Exploring Borderlands and Romanticizing Clandestine Activities

Nedson Pophiwa

"You have made me your smuggler because you are paying me to take you across the border."

Abstract

The article critiques methods and theoretical issues regarding clandestine activities and borderland studies by briefly presenting some of the experiences and findings from a research on smuggling among the Penhalonga and Nyaronga borderland communities astride Zimbabwe and Mozambique between August 2005 and July 2007. The article revisits some of the research issues that I overlooked such as ethics and representativeness of the findings. I agree with some critiques on borderlands studies that the main shortcomings in researching this subject have to do with the inadequate training provided in some graduate schools on African studies. It is this weakness in the training, coupled with other reasons such as the researchers' 'romanticization' of clandestine activities, that makes them take for granted crucial methodological requirements such as ethics and generalizability among other things. This is done through highlighting the methods (such as document analysis, oral history, interviews, and participant observation) which I applied, and the encounters that I met during fieldwork. I realized the impact of discussing methodological and field research encounters, for the benefit of readers and researchers, who may want to work on a similar subject in future, as this could offer assistance on how to handle certain complex methods in probing various subjects.

Introduction

In his review of the book by Nugent (2002) on smuggling across the Togo/Ghana border, Benjamin (2003) states four weaknesses that studies on African borderlands exhibit. Firstly, Benjamin argues that there is relative paucity in literature on African borderlands, and that the existing borderlands literature "... is a narrowly focused outgrowth of the Mexican-American studies." Secondly, a comprehensive border study requires sensitive and thorough research in multiple zones; something that Benjamin says would be "... the product of a decade of intensive examination and re-examination of multivalent processes and population movements." Having grounded myself in historical research and African historiography, I find the last two weaknesses more relevant to this study on smuggling activities along the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border:

Moreover, a 'borderlands approach' to the historical enterprise is very much a personal methodological invention: very few graduate schools today provide opportunities to acquire the necessary skills for conducting a cross-border survey beyond the broad comparative method. Then, there are specific problems encountered by Africanists in the field, most notably the dangers involved in

* University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa: nedson.pophiwa@wits.ac.za
interviewing border residents about their lives and commercial activities and the physical dangers involved with border-crossing (the banditized paramilitary forces of Togo-Ghana are one notorious example).

One would agree with Benjamin, not just because it is an easier way out to justify the weaknesses in one's methodology considering that there is no established approach to handling the subject, but because it is arguably true that some graduate schools have not equipped students with the methodological utensils to work on borderlands. Whilst this claim could be interpreted as mere finger-pointing and a blame game, much of the work on Africa’s borderlands will be found wanting in the way it has been conducted. A number of questions will be asked regarding the way it is conducted, the ethics involved, and the findings of the research conducted will remain contestable for not being generalizable to other borders. This problem of generalizability, or the lack of it, has proved to be a problem to me whenever there were presentations of seminar papers at conferences because listeners have always expected to come across similar or related experiences on a given border. For example, it was not uncommon to hear one question: “How come what I experienced at the border I crossed does not happen at the border you studied?” This made it difficult to justify the difference in the way events unfolded at the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border.

Reflecting on the way I conducted this research, I realize that my study was not representative as a product of that graduate school of innovative but unskilled researchers, and neither did it consider some ethical issues, nor did I pay attention to any sampling issues. But I conducted the research, and came out with a final product. Not to say, therefore, that the study was fraudulently conducted, or that it was flawed, but were it for more systematic methods engaged, the study could have been improved.

The ‘sub-title of this paper—“You have made me your smuggler because you are paying me to take you across the border”—comes from an afterthought on a response that came from one of my interviewees, who also acted as my tour guide while I was conducting fieldwork. I could sum it up by saying he meant that I did not need to ask him how he defined a smuggler considering that I had hired him to smuggle me across the border. For me, being smuggled was a way of getting to know the area that cross-border smugglers in the area used, their routes, and how they travelled and got around police patrols on the border. But for my tour guide/respondent, he felt that I was a client because I was supposed to give him a token for taking me across the border as per our agreement. What I reflect on as an afterthought is whether I considered the ethics of research, especially where crossing was done through unauthorized crossing points. Part of the answer is to be found in the conscious efforts made by my tour guide in avoiding the police. But I further pose the question on the possibility of adhering to ethics in a research that is built upon the premise that clandestine activities across African borderlands is not criminal but a survival strategy.

