

# BORDERS & FRONTIERS

## Africa and Europe by Comparison

Africans have rarely enjoyed the freedom of travel that has become so self-evident for most Europeans. Not only is Europe a fortress for them, but inner African borders may also turn into barriers with unforeseeable risks and uncertainties. Now, for the first time since World War II, Europeans experience similar troubles when moving from one country to another. The guided field-course 2020/21 looks at what borders and frontiers mean for the people on both sides of the Mediterranean. It compares and analyses border regimes and their everyday experience across different African and European countries.

Borders and frontiers are a fascinating subject to study. Borders draw lines between national territories while making the countries neighbours who agree on that border and its regime. They bring people together and keep them apart; may erect walls between neighbours but may also build bridges over troubled waters. Border controls or their absence are based on agreements between states or other political entities, creating everyday realities that affect the lives of people much more heavily than most other administrative measures. Building a wall as once in Berlin or today along the Mexican border in the USA has a divisive impact on the entire population – not only on those who live on either side of the wall. Yonder stands an enemy or a friend, depending on how their status is defined by those who hold power.

However, border people have always tried to work around discriminatory rules and regulations that others wanted to impose on them. Borders thus unite and divide. Custom officers and smugglers are a telling example of how border regimes produce legal difference together with professional cohesion. Bootleggers, smugglers as well as custom officers and police owe their jobs to the very same border and how it cuts through



At the Ivoirian border: Selling refreshments to travellers who walk from the last checkpoint to their busses waiting further down the road.

natural, social and cultural continuities. They are all tied to each other, need one another, and they know each other fairly well. Their lives are deeply entangled. Over the years, they acquire sophisticated bargaining skills that would not exist if they were not interacting so regularly. That is their art of dealing with each other, forging alliances and making the other believe that they are privileged partners. ›Live and let live‹ is a dictum that both custom officers and smugglers would easily recognise as theirs.

There are many such practices – practices that linger between the legal and the illegal, truth and lie, between scoop and failure, hope and despair, dream and reality, fact and fancy. Within this wide field of diverging experiences, this course suggests five themes that may serve as guidelines to students when they search for their own projects:

- The infrastructure of border regimes: How is a border and its facilities constructed as a built environment?
- The governance of borders and what it means for border crossers: How is the work of policemen and custom of-

ficers organised and how is it experienced by travellers, drivers, traders and protractors?

- The advantages of working at, with and across borders: What activities do the people engage in to profit from borders and the differences that they create?
- Waiting and longing for one another: As borders create physical and social distance, they also produce feelings of loneliness and eventually the joys of meeting again.
- The memory of border regimes: How does the experience of border regimes sediment in individual and collective memories of the actors?

The students are invited to form small teams that work on case studies in Africa and Europe in a comparative perspective. The African case studies should be situated in West Africa, in particular in and around Burkina Faso and its neighbours Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo and Mali. The European cases should come from Central Europe with Switzerland and its neighbours. The course is composed of three parts. The fall term 2020 introduces to anthropological methods and theories relevant for your theme. Field work will be conducted in January and February 2021. During the spring term 2021, you will analyse your findings and write a report of about 8 000 words.

Interested? Write an email to [ethnologie@unibas.ch](mailto:ethnologie@unibas.ch). You'll be invited to an online-meeting on Thursday, May 28, at 12 AM.

Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin, August 1961



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Africa and Europe by Comparison

September 2020 - May 2021

The new fieldcourse of the Chair of Anthropology addresses a topical theme: border regimes in Africa and Europe and how they are experienced and remembered. It starts in September 2020, includes fieldwork in Africa or Europe in January and February 2021, and ends in May 2021. The students will be guided by Michelle Engeler and Till Förster.



## Remembering and living European borders.

For decades, Europe was divided by an iron curtain. Crossing that border meant to risk one's life. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was much more than an event of European history. It meant liberation and freedom to travel. Due to the Schengen Treaty, border controls were gradually abolished, and today, most Europeans are used to open borders.

That has changed dramatically. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the borders between Switzerland, Germany and other neighbouring countries were closed in early April 2020 – also the so-called green border, for instance in the Lange Erlen (see above). The many joggers and cyclists who regularly visit the forest easily found new paths. However, cross-border relationships are deeply affected by the new border regime, and families temporarily have to live apart. Most of them have to wait patiently for the re-opening of the borders – just like shopping tourists while stationed border soldiers admit that they are enjoying the lovely spring-time rather than sanctioning anybody.

above: Swiss-German border in April 2020  
right: Guinean-Malian border in February 2012

## Being stuck at an African border.

“...you need papers. White man's magic. But you don't know which papers you will need. When they tell you that you're fine, you're lucky. You don't know whether that will be the same next time you'll get to the border. There may ask for other papers – papers, you never heard of.

They want to see your ID card, and you have it. But then, they look at it and tell you that it is not good. And you don't know why. “There is this white rectangle. It's empty, but there should be something in it.” It always was [empty], but that doesn't matter. Or they tell you that the characters in the brackets behind the number of the card aren't right.

And then, the vaccination certificate. Yellow fever is enough, you were told. But at the border, they are suddenly asking for other vaccinations. Meningitis, Cholera, ... don't know what. In the end, you'll pay. You'll always pay. You're always losing against these guys. They won't let you go if you don't pay their 'tariffs'. That's how they call it. But it goes into their pockets.”

