

To cite this article: Gogonya Logo Martin and Professor Yosa Wawa (2026). THE EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY: PEOPLE WHO STRADDLE THE SOUTH SUDAN AND UGANDA BORDER, International Journal of Education and Social Science Research (IJESSR) 9 (1): 193-201 Article No. 1193, Sub Id 1813

THE EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY: PEOPLE WHO STRADDLE THE SOUTH SUDAN AND UGANDA BORDER

Gogonya Logo Martin and Professor Yosa Wawa

UNIVERSITY of JUBA

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.37500/IJESSR.2026.9114>

ABSTRACT

This paper is about the East African Community and the free movement and settlement of its peoples. It pays close attention to chapter 17 of the EAC articles of association which deals with the free movement of people, labor, services and right of establishment of residence. The historical research method was used in the investigation as the paper dealt with the communities that straddle the South Sudan and Uganda border. The paper confirms the arbitrariness of African countries and boundaries created following the Berlin conference of 1884-1885. The above-mentioned articles of association is tailored to cater for the elites of the East African Community member states, in this case for those of South Sudan and Uganda, and neglecting the needs of the ethnic groups that straddle the border and those who lived along these border lines long before these colonial states were created. The paper recommends that the amendments to the articles of association of the East African community to cater the interests of the border land communities through recognition of clan boundaries, and granting of dual citizenship for the communities who straddle the borders. This latter option makes border land communities become bridges rather than barriers in East Africa.

KEYWORDS: East African Community (EAC), South Sudan–Uganda Border Communities, Free Movement of Persons, Colonial Boundaries (Berlin Conference), Dual Citizenship and Cross-Border Ethnic Groups

INTRODUCTION

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 was a meeting of European colonialists for the purpose of partitioning the African continent which led to the creation of the current African States (Mhango, 2024). This partition of the African continent was done with no regard to the African traditional boundaries along which Africans lived. This arbitrary drawing of boundaries disrupted traditional African ways of life (Adekeye, 2010). The Organization of African Unity (O.A.U) decided that to ensure peaceful coexistence amongst the newly independent African states, the borders inherited at independence should be maintained (OAU Summit, Cairo, Egypt, 1964).

Perhaps to address the problem of artificial boundaries, regional blocs have been created in Africa to serve as bridges for reconnecting communities divided by the partition. Some of these regional groups

include the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Southern African Development Cooperation (SADC), and the East African Community (EAC). They mainly aim at creating peaceful co-existence, economic development, and a sense of common citizenship or political integration (Helmut, 2022). Although elitist in nature, these regional blocs allow free movement of peoples.

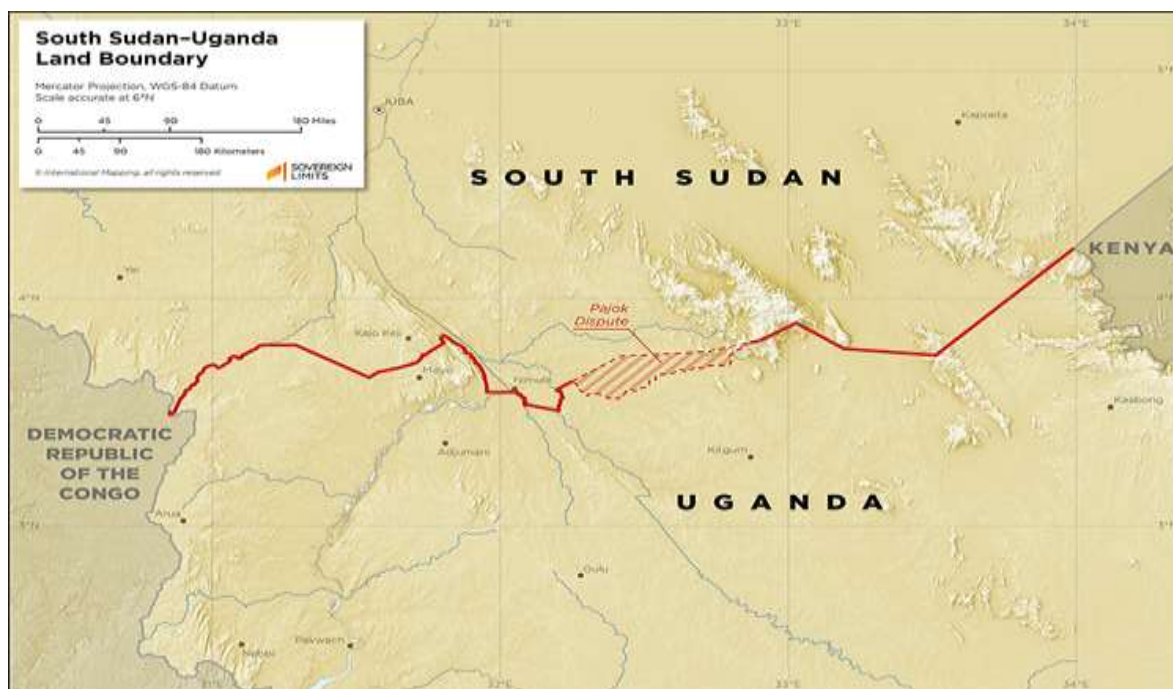
The East African Community (EAC) comprises of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. Its history dates back to 1967 with a predecessor organization. The current EAC Treaty was signed in 1999 and came into effect in 2000 (Drummond, 2015). The main objective of the Community is to foster regional economic and political integration (Amuhaya, 2022). Chapter 17 of its articles of association mandates the free movement of persons. Restrictions are permissible only on grounds of public policy, public security, or public health. The Protocol also promotes harmonization of labor policies, mutual recognition of professional qualifications, and the establishment of common standard travel documents. Chapter 17 does not take the interest of ethnic groups or clans that have lived along the border lines of the East African Community since time immemorial. This chapter does not take the interest of ethnic groups or clans that have occupied border areas since time immemorial.

