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Migration Control, the Local Economy and Violence in the Burkina Faso and Niger Borderland

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ABSTRACT



The externalized European “migration management” in West Africa has technologically modernized and militarized border posts. This threatens visa-free travel, freedom of settlement and borderland economies in parts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It has interrupted historical mobility patterns, depleted the diversity of mobility practices and criminalized regional economies. At the same time, one can observe intensified and asymmetrical violent conflict in some of these borderlands. By taking the Kantchari-Makalondi borderland as a case study we analysed the relations between migration policies, insecurity, forced immobility and economic decline. Our observations and interviews with migrants, traders, security forces and borderlanders lead us to question conventional narratives on border control and African mobilities as a binary relation between Africa and Europe. Instead, they foreground the multiple practices of (im)mobility in these spaces: the circulation and blockage of travelers, merchandise, surveillance technologies, and military interventions and their impact on security and livelihoods.

KEYWORDS

Migration; borders; (im)mobility; violence; relationality; Burkina Faso; West Africa

Introduction

It is not only because of Covid-19 that crossing borders in large parts of West Africa has become difficult, expensive and dangerous. The externalization of European “migration management” to West Africa has resulted in technologically modernized and heavily militarized border posts and borderlands, threatening visa-free travel, freedom of settlement and borderland economies in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Migration control has interrupted historical mobility patterns, depleted the diversity of mobility practices and criminalized local economies (Brachet 2018). As one of our interview partners has put it: “They block us here, you know! They block the traders, the travellers and of course the migrants. Yes there is insecurity, but if there is no movement there is no money”(Interview in Kantchari, 5.2.2020¹). In this

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situation, one can observe intensified asymmetrical violent conflict in some of these borderlands, which is partly linked to the impacts of migration control shaping a changing geography of increasingly complex armed conflicts in West Africa (Trémolières, Walther, and Radil 2020).

By taking the Kantchari-Makalondi borderland (Map 1) as a case study, this paper is concerned with the relations between border management, forced immobility, economic decline and violence. In January 2018, a new border post was inaugurated just outside the town of Kantchari in the borderland between Burkina Faso and Niger. The border post was determined to be a place of strategic interest by the International Organization of Migration (IOM) and European migration control actors keen to extend the borders into the African continent and to stop West African “illegal” labor migration as close to its origin as possible. International funders collaborating with the Burkinabè government not only established a brand-new border post building and site 18 kilometers outside of Kantchari, but also have equipped it with state-of-the-art biometric border technology, including a fingerprinting system that is directly connected with the European database, for instance enabling to effectively and early-on block attempted re-entries after deportations.



Map 1. MIDAS Border Posts in West Africa and the Kantchari-Makalondi Borderland. Source: Authors.

Furthermore, a number of newly trained border police officers were dispatched from the capital Ouagadougou and other regions in Burkina Faso, thus effectively replacing or reinforcing the local police force. In what follows we analyze the effects of this newly introduced system on the local migration economy – for migrants, for their various helpers and the local trading, housing and entertainment industry. We then show how these new international measures have not only hindered migration, but also reintroduced unfettered economic hardship, as well as contributed to violent conflict.

What we argue is a graphic result of this situation is that the new Kantchari border post was attacked and burned down in April 2020. The border post was completely destroyed, which made it necessary to go back to the old border post building right in the town of Kantchari. In addition, the biometric technology (fingerprint scanners, computer-based registration systems and the internet connectivity that enabled instant linking up with European biometric databases) was destroyed, which resulted in the return to the older paper-based registration system. This violent attack has thus not only reintroduced seemingly obsolete sites and practices of border control, but also highlights the detrimental effects of fragmented thinking in migration control. Namely, thinking that separates migration flows and push–pull-factors from complex local realities of life, the general economic situation and related hardship. As we will show this reinforces profound mistrust in and violent resurgence against the state and international border policies.

In what follows, we empirically situate the multiple institutions, practices and technologies and effects of immobilization currently in effect: the application of surveillance technologies, the blockage of travelers and the impact of criminalization of migration on livelihoods and security in the borderland. Subsequently, we examine violent modes of situated responses to forced blockages before summarizing our relational and multiperspectival approach to migration control, insecurity and the local economy in this borderland, and offering suggestions for future conceptualizations of relational borderland research (see also Kramsch 2020). Our analysis draws on empirical data gathered in several research phases between April 2018 and September 2020. Data collection comprised of observation, informal conversations and structured interviews with migrants, travelers, the border police, immigration officers, transporters, brokers, local vigilantes, owners of shops and restaurants and local officials.