The term ‘smuggling’ is regarded as inappropriate because it does not reflect the perspective of the communities involved in it. Hence, some alternative terms have
been applied such as 'second economy', 'underground economy', 'informal economic activities', and various other descriptive terms that avoid the word (MacGaffey, 1983; Ellis & MacGaffey, 1986). Flynn cites McGaffey's definition of the 'second economy' as "...a highly organized system of income-generating activities that deprive the state of taxation and foreign exchange... Some of these activities are illegal, others are legitimate themselves but carried out in a manner that avoids taxation" (1997; 324). These scholars on smuggling and other informal activities have actually moved away from criminalizing such activities to romanticizing them, as it happens in cinemas and films. Harvey (2003) shows the romanticization in cowboy western films of outlaws, drug lords, and other 'outside-the-law' activities. Even those who actually conduct these activities have lost the 'decency' to avoid being caught, and now sell narcotics or other illegal stuff in public. For example, Harvey cites a sign on a kiosk in the town of Maiaco, the contraband capital of the Guajira Peninsula in Columbia, which reads 'Legalize your merchandize here' (2006; 7). It indicates a service in which illegal goods can be made legal through purchasing formal documentation. In that case, where does a researcher stand with a preconception that survival is the reason for the rise in these activities, and their prevalence is a result of the failure of the nation-state project in Africa? Is there room to observe the ethics of research when one becomes immersed in what (s)he is working on?

In this paper I would like to share my fieldwork experiences from the research that I conducted for my dissertation on the history of smuggling along the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border (Pophiwa, 2007). It is an attempt to redress some of the concerns that Benjamin raised on methodological weaknesses of African borderland studies.

The Research Context

The study was spatially located on the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border, and thematically inclined towards smuggling as an informal economic activity. It explored the history of smuggling through engaging the different roles played by the state and borderland communities as actors involved in smuggling. It also interrogated the perceptions of the same parties in a bid to qualify the meaning and implications of smuggling. By concentrating on the Penhalonga and Nyaronga communities, the study illustrates how they used the border as an asset through smuggling and border-jumping activities. The choice of the border was because, by its nature, it is Zimbabwe’s longest border, remains open, and is largely uncontrolled especially in areas where communities live astride the border. The scope of the study was placed within the post-independence context because this period witnessed alarming levels in smuggling activities across the border, especially during the later part of the 1990s when Zimbabwe’s economy experienced serious decline. The period in question exhibits more intensely certain themes, such as cross-border trade and smuggling, which resulted in increased border controls by the state. Due to logistical constraints of studying smuggling activities, the research concentrated more on Penhalonga than Nyaronga.

The primary objectives of this study were motivated by two related considerations, namely: (i) the need to contribute to scholarship on trans-boundary studies, particularly to the knowledge on cross-border interaction and smuggling; and (ii) the
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hope that the findings in this study will go a long way in reshaping the perceptions that are held against borderland communities. By concentrating on the Penhalonga and Nyaronga communities the study seeks to:

(a) Apply borderland theories to the history of the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border
(b) Illustrate how the people of Penhalonga and Nyaronga have used the border as an asset by smuggling and border-jumping activities.

The study’s findings demonstrated how the boundary communities of Penhalonga and Nyaronga used the border as an asset for their survival. It argues that their smuggling activities were a response to state mechanisms that restricted easier movements of their commodities, particularly the aggravation by border patrol officers. The economic hardships that prevailed on the Zimbabwean side of the border pushed most traders into jumping the border so as to find alternative sources of income. These people were inspired by their perceptions about greener pastures on the other side of the border. They were also people who had realized the entrepreneurial potential of Penhalonga, and had taken that opportunity to maximize on it. An effort was made to show the organization of smuggling activities by the border-jumpers; and the role played by different actors in smuggling such as the majorijo (head porters) of Muzuri village on the Zimbabwean side.

Techniques Employed in the Study

The present study grew from the findings of a feasibility study that was first carried out in 2005 in the area under study. It is phenomenological or qualitative in nature, and applies an exploratory case study of the Penhalonga communities astride the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border as the main research methodology. A documentary analysis of primary material at the National Archives of Zimbabwe enabled me to gather background information of the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border, especially on issues pertaining to its demarcation. Newspapers provided useful information on the activities occurring at some of the crossing points that I did not manage to study. They also furnished the study with information on the state’s response to the uncontrolled levels of smuggling at the border. Oral interviews and oral histories with the people of Nyaronga and Penhalonga were collected so as to ensure that these interviewees would be given as much voice as possible (see also Mazarire, 2002). For respondents who seemed to shy away from associating themselves with clandestine activities, especially female interviewees, asking them about their life in general made them confident to speak on almost all the issues. The question which informants felt comfortable with was on how they coped with the economic hardships they were experiencing. The responses in most cases pointed out their involvement in smuggling. In addition to oral history, I also observed activities such as smuggling in action as they were being carried out by traders.

