Panel 69: Revisiting the African Frontier

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This article is work in progress. Comments welcome.

Introduction: approaching the frontier

The panel revisits Igor Kopytoff's original frontier concept to bring it into fruitful conversation with contemporary African frontiers and African studies. Kopytoff's seminal contribution *The Internal African Frontier* (1987) provided an important explanation of the processes of pacification and inculturation of pre-colonial African peripheries. While contemporary African frontiers differ markedly from their precolonial predecessors, the frontier defined as 'an area over which political control by the regional metropoles is absent or uncertain' (Kopytoff 1987b:170) is well alive. Current writings on state failure in Africa and the growing body of literature on African borderlands attest to their endurance and vitality. Kopytoff's understanding of the frontier is essentially one of a politically constructed space. In his own words, 'the frontier is above all a political fact, a matter of political definition of geographical space' (Kopytoff 1987a: 11).

Our interest in Kopytoff's work is primarily motivated by this distinctively political geography understanding of peripheral African spaces and places. In addition to being an empirical reality, the frontier thus becomes an analytical concept, which allows us to understand contemporary political dynamics in some parts of the African continent. It is with this explorative research agenda in mind that we have convened this panel dedicated to *Revisiting the African Frontier*. We are thus primarily interested in an analysis of the logic or rationale of governing that shapes contemporary African frontiers. In other words, we propose using Kopytoff's heuristics of the frontier logic, but apply them in a different empirical context than Kopytoff did in his original work: not pre-colonial, but *post*-colonial Africa is our empirical site.

In recent years academic debates and the literature have shifted from the study of frontiers to the study of borders and borderlands (Wendl and Roesler 1999:6). Border studies have mostly been concerned with the flows of goods and people, cross-border transactions and cooperation as well as more ethnographic, people centered approaches
that emphasize the social construction of borders.\(^1\) Barth’s (1969, 2000) seminal work on ethnic boundaries, understood as social boundaries, and how these are maintained in spite of intense cross-ethnic relations deserves mention here. Often considered an obstacle to Africans’s economic, political and social ambitions, recent studies have underlined how borders serve divided ethnic communities as economic, political, identity and status and rights resources (Dereje Feyissa & Hoehne 2008). While many of the dynamics observed at African borders reflect the above mentioned frontier logic and although many frontiers are situated at the periphery of the nation-state, a frontier is not a border. In a contribution entitled \textit{The Frontier in Comparative View} Dietrich Gerhard (1959:206) stresses the point that the Turner frontier ‘is something entirely different from a border between states, or even from a border region between organized civilizations’. This said, although frontiers are not boundaries, they share a number of characteristics with borderlands, which Donnan (2001:1290) describes as

\[\text{‘(…) zones of cultural overlap characterized by a mixing of cultural styles. They are liminal spaces, simultaneously dangerous and sites of creative cultural production open to cultural play and experimentation as well as domination and control’.}\]

In this introduction to the panel, we consider some aspects of the logic of “political frontiers” in Africa, consider different typologies of such frontiers and propose two ideal-types, the Turner and Kopytoff frontiers, to grasp their governmentality in its variegated spatialities and temporalities.

\textit{The ‘political frontier’}

As Le Meur (2006) recently observed in a case study of Benin, the ‘political frontier’ serves as a useful analytical tool to understand processes of state-making in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. We thus suggest to revisit the frontier dynamics originally conceptualized by Kopytoff, being fully aware that their original empirical context has dramatically altered. What is then the frontier, or, in other words, what makes the frontier an interesting concept for the analysis of current African realities? We suggest that there are three, partly complementary, partly distinctive political dimensions that distinguish the frontier logic.

\textit{First}, the frontier can be apprehended \textit{as an ideological project} or as the imagination of those who claim political space at the margin of the metropole. The idea that frontiers are a political vacuum or no man’s land that needs to be claimed and occupied by outsiders is essential. Kopytoff (1987a:9, 16) talks about ‘the frontier as an institutional vacuum’ as ‘the metropole defined an area in its periphery as open to legitimate intrusion’. This leads us to an examination of the discursive and symbolic strategies with which metropoles and political centers, both national and international, legitimate their claims on a particular frontier zone. While frontiers are often claimed by outsiders for economic

\(^1\) See Newman (2006). A much more substantial review of the booming African border(land) literature will be included in the revised version of this paper. For the time being the reader is referred to the research activities and publications by the members of the African Borderlands Research Network ABORNE (www.aborne.org).
motifs, political motifs are equally important as the recent state reconstruction discourse demonstrates, which portrays African peripheries as essentially ‘blank slates’ in need of international intervention and order (Cramer 2006: 255).

Second, the frontier is a geographical space where state power is territorialized by both material and symbolic means. This occurs in a process in which the state divides peripheral territories into ‘complex and overlapping political and economic zones and rearranges people and resources within these units, and create[s] regulations delineating how and by whom these areas can be used’ (Vandergaast & Peluso 1995:387). The metropole, or, in this particular context, the political center of the nation state, clearly fails to live up to the proclaimed image of the state as the guarantor of welfare and political stability in the frontier. Yet, interpretations that stress the absence or weakness of the state in the frontier are misleading. Through population movements, public policies, property rights regimes, and variegated center-periphery relations – often of a patrimonial character – the metropoles govern the frontier from afar. It is by this process of territorialization, both through population movements and policies, that the metropole is both absent and forcefully present in its frontier.

