sarajevo, in June 1914, and the Great War begun. Most of Europe mobilised its armies and closed its borders, the frontier stopped being an ‘imaginary line’ and its passage reverted to being accompanied by ‘various formalities’ and other more unpleasant experiences. Van Gennepe, the son of a German Lieutenant at the court of the kingdom of Württemberg and of a Dutch mother, both with distant French descent, grew up in Lyon with his mother and a French stepfather, took his mother’s surname, and became a French patriot. After few months of conflict he found Swiss neutrality flawed and denounced the Swiss Germanophiles’ involvement in the German war effort by publishing

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24 Arnold van Gennepe, *Les rites de passage*, Paris, Éditions A. et J. Picard, 1981 [1909], 19. The book was only translated in English in 1960. ‘Territorial passages can provide a framework for the discussion of rites of passage which follows. Except in the few countries where a passport is still in use, a person in these days may pass freely from one civilized region to another. The frontier, an imaginary line connecting boundary stones or poles, is visible – in an exaggerated fashion – only on maps. But not so long ago the passage from one country to another, from one province to another within each country, and, still earlier, even from one manorial domain to another was accompanied by various formalities. These were largely political, legal, and economic, but some were of a magico-religious nature. For instance, Christians, Moslems, and Buddhists were forbidden to enter and stay in portions of the globe which did not adhere to their respective faiths.’ Arnold van Gennepe, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1960, 15. More on this translation below.

anonymous articles on the French journal *Dépêche de Toulouse*, at the beginning of 1915. The Swiss police tracked him down and expelled him.<sup>25</sup>

The strikingly different situation so briefly outlined by van Gennepe in 1909 was a rather recent development, as he knew very well. The disappearance of borders in Europe – that is, on a material, visible level – was a final product of the long nineteenth century, during which large tracts of the continent saw borders radically redrawn and erased by wars and diplomacy. While the kingdoms of Prussia and Piedmont fought their way to the unification of Germany and Italy, the kingdoms of England, France, and Belgium gave new life to an old institution, the passport, in order to facilitate the movement of foreigners in their territory. As Kenneth Diplock, later Baron Diplock and Senior Law Lord of Appeal, wrote in 1946, passports had a long history and went through multiple changes. In Medieval England, the passport was issued by the King to those of his subjects who were allowed to leave the kingdom – for ‘it appears that a subject was prohibited from leaving the Realm without leave of the Crown, since to do so would deprive the King of the subject’s military or other feudal services.’<sup>26</sup> A similar application existed in the kingdom of France, re-established by Louis XIV in 1669.<sup>27</sup> Over time, however, the idea that the subjects of the King of England could leave or re-enter the country at will entered in Common Law and passports in this sense lapsed. The passport was then a leave pass for soldiers of the King of England in the sixteenth century, still strongly connected with warfare and more specifically with wartime legislation. It became the ‘letters of passports’ for English and Danish ships and their crews in a treaty signed by the two countries in 1670, an anticipation of nineteenth – and twentieth-century practices both because it was applicable in times of peace, and because it was issued by the respective sovereign power.

Indeed, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries passports were mostly documents facilitating movement between European kingdoms, but they were issued to foreigners by the sovereign power of the country where they had settled or where they travelled – not by their own national sovereign power. This practice was still in use in mid-nineteenth century: Felice Orsini, the Italian patriot, held a French passport obtained from the French Consul in London,

25 Rosemary Zumwalt, ‘Arnold van Gennepe: The Hermit of Bourg-la-Reine’, *American Anthropologist*, 84, 2, 1982, 299–313; Francesco Remotti, ‘Introduzione: Van Gennepe, tra etnologia e folklore’, in Arnold van Gennepe, *I riti di passaggio*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2012, IX.

26 Kenneth Diplock, ‘Passports and Protection in International Law’, *Transactions of the Grotius Society*, 32, 1946, 42–59, 44; John C. Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018 [2000], 22.

27 Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*, 26.

where he was defined a 'British subject', when he threw a grenade at Napoleon III outside the Opéra in Paris, in 1858. By that time, however, passports had undergone two further transformations: during the Napoleonic wars they were once more wartime authorisations for subjects of an enemy state to live in a foreign country; and progressively, they become documents issued by your own sovereign in order to leave the country and travel or settle somewhere else in times of peace. The new system was in use between France, Belgium, and Britain in the same year of Orsini's attempted assassination, 1858. Then, as soon as it reached this new meaning, which is the one it still has, the passport started to be abolished: in Italy in 1860, in Denmark, France, Belgium, and Britain by 1887, and by 1914 the list comprised at least the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands.<sup>28</sup> Thus, political borders were very much extant – European states kept going on war for their 'natural borders', and to draw them 'exagérément' on their maps – but they existed for some time in a way that did not require any form of control of peacetime movement across them.<sup>29</sup> In the words of the Austrian writer and anti-Nazi refugee Stefan Zweig, recently quoted and analysed by Jesper Gulddal and Charlton Payne, before 1914 'the earth belonged to all' and the frontiers 'were nothing but symbolic lines which one crossed with as little thought as one crosses the Meridian of Greenwich'.<sup>30</sup>

What is missing in the above is, of course, the rest of the world. The history of the passport, an epiphenomenon of how some European states elaborated their legal understanding of territory, sovereignty, citizenship, and movement across the border, is incomplete without their imperial projections across – against – a much larger part of the globe. For the decades in which the 'civilized regions' enjoyed 'free passage' or, as we say today, freedom of movement, were also the period in which European empires reached their maximum extent, and in which the movement of the newly conquered colonial subjects was controlled and restricted, both within colonies and with regards to the imperial metropole.<sup>31</sup>

In July 1872, as the recently reframed passport was falling out of use in Europe, South Africa's Government Notice Number 68 introduced racial passes

28 Diplock, 'Passports', 51.

29 On 'natural borders', see Peter Sahlins, 'Natural Frontiers Revisited: France's Boundaries since the Seventeenth Century', *The American Historical Review*, 95, 5, 1990, 1423–1451; Ngwa, Funteh, 'Introduction', xiv–xv.

30 Stefan Zweig, *Die Welt von Gestern*, 1942, 409–410, quoted in Jesper Gulddal, Charlton Payne, 'Passports: On the Politics and Cultural Impact of Modern Movement Control', 25, 1–2, 2017, 9–23, 9.

31 Radhika Viyas Mongia, 'Race, Nationality, Mobility: A History of the Passport', *Public Culture*, 11, 3, 1999, 527–556.

on the newly acquired southern African Diamond Fields of Griqualand West and Kimberley. 'Blacks' were required a pass to seek work, they were issued another one as employees, and finally a third one when they left the fields. These miners' passes anticipated the development of the notorious Native Pass Laws of twentieth-century South Africa, protesting against which a young Nelson Mandela burnt his own pass on the 26th of March 1960.<sup>32</sup> By then, the pass had become a symbol of apartheid state oppression, as much as the passport was inscribed in the postwar international order as the prime tool to travel under state authorisation. Indeed, the withdrawal of a previously issued passport became a way to radically restrict movement: the cancellation of Paul Robeson's US passport by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI in July 1950 is the mirror image of Mandela's protest in the perspective of state control of movement across and within borders.<sup>33</sup>

The history of passes in southern Africa runs deeper than the inception of mining capitalism and is rooted in the documents that slaves had to carry when moving out of the house or land of their masters, in the eighteenth-century Dutch Colony of Good Hope.<sup>34</sup> In turn, this might have descended from restriction to the movement of commoners within certain European kingdoms, such as in France in the eighteenth century, in some German states in the seventeenth century, and in Russia in varying forms in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.<sup>35</sup> In any case, the South African system of passes was applied from 1809 to free African colonial subjects in service of colonists, known via the racist misnomer of 'Hottentots'.<sup>36</sup> Passes were furthermore required for African travellers to enter the Colony, since at least 1797, after the Colony was conquered by the British empire – it was formally illegal to cross the border in any direction, before then.<sup>37</sup> By mid-nineteenth century at least one African

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32 John M. Smalberger, 'The Role of the Diamond-Mining Industry in the Development of the Pass-Law System in South Africa', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 9, 3, 1976, 419–434; Michael Savage, 'The Imposition of Pass Laws on the African Population in South Africa 1916–1984', *African Affairs*, 85, 339, 1986, 181–205.

33 Barbara J. Beeching, 'Paul Robeson and the Black Press: The 1950 Passport Controversy', *The Journal of African American History*, 87, 2002, 339–354.

34 Philip Frankel, 'The Politics of Passes: Control and Change in South Africa', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 17, 2, 1979, 199–217.

35 Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*, 22–23, 26–27. Note that Torpey did not differentiate as much as Diplock did between the imposition of restrictions via passports within and without national borders.

36 Wayne Dooling, 'The Origins and Aftermath of the Cape Colony's "Hottentot Code" of 1809', 31, 2005, 50–61.

37 Union of South Africa, *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Native Pass Laws 1920*, Cape Town, Cape Times Limited Government Printers, 1922, 2–3.

polity, the kingdom of Lesotho, enforced the colonial system of passes by acting as middle station on the routes between the Colony and another, more distant kingdom, Bopedi: following diplomatic agreements between Lesotho and Bopedi, and Lesotho and the Cape Colony, Bapedi travellers were issued passes by the king of Lesotho, who also exacted tribute in kind or labour before letting them go forward. In Sesotho, the language of these lands, the pass was called *tsela*, 'the road'.<sup>38</sup>

There is no border without a road crossing over it, indeed, and there is no road without travellers moving along. Borders are always places of passage and movement. They are places where movement is regulated, facilitated, controlled, made impossible: places where it might or might not be necessary to show a document of passage, like a passport, or where other documents could signify the end of all passage – for everybody but armed soldiers, such as declarations of war, or for the person to which they are issued, such as blacklists, cancellations, and acts of expulsions like the one delivered to van Gennep in 1915. Embedded in his perceptive if too optimistic reading of the historical trajectory of his 'civilised world' there was a key conceptual realisation: even when borders are immaterial, the passage is material and operates as an index to understand and organise all other forms of passage (social, political, spiritual, existential).

The world in which van Gennep spent the second half of his life is still the world we live in today: made of states which guard – or attempt to guard – carefully and anxiously their borders, where the passport is needed to move, and where the passage is not free, at all.<sup>39</sup> The closed borders of belligerent European empires of 1914 are the hidden, implicit, and subconscious transcript of the modern understanding of how borders work and should work: the touchstone of the proficiency or failings of contemporary borders and, with that, an important component of what is considered the strength of a state.<sup>40</sup> It is not surprising therefore that this last century's scholarly interest in borders, their theory, and their history has been mostly framed by centering the state as the protagonist of the analysis. In this perspective, borders are a

38 Peter Delius, *The Land Belongs to Us: The Pedi Polity, the Boers and the British in the Nineteenth-century Transvaal*, London, Heinemann, 1984, 64; Anthony Atmore, Peter Sanders, 'Sotho Arms and Ammunition in the Nineteenth Century', *The Journal of African History*, 12, 4, 1971, 535–544, 538.

39 On this, see Gulddal, Payne, 'Passports', 9–23; Diplock, 'Passports and Protection in International Law'.

40 I draw this use of 'subconscious transcript' from Paul Nugent, who in turn borrowed it from James C. Scott. Nugent, *Boundaries, Communities and State-Making in West Africa*, 8 fn20.

specific historical product of the elaboration of territoriality of the 'modern state', that is, of some European states in the past five centuries. Thus, borders exist and are negotiated primarily between sovereign states, following an interpretation of the history of international relations that omitted the borderless *Belle Époque* and found in the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia its cradle or, according to some dissonant views, its founding myth.<sup>41</sup> States in Africa and other parts of the world are understood to have subscribed to the Westphalian system and norms, but to have failed in implementing them, resulting in various 'degrees of statehood' – a concept that Christopher Clapham originally coined to highlight their agency rather than their passivity, but which inevitably conveys also an idea of deficiency and failure.<sup>42</sup> This is not the only possible perspective on the matter.

It is a minor detail, but a telling one, that 'passage matériel' in van Gennepe's original 1909 French text was translated as 'territorial passage' in the 1960 English translation which made the book famous. After two world wars, the act of travelling on a physical landscape and of passing through physical markers such as stones, pillars, arches and doorways was more formally understood as the transition between one and another territory and sovereignty, a semantic shift which is by no means mistaken, but which illuminates a side of the matter that was inherent although not so pressing for van Gennepe in 1909, yet. A Franco-German living in French Switzerland, van Gennepe wrote the *Rites de passage* from the point of view of people that move, of travellers or, with a different semantic shift, passengers. His question, of course, was not how borders were negotiated between sovereign states. He understood the progressive dematerialisation of borders as a product of the secularisation of the 'civilised regions' which emptied them of their previous magico-religious meanings, which he sought to analyse. Again, what matters here is not the soundness of the argument – but note the only apparent paradox of magico-religious borders being more material than secular ones. What counts is the perspective in which the argument was framed: the perspective of the passenger, of those who hold – or might not hold – a passport or a pass, not the perspective of those who issue them. For if passports are creations of the state, passengers are creations of the passage, that is of their own action (voluntary, unaware, or forced) of passing through. Through what?

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41 Andreas Osiander, 'Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth', *International Organization*, 55, 2, 2001, 251–287; Turan Kayaoglu, 'Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations Theory', *International Studies Review*, 12, 2, 2010, 193–217.

42 Christopher Clapham, 'Degrees of Statehood', *Review of International Studies*, 24, 2, 1998, 143–157.

### 3 The Margin: the Line That Oscillates

A circle made of stones, of different shapes and sizes, with a diameter of about 70 meters. Perhaps, at its center, a much larger stone, or group of stones. A pillar of porphyry, not far away. A forest of firs. Left and right, the peaks. Ahead and behind, two icy springs running down in two opposite directions. The sky above. And a road rising and descending, and going through. Every year, at the summer solstice, the sun sets behind a gorge on the summit of a peak to the west, projecting for some moments a circle of light right onto the centre of the circle of stones, while the shadows encompass the grass around it. At 2188 meters above sea level, this has been for some thousands of years the megalithic cromlech of the pass of the Little Saint Bernard, marking the passage of the cycle of seasons, and it is the current political border between Italy and France.<sup>43</sup>

After conquering the place, the Roman empire built here a consular road, respectfully passing by at a short distance from the circle, a temple to Jupiter *Poeninus*, from the Celtic name of those mountains, and a *mansio* – the refreshment station of the roman road network.<sup>44</sup> An older Gallo-Roman temple was built there, too. Centuries later, in the mid eleventh century, an hospice was constructed once more for the safety of travellers, about two hundred years since the last recorded mention of the *mansio*. Fortifications of various kind and fortune were erected during the past three hundred years on the rises dominating the passage. The modern road was laid down from the Italian side in 1858, cutting through and partially demolishing the stone circle. It was more recently redrawn and it currently bends around the cromlech, having left a distinguishable mark in the grass where it run for about a century and a half.

Over many centuries, the border between the two closest municipalities on the valley bottoms and eventually of the two distant states to which they belonged shifted in one or the other direction. It was a bit more into the French

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43 A cromlech is a millennia-old megalithic circle of menhirs. The most famous cromlech in the world is Stonehenge. Anon., *Vie de Saint Bernard de Menthon Archidiacre d'Aoste Fondateur de l'Hospice des Mont et Colonne-Joux*, Paris, Victor Palmé, 1862, 59–92; R., A., Review of Carlo Promis, 'Le Antichità di Aosta Augusta Pretoria Salassorum', *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 17, 1, 33, 1863, 74–81; Guido Cossard, 'Il cromlech del Piccolo San Bernardo', *L'Astronomia rivista di scienza e cultura*, 82, 1988, 34–38; Arnold van Gennep, 'De quelques rites de passage en Savoie', *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 1910, 2–3.

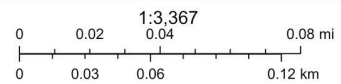
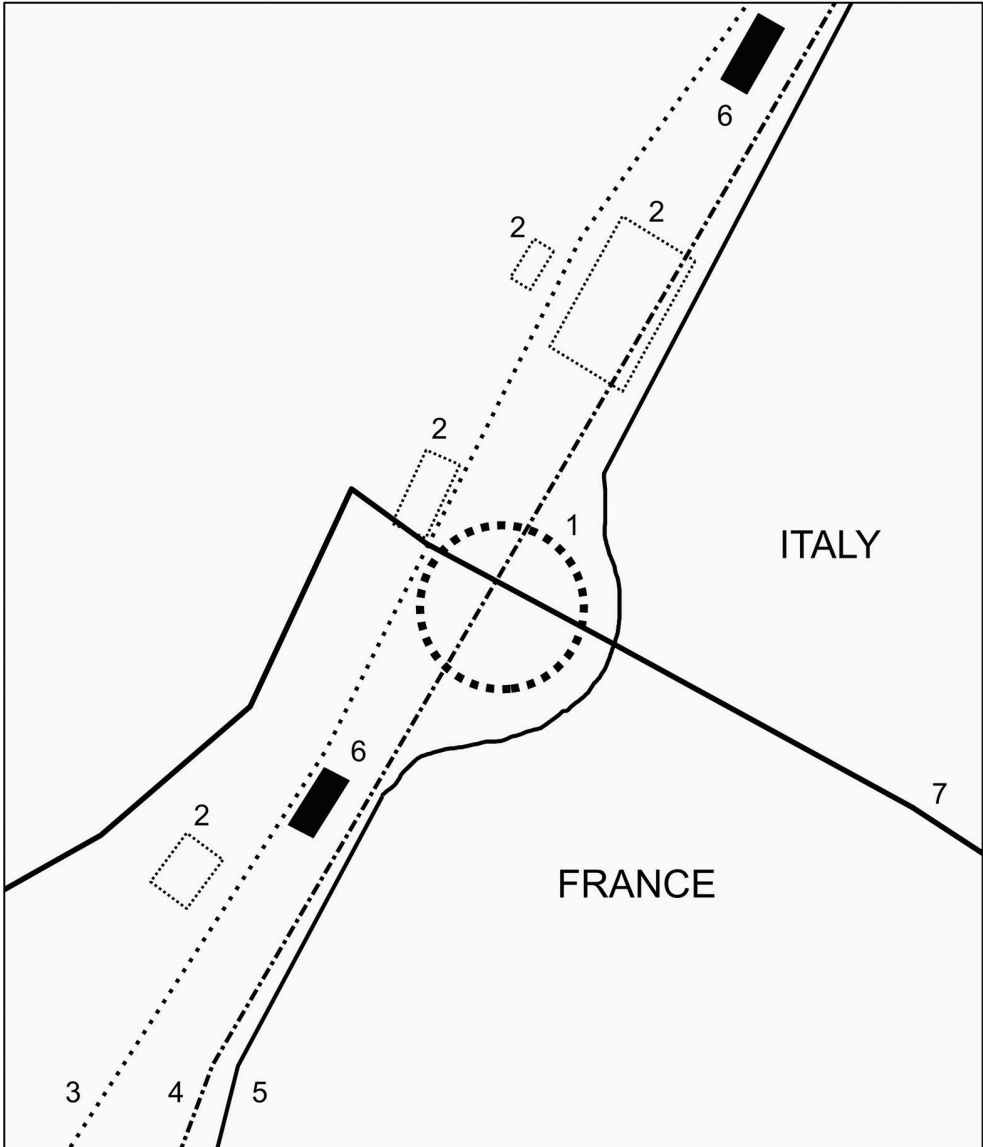
44 The mountain and pass were known in Latin as *Alpis Graia*, but this does not seem to have remained in the built environment of the place. It has given the modern name to that section of the Alps, the *Alpi Graie* in Italian.



MAP A.2 The *cromlech* of the Little St. Bernard (satellite imagery)  
SOURCE: GOOGLE EARTH PRO

side when, in June 1940, Italy declared war on France and launched a disastrous assault on the Little Saint Bernard, failing to capture it and giving France one last victory before its capitulation to the Axis. The postwar peace treaty moved the border towards the Italian side a few hundred meters as a memory of that defeat: the border is now cutting exactly in half the *cromlech*, perpendicular to the dismissed section of the modern road. However, unlike the road, the border line is invisible, if not ‘exag er ement’ on maps. What can be seen on the ground are the two border posts placed a few hundred meters one from the other. In between stands the neutral zone where the sovereignty of one state is practically ending or has ended and that of the other state is beginning or has not begun yet. The *cromlech*, the circle of stones, lies within this ambiguous no state’s land.

The pass of the Little Saint Bernard was among the first cases briefly discussed by Arnold van Gennep in the first essay in which he applied the theory outlined in *Les rites de passage*. In 1910, on the *Revue de l’histoire des religions*, he published ‘De quelques rites de passage en Savoie’, where he analysed the mountainous region of Savoy, straddling contemporary Switzerland, France,



MAP A.3 The cromlech of the Little St. Bernard

Legend: 1 = the cromlech; 2 = temples and the mansio of Celtic and Roman eras; 3 = the Roman road; 4 = paved road (nineteenth century); 5 = paved road (contemporary); 6 = border posts (contemporary); 7 = border between Italy and France (contemporary)

SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE WITH DATA FROM VANNI-DESIDERI, DUFOUR, FRAMARIN, 'NASCITA DI UNA FRONTIERA ALPINA'

and Italy.<sup>45</sup> As in *Les rites de passage*, he began from the 'passage matériel', which in this geographical context corresponded to the 'dévotions' and the 'sanctuaires' associated with the passage of 'cols', mountain passes. That of the Little Saint Bernard was likely the oldest one, but after the Roman conquest most passes saw the erection of sanctuaries to Mercury, god of travellers, overwriting previous Celtic gods. In turn, Christianity later implanted the cult of the Virgin, which flourished across Savoy and the Alps precisely because it was grafted into already existing devotions for the protection of travel. Indeed, went on van Gennep, rural chapels of this kind are everywhere across the Alps, extending their protection to travellers where they would cross a dangerous torrent or a wood infested with wild beasts.

The Little Saint Bernard was no different. As van Gennep hinted, the 'sanctuary' here was marked by a pillar in porphyry, the 'colonnes de Joux', which is commonly referred to as the column of Jupiter, where a rubin known as 'Jupiter's eye' was told to have been placed, until it was replaced by a cross and eventually by the statue of Saint Bernard of Menthon, which still looks over the travellers on the modern road, some hundred of meters from the cromlech. However, van Gennep pointed out, *joux* is a word which 'has doubtlessly nothing to do with Jovis [Jove, or Jupiter]' but designates 'a place planted with firs'.<sup>46</sup> He did not quote the source for this linguistic conjecture, but it might well have been an article appeared on the *Revue Celtique* in 1907, where the linguist Joseph Loth elaborated on his conversations with his colleague Ferdinand de Saussure about the origin of the name Jura for the massif on the Swiss-French border: from *joux*, 'a large forest of firs' and *jur*, 'God' and 'forested peak'.<sup>47</sup> This was accepted in the authoritative dictionary by Georges Dottin, *La Langue Gaouloise*, published in 1918.<sup>48</sup>

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45 Arnold van Gennep, 'De quelques rites de passage en Savoie', *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 1910, 1–83. Arnold van Gennep did not apply directly his new theories to African history, but they were immediately picked up by the Swiss missionary Henri A. Junod, one of the most important ethnographers of the early twentieth-century southern Africa, author of *The Life of a South African Tribe*, 2 vols, Neuchâtel, Imprimerie Attinger Frères, 1912–1913. It is perhaps just a set of curious coincidences that the scholar who studied the most Junod, Patrick Harries, established the Chair in African History at the University of Basel, where the editor of the present volume and author of this Introduction is affiliated – and that Junod himself was a student at the very University of Basel.

46 'Le mot n'a sans doute rien à faire avec Jovis, mais désigne un lieu planté de sapins', in Arnold van Gennep, 'De quelques rites de passage en Savoie', *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 1910, 3.

47 'Une grande forêt de sapins'; 'sommets boisés', in J. Loth, 'Mélanges celtiques', *Revue Celtique*, 28, 1907, 337–341.

48 Georges Dottin, *La langue gaouloise. Grammaire, textes et glossaire*, Paris, Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1918, 263.

Interestingly, both the Little and Great Saint Bernard, the two most important passes of the north-western sector of the Alps, were called after this old Celtic word: Colonne-Joux the former and Mont-Joux the latter – that is, before Bernard from Menthon, archdeacon of Aosta, ascended to the passes, in 1050, and defeated both the Devil and the bands of ‘Saracins’ who were stationed there to rob and kidnap travellers and pilgrims. A nineteenth-century religious brother of Bernard narrated the story ambiguously referring to the physical pulling of the ‘statue of Jupiter’ down from its pillar on Mont-Joux, the modern pass of the Great Saint Bernard, which was in this narrative associated with the Devil and the ‘Saracins’. This would signal the return of peace and the final arrival of Christianity on the two mountain passes.<sup>49</sup>

The Little Saint Bernard and the other Alpine passes occupy a fundamental place in Arnold van Gennep’s system as expressed in *Les rites de passage*. They are a place of passage, of course, but more specifically they are a *marge*, a margin: a marginal place. In his system, the margin is the neutral space in between borders, where the magico-religious and social passage takes place, and where



FIGURE A.2 *Colonne Joux*, unknown author, c.1902–1910  
 SOURCE: CATALOGO GENERALE DEI BENI CULTURALI, ‘PICCOLO S. BERNARDO – COLONNA DI JOUX’, [HTTPS://CATALOGO.BENICULTURALI.IT/DETAIL/PHOTOGRAPHICHERITAGE/0100348911](https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/photographicheritage/0100348911) (LAST ACCESSED ON 10 OCTOBER 2024)

49 Anon., *Vie de Saint Bernard de Menthon*, 59–92.

the passenger 'oscillates between two worlds'. Such passage is inherently dangerous, as the crosses planted here and there on the Alps remind us: in van Gennep's analysis and differently from sanctuaries, they are not located to protect travellers, but to point out where an 'accident' had taken place, or to mark a destination of pilgrimage and therefore to count the remaining days necessary to obtain an indulgence.<sup>50</sup> Physically, the margin is often a desert, a marsh, and 'above all the virgin forest'. Historically, van Gennep defined the margin as the conceptual kernel of a precise institution, the *marche* or *marque*, the march, with a long past.

Chez nous, actuellement, un pays touche l'autre; il n'en était pas de même autrefois, alors que le sol chrétien ne formait encore qu'une partie seulement de l'Europe; autour de ce sol, il existait toute une bande neutre, divisée dans la pratique en sections, les marches. Elles ont peu à peu reculé, puis disparu, mais le terme de lettre de marche (ou de marque) garda le sens de lettre de passage d'un territoire à un autre à travers la zone neutre. Les ones de cet ordre jouèrent un rôle important dans l'antiquité classique, surtout en Grèce; elles étaient le lieu de marché, ou le lieu de combat. Chez les demi civilisés, on rencontre cette même institution de la zone; mais ses limites sont moins précises, parce que les territoires déjà appropriés sont à la fois peu nombreux et peu habités. Ces zones sont ordinairement un désert, un marécage et surtout la forêt vierge, où chacun peut voyager et chasser de plein droit. Étant donné le pivotement de la notion de sacré, les deux territoires appropriés sont sacrés pour qui se trouve dans la zone, mais la zone est sacrée pur les habitants des deux territoires. Quiconque passe de l'un à l'autre se trouve ainsi matériellement et magico-religieusement, pendant un temp plus ou moins long, dans une situation spéciale: il flotte entre deux mondes. C'est cette situation que je désigne du nom de *marge*, et l'un des objets du présent livre est de démontrer que cette marge idéale et matérielle à la fois se retrouve, plus ou moins prononcée, dans toutes les cérémonies qui accompagnent le passage d'une situation magico-religieuse ou sociale à une autre.<sup>51</sup>

50 van Gennep, 'De quelques rites de passage en Savoie', 4.

51 'Here, today, all countries touch each other; it was not like this in the past, when Christian soil was but a part of Europe; surrounding such soil, there existed a neutral band, which was practically subdivided in sections, the marches. They have little by little recoiled, then they disappeared, but the term 'lettre de marche (ou de marque)' preserves the meaning of letter of passage from a territory to another territory across the neutral zone. Those of this type played an important role in classical antiquity, in particular in Greece; they were

By making the connection between the concepts of *marge* and *marche*, van Gennep was not defining the march a marginal place, as most studies on borders do: on the opposite, he was distilling the concept of margin by abstraction from the historical example of the march. His historical application of the latter term, however, was much broader than the specific historical context in which it had first emerged, reaching back into ancient Greece, and so the abstract meaning was also accrued. The difference between definition and abstraction lies at the core of the present approach, which shies away from the attempt to propose clear series of definitions and to create its own typology and terminology, as for example was attempted by Bradley Parker in 2006.<sup>52</sup> The definitions of march, border, frontier, *limes* are intended here to be historically contextual, not universal. It is not here advanced, however, a full ‘comparative history of borderlands’,<sup>53</sup> as Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel proposed. The elements of commonality of the various ‘borders’, their partial overlapping, perhaps a similar conceptual core, are here abstracted into a general discussion which revolves around three figures: the line, the margin, and the threshold.

As it is well known to historians, things change and words change. In this case, borders change, move, or vanish, but the words used to define them change too, in meaning, form and are often wholly substituted by new ones, which are sometimes even borrowed from foreign languages. Together, the two developments configured the great variety of terms which often marks the pages of border studies, and which conventionally push scholars to advance their own definitions. Instead of cleaning up the catalogue of historical of cases into precise definitions for a new vocabulary of border lines, I propose to focus on the very movement, the oscillation of meaning and historical reality

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market places, or battlefields. Among the half-civilised, we encounter the same institution of the zone, but the limits are less precise, because the territories already settled are both few and little peopled. These zones are commonly a desert, a marsh, and above all the virgin forest, where all chan travel and hunt rightfully. Hinging on the notion of sacred, taken territories are sacred for those who found themselves in the zone, but the zone is sacred for the inhabitants of both territories. They who pass from one to the other find themselves both materially nad magico-religiousluy, for a more or lest extended perod of time, in a special condition: they oscillate between two worlds. This is the situation that I identify with the name of *marge* [margin], and one of the objectives of the present book is to demonstrate that this ideal and material margin can be found, more or less developed, in all ceremonies following the passage from a magico-religious situation to another one’. van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, 23–24. Translation by Ettore Morelli.

52 Bradley J. Parker, ‘Toward an Understanding of Borderland Processes’, *American Antiquity*, 71, 1, 2006, 77–100.

53 Michiel Baud, Willem van Schendel, ‘Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands’, *Journal of World History*, 8, 2, 1997, 211–242.

as a way to reflect on what makes the border so difficult and yet captivating to discuss. I argue, it is the movement on the line and of the line, and the linguistic short circuits it has produced.

Strictly speaking the march, before being a 'neutral band' as in van Genep, had been the militarised border fief of the Carolingian empire and of its successor states, which was assigned to a loyal man as Count or Margrave to defend it from its enemies. As studied among others by Julia M.H. Smith, between the eighth and the tenth century marches were created in Brittany, Catalonia, Denmark, Austria, and Italy.<sup>54</sup> The word was there spoken in the Old High German as *marka*, 'sign, border', which gave *mark* in modern German and English and *mearc* in Old English.<sup>55</sup> Before then, the word had appeared in writing in the shape of a Latin neologism, *marcha*, with the meaning of 'borders' at least since the seventh century, in the earlier compilation of Germanic laws which regulated various Romano-Germanic kingdoms which later fell under the Carolingians.<sup>56</sup> *Marka* was the linguistic basis for the Carolingian Eastern March (Ostmark, Austria) and the Dane March (Denmark), and for the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia and eventually the Marches, the English region on the border with the Romano-Briton kingdoms of Cymru, Wales. *Marca*, the Latin neologism by which Carolingian marches were defined in official documents, originated the Italian and Spanish *marca*, which were used for the first name of Catalonia, Marca Hispanica, and is still used for an Italian region which used to be the southern border of the empire, the Marche, placed between the Adriatic sea and the Appenines, between the Muslim, Lombard, and Norman south and the nascent State of the Church.<sup>57</sup> Friuli, Strassoldo's

54 Julia M.H. Smith, 'Fines Imperii: The Marches', in Rosamond McKitterick, *The New Cambridge Medieval History: Volume 11 c.700-c.900*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 169–189.

55 Mark 1 f. "Grenze, Grenzland, Randgebiet", ahd. marka "Grenze, Ende, Grenzland, Zeichen" (8./9. Jh.), in *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, <https://www.dwds.de/wb/Mark#3> (last accessed on 17 October 2023); "March, noun 3", in *Oxford English Dictionary*, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/march\\_n3?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use&tl=true](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/march_n3?tab=meaning_and_use&tl=true), (last accessed on 17 October 2023).

56 This was the case in the *Pactum legis Alamannorum*, xxxix, 1. The *Pactum* is dated to c.613. Theodore John Rivers, *Laws of the Alamans and Bavarians*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016 [1977], 56.

57 Note that Catalonia, or Gothia or Hispania, had already been a border region for Muslim Iberia and it had been conceptualised as such, as Philippe Senac studied. Smith, 'Fines Imperii', 169–189; Cullen J. Chandler, 'Carolingian Catalonia: The Spanish March and the Franks, c.750-c.1050', *History Compass*, 11, 9, 2013, 739–750; Philippe Senac, 'Islam et chrétienté dans l'Espagne du haut Moyen Age: la naissance d'une frontière', *Studia Islamica*, 89, 1999, 91–108.

homeland, was a Carolingian *marka* too, after having already been the first Lombard border duchy in the sixth to eighth centuries.

By no means neutral spaces where one could travel, trade, or hunt at will, Carolingian *marka* were however both zones and lines, or at least sets of lines that were to be crossed in progression: in order to enter the march, and then to leave it, moving from the capital of the kingdom to the enemy lands. Different behaviours and actions were allowed and forbidden after each passage of one of these lines, such as plundering and the gathering of provisions.<sup>58</sup> A *marka* was, moreover, a dangerous place. Charlemagne's knight Roland, himself Count of the *marka* of Brittany, fell in the Basque Pyrenees in 778, during the first of the Carolingian engagements in what later became the Marca Hispanica. Almost two hundred years later, in 955, the king of East Francia Otto defeated the last of the Hungarian incursions into central Europe on the river Lech and 'in accordance to Carolingian tradition', he 'reorganized the frontier commands', as Marc Bloch wrote.

Two marches were created: one in the Alps, on the Mur; the other, further north, on the Enns. The latter, soon to acquire the name of the eastern command – *Ostarrichi*, from which Austria is derived – reached the forest of Vienna as early as the end of the tenth century, and the Leitha and Morava towards the middle of the eleventh.<sup>59</sup>

Over time, however, the *marka* did fall out of the direct control of the Carolingian states as the latter declined, and the former turned into the autonomous, if not neutral areas which are remembered as *marche* and *marque* by van Genep and as march by English-speaking modern scholars.<sup>60</sup> That is, until another group of states reached out to include them, centuries later, whilst slowly turning so-called jurisdictional sovereignties into territorial ones: what we call the 'modern states'. As Peter Sahlins studied, Catalonia, the old Marca Hispanica, was eventually the site of a territorial demarcation between the kingdoms of France and Spain. The process started with the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659, itself a consequence of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. In 1659 the mountain range was for the first time officially recognised as the 'natural frontier', but at

58 Smith, *Fines Imperii*, 177.

59 Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society: Volume I The Growth of Ties of Dependence*, London, Routledge, 2004 [1939], 11. 'Saracins', 'Vikings', and 'Hungarians' composed the three last 'invasions' threatening Europe in the late eight to tenth centuries, raiding and eventually settling in the interstices of Romano-Germanic kingdoms and Carolingian successor states.

60 The process is discussed for Catalonia in Chandler, 'Carolingian Catalonia', 740–750.

the same time older feudal sovereignties were partially respected, creating a complex situation when the County of Cerdanya, assigned to Spain, was split to create a Spanish enclave within the French side.<sup>61</sup> However, Sahlins pointed out, 'the boundary line itself appeared only in 1868 when the final Treaty of Bayonne laid down the official boundary stones that separated the national territorial states of France and Spain'.<sup>62</sup> That is, the border line was transferred from the maps to the physical landscape only at the end of the long transition from 'jurisdictional' to 'territorial' sovereignty.

Incidentally, the 1659 negotiations produced what is still the cornerstone study on the Early Medieval Carolingian *marka* of Catalonia, the book *Marca Hispanica sive Limes Hispanicus*, published by Pierre de Marca in 1688. They also produced a series of meetings on a very small island on the river Bidasoa, which was to become the northern section of the frontier between the two kingdoms. Pheasant Island or Island of the Conference was not too far from where Roland had fallen in 778, and it was in the immediate proximity of where various Spanish and French kings had met in parley and in battle in the previous centuries. In 1660, a year after the treaty, Louis XIV of France married the Infanta of Spain Maria Teresa on the island.<sup>63</sup> Bridges were built for the occasion on the two sides, which were later destroyed. The island was then considered neutral territory, but it still is: a condominium between Spain and France, the sovereignty over the small piece of land amidst the Bidassoa River shifts every six months from one state to the other. The island itself is uninhabited and it is forbidden to visit it. Like the cromlech of the Lige Saint Bernard, Pheasant Island has remained a margin, a place of passage between two worlds, and an oscillating line.

Things change and words change. As hinted above, the Carolingian *marka* were on official documents written in Latin as *limites*, *confinia*, *termini*, *fines*, but Julia Smith warned that the latter 'do not correspond to the modern categories commonly used by geographers and anthropologists, who distinguish between a boundary (linear) and a frontier (zonal)'. She added that 'Carolingian Latin had no vocabulary specific to the farthest reaches of imperial power' where borders were in fact both linear and zonal at the same time.<sup>64</sup> This ambiguity was brought further and even complicated in the context of

61 Peter Sahlins, 'The Nation in the Village: State-Building and Communal Struggles in the Catalan Borderland during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *The Journal of Modern History*, 60, 2, 1988, 234–263. See also Asiwaju, 'Borderlands in Africa, 253–272.

62 Sahlins, 'The Nation in the Village', 239.

63 Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*, University of California Press, Berkeley Los Angeles and Oxford, CA, 1991, 25–60

64 Smith, *Fines Imperii*, 176.

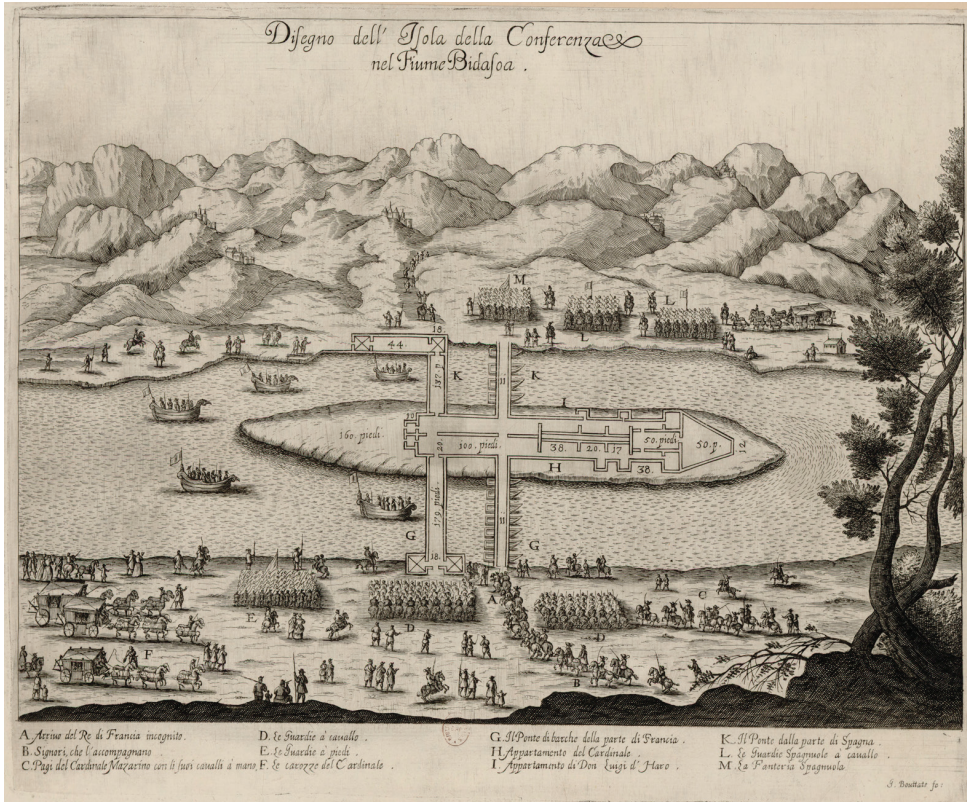
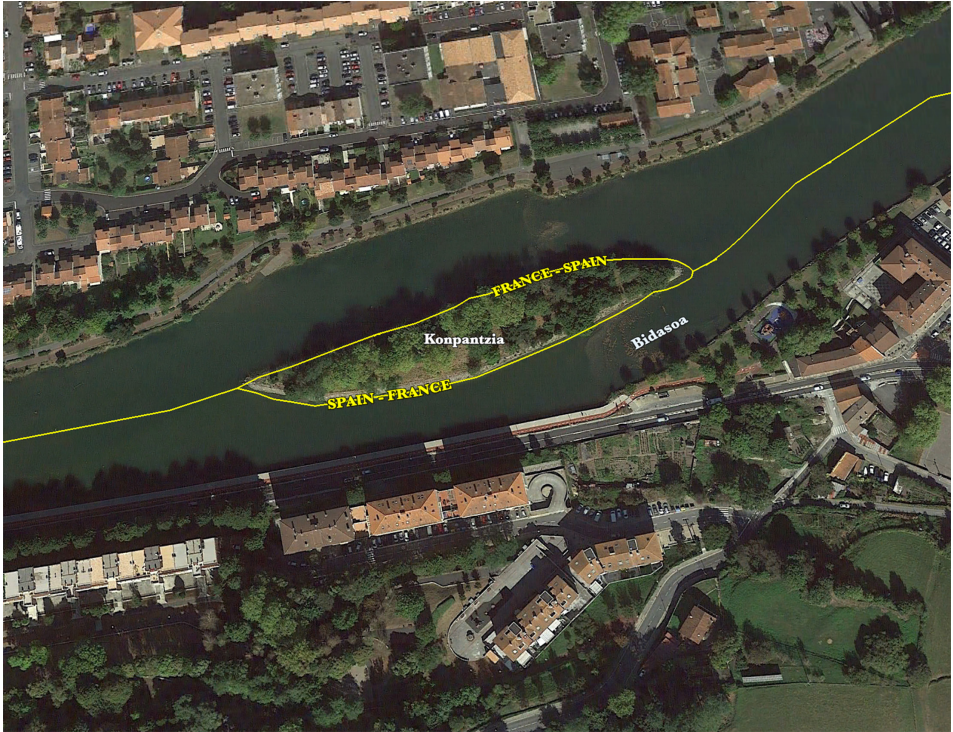


FIGURE A.3 The Island of the Conference

SOURCE: 'DISEGNO DELL'ISOLA DELLA CONFERENZA NEL FIUME BIDASOA', GASPAR BOUTTAS, C.1690

sixteenth-century negotiations about the border on the Pyrenees, which at the same time changed the practical and legal reality of the border, and associated to the older Latin *marca* and *limes* another set of terms which would become integral to the discourse on modern states. Indeed, the Spanish *frontera* and the French *frontier* consolidated to refer to the so-called modern concept of state boundaries or borders, precisely as it evolved between 1659 and 1868, or on a broader continental scale from supposedly 1648 to 1914. A similar meaning has the Italian *frontiera*, which is mostly shared with another Italian word of Latin derivation, *confine*: they are the border lines, the boundaries; they are linear, not zonal. The English word *frontier*, however, has a very different meaning and it is usually adopted for areas – as opposed to lines – without a strong



MAP A.4 The Island of the Conference (satellite imagery)  
SOURCE: GOOGLE EARTH PRO

sovereignty, or any form of recognisable claims to the land, where people move at will.<sup>65</sup>

The lexical short circuit is somewhat hidden in a fundamental book which studied borders, territory, and politics in Africa: *The African Frontier*, edited by Igor Kopytoff in 1987. In his famous introduction, ‘The Internal African Frontier’, Kopytoff elaborated on the process by which African societies were continuously created through movement, fragmentation, and aggregation. As it is well known, Kopytoff reworked and reframed the concept of frontier which was introduced in modern historiography by the north American historian Frederick J. Turner about a century before, in 1893. In the perspective of the author of ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’, and the subsequent *The Frontier in American History*, the frontier had been the supposedly

65 Similar points were made in Parker, ‘Toward an Understanding of Borderland Processes’.

thinly populated region where various groups of settlers established in quick progression. It was placed on the hinterland of the original Thirteen Colonies, and it expanded in a series of linear tidal waves from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast. The frontier was the cradle of American civilization which finally rooted liberty and individualism into the national consciousness of the completely colonised continent.<sup>66</sup> These virtues, stressed Turner, were the product of the 'crossing of a continent', of the 'winning [of] a wilderness', and of 'developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life'.<sup>67</sup> Echoes could still be heard of the 'wide frontier' that 'had been laid naked' in the opening pages of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, and of its 'fearful tale[s] of midnight murder, in which the natives of the forests were the principal and barbarous actors'.<sup>68</sup> That frontier, the West, had been won, so Turner celebrated.

To this American frontier, Kopytoff opposed an 'internal' African frontier as a continuous development by which African societies grew, splintered, occupied the interstices, innovated on themselves, ever changing and adapting to new situations but at the same time keeping and conserving their original aspects.

The thesis being explored here also proposes that many, indeed most, African societies were formed around an initial core-group developed under the relatively undramatic conditions of local frontiers. The process has been repeated again and again in the course of African culture history, giving African societies and their shared political culture a frontier cast. This political culture, in turn, has systemically led to the continuous reproduction of new frontier polities at the peripheries of mature African societies. At the same time, the continuous recreation of the frontier has

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66 Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the year 1893*, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1894, 199–227; Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1940 [1920]. See also a discussion of Turner by Pierluigi Valsecchi in this volume, Chapter 3, "No palaver about 1 or 2 villages with 10 or 20 inhabitants": Precolonial Borders and the Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire Frontier (Seventeenth-Twentieth century)

67 Turner, 'The Significance', 199.

68 James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, London, The Electric Book Company, London, 2001 [1826], 20–21.

maintained an African frontier-conditioned ideology in the political consciousness of African metropolitan societies.<sup>69</sup>

Admittedly, despite its merits, Kopytoff's frontier theory shows today some limits. Howard has criticised its fundamental terminology, which included elements such as 'society', 'culture', 'metropole', 'maturity', 'intruders' that have become by now obsolete or at least contested in the field. In particular, in Howard's critique, such terms include a value judgement which too univocally defines a teleological development, where some historical actors are intended to be bound to progress from one point to the other of the process because more 'mature' than others.<sup>70</sup> Casentini pointed out in addition that Kopytoff's analysis struggled to integrate the border proper, which is anyway an important factor in African history, before and most crucially during and after colonialism, side by side with frontier dynamics.<sup>71</sup> Paul Nugent and others have found a solution in adopting the concept of border for 'the physical limits where the exercise of a given system of sovereignty terminates' and the concept of frontier for 'zones of engagements that lie beyond any exercise of routinized rule'.<sup>72</sup> All the above points are valid, but I would like to propose a different perspective in the way of a very rough historiographical sketch.

Kopytoff's frontier retained a somewhat colonial undertone – he openly spoke of African metropolises, after all, a term which is rooted in the archaic Greek colonisation of the western Mediterranean and the Black Sea.<sup>73</sup> Aspects of Turner's colonial frontier were manifested in the phenomenon which started the African frontier process, which according to Kopytoff would be the initial 'African tidal frontier' – the so-called 'Bantu expansion' – that had submergued 'Pygmoids, Bushmanoids and Cushites' and had 'left the continent very sparsely populated'.<sup>74</sup> Kopytoff also explicitly defined the 'frontier process' as a colonial project in which an area is declared empty and ripe for colonisation: 'the American frontier was a frontier to American settlers; to the Indians,

69 Igor Kopytoff, 'The Internal African Frontier', in Igor Kopytoff, ed., *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1987, 1–78, 7.

70 Howard, 'Nodes', 51–54.

71 Casentini, *Al di là del fiume*, 121.

72 Nugent, *Boundaries, Communities, and State Making in West Africa*, 15. See also Paul Nugent, 'Arbitrary Lines and the People's Minds: A Dissenting View on Colonial Boundaries in West Africa', in Paul Nugent, A.I. Asiwaju, eds., *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities*, London, Cassell, 1996, 35–67, 35–41.

73 'Metropole' or μητρόπολις literally means 'mother city' and refers to the Greek city-state from which the original founder of a Greek colony departed.

74 Kopytoff, 'Internal African Frontier', 10.

it was their home. [...] And so too with the frontier in Africa. The definition of the frontier as “empty” is political and made from the intruders’ perspective.’<sup>75</sup>

It seems that the colonial element of the frontier was retained in places of the African continent which experienced a stronger settler colonialism. In southern Africa, the frontier became a historiographical concept in a colonial and colonialist sense *à la* Turner in the 1920s and 1930s, when nationalist and liberal historians debated whether South African frontiers had been the cradle of the new nation’s virtues, or of its vices.<sup>76</sup> Then, in the late 1960s, it was turned on its head by Martin Legassick, who denounced racism and violence as the product of nineteenth-century imperial metropolises, and defined the frontiers as places of mixture and freedom.<sup>77</sup> The concept was finally accepted in the sense proposed by Kopytoff in the 2010s, as an African ‘internal’ rather than colonial and ‘external’ factor, and it is now mainly applied in archaeology to talk about periods with little or no written evidence.<sup>78</sup> And yet, two broad regions are still well known as the Northern and the Eastern Frontiers for

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75 Kopytoff, ‘Internal African Frontier’, 25. On this basis, it is possible to argue that Kopytoff’s idea constituted an inspiration for John Iliffe’s African ‘colonising society’ pattern of African history as encased in *Africans: The History of a Continent*, first published in 1995, despite no reference to Kopytoff’s book being made. John Iliffe, *Africans: History of a Continent*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007 [1995]. See also the discussion of the ‘Bantu waves’ theory in this volume, Ettore Morelli, Chapter 2, ‘Gyzikoa: Twin-Folk and Threshold on the Orange River Border, Southern Africa 1686–1796’

76 Erik A. Walker, *A History of Southern Africa*, Longmans, London, 1962 [1928], 195–233.

77 Martin Legassick, ‘The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography’, *Collected Seminar Papers: Institute of Commonwealth Studies*, 2, 1972, 1–33; Martin Legassick, *The Politics of a South African Frontier: The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana and the Missionaries, 1780–1840*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2010 [1969]; Martin Legassick, ‘The Northern Frontier to c.1840: The rise and decline of the Griqua people’, in Richard Elphick, Hermann Giliomee, eds., *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1840*, Moddletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1988 [1979], 358–420; Hermann Giliomee, ‘Process in Development of the Southern African Frontier’, Leonard Thompson, Howard Lamar, ‘Comparative Frontier History’, Christopher Saunders, ‘Political Process in the Southern African Frontier Zones’, in Howard Lamar, Leonard Thompson, eds., *The Frontier in History: North America and South Africa Compared*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1981, 3–13, 76–119, 19–171; Timothy J. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and The Origins of The Racial Order*, David Philip, Cape Town, London, 1996, 170–208.

78 Simon Hall, ‘Farming Communities of the Second Millennium: Internal Frontiers, Identity, Continuity and Change’, in Hamilton, Mbenga, Ross, *Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume 1*, 112–167; Gavin Whitelaw, Simon Hall, ‘Archaeological Contexts and the Creation of Social Categories Before the Zulu Kingdom’, in Carolyn Hamilton, Nessa Leibhammer, eds., *Tribing and Untribing the Archive*, 2 vols., Pietermaritzburg University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2016, vol. 1, 146–181.

having been the theatre of nineteenth-century sweeping and violent colonial expansion.<sup>79</sup>

Even less evident or commented upon than this colonial side was Kopytoff's nod to the European Middle Ages. Kopytoff, as many others still do today, saw precolonial African polities as made of concentric circles of decreasing sovereignty and control until 'beyond a certain point, control became erratic and, finally, impossible – in the way of classical "marches"'. Even further, came the area of the 'potential frontier'.<sup>80</sup> A 'classical march' is, arguably, a militarised border region, the *marka*; what was called into play here is the stereotypical march, that is the linguistic drift that the term experienced in European languages in the past millennium, until it was intended as the neutral region without any clear sovereignty which was located between Medieval states during the Carolingian decline.

Thus, by creating this point of contact between the European march and the African frontier, Kopytoff was hinging on a paradoxical aspect of the intellectual lineage of the terminology he adopted. At the end of the nineteenth century the frontier was consolidated in the meaning of 'modern' state border line as the Spanish, French, and Italian *frontera*, *frontier*, and *frontiera* on the European continent, but it was also framed by Frederick Turner as something wholly different and yet distinctly European in north America: as the area in which non-European sovereignties were systematically disregarded and progressively erased from history, the very keystone to the colonisation of the north American continent. A similar development was underway in southern Africa. Such geographical strabism created an essential difference between spaces in the imperial metropole and spaces in the colonial dependencies and, as we know, was a very much typical structure of nineteenth-century high imperialism. Incidentally, this process found in the above-mentioned parallelism between national passports and freedom on one side and colonial passes and control on the other side another significant epiphenomenon. Many decades later, Kopytoff succeeded in making that colonial frontier into something typically African, tellingly hinting at an older example in European history, the Medieval march. In this, a temporal element was added, making the frontier an essential 'other' from modern Europe both in time and space and completing its extraction from Euro-American modernity. To some extent, the African frontier was the modern border's mirror image.

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79 Nigel Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier: Colonist & Khoisan on the Cape's Northern Frontier in the 18th Century*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2005.

80 Kopytoff, 'Internal African Frontier', 29.

It must be stressed that both moments of the process of scholarly framing and application of the concept of frontier, so briefly outlined here, were so successful because of their great heuristic value. They were not mistaken. The frontier in this sense is a fundamental concept which serves well to analyse dynamic, aggressive developments in which one human community frames itself as entitled to expand in any possible form (language, trade, spiritual rootedness, settlement, territorial conquest, human subjugation) into another territory, with or without a military confrontation. It should not be restricted to the history of European colonialism, but it might have entailed different elements in different times and spaces. However, it is a framing that selects and obscures other, competing ideas about that very territory: as Kopytoff wrote, the ideas of those for whom it was 'home'.

This links to another important short circuit in the common vocabulary of border lines. Let us start from considering the fact that *marka* was often times translated in Carolingian Latin as *limes*, that is the quintessential militarised border of the Roman empire, made of networks of forts or *castra*, ditches, and long sections of actual walls. The physical manifestations associated with the concept immediately recall ideas of fixity, resistance, and barrier perpendicular to the direction of a possible invasion. It should therefore come as a surprise what was argued by Benjamin Isaac in a detailed article in 1988: 'there is in Latin no term to indicate what modern frontier studies describe as *limes*, a defended border' and 'there can be no justification for calling any chain of forts in a frontier area a *limes*'.<sup>81</sup> The Latin word *limes* did not mean *limes* as intended in modernist jargon. *Limes*, Isaac explained, was employed for centuries to refer to a military road that was 'opened', 'cut', or 'constructed' into a forest, usually a dangerous one, in Germania. In time, by the fourth century, the term *limes* shifted to indicate a border district under the command of a military commander, the *dux*, but it was an administrative concept not specifically related to the particular fortifications of such district. It could be added, this is the meaning which originated the Medieval institution of the duchy.<sup>82</sup> Hadrian's Wall, goes on Isaac, was never called a *limes*, but *vallum*, 'wall', and on the opposite the eastern deserts where no linear fortifications were ever

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81 Benjamin Isaac, 'The Meaning of the Terms Limes and Limitanei', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 78, 1988, 125–147, 146.

82 Note: Friuli was erected as a Duchy by the Lombard kings of Italy, that is it was made into a militarised border district, before it became a Carolingian *marka* as mentioned above. In modern border studies terminology, this means understanding the *limes* as zonal, instead of as linear, which is the opposite of the common usage of the word.

erected were called *limes* at some point.<sup>83</sup> More recently Greg Fisher came to a very similar conclusion by studying specifically the very eastern *limes* of Arabia and Palestina.

It is now clear that the *limes* can no longer be considered a fortified line where the primary concern was to protect those that lay on one side from those on the other; rather, the *limes* in southern Arabia and Palestine is best understood as a settled zone of frontier country where the nomadic and sedentary populations merged, and where forts and fortified buildings existed to serve a number of diverse purposes.<sup>84</sup>

Even more recent is the publication of the research by Jesse Casana, David D. Goodman, and Carolin Ferwerda, who have reviewed hundreds of Roman forts in what was considered a defensive system between modern Syria and Iraq, where the Roman empire bordered with the mostly hostile Sassanid empire. They effectively debate if *limes* was ‘a wall or a road’ noting that the system was shaped as a network of connections between the two empires, across the deserts, and proposing that their function was to protect travellers from dangers and offer refreshment during the journey as much as confronting possible invading forces, which would have followed that very routes anyway.<sup>85</sup> This *limes* was developed both longitudinally and perpendicularly between the two hostile empires.

Neither Fisher nor Isaac have proposed why the meaning of *limes* eventually shifted to that of fortified border, but one part of the answer might well be in the choice operated by Carolingian jurists to adopt this Latin word, among others, to translate the new military border district, the *marka*. Another part might lie in the Early Modern, post-Westphalian, reception of such older complex when elaborating new territorial sovereignties, as in de Marca’s *Marca Hispanica sive Limes Hispanicus*. Finally, a part was possibly played by the fact that modern historical studies on the Roman *limes* were very much part of that German erudite national identity-making which found full expression after the German unification, but which was rooted in the Renaissance. Of course,

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83 Conversely, it should also be noted that the Marches, or the western border of the kingdom of Mercia, are the location of a fortification built to fend off the Welsh kingdoms, Offa’s Dyke, a linear earthwork about 130 kilometers long.

84 Greg Fisher, ‘A New Perspective on Rome’s Desert Frontier’, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 336, 2004, 49–60, 54.

85 Jesse Casana, David D. Goodman, Carolin Ferwerda, ‘A Wall or a Road? A Remote Sensing-based Investigation of Fortifications on Rome’s Eastern Frontier’, *Antiquity*, First View, 2023, 1–18.

nineteenth-century scholarly debates on German borders were followed by graver thoughts and actions after 1933.<sup>86</sup>

As mentioned above, *Limites*, the plural of *limes*, but also a French word, was used interchangeably with *frontières* in seventeenth and eighteenth-century France.<sup>87</sup> Borders, in fact, were so often fought for and fought at by Early Modern and Modern European states that the enduring association with a military semantic field was not so unwarranted, peaking with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, when state borders were closed and frontiers became fronts.<sup>88</sup> The process was ongoing for centuries and entailed the construction of border fortifications, including on supposedly 'natural' borders. It was precisely in the seventeenth century that the valleys and peaks of the Little Saint Bernard started to be dotted with ever growing bastions and artillery batteries to protect the local rulers from southern enemies. Once the Dukes of Savoy moved their capital from Chambéry on the northern side to Turin on the southern side, the Alpine mountain passes became the last opportunity to stop the advance of an invading French army, before it reached the Italian plains. In this context, the Alpine fortifications were an internal fortified system. When, shortly before the Italian unification, the kings of Piedmont ceded their old homeland of Savoy to France, the Piedmontese fortifications of the Little Saint Bernard were mirrored by French ones which pointed their guns at the Italian

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86 Mario Becker, Egon Schallmayer, 'Limes', in Henrich Beck, Dieter Geunich, Heiko Steuer, eds., *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, Berlin, De Gruyter online 2010 [in print 2001], available at [https://www.degruyter.com/database/GAO/entry/RGA\\_3379/html](https://www.degruyter.com/database/GAO/entry/RGA_3379/html) (last accessed on 17 November 2023). An example of politically-motivated modern German erudition on classical and ancient Roman and Germanic times is offered by the case of Tacitus' *Germania*. See C.B. Krebs, 'A dangerous book: the reception of the *Germania*', in A.J. Woodman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 280–299.

87 Sahlins, *Boundaries*.

88 The Italian word *frontiera* definitely participates in the same warlike undertones, as captured by a rather famous patriotic song composed in 1918 to celebrate the Italian victory in the First World War, the *La leggenda del Piave*: 'L'esercito marciava/Per raggiungere la frontiera/Per far contro il nemico una barriera', in English: 'The army marched/to reach the *frontiera*/to erect against the enemy a barrier'. It was of course actually the Italian army, not the Austrian one, which mostly tried to cross the border in order to 'redeem' Italian lands beyond. In a telling poetic choice, the Anarchist antimilitarist song *Gorizia tu sei maledetta* quite differently sings 'Voi chiamate il campo d'onore/Questa terra di là dei confini/Qui si muore gridando assassini/Maledetti sarete un dì', in English: 'You call field of honour/This land on the other side of the *confini*/Here we die while crying 'assassins'/You shall be cursed one day'.

side, and the pass truly became an Alpine military *frontiera*, as it was when it was fought at in June 1940.<sup>89</sup>

For centuries, on the pass itself, the Colonne-Joux, the pillar of porphyry, kept witnessing the passage of travellers. The forest of firs which may have given its name, the *joux*, was nowhere to be found, if it had ever existed: the pass sits at the upper altitude limit of these trees. It is intriguing, however, that some of the lexical variety related to borders in European languages mentioned so far show a connection with forests. The Roman *limes* was cut across the menacing forests of Germania. The Carolingian *marka* was proclaimed on the forested peaks of the Pyrenees and of the Austrian Alps, but the Old High German word was a cognate of the Norse *mork*, 'forest', and that is still the meaning in modern Norwegian, and must have been so across central Europe before Germanic languages were transcribed. Meanwhile, however, *marka* did not develop into the modern word for 'border' in that Germanic central Europe that enforced Carolingian marches in the first place. In modern German, and modern Dutch, that word is now *grenze*, a word of Slavonic origins which spread across Germanic languages between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries: probably received from the Old Polish *granica*, it originally meant 'forest, none the less'.<sup>90</sup>

From the point of view of states, forests are places of paranoia and anxiety, the anthesis of borders because they are difficult to patrol and police. From the point of view of travellers, forests are places of danger, be that because they are peopled by wild beasts, wild men, or wild spirits: they are therefore one of the archetypal places of passage, where the existence of the passenger oscillates between life and death. They are also places where the passage itself oscillates in one or the other direction, as sources of danger move and change. Such oscillation is what constitutes the core of the *marge*, the margin, the concept abstracted by van Gennepe from the lexical and historical tangle of the *marka*. The oscillation can be studied, described, and put to use. One could build around and across the lines of light and shadow that are drawn and redrawn by the sun in the middle of the *cromlech* at every cycle. The oscillation can also be regulated, controlled, and even replicated, reducing this area

89 Andrea Vanni-Desideri, Nathalie Dufour, Patrizia Framarin, 'Nascita di una frontiera alpina. Il Colle del Piccolo San Bernardo (Valle d'Aosta/Haute-Tarentaise)', in Guido Vannini, Michele Nucciotti, eds., *La Transgiordania nei secoli xii-xiii e le 'frontiere' del Mediterraneo medievale*, Oxford, Archaeopress, 2012, 432–448.

90 'Grenze', f. 'Linie, die zwei Staaten, Länder, Grundstücke oder andere Bereiche voneinander trennt'. Mhd. *graniza*, *graenizen*, *greniz* stammt aus apoln. *granica*, *gráńca* 'Grenzzeichen, Grenzlinie' (poln. *granica*), in *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, <https://www.dwds.de/wb/Grenze#etymwb-1> (last accessed on 20 October 2023).

of neutral danger to an uninhabited island on a river border, or an alpine grass-field between two border posts. Thus, a *marge* is turned into a *seuil*, a margin into a threshold, a doorway made to let people pass.

#### 4 The Threshold

It was about 1440 when Ogun murdered his brother Uwaifiokun, one night during a ceremony in the market, and became *Oba* – the King of Benin – with the name of Ewuare. He was ‘a great magician, physician, traveller and warrior’ who ‘travelled over every part of Nigeria, Dahomey, Ghana, Guinea and the Congo’. As *Oba*, Ewuare is remembered for the conquest of ‘201 towns and villages [...] on this side of the river Niger’, for building ‘good roads’ within Benin City, and for presiding over the expansion of the city along three main roads branching out of the urban centre. Indeed, it is under him that Benin, or Edo as he renamed it, became a city. *Oba* Ewuare also built earthen walls and ditches, *iyá*, which encompassed the city and defended its inhabitants. They were 17 meters tall from the bottom of the ditch to the top of the wall, and 11 kilometers long.<sup>91</sup>

It was he who had the innermost and greatest of the walls and ditches made round the City and he made powerful charms and had them buried at each of the nine gateways to the City, to nullify any evil charms which might be brought by people of other countries to injure his subjects.<sup>92</sup>

However, Ewuare’s walls and ditches were also remembered as a means to control the population of the city and, in particular, to prevent them from leaving. In this version of the story, they were erected in about 1460 ‘when the City was depopulating as a result of his inhuman mourning law over the deaths of his two sons’.<sup>93</sup> The *Oba*, whose sons poisoned each other to death, asked his subjects to share his burden and ‘made a strict law forbidding anyone in the land of either sex to wash and dress up, or to have carnal intercourse for three years’. The people of the city of Benin started to leave, and kept leaving even when the law was repealed, so that *Oba* Ewuare ‘began to tattoo their bodies so that they might easily be known and identified amongst the people

91 The data on the height and length of the walls is taken from Graham Connah, ‘New Light on the Benin City Walls’, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 3, 4, 1967, 593–609, 606–608.

92 Jacob U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, Benin City, 1960 [1934], 14–15.

93 Egharevba, *A Short History*, 85.

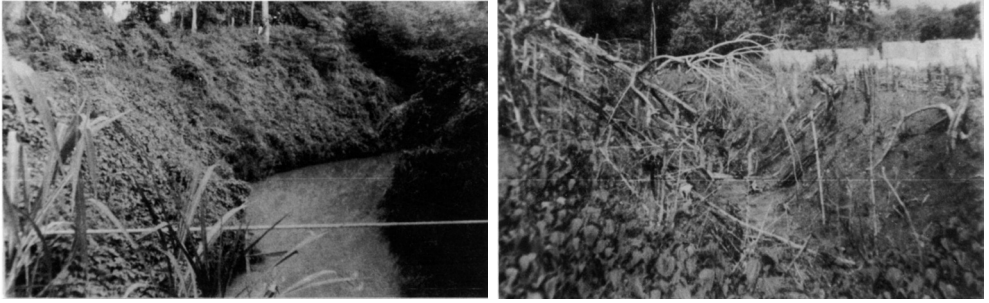


FIGURE A.4 The *iyá* of Benin City, first (left) and second (right) circle of ditch and wall  
SOURCE: ROESE, 'ERDWÄLLE UND GRÄBEN IM EHEMALIGEN KÖNIGREICH VON BENIN',  
BETWEEN 176 AND 177

of other tribes'.<sup>94</sup> In any case, Ewuare's walls and ditches were only the third set of *iyá* being built in Benin City, although admittedly the most impressive ones in height. The earliest earthworks date to *Oba* Oguola, between circa 1280 and 1290, and were built 'to serve as barriers to keep off the invaders in time of war'. They were 7 meters tall from the bottom of the ditch to the top of the wall.<sup>95</sup> In the same period *Oba* Oguola ordered that 'all important towns and villages in Benin copied the example and dug similar moats or ditches round their villages as ramparts against enemies'.<sup>96</sup>

Since the first modern historian of Benin, Jacob Egharevba, published these accounts of the 'moats' of Benin in his *A Short History of Benin*, originally in 1934, the meaning, use, extent, and even dating of the *iyá* have become a matter of some debate.<sup>97</sup> The archaeologist Graham Connah surveyed and studied their remains in the 1960s and revealed that they were part of a much larger network of ditches and walls which crossed the densely forested country of Benin, in some cases at great distance from the capital. They were not concentric around the city, but mostly contiguous, most of them encircling other areas outside the city. As a whole, they were not a 'system' and had no clear defensive function, but Ewuare's *iyá* were atypical in their size and were indeed described by a few European travellers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as urban, albeit overgrown by dense and imposing vegetation, and provided with

94 Egharevba, *A Short History*, 14–16, 85.

95 The data on the height and length of the walls is taken from Connah, 'New Light on the Benin City Walls', 606–608.

96 Egharevba, *A Short History*, 85.

97 See also the partially different account in Jacob U. Egharevba, *Some Stories of Ancient Benin*, Benin City, 1951, 22–24.

wooden gates and guards. The more reliable of such travellers was a Dutchman who visited Benin City in 1600, arriving from the large Ughoton road, and who described the inner walls of the settlement.

At the gate where I entered on horsebacke, I saw a very high Bulwarke, very thicke of earth, with a deepe broade ditch, but it was drie, and full of high trees ... That Gate is a reasonable good Gate, made of wood after their manner, which is to be shut, and there always there is watch holden.<sup>98</sup>

On the opposite, the much more famous engraving by Olfert Dapper, published in 1668, represented the walls and the city in a rather incorrect way. Connah suggested that ‘a series of separate enclosures [...] gradually became linked up to form a pattern within which Ewuare developed his fortified boundary’, at a time when ‘semi-dispersed communities [...] had grown into an urban society requiring defence at an urban level’.<sup>99</sup> These views are mostly shared by the Bini historian Osarhieme Osadolor, who recently pointed out the ‘unifying strategic conception’ behind their erection: to serve as a base for military campaigns and as ‘a refuge for the people’ in case of a siege; and to ‘control the access roads into the capital’, shutting the gates at night and taking a toll on traders and foreigners during the day.<sup>100</sup>

What about the other, much more extensive *diya* criss-crossing the forests? Osadolor defined them as ‘linear earth boundaries of village settlements which served as defensive fortifications’. In this, he countered the interpretations of the archaeologist Patrick Darling, who had proposed that they were ‘communal boundaries delineating the agricultural land belonging to local extended families’, that they functioned as ‘a communal status symbol’ and that they were ‘a symbolic boundary between the real world and the spirit one’ because ‘childless men were placed in the boundary ditches – literally between this world and the next’.<sup>101</sup> Both Osadolor and Darling agreed that the word *iya* could be applied to walls and ditches, but also to ‘any valley’.<sup>102</sup> The closest mountains are about 150 kilometers from Benin City.

98 ‘D.R. The Dutch in Benin’, in Thomas Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology*, London, Oxford University Press, 1960, 119–120.

99 Connah, ‘New Light on the Benin City Walls’, 608–609.

100 Osarhieme Benson Osadolor, ‘The Military System of Benin Kingdom, c.1440–1897’, University of Hamburg, PhD Thesis, 2001, 119. I would like to thank Lucas Burkart and Julia Tischler for introducing me to Osadolor and to his scholarship.

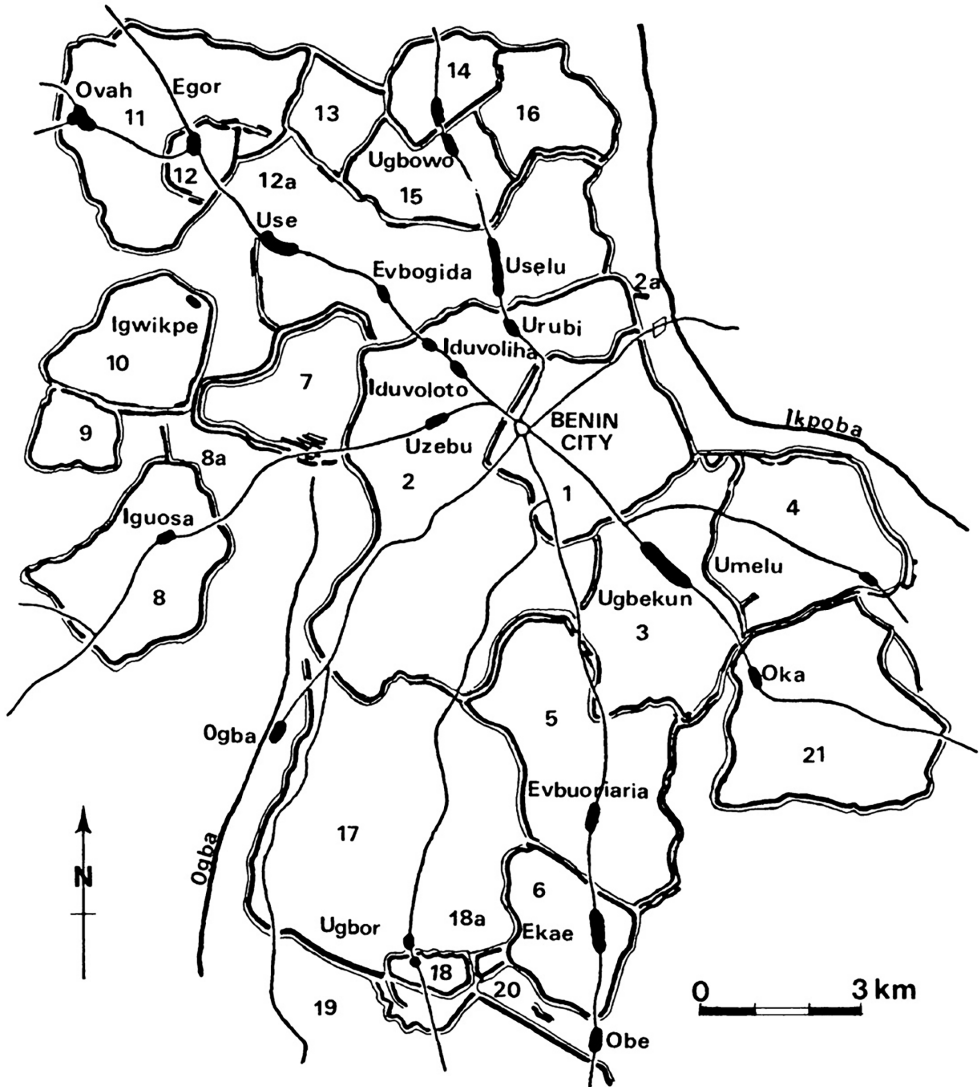
101 Osadolor, ‘The Military System of Benin Kingdom, c.1440–1897’, 120.

102 Darling stated that *iya* was also used for ‘any hole’, but Osadolor refused this. Osadolor, ‘The Military System of Benin Kingdom, c.1440–1897’, 120; Darling, Patrick J., *The Ancient Linear Earthworks of Benin and Ishan*, Cambridge, BAR, 1984, 303.

Maps of the *iya* complex produced by Connah and Darling reveal the extensive reticule of Benin earthworks, which some have claimed being the largest group of earthworks in the world, and the second system of walls in length after the Great Wall of China.<sup>103</sup> As it was more recently summarised by Gérard Chouin, the entire Benin earthworks extend over 6'500 square kilometers of forest, for an estimated total length of 16'000 kilometers.<sup>104</sup> Connah proposed that to dig and build Ewuare's *iya* alone it would have been required the workforce of 5'000 men working for 10 hours a day for the length of a dry season, which is about 200 days long.<sup>105</sup> Egharevba reported that it took three years to build the first and oldest of the three *iya* of the city.<sup>106</sup>

Unique in size and extent, the *iya* of Benin were not the only earthworks of West Africa, and even less the only form of walling. All major Yoruba city-states to the west of Benin City, such as Old Oyo, Ife, and Sungbo-Eredo were likewise bounded both as territories and as cities by earthen walls spanning for hundreds of kilometers in the forest.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, the area where similar earthworks were built stretches from the kingdom of Benin in the east to the area of Daloa, in modern Côte d'Ivoire in the west, for more than a thousand kilometers across the West African forest belt.<sup>108</sup> Smaller forts and walled cities were built on an even larger scale across the Sahel, ranging from the fortified village or *tata* on the Senegal River, along the desert towns of the Niger River

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- 103 Chukwugozie Maduka, 'Preserving the Benin City Moats: The Interaction of Indigenous and Urban Environmental Values and Aesthetics', *Environmental Ethics*, 36, 1, 2014, 83–106; Peter M. Roese, 'Erdwälle und Gräben im ehemaligen Königreich von Benin', *Anthropos*, 76, 1/2, 1981, 166–209; Peter M. Roese, 'Das Königreich Benin – von den Anfängen bis 1485', *Anthropos*, 79, 1/3, 1984, 191–222; Gérard Chouin, 'Fossés, enceintes et peste noire en Afrique de l'Ouest forestière (500–1500ad). Réflexions sous canopée', *Afrique: Archaeologie & Arts*, 9, 2013, 43–66; Gérard Chouin, 'The "Big Bang" Theory Reconsidered: Framing Early Ghanaian History', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 14, 2012, 13–40; Olanrewaju Lasisi, 'New Lights on the Archaeology of Sungbo Eredo, South-Western Nigeria', *Dig it: Journal of the Flinders Archaeological Society*, 3, 2016, 54–63; Graham Connah, 'New Light on the Benin City Walls', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 3, 4, 1967, 593–609; Patrick J. Darling, 'Sungbo's Eredo, Southern Nigeria', *Nyame Akuma*, 49, 1998, 55–61.
- 104 Chouin, 'Fossés, enceintes et peste noire'.
- 105 Connah, 'New Light on the Benin City Walls', 606–608. On labour and the erection of city walls, see also Howard, 'Nodes, Networks, Landscapes and Regions', 59.
- 106 Egharevba, *Some Stories of Ancient Benin*, 22.
- 107 The territory of Abomey was walled at least at a urban level. Gérard Chouin, Adisa B. Ogunfolakan, 'Ife-Sungbo Archaeological Project: Preliminary Report on Excavations at Ita Yemoo, Ile-Ife, Osun State and on Rapid Assessment of Earthwork Sites at Eredo and Ilara-Epe, Lagos State', June-July 2015; Graham Connah, *African Civilizations: An Archaeological Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 185–220; Howard, 'Nodes, Networks, Landscapes and Regions', 43–44.
- 108 Chouin, 'Fossés, enceintes et peste noire'.



MAP A.5 The *÷ya* of Benin, central region

SOURCE: ROESE, 'ERDWÄLLE UND GRÄBEN IM EHEMALIGEN KÖNIGREICH VON BENIN', 171

bend and to the *ribat* in the Caliphate of Sokoto, between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries.<sup>109</sup> Broadening the scope to the entire continent, fortified settlements were built behind trenches, stockades, and hedges of euphorbia in

109 Nugent, 'Arbitrary Lines and the People's Minds', 36–41; John K. Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa 1500–1800*, London, UCL Press, 1999, 30, 50–51; Connah, *African Civilization*, 149–184.

Tanzania from at least the mid-nineteenth century, whereas the fortified itinerant royal encampments of the kings of Ethiopia were made and remade on the Ethiopian highlands since probably the thirteenth century, eventually originating a series of stone-built castles and smaller *ketema*, or fortified villages, still erected in the late nineteenth century.<sup>110</sup> In southern Africa, urban centres were surrounded by walls since at least the thirteenth century at Mapungubwe and more famously at Great Zimbabwe, which as the numerous later *zimabwe* of the plateau was marked by an outer perimeter wall and by one or more monumental walled structures within the settlement. In this latter cases, however, there is really little consensus on what these walls might have been for.<sup>111</sup>

The *ija* of Benin do not seem to have played a significant role in the military campaign which ended the independence of the kingdom. The roads crossing them, and the waterways snaking past them, however, did. In November 1896 the British Acting Consul-General Phillips obtained permission from London to depose the king of Benin because of his opposition to the terms of a treaty signed with Britain in 1892, which prescribed free movement and trade for all foreigners in his kingdom. Phillips then asked permission to the *Oba* to pay a visit, without telling his true objective, via the river port of Ughoton, which had been for centuries the main entry point to the kingdom for seaborne strangers and the only location where European trading factories were allowed.<sup>112</sup> The *Oba* refused: it was the time of an important ceremony through which he obtained the favour of ancestors for the good of the entire kingdom, and no contacts with strangers were possible. Eighteenth-century traders had respected this, but Phillips did not.<sup>113</sup> An unwanted, unwelcome, and unauthorised passenger, he was shot dead together with his numerous African escort and a few British officers by Bini soldiers waiting in the dense forest

110 Richard J. Reid, *War in Pre-colonial Eastern Africa: The Patterns and Meanings of State-level Conflict in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford, James Currey, 2007, 55, 61–63, 161–164; Ronald J. Horvath, ‘The Wandering Capitals of Ethiopia’, *The Journal of African History*, 10, 2 1969, 205–219.

111 A very limited selection includes the most recent works by Shadreck Chirikure, Innocent Pikirayi, ‘Inside and Outside the Dry Stone Walls: Revisiting the Material Culture of Great Zimbabwe’, *Antiquity*, 82, 2008, 976–993; Thomas N. Huffman, ‘Debating Great Zimbabwe’, *The South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 66, 193, 2011, 27–40; Shadreck Chirikure, Foreman Bandama, Michelle House, Abigail Moffett, Tawanda Mukwende, Mark Pollard, ‘Decisive Evidence for Multidirectional Evolution of Sociopolitical Complexity in Southern Africa’, *African Archaeological Review*, 33, 2016, 75–95.

112 Egharevba, *A Short History*, 28.

113 ‘Journal kept by me Frederick Legrand at Benin in the Rio Formosa 1717’, reproduced in Alan Frederick Charles Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485–1897*, London, Longmans, 1969, 322–330.



FIGURE A.5 A river port village on the Benin River

SOURCE: ROTH, *THE GREAT BENIN*, 190. ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *THE DAILY GRAPHIC*, 13 JANUARY 1897

undergrowth on the sides of the main road connecting Ughoton to Benin City, in January 1897.

This event sparked the so-called British ‘Punitive Expedition’ in the following February. The invading force was composed of three main detachments. One was dispatched on the Ughoton road, but was stopped after disembarking, suffering many casualties, and eventually sailed away. The two other contingents approached from the south, through the other creeks of the complex coastline: they took and burnt two minor river towns, Ologbo and Sakponba, crossed various *iya* in the countryside, followed the narrow paths to Benin City, and defeated the final resistance put up by Bini soldiers in their capital. Osadolor ascribes the British victory to the superiority of their weapons, in particular Maxim guns and rockets, and the divisions within the military commanders of Benin.<sup>114</sup>

114 Osadolor, ‘The Military System of Benin Kingdom, c.1440–1897’, 204–232; Connah, ‘New Light on the Benin City Walls’, 598; Egharevba, *A Short History*, 51–53; Thomas Uwadiale Obinyan, ‘The Annexation of Benin’, *Journal of Black Studies*, 19, 1, 1988, 29–40; Alan Boisragon, *The Benin Massacre*, London, Methuen & Co., 1898, 172–182.

Alan Boisragon, one of the only two British survivors of Phillips' January column, and a member of the first detachment to enter Benin City in February 1897, noticed that in Ughoton the landing path run into the deep dry beds of a stream until it crossed over into the settlement of Ughoton by means of ladders, which made for an 'excellent defensive position'. The road from Ughoton to Benin City, he said, was clear and level, passing through the dense forest and a few villages before reaching the capital. It was on this road that they were ambushed. He further explained that on the Ologbo road, which they took during the war, Bini soldiers had cut a path parallel to the one leading to Benin City, to move unnoticed and to launch ambushes without being seen. He then described a stockade closing a narrow passage, commanding a deep ravine, and fortified encampments at crossroads. Their path, which was not the main one to the city, was uncleared and only allowed to march in single file. Indeed, they could only see their enemies when the path opened up in a large road at the entrance of the city, after marching for six days in the dense forest without any source of water and while being shot at from every direction. Even then, there was little clarity in Boisragon's descriptions of the city. Indeed, he wrote that the great walls 'seems to have disappeared long ago' and he did not describe any gate,<sup>115</sup> but he might have mistaken the Bini soldiers he saw on trees as shooting from Euware's *iya*, which might have been still engulfed in dense vegetation.<sup>116</sup> As it is well known, they looted and burnt down the city the following day.

The walls of Benin had not disappeared, as other members of the British expedition testified both in writing and in photographs, and as it was clear to archaeologists once they started to work on them some sixty years later.<sup>117</sup> What had generally disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century was the ability – or the intention – to notice and understand how land was demarcated and lines were drawn in the African continent, both on a conceptual level – as festivals to be respected – and as a practical level – as roads not to be walked. This should not be taken as an absolute or unique historical development. The very first description of Benin's *iya*, written by Duarte Pacheco Pereira in 1500, only mentioned a ditch and no wall, possibly because earthen walls were strikingly different from the urban stone walling of European cities in the Middle Ages and were not recognised as walls at all.<sup>118</sup> However, the late nineteenth

115 Boisragon, *The Benin Massacre*, 8–9.

116 Boisragon, *The Benin Massacre*, 78–80, 172–182.

117 H. Ling Roth, *Great Benin: Its Customs, Art, and Horrors*, F. King & Sons, 1903, 177–178, 188. This argument is partially made in Nugent, 'Arbitrary Lines and the People's Minds', 35–67.

118 This was suggested by Connah, 'New Light', 597.

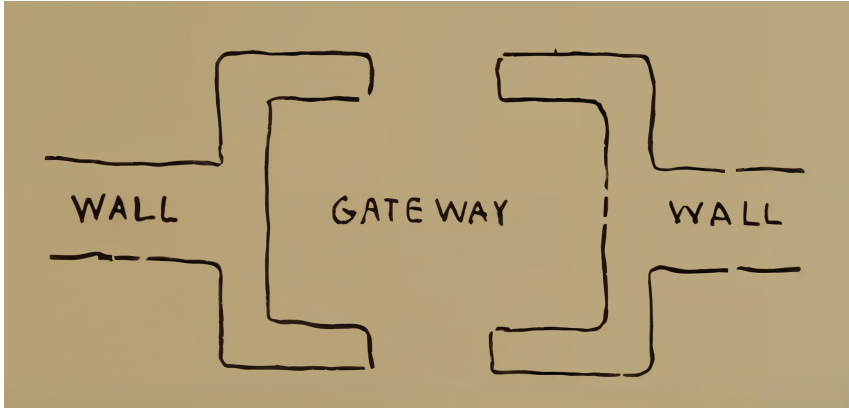


FIGURE A.6 Sketch diagram of a gateway in Benin City  
SOURCE: MADE BY C. PUNCH AND REPRODUCED IN ROTH,  
*GREAT BENIN*, 189



FIGURE A.7 'Ruined doorway leading from one compound into another in Benin City'  
SOURCE: PHOTOGRAPH BY R.K. GRANVILLE AND REPRODUCED IN ROTH,  
*GREAT BENIN*, 191

century was different because, as it should be superfluous to say, such conceptual inability was coupled with the progressive practical annexation of African land to the new European global empires. The conquest of the kingdom of Benin took place, after all, in the aftermath of the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference.

It would be tempting to state that European colonisers did not take into any account African lines – including borders – because they intended to declare the continent *res nullius* or *terra nullius* and freely carve it out for themselves. This however is faulty under many respects. To start with, as Jörg Fischer demonstrated, delegates at the Berlin Conference knew well that the continent was far from being empty, and the land far from being without owners, as the discussions about protectorates, spheres of influence, and effective occupation implied.<sup>119</sup> Mieke van der Linden secondly pointed out the legal paradox of colonial annexations: positivist international law denied African states their sovereignty and their statehood, but prescribed the acceptance of treaties signed between an European state and a local ‘chief’ as legal basis to lay claim to that land. Leaving aside the half-hearted and treacherous way in which the treaties were usually signed, why should another European state agree that sovereignty was transferred to a competing empire, if the local ‘chief’ was no sovereign to start with?<sup>120</sup> Indeed, the partition of Africa ‘didn’t happen at Berlin’, as Simon Katzenellenbogen succinctly titled his contribution on the matter.<sup>121</sup> It took place over many decades, as much in European capitals as in African land, as a result of the actions of both ministers and diplomats who never set foot on the continent, and of soldiers and adventurers who would never set foot again in their European motherlands.

