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# Challenging International Relations' Conceptual Constraints: The International and Everyday Life across Borders in Southern Africa

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## ABSTRACT

One of the critiques of International Relations (IR) is that the discipline's discursive boundaries are particularly rigid and continue to be shaped and maintained by dominant Western-centric concepts and discourses. This paper explores the apparent dichotomy between how concepts like 'the international' are interpreted by IR scholars and the experiences of ordinary people on which these concepts are imposed. How people engage with borders will be used as an illustration, with borders being regarded by IR scholars as constituting important boundaries that are essential to the field's understanding of the world as consisting of neatly separated sovereign, territorial states. Two examples that highlight the arbitrary nature of national borders in Africa draw these assumptions into question and suggest that defining what does or does not constitute the international is, in reality, much more complex than suggested by the theoretical abstractions found in standard IR texts.

**Keywords:** The International, Africa, Borders, Everyday Life, Chewa

## Uluslararası İlişkilerin Kavramsal Kısıtlamalarına Meydan Okumak: Güney Afrika'da Sınırların Karşı Tarafında Uluslararası Olan ve Gündelik Yaşam

### ÖZET

Uluslararası İlişkilerle yöneltilen eleştirilerden biri, disiplinin söylemsel sınırlarının bilhassa katı olduğu ve Batı merkezli egemen kavramlar ve söylemler tarafından şekillendirilmeye ve korunmaya devam ediyor olduğudur. Bu makale, 'uluslararası' gibi kavramların uluslararası ilişkiler alanındaki bilim insanları tarafından nasıl yorumlandığı ile bu kavramların dayatıldığı sıradan insanların deneyimleri arasındaki açık ikilemi araştırmaktadır. İnsanların sınırlarla nasıl ilişki kurdukları, disiplinin dünyayı özenle birbirinden ayrılmış egemen, teritoryal devletler olarak ele alan anlayışına esas teşkil eden ve uluslararası ilişkiler akademisyenleri tarafından önemli kurucu hudutlar olarak ele alınan sınırlar bağlamında, bir örnek olarak kullanılacaktır. Afrika'daki ulusal sınırların keyfi doğasını vurgulayan iki örnek bu varsayımları sorgulamakta ve neyin uluslararası olduğunu oluşturup oluşturmadığını tanımlamanın, aslında standart uluslararası ilişkiler metinlerinde görüldüğünden çok daha karmaşık olduğunu göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Uluslararası Olan, Afrika, Sınırlar, Gündelik Yaşam, Chewa

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## Introduction

One of the critiques of International Relations (IR) is that the discipline's discursive boundaries are particularly rigid and continue to be shaped and maintained by dominant Western-centric<sup>1</sup> concepts and discourses. These narratives frame our political realities and establish the boundaries of the legitimate and the possible. This is also the case with the concept of 'the international', which is perhaps most profoundly implicated in the identity of the entire discipline. In introductory classes to IR, students are taught that IR is a separate field of study because the international constitutes an independent realm that operates within the constraints of anarchy and by a different logic to that of the domestic. Being able to define the international as a legitimately separate realm of study is of course essential to the very *raison d'être* of the discipline of IR, and constitutive of the entire enterprise in which we are supposedly engaged. As scholars like Rosenberg<sup>2</sup> have highlighted in recent years, if we cannot convince ourselves that what we are studying is different from what political scientists, lawyers, sociologists and others study, then we face an existential crisis.

But students quickly learn that the international is a slippery concept, and that the more one tries to grasp it, the distinction between the international, the national and the local becomes increasingly vague,<sup>3</sup> and undermines the notion that the international is indeed a realm separate from the other arenas in which power plays itself out. Instead of taking the international as a starting point, Bartelson<sup>4</sup> suggests that the concept should be treated as an object of inquiry in its own right. This can be approached in different ways. One place to begin is to question IR's self-narratives. The myth that all IR scholars study the same thing and have a shared understanding of what 'the international' is, is based on a false common ground. Importantly, we should ask what mainstream understandings (even if they are only implicit) exclude. If we start by interrogating IR's origin story,<sup>5</sup> for example, we find that it was in fact race and empire that informed much of the early thinking about the international in IR, more so than the more commonly cited noble aim of avoiding war and ensuring peace. In addition, ideas about the international were not the exclusive domain of western Europe and the United States, or a closed circuit between these parts of the world. Instead, ideas of the international travelled to and from different parts of the world through both official – universities, think-tanks, journals, and so on – as well as unofficial – private member groups, networks of individuals – channels.<sup>6</sup> Postcolonial scholars have long pointed out that in terms of constructing an overall story of the international, much is missing due to the fact that the experiences of large parts of the world have simply been excluded,

1 Western-centrism and Eurocentrism are often conflated, with both referring to the limitations engendered by theorizing from a Western or European historical experience, and yet claiming universality. In addition, Western-centrism assumes that Western knowledge is superior to that originating in other parts of the world.