This paper critiques chapter 17 of the EAC of being elitist in nature as it perpetuates the European creation of modern states in Africa and suggests its visitation from the point of view of people who straddle the border areas.

METHODOLOGY

Historical research method was used in this paper. It involves systematically examining past events to develop interpretations and insights, relying on both primary and secondary research methods ((Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003). The historical research method involves systematically gathering and analyzing information from the past using primary and secondary sources to understand and interpret historical events. This method involves evaluating sources like documents and letters, then synthesizing the evidence to construct a narrative or interpretation. The goal is to provide context for the present and potentially make predictions about the future (Kothari, 2010).

Historical books, journals and articles from renowned academics who have written extensively on the border communities like Yosa Wawa and Cherry Leonardi were reviewed. This is to enable capturing of coding themes, experience, events or content. The oral historical method was also used in the form of Key Informant Interviews (KII). The snowball method was used to identify and interview key informants. The interviews were carried out through open –ended questionnaire. The key informants, namely Wani Bulla, Sultan Milton Sikiri and Erasto Roba are clan leaders of communities that are found in both South Sudan and Uganda.



The Border people

“Border peoples” refers to communities and individuals who live in borderlands, developing distinct social and cultural identities shaped by their proximity to political boundaries and the movement of people, goods, and ideas across them (Breitung, 2009). These people experience both the difficulties and opportunities presented by borders, leading to complex, often hybrid identities that can be stronger than national allegiances, and they often engage in cross-border economic, social, and cultural activities.

The Acholi, Kakwa, Madi, and Lugbara peoples are found along the South Sudan- Uganda border. These groups share cultural and linguistic traditions across the national border, with their populations dispersed on both sides of the line, particularly along the western White Nile River in the case of the Kakwa (Leonardi, 2016). The Acholi is a Luo-speaking Nilotic ethnic group who migrated from South Sudan centuries ago into what is now northern Uganda. Some have however remained in South Sudan. The Madi are a central Sudanic-speaking people whose territory runs from the Nimule border area in South Sudan across to the districts of Adjumani and Moyo in Uganda. The Lugbara have a presence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan, in addition to Uganda (Maxwell, 2012).

Livelihoods and boundary or border demarcations

A boundary is a line agreed upon by two states and normally delineated on maps and demarcated on both states while a border is a zone between two states, nations or civilizations (Menon, 2016). The boundary defines the confines of a state, distinguishing its sovereign territory from those of others (Al Chukumwa et al, 2019). Livelihoods on the other hand refers to the capabilities, activities, and assets,

both material and social resources that people use to make a living, secure their necessities, and maintain a dignified existence (Chambers, 1991). This includes income-generating work, but also broader aspects like social networks, skills, knowledge, and available resources, which together form a sustainable way of life.

There are a number of ethnic groups that are found in both South Sudan and Uganda. These include the Acholi, Jie, Kakwa, Kuku, Lugbara and Madi. These are the ordinary people who straddle the border areas and have existed before the formation of the modern African states, South Sudan and Uganda. Their lives are not often affected by changes in Juba or Kampala (Wawa, 2008).