In fact, there was another actor, or rather many of them: Africans. Paul Nugent has stressed that colonial borders were not entirely ‘arbitrary lines’ because border commissions had often to take into account preexisting local divisions, either from the beginning, or in order to amend their mistakes after the new map resulted too impractical for the new colonial territory. He convincingly made the case for the contemporary Ghana/Togo and Senegal/Gambia borders.<sup>122</sup> As mentioned previously, in this book the understanding that colonial borders are sometimes the product of negotiations which reflected or integrated prior African lines is particularly relevant in the chapters by José María

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119 Jörg Fisch, ‘Africa as *terra nullius*: The Berlin Conference and International Law’, in Stig Förster, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Ronald Robinson, *Bismark, Europe and Africa: the Berlin Africa Conference, 1884–1885, and the onset of partition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, 347–375.

120 Mieke van der Linden, *The Acquisition of Africa (1870–1914): The Nature of International Law*, Leiden, Brill, 2016, 59.

121 Simon Katzenellenbogen, ‘It Didn’t Happen at Berlin: Politics, Economics and Ignorance in the Setting of Africa’s Colonial Boundaries’, in Paul Nugent, A.I. Asiwaju, eds., *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities*, London, Cassell, 1996, 21–34.

122 Nugent, ‘Arbitrary Lines and the People’s Minds’; Nugent, *Boundaries, Communities and State-Making in West Africa*.

Pont Chàfer, where a section of the Ghana/Burkina Faso border is analysed under the lens of commercial, labour, and monetary circulation; by Pierluigi Valsecchi, who discusses the long making of a small part of the Ghana/Côte d'Ivoire border; and by Giulia Casentini, who looks into the absence of such awareness among the colonial powers running the northern part of that very Ghana/Togo border.

This book, however, is not interested in making the argument that modern colonial and postcolonial African borders reflected to a greater or smaller degree previous precolonial ones. Some chapters do illuminate aspects of the history of the borders in Africa before, during, and after colonialism, but they reach this conclusion by focusing primarily on the places where the passage was regulated, allowed, and controlled, in the understanding that it was in these places that lines of various kind, including borders, might become suddenly visible to the passenger. This is what made up the core of another fundamental element in van Gennep's analysis, the *seuil*, the threshold, or as he wrote, the *limen*.

In van Gennep's structure of the rites of passage, specific rites are to be performed before the door, at the door, and after the door: the preliminary, liminary, and postliminary rites. The fortune of these terms is obvious, to the point of becoming detached from the theory which originated them and entering common language. This success, however, started after van Gennep's death. Himself a marginal figure, expelled from Swiss academia and rejected from the Durkheimian school which dominated the French academia, he lived on as a folklorist until his death, as mentioned, in 1957.<sup>123</sup> His work was then published in English, for the first time, in 1960, and deeply influenced Victor Turner, the English Anthropologist transplanted in North America who coined the concept of 'liminality' to discuss transformations in society, including 'civilized' ones.<sup>124</sup> This approach explored the religious, ritual, and symbolic aspects of van Gennep's theory, which were after all the main ones, and defined liminality as the stage and period 'betwixt and between' which constitutes the '*sacerrima*', the 'basic building blocks of culture'.<sup>125</sup> It is more specifically Victor Turner's 'liminality', rather than Arnold van Gennep's 'limen', that was proposed as a

123 Zumwalt, 'Arnold van Gennep', 299–313.

124 'Liminality' does not appear in van Gennep's *Rites de passage*. Donald Weber, 'From Limen to Border: A Meditation on the Legacy of Victor Turner for American Cultural Studies', *American Quarterly*, 47, 3, 1995, 525–536.

125 Victor Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*', William Armand Lessa, Evon Z. Vogt, eds., *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, New York, NY, Harper & Row, 1979 [1964], 234–243.

radical innovation in the field of International Relations, by Maria Mälksoo in 2012.

Liminality creates fundamental uneasiness for traditional IR theory as it disrupts, by definition, essentialisations and foundational claims. Defying set-in categories, liminality disturbs the ingrained 'level of analysis' thinking in IR by emphasising the fundamental ontological interconnection between the 'high' and the 'low', the 'centre' and the 'periphery', the domestic and the international.<sup>126</sup>

It may be simplistic and ingenuous to recall that, for Arnold van Gennep, all magico-religious aspects of his theory of the *Rites de passage* was built on one, very visible and very tangible, 'passage materiel': the physical crossing of the *limen*, the threshold which lies on the ground of an open door. It is this *limen* which concerns us now.

As mentioned, Ughoton was the port of Benin City. It was so since at least the end of the fifteenth century, when the Portuguese reached the coast of the kingdom, dropped anchor off shore, and sent smaller boats into the forested creeks. Its foundation, however, dates back to a deeper past, to a previous ruling dynasty of which only little is recorded by Egharevba: the Ogiso. Following a controversial oracle, the last of the Ogiso kings exiled his senior wife and his only son, Ekaladerhan, who were reputed to be the cause of the king's barrenness with the other wives, and of his grave misrule. The exiled prince Ekaladerhan then founded Ughoton 'on the bank of a river after a long course of wandering in the forest'.<sup>127</sup> In an interesting parallelism, in the fifteenth century *Oba* Ewuare 'the Great' assigned Ughoton to his illegitimate son, making him the first Olughoton or governor of the river port.<sup>128</sup> It seems, indeed, that Ewuare used history and memory as much as earthen walls to keep together and to give a sense of unity to the people of Benin.<sup>129</sup> The village of Ughoton became then, during the times of Ewuare or his successor, the place where Portuguese envoys and missionaries disembarked to visit Benin City, and Bini diplomats embarked for Lisbon. Portuguese merchants were settled in Ughoton and traded under the permission of the *Oba*, who controlled what could be

126 Maria Mälksoo, 'The Challenge of Liminality for International Relations Theory', *Review of International Studies*, 38, 2012, 481–494.

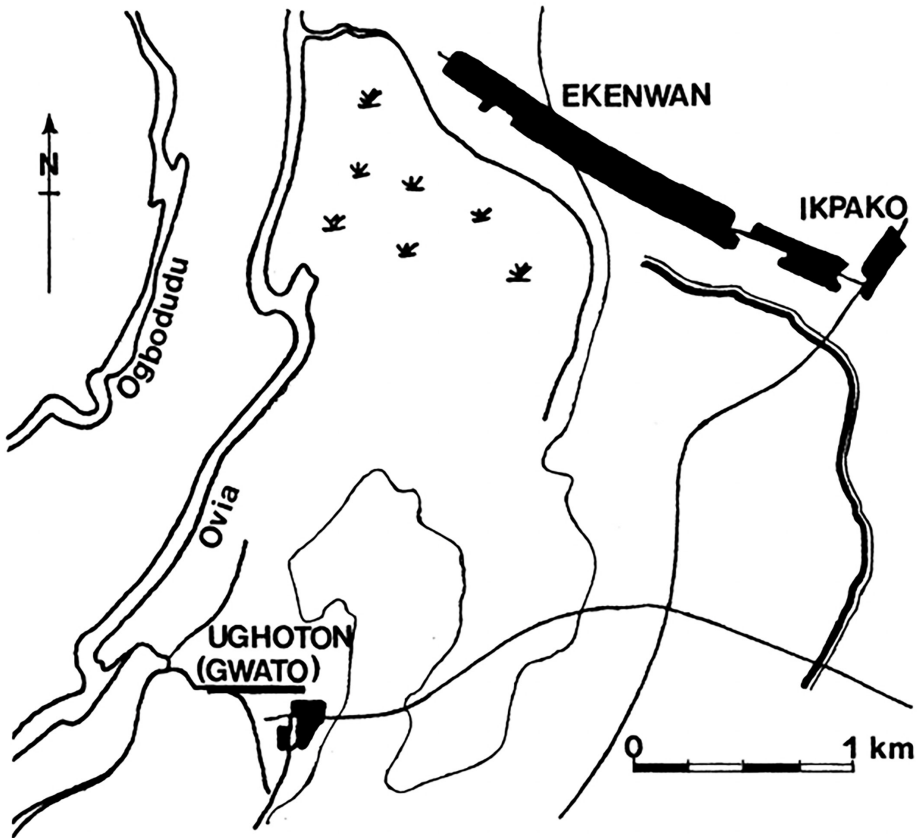
127 Egharevba, *A Short History*, 2.

128 Egharevba, *A Short History*, 18.

129 For example, by patronising the yearly celebrations in memory of Evian, the regent who ruled after the banishment of the last Osigo king. Egharevba, *A Short History*, 5–6.

traded and to whom. This included ivory, green pepper, cloth, and coral, and, as it is well known, the sale of male slaves was soon forbidden, at the beginning of the sixteenth century.<sup>130</sup> Egharevba commented that ‘owing to the unhealthy state of the country their commerce soon ceased’.<sup>131</sup>

In mid-seventeenth century, however, Dutch and English traders stopped regularly in ‘Goto’, Ughoton, where a market was held ‘every week’, as a Spanish



Karte 5E

MAP A.6 Ughoton, the threshold

SOURCE: ROESE, 'ERDWÄLLE UND GRÄBEN IM EHEMALIGEN KÖNIGREICH VON BENIN', 187

<sup>130</sup> Egharevba, *A Short History*, 27–28; Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1983], 54–55.

<sup>131</sup> Egharevba, *A Short History*, 27–28.

Capuchin wrote in 1654. From there 'you leave the river and go ten leagues by land of continuous forested flat land, but every two leagues there are large places where food is sold to travellers', while other settlements were placed off the road, demonstrating the existence of a specific spatial organisation and a functional trading infrastructure which served travellers in a difficult environment.<sup>132</sup> The climate was hostile, indeed, and had taken quite a toll on the expedition of the Capuchins which had been attempted in 1650: disembarked in Ughoton, three out of the six missionaries died during the first six days, and the rest remained sick and weak for the rest of their stay, which was however made even less pleasant when they pulled down the 'idols' of the Bini during a ritual.<sup>133</sup> An unrelenting sickness almost killed Frederik Legrand, a Dutch merchant of Ughoton, who found himself stuck between considerable and difficult credits with local men, the *Oba's* orders to open shop anyway under the threat of cutting their provisions, and a sea captain waiting for his ship to be fully loaded with gum while his sailors died one by one, in 1717.<sup>134</sup>

It was in Ughoton that the ill-fated diplomatic mission led by the Acting Consul-General Phillips landed in January 1897. Boisragon, who as mentioned was one of the two British survivors, described the place rather unfavourably. After having crossed out of the deep ditch, they were welcomed by 'juju men', one of the nineteenth-century racist misnomers for West African spiritual activities. They washed the feet of the strangers in a ceremony which was called 'freedom of the country' and which should have included a present from the side of the Britons, who refused with an excuse and called it a 'backsheesh'. They walked past a sacrificed fowl – a 'juju' – and entered the town, which 'looked very deserted' and was made of 'merely some forty or fifty dilapidated-looking huts made of red clay with bush growing up between them'. No 'white trader' lived there anymore. They were hosted for the night at the house of the 'Chief of Gwatto', the Olughoton, which was 'very much superior' and had 'very thick' walls, so polished to be 'nearly as smooth and shiny as glass'. The Olughoton was visiting the *Oba* in Benin City, but his young son substituted him. Phillips and his companions were also welcomed by two 'Benin City chiefs' who 'had to live at Gwatto permanently' to make sure the Olughoton did not trade on

132 Letter Felipe da Hajar, January 1654, reproduced in Leonard Harding, ed., *Dokumente zur Geschichte Benins*, Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, München, 2010, Document 76. I would like to thank Lucas Burkart for sharing the *Dokumente* by Harding with me and for introducing me to the study of the kingdom of Benin.

133 Letter Felipe da Hajar, Seville 2 June 1654, reproduced in Harding, *Dokumente zur Geschichte Benins*, Document 75.

134 'Journal kept by me Frederick Legrand at Benin in the Rio Formosa 1717', reproduced in Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485–1897*, 322–330.

his own, and to enforce any closure of the market that would be commanded by the *Oba*. Finally, they met three men of an escort sent by the *Oba* who asked Phillips to wait for two more days before proceeding to the city. Phillips, who had already been told not to come at all, refused and so the expedition left in the early morning of the next day, bound to the ambush waiting in the forest.<sup>135</sup> During the following invasion, when Boisragon percurred the smaller path from Ologbo, many other 'juju' were seen along the road, probably placed to stop or slow the British force down.

The port of Ughoton, the Ughoton road, and the corresponding gate in Ewuare's *iya* belonged to a complex spatial set of places which regulated the transit of merchandise and people into and out of the kingdom of Benin. They were not only traversed by more or less welcome strangers and strange goods, but by gods and kings, too.

One of the best-known legends of Ewuare tells how he went to the palace of Olokun, the god of the sea, and stole some coral beads. [...] Ewuare's route to Olokun's palace is said to have been through Ughoton, the port of Benin to which the Portuguese first came.<sup>136</sup>

Ray Bradbury, who re-connected this 'legend' to a tentative chronology of the history of Benin, further elaborated that Ewuare 'is said to have introduced coral beads and red flannel cloth' to the country, making them a royal prerogative, and so suggested that the story 'may refer to an early direct or indirect contact with the Portuguese. Indeed, as Bradbury also discusses, Ewuare created the first of the palace associations in charge with the production and preservation of the royal apparel made with coral beads and red cloth, the *Iwebo*, a word which is often explained as 'the apartment of the Europeans'. As Egharevba put it, 'it is said that the *Oba* of Benin's dress is a copy of the Olokun's dress'.<sup>137</sup> Olokun was represented in the shape of a fish on the neck of the brass Queen Mothers heads, which had an important role in royal rituals. Other animals connected to the royal worship of Olokun were ambiguous creature who lived both on land and in water, such as the mudfish, the crocodile, and the python.<sup>138</sup>

135 Boisragon, *Benin Massacre*, 79–89.

136 R.E. Bradbury, 'Chronological Problems in the Study of Benin History', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 1, 4, 1959, 263–287, 278.

137 Egharevba, *Some Stories of Ancient Benin*, 52.

138 Plankensteiner, Barbara, 'Benin: Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria', *African Arts*, 40, 4, 2007, 74–87, 80 fn16, 84.

Be as it may, Olokun, the powerful *orisa* of the sea in the Yoruba pantheon, inhabited Ughoton. An important sanctuary was built at Aro-Olokun next to the river port, but it is unknown if it was erected before or after Ewuare's stole into the god's sea palace, or the Portuguese ships appeared on the horizon.<sup>139</sup> The 'priest' of Olokun at Ughoton was one of the earliest ambassadors of the kingdom of Benin to Portugal, in the sixteenth century, and Aro-Olokun was the place of the fiercest resistance of Bini soldiers in February 1897, who repulsed the British column invading from Ughoton into the sea.<sup>140</sup> Ughoton was the door that Phillips tried to force open. It was an entry port, but at times a barrier, too. It was a road and a gateway. It was a place of passage and a threshold, like all other places this book is about.

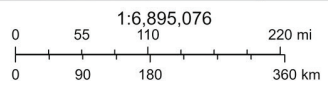
### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on the book, and in particular on the Introduction. Their feedback was instrumental in making this piece much more concrete and balanced by trimming unnecessary parts and strengthening the conceptual core. The research and the writing of this chapter were realised under the framework of the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN 2017) 'Genealogies of African Freedom' (code KFW5RJ-004), at the Research Unit of the University of Pavia.

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139 Bradbury, 'Chronological Problems in the Study of Benin History', 278.

140 Egharevba, *Short History*, 28, 52.



MAP 1.1 Area of study: Western Africa

SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE

# Merchants without Borders: *Lançados* and Luso-Africans in Upper Guinea, 1450s–1600s

*Fernando Mouta*

## 1 Introduction

During the second and third centuries, the indigenous Berber communities of North Africa began harnessing the potential of camels to traverse the formidable Sahara Desert. This pivotal shift not only revolutionized their transportation methods but also set the stage for a significant development: the establishment and evolution of trade routes seamlessly connecting the Maghrib with the vibrant expanse of sub-Saharan Africa. This brought the Mediterranean world and Europe closer to the lands beyond the great sea of sand. The subsequent two centuries witnessed the Sanhaja clans of the western Sahara amassing a substantial fleet of camels. This strategic acquisition cemented their position as key players, enabling them to dominate and expand the region's trade networks.<sup>1</sup>

The arrival of Islam in the Atlas region during the eighth century marked a transformative juncture in history. Beyond the mere exchange of goods along the trade routes, Muslim traders served as carriers of a novel faith into the heart of *Bilad el-Sudan*, the 'land of the blacks'. This confluence of commerce and spirituality profoundly impacted Upper Guinea, especially after gold from the forests of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire was found in increasing quantities around the tenth century. All this dynamism blurred the political, social, religious, and cultural lines of a region unfairly perceived as static.

In the second half of the thirteenth century, the Empire of Mali expanded towards the Atlantic, bringing new people, a new culture and political organization to the region. The emergence of the Songhay Empire during the fifteenth century rivalled Mali for political pre-eminence in Upper Guinea, creating new opportunities and challenges for the local polities and communities. Despite these changes, transnational merchants connected the entire region

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1 David C. Conrad, *Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali, and Songhay*, New York, NY, Chelsea House, 2010 [2005], 30.

and thrived under an atmosphere of accommodation, as long as they complied to age-long local rules of integration into the host societies.

The European arrival south of the Saharan Atlantic coast in the mid-fifteenth century is consensually referred as a pivotal moment in the so-called 'Age of European Expansion'. Overcoming the traditional maritime boundaries allowed for the discovery of new lands and the meeting of new peoples. Nonetheless, the initial encounters were characterized by violence. Portuguese captains would try to kidnap individuals to profit by selling them as slaves or collecting ransoms, following century-old mechanisms of interaction with Muslim communities in the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa. When expeditions reached the Senegal river, the superiority of local tactics and weaponry – the dreaded poisoned arrows – caused the first military defeats and forced a hasty retreat home. It didn't take long for the Portuguese to cope with these setbacks. Overcoming a history of violence demanded a transformative shift towards trade as the most viable path to foster mutual comprehension and attain much desired gains. Portuguese leaders and navigators swiftly adapted their approach, forging commercial ties with local sovereigns and traders. As time progressed, trade evolved into the bedrock of enduring coexistence, once the hurdles of initial interactions were successfully surmounted. This achievement hinged upon the Europeans, much like any outsider, adhering to the established local norms governing social interactions and business conduct. Nonetheless, these initial encounters played an instrumental role in laying the foundation for subsequent relationships. The success of these connections was rooted in the cultivation of trust between the involved parties, a role often facilitated by cultural mediators. Among the notable figures in afro-European interactions, two examples stand out, deserving of our focused attention: the *lançados* and the Luso-Africans.

The former, the *lançados*, were outcasts that, under a crown-sponsored strategy, reveal mechanisms of social adaptation at an individual level and as a survival tactic. Thanks to their connection to the Atlantic trade and as cultural go-betweens between African societies and European commercial expeditions, they were given the chance to integrate local communities. They operated without borders, both mentally and culturally speaking, developing fluid identities that came to the fore according to specific contexts of action. They crossed several lines, be they political, social, cultural, and even religious. Eventually, the *lançados* played a very important role as space negotiators and facilitators of commerce. The latter, Luso-Africans, were the offspring of inter-marriages – or sexual encounters – between a Portuguese man and an African woman. They received their education from either their mother or a member of their mother's kin, and were consistently viewed as somewhat distinct

from the broader community. They were polyglots and adhered to a range of religions, encompassing both local beliefs and Catholicism, which served as a striking illustration of religious syncretism. They had such a fluid identity that they could effortlessly transition between nearby European settlements and African societies. Despite being a rather heterogenous group, all were connected to the Atlantic trade, working as traders, rowers, porters, translators, and so on. They operated between borders and were used to cross the many lines societies impose for their own stability. They used their mixed heritage to better their life opportunities, eventually becoming central in the socio-economic organization of many African coastal cities.

This chapter is structured around the above-mentioned historical dynamics. First, the arrival of Muslim transnational merchants to Upper Guinea through the trans-Saharan caravan routes in the eighth century. This connected the region to broader north African and Mediterranean trade networks, while spreading Islam at the same time. This had profound consequences to the social, cultural, economic, and religious atmosphere of these communities. Second, the arrival of Europeans along the West African coast during the fifteenth century. The novelty of these interactions, the opportunities of the Atlantic trade, as well as the spread of a new religion – Catholicism – profoundly changed once again the fabric of Upper Guinean polities and communities. One of the strategies first used by Portuguese captains, especially when translators couldn't understand the local language or when no communities were found by the coast, was to leave someone behind – the *Lançados* – to hopefully lay the foundations to future relationships. Third, the advent of the Luso-Africans, mixed-heritage individuals, that took advantage of their role as cultural go-betweens and attained a central role in the Atlantic trade, by now very important for many societies in Upper Guinea. The focus on the *Lançados* and Luso-Africans provides two clear examples of these mechanisms of change and integration. Hopefully, Upper Guinea will come across as a multi-cultural region with unfixed borders, displaying dynamics that nowadays are usually attributed to the most modern of societies.

## 2 Transnational Muslim Merchants

In the context of this chapter, Upper Guinea is delineated as extending from the Senegal River to the riverine expanse encompassing Sherbro Island, situated in present-day Sierra Leone. Usually, this demarcation goes further south to the border of today's Liberia, but because of little interactions during the period under consideration, it's preferable to clearly define our geographical

scope. Upper Guinea is composed of three bioclimatic regions. From north to south, there is the Sudan, then the Guinean and, finally, the Guineo-Congolian regions. Their main criterion of definition is the long-term rainfall averages per year, ranging from the driest to the wettest. Furthermore, these different bioclimatic regions correspond to different environments that originate a diversity of commodities available to the societies living and bordering them. The product diversity is increased considering the different ecological conditions available to those living closer or farther from the Atlantic Ocean and the many rivers that cross Upper Guinea.<sup>2</sup>

Owing to this remarkable diversity and the convenient accessibility of these goods through extensive land and river routes, Upper Guinea was consistently marked by robust local, inter-regional, and long-distance commercial interactions. Notable instances of local trade dynamics included the salt trade, which held immense significance for pastoralist societies within the region's interior, and the value of this commodity increased as one ventured further inland. Similarly, the trade in dried fish remained a staple irrespective of proximity to the sea, while the exchange of kola nuts, a highly coveted item, played a central role in the hospitality customs of Upper Guinea, serving as a gentle stimulant, a hunger-relief provision, and even a form of currency. On a broader scale, the inter-regional and long-distance trade networks, particularly part of the trans-Saharan trade routes, encompassed various pivotal commodities. Notably, gold sourced from the forests of contemporary Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, slaves who played a significant role as a workforce across various societies over many centuries, and the aforementioned kola nuts, which held particular importance within Muslim communities due to religious prohibitions on alcohol consumption. These extensive trade networks were managed by different ethnic groups: the Mandinka held sway inland, while the Bafada-Sapi and the Banyun-Bak controlled the coastal and riverine regions.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the establishment of local and inter-regional commercial networks in Upper Guinea is much more ancient than the trans-Saharan caravan routes.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, for the dynamics under study, the long-distance trade is

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2 George E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000–1630*, Abingdon and New York, NY, Routledge, 2019, 7–25.

3 Brooks, *Landlords*, 9, 13, 20–23, 49–96; Liza A. Gijanto, 'Change and the Era of the Atlantic Trade: Commerce and Interaction in the Niimi Commercial Center (the Gambia)', PhD Thesis, Syracuse University, 2010, 7.

4 Colleen E. Kriger, *Making Money: Life, Death, and Early Modern Trade on Africa's Guinea Coast*, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 9–35; David Northrup, *Seven Myths of Africa in World History*, Indianapolis, IN, Hackett Publishing Company, 2017, 48–53; Richard Roberts, 'Linkages and Multiplier Effects in the Ecologically Specialized Trade of Precolonial

central for the understanding of the mechanisms of incorporating strangers in local Upper Guinean communities. These strangers, acting as merchant-clerics, operated without the constraints of borders, be they political, cultural, or even physical. Until the introduction of camels in Africa, the Sahara was a major deterrent for voyages between North Africa and Upper Guinea. Anyway, it took a few centuries of the Berber peoples of the desert to establish the caravan routes of this important transnational trade. The Sanhaja clans traded with the Soninké people who lived to the south, and these intense commercial connections is one of the reasons for the emergence of the Ghana Empire.<sup>5</sup> These were the same routes that made the sub-Saharan regions known to the European and Mediterranean medieval world – the pilgrimage of Mansa Musa is the best example – or that allowed the exploratory journeys of well-known travellers, as Ibn Battúta<sup>6</sup> or Leo Africanus.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, the Sanhaja clans became Muslims and under a religious alliance, calling themselves the Almoravids (*al-murabitun*), set on a series of conquests to spread Islam and ensure its laws were strictly observed. The process of the fall of the Ghana Empire and the spread of the Soninké people gave rise to the Mali Empire of the Mande people in the first half of the thirteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout history, Upper Guinea was a composite of political entities and social organizations: the Jolof Confederation, the Mali Empire, and the Songhay Empire – founded in the late fifteenth century –, just to mention the more relevant. The Jolof, structured into five distinct sub-kingdoms, settled within the northern hinterlands situated between the Senegal and Gambia rivers. Conversely, the Mandinka, also known as Malinke, established their presence along the course of the Gambia River. Going south along the Atlantic coast, we come across a region of wetlands that did not favour the emergence of centralized political states – the presence of marshes and tsetse flies (Genus *Glossina*), carriers of trypanosomes that cause fatal diseases in horses, served as impediments to the effectiveness of cavalry, a pivotal element in the process of empire building across sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, this was the region

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West Africa', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 20, 77–78, 1980, 135–148; Ivor Wilks, 'A Medieval Trade-route from the Niger to the Gulf of Guinea', *The Journal of African History*, 3, 2, 1962, 337–341.

5 Conrad, *Empires*, 29–30.

6 Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa: 1325–1354*, Abingdon and New York, NY, Routledge, 2013 [1929].

7 Leo Africanus, *The History and Description of Africa: And of the Notable Things Therein Contained*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010; Pamela White, *Exploration in the World of the Middle Ages, 500–1500*, New York, NY, Chelsea House Publishers, 2010 [2005], 54–63.

8 Conrad, *Empires*, 19, 35–39.

where several ethnic groups emerged, among which the Bainunk-Kassanké, the Balanta, the Biafada, and the Bijagó, stood out. Although control over all these groups was difficult, the Mandinka exercised some hegemony, visible in the acculturation of cultural and agricultural practices.<sup>9</sup>

The Mandinka people migrated to Upper Guinea as a part of the westward expansion of the Mali Empire. Emerging as one of the most populous ethnic groups across contemporary Mali, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, their initial arrivals were in small numbers, as smiths who sought new deposits of gold. They formed a distinct social and professional endogamous group within their host communities, preserving ancient knowledge of metalworking. Then came the traders, and finally warriors bent on conquest and state-building. Leveraging local mechanisms for assimilating foreigners, the Mandinka integrated with autochthonous societies through unions with local women. These intermarriages gave rise to new lineages and kinship bonds, thus completing a cycle of accommodation. Concurrently, driven by profound cultural exchanges, the Mandinka language disseminated throughout Upper Guinea, capitalizing on the prestige of the Mali Empire. These transformative sociocultural shifts precipitated an escalating commercialization of productive processes across the region and opened what had previously been a more insular area to the wider world. In the realm of politics, this transformation gave rise to a loosely connected federation of states – such as Niuni, Badibu, and Wuli – which maintained distant links to the Mali Emperor, at least in the rhetoric used by local rulers and their lineages to legitimize their authority.<sup>10</sup>

These first Mandinka were Soninké of the crumbling ancient Ghana Empire, although it should be noted that this territory does not correspond to the modern-day country with the same name situated considerably further to the south. During the second half of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, most of the long-distance trade in Upper Guinea was gold and slaves. The trans-Saharan caravans were intricately tied to the European appetite for gold, driven by the phenomenon known as the 'bullion famine'. The origin of this precious metal sparked the genesis of the earliest legends and myths surrounding the 'Land of the Blacks' – Guinea – within the European imagination. Depending on the specific region, these endogamous merchant groups bore

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9 Toby Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300–1589*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 31–33; Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 35.

10 Brooks, *Landlords*, 51–52, 97–119; Ivana Elbl, 'The Portuguese Trade with West Africa, 1440–1521', PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, 1986, 15; Gijanto, 'Change', 13–14; Green, *The Rise*, 31, 53.

distinct names: Jakhanke in the Senegambian area and Juula or Dyula in the contemporary territories of Mali and Côte d'Ivoire. Their devotion to Islam was fervent, and they established themselves as communities with a dual role, both clerical and commercial, situated along the intricate trade routes interweaving Upper Guinea. These communities lived apart from the general local populace in self-governing neighbourhoods or towns governed by Islamic law. In their business endeavours, they also served as marabouts – esteemed religious leaders and educators – capitalizing on the demand for *gris-gris* among local rulers and warriors. These talismans or amulets, composed of small leather pouches containing Quranic verses, were believed to confer significant protective powers upon their bearers. In a manner characteristic of complex societies, education held prestige. Many of these merchant-clerics leveraged their literacy and adept storytelling abilities to serve as judges in certain communities, thereby contributing to the social fabric as multifaceted individuals. The Mandinka merchants usually married with local converted women, spreading Islam to their offspring by the maternal influence in a child's upbringing. It's important to stress that this intermixing was according to the rules of the host societies, in which people were used to changing ethnic groups and language because of the constant mixture of populations. We can safely say that Upper Guinea was – and still is – a region in constant flux.<sup>11</sup>

These dynamics also show that commerce was central in the region as a form of cross-cultural mechanism. This strategy has been used throughout history to connect communities and civilizations with very little in common. In fact, commercial relations connect these societies by establishing mutual understandings and shared goals, benefiting all sides. This is evident in the acceptance of Sudanic and trans-Saharan traders in Upper Guinean communities. Such environment of mutual exchange led to cultural pluralism and

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11 Barry, *Senegambia*, 7–8, 20, 34–35; Robert M. Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade: Diola Religion and Society in Precolonial Senegambia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, 65; Brooks, *Landlords*, 27–28, 59–77; Elbl, 'The Portuguese', 103; Green, *The Rise*, 35–36, 45–48; Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 400–415; Ira M. Lapidus, *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 601–606. Carlos Lopes, *Kaabunké: Espaço, Território e Poder na Guiné-Bissau, Gâmbia e Casamance pré-Coloniais*, Lisbon, Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, 1999, 60, 72; Mauro Nobili, 'Reinterpreting the Role of Muslims in the West African Middle Ages', *Journal of African History*, 61, 3, 2020, 327–340; Northrup, *Seven Myths*, 110; Alberto da Costa e Silva, *A Enxada e a Lança: A África antes dos Portugueses*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Nova Fronteira, 1996 [1992], 312; Ivor Wilks, 'The Juula and the Expansion of Islam into the Forest', in Nehemia Levtzion, Randall L. Pouwels, eds., *History Of Islam In Africa*, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2000, 93–115.

multiculturalism. But this is not exclusive to these African regions. Trade in medieval Europe was organized in a similar way, as traders from different provenances could settle in different territories while maintaining links to home – the Italian traders are the most well-known examples. Thus, upon the arrival of the Portuguese in Upper Guinea, driven by trade as their primary objective, they swiftly acclimated to a comparable environment. They were offered the opportunity for integration, contingent upon their adherence to established norms and their ability to offer enticing goods at favourable prices.<sup>12</sup> We will see the same mechanisms much later and with very different protagonists, namely the *Lançados* and Luso-Africans.

### 3 The Arrival of the Europeans

What is often referred to as the Portuguese discovery of sub-Saharan Africa should be more accurately defined as the arrival of Europeans in the region. While it is true that the initial maritime expeditions were an expression of the will of monarchs or members of the Portuguese royal family – most likely with money borrowed from important German, Genoese, and Florentine bankers –,<sup>13</sup> it's important to note that the sailors and captains of these inaugural crews were born in a great variety of places. Hence, within this chapter, national designations are exclusively employed to denote the flag under which a particular expedition was assembled. Secondly, the term 'arrival' is more appropriate than 'discovery' since navigators were primarily focused on

12 Baum, *Shrines*, 78; Elbl, 'The Portuguese', 128, 589; Gijanto, 'Change', 90–91; Green, *The Rise*, 60; José Lingna Nafafé, *Colonial Encounters: Issues of Culture, Hybridity and Creolisation. Portuguese Mercantile Settlers in West Africa*, Berlin, Peter Lang, 2007, 1.

13 Francesco Guidi-Bruscoli, 'Bartolomeo Marchionni: Um Mercador-banqueiro Florentino em Lisboa (Séculos xv–xvi)', in Nunziatella Alessandrini, Pedro Flor, Mariagrazia Russo, Gaetano Sabatini, eds., *Le nove son tanto e tante buone, che dir non se pò. Lisboa dos Italianos: História e Arte (Sécs. XIV–XVIII)*, Lisbon, Cátedra de Estudos Sefarditas Alberto Benveniste, 2013, 39–60; Federigo Melis, *I Mercanti Italiani nell'Europa Medievale e Rinascimentale*, Milan, Mondadori Education, 1990; Jürgen Pohle, *Os Mercadores-banqueiros Alemães e a Expansão Portuguesa no Reinado de D. Manuel I*, Lisbon, CHAM – Centro Humanidades, FCSH/NOVA, Universidade dos Açores, 2017; Virgínia Rau, 'Privilégios e Legislação Portuguesa referentes a Mercadores Estrangeiros (Séculos xv e xvi)', in Hermann Kellenbenz, ed., *Fremde Kaufleute auf der Iberischen Halbinsel*, Cologne and Vienna, Bohlau, 1970, 15–30; Virgínia Rau, 'Bartolomeo di Iacopo di ser Vanni Mercador-banqueiro Florentino "Estante" em Lisboa nos Meados do Século xv', *Do Tempo e da História*, 4, 1971, 97–117; A.J.R. Russell-Wood, 'Iberian Expansion and the Issue of Black Slavery: Changing Portuguese Attitudes, 1440–1770', *The American Historical Review*, 83, 1, 1978, 16–42, 18.

charting new sea routes to these African regions. Their emphasis was not only on determining the means of reaching these territories but, perhaps more crucially, on ensuring a successful return. This accomplishment stemmed from years of amassed knowledge garnered from navigating trade routes to Northern Europe and throughout the Mediterranean, skilfully coupled with the navigational prowess facilitated by innovative ship designs – the caravel being the most emblematic among them. Moreover, technological progress in the application of traditional nautical instruments, such as the sextant and the astrolabe, played a pivotal role in this endeavour.<sup>14</sup> By the fifteenth century, the ocean was no longer considered an insurmountable frontier, but a path of endless possibilities. And if there was a discovery, it was mutual. Africans discovered how to deal with Europeans, and vice-versa.<sup>15</sup>

It should also be established that there was no ‘Africa’, as there was no ‘Europe’. The concept of a uniform continent, inhabited by the same people who considered themselves part of the same community is a historical simplification and a contemporary myth.<sup>16</sup> Neither of the two continents was homogenous in any way. Both were divided into many political entities, each with its own interests and specific relations with their neighbours. There were no broad regions in Africa unified by a common culture. There were some empires, as in Europe, with local polities that pledged vassalage to a distant ruler.<sup>17</sup> That’s the reason why the role of cultural mediators was so important everywhere in Africa.

During the first years of Portuguese expansion south of Cape Bojador, encounters were characterized by violence. Lesser nobles eagerly in search

14 Francisco Contente Domingues, *Navios Portugueses dos Séculos xv e xvi*, Vila do Conde, Câmara Municipal de Vila do Conde, 2007; Flávio Miranda, ‘Portugal and the Medieval Atlantic: Commercial Diplomacy, Merchants, and Trade (1143–1488)’, PhD Thesis, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 2012; Peter Spufford, *Power and Profit: The Merchant in Medieval Europe*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2002; Richard W. Unger, *The Ship in the Medieval Economy (600–1600)*, London, Croom Helm, 1980, 203–204, 216–217, 231.

15 David Northrup, *Africa’s Discovery of Europe*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014 [2002].

16 Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes*, London, Verso, 1999; Kate Lowe. ‘Introduction: The Black African Presence in Renaissance Europe’, in Tom F. Earle, Kate J.P. Lowe, eds., *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 1–14, 2; Northrup, *Seven Myths*, XXI–XXII; Alberto Pérez de Laborda, ‘Agyssimba’, in Various authors, *Vice-Almirante A. Teixeira da Mota: In Memoriam*, 2 volumes, Lisbon, Academia da Marinha e Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical, 1987, volume 1, 85–90; John Edward Philips, ‘What is African History?’ in John Edward Philips, ed., *Writing African History*, Rochester, NY, University of Rochester Press, 2005, 25–48, 44.

17 Elbl, ‘The Portuguese’, IX.

of knighthood under Prince Henry's supervision attacked the Sanhaja berber communities – the *azenegues* referred in the chronicles – hoping to profit from selling them as slaves or by collecting big ransoms. It was the predicted course of action after centuries of fighting Islam in the Iberian Peninsula and after the conquest of Ceuta in 1415. The context was the clash between Islam and Christianity for the sovereignty of the known world, in which slaves could be taken by either side.<sup>18</sup> This enduring state of war, effectively a crusade, was sanctioned by a collection of bulls and papal letters dating back to the fourteenth century. This strategy was pursued until the Portuguese expeditions suffered the first military defeats in the river Senegal in 1444, falling to the poisoned arrows of local warriors. The deaths of well-known servants of Prince Henry were a shock to the Portuguese crusader mentality. But the human mind is well-equipped to overcome reality crashes. Portuguese royalty issued orders that from 1448 onwards that all expeditions had to sail with peaceful and commercial intentions.<sup>19</sup> Trade would be the new language of enduring peace, as soon as the difficulties of the first contacts, especially in communication, could be overcome. Religious conversions and peace agreements could follow – and were desirable to the Portuguese monarchs –, but only if these initial endeavours proved profitable.<sup>20</sup>

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- 18 David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 64–65.
- 19 João de Barros, Diogo de Couto, *Da Asia. Nova Edição ofrecida a sua Magestade D. Maria i Rainha Fidelissima. Decada Primeira, Parte Primeira*, Lisbon, Na Regia Officina Typografica, 1778, 72; Peter Edward Russell, *Prince Henry 'the Navigator': A Life*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2000, 239–263; Paul Trevor Hall, 'The Role of Cape Verde Islanders in Organizing and Operating Maritime Trade Between West Africa and Iberian territories, 1441–1616', PhD Thesis, The Johns Hopkins University, 1993, 53, 85–86, 95.
- 20 Francisco Bethencourt, Diogo Ramada Curto, eds., *A Expansão Marítima Portuguesa, 1400–1800*, Lisbon, Edições 70, 2010; Bailey W. Diffie, George Winius, *Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415–1580*, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 1977, 152, 173–174; Elbl, 'The Portuguese', 244–247, 250–255; José da Silva Horta, 'Primeiros Olhares sobre o Africano do Sara Ocidental à Serra Leoa (Meados do Século xv–Inícios do século xvi)', in Luís de Albuquerque, António Luís Ferronha, José da Silva Horta, Rui Loureiro, *O Confronto do Olhar: O Encontro dos Povos na Época das Navegações Portuguesas, Séculos xv e xvi*, Lisbon, Editorial Caminho, 1991, 73–126, 95–96; Malyn Newitt, *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400–1668*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2005; Peter Edward Russell, 'White Kings on Black Kings: Rui de Pina and the Problem of Black African Sovereignty', in Ian Michael, Richard A. Cardwell, eds., *Medieval and Renaissance Studies in Honour of Robert Brian Tate*, Oxford, The Dolphin Book Co., 1986, 215–228, 218–219; A.J.R. Russell-Wood, *Portuguese Empire, 1415–1808: A World on the Move*, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between the Portuguese kings and several African rulers ensured two grand objectives: the smooth running of commercial operations and the basis for successful conversions to Catholicism. After all, the evangelization of African populations was the main reason why several Popes granted the Portuguese princes and monarchs the lordship of any newly discovered African territory. It was this prerogative that justified the enforcement of a trading monopoly against European interlopers. Portuguese kings claimed that the profits of the Atlantic trade served to fund this missionary enterprise – and this was confirmed in several Papal bulls. The Bull *Preclaris tue devotionis* issued by Pope Eugene IV in 1437 and confirmed in 1442 granted the Portuguese monarch the right to partake in trade interactions with Africans, provided they abstained from selling weapons or ammunition to them. The Bull *Romanus Pontifex*, issued on 8 January 1455, by Nicholas V to King Afonso V (reigned 1438–1481) and his successors, reaffirmed earlier papal decrees regarding the rights of conquest and awarded Portugal distinct privileges. This included exclusive control over navigation, trade, and fishing extending from Cape Bojador to Cape Nun, extending further to the Indies. Notably, these privileges were explicitly presented as recompense for the efforts in evangelizing African polities. That is the main reason why evangelization was so important since the beginning of Afro-Portuguese relations. These bulls emerged from diplomatic initiatives by Portuguese envoys at the Vatican, serving as tools of the Crown to legitimize attacks against European interlopers in the African Atlantic. The enforcement of this monopoly led to several conflicts between Portuguese vessels and other Europeans, especially the Spanish.<sup>21</sup>

Due to the military superiority of African warriors and the staggering death rates produced by tropical diseases, the position of Europeans in the mainland was often precarious and always dependent of local rulers. They had to abide by well-established rules of different communities on how to deal with foreigners, developed over centuries of commercial relations with the already mentioned long-distance Mandinka and North-African traders. Many think that the establishment of fortified factories was a counterpoint to this submissive situation. The increased control given by these fortified trading posts

21 Joseph Bato'ora Ballong-Wen-Mewuda, *São Jorge da Mina, 1482–1637: la vie d'un comptoir portugais en Afrique occidentale*, Lisbon and Paris, EHESS, 2 vols., 1994, 60–61; Bennett, *African*, 32, 35, 68–69; Alfonso García-Gallo y de Diego, 'Las Bulas de Alejandro VI y el Ordenamiento Jurídico de la Expansión Portuguesa y Castellana en Africa e Indias', *Anuario de Historia del Derecho Español*, 27–28, 1957–1958, 461–830, 487–494, 693–695; A.J.R. Russell-Wood, 'Settlement, Colonization and Integration in the Portuguese-Influenced World, 1415–1570', *Portuguese Studies Review*, 15, 1–2, 2007, 1–35, 2–3.



MAP.1.2 Guinea, 1623

SOURCE: GERHARD MERCATOR, HENDRIK HONDIUS, 'GUINEAE NOVA DESCRIPTIO. INSET: I.S. THOMAE', AMSTERDAM, 1623, [DETAIL] INCLUDED IN GERARDI MERCATORIS, *ATLAS SIVE COSMOGRAPHICAE MEDITATIONES DE FABRICA MUNDI ET FABRICATI FIGURA*, DENUO AUCTUS, EDITIO QUINTA, AMSTERDAM, HENDRIK HONDIUS, 1623

had more to do with controlling European competition than with local threats. Usually, Europeans were at the mercy of local rulers, both for not having access to fresh water and food, and for their poor strategic position in relation to inland attacks.<sup>22</sup>

22 Joseph Bato'ora Ballong-Wen-Mewuda, 'A Instalação de Fortalezas na Costa Africana. Os Casos de Arguim e da Mina. Comércio e Contactos Culturais'. In Luís de Albuquerque,

Gold was the most sought-after item by Portuguese seafarers and merchants. Consequently, the Portuguese Crown promptly enforced a royal monopoly over its trade. Slaves were the most common merchandise in the Atlantic coast of Africa and this trade remained accessible to private participants. Once the economic exploitation and colonization of the American territories began effectively, interest in African slaves increased exponentially. Before that, slaves were mainly exported to be sold across Europe or to be used in the colonization of the Cape Verde islands and S. Tomé. Initially, the Transatlantic slave trade was exclusively controlled by the Portuguese, and over the span of the two centuries under examination, it encompassed a total of more than 563,000 individuals. Nonetheless, these figures are overshadowed by the astonishing magnitudes that would later be achieved during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>23</sup>

The fundamental question is: How did the first contacts between Africans and Europeans happen? The role of the *línguas*, meaning ‘tongues’ in Portuguese, or *tangomaos*, a corruption of ‘turjiman’ in Arabic, which translates to interpreter, was of paramount importance. They were usually kidnapped and enslaved African individuals who were incorporated into the ship’s crew and were not limited to interpreting and cultural mediation. They could be navigators, guides, informants, and diplomatic and trading agents. They would also help clergymen to indoctrinate local populations.<sup>24</sup> Usually, they were the

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ed., *Portugal no Mundo. Volume II: As Zonas de Influência do Ocidente; Origem e Desenvolvimento da Colonização*, Lisbon, Alfa, 1989, 137–149; Herman L. Bennett, *African Kings and Slaves: Sovereignty and Dispossession in the Early Modern Atlantic*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, 103, 125; Elbl, ‘The Portuguese’, 201–241, 282–286, 589–591; Susani Silveira França, ‘Precauções e Improvisos nas Expedições Quatrocentistas de Reconhecimento’, in Maria de Fátima Reis, and Manuela Mendonça, eds., *Raízes Medievais do Brasil Moderno: Guerra e Diplomacia*, Lisbon, Academia Portuguesa da História, 2019, 197–224, 211–213, 218. John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1992], 38, 43; Michał Tymowski, ‘Death and Attitudes to Death at the Time of Early European Expeditions to Africa (15th Century)’, *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, 54, 215, 2014, 787–811; Michał Tymowski, *Europeans and Africans: Mutual Discoveries and First Encounters*, Leiden, Brill, 2020, 36–37.

23 ‘Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade – Estimates’, Slave Voyages, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates> (last accessed on 13 August 2023); Arlindo Manuel Caldeira, *Escravos e Traficantes no Império Português*, Lisbon, A Esfera dos Livros, 2013, 34; Elbl, ‘The Portuguese’, 448–504.

24 Eduardo Aznar Vallejo, ‘El Comercio de Trueque en los Orígenes de la Expansión Atlántica. El Testimonio de las Crónicas del Descubrimiento’, in Ángel Galán Sánchez, José Manuel Nieto Soria, eds., *Poder, Fisco y Sociedad en las Épocas Medieval y Moderna. A Propósito de la Obra del Profesor Miguel Ángel Ladero Quesada*, Madrid, Instituto de Estudios Fiscales,

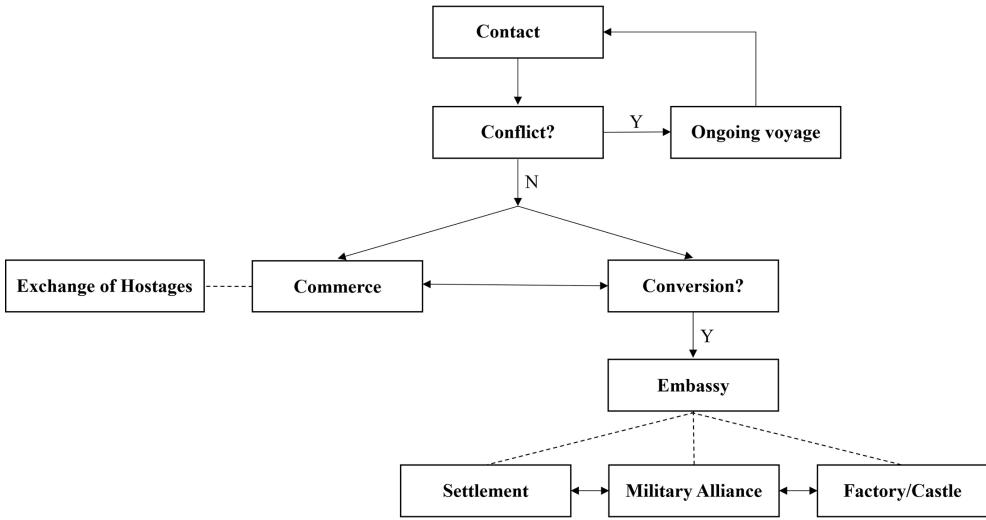


FIGURE 1.1 Flowchart of early Afro-European interactions (European perspective)

SOURCE: DRAWN BY FERNANDO MOUTA

first to go ashore in a new landing spot, taking great risk. According to our research, it is possible to present two alternatives of interaction, depending on the different perspective of either side. They bring light to the mechanisms of social adaptation at the very beginning of the Afro-European relations that will endure in subsequent generations, although in different ways. These models serve as valuable frameworks for comprehending overarching trends and should not be regarded as precise depictions of every individual occurrence.

The flowchart clearly illustrates the crossing of a significant threshold. At its core, this transition signifies a crossing between the realities of the sea and the land. Even apparently minor occurrences could wield profound influence on subsequent interactions, as evidenced by numerous instances where the Portuguese, arriving by sea with unprecedented gifts, were perceived as envoys from the spiritual realm.<sup>25</sup> On a more intricate level, this intersection brought

2018, 361–379, 361; António Manuel Hespanha, *Filhos da Terra – Identidades Mestiças nos Confins da Expansão Portuguesa*, Lisbon, Tinta da China, 2019, 48, 301; Garry Paul Mullender, ‘The Importance of Interpreting During the Portuguese Discoveries in Africa and Asia’, PhD Thesis, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa, 2014, 58–59.

25 Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985, 50; William D. Pierson, ‘White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide Among New Slaves’, *The Journal of Negro History*, 62, 2, 1977, 147–159; Jared Staller, *Converging on Cannibals: Terrors of Slaving in Atlantic Africa, 1509–1670*, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2019.

two entirely disparate worlds into contact, inaugurating a process whose repercussions persist to this day.

Typically, Portuguese ships would drop anchor upon spotting locals on an African beach or at a location suitable for trade. If any conflict arose during this initial contact, the ships would continue their voyage in search of a more amicable encounter. Should the locals seem amiable, certain crew members, usually the interpreter, would be dispatched to engage with them, attempting to barter for intriguing items like gold jewellery or food, while showcasing the array of goods in the ship's hold. Subsequent to this inaugural commercial transaction, the captain would endeavour to establish trade relations, often involving an exchange of hostages for mutual safety. Several locals might stay aboard the ships, while select sailors would accompany the local party, meeting with their leader in a village farther from the coastline.

Should the leader exhibit a friendly disposition, the Portuguese would seek to persuade him to convert to Catholicism, with dual purposes in mind: firstly, shared beliefs and religious practices engender trust; and secondly, such conversion justified the enforcement of the Papal-granted monopoly on trade and navigation along the Atlantic coast of Africa. If these leaders displayed genuine interest in conversion, a formal embassy would be dispatched to their court to initiate diplomatic ties. Over time, and if trust persisted, relations would likely deepen. Three potential outcomes, not mutually exclusive, were conceivable: settlement of Portuguese traders within the village; provision of military assistance upon request against local or regional adversaries; construction of a factory, possibly fortified, to enhance commercial connections and store goods if trade proved lucrative.

From an African perspective, the dynamics unfolded somewhat differently. Firstly, if conflict arose during initial interaction, it typically led to the worst possible outcome, concluding the engagement on unfavourable terms. In cases where the first contact remained peaceful, but newcomers did not present gifts, the African party could either depart or engage in a one-time transaction if the Europeans offered something appealing. If a gift was extended, it would be conveyed to the local leader, who would subsequently participate in trade interactions himself or arrange for traders to operate on his behalf or for his benefit.

A successful initial encounter laid the foundation for the establishment of enduring trade relations. Generally, the exchange of hostages would take place to solidify trust. At this stage, two potential outcomes were plausible, often coexisting: 1) Diplomatic alliance formed with the distant European monarch, thereby bolstering the African leader's regional standing and enhancing his military influence; 2) Integration of foreign traders willing to remain through

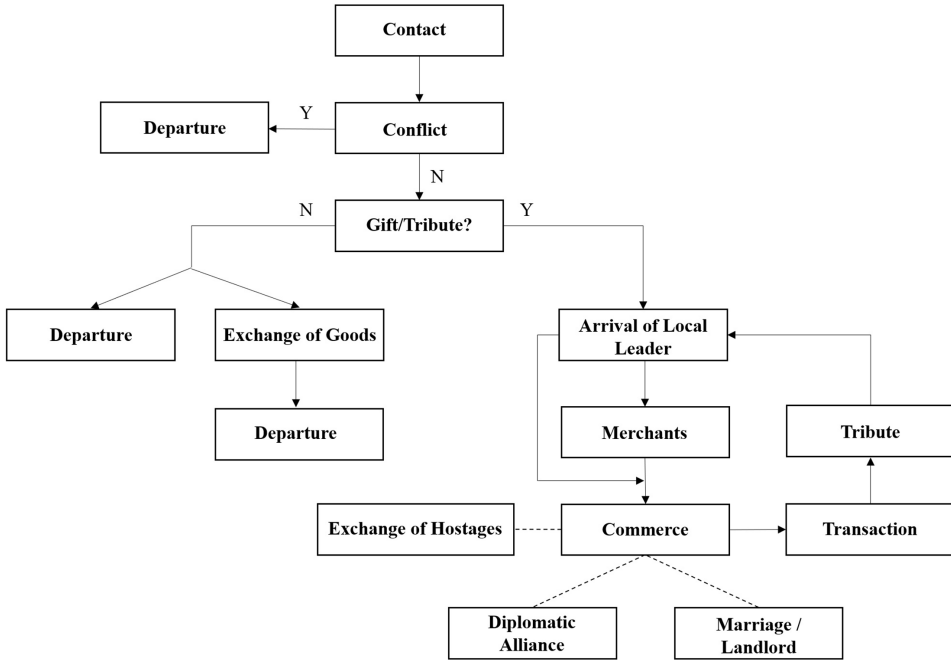


FIGURE 1.2 Flowchart of early Afro-European interactions (African perspective)

SOURCE: DRAWN BY FERNANDO MOUTA

conventional assimilation mechanisms, such as marriage with local women – often members of the leader’s kin – or by forging relationships of landlord and outsider. These traders would be permitted to establish businesses in the village and would contribute a fixed percentage of their profits to their protector. Of significant note is that from this point onward, every time a European ship arrived, trade would only be sanctioned upon the payment of a tribute or gift to the local leader.

Nothing better than some examples to illustrate these mechanisms of interaction and how the Europeans complied with what was expected by the Africans. We begin with an excerpt from Alvise – Luís in Portuguese – Cada-mosto’s second voyage to the Gambia River, in 1455, under a Portuguese flag:

Chegando nós a este lugar determinamos enviar um dos nossos línguas com este negro à presença deste senhor Butimansa, e, assim, lhe mandámos um presente, que foi uma alzimba de seda mourisca, espécie de camisa a nosso modo, bastante bela e feita em terra de mouros ... O intérprete foi com o negro aonde estava este senhor, ao qual disse tanto

de nós, que quis imediatamente mandar certos negros seus as caravelas, com os quais, não somente fizemos amizade, mas também permutamos muita da nossa fazenda, pela qual nos deram alguns escravos e certa quantidade de ouro ... Estivemos aqui coisa de onze dias, e, durante este tempo, vinham as nossas caravelas muitos daqueles negros habitantes de uma e de outra margem, qual para ver um objecto, extremamente novo para eles, qual para vender-nos algumas mercadorias suas ou algum anel de ouro .... Por esta maneira tínhamos todos os dias gente nova nas caravelas, e esta de diversas linguagens, nem cessavam de andar abaixo e acima, por aquele rio com suas almadias, de um lugar para outro com mulheres e homens, do mesmo modo que cá andam as nossas barcas.<sup>26</sup>

In 1456, Diogo Gomes de Sintra, a Portuguese explorer and diplomat in the service of Prince Henry, narrates what happened when first arriving near the city of Cantor, located somewhere in today's Gambian district of Kantora:

E eu mandei sair o preto, que levámos connosco, para que manifestasse aos homens daquela terra o modo e fim porque ali viera para tratar comércio. E assim em grande multidão os pretos se aproximaram. Feita a paz com eles, logo soou a fama por todo o país que estavam os cristãos em Cantor, e correram de toda a parte para ali.<sup>27</sup>

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26 'Arriving at this place, we decided to send one of our interpreters along with this black man to the presence of this lord Butimansa, and thus we sent him a gift, which was a silk Moorish *alzimba*, a kind of shirt in our style, quite beautiful and made in the land of the Moors. The interpreter went with the black man to where this lord was, and he spoke so much about us that the lord immediately sent some of his men to the caravels. With them, we not only made friendship but also exchanged much of our goods, for which they gave us some slaves and a certain quantity of gold ... We stayed here for about eleven days, and during this time, many of those black inhabitants from both banks of the river came to our caravels, some to see an object extremely new to them, others to sell us some of their goods or a gold ring ... In this way, we had new people on the caravels every day, and they spoke various languages. They continually travelled up and down the river with their canoes, from one place to another with women and men, in the same way that our boats do here'. Luís de Luís [Alvise] de Cadamosto, *Viagens*, Lisbon, Portugália Editora, 19--133–135. All translations by Fernando Mouta.

27 'And I sent out the black man we brought with us to explain to the people of that land the purpose and reason for our arrival, which was to conduct trade. And so, a great multitude of the black people approached. Having made peace with them, news quickly spread throughout the country that the Christians were in Cantor, and people came running from all over to there'. Diogo Gomes de Sintra, 'Relações do Descobrimento da Guiné de

The following excerpt is taken from the account of Robert Baker, factor in an expedition to the region of Cestos River, on the Malagueta coast, in 1563:

Stopping, at some distance, the negro chief put water on his cheek, not caring to trust himself nearer till Baker did the like. This signal of friendship being answered, and some tempting merchandize being shewn him, the chief came forward and intimated by signs, that he would stand their friend if some of these things were given him. He was gratified, and many things given to others of the natives. After trading all day with the negroes, Baker returned at night to the ship, carrying the chief along with him, where he clothed him and treated him kindly.<sup>28</sup>

Only after mirroring the gesture of the African chief, a symbolic act of friendship or ritual cleansing involving washing the face with water, did the local inhabitants cautiously approach the arriving Europeans by sea. Through non-verbal communication, the leader succeeded in conveying to the Europeans that trade could commence after the payment of a tribute, although this was interpreted by the Europeans as the presentation of enticing merchandise signifying friendship. The trading day likely concluded to everyone's contentment, as come nightfall, the chief felt secure enough to journey to the European ship and receive additional gifts, most certainly viewed as further tributes in his perspective. This episode reveals that the arrival of Europeans in Upper Guinea did not usher in any revolutionary shifts. Instead, they swiftly and seamlessly assimilated into well-established mechanisms of integrating foreigners into communities accustomed to these constant influxes of newcomers.<sup>29</sup>

Another great example of European compliance with African rules is this excerpt from Richard Rainolds, factor in the English ship *Nightingale*, who travelled to the coast of Senegambia in 1591:

In the towns of Porto d'Ally and Joala, which are the places of chief trade on this coast, and at Canton and Cassan in the river Gambia, there are many Spaniards and Portuguese who have become resident by permission of the negroes, and carry on a valuable trade all along the coast,

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Diogo Gomes', in António Brásio, ed., *Monumenta Missionaria Africana. África Ocidental (1342–1499)*, 2nd series, Vol. I. Lisbon, Agência Geral do Ultramar, 1958, 182–213, 194.

28 Robert Kerr, *A General History and Collection of Voyages and Travels, Arranged in Systematic Order: Forming a Complete History of the Origin and Progress of Navigation, Discovery and Commerce, by Sea and Land, from the Earliest Ages to the Present Time, Volume VII*, Edinburgh and London, William Blackwood and T. Cadell, 1824, 287.

29 Brooks, *Landlords*, 135–140. Elbl, 'The Portuguese', iv; Green, *The Rise*, 75.

especially to the Rio San Dominica and Rio Grande, which are not far distant from the Gambia.<sup>30</sup>

This excerpt distinctly illustrates that European settlement in African mainland hinged upon the consent and authorization of the local leaders. Europeans even had to follow African rules in terms of which goods were accepted, as is evident in the next encounter narrated by Samuel Brun in the Cestos River in 1614. It's important to note that within this African community, there were well-defined rules governing the distribution of benefits resulting from the sale of rice and pepper. The allocation of profits was contingent upon the genders responsible for cultivating the crops:

Actually, no-one goes ashore there, for they bring their wares, namely pepper and rice, on to the ships, desiring in return only iron bars and glass beads. As soon as we dropped anchor there, the people of Sesto and nearby places came with much malaguetta and wanted to trade with us. They traded with us in the following way: we handed them a large tub, which they twice filled with pepper, making a total weight of 280 lb. In exchange we gave them a bar of iron. For the rice they wanted only glass beads for their wives, because the rice is the ware of women, while malaguetta is that of the men.<sup>31</sup>

Cooperation stood as one of the fundamental pillars underpinning Afro-European relations, with commerce and conflict constituting the other two key elements.<sup>32</sup> As previously mentioned, the absence of cooperation would have rendered it utterly unfeasible for Europeans to establish even a modest presence within African territories or engage in trade. In fact, trust and cooperation are essential for these relationships to exist, as stated by Janet Landa.<sup>33</sup> Peter Mathias wrote that, by fulfilling the expectations of both parties, trust

30 Richard Hakluyt, Edmund Goldsmid, eds., *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation, Volume XI – Africa*, Edinburgh, E. & G. Goldsmid, 1889, 338–339.

31 Adam Jones, *German Sources for West African History, 1599–1669*, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1983, 77–78.

32 Fernando Mouta, 'Comércio, Cooperação e Conflito no Litoral Atlântico Africano (1435–1622). Para além do Tráfico Transatlântico de Escravos', PhD Thesis, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 2023.

33 Janet Tai Landa, *Trust, Ethnicity, and Identity: Beyond the New Institutional Economics of Ethnic Trading Networks, Contract Law, and Gift-Exchange*, Ann Arbor, MI, The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

allows the development of cooperative relationships, which implies a deeper and lasting interaction.<sup>34</sup> Cadamosto, arriving at Senegambia in 1455, provides one of the earliest examples of the importance of trust in Afro-European encounters and subsequent relationships:

Ouvindo isto aquele senhor, montou logo a cavalo e veio à marinha com obra de quinze cavaleiros e cento e cinquenta piões, e me mandou dizer que me aprouvesse descer em terra e i-lo ver, que me faria honra; pelo que sabendo o seu bom nome assim o fiz, e ele me recebeu com grande festa, e depois de muitas palavras, eu lhe dei os meus cavalos e tudo quanto quis de mim, fiando-me dele; rogou-me também quisesse ir por terra a sua casa, que era longe da praia coisa de vinte e cinco milhas, dizendo que aí me pagaria bem, esperando alguns dias, pois, pelo que de mim tinha recebido, me prometia um certo número de escravos. Eu lhe dei sete cavalos com os seus arneses e outras coisas mais ... e assim, me determinei a ir com ele; antes porem que partíssemos presenteou-me logo com uma rapariga de doze para treze anos, muito bela por ser muito negra, e disse que ma dava para serviço da minha câmara, a qual eu aceitei e mandei para o navio. E por certo o eu ir acompanhá-lo não foi menos para ver e ouvir coisas novas do que para receber o meu pagamento.<sup>35</sup>

When trust endured, these initial acts of trade and cooperation would often develop into diplomatic relationships. This evolution was in the collective interest, particularly for European monarchs and merchants who aimed to establish institutional ties to foster a favourable atmosphere conducive to

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34 Peter Mathias, 'Risk, Credit and Kinship in Early Modern Enterprise', in John J. McCusker, Kenneth Morgan, eds., *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 15–35.

35 'Hearing this, the lord immediately mounted his horse and came to the shore with about fifteen horsemen and one hundred and fifty foot soldiers. He sent word to me, requesting that I come ashore to meet him, assuring me that he would honour me. Knowing his good reputation, I did as he asked, and he received me with great festivities. After many words, I gave him my horses and everything he wanted from me, trusting in him. He also asked me to travel overland to his home, which was about twenty-five miles from the shore, saying that he would reward me well if I waited a few days, promising me a certain number of slaves for what he had received from me. I gave him seven horses with their harnesses and other items, and so I decided to go with him. Before we departed, he presented me with a girl of twelve or thirteen years, very beautiful because she was very black, and said he gave her to me for the service of my chamber, which I accepted and sent to the ship. Certainly, accompanying him was as much to see and hear new things as it was to receive my payment'. Cadamosto, *Viagens*, 77.

sustained commerce. From the early stages, it is apparent that European navigators endeavoured to engage with local kings and their courts, seeking to captivate their attention through: 1) Demonstrating the value of their trade offerings; 2) Highlighting the personal advantages that could arise from forging a privileged partnership with a European counterpart. For African elites, these benefits usually manifested in increased trade opportunities and personal enrichment, easier attainment of political objectives, heightened social status, and the potential access to European military support.<sup>36</sup>

Diogo Gomes de Sintra narrates an encounter with Beseguichi, a Senegambian lord, in 1456, which is an exemplary illustration of the mechanisms we have been discussing:

Indo nós próximo da margem avistámos duas almadias que iam no mar. E pusemo-nos entre eles e a terra, e navegámos para eles, e em cada uma das almadias estavam 38 homens. E o intérprete chegou-se-me e segredou-me que ali estava Beseguichi, senhor daquela terra e homem maligno, de que já acima falámos. E fiz com que eles entrassem na caravela, e dei-lhes de comer e beber e presentes, e disse-lhes, como se não soubesse que o senhor deles estava ali, para o experimentar: esta terra é Beseguichi? E ele mesmo disse: assim é.

E eu disse-lhe: Porque é ele tão mau para os cristãos? Era melhor para ele fazer a paz com os cristãos, e que uns e outros trocassem as suas mercadorias, e teria cavalos, etc, como faz Burbruke e Budumel e outros senhores dos negros. E digam-lhe lá que eu vos tomei neste mar, e que por amor dele vos deixo ir livres para terra.

Ficaram muito contentes e disse-lhes que entrassem nas suas almadias. E entraram. E depois de todos estarem nas suas almadias disse então ao' senhor: 'Beseguichi, Beseguichi, não julgues que te não conheci; certamente eu poderia fazer de ti o que quisesse. E visto que te fiz bem, tu agora faze o mesmo aos nossos cristãos'.<sup>37</sup>

36 Emilia Viotti da Costa, 'The Portuguese-African Slave Trade: A Lesson in Colonialism', *Latin American Perspectives*, 12, 1, 1985, 41–61, 51–52. Northrup, *Seven*, 107.

37 'As we went close to the shore, we saw two canoes that were going out to sea. And we put ourselves between them and the land, and we sailed to them, and in each of the canoes were 38 men. And the interpreter approached me and whispered that there was Beseguichi, lord of that land and an evil man, whom we have already spoken of above. And I made them enter the caravel, and I gave them food and drink and gifts, and I said to them, as if I didn't know that their lord was there, to test him: is this the land of Beseguichi? And he himself said: so it is.

This incident clearly highlights how interactions that were once marked by violence could transform into more peaceful exchanges, if opportunities for communication and minimal mutual understanding were present. This specific event involving Diogo Gomes de Sintra exemplifies this transition, wherein even amidst a persistently tense environment, he managed to bring Beseguichi and his warriors aboard his caravel. This instance reveals the African understanding of their superiority in close-combat warfare – the caravel's cannons may have instilled fear, but they proved ineffectual against highly manoeuvrable canoes, while European muskets and swords were outmatched by African poisoned arrows and spears.

Central to this entire scenario is the pivotal role played by the interpreter. He not only provided crucial information, alerting Diogo Gomes de Sintra about Beseguichi's presence, but also facilitated the communication process itself. Employing a strategy that had proven successful in the past, the Portuguese navigator employed the tactic of offering food and gifts. Through this approach, he demonstrated his peaceful intentions, proceeding to persuade Beseguichi about the advantages of cultivating a harmonious relationship with the Portuguese, particularly through trade. To strengthen his argument, Diogo Gomes de Sintra highlighted how other local rulers were already reaping the benefits of such relations.

In his narrative, Diogo Gomes de Sintra does exhibit a fair amount of self-praise and showcases his sagacity. However, he provides his readers with a blueprint – from his perspective – for establishing peaceful relations with the lords of the African Atlantic coast: firstly, cultivate an environment conducive to communication; then, strive to initiate commercial connections, highlighting the mutual advantages of goods exchange; finally, uphold peace, recognizing its mutual benefits. Following these events, the Portuguese indeed maintained peaceful and commercial ties in the region under Beseguichi's rule. This was achieved through analogous processes undertaken by other navigators.

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And I said to him: Why is he so mean to Christians? It was better for him to make peace with the Christians, and for each other to exchange their wares, and have horses, etc., as Burbruch and Budumel and other lords of the blacks do. And tell him that I took you in this sea, and that for his sake I let you go back to land in freedom.

They were very happy, and I told them to go into their canoes. And they entered. And after everyone was in their canoes, I said to the lord: "Beseguichi, Beseguichi, don't think that I didn't know you; surely, I could do to you whatever I wanted. And since I did you good, you now do the same to our Christians". Diogo Gomes de Sintra, *Descobrimento Primeiro da Guiné*, Lisbon, Edições Colibri, 2002, 84–85.

These early Afro-European interactions could go horribly wrong, especially if there wasn't someone able to communicate with the other party. Alvise Cadamosto reports one of these encounters between the Senegal River and the Gambia River in 1455:

E, continuando a nossa navegação, chegamos a embocadura de outro rio grande, o qual mostrava não ser maior que o Senegal, e, vendo este rio belo e o país ainda mais belo e coberto de arvoredo até ao mar lançamos ferro. e deliberamos mandar a terra um dos nossos intérpretes. [...] Saindo pois em terra, e tendo-se a barca feito um pouco ao largo, de repente lhe vieram ao encontro muitos negros do país, os quais tendo visto os navios a vizinharem-se à praia, com arcos, setas e armas, estavam emboscados para assaltar algum de nós que fosse a terra. E vindo assim a ele lhe falaram algum espaço; porém não sabíamos o que eles lhe diziam e só vimos que com fúria principiavam a feri-lo com algumas armas que são à maneira de espadas mouriscas curtas, com que brevemente o mataram, de sorte que os da barca o não puderam socorrer. Ouvida por nós esta notícia ficamos atónitos e compreendemos que estes homens deviam ser cruelíssimos tendo feito semelhante atrocidade naquele negro, que era da sua geração, e que de razão muito pior nos fariam a nós; por isso, nos fizemos à vela seguindo o nosso caminho para o Sul.<sup>38</sup>

The presence of cultural intermediaries between Africans and Europeans played a crucial role in averting violence, ensuring trust, and fostering stronger bonds. Now, let's shift our attention to two remarkable instances of cultural mediators on the Atlantic coast of Africa.

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38 'And, continuing our navigation, we reached the mouth of another great river, which appeared to be no larger than the Senegal. Seeing this beautiful river and the even more beautiful country covered with trees down to the sea, we anchored. We decided to send one of our interpreters ashore. [...] Upon landing, and after the boat had moved a little away from the shore, many natives of the country suddenly approached him. These natives, having seen the ships approaching the beach, had hidden with bows, arrows, and weapons, ready to ambush anyone who came ashore. They spoke to him for a while; however, we did not understand what they were saying. We only saw that they began to attack him furiously with some weapons resembling short Moorish swords, and they quickly killed him, so that those in the boat could not rescue him. Hearing this news, we were astonished and realized that these men must be extremely cruel, having committed such an atrocity against the interpreter, who was one of their own kind. We understood that they would treat us even worse. Therefore, we set sail and continued our journey southward'. Cadamosto, *Viagens*, 109–111.

#### 4 *Lançados* and Luso-Africans

The Portuguese used another strategy that also reveal mechanisms of social adaptation, but at an individual level and as a survival tactic. During the early phases of Portuguese expeditions south of Cape Bojador, Portuguese crews included individuals who had been condemned to extended exile or permanent banishment from Portugal. These individuals were employed in a distinctive manner. Upon reaching uncharted territories, the ship's captain would leave one of these individuals ashore and proceed with the voyage. Their task was to explore and gather information about the land and its inhabitants, with the aim of establishing some form of rapport with the local population. If they managed to survive, they were to be retrieved on the return journey. These abandoned Portuguese individuals came to be known as *Lançados*, which translates to 'those thrown away' in Portuguese.

These discarded individuals had to rapidly adapt to surviving in a challenging environment. Fortunately for them, in Upper Guinea, it was deemed unlucky to harm an albino, and many locals perceived white individuals as a distinct type of albino. Additionally, the significant value attributed to hospitality in certain local communities had fostered a tradition of welcoming strangers. Both factors afforded the *Lançados* enough time to forge bonds with influential figures, often serving as protectors, which enabled them to integrate into the community. So long as the *Lançados* adhered to the societal norms of their host communities, particularly through intermarriage or landlord/stranger relations, they could count on protection. The rationale behind the interest of these powerful individuals in sheltering the *Lançados* was rooted in their connection to the Atlantic trade. Local rulers viewed the *Lançados* as intermediaries with the Portuguese, capable of navigating the cultural bridge between the two sides. Over time, the *lançados* would emerge as essential negotiators of space and facilitators of commerce, capitalizing on their understanding of African consumer preferences. They often assimilated local customs, such as marrying multiple wives in polygamous societies, engaging in activities such as going around naked – a practice considered uncivilized by fellow countrymen – and adopting African religious rites and celebrations, earning them the designation 'tangomaus' in the process.<sup>39</sup>

Their contemporary observers noted that they had effectively 'Africanized' themselves, as exemplified in the words of Father Manuel de Barros below.

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39 Brooks, *Landlords*, 38–39, 137–138; Nafafé, *Colonial*, 5–6, 80, 134–135, 144, 152, 155; Maria João Soares, 'Para Uma Compreensão dos Lançados nos Rios de Guiné (Século XVI – Meados do Século XVII)', *Revista STUDIA*, 56/57, 2000, 147–222, 216–217.

The continuity of their designation as the initial interpreters underscores its widespread usage from the outset of Afro-European interactions, highlighting their vital role as cultural intermediaries. It is evident that for many of these convicted individuals, local culture was empowering, liberating, and enticing. They embraced a hybrid identity, adapting to a more 'African' demeanour when engaging with their new host society and adopting a more 'European' stance when interacting with Portuguese expeditions. This hybrid identity, akin to that seen in other groups, signifies the emergence of a creole or mixed society. As time progressed and trade relations between Portuguese and African communities flourished, the term *lançados* also came to apply to sailors who had deserted ships to reside in African villages, seeking to capitalize on trade prospects and aspirations of wealth.<sup>40</sup>

Let's look at two examples that show these mechanisms that we've been talking so far. The first example is again by Cadamosto. According to him:

Estes negros tanto homens, como mulheres, vinham ver-me por maravilha e parecia-lhes coisa extraordinária ver Cristãos nunca até então vistos. E não menos se admiravam do meu traje do que da minha brancura; este traje era à espanhola, um jubão de damasco negro e uma capa por cima. Olhavam o pano de lã, que eles não têm e o jubão e ficavam muito pasmados; e alguns me tocavam as mãos e os braços e me esfregavam com cuspo para ver se a minha brancura era alguma tinta, ou só a carne; e vendo que era carne, ficavam cheios de admiração.<sup>41</sup>

In this excerpt, it becomes evident that Cadamosto was entirely unfamiliar to the locals, yet his presence did not evoke repulsion, as no one treated him poorly. He would proceed his explorations of Senegambia and be able to trade with some local kings and establish peaceful relations with them, showing that foreigners, even those considered completely alien, were easily

40 António Carreira, *Os Portugueses nos Rios de Guiné (1500–1900)*, Lisbon, Author's Edition, 1984, 19, 23. Alberto da Costa e Silva, *A Manilha e o Libambo: A África e a Escravidão, de 1500 a 1700*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Nova Fronteira/Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, 2002, 240.

41 'These black people, both men and women, came to see me in wonder, finding it extraordinary to see Christians whom they had never seen before. They were equally astonished by my attire as by my whiteness; I was dressed in the Spanish style, with a black damask doublet and a cape over it. They marvelled at the woollen cloth, which they did not have, and at the doublet, and were very amazed; some touched my hands and arms and rubbed them with spit to see if my whiteness was some kind of paint or just my skin; and seeing that it was indeed skin, they were filled with admiration'. Cadamosto, *Viagens*, 97.

accommodated. A century and a half later, Father Manuel de Barros, while visiting the same region with religious and missionary intentions, reported that:

Outra sorte de gente há de que se não recolhe menos proveito no confessional, os quais são homens portugueses que andam metidos por dentro de Guiné tiguilando e comprando negros, passando vinte e trinta anos, mais e menos sem se confessarem; e além de ser gente estragada não têm confessor por aquelas partes. Estes se chamam tangosmaus, gente bem nomeada pela vida que fazem, esquecida de sua salvação [...] muitos deles andam nus, riscando e lavrando a pele com um ferro, tirando sangue e depois com um certo sumo de erva, fica a pintura de lagarto ou serpente ou outras que eles mais querem, e isto por mais se naturalizarem com o gentio da terra em que tratam.<sup>42</sup>

In this description, we can clearly see the mechanisms of assimilation and acculturation we have been mentioning. Moreover, the change of lifestyle and body modifications are clear examples of the crossing of thresholds by these men. If we think that most of them, especially if they were Jews or convicted for being Judaizers, came to Africa after being persecuted in Portugal, the possibility of a full social integration into a local community must have felt comforting and liberating. Narratives like these destroy the supposed 'superiority' of European culture when dealing with local African traditions and lifestyles. The best example of this integration is the example of João Ferreira. According to André Álvares de Almada, this *lançado* married one of the daughters of the Great Fulo and was well-known all over the region:

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42 'There is another sort of people not taking profit from the confessional, which are Portuguese men who walk around Guinea trading and buying blacks, spending twenty and thirty years more or less without confession; and besides being spoiled people they don't have a confessor in those parts. They are called *tangosmaus*, people well-known for their lives, forgetting their salvation [...] many of them wander around naked, scratching and drawing their skin with an iron, drawing blood and then, using a certain herb juice, make it stay the painting of a lizard or serpent or any other that they want, and they do this to become more similar to the gentiles of the land with whom they trade'. Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu/ Archivio della Curia Generalizia della Compagnia di Gesù/ Archive of the House of the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Rome, Italy, series *Lusitania*, fls. 349–352v, Manuel de Barros, 'Carta', 19 April 1605, Letter of Father Manuel de Barros; Fernão Guerreiro, *Relação Anual das Coisas que Fizeram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus nas suas Missões, Volume I (1600–1603)*, Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade, 1930, 400–401.

Este lançado Português se foi ao Reino do Gran-Fulo por ordem do Duque de Casão, que é um negro poderoso que habita neste porto pelo rio da Gâmbia acima 60 léguas do mar. Este o mandou por sua ordem com gente sua, e na corte do Gran-Fulo, se casou com uma filha sua ... E chama-se João Ferreira, natural do Crato, da nação, e chamado pelos negros o Ganagoga, que quer dizer na língua dos Beafares, homem que fala todas as línguas.<sup>43</sup>

As a consequence of prolonged relations and interactions, a notable phenomenon emerged: the presence of second-generation offspring born from marriages or intimate relationships between Portuguese men and African women. These children were raised and educated either by their mothers or by individuals from their maternal lineage. They were recognized as possessing a distinct identity from their native community and often led somewhat separate lives. Despite sharing a physical appearance with the broader population, they proudly embraced their European lineage. This was evident not only through their self-identification – they proudly claimed Portuguese identity and took offense when referred to as ‘blacks’ or ‘Africans’ by European visitors – but also through their use of certain items, such as crucifixes and attire like trousers, shoes, and European-style swords. These markers easily set them apart from their fellow inhabitants. Their residences exhibited European-style features such as front porches and were equipped with furniture reminiscent of European design, including elevated tables and cupboards. They assimilated into their native communities based on the socio-commercial ties to the Atlantic trade, assuming roles as traders, rowers, porters, translators, and more. Proficient in multiple languages, they spoke Portuguese, local dialects, and creole, a language borne from the interactions and amalgamation of Afro-European influences. Their religious beliefs mirrored a fusion of Christian, Jewish, and African practices, standing as a compelling illustration of religious syncretism, a phenomenon not commonly associated with these distant historical periods. Their identity was so fluid that they could easily move back and forth between European contexts and African societies. They wisely used the best of their mixed heritage, to better their life opportunities. This model of identity

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43 ‘This Portuguese *lançado* went to the Kingdom of Great Fulo by order of the Duke of Casão, who is a powerful black who dwells in this port by the river of Gambia above 60 leagues from the sea. The latter sent him with his people, and in the court of Great Fulo he married one of his daughters ... And his name is João Ferreira, a native of Crato, a Jew, and called by the blacks the Ganagoga, which means in the language of the Beafares, a man who speaks all languages’. André Álvares de Almada, *Tratado Breve dos Rios de Guiné do Cabo Verde*, Lagos, Câmara Municipal de Lagos, 2006, 31.

formation – flexible, malleable, and based on socio-economic factors – is, as the previous examples of the Dyula, Jakhanke, and *Lançados*, the paradigm of Upper Guinean coastal societies.<sup>44</sup>

Let us see examples of this mixed heritage identity and how it persisted throughout the centuries. According to Le Maire, at the end of the seventeenth century:

Qui est d'une espèce de Portugais, gens qui se nomment ainsi, parce qu'ils les ont autrefois servis, & qu'ils descendent de ceux qui habitèrent les premiers cette Côte, après l'avoir découverte. Des Nègresses qu'ils épousèrent naquirent ces Mulâtres, de qui viennent des plus noirs qu'eux.<sup>45</sup>

John Matthews, after a voyage to the Serra Leone region, at the end of the eighteenth century, inform us that:

The principal people call themselves Portuguese, claiming their descent from the colonists of that nation who were formerly settled here, though they do not retain the smallest trace of European extraction; but having had a white man once in the family is sufficient to give them the appellation. They also profess the Roman Catholic religion (...) yet the most enlightened among them are merely nominal Christians.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, around the middle of the nineteenth century, the Abbot Boilat also refers to these Afro-Portuguese:

Bien que noirs, comme les plus noirs Africains, ils ont la modeste prétention d'être blancs tout purs, et c'est leur faire une grande injure que de les

44 George E. Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century*, Athens OH, Ohio University Press, 2003, 1–101; Brooks, *Landlords*, 188–196; Green, *The Rise*, 67; Peter Mark, 'Evolution of "Portuguese" Identity: Luso-Africans on the Upper Guinea Coast from the Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century', *Journal of African History*, 40, 2, 1999, 173–191, 183; Peter Mark, José da Silva Horta, 'Being both Free and Unfree: The Case of Selected Luso-Africans in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-century Western Africa. Sephardim in a Luso-African Context', *Anais de História de Além-Mar*, 14, 2013, 225–247, 237–239; Silva, *A Manilha*, 238–239.

45 'A species of Portuguese, people who refer to themselves this way because they used to serve, and are descended from, those who first lived along this coast after discovering it. From the Negresses whom they married, were born these mulattoes, from whom in turn came even darker ones'. Jacob Le Maire, *Les Voyages du Sieur Le Maire aux Isles Canaries, Cap-Verd, Sénégal et Gambie*, Paris, J. Collombet, 1695, 96.

46 John Matthews, *A Voyage to the River Sierra Leone*, London, B. White and Son, 1788, 13–14.

prendre pour des nègres ou pour des Sérères. Ils veulent qu'on les appelle les blancs de Joal, les chrétiens de Joal, parce qu'ils descendent des Portugais en ligne directe et qu'ils sont baptisés. Pour tout dire, en un mot, être chrétien, c'est être blanc ; être blanc, c'est être libre.<sup>47</sup>

These three examples show us the continuous importance in Upper Guinea of this group of descendants of the early Portuguese navigators and traders. They maintained their socio-economic characteristics and their connection to the Atlantic trade, always in interaction with other Europeans. What's intriguing is that being identified as 'Portuguese' was not primarily determined by ancestry or nationality; rather, it was a functional or cultural classification.<sup>48</sup> In the perspective of the Luso-Africans, if they engaged in the same occupations as most of the Portuguese and adorned themselves with similar attire, there seemed to be little reason for them to bear a distinct designation. It's the same processes we saw before with the *Lançados*.<sup>49</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

The bio-climatic diversity, proximity to the Atlantic, and the hydrographic network of Upper Guinea allowed the existence of several goods of interest to the various communities living in the region. This variety was also expressed in the existence of various polities and forms of social organization throughout the centuries. For these communities, trade has always played a central role and was the driving force behind many processes of exchange, whether economic, cultural and/or social. This fact is confirmed by the existence of local, inter-regional and long-distance – the trans-Saharan caravan routes – trade networks. The discovery of gold and the availability of slaves in the region attracted transnational merchants and encouraged the arrival of contingents from powerful,

47 'Although they are as black as the purest black Africans, they make the modest claim to be pure whites, and it is a great insult to consider them Negroes or Serers. They want to be called the whites of Joal, the Christians of Joal, because they are the direct descendants of the Portuguese and they are baptized. Succinctly stated, to be Christian is to be white; to be white is to be free'. Abbé P.-D. Boilat, *Esquisses Sénégalaises*, Paris, P. Bertrand, 1853, 108–109.

48 José da Silva Horta, 'Ser "Português" em Terras de Africanos: Vicissitudes da Construção Identitária na Guiné do Cabo Verde (Sécs. XVI–XVII)', in Hermenegildo Fernandes, Isabel Castro Henriques, José da Silva Horta, Sérgio Campos Matos, eds., *Nação e Identidade: Portugal, os Portugueses e os Outros*, Lisbon, Caleidoscópio, 2009; 261–273., 263.

49 Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 50–51.

and somewhat distant, empires – the Empires of Mali and Songhai are the best examples. From a commercial standpoint, the most significant were the Mandinka merchant-clerics, who were eventually integrated into local communities and revolutionized their cultural fabric by disseminating the Mandinka language and the Islamic faith. These processes profoundly altered the conceptual borders in the region, as people were integrated according to their role in the host society and not because of their origin. This constant flow and mixture of peoples transformed Upper Guinea into what is nowadays characterized as a cultural ‘melting pot’.

The arrival of Europeans in Upper Guinea marked a revolutionary juncture in the interactions between Africa and Europe, representing a new disruption of boundaries. However, this event wasn’t an entirely novel occurrence in the region. As the Mandinka examples of previous centuries, European newcomers, especially the Portuguese, eventually became integrated through entirely peaceful means, despite the initial prevalence of violence during the early Afro-European interactions. The major distinction lay in the fact that the new historical actors were significantly more intertwined with the global economy, and the emergence of the Atlantic trade conferred a renewed centrality upon Upper Guinea within the African context. The integration of European newcomers just confirmed the mechanisms of social adaptation and co-existence, for long a characteristic of the region. The mixed marriages and adherence to local customs further strengthened the cultural adaptation and syncretism of social practices. This phenomenon is emblematic of communities classified as hybrid or creole in nature.

