

Bigfooted border theories, barefooted border crossers.

Rethinking resilience and security through the vernacular sense-making and practices of border communities across Cameroon, Nigeria, and Gabon

A thesis submitted to the School of Area Studies, History, Politics and Literature (SASHPL) of the University of Portsmouth in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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*“If all the world is a stage, then borders are its scenery, its **mise en scène**, its ordering of space and action, wherein actors and observers must work at making borders intelligible and manageable and must do so in order for the drama to proceed.”*

(Wilson & Donnan, 2012, pp. 19–20)

Abstract

Through a conceptualisation of *biplacement* and *a-statal actorness* as tools for gleaning meaning of vernacular sense-making and practices of borderlanders, this PhD thesis explores the epistemological implications of borderlander's standpoint on security and resilience in the postcolonial context of border areas across Cameroon, Nigeria, and Gabon. To examine how centring the experiences and sense-making of border communities can help rethink security and resilience, the thesis proposes an analysis that escapes the usually assumed dual performativity of the border. It questions dominant imaginaries of what the border means in concrete terms and what/where it means to be safe in the territorial margins of the nation-state. Its central argument is that the ways in which borderlanders engage the border space not only challenge and reshape the meaning of the post-colonial border, they also enable us to question universalised understandings of vulnerability and threat.

The research is a multi-sited ethnographic study, with an analytical framework that gleans security meanings from borderlanders' geographical imaginations and vernacular bordering practices. Based on the ethnographic in-depth investigation of 16 borderlanders, the experiences of border communities are foregrounded in the understanding of their socio-spatial environment through their narratives about themselves, the border space, and their fears. The study deploys a narrative approach both as a frame of reference and a way to present its fieldwork insights. In its methodology, the project weaves together vernacular security approaches and critical border studies, to inquire how an epistemology that centres borderlanders' narrative agency contributes to unmuting the postcolonial border subject.

In terms of contributions, the study highlights and assesses the impact of side-lining vernacular voices in the conceptualising the postcolonial African border space. It pushes the scholarship on borders forward by drawing and illustrating the epistemological implications of evaluating how border communities make sense of, perform, and mobilise their situated endeavours in common areas of the human condition, such as security and resilience. Most importantly, the thesis introduces the concepts of "biplacement" and "a-statal actorness" as tools for a granular empirical exploration of postcolonial borders. These novel concepts also help in mapping out vernacular entry points for alternative approaches to studying borderlanders, and perhaps designing better participatory border models.

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Table of Acronyms

AMISOM: The African Union Mission in Somalia

AU: African Union

AUBP: African Union Border Programme

CBS: Critical Border Studies

CEMAC : La Communauté Économique et Monétaire des Etats de l'Afrique Centrale

CIRM: Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies

CODESIRA: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa

ECAS: European Conference on African Studies

ECOWAS: The Economic Community of West African States

MNJTF: The Multinational Joint Task Force

NCI: Nigeria Customs and Immigration

NCS: Nigerian Customs Service

NGO : Non Governmental Organisation

RENEW : Rethinking Europe in a non-European World

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1 Chapter 1 - General Introduction

1.1 Thesis Snapshot: "Border Bridge Closed"



Picture 1 - A tank on the Mfum border bridge (Nigeria-Cameroon) – Source: Video frame

This PhD research is about borders, and how seriously unmuting the perspective of borderlanders on the border space help rethink security, resilience, and the postcolonial border itself. However, I would like to start by outlining how the intellectual journey that led to the questions which this PhD thesis seeks to answer somehow confounds itself with my personal trajectory. In the past, I worked with Non-Government Organisations and civil society movements, with a focus on marginalised groups in society. Ten years ago, in Cameroon for example, I was responsible for coordinating a project on Access to Knowledge, as part of the A2K programme. In the UK later on, I worked with Consumers International in London on a project promoting financial literacy for women and other individuals excluded from the traditional banking system in Africa. These experiences allowed me to reflect very deeply on the situation of people living in the “margins” of society, and especially on how many assumptions about them can be far from their own reality. Moreover, my direct involvement with groups of people who are considered marginalised gave me a sense that too much of the effort to support them was inadequate. While a lot was being done especially in developing initiatives and humanitarian assistance to support them,

representations from people who speak on their behalf seemed to diverge from the narrative of those concerned. In other words, a lot was being done to speak for them, to speak on their behalf, to represent them. Nevertheless, not as much was being done to speak to them, and actually foreground what they think and how they see things.

Later on, as I studied for my Masters degree at the university of Portsmouth, I took an interest in borders and my Independent Project was on colonial mapping in Africa, especially the evolution of Cameroon's colonial borders. However, paying specific attention to ordinary borderlanders and how they had been silenced in the mapping process by both colonial and national authorities in charge of borders, border areas in Africa emerged as a potential physical location to investigate how marginal groups in society make sense of, and relate to, their living environment. This sense-making and relationship seemed important to me in the context of border given the ways in which national borders in Africa were historically constituted and the various contemporary issues such as security that were widely discussed in relation to borders and borderlanders. My combined interest in border and promoting the significance of voices from the "margins" can therefore to a great extent explain the objective of this thesis, which is to explore the epistemological implications of tuning directly into the vernacular experiences / sensemaking of borderlanders. These are otherwise known as the people living in the geographical periphery of the state. In terms of knowledge production and theorising in the field of security and resilience, the question to answer is *to what extent could their experiences and practices of bordering contribute to the thinking about conceptualisation of security and policy imaginations?* Framing the problematics of this research question in simple terms requires situating the question in the context of a specific border site, during a specific (series of) event(s).

An example of such a (series of) events can be found in a disturbing video clip sent me by one of my contacts in the border locality of Mfum (Nigeria-Cameroon border). The video was captioned "*Border Bridge Closed*", recorded around September 2018 from the Nigerian side of the border and featured events unfolding at the border bridge between Nigeria and Cameroon. I had spent much of my fieldwork time in that specific location a few months earlier, observing and talking to members of the border community. September 2018 was amongst the first months of the armed conflict opposing the Cameroonian army and the Anglophone separatist movement in the South West of Cameroon. Separatist militants were said to often retreat into the Nigerian side of the border, after launching attacks on the Cameroonian government targets. Nigerian authorities would consequently close the border to prove they

does not support Cameroonian separatists¹, and to prevent the confrontation from spilling over into Nigeria.

In the first frames of the video featuring an unusually deserted Cameroon-Nigeria Ikom Bridge (see picture 2 below), a man of imposing stature, dressed in a well-pressed and richly adorned Nigerian *Kaftan*, can be seen pacing up and down amongst uniformed and plain-clothed border officers. The man is shouting into one of his two large cell phones, behind the Nigerian border gate:

“I am experiencing a war situation here!...an armoured car on the bridge!...that is a war situation!...the soldiers are on top of the bridge!...international rules do not accept any operation on top of a [border] bridge!...the shooting is [getting] into Nigeria and this is not acceptable!...I can't tolerate that! Don't tell me that kind of trash...you are talking nonsense...let any Nigerian die here, you'll see the consequences!”



Picture 2- Nigerian border official - Source: Video frame

¹ Cameroon did the same during the 1967-1970 Biafran war of secession and operated a One Nigeria foreign policy, which it expects Nigeria to reciprocate.



Picture 3 – Senior NCI officer with uniformed state border agents - Source: Video frame

Battling to maintain his voice just above the gunshots' decibels, and nervously pressing the mobile phone to his ear, the pacing man cuts the figure of a towering battlefield commander against the backdrop of the deserted bridge crossing. His calm and majestic pacing bluntly contrasts with his agitated voice and the panicked scattering of other border agents running up and down around him, deferentially. Reminiscent of the usual dynamics at the border I visited not a long time ago, I was able to immediately identify the bone of contention and the man's role. The pacing man in the video was in fact a senior Nigerian border official (NCI² Officer), registering protest to his Cameroonian counterparts over what he sees as unacceptable behaviour from the neighbouring country's military. When he eventually paces away from the border gate, instructing his subordinates to seek cover from potentially stray bullets, all uniformed men vacate the video's foreground. It is only then, as the uniform men move out of focus, that a different composition of the video frames emerges, one that had hitherto been concealed, i.e. the presence of a large crowd of people looming from a distant background. It looks as if these people have all along been overshadowed solely by the NCI officer's body.

The amassed crowd (pictures 4 & 5 below) is manifestly expecting the bridge to open anytime for them to cross into Cameroon. One can only imagine a similar crowd and line of cars on the Cameroonian side

² Nigeria Customs and Immigration

of the border, rife with bullets and fear, unless the combats between Anglophone separatists and the Cameroonian army had already dispersed them.



Picture 4 - Crowd seen from a distance - Source: Video frame



Picture 5 - A crowd of travellers waiting to cross the border - Source: Video frame

To me, the drama of this “*Border Bridge Closed*” video clip lies not so much in the fact that this quiet and unassuming border crossing near where I had been living just months ago was now looking like a no-go

war zone. The suddenly out-of-character and abrasive tone of the exchanges between normally diplomatic state representatives does not surprise me that much either. If anything, these developments simply illustrated a first-hand account of how state interests are negotiated through borders and/or how volatile the dynamics of many international borders around the world can turn. In the context of postcolonial borders in Africa, this can be described as a classic display of how various state agents draw on powerful resources and institutional instruments to perform the territorial materiality of the postcolonial nation-state's border, by mobilising a conventional security discourse. This was not my interest in the video clip.

Not being surprised by this therefore, what fascinated me in this video clip, however, was not the intricacies of inter-state border relations, but the plight of the crowd who could be seen only after the NCI senior officer and his men left the video foreground. Considering the circumstances, one may comprehend the dynamics behind the overtly undiplomatic telephone exchange between the Nigerian official and his Cameroonian counterparts. It is nonetheless hard to situate the place of that distant crowd languishing in the background of the whole picture. It is unmissable that the crowd awaiting the opportunity to cross the border, became visible only when the camera focus shifted away from the border officials. This is such a captivating observation to me, because this change of scene in the video played like an essential metaphor to the basis of this research. The revelation of this shift in scenes helps beg the following questions: *what do we see in the border space when the focus moves away from its official dimensions? What does that distant social mosaic tell us about the border; especially when conventional flares otherwise keep driving our gaze away from them?*

What thus interested me most in this video and had interested me throughout my fieldwork in the two separate border areas I studied, was indeed the video's background: those *no-names* silently standing by in defiant dignity, with their luggage strapped onto their heads and their travel purposes trapped within the confines of spatiotemporal coordinates over which they seemed to wield no direct influence. Together with incidents during fieldwork where I was allowed to take pictures of everybody around the border except the border post itself and border officials, I reminded myself of Césaire's outraged invocation of the "chosification" (i.e. objectivisation, thingification) of the colonial subject and the fabrication of subalterns (1955). The international border in postcolonial Africa being a vivid vestige of colonialism, the

context was giving Césaire's notion its full meaning. The “thingification”³ of borderlanders into invisibility, absence or silence in this video resonated again with my inquiry into the imaginaries of those ‘invisible’ bystanders, and the ‘unheard’ voices from the indigenous border world.

In the context of those events, such as the border closure, that erupt in their social trajectories and create biographical disruptions, I ask myself many questions:

What were the fears and anxieties of these borderlanders as they stood there waiting for the border to reopen? How relevant to them was the threat thus identified in their living environment and justifying border closure? Why did they not renounce their journey despite the danger of bullets flying? Were they fearless or just insouciant? If these threats are irrelevant to them, which are theirs and how do they deal with their “own” fears and insecurities in this specific space?

These questions logically lead to questioning the place of borderlanders in the knowledge production process about borders, and more specifically the extent to which they can shape the various policies that identify state borders as a critical focus of state deployment and international interventions. Focusing these questions on border communities is important, because after all they are those who make the border. They do so by identifying as borderlanders and “edgy” residents of their respective countries; by routinely enacting or performing the border as a physical trait of their living space; and by engaging with the rituals required for the quotidian crossing of the border. Yet, as suggested by a cursory analysis of the video clip and subsequently substantiated by empirical data, border people; those who actually live on/through/thanks to/despite the border, are known to be side-lined when states, and perhaps scholarship, start ‘securitising’ over territoriality, or anything that matters to the “national territorial integrity”. Of course, the same border communities have been included in policy discussions, or worse, exploited by states in their respective territorial claims (A. Wilson, 2017).

³ See Tomonaga Tairako (2018) for a Marxist understanding of this term. Tairako distinguishes thingification from reification (Versachlichung). He explains that Marx's theory on reification actually consists of two elements: reification and thingification. By reification Marx understands the transformation of the social relations of persons to persons into those of things to things, which equals the conversion of persons to things on a dimension of social relations. Thingification (Verdinglichung) however, is the second, further conversion of these social relations of things to properties of things, known as ‘socio- natural properties.’ As a bearer of socio- natural properties, a thing (Sache) becomes a “sub-thing” (Ding).

In the face of a security concern as the one raised by the video clip, it is crucial to determine how the understanding, imaginations and (in)action of borderlanders articulate with the state-centric ethos such as wielded by border officials in this case. Considering the historical trajectory of postcolonial borders and the agency of the individuals in the video waiting to cross the bridge, it is fair to assume that the silence of those by-standers does conceal experiences and knowledges that have not been allowed expression. These are consequently invisible in the video clip, or indeed to any cursory observer. There is a profound urge to find out how much more there is to the silences of these by-standers, than meets the eye. Interrogating these silences immediately opens up insights into how the voices of borderlanders can contest, disrupt, or redefine existing state-based and even people-based understandings of the postcolonial African border. Looking at the video again, I cannot not help but return the substantive question that poses itself under these circumstances is:

do the experiences and sense-making of border communities in these two border locales tell us more than we already know about the postcolonial African border? If so, what is their epistemological significance for the knowledge produced about the living spaces of border communities?

This question can further be broken down into four (4) main research questions that this study therefore seeks to address:

- 1. How do border communities make sense of their own territorial space, otherwise conceptualised as border space? (Chapter 4: *sense-making*)**
- 2. Which vernacular practices are engaged by border communities to navigate the border, mobilise resources and maintain social trajectories across the border? (Chapter 5: *practices*)**
- 3. What do the above practices and sense-making tell us about biographical disruptions to continuity as seen by borderlanders? (Chapter 6: *engaging vernacular idioms of security and resilience*)**
- 4. Can this vernacular understanding of border spatiality help reformulate questions of security and resilience in African borderlands? (Concluding chapter: *epistemological implications of engaging vernacular idioms of security and resilience*)**

The data collected as part of this PhD project allows us to provide substantive answers to the questions above. However, suffice it to say that the data presented is essentially a snapshot of how borderlanders make sense of their territorial space and relate to it. The main observation remains the dynamic nature of the borderlanders' relationship to the border space. Looking at the border from the standpoint of border communities enables us to capture this constant flux, but also to infer meanings and derive epistemological implications that are context dependent (spatially and temporally). These findings, far from making grand claims or sweeping generalisations about the border, simply illustrate how at a specific point in time and at a particular location, unmuting vernacular voices especially in the borderlands can help rethink concepts such as security or the border itself.

1.2 Research Context: borders, borderlanders and state-centric understandings of spatiality

Unlike in European contexts, where the “spatial turn” in the 1990s across humanities and social sciences prompted research interests mainly in the efforts of states to territorialise space, it is often the alleged “failure” of the state in Africa that created the need to understand emerging theatres of spatialisation generally located in the geographical margins. In the African context however, this was largely situated within the framework of the so-called “Washington Consensus”, that sought to increase the role of market forces at the expense of the “ubiquitous presence” of African states henceforth portrayed as impediments to the development of their own populations (McKinnon, 2010; Williamson, 2008). In a different reception of such a notion of development and its implications for African societies, African studies in the recent years have developed a critical scholarship on the particular circumstances of populations living across frontier zones (Engel & Nugent, 2010). This Africanist scholarship on borders has explored various notions such as identity, security and agency mainly through what is largely known as “interventions” for state-building or peace-building (Sabaratnam, 2017).

This multivocal space-bound research agenda that emerged in the early 1990s revived provocative questions about the relationships between the local and the global (Tsing, 1994), space and place (Ferguson & Gupta, 1992), and nation and state (Donnan & Wilson, 1994). The explorations of “border culture” and processes of identity building in the geographical space of borderlands (Alvarez, 1995), came not only from academic investment on space as an analytical category, but also from a profound governance policy commitment to re-centre

humans in decision-making. In this regard, Christine Sylvester's (2013) call for greater engagement with ordinary individuals, reflects a critique of IR's historical neglect of human experiences. This critique also echoes the analytical weakness found in border studies, which have maintained the state as the main unit of analysis, and essentialised state-based geographical space by overlooking individual experiences. The following broad statement by Sylvester on IR can also be made specifically about security or other border studies:

“Individuals aggregated into data points cannot share their voices, their power, their agendas, and their experiences with international relations. And that is my point: in IR, individuals are studied using someone else's script, not their own [...]”.

(2013, p. 614)

However, a far more serious challenge lies beyond the empirical engagement of the borderlands in Africa and its normative orientation towards the ordinary human being. When we look especially at the field of security, many of these critical approaches that emphasise individual human referents have not lived up to their commitments (Booth, 2007, p. 323–25; Browning and McDonald, 2013, p. 243–44). Despite the existence of many explanations to this, there has not been a clear articulation of the otherwise causal link that exists between the prevalence of the nation-state and this persistent neglect of human experiences. Even the “fascination over geographical margins” such as borderlands remains mostly state-bound and territorial (Engel & Nugent, 2010, p. 42). A critique levelled against the field of IR for example, is the persistent grammar of geographical representations that use states as building blocks of their expression. Agnew referred to this paradigmatic persistence as the “territorial trap”. This means that state territoriality continues to be treated as an unchanging entity, in terms of its “obsolescence or persistence” rather than in terms of its significance in different historical-geographical border settings (1994, p. 53).

Even after his seminal 1994 article on the territorial trap, Agnew observed more than a quarter of a century later that, serious theoretical problems persist with this single scale analysis. He again criticised the territorialisation of power at the national-state scale, which thus denies it [power] to other spatial configurations involving place-making and spatial interaction (Agnew, 2010, p. 779). Nevertheless, the “spatial turn” in IR, was a response to this longstanding critique, with its advocates urging to consider the state-society relationship beyond the constraints of territoriality (Engel & Nugent, 2010; Anssi Paasi, 2003a). This challenge to the nation-state territorial paradigm is particularly significant for African

spatiality, whose admission into the international order was achieved through the process of colonial mapping. This colonial process inextricably subjugated African state borders to the strictures of Westphalian spatiality. Most importantly, postcolonial African spatiality found itself tied to the global destiny of the nation-state in the modern world, in such a way that reverberations of state-building agendas always tend to follow colonial trajectories (Harvey, 2009, p. 132).

In postcolonial Africa, this can to a large extent be illustrated through colonially inherited nation-states, which have undergone so little change in their spatial makeup since independence in the early 1960s. The governance of African spatiality has thus been integrated into the international order by subordinating it to external agendas on border policing (Harvey, 2009; Muller, 2017). Therefore, apart from the pre-eminence of the Westphalian spatial organisation that conceives of state borders as rigid containers of societies, African state borders are also integrated in the global securitisation agenda as a foundational signifier of threat, to the extent that areas outside this normative control of state instrumentalities are called “ungoverned spaces” or “not-yet-civilized” regions, awaiting effective state governance (Gerhart et al., 2002; Grovogui, Siba, 2002; Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013, p. 10). It is consequently fair to say that colonially drawn African borders have prolonged the colonial and postcolonial state’s hegemonic writing of spatial order in Africa, thereby locking the understanding of border communities into state-based conceptualisations of space. One of the direct consequences of this state-based discursive hegemon over the narrative of space is that African state borders have succeeded in obscuring the complexity of spatial practices within transnational societies, after silencing the full expression of competing forms of space production which prevailed in pre-colonial Africa. These competing forms of space production continue to a large extent to structure the perspectives and experiences of border communities all over the continent nowadays. In so doing, the now problematic state-based narrative of bordering practices has not only consecrated the statist paradigm in the understanding of borders in Africa as physical containers of societies, it has also facilitated the continued coloniality⁴ of the African space.

As many scholars have observed, this centrality of the territorial state as reified through rigid conceptualisations of borders has persisted, despite the success of the early 1990s “spatial turn” in the

⁴ Coloniality in the sense of decolonial thinkers such as Quijano and Mignolo, who view the dominant paradigm of Western knowledge production about other lands as the “instrumentalisation of reason by the colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 452; Quijano, 2007)

humanities and social sciences (Agnew, 1994; Hubbard & Kitchin, 2011; Strandsbjerg, 2010, pp. 89-95). Agnew's observation therefore retains its validity even today in Western countries. Moreover, the "territorial trap" in the West also doubles as continued coloniality in the African context. The survival of Eurocentric writing of the space order and its implications for postcolonial border communities has therefore been contingent upon two political processes with contrary vectors, namely colonisation and decolonisation. Both processes used the Westphalian "software" to rationalise all existing "geo-bodies"⁵ (Duara & Winichakul, 1995, p. 17) into respectively colonial and postcolonial 'state space[s]' (Brenner et al., 2008).

So, apart from the sheer subordination of formerly colonised territories to the power of European spatiality in the international system (Fotiadis, 2008, p. 7; Sparke & Sparke, 2005, p. 9), this Eurocentric state hegemony structures much of the (critical) thinking on the broad range of spatial practices concerning the borders of African states. For instance, as part of a global liberal peace agenda supported chiefly by external interveners in Africa in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 era, preoccupations with African borders remain committed to a statist normative order, even when non-state actors are expressly taken into account. As a matter of fact, borders are now acknowledged as dynamic sites which continuously participate in the generation of new meanings beyond the nation-state paradigm (Agbiboa, 2017; Roitman, 2005). As a direct consequence of this acknowledgment of borders, border communities occupy a key part in the policy rhetoric of security in Africa both in African regional policies on the one hand (African Union Border Governance Strategy, 2017; Poole & Mohammed, 2013), and interventions actioned by security partners external to the continent, such as Africom, AMISOM, G-5 Sahel, MNJTF⁶, Barkhane, etc. on the other hand (Alexandre, 2020; Armées, 2020). However, it remains obvious that through various policy implementations and their intended convergence in terms of institutional architecture (Pirozzi & Litsegård, 2017; Union & Africaine, 2012), the rationale by which fears, threats and risks are assessed and prioritised concerning borders, continues to side-line the very experiences of border communities (Hadley, 2005). So, while it is being increasingly recognised that borders shape communities as much as they are shaped by those communities, the narrative of this duality still ends up assigning a subordinate role to the spatial practices of such communities, and therefore fails to capture their particular "idioms". This is mainly because even when the focus is on border communities,

⁵ i.e. "a man-made territorial definition which creates effects..."

⁶ See list of acronyms

dominant understandings of their representations and experiences are still structured by the statist or state-centric paradigm in a territorial expression that cannot really deliver on a normative commitment to centring ordinary human beings. This contradiction circles back to the neglect of human experiences as mentioned above.

The centrality of the territorial state inevitably obscures the complexities of spatial practices, especially in border areas where communities tend to ‘produce’ spatial frameworks that befit their own meaning-making processes, and generate patterns of social relations that contest, compete and interact with state forms depending on local vernacular interests. In this regard, the pervasiveness and persistence of the Westphalian geopolitical narratives has gone far beyond the material dimension of geographical assumptions, to obscure the hermeneutical realms of vernacular knowledge about border spatiality in Africa. The persistence of the “Peters Phenomenon” as highlighted by Vujakovic (2002) is therefore not just an enduring cartographic discourse. It ultimately obscures the complexities of spatial practices for the exclusive benefit of the dominant narrative of the Westphalian state order on the one hand, and of the postcolonial African state agenda on the other hand. This constitutes a violent suppression of the semiotic abstraction that underpins ordinary people’s engagements with their material surroundings. In other words, border communities are silenced in their differentiated relationship with their physical environment, especially in terms of the epistemic value of their biographical trajectories and social relations constructed within the “perceived, conceived and lived space” (Lefebvre, Nicholson-Smith, & Harvey, 1974).

The limits of the statist approach to understanding postcolonial borders and the necessity for a people-centred approach in the empirical engagement of borderlanders open an opportunity to combine the “spatial turn” across the social sciences and humanities with postcolonial/decolonial scholarship, in order to advocate the centring of the ‘vernacular’ /‘everyday’. This combination enables us to gain insights into the experiences and representations of border communities as an expression of a dynamic performativity⁷, which is socio-spatial and a potentially leading producer of knowledge amongst borderlanders. In the

⁷ This understanding of power performance is applied on the one hand to borderlanders as performing the border community, and on the other hand to state border agents and symbols, as performing state functions.

context of this study where border communities are considered as wielding an agency completely distinct from the intended statist expectations, performativity is understood mainly from a symbolic interactionist perspective. The notion frames the relationship between the state and border communities as mediated through the physical space of the border. I draw on Brickell's (2005) conceptualisation of performativity, which synthesises Butler's analysis of gender as performative with Goffman's dramaturgical analysis of performance as social interaction. According to this framework (where I have replaced gender identity with borderlander identity), being a "border person" is constructed and is an effect of power relations, but individuals are 'reflexive, acting subjects' (Brickell, 2005, p.29), who act within 'the context of possibilities permitted within the culture' (2005, p. 31). The central argument of this thesis is therefore based on the understanding of power performance applied to borderlanders as performing the border community on the one hand, and to state the border, as performing state functions on the other hand.

1.3 Central Argument

This research project accepts that all borders remain a demarcation in space, yet it focuses on the plurality of meanings of this demarcation from a vernacular perspective in the postcolonial context, in order both to reveal and complicate (existing) bottom-up conceptualisations of borderlanders' understandings. Different theorisations of the border point to the importance of recognising territorial demarcations between states in general as socially constituent power practices which are plural in their manifestations, and pluri-directional in their epistemic production (Atzili & Kadercan, 2017; Johnson et al., 2011; A. Paasi, 1998). However, it seems equally important to underline that these constitutive power practices are unequally articulated within mainstream scholarship and policy thinking pertaining to African borders. Put differently, statist practices of bordering are excessively foregrounded at the expense of vernacular practices. The latter practices are often understood only as shaped by statist bordering processes, therefore lessening their autonomous epistemic potential. Since borders represent "time written in space" (Popescu, 2012; Van Houtum, 2011), with both material and symbolic appearances, the historical origins and indeed socio-political context of postcolonial African borders warrant a special consideration of the vernacular perspective within the space-state-society triptych.

I argue in this thesis that an overreliance on the state-building model underpinning mainstream geographical assumptions makes it difficult to operate the necessary paradigmatic shift that could help

determine the direct relationship between the border as a type of discrete territorial space and the specific human behaviour within. It is a difficulty that Starr and Most (1976) pointed out almost half a century ago, by essentially posing the following question: *how do we operationalise an understanding of state borders as connected to human behaviours?* As seen earlier, answers to this question have come in the form of challenges to the state as containers of society (J. Agnew, 2010); critical historiography of the African international system (Anthony Pella, 2015; Grovogui, Siba, 2002); or questioning existing bottom-up approaches in border studies, security studies, and policy practices. I further argue that these various answers have paved the way for novel understandings of borders as integrated geographical units with their own internal dynamics, but the extent to which these dynamics are capable of shaping knowledge and disrupting assumptions has not been fully explored. This is due mainly to marginalisation in terms of knowledge produced by borderlanders and marginalisation in the international scale as far as the significance of African borders goes.

Marginalisation as a frame of analysis can be moved across the multiscale environment of the border space. At a micro-level, despite a discourse of “depoliticised” bottom-up approaches in border scholarship and a clear rationalisation of geographical specificities in border-focused policy designs (Donnan & Wilson, 2010), there is still a need for a deeper epistemic shift in the conceptualisation of African spatiality in general and, of border spaces in particular (Mercer et al., 2003). This includes considering how ordinary members of border communities also engage borders for their own benefit, thereby deploying a type of knowledge that is not sufficiently considered. This study inquires how this knowledge can bear implications for overall knowledge production about African borders, including beyond borders. Challenging the overarching liberal peace model is the *sine qua non* condition for this shift to succeed at the micro level of producing knowledges about border communities. Beyond that, actually unveiling the missing worlds of border communities and unmuting their agency does not necessarily imply setting out to dismantle the Eurocentric paradigm. Instead, it is using empirical material to feed a theoretical framework that will ultimately demonstrate how a deeper understanding of border communities may better illuminate real life problems common to humanity, such as resilience in the face adversity and security.

In so doing, this thesis advances “biplacement” and “a-statal actorness” as two conceptual tools emerging from the empirical examination to uncover vernacular knowledges. This empirical engagement with the border sites and borderlanders uses these conceptual tools to concretely

foreground knowledges, sense-making and experiences that could have been dismissed otherwise. The notion of “biplacement” uncovered from interpreting fieldwork data calls for an understanding of vernacular border imaginations and practices that escape existing models and assumptions about borderlander identity. As a key contribution of this thesis, the conceptualisation of biplacement depicts the ability of a borderlander not to assign to the border the assumed disruptive effect on a biographical trajectory. A better explanation of the concept of biplacement is the analogy of “rooms within a house”, as put to me by one of the interviewees. “Biplacement” equates crossing the border to moving from one room to the other within the same house, the house here representing the cross-border living space as determined by the borderlander as though states did not exist. Consequently, bordering practices observed and as narrated by borderlanders, come together into a pattern of “a-statal actorness”. “A-statal actorness” as a conceptual contribution to understanding vernacular practices of borderlanders help situate these practices in a different type of relationship with the dominant statist paradigm that has often shaped the study of borders and borderlanders. By emphasising a set of behaviours rather than individuals, “a-statal actorness” first of all frames the agency of borderlanders as centred on other constraints than those of the state. It is conceptualised as the direct relationship between the borderlander and their situated spatial environment, expunged from the overblown ability of state processes to shape space and define behaviours. I have coined this term to escape the rigid dichotomy and the ensuing mechanic antagonism between state and statelessness, that is often overemphasised in studying borderland(er)s. In this view, borderlanders differ through their practices from non-state actors for example, who are in a relationship with the state, albeit a relationship of negation. This thesis on its part argues that through their practices, borderlanders act as though the state did not exist. Hence, the materiality of the border is just an expression of their immediate environment, as expressed through the fluid categories of “denying” and/or acknowledging the border.

1.4 Research Choices

In this section, I elaborate on how decisions have been made about the research objects (why borders, security and resilience?); research subjects (why borderlanders?); and research methods (how to access, collect and interpret data on these subjects and objects of research). Starting firstly with the choice of sites, I elaborate on the reasons why I selected these particular border locales for fieldwork and data collection. The second part explores in detail the subjects and objects of research, as well as their implications for the

data collection process. The final part of this section explains how these choices determine the ways in which the project is designed.

1.4.1 *Choice of Research Sites*

In choosing my research sites, I sought to avoid the influence of existing assumptions about borders in Africa. These assumptions often inadvertently reinforce certain epistemic hierarchies regarding the nature of borders themselves and the relationship between these borders and borderlanders. In order to avoid these influences in choosing the research sites, I departed from the paradigm of physical international borders presented by dominant ideas of world politics as rigid frontiers to human spatial imaginations, and I also avoided border sites already “drowned” in narratives of security.

International news-reporting organisations play a considerable part in “constructing” specific African border contexts, notably by relating them to migration or terrorism. In any case, the notion of border in Africa is associated with insecurity and instability, thus shaping dominant discourses about border areas as producers of threats (Konings, 2005). There is little funding or media interest in covering such places and people that cannot be brandished as sites of insurgency, pandemic, and/or natural disaster epicentres, doubling as scenes of post-conflict socioeconomic devastation (Hadley, 2005; Kapil, 1966). The appeal of border locales for policymakers, humanitarian workers, and even scholars seems to be directly proportional to the extent to which they would be requiring urgent international attention for humanitarian intervention or counter-insurgency deployment. Consequently, other border areas do not *exist* in as much as they do not fit within these preconceived notions of “problem-to-solve” African borders in particular, and sites of knowledge in general. It is precisely because they are disregarded as sites of knowledge that they also do not *exist* in the gaze of policy professionals and scholars who tend to validate knowledge about (in)security for example, only if it is produced from studying sites of insecurity. This type of knowledge is therefore “consumed as ‘conflict knowledge’” (Perera, 2017, p. 43). In contrast, I argue that studying border areas beyond the dominant paradigm of colonial delineation and of on-going /post-disaster or conflict, allows rigorous security research to remain granular through a converse approach. This departure from the beaten tracks of mainstream geographical delineations and disruption-driven agendas, results in a focus on key bottom-up narratives not immensely influenced by the acceleration of an external intervention’s dominant narrative.

Thirdly, it is worth noting that for almost any major political, security and economic crises in Africa, the epicentre of many are often situated in the border areas. Moreover, as zones between two or more political and economic systems, they are often the sites of multiple epicentres for competing or conflicting processes. From this observation, I concluded that in order to learn more about such border areas, I had to learn from the thinking of people living in the geographical interstices between economic and political systems.

I chose sites that are relatively subtracted from intense media coverage and intervention buzz precisely because the typical geographical sites for humanitarian or counter-insurgency intervention are more often than not already shaped by specific epistemic orientations and embroiled within corresponding policy practices. It is usually hard to escape this pre-existing discursive framework. By selecting the southern Cameroon-Nigeria border not prone to the Boko Haram phenomenon, and the Cameroon-Gabon border which is hardly ever in the news or the subject matter of large international policies, this research is insulated from the strictures of current affairs or the discursive tyranny of an active crisis or post-disaster/post-conflict intervention. This site selection rationale can also help ensure that knowledge production that shape solutions to transborder security concerns is not itself defined or determined by the prevailing insecurity discourse.

Most importantly, the rationale thus exposed for site choice is perhaps an avenue for addressing the research paradox that exists, as highlighted by Suda Perera (2017), between constraints that limit research access to conflict-affected areas on the one hand, and the pressure to produce policy-relevant research for the same areas on the other hand. The rationale for choosing these research sites posits that, as disentangled from the dynamics of conflicts and other logics of state-making, a vernacular approach can help glean an *a priori* understanding of disruption and threat otherwise not accessible in times of conflict and/or humanitarian intervention. This rationale has already been concurred by the course of events unfolding in one of the two locales studied. In fact, political uprising in Anglophone Cameroon morphed into full-blown secessionist violent insurgency only a few months after I left the Cameroon-Nigeria border area as described in the “Border Closed” snapshot above. Hence, data collected at a time of relative peace in one of the two border areas can now be used to talk about a place that has virtually become a conflict zone in a relatively short period of time. So, apart from the usefulness of that type of data that can help maintain cognitive lucidity in the face of the constraints of a war that will come and go, the changing dynamics of the state borders reminds us of their unpredictability, and the necessity to refrain from fixed characterisations about border spaces. Most importantly, it underscores the necessity to engage these vernacular narratives before they are subsumed or muddled by the grammars of war, natural disasters,

epidemics, or political upheavals. On the chosen sites of inquiry that are postcolonial borders, the focus on vernacular sense-making by borderlanders themselves ultimately ensures that the subjects, objects, and methods of inquiry are indeed not influenced or determined by state-based discourses.

1.4.2 *Choice of Subjects, Objects and Methods of Inquiry*

In addition to selecting research sites using a rationale that questions the nature and narrative of the state-based understanding of the border, I have also selected a thematic investment that can best exemplify how a novel outlook on African border spaces can produce epistemic impact. That is why in addition to security, resilience has also been included to escape the strictures of dominant definitions of what is or is not a threat. These themes have been chosen because they represent important epitomes of external/regional humanitarian and development interventions focusing on African borders (Faling et al., 2015), but also because they articulate well with the biographical disruptions experienced by people who live in borderlands (see “Border Close” snapshot). The questions raised by the thinking around these themes also speak to border communities as they grapple with common challenges pertaining to the human condition. Furthermore, as a feature of sociohistorical developments and common themes of interventions targeting border areas, security and resilience in many ways mirror the contextual transformations and tensions between the two axes of power involved in the postcolonial border (vernacular axis and official axis). Even though vulnerability can further be broken down into issues of security and resilience, this research project has looked at how borderlanders make sense of what they see as threats and disruptions. While borderlanders and the insecurity or fears they experience are respectively subjects and objects of this inquiry, the overarching notion of the vernacular connects the two.

I understand the term “vernacular security” as simply what it means for ordinary members of the border community to be safe. By relying mainly on the meaning(s) of security in their own terms, borderlanders’ “vernacular security” fits in the definition employed by Jarvis and Lister (2013) to sketch the diversity of ways in which different publics conceptualise security and security threats (See also Gillespie & O’Loughlin, 2009; Jarvis, 2019; Vaughan-Williams & Stevens, 2016). The relationship between human beings and their spatial environment can serve as an entry point into their world as real people, as opposed to deterministic abstractions. Centring the subject of security is as important as, centring the context of security because the situatedness of security is what gives substance to its vernacular. In other words, emphasising the experiences of borderlanders as defining their own perspectives on security is a way of

both entering the borderlanders' world through their spatial practices, and evading dominant imaginaries of security. That is why the border area lends itself so well to explore these relationships, given its interstitial location between two or more political and economic systems. The inevitable dynamics that will be generated by vernacular and official axes of the spatial practices, add to its interstitial or transborder character. Despite the inductive nature of this study, the inevitable character of the encounter between the two axes of border dynamics is assumed, not least because the literature has established the peculiarity of African borders shaping communities to the same extent that they themselves are shaped within these discrete geographical units (Messe Mbega, 2015). However, investigating these dynamics of mutual influences is not the end goal of this research project, it is rather an entry point to studying vernacular understandings of the border space and embedded meanings of security. This requires a befitting and methodological approach that divests the border space from its (post)colonial state reification; enables insights into the worlds of borderlanders as defined by their own agency; and ultimately provides space for the voices of the borderlanders to shape the narratives of their experiences as well as the meaning of how they act out their relationship to the border space.

The research tools used here aim at understanding how unmuting vernacular border voices and sense-making can enrich understandings of fears, anxieties, and ways of addressing them. While it is therefore obvious that this inquiry will be focused more on the vernacular side of the interactions, our claim to the vernacular cannot be formulated *ex nihilo*, or just based on the choice of the befitting territorial location as the theatre of interesting practices. That is, further problematising the border as a contested space hosting both the vernacular and the official, requires a methodological approach that would capture and render the narratives of borderlanders as unaltered as possible. I have accordingly deployed a methodological approach rooted in theoretical frameworks that seek to evidence the coloniality of mainstream knowledge production in a border context where vernacular knowledges are subjugated. This methodological approach, called a *decolonial vernacular narrative approach* rests on three main pillars: the postcolonial/decolonial ethos; the vernacular understanding; and the narrative approach. The first pillar, its postcolonial/decolonial ethos deconstructs the postcolonial border as a territorial space whose dominant discursive construction as state space both in colonial and postcolonial contexts obscures alternative readings. This pillar acknowledges the continued "legacies of colonial rule" long after independence (O. U. Rutazibwa & Shilliam, 2019, p. 1), its impact on knowledge production and the ways in which the processes of (de)colonisation have silenced the voices of borderlanders by reifying the colonial/statist paradigm (Sabaratnam, 2011). As such, this methodological pillar situates this work in the Decoloniality and Postcolonial Critique literature (O. U. Rutazibwa, 2014) that engage the persisting effects of colonisation and contribute to the construction of a new epistemology of/from the

South (Santos, 2014) or a plural order of knowledge, so as “to make the invisible visible” (Matos-Ala, 2018, p. 1). Without necessarily measuring against epistemologies from the North, such a construction should nevertheless bridge what Santos refers to as the “abyssal line” (2014, p. 20) through alternative ontological and epistemological stances. In so doing, we reach beyond the North/South duality by exposing an understanding of the conditions of epistemic oppression that disempower both “the oppressor and the oppressed” (Byrd & Rothberg, 2011; Guha & Spivak, 1988). We should nevertheless not lose sight of the fact that the necessity for such an alternative epistemology on border, as well as a host of other academic areas, arises both from the realisation of the limits presented by the assumed universality of Eurocentrism in theory-making on the one hand, and its debilitating effects presented by Grosfoguel and other decolonial thinkers as “epistemicide” on non-western forms of knowledge on the other hand (Grosfoguel, 2013).

The vernacular pillar, on its part, complements the decolonial/postcolonial approach in this that it seeks to evidence the epistemic validity of borderlanders’ experiences and practices. It is the concrete side of the decolonial ethos as it guides the gathering of vernacular knowledges as produced by borderlanders about their territorial space. It presides over the chosen data collection methods such as ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews. The vernacular component of this methodological approach draws from a recent turn to narrativity as methodological tool. In fact, scholars such as Nick Megoran (2006) and Kuus(2007) focusing on territorial borders have use narrativity to address the need for approaches that enable better access to the lived world of the subjects studied, their actual practices and performativity. Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola aptly offers that,

When studying the politics of everyday life—the human experiences, emotions and ‘little stories’ in and through which political subjectivity is performed and lived out—we need methodological tools that are sensitive to the particular everyday situations and sites where discourses are negotiated (2014, p. 443)

The last pillar of this methodological mix, the narrative approach, also acts as a frame of reference because it encompasses both data collection and rendering. The data collection process is designed with the narrative approach in mind, in the sense that the interview guide for example is intended to help the borderlanders tell their story as they feel and experience. The ethnographic observation itself is not carried out within a defined normative framework that might limit interpretation from the borderlanders’

standpoint. In the rendering of the data, the extensive use of direct quotations is just one of the methods used to give power to the voices of borderlanders in telling their stories.

1.4.3 *Project Design*

This study was set up to 1) minimise the state paradigm as defining border space, 2) consider both sides of an international border to form a single and coherent geographical unit, 3) focus on only ordinary members of border communities, and 4) trace issues that are first and foremost part of these communities' daily life as well as subject of border policy investment. As such, a multi-sited fieldwork approach aims amongst other things to avoid essentialisation of a specific border location and only retain findings that are relevant to at least the two border areas and therefore more likely to provide substantial material for epistemic meaningfulness, theoretical discussion, narrative rationale, and policy analysis. This has allowed me to gain a comparative perspective on how the same themes and categories of people presented themselves similarly or differently, depending on the setting in relation to the border. My fieldwork was deliberately designed to collect similar and comparable amounts of material from both sides of both sites.

The fieldwork consisted mainly of the ethnographic observation of two border sites (Cameroon-Nigeria and Cameroon-Gabon) and the in-depth interviews of 16 borderlanders. The data collected from this fieldwork is interpreted with the methodological framework laid above. As such, the project has sought to rationalise the “performative” character of vernacular agency in the face of the permanence of the state border as an externally imposed disruption. The external character of the border is mainly constructed through its colonial origin. The borders thus studied result from the processes of (de)colonisation, and the inquiry is about their present-day impact on neighbouring communities as well as the various directions taken by the agency of these communities because of changes in their geographical spaces. In other words, it is a study of the capacity of non-state knowledges to question or redefine mainstream understandings of the border, and the accepted meaning of its assumed dual performativity. This in a sense turns upside down the usual focus on the dual performative character of the border, which is assumed to dictate and define dynamics in borderlands. Within the epistemological conception of African spatiality as marginalised, essentialised or bracketed from mainstream theories of IR, Security Studies, or International Political Sociology, this research holds the argument that theorising the African border should first and foremost be articulated as a study of vernacular bordering practices varying from one spatial environment to another, instead of as a theory of state space embroiled in particular marginal social processes.

What makes this vernacular approach particularly urgent and important for the study of postcolonial African borders is the fact that its product is in no way universal or abstract or generalisable, but the result of a disavowed particularist-presented-as-universal Western imperial experience of state/border making. Having established that borders are a specific location of convergence for competing types of territorial politics, specifically that African borders are further complexified by their colonial past (Kehinde, 2010), questions arise as to how (much) border communities contribute to the performativity of these political spaces. Plus, analysing these contributions from a vernacular epistemic standpoint can expand our understanding of this performativity. The project therefore comprises an empirical dimension on the one hand, which engages vernacular agency through expressed representations and practices; and an epistemological dimension on the other hand, which examines how these empirics articulate with knowledge production informing the notion of security, on the other hand.

Empirically, the project explores how the socio-historic dynamics arising from borders drawn by the colonisers prompt various reconfigurations of space-based sense-making amongst borderlanders, and how vernacular imaginaries are in turn expressed in community bordering practices in the specific contexts of the locales studied. Epistemologically, the project draws on the implications of these vernacular imaginings and resulting practices to establish a viable framework to rethink the foundations, orientations and agenda for the knowledge produced about/for security and borders. The project is thus designed to foreground the epistemic implications of unmuting the situated experiences of borderlanders. This design sets the research to assess the extent to which privileging vernacular experiences over official institutional understandings of postcolonial borderlands can reposition thinking about “borderness” itself and reshuffle border policy thinking. By grounding itself in this empirical engagement of the borderlands and avoiding a systematic critique of a particular author or theory, this study seeks to move away from abstract theorisation even as it addresses the subject matter of resilience and security common to both “big” political processes and ordinary members of border communities.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

The current chapter has offered an introduction to the whole project by providing an overview of the main object of inquiry, stating its overarching rationale, and summarising the project objectives. It has also outlined the ways in which this project contributes to the literature on critical border studies and border-oriented policies on resilience and security. The introductory methodological discussion briefly sets out the overall epistemological ethos undergirding this project. Methods and methodology will be further discussed in Chapter 3, alongside a detailed presentation of the data collection process. As the fieldwork for this project was multi-sited, Chapter 3 also offers a deep and detailed insight into the two field sites, the fieldwork choices made and how they contribute to shaping the findings of this research inquiry.

However, before delving into the methods and methodology in Chapter 3, Chapter 2 reviews the state of the field on topics that are of interest to this research, namely a historical overview of African borders; debates around the spatial turn in humanities and social sciences; the relationships between state, society and the border; the specificity of African spatiality and the significance of vernacular systems of knowledge to conceptualisations of what it means to be safe in the border context.

Chapter 3 endeavours to articulate the theoretical framework of this project as structured around three main axes: Critical Border Studies, the narrative approach, and a postcolonial engagement with unmuting borderlanders. It makes a case for vernacular or non-Western forms of knowledge where a theoretical space can be framed for the unmuting of borderlanders' voices to rethink the postcolonial border and related human communities.

Chapter 4 on Borderlanders' Geographical Imaginations of the Border Space (Sense-Making) draws from the methodological framework established in Chapter 3 to explore the ways in which both those who use the state border and those who reject it end up spatialising the border from a vernacular vantage point and how their imaginations of space articulate with imaginations of self. The chapter is essentially about how borderlanders make sense of the border space which they are bound to navigate for economic, social and sometimes security reasons. It resituates semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations within a narrative approach as a frame of reference. It also brings to light the often "invisibilised" dimension of the border, as discursively constructed by the borderlanders, through various techniques such as plural identities, contested claims of legitimacy and personification of the international border.

Chapter 5 on Vernacular Bordering Practices looks at how the tensions running through borderlanders' imaginations of space and self ultimately highlight the ambiguities of vernacular bordering practices. It illustrates tensions and intersections through the ways in which spatial environment is reflected in various vernacular practices of mobility and engagement across the border space. It draws upon the lived experiences of borderlanders to explore how they negotiate with their environment and reflects on their sense-making in the deployment of their economic and social strategies across the border space. The concluding part of the chapter refers to these strategies to enunciate how these findings can question knowledge production about borders, especially as regards policies in the field of resilience and border security.

Consequently, Chapter 6 on Vernacular Idioms of Security and Resilience engages vernacular sense-making and bordering practices to glean idioms of security and resilience that stand out. Starting from the impossibilities of mainstream "security speak" which is unable to capture certain realities and experiences as verbalised by borderlanders, this chapter seeks to uncover the transcript of security and resilience that emerges from the bordering practices of these border communities, especially when one looks at them from a vernacular perspective. It is illustrated with instances of holistic security practices and resilience strategies as captured through vernacular imaginations of border space as well as corresponding actions. The chapter ends with an analysis on the divergence in the narrative of threat/disturbance and discusses the necessity of an alternative framework for understanding notions of threat and (in)security.

This alternative framework is outlined in the Conclusion of the thesis. This final chapter firstly summarises the key insights and arguments developed throughout the thesis. It then analyses the epistemological implications of these insights and arguments, before building on them to offer an alternative framework for studying borders, in the form a research path/framework.

“The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, [...] we live inside a set of relations” Foucault, 1967

2 Chapter 2 - State of the field

In this chapter, I revisit in more detail all the theoretical points raised in the introductory chapter above. To do this, I explore key debates in the scholarly thinking pertaining to critical studies of borders, security and resilience. I also draw connections between the theoretical framework that emerges, and the two operational concepts I have derived from data analysis, i.e. “bi-placement” and “a-statal actorness”. This chapter is therefore divided into two parts. The first part discusses territorial borders in terms of their terminological plurality, historical development in the African context; and borders in relation to space, state, and society. The second part of this chapter focuses on the concept of the vernacular as applied to security and resilience amongst other critical approaches, and the significance of such critical conceptualisations to borders in Africa.

2.1 Borders

The last two decades have seen an emergence of border studies literature, drawing from a wide range of academic disciplines, such as geography, international relations, anthropology, political science, sociology, history and philosophy (Popescu, 2012, pp. 15–22). This body of literature has inspired comprehensive border collections, such as *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies* edited by Doris Wastl-Walter (2011) or *A Companion to Border Studies* (Wilson & Donnan, 2012). As this beginning of the 21st century is marked by globalisation, its immense impact on border studies has led to important shifts from a dominant concern with formal state frontiers and ethno-cultural areas to the examination of border-making in diverse socio-spatial contexts and geographical scales (Scott, 2018). In the same vein, more and more studies of borders have focused on multifaceted processes of border-making as well as their social consequences (Haselsberger, 2014). In the specific African context, these shifts have enabled new insights through investigations on the socio-spatial impact of postcolonial borders (Mbembe, 2000; Nyamnjoh, 2007), revisiting the age-old issue of the dynamic relationships between postcolonial borders and (in)security and/or identity formation (Kapil, 1966).

These important shifts and novel insights have only added to an increased interest in the dynamics of borders usually linked to the geographical genealogy of the Westphalian nation-state and global geopolitical rivalries dating as far back as the 19th century (Dodds, 2000; O’Tuathail, 1996). Nonetheless, these major shifts and increased interest regarding the subject matter of the border seem to have either

side-tracked the importance of defining the term “border” itself, or simply led to its prolific use in various areas of thinking as a polysemic term. Consequently, the multidisciplinary popularity is not necessarily supported by a consensual terminological definition in the literature. On the contrary, if anything, we collect more and more evidence that border-related terms are very elastic and overlapping. For a study such as this that focuses on borders, I believe it is essential to provide an overview of the concept, however brief, not least because it serves the purpose of highlighting the differences and interrelationships between the main terms that will be recurrent throughout this thesis. Moreover, such an overview clarifies and instructs as regards the arguments used in this thesis, given the ambiguity often raised by these main terms, which often overlap or, seem to be used interchangeably. In the following section therefore, I will revisit the following terms principally: *border*; *boundary*; *borderland(er)*.

2.1.1 *Terminological discussion*

The changes that traditional definitions of borders and borderlands have undergone in the post-independence, post-cold war eras, and within the context of globalisation have most notably made the terms *border*, *boundary* and *frontier* interchangeable nowadays. In the same vein, the concept of borderland has been developed and studied under a specific geographical understanding of the border. It is worth noting first and foremost that even though life on earth is divided along cultural, economic, political, and (micro)social lines, the significance of these terms in this thesis is understood as mainly political, in the important role that they play in defining, classifying, and controlling a territory. This is because their contemporary performative ability to assign things, ideas and people to particular spaces and regulate movements across these spaces through what Sack et al. call “a primary geographic expression of social power” (1986, p. 5), is a function of state power as unilaterally exerted unto space. In their supposed “role of ordering society” (Popescu, 2012, p. 8), all these terms conflate a usage and interpretation that foreground the modern state system and border actors as territory bound. In other words, these definitions would be unable to capture the meaning of borders in pre-colonial African political systems for example, or indeed, of any other fashion of ordering society outside the coordinates of the Westphalian territorial state model.

In fact, the standard definition of border as “a point or limit that indicates where two things become different”, and boundary as “a line separating one country or state from another” (Merriam-Webster, 2020) is also concurred with by renowned border studies scholars like Newman and Paasi, who confirms its

“separating” attribute, before emphasising that a boundary “may occur in real or virtual space” (1998, p. 191). Boundary and border, on their part, are both politically charged concepts. While boundary designates the bounds, so to speak, within which a given political unit is fastened together internally; border signifies the limits of such a political unit. Even though boundary is - in most instances - synonymous to border, it is a broader term for describing abstract separation between values, classes, ideas, political (id)entities, etc. (Meinhof et al., 2003). Border, on the other hand, depicts a formal physical delimitation between two or more collective subjective entities. It often has the effect of widening the geographical and mental distance between locations, that otherwise are contiguous to each other. Twin border towns and villages are a classic example of this. Hence boundaries can incorporate borders and frontiers, albeit it with emphasis on the immaterial rather than the material dimensions of thinking. As a cognitive separating wall in the minds instead of on the ground, boundaries can participate in the (re)production of identities, which find their way into societal realms of practices.

The term frontier⁸, synonymous to borderland, carries a slightly more forward-looking and outward orientation than boundary and border. It is “an area ahead of the hinterland”, that used to be referred to as “the foreland” or “the march” in the past (Kristof, 1959). It is understood as constituting the line of separation as much as the proximity to that line, i.e. the land surrounding an abstract line across physical space – the borderland. In this sense, frontiers (or borderlands) can be seen as non-political “transition zone[s]” between two political spaces, the spatial intersection between nation states (Kristof, 1959, p. 270; Turner, 1935). My references to borderland and borderlanders throughout this thesis are therefore based on this non-political connotation of difference or separation that is lacking in “boundary” and “border”. As the scholarship on borders focuses on how boundary and border articulate with wider and distant political processes, it tends to overlook the territorial space of the border itself as an integrated geographical unit, and to naturalise the social behaviours of borderlanders into categories that gives too much weight to the borderline. In contrast, the use of “border acknowledger” or “border deniers” throughout this thesis to refer to people who live by, pass through or use the border in one way or another, is not done so in the understanding that these individuals should be essentialised by the official dimension of the state border. Moreover, the notions of “biplacement” and “a-statal actorness” that have emerged from the data collected further illuminates the flaws in using national borders as categories to study

⁸ etymologically derived from the English noun “front”

borderlanders. The case of postcolonial borders in Africa is especially pertinent because of historical and structural complications which reinforce the necessity to see them as particular analytical categories rooted territorially, but with a powerful sociohistorical dimension. This also reasserts the question as to whether the territorial can ever be non-political as long as borders exist.

Instead of “boundary”, the terminology “border” is also repeatedly engaged throughout this thesis. This might seem surprising or counterintuitive, because *boundary* is inward-looking; carries an undertone of flexibility and uses the separating line as what one may characterise as the *last port of call*. Whereas the term *border*, on the other hand, denotes static differentiation between supposedly stable entities and is therefore seen as *point of departure* (as it were) for understanding borderlands, otherwise known as frontiers. The rationale for electing “border” as operational terminology is that this study explores the border area as a geographical ‘epicentre’ of multiple processes involving communities, rather than a territorial space fundamentally defined by state demarcation known as the border. Borderlanders are seen as entangled in a web of relations with(in) their spatial environment including, but not limited to, the materiality of such an international border. This is served by the realisation that membership to the border community is not necessarily place-based and can be politicised on the account of contested claim to territorialisation. It is for this reason that, instead of the more malleable concept of boundary, this study elects to operationalise border as its main terminology for designating the contested space between two countries as invested by various actors. That is, insofar as the border is considered both as a producer of knowledge and as a site of experiences.

Furthermore, this terminological choice is not a dismissal of the dynamic character of the spaces between states, otherwise known as borderlands, but rather a way of highlighting the distinct spatial identity of these dynamics as reflected within communities that navigate these border spaces. It is therefore a choice justified in the project’s focus on border communities and how their “situated knowledges” (Hunter, 2009, p. 151), articulate with the vernacular dimension of the border. After focusing on the terminological dimension of the border, I will now turn to its historical overview in the context of Africa.

2.1.2 *Historical overview*

The colonial origin of Africa's political geography has been consistently regarded as a defining factor in the ways in which its borders underlie state sovereignty and nation-building processes (A. Asiwaju, 1984; 1993; Kirk-Greene, 1985). The main contention in this political geography's genesis is that Europeans hastily partitioned Africa with little or no knowledge, nor even mere concern for existing realities on the ground. As a result, lines were arbitrarily "drawn" that artificially cut through indigenous homelands and thereby disrupting precolonial polities. Having largely been passed down unchanged to African leaders at independence, and maintained as such in the post-independence era following the OAU's *Utis Possidetis Juris*⁹ (UPJ) principle, the territorial outlines of today's African states are usually compared to a poorly tailored suit, which African polities "wear" with much discomfort (C. Lefebvre, 2011, pp. 199–200). This characterisation has raised heated debates around whether or not African agency can be recovered from the historical process of African border making. In the following paragraphs, I propose to critically overview these debates, bearing in mind the main contention of my thesis that seeks to give more prominence to vernacular epistemology, i.e. border communities in the conceptualisation of the African borderland.

Historical evidence on the "*Big Scramble for Africa*" points to the fact that European imperial colonisers had little, or no geographical knowledge of the territories partitioned by colonial borders. This geographical vacuity, on the part of the colonisers, has informed a recurrent argument on the arbitrary demarcation of African precolonial territories. Empirical studies have recovered how colonially superimposed borders divided ethnic groups, and destabilised pre-existing economic and social organisations (Griffiths, 1986; Zartman, 1965). Scholarship on border communities has often focused on the impact of this arbitrary spatial reconfiguration on populations who bore the brunt of this partition. One of the most cited consequences is the massive disruptions caused to existing ethno-cultural affinities (Prescott & Anene, 1971, p. 3; Starr & Most, 1976). As reported by Reader, colonially superimposed boundaries in Africa "cut through 177 ethnic culture areas, dividing pre-

⁹ *uti possidetis juris* (UPJ) is a principle of customary international law that serves to preserve the boundaries of colonies emerging as States. Originally applied to establish the boundaries of decolonized territories in Latin America, UPJ has become a rule of wider application, notably in Africa. The policy behind the principle was relied upon by the International Court of Justice in the Case Concerning the Frontier Dispute (Burkina Faso/Republic of Mali), ICJ Judgment, 22 December 1986.

existing economic and social units and distorting the development of the entire region” (1998, p. 127). African borders as “lines drawn” by former colonial masters, do not only delineate a geographical space within the African continent, they also provide a historical reading of the Westphalian origins of many evolving socio-political dynamics, especially in relation to territoriality. In postcolonial Africa, secessionist aspirations, inter-state border conflicts and armed separatism can also rightly be attributed to this process of colonial mapping (Ikome, 2004; Sone, 2017, pp. 228–231). In the same vein, even the character of African borders under international law is questioned by many scholars based on these foundational origins. For example, following a detailed study of individual boundary in East Africa involving treaties and inter-imperial relations as well as the problems associated with the externally-imposed borders, McEwen (1971) concludes that treaties between European powers and African “traditional” chiefs over territorial control was a spurious exploitation of international law, since pre-colonial African societies and territorial spaces were neither subjects of, nor stakeholders in, ‘international law’. Hence there is a large consensus in the literature about the negative legacy of borders inherited from colonial masters in Africa (Griffiths, 1986, pp. 210–214).

The perhaps simplistic association of colonial borders with artificiality proceeds from their assessed negative impact on border communities. Apart from being thus categorised as “bad boundaries” (Weigert et al., 1957, pp. 93–94), one of the obvious characterisations of the artificiality of African borders, is their lack of African agency. However, this categorisation conceals two further issues: it reinforces the state as the exclusive and Manichean prism for seeing good and bad; and contributes as a speech act to construct a narrative of the border centring the state. While acknowledging the artificiality of colonial borders, it is worth keeping in mind other implications of the state-based good/bad border argument as it lends itself more to a societal perspective on border making (I shall return to this on the border and society section below). The dichotomy between “good border” and “bad border” has played a major role in shaping knowledge production about African borders, not only by confining the conceptualisation of border within the nation-building paradigm, but also by using state centrality to occult and/or subordinate concurrent forms and dynamics of bordering processes, thereby silencing border communities engaged in meaningful social constructs. This particular conceptualisation of the African border has dominated studies of how cross-border relationships are organised between/within African states and societies, both in historical and contemporary perspectives (Chalfin, 2010; Nugent & Asijawu, 1996). Through various themes such as state formation, centre-margin dynamics, power and agency (Zeller, 2010), the literature has thus focused only mainly on the impact of colonially defined borders on the state-society nexus. This can be observed for example in the examination of the cross-border ethnic loyalties, which remains

underpinned by the state centrality in border performativity (Hadley, 2005; Loungou, 1999; Parham, 2016).

However, of particular significance to the border-agency relationship is the fact, the “Fathers” of African independence gained political control on formerly colonial boundaries and their discursive structures of territoriality. Although the geographical legacy of colonialism is germane to the debates around self-determination and agency in “places of colonies” (Abdoulaye, 2014; Ajayi & Crowder, 1972; Arrous & Ki-Zerbo, 2009, pp. 24–27), African borders have remained self-reproducing instruments for narratives of domination that have transcended their immediate time and space of creation. The decolonisation process could indeed be read as the expression of Africans deciding on how to dispose of colonial property. However, from an African perspective, this is only a limited understanding of socio-spatial dynamics. I argue that the African political elites who sought and obtained that independence were thwarted in their emancipatory process when they rubber-stamped borders designed by colonisers, both by not questioning them and by subsequently adopting the Africa-wide *Utis Possidetis Juris* border principle and thereby prioritised the continued reification of colonial spatial ordering over pre-existing indigenous spatial organisation.

