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## **Economic Boundaries and the Unintended Architecture of Colonial Governance: Cross Border Trade Networks Between Northern Nigeria and Southern Niger, 1914-1960**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the transformation of cross border trade networks between Northern Nigeria and Southern Niger from the establishment of the colonial boundary in 1914 to the independence of both nations in 1960. It advances a counterintuitive argument: that the illicit cross border trade which colonial administrations sought desperately to suppress did not merely persist despite their efforts, but actively shaped the architecture of colonial governance in ways that officials themselves failed to recognize. Drawing on archival sources from Nigeria, Niger, and the United Kingdom, the study analyzes how Hausa, Fulani, and Tuareg trading communities developed sophisticated arbitrage strategies that exploited differentials between British and French colonial systems. These strategies including currency arbitrage, commodity smuggling, and the cultivation of trans boundary social networks did not simply resist colonial control but generated economic flows that colonial states became structurally dependent upon. The article identifies three phases in this co constitutive relationship: disruption and reorganization from 1914 to 1922, the emergence of arbitrage economies that exposed the limits of colonial regulation from 1923 to 1939, and wartime and postwar transformations that revealed colonial dependence on the very trade they condemned from 1940 to 1960. By demonstrating how cross border trade functioned as an unrecognized infrastructure of colonial economies, the study contributes to debates in African economic history, borderlands theory, and the political economy of colonialism, arguing for a reconceptualization of illicit trade not as resistance to colonial power but as a constitutive element of its operation.

**Keywords:** Economic boundaries; cross border trade; colonial governance; Northern Nigeria; Southern Niger; borderlands theory; illicit economies; unintended consequences.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The partition of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884 1885 and the subsequent imposition of colonial boundaries represent one of the most consequential transformations in

the continent's modern history. European powers divided African territory with little regard for pre existing patterns of human movement, economic exchange, or social organization (Anene, 1970; Hargreaves, 1974). Nowhere were the effects of this partition more complex than in the boundary between Northern Nigeria, administered by Britain, and Southern Niger, under French control. This line, drawn across the Sahelian landscape, cut through the heartlands of Hausa and Fulani civilization, dividing communities that had shared language, culture, religion, and economic networks for centuries (Miles, 1994).

The scholarly literature on colonial boundaries has evolved through several phases. Early scholarship focused on the diplomatic negotiations and legal frameworks through which European powers partitioned the continent (Anene, 1970; Hargreaves, 1974, 1985). A subsequent generation shifted focus to the impact of boundaries on African societies, documenting how they divided ethnic groups and disrupted established patterns of interaction (Asiwaju, 1985). More recent work has examined how boundaries became sites of opportunity as well as constraint, with borderland populations developing sophisticated strategies for navigating and exploiting the new political geography (Nugent, 2002, 2019; Walther, 2015).

This article engages with and seeks to advance this literature by posing a different set of questions. Rather than asking how boundaries affected African societies or how Africans adapted to boundaries, it asks a more fundamental question: What if the illicit cross border trade that colonial administrations sought desperately to suppress did not merely persist despite their efforts, but actively shaped the architecture of colonial governance in ways that officials themselves failed to recognize? What if colonial states became structurally dependent on the very trade they condemned?

This framing shifts the analytical focus from African adaptation to colonial boundary drawing toward a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between colonial governance and borderland economic activity. It suggests that cross border trade was not simply a problem to be managed or a form of resistance to be suppressed, but an unrecognized infrastructure upon which colonial economies came to depend. Groundnut exports from Northern Nigeria, livestock supplies to urban markets, and even the functioning of colonial currencies were shaped by cross border flows that official discourse framed as illicit.

The article advances three interconnected arguments. First, the evolution of cross border trade between Northern Nigeria and Southern Niger passed through three distinct phases, each characterized by a different relationship between state regulation and illicit economic activity. Second, in each phase, the strategies developed by borderland traders did not simply resist colonial control but generated economic effects that colonial states incorporated into their functioning, often without recognizing the source. Third, this co constitutive relationship between state and illicit economy challenges conventional understandings of colonial power as something imposed from above and African agency as something exercised in opposition to it.

The significance of this argument lies in its implications for multiple fields. For African economic history, it suggests the need to move beyond narratives of African agency as resistance and toward more complex understandings of how African economic activity shaped the very structures of colonial rule (Cooper, 1996; Berry, 1993). For borderlands theory, it offers a case study of how boundaries generate not only distinctive borderland cultures but also systemic effects that ripple through state structures (Donnan & Wilson, 1999; Zartman, 2010). For the political economy of colonialism, it challenges assumptions about the relationship between formal and informal economies, suggesting that the distinction itself may obscure more than it reveals (Roitman, 2005).

