"We Are the Border": Identity, Exchange, and the State along the Bénin-Nigeria Border

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“we are the border”: Identity, exchange, and the state along the Bénin–Nigeria border

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Life on the edge: centralizing marginality in the border experience

The border which we share with Nigeria, it’s very good.
If we must speak the truth, we profit well.
—Ibere song

In the Yoruba-speaking Shabe region of West Africa, the Okpara river, which forms the international border between the Republic of Bénin and Nigeria, waxes and wanes with the seasonal rains. The rural communities flanking the river look toward it for sustenance and livelihood, particularly during the rainy months when its muddy waters overflow its banks, allowing only local villagers maneuvering dugout wooden canoes to cross its widening breadth. For the four to six months every year when the Okpara is impassable by foot or truck, long-distance transborder trade traffic passing through the region relies on the local border communities to provide the necessary labor and canoes to transport goods across the river. The river’s fertile waters provide a season of profitable wage labor for those who live around it, and are also a critical site of cooperation among the border communities. One local song claims, “The Okpara river from which we drink, you also drink from it; so we are brothers and sisters and we are together.” For the border population, the Okpara is less a boundary dividing them into two nations than a bridge linking them in mutual interdependence.

Unfortunately, political and economic circumstances in the recent history of Bénin and Nigeria have caused transborder trade to wax and wane in Shabe much as the Okpara does. The region has experienced a trend of economic decline, beginning with the collapse of the Nigerian cocoa market in the 1970s and compounded by structural adjustment programs implemented in both countries during the past ten years. Farming has replaced transborder trade as the primary source of income in the border communities, which used to be called “ports” of the Okpara for all their bustling trade activity. The Nigerian state recently intensified its presence in the border area with the construction in 1990 of a full-time customs and immigration post, intended to crack down on illicit cross-border exchanges; this has further dampened trade traffic. Many long-distance traders who once frequented the Shabe cross-border route because of its...
rural and remote location have sought other, more favorable routes. One way in which border residents have responded to the decreased trade traffic, omnipresent customs guards, and plunging economic opportunities is by forging a collective “border identity” based on their territorial claims to the region and their perceived right to participate in, and profit from, transborder trade.

There has been growing scholarly interest in recent years in the particular social, economic, and political circumstances of populations living around borders, including explorations of “border culture” and processes of identity formation in borderlands (see Alvarez 1995). This has been fueled partly by the growth of transnational processes, such as mass media communications and globalizing economies, and partly by recent political revolutions that have undermined international boundaries and redrawn maps, as in Eastern Europe. The current instability of borders that were once hallowed as fixed and monolithic boundaries of disparate national and cultural entities increasingly reveals processes of cross-border cultural negotiation and raises new and provocative questions about the relationships between local and global (Tsing 1994), space and place (Gupta and Ferguson 1992), and nation and state (Donnan and Wilson 1994a). Inquiry has also broadened beyond the study of literal, official borders to include the multivocal borderlands that emerge at the intersections of less formalized cultural and social boundaries, such as those existing between genders, ages, or classes (e.g., Rosaldo 1988, 1989). Borderlands, both literal and figurative, are sites where political, cultural, and social identities converge, coexist, and sometimes conflict. Because they are meeting areas of diverse political, economic, and cultural systems, they provide unique insights into the ways in which identities are constructed (e.g., Donnan and Wilson 1994a). In this article, I explore how a group of people living in a literal international border zone renegotiate and manipulate that border as well as cultural boundaries in ongoing processes of identity formation, thus forging a cohesive, transnational border identity.

The U.S.-Mexico border has been the site of much valuable anthropological and sociological analysis of the particular circumstances of borderland populations (e.g., Alvarez 1987; Hansen 1981; Martínez 1994; Rosaldo 1989) and of influential literary and folkloric explorations of being a borderlander (e.g., Anzaldúa 1987; Paredes 1958). There has also been growing scholarship on border populations throughout Eastern and Western Europe (e.g., Donnan and Wilson 1994b; Nagengast 1991; Sahlins 1989; Strassoldo 1989). In an effort to emphasize cross-cultural similarities of border regions, Martínez has argued that “the determining influence of the border makes the lives of border peoples functionally similar irrespective of location, nationality, ethnicity, culture, and language. In other words, all borderlanders share the border experience” (1994:xviii). Although it is true that borders everywhere present people with similar structural constraints and processes, including international delimitations, cross-border trade, migration, and border conflict, people do not deal with these constraints and processes in the same way everywhere. By looking at how the particular political, cultural, and economic histories of border populations may shape their perspectives of borders, boundaries, nationality, and community, however, we can better understand the processes of identity negotiation in borderlands.

The formative processes, characteristics, and manifestations of a Shabe border identity offer new understandings of the unique dynamics of borderlands. Gupta and Ferguson have defined borderland as “an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject” (1992:18, emphases added). I would argue that, in the case of the Shabe, it is a local sense of deep placement instead of displacement, deep territorialization instead of deterritorialization, which forges strong feelings of rootedness in the borderland itself and creates a border identity. Interstices are full of power, and Shabe border residents are fully aware of how they can use their interstitial power—their borderland advantage—to benefit themselves. At this particular juncture of two nations, the borderland itself becomes a deeply
placed stable identity, a way in which locals define themselves and their relationships to others. “We are the border,” claim Shabe border residents. At the same time, they do not become “hybridized subjects,” melting pots of the multiple identities that merge at the border.

Like the U.S.-Mexico border, most international boundaries in Africa arbitrarily divide ethnic groups as well as kin groups. Such arbitrary borders are a colonial legacy, testaments to Africa’s colonized history and European governments’ struggles for control over people, land, and resources. The fact that colonists paid little attention to indigenous cultural groups and ethnic boundaries, dividing friends and family into different colonial territories while incorporating ancient enemies into the same colonial territory, is often cited as a leading factor in the contemporary political instability of many African states. Less thoroughly explored are the ways in which “arbitrary” African borders have become entrenched and embedded in the local communities that surround them. How is it that populations that had an international border imposed on them cannot now imagine their existence without it? How are borders perceived by those continuously crossing them as corridors of opportunity rather than as divisions and barriers?

Borders can become corridors of opportunity when border residents can maintain some freedom of movement across and around them. Shabe border residents have embraced their interstitial position because they can control their own movement, as well as the movement of others, in their border region. Unlike U.S.-Mexico border residents, who are subject to intensifying, dangerous, and life-threatening state controls on their border crossings, Shabe have been able to appropriate the Benin-Nigeria border and emphasize their deep placement within the borderland. Rather than standing as a stark, guarded barrier to wealth and opportunity, as the U.S. border does to many Mexicans, Shabe on both sides of the boundary can profit by moving easily from one side to the other and by exploiting state inconsistencies and controls. This also helps explain why Shabe border residents are not experiencing crises of identity or “borderlands hysteria” (Rosaldo 1989:28), conditions that frequently characterize the lives of U.S.-Mexico border residents. By centralizing their marginality in their economic strategies and through common border experience, Shabe have constructed a strong, transnational identity around their sense of deep territorialization in the borderland.

