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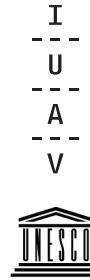
TRANSLOCAL URBANISM IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: PRACTICES, STORIES AND PLACES OF CROSS- BORDER TRADERS BETWEEN JOHANNESBURG AND MAPUTO

Paola Piscitelli



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30135 Venezia- Italy
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Introduction

This article investigates the link between mobility and urban space in the geographical context of Southern Africa. Movement has long been a distinctive feature giving shape to African societies, cities and regions (Simone, 2011). It has been used alternatively as an instrument of control and manipulation in the form of forced migrations and displacements by colonial regimes and of escape and autonomy in the form of rural-urban, interregional and international migrations by local populations, changing shape and characteristics over time.

Going back and forth, "Africans have long travelled widely across the region and the world, moving themselves and goods across many obstacles", as AbdouMaliq Simone writes (Simone, 2011). In so doing, they have elaborated transnational circuits of movement and exchange between different cities that call for a concrete engagement by planning and regional policies in order to productively appraise such movement.

This requires the substantial effort of moving from the assumption of stability about the relationship between populations and place towards a vision of cities as interdependent systems. The 'relational thinking' (Söderström, 2014) of contemporary urbanity I propose here, however, differs from an isotropic world of swirling flows. It considers relations as "historical products, moored in material forms and generating change through power-mediated processes" (Söderström, 2014). It is therefore necessary to view relations in light of their historical development and through the lens of moorings and barriers underlying the constitution of interconnected platforms of urban spaces.

The research the following article is drawn on adopts this perspective in order to interpret underestimated dynamics in the contemporary world, where mobility is more and more a constitutive aspect as well a clue of structural constraints, inequality and exclusion. It focuses on the practises of *mukheristas*, informal cross-border traders commuting between Johannesburg and Maputo. The paper examines informal cross-border traders, their trans-local practices and their role as urban agents. The text first traces the theoretical framework. It then draws on ethnographic field work to provide an account of a common day in the life of a *mukherista*. Finally it considers how the relationship between movement and the urban can be critically explored by researchers.



Paola Piscitelli is PhD Candidate in Urban Planning and Policy Design at the University Iuav of Venice. She has carried out research and fieldwork in Egypt, Morocco, South Africa, Mozambique and Ecuador. She was a Marie Curie Visiting Fellow at the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) of the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), a visiting PhD Candidate at the University of Westminster in London and an intern at the Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies (CUBES) of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Her research interests concern urbanism, informality and mobility practices in contexts characterized by strong structural constraints.

1. Paraphrasing Smith, the terms refer to the kind of phenomenological urban perspective drawn on the concepts of trans-localism I adopted to unveil the stories, networks and places of *mukheristas*.

'Translocal urbanism'¹, a heuristic device to explore the link between mobilities and cities

In the last decades, a debate has emerged in migration studies about the need to consider space and the 'urban' (Leo Collins, 2011). At issue is the need for new examinations of the intersection between migration and life in cities. The call is to go beyond the vision of the city as a bounded container. Instead, the call is for a conceptualization of the relational-territorial configuration of cities in the 'constantly changing geographies of globalization' (ibid.). The relational-territorial approach demands attention to the making and re-making of places and territories through networks of flows. Migrant groups fall within these flows. As such, they need to be viewed as particular types of urban dwellers. Moreover, the relational shift calls for a move from the attention to cartographically drawn territorial limits to 'spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable them' (Collins, 2011; Hannam et al., 2006).

This is at the centre of the call for a critical approach to mobility studies proposed by Söderström. In the book *Critical Mobilities* (2013), the author endorses the occurrence of the 'mobility turn' that John Urry and Mimi Sheller set forth in their article "The New Mobility Paradigms" (2006). Mobility studies stress the significance of movement and mobility, as old as the history of mankind in as much as it is the expression of human aspiration to freedom (Palidda 2008). Nevertheless, they argue the contemporary topicality of the phenomenon.

This topicality doesn't refer uniquely to intense and 'liquid' forms of mobility (Bauman, 2003), but also to the strong influence of the latter on socio-spatial dynamics.

Although drawn on mobility as the *condicio sine qua non* of globalization, the 'new mobility paradigm' distances itself from globalization studies by its focus on power of discourses and practices rather than flows or speed (Sheller, 2011). Mobility research, therefore, calls for a critical re-thinking of the relation between bodies, movement and spaces (Sheller 2011), in order to shed a light on what is at stake.

Acknowledging the different ontological understanding of mobility proposed by the 'mobilities research agenda', Söderström underlies the "new epistemological foundations based on the consideration" of the centrality of mobility (Söderström et. al., 2013).

With his explicit stance in favour of a critical attitude in mobility studies, he shows the way to bring out their potential. This can be achieved by explicitly addressing questions of inequality, domination and constraints underlying mobility. It implies the adoption of the same perspective of the territorial agents or, in other words, a learning of trans-local processes drawn on an everyday basis, in order to contribute to a deep and articulate trans-local knowledge of urbanity.

The notion of trans-locality, defined as 'situatedness/groundedness during mobility' (Brickell and Datta, 2012), facilitates the understanding of the

role of mobility in connecting and transforming places. Going beyond the concept of transnationalism (Glick Schiller, 2011), it stresses the importance of local-local connections during transnational migration in a way that shifts the comprehension of locality from a level of isolation to one situated within a network of spaces, places and scales interconnected by plural types of mobility. In such a 'place-based' rather than 'place-bounded' understanding of the local, identities are negotiated and transformed (Brickell and Datta, 2012) according to the interplay between mobility and power that occurs moment-by-moment.