The article proceeds in seven sections. Following this introduction, section two reviews the relevant literature and elaborates the theoretical framework. Section three outlines the methodology, including a critical reflection on archival sources. Section four provides historical context on pre colonial trading networks and the imposition of colonial boundaries. Section five presents the empirical analysis organized chronologically across three phases, with each phase examined for its specific dynamics and unintended consequences. Section six discusses the findings and their implications for broader debates. Section seven concludes by reflecting on what this case reveals about the nature of colonial governance and the place of illicit economies within it.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **The Historiography of Colonial Boundaries in Africa**

The study of colonial boundaries in Africa has generated a substantial literature spanning multiple disciplines. J. C. Anene's (1970) foundational work, *The International Boundaries of Nigeria*, established the diplomatic and legal history of Nigeria's boundaries, documenting the negotiations between Britain and France that produced the line dividing Northern Nigeria from Niger. Anene's meticulous archival research remains essential for understanding the formal processes of boundary delimitation, but his focus on European diplomacy left unexamined the experiences of African populations living astride the new boundaries.

A. I. Asiwaju's (1985) edited volume *Partitioned Africans* marked a significant shift, bringing together case studies that examined how colonial boundaries affected African societies. Asiwaju's own work on the Yoruba borderland demonstrated that boundaries divided ethnic groups, disrupted established patterns of interaction, and created new forms of identity and conflict. This scholarship established that boundaries were not merely lines on maps but lived realities with profound consequences for African populations.

William F. S. Miles's (1994) *Hausaland Divided* provided the first sustained ethnographic study of a single borderland community divided between Nigeria and Niger. Miles's research, based on extensive fieldwork in twin villages on either side of the boundary, revealed how a shared Hausa culture diverged under the influence of different colonial and postcolonial administrations. His work demonstrated the power of boundaries to shape identity, language, religion, and political orientation over time. More recent scholarship has moved beyond a focus on disruption to examine how boundaries became sites of opportunity. Paul Nugent's (2002, 2019) studies of the Ghana Togo borderland show how border communities developed sophisticated strategies for navigating the boundary, from smuggling to currency arbitrage to the cultivation of multiple identities. Nugent argues that boundaries should be understood not simply as barriers but as complex social spaces that generate distinctive forms of economic and social organization.

Olivier Walther's (2012, 2015) work on contemporary West African trade networks applies network analysis to understand how cross border trade is organized through social relationships that transcend national boundaries. His research demonstrates the resilience of these networks and their importance for regional economies, but his focus is primarily contemporary, leaving historical dynamics less explored.

## **DEBATES ON AFRICAN AGENCY AND COLONIAL POWER**

The question of African agency in the colonial period has animated African historiography for decades. Early nationalist historiography emphasized African resistance to colonial rule, documenting rebellions, protests, and movements of liberation. Subsequent

work explored more subtle forms of agency, including how Africans shaped colonial outcomes through negotiation, collaboration, and everyday practice (Ranger, 1983). Sara Berry's (1993) work on land and credit in colonial Ghana demonstrated how African actors manipulated colonial institutions to their advantage, exploiting ambiguities in customary law and colonial policy to pursue their own interests. Frederick Cooper's (1996) study of labor in French and British Africa revealed the limits of colonial control over African workers, showing how strikes, mobility, and everyday resistance forced colonial states to repeatedly revise their labor policies.

Cooper's (2002) later work has emphasized the importance of understanding colonialism as a contested process in which both colonizer and colonized were transformed. He argues against narratives that portray colonialism as a unified project imposed from above, insisting instead on the contingency, uncertainty, and incompleteness of colonial power. Janet Roitman's (2005) study of the Chad Basin offers a particularly relevant framework for understanding the relationship between state regulation and illicit economic activity. Roitman argues that the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate economic activity is itself produced by regulatory regimes, and that what officials label as illicit may in fact be integral to the functioning of regional economies. Her work suggests that smuggling and other informal activities should be analyzed not as deviations from formal economies but as constitutive of them.

### **Borderlands Theory**

Borderlands theory provides a framework for understanding the distinctive dynamics of regions bisected by international boundaries. Donnan and Wilson (1999) argue that borders are not simply lines but zones of interaction characterized by specific social, economic, and cultural dynamics. Borderlands are spaces where state authority is often attenuated, where multiple legal and economic systems coexist, and where populations develop distinctive strategies for survival and accumulation.

Alvarez (1995) emphasizes that borderlands generate distinctive cultural forms as populations adapt to the opportunities and constraints of life at the margin. These cultural forms include hybrid identities, specialized knowledge, and social networks that span the boundary. Zartman (2010) similarly emphasizes the creativity of borderland populations in developing strategies for navigating multiple legal and economic systems. Nugent's (2019) recent work synthesizes insights from borderlands theory with detailed historical research on West Africa. He argues that boundaries should be understood as processes rather than static lines, continually remade through the practices of borderland populations and the responses of state authorities. This processual understanding of boundaries informs the analysis in this article.

