



Africa in movimento / Africa on the Move

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TITLE: BORDERS, FRONTIERS AND STATE FORMATION IN SUB-SAHARANA AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: The panel aims to investigate the morphology of power at the margins of the African state. African borders have long been considered as barriers artificially drawn by colonial powers challenging grassroots cultural and socio-economic trajectories. Notions of (quasi-)failed states contributed to crystallize an understanding of borders as artifacts appropriated by the fragile postcolonial state to support its monopolistic claims to the use of violence within the national space. In recent years, the new wave of borderland studies have increasingly criticized this narrative. Far from being considered as fixed spatial boundaries, borderlands are today looked at as fluid areas where identities are continuously renegotiated. New research focuses on the agency of local actors, highlighting how borderlanders themselves actively engage in creating, shaping and exploiting borders to mobilise symbolic/material resources from the surrounding environment.

From the perspective of the centre, the borderland is also the privileged *locus* where the postcolonial state merged developmental narratives and territorialisation strategies, sometime in collaboration with private (trans-)national actors. The degree of state intervention and the nature of the agents involved in the statecraft project is useful to trace a distinction between frontiers of control, extraction and settlement (Geiger 2009). In order to understand how these frontiers evolve, we would like to investigate on the internal dialectics within the administrative hierarchy of the state and between formal and informal stakeholders along the border as well. The contamination between primordial and Weberian identities intersect with daily practices of survival and control, transforming the frontier into the arena where different stakeholders (re-)negotiate new forms of dependency and statehood.

The purpose of the panel is to deconstruct the process of appropriation and contestation of African borders, focusing on the underlying factors and strategies put in motion by the postcolonial state, regional elites and ordinary (trans-) borderlanders. We would like to put together contributions from different disciplinary fields, in order to understand how borders shape the trajectory of state formation – historical process of vulgarization of power – and state building – conscious effort of creating an apparatus of control (Berman, Lonsdale 1992) – in sub-Saharan Africa.

CONVENOR'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Isabella Soi is a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Social Sciences and Institutions, University of Cagliari. Her main research interests are focused on the making of borders in East Africa and the Great Lakes Region.

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