These elites who had sought to dismantle the colonial system, ended up seizing and reinforcing the colonial political structure, by failing to disrupt the existing colonial spatial arrangement. Since these political actors appear to have merely inserted themselves as players in the state-based dominant world system, they therefore became part of the fabric that constitutes the vehicle of agency in the international system, the state. Consequently, African borders should be approached as both an inheritance of colonial understanding of space and a historical evidence that borderland population identity and agency can be recovered despite the statist dimension of the border. In any case, a reversal to pre-colonial territorial arrangements on a time axis to arrive at the precolonial dynamics in the places of today’s borderlands is impossible. Moreover, the postcolonial discursive rhetorical instrumentation of those borders as “empty signifiers” by African political leaders throughout various socio-historical and geopolitical changes have continued to evolve in tension with the agency of borderland communities, and in the exclusive pursuit of state interests (Arrous & Ki-Zerbo, 2009; Wallach, 2011, pp. 361–362). In other words, very much like European empires rationalised those borders in their colonial competition, post-independence African leaders found them to be

potent rhetorical instruments for consolidating their respective nation-building narratives and for articulating various regional economic agendas.

Communities living at the edges of these national territorial units have since Independence found themselves navigating territorial spaces known as state borders and adjusting accordingly. Understanding what propels, but also inhibits transformations and adjustments within border areas means engaging with the ambivalent legacies of colonialism as well as the ways in which other contemporaneous external processes are appropriated, adjusted or contested in these postcolonial contexts by communities inhabiting these spaces. Placing the analytical cursor against the “geographical text” instead, as it were, allows for a reading of borders’ past trajectories through precolonial and colonial politics of territoriality from the bottom up. This also affords the opportunity for apprehending the essential reconversions of African border contexts in the contemporary world order. The divided or transnational character of many communities’ ancestral home today validates most of the accusations against colonial spatial organisation in Africa. However, limiting the focus on the impact of colonial bordering on border communities in (post)colonial times presents the risk of essentialising border communities as static monoliths.

In the case of the Cameroon-Nigeria border and the Cameroon-Gabon border for instance, very little attention has indeed been paid to the extent to which these communities supposedly affected by the borders might have had an internal dynamic of their own, and/or a defining influence on the constitutive performativity of the said state border. In other words, every other thing being equal, other disruptions might have occurred to these socio-spatial systems and would not have nonetheless been the only way to define the populations inhabiting the geographical areas in question. This approach does not seek to dismiss the might of the colonial technology of subjugation or pitch itself against the solid body of historiography on African borders referred to in this research project. Instead, it only seeks to refrain from giving the postcolonial African border more reproducing of its power than it has already garnered, by recovering dominated/muted voices. Anene and Prescott lay the historical pathways to this approach to bordering by arguing in their work on Nigerian borders, that “no one who goes through the documentary material of the boundary negotiations for Nigeria will fail to be impressed by the extent to which data on treaty with native rulers including the extensiveness of their states figured in the negotiations” (Prescott & Anene, 1971, p. 12).

This does not exactly suggest that the borders were negotiated on equal terms between European colonisers and local rulers, but rather that, as Uzoigwe (1985) points out in his article entitled *Reflections on the Berlin west Africa Conference*, most data accounts give no detail on how local political dynamics played in the background of such treaties. The question remains, for instance, whether these local rulers could simply have exploited the presence of the Europeans (with superior firepower) to lay claim on contested or coveted territories and enact colonial borders in the same process (Niang, 2018). A case in point is the then King of Calabar (Nigeria-Cameroon border) who took advantage on his dominant business position in the palm trade with the Europeans, to lay claim on swathes of territories extending all the way to the present southern Cameroon-Nigeria border. This is a territory that had never been part of the land he had controlled before the signing of his protection treaty with the British (Prescott & Anene, 1971, pp. 12–16). Another contextual example is the fact that the 1886 treaty between Duala Chiefs and the Germans in present-day Cameroon enshrined both a strategic security interest on the part of the local leaders and preservation of existing patron-client networks (protection treaty). If anything, this entanglement between local politics and European agents, whether confrontational or conciliatory, was indicative of the dynamic nature of local politics then, as well as a measure of rivalries within and between various precolonial polities as successfully argued by Amy Niang (2018).

Looking at the possible motivating factors behind these practices such as protection against a belligerent neighbour or a bid for preferential treatment, indigenous societies (admittedly more local political leaders than ordinary members of the communities) appear to have been more engaged in their own politics rather than submitting to the colonisers (Oduwobi, 2004, pp. 89–96), even though this turned out to mean effectively agreeing to the terms of colonisation. Arguments both for and against indigenous Africans having agreed to, or at least played an active part in the colonial bordering process portray the complex political dynamics at play within African precolonial societies and foreshadow the impossibility to comprehend vernacular dynamics from the study of official borders. The puzzle now is that, much more with borders than with political systems, the space of the border seems to make a *tabula rasa* as though the inception of the colonial border marks the end of precolonial local history. This ushers in a narrative of the border that can only be articulated or subsumed in the nationalist discourses of the post-colonial state narrative contested.

Hence, the historiographical materialisation of the colonial state suppresses the agency of borderland societies in three key ways. First, it tends to conceal the historical evidence that indeed, even before 1884, and most importantly even before the treaties were concluded with

local chiefs including for the areas that would in the *longue durée* be affected by borders, local politics intermingled in various alliances with European parties. Secondly, it makes no case of the micro-level dynamics that developed as a result of these spatial transformations, again positioning the postcolonial state making trajectory as the dominant lens through which to read border space in historical terms. Thirdly, it overlooks the “natural” resilience of borderlands which, although demarcated on maps, still remained out of reach for colonisers a long time after the treaties became effective, as these areas were more often than not inaccessible, and the colonial administration lacked the resources to cover them all.

To this date, various processes of the postcolonial state reification are at odds with dynamics on the ground in the borderlands. Yet, these processes are often used as the point of analysis for knowledge about borderlands. Parallel developments are considered as new phenomena and not properly associated to their historical continuity. If we turn the approach upside down though, there is a way of seeing the changing landmarks registered in the state paradigm of nation-building in Africa simply as watershed moments in the ways in which inhabitants of borderlands creatively respond to various forms of state rationality in their spatial environment. In other words, the colonial and postcolonial bordering process comports two readings, even though the more prominent has always been aligned with the historical trajectory of state formation in Africa. It is therefore worth emphasising that this state rationality is not the exclusive determinant of borderlanders’ behaviour, and that what has not been forcefully highlighted so far in the scholarship is the fact that these various formats of the African bordering seen in different historical stages discursively reify one and the same materiality of the border. The potential of these historical “topsy turvy” of the border to be perceived as a sort of dynamics reveals a lacuna in the analysis of border performativity. Historical landmarks in the border dimension of the state-building process in Africa are foregrounded in places where the dynamics of the border communities are, to a considerable extent, self-generating and independent of the state bordering process.

Current epistemological assumptions on contemporary African border communities seem to argue that these communities exist only by, and because of, the border. Yet, while it is fair to say that Colonialism brought a dimension to African spatial organisation, it has not defined it in the sense of creating or re-inventing space. Recovering and unmuting the agency of these border communities in the present requires that we contest this notion of the all-overpowering impact of colonialism over the

whole of African reality, as a rejection of the “fatal impact”¹⁰ theory (Moorehead, 1966). It is important to consider border communities beyond the decree of the imperial or state border, as simply communities doing their best to domesticate their living space. This is how this scholarship can escape the historiographic dichotomy which, while presenting border communities as victims of colonial mapping, also - maybe inadvertently - contributes to erasing or belittling their agency from various narratives. Put differently, postcolonial borders can do three things at the same time. (1) They simultaneously embody enduring colonial influences and (2) serve as a site for reading community practices that may amount to an epistemic “product of resistance to colonialism and imperialism” (Lawson, 2012, p. 56). But beyond this, (3) they are also sites of living and practices since precolonial times that were not defined by colonisation, and this extends beyond the time and space of the postcolonial state. In this sense and as shall be elaborated upon in the next section, while mainstream geography, which is known to have pioneered the study of borders and boundaries, has been mainly focused on the state-centric institutional processes of demarcation and the political bordering of territorial space, critical historiographers and geographers have done well to pay more attention to the ways in which borderland communities proceed to shape borders as well as being defined by institutional processes of territorial demarcation.

¹⁰ This theory suggests that colonised races of the Pacific were unable to resist the strength of the arms, the organisation and desire for riches of European nations. The fatal impact theory goes with the notion of blame against the colonised people and an implicit acquiescence to the prevalence of might, instead of right. Postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha (1994) and (1978) find such ideas demeaning to the colonised people as they exclusively foreground the agency of the colonisers, portraying Indigenous people as recipients only defined by impact from external forces on them.

2.1.3 *The spatial turn and its implications for African borders*

The embedding of border paradigms in political geography and sociology of space is consubstantial to debates regarding approaches to studying local agency. These debates explore the organisation of territorial space and the possible socio-political impacts of spatial arrangement on human communities. With the “spatial turn” in social sciences, critical border studies have been at the forefront of advancing provocative agency-based research agendas on the border-society nexus (Taylor, 2000, p. 158). The conventional genealogy of space as an analytical category marks the early 1990s as its foundational milestone. However, this meta-theoretical device is much older and could be traced at least as far back as the beginning of the 19th century when Einstein introduced the general theory of relativity, thus founding a new way of thinking about space, that sought to escape beyond the Newtonian absolutist understanding of space as independent of the observer’s position.

Building upon this, Einstein’s fellow countryman, German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) elaborated on space as an analytical category. A few years later, French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1901 – 1991) published the influential book entitled *The Production of Space* (1974), spelling out a research programme for the spatial turn. This spatialisation of thought and experience in the modern world was being ushered in by prominent thinkers such as Foucault, Giddens and Jameson. After the Fall of the Berlin Wall and its symbolic implications for the nation-state’s borders, this line of thinking built on the work of modernist thinkers to take ground in social sciences and humanities, with the intellectual contribution of critical geographers such as John Agnew (1994) and Edward W. Soja (1989) who urged the rethinking of the dialectics of space, time and social being in critical theory.

However, this somewhat linear and Eurocentric genealogy of thought about space can be contested in the ways in which it excludes insights from Africa-centered or other non-western conceptualisations of time and space. The “spatial turn” in social sciences emerged at a critical transitional era when, the West’s obsession with history and the past in 19th century was being gradually replaced with what Foucault referred to as the “epoch of space” (1984, p. 22). Yet, it is surprising that this same historical time period (between the 19th and the 20th centuries) that registered crucial landmarks of the European colonial process in Africa failed to infuse the “epoch of space” with the spatialised experiences of African indigenous societies. Notwithstanding, Nikitah O. Imani exposes how Africa-centered conceptions of time and space can enrich the pertaining thinking. In this regard, he considers for example how the Sasa and Zamani conceptions of time among the Swahili can bring constructive nuances to “the corner reality” (Imani,

2012, p. 106). In the same vein, Aja Egbeke (1994), a Nigerian thinker, articulates how Igbo conceptualisations of time and space are rooted in indigenous practices and beliefs regarding causality, rather than confined within a three dimensional space situated on the linear time matrix, having length, width, and height.

This focus on how space is constructed by ontological practices was also theorised by Cameroonian philosopher Fabien Eboussi Boulaga (1977), as the concept of the “Muntu”. Beyond an exposition of the Muntu’s worldview as valid, Boulaga insists the Muntu’s “word”¹¹ should escape drowning by other “words” by asserting himself as the subject and object of his words. By entitling and publishing his book “La crise du Muntu” (The Muntu in Crisis) exactly in the same time period that Western critical thinkers such as Foucault were depicting a paradigmatic shift towards spatial experiences, Boulaga’s thought can also be read as an assessment of the how the experiences of colonial spaces have been left out of modernity, virtually shutting down the voices of the emancipated Africans who had just gained independence in the 1960s. In this sense, these modern shifts seem limited within the coordinates of the Eurocentric worldview, and this is therefore a caveat to be mindful of, in the examination of the spatial turn in the social sciences. However, mobilising this spatial turn to analyse postcolonial borders in Africa is not synonymous to centralising European vernaculars to talk about specific African spaces and experiences. It is an acknowledgement of its effective destabilising effect on the nation-state normative framework as epitomised by those borders.

With the innovation of the spatial turn in many disciplines, containerised societies within nation-states have become less and less considered as the main or only focus of analysis to understand the state-society relationship. By yielding to the strong plea of the 1990s to reconceptualise space in order to escape the notion of territories as “frozen frameworks where social life occurs”, (Anssi Paasi, 2003b, p. 110), more and more scholars of African border(lands) have used this conceptual shift to reinforce their critique against the essentialisation of the nation-state as the dominant regime of territoriality and unit of analysis (Boeckler et al., 2018; Engel & Nugent, 2010; Englebert et al., 2002). In fact, the third ECAS¹² held in Leipzig in June 2009 under the theme *Respacing Africa* focused mainly on assessing the extent to which African Studies had moved away from what Robert Sack (1986) deconstructed as territorial fetishism by

¹¹ Parole in French, literally “speech”

¹² European Conference on African Studies

positing that territories are social constructs embedded in social relations and designed to serve specific ends. This process was identified in the early 1990s by Shields (1991) as *social spatialisation*.

Social spatialisation foregrounds margins as examples of contested spaces where social activities, material things, phenomena or processes take on specific spatial frames. In expanding this notion, Paasi famously stated that, “Territories are [...] made, given meanings, destroyed, and remade as part of social life and individual action” (Anssi Paasi, 2003b, p. 110). This idea is further developed when he states that social spatialisation is the process through which “ [...] individual actors and collectivities are socialized as members of specific territorially bounded spatial entities, participate in their reproduction and 'learn' collective territorial identities, narratives of shared traditions and inherent spatial images” (2009, p. 226). In the Africanist scholarship too, there has been a persistent call since the spatial turn in the 1990s for new frameworks, concepts and approaches that are “more authentically grounded in African history and the ideas, institutions, intellectual perspectives and practices of African states and societies” (Bischoff et al., 2015, p. 4). This paradigmatic shift from the isotropic conceptualisations of state territoriality, in the analysis of African spatiality, has inevitably highlighted the insufficiencies of recent engagement with the conceptualisation of African territoriality both in academic and policy circles.

There is a case to argue that the most obvious place to observe these insufficiencies in the conceptualisations of African territoriality as discrete geographical units, is the territorial border. Because if we admit that territoriality is a contested expression of power and agency through material space, then the border is the tool par excellence to forcefully projecting these in the various practices of claiming, establishing and maintaining the limits of territorial space. Wilson and Donnan aptly established that “If all the world is a stage, then borders are its scenery, its *mise en scène*, its ordering of space and action, wherein actors and observers must work at making borders intelligible and manageable and must do so in order for the drama to proceed.” (2012, pp. 19–20). As such, the African border cannot be analysed in terms of its geographical materiality only. That is to say, in terms of Newman’s traditional understanding (material, as opposed to hermeneutical) of borders “as constituting the physical and highly visible lines of separation between political, social and economic space” (2006, p. 144). Without completely rejecting this material dimension of the border, Nerven indicates that this understanding should only be the point of departure of accessing the symbolic role of borders as being both physical juridical ‘lines’ on the one hand, and “zones of cultural production, space of meaning-making and meaning-breaking” on the other hand (Donnan and Wilson 2001, 64). This is echoed in the works of critical geographers such as John Ruggie and John Agnew who had earlier on launched the attack on the “territorial trap”.

While Ruggie's analysis of non-territorial regions of the world retained a more global institutional approach (1993, pp. 73–75), Agnew's granular focus remains the territorial state which misleads conceptualisation by placing the nation-state "as not simply the primary but as the singular actor of modern world politics" (2015, p. 43). Anssi Paasi's contribution to the assault against the "territorial trap" articulates the crucial post-constructivist argument of plural meanings. He argues that, instead of their complete dismissal, territories as "bounded spaces" should be understood as only a type of the spatiality of power amongst others, even as territory will continue to significantly define the understanding of the state, and therefore of world politics (2009, 214). Paasi's conclusive argument above is significant in the sense that it underlines the persisting and significant role that the edges of "bounded spaces" play in the articulation of power, while also giving prominence to how social imaginations work to contest such power within a specific space. This is arguably the strongest median between the two major political geographic perspectives on the links between the geographical environment and human societies. These two major political geographic perspectives consist of environmental determinism, on the one hand, and the institutional performance on the other hand. The former contends that inherent and physical features of the spatial environment are significant in the behaviour of people inhabiting that environment (Gallup et al., 1998; Sachs, 2003). Whereas Krugman is amongst the group of scholars who attribute societal performance to institutions managing the specific geographical area (Fujita et al., 1999). Rather than arguing for any of the above perspectives, this debate may be extended to transnational border spaces as a contested space where competing accounts of societal dynamics can be explored side by side.

The organisation of social imaginations to domesticate specific geographical and political realms within African border contexts is documented. Janet Roitman's (2005) historical and ethnographic study of a frontier region - the Chad Basin that covers northern Cameroon, north-eastern Nigeria, Chad, and the Central African Republic is a case in point. Her study provides an analysis of multiple worlds that centrally involve different logics of borderness. In this multiply bordered region, Roitman focuses on shifting fiscal relations between people and the state as an approach to trace the multiple and ambiguous reframing of political citizenship in the region. Similarly, Catherine Boone's (2003) analysis of centre-periphery relationships in Ghana, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire demonstrates that instead of geographical and demographical constraints, larger sociological dynamics at the border determine the ways in which central-state rulers act in their attempts to project power into the periphery. She pays specific attention to the interaction between central rulers and local elites in peripheral areas. There is however a case to argue that these elites are no longer peripheral and if so, then only through territorial fetishism given their structural and direct connection to central powers. In fact, one could argue that both Roitman and Boone

come short of critically analysing border space beyond its received form, within the one-dimensional paradigm of territoriality as a regime for state control. This does nevertheless not diminish the rich analysis of social processes across border spaces, even though the ways in which their mostly elite-based and state-based orientations tend to re-edit the notion that border spaces only exist because of/through/for the state. In other words, these analyses create an underlying sense that, should those borders disappear, all community life in that specific geographical area would come to an end. There is a persisting sense of space being treated as given, because the processes studied are too state-dependent to qualify as spatial products of social practices alone, unlike representations of social action as structuring space.

Hence, despite their bottom-up focus on local border communities, such characterisation of African border spatiality that emerges from the studies of Boone and Roitman tend to reinforce the reification of state power over the agency of peripheral areas as spatial continuity and geographical units. It revives the notion that inhabitants of borderlands are incapable of existence without or beyond the state-centred parameters. Such a bottom-up and margin-driven consideration of borderlands is ultimately only an analysis of state formation by other means, a counterintuitive step that inadvertently continues to confine thinking within the shackles of what Agnew called the “territorial trap”. The challenge in foregrounding social processes in African border areas remains to avoid presenting borderlands and border communities as largely passive recipients of official border dynamics and only reactive to the whims of central state power.

2.1.4 *The Performative Relationship between Border, State and Society*

The different forms that postcolonial state borders take nowadays articulate their ability to engage with those likely to use the border instead of hostile armies. It is therefore expected that the performativity of the border should very much reflect anticipated behaviours, perceptions, and identity of border users. Border policies designed to control this performativity rationalise the border space along the lines of specific political objectives. The key element in this rationalisation process is that it does not merely reflect the political thinking of the powers that be, it also bears a portrayal of the envisaged functions of the border and the part played by those likely to use it against the backdrop of constant change. Such reality of African borders has been studied empirically (Dobler, 2010; Ndumbe, 2013; Walther, 2009), drawing upon the ethnographic and historiographic research on borders and borderlands globally (Alvarez, 2012; Heyman, 2010; T. M. Wilson & Donnan, 2012). This study of borders combines two main disciplinary approaches to examine it, both as an abstract construct in the political realm and as a physical reality with which human societies engage as borderland actors. History and social sciences often come together in the borderland scholarship to study the relationship between the reality of border spaces and their impact on societies around their immediate vicinities.

In this examination, it seems that the (de)construction of border is a by-product of human societies, which states only instrumentalise for their own purposes. Tharailath Koshy Oommen states that “The rise and fall, the construction and deconstruction of various types of boundaries is the very story of human civilization”(1995, p. 251). In the same vein, Cerny explains that ever since Plato’s Republic, two kinds of bordering and structural differentiation have presided over politics and society. The first, ‘vertical’ dimension is rooted in physical space, while the second, ‘horizontal’ dimension is one of social stratification or functional differentiation (2008, pp. 13–14). Cukwurah (1967) on his part, posits that the original social organisation by humans comprised several independent bands of people on adjoining territories who would eventually come into contact because of concomitant pressure on land, and would negotiate mutually agreed mode of spatial interaction as well as inter-group relations, which usually included borders. In his influential book on precolonial African territoriality entitled *The African Frontier*, Igor Kopytoff (1989) re-visits Turner’s conception of the American frontier as an expansion of settlement into a supposedly free land where wilderness was transformed into a civilised space leading the emergence of a metropolitan society. Kopytoff advances border making as not only consubstantial to human societies, but as a forefront of their development and growth. In the same social conceptualisation of border making, Prescott (1965) claims that boundary

negotiation between disparate human communities served to diffuse tension, avoid conflict, and preserve material benefits of territorial occupation. Indeed, we may rightly conceive of these bordering processes as simply deliberate constructs, consciously and purposely contrived to meet specific social demands. This understanding can be applied to both states and human societies, especially that states are forms of human agency on par with the leadership of any community acting out various needs for the determination of boundaries out of expediency.

Every other thing being equal, the pioneering work by French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* as presented in the preceding section, also articulates the space as a product of social practices, resulting from past contestations and never-ending present negotiations. Lefebvre presents space as a product of social construction, shaped by meanings and values which define perceptions and practices in specific spatial areas. He makes his case with the concepts of the *trialectics* of spatiality, *historicality*, and *sociality* which bring time, space and society in a ceaseless entanglement of meaning production. Edward Soja goes even further by combining Lefebvre's concepts with Michel Foucault's notion of *beterotopia* as places and spaces of otherness that function in non-hegemonic conditions, to develop his concept of *third space*: spaces that are both real and imagined (1996). This is similar to what Entrikin calls “the betweenness of place” (2011). Taken together, all these notions can be seen as conceptualisations of various types of intersections between imagined and physical spaces, or between different constructions of spaces. By narrowing the examination of these interactions between the geographical environment and human societies on the border space, a distinction emerges between ‘physical’ and ‘performative’ border. Cerny notes that the latter “define[s] the boundaries of human life at least as much as, or more than, hard geographical spaces; they are complex and multidimensional, reflecting the myriad dimensions of politics, economy and society more closely than mere geography” (2008, pp. 1-2).

The common, yet unarticulated thread to these debates is the constant spatial transformations that affect *geographical imaginations*¹³ of local communities within border areas, and how these geographical imaginations themselves structure the behaviour, or the performance, of those who live *by* the border. I have proposed the concepts of “biplacement” to study these geographical imaginations, and “a-statal actorness” to sum up these patterns of behaviour and

¹³ Detailed discussion of “geographical imaginations” in Chapter 4

border performance. As an example of this, Kaiser has explored the ever-present eventfulness embedded in the performative processes of borders by opening a discussion on performativity and the power of border performatives, in the relationship between performativity and social events. This approach goes beyond the post-structural approach to research on borders, which underscores the workings of power in naturalising and essentialising borders as things rather than socio-spatial practices (2012, pp. 522–537). Applied to the context of the two border areas in this study, these various concepts of intersections, transformations, and constructions of both physical and imagined spaces work to emphasise how processes of colonisation, postcolonial state-building and external interventions are also embedded in the unending discursive practices. Most importantly, this opens a path to also conceptualise vernacular practices of borderlanders as processes of space production, as evidenced by the performativity of the border. There however remains a persistent tension between attempts at essentialising the border in a specific way and the ever-present potentiality of change and adaptation performed by communities in their various vernacular practices. By linking performativity to key livelihood events, in the sense of things happening at the border at the initiative of borderlanders, mobility emerges as repetitive eventful practices performed by border communities to meet social, economic, and psychological needs of security.

2.2 Borderland security in the Vernacular and the Everyday

This second part of the literature review chapter will explore various critical approaches to security in order to establish the relevance of vernacular security to the study of borders, and especially the conditions under which the significance of such an approach is important for borders in Africa.

2.2.1 *Critical approaches to security*

Securitisation Theory successfully demonstrated that there is no intrinsic value to any given threat outside of its socio-linguistic construction (Buzan et al., 1998). However, various scholars pointed out the limits of this presentation of threat in existential terms, by drawing attention to the role of audience reception (Balzacq, 2005; McDonald, 2008; Meyer, 2009). Thierry Balzacq (2010, p. 19), especially noted that Securitisation Theory has tended to “skirt the distinctive role of the audience” because of the Copenhagen School’s prior focus on what security elite actors do and say. Pointing out the same shortcoming, Christoph Meyer (2009, p. 650) criticised Securitisation Theory for not adequately addressing “different levels of risk perception and fear among different types of audiences”. Johan Eriksson, on his part concluded that the securitisation frame is unable to account for the way in which certain threat images acquire wider ‘societal salience’ whereas others do not, and he explains this lacuna by the fact that the focus on elite speech acts ends up overlooking the “cultural context in which a threat image is identified” (2001, p. 222). This is perhaps a clear expression of the limits of the empirical engagement implied by the centrality of the citizen in the security rhetoric. This security rationality that seeks to depoliticise the prioritisation of threats therefore seems unable to empirically incorporate its plural meaning outside traditional security frameworks, and in this regard, securitisation theory has not been the only alternative conceptualisation of security that received criticism.

Many other proximate approaches in security emphasising individual human referents such as human security, critical security studies, post-colonialism, feminism, ontological security studies, and everyday security studies present some conceptual flaws in their attempts to decentre the statist/militaristic/positivist assumptions of security studies as traditionally constituted (Jarvis Lee, 2019). For instance, critics of human security acknowledge its successes in producing a “normative reference point for human-centred policy movements”, but tie these successes to the concept’s ambiguity and potential to be diverted to more traditional security frameworks (E. Newman, 2016, p. 2). More precisely, in the words of Giorgio Shani,

“human security may be sufficiently malleable to allow itself to be used to legitimise greater state control over society in the name of protection” (2007, p. 7). Another reconceptualisation of security from the “bottom up” that came under criticism was the “Welsh School” of Critical Security Studies (CSS), which focuses on breaking security from more traditional collocates such as sovereignty, order and power, and reconfiguring the term around emancipation as explained by CSS leading theorists like Peoples (2011, pp. 1116–1119) and Ken Booth (1991, p. 319). Despite its insistence on the fact that security analysis should begin with concrete insecurities and real fears, CSS attracts the same criticism as Human Security with which it shares the same thematic breadth, namely a universalism that could be traced to security’s traditional connection to oppressive political projects and imaginaries (Neocleous, 2008, pp. 4–6). Mindful of these criticisms of explicit universalism; the unacknowledged eurocentrism or security’s masked connections with oppressive imaginaries, some other works on security has sought to effectively escape from Eurocentric assumptions, while pursuing critical research trajectories.

On the conundrum of how to use people-based (as opposed to state-based) specific knowledge to achieve better human security, some scholars have argued for the necessity, or at least the analytical usefulness of the concept of ‘vernacular security’(2005). Bubandt draws his argument from the much wider constructivist scholarship which views security as a socially situated and discursively defined practice. Whereas materialist theories such as realism and liberalism take interests and identities as given, both traditional and critical constructivists emphasise on their origin and the notion of change (Holstein & Gubrium, 2013, pp. 373–378). Operating on the ontological assumption that actors are shaped by - and within - their living spaces as they collaboratively negotiate meanings, the constructivist approach to security involves an attempt to understand (not necessarily to explain) human (in)security in terms of those who experience it, within an interpretive "bottom-up" analysis of the social worlds in question. Even from an economic and complex systems theory standpoint, Samir Rihani views economic development as a “home-grown” product rather than an externally bestowed blessing; more precisely “the result of local interactions between people” (2002, p. 11).

Apart from the wider outlook on the politically and socially contextualised ontology of security, Bubandt’s argument on the analytical usefulness of the vernacular contests the material impossibility of a seamless extension of global governance. He does this by demonstrating for instance how in eastern Indonesia, “the implementation of the statist idea of security encountered local universes containing ontological notions of safety and uncertainty that often accommodated and undermined the security project of New Order rule in unexpected ways”

(Bubandt, 2005, p. 276). In the interstices of such global-national-local encounters, the vernacular challenges the assumed semantic homogeneity of security with the political history and the local ontological ways in which danger, risk, threats and (in)security are understood or defined. It is these contradictory processes of reformulation, accommodation or rejection that Bubandt has termed “vernacular security”, inspired by anthropological studies of global modernity with concepts such as Appadurai’s “vernacular globalisation” (1996) or Mbembe’s “representation in the gigantic” (2000).

The notion of pluralities or the ‘multiple’ has been criticised both as a potential vessel for relaxing relativism and universalising Eurocentric experience. The risk here is the systematic comparison, which refers back to western-centric universal concepts of often limited analytical value. There is a danger in trading the universalist paradigm of the world order for the particularistic paradigm, especially if this is carried out only for the sake of contesting the former (Lindberg et al., 2014). The first danger of particularism for a study on African borders is essentialising Africa while confronting the “colonial matrix of power”. Any mythologisation of African border experiences would lack the much-needed “projective capacity to imagine alternative possibilities” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 962). For the vernacular to therefore bear its own meaning in the African context, i.e. to speak with its own voice while referring to itself, caution should be taken against the ability of Eurocentrism to adapt, subvert and diffuse itself, including in the form of anti-Eurocentric or non-Eurocentric eurocentrism (Duzgun, 2018). It is a case of critical approaches to security recognising that one vernacular exerted its hegemony over the others, but also that each vernacular is not performed in isolation. Many vernaculars are imbricated in a world with differing agendas. The vernacular is therefore always plural because “every local site of modernity is brought into social existence in a tension-filled relationship between local concerns and global forms of discursive and institutional power” (Bubandt, 2005, p. 276; Pieterse, 2000; J. W. Scott, 2018).

2.2.2 Relevance of Vernacular security approaches for studying African borders

The question to address now, given the plurality of vernaculars and their entanglement, is which vernacular approach is a best fit for the study of African borders. Empirical investigations into transnational insecurity in Africa have focused (perhaps only) on political actors of varying degrees. Cyril Obi (2008), for instance, explores transnational security challenges in West

Africa through the actions and discourses of NGOs, government representatives and ECOWAS agents. This focus on top-level and otherwise institutional actors downplays the theoretical constraints raised by critics the securitisation theory as described in the previous section. The relationship (even though of supposed independence) of such actors to the state paradigm affects both the performative nature of national boundaries in themselves and the agency of local actors not affiliated to institutional networks. Locally, policy instruments like the African Union Border Programme (AUBP) are primarily concerned with threats to the exercise of national sovereignty. They are based on an understanding of these threats as resulting from poorly defined state borders, “drawn during the colonial period in a context of rivalries between European countries and their scramble for territories in Africa [...] a recurrent source of conflicts and disputes” (AUBP, 2018; African Union Border Governance Strategy, 2017).

Cross-border security in Africa, in the view of the African Union, is therefore only a convenient accessory to - and dependent upon - the AUBP’s main goal to clearly demarcate territorial spaces where nation-states can exert their respective sovereignties. As a paradigmatic offspring of this western-centric model, African transnational security policies, and border policies in general (whether externally driven or not) reflect an adjusted Westphalian understanding of African borders. This adjusted understanding results mainly from challenges to the notion of physical borders in the West, as seen earlier, rather than from a determining principle of African spatiality per se. Furthermore, the localised changes in the narrative portraying African specificity are tuned to local realities mainly through the input of African state agencies or the so-called non-state actors who, as I argue in more detail later on (Chapter 4), do not operate from a position of *a-statal* actorness.

These border policies paradoxically reinforce the centrality of African states on issues of border (in)security, due in part to their inability to escape the shackles of the “territorial trap” (Agnew, 1994). Building upon this paradox, a change of narrative and self-identity of external interveners is carried out primarily on the basis of their own interests, and not of those of the African state partners involved, much less of the local communities, even though these are framed in terms of “longstanding mutual interests” (European Union, 2011, p. 4). Olivia Rutazibwa argues that local ownership and participation have been advocated and framed in the discourse of external interveners in the developing world in general, as ways of countering contradictions inherent in the international ethical ambition. Consequently, effective local

ownership cannot be articulated through the type of local partners involved, however “depoliticised” they may seem (2010).

At a more local level, Julia Brown (2011) for instance identifies fundamental weaknesses in the participatory model of water management likely to result in more injustice rather than less. As a solution to this paradoxical engagement with local ownership, Sabaratnam advocates for a “careful engagement with the experiences and critical political consciousness of those who are rendered as ‘objects’ of power . . . [by] engaging with the ways in which different people politicize various aspects of their experiences, narrate the terms of their situations and critically interpret the world around them” (2013, p. 272). Similarly, Hönke and Müller diagnose that engaging local ownership on security issues in the postcolonial world requires richer, thicker, and more localised understandings of security, “gleaning the meanings that the people we study attribute to their social and political reality.” (2012, p. 395). Thus, the identified aporia of various people-oriented security approaches only highlights the scope that exists for engaging their inadequacy of “addressing the security and strategic concerns of the weak, the vast majority of the people living on the planet”(Barkawi & Laffey, 2006a, p. 352).

Emphasising the experiences of the global South’s inhabitants echoes the ways in which gendered insecurities within feminist security studies demonstrate that “the mundane matters” (Doughty & Murray, 2016; Enloe, 2011), and how violence and insecurities are narrated, experienced, and lived through assumptions, categories, and behaviours that are intrinsically gendered. Although this discussion of critical approaches to security obviously cannot do justice to all relevant contributions, it does point to the assessed importance of alternative approaches to security and the necessity to decentre understandings of security by focusing on “real people”. Operating on the ontological assumption that these “real people” are shaped by - and within - their living spaces as they collaboratively negotiate meanings, the constructivist approach to security involves an attempt to understand (not necessarily to explain) human (in)security in the terms chosen by those who experience it, within an interpretive "bottom-up" analysis of the social worlds in question. It is therefore analytically a problem not to centrally include those who are subjects for at least two reasons. First, meanings of (in)security are intersubjectively produced by, culturally embedded in, and politically contested via “processes of identity construction in which the self and other, or multiple others, are constituted” (Weldes, 1999, p. 10). It follows almost in obvious terms that the borderlander experiences should then be the “hotspot” of meaning in shaping issues of security at least in the border areas. Second, even a critical analysis of dominant discourses of security comports the potential to silence the voices of communities already marginalised by the internal workings of the postcolonial African state and serves to perpetuate their exclusion.

In the African context of borders, where Westphalian territoriality had been co-constitutive of colonial mapping, the epistemological phenomenology of the international border dismisses both the (1) particular spatiality of African states and the (2) heterogeneously experienced reality of borders, for the benefit of one master narrative on border security. Bubandt's concept of vernacular security becomes very useful in divesting this totalising narrative of security. There is a strong case to argue that this divestment should necessarily be carried out through actively engaging the perceptions and experiences of the ordinary citizen in the evaluation and prioritisation process concerning threat. However, despite a rhetoric that aligns with this rationale in various border-oriented policies in Africa, we are still unable to articulate precisely how border communities conceptualize and experience 'threats' and '(in)stability' in their social worlds. The views, cultural repertoires of knowledge and testimonies of the African borderland subject of (in)security remain largely invisible despite an explicit engagement to recover them. Far less is known about whether/how these border communities construct awareness of, engage with and/or contest state policies that tend to enjoin them to contribute to state security and build societal resilience. In the deficit of vernacular knowledge as source of expertise, the state-centric paradigm (albeit in its new rhetoric) still ends up foregrounded in externally-driven security policy interventions and national border priorities, and again, despite a narrative that tends to suggest otherwise. This deficit becomes more apparent when the security focus is articulated in the borderlands in terms of resilience across border communities. Engaging the vernacular to understand the "imaginaries, conceptions, fears, and insecurities of real people as experienced and lived within daily life." (Jarvis, 2019, p. 120), demands a specific consideration of vernacular security for the border locales in question.

2.2.3 *Significance of the border "vernacular" for security and resilience*

In the context of the "vernacular" and "everyday" turns in critical security studies, studying the Cameroon-Nigeria and Cameroon-Gabon border locales participates in the process of seeking to reformulate the importance of the embodied experiences of ordinary people, within a tradition of thought that recovers the individual as the referent object of threat and (in)security. In the extent to which it articulates with the experiences of border communities in this study, I argue that the concept of *a-statal actorness* (which will be introduced gradually, and then fully articulated in the Conclusion of the thesis) describes a performance of agency that operates as though the state did not exist or does not exist centrally. The *a-statal* actor differs from the non-state actor in the sense that the non-state actor is in a relationship with the state, is dependent on the state which it contests for its existence. Both the state and the non-state actor are co-constituents of

the same reality. Meanwhile, *a-statal actorness* is primarily a representation of a relationship to the world, that is considered unaware of (or un-interested in) the state system. That is also why I used actorness instead of actors more often. “*A-statal actorness*” treats the border as one of the many discrete entities in relations within a complex spatial web. I also argue that extending security to plurality means doing away with considerations that turn definitional challenges into central problems – and by the same token, an unending exercise. This also means looking at security from an angle that does not prioritise the linguistics of its identification. For example, the distinction between security and resilience is one that speaks to this desire to compartmentalise different sides of the vulnerability coin, or vernacularise threat as a way of relegating difference instead of centralising it. While security and resilience can be seen as two distinct fields of scholarly investment, the extensive scholarship on resilience thinking draws out two key points that resilience shares with the notion of security.

Firstly, both concepts are structured around the broad notion of the threat and critics argue for an even broader framework for understanding threat in the two cases. Secondly, there is suspicion both for resilience and security that they can be hijacked as a biopolitical excuse for greater control over society (Chandler, 2013). The growing literature that has explored what it means to study threat and (in)security from the perspective of popular – or ‘vernacular’ – constructions draws from the same broad-based mix of ethnographic, emancipatory, cosmopolitan and constructivist perspectives as vernacular resilience (Gillespie & O’Loughlin, 2009; Jarvis & Lister, 2013). Their main focus typically revolves around how particular individuals and groups articulate their attitudes and understandings. However, these studies have been carried out mostly in western contexts and despite foregrounding context as determining value in the construction of subjectivities, specific geographical dynamics have not been a central concern. Furthermore, the “vernacular” and the “everyday” turns have developed largely in parallel rather than in conversation with each other. This leads to several blind spots, even though both turns share a common focus on empirical approaches to recover the voices and de-silence the agency of the marginalised (Anzaldúa, 1999; Capetillo-ponce, 2006).

Building upon Gloria Anzaldúa’s thought about experiences in borderlands, this focus is shaped by what Mignolo has conceptualized as “border gnosis”, i.e. sensing and knowing by the virtue of the fact that one lives in, and directly experiences, imperial/colonial borderlands (Mignolo, 2000, p. 157). Both empirical trajectories (vernacular/everyday) have however established a solid insight that citizens and policymakers often differ in their understanding of threat images and (in)security. Beyond this insight, if we politicise the foundations of border space while connecting and building on the respective insights from both the “everyday” (Kolossoff & Scott, 2013) and the “vernacular” (Bubandt, 2005) turns in critical security

studies, it becomes apparent that popular constructions, experiences and stories of (in)security have the potential to not only draw over the epistemic “abyssal line”, but also to disrupt ‘official’ accounts of security. This joins similar calls in the field of resilience, that have put forward the argument that anticipatory value-judgment on resilience cannot be epistemologically justifiable as resilience must be “context-informed” (Bourbeau, 2013, p. 11). In the same vein, Corry fustigates the critical literature for confining resilience to the sole neoliberal paradigm, not least because of the inconsistency of this framing as compared to resilience’s own purported philosophical origins and complexity, but also for insufficient “empirical examination” that positively and systematically links resilience to neoliberal practice (2014, p. 271). Most importantly, “many current debates about the nature of resilience dislocate it from the everyday practices of communities” (Ryan, 2015, p. 299). Allowing empirical examination of resilient practices of across African borders will therefore also speak to the theorisation of threat in the same space.

In conclusion, this modest exploration of the literature pertaining to borders in Africa and people-centred approaches to security has pulled together theoretical connections that bring to light knowledge gaps in the historiographical analysis of African borders, the performative dynamics of the border space, and the significance of the vernacular in the context of the border locales. Despite addressing core issues that otherwise conflate in the topic of security in Africa borders, criticisms of dominant models and conceptual challenges to the place of space leave a knowledge gap, which underscores the crucial importance of context to theory, once again. That is the basis of my methodological approach which involves “walking backwards” from existing theories to the field where “lived experiences” will provide fresh material for theorising borders from a postcolonial perspective.

3 Chapter 3 - Methods and Methodology

This chapter's first section is a reflection on the project's overall research ethos. After introducing the research philosophy that underpins this project, I will in turn examine research contributions, and their potential impact. The chapter starts with an overview of the literature that has shaped the current research ethos rooted in postcolonial critique. The second section of the chapter looks at the methodological implications of this theoretical framework and therefore discusses the methods used for data collection. The third and last part of this chapter introduces the research sites in more detail and focus.

3.1 A Postcolonial Vernacular Narrative Methodology

3.1.1 *Research ethos*

Postcolonial critique as a way of looking at knowledge differently refers to the principles of self-determination for people whose societies and spaces have been altered by various processes and discourses of colonisation. Robbie Shilliam describes the effects of these processes and discourse as “a cutting logic that seeks to – but on the whole never quite manages to – segregate peoples from their lands, their pasts, their ancestors and spirits” (2015, p. 13). And it is exactly because coloniality “on the whole never quite manages” to succeed in silencing the colonised, that their experiences and knowledges are still an epistemic treasure trove. State borders in Africa are palpable vestiges of colonial rule, and their analysis in many ways can equate an assessment of how colonialism persist in its afterlives. The Decolonial/Postcolonial ethos conflates both an epistemological project that counters the continued effects of colonialism (Shilliam, 2015), and a methodology/research strategy that consists in desilencing or demythologising (Rutazibwa, 2018; Sabaratnam, 2011). The methodology and methods used in the conduct of this PhD research project seek to foreground the vernacular of borderlanders through a narrative approach deployed in the postcolonial context of borders in Africa. Theoretically, this stems from the implications of the decolonising literature, and especially the need to desilence/demythologise the agency of colonised people as articulated by authors focusing on Decoloniality and Postcolonial Critique such as Olivia Rutazibwa (Rutazibwa, 2014; Rutazibwa & Shilliam, 2019; Smith, 1999).

This body of literature echoes Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's 1986 "Decolonizing the Mind" and builds on the thesis advanced by pioneering Postcolonial critiques like Saïd (1978), namely that colonialism did more than impose territorial control and plunder resources. This literature looks at the continued impact of colonialism on the mental universe of the colonised, long after independence was gained. In the area of knowledge production, Tuhiwai Smith argues that colonialism is far from being a "finished business", by assessing its impact on research. Her work proposes a "new Indigenous Research Agenda" which aims to replace Western-centric academic methods(1999). A scholarship has emerged which explores the epistemological implications of foregrounding vernacular experiences and practices as sites of knowledge that would otherwise be discarded, diminished or simply dismissed(Grosfoguel, 2013; Mignolo, 2011; Santos, 2014). This highlights a critical knowledge gap created by the silencing of (formerly) colonised people, and this thesis draws its ethos mainly from to need to provide empirical illustration to desilencing/umuting colonised voices.

For an understanding of African borders and related issues, a postcolonial methodology also responds to the call by many scholars to depart from the liberal peace paradigm that has shaped African national borders inherited largely *Utis possidetis Juris* from European colonisation. One of these reasons being that the objectives of "liberal peace-building are insensitive to local contexts [and] disempowers [sic] local communities" whose varying geographical locations falsify this one-size-fits-all normative approach (Selby, 2013, p. 58). This caution echoes calls for a counter theoretical narrative completely disentangled, or in Mignolo's terms, "delinked" from the western-centric paradigm (Mignolo, 2007). A research on the representations of border communities should therefore be aware of the potential re-appropriation and/or reproduction of such dominant narratives of the border not only in terms of knowledge production, but also in the ways in which border communities may convey their representations. Moving away from the colonial prism has consequently enabled an emphasis on micro-sociological analyses of concrete human experience in postcolonial border spaces as shaped by vernacular agency rather than by colonial enterprise and its legacy reflected in state-based conceptualisations of the border.

This postcolonial critical assessment of the border cannot prosper without being mindful of the various forms in which coloniality persists. The postcolonial assessment of the African border also means in the first instance acknowledging it as a legacy of colonialism connected the spatial rhetoric of global politics. In the second instance, the national level is a reification of

borders as nation-building instruments. At the local level finally, borderlanders are thus subjected to this triple convergence of dominant and silencing dynamics. This acknowledgement goes hand in hand with recognising its implications for the knowledge produced about borders. Particularly, postcolonial theorists such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, suggest expanding the RENEW¹⁴ model and therefore advocate the provincialising Westphalian conceptualisations of space as a relative form of knowledge in order to discontinue its colonisation of African spatiality (Chakrabarty, 2000). There is a clear need to avoid the beaten tracks of theoretical criticisms while departing from Eurocentric conceptualisations of African space, and from state-centred categorisation of border dynamics. One way of doing this is to create a conceptual space that divests the notion of border from its Westphalian spatial conceptualisations before tracing how the post-colonial African border can be re-thought within this framework as an analytical category. Studying border communities beyond the matrix of colonial power has enabled me for instance to operationalise fluid categories such as “border deniers” and “border acknowledgers”, or novel concepts such as “biplacement” and “a-statal actorness”. This also enables us to see borderlanders as subjects rather than objects of knowledge.

Following on from this, the methodology of this study consists of three pillars. Firstly, the Critical Border Studies (CBS) approach, as formalised by Parker and Vaughan-Williams (2012). CBS aims at ‘decentring’ the border, i.e. moving it away from research pathways centred around state-based conceptualisations of the border seen as ‘the line’. CBS thus lays emphasis on how alternative lenses on borderlands can shed more light on the border as a site of investigation (‘line in the sand’). Secondly, this rather theoretical-political abstraction of the border problematisation is put in conversation with ethnographic and critical approaches in human geography and security studies. As a direct result of the focus on the experiences of people, the narrative approach that presided over data collection with a prioritisation of life stories, is also reflected in the analysis thereof. Hence, the narrative approach also enables CBS lenses to directly explore the lived experiences of borderlanders (Merje Kuus, 2007; Megoran, 2006). The third and certainly the most important pillar of this thesis’ methodology subscribes to a desilencing ethos building on postcolonial, decolonial and grounded theory approaches (Barkawi & Laffey, 2006b; Enloe, 2011; Macdonald, 2009; Santos, 2014), which are all committed to vernacular

¹⁴ Rethinking Europe in a non-European World

knowledges and epistemic justice. As ultimately applied to the topics of security and resilience in the postcolonial border context, this overall methodological approach seeks to divest the border of the legacy of colonialism as a dominant paradigm, in order to “unmute” the voices of borderlanders speaking to the continued domination as intermediated via the postcolonial nation-state.

This postcolonial methodological engagement with the state border in Africa draws upon the critiques of postcolonial politics both in terms of its historical processes and present-day struggles confronting the legacies of colonialism (O. U. Rutazibwa & Shilliam, 2019, pp. 1–7). Borders inherited from colonial mapping of Africa are not just legacies of colonialism. In the post-colonial era, they continue to mediate the instrumentalities of the nation-state within the same colonial paradigm, especially as far as border communities are concerned. The postcolonial ethos is therefore an awareness of these multifaceted legacies of colonialism, and the extent to which they continue to dominate mainstream imaginings of the African territorial space (Parasram & Tilley, 2019). The methodological objectives set out by these three pillars are achieved in this project through underscoring the importance of centralising the vernacular of those silenced by the colonial process and using this to re-engage context to situated theory. By emphasising the significance of vernacular narratives to empirical enquiry about insecurity and threats, such an approach momentarily disables the post-colonial state paradigm by avoiding the latter’s stifling effect for borderlanders’ voices.

In this sense, this methodological approach also echoes other scholarly philosophies rooted in desilencing vernacular knowledges, such as CIRM (Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies). CIRM criticise the disregard of Indigenous¹⁵ knowledges and Indigenous peoples’ own research methods (Smith, 2012). In the same vein and given that the context of study is two border locales in central Africa, this non-Eurocentric methodological stance fits very well within the CODESIRA’s objectives¹⁶. Like many non-Eurocentric approaches, CODESIRA advocates the appropriation by African researchers of the ideologies developed by the proponents of epistemological and methodological deconstruction, which contribute to an Africanist theorisation of axiological emancipation in research. The main

¹⁵ ‘Indigenous’ (capital I) denotes the native peoples of colonised lands, such as Aboriginal Australians or Inuit Alaskans, while ‘indigenous’ denotes the native peoples of non-colonised lands. CIRM tends to focus more on lands which have becoming settlers’ colonies. I take the view that epistemic subjugation does not necessarily require the (continued) physical presence of the colonisers (former). Knowledge production is more insidious in its abstract nature.

¹⁶ The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (<https://www.codesria.org/>).

significance of the “vernacular” and the narrative approach here is the embedded notion that current bottom-up understandings of the conditions and daily experiences of ordinary people almost always tend to speak *for* these people, rather than *to* them, or even *with* them. With the specific normative commitment to avoid speaking *for* people, CIRM is rooted in relationships, responsibility, respect, reciprocity, and accountability. Most importantly, it offers a potentially useful corrective to the paternalising tendency of other people-based approaches, by emphasising the direct “speak” of traditionally silenced individuals, such as border communities.

In its endeavour to recover a space of meaning for communities that are marginalised or silenced, this methodology also shares common features with many other approaches such as PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal), that aims to bring about a "reversal of learning" in order to learn from rural people directly (Chambers, 1981). Equally, CBS requires us to look at the border in terms of diverse *bordering practices* and to analyse bordering practices through the lens of the *performance* which produces and reproduces them (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012, p. 729). However, while Chambers’ approach in “putting the last first” (1983, p. 8) successfully foregrounds the validity of non-western vernaculars, it differs from this thesis’ approach in at least two ways. Firstly, the rural context in the PRA approach limits its application to the specific set-up of rurality while this combined approach focuses more on borders as geographical units. While some border locations can be found in rural areas, intense border dynamics are mediated through the urban border locales. Secondly, vernacular knowledge in PRA is a means to an end, i.e. solving specific development problems, while the approach of this thesis takes rather seeks to establish coherent and concise meaning of border based on vernacular understanding. It is, to some extent, a difference between sense-making and problem-solving. With regards to performance and bordering practices as laid out in the CBS approach, this project has made the choice to focus principally on the border communities’ side of this dual performativity that results from the encounter between the state dimension and the vernacular production of the border. This heuristic approach nevertheless presents limits in terms of claiming to an exhaustive examination of the border world when the state dimension is discarded or minimised. However, the dominance of the state narrative as regards borders leaves space for such a disproportionate consideration. As such, the experiences, practices and sense-making as expressed by borderlanders is our entry point into the border as site of knowledge. In this understanding, the border is both a territorial space that creates multiple imaginaries and a thematic area capable of generating meaning and knowledge necessary to unveil the social world of border communities.

Once this ideological clarification has been made, the only challenge remaining is how to actually unveil the social world of border communities without re-writing their stories in preconceived terms. Researchers

such as Torill Moen believe that the narrative as a unit of analysis provides the means for doing this. In other words, the narrative approach can solve the problem faced by the researcher who is seeking “to examine and understand how human actions are related to the social context in which they occur and how and where they occur” (Moen, 2006, p. 56). Theoretical explorations of the postcolonial African borders show that politically constructed narratives of the border are only the product of geographical devices rather than a reflection of a societal reality. As this project’s fieldwork has found out, the societal reality itself is often much more complex, especially when we look at how borderlanders make sense of their specific geographical environment. Hence the narrative approach consists in letting the stories of borderlanders speak for themselves, rather than using the data collected as a pretext to talk about border communities through the works of other authors. It is a more holistic movement across project design, implementation, and rendering.

For instance, the design of my questionnaire guide provided spaces for digression or side-tracking by the interviewees. In the same vein, the data collected have been “narrativised”, to use Czarniawska’s terms (2004, p. 55). As a reflection of this narrativization in the writing of my thesis, certain terms, such as Bayam Salam or Border Girl, which could have been italicised are instead written in proper noun forms with capital letters. This is a recognition of the centrality claimed for the borderlander’s narrative. Too often, claims about the necessity to respect vernacular forms of knowledge are undermined by the very articulation of these claims itself, through apparently insignificant biases such as italicising signifiers that are otherwise central to this vernacular discourse. Thus, marginalisation is again produced as part of criticising it. In the same vein, foregrounding vernacular narratives has meant that rendering the narratives of borderlanders features numerous verbatim excerpts of semi-structured interviews, instead of lengthy analysis thereof. This is a logical development of the commitment to prioritise and give due respect to vernacular knowledges. In so doing, this PhD project contributes to knowledge both empirically and theoretically.

3.1.2 *Research Contributions*

The project contributes to the literature on how to conceptualise African space and engage situated actors by centring the vernacular beyond binary connotations of the state-based paradigm. Proposing novel concepts such as “biplacement” and “a-statal actorness” creates an encompassing framework that articulates vernacular sense-making within the border as a site of knowledge, widening the scope security and resilience. The narrative approach used in the rendering of the data collected allows the

foregrounding of practices and sense-making in border communities as valid epistemologies, with a focus on border communities as the main producer of knowledge for the understanding of borderlands. It does so by firstly looking at a border space beyond the strictures of current affairs even as it enquires about common themes of the human “drama” and international intervention. This approach operates an epistemological framework that seeks to unmute vernacular practices as a form of knowledge that should also count. It challenges the conceptualisation of the postcolonial African border as receptacle site of static state power; and centres the actions and sense-making of communities as the dynamics that actually constitutes the border in terms of its performativity and knowledge base. The project also contributes to the ethnographies of borders globally, and more particularly to the Africanist scholarship that examines the relationship between the continuous processes of state formation and their embeddedness in the dynamics of relationship between society and the state. To enrich this line of thinking, it seeks to offer an interdisciplinary contribution to the literature on non-statist, and other alternative conceptions of territoriality and security. It ultimately tests the impact of such conceptions on policy and scholarly questions through its examination of vernacular understandings of resilience and security practices. Apart from addressing a specific audience, this project makes three key contributions: methodological, empirical, and theoretical.

In its empirical design, this study focuses on an area not determined by knowledge production about the border-security nexus. The chosen border locales are not often in the spotlight, as these are outside seemingly acute security situation. In so doing, I study security and resilience in fieldwork sites that escape the grip of the usual geographies of vulnerability and the tyranny of current affairs. This contributes to diversify data sources for investigations pertaining to borders. Furthermore, this project helps address the scarcity of material focusing on the sense-making and practices of borders communities, through its multi-sited data collection process. The type of empirical data collected in the chosen border areas as part of this research and the methods used substantially broaden the empirical foci of case studies in Africa, thanks to the interplay between different transnational social spheres and other (aspects of) security actors that have hitherto escaped the gaze of traditional empirical studies involving non-state actors of security in Africa.

This project makes a theoretical contribution by adding to the literature on critical security, critical border studies, and the spatial turn in African border scholarship especially by refreshing the implications of essentialising African borderlands in knowledge production, both at theoretical and policy levels. This research thus provides a much-needed example of how new theoretical perspectives or conceptual

insights into knowledge production can improve border security thinking. The patterns emerging from observing practices and sense-making within border communities provide a basis for questioning existing theoretical assumptions about transnational practices in the postcolonial context and for establishing a theoretical junction between African border specificity and the push in the scholarship to centralise territorial space as a conceptual tool in understanding world affairs. By conceptualising and foregrounding the borderlander as an agent in control of their milieu, this research endeavours to de-silence the agency of border communities because their plight speaks to a larger intellectual concern today. This concern is focused on African epistemic freedom, that not only constitutes the precondition for the economic and political liberation of Africa, but also one that can contribute effectively to addressing problems faced by the world by engaging the right audience.

3.1.3 *Audience and Potential Impact*

Its relevance extends beyond central Africa to provide transferable research avenues or policy improvement opportunities for other border locales of postcolonial character. This project will be of interest to researchers with critical approaches in the fields of African borders, security and geography. Furthermore, border communities who are frequently misunderstood, overlooked or simply inadvertently silenced by humanitarian workers, national governments and global policy makers will benefit from having their voices mediated through epistemological discussions in academic enquiries and policy practices. Combined with practical insights into security and resilience practices by borderlands themselves, the rendering of vernacular narratives and the restitution of their experiences are an opportunity to contribute to meaningful discussions about the value of vernacular systems of knowledges and how precisely they can help deepen our thinking about resilience and security. Even though this project does not make direct policy recommendations, the epistemological stance it reinforces speaks directly to humanitarian aid workers or development professionals. They can improve on workable ideas based on this postcolonial understanding of border communities and design better participatory methods for their people-oriented project implementation. Hence, this project indirectly contributes to platforms that value vernacular knowledges to improve humanitarian thinking. National governments in of postcolonial nation-states may also benefit on behalf of border communities where in the context of resource scarcity, clarified priorities and appropriate perspectives stand to produce more effective support for resilience, which in turn can yield more positive impact when addressing economic, social and environmental problems arising across border spaces. The next chapter of this thesis will now turn to the border as scene of semiotic and dynamic relationships.

3.2 Methods

Following a presentation of the border locales and a reflection on fieldwork implementation, this second section explores the methods used for data collection methods. I will accordingly address desk research, ethnographic observation, and interviews in this section.

3.2.1 *Desk research*

Desk research allowed me to access both primary and secondary data. In the first stage, an initial review of the literature and general desk research produced background information about the fieldwork locales; an overview of relevant policy issues, theoretical gaps, and empirical challenges for knowledge production about borders. The secondary sources of data collection were mainly literature-based. These multiple sources of information have enabled me to reflect deeper on the data collected from the field. I formally requested and obtained full access to the online archives of the Basel Mission based in Germany. I spent a great deal of time on these online archives, studying colonial maps of Cameroon, Nigeria, Gabon and Gabon for material on the early colonial period of Germany in South West Africa. Bearing in mind that I ultimately sought to explore how the sense-making and practices of border communities articulated with common themes of human concerns such as security and resilience pursued through various intervention policies, I also collected 'grey literature' on security and resilience targeting border areas in Africa generally, as a secondary source of data. I have not come across any specific security and resilience literature for these specific border areas. Reasons for this could be that they are not considered sites of disaster or post-conflict intervention. Also, these sites were not chosen based on a specific security agenda, either nationally or internationally.

Throughout, between, and following field work from 2017 to 2018, I collected a substantial amount of material from online sources covering those border areas or neighbouring locations. Sources include social media feeds and news items largely but not exclusively published online. From September 2016, I kept a specific archive of news items relating to the Anglophone protest, morphed into a developing separatist movement in Cameroon, as it concerns one of the two areas where I had completed my fieldwork. After fieldwork, I categorised all news media sources according to the topics emerging from fieldwork events I was following up on. This extensive desk research also focused on relevant theories, border

historiographies and policies targeting these geographical areas. Within policies, I have focused exclusively on security and resilience policies relevant to African borders in general. While country specific information was gathered mainly through desk research, physical presence in fieldwork sites also enabled access to primary sources not available on the internet (local newspapers, unconnected libraries, human sources, cultural artefacts, etc.). Secondary data materials were sourced from libraries in the United Kingdom, mainly from the University of Portsmouth library both on campus and using its online facilities which connect to hundreds of databases such as EBSCO. I also consulted works on African borders and security at the University library in Yaoundé, Cameroon. I attended workshops relating to resilience and security in France and in Germany. Content analysis of newspaper articles, especially on contemporary border issues, also provided useful data for the research. Inter-governmental, non-governmental and governmental policy documents, especially those of their agencies involved in border issues, were also consulted. Desk research data on each country and its border area was complemented and cross-referenced with ethnographic observation data, as well as data obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted as follows.

3.2.2 *Ethnographic Observation*

The use of ethnographic participant observation has been tested as a successful method for empirical engagement of border communities (Megoran, 2006, p. 623; Rogerson & Mushawemhuka, 2015). The multi-sited ethnographic observation method is most useful for this study because it is a “spatialisable” method, which allows for the tracing of observed social phenomena over different locations, realms (vernacular, statal, international), and time periods (pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial). It also helps highlight the status-quo ante, the evolution of border dynamics from a statist standpoint, and the construction of the same border through the action(s) of border communities. However, I have added semi-structured interviews to ethnographic observation, so as to be able to answer the “how” and “why” questions about border communities, in addition to the questions relating to the “what” and the “where”, which obviously the interview method alone cannot adequately tackle. Ethnographic observation enables a close study of the physical environment and human interactions within it. Apart from allowing me to gain deeper insights into the border context, ethnographic observation enabled me to identify potential respondents, pre-screen them, and finally select those who would take part in the semi-structured interviews.

I conceived of ethnographic observation as being as much a phenomenological task as it is a self-centred introspection through the gaze of the object of inquiry. Ethnographic observation for this project required extensive travel, back and forth across the international land borders and their geographical vicinities, affording me the invaluable opportunity of observing while participating in various activities such as helping a transporter, assisting a tradesman or helping out in a church. My visits to various border locations were planned most of the time to follow up on the events and people I had encountered a few days or a week earlier. I would reverse the fieldwork location of my main base to alternate equally between the two sides of each border locale. Apart from shadowing specific individuals as arranged, I sometimes chose to cross the border on my own for various purposes like shopping, attending a party, church service, and other routine activities that are important aspects of daily life (in the borderland). This allowed me to reflect on the process of cross-border mobility as it happened. Based on preliminary findings, I quickly realised that it would be problematic for me to limit my concept of the place of ethnographic inquiry along the lines of state demarcation or the main border towns. Physical access to official state demarcation markers would have necessitated a much longer time spent in the field with very little ethnographic data as most of these geographical locations were uninhabited by humans. Sometimes they were located in swampy basins or deep inside the forest, when they had not been tampered with by local communities.