The *Lançados* and Luso-Africans are two excellent examples of these dynamics. The *Lançados* were outcasts forced to live in African communities, strategically leveraging the rules of integrating outsiders as a means of survival. Their value to these societies presented a window of opportunity. Their cultural affinity with European expeditions rendered them a crucial ‘asset’ for local political and commercial elites, facilitating communication pathways and laying the groundwork for enduring relationships, spanning the realms of trade, diplomacy, and even religion.

The Luso-Africans, born of a European father and an African mother, constituted a diverse group. Raised within their host communities yet somewhat set apart, they enjoyed full membership while embracing their mixed heritage as an integral part of their identity. This special heritage served as a distinctive emblem, setting them apart from both compatriots and newly arrived Europeans. Most held connections to the Atlantic trade, often engaged in logistical roles supporting European commercial ventures, or as traders themselves, serving as intermediaries within the trade networks connecting inland markets

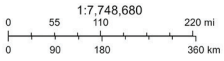
and communities. The enduring presence of the Luso-Africans across generations underscores their pivotal role within the commercial, political, and social dynamics of Upper Guinea.

These two examples demonstrate the centrality of cultural go-betweens in the encounter of civilizations and in changing borders, whether physically, culturally, or mentality-wise. *Lançados* were forced to cross a border by the Portuguese and African leaders allowed it, as well as their integration in their communities; Luso-Africans became brokers of Afro-European encounters, symbolically placed at a border where cultural and commercial exchanges took place. In conclusion, Upper Guinea was, and continues to be, a region characterized by multiculturalism, adaptable identities, and permeable boundaries. Not even the arrival of Europeans in the mid-fifteenth century altered its fundamental essence as a cultural ‘melting pot’.

### Acknowledgements

This chapter was possible thanks to the research conducted under a PhD project entitled ‘Commerce, Cooperation and Conflict in the West African Coast (15th-16th centuries). Beyond the Transatlantic Slave Trade’ (SFRH/BD/139662/2018), funded by the FCT (*Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia*), an R&D agency of the Portuguese government, and hosted at CITCEM (*Centro de Investigação Transdisciplinar «Cultura, Espaço e Memória»*).

This chapter has its roots in a presentation delivered at the 2021 European Social Science History Conference and was greatly improved by the suggestions and contributions of the editor of this book, Ettore Morelli.



MAP 2.1 Area of study: Southern Africa  
SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE

# Gyzikoa: Twin-Folk and Threshold on the Orange River Border, Southern Africa 1686–1796

*Ettore Morelli*

## 1 Introduction: at the Centre of the Margin

The interior of southern Africa is a vast highveld grassland of endless plains, crossed by a myriad of rivers and seasonal rivulets and bordered by high mountains in the east and by desert lands in the west, in the south, and in in the north-west. The Orange River, one of the largest in Africa, traverses the landscape from east to west, from the peaks of the Maloti Mountains to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. In this chapter, it is referred to as the Great River. Human communities lived in numerous large cities in the north, in smaller towns and conurbations of villages in the south, and in small villages – often sparsely built and relocated along migratory patterns – in the west and south west.

This chapter deals with territoriality and mobility in the interior of southern Africa before colonialism. People on the move – single individuals, families, associations, and larger communities – often followed recognised paths that traversed the landscape where the natural and social environments were more favourable to their enterprise. Settled rulers and powerful men – rarely, women – exercised and tried to exercise control over key points of these paths. Some were content with demanding a tribute to settle or a toll to pass; others claimed primacy and sometimes monopoly of trade; and others yet decided who could and who could not go beyond those points, to travel or settle.<sup>1</sup> There were, then, those who preyed on both the travellers and the settled ones. The

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1 On movement and control of people, see Allen M. Howard, 'Nodes, Networks, Landscapes, and Regions: Reading the Social History of Tropical Africa 1700s-1920', in Allen M. Howard, Richard M. Shain, eds., *The Spatial Factor in African History: The Relationship of the Social, Material, and Perceptual*, Leiden and Boston, MA, Brill, 2005, 21–140, 27. For the historiography of this concept, see Jane I. Guyer, 'Wealth in People, Wealth in Things – Introduction', *Journal of African History*, 36, 1, 1995, 83–90, and Jane I. Guyer, Samuel M. Eno Belinga, 'Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 36, 1, 1995, 91–120. As Guyer and Belinga explains, the idea ultimately rests in the concept of 'wealth in people' developed in Suzanne Miers, Igor

landscape was drawn by immaterial lines, some to be followed, and others to be crossed. This chapter studies what happened when the lines met.

The analysis adopts the vantage point of the Gyzikoa, a small community settled on the Orange River in the eighteenth century, near the location of the modern town of Upington. It is here argued that they lived at the crossroads of two long-distance routes and that they once were a gateway into the domains of the most powerful ruler of the region, Tau of the Barolong. By observing its function as an environmental, commercial, cultural, and political threshold in the late eighteenth century – a *limen* – the present work attempts to reconstruct the micro-history of an intermediary community which made travelling possible and trade profitable, but which was also at one time integrated into a long-reaching mechanism of territorial control. Beyond its importance in the region, the case study is proposed as a southern African example of the construction of territoriality, of interactions on the border line, and of long-distance connections. Settlements like the village of the Gyzikoa were *limina*, thresholds, because they were nodes or centres of a particular, marginal kind – to borrow and bend Allen Howard's terminology for spatial analysis.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, echoing Paul Nugent, they were margins of a particular, central kind. Constituting the point of passage on the border line, the Gyzikoa were settled at the centre of the margin and reinforced the centrality of the latter via careful marriage strategies which inscribed them in the social network of the region and immediately resulted in their identification as spatial, social, and political in-betweens.

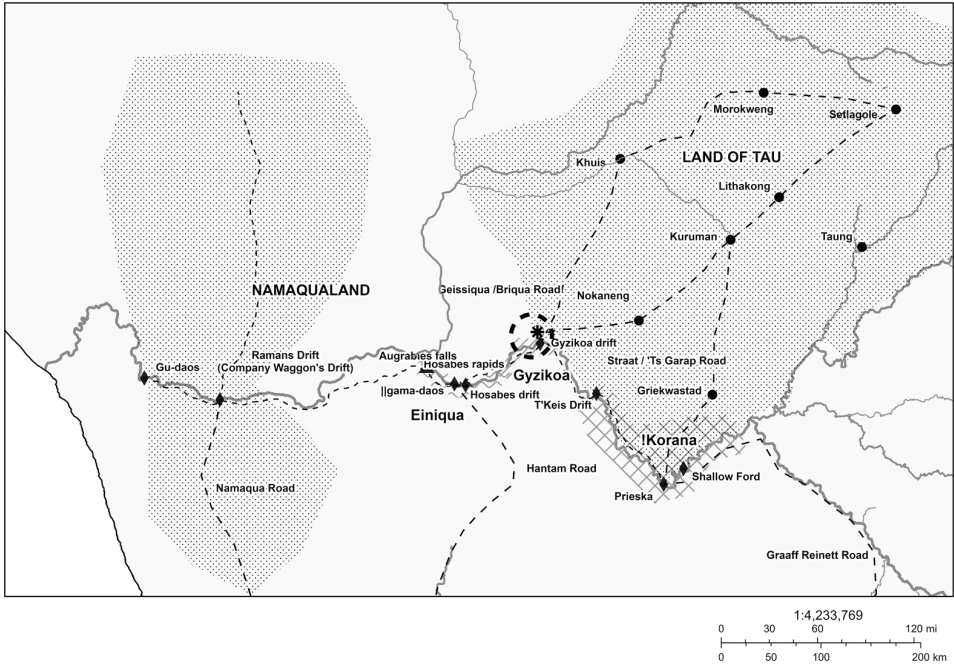
The main sources for this exercise are well known, but only partially employed by scholars: the travel accounts by Hendrik Jacob Wikar and Robert Jacob Gordon, who explored the Great River and reached the village of the Gyzikoa respectively in October 1778 and October 1779. Their importance for the historical knowledge of this region is immense. The richness of their writings provides us with the level of detail that is needed to attempt this micro-historical analysis. Their ethnographic annotations have been for long time recognised as foundational texts in the study of the communities of the northern Cape, the modern name of the region. There are however important differences between the two, which should be noted in advance.

Hendrik Jacob Wikar was a Swede who entered service of the Dutch VOC as *soldaat* and later as *schrijver* in 1773, but deserted the Company and Cape Town

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Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, Madison, WI, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977.

2 In Howard, the 'nodality' of an entity refers to the 'centrality' they occupy in a spatial system, and nodes are 'borderless foci of social activity'. Howard, 'Nodes, Networks, Landscapes, and Regions', 37.



MAP 2.2 The Orange River network in the eighteenth century  
 Legend: dashed circle = approximate area of the Gyzikoa villages in 1778-1779; asterisk = start of Briqua Road; dashed lines = roads; diamonds = fords; triangle = Augrabies Falls; dots = settlements in the Land of Tau; dotted areas = Namaqualand, Land of Tau; chequered area = !Korana settlement area; dashed area = Gyzikoa settlement area; wave area = Einiqua settlement area

SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE

after his finances took a bad turn due to his fondness of gambling, in April 1775. He fled north to the lands far away from the Colony and, by 1778, he was living there for some time, on the lower course of the Great River. He built strong social connections in the area, some of which were made during the very journey on the river. Indeed, his journey was not primarily a geographical exploration, but a trading enterprise organised by the Piquetberg-born 'Hottentot' trader and Namaqualand farmer Claas Barend, which he decided to join. Claas, also referred to as Claas Bastaard, welcomed Wikar because the Swede brought a horse and a gun with him, but in time they developed a strong relationship beyond the initial pragmatism.<sup>3</sup> Even closer was the connection with the 'Bushman' Captain Ouga, who adopted Wikar as 'brother companion' – the

3 E.E. Mossop, ed., *The Journal of Hendrik Jacob Wikar (1779), The Journals of Jacobus Coetsé Jansz (1760) and Willem van Reenen (1791)*, Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1935, 20–25.

closest translation to the unknown word *opligtbroer* which Wikar uses – and became his most trusty friend during the voyage. Claas spoke Dutch, but Wikar likely spoke the lower river or Cape Khoe, because he only mentioned interpreters when reaching the upper parts of the river, where Setswana was heard. It would be naive to consider Wikar a local, for he was not.<sup>4</sup> However, he was so strongly connected with some communities of the region to be admitted to the meaning of important rituals such as the *andersmaak* or rites of passage of the Namaqua and the hunting and gathering practices of the San, which he was among the first to describe in writing.<sup>5</sup>

Wikar kept notes during the journey, but they were never found: the source referenced by all scholars is the edition of report that he wrote for Governor von Plettenberg in order to be pardoned and re-admitted in the Colony. The report was composed once he was back in Cape Town in 1779, it included a sketch map, and it was preserved at the Cape until it was edited and published, at the beginning of the 20th century. A contemporary copy of the report, with little differences, was sent to The Hague in the Netherlands and is today kept in the Dutch National Archives.<sup>6</sup> As noted, Wikar's account became in time a fundamental piece in southern African scholarship. This chapter makes use of the standard edition of Wikar's journal, that made by E. Mossop for the Van Riebeeck Society in 1935, which was also the first one to make it available in English.<sup>7</sup>

On the opposite, Robert Jacob Gordon was on the Great River on an official journey. He was a Dutchman of Scottish descent, an intellectual connected to the Dutch Enlightenment, and a VOC military officer who was assigned to the Cape of Good Hope in 1776.<sup>8</sup> During his stay at the Cape he made five long exploratory journeys of the land both within and without the colonial border. That to the Great River, which he renamed the Orange River, was the fourth one. His journals reflect his more methodic and scientific approach, but also show that Robert Jacob Gordon was an outsider in the region. He met Wikar while the latter was travelling to the Cape and obtained information from

4 Ironically, Wikar tried to pass as a native 'of this country' when he first met Claas Barend. It is not recorded what the head of the expedition thought of this statement.

5 Mossop, *Wikar*, 64–65 fn.

6 I have not consulted this version. National Archives, The Hague, Collectie Van Plettenberg, nummer toegang 1.10.67, inventarisnummer 29–30, 'Reisverhalen van zijn tochten langs de Grote rivier door Hendrik Jacob Wikar', 2 deels.

7 Mossop, *Wikar*.

8 Patrick Cullinan, *Robert Jacob Gordon 1743–1795: The Man and his Travels at the Cape*, Cape Town, Struik Winchester, 1992; Siegfried Huigen, *Knowledge and Colonialism: Eighteenth-century Travellers in South Africa*, Leiden and Boston, MA, Brill, 2009, 93–117; 'About', in <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/about> (last accessed on 14 August 2023).



learnt on the far eastern border of the Colony. With that, he could communicate personally with the Gyzikoa, whose southern Setswana language was very distantly related to the languages of the eastern border. Yet, Gordon was not fully in command of his expedition, either, relying heavily on his guides for the actual direction taken.

Gordon did not write his journals for publication but conducted a systematic study of southern Africa which was informed by both his scientific interests and his military duties as the last Dutch commander of the Castle of Good Hope. His papers included watercolours, maps, diagrams, and notes of various kind, which were dispersed after he killed himself in 1795, shortly after surrendering the Cape to the British forces. They remained for long time out of the reach of researchers. His large 'Atlas' of southern Africa, which he drew in 1786, has been known since the 1960s. His journals were edited and published in 1988, including some of his other maps and drawings.<sup>9</sup> However, most of his notes have only been recently published online thanks to the combined efforts of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Brenthurst Library in Johannesburg, which hold what is known to be left of his papers.<sup>10</sup> This includes crucial annotations on the trade routes and the political geography of the Great River that have never been studied by scholars and that are here discussed for the first time. Some were made in 1789, a decade after the journey to the Great River, posing direct questions on how and why he kept gathering intelligence about the region. To sum up, in addition to plain novel evidence, this chapter proposes a reading of Wikar and Gordon which is focused on their description of movement, settlement, and control, integrating older interpretations which were fixated on identity.<sup>11</sup>

As elsewhere in the continent, the history of this land was defined by its subjugation under colonial rule in the nineteenth century. That is, it was during colonialism and as a result of colonisation that the enduring paradigms

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9 This chapter makes use of the transcription and translation of Gordon's journals made by Patrick Cullinan, and archived online by the University of Cape Town in the 'Robert Jacob Gordon Journal Archive'. See Patrick Cullinan, 'Introduction to the Transcription and Translation of the Gordon Travel Journals'. When not stated differently, all references to Gordon's journal of the 4th journey are to Cullinan's transcription and translation. <https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/rjgj/page/index> (last accessed on 25 November 2023)

10 The website is <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/> (last accessed on 14 August 2023). The website reproduces the transcriptions of the original Dutch and of the translations of the journal by Cullinan, but includes also a great number of transcription of previously unpublished and unknown Dutch notes, and some translations by the editors of the project.

11 Howard, 'Nodes, Networks, Landscapes, and Regions'.



MAP 2.4 Gordon's Southern Africa, 1786

Legend: dashed circle = approximate area of the Gyzikoa villages in 1778-1779

SOURCE: RIJKSMUSEUM, RP-T-1914-17-3, ROBERT JACOB GORDON, 'KAART VAN ZUID-AFRIKA', MANUSCRIPT MAP, 1786. MAP AVAILABLE [HTTPS://ID.RIJKSMUSEUM.NL/200551494](https://id.rijksmuseum.nl/200551494) (LAST ACCESSED ON 26 NOVEMBER 2023)

which defined the scholarly colonial understanding of this region were crafted. This was a direct consequence of the region across the Great River being the theatre of the Great Trek, the migration of some Dutch settlers away from the British Cape Colony which started in 1834, and of the discovery of diamonds in 1867 and of gold in 1886. Also typically, some or some fragments of these paradigms are still standing in postcolonial times. Two are pertinent to the present treatise: the racial stereotype of the waves of Bantu migration; and the colonial

epic of the frontier. In a much diminished but not entirely innocuous form, these paradigms keep structuring some recent academic interpretations, as it will be briefly discussed.

In the following section, the chapter analyses the political ecology of the broader riverine region by bringing together for the first time key features of the landscape such as river crossings and seasonal floods in order to highlight the relevance of the different forms of human settlement along the river. In particular, it proposes the existence of a social infrastructure of travel in the eighteenth century, and most notably of a network of long-distance routes criss-crossing the region. Later, the chapter discusses the two set of lines which were imposed on the landscape during its colonisation in the nineteenth century, and which severely distorted the understanding of the region: racial lines, and in particular the 'Bantu-Hottentot' divide, which fixated peoples in rigid categories; and the colonial frontier, which ignored and overwrote local sovereignties and their connection to the territory. Finally, the chapter moves to study the history of the Gyzikoa between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, proposing new cartographic evidence to backdate of almost a century their existence, and then focusing on the details of their role as commercial, social, and political threshold. In conclusion, this work casts a new look on the immediate historical successors to the Gyzikoa in the region, and discusses the relevance of the present reconstruction for other parts of southern Africa.

## 2 *!Garib, the River*

The Great River springs from the highest peaks of the Maloti, at about 3,300 meters above sea level. Its waters flow south from the Phofung massif, the 'Place of the Eland' of nineteenth-century mountain herders and hunters. In 1836, the French missionary and explorer Thomas Arbousset was told by them that other important rivers were born from its rocks: the Tugela, which jumps off the escarpment for almost a thousand meters and flows towards the Indian Ocean; the Nahamali, that runs north on the grassy highveld, then bends west into a larger stream; the Mohokare, which heads west in a majestic green valley, then south where it joins the Great River. Struck by this geographical feature, Arbousset renamed the Phofung 'Mont-aux-sources'.<sup>12</sup>

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12 Thomas Arbousset, *Relation d'un Voyage d'Exploration au Nord-Est de la Colonie Du Cap de Bonne Esperance, Entrepris dans le Mois de Mars, Avril et Mai 1836, par MM. T. Arbousset et F. Dumas, Missionnaires de la Société des Missions Évangéliques de Paris, Écrite par Thomas Arbousset, Avec Onze Dessins et une Carte*, Arthus Bertrand, Paris, 1842, 141–152;

Departing from its source, the Great River snakes south across the highest Maloti mountains, amidst rock shelters and alpine pastures, and is here called *Noka 'Nchu*, 'black river', for the darkness of its waters – a consequence of its ironstone riverbed.<sup>13</sup> It bends north-west among the lower valleys of the southern Maloti, and takes the name *Senqu*, 'shield', which is apparently how Sesotho-speakers north of the river called the largest shield their enemies used in battle. Naming a river after a shield suggests that it was a place of fighting, as it was indeed in the early nineteenth century; naming it after the shield of the enemy suggests that it was the northerners attempting to cross south, and failing. Leaving the mountain range behind, the Great River receives the waters of the Mohokare and marks the arid plains to the south west, then to the north west for a longer tract. It starts here to be called *Nu !Garib*, 'black river' in the languages of the Khoe, once more for the colour of its waters.<sup>14</sup> For a brief period during the 18th century, this section was known in the Colony as *Wilhelmina River*. Then, about 800 kilometres away from its spring, the Great River is joined by the other large river of the central plateau, in which the waters of the Nahamali are mixed with those of many others. The river flowing from the north-east is in Khoe languages the *Gij !Garib*, from the grey colour of its waters. In Dutch, it was translated as *Vaal River*.<sup>15</sup> In Sesotho and Setswana this is called both the *Lekoa* and the *Noka e Tsehla*, the latter meaning 'yellow river'.

Once the 'black' and the 'grey/yellow' river join into one single stream, they simply become the *!Garib*, or 'the River', often mentioned by Dutch colonists as *Gariëp* and as the *Grootrivier*, here in its middle and lower course.<sup>16</sup> The Great River runs for another 1800 kilometres across arid plains, channelling itself in rough rocky gorges, embracing the fertile islands of a serpentine interior delta, thundering down a perilous waterfall, and finally flowing through the broken hills of the Richtersveld by the Atlantic coast, where it meets the Ocean. On

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Albert Brutsch, 'Arbousset and the discovery of Mont-Aux-Sources', *Lesotho. Basutoland Notes and Records*, 7, 1968, 49–56.

- 13 Peter E. Raper, *Dictionary of Southern African Place Names*, Johannesburg, Lowry Publishers, n.d., 203.
- 14 Raper, *Dictionary*, 343. For a more detailed account, see Menán du Plessis, 'The Name of the Fourth River: A Small Puzzle Presented by a Fragment of Kora, for Johan Oosthuizen', *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics*, 48, 2017, 123–137.
- 15 Raper, *Dictionary*, 203.
- 16 The most recent publication on the lower Great River is Luregn Lenggenhager, Martha Akawa, Giorgio Miescher, Romie Nhlotelele, Ndidzulafi Innocent Sinthumule, eds., *The Lower !Garib Orange River: Pasts and Presents of a Southern African Border Region*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2023.

the middle course, between the junction with the Vaal River in the east and the waterfalls in the west, the Great River takes also the name of *Ein*, *Eyn*, or *Eyra*, once more 'the River' in the local languages.<sup>17</sup>

It was on its lower course next to the estuary that Robert Jacob Gordon named it the Orange River, in 1779 – not because its waters change their colour again, but as a homage to the ruling family of the United Dutch Provinces, the Oranje, of whom he considered himself a loyal subject. Gordon, who explored both parts of the upper, and parts of the lower and middle Orange River in two different journeys, understood that this was one single body of water running from the Maloti to the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>18</sup> It seems that this geographical knowledge was not widely found before his travels, as the size of the Great River somewhat defied a precise understanding of its full course. The inhabitants of the mid river, when asked by Wikar about the sources of the Great River in 1778, replied surprised 'by asking me [Wika] if I could explain where the sky ended'.<sup>19</sup> Their bafflement possibly means that they did not know of anybody who had travelled from the mouth to the source, for a distance of about 2,400 kilometres. This is just slightly less than the length of the Zambesi River and makes the Orange River, as it is more commonly known today, the second longest river of southern Africa and the sixth longest one in the continent.

Crossing most of southern Africa east to west, the Great River flows through radically different environments and climates, from the alpine regions of its sources, to the desert landscape of its middle course, to the dry, hilly, and just slightly less arid country of its mouth. The difference in annual mean rainfall along its banks is substantial, being above 1000 mm on the Maloti and only about 53 mm on the Atlantic coast. The river spans both the Indian monsoon summer rainfall regions in the eastern half of southern Africa and the Atlantic winter rainfall regions in the western half, but in truth it gets by far most of its waters from above the junction with the Vaal. Its course is therefore generally swollen in summers, between December and March, and is lower in winters, from June to September.<sup>20</sup>

This composite environment had a bearing on how terrestrial travellers experienced moving both along and across it. On the central plateau, the heavy summer rains transform small rivulets and even dry riverbeds in

17 Raper, *Dictionary*, 352.

18 It is possible that the !Korana acknowledged that it was the 'white man' who understood that it was one single river. Du Plessis, 'The Name of the Fourth River', 123–137.

19 Mossop, *Wika*, 158–159.

20 Andrew B. Smith, ed., *Einiqualand: Studies of the Orange River Frontier*, Cape Town, UCT Press, 1995; Moolman, J.H., 'The Orange River, South Africa', *Geographical Review*, 36, 4, 1946, 653–674.

serious hurdles and sometimes in impassable barriers. In summers, thunderstorms often erupt abruptly, making the waters rising quickly downstream, even at great distances – very dangerously, if anybody is caught crossing. These features are true for all watercourses, but had the largest impact on the Great River and on its major tributary, the Vaal River. Counter-intuitively, for humans a relative lack of water was a desired aspect when planning a journey across rivers. In the interior, the early dry winter was the season for travels, for hunting, and for most activities which involved river crossings, such as large military expeditions.<sup>21</sup> This also meant that long distance travels had to be thoroughly organised because both food and water had to be carried, or their provision along the route planned ahead. Seasoned travellers such as the members of Wikar's party departed with a limited number of oxen, divided between pack oxen to carry provisions and slaughter animals to be kept as reserve when food ended.<sup>22</sup> Colonial expeditions were usually larger, heavier, and slower. By the Great River, access to both water and food was relatively easier and this made its course a potential route for long distance travellers, but the road often departed from the river banks for days due to physical obstacles. Moreover, some of the most arid parts of the Great River hinterland, such as the Hantam and Karoo between the middle Great River and the Cape, could only or preferentially be traversed during or immediately after the summer rains, making planning the longest journeys, those spanning across the entire environmental spectrum, very elaborate, and subject to risk.<sup>23</sup> By their own nature, these travels were likely to be attempted only once a year, because it took several weeks to perform them and by then it might not be the right moment of the year to start again.

Crossing the Great River itself was a major peril in travels into the interior, as many nineteenth-century colonial explorers discovered. William John Burchell, who led an exploration north in 1811, reached the river in mid September, before the beginning of the summer rains. He noted the low level of the water, the high banks, and the marks of previous floods, some of which seemed to have surpassed the very banks and have reached the surrounding area. He estimated these most violent occurrences to happen roughly

21 Both Wikar's and Gordon's travels along the Great River were planned and executed in winter, and were interrupted when the season turned to summer and the rains started.

22 Claas Barend's party had five pack oxen and three slaughter oxen. Others, like Ouga and his community, slaughtered animals and ate as much as they could at their village before leaving for a journey with a bellyful, then sustained themselves with *veldkos* for at least a month. Mossop, *Wikar*, 22 fn4, 32–33.

23 Robert Ross, 'The !Kora Wars on the Orange River, 1830–1880', *Journal of African History*, 16, 4, 1975, 561–576, 563.

once every seven years, but it is not clear on what factual basis he made the estimates. The breadth of the river was, at that location, about 238 meters, but he added that the average breadth seemed to be 320 meters, which could become 400 during floods, and even 1600 meters if the river spilled entirely over the banks.

At that place, however, the Great River was not fordable, at least for Burchell's large expedition party. His guides found a favourable location about fourteen kilometres upstream, where the river was about 400 meters wide, the water was very shallow, and the current was quite strong. Burchell named it 'Shallow Ford'. A party had to build a makeshift road for their waggons to reach the level of the waters down the steep banks and through the thick vegetation. He checked the water and, seeing it crystal clear, he concluded that it had not rained upstream. Once all was ready, a group of men on horseback and on oxback – a typical way of travelling in southern Africa – entered the river to control where the water was the shallowest and if there were any holes in the riverbed; then, the waggons went in, one by one, in quick succession, the driver keeping the oxen from turning along the current, each waggon taking about fifteen minutes to cross; finally, their other oxen were led across by about twelve men, whilst sheep and goats had to be swam across by a similar number of men. It took more than one day to complete the crossing since they reached the river in the first spot, and there was a general feeling of hurry due to the fact that, if the water rose, they might be delayed for a week or even a fortnight.<sup>24</sup>

The discipline displayed by Burchell's party was necessary. Some kilometres downstream from where he crossed the river there was a more famous ford called Priskab or Prieska, a name deriving from a !Kora word meaning 'place of the lost she-goat'.<sup>25</sup> An earlier colonial traveller, Hinrich Lichtenstein, had two risky crossings there when travelling to and fro the capital town of the Batlhaping, Kuruman, in 1805. On his way north, a man of the party almost drowned while carelessly riding his horse into the river, when he fell into the hole of a hippopotamus in the riverbed; on this occasion, they also lost three sheep, carried away by the current and drowned. Some months later, on his way back south to the Colony, the oxen leading the waggon got entangled in a rope the guides were using to walk across the current, and they had to stop

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24 William John Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, 2 Vols., Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, London, 1822–1824, vol. 1, 315–322.

25 William Somerville, *William Somerville's Narrative of His Journeys to the Eastern Cape Frontier and to Lattakoe, 1799–1802*, Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 1979, 77 fn5.

in the middle of the river and quickly disentangle them, risking for the entire waggon to be carried away.<sup>26</sup>

In time, colonial travellers acquired a more systematic knowledge of the floods of the Great River. Thomas Arbousset, who mostly travelled across and along its upper course, described the summer floods of the river in his 1842 travel account. In his view, floods were somewhat predictable in that they happened within a specific period of the year and, when taking place, their average duration was known. Commonly, the river could be flooded and therefore uncrossable for about two months every summer. The same was true for the Mohokare, despite it being much smaller.

Le fleuve Orange est, comme le Calédon [Mohokare], sujet à des crues périodiques qui se renouvellent trois ou quatre fois entre la fin de novembre et le milieu d'avril: la première crue dure ordinairement de dix à douze jours; les deux ou trois suivantes durent cinq ou six semaines.

Ces crues retardent fréquemment les voyageurs qui doivent traverser le fleuve, et surprennent quelquefois ceux qui tentent de le passer à gué.<sup>27</sup>

There was another aspect that made the floods of the Great River noteworthy: on its middle and lower course, where the surroundings were dry, a very large flood was announced by a cloud of dust advancing 'far away in the desert', which was produced by the water level rising violently along its course.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes, however, the river could be flooded even outside of the proper season, and without any recognisable warning, as Wikar noted.

Last year, 1778, was an exception, so that the Great River was full in the months of July and August, when, according to the Hottentots, it is the time that it ought to be empty; and at the time of the favourable monsoon the river should be full, for then the rain, which is accompanied by

26 Henry[Hinrich] Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa: In the Years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806*, translated from the original German by Anne Plumtre, 2 vols., London, Henry Colburn, 1812, vol. 2, 223–224, 340.

27 'The Orange River is subject, like the Caledon River, to periodical floods which happen three or four times between the end of November and the middle of April: the first flood usually lasts between ten and twelve days; the following two or three floods last for five or six weeks. These floods frequently delay the travellers who have to cross the river, and sometimes they take by surprise those who attempt to cross the fords'. Arbousset, *Relation*, 149. Translation by Ettore Morelli.

28 Moolman, 'The Orange River', 655–656.

heavy thunder, comes from the east. A storm of this kind brings rain to some places, but to others none.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, in October 1778, Wikar and his party had to swiftly relocate away from the river banks on the middle river course, when the water rose 'frightfully' despite there not having been any rain for days.<sup>30</sup> At least once, in June 1823, the movement of several armies on a winter campaign was influenced by both the Vaal River and the Great River being in flood, blocking the path of some contingents, and submerging some others who tried to cross during their rout.<sup>31</sup>

Crossing the Great River had better to happen at the right time and the right place. This is why, in this environment, the fords of the river became a well-known feature both for the people who inhabited the region and for those who travelled there often. Indeed, the first colonial travellers found an established infrastructure at various places along the watercourse: communities of specialists who lived by the river, and were trained in swimming across sheep and goats, in driving large cattle, quickly adapting to the dangerous ox-led waggons from the Colony, and generally in guiding parties who were directed on one side or the other of the Great River.<sup>32</sup> Such was the case of the first colonial expedition which reached the ford at Prieska, led by Truter and Somerville in 1801–1802 which found communities of !Korana and San who acted as boatmen with logs and rafts modified for the purpose.<sup>33</sup> It is not by chance that a

29 Mossop, *Wikar*, 192–195.

30 Mossop, *Wikar*, 130–131.

31 Marion How, 'An Alibi for Mantatisi', *African Studies*, 13, 2, 1954, 65–76; William F. Lye, 'The Difaqane: The Mfecane in the Southern Sotho Area, 1822–24', *The Journal of African History*, 8, 1, 1967, 107–131.

32 This was recently and more deeply discussed by Andrea Rosengarten, 'Entangled Networks: Ethnicity, Mobility, and Exchange in the Lower !Garib / Orange River Region in the Late 18th Century', in Luregn Lenggenhager, Martha Akawa, Giorgio Miescher, Romie NHITEVELEWKA, Ndidzulafhi Innocent Sinthumule, eds., *The Lower !Garib Orange River: Pasts and Presents of a Southern African Border Region*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2023, 27–49.

33 Somerville, *Narrative*, 77–83; Petrus Johannes Truter, William Somerville, [Copy] 'Journal', in George McCall Theal, ed., *Records of the Cape Colony, From May 1801 to February 1803, Copied for the Cape Government, From the Manuscript Documents in the Public Record Office, London, Vol. 4*, William Clowes and Sons, London, 1899, 359–436, 370; Petrus Borchardus Borchards, *An Auto-Biographical Memoir, Being A Plain Narrative of Occurrences From Early Life to Advanced Age, Chiefly Intended For His Children And Descendants, Countrymen And Friends*, Cape Town, A. S. Robertson, 1861, 67–69; John Barrow, *A Voyage to Conchinchina, in the Years 1792 and 1793: Containing a General View of the Valuable Productions and the Political Importance of This Flourishing Kingdom, and Also of Such European Settlements as Were Visited on the Voyage ..., to Which is Annexed an Account of*

large band of amaXhosa, led by a royal prince, chose the vicinity of Prieska to settle and exact tribute from travellers when they arrived on the Great River in about 1795, leaving the distant lowlands of the eastern coast.<sup>34</sup>

The existence of local toponyms for recognised crossings on the Great River suggests a longstanding human interaction with the watercourse, even though it is not possible to trace when this interaction started from this single type of evidence.<sup>35</sup> For the purpose of this chapter, it is important to note that the knowledge of how and where to ford the river was already established by the last quarter of the 18th century. All river crossings had Khoe or San names, stemming from populations who had perhaps inhabited these lands for centuries, if not millennia. Some names clearly showed the importance of river crossings for transhumance patterns, or anyway for the movement of domestic stock. However, the lack of Setswana and Sesotho names for the fords might be a distortion produced in written sources by the fact that all colonial travellers came from the south, across the lands primarily inhabited by Khoe – and San-speakers, and were instructed by them about the Great River.<sup>36</sup>

Be as it may, not all fords were alike, as the travel accounts make clear. For example, only some were particularly apt for ox-led waggons, a way of travel which was mostly employed by colonial traders and explorers but which was also adopted by some wealthy individuals living without the bounds of the Colony.<sup>37</sup> In the lower Great River, such a ford was Ramans Drift, also known as Haraxas or Knorhaan, which was quite simply the ‘Company Waggons’ Drift’ in colonial sources – the ‘company’ obviously being the VOC which ruled the Cape. Situated on the lower river course, this ford was far away from the border of the Colony, which only reached the Great River in 1848. Nevertheless, it was probably at Ramans / Company Waggons’ Drift that a trading

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*a Journey Made in the Years 1801 and 1802, to the Residence of the Chief of the Booshuana Nation*, London, T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1806, 375, 422; Peter Kallaway, ‘Danster and the Xhosa of the Gariep: Towards a political economy of the Cape Frontier 1790–1820’, *African Studies*, 41, 1 (1982), 143–160; Lichtenstein, *Travels*, vol. 2, 223–224.

34 Kallaway, ‘Danster’, 143–160.

35 On the difficulty of Khoe toponomastic specifically, see du Plessis, ‘The Name of the Fourth River’.

36 This seems confirmed by William Somerville, who was able to write down at least one Setswana toponym for the Great River region after they had visited Lithakong. This place was called ‘Tsinzaban’ by the Batswana and ‘Ts’heip’ by the !Korana. Somerville, *Narrative*, 173.

37 The old Griqua *captyn* Cornelius Kok told the missionary John Campbell in 1820 that his father Adam Kok was the first to have owned a waggon north of the Oliphants River in about the 1740s. John Campbell, *Travels in South Africa Undertaken at The Request of the London Missionary Society, Being a Narrative of a Second Journey in the Interior of that Country*, 2 vols., London, Francis Westley, 1822, volume 2, 260.

expedition-turned-commando crossed the Great River in 1736, for the first time bringing colonial war to the communities of the north.<sup>38</sup> It was likewise through it that the colonial party of Hendrik Hop and Carel Frederik Brink went across the river to explore the lands in the north, in 1761.

Hop and Brink followed the reports of an elephant hunter who had crossed the river somewhere else in 1760. This man, Jacobus Coetsé, crossed at the lower Gū-daos Drift, the 'Sheep Path'.<sup>39</sup> Coming from the south, a long sandy valley provides a natural road across the rugged hills that surround the river, the Richtersveld: Wikar noted this on his map as the 'Goedous Opening', and it is precisely where he began his journey, joining Claas Barend's expedition, in 1778.<sup>40</sup> The road of Gū-Daos reached to the south the region of the Cape, while to the north it travelled to greater distances, possibly even to Angola.<sup>41</sup> In the eighteenth century, Gū-daos and Ramans drifts connected two large Namaqua communities, the Little Namaqua living south of the river, and the Great Namaqua living north of it. In early September 1778, Claas Barend wanted to bring Wikar to travel and trade among the Great Namaqua 'rich in cattle' in the north, but found both the Gū-daos and Ramans drift impassable because of the river was in flood and had to proceed further upstream to the east.<sup>42</sup> Today, the highway from Cape Town to Windhoek is built exactly into the sandy valley and Gū-daos Drift acts as the main frontier post between South Africa and Namibia, this section of the river having become an international border.

Several days' travel along the rocky southern bank were necessary to reach the next place where the river was fordable. First, however, the traveller had to pass a major geographical feature, the Augrabies Falls. The falls, the name of which came from the Nama word *!oukurubes*, 'The Noise Making Place', are 121 meters high and constitute an environmental boundary between the lower and middle Great River course, to some extent dividing both its aquatic and terrestrial populations. In 1778, the Namaqua called 'Einiqua', 'People of the River', those inhabiting the banks upstream of the Augrabies. Here, the middle Great River opens in a myriad islands of different size, covered in thick forests, green grass, and made of very fertile alluvial soil, some quite high above the level of the water and therefore safe from floods.<sup>43</sup> In the 18th century, some

38 Nigel Penn, 'The Orange River Frontier Zone c.1700–1805', in Smith, *Einiqualand*, 60–62.

39 Huigen, *Knowledge and Colonialism*, 276–279.

40 Mossop, 'Introduction', in Mossop, *Wikar*, 2–3, 20–21.

41 Leibbrandt, H.C.V., *Precis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope: January 1659-May 1662, Riebeeck's Journal &c., Part III*, Cape Town, W.A. Richards & Sons, 1897 [Henceforth: *VRJ*, *III*], 255–256, 20–23 April 1661.

42 Mossop, *Wikar*, 22–23.

43 Gordon, 4th Journey, 24, 25, 26 October 1779.

were inhabited and cultivated; today, the woods have disappeared and they are mostly occupied by intensive commercial farms. In this section of the river, fords either corresponded or were in the vicinity of some of the major islands, such as in the case of the closely related Hosabes ford and Neus Island. Further upstream, one of the largest island was only reachable after crossing 14 streams from island to island, because one of the main channels dividing the island from the banks was too dangerous to swim across directly.<sup>44</sup> In 1778, this land was inhabited by the Einiqua.

The land of the Einiqua had another important geographical feature. A further 25 kilometres upstream from the falls, a seasonal river, the Hartebeest or ||kamab, joins from the south, corresponding to the end of a route that was used to reach the Great River from across the southern drylands. This road was known to colonial travellers in 1801 as the 'Hantam road', because it crossed that flat and arid region north of the colonial border, before reaching the Zak and Hartebeest Rivers and, eventually the Great River.<sup>45</sup> As mentioned, the crossing of the dry Hantam and Karoo was probably only ventured during two or three months in summer, when the scanty rains would bring some water to seasonal pools and underground wells, but the difficult road was ideal for travelling undetected because the dry riverbeds of the Zak and Hartebeest Rivers were thickly wooded and could conceive movement. Conversely, they could also harbour sentinels, or ambushers, especially in times of war.<sup>46</sup> The Hantam road was a rather high stakes road to take, and Somerville and Truter eventually decided to avoid it in 1801.

The first ford of the middle Great River was just below the junction with the Hartebeest River and the Hantam road and was known as ||gama-daos and ||kamab-daos, 'water passage' and 'Hartebeest ford'.<sup>47</sup> Here Wikar crossed north in October 1778, but he also plotted on his map two further fords at a close distance upstream: one had to be crossed only in the months of April and May, the other one in December.<sup>48</sup> The latter, called Hosabes or Vondeling, was crossed by Wikar on his return trip and by Gordon while going upstream, in October 1779. Hosabes was shallow, had a rocky bottom and was divided into three streams, so that Gordon's party did not have to use rafts and walked in hip-deep water. They had, however, to leave the waggon and most of their

44 Mossop, *Wikar*, 136–139.

45 Somerville, *Narrative*, 180–183.

46 Ross, 'The !Kora Wars', 563.

47 Mossop, *Wikar*, 128–129.

48 Mossop, *Wikar*, map between pages 192 and 193.

inventory behind and to continue with pack oxen only.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Hosabes is just above a narrow rocky gorge where the river makes various rapids and a whirlpool into which – Wikar was told – a raft manned by five men carrying hippopotamus meat once disappeared, never to be seen again.<sup>50</sup> In places like this, in order to travel along river, it was necessary to go across, avoid the difficult and rocky banks, and continue on the easier side.

Travelling further away from the Augrabies Falls, the course of the Great River brings the voyager into a long bend in the north, then another long one in the south. Another ford or series of fords was located at the northernmost point reached by the river, which had a width of about 165 meters. At the ford, some of the streams sometimes run dry, as Gordon described in October 1779. This was the area settled by the Gyzikoa villages, and it was from here that another recognised road started, traversing another dry region to the north, to the 'Briqua' or 'Bitjoana' communities, to the Land of Tau.<sup>51</sup> The journey to the closest settlement along the Briqua road could be made in three days during the dry winter season – but no water was to be found along the way – or on four days during the wet summer months, meaning that at least one swollen river had to be crossed.<sup>52</sup> Two of the main destinations, however, were at 20 days' distance to the north-east, in October 1779, across at least another great river, already mentioned as the Kuruman in eighteenth-century sources.<sup>53</sup>

Further upriver, moving south along the river, there was T'Keis, a ford which was used by Truter and Somerville in 1801 to travel from the town of Lithakong to the islands near the Augrabies Falls.<sup>54</sup> Like ||gama-daos and Hosabes, it seems that T'Keis was a ford where travellers crossed in order to move along the river. Finally, the fords described and used by Lichtenstein and Burchell in 1805 and 1811 – Prieska and 'Shallow Ford' – were located in the southernmost point reached by the middle river, only about 100 kilometres downstream from the junction between the Great River and the Vaal River. Neither Gordon nor Wikar arrived this far in 1778 and 1779, but both were told of the junction lying about two hundred kilometres from where they stopped. The earliest

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49 Gordon 4th journey 21, 22, 23 October 1779.

50 Mossop, *Wikar*, 130–133.

51 Gordon, 4th Journey, 28 October 1779.

52 Mossop, *Wikar*, 146–149. Wikar surprisingly wrote that water was to be found in July, August, and September, which are the driest months in the interior.

53 The villages of 'Matjaro' and 'Makrakki'. Gordon, 4th Journey, 30 October 1779; Brenthurst Library, Johannesburg, Robert Jacob Gordon, MS.107/9. Topographical and geographical notes. Available online at <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/writings-and-drawings> (last accessed on 29 August 2023).

54 Somerville, *Narrative*, 174–175.

description of Prieska is found in Somerville's narrative of the first expedition to the Batlhaping: the river was here only 137 meters wide and was divided in two streams, with an island made of gravel in the middle. Even in these circumstances, the 'uncommonly low' water in early November could rise abruptly putting the expedition in danger, as it happened to Somerville in 1801.<sup>55</sup> Prieska channelled the itineraries of travellers coming from the eastern parts of the Cape, across the Sneewberg, making it the third place where roads from the south reached the Great River. Here the road continued across, northwards: it was recorded as the *'Ts Garap*, in !Kora, and *Straat* in Dutch, leading to Lithakong by Somerville in 1801, but its itinerary was possibly much drier than the one of the Briqua road, climbing the karst Ghaap plateau.<sup>56</sup> As mentioned, the country around Prieska was almost certainly already inhabited by the !Korana at around mid-eighteenth century.

In addition to fords, there was another physical feature that shaped the way travellers moved around, along, and across the river. As mentioned, in many sections the Great River flows amidst rocky ground and into high gorges. These surroundings often proved difficult to traverse and in some occasions it was necessary to either go across, or to lose sight of the watercourse for one or more days in order to travel around such stony obstacles, some of which were represented on Wikar's and Gordon's map. Conversely, there were several openings in the rocks that made travelling easier: some were perpendicular to the watercourse and often led to a ford; others were parallel to the Great River and allowed for travellers to move along; both were called by Dutch-speakers such as Wikar and Gordon with the word 'poort': 'gateway', 'defile' and, in South Africa, 'mountain pass'.<sup>57</sup> One of the former was the already mentioned 'Goedous Opening', the sandy valley leading to Gū-daos ford; among the latter, Wikar encountered early on 'a narrow gorge ['poort' in the Dutch original] leading down to the river' when crossing the Kabaas Mountains longitudinally, in the vicinity of modern-day Pella.<sup>58</sup>

It was on these mountains, which formed the hinterland of the Augrabies Falls and which had to be traversed to move from the lower to the middle river, that Wikar met a strong group of 'Bushmen' whose name was 'Nannigai or Mountain-climbers' ['bergklimmers' in the Dutch original], perhaps showing some kind of functional specialisation similar to the one of the swimmers on

55 Somerville, *Narrative*, 76–83.

56 Somerville, *Narrative*, 171.

57 Raper, *Dictionary*, 49.

58 Mossop, *Wikar*, 34–37.

the fords of the Great River.<sup>59</sup> Wikar's 'brother companion' Captain Ouga was one of the two leaders of another San community of this neighbourhood. His decision to join the expedition proved of the utmost importance in various moments of the journey, when Ouga acted as an interpreter and a cultural broker with San communities of the river. It is also likely that Ouga made a good guide into the hilly maze of this section of the river, which was later described by Wikar.

Everywhere along the river from Koungama far down right up to the waterfall [Augrabies] there are large mountains. Only here and there do you find any narrow passages and passes ['poorte' in the Dutch original] which lead down through the mountain to the river, but on the right hand of the mountain running south east there are wide grass plains. On the far side [north] of the river, in just the same way, the mountains run along the river, and on the north side of the river is an exceedingly long, high, flat-topped mountain. It takes three days' travelling on foot along this mountain before you come to the end of it.<sup>60</sup>

The editor of Wikar's report, E.E. Mossop, tried to trace the route travelling there himself in the 1930s and his words provide a good idea of what it took to travel from the lower to the middle river course and to go beyond the Augrabies Falls.

To decide where Wikar had left the river, and to trace his cross-country route to rejoin it near Augrabies Falls, presented the most difficult topographical problem in his journal. [...] His point of departure [from the river] was at Beenbreek [...] and Beenbreek was Kaykoop or *Gei-||ōp* meaning Great Death. Between Beenbreek and Gamceip near the Falls [Augrabies], for approximately 70 miles [112km] it is a physical impossibility to follow, for any distance, the banks of the Orange River. It is here shut in by mountains which are terrible in their lonely ruggedness and the surrounding country is part of that great finger of desolation which the Kalahari has pointed across the river towards the heart of the Cape Province. [...] Descending from the high plateau through these hot defiles to the low-lying river is both fatiguing and unpleasant.<sup>61</sup>

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59 Mossop, *Wikar*, 36–37.

60 Mossop, *Wikar*, 192–193.

61 Mossop, *Introduction*, 5–6.

Such remarks echo those of the 1979 editors of the *Narrative* by William Somerville, who were unable to accurately show the route taken by the Truter-Somerville expedition when they moved towards the Augrabies Falls coming from Prieska, repeatedly crossing the river and the mountainous sections alongside it.<sup>62</sup>

Modern editors were not alone in finding rocky *poorte* unpleasant. These deep mountain gorges were the optimal location for elephant hunters, who either surprised the large quadrupeds during their crossing, or attracted them into the defiles, to more easily surround and kill that largest prize of the hunt without risking their lives on an even ground.<sup>63</sup> *Poorte* were therefore both places of passage for travellers and destinations for those hunting the largest prize offered by the country. Hunting, in any case, was part of the riverine infrastructure of travel. Travellers had to be skilled hunters to fully profit from the resources offered by the difficult landscape, and to keep building up the provisions of the party along the road. At the intersection between the two activities there was a custom which fully represent both the refined aspects of such infrastructure, and the need for travellers to be thoroughly accustomed with the route of the Great River.

They [the 'Namnykoa', a section of the Einiqua] informed me that it was customary among them for those who were travelling, if they found anything in the kaysi [game-trap], to use freely what they found without any objection being raised. For it was the custom among the Blip and the Eynikkoa to provide the traveller with food free and, when they came to other tribes, they expected the same.<sup>64</sup>

Spike traps were, obviously, hidden on animal tracks and places of passage and had to be either carefully avoided or actively looked for.<sup>65</sup> Gathering or foraging was as much needed as hunting. Captain Ouga, the 'brother companion' of Wikar, was likely the source of all the information about gathering the Swede noted down in his report: which plants, roots, and insects to eat, and which to avoid. As he wrote, Wikar learnt 'to live in Bushman style when the necessity arises'.<sup>66</sup> This included eating 'astringent' substances to keep the hunger at bay when nothing was found, and learning how to follow the tracks of the bees, in

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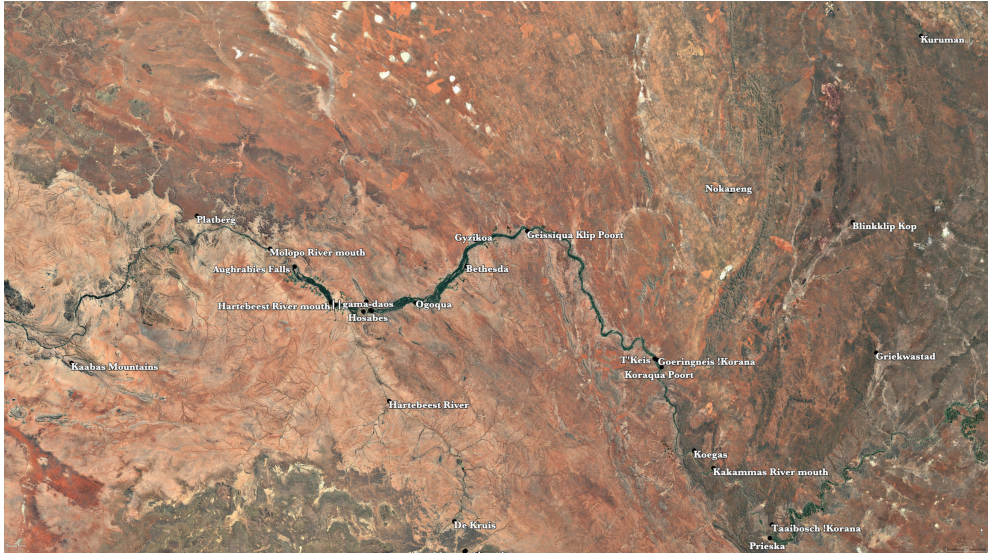
62 Somerville, *Narrative*, map by Edna and Frank Bradlow.

63 Mossop, *Wikar*, 102–103.

64 Mossop, *Wikar*, 118–121.

65 Mossop, *Wikar*, 48–49.

66 Mossop, *Wikar*, 56–57.



MAP 2.5 The middle Orange River from Kaabas Mountains to Prieska (satellite imagery)  
SOURCE: GOOGLE EARTH PRO

the evenings and against the wind, to trace the hives down and gather honey, which was both eaten raw and used to brew beer – but only if the bees did not feed on poisonous trees or bushes, as he learnt the hard way, severely intoxicating himself.<sup>67</sup>

Above the Augrabies Falls the surroundings of the river are considerably less hilly and at times perfectly flat. Occasionally, however, *poorte* are still found along the road, interestingly not too far from recognised river crossings. It is the case of two passes, the ‘Klip [Cliff] Poort’ mentioned by Gordon and ‘Neus Poort’ marked on modern maps, which lie on the road running on the northern bank of the Great River, precisely on the section between the ||gama-daos and Hosabes fords, only 4 kilometres from the latter drift and from Neus island in the river. Further upstream, there were at least two other *poorte*. One was precisely on the southern side of the northernmost bend of the Great River, where the Gyzikoa were settled, and was named ‘Geissiqua Klip [Cliff] Poort’ accordingly by Gordon.<sup>68</sup> The other was towards the end of both Wikar’s and Gordon’s itineraries. This narrow passage was named ‘Koraqua Poort’ by

67 Mossop, *Wikar*, 56–57, 96–97, 118–119, 180–183.

68 Gordon, 4th journey, 11–12 November 1779.

Gordon because he found two villages of !Korana living at a short distance at both ends. The location was also characterised by a 'beautiful island' in the river and it was possibly the same place where, in 1801, the colonial expedition of Somerville and Truter crossed the river, on their way towards the Augrabies Falls: if this were the case, then the 'Koraqua Poort' would be on the eastern side of the T'Keis drift, and the two !Korana villages would be settled in the vicinity of both.<sup>69</sup>

Four areas along the river were characterised by all the above mentioned features. Here the traveller could move both alongside the River on the upstream/downstream axis and perpendicular to it on the north/south one. Here the traveller usually crossed the rapid waters of the river and the precipitous rocks of a *poort*. These places of passage were riverine crossroads. West to east, the first one was made by the two closely related drifts on the lower river, Gū-daos / 'Sheep Path' and Ramas/Company Waggon Drifts; the second one was at the junction of the Hartebest River above the Augrabies Falls; the third one was on the northernmost bend by the Gzyikoa; and the fourth one was around the Prieska drift. Four roads joined the river in those points. In the west, a road connected Little and Great Namaqualand on the two sides of the Great River, and further sections of the west coast; we could refer to this as the Namaqua road. The Hantam road joined the Great River from the south at the Hartebest junction, but it did not go across: the road connected the interior of the Cape to the Great River east-west axis. Conversely, the Briqua road joined the river from the north at the northern bend, but there are no signs that it went across to the south. The above mentioned 'Geissiqua Klip Poort' on the southern side of the river was parallel to the watercourse, on the east-west axis and indeed, people arriving on the river via the Briqua road easily moved either upstream or downstream along the Great River route. Finally, on the lower bend, the *Ts Garap / Straat* reached the river at Prieska, crossing over and connecting the eastern Cape to the same destinations in the Land of Tau far north also arrived at by the Briqua road, but across a longer dry section above a karst plateau, the Ghaap. The Gzyikoa were the central crossroad of this system, the connective node between the two centres of power and wealth, the Land of Tau in the north and the Namaqua in the west.

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69 Gordon, 4th journey, 3 November 1779; Somerville, *Narrative*, 172–175.

### 3 The Boundary of Race: Mixedness and Bantu Waves

Located along the northern bend of the Great River where the modern South African town of Upington now stands, the villages of the Gyzikoa have been less of a magnet for historians in the 20th century than they were an attractive post for travellers and traders in the 18th century. While several scholars have taken up the challenge to read the complex archive of these lands and their peoples, the Gyzikoa have only earned short references in historical works and have remained a small but curious footnote on the page of the broader region. In addition, most scholars dealing with them have chosen to pursue the search for their identity, following the established academic and popular view of the region as a fundamental place of transition between ‘Bantu’ – specifically Batswana – and ‘Hottentot’ communities – !Korana and Einiqua – as it will be discussed. In this, most were inevitably pulled by the fundamental explanation of their very name, Gyzikoa, provided by Wikar, the first European or ‘hoengab’ who ever reached their villages, on the 28th of October 1778.<sup>70</sup> In his gloss, Gyzikoa would mean ‘Twin Kraal’ or ‘tweelingkraal’, and ‘Twin folk’ or ‘tweelingvolk’.

They were given this name because half their people live here, while the other half are with the Blicquas and one can immediately see the difference, because the latter are big, strapping, fine men in blackish-brown hair like Madagascar slaves; but the former often intermarry with the Korakkoa higher up or with the Aukokkoa down here, so that they are much hybridized.<sup>71</sup>

They are called Gysicquas or Twin-kraal because they and the Blicquas come over and live with one another reciprocally in batches.<sup>72</sup>

Let us note from the beginning that the explanation of the name first and foremost implied a double localisation: some of the Gyzikoa lived elsewhere. Wikar identified consequently a double kin connection starting from their villages on the Great River: one running north, to these ‘Blicquas’, among whom ‘half’ of the Gyzikoa lived; another one running upstream to the !Korana and downstream to the Einiqua, with whom the Gyzikoa ‘intermarried’. The resulting

<sup>70</sup> Mossop, *Wikar*, 144–145, fn126. Wikar translated ‘hoengab’ as ‘Dutch’, but the linguist Maingard noted that in Nama |*Hûn* meant ‘European’.

<sup>71</sup> Mossop, *Wikar*, 142–143.

<sup>72</sup> Wikar was previously told that ‘Half of the Gyzikoa live along the other large river and they themselves are bastard Blicquoas’, Mossop, *Wikar*, 30–31, 204–205.

'hybridisation' was commented by Wikar both in terms of physical appearance and in terms of linguistic proficiency, for the Gyzikoa spoke the languages of the Einiqua and !Korana on the middle river, the language of the Namaqua on the lower river, and the language of the 'Blicqua' north of the river.

They [the Namaqua] stated that the lower Eynikkoo [Einiqua], named the Namnykoo or Karos-bearers, had been at war with the upper Eynikkoo, the Gyzikoo or Twin Kraal, and had taken a large number of cattle from the latter, who had fled to the Blicquoas. Half of the Gyzikoo live along the other large river and they themselves are bastard Blicquoas.<sup>73</sup>

Their [the Gyzikoo's] usual form of speech is almost like that of the Nomakkoo [Nama] Hottentots, but they can all speak the Blicquoas' language and are to all intents and purposes exiles from their own country.<sup>74</sup>

The three tribes that I had met previously are named in one word Eynikkoo or Riverfolk by the Namacquoas, but these are different, they are really bastard Blicquoas. They were anxious that I should visit their people, the Blicquoas.<sup>75</sup>

In particular, Wikar wrote that 'all the aged people can speak the language of the Blicq', suggesting that perhaps not all the children of mixed marriages on the river learnt the language of their relatives far north. Yet, it can be seen that, for Wikar, the strongest of the two connections was the one with the north, with the 'Blicquoas', and indeed the map of the river he drew mentions them as 'Gyzijkoas off gevlugte bliquoas', 'Gyzikoo or exiled Bliquoas'.

Exactly a year after Wikar, on the 28th of October 1779, another 'hoengab' arrived from the lower Great River to the villages of the Gyzikoo, Robert Jacob Gordon. In his journal he wrote their name as 'Geisiquas' and immediately picked up an additional, crucial, information about the people of the north: 'their name is Bitjoana and not Birina or Briqua as they are called by the Hottentots'.<sup>76</sup> The word Bitjoana is today written Batswana and indicates communities living as far north as the Okavango delta and the Zimbabwean plateau. The southernmost of the Batswana communities has been, since the first contact with colonial travellers in 1801, that of the Batlhaping around the Kuruman River, north-east of where the Gyzikoo lived in 1778–1779. Indeed, by 1801–1802, when the colonial expedition of Truter and Somerville explored

73 Mossop, *Wikar*, 30–31.

74 Mossop, *Wikar*, 142–143.

75 Mossop, *Wikar*, 146–147.

76 Gordon, 4th journey, 28 October 1779.

the region, the Gyzikoa had disappeared from the northern bend of the Great River. For this reason, they remained unknown to southern African scholars throughout the nineteenth century, until Wikar's report was published by the Van Riebeeck Society in Cape Town.

Indeed, the first authoritative points on the Gyzikoa were made in the 1930s by two of the fathers of the South African linguistic school and esteemed scholars of the Khoe of the Cape, Louis Maingard and Jan Anthonie Engelbrecht.<sup>77</sup> Both worked on Wikar's travel account while studying the !Korana, the above-mentioned Khoe community who lived upstream on the Great River. The argument by Engelbrecht rested on common-sense genetic and on linguistics proper, and was attached to the 1935 edition of Wikar's journal within a short chapter on 'The Tribes of Wikar's Journal'.

As for the BeChuana [Batswana] they greatly admired the courage of the Hottentots by whom they had been repeatedly defeated in battle, and they were intent on marrying their women as they imagined that the offspring of such a union would be courageous too. These and other circumstances led to the formation of a mixed tribe, namely, Wikar's Twin-folk or Gyzikoa, or to give them their proper appellation, |*Geisikwa*, from |*ge*, the stem meaning twin. [...] There were yet other circumstance which, like those mentioned above, led to intermixture between Bantu and Hottentot in the north [...] The way in which this closer contact between Bantu and Hottentot came to be established, appears to have been more or less parallel to that which led to an infusion of Hottentot blood into a section of the Xhosa [in the eastern colonial border].<sup>78</sup>

Louis Maingard had already proposed similar views in 1932 and 1933 and was indeed the main authority referred to by Engelbrecht. The earlier mention of the Gyzikoa was a short passage within Maingard's essay 'Studies in Korana History, Customs and Language'.

Beyond Upington, at the point where the river bends in a south-easterly direction [moving upstream], were the 'Gysikoa', a mixed race of 'Brikwa' (Bechuana) and Hottentots with the typical appearance of the Bantu, tall

77 For a short summary of their work, see Menán du Plessis, *Kora: A Lost Khoisan Language of the early Cape and the Gariep*, Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2018, 45–46, and *passim*.

78 Jan Anthonie Engelbrecht, 'The Tribes of Wikar's Journal', in E.E. Mossop, ed., *The Journal of Hendrik Jacob Wikar (1779), The Journals of Jacobus Coetsé Jansz (1760) and Willem van Reenen (1791)*, Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1935, 221–237, 221–222.

and blacker than the latter, and who looked upon themselves as Bechuana although they spoke both SeChwana and Korana.<sup>79</sup>

The following mention of the Gyzikoa was a more structured argument included in a short erudite article on the 'Brikwa' published in 1933, which is still the reference point for this matter. The article was based on clever geographical speculation and the deep knowledge of the orally-conveyed history of two main communities of the region, the !Korana and the Batlhaping; respectively, the most north-eastern Khoe-speakers, and the most south-western Setswana-speakers. This meant, in the categories of the 1930s, calling into play the 'Hottentot' and 'Bantu' 'races', as seen also in Engelbrecht.

Wikar's picture is thus one of a Bantu tribe having largely retained their culture and their physical type, in spite of a large admixture of Hottentot blood. It must be remembered that the place where Wikar met them was situated between the Aukokoa on the west and the Korana on the east, i.e., the district where the Langebergen run down to the Orange River, and we shall see from the evidence gathered from subsequent travellers that the Gysikoa are to be identified with the Bathlaping [sic].

For the original home of the Bathlaping [sic] was in the Langebergen along the Nokana, a river that joins the Orange near where Wikar's Tweelingvolk had their settlement.<sup>80</sup>

Despite its longevity, Maingard's argument was flawed in several respects. Some are very minor. The Langeberg proper does not reach the Great River near Upington, the Nokana used to flow north-westwards into the Kuruman River, and there is no river large or small running into the Great River from the north in the vicinity of modern Upington. His final point was right, as it will be discussed later: the Gyzikoa were Batlhaping, among other identities they claimed. However, Maingard's explanation of the name Gyzikoa was a rather important departure from what Wikar had observed, that is the division of the Gyzikoa in more than one locality. In Maingard's words, they were the Twin Folk because they were a 'mixed tribe'.

After Maingard and Engelbrecht, mixedness became the lens adopted to study the Gyzikoa and indeed the entire region, and all subsequent scholars

79 Louis F. Maingard, 'Studies in Korana History, Customs and Language', *Bantu Studies: A Journal devoted to the Scientific Study of Bantu, Hottentot and Bushmen*, 6, 2, 1932, 103–162.

80 Louis F. Maingard, 'The Brikwa and the Ethnic Origins of the Bathlaping', *South African Journal of Science*, 30, 1933, 597–602.

built their arguments around this concept. The historian Christopher Saunders followed Wikar and Maingard in another foundational article published in 1960, where he defined the Gyzikoa as ‘mixed Tlhaping-Kohoikhoi’.<sup>81</sup> Martin Legassick, the most important historian who worked on the region, called them ‘a Sotho-Tswana and Kora mixture’ in 1969.<sup>82</sup> The same definition of Saunders, ‘mixed Tlhaping and Khoi’, was used by the archaeologist A. Humphreys in 1976.<sup>83</sup> More recently, in 2003, Nancy Jacobs referred to both Maingard’s and Humphreys’ works to discuss the Gyzikoa, but returned also to Wikar’s literal argument that their name was due to them being a ‘divided people’. In her analysis, ‘Tswana’ and ‘Khoi’ were two opposite poles between a semi-settled agro-pastoralist lifestyle and a nomadic pastoralist one, as seen below.<sup>84</sup> Nigel Penn, on the opposite, wrote in 2005 that the Gyzikoa ‘seemed to display a mixture of Tswana and Khoikhoi ancestry’, interestingly ‘with the latter influence predominant’, which is the opposite of Wikar’s own hints.<sup>85</sup>

These studies shared with Maingard and Engelbrecht an acute attention for the mixing of human communities across a region that, since about the beginning of the nineteenth century, had been considered a place of transition between the ‘Bantu’ and the ‘Hottentots’. The latter term, ‘Hottentot’, was already employed in eighteenth-century Dutch southern Africa for the inhabitants of the Cape region which are today referred as Khoi, and was progressively extended to the communities of the north, such as the Namaqua, Einiqua, and !Korana, as a vague blanket term. The word had a strong negative connotation, both in southern Africa and among intellectual circles in Europe.<sup>86</sup> ‘Bantu’, the other concept deployed by Maingard and subsequent scholars, was only coined

81 Christopher Saunders, ‘Early Knowledge of the Sotho: 17th Century and 18th Century Accounts of the Tswana’, *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library*, 20, 1965–1966, 60–70, 66–68.

82 Martin Legassick, *The Politics of a South African Frontier. The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana and the Missionaries, 1780–1840*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2010 [1969], 33.

83 A.J.B. Humphreys, ‘Note on the Southern Limits of Iron Age Settlement in the Northern Cape’, *The South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 31, 121/122, 1976, 54–57.

84 Nancy J. Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice: A South African History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 37–39.

85 Nigel Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier: Colonist & Khoisan on the Cape’s Northern Frontier in the 18th Century*, Athens OH, Ohio University Press, 2005, 162–163.

86 Richard Elphick, *Khoikhoi and The Founding of White South Africa*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1985; François-Xavier Fauvelle, ‘Des murs d’Augsbourg aux vitrines du Cap: Cinq siècles d’histoire du regard sur les corps des Khoisan’, *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, 39, 155/156, 1999, 539–561; David Johnson, ‘Representing the Cape “Hottentots”, from the French Enlightenment to Post-Apartheid South Africa’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 40, 4, 2007, 525–552; François-Xavier Fauvelle, *À la recherche du sauvage idéal*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2017.

by the German linguist Wilhelm Bleek in 1858, while he was studying southern African languages in Cape Town, to define the greater family of African languages – and peoples, or ‘races’ – which inhabited the continent north of what was by then the ‘Hottentot race’.<sup>87</sup> While African communities were more and more racialised towards the end of the century, the word ‘Bantu’ progressively substituted the southern African racist slur ‘Kafir’ in nascent local academic circles, which had used to be the only term for the peoples of the eastern coast and of the deep interior.<sup>88</sup>

Scholars today are aware that elaboration and diffusion of racial theories during the nineteenth century solidified identities that used to be malleable and less sharply defined in historical times.<sup>89</sup> The most recent elaboration on Wikar’s ‘Twin Folk’ and subsequent scholarly annotations came in 2010 with the influential work by Paul Landau, who effectively took the Gyzikoa/Geisiqua as a model for a proposed new category in the political geography of precolonial central southern Africa: the ‘twin court’. Landau, crucially, operated a remarkable shift: sure, this community was mixed, but so were many others, if not most of them before colonialism; what made them peculiar was that their village was ‘a doublet’ and that they were ‘a minor partner in a hierarchical alliance with another entity’ which in Landau’s understanding would constitute a recurrent structure in the politics of the precolonial interior.<sup>90</sup> Thus, Landau focused on the element of the double localisation, read it in terms of political power structures, and abstracted it to find a paradigm for the political history of the region. This was a quite different reading of Wikar’s text, and by no means incompatible with what the voyager wrote. Andrea Rosengarten, the latest scholar to mention the Gyzikoa, has followed Landau’s interpretation,

87 Wilhelm Heinrich Immanuel Bleek, *A Comparative Grammar of South African Languages: Part I Phonology*, London, Trübner & Co., 1862, 3; Raymond O. Silverstein, ‘A Note on the Term “Bantu” as First Used by W. H. I. Bleek’, *African Studies*, 27, 4, 1968, 211–212; Jan Vansina, ‘Bantu in the Crystal Ball I’, *History in Africa*, 6, 1979, 287–333; Andrew Bank, ‘Evolution and Racial Theory: The Hidden Side of Wilhelm Bleek’, *South African Historical Journal*, 43, 2000, 163–178.

88 ‘Kafir’ was first used by the Portuguese as ‘Caffre’ to refer to all inhabitants of southern Africa but, after the Dutch created the ‘Hottentot’ ethnonym, it remained as a distinctive name for the ‘blacker’ inhabitants of the north-eastern half. See Jochen S. Arndt, ‘What’s in a Word? Historicising the Term “Caffre” in European Discourses about Southern Africa between 1500 and 1800’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 44, 1, 2018, 59–75.

89 Pertinent to this chapter are Paul Stuart Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 108–250; Saul Dubow, ‘Earth History, Natural History, and Prehistory at the Cape, 1860–1875’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46, 1, 2004, 107–133.

90 Landau, *Popular Politics*, 6–7.

although she seems to place them in a much more predominantly Khoe and Namaqua social landscape, which mostly looks towards the lower Great River.<sup>91</sup> In her understating, the Gyzikoa were an example of a community located ‘within subdivisions of a larger network’ which followed a ranking by ‘seniority’ and expressed itself in ‘pairings’ or, in Gordon’s language, “*moieties*”, or two parts of whole.<sup>92</sup> Before moving further in the direction opened by Landau and Rosengarten, however, it is necessary to follow the roots of Maingard’s and Engelbrecht’s arguments, because they still inform part of today’s scholarship.

As a matter of fact, Hottentots and Bantu were understood to have met somewhere in the region of the Great River, but not at the river itself where the Gyzikoa were settled. This was clearly shown by the maps of southern Africa which were produced by English cartographers during the first half of the nineteenth century. Starting with the one drawn by the explorer and naturalist William Burchell in 1822, which might be the first specimen of this kind, a line appeared in the Kalahari desert, running from the north-west to the south-east towards the Great River, then turning straight to the east at a great distance from the northern bend of the river, snaking northwards, then southwards as to avoid the headwaters of the Harts River, and then abruptly cutting south, almost in perpendicular way, towards the eastern coast. In Burchell’s map it was labelled thus in the north: ‘This line marks the northernmost boundary of the Country inhabited by the various Nations of the Hottentot Race’; and in the eastern part ‘Eastern Boundary of the Hottentot Race’.<sup>93</sup> Although not graphically different, this line was conceptually remote from the other one which run much to the south, the ‘boundary of the Colony’: the former was a racial boundary, the latter was a political one; the latter was based on a reasonable though not exact knowledge of the landscape, the former claimed to depict areas of southern Africa where colonial officers and map-makers had never set foot.

The imaginary line had an immediate fortune and was picked up soon: it was already in one table drawn by Vandermaelen for his *Atlas universel de Géographie* in 1827, illustrating the ‘Pays des Hottentots’. Here it read ‘Contrée habitées par les différentes nations de la race des Hottentots’ and it was coloured in yellow for the southern side, and in green for the northern side.<sup>94</sup>

91 Rosengarten, ‘Entangled Networks’, 27–49.

92 Rosengarten, ‘Entangled Networks’, 38.

93 William Burchell, ‘A Map of the Extratropical Part of Southern Africa Constructed by William J. Burchell, Esqr.’, London, Longman ..., 1822, in Burchell, *Travels*, vol. 1, end of the volume.

94 Philippe Vandermaelen, table 51 ‘Pays des Hottentots’, in Philippe Vandermaelen, *Atlas universel de géographie physique, politique, statistique et minéralogique*, 6 volumes, Brussels, 1827, vol. 3 Afrique. Available online [https://library.princeton.edu/visual\\_materials/maps/websites/vandermaelen/home.htm](https://library.princeton.edu/visual_materials/maps/websites/vandermaelen/home.htm) (last time accessed 18 August 2023).



MAP 2.6 Burchell, ‘This line marks the northernmost boundary of the Country inhabited by the various Nations of the Hottentot Race’, 1822

Legend: dashed circle = approximate area of the Gyzikoa villages in 1778–1779

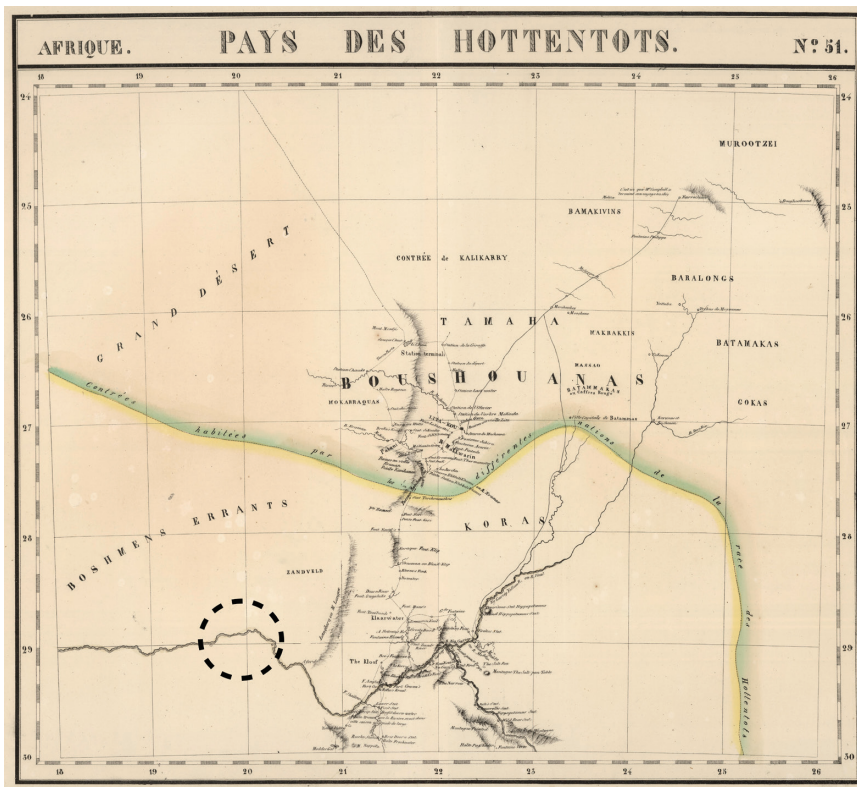
SOURCE: WILLIAM BURCHELL, ‘A MAP OF THE EXTRATROPICAL PART OF SOUTHERN AFRICA CONSTRUCTED BY WILLIAM J. BURCHELL, ESQR.’, LONDON, LONGMAN ..., 1822, IN BURCHELL, *TRAVELS*, VOL. 1, END OF THE VOLUME [DETAIL]

Following that, the line appeared in the map of southern Africa made by Sidney Hall in 1828, coloured in yellow only; the colonial boundary was in pink on the colonial side as typical of British possession, and in yellow on the ‘Hottentot’ side.<sup>95</sup> Then, the line was integrated in the Arrowsmith maps of southern Africa, at least since the 1834 edition and without variation in the 1836 and 1842 editions.<sup>96</sup> Here it read ‘Northern boundary of the various nations of the

95 Sidney Hall, ‘Southern Africa’, London, Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown & Green, 1 October 1828, included in Sidney Hall, *A New General Atlas, With the Divisions and Boundaries Carefully Coloured; Constructed Entirely from New Drawings, and Engraved by Sidney Hall*, London, Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown & Green, 1830.

96 John Arrowsmith, ‘Cape of Good Hope’, London, John Arrowsmith, 15 February 1836, included in John Arrowsmith, *The London Atlas of Universal Geography, Exhibiting the Physical and Political Divisions of the Various Countries of the World, Constructed from Original Materials*, London, John Arrowsmith, 1838; John Arrowsmith, ‘Cape of Good Hope’,

Hottentot Race'. Arrowsmith also copied the double green and yellow colours for the line from Vandermaelen. The large bend around the Harts River became even more accentuated, probably as the coordinates of the eastern parts of the southern African interior started to become more accurate, but also as a result of the changing political geography of the region, as it will be discussed in the next section. The importance of the Arrowsmith maps in the general history of southern Africa has already been noted by Norman Etherington and Elri Liebenberg: adopted by Governor Sir Benjamin D'Urban and by the British Parliament in the 1830s and 1840s, these maps improved on previous ones in various



MAPS 2.7 Vandermaelen, 'Contrée habitée par les différentes nations de la race des Hottentots', 1827  
 Legend: dashed circle = approximate area of the Gyzikoa villages in 1778-1779  
 SOURCE: PHILIPPE VANDERMAELEN, TABLE 51 'PAYS DES HOTTENTOTS', IN  
 VANDERMAELEN, *ATLAS UNIVERSEL DE GÉOGRAPHIE PHYSIQUE*, 1827 [DETAIL]

London, John Arrowsmith, 15 February 1842, included in John Arrowsmith, *The London Atlas of Universal Geography, Exhibiting the Physical and Political Divisions of the Various Countries of the World, Constructed from Original Materials*, London, John Arrowsmith, 1842.



MAPS 2.8 Hall, 'Boundary of the country inhabited by the Hottentot race', 1828  
 Legend: dashed circle = approximate area of the Gyzikoa villages in 1778-1779  
 SOURCE: SIDNEY HALL, 'SOUTHERN AFRICA', LONDON, LONGMAN, REES, ORME, BROWN & GREEN, 1 OCTOBER 1828, INCLUDED IN SIDNEY HALL, A NEW GENERAL ATLAS, 1830 [DETAIL]

respects, but also carried over several dubious features.<sup>97</sup> The 'boundary' of the 'Hottentot Race' was among them.

The history of the concept of racial boundary, so vividly represented in these early maps of southern Africa, is worth a treatise of its own and will not be pursued here. It should only be remembered that racial boundaries were at the same time elaborated in the eastern part of the Colony. Robert Ross studied in the case of the Kat River Settlement – interestingly, another 'mixed'

97 Norman Etherington, 'A False Emptiness: How Historians May Have Been Misled by Early Nineteenth Century Maps of South-Eastern Africa', *Imago Mundi*, 56, 1, 2004, 67–86; Elri Liebenberg, 'Shifting Boundaries in southern Africa – The Arrowsmith Map of 1836', *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, 62, 3, 2008, 128–144; Johanna Skurnik, 'Authorizing Geographical Knowledge: John Arrowsmith, Mapmaking and the Mid Nineteenth-century British Empire', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 69, 2020, 18–31; Elri Liebenberg, 'Unveiling Southern Africa: John Barrow's map of 1801', *International Journal of Cartography*, 7, 2, 2021, 164–170.



MAPS 2.9 Arrowsmith, 'Northern boundary of the various nations of the Hottentot Race', 1836  
 Legend: dashed circle = approximate area of the Gyzikoa villages in 1778-1779  
 SOURCE: JOHN ARROWSMITH, 'CAPE OF GOOD HOPE', LONDON, JOHN ARROWSMITH, 15 FEBRUARY 1836, INCLUDED IN ARROWSMITH, *THE LONDON ATLAS OF UNIVERSAL GEOGRAPHY*, 1838 [DETAIL]

'Hottentot' community, as if setting 'racial' boundaries had become an urge in inherently complex contexts.<sup>98</sup> Needless to say, the Republic of South Africa put in practice particularly heinous versions of racial boundaries during the twentieth century. Almost a hundred years before, the idea of a 'Hottentot border' seeped into the theories of the man who coined the term destined to become its double, 'Bantu', the already mentioned Wilhelm Bleek. In his *A Comparative Grammar of South African Languages*, published in 1862, the German linguist explained – correctly – the presence of clicks in some Bantu languages of southern Africa with their proximity to such a 'Hottentot border'. Conversely, those languages without clicks 'seem not to have encroached so

98 Robert Ross, *The Borders of Race in Colonial South Africa: The Kat River Settlement, 1829–1856*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

much upon former Hottentot territory'.<sup>99</sup> Thus was a fundamental structure of southern African colonial historiography anticipated: that of the Bantu invasion of 'Hottentot' lands.

Indeed, what happened along that 'Hottentot border' or 'boundary', besides linguistic borrowings, was written for the first time at length by the geologist and self-taught ethnographer and archaeologist George W. Stow, who spent several years studying the interior of southern Africa along the upper Great River and the Vaal River, dying before completing his research in 1882. His unpublished manuscript was titled 'The Intrusion of the Stronger Races' and was edited and published in 1905 by a leading colonial historian, George McCall Theal, as Norman Etherington has described.<sup>100</sup> The book appeared with the title *The Native Races of South Africa. A History of the Intrusion of the Hottentots and Bantu into the Hunting Grounds of the Bushmen, the Aborigines of the Country* and introduced a further key concept, which had a lasting legacy in 20th-century linguistics, history, and archaeology: the 'Bantu wave', which supposedly had washed upon a previous 'Hottentot wave', and submerged the 'aboriginal inhabitants' of the country, the 'Bushman'.<sup>101</sup>

The concurrent testimony thus afforded by these several traditions, obtained from widely separated and independent sources, would seem to shadow forth that in Central Africa also there were successive waves of migration, the one being formed by the Bantu tribes, which drove the Hottentots before them, until the latter diverged towards the ocean on the side of the setting sun. This after an apparent lull was succeeded by a second, which brought the present intra-lacustrine tribes into the country they now occupy; while the foremost wave was continuing its onward progress towards the south. This wave broke again into others, at first dividing into two great branches, the one rolling impetuously along the coast line, and driving farther and farther into the more central regions the other, which reached as far south as the Vaal in successive wavelets. The first of these we have already considered; and the second, like the first, might be divided into minor sections, which were afterwards again

99 'The occurrence of clicks in their Kafir dialects decreases, almost in proportion to their distance from the Hottentot border: Bleek, *A Comparative Grammar*, 12–13.

100 Norman Etherington, 'Writing History on Maps. George Stow's Fantasies of Migration', in Norman Etherington, ed., *Mapping Colonial Conquest. Australia and Southern Africa*, Crawley, University of Western Australia Publishing, 2007, 123–145.

101 This intellectual lineage was pointed out by Etherington, 'Writing History on Maps', 123–145. It was, on the opposite, missed by Vansina, 'Bantu in the Crystal Ball I', 287–333.

subdivided into several branch tribes, the most ancient divisions being those of the Barolong and Batlapin.<sup>102</sup>

The relatedness of most of the human languages south of the Sahara, that we still call Bantu, is indisputable. Other aspects are less secure. Their relative similarity has eventually pushed scholars to think away from one of the fundamental models for the first generations of studies, that of the Indo-European expansion. Even more so, the existence of unrelated languages, some of which survive today, has never ceased to puzzle and pose questions to scholars since it was framed by Wilhelm Bleek. Issues such as the connections between language and community, language and material culture, even between language and blood or genetic baggage remained a matter of debate for most of the twentieth century.<sup>103</sup> One of the latest developments in Bantu linguistics propose that 'Bantu expansion involved small communities on the move from the start and, for century after century, in search of lands in one new environment after another'. Instead of splitting in large branches from an original trunk and moving in clearly-distinguishable waves or large migrations – the Indo-European model – 'Bantu languages peeled away' in succession and their speakers never erased the original inhabitants, at least not in a single historical development.<sup>104</sup> Genetic and linguistic research show today that the Bantu populations with the highest evidence of gene flow with non-Bantu southern Africans are also those where clicks are found – a feature originally belonging to San and possibly Khoe languages, as the linguists know since the times of Bleek – but they are unable to provide a clear explanation yet.<sup>105</sup> For example

102 George W. Stow, *The Native Races of South Africa: A History of the Intrusion of the Hottentots and Bantu into the Hunting Grounds of the Bushmen, the Aborigines of the Country*, edited by George McCall Theal, London and New York, Swan Sonnenschein & Co and The Macmillan, 1905, 433–434.

103 Vansina, 'Bantu in the Crystal Ball I', 287–333; Jan Vansina, 'Bantu in the Crystal Ball II', *History in Africa*, 7, 1980, 293–325; Jan Vansina, 'New Linguistic Evidence and 'the Bantu Expansion'', *The Journal of African History*, 36, 2, 1995, 173–195.

104 Rebecca Grollemund, David Schoenbrun, Jan Vansina, 'Moving Histories: Bantu Language Expansions, Eclectic Economies, and Mobilities', *The Journal of African History*, 64, 1, 2023, 13–37. See also the overview by Koen Bostoen, 'The Bantu Expansion', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia, African History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, published online 26 April 2018, 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.191> (last accessed on 14 December 2023).

105 Sarah J. Marks, Francesco Montinaro, Hila Levy, Francesca Brisighelli, Gianmarco Ferri, Stefania Bertocini, Chiara Batini, George B.J. Busby, Charles Arthur, Peter Mitchell, Brian A. Stewart, Ockie Oosthuizen, Erica Oosthuizen, Maria Eugenia D'Amato, Sean Davison, Vincenzo Pascali, Cristian Capelli, 'Static and Moving Frontiers: The Genetic Landscape of Southern African Bantu-Speaking Populations', *Molecular Biology and Evolution*, 31, 1, 2015, 29–43; Ananyo Choudhury, Dhriti Sengupta, Michele Ramsay, Carina Schlebusch,

Setswana, the modern language an older version of which the Gyzikoa of the Great River spoke, does not contain clics, despite its speakers carrying genetic evidence of considerable past mixture with non-Bantu speakers, and despite them living in a region with an established history of both peaceful and hostile relations with non-Bantu speakers.<sup>106</sup>

The original Bantu migration 'wave' theory left its mark in southern African scholarship. The contour of this wave can be distinctly perceived in the noteworthy map produced by Stow in the early 1880s to illustrate the 'intrusion of the stronger races', where the blue arrowhead of Batlhaping, Barolong, and other Batswana migratory lines stop in a rough diagonal way across the Kalahari, never reaching the Great River, but crossing the Vaal river towards the east. Some yellow and orange lines representing 'Bushmen' and 'Hottentots' even moved in the opposite direction, stopping and overlapping in this area, suggesting resistance and conflict. George Stow wrote that the 'the vanguard of the great southern migration of the Bantu' had produced smaller and 'degraded' communities on the 'western border' of the Batswana, but this was not a direct reference to the Gyzikoa, whose existence, not having read the still unpublished Wikar's report, he ignored.<sup>107</sup>

Indeed, the important point, for the present chapter, is that once Wikar's and Gordon's reports started to circulate among scholars, the Gyzikoa were found to have been consistently at odds with this rather imaginary boundary of the 'Hottentot Race' which resulted from the supposed washing of the Bantu wave and was however, by the 1930s, strongly entrenched in South African academic discourse. This is among the reasons why 'mixedness' remained a key concept in all attempts to analyse their history: as 'Bantu', they were too south and west, out of place on the northern bend of the Great River.

In fact, even if racial theories were discredited and challenged even before than the Bantu expansion was, something of their geographical representation remained. For example, when southern African archaeology elaborated the two theoretical poles of 'Stone age pastoralism' and 'Iron age agro-pastoralism', they were openly overlaid to their historiographical predecessors, 'Khoeh[Hot-tentot]' and 'Tswana [Bantu]'. In this scenario, they were adopted to represent respectively the political formations of the !Korana and the Batlhaping.

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'Bantu-speaker migration and admixture in southern Africa', *Human Molecular Genetics*, 30, 2, 2021, 56–63; Brigitte Pakendorf, Hilde Gunnink, Bonny Sands, Koen Bostoen, 'Prehistoric Bantu-Khoisan Language Contact: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach', *Language Dynamics and Change*, 7, 2017, 1–46. I would like to thank Reviewer 1 for the criticism on my previously too sharp argument on these topics, and for the suggestion to integrate modern genetics in the discussion.