### **Toward a Unified Theoretical Framework**

This article integrates insights from these literatures into a unified theoretical framework organized around three propositions.

First, colonial boundaries are best understood as sites of ongoing negotiation rather than as fixed lines imposed once and for all. The boundary between Northern Nigeria and Southern Niger was continually remade through the interactions of colonial officials, borderland populations, and the economic flows that crossed it. Second, the distinction between legitimate and illicit economic activity was not given but produced through colonial regulatory regimes. What officials labeled as smuggling was often simply trade that followed different logics than those encoded in colonial law.

Third, illicit cross border trade did not simply resist or evade colonial control but actively shaped the conditions under which colonial governance operated. Colonial states

became structurally dependent on economic flows they could not fully regulate, and this dependence shaped policy, administration, and the possibilities of colonial rule. These propositions frame the analysis that follows, directing attention not only to what borderland populations did but to how their activities reconfigured the possibilities and limits of colonial governance.

## **METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES**

### **Archival Research and Its Limitations**

This study is based on extensive archival research conducted at the National Archives in Kaduna, Nigeria; the Archives Nationales du Niger in Niamey; and the National Archives in Kew, United Kingdom. The research spanned eighteen months between 2019 and 2022 and involved consultation of approximately three thousand files. The Nigerian archives hold records of the Northern Nigerian colonial administration, including annual reports for Niger Province and Katsina Province, district officer tour diaries, customs and excise files, and correspondence between provincial administrators and the colonial secretariat. These records provide detailed information on colonial perceptions of cross border trade, efforts to control smuggling, and the challenges of administering a long and porous boundary.

The Nigerien archives hold records of the French colonial administration, including annual reports for the cercles of Zinder and Maradi, economic affairs files documenting trade and commerce, and administrative correspondence concerning relations with British Nigeria. French records offer a different perspective on cross border trade, revealing French concerns about the drain of Nigerien production to Nigerian markets and the difficulties of competing with British commerce. The British National Archives hold records of the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office, including correspondence between colonial governors and London, reports on economic conditions and trade, and records of Anglo French diplomatic exchanges concerning boundary matters.

A critical methodological issue must be acknowledged at the outset. Colonial archives are not neutral repositories of fact but products of particular institutional perspectives and power relations. As Stoler (2009) has argued, colonial archives are themselves technologies of governance, shaped by the categories, concerns, and blind spots of colonial administrators. The records they contain tell us more about how colonial officials saw the world than about how African populations experienced it.

This study addresses this limitation through several strategies. First, it reads colonial records against the grain, attending not only to what officials said but to what their silences, contradictions, and anxieties reveal. Second, it compares British and French perspectives, using the differences between them to triangulate toward a more complete picture. Third, it supplements archival sources with published oral histories and ethnographic accounts that provide African perspectives not captured in colonial records.

### **Oral Histories and Published Sources**

Published oral histories and ethnographic accounts provide crucial complementary evidence. Miles's (1994) study of the Hausa borderland includes extensive interviews with residents of border communities, providing insights into how cross border trade was remembered and understood by those who participated in it. Baier's (1980) economic history of the Central Sudan incorporates oral data collected from traders and pastoralists in the 1970s, when some individuals who had traded during the colonial period were still alive.

These sources have their own limitations. Memory is fallible, and oral accounts collected decades after the events they describe must be treated with caution. Narratives may be shaped by subsequent events, by the circumstances of the interview, or by the

desire to present oneself in a favorable light. Nevertheless, when used critically and in conjunction with archival sources, oral histories provide perspectives unavailable elsewhere.

### **Analytical Strategy**

The analysis proceeds through a combination of chronological and thematic organization. The colonial period is divided into three phases based on significant changes in colonial policy, economic conditions, and global context. The periodization is not arbitrary but derived from the archival evidence, which reveals distinct shifts in the dynamics of cross border trade around 1922 and 1940.

Within each phase, the analysis examines four dimensions of cross border trade: the commodities and currencies traded, the strategies developed by traders, the responses of colonial administrations, and the unintended consequences of these interactions for colonial governance. This framework allows for systematic comparison across phases while attending to the specific dynamics of each period.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE NIGERIA NIGER BORDERLAND BEFORE 1914**

### **Pre Colonial Trading Networks**

Long before the arrival of European colonial powers, the region that would become Northern Nigeria and Southern Niger was integrated into extensive trading networks that connected the Sahel to the forest zones to the south and the Mediterranean world to the north. As Lovejoy (1980) has documented, the Central Sudan was a major node in trans Saharan and regional trade, with networks of Hausa, Kanuri, and Tuareg merchants moving goods across vast distances.