The everyday urban experience of people is becoming more and more affected by trans-local practices and criss-crossing networks. 'Every-day life is thus a transversal site of contestations rather than a fixed level of analysis. It is transversal...because the conflicts manifested there, not only transverse all boundaries, they are about these boundaries, their erasure or inscription and the identity formation to which they give rise' (Campbell 1996).

This is about a reformulation of the notion of every-day life as the 'transversal politics of everyday life', which focuses on the relationship between mobility/trans-local networks and space. It is therefore necessary to try to grasp the everyday life experiences of trans-local migrants and mobile subjects in terms of their concrete social and place-making practices, in so re-constructing the '*territoires circulatoires*' (Tarrus, 1992) they shape. Such spaces are constituted by conquered 'spaces-in-between', that are the nodes in which networks converge, overlap, conflict or collaborate in a complex inter-textual landscape.

Hence I propose here the adoption of the theoretical framework of 'translocal urbanism'² to refer to the making of contemporary cities via the 'mobile constitution of the urban space'. This represents the specific semantic field in which not only the characters and "the meanings of the places produced by and, in turn, producing globalised mobilities" (Söderström 2012), but also the power of the regulations they depend on, come to the fore. Mobility is a socially constructed and regulated movement encompassing, among other things, relevant aspects of competence (Cresswell, 2008). 'Translocal urbanism' is, therefore, strongly concerned with the spatial manifestations of mobility as well as the multifaceted dimensions of agency embedded in it.

The present work aims to explore these issues by trying to unveil the spatial configurations and multiple forms of agency emerging from the practices of mobility of informal cross-border traders between Johannesburg and Maputo. This is envisaged as a fundamental step for planning meant as a sensible practice of knowing (Davoudi, 2015) and learning (McFarlane, 2011) able to steer the design of policies towards a positive use of the ways in which movement respatializes social dynamics and produces new forms of urbanity (Simone, 2011).

2. The expression paraphrases the more known notion of 'transnational urbanism' by Smith (2000), proposing a revision of it.

3. The first one was carried out between May and July 2014 mainly in Johannesburg, while the second one was conducted between October and December 2015 in Johannesburg, Maputo and along the Maputo Corridor.

4. The following part is extracted from my ethnographic diary and the notes from interviews to Antonia, done on the road between Maputo and Johannesburg at the end of October 2015.

'Following the object of the study'

Translocal urbanism demands an appropriate research method. The investigation of trans-local processes based on mobile subjects requires following 'the object of the study across sites and scales in order to map the relationships between different actors, locations and levels' (Marcus, 1995). My attempt to retrace *mukheristas'* practices between South Africa and Mozambique inevitably led me to carry out ethnographic explorations on their tracks. I got to them after a first phase of semi-structured interviews, participant observations and narrative inquiry using visual tools which was fundamental in order to approach the field. My interviewees were not only cross-border traders, but also other local actors connected to them, such as drivers, employees at the station, owners of transport companies, hoteliers, receptionists, business intermediaries, customs officials, street vendors and dealers. Cross-border transit involves, directly and indirectly, a huge variety of subjects, not all of them mobile, many of them playing the role of power brokers. I felt the need to get a representation that was as close as possible to these intricate ramifications, in order to deconstruct the assemblage they form and to unravel the power relations underlying it.

I identified ten privileged subjects for in-depth interviews through snowball sampling (Silvermann, 2000) and found among them those willing to let me follow their trans-local routes. During my two periods of fieldwork³ I conducted multi-situated ethnographic explorations in Johannesburg, Maputo and along the corridor between the two cities. Such an experimental way of engagement with informal cross-border traders was the most appropriate way of exploring their trajectories, frontiers, intersections and tactics (De Certeau, 1989).

The following discussion reports an excerpt from the diary I compiled during one of my ethnographic explorations with Antonia, a cross-border trader trading dogs between Johannesburg and Mozambique. Antonia's story is simultaneously very peculiar and quintessential of cross-border traders' daily lives. For this reason, the story tells about a day with Antonia, in the attempt to provide a picture which is not only local but also of trans-local urban lives.

A day with Antonia. 'Businesswoman' between Johannesburg and Maputo⁴

It's a muggy Thursday in mid-October. I am waiting for Antonia at the Sasol gas station in Malhapse (Matola), where she arranged the meeting at 12. It's 12.30 and she's late. At 12.40 a text message announces her arrival by indicating the coordinates to her car: a white Toyota with the numberplate HHC 739mp. After twenty-two years spent carrying stuff from side to side of the border, Antonia got used to spelling out her car's number plate immediately after her name. It's the way she identifies herself. At 47 years, Antonia appears as a brisk beauty faded by fatigue.

The market niche she managed to carve out is the trade in dogs. She buys puppies in the farms around Johannesburg and resells them in Maputo. At the border everybody knows her as "the lady of the dogs". Being mixed-race, she claims to be Portuguese when she trades in South Africa in order to ensure the deal.

This job has allowed her to bring up three children alone, since she separated from her husband ten years ago. The car is her second home. It's a van with shaded windows, marked by the traces of Antonia's incessant travelling. Antonia ran into debt to buy it and she had to make fifteen trips between Maputo and Johannesburg to repay the debt.

Two years ago Antonia's got involved in an accident that left half of her face burned and killed her travel companions. They were travelling at night, when a volley of bullets pushed them into the guardrail. "Ladrões!" Antonia explained to me. "They recognize Mozambican numberplates and in a short time keep a file on you. They know the commodities and the amount of money you carry. And they lie in wait for you."

