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22nd Annual Conference of the

The Association for the Study of Ethnicity & Nationalism

ASEN

"Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries"

27-29 March 2012

PANEL SESSION 3 – Boundaries in the Borderlands of Africa

LIVING IN THE *MUGANO* – THE PARTITIONED NDAU IN THE MOZAMBIQUE-ZIMBABWE BORDERLAND[1]

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1. Introduction

The Mozambique-Zimbabwe border is one of longest boundaries in Southern Africa. Running for about 1,231 km, it divides eastern Zimbabwe and central Mozambique. At the same time, it is one of the least researched borders in Southern Africa. While some research has been carried out along this border focusing on refugees (Hughes 1999), on labour and migration (Tornimbeni 2005, Newitt & Tornimbeni 2008), on agriculture and environmental conservation (Tornimbeni 2007, Hughes 2009), and on land politics and traditional authorities (Tornimbeni 2010, Florêncio 2005), very little is known about how the borderland communities perceive and relate to the boundary.

One of these communities is the Ndau. The Ndau are an African ethnic group divided by the colonial border between Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Before the partition, eastern Zimbabwe and central Mozambique were part of the pre-colonial Zimbabwe Plateau that was occupied by Shona people of various ethnic dialects. The Ndau are therefore an example of a partitioned group that has been sharing common social and cultural traits for several centuries, despite the border. These ties have contributed to the emergence of a sense of 'ndauness' in which social structures and cultural practices associated with totems, marriages, births and deaths bind the Ndau together. These "traditions" may have changed with time but they also retain a coherent relevance for the Ndau today[2].

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[1] This article is part of ongoing research and was produced as part of the research project "Identities and Borders in Africa" (PTDC/AFR/098339/2008), sponsored by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). The author would like to acknowledge the support of the Project Coordinator, Cristina Udelsmann Rodrigues, and the host institution, CEA-IUL. The data used in this article were gathered during fieldwork in Mozambique (Maputo, Chimoio and Espungabera) in April and May 2011with the help of Ganhane Samuel, a research assistant. The author's gratitude goes to him and the people who generously shared their knowledge and their borderland lives with her.

[2] McGonagle, 2007: 69

Just like others in Africa, the Mozambique-Zimbabwe border is regarded and treated as artificial and as not imposing any restrictions on movement, at least in the district in question.

This article draws on original empirical research among the Ndau on the Mozambican side of the border. It includes some reflections on African borderland identities, focusing on the Mozambique-Zimbabwe border and shedding light on practices and representations from Ndau social actors on the Mozambican side of the border about Ndau 'on the other side'. It analyzes the 'partitioned' Ndau's sense of belonging and the uses and meanings of the international border to them. It also relates the evolution of the Ndau identity with the historical and political development of Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

The first part of the article addresses some general issues about African borders and then analyzes the Ndau ethnic identity in the Mozambique-Zimbabwe borderland and its representations and possibilities as a transnational identity. The ideas set out here are the result of a case study of Espungabera, the capital of the Mossurize district (Manica province, Mozambique).

2. African borders

The borders of Africa, their drawing by the colonial powers, their impact over divided ethnic groups or the consequences of keeping these borders after the decolonization are no original or recent issues in the Social Sciences. In fact, African borders have been highlighted in academic debates during the last decades and the first studies about these issues are as old as the OAU's decision that the new independent African states should keep and respect the colonial borders (1963).

The works on African borders can be grouped, according to Nugent, in two broad categories: those about the state and territorial sovereignty, and those about local level research[3]. In what concerns African's own perspectives, especially the territorial perceptions prior to colonialism, Kopytoff's work (1989) thoroughly analyses the "African border" pre-colonial meanings and representations. Asiwaju also has an important role in this field as he compares African borders with other world borders (1996) and as he discloses the African social and ethnic groups' perspectives about the divisions provoked by the borders (1985).