106 Pakendorf, Gunnink, Sands, Bostoen, 'Prehistoric Bantu-Khoisan Language Contact', 31.

107 Stow, *Native Races*, 420–421.



on cultivating. Agro-pastoralists spoke the Bantu languages that have developed into Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Shona, Tswana, Herero, and others.<sup>109</sup>

However, there is something that changed considerably in the historical reconstruction of the region: the direction of historical change. Jacobs mentioned critically 'early historians of southern Africa' such as George Stow, George McCall Theal, and Seetsele Modiri Molema, who had considered the Batlhaping 'a vanguard of Sotho-Tswana migration whose Bantu authenticity had diminished through mixture with the Khoisan'. As opposed to their belief in the 'degradation' of the Batlhaping because of 'Khoi influence', she proposed that the transformation was coming from the south as much as it was enabled by the north: 'I use the same evidence to argue that this [the Batlhaping] was a young chiefdom still coming into conformity with Sotho-Tswana patterns', transitioning from pastoralism to agro-pastoralism.<sup>110</sup> North of the Great River, the 'Briqua' were becoming Batswana. This is a dynamic typical of another fundamental concept: the frontier.

#### 4 Echoes From an Empty Land: the Frontier, the Namaqua, and the Land of Tau

The region where the Gyzikoa dwelt is today part of South Africa's Northern Cape Province, but to the historian this was the Northern Frontier: a vast tract of land outside the northern and north-eastern border of the Colony of Good Hope, which was characterised by several frontier dynamics (hunting, trading, raiding, missionary, farming, mining) since the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century.

Many historians worked on these frontier dynamics and some are immediately pertinent here. Nigel Penn has produced one of the few book-size studies on the region, and the only one focusing on the 18th century: the deep and painstakingly detailed *The Forgotten Frontier*, which reconstructs the violent erosion and progressive destruction and subjugation of local communities by colonial forces and influences during the Dutch period and into the beginning of British rule.<sup>111</sup> Robert Ross has studied two of the most important communities

109 Jacobs, *Environment*, 32.

110 Jacobs, *Environment*, 34. Note that Jacobs refers imprecisely to Molema with his father's name 'Silas', as other historians commonly do. See Ettore Morelli, 'Seetsele Modiri Molema, Historian of the Barolong, 1891-1965', *Afriques. Débats, méthodes et terrains d'histoire*, Varia 2024, online since 22 April 2024, <https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.4788>.

111 Penn, *Forgotten Frontier*.

of the region, the !Korana and the Griqua, the former being among the last to stand against colonialism on the Great River, in 1830–1880, the latter emerging at the beginning of the 19th century after decades of extreme mobility and mixture, and eventually playing a key historical role in the region of the Vaal/Great River confluence and across the Upper Great River.<sup>112</sup> Sunet Swanepoel has edited a book on *Resistance in the Northern Cape* where various episodes of opposition to the enforcement of colonial rule during the 19th century are analysed.<sup>113</sup> Kevin Shillington studied the advance of the frontier across the Vaal/Great River towards the Molopo River during the second half of the century in his *The Colonisation of the Southern Tswana*.<sup>114</sup> Finally, Wayne Dooling re-interpreted the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) as one of the last if not the very last episode in the history of the Northern Frontier, when the ‘masters and servants’ frontier finally ‘closed’ enforcing the interest of ‘white settler rule’.<sup>115</sup>

Yet, the main historian of the Northern Frontier in the last half a century was Martin Legassick, whose PhD thesis, articles, and book chapters remain crucial reference points today. The thesis, discussed in 1969 and published almost verbatim in 2010 as *The Politics of a South African Frontier*, re-focused entirely the historical discourse on the region from a colonial to an Africanist – if not African – perspective.<sup>116</sup> The protagonists of his study were the Griqua, the ‘Sotho-Tswana’, and the missionaries who reached the area in the final years of the eighteenth century, bringing Christianity, trade opportunities, and the promise of peaceful coexistence with the Colony. From a conceptual point of

112 Ross, ‘The !Kora Wars’, 561–576; Robert Ross, *Adam Kok’s Griquas: A Study in the Development of Stratification in South Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976.

113 Sunet Swanepoel, ed., *Resistance in the Northern Cape in the Nineteenth Century: History and Commemoration*, Kimberley, McGregor Museum, 2012.

114 Kevin Shillington, *The Colonisation of the Southern Tswana 1870–1900*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1985.

115 Wayne Dooling, ‘Reconstructing the Household: the Northern Cape Colony Before and After the South African War’, *Journal of African History*, 50, 3, 2009, 399–416.

116 Martin Legassick, ‘Mokalaka, Regent of the Rolong boo Ratlou ba Mariba: A Synthesis of Oral and Written Sources’, *School of Oriental and African Studies and Institute of Commonwealth Studies. Seminar on African History*, Session 1966/1967, Paper 14, 1–19; Legassick, *The Politics*; Martin Legassick, ‘The Sotho-Tswana Peoples before 1800’, in Leonard Thompson, ed., *African Societies in Southern Africa*, London-Ibadan-Nairobi, Heinemann, 1969, 86–125; Martin Legassick, ‘The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography’, *Collected Seminar Papers. Institute of Commonwealth Studies*, 2, 1972, 1–33; Martin Legassick, ‘The Northern Frontier to c.1840: The rise and decline of the Griqua people’, in Richard Elphick, Hermann Giliomee, eds., *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1840*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1988 [1979], 358–420; Martin Legassick, *Hidden Histories of Gordonia: Land Dispossession and Resistance in the Northern Cape, 1800–1990*, Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2016.

view, his contributions were manyfold. On the one hand, Legassick challenged the Afrikaner epic of the frontier, a straightforward acceptance of Frederick Turner's ideas according to which South African culture was positively forged by generations of Dutch frontier farmers, the *trekboers*, and even more so by the *voortrekkers* who left the Colony for good in 1834 and brought 'civilisation' in the African interior.<sup>117</sup> On the other hand, he also criticised liberal historians who planted a reverse value system on the same framework, pointing out the frontier as the place where racist South Africa and the roots of *apartheid* first germinated, versus a 'liberal' Cape Town which was eventually sidelined.<sup>118</sup>

To both, Legassick opposed an interpretation of the Northern Frontier as a 'frontier zone' which was characterised by the 'lack of a single source of legitimate authority' and by a 'mutual acculturation' enabling the elaboration and preservation of different 'ways of life' by different frontiersmen. Racism, he stressed, was a product of the scientific cultures of imperial metropolises, even liberal ones. People on the southern African frontiers were anomalous, mobile, independent, and did not fit in the Colony's racial framework, which sought – and eventually succeeded – to impose 'white supremacy'. The foremost of these anomalous frontiersmen were in Legassick's view the Griqua, who were 'both the product of Cape Colony society, in its mediated frontier form, and yet they were non-white'.<sup>119</sup> A second conceptual advance made by Legassick was the early rebuttal of the Bantu 'waves of migration' theory, suggesting that 'the settlement of the territory occupied by the Sotho-Tswana was a slow process, involving the migration to the area of relatively few people, with the bulk of population increase occurring in situ'.<sup>120</sup>

Despite the great differences, all scholars who have written on the Northern Frontier shared one basic argument: the region was, indeed, a frontier empty of recognisable forms of political sovereignty, where communities moved often and apparently without restraints to respond to economic, environmental, and military needs and threats. This was the case for the riverine peoples, but also 'Sotho-Tswana' such as the Batlhaping appeared rather unsettled to nineteenth-century colonial observers and later scholars. Their large cities were frequently abandoned and rebuilt at considerable distances, leading the explorer William Burchell, the same who first drew the boundary of the 'Hottentot Race', to consider in 1812 that 'the Bachapins [Batlhaping] stand just

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117 For a more thorough discussion of the concept of 'frontier', see the Introduction to this book.

118 Legassick, 'The Frontier Tradition', 1–33.

119 Legassick, *Politics*, 10.

120 Legassick, *Politics*, 18.

on the line which marks the division between an agricultural or stationary, and a nomadic, life.<sup>121</sup> This obviously perfectly aligns with his cartographic representation of the racial line, which crosses their territory. The historian Kevin Shillington looked at the history of the Batlhaping in a longer perspective and defined it a 'semi-nomadic pattern of movement'.<sup>122</sup> As already mentioned, this was read by Nancy Jacobs as a case of 'frontier zone dynamics' where the 'young chiefdom was still coming into conformity with Sotho-Tswana patterns' while moving from pastoralism to agro-pastoralism.<sup>123</sup> Some of the basic elements of the frontier are so entrenched that they still informed the recent argument by Paul Landau, despite his overall attempt to surpass the very concept of 'frontier' with another north American adaptation.

Americanist historians have introduced the word 'borderlands' to signal this kind of region. A borderlands, unlike a line or a front, as in 'frontier', suggests a space governed by interactive, overlapping, and incomplete authorities. In the borderlands, wildlife dwindled, trade thrived, and customs were violated and renewed. Such a domain grew north and east of Cape Town, towards the Fish and Kei Rivers, over the Karoo, up toward the Orange River, and pressed at the base of highveld farmers' settlements.<sup>124</sup>

Yet, other aspects Landau's proposal do improve on the 'frontier' framework in a fundamental way. The 'borderland' was not empty of political formations. On the opposite, some were strong enough to attract mobile communities, and settle them. It is crucial, for the chapter, to note that Landau places this conceptual region precisely across the Great River, which was the 'gateway to the borderlands': 'once métis people crossed to the north side of the Orange and pledged their fealty to a chief, they might survive and even prosper'.<sup>125</sup>

This is correct. The dry and inhospitable land about the Great River and beyond was known as a place of prosperity, trading opportunities, and violent political confrontations for the inhabitants of the Cape at least since mid-17th century. Between then and about mid-18th century, at least two major wars broke out in these regions over this section of the long distance trade network which spanned across southern Africa. Throughout this period, the main political actors in the region were the Namaqua in the west, and those who would later be known as Batlhaping and Barolong in the far north east. By about 1740,

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121 Burchell, *Travels*, vol. 2, 511–512.

122 Shillington, *The Colonisation*, 12–17.

123 Jacobs, *Environment*, 34.

124 Landau, *Popular Politics*, 3.

125 Landau, *Popular Politics*, 5–6.

most of the territory north-east of the Great River had become the 'Land of Tau', the *kgosi* or ruler of the Barolong. Both conflicts were already covered by Neil Parsons in a chapter within Swanepoel's book on *Resistance in the Northern Cape*, but it is here relevant to reconstruct them inasmuch that they bear with the history of the Gyzikoa, and of the crossings on the Great River.<sup>126</sup>

Evidence about the first war of the Great River dates to March 1661, when a Dutch expedition to the north of the Fort of Good Hope reached the Namaqua. The Khoë people of the Cape had previously described the Namaqua to the Dutch as living about 25 days' travel to the north, possessing 'multitudes of cattle which cover an immense area', and 'valiant in war'.<sup>127</sup> The Namaqua were indeed found a wealthy and powerful people, ruled by King Akembie or Akey of 60 or 70 years of age, who sat on a wooden block adorned with copper beads, and was himself laden with copper chains and copper beads, rings, arm rings, ivory ornaments, and refined animal skins. King Akembie presided over four sections or villages of the Namaqua, all of which were presently on campaign, living on inhospitable ground closer to the Cape, and moving slowly due to the size of their herds. The itinerant village of the king hosted about 700 inhabitants, 4000 cattle, and 3000 sheep.<sup>128</sup>

In March 1661, the Namaqua were at war with both the Chochoquas, Khoë allies of the Dutch, living near Saldanha Bay under Oedasoia, and with another people far inland, the 'Bryckje' or 'Brigodys' under their king Eyra. Both wars were at least partially due to contrasting views about who should control and benefit from long distance trade. Rumours reached the Dutch that 'the Namaquas wished to take possession of the territory about the Cape, in order alone to trade with the Dutch and drive away the Hottentoo [Cape Khoë] nations', and had therefore attacked and destroyed one of Oedasoia's cattle posts.<sup>129</sup> This plan was partially due to the recent settlement of the Dutch at the Cape in 1652. Whereas previous trade networks used to branch off to the north along the Atlantic coast, to another land 'visited by ships and where there are fortresses with guns', Portuguese Angola, the refreshment station at the Cape had created a new commercial avenue and had started to pull trade south.<sup>130</sup> After some months of fighting, the Namaqua were content to have enforced peace between them, the Chochoquas of Saldanha Bay, the Chariguriqua of the Piketberg, and even the formerly independent Soaqua of the Cederberg mountains

126 Neil Parsons, 'Notes on the History of the Korana and their Relationship with Batlhaping', in Sunet Swanepoel (ed. by), *Resistance in the Northern Cape in the Nineteenth Century: History and Commemoration*, Kimberley, McGregor Museum, 2012, 45–69.

127 Leibbrandt, *VRJ*, III, 219, 3 February 1661.

128 Leibbrandt, *VRJ*, III, 237–239, 20–22 March 1661.

129 Leibbrandt, *VRJ*, III, 211, 20 January 1661.

130 Leibbrandt, *VRJ*, III, 255, 20–23 April 1661.

and arid Hantam. They planned therefore to peacefully visit the Cape during the next dry season, a hint that longer journeys were often undertaken following a yearly pattern and when it did not rain, as it was discussed above.<sup>131</sup>

However, the war with the 'Brigoudys' of the interior raged on for longer and might indeed have brought the Namaqua to seek for peace in the Cape region. Dutch reports mistakenly wrote that the cause of the conflict was 'gold', but this corresponded to */urib*, 'metal' – a Khoë word which was mistranslated and misunderstood by Dutch officers, spurring their expectations about the interior.<sup>132</sup>

The Namaquas were at present [April 1661] marching against the Brigoudys [...] because the latter had kept back for themselves fully half of the gold which they had bartered from the Geyry[*/urib*]-Eyquas for the Namaquas, so that they had defrauded and robbed the Namaquas. These Brigoudys appear to be partly subject to the Namaquas, and obliged to bring to the latter all the gold obtained from the Geyry-Eyquas; but as sometimes act treacherously in this and rob the Namaquas, the latter are obliged to bring them under proper devotion by force of arms.<sup>133</sup>

This war did not go well for the Namaqua and successive Dutch expeditions were not able to reach Akembie and his community. In February 1662, an explorer learnt that they had crossed the Oliphants River to the north and established 'far inland, beyond a large tract of arid, salt and sandy country, which at present cannot be crossed in this dry season though want of fresh water'.<sup>134</sup> The Namaqua were using the landscape as a defensive measure, hiding behind those parts of the country where travelling during the dry summer season was impossible: at the same time of the year when the Great River was likely to be swollen and impassable due to the summer rains of the interior, as it was previously discussed.

A few days later further information about the inland peoples were given by Oedaso to the Dutch *Commandeur* Jan Van Riebeeck. On the other side of the 'great river various nations lived in 'vaste plaatsen', 'permanent habitations', who were much darker in skin colour than the people of the Cape, who obeyed one 'groot Heer', a powerful Lord or King, who actually never moved from his house without an army or a 'large retinue'. These were nations such as the 'Brigondj',

131 Leibbrandt, *VRJ*, III, 256, 20–23 April 1661.

132 On this mistranslation, see Gerrit Harinck, 'Interaction Between Xhosa and Khoi: Emphasis on the Period 1620–1750', in Leonard Thompson, ed., *African Societies in Southern Africa*, London-Ibadan-Nairobi, Heinemann, 1969, 145–170.

133 Leibbrandt, *VRJ*, III, 254, 20–23 April 1661.

134 Leibbrandt, *VRJ*, III, 334, 16 February 1661; Elphick, *Khoikhoi*, 136.

'Chory-Eyquas', and 'Cumissoquas'.<sup>135</sup> Christopher Saunders wrote correctly, in the already mentioned foundational article, that this was one of the earliest mentions of the 'Tswana', and the first somewhat detailed one.<sup>136</sup> The association between the seventeenth-century 'Brigondj/Bryckje', which would mean 'goat people', and the early nineteenth-century Batlhaping remains the most likely one, whereas the Chory-Eyquas or 'metal people' were possibly the Barolong, who mined, smelted, and smithed metals, especially iron. Another etymology might reinforce the same attribution: the steenbok was the symbol or *seboko* of the ruling dynasty of the Batlhaping, whereas iron was the *seboko* of the royal family of the Barolong. Their names in Khoekhoegawap could be a hint to their ethnonyms as much as to their commercial inclinations. The 'Cumissoquas', perhaps 'sweet water people' might have been a community living near a large river, or a lake: possibly, the Einiqua, as discussed below.

The war of 1661–1662 was therefore fought between the Namaqua of the lower Great River and the progenitor of nineteenth-century Batlhaping upstream because the latter, who appeared to be somewhat subject to the former, had withheld for themselves part – significantly, half – of the metals which they traded from the north across the river, with the 'Chory-Eyquas', possibly the Barolong. It was a war fought over the Great River metal trade. The fact that the conflict was fought at the river is only hinted by another possible misunderstanding in the Dutch reports, which called 'Eyra' the King of the Brigondj – a word that was actually used by the Khoe to refer to the Great River, as already mentioned.<sup>137</sup>

A second war on the Great River erupted in the following century between the !Korana and the kingdom of the Barolong. The fighting revolved around the fords of the upper Middle river, and in particular the ford of Prieska, in about the 1750s. This time, the Namaqua do not seem to have been directly involved. According to Wikar in 1778, at least, they were settled far in the west and across the river in modern Namibia. They were now ruled by a wealthy king who was 'almost an idol' and exercised a certain degree of control over the eight sections that now composed his community, including making laws and levying a tax in tobacco on any good traded by his subjects. This aspect, together with the repeated attempts made by Claas Barends' party to reach and trade with them in 1778, substantiate the analysis of the broader Great River region as marked by great environmental obstacles but also by great commercial and political opportunities for those who knew how to move across the network.<sup>138</sup> This

135 Leibbrandt, *VRJ*, III, 334–335.

136 Saunders, 'Early Knowledge of the Sotho', 60–70

137 Raper, *Dictionary*, 1987.

138 Mossop, *Wika*, 20–29.

was the case of the !Korana and of the Barolong, the two main historical actors of this second war. This time several sources exist, and a bit easier to read than the elusive and scantily-informed seventeenth-century Dutch reports, despite being from about a century after the events that they describe.

According to a good number of African rulers and councillors, who made their statements in the nineteenth century, the country north of the Great River used to belong to a structured political formation, the 'Land of Tau'. The man, Tau, was the *kgosi* or ruler of the Barolong, a royal dynasty who had established their power base in the upper valley of the Molopo River far in the north, since at least 1600. Tau started to rule in about 1720 and expanded the already sizeable domain of the Barolong, re-establishing their control over distant subjects and conquering new lands to the south, founding a new capital at Taung, on the Harts River. He died in about 1760 and his kingdom fell to pieces in 1777, as the historian Setseele Modiri Molema has written in his unpublished manuscripts.<sup>139</sup> Indeed, to nineteenth-century colonial missionaries, explorers, and officers, the Barolong only consisted in many small communities, ruled by members of an extended family, sometimes divided by deep hostilities, and often moving about the landscape not unlike the Batlhaping.

Once diamonds were discovered in the region, in 1867, the land started to be cut by lines which sought to win the diamond fields for one of the competing colonial powers, the British Cape Colony and the independent Orange Free State and South African Republic. In these pressing times, the descendants of Tau's allies, enemies, and his own fractured family were called to testify on the issue of land rights and historical claims to the land.<sup>140</sup> They all agreed that everything north of the Great River / Vaal River confluence, west of the Schoenspruit River, and south of the Molopo River used to be 'Thow's country' and the 'Land of Tau', and one councillor emphatically added that 'Tona [Tau] never had a line, because the whole country was his'.<sup>141</sup> Secondly, there was a

139 SOAS Library, M4916, Microfilm 'Baralong Tribal Papers. History of the Barolong. An Ethnological Study of the Barolong Tribes', by Setseele Modiri Molema, 49–50.

140 Cape of Good Hope, *Evidence Taken at Bloemhof Before the Commission Appointed to Investigate the Claims of the South African Republic, Captain N. Waterboer, Chief of West Griqualand, and Certain Other Native Chiefs to Portions of the Territory on the Vaal River Now Known as Diamond Fields*, Cape Town, Saul Solomon and Co., 1871; Captain Augustus F. Lindley, *Adamantia: The Truth about the South African Diamond Fields: or, a vindication of the right of the Orange Free State to that territory, and an analysis of British diplomacy and aggression which has resulted in its illegal seizure by the governor of the Cape of Good Hope*, London, W.H.&L. Collingridge, 1873.

141 Statements by Mooi, Moroka, and Mongala, Bloemhof, 3–5 May 1871, Testimony of the Batlapin Chiefs as to the proprietorship of the Barolong Country, at Barend Barends'

recurring agreement that the first line within Tau's domain was drawn after his death, at the times of Molehabangwe, *kgosi* of the Batlhaping, to allocate land to the immigrant Griqua in the southernmost corner of the Land of Tau, which later became known as Griqualand West.<sup>142</sup>

It will not be missed that almost all external boundaries coincided with river courses, at least in late 1860s testimonies. However, when asked, most remained vague on Tau's boundary in the west: some pointed out the Langeberg, sometimes including the country immediately west of it, and naming a locality called Nokaneng; others answered to ask the Batlhaping, who used to reside in those districts.<sup>143</sup> The west, indeed, was the Kalahari Desert, where even the waters of the Molopo River lost their way and disappeared. It was straight north of where the Gyzikoa resided, on the Great River. It was clearly difficult to conceive a boundary line in this environment, and perhaps difficult or superfluous to maintain it. Seetsele Modiri Molema, historian of the Barolong, wrote in 1920 that the Kalahari itself was the 'fortress' of its inhabitants, the Bakgalagadi, 'whose walls are the want of water'.<sup>144</sup> Be as it may, the original boundary line of the Land of Tau, as supported by many testimonies between 1869 and 1871, had little or no bearing on the eventual inclusion of the diamond fields in the Cape Colony as an enlarged Griqualand West – enlarged to include the diamond fields, precisely.<sup>145</sup>

When Tau was alive, more than a century before, things were different. Crossing into his land was an act of some consequence, and claiming parts of it without his approval led to war. This is what happened when the !Korana crossed the Great River to the north, between circa 1740 and 1760, as one of their rulers recalled in 1869. The man was old Massow Rijt Taaibosch and he ruled the !Korana of the Harts River, the region north of the Vaal River which featured as a 'Hottentot' protrusion into the lands of the 'Bantu' in the above-mentioned

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village, 25 August 1870, Statements by Mahurah and Massouw Gert Taaibosch, Witgatboom, 23 February 1869, *Bloemhof Blue Book*, 134–141, 159–161, 289–294.

142 Statements by Mooi, Moroka, and Mongala, Bloemhof, 3–5 May 1871, Testimony of the Batlapin Chiefs as to the proprietorship of the Barolong Country, at Barend Barends' village, 25 August 1870, Statements by Mahurah and Massouw Gert Taaibosch, Witgatboom, 23 February 1869, *Bloemhof Blue Book*, 134–141, 159–161, 289–294.

143 Statements by Mooi, Moroka, and Mongala, Bloemhof, 3–5 May 1871, Testimony of the Batlapin Chiefs as to the proprietorship of the Barolong Country, at Barend Barends' village, 25 August 1870, Statements by Mahurah and Massouw Gert Taaibosch, Witgatboom, 23 February 1869, *Bloemhof Blue Book*, 134–141, 159–161, 289–294.

144 Molema, Seetsele Modiri, *The Bantu Past and Present: An Ethnographical & Historical Study of the Native Races of South Africa*, Edinburgh, W. Green & Son, 1920, 37. On Molema, Morelli, 'Seetsele Modiri Molema'.

145 Shillington, *Colonisation*, 35–60.

nineteenth-century racial maps. His testimony was collected by both the Orange Free State and Cape Colony sides of the diamond fields dispute, with some differences. George W. Stow, the historian of the 'Bantu waves' and of the 'Native races' of southern Africa, only picked up – and plagiarised – the one published by a supporter of the Orange Free State, Augustus Lindley, which mentioned the !Korana migrating from the western Cape, but began with them already occupying the region of modern-day Griquatown, north of the river.<sup>146</sup>

There were other versions. One of them, given by another !Kora ruler, Hanto, to French missionaries in 1836, mentioned the great chief Kunapsoopo leading his community to the Khoe of the eastern Cape, then north across the Cape mountains and to the Brak River, which runs parallel to the upper Great River to the north west and joins it at a little distance from Prieska. Crossing the Great River, they found a group of 'Bushmen' at the spring of 'Gatee-t'Kamma and negotiated with them the settlement in the country.<sup>147</sup> The place would only become known as Klaarwater and then Griekwastad/Griquatown about sixty years later, in about 1800. Hanto's narrative was collected with many others by Louis Maingard in his 1932 study of the 'Koranna Tribe', which included the 'Colonial' 1869 version by Massow Rijt Taaibosch. Here, the river crossing featured prominently.<sup>148</sup>

The Koranans went on to this side of Nieuwveld, Cape Colony, near the Spitskop, called T'Koup. Then they came below Great River and having crossed the drift called Kornaar or Zanddrift [location unknown, possibly Prieska]. Thereupon Thow [Tau], who lived at Touns [Taung], made up a commando against the Korannas. When his commando arrived at the outposts of the Koranna, some people said it was a pleasure trip, others that it was a commando. The Korannas were at the other [southern?] side of the Great River, and made up their mind to hand their slaughter sheep to Thow in token of friendliness. Then the Kafirs[in this case, Barolong] broke their assegais[spears] and concealed them under their karrosses [cloaks]. They asked the Korannas who their captain was. The Korannas then went through the river to the Kafirs. They were the great-grandfathers of Massouw and Gert Links. When they were there, the Kafirs stabbed Massouw's great-grandfather. The Korannas fled through the river, for they were unarmed. Massouw's great-grandfather died in the river from the wounds he received. Gert Links's[sic] great-grandfather escaped. The Koranna women brought bows and arrows to the men, who

146 Lindley, *Adamantia*, 10–15; Stow, *Native Races*, 286–287.

147 Arbousset, *Relation*, 49–50.

148 Maingard, 'Studies in Korana History', 108–109.

took them. The whole of the Kafirs that pursued the Korannas were shot down in the river. Thow was not killed. He fled with his people, and they were scattered about. The Korannas pursued the Kafirs, and almost exterminated them altogether. But Thow survived. Thereupon the Korannas made up a commando against Thow, and fought them at his werf [town] and killed many of them. [...] The Koranna commando returned, and Thow subsequently fell sick and died [...]. The Koranas then took Touns and the land of Thow, who was the great chief of the Kafirs.<sup>149</sup>

The war started when the !Korana crossed into the Land of Tau, presumably in the 1760s. The final rupture of the Land of Tau into a bitter civil war which pitted five sections of the Barolong royal family against each other, in 1777, was a consequence of their defeat by the !Korana and subsequent crisis.

Neil Parsons collated these and other reconstructions of the !Korana migration, producing a detailed summary for the book *Resistance in the Northern Cape in the Nineteenth Century*. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the !Korana of Kunapsoopo migrated away from the eastern Cape to the Great River because they were called or anyway attracted by the presence of a smaller section, the 'Left Hand' !Korana, who had previously reached the Great River travelling via the northern Cape and the lower and middle river route. Those were the Links, 'left' in Dutch, !Korana, whereas the latecomers were the 'Right Hand' or Taaibosch !Korana: both Links and Taaibosch were still among the most powerful families in the 1860s, as they were in Wikar's and Gordon's accounts of 1778–1779. Together, the two sections of !Korana were establishing their primacy along the Great River in the 1740s–1750s, on other Khoe and San, before the war with Tau. As to the deeper reason of the conflict, Parsons noted that long distance trade and the specific features of the political landscape were paramount.

The Barolong under Tau and the Korana under Kunapsoopo represented two competing trade networks for ivory, fur, and metal exports: an older network supplying Delagoa Bay in southern Mozambique, and a newer alternative also supplying the Cape with cattle. The Batlhaping straddled the two networks.<sup>150</sup>

This is an updated version of the theory of the reversal of precolonial trade patterns which was first proposed by Martin Legassick as a disruptive force

149 Statement by Massow Gert Taaibosch at Witgatboom, 23 February 1869, *Bloemhof Blue Book*, 290.

150 Parsons, 'Notes', 51.

in the Northern Frontier.<sup>151</sup> It is however more likely that, by mid-eighteenth century, the balance of power was still firmly in the hands of the extensive and wealthy Land of Tau in the north-east, and of the Namaqua in the west, rich in cattle and safe behind the drylands. In fact, the theories of the reversal of precolonial trade patterns substantially undervalue the importance of the eighteenth-century trade route of the Orange River, of which we have substantial evidence. The larger trade network was as much centred in the domains of the Barolong and of the Namaqua as in the distant colonial entrepôts.

Indeed, another explanation is possible. By crossing at Prieska and settling in the immediate hinterland north of the Great River, the !Korana established themselves on the trade route that led to the eastern Cape, of which relatively little is known, apart from the fact that it brought iron, copper, and ivory to the amaXhosa, and that its northern section was known as the *'Ts Garap* or *Straat* by 1801.<sup>152</sup> This would have made them an immediate threat to the stability and profitability of the other route running west along the Great River to the Namaqua, which had been fought for in 1661–1662. The latter was the 'Briqua/Geissiqua road' of 1778–1779, which had been working for more than half a century thanks to the services of a small riverine community settled precisely where it was needed most, the Gyzikoa. In fact, they had been living on the Great River since long before the two 'hoengaab', Wikar and Gordon, visited them.

## 5 The Gyzikoa, 1686–1796

The Gyzikoa appeared for the first time on the map of southern Africa twenty-four years after the Namaqua were defeated by the Briqua and eighty-eight years before Wikar reached their village on the Great River. They were written about for the last time only ten years after Gordon drew his own 'Atlas'. This period of a hundred and ten years is the minimum estimated time of their existence as a distinct community, but as it will be seen very little is known about them for most of it. Only one basic element can be drawn from their

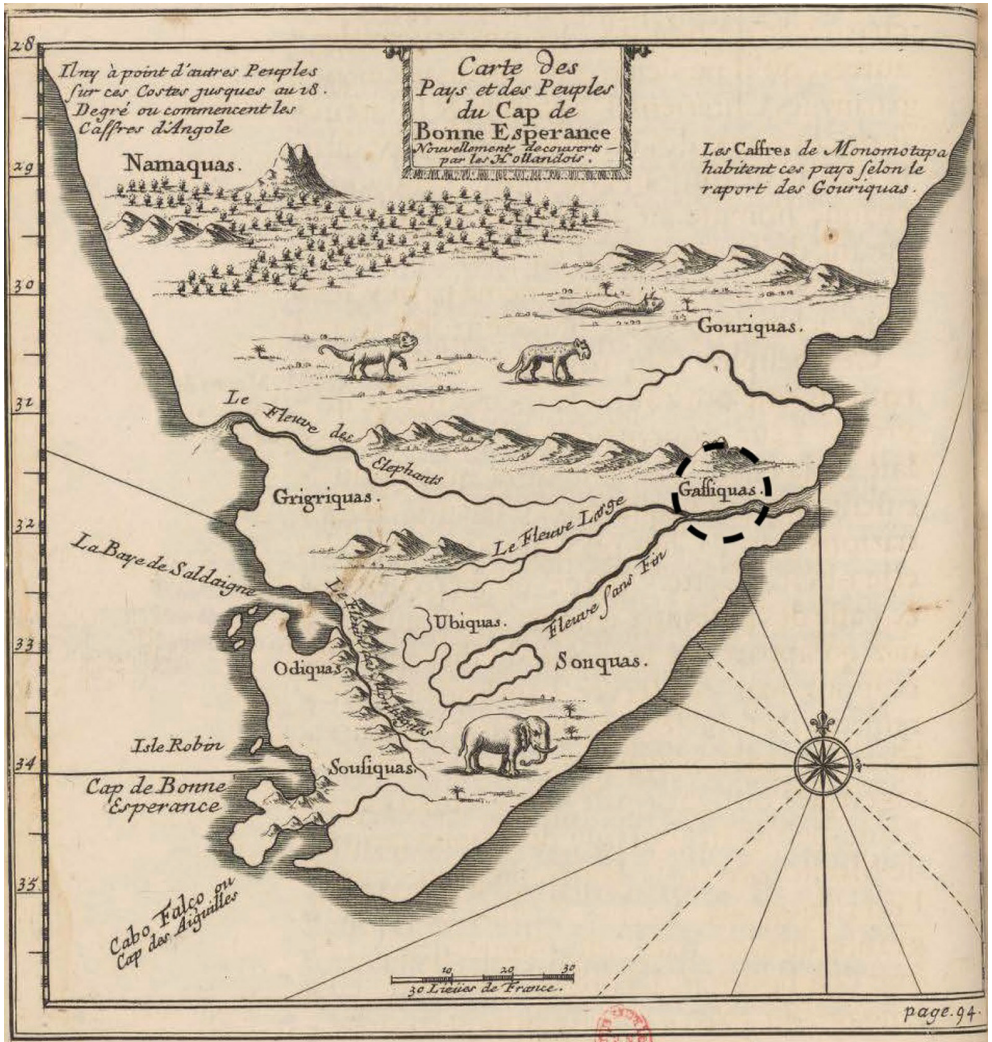
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151 Legassick, *The Politics*, 27, 62–75, 111–114, 326–331; Monica Wilson, 'The Sotho, Venda, and Tsonga', in Monica Wilson, Leonard M. Thompson, eds., *A History of South Africa to 1870*, London and Canberra, Croom Helm, 1982 [1969], 131–182, 150–151; Norman Etherington, *The Great Treks: The Transformations of Southern Africa, 1815–1854*, London, Longman, 2001, 30–31; Elizabeth A. Eldredge, 'Delagoa Bay and the Hinterland in the Early Nineteenth Century: Politics, Trade, Slaves, and Slave Raiding', Elizabeth A. Eldredge, Fred Morton, eds., *Slavery in South Africa: Captive Labor on the Dutch Frontier*, Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1994, 127–165, 147–148, 162n.

152 Harinck, 'Interaction Between Xhosa and Khoi', 145–170; Somerville, *Narrative*, 171.

cartographical representations, in addition to their very existence: the Gyzikoa were always placed next to a large river. To some extent, their history is also the history of the cartographer's attempts to correctly draw the line of the Great River on the map.

In 1686, the French Jesuit missionary and scientist Guy Tachard, who had stopped in Cape Town during an official embassy to Siam in 1685 and again



MAP 2.11 Gassiqua, 1686

Legend: dashed circle = the Gyzikoa

SOURCE: NO AUTHOR, BUT HINRICH CLAUDIUS, 'CARTE DES PAYS ET DES PEUPLES DU CAP DE BONNE ESPERANCE NOUVELLEMENT DECOUVERTS PAR LES HOLLANDOIS', IN TACHARD, VOYAGE DE SIAM, 94

during the journey back to France, printed in Paris the book *Voyage de Siam*, which included what appears to be a roughly-drawn sketch map of southern Africa. The ‘Carte des Pays et des Peuples du Cap de Bonne Esperance Nouvellement decouverts par les Hollandois’ was drawn into a cartographic void, as both Ptolemy-based Renaissance geographers and those mapping more accurately the African coastline after Portuguese navigators lacked direct information about the interior of southern Africa.<sup>153</sup> Indeed, between the late sixteenth and late seventeenth century Portuguese cartography was obtaining some breakthrough for the heartland of the kingdom of Mutapa in modern-day Zimbabwe, but no Dutch map of the region of the Cape was published after the establishment of the Fort of Good Hope in 1652, until François Valentyn official description of the Dutch empire in 1726.

Tachard’s ‘Carte’ placed the ‘Gassiquas’ by the coast of the Indian Ocean in the east, just north of a deep estuary which was formed by two seemingly important rivers: the ‘Fleuve Large’ and the ‘Fleuve sans Fin’ – both flowing from the deep interior in the west.<sup>154</sup> The location of the ‘Gassiquas’ on the map, however, is inexplicable. Indeed, it is not explained by Tachard, who does not provide geographical references in the brief description of each of the seven ‘nations’ who inhabited southern Africa, which was also part of the *Voyage de Siam*.

Les llassiquas [typo in the printed original] sont la cinquième [nation], ils le sont davantage : ils sont riches & puissans, peu versez dans le métier de la guerre.<sup>155</sup>

Tachard’s information on the Gyzikoa were far from being first-hand product of direct observation. Nigel Penn and Adrien Delmas have studied how the passing French Jesuit met at the Cape a kindred spirit in the German apothecary Heinrich Claudius, in VOC service as botanist. Claudius accompanied the *Commandeur* Simon van der Stel in several of his journeys, including the most recent one to the Namaqua in the north in 1685–1686, which was the first time the highest Dutch authority in the Cape had come in the vicinity of the

153 Francesc Relaño, ‘Against Ptolemy: The Significance of the Lopes-Pigafetta Map of Africa’, *Imago Mundi*, 47, 1995, 49–66.

154 No author, but Hinrich Claudius, ‘Carte des Pays et des Peuples du Cap de Bonne Esperance Nouvellement decouverts par les Hollandois’, in Guy Tachard, *Voyage de Siam, des pères jésuites, envoyez par le Roy aux Indes & à la Chine. Avec leurs observations astronomiques, et leur remarques de physique, de géographie, d’hydrographie, & d’Histoire*, Paris, Arnold Seneuze and Daniel Horthemels, 1686, 94. Their name is written ‘Gassiquas’, similar to how Gordon would write it, ‘Geissiqua’, about a century later.

155 Tachard, *Voyage de Siam*, 104.

Great River network of long-distance connections.<sup>156</sup> As Nigel Penn and Adrien Delmas write, Claudius, Tachard, and the Dutch Commissioner and naturalist Hendrik van Reede tot Drakenstein discussed rather freely the recent Dutch discoveries in southern Africa, both botanical and of other kinds. The result? Hinrich Claudius was fired by van der Stel for telling too much to the Frenchman, who was an official representative of the Catholic king after all.<sup>157</sup> Tachard had been quite revealing on Claudius' role in his *Voyage de Siam*, indeed.

C'est de luy [Claudius] que nous avons tiré toutes les connoissances que nous avons de ce Païs, dont il nous donna une petite Carte faite de sa main avec quelques Figures des Habitans du Pays & des Animaux les plus rares que j'ay fait ajouter icy.<sup>158</sup>

Both the map and the information on the seven 'nations' of southern Africa were therefore by the hands of Hinrich Claudius, although it is possible that Tachard did at least translate or rephrase Claudius' words.<sup>159</sup> However, it is likely that they were not the product of Claudius' direct observations, either, because the German botanist had only travelled for about 26 *lieues* north and east of the Cape, that is about 115 kilometres, as Tachard reported: the Copperberg, the northernmost point reached by Simon van der Stel was another 330 kilometres away.<sup>160</sup>

However, the source or sources of information for Claudius were almost surely met during the recent journey of Simon van der Stel to the Namaqua. It might not be too peregrine to suppose that at least parts came from the 'Hottentot of the "Camissons nation", perhaps of the Einiqua, who had passed his youth in wandering about the country along the lower course of the great

156 The journey was summarised in some detail by George McCall Theal, *History of South Africa South of the Zambesi from the Settlement of the Portuguese at Sofala in September 1505 to the Conquest of the Cape Colony by the British in September 1795, Vol.11: Foundation of the Cape Colony by the Dutch*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1922, 279–290. Note the map facing page 290.

157 Nigel Penn, Adrien Delmas, 'Peter Kolb and the circulation of knowledge about the Cape of Good Hope', in Martin Lengwiller, Nigel Penn, Patrick Harries, eds., *Science, Africa and Europe: Processing Information and Creating Knowledge*, New York, Routledge, 2018, 16–46.

158 Tachard, *Voyage de Siam*, 88.

159 Claudius' authorship in Tachard's book was also discussed by Andrew B. Smith, 'Different Facets of the Crystal: Early European Images of the Khoikhoi at the Cape, South Africa', *Goodwin Series*, 7, 1993, 8–20, 13–14, and Huigen, *Knowledge and Colonialism*, 100 fn28.

160 Tachard, *Voyage de Siam*, 88. Additional research on the role of Claudius and the voyage of van der Stel is needed.

river', and who was brought back to Cape Town by the *Commandeur*.<sup>161</sup> Indeed, the 1686 'Carte' published in the *Voyage du Siam* was tolerably correct only in the section along the Atlantic coast to the north, to the Namaquas. The fact that the position of the Gyzikoa appears to be grossly mistaken in Claudius/Tachard 1686 map of southern Africa is then of minor importance, once it is understood that the map was but an attempt to annotate in a graphical form the information just collected from the Namaqua, which included the existence of the 'Gassiquas', among other newly discovered 'nations', in a part of southern Africa which was still unknown.<sup>162</sup>

It is even possible to propose an additional hypothesis. The 'Carte' did not contain one important geographical feature that had been discovered by the very expedition by van der Stel: the existence of a great river in the north, which was not seen by the *Commandeur* and was therefore marked with a dotted line in the unpublished map drawn after the expedition, and only reproduced and published in 1881.<sup>163</sup> This river, called 'Eijn' 'by the Hottentots' as written on the latter map, was the Orange or Great River. As mentioned above, it had two main characteristics: the great size, and its endless reach, which its inhabitants compared to the sky when talking to Wikar in 1778.<sup>164</sup> The 'Fleuve Large' and the 'Fleuve Sans Fin' in Claudius/Tachard's 'Carte' were an imaginative split representation of the Great River, confusingly placed in the east and not in the west of southern Africa. If this hypothesis is correct, the 'Carte' proves both the Gyzikoa's existence and their settlement just north of the Great River in 1686.

Peter Kolb, the recognised authority in early eighteenth-century knowledge of southern Africa, considered Tachard to be grossly mistaken about the 'Gassiqua'. Their real name, he wrote in 1745, was 'Hessaquas', another better-known Khoe community of the Cape, and the French missionary was even more mistaken about their position in the country.<sup>165</sup> Sure, the 'Hessequas' figured in a completely different location in François Valentyn's detailed map of the Cape

161 Theal, *History of South Africa, Vol. II*, 289. 'Cammissaqua' was the name of a people of the interior in the accounts by Jan Van Riebeeck, as mentioned above. Their connection with 'sweet water', 'cumissa', make them a possible candidate for the Orange River hinterland. It is plausible but unconfirmed that they were the Einiqua, the 'People of the River', described in the 1770s by Wikar and Gordon.

162 The Grigriqua, on the road between the Cape and the Nama, are in the right place, too.

163 'The chart of Commander Simon van der Stel's journey to the Copper mountain in Little Namaqualand, which appears on next page, is greatly reduced in size from the original one, which I copied in the archive department at the Hague, and which the Cape government caused to be published with my report upon the work done by me there in 1881.' Theal, *History, Vol. II*, 290fn.

164 Mossop, *Wikar*, 158–159.

165 Peter Kolb, *Beschreibung des Vorgebürges der Guten Hoffnung, und derer darauf wohnenden Hottentotten; Worinnen von der natürlichen Beschaffenheit des Landes, von den Gebräuchen*

of Good Hope, made in 1726. In this map, which featured a much higher number of African ethnonyms, and which remained a reference for maps of the Cape region throughout the century, the 'Hessequas' were little to the south of Saldanha Bay and there were no 'Gassiqua' at all.<sup>166</sup> Truth be told, the location of many of the communities in Valentyn's map is surprising and inexplicable, too but this is a line of research that should be pursued another time.

However, the 'Gassiquas' were not a simple botanist's mistake. Their location next to the two imaginary rivers was confirmed by Guillaume Delisle on his *Carte d'Afrique*, made in 1700, and by Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville on a manuscript map of southern Africa, drawn in c.1725.<sup>167</sup> D'Anville made a remarkable advance in 1749 with his 'Afrique. Southern section', a map that still did not feature the Great River, which effectively remained uncharted for another half a century. His improvement was to move the 'Fleuve large' and the 'Fleuve sans-fins' to the centre of the interior, and only presuming they joined in a dotted line flowing east, at some point becoming the Rio do Infante, the old Portuguese name for the Umtata or Great Fish River, with an estuary in the eastern coast just south of Natal. The mouth of the Great River on the Atlantic coast yet to be charted, the 'Gassiquas' were in this map north of the 'Fleuve large', deep in the central interior of southern Africa, and just south-east of the 'Grands Namaquas'.<sup>168</sup> Not too far off from where they were actually found, thirty years later.

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*der Einwohner, ingleichen von der Einrichtung dasiger Holländischer Colonien zuverlässige Nachricht gegeben wird*, Frankfurt and Leipzig, Peter Conrad Monath, 1745, 68.

- 166 See for example how the 1795 map of the Cape by Delarochette borrowed ethnonyms and locations of African communities long gone by the 1726 map by Valentyn. L.S. de la Rochette [Louis Stanislas d'Arcy Delarochette], 'The Dutch Colony of the Cape of Good Hope', London, William Faden, second edition corrected 1 December 1795, included in William Faden, *General Atlas*, London, William Faden, 1811; François Valentyn, 'Nieuwe Kaart van Caap der Goede Hoop in hare rechte tegenwoordige staat', J. van Braam et G. onder de Linden, undated, printed in François Valentyn, *Beschryving van Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, Vol. 5, 'Beschrijving van de Kaap der Goede Hoop, Met de Zaaken daar toe behoorende', thiende boek, eerste hoofdstuk, Amsterdam, J. van Braam et G. onder de Linden, 1726, between 2 and 3.
- 167 G. de l'Isle, 'L'Afrique dressée sur les Observations de Mrs de l'Academie Royale des Sciences, et quelques autres, sur les memoires les plus recens', Paris, G. de l'Isle, 1700; Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, 'Carte manuscrite de la côte d'Afrique depuis le cap Negro jusqu'à celui de Bonne Espérance et de la jusqu'à la rivière de Pescaria', original in Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF), Paris, département Cartes et plans (DCP), GE DD 2987 (8269), available <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8595628g#> (last accessed on 26 Novembre 2023) Both maps are reproduced in Júnia Ferreira Furtado, 'Evolving Ideas: J.B. d'Anville's Maps of Southern Africa, 1725–1749', *Imago Mundi*, 69, 2, 2107, 202–215.
- 168 Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, 'Afrique. Publiée sous les Auspices de Monseigneur le Duc d'Orléans Premier Prince du Sang', Paris, Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, 1749.



MAP 2.12 Gassiquas, 1749

Legend: dashed circle = the Gyzikoa

SOURCE: JEAN BAPTISTE BOURGUIGNON D'ANVILLE, 'AFRIQUE. PUBLIÉE SOUS LES AUSPICES DE MONSIEUR LE DUC D'ORLÉANS PREMIER PRINCE DU SANG', PARIS, JEAN BAPTISTE BOURGUIGNON D'ANVILLE, 1749 [DETAIL]

These features appeared again in 1774 on the map of southern Africa south of the Tropic made by the Dutch cartographers van Esveldt and Holtrop, who put the location of the 'Gassiquas' in the very centre of the interior, between the 'Klein Namaquas' to the south-west and the 'Grote Namaquas Natie' to the north-east. Notably, the map presented a single great river crossing all southern Africa in a south-easterly direction and joining the Indian Ocean in what would later be known as the Eastern Cape: the Rio do Infante, a modern exaggeration which was still a consequence of the confusion made in the 1686 Claudius/Tachard 'Carte'. Even so, the 'Gassiquas' remained next to this great river, this time south of it.<sup>169</sup>

The next cartographic representations of this community finally put some of the most important elements in the right place. In 1790, the French biologist,

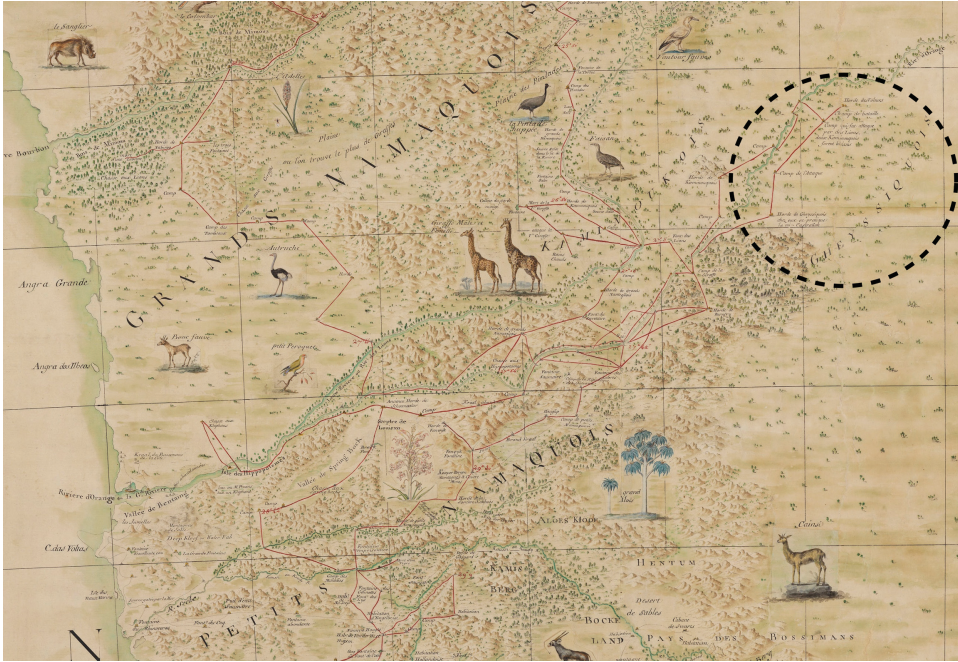
169 Wed. van Esveldt, Holtrop, 'Zuidelijkste gedeelte van Afrika of het land der Hottentotten: volgens de nieuwste waarneminghe opgesteld', Amsterdam, bij de Wed. van Esveldt en Holtrop, 1774 or 1775, Utrecht University Library, Special Collections, KAART: Ackersdijck 793 (Dk27-15), available <https://objects.library.uu.nl/reader/index.php?obj=1874-372691&metadat a=1&clan=en#page/61/25/95/61259518147007488936256421465697086704.jpg/mode/1up> (last accessed on 26 November 2023).

hunter, and Enlightened literate François Le Vaillant, who had explored vast tracts of the country between 1781 and 1784, produced a large and ornate map of southern Africa to illustrate his travels to King Louis XVI.<sup>170</sup> This map finally included the newly charted Orange River, as named by Captain Robert Jacob Gordon in 1779. The 'Gheyssiquois' were located south of the Great River, slightly off from the 'Petits Namaquois' also south of the river and to the south-west of them, and not far from the 'Grands Namaquois' north of the river and to the north-west of their location. The course of the river upstream was left incomplete: the 'Gheyssiquois' were settled in a region where the river flowed from the north-east to the south-west, that could correspond with the last section of the northern bend of modern Upington. Incidentally, this was also among the earliest maps to show the 'Koriquois' or !Korana north of the Great River, where they were effectively situated after the invasion of the Land of Tau, but placed them next to the Namaqua far in the north west. Simpler versions of the large Le Vaillant map were made on the occasion of the publication of his second voyage in 1796, in French and in German.<sup>171</sup> A century after Claudius and Tachard, European cartographers finally succeeded in providing a more detailed representation of where these 'Gassiquas' and 'Gheyssiquas' were settled, by overlapping the 'Fleuve Large' to the 'Fleuve Sans Fin' into a single watercourse and shifting this Great River from the eastern to the western parts of southern Africa.<sup>172</sup>

170 François Levaillant, [Le Vaillant], 'Partie Meridionale de l'Afrique depuis le Tropique du Capricorne jusqu'au Cap de Bonne Esperance contenant les Pays des Hottentots, des Cafres, et de quelques autres Nations, Dréssée pour le Roi sur les Observations de M. Levaillant par M. de Laborde, ancien premier Valet de chambre du Roi et Gouverneur du Louvre, l'un des Fermier Généraux de Sa Majesté', Paris, 1790, BnF, département Cartes et plans, GE SH 18 PF 114 DIV 2 P 26, available <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55011014j?rk=128756;0> (last time accessed 26 November 2023).

171 François Levaillant [Le Vaillant], 'Carte de la Partie Meridionale de l'Afrique Pour servir d'intelligence aux deux Voyages de Levaillant, Paris, H.J. Jansen et Perroneau, 1791-1804, BnF, département Cartes et plans, GE C-2285, available <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b530293254> (last time accessed 26 November 2023); Johann Reinold Forster, 'Die südliche Spitze von Afrika; zu le Vaillant's Reisen während der Jahre 1780 bis 1785', 1796, Harvard University, Harvard Map Collection, G8481 S12 1796 S6, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/expeditions-and-discoveries/catalog/38-990115383800203941> (last accessed on 26 November 2023).

172 Note that this was not the case in Boulton's map of Africa made in 1794, which appears to be inspired only to d'Anville for its southern African part. Solomon Boulton, 'Africa, with all its States, Kingdoms, Republics, Regions, Islands, &c., improved and enlarged [sic] from D'Anville's Map, to which have been added a particular chart of the Gold Coast wherein are distinguished all the European Forts and Factories', London, Laurie & Whittle, 1794. Library of Congress, available [https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl\\_06782/?r=0.404,-0.031,0.63,0.387,0](https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl_06782/?r=0.404,-0.031,0.63,0.387,0) (last accessed on 26 November 2023).



MAP 2.13 Gheyssequois, 1790

Legend: dashed circle = the Gyzikoa

SOURCE: FRANÇOIS LEVAILLANT, [LE VAILLANT], 'PARTIE MERIDIONALE DE L'AFRIQUE DEPUIS LE TROPIQUE DU CAPRICORNE JUSQU'AU CAP DE BONNE ESPERANCE CONTENANT LES PAYS DES HOTTENTOTS, DES CAFRES, ET DE QUELQUES AUTRES NATIONS, DRÉSSÉE POUR LE ROI SUR LES OBSERVATIONS DE M. LEVAILLANT PAR M. DE LABORDE, ANCIEN PREMIER VALET DE CHAMBRE DU ROI ET GOUVERNEUR DU LOUVRE, L'UN DES FERMIER GÉNÉRAUX DE SA MAJESTÉ', PARIS, 1790 [DETAIL], BNF, DÉPARTEMENT CARTES ET PLANS, GE SH 18 PF 114 DIV 2 P 26, AVAILABLE [HTTPS://GALLICA.BNF.FR/ARK:/12148/HTV1B55011014J?RK=128756;0](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/HTV1B55011014J?RK=128756;0) (LAST TIME ACCESSED 26 NOVEMBER 2023)

This change was the product of Wikar and Gordon as much as and perhaps more than the better-published Le Vaillant. The two travellers' unpublished first-hand accounts of the Great River provided an incomparable wealth of information to those who were able to get their hands on them. Le Vaillant, in particular, knew well Gordon's biological writings and did not hesitate to personally ask him for advice about the routes to take for his own journeys in the early 1780s.<sup>173</sup> Indeed, Le Vaillant is the only other traveller, in addition

173 François Le Vaillant, *Voyage de Monsieur Le Vaillant dans l'Intérieur de l'Afrique, par le Cap de Bonne-Espérance, dans les Années 1780, 81, 82, 83, 84 & 85*, 2 volumes, nouvelle édition, Lausanne, Mouton et Mignou, 1790, vol.1, 46–47.



The Gyzikoa had a recognised leader, but the small community could not agree on his succession once he died, some months before October 1778. These internal tensions might have played a role in the division of the community into two settlements by October 1779, but this might also be due to changing patterns in the river economy, ecology, and politics. In absence of an undisputed heir, the wealthiest man acted as *de facto* leader in October 1778,<sup>175</sup> probably the old man whose name was recorded as Hamma Gamma Toeroebep by Gordon in October 1779. However, Wikar and Gordon do not explicitly report any interactions with political authorities at the Gyzikoa, and Gordon primarily relied on the services of a renowned but unnamed warrior who held much respect within the community and could command provisions for the travellers.

Wealth was both produced locally and made in transit. The Gyzikoa herded cattle: they owned about 400 head of cattle ‘but few sheep’ in October 1778, arguably a sizeable number for the arid environment in which they lived. In October 1779, their herds seem to have decreased to 200 between cattle, sheep, and goats. A community of ‘Bushmen’ nearby lived under the Gyzikoa, probably to serve as herders and porters: ‘for every tribe that owns cattle also has a number of Bushmen under its protection’, explained Wikar.<sup>176</sup> The Gyzikoa milked their cows in the afternoons and in the evenings, like the Namaqua far downstream, after the Augrabies Falls, but sometimes also in the mornings.<sup>177</sup> They hunted and prepared the skins of hunted animals. In October 1779, many buffalo skulls were spotted among the ruins of their former village. Sometimes the Gyzikoa hunted in cooperation with their ‘Bushman’, like in November 1779 when they caught some hippopotamuses with spike traps. Moreover, they also built fish-traps and fished in the river, and grounded the bark of the camel-thorn to obtain a red powder as body decoration, as it was observed in October 1779.

The local produce, however, was by far surpassed by the amount of the goods traded at their village. The source was the land to the north: one day of travel upstream from the Gyzikoa village in 1778 started the Briqua road. Trade on this road was carefully organised and structured, for as mentioned the journey crossed arid parts where no water could be found for several days, and connected places as distant as twenty days’ travel. It only took place once a year, when the people from the north came to the river.

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175 Mossop, *Wika*, 144–145.

176 Mossop, *Wika*, 161.

177 Gordon 4th Journey, 28 October 1779.

The Blip come each year to the tribes living along this river to trade, bringing with them tobacco, ivory spoons, bracelets, copper and iron beads, glass beads, copper earrings and bracelets, knives, barbed assegais [spears] and also smooth axes and awls. This is the way they trade: for a heifer they give eight assegais, an axe and an awl, a small bag of tobacco and a small bag of dagga [cannabis], and for a bull or an ox, five assegais plus all the other things as for a heifer. They also bring soft, well tanned skins of hartebeest with the grain removed. [...] The copper and iron work, the spoons made of wood, rhino and buffalo horns, and also modelled in ivory, the bowls, etc., all of which they sell to these tribes, prove their ingenuity. They also reap a kind of corn [sorghum, or millet]; and the Korakkoa showed me calabashes [pumpkins] which came from there.<sup>178</sup>

The pattern of exchange was rather clear: the Great River region could only offer cattle – which was highly prized – but all the rest came from the north. Indeed, Wikar commented that ‘whenever you ask: Who made that? the immediate answer is: the Blicquoas’.<sup>179</sup> Since the middle Great River was not particularly suited for large herds, it is possible to suggest that, in 1778–1779 as in 1661–1662, the cattle traded at the upper bend crossroad ultimately came from the Namaqua in the west, which were therefore an active part of the trade. Likewise, refined metals still came from the north, either from the Land of Tau, or from beyond. Wikar asked about its provenance, but the people at the Gyzikoa were rather unsure and only vaguely described what appears to be iron mines and smelting practices in some mountains far north. ‘The Blip keep it a secret’, they said.<sup>180</sup> Ivory was not mentioned in the seventeenth century, but it featured as an important item of trade in 1778–1779. In particular, as much as metal tools and weapons, ivory objects struck both Wikar and Gordon for their beauty, proof of a great craftsmanship.<sup>181</sup> Gordon made a drawing of two steel knives with elaborate ivory handles and sheaths which clearly resemble, but surpass in detail and beauty, specimens obtained by the British Museum during the following century.<sup>182</sup> It can be presumed that the cattle which was seen by

178 Mossop, *Wikar*, 148–149.

179 Mossop, *Wikar*, 148–149.

180 Mossop, *Wikar*, 154–157.

181 Mossop, *Wikar*, 136–137, 148–149; Brenthurst Library, Johannesburg, Robert Jacob Gordon, MS.107/9/3. Topographical and geographical notes. Available online at <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/writings-and-drawings> (last accessed on 29 August 2023)

182 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, RP-T-1914-17-92, Robert Jacob Gordon, [drawing of] ‘A Tswana or Kora knife with its sheath, 1777? Gordon’s drawing is available online at <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/drawings/rp-t-1914-17-92> (last accessed

Wikar and Gordon at the Gyzikoa in 1778 and 1779 was either the result of the sale of such high-value items, or was kept in stock in advance of their purchase; in any case, cattle would be periodically transferred to the north along the Briqua road.

The survival of the purchased animals was clearly to be taken into consideration, too. The Gyzikoa knew how to cross the drylands and reach the first settlements in the north. Wikar wrote that ‘for themselves they take provision of milk and water, mixed in skin bags which the pack oxen have to carry’, but the cattle would not drink for three days – unless a thunderstorm passed along that section of the drylands, and left ‘water here and there on the flat rocks’, which would remain available for at least a fortnight. Even then, however, not more than ‘three or four pack-oxen’ could be sustained, during the dry season.<sup>183</sup> The most successful expedition was not the largest one, but the one which found the right balance between consumption and provisions, and survived the road. Gordon noted that ‘the Briquas only come through by way of the Geisiqua road and so along the river’ and that ‘the rest is Bushman land’, arguably meaning that the survival was even harder there.<sup>184</sup> In his unpublished notes, Gordon recorded the branching of this road towards several destinations in the north, and wrote down day by day the obstacles and resources that could be found, including when water was not to be found for the entire day: somebody gave him a very detailed description of the itinerary, yet another proof that travel involved planning and good knowledge of the road.<sup>185</sup> In 1778–1779 and surely for some time before that, the Gyzikoa were a commercial threshold which regulated the transit of wealth flowing in the narrow passage amidst inhospitable lands between the north and the Great River. They clearly benefited from environmental constraints and from their own specialisation as skilled travellers.

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on 29 August 2023). British Museum, London, United Kingdom, Af979.01.3077.a-b, ‘dagger; sheath’; Af.3093.a-b, ‘knife; sheath’; Af.5518.a, ‘dagger’; Af910.-380.a, ‘knife’. Available online at [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_Af979-01-3077-a-b](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af979-01-3077-a-b); [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_Af-3093-a-b](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af-3093-a-b); [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_Af-5518-a](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af-5518-a); [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_Af-1910-380-a](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af-1910-380-a) (last accessed on 26 November 2023).

183 Mossop, *Wikar*, 146–147, 156–157.

184 Gordon, 4th Journey, 3 November 1779.

185 Brentthurst Library, Johannesburg, Robert Jacob Gordon, Appendix: MS 107/3/1/3. Available online <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/manuscripts/appendix-ms-107-3-1-3> (last accessed on 29 August 2023); MS.107/9/3. Topographical and geographical notes. Available online <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/writings-and-drawings> (last accessed on 29 August 2023)



FIGURE 2.1 A Brika knife

SOURCE: DRAWN BY ROBERT JACOB GORDON, ARCHIVED AT RIJKSMUSEUM, OBJECT NUMBER RP-T-1914-17-92. AVAILABLE ONLINE AT [HTTPS://WWW.ROBERTJACOBGORDON.NL/DRAWINGS/RP-T-1914-17-92](https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/drawings/RP-T-1914-17-92) (LAST ACCESSED ON 29 AUGUST 2023)

For sure, many Gyzikoa knew very well both the Great River and the land to the north. As mentioned, they had relatives among the riverine people downstream, the Aukokoa of the Einiqua of the islands; and upstream, the Korakkoa or !Korana.<sup>186</sup> Some of these connections were influential in the region: one of the *ghawaap* or captains of the Einiqua had two sons from a woman at the settlement of the Gyzikoa, and they lived with her there.<sup>187</sup> Incidentally, this is a type of marital connection which is not discussed by scholars, who still only consider the reversal gender balance as typical, such as in the case of the ruling family of the Batlhaping who had started to take wives among the !Korana in mid-eighteenth century. Entire families of the Gyzikoa, however, lived for prolonged periods in the north across the drylands, on the Kuruman river at eight days' travel in Gordon's unpublished itinerary, and periodically came back to the Great River.<sup>188</sup> The family, possibly the extended household, was the fundamental unit of the system. This point, which was already made by Wikar, is developed in more detail by Gordon, which allows to take a closer look at the complex cross-regional social network in which the Gyzikoa were embedded.

Heard that some of the Second Geisiquas [the smaller village met by Gordon, south of the river] had arrived from Briqua Land [the north], nearly dead of thirst. The Dowski and Curuqua kraals [villages] lie together on the Koeremana. Thereafter the Homma Cariqua and Curuquer are also together. They are all Geisiqua families and marry with Moetjoana but at present they have arguments and fights. Many people have died of the children's disease [smallpox] but the sickness has now ceased. For a while this disease has stopped the Geisiquas and Koraquas, as also the Briqueas and Namaquas, from visiting one another.<sup>189</sup>

Robert Jacob Gordon consolidated and integrated these information in his large 'Atlas', the manuscript map of southern Africa which he produced in about 1786 to illustrate his newly attained knowledge of the entire country.

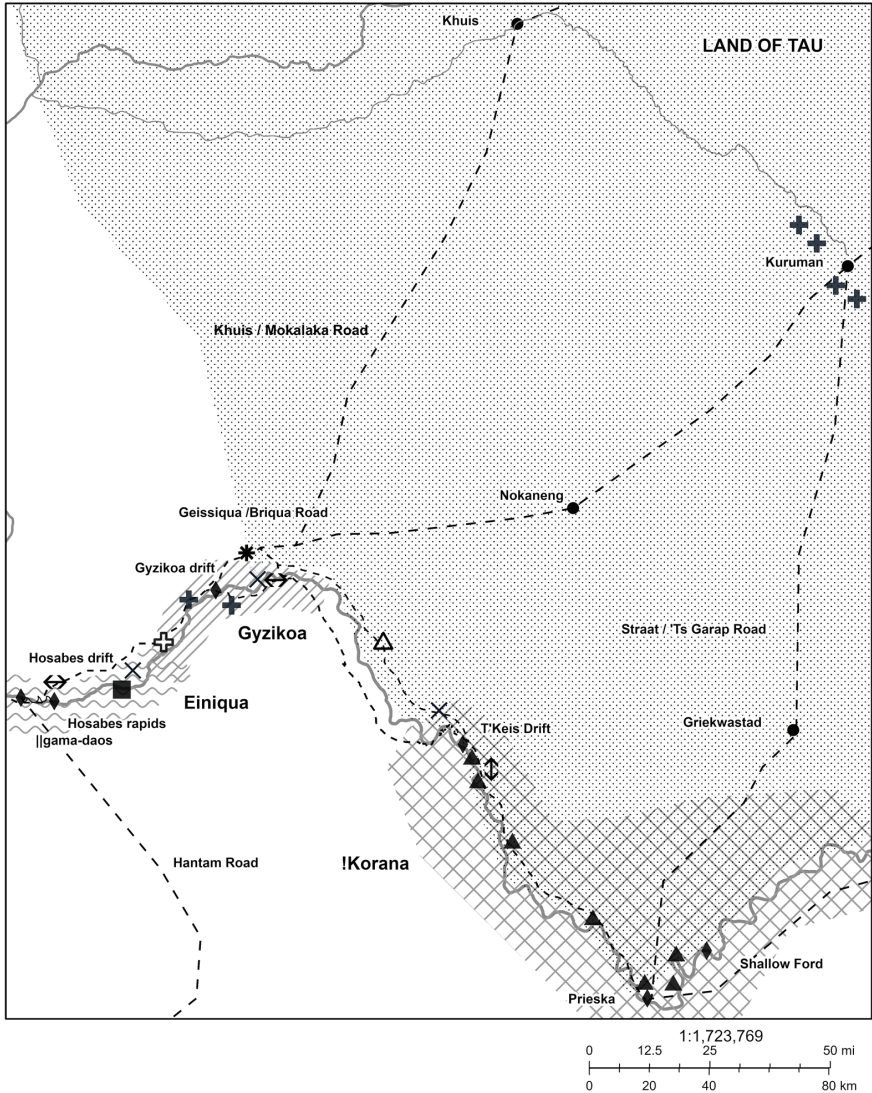
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186 Mossop, *Wikar*, 142–143.

187 Gordon, 4th Journey, 27 October 1779.

188 Brenthurst Library, Johannesburg, Robert Jacob Gordon, MS.107/9/3. Topographical and geographical notes. Available online <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/writings-and-drawings> (last accessed on 29 August 2023)

189 Gordon, 4th, 12 Nov 1779.



MAP 2.15 The middle Orange River and the roads to the north in 1778-1779  
 Legend: black crosses = Gyzikoa villages in 1778-1779; white cross = older village of Gyzikoa; black triangles = villages of !Korana; white triangle = old village of !Korana; black square = village of Aukokoa; dots = settlements in the Land of Tau; the letters x = villages of hunters (San); dotted area = Land of Tau; chequered area = !Korana settlement area; dashed area = Gyzikoa settlement area; wave area = Einiqua settlement area; asterisk = start of Briqua Road; dashed lines = roads; diamonds = fords; double arrows: *poorte*; waves = rapids  
 SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE

On the top, next to a drawing of 'Moetjooanas Huijshouding' he wrote a paragraph on the family connections between the Gizikoa of the Great River and those of the Kuruman river.

Several distinct families of the Geisiqua live with these Moetjoeanas, having intermarried with them. They call themselves Dousiqua, Coriqua, Kùriqua, and homma Cùriqua. However the smallpox rages from time to time among these peoples. This hindered communications between them and the Hottentots, that is Koraquas, Einiquas and also the Nam-aquas, because they often caught the smallpox from these peoples and have lost many of their tribesmen because of it.<sup>190</sup>

Halving the population of the Gyzikoa on the Great River, and permanently relocating one part on the Kuruman among the 'Briqua' or 'Moetjoeanas' produced something more important than 'hybridisation' and 'mixture'. It created a fundamental branch of the cross-regional social infrastructure of travel. Gyzikoa families on the Kuruman would host and allow to settle those of the Great River coming to visit, just as the vice-versa was witnessed by Gordon in November 1779. This social network was based on kinship ties and language proficiency – the Gyzikoa had to know both the languages of the north and of the river to make the connection work properly. Thus, they were a social threshold which facilitated movement of people, but also the circulation of news, in normal times. On the opposite, when a great danger arose, such as a smallpox epidemic or a war, the Gyzikoa could regulate and temporarily stop the movement of people, news, and goods, until it was safe to travel again.

Neither Wikar nor Gordon journeyed on the road to the north, despite their intentions to do so. Wikar's companions had different plans, kept following the river upstream to the !Korana, and refused to travel north. Wikar noted bitterly that he did not dispose of an interpreter to the Briqua, and that 'I was not my own master, and had to dance to the piping of my company, which in itself was enough cause for regret'.<sup>191</sup> Gordon was less explicit, or aware of his party's decisions, in his own notes. After leaving the Gyzikoa and moving upstream his 'Hottentots', the guides of his expedition, 'kept saying something different', and

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190 Rijksmuseum, RP-T-1914-17-3, Robert Jacob Gordon, 'Kaart van Zuid-Afrika', manuscript map, 1786, annotation on the map, top. Translation by the editors of <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/drawings/rp-t-1914-17-3-a> (last accessed on 16 August 2023). Map available <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/search/objects?set=RP-T-1914-17-3#/RP-T-1914-17-3,0> (last accessed 26 on November 2023).

191 Mossop, *Wikar*, 156–157.

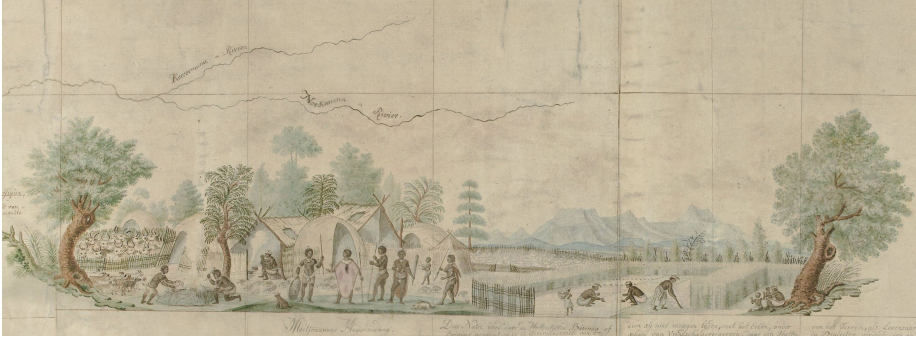


FIGURE 2.2 'Moetjooanas Huijshouding'

SOURCE: RIJKSMUSEUM, RP-T-1914-17-3, 'KAART VAN ZUID-AFRIKA', MANUSCRIPT MAP, 1786, [DETAIL], AVAILABLE ONLINE [HTTPS://WWW.ROBERTJACOBGORDON.NL/DRAWINGS/RP-T-1914-17-3-A](https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/drawings/rp-t-1914-17-3-a); AND [HTTPS://ID.RIJKSMUSEUM.NL/200551494](https://id.rijksmuseum.nl/200551494) (LAST ACCESSED ON 29 AUGUST 2023)

despite him wanting to visit both the !Korana and the 'Briquas', they led him to the former only.<sup>192</sup> As to the Gyzikoa, they desired that the trading parties moved along the Briqua road and visited the people in the north, or at least so Wikar reports to have understood. They might have been disappointed seeing them proceeding upstream to the !Korana instead.

The reason for this mismatch was found a few days after, among the first !Korana of the Great River. Living in three villages in 1778, one of which counted 49 habitations and 'stock in great numbers, chiefly cattle', they likewise purchased all they possessed from the north. Their leader, Soenop, asked Wikar about the provenance of the beads that his trading partners had brought from the lower reaches of the river. He then nervously replied to Wikar's description of the Colonial market where, as the traveller said, the !Korana would have found more they could afford.

'So you may say, but you will fare as the Blicquoas do, who are also rich in possessions, but when we are at the height of our bargaining, the store of goods which the Blip have to exchange, gives out.' I [Wikar] tried to talk him out of it, but he said: 'We are, and shall always remain, masters in trade.'<sup>193</sup>

192 Gordon, 4th Journey, 30 October 1779.

193 Mossop, *Wikar*, 166–167.

Many more !Korana, even wealthier in cattle, lived further upstream, divided in various communities of several villages each. Soenop's words suggest that they were trying to buy out the entire stock of goods brought by the people of the north, possibly attracting riverine traders to their villages along the southern bend of the Great River and away from the Gyzikoa traders on the northern bend. Both Wikar's and Gordon's parties ended there, after all, and from there they turned back downstream. In proximity of the ford of Prieska, the !Korana posed a direct challenge to the Gyzikoa, and to their function as commercial threshold on the long-distance trade network of the Great River. The consequences were noteworthy in the *longue durée*. As the barycentre of the Cape Colony progressively moved to the eastern districts along the Indian Ocean coast, the road from Graaff-Reinett across the Sneewberg and reaching Prieska became the preferred itinerary to the interior for colonial travellers – from the German naturalist and doctor Hinrich Lichtenstein in 1805 to the *voortrekkers* in 1834, to miners, land surveyors, and profiteers in the diamond and gold rushes in 1867 and 1886. These nineteenth-century frontier dynamics made this portion of the former Land of Tau, by then known as Griqualand West, into the threshold for ideas and goods that should and should not reach the north, such as Christianity and guns. In 1778–1779, however the !Korana were still operating in a system which pointed towards the north and the west, including the lower river and Namaqualand. In this context, they aimed to substitute the Gyzikoa as commercial and social threshold of the Great River. The first manifestation of this attempt was, ultimately, the most likely cause of Tau's treacherous attack and ruinous war when they had crossed north, at some point in the 1740s–1760s.

Strategic as they were, the Gyzikoa were not a powerful political actor. At least since the second half of the seventeenth century, the landscape was dominated by the Namaqua in the west and by the people north of the river. The Gyzikoa were, possibly, pulled sometimes to the side of the Namaqua, likely before the 1661–1662 war, and sometimes to the other side, being under the Barolong after the conquests of Tau in 1740. In the aftershock of the final collapse of the Land of Tau in 1777, when the Barolong royal family broke down into a civil war, the very commercial role of the Gyzikoa was under threat. The macro-region appeared politically fractured in several political units that tried to navigate the difficult waters of the period. On the Great River, the Gyzikoa had been attacked by the Einiqua, who stole their cattle, killed their leader and some of their men a few months before October 1778, but who were defeated once the other half of the Gyzikoa from the north came to help. In a matter of few months, by April 1779, the Gyzikoa were threatened by the !Korana, moved two days downstream and menaced to make an alliance with the Einiqua; then,

by October 1779, they were allied with the !Korana, had moved a day upstream, and were fighting against the Einiqua.<sup>194</sup> Their marriage strategies with both the !Korana and Einiqua surely put the Gyzikoa in an awkward position in this new political context.

The situation was still relatively quiet in the north, as it appears in Gordon's unpublished notes. One 'merrihawang' or 'Minehawang', was the 'Captein van Makkabiqua' who lived on the Kuruman: clearly this was Molehabangwe, the *kgosi* of the Batlhaping, here called with a Khoe ethnonymic desinence '-qua'. It was therefore under Molehabangwe that the Gyzikoa families lived on the Kuruman River. Another 'captain' noted down by Gordon was 'Heissi', possibly the *kgosi* of the 'Matjaroequa', the Batlharo, who were settled further downstream on the Kuruman River, more distant in the north of the Gyzikoa. The most powerful man of the north was however 'moekerakera', 'makraki', or 'makaraki', 'captein' and 'koning' of the 'moetjoanas' and of the 'Cabiti', who ruled over two cities each as large as Cape Town, that had a population of about 14,000 at the time.<sup>195</sup> This man was *kgosi* Mokalaka of the Barolong royal family, a grandson of *kgosi* Tau who momentarily had the upper hand in the first phases of the civil war that erupted among his descendants.<sup>196</sup> Mokalaka, Molehabangwe, and possibly Heissi were allies, and controlled the south-western part of the Land of Tau, that which was traversed by the Briqua road and was ultimately connected to the Great River.

However, their reach seems to have extended less than at the times of Tau himself. Gordon was told in October 1779 that the 'Koraqua and Einiqua drove them [the 'Bitjoana'] from here [at the Gyzikoa].<sup>197</sup> Wikar considered the Gyzikoa 'exiles from their own country'.<sup>198</sup> The people of the north used to be settled and to control the northern bend of the Great River, possibly since the times of the 1661–1662 war against the Namaqua reported in Dutch sources. The Gyzikoa, who had existed since at least 1686, were perhaps the product of

194 Gordon, 4th Journey, 28, 29 October, 12, 14, 29 November 1779; Mossop, *Wikar*, 30–31, 64–65, 150–151, 170–173.

195 Gordon, 4th Journey, 28 October 1779; Brenthurst Library, Johannesburg, Robert Jacob Gordon, MS.107/9/3. Topographical and geographical notes. Available online <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/writings-and-drawings> (last accessed on 29 August 2023); Appendix: MS 107/3/1/3. Available online <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/manuscripts/appendix-ms-107-3-1-3> (last accessed on 29 August 2023); MS.107/10/11. Linguistic notes. Available online <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/writings-and-drawings> (last accessed on 29 August 2023).

196 SOAS Library, M4916, 'Baralong Tribal Papers. History of the Barolong. An Ethnological Study of the Barolong Tribes', by Setseele Modiri Molema, R.4 and following.

197 Gordon, 4th Journey, 28 October 1779.

198 Mossop, *Wikar*, 142–143, map facing 192.

a compromise between the Namaqua and the growing Barolong power once the 'Briqua'/Batlhaping[?] had tried to move out of the Namaqua commercial control in 1661. Mixed, halved, and twinned, they functioned as a threshold throughout this extended period and, surely from the conquest of *kgosi* Tau in the decades before 1740, as a crucial node on a otherwise vague desert border.

This changed radically after the !Korana of Kunapsoopo crossed the Great River to the north, and Tau lost the war, his land, and his life. The Gyzikoa only retained their function as commercial and social threshold for some time, facilitating and regulating movement to and fro the Great River perhaps until April 1789, when a 'captein' of the Ogoqua Einiqua near the Augrabies Falls was able to cross northwards himself, arguably profiting from the last rains of the season, and led an army to attack *kgosi* Mokalaka in his domains, which were then located far away near the modern border with Botswana.<sup>199</sup> The fact that Robert Jacob Gordon noted down the information about this small conflict ten years after his journey on the Great River is a double proof: that he had established his own intelligence network which was able to tap into the Gyzikoa connections from the ramparts of the Castle of Good Hope, where he was settled; and also that he had understood the importance of the progressive dislocation of the communities of the Great River, of the disruption of the old cross-regional social infrastructure of travel, and of the collapse of the previous political landscape of the interior. This awareness was lost, together with his notes, once the British empire took over the Cape in 1795.

## 6 Conclusion: Twinning on the Border

On the 1st of October 1801, the Commissioners of the British expedition, P.J. Truter and William Somerville, left Cape Town. They followed a long diagonal line dotted with recent colonial farmsteads, crossed the border of the Colony into the drylands, and reached the Great River at Prieska a month later, on the 2nd of November 1801. They knew they were a bit late into the rainy season, and indeed they found the river in flood, making for a dangerous passage.<sup>200</sup>

199 Brenthurst Library, Johannesburg, Robert Jacob Gordon, MS.107/9/3. Topographical and geographical notes. Available online <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/writings-and-drawings> (last accessed on 29 August 2023). Indeed, the scant information provided by Le Vaillant placed the Gyzikoa south of the Great River and seemingly several days downstream, and far from the Griqua road, in 1783–1785. François Le Vaillant, *Second Voyage dans l'intérieur de l'Afrique par le Cap de Bonne-Espérance, dans les années 1783, 84 et 85*, Bruxelles, B. Le Francq, 1797, vol. 3, 219–222.

200 Somerville, *Account*, 51, 77.

Their route was different from both the Namaqua road and the Hantam road, and entirely bypassed the middle and lower Great River.

Their destination was the land of the 'Beriqua' in the north, which they were the first to reach and describe. The capital, Dithakong, was a large city of about the size of Cape Town and an estimated population of 8,000 inhabitants. They had a king, Molehabangwe, and a 'Second Chief', Mokalaka, who governed about a half of the city, both in their fifties. The people of Dithakong cultivated the land, herded cattle, hunted and manufactured animal hides, smithed copper and iron, but did neither mine nor smelt them, and were involved in trade and diplomatic relations with neighbouring communities. As Gordon noted more than twenty years before about the Gyzikoa, William Somerville wrote on his journal that 'Briqua is a name unknown to them, but applied to them by the Kora Hottentots – they call themselves Bōōtshoōānās', that is Batswana.<sup>201</sup>

The purchase of cattle, the official objective of the expedition, was only allowed four days after the arrival at Dithakong, and after the king Molehabangwe set the rate of exchange, and imposed that gifts in oxen would only be accepted if coming from himself or his sons. The result was very unsatisfactory for the Commissioners: the people of Dithakong would only accept glass beads and refuse all other items of trade brought from the Colony, such as iron tools – they had their own. The price was considered quite high, between 2 and 3 pounds of beads for a single ox; and oxen could not be purchased as entire herds but only negotiated one by one. The point was already noted by several scholars: Dithakong was a place where cattle was bought from traders coming from the south and accumulated, not sold.<sup>202</sup> Molehabangwe maximised their profits while avoiding that an unforeseen circumstance, the colonial expedition, subverted the regional market, eventually selling very few heads of cattle to the Commissioners.<sup>203</sup> After eight days of efforts, Somerville called the expedition a failure when he counted the total cattle purchased at 120, but spotted much larger herds roaming around the town, clearly intentionally kept away from them.<sup>204</sup>

A further disappointment came once the Commissioners learnt of an inland trade which brought tobacco, copper, and iron from the north, and to a less degree cloth and Indian calicoes, which were bought in exchange of prepared animal skins. The traders, they were told, 'come once a year to this place in

201 Somerville, *Account*, 123.

202 Legassick, *Politics*, 111–113, 124–126.

203 Somerville, *Account*, 131.

204 Somerville, *Account*, 140–141.

large parties', they spoke a different language, and lived near 'a large water that makes a great noise, on which people float in *boxes* [probably, canoes made of hollowed-out trunks] – and that there are some White people who live near the water'. Somerville supposed this was a Portuguese settlement in West Africa, but it is more likely to have been Delagoa Bay, or a Portuguese *feira* on the Zimbabwean plateau and on the Zambesi river. In any case, Molehabangwe gently refused to provide them with guides and interpreters to proceed north, fearing that any ill might occur to them would be blamed on him by the Colony. The Barolong and Bangwaketse, 'nations more northerly and easterly than his own', were only mentioned to the Commissioners while they were on their way back to the Colony, as a bait to invite them back to Dithakong in a year's time.<sup>205</sup> Long distance trade clearly followed a yearly pattern and was strictly regulated by the local political ruler.<sup>206</sup>

When the expedition marched back towards the Great River crossings in the south, however, another trading opportunity appeared to the Commissioners upon hearing of the 'Horde of Cornelis Kock', the wealthy patriarch of a small but growing community which was by most referred to as Bastards, from the formal Dutch-era definition of the children of slaves – usually of Malay descent – and local Khoe, or of their colonial masters. In about a decade's time from the passage of Somerville and Truter, the Bastards renamed themselves into Griqua. Much has been written about the Griqua and the Kok family, for the importance they had in the history of the following half a century in the broader region was paramount. The founder, Adam Kok, was indeed a liberated slave who had bought a farm in the Piketberg, in the Colony, in the 1740s. Here he connected with some Grigriqua, one of the minor Khoe communities of the seventeenth-century Cape region, and gave birth to his son Cornelis. During the second half of the eighteenth century, he moved with his extended family outside the Colony, in the land of the Little Namaqua, just south of the Great River, and received a 'staff of office' from the VOC as an acknowledgment of his authority. Eventually, he moved upstream along the Great River, attracted by the opportunities in cattle farming, hunting, and trade. He lived in the same region and practiced the same trade of Claas Barends, Wikar's and Gordon's guide and expedition master in 1778–1779.

When Adam Kok died, in 1795, his son Cornelis Kok took over, and there he was in 1802, '8 or 10 days to the westward or down on the Gareep' from where

<sup>205</sup> Somerville, *Account*, 141, 152–153.

<sup>206</sup> For some of this points, see the more elaborate Gary Y. Okihiro, 'Precolonial Economic Change Among the Thlaping, c.1795–1817', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 17, 1, 1984, 59–79.

the Truter-Somerville were about to cross, on the southern bank. The location was described by Somerville as the place where the river makes an 'remarkable [...] abrupt turn [...] at an elbow', changing its flow from a south-westerly direction to a westerly direction: this place was at some distance downstream from where the Gyzikoa had been settled at the times of Wikar and Gordon, and about in the area where they were located by Le Vaillant. Cornelius Kok and his father Adam before him had quite literally taken the place of the Gyzikoa, who were absent from the political landscape of 1801 – possibly, by then permanently settled in Kuruman and Dithakong with the name of Batlhaping and under their independent ruling dynasty. The situation on the Great River had indeed worsened since 1779, a direct consequence of the steady arrival of horses and guns in the landscape. On the lower bend roamed the band of the amaXhosa prince Danster Nzwani, who had travelled thousand of kilometres from the eastern Cape and now tried to control Prieska, and of the German bandit Jan Bloem, who attacked Kuruman, settled and raided at various places along the *'Ts Garap Straat* and the Briqua roads, and was eventually poisoned in 1799.<sup>207</sup> On the middle Orange river the Einiqua had disappeared, too. The islands of the river towards the Augrabies Falls were now the refuge of !Garuchamab, better known with his colonial name of Klaas Afrikaner, who likewise raided and robbed across the region. Somerville and Truter were rather easily persuaded by Cornelius Kok to join forces with him and try to eliminate Afrikaner in 1802. The expedition did not succeed and Afrikaner escaped, eventually making his way in the former territory of the Namaqua, to become an important character in Namibian history.