Thinking the Border Relational

Both the construction of physical and symbolic borders as a basic element of institutionalizing a territory, and the counter-hegemonic subversions of and challenges to borders as sites of (however incoherent and fragmented) sovereign power are inherently violent. This is even more true with regard to the securitization of borders during the last two decades. As Jones (2019, 37) has put it: “the hardening of the border through new security practices is the source of the violence, not a response to it.” However, how recent borderwork relates to violence and conflict remains largely understudied within critical border studies (Brambilla and Jones 2020). By giving an ethnographic account of a specific border regime shaped by multiple grievances in the context of the border-migration relationship between Europe and Africa (Andersson 2014), this paper aims to make a

contribution to the relations between borders, violence and conflict (see also Jones 2016; Van Houtum 2010).

In this we start from the premise that by reading the border as a relational space we are able to grasp the multiplicity of effects changing migration policies. These effects do not only impact those who travel, but also affect the spaces they travel through, get stuck in or do not seek out anymore. However, if space is to be understood as a process of and result from relating objects, places, and people (Massey 2005), borders present an empirical challenge. For if people are stopped at borders, space can become a container for them. Refugees stuck at the EU's external border can attest to this. In addition, the closing and separating function of borders and the control and prevention of circulation puts at least two spaces, on either side of the border, in a specific relationship. With the spatial spread of control and barring functions, borders can thus be understood both as relational spaces themselves and – at the same time – as relations of spaces (Löw and Weidenhaus 2018).

Moreover, borders must be understood as part of the social world, or as Paasi (2012, 2305) has put it: “Borders are relational in the sense that they are produced, reproduced, and transformed in diverging social relations and networks.” We conceptualize the border as a dynamic assemblage of power relations that is, in a global context of border securitization, mobilized to separate undesirable circulations of people and things from those that are considered unproblematic. We will focus on the border-related social practices of control, blockage and surveillance that shape (im)mobilities which in turn simultaneously reproduce, challenge and subvert the very border as process, institution and symbol.

At borders, mobilities are tracked, ordered and governed in the context of migration control or biometric citizenship (Amoore 2013; Breckenridge 2014). Crucially then, migration and border-related practices do not only have an effect on the lives of migrants, refugees or travelers, but changing border regimes are intertwined with broader changes in local economic and social life. As we will see, the subversion of the “biometric border” (Amoore 2006) in Kantchari, where border crossers are monitored and often violently stopped, results itself in a proliferation of violence that is constitutive for this borderland as a relational space. The Kantchari border post is one of the countless ones mobilized to limit the movement of people in the context of global migration control that in itself needs to be seen as a relational process. The externalization of the EU borders is characterized by the involvement of a multitude of state, private, national and international actors and new and complex networks of relations between them, in which governments and institutions in third countries, international humanitarian and national development organizations are assigned tasks of border control and border security policy (Hess and Kasperek 2017).

As we show in the following, carefully attending to the wider relational effects of a changing mobility regime enables us to see the border as constitutive of and embedded in the making of space. As Rumford (2012, 887) has suggested “borders cannot be properly understood from a single privileged vantage point and bordering processes can be interpreted differently from different perspectives.” Rather, as he suggests borders have to be analyzed in a multiperspectival study and its constitution and effects be interrogated by a multitude of different actors, notably including citizens and their perspectives and actions, not merely the state's or the migrants'. This also complicates conventional

narratives of border control and African mobilities as a binary relation between Africa and Europe.

Experiencing the European Border in West Africa

The externalization of border control and the relocation of migration control from Europe to Africa is more than a simple infrastructural upgrade or the “spatial stretching” (Amoore 2011) of European border techniques and technologies to the African continent. Rather it is molded to different historical contexts and organized through specific constellations of uneven movements. The shape of the new border is characterized and formed by a multitude of actors and shifting actions. We thus understand its ramifications as being constituted in and through multiperspectival relations (Rumford 2012): of new and existing practices of border control and migration management, as well as other relational practices, or indeed “borderwork” (Rumford 2008) between people, ideas, infrastructures and economic interests. Focusing on the newly introduced Kantchari border post, its technologies and effects on (im)mobile people, we aim to shed light on socio-economic inequalities, power and exclusion which we suggest are crucial to understanding who can benefit from mobility, and who loses.

The politics of migration control in Burkina Faso are part of a global pattern. There is a belief circulating between many citizens and states that by better controlling the risks and uncertainty linked to migration, and by fixing identities, the world would become safer (Mbembe 2018). In particular movement from the African continent to Europe is hotly debated and controlled. However, the current practices of remotely controlling mobility within Africa and stopping migration from the continent to the EU as early as possible are not new. They rather must be understood as both building upon the experiences of European migration control regimes that Fahrmeir (2018) analyzed in this journal, and as an intensification and expansion of practices operating since the late 1990s in the context of the externalization of European border and migration control in West Africa (Frowd 2018). The multiplication of concrete measures and instruments of migration control is thus based on a spatial shift or extension of border control practice, which no longer takes place only at a territorial line, but increasingly within an expanded zone, both at sea and in numerous countries of origin and transit (Zaiotti 2016).