According to Malcolm Anderson, political borders are instruments of state politics and represent the level of control that a state has over its territory. Borders are also marks of identity, political beliefs and myths about the unity of the populations living in the same political territory. They contribute to the construction of an 'imagined community' that is called a nation[4]. Jeffrey Herbst claims that all borders are artificial because states aren't natural creations either and so borders are political creations established for the uses intended by those who defined them[5]. On the other hand, according to Christopher Clapham, the relationships between states and their borders may be of two kinds – borders that are built by states or states that are built by their borders – and most independent African states clearly belong to the second type[6]. Indeed, today it is generally agreed that African borders are merely artificial, formal and symbolical and this is why they are porous.

In pre-colonial Africa, social groups (kinship groups, villages, cult groups, chieftaincies or kingdoms) were highly autonomous. However, rivalries or desires for emancipation took the form of witchcraft, poisoning or disagreements about succession rules. In these cases, traditional African societies periodically expelled people from their kinship groups, communities and societies. These people moved to other places, over the 'borders', and their relationships with the 'centre' from which they came might be kept or permanently broken[7]. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there was a whole new social construction within the 'border' because the group that settled there had all the social, institutional and ethnic features of the 'metropolis'. On the other hand, new conflicts and tensions would emerge inside this new group causing what Kopytoff calls 'structural replication'. The emigrant group settles within the border and gives rise to a new structured community, from which another group will leave to another border and so on[8].

This was the meaning of African borders in the past. But the current outline of African boundaries represents the sharing out of African territories by European powers at the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference, which radically subverted the pre-existing spatial organization. While in some cases new demarcations corresponded to old ones, such as

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[3] Nugent, 2002:5-6
[4] Anderson, 1996: 1
[5] Herbst, 1989: 692
[6] Clapham, 1998: 79
[7] Kopytoff, 1989: 18
[8] *Idem*: 27

Rwanda, in other cases the new boundaries suddenly cut up existing social and political units and made it necessary to create a new identity. In any of these cases, the new outlines followed the European powers' way of thinking and relationships between them. They totally excluded local societies from the demarcation processes.

When the independence of African countries was taking place, the 15th and 16th UN General Assembly sessions, in 1960 and 1961 respectively, approved resolutions to maintain the colonial borders. The OAU was also in favour of keeping colonial borders when it was established in 1963. This meant that the new independent African states would build their own sovereignty on the same territorial basis as their predecessors. The new African political leaders also believed this was the best thing to do, because they feared they might lose power if they decided to start trying new kinds of political organization[9]. As a result, African borders have changed very little since the end of decolonization, except some cases like the Bakassi peninsula, between Cameroon and Nigeria, and Eritrea.

In most cases, the new African political elites were unable to extend their legitimacy to their entire population. Most African states were too big and lacked the technical, material and human resources to unite the whole population in a feeling of national unity and belonging. The need to step up nationalism, modernization and economic development also led the elites to choose authoritarian political models, such as single-party or military regimes, which became extremely 'exclusive' and left rural populations out of power. Those who stood on the sidelines also began to regard the elite formation process as clearly related to ethnic, regional or religious loyalties.

In the 1980s, the end of the Cold War and international geopolitical alignments created the idea that Africa was being left to itself. However, the structural adjustment policies that followed eventually helped to emphasize Africa's economic crisis and led to the impoverishment, marginalization and alienation of most of the rural populations and their local elites[10]. These events, along with international pressures to adopt political liberalism, caused the retraction of the state and its withdrawal from the peripheries, and so elites in power radicalized their positions so as to not lose their privileges and places within the state apparatus[11].

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[9] Herbst, 1996-1997: 121
[10] *Idem*: 7
[11] Clapham, *op.cit.*: 82-83

These political options by African states affected the populations living in the borderlands. Due to their ancestral and pre-colonial connections, they feel culturally closer to others living in one or more neighbouring countries than to their fellow countrymen. This means that crossing an international border is just an administrative matter in these populations' daily routine, because they do not consider this movement to be a change in cultural territory. People may cross an international boundary to farm, go to school or the market, participate in ethnic group weddings or funerals… This happens in almost all African borderlands[12].

