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Constructing the border from below: Narratives from the Congolese–Rwandan state boundary

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A B S T R A C T

This article is about the simultaneous subversion and perpetuation of political borders 'from below'. Using the state boundary between the cities of Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Gisenyi in Rwanda as a case study, this article shows how people make sense of their border-related social world. By analyzing everyday narratives and practices of people who live on both sides of the border, this article reveals popular geopolitics at work and demonstrates the inchoate character surrounding the idea of 'the border'. Border talk is examined in key narratives and narrative clusters to emphasize the primacy of certain thematic plots and to reveal which aspects of the border people prioritize and how they attribute meaning to the idea of the border. Views of the border ranging from a desired barrier against the demonized 'other,' and as a means of exclusion, to its conception as an institution that may be in need of reform but is essential to economic survival, make clear that approaching the border through narratives means allowing for its historicity and relationality. Border narratives and practices reveal some neglected aspects of violent conflict in the study region and provide insights into state–society relations, an understanding of the state's legitimacy, and an understanding of the effects of the border as a social construction that influences everyday life.

Introduction

Through an analysis of the narratives and social practices of borderlanders, this article concentrates on local perceptions of the state boundary between the cities of Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Gisenyi, Rwanda. This tension-filled border separates two countries that, after fifteen years of outright warfare, proxy warfare and, mutual allegations of support for militias and rebel groups, have only very recently begun to engage in hesitant efforts to reach a political rapprochement. The complicated bilateral relations between these two states in general, as well as the recent political history of the border region around Lake Kivu, shaped by ethnic and identity conflicts, have been a major subject of studies conducted from a macro perspective in history and political science (Chrétien & Banégas, 2008; Mamdani, 2001; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2007; Prunier, 2009). By contrast, this paper focuses on micro-narratives of the state border as a spatial phenomenon. As both a symbolic and material manifestation of power relations, and as the linked creation of difference, the border is constantly reproduced and reconfigured but at the same time subverted 'from below'.

My approach builds on a tradition that asks how people narrate, how they 'story' (Somers, 1994) the way of making sense of their border-related social world. The border must be conceptualized as a part of daily life to understand the logics and concrete processes of its diverse perpetuations instead of seeing it as an abstract construct. Comparative research into identity construction along the former eastern border of the EU, for example, illustrates the analytical potential of drawing on everyday narratives to understand perceptions of 'the other' and the persistence and dynamics of constructing difference (Meinhof & Galasinski, 2005; Wastl-Walter, Varadi, & Veider, 2002; see also Havrelock, 2007; Pickering, 2006). A large amount of scholarly work on border narratives (e.g., Paasi, 1996; Sidaway, 2002) is rooted in the European border experience. However, questions of identity, citizenship and autochthony are also increasingly linked with empirical work on concrete border phenomena in Africa (e.g., Brambilla, 2007; Miles, 1994, 2005; Nugent, 2008). In a recent article for this journal, Raeymaekers (2009) analyzes unofficial cross-border trade to describe the making of new forms of political interaction along the Congolese–Ugandan border. The current article contributes to this growing literature and seeks to enhance conceptual reflections on both the symbolic functions of borders and their material impacts. I

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will attempt to broaden the conceptual scope of border narratives by concentrating on local stories about the border and linking these stories to the narrators' practices. This approach helps to reveal competing meanings of the Congolese–Rwandan state boundary, to identify and understand the important features and the driving forces behind violent conflict in the region, and to learn more about the shape of the state and state–society relations on both sides of the border. After a presentation of the theoretical and methodological background of the study as well as a contextualization of the border, the empirical chapter presents an analysis of different micro-narratives. The paper ends with some reflections on the methodological, contextual and theoretical contributions of this research.

Border talk and border practice: theoretical background and methodological approach

Narratives in border studies

Reece Jones, in an attempt to re-categorize boundary studies in geography, recently stated that "the boundaries of what constitutes the category 'boundary studies' have been constantly shifting and changing" (Jones, 2009a: 181). With this comment, Jones is in line with the bulk of reviews that trace the transformation of border studies from the early twentieth century to the present. Reflecting the general empirical and theoretical developments within geography, most of these reviews trace a line from mainly descriptive studies (e.g., historical–geographical approaches, typologies, and functional approaches) that focus on international borders to postmodern approaches (Kolossov, 2005; Newman, 2006; Newman & Paasi, 1998; Paasi, 2005). The two groups overlap to a certain extent, and the latter group may be further differentiated into two additional groups. On the one hand, there are studies of geopolitical discourse and the social construction of territories and boundaries; on the other hand, there are more agency-oriented and behavioral approaches that focus on the active social processes of demarcation and zoning in the broad context of cultural politics.

After a short-lived discussion on an allegedly borderless world, a theoretically informed engagement with state borders quickly gained renewed importance. Furthermore, some scholars are uneasy with discourse analysis, which is said to foster a certain depeopling of border studies by "reading and interpreting texts on boundaries instead of doing time-consuming fieldwork among border people" (Paasi, 2005: pp. 668). In another article for this journal, Nick Megoran expressed his concern that studies of elite discourse are in danger of becoming repetitious, one-sided and even irrelevant if the borderlanders' everyday experiences and understandings are ignored (Megoran, 2006). This dissatisfaction with a purely text-based approach to borders mirrors a more general debate on the weaknesses of discourse concepts in political geography and the relationship between language and practice (Müller, 2008). In this paper I therefore focus on the micro-narratives of borderlanders as a means of accessing everyday experiences and practices at the border.

Until the appropriation and reconceptualization of 'narrative' and 'narrativity' as concepts from social epistemology and social ontology, which started in the 1960s, the study of narratives was associated with the story-telling methods of historians and with non-theoretical forms of representation (Somers, 1994). Although there may be some common ground regarding the relationship between text and social reality – most scholars concerned with narratives would agree that it is through stories that people make sense of the world – narrative analysis is employed very differently in various fields of study (Elliot, 2005).

The same is true for narrative analysis in border studies, not least because narratives operate on different, though converging scales. Inspired by the seminal work of Paasi (1996), a large amount of existing research focuses on the study of narratives in media texts, academic writing, and government and other public documents (See Strüver, 2008). A similar body of work uses a border poetics approach, which deals with the representation of borders in literature and the arts (Prokkola, 2008). Border studies have undoubtedly been enhanced by this analysis of master narratives, but it is clear that this kind of 'remote sensing' can only make a partial contribution to the understanding of borders. James Sidaway (2002) has adopted a mediating approach that acknowledges the importance of both elite and local narratives, both theoretically and methodologically. In his work on the Portuguese–Spanish border, he argues from a meso-level perspective, drawing on official documents, maps, literature, local media and discussions with borderlanders. To understand border-related local life worlds, scholars today are increasingly concerned with the question of how ordinary people narrate 'their' borders (Jones, 2009b; Megoran, Raballand, & Bouyjou, 2005). This article aims at contributing to the growing number of agency-oriented border studies by rendering visible the different meanings of the Goma–Gisenyi border, through an understanding of its impact on everyday life and individual border experiences (Newman, 2006). This article highlights certain border-related practices and conceptualizations of the border as expressed in the narratives of borderlanders.

Listening, crossing and observing the border

Many scholars who wish to gain an understanding of borders by studying daily practices at the local level advocate for a return to 'the field'. Megoran (2006: pp. 625) proposes more specifically that scholars who wish to understand borders must engage in participant observation, rather than simply conduct interviews. To observe border practices and to grasp the emic interpretations of these practices, I opted for a triangulation of methods. I made observations at different places along the border, conducted interviews using the visible border as a stimulating prop, and engaged in mobile data gathering (Sheller & Urry, 2006) through participant observation and interviews conducted while crossing the border together with informants.

For this paper, I use data collected during several visits to the Congolese–Rwandan borderland around Lake Kivu made between October 2006 and November 2008. My conclusions result from the analysis of fifty-one interviews with different individuals from both sides of the border. I spoke to men (33) and women (18), to people with Congolese (23) and Rwandan passports (14) and to people with double citizenship (11). Not all subjects had a cross-border occupation (e.g., border officials, smugglers, petty traders and street vendors and employed commuters), but all had some relationship with the border. I did not rely on a probability sample that represents a whole population. Instead my objective was to highlight the variety of border talk. Therefore, I chose my interview partners according to different border activities and attitudes that I observed while strolling near the border and in adjacent neighborhoods.

