

ECAS 2019

Panel: Making a Living on & off the Road –

Trucking and the Politics of Movement and Stoppage in Africa

**Enforcing the "Smooth Flow" - Challenges of New Mobility Infrastructures at Kenyan Borders**

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The following presentation is based on my ongoing dissertation project in Anthropology. I am using a multi-sited approach in order to compare dynamics at different borders all over Kenya. I would like to use this opportunity to present and to discuss some of my material of 13 months of fieldwork that I completed in December 2018.

Within East Africa, Kenya serves as a transit zone for landlocked countries like Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan. During the last years, the country has implemented several infrastructure projects. Many roads were re-built and the LAPSET (Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport) corridor extends the Kenyan road network to the marginalised North of the country. My research project inquires the dynamics and effects on the ground that occur in the process of implementing new infrastructure projects. For example, one informant from the Kenyan Long Distance Truck Drivers Union complained that since roads have been improved, companies provide their truck drivers with less fuel. In case a truck runs out of fuel, the driver has to cover the costs at the petrol station himself. To save fuel, many truckers use risky ways of driving without gear, which has led to several accidents.

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## Borders: Forced Stoppage and “Smooth Flows”

Within this panel, my presentation deals with the specific role of border posts along roads in Eastern Africa. Border checkpoints are composed of roadblocks that lead to a forced stoppage of vehicles and people. Border posts are permanent control structures with a combination of security personnel and white-collar bureaucrats such as immigration and custom officers. Crossing the border to continue the journey requires certain standardised bureaucratic procedures. When cargo reaches the border, custom officers verify the consignment, check documents, check if taxes and road tolls are paid, and finally release the truck to move on. During the procedures, local clearing companies take over and do the paper work, while truck drivers wait and relax at the border, maybe use the break to wash their clothes, go out for drinks, meet with prostitutes or long-term girlfriends. Their wait can take long because cargo undergoes distinct bureaucratic procedures in two countries, so that trucks may park at the border for several days.

However, this is currently changing. In 2010, the East African Community (EAC) introduced legal frameworks to establish so called “One Stop Border Posts” (OSBP) across the region. Kenya’s first OSBP was launched in 2016, others followed in 2018. While before people, cars and trucks had to stop in two countries, the new border concept combines officers from the two countries in one joint facility. For example, a traveller does not need to get an exit stamp in an office in Uganda and an entry stamp in a Kenyan office any longer. He or she will rather find officers of the two countries sitting together in the same office. The concept thereby promotes international cross-border relations. Simultaneously, it also involves digitalisation through interlinked databases between different national border agencies. The overall idea behind One Stop Border Posts is that borders in East Africa become more efficient, that procedures are simplified, and that time of stoppage is reduced. The OSBP should increase mobility, and create a “smooth flow of people and goods” in the whole region.

The expression of a “smooth flow through an international border” is especially interesting because it stands in opposition to the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari in “A Thousand Plateaus” (1980), and to

their dialectic theory of the smooth versus the striated space. In their view, the smooth space enables nomadic, almost anarchic flows of movement. The striated space on the other hand is a state governed space by the means of punctual disruptions. As a state control institution, the border checkpoint clearly belongs to the latter. The OSBP concept, however, claims to be a combination of both. It is the enforcement of “smooth” mobility flows by striated means. This combination of two dialectic ideas of the smooth and the striated in the One Stop Border Post concept illustrates that the border post itself is a more or less ambivalent institution. Beside the facilitation of mobility and trade, the One Stop Border Post was also introduced as a strategy to tighten border surveillance. It adapts a multi-agency security approach against, for example, AlShabaab terrorists. The “smooth flow” therefore does not relate to each and every one. In his “Theory of the Border” (2016), Thomas Nail states that borders involve processes of bifurcation. They work as filters that allow some paths to continue, while others are redirected. At the One Stop Border Posts, certain goods and privileged travellers pass the border easily, but others are forced to come to a halt. For instance, people without the right documents or trucks with prohibited goods are excluded from the smooth flow.

### Making a Living in Border Towns

Which effect has the new border concept for the locals? Most Kenyan border communities live in marginalised areas. Depending on the region, they are either small-scale farmers or pastoralists. There are almost no other alternatives to make a living so that the traffic at the border becomes the major economic activity. The border town Malaba lies at the Ugandan-Kenyan border along the Northern Corridor. It is the busiest border of Kenya, where 800 to 1000 trucks pass daily. Locals provide services to truckers and travellers. They work in hotels, restaurants, cyber cafes; others work as hawkers, sex workers, cleaners of trucks and so on. These people depend on the road and on the border. One resident expresses this by saying: “The border is the only industry we have.” The new efficiency of the OSBP has the effect that travellers and truckers only stop on one side of the border and also leave the border town within a shorter period. This means that local businesses are going

down and many complain about the increase of poverty. An additional problem for Kenyan border towns are different exchange rates of money. The Kenyan Shilling has a higher currency value compared to the neighbouring countries, so that many travellers prefer to get cheaper services, food and drinks across the border, and do not promote the Kenyan side of town.