Instead, I decided to increase my participation in crossing the border with borderland residents, travellers, and transporters. On several occasions, I accompanied people on daytrips across the Gabon-Cameroon border, including once to the Guinean town of Ebebeyin, with an equal number of journeys in the reverse direction. I had done the same at the Cameroon-Nigeria border a few months earlier. These crossings allowed me to not only observe how people navigate the borderland and negotiate their way across the state border. They also did require me to submit to the demands of the borders in order to obtain daily border passes, sometimes just verbally or even in the form of a nod from an immigration officer. Crossing the borders alongside people who could share their “live” feelings about the whole process in real-time was always an excellent opportunity to not only directly observe how regulation of movement across borders attempts to control borderlanders, but also how they instantly react as *a-statal actorness* (more on this in Chapter 4). These periods of field work allowed me to make and maintain contact with borderland residents and travellers in both border areas. I made notes of all field observations and kept a detailed diary of these field notes throughout all phases of

fieldwork. I also made notes of casual conversations with people as I travelled across the border areas, but also around other parts of Nigeria or Gabon as I travelled to/from the border locales. Some of these conversations were recorded with the permission of my interlocutors. In addition to observing and talking to people, my data came from sources as different and as varied as historical analysis, archival search, and policy analysis.

3.2.3 *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews consisted in using some 80 questions¹⁷ to guide a sustained conversation with 32 individuals (I however retained only 16 interviews for deep analysis, out of which 8 are built in the frame of the narrative restitution). Just as the research sites were carefully selected for the reasons explained earlier, participants in semi-structured interviews were selected based on their potential to provide rich data on how borderlanders make sense of their condition as people living around, or using the border. My focus in the interviews was to generate data about the experiences and thinking of ordinary borderlanders. As such, I did not interview any high-level immigration officials and even the casual conversations I had with lower-ranking immigration and security officials were limited to administrative necessities that had brought us together or exceptionally, small talk. I did not ask them questions about professional aspects of their work and/or government policy. This was not my objective. I had obtained my data about policies from desk research. However, my interviews with border residents, tradespeople, travellers, and transporters focused mainly on how their own life histories and personal horizons extended across the border. In the process, I was able to interact with people as they dealt with customs and immigration officials, and when they talked about smuggling activities and techniques of outmanoeuvring state agencies. I spent a lot of time with different types of travellers and transporters, but I also spent a significant amount of time with ordinary borderland dwellers especially *Yomi* and *Eudes* whose imaginations of self and space represented a divergence from other borderlanders bent on performing their mobility across the border.

¹⁷ See Appendix for interview guide

Apart from merely observing, casual conversations and spontaneous questions afforded me a deeper understanding of perception and representations of borderlanders. As such, a non-negligible component of the fieldwork can be said to rely on these spontaneous interactions which probed my interlocutors to cover various topics ranging from inherited oral history of precolonial rule, to security and contemporary challenges they face to maintain their livelihoods. It is worth stating here that the interest in their take on these various topics was less the accuracy of their restitution than their lived experiences and the meanings they assign to these experiences. For example, my observation of songs and folklores woven into various cultural and religious practices gave me an insight not only into the past of these communities but also into how they perceptively relate to the physical world around them.

The conduct of the semi-structured interviews was undergirded by a line of inquiry structured around the key characteristics of open-ended questioning, personable approach and openness to non-linearity as well as digressions. At the Cameroon-Nigeria border, random conversations and semi-structured interviews were carried out in Pidgin English and English. There were a few instances of French, especially in random conversation with travellers. Every single person encountered was fluent in Pidgin English and English, in addition to at least one other language. Hence, I must make it clear that some quotations from the interviews are actually English versions of interactions that took place in Pidgin English, especially at the Nigeria Cameroon border. Others are translations from/via French. The interviews at the Cameroon-Gabon-Guinea border were conducted entirely in French. In cases where the local Ntumu or Spanish were used, I would request my interlocutor to translate into French, which was done readily as all also had at least a decent level of French. The targeted respondents included people I met during ethnographic observation, most of whom had participated in casual conversations or had been recommended by other respondents based on the characteristics I had communicated during random conversations.

The respondents who participated in semi-structured interviews were also selected on the basis of accessibility, availability and demographic suitability. One of the high points of the fieldwork was the focus group interview at the Gabon-Cameroon-Border, as it allowed the participants to also question one another about their contested identities, and their relationship to the border space. As far as I could tell, this laid bare what I will come to conceptualise as their *a-statal actorness*. Because this was primarily intended to generate qualitative data rather than quantitative statistics, I did not ask respondents too many identifying details. However, I

endeavoured to achieve a gender balance among the respondents (at almost 50/50 male/female). I made a particular effort to hear from younger respondents under the age 20, but only managed to sit one down for a semi-structured interview.

Table 1 - Demographic distribution of respondents used in deep analysis

Age	Frequency	Sex - Male	Sex - Female
70 +	2	2	0
60-69	2	1	1
40-49	3	2	1
30-39	5	3	2
20-29	4	2	2
- 20	1	0	1
Total	16	9	7

List of main concepts and themes covered during interviews:

- Biographical disruptions
- (In)security in borderlanders' own terms (language)
- Fears and threats in the border area
- (In)dependence from state (infra)structures
- Identity and individual relationship to border space
- Shared practice of mobility, security, and negotiation
- Overlap between common state policy aims and vernacular aims
- Power dynamics across the borderland
- Spaces within the border space
- Social networking across border

In order to facilitate thematic and geographical references during semi-structured interviews, I had printed medium-scale maps of the border area which I would invite respondents to refer to if needed. Many were able to show me the general area of their places of work, residence or education, and most importantly, I was able to geographically pinpoint specific areas for certain recurrent themes such as cattle theft, ritual violence, ethnic tension, transport conditions, commercial products, markets, and the seasonal environmental changes that affected

livelihoods. It is worth mentioning here, before developing later, that I also noticed on the printed maps that almost all respondents had a bi-locational relation to the border area, meaning that they were either having residence on either side of the border, or living on one side and working on the other side, etc. Secondly, the level of genealogical entanglement was such that virtually most residents knew or were related to one another. When dealing with the topic of local history, I used some pictures in history books found locally to start conversations about their personal life. I also asked questions about cultural events, common linguistic references, religious beliefs, and cultural expressions such as songs. I did not pay for the interviews but offered refreshment and organised transportation for some of the interviewees.

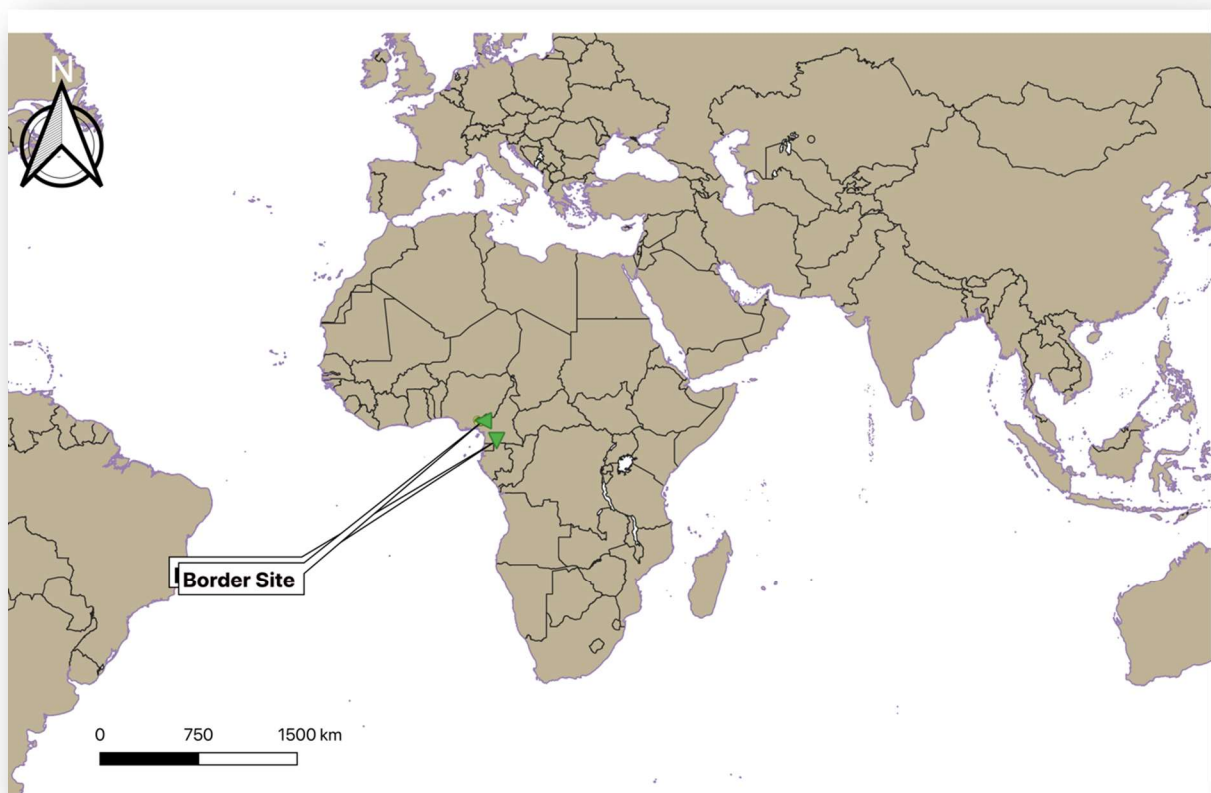
Table 2 - Emerging themes

Themes	Contents
Identity	Nationality, ethnic group, clan, language, residency, family, etc
purpose of presence	Work, family, travel
Degree of Attachment	Low, high, medium
Social capital	Ancestry, knowledge, languages, connections
Political structure	Traditional authority, social associations, state authorities
Values	Religious, traditional, official, moral
Socio-professional category	Traveller, go-between, transporter, farmer, etc
Security / resilience	Types of insecurity, quest for peace, official narrative, personal narrative, fears, anxieties, threats, responses
Mobility	Moving resources, moving bodies, controlling mobility, facilitations

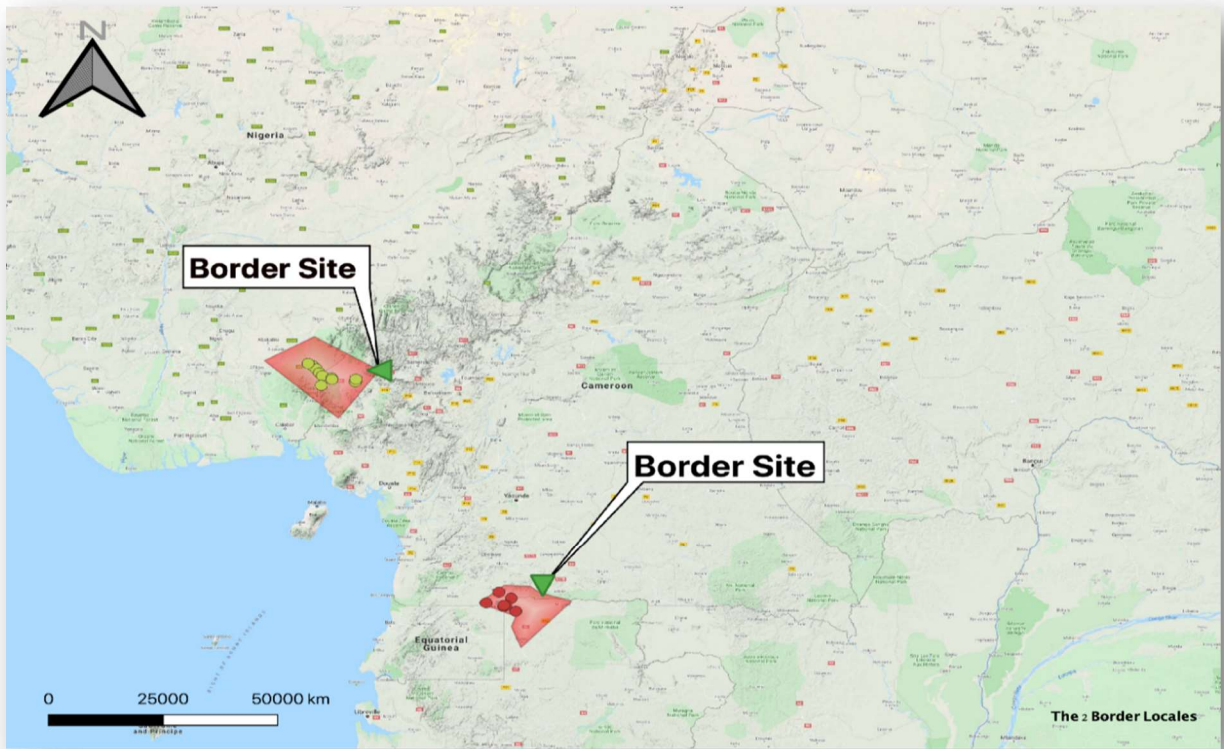
The fact that I was sometimes transcribing rather than recording proved more time-consuming and sometimes lacked fluidity and the desired spontaneity. I have also considered my own positionality and subjectivity as a researcher in taking these interview notes and analysing the ways in which my questions were framed. Even though preliminary research had suggested general lines of inquiry that guided my semi-structured interview questionnaire, I made the choice not to limit myself with a pre-coding system as is in fact recommended when conducting qualitative research. Once all the data was collected, transcribed and organised, I then developed a method of thematic identification and labelling that is bespoke for this specific

research project. I used Nvivo, a data analysis software, to help organise the labelling process, code data to specific themes and establish necessary links with the rest of the project (literature, policy analysis, and archival research). As an essential first step-in managing the analytical process of the data collected in the field, I brought together those elements of the data corpus that I conceived of as sharing some perceived commonality. This step prepared the transcripts for more in-depth analysis. I then indexed them and linked via Nvivo to relevant topics in the literature or policy. This preliminary codification enabled me to reduce the transcripts and field notes to a manageable level, with the purpose of achieving a simple conceptual schema. Additionally, this thematic analysis also enabled me to open the data and think beyond the data through the overall project’s philosophical ethos as articulated in third section this chapter as below.

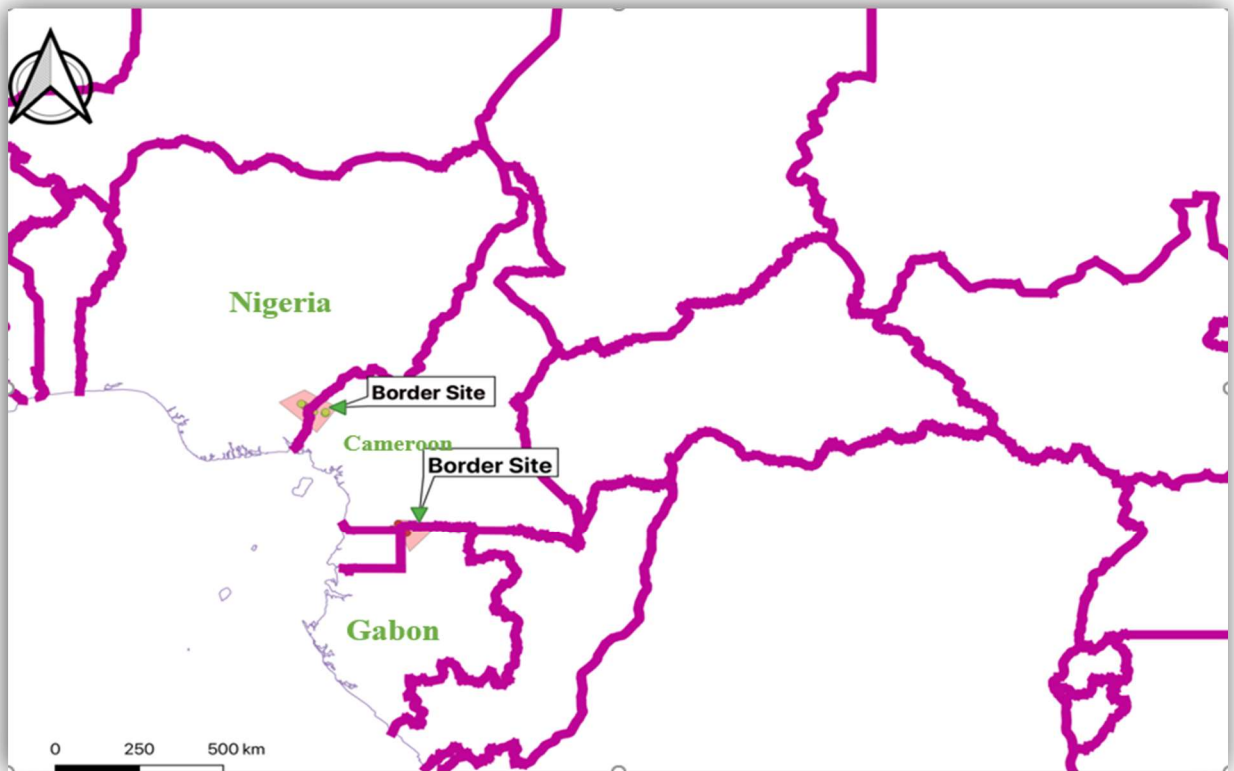
3.3 Border Locales



Map 1 -Location of the border sites on a map of Africa



Map 2- The two distinct border locales - Source: Built in QGIS



Map 3 - The Border Locales - Source: Built in QGIS

As reflected in the topographical representation of the border areas studied (Map 2), both sites are located at the heart of the forest region of Central Africa, within which border towns are separated from one another in their respective countries by a large river with deep banks in many places. Both border locales are situated in the southern part of Cameroon, bordering Gabon and Equatorial Guinea on the South on the one hand, and bordering Nigeria on Cameroon's South West on the other hand (see maps above). The border town is where the essence, meaning and value of the border performativity can best be manufactured through the actions and expressed perceptions of borderlanders. In prioritising the prevalence of towns or cities as pivotal points, cross-border dynamics across border space become more accessible for analysis. In the case of these two border locales, the structure of cross border dynamics represents a pattern of "twinned" towns across the border acting as warehouses, and clusters of towns on the main corridor of passage across the border (see clusters as represented by dots on Map 3 above).

3.3.1 *Fieldwork implementation, challenges and positionality*

This project's fieldwork collected contemporaneous empirical data on security and resilience in order to contribute to a theorisation of African borders based on a differing epistemological approach. My aim for this thesis has been to explore what more state-society relations and everyday life in the territorial margins of two African borderlands can tell us about sense-making and practices related to security and resilience. The empirical material used in the thesis was therefore mostly collected during fieldwork conducted between January 2017 and January 2018 in two different international border locales in Africa, precisely across the southern border between Nigeria and Cameroon (Ikom-Ejumodjock); and across the three-part border area joining Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon (Kye Ossie - Bitam). I completed the first leg of the fieldwork in Nigeria-Cameroon from January to April 2017. The second leg was carried out in the Cameroon-Gabon-Guinea three-part border area between October 2017 and January 2018. I spent three months in each of the border locales thus described to collect data for this study. These research contacts add to two shorter visits to each of the border locales prior to starting the PhD project at the University of Portsmouth.

During the total of six months of data collection, my stay involved a great deal of travel back and forth across the borders. The fieldwork itself mainly involved the use of two qualitative

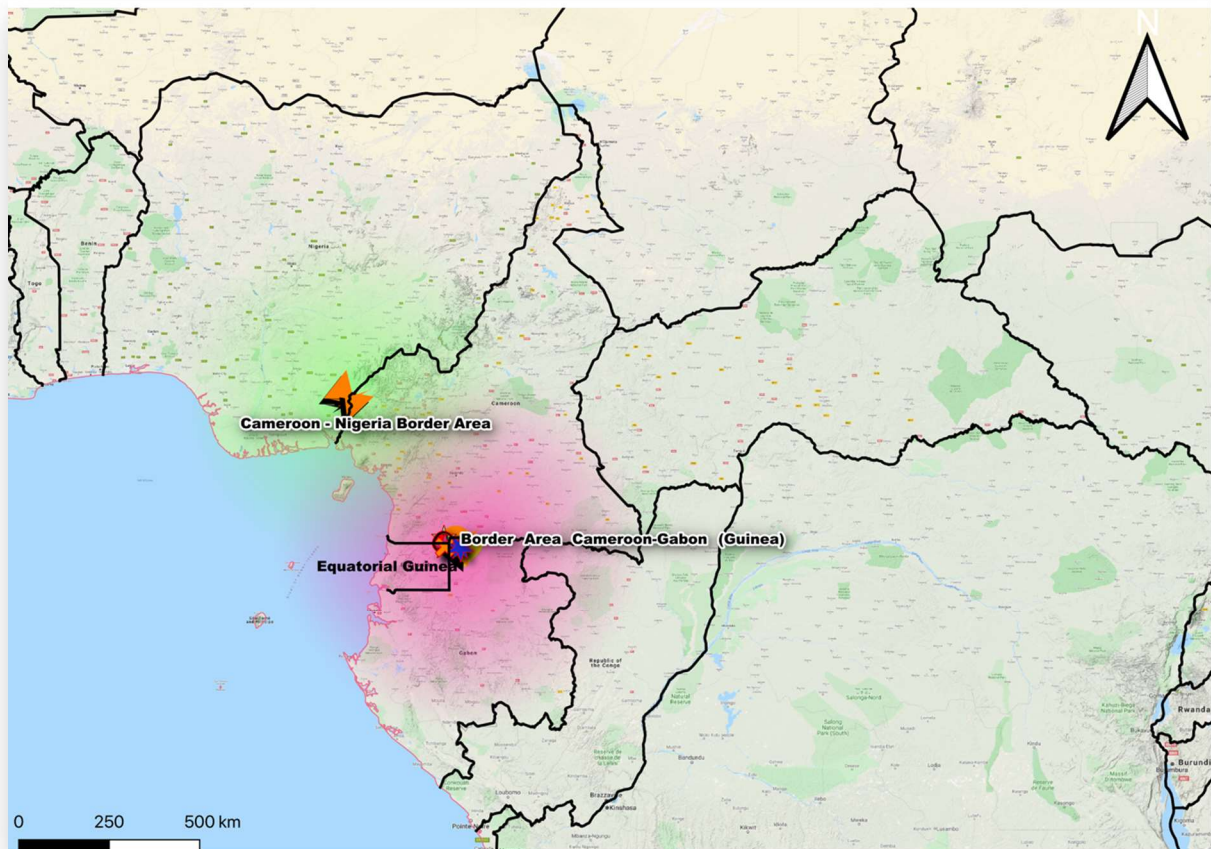
research methods: ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews of respondents. I stayed in touch with many contacts in these areas and continued conversations with them to refine data collection, even when I was no longer in the country. Having often travelled to all the above countries in the past prior to undertaking the PhD programme, a good degree of experience with local customs, including knowledge of pidgin English, has been an asset. Research tools I used included a diary, a brief written presentation of my project, which I would read out to potential respondents, my interview guide, and a voice recorder. At the end of each series of interviews in a border area, a focus group discussion (FGD) was employed to take advantage of a group discussion in relation to emerging themes in previous interviews. Ethnographic observation included first-hand experience in the borderland, border crossing dynamics, negotiation strategies and social interactions around the border.

The study followed main travel routes across borders in these two locales, with ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews involving 16 members from the two separate border communities, as well as informal discussions conducted with transporters, traders and other cross-border actors/“facilitators”. Casual conversations during ethnographic observation were carried out with randomly chosen individuals, whom I call “informants” (as opposed to respondents), because although the conversations with such people did inform my ethnographic observation, the exchanges were spontaneous, unstructured and usually not recorded, and their “traces” on the final data cannot be systematised. Efforts were also made to achieve the best demographic mix possible under the circumstances. Ethnographic observation consisted in taking several trips between the borders and main border towns as well as other adjacent villages, observing and asking questions. I also visited a few churches, attended social gatherings and various group meetings, and followed discussions and issues pertaining to tradesmen and transporters’ associations.

For my trips along the main border roads in Nigeria, I agreed with a “bus preacher” to shadow him and observe his interactions with the community. In Gabon, I spent most of my travel time with the same cross-border driver who would also carry other passengers. My overall fieldwork inquiry essentially sought to understand the perceptions of how living in such transnational space plays out or affects/shapes lives. I applied for and was granted research authorisations from the Cameroonian, Gabonese and Nigerian authorities during all phases of fieldwork. Even though these authorisations legally covered my activities, I was still faced with a lot of questioning by local security personnel in all the three countries. Conducting fieldwork across

these specific border areas forced me into the position of identifying as a borderlander myself, as I faced the challenges of currency disparity across the Cameroon-Nigeria border for instance, and harassment by some customs officials, and the daily hardships of transport in a neglected peripheral region. However, by so doing, I was able to deeply gauge how these border communities draw boundaries around themselves, create new spaces within the border space and how they situate themselves in relation to the border. I succeeded in following people and the issues they were pursuing as part of their daily lives across the international border in the two locations.

As a Cameroonian national who was born and raised in the culture widely shared across the fieldwork sites, I felt that my cultural awareness constituted an entry point into the realms of perception and representation of these border communities. Additionally, as I speak English, Pidgin English and French, I also felt that my language skills would afford me the opportunity of receiving immediate responses from respondents and having deeper conversations, follow-up or probing questions, which would not be possible with the questionnaire only. Repeating the same data collection methods in two different settings; refining my observations and cross-examining information from the two border spaces allowed me to question and reflect critically on my own assumptions as an African imbued with “natural” knowledge of the area. Furthermore, the reluctance and questioning of some ordinary people in the field who challenged my credentials, or openly doubted my ability to comprehend their world despite seeing the documents (for my credentials) and the obviousness of my African identity led me to assess the objective distance that laid between me and my object of inquiry.



Map 4 - Comparison of border sites - Source: Built in QGIS

That distance also spoke to me in paradoxical terms of the “abyssal line”, the real cognitive frontier between what is usually considered knowledge of the border, and the social worlds of border communities who only let in those to whom these worlds are of any genuine use. Given this paradox between my obvious Africanness (born and raised in Cameroon), and the suspicion that hovered around my interactions with borderlanders, this fieldwork also brought to light the tension that lies between my African experiences and my scholarly socialisation in the Western/Eurocentric academy. I later reflected on why my credentials and identity were disputed based on my conversational interactions and observations. In fact, in a place where many White tourists travelling by land and crossing the border with expensive motorbikes or large 4X4 vehicles was a rather common sight, the “tourist questions” I was asking instantly prompted my interlocutors to associate me with the dominant paradigm of white tourism, development assistance or multinational entrepreneurship. As I was later told, this association normally invites “tourist answers” which are normally tailored to the assumed limited ability of the westerner to comprehend certain things African, and based on a general suspicion of a deceptive agenda presented by such tourists. Furthermore, withholding or truncating information given in “tourist answers” can

potentially generate profits for the locals. Examples of this include giving the wrong exchange rate, scamming, or doubling the price of items. On the other hand, the repeated questions to ascertain my intentions and the nature of my work also sought to establish whether I am a representative of the state, and in which case another type of reluctant treatment would have been given. Questions were repeatedly asked about my nationality, the funding I had for the study and the “real” purpose of my study. All of these suspicions contributed to the overall reluctance of interviewees to be recorded.

As regards semi-structured interviews, especially in the Nigeria-Cameroon border area, I was faced with constant reluctance about recording on the part of my interviewees. Some respondents who had agreed to do the interview eventually changed their mind and decided not to go along with the process once I mentioned that I intended to record our conversations. Apparently, word quickly spread around concerning my research activities and developed uneasiness with many people, owing to the overall national security situation in Nigeria, and the then brewing anglophone crisis across the border from Cameroon. Apparently, there had recently been a situation where people were recorded talking about various things and these recordings were eventually used by the authorities to make several arrests in relation to Boko Haram. I found this surprising since these same borderlanders had told me that Boko Haram was not a problem in that part of the country, and that they were not worried about it. But the explanation they had for me was that Boko Haram has connections and hideouts everywhere around the country and abroad, even though they tended to operate in specific locations North of Abuja. I was told stories of people now languishing in jail for just having innocently bought a second-hand SIM card off someone, and which was later traced to Boko Haram or other criminal activities. In the Cameroon-Nigeria border area therefore, those who agreed to go through with the semi-structured interviews insisted that they should not be recorded, and I had no other choice than agreeing to that. This made the semi-structured interview process more difficult as it was more tedious to take notes while listening at the same time after asking (follow-up) questions. Nevertheless, I was however able to fully develop the notes taken from memory immediately after the interviews. Fortunately, all the semi-structured interviews in the Cameroon-Gabon-Guinea three-part border were audio recorded. I also took notes during all interviews and, whenever possible, edited and expanded these within maximum 24 hours of the actual interview.

3.3.2 *The Nigeria-Cameroon Border Locale*



Picture 6 - Mfum Border Bridge (Nigeria Side)¹⁸



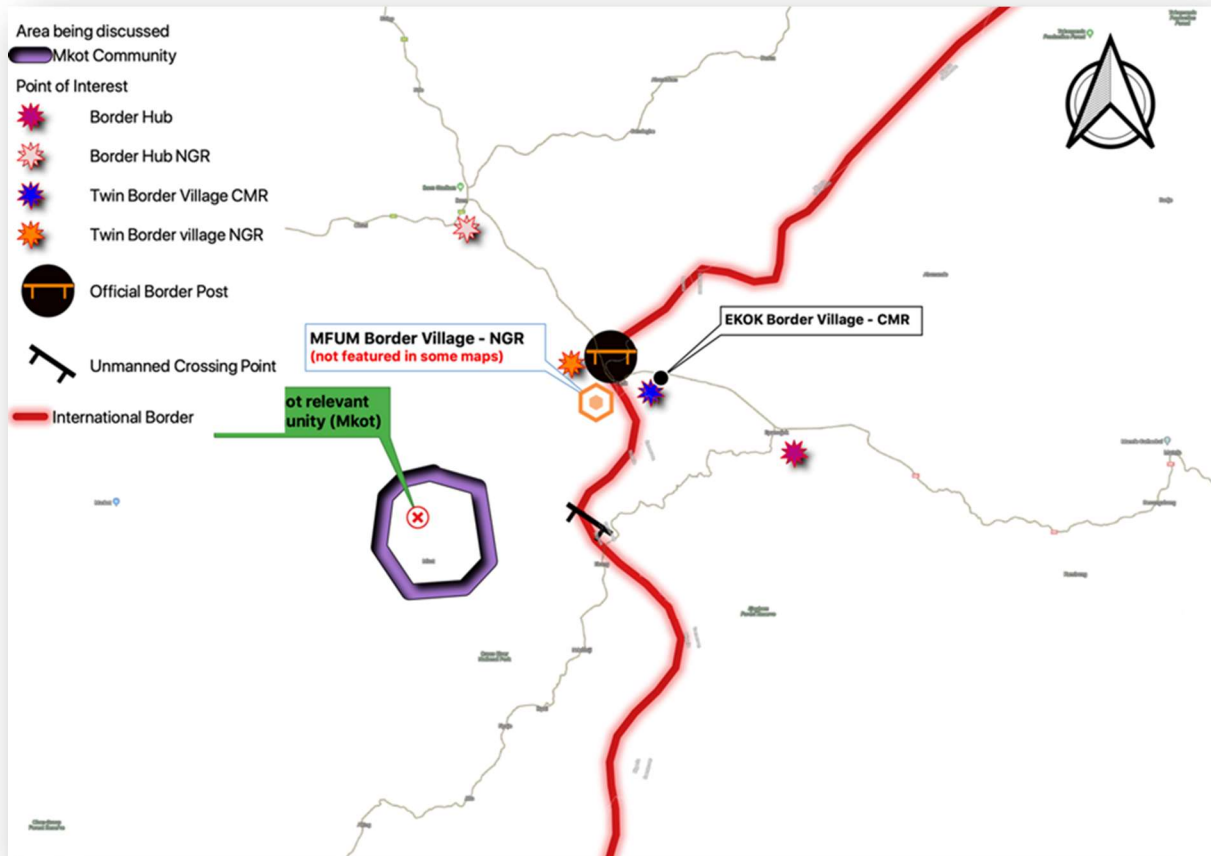
Picture 7 -Nigeria Customs Service Office

Pictures 6&7 above feature the (then) new customs office being built at the Cameroon-Nigeria border post in Mfum on the Nigerian side. Cameroon shares the entirety of its western border with Nigeria. These 21,000 km-border spans across mountains and desert in the North, dense forests in the South, and meets at 21 border points in the ocean. Since colonial times therefore, there have always been literally hundreds of official border points between Nigeria and Cameroon, ranging on land, sea, and rivers, not accounting for informal or illegal crossing points (Prescott & Anene, 1971). Roads suitable for motor vehicles were established between

¹⁸ Unless otherwise specified, I am the author of all pictures used.

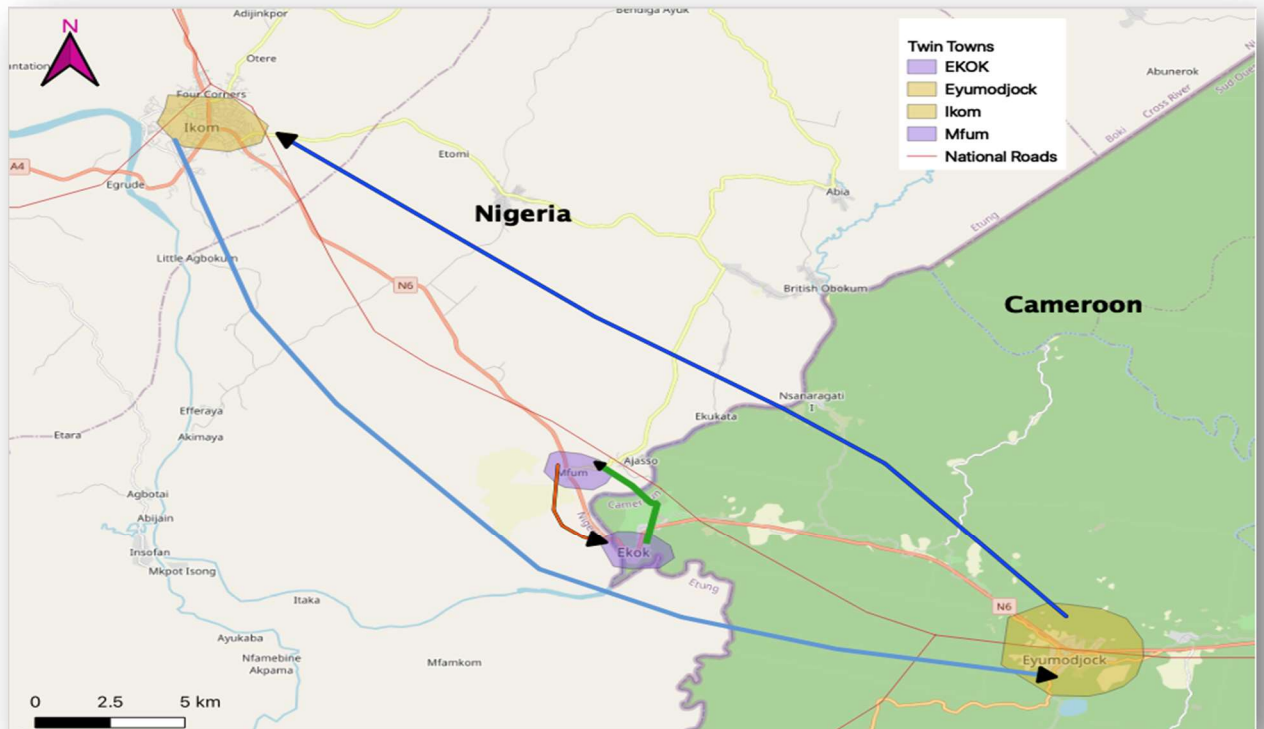
(the then British) Nigeria and Western Cameroons (then French Cameroon) as from 1955. The pre-1961 maritime routes between the coasts of the two countries had been facilitating travels and commercial exchanges ever since (Mundemba to Calabar in Nigeria by sea, and between Calabar and Ekondo-Titi). That notwithstanding, this study focuses only on the border area around Mfum and Ekok, two Nigerian and Cameroonian border towns respectively, which are connected by a border bridge over a river.

The suspension bridge (picture 6 above) built in 1948 is the official border crossing point connecting Nigeria with Cameroon at the Mfum border station. The customs check points for each of the two countries (Cameroon and Nigeria) are located on the edge of the bridge on their respective side of the border (See pictures above). Technically, there is not even a tiny stretch of 'no man's land' between Nigeria and Cameroon here, as is often the case in other border locations, apart from the bridge itself. The one-lane bridge is accessible from the Nigerian side only when you have been cleared to enter Cameroon and equally, from the Cameroonian side of the border, you would not be allowed onto the bridge unless you have permission to enter Nigeria. The Cameroon-Nigeria border at Mfum technically separates the two border towns of Ekok (Cameroon) and Ikom (Nigeria), even though a closer observation puts Mfum (instead of Ikom) in a twin relationship with Ekok in Cameroon, much the same as the town of Ikom in Nigeria mirrors the town of Eyumudjock in Cameroon (see map 5 below).



Map 5 - Border Towns - Source: Built from QGIS

Despite the infrastructural disparity between Ikom and Mfum, both border towns are on a par when it comes to roads. Apart from the main national roads, including the Bamenda-Enugu Road (aka Smuggler Highway) which links both towns, and indeed all the four key towns, all other roads branching into neighbouring villages or around town are dirt roads or dilapidated tarred roads. Development of state infrastructures on both sides of the border seems to have built heavily upon British colonial design and infrastructures, which are still visible across the whole border area, especially in the form of administrative buildings. In the Esai community for instance, administrative buildings and houses from the British colonial era still exist, even though occupied by the ordinary people.

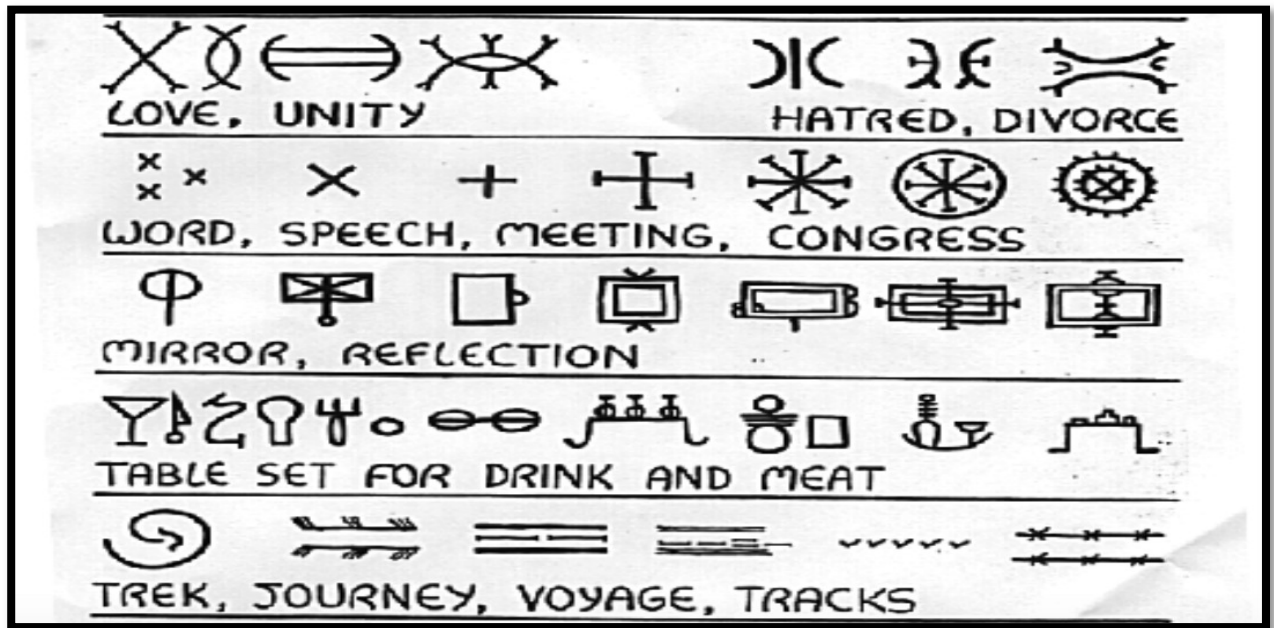


Map 6- Cameroon-Nigeria border - Source: Built in QGIS

As shown in map 6 above, the border towns of Mfum in Nigeria and Ekok in Cameroon are “twin” towns, only separated by a river. However, the whole border area from Ikom in Nigeria all the way to Eyumodjock in Cameroon, including the neighbouring villages on both sides of the border, has been inhabited by the Ejagham-speaking people of the Ekoi ethnic group since pre-colonial times. There exists amongst all the Ejagham-speaking inhabitants of the border area, a similar cultural affiliation in terms of dressing and traditional festivals, despite minor idiosyncratic divergences. These changes and minor differences can be labelled the visible effects of immigration and/or religion. Christianity now predominates religious life in the area, though the practice of traditional religious forms continues on both sides of the border.

The Ekoi (Ejagham) people, found on either side of this southern Cameroon-Nigeria border area, use common dialectical varieties of the same Ekoi language and share the same culture expressed through their famous Ekpe headdresses for example. The ancient use of *nsibidi* ideographs (picture) is common to both sides of the border as reflected in their distinctive art of sculpture as well as complex forms of social organisation modelled on this art form (Okehie-Offoha & Sadiku, 1996, pp. 16–32). Regardless of this resemblance in vernacular culture as

reflected in traditional attires and even eating habits, one cannot miss the specific “modern” layer of cultural imports from other parts of Nigeria and Cameroon into this area. Apart from a variety of other African languages spoken concurrently with English and Pidgin English, the influence of (most probably) the Nigeria film industry as well as a specific type of evangelism manufactured in Nigeria is heavily represented, across towns bordering Nigeria, and beyond into the whole English-speaking part of Cameroon.



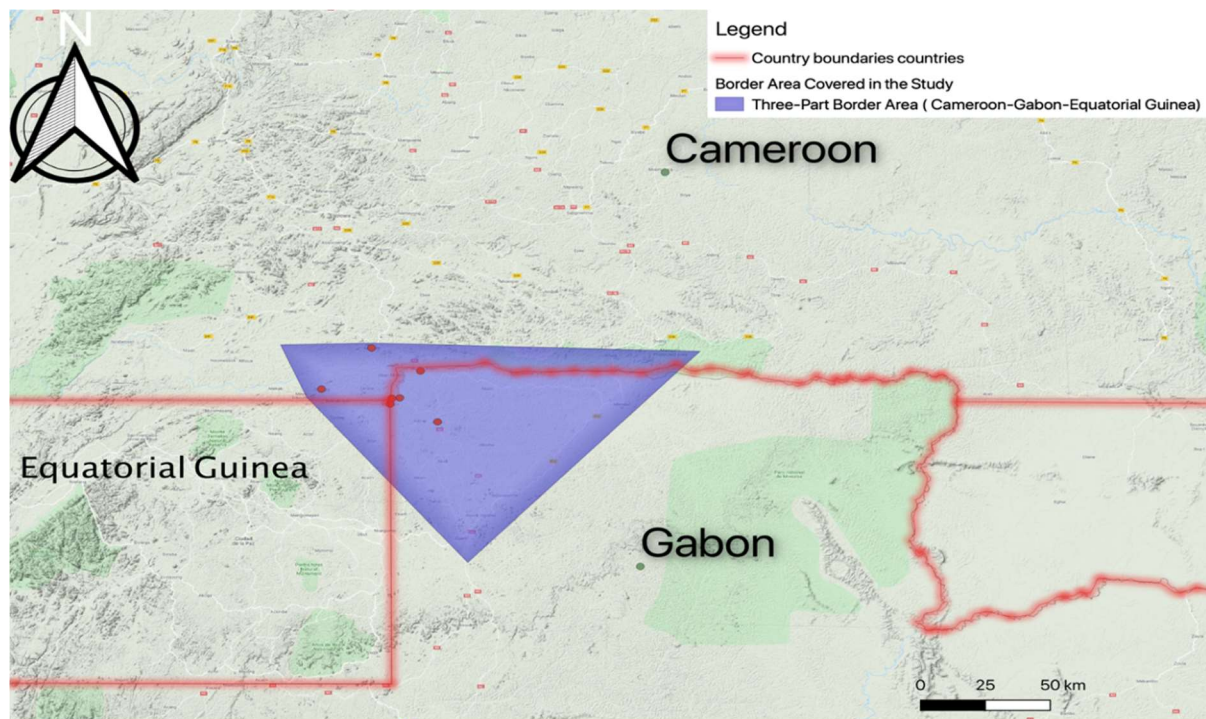
Picture 8 - Sample nsibidi ideographs. Source:(Njideka Agbo, 2019)

Close family ties that exist between the borderlanders coupled with the visa-free agreement to make the movement of local people almost seamless across the border area, even though immigration officials still require documentation and payment to cross the border using the bridge. This cannot be however systematised for individuals crossing the border daily, such as Nigerian students who attend schools in Cameroon or vice-versa. Despite the ancestral lineage of the majority of people living in this border locale, there is a significant mixture of other people from all ethnic and linguistic backgrounds from all over Cameroon and Nigeria. This category of borderlanders mostly settled here because of a business activity. Nigerian tradesmen I have met on both sides of the border are mostly from the Igbo ethnic background, many of them born there even though they do not have the Ejagham lineage that is more prevalent in the area. Whatever the stories and trajectories, all individuals I encountered identified simultaneously with one or two ethnic groups, and one or two nationalities. In

addition to English and Pidgin English, all were fluent in a least one additional African language.

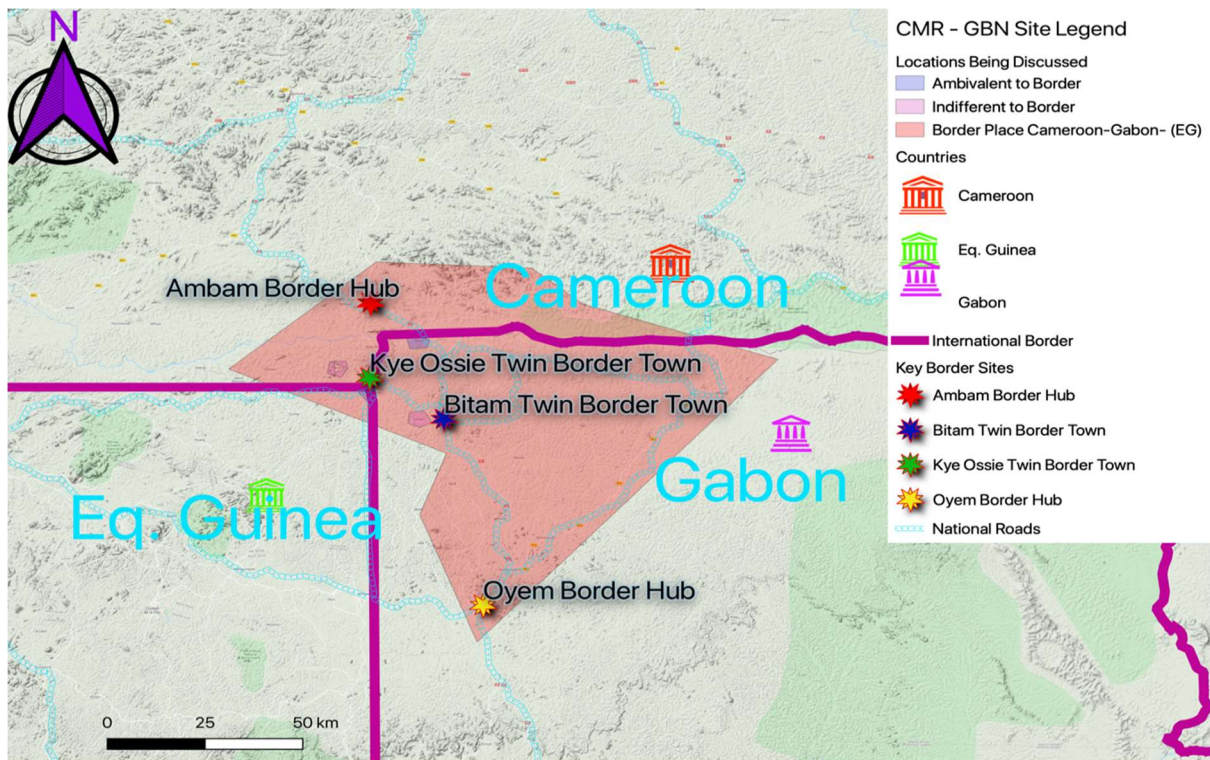
In Nigeria, Ikom and Mfum are the main border towns, whereas Ekok and Eyumodjock mirror them on the Cameroonian side of the border. Referring back to the prioritisation of border towns dynamics as described at the start of this chapter and owing to role played by the towns of Ekok and Ikom in the border dynamics across this area, I have elected to symmetrically pair Ekok and Mfum in Nigeria on the one hand, and Eyumodjock and Ikom on the other. As can be seen on map 6 above, Eyumodjock is at the crossroad of two main roads, same as Ikom in Nigeria. The most visible activity at the border is the transportation business, for obvious reasons. Many Nigerians also travel to Cameroon mainly to sell car parts and any manufactured products that could be more expensive across the border. There is a good proportion of Cameroonians spending a night in Ikom just as a stopover on their way to Lagos or Abuja for more diverse reasons including jobs and church attendance. Conversely, many Nigerians also spend the night in Ekok or Eyumodjock, while they are *en route* to Douala or Yaoundé for a variety of reasons, including family visits. To this travelling population, one must add Nigerians who live and work on the Cameroonian side of the border, and vice-versa.

3.3.3 *The Gabon-Cameroon (+ Equatorial Guinea) Border Locale*



Map 7 – The Cameroon-Gabon-Eq. Guinea Three Part Border - Source : Built in QGIS

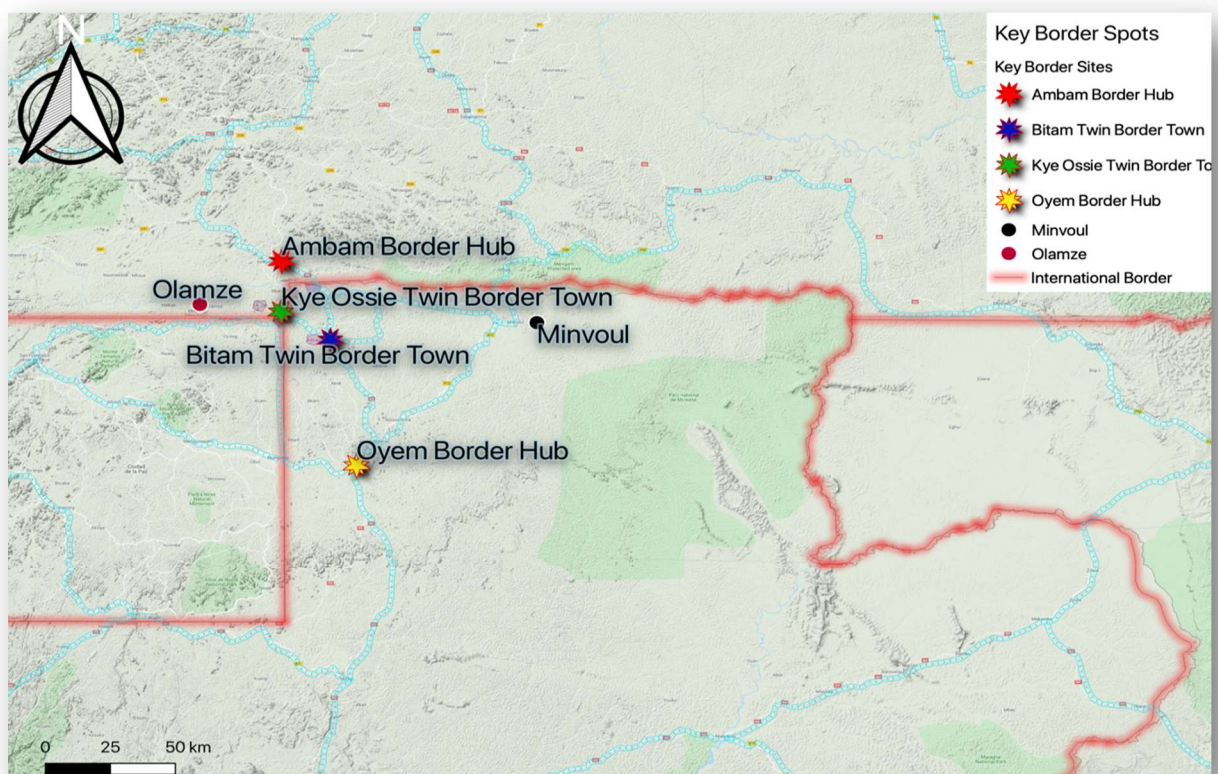
Bitam (Gabon) and Ambam (Cameroon) (See Map 8 below) have been border towns since the early 20th century when Cameroon (Kamerun) was a German colonial territory and Gabon, a French colonial territory. Over time, they have changed and evolved in many ways including the type of border activities carried out and their inhabitants. Ebebeyin (Eq. Guinea) is famously known to have been part of the three neighbouring countries in separate occasions, owing to territorial disputes between (post)colonial states. Nowadays however, the main political and structural aspect of this border area to be taken into consideration is its location at the heart of the CEMAC regional integration process. Unlike the Cameroon-Nigeria border area described above, and which also doubles as the border between two regional entities (CEMAC & ECOWAS), the three-part border area between Cameroon, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea is an integral part of the economic integration discourse at the CEMAC regional level. Policy discourse on economic integration comprises a component that seeks to promote the convergence of economic strategies from the three countries, and this includes constantly reassessing the functions of their respective borders. Geographically speaking, the three-part border between Cameroon (South), Gabon and the Equatorial Guinea (North) can be described as connected across the Ntem Valley through a triangular relationship between the border town of Kye Ossi (Cameroon), Bitam (Gabon) and Ebebeyin (Eq. Guinea).



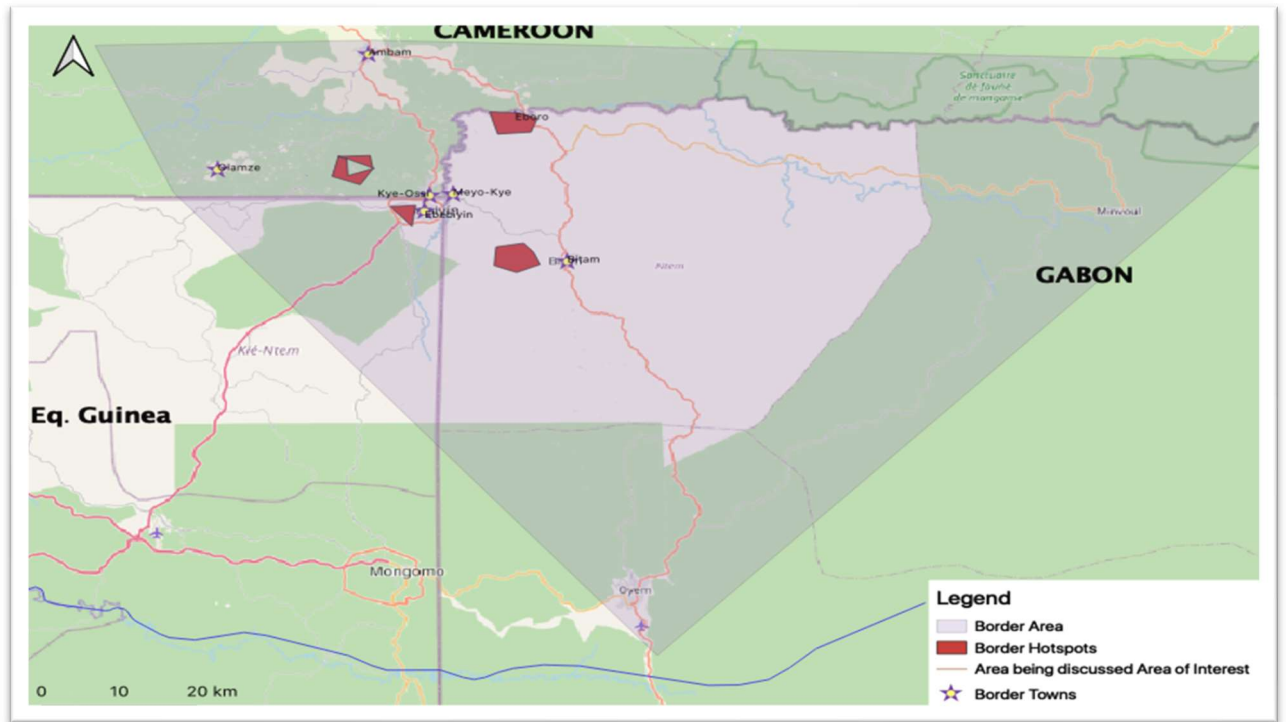
Map 8 - Cameroon - Gabon border - Source: Built in QGIS

Although I will refer to Eq. Guinea from time to time and especially to its border town of Ebebeyin, I will concentrate mainly on Cameroon and Gabon where I spent more fieldwork time. In addition to the main border town of Kyé-Ossi, a dozen other Cameroonian villages sit on the border with Gabon on the one hand (Andjou'ou, Meyo Nkoulou, Mefoup, Kono Fonossi, Alen Esseng, Nlomo, etc.), and Equatorial Guinea on the other hand (Mekomo, Akonangui, Ebengon, Meguikom, Metet, Meyo, Biboulou, Minkomo). Ambam (Cameroon) and Bitam (Gabon) offer many similarities, so much so that they can be considered as twin towns like Mfum and Ekok in the Cameroon-Nigeria border. The complex and differentiated web of relations between these two towns and other key border sites such as Olamze and Kye-Ossi (Cameroon) or Minvoul and Oyem (Gabon) plays such an instrumental part in the overall dynamics of that border area that I have decided to base my consideration of twin border towns as well as pivotal hubs of border activities, on the distance covered in moving resources and people across the international border. Kye-Ossi gains prominence due to its immediate proximity to the border while the Ntem River separates this town from the larger town of Ambam. Kye-Ossi is located at roughly 25 km from the other border point between Cameroon and Gabon (Eboro-Ntem) and at a distance of about 57 km from the town of Bitam.

Bitam is strategically located as the only Gabonese town that simultaneously borders both Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. Bitam is also placed on a plateau at the intersection of three different main roads that link the town to the rest of Gabon. The first one is the Route Nationale 2 (RN2) which travels all the way to Libreville, the Nation’s capital city through the town of Ndjolé. Secondly, Route Nationale 5 (RN5) connects Bitam to Libreville too, via Medouneu. Finally, the Route Interieure 2 (RI 2) links Bitam and the town of Minvoul (See map 9 below). This stresses the strategic importance of Bitam on which the whole of Gabon relies for food supply on a daily basis (see Map 9 below).



Map 9 - Border towns



Map 10 - Border hotspots

At Kye-Ossi, border posts for the three countries are found respectively within 3 kilometres from one another. The border town of Kye-Ossi hosts the largest market that provisions the two other countries with fresh food, manufactured products, and items of clothing. This means that the direction and flow of goods and money is unidirectional. Across all these border villages, local populations move from one country to the other without any strict formalities as the borders are not formalised. In the locality of Ebengon for instance, Cameroon is separated from the Guinean village of Koumadjap by only a small but dense forest wherein only villagers can tell the territorial limits of each neighbouring state. The same goes true for the Cameroonian villages located in the Ma'an subdivision bordering Equatorial Guinea. Further south of Cameroon, the natural border with Gabon as formalised by the Kyé river is crossed on a daily basis by villagers from both sides of the border using boats.

In the valleys travelled by the Ntem River and its tributaries, the native populations known as the Ntoumou, are settled across the territorial space of the three countries and share the same ancestors and cultural practices despite a de facto territorial separation since the colonial era. In the border town of Kyé–Ossi however, the cosmopolitan character of the population make-up is due to immigration of indigenous people from other regions of Cameroon essentially. Most of these immigrants have settled and have been living here for generations working in

border trade or agriculture. I have met residents of Kye-Ossi who hail from as far as the Far North region of Cameroon, just South of Chad. People also come from other regions such as the Bamouns and the Bamilékés. Kye-Ossi is not the only cosmopolitan border town here. Abang Minko'o in Cameroon, albeit to a lesser extent, also has a significant number of non-native Ntoumous residents. The town that mirrors Kye-Ossi's cosmopolitanism is Bitam in Gabon, where the same Cameroonians are found, including people from the English-speaking part of Cameroon. Bitam is a more cosmopolitan town as compared to its Cameroonian counterparts such as Kye-Ossi and Ambam.

The market in Ambam, known as *Marché Mondial*, is striking in the extent of its influence and by the formidable reach of its catchment area. Given the tight border control at Ambam and stringent immigration rules especially for nationals of non-neighbouring countries, an incalculable amount of money changes hands between the middlemen, corrupt immigration officers, transporters, and villagers. Transportation using motorbikes is a booming business in the area, where there are at least two specialised sales offices of brand-new motorcycles. This is surprising given the small size of the town of Ambam. Immigration is only second to transportation in the border area in terms of revenues generated both for the government and private individuals. In order to meet the demand of the cities of the interior of Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, hundreds of trucks loaded with food items and manufactured products cross the various border points on a daily basis, paying official fees and sometimes bribing their way into Gabon or Equatorial Guinea. Because of the lack of the manufacturing industry in the border area and the fact that food stuff produced here is virtually insignificant as compared to the overall volume of food sold and bought at the border for export, the third economic activity is the buying and selling of foodstuff and other products, but primarily foodstuff. In fact, tradeswomen who specialise in buying and selling food across the border are known as "Bayam-Sellam".