The methods used in the study were drawn from other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and history. Anthropological methods are argued to be among the most credible approaches to studies on smuggling and other clandestine activities. Harvey (2006) argues that anthropological accounts are by far the most numerous and widespread studies of smuggling; and in many ways the most modern in that, working with notions of the margins of the state, they push the discipline itself
into areas that it has not traditionally ventured. The basic argument is that anthropology often works with economic material and archives; and this is particularly suited to smuggling which, for some individuals, often means operating alternately or even simultaneously within state economies, and in 'extra-official' spaces (ibid, p.3, 4). More importantly, anthropological methods and related social science methods are particularly useful for investigating activities that may be clandestine because of their reliance on establishing trust and rapport with the communities under study (Ellis & MacGaffey, 1996; Niger-Thomas, 2001; Lubkeman, 2000; Kloppers, 2005; Flynn, 1997; Icduygu & Toktas, 2002). Some historians have also applied the same methods; and as will be illustrated later, this study adopted the same approaches.

The research was phenomenological or qualitative in nature, and the main research methodology applied was an exploratory case study of the Penhalonga communities astride the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border. Fieldwork was carried out to enable effective data collection for the research. Some of the techniques that were pursued were documentary analysis, oral history, and participant observation. The first few days of fieldwork were not very interesting because I tended to develop cold feet when interviewing people over the issues of smuggling that were obtaining in the borderland. Sometimes I did not lead the discussion, and the interview lost its course as respondents would go on talking about issues that were irrelevant to the interview.

(i) Documentary Analysis
A documentary analysis of primary material at the National Archives of Zimbabwe enabled me to gather background information of the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border, especially issues pertaining to its historical development. Whilst the reaction by Africans to the demarcation of the border is not vividly captured in archival documents and official reports, we learn from the official records that Africans had their own feelings towards the redrawing of boundaries (Moore, 1995). There was, however, a problem in locating sources on what transpired during the colonial period. There were more of labour issues than informal trading activities amongst Africans living across the border. Therefore it was not possible to dwell much on the colonial period.

Different Zimbabwean newspapers (such as The Herald, the Sunday Mirror, The Sunday Mail, and the provincial paper, The Manica Post) provided useful information on the activities occurring at some of the crossing points that I did not manage to study. This source also furnished the study with information on the perceptions of state officials; and the state's response to the uncontrolled levels of smuggling on the border. These newspapers frequently reported and commented on smuggling. Some of the interesting headlines read: "Donkeys used as cross-border transport"; "Smugglers bleeding Zimbabwe dry"; "Smugglers starve nation"; "Curb Smuggling - Promote Trade"; etc. An optimistic one read: "Net closes in on grain smugglers"; but it turned out that nothing solid happened except for a state official assuring that stern measures were being put in place to stop smuggling, and seven days later a sister paper reported "Smuggling cases still on the rise", attributing this to the meager fines on smugglers. One newspaper, The Herald (June 2004), pointed the issue of state protectionism, as one of the factors that had fuelled smuggling to unprecedented levels:
Zimbabwean price controls imposed on basic foods, such as cooking oil, salt, etc., have made it cheaper to buy these products there, and have provided an incentive for traders to smuggle goods across the border, which the Zimbabwean authorities say is fuelling local shortages while avoiding customs controls. The scale of the smuggling has reportedly led to the sales of more expensive Mozambican-produced sugar dropping significantly.

According to the paper, smuggling was thus a reaction by the communities astride the border to the harsh economic environment that prevailed in Zimbabwe.

It seemed there have never been quantitative data pertaining to the impact of smuggling as the newspapers continued to talk about billions worth of revenue being lost through smuggling. However, considering that most of the newspapers were government-owned, they mostly carried the perceptions of the state on the clandestine activities; and sometimes went further to recommend what the government should do to stop them. To compensate for these loopholes, back-checking of the information was verified by other data collection techniques.