Anthony Akiwaju has been one of the leading scholars of borderlands in Africa (1976, 1985; Akiwaju and Adeniyi 1989) and cross-culturally (1983). Because of his pioneering efforts, much of the available research on borders in Africa focuses on Nigeria’s borders and the Nigeria-Benin border in particular (e.g., Dioka 1988; Gonsalvo 1988; Igue 1976, 1989; Igue and Soule 1992). I agree with Martinez (1994), however, that the predominant concerns of most of these studies are with official, international cooperation between states and not with the nature of social interactions in local communities around borders. Some notable exceptions have paid closer attention to the ways in which border residents move around and across borders—through marriage strategies, residence strategies, and individual economic strategies—and have concentrated on central and southern Africa (e.g., MacGaffey 1988; Newbury 1986; Pottier 1988; see also Babatunde 1988 for a Nigeria-Benin example, and Miles 1994 for a recent Nigeria-Niger study).

Similarly, recent studies of transborder trade in Africa (e.g., Collins 1985; Igue and Soulé 1992; MacGaffey 1991) have provided new insights into its macroeconomic characteristics and its impact on national economies but have not closely examined how such trade intersects with the social and microeconomic realities of local border populations. Differences in national economic policies, regional resources, and monetary currencies make borders lucrative zones of exchange and trade, often illicit and clandestine. Smuggling occurs across borders around the world, providing an important means of livelihood for border residents and prompting creative social networking and cross-border ties within borderland populations (e.g., Kavanagh 1994). Transborder trade and exchange is an integral part of the “border experience,” but a
dearth of inquiry into how local residents involve themselves in it leaves us with only a limited understanding of its role in border societies. More specifically, how do cross-border exchanges engage and reformulate identities? How do constructions of nationality, transnationality, ethnicity, and community intersect with processes of transborder trade? In a recent study of Mexican trucking across borderlands, Alvarez and Collier argue that Mexican truckers continually constitute and recreate ethnicity as part of an entrepreneurial process of successful penetration of foreign markets. They point out that “the ambiguities of identities in borderlands can also be strategically played upon to forge, reformulate, and even mobilize ethnic identity to advantage” (1994:607). As I will illustrate in the following pages, Shabe border residents have similarly forged a sense of border identity in the face of economic change and decreased transborder trade.

Research for this article was conducted in the Shabe border region of Bénin and Nigeria from June to August 1992 and from October 1993 to October 1994. During the 12-month research period, I worked in a triangle of three border communities, each approximately three kilometers apart. Although I resided in a Béninois town (Ibere), I crossed the border three to four times a week to visit and work with residents of the nearby Nigerian town (Ogbori); I also worked regularly in a second Béninois community (Papo). (Owing to the politically sensitive nature of this research, I have changed the names of all border towns and am deliberately vague about their exact locations.) Being a researcher in a borderland forced me into the position of being a borderlander myself, as I faced the challenges of divergent currency valuations, threats by customs officials, and the daily hardships of transport and underdevelopment in a neglected, peripheral region. Nor was it unusual for me to participate in group conversations consisting of three or more languages: Béninois French, Nigerian English, Shabe Yoruba, and occasionally Fon or Hausa. Because borderlands are inherently zones of mediation and ambiguities, I will throughout this article try to distinguish clearly among Béninois border residents, Nigerian border residents, customs guards, and nonlocal traders. Only by so doing can we understand how these groups draw boundaries around themselves and how they situate themselves in relation to the border. When I speak of “border residents” or “local residents,” I am referring to both Béninois and Nigerian residents in the border region.

a bounded border: economic change and emerging identity

The way in which we spend this money,
We don’t understand it anymore.
In the olden days, when everything was going well,
It was 10 kobo for 25 francs.
Why has this changed? —Ogbori song

The current international border between Bénin and Nigeria was first established as an intercolonial border between British and French territories in 1889. Although the majority of Shabe Yoruba were incorporated into French Dahomey, a number of eastern Shabe villages became part of British Nigeria. Aside from politically and economically dividing them into two groups and separating most of them from other Yoruba ethnicities in Nigeria, the border forced a majority of them into a national identity with Dahomean Fon, their former enemies. Ajiwaju (1976) points out that the Shabe, like many of the other divided ethnicities, were resentful of the newly imposed border. As early as 1894, at the time when the Anglo-French Boundary Commission was preparing to come to Shabe to demarcate the border on the ground, community leaders tried to persuade the French to redraw the dividing line along the Zou river to the west of Shabe, incorporating the entire Shabe region into British territory and separating them from the Fon. At the same time, the Onishabe (Shabe king) entreated fellow traditional rulers in Nigeria to intercede with the British on their behalf. By 1902, after these diplomatic
efforts had clearly failed, a group of enterprising Shabe took the matter into their own hands and secretly uprooted the border demarcation pillars, defiantly replanting them along the Zou river.

Shabe continued to maintain ties across the British-French border through social, political, and economic interactions. Colonial documents reveal that cross-border marriages continued to occur after the border was formed, and they still do today. There is also evidence that Shabe residents of the French territory repeatedly crossed the border to avoid taxes and French conscription. Unofficial transborder trade has been particularly influential in supporting cross-border networks. The informal economy in Bénin-Nigeria border regions has thrived because of such factors as disparities in currency stability, export taxes, and national subsidy policies. Small border market towns that sprang into existence with the creation of the border were originally formed to reinforce cross-border solidarity and now play vital roles in the regional economy (Igué 1989). The structure of transborder trade in Shabe is representative of the more general pattern existing in many areas of West Africa: there are “twinned” towns that hold periodic markets on both sides of the border to exchange goods, border warehouses where large quantities of goods are stored, and clusters of towns at the main points of passage across the border (Igué 1989).

Two general types of unofficial trade pass through the Shabe border towns. First, there is large-scale exchange of goods being transported long distances, among the cities of Lagos, Ibadan, Savé, Cotonou, or Lomé. Customs officials primarily target this trade, which is largely conducted by nonlocal men (they occasionally work for wealthy women traders in those cities). Second, there is small-scale, localized exchange and regional distribution of goods sold for immediate consumption in the periodic markets of the border region. This “petty trade,” which is controlled by local women, is also monitored by customs officials but is subject to minimal or no taxation.

During the past 20 years, the Shabe border region has suffered a downward spiral of economic opportunity, largely owing to a decreased flow of transborder trade through the area. Local antagonisms toward the Nigerian and Béninois states have intensified markedly in the wake of a series of economic developments that have restricted opportunities for trade and wage labor at the border. Because border residents perceive the state as the catalyst and cause of the economic hardships and because the state offers little or no infrastructural or economic development to this marginal rural border area, a heightened sense of border solidarity has emerged. A growing distrust and suspicion of government—the interests of which are perceived as being opposed to border interests and that regularly infringe on the economic and political freedoms of border residents—has contributed to a strengthened border identity.