In Burkina Faso, pushed by financial incentives offered by the EU the installation of measures of migration control at concrete places is embedded in a complex web of governance structures following the Joint Valetta Action Plan and the Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development, also known as the “Rabat Process.” It assembles bi- and multilateral actors as well as both complementary and opposing programs and policies such as the Capacity Building in Support of Security and Development (CBSD), the “Programme Gestion intégrée des Espaces frontalières” under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for stability (EUTF) and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa and the support of the G5 Sahel Joint Force to name but the most important ones. What these different policies and programs have in common are a conceptualization of both migration and mobility in general as something potentially threatening and an external re-interpretation of long lasting local and regional irregular practices of travel and transport as criminal (Brachet 2018).

The construction of a new border post 18 km outside of the town of Kantchari 2017 and its technical reinforcement and militarization from 2018 onwards were part of the multilateral project “Renforcement de la sécurité des frontières du Burkina Faso, Phase II” of Burkina, Niger, Japan and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Simultaneously the local security situation deteriorated, especially in remote and cross-border areas of the country, when a new front of violent attacks emerged in the southeast that added to the Northern Front with Mali. Kantchari is a strategic site for cross-border mobilities between Niger, Burkina, Togo and Côte d’Ivoire, linking the ports of Lomé, Accra and Abidjan with Niger. After the outbreak of armed conflict in Northeast Mali in 2012, and associated restrictions on travel opportunities, the Ouagadougou-Kantchari-Niamey route also became increasingly important for international migrants on their way to Agadez and on to Libya. According to local border officials, the number of documented border crossings in Kantchari doubled between 2014 and 2017 to around 300,000 per year. Border officials assumed that at the same time the number of undocumented border crossings has also multiplied due to the limited control possibilities in this sparsely populated borderland, where people have many opportunities to cross into Niger and travel on to Niamey and Agadez via the cities of Boni, Mango and Banoukoura (Informal conversation, Kantchari 17.4.2018).

The Criminalization of Travel

The Kantchari border post is run by immigration officers and policemen that were trained by the IOM. In particular, their training pertains to the new technology introduced and the new European biometric migration control concepts and practices it aims to extend right into the African continent. The post was equipped with sophisticated models and technologies: such as a Border Management Information System. There were three Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS) kits installed in the Entrance and three more kits at the exit. It was with the help of these technologies that the post cooperated closely with Frontex. The officers, for instance, consulted the EU-funded central database WAPIS, the West Africa Police Information System, where all collected fingerprints can be found and are matched with Interpol. As we will also see below, for those under suspicion of heading to Europe the journey often ended here. However, even after the upgrading of the border post and the increased presence of security forces on and around the border, it was impossible to stop undocumented migration completely.

Now they are hunting us. They have been hunting us since they got cars and motorbikes. Since they say that they will stop human trafficking as they call our work. If they catch you with someone on your motorbike, you’re screwed. Then there are three possibilities. Either you go straight to prison or you are lucky and they let you pay, or they let you pay but you cannot. Then it’s prison again. I ask you: Is that normal? Before, everything was ok, everyone did their business. Now we go to prison and they keep on earning. (Interview, Kantchari 2.5.2018)

This is a quote from an interview with one of the many “helpers of migrants,” as our interviewees and the local population more generally calls them. Inspired by Rumford’s work (2008) we use the term informal “borderworkers” in the following, to underline that

indeed not only formal borderworkers and the state forms and constitutes the border, but also a diverse network of people, workers and infrastructure surrounding the “official” border. The borderworker quoted here underlines the massive impact of tightened migration control on the local population. The discourse on illegal migration materializes in criminalization of formerly tolerated and socially accepted practices coupled with benefit taking and corruption. Interesting is the last remark “and they keep on earning,” underlining that the border is still permeable. However, the agents who benefit have shifted. While before there was a lively migration business of which corrupt border patrols, local policemen, as well as informal borderworkers made business, the matrix of beneficiaries has now shifted. As the borderworker quoted above’s reference to the new motorbikes and cars of the border and security authorities makes clear, the control measures are geographically not limited to the official border crossing, but are carried out throughout the entire border strip. Police patrols now also monitor the informal border crossing routes to track down migrants, their helpers, smugglers and traders who want to avoid customs. It is these informal routes, which of course continue to be used but to a much lesser extent and at a significantly increased risk – a change that has been of great importance to the local migration economy.