A boundary or border has got a deep economic significance in the African traditional society. In African societies, people often live together as a social community with the blood relationship as the bond in order to satisfy their needs of subsistence (Ning, July, 2012 p.122). Economically, farms on which communities cultivated, land on which they grazed their animals all had boundaries or borders. A number of these traditional boundaries or borders cut across the current international borders. With the emergence of the modern state, these cultural boundaries and borders have been largely ignored which has infringed on the lives of the communities concerned.

Small-scale cross-border trade (SSCBT) between South Sudan and Uganda is a vibrant, yet complex, economic activity, particularly in border communities. While it offers livelihood opportunities and facilitates the exchange of goods, it also faces challenges related to security, informality, and non-tariff barriers (Leonardi, 2016). Those who practice this cross-border trade don't do this through the gazette border crossings, but they have been doing this in complete disregard of the international border, which legally is illegal.

With the emergence of the modern state, the original African traditional boundaries and borders were largely ignored and new boundaries or borders were established by the colonialists. These modern boundaries and borders largely disregarded the way of life of the inhabitants of these border communities with a number of them being split between two (2) or more countries (Paine, 2025).

Informal integration between all the ethnic communities living along the border has taken place over many years. As such these communities straddle the border whenever it suits them. As for the Kakwa communities who live on either side of this international border in Koboko in Uganda and Kaya in South Sudan. It is worth noting that some Kakwa in Uganda have their farms in South -Sudan while those in South Sudan could be having their farms in Uganda. As such, straddling the border becomes more of necessity (Ghazi, 2012).

African borderlands such as those between South Sudan, Uganda and Congo are often presented by analysts as places of agency and economic opportunity, in contrast to hardened, securitized borders elsewhere. We emphasize, however, that even such relatively porous international borders can nevertheless be the focus of significant unease for borderland communities. Crossing borders can enable safety for those fleeing conflict or trading prospects for business people, but it can also engender

anxieties around the unchecked spread of insecurity, disease and economic exploitation (Comaroff.1999).

Spiritual concept of a boundary or border

A border or boundary should not be seen in terms of a line drawn on the ground. Spiritually, there are also boundaries whether one looks at Islam or Christianity. According to Amanze, (13, March, 2024, p 542), in Africa, societies have intimate connection with animals, plants or natural elements with the ancestral roots of the clan or tribe through which they trace their roots or history. In African spirituality emphasis is placed on communal solidarity and the environment (Amanze, 2024).

The Acholi clans of Babi, Palabek and Lamogi are found in both South Sudan and Uganda. These clans in South Sudan have relations with those in Uganda and as a result crisscross the border to attend cultural functions in South Sudan and Uganda which in most cases is more of an obligation than a right.

When rural refugees are settled at their places of initial entry and settlement, often among their “relatives” they easily become self-reliant. This accounts for the fact that 75% of African refugees are spontaneously settled along common borders. As rural people, their continued stay is due to availability of adequate agricultural land and social support. This is because the clan is central in enabling individuals reach their goals and aspirations in the commonwealth of people of one clan. Agulanna (2010) describes a clan as having in mind a society whose members (1) are in personal contact, (2) are concerned for one another’s welfare, (3) are committed to common purposes and procedures, (4) share responsibility for joint actions, and (5) value membership in the community as an end worth pursuing. Generally, then, a community life helps to create a sense of amity and security among the members of society. It also helps in fostering respect for each member of society as well.

In an interview with Wani Bula (Juba, 14th October, 2023) he told the researcher of a story when his father, Mulukwat lo Kunyoro was supposed to be moved from his ancestral land of the Kunyoro in Kajokeji, Liwolo payam to Kalla in present day Lainya county as part of an attempt to control the spread of sleeping sickness, he refused arguing that when he leaves, who will take care of the ancestral land and spirits and how will they share gifts with their brothers and sisters who are on the Ugandan side of the border. Although he was imprisoned for that, he did not yield. His other people were eventually moved.

Understanding this ambiguous construction of borders in the minds of their inhabitants requires us, we argue, to look beyond statist or globalizing discourses and to appreciate the moral economies of borderlands, and how they have been discursively and epistemologically negotiated over time. Narratives around witchcraft and the occult represent, we argue, a novel and revealing lens through which to do so and our study draws on years of fieldwork and archival research to underline how cartographies of witchcraft in this region are, and have long been, entangled with the construction of state political geographies, internal as well as international.