The collapse of the Nigerian cocoa market, first in the 1970s and again in the middle to late 1980s, dealt the first serious blow to Shabe’s informal trade. The previously booming cocoa production in western Nigeria provided a major commodity for the Shabe economy. Nigerian traders brought the cocoa to the villages on the border, where Béninois and Togolais traders from the coast purchased and transported it south. The border villages were important loci of exchange for the cocoa, drawing steady influxes of nonlocal buyers and sellers who formed a busy and profitable market for local women traders and provided work for local men to load and unload trucks. When cocoa imports fell this trade abruptly stopped, significantly reducing the income opportunities of locals, both women and men, and adversely affecting the border area economy in general.

The transborder cocoa trade was to some extent replaced by informal trade in Nigerian gasoline and petroleum products, including plastic goods, and large quantities of liquor, cigarettes, and packaged goods imported into Bénin from Europe and the United States. Significant quantities of agricultural products are also exchanged and there is a lively trade of secondhand clothing imported from Europe and the United States as well as of inexpensive new
western clothing imported from China and Taiwan. Many of these imports arrive at the Cotonou, Bénin, and Lomé, Togo, shipping ports, where Nigerian traders purchase and transport them to Lagos or Ibadan via long, roundabout detours through the rural central regions of Togo, Bénin, and Nigeria. Although such detours require significant amounts of time, the traders save money and avoid the higher risk of official confiscation by circumventing the numerous roadblocks and customs posts along the busy coastal highways linking Lagos to Lomé.

But trade in these commodities differs in one critical respect from the cocoa trade: whereas cocoa was exchanged between Nigerians and Béninois in the border towns, the gasoline, packaged goods, agricultural items, and clothing merely pass through, occasionally stopping only for transfer out of the trucks of one country into those of another. Because they have ceased to be the loci of exchange, the border communities have experienced a significant loss in nonlocal visitors. As a result, local women traders never recovered the bustling market that sustained them in previous years and wage-labor opportunities for local men decreased because the volume and frequency of gasoline traffic has not matched that of cocoa. In the late 1970s, most able-bodied women began working side by side with men to load and unload goods at the border as a source of monetary income. The loading work is largely seasonal, in high demand during the rainy season when the Okpara river that forms the border is full and goods must be transported across by canoe, and in low demand during the dry season when trucks can traverse the dry riverbed. As a source of income, the work is sporadic and unreliable and is not sufficient to replace the cocoa trade. Consequently, women who had previously supported themselves and their children solely through their market activities began turning toward farming as a supplement to, or replacement of, their trade. Men also spent significantly more time working on their farms as opposed to working at the border.

Other developments more closely identified with the state have combined to reduce still further the regional transborder trade traffic and, consequently, men’s and women’s income-earning opportunities. Political and economic instability in Nigeria has been a leading factor. In 1984–85, the damaging effects of illicit transborder trade to the Nigerian economy led the Buhari military government to close the border and to create a “border zone” intended to act as a buffer against clandestine trade activities. Stretching along the entire Nigerian border with an average width of 20 kilometers, this zone received no supplies of products likely to interest neighboring countries. The primary border towns were militarily occupied to prevent the movement of illicit goods. Although illicit trade in Shabe during this time did not cease completely, it was significantly hindered. Women traders were the most severely affected as they were unable to cross the border to engage in regional distribution, while men had occasional wage-labor opportunities helping traders circumvent the military by making wide detours into the bush. In 1986, recognizing its limited impact and its role in straining relations with neighboring states, Babangida abolished the “border zone” and created the National Boundary Commission, which continues to make concerted efforts toward cooperation and joint management of borderlands with Bénin, Niger, and Cameroon.

Structural adjustment programs instituted in Nigeria in the late 1980s, including a devaluation of the naira, precipitated a nationwide economic crisis that has also inevitably leaked across the border into the Béninois Shabe region. The naira devaluation dealt a fatal blow to many Shabe traders, both women and men, as the prices of commodities soared. For many small-scale traders who had struggled to diversify after the collapse of the cocoa trade, the cost increases of the devaluation were too great to overcome and traffic across the border was reduced. More recent political upheaval in Nigeria, with widespread labor strikes led by the powerful petroleum workers’ unions (in protest of General Sani Abacha’s military regime’s annulment of the 1993 democratic election results) have also directly affected the flow of trade across the border. During the ten-week duration of the strikes, from May to August 1994, border trade in Shabe was at a complete standstill. The recent devaluation of the French West African franc (CFA), the
Béninois currency, in January 1994, has also had a severe impact on the Shabe economy. The most crippling effect of the devaluation was that all imported goods, including most of the packaged and preserved goods that are important commodities sent from Bénin to Nigeria, doubled in price practically overnight. Like the earlier devaluation of the naira, the CFA devaluation increased capital needs and decreased profits of border traders, resulting in a further reduction of trade traffic through the Shabe region.9

Shabe border residents perceive the Nigerian and Béninois states as being the primary parties responsible for the economic hardships created by these developments; antistate sentiments have especially intensified since the Nigerian government established a permanent, full-time customs and immigration post in the Nigerian border town of Ogbori in 1990. Before the construction of this post, the nearest customs posts were located 25 kilometers west of the border in Bénin and 26 kilometers east of the border in Nigeria. Although the guards made periodic patrols to the border, traders and the local population enjoyed relative ease of movement between the two countries. Since the new post on the border was established, traffic in the area has noticeably decreased as long-distance traders have sought alternative, unpatrolled cross-border routes.

With the decrease in traffic and accompanying loss of income-earning opportunities for border residents, tensions between customs guards and border residents have intensified. As representatives of the state who regularly attempt to restrict and control cross-border movements, customs guards bear the brunt of local antistate antagonisms. The guards in Ogbori are stationed there under the orders of the Nigerian Customs and Immigration headquarters in Ibadan. Their rate of turnover is high; the maximum length of stay for any guard is approximately three months, but many come and go within a month. Because of the remote and undeveloped location, the border region is considered a “hardship” assignment. The guards are all urban and relatively well educated (having completed secondary school) and consider the rural border residents to be “backward” and “uncivilized.” They represent a wide range of ethnic groups and languages from all areas of Nigeria, including Hausa, Igbo, and Tiv as well as Yoruba. They generally speak English among themselves because of their ethnic diversity, and, unless they speak Yoruba, they are unable to communicate with most of the border residents who cannot speak English. One guard explained to me, “We do not mix with the villagers. We do not have enmity with them but we do not mix with them either. We speak English among ourselves. We just stay to ourselves.” They spend most of their time at the customs complex, visiting town only to eat meals at local “chop bars” or buy beer or soda at the local bar.