2 Justin Rosenberg, "The Elusive International", *International Relations*, Vol. 3, No 1, 2017, p. 90-103.

3 A wide range of critical IR scholars have questioned the assumed divide between the domestic and the international that lies at the core of the field of IR. See, for example, R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993; Didier Bigo and R.B.J. Walker, "Political Sociology and the Problem of the International", *Millennium*, Vol. 35, No 3, 2007, p. 725-739; Pinar Bilgin, "Critical Investigations into the International", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No 6, 2014, p. 1098-1114.

4 Jens Bartelson, "From the International to the Global", Andreas Gofas, Inanna Hamati-Ataya, and Nicholas Onuf (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of the History, Philosophy and Sociology of International Relations*, London, SAGE, 2017, p. 33-55.

5 As, for example, Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2015.

6 For example, Alexander Davis, Vineet Thakur and Peter Vale "Imperial mission, 'scientific' method: an alternate account of the origins of IR", *Millennium*, Vol. 46, No 1, 2017, p. 3-23 on how the ideas and method of what was to become IR were initially inspired by the peculiarities of the racialised South African state and its position in the British Empire, and then circulated transnationally via the imperial networks.

that what Blaney and Tickner<sup>7</sup> call “peripheral experiences” have been marginalised. This paper is therefore part of the project to challenge Western-centric accounts of IR which claim universality but are in fact parochialism presented as universalism.

Due to the importance given to them under the Westphalian notion of territorial sovereignty, borders have become constitutive of our understandings of the international. Standard notions of the international assume the existence of bordered (political) communities whose boundaries coincide with the territorial boundaries of sovereign states. By taking seriously the experiences of communities that straddle formal borders, we can get closer to a post-Westphalian understanding of the international that recognizes it as consisting of a dense web of social, cultural and economic interconnections that defies a simple distinction with the domestic. Partly as a response to Mbembe’s quest to “write the world from Africa or to write Africa into the world”,<sup>8</sup> this paper draws on two cases from the African continent: the first is that of the Chewa people of Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia; the second is that of the Kwan-yamas of Namibia and Angola. The African continent provides particularly rich examples of where the distinctions are blurry, and identifying the international is complicated. This is not meant to imply that people in other parts of the world do not have similar experiences, or that Africa is an exception. Instead, it should be regarded that Africa is an “articulation of the global”<sup>9</sup> and that it has been particularly marginalized as an agent of knowledge production. Importantly, Africa should not only be seen as providing the raw data to test Western theories, but also as a site for theory generation. Taking this line of thinking further, Comaroff and Comaroff<sup>10</sup> challenge us to recognise, contrary to the notion that all knowledge of value originates in the West, that in fact “it is the global south that affords privileged insights into the workings of the world at large. That it is from here that our empirical grasp of its lineaments, and our theory-work in accounting for them, is and ought to be coming”.

## **The Everyday and The International**

An important means of challenging orthodox stories of the international is to tell stories from the ground up, from the experience of the local, of ordinary people, of those engaged in the day-to-day practice of the international. This approach assumes that the realities of everyday life do not neatly align with IR’s theoretical abstractions, and draws heavily on the work of postcolonial scholars, particularly Philip Darby’s edited collection on *‘Postcolonizing the international’*.<sup>11</sup> Like him, I am interested in exploring experiences and responses to the international in places where IR scholarship rarely looks, in “material usually left out”,<sup>12</sup> in order to ‘privilege Third World knowledge, to begin with the people and issues that mostly figure last- if at all – in dominant discourse’.<sup>13</sup> This also entails challeng-

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7 David Blaney and Arlene Tickner, “International Relations in the Prison of Colonial Modernity”, *International Relations*, Vol. 31, No 1, 2017, p. 71–75.

8 Jesse Weaver Shipley, Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe, “Africa in Theory: A Conversation Between Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 83, No 3, 2010, p. 654.

9 Rita Abrahamsen, “Africa and International Relations: Assembling Africa, Studying the World”, *African Affairs*, Vol. 116, No. 462, 2016, p. 131.

10 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from The South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa*, Boulder and London, Paradigm, 2012, p. 1.