Third, the frontier is a political space with specific characteristics of disorder and violence that are often of contradictory nature. Particular configurations of order and disorder, often of a violent nature, are encountered in the frontier. The encounter between settler and indigenous populations, the overlap of different cultural styles, the transition between different production systems, the meeting of nationally defined territories, the territorial strategies by which metropoles regulate their hinterlands, and the resistance of local populations to these and other trends reproduce violence and political disorder (Chabal & Daloz 1999) as ways of doing politics that are recurrently practiced in the frontier. What is often perceived as an ‘unruly’ behavior by frontier inhabitants, is often tolerated, if not initiated, by metropoles who tolerate different political norms and levels of violence in their frontier areas as compared to the political center.

**Turner and Kopytoff frontiers: spatio-temporal dynamics of order and disorder**

Different frontier typologies exist. Frontier historian Rieber (2001: 5813) distinguishes three basic types of frontiers; consolidated state frontiers as observed in Western Europe’s transition from feudalism to centralized monarchies; dynamic frontiers of advancing settlements such as the American, British, Imperial Russian and Chinese frontiers and symbolic frontiers corresponding to popular imaginings of the geographic confines of different civilizations, cultures and religions (Rieber 2001: 5813). In a more recent review of the current frontier literature Danilo Geiger (2008) determined three frequently overlapping types of frontiers, namely frontiers of settlement, frontiers of extraction and frontiers of control.

Rather than following one of the two typologies from above, which have their own merits, for analytical purposes in this panel, we suggest two ideal-types of frontier rationally that we subsume under ‘Turner’ vs ‘Kopytoff’ frontier. These ideal-types resonate with the institutional rationale that undergirds two different types of frontiers with specific political orders and territorial patterns of governing (table 1 and figure 1). The two ideal-types will combine the three dimensions of the frontier rationale - as the
ideological project by the metropole (ideational space), as a location where state power is territorialized (geographic/container space) and as a particular configuration of disorder and violence (political space) – in different spatialities and temporalities. In other words, these two ideal-types differ in the spatial and temporal dynamics of the governing rationale of frontiers – and we will find these ideal-types or hybrids of the two types in different empirical sites on the African continent today.

Arguably, Kopytoff developed his work on the frontier from a critical discussion of Frederick Jackson Turner’s seminal contribution on ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ (1893). Turner described the expansion of the settlement frontier in the American ‘wild west’ as a teleological advancement of European settlers into an area of ‘free land’. The settler transforms spaces of wilderness into spaces of civilization through successive forms of frontiers: traders and trappers are followed by ranchers and miners. The latter are followed by farmers, and finally townsmen. Turner’s settlement frontier advances on a linear, teleological path towards enculturation, pacification and civilization. The frontier, therefore, is a short-lived form of territorial expansion from the metropoles into the peripheries of empires or states. The metropole gradually eats up the wild periphery and transforms it into a part of the metropole, thereby pacifying the periphery. The clue in Turner’s argument was that the frontier experience of encountering wilderness and civilizing it had significant impacts on the institutional values of American society more broadly (or what he termed the national character). In other words, the frontier experience bounced back to the metropolitan society.

Kopytoff called Turner’s type of frontier the ‘tidal’ frontier and distinguished it from the ‘internal’ frontier that he observed in pre-colonial Africa. This internal frontier emerged at the interstitial spaces of different kingdoms and princely polities. Settlers, herdsmen and farmers, split off from existing metropoles (dominant societies, political orders, petty kingdoms) and started to occupy ‘open spaces’ at the spaces-in-between at the territorial
margins of other dominant societies, political orders and kingdoms. Both types of frontier therefore share the founding myth of frontiersmen who conquer no-man’s land, free land, open space. But the frontier dynamics differ. Turner’s frontier described the expansion of the metropoles into the periphery whereas Kopytoff’s interstitial frontier suggested the emergence of new social and political formations, the ethnogenesis of peripheral groups who, if successful, would themselves become dominant and loss a part of their population who ventures to establish new frontiers. At the periphery, the nucleus of new metropoles and kingdom emerged. Whereas Turner described the frontier in teleological, linear, irreversible fashion, Kopytoff’s interstitial frontier is cyclical, dynamic and reversible.

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<th>‘TURNER’</th>
<th>‘KOPYTOFF’</th>
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<td><strong>Frontier logic</strong></td>
<td>Settlement (tidal) frontier: Expansion of the metropolitan centre</td>
<td>Interstitial (internal) frontier: Emergence of new formations (ethnogenesis)</td>
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<td><strong>Empirical context</strong></td>
<td>American ‘wild west’ European colonial expansion</td>
<td>Pre-colonial frontier (internal African frontier)</td>
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<td><strong>Frontier spaces</strong></td>
<td>Wilderness at the periphery of empires, states</td>
<td>Institutional vacuum at the spaces-in-between different empires, kingdoms</td>
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<td>frontier space as ‘no-man’s land’</td>
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<td><strong>Temporal dynamics</strong></td>
<td>teleological, lineal, irreversible (transformative), short-lived</td>
<td>cyclical, dynamic, reversible</td>
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<td><strong>Spatial dynamics</strong></td>
<td>Centre-periphery (metropole “eats” the periphery)</td>
<td>Periphery turns new centre (emergence of new metropoles)</td>
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We want to suggest that these two distinct logics of territorialization are still relevant today and help us understand and describe contemporary territorial and political dynamics of African statehood and political (dis) order both at its margin and its center. We label them as two ideal-types: the ‘Turner’ frontier and the ‘Kopytoff’ frontier. By this, we use the differentiation of the frontier concept as suggested by Kopytoff, but apply it in a different empirical context: not pre-colonial, but post-colonial Africa and its contemporary frontiers. In this sense, we do not revisit Kopytoff’s original African Frontier, but contemporary African frontiers as sites of empirical research.
References