The physical and social distance maintained between guards and border residents resonates with signs of inequality between urban and rural, center and periphery, and educated and uneducated. The Western-dressed, English-speaking, government-employed, urban-dwelling officials are representatives not only of the authoritative Nigerian state but also of the economic and educational privileges of centralized regions. Power struggles between urban and rural areas and the systems of value and privilege they represent have been noted elsewhere in Nigeria, as well as throughout Africa (e.g., Bastian 1993; Kopytoff 1987). In Shabe, increasing disillusionment with the lack of government interest in borderland development has fueled a growing sense of detachment from state structures. For example, effective state infrastructure in both the Nigerian and Béninois areas of the Shabe border region is practically nonexistent. Among the Nigerian communities, no sanitation infrastructure and no wells exist for drawing safe water; construction of a primary school was begun by the state and abandoned before it was finished; a state-built rural health dispensary remains vacant, unstaffed, and unequipped; and the road connecting the border to the nearest larger Nigerian town is in extremely poor condition and occasionally impassable during periods of the rainy season. Although infrastructure in the Béninois communities is better than in the Nigerian communities, it has been provided by private missionary and development programs and not by the postcolonial Béninois
government. Catholic missionary groups built two primary schools in the 1970s, but both are understaffed and one that was partially destroyed by a tornado in the late 1980s remains in ruins. The government has not staffed or equipped a health dispensary built by a Dutch development program. The Béninois state does regularly maintain one dirt road to the border, but others become impassable during the rains.

As representatives of “development,” customs guards are constant reminders of the border region’s underdevelopment, which border residents largely blame on state corruption. In other words, the perceived privilege, greed, and corruption of Nigerian customs officials are seen by border residents as individual refractions of the privilege, greed, and corruption of the Nigerian government. Payments extracted by the guards as “customs duties” from both local and nonlocal traders crossing the border remain largely unrecorded in the state logbooks and go directly into the guards’ personal purses (see also Konstantinov 1996). The often long and tedious negotiation of bribes between guards and traders, during which time the guards confiscate traders’ goods and sometimes arrest the traders themselves, anger locals and nonlocals alike because they know the guards are manipulating state authority to reap personal profit. From the point of view of border residents, the government has imposed only economic hardship on them and has done nothing to help them develop, while customs guards, as arms of the government, are only out to rob them. At the same time, because they also intervene as mediators between guards and nonlocal traders, border residents express ambivalent feelings toward the guards. Although they resent the guards’ presence, they must also maintain working relations with them in order to earn income through mediation, a point I will elaborate below.

The border communities claim that their welfare and survival is being threatened by their very own governments because of the intensified customs controls and growing economic hardship in the Shabe informal border economy. Borderland marginality is made ever clearer by the hovering, hoarding, commanding presence of the state, the perceived purpose of which is not to help border residents but to hinder their advancement by stifling what was once their promising path to development—lucrative transborder trade. The perceived threat presented by the Nigerian and Béninois states, and especially the customs guards, has led border residents to assert and emphasize their common border identity in a variety of ways.

Changes in established relations between social groups often catalyze identity formation. That is, when one group considers its interests to be threatened by another it moves to strengthen the divisions between the groups by reinforcing the perception of differences and by constructing boundaries to identify common interests with other groups (Barth 1969; Mach 1993). Sameness and separateness are thus two sides of the same coin. In this case, the common economic interests of border residents have emerged in the face of recent economic change as guidelines for constructing boundaries between themselves and the state, as well as between themselves and nonborder residents (see also Lattimore 1968). By emphasizing their shared dependence on the opportunities surrounding border trade and their interdependence as partners in trade across the border, Shabe border residents have forged a sense of border identity that defines, on the one hand, their roles in transborder exchanges and, on the other, their relations with both the state and nonborder residents. In the next section, I outline ways in which this border identity is constructed by the socioeconomic activities of transborder trade.

"we are the border": identity, exchange, and the state

Ogbori, let's go hand in hand.
If you want to have a meeting,
Call Ibere; Call Papo;
So we can go hand in hand. —Ogbori song

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When confronted with state controls that threaten border residents’ ability to move across and around the international boundary, the social, economic, and micropolitical networks that crisscross the border play key roles in reinforcing and shaping local solidarity. They provide avenues of action for managing and manipulating the border and for evading the control of the ever-present customs guards. The following story of one incident of conflict with customs officials, recounted to me by a Béninois Papo resident, exemplifies an important way in which locals respond to state intrusion on their activities:

One time last year the chef du douane [director of customs] came and found us transporting 500 liters of gasoline across the river, and demanded that we pay customs on it. I said to him, “Chef, I want to ask you a question, and please don’t become angry with me. We are the border here. Why do you think we are the border? Why do you think we are here? So that we can trade! Why do you want to hurt us this way?” And we refused to pay. So he left to get his truck so he could confiscate the gas. When he came back, it was gone. We had hidden it all in the bush. He searched the whole village and couldn’t find it. You see, we are together here.

“Because we are the border!” they exclaim when arguing with customs guards or when explaining their belief that they should be allowed to cross the border at will. What does it mean to “be a border”? In a very literal sense, locals embody the border: they conceive of their cluster of communities flanking the Okpara river as constituting the international boundary. The “border” is not merely an arbitrary line dividing two nations; it is a social grouping based on historical, residential claims to the Okpara region. For purposes of clarification, I use “border” (with quotation marks) to mean the social grouping of Béninois and Nigerian residents who believe they constitute the boundary, and border (without quotation marks) for the formal international boundary between the states. The social grouping of the “border” is defined by residence in the binational territory that surrounds the international border. Membership is determined not by ethnicity or nationality, but by length of continuous residency in the region. Kinship and ancestral claims to land and residency can ease an individual’s incorporation into the group, but are not necessary conditions. In most cases, trusted and respectable foreigners who have resided in the region for several years are considered part of the “border.” By the end of my yearlong residence in the border region, I too was incorporated into the “border.” This status was especially clarified for me at times when I experienced conflicts with customs guards and locals angrily argued with them on my behalf, claiming that because I was in continuous residence in the area I should be able to cross the border at will for purposes of local travel.

Because the “border” is constituted by their binational social grouping, local residents argue that they have rights to uninhibited movement within their group, despite being situated in two different nation-states. In other words, they insist that they should be able to move freely across the border for all social and economic interactions that take place within their transnational community, their cluster of three border villages. Thus official discourses claim that for purposes of marriage, visiting kin and friends, attending ceremonial activities, or for local distribution and consumption of trade goods border residents have the right to cross the border without having to pay “duties” (or bribes) to customs guards. Microtrade links among marketwomen in the three towns and their regular movements across and around the border for the towns’ periodic markets have been particularly important for forging solidarity within the “border.” Local residents identify this solidarity as a necessary condition for successful distribution of trade goods, and border towns’ economic interdependence is often spoken about in terms of these local networks of exchange. For the most part, customs guards respect local borderland exchange movements and rarely interfere with them, although they occasionally demand gifts of food from women traders traveling to and from periodic markets. But border residents—women and men—also often manipulate their relative freedom in crossing the border, using local petty trade or social visits as a screen for participating in illicit long-distance trade.