Given the spatial stretching of the border, travelers have to experience this combination of restrictive controls, harassment and corruption already on their way from Ouagadougou to Kantchari. In December 2019 there were 13 checkpoints lined up over a distance of 378 km of the gendarmerie and the military, where travelers without valid documents were charged fines and searched. Travelers without Burkinabe passports were charged fees even if they had valid documents. People who were classified as *candidats à la migration* (candidates for migration) were particularly harassed the closer they got to the border, although, under the ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of People and Goods, they are actually allowed to move freely from Burkina Faso to Niger. As one of our interviewees put it:

I simply want to go to Agadez to work with my older brother, I’m a mason ... Now I have been stuck here at the border for two days and they don’t let me go. And do you know why? I made the mistake of crossing over normally with my passport and giving them my fingerprints and now they say that their computer found my fingerprints and that I’ve been to Italy before. But that’s not true. ... Now I have to find another way. (Interview Kantchari 28.4.2018)

The young man from Togo quoted here addresses the technical core of migration control in Kantchari, namely its integration into the IOM’s border management information system, the so-called MIDAS, the Border Management Information System of the IOM. MIDAS automatically captures biographical and biometric data of travelers using document and fingerprint readers and was via the main server based at the General Directorate of Border Police in Ouagadougou connected to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) in Warsaw (Interview with IOM staff, Ouagadougou 10.12. 2019).

However, technologies require active adaptation to the local context. The movement of technologies and objects from one context to another is often imagined as a straightforward case of diffusion or implementation (Behrends, Park, and Rottenburg 2014).

Complicating this picture, technologies are not simply transferred and function in the exact same way as intended (or indeed used on the European continent), but rather technologies are adapted and molded to different contexts and change their function or usefulness. In this case, local climatic and infrastructural conditions have meant both technologies and their operating humans do not always work as intended. This in turn creates opportunities for people in search of a return to more local agency and economic opportunities in border management. As this immigration officer argues:

Our rooms are so hot. Our solar panel is overloaded and can no longer supply air conditioners. Our fans circulate hot air. With MIDAS we are suffering from heat and electricity deficit. For example, the air conditioners no longer work in our cramped passenger check-in rooms. Each bus drains more than 80 people and if we have to check all of them multiplied by the number of buses, we literally go crazy and aggressive. We become slaves to a system that, far from making our job easier, causes us other problems. (Interview, Makalondi 20.12.2018)

Socio-technical infrastructural problems with the new information system forced the immigration officers to return to handwritten registers. The combination of fragmented electricity supply and equally patchy accountability structures, *“la machine est en panne”* (the machine is broken) how one of our interview partners put it. Of course, the machine can be broken due to infrastructural break-down as much as due to individual need for additional income on the side of the immigration personnel. Thus, real and maneuvered technical problems of the new information and analysis systems allow immigration officers to return to the handwritten registers and so regain their earlier agency: namely, they can let people without adequate travel documents pass – against a bribe. Rather than simply condemning these practices as corruption, we need to rather acknowledge here the unreliable functioning of the state in Burkina Faso. Salaries can be arriving unreliably and responsibilities for extended families where everyone is struggling to make ends meet in fragile economies can make humans in urgent need of an additional income. In short, it means even these clever and highly-technisized border management technologies arrive in the reality of everyday pressures of poverty. This means they are adapted and localized when traveling (Behrends, Park, and Rottenburg 2014), or in this case, they are disregarded altogether.

Furthermore, new systems also create new rules and indicators, which in turn creates new indeterminacies. Funds available through the EU – Programme d’appui à la gestion intégrées des frontières (PAGIF) allowed the government to rebuild the border posts, to send additional staff and to concentrate security forces in the borderland with the task of fighting “illegal migration.” There were various justifications for the eventual illegal prevention of the transit of people suspected of being on their way to the Mediterranean as “candidats à la migration”: an entry stamp of North African states in the passport, telephone numbers from Algeria or Libya in the mobile phone, reasons for entering Niger simply judged by border officials to be false or a record in FRONTEX’ data management system. As this traveler from Ghana explains:

I am visiting my sister in Niamey. She has been married for more than two years and I simply want to see her ... Now I’m considered as a migrant leaving for Europe. Do I no longer have the right to move normally? You see, I have my papers and I’m told to be more precise about what brings me to Niger ... Now they want me to pay 20,000 FCFA (about 37\$) to cross but there is no guarantee. (Interview Makalondi, 14.12.2019)

Even if this interview quote reinforces our suggestion of a certain negotiability of the border itself, rigid controls and the arrest of migrants and the informal borderworkers relatively quickly meant the migration boom in Kantchari was ending and migrants searching for alternative routes. This had grave effects on the local economy as we document in the next section.