All these mobile communities were polyglot, mobile, mixed, and revolved around the old Great River network. Their leaders, and probably their followers too, put in place one key strategy which used to be of the Gyzikoa: they married in local communities, multiplying their commitments but also their connections. Clearly, however, their violent and parasitic strategies were not functional to the movement of people and wealth along the river, quite the opposite. Only one group seemed more intent in cattle farming and trading than in raiding: the Bastards of Cornelius Kok. It might not be a coincidence that another Kok, Jan Matthys, was found by Somerville and Truter settled towards the Kuruman river, close to where the Briqua road and the *'Ts Garap Straat* met, intent in trading with the Batlhaping. Either Jan Matthys Kok, or Cornelius, were defined by Somerville the 'principal dealer' at Dithakong: 'he comes once a year to this place and exchanges beads, sheep goats

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207 Penn, *Forgotten Frontier*, 198.

and dogs for cattle, which he again he sells to certain people in the Cape, who (I believe) supply him with Gun powder and beads and purchase his cattle'.<sup>208</sup> Nigel Penn, among other historians, have noted the short-lived association of Jan Matthys Kok with the London Missionary Society, and have considered him a colonist of European descent.<sup>209</sup> For sure, he was involved in a much lucrative trade in ivory with the Colony, which earned him much but led to his murder, during a trading expedition to the Batlhaping, in 1805.

As to Cornelius Kok, at about the end of the eighteenth century he went to *kgosi* Molehabangwe and asked permission to settle north of the Great River. Molehabangwe gave him the 'Bushman' fountain of 'Gatee-t'Kamma, which probably had been at the centre of Tau's war against the !Korana in the previous century. Kok's Bastards started to call it Klaarwater and the Batlhaping gave Cornelius Kok a Setswana name, Keronjani.<sup>210</sup> The place was, of course, on the *'Ts Garap Straat* leading to the fords of Prieska and the Cape Colony. It was here that the Bastards agreed to change their name into Griqua when the London Missionary Society Superintendent, John Campbell, asked them to do so in 1813. Klaarwater became Griekwastad, then Griquatown, and the area became Griqualand West, a new threshold between the Cape Colony and the land of the north. In August 1820, now an old man, Cornelius Kok reminisced with Campbell of the early days when he had reached the land north of the Great River for the first time: following the game during a hunting expedition, he reached the Kuruman River and 'here he found the Matchappees'.<sup>211</sup> The Batlhaping, sure, as most historians tend to unravel this apparent naming mistake, but in his frontier Dutch also the *maatschappij*, his trading partners, his other half. The Griqua had indeed fully taken the place of the Gyzikoa as the connecting link between the Great River and the deep north.



The Great River was a place of contact, communication, and crossing. Along its course, across the changing environment, and between competing political powers, people lived and moved for centuries, learning the skills and the techniques which were necessary for both settlement and movement. The communities of the river specialised in a varied set of activities, which formed

208 Somerville, *Narrative*, 97, 139–140, 144–145, 169, 165–166, 171.

209 Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier*, 348 n92.

210 Statement of Mahurah Molehabangwe, 23 February 1869, Witgatboom Vaal River, *Bloemhof Blue Book*, 292–293.

211 Campbell, *Second Journey*, vol. 2, 260–261

an impressive social infrastructure of travel. Some knew how to survive in the desert and to traverse its arid expanse following the bees, if need be. Others became exceptional swimmers, and ingenuous carpenters, braving the current to bring travellers across. Many spoke more than one language. Some built family relations within foreign communities, or living in a distant land. All played a role in making the Great River region traversable.

There was one community of specialists, however, which included most of the characteristics of the Great River infrastructure. Placed for at least a hundred years, between c.1660s and c.1790s, on the northern bend of the Great River, the Gyzikoa were a threshold in the most crucial place of crossing: midway between the wealthy cities of the north-eastern interior and the rich shepherd kings of the western coast, where the road of the river and the road of the northern drylands met. Such a place of crossing was coveted by powerful men both close by and far away and the Gyzikoa could hardly remain neutral. During the century of their documented history, they seem to have changed ruler, overlord, or master several times, and at least twice after large conflicts, in 1661–1662 and in c.1740–1760. They were pulled at one moment into one, or into another political sphere. In one case they became part of a large state, the Land of Tau, and seem to have been made by *kgosi* Tau into a node and a point of control on the political border of his kingdom. It did not last much. The breakdown of the Land of Tau in the 1770s was not followed by the rise of another polity of a comparable size, and the last decades of the century saw the incursions of several bands of raiders which depopulated and effectively disrupted the Great River region, creating a relatively short-lived period of great instability which was taken by new colonial observers as the norm, and called the Northern Frontier.

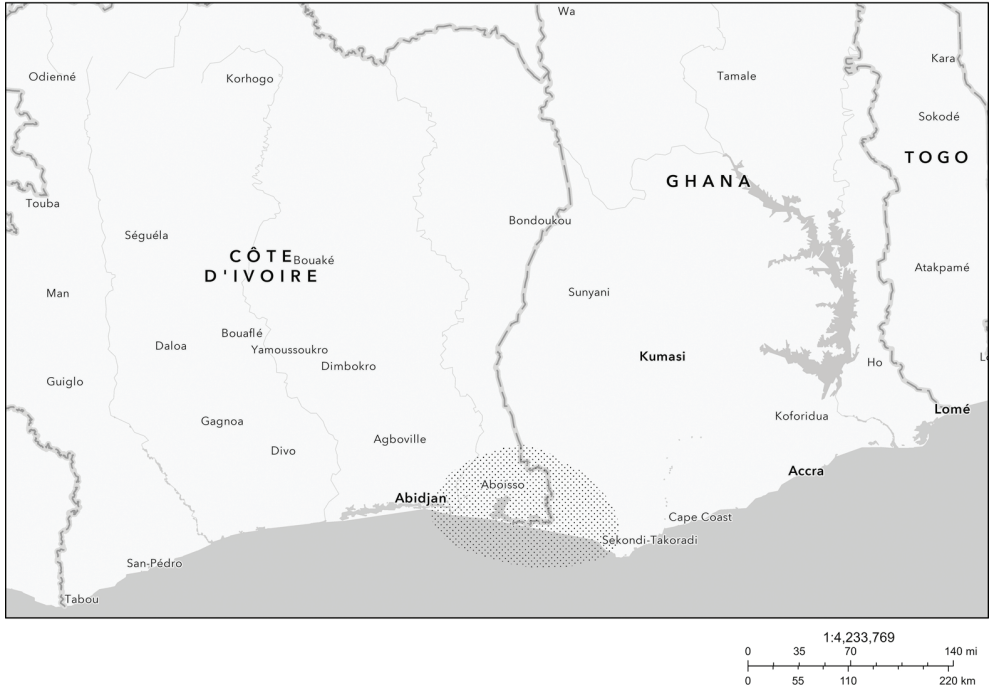
However, in 1778–1779, immediately after the collapse of the Land of Tau, the fundamental aspects were still at work. The Gyzikoa ensured that all the communities of the Great River communicated. They married into most of them, and spoke their languages. They moved when necessary, but they were found more or less where they were supposed to be. They performed an essential task, the undertaking of the yearly long-distance trade expedition which effectively split them in half; and which, at the same time, joined their halves with other peoples somewhere else. They were not a ‘people’, a ‘tribe’, an ‘ethnicity’, or a single ‘family’. They were a varying assemblage or association of families which in a given time gathered to live on the threshold. The Gyzikoa were the twin-folk: the people who made a living by twinning on the Great River border, and made the Great River region live and flow. Dual structures were common in the political institutions of south-western southern Africa, where the ‘Great’ and ‘Little’ parts featured in most political formations. The communities of the

interior had dual structures, too, in the form of the unequal alliances defined a 'twin court' by Paul Landau. The Gyzikoa, however, were not a twin court, but a more specific type of alliance: twinning on the border, they created connections between different communities and became a place of passage and crossing to faraway lands. They were the threshold.

### Acknowledgements

The research and the writing of this chapter were realised under the framework of the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN 2017) 'Genealogies of African Freedom' (code KFW5RJ-004), at the Research Unit of the University of Pavia.





**MAP 3.1** Area of study: Côte d'Ivoire-Ghana border  
**SOURCE:** DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE

# **‘No Palaver about 1 or 2 Villages with 10 or 20 inhabitants’: Precolonial Borders and the Ghana-Côte d’Ivoire Frontier (Seventeenth-Twentieth century)**

*Pierluigi Valsecchi*

## **1 The Hyperbole of African Borders**

The discourse on Africa has long shown a marked propensity for hyperbole. The analysis of sub-Saharan politics bears this out especially clearly. Incontrovertible deductions, though based on the observation of spatially and temporally localized realities, have been extrapolated with extreme ease and applied in general to the African context. Even if originally true, they have become hyperboles, exaggerated assumptions, and therefore misleading for the purposes of analysis. The reasons for this state of affairs are probably many, but especially two closely connected and equally obstinate ones stand out. The first has been a deep-rooted tendency to consider, wrongly, sub-Saharan Africa as an overall homogeneous whole. Obviously this had its origins in an excessive emphasis placed on the relationship with the West and on the colonial process. The second reason, strictly linked to the first, is the adoption of historical perspectives restricted to an excessively narrow a time band. The analysis hardly considers local terms of comparison that go further back than the twentieth century and only rarely the nineteenth – that is, precisely the colonial and immediately precolonial phase. No doubt, this is a sign of the pertinacious survival of often unconscious Eurocentrism in approaching the history of African societies of the last two centuries, which has long led to grossly underestimating the often decisive weight of historical, political and cultural factors internal to the colonized societies in the very dynamics of colonial hegemony. But it is worth recalling in this regard the words of Thomas Spear in one of his now famous essays critical of the ‘constructivist’ approach to African history:

Schooled since the early 1980s in the ‘invention of tradition’, the ‘making of customary law’ and the ‘creation of tribalism’, we have come to see ‘traditional’ African institutions as inventions of colonial authorities and missionaries colluding with African elders to establish colonial hegemony

... however, the emphasis on colonial invention (defined as devising, contriving or fabricating) has led historians to neglect the historical development and complexity of the interpretative processes involved. Such constructions were rarely without local historical precedents, and they had to be perceived as legitimate to be effective. Local discourse played a vital role as people continually reinterpreted and reconstructed tradition in the context of broader socio-economic change.<sup>1</sup>

In short, Spear wisely recalls that nothing comes from nothing, emphasizing the need to bring those 'local historical precedents' at the core of any credible process of reconstruction and historiographical interpretation.

A hyperbole of long and undisputed success has regarded the total artificiality of the borders between today's African states, commonly understood as an exclusive product of the colonial partition of the late nineteenth century, which radically upset and redesigned the framework of previous human and political-territorial aggregations. Since decolonization did not question such artificial frontiers – thus the argument goes – independent Africa wholly inherited borders imposed by exogenous interests, which at times separated what had previously been united and, in other instances, brought together socio-political units which in the nineteenth century had been differentiated and autonomous. Hence it is not surprising that the state structures housed within should present macroscopic problems of national homogeneity. Nor is it surprising, given these spurious origins and the political-institutional fragility of many states, that borders often tend to be weak and debated, except in the formality of international relations.<sup>2</sup>

Political research offers a broad variety of case studies showing that 'the notion of fixed boundaries and bordered delineations has little purchase across whole swathes of Africa'. This statement is based on massive evidence suggesting that:

In a considerable number of spaces in Africa, borders either essentially do not exist in the Westphalian sense – being ignored by actors such as

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1 Thomas Spear, 'Neo-traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 44, 1, 2003, 3–27, 3–4.

2 Pierre Englebort, Stacy Tarango, Matthew Carter, 'Dismemberment and Suffocation: A Contribution to the Debate on African Boundaries', *Comparative Political Studies*, 35, 10, 2002, 1093–1118; see also Alberto Alesina, William Easterly, Janina Matuszeski, 'Artificial States', *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 9, 2, 2011, 246–277, 266.

local populations and refugees – or they are strategically used by (often self-styled) representatives of the state to extract resources and rents.<sup>3</sup>

The argument is not new, as even a perfunctory analysis of pre-colonial states reveals. In the precolonial context, borders were hardly firm lines of delimitation between powers, but rather porous fields of encounter and interaction between different power influences.<sup>4</sup> But the key issue is that there has long been a tendency in studies on regionalism to make reductive interpretations of the international border and at times to give misleadingly short shrift to its differentiation with respect to the 'internal border' (understood in the widest variety of territorial, environmental, administrative, historical-regional, ethnic-cultural, religious, linguistic, etc., delimitations). It is, to say the least, questionable to deduce, from specific methods of perception and management of the international border, a judgment of absolute value on the international border as a consolidated historical reality and a continually essential presence in the system of inter-African relations.

First, there must be a clear awareness that the specific border situations greatly differ from each other by type and historical genesis. In many instances, it is perfectly legitimate to regard them as pure and simple assertions of colonial power interests. What else could be said about the Kongo lands, criss-crossed by the borders of four different colonial entities within the space of a few hundred kilometres? Or Azande's by three, or Kanem-Bornu's, split as it was between various British, German and French colonial territories? And what of the borders of Sahelian and Saharan countries, whose straight lines, functional to French administrative geography, often run through areas with negligible population density or even devoid of a stable population.

However, well-grounded as it is in several cases, this conclusion does not fit the entire spectrum of historical evidence. Indeed, a fair number of African borders have complex histories that go beyond European colonial enterprise. The delimitation of colonial borders, that is, was often deeply influenced by dynamics which developed on the spot and which pertained to aspects of inter-African relations that went back in time and that made these borders

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3 Fredrik Söderbaum, Ian Taylor, 'Considering Micro-regionalism in Africa in the Twenty-first Century', in Fredrik Söderbaum, Ian Taylor, eds., *Afro-Regions: The Dynamics of Cross-Border Micro-Regionalism in Africa*, Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2008, 13–31, 13–14.

4 For a concise discussion of this topic see Fabio Viti, 'Centro e periferia negli Stati dell'Africa precoloniale', in Pierluigi Valsecchi, ed., *Africa tra Stato e società. Scritti in omaggio a Gianpaolo Calchi Novati*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2009, 13–32.

well recognizable and recognized by the people they were meant to separate.<sup>5</sup> The border between Ghana and Togo is a good an example of geo-political engineering supervised by the League of Nations, which after the First World War gave its blessing to the division of the former German Togoland into two mandates, one French and one English. The new frontier line was evidently the product of exogenous interests but, as Paul Nugent masterfully shows, 'the act of drawing the border on the map' set in motion a local dynamic in which communities became active protagonists of the transcription on the ground of hypsometric contours, admirably adapting to the new reality and promptly redefining affiliations and loyalties.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 The Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire Border

In Nugent's argument, the driving force behind the drawing on the new frontier is completely exogenous, even if local agents proved of fundamental importance in carrying out the action. The Ghana/Côte d'Ivoire frontier offers yet another case. This is often portrayed as a textbook example of the impact of European colonial enterprise, which split up areas and communities with long histories of interconnection and sometime unity.<sup>7</sup> In broad terms, and limiting ourselves to the central and southern portion of this border, we can say that the colonial partition cut off the western half of the Akan group of peoples from its core in central and south Ghana. The new frontier secured to the French the Gyaman kingdom, separating it from the rest of the Abron homeland. In the same way, the southern section of the boundary cut into two halves two pretty homogeneous areas: the Anyi speaking and the Nzema speaking regions. The Anyi ancestral core – namely Aowin – went over to the British, while its western expansions, Sanwi and the Ndenye polities, became French. Nzema lost its western chunk to the French Colony.

5 Jack Paine, Xiaoyan Qiu, Joan Ricart-Huguet, *Endogenous Colonial Borders: Precolonial States and Geography in the Partition of Africa*, SSRN, published online 11 October 2021, last revised 4 June 2023, available online <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3934110>, or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3934110> (last accessed on 29 September 2024).

6 Nugent, Paul, *Smugglers, Secessionists, and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Lie of the Borderlands since 1914*, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2002, 5.

7 See for instance E.O. Saffu, 'The Ghana-Ivory Coast Boundary', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 5, 2, 1970, 291–301; Stary, Bruno, 'Un no man's land forestier de l'artifice à l'artificialité : l'étatisation de la frontière Côté d'Ivoire-Ghana', *Les Cahiers d'Outre-Mer*, 222, 2003, 199–228, available online <http://journals.openedition.org/com/878> (last accessed on 30 April 2019).

However, it is worth noting that all contestations of the boundary in the course of the twentieth century came from the colonial and later from the independent national governments, while the local elite and ethnic establishment hardly questioned the colonial boundary settlement as such.

Côte d'Ivoire's decolonization and independence (1960) was accompanied by serious, prolonged turbulence caused by the attempted secession of the Anyi-speaking Kingdom of Sanwi, in the extreme south-east of the country. However what the Sanwi secessionist leadership called into question was the subordination of the Kingdom to Abidjan, not the international boundary as such, which they fully recognized as the eastern frontier of their polity.<sup>8</sup>

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8 The Anyi majority and royal establishment of Sanwi felt threatened by the land claims of the lagoon and coastal communities – in particular the Ewuture (also known as Eotilé or Melkyibo) and Nzema – incorporated into the body of the kingdom starting from the eighteenth century, and felt little protected by the new balance of power that was being defined in Côte d'Ivoire as part of the independence process. In 1958 they appealed directly to Paris, leveraging the guarantees of the protection treaty stipulated, and never abrogated, between France and Sanwi in 1843, and demanded explicit recognition of the individuality and sovereignty of the kingdom. The irredentists went so far as to successfully boycott Côte d'Ivoire 1959 parliamentary elections and unilaterally declare Sanwi's independence ahead of the rest of the country in February 1960. This prompted the French and Abidjan's reaction and the flight to Ghana of the separatist leadership and militants. In the early 1960s, Ghana supported and hosted the exiled members of the *Mouvement de libération du Sanwi*, fueling accusations of annexationist intentions against President Kwame Nkrumah. After his fall in 1966, the exiles were handed over to Côte d'Ivoire, but Sanwi separatism exploded again in 1969–70, in connection with President Felix Houphouët-Boigny's recognition of the secession of Biafra, giving rise to a claim with military aspects and soliciting the intervention of the OAU and the UN. The repression ordered by Houphouët-Boigny was extremely harsh. For several years Sanwi remained clearly marginalized and disadvantaged compared to the rest of eastern Côte d'Ivoire. A reconciliation was only reached in 1981, when the president allowed the enthronement of a new *blemgbi* (ruler, king) of Sanwi. However, the aftermath of the conflict and the resentments linger on and are still tangible in the area. Amongst the scant literature on this less-known West African crisis, see in particular the precious information on the early stages of the crisis provided in A. R. Zolberg's book, *One-Party Government in the Ivory Coast*, Princeton, Princeton Un. Press, 1964; W. Scott Thompson analyzed it briefly in the perspective of Nkrumah's Foreign Policy in *Ghana's Foreign Policy, 1957–1966*, Princeton, Princeton Un. Press, 1969. Samba Diarra provided useful hints in *Le faux complot d'Houphouët-Boigny. Fracture dans le destin d'une nation (1959–1970)*, Paris, Karthala, 1997. Catherine Boone developed an interesting analysis in socio-economic terms of the unique position of the Sanwi ruling group within the Ivory Coast elite, and the reasons of its disaffection and insulation in 'Rural Interests and the Making of Modern African States', *African Economic History*, 23, 1995, 1–36 and in *Political Topographies of the African State. Territorial Authority and Institutional Choice*, Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 2003. A comprehensive analysis from a Sanwi perspective is attempted by Lazare Koffi Koffi, *La France contre la Côte d'Ivoire. Aux origines, la guerre contre le Sanwi (1843–1940)*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2011; Lazare Koffi Koffi, *La France*

Indeed, they upheld the late nineteenth century colonial frontier as a fundamental historical achievement of their ancestors, and this is only apparently paradoxical if we consider that the role played by the ruling group of Sanwi in the demarcation of the Anglo-French colonial boundary was as much crucial as the one played by the Nzema ruling group.

The history of Sanwi in the twentieth century is closely linked to that of Aowin and Nzema. The mass crossing of the international border by the Sanwi elite and population, taking refuge with Ghanaian neighbours and relatives, has repeatedly characterized moments of crisis in the history of the region. After the colonial partition, Sanwi repeatedly played the pro-British card against the now overwhelming power of the French. The most effective move in this sense occurred in 1916–20, leading to the temporary exodus to Aowin and Nzema of most of the chiefs and over 50% of the population.<sup>9</sup> Other, smaller-scale, exoduses marked the secessionist crisis from 1958 to 1970.

When the politics of chieftaincy are considered, trans-border liaisons endured throughout the twentieth century – colonial and post-colonial. Suffice it to mention that currently a good many members of the royal matrilineage of Beyin – one of the two main Nzema Stools of Ghana – are Ivorian and reside in the Côte d'Ivoire. Conversely, the Ghanaian Nzema Stools played – and play – a crucial role in the ethnic politics of Ivorian Nzema communities. In 2006, for instance, the Nzema of Grand Bassam provided themselves with a paramount ethnic ruler by, in short, 'creating' a 'traditional' authority. The institution procedures and the choice of how to define the hereditary access to the office (i.e. to which matrilineage or matrilineages it was to be entrusted) benefited from the assistance and advice of the Paramount Chief of Beyin and

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*contre la Côte d'Ivoire. L'affaire du Sanwi. Du malentendu politico-juridique à la tentative de sécession*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2013.

9 In 1916 over 50% of Sanwi population crossed the Gold Coast Border to Aowin and Nzema, in a massive rejection of the puppet-king imposed by the French and conscription for the First World War. By 1920 most of them were back, but several refused to repatriate. In 1921 the French *commandant de cercle* still questioned the loyalty of the general population to France, complaining about 'the spirit of independence of the indigenes' who understood English, kept up strong ties with their neighbours of the western God Coast, preferred the Shilling to the Franc and opposed Gold Coast regulation in terms of land-holding and chiefly powers to the more intrusive French colonial legislation. Archives Nationale de Côte d'Ivoire (ANCI), Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 1EE (Affaires politiques) 24/1/4, X-27-14, Cercle d'Assinie, Rapport annuel 1921.

of the other Nzema paramount rulers in Ghana, gathered in a permanent coordination session called Nzema Maanle,<sup>10</sup> a sort of ethnic lobby of traditional leaders.

The deep relationship between the two halves of Nzema also affected 'high', state, politics. In Felix Houphouët-Boigny's Côte d'Ivoire a consensus was constructed by observing delicate but precise rules of equilibrium in the governing bodies between the representatives of different communities. The Nzema community, numerically small but geographically close to Abidjan and the heart of the state and its institutions, and, not incidentally, enjoying a relatively high level of education, was invariably present in the upper ranks. Interestingly, the core group of Nzema power-brokers in the Côte d'Ivoire revolved around an influential matrilineage, the Mafolɛ, whose center is in Beyin, Ghana, but which control several Stools in Côte d'Ivoire. The Mafolɛ of Beyin are among the main supporters of the Paramount Stool, and several exponents of the past and present Ghanaian Nzema elite have come from their ranks, including the late Lee Ocran, a well-known veteran of national politics, a member of the government in the years of J.J. Rawlings, head of the Mafolɛ family and an underchief of Beyin. What is of interest here is that, at the time of the formation of the first post-Houphouët government, in 1994, chaired by Konan Bediè, the Mafolɛ were expressly asked to choose one of their members for the group, even if, in the event, they decided to pass on the offer for lack of eligible members in their ranks. It was the Mafolɛ matrilineage as such that was consulted and it was its largely Ghanaian top exponents who made the decision.<sup>11</sup>

But at the same time, the Ivorianness of the westernmost Nzema communities is an incontrovertible and macroscopic fact, their profound identification with the history of the country being attested by the numerous national figures hailing from this group. To name but a few: Gabriel Dadié, his son Bernard, and Jean-Baptiste Mockey. Gabriel Dadié, the first Ivorian to obtain French citizenship, was a planter and the main founding father, in 1944, of the Syndicat agricole africain (SAA), cradle of nascent anti-colonial nationalism; Bernard Dadié, a renowned playwright, was a leading activist of the anti-colonial movement, and a politician of independence; the famous politician Jean-Baptiste Mockey,

10 The Nzema term *maanle* in this context can be translated as 'world', country, state. The term – corresponding to the Twi *ɔman* – loosely conceptualizes a community as an organic and historically grounded whole of human society, politics and territory and is applied equally to every non-elementary community level, regardless of its relative hierarchical position. In purely political terms, *maanle* can also be translated as 'the people', i.e. the whole of the community as opposed to the holders of power.

11 The information on the 1994 affair was given to the author by Hon. Lee Ocran, then Minister of State, during a conversation in Beyin, on 3 November 1996.

a very early militant and the head of the radical wing of the Parti démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire, was several times minister and, finally, an opponent of Houphouët-Boigny. And what about the distinctly Nzema component of Ghana's national life? Kwame Nkrumah, the father of the country and first leader of independence, was only the most famous member of a community that throughout the first half of the twentieth century fully and actively participated in the political, cultural and economic life of Gold Coast/Ghana. Cases in point would be the Paramount chiefs of Beyin, Annor Adjaye I and II, who combined the leadership of their specific part of the country with their activities in country-wide colonial institutional settings. All this to say that any expression of today's Nzema identity cannot ignore a reference to figures and contexts that are central to the very genesis of the two States that today include the Nzema land. At present and on the basis of the history of the last century, a Nzema identity is no conceivable as disjointed from a concurrent Ghanaian or Ivorian identity.

Many political analysts would be ready to point to such case as obvious evidence of the institutional weakness of the African nation-state – a weakness compounded by the undefined nature of a frontier which was established without regard for the human and historical frameworks of the region concerned. I would object that exactly the opposite is true: that frontier is so deeply embedded into the long-term history of the region to the extent of becoming the tangible pivot of all its internal relational dynamics.

### 3 Main Actors and Bit Players

In conventional historical reconstruction, the creation of the Gold Coast/Côte d'Ivoire boundary takes the form of a linear process, mirroring the progress of European powers in the interior of West Africa and the more general logic informing the 'Scramble'.<sup>12</sup> The process is invariably presented as having been set in motion by European powers (be they competing or colluding among themselves) as a function of their positions and interests in the region. Holding all the cards, they are the primary actors throughout the story, and lead it to its foreseeable conclusions. Africans, however, were not secondary actors and cannot be dismissed as bit players in a plot which they did not themselves conceive.

The colonial delimitation has its precedents in an agreement concluded in 1869 between the French and the Dutch, establishing a coastal boundary

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12 For a brief reconstruction of the delimitation process see William W. Claridge, *A History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti*, 2 vols., London, Frank Cass & Co., 1964 [1915], vol. 2, 159, 283, 328, 431.

between their respective spheres of influence in correspondence with the town of Avolenu or Newtown (the current Ghanaian border-town).<sup>13</sup> For those who are not familiar with the history of this area, the Netherlands held the European forts in the Western Gold Coast for a brief period (1868–1872), after an exchange with the British and before finally selling all their possessions in the Gold Coast to the UK in 1872.<sup>14</sup>

Newtown is located on the long strip of coastland separating the Dwenye Lagoon, formed by the River Tano, from the Atlantic Ocean. More precisely, the town is built on a very narrow strip of littoral squeezed between the Ocean and a small sheet of water, the Belinbangara lagoon, laying a short distance south of the Dwenye's shore, and unconnected with the main body of water. In 1877 two British officers – Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Tyrrell, Colonial Engineer and Capt. Alexander Grant, District Commissioner of Axim – cut a few hundred yards long road at the western outskirts of Newtown connecting the ferry dock on the Belinbangara Lagoon with the Ocean shore. This road was adopted in local convention as marking the border between the British and the French territories.<sup>15</sup>

Already in 1880, however, the British wanted to push the boundary about 6 miles further west, based on a demarcation point established fifty years earlier by the Nzema *belemgbunli* (ruler, king) Nyanzu Aka I (reigned c. 1816/17–1832) as the divide between Nzema and Sanwi.

Indeed this claim made a great difference for the British. The version of the Boundary at Newtown, supported by the French, indicated the course of the Tano River as separating their territory from the Gold Coast, while the British version implied a claim to a large chunk of the forest region to the west of the river bank and to the north of the Lagoons as part of their Colony. The issue at stake was of some substance: the area in question included the gold-rich district of Dissou, which was regarded as very promising for mining projects.

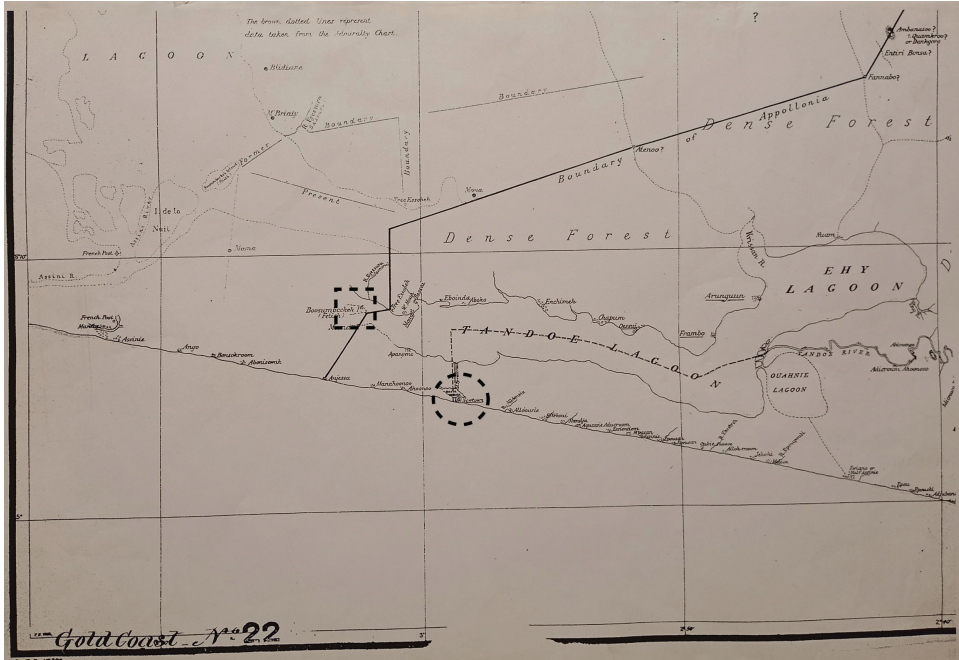
In 1882 a mixed Anglo-French Commission was appointed to settle the issue, but it separated in January 1884, after failing to reach an agreement.

But the respective positions of the English and French in this dispute overlapped and coincided with those of other local actors, establishing a direct continuity with the hegemonic disputes that had been taking place in the region for at least a couple of centuries, well before the Europeans came to the forefront of local politics.

13 The Franco-Dutch Agreement of 1869 is mentioned in Louis Sicking, *Colonial Borderlands: France and the Netherlands in the Atlantic in the 19th Century*, Leiden and Boston, MA, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2008, 87–88.

14 Douglas Coombs, *The Gold Coast, Britain and the Netherlands, 1850–1874*, London, Ibadan, and Accra, Oxford University Press, 1963; Sicking, *Colonial Borderlands*, 71–105.

15 The National Archives (TNA), Kew, United Kingdom, CO 879/19/10, n. 142, Report of the British Commissioners in re Assinee Boundary, Aburi, 2 April 1884, par. 5.



MAP 3.2 The 1882–1884 Assinie Border Commission  
 Legend: dashed circle = Newtown; dashed square = Assouho or Assongu Island. From the original source: continuous line = ‘The Western Boundary of Appollonia considered by the English Commissioners to be the Western Boundary of the Gold Coast Colony’; dashed line = ‘Claimed by the French Commissioners to be the Eastern Boundary of the French Protectorate’  
 SOURCE: TNA, CO 700/GC 22, MAP SHOWING THE TOWNS AND VILLAGES VISITED BY THE ASSINIE BOUNDARY COMMISSION IN DECEMBER 1883 & JANUARY 1884. ALSO THE COUNTRY TO THE NORTHWARD AFTERWARDS VISITED BY LIEUT. PULLEN [DETAIL], EDITED BY ETTORE MORELLI

The French position supported Sanwi’s assertion of its exclusive control over the gold fields of Dissou, the forest stretches up to the river Tano, and especially the northern shore of the Dwénye Lagoon, where the first industrial agriculture of coffee, cocoa and cashew in Côte d’Ivoire began to develop in 1881 on the initiative of Arthur Verdier. The year before Verdier had obtained *blemgbi* Amun Ndufu II of Sanwi the exclusive right to exploit the forest area for the Elima plantation.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, the English position reflected similar

16 After the evacuation of the French contingent in Côte d’Ivoire in 1870, following the defeat of Napoleon III in the War against Prussia, Arthur Verdier remained at Assini as resident and ‘guardian of the French flag’ until 1885. Verdier entrusted the management of Elima to his nephew Amédée Bretignere, who was joined in 1882 by Marcel Treich-Laplène,

Nzema ambitions on the lagoon and the claims made by Aowin on Dissou and the gold district. In the case of the Nzema, the claims had been accompanied in the past by attempts at military occupation and by a substantial migration of Nzema communities, which by the 1880s had become the dominant demographic group on the shores of the eastern lagoon system, preparing to expand into the forest area.

What in terms of international relations was a minor colonial border issue became a protracted territorial conflict between Sanwi and Nzema, which witnessed violent outbreaks, the mediating intervention of Aowin – which in turn made its own territorial and jurisdictional demands – expulsions of communities and occupations of territory by formal reference to one of the two European flags, but actually in a context of poor knowledge and ability to control on the part of the local representatives of London and Paris.<sup>17</sup>

Negotiations for the delimitation of the frontier were resumed in 1888, leading to the Agreement signed in Paris on 10 August 1889. The boundary agreed upon was traced starting from a point immediately to the west of Newtown; it reached the midst of the Dwenye Lagoon and turned east cutting the Lagoon in the middle through its length, leaving the south bank to the British and the north bank to the French; then it followed the course of the Tano up to the town of Nugua (or Nougoua). According to this diplomatic instrument, demarcation further north was to be agreed upon by commissioners on the bases of treaties concluded with local polities.

As far as the section of the boundary actually demarcated in 1889 is concerned, the Agreement marked a de facto the prevalence of the French version, while the British renounced their claims to the lands west of the Tano. However, the progress of their influence in the interior, especially with the inclusion of Sefwi in the Protectorate (1886), had by that time led to a substantial re-definition of British strategic priorities on the western frontier. While

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a well-known figure of 'explorer'. For three classic readings on this phase in the history French presence in Côte d'Ivoire see Henry Mouëzy, *Assinie et le royaume de Krinjabo: histoire et coutumes*, Paris, Larose, 1958; Paul Atger, *La France en Côte d'Ivoire de 1843 à 1893*, Dakar, Université de Dakar, 1962; Bernard Schnapper, *La politique et le commerce français dans le Golfe de Guinée de 1838 à 1871*, Paris, Mouton, 1961.

17 Details on the border conflict are scattered throughout the documentary materials in TNA, CO 879/19/10, n. 142, 1884 Assinee Boundary Commission, Palavers; CO 879/37/3 Africa (West), n. 435, 1894 Further Correspondence respecting the Assinee Boundary, Gaman and Neighboring Territories; CO 879/25/6, 1886. On the events of the delimitation see also Captain Louis Gustave Binger, *Du Niger au Golfe du Guinée par le pays de Kong et le Mossi*, 2 vols., Paris, Hachette, 1892; Maurice Delafosse, *Les frontières de la Côte d'Or et du Sudan*, Paris, Masson et C.ie Éditeurs, 1908.

leaving to the French the contested areas west of the Tano, the British Gold Coast secured its claims over Aowin and, much more importantly, obtained from the French an explicit recognition that Asante was part of the British sphere of influence.

The boundary delimitation process on the Western frontier went on throughout the following decade, accompanying the progression of Britain and France in the interior. In July 1893 a new Anglo-French agreement defined the boundary as far north as the 9th parallel. Finally, after the British invasion of Asante in 1896 and their acquisition of the Northern Territories, it reached the 11th parallel, which was adopted as the reference for negotiating the northern boundary of the British Gold Coast with the West African domains of the French, who had by that time occupied the upper section of the Volta river basin (present-day Burkina Faso). The settlement of this frontier was formalized in the Anglo-French convention of 14 June 1898.<sup>18</sup> However, the British full occupation of Asante was not finalized until 1901, with the defeat of Yaa Asantewaa's insurgency. This process concluded, the delimitation and demarcation of the route, decreed by agreements in 1901 and 1902, took place in February–April 1903 and were validated through an agreement in 1905. Two verification missions in 1922 and 1926 re-established and increased the boundary stones.<sup>19</sup>

While in the border events of 1880–84 the competition between Europeans still in many ways depended on the logic of competition between the African powers and interests closest to the Atlantic coast, in 1889 – during the sudden and full manifestation of the Scramble at the continental level – the reasons and strategies of European actors clearly acquired their own substantial autonomy through the expansion of the chessboard of confrontation. Nonetheless, the success of the agreement remained linked to achieving a realistic compromise between the opposing demands of local African parties.

As for the southernmost section of the border, the disputed areas remained in French territory, but the Nzema people of the lagoons gained recognition and approval of their presence on the lands they occupied and their individuality as a community, despite being included in Sanwi. These communities came to play a crucial role in managing cross-border relations (including smuggling)

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18 Claridge, *A History*, vol. 2, 430–431.

19 Stary, 'Un no man's land', 4. See also Albert van Dantzig, 'The Demarcation of the Southern Section of the Border Between the Gold Coast and Ivory Coast', in Various authors, *Les populations communes de la Côte-d'Ivoire et du Ghana. Colloque interuniversitaire Ghana-Côte-d'Ivoire, Bondoukou, Abidjan and Accra, Universités d'Abidjan et de Legon, 1974*, 629–646.

and maintained a substantial network of links with the socio-political structure of the portion of Nzema under British control.

The delimitation and demarcation of the border was a fairly slow process, with various land issues and negotiations between the two European powers, but with the decisive contribution of the Africans, in a context of latent tension and, at times, open conflict between political entities and local communities, in some instances more or less secretly manipulated by Europeans, in others eminently endogenous.

More than any other consideration, it was the same set of facts that we have summarized that shows the importance of local African action in giving rise to, and then managing, a significant phase of the process of partitioning this part of West Africa. The Sanwi and Nzema ruling groups exploited and indeed were to some extent successful in directing the rivalry between British and French interests in order that it might serve their own long rooted strategies.

This surfaces very clearly in the analysis of the verbal proceedings of the Anglo-French joint commissions for the delimitation of the border.<sup>20</sup> The demarcation proceedings involved substantial collections of local historical traditions by official representatives of the two colonial powers. Rulers, notables, communities, factions within communities, etc. told their own versions of who they were, where they came from, who they served or refused to serve, what their rights were or what their claims were on the land they had settled. A limited group of individuals, with different degrees of power, wealth and influence gave public voice to these claims, and their statements were recorded. This established the relevant parameters for later enquiries and historical research. No doubt, this type of African agency interacted with the vested interests and strategies of the European powers, contributing greatly to the consolidation of a new status quo, whose most visible legacy was the colonial border when it was finally agreed upon.

The corpus of narratives created by the demarcation of the border came to constitute a fundamental text for a new status quo, and it profoundly re-shaped the region. This text also powerfully influenced successive formulations of local history – both oral and written – and twentieth-century academic research in and on the area.

In short, African actions interacted in the background with the interests and strategies of Europeans and contributed in a fundamental way to formulating the new territorial and political status quo of the region in the colonial era, whose most evident product was the borderline ultimately agreed upon. It might

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20 Especially the documents in TNA, CO 879/19/10 and 879/37/3.

be excessive to conclude that local actors played a dominant role in defining the border, but it is undeniable that the border adapted to stringent logics of geography, relationships between communities, traffic, conflicting interests, choices of alliance and political subordination that were in large part locally rooted. Conversely, local actors promptly appropriated the new reality of this international border,<sup>21</sup> which in the end they wanted as a useful compromise solution, and deeply internalized it in relation to fundamental aspects of their own life.

#### 4 A Long History of Bordering

The new border responded to a need strongly felt and shared by local society. To fully understand this datum we need however to shift the focus from the relations between late nineteenth century competing European Colonial powers to the specific long-term historical dynamics of this West African region. In this perspective, the definition of the Anglo/French frontier emerges as the final act in a process that had begun at least a couple of centuries earlier and whose main actors were local African powers.

The regions through which the central-southern section of the Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire border runs are historically characterized by their being open to and projected towards one of the great 'frontiers' of this part of Africa. Here the term 'frontier' must be understood not in its most common sense of border line, but rather with reference to the notion of 'internal' frontier developed by I. Kopytoff: that is to say, an 'interstitial' space existing between coherent and organized societies or political realities; in this reading, the frontier is a liminal and transitional space, of the most varied dimensions and little or not at all structured demographically and politically.<sup>22</sup>

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21 Paul Nugent outlines an interesting comparison between two border areas: one between Ghana and Togo, the other between Senegal and Gambia, highlighting how the dynamics of the border were shaped by the border populations as much as by the states concerned. The very perception of the State was conditioned by the appropriation and reinterpretation on the territory, both by local communities and by the institutions of state power, which, in specific contexts, often exhibited a perception of its own sovereignty and, from its derived implications, less rigid and all-encompassing, different from that officially asserted and more open to margins of negotiation. See Paul Nugent, 'Border Anomalies: The Role of Local Actors in Shaping Spaces Along the Senegal-Gambia and Ghana-Togo Borders', in Alice Bellagamba and Georg Klute, eds., *Beside the State: Emergent Powers in Contemporary Africa*, Cologne, Koeppe Verlag, 2008, 121–138.

22 Igor Kopytoff, ed., *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1987. The category of 'internal frontier' that Kopytoff applies to the African framework has a long intellectual genealogy, which

The space in question covered the forest areas of the Comoé and Bandama rivers basins, i.e. the eastern half of today's Côte d'Ivoire. According to Ray Kea, throughout the seventeenth century, these areas formed a 'Frontier' region on the western fringes of an expanding 'Akan world'.<sup>23</sup> This region was characterized in past centuries by 'low density' regimes, in demographic and economic-productive terms, but also in institutional ones, with a more dispersed – and to some extent less structured – political geography<sup>24</sup> in comparison with central-southern Ghana, i. e. the cradle of the Akan world.

A crucial space of connection and transition between the Akan 'epicentre' and its western 'Frontier' periphery included the communities solidly structured around the courses of the Tano and Bia rivers and their coastal lagoon system. This role as a 'gate' to the West strongly determined the character of the region as a meeting or exchange place, or – conversely – as an arena of conflict between different worlds. These characteristics have endured throughout later historical phases, including the colonial period, and still have fundamental implications in the present.

The different communities which dwelled in this region were organized in several micro-polities with a distinct territorial characterization. Competition and conflict between, and within, these units were constant. At the same time, they were strictly interconnected by links of affinity and allegiance among their ruling groups. The peculiarity of the environment underpinned a system of functional interdependence which linked different groups and communities within each polity and across the entire area, but also well beyond it. Communities of farmers, salt-makers and fishermen complemented one another, and the role played by fresh water fishing communities in enabling connections and providing transportation through their fleets of canoes was crucial for the conduct of trade all over a very wide riverine and lagoon region.<sup>25</sup>

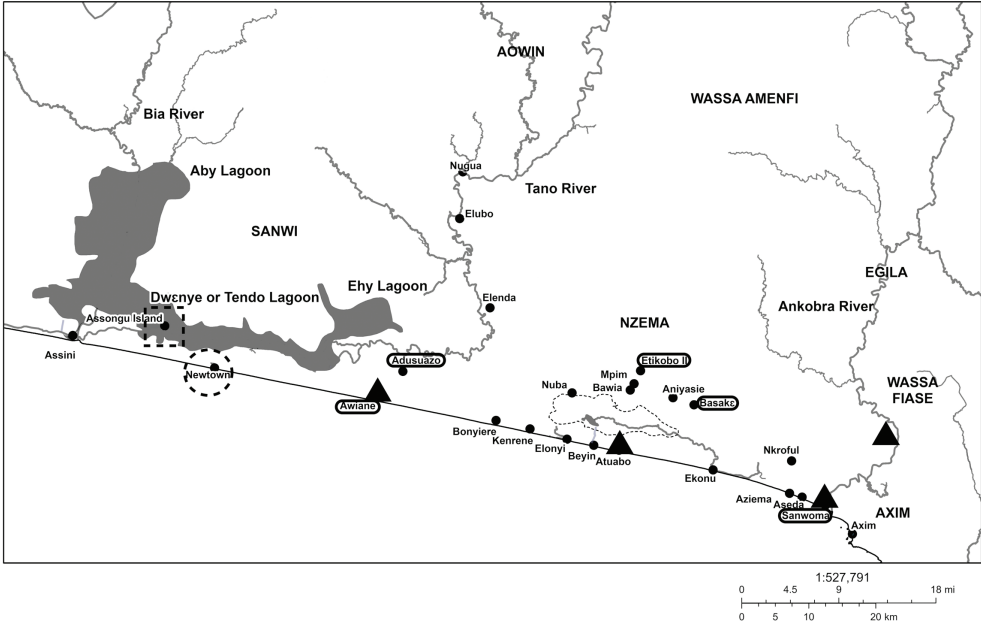
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connects it to the conceptualization of the F.J. Turner's Great American Frontier, by way of the idea of J.R.V. Prescott's 'Frontiers of Separation', territories that divide different political entities without falling under the jurisdiction of any. See F.J. Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, in R.A. Billington, ed., *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1961, 28–36; J.R.V. Prescott, *Boundaries and Frontiers*, London, Croom Helm, 1978. See also the Introduction in the present volume.

23 Ray A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics in the Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast*, Baltimore and London, MD, Johns Hopkins, 1982, 79.

24 Claude-Hélène Perrot, *Les Anyi-Ndényé et le pouvoir aux 18e et 19e siècles*, Abidjan and Paris, Ceda and Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982; Fabio Viti, *Il potere debole. Antropologia politica dell'Aitu n'vle (Baule, Costa d'Avorio)*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 1998.

25 Pierluigi Valsecchi, *Power and State Formation in West Africa: Appollonia From the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 49–51; Claude-Hélène



MAP 3.3 Nzema or Appolonia and neighbouring areas  
 legend: triangles = armory / powder warehouse; circled names = frontline defences; dashed circle = Newtown; dashed square = Assoho or Assongu Island; names in majuscules = pre-colonial states; dashed perimeter = Amanzule wetlands and Lake  
 SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE FROM DATA PROVIDED BY PIERLUIGI VALSECCHI

In this context, a fundamental development was the consolidation of relatively sizeable territorial powers which imposed their sway over the pre-existing layer of micro-polities from the early decades of the Eighteenth century. These ‘micro-imperial’ newcomers were the ancestors of the complex made up of present day Nzema, Sefwi, Aowin and Anyi polities. Around 1724–1725, the Anyi polity of Sanwi – an offshoot of Aowin – swept a number of communities and micro-polities in the valleys of Tano and Bia rivers and lagoons, establishing its hold over the access to the Atlantic coast in the area of Assini. Here, during the previous century, a group called Esuma, who had moved from another Assini, located on the coast just over 20 miles further east (and called by the Esuma

Perrot, *Les Éotilé de Côte d'Ivoire aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles. Pouvoir lignager et religion*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2008.

'Great Assini'<sup>26</sup>), had set itself up as a polity of a certain standing at the oceanic outlet of the lagoon system, becoming in the late seventeenth century an important reference point for French interests in the Gulf of Guinea, until the creation of an ephemeral and ill-fated French commercial base between 1700 and 1703.<sup>27</sup> During its expansion, Sanwi entered into fierce competition with the polity which was then forming in the Nzema area, to the south-east, for control over the trade routes connecting the coast to the interior.

The Nzema polity – known to the Europeans as Appolonia – centred in the area between the Ankobra river and the small chain of hills known as Cape Appolonia, expanded westwards, incorporating the area called Adwɔmɔɔ, an entity of some importance during the seventeenth century, which overlooks the lower course of the Tano and the lagoons. The process of subjugation saw the migration westward of part of the population, which in some cases joined the Ewuturo communities of the lagoons. Those who accepted the rule of the new lords came to occupy an important intermediate position in the new Nzema power structure, ensuring the defence of the western flank of the polity, whose royal headquarters were in Beyin and Atuabo. The mouth of the small Eloni river, crossed by a system of palisades, marked the limit between the land directly controlled by the Nzema's *belemgbunli* (ruler) and the one managed by his 'autochthonous' subordinate allies, the so-called Azanwule – today the name connotes one of the great Nzema and Anyi matrifamilies.<sup>28</sup> On the coast, the expansion of the new Nzema polity also included some active coastal market towns, organized as small autonomous polities: in particular Edobo and Awiane. The second was the ancestor settlement of today's town of the same name, which became known in the second half of the nineteenth century as Half Assini. In this era, and throughout much of the nineteenth century, Awiane was in particular controlled by other 'autochthonous' allies of the Nzema polity, namely the Alɔnwɔba matrifamily.<sup>29</sup>

26 The name Assini, attributed by the Esuma to the new headquarters, was the same as the coastal area of origin, which remained in the toponymy and historical memory of the extreme western coastal stretch of Ghana, near today's settlement of Nzimitianu, Jomoro Municipal Assembly.

27 There is a substantial literature on the relationship between Assini and the French. I limit myself to indicating Paul Roussier's fundamental collection, Paul Roussier, *L'Établissement d'Issigny, 1687–1702. Voyages de Ducasse, Tibierge et d'Amon à la Côte de Guinée. Publiés pour la première fois et suivis de la Relation du voyage du royaume d'Issiny du P. Godefroy Loyer*, Paris, Larose, 1935.

28 Valsecchi, *Power*, 170–171; Perrot, *Les Éotilé*, 76.

29 Pierluigi Valsecchi, *I signori di Appolonia. Poteri e formazione dello Stato in Africa occidentale fra XVI e XVIII secolo*, Rome, Carocci, 2002, 170; Pierluigi Valsecchi, 'The "True Nzema":

The name Awiane – which occurs in seventeenth-century documents in various variants: *Albane*, *Besné*, *Abini*, *Abane*, *Asbini* and others – is locally associated with the term *eweene*, which expresses the concepts of boundary and frontier in the Nzema language. Tradition also attributes another name to Awiane, but more generally to this western section of the coast: *Awielee*,<sup>30</sup> from *ewiele*, the end, the finish. It is a noun form of the verb *wie*, to end, conclude.<sup>31</sup> But beyond any consideration regarding the reliability of these etymological reconstructions in association with the place name, the objective historical fact is that Awiane is located immediately east of that ancient Assini – ‘Great Assini’ – from which the Esuma migrated westward to found modern Assini, subsequently conquered by Sanwi. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the perception of this stretch of coastline and its immediate hinterland as both *limes* and *limen* was evident. *Limes* as a visible western term and outpost of the communities and politics that affected the region between the Ankobra river and the Tano river; *limen* as a threshold to the imposing lagoon, island and forest system of the lower Tano valley, and a privileged corridor of a centuries-old dynamic of immigration from the East.

Communities in the extensive borderland were constantly the target of pressures to align themselves with one or other of the power centres, along with attempts to secure influence or control over prestigious local shrines, which were also important territorial landmarks.<sup>32</sup> The entire system of water bodies created by the Tano river – Dwenye Lagoon (Dwen or Juen or Tando on

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A Layered Identity’, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 71, 3, 2001, 391–425, 407.

30 For these Nzema terms cfr. P.A. Kwesi Aboagye, *Nzema nee Nrelenza Edwebohile/Nzema English, English Nzema Dictionary*, Accra, Bureau of Ghana Languages, 1992. For an historical and geographical discussion of the place name see René Baesjou, ‘The Historical Evidence in Old Maps and Charts of Africa With Special Reference to West Africa’, *History in Africa*, 15, 1988, 9–16.

31 Some ancient graphic variants such as *Abini*, *Abany*, *Abane* etc. could also suggest a derivation from *abane*: fence, wall, however associated with the idea of term, barrier, boundary.

32 Around April of 1764, a large joint force from Aowin and Wassa, which was also reinforced by men from the settlements along the Tano River, crossed the river and struck the forest communities subject to the Nzema ruler Amihyia Kpanyinli, as well as the Ewuture who had fled the lagoons and settled along the coast. The invaders destroyed the crops and captured 300 women and children. The effects of the attack were so devastating as to cause a serious famine. This was retaliation for a raid Amihyia had led some time before against the area of Ngatakro, on the Tano River. During this raid, Amihyia had been responsible for killing the chief custodian of the Tano *bozonle* (now in Nougoua) which was particularly revered by the Aowin peoples. This place was also an important meeting place for merchants from Wassa and Asante. Furley Collection (FC), Balme Library, Legon, Ghana,

maps) and Ehy Lagoon – and the Bia river – Aby Lagoon – constituted (and constitutes) a concentration of sacral force of extreme intensity. The approach to these waters, for production or simply communication, was meticulously regulated by interdicts of various types. A small island known as Assoho or Assongu is located in the centre of this vast extension of waters, at the very point that marks the transition between the lagoon system of the Tano river and that of the Bia river. The island is the abode of Assoho or Assongu, a trans-human entity (*bozonle*), who exercises a recognized primacy over local bodies of water. Assoho's custodians and servants were – and still are – the people of M'brati, an Ewutire fishing community settled on the northern bank of the lagoon, just in front of the island.<sup>33</sup>

The need to define some form of delimitation between the spheres of domination or influence of the two polities was quite evident even before mid-century, when Sanwi attempted to take control of the lagoon Ewutire communities. These were supported in their struggle by Nzema, where they took refuge en masse, leaving the lagoon areas unguarded. Later, the Sanwi rulers reached an agreement with the Nzema rulers, and a part of the refugees returned, but the situation thus created was actually a sort of temporary 'neutralization' of the bodies of water and their shores, continually threatened by the attempts of the two powers to gain stable access to the resources of the area: natural ones (fishing and gold deposits) and strategic ones (the lagoons and rivers were crucial communication arteries).<sup>34</sup>

During the 1760s, Sanwi allied itself with the Dutch, who tried to strangle the political and commercial autonomy of Nzema, which however managed to launch a series of offensives and, in 1765, struck an alliance with the British.<sup>35</sup> The pact was sanctioned by a written agreement in which the two brothers and co-rulers of the area, Amihyia Kpanyinli and Boa Kpanyinli, provided a geographic definition of the territory over which they claimed dominion: extending along the Atlantic littoral westward from River Ankobra's mouth, to a point located about thirteen miles west of the chain of coastal hills known

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n. 106 (C), Dutch Letters from the Gold Coast, 1760–1764, 'Report by J. Prehuysen, 15 May 1764'.

33 The island is still nowadays a main shrine of the Ewutire people of Côte d'Ivoire and a pillar of their identity as a group.

34 Valsecchi, *Power*, 182–183; Valsecchi, *I signori di Appolonia*, 278–279; Henriette Diabaté, 'Le Sannvin. Un royaume akan de la Côte d'Ivoire (1701–1901), sources orales et histoire, 6 vols., Phd Thesis, Université de Paris I Sorbonne, 1984, vol. 1, 521–529.

35 Valsecchi, *I signori di Appolonia*, 261–301.

as Cape Appolonia, and a distance between fourteen to sixteen miles inland.<sup>36</sup> Whether the distance was expressed in nautical miles or land miles, the western border was located in the area where modern Awiane/Half Assini stands.<sup>37</sup>

The conflict between Sanwi and Nzema erupted recurrently in the following decades. Since the 1780s the Asante kingdom expanded its presence in the region and by the beginning of the nineteenth century both polities were subject to some form of effective control by Kumasi, the Asante metropolis, through a network of resident officers (mainly tribute collectors).<sup>38</sup> However Nzema/Sanwi relations continued to be marked by chronic conflict, with periodic outbursts of actual warfare, up to the long campaign led by the Nzema ruler Ezoa Kpanyinli (reigned 1800–1805) in 1802–1804, which ended with a negotiation between the parties and a later attack in 1807 by his brother and successor, Ezoa Kyi (reigned 1805–1817/18).<sup>39</sup>

We have clear evidence of what, in 1815, both the Nzema rulers and the English considered ‘the Frontier Croom [town or village] dividing Assinee from Appolonia’. To be precise, the settlement belonged to ‘a Man named Cudjoe Hoblaky’ and was located 10 hours’ walk west of Beyin, where the English post stood.<sup>40</sup> The character in question is Kodwo Hɔba Kyi, leader of the Alɔnwɔba matrilineage that had settled in the area of modern Awiane or Half Assini.<sup>41</sup>

36 TNA, CO 388/54. ‘Copy of a Cession of Cape Appolonia to the British Nation, Appolonia 25th Dec. 1765, 5th of George III’s Reign’. The agreement was signed by Boa, Amihyia, and other 44 ‘Principal People’, whose names are unfortunately not shown on the only known copy.

37 As late as 1848, Brodie Cruickshank was still indicating Awiane as the western boundary of Nzema. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland, MS 20324. Brodie Cruickshank, ‘Letters from the Gold Coast and Slave Coast with an Account of a Mission to the King of Dahomey, 1849’, Unpublished manuscript, Letter Atuambo 9 May 1848.

38 For discussions on the basis of available studies and sources see Pierluigi Valsecchi, ‘Lo Nzema fra egemonia asante ed espansione europea nella prima metà del XIX secolo’, *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell’Istituto Italiano per L’Africa e l’Oriente*, 41, 4, 1986, 507–544; Pierluigi Valsecchi, ‘Il Sanwi e l’impero asante: dati e ipotesi per una storia delle relazioni politiche’, *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell’Istituto Italiano per L’Africa e l’Oriente*, 44, 2, 1989, 175–210.

39 See TNA, T70/1004, Appolonia Day Book, Christopher Deey, 1 October–31 December 1802; 1 January–31 December 1803; 1 January–31 December 1804; Valsecchi, *Power*, 182–183.

40 TNA, T70/1599, D. Bayley to Governor Council, Appolonia Fort, 19 September 1815. Much of the cargo saved from the shipwreck had been recovered by the people of Assini and the Ewuture settlements on the lagoon. Nyanzu Aka arrived at the scene of the shipwreck only 24 hours later and had the remainder collected and transported to his residence in the area.

41 Shortly afterwards Hɔba Kyi clashed with Nyanzu Aka I, the Nzema ruler, and abandoned the area with his men, actively siding with the ruler of Sanwi, Atɔkpala, against his previous lord and attacking and burning Awiane. Years later, one of his successors, Kyena

In the testimony of 1815, the definition of Hɔba Kyi's *croom* as 'border' is something more than a generic indication. The context in which the information is provided is a dispute around the legitimacy or otherwise of Nyanzu Aka's appropriation of the assets recovered from the shipwreck of the merchant vessel *African Triumph*, which belonged to A.C. Hutton. At that time, Nyanzu Aka was the designated heir of the Nzema ruler Ezoa Kyi. According to custom, the goods stranded beyond the borders of the country were 'lawful prey', and the Nzema leaders claimed that the stranding had occurred about 16 miles west of Bonyere, well beyond the border. On their part, Hutton and the English denounced the act as illegal, claiming that the accident that had caused the shipwreck had taken place in front of the residence of Hɔba Kyi, i.e. right on the border, and only after the wreck had been dragged ashore and plundered by Nyanzu Aka's men, who had prevented the crew from making the recovery.<sup>42</sup>

Around 1830, during another phase of war between Nzema and Sanwi,<sup>43</sup> *belemgbunli* Nyanzu Aka I of Nzema landed on the lagoon island of Assoho or Assongu. According to oral histories and direct witnesses, the landing by Nyanzu Aka's forces was seen as a profanation, and preoccupying oracular responses urged the king to present a man and a woman to his enemy, the ruler of Sanwi, Atɔkpola in order to give the two to the people of M'brati as ritual offerings to the *bozonle*. Nyanzu Aka then had to withdraw the boundary of the occupied area, moving it from the stream Eyessuru, a very short distance to the east of M'brati, to a point further east, marked by the presence of a great *ezɔbe* tree (azobé or red ironwood, s.n. *lophira alata*), in the midst of a dense forest area stretching just east of the island of Assoho.<sup>44</sup> The new demarcation point on the mainland brought the extreme Nzema front very clearly into the area of the Dwenye Lagoon and at a certain distance from the southern Aby

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Koame, made peace with the next Nzema ruler, Kaku Aka and broke with Sanwi, bringing the exiles back to Awiane. Public Records and Archives Administration Department of Ghana (PRAAD), Administration (ADM), Accra, Ghana, ADM 11/1/1699, F. Crowther, Commission of Enquiry into the Constitution of Apolonia, Notes of evidence, Nta Aka, Amo Soma, Honjah Kobbina, Beyin 14 March 1914.

42 TNA, T70/1599, D. Bayley to Governor Council, Appolonia Fort, 19 September 1815.

43 Around February 1830 the longstanding rivalry and hostility between Nyanzu Aka of Nzema and Atɔkpala of Sanwi developed into full fledged war. Algemeen Rijks Archief (ARA), National Archief (NL-HaNA), The Hague, The Netherlands, Kust van Guinea (Nederlandse Bezittingen op de Kust van Guinea), 1.05.14, inv.nr. 358, Journal, Elmina (Last), entry for 14 February 1830 [scan 0181]. See also J.Y. Ackah, 'Kaku Ackah and the Split of Nzema', MA Thesis, University of Ghana, Legon, 1965, 80.

44 TNA CO 879/19/10, Chapum, 28 December 1883, 7.30 a.m.: Quabina Essan of Adikroom [Adusuazo]; Palaver at Nuam, 11 December, 2 p.m. present: the English Commissioner, Chief Attiala, 2nd do. Abbati Cudjoe, Assan Cudjoe.

Lagoon and Assini, reaffirming Nzema's recognition of the Ewuture's territorial dimension, and re-establishing a spatial balance with Sanwi.

## 5 Nzema *limes* and Nzema *limen*

Nyanzu Aka's successor, the famous and notorious Kaku Aka (reigned 1832–1848), developed a strategy of consolidating his hegemonic hold in the commercial and political-military fields, which involved the deployment of territorial garrisons for managing border areas in certain very well defined cases. Nzema was a relevant regional power in the western Gold Coast, and an oceanic commercial outlet of considerable importance for the Asante Kingdom in the 1830s and 1840s, as an alternative to the central Gold Coast's coastal markets. It was all the more important – especially for supplying war materials through trade at anchor – for its freedom from stable European presences, as it was only nominally linked to the English.<sup>45</sup> However, in this context there arose an intense competition between Nzema and Sanwi as the western terminals of Asante trade. Hence the resort to competing control strategies on the internal road nodes, and especially those of the lower course of the Tano and the Aowin area, a primary cause of the conflict between the two centres of power.<sup>46</sup> On its northern and eastern fronts, Kaku Aka kept up a recurring conflict with Wassa and Axim. The situation involved periodic phases of great tension with the Dutch base in Axim and with the English, to whom, like Wassa, Kaku Aka was at least nominally linked by an alliance agreement. George Maclean, President of the Committee of Merchants of the Gold Coast between 1830 and 1843, led a difficult and ineffective punitive expedition against Kaku Aka in 1835. He succeeded in obtaining a series of financial reparations from the ruler and in imposing a code of conduct for the future, which effectively

45 The British post of Fort Appolonia, at Beyin, was formally abandoned in 1821. See United Kingdom, *British Parliamentary papers (BPP)*, 1842-C.551. *Report from the Select Committee on the West Coast of Africa; together with the Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, and Index. Part 1 – Report and Evidence*, Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, 5 August 1842, F. Swanzy, 29 April 29 1842, (900). William Hutton, a merchant, had recommended abandoning the fort, arguing that it did not provide any real protection to British trade and was only a financial burden for the management of the settlements. William Hutton, *A Voyage to Africa: Including a Narrative of an Embassy to One of the Interior Kingdoms in the Year 1820. With Remarks on the Course and Termination of the Niger, and Other Principal Rivers in that Country*, London, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1821, 77. Attempts by George Maclean to reoccupy the fort in the 1830s proved unsustainable.

46 See Valsecchi, 'Lo Nzema fra egemonia asante ed espansione europea'; 'Il Sanwi e l'impero asante'.

remained a dead letter. To complicate the picture, the intrusion of the French into the region began in 1843. It was in fact the need to create a bulwark against Kaku Aka's aggressiveness, who had now become an insurmountable barrier between Sanwi and areas to the east and northeast of the Tano, together with a perceived threat from Asante, which led the Sanwi rulers to sign the Treaty of July 1843 with the French, who granted their protection to Sanwi and obtained the right to set up a base at Assini.<sup>47</sup> Incidentally, this development obviously aroused the concern of Maclean who, in a letter to Lord Stanley, argued that the new French post at Assini, located on the left bank of the oceanic outlet of the lagoon formed by the river Tano, would be in Nzema territory and, therefore British 'competence' since, the President of the Committee of Merchants asserted, the left bank of the Tano river and, therefore, of the Tando/Dwenye Lagoon marked the border of the Nzema territory.<sup>48</sup>

Maclean's 1835 expedition had called into question the presumption of Nzema's impregnability with respect to attacks from the east, inducing Kaku Aka to undertake an overall strategy of permanent military garrison of the territory under his control, completing it at the beginning of the following decade. The new defensive and offensive system implemented by the ruler hinged on three armoury buildings. The major one stood within the royal quarter in Atuabo, Kaku Aka's residence. This armoury and gunpowder deposit was a large building of masonry. It was under construction in 1841. This building had two more replicas in the gunpowder magazines built by Kaku Aka on the edges of his domain.<sup>49</sup>

47 Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (AN-OM), Aix-en-Provence, France, Sénégal (Sénégal et dépendances), IV, 29 (a), Directeurs des Colonies au Ministre, Paris, 28 December 1842. The Nzema threat, along with the Asante threat, would induce the Sanwi to seek the protection of a European power. The treaty text is reported in Mouëzy, *Assinie et le royaume de Krinjabo*, 67–69. On the circumstances of the French establishing their post in Sanwi see also Atger, *La France en Côte d'Ivoire*, First Part; Schnapper, *La Politique et le Commerce*, Chapters 1, 2, 3.

48 Not only that, but the new arrivals would also have planted their flag about ten miles further east, that is, well inside the 'British' area. But Maclean's deduction was just a speculation and, as he himself specified in the letter, in Cape Coast Castle there were no documents relating to the 1765 agreement between Nzema and the English and he therefore had no way of verifying the limits of the territorial extension that this specified. In fact he was wrong: as we have seen, the western limit mentioned in 1765 did not go beyond Awiane. TNA, CO 96/4, Maclean to Lord Stanley, Cape Coast Castle, 2 February 1844: 'My limited means compelled me to abandon it [the fort]. It is true the great distance of Appolonia from Cape Coast Castle and the turbulent character of its present Chief, have rendered it impossible for me'.

49 The construction of at least one of the two buildings got under way in early 1841, as witnessed by the Methodist missionary William Allen, who was a guest of Kaku Aka's and

In 1841, Kaku Aka started creating a new settlement on the eastern coastal boundary of his domain, Sanwoma, right on the western bank of the Ankobra, at the river's mouth, in order to establish his firm control over the river crossing. The ruler also gave orders to the chief of Asanta – who held responsibility for the area – to build 'a large house 20 feet long which ought to be plastered and painted white', to be used as a deposit for war material, but also, should the need arise, as a dwelling.<sup>50</sup> Another similar building to guard the course of the Ankobra further upstream was later built by order of Kaku Aka in 1846.<sup>51</sup>

The creation of the settlement of Sanwoma, with its armory building, reported by the Commandant of Axim Fort, Rühle, in September 1841, was tantamount to appropriating the river crossing, which had hitherto been served by a ferry based on the Axim bank. Kaku Aka had the ferryman ordered 'to remove from there because the King Quacoe Accah had appropriated the river Ancobra'. Moreover, he had a series of boats of various sizes built that controlled the mouth and the surrounding coast from Sanwoma.<sup>52</sup>

This development marked a turning point in Kaku Aka's plans in the Ankobra region. With the foundation of Sanwoma, the lower river course and mouth acquired for the ruler the clear status of a boundary and an entrenchment. This was in contrast with the past, when the first defensive front for the Nzema rulers had been the stronghold of Asanta, located less than 2 miles west from the river. The intermediate strip of territory was considered a sort of 'no man's land', already the subject, at the end of the seventeenth century, of disputes by the Dutch from the fort of Axim, in their attempt to assert the right to control the crossing of the river and also over Asanta, on the basis of claims dating

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who counted about twenty bricklayers at work on the project. BPP, 1842 C551-1, Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on West Coast of Africa, Rev. William Allen's letter of 2 February 1842 quoted in J. Beecham, 31 May 1842 (3593).

50 The building was then completed in record time, between 23 and 26 September, by sixty men and ten women sent expressly by Kaku Aka. ARA, NL-HaNA, Kust van Guinea, 1.05.14, inv.nr. 522, Incoming papers from Outforts, Axim (Rühle), Report September 1841: entry for 2, 7, 9, 19, 20, 23, 26 Sept. [scans 0255, 0269–0270]; Kust van Guinea, 1.05.14, inv.nr. 364, Journal (Governor, Elmina), 1838 1 July 1841–31 December, 1841: entry for 16 September [0199].

51 ARA, NL-HaNA, Kust van Guinea, 1.05.14, inv.nr. 528, n° 40, Van Hien to Derx, Axim 2nd December 1846 [scans 0283–0284]; see also inv.nr. 366, Elmina Journal 1847, Derx, entry for 5 December [0117–0118].

52 NL-HaNA, Kust van Guinea, 1.05.14, inv.nr. 522, Incoming papers from Outforts, Axim (Rühle), Report September 1841: entries for 2, 7, 9 Sept. [scan 0255]. We can get an idea of the size of this flotilla from the fact that, according to Rühle's information, Kaku Aka sent 200 paddles to Asanta.

from the Portuguese era, according to which the extreme limit of Axim's territory was the Biale rivulet, approximately 3 miles west of the Ankobra.<sup>53</sup>

Awiane became the fortified outpost at the western edge of the coastline falling under Kaku Aka's undisputed control, and the operational base for his aggressive policy towards Sanwi. By about 1842, the ruler had strengthened the garrison of the area by ordering Ebuloni Tanoë, of the Ntweafɔo matrilineal family, to move his residence to Awiane with his armed men and dependents. Later Kaku Aka called on his main general, *asafo-safohyenle* Koasi Amakye, to organize the military reinforcement of the outpost by having a large powder magazine built in the city with lime extracted from the lagoon. The building is mentioned by Brodie Cruickshank who, after the British-led military expedition that finally defeated and captured Kaku Aka in April 1848, went as far as the French post of Assini and spent the night in Awiane: 'I have established myself in the King's Powder Magazine, which appears to be the most respectable place in the whole town'.<sup>54</sup>

The three gunpowder magazines were the coastal architectural markings of Kaku Aka's hegemonic strategy, which was supported within his domain by a string of garrison towns placed in an advanced position along different routes, such as Basake, in the vicinity of Anyinasie, and Etikobo II, in the forest area between Anyinasie and Nuba, both frontline defences on the roads to Wassa. Focusing on the western section of the kingdom, the course of the River Tano became the backbone of a system of frontline defences against Sanwi, connecting Half Assini with Adusuazo, a fortified outpost in the dispute with Sanwi over control of the terminal course of the Tano. The town, lying on raised ground just over a mile from the course of the river as the crow flies, was the rear base for a flotilla that safeguarded Nzema's fishing activities in the lagoons to the west.<sup>55</sup> Also, the communication line that ran between Nuba, northwest of the Amanzule lake and the towns along the Tano (especially Elenda, Elubo and Nugua) played a crucial defensive role for the territory and for a fundamental commercial thoroughfare.

53 Valsecchi, *Power*, 74, 235 fn78.

54 National Library of Scotland, MS 20324. Cruickshank, 'Letters from the Gold Coast and Slave Coast', 9 May 1848.

55 For Basake and Sanwoma as Garrison Towns see Ackah, *Kaku*, 89; R.W. Sanderson, 'The History of Nzima up to 1874', *Gold Coast Review*, 1, 1, 1925, 101. For Etikobo (present Tikobo II) see my interview to *nana* Nda Bile II, Chief of Tikobo II, and assistant-*abusua kpanyinli* Awonzo Mɔke, Tikobo II, 25 November. For Half Assini and Adusuazo see National Library of Scotland, MS 20324. Cruickshank, 'Letters from the Gold Coast and Slave Coast', Atuambo, 9 May 1848.

The following years saw a progressive resurgence of tensions and growing aggressiveness on the part of Kaku Aka, who between 1846 and 1847 managed to become the de facto arbiter of the area's balance of power, almost certainly with Asante's tacit approval. At the end of 1847, his armed men, who entered the Aby Lagoon area, intercepted and killed the French commander of Assini and six of his men in transit on the lagoon. However, Kaku Aka was captured and deposed in April 1848 during a massive British-led expedition made up of contingents from various local polities organized by the Governor of Cape Coast Castle, William Winniett. This action, although not leading to the establishment of real British control over Nzema, eventually put an end to its ancient royal line and opened the way to the political fracture of the area.<sup>56</sup>

Soon after the removal of Kaku Aka, the border issues between Nzema and Sanwi were discussed and adjusted in April and May 1848 as part of a comprehensive peace agreement between Sanwi and Nzema, mediated and witnessed by Brodie Cruickshank and Bissoo,<sup>57</sup> a Chief of Cape Coast. The peace agreement between the Nzema chiefs and elders and the Sanwi envoys was sanctioned by an oath taking ceremony at Atuabo – the main royal residence during Kaku Aka's reign – which was repeated at Assini on May 6 in the presence of *blemgbi* Amun Ndufu himself, Cruickshank, and two French officers.<sup>58</sup> Cruickshank does not provide further details about the boundary matter but, at least from the point of view of the French, there undoubtedly remain areas of dissatisfaction in this regard. In 1849, the French commander of Assini, Rodolphe A. Darricau, lamented that the English had their agents deployed among all the chiefs and claimed that the border of the 'populations de Kakoaka' extended to the left bank of the Tano and that therefore the French blockhouse is on English territory and that the French could not communicate with the interior unless with English permission. For this Darricau ordered the blockhouse evacuation on the right bank, but leaving the French flag on the original site.<sup>59</sup>

56 Pierluigi Valsecchi, 'The Fall of Kaku Aka: Social and Political Change in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Western Gold Coast', *Journal of West African History*, 2, 1, 2016, 1–26. At the end of a long internal conflict, the breakdown of the unity of the Nzema area was formally sanctioned in 1874 with a reconciliation and the British recognition of two separate polities: an eastern one, based in Atuabo and a western one, based in Beyin.

57 For the career of Bissoo, an enslaved northerner who turned a wealthy merchant and an influential notable at Cape Coast see Brodie Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa*, 2 vols., London, Frank Cass & Co., 1966 [1853], vol. 1, 243–244.

58 National Library of Scotland, MS 20324. Cruickshank, 'Letters from the Gold Coast and Slave Coast', Atuambo, 30 April 1848; 9 May 1848.

59 Archives Nationales (AN), Paris, 200Mi Microfilms de complement, Archives de l'ancien Gouvernement général de l'Afrique occidentale française, 1779–1940, 772 5G7, Darricau au Commandant en chef la Division navale des Côtes Occidentales d'Afrique, Poste d'Assinie, Exercice 1849.

Thirty-five years later a Nzema witness to the oath-taking at Assini, a man of Adusuazo named Kabenla Ezua (*Quabina Essan*), provided his version of the 1848 boundary agreement event to the Anglo-French Boundary Commission:

I was present at Assinee with Bossu [Bissoo] and the Englishman 'Kukusan' [Cruickshank] .... When we swore the great oath with Amatifou [Amun Ndufu], it was agreed to make peace; as Quacoe Akkah [Kaku Aka] had been taken away by the English. The oath was sworn and peace made; but when the dog was to be killed [the covenant-sanctioning sacrifice] the Kinjaboes [the Sanwi people; Krinjabo is the royal capital] wanted the head, and the Appolonians [the Nzemas] said, 'No! We have driven you back to Bianco, and we must have the head as the conquerors', therefore no dog was killed, as both parties claimed the head.<sup>60</sup>

Kabenla Ezua's account clarifies that the re-establishment of peace did not eliminate a large degree of ambiguity. However, many testimonies from both sides balance this reality by specifying that, in any case, after the however incomplete sworn pact, the people of Sanwi and Nzema enjoyed recognized freedom of movement without incurring risks or threats within territories that the long war period had left largely uninhabited.<sup>61</sup> Cruickshank clearly demonstrated this situation of depopulation in 1848, when he made the journey between Awiane and Assini, sailing on the lagoon, and then returned by land, traveling along the entire Atlantic coast:

I arrived at Eywee-Anoo [Awiane/Half Assini] the Frontier town of Appolonia ... a distance of upwards of 30 miles, however, intervenes between this place and Assinee, but the hostility which have so long existed between the two Tribes has made a perfect desert of this large district which has not a single human inhabitant throughout its whole extent.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, Cruickshank also documented the fact that, on the northern shore of the Dwenye lagoon, the evacuation of the permanent settlements in the pre-war phase was already beginning to be partially compensated by the expansion of temporary camps linked to the intense activity of Nzema

60 TNA, CO 879/19/10, Chapum, 28 December 1883, 7.30 a.m.: Quabina Essan of Adikroom [Adusuazo].

61 See for instance TNA, CO 879/19/10, Newtown, 22 December, 3.15 p.m., statement by Azooakoo, Chief of Urungun (Aronguane) [Alangouanou].

62 National Library of Scotland, MS 20324. Cruickshank, 'Letters from the Gold Coast and Slave Coast', Atuambo, 9 May 1848.

fishermen, especially after the offensives that Kaku Aka led in the 1840s had effectively succeeded in expelling the Sanwi from this section of the frontier:

The King of Appolonia has managed to maintain the control of this inland sea [Tando or Dwenye Lagoon], by means of which he has been in the habit of making predatory incursions upon the Assinees and the people of Iby [Aby] and Kinjabo [Krinjabo], all of whom inhabit the country on the west side of the river and lakes and are under the sovereignty of Amatiful [Amun Ndufu], who styles himself King of Attacla [from the name of Amun Ndufu's predecessor, Atokpola]. After passing down the lake in a westerly direction for about 8 hours, we came in sight of another splendid sheet of water extending away to the northwest. Far as the eye could reach the plain was one immense sea of water, and in the back ground to the west was a high woody range of hills. This second expanse of waters is here called Igee [the Aby Lagoon], and on its northern border is situated Kinjabo the Capital of the King of Attacla and Assinee ... We had seen a whole fleet of Appolonia canoes fishing as we came down the Tendo [Dwenye], which created some uneasiness among my crew of Assinees, and induced them to look to the priming of their pieces. When I asked, how they could have any alarm, after having taken Fetish together [the peace oath-taking], they said, that these people in the canoes almost lived entirely upon the water, and might not all yet know, that I had made them friends, and that at best Appolonians were very treacherous. The cause of alarm, however, vanished. The canoes one by one separated, and slunk away into the numerous creeks of the lake, the appearance of their sails stealing round small bulky head lands into the dark recesses of the jungle conveying to mind a disagreeable impression of stealthy and cunning and treachery. The Appolonians have completely monopolized the Tendo and the lake formed by it and even have huts for the fishermen erected in the bush upon its west banks. The depth of this sheet of water appears very unequal but generally it is shallow, and it is covered in many parts with the Appolonian stake nets. It appears to abound in fish. We disturbed some shoals of them, and they jumped high out of the water many of them falling in our canoes. The Igee [Aby Lagoon] belongs properly to the King of Attacla, but the Appolonians had latterly got so daring that they swept this fine sheet also and kept Amatiful shut up in his Country.<sup>63</sup>

63 National Library of Scotland, MS 20324. Cruickshank, 'Letters from the Gold Coast and Slave Coast', Atuambo, 9 May 1848.

The two decades following the collapse of Kaku Aka's power saw a gradual reoccupation of the coast west of Awiane, with the reconstitution of pre-existing settlements and the creation of new ones, in connection with the resumption of the specific productive activities of this area, i.e. fishing and the making and marketing of sea salt, while agriculture expanded in parallel in the forest strip between the coast and the lagoon. On the Nzema side, a central role in this process was played by Awiane, which managed the Atlantic coast and southern shore of the lagoon, while Adusuazo was at the origin of the 'recolonization' the northern shore. On the Sanwi side, the town of Aby and the Ewutire communities reconstituted and expanded their presence in the lagoon areas, while Assini remained substantially focused on its commercial port with a French presence and an important centre for lagoon and ocean fishing, which made it a destination for the Nzema, who made up the majority of the population. In this sense, Assini was an integral part of the east-west mobility dynamic that affected the entire Nzema coast, while its main external projection in this phase remained mainly linked to the lagoon connection with Krinjabo, the political centre, together with nearby Aboisso, the commercial hub to and from the interior and Asante.

Johannes George Schnerr, one of the Dutch residents of Beyin during the brief Dutch tenure of the fort, provided illuminating details about what happened at this stage along the coast west of Awiane. In November 1869 Schnerr traveled along the entire coastal stretch between Beyin and the French post of Assini, where he went to define the already mentioned agreement that would specify the boundary between Nzema and Sanwi, i. e. the Dutch and the French. In his detailed account of the reoccupation of the coast west of Awiane, Schnerr enumerated and described all the settlements up to the village of Avolenu/Newtown, built only a few years earlier as a salt producing settlement. The place had a negligible population of less than 30 people, but a trading post was being built there by Captain Hoare, agent of Frank & Andrew Swanzy's Merchant House of Cape Coast. Hoare was also an intimate friend and business associate of the great notable and wealthiest merchant of Beyin, Tanikyi, also known as John Tanikyi or, being the son of the late ruler Kaku Aka, Prince Tanikyi. Tanikyi was the main agent for Captain Hoare on the windward coast, and in his residence in Beyin a room was always kept ready to host Hoare during his frequent commercial passages along the coast.<sup>64</sup> Avolenu/Newtown presented itself as especially favourable in terms of access to the lagoons and the course of the Tano: that is, the main connection axis between these

64 Hugh McNeille Dyer, *The West Coast of Africa as Seen from the Deck of a Man-of-War*, London, J. Griffin & Co., 1876, 98.

western areas and Asante. Once past Avolenu/Newtown, Schnerr attested to three further very small villages recently created by Nzema people coming from Awiane, two of which we will return to, namely: Anjessoe (Aziessa), 10 compounds with a few fishing families, and Aboenésiwa, 3 compounds with 8 people, the last settlement inhabited by subjects of Beyin. The following villages were inhabited by people of Assini, i.e. Sanwi subjects.

As already mentioned, Schnerr would return from this expedition with a fourfold agreement between Nzema/Dutch on one side and Sanwi/French on the other, which recognized the small village of Avolenu/Newtown as the boundary.<sup>65</sup> The agreement would not be ratified by France, that would soon be involved in the disastrous Franco-Prussian war, and also lose its importance for the Netherlands. The Hague soon decided to cede all its interests and prerogatives in the Gold Coast to London, but these plans were upset by serious turbulence on the part of African opposition to the 'exchange' of settlements with Great Britain. The whole matter was complicated by the Asante military intervention in the Gold Coast in 1870, followed by a state of generalized hostility that lasted until 1874 and that also massively affected the Nzema.

Throughout the next ten years, jurisdictions within the Sanwi/Nzema borderland remained somewhat fluid, but in essence the ideal line of coastal and lagoon demarcation that ran between Avolenu/Newtown and the *ezobe* tree, just west of Mahoa, continued to be regarded as the pivot of a system of conventional demarcation between the two powers, at least in the coastal and lagoon section of the extensive borderland running from the Nzema town of Awiane/Half Assini to the Sanwi town of Assini. But the exception raised by London in 1880, proposing to return to the older boundary established by Nyanzu Aka on the Eyessuru rivulet – a boundary that would have fostered the Nzema and Aowin claims on the Dissou gold area – undermined this balance.

While negotiations were ongoing, the Sanwi/French side responded to this demand with a forceful intervention in the disputed areas. In November 1882, the Ewuture population of M'briati, the custodians of the Assongu *bozonle*, and the Krinjabo armed men sent by Amandufo prevented the Second British Commissioner, Reginald E. Firminger, and *belemgbunli* Nyanzu Aka II of Beyin with his chiefs from reaching the *ezobe* tree, thereby eliminating the prospect of granting passage towards the Eyessuru rivulet, the pivot of the oldest Nzema advanced military front. At the same time, the envoy of Amun Ndufu, his son Ala Kwao, publicly recognized that the *ezobe* was the boundary

65 ARA, NL-HaNA, Kust van Guinea, 1.05.14, inv.nr. 1101, Report 1: Journey from Bein to the French post in Assinie, in November 1869, Schnerr, Beyin 18 January 1870 [scan 0177].

between Sanwi and Nzema.<sup>66</sup> On the coastal side, the same English claim was based on a version according to which the ancient boundary, about six miles west of Avolenu/Newtown, coincided with the small fishing camp of Aziessa, mentioned by Schnerr in 1869, which during the Nyanzu Aka I's 1830 campaign against Assini was where his troops were concentrated.<sup>67</sup>

As previously stated, these British requests were not followed up after the resumption of border negotiations years later: by that point, London was willing to cede the territories claimed by France and Sanwi. But the very logic of border negotiations had completely changed and African agency was objectively weaker.

## 6 By Way of Conclusion

Until now I have refrained from venturing into a systematic treatment of the history of this border.<sup>68</sup> The reason was that I perceived – and continued to see – the risk involved in attempting to verify 'African agency' by means of sources connoted to the point of excess by such evidently exogenous politico-diplomatic perspectives as those produced in the framework of the Scramble, for the purpose of demarcating areas of European territorial domination. Indeed, it is true that the local elite often proved able to influence the actions and choices of their respective European allies. It is also true that from at least as far back as the eighteenth century the confrontation between Sanwi and Nzema had assumed the clear makeup of a territorial competition, even going so far as to formulate hypotheses of spatial demarcations tantamount to an actual linear border. But after all, it was still undeniably the British and the French who were the mainspring of the colonial boundary operation.

But recently an important assist inspired me to investigate the circumstances of what is considered the historical precedent of the demarcation process of the 1880s, namely the modest 1869 accord between the French and the

66 TNA, CO 879/19/10, T.F. Pullen, R.E. Firminger, Report of the British Commissioners in re Assinee Boundary. Abbreviations, Aburi, 2 April 1884, 221, 9; Palaver at Mahooa, 22 November 1883, 12 mer., 266–267.

67 TNA, CO 879/19/10, Newtown, 22 December, 3.15 p.m., statement by Azooakoo, Chief of Urunguun (Aronguane) [Alangouanou].

68 I presented some of the materials that inform this article in Pierluigi Valsecchi, 'La frontiera come storia. Politiche dell'appartenenza sul confine Ghana-Costa d'Avorio', *Il Politico*, 75, 3, 2010, 101–117.

Dutch to establish a demarcation point – especially for commercial purposes – in Newtown.