11 Phillip Darby, *Postcolonizing the International – Working to Change the Way We Are*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2006.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

ing “the way the international has been appropriated to stand for the experiences and interests of the powerful”<sup>14</sup> and as “a zone set apart from the domestic and the personal”<sup>15</sup>. This approach is also in line with the thinking of feminist scholars like Laura Shepherd<sup>16</sup> who argues that, in order to uncover the international in all its facets, we must look towards, and take seriously, “the spaces between” and the people who inhabit those spaces. Inevitably, this will mean looking outside the narrowly defined boundaries of what constitutes knowledge in International Relations. These boundaries relate to both what knowledge is regarded as important (in terms of subject matter) but also where it comes from (geographically speaking and epistemologically speaking).

For the purposes of this paper, it is thus assumed that the conceptual distinction between the international and the domestic on the basis of which the field of IR justifies its existence, is one which often has no relation to the lived experiences of ordinary people. It hopes to contribute to this literature by exploring how ordinary people engage with the international, including through considering the responses that the international elicit, which can be acceptance, assimilation, adaptation, but also resistance. Disciplinary understandings of the international rely to a large extent on the related concepts of sovereignty and statehood. As numerous scholars<sup>17</sup> have pointed out, applying these concepts to some African states is problematic as they do not fulfill the formal and Western-centric criteria for statehood or empirical sovereignty. While important work has been done, both in the field of African studies and to some extent in IR, questioning the applicability of Western concepts to Africa, this paper focuses less on how the concepts of territorial statehood, sovereignty and borders do or do not apply to African states, but rather on what the way in which people experience, challenge, respond to, ignore and resist them, tells us about their experiences of the international. As already noted, one way in which ordinary people experience what IR has termed ‘the international’ can be accessed through exploring the way they navigate and negotiate state borders.

## Borders as Markers of the International

In the same vein as Lapid,<sup>18</sup> I regard bordering, ordering and identity building as interrelated processes that all contribute to constructing the international.<sup>19</sup> Borders are therefore perhaps the most obvious places where the international is negotiated. While they are socially constructed,<sup>20</sup> they have become constitutive of our understandings of the international. This is largely due to the importance

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14 Ibid., p. 6.

15 Ibid., p. 11.

16 Laura Shepherd, “Whose International Is It Anyway? Women’s Peace Activists as International Relations Theorists”, *International Relations*, Vol. 31, No 1, 2017, p. 76–80.

17 See, for example: Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, “Why Africa’s Weak States Persist: The Empirical and the Juridical in Statehood”, *World Politics*, Vol. 35, No 1, 1982, p. 1-24; Kevin Dunn and Timothy Shaw (eds), *Africa’s Challenge to International Relations*, Houndsmills, Palgrave, 2001.

18 Yosef Lapid, “Identities, Borders, Orders: Nudging International Relations Theory in a New Direction”, Mathias Albert, David Jacobson, and Yosef Lapid (eds), *Identities, Borders, Orders: Rethinking International Relations Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 1-20.

19 For an overview of the historical development of modern borders, and how borders are treated in IR, see Kerry Goettlich, “The Rise of Linear Borders”, *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia, International Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020.

20 Agnew (2008:176) reminds us that borders are “not simply practical phenomena that can be taken as given. They are complex human creations that are perpetually open to question”. Novak refers to this as the ambiguity of borders as being both “static markers of sovereign jurisdictions and socially produced and reproduced institutions”: See Paolo Novak, “The Flexible Territoriality of Borders”, *Geopolitics*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2011, p. 742.

given to them under the Westphalian notion of territorial sovereignty, under which borders constitute the juridical and territorial limits of sovereignty, and are therefore regarded as indicators of where the international begins and the domestic ends. Borders are also important markers of identity, especially in designating categories of citizen versus alien, us versus them.<sup>21</sup> Assuming that borders constitute important markers of the international, this paper will explore examples of how borders are navigated, resisted and redefined in the African context, in an attempt to escape the “territorial trap set by Westphalia”.<sup>22</sup> This is in line with Lapid’s contention that both the ‘inter’ and the ‘national’ are shaped and stabilized at the identities/borders nexus and that “world-constituting distinctions -such as inside/outside, anarchy/hierarchy, domestic/foreign, self/other, here/there, and so on – materialize at this critical intersection”.<sup>23</sup>

In many parts of the world, international borders are arbitrary and the result of the spread of the European model of territorial statehood to the rest of the world. In Africa in particular, borders between states, which were determined and imposed<sup>24</sup> by the colonial powers at the Congress of Berlin, are, in practice, largely meaningless. They are still often ill-defined and porous, and fail to draw clear lines between the domestic and the international. The postcolonial period sought to replace a system of overlapping and complicated authority relations in Africa with “a relatively uniform system of sovereign territorial states”.<sup>25</sup> With minor exceptions, the newly independent state maintained the colonial borders. There are many reasons for this, which fall beyond the scope of this paper. Amongst these were the pressure from the international community, including the UN, which strongly discouraged challenges to existing borders. In addition, international recognition conferred important benefits on states and their leaders, and the newly formed Organisation of African Unity (OAU)’s similarly endorsed existing borders.<sup>26</sup> As Reed<sup>27</sup> points out, one of the consequences is that the us/them distinction based on citizenship of a state is often overshadowed by the kinship or linguistic bonds which transcend state borders.