“Poverty Is Back”: Impact on the Local Economy

The journey of travelers from mainly Gambia, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Senegal, Ghana, Togo and the three Guineas had led to a vibrant migration economy in Kantchari since 2014. This not only attracted businessmen and traders from outside the region, but also benefited, primarily, the local population who opened hotels, shops and restaurants, serving as mediators between border officials and migrants and brought them uncontrolled across the border on their motorbikes.

Before, every night I used to have three people on my bike to help them cross the border. I made three laps a day for a sum of 5,000 F CFA that each migrant paid me ... To drive them to Makalondi, I would take up to 20,000 F CFA, sometimes. I helped a lot and I’m proud of it. They all want to go to Europe ... It’s obvious ... (Interview, Kantchari, 26.4.2018)

This is the account of an informal border worker who not only recounts his loss of income here, but also draws our attention to the fact that migration aspirations are part of life in many economically weak and unequal West African states. Helping those who seek out to improve their own employment and life chances is not considered an illegitimate activity, but “helping.” But it was not just the informal borderworkers who lived from these activities, the wider local economy benefitted too. The economic consequences resulting from the criminalization and prevention of transport, travel and migration are massive. As this transporter recalls:

Women, young people ... everyone benefited from migration that passed through Kantchari. The population had enough opportunities to make money. We, the young people, were really doing well. Our land is not fertile and therefore helping migrants brought us a lot of money. Additionally our women sold on the streets. There were bars everywhere and prostitution corners as well. Kantchari was really good. Now, walaï, everything is spoiled ... (Informal conversation, Kantchari 8.12.2019)

Migration-related border economy brought relief from otherwise very limited economic and agricultural possibilities in the arid region around Kantchari. But it was not only the informal borderworkers and the adjacent trading and entertainment industry that benefitted as a former helper of the migrants confirmed. One of the brokers interviewed argued that:

Kantchari was always full of people and it was difficult to distinguish the market day from other days. There were a lot of buses from Ouaga, Fada, and we would take the migrants at the customs, negotiate for them and take them across the border. Even the policemen at the borders profited. The migrants paid between 15,000 and 20,000 francs to the police to cross. Those who didn’t have this money asked us to help. Those who didn’t have identity documents came to us and we helped them to cross via the bush. (Interview, Kantchari 13.12.2019)

Until 2018 some informal borderworkers made between 20,000 and 200,000 FCFA per day by getting up to 10 migrants across the border. Buses and motorbikes transported hundreds of border crossers per day. Ordinary taxi drivers benefitted as much as local elected officials, policemen, members of other security services who reinvested the money they got at the border into the local migration economy. We met a policeman serving at the border who owned bars, restaurants and rented houses for migrants and so became very powerful locally – one of the “big men” in Kantchari. In order to accommodate migrants in Kantchari, both young people and established local businesspersons opened, how they were called them, “ghettos,” namely passageway chambers to accommodate migrants who, due to lack of means, would have to wait in Kantchari for their parents or other relatives to send money.

After the implementation of migration control in 2018, these “ghettos” were closed, and restaurants, bars and shops went bankrupt. According to an elected municipal official more than 80% of the region’s economy was related to migration. Since the municipal administration collected taxes from the various actors involved the migration economy, about 70% of the budget was essentially based on taxes from migration. Today, it is only 5%. The current financial gap threatens the functioning of local administrations in the entire region (Interview Kantchari 19.9.2020).

The current economic decline of the region is also due to the general restrictions on mobility, such as the curfew and the ban on riding motorcycles. Some markets like Dabougou and Boulmantchangou have been closed completely, others like in Sambalgou and Partiaga are only open for a short time because visitors have to hurry to get home before curfew.

People come from many villages to the market in Kantchari every Monday. Some come from Niger, others from hamlets and small villages even more than 60 km away from Kantchari. But all are obliged to leave the market from 2 pm onwards so as not to be surprised by the curfew on their way. The time of animation of the market is reduced, people do not come as before. It’s not a business anymore and despite all this, they continue to collect taxes every market day. This is suffocating us. Many traders have fled Kantchari because of all these problems. (Interview with a trader, Kantchari, 20.9.2020)

Before the international investment for border control, the different actors cooperated closely and everybody knew who was involved, who did what with whom and how. These relations were then broken up relatively abruptly when the border was staffed with more and better paid agents sent from the capital, who were trained for the technical upgrades and made responsible for the smooth implementation of the new border management. However, although the sensitive web of actors committed to each other was in a certain way disturbed by the new staff and the new discourse of “illegal migration” border officials also realized very quickly that migration control reduced their own income opportunities and that it was economically devastating for society as a whole for which they are also held personally responsible.