There is a list of African cultural areas that were 'partitioned' by international borders[13]. On this list, 103 international African borders cut up 131 cultural areas, some of which are partitioned by more than one border. Their distribution slices up the continent because each international border in Africa cuts through at least one cultural area. But this does not mean that borders are walls to these partitioned ethnic groups. In fact, these borders are channels along which people, goods and ideas flow[14]. Although they were mentioned in the 1985 Asiwaju list, the Ndau did not claim the restoration of a common territory.

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[12] Tomàs, 2010: 36
[13] Asiwaju, 1985: 256-258

3. The Mozambique-Zimbabwe Border

Map 1: Mozambique (Nations Online Project)

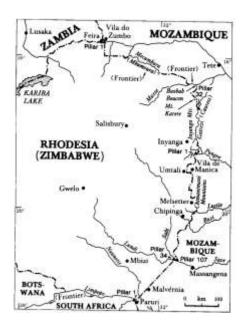The border that separates Mozambique from Zimbabwe,

is approximately 765 miles in length (…). *The alignment which resulted from the Anglo-Portuguese agreements of 1891 and 1893, together with the Arbitral Award of 1897 concerning the Manica Boundary, gave rise to a prolonged sequel of demarcations and modifications ending in 1940*[15].

The extensive boundary was established on the basis of four main points which were marked by the rivers in the region: the point between the river Zambezi and the Mazoe, from the Mazoe to the Honde (Barue section), from the Honde to the Save (including the Manica Boundary) and the Save to the Limpopo[16].

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[14] Tomàs, *op.cit*: 14-15
[15] Brownlie, 1979: 1219-1221
[16] *Idem*: 1221-1222

Map 2: Mozambique-Zimbabwe border (*in* Brownlie 1979, 1220)

The 1891 Anglo-Portuguese Treaty established the border between Mozambique and Southern Rhodesia but the unity of Mozambique has been in question since its creation. As Tornimbeni claims, the northern region was influenced by the "spread inland of Islam through the Yao migrations and trading connections and through the expansion of Islamic sheikhdoms of the coasts"; the central region was a "complex web of relationships that developed around the *prazo* system"; the southern region was a powerful political entity (Gaza Kingdom); and Delagoa Bay was a "natural port serving the Transvaal"[17]. So the frontiers drawn by Portugal and Britain created a country with separate regions and this *status quo* remained for several years as the Portuguese colonial state granted the occupation and administration of the centre and the north to two charter companies – the Mozambique Company and the Niassa Company[18].

Also the railways and roads that crossed Mozambique (*corridors*) were intended to link the British colonies of the interior to the Mozambican coast and the different parts of the colony were also subject to different foreign influences. Therefore, the various regions of Mozambique remained tied to their British neighbours by the *corridors* (arteries of economic activity), "by labour migration across the nearest frontiers and by the increasing networks of cross-border contacts created by people seeking education,

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[17] Tornimbeni, 2010:38
[18] *Ibidem*

employment, consumer purchases, land and the maintenance of traditional ties with kin groups"[19].

Due to geographical proximity, the movement across the colonial border was so common and the frontiers so permeable that a number of people crossed the border on a daily basis, using routes that had already developed before the establishment of effective Portuguese colonialism. The Portuguese colonial state was unable to control those flows of people, not to mention the evasions from hut taxes and forced labour (*chibalo*) and also the illegal migrations to South Africa's mines and Rhodesian plantations. It was also powerless to stem the spread of Rhodesian religious cults or the nationalist ideas sustained by the leaders of such churches (like Kamba Simango)[20].

In Mossurize district, in the southern side of the actual Manica province (former Manica district) and in the borderland with Southern Rhodesia, the "internal conditions were so harsh, and the family and cultural links with the territories, at that time under British administration, were so rooted, that almost all the African male population of Mossurize emigrated abroad"[21]. The Portuguese administration settled an office in Espungabera (Mossurize's capital) in 1900 but, even with this office, and until the end of colonialism, the Portuguese had no effective means of controlling the entire border, so the line as a barrier never really entered these borderland people's minds or practices.