The act, which as far as the specific relations between the Dutch and the French were concerned was considered purely as a basis for a future convention, was stipulated in Assini on 13 November 1869. Present on the Dutch/Nzema side were Johannes G. Schnerr, the resident of Beyin, as delegate of the Governor of Elmina, Colonel Nagtglas, and Bile Kofi, the *kpomavole* (spokesman) of *belemgbunli* Koasi Amakye I, i.e. the former general of Kaku Aka who had taken over the power in Beyin after the deposition of his royal master in 1848. Also present was the interpreter of the Dutch post, Anan Barend. On the French/Sanwi side were Capt. Gustave Martin, the commander of the French post and delegate of the Counter-Admiral Dauriac, M.M. Alakamessa, *Sous Lieutenant Indigène* of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais, Charles Louis Gabriel Martin, Sergeant of the Tirailleurs, Castor, interpreter of the post of Assini, and the chiefs and elders of Assini. The names of the latter – crucial actors in the proceedings – are not specified in the minutes of the act, which as such has a documental value for the two European parties. The point is that the actual boundary negotiation took place between the Sanwi chiefs and the Nzema plenipotentiary, and not between the Dutch and the French:

The chiefs and elders of the country of Assinie have assembled for the purpose of providing all information in their knowledge concerning the probable limits of the countries of Appolonia and Assinie, the Gentlemen Commanders Martin and Schnerr having the mission of establishing the basis of a convention which clearly specify the line of demarcation of their respective territories, a convention which, in any case, must be submitted by them to the Commanders in Chief. After a discussion that did not exceed an hour, the Chiefs and elders of the country reached an agreement with the Staff-holder of King Améki as to the place where the territory of Assinie ends and where the territory of Appolonia begins. The discussion was conducted with the utmost good will, and, from the agreement between the parties, the following statement resulted. The town of Appolonia has its seacoast limit at the village called Afouliénou, or Niélalienou. Such village, although it was built by Appolonians and occupied by them, is located on Assinian land; the limit is at the exit of the village on the Appolonia side [i.e. to the east]. To the north it is limited by a straight line that, starting from the village Afouliénou, ends at the village of Mohua, located on the right bank of the Tando Lagoon, in the town of Assinie; there is no village in this place

on the Appolonia side; the point of reference for the natives is the village of Mohoua.<sup>69</sup>

When I examined Schnerr's documents, I immediately understood that the real decisions about the possible cession of the territory occupied by Nzema subjects had been made by the Nzema ruler Amakye I, who then sent his *kpomavole* Bile Kofi – his chief courtier and adviser – to accompany Schnerr with full negotiating mandate. Schnerr was greatly bound to the Beyin power structure. His main local referent was the highly influential Prince Tanikyi, Captain Hoare's wealthy agent and Swanzys's sub-agent. Schnerr had also spent the entire first period of his residence in Beyin as a paying guest of Tanikyi, since the fort, having no roof, was largely unusable. As we know, Tanikyi was involved in developing Avolenu/Newtown as a trading post of the Swanzys, since it was strategically located at a short distance from the Dwenye lagoon and not far from Assini – where the trading house was very active. Schnerr notes in his report that Amakye instructed Bile Kofi that, if he saw fit, he should decide to cede to Sanwi not only the small salt producing village of Abonesiwa, a few miles west of Newtown, which was considered the last settlement belonging to Appolonia, but other seasonal settlements as well:

Although Abonésiwa was designated in Bein as the border *krom*, because the population consists of Appolonians (N.B. 8 persons), who have their residence there temporarily (to make salt; they return afterward to their birthplace and place of origin, Ewianoe), this was no reason whatsoever to claim land ownership from Appolonia. The King of Appolonia had also indicated that he wanted absolutely no palaver about 1 or 2 *krommen* with 10 or 20 inhabitants, as Appolonia was large enough, and counted too many inhabitants.<sup>70</sup>

These words emphasize a decisive point: the right/duty of jurisdiction over one's subjects does not – or does not necessarily – imply claims of ownership over the land. Amakye I implicitly recognized the right of those who now

69 The final declaration (in French) was signed by Schnerr, Martin and their staff Ch. Martin, Anan Barend and Alakamessa. ARA, NL-HaNA, Kust van Guinea, 1.05.14, inv.nr. 729, Assinie 13 November 1869 [0907–0909].

70 ARA, NL-HaNA, Kust van Guinea, 1.05.14, inv.nr. 1101, Register of outgoing letters, 16 November 1868 – 26 June 1870, Report 1: Journey from Bein to the French post in Assinie, in November 1869, Schnerr, Beyin 18 January 1870 [0178].



MAP 3.4 Appolonia and Assini at their western and eastern borders, 1869

Legend: dashed circle = Newtown; dashed square = Assoho or Assongu Island

SOURCE: ARA, NL-HANA, KUST VAN GUINEA, 1.05.14, INV.NR. 1101, KAART DER GEDEELTEN VAN DE AFDEELINGEN APPOLONIA EN ASSINIE AAN HARE W. EN O. GRENZEN, SCHNERR [SCANS 0184–0186], EDITED BY ETTORE MORELLI

exercised power over Assini, i.e. the Sanwi, to control land in that area which had been ‘Great Assini’.

In a confidential note to the Dutch Governor, Cornelius Nagtglas, Schnerr then provided his own version of Amakye’s willingness to sacrifice any territorial positions recently occupied by his subordinates:

Although the population of Afoeljinoe consists of Appolonians, and the village has been built by them, these inhabitants maintain very little relations to the other people of Appolonia; likewise, the king of Bein has little say there, due to the distance; they always get their necessities from Assinie, insofar as they do not have them themselves. They are salt producers, and do their salt trading with Kinjabo and many other places in Assinie, located on the other side of the Tannou. They have joined up with the people of Assinie, so to speak. Furthermore, during my presence

there in 1869, the people have told me that they had never experienced any nuisance, not from the inhabitants, not from the [French] commander of Assinie; they do however give salt to the king of Assinie [Amun Ndufu] every once in a while for living there, but they are not opposed to this themselves. They also informed me that they would not hesitate to return to Ewianoe [Awiane] if they would start to experience nuisance, as their *krom* consisted of only a few houses.<sup>71</sup>

This was how the boundary at Avolenu/Newtown came about and how it was later consecrated, remaining the international border to this day, even if the border line, based on the road traced in 1877 by Tyrrell and Lang, was then established a few dozen meters further west than Avolenu, which lay completely within British territory.

It is also clear from Schnerr's diaries that the first person who wished to negotiate and establish a border, thus attempting to put an end to the chronic tension with Sanwi and settle the trade disputes with an accord, was Amakye I himself. But in the end even the Sanwi ruler Amun Ndufu saw fit to establish a border line at this stage, though for a completely different reason, which had to do with the Sanwi's search for autonomy from the true great power in the region at this time, the Asante Kingdom. Amakye I was a very loyal client of Asante – like the Dutch; much less so Sanwi, who tried desperately to keep Asante traders from going directly to the French posts, thus maintaining a very lucrative role of exclusive commercial intermediary between the French and the Asante.

In short, the establishment of a linear border in this phase was of crucial interest to the ruling groups of both Sanwi and Nzema, for reasons of 'freedom', one is tempted to add. For Amakye it signified the prospect of liberation from a situation of perennial conflict that had seriously limited his possibilities of access to the expanding markets further west; for the Sanwi ruler the

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71 ARA, NL-HaNA, Kust van Guinea, 1.05.14, inv.nr. 729, Note by the Resident J. G. Schnerr, former commander in the District Appolonia, currently in the District Axim, Axim 26 June 1870 [0929–0930]. Schnerr added: 'The [French] commander Gre. Martin also informed me that he would not claim any of [Avolenu's Nzema settlers] rights. There should furthermore be made notice of the fact that the populations of the small *krommen* situated west from Afoeljinoe, namely Anjessoe, Eijennesoe, Abonésia no. 1 and 2, and Aankoeang, also consist of Appolonians, and that they have also been constructed by them; the inhabitants of the *krom* Assinie too were originally Appolonians, who back then were driven from Appolonia for murder, theft and other such things. As far as I am concerned, residence of Appolonians in a *krom* built by them on Assinian territory will not give rise to any trouble.'

border was an attempt to build a bulwark – one which was also to some extent recognized by the Europeans – against the constant encroachment of Asante hegemonism.

In the light of this precedent, perspectives that foreground African Agency in constructing the colonial border do make a lot of sense. When, later on, the frontier was formally established by the Europeans, it was also strongly wanted by local powers and interests, who took an extremely active part in its creation and who influenced and directed the process on the ground to an extent hitherto overlooked by historical and political analysis.

### Acknowledgements

I am truly grateful to the two anonymous reviewers who commented my paper for their insightful remarks that gave me a glimpse of possible new avenues for my research on these issues. The research and the writing of this chapter were realised under the framework of the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN 2017) 'Genealogies of African Freedom' (code KFW5RJ-004), at the Research Unit of the University of Pavia.





MAP 4.1 Area of study: Burkina Faso-Ghana border  
 SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE

# Thresholds, Borders and Cowries: the Problem of Small Change in West Africa and the Spread of Single Currencies in Northern Ghana

*María José Pont Cháfer*

## 1 Introduction

Colonisation in Africa implied new territorial borders and currencies modelled on those used in the metropolises. Although the two processes were closely connected, the new currencies straddled some borders, revealing the project underpinning them: the franc and the pound (and its successors, the British West African pound and the West African CFA franc) created two currency blocks in West Africa that blurred the lines between colonies under the same metropole while strengthening those between their ruling empires. Despite their less fragmented map, colonial currencies have been considered equally disruptive as colonial borders because they not only cut across pre-existing currency areas, disrupted trade and reoriented the economy towards metropolises but also impinged upon populations' everyday practices as former currencies disappeared, and with them their valuation systems.

Because colonial currencies triggered a process that reached a point of no return – African independent nations' currencies comprise coins and banknotes, like those of their colonial predecessors – the passage from the old to the new monetary system has often been seen as a watershed in African history, a sort of revolution that profoundly altered people's lives. The new money represented the objectivation of an altogether distinct regime of value (variously identified as modern, Western or capitalist) that clashed with and shattered local regimes: crossing the boundary between systems was like crossing the threshold to a new era, with no coming back.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Paul Bohannon, 'Some Principles of Exchange and Investment among the Tiv', *American Anthropologist*, 57, 1, Part 1, 1955, 60–70; Paul Bohannon, 'The Impact of Money on an African Subsistence Economy', *Journal of Economic History*, 19, 4 1959, 491–503; A.G. Hopkins, 'The Currency Revolution in South-West Nigeria in the Late Nineteenth Century', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 3, 3, 1966, 471–483; Jean Comaroff, John L. Comaroff, 'Beasts, Banknotes and the Colour of Money in Colonial South Africa', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 12, 2, 2005, 107–132.

Recent studies have substantially toned down this picture: a failure to put enough official currency into circulation, weak enforcement of legal tender laws and people's resistance to depart from their accumulated assets and practices resulted in the coexistence of new and old currencies for decades, giving local populations a margin for negotiating their passage. 'Primitive' monies – as pre-existing currencies were often labelled – were reconfigured to fit into the new conditions; but change was not unidirectional and 'modern' money was also transformed by social practices.<sup>2</sup> Coexistence entailed transfers and commensurability rather than utter incompatibility; even if certain monetary items could be associated with particular practices, mechanisms for exchanging them existed.<sup>3</sup> This literature highlights above all the continuity between the pre-colonial and colonial period in the coexistence of multiple currencies.

Multiplicity is considered Africa's hallmark, although previously it was the norm almost everywhere, at least until nearly all monetary systems were reorganised into single currencies: between the early nineteenth century and the Second World War currencies all around the world were standardised and the relationships between their denominations fixed permanently in such a way that each denomination represented a fixed fraction or multiple of a single standard of value.<sup>4</sup> Africa's rich array of currencies in the pre-colonial period and its comparatively protracted transition to single currencies provide an excellent vantage point for studying at the local level a transition that was truly global.<sup>5</sup>

However, there are important limitations to this project. First, multiplicity makes generalisations debatable, with Africa providing a case in point that

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2 Jane I. Guyer, 'Introduction: The Currency Interface and Its Dynamics', in Jane I. Guyer, ed., *Money Matters: Instability, Values and Social Payments in the Modern History of West African Communities*, Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1995, 1–33; Karin Pallaver, "'The African Native Has No Pocket": Monetary Practices and Currency Transitions in Early Colonial Uganda', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 48, 3, 2015, 471–499.

3 Karin Pallaver, 'Introduction: Money, Colonialism and African Societies', in Karin Pallaver, ed., *Monetary Transitions: Currencies, Colonialism and African Societies*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 1–28.

4 For examples of multiplicity outside Africa, see Luca Fantacci, 'The Dual Currency System of Renaissance Europe', *Financial History Review*, 15, 1, 2008, 55–72; Thomas J. Sargent, François R. Velde, *The Big Problem of Small Change*, Princeton and Oxford, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2001; Chang Xu, Helen Wang, 'Managing a Multicurrency System in Tang China: The view from the Centre', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 23, 2, 2013, 223–244. For the spread of single currencies, see Eric Helleiner, *The Making of National Money: Territorial Currencies in Historical Perspective*, Ithaca and London, NY, Cornell University Press, 2003.

5 Jane I. Guyer, Karin Pallaver, 'Money and Currency in African History', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

defies generalisation after generalisation, from the old distinction between all-purpose and special-purpose money to the more recent proposals highlighting African currencies' dramatic devaluations in contrast to the stability of their European counterparts.<sup>6</sup> The difficulty lies in finding a common feature, and focusing on smaller regions or shorter periods does not improve one's chances. What did cloth, cattle, slaves, iron bars, brass bracelets, silver coins, gold dust, nuggets, cowries, beads, salt or kola nuts, to name some of the monies used in West Africa in the late nineteenth century, share in common? Some were imported, others local; some were consumed, others stored for long periods; some experienced dramatic devaluations, while others remained stable or even appreciated; some were widely distributed, but others were the privilege of a few. For this reason, this chapter focuses on the cowry instead of African pre-colonial currencies in general. While this shell did not represent the quintessential African money – after all, it was quite peculiar – it was by far the most widespread money, crossing political, economic, class, gender and age lines as kings, slaves, men, women, and children used it.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the nature and outcome of its encounter with colonial currencies mattered to about three-fifths of the West African population.<sup>8</sup>

The second limitation emerges from the necessary conditions for multiplicity to exist in Africa and elsewhere. As I will discuss more extensively below, single currencies' main innovation did not lie in the use of coins and notes instead of commodities as money but in the fixed values of their denominations: a dollar or euro is always equal to one hundred cents, whereas multiplicity was characterised by fluctuating values among the monetary items (whether currencies or denominations) current in a given area. In fact, fluctuating exchange rates were a requisite because by adjusting values to supply and demand, they ensured that no denomination/currency was undervalued and

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6 For the first generalisation, see David C. Dorward, 'Precolonial Tiv Trade and Cloth Currency', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 9, 4, 1976, 576–591. For the second generalization, see Jane I. Guyer, 'Soft Currencies, Cash Economies, New Monies: Past and Present', *PNAS*, 109, 7, 2012, 2214–2221.

7 For example, in 1889 Freeman depicts children in Soko (Côte d'Ivoire) buying a few crystals of salt for five cowries to suck them as sweets; see Richard Austin Freeman, *Travels and Life in Ashanti and Jaman*, Westminster, Archibald Constable & Co., 1898, 179.

8 Using recent population estimates, I estimate that about 60 per cent of the West African population lived in the cowry zone in the second half of the nineteenth century. For population estimates; see Ewout Frankema, Morten Jerven, 'Writing History Backwards or Sideways: Towards a Consensus on African Population, 1850–2010', *Economic History Review*, 67, 4, 2014, 907–931.

disappeared from circulation as Gresham's law predicts.<sup>9</sup> Here lies multiplicity's central paradox: fluctuations made exchanges uncertain and costly and disincentivised the use of multiple denominations/currencies in transactions. Kuroda argues that in contexts of multiplicity, a division of functions often existed among denominations/currencies and their flows rarely overlapped.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the existence of multiple currencies/denominations did not necessarily entail that people managed them: multiplicity could have been a merchants' or elite's privilege, the majority favouring one currency and only resorting to others on special occasions (for instance, for marriage payments) or for meeting specific obligations such as the payment of taxes.

Historically, this division of functions was particularly noticeable between the low-value money used in local markets and the high-value one used in regional or international transactions. Helleiner argues that in the preindustrial world, this situation was unproblematic given that these markets belonged to separate spheres.<sup>11</sup> However, international trade increasingly came to hinge on the growing participation of small producers and consumers who used small currencies to supply and buy commodities that were transacted in global markets in large currencies, and thus, on connecting the two spheres. Their integration became pressing after the first quarter of the nineteenth century when international trade started growing at an unprecedented pace.<sup>12</sup> Single currencies are credited with simplifying this integration and stimulating global trade.

Colonial currencies aimed to bring these innovations to Africa to facilitate exports and promote market integration with the metropolises.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, colonial governments were quite pragmatic regarding pre-existing monies. Local currencies were only demonetised and redeemed in exceptional cases, partly because administrations lacked the necessary financial resources,

9 Grehanm's law states that bad (overvalued) money drives out good money. For a thorough explanation, see George Selgin, 'Gresham's Law', in Stefano Battilossi, Youssef Cassis and Kazuhiko Yago, eds., *Handbook of the History of Money and Currency*, Springer Nature Singapore, 2020, 199–219.

10 Akinobu Kuroda, 'What is the Complementarity Among Monies? An Introductory Note', *Financial History Review*, 15, 1, 2008, 7–15; Akinobu Kuroda, 'Concurrent but Non-Integrable Currency Circuits: Complementary Relationships among Monies in Modern China and Other Regions', *Financial History Review*, 15, 1, 2008, 17–36.

11 Helleiner, *Making*, 67.

12 Kevin H. O'Rourke, Jeffrey G. Williamson, 'When did Globalisation Begin?', *European Review of Economic History*, 6, 1, 2002, 23–50; Giovanni Federico, Antonio Tena-Junguito, 'World Trade, 1800–1938: A New Synthesis', *Revista de Historia Económica/ Journal of Iberian and Latin American Economic History*, 37, 1, 2019, 9–49.

13 Eric Helleiner, 'The Monetary Dimensions of Colonialism: Why did Imperial Powers Create Currency Blocks?', *Geopolitics*, 7, 1, 2002, 5–30.

partly because they believed that their new currencies were intrinsically superior and would naturally displace the older ones.<sup>14</sup> In any event, the use of local commodities such as cattle or kola as money was difficult, if not impossible, to control. Furthermore, fixing their exchange rates was tantamount to regulating their markets, so these currencies were left to the vagaries of their markets and people continued using them without being molested. Governments concentrated on demonetising foreign coins and substituting the low-denomination currencies that were more widely used. Among the latter, the cowry was the most widespread, being used in vital transactions such as food purchases. Moreover, its exchange rates constantly fluctuated, making a sizeable and essential part of the economy rather volatile. This was far from the ideal that colonial administrations pursued and it was especially problematic for government workers, who were paid in official currencies but had to purchase food in cowries, as their purchasing power fluctuated from one day to the next.

Hogendorn and Johnson's work on cowries has stood the test of time.<sup>15</sup> Their central thesis is that inflation ended the shell money and colonial policies only dealt the *coup de grâce*. Inflation resulted from the massive imports of shells during the second half of the nineteenth century that the domestic economy could not absorb, whereby cowries depreciated to such an extent that they became useless as money. However, at the time when Hogendorn and Johnson conducted their research, little was known about the problems that governments and populations had experienced across time and space in having a small change that did not depreciate, the so-called 'big problem of small change'.<sup>16</sup> Revisiting the shell money as small change opens new questions and offers new insights into this crucial episode of monetary history and state-building in Africa, while also explaining what the inflation thesis left

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14 For two exceptional cases of redemption, see Hopkins, 'Currency' and Ben Naanen, 'Economy Within an Economy: The Manilla Currency, Exchange Rate Instability and Social Conditions in South-Eastern Nigeria, 1900–48', *The Journal of African History*, 34, 1993, 425–446.

15 Jan S. Hogendorn, Marion Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

16 Hogendorn, Johnson, *Shell*, 1; Sargent, Velde, *Big Problem*, deal with the problem of small change in Europe, but similar problems existed in China and India. See Chau-Nan Chen, 'Flexible Bimetallic Exchange Rate in China, 1650–1850: A Historical Example of Optimum Currency Areas', *Journal of Money, Credit and Banking*, 7, 3, 1975, 359–376; Werner Burger, *Ch'ing Cash*, Hong Kong, The University of Hong Kong, 2016, 247–249; Frank Perlin, 'Money-Use in Late Pre-Colonial India and the International Trade in Currency Media', in J.F. Richards, ed., *The Imperial Monetary System of Mughal India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987, 232–373, 367.

unexplained: Why did cowries survive for more than half a century in some areas? Why did they precisely last longer in the borderlands between empires?

The next section of this chapter analyses the great inflation thesis and offers an explanation that is more congruent with the role that the cowry continued to play during the colonial period. The third section assesses colonial currencies' actual innovations, as well as the thresholds that African populations crossed by using them. The fourth section funnels the argument to northern Ghana to explore how former currency zones' boundaries shaped colonial currencies' spread, before the fifth section shifts focus to the unexpected role of borders in the survival of the cowry. The conclusion condenses the findings and argues for the centrality of the 'margins' of empires in deepening our understanding of global processes.

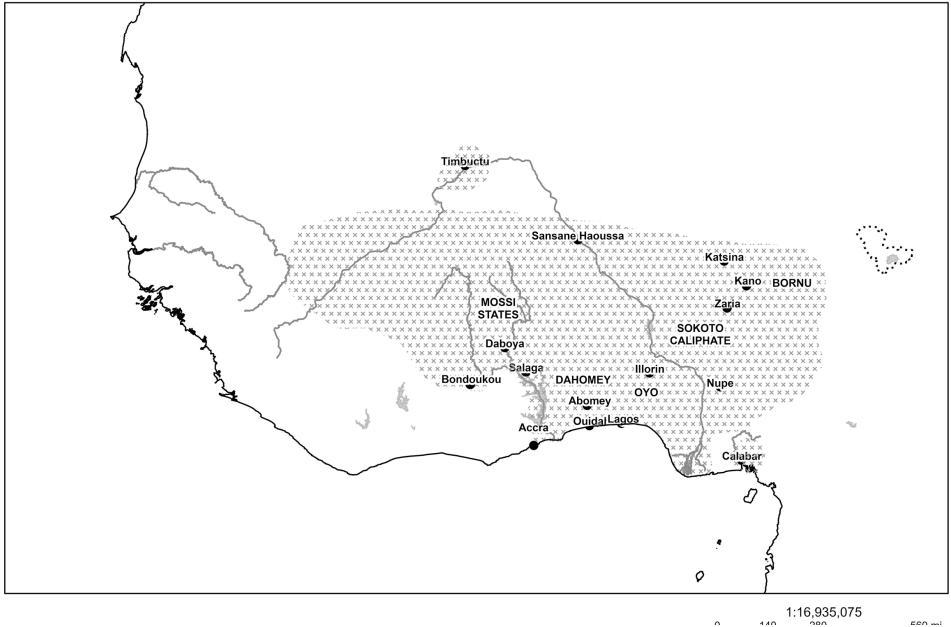
## 2 A Great Inflation?

Although it is unknown when this porcelain-like shell was first introduced from Asia into West Africa, the earliest document mentioning the cowry as a low-denomination currency dates from the mid-fourteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Initially brought through trans-Saharan routes, imports spiralled after cowries began to be shipped through the Atlantic coast. Historians have documented the arrival by sea of near 50 billion shells from the early sixteenth century to 1904, the year in which the British prohibited their importation in the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, the major market for cowries.<sup>18</sup> During its history, the cowry currency area expanded from the Sahara's borders and the Niger river's adjacent lands until it reached its heights in the mid-nineteenth century when it comprised present-day Benin, Togo and Burkina Faso, most of Nigeria and Ghana, southern Niger, Chad and Mali, and northeast Côte d'Ivoire.

Originally imported from Asia – the shells from the Maldives were particularly sought due to their small size – East Africa (in particular, Zanzibar and Mozambique) became the main provider after the 1850s. Although the East African shells were larger and heavier, these disadvantages were more than offset by their lower prices. Imports peaked at a level never seen before – between 1851 and 1880, an average of 1 billion cowries arrived each year for a potential user population of about 15 million – while values plunged to equally

17 M. Hiskett, 'Materials Relating to the Cowry Currency of the Western Sudan-II: Reflections on the Provenance and Diffusion of the Cowry in the Sahara and the Sudan', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 29, 2, 1966, 339–366, 346.

18 Hogendorn, Johnson, *Shell*, 62, 67, 70, 76 and 78.



MAP 4.2 The cowry area of West Africa

Legend: crosses = cowry area; names in majuscule = precolonial states

SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE FROM DATA PROVIDED BY MARÍA JOSÉ PONT CHÁFER

unprecedented levels. Hogendorn and Johnson call this episode ‘the great inflation’ and argue that it ruined the shell money because its value became too low.<sup>19</sup> The fact that cowry imports fell close to zero in Lagos before the British prohibited them in 1904 seems to corroborate the authors’ argument that the shell money was ended by inflation rather than by any colonial policy.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the main evidence for this thesis does not come from inflation – defined as an increase in the general prices of goods and services – but from the wild depreciation against other currencies that the cowry experienced on coastal sites during the second half of the nineteenth century: in Dahomey, the Spanish dollar rate went from 2,000 cowries in the late 1840s to 20,000 cowries

19 Hogendorn, Johnson, *Shell*, 128–129, 138–143.

20 Also in Hopkins, ‘Currency’, 474–475.

in the 1880s,<sup>21</sup> while in Lagos, 2,000 cowries exchanged for about 50 pence in the 1850s but for only 6 pence at the turn of the century.<sup>22</sup>

Hinterland data are far less spectacular and more difficult to interpret. To begin with, it is unclear which other currencies circulated, except in Bornu, where Maria Theresa thalers were widespread, and some gold-producing areas, where cowries were concurrent with gold.<sup>23</sup> Gold and silver coins were certainly accepted almost everywhere, although gold – the principal large currency in West Africa until the second quarter of the nineteenth century – became scarce afterwards.<sup>24</sup> Silver coins' imports had increased by then, but except in Bornu and the Atlantic ports where they were relatively widespread, coins were only accepted in small quantities, and often to be melted down for making jewellery.<sup>25</sup> In any case, silver coins in Bornu, the Sokoto Caliphate, or the Mossi states did not experience the same appreciation as on the coast, with values still ranging from 2,000 to 6,000 cowries in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> In these areas, short-term or even daily fluctuations had more

21 Robin Law, 'Cowries, Gold, and Dollars: Exchange Rate Instability and Domestic Inflation in Dahomey in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', in Jane I. Guyer, ed., *Money Matters: Instability, Values and Social Payments in the Modern History of West African Communities*, Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1995, 53–74.

22 Hopkins, 'Currency', 476.

23 This was the case in Jaman but not of Ashanti, where the use of cowries was prohibited, at least during the nineteenth century.

24 Marion Johnson, 'The Nineteenth-Century Gold "Mithqal" in West and North Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 9, 4, 1968, 547–569. For the coining of gold in West Africa, see Sam Nixon, Thilo Rehren, Maria Filomena Guerra, 'New Light on the Early Islamic West African Gold Trade: Coin Moulds from Tadmekka, Mali', *Antiquity*, 85, 2011, 1353–1368; and Joseph Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee*, London, Henry Colburn, 1824, CXI–CXV.

25 For silver coins' commodity use, see Samuel Crowther, John Christopher Taylor, *The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, London, Church Missionary House, 1859; Hogendorn estimates that in Zaria in the mid-1890s, only between 350 and 1,400 Maria Theresa thalers circulated, probably closer to the former figure, see Jan S. Hogendorn, 'Slaves as Money in the Sokoto Caliphate', in Endre Stiansen, Jane I. Guyer, eds., *Credit, Currencies and Culture: African Financial Institutions in Historical Perspective*, Stockholm, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1999, 62–77, 66. Using data from Barth and following Hogendorn's calculations, between 1,250 and 5,000 dollars were circulating in Katsina in 1853; see Henry Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa*, 5 vols., London, New York and Melbourne, Ward, Lock and Co., 1890, vol. 2, 149.

26 Gustav Nachtigal, *Sahara and Sudan, Volume Four: Wadai and Darfur*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1971 [1879–1889], 5; Captain Louis Gustave Binger, *Du Niger au Golfe du Guinée par le pays de Kong et le Mossi*, 2 vols., Paris, Hachette, 1892, vol. 2, 55, 104, 498–99; Charles Henry Robinson, *Hausaland or Fifteen Hundred Miles through the Central Soudan*, London, Sampson Low, Marston and Company, 1900, 85–86.

impact. For instance, the thaler in Bornu ranged from 1,440 to 3,200 cowries in 1851 and from 3,840 to 6,080 cowries between 1872 and 1873, whereas in Katsina the dollar fell from 2,500 to 2,300 cowries in 1853 when Barth exchanged 200 dollars and from 5,000 to 4,000 cowries when Robinson did the same with 140 thalers in Zaria in 1894.<sup>27</sup> Exchange rates also varied from one place to the next: Binger reported values of 5,000 cowries in Salaga, but of only 4,000 cowries in the neighbouring town of Walewale.<sup>28</sup> The British shilling – the other more widespread silver coin together with thalers and Spanish dollars – exhibited a similar behaviour: at the end of the nineteenth century, it was equivalent in Lagos to 4,000 cowries, in Salaga to 1,000 cowries and in Daboya (northern Ghana) to 500 cowries,<sup>29</sup> whereas during the nine weeks in which Freeman stayed at Bondoukou (Côte d'Ivoire) in 1889 its rates fluctuated between 800 and 1,200 cowries.<sup>30</sup>

Another currency was slaves, whose use as money might have been incentivised by the scarcity of other large-value currencies.<sup>31</sup> Slaves were not a standardised currency, with their value depending on their age, gender and health: in a late nineteenth-century schedule of inheritance from Kano, slaves' values ranged from 40,000 to 160,000 cowries, but no male fetched more than 100,000 cowries.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, their markets were particularly volatile, with war or famine creating serious gluts: in the Koury District (Burkina Faso), a slave usually cost 50,000–70,000 cowries but during a famine in 1899 only 10,000–15,000 cowries.<sup>33</sup> While all of this makes it more complicated to estimate trends, the available data suggest that their exchange rates followed a similar trend to that of silver coins, appreciating enormously during the second half of the nineteenth century on the coast but to a much lesser extent inland: an adolescent girl in Kano was equivalent to about 100,000 cowries in the early 1850s and to

27 Barth, *Travels*, vol. 1, 383, vol. 2, 149; Nachtigal, *Sahara*, 5; Robinson, *Hausaland*, 85–86.

28 Binger, *Niger*, vol. 2, 55, 104.

29 Public Records and Archives Administration Department of Ghana (PRAAD), Administration (ADM), Accra, Ghana, ADM.5/3/8, Mission to Atabubu, 22; PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/267, Director of Military Intelligence to Colonial Office (Received June 8, 1898), enclosure 2, Daboya.

30 Freeman, *Travels*, 251.

31 Barth, *Travels*, vol. 1, 491; Alvan Millson, 'The Yoruba Country, West Africa', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*, 13, 10, 1891, 577–587, 585; Robinson, *Hausaland*, 131; Hogendorn, 'Slaves', 72–74.

32 M. Hiskett, 'Materials relating to the cowry currency of the Western Sudan-I', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 29, 1, 1966, 122–142.

33 Andrew Hubbell, 'A View of the Slave Trade from the Margin: Souroudougou in the Late Nineteenth-Century Slave trade of the Niger Bend', *The Journal of African History*, 42, 1, 2001, 25–47, 43–44.

230,000–330,000 cowries in the 1890s;<sup>34</sup> in contrast, in Dahomey, slaves averaged about 80 dollars or 160,000 cowries some years before the great inflation but 300 francs or 960,000 cowries in 1890.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the latter increase seems to reflect the depreciation of the cowry because prices expressed in dollars, pounds or francs did not show the same upward trend.<sup>36</sup>

The question remains whether the depreciation of the cowry against large currencies (or ‘commodities’ that functioned as such) is a good proxy for inflation.<sup>37</sup> Conflating inflation and depreciation makes sense in contexts of globalised markets and single currencies, where the depreciation of the standard of value affects all denominations, however, it is open to question in contexts of fragmented markets and non-integrated currency circuits. As Rönnbäck has highlighted, determining whether inflation existed would require a price series of basic goods that does not exist.<sup>38</sup> It can be argued that certain data seem to corroborate the notion that depreciation generated inflation: for instance, a fourfold increase – from three to twelve cowries – in the price of a kenkey ball (maize dough) in Abomey (Dahomey’s capital) between 1858 and 1864 suggests that depreciation and inflation were two sides of the same coin. Nonetheless, the glimpse of women selling food in two-cowry lots on the road leading to Abomey in 1871 casts doubts on this narrative.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, why did the dollar exchange rate double from 10,000 to 20,000 cowries between 1871 and 1899 while the cost of a generous daily diet based on maize (about 200 cowries) remained the same during this period?<sup>40</sup> This lends some support to contemporary beliefs that rising food prices in Dahomey were motivated

34 James Richardson, *Narrative of a Mission to Central Africa*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1853, vol. 2, 202–203; Robinson, *Hausaland*, 88, 131–132. Robinson’s prices are in British pounds, but he probably converted prices in cowries to pounds. He gives an exchange rate of £3 to 100,000 cowries in Zaria.

35 Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving ‘Port’ 1727–1892*, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2004, 145; E. Chaudoin, *Trois mois de captivité au Dahomey*, Paris, Hachette, 1891, 81.

36 For instance, see slave prices in Ouidah between 1834 and 1864 in Law, *Ouidah*, 159, Table 5.1.

37 For a detailed explanation of inflation, see Klas Rönnbäck, ‘The Challenge of Studying Inflation in Precolonial Africa’, *History in Africa*, 45, 2018, 5–18.

38 Rönnbäck, ‘Challenge’; Robin Law has carried out the most detailed studies on inflation, see particularly Law, ‘Cowries’.

39 Robin Law, ‘Posthumous Questions for Karl Polanyi: Price Inflation in Pre-Colonial Dahomey’, *The Journal of African History*, 33, 3, 1992, 387–420, 414; J.A. Skertchly, *Dahomey as It Is*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1874, 114.

40 Skertchly, *Dahomey*, 491; L. Brunet, Louis Giethlen, *Dahomey et Dépendances*, Paris, Augustin Challamel, 1900, 280.

by insufficient food supply.<sup>41</sup> In fact, even for a generous diet, 200 cowries per day was very expensive, at least compared with the 40 cowries that a good meal cost near Ibadan in the neighbouring Oyo.<sup>42</sup> Dahomey's exceptionality is further evidenced by the fact that in Calabar (southern Nigeria) it was still possible to eat 'gari and soup' (a cassava-based dish) for five cowries in the early twentieth century.<sup>43</sup> Such prices in a coastal town conflict with the idea that inflation ruined the cowry. In fact, stable prices were not limited to food: a *turkedi* (a popular and widely used female cloth manufactured in Kano) seems to have cost almost the same between the mid-1820s and the last decades of that century.<sup>44</sup>

Inland, the cowry maintained purchasing power well after colonisation: in Navarro District (northern Ghana), purchases at local markets ranged between 10 and 100 cowries in 1907, while in Northern Nigeria the daily diet cost about 100 cowries in 1909–1910.<sup>45</sup> In 1934, twenty-one groundnuts, two boiled potatoes or a heap of peppers were among the items that buyers could still purchase for five cowries at Gaoua market (Burkina Faso).<sup>46</sup>

All of this suggests that the 'great inflation' should be more accurately termed as the 'great depreciation'. While this is not to say that inflation was in-existent, the different rates of depreciation between the coastal ports and the interior together with the different extent to which depreciation affected inflation triggered a cascade of events that was not necessarily detrimental for the cowry. Whereas importing cowries might have become less attractive for European traders because they bought fewer exports, the growing coastal/hinterland differential made transporting cowry inland more attractive for African traders. The impact of inland demand on the whole cowry trade should not be underestimated since its bulk came from there. In fact, there are alternative explanations for the fall of cowry imports close to zero in Lagos in the decade preceding its ban by linking it to events that disrupted this trade: Dahomey – a

41 Law, 'Cowries', 67.

42 Millson, 'Yoruba', 582.

43 Raymond Gore Clough, *Oil Rivers Trader*, London, C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd, 1972, quoted in Walter I. Ofonagoro, 'From Traditional to British Currency in Southern Nigeria: Analysis of a Currency Revolution, 1880–1948', *The Journal of Economic History*, 39, 3, 1979, 623–654, 628.

44 Hiskett, 'Materials', II, 363.

45 Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Murgu: The Wages of Slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate', *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 14, 1, 1993, 168–185, 178; PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/514, Navarro District, 1 November 1907.

46 The list is quite longer, although it is important to note that the cowry was appreciating by then; see Vicent Dolor, 'L'emploi des cauris monétaires chez les Lobis', *Bulletin hebdomadaire d'information et de renseignements*, 74, 1935, 5–8.

central market for Lagosian cowries – was taken over by the French in 1894; Nupe and Ilorin, which lay on the main cowry trade route, were occupied by the British in 1897, and the Sokoto Caliphate – the largest cowry economy – in 1902. Nevertheless, Lagos' changing role as colonisation progressed and colonies demarcated their territories probably better explains why imports fell at this port: in the newly established Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, cowry trade moved to ports closer to the Niger river, and more than 800 million cowries were imported between 1901 and 1904. The prohibition of 1904 targeted these imports and the demand that maintained them, which was far from dead.<sup>47</sup>

The combination of cowries' depreciation and maintenance of their purchasing power significantly affected the spread of colonial currencies because it made the cowry more difficult to substitute. In British colonies, before the issue of one-tenth pennies in 1907, the value of the smallest coin – the farthing (a quarter of a penny) – ranged from ten to twenty cowries in those areas where the cowry had experienced less depreciation. However, the situation was more complicated because the smallest coin that actually circulated to some extent was the three pence, which was equivalent to 120 cowries inland and 1,000 cowries in Lagos. In theory, the French were in a better position thanks to the cent, especially in French Sudan, where it was worth between five and thirteen cowries; in practice, cents were also scarce: a report in 1912 explained that fifty, ten and five cents had met local acceptance but not the cent. The fact was that cowries continued to be useful even in Dahomey: an *akassa* ball – a staple food – cost twenty cowries, and since the cent exchanged for 28 cowries, selling a ball for a cent increased its price by 40 per cent.<sup>48</sup>

This situation left colonial administrations with two options to end the cowry. The first was to create a coin with similar values, although such a coin could be only produced at a loss. The second was rounding up prices, which was tantamount to generating inflation. Neither option was attractive for them: financing colonies' small change was out of question – if anything, metropolises hoped that seigniorage would help to finance colonies – and cheap food was essential to keep labour costs at bay. The most rational option was to maintain the cowry as the lowest denomination of the new currencies; the problem was that the cowry competed with official coins and drove them out of circulation;

47 United Kingdom, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Blue Books for Southern Nigeria*, London, Government Printer, 1901–1904.

48 France, *Journal Officiel de la République Française. Lois et décrets*, vingt-troisième année, No. 260, 1891, 4640; Emile Baillaud, *Sur les routes du Soudan*, Toulouse, Édouard Privat, 1902, 71; France, Ministère des Colonies, *Bulletin de l'Office Colonial*, No. 49, 1912, 371; Brunet, Giethlen, *Dahomey*, 180, 209, 280.

moreover, attempts to fix its value failed. As the next section explains, these problems were largely a consequence of the sort of money that the cowry was.

### 3 Reassessing the Threshold of the Colonial Period

To understand the threshold that populations were supposed to cross by adopting single currencies, it is important to understand where they departed. One striking feature of the West African cowry zone was the dearth of other currencies: Nachtigal highlighted the difference between Bornu, where cowries were a relatively recent introduction, and the neighbouring Wadai, where they were not current, and the media of exchange multiplied – strips of cotton cloth, antimony powder, pepper, salt, onions, garlic, glass beads, paper and the like – making small transactions cumbersome.<sup>49</sup> The characteristic multiplicity that single currencies were supposed to end was rare in the cowry zone. This was especially true concerning local markets, where it was almost impossible to buy without cowries, but wages, taxes or tolls were also paid in cowries. In principle, this illustrates the lack of integration between large and small currencies typical of multiplicity, aside from the fact that the cowry was also used in large transactions: tribute, sometimes amounting to up to two million cowries a year was paid by some states to the Sokoto Caliphate's central government, while descriptions of famous markets such as Salaga, Katsina or Timbuktu from the last quarter of the nineteenth century highlight that transactions that even amounted up to 50,000 cowries were conducted in cowries.<sup>50</sup>

Contemporary European travellers often complained about the cowry's bulkiness. In truth, as the lowest-value monetary item, the cowry was neither bulky nor weighty: a Maldivian specimen weighted little more than 1g (the East African cowry, the double), while the Chinese copper coins known as *cash* – the world's most widespread low-value currency together with the cowry – weighed between 1.19g and 5.97g, the British farthing 2.83g, and the French cent 1g.<sup>51</sup> The cowry was bulky because it was used in large transactions for which it was ill suited. This is intriguing because since the sixteenth century, many

49 Nachtigal, *Sahara* 26–32, 37, 201.

50 Barth mentions different figures for the tribute paid in cowries by some states, but the highest is two million, see Barth, *Travels*, vol. 2, 155. For Timbuktu, see Oskar Lenz, *Timbuktu: Reise durch Marokko, die Sahara und den Sudan*, Leipzig, F.A. Brockhaus, 1884, 156; for Salaga, Marion Johnson, 'The Slaves of Salaga', *The Journal of African History*, 27, 2, 1986, 341–362, 343–344; for Katsina, Polly Hill, *Rural Hausa: A Village and a Setting*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1972, 221.

51 Burger, *Ch'ing Cash*, 16.

monetary systems around the world – especially those involved in maritime trade – underwent a process of ‘silverisation’ due to the availability of American silver. The weak penetration of silver in the West Africa is particularly puzzling in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when the international gold-to-silver ratio started mounting, but silver continued to be comparatively expensive there.<sup>52</sup> Why were cowries invading the niche of large currencies?

Historians and anthropologists have often classified the cowry as commodity money for unclear reasons. However, its non-monetary uses – the defining characteristic of commodity money – were marginal. It is true that cowries were sometimes used as amulets, for decoration, in rituals, divination or games, but most of these uses could have evolved from or were linked to the monetary ones and often only implied a momentary withdrawal from currency circuits. In addition, cowries’ intrinsic value—another key characteristic of commodity money—was negligible, with the value of its lime being low and its extraction demanding to make it worthy, especially because local shells could be collected for this purpose. Marginal commodity uses and an exchange value higher than the value of its material are the defining characteristics of fiduciary money, and the cowry should be considered as such.<sup>53</sup>

Commodity money belongs to the past. It was abandoned after millennia of use due to its difficulties in keeping pace with trade growth and substituted with fiduciary money due to the latter’s lower costs and no competing uses, which allowed its stock to expand faster: modern money is fiduciary money. Despite its advantages, the transition to fiduciary money was slow because the use of tokens as money posed considerable challenges: the difference between their intrinsic and exchange value was too tempting for forgers, at least until technology – in particular Boulton’s press – increased technological barriers that protected tokens against counterfeiting, while their cheapness made them prone to oversupply and rapid depreciation. For centuries, forgeries,

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52 For instance, in Lagos, Europeans traders imported silver free of charge but not gold, see Hopkins, ‘Currency’, 482. France’s adoption of the gold standard in 1873 left a considerable stock of useless silver écus (5 francs) part of which were exported to Africa, see Raymond Gervais, ‘La plus riche des colonies pauvres: La politique monétaire et fiscale de la France au Tchad 1900–2000’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, 16, 1, 1982, 93–112.

53 An exception to the rule is Jan S. Hogendorn, Henry A. Gemery, ‘Continuity in West African Monetary History? An Outline of Monetary Development’, *African Economic History*, 17, 1988, 127–146, 128–129. However, they contend that cowries should be considered commodity money because their procurement involved real resource costs due to being obtained in exchange for slaves. This argument overlooks the fact that the majority of cowries were exchanged for oil palm; moreover, it would imply that the transition to ‘legitimate commerce’ transformed cowries into fiduciary money.

oversupply and steep depreciation were the principal reasons why attempts at fiduciary small coins or paper money ended in resounding failures.<sup>54</sup> The solution lay in backing tokens with commodity money, thus placing a ceiling on their issue, while technological advances made forgers' work harder. Both measures helped to control the amounts in circulation and made states more prepared to guarantee tokens' convertibility into commodity money at specified rates, in turn increasing the public's willingness to accept them. Borders played a considerable role in this system because for convertibility to work, states were required to delimit the areas of their currencies and control the money that circulated within them: single currencies were territorial currencies, with the nation being the most common unit, albeit not the only one because these transformations – which made monetary policy dependent on and central to governments – occurred in the age of New Imperialism.<sup>55</sup>

Supply control and convertibility into full-bodied money on demand are the main ingredients of the so-called 'standard formula', credited with solving the problem of small change by allowing the circulation of fiduciary small coins without depreciation.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the solution to this problem pushed the integration between large and small spheres, and the spread of fiduciary money worldwide, transforming monetary systems on a global scale. In the first stages, the convertibility of fiduciary money to commodity one was central; however, this increasingly came to be seen as a hindrance due to the high costs of commodity money and the difficulties in expanding its stock. The limits that convertibility placed on the system were especially felt after the Second World War when international trade accelerated enormously. Therefore, in a few decades – more precisely, in the 1970s – commodity money was abandoned, driven out by fiduciary money.<sup>57</sup>

Against this background, the cowry emerges as an exceptional money: prior to the breakthrough in technology and the increasing state control over money,

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54 Sargent, Velde, *Big Problem*; R.G. Hawtrey, 'The Collapse of the French Assignats', *The Economic Journal*, 28, 111, 1918, 300–314; Richard von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000–1700*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, University of California Press, 1996, 43–47, 53, 60–62, 70–82.

55 Helleiner, 'Monetary'.

56 Sargent, Velde, *Big Problem*, 5.

57 For an explanation of stages, see Angela Redish, 'Anchors Aweigh: The Transition from Commodity Money to Fiat Money in Western Economies', *The Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'Economique*, 26, 4, 1993, 777–795. Estimations suggest that world trade grew 4,300% from 1950 to 2021. World Trade Organization, [https://li.wto.org/english/res\\_e/statis\\_e/trade\\_evolution\\_e/evolution\\_trade\\_wto\\_e.htm](https://li.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/trade_evolution_e/evolution_trade_wto_e.htm) (last accessed on 22 November 2022).

no other token spread like the cowry had.<sup>58</sup> The main reason was that it was impossible to counterfeit. In addition, the fact that it had to be imported placed a ceiling on oversupply, at least when compared with other fiduciary monies, especially banknotes. On the other hand, the possibility of transporting it as ballast for ships kept its cost low – the cowry was cheap money – and avoided interferences with trade growth as it did not compete for transport.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the cowry was easier to identify than coins because there existed only one kind; it was also more uniform because the practice of clipping or ‘sweating’ (shaking in a bag) to obtain part of its material (its metal) was pointless in the case of cowries but a common crime in the case of coins. Therefore, whereas small coins often circulated locally at different values because several coins coexisted or some coins contained less metal than they should, the cowry circulated locally at a single value, even if its exchange rates varied throughout its currency area. Only when East African cowries arrived massively during the second half of the nineteenth century and two types of cowries coexisted, they fetched two different values, although not always, because in some places they were interchangeable.<sup>60</sup> These characteristics made the cowry a very reliable money and facilitated its spread. In contrast with the profusion and limited currency of many small coins, the cowry crossed multiple political borders. Cowries enabled a massive monetisation of low-value transactions at a time in which many countries were struggling with their small change.<sup>61</sup>

The fact that the cowry was fiduciary money in a world dominated by commodity money helps to explain the dearth of other currencies in its area without a need for invoking Gresham’s law. The cowry was money above all else, money that rarely leaked into commodity uses, unlike cloth, iron bars, silver

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58 Chinese coppers were supposed to be full-bodied money, although due to wear and tear, forgeries and shortages, underweighted coins circulated widely albeit at a discount, thus they illustrate the problems of small commodity coins. See Burger, *Ch’ing Cash*, 16, 52. For the spread of cowries worldwide, see Yang, Bing, *Cowrie Shells and Cowrie Money: A Global History*, London and New York, Routledge, 2019.

59 Hogendorn, Jonhson, *Shell*, 147.

60 G.T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, London, Seeley, Service & Co. Limited, 1921, 198; Binger, *Niger*, vol. 2, 53.

61 Sargent, Velde, *Big Problem*; George Selgin, *Good Money: Birmingham Button Makers, the Royal Mint and the Beginnings of Modern Coinage, 1775–1821*, Ann Arbor, MI, The University of Michigan Press, 2008. For an overview of distinct monetary paths and the level of small change in Eurasia, see Jan Lucassen, ‘Deep Monetisation: The Case of the Netherlands, 1200–1940’, *TSEG/Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History*, 11, 3, 2014, 73–121, and Jan Lucassen, ‘Deep Monetization in Eurasia in the Long Run’, in R.J. van der Spek, Bas van Leeuwen, eds., *Money, Currency and Crisis: In Search of Trust, 2000 BC to AD 2000*, London and New York, Routledge, 2018, 55–101.

coins or other monies used in West Africa. Its stock could expand more rapidly because almost every new import represented an addition, whereas new supplies of commodity monies often had to replace what had been consumed, creating an imbalance that grew over time and favoured the use of cowries. This imbalance caused the combination of depreciation and purchasing power mentioned in the previous section, as depreciation reflected the comparative scarcity of other currencies rather than oversupply of cowries. In fact, the staggering figures reported by contemporary travellers tell of an enormous demand that should not have been easily met: the King of Dahomey freely distributed about 27.4 million shells during the annual customs of 1850;<sup>62</sup> the fares collected on three ferries on the Niger river were estimated at 17.6 million for 1858;<sup>63</sup> villages in north-western Ghana individually paid up to 100 million cowries and some slaves as tribute to avoid raids in the late nineteenth century;<sup>64</sup> tolls in Ibadan and Abeokuta (Nigeria) in 1902 amounted to £15,000 or about 600 million cowries;<sup>65</sup> and tax in Kano Province for 1907 – mainly paid in cowries – was equivalent to £26,241 or 577 million odd cowries.<sup>66</sup> In fact, shortages were not unknown, as the king of Dahomey prohibited cowry exports inland during the British naval blockade of 1851/1852 to avoid them, and almost all European travellers report shortages in their accounts: Barth found that shells were scarce in Katsina and Wurno (Sokoto Caliphate) in 1853, Rohlfs on the border of Yorubaland in 1867, Robinson in Kafi (Sokoto Caliphate) in 1894, and Baillaud in Sansané Haousa (Niger) in 1899, while the chief of Christiansborg (Accra) asked the British Governor in 1903 to publish a notice for market sellers to accept copper coins because cowries were scarce (unfortunately, coins were also scarce as the bank had only £5 in coppers).<sup>67</sup> While

62 Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans*, 2 vols., London, Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1851, vol. 2 41, 46, 78, 184, 224.

63 Crowther, Taylor, *Gospel*, 201.

64 Natalie Swanepoel, 'Small Change: Cowries, Coins, and the Currency Transition in the Northern Territories of Colonial Ghana', in François G. Richard, ed., *Materializing Colonial Encounters: Archaeologies of African Experience*, New York, NY, Springer Science, 2015, 41–69.

65 Toyin Falola, 'The Yoruba Toll System: Its Operation and Abolition', *The Journal of African History*, 30, 1, 1989, 69–88, 70.

66 The British Library, London, EAP535/2/2/6/75, Assessment summary Kano and Katsina [1907], available online <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP535-2-2-6-75> (last accessed on 27 September 2024).

67 Law, 'Cowries', 54; Barth, *Travels*, 149, 235; Elisabeth de Veer, Ann O'Hear, 'Gerhard Rohlfs in Yorubaland', *History in Africa*, 21, 1994, 251–268, 256; Robinson, *Hausaland*, 61; Baillaud, *Routes*, 193; PRAAD, Accra, ADM.11/1/1775. Palaver Book, at Christiansborg Castle, Thursday 31 December, 1903.

these shortages were probably a product of uneven circulation, it is important to highlight that they occurred in the midst of a deluge of imports, when cowries were depreciating, and before the prohibition on imports (the British prohibited them in 1904, the French in 1907 and the German in 1911).<sup>68</sup> However, these shortages could have also been a by-product of the depreciation and volatile exchange rates that escalated during the second half of the nineteenth century, which increased the reluctance to exchange currencies, enlarged the cowry's sphere and augmented its demand.

Whatever happened, the cowry ended up being used in large-value transactions, creating problems of bulkiness and increasing expenses. The official currency that colonial administrations wanted to impose solved these problems by using different coins with fixed exchange rates. This system had already been working for some decades in Europe, but to colonial administrations' surprise, it did not meet the enthusiasm of the populations. The problem was not the usual assumption that people were used to commodity money and mistrusted fiduciary coins – after all, the colonial administrations were offering a mix of commodity and fiduciary money not unknown by many populations – but that the new currencies did not behave as they were supposed to: it was as if their journey from the metropolises to the colonies transformed them in a different type of money, especially when they crossed the boundaries of the cowry area.

#### 4 Currency Boundaries and the Spread of Single Currencies

Colonial currencies were territorial currencies, with the limits of their zones corresponding with the borders of the political authorities that issued them. It has been commonly held that the international borders drawn after the scramble for Africa were arbitrary, compromising the legitimacy of the African colonial and independent states.<sup>69</sup> Their negative impact was also felt on money and trade as the new borders determined which currency was the legal tender, regardless of pre-existing currency zones and trade networks. While the next section explores the opposite notion – namely how the new borders benefited pre-existing currencies and hampered colonial currencies' spread – this

68 Hogendorn, Johnson, *Shell*, 150.

69 Jeffrey Herbst, 'The Creation and Maintenance of National Boundaries in Africa', *International Organization* 43, 4, 1989, 673–692; Pierre Englebert, *State Legitimacy and Development in Africa*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 2000; Stelios Michalopoulos, Elias Papaioannou, 'The Long-Run Effects of the Scramble for Africa', *American Economic Review*, 106, 7, 2016, 1802–1848.

section first focuses on how the boundaries of former currency areas blurred colonial borders and drew lines where there were supposed to be none. My main argument is that former divisions determined colonial currencies' acceptance and specific coin distribution and that the lines drawn by the colonial map were not uniform.

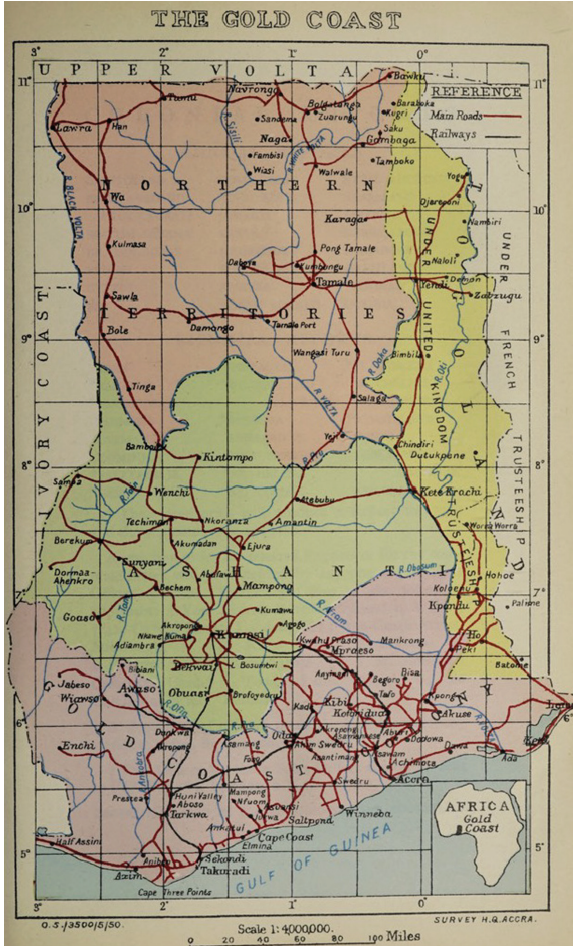
Nugent's insight that colonial states were shaped by the process of their coming into being – with no state looking like the rest – is applicable to the territories that comprised each colony, as local administrations took different forms depending on how their areas were incorporated into a single colony.<sup>70</sup> Colonies were rarely formed all at once but rather resulted from adding inland territories to coastal colonies. The Gold Coast graphically illustrates this: it was composed of the Colony (the administration's seat, which became an independent colony in 1874), the Ashanti and the Northern Territories protectorates (both formally annexed in 1902), and British Togoland (a part of the former German Togoland, occupied by the British in 1914, which became a League of Nations mandate from 1922).<sup>71</sup> Crucial aspects such as direct taxation, per capita expenditure on public works or the role played by former political authorities considerably differed. However, the interplay between these administrative boundaries and former political borders was complex in the sense that although the latter shaped the former, administrative boundaries favoured certain historical readings while overlooking others; for instance, the Ashanti protectorate represented a particular reading of what had been the former Ashanti empire. On the other hand, administrative boundaries could be equally overlooked in favour of former connexions: the introduction of poll tax in the northern but not the southern section of British Togoland at the same time as in the Northern Territories reflected the fact that large areas of the northern section had been part of pre-colonial states included in the Northern Territories. In fact, the northern sector was administered from the Northern Territories protectorate and the southern one from the Colony, despite the whole British Togoland being a mandate.

The influence of the past was also felt in money. The long-standing presence of the British on the coast had created a favourable environment in the Colony for the shilling and to a lesser extent the three pence, which was not paralleled in the rest of the Gold Coast. Nonetheless, the acid test for the colonial currency was in small coins, and those under three pence proved particularly

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70 Paul Nugent, *Boundaries, Communities and State-Making in West Africa: The Centrality of the Margins*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 12.

71 On German, British, and French Togoland, see Chapter 5 by Giulia Casentini in the present volume.



MAP 4.3 British Gold Coast and Togo Administrative Units  
 SOURCE: COLONIAL OFFICE, *REPORT ON THE GOLD COAST FOR THE YEAR 1949*, LONDON, HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE, 1950

important in those areas whose monetary systems had been based on small change such as the cowry.

The Blue Books narrate the imprint of pre-existing currencies on the progress of colonial coinage in a concise and illuminating way, showing on a small scale how former currencies shaped this progress. Although before 1902 the Blue Books were supposed to refer to the Colony (the protectorates had not yet been annexed), it soon becomes evident that they narrate what was happening in the capital Accra, and its area of influence: cowries were used there

and in the eastern territory of the Colony, but rarely in the western part. From 1875 to 1881, after listing the gold and silver coins accepted as legal tenders, the Blue Books' 'Coin' section informed that copper coins were not much used. However, between 1877 and 1882, they seemed to make some progress because in the paragraph devoted to cowries, it was noted the natives were getting used to coppers and their circulation was increasing. This proved to be a short episode or wishful thinking because between 1883 and 1889 the following remark appeared: 'Bronze coins are not much in use, the natives entertaining a dislike to the use of Copper coinage'. The persistence of this reticence is indicated by the following addition to this sentence from 1890 to 1903: 'More than one attempt has been made to establish a bronze coinage but without success'. In 1904, the whole paragraph was edited as follows: 'Bronze coins are much in use, the natives having come to like them in preference to cowries which are getting very scarce'.<sup>72</sup> The fact that cowries had to become scarce for bronze coins to be accepted is somewhat surprising because the reader had been informed from 1875 onwards that '[c]owries are practically no longer used for barter in this settlement' or that '[c]owries are still in use, but to no appreciable extent, and only amongst the lower classes in the market places for the purchase of articles of food of little value'. However, the notion that scarcity played a role in pushing copper coins' use is supported by the chief of Christiansborg's petition to the Governor in 1903 for market sellers to accept copper coins mentioned in the previous section. In fact, scarcity in Accra could have been a side effect of the displacement of cowry imports from Lagos further east in the early twentieth century.

Resistance to bronze coins suggests resistance to fiduciary coins: before the end of the First World War, only coins under three pence were tokens made from bronze. While this resistance seems to have been quite generalised during the first two decades of the twentieth century, its impact varied depending on the availability of alternatives and the importance of small change in the local economy. The composition of coinage imported into the Gold Coast shows that the acceptance of copper coins did not make a significant impact: from 1904 – when cowries became scarce in Accra and neighbouring areas – to 1912 – the year in which nickel coinage was introduced (which is dealt with below) – the equivalent of three million pounds in silver coinage was imported against less than 6,000 pounds in bronze coins.<sup>73</sup> These figures reflect that colonial currency was making inroads above all in the southern part of the Gold Coast (the Colony and Ashanti), where coins below three pence were unnecessary

72 United Kingdom, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Blue Book for the Gold Coast*, London, Government Printer, 1875–1904.

73 United Kingdom, *Colonial Reports – Annual, Gold Coast*, 1906–1911.

for paying wages or for cocoa – the main export – and where no small change had existed, or if it did – as in Accra – increases in wages and food prices had made its use increasingly marginal.<sup>74</sup> The transition to fiduciary money in these areas (except those which had used the cowry) occurred after the First World War, when the content of precious metals in coins was halved. Whatever dislike it provoked, there were no alternatives by then.

The story differed in the Northern Territories due to the availability of cowries and the importance of small change.<sup>75</sup> I have argued above that there was room for the cowry in the monetary system that colonial authorities wanted to impose, which was especially true for the Northern Territories. In principle, cowries' niche was quite large because even the shilling had made little inroads there. Silver and copper coins were accepted by long-distance traders living in the main towns but were often utilised to manufacture ornaments or returned to the Treasury for the payment of fees or fines.<sup>76</sup> In many districts, it continued to be almost impossible to buy at local markets without cowries as sellers did not accept coins.<sup>77</sup>

Colonial authorities believed that the cowry could lose its stronghold if a sufficient number of small coins were circulated and a coin of lower value than copper coins was introduced.<sup>78</sup> Established in 1912, the West African Board responded to these expectations by issuing subsidiary nickel currency in three denominations – one-tenth of a penny, one half-penny and one penny – which started circulating in July 1912 in the Gold Coast and in June 1913 into the Northern Territories.<sup>79</sup> These coins were designed with a hole in the centre to imitate the holes made on cowries in some places to string them and facilitate transport.

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74 In gold-producing areas, gold dust was used for small transactions, although its value was comparatively high.

75 For short, in the text, the Northern Territories also include the northern section of British Togoland.

76 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/87. District Commissioner, Bawku, N.T. [Northern Territories], 24 September 1909; ADM.56/1/446. Annual Report Southern Province for 1910; ADM.56/1/448. Annual Report on the Northern Territories for 1910; ADM.56/1/126. District Commissioner Northeastern Province to Chief Commissioner, Northern Territories, 22 August 1911.

77 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/126. Cost of living for native officials at Bawku; Ibid. Cost of native produce as sold in the Navarro market.

78 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/428. Progress Report on the Northern Territories for the Month of July, 1907; ADM.56/1/514. Navarro District, 1 November 1907; ADM.56/1/514. Navarro District.

79 United Kingdom, *Colonial Reports – Annual, No. 770. Gold Coast. Report for 1912*, London, Printed for His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1913; PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/489. Annual Report on the Northern Territories for 1918.

Nickel coinage was devised to compete with the cowry and for the first time in centuries it created a real situation of competing currencies. However, its spread was expected to be relatively slow because the administration had no intention of redeeming cowries, and the only way to introduce it was through the payment of government wages and the administration's purchases in local markets. In this sense, the Northern Territories differed from the neighbouring French colonies, where head taxes were introduced much earlier and from 1907 only accepted in French currency, making it compulsory for populations to obtain official currency.<sup>80</sup> By contrast, in the Northern Territories, it was still possible to pay ferry tolls or caravanserai fees in cowries in 1920 and direct taxation only started in 1936.<sup>81</sup>

Despite these limitations, the prospects for nickel coins looked promising. The annual report on the Gold Coast for 1913 noted that despite still being current, cowries were becoming extinct thanks to the tenth-of-a-penny coins.<sup>82</sup> Between 1912 and 1917, a value of £10,567 in nickel coins in three denominations (between 2.5 and 25 million coins) arrived in the Gold Coast, most of which made their way towards the north since 'tenths' were rarely seen in the Colony or Ashanti.<sup>83</sup> By 31 March 1924, it was estimated that £33,946 in nickel coins were in circulation.<sup>84</sup> Although cowry rates varied, this amount was equivalent to more than 400 million cowries. This was a very considerable amount considering that £2,687,110 in alloy coins of three and six pence and one and two shillings also circulated, making nickel coins only necessary for small change.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, during these years the northerners' seasonal migration to cocoa areas in the south assisted coins' introduction, which had previously been limited to government's dealings.

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80 Mahir Şaul, 'Money in Colonial Transition: Cowries and Francs in West Africa', *American Anthropologist*, 106, 1, 2004, 71–84, 75.

81 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/208. Copy of Informal Diary, Lorha, North Western Province from 1 to 7 October 1917; ADM. 56/1/265. Handing Over Report, from Capt. C. St. B. Shields to A.C. Duncan-Johnston Esq.

82 United Kingdom, *Colonial Reports – Annual, No. 806. Gold Coast. Report for 1913*, London, Printed for His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1914.

83 United Kingdom, *Colonial Reports – Annual, No. 894. Gold Coast. Report for 1915*, London, Printed for His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1916; *No. 998. Gold Coast. Report for 1917*, London, Printed for His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1919; *No. 1029. Gold Coast. Report for 1918*, London, Printed for His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1920.

84 United Kingdom, *Colonial Reports – Annual, No. 1255. Gold Coast. Report for 1923–24*, London, Printed for His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1925.

85 United Kingdom, *Colonial Reports – Annual, No. 1255. Gold Coast. Report for 1923–24*, London, Printed for His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1925.

In a context that was so unfavourable for the cowry, the Prohibition of Cowries Ordinance that came into force in December 1925 in the Northern Territories looks like a mere formality, and that the ordinance had to be disallowed for technical reasons – cowries had never been recognised officially as currency, so its monetary use could not be prohibited – a minor setback. However, the ordinance was not a mere formality but – like the prohibition of 1904 in southern Nigeria – part of the struggle against cowry, which was resisting more than expected. In fact, although reports on tenths were initially optimistic,<sup>86</sup> upon closer scrutiny, it emerged that they were often being used to make bangles.<sup>87</sup>

The resistance of cowries was partly motivated by the barriers that they placed on counterfeiting, in contrast to coins and all their alleged technological advances. It is unclear how many counterfeit coins circulated, but it is clear that they did: the Native Administration of Dagomba District lost £36 odd over the receipt of counterfeit money in 1937–38, the second year of the poll tax payment.<sup>88</sup> In January 1940, £100 worth of taxes arrived in pennies from the Sanguli-Saboba area. The reason for 2,000 adult males paying their one-shilling tax penny by penny was soon discovered: during the last few years, they had been paid for their cattle and sheep by visiting traders in counterfeit coins, and thus, to avoid cheating they had started accepting only a coin, the penny, and specifically only the old ones because they had also received counterfeit new pennies.<sup>89</sup>

The evidence for counterfeit coins sheds light on the challenges that the colonial currency met where a more reliable alternative existed. However, it is striking that the evidence relates to the period after direct taxation was imposed. One reason might be that previously fewer coins returned to treasuries, so fewer fake coins were received even if they were already circulating; for instance, the Dagomba District treasury increased from £2,168 in 1934–35 to £14,318 in 1937–38.<sup>90</sup> It is also plausible that taxation forced people to accept coins, and the greater demand tempted counterfeiters. In any event, the evidence reveals the context that facilitated the spread of counterfeits. The

86 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/211. Annual Report on Yendi District 1915; ADM.56/1/218. Copy of an Official Diary for Navarro-Zuaragu for the week ending 31 January 1917.

87 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/209. Official Informal Diary, Ag. District Commissioner to the Acting Commissioner of the North Western Province. [February 1917]; ADM.56/1/229. Yendi Diary for August 1918.

88 PRAAD, Tamale, NRG.8/3/62. Annual Report on the Dagomba District for the Year 1937–38.

89 PRAAD, Tamale, NRG.8/4/94. Informal Diary of the District Commissioner, Dagomba, for the Month of January 1940.

90 PRAAD, Tamale, NRG.8/3/62. Annual Report on the Dagomba District for the Year 1937–38.

Sanguli-Saboba area – where the poll tax was paid in pennies – was located far from any colonial station. It is known that nickel coins arrived there in April 1916 because after their introduction the exchange rate for a penny fell from 100 to 200 cowries.<sup>91</sup> This heavy depreciation suggests a profound dislike for them, and thus few coins should have circulated. An isolated area where scarce coins circulated and people suddenly had to obtain them to pay taxes was the ideal context to introduce forgeries. By choosing a specific coin (the old penny), the population's reaction also shows how far the colonial currency was from working as a single currency in which the different denominations were perfect substitutes for the standard of value.

Although taxation forced people to obtain coins, it was insufficient to put an end to the shell money: in the western area of the Northern Territories, people living close to the Upper Volta's border still preferred cowries to coins in 1946–47, while on the French side of this border – where taxation had started several decades earlier – two-thirds of transactions were still carried out in cowries in 1956–57.<sup>92</sup> These two areas were connected by cultural and commercial links that continued despite their partition by an international border. It was there that cowries survived longer than elsewhere, still being used in the early 1980s, although by then transformed into a special-purpose money.<sup>93</sup> This was the last stage of a process during which the cowry niche shrank from almost working as a single currency to becoming the money for buying local produce or making social payments.

## 5 Imperial Borders and the Survival of the Cowry

As territorial currencies, colonial currencies entailed control over the monetary flows through borders. Although Nugent validly argues that taxes on imports represented the main source of revenue for the Gold Coast government, and this implied tight border control to check smuggling – especially from Togo – imports largely depended on cocoa exports, which provided income to buy

91 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/124. District Yendi. Copy of Diary.

92 PRAAD, Tamale, NRG.8/3/145. Annual Report for the Gonja District 1946–47; Jean-Louis Boutillier, 'Les cauris en tant que monnaie dans le sud-ouest du Burkina Faso au xx<sup>e</sup> siècle', in Michèle Fiéloux, Jacques Lombard, Jeanne-Marie Kambou-Ferrand, eds., *Images d'Afrique et Sciences sociales: Les pays lobi, birifor et dagara*, Paris, Kartala-Orstom, 1993, 249–262, 251.

93 Philip Evans, 'The Cowrie Economy and the Maintenance of Social Boundaries in Northern Ghana', *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 10, 2, 1985, 29–40.

imports besides producing government revenue from taxation on exports.<sup>94</sup> Cocoa production in turn relied on seasonal labour that until the Second World War overwhelmingly came from French colonies, and thus thousands of migrants were expected to cross the border twice per year, first southbound and later northbound.<sup>95</sup> Thus, the tight control over the south-eastern border that Nugent documents was accompanied by a lax control over the northern border, showing that colonial borders were not uniform but shaped by the flows moving through them.

French authorities were also interested in a soft border since this migration came from their landlocked colonies where the French administration depended on direct taxation for its revenue, and cocoa wages allowed migrants to pay their taxes at home. In addition to labour migration, considerable cattle were imported from the French colonies through the Northern Territories into the southern part of the Gold Coast, where they were difficult to rear due to the prevalence of trypanosomiasis. The Gold Coast's central government considered cattle so indispensable for a balanced diet that, despite protests from the Northern Territories' administration over losing its main source of revenue, it abolished caravan tolls in 1909 to encourage cattle imports. This left the Northern Territories protectorate completely dependent on the south for financing, transforming it – as so graphically put by the Commissioner of the North Eastern Province – into 'merely a stepping stone towards the down country markets'.<sup>96</sup>

Facilitating the passage of persons and cattle through the northern border implied the need to tolerate certain cross-border currency movement, although the extra oxygen that it gave to the cowry was quite unexpected. The reason lay in the strong depreciation of the franc that started with the outbreak of the First World War. Before the war, the value of the franc was similar to the shilling, with 20 to 25 francs being equivalent to a pound; however, the franc was one of the currencies hit hardest by the war: during the conflict, the pound exchange rate was always over 25 francs, while in 1920, 59.6 francs were worth a pound. This was only the beginning of a staggering depreciation that stabilized at about 124 francs to the pound after peaking at 240 francs in 1926. In 1936, the pound-to-franc rate was 105, in 1937 110, and in 1938 176 francs,

94 Nugent, *Boundaries*, 174–175.

95 Between 1924 and 1930, about 200,000 British migrants and 370,000 French migrants crossed the Volta to reach the southern part of the Gold Coast where cocoa was grown; PRAAD, Accra, ADM.11/1/1076. Annual Invasion of the Gold Coast by French & N.T. Subjects in Search of Labour.

96 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.51/1/448. Annual Report on the Northern Territories for 1910.

at which it stabilised until the Second World War. However, this stability was short lived, with the pound reaching 480 francs in 1945, 864 francs in January 1948 and 1,062 francs in October 1948.<sup>97</sup> The last stage of this depreciation was mitigated in French colonies due to the introduction of the West African CFA with a fixed exchange rate of 1 CFA equal to 1.70 French francs in December 1945, with the exchange rate subsequently being changed to two francs in October 1948 until 1960.

In contrast to this turbulent story, the cowry maintained much more stable values relative to both the pound and franc, even with considerable seasonal variations like in the past. Consequently, the franc became overvalued when cowries mediated their exchanges with the pound. Both the French and British governments were partly responsible for this situation due to their insistence on fixing exchange rates to the cowry together with the bans that were imposed on its import, which left the number of cowries frozen (or rather decreasing) while coins continued to increase in number, pushing cowry prices upwards.

In 1915, the French Commandant and the British Commissioner from the neighbouring zones of Upper Volta and western Northern Territories agreed to fix the exchange rate at 1,000 cowries to the franc or shilling.<sup>98</sup> It slightly overvalued the franc, although the difference was not relevant due to transport costs. This rate soon became unrealistic, but even though the British struggled to maintain rates and avoid cowry appreciation – they aimed at 800 to 1000 cowries to the shilling, but rates often fell to 500 or even 200 cowries – these rates were not high enough compared with those in the French colony, where the franc exchanged from 140 to 800 cowries.<sup>99</sup> As a result, cowries began to flow from adjacent French areas to the British territories. The acting District

97 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.5/1/66. Annual Report on the Northern Territories for 1910; Paul Einzig, *The History of Foreign Exchange*, London, Macmillan & Co., 1962, 251–252, 256, 258–259.

98 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/489. Annual report for 1918, Lorha.

99 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/511. Northern Province-Northern Territories, Annual Report, 1924–1925; ADM.56/1/512. Northern Province-Northern Territories, Annual Report 1926–1927; ADM.11/1/1555. Annual Report Mandated Area South Mamprusi Section. The Upper Volta's Governor gives a rate of 600 cowries to the franc in 1921, remarking that formerly the usual exchange was at 1,000 cowries to the franc, see Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (AN-OM), Aix-en-Provence, France, Haute Volta, 10G/9. Rapport d'ensemble sur la situation économique pour l'année 1920. Somda provides some rates for the Upper Volta and the area next to the border. In particular, for 1923 he lists an exchange rate of five francs to 4,000 cowries in Upper Volta and 2,000 cowries in the Gold Coast, see Claude Nurukyor Somda, 'Les cauris du pays lobi' in Michèle Fiéloux, Jacques Lombard, Jeanne-Marie Kambou-Ferrand, eds., *Images d'Afrique et Sciences sociales: Les pays lobi, birifor et dagara*, Paris, Kartala-Orstom, 1993, 233–246.

Commissioner of Lawra-Tumu District believed that the reason was that the French had stopped the use of cowries, but the shell money continued to be widely used in the neighbouring colony.<sup>100</sup> Although money changers were the best positioned to benefit from this anomaly, the differential also benefited migrant labourers from the French colonies who obtained more shillings upon their arrival in the Gold Coast if they brought cowries instead of francs.

Inflows not only came from neighbouring French colonies. Indeed, by reducing transport costs, the railway from Accra to Kumasi and the spread of lorry transport in the early 1920s incentivised imports from areas within the colony where cowries fetched lower rates or had lost their currency. This brisk trade attracted money exchangers, who became ubiquitous especially in the eastern part of the Northern Territories, making the situation confusing and the value of money uncertain. Complaints against collusion between money exchangers and traders were common, although traders also exchanged money. The main complaint – probably from government workers – was that traders only sold their wares in cowries, asking for a higher rate to the shilling (say, 800 cowries) than that obtained from money exchangers (say, 500 cowries). District commissioners tried to enforce measures to avoid the appreciation of the cowry by prosecuting those who gave lower rates, even expelling foreign traders, however, the exchange rate repeatedly fell below the rate of 800 cowries to the shilling that commissioners targeted.

Volatile exchange rates and the constant inflow from other areas encouraged the cowry currency as locals tried to avoid exchanges altogether and did not accept coins except by force, meaning that the ‘cowry question’ continued unsolved after years of trying different measures.<sup>101</sup> It was in this context that the Cowries (Prohibition of use as Money) Ordinance was enacted in December 1925 (cancelled on 12 March 1927), followed by a prohibition of the importation of cowries from Ashanti and elsewhere in an attempt to stop their influx into the region.<sup>102</sup> It was useless, and the cowries were still ‘much

100 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/494. Report of the Lawra-Tumu District for the 1st Quarter Ending 30 June 1926, by Major P.C.R Moreton, D.S.O., Acting District Commissioner.

101 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/489. Annual Report for 1918, Lorha; ADM.56/1/237. Commissioner Northern Province to Chief Commissioner, 3 March 1925; PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/494. Report of the Lawra-Tumu District for the 1st Quarter Ending 30 June, 1926, by Major P.C.R Moreton, D.S.O., Acting District Commissioner.

102 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.11/1/1516. Report on Eastern Dagomba District for the Year Ending 31 March 1927; ADM.56/1/285. Northern Province-Handing Over Report: From Mr. A.J. Cutfield, Provincial Commissioner, to Lieut-Col. P.F. Whittall, D.S.O. Dep. P.C.

in use' in 1930 even in the eastern part of the Northern Territories, where they enjoyed a smaller comparative advantage.<sup>103</sup>

Cowries were not the only challenge to the British West African pound. In 1925, the Chamber of Commerce in Accra reported that large quantities of two and one francs were being imported, while in the markets closer to the borders five and ten centimes circulated massively.<sup>104</sup> District commissioners publicised the franc devaluation and warned against people accepting French currency. However, these measures were largely ineffective and a considerable amount of French currency circulated, especially in the north-eastern area of the Protectorate.<sup>105</sup> In some markets, sellers even refused to accept British money, preferring the French money instead. The invasion of foreign coins was not a brief episode, and more than a decade later a considerable number of French coins were still circulating in northern markets.<sup>106</sup>

The occasional introduction of new coins by the British West African Currency Board further increased the reluctance to accept British currency. This reluctance was especially strong when three and six pence and one shilling coins started being issued in alloy instead of silver in 1920: in some places, they were simply rejected, whereas in others they fetched only half their previous rate.<sup>107</sup> However, over time the opposite emerged, and the old copper and silver coins whose intrinsic value was higher began no longer being accepted in some places.<sup>108</sup> This contradicts the widespread belief that West Africans accepted money due to their commodity value and suggests that other factors such as reliability were crucial.

Availability was another decisive factor. The shortage of coins – which became acute in the mid-1930s – promoted the search for alternative currencies. It is important to note that shortages did not necessarily mean that fewer

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103 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.11/11/1555. Annual Report Mandated Area South Mamprusi Section, January to December 1930.

104 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/285. Northern Province, Handing Over Report, to Lt.-Col. P.F. Whittall, D.S.O., dated 30 November 1925; ADM.11/1/1516. Report for the Quarter Ending 30 September 1926, Eastern Dagomba District.

105 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.11/1/1516. Report for the Quarter Ending 31 December 1926, Eastern Dagomba District; Report on Eastern Dagomba District for the Year Ending 31 March 1927; PRAAD, Accra, ADM.11/1/990. Report on the Eastern Dagomba District for Year Ending 31 March, 1929.

106 PRAAD, Tamale, NRG.8/4/63. Informal Diary of the Acting District Commissioner, Eastern Dagomba, for the Month of June, 1932; NRG.8/4/77. Informal Diary of the District Commissioner, Dagomba, for the Month of April 1937.

107 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/265. Handing Over Report, Salaga District, Salaga, 25 November 1920; Annual Report of the Northern Territories for 1921.

108 PRAAD, Tamale, NRG.8/4/77. Informal Diary of the District Commissioner, Dagomba, for the Month of July, 1937.

British coins were circulating but rather that demand outstripped supply. This could be one of the reasons why French coins circulated widely because they alleviated scarcity – the other reason was that they circulated overvalued and activated Gresham's law. In any event, the availability of small coins could not be taken for granted. Obtaining them required time and determination, and even the colonial administration – which was better positioned to meet its needs – often found itself unable to pay in the desired small change, to its workers' dismay.<sup>109</sup> Commissioners believed that the reason was that many small coins went across the frontier, although as seen above French coins were crossing the border towards the British colony, meaning that small change was probably scarce.<sup>110</sup>

Shortages became severe in 1937 and they were not specific to the Northern Territories or even the Gold Coast but affected all British West African colonies. In other colonies, there was a belief that high cocoa prices had cleared out the British West African Currency Board's alloy stock, which had flowed to the Gold Coast.<sup>111</sup> Sierra Leone's Currency Board was short of alloy coins and had no nickel coins, while Gambia's stock was equally exhausted. Although high cocoa prices could have funnelled part of the stock towards cocoa areas, the introduction of direct taxation in the Northern Territories in the 1936–37 fiscal year might have also played a role as it forced taxpayers to obtain British coins. The outbreak of the Second World War prolonged the shortage for several years, and it was still felt in 1942 in the canteens of the Royal Air Force in all four West African colonies. In a letter to his counterpart in Gambia in March 1942, the Colonial Secretary of Sierra Leone considered that shortages were inevitable during the war;<sup>112</sup> however, people, who were not committed to the spread of the colonial currency but simply wanted to carry out their transactions with reliable money, used the best that was available to them, which often took the form of shells or French coins.

109 PRAAD, Tamale, NRG.8/4/77. Informal Diary of the District Commissioner Dagomba, for the Month of May 1935; Informal Diary of the District Commissioner, Dagomba, for the Month of June 1935; PRAAD, Tamale, NRG.8/4/73. Informal Diary of Mr. Guthrie Hall, District Commissioner, Gonja, Salaga, for the Month of January 1936; Informal Diary of Guthrie Hall, esquire, D.C. Gonja, for the Month of June 1937.

110 PRAAD, Tamale, NRG.8/4/73. Informal Diary of Mr Guthrie Hall, District Commissioner, Gonja, Salaga, for the Month of January 1936; NRG.8/4/94. Informal Diary, R.K. Talbot, D.C., Dagomba, June, 1944.

111 The rise in the price of cocoa occurred in December 1936, when it increased from eight shillings a loan to twenty-one shillings and sixpence, see PRAAD, Accra, ADM.11/1/1529. Togoland Report 1936, Southern Section.

112 Sierra Leone Public Archives, Freetown, Sierra Leone. Box 685(2), CSO/B/48/37. Temporary Shortage of Currency.

The end of the war did not improve the situation for the British colonial currency due to the pound's depreciation, which had deteriorated since the outbreak of war. In this context, cowries surfaced again in force, especially in the western area, as people considered them a more stable and secure currency.<sup>113</sup> Thus, the shell money was still alive more than four decades since the prohibition of importing cowries had been implemented in Southern Nigeria. However, this was its swan song, as in about a couple of decades its use was to become very restricted. Nonetheless, time was running out faster for the colonial currency, which was replaced by the Ghanaian pound in 1958.

## 6 Conclusion

Counterfeits, invasions of foreign coins, shortages, and fluctuating exchange rates had affected small change in many parts of the world for centuries. Single currencies emerged to solve these problems; however, their introduction in the West African cowry area did not produce the expected results but paradoxically brought the problems that they were supposed to solve.

Cowries reached global circulation because they were impossible to counterfeit, in contrast to coins, despite technological advances. Counterfeiting especially hit the population who depended on low-value transactions to make a living or those living in rural areas distant from colonial stations. For them, the cowry offered a much more reliable and easier-to-identify currency.

I have argued that multiplicity for most of the population living in the cowry area was a colonial phenomenon. In any event, the multiplicity of the colonial period had specific characteristics: formerly, a division of functions among currencies tended to emerge, whereas in the colonial period several currencies competed for the same low-value transactions. Invasions of foreign coins – another colonial phenomenon that emerged with the imposition of territorial currencies – added competitors. On the other hand, although shortages had been known, West Africa was one of the few regions in the world that developed a monetary system based on small change and its shortage was specific to the colonial period. Finally, the cowry had reduced fluctuations at the cost of bulkiness by invading the niche of high-value currencies, while fluctuations in the small-change niche plagued the colonial period. As seen, attempts to fix the cowry exchange rates failed, while the influx of French currency in a period of sharp depreciation added instability. However, the most striking issue was that the values of the different British denominations fluctuated among

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113 PRAAD, Tamale, NRG.8/3/145. Annual Report for the Gonja District 1946–47.

themselves because they did not circulate at their face value but rather at a value determined by the market: in Yendi, those who purchased goods for the value of a penny received 1.5 pence as balance if they paid with a three pence coin but four pence if they paid with a six pence coin; during his official tour of 1920, the Governor explained in public meetings that £1 notes were worth twenty shillings and not the fifteen shillings that people were obtaining;<sup>114</sup> and as mentioned above, an alloy shilling initially fetched half the rate of a silver shilling, while in 1937 the latter's value fell close to zero as they were not accepted. In short, the colonial administration failed to bring the single currencies' innovations not only because other currencies coexisted, but because its single currency behaved as an amalgam of fluctuating monetary items.

Borders played a part in creating this situation. Controlling the monetary flows was crucial to fixed exchange rates between denominations, but in the Gold Coast tight control over its northern international border was contrary to the colonial administration's interests. The result was not only that French currency circulated freely but that the border gave the cowry a renewed strength once the franc depreciated. Overvaluation of the cowry and the franc in British territory put Gresham's law to work. The irony was that this occurred at the same time that the French and the British were carefully drawing their common border.

How the colonial currency worked strongly depended on the currencies that preceded and coexisted with it. They blurred or added lines to the map that colonial authorities were drawing, not only determining the progress of the colonial currency but also the specific coins that circulated. This is not to say that colonial borders did not matter, but rather that their impact was not necessarily as expected. Moreover, the passage was not only negotiated through them but also through former currency areas' boundaries, which were invisible on the colonial maps.

The question remains whether colonial currencies are to be analysed as single currencies. The mere fact that tenths, pennies and shillings were circulating did not mean that a single currency was spreading. This is important for the chronology and role of colonisation in globalising single currencies. Colonial administrators believed that they were introducing a single currency, and when it did not work as such they blamed people for their inability to understand how 'modern' money worked. By doing so, they showed a considerable fetishism for their money since they believed that their coins and banknotes had the power to re-enact the world to which they belonged; however, they

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114 PRAAD, Accra, ADM.56/1/237. Palaver Book. Speeches at Nkroforo and Salaga in April and August 1920; ADM.56/1/211. Yendi 9 December 1919.