The products they buy and sell across the border include bread, cakes, lettuce, cabbage, carrots, pepper, ginger and traditional craft products (rack, hood, pestle, mortar, basket, etc.). Cassava and bananas are the only staples produced directly in the border regions of Cameroon and Gabon and supplied to the food market that extends all the way down to Libreville and Malabo. Locally produced in the border are also fishery products derived from small-scale fishing or fishponds, vegetables, livestock products and episodically cocoa and coffee. Agricultural products such as tomato fruits, vegetable products, but especially bananas plantain circulate

from Ambam to Bitam. This flow is also fed in small quantities by some traditional breeding products that leave the close and distant vicinities of Ambam for Bitam. If we look exclusively at the goods coming directly from the cities of Ambam and Bitam, the flows operating between these two localities are of unequal importance. The main product that goes from Bitam to Ambam and other localities over the border in Cameroon, is bread. Many trucks that pass through the border going to Cameroon are in fact empty. Meanwhile, Bitam and other localities in the Ntem département in Gabon receive agricultural products from of border towns and villages of Cameroon on a daily basis. The products are collected from the border markets of Abang Minko'o and Kye-Ossi. In fact, food products moving from these towns to Bitam are both varied and considerable, and their circulation between the two countries mobilizes various actors on both sides of the border (porters, farmers, tradespeople, transporters, customs officials).

Borderlanders on the Cameroonian side of the border complain incessantly that their localities are not connected to the national electric grid. Hence, generators are used for anything that requires electric power, from charging phones to running a beer parlour. Charging one's electronic appliances is often an additional incentive to cross into Gabon or Equatorial Guinea where there is stable electricity in the nearest border towns of Bitam or Ebebeyin and villages around. Running water is available only through private boreholes. Apart from the main national road connecting the principal border towns of Ambam and Kye-Ossi to Gabon, the other roads are essentially mud roads that become impracticable during rainy seasons. In border villages, infrastructures are limited to basic provisions such as primary schools, local churches and health centres. Kyé-Ossi and Abang Minko'o are an exception to this because of their strategic position at the border. With a similar geographical composition, it is quite difficult to establish infrastructural differences between villages and towns from both sides of the border. However, thanks to the make-up of the populations they shelter, Ambam, Kye-Ossi and Bitam stand out from other villages, towns and even semi-urban centres around them. Suffice it to say, that while there is electricity in Bitam, just less than 60 km away from Cameroon, lack of running water, poor government services and dilapidated market infrastructures for instance makes such a comparison inconsequential. Kye-Ossi, Ambam and Bitam seem to be configured in a way that each of these individual spaces offers natural, human, and economic characteristics that are more similar than different. The same goes true for respective villages.

4 Chapter 4 – Imaginations of border space and sense-making

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the mental universe of borderlanders as shaped by their experiences and the border space itself as a physical site of semiotic performance. It will specifically answer the research question 1, i.e. **How do border communities make sense of their own territorial space, otherwise conceptualised as border space?** Sense-making as formed by borderlanders is mediated through expressed interpretations of displayed attitudes and behaviour patterns. This can be seen for example in how they move from one set of attitudes/behaviours (border deniers) to another (border acknowledger); and through their interpretation of, and performative response to, the signs and symbols that materialise the border. Such an interpretation is also an entry point into the plural vernacular spaces that are created by the borderlanders and the hierarchies within. However, before attending directly to these spatial imaginations of borderlanders, an overview of the authors of these imaginations is provided. By way of example and as a practical experimentation with this thesis' overarching ethos of desilencing through foregrounding borderlanders and their own narratives, I will first introduce the key interviewees involved in these narratives to situate the themes that emerged from our conversations. As an illustration of how these themes are woven into their life stories, a sample narrative of one of the interviewees with running commentary will provide background and context to examine the imaginations of space from the perspective of these borderlanders.

Next, the examination of vernacular spatial imaginations is articulated in two main loci. The first locus deals with how my ethnographic observation of the border locales decodes the grammar of border signs and symbols. In order to understand and explain the imaginations of the border space as a site of contested power and scene of performativity, the chapter will draw upon various theorisations of the border to conduct a hermeneutical analysis of the border-borderlander relationship. Understanding the parameters of this relationship is crucial as its performativity predicates the geographical imaginations of the borderlanders. The second locus covers how this contested relationship results in a hierarchical spatialisation of the border as well as the contending and overlapping vernacular spaces produced around, and within the border. It is an exploration of how border communities construct vernacular imaginations over such spatialisation.

Being a recurrent phrase in this chapter, *Geographical imaginations* deserves attention in this introductory section of the chapter. According to a very detailed definition by Jessey Gilley (2010, p. 1223), a geographical imagination is

a way of thinking about the world and considering the relative importance of places and the relationships between “our” places and “other” places. The term encompasses a variety of meanings, including individual mental images and socially produced discourses about cultures, spaces, and differences. How people see the world is influenced by many factors, including social class, education, and personal and political philosophies. The particular moments in history in which people live also play a major role in how they view the world around them.

This definition echoes other scholarly take on the concept, seen as shaping much of the world’s social and spatial thought. Authors such as Derek Gregory and David Harvey argue that people (both individually and collectively) develop a sense of boundaries, which separate “our” spaces and places from other spaces and places through their *geographical imaginations* (1990, 2005). This thus situates the centrality of geographical imaginations in the social and spatial constructions of identity and relationship to space. These constructions are fundamental to the knowledges produced by borderlanders as part of everyday assumptions, perceptions, and expectations.

However, it is worth noting that the facets of borderlanders’ geographical imaginations studied here differ in kind from those usually gained through travel, the media, or formal geographical education. Insights from fieldwork suggest that border experiences are the primary vectors in how borderlanders relate to the particular discourses and social narratives about how the world is structured, and their place within. This emphasises their relation to the world rather than the assumed antagonistic relationship to the state. In contrast to the dominant perceptual and cognitive discourses that shape national geographical imaginations along ideological lines (Gilley, J., 2010, p. 1224), studying the geographical imaginations of borderlanders is an attempt to understand how the vernacular sustains and justifies actions that make reality conform to what is seen in the imagination. It is exploring the unexpressed relationship between linking physical space and imaginations from a border vernacular standpoint.

4.1 People

Various references to semi-structured interviews will involve my conversations mainly (but not only) with the following individuals whose background I provide below: *Florence*, *Odette*, *Souley*, *Yomi*, *Aliou*, and *Eudes*¹⁹ mainly.

***Eudes*, *Docta*, *Aliou* : Cameroon – Gabon (Eq. Guinea) Border**

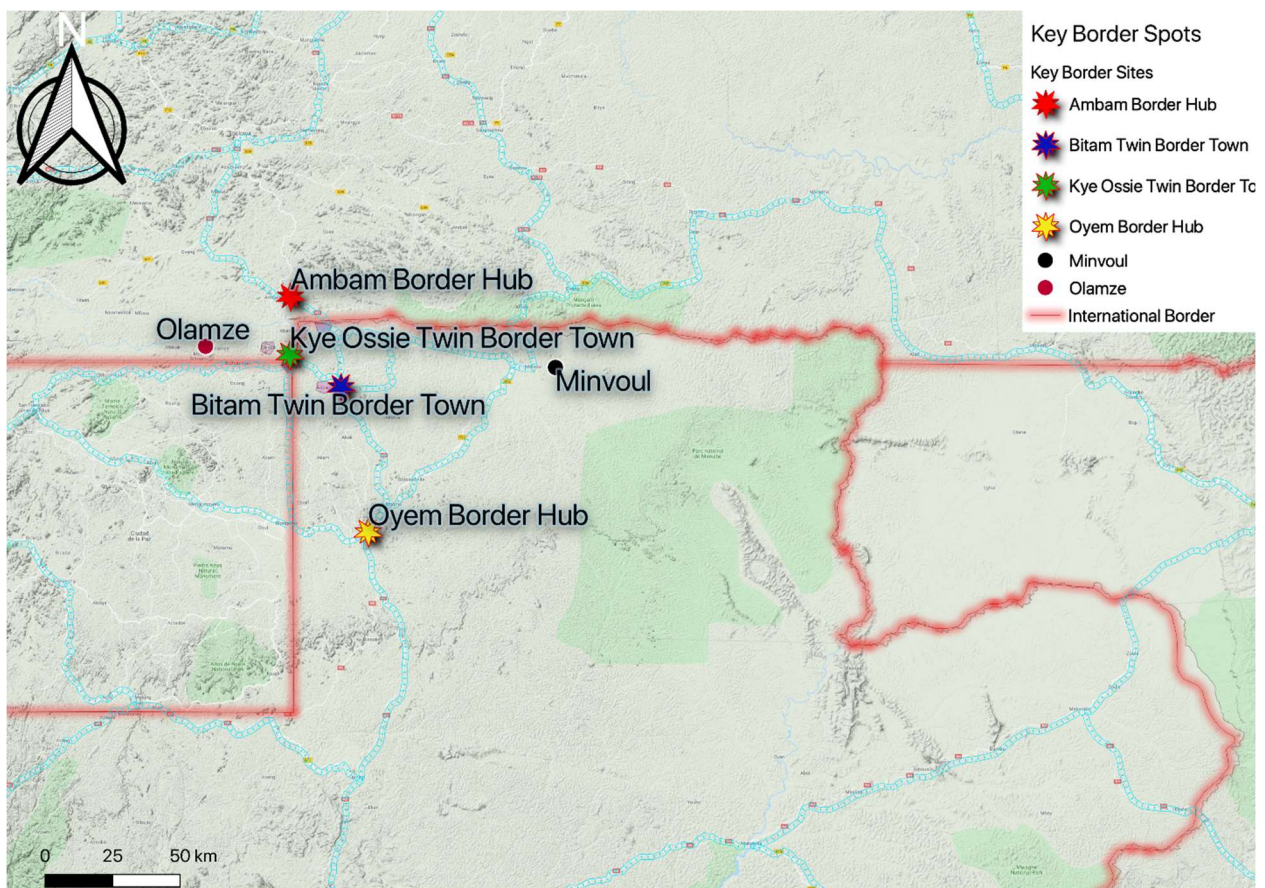
At the Cameroon-Gabon border, I visited *Eudes* on three separate occasions to interview him and understand his life. *Eudes* was born in the village of *Fénéfé* where he now lives, and which sits not too far from the border with Gabon. He describes himself as a professional pestle and mortar maker. *Eudes* was born into a family of wood workers of various descriptions. He told me his father and grandfather made masks, statues, and various household items out of wood. *Eudes* said that when he was younger, his father would send him to deliver statues and masks all over the [border] region, and sometimes the return journey alone would take him two or three days, walking and resting in the homes of relatives around the region.

Docta is a transborder tradesman, who buys contraband pharmaceutical products from Cameroon and sells across the border in Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. *Docta* normally lives in Kye-Ossi (Cameroon), but spends many days on different sides of the border depending on his business activities at the time.

I also met and interviewed *Aliou* at this border location. *Aliou* is from the Tikar ethnic group in Northern Cameroon. He lives in Kye-Ossi in Cameroon. He is 43 years old, owns a “snack bar” run by his wife with the help of two employees. He also owns land and lives in a house he has built in Kye-Ossi. He says that all his life is the border. He speaks French, his own mother tongue, a bit of Spanish and understands bits of the local Ntumu’s language, his wife’s mother tongue. He has gone back to visit his birthplace in northern Cameroon, only on a few occasions. *Aliou* told me that he is officially a transporter, but actually specialises in helping

¹⁹ Italics mean that these are not real names. All names of individuals and specific locations have been changed for anonymity purposes.

illegal immigrants to cross the border from Cameroon into Equatorial Guinea or Gabon. He has contacts in each of these two countries. These contacts of his act as relays when he sends somebody over. He also has contacts with immigration and customs officials from all sides of the three-part border. He belongs to various border associations, including for traders and transporters.

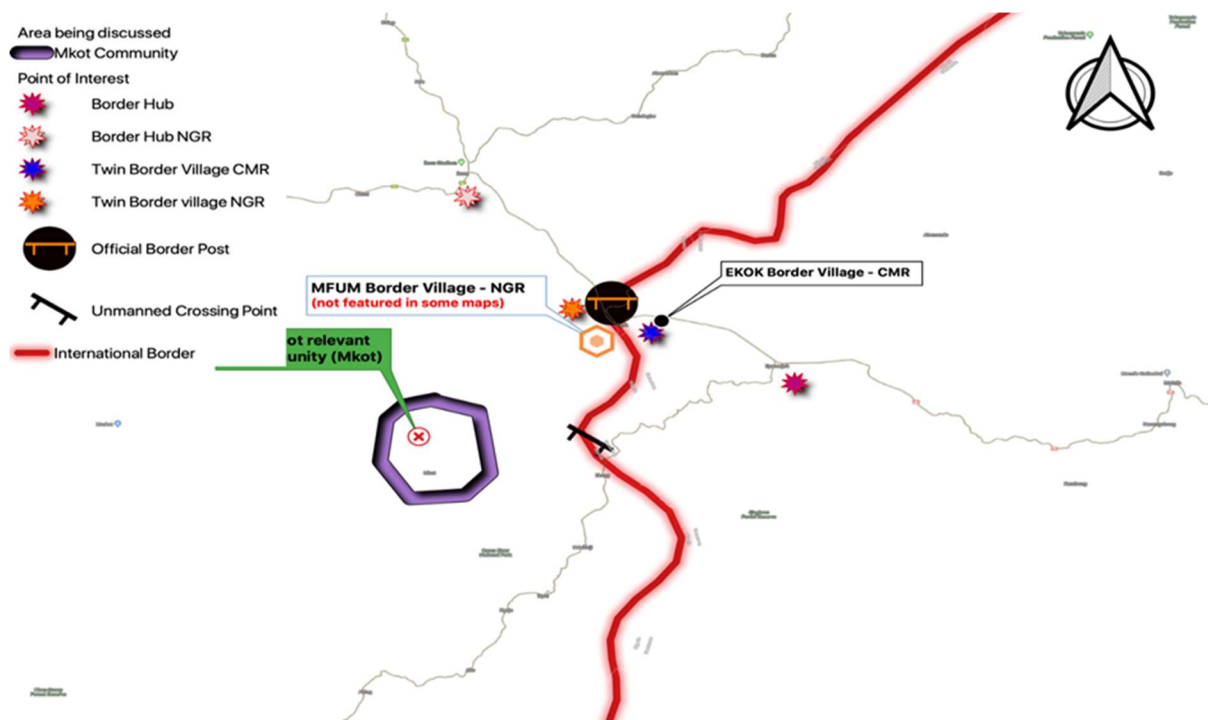


Map 11 - Three-part border (CMR - GBN – EqGN) – Source: Built From QGIS

Odette & Souley, Yomi: Cameroon – Nigeria Border

At the Cameroon-Nigeria border, *Odette* and *Souley* are both tradespeople who cross the border from Cameroon to Nigeria every other day to meet their customers to whom they supply various forest products for food and health. I met the couple when they had come to source their supplies from *Yomi* in his village of Mkot (see map 12 below) in Nigeria. The products they sell include various types of mushrooms, dried and fresh fruits, seeds, spices and vegetables. It is worth noting that *Souley* and *Odette* source most of their products from the rainforest area of Cross River State in Nigeria. The couple told me that, owing to the topographical configuration of

the forest, the specific products they trade are more accessible from the Cameroonian side of the forest than from the Nigerian side, even though the forest itself is located in Nigeria. *Yomi* regularly enters the forest from the Cameroonian side in order to fetch and sell these products. On the one hand, Cameroon is reputed for having the best-quality-forest-products, so crossing the border back into Nigeria with their products is economically advantageous. The couple therefore takes advantage of their ancestral links with Nigeria, as well as the opportunity presented by the border to enhance their income generating ability.



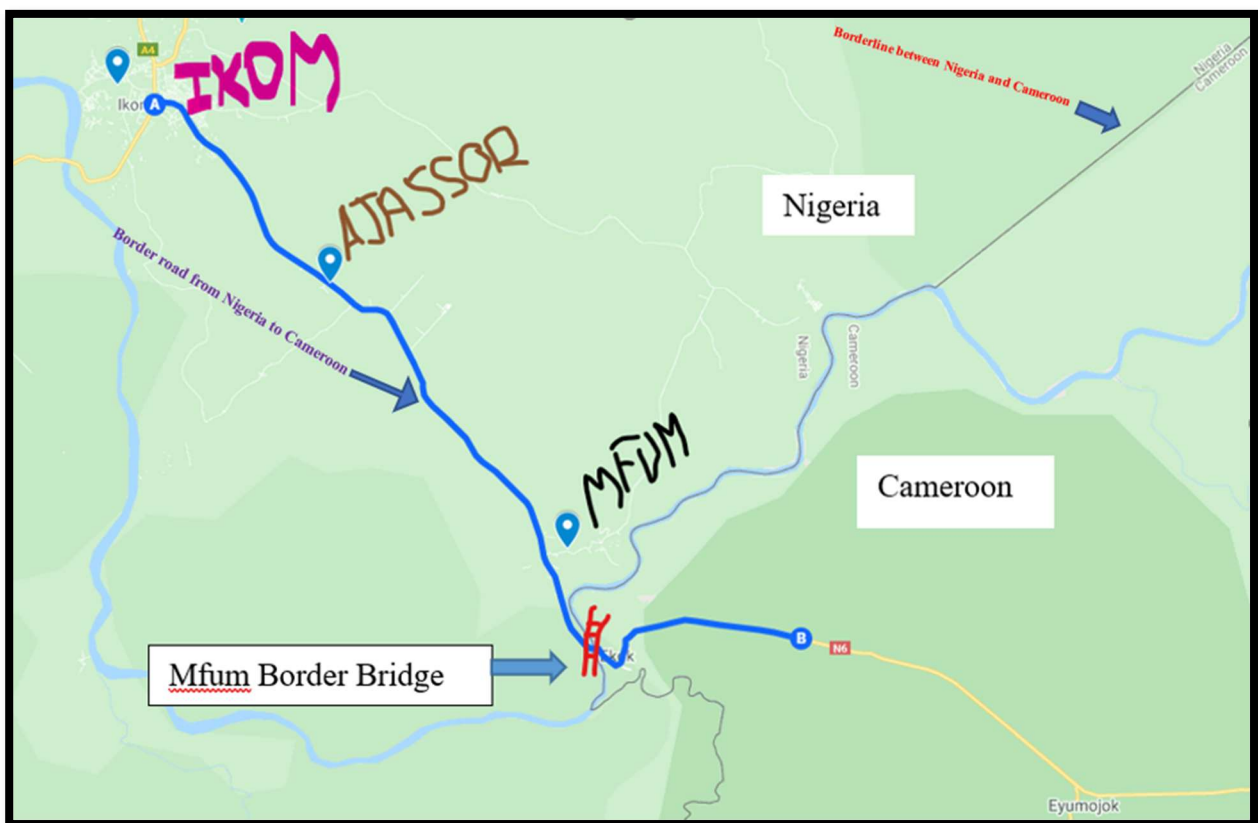
Map 12- Mkot, Yomi's village – Source: Built from QGIS

4.1.1 Narrative Sample of Borderland Experiences and Sense-Making: The Case of Florence

I will now present a narrative sample excerpted from my encounters and interviews with Florence. Alongside *Florence's* direct words in the narrative sample below, is a running commentary on the themes that will be elaborated upon in the following chapters. Most importantly however, this running commentary is not exhaustive, but provides the contextual background of the border together with a life story. *Florence's* narrative as brought forward in this sample ends up sketching the border locales, everyday experiences of borderlanders as well as the themes that will be referred to in more detail throughout the rest of the thesis. The

commentary of *Florence*'s specific case should also be seen here both as snapshot of a borderlander's everyday life open to plural interpretation by anyone, as well as a thematic introduction to fieldwork data interpretation.

Like many other interviewees especially at the Cameroon-Nigeria border, *Florence* did not allow me to audiotape our conversations for fear of “*Wahala*” (getting into trouble), so the interview was handwritten. I met and interviewed *Florence* four consecutive times in Ikom, one of the main towns on the Nigerian side of the Cameroon-Nigeria border (see Map 13 below). This semi-structured interview provided an insight into her geographical imagination as well as an appraisal of her borderlander agency through cross-border mobility events and how she verbalised the rationale for her actions. Throughout the interview, *Florence*'s sense-making of the border is expressed through her own relationship to the border space and her navigation thereof. This relationship reveals tensions, intersections, overlapping, and sometimes convergences between the multiple spaces of the border and her own dynamic border identity. This interview also renders her vernacular understanding of obstacles, challenges and threats to her livelihood.



Map 13 - *Florence's Living Space* – Source: Built from QGIS

Florence was born in Ajassor (see map 13 above) just a few years after independence when the border was “*becoming big ...when they constructed the border bridge*”²⁰. She only completed primary school and stopped because “*there was no one to pay for me to continue*”. Her parents both died in the space of two years in the early 2000s²¹, and by that time she had already left Ajassor to live in Ikom (larger border town but further away from to the border) with her Cameroonian husband. *Florence* met *Eugene* “*in this border business*”, after separating from the father of her first child. *Florence* described her childhood, referring to her younger self as “*Border Girl life*”. When prompted about what she meant by “*Border Girl life*”, *Florence* referred to her ancestry in Ajassor, near the border bridge between Cameroon and Nigeria and described a Border Girl as one who grows up “*doing everything that children living here do*”.

DW²² : *Can you give me a few examples of the things border children do?*

Florence: I don't know, everything, selling things by the roadside, going down to Mfum to buy or sell things for our parents, usually being sent over to Cameroon to get things. You know in those days, the road was not tarred as it is now, so you had to be a border girl to know all the shortcuts to get to Mfum and also avoid bad people at the same time. Well even today, if you are not a border girl, they cannot let a young child cross the border on her own, you see.

The way in which *Florence* refers to herself since childhood as a Border Girl and describes the activities thereof, strongly underlines the formative process of a borderlander. She also introduces the characteristics and manifestations of her border identity not necessarily defined by the border as one might quickly conclude, but instead as shaped by an awareness of the additional geographical significance of her living space. Furthermore, *Florence* brings up many elements of her identity throughout our conversation to reinforce her belonging or connection

²⁰ Text sections in italics are excerpts from semi-structured interviews and casual conversations. These are all Personal Communications, that took place from January to April 2017 (Cameroon-Nigeria Border), and from October 2017 to January 2018 (Cameroon-Gabon-Eq. Guinea Border)

²¹ Specific information cannot be divulged for anonymisation purpose.

²² DW stands for Dieunedort Wandji (interviewer), throughout interview transcripts.

to the two sides of the border, which gives the ultimate impression that she is dislocated from the border as “the line” and instead emphasises her control over the border as a potential disruption to her biographical trajectory. For example, *Florence* said that the fact that her first boyfriend lived over the border in Cameroon presented an advantage in a cultural context where having a boyfriend as a teenager is usually frowned upon by parents.

*“That way my parents never knew anything about him. I would see him whenever I crossed the border, and nobody knew me there. He would also come here to see me, and nobody knew him over here. So, nobody could report any of us to our respective parents that they saw me or him with such and such person”*¹¹

Florence was also very keen on demonstrating her strong attachment to the land. Her parents are now all deceased, yet she still visits some living relatives where she grew up in Ajassor and Ajassor village (cousins, uncles, and one her maternal grandmother who is still alive).

“I also visit my parents, where they are buried in Ajassor village, just to let them know that I have not forgotten about them. I will never forget them. I talk to my children about them, so that they know about their roots”

This line of connection that flows from ancestral lineage to territorial space adds a layer to *Florence*’s identity not being defined exclusively by the border. She is first and foremost a daughter of the soil, and the border dimension is an addition that she addresses as part of mastering her living environment. *Florence* told me that when her parents were alive, they used to farm the land in Ajassor village, a rural farming zone located a few kilometres from Ajassor town. They would then sell the products at Ajassor Market on market days and even non-market days.

“I remember even then that on Market Days one had to be mindful of what to take to the market. My mother would say that anything that people could buy from Cameroon would be cheaper on Market Day, so no point selling these on Market days. I would then be sent to sell them by the roadside on non-market days. My father would, during rainy seasons for instance, cross the border and buy foodstuff from Cameroon to sell on the Market Day. That way, he said he earned more than spending his time growing stuff himself or going into the forest to harvest forest products. Later on, he taught me how to do it when I was just nine or ten years old. From

then on, he would let me go on his behalf because they did not harass border children a lot at the border. Whenever there was no school, my parents sent me to the market to sell farm products myself. After school sometimes, I used to sell the remainder of what my mother had been unable to sell on Market Day by the roadside in front of our family house. Every time there was no school, or during holidays, I knew that I was going to do business, go to Cameroon or to farm, and get things to sell here. All border girls did this. And they still do it today. The only difference is that, neither me nor my parents never had the idea then to buy things here in Nigeria and sell in Cameroon. I don't really know why. It was so obvious though."

Florence told me that as a teenager she became well-versed in the workings of the fresh food market in the border area, especially concerning items coming from Cameroon. Her family had established a reputation in the Ajassor neighbourhood and, even as a teenager, she was already part of this reputation.

"Because I could do everything my parents did, go to the farm to harvest and sell; go over to Cameroon to buy and bring back here for selling. It is only the cocoa and coffee business that I did not know."

This is indicative of a geographical imagination shaped not by the border as a dividing line per se, but rather by a reliance on discrete locations connected across space. Going to the farm to Ajassor Village (in Nigeria) and crossing the border to buy food from Ekok (into Cameroon) are not mobility events that *Florence* sees as distinct from one another. She describes them together as livelihoods activities connected to sourcing products that she can sell. The sense that she thus makes of the border space is deeply ingrained even in her awareness of the difference and variations that exist from one side of the border to another. For example, in describing what she sees as various beliefs of a shared myth that border residents have co-constructed over the years with the presence of the border, *Florence* said that since her teenage years, the same product harvested in Nigeria, will not be seen as having the same quality or value as that coming from Cameroon. Consequently, food products that come from Nigeria but circle through the Cameroon-Nigeria border back into Nigeria, would be more expensive (and the price difference will be more than twice the additional expenses of going through the border).

Again, it would be inaccurate to assume that difference in product quality as constructed by borderlanders squarely aligns with the jurisdictional differentials portrayed by the state border between Cameroon and Nigeria. In reality, it is far more complex and reflects both conscious and unconscious discourses about quality and value, which cannot be dissociated from the character of the border space as a site of intense economic exchanges. In this vein, when talking about the price and value of education across the border, *Florence* expressed her amusement with the irony of these discursive constructions that did not even correspond to their physical or geographical pretexts. To illustrate this, she talked about an episode of her teenage days in the late 70s and early 80s. Back then, some of her age-mates used to attend school across the border in Cameroon. *Florence* said that people in her neighbourhood in Nigeria thought that these children stood a better chance in life because they were being taught (in) French in the Cameroon's school curriculum, since Nigerians see Cameroon as a French-speaking country.

*“These kids used to pretend that they can speak French, just because they were attending school in Cameroon, even though no one ever heard them speak French. What is funny is that even people who used spend a lot of time in Cameroon in places like Ekok, Mamfe and even Bamenda [Cameroon], knew very well that no one speaks French there. English was and still is the official language there. They speak English in schools and pidgin English outside school. So, where were these children supposed to learn French? Nevertheless, for some reason, people just liked the idea that once you cross the border as a student and go to Cameroon, you start speaking French. Like magic! [clicking her fingers to the air] I remember one girl attending school across the border in Cameroon, who used to make up words in French, just to impress those of us who could not afford to go to school there. She would talk thinks like **jevoua voua mon nomme voua voua oui oui** [twisting her lips and tongue to accent the exaggeration]. And we were very impressed. And one day, a French tourist was passing here. Everybody rushed to that girl's house to call her so she can come and speak French with the tourist. The girl refused to come, claiming that most of her French was left in her classroom in Cameroon, and she therefore would not have much of a French to speak to the French tourist. I know you probably will not believe this, but it is a true story and you can just ask people around Ajassor. [Long laughter]”*

This admittedly funny story unassumingly highlights the impact of the border on linguistic representations, and the same certainly holds true for other representations. More precisely, this is not simply the impact of the border as such, but rather the impact of the sense borderlanders

make of the border. While in fact, crossing the border from Nigeria into Cameroon lands you in the English-speaking part of Cameroon, borderlanders have formed a geographical imagination of this space differential that has nothing to do with the linguistic reality. In the same manner of currency differentials across the Cameroon-Nigeria border, the imagined values of education from one side of the border to the other reminds us of the difference in price and value assigned to products from Nigeria, which had circled back into Nigeria again through Cameroon's border. These are only a few examples of vernacular sense-making that diverge from the intended meaning of the official border. This divergence also underlines the tension arising from the vernacular bordering practices and sense-making that simultaneously dismiss and acknowledge the border. This tension that makes the border-based linguistic imaginary of others funny to *Florence*, a proud Border Girl, is also woven into the biographical trajectories described by many other borderlanders.

In *Florence's* case however, her biographical trajectory includes many disruptions, but these did not get her to relocate across the border, unlike other borderlanders. Instead, *Florence* cites the following reasons for relocating from Ajassor (where she was born) to Ikom (where she now lives).

"First, there was no way I could expand my business over there in Ajassor. My parents had grown old and I did not have time to continue going to the farms and do this business. Some people in Ajassor village took our farm and started to claim that it was their parents' farm that my parents had just borrowed. It was too complicated, and I had no man in the family except my dad who could fight for the land. And my dad was already very unwell. It had been two years since he last went to that farm. When I heard the news and went down there to ask why these people were taking our land, they came out with machetes and threatened to kill me. So, I just left to protect my life. Some people have been killed here for less than that, you know, and they end up with your property while you are no more."

DW: And what happens to those who would kill people like that?

Florence: "Well, sometimes, they can be arrested, but not all the time. If you are not from a powerful family, the police might not even get involved. And sometimes, even when they are arrested, they can still be released if there is no one there to follow up with the case."

DW: “And what was the other reason why you left Ajassor for Ikom?”

Florence: Jealousy. My mother advised me to move on, because as my business was growing, many people in Ajassor were showing me the “black eye”. Some of them had their children who had gone to school more than me, others in Cameroon, but they couldn’t do what I was doing, so they were jealous.

DW: “But Ajassor is not far from here [Ikom]. Those people can still see you here.... why not go to Onitsha for example?”

Florence: “I could not continue to do my business if I went too far from the border, and also from my parents who were already old. So Ikom was the only place I could go and still be close to my parents and the border, or go to Cameroon.”

On her relationship with her current husband, *Florence* admitted that it presented many advantages to both members of the couple for business in the border area context, the husband being Cameroonian and *Florence* being Nigerian.

Florence: “Obviously I did not marry him for that reason. Many Cameroonians had wanted me before, even the father of my first child is Cameroonian, and many Nigerian women are married to Cameroonians and Cameroonian women too are married here. It just happens because we are all together here.”

Florence said about her husband that, “When he lived on the Cameroonian side, he would waste a lot of time in the morning to travel here [in Nigeria] first before he can pick his stuff and by the time he returned to Ekok [in Cameroon], many customers would have already bought from someone else and left. Now, he just wakes up, picks up his cargo and off he goes straight to the market. [...] can you imagine, although my husband has been living here for more than 10 years, I still have to go and pick him up at the border every single time he buys supplies for me from Cameroon? If I don’t pick him up and say that the things belong to me, he will pay all the 15 checkpoints between Mfum and here. The same thing for me if I go to Cameroon. That is not fair, and that is why some people prefer to use back routes, even if it takes more time and can be dangerous at times.”

Florence also said that once her husband crosses the border into Cameroon no paper can be asked off him, even if the border officials in question are newly appointed.

Florence: “As a Cameroonian, he is free to roam around there as he pleases. He will always be Cameroonian, and I will always be Nigerian when it comes to these border people. After all, his vaccination scar²³ is different from mine” □

Florence said that she has many friends, relatives and customers living on the Cameroonian side who visit her regularly. Her story is one of essential fellowship with other people from “the other side who only mind their own business” as opposed to relatives and acquaintances on the Nigerian side who are jealous and envious of her. This is a paradox of geographical imagination that brings her physical location in tension with her cross-border solidarity. She said that since the death of her parents, she has not been visiting her own family home where her sister now lives with her own children. Her sister can visit her in Ikom at the market or at her own home, but *Florence* is afraid of her former neighbours’ “black eye”. *Florence* is very conscious of her prosperity which she can measure from the poor background she had come from and certainly compare to her sister’s, a modest primary school teacher in Ajassor, married to a Border Driver.

Florence’s story is also one of generational transmission of bordering practices, in the sense that she says she inherited the drive to succeed from watching her mother fight like a soldier to put food on the table especially when her father became incapacitated. She portrayed her mother as a woman “who took no nonsense from nobody and she would give you wahala if you wanted wahala [trouble]”. She described how nobody could touch their farm when her mother was still in good health, and she would stand up to border officials (men) who tried to extort money from her. Her mother had taught her how “to fight the border”, otherwise she would be working “just to grease these government men”. In talking about extortion at the border, *Florence* took to portraying a moral self, a citizen who was willing to pay the fair taxes and custom duties, but resented the habit of Government officials who abused the authority bestowed upon them and treated some people unfairly.

²³ Different government health policies. Will be elaborated upon in Locus 2 of this chapter as below.

“We don’t even complain about lack of schools or roads here, even though they have made this road now.”

In her understanding of “*fighting the border*”, *Florence* positions herself as a politicised being, with moral superiority over border officials and taxmen representing the Government. She draws such a moral authority from the solidarity she had with all the other hardworking border people who were constantly extorted by these government representatives abusing their power. The extent to which this politicisation is simply a mobility negotiation strategy, or a centralisation of marginality has not been fully established in this study, but suffice it to say that “*fighting the border*” amounts to personifying the multifaceted state dimension of the border to achieve personal goals. *Florence* sees the state border as both legitimate and illegitimate, depending on circumstances. Based on this tension, I have mapped out *Border Deniers* and *Border Acknowledgers* as different mantles that borderlanders can wear. Moreover, *Florence* also conflates this sense-making with her own moral self, indicating her entitlement not only to judge, but also to benefit from the border’s economic dynamics. This is an illustration of how several layers of the vernacular sense-making of border might overlap, intersect or contrast.

In the final part of the semi-structured interview, which focused on illegal practices across the border and (in)security, *Florence* solicited my “*common sense*” to see that people who smuggled things across the border were doing so exactly as a reaction to these abuses from the government. When I asked her about child trafficking and the smuggling of things like weapons, she reacted with disdain and said:

“Those are criminals that the government should be going after instead of harassing poor people who are just trying to make both ends meet. But sometimes, the boys in the community are better at spotting criminals trafficking children, who are different from those who are just travelling with children without papers”.

Again, her ambivalent categorisation of practices that are all deemed illegal by state border authorities is a testament of diverging conceptualisations of the border between the official and the vernacular. In the same vein, positioning herself as a moral authority who refuses to align with government definition of criminality creates a space of vernacular agency that shapes the

dissenting ways in which *Florence* conducts herself while navigating the border space. This vernacular agency controls the channels of her actions more than the official framework implemented by state border authorities to control cross-border mobility. On the question regarding insecurity and her fears, *Florence* had the following to say:

“There are many things I fear here, I cannot say I am most afraid of only one thing in particular. As a border girl, I have grown up around this place and I know that it is full of many dangers for which you need to always shine your eyes for. Obviously, I fear that my business can burn down because that is common, but above all I fear traffickers. You should stay away from them and avoid messing with their business. If you try, you will get into trouble and even the police cannot protect you, so the only way for you to save your life will be to leave this area. Many people have had to abandon their businesses and homes here just because they have had some run-ins with the traffickers, these guys don’t joke. When you become their target, you start hiding like someone who broke out of prison and is avoiding authorities.”

DW: “What could make you leave this place and never come back?”

Florence: “Like I said, if you become enemies with the traffickers, because they can actually just eliminate you physically and no one would even know or budge. Or if for some reasons the government thinks that you are one of the traffickers.”

DW: “So you don’t think the state authorities can protect you here?”

Florence: “The state protects itself here in Mfum, not us, my brother. You have to be very careful. If you count on the state, it will let you down. All it cares about is the customs duties it collects.”

In her concluding remarks, *Florence* stressed how there is a clear divergence between her understanding of criminality and threats on the one hand, and the official discourse about these on the other hand. This is not in itself a novelty, but looking at the behaviour that is determined by this understanding reveals the extent to which *Florence*’s bordering practices are shaped by how she makes sense of the border space. This sense-making provides a framework to explain the tensions between the two main varieties of borderlanders and the various layers and facets of the border as she sees them. This prompts to look at the differences and tension between

both mantles borderlanders are likely to wear, so to speak: *Border Deniers* and *Border Acknowledgers*.

4.1.2 *Border Acknowledgers and Border Deniers*

4.1.2.1 *Border Deniers*

The dismissal of the border is more prevalent in the narratives of those borderlanders whom I have called *Border Deniers*, i.e. those borderlanders such as *Yomi* and *Eudes* who do not see their lives through their status as inhabitants of a border space, even though their livelihoods are intrinsically related to the existence of the border. For instance, explaining why his border village is so sparingly populated, *Yomi* portrays a geographical imagination more aligned towards the Nigerian national than the Cameroon transnational.

Yomi: “Our number hardly grows, not that we don’t have children, but many people send their children to Lagos or Port Harcourt or Abuja for school. So only old people are left here and very small children most of the time. I used to walk a very long distance when I was little to go to primary school. And sometimes it would rain on me either on my way to school, or on my way back from school.”

DW: “Why do they send their children to Lagos, Abuja and all those faraway places while they can send them to Cameroon nearby or even to Ikom where there are more schools?”

Yomi: “I am not sure how it all started, but we have most of our relatives in big cities instead, and people tend to go where there is already someone to welcome them, you see. Every household here has children, uncles, aunts in Lagos or Abuja. Many of them are even abroad. So if the entire Mkot diaspora was to come back to this village, there wouldn’t be enough space for everybody to live.”

It is however worth noting here that, as a *Border Denier*, *Yomi*’s sense-making of the different places and spatial trajectories of his relatives is neither national, nor transnational. These categories are the ones I used in an analytical process of elimination, to arrive at the conclusion that *Yomi*’s spatial imagination does not integrate his otherwise obvious borderness. This is also an insight into his bordering practices as *a-statal*

actorness. As a matter of fact, there are no instances of the term national or nationality in *Yomi*'s entire interview. His categorisation of space is neither for, nor against the border, it simply lies beyond it, even though it may acknowledge the border. This particular mixture of dismissal (with concealed acknowledgement) of the border is also evident in the following exchange with *Yomi*:

Yomi: [...] *We usually meet at my mum's village, but sometimes they will come to Nkot in terms of business. I have never been to Cameroon, at least not knowingly [laughs].*"

DW: *"Why not knowingly?"*

Yomi: *"You know, we are here near the border with Cameroon in this forest, or even in Cameroon. In fact, nobody knows where the limit with Cameroon really is in this forest, and it does not matter. [...]"*

The irrelevance of the border as implied by *Yomi* reinforces other expressed efforts to place a mental distance between himself and the border, despite the geographical proximity. Most importantly, it seeks to show that he has control over the border, and not the other way around. In the Cameroon-Gabon-Eq. Guinea Border locale, the narrative of *Eudes* displays the same patterns of dismissal, mental distancing, and discursive superiority in relation to the border. In a similar fashion to *Yomi* above, *Eudes* describes how from a young age, the border meant nothing to him:

"I used to go to Adzap a lot, and at some point, people started saying that Adzap is now Gabon. The funniest part is Ebebyin. One day they told you this is Cameroon, the other day they say this is Gabon, then they will tell you this is Equatorial Guinea. All of this was very funny to me."

DW: *"How did all these changes affect your life and the trip you were doing?"*

Eudes: *"They did not affect me personally in any way. I could say except for the fact that people started speaking Spanish in Ebebyin, because they were now learning it in school and talking it on the radio while I was learning French in school instead. But I never needed to speak Spanish anyway, or French for that matter, to anyone I was going to see. They all spoke Ntumu, and many of them are related to me in the family anyway."* (Section on language)

DW: *"Did these changes not impact your father's business, in terms of less people coming across the border for example, or more people being prevented from coming over, who could be potential buyers for you?"*

Eudes: “Well, I don’t think so. There have been a lot of changes, but I don’t see it as related to the border. Sometimes people need something, and sometimes they don’t need it anymore because they have seen something better. For example, who is going to buy a wooden spoon when a plastic one is a lot cheaper and cooler? Even I don’t have a wooden spoon in my house anymore. I still go to Kye-Ossi market every time, but I am not able to sell the same items that my father and I used to sell there 50 years ago. And this is not because of the border, but fashion.”

Eudes refers, at the beginning of the above interview excerpt, to the various changes in border locations following low-intensity territorial disputes and demarcation processes involving Gabon, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea after Independence. I asked *Eudes* as well as several members of the Adzap and *Fénéfé* communities what they thought the impact of the border was on their livelihoods, especially the farm products they sold in local markets. In their responses, they were surprised (and used all facial cues and scorning hand gestures to underscore their astonishment) that I should mention the border as having anything to do with the products they sell in their local markets. They told me that all the people who visit their market are their kin from other villages with whom they speak the same language, so there was nothing suggesting that the small quantities they bought were to be sold somewhere else. Yet, when I compared the price of the white pepper in Bitam (Gabon) and what it is being sold for in *Fénéfé*, I realised that small quantities can actually yield a lot of profit as the same product is almost 10 times more expensive in Bitam. The strong verbal emphasis laid on minimising the impact of the border by *Eudes* and his fellow villagers translated the same desire as displayed by *Yomi* to dismiss the border, and show their control over it, in the case of *Fénéfé* villagers, through kinship and language. This rejection of, or mental distancing from, the border is indicative of an apprehension thereof. Conversations with *Border Deniers* did not at first make clear the reasons for this rejection or hostility to the notion of the border. However, putting together their vernacular conception of the border paces as a natural endowment will further clarify it, as well as what they share with *Border Acknowledgers*.

4.1.2.2 *Border Acknowledgers*

Souley: “We go together always because she has a role that she plays as a Cameroonian, and I also have a role as a Nigerian. Let’s say we complement each other [...] I only buy bush meat

for the family, there is a lot of stress taking it over the border. You end up paying these border people so much that you will always make a loss selling bush meat.

Odette: “The only way is to cook it and cross the border as someone going to Mfum or Ikom to sell food [...]”

As can be learned from the words of Souley and Odette above, *Border Acknowledgers* do exactly the opposite of what *Border Deniers* do. The *Border Acknowledger* makes explicit references to the border as a phenomenon that is materialised in their living space and with which they are bound to interact. The following statements are more examples of such acknowledgement.

“You see he is Gabonese, I am Cameroonian, but we have known each other for more than 30 years. We look alike. When we were younger, we would cross the border in the night into Kye-Ossi to chase girls. On the way back, he would always run from the police and the next day I would be the one in trouble because we look alike and the border police would always mistake him for me. [...] we just call ourselves brothers and sisters, uncles and aunties here because we are the same. Two of my sisters live in Bitam. Many of my relatives live in Libreville and Port Gentil. I have a brother, uncle, auntie or sister in most places in Equatorial Guinea. Everywhere I go in these three countries, I am at home.” Docta (Cameroon- Gabon border)

“Yes, and when we get to the border, we just say in our mother tongue that we are going for a family visit, because we speak the same language both in Gabon and Guinea over there. When I am there, you cannot tell whether I am Cameroonian or Gabonese or Guinean. [...]When you are in Cameroon, you just move a step, you find yourself in Equatorial Guinea. If you turn around with another step, you are in Gabon.” (FG – Cameroon-Gabon):

Fiona: “Yes, both in Nigeria and Cameroon. I am based in both countries equally and I feel at home in both.

DW: “Where? In Ekok or further afield?”

Fiona: “In Cameroon, I know all the northwest region like the palm of my hand. In Nigeria, I know all the Ikom and Mfum LGAs and I also know Onitsha, Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt. [...] In Nigeria are most of my in-laws, but also friends I share with my husband and many of

my business partners. My family and part of my husband's family are based in Cameroon.”
(Fiona, Cameroon-Nigeria Border)

One important observation that emerges out of the statements above and other instances of discursive acknowledgement of the border is that, in contrast to *Border Deniers* who use verbal expression to discursively dismiss or reject the border, *Border Acknowledgers* like *Docta* and *Fiona* use verbal expressions to acknowledge the border, yet log on their opposition to the border within the same statements. In other terms, acknowledging the border does not mean agreeing with the border.

Border Deniers and *Border Acknowledgers* seem to be on the same wavelength as far as rejecting the border goes, but unlike *Yomi* and *Eudes* who seem to be concealing their apprehension of the border, *Odette* is very clear about the reasons for oppositional sense-making of the border :

Odette: “[...] they are very rough, and they just want all your money, all of it. And they talk to you as if you were trash. They humiliate you so you can fear them and not protest when they abuse their authority to take your money for their own pockets. The border can take even your family pot if they see it. That's why they search your body and make you cross the bridge on foot”.

Many *Border Acknowledgers* I have spoken to, including *Florence* in the sample narrative, refer to themselves as “Border Person”, “Border Girl”, “Border Woman”, “Border Transporter”, etc. There have also been many occurrences of the phrase “border life” in the conversations and interviews. These are borderlanders who verbalise their awareness of how the border is involved in, and shapes, their lives. However, this difference from *Border Deniers* cannot be systematised along ontological lines because when I turn to *Eudes*, who does not see himself as a “Border Man” or “Border Boy”, the paradox of his claims is formed in the similarity between his life and the lives of those who see themselves as border people and whom I have called *Border Acknowledgers*. *Eudes* has been labelled earlier under *Border Deniers* , and even though he rejects the term “Border Man”, the description he provides of his childhood, and indeed of current life, is startlingly similar to *Florence*'s. He says:

“BackBack in those days, we had a lot of traditional secret societies, and the mask business was very good because of that. They needed masks for their rituals and dances. It was like a fashion to own many masks even if one did not belong to a traditional secret society. My father

was always very busy with the demand from many customers. I was the delivery person, and I would go to Gabon and Equatorial Guinea mostly on foot, but my father bought me a bicycle later on, which made my life a lot easier.”

This almost identical description of childhood experiences as compared to *Florence*'s at the Cameroon-Nigeria border as well as patterns of livelihoods activities, curiously through contrastive labelling of self-identity in relation to border space, strongly suggests that the difference between a *Border Acknowledger* and *Border Denier* is perhaps only discursive. This is not surprising, given that I have used this seemingly categorisation only to phase my understanding of various vernacular patterns of interactions, and definitely not as ontological classification. However, this discursive difference in the imaginations of self is very important as we shall see in the diverging performance of the bordering practices, especially as regards the ways in which these imaginations of self eventually shape differing conceptualisations of the border (Chapter 5). However, before moving on to the bearing of this apparent discursive dissonance, it is worth digging further into this differing self-labelling of the borderlanders. By contrasting this sense of self to a reality within which *Florence* (*Border Acknowledger*) and *Yomi* (*Border Denier*) describe similar experiences of, and activities across the border, it becomes clear that the borderlander is able to embrace and/or fully identify simply based on imaginations of self in relation to specific places.

In fact, when considered linguistically, “border persons” are just two random words put together; they cover no palpable reality as seen above through the divergent labelling of border experiences and self-projections. The question that arises here is “what is the *border* in *border person*?”, and “what is the *person* in the phrase *border person*?”. The section on hierarchical spaces of the border in Locus 2 will provide answers to the question “what is the *border* in *border person*?” by elaborating on the multiple border spaces produced by vernacular hierarchisation of the border. To answer the other question, i.e. and “what is the *person* in the phrase *border person*?”, we need to focus on the borderlander's ability to retain the same imagination of self across different contexts or produce differing imaginations of self within the same contexts, rather than hybridise these imaginations. This shows that the *person* in the “border person” is someone who constructs full identities that can be dismantled and relocated across space, yet retain the same imaginary across time. This is what I have referred to as bi-placement, based on insights from fieldwork, and which is epitomised this simple statement by *Fiona*

“I am Cameroonian, and I am also Nigerian like my children”.

One must look at *biplacement* from a phenomenological dimension as well as from a discursive perspective. In terms of discourse, the biographical dimension of the narratives produced by both *Border Acknowledgers* and *Border Deniers* tells a story of bi-placement, of people who do not only see themselves as belonging to multiple locations, but who actively and deeply place themselves in two or more locations across the border. Their social world is not one of synthesised or hybridised identities, it is one of where strong rootedness is consciously forged in two or more different transborder locations. At the same time, *Border Deniers* also confirm their placement through the similarity of their experiences and activities with *Border Acknowledgers*. Instead of defeating this logic of bi-placement, the rejection of the “Border Person” appellation by *Border Deniers* reinforces the notion that the borderlander is able to extract themselves from the observable phenomena of the border in order to assert a distinct sense of self. Their exclusion of the official dimension of the border emerges only as a verbalisation of their situated imagination of self. These patterns of label rejection, identity dislocation/relocation and bi-placed biographies do provide a framework for setting the understanding of border communities’ practices, norms and values outside the political structuring of the Westphalian common-sense with regard to borders.

On the one hand, they divest the post-colonial border of its assumed ability to singlehandedly capture and shape peripheral identities located outside the control of the central state. On the other hand, recognising these bi-placed identities as a common thread between the two types of borderlanders allows the analysis to escape the temptation of essentialising post-colonial border communities as trapped within a sort of primordial tribal solidarity as passive resistance against the border. This is why and how the sense of displacement that the border is expected to inflict, akin to “borderlands hysteria” as theorised by Rosaldo (2001) seems to have no effect on these communities. In an ironical twist therefore, where the static border is invested in the terrain of movement, the border community is profusely absent as it follows the stationary logic of placement and location wherein the signs and symbols of the border can be reinterpreted taking them into account.

4.2 Locus 1: The grammar of border signs and symbols

This locus of the chapter on imaginations of space attempts to decipher the border as a spatial scene within which the relationship between the borderlander and the state border is (re)produced through signs and symbols. It draws mainly from insights from observing official border crossing points to examine this relationship. It is nevertheless worth emphasising that these official crossing points do not in any way encompass the entirety and the complexity of the borderlands studied, but they remain in my modest opinion, sites par excellence of dynamic direct encounter and perhaps confrontation between the two main vectors of the postcolonial border space, i.e. the vernacular and the official. Most importantly, I envision this as a dialogic relationship of effects where each party entangled in the relationship uses an array of performance devices to attempt to influence the behaviour of the other. Here, I am mainly interested in what the borderlander makes of this relationship, and how the intended effects of the state border are interpreted from the borderlander's standpoint. This section therefore curates a few symbolic expressions used at official border crossing points in both border locales, to gain insights into how the state border and the borderlanders encode and decode these expressions as part of a power struggle over the meaning of the border space. This is not yet a full-blown analysis of the geographical imaginations or bordering practices, but assuredly it is an effective way of tapping into the nature of the relationship between the border space and the borderlander. In order to study this power dialogue between the borderlander and the border space, focus is laid on three main categories of symbolic expressions (border semiology, linguistic repertoire, and performances), which this section is going to examine.

4.2.1 *Border Signs, Messages and Audiences*

As representatives of "the state", customs officers and border guards are constant reminders of not only the state, but also of the state's inconsistencies in its inability to discharge its duties, yet attempting to jeopardise what borderlanders perceive as an endowment of their geographical environment. They are seen by border residents as individual reflections of the privilege, greed, and corruption which reverberate in the border space through tyrannical border control practices. What border communities see as unfair and unjustified harassment of both local and nonlocal individuals crossing the border remains largely what in their eyes defines the border as to be ignored, rejected or "fought". As a matter of fact, receipts are not delivered

for a great deal of the payments collected. They are therefore unrecorded in the state logbooks and go directly into the guards' personal purses. The often long and tedious negotiation of bribes between guards and traders, during which time the guards confiscate traders' goods and sometimes arrest the traders themselves, frustrates both locals and non-locals alike. This is because as much as they recognise their own helplessness, they do not dissociate individual border officials' practices from state norms. *“That is the true face of the state”* (Personal Communication, Nigeria-Cameroon Border, March 2017) as *Ekema* understood things. From the perspectives of the border population therefore, the existence of a government, just as the existence of the border in its territorial principle, is not a problem, but its materiality imposes hardship on them through border officials, as an extension of the government.



Picture 9 - Flag of Cameroon painted on police check point at the Cameroon-Gabon border.



Picture 10 - Flags of three countries painted on a road sign at the three-part border (Cameroon, Gabon, Eq. Guinea)

As a site of state performativity, the border mobilises many tools and devices which take on different meanings. A host of totemic signs and symbols such as flags, barriers, directions, uniforms, and even the road are the various forms which express the power of the official border as the projection of the state in the physical realm. As seen in pictures 9 and 10 above, a concentration of flags and state emblematic signs can be seen at the official crossing points. In the case above, these comprise flags for three different countries and armorial bearings.



Picture 11 - Checkpoint, Ikom-Mfum road in Nigeria (“smuggler highway”)

The direction and audience of these border signs are geared primarily towards the ordinary border user, crossing on foot, using a motorcycle or a car. In picture 11 above, the road portcullis studded with iron spikes, is normally destined to impede the advance of persons trying to forcefully cross the border. However, it is unmissable that these pointy iron spikes are covered by plastic bottles. In addition, the length of the roadblock is such that it does not occupy the whole width of the road, leaving plenty of room for pedestrians, motorbikes and even cars. Not only would it not be harmful to car tyres to run over it, thanks to the plastic bottles covering the iron spikes, the whole mobility control device turns out to have no coercive effect at all, as it cannot stop anybody determined to pass. As a matter of fact, the border guards manning this roadblock were already asleep when we arrived at around 8PM - having been delayed because our car had broken down. So, we could have easily passed unnoticed, but our driver stopped nevertheless and exited the vehicle to go and wake them up. I later asked the driver why we did not simply go through. He said that people gossip a lot around there and the guards, who know him very well, would eventually have found out one way or the other.

Two key messages can be drawn from this road device. Firstly, given that its primary function of physically stopping people cannot be performed based on the way it is set up, it is fair to assume that this is a sign rather than a control device. Following from this, it is also clear that

the intended audience for this sign is not an enemy attacking the territorial integrity of the country at the border. Instead, this sign is destined to ordinary borderlanders who use this border road leading only to the border, especially if when using a vehicle or a motorbike. The expression of these signs is therefore directed at the community of border crossers who use the border as a median point between two discrete geographical spaces. In addition to targeting this specific audience, these signs also constitute semiotic utterances which clearly demarcate the official space from the vernacular space across the border area. They act as an extension of words beyond the use of language, which the border community uses too, in order to demarcate space or interpret such demarcation. At the Cameroon-Nigeria border for example, the frontiers between constative and performative uses of language can be seen as blurred in the ability of an arrow sign on a border barrack pointing to Nigeria despite the barrack being already located on Nigerian territory beyond the border bridge and that road leading nowhere else than Nigeria.



Picture 12 – Arrow on the wall – Source : Video frame

The same could be said of the red inscription “Arrêt Obligatoire” (Compulsory Stop) on picture 13 below at the Cameroon-Gabon border. It seems to catalyse the same performative function, of signalling to the traveller a shift in jurisdiction and consequently an indication of where power rests from thence onwards.



Picture 13 - Cameroon - Gabon border

In the same vein, the Nigerian Customs Service (NCS) building presents a similar display with a red stop sign on its frontal facade, so much so that people coming from afar would be unable to see it in the distance (Picture 14 below). Even though this looks like an ordinary road sign normally seen at crossroads, this is not the case as there is only straight lane leading onto the border bridge at this point.



Picture 14 - NCS building presents a similar display with a red stop sign on its frontal façade

How the target audience of these signs, again, appears to be ordinary border users is illustrated by a particular scene I witnessed at the Nigeria-Cameroon border. In this incident, a pole hoisting the Cameroonian flag had broken and fallen down. Border officials enlisted the help of all bystanders to put the broken pole back up. All bystanders and some people who were waiting to cross the border obliged, including me. Apart from this instantaneous and dutiful cooperation which spoke volumes about the power dynamics at play here (I shall return to this in Chapter 5), the purpose and audience of the flag emerged more neatly as we helped hoist it back up. In this occurrence, and as directed by border officials, the discussions amongst those who were trying to put the flag back up revolved on what the best place to position the flag would be. The border officials were insisting on the fact that the flag should be clearly visible.

However, there was no doubt as to whether or not the flag should be seen from above, say from a helicopter, or from afar by someone in a car for instance. Instead, the question at stake was whether it was close enough (and not too close) to the main road so that border crossers, whether on foot or in cars, could see that this is where “*Cameroon begins...and Nigeria ends*”, as one border official made it clear. The barriers or gates are also merely symbolic in the sense that they cannot physically prevent anyone from crossing if they really wanted to force their way through the border. For example, in the sense of an invasion or a hostile takeover of the border, there is really nothing the border’s physical infrastructures can do to prevent or stop it. In terms of this symbolism therefore, we can say that all the totemic utterances of the land border are based on a grammar of power and convey a message around a call to allegiance to which border communities will respond in varying forms.

4.2.2 *Performances at the border crossing point*

In order to fully grasp the various performances at the border, it is useful to remind ourselves of the Critical Border Studies (CBS) approach invoked in the preceding chapter, and which examines the border in terms of diverse *bordering practices* and the relationship between these practices and *performance* (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012, p. 729). Furthermore, I draw on a synthesis between Butler’s analysis of gender as performative and Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis of performance as social interaction. This synthesis is conceptualised by Brickell as a performativity framework within which individuals are “reflexive, acting subjects” (2005, p. 29). So, if we replace gender identity with border identity within this conceptual framework,

the constructed responses of the borderlander to the signs and symbols described above can be seen as actions within ‘the context of possibilities permitted within the culture’ (2005, p. 31). As seen above therefore, state border agents as well as symbols essentially constitute both bordering practices and performance of state functions. Border communities on their part, through ways of talking, walking, sitting, dressing or even standing still, also perform their own meaningful bordering practices. Border crossing points become key junctions of time and space wherein these performances often come into dialogic interaction from the official to the vernacular, and vice-versa.

Building on from this CBS conceptualisation of actors at the border crossing points aids the understanding of this symbolic dichotomy that opposes the two sides on the border site. This separation can be expressed in terms of the urban versus rural, the centre versus the periphery, the educated versus the non-formally educated, the steady income versus the unpredictable livelihoods, etc. In fact, border officials typically wear their clean and well-pressed uniforms, speak mostly English (Nigeria-Cameroon), French (Cameroon-Gabon), or Spanish (Equatorial Guinea) as they originate from diverse ethnic linguistic backgrounds from within their countries and cannot always understand the local languages. Indeed, when border officials understand one native language, they tend to start the conversation in the applicable official language, even when they are being spoken to in that native language. In stark contrast, all those who use the border dress mostly in shabby clothes, speak Pidgin English (Nigeria-Cameroon), broken French (Cameroon-Gabon), or their African mother tongues. In their interactions, the border crosser can be seen to be the one who always uses a lot of hand gestures, sometimes bodily contortions to complement statements, all without looking the border official in the eye. In the meantime, the border official tends to always remain calm, composed and speaks while looking the border user in the eye.

This divide is aptly summed up through in this statement by Ruth below:

“We do not mix with the NCI²⁴ people. We do not have any hate for them but, they are not our class. In fact, we are not on the same team. They speak English among themselves. We speak

²⁴ Nigerian Customs and Immigration

Pidgin amongst ourselves. You see, we are not cut from the same cloth. We are not on the same path. There is no war, but you see...” – Fiona (Nigeria – Cameroon Border)

Bearing in mind the contrast with the living conditions, source of income and physical attire of the rest of the border population, border officials display the performance not only of the authoritative state dimension of the border, but also of the economic and educational privileges of the political centre as compared to the periphery. Another dimension of this divide is that, it is not intended to be a separation between equals. The subservience of the borderlander towards the state border is expected, as we shall see in the following two examples. However, this subservience is also a window into the blurred lines of this border divide and the performed dimension of this symbolic demarcation.

Example 1: The small grocery shops near border posts align their supplies with the needs and preferences of these border officials. Even the type of music played during business time in the nearby shops must please them.

Example 2: The common practice in both border locales is for people crossing the border to be ordered out of the vehicles by border officials. They are told to leave all their belongings in the car, including their shoes. They are only allowed to carry with them their ID documents and therefore must cross the border barefoot, after sometimes undergoing physical body searches.

The mere act of being body-searched and of physically walking across the land border without shoes is interpreted by borderlanders as an unnecessary humiliation and in fact, as a usurpation on the part of the guards. *Berita*, who shared the same car with me on several crossings, told me that although she crosses the border regularly and is known to the border officials, there is no exception for her. She complained that,

“[...] they make me born again every time”,

The phrase “born again” deserves attention in understanding the performance of subservience. This phrase has become associated with walking barefoot across the border. It is borrowed from the parlance of Pentecostal Christianity that is very vibrant in the South of Nigeria, as well as in Cameroon. I had observed that religious linguistic references are deeply ingrained in much of the way borderlanders relate to their social world. In the drinking parlours, bars, markets

and cars around Ikom and Ekok (Cameroon-Nigeria border), it is not uncommon for someone to come up to you and suggest that you should consider joining their church by “*accepting Jesus as your Lord and Saviour*”. If you do, you will be known as being “*born again*”. In one church service I attended in Ikom, the Pastor explained to new converts that:

“To be born again means to abandon everything bad behind you, every sin, every bad company, and follow the light of Jesus for the rest of your life”.

Hence, the powerful symbolism of leaving everything behind (in the car), including shoes and crossing the border barefooted forcefully portrays the notion of depriving and surrendering to a higher being, a deference to a superior moral authority. As we shall see below, this display of power (imbalance) does not sit well with the borderlanders’ interpretation of the expected subservient response. Most importantly, the allegory of being “born again” is substantiated as pure performance because, just like the pastor complained that new and enthusiastic converts still go back to their old ways, everything that is left behind in the cars are eventually picked up by their owners who do not continue their journey as barefooted as they crossed the border. This shows the extent to which this subservience conceals a high degree of hypocrisy or subversion on the part of the border crossers.