(ii) Oral History and Interviews

Oral histories with the people of Nyaronga and Penhalonga were collected so as to ensure that these interviewees would be given as much voice as possible. Oral history comprises an account of the lived experiences of people. These differ from oral traditions which are mostly histories passed among succeeding generations of a given people. An oral historical account has its own advantages. One important aspect was realized by Lubkeman (2000) who used oral history or life-history approach in his study of migration trends on the Mozambique-Zimbabwe border. Lubkeman states that the methodology proved to be another way of going round to find an answer from reluctant informants. Since people did not want to talk about the civil war in Mozambique, Lubkeman interviewed the people about their life history, and in the process they eventually spoke about their experiences in the war. I benefited in the same way by taking that approach when speaking to respondents who seemed to shy away from associating themselves with clandestine activities. Asking them about their life in general made them confident to speak on almost all the issues of the enquiry. The question which informants felt comfortable with was on how they coped with the economic hardships they were experiencing.

From an oral interview carried out with a widow who identified herself as Amai Millicent, it was demonstrated that the smuggling course was a well-planned enterprise:

We usually gather in groups of five people. We usually need at least two men for protection in case something goes wrong they can protect us. At around 2 am the police and soldiers will be asleep as they will be tired of patrolling the border half the night. The usual route passes though Muzuri village via a mission called Elim then up the Nyaronga Mountain. The first area we come across on the other side is Monarch Mine, then Nyaronga plantations until we reach the township. There we get lifts to Villa de Manica where we sell our wares and return with commodities such as soap and clothes. We make sure that we return before 4 am when the police and soldiers are awake again (Amai Millicent, 2005).
Probably because informants were not at liberty to explain all their cross-border experiences, it could not be substantiated whether border guards requested for sexual favours as a way of settling the crimes of smugglers.

(iii) Participant Observation

In addition to oral history and oral interviews, I used participant observation method to see illegal activities such as border-jumping in action as they were being carried out by traders. The key factor in such a method is that one must operate on two levels: becoming an insider, while remaining an outsider. Generally, it takes time to carry out participant-observation, but this was made possible in a short time through a friend who resided in Penhalonga, the area under study. There is one incident in which I attempted the method on my way from Johannesburg, at the Beitbridge border with South Africa. The Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) stipulates that everyone crossing a border into Zimbabwe should fill in a declaration form for the goods they have purchased outside the country. The list of goods on the declaration form is then evaluated by customs officers who cross-check the prices marked with the goods at hand. If the total exceeds the maximum duty-free allowance, then the person is expected to pay duty for the excess goods, depending on the percentage rates for the category of goods. Usually duty free on consumer goods is R1500, or US$200. This is the standard requirement for duty charges at Zimbabwe’s borders including the airport. To ensure that people do not smuggle goods into the country, ZIMRA officers resort to bag searches, and sometimes body searches. The officers search a whole bus with as many as seventy-five passengers. Everyone is told to get off the bus and stand beside their luggage. They search the bus or any luggage that will have been left in the bus, and then search each passenger one by one. At the same time they will be verifying the declaration form and the goods. At first sight this sounds to be a very effective system because of the thoroughness with which the officers conduct their searches.

However, the officers know—and so do some other passengers—that smuggled items or undeclared goods are negotiated entry by the bus crew: both the conductor and the driver. The bus crew communicates in advance with the officers about the goods, no matter how big, that will pass ‘untouched’ by making a settlement with the officers. So the ZIMRA officer will go about with his business pretending to be thorough and descending heavily upon those who do not play the ‘game’. Besides the bus crew, there are also young men—known as jega—who loiter around the searching point looking for people to assist to smuggle goods across the border. To understand how these people operate, I recruited the service of one of them. The jega was tasked to find a way of making a bag disappear when the officers were searching people’s bags, and then make it re-appear when the bus search has been completed. The officer ordered everyone to take out all their bags from the luggage pit onto the side of the bus, and stand beside their baggage. With a speed of lightning, the jega managed to take the bag, and hid it in one of the shops by the immigration building. After all the searching was complete and bag was returned, and he simply stated that the mission had been accomplished. However, his charge was exorbitant because he insisted to be paid in South African Rands and not Zimbabwean dollars. In the process of
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negotiating with him to reduce from R200 to R100, he was summoned by a police officer who patrols the exit point; and they spent some few minutes together. When he came back he said the officer had seen him running off with a bag and returning it onto the bus, and so he wanted a cut or else he was going to stop the bus at the border and look for the owner of the bag when the bus was about to cross into Beitbridge. So he got away with R200. After calculating the charges for this service, it was clear the jega had ripped off quite a lot. Amongst other items in the box was a small desktop printer worth R300; and if I was to pay duty, the charge would have been 5% of R300, i.e., R60! The young men who loiter around the post as jegas are networked with customs officers and policemen. They either work for them or have a partnership of some sort. Customs officers have a tendency of frustrating travellers who have goods to declare by sometimes denying the authenticity of receipts for goods, thus forcing them to resort to the services of the greedy jegas.