Interviews were conducted in French and, with the help of a translator, in Swahili. Thirty-six of the interviews are 30- to 80-min audio recordings; the rest of the interviewees did not want to be recorded. The latter interviewees, together with those people who refused to talk to me at all, came mainly from Rwanda and were afraid of the Rwandan secret service, which is omnipresent but hardly visible to outsiders, both at the border and in the two towns in this study. The very fact that it is much easier to speak to

Congolese, even on the Rwandan side, hints at the special character of this border, which is explored further in the next section.

To create an atmosphere of shared experience, I conducted all interviews in close vicinity to and within sight of the border. Spending time close to the border allowed me both to observe the daily negotiation of official and unofficial border crossings, and to spot potential interview partners. These were mostly people who actually crossed the border, but also people who, for example, were waiting for someone coming from the other side, or who simply lived near the border.

The more static interviews consisted of situated talk, in which I asked the interviewees what they thought about the border and what sort of experiences they had had with it, to stimulate border talk. When I was allowed to accompany respondents during their border crossings, I used a more conversational style of interview. The border regime and the sensitive political setting regularly made it necessary for me to go through border clearance separately from my informants, so that a "natural go-along" in the sense of Kusenbach (2003) was not possible. However, my approach did not utilize an artificially created experimental mobile research situation, in which the researcher and the informants make a thematic tour (See Brown & Durrheim, 2009).

Border talk is always linked to real physical and material consequences, and the combined approach of static and mobile methods, as a hybrid between interview and participant observation, helped me to counterbalance the restrictions of classical interview situations and pure observation, and to clearly grasp border perceptions and practices. My interviewees included small-scale smugglers, commuters and petty traders. The fact that I made regular border crossings using a multiple-entry visa, sometimes four or five times a day, and not always while carrying out an interview, brought about suspicions on both sides of the border. However, it was much easier to handle the Congolese authorities, who gradually became familiar with me, than the strict Rwandan border security. Besides a short-term arrest by the Rwandan military, my constant presence at the border did not bring about any regulatory problems, other than the fact that I eventually had to apply for a new passport due to the excessive number of stamps in my original passport.

The Goma–Gisenyi border relationship: introduction to the case study

All wars in the DRC, which have had millions of direct and indirect victims during the past two decades, started in the Kivu region (Prunier, 2009), making the border a hotspot for the regional conflict system and associated geopolitical developments. This border serves as a magnifying glass for the complex relations between the two countries, as was demonstrated on a macro level in August 2009, when Rwandan president Paul Kagame and his Congolese counterpart Joseph Kabila held their first common press conference at the border checkpoint, *Grande Barrière*, to display their latest rapprochement. As border talk is historically contingent, I will contextualize my analysis by relating the dynamic border regime of the last two decades (See Table 1) to the different but intertwined conflicts in the region.

Conflicts in the Kivu region: the border in context

Goma and Gisenyi were founded as Belgian and German colonial military posts respectively. At the time the border was created, it suddenly separated local life worlds that had until then been closely intertwined, just as occurred in many other places in Africa. After World War I, the Belgians took over Gisenyi together with the rest of the German colony Rwanda–Urundi (Bindseil, 2008). The colonial administration of the Belgian Congo then organized resettlement from densely populated Rwanda to the Kivu region to provide labor for farms, tea and coffee plantations, and mines, increasing the Rwandophone population numerically (Mamdani, 2001). In Rwanda itself, the Tutsi minority was favored over the Hutu majority, and was treated with privilege as it enforced Belgian rule. With the Hutu rebellion of 1959 against the Tutsi elite, there was another important migration stream to the Kivus, consisting of Rwandan Tutsi refugees who fled from the sporadic massacres that followed independence. This migration lasted until the early 1970s, and today, Congolese Tutsis in the Kivus are subsumed under the term *Banyarwanda* (i.e., those who share the language Kinyarwanda), regardless of whether they have been living there for hundreds of years or if they have arrived only recently.

Table 1
Changing regimes at the Goma–Gisenyi border.

Characteristics of the border regime	Hours of operation[a]	Entry requirements for city residents/ Congolese and Rwandan citizens	Rigidity of control
Period			
Mid 1980s–1994 Close relationships between the presidents Mobutu (Zaire) and Habyarimana (Rwanda)/civil war in Rwanda	Until midnight	Identity card (residents and non-residents)	Lax control on both sides of the border
1994–1996 Change of government in Rwanda/ Restructuring of defeated Rwandan army and Hutu militias in refugee camps near Goma	Until 6.30 pm	Introduction of *jeton* system for residents *laisser passer* for non-residents	Strong control on both sides of the border
1996/1997 (First Congo war) Overthrow of the Mobutu regime in Zaire (now DRC)/Closure of refugee camps of Rwandan Hutu near Goma/Rwandan troops in Eastern Congo	Midnight at *Grande Barrière* (*GB*) 6 pm at *Petite Barrière* (*PB*)	Residents: *jeton* Non-residents: *laisser passer*	Virtually no control in DRC Lax control in Rwanda
1998–2003 (Second Congo war) Rwandan occupation of Eastern Congo/Political control through Rwanda via RCD-Goma	Midnight at *GB* 6 pm at *PB*	Residents: *jeton* Non-residents: *laisser passer*	Virtually no control in DRC Lax control in Rwanda
2003–2005 (Political transition) Rwanda retreats from DRC/RCD-Goma still in power in the Kivus	8 pm at the *GB*	Residents: *jeton* Non-residents: *laisser passer*	Lax control in DRC Strong control in Rwanda
2006–2009 Laurent Kabila elected president in DRC/ RCD-Goma looses power in the Kivus/War between Nkunda rebellion and national army	(6 pm for cars) 6pm at *PB* 8 pm at the *GB*	Residents: *jeton* Non-residents: *laisser passer*	Strong control on both sides of the border
2009/2010 – Arrest of Gen. Nkunda/Integration of Nkunda's troops in national army/Political rapprochement between DRC and Rwanda	(6 pm for cars) 6pm at *PB* 24 hours at *GB* until midnight at *PB*	Residents: *jeton* Non-residents: *laisser passer*	Moderate control in DRC Strong control in Rwanda

[a] Opening at 6 am for all periods and both posts.

War in the Kivus started in the early 1990s, due to conflicts over land in Masisi and Rutshuru, the regions that were most impacted by colonial resettlement and flight. The clashes became rapidly ethnicized, with the Banyarwanda in conflict with other ethnolinguistic groups. These conflicts, as well as the civil war in Rwanda from 1990 to 1994, had no major impacts on the regime of the Goma–Gisenyi border. Lax border control arose in the 1980s and reflected the close relationship between Zaire's long-time dictator, Mobutu, and the Rwandan president, Habyarimana, who were close allies in the politics of the Great Lakes region. The first important rupture occurred in 1994, when more than one million Hutu refugees, including well-armed soldiers and militias, crossed the border into Goma, fleeing reprisals by the troops of Rwanda's former Tutsi rebel chief and current president, Paul Kagame. Virtually overnight, the border became a dividing line between two enemies, because Mobutu did not prevent the exiled Hutu from expelling and killing Congolese Tutsi and from launching attacks on the Rwandan side of the border. These attacks triggered the invasion of the new Rwandan army, which, together with Kivu's Banyarwanda, spearheaded the overthrow of Mobutu in 1997. Goma became the headquarters of the Rwandan-backed rebel movement *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie-Goma* (RCD-Goma), which mainly consisted of Banyarwanda and contested the new regime in Kinshasa (Tull, 2005). During the *de facto* occupation of Eastern Congo by Rwanda from 1998 to 2003, there were virtually no border controls. The regime changed again when Rwandan troops retreated in 2003. However, attempts by the international community to stabilize the weak Congolese state exclusively at the national level did not bring peace to the east. Contrarily, it contributed to massive violence in the region because the two most striking problems were ignored: the citizenship crisis and the security concerns of Congolese Tutsi owing to the presence of the Rwandan Hutu militia FDLR (Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda) in the Kivu region. However, with the elections of 2006, and the political decline of the RCD-Goma, the Congolese state regained a certain degree of control of its borders in the east. At the same time, however, the insurgency of General Laurent Nkunda, a dissident Congolese Tutsi who was perceived as Rwanda's proxy, against Joseph Kabila, the new president (See Stearns, 2008), gave rise to a distinct militarization of the border and rigid controls. With Nkunda's arrest in 2009, the Rwandan government reacted to harsh allegations by the international community that it had helped to fuel the war, and opened the door for a political rapprochement.[1] This development also found expression in a relaxing of the rigid rules for border crossings.