Between ourselves, I’m going to tell you a secret. Illegal trafficking was convenient for everyone and especially for us. With this new tool (MIDAS), we can no longer honour certain commitments. Before there was mutual understanding between the transporters and us, everything was going well. It was a win-win situation for both of us. But now everything has become complicated. Today people find themselves unemployed, the hatred against

the state and its symbols is real. It is badly thought out by the decision-makers in our country who are in the pay of Westerners ... I confess that this policy and the repression that followed has plunged everyone into poverty. One must always be afraid to stay next to the hungry, he will do anything to reach his objective. (Informal conversation, Kantchari 18.12.2019)

The concerns of this border policeman seem to be justified, as the incomprehension and indignation of the affected population is increasingly directed against the representatives of the state at the border, against the G5 Sahel Force and the Burkinabe army, both involved in migration control. As a former helper of migrants has put it:

The passage of migrants in our region helped us a lot. We managed to help our parents and feed our family. But since they started to punish people and send us to prison, poverty is back. Nothing really works anymore. People have fled Kantchari, others are looking for ways to drive the army out of the area. If you ask the population, you will understand that everyone is tired of the situation. (Interview Kantchari 23.9.2020)

The desperation about how the change has (again) “plunged everyone into poverty” as the official above put it, has also strengthened local militias and violent responses against the state sanctioned re-organisation of the local migration economy. Responses to migration control are getting increasingly violent and there are many attempts at driving the army and state forces out of the region. In the next section we then relate forced immobility to violent mobilization. We discuss the loose alliances between former transporters, brokers, disillusioned unemployed youth, vigilantes and jihadists, and suggest they thus constitute an unexpected result of Afro-European migration control.

A Violent Borderland

On April 18 2020 non-identified armed men attacked and destroyed the Kantchari border post. Everything that was not looted went up in flames, including the entire technological investment in migration control. The border post was already attacked on April 4 when one policeman was killed. As revenge the army raided a village of Fula people nearby the border post. This in turn led to the attack and total destruction of the border post on April 18. To this day, controls are therefore carried out at the former border post at the outskirts of the town, close to the customs and the Gendarmerie. As all the technical equipment went up in flames too, there has been a return to old paper-based control practices, presumably with all the well-rehearsed practices of controlling and passing. While the newly trained reinforcement officers from the capital are still around, they are also based in the town of Kantchari again and use the former paper-based systems. In addition, the security forces now also lack the basis for controlling the informal border crossings where they run an increased risk of being ambushed. As a result, non-documented border crossings have increased again.

On the one hand, this assault was both an attack on symbols of a contested state in general, and on a specific location of state intervention in the regional economy, which had heavily depended on the mobility of people and goods. On the other hand, the event and the dynamics of mutual attack and revenge should be understood in a broader context of the complex conflict situation in the Sahara-Sahel in which violent conflict in Burkina Faso, rooted in structural asymmetries of state-building, is embedded (Idrissa 2019; Trémolières, Walther, and Radil 2020). Since 2015, violent conflict has

been expanding from Mali into Burkina. In loose and constantly changing alliances state forces, international armies, pastoralist and farmers, vigilant groups, disappointed and angry youth, local and international jihadists in the North of Burkina, criminals and armed mobs are engaged in asymmetric warfare from which especially civilians suffers most.

In this context, it is important to specify who these violent actors are because contrary to the official Burkinabe discourse which understands all violent non-state actors as “terrorists,” many of the jihadists’ allies have very different motivations to take up arms yet are supported by those religious militants, who want to foster their grievances against the Burkinabe state. Some selected incidents shed light on how the previously described practices of immobilization and their economic effects contribute to a formation of an increasingly violent borderland.

When an armored vehicle of the G5 Sahel force on its way on the road between Fada N’Gourma and Pama was destroyed by a booby mine on the morning of December 22 2018, killing three soldiers, immediately unknown “jihadist” were held responsible.

“My friend, not the ‘terrorists’ did that, these people are not foreigners. They are natives from here” (Informal conversation with a bus driver, 22.12.2018).

Even though the bus driver’s assessment cannot be independently verified, it illustrates the local perception of the violent conflict in the region. There are similar interpretations for the attacks on a police patrol at Yaagou some 30 from Kantchari on November 20 2019, on the gendarmerie post in Kantchari itself on March 3 2021 or on a military convoy near Sakoani on the road between Matiakoali and Kantchari on September 11 2021.