Mozambique's independence did not change the situation and even fostered cross-border flows because the new state did not have the proper resources for supervising all flows of people or goods. On the other hand, only two years after independence, Ian Smith's war against Mozambique in 1977[22], followed by the armed conflict between FRELIMO and RENAMO, contributed to the state's weakness in controlling the national territory and population.

The civil war resulted in huge flows of Mozambicans to refugee camps or family units on 'the other side'. Almost everyone living in the Mossurize district today has a parent or grandparent who escaped to Southern Rhodesia during the Mozambique war of

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[19] Newitt & Tornimbeni, 2008:715
[20] Branquinho, 1967
[21] Newitt & Tornimbeni, *op. cit.*:726
[22] The government of South Rhodesia, a former British colony, was ruled by a white minority and Ian Smith was its leader. Smith had unilaterally declared the country's independence in 1965 and a civil war between the white army and the guerillas of the ZANU (*Zimbabwe African National Union*) and ZAPU (*Zimbabwe African Popular Union*) followed. When Mozambique became independent (1975), it decided to close the border with Rhodesia and to support the ZANU, which attacked Smith's forces from Mozambican territory. As a consequence, Smith retaliated and started his own attacks on Mozambique.

independence and remained there during the conflicts that followed or only escaped during the civil war. These people looked for a safe place with their families, studied and got jobs in Zimbabwe and returned to Mozambique only after the peace agreement in 1992. Some felt so deeply integrated in Zimbabwe that they never returned (Interview, Espungabera). Ineffective control over the borderlands during this period created a no man's land between the two countries that was used to set up illegal trade networks to supply Mozambique's local markets that were suffering from a shortage of goods (Interview, Espungabera).

The end of the civil war in 1992 brought a desire to stabilize and consolidate the state. However, this has been a fragmented unfinished process because Mozambique still has no effective control over its huge territory.

The only formal Mozambique border office in the Mossurize district is in Espungabera, which is located about three miles from the village centre. It is a 'historical' border, with few flows of people or goods, and people cross it most at the end of the year, when Mozambican workers in South Africa use this border to return home for the holidays (Interview, Espungabera). In most cases, the people from the Mossurize district enter Zimbabwe 'illegally' along 'cross-country paths' which are found all over the length of the border. They do this because most of them have no passport or because it is quicker to get to Zimbabwe along these paths than to walk to the official crossing[23] (Interview, Espungabera).

So the borderland communities still cross the border like they did in the past and go to Zimbabwe to visit their families, consult healers and traditional authorities, go to school and take part in ceremonies. These people do not seem to feel the impact of the international border on their daily lives – either in colonial times or even today.

4. The Ndau Ethnic Identity

Mossurize is a district in Mozambique in the southern part of the borderland with Zimbabwe and its inhabitants belong to the Ndau ethnic group. Ndau origins and history are related to the Zimbabwe plateau, to the fragmentation of the Monomotapa Empire and the Mbire kingdom and to the expansionary cycles of the Rozvi. The Rozvi were a Shona-Caranga lineage group who moved from the Zimbabwe hinterland highlands around the fifteenth century and successively occupied the central strip between the

Búzi and Save rivers, dominating the Tonga populations that lived there and settling in small political units (chieftaincies) that were relatively autonomous but related by kinship[24].

Ndau was the name that invaders from the south, the Nguni, gave to the people living in the region between the Save and Búzi rivers when they invaded them in the second half of the nineteenth century. This name comes from the way these people greeted a chief or important foreigner. They knelt, clapped their hands and repeatedly and rhythmically shouted *ndau ui ui, ndau ui ui*. So the Nguni invaders called these people Ndau to represent them as a population and their condition of subservience and submission to the Nguni lords. Nowadays, the hypothetical origin of this name is widely accepted by the Ndau people and is deeply rooted in their oral history, although no-one knows whether it was Ndau oral history that influenced the authors or if the authors' proposals were accepted and interiorized by the people[25]. Nguni domination was first led by Sochangane (also known as Manicusse), who established his capital in today's Mossurize district, and ended in 1889 under the leadership of Gungunhane (Manicusse's grandson) when he retreated south. Two years later, the 1891 treaty between Portugal and Great Britain formally gave birth to Mozambique.

