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ESSAY
SPECIAL SECTION

From Frontier to Boundaries and Back: The Circular Historiography of Comparative African Borderlands Studies

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This essay is part of the Special Section, ***Border Studies: Past, Present, and Future****, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Association for Borderlands Studies.*

Introduction

As elaborated in *Bridging African Boundaries* (Asiwaju 2021) and the *Review Report* in *Borders in Globalization Review* 6, no. 2 (2024), the historiography of the academic subfield of comparative African borderlands studies is indicative of a circular progression from "frontier" to "border" and back; and this somewhat fits into the broad periodization of African history into the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial eras.

Given the unresolved issue of language and terminology in the field of border and borderlands studies, this narrative begins with a brief clarification of the basic but contested concepts of "frontier" and "border." In classical political geography, the concept of "frontier" denotes two different meanings, although both are in reference to delimitations between proximate, neighbouring, and, especially, limitrophe state territories: the one, ancient, which depicts the frontier as a 'region' or 'zone' of separation, contact or transition; and the other, relatively modern, conceptually a "widthless line" of demarcation.

Ordinarily, "border" was a synonym for frontier, even in the two stated perspectives. However, while in most modern European languages the term **frontier** (*frontière*, *frontera*, *fronteira*, *frontiera*) became the reference to international boundaries, in North America, particularly in relation to the spectacular and problematic US–Mexico boundary, which is also the birthplace of borderlands studies as an academic interdisciplinary field, the popularized nomenclature is border. The word border in border/borderland studies literature equates the English term "frontier" with its European equivalents and is used descriptively to refer to an international boundary. Either way, the two concepts commonly refer to external limits of nation-state territories.

Precolonial Africa

Whether the centralized kingdoms of the Yoruba, the Hausa, the Kongo, or the Shona, or the decentralized states of the Igbo, the Nuer, the Maasai, or the Khoisan, precolonial Africa manifested impulses and premodern practices of the frontier as a state territorial marker. Ivo Wilks (1992) even presented an Asante case study of "mentally mapping" traditional state territories.

However, as Davidson (1959) aptly observed, precolonial Africa was "seldom one of narrow nationality," and the "genius was for integration—integration by conquest as the times prescribed, but also by an ever-fruitful mingling and migration…[Africans] were never patient of exclusive frontiers." Kenneth Dike, world-renowned Nigerian pioneer of modern African historical scholarship who founded the famous Ibadan History School and intertwined the Ibadan History Series published by Longman of London, has concurred.

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Thus, in his endorsement of Joseph Anene (1970) in the *Ibadan History Series*, Dike, writing as the series' general editor, said that "the precolonial notion of interstate boundaries was for our ancestors much less rigid and more pragmatic than... many African leaders are adopting today... 'international boundaries' were for our ancestors not a barrier to movement of peoples and cultural diffusion." It is these essentially fluid "interstitial" boundaries that the famous anthropologist, Igor Kopytoff, came to showcase in his seminal edited volume (1987).

Joseph Anene, the pioneer historian of Independent Africa's colonially inherited state boundaries, has identified and elaborated on the three dynamic interfacing borders in precolonial Africa as "frontiers of contact" between adjacent political and cultural groups operating as neighbours, "frontiers of separation" with a "buffer zone" of inaccessibility between them, such as insurmountable mountain ranges and unhealthy swamps, and "frontiers of transition," such as those that prevailed between distinct socio-political groupings, permitting interpenetrations and overlaps that make clearcut boundaries virtually impracticable.

The Dawn of Borders

If the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia first brought borders to Europe, it was European imperialism that foisted borders on Africa in the wake of the so-called European 'Scramble' for Africa and Partition from the mid-1870s to the 1900s (Förster et al. 1988). The end result is today's African continent, with all 54 African states belonging to the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU)—except for the six island states—and sharing approximately 110 borders.

It was the transformation of intercolonial boundaries to international boundaries that gave rise to what Strassoldo (1989) has categorized as "traditional border studies." With the stress on the function of the boundary as markers of sovereign state territories, traditional border studies became the domain of exploration by experts from the different disciplinary orientations in international relations (political science, law, history, geography, and geopolitics), beginning with the popular *Map of Africa by Treaty* (Hertslet 1894).

Back to Frontier

Perceptively referred to as "modern border studies" in post-War Europe and later globalized as "borderlands studies" in contemporary North America, comparative African borderlands studies was uniquely born out of an intentionally African template of "reciprocal comparison" with other regions, especially the global North of erstwhile imperial Western Europe and ex-colonial North America of older modern state societies. These states were exposed for much longer to nation-state territorial and border challenges, with respect to nation-building vis-à-vis engagements with wider regional integration for continental peace and sustainable development.

Concern for border-impacted territorial communities and subnational local authorities is the hallmark of "modern border Studies," which focuses on the causes of territorial state formation and the delineation of borders. The distinctly comparative perspective was developed through Asiwaju's pioneering works on the comparative history of Africa's ubiquitous cross-border areas, regarded as modern equivalents of traditional "African frontier(s)." Asiwaju began with the first known full-scale case history of the strategic cross-border proximities, which he found in his own lived native Yoruba culture area, astride the Nigeria–Bénin (formerly Dahomey) border in West Africa.

Proudly a product of the Ibadan History School, the study, *Western Yorubaland Under European Rule* (Asiwaju 1976), was published in Longman's elite *Ibadan History Series*. The endeavour peaked with two other highly influential scholarly publications, both issued by University of Lagos Press in December 1984: Asiwaju's *Partitioned Africans*, which had wide continental coverage and was shortly thereafter published by C. Hurst, London, and St. Martin's Press, New York, and *Artificial Boundaries*, Asiwaju's globally publicised and enormously popular inaugural lecture as Professor of History at the University of Lagos. Having been so solidly supported and formally launched by the University of Lagos Department of History in the 1980s, the sub-field on African boundaries grew by leaps and bounds due to phenomenal interest in the field from both academia and policy worlds.

In academia, there have been even more scholarly building blocks contributed by renowned African and Africanist borderlands scholars, notably, prize-winning *Hausaland Divided* (Miles 1994) and the more breathtakingly global *Scars of Partition* (Miles 2014). There is also the landmark work *Smugglers, Secessionists, and Loyal Citizens* (Nugent 2002) and the follow-up, *Boundaries, Communities, and State-Making in West Africa* (Nugent 2019).

The African Borderlands Research Network (ABORNE) was successfully established in 2007 as an outstandingly credible regional replication of the world-wide Association of Borderlands Studies (ABS). As demonstrated in the ABORNE-established Border Studies Book Series by Palgrave Press and, more explicitly, in Coplan (2010), there has also been a progression from empiricism to theorization and postmodernism.

Asiwaju's widely acknowledged prominence as a leading figure in African cross-border governance and integration policy arenas since the mid-1980s, both nationally

in Nigeria and Mali and regionally in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and African Union (AU) in Abuja and Addis Ababa, attests to the exceptionality by which Comparative African Borderlands Studies has systematically bridged the world of academia with cognate policy domains (Asiwaju 2015).

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