To understand violence in the Kantchari region, one must first look back to the period between 2010 and 2016, when there countless robberies illustrated a general deterioration of the security situation. As the central state was unable to guarantee safety, self-defence groups, the so-called “Koglweogo” were founded. The *Koglweogo* quickly brought the situation under control by pursuing the criminals with brutal force and driving them out to the cross-border national parks of Arly and Pendjari (Benin). In 2016, in the wake of the European Union’s new migration control policy and with the arrival of the Barkhane security forces, the legitimacy of the *Koglweogo* was questioned due to the human rights violations they were accused of and the first so-called “terrorist” attacks occurred in eastern Burkina Faso. In fact, these attacks were the first reactions to the restrictions that came with the new interventions. These attacks were carried out by those who realized very quickly that this new policy of controlling migration, fighting smuggling, securing borders in general, under the flag of fighting terrorism meant financial losses for them.

Now that there is money from the G5 Sahel to fight what they call human trafficking and terrorism, we see them (the security forces), but before, when there was no money, we only saw them on market days in the villages, where they plundered the people. When there is a robbery, you never see them or they arrive hours later. The split between us the population and them is real, it makes them easy targets. (Interview with a Koglweogo, Kantchari 18.12.2018)

The dominant discourse among the local *Koglweogo* is that their contribution to secure the borderland has not been appreciated in any way and that, in addition, they

are even criminalized (Interviews with two Koglweogos, 18.12.2018 and 22.09.2020; numerous informal conversations with Koglweogos). Now that the state security forces are better equipped in the course of combating human trafficking, smuggle and terrorism, and are additionally supported by the G5 forces, vigilante groups see themselves marginalized and bypassed by the state in the distribution of funds made available for migration and border control. Previously, the *Koglweogo* earned very flexibly both by harassing and fleecing of migrants and as their transporters. With migration control, both sources of income are now threatened.

The groups attacking the security forces are very heterogeneous and can be seen as loose and shifting alliances between smugglers, criminals, *Koglweogo*, the group of well-trained soldiers demobilized after the fall of Blaise Campaoré in 2014, former brokers and migrant transporters, stranded migrants and unemployed youths.

Anyone who does not have a job here can be recruited. You can give a gun to almost anyone. What are people supposed to do when almost no one can cross the border because of the army? What are we supposed to do when there are curfews and when we are no longer allowed to ride our motorcycles because the terrorists are supposedly always attacking on mopeds? Is every motorcyclist a terrorist? Traders today are smugglers, and helping migrants across the border today means human trafficking. (Interview with a trader, Kantchari 20.9.2020)

There are numerous common economic interests between all these groups who are persecuted and fought against in the course of migration control and who suffer severe economic losses due to mobility restrictions.

As soon as they know that you are in contact with migrants or that you have been a transporter, the FDS (Defense and Security Forces) come to take you for questioning. Several transporters and bus drivers have been arrested and thrown in prison, simply because they were trying to bypass the border with migrants. Let me tell you, young people, my friends, have been forced to flee and to take refuge in the bush, in the forest. They are afraid of being arrested by the FDS. It is logical that they attack the FDS ... And sometimes they are even helped by migrants who are blocked and do not hesitate to join groups of bandits in order to eat. (Informal conversation with a former transporter, Kantchari 23.9.2020)

Some of the groups are said to have at least loose alliances and selective cooperation with the newly formed remnants of Oumarou Diallo's katiba "Group of Diawo." Diallo had fought in Mali with Amadou Koufa and was one of the first jihadists to establish himself in eastern Burkina Faso before being arrested in March 2019. However, the vast majority of our interlocutors told us that despite selective alliances, local armed groups usually hide behind the concept of the jihadist in order to distract.

We do not want claim that migration control is the most important or even the only explanation for armed conflicts and the catastrophic security situation in the region, but it does contribute to deeper understanding of the current situation characterized by a forced immobilization of almost all borderlanders. Since 2016 and increasingly since the introduction of the new border management measures 2018 so-called terrorist attacks have spread rapidly to the East of Burkina Faso. As the security forces try to contain the violence, attacks against state institutions and Christian churches as well as kidnapping and criminal attacks especially against mining companies increase. It can be assumed that the loss of income from the migration economy, whether from the transport of migrants, from brokerage or from the plundering of migrants, as well as from informal

cross border trade in general could not be compensated for and has enlarged and diversified the spectrum of non-state armed actors, especially in this border region. This is the reason why we go so far as to say that the majority of attacks against the security forces such as G5, gendarmerie, border police, etc. are economically motivated.