Merging cities but a fragmentary borderland

From the beginning of the violent conflict in the Kivus in the early 1990s to 2009, Goma's population shot up from 170,000 inhabitants to an estimated 640,000 (Fig. 1).

The enormous influx comprised refugees from war-torn rural areas, but also migrants who were attracted by the new job market created by the concentration of international humanitarian organizations (Büscher & Vlassenroot, 2010) and a construction boom, in which much money from mineral trade was reinvested. Goma had always attracted immigrants from other provinces because its strategic location as a regional trade center offered income opportunities and because the fertile volcanic soils in the highly productive rural areas surrounding the town guaranteed low food prices. '*Twanjingoma*' is a well-known saying in Swahili and means, essentially, "Let's go to Goma to have a peaceful and easy life." War and lasting insecurity in the rural areas amplified a rapid urban population boom that started when Goma became the provincial capital of North Kivu in 1988.

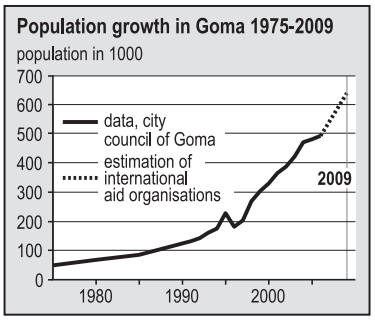

Fig. 1. Population growth in Goma 1975–2009.

Gisenyi, with about 70,000 residents, is far smaller than Goma, although it has experienced steady (but more modest) growth over the past two decades. In 2001 the *Université Libre de Kigali* (ULK) opened a campus in Gisenyi, stimulating the city's economy, which depends on tourism, a brewery and some banks. One remarkable change has been the westward extension of the city toward the border, where urban growth and expansion in both towns has led to significant densification (Fig. 2).

At the border, the two cities almost physically merge, due to extensive construction activities in a strip between the two official border checkpoints, *Petite Barrière* and *Grande Barrière* (Fig. 3).

This border area was considered a neutral zone until the Rwandan authorities constructed a dirt road in the late 1990s to definitely affix the boundary line that now runs between the poor but lively district of Birere, with its wooden houses, and the Rwandan-occupied area with its high-class real estate (Photo 1). Today, the buildings along the border are so close to each other that one could theoretically cross from one country to the other through a garden gate or by simply crossing the road, if the highly militarized zone wasn't so heavily guarded.

> "*When I crossed the border for the first time the difference was striking. The first thing you recognize is the cleanliness. I mean, you leave this dirty and chaotic Goma and on the other side you suddenly think: Hey, what's so different here? And you realize that it is pretty tidy. Streets are clean, there is no rubbish lying around and it's much more calm. It's simply more beautiful and it's only a matter of several hundred meters. Really crazy.*"[2]

This quote illustrates the fact that despite the spatial proximity and economic interactions between the two countries, there is no borderland, in the sense of a transition zone where "cultural, linguistic and social hybridity can emerge, resulting in the formation of a sub-cultural buffer zone within which movement from one side to the other eases up considerably – the person in transit from one place or group to another undergoes a process of acclimatization and acculturation as he/she moves through the zone of transition, so that the shock of meeting the 'other' is not as great as he/she feared" (Newman, 2006: pp. 151). When one crosses from one side to the other of Goma–Gisenyi, little prepares one for what is waiting on the other side. It is not really a hybrid milieu, except with regard to language, as most people in Gisenyi manage to speak Goma's lingua franca, Swahili. Travelers coming from Gisenyi, which is a calm, well-organized and tidy city with good infrastructure, where plastic bags are forbidden for environmental reasons, and where one can feel safe strolling about at night, are totally unprepared when crossing the border to Goma for the first time. Before one gets used to the way this city functions and to the Goma style of living and surviving, the impression is usually that of a chaotic, stirring and vibrant place. One observes that there is hardly any basic infrastructure or public services, except in the city

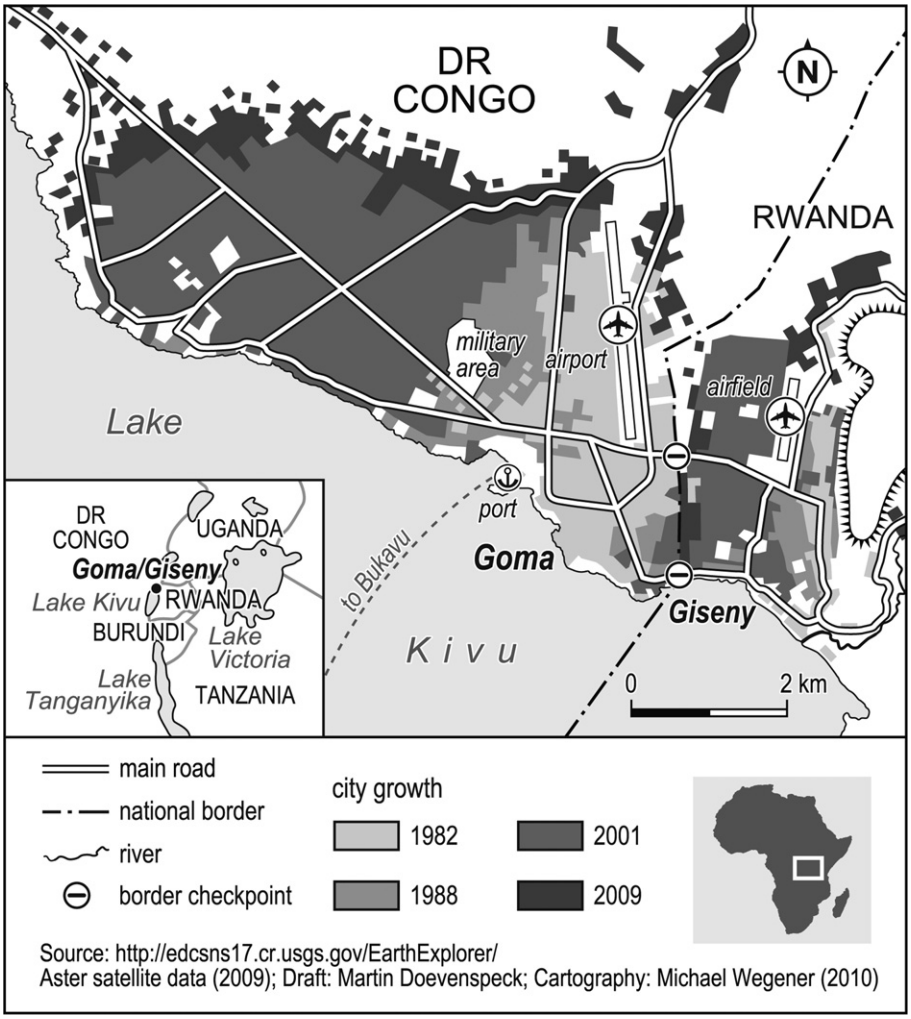

Fig. 2. City growth in Goma and Gisenyi, 1982–2009.

center, and that most people avoid walking long distances in the unpaved and dirty streets after dusk because of an extremely high crime rate (See Pole Institute, 2009).

This initial perception of the border as a distinct cut-off point is subject to some moderation in the empirical section of this paper, but it certainly reflects real asymmetries and inequalities; economic opportunities and insecurity in Goma contrast with visible urban governance and security in Gisenyi, where local markets are much smaller. This contrast mirrors the distinct paths of development the two states have followed since the mid-1990s, with the result that this border is not only one between former warring parties but also between two very diverse political orders and societal projects. On the one side is Rwanda, ostensibly the 'strongest' state in Africa with its obsession for security and control and impressive development in terms of macroeconomic indicators (Ansoms, 2009; Goloobo-Mutebi, 2008). On the other side is the DRC with weak and dysfunctional, if not completely absent, state institutions, partly under the custody of the UN and the international humanitarian industry, and partly at the mercy of politico-economic adventurers (Kodi, 2008; Prunier, 2009).