It is also important to note the argument made by scholars such as Mamdani<sup>28</sup> and Bilgin,<sup>29</sup> who make the point that all borders are artificial, and that in this sense those drawn by the colonial powers in Africa are no different. The issue is, instead, the violence that accompanied the institutionalization and enforcement of these borders, and the imposition of a particular (moral and legal) order.<sup>30</sup> It is

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21 Kurt Mills, “Permeable Borders: Human Migration and Sovereignty”, *Global Society*, Vol. 10, No 2, 1996, p. 77.

22 Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, “Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 31, No 1, 2002, p. 109.

23 Lapid, “Identities, Borders, Orders”, p. 11.

24 While many contemporary borders in Africa were the result of the colonial division of the continent, the politics of territoriality were not exclusively colonial introductions, and relied to some extent on existing pre-colonial practices of territorial demarcation.

25 Lee Seymour, “Sovereignty, Territory and Authority: Boundary Maintenance in Contemporary Africa”, *Critical African Studies*, Vol. 5, No 1, 2013, p. 17.

26 For further detail, see Lee Seymour, “Sovereignty, Territory and Authority: Boundary Maintenance in Contemporary Africa”, *Critical African Studies*, Vol. 5, No 1, 2013, p. 17-31.

27 Wm Cyrus Reed, “The New International Order: State, Society and African International Relations”, *Africa Insight*, Vol. 25, No 3, 1995, p. 140-149.

28 Mahmoud Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1996. Mamdani, Mahmood (2015). “Political Identity, Citizenship and Ethnicity in Post-Colonial Africa”. Keynote address at the Conference “New Frontiers of Social Policy”, Arusha.

29 Pinar Bilgin, “Critical Investigations into the International”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No 6, 2014, p. 1098-1114.

30 Ali Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, Boston, Little Brown & Co., 1986; Sabelo Ndlovu-Gathsheni, “Decoloniality

therefore not the borders per se that represent a particular type of Westphalian state-centrism, but rather the way in which they have been enforced in a way that discounts life “inside and across those borders”.<sup>31</sup> Benyera similarly reminds us that “The Treaty of Westphalia, the Berlin Conference, modernity and colonialism turned borders into institutions complete with supporting mechanisms such as passports, border control agencies, immigration and customs officials and many other related support structure”.<sup>32</sup> This is significant for the rest of the paper, in which the focus is indeed on how life continues across borders, and how people circumvent and disregard them in their everyday lives. We will also see how, in some cases, the institutions mandated with enforcing and policing borders – in a sense, upholding the domestic/international divide, exercise flexibility in adapting to cross-border activities.

While there has been ample work done in the fields of African history, African studies and comparative politics on the artificiality of borders in Africa, the impact of cross-border ethnic identity as well as the link between imposed borders and contemporary conflicts,<sup>33</sup> less work has been done in the field of IR on how bordering practices in Africa help us to think about questions of sovereignty, the state and the international. To illustrate the effect on Africa’s international relations, I will outline two examples: the first is Chewa people of Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia; the second is the Kwanyamas of Namibia and Angola.

While investigations into ethnic identity and ethnic cultural practices are normally perceived as falling outside the ambit of what constitutes international relations, and should instead be left to anthropologists and cultural theorists, it is exactly this kind of example of how ordinary people experience and make sense of how the international impacts their daily lives, that can highlight important aspects of the international that are simply overlooked by approaches that have states, power and privilege as their focus. As Barkawi and Laffey<sup>34</sup> argue, anthropologists, cultural studies scholars (and, one might add, geographers) have done a much better job at questioning the assumption that the world consists of discrete states and societies that can be studied individually, with the international presumably being what lies between them. Standard notions of the international assume the existence of bordered (political) communities whose boundaries coincide with the territorial boundaries of sovereign states. The countless examples of communities – both cultural and political – who straddle formal state borders and in some cases disregard these borders in their everyday lives, serves to undermine the legitimacy and usefulness of concepts that have not only become commonsense in

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as the Future of Africa”, *History Compass*, Vol. 13, No 10, 2015, p.487-488.