We get to the Ressano Garcia border post in less than an hour. Upon arrival, Antonia takes the entrance for private cars, next to the one I usually take when I travel by bus.

She parks right behind the building for passport control and greets everyone with familiarity. She moves within that space that, for me has always been only a line to cross quickly, as if she inhabited it.

At some point she encounters an old acquaintance, Dona Azira, a *mukherista* she once used to travel with. Azira is going to Komatipoort to buy products for the breakfasts she prepares every day in her small *loja* in Benfica but she doesn't have a car and Antonia invites her to join us.

At the passport control Antonia releases fingerprints joking with the policeman and quickly proceeds to the car, gesturing for me to hurry up. We have to repeat the procedure on the South African side.

We get in the car. I hesitantly sit down on the front seat, Azira stretches into the space without seats in the back. "I used to travel this way when I was nine months pregnant. Now that I'm not pregnant I can do it without problems!" – she replies to my invitation to take my place.

We drive two hundred meters and we get into South Africa. It is a ridiculous distance, but everything changes: Antonia changes name and becomes Mary, as they know her here. I realize that she strives to keep a low profile while responding in Zulu and Shangana. Even here, however, she knows everybody behind the glass of the visa control. In a few minutes we get back into the car and head towards the centre of Komatipoort.

Just 5 km far from the border and 8 km far from the south-western edge of the Kruger Park, Komatipoort is located at the confluence of the Crocodile River and the Komati River- which it takes its name from- in the mountain pass of the Lebombo Mountains.

Between two rivers and two countries, it has been a transit place since its origins. It began, in the late nineteenth century, as a camp connected to

the railroad under construction from Lourenco Marques and has always been a place evoking possible but terrible salvation in the stories of Mozambicans who illegally migrated to South Africa.

Today Komatipoort looks like a typical border town, suddenly hit by global investments: South African and Chinese companies are opening new stores and warehouses, taking advantage of the benefit deriving from the proximity to Mozambique, the main importer from South Africa. Every day a composite crowd of small, medium and large cross-border traders comes to buy in these stores. They generally depart from Maputo by bus, car, van, minivan or trucks and buy products ranging from groceries to clothing and household furniture in Komatipoort. They stock their vehicles up with the products they bought and go back to Maputo. The day after they distribute the goods to their customers and retailers in the endless formal and informal markets of the entire Maputo metropolitan area.

Antonia and Azira are here for the same reason. Azira comes to Komatipoort, the only place where she shops in South Africa, four or five times a month, whereas Antonia usually shops in Johannesburg, except for urgent orders bought in Komatipoort or in Neilspruit. The journey from Maputo to Komatipoort is short, so the profit is higher.

We take three minutes to get to the main street in Komatipoort, a tree-lined road in the middle of two parallel strings of stores and warehouses with English, Portuguese, Chinese and Afrikaner signs. It's 3 in the afternoon. Antonia says she is hungry and parks right in front of a seemingly modest butcher's. The entrance reveals an immense space messed up by a sequence of counters, cases and fresh and dried hunks of meat hanging from the ceiling. The multitude that crowds it moves at the rhythm of North African bazaars: customers order pounds of fresh meat in Shangana and Afrikaner, pay and leave, leaving a mess ruled by invisible internal laws behind.

Antonia and Azira do the same and go out towards the backyard of the store. There is a large open space, half covered by a rusty awning and sparsely equipped with a grill and some tables. It is a space for informal *braai* (the South African barbecue) for people gathered there on the days of *negocio*. We finish eating and leave for our shopping, temporarily separating ourselves from Azira.

Antonia buys fifty boxes of Italian shoes, thirty kilos of red dogs and some other products for animals.

We pass by a stopping point for *chapas*. Three minibuses are stationed there. They are almost completely hidden by a large group of people busy arranging some drinks under layers of packaging for eggs. "That's how they hide liquors. Alcohol and tobacco are among the smuggled goods", Antonia says.

We park and Antonia goes to a small group of women sitting under a porch, looking absent and eternally bored. They change Meticals in Rands and vice versa. Antonia changes her Meticals, goes into another butchers and

immediately after goes into a Chinese magazine, where we meet Azira. She and Antonia take a shared cart. In less than ten minutes, it is loaded by a hundred packs of eggs, a dozen large parcels of flour and rice, fifty litres of oils and innumerable polystyrene containers for food takeaways.

A shop boy helps them to arrange everything in the small space left in the van. His African patience proclaims him the new champion in the 'Tetris-for-*mukheristas*' discipline. He leaves a little space for Azira, who slips in and goes to roost over a stack of boxes. He finally arranges the last two packages on my knees.

Through my half-covered visual, I observe the surrounding landscape made of storekeepers, shop boys, cross-border traders, customers, vendors and money changers dwindling as we pass.

"That's how *mukheristas* travel!" Antonia says "Many women do not like the word *mukherista*. They feel offended by it because it is a *calão* standing for '*malandra*', a person who illegally carries goods across the border. Personally, I prefer 'business woman' or '*mulher negociante*'. I prefer this than being employed. I have no bosses and I always manage to get to the end of the month".

At five o'clock we are again at the border. The passage through the South African border offices is fast, but when we cross the border to Mozambique, time becomes endless. Antonia's car stops for twenty minutes. She stands up in the middle of a knot of officials. I try to reach her, but she stops me with a tight smile. "I am super busy now!", she says. Twenty minutes later she's back and asks us to walk 500 meters ahead. She cannot pick up Azira in a maximum two-persons car and we need to pass the check-point before restarting our travel together.