Picture 15 - Police searching travellers who stepped out the vehicle to cross on foot as directed

From a prosaic observation, one could be tempted to infer subservience based on the borderlander’s submission to the searches. The compliance with instructions to walk barefooted across the border seem to signify their confirmation that they have understood and

are aligning with the message conveyed by official border signs, symbols and performances. This observation can even be reinforced by the fact that borderlanders promptly exit the vehicle even before being ordered to do so or prepare their documentation such as IDs when approaching the point where this could be required, or instantly raise their hands to submit to body-searches. However, as shall be discussed in Chapter 5 on mobility and negotiation strategies, behind this apparent conformity, borderlanders actively contest the legitimacy of those demanding such subservience and subvert the border by converting such performance of theirs into instrumental resources. They do this through clothing, code-switching, money, official documents and most importantly, other members of the border community. Borderlanders as much as border officials mobilise their respective semiotic resources to engage a dialogic performance of the border through certain behaviours expected by the state border at a specific time on the specific site of the border.

4.3 Locus 2: How borderlanders create vernacular space within, across and beyond the physical border

This section discusses the spaces produced and navigated by borderlanders. When we look at the implications of the imbalance of power in the dynamics shaping the border space, a set of essential questions arise. The questions are: *what are the complexities of the spatial organisation of the borderland, beyond the vernacular/official divide? In other words, what other spaces are produced by the performativity thus established and what relationships are there between these spaces?* In order to attend to these questions, this first part draws on the data to analyse how the vernacular relation to the border space can lead to a situation where one layer of the border superimposes itself on and/or subsumes the other. It distinguishes between fixed and shifting layers of the border space from the borderlander's perspective. The second part of the section then further problematises the notion of border layers, by probing into the ways in which borderlanders have spatialised their border world into contiguous and hierarchical frames of action.

The "Border Bridge Closed" video described in Chapter 1, shows how the vernacular dimension of the border can be subsumed under the official performance of the state border. In that specific case, because of tensions between two countries (Nigeria and Cameroon), the official crossing point is simply closed, consequently shutting down all activities for the

borderlanders who would have relied on this crossing point to return home or go about their daily activities. Most importantly, it is the fact that despite the tension, transnational interactions can continue, that which makes us realise that there are diverging ways of relating to the border space. While I was doing fieldwork in 2017, what is dubbed in Cameroon the “anglophone crisis” was in its early stages with separatist activists fleeing into Nigeria. There would be announcements on the radio that the border had been closed between the two countries, yet one could still hear people saying, “*I am going to Cameroon*”. just as unassumingly as those saying, “*I have just arrived from Cameroon*”. Another particularly telling example of this vernacular dimension of the border diverging from the official border can be found in the words of *Docta*, who had this to say when I asked him if he would feel safer should the border close.

DW: “*Would you feel safer if they closed the border?*”

Docta: “*It is not necessary. The few times, they have closed the borders, things have instead become worse.*”

DW: [“*Probe.*] *Really? How?*”

Docta: “*For example, when the border was closed because of the Ebola thing, people continued to cross but unofficially, paying high prices for bribes. These could have been people actually having the disease. People like us were left without a job, while criminals were using other contraband routes to get people in and out of Gabon.*”

DW: “*Where are these contraband routes? The way I see the river between Cameroon and Gabon, I don’t think there can be any other way to cross apart from the bridge?!*”

Docta: “*No, there are many other ways of crossing not necessarily here, but these are very dangerous because they are used only by drug traffickers and people like that. If they see you there and you are not one of them, your life is in danger. They create the routes and use them.*”

The official announcement of border closure therefore has no direct bearing on the reality on the ground. It is to some extent an empty performance of the state technologies of power at the border, in the sense that this official closure does not mean that people can actually be prevented from travelling across the border. As the dominant narrative about the border, this creates two potentially dangerous situations that the knowledge of the vernacular narrative can help contain. Firstly, as *Docta* says in his statement, there is a risk of people effectively carrying Ebola to cross the border and spread it. Secondly, the lack of accurate information also creates a situation whereby those whose understanding of the border is shaped only by the official

narrative of the border make the wrong decisions. This is illustrated by what *Josiane*, a young borderlander at the same Cameroon-Gabon border thinks was “a serious problem”.

DW: “*Describe what happened.*”

Josiane: “During the Ebola crisis, there were many people here who could not cross the border, the place was overcrowded, and we kept thinking what if we have a case of Ebola here?”

DW: “*Who did you report it to in the first place? Why?*”

Josiane: “The security people were overwhelmed too, because people kept arriving for almost a week, thinking that they will be let through and the situation was really out of hands. We started experiencing food shortages and people were defecating anyhow in the bushes, so there was a real risk in case somebody had Ebola. We told the officers, but there was nothing they could do about it. Many people had come from far away, did not have money or anywhere else to go, apart from just finishing their journey.”

The people *Josiane* refers to here as being trapped are those whose knowledge would have been informed only by this official dimension of the border. These examples and testimonies point to the fact that even labelling a video clip “border closed” to refer to the official border crossing point being suspended is either a misreading of the actual dynamics on the ground or the triumph of the official border in shaping narratives about the border space. In any case, the diverging trajectories of mobility across the border reveal the existence of two layers of the border, or two spaces that are superimposed, with the official border on top of the vernacular. More often than not, the vernacular border space is subsumed into the official border space, thereby bringing forms of vernacular spatialisation that relate to the official border in terms of layers. That is going to be the topic of the following section.

4.3.1 *Shifting layers - Revolving border*

As a response to the rigid and dominant nature of the official border, borderlanders established a “blown-up” relation to the state border by organising it into layers. In other words, instead of just accepting the border as wedging a rigid line across space and time, they have unpicked its constituent parts so as to be able to navigate them easily. For example, as shown in the figure below, the official border is seen as singular in its function from a state perspective but is understood as harbouring several aspects of life from the borderlander’s perspective.

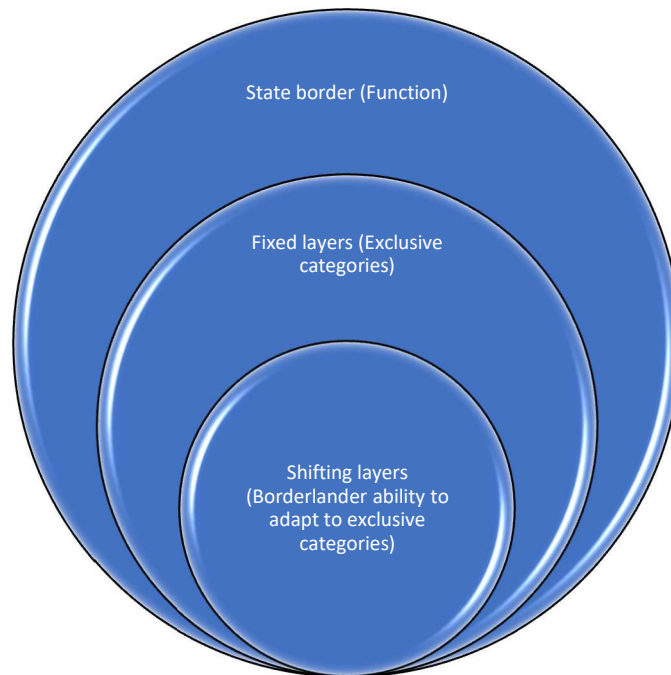


Figure 1 – Border layers

Areas such as nationality and country of residence are seen both through the fixed layer of the state border and the shifting layers of borderlanders' gaze. The forms of spatialisation imposed by the state border are thus reconfigured by the borderlanders to signify plurality in areas where they are seen as interfering with usual modes of livelihoods. For example, the fixed layer of the border checks nationality at the Nigeria-Cameroon border in binary terms and as exclusive categories: either Nigerian or Cameroonian. You cannot be both, and even if you do not have any ID documents, the type of vaccination scars you have (shoulders for Nigerians; biceps for Cameroonians) will determine an exclusive. Depending on which nationality you are assigned, you will be disadvantaged either on your way out or on your way into the country. However, borderlanders manage to escape these rigid categorisations through shifting layers of the border space. As we can see in the shifting layer column as per table 3 below, borderlanders can shift their identity based on ancestry or family ties, and the resources range from documentation to body scars. To illustrate this, health policy in Nigeria provides that vaccinations against tuberculosis and smallpox are carried out on the shoulder, meanwhile Cameroonian health authorities have a policy of performing these vaccinations on the biceps. The scars left by these vaccinations are quite distinctive and literally separate Cameroonian bodies from Nigerian bodies. This can therefore be used as a rigid bordering practice, a fixed layer of identity through

an exclusive nationality marker. However, many Cameroonians who were born before 1961 or shortly thereafter might have the “Nigerian” scars, because English-speaking Cameroon was then an integral part of Nigeria/British colonies. This introduces the shifting layer to the identity category of bordering based on body scars because one can have Nigerian scar and hold a Cameroonian ID document, and vice-versa.

The table below recapitulates how the rigid dimension of state border encounters shifting layers of the borderlanders’ world. The shifting layers of the border as understood by borderlanders convey a strong point on the ontological dimension of the vernacular border. They underscore the capacity of such borders to accommodate multiple dimensions of complex spatial form and their ability to quickly integrate new geographical imaginations. This ontological implication can also be analysed as providing factual evidence of a pattern ingrained in the African borderlander since the colonial mapping process, which has since made the physicality of the state border a transient spatial phenomenon. It is consequently no surprise that, concurring with archival information about the shifting location of borders, the insights from fieldwork indicate that borderlanders relate to their spatial environment as one that is constantly subject to discursive transformations with palpable effects in the socio-political as well as in the physical realms.

Table 3 - Fixed and Shifting layers of the border

	Fixed layer	Shifting Layer	Comments& Examples
Identity	Nationality	Ancestry / marriage	ID cards, vaccinations scars, languages

Residence	Country	Border village	Shifting borders, inaccurate borders, land disputes, “fighting the border”
Economy	Business	Type of business	Currency fluctuations, seasonal products, changing needs, changing policies, new opportunities
Social capital	Belonging	Monetisation of knowledge, languages, connections, etc.	removing packaging to avoid customs, telling through ancestry,
Authority	State	Mediators, community rulers,	<i>A-statal actorness</i>
Values	Legal	Lawful/legitimate	Oil vs drugs/ Child trafficking

Nevertheless, a critical reflection on the ontological basis of spatial identity of the borderlander also requires an exploration of the border communities in question in a relational approach, i.e. as a performative network of human relations acted out in spatial practices. In other words, *what do the different types of a borderlander’s pursuits tell us about actual vernacular spatial hierarchy and organisation?* Of course, this does not cancel the fact that the border as a geographical feature is place-based, nor does it diminish its investment in movement rather than immobility, even though its own performativity can be abstract or perceived in the practices of border communities. This only implies the necessity to shift the focus from *where* community and social cohesion are performed to *how* the community taps into an eclectic social capital to cater for its changing needs within a given space, and to eventually deal with perceived impediments to their material fulfilment. Having earlier established that the most significant demarcation in the two border locales is not the division between neighbouring states, but rather between the border communities and the border itself, this section on shifting layers has introduced us to the abstract yet pregnant spheres that intersect around the border. From the vantage point of this plurality of spaces across the border area, I will now group activities under specific spaces before looking at possible intersections and overlaps.

4.3.2 *Spaces within and beyond the border space: community, legitimacy and money.*

By grouping various socioeconomic activities according to the ways in which they are performed as bordering practices by borderlanders, it emerges that these activities are in fact rooted in different spheres of the vernacular border. Insights from the ethnographic observation of borderlanders conducting various livelihoods and sociocultural activities suggest that borderlanders operate mainly across three different bounded spaces, which often overlap or intersect. These spaces are not necessarily physical spaces or exclusively abstract, but through their performance, borderlanders create specific realms of meaning across the physical border space. It is in fact not extraordinary that people change their behaviour and types of social interactions depending on the place where they find themselves. Human Geographers have indeed theorised the distinction between subjective and objective spaces as well as the meanings attached to places as sites containing different aspects within themselves (J. A. Agnew, 2014; Copans, 2019; Entrikin, 2011). However, beyond this spatially produced meaning (Hubbard P., Kitchin R., 2004), two main elements stand out as meanings are constructed and mobilised by borderlanders.

Firstly, all spaces created by borderlanders are rooted in values outside the realm of the border and extend beyond the physical space of the state border. Secondly, it is interesting to note how, within the border space itself, the performance of vernacular bordering practices provides several discrete “betweenness of places”, i.e. a point of encounter between objective and subjective spaces. In this sense, what borderlanders do to circumscribe the limits of these bounded spaces through performance not only reflects the different scales of their identity as borderlanders, but also their value system as socially situated beings not exclusively defined by the border. In the examination of these spaces below, I refer to each type in plural form because of their discrete distribution across physical space, abstract space and time as well as the plurality of the same type space in several physical locations across the border area.

As illustrated in the figure below, the first one is *spaces of community*, which encompass the performances and discursive constructions by border communities aiming at fulfilling specific social functions across the border space. *Spaces of legitimacy* relate to the moral economy of the border as segmented by borderlanders along the lines of morality and legitimacy, instead of legality and regulation. The third type of spaces is *spaces of money*, which relates to both physical and abstract contexts within which the conditions for ensuring livelihoods are created.

It however worth noting that the spaces are not rigidly divided as shown in this schema and that these do not constitute an exhaustive listing of all the spaces vernacularly produced in relation to the state border.



Figure 2 - Borderland spaces

4.3.2.1 Spaces of community

Spaces of community are multiple and varied, but we can mainly look at them as both physical spaces and abstract spaces. One example of physical space of community can be seen in how *Chief Ossaji*, a local customary leader in a Nigerian border village²⁵, liaises with other chiefs in border villages to distribute land and settle disputes in “grey areas”, i.e. land whose ownership is not clear and upon which many people can lay claim at the same time.

Chief Ossaji: “You know, when the white man came and said that from now on, this is a border, some people just left their land, never to come back. Many generations later, we do not know for sure whom this land belongs to, so it up to our community to decide what to do with the

²⁵ Village name withheld for anonymity purposes

land now. It should belong to one of us still, but not because he is Cameroonian or Nigeria. Just because he is our son.”

Another example of physical spaces of community can also be seen in the ways in which borderlanders mesh the border space with a web of family ties across time and space. This is very obvious in the following segment of the FG discussion at the Cameroon-Gabon border during which an elder (*Padday*, 80 years old) tells me about their transnational community:

Lamel: “Yes, like us here, we are “Sandons”, we have meetings following the rituals of our ancestral practices.”

DW: “Are the sandons like a tribe or an ethnic group?”

Lamel: “It is like saying a family, under the ntoumou ethnic group.”

DW: So, what do you do when you meet for your traditional rituals and family gatherings?

Padday: For example, this year again, we have already received the invitations with the dates, we are going to go to Gabon, Cameroon and Guinea for three days. We do this every year.”

DW: “And what do you do during these three days? What do you talk about?”

Padday: “As a family, we talk about our ancestral traditions and solve problems that have arisen in the family. If there is a problem in the family in Equatorial Guinea, they call me and I go there and solve it. And whatever I say they listen to me, if I say the problem is finished, it is finished for the family. I have done the same in Gabon. I am a peacemaker and they respect me everywhere.”

Apart from creating discrete physical spaces of community across the border, borderlanders are also involved in more ethereal spaces of community, which are not necessarily anchored in physical spaces but are expressed as abstract bounds of specific practices, shared values and norms in relation to the borderland. These spaces comprise various formal and informal solidarity networks across the border. Such formal solidarity networks include the “Border Driver Association” for example, at the Cameroon-Nigerian border or the “Association des Femmes Bayam Salam” at the Cameroon-Gabon border. Informal solidarity networks bring together, for instance, travellers who form a community of their own, but I argue that this belonging is not imagined.

Anderson's (1991, p.6) classical theorisation of nationalism elucidates that, in essence, a nation is an ‘imagined political community’, since the individuals of a nation will not personally be acquainted with most of their fellow members but on a level of consciousness, conceive

themselves as all belonging to the same community. The unstated assumption in this theory however remains that such a community should first be decreed, recognised or asserted. By applying Anderson's theory to the border community instead of a specific nation, some peculiarities tend to reinforce the notion of unimagined communities, i.e. those who might not see themselves as belonging together, yet are locked together into shared practices and representations. The relationship between members of the border community is not always that of solidarity or cohesion. In fact, tensions occur for example during land disputes in poorly demarcated border areas, where national identities, and even national pride, tend to supersede ethnic belonging or cross-border solidarity. Nevertheless, my observation of the two border communities allowed me to conclude that despite multiple identities and tension woven as undercurrent of relationship dynamics amongst members of the border community, there is a distinct sense of belonging related to territorial placement of individuals rather than their relationship with one another. Spaces of community thus evidence an aspect of belonging, which is belonging without imagining.

4.3.2.2 *Spaces of money*

The most obvious spaces of money across the border are marketplaces. The driving factor of all interactions in places like *Marché Mondial* at the Cameroon-Gabon border is money. The quest for money here seems to supersede all other activities in relation to the border. Spaces of money are also literally epitomised at the Cameroon-Nigeria border by currency exchange activities where many individuals engage in currency exchange at the border with the clear objective of taking advantage of the currency differentials and economic fluctuations. These are spaces of money because money in cash is the most obvious pursuit in these physical spaces, which are nonetheless generated by two macro-economic systems coming into contact precisely at these specific spaces like no other border spaces. Another example of spaces of money is how borderlanders demarcate where they can directly make money from where the state can make money on the border space. In fact, when traffic on certain unofficial cross-border routes increases noticeably, thereby prompting patrols by border guards in those areas, borderlanders move to set up their "community development" roadblocks on alternative cross-border routes, far from the areas being policed by border officials.

Interestingly, borderlanders leave the roadblocks behind when they move to another location and border officers just literally come and begin to man the same checkpoints set up by borderlanders. When eventually the traffic goes down because it has been yet again diverted to the “new” routes, border officials either go to these next places or return to their original border post. This illustrates a tacit collaboration between borderlanders and border officials as part of a process of creating vernacular spaces of money far from state spaces of money across the same border area, using the same methods. These checkpoints are therefore physical spaces of money within their own bounds wherein both ordinary borderlanders and border officials insert themselves for the same purpose. The mobility of both borderlanders and border officials across different checkpoints also indicate that spaces of money are not limited physically either. In the same vein, many borderlanders travel with both currencies and while travelling, they offer exchange services to other travellers in exchange for small fees. As *Florence* says:

“Once I have tied my scarf like this, I am in business mode, no sister, no family, no friend. My day must pay me. Full stop.”

This statement summarises the psychological disposition or mental spaces that are not necessarily rooted in physical space, and which I have included in spaces of money for classification and analysis. The same concrete-abstract duality can be observed in spaces of legitimacy.

4.3.2.3 Spaces of legitimacy (moral economy)

By spaces of legitimacy, I refer to borderland practices, shared values and norms that sequence the borderland both virtually and physically in terms of what/where is a crime or not. In other words, based on a specific vernacular nomenclature, as can be seen in the table below, what is illegal might be seen as legitimate by borderlanders and vice-versa, and therefore falling outside or inside vernacular spaces of legitimacy depending on borderlanders’ view. Conversely, what is seen by borderlanders as a criminal transgression might not have a signifier in legal official discourse due to lack of relevance. Spaces of legitimacy can also be physical. Examples include back roads which borderlanders did not want to show me or topics they did not want to get involved with, for fear of “*Wahala* [getting into trouble]”. Based on this shifting

normative frameworks for defining what is acceptable or not, the table below illustrates a range of issues and the ways in which these are considered a crime by some, and not by others.

Table 4 - What is criminal?

Criminal?	Borderlanders	Official state position
Human trafficking	Not always	Yes
Informing on contraband	Yes	No
Smuggling	No	Yes
Smuggling Drugs & Arms [□]	Mostly Yes	Yes
Fake IDs	No	Yes
Community roadblocks	No	Irrelevant
Trespassing shrine	Yes	Irrelevant
Cultural cross	No	No

4.4 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter on the semiotics of the border and its spatialisation delineates the performative relationships between borderlanders and the border space, and especially how imaginations of the border space are built on the grammar of border signs and symbols. However, this chapter has in the first instance introduced the borderlanders before proceeding to conceptualise the dynamic relationship between vernacular gaze and the official expression of the border. This examination cuts across a normative dichotomy or tension between the vernacular and the official border. Beyond this almost Manichean view of border dynamics, the interactions of plural vernacular spaces in the postcolonial context reveals that the dynamics in borderlands are too complex to be grasped from a two-level analysis of the border only, nor even from the centre-periphery perspective. The border performativity involving the vernacular and the official results in the production of many other distinct vernacular spaces that structure a form of spatial hierarchy.

A historical hindsight tells us that by becoming borderlanders, pre-colonial inhabitants of territorial spaces that morphed almost overnight into border spaces, did more than reconfiguring their relationship to territoriality. They also adjusted their relationship to authority and hierarchy in their (postcolonial) border living space that had a postcolonial border

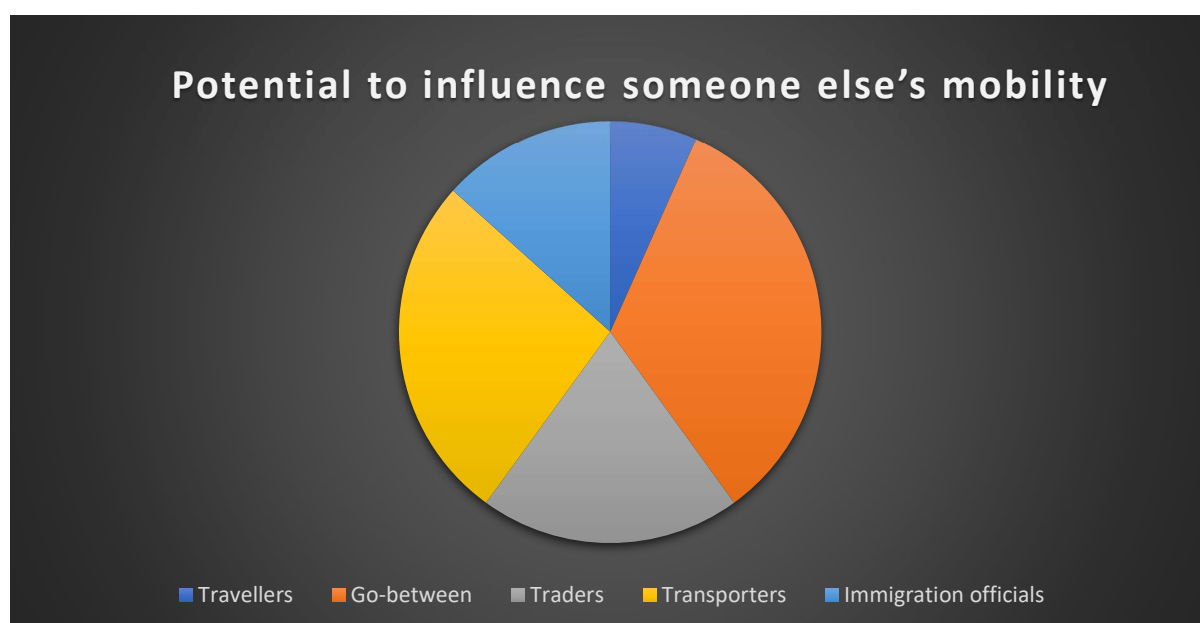
space, amongst other things. This is indicative of a trajectory of resilience alongside the inception and development of the colonial border. As gleaned from the insights generated during my fieldwork, this reconfiguration of the borderlander's imaginations of space does not result only in a dichotomy between the vernacular border and the official border. Nor does it suppress vernacular socio-spatial dynamics. Instead, border "layers" and spaces are produced, even though these are epistemically silenced by the discursive dominance of the official border as dictated by its functions, a solid component of the nation-state. Consequently, apart from essentialising and/or excluding the other layers and spaces of the border, the misrepresentation of power in the border space has limited our understanding of these dynamic vernacular modes of organising space.

It is worth noting however, that the boundaries between the spaces imagined and produced by borderlanders are not as rigid as their above classifications may imply. As I have found out, these vernacular spaces, both physical and abstract, are not limited to interhuman relationships. They can also be defined by the specific pursuits, such as money or land acquisition through community belonging. Navigating these spaces can also occur simultaneously, as one can be grappling with different issues and relationships at the same time. To sum this up, I have generated below a framework for analysing when and how various actors rooted in different vernacular spaces influence mobility in terms of power differentials. This is based on ethnographic observation rather than statistical analysis, but it robustly reflects the hierarchical structure of actors that allows the borderlander to make rational choices about mobility and resources. This is also an illustration of how the "betweenness of places" operates in the vernacular dynamics of the borderlands. As summed up in the table below and the following pie chart, I have linked actors to spaces and the hierarchy is established by determining the weight of particular vernacular spaces on the ability to influence mobility across the border in terms of facilitating, delaying or impeding it.

Table 5 - Potential of Border Actors to Influence Mobility

Actors	Description / vernacular space of influence	Potential to influence someone else's mobility (1 to 5)
Travellers	Individuals seeking to cross the border for social reasons (space of community)	1
Go-between	Unofficial role but is recognised in the border area and wields a considerable amount of power. Sometimes a relative of a powerful official or a friend (spaces of money/spaces of community/spaces of legitimacy)	5
Traders	Economic operators who buy things from one side of the border to sell on the other side (spaces of money/spaces of legitimacy)	3
Transporters	Those who carry passengers and goods from one side of the border to the other (spaces of money/spaces of community)	4
Immigration officials	People with state authority (spaces of money/spaces of legitimacy)	2

Figure 3 - Potential of border actors to influence mobility



In the same manner that the divide between the official border and the vernacular border provides for passageways, the essentially conflicting nature of links between all these spaces also intersect, instead of opposing one another. The same holds true with the distinction between *Border Deniers* and *Border Acknowledgers*. Like in any battle therefore, there are safe zones as well as cease-fires, and open lines of communication between warring factions. This analogy, for lack of better images, perfectly depicts the fluidity of these bounds across time and space. Borderlands are thus effectively a transition zone or a hybrid space in which authority, loyalties and affiliations are not clear-cut (D. Newman, 2012; Schomerus & de Vries, 2014). However, as I argue in the next chapter with regards to the distinction between *Border Deniers* and *Border Acknowledgers*, there has usually been a confusion between this hybridisation of the border space and the bi-placed identities of borderlanders in their imaginations of self. The border being just one hurdle amongst many others along the way, this reflection on identity dislocation and bi-placed biographies offers a theoretical ground for categorising a type of social actor in the transnational space; an actor, who is able to produce meaning for places and strategically shape their environment beyond (and independently from) the state paradigm. These actors operate within the paradigm of what I have called *a-statal actorness*.

The question the next chapter will attend to therefore is, *how does such a paradigm articulate with the discursive landscape of borderlanders' identities to respond to the vital need of making sense of the spatial environment within which they operate?* As mobilised discursively, the bi-placement or multiple rootedness of *a-statal actorness* link to how border communities conceptualise or perform the border, depending on whether they are denying or acknowledging the border. In other words, these spatial imaginations will be enacted through the ways in which borderlanders convey a combination between a performance of spatialisation and imaginations of self. These enactments, otherwise known as bordering practices, can be observed through the ways in which borderlanders organise and negotiate mobility across the border space.

5 Chapter 5 – Vernacular bordering practices: negotiating (im)mobility and mobilisation of resources across the borderland

This chapter uncovers how border communities invent and constitute themselves to invest in their spatial environment. It seeks to answer the research question 2, namely: **Which vernacular practices are engaged by border communities to navigate the border, mobilise resources and maintain social trajectories across the border?** The multiple spaces of the vernacular border as uncovered in the preceding chapter are also a theatre for studying the various ways in which borderlanders navigate across them and give them meaning. The plurality of these spaces even from the borderlander's perspective could vindicate Gupta and Ferguson's definition of the borderland as an "interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialisation that shapes the identity of hybridised subject" (1992, p. 18). It is a conceptualisation supported by Martinez who argues that, "the determining influence of the border makes the lives of border people functionally similar irrespective of location, nationality, ethnicity, culture, and language" (1994, p. 18). Hybridity has thus been presented as a universal identity marker for borderlanders all over the world. Their geographical positioning is assumed to be fated with displacement and deterritorialisation. It is therefore an identity marked by dispossession and disconnection. However, using the concept of biplacement, instead of displacement, this chapter will argue that, conceptualising the identity of the borderlanders as hybrid seems to lend more credence to facile essentialisation of the postcolonial border subject as this reinforces the notion of deterministic identities as well as linear bordering practices. This blanket characterisation of borderlanders to some extent echoes the territoriality-related arguments about African spatiality in general, and African border communities in particular.

In the following lines, I provide comments to several statements by borderlanders who create a narrative of bi-placed biographies referring to themselves as deeply placed in two or more locations even though they produce diverging performances of the border. The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first part, it looks at how underneath, above and beyond the permanence of the state border, diverging imaginations of self and space produce different performances by borderlanders, who can be fluid between two main sets of behaviours. This is biplacement. The second section of this chapter highlights these ambiguities and tensions that show the difficulty to confine the borderlander to a specific category. Building upon this, the

third section now explores how such a “biplaced” borderlander negotiates mobility and mobilisations of resources across the border space.

5.1 Diverging border performances

5.1.1 *Acknowledging the border*

The personification of the border by most *Border Acknowledgers* who discursively bestow the border with human attributes is indicative of a sense-making that recognises the existence of the border, including its agency as distinct. Analysis of casual conversations and semi-structured interview transcripts from my fieldwork reveals that borderlanders have come to see the border as a (anti)social being, using personalising adjectives to refer to the border. Such descriptions of the border include characterisations such as:

“He [the border] is smaller than you” Aliou, Cameroon-Gabon border

*“Sometimes, it **behaves** well, sometimes not. Some years, the border is a **blessing**, for example if you are selling this from Nigeria when the Naira is high”. Fiona, Cameroon-Nigeria Border*

*“You should know how to **fight** the border, because it always **fights** back and you must always be prepared” Docta, Cameroon-Gabon Border*

*“The border should always **listen** to us, rather than us listening to the border” Odette, Cameroon-Nigeria Border*

This personification of the border by border communities underscores their perceived axiomatic ontology of the border whose various functionalities across time and space are part and parcel of the same way of being. Much of the analysis of the border dynamics has been based on these varying functionalities of the border. Shifts in policies only reflecting these very changes in border functionalities. Hence, the conceptualisation of the *Border Acknowledger* is not dynamic in terms of the existence of the border, because the border is fixed in its purpose even though its functions can be multifaceted and constantly changing. The language used mainly by *Border Acknowledgers* conveys a sense of habit to the border. *Border Acknowledgers*

therefore view their relational engagement with the border through the border's human attributes as reflected for instance in *Aliou's* use of pronouns and the verb "quarrel" below:

*"If you want to use the border, you must know that **he** does nothing for free, my friend. **He** does not call you to come, but if you come to **him**, it is your choice. You can also choose to go through other routes, but it would take you days to reach the other side and you are not safe. [...] **He** is smaller than you, **he** can't force you, but if you come to **him**, you have to pay. That's the rule, if you respect that, **you guys** will never **quarrel**."*

This personification of the border by *Aliou* echoes Lamel (Focus Group, Cameroon-Gabon), who mixes the border and the actions of random actors, perhaps to show that the extent of entanglement is such that the particular border layer or border space activated by an individual take on the characteristics of the said individual.

Lamel : *"Yes, but the border **stands** in your ways only until you give **him** money. Then **he becomes the Canoe man**, who is there only to work his money. As long as **he** receives **his** 500 or 1000 CFA francs, **he** couldn't care less whether it is a criminal crossing or a saint, where you are coming from and where you are headed to. **That's what the border does to your brain.**"²⁶*

The personification of the border that conflates the canoe man and the border itself, establishes the relational levelled playing field where, whenever necessary, the borderlander and border can meet and engage relationally as equals. Attributing agential ability to the border akin to human capabilities by members of the border community can also be found in the common expression "*fighting the border*", which travellers use to refer to their dealings with border officials. This expression supposes that the border is able to engage in a confrontational interaction with borderlanders. Embedded in this understanding is the notion that the fight

²⁶ Personal communication. Cameroon-Gabon Border, November 2017.

This particular statement was made in the context of a focus group discussion when I was asking questions about insecurity in the border area between Cameroon and Gabon, and the role played by Canoe man in helping fugitives escape from one country to another.

occurs at the official crossing point. This is certainly why *Florence* also conflates the border and border officials into a single person when she says: “*The border can steal even your family pot²⁹ if they see it.*” Border personification of the is found mostly throughout the narratives of *Border Acknowledgers*, and not in those of the *Border Deniers*. This is especially consistent with the fact that, as suggested by *Aliou*’s statement above and reinforced by *Odette* and *Souley*’s words below, engaging the border is a rational relationship not only to the official border, but also to other vernacular spaces of the borderland.

DW: “*Why do you not use other crossing points since the border guys here seem to annoy you than much?*”

Odette: “*If you are carrying large quantities of goods like we do, it is very difficult to use those shortcuts, because you will always need a car and the state of the road is not always the best. You will waste a lot of time there in the bush and time is money for me. I sometimes do two trips over the border in one day.*”

Souley: “*Also, it is not always safe there especially if you have a lot of things to carry and people know that you are carrying money.*”

Odette: “*Here, we have our regular drivers whom we trust and who can pick us from home and drop us immediately at destination in Nigeria.*”

The border they refer to here is the official crossing point, and not the line of demarcation on the ground. It is also understandable why *Aliou* is persuaded that “*the border is smaller than you*”, because it may well be that a “border person” is only the dimension of the border resident that engages the border, the personified border. This personification is also that of all the layers and hierarchical spaces into which the borderlander has subdivided its space. In this regard, attributing human traits to the border is indicative of the multivocal relationship with the border space, within which the statist dimension of the border is engaged by the borderlander as one of the many ‘individuals’ in their social worlds comprised of many other spaces. As in normal human relationships therefore, (dis)engaging is normally a rational choice governed by freewill, even though underpinned by the tension between values and interests. Put differently, a border person simply refers to the skillset necessary to deal with the constraints of the official border or any other spatialised hierarchy of the border that *Border Acknowledgers* choose to

engage with. This can be illustrated by the engagement of the border as space of community by travellers.

The community of travellers crossing the border always took shape as we approached the first border checkpoints. At this particular time, long distance travellers too would usually be told by fellow passengers on the bus or in taxis how to behave and what to say in order to avoid being “*fleeced*” by the border. Advice was given on how to package the bags, speak to border officials, carry oneself, and tell stories about origins and destinations. Once the border is crossed, these same passengers take different destinations and enter diverse worlds, different spaces. We can infer from this observation that such a solidarity is not place-based and will therefore be wrongly described as border solidarity. Given that the border would be too weak an identity marker, it seems appropriate to view this as a space produced by the border, and a virtual space within which the community of travellers come together to mutually facilitate their mobility.

The same holds true for the microtrade links among marketwomen, tradesmen, transporters, fellow passengers who forge a solidarity not based on their border identity, but for the purpose of maximising their mobility in that corridor of opportunities. Associations such as the “Border Transporter Association” at the Cameroon-Nigeria border, or the “Solidarité Bayam Salam” at the Cameroon-Gabon border are more permanent and formalised communities of borderlanders. Just as the community of travellers, they are formed in response to the border’s likelihood to threaten their interests. They therefore discursively position themselves not as international traders, but as free movement petitioners who are concerned with the restrictions being posed on their rights to interact within their community, comprised of a cluster of border villages. This discursive construction of bi-placement in the spaces of community situates mobility for the purposes of marriage, visiting kin and friends, attending ceremonial activities, or for local distribution and consumption of “small things”. By refusing to enter the mould of the international, mobility is performed by way of a minimalist acknowledgment of the border through an engagement of community spaces. The common thread to this performance remains bi-placed identities, which borderlanders perform in a way that their displacements look as if they were not any form of mobility. In order to cross the state border, the bi-locational status is mobilised by those who have to “fight” their way through the border. The following story recounted to me by *Josiane* (a bartender in Kye-Ossi), exemplifies an important way in which

border users' discursive representation of their bi-placement ensures that vernacular governance dominates official border governance:

“Last month, my friends and I went to Guinea. It was just for sightseeing, but they wanted us to pay before we cross. My friend has a fake Guinean ID which she showed, and said that we were together. When she was taking the ID out her wallet, her Cameroonian ID also fell down. They first said that her ID is fake, and that even if it was a real one she is not entitled to have two IDs and that we could not prove that we live nearby. How could they verify? They themselves could not speak ntoumou. So we argued over all those things for about thirty minutes, but they eventually let us through.” Josiane, Cameroon-Gabon Border

Because this bi-placement is not clear-cut on paper, clarifications are always needed and that is why border officials have to ask many questions, thus venturing into a discursive territory over which they have very little control. In fact, everyone with some local knowledge can claim to be Nigerian, Cameroonian or Gabonese and these border officials would not always be able to ascertain the validity of the claim. Everyone can also establish the extent to which they belong, knowing that this only serves to reduce the effect of the border. *Josiane* added that,

“You don't always have to have documents, and not having documents does not mean that you don't belong where you say you belong. They will still let you through if you can convince them”.

Border officers themselves open the way for this discursive construction of bi-placement when they ask for more details, and where state inconsistencies mean that there is no written law for every scenario that might arise. Fittingly, borderlanders are all too aware of this. In their use of bi-placed identities to perform their mobility as meaningless, long distance travellers and borderlanders who cross the border almost on a daily basis use their bi-locational ability to maximise their mobility opportunities across the border area. These *Border Acknowledgers* navigate the border space with the full awareness that it is an exceptional corridor of opportunities straddling two distinct spaces. However, it is equally their understanding that their bi-placed identities and the discursive constructions thereof will ensure their mobility as well as limit the negative impact of the border on the end-goals of their pursuits, be it social or economic. They therefore execute their mobility from the standpoint of their bi-placed identity, which they seek to rationalise as meaning that the border has no jurisdiction over their bodies.

Their main objective remains to maintain the necessary freedom of movement across and around the border, by presenting themselves as not moving at all. To put it in another way, the notion of bi-placement makes highly purposive mobility look like meaningless movement, one that is not worthy of state border attention. For example, at the official Nigeria-Cameroon border crossing point, when negotiations were stalling with border officials and heated arguments erupted, the traveller would make the following exclamation, with all the gestures that indicated surprise and outrage:

“I am going home, and you want me to pay to go to my own house? This is unbelievable!”

Border officers usually give in to this theatricalisation of bi-placed identities, once it is confirmed that the individual does in fact live in the vicinity of the border. Many a time however, long distance travellers who know these tricks and put up the right performance can also be let through the border. As a matter of fact, minimising the international significance of their movement across state borders also takes the form of actually confronting the official crossing point as seen in the first example above. As illustrated by the *“I am going home, and you want me to pay to go to my own house? This is unbelievable!”* statement, borderlanders tend to discursively subsume the interstitial border world within their bi-placement. By depriving their mobility of its international character, borderlanders succeed in negating or mitigating the power of the state border itself. This comes through clearly in the statement below:

“Sometimes, you have to look them in the eye and tell them who you are. And they know it, even when they pretend, they don't know the rules. They just want to see how far they can push you. And if you are weak, they abuse your rights. Even when you give them a small something, you have to make sure they understand that you are just giving them, not because they threatened you. If they see fear in your eyes, you are finished” - Fiona, Cameroon-Nigeria Border

Another illustration of this link between deep roots within a vernacular space of community connected to bi-placed identity across borders could be found in a land dispute I witnessed in Baleete. This village is located at the border between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. The place is far from the official crossing point and where the border demarcation has not been precise since independence. A local convention amongst villagers has placed the international border *“somewhere after the big trees over there”*, as I was told. However, a dispute arose when

one Cameroonian decided to clear a vast swathe of the area to use for farming. Some villagers on the Eq. Guinea side estimated that this encroached on their land and moved to stop the clearing. Mbanga (the Cameroonian) asked: “*Are you saying that this is Equatorial Guinea, or are you claiming that I have taken your land?*” As he explained to the elders who were trying to solve the dispute, “*the land might bear the name of the country, but our forefathers gave it to us, not to a country*”. After listening to him, the elders concurred with his reasoning and decided that he had the right to farm across the border even as a Cameroonian. Not because of some sort of property rights guaranteed by the state, but because the land had belonged to his ancestors and had been passed down from generations to generations, long before the state ever existed.

In a result similar to the one sought by *Border Deniers*, the confrontation between state controls over the border crossing points, and the borderlander’s desire to move across and around the international border occurs not in official terms, but in vernacular terms. Of course, the border official still embodies the state during these interactions (language, uniform, rules and regulations), but the borderlander considers all of this as “*le prix taxé³⁰*”, as they refer to the demands of border officials. In other words, everything is negotiable, from visa fees to customs duties to the veracity of documents presented. They know that their bi-placed positionality provides them with avenues for manipulating the border and eventually reducing the demands and constraints it attempts to place upon them. Here again, the notion of ungoverned space takes a slightly different meaning as border governance is eventually overrun by vernacular governance of the border, exactly what *Border Deniers* themselves seek to achieve. *Border Acknowledgers* accordingly ensure their mobility by dislocating their identities in sequence from one discrete space to another while consistently demonstrating that they belong to each of the spaces, so as to deny the border the faculty to regard their mobility as transnational. As such, just about anybody can tap into this repertoire of bi-placed identities to negotiate mobility. And when just about anybody crossing the border can use it, bi-placement becomes a frame of reference for assumed legitimacy and inalienable rights to uninhibited movement across the border. In so doing, the borderlander articulates their bi-placed identity not in a bid to relate to the border, but rather to bring the border into their own world as a subordinated feature, by collapsing it into their plural geographical imaginations. Just like *Border Acknowledgers* thus use the bi-placement related to spaces of community to minimise the effect of the border, *Border Deniers* also refer to deep roots related to spaces of legitimacy in their performative denial of the state border.

5.1.2 *Denying the border through deep roots*

For some neighbouring villages along the three-part border between Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, the distance between the villages through the official border crossing point is far shorter thanks to tarred roads and automobile practicability, as compared to the tortuous footpaths through the forest and sometimes sloppy riverbanks. The same observation has been made about the Ekang crossing point at the Nigeria-Cameroon border. Yet, inhabitants of these villages still prefer using cultural crossing points.

“If we were passing through Mfum like this, we would be international travellers, but here we are just going from one village to the other, even from one farm to another.” - Yomi

Hence, *Border Deniers* not only reject the rationality of the border post as the ideal crossing point into the other country, they also align their mobility with their geographical imaginations of the border space. Their understanding of their geographical world specifically has not integrated spatial organisation in terms of countries. The case of physically avoiding the official border crossing point or ignore the state must not, however, be overstated. Among the multiple framings of their space provided by *Border Deniers*’ narratives, is the proposition that their space is safe and secure and does not need government intervention. In other words, based on the vernacular spatial nomenclature, *Border Deniers* see their immediate physical environment as spaces of legitimacy and it is based on this rationale that it supersedes the State. *Eudes* emphasised to me that,

“No sous-préfet has ever set foot on this area. I don’t think the government has any business here. Why would they come here? For a hospital? Their tarred road? There are no boko haram here, no armed robbers. Nothing. Why would they start changing things here now? Who complained? We don’t complain. All these pathways you see here were built by our parents, even before Independence and these were not to link to countries, but just to move from one village to another”.

Eudes also insists on the intrinsic virtue of their transborder space and how it keeps them away from the spaces of crime and insecurity. He declared that,

“When people were trying to pass through here to go to Equatorial Guinea for a coup d’état, we helped the authorities to identify them. We did it all, there was no distinction, and no one would say oh I am Cameroonian, so this does not concern me, or I am Gabonese, that’s none of my business. We were all in it together. Why? Because this place is a sacred place, our ancestors loved peace and the Ntounou people love peace above everything else. We cannot follow greed.”

This representation of their territorial space as safe and the people navigating within it as morally upright amounts to a discursive construction whose final goal is to support the reason why this area should be left alone. Yomi’s statement echoes Eudes’:

“I don’t need to take part in any illegal activities like smuggling weapons or drugs or trafficking children through this forest. I am happy with what the forest gives me. But if they continue to ban us from harvesting certain products because they want to sell it to big drug companies, many people will have no choice than doing what is illegal. Now you will hear that some forest guards fell in a trap that was set for animals, why do we not fall in those traps? Because it is our place, we know the place like the palm our hands. They are now moving around the forest here with guns, entering even sacred places with guns, stepping foot in shrines where they are not supposed to go. Why are they bring all this wahala?”

Border Deniers like Eudes and Yomi here present the government as attracted by those who “follow greed” and those who do negative things. Presenting their living space as a peaceful one that seeks nothing negative, they discursively restrict the presence of the government especially because of the absence of those things that could serve as a pretext for government presence in their area.

“This forest is our true supporter and redeemer. It feeds us, gives us money and alleviates our suffering in a way that neither the church nor the government can ever do. You see, the variety of products you can find in the forest can help your household in many ways, for food, medicine, building your house and earning money. That is why I don’t understand those who cling to the cities even when they are jobless there or living a miserable life with little money”. (who?)

As a matter of fact, the forest is a space where households directly sustain their livelihood in at least four key areas: food security, health improvement, income generation, reduced

vulnerability. *Yomi* told me that over 700 different useful forest products can be harvested from the forest area that we visited. He specialises in bush meat, wrapping leaves, forest food, medicinal plants, canes, chewing stick, building materials, pestle, sponge fibres, mushrooms, fruits and nuts, leafy vegetable etc. This study did not collect much data on other livelihoods activities in the transborder space such as farming or grazing. However, casual observations established that the interstitial spaces between two countries were also more conducive for farming and cattle grazing, because “*the place belongs to no one*” as I was told. In addition to cognitively marking their territory as special, *Border Deniers* stress the vital importance of that border space to their livelihoods and, above all, link everything to their ancestral lineage as territorially rooted. The vital importance of the border space to borderlanders is therefore not just in terms of the resources or commodities it represents, but because it is first and foremost ancestral land.

Yomi: “That is impossible when I am alive. When I am dead, obviously, I will leave not only this place, but the world. But as we speak nothing can me make me abandon the land of my ancestors. Nothing. My life is here. Even if my children go away, no matter how far they go, they know that they will still come back here. Mkot is our homeland. Our ancestors gave it to us, and therefore we cannot abandon it. Why do you ask that question?”

In fact, one key difference between *Border Deniers* and *Border Acknowledgers* is that the former almost all stated that they would continue to live in the area even if the border closed forever and even if economic activities were reduced to nil for one reason or another. Their claim of legitimacy is in greater part rooted in this sense of deep territorialisation, which they use to construct the border space and its content as a natural endowment to them. The rare instances of references to the border are those where *Border Deniers* like *Eudes* explain why they see their relationship to border space as superseding their relationship to the international border, like in the statement below:

“The international border falling here is our luck as it could have been our bad luck if it was a disaster like lake Nyos in Cameroon a few years ago. Nobody came to say that they should be spared. It is our place first, and the border second.”

In the same vein, when *Fiona* says: “*I am Cameroonian, and I am also Nigerian like my children*”, she does not only see this bi-placement as generating an entitlement, but most

importantly, as a legitimate entitlement which the border does not supersede. Instead, it is the other way around: their legitimacy is derived from a border layer that predates state border in time, and physically extends beyond the state borderline. *Fiona* therefore expects the border to adapt to this *natural* state of things, and would therefore express frustration if it does not, as seen below:

“The border should always listen to us, rather than us listening to the border”, she says, “because we were here before the border and everybody who is sent here to work at the border comes and meets us here, then leaves us still here when they go. I know things about the border that even the government does not know. I know places where people call Cameroon, while it’s Gabon, and I know places that people call Equatorial Guinea while it is Cameroon. I did not attend any school to learn this, and no one pays me to know all this. So, when I show up at the border, they better respect that knowledge. And I tell them that all the time. They already know me anyway, even when I go up there for negotiations on behalf of someone. They deal with me quickly.”

Hence, imaginations of self as a legitimately rooted in a territorial space lead to performance of the border as superseded by this legitimacy based on imaginations of the border space as a natural endowment for the borderlanders. Imaginations of self in the borderland can therefore hardly be dissociated from the thinking that structures the perceived importance of the borderland to those who inhabit it, either continually or transiently.

The following conversation with *Yomi* during an interview summarises this sense of border as natural endowment based on territorial legitimacy that supersedes the international border:

“Yomi: (talking about the forest) It’s God’s gift to our people and nobody should be monitoring us like forest guards tend to do [...]”

DW: *“What could make you leave this place and never come back?”*

Yomi: That is impossible when I am alive. When I am dead, obviously, I will leave not only this place, but the world. nothing can me make me abandon the land of my ancestors. Nothing. My life is here. Even if my children go away, no matter how far they go, they know that they will

still come back here. Mkot is our homeland. Our ancestors gave it to us, and therefore we cannot abandon it. Why do you ask that question?"

Understandably, this can be seen as a performative dissidence since *Border Deniers* very much disagree with state spatialisation practices in their living environments and consider state actions as an intrusion or attack on their livelihoods and sacred places. In order to express these disagreements, they utilise various strategies to “erase” the border and protect their spatial environment as a vital resource which the material manifestation of the international can jeopardise. The excerpt below is drawn from a story which *Eudes* told me. It illustrates very well some of the techniques used by these communities to demonstrate their hostility to other spatialisation of what they consider to be their natural endowment.

Eudes: “One day, a Cameroonian general came here with the press and many soldiers, because they had reported to them that Equatorial Guinea was taking part of the Cameroonian territory in this area. When they arrived with their old maps and asked people in the communities where the locations were, we showed them different places, and did the same when the Guinean army people arrived. They went to separate locations and established that their territory was not being infringed upon. They were satisfied that they know the border.”

DW: *“But why did you do that?”*

Eudes: “Well because you know, if they had met in the same place, there could be confrontation and when elephants fight, plants suffer the most you know. Even if they don't fight, that might encourage Equatorial Guinea to build the wall they wanted to build at the border. And if they build a wall, that will create a lot of problems for us. For example, if you have your farm on the other side of the wall, you will now be obliged to carry every and go all the way where there is a gate or something like that to cross, and crossing will probably not be free. Why must we suffer like that?”

This tactic not only ensured that all potential disruptions are contained and kept out of their way, it also discouraged these outsiders from further attempts. As clear delineation between physical spaces of community and virtual spaces of crime, a strong resonance of this story is found in *Yomi*'s explanation about the tens of traps we visited as I shadowed him during one of his forest harvesting tours. Although *Yomi* did not make it specifically clear in his statements,

for obvious reasons, it transpires from the double-entendre fashion he spoke about the traps set across the transnational forest, that some of them were intentionally arranged to either harm or dissuade forest guards. *Yomi* insisted, in particular, on traps around the shrines in the forest while the conversation between the two of us continued as follows:

“DW: Why are there so many large traps around the shrines?”

Yomi: “Well, it is to protect the shrine, you know...people do their sacrifices here...and wild animals...they come to eat the meat sacrificed to the gods, it is not their meat (laughs), they should go and hunt their own and leave our ancestors alone. These traps sometimes catch even domestic animals like dogs and cats. You see they come all the way from the village just to eat free meat here (laughs) because the smell attracts them, but they are animals you know, they forget they are meat too (laughs) if they don’t want to go and hunt, they become prey here.”

DW: But why make them so big, they can catch human beings?”

Yomi: Well if you are a human being and you behave like an animal, coming here to stick your nose into the meat in our shrine, then you will be treated like prey.or a naughty dog...(laughs). But it cannot kill a human being, you see. It can only teach them a lesson.

DW: Which lesson?”

Yomi: That you should respect people’s place. That’s all.

DW: How would someone going around in the forest here know where every shrine is, and possibly where every trap is?”

Yomi: Why would that someone be going around here in the first place? It means you should not be coming in here alone if you don’t belong here. And if you don’t belong here you have no business doing here that you need to know where all the traps are. When people need something from this forest, they talk to us the forest gatekeepers and we get it for them. If it is not the right time or the right type, or even if it is there but not available, then we will tell them. See for example, you are here with me, I have shown you everything. Do you have any problems?”

DW: *No.*

Yomi: Has a trap seized your legs? (Laughs)

DW: *No.*

Yomi: You see!

I could not help being particularly impressed by, and report here, the amount of laughter and malicious facial expressions produced by *Yomi* when he talked about these giant traps, which could actually maim a human being as far as I could tell. It became clear that he was metaphorically referring to forest guards when he said,

“Well if you are a human being and you behave like an animal, coming here to stick your nose into the meat in our shrine, then you will be treated like prey”

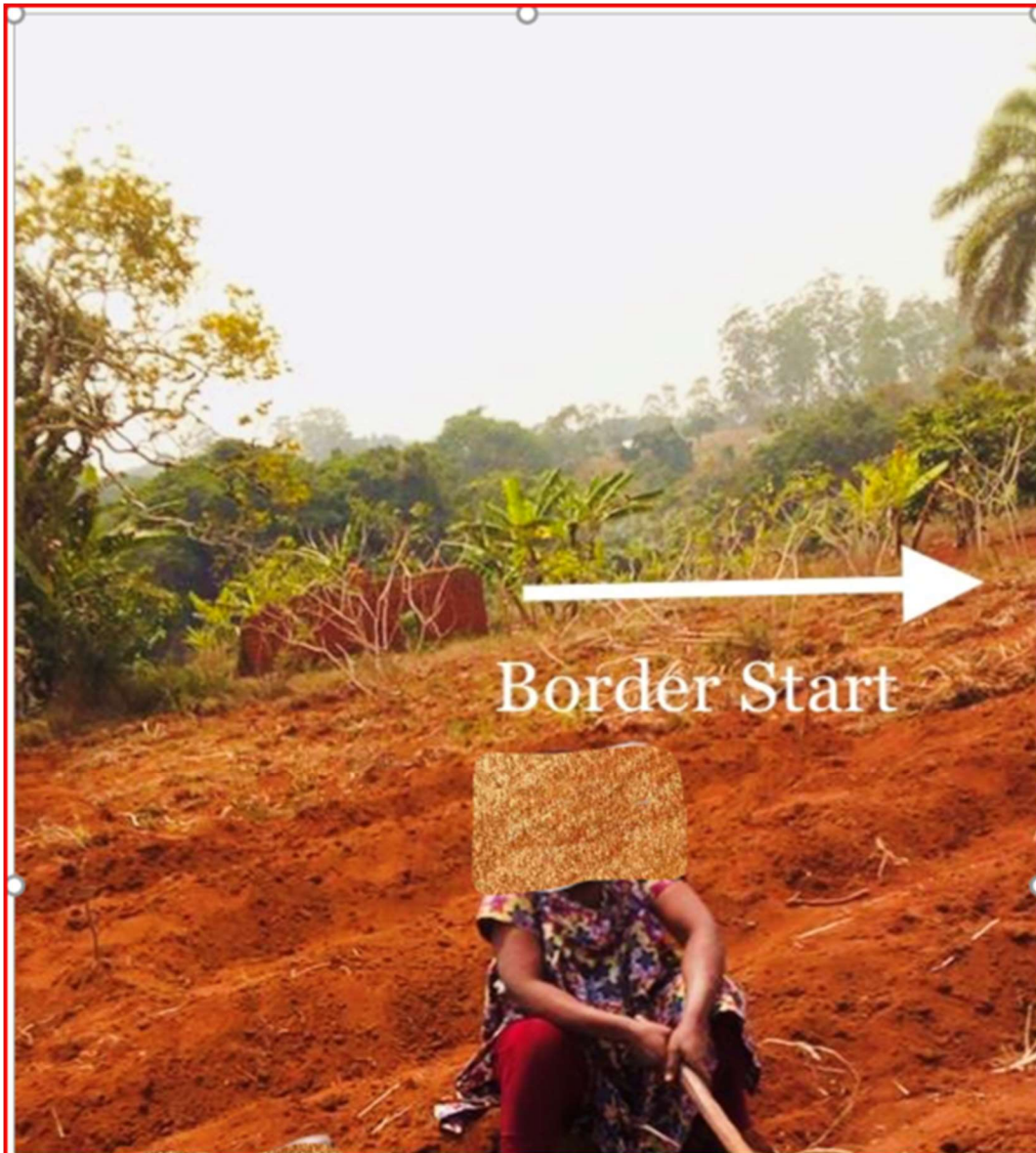
In fact, this resonates with all the resentment expressed by *Yomi* and fellow villagers against forest guards who are government agents, but not recruited from their community. It appears to me that “*naughty dog*” is none other than a pejorative representation of forest rangers, who go around the forest. However, this could also mean anybody who in *Yomi*’s eyes does not have the legitimacy to probe into the forest.

Although this warning had been very subtle in the way *Yomi* presented it to me, he was very blunt when he forbade me to enter the forest with electronic equipment (like a camera or phone, etc.). He told me in no uncertain terms that I would not be an exception, adding that forest guards too have a lot of stories to tell about the electronic equipment they have “*infiltrated into our forest*” (*Yomi*’s words, bold emphasis, mine). At this point, I was not sure whether *Yomi* referred to the supernatural belief that the electronic equipment would break down or the idea that they physically sabotage such equipment. In any case, this is in parallel to the reports of similar activities on the Cameroon-Gabon-Guinea three-part border. As part of casual conversations I had with members of the border villages, I was told that one borderlander was not too happy about being called a Cameroonian, so he located two boundary markers probably dating back from the colonial period, uprooted them and planted them somewhere else, in such a way that his village would de facto fall within Gabon. Later on, some of his neighbours did

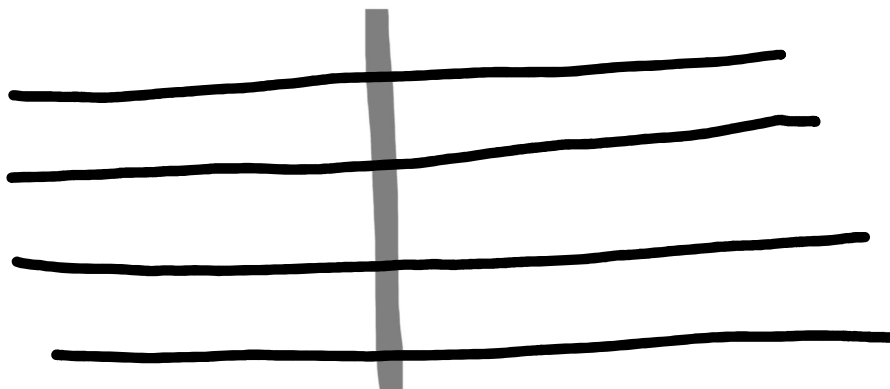
not like the idea, and proceeded to do the same thing. This resulted in them finding themselves under the jurisdiction of Equatorial Guinea. Eventually, as the story goes, the border markers were uprooted all together one night by unknown individuals, so that there is no telling today which village is in which of the three countries, even though maps would suggest otherwise.

A final example of this is performative dissidence by *Border Deniers*. Looking at the farming practices of Cameroon-Gabon borderlanders, I observed a common pattern especially amongst the younger generation of agricultural entrepreneurs. They leave vast swathes of bushes untouched in the interior on either side of the border, to create farms exactly “on top of” the international border. In this way, their farms always stretch from one country to another. Instead of the rows of cultivation being parallel to the imaginary borderline, these youths purposefully make them perpendicular such that there is no break, even though the farm technically straddles two countries. The common explanation I received was that this helps them evade fiscal controls as they claim to belong to the other country when inspectors from one country arrive, and vice-versa. This explanation does not hold much water because access to these areas is so difficult that inspections rarely ever take place, added to the likelihood that there will be nobody on the farm on that specific day. Another explanation received was that all the land in the interior of the country already belongs to someone, so the youth come to these stretches of no-man’s land to invest in agriculture.

In any case, conversations with borderlanders here have thus suggested a persisting sense of continuity in spite of state borders. This sense is rooted in how they perceive themselves as being connected by something more powerful than nations; by a shared history and most importantly by an active solidarity in dealing with the border as an aspect of their spatial environment, rather than the aspect thereof.



Picture 16 - Farmland across the border



Picture 17 - Position of lines of cultivation across the border

The expression of deep roots thus performed by *Border Deniers* are in fact a meaning of deeply rooted across the transborder space. It is however noteworthy that this performative dissidence in spatial practices of *Border Deniers* are in fact also a tacit acknowledgement of the state border. The only difference with *Border Acknowledgers* being that *Border Deniers* choose not to engage the border, while the former engage it albeit still in contested forms. In this sense, the will to maintain freedom of movement and the expressed control over their interstitial territorial space underlies both the concealed apprehension of the border by *Border Deniers* like *Yomi*, and the openly expressed desire of *Border Acknowledgers* like *Fiona* to reduce the border to its simplest expression. The dimensions of their interstitial positioning that they embrace are those which ensure their control over the transborder territorial space as well as freedom of movement in order to fulfil economic or sociocultural needs.

5.2 The ambiguities, tensions, and intersections of vernacular bordering practices

“Well, if you are a human being and you behave like an animal, coming here to stick your nose into the meat in our shrine, then you will be treated like prey.” – (Yomi, personal communication, March 2017 in the forest area, Cameroon-Nigeria border)

A cursory look at the diverging border performances leaves the impression that where *Border Deniers* seek to dismiss the border while downplaying and/or concealing their apprehension thereof, *Border Acknowledgers* seek to actively crush or erase the border while understating the contribution of the border to their livelihoods. Unlike in the case of *Border Acknowledgers*, the relationship between *Border Deniers* and their territorial space is not one structured around mobility. It is a land-based relationship which, owing to the strategic engagement of the border as explained above, can be understood as a discourse of rooted placement and a performative divergence from the official state border. However, the performance of the vernacular right to uninhibited movement across the border area perfectly aligns with the understanding which conceives of a forest straddling across the border as *“a gift from God”*. In any case, both types of borderlanders similarly articulate their conceived rights to movement and control over the border space because they see the legitimacy of their entitlement as originating from a realm over which the state is not entitled to interfere. Hence, the apparent identity contrast between *Eudes* and *Florence* instead underscores the borderlander’s ability to withdraw or dislocate depending on the border constraints at hand, and how the borderlander rationalises their situation in relation

to the border. And this rationalisation of how one situates oneself in relation to the border takes shape in the border dismissal as expressed by many *Border Deniers* and border engagement by *Border Acknowledgers*. There is a clear distinction between their performances, but a profound ambiguity or tension over the discursive finality of these performances.