What is more, locals express their feeling of being excluded from the new border facility, where mostly non-locals are employed. In Namanga, for example, local business people like bus conductors, insurance companies and hawkers are no longer allowed inside the new border facility. They gather behind fences during the whole day and wait for opportunities to talk to travellers. The new regulations have affected especially the women of the local Massai community. Since colonial times, these women used to sell jewellery and beadwork to Western tourists. Safari companies usually cross the Kenyan-Tanzanian border in Namanga to visit National Parks in both countries. This business used to be the main source of income for the local Massai women, and their exclusion from the border facility and from the tourists led to protests of the Massai women's groups. Now, at least at the Kenyan side of the border, they are tolerated to access the OSBP, but only temporarily.

However, it is not only the locals who make a living off the road, but also border control officers. The introduction of the new border system brought changes for the work of, for example, custom officers. Custom work used to be done through manual procedures, and taxes were paid directly on the spot. The new digitalised system interlinks multiple agencies, and taxes and fees have to be paid through banks or through mobile money. It is a common narrative among custom officers to quote their older colleagues who talk about the "good old times". Those days, direct taxation meant that custom officers could easily get an additional income through bribes. During my research, I got a couple of reports where officers develop their own strategies to cope with the new changes. I was told by local clearing companies that some individual officers delay files of consignments on purpose, until the agents pay extra money. Other times, officers might claim that the systems are down or that there is a power outage, so that they can go back to manual procedures, which are more flexible and less controllable. At the border, local clearing companies compete for contracts with trading

companies, so that each of them tries to push the trucks and files through the border as fast as they can. This shows that different people who make a living off the road and off the border have different agendas, and who prevails is a question of power.

### Conflict and Mobility Disruptions

Another One Stop Border Post lies in Moyale. It is the only official border crossing at the Kenyan-Ethiopian border. Two years ago, the highway between Moyale and Nairobi was completed as part of the LAPSET corridor to connect the two countries. The journey used to take a whole week but now the capital can be reached within one day. Expectations in Kenya are high concerning new trade opportunities with Ethiopia. However, at the new border facility, one meets only a handful of parking trucks. Otherwise, stray dogs occupy the compound. The border remains almost deserted, and there seems to be even less traffic across the border than before. What are the reasons for this “disruption” of mobility?

One reason is that Ethiopia is not in the EAC customs union, so that trade and transit between both countries are more expensive than between other countries. Another reason is insecurity in Southern Ethiopia. In the beginning of 2018, fights broke out between the Garre-Somali and the Borana-Oromo communities, which are also local border communities in Moyale. The road that connects Addis Ababa with the border in Moyale marks the boundary between the Somali region and Oromia region, and the road itself became the frontier during the clashes. Reaching the Ethiopian-Kenyan border, the road splits Moyale into two parts of town. Tensions are high. A local Borana cannot walk on the opposite side of the road that belongs to the Garre part of town, because he can be killed on the spot, and vice versa. Therefore, many traders do not send their consignments into the area at the moment, where at times even border offices in Kenya could be hit by stray bullets. Especially local traders avoid the main road completely. They divert and use unofficial border crossings, for example in Sessi in the Borana-Oromo side of town. Sessi is a wide and open terrain where even lorries can

pass. There are no custom or immigration officers on the spot, except for a handful of Kenyan security officers. On the Ethiopian side, Oromia militia runs a roadblock, where I am told that traders pay informal “taxes”. Ethiopia is a federal state, and every region has a local security force. For any trade that crosses through the main border at the OSBP, taxes have to be payed to the national government of Ethiopia and Kenya, but in Sessi, money stays within the region. Therefore, regional politicians benefit from this set-up and do not support the idea of the OSBP. Kenyan border officers have tried to shut down this road a couple of times, but failed. Their standing in the area is risky as they are easily overpowered by locals and by the militia. For them, it seems to be impossible to close this border.

This example shows that infrastructures such as roads and border facilities do not always work out the way they were intended. Infrastructures are, in the words of Richard Rottenburg (et al. 2014), “travelling models”. They are standardised concepts that need to be translated on the ground, and the local translation process can lead to variations. Roads cross through local settings, unique places with their own histories and socio-political backgrounds. The implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects never runs completely “smooth”. Local practices and circumstances on the ground might interfere and lead to disruptions, especially in times of conflict. This not only involves local civilians but also enforcement personnel, who are also humans with their own strategies and methodologies, but are often not included in analysis.