I set off with Azira along the stalls of street vendors and moneychangers and the traffic of travellers, buses and minibuses. I look at the landscape, a bleak jumble of objects: over the crowd in transit, there are rows and rows of trucks stacked in parallel lanes, fragments of markets and settlements, a desolate cemetery, a church, a mosque and a recently built school. Everything has been thrown together there as if it were provisional. The only certainty is the way in between. This is Ressano Garcia.

The border is a liquid, strange space with a geographical and temporal depth, forged by eternally repeated and always identical passages. It is a repository of despair and hope, where the mass of people in transit runs alongside those who never manage to move like oil on water. After 500 meters we find Antonia's van and leave again.

On the way back we speak little. There is a palpable weariness. I ask Antonia how she can do this a dozen times a month.

"This is not a life" – she replies – "As soon as you can, you give up" Antonia measures her life in journeys. The number of trips depends on the economic needs and on the product in demand. When they are both high, she makes up to eight trips a month, three from Maputo to Johannesburg and five to closer destinations such as Komatipoort and Neilspruit.

" When my two daughters were at home, my life was very stressful. Once, the second one broke her hard drive. I had to make three trips to be able to pay for a new one."

I ask how she managed to avoid checks on the goods. She explains that she always manages with a different excuse. The customs police know the truth, but they let her pass at the price of a small bribe. Today she had to pay 300 Meticals and 40 Rands (that is equal to about 10 Euros) because the amount of products was small. . For larger quantities the bribes correspond to 15% of the cost for goods. It is better than 47% of taxes to be paid by law, but since the controls are three (two at the border and one along the way), the total bribe can even exceed the legal tax costs. So far Antonia has always managed to pay small bribes, but she knows that it is just a matter of luck.

Luck is also necessary to become a *mamana* (a big and respected business woman). *Mamanas* usually start from scratch but they are lucky in finding an important client (such as the owner of a hotel under construction) and the start-up capital. They often resort to *xitique* or, more rarely, to bank loans obtained by presenting an economically stable colleague as guarantor. The capital is also used to rent the car to travel to South Africa. Early journeys happen weekly, in rented cars. But if the customer pays well and regularly and the *mamana* manages not to get stuck with customs controls and high bribes at the border, she is able to buy her own means of transportation to carry the goods within six months and to buy a new house and a private car within a couple of years. In four years she hires a personal driver that makes trips for her and is able to pay customs fees since her income has increased tenfold in the meantime. However, all this depends on a chain of fortuitous events. And one can always restart and go back to the starting point.

At the sign indicating a 20 km distance from Maputo, Antonia leaves the highway and takes a dirt road on the left. We arrive in front of a white wall on which it's written " Loja Kadcri" . It is Antonia's shop, as it is called, by merging her son's and grandson's names, Kadu and Cristina. " So one day it will be theirs" , she says.

The shop is adjacent to the house, a modest building on a plot of 1,200 square meters. Antonia bought it twelve years ago, when it cost 3,000 Meticals. Today it is worth \$50,000, she says. She built the house with the help of a worker and moved in last year. Azira, who recalls Antonia's sweltering apartment in Alto Mae, observes the place with admiration.

Antonia invites me into the house. The kitchen is an external equipped space with a cover sheet. The dining room, the bedroom and the bathroom are sheltered inside the building and cluttered with objects. Everything transmits a feeling of temporal suspension.

" When I will have more money, I will build a bigger house at the end of the property and this one will be the *dependência* for guests," Antonia says, confirming my impression.

We unload the products purchased from the van and leave again with one more passenger, Kadu.

After a while, we drop Azira at the stop of *chapas* directed to Benfica. She nimbly slips out of the car and starts pulling out of the van all her new goods. In a few minutes she is surrounded by towers of packages, in the middle of an impromptu street market.

We leave Antonia negotiating with a driver the cost of a whole minibus for herself and her goods. After a few minutes we are at Dona Teresa's house, Antonia's adoptive mother was single and made a living by selling potatoes and onions in the central streets of Maputo. Antonia helped her when she was a child, going to the market every day after school. She always passed by Dona Antonia's house, until one day the lady invited her to enter and stay.

Dona Teresa's place is a detached single-floor house adjacent to a group of similar constructions. It is located just in front of the Fajardo market, the most important food market in the city centre. Antonia goes in and immediately starts to cook. After a while we all sit around the table ready to have dinner. The television is on. It broadcasts *Amor à Vida*, the Brazilian soap opera that everyone watches in Maputo. From salespeople to doormen, anyone who has a TV in Maputo is tuned into *Amor à Vida* at 9 p.m.

The city stops. And so does Antonia. We wake up in the night. We fell asleep in front of the TV in a surreal silence for this part of town, usually among the most chaotic places.

During the day, the Fajardo market looks like an exploded anthill, crossed by swarming and clashing flows. The traffic of *chapas* coming from the north to the central districts and the commuters working in the area intertwine the eternal crowd of the market, is made up not only of sellers and buyers, but also the diverse human flood eternally in search of opportunities. More than trading places, markets here are mainly places of circulation and exchange of information and opportunities.

Mukheristas feed them. Tonight, though, they are late.

Antonia takes me to the street, where a white van has just arrived. There are two *mamanas* that she knows on board.