Kano, in particular, had developed by the nineteenth century into one of West Africa's most important commercial centers. Paul Lovejoy's (1980) magisterial study of the kola trade traces how Hausa merchants organized caravans that transported kola nuts from the forest zones of the Gold Coast to markets throughout the Sahel. Philip Shea's (2006) research on the Kano textile industry reveals a sophisticated manufacturing sector producing indigo dyed cloth that supplied markets throughout the region and beyond. These commercial networks were not merely extractive but productive, generating wealth that supported urban centers, craft industries, and political institutions.

These trading networks operated without reference to the kinds of boundaries that would later be imposed. Merchants moved freely between Kano and Zinder, between Sokoto and Maradi, guided by relationships of trust, credit, and kinship that spanned the region. The caravan routes were maintained through agreements between political authorities and merchant communities, with tolls and protections negotiated locally rather than imposed by distant states (Baier, 1980; Brooks, 1993).

### **Ethnic and Cultural Continuities Across the Future Boundary**

The territory that would become the Nigeria Niger border was characterized by profound ethnic and cultural continuities. The Hausa, who dominated much of the region, were distributed across a wide area with no sharp dividing lines between communities. As Miles (1994) has documented, villages on either side of the eventual boundary shared language, religion, cultural practices, and family connections. The very concept of a boundary separating Hausa communities was foreign to Hausa social imagination.

The Fulani, many of whom had settled in Hausa regions following the nineteenth century jihad of Usman dan Fodio, were similarly distributed across the area. Their pastoral economy, based on seasonal movement of cattle, required access to grazing lands

and water sources that paid no attention to future colonial boundaries. The Tuareg, who controlled much of the trade across the Sahara, also moved across the region, their caravans linking the Mediterranean coast to the Sahelian markets (Baier, 1980).

The significance of these continuities for the subsequent history of cross border trade cannot be overstated. When the colonial boundary was drawn, it did not separate strangers but divided kin. The relationships of trust and obligation that underlay trading networks were not erased by the appearance of a line on a map. They persisted, providing the foundation for the adaptive strategies that borderland communities would develop.

### **The Sokoto Caliphate and Regional Economic Integration**

The political framework for much of this economic activity was provided by the Sokoto Caliphate, established following Usman dan Fodio's jihad in the early nineteenth century. As Murray Last's (1967) definitive study demonstrates, the Caliphate created a degree of political unity across a vast territory, with emirates owing allegiance to the Sultan in Sokoto while maintaining substantial local autonomy. This political structure facilitated economic integration. The emirates, including Kano, Katsina, and Zinder, maintained peaceful relations that allowed trade to flow. The legal system based on Islamic law provided a framework for commercial contracts and dispute resolution that was recognized across the region. The currency, based on cowrie shells and later on silver dollars, circulated freely without regard to political subdivisions (Lovejoy, 1980).

The Caliphate's influence extended into areas that would later become part of French Niger. The emirate of Zinder, for example, was fully integrated into the Caliphate's political and economic networks. When French forces conquered Zinder in 1899, they disrupted connections that had bound the city to Kano and Sokoto for generations (Fuglestad, 1983). This history of integration would prove crucial for the subsequent development of cross border trade, as the relationships and knowledge that had sustained pre colonial commerce provided the foundation for new forms of economic activity across the colonial boundary.

### **The Imposition of Colonial Boundaries**

The boundary between Northern Nigeria and Niger was defined through a series of Anglo French agreements between 1898 and 1906. As Anene (1970) and Hargreaves (1974) have documented, the process was contentious, with both sides seeking to maximize their access to trade routes and strategic positions. The boundary as finally delimited bore little relation to pre existing patterns of human occupation or economic activity. It cut through the territories of Hausa emirates, separating Kano from its northern hinterlands and dividing communities that had long been integrated.

The initial impact on trading networks was disruptive. Customs posts were established at crossing points, and duties were imposed on goods moving between the two colonies. Traders who had moved freely now required documentation and faced the risk of confiscation if they failed to comply with regulations. Long distance caravans were particularly affected, with some routes falling into disuse as traders sought alternatives that avoided the boundary (Baier, 1980).

Yet even in this early period, the seeds of subsequent adaptation were being sown. Traders began to learn the new landscape of regulation, identifying which crossings were patrolled, which officials could be bribed, and which routes offered the best chances of evading detection. The boundary was not simply an obstacle but a new element in the commercial environment to be understood and navigated.

## **ANALYSIS: THREE PHASES OF CO-CONSTITUTION**

## **Phase One: Disruption and the Emergence of Regulatory Arbitrage, 1914 1922**

The amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria into a single British colony in 1914 marked a significant moment in the consolidation of the colonial boundary. As the British administration in Lagos sought to standardize customs regulations and improve revenue collection, pressure increased on cross border trade. District officers in border provinces were instructed to enforce customs regulations more rigorously and to report on smuggling activities (National Archives Kaduna, 1915).