The conquest by the Nguni in the nineteenth century acted as a foil for the Ndau to re-create their identity and assume a sense of Ndauness with a power that reverberated into the twentieth century. However, this nineteenth-century episode of common suffering at the hands of others reinforced a sense of being Ndau in a way that earlier relationships had not. The 'other' came to rule over the Ndau in a more direct manner in the nineteenth century and this harsh reality continued into the period of formal colonialism under the Portuguese and the British[26].

The establishment of the international border in 1891 was not enough to break the ties between the Ndau that were now living in two different colonies. In fact, that separation was never effective. For instance, the political relations between Ndau chieftaincies in Mozambique and Rhodesia remained strong, as they had an important magic and religious aspect and a complex chain of political hierarchies and subordinations. Despite the Portuguese colonial authorities' efforts to sever them, these ties have been

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[23] Crossing the Espungabera checkpoint, the nearest Zimbabwe village is located about 13 miles away.
[24] Florêncio, 2005: 79
[25] Florêncio, 2002: 52
[26] McGonagle, *op. cit.*: 91

maintained and, even nowadays, Mozambique Ndau chiefs are subordinate to Ndau Zimbabwe when it comes to magic and religious issues and visit them to solve it[27].

The word for 'border' in the local language (ciNdau) is *mugano*. But *mugano* means 'limit' or 'end' and is used for any territorial limit (*nyika*) and not only specific state limits. So it can be said that there is no idea of strict separation between two different political units in Ndau vocabulary. In fact, as Elizabeth McGonagle sustains, many Ndau elders in both countries do not cite any firm boundaries for the Ndau region, perhaps because their sense is that they are *between* borders with an unbounded sense of Ndau territory[28].

Cross-border flows in the Mossurize district have changed over time but only due to political or economical events, not to any change in cultural ties between the people on either side. In fact, during Mozambique's war of independence and civil war, most part of the illegal borderland flows were Mozambican refugees or smugglers entering Zimbabwe. With Zimbabwe's current economic crisis, which has escalated since 2000, it is the Zimbabweans' turn to seek consumer goods and fuel in Mozambique. The currency used most in this borderland used to be the Zimbabwe dollar, but Harare recently abandoned it (due to Zimbabwe's severe inflation) and now allows the use of different foreign currencies for trade operations and business transactions, including the United States dollar (USD). This has helped reduce flows of Mozambicans to Zimbabwe for shopping. Nowadays, Mossurize habitants often go shopping in Chimoio (Manica's province capital) instead of Zimbabwe, making a much longer journey along some difficult roads (a trip of about 240 miles each way) but they consider this a better option than the cost of exchanging Mozambican currency (metical) for USD (Interview, Espungabera).

Were it not for these recent economic events obliging the Ndau from Mozambique to change their shopping habits and creating a barrier to cross-border trade, it could be said that this border was nothing but an imaginary line. Its line is more symbolic and relevant for central governments than for borderland populations, who have a huge cultural and social homogeneity. In fact, in the past the borderline was not regarded as a real thing. Ndau family and political units were located on both sides of the border and people kept up their interaction during the colonial period and still do, even after the

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[27] Florêncio, 2005: 129
[28] McGonagle, *op.cit.*: 109

independence of the two countries. In other words, it is not possible to study the history of the Mozambican province of Manica without taking account of the history of Zimbabwe's Manicaland province[29]. It can therefore be considered that this ethnic identity shows some outlines of a transnational identity, rooted in the Monomotapa Empire and submission to the Gaza Empire, both of them prior to the establishment of the border. This idea of oneness with those on 'the other side' is noticeable through common symbolic places, like 'Lugar de Gungunhane' (Gungunhane Place). This is a place in Espungabera, on the road to the Machaze district, where there is a huge tree with a rock below it, where Gungunhane, the last Gaza Emperor, allegedly sat and rested when he was moving south with his troops. There is an identical place with the same name in Chipinge, Zimbabwe, where people say that Gungunhane also sat and rested (Interview, Espungabera). This oneness also prevails in the words of the Ndau living in Mossurize. 'There's no such thing as two separate countries, Chipinge [Zimbabwe] and Mossurize [Mozambique] are all Ndau' (Interview, Espungabera). 'We get there and we all speak the same language. Everyone understands each other: it's not like going to a different country' (Interview, Espungabera).