"The border is slow today," the older one grumbles under a white synthetic bearskin fur blazing in the night. They chat half-sleepy with their chauffeur while waiting for their trucks to download the crates of fruit and vegetables bought in Gauteng. But the trucks are stuck at the border.

Shortly after the first one arrives, followed by a row of vans, cars and motor vehicles. The market silent so far lights up with voices and furtive movements. The road which Dona Teresa's house overlooks is filled with towers and walls of boxes and pyramids of sacks, temporarily erected around *mukheristas* and *mamanas* who are directing the works with tired but precise gestures.

They look like strange night birds, wrapped in heavy blankets and colourful *capulanas*. Dreamlike visions, they dissolve before dawn, just before the

5. These languages are spoken in Maputo and Gaza provinces, as well as in Southern Mozambique.

masses of street vendors pour out to stalls and cabins and the market starts to pulse again. "Come on," Antonia says "I have many things to do. Tomorrow it's gonna be my turn again!"

The institution of *mukhero*

Antonia is a *mukherista*, a name given to women doing *mukhero*, informal cross-border trading between South Africa and Mozambique. It comes from the corrupted English phrase 'May-you-carry this bag to the other side?' referring to the procedures at border facilities, that in Shangani and Ronga Mozambican national languages⁵ sounds like '*mukhero*' (Raimundo, 2005). The institution of *mukhero* is only one of the many informal business practices that often span borders in Mozambique (Baptista-Lundin and Taylor, 2003), "flourished after the abandonment of the socialist project and the gradual disappearance of the old safety net provided by the state in Mozambique" (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2008).

Through it, a variety of goods are brought in not only from South Africa but also other regions of Mozambique and the neighbouring countries to be sold on the informal market in Maputo. All the countries bordering Mozambique are involved in the lively cross-border interactions made up by the *mukhero*, but the relationship with South Africa is particularly intense. Initially, the *mukhero* was drawn on the purchase of agricultural products, missing in Mozambique. Afterwards, other products were gradually incorporated, so that nowadays the institution encompasses a variety of goods from vegetables and fruits to clothes and household small furniture and electrical appliances.

In addition to the expansion of the commodity, the last decade also saw an expansion of the market from the regional to the international level, including trades with Brazil, Thailand, Hong Kong, Dubai and China. In this last case, the trade involves the purchase of synthetic hair and cheap cosmetics in countries like Brazil and China to be resold in the raising Mozambican cosmetic industry, as E., a former *mukhero* guy, explains: 'The business in Brazil, China and India is about this artificial hair. They go to buy in those countries. They make big profits from this business. It's usually the youngest ones who do this. They are between 20 and 35 years old, the young generation of *mukheristas* working on a global scale. They transport hair squeezed in backpacks. It's cheap, easy and convenient. By doing this business for a few years, they manage to open saloons and buy houses in South Africa' (Ernesto, former Mozambican *mukhero* - June 2014, Johannesburg).

My investigation focussed on the flow between Johannesburg and Maputo. Based on what I could trace, *mukheristas* buy goods in wholesale stores in Johannesburg – in most of cases, in Dragon City, a huge area of Chinese shopping malls in the city centre, and in some other shopping centres in the 'Town' – to make resale at tripled or quadrupled prizes in Maputo. Here, they deliver the goods to retail merchants, mainly coming

from Nigeria and Burundi, who work both in the wholesale and retail markets (such as Estrela Vermelha market, Xipamanine market, Chikene market, Mandela market, Museu and Zimpeta market), where they return the next day to take the money.

Women play a major role in the sector. Aged 25-50 (the oldest ones are named *mamas*, a moniker implying a dutiful respect for the age and the fortune accumulated over years of hard work), they represent the 70% of regional informal cross border traders between Mozambique and South Africa (Peberdy and Rogerson, 2000) and the 80-95% of applicants for visitors visas for trading or shopping in SA (Peberdy and Crush, 1998).

Studies by Covane (2002) and Feliciano (1998) show that women's involvement in this practice started in colonial times, when women used to migrate with their husbands.

It considerably increased during the civil war (1981-1994), when informal cross-border trades constituted a fundamental source for the supply of basic necessities. Women, who were not enrolled in the army, bravely used to cross the border into Swaziland against the RENAMO (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana) forces to buy bread and cabbage for their children and people (Raimundo, 2005), 'saving Maputo and the country in its hungry years', as reported by the common knowledge.

Female involvement in the sector grew after the general peace agreements in 1992 (Manganhela, 2006) until it became predominant. The trend reflects the phenomenon of 'femigration', that is the increase on a global scale of women choosing to move - often independently - to other countries for work opportunities (Faith D. Nkomo, 2011).

However, 'femigration' represents a highly influential phenomenon in the Mozambican context, where before independence migration of women from rural areas to the city was a rare and far from simple trajectory (Sheldon, 2003)⁶. Women's migration in Mozambique started with the beginning of the liberation war in 1964, when many joined the FRELIMO's guerrillas (Raimundo, 2009) and only in the last three decades it became the norm, having a strong impact on urbanization and the development of cities.

Women's involvement in urban life in Mozambique has been multifaceted, and "neither cities nor women remained unchanged once women settled in urban areas" (Sheldon, 1996).

The *mukheristas* field is complex and composed by many different kinds of traders. Peberdy (2002) distinguishes them based on the duration of their stay in the foreign country, identifying two main categories: the 'shopper-women', who travel to South Africa for one to four days to buy goods to sell in their country; and the 'trader women', who travel from one week to two months, sometimes across several countries. Several *mukheristas* who started informal cross-border trades as a survival strategy ended up building viable, informal, business enterprises (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2008), possessing trucks and managing large sums of money. They have

6. As Raimundo explains (2008), a married woman from the south of the Zambezi River - a patrilineal society - was not able to make any decision, including business and travel, without the authorization of her husband, to whom she belonged in accordance with the institution of the *lobolo* (bridewealth). Conversely, northern Mozambique is a matrilineal and highly Islamic society, but likewise women did not have free mobility.