Because Shabe border residents perceive themselves as constituting the “border,” they claim they not only have the right to move freely throughout their region but also to control all...
movements and exchanges in their communities. Since they define the “border” as their social group, they assert their right to determine and engage in the passage of goods and people through their midst. No one should pass through their communities without their cooperation and mediation, and nothing should be carried from one side of their transnational territory to the other without their express involvement and agreement. This in itself is not unique. Small independent communities throughout Africa have used roadblocks and tolls to control traffic through their towns since precolonial times (Clapperton 1829; Hallett 1965) and continue to do so today. The unique aspect is that this community spans the juncture of two nation-states, so that their declaration of authority over who and what passes through them brings them into direct conflict with the authority of those states.

Many tensions between border residents and the states revolve around the central cross-border road that serves as the conduit of transborder traffic. As the passageway for trade movements that brings economic opportunity to the Shabe border region, the main cross-border road is viewed as a route away from rural underdevelopment and toward urban “modernity.” But this is not so in a literal sense, for it is not so much that the road is the border residents’ pathway to the city—although many young men and women do leave the border region for cities throughout West Africa—as that it is the city’s pathway to the border. It is the source of economic expectation, the future highway to wealth and opportunity, in that it holds all hope for increased transborder trade traffic through their region, bringing with it greater economic opportunity and development. Indeed, popular attitudes in the borderland hold that the current economic recession would be instantly reversed if only the road were paved and a bridge built across the Okpara. Border residents hold both the Nigerian and Béninois states responsible for failing to construct this interstate-highway answer to the peripheral borderland’s poverty. Consequently, tensions between the “border” and the Nigerian and Béninois states are played out partly through contested authorities and competing controls over the flow of commodities and persons through the region. By exacting their own controls on goods and people who cross the border within their transnational territory, border residents defiantly assert their independence from state structures while simultaneously establishing their separateness from the nonlocal, often urban, transborder traders.

Igor Kopytoff’s work on the biographies of things (1986) is useful for understanding the relationship between Shabe border residents and the goods passing through their region. Kopytoff argues that the way in which societies construct individuals is analogous to the way in which they construct things, and that the nature of social identities tends to mirror the nature of classified commodities in any society. Commodities in the borderland are characterized by ambiguous values because they are being exchanged between two different national economic systems, often illegally. Their exchange involves different currencies and their value in the border region is always subject to debate, depending on their point of origin, their destination, and the parties involved, as they have differing values for customs guards, traders, and local residents. Commodities that move across the border are powerful and form the center of political struggles between social groups precisely because they are bridging two national economies.

Likewise, border residents draw their economic and political power from their positions in the interstices of the borderland. They bridge two national economies and two political systems and manipulate their marginal situation to their own economic advantage by wedging themselves between traders and the state. By asserting their right to control all goods and movement through their territory, they construct their political power around their claim to be the “border.” In other words, they emphasize their “deep placement” and “deep territorialization” in the border region as justification for their mandatory political and economic involvement in transborder trade. Political negotiations and relations between border residents, traders, and customs guards revolve around the transborder exchange of commodities and determine the ever-changing values of such commodities (e.g., Appadurai 1986). This brings us to the very
heart of understanding the “border,” for the foundation of the Shabe border identity is precisely
the point at which a sense of “deep placement” and locatedness in the region meets the act of
transborder exchange, with all its associated sociopolitical processes, networks, relations, and
possibilities for making money. The “border” has been forged by emphasizing both residential
claims and economic claims to involvement in the processes of transborder trade.

Shabe border residents assert control over nonlocal movement in their region in two ways.
First, they tax goods and people who pass through their communities. During the dry season,
they erect roadblocks to stop traffic so that they can impose a toll on all passing vehicles. When
trucks carrying groups of migrant laborers pass through the region, an additional head tax is
levied on each passenger. Large trucks are charged more than cars, yet truckdrivers who
regularly pass through and who maintain good relationships with the towns are charged less
than unfamiliar truckdrivers. This suggests different levels of relations between nonlocals and
border residents, but it is important to point out that no nonlocal cars, trucks, or persons (except
police, customs officials, and other state representatives) are allowed to pass through the border
region without paying a fee; toll-free passage is a privilege reserved only for members of the
“border.”

During the rainy season, when the Okpara is full and can only be crossed by canoes, locals
charge a steep fee for transporting nonlocal passengers and goods across the river. Canoe work
is an important cooperative activity between villages on either side of the river and is supported
by a highly organized system of labor. At the primary cross-border route, teams of local young
men participate in weeklong shifts; they are supervised by two elders, one from each village on
either side of the river. Every week two teams of two young men—one team from each
village—work the canoes. One member of each team is assigned responsibility for collecting
and recording transport fees and the other is designated as chief rower. At the end of the day,
the canoes are locked up and the teams pool all their money and then divide it in half. The men
then return to their respective villages and remit the day’s income to the responsible elder, who
pays the workers a percentage of the earnings and deposits the remainder in a village savings
box. Every able-bodied local man aged 18 to 40 years is given the opportunity to work one
week of every season, and the elders maintain lists of available workers and assign the shifts. If
there are men who have not had an opportunity to work by the end of the rainy season, when
the river waters recede and vehicles and pedestrians can once again cross the dry riverbed, they
will be the first ones assigned shifts at the beginning of the following season.

It is significant that local in the context of canoe work is clearly defined by the elders as
continuous and upstanding residence in the Okpara region for at least two years. Eligibility for
participating in “being the border” by controlling trade and traffic movement across the river is
determined by length of residence—not by kinship or ethnicity—pending their record of
upstanding and respectable good citizenship. A further key point about membership in the
“border” is revealed by the flow of money into and out of the toll savings boxes. In Ogbori,
Nigeria, and Ibere, Bénin, toll profits are used only for common village needs such as the
construction and improvement of market stalls or other public buildings or for food and drink
expenses for welcoming prestigious village visitors. In Papo, the second Béninois town, the
money remaining in the savings box at the end of every calendar year is equally divided among
all adult residents, women as well as men. In each case, it is members of the “border” who reap
some small profit from the taxation of goods and people, whether collectively or individually.
And in Papo, where the revenues are equally divided, the privilege of receiving a portion of the
profits is again defined by continuous residency in the area—not by kinship, ethnicity, or gender.