Yet amidst the latest mass refugee influx into Uganda, there is considerable unease about migration, and a longer history of local-level concern over the effects of cross-border movement on economy, society and moral community. In this study, we therefore ask why – and how – even some of the more recently established international and internal boundaries have gained meanings for their inhabitants that seem to evoke global tendencies towards the pathologization of migration and securitization of borders (Wawa, 2008).

Such unease was expressed by some of our respondents (particularly government personnel) in the familiar refrains of global state security discourse: porous borders and migration blamed for crime, insecurity and resource competition. But we caution against the appearance of universality conveyed by such discourse, and indeed by the apparent commonalities of hardening borders and anti-immigrant politics around the world. Global patterns are always locally inflected and mediated, and the territorial state is itself historically and geographically contingent ([Agnew, 1994](#)). As borderlands scholarship has emphasized, boundaries only become real on the ground through the work of borderland inhabitants and border-crossers in imagining, negotiating and exploiting them ([Feyissa & Hoehne, 2010](#); [Johnson et al., 2011](#); [Nugent, 2002](#)). Understanding these processes of border-making, we argue, requires exploring local imaginaries and epistemologies of space that exist in dialogue with universal statist discourses but reveal the more personal, quotidian and intimate ways in which political and economic geographies are experienced and morally interpreted.

It is also worth noting that moral negotiations of borders primarily in the form of discourse and action relating to phenomena which are commonly described in English as ‘witchcraft’ or ‘poison (ing)’ (Ndjio, 2008). This is unsurprising in light of the extensive anthropological work on African witchcraft as a dynamic, mobile range of ideas, which are often expressive of the hidden ways in which wealth and power accumulate and circulate across borders in a globalized economy ([Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999](#)).

Yet as Amber [Murrey \(2015\)](#) points out, political geography has been slower to embrace such epistemologies as ways of negotiating spatial orderings of power and exploitation. The recent scholarship on African witchcraft, meanwhile, rarely considers how occult geographies relate specifically to political boundaries.

In doing so, we are conscious of the dangers of seeming to reinforce the exoticization and stereotyping of African epistemologies. Why focus on witchcraft when Ugandans and South Sudanese also spoke about political boundaries in universally-recognizable idioms of state security and immigration threats? Our answer is that there are also dangers in paying attention only to the globalized languages of state territoriality and border security. In particular, such discourses can obscure the ambiguities of borders for their inhabitants, who have to navigate their multiple risks and opportunities. For those who accept its existence, witchcraft is an inherently ambiguous set of phenomena: a means of both acquiring and attacking power and wealth ([Geschiere, 1997](#)). It is thus a particularly revealing lens for highlighting the often-contradictory effects of cross-border movement and a powerful explanation of

the resulting inequalities. Crucially, witchcraft imaginaries are concerned not only with the security threats of cross-border movement, but also with its unequal economic effects: the sense that some people have become unnaturally wealthy to the exclusion, or through the exploitation, of the borderland populations.

The Clan as a political entity in Africa

Clan histories often connect settlement with clan formation. They are often tales that relate to some remarkable even from common history of the people although told in color that are well known in specific society (Farelius, 2012). It shows a person's history of migration and settlement. As time grew, the original person became a mythical figure or patriarch. This means after death he became even more powerful than when he was living. In Kakwa, naming ceremonies for instance, children are dedicated to mountain Liru, where the spirit of Jaki is assumed to stay watching over Kakwa land.

The idea of a founding father is a common practice. After the father figure of the whole ethnic group, other spiritual figures include the founder of the clan. A clan is composed of several families all of which had their origin traced to a common mythical ancestor. This is the basis of political units in traditional African settings (Mugambi and Kirima, 1976). Thus, the clan gives rise to a network of relations connecting one person to many others by kinship and marriage (Radcliffe and Forde, 1950). This is why it is possible to find refugees settle spontaneously in certain areas. When the Bura in Koboko were forced into refuge between 1979 and 1986, Gabriel Gboro, the King of Bura simply crossed into the Democratic Republic of Congo with his traditional regalia and continued with his office (Gboro, March 15, 2002). He and the rest of the Bura in Uganda did not need somebody to apportion to them land.