On one occasion I hired a tour guide, who later on provided a detailed interview on smuggling when he had gained confidence in me. One day I asked him to help me to cross the border during mid-day. After walking half an hour under the scorching sun, the tour guide suddenly stopped and said he would not go any further than the crossing point into Mozambique. The rest of the area before us was Mozambican territory which was manned by border guards; so he insisted he would not encroach into the area that lay beyond no man's land. He narrated his nasty experience with them two weeks before. The guards had been changed and not knowing this, his guide tried to cross in broad daylight thinking that his friends were still guarding the border post. The new guards held him and confiscated his money, as well as the goods he had with him. Amongst these goods were shoes and candles that he had bought from Manica. He was spared of the usual beatings but lost everything he had to buy his 'freedom'. He insisted that the mission to cross the border into Mozambique would have to be done in the evening. It became clear that smuggling in the afternoon was risky and costly too if one was to be caught by the guards who, worse still, could shoot anyone and get away with it. So smuggling and border jumping into Mozambique needed a strategy—doing it at night (Pophiwa, 2007).

In some instances I had to quickly find somewhere to sit and scribble in my notebook all the information that I was told by an informant before I forgot it. Once, after talking to a border guard, I took some time—about five minutes—trying to recap and write on paper everything that he had told me because I did not want him to realize that I was interviewing him. Through observation I was able to understand the way certain issues operate. Gaidzanwa (1998), points out that observation of actual traders in action could be more illuminating and a better basis for generating explanations and solutions for issues that perplex governments and academics where cross-border trade is concerned.

Concluding Remarks

Conducting research in African borderlands, especially coming from a background in Economic History, I find it a personal methodological invention. The borderland as a research field site exhibits its own peculiar characteristics; and a researcher has to be
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adaptive to any such conditions. Take, for instance, the risks involved in trying to negotiate for information with border guards who are on the look-out for border jumpers, and anyone they catch befits that description. There is also the issue of suspicion among villagers or smugglers who, even after getting to know you as an innocent researcher, still feel they are exposing themselves by revealing their illegal activities. To some, it just cannot make sense for someone to only have academic interest in finding out that kind of information. So, finding people who are more than willing to give out useful and relevant information is not an easy walk in the park.

Added to this also, is the patience that is needed when interviewing elderly people who sometimes stray from the questions being asked and go on and on about some other issues not relevant to the subject being discussed. That is usually a problem for tape recorders because some of that information will just be occupying limited and valuable space on the cassette.

From the foregoing, one can argue that although efforts are being made to teach methodology in graduate schools, there is need to continuously develop and expand on the materials being taught because there are still so many other ways of collecting critical data that would be more enlightening than the traditional methods. Where research deals with communities, participatory methods are the most appropriate. Some researchers have begun to realize that the communities they study have more information than official documents or opinions of them. After spending years in the archives going through official documents, one can wake up to realize the depth in the knowledge that people have about themselves, their culture and life experiences, which sometimes go beyond the time of their birth. Therefore, it is imperative that traditional methods of research are constantly manipulated to derive new ways of probing questions.

Probably another important pointer is on the aspect of applying and devising appropriate theory that forms a salient basis for research. When researchers are equipped with theory on a given subject, they are empowered to know exactly what type of information they would require, and with techniques they have the know-how on the ways to dig out the treasure. I remember going into the field theoretically assuming that the border would be so porous that I would cross it at any time of the day, only to find that the border patrol officers would be ready to stop such activities if they were to come into contact with any border jumpers. Thus I had to revise my understanding of porosity to a different condition, with a different set of rules. You just could not cross the border, but had to find ways of avoiding contact with the actual border itself—in this case the border patrols—or you had to settle an agreement with them. So it becomes possible to prove wrong or correct existing theories and conceptualizations of borderlands and other related aspects. It should be stressed that speaking to the people (walking libraries) is one of the best ways of finding out about them. I will always remember a man in his late 50s whom after the interview thanked me for刷新ing his memory on the good old days of his boyhood in the borderland.
References


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