Instability has increased across the country. Before 2018, extremist activities were prevalent mainly in Burkina Faso's northern Sahel region. However, 2019 saw an exponential increase in extremist activities, which has expanded to the east, west, and southern portions of the country. Non-state armed groups target civilian and military targets alike. Economic desperation fuels jihadist insurgency, armed criminality, violent intercommunal competition over natural resources and antigovernment grievances which the security forces, most of whom are not local, are at a loss to deal with.

Bandits, smugglers and other criminals know that we do not control the region. For example, we are more than 97% foreigners in the region. How can we fight these people who perfectly master their forest and the different trails? They are very fast and operate with motorcycles while we have very few means... At night, they make incursions to attack and retreat in the forest... It's terrible, all that. (Informal conversation with an army officer, Kantchari 24.09.2020)

As a response the Government of Burkina Faso has declared a state of emergency in the entire East regions, including a curfew and the ban of motorcycles. This, in turn, has severely limited opportunities to make a living and led to further resentment among the population against the government and the executing security forces. Especially the ban of motorcycles on January 1 2020 was devastating for the population. Motorcycles were the most important means for the mobility of people and goods between villages or the bigger centers. Trade has become much more difficult and prices for food and other basic goods are on the rise.

First of all, how are people supposed to get to the market now? How are the arenas supposed to get to the market? Everyone depends on the motorbikes. How can the government ban motorbikes just because the bandits also ride them? And then everybody must have his Identity Card. Anyone who moves without this piece is immediately is suspected by the FDS. They (FDS) have a list of wanted persons, so everybody without an ID is immediately arrested and taken to the military bases. There are some who never come back. It is days later that their bodies are found either on the side of the tracks or in the bush. (Interview with an employee of the local administration, Kantchari 19.9.2020)

There are countless reports of excesses of violence by the security forces, of torture and executions of suspects. Riding a motorbike or being without identity papers has become life-threatening. In this atmosphere of fear and mistrust, people stay at home or use bicycles if they can. The previously lively markets are deserted which further accelerates the economic decline in the region and pushes even more people into illegal activities, fueling the cycle of violence of security forces and border infrastructure on the one hand and violent responses on the other.

Conclusion

This paper offers a way to understand to what extent forced immobility through new and sophisticated security practices in borderlands relates to violent (political) mobilization and constitutes an unexpected result of European migration control in Africa. Thinking

borders relationally means to understand them as networked spaces of relations (Amin 2004). We have shown how complex multiple dynamics of power that are involved in the practices of bordering and mobility control in Kantchari are related to political processes on various scales, linking the very local to global ideas of border management and migration control. In Kantchari border-related practices concentrate on the idea of restricting and controlling movement to contain human mobility that is undesired and designated as a security threat in general and international migration towards Europe in particular. The powers at work here try to re-make the local border a global one. Local actors though have agency too and through turning to violence, they have re-localized the border practices to a certain extent (and probably only for a certain time). Multi-perspectival study of borders thus enables us to see that the border is not only made by the state and their agents, but also by surrounding actors, such as citizens winning and losing from shifting border and mobility regimes.

This agency manifests both in a Kantchari that is now economically starved and it surfaces in unemployed informal borderworkers as well. In its most extreme form it has resulted in a radically shifted border regime: namely a burnt down high-tech border post that underlines the significance of borders for understanding the multiple spatialities of violence and conflict. We analyzed the border as a site where the close relation between state power and violence becomes explicit. The interventions to secure the borders – to control migration and mobility in general – fuel intra – and intercommunal conflict, in which violence is conceived of as an appropriate way to get access to economic resources. For instance, they were an opportunity for the Gourmantché group to influence the long-standing conflicts with the Fulani in their favor, who were very quickly equated with terrorists. The Gourmantché succeeded in gaining terrain, i.e. keeping the old enemy at a distance and taking land from them, and in putting the Fulani in a general situation of vulnerability. As Raeymaekers, Menkhaus, and Vlassenroot (2008) and Korf and Raeymaekers (2013) have demonstrated in other contexts, violence in the Kantchari borderland is not spontaneous or chaotic, but reveals processes of fundamental social and political change.

We thus understand the violent borderland as being constituted in and through such multidirectional relations, relations between new and existing practices of border management, mobility control and struggles and resistances, relations between people, ideas and infrastructures. By having studied the processes by which “irregular migrants,” “human traffickers” and violent actors are made through relational practices, we have shown that migration control is not a discrete, given entity. Carefully attending to the subaltern geopolitics of uneven practices and spaces of (im)mobility and resistance allows us to understand better how configuring European borders impacts African livelihoods, and indeed how Africa and Africans are situated and valued in global geopolitics.

Note

1. All interviews were translated from French to English.

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