31 Pınar Bilgin, *The International in Security, Security in the International*, London, Routledge, 2016, p. 355.

32 Everisto Benyera, “Borders and the Coloniality of Human Mobility: A View from Africa”, Innocent Moyo and Christopher Changwe Nshimbi (eds.), *African Borders, Conflict, Regional and Continental Integration*, London, Routledge, 2019, p. 12.

33 On the nature of borders in Africa and their implications, see for example Emanuel N. Amadife and James W. Warhola, “Africa’s Political Boundaries: Colonial Cartography, the OAU, and the Advisability of Ethno-National Adjustment”, *Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 6, No 4, 1993, p. 533-554; A.I.Asiwaju, (ed) *Partitioned Africans: Ethnic Relations Across Africa’s International Boundaries, 1884-1984*, London, C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 1985; Christopher Clapham, *Africa and International System: The Politics of State Survival*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996; Jeffrey Herbst, “The Creation and Maintenance of National Borders in Africa”, *International Organization*, Vol. 43, No 4, 1989, p.673-692; Jeffrey Herbst, “Challenges to Africa’s Boundaries in the New World Order”, *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 46, No 1, 1992, p. 17-30; Paul Nugent and A.I. Asiwaju (eds) *African Boundaries, Barriers, Conduits and Opportunities*, London, Pinter, 1996; Nicholas Sambanis, “Ethnic Partition as a Solution to Ethnic War: An Empirical Critique of the Theoretical Literature”, *Policy Research Working Paper No. 2208*, The World Bank, 1999.

34 Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, “Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 31, No 1, 2002, p. 115.

the discourse of IR, but which according to some constitute the very core business of the discipline. Approaching the international through cultural interconnections allows us to move beyond viewing the international as a “thin space of strategic interaction” and instead understand it as a “thick set of social relations, consisting of social and cultural flows”.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps most importantly, it can challenge our existing assumptions about states, borders, the domestic and the international, and how flexible or inflexible these categories are. Next, we turn to the cases.

## **The Chewa of Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia**

The Chewa people are an ethnic group who live in Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique,<sup>36</sup> and whose experiences blur our understandings of statehood, sovereignty, borders, and by implication the international. For his doctoral dissertation, Happy Kayuni<sup>37</sup> conducted an investigation into how the Chewa understand, experience, manage and interpret the overlap between formal states (as defined by the Westphalian model) and informal trans-border ethnic identity without raising cross-border conflicts in the process. The Chewa refer to themselves as belonging to a kingdom (formerly the Maravi Kingdom) which currently cuts across the three modern African states of Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. While the King Gawa Undi is based in Zambia, his informal traditional authority extends to Mozambique and Malawi, and the secretariat of the kingdom, the Chewa Heritage Foundation (CHEFO), is headquartered in Malawi. The Chewa regard themselves as one community, and regularly cross international borders to participate in important community events such as marriages, funerals and inaugurations of chiefs. At the pinnacle of the Chewa tradition is the Kulamba (‘to pay homage’) annual ceremony, held every August at the headquarters of King Gawa Undi in Katete, Zambia, and bringing together about 150 thousand Chewa. It is both a Thanksgiving ceremony and a New Year celebration during which the people give thanks to *Chiuta* (God) for the good harvest, peace and general prosperity, and thank the Kalonga Undi for his stewardship over the year by paying homage and offering gifts.<sup>38</sup>

The three states officially relax border controls to allow members of the Chewa community to cross the borders for cultural practices.<sup>39</sup> For example, Malawians and Mozambicans traveling to the ceremony in Zambia are not required to carry passports, but are expected to register their names on a list. According to one attendee, “...the attending people can’t be distinguished as Chewas from Zambia, Mozambique or Malawi. During the period of the ceremony the Chewas from Malawi and Mozambique literally walk into Zambia without visas. They don’t need them. It is reminiscent of the bygone era before British colonization.”<sup>40</sup> Explaining why the Chewa King, Gawa Undi, is not required to carry a passport, CHEFO chairperson, Justine Malewezi, argues, “The land belongs to him, why should he produce a passport?”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the masked traditional dancers, known as Gule Wamkulu, are not

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35 Ibid., p. 110.

36 The Chewa constitute 47%, 7%, and 3% of the populations of Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique, respectively.

37 Happy Mickson Kayuni, *The Westphalian Model and Trans-border Ethnic Identity: the Case of the Chew Kingdom of Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Cape Town, University of the Western Cape, Department of Political Science, 2014.