French authorities in Niger faced similar challenges. The postwar period brought economic difficulties, and the French administration was concerned about the drain of Nigerien production to Nigerian markets where prices were higher. Groundnuts, in particular, were flowing across the boundary, depriving French trading houses of supply and reducing customs revenue. A 1919 report from the Cercle de Zinder estimated that substantial quantities of groundnuts were crossing the boundary through unofficial channels, with local traders exploiting price differentials that French officials could not eliminate (Archives Nationales du Niger, 1919).

What is significant about this early period is not merely that smuggling occurred but that it revealed fundamental contradictions in colonial economic policy. French officials wanted Nigerien farmers to produce groundnuts for export, but the prices they could offer were constrained by higher transport costs and French commercial policies. British officials wanted to control the boundary to protect customs revenue, but they also benefited from the additional groundnuts that entered Nigerian markets through informal channels. The very policies designed to regulate trade created conditions that made evasion profitable.

This period saw the emergence of what might be termed regulatory arbitrage: the exploitation of differences between regulatory regimes for profit. Traders learned to navigate the gap between British and French colonial systems, moving goods to the jurisdiction where they commanded higher prices and currencies to the jurisdiction where they were more valuable. This was not simply resistance to colonial rule but a sophisticated form of economic calculation that exploited the inconsistencies of colonial governance.

## **Phase Two: The Architecture of Arbitrage, 1923 1939**

The interwar years saw the consolidation of cross border trade as a central feature of the borderland economy. This period was characterized by the emergence of sophisticated arbitrage strategies that exploited multiple dimensions of difference between British and French colonial systems.

### ***Groundnut Arbitrage***

The groundnut trade remained the most significant component of cross border commerce. As Hogendorn (1978) has documented, groundnut production expanded rapidly in Northern Nigeria following the arrival of the railway, with prices determined by world markets and supported by British trading houses. In Niger, by contrast, groundnut producers faced lower prices due to higher transport costs and French colonial pricing policies.

The price differential created a powerful incentive for cross border trade. A 1930 report from the Cercle de Zinder estimated that as much as thirty percent of the groundnut crop was being smuggled into Nigeria (Archives Nationales du Niger, 1930). British officials acknowledged the trade but were reluctant to suppress it aggressively, recognizing that it benefited Nigerian merchants and contributed to the prosperity of border markets. A 1932 report from Katsina Province noted that the trade in Nigerien groundnuts had

become essential to the local economy and that suppressing it would cause significant hardship (National Archives Kaduna, 1932).

What is striking about these documents is what they reveal about colonial officials' understanding of the situation. They recognized that the trade existed, that it benefited their colonies, and that suppressing it would be difficult and perhaps counterproductive. Yet they continued to frame it as a problem to be solved rather than as an integral feature of the colonial economy. This discursive framing obscured the extent to which colonial economies had come to depend on flows they officially condemned.

### ***Currency Arbitrage***

Currency arbitrage emerged as another significant dimension of cross border commerce. The British West African pound and the French franc floated against each other, with exchange rates determined by market conditions as well as colonial monetary policies. Traders could profit by buying currency on one side of the boundary and selling on the other, or by using currency differentials to reduce the cost of goods.

As Hogendorn and Johnson (1986) have shown, African traders had long experience with complex currency systems. The pre colonial economy had accommodated multiple currencies cowrie shells, silver dollars, gold dust whose values fluctuated relative to each other. Traders had developed sophisticated strategies for managing currency risk and exploiting differentials. These skills transferred readily to the colonial context.

The archival record contains numerous references to currency smuggling, though officials often struggled to understand its mechanics. A 1925 report from the Cercle de Maradi complained that Nigerian currency was circulating widely in Niger, undermining French monetary control and complicating tax collection (Archives Nationales du Niger, 1925). British officials made similar complaints about French currency crossing into Nigeria. Neither administration could effectively control these flows.

### ***Livestock Trade***

The livestock trade also flourished during this period. Northern Nigeria's growing urban population and expanding cash crop economy created demand for meat and draft animals. Southern Niger's pastoral Fulani and Tuareg populations were well positioned to supply this demand.

As Baier (1980) notes, the livestock trade was particularly suited to smuggling, as animals could be moved along routes that avoided official crossing points. The trade was organized through networks of pastoralists and traders who had longstanding relationships spanning the boundary. These networks predated colonial rule and proved remarkably resilient to colonial efforts to control them.

A 1937 report from the Cercle de Zinder acknowledged that the livestock trade with Nigeria was essential to the pastoral economy and that efforts to suppress it would meet with fierce resistance (Archives Nationales du Niger, 1937). French officials recognized that their authority in pastoral areas was limited and that pushing too hard against the livestock trade could provoke unrest they were not prepared to handle.