Cross-border trade and border management

Situated between the Congo Basin and the densely populated highlands of Uganda and Rwanda, Kivu has always been an important transit region for long distance trade connecting the east and the west of Central Africa. At the Goma–Gisenyi border, foodstuffs such as beans and bananas are taken to Rwanda for consumption, and minerals from the mines of North Kivu are exported overseas through Rwanda and East African ports. In return, and along the same routes, construction materials and petroleum products, as well as consumer goods from Mombasa, are imported (Tegera & Johnson, 2007). Additionally, meat, milk products and vegetables from Rwanda are sold in local markets in Goma. Different taxation laws in the two countries lead to widespread, small-scale smuggling. Many consumer goods, such as electrical appliances, alcohol and construction materials, are cheaper in the DRC, and are unofficially re-exported to Rwanda, from whence they came.

As already mentioned, there are two main official border posts linking Goma and Gisenyi: *Grande Barrière*, also called *Corniche*, which is situated on the lakefront, and *Petite Barrière* which links Goma's commercial center with Gisenyi's markets (Fig. 3). Most cross-border trade takes place at *Grande Barrière* because this is the customs post for cars and trucks. The staff of international organizations uses this border post for immigration procedures. *Petite Barrière* is usually closed to personal vehicles and trucks, and it is rare to see foreigners at this checkpoint, where only pedestrians can cross. Both border posts open at 6 a.m. As an expression of the political rapprochement between the DRC and Rwanda, *Grande*

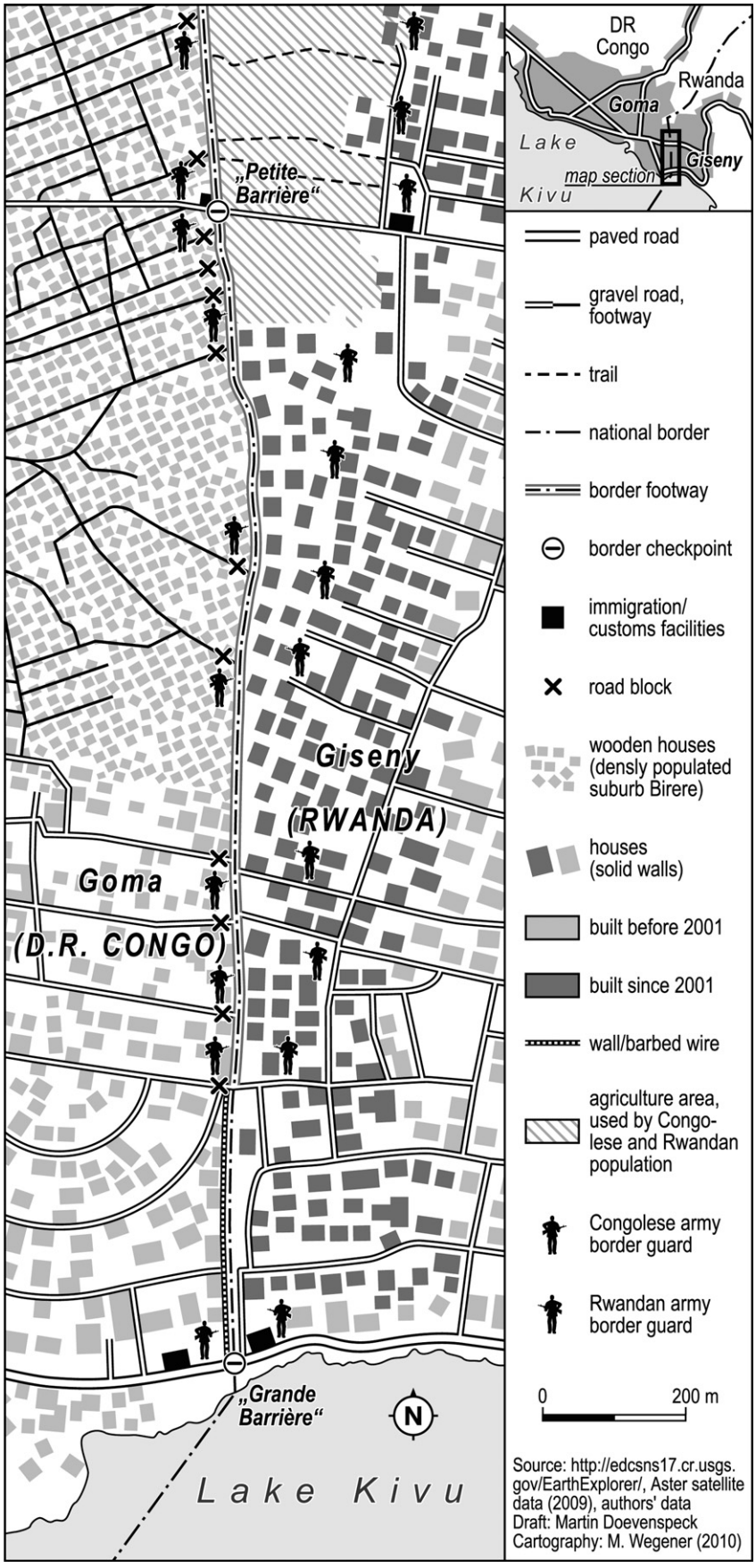

Fig. 3. The Congo–Rwandan state border between Goma and Gisenyi.

Barrière has been kept open until midnight since September 2009, whereas *Petite Barrière* still closes at 6 p.m.

Both posts are busy places of daily commuter transit. About 15,000 people cross the two posts officially everyday (INICA, 2006). These are not only traders and day laborers but also students and teachers who come and go between the two towns. Officially it is unproblematic for local residents to cross the border, as they only need to show their identity cards to the immigration officers to get a daily authorization called a *jeton* to cross to the other town. A *jeton* only allows an individual to move within the municipal limits. Those who want to travel farther have to buy a pass, a so-called *laisser passer*, which is also required for Congolese and Rwandans who live outside Goma and Gisenyi. However, crossing the border is not so easy for most people. Especially on the Congolese side of *Petite Barrière*, people often have to spend an hour or more bargaining over a small bribe to be given to border officials before they obtain a *jeton*. Aside from these official movements, there are hundreds of smugglers and traders, as well as commuters who simply want to avoid time-consuming border procedures, who negotiate their way across the border unofficially, especially along the strip between the two checkpoints. I will come back to these unofficial movements later.

Dangers, benefits and the other: Goma–Gisenyi border talk

In what follows, I will present border talk through four key narratives and two narrative clusters, providing a structure for the multitude of border experiences and the contradictory border views that emerge, even within many individual interviews. Where possible, I will complement this interview data with my own observations. In the key narratives, I have pooled individual border stories with similar core statements from a particular side of the border. The two clusters also pool stories, but they are not confined to one side. Instead, they have a border-crossing dimension, as they link Rwandans and Congolese border views. For both key narratives and clusters, selected and instructive quotes from interviews are given.

Group- and country-specific border views: key narratives

The four key narratives revolve around what I was able to identify as the most important topics that arose in the interviews: security problems in Goma (and in the Kivu region in general) due to the porosity of the border, the essential importance of the border for the livelihood of Rwandan peasants, the recreational function of the border and the perceived exclusion and citizenship crisis of the Congolese Tutsi.

'The Rwandans want the entire Kivu': the border as a gateway for Rwandan aggressors

Referring to the border as a gateway for aggressors from Rwanda is a dominant narrative because many Congolese believe that the border is too porous and should be better protected. This narrative involves stories about Rwandan merchants smuggling weapons, about the infiltration of saboteurs and Rwandan troops in plain-clothes, and about cross-border robberies. There are countless accusations that Rwanda is following a strategy that involves destabilizing the Congo for its own economic interests and supporting Congolese Tutsi rebels in the Kivu region so that they can serve as a buffer between the Rwandan territory and the exiled Rwandan Hutu militias.

> "*You know what is happening here? Twice and in broad daylight I have seen people coming from Rwanda who wanted to pass the border with beans. Everybody was wondering why beans are coming from Rwanda since normally they are traded in the reverse direction. Well, the soldiers checked up on these people and they found bombs and mines under the beans… That's what they are bringing to make war over here*".3

People who represented the border in this way did not travel to Rwanda and had hardly any contact with the other side. Those who lived in the densely populated suburb of Biréré (Fig. 3), so close to the border that they were confronted with border issues everyday, were often extremely hostile toward the other side. Though deeply involved in cross-border trade and in smuggling, they actually avoided crossing the border.