As an example, borderlanders who control the movement of others and wedge themselves between unofficial crossing points and the state to make both ends meet, can simultaneously be labelled as *Acknowledgers* and *Deniers*, simply because they mobilise both dimensions of the borderlander performance. The youths who stopped me from crossing the river without payment, claimed their legitimacy in the following terms:

“We are the people who look after this place. Your payment is your contribution”.

The tension lies in the legitimate control over territory they claim based on their deep-rooted identity, and their acknowledgment of the border which warrants a payment. They are known to involve border officials if illegal migrants do not give them money. These youths are the same who could help negotiate a cheap border crossing for an illegal immigrant, by resorting to the repertoire of bi-placed identity. This represents tension as *Border Deniers* do not normally involve themselves at all with issues of mobility across the border. There are also similarities between the ways in which *Border Deniers* seek to deny the materiality of the international border and the ways in which the *Border Acknowledgers* proceed to mitigate it. Of particular significance is the convergent tendency for both categories to rationalise the same contentious border space, either as an abstract commodity, or as a concrete resource they are entitled to benefit from, and whose ultimate value is enhanced by its liminal localisation.

Another inescapable similarity is the conflicting relationship between their contentious geographical imaginations on the border and their actions. The only variation being that *Border Acknowledgers* actively engage the physical border in order to discursively neutralise its effects on their mobility, whereas *Border Deniers* actively silence the border even though their discourse on the border provide a hidden transcript of engagement. This suggests that rather than confronting the border in a bid to reject it altogether, borderlanders simply centralise their marginality to draw full benefit from their peripheral position at the edges of the state, so to speak. In the same vein, *Border Acknowledgers* would consistently emphasise their bi-placed legitimacy as a natural right that should protect them from the border. Marriages, residence,

the choice of which family ties to revive, and livelihoods choices are therefore not just economic strategies or efforts to conform with immigration officials. They are actual embodiments of a dual rootedness across the border, which holders thereof expect to be seen as entitlements directly flowing from their rights in the borderland as a natural endowment to them. In the same way as *Border Acknowledgers*, *Border Deniers* are themselves sometimes conflicted in the process of expressing their imagination of space. At one time they argue that there is no border, or no need for a border, or that the border is disruptive. At another time, they would acknowledge the border, for instance, in assigning value and price to the commodities extracted from the border space. *Yomi* and *Odette*'s commercial encounters epitomise this tension. *Yomi* (*Denier*) sells forest products to *Odette* (*Acknowledger*), and both participate in the border trade with the full understanding of the ways in which the border enhances their business.

Yomi: “Yes, I know that they think that the products come from Cameroon, and that now, even if there was a shorter way to get to the products out of the forest from the Nigerian side, I think nobody would use it. I wouldn't, because the same product would be sold for lesser money than those which come from the Cameroonian. side”

WD: “Just because they go round and cross the border before returning to Nigeria?”

YOMI: “Of course, this drives the price up! That is what people want to hear. They want to be reassured that it is coming from Cameroon. As far as I am concerned, If you say that these products come from Cameroon, you are right. If you say that they come from Nigeria, you are not wrong either. (Laughs) There is no harm in telling their customers that! And they are not lying because they actually cross the border from Cameroon to sell the products. I don't see any problem with that. It does not change the fact that I myself do not know whether these products come from Cameroon or from Nigeria. We know which village is Nigeria and which is Cameroon, but in the forest, how would you know?”

In the private land dispute I witnessed in Baleete and referred to in 5.1.1 above, I also observed that the protagonists were not only aware of the unclear official demarcation, but were also pitching their argument with careful reference to the temporality of events as well as ancestral lineage. Ownership of land was being claimed using a combination of de facto state authority and ancestry rights over the area. Again, a conflicting encounter between acknowledgment and

denial of the state border. Those using the border and claiming this spatial legitimacy conceive of members of their communities flanking either side of the border as being each entitled to natural rights which trump or extend beyond the border itself as much as they predate that border. It is in this sense, that those communities rely on imagined spaces to “conquer” the border as part of their spatial representation, instead of, strictly speaking, accepting border-specific relational dynamic. The relationship between borderlanders and the materiality of the border space reveals itself as not only filled with tension, but most importantly it is understood as rife with ambiguities and conflicts between rejecting the border and taking advantage from it.

In a nutshell, it is observed in performance and discourse that *Border Deniers* deploy a contentious agency over territoriality, which seeks to mitigate the significance of the international border. They utilise a mix of strategies to promote their particular imaginations of the border space, which they rationalise into socioeconomic spaces that should be protected from the official functions of the state borders. They achieve this through a discourse of rooted placement which carves their transborder geographical unit away from spaces of crime. Furthermore, they position themselves as moral and legitimate agents who are better placed to decide what can be done for the best interest of their communities, especially given that the state has “no business there”. Apart from this discursive and performative rendering of their geographical imaginations, *Border Deniers* physically transcribe their dissidence with official spatial organisation through various actions. All these actions translate their hostility towards the state dimension of the border, but such a hostility should not be overstated even if they would not admit their reliance on the state border to maximise the value of their geographical space. This is an example of dynamics and processes indicating when and how contentious agency can slow down or reverse the expansion of state presence in the border space. Their geographical imaginations and performances are consistent with centralising marginality, as is the case with *Border Acknowledgers*. We can nevertheless take away that in the same manner that by emphasizing their shared interest in “fighting the border”, both strands of borderlanders can be seen as united in some of their strategies. In the next section, I outline ways in which these performances are combined with linguistic and semiotic devices to negotiate mobility and mobilisation across the border zone.

5.3 Negotiating the mobility

“If you are not flexible, you can’t succeed here [doing business in the border area]. You must be quick on your feet when things change. We moved back to Cameroon at some point because we needed an early trip into Nigeria every morning from Cameroon”. (Fiona, Nigeria)

My field observations and the analysis of interviews shed light on the links between imaginations of self as well as spatial representations on the one hand, and agency strategies on the other hand. Put simply, the ways in which borderlanders conceive of themselves in their particular spatial environment determine the strategies they are likely to use to negotiate mobility, livelihoods and other social pursuits across the border space. These links also suggest for instance that mobility practices that appear to only take advantage of state inconsistencies (corruption, lack of infrastructures, proliferation of fake/illegal documents) actually draw upon a much more complex web of imaginations. In this section on negotiating mobility, we explore the links between these imaginations and how they shape various forms of negotiations that pertain to crossing the border. These links pull together bi-placed identities, imaginations of self and the constructed legitimacy that subsumes the state border through vernacular spaces. They are expressed as performances within the interplay between various spaces (legitimacy, community, money) and livelihoods strategies. This examination of how mobility is negotiated will focus mainly on making sense of the tension that arises from the ambiguities, inconsistencies and conflicts in the relationships between borderlanders and their imaginations of self and border space.

This tension in the relationship between the official dimension of the border and *Border Acknowledgers* arises mainly from the divergence between bi-placement as frame of reference for local mobility and the materiality of the international border as controlling movement across space. The following statement illustrates how and why borderlanders do not necessarily see themselves as negative.

“Kalu: We know that they have their role to play. I am not saying that the border is necessarily a bad thing. I am only saying that they should mind their own business. And we mind our own business. Normally, the border is there to say that one country is not taking another country’s land. But where is the wahala now? Has one country invaded the other one? So why would they complain? They normally have no rights to be after us. They should normally collect their

taxes from those big trucks. Because they are international. Not from us. We are locals, you see. Those who should pay are the government big people who pass here every day from one country to another, without even being searched. Nobody asked them any question. They just show their papers. I am general this, I am colonel that. I am director of this and that, and those three cars are mine (changing voice to speak with a deep tone and raising shoulders to mimic an important personality). So, if those people who are actual doing the international stuff can cross free, why do we have to pay? But just to avoid unnecessary wahala, we just give them what we can just to say that baba, we know you are there too, and you protect us too. But we give because we know how to get it back [...]”.

DW: *“How do you get back what you give the border?”*

Kalu: “There are plenty of ways, my brother. I can tell you some of them, but I can’t tell you everything, you know. For example, when I am going to visit my brother in Cameroon, how can you tell whether what I am carrying with me is for sale or just for my personal use over there? You can’t tax that! Even if I have a whole lorry, I can still give them a small thing and they write down that it was a basket. (laughs)”

Based on the geographical imagination inspired by the processes of dislocating and relocating identities in discrete spaces, these borderlanders see the official border as unfairly interfering with their vernacular spaces. They believe that because they are moral agents in navigating spaces of legitimacy, community and money within a cluster of border villages, state control over them should be minimal. Even this minimal control is only to the extent that crime and insecurity are under the direct responsibility of the state. In their sense, the bribes and other fees they pay, including the agreement to being searched, constitute a performative proof of good faith and their own way of acknowledging the state action as concerns crime and insecurity. Yet, their discursive engagement with the border highlights the inability of the state to discharge its border duties in these areas. This further strengthens their confidence that border officials are not allowed to demand anything from them.

Kalu: “We are not criminals, you know. Those they should be looking for are ritualists, child traffickers, drug dealers, weapon smugglers, yes, people like that”.

As regards bi-placement, the assumption of virtue exercised by border communities in areas of cultural crossings covers different realities. *Border Acknowledgers* manipulate this relaxed monitoring in crossing the border, by exploiting local petty trade or social visits as a screen for participating in smuggling, long-distance trade or travel. Thanks to their deep sense of dual or sometimes triple territorialisation, some of them have constructed a vernacular institutional mandate to control the movement of others across the border. By others here, I refer to non-local travellers who do not regularly cross the border and are usually travelling further to the interior of the country for various reasons. These “others” also include undocumented migrants who seek to cross the border into Gabon or Equatorial Guinea on the one border area, or into Nigeria on the other border area. But they also include those smuggling contraband through non-official crossing points.

Border Acknowledgers, have expressed the view that they perceive themselves as constituting the “border”, based on their claim to a right to move freely throughout their living space. This entitlement, in their opinion also extends to controlling all movements and exchanges in their communities that do not go through official crossing points. An entitlement also paradoxically claimed by many *Border Deniers*, since they define the border space as “*belongs to us, and we belong to the border area*”. This determines them to assert their right to engage in the passage of goods and people in their midst. In this understanding, whoever does not seek their cooperation and mediation should not be allowed to pass or carry anything through their communities, from one side of their transnational living space to the other. Only their explicit involvement and agreement guarantees a seamless passage. In order to meet these exigencies, undocumented migrants from Cameroon and many other West African countries work in the border area for many months, and sometimes years, saving money for their onward journey to the interior of Gabon or Equatorial Guinea. These wayfarers have to rely on local borderlanders to aid their emigration project. The same has been observed at the Cameroon-Nigeria border, even though the dynamics are somewhat different in terms of waiting times. In any case, the illegal border crosser relies on the local borderlander to guide them and protect them through back routes that are not monitored; to speak on their behalf where necessary before authorities, and most importantly, to abstain from alerting the authorities. This is a task that many border residents invest in, taking advantage of their knowledge of the area and unofficial relationships with immigration officials.

Yet, an aspect of the tension is that apart from juggling with two national IDs (even though illegal), these borderlanders extend the interpretation of their mobility to mean that it does not in any way or form infringe the spaces where state control should be exercised. Every move is pretext to a much more hidden transcript of their geographical imagination. For example, showing an ID is not destined to fulfil the administrative requirement of identifying oneself before crossing an international border; it a pretext for a discursive demonstration that the holder of that ID should not be subjected to the rigour of international mobility. As detailed above, the assumed virtue of bi-placed local identities is actually a front for many activities that would fall under illegality but which borderlanders have circumscribed within the framework of legitimacy. Hence, because they can control their own movement while legitimately navigating different vernacular spaces, they perceive the state dimension of the border affecting them as a form of mis-governance. According to them, vernacular governance is more legitimate. It is therefore common for some youths to erect roadblocks at unofficial passageways and demand payment from those who are using these paths.



Picture 18 - Small river running across the mud road in the Cameroon-Nigeria border area

I hired a motorbike rider to take me on exploration along these tracks. As we approached a small river running across the mud road (picture 18 above), there were several people signalling menacingly to stop. The bike rider tried to ignore them, but they surrounded us both on the bike, some of them carrying stones. The pictures below are stills from the video taken from the camera, which had been strapped to the bike rider's chest as I sat behind him. The first still

frame shows us being surrounded, and the second one shows one youth threatening us with a stone, for attempting “to disrespect us [them, the youth who erected the checkpoints]”. This self-assigned legitimacy entitles them to rationalise their economic strategies based on their sense of ownership over the borderland. In the example in picture, the youth in the picture shouting to me “*I am the border here*” is, in this regard, a striking example. His legitimacy here is conferred by the community, which I read as a construction of a vernacular border institution.



Picture 19 - Surrounded " the border na we"



Picture 20 - Threatened by a stone

The conversation leading up to the payment ran like this:

DW: “*Why do we have to pay to cross?*”

Youth 1 (youngest): “*If you don't want to pay, turn your Okada (motorbike) and go back. Just go away, if you are not looking for wahala (trouble.)*”

Youth 2 (the one with the stone): Everybody pays, that's the rule, Oga. He [pointing the bike rider] he knows it, but he just wants to disrespect us."

DW: "Yes, I understand. I am willing to pay, but I just want to know why I should pay. Are you guys part of the government?"

Youth 2: "No, we are the people who look after this place. Your payment is your contribution."

Youth 3: "Look at my hands. Look! Look! All these stones do not transport themselves han! If not for us, you wouldn't have a road here to use. Just pay. It's normally 1000 Naira. But it is 2000 Naira now that you have annoyed us."

DW: "But why are you not asking that woman to pay too?" (An elderly lady happened to be crossing on foot)

Youth 2: "She lives here. She is going to her farm just over there. Why would she pay? How does that concern you?!"

DW: "Her contribution. She is using the road too, isn't she?"

Youth 3: (Pushing the motorbike): "Just go back now, even if you pay, you will never cross here again. You want to be difficult with your stupid questions. Just go before something happens to this Okada (motorbike)!"

Having grown up in Cameroon, the whole situation did not frighten me at all, and I was able to beat the price down eventually to 500 Naira, and we crossed. I also learned later on that these youths are actually not even from this that area (Etung). However, they had been doing that "business" for so many years and roaming the area so much so that they can tell who an outsider is, and who is not. I witnessed a similar case with Bilial, who though not originally from the border area of Eboro (Gabon-Cameroon), was making money from his knowledge of the area by facilitating the passage of illegal migrants and contraband products. As an economic strategy, this is obvious, but Bilial told me that the key thing for him was the mutual respect between him and the locals, who accepted him as one of their own.

There is however a divergence in the sequencing of these strategies between *Deniers* and *Acknowledgers*, as illustrated in the table below. Discursively, while the *Deniers* tend to problematise their own mobility in various ways so as to subtract themselves from the effects of the said border, the *Acknowledgers* avoid verbalising the border and its effects. As a result, while *Border Acknowledgers'* mobility deconstructs the border using language, the *Border Deniers'* unsaid words end up reifying the border and its dividing function. The same paradox is observed in their performative relationship to the border, i.e. their performances and non-

verbal actions in relation to the border. Hence, despite their discursive deconstruction, while *Border Acknowledgers* proceed to acknowledge the border by submitting to checks for instance, *Border Deniers* destroy it in the physical realm through relatively violent actions. Both categories end up acknowledging and rejecting the border, albeit in differing circumstances. The “differing sameness” of the two categories of borderlanders and the ambiguous separateness between the state and borderlanders are thus two sides of the same coin, which can be summarised by the differing aspects of how borderlanders negotiate mobility and mobilisation of resources across the border space.

Table 6 - The paradox of border denying - acknowledging

	<i>Border Acknowledgers</i>	<i>Border Deniers</i>
Discourse	Acknowledge the border Don't mind talking about the border	Refute the border Don't like to talk about the border
Performance	Engage with border signs & symbols, only to subvert and disempower them (“you want me to pay to go to my house?”)	Move to benefit from the “border” character of their space (smuggling, “the border na we”, “gift from God”) Cultivation patterns acknowledge the border

So far, I have tried to portray the ways in which the socioeconomic activities and human relations around the transborder locales depend on negotiated mobility. It is evident that borderlanders have forged bi-placed identities which they juggle according to context, in order to negotiate movement across the border; especially when they confront the official border. A few examples include when they emphasise their bi-placed identities to deconstruct the international character of their mobility across the border, or to assert their entitlement to free movement as per their self-defined legitimacy. While it can be suggested that not all borderlanders engage in mobility across border in order to assert their bi-placed identity, it is nevertheless true that their localised agency emerges in many ways through their options, attitudes and practices as regards crossing the border. Choosing longer footpaths through the forest to go from one border village to another, instead of using the official crossing point is an

example of local agency that opts to assert itself in contradistinction to the official border. By the same token, the sense of solidarity amongst travellers and various groups defined by border performativity, which emerges primarily in contexts of negotiations with representatives of the state border is significant.

These solidarity networks, sometimes instantaneous and almost always formed for the sole purpose of “fighting” the border, constitute a testament to the dynamic interplay between the official dimension of the border and the vernacular spaces produced as border communities respond through their geographical imaginations. Yet, as *Border Acknowledgers* navigate the multiple spaces and layers of the border region, emphasising their bi-placed identities as economic strategies to control the mobility of others or as security strategies to benefit from the protection of the state, the ambiguities that characterise their relationship with the border become very clear. They resent border officials’ actions, but they must also maintain working relations with them in order to generate income through mediation on behalf of travellers who need their help. They minimise the border but take advantage of the economic differentials between two systems. They deny the border any rights over them, but they claim borderlander identity when they benefit from the movement of others (illegal migration). They subdivide spaces of crimes into what is legitimate and what is not, relying on the state functions of the border to protect them from the nefarious effects of crime. These ambivalent relationships with the border can be transcribed as the intersections between the various vernacular border spaces and the border on the one hand, and as an overlapping among these spaces themselves, on the other hand.

The various expressed attitudes and actions of (both *Deniers* and *Acknowledgers*) make clear that they are fraught with conflicting feelings about the place of the state border. They see it as negative and yet are unable to change on the one hand, or do not wish it to change on the other hand. The *Deniers* do not want to give the border any more importance as it might disrupt their way of living, even though, at the same time, they sense that a state border is something larger than their geographical world. The *Acknowledgers* are border-crossers who are fully conscious of the economic opportunity brought about by the existence of the border. However, they rationalise their mobility as the negation of this border in order to secure their livelihoods. In any case, the tension that arises from these conflicting feelings is not the usually assumed tension between the local and global, or the external and the vernacular, or the state and the community. It is a tension that invokes the full agency of situated human beings dealing with

another agency in their spatial environment, amongst other things. In other words, in the same way that the state border is a structural feature of something that extends beyond its immediate physical space, the borderlander's world is not limited to the statist dimension of that physical space. Consequently, this tension is much more fluid than geographically distributed or structurally layered, as laid out in the mainstream understanding of border dynamics. That is, *Border Deniers* can become *Border Acknowledgers*, and vice-versa. Conversely, when the borderlander is given centre stage in the analysis of the same border dynamics, especially through allowing the narrative of their experiences and the direction of their sense-making to guide our interpretation, we remind ourselves that border communities are not passive subjects of exposure to central authorities.

However, this reminder should not only be considered as the starting point of envisaging the active influence of the borderlander on the border space as has already been established in existing research on border community agency (Mercer et al., 2003). It can also serve as the working base for understanding that this active influence of border communities is the prime of a more dialectical relationship with the border, seen as an annihilating agent. My findings confirm that a significant, yet unacknowledged part of border dynamics is predicated upon how borderlanders see themselves in relation to the border. Furthermore, these findings have indicated that navigating the border space is tantamount to travelling between dismissal of the existence of the border and domestication of its (nefarious) impact. This clearly diverges from the duality of the performativity understood only as mutual influence between the border and the borderlander. Of particular significance in these narratives is the emergence of the centrality of border communities who might not be fully aware of what the border means to others, but have carved out their own sense of the border beside and beyond the officially intended meaning of the border. Whether by dismissing the border, denying it, crushing it, or negating it in any form, or personifying it, the ways in which borderlanders respond to the tension between this dismissal and their apprehension of the border maintains a consistence of their agency that supersedes the intended purpose of the official border. In other words, the narratives of borderlanders project this tension only as the thrust that sustains their control over the border space as well as other things necessary for continuity and stability in their own terms. Behind the guise of instability or dynamism presented by all the changes occurring in the statist realm of the border, border communities paradoxically only seem to see one perpetual disruption which they seek to bring under control by constantly reinventing their geographical imaginations.

5.4 Conclusion

As this study has established, postcolonial state borders have invited various responses from the border communities, ranging from the ways in which they make sense of this border to how they operationalise this sense-making in their daily lives. In this chapter, I have looked not only at the continuous dynamics of economic actions as negotiated against state representatives in the border space, but I have also specifically distinguished between human mobility on the one hand, and the territorial space of the borderland (understood as a natural endowment) on the other hand. I have underlined that these vernacular bordering practices are a product of both imaginations of space and imaginations of self in the context of the postcolonial border. This distinction provided a firm empirical foundation to scale up the analysis of the links between geographical imaginations and everyday life across the border space. In this analysis therefore, the articulation between the contentious agency of borderlanders and their sustained negotiation strategies has been of particular interest. Amongst these strategies, I have paid attention to the role played by language use as part of performative dynamics. Ultimately, to situate the question of mobility and mobilisation of resources, this chapter has been an exploration of how contemporary relational dynamics across the border space articulate with vernacular representations of territoriality.

Based on insights from fieldwork data, this chapter's argument further complicates Gupta and Ferguson's view on hybridisation and other such notions transferring the border's dynamic character to ontological implications about the borderlanders. In fact, borderlanders in Cameroon, Nigeria, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, especially those in the border locales of my fieldwork for this research project, are actors with dynamic performances of the border against a backdrop of deep territorial roots on both sides of the border. Their mobility speaks to a form of *bi-placement* rather than *dis-placement*. As an alternative framework, I propose a bi-placement of identity of rooted bordering practices rather than hybridisation of multiple identities and displacement. This differentiation connects the performative relationship between the borderlander's sense of self, and the multiple spaces produced by the vernacular-official performativity of the border (as seen in the previous chapter). Understanding these relationships is key to explaining three main strands of the borderlander's imagination of the border space, namely: border personification, border dismissal and border as natural endowment. Building on from the inconsistencies of this differentiation, the second part of the chapter focused on the ambiguities, tensions and intersections within vernacular border

performances. In the chapter's third section, I looked closely at how these spatial representations and imaginations of self within the border space shape the ways in which borderlanders negotiate resources and mobility across the borderland. This section specified the extent to which vernacular bordering practices enable borderlanders to negotiate the border space itself as a type of endowed resource to be exploited, and to monetise mobility across it.

I conclude that crossing the border has become the basis for a strong collective identity that is transient in its form and focused on mutualising efforts to subvert the official border. Looking at both *Border Deniers* and *Border Acknowledgers*, this chapter has documented the ways in which borderlanders juggle with various vernacular spaces or mobilise their identities when opposing the other official border. In the context of negotiating the borderland as resources or mobility across it, utilising their various practices, borderlanders seek to symbolically discard or diminish the ability of the border to interfere with their daily lives, and therefore combine many strategies, either discursively or physically. As this chapter has demonstrated, distinct actions and their outcomes are deployed as the borderlander grapples with the need to navigate, or indeed maintain connexion between the different spaces divided by the border, as well as take advantage on the economic implications of the said international border. These negotiation patterns are also important factors underpinning mobility strategies and resource politics from the vernacular perspective.

It is therefore evident from the data explored that the day-to-day reality of navigating the vicinity of the border itself results in new socio-political and economic phenomena on the vernacular dimension of the border. The common preoccupations of borderlanders have emerged in the face of the meaning of the state border and the implications thereof to their geographical space. Borderlanders have invested in constructing boundaries between themselves and the state, as well as between themselves and such spaces that are seen as useless or threatening. That is why the border becomes a site of contested and sometimes ambivalent relationships, where borderlanders draw economic and political negotiation tools from their positions in the interstices of two economic and two political systems. This is not a revelation, as the existing literature has largely discussed this tension between border communities and the border itself. However, a vernacular narrative approach enables us to understand that they manipulate their marginal circumstances to their own advantage by rationalising their identity as bi-placed. This transpires through the ways in which they make sense of the various vernacular spaces they navigate. It is also clear in the basis for wedging themselves between

other border crossers and the state, or simply by emphasising their legitimacy over the borderland as cultural commodity. In terms of navigating various vernacular spaces of the border, examples include how borderlanders distinguish between spaces of crime and their own spaces of community as a discursive strategy to facilitate mobility or preserve specific physical spaces.

Whether or not borderlanders realise that their marginality is related to their geographical location at the “edges of the state”, they transform their fate into the opportunity to centralise that very marginality to maintain their social relations, protect their resources, develop economic strategies and tap into the ambiguous values of powerful cross-border movements. Having said that, there is significant interest in the ways in which borderlanders have responded to their transnational geographical space by entrenching their identities ever deeper into their border space. This notably raises the question of what items of meaning can be gleaned from the sense-making imaginations produced by the borderlander’s vernacular agency. And as far as international policies are concerned, especially those targeting border areas, one may also ask the extent to which these vernacular bordering practices can articulate with the said policies. The question at this stage is *how does a borderlander’s agency, in thus defining a sense of self and making sense of the border space, translate into organisation of knowledge across such a fragmented spatial configuration?* In other words, when we engage policy concepts such as resilience and security, *which are preoccupied with improving the living conditions of marginalised communities akin to border communities, what do these bordering practices tell us about the security and resilience of borderlanders?* That will be the topic of the next chapter.

6 Chapter 6 - Idioms of Security and Resilience in the Borderlands

As elaborated upon in Chapter 2 (State of Field), the dominant imaginaries of border security in Africa are still deeply influenced by the global securitisation agenda, predicated mainly upon the Liberal Peace logics which considers some border areas in Africa as “ungoverned”, “undergoverned” or “misgoverned” spaces. In this perspective, border governance priorities of African states have tended to converge with the global securitisation agenda, thus reinforcing a particular discourse of vulnerability where border communities are seen as victims of state absence, or indeed oppressive presence. Borderlanders are therefore enlisted in a state security narrative as part of dealing with some functions of the state across this spatial environment in their everyday life. Henceforth, one should not underestimate the ability of official narratives on security and resilience to shape behaviour and discourse within the border space itself. The problem however remains that in the absence of a narrative by borderlanders themselves, unilateral state-based understandings of postcolonial borders exclude a host of vernacular dynamics such as those examined in Chapters 4&5 above. In so doing, they deprive scholarship and policy making of an aspect of knowledge that could otherwise be put to good use. The research question this chapter is going to answer is : **What do the above practices and sense-making tell us about biographical disruptions to continuity as seen by borderlanders?**

Previously, chapters 4 and 5 established how imaginations of self and schemas of spatial sense-making amongst borderlanders feed into vernacular (im)mobility strategies across borderlands. To deepen the understanding of these vernacular practices, this chapter goes beyond sense-making and negotiations to glean the security meanings contained within these geographical imaginations in the context of the postcolonial border. It brings the borderlanders’ livelihoods and mobility practices in conversation with embedded idioms of security and resilience. This uncovering of the borderlander’s “security speak” offers greater insights into the plurality of security and resilience, especially the ways in which we can enrich their conceptualisations. In other words, by gleaning the meanings that borderlanders attribute to their social reality, their own idioms of vernacular security emerge that concur or diverge with existing bottom-up conceptualisations of security, be it critical, such as human security or positivist, such as states protecting borderlanders. This uncovering also reinforces the necessity of not limiting our insight into borderlanders’ vernacular world only to the ways in which they make sense of the territorial space they live in. It becomes crucial to also examine how, in so doing, they engage

with the very themes of resilience and security as contained in those policies which target borders specifically. Bearing in mind the (in)direct references to security and practices amounting to resilience observed in the field; or simply put, bearing in mind the fact borderlanders “do” security and resilience without terming them as such, this chapter will draw upon fieldwork data to excavate vernacular idioms of security representations and resilience practices in the borderland, beyond state narratives, and as part of vernacular relation to reality.

In other words, the main research question this chapter sets out to answer can be rephrased as, *how do borderlanders understand (in)security or (in)stability, and how do they mobilise their knowledge repertoire and these schemas of understanding to respond accordingly?* The aim is to assess the extent to which vernacular identities, geographical imaginations and (im)mobility strategies in borderlands engage with the notions of security and resilience to illuminate borderlanders’ vernacular knowledge. The chapter is divided into four main parts. The first section discusses the limits of dominant narratives of security, especially how vernacular experiences of borderlanders illustrate these limits. Here, I argue that pushing back on the Eurocentric lens invites us to explore the vernacular world and this paves the way to seeing how these idioms articulate with common security problems. The second part contrasts samples of vernacular idioms of security with known understandings of official security narrative. Here, I select three common security problems to illustrate how border communities approach them from a vernacular standpoint with efficient results. After exploring vernacular understanding security and disruption and the ways in which they evade dominant conceptualisations, the third part studies three examples of resilient practices drawn from the vernacular repertoire of borderlanders. Before the conclusion, the fourth part of this chapter draws on the diverging narratives of disturbance and (in)stability to reflect on the vernacular resilience of borderlanders.

6.1 The impossibilities of mainstream “security speak”

Mainstream security speak is the dominant vernacular of security, which is not equipped to capture the realities expressed by other vernaculars, such as those of the border communities. Throughout the interviews and casual conversations, borderlanders’ narratives of their daily lives within their spatial environment made (in)direct references to “feeling[s] of insecurity aris[ing] more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event”,

like the 1994 UNDP report suggested, when it introduced the concept of Human Security. In this chapter, I argue that, as expressed through geographical imaginations and spatial performances or mobility practices, patterns of resilience and security representations emerge that fall outside the mainstream “security speak” as discussed in Chapter 2 (State of the Field). There is therefore a great potential to better diversify and expand the notion of security and threat in the context of these border communities. At the same time, it is not enough to just turn security on its head to look at those vernacular fears and insecurities, or more precisely at how these borderlanders use their own vocabularies, knowledge repertoires and schemas to construct and describe their experiences of (in)security. Instead, it is more useful to build on this vernacular sense-making to also examine in detail how borderlanders “cope with and respond to violence in ways that differ, sometimes radically, not only from the dominant state security narratives, but sometimes also from universal conceptions of human and citizen security” (Luckham, 2017, p. 112; Luckham & Kirk, 2013). Notions of security and resilience, chosen for their alignment with the notion of improving lives, can be found as woven into the imaginations and practices of the border communities studied, albeit with different scales, aims and character.

Below is a sample of the answers borderlanders provided during interviews when I asked what they are most afraid of:

“When you cross the border every day to buy and sell, your fear is the border itself. Because you never know how much you are going to make until you cross the border. These people are unpredictable, and if you are unlucky to deal with the greedy ones, you end up on a loss. So, my anxiety every time is about how much the border is going to take from me”. – Odette, Cameroon-Nigeria Border

“We live here with the constant fear of fire. You can have a shop like this and the next day even your shop assistant is richer than you. Just because of fire. There was a guy just over there, he is now working for someone else as a shop assistant, he used to have his own big shop. But the whole thing burnt down overnight”. – Florence, Cameroon-Nigeria Border

“You have to be very careful with people around here. Some people are just jealous for no reason. They are just wicked because that is what their witch[craft] commands them to do. Since they are not successful in this world, they are very powerful in the world of darkness and

can harm you anytime. That is why I avoid arguing with anybody here. If you take my money or buy on credit and don't want to pay me, I will only ask one time. If you don't pay, finish. I will leave you with the money. Because what this witch[craft] people want is an argument. When you argue with them, your anger is the vehicle they use to get to you and eat your soul at night. That's why you see many people just drop dead without any explanations". Odette, Cameroon-Nigeria Border

"I am mostly afraid of rituals. That is why I am of two minds about going to university. I know there is a lot of secret societies there and they force you to join them through rituals. These rituals can be deadly you know...There was one guy from my village who went to University and just returned a few months later, a completely deranged man. He has never recovered." Student on the Bus – Cameroon- Gabon border

"I mostly fear stumbling on drugs or arms traffickers using cutty roads. When you see their faces, they will do everything to finish you, even if you promise never to tell anyone. So, when they tell me about a cutty road, I first make sure that road is not used by them". - Aliou, Cameroon-Gabon Border

"It is not just mine, but I believe everybody's in this community. We have nightmares about pharmaceutical companies. We hate logging companies. They are more powerful, and they can just destroy us". – Yomi, Cameroon-Nigeria Border

In Ikom Central Park, where many wholesalers have their shops and warehouses and where fire has repeatedly destroyed a lot of properties, the predominant concern was about fire incidents. Traders who crossed the borders on a daily basis to buy and sell, taking advantage of currency differentials or structural differences in respective national economies, expressed anxiety over their livelihoods being threatened by currency volatility and whimsy weather that could create shortages. At the time of this fieldwork, the story of the girls abducted in Shiboek and said to have been taken over the border to Cameroon was still very much a topic of conversation. So were the transnational insurgent activities of Boko Haram. However, the issue of transnational terrorism did not feature prominently as a threat according to our semi-structured interviews and group discussions. For *Francis* (on the bus), Boko Haram was a very distant threat and, *"we [could] only pray for those affected"*. *Francis* was more concerned with the impact of the falling Naira value on border tradesmen and small businesses, as well as financial insecurities that would ensue. These are issues to which the main border policies are oblivious given that their alternative

referent object, purpose and methodology are centred on the macro-characteristics of transborder trade and its potential impact on national economies. The divergence of threat narrative here occurs at the intersection between such trade and the social as well as microeconomic realities of local border populations. This illustrates how despite referring to “border experience” especially by invoking the impact of trade and the protection of border communities, official border policies are lacking in insight into how border societies actually involve themselves in this “border experience” and how this vernacular involvement engages and reformulates representations of threats and (in)security.

During fieldwork, discussions often revolved around national security topics such as the failed coup in Equatorial Guinea during which assailants were chased down across the Cameroon-Gabon border. There were also concerns about the potential spill over effects into Nigeria, of the [then] brewing anglophone crisis in neighbouring Cameroon, or even the possibility of Boko Haram’s transnational activities moving south. Despite this, the predominant concern again was about how this might affect immediate family members and with the border closing hypothetically, how this would also disrupt social life as many have relatives on either side of the border with whom they meet regularly for both business and social pursuits. It is clear therefore that vernacular representations of everyday (in)security as found in the choice of issues that border residents or travellers identified as threatening their security on a daily basis differed markedly from those identified by official border governance strategies and objectives as seen in the AU Strategy for Enhancing Border Management. For example, while smuggling features in various guises across all the policies aiming to improve border governance, the types of goods and people that members of the border community find threatening are more complex. The same goes for the issue of human trafficking and illegal immigration. In order to gain an insight in this complexity, we need to differentiate between legal, legitimate and lawful as borderlanders do, following their knowledge categories. The border community’s use of borderland principally shows that their primary pursuits of economic gains and maintenance of social connections across borders makes a clear distinction between lawful/legal/legitimate activities.

Differences in national economic policies, regional resources, currency differentials, make borders lucrative zones of exchange and trade everywhere around the globe, often illicit and clandestine. It has for a long time been extensively documented that cross-border smuggling provides a significant means of livelihood for border residents, thus prompting creative social networking and cross-border ties within borderland populations (Kavanagh, 1994). In their mobility practices, ordinary members of border communities would not participate in child trafficking for criminal purposes (ritual killings of infants or “baby factories”) and smuggling of drugs across border; at least those participating would not do it openly

within the community. When asked why, almost all interviewees agree that such practices threaten their values and endanger the lives of people. They say that they would report to the authorities, should they know of any such activity going on, and that their silence on this could not be bought with money. At the same time, many undocumented teenagers are brought over from Cameroon into Nigeria, not for ritual killings or baby factories but to work in shops across the border in Nigeria and sometimes even further afield in Lagos or Abuja. These are mostly abandoned children whose parents died or are too sick, in any case unable to support them as they become teenagers. Furthermore, the state does not assist these children, so much so that going to Nigeria to work albeit with no significant salary is better for them than their lives in Cameroon where most of them do not even have a roof nor a birth certificate that parents are unable to afford. Nevertheless, crossing the border with these undocumented children still falls under the human trafficking description used in border management. Since the travellers and transporters often know exactly where these children come from and where they are going, the “trafficker” cannot be denounced to the authorities. Instead, he is protected by all the tactics devised and honed within the community to outsmart border officials or subvert the border. This form of “human trafficking” is considered legitimate even though still illegal, as opposed to other forms considered as criminal, and therefore illegitimate as much as illegal.

From a mainstream “security speak” viewpoint, these can be considered minor or trivial security concerns, as compared to the threat of Boko Haram or other insurgency groups. These answers to my direct questions regarding their fears and anxieties could therefore be dismissed as what Foucault termed “subjugated knowledges”: “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.” (1982, p. 82). Indeed, the fears and anxieties registered in the borderlands include what many “scientific minds” would call superstition, but which, when examined closely, become very interesting, not least in the way they structure their responses to the perceived threats. In this regard, the below story of *Odette* is emblematic of how both the coordinates of, and reaction to fears and threats seem at odds with what would ordinarily be expected. A particular relationship with the border reality has emerged from the data, wherein many members of the border communities structure their action according to a worldview, which to the outsider should be very important. Where there are limits to the mainstream understandings of security, I do not mean the importance of this worldview as knowledge in itself, but as paths through which one can truly grasp and explain certain vernacular security and/or resilience practices that are meaningful only within the specific contexts of the border areas studied. In this regard, a particular series

of events that happened to *Odette* is very illustrative of how her actions across the border space are underpinned by her geographical imagination.

6.1.1 *Odette scammed*

*Odette*²⁷ believes that on one occasion when she made a huge loss on a particular purchase, due to an unusual series of misfortunes on the trip back to the market from the forest, her business had been cursed by the forest gods as retribution for greed, ungratefulness (for having two countries), and disrespecting the forest.

“The ancestors must have said, we are already blessing you with two beautiful countries (referring to her ability to move between Nigeria and Cameroon), why do you want to disrespect us again?” *Odette* confessed.

In fact, on that particular day, *Yomi* (the Forest Gatekeeper) had not been present on that specific spot where he and some of his forest gatekeeping colleagues meet customers at the outskirts of the forests for supply. The reason for this collective absence was that, the day was a particularly busy one in the region with many concurrent celebrations going on. Notwithstanding its particular hecticness, *Odette* instead saw this exceptionally busy period as an opportunity to scoop in on the increased demand for various forest products, especially from city-dwellers who would come home for the traditional celebrations. She therefore made the trip against all odds to the usual selling point on one of the agreed days under normal circumstances. However, upon *Odette*'s arrival at the outskirts of the forest, *Yomi* was nowhere to be found, and neither were his usual colleagues. Instead, new faces presented themselves as standing in for the absentee gatekeepers. As *Odette* struggled to recognise them and expressed reluctance as to their credentials as bona fide Forest Gatekeepers, these individuals managed to persuade her that they had just recently undergone the rite of passage to become “gatekeepers” themselves, and that they were in effect standing in for the absentees because *Yomi* and others were taken up the celebrations in the region. This sounded logical, and as telephone signal is absent in that

²⁷ the tradeswoman who buys forest products from *Yomi* and other forest “gatekeepers”

area, there was no way to verify their claim. Shaking off her doubts about their claimed legitimacy, *Odette* proceeded to buy her products from the suspicious-looking individuals. This misjudgement on her part indeed became a fact when she met *Yomi* the following week. It turned out, these individuals had not been mandated by anybody at all, and the actual replacement sent by *Yomi* came only a few minutes after *Odette* had bought her supplies from the imposters and left the forest. It is speculated that some carefree young people must have overheard *Yomi* discussing his upcoming absence as well as plans to have a replacement for that specific day, and then proceeded to impersonate the replacement, using the opportunity to make quick money. That is, after all, the only logical explanation for such a well-planned and executed act of impersonation.

However, what interests us more in this story is *Odette*'s series of misfortunes on her way back on that particular day. She had a car accident, from which she barely rescued half of her investment in forest products from the overturned car. Even as she came out of the accident with only minor injury, she eventually met up with unusually demanding border guards when she managed to reach the border with half of her cargo. Negotiations added to time wasted because of the accident, making her extremely late for market peak time. *Odette* ended up with a loss on that particular trip, where she expected to quadruple her normal earnings per trip. *Odette*'s eventful misfortune can be explained in a way similar to the increased likelihood of one person dying if requiring emergency medical attention on a Sunday in many Western countries. This cartesian explanation is backed up by exactly the fact that this was a very busy day in the border region, with increased cross-border traffic and probably a heightened greed on the part of other individual border actors who were all aware of the gains at stake during that particularly hectic period full of business transactions. This combination of at least three converging factors would have sent warning signals to an otherwise forward-thinking and sophisticated border market analysis, about the deceptive appearance of such a crunch time. One may dismiss *Odette*, as a backward village woman roaming the remote peripheries of two developing countries, who failed to understand that she should have replenished her stock in advance of that special day, in order to avoid being caught up as she became in the hecticness of that crucial day. Yet, the knowledge schema used by *Odette* in this case is most useful for understanding how borderlanders relate to that particular forest and how such a sense-making of their place in that specific space articulates with the border as an ecosystem with internal coherence.

First of all, in her own narrative of the story and how it affected her, she does not portray herself as a victim. She positions herself very much as the main actor manoeuvring her own fate across the border, instead of as someone complaining about having been scammed, involved in a car accident, and ripped off, all in one day. She does not complain about *Yomi* either, or the forest gatekeeping system for having failed to organise a safer transition of duty while absent. She does not complain about the potentially poor state of the vehicle (most of them are very old) which might have led to the accident. Even the behaviour of the greedy border officials she met on that specific day is viewed in a more fatalistic fashion, instead of as a given variable that could have altered the outcome of the day for her. Even though the overarching belief system behind this mental attitude to events is grounded in the transnational potency of the forest Gods, the fact remains that she emphasises her own agency as someone already unusually blessed by the Gods with two countries to draw her livelihoods from. This articulates well with the basic principles of a resilient mindset, which is shared by the border community. Not only does she not allow her current plight to undermine her confidence in what she sees as an asset (blessing), she always readily projects herself forward by emphasising her decision-making ability to address the crisis and avert it in the future.

Secondly, whether *Odette's* core belief is demonstrable or not is not important, but understanding this belief is instrumental in grasping what she sees as a potential for disruption. In this particular case, breaking the rules of the forest has been the trigger for the string of destructive events that unfolded later. Even in cartesian terms, there is no way of proving that she would have been in that very accident had she delayed her departure from the forest for a few minutes, just enough to deal with genuine individuals instead. Quite to the contrary, it is highly likely that she would not have been in that car, at that specific place and that very moment when the accident occurred. The law of probability reinforces this by the principle that the same chance event is not likely to happen twice within a relatively short time period, like cars overturning within minutes of each other. One could therefore refer to this alignment to say that *Odette's* premise in ordering her mobility across space is as valid any other belief system, but most importantly, it tells us more about this particular understanding of disruption as a having a trigger at a realm beyond the immediate observable environment of disruption impact. This links in with notions of epicentre and apocentre in terms of disasters and catastrophes. It also highlights the necessity to garner a vernacular understanding of apocentre before engaging with the impact of a disruption. Furthermore, this also means that *Odette's* geographical imagination conforms with her tangible reality in that her breaking the rules in

one particular realm of the border world, triggers a series of undesirable events across the transnational space where her body, mobility and livelihoods coalesce. As an integrated ecosystem therefore, the imaginaries of the border space can rightly be put in conversation with the concept of security.

6.1.2 *Imaginaries of the border space in conversation with the concept of security*

Apart from incidents like the one in which *Odette* was involved, a great deal of the expression of vernacular (in)security is in fact embedded in the geographical imaginations of borderlanders. To illustrate this, I will now combine vernacular spatialisation of the border space as discussed in chapter 4 with a case study of the Etung transnational forest. This will help glean the security meanings of borderlanders' performance of their relationship to border space and to the forest. A key aspect of this section will capture the multiple ways in which borderlanders pre-empt security threats or address insecurity problems across their transborder space.

The borderlanders I interviewed avoided discussing certain topics related to terrorism or illegal activities that are very dangerous for them, such as drug trafficking. At the Cameroon-Nigeria border, all but one respondent agreed for our semi-structured interview to be recorded on tape. The reason for this reluctance was related to an earlier incident where many individuals were imprisoned based on an audio-recordings they had shared about Boko Haram. Even though borderlanders consistently said that they did not feel threatened by the Boko Haram insurgency happening far away in the North of both Nigeria and Cameroon, this collective reluctance to address the topic and/or to go on record shows not only an acute awareness of the overall security situation affecting both countries, but most importantly, an awareness of the ways in which this situation relates to their personal circumstances as individuals in their transnational geographical space. In other words, while they employ the same terms of insecurity in relation to terrorism, their fears are not exactly the same as implied by those terms in official narratives of the Boko Haram insurgency. The vernacular dimension of this insurgency is therefore not similar to what is fashioned even in the human security discourse on how insurgents might pose threats to people's lives and property. In fact, they have no anxiety or fears about the insurgent group, but they are acutely aware of how the Boko Haram phenomenon might affect them. And most importantly, it is also an awareness of being in such a transnational milieu:

“where people come and go, and if it turns south there will be no one to witness for you.” (– Ekema, Nigeria – Cameroon Border). This reveals that their anxieties over Boko Haram are not the same as the ones felt by Nigerians north of Abuja for instance, and as framed in the official security narrative.

These fears and anxieties are expressed in indirect ways. No one told me directly that they did not want to be recorded or why exactly they gave me appointments to which they would not show up, or where they showed up but said that they needed to check with someone else (husband, chief) before they could be recorded, or other excuses. I noticed that when I was noting down the reason why they did not want to be recorded, I had to infer the reluctance from the strange consistency of excuses from different individuals to avoid going on tape. (Example: “I recently had an issue with my throat, so this is not my usual voice. I am still recovering. I do not want you to record something that someone might say tomorrow this is not my voice”. – Or “If you are in a hurry, why don’t we just talk, and you write down as you are doing now?”). Additionally, it was through other parties, as I participated in casual conversations, that I was able to connect the collective reluctance to the incident about Boko Haram recordings which landed a few members of the communities in prison. I now wonder whether these topics were not purposefully brought up in my presence, frequently as they were, to indirectly tell me what the community thought about my prospect of recording some people. Obviously, I had openly shared my intentions with all potential respondents and in hindsight, I suspect they must have discussed in my absence and decided they had to let me know how dangerous this could be. This reflects the circuited ways in which the danger can materialise for them, an explanation of the metaphorical vocabulary used to designate the phenomena. This also explains the apparent paradox between their saying openly that they are not afraid of the insurgent group, yet refraining from talking about it, especially on the record.

Moreover, the delineation of areas which borderlanders can frequent and those they cannot, is not just virtual in the sense of discussing security matters. It extends to the physicality of the border space with their avoidance of certain activities that are deemed dangerous either because it brings them in direct confrontation with the state, or because it puts them in harm’s way to other non-state actors, or even exposes them to accidents. These include crossing the border using routes frequented by drug-traffickers or using accident-prone riverbanks. Another telling idiom of security is the ways in which *Border Deniers* manage to “unborder” the forest, expressing the fear that allowing the border to materialise across their territorial space is likely

to bring disruptions. For example, *Yomi* (the Forest Gatekeeper) told me that thanks to the fact that the borders in the forest are not clearly demarcated, pharmaceutical companies find it difficult to obtain permits to exploit medicinal essences from the forest.

“When they go to Nigeria, we say that is Cameroon, and when they go to Cameroon, we say that is Nigeria. The day they get a permit, we are finished here. You see, it is not a simple matter, we are fighting for our life here, and it will fight like that till the end”. (*Yomi*)

The borderlander’s fears and anxieties over the possibility of pharmaceutical firms moving in is indicative of the fact that their geographical imaginations and practices that tend to deny the borders are also a reflection of their situated understanding of that specific threat posed by the materialisation of the border, which could then lead to the devastating actions of industrial actors. Hence, this knowledge of security and stability not only confirms the borderlander as an informed and sensible actor whose understanding of security is not aligned with statist interests in security, but also as a transnational actor whose referent object of security is none other than himself across the borderland as delineated space. The spatial delineations of the borderland as produced by vernacular imaginations of border space also clearly assign those spaces where the state is expected to intervene in order to uphold security, and where the borderlanders know they have to rely on themselves. This is very evident in their mobility strategies. In acknowledging the border before negotiating to annihilate its effects on them, *Border Acknowledgers* thereby recognise state space in the border and also its role in securing them. But at the same time, these borderlanders know that they have to rely on themselves if venturing in remote areas or protecting their businesses. This virtual and physical spatialisation of security responsibility is a window into the agency of borderlanders as far as wielding their own security rationale goes. That is why the following examples of two seemingly contradictory security situations involving borderlanders ultimately concur to the expression of the same vernacular security rationale in the borderland.

In the first situation, members of the border community in the Cameroon-Equatorial Guinea-Gabon three-part border helped the Guinean authorities with intelligence and physically participated in the manhunt and arrest of armed mercenaries who were smuggling themselves into Equatorial Guinea as part of a wider plot to overthrow the Obiang N’Guema regime in 2018. In the second situation, the same border community is known to have misled both Cameroonian and Guinean military over the location of border markers, as sections of the army

from the two countries were mobilising over an apparent territorial dispute. When both countries' armies had come to investigate reported encroachment of their respective national territory by either army, borderlanders misled both. Instead of borderlanders siding with their respective national armies, they cooperated from both sides of the border to lead both armies astray and confuse them. Most importantly, this transborder cooperation amongst borderlanders was not coordinated, as everybody "*just knew the right thing to do in a situation like that*" (*Docta*). As a matter of fact, borderlanders from the Cameroonian side told the military that indeed the Guinean army had come to the area, but proceeded to give wrong information on the exact location they had visited, making sure that their indications would locate the Guinean army site exactly within Equatorial Guinea. Borderlanders in Equatorial Guinea did exactly the same, in reverse order. In the first situation (cooperation with state authorities), we see borderland populations siding with the state and in the second case (territorial dispute), we paradoxically see the same borderlanders working against the state. This is only a paradox if seen through the eyes of the state. Beyond this, border communities are however very consistent in the pursuit of their own security interest, which consists in avoiding destabilisation of their geographical space, whatever the reasons. "*When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers*" is the phrase that regularly concluded the story each time a member of the border community told me about these tactics to keep their living space safe.

This also shows that knowledge schemas applied to the borderland diverge from the statal meaning of the border. The knowledge categories as seen in the hierarchy of spaces means they know what to avoid in specific areas, which alliances to form, and where neutrality is a safety card. In situating the agency of borderlanders in terms of security as can be seen in these two different cases, borderlanders clearly indicate the centrality of their own spatial environment as security referent, making their alignment with state space and official security narrative a pure coincidence. This does not mean that borderlanders cannot be affected by security problems that concern the state like in the case of Boko Haram. It simply means that their security interest in the phenomena is always likely to diverge and vary. This goes to show that in so doing, even if the surface observation suggests otherwise, borderlanders reject attempts by central governments to enlist them in official security narratives, and instead follow their own vernacular transcript of security that is discernible only upon closer observation. Whether this results in outcomes that converge with statist agenda is pure coincidence, the same as divergence with government objectives does not seek to satisfy the purpose of dissidence,

contradiction or confrontation. It is merely a difference in nuances which I shall illustrate with a case study of the Etung forest at the border between Cameroon and Nigeria.

6.2 Security case study of the Etung Forest

Paying particular attention to the ways in which *Border Deniers* mobilise their geographical imaginations to discursively and performatively deconstruct the state border, and focusing on the transnational Etung forest straddling the Cameroon-Nigeria border, the gleaned meaning of the border community's relationship to the forest is revealed. It shows that their spatial practices encompass various security concerns such as the protection of biodiversity, anti-deforestation efforts, food security, income security, and environmental security altogether. I will argue that tapping into this vernacular understanding of security allows us to uncover other security "idioms" in terms of keeping biodiversity safe, as well as protecting food and income. These idioms also reconfigure our perception of security in terms of costs.

6.2.1 Protection of biodiversity

As *Yomi* explained during our semi-structured interview, borderlanders living around the transborder Etung forest use a variety of methods to protect the biodiversity of the forest. It is worth emphasising that *Yomi* does not use the term biodiversity or does not explicitly say that protecting biodiversity is the goal of their conservationist-like action in the forest. As seen earlier, only a selected number of individuals like *Yomi* are allowed to enter the forest and harvest forest products, set traps, or even hunt. According to *Yomi*, they become the forest's "gatekeepers" after a month-long initiation rite during which they "*receive instructions from [our] ancestors to protect the shrines [in the forest]*". Gatekeepers belong to the Etung ethnic group found both on the Cameroonian as well as on the Nigerian side of the border. The protection they provide for the forest is not understood as physically preventing people from entering the forest, but rather as enforcers of community taboos and sacred principles. In effect, the (un)intended result of protecting their space against potential intruders is that in the way they do, by dissuading access into the forest using traps (it is forbidden to fire a gun or make loud noises in the forest), and only allowing a select number of individuals to harvest or hunt within, the pressure on the forest resources is considerably reduced.

As part of the moral economy practised by *Yomi* and his colleagues who are allowed to hunt and harvest in the forest, only a selected number of forest products can be exploited at any particular season of the year, thus allowing time for the forest to naturally replenish the stock before further harvesting. This would not have been the case had the forest been open to industrial exploitation of medicinal plants for example, which are plentiful. Selecting specific types of forest products to harvest in specific periods of the year even when they are available during other periods, ensures that the right quantity is extracted regularly without jeopardising the forest's ecosystem. Again, it is worth emphasising that this analysis of the consequences of their *conservationist* actions is consciously using the dominant environmental security lens and parlance, only as a way of accessing and translating vernacular idioms of security. This limited usage is therefore mindful of its potential to reify borderlanders' own security rationale or repackage them into mainstream policy projects regarding environmental security.

The vernacular convention around the sanctuary status of the forest raises its value in the eyes of the community, prompting a collective reverence for the site that makes widespread hunting inadmissible, trespassing an abomination, and industrial exploitation a threat that is collectively fought. This is significant because being located virtually in a no-man's land where national borders are not clearly demarcated, national governments would have been at a loss had they to muster the necessary financial and human resources to protect the forest and monitor hunters and/or poachers. The second most important challenge to national governments would have been to determine, in that forest straddling two countries, where their respective jurisdictions started/ended. Forest users from both sides of the border would have undoubtedly taken advantage of this confusion to evade government control and harm the forest's biodiversity in the process. We can therefore see that these conceptualisations of the border space as a natural endowment by the border community and vernacular practices akin to resource politics do conceal a hidden transcript of the vernacular form of understanding threats and addressing security challenges to the community.

These actions by *Border Deniers*, despite and beyond the state border, culminate in what could translate in other mainstream terms as environmental security. Furthermore, this incorporates even the institutional dimension to the extent that they manage to impose a vernacular institution of control that is respected by everybody in the transborder community, including the state-sponsored forest guards whose presence is more a formality than anything else. Since this border community conceives of the forest as containing sacred sites such as ancestral

shrines that must be protected against the border, and based on their imaginations of the border space that structure their physical “deconstruction” of the all expressive forms of the state border functions in their area, these *Border Deniers* (un)knowingly participate in environmental security from their vernacular vantage point. The unintended results nevertheless articulate strongly with global environmental security concerns. Apart from environmental security, these practices can also be seen as ensuring food security and income security.

6.2.2 *Food and Income security*

In fact, the role played by this forest in sustaining the lives of borderlanders cannot be over-emphasised, as it provides opportunities for food, shelter (wood for construction), and income. The transnational forest is a major source of food (mushrooms, seed and spices, fruits, vegetables and a great variety of animals). In addition to food destined directly for local and immediate community consumption, a great deal of forest products are sold to intermediaries (such as *Odette*) who cross the border to sell them back in Nigerian and Cameroonian border towns or further afield in order to generate income. However, this in itself is not really crucial to our study. What is more interesting is the extent to which borderlanders manage to maintain such a sustainable stream of those opportunities through spatial practices that are for the most part inspired by, or structured around, their location in the borderlands. As a matter of fact, even though *Border Deniers* tend not to admit the advantages offered by their location at the centre of the transborder exchange, I observed how this geographical particularity enhances the value of forest products for several reasons detailed earlier. It is therefore in cognisance of this enhanced value owing to the transborder paradigm, that *Border Deniers* firstly view their spatial environment as a natural endowment; secondly, they move to protect it against the usual manifestations of the state border as well as other outsiders to their space of community; and thirdly, they ultimately manage to ensure food and income security thereby mitigating their own anxiety as regards food supply.

Because they have made sense of their spatial environment as a natural endowment, a “*gift from God*” as they put it, *Border Deniers* living off the transnational forest have developed a forward-looking relationship with the forest. In this sense, both their present and future are intertwined with the existence of the forest and their spatial proximity to this major source of

food relaxes the pressure to accumulate on an industrial or commercial scale. “*They know we always come home with something for them; and if it is not me, it is one of the other gatekeepers*”. *Yomi*’s customers who are transborder traders not buying for personal consumption know that the supply is limited and that is why they cannot have more than four days’ worth of stock and have to return to *Yomi* at least once a week to replenish their stock. Conceiving of the forest as a natural endowment and being aware of its economic advantage due to its transborder geographic location, has underpinned the moderation with which the forest is exploited by the border communities who also look after it as an ancestral legacy.

The respect for ancestral traditions means they respect those gatekeepers appointed to go into the forest and “*look after the shrines*”; these same people are the only ones entitled by tradition to take things from, or kill animals in, the forest. A sort of vernacular institution emerges out of this respect and adherence to ancestral rules by the people living in the immediate proximity of the forest, so much so that those coming from outside the area find it difficult to go against existing arrangements. I argue that these arrangements amount to a food security governance in that specific border space that would otherwise become vulnerable through uncontrolled exploitation out of the state’s reach and therefore threatening the very survival of surrounding communities by jeopardising their access to vital sources of nutrition. As borderlanders themselves regulate access to food resources, they distribute the stock available parsimoniously without pressurising the forest. Consequently, the abiding participation of traders and other border “*acknowledgers*” in that system of food security also feeds the community with the necessary income. The steady supply cycle of forest products therefore guarantees an equally stable supply of food to the community and a steady flow of income, especially when those who “*look after*” the forest reinvest their money back into the local economy. In addition to protecting biodiversity, as well as ensuring food and income security, the geographical imaginations of borderlanders produce an alternative understanding of security through assigning a differing meaning to the cost of security.

6.2.3 *The cost of security*

The three or four Nigerian government-assigned forest guards essentially only patrol the outer surroundings of the forest. These forest guards are often portrayed by border communities neighbouring the forest as a nuisance and seen as likely to endanger the forest “*because of their*

stupidity”, as *Yomi* explained. However, after careful observation of the workings of forest protection as organised by Gatekeepers from both sides of the border, one easily concludes that these forest guards only perform formalities here, and the fact that they abide by the rules laid down by Gatekeepers strongly suggests a positive assessment on their part of the role played by these forest’s Gatekeepers, as a mutually beneficial status quo. In fact, one cannot begin to imagine the sheer amount of financial, infrastructural, human and technological resources that would have been required, were the state to achieve the same environmental objectives without the participation of the Gatekeepers. Needless to say, that it costs nothing for the community to run this “environmental security” and “biodiversity protection” processes. At a time when funding is seen as the absolute cornerstone for security worldwide, and even more so, that better security simply equates to more funding, these vernacular approaches observed in this Etung transborder forest show that ordinary individuals are able to optimise their spatial environment at virtually no cost, to address their fears in multiple security areas. This puts in perspective the notion of ungoverned spaces as understood in security studies and IR, where the lack of (or perhaps funding for) state infrastructures is made to equate the absence of security or ability to organise security.

6.3 Examples of resilient practices

In this section, I am going to trace vernacular resilience through mobility practices across the border space, by highlighting their particular understanding of the border as a disruption. I will do this by exploring their use of language and the ways in which collective forms of resilience can be reformulated. The understanding of the postcolonial border as a disruption bears similarities with the wider understanding of the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’, which adopted a view of African states as impediments to development, growth and population resilience (Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999). However, it is important to emphasise that the methodological lens of this study see resilience in contrary terms to the ‘structural adjustments’ framework that informed the ‘Washington Consensus’. Instead, this notion of vernacular resilience fits well within the heuristic of the resistance framework as developed James C. Scott through “everyday forms of resistance” (1989). Yet again, this resilience of border communities cannot be articulated as tension with political regimes against which various forms of collective organisation would develop to address their absence or indeed, oppressive presence. Even though the call to recognise and study vernacular forms of resilience situates itself within the

framework of ineffective or oppressive eco-political orders, it is worth noting that the diffuse resilience of communities dealing with the presence and persistence of externally-imposed international borders provides material resources and practices for uncovering the border itself as a disruption. This resilience is much more prosaic than political, as it is built mainly as relational engagement with the specific geographical environment of the border. I will therefore first discuss three examples of how various practices of mobility can be understood as forms of collective or individual resilience. Secondly, I will draw the implications of these practices of security-related conceptualisations such as stability or continuity to reformulate an understanding of the border as disruption.

6.3.1 *Performative subservience and resignation*

Even though they work and sometimes live amongst borderlanders, border guards and customs officers all perform urbanity in their mannerisms, appearance and acting. Their use of official national languages (English or French) shows that they are relatively well educated, or at least they act very much as though they are better educated than border users. Meanwhile border users, including those with university degrees, inhabit the role of the "backward" and "uncivilized" rural resident. I met *Ekema*, a tradesman with a master's degree in law from the University of Yaoundé at the Cameroon-Nigeria border. He told me that he has to act uneducated, dress shabbily and pretend to be very poor in order to minimise costs while going through the border with his merchandise.