### ***Social Networks as Infrastructure***

The organization of cross border trade during this period depended heavily on social networks. Hausa traders, in particular, organized their commercial activities around extended family connections that spanned the boundary. As Cohen (1969) documented in his study of Hausa migrants in Yoruba towns, Hausa trading networks were structured through relationships of kinship, clientship, and religious affiliation that created bonds of trust extending across vast distances.

A trader in Kano could send goods to a relative in Zinder with confidence that payment would be remitted and that any disputes would be resolved within the family. These

kinship ties were reinforced by marriage alliances that linked trading families across the boundary and by shared religious commitments that provided a common framework for commercial ethics (Lovejoy, 1980). What is significant about these networks from the perspective of colonial governance is that they operated independently of state structures. Colonial officials had no visibility into them and no means of controlling them. The networks constituted a parallel infrastructure for economic activity that existed alongside and often in tension with the official colonial economy.

### ***The Limits of Colonial Response***

Colonial responses to cross border trade during the interwar years were characterized by a fundamental ambivalence that reflected the contradictions inherent in colonial governance. On one hand, both British and French administrations sought to control smuggling and protect colonial revenues. Customs posts were staffed, patrols were conducted, and penalties for smuggling were imposed.

On the other hand, officials recognized that complete suppression was impossible and that aggressive enforcement might have unintended consequences. A 1934 report from the Governor of Northern Nigeria to the Colonial Office acknowledged that the boundary was too long and too porous to be effectively patrolled and that local populations were largely uncooperative with customs enforcement (Public Record Office, 1934). The report recommended a focus on major smuggling operations rather than attempting to stop all cross border trade.

This ambivalence was not merely practical but structural. Colonial states depended on the economic activity that cross border trade represented. Nigerian markets depended on Nigerian groundnuts and livestock. Nigerian pastoralists depended on access to Nigerian markets. The prosperity of border towns on both sides was tied to cross border commerce. Suppressing the trade entirely would have caused economic disruption that colonial administrations were not prepared to accept.

### **Phase Three: Wartime and the Revelation of Dependence, 1940 1960**

World War II brought profound changes to the economies of both colonies and revealed with particular clarity the extent of colonial dependence on cross border trade.

#### ***Wartime Transformations***

The war disrupted normal trading patterns, created new demands for commodities, and intensified colonial control over economic activity. For Northern Nigeria, the war meant increased demand for agricultural commodities to support the Allied war effort, with groundnut production encouraged and prices supported by the British government (Hogendorn, 1978). However, the war also brought shortages of imported goods, as shipping was diverted to military purposes.

For Niger, the war meant integration into the war economy of French Africa. Following the fall of France in 1940, Niger was initially administered by the Vichy regime, then by the Free French after 1942. The war brought increased demands for agricultural production but also disruption of normal trade routes. The boundary with Nigeria became even more significant as a potential source of goods and as an outlet for Nigerian production (Fuglestad, 1983).

The war years saw increased colonial surveillance of the boundary. Both British and French authorities were concerned about smuggling, which they saw as undermining the war effort. Controls were tightened, patrols increased, and penalties for smuggling became more severe. Yet despite these measures, cross border trade continued, adapting to the new conditions. What is striking about the wartime period is the extent to which colonial authorities came to depend on the very trade they were trying to suppress. British

officials responsible for wartime procurement recognized that Nigerien groundnuts entering Nigeria through informal channels contributed to overall supply. French officials responsible for feeding urban populations recognized that livestock and grain from Nigeria were essential to preventing famine.

A 1943 report from the Cercle de Zinder acknowledged that despite official efforts to stop cross border trade, local administrators had tacitly permitted it to continue because the alternative widespread hunger and potential unrest was worse (Archives Nationales du Niger, 1943). This document reveals the gap between official policy and practical administration, a gap that cross border trade exploited and that officials managed through informal accommodation.

### ***Postwar Development and Continued Dependence***

The postwar period brought significant changes to both colonies. In Northern Nigeria, the postwar years saw continued expansion of groundnut production, rising prices for agricultural commodities, and increasing availability of consumer goods. The colonial administration invested in infrastructure, including roads and marketing facilities, that facilitated trade (Hogendorn, 1978).

In Niger, the postwar period was marked by continued poverty and neglect, but also by the beginnings of development initiatives. The French colonial administration, responding to postwar pressures for reform, invested modestly in infrastructure and promoted agricultural development. However, the gap between the two economies persisted and in some respects widened (Fuglestad, 1983). The price differential for groundnuts remained substantial, encouraging continued smuggling from Niger to Nigeria. A 1952 report from the Cercle de Maradi estimated that groundnut smuggling remained at levels comparable to the interwar period, despite efforts at enforcement (Archives Nationales du Niger, 1952). The report noted that many Nigerien farmers had come to depend on the higher prices available across the boundary and would resist any attempt to cut off this trade.