The second way in which border residents actively involve themselves in the passage of
people and goods through their region is by acting as mediators between nonlocal traders and
customs guards. Nonlocal traders seek the brokerage services of locals in negotiating bribes
with the guards. Generally, the greater the value and quantity of goods being brought through

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the border region, the more difficult and lengthy is the period of negotiation. As mediators, locals are key participants in this process. Although any local may attempt to broker an agreed price between trader and guards, certain residents specialize in networking and maintaining relationships with both parties. Most mediators are young men, aged 25 to 40 years, although older, successful marketwomen occasionally mediate with the guards for their own clients or kin. The mediator’s services are usually rewarded with a payment from both the trader and the guards. When traders fail to request the mediating services of a local, they are stigmatized not only by the locals (“they were stupid not to ask us to help them”) but also by the guards, who often refuse to allow the traders to pass until locals have been invited to mediate the situation. In difficult cases, when negotiations have lasted longer than 24 hours and no settlement has been reached, the balé (chief or authoritative head of town; literally “father of the earth”) of the involved town is invited to intervene. Because of his leadership position and the respect accorded him by locals, traders, and guards alike, he is usually successful in brokering an agreement. In such cases, he too receives significant compensation for his services.

Border residents’ roles as brokers lay at the heart of a deep contradiction in their relationships with customs officials. On one hand, they harbor deep hostilities toward the guards and toward the state for intruding upon their informal economic system and for interfering with their right to uninhibited exchanges in their region. On the other hand, in order to maintain an element of control over the traffic passing through their communities by mediating for traders, they must maintain working, cooperative relationships with the guards. Border residents continually struggle with conflicting feelings of hostility and humility, independence and interdependence, confrontation and cooperation in relation to the officials. As I will show, one way in which locals cope with this contradiction is by subverting the authority of the guards in clandestine ways. First, however, in order to understand better the nature of the contradiction, I will trace some ways in which these conflicting feelings and reactions have been played out by locals since the establishment of the full-time customs post.

Before the new Nigerian customs and immigration post was built in Ogbori, the nearest existing Nigerian post was located in the town of Awode, 26 kilometers east of the border. In 1990, when the Nigerian government decided to construct a new post, they first sent a team of engineers and construction workers to the site. When the engineers arrived at the old post in Awode, the customs guards stationed there tried to trick the engineers into building the new, improved complex in Awode by lying and telling them that they were already in Ogbori. The engineers were aware that the new post was to be built on the Okpara river, so they asked the Awode customs guards to show them the river; the guards led them to a small stream west of town and claimed it was the Okpara. Word about how the guards tricked the engineers quickly spread throughout Awode, but no one came forward to rectify the situation. A small group of Ogbori students attending secondary school in Awode sent a message to their elders in Ogbori informing them of the problem. A few days later, following their elders’ instructions, the students visited the engineers and told them the true location of Ogbori and the Okpara, a further 26 kilometers down the bumpy dirt road. The engineers packed up and continued west, found the real Ogbori, and initiated construction of the new post.

Why did Ogbori residents enable construction of the post in their community by guiding the engineers to them? Why did they, in essence, invite conflict and competition with the customs guards by assuring that the post was constructed in their town? Why did they not simply let the misled engineers build the post in Awode and profit by remaining a remote and uncensored throughway for traders? “Because we are the border,” they told me. By welcoming the new post into their community, border residents ensured themselves a degree of control over traffic movements through their region despite the presence of the state and better situated themselves in relation to the guards. First, recognizing the Nigerian government’s renewed and increased efforts to control cross-border trade in Shabe, Ogbori residents feared having to pay steep
customs and excise “duties” themselves when traveling to and from Ogbori had the post been located in Awode. So, despite the new drawbacks of having the continuous, full-time presence of the guards in the border region and the accompanying potential for conflicts of interest and authority, border residents decided that if there was going to be a new and improved customs post in the area it ought to be in their community. In that way they could more effectively manage and manipulate the post to their own advantage.

Second, if the post had been located at Awode, Ogbori residents would not have had the opportunity to profit from transborder trade by mediating between guards and traders, as those roles would have been filled by Awode residents. Indeed, the complicity of Awode residents with the Awode customs guards’ ruse may be explained by their desire for those brokerage roles and the opportunity for profit the roles presented. This, at least, is how Ogbori residents interpreted what they saw as the betrayal behind the complicity of Awode residents. The event remained a source of tension between the two towns for several years. It served to underline differences between border and nonborder residents, and reinforced a sense of border identity based on “deep placement” in the border region and border residents’ rights to involve themselves in—and profit from—transborder trade.

Local efforts to negotiate with the customs guards were initiated immediately upon the guards’ installation in Ogbori. Soon after the first team of officials arrived at the newly constructed barracks, the three bale of the border towns invited them to a meeting to negotiate a working agreement between the guards and locals. A “free-trade pact” was established, with the mutual understanding that residents would not interfere with the guards’ duties to regulate long-distance trade as long as local marketwomen and petty traders were allowed to move freely across the border for the purposes of local distribution. This pact was intended to protect the freedom of movement of border residents while simultaneously constructing some formal guidelines for relations between guards and locals. The official cooperation and mutual respect also allowed local residents to move into the interstices of the agreement by establishing relationships of brokerage between the guards and long-distance traders. Even though such mediation was not formally arranged, it soon became the standard model of interaction, allowing both guards and locals to maintain a degree of control over the passage of goods and people through the border region.

But at the same time that the bale were initiating relationships of cooperation with the guards, other border residents took it upon themselves to express their displeasure with the state’s intensified presence in their community. When the new post was constructed in Ogbori, the engineers also built two small shelters for customs guards at a secondary cross-border route two kilometers north of Ogbori, near the lbere border crossing. One of the shelters was constructed entirely of thatch and the second of mud walls and thatched roof. They were intended to house guards to regulate trade on this secondary, less traveled route, but only for limited daytime periods and occasional overnights during the busier trafficking times of the year. Soon after their completion the shelters were burned down by anonymous local residents in an act of defiance and outright resistance to the new presence of the officials and the state, an act reminiscent of the clandestine relocation of the border demarcation pillars in 1902. The Nigerian government has not rebuilt the two shelters since they were burned down because, in the words of one customs official, “the villagers will just burn them down again, like the last ones.”

What these various reactions of border residents make clear is that they are fraught with conflicting feelings about the increased state presence in the borderland and stricter state authority over traffic movements through their “border.” Struggles between wanting to reject restraints placed on them by customs guards and wanting to maintain working relations with those same guards in order to extract more profit from their presence are constantly pulling locals in opposite directions. These struggles constitute a core contradiction for all those in the “border.” It is a contradiction that, as long as the guards remain in the border region, is unlikely
to ever be fully resolved. But one way in which border residents respond to this tension is through clandestine subversion of state structures.

Border residents mediate passage through their region for nonlocal traders not only by brokering agreements with customs guards but also by enabling these traders to avoid confrontation with officials by leading the traders in secret detours around the post. This is most easily accomplished during the dry season, when the dry riverbed can be crossed at a number of points using remote bush paths and old roads called fayawo (literally, "secret detours"). Fayawo may be used to transport a wide variety of commodities illicitly across the border; these goods include large loads of gasoline and smaller loads of kerosene, as well as packaged merchandise and cloth. In 1991, over a period of several months, one fayawo was used to drive 50 brand-new luxury cars, including Mercedes Benz and Toyota sedans, illicitly into Nigeria. Fayawo trafficking is more difficult in the rainy season when passage across the river is restricted to two locations of canoe crossing that are vigilantly watched by customs guards. Nevertheless, locals still succeed in getting some goods across the river without the guards' knowledge by hiding them in the bush and transporting them by bush footpaths around the customs post. Local resourcefulness in transporting goods by canoe is impressive. I witnessed several occasions when vehicles—including a Mercedes Benz sedan and two Volkswagen vans—were loaded onto two canoes and floated across the river. In two cases fayawo were used to circumvent customs; in another the owner negotiated a "duty" with the guards.