7. The definition of the African middle class is difficult and controversial. According to Mazzolini (2014), it can be defined and subdivided on the basis of the data provided by ILO into three categories, named: "near poor" (2-4 USD/day), "emerging middle class", (2-13 USD/day) and "middle class and above" (> 13 USD/day).

become prominent in the local economy, with far-reaching impacts on gender and intergenerational relationships. According to more than one of my interviewees, some *mukheristas* can earn up to \$ 90,000 per month. The conspicuously exaggerated figure is hard to verify, given the unregistered character of the business.

However, it outlines how the institution of *mukhero* encompasses both poor and middle class⁷ people. For the former, cross-border trade is a hard and arduous way to earn a livelihood through risks and harassment. For middle class women linked to more global networks, it represents upward mobility and profits (Desai, 2009). In both cases, however, informal cross-border trade is a fragile and mutable state, constantly exposed to 'luck'—to use an expression of Antonia's — or rather to changes in the market, the local context and the social networks.

Much of this vulnerability depends on the informal character of the practice, ascribable, as shown beforehand, to full or partial evasion of trade-related regulations, for instance the possession of a legal license (Cruz and Silva, 2005).

Antonia clearly explains how the word *mukhero* itself is often used and perceived as a vernacular, derogatory expression pointing out the smuggling-related aspect of the practice. The activity may sometimes encompass real illegal practices, such as misclassification, under-invoicing and/or bribery of customs officials, that however mustn't be confused with the phenomenon of illegal economy.

The smuggling, in fact, concerns legitimately produced goods (staple food commodities, low quality consumer goods such as clothes, shoes etc., pieces of furniture and electronic goods as indicated above) and, as such it is a fundamentally legal import-export activity drawn on the exploitation of the differential of currencies between the two countries.

The recourse to informal economic practices has to be contextualized in the frame of the neo-liberalism in the Global South, including Africa (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2008). As a hegemonic discourse orientating political and economic policies for Africa towards de-regulation and obliteration of the welfare state (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2008), it has resulted in a decline of formal work opportunities provided by the State and large-scale retrenchments (Lindell, 2010). This pushed people into informal economies as a way to secure a minimal form of self-employment for survival (Hansen and Vaa, 2004; Bryceson, 2006; Lindell, 2010). Despite the general tendency to operate in the direction of the formalization of the informal, reflected by the more recent ILO's prescriptions (Crush, Skinner and Chikanda, 2015), the informal economy remains large and important. In South Africa, the informal economy persists despite the apartheid-era repression of informal entrepreneurship as it is populated not only by South Africans struggling to find a job in the formal sector, but also, and very consistently, by migrants led by strong entrepreneurialism. In Mozambique, the informal economy represented the main source of

livelihood after the destruction of the national economy by the civil war in the 1980s, favoured by a *laissez-faire* attitude by the government. Even during the last two decades of fast growth of the national economy, the informal economy has proven to be extremely resilient, with 75% of the economically active population informally employed in 2005 (Crush, Skinner and Chikanda, 2015). The informal economy represents a dynamic and heterogeneous sector playing a fundamental role in poverty reduction.

This practice feeds both a formal and an informal market. The first one is in the hands of border officials, who tax the transit of goods and people as much as they like. The second one results from the violation of the law, for example by exceeding the trade limits permitted by law or by bribing border guards simply because it is cheaper than paying taxes.

Such informality, which characterizes the transit of goods and people across borders between African countries, however, is common and widespread (Chabal, 2009).

In this sense, informality should simply be interpreted as the process by which modernity and tradition interact in a dynamic agency that seeks to overcome existing constraints to achieve "decent" living conditions (ibid.). Informal cross-border traders do not consider themselves as part of a sort of virtual underclass, but rather to be human agents with legitimate recourse to their own agency to navigate and take advantage of the environment they live in against and across structural constraints.

The multiple thresholds of contact between the formal and the informal sectors also characterize buying and selling (Peberdy, 2002). Informal cross-border traders comprise a significant part of small, micro and medium enterprises in the region and may have a significant impact on formal and informal retail markets. The practice produces large volumes of trade that often exceed those of the formal sector and always plays a significant role in regional trade relationships (Peberdy, 2002).

The Economic Commission for Africa has recently recognised the extent and importance of informal cross-border trades in Africa, noting that "informal trade is ... the main source of job creation in Africa, providing between 20% and 75 % of total employment in most countries" (Crush, Skinner and Chikanda, 2015).

The African Development Bank estimates that informal cross-border trade constitutes between 30% and 40% of intra-SADC (Southern African Development Community) trade with an average annual value of USD 17.6 billion (Afrika and Ajumbo, 2012). This absolute value corresponds, on average, to 41% of national GDP in 16 Sub-Saharan countries according to data compiled by ILO in 2014.

If the income of informal cross-border traders is often moderate, cumulatively their activities contribute significantly to GDP (Crush, Skinner and Chikanda, 2015).

The predominant anxiety to label (often inappropriately) these practices,

however, leads to underrate the vital role they have in inter-urban connections and regional integration as well as to misunderstand their really negative aspects.