38 Kayuni, *The Westphalian Model*, p. 107.

39 Ironically, in 2012, the three countries embarked on a process of demarcating borders that remained unclear following the end of colonial rule in Kayuni, *The Westphalian Model*, p. 126.

40 *Zambia African Safari-Biweekly*, quoted in Kayuni, *The Westphalian Model*, p.108.

41 Kayuni, *The Westphalian Model*, p. 128.



required to show any identification or register themselves. Malewezi asks, “How can a spirit produce a passport or official document at the border? It is simply a spirit!”<sup>42</sup> These examples show how traditional authority that stretches across borders and cultural beliefs and practices challenge assumptions about the sanctity of borders and rigid conceptions of the international in opposition to the domestic. Through conducting interviews with Chewa individuals, Kayuni finds that “The perception shared by most Chewa people that borders are meaningless as far as culturally expressing and identifying themselves.”<sup>43</sup> The relaxing of border controls by state officials in order to facilitate movement for cultural purposes also underlines Salter’s point that “borders are not only geographically constituted, but are socially constructed via the performance of various state actors in an elaborate dance with ordinary people who seek freedom of movement and identification.”<sup>44</sup>

One can also interpret the Chewa people’s engagement with borders, the state and, by implication, the international, as a form of (implicit) resistance. By simply not accepting the rules associated with territoriality and borders, they are rejecting the imposition of a Western construct on their lives, their everyday practices and their cultural rituals. This was perhaps the reason why the British colonial government banned the ceremony in 1934 when it was noted that the Chewas demonstrated greater allegiance to their king than to the colonial state. In contrast, the ceremony is supported by Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique, and in 2007 it was attended, for the first time, by all three heads of state, underscoring its importance.<sup>45</sup> This could be seen as an attempt by the state to maximise its own legitimacy by supporting the cultural identity of its citizenry which demand that their cultural leader should play a role in this identity.<sup>46</sup> It underscores Nkiwane’s point that “the state may derive its power from a variety of sources, and in the context of Africa what may appear to be a loss of central state power may in fact be its reconfiguration.”<sup>47</sup> Despite differences in the contemporary roles and practices of traditional authorities in the three countries, by accommodating and maintaining good relations with them, the three states have managed to avoid the politicisation of ethnic identities.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the Chewa do not appear to be engaged in an explicitly political project. Instead, they seem content to be citizens of Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique (and in some cases view this as their primary identity) as long as the trappings of statehood, particularly borders and the restrictions they impose on mobility, do not interfere with their practice of cultural ceremonies. In order to remain relevant at the international level, the state implements demarcation of borders, but at the same time, to remain relevant at a local level, it relaxes formalities in order to respond to the needs of the community.<sup>49</sup> This suggests that the strict conceptions of borders, states, sovereignty and the international that are assumed in IR are misplaced and unhelpful in trying to understand the way in which the people and governments of this part of the world conduct their cross-border interactions. It also challenges the idea of an international defined by formally recognized borders, or what one might refer to as a “bordered international”. The same applies to the next case, for

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42 Ibid., p. 129.

43 Ibid.

44 Mark Salter, “When the Exception Becomes the Rule: Borders, Sovereignty, and Citizenship”, *Citizenship Studies*, Vol. 12, No 4, 2008, p. 373.

45 Kayuni, *The Westphalian Model*, p. 7.

46 Ibid., p. 103.

47 Tandeka Nkiwane, “Africa and International Relations: Regional Lessons for a Global Discourse”, *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 22, No 3, 2001, p. 279.

48 Kayuni, *The Westphalian Model*, p. 66.

49 Ibid., p. 131.

which we remain in southern Africa.

## **The Kwanyamas of Angola and Namibia**

Colonial borders are also relevant in this next case study, with the border between what is now Namibia<sup>50</sup> and Angola serving to fragment the Kwanyama, a community that continues to feel connected by kinship, culture, history, and geography. This case is slightly different to that of the Chewa as the Kwanyamas live on the border, or in what can be called borderlands, meaning that their everyday life is much more affected by their proximity to the border. By way of background, the Kwanyamas are one of 13 sub-tribes of the Ovambo ethnic group, and the only one whose traditional territory was divided between two colonial powers (Germany and Portugal) during the Berlin Conference in 1885. The colonial occupation of the Kwanyama kingdom by Portugal and later South Africa during World War I resulted in the displacement of the kingship to the southern half of the territory, which was now bifurcated by an international boundary between Angola and South West Africa. The northern Namibian border region with Angola had never been subjugated by the Germans, and it was only under South African rule that an effective occupation and administration began in this region.<sup>51</sup> The close relationship between ethnicity and territory in Kwanyama history was disrupted by the imposition of colonial borders,<sup>52</sup> which resulted in a complex reevaluation of identity, with ethnic and national identities no longer the same, and members of the same ethnic groups being cast as 'foreigner', by the state at least. Similar to the situation of the Chewa, following independence, there was a deliberate effort to restore the kingdom to its rightful status. In 1998, the Committee for the Restoration of Oukwanyama was established by traditional chiefs, with the declared aim of reunifying the territory originally inhabited by the Kwanyamas.<sup>53</sup>