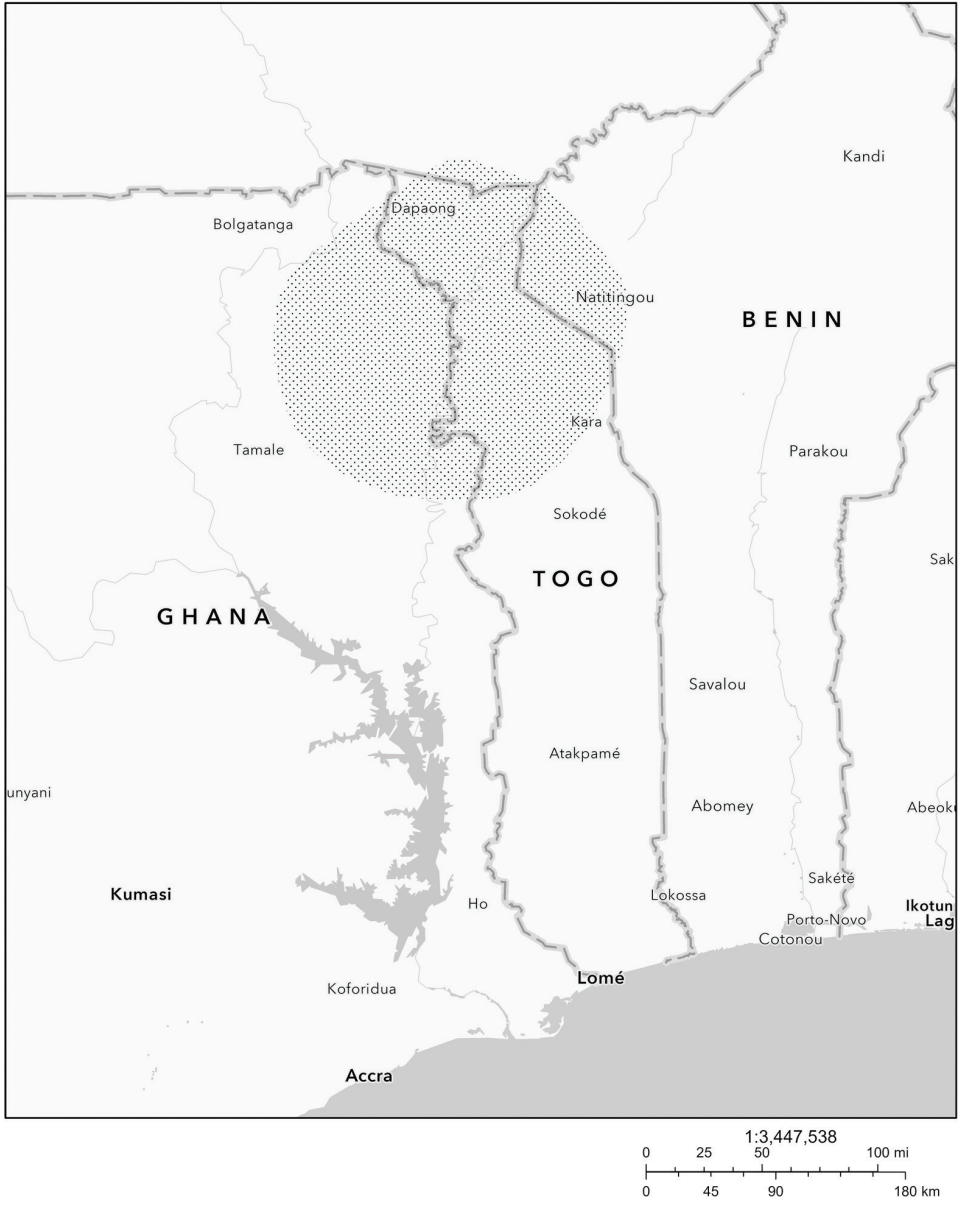
brought the objects but not the institutions. Which were these institutions? While we do not yet have the whole answer – surely, the history of the colonial world can provide crucial insights – we know that they were supposed to guarantee convertibility at specified fixed rates, safeguard against counterfeits and provide a reliable supply. As the evidence in this chapter shows, the colonial administration took almost no steps in this direction but focused on campaigning against the cowry.

The evidence analysed here prompts the need to reorder the elements that pushed single currencies on a global scale. Although convertibility to commodity money is considered a key part of the standard formula, if the goal is to understand the transformations that spurred trade and market integration to unprecedented levels, fiduciary money should be given a more preponderant place. After all, convertibility only initially played a role. In the long run, the spread of fiduciary money emerges as the main feature, and the fixed relations between denominations were key.

Moving the perspective to fiduciary money made of denominations with fixed values helps to explain why colonial currencies experienced problems when they crossed the boundaries of the cowry zone: while the cowry was a response to the same challenges that prompted the emergence of single currencies, it was a token for a world characterised by a low monetary control, whereas single currencies belonged to a world of stronger control in which the state was expected to play a major role in fixing the value of the different denominations. The supervision that colonial currencies required for working as single currencies was beyond the capacity of the colonial administration, which was able to circulate various sorts of fiduciary money but not fix their relations: in other words, it could circulate tokens but not determine their value. It took decades to fix them, whereby the passage to single currencies composed of multiple denominations with fixed and unalterable values was so protracted and confusing that it is doubtful that the populations crossed during the colonial period the threshold to a new era.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Wereldmuseum and, particularly, its library staff in Leiden for their help and generosity in the use of their excellent resources.



MAP 5.1 Area of study: Ghana-Togo border  
 SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE

# Border Crossing, Strategies of Resistance and Colonial Violence: Narratives from Northern Ghana and Togo (1920s–1940s)

*Giulia Casentini*

## 1 Introduction

I propose to observe the effects of colonial border demarcation on local communities in Ghana and Togo, with the aim to reflect on the dynamic relationship between the border and the people, by drawing particular attention to the relationships between centre and periphery in the African colonial space.<sup>1</sup> The analysis revolves around two points: I consider the construction of the border and its movements in history, and then I analyse how the colonial border represented an element of disruption, destabilisation of social and economic local life, but also a tool for resistance to the colonial violence. In our area of research, in fact, border communities could take advantage of the colonial border to escape taxation and detention, and try to avoid the loss or destruction of properties by the colonial authorities.

The contemporary border between the northern sections of Ghana and Togo lies on the Oti River and incorporates all the features of a natural threshold: on the one hand, it can be difficult and dangerous to cross, and on the other hand it is a connector of social and political life. In the local narratives and practices, the river represents more of a hinge than a barrier for Konkomba communities living on both sides: the river attracts people to fetch water, wash clothes, talk and meet to cross it together to reach markets on the opposite side. At the same time, the river fertilises the area when flooding during rainy season, thus constituting a precious, vital element for border communities. Nevertheless, the overflows cause insecurity, damages and threat: during rainy season, indeed, the river becomes too dangerous to be crossed, the floods often isolate riverside villages that can suffer lack of food, drinkable water and basic medical assistance.

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1 Igor Kopytoff, 'The Internal African Frontier', in Igor Kopytoff, ed., *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1987, 1–78.

Local stories and myths, narrated also in the first ethnographic accounts of the 1920s by A.W. Cardinall and in the monography on Konkomba written by David Tait in the 1950s, speak about the Oti River in terms of a threshold.<sup>2</sup> This account of the crossing of Oti River by Konkomba escaping Dagomba control is quite revealing:

They [Konkomba belonging to Kpalba clan], or rather their grandfathers, fled to the river, which was in flood. They could not cross and begged a crocodile to help them. He did so and all crossed safely on his back. The Dagomba came up and, seeing that the fugitives had crossed, considered the river fordable; it was not. So many were drowned. Hence the crocodile to the Palba [sic] is not to be slain or eaten.<sup>3</sup>

The Oti River was and still is a natural threshold before becoming a colonial border, and the concept of threshold is ritualised by the relationship, in this case, with the totemic animal, the crocodile. This river incorporates the features of *limes* and *limen* described by Raimondo Strassoldo when discussing the ambiguous and ambivalent concept of the border.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, for Strassoldo the border is 'opening and closure, barrier and conduit, exclusion and contact, *limes* and *limen*, dissociation and association, separation and articulation'.<sup>5</sup> These polar opposites indicate from one side how the threshold is a necessary element for the production and reproduction of the social order, from the other side how the threshold itself is functional to the relationship between the social system and the environment. The case of Konkomba communities, if understood in the *longue durée*, is particularly revealing of this continuous double function of the border, that in the course of history changes and constructs the dialogical and conflictual practice of social, economic and political relations.

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2 Allan Wolsey Cardinall, 'Random notes on the customs of the Konkomba', *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 18, 69, 1918, 45–62; David Tait, *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961.

3 Cardinall, 'Random notes', 46. See the Conclusion of the present volume, 'Places of Passage', for the discussion of a similar southern African stories involving a little girl fleeing from a cannibal.

4 Raimondo Strassoldo, 'La teoria del confine', in *Temi di sociologia delle relazioni internazionali, Quaderni dell'ISIG*, 5, Gorizia, 1979, 133–202.

5 'Chiusura e apertura, barriera e cerniera, esclusione e contatto, *limes* e *limen*, dissociazione e associazione, separazione e articolazione'. Strassoldo, 'La teoria del confine', 133–202. When not otherwise stated, all translations of the chapter are by Giulia Casentini.

The above-mentioned passage from Cardinall's notes discloses another relevant aspect of the relationship between groups in this area of multiple borders: Konkomba were frequently attacked and raided by neighbouring groups, like Dagomba in this case, in a dynamic of constant negotiation of their autonomy and sphere of influence. Therefore, Konkomba revolts are located in a complex regional geopolitical framework. Initially (from the end of the Nineteenth century to the 1920s) Konkomba fought back colonial territorial intrusion as they used to fight back, constantly, the interference, raids, and slave raids of neighbouring kingdoms. The Konkomba tried in various forms to maintain their territorial and political autonomy by inserting colonial powers into a dialectic with the 'others' that was already profoundly structured in their resistance to Dagomba, Nanumba, Anufo. At a later time, from the 1930s onwards, the changing of the colonial policy (especially in British controlled areas) intensified not only the conflict between the Konkomba and the colonial authorities, but also with the neighbouring groups: the British colonial administration, in fact, decided to subordinate Konkomba communities to other more organised kingdoms, due to their lack of recognisable structures of power.

It is clear that the border has played a crucial role in shaping groups' relations, power structures and strategies of resistance in the borderland. Beyond its empiric nature, the borderland brings along characteristics of change and fluidity.<sup>6</sup> It can become an analytical instrument that permits us to understand some political dynamics that interest the path that leads to the construction of the modern African state. I propose to use the concept of border and borderlands as suggested by Dereje Feyissa and Markus Hoehne: borders are the institutions of inter-state divisions according to international law, while borderlands are the physical spaces along the borders: 'Borders and borderlands mutually define one another – the existence of the border constitutes the borderland. We specifically engage with borders as institutions that can be made use of, and borderlands as fields of opportunities for the people inhabiting them'.<sup>7</sup> As suggested by Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, it is relevant to shed light on the practices of African borderlands to enhance our knowledge on the potential of cross-border exchanges, understood also in their historical dimension, and on

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6 Ulf Hannerz, 'Flows, Boundaries and Hybrids: Keywords in Transnational Anthropology', *Mana*, 3, 1, 1997, 7–39.

7 Dereje Feyissa, Markus Virgil Hoehne, *Resourcing State Borders and Borderlands in the Horn of Africa*, Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology, Working Paper No. 107, 2008, 2.

the relevance of the presence of the international border in the economic and social life of borderland communities.<sup>8</sup>

Borderlands are often marginal areas, in which the politics conceived and performed in the centre cannot easily be perceived and understood; these peripheral regions often struggle to feel included in complex and sometimes controversial national identity construction processes. The interaction between different political subjectivities – local groups, traditional chiefs, colonial administrators – and the connection between diverse politics of control and the flux of everyday life that constantly pass through it, make the border a place of paradox and, I would say, a place in which political entities and identity processes are constantly discussed.<sup>9</sup>

For these reasons, and probably many more, borders represent privileged observation points to critically read political transformations, and they must be carefully analysed in order not to fall into the wrong commonplace that Africans have little to do with the practical creation of the contemporary national borders, perceived as a sole legacy of the European colonial action. Many scholars have already moved in this direction; for what concern the construction of borders in West Africa, Pierluigi Valsecchi has, for example, proposed a reading of the process of definition of the southern section of the Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire border as a practice consciously and strategically determined by local African powers.<sup>10</sup> As I elaborated elsewhere, even in the area I am working on there are hints of local interaction and negotiation with colonial powers for the delimitation of the border.<sup>11</sup> As highlighted by Paul Nugent, even if this specific border was the product of European colonial interests, it must be recognised that the delineation of the border gave rise to a dynamic in which local communities became central actors of the new change and were able to define and redefine belonging, alliances, political relationships.<sup>12</sup>

8 Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, 'Borders and Borderlands as Linchpins for Regional Integration in Africa: Lessons of the European Experience', *Journal of Borderland Studies*, 8, 1, 1993, 1–20.

9 Paul Nugent, Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, 'Introduction: The Paradox of African Boundaries', in Paul Nugent, Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, eds., *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities*, London, Cassell, 1996, 1–17.

10 Pierluigi Valsecchi, 'La frontiera come storia. Politiche dell'appartenenza sul confine Ghana-Costa d'Avorio', *Il Politico*, 75, 3, 2010, 101–117. See also his contribution to the present volume, Chapter 3 'No Palaver About 1 or 2 Villages with 10 or 20 Inhabitants' Precolonial Borders and the Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire Frontier (Seventeenth-Twentieth Century)'.  
11 Giulia Casentini, 'Il confine come agente di costruzione della rappresentanza politica: il caso di Ghana e Togo settentrionali', *Il politico*, 75, 3, 2010, 118–135; Giulia Casentini, *Al di là del fiume. Storia e antropologia di un confine africano (Ghana e Togo)*, Roma, Viella, 2015.

12 Paul Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists, and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Lie of the Borderlands since 1914*, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2002.

I would position my contribution under this light, while I propose myself to dig analytically more on the creative use of the border made by those groups historically subordinated, without centralised political structure and therefore, during colonial times, voiceless.

In addition, I would propose a reading of the language used by colonial administrators, both on the French and on the British side, in defining Konkomba communities and producing a de-individualised and de-humanised stereotype that had, and still have, a profound echo on their representation in the media and their ability to speak for themselves. As underlined by Frantz Fanon, colonial language has a fundamental importance to understanding the dimension of being-for-others.<sup>13</sup> The border perspective allows us to highlight how, despite of the profound differences between British and French colonial systems, the representation of the colonised was very similar, and produced a shared negative label that contributed to the oppression and marginalisation of this peripheral group of people.

In the construction of the research that brought to the writing of this contribution, I focused on archival and ethnographic research, through which I broadly investigated the complex and multilayered relationship of the Konkomba with the border, in a *long durée* perspective. While my broader research considers the Konkomba, the border and their neighbours until contemporary times, by confronting with the role of the border and the colonial territorial partition in the postcolony, here I focus on a specific timeframe, that saw the birth and the consolidation of specific colonial dynamics of control and violence. In 1994, Konkomba communities were at the centre of a civil conflict erupted in Ghana due to their exclusion to land control and political representation, and the border played a crucial role in the escape of displaced people, in the hide of individuals involved in the clashes, but also as a catalyst of political processes and identity construction mechanisms of a borderland group that was, and somehow still is, excluded from the national political dynamics.<sup>14</sup>

13 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York, NY, Grove Press, 2008 [1952].

14 For an account on the diffuse conflict situation that characterises the Northern Region of Ghana, and especially the Konkomba, see N.J.K. Brukum, 'Conflicts in Northern Ghana', unpublished, 2005; Petr Skalnik, 'Nanumba versus Konkomba: An Assessment of a Troubled Coexistence', in Wim van Binsbergen, ed., *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law*, Leiden, LIT Verlag, 2003, 69–78; Jon Kirby, 'Peacebuilding in Northern Ghana: Cultural Themes and Ethnic Conflicts', in Franz Koger, Barbara Meier, eds., *Ghana's North*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2003, 161–205; Arthur Bogner, 'The 1994 Civil War in Northern Ghana: The Genesis and Escalation of a "Tribal" Conflict', in Carola Lentz, Paul Nugent, eds., *Ethnicity in Ghana: The Limits of Invention*, London, Macmillan, 2000; Susan Drucker-Brown, 'Communal Violence in Northern Ghana: Unaccepted Warfare', in Robert Hinde, Helen Watson, eds., *War: A Cruel Necessity?*, London, Tauris Publishers, 1989, 37–53.

Interestingly, no conflict erupted for the same reasons in the Togolese side, due to various causes among which the French colonial heritage in managing local powers and access to land is paramount. Again, the border acted as a place of passage, and a threshold: a porous place, made to be crossed, and a conceptual line that defined the transformation of the political system of the Konkomba.

## 2 Konkomba Communities and Their Neighbours

My fieldwork was carried out in villages inhabited by the Konkomba, a group that lives today in some districts of the North-Eastern part of Ghana and the North-Western area of Togo. Following the definition coined by British social anthropology during colonial times, which lasted quite long in anthropological studies and especially in the common local language used by media and often politicians, Konkomba would be an ‘acephalous’, ‘stateless’, ‘segmentary’ group, that is to say that they didn’t have centralised political organisations higher than kinship groups.<sup>15</sup> I wouldn’t use here this definition, that has a negative, privative connotation (‘acephalous’ as without head, ‘stateless’ in this context as without state structures, ‘segmentary’ as just a part of a whole something); I would rather prefer to define their political system as a diffuse power, by following the suggestion of Jean-Loup Amselle to avoid any crystallisation of typological definitions and move forward to a political anthropology that focus on the forms of power, instead to concentrate on the classification of political systems.<sup>16</sup> A convincing analysis of the relevance of the forms of diffuse, or ‘soft power’, in their capacity to intersect with neighbouring models and thus welcoming the multicultural, has been recently provided by Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber.<sup>17</sup> This means to highlight first of all the existence of a political system among these societies, and secondly to drive the attention towards their scattered, decentralised, fluid system that allow different centres, defined by the presence of a land shrine and a land priest, to spread power until the encounter with other similar centres.<sup>18</sup>

15 Meyer Fortes, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, eds., *African Political Systems*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1940; John Middleton, David Tait, *Tribes Without Rulers: Studies in African Segmentary Systems*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1958.

16 Jean-Loup Amselle, *Logiques métisses : anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs*, Paris, Paillet, 1999, [1990].

17 David Graeber, Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings*, Chicago, IL, Hau Books, 2017.

18 Giulia Casentini, ‘Different Ideas of Border and Border Construction in Northern Ghana: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives’, *Ghana Studies*, 17, 2014, 177–202.

Historically, the Konkomba have been portrayed as the periphery of politically centralised kingdoms, like Dagomba, Nanumba, Gonja, Mamprusi, Anufo; being subjected to their economic and political control meant that the Konkomba are still today in a condition of subordination for what concern the access to land and political representation. Konkomba, Dagomba, Nanumba and Anufo are settled in the region included between the medium Volta basin (Black Volta and White Volta Rivers) to the west, and the River Oti, more eastern. These groups have maintained strong relationships and developed heavy conflicts; their history cannot be understood without the presence of other great political entities of Western Africa like Mossi, Gonja and the Asante.<sup>19</sup> Considered a marginal area by the first European visitors, scholars and colonial officers, named 'the hinterland' of more influential political formations,<sup>20</sup> it was actually a central node of the regional trade for at least four centuries, and developed centres of Islamic cultural diffusion,<sup>21</sup> as demonstrated by the flourishing relationships with the Asante merchants active on the long distance (*batani*, pl. *batafo*) who regularly attended northern markets,<sup>22</sup> and with Hausa trade networks. In confronting with the theme of frontier areas in Western Africa, Mabogunje and Richards suggest designing a map of the people and political formations conceived as a network, a system of nodes of economic and political power that were connected by a system of commercial ties, patronage, tributary relationships, migration movements.<sup>23</sup> The regional dimension, often relegated into the background in favour of a reading that would privilege connections between the local dynamics and the global dimension, is indeed a crucial perspective that can highlight how some fundamental equilibrium and conflictual choices, historical and contemporary, were shaped.<sup>24</sup>

19 Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975.

20 Robert Sutherland Rattray, *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1932.

21 Nehemia Levtzion, 'Commerce et Islam chez les Dagomba du Nord-Ghana', *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 23, 4, 1968, 723–743.

22 Kwame Arhin, 'Aspects of the Ashanti northern trade in the Nineteenth century', *Africa*, 40, 4, 1970, 363–373.

23 Akin L. Mabogunje, Paul Richards, 'Land and People: Models of Spatial and Ecological Process in West African History', in J.F. Ade Ajay, Michael Crowder, eds., *History of West Africa*, New York, NY, Longman, 1971; Christine Oppong, 'Local Migration in Northern Ghana', *Ghana Journal of Sociology*, 3, 1, 1967, 1–16; Toyin Falola, Aribidesi Usman, *Movements, Borders and Identities in Africa*, Rochester, NY, University of Rochester Press, 2009.

24 Allen M. Howard, 'Nodes, Networks, Landscapes, and Regions: Reading the Social History of Tropical Africa 1700s–1920', in Allen M. Howard, Richard M. Shain, eds., *The Spatial*

When colonial powers started confronting with local institutions, the identification of trustable political and administrative hierarchies was a crucial requirement in the construction of all their systems of control, and Konkomba's weakness in this sense was perceived as an underlying problem. British colonial system tended to get around it in a pragmatic way, relying on the institutional support offered by the presence of centralised societies: in practice, diffuse power groups were considered as integral part of the sphere of influence of neighbouring groups, and given in their custody for the purposes of the colonial administration. This practice has contributed to the construction of a local discourse based on the legitimacy to the access to land and political rights that would exclude diffuse power groups,<sup>25</sup> by exasperating a condition of long, internal conflict that gave rise to a civil war in Ghana in 1994.

However, the historical reality was probably very different. As demonstrated by many relevant studies,<sup>26</sup> before European colonization diffuse power groups occupied the interstices of kingdoms of the Voltaic region, while maintaining during time a strong autonomy. They were often raided and occasionally forced to the payment of a tribute in some periods of the year, but they were never totally incorporated in other political realities, nor their tributary condition was systematic. Akosua Perbi reported in her work on slavery in Ghana that Mamprusi, Dagomba and Gonja occupied a strategic position in the regional slave trade and became important slave suppliers in the Northern markets.<sup>27</sup> Most probably, the Konkomba were among the communities that were frequently raided. The relationship between different groups inhabiting the area, in particular between the seventeenth and the end of the nineteenth century, was mainly characterized by ongoing political and economic negotiation, often conflictual, and by a great mobility.<sup>28</sup> As underlined also by Fabio Viti, precolonial state structures were characterised by a perception

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*Factor in African History: The Relationship of the Social, Material, and Perceptual*, Leiden and Boston, MA, Brill, 2005, 21–140.

- 25 Pauline E. Peters, 'Inequality and Social Conflicts over Land in Africa', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 4, 3, 2004, 269–314.
- 26 Jack Goody, 'The Mande and the Akan Hinterland', in Jan Vansina, Raymond Mauny, Louis-Vincent Thomas, eds., *The Historian in Tropical Africa*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 193–218, 1964; Carola Lentz, Richard Kuba, *Land and the Politics of Belonging in West Africa*, Leiden, Brill, 2006.
- 27 Akosua Adoma Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana: From the 15th to the 19th Century*, Accra, Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2004.
- 28 For a detailed reconstruction of the political relationships in the area from the seventeenth century onwards, see the collection of locally produced documents translated from Arabic and interpreted in Ivor Wilks, Nehemia Levtzion, Bruce M. Haight, *Chronicles*

and management of borders and frontiers as mobile, fluid, porous places of encounter, but also conflict, between different influences of power.<sup>29</sup> We have little information about the pre-colonial dynamics of the region, despite, perhaps, the translation from the Arabic of the *ajami* manuscripts contained in the Chronicles from Gonja.<sup>30</sup> We can intersect these narratives with the first ethnographies of the area, and we find out that the response of the Konkomba to the raids organised against them by their neighbouring groups were confronted through the socio-political instrument of the *mantotiib*, that is the obligation of people belonging to the same kin to offer support in case of difficulties, conflicts, but also when performing a ritual over land or a funeral.<sup>31</sup> The institution of the *mantotiib* is crucial for the functioning of society with diffuse power like the Konkomba. As convincingly pointed out by Benjamin Talton, there is a profound tie that connects those belonging to the same clan and to the various lineages, so much so that everyone is involved in case of an offence perpetrated to someone of the same kin. In case of retaliation, indeed, feuds that arose can reach great dimensions and eventually involve entire major lineages.<sup>32</sup>

By constructing fixed boundaries between different political kingdoms of the Northern regions and including forcibly diffuse power groups, colonial powers actively contributed to the progressive loss of autonomy of the latter. During colonial times, for example, centralised groups continued to carry out raids to search for slave and semi-slave labour force among political entities on their margins, but in the eyes of colonial administrators these practices were understood as forms of tax exaction, and indeed legally recognised. From the beginning of the twentieth century, Konkomba suffered increasingly from these incursions, legitimised by the colonial power. In addition, the imposition of the new colonial border between the French and the British divided in two halves their territory and brought about disruption in their everyday lives.

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*from Gonja: A Tradition of West African Muslim Historiography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

- 29 Fabio Viti, 'Centro e periferia negli Stati dell'Africa precoloniale', in Pierluigi Valsecchi, ed., *Africa tra Stato e società. Scritti in omaggio a Gianpaolo Calchi Novati*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2009, 13–32.
- 30 Wilks, Levtzion, Haight, *Chronicles from Gonja*.
- 31 David Tait, *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961; Benjamin A. Talton, *Politics of Social Change in Northern Ghana: The Konkomba Struggle for Political Equality*, New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- 32 Talton, *Politics of Social Change in Northern Ghana*.

I have analysed the causes that underly the local conflict, with particular attention to the Konkomba community who is redefining its own political status in order to cope with political changes and challenges produced during colonial and post-colonial phases. Thus, I have worked with Konkomba in both sides of the border and investigated their contemporary relation with the territorial partition and the historical path that led to it, by analysing documents from the colonial archives.

### 3 The Movement of the Border

The construction of the contemporary border between Ghana and Togo lasted a long time, from the ratification of the first agreement between Germany and Great Britain on 14 July 1886,<sup>33</sup> to the nomination of a Border Demarcation Commission in 1972, when it was necessary to go back again to that process due to the reunification struggle of the Ewe, located in the coastal area.<sup>34</sup>

From 1886 to 1914 what is now the eastern part of Ghana together with modern day Togo constituted a single colonial possession under German control, Deutsch Togoland, that was subsequently divided in two Mandates of the Society of Nations after the German defeat in the First World War. The Mandates were entrusted respectively to Great Britain (west) and France (east), that had occupied the German colonial possession during the war.<sup>35</sup> The border between the new colonial powers was defined in the Anglo-French agreements of 1919, while the Mandatary condition was ratified from the Society of Nations on 20 July 1922: the western part was called British Togoland and was annexed to the British colony of the Gold Coast, and the eastern part, which was wider, constituted the French Togoland. From 1946 the two Mandates were administered as Trust Territories under United Nations auspices.

33 The German colonial power declared a Protectorate on coastal Togoland in 1884, while the definition of the northern part of the border happened some years later.

34 The Ewe were included at the end of the Nineteenth century under the German possession, and the divided in two halves between French and British Togo. They have made claims for reunification since decolonisation. See Ulrike Schuerkens, *Du Togo allemand aux Togo et Ghana indépendants*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001; Dennis G. Austin, 'The Uncertain Frontier: Ghana-Togo', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 1, 2, 1963, 139–145; Paul Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists, and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Lie of the Borderlands since 1914*, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2002; Chiara Brambilla, 'Confini, cartografia e identità: l'esempio della frontiera coloniale tra Ghana e Togo', *Bollettino dell'Associazione Italiana di Cartografia (AIC)*, 123–124, 2005, 271–282.

35 Akin Olorunfemi, 'The Contest for Salaga: Anglo-German Conflict in the Gold Coast Hinterland', *Journal of African Studies*, 11, 1, 1984, 15–24.





MAP 5.3 Konkomba territory in German Togo, 1902

SOURCE: PAUL SPRIGADE, 'KARTE VON TOGO', BERLIN, E. VOHSEN, 1902, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE, DÉPARTEMENT CARTES ET PLANS, GE C-3168 [DETAIL], AVAILABLE ONLINE AT [HTTPS://GALLICA.BNF.FR/ARK:/12148/BTV1B53060536W/F3.ITEM.R=TOGO.ZOOM#](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/BTV1B53060536W/F3.ITEM.R=TOGO.ZOOM#) (LAST ACCESSED ON 14 OCTOBER 2024)

It is particularly interesting to note that the movement of the border brought about new disruptions: during German colonial occupation the Konkomba were together under the same territorial possession, while with the partition in two Mandates they were divided. The villages located in the westernmost part of their territory were put under British control, and the others under French jurisdiction. The debate on the layout of the new border lasted many years and interested not only the two colonial powers controlling the area, but also local chiefs and figures of power.<sup>37</sup> Konkomba communities, for their part, were not considered among those groups that colonisers, especially the British, wanted to or needed to confront with in managing the partition. The movement of the border, though, would appear quite frequently in the colonial documents regarding various issues concerning Konkomba territory, proving that the

37 Olofunfemi, 'The Contest for Salaga', 15–24.



MAP 5.4 French Togo, 1922–1960.

Legend: dashed circle = Konkomba territory

SOURCE: 'TERRITOIRE DU TOGO PLACÉ SOUS LE MANDAT DE LA FRANCE', NO AUTHOR, PARIS, 1925, BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE, DÉPARTEMENT CARTES ET PLANS, GE D-8257, AVAILABLE ONLINE AT [HTTPS://GALLICA.BNF.FR/ARK:/12148/BTVIB84586497.R=TOGO?RK=64378;0](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/BTVIB84586497.R=TOGO?RK=64378;0) (LAST ACCESSED ON 14 OCTOBER 2024)

border had the power to shape not only colonial strategies but discourses, rhetoric, representation and imagination, which definitely reverberated on local perceptions, narratives, and resistance.

#### 4 The Konkomba and the Colonial Administrations

The administrative strategies put in place by colonial powers, British and French, were different under many aspects, and profoundly influenced the shaping and reshaping of relationships between groups and the territorial administration.

The British government ruled more indirectly than the French administration, which followed a centralised administrative project that came with a transformative republican ideology and had more administrative resources.<sup>38</sup> British colonies, instead, employed less administrative effort and devolved more power to local authorities when centralised institutions existed.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, the partition of German Togoland after World War I provides an interesting case to analyse the impact of British and French colonisations on a territory that was previously under the same, German colonial rule.<sup>40</sup>

Initially, from 1914 until the 1930s, the administration of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, including the northern section of British Togoland, followed the system of the direct rule, conceived in opposition to the indirect rule, already applied successfully in the centre and southern regions of the Gold Coast. In the opinion of the British administrators, in the northern part of the colony it wasn't possible to rely on the management of structured and politically organised kingdoms comparable to the Asante. Local kingdoms seemed to lack centralisation, the authority of local chiefs was perceived as fragmented and ineffective, to the extent that British indirect rule appeared to be not functional for the area.<sup>41</sup> For this reason, the initial strategy of colonial

38 Carl Müller-Crepon, 'Continuity or Change? (In)direct Rule in British and French Colonial Africa', *International Organization*, 74, 2020, 707–741.

39 Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, 'The Aleketu of Ketu and the Onimek of Meko: The Changing Status of two Yoruba Rulers under French and British Rule', in Michael Crowder, Obaro Ikime, eds., *West African Chiefs: Their Changing Status under Colonial Rule and Independence*, Ife, University of Ife Press, 1970, 134–161; Michael Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule*, London, Hutchinson, 1968.

40 Denis Cogneau, Alexander Moradi, 'Borders that Divide: Education and Religion in Ghana since Colonial Times', *The Journal of Economic History*, 74 3, 2014, 694–729.

41 Robert Sutherland Rattray, *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1932.

control was based on the widespread presence of British colonial administrators in the management and the political reorganisation of the relationships between different groups. Here, the comparison with the warrant chiefs in Igboland and its complexities is useful and interesting.<sup>42</sup> The case of warrant chiefs speaks about a situation in which British colonial authorities shaped chieftaincy in a political space previously organised as a diffused power society. This has caused a severe disruption in Igbo's social and political structures, by inserting a coercive figure of power that, simply to answer the colonial interests and needs, exerted a considerable degree of violence, coercion, and eventually corruption.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, as noted by many authors,<sup>44</sup> the absence of chiefs did not mean that Igbo society was egalitarian; in any case, though, the imposition of arbitrarily nominated chiefs responding to the colonial power caused a considerable crumbling of their local governance. Indeed, warrant chiefs were not accountable to their kin, they were often perceived as civil servants and, even more often, as mere instruments of the colonial power so much so local revolts and attempts at dismissal took place. If one tries to compare this with the Konkomba condition, very challenging points can be raised and confronted. It is the division of the Konkomba under two different colonial powers that allow, in my opinion, a fruitful comparison and a fertile discussion. My hypothesis is that Konkomba communities were never fully forced to abandon their social and political structures, and this has allowed them to re-organise, where necessary, by keeping their system. This is due to a variety of factors, not least the scarce interest that all the colonial administrations had in the arid, poor and unproductive North. Nevertheless, I believe that the actions undertaken by different colonial powers and the relationships that the Konkomba had with their neighbours profoundly shaped their current path to a political recognition, especially in Ghana. In French controlled areas, chiefs were nominated to help French administration, but if we observe the chiefly structure of Konkomba communities in Togo today we can see that the elders and the *utindaan*<sup>45</sup> still play a central role in taking decisions. The chief does exist, but he cannot move without proper consultation with other figures

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42 I thank one of the two anonymous reviewers for the suggestion to elaborate on the comparison between the Konkomba case and the more famous colonial creation of warrant chiefs in Igboland, Nigeria.

43 Femi Adegbulu, 'From Warrant Chiefs to Ezeship: A Distortion of Traditional Institution in Igboland?', *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, 2, 2.2, 2011.

44 See, for example, Godfrey N. Uzoigwe, 'Evolution and Relevance of Autonomous Communities in Precolonial Igboland', *Journal of Third-World Studies*, 21, 1, 139–150, 2004.

45 Earth priest in Likpakpaaln (Konkomba language). This very important figure of power superintends the management and the rituality over land.

of power. A different situation took place in British controlled areas, where chiefs were used much more consistently to act on behalf of colonial administration. The Konkomba were put under the control of chiefs belonging to other groups, while they could keep entirely their own system based on diffuse power, where kin relations were central in the management of power and the role of elders and *utindaan* wasn't discussed or challenged by British colonial administrators.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, it was only in the 1930s that the British decided to exploit the administrative structures of local kingdoms in the Northern Territories, too. In this phase, a new kind of specific colonial violence took place, that is to say the territorial partition for administrative purposes and for the exploitation of natural and human resources through the mandate of local powers. Colonial governmentality expressed here a series of contradictions: the passage to a system that was perceived to be/conceived to be closer to local cultural and political specificities did not allow for a less coercive control but produces a simple reconfiguration of powers that actually reinforced local conflicts. It was a power device that increased existing imbalances and created new ones, affecting mainly those populations that did not respond to the standardised vision of the colonial powers: populations that are not organised according to the centralised model, like the Konkomba.

French administrators, instead, by following the model of the direct colonial administration, opted for a different kind of territorial partition and management. They chose a system based on the centralisation of power and aiming at a division of the land that followed more the administrative needs than alleged 'ethnic' needs.<sup>47</sup> This means that, contrary to the British system that focused on the recognition of local kingdoms and the mandate to them of some administrative aspects, the French colonial project highlighted the direct intervention on local political administration, often ignoring and overcoming local authorities. As affirmed by Delafosse, talking about the direct administration, 'we have to intervene discretely, apart from economic questions in which we

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46 Nowadays, due to the relevance of the chieftaincy institution in Ghana that is recognized and regulated by the 1992 Constitution, the Konkomba are working towards the construction and definition of their own chieftaincy, with a chief (*ubor*) nominated among elders of different clans and the maintenance of the figure of authority of the *utindaan*.

47 The institution of the *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF) and of the *Afrique Equatoriale Française* (AEF) were examples of this system of territorial division and restructuring that respond uniquely to colonial administrative needs. Schuerkens, *Du Togo allemand aux Togo et Ghana indépendants*.

will direct the chiefs, who are poorly prepared for this role'.<sup>48</sup> Despite a certain hostility towards local structures of power, the French colonial administration depended on local intermediaries to collect taxes, enlist forced labour, recruit soldiers and maintain the local infrastructures. For these purposes, chiefs were appointed based on their loyalty to the French colonial power rather than their precolonial status. They were stripped of their traditional authority and converted into colonial agents under the supervision of the *commandant de cercle*.<sup>49</sup>

Obviously, both Great Britain and France had the same goal, namely the maximum administrative efficiency, but they reached it by following two different paths and putting in place two different mechanisms of control and understanding of local relationships.

While Great Britain incorporated British Togoland in the Gold Coast colony and administered it following the system already in place in the rest of the territory, France, that was managing a new separate colony, had to submit more rigidly to the rules of political management of Mandates, that were different from those in place for ordinary colonies. Indeed, French Togo had a kind of administrative autonomy that, even if just relative, brought to a different management compared to the other colonies of the *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF).

The first Commissioner of the French Republic, Paul Auguste François Bonnacarrère, opposed firmly to the annexation of Togo to Dahomey, understanding that the new territory was bringing peculiar issues that needed to be managed separately, as for example its recent history of territorial formation, its geopolitical characteristics and, last but not least, the mandatory condition. In 1934, after the resignation of Bonnacarrère, Togo was inserted in a unitary colonial project with Dahomey, in which the Governor of Dahomey was in charge of covering all the duties that were in the hands of the Commissioner of the French Republic in Togo. The joint rule proved to be a failure and was finally dismantled in 1936. At that point, Togo was put under the general governor of the AOF and brought back to its previous autonomous administrative condition.<sup>50</sup>

48 Maurice Delafosse quoted in Schuerkens, *Du Togo allemand aux Togo et Ghana indépendants*, 77.

49 Müller-Crepon, 'Continuity or Change?', 707–741.

50 Cathérine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *L'Afrique Occidentale au temps des Français. Colonisateurs et colonisés (c.1860–1960)*, Paris, Éditions La Découverte, 1992.

For what concerned the territorial organisation, the French kept the same system adopted during German colonial control, which actually continued in the use of names and of the borders of the administrative districts.<sup>51</sup>

The way in which colonial powers managed and perceived local realities is fundamental to understand territorial changes and how border drawing and imposition had an influx on the lives of people inhabiting the area. British and French administrations were not only the product of different colonial models, but also of a diverse conception of the role that local groups could have in the economic development of the colony. A rich archival documentation allows us to reconstruct the specific contingent goals of the diverse colonial administrations in our area of interest, that was lacking natural and agricultural resources if compared to the most southern parts.

British colonial policy was essentially aimed at political and territorial control, due to the difficulties already experienced in managing the different groups of the area, especially the north, while the French system seemed to be oriented towards a valorisation of the limited agricultural potentiality intended to maximise taxation. British administration dedicated a lot of energies in the management of Konkomba communities in the attempt at containing what they believed to be a conflictual and destabilising force, that could disrupt the administrative efforts already implied in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. The brief incursions in the villages happened only in the case of litigations, murders, disorders. The District Commissioner was always accompanied by a chief, normally from the neighbouring centralised Dagomba, who helped with translation (the Konkomba, at the time, rarely spoke English, and even more rarely British administrators learnt Likpakpaaln, their language), who positioned himself as an 'intermediary' between colonial power and the peripheral Konkomba communities, acquiring a higher status. As observed by Franz Fanon in relation to the use of language in the colony, the 'native' officers were mainly interpreters; they served to convey to their fellows the master's order, and they themselves enjoyed a certain status.<sup>52</sup> The marginal geographical position of Konkomba villages, enhanced by their exclusion from the communication routes built by following a project that put first the productive Southern and Central regions, reduced to a minimum the colonial interest for

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51 The Togolese districts, in the first phase of the French colonial administration, were Lomé, Anécho, Atakpémé, Sokodé, Sansanne-Mango, Klouto. Contemporary Togo is divided in five Regions (Région des Savanes, de la Kara, Centrale, des Plateaux, Maritime), which are divided in 30 Prefectures, plus the Municipality of Lomé. Our area of study is located in the Région des Savanes, Prefecture of the Oti.

52 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York, Grove Press, 2008 [1952].

the area, and the local perspectives to enter the regional agricultural market.<sup>53</sup> Order and discipline seemed to be the fundamental aspects necessary for the rational and productive management of the colonial 'periphery'.

The *rappports annuels* of the French administrators in Northern Togo, instead, took place with regularity and followed a precise and constant structure: description of the path followed, population census, mapping of the rural production, updates on eventual issues (conflicts, epidemics, famine, etc). Particular attention was dedicated to the agricultural production of Konkomba communities, and consequently political quarrels in the villages were defined as 'serious' because they often implied the stealing of crops and the decreasing of the production. In a small colony like Togo, it seemed necessary to economically exploit every possibility, also in remote and destitute areas like the North of the country. The Konkomba appeared as a community difficult to manage, but their great dedication to yam cultivation contributed to produce a shared perception in French colonial administrators, who defined them 'great workers, more savages than rebels'.<sup>54</sup> Taxation in French controlled area was very high, and it became one of the first reasons why many people left their villages in French Togo to join their families and move into British controlled areas.

This was the case of the family of P.D., who is today resident in Saboba, Ghana, but was born in the colony of Togo in 1940s. P.D. remembered that his father moved in the Gold Coast just few years after his birth:

Following my father stories, the things that they did [in French controlled area] were not good. They taxed people too much, you had to pay for everything: if someone died, if your son had to get married. And they pretended communal work, that means that you had to work for free, to plant trees and things like that. Here in Ghana [sic], it wasn't like this, there was freedom. [...] In Togo, if you couldn't pay, they beat you.<sup>55</sup>

According to Benjamin Talton, migration towards British controlled territory was more frequent than the one towards French colonial possessions, due to the French policy of recruitment of semi-slave labour force, compulsory

53 Paul Ladouceur, *Chiefs and Politicians: The Politics of Regionalism in Northern Ghana*, London, Longman, 1979; N.J.K. Brukum, 'Studied neglect or lack of resources? The socio-economic underdevelopment of Northern Ghana under British rule', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, New Series, 2, 1998, 117–131; Paul Naameh, 'The State and Development in Northern Ghana, 1892–1966', MA Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, 1993.

54 Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 117. Doc. N°273. Mango, 2.

55 Giulia Casentini, conversation with P.D., Saboba, Ghana, 6 December 2009.

agricultural work, and heavy taxation.<sup>56</sup> In my opinion, though, the phenomenon was more complex and involved at the same time communities that were living on both sides of the border, enhancing a constant movement in both directions. This happened, and happens also today, because the reasons behind this transborder mobility were and are numerous and related not only to colonial violence and pressure, but also to various aspect of the communitarian life: people usually move to buy and sell in local markets, to visit families and to get married, or they flee after having committed a crime, to avoid an arrange marriage, to escape conflict, or external control. Moreover, as we will see, British colonial control was different but as coercive as the French one; Konkomba individuals frequently decided to flee from the British side, too, and colonial documents demonstrate this.

## 5 The Colonial Perception and the Invention of the 'Konkomba Attitude'

Notwithstanding the different strategies adopted by colonial powers, the Konkomba suffered historically from the same stigma in front both French and British administrations: their reputation as a violent, savage, backward, uncontrollable group, already reported by the German colonial power, continued during the Mandate period and remains, somehow, vivid also in contemporary times. Colonial administrators' reports offer various elements to understand their relationship and their prejudice towards Konkomba communities, describing an attitude characterized by lack of collaboration with the colonial authorities, sometimes with the use of violence, in which we can recognise a resistance to the colonial presence and to the imposition of colonial apparatus of control such as taxation, semi-slave labour recruitment, limitation to the mobility, and the intrusion in local conflicts and feuds.

It is exactly the presence of the border that allows us to consider the condition and the action of Konkomba from two points of views, the British and the French one. This double instrument of observation is analytically inspiring because it permits from one side to evaluate the consequences of two different colonial managements on the same peripheral group, and from the other side to analyse the strategies used by Konkomba communities to hinder the colonial project, often using the opportunity represented by the border.

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<sup>56</sup> Talton, *Politics of Social Change in Northern Ghana*.

Frantz Fanon analysed thoroughly how the colonial power worked towards the 'correction' of the colonised subjects to make them fit into a social environment of the colonial type, in a perspective that assumed a 'systematised negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity'.<sup>57</sup> As we shall see analysing colonial documents, the de-humanisation and reduction to a lower status compared to Europeans and to other local kingdoms were some of the elements that characterised the construction of the colonial idea of the Konkomba, that was functional to the legitimisation of coercive and violent measures adopted against them.

The Konkomba constituted an anomaly in the eyes of colonial powers and numerous documents report about the difficulties in managing and ordering such a complex group. In the informal diary of the Chief Commissioner for the Northern Territories (CCNT) Cecil Hamilton Armitage (British Gold Coast), in November 1917, we read that:

The Konkomba are a singularly interesting tribe [...] They can be aptly described as 'the Irish' of Togoland: pure love of fighting for fighting's sake is at the bottom of most of the disturbances that occur, and the young Konkomba has recourse to his bow and poisoned arrows as joyously and light-heartedly as the Irish man to his 'shillelagh'<sup>58</sup>. He sets little value on human life and a remark made by a Konkomba with regard to a farm dispute is typical of his attitude towards it – better a few dead men than an empty stomach.<sup>59</sup>

The tone of these considerations, dating back to the 1917 – when Eastern Togoland hadn't been occupied yet by Great Britain, but there was already in place a negotiation with the Ya Na –<sup>60</sup> was maintained and even emphasised many

57 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, NY, Grove Press, 2021 [1963], 182.

58 'Shillelagh: a thick, heavy wooden stick, often with lumps on the surface, traditionally used in Ireland as a weapon.' *Cambridge Dictionary Online*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/shillelagh> (last accessed on 6 October 2024)

59 Public Records and Archives Administration Department of Ghana (PRAAD), Administration (ADM), Accra, Ghana, ADM 56/1/177.

60 The Ya Na is the paramount chief of the Dagomba kingdom, that at the time was divided in two halves by the border between German and British colonial possessions. It was reported in colonial documents that the Ya Na worked closely to the British administrators to see his territory reunited under the same colonial power, since the partition brought instability and internal conflicts. On the specific case of the Ya Na Abdulai see Martin Staniland, *The Lions of Dagbon: Political Change in Northern Ghana*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975; Ladouceur, *Chiefs and Politicians*; Casentini, 'Il confine come agente di costruzione della rappresentanza politica', 118–135.

years later, in 1940, when in occasion of a fight among Konkomba in Zegberi, the CCNT W.J.A. Jones affirmed:

The Konkomba truly reverted to a state of savagery. For twenty-five years they have been a festering sore on an otherwise healthy administrative body. At times there were reasons to hope that the sore would yield to normal treatment; [...]. I am now convinced that only by drastic treatment will it permanently be cured. To change the metaphor, we must cease to treat the Konkomba as naughty, but amusing, children. Leniency they do not understand; they consider it to be a sign of fear.<sup>61</sup>

British colonial control had not loosened in all those years; it rather assumed an even more intrusive form especially for what concern the local political dynamics, with the consequence of exacerbating relationship between groups and different figures of authority. Fanon profoundly elaborated on the semiology constructed by colonial power (in his case, French in Algeria) that defined the mental backwardness of the colonised and justified strong decisions and actions brought by the administration. In this construction, the reference to a 'childlike mentality' is paramount.<sup>62</sup>

Very similar in the tone was the report of the French administrator Léon Victor Bauche, who in 1923 referred to Bonnacarrère, Governor of French Togoland, and to the results of his inspection in the north of the country:

M. le Capitaine Lucien, Commandant de cercle de Sansanne-Mango [...] m'a fait connaître l'incident récemment survenu dans le voisinage et causé par des auteurs de troubles du petit groupement Konkomba de Nantolé (Njatul). Vous voudrez bien trouver sous le présent pli copie des rapports officiels sur cette affaire dont l'origine sans aucune portée politique est un crime de droit commun qui dégénéra en rébellion ouverte [...]. Les Konkombas de notre zone [...] ont depuis trop longtemps abusé de leur réputation d'enfants terribles et déclaré qu'ils n'admettaient pas l'immixtion de notre administration dans leurs querelles sanguinaires vidées par vendettas, successives et préméditées après libation de bière de mil.<sup>63</sup>

61 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 11/1/1801, Case No. C.S. 310-3485/93/28 S.F.4.

62 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 224.

63 Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 117. Doc. N°673. Mango, 2, 'Mr. Captain Lucien, the *Commandant de Cercle* of Sansanne-Mango [...] told me about the recent incident caused by some riotous youths belonging to the little Konkomba group of Njatul. You will see

Again, in 1932, the *Commandant de Cercle* of Sokodé, Paul Louis Mahoux, said about an episode of conflict happened in the Konkomba village of Takpamba:

Nous sommes en présence d'une population pour qui la vie humaine est très peu de chose et dont la coutume exige impérieusement que le sang soit vengé dans le sang.<sup>64</sup>

The first interesting aspect regards the similarity drawn by both French and British colonial powers between the Konkomba and children. This expression clearly explains the paternalistic attitude that does not refer to the Konkomba as a group with its own political subjectivity, its own system of relationships, and ultimately its own strategy to resist the colonial control. To assimilate them to children means to deprive them of their agency, their legitimacy of thought and action, and their political decision, that is recognised, by contrast, to adults. Europeans are the only ones to consider themselves 'adults', which in practical terms means that they invest themselves of the authority and power to intervene in local dynamics through 'severe' measures. By refusing to recognise the agency of Konkomba communities, however, they failed at understanding the equilibrium of powers that underlie these episodes described as 'without political significance'. The reference to the lack of political intention in the episodes of violence carried out by the colonised is identified also by Fanon as a crucial element of the colonial machine, aimed at eliminating any possible element of reflection on individuality and social freedom conceived in the local sense.<sup>65</sup>

The constant reference to 'futile reasons' that would push the Konkomba to a constant and open fight, due to their temper 'naturally' directed towards the pleasure in bloodshed, is another sign of the incapacity and unwillingness to understand local political dynamics, which is a direct consequence of the paternalistic attitude already considered above.

It is frequently reported that the Konkomba are used to resort to violence, both during colonial times and in contemporary episodes like the 1994

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in the official report that this incident has no political relevance, it has been caused by a civil offense which has degenerated in an open rebellion. [...] The Konkomba living in our area [...] have taken advantage of their reputation of *enfant terribles* for a long time, and they declared that they won't tolerate any interference of our administration in their bloodthirsty and premeditated feuds, accomplished after millet beer libation'.

64 Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 117, Doc. N°266. Mango, 2, 'We are in front of a population that treats human life with little respect, for whom their customs imperiously requires that bloodshed must be revenged through bloodshed'.

65 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

conflict. David Tait, who produced the first ethnography of Konkomba communities, published in the 1950s, accurately described how violence is used by Konkomba communities on various occasions; in his analysis it is clear that violence is a constitutive, not disruptive, element of the society.<sup>66</sup> However, as affirmed by Fabio Viti, we cannot forget that war and violence are political choices, the outcomes of internal negotiations and of the consultation of supranatural entities. The use of violence cannot be analysed as an ecological imperative; we must consider, though, that all the societies can be violent or warlike if they are called to defend themselves and offend, without understanding these actions as integral part of their own 'culture'.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, in addition to the need to manage internal disputes, the Konkomba, due to their diffuse power political structure, have historically been in a constant position of defense against more organised and structured neighbouring populations (Dagomba, Nanumba, Anufo). Moreover, as suggested by Michel Izard, in a region where hunting is a highly valued activity, where groups must protect themselves from slave raids, and where the recruitment of mercenary militias is common, everyone is armed, and ready to use weapons.<sup>68</sup> The encounter with colonial powers represented for sure another oppressive element to fight with the choice of violence.

Colonial occupation changed profoundly also the political relationships between local groups, introducing a hierarchy of values that sets aside the last place for those who were not useful to the colonial administration, who became considered as 'children', deprived of agency and political authority. However, as we have seen, Konkomba's use of violence was placed in an already conflictual framework, that was highly exasperated by the colonial experience.

## 6 Practices of Colonial Control and Violence

Before the end of the First World War, the British moved eastwards to occupy portions of German Togoland and started establishing relationships with Konkomba communities. Attempts at managing this peripheral and scattered group were oriented to stem violent episodes, and to establish a relation based on a kind of persuasive subjugation. By reading the personal diary of the Chief

66 David Tait, 'The Political System of Konkomba', *Africa*, 23, 3, 1953, 213–223; Tait, *The Konkomba*.

67 Fabio Viti, ed., *Guerra e violenza in Africa occidentale*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2004.

68 Michel Izard, 'Parlare di guerra in antropologia', in Fabio Viti, ed., *Guerra e violenza in Africa occidentale*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2004, 23–37.

Commissioner for the Northern Territories (CCNT) Cecil Hamilton Armitage, we can understand of what these attempts to include the Konkomba in the British colonial project of occupation of German Togoland consisted, and which rhetoric was in use at that time. In 1917, Armitage took note of some relevant aspects of his patrol of Konkomba territories:

I scored my most effective point when I asked the young men themselves if they wanted the Germans back again. Following on the invariable outburst of dissent, I told them that if such were the case, they must help us to win the war. I then paused, while the young men looked anxiously at each other: evidently fearing that a demand for recruits was about to be made. In the midst of a tense silence, I then informed them that there was only one way in which they could help us, and that was by refraining in future from killing their own brothers and from indulging in blood feuds: by generally keeping the peace and by giving the District Political Officer no trouble. The look of relief that passed like a wave over their faces [...] and they promised that in the future everyone would be on his best behaviour to help to win the war. I then told the Elders that if any of their young men's blood became so heated that they must need cool it by fighting, they should send them to the DPO, who would hand them over to me at Tamale when I would make real soldiers and men of them. [...] I concluded by pointing out their cowardice and folly in fighting with and killing their own brothers, when thousands of white men were laying down their lives in order to secure freedom and peace in the world.<sup>69</sup>

The rhetoric used by the CCNT is clear: he tried to manipulate reality to his advantage, making Konkomba communities to believe that the defeat of the Germans in the war in Europe would have brought the liberation of Konkomba territories under German control, by exploiting a persuasive and paternalistic dialectic that was typical of the colonial system in that historical period.<sup>70</sup> This colonial dialectic had no shame in openly revealing its own exploitative and racialised project: Armitage's words disclose precisely how the colonial administration perceived local groups. Local authority is completely overpassed,

69 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 56/1/177.

70 N.J.K. Brukum, 'Studied neglect or lack of resources? The socio-economic underdevelopment of Northern Ghana under British rule', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, New Series, 2, 1998, 117–131; Badjow Tcham, 'Le pays Konkomba : l'impossible pacification (1896–1946)', in Nicoué Lodjou Gayibor, ed., *Les Togolais face à la colonisation*, Lomé, Presses de l'UB, 1994, 151–211; Talton, *Politics of Social Change in Northern Ghana*.

local customs in dealing with crime is totally unacknowledged, and indeed if a young man committed a violent act only the colonial power would have the capacity to manage it. Moreover, here Armitage underlined the idea through which the only valuable expressions of courage and force are those directed towards the war efforts in Europe, recalling other works reflecting on the recruitment of African soldiers for the First World War, in which the rhetoric around the disciplining of the warrior instinct and the exploitation of other 'typical' characteristic of some groups is analysed.<sup>71</sup>

In 1915, an ordinance on the regulation of punishments in case of robbery, murder, and noncompliance with colonial law in the Protectorate of the Northern Territories, stated:

Where within any village or district a person is unlawfully killed, or dangerously wounded by unlawful attack, or the body is found of a person believed to have been unlawfully killed, the Governor may impose a fine on all or any of the inhabitants of such village or district of the member of any tribe or community resident in therein unless they can show that they did not take part in the commission of the offence and either.<sup>72</sup>

In composing this regulation, the certainty of assuming that there is unlawful, and consequently lawful killing is evident, where by 'lawful killing' they define only the act perpetrated by the colonial power.

This ordinance would be systematically employed in Konkomba areas, where the colonial administration imposed extremely harsh punishments that penalised groups and not (allegedly guilty) individuals. Communities were punished as a collective body, and everyone became responsible for any crime – in the British conception of crime – that was perpetrated in their territory. With these measures, Konkomba subjectivity was denied, once again: there was no attempt to understand and interpret the reasons behind diffuse rebellions, there were no individuals responsible for committing a crime but entire communities to be quelled with violence and the destruction of properties and livestock. Here is empirically evident what Frantz Fanon said about the fight of the colonised: 'Colonialism has not simply depersonalised the colonised.

71 Joe Harris Lunn, "Les races guerrières": Racial Preconceptions in the French military about West African Soldiers during the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 34, 4, 1999, 517–536.

72 Public Records and Archives Administration Department of Ghana (PRAAD), Northern Regional Archives (NRG), Tamale, Ghana, NRG 8/2/21, Ordinance No. 20 of 1915, Chapter 80.

The very structure of society has been depersonalised on a collective level. A colonised people is thus reduced to a collection of individuals who owe their very existence to the presence of the coloniser'.<sup>73</sup>

In January 1915 the District Commissioner W.E. Gilbert went to the Konkomba village of Sambul to suppress a dispute, which had arisen 'without any apparent reason', between two sections of the village, causing the death of three people and the injuring of other 18. The DC was accompanied by the Dagomba chief of Demon<sup>74</sup> and 15 officers of the police force, and the day after also the Commandant Arthur Massey, from the Northern Territories Constabulary, joined the patrol. The conflict was a great cause of concern; Gilbert managed to collect 4,000 poisoned arrows that were burnt by colonial authorities.<sup>75</sup>

In those years, the Konkomba issue was at the heart of the management problems of the northern regions also in French Togo. In 1932 the *Commandant de Cercle* of Sokodé, Paul Luis Mahoux, sent to the Commissioner of the French Republic in Togo the report of a complex case of feud that caused the death of two people in the Konkomba village of Takpamba, and involved also other villages located in the British part of Togo. After having meticulously described the case, and hoped for a resolution of the conflict in collaboration with the British District Commissioner of Yendi, Mahoux wrote some general considerations on the management of the problems continuously caused by this population:

J'estime que nous ne devons ni ne pouvons tolérer qu'une bande de 200 forcenés ivres de fureur et d'alcool puissent impunément assassiner deux hommes même par représailles immédiates. [...] Les deux victimes n'ont participé ni de près ni de loin au meurtre de Sanja ; seul leur tort aux yeux des gens de Takpamba était d'être originaires du village où le crime a été perpétré. Il serait évidemment con-forme aux règlements de se saisir de ces deux cents individus et de les traduire devant la juridiction compétente. Mais est-ce possible ? Je ne le crois pas. [...] A mon avis le seul coupable réellement responsable sans cette affaire, c'est la bande entière considérée sans son ensemble et non tout ou partie de ses éléments constitutifs pris individuellement. [...] Une sanction préjudicielle a déjà été prise par l'Administrateur, Commandant de Cercle de Mango : une

73 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 219–220.

74 This is one of the first reported example of the British colonial strategy to put Konkomba communities under the control of more structured neighbouring groups, like Dagomba in this case.

75 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 56/1/300, Case No. 77/67/1925.

punition de prison a été infligée à chacun des Chefs des Soukhalas<sup>76</sup> du Village et à chacun des Chefs des autres agglomérations. [...] Je vous demanderais, en conséquence, Monsieur le Commissaire de la République de vouloir bien, conformément aux dispositions des articles 21, 22 et 23 du décret du 24 mars 1923 déterminant au Togo, l'exercice des pouvoirs disciplinaires, infliger au Canton de Takpamba (Cercle de Mango) une contribution collective de 3.000 francs [...]. Il est certain enfin que si nous, le Blancs, n'étions pas là, cette affaire serait loin d'être terminée.<sup>77</sup>

It is difficult to imagine which could have been the perception of Konkomba communities in front of the operation of colonial control and violence. The contemporary narratives, that are based on the memories of the forefathers who were present during colonial times, are still resentful and reveal, at the same time, a kind of resignation towards a system of control that, through the joint venture between colonial administrations and local chiefs,<sup>78</sup> who were mainly Dagomba in our case, considerably reduced the space of action and political claim of Konkomba communities.

## 7 Practices of Resistance

The Konkomba had little bargaining power: they had few possibilities to defend themselves from colonial intrusion and, probably even less, from the

<sup>76</sup> 'Compound', 'section'.

<sup>77</sup> Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 117, Doc. N°266. Mango, 2. 'I think that we cannot tolerate that a bunch of 200 mad individuals, livid with fury and alcohol, could assassinate two people for retaliation with impunity. The two victims [...] didn't participate to the killing of Sandja; they are just wrong, in the eyes of the people of Takpamba, of being from the village in which the crime was perpetrated. It would comply to regulation to capture these 200 individuals and summon them in the competent jurisdictions. But is it possible? I don't think so. [...] In my opinion, the responsible of this case is the entire gang, considered as a whole, and not just a part of its elements considered singularly. [...] A preliminary sanction has already been applied by the Commander of the Cercle of Mango: to imprison all the chiefs of the soukhala of the village [Takpamba] and all the other chiefs of the neighbouring communities involved. [...] I would consequently ask, Mr. Commissary of the Republic, to be allowed, following the disposition contained in the articles 21, 22 and 23 of the decree of the 24 March 1923 on Togo, to impose a collective sanction of 3,000 francs on the canton of Takpamba (cercle of Mango). [...] It is certain, however, that if we, the Whites, weren't here, all these problems would be far from being resolved'

<sup>78</sup> Carola Lentz, 'The Chief, the Mine Captain and the Politician: Legitimizing Power in Northern Ghana', *Africa*, 68, 1, 1998, 46–67.

collaboration between European powers and local kingdoms. Nevertheless, they were able to carry out a generalised resistance to the colonial practices of control and exploitation.

There is a widespread tendency to use the term 'resilience' in describing the forms of adaptation that border communities put in place during colonial times, in the transition to the postcolony and also in contemporary times. Wandji, for example, elaborating on the Cameroon-Gabon frontier, affirms that people living in the borderland deployed many strategies to tolerate or circumvent the presence of imposed borders on their territory, by maintaining their livelihoods, communal ties, and social organisation: all these practices can be described as resilient, and the border should be considered as their trigger.<sup>79</sup> Border communities, then and today, have had to constantly reassess their geographical imagination, engaging in subtle forms of 'resilience' because these are strategies matching the nature of the threats they perceive.<sup>80</sup> Assuming that every border has a peculiar historical and social path, I doubt that the colonial control imposed on Konkomba communities via the colonial border was widely perceived as subtle, and I challenge the idea that their strategies to carry on their lives could be just described as resilient.

I would use, instead, the term 'resistance', by borrowing the distinction proposed by Cindi Katz between resilience and resistance. The feminist scholar, drawing into her fieldwork in rural Sudan, prefer to define as 'resilience' those strategies that imply productive adaptation to a changing context: in particular, she refers to the practices of adjustment to deforestation and pasture deterioration by the community decision to radically expanding their terrain of work, by allowing, in less than two decades, young people to remain in the village and find a remunerative activity. Practices that might be understood as 'resistance', instead, refer to those actions consciously directed at altering a condition that people recognised as oppressive.<sup>81</sup> This is the reason why I choose to talk about resistance, even if we are not in front of an organised, structured activity directed towards a specific project like the suppression of the border, or the defeat of the colonial powers. What I definitely recognise in the strategy implied by Konkomba is the conscious action to cross the border to alter the oppressive condition in which they found themselves in,

79 Dieunedort Wandji, 'Rethinking the Time and Space of Resilience beyond the West: An Example of the Post-colonial Border', *Resilience*, 7, 3, 2019, 288–303.

80 Wandji, 'Rethinking the Time and Space of Resilience beyond the West'.

81 Cindi Katz, 'Social Systems: Thinking about Society, Identity, Power and Resistance', in Nicholas Clifford, Sarah Holloway, Stephen P. Rice, Gill Valentine, eds., *Key concepts in Geography*, London, SAGE, 2009, [2003], 236–250.

characterized by heavy taxation, capillary control of their mobility, detention, severe hindrance of their social habits.

The strategy represented by the defensive war, used during the first phase of the German occupation, seemed to be abandoned in favour of mild and sporadic armed attacks, and a more frequent use of the escape and the refusal to collaborate. Cornerstone of this practice of resistance is the colonial border, which provided great opportunities for independence to the Konkomba communities inhabiting the frontier.

Certainly, the decision to abandon offensive tactics was greatly due to the widespread control under which the villages were placed. During the patrolling of the villages, colonial authorities destroyed systematically all the arrows, bows and weapons that they could find, jeopardising also the possibility to carry on hunting activities, which as mentioned was very important for the livelihoods of Konkomba communities. Most probably, though, there was also a question of political expedience: the clear military superiority of the colonial armies made armed resistance unproductive. Moreover, armed resistance itself could not assume organised and structured dimension due to the diffuse power political system of the Konkomba. Their division in clan scattered around the vast territory, that initially constituted a potential limit in their organised response against colonial powers, eventually became an important instrument of resistance.

In a report dated June 1935, by the *Commandant de Cercle* of Mango, we read:

Le recouvrement a été particulièrement très difficile en pays Konkomba où de nombreux indigènes abandonnent encore leur soukhala pour se réfugier en brousse lors de l'arrivée d'un fonctionnaire.<sup>82</sup>

This report is one of numerous similar documents attesting the escape of Konkomba individuals or, sometimes, entire lineages to avoid taxation, forced labour recruitment, destruction of properties, detention.

In 1927, Gilber reported about a fight between two sections of the Konkomba villages of Kuntuli and Tschegebani. The Dagomba chief of Demon called the DC Gilbert to set the fight, but when the latter arrived the villages were deserted. Gilbert could arrest only 6 men, then he sent a message to invite everyone to come back to the villages to be judged, but his plea remained unattended:

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82 Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 30, Doc. N°1638. Mango, 2, 'The [tax] collection was particularly difficult in Konkomba countries, where numerous indigenous abandoned their soukhala to hide in the bush as soon as they know that an official is arriving'.

At 7 a.m. on the 3rd as no one came to me I went there and burnt their compounds (33) and some yams and corn, and also burnt the Headman of Tschegebani's compound. [...] I am convinced that if I had not burnt the compounds and food the other sections would have fought, sooner or later.<sup>83</sup>

Colonial reports of the 1920s and 1930s recounted internal fights in the Konkomba communities living the borderland, highlighting a crucial aspect of the border as a barrier but also as an opportunity. French and British colonial administrators tried to establish a system of control which limited the trans-border mobility of their subjects, with the aim to grant the governability of their territories. By analysing some village litigations, we can better understand what the colonial border imposition may have meant for local communities.

Of great interest is the report dated 5 February 1923, regarding a litigation happened in two Konkomba villages under French colonial administration that reverberate in some sections of the Konkomba village of Saboba, under British jurisdiction. The Deputy Chief Commissioner for the Northern Territories, from Tamale, informed that:

Two Konkomba villages on the French side of the Oti River [which correspond to the border] have been fighting, and the Saboba people have been joining in. The French Commissioner informed Mr. Gilbert of this, and Mr. Gilbert has information that some French Konkombas are on our side of the River.<sup>84</sup>

The report made by Mr. Gilbert, District Commissioner of Yendi, on the 7 February was more precise and unveiled relevant particulars:

Two villages Boman and Nalun under French administration fought over a woman on or about the 25th of last month. The Saboba people are divided into three sections: Main, Nalongni and N'jenga. The Main and Nalongni sections are related to Nalun, and N'jenga to Boman. The Main section hearing of the fight got their bows and arrows and went over to help their relatives, but very soon after crossing the river they met the Nalun people running to Saboba. They returned with them and did not fight. The N'jenga people, fearing reprisal, ran away and their corn

83 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 56/1/399, Case No. 2/6/1926.

84 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 56/1/300, Case No. 55/48/21.

and yams were, to a certain extent, looted by people from the Manin and Nalongni sections.<sup>85</sup>

It is evident here that, even if the border has brought disruption and profound changes in Konkomba territory, it did not prevent them to move, cultivate lineage ties, perpetuate their social and conflictual communal life. Colonial administrators could take note of this, fine them following the 1915 Ordinance for the chaos caused to the colonial order but could not really stop their mobility and their creative use of the border, which express a conscious, organised effort to escape colonial control through the practice of the *mantotib*.<sup>86</sup>

While patrolling the villages, colonial administrators could not help but take note of the continuous mobility of some sections, on both sides of the border. In 1935, the French reported that:

Aucun exode m'a été signalé dans les divers cantons visités à l'exception de deux soukhalas du village de Namou (Canton de Takpamba) (qui sont parties en Gold Coast pour rejoindre leurs parents).<sup>87</sup>

In 1923, Gilbert, on the British side of the border, went to talk to some villages to prevent the movement of people, due to the notice received from the *Commandant* of Sansanne Mango:

I proceeded to Nambiri and held a palaver with all the local people and warned them that they were not to join their relatives from Nanguel in the fight [...] The following two days I visited as many villages as possible near the frontier to see that my orders were carried out. I was informed that all French subjects had returned across the Oti River (the Anglo-French boundary). [...] The Nanguel people are related to most of the Konkombas living between Saboba and Nambiri, and if they are allowed to stay on this side, I am afraid that there is a possibility of the Kidjabons people coming over.<sup>88</sup>

85 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 56/1/300, Case No. 82/48/21.

86 See Section 2 for a thorough explanation of the practice.

87 Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 30, Doc. N°1638. Mango, 2. 'No exodus has been reported in the various canton that we visited, apart from two soukhalas of the village of Namou, in the canton of Takpamba, where all the inhabitants left to join their families in the Gold Coast'

88 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 56/1/300, Case No. 73/13/19.

While reporting on the livelihood conditions of Konkomba, the *Commandant de Cercle* of Mango wrote in 1935:

En ce qui concerne le canton de Takpamba, la tournée effectuée dans les divers villages m'a permis de constater que les Konkombas ne sont pas pauvres et se livrent volontiers aux travaux de champs. De très vastes surfaces ont été plantées en ignames. Mais là encore, ils manifestent leur désir d'indépendance absolue et se refusent à sortir de chez eux pour aller vendre leurs produits. Tout au plus quelques-uns d'entre eux, très rares, vont jusqu'à Kandé. Les autres tentent d'écouler leurs produits sur les marchés de Takpamba, fréquenté par quelques acheteurs de Mango, de Katchamba et de Tanga.<sup>89</sup>

It seems that, actually, the resistance of the Konkomba communities is inherent in their socio-economic and political structure. Their everyday practices made them 'resistant' to colonial control and management. There was no aspect of Konkomba life that could productively dialogue with colonial projects and power structures: they were too quarrelsome, not very productive, too scattered on the territory, not organised.

As Fanon wrote, 'the colonised's indolence is a conscious way of sabotaging the colonial machine; on the biological level it is a remarkable system of self-preservation and, if nothing else, a positive curb on the occupier's stranglehold over the entire country'.<sup>90</sup>

The colonial gaze could not see beyond its structures of control and its contingent goals. By doing so, it failed in grasping fundamental aspects of the life of their subjected communities. What French administrators read as a 'refusal to collaborate' in the economic prosperity of the colonial possession was simply a diffuse practice that has been in use until recently: Konkomba communities harvest great quantities of yam, corn, red millet that are normally sold in major markets by other individuals, mainly Anufo, Dagomba, Mossi traders. It was not a Konkomba duty to sell products in bigger, distant markets. They are

89 Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 30, Doc. N°1638. Mango, 2. 'For what concern the canton of Takpamba, during the patrolling I realised that Konkomba are not poor and gladly dedicate themselves to agriculture. They plant yam in large portions of land. But yet, they manifest their desire of absolute independence, and they refuse to leave their villages to sell their harvest. At the most, some of them, very rarely, go to Kandé. The others try to sell their products in the market of Takpamba, attended by some traders from Mango, Katchamba and Tanga'.

90 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 220.

mainly farmers, especially in this historical phase, tied to a social, economic and ritual role that revolves around land.<sup>91</sup>

## 8 Conclusion

While analysing the clash/encounter between diverse management strategies and different conceptions of space, we entered in the local debate regarding the colonial territorial partition, and we could consider the consequences brought about border definition on local political equilibrium from a critical point of view.

The construction of the border involved colonial powers and, to some extent, local powers, but only those organised and structured peoples with a recognisable chiefly hierarchy. Ultimately, those peoples were perceived by colonial powers as 'legitimate'<sup>92</sup> occupiers of the land. Groups organised with a diffuse power structure, like the Konkomba, were considered as peripheries of neighbouring kingdoms, deprived of any active role in the restructuring of the geographical map of the region and in the construction of a new spatial system born from the discussed and conflictual encounter between the European colonial model and the different landscapes conceived locally. Wyatt MacGaffey noted that the colonial classification had the responsibility of crystallising this juxtaposition, from the one side glorifying the centralised system of organised kingdoms, from the other side celebrating the 'stateless' for their presumed ontological freedom from the despotic potential of organised structures.<sup>93</sup>

Notwithstanding, Konkomba communities, who found themselves in the colonial borderland after the territorial division between Great Britain and

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91 In the last decades, Konkomba have organised themselves in expanding their own control over their yam production and have established trade points in important southern Ghanaian markets, like Old Fadama in Accra (also known as Agblobloshie). Nowadays, indeed, they are not only farmers but also traders, adjusting to the current need of the market and asserting, once again, their independence. See Giulia Casentini, 'Partecipazione politica, mobilità e appartenenza: il ruolo dei migranti di ritorno in Ghana', in Selenia Marabello, Umberto Pellicchia, eds., *Capitali migratori e forme del potere. Sei studi sulle migrazioni ghanesi contemporanee*, Roma, CISU, 2017, 103–124.

92 Robert Sutherland Rattray, anthropologist and British colonial administrator, first in India and then in the Gold Coast, defined as 'legitimate' those groups with a centralised structure of power, with a chief at the top, that proved to be useful to the management of the colony. Rattray, *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*.

93 Wyatt MacGaffey, 'The Residue of Colonial Anthropology in the History and Political Discourse of Northern Ghana: Critique and Revision', *History Compass*, 8, 6, 2010, 431–439.

France, could exploit the presence of the new border in many ways, often to their own advantage. From its definition in 1919 onwards, the border took on different meanings in the political and socio-economic life of borderland villages. More precisely, it was perceived as a limitation and as an opportunity, representing simultaneously in two, opposite ways the effects brought about an external imposition on local communities.

The ambivalence of the border, *limes* and *limen* highlighted by the analysis of Strassoldo is here crucial to understand these dynamics.<sup>94</sup> The border has a double significance in the life of the local communities and is a fundamental element of the relationship between people and the space. A border that is at the same time 'barrier and connection' is an instrument of the restructuring of the relationships between communities and their territory, in a process in which borderland groups think and construct their identity also in relation to the position of the border and the social, political, and economic events that revolve around it.<sup>95</sup>

This contribution aims at positioning the Konkomba experience, their actions and reactions to colonial order, at the centre of the regional picture representing the border and its perils. I argue that, far from being 'a-historical' or backwards, crystallised in the colonial representation, the Konkomba have done more than just navigating the colonial storm. Through their activity of resistance and constant determination of the self, they have indeed contributed to the shape of the local narrative on the border, its forms and the possibilities arose around it. As testified by the seminal work of Jean Allmand and John Parker on Talensi historical and contemporary identity, a detailed and attentive study demonstrates that the so called 'stateless' populations do not comply with the stereotype of a 'people without history',<sup>96</sup> immobilised in space or time by the 'tradition' that colonial officials and western scholars landed upon them. Konkomba communities have proven to be able to cope with the challenges brought by colonial occupation, to resist to some imposition and to be resilient to some other structural changes, like the historical heritage of a double colonial occupation, making them partly francophone, partly anglophone, partly Ghanaian, partly Togolese, all Konkomba. These contemporary multiple identities are not discussed, not confronted. The Konkomba have actively and consciously incorporated them all and navigate the contemporary world by embodying their own multiplicity.

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94 Strassoldo, 'La teoria del confine'.

95 Strassoldo, 'La teoria del confine'.

96 Jean Allmand, John Parker, *Tongnaab: A history of a West African God*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005, 215.

While working with Kabre communities in Northern Togo, Charles Piot observed that the border perspective is a privileged point of observation of communities in transition because it could help breaking the epistemological division between tradition and modernity, local and global.<sup>97</sup> Borders, as sites of profound and dramatic changes, are not just the symbols and places where these changes take place, but also the agents causing them.<sup>98</sup>

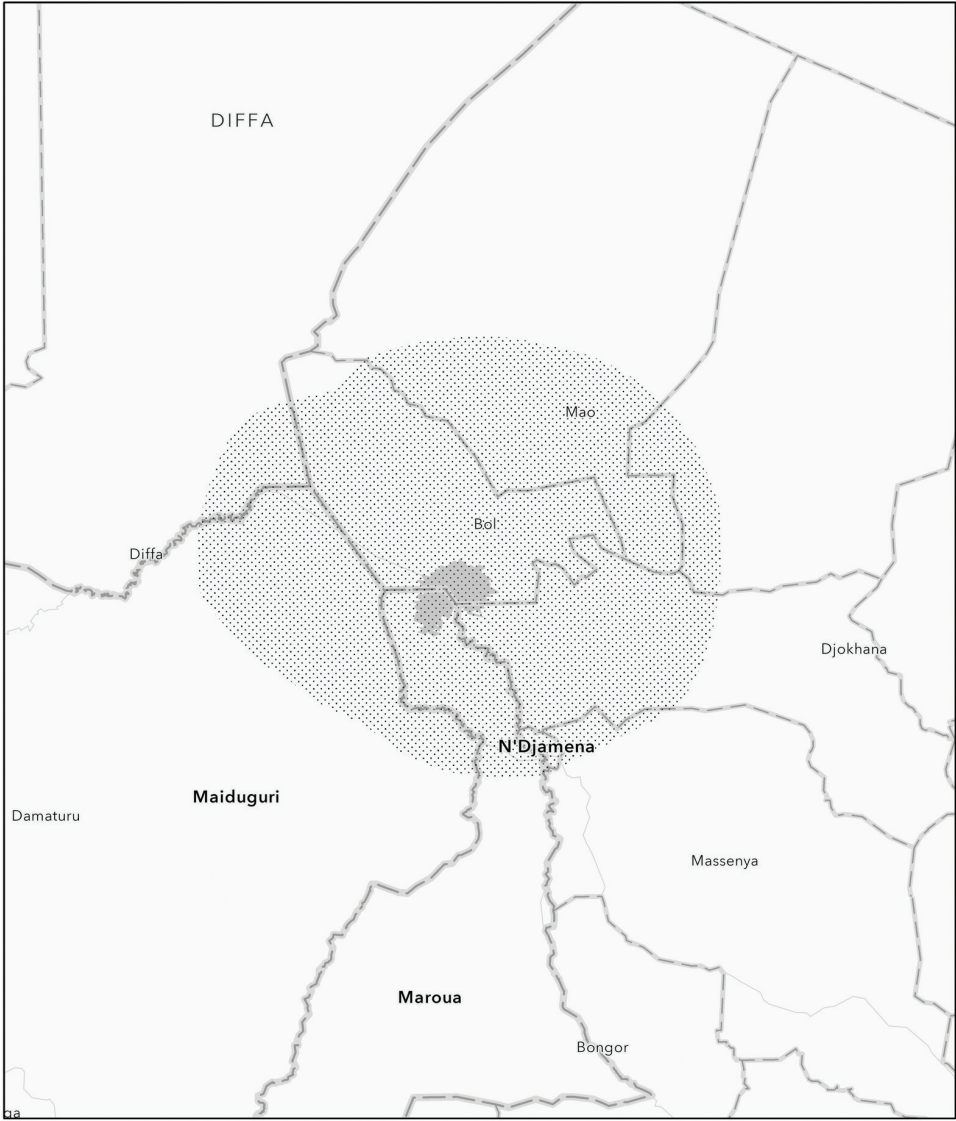
Konkomba communities make the border into a threshold as a space to go through, the significance of which for local communities revolves precisely around the possibility to cross it. For them, a homogeneous community divided by a border that used to be and is still quite porous, the border itself exists because it can be crossed, because it represented – often in their recent history – an instrument of resistance, escape, trade.

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97 Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2010.

98 Hastings Donnan, Thomas Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and the State*, Oxford, Berg, 1999.





MAP 6.1 Area of study: Lake Chad  
SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE.

# Borderities and Freedom in Colonial and Post-colonial African Borderlands: a Case Study of the Borders in the Lake Chad Basin

*Aimé Raoul Sumo Tayo*

## 1 Introduction

The border, a social, geographical, and political construction, is a condition for the existence and survival of all living organisms. It is to the State what keratin is to insects, bark to trees, endocarp to seeds, integument to eggs, and cuticle to stems.<sup>1</sup> This construction, intended to cage populations in order to control, monitor, or at least influence them, was used by Europeans in the formerly colonized territories to clearly distinguish between those who had access to the rights and benefits from the State and those who could not due to their status as natives or non-natives of the concerned colonial empire.<sup>2</sup> In Africa, international boundaries stem from explorations and approximate locations of territories. These rigid boundaries, with their profound impact on African communities, challenged the spatial logic that prevailed in the pre-colonial period when territories functioned through networks of alliances, belongings, allegiances, and concentric relationships.<sup>3</sup> In the Lake Chad Basin, for example, these colonial borders bear the scars of European rivalries for access to the Lake Chad strategic position. The borders have partitioned many ethnic groups who live today, straddling the Lake Chad Basin dyads.<sup>4</sup> The presence of these cross-border communities has long been analysed dramatically. This perception originates from the stereotype of a Balkanized Africa, divided between

1 Régis Debray, *Éloge des frontières*, Paris, Gallimard, 2010, 35.

2 Elva Fabiola Orozco-Mendoza, 'Borderlands Theory: Producing Border Epistemologies with Gloria Anzaldúa', MA Thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2008, 10.

3 Agnès Lambert, 'Espaces d'échanges, territoires d'État en Afrique de l'Ouest', *Autrepart*, 6, 1998, 34.

4 A dyad is a boundary line between two current states. Michel Foucher, 'Fronts et frontières des États du tiers-monde: Étude de géographie géopolitique', PhD Thesis, Paris 1 University, 1986.

the colonial powers during Berlin's 'diplomatic butchery'.<sup>5</sup> Based on the myth of the concordance between the political and ethnic-linguistic border,<sup>6</sup> this idea then perceives the border under the prism of coercion, loss of autonomy, freedom, and belonging.

Contrary to this perception, this paper draws on the example of the Lake Chad Basin to show that these borders are, on the opposite, places of continuous and diverse expression of multifaceted freedoms. What are the foundations, and how is the freedom of local populations at the margins and borders expressed in this space? This work's vernacular approach analyses the boundaries through the prism of the daily life of individuals in the Lake Chad Basin.<sup>7</sup> The dynamic examination of the 'borderities'<sup>8</sup> in this space shows that contrary to popular belief, the borders have always been a place of freedom and liberty for the local populations. While intellectuals and politicians perorate on putative borders' harmful effects, these artifacts weakly disturb local people's everyday border crossing. Even in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, the various teichopolitics<sup>9</sup> have been relatively effective because local populations created alternate routes and continued to exercise their liberty and freedom in the manner similar to the virus, which does not adhere to visa formalities when crossing from one country to another.

## 2 Geographical, Conceptual, and Theoretical Framework

This chapter is deeply influenced by transnational paradigms which offer a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between different nationality's social actors.<sup>10</sup> These theories are particularly relevant in informal dynamics and multiple territorial and social affiliations. They view the border

5 Abraham Bernard Onguené, 'Frontière et intégration sous-régionale : le cas de l'Afrique centrale (1960–2002)', PhD Thesis, International Relations Institute of Cameroon, 2002.

6 Camille Lefebvre, 'Histoire des frontières du Niger', *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, 73, 2004, 18–24, 20.

7 Chris Perkins, Chris Rumford, 'The Politics of (un)fixity and the Vernacularization of Borders', *Global Society*, 27, 3, 2013, 267–282.

8 Szary Amilhat, Anne-Laure, Frédéric Giraut, 'Borderities: The Politics of Contemporary Mobile Borders', Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary, Frédéric Giraut, eds., *Borderities and the Politics of Contemporary Mobile Borders*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 1–19.

9 Florine Ballif, Stéphane Rosière, 'The Challenge of "Teichopolitics": Analyzing Contemporary Border Closures', *L'Espace géographique*, 38, 3, 2009, 193–206.

10 Ludger Pries, 'Transnational Societal Spaces: Which Units of Analysis, Reference, and Measurement?', in Ludger Pries, ed., *Rethinking Transnationalism: The Meso-link of organisations*, London, Routledge, 2008, 1–20.

as the product of social practices and habitus, going beyond the state-centred conception of the border to embrace objects such as regions, macro-regions, cities, and suburbs.<sup>11</sup> Transnational paradigms also consider the individualized dimension of the relationship to the border, which Amilhat Szary and Giraut call 'borderities'. This term refers to 'the individual and collective dimensions of what is at stake in a territorialized and politicized relationship to international boundaries and their crossings'.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the vernacular approach analyses borders through the prism of individuals' daily lives.<sup>13</sup>

Going beyond these theoretical choices, this work challenges the Pan-Africanist, victimized, and militant current in African borders historiography. This current emphasizes the separating function of borders, considering them an obstacle to the Pan-Africanist dream. In this framework, these political artifacts are studied only to be condemned.<sup>14</sup> The Africanist literature insists on their 'artificiality' and denounces their multiple adverse effects (delay in development, population imbalances, migration, and conflicts). In this configuration, the concepts of 'artificial borders' and 'African balkanization' are part of those 'venerable beliefs that one hardly dares to scratch for fear of committing sacrilege'.<sup>15</sup> These pious dogmas had ended up imposing themselves on common sense. The militant approach to African borders is also part of a 'liturgical mode of victimization'.<sup>16</sup> Beyond its victim and militant posture, this paradigm is marked by a historicism which, like the economicism of liberal approaches, is not always relevant to analysing the dynamics on African borders.<sup>17</sup>

However, challenging this epistemological stance is a crucial step towards the 'disarmament' of African borders and their perception as stitches and welding. This shift in perspective, exemplified by the Pan-Africanist current of African borders historiography in the early 2000s,<sup>18</sup> has led to a new

11 Henk Van Houtum, 'The Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries', *Geopolitics*, 10,4, 2005, 672–679.

12 Szary, Giraut, 'Borderities: The Politics of Contemporary Mobile Borders'.

13 Perkins, Rumford, 'The Politics of (un)fixity and the vernacularization of borders'.

14 Alpha Omar Konaré, 'Opening speech symposium "Histoire et perception des frontières en Afrique du XIIIe au XXe siècle dans la cadre d'une culture de la paix"', Bamako, 15–19 mars 1999', in UNESCO, ed., *Des frontières en Afrique du XIIIe au XXe siècle*, Paris, UNESCO/CISH, 2005, 27–33, 28.