> "*Once I saw a woman coming across from Rwanda who was really fat. And you know why she was so fat? She had buckled on a cartridge belt under her skirt. The woman came to the soldiers and gave them 20 dollars. I asked the soldier: 'How can you so easily accept 20 dollars and let this woman pass? Go and ask what's inside her bag.' The soldier then asked her to lift up her skirt and we saw an entire cartridge. The woman gave two or three thousand to the soldiers and they let her go back to Rwanda… We want a wall, just as in Berlin. This wall that they broke down there, we want it here for us. They (the Rwandans) don't want us to live in peace. He (Rwanda's president Kagame) always sends soldiers to support Nkunda and to destabilize the security over here*."4

Much of this border talk concerning perceived threats from Rwanda must be understood in relation to conflicts in the hinterland of Goma. Although the lives of the inhabitants of Goma have not been directly threatened by the ongoing fighting, except in October 2008 when rebel troops were on the point of taking over Goma, they nevertheless project this danger onto the border. The border's importance for the people in Goma can also be understood when one realizes that in hardly any other state in Africa (maybe with the exception of Somalia) have processes of de- and re-territorialization been so extensive as in the eastern part of the DRC. These processes involve a continuous and generally violent genesis of para-state territorial organizations with fluid boundaries. In this context, the Goma–Gisenyi border is one of the few materialized expressions of a state that is otherwise hardly visible. Therefore, the desire for a wall, for instance, can be interpreted as a desire for clarity. Stability and certainty are much wished for, at least here at the border, where the constantly shifting frontiers between state territory, rebel states, and militia-controlled areas in the hinterland have confused and scared people and put the fragility of the Congolese state on display. At the same time, people have been extremely disappointed by those who are charged with controlling and protecting the border. In numerous interviews, Congolese border officials are accused of venal complicity with the alleged Rwandan aggressors.

Congolese border talk consistently reveals the widespread anti-Rwandan, or rather anti-Tutsi, tendencies that are very common not only in Goma or the Kivu region but in the whole of the DRC. Another constant in these stories is the equating of Rwandans with Congolese Tutsi.

> "*Nkunda's war has the same objective as the previous one. It's about finding land for the Nilotes, these Tutsi. They want Tutsi from the whole of Africa to come here and for us to take them as Congolese. If they came as businessmen or as stockbreeders, without demanding citizenship, ok, but they come and immediately they want to become Congolese… These people are terrible. You know what happened in Masisi? They arrived in Masisi and began to seek their own kingdom… A Tutsi always wants to be chief, he always seeks to dominate the people he has found. And if you refuse, he kills you. In any case, killing is nothing to him*."5

In these narratives, the adoption of racist colonial stereotypes ('Nilotes', see Miles, 2000) and selective perception and interpretation of the more recent political history of the region are condensed to become a construction of the threatening other, thus perpetuating the sense of 'otherness' (Van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002). The stories about Rwandan infiltration and destabilization strategies clearly mirror master narratives in the pro-government Congolese press, which also continually reproduces the myth of a Nilotic empire. The fact that Rwanda has played a key role in eastern Congo for the last fifteen years is undisputed. However, it seems that the Congolese government needs the Nilotic myth to gain legitimacy and to exercise power over a population that increasingly criticizes it for being corrupt and incapable of providing basic services such as security. In theoretical terms the power of the Nilotic myth in the Great Lakes may be understood in the framework of Slavoj Zizek's psychoanalytical theory of ideology in which the philosopher "suggests that 'national paranoia' stems from nation's nervousness at not yet being constituted as 'authentic states'" (Jackson, 2002: pp. 20).

Remarkably, there were no similar stories of a dangerous 'other' on the Rwandan side. Contrarily, and as I will elaborate in the following key narrative, most people emphasized positive aspects and opportunities associated with the border. This might be explained by the fact that Rwandans never suffered from Congolese actions as the Congolese did under Rwandan occupation and Rwandan-backed rebellions and still do, under Rwandan militias operating in the Kivu region. The fact that evil is seemingly not expected to come from the other side points to a potential internalization of the enemy.[6] This internalization might have to do with the trauma of the Rwandan genocide (one's neighbor as an enemy) but also with the fact that many Rwandans consider their own government and its regulative interventions as more dangerous than any actions of the neighboring state. This perception is elaborated in the following key narrative.

Interestingly, the pro-government press in Rwanda represented the border as a threat to national security for a long time (Figs. 4 and 5). The two cartoons presented here were published in *The New Times*, the country's most important daily newspaper. One calls to mind the bombing of the Rwandan borderland by Hutu militias operating in the DRC, something that seems very unlikely nowadays. The other shows women smuggling hand grenades and machine guns into Rwanda.

'Without Goma we would die': the border as an exit option

It is more the positive aspects, especially income opportunities and the liberating character of the boundary, which are at the forefront of border talk by Rwandans. The border as an exit option is a very strong narrative, especially among Rwandan women who sell agricultural products such as tomatoes and beans in Goma to ensure their livelihoods.

Fig. 4. Cartoon published in The New Times, 06.03.2007.

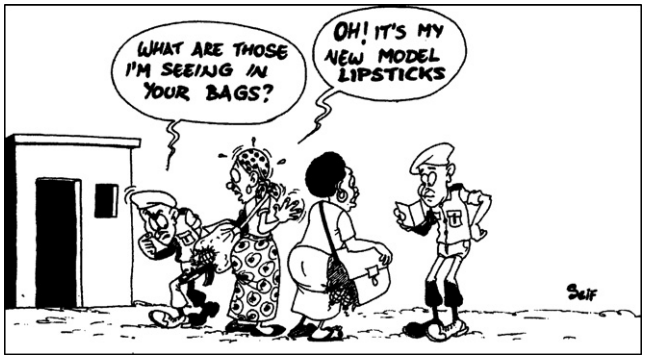

Fig. 5. Cartoon published in The New Times, 29.11.2007.

> "*In Gisenyi we are starving. People in Congo are well off, there is a lot of money in Goma and they eat… There is no money in Rwanda and people are jobless. And the government controls what we are growing. Beans are forbidden now and they have destroyed our field with beans. I do not understand why… Selling tomatoes in Goma means 300 francs for me. With that money I buy some manioc flour.*"[7]

Every morning one can observe a seemingly endless stream of Rwandan women carrying baskets of agricultural produce and marching for 2 h or more from the hilly rural hinterland of Gisenyi toward the border post *Petite Barrière*. Here they negotiate the border-crossing with the Congolese, trying to get a reduction of the 100 francs they have to pay to enter with their goods. A reduction of 50 francs is a great help in view of the modest profit of 300–500 Congolese francs that they gain from selling their tomatoes or eggplants in the streets of Goma. For them, the border is an opportunity of utmost importance to escape the economic restrictions of the authorities in Rwanda, where non-registered street sale is prohibited and a repressive developmental state even regulates what peasants are allowed to grow. These are just a few of the numerous measures contained in the Rwandan rulers' project for a 're-engineering' of rural society in the country (Ansoms, 2009). Accompanying these women back to their homes in the hills around Gisenyi gives a clear impression of the anti-rural bias in Rwandan policy-making that refers to "poverty as at least partially a problem of mentality" (ibid.: 302). In sharp contrast to the bedizened capital of Kigali, the rural areas of the densely populated Rwandan north-west are inhabited by peasants who for the most part fear the long arm of the state, represented for instance by agricultural advisers. These state agents enforce regulations that often impede the peasants in their efforts to cope with harsh conditions and a degraded environment. The Rwandan modernization project promotes information technology and the ideal of a service society and is clearly focused on urban centers (GoR, 2000), thus widening the rural-urban gap and "bypassing the poor" (Ansoms, 2008). Hence, popular accounts of the state as a threat expose the notion of prosperous and developmental Rwanda as a myth. This raises the question of whether both states, and both cities, represent each other's metaphorical mirrors (See De Boeck & Plissart, 2004: pp. 14–16) when both sides, including at least the official side in Rwanda, keep referring to the respective other as the place where danger comes from.