The high degree of vulnerability to which informal cross-border traders and especially women are exposed is an example of these negative aspects. These include: poor transportation; complicated customs forms and procedures; lack of storage facilities; lack of affordable accommodation and other services; fear for safety and security, particularly due to the absence of safe places to save the large amounts of cash carried, as the access to commercial credit is very difficult. In addition, there is: the experience of crime (especially theft); xenophobia; police harassment and regulatory issues regarding visas, passports, trading licences, tax refunds and customs control which are the hardest difficulties encountered (Peberdy, 2002; Morris and Saul, 2005).

In contrast to all these hurdles, informal cross-border traders have deployed a wide range of individual and social tactics to carry on their business and to defend their right to dignity and urban life. The lack of formal employment opportunities provides them with sheer determination and a savvy business sense that help them to succeed in challenging conditions (Peberdy, 2002). Informal cross-border traders embody the spirit of African entrepreneurship and make up a crucial, though often overlooked part of the national and transnational economies in the continent (ibidem).

While (informal) cross-border trade keeps being labelled as an illegal practice, the chance will be missed to see its potentialities for development realised.

The agency behind invisibility

Antonia's story unveils much of this potential, showing how *mukheristas*' lives enclose manifold forms of agency. Agency is intended, here, as the 'power to', the ability to face and act on opposition, limits and constraints. Most of *mukheristas*' 'agency' is deployed at the border.

Mukheristas know how to pass over the border and to circumnavigate transnational destinations. They are cross-border traders and proactive borderers at the same time (Rumford, 2011). At the border, the interface between the top-down and the bottom-up stands out, showing how norms and normative practices clash and how "state and society straddle each other" (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2008). Yet at the border manifestations of (state) power face byways of resistance to it.

The case of the Ressano Garcia border post in Antonia's story, in particular, reveals the neo-patrimonialistic nature of "the African state" (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2008). The interpretative category of neo-patrimonialism, shared by many scholars of African politics, explicates the tendency to extract resources from the state or the economy to deploy them as means to maintain legitimacy and power (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2008). Neo-

patrimonialism implies the hoarding and control of resources by small groups and élites, rather than a just redistribution for collective development, and so matches well with corruption and the exercise of personalised exchange. It also explains the demand for bribes from small informal cross-border traders as well as the limitation of their traffic as soon as they fortuitously and laboriously succeed in overcoming the poverty threshold.

Informal cross-border traders have no other choice than acting at the interstices of the formal and the informal through their agency. Inside limited spaces of manoeuvre, they use mobility and cross-border practices as a way to avoid capture and, hence, as a form of active agency, through which they operate tactics at the interstices of strategic constraints (de Certeau, 1984).

'Active agency' refers to actions encompassing purposeful behaviours (Kabeer, 2010). It is a 'transformative' agency: it can act on restrictive structures and challenge them, initiating processes of change. In this regard, *mukheristas*' practices are intensively transformative.

They bring financial independence (more easily than in the wage labour market), major weight in the family decisions, equipment in situations of exclusion (loneliness, celibacy, infertility, domestic violence), hope of a better life to following generations, sometimes even possibility of re-invention of womanhood (Cefai, 2003).

All this happens on the basis of trans-local agency, the capacity of crossing the borders and organizing life across borders, as the story of Antonia shows. It doesn't mean that borders have disappeared. Conversely, borders are inscribed at the heart of the contemporary experience, playing a strategic role in the world-making. Actors are still classed, raced, and gendered bodies in motion in specific historical contexts, within certain political formations (Smith, 2005). However, the border offers an epistemic point of view able to disclose the dynamics that are currently reshaping power (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2014).

In the case of the border between South Africa and Mozambique, the interesting element that stands out is that it is used as an opportunity to extract economic resources. As such, it is shaped and reshaped by informal cross-border trades as well as by border officials, opposite to what is declared in the policies.

Through their trans-local agency, *mukheristas* interconnect distant places and networks. Some of them are easily locatable (such as the markets in Maputo), other are interstitial, liminal or even ephemeral (such as the network of micro-spaces conquered in Johannesburg).

All of them compose a complex assemblage of trans-local geographies and urban lives. By working as logisticians in connecting the wholesale trade carried on by Chinese and South Africans in South Africa to Mozambicans (in)formal markets - so linking the global markets to the local and regional ones - *mukheristas* act as territory-users and makers.

Their agency is also 'socio-spatial'. The two terms 'socio-spatial' are actually interchangeable, consistently with the Lefebvrian concept of space as social construct (1974) or 'shared enterprise' (Awan, Schneider and Till, 2011). In this sense, spatial production is a dynamic, evolving sequence, which multiple actors contribute to and individuals live out their lives within (Awan, Schneider and Till, 2011).

Deploying movement as a multifaceted strategy of urban survival, cross-border traders readjust to shifting contexts and shape spaces and time following the evolution of their trajectories.

In the hostile and xenophobic South African context, they deploy a range of 'tactics of invisibility' (Romania, 2004; Ostanel, 201) in order not only to develop their informal business, but also to defend their rights as persons and citizens from risks or threats, avoiding control and surveillance. They commonly congregate in areas characterized by the presence of the ethnic group of origin or otherwise occupy silently liminal spaces in the city.

In Maputo, in contrast, they have a much more tangible impact. Part of their earnings are used to open up new economic activities and to purchase plots of land on which to build new houses, thus contributing to Maputo urban expansion.