While such subversive avoidance of state structures would usually be called smuggling, I prefer not to use this term because it inadequately portrays the nature of these trade movements from the point of view of border residents. Smuggling throughout Africa is regarded by social scientists as an informal economy activity. Scholars have used a variety of definitions in their studies of the informal economy, alternatively called the "parallel," "second," "black market," "unofficial," or "unrecorded" economy. Janet MacGaffey's definition of the second economy best captures the dynamics of trade in the Shabe region: "a highly organized system of income-generating activities that deprive the state of taxation and foreign exchange. . . . Some of these activities are illegal, others are legitimate in themselves but carried out in a manner that avoids taxation" (1988:168). The notion of smuggling, redolent as it is with assumptions of illegality and wrongdoing, does not represent the ways in which border residents proudly stake their economic claim in transborder trade movements. Although border residents are fully aware that according to state laws it is illegal for them to sneak goods around the customs post, they do not regard it as morally wrong for them to do so. Because of the entrenched corruption of customs guards, they know that most of the "legal" taxes paid on goods will go, not to the state, but instead to the guards' pockets. In this situation, legality and wrongdoing become relative. Border residents believe that they have the right to move freely within their binational bounded territory and that guards are wrong to bribe them in the name of the state for personal gain. Thus their clandestine movements of goods around the customs post and their secret stashes of goods in the bush to hide them from the guards' watchful eyes are defiant statements of border residents' authority over traffic through their region. It is also a way in which they can subvert state claims to authority while avoiding a direct confrontation with customs guards that would threaten their lucrative positions as brokers. Although the guards suspect locals of assisting traders with fayawo, the guards rarely catch them in the act.

When customs officials do successfully crack a fayawo movement, they do so with the aid of local residents acting as informers. Although women are also occasionally accused of informing—especially if they are suspected of providing sexual services to the guards—most customs informants are young men between the ages of 16 and 40 years. Informants are rewarded with a cash payment from the guards. Called "spies" by other local residents, informants betray the "border" by transgressing the social boundaries erected between the "border" and the state. Barth argues that "the organizational feature which . . . must be general
for all inter-ethnic relations is a systematic set of rules governing inter-ethnic social encounters” (1969:16). Customs informants violate expectations of loyalty to their border community by breaking normative rules of interaction with the guards, and informants are accordingly stigmatized by their group. The way in which customs informants are vehemently regarded as untrustworthy “traitors” is a clear indication of the recently strengthened boundaries dividing “border” and “state,” as well as of the acceptable and expected patterns of social behavior that constitute these boundaries and that contribute to the maintenance of a cohesive border identity.

I have tried here to portray the ways in which the socioeconomic and micropolitical activities and relations surrounding transborder trade in the Shabe region define a sense of solidarity for border residents. By emphasizing their “deep placement” as borderlanders, local residents from both nations have forged a border identity that emerges primarily in contexts of exchange across the border. I am not suggesting that locals engage in transborder trade only as a means of asserting their border identity. To the contrary, their sense of “borderness” has emerged from their involvement in the trade and, in particular, from their financial suffering in the face of economic change and declining transborder traffic. With decreasing income-earning opportunities, members of the “border” feel ever more strongly about declaring their right to engage in, and profit from, the trade that passes through their region. Thus they have created their binational border identity by drawing on both their shared dependence on transborder trade and their sense of locatedness in the border region. In other words, the “border” exists where notions of “deep placement” meet cross-border exchange and all its surrounding social, political, and economic relations.

ambiguous borderlands and deeply placed borderlanders

We go to Ogbori, And Ogbori residents come here. The right hand washes the left hand, And the left hand washes the right hand. God created us and placed us side-by-side. —Ibere song

The contemporary “deep placement” of Shabe in their borderland raises interesting questions about processes of identity formation, as well as about historical, global processes of political and economic change and their impacts on national borders. A century ago, Shabe leaders pleaded with British and French colonial officers to move, or to abolish, the border that divided them. But in recent decades the border has become the basis of a strong collective identity and an important means of capitalization for their economic strategies. Shabe quickly learned how the economic and political divergences of British and French rule could be manipulated at the border, as is evident from early cross-border movements that enabled people to avoid taxation or military conscription. Today the border is the site of converging commodities and currencies embedded in global and international economic processes, from World Bank structural adjustment policies to Taiwanese-made women’s underwear en route to Ibadan. Borderlanders realize that their very marginality—their borderland advantage in the interstices—gives them the opportunity to exploit the ambiguous values of powerful cross-border movements. Unfortunately those same global and international economic processes that make the border lucrative have also contributed to recent economic decline in the border region, as well as throughout West Africa. Shabe borderlanders have responded to their intensified economic marginality by digging ever deeper into their borderland.

Rosaldo has pointed out that borderlanders have often been treated as culturally invisible: “borders between nations, classes, and cultures were endowed with a curious kind of hybrid invisibility . . . they seemed to be a little of this and a little of that, and not quite one or the other” (1989:209). Shabe border identity illustrates how borderlanders can be empowered by their
positioning on boundaries and crossroads. Far from being invisible, they claim to embody the border. Nor are they a homogenous or uniform group. Being the “border” is one form of shared identity that emerges in certain contexts and is crosscut by a number of other identities and social groups. For example, as among other Yoruba peoples, *ilà* (hometown) identification is very strong in Shabe, a phenomenon whose significance has been discussed and debated at length by prominent scholars (Laitin 1986; Peel 1983). Gender, age, and religion are also influential and entrenched markers of identity. Even within the “border,” there is ongoing economic competition and conflict among the border towns, as well as between women and men.14

Expressions of nationalism also complicate border solidarity. Despite the ethnic, kinship, and cultural networks that transcend the international boundary, Nigerian Shabe and Béninois Shabe have no desire to trade places with each other. The extent to which nationalist loyalties, pride, and biases shape border residents’ opinions of the two states is telling. It shows how they value their governments and countries and how they value the international border from which they earn their livelihood. For example, Béninois Shabe frequently shake their heads at the internal political instabilities of Nigeria and exclaim, “Nigerians are uncivilized!”15 During the 1994 labor strikes in Nigeria protesting Sani Abacha’s imprisonment of Moshood Abiola, many Béninois Shabe residents held their breath, fearing that a Nigerian civil war would erupt and draw crowds of Nigerian immigrants to their border region. “What kind of country is it that puts their elected official in jail?” many of them remarked to me. “Nigerians are uncivilized.”