Strained state–society relations in Rwanda are further illustrated by the fact that female traders usually play down the

problems they face while selling in the streets of Goma: exclusion from official market places and harassment from both Congolese civilians and officials. Traders accept these difficulties, making use of the border to cope with the very specific uncertainties that arise from the Rwandan model of development. What they fear most is closure of the border for a long period, as in 2004 when Laurent Nkunda captured the city of Bukavu.

> "*I come to Goma every day to sell tomatoes or beans. In Goma there is money and I can make 500 francs per day. But during Nkunda's first war they closed the border and we could not work. That was bad, very bad. We did not know what to do. Really, without Goma we would die*."8

'My life is in Goma, the only thing I am doing here is sleeping and I sleep well': the border as a chance for recreation

Another frequent border narrative concerns what we might call the recreational functions of the border, expressed mainly by young pragmatic Congolese who have relocated their families to Gisenyi, where living costs are lower and where they can escape the security problems that are prevalent in Goma. They perceive the border as open, are quite content with the management of the border, and navigate easily between two political orders that provide them education and security on the one side and business opportunities on the other. Just like many traders and street vendors, they cross the border on a daily basis, but I seldom saw any of them having problems with border officials.

> "*I live here (in Gisenyi); I'm studying. But every day I go to Goma for business. My life is in Goma; the only thing I am doing here is sleeping, and I sleep well… There is a lot of insecurity in Goma, and once we were raided in my house. I feel safe now even if they want to control everything. But I don't care, I have nothing to hide, you know. I like them; they know how to rule a country. But on the other hand, I feel pity for them. They are always scared.*"9

This quote expresses a more ambivalent Congolese attitude toward Rwanda: appreciation of the apparently effective state organization combined with disconcertion regarding the omnipresence of control and surveillance. These stories do not emphasize Rwandan invasions, but ultimately, some distance and distrust remain. Nevertheless, for Congolese people in Rwanda, life is much more predictable than in Goma. However, using the border selectively to 'recover' from the exhausting conditions in Goma is, in one way or another, a common practice among the more wealthy residents of this city. People come to Gisenyi from time to time to relax at the beach, but also to use Rwanda's reliable postal and banking services, which have been lacking in Goma for a long time. Moreover, the border serves as a doorway to the world for the mobile elite of North Kivu. Businessmen, politicians and other wealthier Congolese apply for visas at the embassies in nearby Kigali instead of flying to Kinshasa; they also use the regular air connections available at Kigali airport. It remains to be seen whether these increasing contacts with 'the other' will contribute to a deconstruction of the prevailing stereotypes presented in the first key narrative and, more generally, to cross-border appeasement. However, these more functionalist attitudes undoubtedly have the potential to function as a counter-narrative against representations of the border as a gateway for Rwandan aggressors.

'Nobody can deny me my nationality': the border as exclusion

The following is a key narrative of the Congolese Tutsi. It revolves around experiences of expulsion, violence and discrimination. It is a narrative with a cross-border dimension because these people live on both sides. In their own self-perception, they are refugees in Rwanda and persecuted in Congo. The stories are centered on threatening border experiences, discrimination, loss of their native Kivu, and a certain helplessness and powerlessness in view of their perceived social and political exclusion.

> "*I left Goma in 1994 when the Hutu arrived. I was in fear of my life since they began to search for us. Afterwards, my father returned to our house but to this day he spends the night in Gisenyi. And always at Petite Barrière they threaten him. They say 'Hey, where are you going, you are Rwandan, you support Laurent Nkunda. Give us some money.' He always has to pay. It's not safe for us… I'm still Congolese and I want to go back. You know, in Rwanda there is no place for us… Three weeks ago soldiers took away my Congolese voting card when I was attending the funeral of my nephew in Goma. He was a soldier and died in a battle against Nkunda. There were other soldiers who began to shout that we are Rwandans and that we are working for Nkunda. Ha, you know me I'm a taxi driver. I've nothing to do with politics. So I told them: 'This is my family and this brother died for the country, so what do you want?' But one of them took my identity card and said 'give me 100 dollars if you want it back.' I did not pay, but I have a photocopy. In Congo there is no justice.*"10

This is a quote from an interview with a taxi driver who belongs to the ten percent of Gisenyi's population that possesses dual citizenship (Republique du Rwanda, 2007). It recalls the traumatic events of the past that are omnipresent in people's memories and the anti-Rwandan and anti-Tutsi tendencies that were given expression in the first key narrative. After the genocide in Rwanda and the pogroms against Congolese Tutsi, many Tutsi fled to Rwanda where it is state policy to give Rwandan citizenship to all refugees who speak Kinyarwanda. Whereas Rwanda accepts dual citizenship, the DRC does not, which places these people in a trap. They desire to go back to the Congo but do not want to abandon their Rwandan option as long as they do not feel safe in what they consider to be their home country. This inner disunity is expressed in their border talk (Photo 2).

> "*I'm Congolese and I could have Congolese citizenship if I gave up the Rwandan one. But for the moment I prefer to have a Rwandan passport… We have invested a lot in Rwanda but all we have in mind is to go back. We have our land over there, our cows, our farms… I'm quite often in Goma to see my friends but there are places where a Tutsi can't go. In Goma it's Katindo for example. If I*

Photo 1. Border strip between *Petite Barrière* and *Grande Barrière*. Gisenyi, Rwanda on the left.

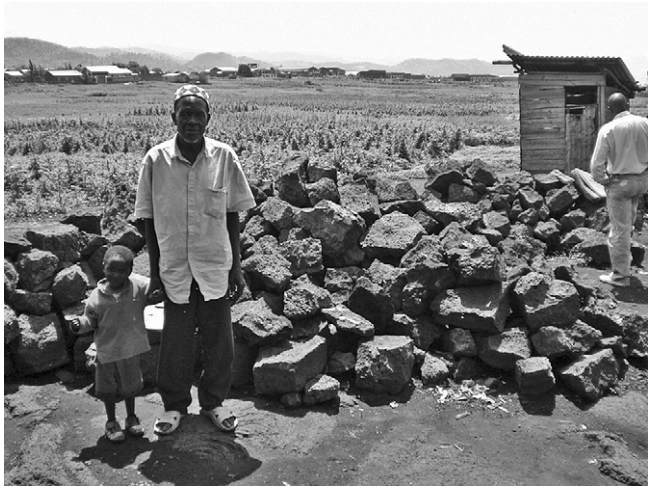

Photo 2. Roadblock 'against Rwandan invasion' on the Congolese side of the border, north of *Petite Barrière*.

went there with my Rwandan number plate, it would be a problem. Or certain areas in Masisi, Rutshuru and South Kivu. It's simply too dangerous." 11

As Congolese Tutsi were under general suspicion of supporting the Nkunda rebellion, there are numerous stories of harassment at the border, which they perceive as a symbol of exclusion. The border constitutes a physical line that signifies identity-related separation and cuts them off from their houses in Goma, their farms in the hinterland and family members who have remained on the other side. It also appears as a line that continually shifts inside Goma and the entire Kivu region, leading to multiple new and invisible boundaries (See Alvarez, 1995; Van Houtum & Strüver, 2002) that delimit various no-go areas for this group. The same holds true for those Tutsi who still live in Goma.

"*I'm from Masisi but we moved to Goma during the war of 1993. Today I live in Goma but I work in Gisenyi. … So every day I pass Grande Barrière. For me it's ok; they know me and they know that I go to work. But it's an anxious life in Goma. Everybody is concerned by this insecurity but if you speak Kinyarwanda you are targeted. In the evening we try to be at home before dark to avoid any trouble. And during the night we are vigilant… I remain in Goma because it's our country. We have to take things as they come. Even those who live abroad know where the place for them to live is*."12

The Congolese Tutsi community has somehow come to terms with their ambiguous connections to both sides, and many people cope with the situation by making use of the border. Many have completely shifted the center of their lives to Gisenyi, where they feel safe. They cross to Goma only as visitors during the daytime. Others live in Gisenyi but do business in Goma, or even live dangerously by remaining in Goma and occasionally working for relatives in Gisenyi.