"When I call them Oga [Boss], they are very pleased and assured. But I only come here once a week. Little do they know the rest of the time I train people who are their superiors. I can actually pay the salary of two or three of them every month [...]. One of the reasons you should not show off with them is that they will find out that the specific item you trade generates a lot of profit and they become very greedy when they sense that you have the money". (Ekema)

Obviously, not all border users are well-to-do university graduates disguising as poor illiterates. In fact, quite the majority of border populations actually fit a description of powerlessness that contrasts with the image of the border official. However, *Ekema's* efforts to fit into this representation of the borderlander is indicative of the vital and conscious adjustments made rationally to circumvent or mitigate the border perceived here as a potential danger. In the context of various structural orders of the state threatening from above, this rational practice of

false subservience can account for vernacular resilient strategies breaking out from below. This is an “everyday form of resistance” famously documented by James C Scott in his work “everyday forms of resistance” on hidden forms of peasant resistance in Latin America, which can also extend to other economically subordinated groups. In the context of the border, *Ekema* epitomises this subordinated group and the false subservience he displays towards the border officers is none other than a ruse to ensure that the threat of discontinuity to his trip or economic loss does not materialise. Needless to say, *Ekema*’s false subservience is not directed at a particular officer, but rather at anything or anybody that can wield state power through the functions of the border. The assumed powerlessness of borderlanders in the face of border officials is indeed predicated upon the acceptance that these border officials are above all, the representatives of the state. As such, the state is often the target of political rhetoric which borderlanders sometimes use to negotiate their way across the border.

When asked how, considering those fears, they go about their daily lives, they showed very little reliance on the state, and instead expressed a sense of powerlessness (“Man go do how?” “On va faire comment?”) which is interestingly contradicted by the resilient practices traced in their daily activities. This expressed sense of powerlessness is at the surface level also indicative of the extent to which dominant narratives of resilience have enlisted border communities in dismissing their own resilience practices. Furthermore, on a deeper level, this expressed sense of powerlessness acts as a subterfuge concealing a powerful determination to act and address what they see as obstacles or danger. In other words, a surface level analysis of border communities’ expressed sense of powerlessness shows that they are resigned and have been forced to accept that what they actually do about their fears and perceived uncertainty of their spatial environment does not count and cannot not change anything. However, upon closer analysis, these expressions do not actually mean what they are used for. The “*Man go do how?*” and “*On va faire comment?*” expressions that are recurrent amongst borderlanders in both border locales, are constative expressions rather interrogative ones. These are not questions in and of themselves, they are instead acting like rhetorical questions and usually come at the end of explaining the paradox or incongruity of a situation. Most importantly, instead of conveying resignation, they mark a determination to stand one’s grounds. For example, I noted an incident at the Cameroon-Nigeria border between a tradeswoman and border officials. After her goods had been seized, she sat near the border post, within hearing distance from border officials and was speaking loudly on her mobile phone:

“The first man searched my bags and said if I bless him with 3000 Naira, I am free to go. I emptied my pocket and gave him. After just a few steps, now his colleague says I need to go to the office and pay custom duties on the food I am going to use to feed my family. So, we are here. Man go do how?” (name unknown)

In this phone call, which I suspect was not a real phone call, the woman was actually aiming her message at the border officials. Her intention, speaking within hearing distance and loudly enough, was to state that they had a deal, of which they failed to honour their side. Secondly, she was letting them know that she has no more money and that there was no point in keeping her there. The border officers played right into her scheme, and she was free to go a few minutes after the phone call (most likely a fake call).

6.3.2 *Reading newspaper headlines to cross the border*

The marketplaces of border towns or border hubs ordinarily have two or three shops where newspapers are displayed for sale. The “screaming” front pages of many of these newspapers are full of anti-government rhetoric highlighting state inadequacies in various areas. Many tradespeople line up in front of the newspaper stalls in the morning, while eating their breakfast standing or waiting for a vehicle to transport them across the border. They rarely buy these newspapers but whatever is written on the front covers is likely to resurface when they get to the border and negotiations with border guards seem to hit a deadlock. In exaggeratedly demonstrative anger, these tradespeople can be heard politicising state inconsistencies in their discursive positioning. They inhabit the role of a marginalised group being further harassed through the border. In situations like these, they will address border guards as though they were in the face of the Government, with statements like:

“If you don’t allow us to do this, what else can you give us? We live here without electricity, this money you are asking me is what I will need to pay for gasoline for my generator”. (name unknown)

“If we had waited for this government, we never would have this smuggler highway tarred like this. How can the Chinese do something, and you guys are now taking credit for it?” (name unknown)

“How can you treat us like criminals and terrorists?! These people [lorry drivers] do not even pay the little that you are turning down. And we know everybody uses the border.” (name unknown)

“Is it too much to ask, when you cannot even build a school here? Tell me!” (name unknown)

In utterances like these, border users resort to the political repertoires of opposition parties to remind state representatives (customs officials) that the state is in their opinion not only responsible for the economic hardships they endure at the border, but that they are also unable to deliver in the areas of security and fighting crime. Pertinent political points drawn from the front cover of newspaper headlines are made to suit a much wider political discourse of marginalisation of border communities and the state’s inability to discharge its duties at the border.

*“You are prepared to let us die of Ebola because you don’t care, and you are not prepared to let us go and die in our homes, again because you don’t give a **** about us”.* (name unknown)

Border users in a sense centralise their own marginality as a strategy to undermine the legitimacy of state officials working at the border. They know this will not change anything politically (that is not their objective), but in doing so, they attack the confidence and legitimacy of border officials. I was able to see expressions of embarrassment through nervous laughter and anxiety over escalation into a full-blown protest on the part of border officials when statements like those were made by members of the border community. This level of confrontation is not common, but when mobility strategies get to the level of political statements being made, border officials become sensitive to the likelihood of this turning into a collective protest and quickly diffuse the situation by giving in to the demands of the individuals, or group of individuals confronting them in this fashion at that particular point in time. Indeed, anti-state rhetoric of the above kind flares up in intensity with any policy enforcement or economic shift that means state authorities will exert more control on border transactions or movement than it is already doing. I noticed this peak at the Cameroon-Nigeria

border when the Naira-CFA Francs exchange rate became very volatile, and at the Cameroon-Gabon border when a new policy was introduced. The relaxed border rules specifically for border residents seems to respond to this demand from border populations to enjoy relative ease of movement between neighbouring countries.

Roadblocks are a typical example of how borderlanders thus centralise their marginality as a livelihood strategy. Even though not directly targeting the state, they mimic the government where the government is absent. They also take advantage - albeit in a different approach - from the central power's inability to discharge its duties everywhere in the border zone. A case in point is the youths I described earlier on as regularly setting roadblocks. As context to the study of a border resilient subject, we could interpret their actions as simply criminal. One may say that these individuals are not displaying any form of resilience to anything, but are instead engaged in organized extortion, transnationally for that matter. However, in their mimicry of the state, the same individuals could also be seen as the embodiment of a marginalised community turning state inconsistencies upside down, and centralizing this marginality to sustain life across the border space. Further, we could also see the expression of a genuine vernacular institution capitalising on the border space that is perceived as a natural endowment. This is achieved by controlling the mobility of others. Even if setting up roadblocks to collect money from border crossers can be seen as the actions of marginalised people turning state inconsistencies upside down, it is nevertheless their sense of rootedness in that particular space that grants them, in their view, natural rights of control over outsiders' movements. This shows how vernacular identities feed into livelihood strategies. By asserting their right to control all goods and movement through their territory, they construct their livelihoods around their claim to be "*the border here*", which also shows either that border does not mean the same or that they are happy with some aspects of the border.

6.3.3 *Solidarity*

Although the regulation of mobility in borderlands falls under specific legal frameworks and regional border policies, the ethnographic data collected exposes a body of social relations built around the mutual interests of borderlanders collectively protected via institutionalised subversive strategies that seek to outmanoeuvre the "official border". These social relations are overseen by locally based social actors who operate as gatekeepers at the crossroads between

state borders, borderland territorial limits, border officials and cross-border travellers. These are various types of intermediaries who are also power brokers, negotiating between border users and border officials, and between crossers and transporters, and between sellers and buyers. These locally based social actors acting in no formal capacity are also seen as arbiters in disputes as well as the authorities assessing where the boundaries of the vernacular spaces stand. In so doing, they systematise the border space and codify its practices against the state, for the benefit of all those involved. As such, their role is central in the question of mobility in borderlands.

This solidarity links to vernacular spaces of communities (Chapter 4) formed instantaneously amongst the travellers comprised of drivers, tradespeople, visitors, etc., all assimilated into a community, so to speak. It is a creative form of social networking, obviously prompted by the imminent adversity represented in the international border ahead of them. It speaks to the capacity for a group to instantaneously come together for the purpose of addressing adversity. Instead of the conceptualised local solidarity at border level which essentialises and simplifies the borderlanders based on ethnicity, I argue here for the more specific notion of localised solidarity. As the process of crossing the border does not occur in one single place, this solidarity (use of mobile phones, networks) in the face of adversity, ties in with the dynamic character of mobility, addressing adversity from one place to another, therefore dismounting and remounting resilience strategies in the face of such adversity. This relates to the notion of the border as not being place-based.

We see in the solidarity of borderlanders, how the 'social fabric' is shaped by perceived threads or woven in the practice of sharing costs and secrets to outsmart border officials when rules and regulations constitute a hindrance to their objectives. The mobility practices performed by travellers across borders eventually create a system of resilience, which while reflecting the agency of these social actors, conveys an awareness that complete, compete or contest the state structure expressed through the non-dynamic performativity and the reifying character of international borders. Drawing on James Scott's celebrated study of poor peasants in Malaysia (1985) to analyse the mobility practices of borderlanders across the two border locales, my fieldwork further indicates that subtle but powerful forms of 'every day resistance' rather than visible historic 'events', create a conscious and diverging narrative of contemporary politics of threat amongst the border community. All the above examples of resilient practices, far from exhaustive, constitute a sample of multiples strategies used by borderlanders to protect the

continuity of their biographical trajectories and to ensure that mobility across the borderland benefits them. Essentially though, the most important insight from observing these strategies is not their qualification as resilient practices, but the fact that accepting these as resilient practices unveils a character of the border as seen only through vernacular eyes. In this sense, the personification of the border is a trope for the divergence in the narrative of disruption that exists between state-based understandings and vernacular representations of threats.

6.4 Diverging narrative of disturbance and (in)stability

While travellers seemed resigned to other challenges such as poor roads, uncomfortable accommodation and bad food during the trip, they seem very concerned about these controls.

“I did not mind when the road was bad, we didn’t have all this wahala and you could do your thing with anybody monitoring you. Now every driver only wants to use the tarred road. And when you pass through it, you must pay almost every man you see. I am even asking myself what the use of that road to us is. It is just to grease the hands of those people”. Odette, Nigeria-Cameroon Border

Put differently, state inconsistencies or the state’s inability to discharge its duties towards border communities are at worst an inconvenience in their scale of priorities. The border area development agenda therefore meets a differing priority ordering when we note that borderlanders have a more acute awareness of, and concerns about, the implications of these policies for their deeply territorialised lives straddling the border space. This is so acute an awareness that complying with all official border-crossing requirements and the normative materiality of the border is not at all a matter of complaint in the conversations or answers of borderlanders. However, complying with these requirements does not protect the travellers from harassment on the part of immigration officials who can abuse their powers and cause extreme annoyance simply by detaining a passenger a whole day awaiting immigration interview. Moreover, major policy shifts and political developments at regional and/or national levels further destabilise their economic strategies, even when these shifts are destined to facilitate mobility across borders and “protect border communities”. A striking example is a major policy shift (on paper) whereby visa requirement was officially waived for CEMAC countries’ citizens who hold valid passports. Despite the implementation of the prescription

about free-movement within CEMAC that the Heads of States of the six-member countries enacted in 2013, and officialised during a summit in Chad in late October 2017 (while I was still doing fieldwork in the area), I witnessed first-hand how this measure instead worsened the plight of travellers who now had to pay higher prices for “smuggled” visas, that had paradoxically just been waived. The same holds true with the threat from Boko Haram or from territorial dispute.

From the responses of borderlanders to the changes, we can study of mobility practices and the agency within by isolating specific patterns of resilience from the ethnographic observation or interviews conducted during fieldwork. However, with respect to how exactly these border policing practices disrupt their lives, there is not a single answer. In essence, this proves almost as difficult as pinning down the concept of resilience itself within relevant scholarship. There is a consensus that, resilience as a concept lacks coherence, clarity and consistency of use when operationalised in the social sciences (Norris et al., 2008). Nevertheless, the character of the border as an unstable space has been expressed through various ways in which borderlanders have mapped their geographical imagination of their living space. Using the case of policy change (CEMAC passport) or security problems that arose during the attempted coup in Guinea through the Cameroon-Gabon border, *Docta* describes this instability in the following words,

“There are many things that can make your life change overnight. So you can’t really make long term projects here as if you were in any other town where you can buy your land safely and...and...you see”.

The same was observed at the Nigeria-Cameroon border where during the time I was there, there was a combination of both the falling rate of the Naira and security problems in Anglophone Cameroon affecting the Cameroon-Nigeria border. In fact, the fall in the value of the Naira meant a fall in profit margins for traders buying in Cameroon to sell into Nigeria. On the other hand, political uprising in the English-speaking part of neighbouring Cameroon, just across the bridge from Nigeria, caused various sorts of disruptions to the local border community.

The most important thing to note here is the multiplicity of events which culminate to create a serious disruption requiring a fully-fledged coping strategy; one event alone would have been a normal imperfection of everyday life. These combined events described in the two locales

only for the period of our presence have been preceded and indeed followed, by similar disruptions which explain why borderlanders view their space as an unstable space. Unstable in the sense that it cannot guarantee the sustainability of their livelihoods or the certainty of their social arrangements without their direct intervention. This differs from the state understanding of the border as unstable or as disruptive. This divergence can be further examined in the motivation that drives border communities to find ways to address these challenges to continuity and certainty. When asked for example, why they would store the goods they buy in order to wait for a better rate of the Naira or take the challenges of either immigration harassment (CEMAC passport), or transport difficulties on roads that avoid checkpoints, their motivation was mainly the desire to support their family. This family support does not only include providing financially; physically visiting a relative was stressed by respondents as being very important and also worth the trouble to “*fight the border*”.

Taken as a whole and considering the border as a dynamic space, this understanding of instability justifies the perception of the border space as one within which coping and adaptative strategies must be organised in order to maintain a certain equilibrium. Yet, while the official perspective on the instability of the border relates mostly to threats to the state as a system, borderlanders only consider those threats that directly affect their ability to sustain themselves socially and economically. Consequently, while resilience as envisaged by state authorities entails biopolitical efforts to ensure the perseverance of the border community as the social component of the territorial border, borderlanders view their resilience as constructed through a strong social support base and cross-border connections to protect themselves from the border. In other words, the changing political and economic environment is reflected in the border areas as direct impact on trade and mobility. However, the flexibility of the border as the medium through which the objectives of trade and mobility can be pursued despite these changes, is interpreted differently from either a state or community perspective. That is why travellers ceaselessly cooperated/conspired to outsmart security forces and immigration authorities. In this regard, the border areas studied make a compelling point for observing the experiences and coping strategies of various types of travellers as they use different techniques to outsmart border security forces, with the aim of avoiding/mitigating harassment, financial loss and even imprisonment before formulating policy.

The ease with which border residents play on state inconsistencies to juggle with their identities and stories while crossing the border contrasts with the borderland identity struggle as

portrayed by Gloria Anzaldua in the US-Mexico border, where “the ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness” (1987, pp. 78–79). I argue that this lack of anxiety can be explained firstly by the collective rather than individual approach to border consciousness observed in both border locales, and secondly by the awareness that the materiality of the state border is transient and flexible. Border residents in the Cameroon-Nigeria border for example use pidgin English to include or exclude border guards in their interactions. They activate power relations by assigning a formal or informal place to border officials when they choose to speak to them in English or Pidgin English.

Furthermore, even those who speak the local Ejagham language prefer to always speak in Pidgin English on the border scene for what I see as an effort to connect more widely to the border community comprising those who are not locutors of the Ejagham language. Likewise, language use across the Cameroon-Gabon area amounted to a desire to maintain a community based around the solidarity against what is considered border harassment. This use of language can also be likened to the ways in which travellers and transporters readily come together in exchanging “strategic intelligence” and cover for one another during crossings. In a sense, their invisibility diluted in their apparent hybridity as they come from diverse horizons and being “a little of this and a little of that, and not quite one or the other” (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 209), is compensated by a solid a collective resilience system illustrated by how they empower themselves as a community to cope with the adversity of the border.

6.5 Conclusion: alternative starting points for analysing the contemporary politics of threat and (in)security

The question this chapter set out to answer was “what do the practices and sense-making examined in the two preceding chapters tell us about the disruptions and threats as perceived by borderlanders?”. Borderlanders’ accounts of security and resilience offer any alternative starting points for analysing the contemporary politics of threat and (in)security in border areas. Accounts of resilience and representations of stability as drawn from my fieldwork have suggested that borderlanders develop their own resilience strategies which seek to treat the border as a disruption. While the materiality of the border is an enduring feature of the

borderlanders' geographical imagination, it has become clear through various statements that the expression of border governance itself is largely apprehended as disruption. As such, borderlanders view their resilience as constructed through a strong social support base and cross-border connections to protect themselves from the unpredictability of the border. Furthermore, the referent of security unsurprisingly differs between state rationalisation of threat and vernacular representations thereof. Accordingly, while the state-based understanding of security is expressed in terms of its ability to maintain control over the border and regulate mobility and exchanges, border communities have been observed and heard to refer to their immediate relatives and livelihoods as constituencies of security.

Against the backdrop of a border governance reflecting the strictures of postcolonial states in Africa, the materiality of the postcolonial border carries in its performativity all the disruptive vectors inscribed onto African territorial space since the colonial era. Border communities then, and today, have had to constantly reassess their *geographical imagination* following various historical developments and policy changes in the wider international context affecting them directly and adversely. Put differently, the postcolonial border can be considered as a site of disruption; a permanent turbulence in the lives of border communities, owing to its being a colonial legacy, a physical feature of the postcolonial nation-state doubling (in)conveniently as an instrument of neoliberal global agenda. However, this chapter is far from constituting the record of these changes and the resilient dynamics they have constantly been creating. It has only used a few examples of these dynamics as an entry point into truly expanding the vernacular dimension of security and of resilience as embedded in mobility practices and resource politics of borderlanders. This conceptual expansion has been emphasised here as necessary because despite critical security and resilience scholarship turning to bottom-up approaches and agency-based conceptualisations to ascertain people-oriented security and resilient practices, certain key assumptions undergirding the literature continue to trap the thinking within a limited western-centric framework.

Most of the findings from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions about how border communities perceive threats to their security individually and collectively –including the kinds of conversation topics that they feel threatened by – support the conclusions of past studies associated with the vernacular turn. Like Jarvis and Lister (2013) or Gillespie and O'Loughlin (2013) have suggested, the individual or immediate family members is/are the regular referent object(s) of security. In this regard, the conversation between *Lamel* and *Padday* in the Cameroon-Gabon focus group discussion is consistent

with the ways in which the perceived salience of a threat was typically expressed in terms of spatial proximity, priority ordering and potential origins that differed greatly from the statal representation. When asked directly what they were mostly anxious about in terms of their safety and security in their living areas, many borderlanders readily responded by expressing concerns about threats to their livelihoods and other sources of threat that could be dismissed as unsubstantiated.

I note here that the narratives of threat amongst the border populations and the state are divergent at two levels. First, while border communities focus on human security with their own bodies or immediate relatives as referent object, the threat narrative of border governance is concerned with policing bodies in their cross-border movement to ensure that they do not deviate and pose a threat to the state. This diverging representation extends into what is seen as legitimate by border communities while being characterised as illegal by border regulations. Secondly, another analysis of these diverging narratives can be drawn from the ways in which the border, as a contested site of discourse, reveals how the state marginalises its inadequacies as much as borderlanders centralise their marginality. For instance, the discursive generalisation of all movement of undocumented persons across the border as human trafficking, and therefore a threat that needs to be addressed in priority, can also be interpreted as a way in which the postcolonial state repackages its insufficiencies into discursive vulnerability for others. This ultimately criminalises those who mobilise their *a-statal actorness*, while they could otherwise use the border to problematise the role of state in terms of social services delivery for instance. In a very subtle dimension therefore, the divergent narratives of threat at the nodal point of the border does not just illustrate the differing security referents and the lack of empirical engagement with the “border experience” on the part of state policies. It also tells us about how states can still use territorial borders to shut down their own socio-political contradictions.

Saying this does not underestimate the impact of this state threat discourse on border communities or indeed the ability of governments’ agendas to shape security narratives within border populations, not least because of the powerful infrastructures and resources deployed to manage the border. On matters of “extreme security”, the interests of borderlanders, immigration officials and the state seem to converge, and border communities show some awareness of their “duty” to uphold the state, albeit in their own interest. In any case, they do not negate or contest in the sense that they participate in the implementation of the border by helping the state with the prevention of the smuggling of weapons across borders. Border communities in the Cameroon-Gabon border have since the failed coup in Equatorial Guinea in early January 2018 been helping security services with intelligence. There is therefore an underlying awareness of being needed by the government and (albeit very low) expectations of entitlement as borderlanders so

long as this does not fundamentally jeopardise the state. This aligns with the deep contradiction in which border residents especially find themselves embroiled in their relationship with the state, as part of their role as brokers between diverging worlds. They express feelings of hostility against the state as represented by border officials for intruding upon their informal economic system and for interfering with what they view as their legitimate right to benefit from clandestine traffic and immigration. Paradoxically, they know the stakes are only as high as the immigration controls are tight. And sometimes, they profit by acting as mediators between traders and border guards. This intersection of interests and navigation between confrontation and cooperation tends to blur the distinction between both discourses.

Prima facies accounts of security threats and priority ordering might therefore seem to reproduce the logics of governmentality. However, semi-structured interviews with selected respondents has made it possible to “de-silence” and isolate the security interests of the community, and to understand how these are shaped by a particular “border experience” currently inaccessible to the state logic. This experience produces vernacular accounts of (in)security that identify several issues of pressing concern, which are nevertheless excluded from various border strategies. This raises the question of whether these accounts or the issues they raise, fundamentally disrupt the logic of security. For this reason, unmuting the voices of borderlanders, who have hitherto been largely excluded from debates and policies targeting borders, is sufficiently substantiated as a disruptive move since vernacular representations of the border exclude the potential to reproduce and further entrench the dominant state logics.

7 Conclusion & Implications: Towards a Conceptual Framework for African Borders (A-statal Actorness?)

A few decades ago, Painter indicated that politically constructed narratives of the border are only the product of geographical devices rather than a reflection of a societal reality (1995, p. 47) . As this project's fieldwork has found out, the societal reality itself is often much more complex and multi-layered, especially when we look at how borderlanders make sense of their specific geographical environment. This thesis empirically engaged border dynamics through the study of borderlanders' experiences, imaginations and practices as shaped by territorial space beyond the reification of the state. The patterns emerging from observing practices and representations within these two border communities have provided a basis for questioning existing theoretical assumptions about transnational (in)security and resilience across African borders. They also help establish an empirical junction between the theorised African border specificity and the push to use the postcolonial border space as a central conceptual tool in understanding world affairs. The data thus collected suggest that downplaying vernacular perspectives on territorial space has created a combined knowledge gap; a theoretical defect brought to light by the contrast between the persistent nation-building rationale and vernacular experiences as shaped by contextual spatial dynamics. The project has collected more evidence of the necessity to go beyond the widely accepted notion that the border is only a product of a dual performativity within which, state and society are entangled in various contested forms of sense-making. In effect, in addition to offering a conclusion to this thesis, this chapter also answer research question 4: **Can this vernacular understanding of border spatiality help reformulate questions of security and resilience in African borderlands?**

The third space as theorised by Edouard Soja (1996) is multi-layered in the postcolonial context of the border, as gathered through the experiences and dialogic interactions of borderlanders. The imaginations shaping this third space speak of differing experiences depending on everyone's situated relationship with the state border. These situated experiences on African borderlands have been studied far less; and even less so are the ways in which borderlanders mobilise them to make sense of the world they live in and the extent to which this can help reformulate questions of security and resilience. The excavation of this sense-making based on the borderlanders' own narratives has been the main task of the PhD research project. Insights from this analysis show that once we move away from the narratives of the border as produced

by geographical devices on maps and their meaning in realist IR, we find ourselves trying to make sense of a chaotic border world. We experience a destruction of our common meaning; a dismantlement of the “approved” relation to the physical world as conveyed by mainstream geography, and a crumbling of the meaning of objects within the border space. Some of these objects include border posts, roads, cars, people, dwellings, farms, animals, words, sounds, signs, etc. contained within the bounds of the interstitial spaces between countries. This excavation from the borderlanders perspective reveals that many of these borders objects of inquiry to be emptied of their very substance, or insufficiently signified when we uncover other meanings as produced by the vernacular engagement of borderlanders.

In the context of these border locales, the rituals, narratives, symbols, and archetypes that define communities, as well as the vernacular border spaces to which the communities attach meaning provide key insights into this “third space”. At this stage, for the cursory observer willingly divested of the statist lens, it takes a conscious effort not to seek refuge again into the comfortable explanations of the border mediated through its state-based normative conceptualisations. Yet, a vernacular perspective on this border space reveals itself to be more substantial and coherent than initially anticipated. It offers insights into hitherto unexplored realms of the border space and the communities therein. Members of the border communities recounting their experiences and expressing how they make sense of their spatial world help create reasonable order, and a way out of the semantic anxiety and semiotic chaos that erupt as we move away from the statist lens. The rich layers of lived experiences and the ways in which border communities make sense of their space constitute a centre of expertise that we can learn from in many ways. In this regard, ethnographically observing the border world and exploring the continuous experiences of borderlanders as recounted through their own narratives has been key to better understanding four important facets of the vernacular conception of the state border: (1) the dialogic interactions between the state border and the borderlanders producing a third space; (2) how this vernacular border world is spatialised and articulates with imaginations of self and space; (3) an appraisal of how this (albeit tensed) vernacular sense-making and bordering practices produce interesting idioms of security and resilience. (4) Most importantly, and this Conclusion will establish, uncovering these vernacular bordering practices enriches conceptualisations of security and resilience.

This PhD research project has studied the ways in which border communities in Cameroon, Nigeria and Gabon relate to their living spaces by focusing on the vernacular dimension of the

border. Based on the data collected, it can be concluded that, as various functions of the state border holistically *interfere* with the agency of borderlanders, the spatial sense-making and practices of the latter produce different ordering effects on social interactions within the border community on the one hand, and between borderlanders and their spatial environment on the other hand. In this study's focus on the border space as a place subjected to a reification of state processes originating outside its immediate historical and geographical coordinates, a useful preliminary observation has been established on the spaces produced by the vernacular-official border performativity. As a product of temporal and physical entanglement between state structure and society, border performativity can be viewed, either as an iterative process of mutual influences creating a third space between the state border and borderlanders, or as the product of vernacular organisation of the border as a social space. These two lenses on border performativity can look identical, or even confusing inasmuch as they intersect in many ways to conjure the notion of mutual influences. However, in practice, the former lens ends up only studying the societal impact of rationalising official border functions, thus occulting the emerging social ordering from below as a response to the state border. The latter lens, however, highlights the epistemological inequality concealed in the assumed dual performativity of the border, so as to foreground the vernacular organisation of the border space.

In the same vein, this project has sought to focus mainly on that one side of the coin, so to speak, to understand the vernacular implications of the "confrontation" between the two axes of the power that contest the border space. This approach has taken my research away from just tracing the impact of state borders on communities that live around it, to inquire into how an exploration of the geographical imaginations and corresponding practices amongst these borderlanders reveals their vernacular agency especially in the areas of security and resilience. The tension that emerges between community action and the totalising 'state space' is the crux upon which revolves the agency of border communities studied, as they make sense of their transnational living space and act accordingly. As such, this study finds that tracing the agency of border communities in contemporaneous border contexts in Africa commands an interrogation about the place of border communities in the historical processes of border making as well as in the epistemological foundations of bordering practices. It emerges that the state border and its negation can exist side by side, be entangled or locked into battle on the same site. Even more so, interesting questions arise from the ways in which borderlanders combine their bi-placed identities with the juggling of multiple vernacular spaces to negotiate mobility and mobilisation across the borderland. These questions are raised not only about processes of identity formation across the border space, but also about how geographical imaginations shape the border

communities' ability to negotiate across such a site of converging commodities, currencies, international socio-economic processes, and even global policies.

In conclusion to these choices, even though I acknowledge the visual predominance of the state dimension in the materiality of the border, the choices made mean that this research has not looked at the border from a statist understanding of the international border. That is why in the data collection process for instance and the rendering of various narratives, utterances from state officials have been systematically discarded from the analytical framework. The one and only exception was the reference to the Senior Nigerian border officer in the video clip commentary at the beginning. Apart from this, this project's entire frame of reference has been set up to respond precisely to these vernacular understandings and imaginaries, rather than mobilising security signifiers that could have been mapped out in advance. Equally, the project did not seek to evaluate any particular security policy or any specific school of security thinking. The main aim has been limited to creating space for rethinking security and resilience based on borderlanders' vernacular knowledge. The aim is generating a framework of thinking within which vernacular narratives can help reconsider knowledge production in the fields of security and resilience, especially as regards borderlands in Africa. The empirical engagement with the borderlands has produced an alternative or perhaps a complementary approach to people-centred (dimensions of) policies, but it stops short of making direct and specific policy recommendations, even if there are clear contributions in this regard.

In terms of policies, my critical understanding of security and resilience has been rooted in a vernacular consideration, which envisages security as situated experiences, notably the necessity to conceptualise security along the interest(s) of such communities, rather than institutional policy makers. Insights from critical geography provided preliminary conceptualisation and delineation of the transnational border area as an integrated geographical unit on the receiving end of externally imposed spatial ideologies and the reification postcolonial state structures. This approach has usefully been complicated with vernacular expressions of agency to capture the relationships between behaviour patterns and the specific environment of the transnational space. Going beyond the state-based conventional understanding of the border in order to uncover the border world as seen through the borderlander's vantage point, helps us escape a vision of state borders as "mirrors of nature [or] neutral transmitters of universal truths" (Short, 2003, p. 24).

The methodology section and, indeed the writing of this methodology into the rendering of empirical data analysis, have amply demonstrated that delinking the official border dimension from vernacular border performance helps uncover a sustained link between the vernacular imaginations of borderlanders and the various ways in which border communities “perform” the border space. Similarly, the centring of vernacular agency has shown, that within these practices and vernacular sense-making, are buried various silenced expressions of fears and anxieties which borderlanders either verbalise or perform in their relationship to the border. The insights from the fieldwork further suggest that the silenced ways in which borderlanders understand security threats and address them do carry the potential to expand human-oriented approaches to security and open avenues for research and policy work. To detail these implications for border and security scholarship, this Conclusion Chapter is divided into three main parts. The first part outlines key insights and arguments of this dissertation. The second draws the epistemological implications of these insights in terms of conceptualising border space in postcolonial contexts; rethinking security and resilience; and designing border policies more generally. The final part sets out potential research and policy paths on border security by proposing a conceptual tool (the *a-statal actorness*) and a conceptual framework for African borders.

7.1 Key insights and arguments: geographical imaginations

The main insights of this PhD project have consistently been structured thematically, discussed substantively in their respective chapter, and summarised accordingly in each conclusion sections. In the end, three overarching points emerge from this study: (1) the reified immobility and permanence of the state border; (2) the direct links between vernacular geographical imaginations and spatial practices of borderlanders; and (3) the expansion of security representations and notions of threat as harboured within these vernacular sense-making and practices. Interestingly, foregrounding the experiences and sense-making of borderlanders in this study is not only a methodological option with a potential to enrich empirical engagement of borderlands, it is also a logical move following the realisation that focusing on the reified functions of the state border cannot provide significant insight into the perspectives of borderlanders on the border space. In this section therefore, before summarising the project’s key findings on geographical imaginations, vernacular border practices and corresponding security meanings, I will firstly focus on an in-depth assessment of the qualitative data on the first point that has emerged, namely official border performativity as dynamic immobility. This will also serve as a steppingstone to the second part of this section, i.e. summarising the

relationship the borderlanders' geographical imaginations and their performance of the border space. Established in this study as a crucial entry point to the understanding of vernacular agency across the border space, the data on the imaginations-practices relationship reveal the borderlander as a self-centred actor navigating an integrated space beyond the territoriality of the state. In this *a-statal actorness* that produces vernacular idioms diverging or conflicting with the state rationale of the border, the borderlander is not an actor within state space. The third part of this section shows that idioms of security and vernacular resilience patterns are embedded within vernacular bordering practices.

7.1.1 *Border performativity as dynamic immobility*

As theorised by Rabinowitz (2001) and further explained by Navaro-Yashin (2003), the primary practical purpose of borders is to stop things, immobilise people and stall ideas from moving around without control. This function of the border has been verified in the two border locales studied, both from historical and spatial perspectives. The various ways in which the Nigeria-Cameroon and the Gabon-Cameroon state borders is experienced by borderlanders invoke the state's ability to constrain, restrict, and dictate against the communities' desire to benefit from the border space as a corridor of opportunity and/or a natural endowment vested in their geographical space. In this sense, a dynamism of the border understood as the constant changes in the ways in which the state delivers on this purpose of the border; its assessed impact on border communities is a flawed understanding of dynamism. It is flawed because when we look at the border from the perspectives of the borderlander, these changes - such as historical locations of borders, physical transformations and shifting policy practices - are not meaningful in themselves and do not seem to structure the entirety of social ordering around borders. Furthermore, their investment in immobility rather than mobility contrasts hugely with the principle of dynamism. These characteristics that dominate the usual understanding of the state border can therefore be rightly seen as the opposite of dynamic.

Border performativity has usually been understood as part of the notion that, borders acting as barriers, are intended to "censor" the movement of people, things, including ideas. In so doing, borders then trigger various social attempts to define them as much as they define the socio-spatial environment. The danger with this conceptualisation of border performativity is that it risks essentialising border communities as being themselves a product of the border, while

evidence from the data suggests that the border is just one relational element amongst many others within their spatial environment. Furthermore, this study has uncovered borderlanders' agency as one which wields control over the border space rather than being subjected to it. As seen in their negotiations of mobility, border communities in Cameroon-Gabon and Nigeria-Cameroon have come to intuitively associate the statist dimension of the border with the concept of immobility, rather than mobility which should normally underlie its intended dynamism. In effect, the border keeps attempting to arrest the dynamism of borderlanders by restricting their mobility or assigning new meanings to their actions across the border space. This potential of the state border to immobilise border populations can be seen in the symbolic meaning of barriers and checkpoints; waiting times associated with administrative formalities at the border or even the unresolved disruptions of the political order that "suspend" everyday life through biographical disruptions (see "Border Bridge Closed").

This borderlanders' perspective on mobility offers insights into the fact that the three regimes of expression (the global, the national and the local) that are projected unto the borderland as vectors of dynamism are actually converging to signify immobility. Hence, even if borderlanders inhabit a geographic receptacle of the classical tripartite scheme of the World Systems Theory known as the centre - semi-periphery - periphery, the tension between state and society across the border space is too complex to be grasped from this three-level perspective only. In addition, foregrounding the borderlander's geographical imaginations has shown that, in contrast to what is laid out in their classical understanding, the concepts of centre and periphery are much more fluid than geographically distributed. In other words, there are centres within/departing from the peripheries. Centring the borderlanders within their geographical space thus turns the notion of border performativity upside down, since, as Kolosov rightly observed, "local territorial communities are not passive subjects of exposure to central authorities, but actively influence the formation of identity, and the nature and perception of borders [...]" (2015, p. 43). The data collected from fieldwork suggest that border communities have integrated in their geographical imagination that borders are constantly transformed, displaced, reworked, re-functionalised. While these changes reflect the dominant policy/political climate of the day, I have observed that border communities are not so much interested in the details of changes, as they are in the permanence of these changes. The postcolonial border dynamism is in effect non-dynamic as the border itself never changes. Only communities adapt to various state reification processes, of which the border is a mere catalyst. As such, Wallach's dualistic conception of border performativity as an empty signifier (2011),

should be recast as a plurality of signifiers, most likely to be substantiated by vernacular practices than the state side of the border world. However, performativity is often understood as just the state side, and wrongly so. The state is predictable and therefore linear and non-dynamic as compared to the communities who are unpredictable, inventive, unrestrained and non-linear.

It is now clearer that the much-discussed dynamic nature of the border which essentially foregrounds the impact of changes in state functions of the border, as related to short-term socio-political activities, normally contrasts with its intended permanence and stability. Thus, by positing that “No border is built for a short term: it is built for eternity”, Van Houtum confirms the findings from critical historiographical analysis that even though the idea of the border itself might be permanent, no state borders possess eternal properties (2010, p. 290). However, the border properties are often taken to represent the border itself. Borderlanders make a distinction between the two, so as to effectively engage the permanence of the border. As shown through the empirical examination of borderlands in Cameroon, Gabon and Nigeria, borders have ceaselessly been changing both physically (actual wall/fences), locationally (moved from one place to another) and functionally (from imperial frontiers to inter-national borders). This means that the dynamism of the border seen in the sense of material instability fails to capture real border dynamics since the material changes described above constitute only a reflection of a permanent geographical construction that has been inserted into the mental landscape of the populations living around these borders. It is therefore very important to distinguish between the development of the border, which is axiomatic to the nature of the border and the dynamics it creates by “inscribing” itself unto the geographical imagination of the local populations. This dialectical ambivalence of the border where change is the only thing that does not change is also supported by the fact that African borders, as outcome of ongoing postcolonial state processes (also referred to as “official bordering practices” or “border dynamics”), are not necessarily a reflection or representation of border experiences.

These experiences are better discernible as outcome of vernacular practices that centralise the borderlander in an epistemology of the border. In other words, just as contemporary state bordering practices do not in themselves tell us anything about the borderlanders, apart from the impact these practices may have on them and further border policing changes, a border performativity seen through statist lens cannot truly account for vernacular bordering practices. So, while “bordering practices” (essentially border properties) can be seen as dynamic changes,

they do not mean much to the border community other than new parameters of a permanent situation. This completely shifts the focus to how primarily the social nature of interactions across borders is shaped by dynamic direct encounter between the two main vectors of the postcolonial border space, i.e. the vernacular and the official. Their location, physical changes, and state mobility policies are not as important as the new socio-economic dynamics generated as a response from border communities. The Cameroon-Nigeria and the Cameroon-Gabon borders have each espoused this oxymoronic conflation of, for lack of better phrase, dynamic stability, or static dynamism. They have not always been in their present location; they have changed forms and functions across historical time and geographical space. And yet, there is no better evidence of their ingrained permanence in the borderlanders' imaginaries of space than these changes themselves. Put differently, without looking at the response of border communities, a historical overview of these changes only confirms the entrenched nature of the colonial border and its reification in contemporary mainstream representation of the postcolonial African international border. Nevertheless, in their direct relationship to the border space, border communities engage the state borders on a daily basis not by rationalising these functions or properties of the state border, but rather by relating dialogically with signs, symbols and actions that denote the official border dimension.

As such, the performativity of the border space from the borderlander's perspective is the mobilisation of many tools and devices which take on different meanings. The totemic signs and symbols of the state such as flags, barriers, directions, uniforms, and even the road are examples of the ways in which the state is expressed in the physical realm and which borderlanders can contest or interact with accordingly. In this performative relationship to the border, we understand borderlanders' emphasis on themselves, not as subject to the border, but as social beings having command over their living space, of which the border is only an element mediated through these signs and symbols. This dichotomy between the vernacular and the official is different from the one that foregrounds the statist dimension of the border, as it allows the analysis to look both at the shifting layers of the border as understood by borderlanders as well as the discrete distribution of various bounded spaces produced by border communities across the physical and/or abstract space and time of the border. The complexity of borders in general, combined with the established fact that various sorts and dimensions of borders can exist within the same territorial space, compromises the notion of a dualistic and egalitarian understanding of border performativity. As outlined above, gaining a better understanding of the diverse factors which bring every unique (part of) border into being, requires a shift in focus

as advocated by border scholars such as David Newman (2015), namely moving from borders to bordering practices.

While doing this, it is however important to distinguish between state bordering practices and vernacular bordering practices. As seen throughout this thesis, state bordering practices do tell us more about the state, than they help us decode the said border itself. Conversely, a people-centred perspective which not only decentres, but also problematises this decentring process, has created a fundamental basis in understanding how vernacular relationships to spatial environment and practices of mobility work together to constantly reinvent borders in terms that are understood differently by borderlanders. That is why it was necessary to carry out an exercise on the development of the two border areas studied and link this development to be analysed as a non-dynamic process underpinning the static nature of the border. In this step towards decoding the border from a non-statist perspective, the different border and bordering components and functions have been bundled together as an integrated performance of externality and adversity vis-à-vis centralised border communities. Looking at the constant changes in bordering dynamics as a transcript of a territorial “tumult” in the past, as well as their present-day consequences, allows us to critically examine what these changes mean for border communities as they deal with the multifaceted and amorphous processes of borders shifting physically and functionally. Narratives of the past, anecdotes of lived reality, mobility patterns, accounts of everyday experiences, expression of sense-making, etc. collected from various individuals across the border areas studied constitute the discursive landscape, through which communities attempt to make sense of state borders through their own practices. This discursive landscape, which certainly shapes their geographical imagination, renders a representation of their living space as one within which constant changes are naturalised and internalised. As an indication of emerging vernacular resilience strategies for instance, many respondents linked their preparedness for instability to these changes that they expect and address regularly.

Overall, this understanding of border performativity has allowed the uncovering of a different and active rapport to territorial space where the borderlander’s agency is primarily geared towards their present need for new resources and/or societal fulfilment. As fieldwork has also allowed us to observe, these primary motivations underlie the diverging functions of their own representation across space, as compared to the intended or assumed functions of the state border. Paradoxically therefore, while the border presents itself as a facilitator of movement,

yet gaining meaning as a restrictor of mobility namely through stopping or monitoring the movement of goods and people, borderlanders pull themselves in the direction of bi-placement, pretending immobility while actually their performance of the border space as related to their geographical imaginations denote an extensive engagement with mobility across the border space. In this performative relationship to the border, we understand borderlanders' emphasis on themselves, not as subject to the border, but as social beings having command over their living space, of which the border is only an element mediated through signs and symbols. This dichotomy between the vernacular and the official is different from the one that foregrounds the statist dimension of the border, as it allows the analysis to look both at the shifting layers of the border as understood by borderlanders as well as the discrete distribution across various bounded spaces produced by communities in the physical and/or abstract space and time of the border.

7.1.2 *Borderlander's Geographical Imaginations and Performance of Border Space*

In the following lines, I will revisit the building blocks of the borderlanders' geographical imaginations (imaginings of self and space) as well as the ways in which these have structured various negotiations of (im)mobility within the border area.

Starting with imaginations of space, the data analysed suggest that, as a response to the rigid and oppressive character of the official border, borderlanders conceive of the border space as multi-layered. By "blowing up" the border into its constituent parts, borderlanders find it more manageable to navigate the border space in sequence or deal with one layer while avoiding the other. Of crucial significance to this vernacular "layerisation" of the border is the distinction between fixed layers and shifting layers of the exigencies imposed by the official border. For example, in the identity category, nationality is a fixed layer of the border as seen by borderlanders, but ancestry and marriage can be used as shifting layers to move around nationality and escape its rigidity. Still in relation to space, the data suggest that borderlanders create several spaces within the border space, both abstract and physical, whose bounds are inhabitable either simultaneously, in sequence, or discriminatorily. Amongst these spaces, I have particularly noted spaces of legitimacy, spaces of money and spaces of community, as distinct bounds within the border space, or because of the border space. Within the parameters of these spaces, the overarching impetus for action is either security, money or community respectively. Needless to say, that the spaces thus listed are not exhaustive, but they are important as illustrations of how to access the border

world from the vernacular vantage point. Equally important is the relationship between the border space and its overall meaning for the borderlanders.

In this regard, in addition to seeing the border as one element of their spatial environment amongst others, an insightful distinction has emerged between *Border Deniers* and *Border Acknowledgers*. Identified as the first building blocks of the borderlander's sense-making, these two categories are not conceived in the sense of positivist or deterministic classification of borderlanders. Instead, they should be seen as a mapping of a fluid relationship to border space as expressed by borderlanders. In other words, a Border Denier can become a Border Acknowledger and vice-versa, depending upon circumstances. The former category is made up of individuals/behaviour patterns that typically live in the transborder space, yet do not accept/conceive of themselves or their lives as dependent on, or influenced by, the international border nearby. The latter, however, may or may not live in the 'frontier' space, but engages the state dimension of the border in various ways to facilitate mobility, and/or as economic strategy. I observed that, while *Border Acknowledgers* label themselves as "Border Person", "Border Girl", "Border Man", etc. to emphasise their bi-locational identities, *Border Deniers* instead consider the border as having no bearing on their identity. At most, they consider their cross-border identity to supersede the border, which is therefore immaterial in their imaginations of self. Both categories of identities in the borderlands studied are expressed through statements, signs and symbols that constitute a discursive divergence. Indeed, as summarised above, we noted that imaginations of space vary. This variation is shaped by the borderlander's situation in relation to the border. For example, *Border Acknowledgers* view the official border as a corridor of opportunity that can be engaged through various mobility strategies, while *Border Deniers* see the official dimension of the border as a nuisance that should be annihilated, if not physically, at least symbolically.

Consequently, a divergence emerges in the type of preoccupation and activities expressed by both categories of borderlanders based on the sense they make of the border space in relation to their particular circumstances. While *Border Acknowledgers* are more interested in how to mobilise their social capital and especially their bi-placed identities and solidarity networks to freely navigate the border space, *Border Deniers* work towards the symbolic deconstruction of the border in order to highlight the physical continuity of their living space. The data collected also suggest different forms of attachment to the territorial space of the border. Whereas *Border Deniers* tend to live a little further from the main border towns and profess a moral commitment to living in these specific locations, *Border Acknowledgers* are more transient and can move around more easily following business tide and whims. These differences and diverging attitudes are however of a very superficial order, because when one looks more closely,

both *Border Deniers* and *Border Acknowledgers* participate in different aspects of the same politics of rejection of the state border, juggling vernacular spaces and negotiation strategies to achieve the same goal of disabling the effects of the state border on them.

In terms of similarities, both types of borderlanders above all see the border's advantageous aspects as an entitlement to which they are naturally eligible. I have concluded that emphasising bi-placed identity to navigate the border space is not just a mobility strategy; it appears in fact to be a chiasmic operation that enables the borderlander to mentally dissociate from the official border in order to avoid the ambiguity of both cooperating and rejecting, while all the same retaining the moral ability to justify the benefiting from the border. Notably, *Border Acknowledgers* see the border as a corridor of opportunities, to which their bi-placed identity guarantees preferential entitlement. Conversely, *Border Deniers* who reject the notion of the state border as much as possible, still see their transborder living environment as a natural endowment for which state interference is uncalled for. A case in point is the Etung transnational forest. Put it simply, both border "acknowledgers" and "deniers" end up participating in the same practice of disabling the border in order to reduce its effects as much as possible, even though we can see differing imaginations of the border as summarised above, or imaginations of self as will be summarised in the following lines.

The materiality of the border in itself is not a significant concern and has been accepted within the geographical imagination of borderlanders as a "fact of life". This can also be observed in their integration of multiple identities and spatial adjustments in their social relations where we found no "crises of identities" or "borderlands hysteria". Borderlanders see borders as corridors of opportunity only as long as these borders allow them to maintain some freedom of opportunity around and across them. In a sense, their full embrace of their interstitial space is only predicated upon the certainty that they can control their own movement and to certain extent, the movement of other people crossing the border area. However, their perceptions of control regimes imposed by states on borders denote disruptive interference which destabilise their sense of continuity. By considering the borderland as a natural endowment ("deniers"), or free movement as a right to which they are entitled ("acknowledgers"), borderlanders solve the conundrum often perceived as their incoherency between loathing and benefiting from the border. As far as they are concerned, the advantages of the border are just a coincidence, a matter of fate which could have been negative, and they would still have dealt with. Hence, the strategic transborder location of the Etung forest or Cameroon-Gabon border villages selling black pepper is not something that borderlanders readily admit in their narratives. Instead they brush this under the rug to emphasise the fact that their geographical unit is one and continuous,

despite the border. Both groups therefore set themselves to operate according to mental and physical frameworks that transcend national boundaries and nation-state borders.

7.1.3 *Borderless performance of the border space*

The discursive difference constructed as part of imaginations of self and space in the borderland is very important, especially as regards the ways in which these imaginations shape differing performances of the border in terms of negotiations, vernacular politics of resources, and mobility strategies. Analysis of semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation provides the understanding that both types of borderlanders experience the performance of the border superstructure (check points, officials, rules and regulations) as a disruption to their perceived sense of continuity – despite the border itself being an opportunity. In order to circumvent this disturbance in the physical and temporal spaces between them and their socio-economic pursuits, borderlanders come up with various practices that are solidly aligned with their geographical imaginations. Examples include several negotiation strategies used by border crossers or border residents taking advantage of mobility across the border. In this case, bi-placed identities have constituted a key asset in navigating the border space. Furthermore, strategies to dismiss the border amongst *Border Deniers* have also been interpreted as emanating from their vernacular representation of the border space as a natural endowment over which they have ancestral rights that supersede various constructions and functions of the state border. To mark their agency and refusal to be subjectified by the border, patterns of border personification are all indicative of the fact that borderlanders consider the border not as the sole defining aspect of their life, but as an important relational item in their multi-layered living space that extends even beyond the physical location of the border. In any case, juggling with the varied layers and across the multiple spaces within the border space, the performance of the border indicates more control than normally envisaged. This control reifies the agency of borderlanders in mobility patterns and politics of resources, which themselves carry deep-seated idioms of resilience and security.

7.1.4 *Embedded idioms of resilience and security*

The rejection or the disabling of the official border is a single objective aimed at by both types of borderlanders and achieved through different means. These include discursive strategies,

performative strategies, and linguistic strategies. In terms of discursive strategies, this thesis has shown how both categories of borderlanders create a dissuading discourse directed towards border officials, with the aim of significantly reducing the ability of the border to control them or dictate their behaviour. For mobility practices, discourses of bi-placement, entitlement and even of political neglect, enable users to lessen the financial impact of crossing the border. These are also means through which many other borderlanders control and/or profit from the mobility of others crossing their territorial space. In the performative realm, the actions of *Border Deniers* are more telling of their desire to physically prevent the border from materialising with both linguistic and semiotic distancing, in addition to active subterfuges. In other words, their spatial performance through language, signs and symbols is, at the same time, a dismantlement of the state border.

These all point to the border as a permanent threat, or at least a continuous disruption that borderlanders address on a daily basis as part of keeping control over their living spaces. Their fears and anxieties are therefore embedded within their actions and strategies, which (upon deeper analysis) can be read as vernacular idioms of security and resilience that apply to other areas of life. Furthermore, as an extension of geographical imaginations and vernacular bordering practices, these idioms of securing and surviving expand the concept of security into the vernacular and the concept of resilience to plurality. As such, the interaction between three processes (imaginaries of space and self; contentious mobility and resource politics; idioms of threat and disruption) forms the crux upon which revolves the borderlander's vernacular agency. Put differently, the ways in which borderlanders make sense of the border space and act accordingly, also comprise vernacular understandings of threat and disruption, as well as vernacular responses to these dangers.

For instance, the personification of the border, seen as a circumscribing a threat or a disruption before addressing it, has enabled us to establish how meanings of vernacular security and patterns of resilience can be gleaned from the otherwise anodyne actions of border communities. In order to complete this exercise, it has first of all been necessary to centralise the vernacular worldview which structures the actions of the borderlander. Like in *Odette's* story, this acceptance of vernacular interpretation of border space has enabled us not only to see a possible hermeneutical alternative for the explanation of the origin(s) of insecurity, it has also helped uncover the choices made by borderlanders to protect themselves, their communities and the continuity of sustained livelihoods. In this sense, the imaginaries of the border as expressed by borderlanders is not just a passive perception of geographical spaces, it is an operative

imaginary that structures rational actions taking into account the transborder nature of this particular physical space. In the case study of the transborder Etung forest for instance, we note how vernacular conceptualisation of the transnational forest leads to what would qualify as robust environmental and human security. Furthermore, these vernacular practices of security raise questions about the cost of security in mainstream understanding of border policing. Apart from these idioms of security, the practices of border communities in the two border locales also show several examples of resilience practices that help rethink the concept of resilience, and most importantly the conventional understanding of disruption.

To conclude this section on key insights of the study, it is safe to say that thick cartographic borderlines which represent international borders between states, are actually also signifiers of ongoing negotiations between border communities and their spatial environment. The variety of the geographical imaginations' constitutive elements, and corresponding socio-spatial organisation and bordering practices are fuelled by the permanency of the border as both postcolonial disruption and opportunity. From cross-border solidarity networks to transnational vernacular security institutions, the social dynamics and modes of spatial organisations generated in response to the (post)colonial border are testament to vernacular agency of borderlanders. By shifting the focus to the daily lives of border residents and users, an eclectic map of the border space begins to emerge, within which vernacular trajectories and performative interests are juxtaposed. By envisioning the border as a contested political structure with sometimes limited social insertion, the border space appears as a site of agency where local patterns of expression, and indeed of being, contest and compete with the state to constantly reinvent the border space beyond the state itself. We now see that first, navigating the border space is also synonymous with juggling between several identities and spaces, or holding onto many of them at the same time. Secondly, the border community is an assemblage, woven together in its members' shared belonging to the border and their relative consciousness of this common destiny that however stops short of being defined solely by the border. This is demonstrated by greater affinity for ethnically different borderlanders than for co-ethnics or co-citizens who do not belong to the border area. Third, these findings suggest that the border retains a special importance in the development of community consciousness across the border space and remains an important crux of the multi-pivotal geographical imagination of the border community. Fourth and finally, the ways in which borderlanders conceive and perform the border space are also a coded transcript of their particular idioms of security and vernacular resilience patterns. In this regard, these findings bear many epistemological implications.

7.2 Epistemological implications

The findings of this research bear epistemological implications of two main orders. Firstly, there are implications in terms of conceptualising the postcolonial border space in Africa, and secondly these findings lead to rethinking bottom-up approaches especially as concerns security and resilience. Conceptualisation of border space as a site of contestation and performativity is enriched by the borderlanders' geographical imaginations, which, when centred, cast a new light on the border space as more complex than just a physical divide between two countries or an abstract fault line between statelessness and stateness. Conceived through vernacular lens, the border space emerges first, and foremost as natural endowment bestowed upon borderlanders or as a corridor of opportunity within which they are legitimately entitled to navigate without state restrictions. Furthermore, this perspective on border space questions its usually assumed marginality through the border's ability to centralise and revive social issues that have been swept under the rug as illegal, and yet which resurface at the border in question marks. For example, between vernacular spaces of legitimacy and spaces of community, what is known as child trafficking takes on a plural meaning and highlights a nationwide state inability to discharge its duty of care towards neglected children. In this regard, the second order of epistemological implications of these research findings expand the notions of safety and threat through an alternative understanding of vernacular practices. In other words, security and resilience as seen by borderlanders displace, relocate and complicate what it means to be safe. Where disruptions to complex human systems are usually conceived as external and abrupt, borderlanders teach us that the border itself is a disruption and, what is more, a permanent and slow one integrated in the functional make-up of the border itself. In response, vernacular resilience and security strategies are embedded and entangled within the border-community relationship. The border becomes a disruption that border communities embrace as part of mitigating various adverse effects of their otherwise advantageous living space -instead of seeking to eliminate or run away from the said disruption.

The various resilience strategies used by borderlanders lead to three main epistemological implications for resilience thinking. Firstly, resilience as a practice is embroiled in the borderlander's entire existence ("border girl"). This embroilment of resilience as a way of life conceives of resilience as a life equipment inherent to the border actor, and which should be harnessed instead of being provided by external agencies. Secondly, and directly related to the permanence of resilience, is the challenge to the universal understanding that seems to prevail over what a disruption or a threat is. In resilience thinking, shocks or disruptions or threats are often seen as eventful, sudden, external and "loud" (Lindroth & Sinevaara-Niskanen, 2019; Walker & Cooper, 2011). However, we see through vernacular eyes that the border as a

disruption or threat is an internally impulsion instead of integral dynamics; silent instead of loud; and continuous instead of sudden or abrupt. Put differently, the postcolonial as a site of tension constitutes a permanent and silent disruption to the lives of borderlanders. The most important part of this argument is not the ways in which colonial legacy combines with the physical feature of the postcolonial nation-state and instrument of neoliberal global order to constitute a threat or disruption. Instead, just as it is important to see plurality in resilience practices that incorporate vernacular resilience of borderlanders, it is equally important to expand the notion of disruption or threat beyond its conventional understanding. As a third epistemological implication, this expansion creates a link between security and resilience through the commonality of the ways in which border practices tell us more about vernacular meanings of fear and anxiety, than they do about the physical constraints posed by the border.

This goes to show that while border constraints and processes might be universal, the key insights from this research suggest that border communities across Cameroon, Nigeria and Gabon respond to these constraints in a way that alter their meaning. As such, the vernacular layers of meanings that are created in response to the official dimension of the border become necessary to fully understand bordering practices deployed by these communities. Hence, the actions of these communities across the border are based on a rationale that is mediated through their geographical imaginations rather than through the border dynamics. The point of departure to understanding their bordering practices, or indeed this rationale, should therefore be the sense they make of the border space and not the functions of the state border or the latter's supposed impact on the border society. A triangulation of the border space, border practices and geographical imaginations as shown below (Figure 5), reveals that these three are centred on idioms of threat and disruption which border communities address on a daily basis.

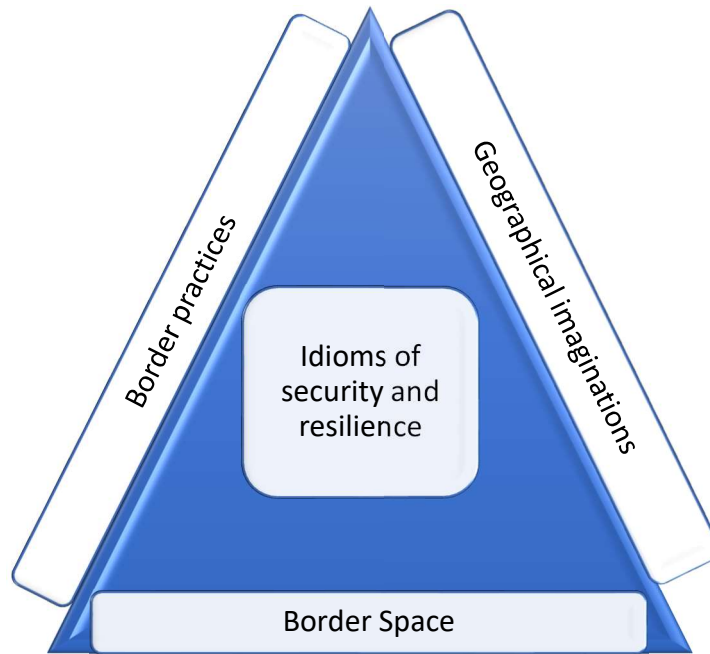


Figure 4 – Triangulation: border space, border practices and geographical imaginations

Consequently, their security representations and resilience strategies are all embedded in the ways in which they make sense of the border space and physically relate to its distributional organisation across time and community. Such a triangulation is an opportunity to bridge the cognitive gap between the “spatial turn” paradigm and the persistent failure of human-centred approaches to directly capture the agency of specific communities within their living environment, especially in the context of resource politics (Brown, 2011). Where borderlanders are conveniently casted as passive subjects of the border, this triangulation goes beyond the mere invocation of vernacular agency to provide a pathway towards substantiating their control over the border space and the material possibilities thereof. This is also an emancipation from assumptions that conceive of borderlanders as necessarily a trope for mobility or displacement.

Looking at how borderlanders operate on their subjective and situated spatial coordinates, the geographical physicality of the state border and indeed its reifying instruments fail to contain the production of vernacular spaces. The concept of *a-statal actorness* has risen from this research data analysis and lingered over its rendering because mobility has proved too reductionist to capture and explain the phenomenological relationship between the border communities studied and the state border, as part of border performativity. As a matter of fact, transborder mobility (i.e. literally moving from point A to point B across the border) explains many of the attitudes and negotiation strategies deployed by borderlanders in their interactions with state border agents. Beyond their own mobility, we have also seen how many border residents centralise their own marginality through the control of other people’s mobility

across the borderland, as a way of sustaining livelihoods. It is therefore undeniable that the border is a site of intense and dynamic mobility practices. However, the mobility paradigm does not account for the imaginations of self and of space that profoundly structure these socio-economic strategies across the borderland, and indeed other attitudes and practices that seem to contradict. The mobility paradigm would, for instance, fail to explain the apparent paradoxical tension between *Border Acknowledgers* and *Border Deniers*. While we might attempt to explain the attitudes and practices of the former through mobility lenses, it is more difficult to use mobility as a defining element of the latter's relationship to the border. In the second group of borderlanders, immobility seems to be the predominant paradigm anyway.

Indeed, as seen earlier, mobility is paradoxically promoted by the border while the geographical imaginations and bi-placed identities constructed by borderlanders structure a discourse of immobility. Flaws have therefore been revealed in the mobility paradigm by the combined effect of the following findings: both groups of borderlanders eventually concur in their objective of “disabling” the border by arguing for immobility where the border sees mobility; the distinction between these two groups is more operational than ontological; and from the borderlander's perspective mobility equates subalternity. Based on this realisation, emphasising mobility in the understanding of the border and indeed of borderlanders therefore amounts to persisting in the foregrounding of the statist paradigm. Following on from the preceding demonstration, it is clear that as a marginal process reifying the state paradigm, mobility is unable to encompass border performativity in its entirety. Instead, it seems more coherent to look at the borderlander as an actor in direct relationship with their situated spatial environment, expunged from the overblown ability of state processes to shape space and define behaviours. The conceptualisation of this converse ability as *a-statal actorness* helps us express that theorising the postcolonial border in Africa from a community perspective, gains in being articulated as theory of vernacular practices in an integrated spatial environment, instead of as a theory of state space embroiled in particular marginal social processes.