The livestock trade continued as well, with animals moving from Niger's pastoral zones to Nigeria's growing urban markets. A 1955 report from the Nigerian Department of Veterinary Services noted that the supply of cattle to Nigerian markets depended heavily on animals originating in Niger and that any interruption of this supply would cause significant price increases and potential shortages (National Archives Kaduna, 1955). The postwar period also saw changes in the organization of cross border trade. The expansion of motor transport, though still limited, began to transform the logistics of moving goods. Traders who could afford trucks could move larger volumes more quickly than those dependent on animal transport or headloading. This favored the emergence of larger scale trading operations and increased the volume of trade (Walther, 2015).

### ***The Unacknowledged Infrastructure***

By the end of the colonial period, cross border trade had become an unacknowledged infrastructure of the colonial economies of both Nigeria and Niger. Nigerian markets depended on Nigerien groundnuts and livestock. Nigerien pastoralists and farmers depended on access to Nigerian markets. Border towns on both sides depended on the commerce that flowed across the boundary. Yet this infrastructure remained officially invisible. Colonial records continued to frame cross border trade as a problem to be solved, even as officials at all levels accommodated it in practice. The discourse of smuggling obscured the extent to which colonial states had become dependent on flows they could not control and perhaps did not fully understand.

This is not to suggest that colonial states were powerless or that cross border trade operated entirely outside their influence. Colonial policies shaped the conditions under which trade occurred. Customs posts, patrols, and penalties created costs and risks that traders had to manage. But the relationship was not one of simple imposition and resistance. It was a dynamic of mutual constitution in which state and illicit economy shaped each other in ways that neither fully controlled.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Rethinking Illicit Trade in Colonial Contexts**

The findings of this study challenge conventional understandings of illicit trade in colonial contexts. The dominant framework, derived from Scott's (1985) work on everyday resistance, conceptualizes smuggling and other informal economic activities as forms of resistance to state power. In this view, borderland populations evade colonial regulations as a way of asserting autonomy and rejecting state claims to control their lives.

The evidence from the Nigeria Niger borderland suggests a more complex picture. Cross border trade was certainly a form of evasion, and it certainly frustrated colonial officials. But it was not simply resistance. It was also a form of economic activity that colonial states came to depend on, an unacknowledged infrastructure that supported colonial economies in ways officials did not recognize or chose not to acknowledge.

This finding aligns with Roitman's (2005) argument that the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate economic activity is itself produced by regulatory regimes. What officials labeled as smuggling was simply trade that followed different logics than those encoded in colonial law. These logics were not necessarily opposed to colonial interests; they sometimes served those interests better than official channels could.

### **The Limits of Colonial Power Reconsidered**

The study also contributes to debates about the limits of colonial power. The persistence and vitality of cross border trade throughout the colonial period reveals that colonial states, while certainly powerful and oppressive, were also limited in their capacity to control economic life. The boundary was simply too long and too porous to be effectively patrolled. Local populations were often uncooperative with authorities. Colonial officials themselves sometimes facilitated the trade they were supposed to suppress. But the limits of colonial power were not merely practical. They were also structural. Colonial economies depended on the very flows that official discourse framed as illicit. Nigerian markets needed Nigerian groundnuts and livestock. Nigerian pastoralists needed access to Nigerian markets. Border towns needed cross border commerce to survive. These dependencies created structural constraints on colonial action that no amount of enforcement could eliminate.

This finding supports Cooper's (1996, 2002) emphasis on the contingency and incompleteness of colonial power. Colonial states were not all powerful entities imposing their will on passive subjects. They were institutions operating within constraints, many of which were created by the actions of the very populations they sought to control.

### **Borderlands as Zones of Systemic Effect**

The study also contributes to borderlands theory by demonstrating that borderlands are not merely distinctive local spaces but zones whose dynamics have systemic effects that ripple through state structures. The cross border trade examined in this study did not remain confined to the borderland. It shaped groundnut prices in Kano, livestock supplies in Lagos, currency circulation throughout the region, and the possibilities of colonial governance itself. This finding suggests the need to move beyond approaches that treat borderlands as marginal or peripheral. Borderlands are often central to regional

economies and to the functioning of states, even when this centrality goes unrecognized. The very features that make borderlands distinctive porosity, hybridity, the coexistence of multiple regulatory regimes create effects that extend far beyond the border itself.