15 Axelle Kabou, *Et si l'Afrique refusait le développement ?*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1991, 17.

16 Achille Mbembe, 'African Modes of Self-Writing', trans. Steven Rendall, *Public Culture*, 14, 1, 2002, 239–273.

17 Daniel Bach, 'Contraintes et ressources de la frontière en Afrique subsaharienne', *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée*, 3, 3, 1995, 533–541.

18 The breaking point could be the Symposium of Historians of Africa held in Bamako (Mali), from 15 to 19 March 1999 or the Symposium on the Dynamics of Regional Integration

understanding of borders as opportunities rather than obstacles. This work is part of this evolving approach, bridging the gap between boundary studies (where is the border located?) and border studies (how is the border socially constructed?), the objective being to enrich epistemological and ontological discussions on borders, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on African borders.<sup>19</sup>

As part of Critical Border Studies (CBS), this research adopts a comprehensive approach, combining two main methodological approaches: direct observation of border dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin, particularly in the Lake and around the Mandara Mountains and the banks of the Logone, and interviews with local actors. Over the period from 2004 and 2022, I conducted ethnographic research on the settlement of the border dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria in Lake Chad and the land border. I also researched the Boko Haram insurgency in the far northern region of Cameroon. My fieldwork involved observing border dynamics, tracking the activities of local actors, and deciphering the underlying logic and dynamics. The data for this chapter was also sourced from the security and administrative archives in Cameroon. To ensure a balanced perspective, I consulted regional newspapers, reports from local NGOs, and academic literature, thereby avoiding any biased generalizations related to the Cameroonian prism of the ethnographic survey. The cross-analysis of this comprehensive data gives set yields compelling insights into why the borders of the Lake Chad Basin are thresholds, how freedom and liberty for the local populations are expressed daily. Beyond these theoretical and epistemological considerations, the Lake Chad Basin serves as the geographical backdrop for this study.

The Lake Chad Basin, a region of complex geographical and political dynamics, is subject of debate in the existing literature.<sup>20</sup> Geographically, it encompasses the eponymous watershed whose extent is estimated at 2,382,000 km<sup>2</sup> and which integrates the Sahelian shores of Algeria, Libya, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic (CAR).<sup>21</sup> Its network primarily consists of the Chari-Logone-El Beid river system and the Komadugu-Yobé ensemble. Politically, the Lake Chad Basin refers to the space managed

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in Central Africa, organized by the Department of History of the University of Yaoundé (Cameroon), from 26 to 28 April 2000.

19 Van Houtum, 'The Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries'.

20 Janet Roitman, 'Les recompositions du bassin du lac Tchad', translated by Roland Marchal, *Politique africaine*, 94, 2, 2004, 7–22, 7.

21 Martin Zachary Njeuma, 'Coopération internationale et transformation du bassin du Lac Tchad. Le cas de la Commission du Bassin du Lac Tchad', *Politique africaine*, 94, 2, 2004, 23–24.

by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), an institution created on 24 May 1964 in Fort Lamy (N'djamena), which includes Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria, and Chad. The Central African Republic, although not directly bordering the Lake, became the fifth member state in 1994. Despite the challenges and for functional reasons, this work adopts the official and institutional definition of the Lake Chad Basin as it was at its creation.

The Lake Chad Basin, a region that bears the historical weight of being a crossroads of colonial ambitions, roughly corresponds to the territory of the former kingdom of Kanem-Bornu and its margins. This kingdom, founded in the eighth century, reached its peak between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>22</sup> The early eighteenth century saw the destruction of Kanem-Bornu by Rabbah, who invaded Darfur in 1887 and extended his authority to the Ubangi-Chari, where he clashed with France. His victories included the conquest of Baguirmi in 1892, the defeat of the army of the Shehu of Borno, and the establishment of his palace at Dikwa in 1893.<sup>23</sup> The British took control of part of Borno as early as 1902, while the other part, including the former Capital of Rabah, Dikwa, came under German control. The French settled in Fort-Lamy after defeating Rabbah.<sup>24</sup> The study of horogenesis in the Lake Chad Basin reveals that this space was a focal point of Anglo-Franco-German colonial ambitions, each of which believed Lake Chad was navigable and insisted on having access to it.<sup>25</sup>

Beside Lake Chad, the Mandara Mountains and rivers Logone, Chari, and El Beïd are the main physical border in the Lake Chad Basin. The flow of these rivers varies with the seasons and dries up completely during the dry season. It causes border conflicts in Lake Chad, which generally focus on water and land. Indeed, in this half-desert Sahelo-Sudanese zone, this reserve of fresh water is vital for local populations, animals, and even nature through infiltration and evaporation. The area is also the scene of political, ecological, economic, and security issues. In recent years, population pressure, climate warming, and desertification have threatened Lake Chad's existence.<sup>26</sup> This situation has pushed people to flee to the Lake deep areas. The resulting population concentration has degraded the environment and available natural resources. The problem has become even more complex since the discovery

22 Ronald Cohen, *The Kanuri of Bornu*, New York, NY, Rinehart and Winston, 1967, 23.

23 Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, 'Boko Haram et la mise en récit du terrorisme au "Sahelistan"', *Afrique contemporaine*, 255, 3, 2015, 21–41, 32.

24 Cohen, *The Kanuri of Bornu*, 19.

25 Mohamadou Ibrahim Bagadoma, 'La commission du Bassin du lac Tchad structure probante ou coquille vide', MA Thesis, Collège interarmées de Défense, Paris, 2007, 10–11.

26 Bagadoma, 'La commission du Bassin du lac Tchad', 4.

of mineral resources such as Chromium, Cobalt, Titanium, Uranium, and Platinum and with the potential of the Lake in terms of industrial fishing and tourism.<sup>27</sup> Today, the land issue and the control of the Lake's resources are at the heart of multiform tensions. These tensions are further exacerbated by the actions of Boko Haram, a significant factor in the region's geopolitical and security issues.

The territory of the former kingdom of Kanem-Bornu is therefore shared between the Nigerian Borno state, the Cameroonian administrative Divisions of Logone-et-Chari (Kousseri), Mayo-Sava (Mora), the district of Maga in the north of the Mayo-Danay Division (Yagoua), and the Chadian 'prefectures' of Lac (Bol), Kanem (Maio) Chari-Baguirmi (N'Djamena) Bata (Ati) and south-eastern Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti (BET). The Lake Chad<sup>28</sup> itself is shared between Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria, and Chad. Its borders were the subject of intense negotiations between the French, British, and German colonizers, notably over the city of Yola, the political and religious capital of the Emirate of Sokoto, a large commercial centre, and the terminus of ivory and kola caravan tracks from the south of the country.<sup>29</sup> The British had mandated the *Royal Niger Company* to sign a protectorate treaty with the indigenous rulers of the Yola region. The intervention of France, on whose behalf the explorer Mizon had obtained an agreement from the Emir of Yola, has precipitated negotiations between Britain and Germany.<sup>30</sup> The various international borders in the Lake Chad Basin were demarcated during the colonial period. However, after incidents between Nigeria and Chad between April and June 1983, the borders were more precisely demarcated in Lake Chad under the auspices of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), a reassuring sign of the region's commitment to peaceful coexistence and cooperation.<sup>31</sup>

Borders problems have long been an issue in the relations between Nigeria and its francophone neighbors. Vogt and Ate have emphasized the 'French

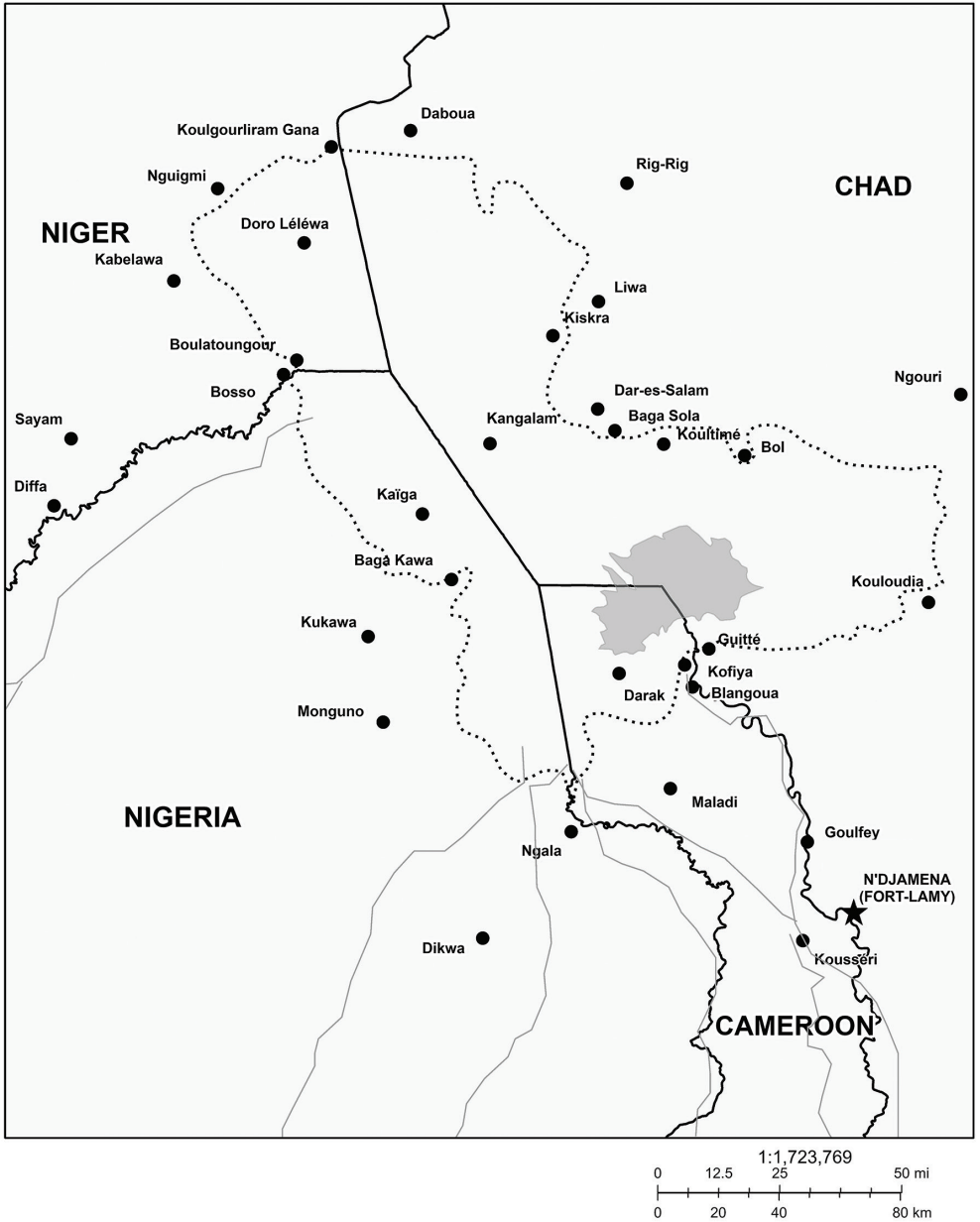
27 James Ibrahim, 'Lake Chad as an Instrument of International Cooperation', in Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju, P.O. Adeniyi, *Borderlands in Africa: A Multidisciplinary and Comparative Focus on Nigeria and West Africa*, Lagos, University of Lagos Press, 1989, 309–311, 313.

28 The geopolitics of the lake result in unbalanced relations. Half of the lake belongs to Chad, 1/4 goes to Nigeria, 1/6 for Niger and 1/12 for Cameroon.

29 Daniel Abwa, 'Les fluctuations des frontières du Cameroun (1884–1961)', *Les Cahiers de Mutations*, 10, 2003.

30 Aimée Blanche Anguessebeh, 'Les frontières franco-allemande du Cameroun 1884–1916', MA Thesis, University of Yaounde 1, 1991, 25.

31 This intergovernmental organization was created by the Fort Lamy Convention of 22 May 1964. It initially included Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria, and Chad, then, from March 1994, the CAR. Its main objective is coordinating and intensifying cooperation and efforts to develop the Lake Chad Basin.



MAP 6.2 Lake Chad

Legend: dotted line = shoreline of Lake Chad in 1972; grey area = Lake Chad in 2024.

SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI FROM DATA PROVIDED BY AIMÉ RAOUL SUMO TAYO, AND CHRISTIAN SEIGNOBOS, 'LA RÉGION DU LAC TCHAD SOUS L'HYPOTHÈQUE BOKO HARAM', HÉRODOTE, 172, 1, 2019, 63–86

Factor' as a source of tensions in the Lake Chad Basin, which refers to the historical influence of France in the region and its impact on the geopolitical dynamics.<sup>32</sup> Some Nigerian scholars also consider Cameroon a security challenge for Nigeria as this country 'embarks on actions detrimental to Nigeria's national interest and security'.<sup>33</sup> Frequent border clashes have also characterized the relations between Nigeria and Chad. It was the case between 18 April and 25 May 1983, when, from a Nigerian perspective, Chadian troops attacked the Army Rifle Company at Kainasara and other islands in Lake Chad. Also, Chadian security forces are frequently accused of harassing Nigerian fishers in the Lake.<sup>34</sup> Nigeria's irredentism usually caused the ensuing disputes, the constant change in lake levels, and the displacement of the islands, for example.<sup>35</sup>

The International Court of Justice in The Hague settled the border dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria on 10 October 2002. Subsequently, new border pillars were installed under the auspices of a sub-commission of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission, assisted by United Nations experts.<sup>36</sup> Currently, bilateral relations between the States of the Lake Chad Basin are relatively peaceful. The LCBC, serving as an interface for the joint management of environmental and safety issues, plays a crucial role in maintaining the region's stability. However, at the organizational level, the functioning of this organization is hampered by the sovereigntist claims or fears of States. The crisis linked to the jihadist group Boko Haram recently led to the establishment of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). However, besides problems with funding, MNJTF's main problem is mistrust. Also, there are mutual complaints, countries blaming neighbours for internal problems. There is also a low military and national pride problem as Nigeria has shown reluctance to accept foreign military force on its territory several times.<sup>37</sup>

This chapter frames the threshold in terms of a line to be crossed, in terms of freedom broadly, including related concepts such as independence, autonomy,

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32 Margaret Aderinsola Vogt, 'Strategies for the Enhancement of the Security of Nigerian Borders', *The Eagle Journal of the Nigerian Command and Staff College*, Jaji, Nigeria, 1981, 39–40; Bassey E. Ate, Bola A. Akinterinwa, eds., *Nigeria and its Immediate Neighbours: Constraints and Prospects of Sub-Regional Security in the 1990's*, Lagos, Institute of International Affairs and Pumark Nigeria. Ltd, 1992.

33 Adedoyin J. Omede, 'Nigeria's Relations with Her Neighbours', *Studies of Tribes and Tribals*, 4, 2006, 7–17, 9.

34 Omede, 'Nigeria's Relations with Her Neighbours', 13.

35 Aimé Raoul Sumo Tayo, 'Héritage colonial et gestion des conflictualités des frontières internationales du Cameroun', PhD Thesis, University of Yaounde 1, 2017.

36 *Cameroon-Tribune*, n° 9497/5698, Tuesday, 15 December 2009.

37 Roitman, 'Les recompositions du bassin du lac Tchad'.

belonging, and their opposites. Moreover, a distinction is made between freedom and liberty for borderland populations. Indeed, for Hannah Arendt, there is a conceptual difference between liberty and freedom: 'Liberation may be a condition of freedom but by no means leads automatically to it'.<sup>38</sup> Freedom is a state of being, something psychic and inner. Liberty is more physical.<sup>39</sup> Applied to this research, liberty refers mainly to the transnational mobility of people, goods, and services. In contrast, freedom relates to populations' perceptions, social logic toward international borders, and territorial-based identities. On this last aspect, the possession of multiple identity documents and the adoption of vehicular languages, rather than the official languages inherited from colonization, can thus be seen as a mode of expression of the freedom of populations and the defunctionalization of borders, in particular concerning shell function, as international borders have failed to establish a territorially based identity.<sup>40</sup>

In the same vein, defunctionalization is considered here as the process during which classic functions of borders (military, identity, competence, fiscal, screening, shell, filter, panopticon, and fulcrum functions) are attenuated or eliminated to make them more flexible and as instruments of cooperation. This process also refers to debordering and 'deterritorialization'.<sup>41</sup> In fact, borders are not playing their traditional differentiation function in the Lake Chad Basin. Indeed, the border is theoretically an essential element in producing identities and a 'support for the consolidation of belongings'.<sup>42</sup> As the philosopher Étienne Balibar points out, borders constitute the 'institutional fixation point of political identities and the point where these identities become uncertain again'.<sup>43</sup> At least, the differentiation function may have been induced by adopting the official colonial language, English (Nigeria) or French (Cameroon, Chad, Niger). Instead, vehicular languages serve as hyphens for cross-border communities.

38 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, London, Penguin Books, 1990, 29.

39 Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, 'Are Freedom and Liberty Twins?', *Political Theory*, 16, 4, 1988, 523–552.

40 Vera Pavlakovich-Kochi, 'Cross-border Cooperation and Regional Responses to NAFTA and Globalization', in Doris Wastl-Walter, ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, London and New York, NY, Routledge, 2016, 503–526.

41 Lothar Brock Albert, Mathias, 'Debordering the world of states: New spaces in international relations', *New Political Science*, 18, 1, 1996, 69–106; Doris Wastl-Walter, ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, London and New York, NY, Routledge, 2016, 2.

42 Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary, *Qu'est-ce qu'une frontière aujourd'hui?*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2015, 18.

43 Étienne Balibar, *Nous, citoyens d'Europe? Les frontières, l'Etat, le peuple*, Paris, La Découverte, 2001.

The intensity of informal cross-border trade and especially the high magnitude of smuggling thus express the limits of fiscal and customs functions of borders in the Lake Chad Basin. In the same vein, the intensity of cross-border mobility could be the expression of the liberty of the local population. It reflects, at least, borders defunctionalization, particularly regarding regulating the movements of persons and goods.

### 3 The Configuration of Borderlands as a Factor of Freedom and Liberty for Local Populations

The movements of people and goods in the Lake Chad Basin are influenced by a set of factors, including the geographical configuration of border areas, the porosity of borders, a lack of territorial control, and the presence of cross-border communities. However, what truly sets this region apart is the unique freedom of local borderlanders, a freedom that is linked with blurred citizenship and specific social perceptions of international borders.

#### 3.1 *The Lack of Territorial Control*

The borderlands in the Lake Chad Basin have long been socio-economic grey zones due to the weak presence of the State and the prevalence of criminal activities. Lake Chad, in particular, has been, since at least the fifteenth century, a grey zone, that is to say, a lawless, deregulated, abandoned, and decaying area. Surrogate authorities have been vying with the state for a monopoly on legitimate violence and a fiscal monopoly.<sup>44</sup> In some border areas, 'the informal economy and armed factions compete with the nation-state for undisputed control of regulatory authority and financial power'.<sup>45</sup> Local entrepreneurs of violence have long constituted themselves as surrogate authorities. Since the pre-colonial period, Lake Chad has been a refuge for rebel populations. Over the centuries, this space has been a place for 'societies of refusal', counter-societies of 'bandits', traffickers, or jihadists, all forming the 'collective of refusal'.<sup>46</sup> During the 1990s, the Lake had been one area of refuge for the Chadian Movement for Democracy and Justice (MDJT) rebel group.<sup>47</sup> An endemic

44 Gaïdz Minassian, *Zones grises : Quand les Etats perdent le contrôle*, Paris, Autrement, 2011

45 Janet Roitman, 'La garnison-entrepôt : Une manière de gouverner dans le bassin du lac Tchad', *Critique Internationale*, 2, 2003, 93–115, 39.

46 Nicolas Courtin, 'Comprendre Boko Haram. Introduction thématique', *Afrique contemporaine*, 255, 3, 2015, 13–20, 16.

47 Omar S. Mahmood, Christian Ani Ndubuisi, 'Response to Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Region: Policies, Cooperation and Livelihood', *ISS Research Report*, 2018, 1–29, available

presence of cross-border rural banditry characterizes Lake Chad Basin's margins.<sup>48</sup> The remote parts of the Lake now serve as the main sanctuary for the Islamic State in the West African province (ISWAP).

Lake Chad basin borderlands are far from the countries' capitals except for Chad. For example, the Cameroonian locality of Fotokol is 305 km from Maroua, the regional capital, and more than 1500 km from Yaoundé, the country's capital. Nevertheless, Fotokol is near the Nigerian city of Gambaru-Ngala, separated only by the bridge over the El Beïd River. This Cameroonian town is very landlocked because of the poor state roads. The remoteness of the borderlands from the capitals has thus created a weakness in territorial control.

One of the most significant consequences of the Lake Chad Basin remoteness is the absence of basic social infrastructure for local populations.<sup>49</sup> These spaces are not permanently endowed with state services. A report from the Cameroonian Ministry of Territorial Administration highlighted the difficulty of controlling Lake Chad's islands due to the absence of a permanent local administration or unit of law enforcement and defense units, as well as the lack of social infrastructure such as schools, roads, health centres.<sup>50</sup> In the same vein, the Boudouma people, some of whom have pledged allegiance to Boko Haram, have expressed dissatisfaction with the absence of the State. Some were not even aware of the colors of the Chadian flag before 2015.<sup>51</sup> The lack of public investment and territorial control has turned the borderlands in the Lake Chad Basin into lands of disobedience.<sup>52</sup> The lack of regular contact with the administrative authorities, marginalization from other parts of the national territory, and problematic access to social services can lead to

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online <https://issafrica.org/research/books-and-other-publications/responses-to-boko-haram-in-the-lake-chad-region-policies-cooperation-and-livelihoods> (accessed 24 November 2023), 6.

48 Géraud Magrin, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, 'Introduction', in Géraud Magrin, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, eds., *Crise et développement. La région du lac Tchad à l'épreuve de Boko Haram*, Paris, AFD Agence Française de Développement, 2018, 13–21.

49 At Fotokol, the public services were operating at a slow due to a lack of staff. At the local high school, for example, in 2010, there were only three full teachers, including the headmaster. However, the city had a district hospital where Nigerians came for treatment.

50 Archives of the Border Research Unit (BRU) Ministry of Territorial Administration, Yaoundé, Cameroon, Ministry of Territorial Administration, Datasheet of the Sub-Directorate of Administrative Organization on the implementation of the recommendations of the Abuja ministerial meeting of 30 September 2002, and follow-up to the decision of the International Court of Justice in The Hague of 10 October 2002 on the land and sea border, undated.

51 Mahmood, Ndubuisi, 'Response to Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Region', 7.

52 BRU, Excerpt from the intelligence bulletin, Period from 1 to 26 February 1973.

disenchantment among border populations. This situation may explain the allegiance of many border communities to Boko Haram Jihadists. It is known that 'people of borderland areas are capable of creating and exhibiting the feature of, or becoming agents of uncontrollable opinions'.<sup>53</sup>

The poor territorial distribution of control structures also explains the porosity of the borders around Lake Chad. Some border sections of the various dyads lack substantive border control. In some Cameroon-Nigeria border sections, Cameroonian authorities have set up police and customs services at least 10 km from the border, presumably to avoid friction with Nigeria.<sup>54</sup> Until the early 2000s, even patrols by Cameroon's security services were rare on the Lake Chad islands. The most advanced force was a small section of seven gendarmes at Blangoua.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the states on the shores of Lake Chad have minimal human and material resources for border control. Between 2014 and 2016, Niger, Nigeria, and Cameroon were overwhelmed by the capabilities of the paramilitary threats they were facing.<sup>56</sup>

One of the common characteristics of borderlands in the Lake Chad Basin is the virtual absence of states. As a result, Cameroonian people, for example, who thought they were neglected, quickly bowed to Nigerian traditional authorities or customs and tax officials. In the few places where state actors are present, border governance is marked by corruption and bad governance, perpetuating the belief among the local populations that the state is there only to exploit them. This perception not only weakens allegiances to the state but also fosters a deaf opposition. Moreover, in 2017, three of the four countries concerned occupied the leading group of the most corrupt countries in the world, according to the ranking published by the NGO *Transparency International*.<sup>57</sup> The situation is even more dramatic at the borders, where all public services constitute nests of institutionalized corruption. The assignment of a civil servant to the margins is usually a means for the

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53 Kola O. Ogundowole, 'Borderland as The Function of Space and Time: A Philosophical Insight into the Issue of Borderlands', in Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju, P.O. Adeniyi, *Borderlands in Africa: A Multidisciplinary and Comparative Focus on Nigeria and West Africa*, Lagos, University of Lagos Press, 1989, 45–50, 48.

54 Interview of Aimé Raoul Sumo Tayo to a former administrative authority, Maroua, June 2019.

55 BRU, Intelligence Bulletin of 25 February 1980.

56 Aimé Raoul Sumo Tayo, 'L'armée camerounaise face à Boko Haram : analyse séquentielle des stratégies d'innovation et d'adaptation des forces de défense face à un ennemi hybride', in Adder Abel Gwoda, François Wassouni, *Boko Haram au Cameroun : dynamiques plurielles*, Bruxelles, Peter Lang, 2017, 41–58.

57 Mahmood, Ndubuissi, 'Response to Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Region', 6.

redistribution of advantages and prebendalism, further exacerbating the plight of the local population.

### 3.2 *The Presence of Cross-Border Communities*

Beyond the lack of territorial control, the freedom and liberty of local populations in the Lake Chad Basin can be explained by the presence of cross-border communities. Indeed, in this area, many homogeneous ethnic groups have been partitioned by the international border, constituting 'hyphen communities'.<sup>58</sup> This situation challenges the perception of linear borders and creates a continuum. For example, the Kanuri (also called *Bornouans* in Cameroun) live between Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria, and Chad. These founders of the Bornu Empire were with the Mandara the most significant slave raiders in the Lake Chad Basin.<sup>59</sup> The Mandaras are also found in Cameroon and Nigeria. Their former capital was Kerawa in Nigeria. Today, it is in Mora in Cameroon.<sup>60</sup> They are found in Cameroon in Kousseri and Logone Birni sultanates.<sup>61</sup>

Alongside the Kanuri, the Shuwa Arabs, whom Brann calls the *Sudanese Arabs*, are the second people straddling the borders. They are mainly found in the areas of Dikwa (Nigeria), N'Djamena (Chad), and Kousseri (Cameroon).<sup>62</sup> Other 'hyphen communities' belong to the neo-Sudanese ensemble, such as the Kotoko, the Mousgoum, and the Massa. They settled near Logone and the Chari.<sup>63</sup> The Toupouri, the Massa, and the Mundang are the main cross-border communities on the Chadian-Cameroon border. Boulet and Podlewski locate their origin in the Bornu Empire. Mokam distinguishes the Mundang *Za-sin* (that is to say, 'from above'), from the Diamaré plain in Cameroon and north of Pala in Chad, and the Mundang *Kabi* (literally, 'those of water'), mainly in Chad. In the latter country, the Mundang are found primarily in the 'prefecture' of Mayo-Kebbi. In Cameroon, they are scattered in the Divisions

58 David Mokam, 'Les peuples traits d'union et l'intégration régionale en Afrique centrale : le cas des Gbaya et des Moundang', in Daniel Abwa, Joseph-Marie Essomba, Martin-Zachary Njeuma, Charles M. de la Roncière, eds., *Dynamique d'intégration régionale en Afrique Centrale*, Yaoundé, PUY, 2001, 125–140, 126.

59 Issa Saïbou, *Ethnicité, frontières et stabilité aux confins du Cameroun, du Nigeria et du Tchad*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2012, 109.

60 Conrad Max Benedict Brann, 'A Socio-Linguistic Profile of Nigeria's Northern and Eastern Borders', in Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju, P.O. Adeniyi, *Borderlands in Africa: A Multidisciplinary and Comparative Focus on Nigeria and West Africa*, Lagos, University of Lagos Press, 1989, 213–245, 215.

61 Issa, *Ethnicité, frontières et stabilité aux confins du Cameroun*, 109.

62 Brann, 'A Socio-Linguistic Profile of Nigeria's Northern and Eastern Borders', 215.

63 Marcel Rouspard, *Nord-Cameroun : ouverture et développement*, Coutances, Impression et Façonnage Claude Bellée, 1987, 57.

of Mayo-Kani, Diamaré, Mayo-Louti, Mayo Rey, and Benue. The Mundang of Cameroon and Chad had been temporarily united under the German colonial administration following the 4 November 1911 Convention between France and Germany. The German territorial acquisitions, especially the western part of Mayo-Kebbi, brought the entire Mundang country into the Cameroonian zone.<sup>64</sup> With the new fluctuations of Cameroon's international borders following the Great War, the Mundang are primarily found in Chad. These cross-border people have kept their similarities despite their division by international borders.<sup>65</sup>

In the Lake Chad Basin, cross-border communities also belong to the so-called 'Chadic' ensemble, with Paleo-Sudanese peoples such as the Mafa, the Mafou, the Daba, the Kapsiki (called Highi in Nigeria), the Guidar, the Guiziga, and the Mandara. Many other micro-ethnic groups are found on the massifs, plateaus, and foothills of the Mandara Mountains south of Mora.<sup>66</sup> There are also the Sukur, from the locality of Psakali, next to Mokolo in Cameroon, and the Fali, found in Cameroon and Nigeria, near Mubi. There are also the Bachama-bata called Bwatiye nowadays, living as well in Nigeria as in the Benue Valley in Cameroon and the Kotoko. The latter are found in Cameroon, Nigeria, and Chad.<sup>67</sup> The Kotoko are the oldest occupants of the shores of Lake Chad. They built principalities, the most important of which are the current sultanates of Goulfey, Kousseri, Makari, Logone-Birni, Afadé, Bodo, and Woulki. Traditionally Muslim, they are mainly fishermen, although they increasingly engage in trade and agriculture.<sup>68</sup> In Lake Chad, the Buduma are one of the leading cross-border communities. They refer to themselves as 'Yidena'. The Kanuri call them 'Buduma', and the Kanembou call them 'Kuri'.<sup>69</sup>

Physically, it is challenging to differentiate the citizens of one country.<sup>70</sup> As elsewhere in Africa, communities, by straddling borders, have avoided the creation of deserts as buffer zones and created opportunities for cooperation. The community of networks of exchange between several ethnic groups has superposed networks of relations, the boundaries of which do not coincide.

64 Roupsard, *Nord-Cameroun*, 130.

65 Mokam, 'Les peuples traits d'union', 131.

66 Roupsard, *Nord-Cameroun*, 57.

67 Brann, 'A Socio-Linguistic Profile of Nigeria's Northern and Eastern Borders', 215.

68 Issa, *Ethnicité, frontières et stabilité aux confins du Cameroun*, 13.

69 Roupsard, *Nord-Cameroun*, 57.

70 However, police authorities use vaccination scars to distinguish Cameroonians from Nigerians. While Cameroonian medical authorities administer the Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccine at the forearm level, those in Nigeria do so at the upper arm.

The situation creates a blurring in the spatial structure of border areas. It is difficult, if not impossible, to make a clear distinction between borders.<sup>71</sup>

Beyond the ethnic question, transnational vehicular languages in the Lake Chad Basin allow the fluidity of international exchanges. Hausa serves as a *lingua franca* on the shores of Lake Chad, especially on the Nigerien-Nigerian and Cameroonian-Nigerian dyads. On the border with Chad, this language is strongly challenged by Arabic. Standard communication systems create continuities in space, especially since these people speak the language of kinship, descent, and alliance. In this context, the boundaries are blurred because they encompass all individuals with whom it is usually possible to maintain relationships, creating discontinuities in social relations.<sup>72</sup>

### 3.3 *Afuctional Borders*

The borders in the Lake Chad Basin do not fully play their classic differentiation, allocation of competencies, fiscal, customs, and control functions. The border disputes recorded in the Lake Chad Basin originate in the massive settlement of peasants and pastoralists, who were victims of the droughts of 1972–1973 and 1983–1985. These populations, primarily Nigerian, settled massively in the Cameroonian part of the Lake because, in their country, large arable and grazing areas had been confiscated by the authorities as part of the Chad Basin Development Authority (CBDA) project.<sup>73</sup> This project, while aiming for development, has had profound social and economic consequences, leading to tensions and disputes over the demarcation of international borders are thus linked to the land question. Traditional leaders often challenge international boundaries to compensate for insufficient arable land.<sup>74</sup> Depending on their interests, populations invoke ancestral and pre-colonial rights or property rights based on nationality to support their claims. Challenges to international boundaries by populations are recurrent at Lake Chad. Until the 2000s, the people of Boumgour Makary, for example, disputed the arable land of the Lake with the Nigerians of Ngala. The gradual withdrawal of the waters of the Lake during the dry season advanced Nigerian herders in transhumance towards Cameroonian lands, which, in the same period, were occupied by Cameroonian fishermen.<sup>75</sup> Nigerian herders and farmers particularly coveted

71 Paul Claval, 'L'étude des frontières et la géographie politique', *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 18, 43, 1974, 7–22, 12.

72 Claval, 'L'étude des frontières et la géographie politique', 12.

73 Issa, *Ethnicité, frontières et stabilité aux confins du Cameroun*, 106.

74 BRU, Intelligence Bulletin of 25 February 1980.

75 BRU, Report of the commander of the gendarmerie brigade of Makary on the land dispute between Cameroonian farmers and herders and those of Nigeria, June 6, 1984.

the Cameroonian area of Lake Chad, which is the most fertile and favourable to transhumance.<sup>76</sup>

Historically, the Cameroonian islands of Lake Chad have been predominantly inhabited by Nigerians. In the Darak sub-division, for instance, during the 2000s, foreign populations, primarily Nigerians, made up 90% of the total population.<sup>77</sup> This demographic reality has often led to tensions, as many migrants tend to question the authority of local chiefs and prefer to seek assistance from the authorities and police forces of their countries of origin. According to Cameroonian administrative reports, the Nigerian people of Lake Chad have long been cultivating Cameroonian land and, over time, not only refused to pay traditional taxes but, eventually, claimed the land as Nigerian territory.<sup>78</sup> Nigerian traditional chiefs have even established representatives in Cameroon, with the *Lawan* (traditional ruler) of Wulgo going as far as planting the Nigerian flag and renaming Cameroonian islands in the late 1980s.<sup>79</sup>

Undoubtedly, the presence of cross-border communities is a significant factor for open borders in the Lake Chad Basin. This is also true for the afunctional nature of international borders. Like most African borders, the dyads of the Lake Chad Basin are porous. It's important to note that emphasizing the porous nature of these borders is not pejorative. Just as pores allow the skin to breathe, ports, bridges, and other border crossing points are the routes of exchange with the outside. To describe a border as a sieve is to acknowledge its true function, which is to filter. As the saying goes, 'a living system is a thermodynamic system of exchanges with the terrestrial, maritime, social environment'.<sup>80</sup>

It is not the porous nature of borders that is the issue, but their afunctionality. Due to their configuration, government policies, and local dynamics, these borders do not fulfil their screening, filter, or panopticon functions. The absence of significant obstacles to the movement of people and goods, coupled with the weakness of control structures, exacerbates the problem. The personnel dedicated to border control are often poorly equipped, complacent, and corrupted. Border control, management, monitoring, and protection are

76 BRU, Letter from Félix Gounoko Haounaye, Divisional officer, Logone-et-Chari, to the Governor of the Far North Province, 3 February 1988.

77 Halirou Abdouraman, 'Le conflit frontalier Cameroun-Nigeria dans le lac Tchad : Les enjeux de l'île de Darak, disputée et partagée', *Cultures & Conflits*, 72, 4, 2008, 57–76, 74.

78 BRU, Letter from the Governor of the Northern Province to the Minister of Territorial Administration, dated 27 March 1980

79 BRU, Encrypted Radio Message from the Governor of the Far North to the Minister of Territorial Administration, 1 April 1985.

80 Debray, *Éloge des frontières*, 37.

generally deficient in most border areas in the Lake Chad Basin. In this context, detecting and preventing the entry of unwanted persons, animals, vegetation, and goods is almost impossible.<sup>81</sup> The existing checkpoints, which are supposed to organize cross-border mobility, are characterized by an absence of the material element (wall, fence, barrier, obstacle, sign, etc.), the corruption of the human elements (guard, guard, policeman, customs officer, soldier, etc.), and the absence of the technological element (camera, gantry, detector, computer, software, etc.) except at the N'Djamena and Maiduguri airports.

Globally, the Lake Chad Basin borders are easy to cross for local populations. It is why this space has maintained its specific identity despite colonial borders. The various borders in the Lake Chad Basin are thus kinds of weld points for local populations. This transparency of borders is also due to the configuration of borderlands and the resulting polarisation effect. In many cases, the border puts face-to-face two adjoining cities where the distinction of the international boundary is tricky. It is the case between the Nigerian locality of Banki and Amchidé in Cameroon. Both towns have a common market on the international border, which a simple bamboo has long materialized. However, a boundary pillar was built between the two border towns in 2004.

This porosity is also linked to the nature of the border elements in the Lake Chad Basin. The border flow of rivers Logone, Chari, and El Beïd varies with the seasons and dries up completely during the dry season. For example, the El-Beïd River, between Cameroon and Nigeria, changes course and dries up during the summer, making the border extremely porous and multiplying infiltration routes and smuggling tracks. It is generally admitted that where the border is easy to cross, we often witness the creation of border territories—areas where the border is not a barrier but a meeting point, contributing to the formation of a specific identity spaces.<sup>82</sup> This situation explains the freedom and liberty local populations enjoy in the Lake Chad Basin, as with the demographic, economic, social, and cultural polarization toward Nigeria.

### 3.4 *Border and Polarization Effects in the Lake Chad Basin*

The Lake Chad Basin borderlands are unique in their territorial, cultural, and economic transitional nature. They fall under the category of 'maximum borders', a term used to describe borders with significant cultural, linguistic, and

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81 Wafila Okumu, 'Border Management and Security in Africa', *Concordis Briefing*, 4, 4 2011, 1–19, 5. On the porosity of borders in Africa see the Introduction to the present volume, 'The Threshold'.

82 Szary, *Qu'est-ce qu'une frontière aujourd'hui*, 28.

ancestral affinities.<sup>83</sup> Economically, these borderlands are distinct transitional zones due to their substantial trade at both official and unofficial points. In the daily practice of border area population, it is challenging to determine when one crosses from one State to another. Culturally, it is also difficult to make any differentiation as border populations mutually adopt elements of culture, including clothing, language, architecture, and religion.<sup>84</sup>

The area is also experiencing a significant polarization effect due to the strong dependence on borderlands on the Nigerian side. This polarization is linked with ecological differentials and the resulting trading systems.<sup>85</sup> The entire Lake Chad Basin's economy is heavily reliant on Maiduguri, Nigeria, following a pre-colonial territorial logic.<sup>86</sup> The economy of the Lake is extroverted, with trade conducted only in Naïra, and the entire fish production is sold in Nigeria,<sup>87</sup> controlled by Nigerian traders. For instance, the Cameroonian island of Darak exports 80% of its 1,400,000 tons of fish to Maiduguri in Nigeria.<sup>88</sup> This significant interaction is also evident in the shared use of land for cultural and pastoral activities, shared markets, and participation in the same social activities.

There is also a religious polarization with the movements of itinerant students to imams of great renown, especially in Nigeria and Chad. This mobility has favoured the expansion of Islamic reformist movements.<sup>89</sup> The extension of the operational area of Boko Haram, a Nigerian jihadist group, cannot be understood without considering this polarization effect, which is particularly pronounced in the Lake Chad Basin. Indeed, the Islamist sect has taken advantage of the borderland's geopolitical, anthropo-sociological, and socio-economic configuration to expand to Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Ultimately, the configuration of the borderlands in the Lake Chad Basin favours the

83 C.M. Momoh, 'A Critique of Borderlands Theories', in Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju, P.O. Adeniyi, *Borderlands in Africa: A Multidisciplinary and Comparative Focus on Nigeria and West Africa*, Lagos, University of Lagos Press, 1989, 51–63, 52.

84 O. Adejuyigbe, 'Identification and Characteristics of Borderlands in Africa', in Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju, P.O. Adeniyi, *Borderlands in Africa: A Multidisciplinary and Comparative Focus on Nigeria and West Africa*, Lagos, University of Lagos Press, 1989, 27–36, 34.

85 Emmanuel Chauvin, Géraud Magrin, 'Violence and regionalization in Central Africa', *Belgeo*, 4, 2020, 1–19, online at <https://doi.org/10.4000/belgeo.43632> (accessed 21 December 2020).

86 Alix Servais Afouda, 'Echanges transfrontaliers et organisation de l'espace dans le bassin du Lac Tchad', PhD Thesis, University of Bordeaux 3, 2010, 342.

87 Corentin Cohen, 'Boko Haram, une impossible sociologie politique ?' *Afrique Contemporaine*, 255, 2015, 75–92, 76.

88 Abdouraman, 'Le conflit frontalier Cameroun-Nigeria dans le lac', 63.

89 Mahmood, Ndubuisi, 'Response to Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Region', 8.

freedom and liberty of border populations. This freedom is expressed in several ways, including the ability to move across borders for trade and cultural exchange, and the liberty to settle in their chosen country.

#### 4 Border Dynamics, Liberty, and Freedom for Local Populations

The geographical and sociological layout of border areas in the Lake Chad Basin favors plural expressions of local populations' liberty and freedom. This chapter focuses on the persistence of cross-border ethnic solidarity, blurred citizenship, and an intense movement of people and goods that make the Lake Chad Basin an integrated space, with its borders serving as thresholds.

##### 4.1 *The Persistence of Secular Ethnic Solidarities*

The international borders in the Lake Chad Basin have not overcome pre-colonial ethnic solidarity as cross-border communities continue to maintain close relations. The symbiosis is so intense that the slightest inter-communal conflict in one country has repercussions in another. For example, during the Arab insurrection of 1919 in Cameroon, the Shuwa received support from their brothers in Chad and Nigeria. Also, during the January 1992 clashes between the Kotoko and the Shuwa Arabs, there was a cross-border mobilization as relatives of both sides reportedly flocked from neighbouring villages and countries armed with knives and firearms.<sup>90</sup> It was also the case recently in 2021. Saïbou Issa's observation that 'gravitating in the orbit of the [neighbouring] territory, the populations tend to lose the reflex of national feeling, ethnic solidarity then prevailing over national solidarity',<sup>91</sup> provides a theoretical framework for understanding the issue. Therefore, the borders on Lake Chad's shores do not play their function of differentiation. They do not even make it possible to determine what is national and what is not. Similarly, this persistence of cross-border ethnic solidarity generates security and law enforcement problems.

These populations participate in activities on both sides of the border and are similarly engaged in agricultural activities.<sup>92</sup> Even after independence, cross-border dynamics allowed foreign populations to have farms in the

90 Issa, *Ethnicité, frontières et stabilité aux confins du Cameroun*, 112.

91 Saïbou, Issa, 'Cameroun-Tchad : image de l'autre et attitude', in Daniel Abwa, Joseph-Marie Essomba, Martin-Zachary Njeuma, Charles M. de la Roncière, eds., *Dynamique d'intégration régionale en Afrique Centrale*, Yaoundé, PUY, 2001 313–324, 324.

92 Mokam, 'Les peuples traits d'union', 136.

neighbouring country. As noted by Okon Ekpenyong, 'most of these ethnic groupings share deities, ancestral shrines, major rites such as birth, manhood, maidenhood, womanhood, marriage, childbearing, and burial custom. Some still share annual festivals and rituals which all members of the ethnic group have an obligation to attend irrespective of location vis-à-vis an international boundary'.<sup>93</sup> These populations in border regions also maintain economic relations regardless of international borders, demonstrating the practical implications of the cross-border solidarity. For example, in the Konni area on the Niger-Nigeria border, transbordalities are influenced by kinship relationships, religious considerations, ethnicities, and trading communities.<sup>94</sup> As Saïbou Issa points out, 'Identity markers continue to pave the way for integration in productive sectors dominated for decades by local or cross-border community networks'.<sup>95</sup>

On the border between Niger and Nigeria, there is a real economic integration from below, which revolves around official and especially clandestine exchanges. Cross-border ethnic similarities play an essential role. There is a close symbiosis Among the Hausa on both sides of the border because of their culture, language, frameworks of thought, and social and religious values.<sup>96</sup> On this last aspect, the mobility of Quranic teachers and Nigerien students to Quranic centres renowned for perfecting their education creates a certain homogeneity of Islam and its currents of thought in the region.<sup>97</sup> Generally, cross-bordalities in the Lake Chad Basin are beneficial or problematic.<sup>98</sup> In the present case, the Boko Haram crisis is one of the problems that cross-bordality can pose, particularly the presence of people living straddling the various dyads. Indeed, despite officials' denials, Cameroon, for example, has long

93 J.L. Okon Ekpenyong, 'Potentials of Nigerian Boundary Corridors as Sources of International Economic conflicts', in in Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju, P.O. Adeniyi, *Borderlands in Africa: A Multidisciplinary and Comparative Focus on Nigeria and West Africa*, Lagos, University of Lagos Press, 1989, 293–305, 294–295.

94 Dillé Bibata, 'Frontières et développement régional. Impacts économique et social de la frontière Niger-Nigéria sur le développement de la Région de Konni', PhD Thesis, Lumière Lyon 2 University, 2000.

95 Interview of Aimé Raoul Sumo Tayo to Saïbou Issa, Maroua, November 2020.

96 Emmanuel Grégoire, 'Quelques aspects des échanges entre le Niger et le Nigeria', in Claude Robineau, ed., *Les terrains du développement : approche pluridisciplinaire des économies du Sud*, Paris, ORSTOM, 1992, 153–159, 157.

97 Adamou Moussa Ibrahim, 'L'insécurité transfrontalière en Afrique de l'Ouest : le cas de la frontière entre le Niger et le Nigeria', PhD Thesis, Côte d'Azur University, 2019, 66.

98 Saïbou Issa, 'Introduction : Résurgence de la question musulmane dans le bassin tchadien', in Issa Saïbou, ed., *Les Musulmans, l'école et l'État dans le bassin du lac Tchad*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2016, 7–20, 8.

served as a rear base from which insurgents were preparing their offensives in Nigerian territory. The country also served as their *Safe Heaven* to escape pressure from the Nigerian military. Similarly, Cameroon is the sect's primary and primordial logistical base. The situation is quite the same in the Niger-Nigeria border, where the Nigerien territory adjacent to the border served as a fallback zone for the jihadists.

#### 4.2 *Lake Chad Basin as an Integrated Space: the Movement of People and Goods*

The persistence of cross-border ethnic dynamics manifests local populations' liberty and freedom in the Lake Chad Basin, the same as the intense movement of people and goods. In this space, exchanges from below are ancient. In many ways, this space has always been an 'African crossroads'.<sup>99</sup> Lake Chad basin's borders have never been barriers for local populations, as shown by archives and even colonial and post-colonial legislation. Therefore, they have never prevented the movement of border populations. Since the colonial period, deterritorialized practices have created a floating population.

Moreover, the colonial powers abhorred this situation because of its effects on taxation and labour. Indeed, by losing its ability to control local populations, the state sees its ability to control its territory diminish.<sup>100</sup> In British Cameroon, for example, the border regime was weak. The colonial authorities explained this situation with the costs of monitoring the border, which could not be compensated by the results to be expected. They also raised the problem of indigenous citizenship. On this point, the British questioned whether citizenship should be considered in terms of place of residence or territory of origin. They believed it was necessary to consider Cameroonians forced by the Germans to settle on the other side of the border. For the English, citizenship was a function of residence, while for the French, it was a function of place of origin.<sup>101</sup> As for the French, the decree of 19 October 1937 regulating the emigration and immigration of indigenous people in Cameroon offered a derogation regime for the populations of neighbouring border areas. Herders and

99 Géraud Magrin, 'Autour du lac Tchad, l'intégration régionale dans tous ses états', in Alia Gana, Richard Yann, eds., *La régionalisation du monde. Construction territoriale et articulation global/local*, Paris, IRMC/Karthala, 2014, 233–252, 234.

100 Johnny Egg, Javier Herrera, 'Introduction', in Johnny Egg, Javier Herrera, eds., *Échanges frontaliers et intégration régionale en Afrique subsaharienne*, Éditions de l'Aube, Avignon, 1998, 5–25, 9.

101 Gilbert Noupinbong Tonpoba, 'Les relations entre le Cameroun sous mandat français et le Cameroun sous mandat britannique de 1919 à 1939 (cas des régions actuelles du Sud-ouest et du Littoral)', MA thesis, University of Yaounde 1, 1993.

other nomads from neighbouring countries were exempted from any formality during annual transhumance in Cameroon.

After independence, states' legislations and daily practices promoted the mobility of border populations. For example, the Convention of 6 February 1963 between Nigeria and Cameroon states that between the two countries, 'entry is free for three months, after which the immigrant must be asked to prove his means of subsistence'. Moreover, the mobility of people in this geographical space is a fundamental element of identity and trade, in short, an element of survival through the activities of transhumance, business, and episodic migration for agro-pastoral reasons, for example. The stability of the Lake Chad Basin depends on seasonal migration and trade relations to ancient settlement areas, including those of Diamaré, Komadougou Yobé, Mundang, and Toupouri.<sup>102</sup> Finally, the colonial border has not successfully imposed the 'territorial space' over the 'social space'. In such a context, local populations have various belongings that go beyond the framework of the State.<sup>103</sup> They use borders as a resource and as a source of opportunities. The freedom and liberty of populations create a form of integration from below, a concept that refers to the grassroots level of integration driven by historical, economic, and cultural solidarity within the Lake Chad Basin, in a context where institutional integration initiatives from above are stalling, and official trade is meagre.

One of the commonplaces about African border dynamics is the supposed weakness of intra-community trade. Michel Foucher noted a policy of 'defragmentation' and the weakness of intra-community trade on the African continent: 'Africa, mostly extroverted, trades more easily with the rest of the world than with itself'.<sup>104</sup> The fragmentation of the continent would thus be an obstacle to intra-regional development, mainly because of its effects, significant transaction costs, non-tariff barriers, immigration procedures, the scale of informal cross-border trade, and the thickness of borders, which is illustrated by the weakness of logistical performance (networks, customs, procedures).<sup>105</sup>

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102 Emmanuel Chauvin, Charline Rangé, Jaques Lemoalle, Géraud Magrin, Christine Raimond, Sylvain Aoudou Doua, Hadiza Kiari Fougou, Abdourahmani Mahamadou, Ahmadu Abubakar Tafida, Abdullahi Liman Tukur, 'Le système régional : environnement, populations et ressources', in Géraud Magrin, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, eds., *Crise et développement. La région du lac Tchad à l'épreuve de Boko Haram*, Paris, AFD Agence Française de Développement, 2018, 25–73, 25.

103 Noupinbong Tonpoba, 'Les relations entre le Cameroun sous mandat français et le Cameroun sous mandat britannique'.

104 Foucher, *Frontières d'Afrique*, 40.

105 Foucher, *Frontières d'Afrique*, 39.

The situation is different in the Lake Chad basin, where trade does not recognise borders. For the local populations, political, fiscal, and customs borders are not economic borders. They trade with the outside world as they do with their neighbours in the same country. Regional economic life revolves around commercial traffic. Nigeria is the source of supply for manufactured goods and the main outlet for agro-pastoral products in the Lake Chad region. Agroecological, demographic, monetary, regulatory, and customs differentials have allowed proper integration 'from below',<sup>106</sup> with poles emitting agricultural or manufactured products such as the Diamaré plain or Maiduguri. Local exchanges are intense. Cross-border trade is more characterized by informal trade and smuggling. This trade goes through the custom posts whose agents are often corrupt. As a result, it is less about smuggling trade than fraud.<sup>107</sup> Local economies are based on geographical and ecological complementarity. Monetary value ratios strongly influence cross-border dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin. Economic disparities between Nigeria and the francophone countries of the CFA zone are at the origin of border dynamics. The continued depreciation of the Naira has made the CFA a refuge or safe-heaven currency for traders in the Lake Chad Basin.<sup>108</sup> Also, the differentials created by the border make them multidisciplinary resources. This situation originates from what geographer Karine Bennafla calls 'commercial fermentation'.<sup>109</sup> The local population play a significant role in shaping the economic dynamics of the Lake Chad Basin, and their contribution is of immense significance.

Similarly, the Lake Chad Basin has almost no border effects, particularly on costs, trade volumes, and national preferences and tastes. On this last aspect, the border does not affect consumers' economic preferences, which is called 'domestic consumer bias'.<sup>110</sup> For example, the Cameroonian populations of the Lake Chad Basin prefer to trade with the neighbouring country than with

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106 Chauvin, Rangé, Lemoalle, Magrin, Raimond, Aoudou Doua, Kiari Fougou, Mahamadou, Tafida, Liman Tukur, 'Le système régional : environnement, populations et ressources', 60–61.

107 Egg, Herrera, 'Introduction', 9.

108 Afouda, 'Echanges transfrontaliers et organisation de l'espace dans le bassin du Lac Tchad', 342.

109 Bennafla, Karine, 'Pour une géographie des bordures à l'heure globale: frontières et espaces d'activités informelles', PhD Thesis, Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense University, 2012. In the present volume, María José Pont Cháfer studies another case of a border where differentials in currency played a fundamental role. See chapter 4 'Threshold, Borders, and Cowries: The Problem of Small Change in West Africa and the Spread of Single Currencies in Northern Ghana'.

110 Keith Head, Thierry Mayer, 'Effet frontière, intégration économique et "Forteresse Europe"', *Économie et Prévision*, 152–153, 1–2, 2002, 71–92.

the national industrial cities on the coast, nearly 2,000 km away. As part of the fight against Boko Haram between 2014 and 2016, the border closure had disastrous consequences for local populations and paradoxically contributed to feeding the insurgency. This measure has led to a slowdown in trade, higher prices for imported products, and a fall in the prices of local products. It has forced the Cameroonian traders of the Lake Chad Basin to reorient specific supply circuits from the Cameroonian coast. Now having to cross more than 120 checkpoints on 1,800 km of road, transporters must provide about 187,000 CFA francs in 'road expenses' to be distributed to police officers, gendarmes, road safety officers, and those of the Ministry of the Environment. This multiplication of checkpoints on the road to Douala and the corruption and scams resulting from it is mainly responsible for the increase in truck rental prices for transporting goods from Douala.

This situation shows that life in the Lake Chad Basin depends on cross-border mobility. In normal conditions, the Lake Chad basin is an integrated space where the border does not affect the mobility of people, goods, and services. The signal of the mobile telephone companies crosses boundaries, allowing better communication between borderlanders. Even for the military, borders have become more fluid. A mechanism set up by the LCBC enables the Cameroonian and Chadian armies to conduct operations as far as Nigerian territory. This regional cooperation is crucial in the fight against Boko Haram. Also, Nigerian soldiers and police have regularly crossed the border into Cameroon under pressure from Boko Haram jihadists. For example, it was the case on 24 August 2014, when 670 Nigerian soldiers with their full armament and seven armoured infantry vehicles had decided to retreat via Cameroonian territory.

Ultimately, faced with the jihadist threat, the principle of the impenetrability of the border and its corollary, territorial exclusivity, is contested in the Lake Chad Basin. The armed forces of Cameroon, Niger, and Chad regularly conduct operations on Nigerian territory against Boko Haram sanctuaries. This situation underscores the interconnectedness of the Lake Chad Basin where troubles in one country have an impact on the others. Cameroon, Niger, and Chad regularly host refugees, highlighting the urgent need for a collective response. Between 1979 and the early 2000s, the northern part of Cameroon hosted more than 100,000 Chadian refugees fleeing the country's civil war. Following the coup attempt in Chad in 2008, 17,000 Chadian refugees found refuge in Cameroon.

#### 4.3 *Blurred Citizenship*

Beyond their liberty, the freedom of the Lake Chad Basin border populations is manifested by possessing multiple national identity documents, creating de facto blurred citizenship. This freedom is marked by borderlanders' mental

relationship to the border. They do not feel caged by the borders inherited from colonization. Examining their daily practices reveals reminiscences of the pre-colonial conception of the border. Indeed, the spatial dynamics that prevailed during the pre-colonial period were different. The creation of a new border resulted from a social cadet's departure to find a new village in the distance while keeping links with his town of departure. This logic created chains of meshed communities.<sup>111</sup> The dynamics of colonial horogenesis, through processes of 'mapping', following exploration and approximate locations of spaces, did not take into account the ethnic configuration because 'African social and political formations were not conceived as territories in one piece, they functioned through networks of alliances, belonging, allegiances of hamlets, of houses and villages'.<sup>112</sup> In the Lake Chad Basin, as everywhere in Africa, contemporary international borders are an 'extraordinary cultural amalgam'. The researcher faces two apparently contradictory visions, but which are in reality complementary: the vision of the state, for which the border is above all a line to be protected in the name of its sovereignty, and those local communities, for which the border is a space, and most often a helpful area, which makes them live by its very existence.<sup>113</sup> Undeniably, the border of colonial origin has not successfully imposed the 'territorial space' in the face of the 'social space'. In such a context, 'the actors remain inscribed in the different modes of belonging that go beyond the framework of the State'.<sup>114</sup> Nigerian traditional chiefs do not hesitate, for example, to dismiss Cameroonian leaders and collect taxes from farmers in Cameroonian territory. Also, until the 1990s, for instance, Cameroonian chiefs of the Lake had to pledge allegiance to the Nigerian *Lawane* (traditional leader) of Wulgo.<sup>115</sup> Nowadays, the buoyancy of border populations in the Lake Chad Basin is manifested by the possession of multiple national identity cards and international participation in votes following a logic of subversion of elections, among other things.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, the blurred citizenship of border populations in the Lake Chad Basin is linked with fake election practices, which consist of granting identity documents to foreigners to constitute 'voting cattle' in favor of the ruling parties. In the entire

111 Egg, Herrera, 'Introduction', 8.

112 Lambert, 'Espaces d'échanges, territoires d'États en Afrique de l'Ouest', 35.

113 Cathérine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'Histoire et perception des frontières en Afrique du XII<sup>e</sup> au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle', in UNESCO, ed., *Des frontières en Afrique du XIII<sup>e</sup> au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, UNESCO/CISH, 2005, 39–54, 47.

114 Egg, Herrera, 'Introduction', 8.

115 BRU, Letter from Félix Gounoko Haounaye, Divisional Officer, Logone-et-Chari, to the Governor of the Far North Province, 3 February 1988.

116 Roitman, 'La garnison-entrepôt', 39

subregion, there is a tradition of indiscriminate issuance of identity documents in the context of the instrumental use of ethnicity for electoral purposes.

Also, Cameroon's National identity Card system is not just a simple administrative process, but a complex system plagued by significant documentary fraud.<sup>117</sup> The legislation on national identity cards, while well-intentioned, has provision that allow the issuance of this document to citizens of neighbouring countries. This practice, which is not even provided for by Lake Chad Basin's national laws, has led to *de facto* quadri-nationalities that blur the national identities in the region. The challenge of determining who is Cameroonian, Chadian, Nigerian, or Nigerien is significant and the populations concerned have several authentic identity documents that they use according to their situation and projects. The system's complexity is further highlighted by a Presidential Decree in Cameroon, which allows the applicant for a national identity card who cannot produce a birth certificate to use a document based on a report of the traditional ruler of the locality and two witnesses of the applicant's family.<sup>118</sup>

The corruption of corrupt officials is a significant factor that blur the citizenship in the Lake Chad Basin. The populations in the area mostly have identity documents from the four countries, and the actions of corrupt officials further complicate the situation. For example, on the eve of the 2013 municipal and legislative elections and in the wake of the operation of the free issuance of the national identity card that the Cameroonian authorities had triggered, police officers in Petté, Far North Region, had been accused, in anonymous leaflets, of having sold Cameroonian nationality to foreigners.<sup>119</sup> Boko Haram has thus taken advantage of the greed of police and gendarmerie officers responsible for issuing some of these documents. The urgent need for reform is evident in the fact that crooked officials have given identity documents to Boko Haram members who have found refuge in Cameroon.<sup>120</sup> As early as 2015, many jihadist leaders were arrested with Cameroonian birth certificates and passports. In September 2014, a prominent Boko Haram leader was arrested in Kousseri, a Cameroonian town near the Chadian capital. The Jihadi leader had a Cameroonian identity card in the name of Abakar Ali and an official Nigerian document in the name of Moustapha Oumar.<sup>121</sup>

117 Marcelle Lucette Mbang, Christine Nadège Ada, Carole Valérie Nouazi Kemkeng, 'La sécurisation de la nationalité camerounaise à l'ère du numérique', *ADILAAKU. Droit, politique et société en Afrique*, 1, 1, 2019, 149–170.

118 Cameroon, Decree n° 2007/254 of September 4, 2007, Defining the characteristics of and method of preparing and issuing the national identity card in Cameroon.

119 *L'œil du Sahel*, n° 53, May 13, 2013.

120 *L'œil du Sahel*, n° 730, Monday, August 17, 2015.

121 *L'œil du Sahel*, n° 639, Thursday, September 25, 2014.

In addition, historical migrations have deeply influenced the fluidity of nationalities in the Lake Chad Basin. In the 1960s, Cameroonians departed to Nigeria for work in the context of rising wages due to the oil windfall.<sup>122</sup> Similarly, many 'Cameroonian' communities were, in fact, 'Nigerian'. They migrated to Cameroon because they were disappointed with the attachment of their land to Nigeria following the referendum of independence of northern Cameroon in 1961.<sup>123</sup> This historical context is crucial to understanding the current state of national identities in the region. For example, Bamare, a neighbourhood in Maroua, was founded by people from the Nigerian town of Bama.

Today, in the Lake Chad Basin, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between Cameroonian, Nigerian, Nigerien, and Chadian. The former Nigerian vice-president and PDP candidate for the 2023 presidential election, Atiku Abubakar, is regularly accused by his opponents of being a Cameroonian.<sup>124</sup> In addition, migrants from neighbouring countries have periodically taken up positions of responsibility in the host country. Gabriel Mbäïrobe, a Laka of Chadian origin, settled in Cameroon in the mid-1970s and became Minister of Agriculture in Cameroon after having held leading positions in a large state company. He is cited as an example by Chadian students in Cameroon's universities:

His career suggests the possibility for a Chadian student to settle permanently in Cameroon and complete a professional project in this country. Such a person could offer a promising future to his offspring, who will enjoy the status of a Cameroonian citizen like other Cameroonians. We thus have Chadian families who look like Cameroonian families today and whose members are Cameroonian civil servants.<sup>125</sup>

The freedom of the populations bordering the Lake Chad Basin is evident in their possession of multiple identity documents and their refusal to be

122 Rousard, *Nord-Cameroun*, 64.

123 Christian Seignobos, 'Les racines de la sédition djihadiste Boko Haram: Pourquoi au Bornou?', in Emmanuel Chauvin, Olivier Langlois, Christian Seignobos, Catherine Baroin, *Conflicts et violences dans le bassin du lac Tchad: Actes du XVIIe colloque Méga-Tchad*, Marseille : IRD éditions, 2020, 57–76.

124 *SaharaReporters*, 'Atiku, His Father, Grandfather Are Not Nigerians But Cameroonians, Abba Kyari Insists', 31 July 2019. Available online <https://saharareporters.com/2019/07/31/atiku-his-father-grandfather-are-not-nigerians-cameroonians-abba-kyari-insists> (last accessed on 25 November 2023).

125 Luc Stéphane Massoma, 'Immigration estudiantine tchadienne et incidence sur la vie universitaire : cas des étudiants tchadiens de l'université de Maroua', *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, 8, 2, 2021, 150–156.

confined by international borders. This is particularly true when it comes to nationality and the dynamics of allocation it induces.

## 5 Conclusion

The study of border dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin makes it possible to challenge or at least relativize the Pan-Africanist, victimized, and militant approaches in African borders historiography, emphasizing the separating function of borders and considering these artifacts as obstacles to the Pan-Africanist dream. This work's vernacular approach, which considers the individualized dimension of the relationship to the border, establishes that contrary to popular belief, the borders in the Lake Chad Basin, which serve as thresholds, have always been a place of liberty and freedom for the local populations. While intellectuals and politicians perorate on borders, this has not disturbed everyday border crossing for local populations. The configuration of the borderlands and the resulting cross-border dynamics allow for proper regional integration from below. As Stéphane Paquin rightly points out, 'the challenge of the coming years is to institutionalize a true multi-level diplomacy where sub-state entities are given a sufficiently important role to benefit from globalization'.<sup>126</sup> A step has been taken with a paradigm change in border perception at the African Union, where former barriers are now seen as bridges.<sup>127</sup> The same is true with the adoption by the African Union of a Convention on cross-border cooperation on 14 June 2014 to promote local, sub-regional, and regional cooperation. However, this agreement has not yet entered into force. Instead of a top-down approach, existing cross-border and informal cooperative dynamics should have been institutionalized. Indeed, the external action of the local authorities dates from the colonial period. It then took on an inter- and intra-imperial dimension. Half a century later, the new states' leaders took up this sub-state diplomacy, also called para-diplomacy, proto-diplomacy, or multi-level diplomacy. However, it remains in the field of the informal. Nevertheless, any border governance that does not consider the intense existing cross-border cooperative dynamic and does not involve local populations and actors would be doomed to failure.

126 Stéphane Paquin, *Paradiplomatie et relations internationales: théorie des stratégies internationales des régions face à la mondialisation*, Bruxelles, PIE/Peter Lang, 2004.

127 Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju, 'The African Union Border Programme in European Comparative Perspective', in Thomas M. Wilson, Hastings Donnan, eds., *A Companion to Border Studies*, Oxford, Wiley & Sons, 2016, 66–82.

## Places of Passage

*Ettore Morelli*

### 1 The Other Side

A famous *tšomo*, a story, of the southern African highveld tells the tale of 'Maliepetsane, a girl and Limo, a cannibal. He chases her; twice she escapes into the small hole where she lives, but she finally falls into the cannibal's trap, who brings her home to his mother to be cooked and eaten. However, as soon as Limo leaves home, 'Maliepetsane breaks free, kills the old woman, takes her dress, cooks her, and feeds her to her son, unbeknownst. When the trickery is revealed, the chase starts once more. 'Maliepetsane runs towards the river, but the river is full and she cannot cross it. She therefore changes herself into a pebble.

Limo looked around for her. As he could not see her, he picked up a stone – Even if she were walking on the other side I could hit her. So saying he threw the stone to the other side of the river. But it was not a stone, it was 'Maliepetsane. The stone fell down with a thud on the other side – Limo has helped me to cross the flooded river! Limo has helped me to cross the flooded river!<sup>1</sup>

The Mosotho scholar S.M. Guma commented that the 'historical nucleus' of the story was the ability of 'the weak' to exploit the 'blind spots' of the strong, cruel, and gruesome.<sup>2</sup> The latter are here represented by a personage with a peculiar name. As it was noted by Paul Landau and Herman Batibo, Limo literally means 'cannibal'; but is also linguistically related to the Bantu root for 'spirit', \*-*dímu*, which in central southern Africa primarily produces *molimo*,

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1 Edouard Jacottet, *The Treasury of Ba-Suto Lore. Being Original Se-Suto Texts, With a Literal English Translation and Notes*, Morija, Sesuto Book Depot, 1908, 258–262. The *tšomo* is summarised and discussed in S. M. Guma, *The Form, Content and Technique of Traditional Literature in Southern Sotho*, Pretoria, J. L. Van Schaik, 1967, 10. For a similar story, but located on the Oti River on the modern border between Ghana and Togo, see Giulia Casentini in this volume, Chapter 5, 'Border Crossing, Strategies of Resistance and Colonial Violence: Narratives from Northern Ghana and Togo (1920s-1940s)'

2 Guma, *The Form*, 10.

'ancestor', the mostly benevolent and enduring spirit of dead rulers, progenitors of the present ones.<sup>3</sup> Another famous *tšomo* relates the story of a young woman, a river crossing, and a *molimo*, this time as ancestor. It is the tale of Masilo, apical figure in many royal genealogies of the southern African highveld from modern Lesotho to modern Botswana, and Thakane, his sister. In a rather typical act of 'monstrous' and 'transgressive violence' of founder kings, Masilo takes advantage of a flooded river, swims his sister across, rapes her, then attempts to kill her, performing such gruesome acts on an islet in the middle of the river. Thakane, however, survives and Masilo's acts are discovered, leading him to hastily escape from their father's wrath, crossing once more the river and starting the journey to become a southern African stranger-king.<sup>4</sup>

How much does it cost, to pass? How much does the passage change the passenger? What does the passenger lose and what do they gain? This surely depends on the difficulty and danger of the passage, but also on the status of the passenger, and their intentions. The weak might find salvation across by becoming inedible for the appetites of the powerful, who would otherwise consume them. The guilty might escape across by forfeiting their status and inheritance, and starting anew. A Setswana political maxim states: *Fa tlou e tlola noka ke tloutswana*, 'An elephant when it crosses a river becomes a small elephant', possibly meaning that any foreign ruler or subject entering the territory of the local *kogsi* would find their status diminished accordingly, and would be placed in a new hierarchy – regardless of any actual river being crossed.<sup>5</sup>

Crossing rivers and climbing mountain passes, or 'closing' and defending them, are one of the most common and most commendable deeds in the praise poetry of central southern African aristocrats and royals. Masopha, a valorous son of the king of Lesotho Moshoeshe, was praised for having led the frontal assault on the fortified passageway into the mountain fortress of his father's strongest enemy, in 1853.

3 Paul Landau, 'Transformations in Consciousness', in Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard K. Mbenga, Robert Ross, eds., *Cambridge History of South Africa, Vol. 1 From Early Times to 1885*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 392–448; Herman M. Batibo, 'The Bantu Ancestors' Image of God: A Linguistic Account', *Boleswa Journal of Theology, Religion and Philosophy*, 4, 3, 2017, 24–34.

4 I borrow the analysis of kingly transgressive violence and of the stranger-king from David Graeber, Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings*, Chicago, Hau Books, 2017. The story of Masilo and Thakane is variously recorded. See Jacotet, *The Treasury*, 80–89.

5 Isaac Schapera, *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom*, James Currey, Oxford, 2004 [1938], 120; Zibani Maundeni, ed., *40 Years of Democracy in Botswana, 1965–2004*, Gaborone, Mmegi Publishing House, 2005, 84.

Most have climbed up by the passes of the women,  
 But *he's* climbed up by the passes of the men,  
 He's climbed into the centre, where the warriors are thronging,  
 Where the spear that goes astray stabs the horse!<sup>6</sup>

The best example of this trope is perhaps found in the songs of Mopeli, brother of the king of Lesotho, who played a central role in the defeat of a colonial army which assembled on the plains and marched against their mountain holds, in 1851. The colonial commander, Major Warden, rallied a contingent of Barolong, a large community who had previously settled under Moshoeshoe in 1834, but who were by then acting as independent and sheltered behind colonial protection: Chake, their military commandant, fared the worst against Mopeli, 'the crocodile' – the symbol of the royal family of Lesotho. The latter 'closed the ford', made the Barolong 'drown' by hundreds, and confined the 'enormous monster', the 'ogre', Warden's army, to the plains, where it was defeated. An ominous message was conveyed to the approaching army by two sinister birds.

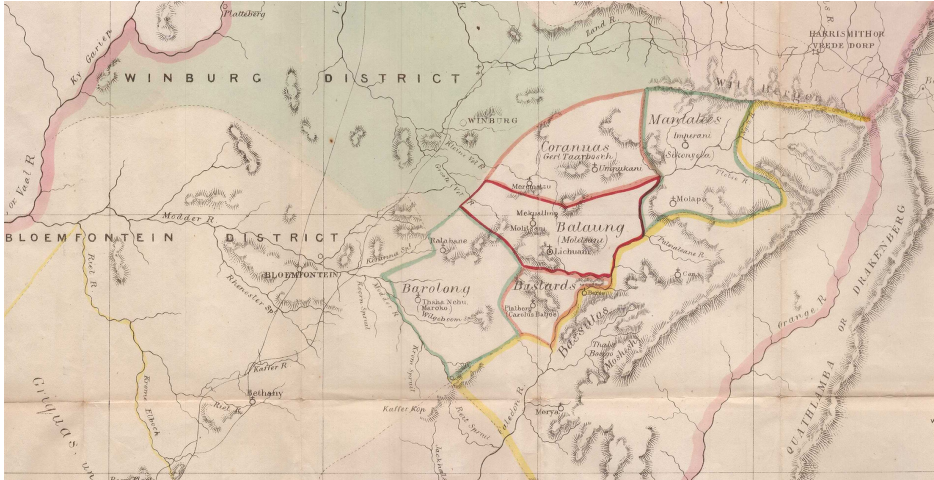
The raven cawed and said: 'Where are you going?  
 The crow cawed and said: 'Where are you going?  
 The land beyond the river is a land of wars.'<sup>7</sup>

Mosebi Damane and Peter Sanders, who curated the critical edition of these praise poems, commented in footnote that 'the reference to the river [...] cannot be explained'.<sup>8</sup> That is because there was no river on the route from where the colonial army assembled, near Bloemfontein, to the place where the main battle was fought, Mekoatleng, the district of Mopeli and of their ally Moletsane. The military confrontation, moreover, took place on a flat-topped hill from which the defeated Barolong were hurled to death: this is what was described as 'drowning' in the river in the praise poem. As in the case of the Setswana maxim, a river could become a metaphor for a border and the land could be divided into distinct territories even when there was no river dividing them. In this case, it was not a peaceful 'elephant' crossing it, and accepting a lower rank, but a hostile army: crossing the border was an act of war. For sure, however, by winning in this campaign Mopeli prevented the enemy army to go

6 Mosebi Damane, Peter Sanders, *Lithoko: Sotho Praise Poems*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974, 121.

7 Damane, Sanders, *Lithoko*, 102.

8 Damane, Sanders, *Lithoko*, 102–104.



MAP B.1 The land beyond the river is a land of wars, 1851  
 SOURCE: ARROWSMITH, JOHN, 'SKETCH OF THE SOVEREIGNTY BEYOND THE ORANGE RIVER, AND A SUPPLEMENTARY MAP OF SOUTH AFRICA', LONDON, JOHN SNOW, 1851 [DETAIL]

further, to cross the Mohokare river, and to reach the core of the kingdom of Lesotho where Moshoeshoe's mountain capital was.

The Mohokare, or Caledon River as it is called today, has enjoyed in the past the sustained attention of a scholar from the *ABORNE* research group, David Coplan. The river constitutes the contemporary north-western border between Lesotho and South Africa, as defined by the treaties signed in 1868 when Lesotho was finally annexed to the British empire as a partially autonomous region. On the other side lies the Orange Free State Province, formerly the Orange Free State Republic, which was the historical actor leading the final wars against Lesotho in the late 1850s-1860s. For many in Lesotho today, that land is still the 'Conquered Territory' and the border is still a place of violence and colonial control, the Basotho of Lesotho constituting an important migrant minority in South Africa, often crossing unrecorded and living illegally in modern South Africa.<sup>9</sup> In his work, Coplan elaborated on the 'folk derivation' of the name as 'that which lies amidst', which is reputed to come from the reaction of the king of Lesotho Moshoeshoe to the colonial imposition of a border line at

9 David B. Coplan, 'History is Eaten Whole: Consuming Tropes in Sesotho Aurature', *History and Theory*, 32, 4, 1993, 80-104; David B. Coplan, *In the Time of Cannibals: The Word 'Music' of South Africa's Basotho Migrants*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

the river, in 1849: 'How can they make a border amidst our land?'.<sup>10</sup> Coplan compared 'differing European and African concepts of the relation between polity and territory' and stated that 'European legal notions of nation, sovereignty, boundary, and their attachment to land had no counterparts in African political culture in the region'.<sup>11</sup> In his reconstruction, the king of Lesotho was opposed 'to the very idea of boundaries'.<sup>12</sup>

As I have argued elsewhere, however, king Moshoeshoe was rather attached to a territorial understanding of his rule. He disliked when his subjects moved within Lesotho, and confronted one of his subordinate rulers, Moorosi, when he attempted to cross the Orange River and move further away from him to the south, in 1848. On the occasion of the first setting of the river border on the Caledon / Mohokare, in 1849, the king rebuked Moletsane, his powerful subject who lived on the other side together with the king's brother Mopeli, because that man had a history of excessive movements, too. In king Moshoeshoe's understanding, the two were *baroa*, a term which has been translated as 'bushmen', but which I connected to a perception of political power as settled and fixed in a defined territory, opposed to those who built their power by continuously moving in a network of temporary settlements within a broad area.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, the king of Lesotho entered a series of agreements which made the kingdom a recognised place of passage for inland migrants travelling to the Colony, by granting them a *tsela* – a colonial pass. Moreover, Moshoeshoe exercised his rule through written and oral laws which were enforced by a series of district courts coinciding with the outer territories of Lesotho, each under one of his powerful relatives – Mopeli, 'the crocodile'

10 David B. Coplan, 'A River Runs through It: The Meaning of the Lesotho-Free State Border', *African Affairs*, 100, 398, 2001, 81–116. Other works include David B. Coplan, 'People of the Early Caledon River Frontier and Their Encounters', *African Historical Review*, 44, 2, 2012, 55–77; David B. Coplan, 'Land from the Ancestors: Popular Religious Pilgrimage along the South Africa-Lesotho Border', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 4, Dec., 2003, 976–993; David B. Coplan, 'Unconquered Territory: Narrating the Caledon Valley', *Journal of African Cultural Cultures*, 13, 2, 2000, 185–206.

11 Coplan, 'A River Runs through It', 83.

12 Coplan, 'A River Runs through It', 85.

13 Ettore Morelli, "A Bushman Cannot Rule": Power, Movement, and Freedom in the Family of Moletsane. Central Southern Africa, 1849 and 1967', *Africa. Rivista semestrale di studi e ricerche*, 4, 2, 2023, 89–118. My main inspiration on this subject is Rachel King, *Outlaws, Anxiety, and Disorder in Southern Africa: Material Histories of the Maloti-Drakensberg*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. King first proposed this paradigm for the region and for the case of Moorosi.

who 'closed the ford' and won the battle in 1851 was one of them.<sup>14</sup> Moshoeshoe was hostile to the lines drawn after 1848, when the entire area was declared colonial territory under the Orange River Sovereignty, because they did not follow his own borders and carved out parts of his lands for colonisation. He was not hostile to boundaries themselves. However, other aspects were conceptually unacceptable as much as they were practically distasteful: land purchase was itself impossible under local land tenure; while the transformation of settler purchases into titles of property and then proof for the extension of imperial sovereignty, a typically colonial procedure, had no possible consensual application in central southern Africa, as Coplan argues.

Rivers flow down from the mountains, divide the land, but at the same time run amidst and unite, gather, collect. A perfect representation of this bivalent aspect is captured in another piece from the praise poetry of Lesotho's royalty. In 1871 two grandsons of the king were sent on an expedition deep into the peaks of the Maloti mountains, to destroy the last independent community of *baroa* 'bushmen' who had stolen from their father's village. The expedition itself is described in the poems through river crossings: 'Go across streams that are full,/Go across the Orange[Senqu], go across the Seate,/Even cross the Mantšonyane and others.' in a progressive ascent towards their destination. However, only the streams running outside their land, in the still hostile Maloti range, were 'crossed', while the ones near to their villages were 'drunk' after the expedition was over: 'You'll drink the Hlotse, you'll drink the Caledon[Mohokare],/then you'll go home'.<sup>15</sup> Rivers and bodies of water which run amidst could become places of important communal rituals, such as initiation rites, rainmaking, and cleansing after battle.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes, as in the case of the Oti River studied by Casentini, of the coastal lagoons of the Tano River studied by Valsecchi, and of the Orange River studied by myself, such bodies of water added strong commercial and social functions to a more or less developed

14 National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, George Grey Collection, G.10.b.15(10a), 'No. 259a, Molomo oa Moshesh bakeng sa linoge, Thaba Bosiu 27 August 1855'. The text of this Law makes clear that Lesotho had a regionally decentralised system of jurisdictions hinging on the courts of selected members of the royal family.

15 Damane, Sanders, *Lithoko*, 182–183.

16 For an analysis of the expedition and more elaboration on rivers in central southern Africa, see Ettore Morelli, "Have You Ever Captured Anything for Your Parents?" War, Captivity, and Slavery on the Precolonial Southern African Highveld, c.1800–71, *Journal of African History*, 60, 1, 2019, 45–65; Ettore Morelli, "The Wind that Dries Up the Land: War, Power, and Slavery on the Southern African Highveld", PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2018, 107–119.

spiritual meaning, becoming piece and parcel of the connective tissue and the road networks of the region.<sup>17</sup>

## 2 Between Life and Death: the Great Rhythm of Universe

This, eventually, leads to the conclusion of our excursion on the threshold. As much as borders, rivers and mountains can be crossed, but they can also divide and prevent the crossing. As much as borders, the crossing is easier and sometimes only possible in some places: the ford, the pass. The difference, of course, is that rivers and mountains are lines drawn by nature, or the gods; while borders are lines drawn by humans. Why? With Strassoldo, Nugent, and Asiawaju, we hold that a border unites as much as it divides. However, even before uniting and dividing, a border exists because of the crossing: it exists to be crossed over, to be passed through, to be a place of passage. It is undeniable that borders are places on the margins: they are ontologically, geometrically, geographically, socially, and historically constituted as such. Recent trends of scholarship have given borders a new centrality, refocusing the attention on their workings and thus 'centring the margins'. As mentioned in the Introduction, within African Studies this has come with the realisation that the centre/periphery structure which serves to understand much of European history does not properly describe a political situation where the centre is often too weak to control its margins, where the borders are porous, where the crisis of legitimacy endemic to the postcolonial state supposedly causes repeated failures and fractures at both the central and the marginal level. Howard's and Shain's conceptual proposal of the functional region, the node, the social network and the landscape helps to make sense of a geography which is not so strongly defined by states – or recognised as such. It would probably be much useful to adopt it also for the old cradle of the European state.

However, this book opted for a different perspective. Strictly speaking, it does not centre the margins: it argues that the margins have centres, too. Margins, in the perspective adopted here, are not defined by their physical, cultural, or political distance from the centre – which they very often possess – but by being places of passage: places where the passenger 'oscillates between two worlds' and where traces of neutrality and danger persist. The centre of the margin is the threshold, the *limen*, that section of the line which attempts to control the oscillation, or to embrace it. Thresholds exist in order to be crossed, to regulate

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17 Giulia Casentini, *Al di là del fiume. Storia e antropologia di un confine africano (Ghana e Togo)*, Roma, Viella, 2015, 105, 205–207.

the crossing, and to make the crossing possible in the first place. This book argues that the centre of the margin is what gives the margin its ontological, geographical, social, and historical value. Every point on the border line may and do work differently, but our metonymical argument is that it is specifically the point working as a threshold which gives meaning to the entire border line. This is because borders are drawn – or imagined, claimed, contested – primarily branching away from the intersection with a line of movement at a point of crossing; or are consciously drawn across various points of crossing and lines of movement. It is the movement across the threshold which makes the border, as much as the other way around.

Time and time again, those particularly strong actors among the many which participate in the experience of the passage, the states, have tried to monopolise the regulation, enforcement, and even the very existential meaning of borders and border crossings, in the attempt to make them perfectly safe, or at least secure for their own sake. That very development may make border crossings more difficult and even dangerous, for those who pass, but may also make them easier and 'free'. The weak may flourish or perish, the strong may ensnare or be cheated at the border. It seems, however, that the oscillation, neutrality, and danger cannot be fully eliminated from these places of passage. This only makes sense when it is accepted that movement, as much as fixity, is a constitutive element and a *raison d'être* of the lines we call borders and in many other ways. The border itself oscillates.<sup>18</sup> Arnold van Gennep concluded his *Les rites de passage* by noting that, in some human societies, the rites of passage are drawn in imitation of a particular kind of material passage, that of astral bodies.

Enfin la série des passages humains se relie même chez quelques peuples à celle des passages cosmiques, aux révolutions des planètes, aux phases de la lune. Et c'est là une idée grandiose de rattacher les étapes de la vie humaine à celles de la vie animale et végétale, puis, par une sorte de divination préscientifique, aux grands rythmes de l'univers.<sup>19</sup>

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18 Paul Nugent wrote of the 'oscillating frontier'. Nugent, Paul, 'Arbitrary Lines and the People's Minds: A Dissenting View on Colonial Boundaries in West Africa', in Paul Nugent, Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, eds., *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities*, London, Cassell, 1996, 35–67, 39.

19 'Finally, among some peoples the series of human passages is also inspired by cosmic passages, by the revolutions of the planets, by the phases of the moon. And that is a grand idea, to reconnect the stages of human life to those of animal and vegetal life, and then, by means of a sort of prescientific divination, to the long rythmes of the universe'. van Gennep, Arnold, *Les rites de passage*, Paris, Éditions A. et J. Picard, 1981 [1909], 279.

Centuries pass and people pass on the Little Saint Bernard, the border oscillates, is drawn and redrawn by the deeds of men, thin black lines on the white expanse. Meanwhile, the sun still cast shadows and draws circles of light and darkness on the circle of stones. Something not dissimilar takes place at the same time, in the austral winter months, in two caves enriched with particular engravings and rock formations.

A feature shared by Rhino and Ancestors' Caves is that during daytime, both are dimly lit. This is aptly described by Campbell et al. as 'perpetual twilight'. At Rhino Cave, this dimness is broken by a short period of direct sunlight during the mid-wintered months. The Cave is illuminated for a few hours in the late afternoon when a narrow arc of sunlight enters through a small opening in the ceiling and flickers directly across the carvings. This brief appearance of direct light was discovered to also be a feature of Ancestors' Cave. However, at this site, it is not the rock carvings that are highlighted. The photograph [...] was taken mid-morning during the few minutes when sunlight entered through the natural chimney-like hole in the roof of the cave and fell directly onto the upright stone and natural ledge at the rear of the cave. According to the oral account [...] this is the ledge used in the ritual to thank the ancestors for a successful hunt.<sup>20</sup>

At the Tsodilo Hills, rising lonely from the vast plains where the waters of the Okavango get lost into the dry Kalahari, humankind was once created, according to those who live and have lived there.<sup>21</sup> In the caves of the Tsodilo Hills, around which no known political border was ever drawn, one should enter in order to experience that fundamental oscillation between light and darkness, life and death, which still belongs to all our border crossings: both those 'free' and made in privilege, and those forbidden, barred, walled, and made in the constant fear of losing our own life.

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20 Sheila Coulson, Phillip Segadika, Nick Walker, 'Ritual in the Hunter-Gatherer/Early Pastoralist Period: Evidence from Tsodilo Hills, Botswana', *The African Archaeological Review*, 33, 2, 2016, 205–222.

21 Alec C. Campbell, Larry Robbins, Michael Taylor, eds., *Tsodilo Hills: Copper Bracelet of the Kalahari*, East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 2010.



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What is a border, and why does it exist? Reappraising a key idea from Arnold van Gennep's *Les rites de passage*, this book argues that a border is a threshold, a *limen*, made to be crossed. *African Thresholds* studies places of passage spanning from the riverine networks of Senegambia to border-making in colonial Gold Coast and Côte d'Ivoire; from the desert roads of central southern Africa to river heartlands in colonial Togo; from flows of cowrie shells across the Volta River to insurgent borderities in the Lake Chad. In a time when state borders are increasingly shut, this book aims to show us that a border is made by those who cross it as much as by those who stand by it.

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STUDIES IN THE SOCIAL HISTORY  
OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH, 5

ISSN: 2590-3144  
[brill.com/shgs](http://brill.com/shgs)