In Oshikwamnyama, the border is called 'onaululi', meaning artificial division, perhaps most visible in the village of Onghala, which is divided by the Angola-Namibian border (Brambilla 2007, 32). The border is crossed regularly, sometimes on a daily basis, for the purpose of visiting relatives, shopping, and exchange of cattle and crops, and attending school and church. Another important reason for crossing the border that is similar to the Chewa's annual crossing for the Kulumba ceremony, is to visit the burial site of the former king in Oihole in Angola, especially the annual pilgrimages for the funeral celebrations in February.<sup>54</sup> This shows how fluid the border is, with the Kwanyama residing across national boundaries, and the people on both sides sharing similar cultural features, languages, that allow them to think of themselves as one. As Brambilla so eloquently states, the border can be in-

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50 Namibia was known as South-West Africa until its independence in 1990.

51 Napandulwe Shiweda *Omheddi: Displacement and Legitimacy in Oukwanyama Politics, Namibia, 1915–2010*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Cape Town, University of the Western Cape, Department of History, 2011, p. 2. It is important not to romanticise traditional authority and ethnic and cultural loyalties. Mamdani (1996) reminds us that the colonial governments in Africa actively promoted ethnic allegiances in order to reinforce putatively 'primordial' identifications tied to tribe and clan. He further claims that to do this, these governments supported the native authorities they found in the different communities, and sometimes gave them more powers than those native institutions traditionally had. Shiwedu (2011) also explores how the South African apartheid regime used these tactics to rule South West Africa's population from until Namibia's independence in 1990.

52 Chiara Brambilla, "Borders and Identities/Border Identities: The Angola-Namibia Border and the Plurivocality of the Kwanyama Identity", *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Vol. 22, No 2, 2007, p. 28.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

54 Cristina Udelsmann Rodrigues, "The Kwanhama Partitioned by the Border and the Angolan Perspective of Cross-Border Identity", *African Studies*, Vol. 76, No 3, 2017, p. 438.

terpreted as a “geopolitical wound cannot break cultural processes along and across it”.<sup>55</sup> It underlines that contradictions abound at borders, which often fail to coincide with the borders of culture or ethnicity. Territoriality, which produces borders, is by default, disruptive of social processes, especially borders, and serves to oversimplify and distort realities.<sup>56</sup>

The idea of the divided king is also representative of the cross-border nature of the people he represents, “[The king] is both Angolan and Namibian, like the Kwanhamas are”.<sup>57</sup> Related to this is the belief, rooted in oral history, that the last pre-colonial king Mandume, who died in 1917, has his head buried in Windhoek, Namibia and the rest of his body in Oihole in southern Angola. at Oihole in southern Angola. His body is thus believed to be fragmented between the two countries.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, the current Ovakwanyama Queen Martha Mwadinomho ya Christian ya Nelumbu was born in Angola, but grew up and now lives in Namibia. All this suggests a fluid experience and understanding of the way in which borders define territory, identity and construct the international. While the Kwanyama are now also citizens of Angola and Namibia, this does not diminish their ethnic identity or loyalty to their queen. In their everyday life, the border is less of a marker between inside and outside, us and them, domestic and international, than simply a bureaucratic obstacle of little consequence. This suggests that the international operates at different levels, in a fragmented way that draws into question the assumed universality of IR concepts that have been developed based solely on Western experiences, and their continued relevance for understanding the world in all its diversity and complexity.