But Shabe Nigerians living only a quarter of a kilometer east of the border are enormously proud to be citizens of the most populated country in Africa. For example, the parents of the bâle of Ogbori, Nigeria, were both born in Savè, Bénin, and the bâle himself spent much of his childhood visiting and living with relatives in Bénin. Yet when I asked him how he identified himself, he said, “We are in Nigeria here, but we are all from Shabe (Savè, Bénin). I am Nigerian, but my mother and father both came from Shabe.” When I asked him if he claimed allegiance to the Onishabe, the Shabe king who resides in the palace in Savè, he exclaimed, “No! The Alááfin of Oyo (Nigeria) is my king!” Another Ogbori resident, a young man, told me that if Nigeria and Bénin were ever at war with each other, he would fight for Nigeria against his Béninois Shabe relatives. Rather than contradicting feelings of border solidarity, strong nationalist identifications only point out another way in which the border structures the lives of the people surrounding it. Boundaries exist in order to separate as well as be crossed, and Shabe border residents can easily move between their separate nationalist identities and their “border.”

The ease with which Shabe border residents are able to juggle these identities contrasts with borderland identity struggles observed along the U.S.-Mexico border. Gloria Anzaldúa has perhaps best portrayed the U.S.-Mexico “consciousness of the Borderlands”: “The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness . . . she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders” (1987:78–79). The cultural, political, and economic ambiguities of the U.S.-Mexico borderland appear to confront its residents with a great deal more personal ambiguity or “borderland hysteria” (Rosaldo 1989) than I found in Shabe. This is partly explained by the much greater difficulties faced in physically crossing the U.S.-Mexico border and the enormous differences in national wealth and political power that meet there in stark contrast. Because Shabe can easily move across the border within their binational territory, it becomes a corridor of opportunity for them rather than a barrier to opportunity.

Shabe border residents, unlike U.S.-Mexico border residents, have been able to appropriate the border from state regulations with their territorial claims to the borderland. By centralizing their marginality in their self-definition and economic strategies, Shabe borderlanders have embraced their life on the edges of their countries. Their controls over the social and economic
space surrounding the border allow them to manage borderland ambiguities for their own ends, a freedom they see as hampered by the increased state presence in the region. But despite their disgruntled feelings toward their current governments over economic decline and lack of development in the region, members of the “border” remain deeply placed in both their border region and in their respective countries. Shabe border residents are neither hybrid nor nationless. On the contrary, they recognize that it is precisely because they belong to separate nations that they can manipulate and negotiate the border to their mutual advantage. Being the “border” implies separation as well as unification, exclusion as well as inclusion, independence as well as interdependence. As one Papo resident pointed out to me, “Nigeria is disorderly but it is Nigeria who feeds us because this is the border, you understand?”

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1. His work as both scholar and policy maker has focused on efforts to increase transnational cooperation and promote joint management of border regions. Some strides were made toward this in Nigeria and Benin in 1988, when a Nigerian–Benin Transborder Cooperation Workshop brought scholars, policymakers, and traditional rulers together to exchange recommendations for the active integration of planning for borderlands.

2. See McEwen 1991 for a complete history of the demarcation of the Nigeria-Bénin border.

3. This pattern is also similar to the twin cities that span the U.S.-Mexico border. Along the Nigeria-Bénin border, however, the border settlements are small towns and villages, with their larger associated cities situated 25 to 30 kilometers into the interior.

4. For some excellent analyses of women’s marketing and trade activities throughout Yorubaland and West Africa, see Awe 1972; Clark 1988, 1994; Hodder 1963; Krapf-Askari 1969; Little 1973; Mabogunje 1961; Robertson 1984; Sudarkasa 1973; Trager 1976.

5. Cocoa imported to Bénin from Nigeria fell from recorded levels of 20,000 tons in 1973 to 5,000 tons in 1974. Between 1975 and 1984, annual imports ranged from 1,000 to 7,000 tons. Imports peaked again in 1986 with 25,450 tons and then fell sharply to an all-time low of only 618 tons in 1987 (Igué and Soule 1992).

6. By the mid-1970s oil accounted for more than 80 percent of federal revenues and more than 90 percent of Nigeria’s foreign exchange income, while agriculture’s share of the gross domestic product declined from a half to less than a third (Berry 1985).

7. Although women worked at the border with men for at least 15 years, in 1992 they were forbidden to continue such work by the men of the border villages. In the face of ever-decreasing opportunities, this was a strategy by the men to claim the limited available wage labor for themselves.

8. The 1993 election has been internationally recognized as the most democratic election to take place in Nigeria to date. On the first anniversary of the annulled election, Moshood Abiola, who had received the majority of votes, declared himself president and was immediately arrested by General Abacha’s government. At the time of writing, he remains in prison.

9. Women traders were hit especially hard by the CFA devaluation, as the packaged and preserved goods that were directly affected by it form the base of marketwomen’s stock, along with basic necessities such as sugar, tomato paste, canned and powdered milk, cigarettes, matches, candles, lanterns, and rice. Since the devaluation, many marketwomen can only afford to carry half the amount of stock they used to carry. Moreover, women have been harder hit than men because women are responsible for providing these packaged and preserved goods for the household while men provide the staple goods, such as yams and manioc, which they produce on their own farms.

10. Sharon R. Roseman (1996) has identified similar representations of roads in the rural Galician region of Spain. Research by Mark Auslander in rural Zambia reveals local conceptions of roads as symbolic conduits of corrupt, destructive, and subversive elements that threaten collective good: “these imaginatively conceived flows of commodities and persons constituted contesting moral geographies—symbolic ‘maps’ of the unequal relations between and within peripheral rural communities, the Zambian industrial core, and the wider Southern African political economy” (1993:170). Geographies of unequal relations also characterize perceptions of Shabe roads, but instead of seeing them as conduits of corruption, border residents regard them as their access to opportunity.

11. Such laborers are usually Togolais traveling to or from western Nigerian farms.
12. Women do not participate in canoe work, which is considered “men’s work.” Because of the river’s swift currents the work is very physically demanding and only strong young men are capable of rowing across without losing control. Women also never learn how to swim, partly because of the river’s dangerous currents and partly because swimming is considered an exclusively male activity. Moreover, rowing canoes is closely associated with driving cars and the same verb is used to describe both activities. In this rural region, driving cars is also an exclusively male activity.

13. The pact has been largely successful. Although there are occasional instances when the guards harass market women traveling between the border communities, the latter are generally allowed to pass with ease.

14. For analysis and elaboration of the gendered border economy in Shabe, see my dissertation (Flynn 1997).

15. One Béninois Shabe explained to me, “Nigerians are not civilized because they don’t know the difference between bad and good. They don’t know! It’s all the same to them. Also, they do not think about things before doing them. They don’t consider all the aspects of something before doing it, they just do it. Béninois consider things very carefully. That is why we are civilized.”

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