In 2014, Ugandan local government officials took national census enumerators to villages they claimed were inside Uganda's Moyo District, in the north-west of the country. There they were arrested by South Sudanese authorities, who insisted that this territory belonged to South Sudan's Kajokeji County. They were soon released, but the incident sparked off days of cross-border violence along ethnic lines: the international border here remains defined by a 1914 British colonial order, which sought to make it a 'tribal' boundary between the Kuku of Kajokeji and the Ma'di of Moyo. Yet this conflict a century later was in many ways surprising and unprecedented. Despite recurrent armed rebellions spilling across the border, the Kuku and Ma'di themselves had a long history of peaceful relations, intermarriage, trade and common farming livelihoods in the green hills above the west bank of the Nile. Never formally demarcated, this international border has been described as the epitome of an 'artificial' colonial boundary, resisted or ignored by local communities with enduring cross-border solidarities. 'We are the same people, same blood', representatives of the closely allied national governments had declared in 2011, seeking to defuse the rising local tensions over the border. So why had this boundary become such a focus of tension and conflict on the ground, and why was it the local rather than central government administrations on either side that were leading the competing assertions of state territorial limits (Leonardi, 2020)

“In 2001, Barry Sesnan told me a story of a confusion of a Kuku youth who was in 1980s working for him as a houseboy. Barry was at that period working in Juba, Southern Sudan. After returning from his annual leave from Kajokeji, he asked his houseboy among other things, how Uganda was. In reply, the houseboy told him that he had never been to Uganda since birth.” Barry could not believe it but decided not to pursue the discussion. After many months passed, Barry and the houseboy visited Kajokeji together. While in Kajokeji, one day they both climbed on top of one of many rocks outgrowths and could see Moyo town many several miles inside Uganda. Barry then asked the houseboy for the name of the town. He promptly named it correctly. Then Barry asked whether he had been to Moyo. “Almost daily when in Kajokeji alone” he informed Barry. Then Barry asked how come he once said he had never been to Uganda. As part of confusion he replied by asking Barry “is that what you mean by Uganda?” True, for the Kuku, besides marrying fellow Kuku, many find their wives and husbands from the Madi of Uganda. After all they have the same dances and sometimes some songs. How can people you marry from and dance with become foreigners? Kuku and Madi integrated many years back. The Kuku do not consider Moyo as being in Uganda or Madi as foreigners although they come from different language groups (Wawa, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The ordinary people who straddle the border areas have existed before the formation of these modern states, South Sudan and Uganda. Their lives are often not affected by changes in Juba or Kampala. Since regional integration is about loosening the strength of international borders while bringing people together, granting dual citizenship to the communities that straddle the border between South Sudan and Uganda could be a solution to the predicament they face today.

REFERENCES

Books and Journal articles

- Adekeye. A. (2010). *The Curse of Berlin: Africa after the Cold War*. London. Hurst publishers,
- Amanze. S. (2024). *Banished*. Indiana. Author House publishers,
- Amuhaya. C. (2022). *A century of East African Integration*. London. Palgrave Macmillan,
- Comaroff. J. (1999). *Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African post colony*. North Carolina. Duke university press,
- Drummond. P. (2015). *The Quest for Regional Integration in the East African Community*. Washington DC. IMF,
- Farelius. B. (2012). *Origins of Kinship Traditions and Symbolism in the Great Lakes*. Kampala. Fountain publishers,
- Geschiere. P. (1997). *The Modernity of Witchcraft*. Virginia. Virginia University press,
- Helmut. A. (2022). *Regional Integration, Trade and Industry in Africa*. London. Springer publishers,

Leonardi. C. (2020). Patchwork States: The Localization of State Territoriality on the South Sudan-Uganda Border, 1914-2014. *Past and Present* (ISSN 0031-2746): vol 1,

Leopold. M. (2009). *100 years of North-West Uganda/South Sudan border*. Journal of Eastern African Studies: Vol 3, No3,

Mhango. N. (2024). How Berlin Conference Clung on Africa. Bamenda. Langaa RPCID,

Mugambi and Kirima. (1976). The African Religious Heritage. Oxford. Oxford University press,

Ndjio, B. (2008). Two examples of African “reinvention” of Global Capitalism. Boston. African studies center,

Radcliffe and Forde. (1950). African Systems and Kinship of Marriage. Oxford. Oxford University press,

Wawa. Y. (2008). Refugee aid and development: a case of Sudanese refugees in West Nile Uganda. Uganda Kampala. Fountain Publishers,

Interviews

Erasto Roba, 4th October, 2025, Ephata Primary school, Gosene residential area, Juba, Central Equatoria State.

Sultan Milton Sokiri, 15th September, University of Juba, Juba, Central Equatoria State.

Wani Bula, 29th September, 2025, Munuki residential area, Juba, Central Equatoria State.