This leads us to the conclusion that knowledge production about borders especially in postcolonial Africa has mainly assumed that merely looking at the (negative) societal impact of changes in the reifying state realm amounts to a critical study of borders. Nevertheless, it has been demonstrated that while changes in state structure or border functions are likely to reconfigure the meaning of space for the border society, very little is still known about how this change of meaning is (re)produced through the representations and actions of the said society. Moreover, even people-centred approaches have tended to reinforce the assumption that state-based changes shape the “third space” created through the border-society dynamics.

Consequently, this research has attempted to sketch out a knowledge gap created by poor consideration of vernacular bordering practices, which tend to be linked to known changes in the realm of the state border, such as policy changes, cross border conflict and disaster management in remote locations. Such an approach overlooks the wealth of other dynamics from below that offer perhaps better explanations of vernacular bordering practices. In order to fill this lacuna and bridge the knowledge gap indicated above, the iterative analysis of semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation conducted as part of this research project establish that more solid empirical links exist between the borderlanders' imaginations of self and of space on the one hand, and bordering practices on the other hand. Most importantly, thus foregrounding the vernacular sense-making of the border space opens up learning beyond vernacular practices across the border space. It centralises vernacular idioms of threat and expands the notions of security and resilience beyond their restrictive conventional framework. The design of border policies and indeed of any people-centred intervention in border areas might benefit from the “convex” framework or “valley” path for policy and research that emerges from this study.

7.3 The proposed valley research path or convex border framework

7.3.1 *What is it?*

In order to show the potential usefulness of the *valley research path* or the *convex border framework*, I will begin by explaining the representation of this framework. Then, I will proceed to elaborate on how this representation articulates with key elements of the framework itself. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a convex is an abstract shape “curved or rounded outward like the exterior of a sphere or circle”, and the dictionary adds the interesting mathematical detail that a convex is also made up “*of a set of points : containing all points in a line joining any two constituent points*”. The closest physical similarities to this framework's abstract representation could be an upright bowl, as opposed to a bowl turned upside down (a concave). A convex can also be likened to a valley, as opposed to a mountain (inspired by the geographical landscape of the borderlands studied).

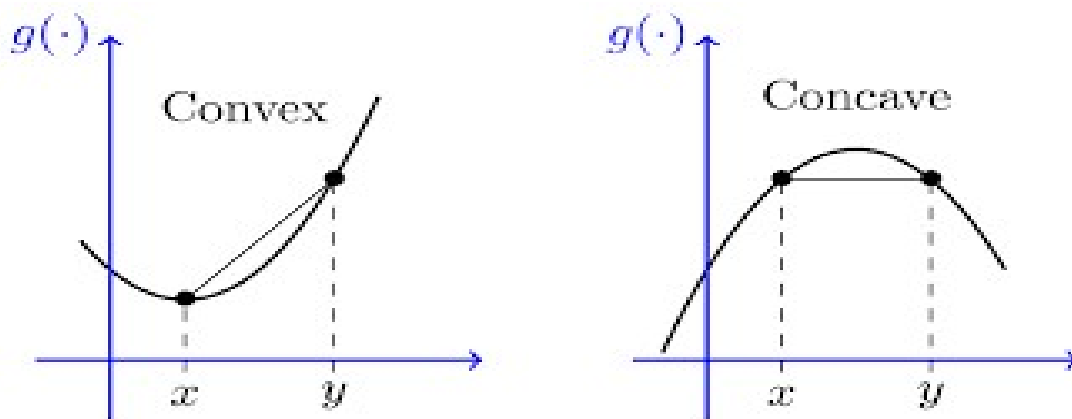


Figure 5 - A convex Vs a Concave. Source : Stack-Exchange

<https://math.stackexchange.com/questions/2364116/how-to-remember-which-function-is-concave-and-which-one-is-convex>

The representation of this framework is much more than shapes, it casts the relationships and interconnections between the cognitive triptych consisting of knowledge production, border experiences, and border performativity. The images of the convex and the valley are summoned here to camp this representation because, with their references both to corresponding shape and the connection between a set of points in mathematical terms, they accurately represent both the rich tapestry of vernacular sense-making and the performative relationships that have been overlooked in border and security studies. Put in another way, the mountain or upside-down bowl approaches to studying the postcolonial border brought to acknowledge all the three elements listed above but establish flawed connections between them as illustrated below.

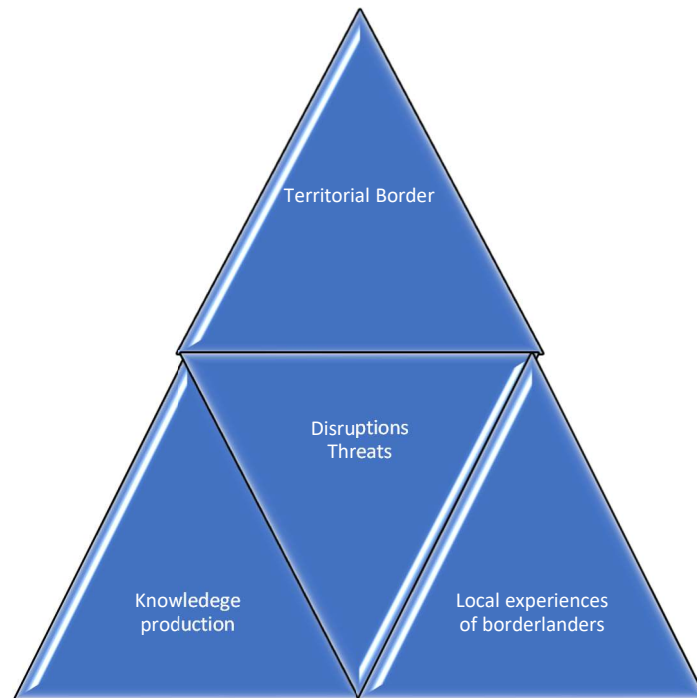


Figure 6 - The mountain (concave) approach to studying borders

The mountain approach summarises the critique I have made of the state of the field. In this representation, the most prominent element is the peak of the mountain or the top of the bowl/concave, symbolising territorial border performativity. This could be the phenomenological manifestations of any type security threat or even natural hazard, or a combination of both in the border context. This mountain framework shows how people-centred approaches in the vernacular or local turn are indeed informed through the base by vernacular experiences. This aligns with global development and humanitarian frameworks such as the *Sendai Framework*, the *Grand Bargain*, the *New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States* and the *International Health Regulations*. The knowledge production that shapes theories and policies engaging state functions and disruptions seem in fact to be tuned to these local experiences. However, it is instead a matter of proportion, position and orientation. In this mountain analogy, the rather subterranean relationship between knowledge production and vernacular experiences is the metaphor of how vernacular voices are muted or silenced within knowledge production about borders. This is exemplified by the AUBP acknowledgement of border communities, who are nevertheless not centralised in border policy making. Furthermore, as can also be seen on the mountain approach representation, the subterranean relationship between local experiences and knowledge production is one of domination and silencing through compartmentalisation. Consequently, theories and policies on threats and disruptions are still very much dominated by territoriality, even though they are connected to vernacular practices. Finally, upward orientation means that there is bound to be an imbalance or divergence of the territorial border from the vernacular experiences of threats and disruptions. In contrast to the above, the convex

approach as below advances a framework for border theorisation and policy design, that alters the positions, reshuffles these relationships and overturns the orientation.

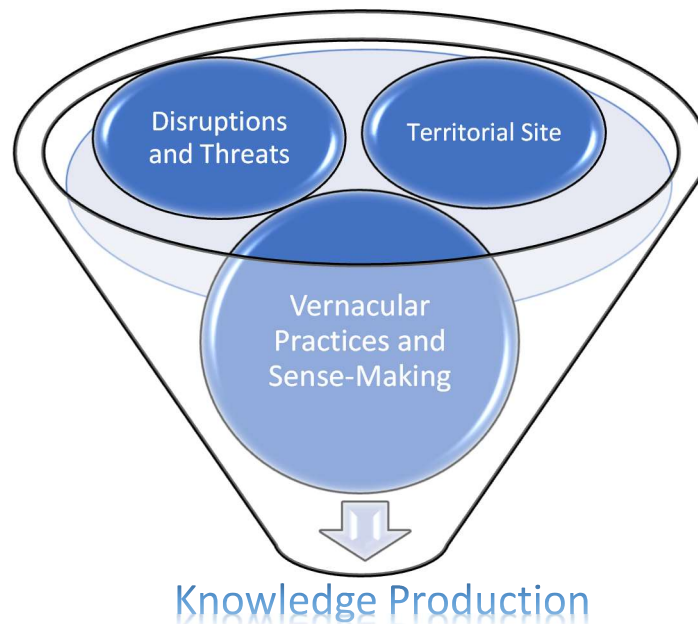


Figure 7 - The valley (convex) approach to studying borders

The above figure represents the convex border framework or the valley research pathway that has emerged out the key insights and epistemological implications of this study. It summarises how the key findings and their epistemological implications reconfigure the postcolonial border as a site of knowledge pertaining to the border itself, but also to issues of security and resilience. This reconfiguration also covers the proportion of vernacular input, the position in knowledge production as well as orientation of the flow of conceptualisations about borders. Firstly, in terms of position, disruptions and border site are placed at equidistance from the centre of the convex, with no direct relationship to each other. This means that both elements of the framework are important, but not central. Instead, the centre and the mediating both the production of knowledge about borders and the construction of border performativity are invested by two distinct layers of border factors (vernacular sense-making and border practices). Secondly, in terms of proportion, the equidistance between both disruptions and the border site ensures that both elements of the framework, though not in direct relationship, can be fed-back in equal proportion with the empirical dynamics of the border. These multi-layered empirical dynamics themselves constitute the larger portion of the framework, owning the typical relationships between vernacular sense-making and border practices (both official and vernacular). Finally, the flow of conceptualisation of the border space goes from the border site itself all the way to knowledge production but passes through the necessary tapestry of border practices and vernacular sense-making.

Hence, this framework allows the researcher, theorist, policymaker or intervention worker to avoid the universalism of human-centred approaches, as they continue to conceal dominant imaginaries of the postcolonial border. It looks at the deeper meaning of border practices beyond discourse, by using vernacular narratives as an entry point to empirically engaging border sites. It ultimately conceptualises border practices as a multi-layered performativity, by centralising vernacular-sense making. This is, according to the findings of this research, a key to uncovering border practices as defined by the geographical imaginations of border communities and their own idioms of security and continuity. Combining these constitutive elements of the postcolonial border can enable us to frame a theoretical space for the expression of the borderlander's agency or (the) *a-statal actorness*.

7.3.2 *Framing a theoretical space for the African borderlander's agency*

The contention that modernisation is a reconfiguration of colonisation as far as formerly colonised people are concerned combines with the reifying legacies of colonialism such as borders, to highlight the necessity of a paradigmatic shift that will frame a theoretical space for the African borderlander's agency. The two main parts of concept of "delinking" as laid out by Mignolo (2011) consists in this paradigmatic shift. Untangling and isolating the "third world" away from the subsuming conceptual web of coloniality on the one hand; and rebuilding its politics, economy and philosophy on the other hand constitute the concept's main tenets. Firstly, the paradigmatic shift advocated by the untangling and isolation of the "third world" is achieved here through the choice of border sites, and types of actors. In other words, the first step of delinking is covered by choosing to work on border locales that are not defined by active post-conflict or disaster management programmes. In its second dimension, focusing on the *a-statal actorness* of border performativity complements this isolation from coloniality. This provides a framework for the recovery of vernacular histories and knowledges. Furthermore, tapping into the vernacular sense-making of borderlanders through a narrative approach creates a discursive space wherein the borderlander's worldview and related practices can predominantly shape the understanding of the border. A look at the African borders in this fashion is therefore deconstruction of the ways in which borderlanders have been integrated into the coloniality of power through colonial map-making, post-colonial state-building rationales, and interventionist agendas. Positioning the postcolonial border as a site of knowledge therefore means framing a space wherein the agency of the borderlanders can be theorised. This means crafting the centrality of *a-statal actorness* in the understanding of the border as a contested site.

In so doing throughout this research project, a distinctly emancipated voice of the African borderlander emerges from what Mignolo terms the “abyssal line” of knowledge production. This line of “epistemicide” i.e. a process through which non-colonial knowledges are rendered invisible or swallowed up (Grosfoguel, 2013; Santos, 2014) runs through the pre-eminence of Westphalian conceptualisations of territorial space, and universalist understandings of security even when repackaged as bottom-up. Creating a space for theorising vernacular knowledge in border locales means conceiving of the African borderlander as an emancipated agent, tapping into the *a-statal actorness* of the borderland. The borderlander should be seen here as performing at equidistance between the state site and the expected impact of external processes influencing their environment. The borderlander is the centre of their own world (in this case the border site), where their situatedness is centred mainly on their needs and not in presumed relationship to the absence or oppressive presence of a political order. *A-statal actorness* therefore operates as full social agency in negotiating mobility and mobilisation of resources across relatively distant sites encompassing the border. It is a conceptual tool that captures the agency of border communities and their sense-making in order to better understand the ways in which these interact with other dematerialised border actors such as political structures and sociohistorical trajectories. Locating this beyond the state/non-state dichotomy has enabled the gleaning of idioms of resilience and security embedded in socio-spatial dynamics and vernacular representation of space. This clearly shows that various disruptions and threats in the border context have not fundamentally altered the relationship between border communities and their spatial environment. Instead, they have provided a new context for expressing this *a-statal actorness* as can best be recovered through vernacular narratives. This is certainly not a revolutionary insight, but the potential impact of thus conceptualising the borderlander would be significant to any theoretical approach of the African border. The borderlander’s agency is therefore located in the interstice between the vernacular and epistemological, as supported by borderlanders’ narratives.

Finally, inquiring how the practices of borderlanders translate across different local contexts becomes synonymous to isolating and monitoring the independent interactions of such actors through *a-statal actorness*. This can help reformulate questions of spatiality and security especially as far as the postcolonial border is concerned. It emerges from this novel outlook on border space, that theorising the postcolonial border in the African context should be articulated more as a theory of *a-statal actorness* instead of theory of state space, and, within the same token, as a theory which foregrounds the voice of vernacular agency in relation to geographical space. Beyond unmuting vernacular voices from borderland communities, centring vernacular forms of spatial practices

offers new insights into understanding security and resilience. These insights may benefit students of security, resilience, borders as well as humanitarian practitioners.

FORM UPR16

Research Ethics Review Checklist

Please include this completed form as an appendix to your thesis (see the Research Degrees Operational Handbook for more information)



Postgraduate Research Student (PGRS) Information		Student ID:	514052			
PGRS Name:	Dieunedort Wandji					
Department:	SASPHL	First Supervisor:	Dr Olivia U. Rutazibwa			
Start Date: <small>(or progression date for Prof Doc students)</small>	October 2015					
Study Mode and Route:	Part-time	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	MPhil	<input type="checkbox"/>	MD	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Full-time	<input type="checkbox"/>	PhD	<input type="checkbox"/>	Professional Doctorate	<input type="checkbox"/>

Title of Thesis:	Bigfooted border theories, barefooted border crossers. Rethinking resilience and security through the vernacular sense-making and practices of border communities across Cameroon, Nigeria and Gabon
Thesis Word Count: <small>(excluding ancillary data)</small>	86139

If you are unsure about any of the following, please contact the local representative on your Faculty Ethics Committee for advice. Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University's Ethics Policy and any relevant University, academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study

Although the Ethics Committee may have given your study a favourable opinion, the final responsibility for the ethical conduct of this work lies with the researcher(s).

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a) Have all of your research and findings been reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
b) Have all contributions to knowledge been acknowledged?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
c) Have you complied with all agreements relating to intellectual property, publication and authorship?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
d) Has your research data been retained in a secure and accessible form and will it remain so for the required duration?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
e) Does your research comply with all legal, ethical, and contractual requirements?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>

Candidate Statement:

I have considered the ethical dimensions of the above named research project, and have successfully obtained the necessary ethical approval(s)

Ethical review number(s) from Faculty Ethics Committee (or from NRES/SCREC):	16/17:05
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If you have *not* submitted your work for ethical review, and/or you have answered 'No' to one or more of questions a) to e), please explain below why this is so:

Signed (PGRS):	Date: 30/07/20
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Appendix

Interview guide

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Nickname: ----- **Age Range:** ----- **Gender:** ----- **Profession:** -----

Location(s) of interviews: ----- **Date(s) of interview(s):**----- **Language of interview:**

Interview Profile:

~ DAY 1 ~

A. BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

- 1- Were you born here?
- 2- Why did your family move from ----?
- 3- Or when did you or your parents move here? Why? N/A (When did you settle here)
(What business?)
- 4- What made you move from your place of birth? (if relevant)
- 5- Where does the majority of your relatives live? Why?
- 6- Which ethnic group would you most likely identify with?
- 7- Apart from English/French, what other languages do you speak?
- 8- Which of these languages, including English do you find more useful? Why?
- 9- Which of these languages, including English do you consider your mother tongue?
Why?
- 10- What is your job here?

B. TIES AND NETWORKING ACROSS BORDER

- 11- How often do you cross into Cameroon/Nigeria/Gabon? (if ever)
- 12- What was the last time?
- 13- Do you have friends, partners, and relatives on other side of the border?
- 14- Where? In Ekok or further afield?
- 15- Tell me about them (relatives, partners, etc.)
- 16- How are people on the other side of the border related to you?
- 17- Do you consider yourself as related to Cameroonians? How?
- 18- Do you understand one or tribal more languages? (If not, why?)
- 19- Can you tell me about three separate occasions you have been to other side of the border (if any?)
- 20- How do you feel about them coming here? Are they useful?

C. RELATION TO SPACE - MOVEMENT / TRANSPORTATION

- 21- Do you know how long that border has been there?
- 22- Is it a good or a bad thing for your movements?
- 23- Have you ever been to the border? Is it a big place? Why (not)?
- 24- If they could change a few things on that border what would you propose?
- 25- How did you feel about the trip – to the border or to Cameroon?
- 26- Can you describe the journey (from here to Ekok)?
- 27- What are the risks in travelling to the other side of the border ? How would you avoid those risks?
- 28- How did you travel? What did you do during the journey (and why)?
- 29- Can you do the job you are doing here somewhere else far from the border? Yes
- 30- How does the other side of the border contribute to your job and security here?
- 31- I hear that a long time ago, Cameroonians and Nigerians/Gabonese living in this area were one people. Can you tell me more about this?
- 32- How did you learn about all this?

D. SECURITY IN OWN TERMS (BASIC VERNACULAR PERCEPTION)

- 33- According to you, what is security?
- 34- Who is responsible for your security?

- 35- Are you responsible for other people's security? Why not? (or how)
- 36- What do you have to protect here?
- 37- Against what/whom do you have to protect from?
- 38- What would you say is the level of threat from what you have described?
- 39- What are you most afraid of here?
- 40- If you were affected like that, whose fault would you say it is?
- 41- There are more security forces in this area than in other places, how do you feel about that?
- 42- If you have a security concern at personal or community level, who would you speak to in the first place?

~ DAY 2 ~

E. FEARS AND WHAT MATTERS

- 43- What are you most afraid of here?
- 44- Is there any phenomenon/behaviour/prospect that makes you unsafe here?
- 45- Is there any phenomenon/behaviour/prospect that makes you unsafe here?
- 46- What danger can make you leave this area?
- 47- Can you describe how that danger would affect you so much?
- 48- For instance, what is if they stole all your clothes, would you run away from this place?
- 49- Are you afraid of Boko haram here? Why?
- 50- Who do you trust most with your security, apart from yourself?
- 51- Do you think Cameroonians who come here create trouble?
- 52- Would you feel safer if they closed the border?

F. SHARED PRACTICES

- 53- How many times have you (someone you know) experienced a serious problem here?
- 54- Describe what happened
- 55- Who did you (they) report it to in the first place?
- 56- Did you (they) get satisfaction?

- 57- How did you (they) go about getting that satisfaction? What in your opinion was the key thing in this process?
- 58- Do you know some members and the leaders of the vigilante group?
- 59- How they chosen and what is their role?
- 60- Do you know any other similar group on the other side of the border?
- 61- Do you know any such group that would comprise both Cameroonians and Nigerians? What is their purpose?
- 62- How does the government contribute to your life here?

~ DAY 3 ~

G. OTHER CHALLENGES

- 63- Apart from immigration control, how else do security forces here help the community?
- 64- Have you ever seen something you like from the security forces on the other side of the border?
- 65- If you (or someone else) needs emergency treatment in hospital today, what is the likely scenario?
- 66- I see very beautiful roads here. Is the government doing well to address development problems here including security issues?
- 67- Why are there new border infrastructures (being) built?
- 68- How do you think that would improve the lives of communities on this side?
- 69- Why in your opinion has it not been built on the other side?
- 70- How often do you move around this area to do things not related to your job or family? What do you do? How often? Who do you do with?

H. POWER RELATIONS

- 71- Are you (or do you know someone who is) a member of any group, or organisation that connects people from both sides of the border?
- 72- What is the purpose of that organisation?
- 73- Who do they negotiate with or influence to achieve their objectives?
- 74- What do they use to push things to go their way?
- 75- How does one does (did you/they) grow in that organisation?
- 76- How does the leader of that organisation maintain their respect and consideration within the community?
- 77- What qualities should one have in such a group to be able to appeal to people from both sides of the border?
- 78- Do you think the leaders of such groups are powerful in the community?
- 79- Do you think the leaders of such groups exploit the border authorities or are they exploited by border authorities?
- 80- If any of your fears you talked about the other came to materialise, how can members of this group help?

Diary

Sample Diary Notes and Ethnographic Observation Entries

[Nigeria-Cameroon Border]

Diary Note: 30/01/2017

Today's to do: sort out phone sim card with Demos; Book tickets for Ikom/inquire about the trip.

While waiting to depart for Ikom, the border area on the Nigerian side, I am housed at my former classmate's home in Lagos. Very nice and big mansion. Demos is now a Businessman in Nigeria. Very successful! Big house with maids. wow. A hotel room would cost me at least £30 per night. Financial constraints are limiting some of the things I can do

On TV and in casual conversations, the topic that keeps coming up is the uncertainty about President Buhari's health. Some are claiming that he passed away, but the information is just being kept secret. Another talk of the day is the currency exchange rate that has fallen dramatically against the Naira. Demos takes me to someone who can exchange my Dollars into Naira (Demos advised me prior to my departure that exchanging the Dollars is easier in Nigeria than other major currencies, so I took dollars with me, instead of GBP)

We go to the bus station to buy advance tickets for tomorrow. Departure is 6: 00 AM only with prepaid tickets.

I go out for a drink with Demos, and we are joined by his brother Mark. Discussions with other people sitting around the same table in the beer parlour. No electricity. People in Lagos are very aware of their personal security and the context in Lagos. Mark cannot sate late, past 9PM because "Lagos is too dangerous" at night, they all agree. He will need to take two taxis before reaching his home. Even with the effect of alcohol on the face of my interlocutor, on senses that they are very much conscious of the danger. All urge Mark to leave. I ask if anyone here

has experience insecurity in Lagos, thinking about Boko Haram, but they all say there's no one in Lagos who has never been robbed, assaulted, or have their house broken into. I mention BH, the mood changes. They say those affected by bombings is just bad luck. The day God said you were going to die.

Thinking in my head, how to police and organize security in such a busy city. Very crowded, you can feel the pressure walking in the streets. Sense that people have no identity. Streets are busy and dark at night.

Diary Note: 31/01/2017

I bought some newspapers that I hope to read on the on the way. I have been told the journey lasts the whole day. Demos woke me up at 4 AM and by 5:30 we are at the Bus station already. I go through the newspapers, and all of them talk about Boko haram. I boarded a bus which headed south at 6:30, departing Lagos. I understand the journey is going to take the whole day, we are going travel southeast through several states (Ondo, Edo, Anambra, Enugu, Ebony) before reaching the border state of Cross River. I show my newspaper to the passenger sitting next to me (Francis), to engage them in a conversation about Boko Haram, insecurity. He carefully avoids the topic.

As we depart Lagos, a well-dressed preacher with a bow tie climbs into the already overcrowded bus, squeezes himself through a row of passengers waving an old Bible held high in one hand. The man introduces himself as "senior evangelist". Silence in the bus. He starts praying for all of us and all heads bend forward and repeat "amen" in chorus to each line of prayer. He prays, amongst other things, against road accidents, carjacking, breakdown, sickness, bombs, etc. Prayer lasts 5 to 10 minutes. At the end, the preacher throws his hand around to receive donations. My neighbour donates 500 naira. I later asked why that much, he says he wants to show his faith in the preacher's words. Francis agrees to me recording what he says about his faith and motivation to give money to the preacher, but is not so keen to talk about security or boko haram, even off tape

Failed attempt to start a conversation with Francis since disclosing that I am a student doing research on security, taking notes and recording. I can tell he finds me suspicious. Sitting to my left, Friday Obele seems interested in my unsuccessful attempts to engage Francis in a conversation. Friday is a young student, travelling from Lagos to Ebony state to join the Polytechnic. He is curious. Friday agrees to tell me about security and his fears. He says the main security problems around Ebony state is land dispute between farmers and cattle herders. This often result in deaths and destruction of properties. The second is rivalry between fraternity groups on the campus. This is sometimes also deadly. Friday is puzzled that I am Cameroonian, but instead coming from England. He brother regularly travels to Cameroon to get raw material (animal skin) for his business. Francis asks me if I know anyone who can supply them with pangolin skin. No, I don't know. He is not going as far as cross river state, the one adjoining Cameroon, so is not much of an interest to the research

The Road

I am agreeably surprised by the state of the roads, apart from a difficult stretch of about 60 km, the road is tarred from Lagos to Ikom. Otherwise, the journey could last btw 2 to 3 days. That was the case before. But we have to stop at numerous checkpoints, heavily militarised, different agencies of security forces, police, military, customs, immigration, wildlife, etc. most overstep their duties, and all want bribes of some sort from the passenger and the driver.

When I asked passengers why so many checkpoints, many reply that it is normal, it is for security "you know what is going on in the country" referring to Boko Haram I guess, but when I asked if it was different before BH, no one is really sure.

We stop at Onitsha, I start a conversation with fellow passenger Moses, and explain to him the reason of my visit to the UK, He says he know someone living in Ikom, who can help me with interview or field information. Arikpo. I like the sound of the name. He calls Arikpo, introduces us and gives me his phone number.

Too tired now to write. Very tiring journey. Arrived in Ikom 22h.

Diary Note: 1/02/2017

Woke up at 11! Still very tired and some headaches. Hopefully not signs of malaria! I am taking medication. I will go out of the hotel to look around for cheaper accommodation, I can't afford to stay here more than two days. Very expensive for my budget. I also need to find a place to eat and look around. Maybe make some more contacts. I plan to start my ethnographic observation tomorrow. Excited but find the task daunting as well. Never done it.

I met Prince a few hours ago. A transporter who carries passenger to the Border. Looks nice and intelligent. He says he can get me cheaper accommodation and assist with transportation whenever I need him (priced to be agreed hourly). RDV avec Prince demain matin. Simple questions for conversations, maybe interviews. Needs to refine interview questions, people not very talkative, especially when it is about security. Misunderstanding? Mine or theirs? Probably need to review interview questions?

Diary Note: 2/02/2017

Prince has found an accommodation for me. Been to Prince's house and greeted his family (wife and daughter). I am going to rent a room in Ruth's house. Have not seen the house yet.

Prince has been hired for the morning, and I have asked if I may spend the time with him and his passengers. He agrees. Passengers agrees as well, though it has taken time to explain that I am not a journalist. Initially very reluctant and said he would not speak to a journalist. I am not a journalist!

Had my first observation today. Not too sure what to make of it. It is so difficult to do without thinking about the theories, the whole PhD project. Feeling that it is artificial. I think the sense of urgency, if I had good budget and plenty of time to spend here, maybe I would feel differently. Anyway, I am here now, on the field!

Codes for metanotes.

Observation note: 02/02/2017

The passengers are in fact one businessman (name not given – I call him the boss) and his assistant (Olivier). They have travelled into Nigeria crossing the border to buy car parts. They arrived last night and will be going back this afternoon. The Boss is sitting on the passenger front seat. I am sitting on back next to Olivier. Olivier and Boss are francophones, so I think conversations can flow more easily. I don't really speak Pidgin English and speaking English in Nigeria gives a different dimension to the conversation. Boss tells me he has a lot of Nigerian friends settled in Cameroon. They introduced him to the trade of car parts. We drive to the shop of one of his suppliers. Business is conducted in pidgin. Car parts are spread all around the shop front, many more on shelves, one giant almanac with people wearing traditional Igbo costumes is hanging on the shop door. Small talk, not a lot – Boss is in the hurry. The boss and the shopkeeper obviously know each other, shake hands warmly, tap on the shoulder. Boss walks around the small shop, goes behind the counter to inspect some articles. Pulls out a list from his pocket and reads out his order. Shopkeeper takes list and gives his own assistant. Boss calls Olivier. Both assistants go behind the shop (storage) and come with many car parts in boxes. Two trips. Put in the car boot.

Back in the car. Boss addresses Olivier without looking at him sitting just behind. He asks whether he made sure the number of parts ordered was correct. "Because last time you made a mistake and it cost me a lot of money". Olivier confirms he cross-checked everything. I asked Boss a few questions, but he does not seem to want to talk a lot. His answers are Yes/No answers. Why? Is this his natural way of talking? Is he preoccupied by his business? Or he does not want to risk saying things he shouldn't say [secret] We arrive at the second supplier. A larger shop than the previous one. . Olivier gets out the car together with everybody else, but waits in a distance while Boss greets and does small talk. But he is paying attention. Discussions between boss and supplier go to price of goods. Price agreed. Olivier carries the car parts to the car boot. No assistant for this shop owner or assistant on a different duty. I help Olivier carry some of the items.

We stop at a different location (Ekirikiri). This time not for business. Boss says he won't be long, he is dropping in on somebody there. (Who? Relative? Friend?) Olivier tells me Boss has

a child with a lady who lives there. Wife? No. “Juste comme ca”. But they stop there every two weeks they come for business. The lady is Cameroonian too, but anglophone although now settled in Nigeria. Boss calls Olivier to bring the bag they had. I stay in the car with prince. Prince tells me there are many Cameroonians who just cross the bridge and settled here and nigerians do the same as well. Not necessarily because of prior family ties. Some have ties to the area. Boss and Olivier return, with lady escorting them to the car. We drive towards the border now, Mfum. Many checkpoints. Stops. Boss steps out of the vehicle. Police officers and soldiers at some checkpoints want to inspect the car and order that the boot should be opened. Boss talks with them, convincing some to let us go with some bribes. Other take the bribes but still inspect, though casually. Some check our documents as well – identity mainly. No immigration question until Mfum. I try to ask Boss about the bribe he gives. He avoids the topic, I insist a bit he says he does not want to talk about that [secret]. We arrive in Mfum. Prince will not be crossing today. Olivier gets their luggage out of the car and hails another taxi driver who is probably awaiting customers to cross

Diary Note: 03/02/2017

Before

I am observing Ikom main market today. I think it will be better to start from there and sweep down to the border itself (Mfum).

After

I ended up having to speak to people to find out more about the market and their situation within. Maybe I am doing it the wrong way. Not really interviews just supplementary information to make sense of what I was observing.

Observation Note: 03/02/2017

No military presence in the market as on the roads. In fact, no uniformed security agent in sight. Prince describes the market for me, different “wards” for different kinds of items. We are

sitting in front of a ward where they sell everything to do with kitchen utensils (cups, glasses, pots, etc.). Interaction with Gloxy (anonymised, age 40-50). She tells me Border makes Ikom less secure. People come from Cameroon and commit crime here. Nigerian criminals often escape to Cameroon very easily. Gloxy also expresses frustration: Cameroonians come easily to Nigeria, while Nigerians are submitted to stringent security check while going to Cameroon. Gloxy agrees for participate in the interview in the future. I gave here the information leaflet. Going around the market, it is difficult to tell who is Cameroonian or who is Nigerian. Market not very busy. But very big. The car park is combined with the market. In the motor park, taxis and old buses go and come to/from other destinations than the border. I met Gloria (nickname) with a two bags of bread, waiting for Okada (Taxi Bike). Born in Nigeria originally from Abbi LGA, but moved with family to settle in Ekok (Cameroon). Travels back to Nigeria every week. Taking the bags to the border to add to other things she has bought already. No knowledge about security in the market or around the market. Does not feel there is a security problem. Has never experience insecurity when she travels to/from Cameroon. I can start to clearly distinguish the Igbo language when it is spoken in the market. Predominant. But other languages are spoken as well, including Pidgin English which I understand perfectly though can't speak to the same level.

Shops are mostly family businesses, with husband leading the management. The wife is generally cashier and there are one or two assistants usually family relatives or mere maids? Shopowners look very opulent by local standards. Big SUV for errands. The husband and wife very well-dressed, expensive jewellery, skin bleached

A taxi bike rider comes and stops in front of the shop, offload boxes tied to the rear of bike, greets everyone including me, says such and such sent the parcels with him to complement previous deliveries. Wife calls such and such immediately, confirms they have received the parcels. Thanks. Husband on the phone chatting casually, does not seem to pay attention to what is going on, he is laughing on the phone (social call?)

Moving to a different ward. Two large delivery trucks parked nearby. Drivers sleeping at the wheel. I gather they travelled through the night there are restrictions on lorries travelling during the day. Waiting to be offloaded.

Drawing of the market here

Short conversation with Maggi. She works in one of the shops with her “Oga” (uncle? Boss? Relationship not more specific than that). Why did she come to Ikom instead of Lagos or Abuja for instance?

[inter] Moving southeast towards the border; many opportunities based on kinship as many shop-owners here speak Igbo while the original inhabitants of the area speak Etoung/Ekoi/Edjangang.

As compared at first sight to other Nigerian towns I have seen especially coming down from Lagos, one can say that Ikom is actually a small town, rather than a city. However, it looks more expansive and modern. Tourist attraction sites include Nigeria’s Stonehenge called Ikom Monoliths, which extends all the way to Calabar, Afi rain forest, Ikom town beach and Agbokim Waterfall. I understand there is a lot of fresh foods and low-cost housing as compared to other big cities.

Diary Note: 4/02/2017

Focus today is on taxes the drivers taxi drivers and passengers arriving on the main road front from the border. So going a second day that will focus on transporters

after

Border does not belong to borderlanders. Who are borderlanders? People in the market are all just pass passing no even aware of why this specific place is what it is may be the border is too hyped up? 80% of people arriving into the market to sell I foods stuff or usual household items

The others are just travelling further away (Onitsha, Lagos, Abuja, etc. if food stuff are sold here did they come from Cameroon or locally?

I guess today has enabled me to understand Ikom a bit more, raising many questions about food and the interactions away from the border on the Nigerian side. where do all the products come from? Tomorrow first observation in Mfum

Observation: 4/02/2017

I speak with Caroline she's aged between 45 and 55 she lives normally in Ikom and travels between Ikom and Mfum regularly. She's a tradeswoman. she believes that the business is affected by the fluctuation of the exchange rates. she also thinks that taxes are too high. she has a shop in Ikom and she thinks that fire safety measures are not good enough, so she does not feel safe. There was a problem last year around this time; a fire problem caused by poor electrical wiring she lost her shop to the fire around 50 other shops were destroyed, razed by the flames. another t that affects her Business is strikes in Cameroon she thinks that when there are strikes in Cameroon, it affects her business very badly. She has never experienced buckle around she has one hundred percent faith finger.

Esther is sitting with Caroline they are waiting for a taxi that can take them to Mfum. She agrees with everything Caroline says by constantly nodding. becomes particularly agitated when it concerns Exchange rates, she says that she had to change the type of items she sells completely because of currency rate fluctuations between Cameroon and Nigeria. she also complains about compulsory Insurance that they have to be in the shops here in Ikom while virtually nothing has changed in wiring habits across the market since last year.

Moss cars here carrying passengers and dear log each across the border and from Econ and from son to Econ are V is these vehicles are reputed to be very that come I'm hard to maintain so I am surprised to see Harrell V are so many of them here.

Diary Note: 5/02/2017

Today I intend to make a general observation of Mfum, and from this establish a more detailed observation plan based on some of the questions I already have and others that might arise such as where do the products come from? Why is there not a market as big as this in Mfum? What “security” can be readily seen at the border?

Observation: 5/02/2017

The Mfum border bridge is technically located in Ajassor community. On the way, a few small cars, loaded with many bags on top pass us and Prince says these are cars coming from Cameroon. He can recognise some by their Cameroonian number plates but tells me he just knows the cars. We are not questioned at checkpoints since our car is not loaded and carrying only two people. Prince also tells me the “main people” here are members of Nigerian Customs Service (NCS), normally deployed to borders to check smuggling of contrabands and other illicit activities sabotaging the economy. Border open at 5:00 in the morning. Early hours of the morning in Mfum. We arrive at the border at 7:30 am. My attention is caught by 42-seater with the inscription ‘Sans Payer’ across the side. Several bags of rice, fabrics, fresh tomatoes, kassava, among others, are being offloaded from the bus coming from Cameroon. The bus is clustered by about eight officials of the NCS. Prince tells me these officers are actually soliciting bribe from the driver and the passengers who are obviously smuggling one thing or the other if one goes by the book, considering the nature of some of the items. I do not ask which specific items are contraband. Other NCS elements are openly stretch their arms to other vehicles and close them on banknotes. I repress the desire to take pictures... Those who “shake hands” with officers from the car obviously parted with money and can continue without screening. The cars are again stopped at subsequent checkpoints ten meters apart from each other. It seems ‘legal’ for any item to be brought into the Nigeria from neighbouring Cameroon and for people to move in and out of the country as long as money changes hand. Border users are very deferential to NCS officials. Too deferential. Why? Prince tells me the situation is “more interesting” at night. I make a note to myself to come back here at night.

I speak to Yomi, who is sitting near a heap of bananas. She says she gets them from the farms in neighbouring villages in Nigeria. People buy from Ikom or from Ekok. Same Price. But

some customers want her to cross the border before delivering. She charges extra. Crosses the border without questions, because she is known to immigration. And she gives bribes. It is so normal that everyone, including children know. A woman complains lively that they have collected all the money she had and stolen two out of the bags of rice she was taking to her village for a burial. Yomi Agrees to participate in the semi-structured interview. Will call her to organise this.

No phone reception here. Cameroonian sim card is better I understand. All people here have both a Cameroon and a Nigerian sim card, those who spend all their time here don't even bother to have a Nigerian simcard/

Diary Note: 6/02/2017

Mfum is located in the Etung LGA, unlike Ikom which is in the Ikom LGA. Both cities are less than ten minutes' drive from each other on the tarred road, also known as border road. I am warned again by my friend not to take pictures maybe it is better to type up my notes from memory immediately afterwards rather than ostentatiously take notes. I already made an application to the LGA so don't think I need to inform immigration officers about my observation they may not act as they usually do or normally do because they know I am around so I prefer to observe them in their natural environment acting as they normally would. yesterday I did not so much need to take pictures but today I understand even better why they will frown on having their pictures taken or anything they do recorded of course they can easily put forward the argument of security saying for example you are not allowed to film on the bridge without permission so there is no way you can film the officers working at the border post without filming the bridge itself therefore I prefer to only make notes and whenever possible to take notes after the observation not while I am observing. it is probably no useful to attract the attention unnecessarily for the moment.

On the way back from Mfum it is just 12 and we have to leave because Prince has an appointment. instead of going back to Ikom all the way, I want to stop at Ajassor mission so

that I can do some observation before the evening. Prince is going to come and pick me up after his business appointment.

Need to come back here for more observation and go to ajassor village.

Analysis based on background information : Takamanda forest: Local livelihoods depend on non-timber forest products in Cross River National Park, Takamanda and Korup (Bush Onion, Bush Mango, Eru, Njansang, Bush Pepper. Chewing Stick, Bitter Kola, Haoussa Stick< Cola Nut, Alligator Pepper), collect as source of income, harvested when demand for farm labour is low, collected for consumption or sale – Proximity with border and Ikom Market

Observation Note: 6/02/2017

I meet Mr Ekeng, a teacher by profession and quickly explain the reason of my presence. He declines to take part in the interview citing his position as civil servant. It does not make sense, but makes some sense at the same time when one takes into account African socio-political context. But also, the topic “security”! However, Mr Eken agrees to tell me about Ajassor. Insisting that the locality sustains one of the substations of the Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria (CRIN) with mandate for cocoa and Kola. The conversation takes this turn because I have seen bus passing with the signs CR I N and that asked question the bus is carrying many passengers who I understand are going for a training at the C R I N site.

Ajassor is the last Village before Cameroon, it literally ends where in Nigeria ends because its limits on the East are the same limits as the Nigerian territory and separated from Cameroon by the river called Mfum.

We stop at a crossroads where the main border Road continues towards Ikom. there are few Women sitting behind their stalls and selling various food items. there are two small restaurants on each side of the road students are coming back from school in their uniforms one small path

is going into the bush, one road is branching into the rear of the village, the road is not tarred. the crossroads where Prince me is seemingly very empty despite many houses in its surroundings. In fact, many more houses as compared to Mfum. not many people I am told you need to take a bike to just ajssor community /mission.

cars stop from time to time Drop passengers. Passengers now take a bike for their onward destination. bikes arrive from the village onto the tarred road with items lauded on the back and other things destined for the market.

The surrounding forest is said to be a major source of food for the community and also for income. Products sold include mushrooms, seed and spices, fruits, vegetables and a great variety of animals. But they say most of the areas where these are produced are not accessible.

StopPrimary Health Centre (PHC) in Ajassor.

Dairy Note: 7/02/2017

During my todays' observation at the Ikom market, when I asked questions about security a way of declining by my interlocutors was to redirect me to the vigilante Group in charge of security in the market. I was unable to speak to them because they refused to talk to me about security. However, I was introduced to the chief of a neighbouring community who also organises security in his community situated near the border in The Etai community.

I'm going to meet him today (Chief Ossaji) so we can discuss how he organizes security. he is going to be available only in the afternoon I'm going to make him around 4 PM

Observation Note: 7/02/2017– Interview with Chief Ossaji (Instead)

Dairy Note: 8/02/2017

Today – travel interviews to be made with Kalu, Fiona and Debra

Observation Note: 8/02/2017– Ajassor – Etomi - Bendeghe

The Agbe initiation rites. This allows you to be involved in Community issues such as Wars, political matters, Society. We witness an initiation rite. Drums are being used. It often takes place at the same time with the yam festival.

Only one technical school in Ajassor. No school of agriculture apart from the CR I N. This surely explains why farming is traditional. No government interests? Government invest only in cash crops (Cocoa, palm oil)

Why cassava from Cameroon? Plenty of cassava farms here. Government-owned estates, but mostly private. Best go to politicians. Standardised measurements in the sale of agricultural products. Is this the reason why small wing of coffee from Cameroon for.? Measurement. No electricity.

The largest towns are actually Etomi me and Bendeghe. I mean the largest towns in the LGA. The border has not made Mfum a big town.

Etomi

Small village with buoyant life. A few houses are built in concrete material. But the majority are built using mud and wood. Roads not tired but accessible when dry. Many people live in the town centre, but the majority live on the farms. People use “Okadas” to go to Farms.

Bendeghe

Impressive Kingdom Hall for Jehovah’s witnesses. Very clearly meet. Impressive and neat, contrasts with surrounding houses and all other houses in the village. Market in the town centre a bit like market in Mfum, but more products and more dynamic. Lorries being loaded with large bags (fruit? Food? Cocoa? Coffee?) Some vegetables. Did not ask do not ask.

Dairy Note: 09/02/2017. – Mfum Road to Border

I am concentrating today on the “smuggler highway”.

Will focus just on this, though I have been there before, but en route to somewhere else. Maybe something new if I see from this perspective. Maybe a dynamics I did not pick up

For example, are there by-road?

Starting too late today. Prince busy in the morning with another job.

Anyway no really feeling the stamina today.

Observation Note: 09/02/2017

Tared Road. It is called smugglers highway because before the road being tared they used to be many places for hiding contraband products.

Development seems bad road? Yes, but not as much as expected.

Three petrol stations being built, but not yet completed. No people working on this site sites.

Another vast construction site to the right of the road. Future Nigeria- Cameroon border Post.

Why is it on Nigerian side?

Traffic okay. Cars coming in the opposite direction loaded (coming from Cameroon). many minibuses which are stacked and packed with goods

Nigeria number plates. Cameroon not the plates. No uniform colour.

Traffic seems to intensify in the evening. Maybe just today.

Dairy Note: 10/02/2017. – Local residents mfum

I will spend time at Mfum today, with special attention to local residents of Mfum. This means just going to the houses around the border posts because in my experience of the area, many people spend their days in Mfum don't live there. Local residents should be people who sleep there or consider there as their home after work every day. Many people who work in Mfum will spend their days there but go to or other places after work in the evening.

Observation Note: 10/02/2017

Wives of border employees. Bayam sellam.. Mfum villagers who were unable to move because they do not have the land anywhere else. poverty. Locals are poorer.

Many people who spend their days at the border to not live there

Houses built in a single line on both sides of the road leading to the border. Some houses have doors and windows closed. Nobody at home. A few houses have their doors open.

Small houses off generally two rooms and one living room. No current water. No running water. Connected to the grid. But usually no electricity. Most women spoken to leave their big colours because they are the wives of people working at the border.

Dairy Note:11/02/2017. – Mfum Sellers

Observation Note: 11/02/2017

Three restaurants but actually small eating places----they serve Fried eggs, Coffee, bread and beans sometimes with spaghetti. Customers are mostly passengers and transporters but occasionally some immigration officers order food to be brought to them in the office.

There are also small grocery shops on the roadside in small kiosks.

Bayam sellam (small traders) how bananas, beans, call, corn, etc on display of small stalls.

Some buy and sell directly from/to people travelling

Dairy Note: 12/02/2017. – Physical Border

Observation Note: 12/02/2017

The stretch of road between Ikom and the border at Ekok/Mfum is beautifully tarred, I always enjoy the ride. There's never too much traffic on this road, despite the road being described as one of the busiest in cross river state. Maybe I have always plyied the road at a good time. Anyway, no congestion all the way to the border. The border road is also known locally as “the smuggler’s highway” ☺. Before reaching the border, We come across many different types of police, immigration officers, traffic police, tax collectors, military, etc.

A suspension bridge built in 1948 connects Nigeria with Cameroon at Mfum border station. There is actually no ‘no man’s land’ between the Nigeria and Cameroon, apart from the bridge. The lane of suspension bridge is accessible from the Nigerian side only when you have been cleared to enter Cameroon and equally, from the Cameroonian side of the border, you would not be allowed onto the bridge unless you have permission to enter Nigeria.

Prince drops me and returns to Ikom to look for passengers. I am going to be here the whole day, so not in a hurry. I walk down to the last checkpoint before the barrier. The barrier is

adjacent to the offices of NCS officers. Overcrowded. Barrier is an assemblage of large iron poles that rotate to open and close. A small enclosure allows pedestrians to step into the offices or cross onto the bridge once they have been cleared to enter Cameroon. The offices are located within a small two-room building made of concrete. I take notice of poster behind some officers standing. The poster is on the wall and reads “Help end corruption. PSA”. PSA is the anti-corruption authority. The ambiance now is chaotic, officers go up to cars coming from Cameroon and collect documents from all passengers, then retire back to their offices. Passengers now have to follow them to sort their immigration issues. That way officers are not very vigilant who is physically crossing. They are confident no one can go on the bridge without clearance. But there seems to be one keeping an eye on people who might loiter onto the bridge, or just observing. Not sure. Too many passengers, both those coming from Cameroon and those going to Cameroon. Cars park before the barriers if going to Cameroon, or cross the barriers and park facing Ikom if going into Nigeria. Bridge is almost always empty. Nor cars static on the bridge.

One car is stopped on the bridge. Officers gesture to the driver to clear off. Car apparently has a breakdown or is low on fuel. Passengers get out and push to the barrier. Many individuals without uniforms clearly working in collaboration with immigration officers. They act as go-between talking to travellers, then talking to immigration. Cars are lined up, some with engines running. Rackets. Fumes. Radio playing from inside the offices. Mostly Nigerian “African beat” hit songs. Church music playing from speakers in a small shop nearby, sometimes mixing with American rnb songs. I recognise a 50 Cent and Justin Timberlake song. A few people sing along with church songs, while attending to their businesses. “Where is your Yellow Card?” is the most recurrent question. Pay.... Naira, or you go back to Cameroon. One man is standing a few meters away, pacing up and down, shouting “The warnings of God’s oncoming judgment” to passengers and handing out leaflets. Some of the things he says coincidentally borrow the imagery of bridge and frontier, especially his instance not to cross to the other world without giving one’s life to Jesus. He says, once you cross it is over, you may never return to change anything you left behind.

Thinking: Mixing of religiously Christianly charged words with secular language in public spaces and discourse struck me ever since I arrived in Lagos and paying attention to security. Religion and faith is ubiquitous in allegories and various layers of meanings to mundane words. I need to eventually visit a church to find out a bit more about the place of religion in all this.

Other checkpoints

Houses alongside the roads

Sellers

Dairy Note:13/02/2017. – Mfum Transporters

Observation Note: 13/02/2017

Passengers alighting at the Ikom border coming from Cameroon and visibly looking to continue with a different car are immediately surrounded by the vendors, carriers and transporters each offering their services. Transporters usually check first that immigration has been cleared and passenger is ready to go. Many transporters at a time. Advertise the comfort of their car and also their connections with law enforcement for the remainder of the journey.

On the other side of the road, facing towards the gate, transporters to Cameroon. All using pidgin, inviting passengers to their cars. Some passengers especially traders seem to know transporters personally. Nigerian side transporters seem more disorganised and scrambling over passengers, while Transporters to Cameroonian side wait patiently and seem to “lobby” their customers while they go through immigration.

Dairy Note:14/02/2017. – Immigration officers Nigeria / Cameroon

Observation Note: 14/02/2017

Both sides: Check passports or documents, yellow fever, uniform, asks colleagues to come over for verification, send passengers to other offices, speak in private with transporters on behalf of customers, collect bribes both openly and in hiding – seem to hide more from colleagues than from the ordinary prying eyes (especially on the Cameroon side)

Language used is pidgin, and English to put a distance, signal hostility or preparing to demand higher bribe or threaten customer.

Uniforms are clean, well-pressed, contrasts with passengers and transporters and local residents dressed ordinarily or for manual work.

Diary Note:15-16/02/2017. – Interviews

Observation Note: 15-16/02/2017

Diary Note: 17/02/2017. - The church

Before

Today I am going to the church Prince recommended to me when I asked about where I can see people in the area doing other things apart from buying and selling or trying to cross the border. The church is called *The Redeemed House of the Lord*. I try to rethink my first years back in Cameroon at the University of Yaoundé, when a friend invited me to a similar church and I found myself lining up in front of the congregation amongst those who were prepared to “give their lives to Jesus”. Prince is coming to pick me with his car at 6PM, I realise that this

is also the first time that I will be doing fieldwork at night. Nocturnal ethnographic observation hahaha. I used to see people in church with notebooks and pens carefully jotting down during sermons, so I will not be a curiosity like when I stand in the middle of the crowded market with pen and paper. Prince said the pastor is a friend of his, and no need to ask permission, but apart from ethical consideration at university, I just feel strange to be undertaking such an exercise in the “house of the Lord” without informing the pastor. I must insist that Prince calls him before we arrive. This is not a Sunday, so maybe the church will not be crowded. Who will come? Who goes to church these days? Mainly people who have difficult problems and can't find direct solutions (incurable sickness for example). Why do I not go to church? Do I believe in God? Still? Specifically, in **Ikom**, who goes to Church? How does Church attendance shape their outlook on the place they live in? How would I dress appropriately for this, so as to be neither too casual or too formal? I need to be as laid back as possible. I will wear a pair of jeans and a shirt then.

I will also carry my small black purse to put my notebook in together with my personal documents and some money

After

Observation: 17/02/2017 – The Church

The road to the church takes us away from the town centre towards its edge. We arrive at the church, new-looking building, both not really ostentatious as compared to other churches I have seen on my way down from Lagos. Building is surrounded by trees. The church is located in a solidly more affluent neighborhood, as compared to the market square or the old colonial headquarters where chiefs now live. I expected loud singing from a distance as we approach the church, but it is quiet outside of the building. Prince parks next to very nice cars. This BMW seems brand new! Cars here are imported second-hand. There are still many empty spaces in the yard, gets full on Sundays instead.

Pastor is well-dressed but is not extravagant, very articulate (despite his stammering) and not too loud. It looks dwarfed by the sanctuary, which swallows all the items of furniture and decoration.

Church members are women in majority, well-dressed, a mixture of nice perfumes up in the air, there are men too, but no in the same number as women. Poorly lit in the back here, but the podium where the pastor is standing and preaching is very well-lit. The sign on the wall reads “Thursday Teachings”. Today is Thursday. Pastor is talking about the place of husband and wife. Why is the husband the head? He explains man and woman are equal, but husband and wife is different. Duties and rights. Occasional laughter, when Pastor takes funny examples or mimic a woman. Some singing from a song book. On the wall behind the pastor, words to the song they are singing are being projected onto a large screen from an overhead projector next. This church seems to de-emphasize the kind of charismatic behaviour that normally characterises services in “born again” churches across Africa these days (faith healing, speaking in tongues). Have they broken entirely with the Pentecostals? (I suspect)

Nice and new benches, sitting down – smell of fresh paint or varnish

Service lasts around 20 minutes. Pastor tells everyone in the congregation to turn around greet their neighbour, say “you are blessed” and introduce themselves to the people around them. People visiting the church for the first time are asked to show hand. I raise my hand. Some comes to me and takes my details. “You no bi Nigerian?” “No, I bi Cameroonian” – Surprise.

I greet a few people with a shake of hands. I overhear Igbo being spoken by many members of the church. Prince comes up introduces me to a few people. Almost all are “Businessmen” and live locally i.e. in IKOM. I estimate that there are 100 people who participated in this service. Many young people as well, almost all attending alongside their parents or bosses (maids). Dress is formal, and all members appear to know one another very well. Almost all my interlocutors are puzzled by the fact that I am not Nigerian. The pastor later told me they do not have Cameroonians, and indeed other nationalities in the church. One man is from Benin (the country) but that is all. The pastor says the church is newly built thanks to the donations of members who are in business. The pastor himself is a businessman. Almost all operate at the motor park. A few have established business in Onitsha, but families live in Ikom.

Diary Note: 18/02/2017

I thought it might make good difference to go from Ekok to Mamfe on the Cameroonian side. Ekok being a big Like Mfum on the Nigerian side, and Mamfe being like Ikom. the road from

Ekok to Mamfe is beautifully tarred. It has not always been the case as I understand, so the experience I am going to have today will probably be different from one people had three years ago.

Prince is to leave me out at the border in the morning and from there I will make my way into Cameroon and hopefully will return before the evening.

Awoken to stormy weather and headed off for the border just as the first colours of the sunrise began to break through the foggy sky. I am doing a return trip to Cameroon today, so I need to go as early as possible in order to return before border closure or it is too dark and possibly dangerous to move around.

Observation Note: 18/02/2017

Is it Mfum or Ekok or Abonando suspension bridge? it depends on all your ask.

Prince spoke to immigration officers on my behalf. So I am not stressed about immigration issues. However I can see that my fellow passengers are very worried and stressed because they have to discuss with NCS officers on the Nigerian side and Cameroon immigration on the Cameroonian side. Passengers negotiate with NCS officers behind the cars; some go to the NCS small office just before the barrier where uniformed officers are cramped around a few desks. Many of the officers are standing with passports and IDs in their hands. Passengers stay there for a few minutes, and come back to the car frowning. Others look helpless and ask the driver to plead their case with the officer saying that they do not have enough money left after all these negotiations. The driver goes to and fro between the passengers and the officers. Finally a settlement is reached and the driver returns with the passengers documents. All passengers are cleared. An officer walks up to our car, orders us to step out of the vehicle leaving all our bags in the car, and cross the suspension bridge on foot. The driver follows us with the vehicle as we walk to the Cameroonian side of the border. Why did we have to step out of the car? The car is not searched?

Sketch map of Ekok, Eyumodjock and Mamfe

On the crossing I overhear passengers complaining about the greed of immigration officers they're talking in pidgin English to me; my Pidgin is not great. They change subject and accelerate their walking and leave me. Another group exchanging documents. They are talking about iDs for the Cameroonian side. one woman says to the other woman you know you should leave these with the driver otherwise you might get into trouble and they will reap you off but the other woman asks what if they ask for the form from Nigeria, the other **woman** replies that's why we'll give them something

We are back in the car travelling to Eyumojock, and then Mamfe. this is Manyu division. Administratively. The people and culture give the sense of Nigerian dominance. you can still feel the Nigerian accent in the pidgin English, the Nigerian way of doing business, the fuel that comes from Nigeria is everywhere, the tribal languages spoken is a variant of the Ekoi language. I have just spent almost 3 weeks in Nigeria maybe I am a big influenced by that. Cameroon flags everywhere here. Difference from Nigeria. frontier police posts not as many as in Nigeria. Obsession with ID cards though. Just like Ekok, Mamfe is immersed in the Nigerian way of life.

Passengers tell me the bond between these areas and Nigeria has been strengthened for many decades by the neglect of the 151 km between Mamfe and Kumba. These had become a buzz-wEEP for anglophones until the road was tared. The same goes true for the Bamenda- Mamfe road, and the Mamfe-Ekok lap.

The car smells of contraband petrol/fuel known here as this Zoa-Zoa. This fuel is illicitly brought over from Nigeria. No smoking written everywhere in the car. when we stop some passengers get out to smoke. They are chased away from the car, as far away as possible by other passengers and driver. When we get back in the car I realise that we actually can blow up any time. the car is filled with many other illegal imports: fake drugs: generators, electronics,; no petrol station insight. Mamfe is a lovely and lively city within serene surroundings of tropical scenery whose quietness brings a sort of nice contrast

Diary Note: 19/02/2017

I'll left without my observation Book. At the border in Ekok. Some people can be seen passing through passport control from Cameroon with no papers or identification being checked. They seem to be used to doing so. They nod at immigration officers who nod back, and this sign language is complemented by a subtle slip of cash.

When we arrived in Ekok, young people (mostly boys) make transactions through the windows of cars preparing to depart of passing immigration control and when they slow down at checkpoints, selling bananas and corn-on-the-cob, fruit, juice, and even water.

Meeting a farmer in Eyumojock to discuss casually. I met Andre yesterday on my way back from Mamfe. I obviously explained to him the purpose of my visits and the subject of my research. I am going back to meet Andre and discuss especially farming and agriculture in the area.

We drive through plantations, some wild stuff - canopying over the road overhead, creating a beautiful, dark, green, tunnel.

Road from Ekok to Mamfe : A police checkpoint. We stop. One police officer comes and asks for IDs, barely takes a glance, ask us for a gift or juice or fresh water for this hot day. The driver gives them something in his closed palm. His colleagues notices the gesture and comes over to us from the other side of the road, smiling. They are very friendly. We take off again, driver nervously check fuel level (Diesel) and is worried we might not arrive. There's plenty of Zoua Zoua on the black market but mostly petrol, diesel is hard to find. Contrast of driving through such a an oil-rich region but stressing about a few litres of diesel. One petrol station.

Time from Ekok to Mamfe : over an hour. Longer than Mfum to Ekok.

Andre is a Farmer. I am aware of the strikes and All the social political problems often raised by the anglophone in Cameroun. I am wondering how much Will these new roads foster Communication and more demands from anglophones within Cameroun. Good roads also mean that anglophones will easily organise two further their political claims about marginalisation, so the roads might actually bring politically reversal of intended consequence. I'm thinking this because right now in the car there is a teacher complaining about

marginalisation. I discussed with her she only teaches two days a week and returns to Mamfe everyday thanks to the road.

Andre tells me about Cocoa smuggling into Nigeria. Cameroon Southwest region produces half of Cameroon's cocoa.. Cameroon southwest region is close to Nigeria than Douala where the Port is. That's why there are many smuggling routes to Nigeria or to nearby villages where Nigerians can come and collect products. Villages produce cocoa. Bags of cocoa beans loaded on top of pickup trucks. in cars with Nigerian number plates.

Diary Note: 20/02/2017

The administrative configuration in Cameroon is slightly different than in Nigeria. Region – Divisions and Subdivisions, headed by appointed Governors, Divisional Officers and sub divisional officers. - In almost all public spaces I have been to, such as public transport, beer parlours, football pitches, crossroads, shops, one recurrent topic of conversation is the comparison between now and before in terms of the Quality of the road. One man talks about the way he was tortured by the road three years ago. One woman who was travelling with me in a taxi said That she gave birth on the road to the hospital and eventually never reached the hospital. She had had to return home with her new born baby since the road was so bad that she could not continue after one day of heavy rain. She waited for one day in the rain with the baby but eventually gave up and returned home.

“That is now history”. “The situation was akin to stone age”. “Just like emerging from the primitive era”.

Andre told me that large farms have opened since 2015. Between widikum and Mamfe. Palms, plantains. We stop at Kendem. Walk to the bridge over River Manyu

In Mamfe “River Port” (was main commercial liaison between the then west Cameroon and Nigeria) – saw smaller boats. I understand they ferry people and goods to remote riverside communities and Nigeria.

In Mamfe. Intimidating huge Catholic Church near main street. traders in fruit, phone cards and sweets. Restaurants, makeshift, cobbled together with wooden planks. rice and tomato sauce served

Question 1 –which specific destinations in Nigeria?

question 2 –why do they still use the main road for smuggling?