The situation of the Congolese Tutsi is emblematic of the prevailing contradictions between imperial border-making and the hereditary territorial logic of the post-colonial nation state, on the one hand, and the everyday drawing of social boundaries between populations, on the other (Jackson, 2006). It also illuminates an apparently general tendency to produce losers, disadvantaged groups and new violence through so-called post-conflict peace-building, power sharing and state re-building processes (Lemarchand, 2007; Mehler, 2009). As these macro approaches are generally steered by international actors and structured by "flawed ideas" (Englebert & Tull, 2008), they are prone to appropriation by certain groups and their interest in excluding others. This observation also applies to the unresolved question of Congolese Tutsi citizenship. The return of Congolese Tutsi refugees from the camps in Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania is one of the most important driving forces of violent conflict in North Kivu (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2007; Weiss & Carayannis, 2005). Continuing neglect of these issues, willful or not, is likely to fuel future conflict.

Cross-border linking of groups according to certain border views: narrative clusters

Identifying and analyzing thematic clusters implies focusing on border-crossing dimensions that are not restricted to groups on just one side of the boundary. The two clusters combine border talk from both sides to reveal the bi-national dimensions of peoples' border experiences. They pull together stories of the negotiable and income-generating character of the border, as well as pragmatic assessments of the border as an unavoidable fact.

'The border is my field': the border as a resource and matter of negotiation

In spite of deep-rooted animosities toward 'the other', conceptions of the border as a field that has to be cultivated are frequently expressed in border talk. Negotiating border-crossing with contraband, especially in the strip between the two border posts, is a crucial feature of this 'cultivation'. People make use of the significant price and tariff differences in the two countries through smuggling or unofficial small-scale trade. However it is labeled, this multi-faceted activity provides income for many people in Goma and Gisenyi, and is a part of everyday life, just as it is at many other borders.

"*Bread is inferior and expensive in Goma. So we go to Gisenyi to buy it and then sell it in the streets of Goma. It's 140 francs in Gisenyi and we sell it for 200 in Goma. Each of us carries 200 loaves and makes about 10 dollars per day. We don't pay taxes but we pay the Congolese soldiers and policemen. All depends on the goodwill of the Rwandans, but we never spend a day without crossing. Yesterday we were not allowed to but we went secretly by using the construction sites. You know the border is my field. I make money out of it.*"13

The trade that gives meaning to this border for many people is not so much the spectacular smuggling of minerals to Rwanda or lucrative petroleum import fraud (Mitchell & Garrett, 2009; Tegera & Johnson, 2007), but mundane efforts to make a living by crossing the border with undeclared goods. Cosmetics, alcohol and other consumer goods are brought to Gisenyi, while bread and other convenience goods that are scarce on the Congolese side are carried to Goma. I observed people on either side hiding contraband in their clothes and bags just before crossing the border through the former buffer zone between the two states, which people call *makoro* (stony area).

If it is impossible to hide the goods due to their size or quantity, as in the case of the bread sellers, everything depends on the negotiating skills of the actors. Whereas Congolese border officials are usually easy to bribe, Rwandan border guards seem to be generally open for negotiations but much more aware of observation by their superiors; they cooperate only with people they already know. This practice has given rise to trading networks, causing smugglers to wait sometimes for hours at the border before they spot 'their' Rwandan soldier.

Disabled people in Goma and Gisenyi also sometimes engage in smuggling, using special wheelchairs with luggage carriers to convey all sorts of goods across the border. Because they are exempt

from taxes and customs, at least on the Congolese side, businessmen from both sides often hire disabled people to conduct unofficial cross-border trade.

> "*The border is my living, I'm a transporter between Gisenyi and Goma. The customer calls me to give the order and I transport it. Everything, it's up to him… If I go to Goma I pay a small amount to the Congolese to pass without being checked. This is really an advantage. But when I come back to Gisenyi I often have to declare what I have. We are negotiating with the authorities to have this same advantage in Rwanda.*"14

It takes two to negotiate, which means that the border is a lucrative field not only for contrabandists, but also for a multitude of border officials and semi-officials, especially on the Congolese side. It has been well known for a long time that officials are involved in smuggling and unofficial trade at the Goma–Gisenyi border. Even minor initiatives aimed at formalizing the border regime, as during the visit of Rwanda's president Kagame to Gisenyi in October 2008, are seen by Congolese border authorities as a constraint on their income opportunities.

> "*We are subcontractors; we are working for the security of our nation, but we are not paid. But my family must eat. I have six children and today, for example, I have absolutely nothing I can give to them. It's all because of Kagame's visit. He came with his soldiers from Darfur to secure the border. And now, nobody passes through the makoro. Normally we make money from the smugglers and traders who come with petrol or meat, but now everybody is obliged to pass at Grande Barrière or at Petite Barrière where we are not allowed to work.*"15

Until the latest changes to the border regime in 2009, there were more than twenty state services operating on the Congolese side, all of them seeking profit by unofficial taxation of smugglers instead of seizing contraband for the public purse. What made things even more confusing was that every service seemed to have its own civilian 'subcontractors', approximately 25016 in number, usually unemployed men who had permission to search border crossers for a share of the gains. The venality of border officials is rooted in the violent political transformations of the last decades, which have resulted in an additional weakening of state institutions that were already hollowed out at the end of the Mobutu era (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). There are numerous accounts of how Mobutu, faced with general economic decline and widespread social instability, invited citizens to participate in the system of tolerated corruption and embezzlement ('be smart when you steal', 'you eat where you work'; Kodi, 2008: pp. 23). Being *débrouillard* (inventive) was the only way to survive in a state that had retreated from the public sphere. In Goma, Congolese border (semi-)officials were permanently lying in wait for 'victims' along the border, virtually competing for smugglers or border crossers who wanted to avoid time-consuming procedures at the border posts. It was striking that for most contrabandists this did not seem to be a problem at all, but was simply included in their economic calculations.

However, illicit border activities and, at least as far as the Congolese side is concerned, the intense involvement of state officials, also points to the contradictory meaning of these activities. Donnan and Wilson (1999: pp. 105) suggest that illicit border activities subvert the state and at the same time reaffirm it because their existence depends on the maintenance of the border. Similarly, Roitman (2005) shows that it is not a parallel political order that emerges when state authorities permit and benefit from the flow of undeclared goods, but rather, it is a "dislocated political system" (ibid.: 22). Despite new and subversive border practices, this dislocation is entrenched in the logical order of the nation state, which it ultimately confirms and perpetuates. The author suggests that the key to an understanding of the paradox between the "increasing intensity of unregulated activities and the persistent efficacy of state infrastructure" (Roitman, 2004: pp. 194) is to distinguish between state power and pluralized state regulatory authority. This means that in the case of the Goma–Gisenyi border, the Congolese state, represented by border (semi-)officials, may not prevent smuggling, but it is still able to extract fees from the smugglers.

'It is good as it is; every state needs borders': the border as normality

Referring to the border as an irrevocable fact expresses a wish for separation from 'the other', just as in as the very first key narrative, though with less negative undertones.

> "*The border is good. It's a means of security; it discourages criminals from both sides. At the same time it's open. People from Rwanda come to Goma to search for food and Congolese go to Gisenyi to buy meat and milk… It's good as it is; every state needs borders… And Congo is different from Rwanda. Ok, there is security in Rwanda, you can move around during the night without being attacked by robbers. But discussing politics as we do? Only in secret!*"17

Here, the border is storied as being principally open but constituting a separation from the unwanted aspects of what lies on the other side. References to mutual dependency are accompanied by calm assessments of the 'we' and the 'other': food security and freedom of expression but pronounced criminality in Goma, versus personal security but political oppression in Gisenyi.

> "*There is no big difference between the Congolese and ourselves because we have adapted to the Congolese and they have adapted to us. We live together; the Rwandans are often over there and the Congolese are often here. We even marry among ourselves and everybody benefits from this border… I'm studying in Goma and we students are quite open with each other. It's the politicians who sow mistrust, not us.*"18

On the Rwandan side, people often emphasize commonalities rather than problems and tensions. They employ narrative strategies of avoidance to downplay the consequences of the unresolved conflicts in cross-border relationships since 1994. Referring to groups on the other side in which prejudices play a lesser role and to the importance of ordinary peoples' points of view are ways of evading discussions of the role Rwandan politics played in creating profound ruptures in the cross-border relationship. However, this conceptualization indirectly blames the other side, too, stressing the need for solidarity of the common people on both sides of the tension-filled border.

Like 'storying' the border as a chance for recreation, these accounts of border opportunities indicate that there is a wish for détente on the local level and a potential opportunity for both peace-building and deconstructing stereotypes through everyday border practices.