### **Implications for Postcolonial Borderlands**

The history explored in this study has implications for understanding contemporary border dynamics in West Africa. The patterns established during the colonial period the organization of trade around kinship networks, the importance of smuggling, the persistence of price differentials continue to shape cross border trade between Nigeria and Niger (Walther, 2015). The contemporary relevance of this history is particularly evident in responses to security concerns. Periodic border closures and increased militarization, justified as responses to Boko Haram and other armed groups, disrupt the cross border trade on which many communities depend. Yet these measures rarely achieve their stated objectives, in part because they fail to recognize the deep historical roots and structural importance of cross border commerce (Miles, 2005).

Understanding the colonial history of cross border trade suggests that effective policy must work with rather than against the grain of borderland economic organization. Attempts to suppress trade that has been sustained for generations are unlikely to succeed and may create more problems than they solve. Policies that recognize the legitimacy and importance of cross border commerce while addressing genuine security concerns would be more likely to achieve sustainable outcomes.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has examined the transformation of cross border trade networks between Northern Nigeria and Southern Niger from the establishment of the colonial boundary in 1914 to the independence of both nations in 1960. It has advanced a counterintuitive argument: that the illicit cross border trade which colonial administrations sought desperately to suppress did not merely persist despite their efforts but actively shaped the architecture of colonial governance in ways that officials themselves failed to recognize. The analysis has traced the evolution of cross border trade through three phases. The first phase, from 1914 to 1922, was characterized by disruption as established trading networks adjusted to the new reality of colonial boundaries, but also by the emergence of regulatory arbitrage strategies that exploited inconsistencies between British and French colonial systems.

The second phase, from 1923 to 1939, saw the consolidation of sophisticated arbitrage economies as traders exploited price differentials, currency differences, and regulatory disparities. This period revealed the limits of colonial control and the ambivalence of colonial officials who recognized the benefits of cross border trade even as they officially condemned it. The third phase, from 1940 to 1960, brought wartime and postwar transformations that revealed with particular clarity the extent of colonial dependence on cross border flows, a dependence that officials managed through informal accommodation while maintaining official discourse of suppression.

Throughout this period, borderland communities developed and refined strategies for navigating the colonial boundary. Hausa traders organized their commercial activities around extended family networks that spanned the boundary, creating relationships of trust that enabled complex cross border transactions. They developed specialized knowledge of prices, exchange rates, patrol schedules, and smuggling routes that gave them advantages over less experienced competitors. They adapted their practices to changing conditions, from wartime controls to postwar economic expansion.

These findings have implications for several fields of scholarship. For African economic history, they suggest the need to move beyond narratives of African agency as resistance and toward more complex understandings of how African economic activity shaped the very structures of colonial rule. The traders examined in this study were not simply resisting colonial power but creating economic flows that colonial states became structurally dependent upon. Their agency was not exercised against the colonial economy but within it, shaping its possibilities and limits.

For borderlands theory, the study demonstrates that borderlands are not merely distinctive local spaces but zones whose dynamics have systemic effects that ripple through state structures. The cross border trade examined here shaped prices, currency flows, and policy possibilities throughout the region. Understanding borderlands requires attending not only to local dynamics but to these broader systemic effects.

For the political economy of colonialism, the study challenges assumptions about the relationship between formal and informal economies. The distinction between legitimate and illicit economic activity was not given but produced through colonial regulatory regimes, and it obscured the extent to which colonial states depended on flows they officially condemned. This finding suggests the need for more nuanced understandings of how colonial economies actually functioned, beyond the categories through which colonial officials understood them.

The study also has implications for understanding contemporary border dynamics. The patterns established during the colonial period continue to shape cross border trade between Nigeria and Niger, and efforts to suppress this trade through border closures and militarization have consistently failed to achieve their objectives. Understanding the historical roots and structural importance of cross border commerce is essential for developing policies that address genuine security concerns without undermining the livelihoods of borderland communities.

This study has limitations that suggest directions for future research. The reliance on colonial archives means that African perspectives are mediated through the categories and concerns of colonial officials. Future research incorporating more extensive oral histories could provide deeper insight into how borderland communities understood and experienced the dynamics examined here. Comparative studies of other West African borderlands would illuminate whether the patterns identified here are specific to the Nigeria Niger context or reflect broader dynamics. Research on the postcolonial period would reveal how the patterns established during colonial rule have evolved since independence.

Despite these limitations, this study demonstrates the value of examining colonial boundaries not as impositions to which Africans adapted but as sites of ongoing negotiation in which both colonizer and colonized were transformed. The traders who moved groundnuts, livestock, and currency across the Nigeria Niger boundary were not simply resisting colonial rule but actively shaping the conditions under which it operated. Their activities constituted an unacknowledged infrastructure of colonial governance, a parallel economy that colonial states depended on even as they officially condemned it. Recognizing this dependence challenges us to rethink not only the history of this particular borderland but our understanding of colonial power and African agency more broadly.

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