## Conclusion

The aim of the two cases was to highlight the incongruity and contradictions between the way in which the international is generally conceptualized in the field of IR (as being distinct from the domestic), and how it is experienced in practice. While concepts such as the international and sovereignty are often employed in largely abstract terms in IR scholarship, they entail very concrete social practices, including bordering practices. As Salter reminds us, “Borders are a unique political space, in which both sovereignty and citizenship are performed by individuals and sovereigns”.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, conceptions of the international do not necessarily presume clear understandings of what is local and what is global (as this distinction is problematic in itself), but are also influenced by notions of identity, feelings of kinship resulting from shared values, and so forth. Relatedly, instead of constituting shorthand ways of demarcating where the domestic or national ends and the international begins, the borders of territorial states can instead serve to blur these distinctions, and underscore Reed’s contention that “Cross-border ethnic structures and porous international boundaries combine to enable citizens to undermine the sovereign ability of the African state to enforce decisions on its citizens”.<sup>60</sup> In the process, they enable citizens in, for example, parts of Africa to be engaged in activities that in the lexicon of IR would be considered international, but which they themselves do not necessarily perceive as such. As Onah reminds us, “... the African border, just like its counterparts elsewhere, has

55 Brambilla, “Border and Identities”, p. 35.

56 James Anderson and Liam O’Dowd, “Borders, Border Regions and Territoriality: Contradictory Meanings, Changing Significance”, *Regional Studies*, Vol. 33, No 7, 1999, p. 598.

57 Traditional leader, interviewed by Udelsmann Rodrigues, “The Kwanhama Partitioned”, p. 438.

58 Shiweda, *Omhedhi: Displacement and Legitimacy*, p. 241.

59 Salter, “When the Exception Become the Rule”, p. 365.

60 Reed, “The New International Order”, p. 142.

exhibited the 'contradictions of territoriality': they are supposed to curb the flow of people across sovereign jurisdictions and represent the limits of similar demographic groups. Yet, people freely criss-cross these boundaries, which often do not even contain different peoples on the different sides. In effect, these boundaries do not just shape, but are also shaped by, what is inside and what is out".<sup>61</sup> This further serves to underline how IR concepts and categories are imposed on reality in a way that does not necessarily reflect experiences on the ground.

While these examples are deliberately drawn from Africa, based on the recognition that African experiences have been particularly silenced and dismissed in the field of IR, it is important to reiterate that these experiences are certainly not unique to the continent. One need only think of the case of Kurdish people, which stretches across Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran; or the way in which the US-Mexican borders disrupts flows of everyday life, or the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian border. It is important that Africa not be constructed as somehow exceptional, as not only would this support and maintain the colonial emphasis on difference, but it would also limit the potential for generalising insights and contributing to theory building. This is especially important in light of the argument that "in the dialectics of contemporary world history, the north appears to be 'evolving' southward".<sup>62</sup> In that sense then, the aim is not just to relativise the Western notion of the international in order to challenge its claimed universalism, but to go a step further and claim that African experiences and understandings of the international are in fact foreshadowing shifts in Western ideas.

In summary, this paper has tried to problematize the international, and to ask what studying the way in which ordinary people encounter borders can tell us about the international, or not, instead of trying to preemptively frame these experiences according to existing Western frames of reference, which IR not only takes for granted, but assumes to be universally applicable. Based on the assumption that borders are important signifiers of the distinction between inside and outside, by exploring how the Chewa and the Kanyama encounter the borders of Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, and Angola and Namibia respectively, the international is shown to entail a complex and constant process of social reproduction, challenge and negotiation. This suggests a rather messy process, which challenges the predilection in the Western academic tradition with certainty, rationality, and clear boundaries. The cases discussed illustrate that the lived experiences of people on the ground do not necessarily correspond with the conceptual constructions imposed on the world by IR scholars. In addition, they also suggest that the international operates simultaneously at different levels and in multiple ways, and is engaged and resisted through everyday practices. These insights should encourage us to rethink how we conceptualise and employ concepts such as the international, and related concepts like sovereignty and statehood. Inevitably, this will mean looking outside the narrowly defined boundaries of what constitutes knowledge in International Relations. These boundaries relate to both what knowledge is regarded as important (in terms of subject matter) but also where it comes from (geographically speaking and epistemologically speaking). IR has been at pains to maintain a pure discipline that limits itself to the study of issues of relevance to the global north and to avoid being contaminated with foreign ideas and subject matters. A fear of reflections from the global South disrupting the neatly laid boundaries of the field is particularly tangible, and reflects the anxiety around the possible disruption of the international liberal order by those from outside the liberal West. Instead, drawing on these

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61 Emmanuel Ikechi Onah, "Trans-Border Ethnic Solidarity and Citizenship Conflicts in Some West and Central African States", *African Security Review*, Vol. 24, No 1, 2015, p. 65.

62 Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South*, p. 13.

alternative sites of knowledge should be regarded as an opportunity, a recognition that these “ways of knowing-and-being that have the capacity to inform and transform theory in the north, to subvert its universalisms in order to rewrite them in a different, less provincial register”.<sup>63</sup>

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63 Ibid, p. 49.

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