Conclusions

The micro-level approach of collecting border talk near and within sight of the border, with a special focus on mobile data gathering (i.e., crossing the border together with respondents as a hybrid of description and participation) has revealed multiple views of the border and the contradictory and conflicting meanings ascribed to it. In view of the diversity of narratives that emerges when people whose everyday lives are directly impacted

by the state boundary are given a voice (Berg & van Houtum, 2003), such an approach might inspire other scholars who feel methodologically uncomfortable with the 'remote sensing' of borders. Pooling border talk in key narratives and narrative clusters, as an aggregation of individual border stories that contain similar views, helps to emphasize the primacy of certain thematic plots and reveals those aspects of the border that people prioritize and the meanings they give to it. The range of accounts of the border, from being a desired barrier against the demonized 'other' and a means of exclusion to its conception as a resource, makes it clear that understanding the border through narratives requires allowing for historicity, relationality and contrariness (Somers, 1994: pp. 617).

Narratives are not only based on individual experiences but also on local hearsay; they are embedded in the broader politico-economic environment of the borderland. Hence, I do not claim to have presented the entire spectrum of narratives and I do not understand these key narratives and clusters as immutable. Rather, I cover a specific stage in the life of this border, whose interpretation not only changes with every generation, as suggested by Paasi (1996: pp. 263), but at an increasingly fast rate. The same approach in the recent phase of political détente would surely reveal new variations and peculiarities in the narratives, making them appear less resilient and as part of a sedimentation process that leads to a multi-layered and inevitably contradictory picture of the border. The simultaneity of militarization and rigid control over the flow of people and goods characterizes many borders, including those in less conflict-prone contexts (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999). However, analyzing micro-narratives in a conflict setting can shed light on both political transformations in the two countries and lesser-studied aspects of conflict.

Narratives are always linked to very real physical and material consequences. Hence, the pronounced division between the inhabitants of the conurbation may be seen a symptom of the recent political history of the Rwandan–Congolese borderland, which includes civil war, redefinition of citizenship and nationhood, and flight and expulsion, as well as a symptom of the imperial decisions that divided the territory in the first place. Through border talk, much can be learned about conflicts in the Kivu region. While in the past ten years, the lopsided discourse on mineral exploitation as the key driver of violent conflict has gained more and more emphasis in academic writing and popular campaigning19, seemingly less tangible aspects have received much less attention. In line with more recent studies that interpret mineral exploitation not so much as the cause, but rather as a symptom of conflict, due to a lack of economic alternatives (Johnson & Tegera, 2005; Mitchell & Garrett, 2009), this article points to some of these other important aspects: conflicts over access to land, the citizenship crisis of the Congolese Tutsi, the uncertain future of Congolese refugees abroad, human rights abuses by state institutions, and, last but not least, the emotional dimension, after decades of war, which leads to demonization of the other and the perpetuation of differences. Moreover, observing the Rwandan state, which projects itself into a distrustful and reluctant rural area, leads us to question the accuracy of the public image of Rwanda as a prosperous and developing country, in line with recent scholarly work (Ansoms, 2008, 2009). Instead of reproducing the government portrayal of the Congo as a place from where danger comes, most Rwandans refer to the opportunities this border offers because many of them depend on the demonized neighboring state for their livelihoods. Furthermore, for more than a few Rwandans, their home state, and especially its anti-rural development policy, constitutes a serious threat, which may pose a problem of legitimacy for the Rwandan government in the medium term.

Generally, Congolese and Rwandan accounts of the border as a resource, as an opportunity for recreation and as something normal and inevitable, show that the mutual exchange embedded in everyday border practices at the local level has the potential to contribute to a deconstruction of the official versions of otherness. Given that the complicated regional geopolitical framing may change in quite unexpected ways, as experience has shown (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2009), it remains to be seen if the mutual benefits of the border will contribute not only to a destruction of stereotypes, but also to peace-building processes from below.

Paasi (2005: pp. 670) argues "that a kind of saturation of the theoretical perspectives on boundary studies has taken place, as the ideas of regions and boundaries as discourses, social institutions, practices etc. are now circulating in a number of papers," and suggests we should reflect more on concepts in relation to social theory in general. In this case study, the observations derived from micro-narratives provide insights into state–society relations, understandings of the state's legitimacy, and the effects of the border as a social construction on everyday life. The study confirms Roitman's (2005) observation that unofficial cross-border trade and the involvement of state officials need not bring about alternative political models that challenge the legitimacy of the established one. Rather, a proliferation of statehood can be observed, made visible through a 'pluralization of regulatory authority' (ibid.). What is remarkable is that this proliferation of statehood subverts the nation state and at the same time seems to continually reconfirm its territorial logic because it depends on the border for its perpetuation. Proliferation of statehood can therefore be seen as a result of daily encounters of individuals with the state at the border. It is here, at the border, that a continuous 'permeation of stateness into the everyday' takes place, a process Painter (2006: pp. 753) describes in the context of industrialized countries. The contradictory meaning of borders for the people who live with them could not be better illustrated than through this very aspect: at the border, the Congolese encounter their own state, otherwise often invisible, exerting a hybrid of real and symbolic control as a rare expression of state territoriality. Rwandans use the border to escape, at least temporarily, from their state's omnipresence. In doing so, they simultaneously subvert and confirm the state through an outsourcing of problems and practices, which somehow stabilizes the established order in the country. It would be a rewarding task for future research to explore how these encounters of condensed and contradictory border 'stateness' potentially shape a hybridization of political orders, however spatially limited.

Finally, it should be stated that even in the area under study, which is subject to constant geopolitical reconfigurations, the border as a social construct is not only enforced from above but is also perpetuated from below (Newman, 2006), showing popular geopolitics at work. Regarding the manifold repercussions of this social construct on the everyday life of the people, practices and narratives relating to the border illustrate why some of the social demarcations undergo material substantiation and become physically apparent, while others do not. Studying narratives therefore allows an understanding of the imaginative and the material dimensions of borders, as well as of the functionality of their spatial manifestation and their representations. It demonstrates the contradictory, inchoate and dynamic character of borders, indicating once again that there is nothing static about them.

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Endnotes

[1] 'A rift among rebels'. Africa Confidential 50, 2. 'Shotgun wedding'. Africa Confidential 50, 3.
[2] Interview with a UN employee, 27 November, 2007; in his car, waiting for border clearance at *Grande Barrière*.
[3] Interview with a motorcycle taxi driver, 10 November, 2007; Goma near *Petite Barrière* (all interviews are translated from Swahili and French into English).
[4] Interview with an unemployed person from Biréré district (Goma), 29 October, 2007; in front of his house directly at the border.
[5] Interview with a pastor, 9 November, 2007; during a walk from his house in Biréré district (Goma) to the border and back.
[6] I am grateful to one of the reviewers for drawing my attention to this aspect.
[7] Interview with a Rwandan street vendor, 12 November, 2007; Goma, city centre.
[8] Interview with a Rwandan street vendor, 13 November, 2007; Goma, on the road leading to *Petite Barrière*.
[9] Interview with a Congolese student and shop owner, 13 March, 2007; Hotel Ubumwe, Gisenyi (about 100 m from *Grande Barrière*).
[10] Interview with a taxi driver, 19 October, 2008; in his cab near *Petite Barrière*.
[11] Interview with a businessman, 15 March, 2007; in his house in Gisenyi near *Grande Barrière*.
[12] Interview with a hotel employee, 16 October, 2008, Gisenyi near *Grande Barrière*.
[13] Interview with two Congolese youngsters, 9 November, 2007; near one of the roadblocks on the Congolese side of the border.
[14] Interview with a disabled Rwandan, 30.10.2008; Gisenyi, near *Grande Barrière*.
[15] Interview with an unofficial agent of the Congolese intelligence service, 21 October, 2008; on the dirt road between *Grande* and *Petite Barrière*.
[16] Interviews with the head of the Congolese border police (Goma, 13 November, 2007) and a former head of the immigration office at *Petite Barrière* (Bunagana, 26 October, 2008).
[17] Interview with a woman from Mbanga disctrict (Goma), 25 March, 2007; in a local market in Biréré, near *Petite Barrière*.
[18] Interview with a Rwandan student, 23 October, 2008; Gisenyi, near *Petite Barrière*.
[19] See, for example, the special page of the US "Enough Project": www.enoughproject.org/conflict-minerals.

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