The sharing of a common language (ciNdau) helps to maintain and reinforce a cross-border Ndau identity in this region. However, the national languages prevail in government communications and at school in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, so the Ndau on each side of the border also speak their national language along with ciNdau. The exception (in Mozambique) is those who have never been to school and live deep in the Mossurize woods, far from Espungabera center. These people only speak ciNdau and scarcely understand little or no Portuguese.

These cultural and language features, which are traditional aspects, are very important to maintaining and consolidating the Ndau identity in the region and are reinforced by other cultural elements such as the common history of this partitioned group. Their submission to the Gaza Empire strengthened these ties and they were not shaken even during liberation or civil wars in each country. This deep sharing of common elements is emphasized daily by the Ndau's movements in the borderland and gives them a sense of freedom that goes beyond any constraints: 'I feel free because I am Ndau' (Interview, Espungabera).

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[29] Beach, 1989: 347

Bonds of marriage, language and culture tie Ndau speakers to one another across the border and they share common interests and a common identity. But people refer to it in conversation and acknowledge its existence, which may possibly make it a hard border in some respects – yet with soft edges.

For the vaNdau people of Mossurize there is an idea of belonging to a place called Mozambique. People know they are Mozambicans and they share a feeling of belonging to a Mozambican identity. However, they regard this identity as secondary, and, to a certain extent, as imposed by the state. And this identity doesn't overlap or annihilate others that they consider more important, such as local or family identities, which have not been suppressed by the establishment of international borders.

5. Conclusions

Almost all the analyses of African borders are about divisions of pre-existing social and ethnic groups by colonial borders. The debate about borders and identity issues is almost always related to ethnic divisions produced and maintained by independent African states.

In pre-colonial years, borders were defined according to the distance over which a political unit could extend all its power, and this distance fluctuated over time when territories were conquered or lost. The main change that colonialism brought to this *status quo* was a new system of fixed territorial boundaries, which the post-colonial African states decided to keep.

The Mozambique-Zimbabwe borderland, which settled some social, economical and political differences at a national level such as language and geography, was not the outcome of ancestral or historical diversities. In fact, the border was only the result of territorial rivalries between Portugal and Great-Britain in southeast Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. Before that, such a border would have had no meaning because there were old connections and bonds between people and economies of the Zimbabwe plateau and people and traders on the Mozambican coast.

During fieldwork it was clear that in Manica Province bordering Zimbabwe emigration continues and transnational networks succeed. Also that the international frontier separating Mozambique and Zimbabwe is an artificial border running through the Ndau-speaking area, dividing kin, culture and speakers of the same language. Most people on or near the border in the 1990s were oriented towards Zimbabwe, partly due to the

facilities on that side. With better roads, more frequent transports, well-stocked shops and greater educational opportunities, Zimbabwe lured Ndau speakers residing on the Mozambican side of the border. Children crossed the border to attend school in Zimbabwean communities and some Mozambican residents used only Zimbabwean currency. Since then the situation has changed and mad an about turn. The currency used in the borderland has changed to USD or the South Africa rand. Zimbabwe's schools are still considered to be better than those in Mozambique and parents still prefer to send their children attend classes there.

From the above, this case shows that African borders, and specifically the Mozambique-Zimbabwe borderland, do not represent a true political, religious or cultural break line between people. In fact, this borderland allows and fosters continuing flows between sides due to the weakness of their own central governments in controlling the territory and the people's low identification with their country, which is regarded as a foreign entity.

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