The most relevant aspect underlying their practice, however, is the process they put in place connecting heterogeneous social networks through (in)visible interstitial spaces. Wholesalers, retailers, formal and informal transporters (including truck, bus and minibus drivers), hoteliers, storekeepers and buyers of the most diverse cultural and social backgrounds are linked from one side to the other of the border by the practice of *mukhero*. At the same time, spaces are adjusted to alternative uses, such as in the case of the open space used for informal *braai* in the story of Antonia or vacant spaces re-used as stores and facilities for *mukheristas* and their drivers.

This can be defined as a 'transactional' way of finding and carving out space in the everyday life of the city (Lefebvre, 1947, 1961, and 1981). Space is instrumentally approached and the relations among the networks are chiefly driven by economic individualistic reasons. Nevertheless, space is built through the liminal tension between socio-economic networks and the self that is exactly at the base of the notion of socio-spatial agency (Awan et al., 2011).

The 'transactional relationships' put into being by *mukheristas* set up a system of conjunctions and of 'assemblage' (Simone, 2011, McFarlane, 2011; Fariás and Bender, 2012), able to generate social compositions across a range of individual skills and needs.

The result is a "new urban infrastructure" across Africa, that doesn't have to do only with material infrastructures, but with the very bodies and life stories of African city dwellers (Simone, 2003). Such urban infrastructure made of a complex system of circulation, collaboration and connections,

outlines a diverse model of urbanity.

It is a distinctive model both from the prevailing trend to represent similar forms of urbanity as "characterized by inequality, poverty, poor service delivery, crime, and weak institutions" (Kihato, 2013) and from developmentalist visions inspired by western models. These representations often miss a consistent part of the city actually lived and acted.

The adoption of a "view from below" (Simone, 2004) focusing on the peculiar but very common practices of informal cross-border traders, discloses a different image of the city that accounts for the common behaviours, needs and aspiration of urban dwellers. In particular, informal cross-border practices show the territorial impact of economic precariousness. Constantly fuelling new "urban estuaries" (Landau, 2015), economic precariousness brings about new forms of territoriality. This is made up of orchestrated modes of conviviality and community founded on 'use' more than on 'ownership' (Landau, 2016). New organising principles and solidarities are provided and they are at once place-specific and trans-local.

They demand a deep understanding of the urbanity put in place, in order to appraise the capacities and openings it generates, as well as to limit its criticalities.

The Transnational Space between South-Africa and Mozambique between changes and permanencies

Informal cross-border traders constitute an additional layer of the 'historical transnational space' (Vidal, 2010) between southern Mozambique and eastern South Africa. This transnational space has been constructed by alternate historical events connected to the shifting economic and political systems in effect during and after apartheid. It dates back to the beginning of 1900, when it was created by the social figure of the young male adventurer coming from rural areas of Mozambique and working in South African mines. The political system of apartheid forced migrant workers to go back home periodically, in order to delay their self-organisation, thus producing temporary migration. Migration has long been a crucial component of the asymmetrical and subordinate cross-border relationship between South Africa and Mozambique, based on White South African exploitation of black labour (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2009). This migration pattern has largely persisted into the post-1990s, incorporating flows related to other migration factors. From the '60s onwards, the economic sectors of import - export and investments went to join the migration system, constituting a further link between Mozambique and South Africa. In a short time, South Africa became the second largest trading partner of Mozambique after Portugal. In the 1980s, the civil war produced a different flow of Mozambican migrants to South Africa: asylum-seekers. Approximately 300,000 to

400,000 people moved to South Africa (Crush, Skinner and Chikanda, 2015). After the ending of apartheid and the independence of Mozambique, with the establishment of formal democratic institutions in both countries, migration from Mozambique to South Africa continued (De Vletter, 1998). What was once a difficult and dangerous journey to South Africa is now far easier thanks to South Africa's automatic 30-day-visa policy. Greater ease for the acquisition of passports and the adoption of the devaluation of the visa policy for emigration in SADC member countries has improved migrants' lives in Johannesburg and eased cross-border trades (Covane, 2002). The result is that, between 2004 and 2013, cross-border traffic from Mozambique to South Africa has increased from around 400,000 documented entries per annum to nearly 1.8 million (Peberdy and Crush, 2015). Nowadays informal cross-border trade between Maputo and South African border towns as well as cities such as Johannesburg is one of the primary motivators for entry in South Africa (ibid.). Informal cross-border traders represent the new transnational figure of the transnational space between South Africa and Mozambique.

In the mid-1990s, this informal cross-border micro-region happened to coincide with the new government's showpiece of regional development planning: the Maputo Development Corridor (Peberdy and Crush, 2001; Söderbaum and Taylor, 2008). The MDC is a more formal Spatial Development Initiative (SDI) project complying with the job creation strategy of those years. This strategy consisted in identifying key geographical zones with proven economic potential for new investments and in fast-tracking private sector capital formation and investment in those areas (Peberdy and Crush, 2001). The underpinned long-term vision aimed to value borderlands and transforming borders from "barriers" to "bridges", by implementing several measures such as the facilitation and speed up of goods and people's circulation or the increase of bilateral cooperation agreements in tourism and industry between the border towns. However, the attempt of fostering regional development and economic cooperation in the borderland between South Africa and Mozambique simply ignored informal cross-border traders. As Peberdy and Crush (2001) reported, in fact, informal cross-border traders and their impact on regional trades were hardly mentioned in the official policy documents related to the SDI programme.

More than 15 years since that paper, the SDI still neglects informal cross-border traders, though they constitute between half and two-thirds of the total economy only in Mozambique (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2008). Huge financial resources have been devoted to large investment and infrastructure projects (such as the toll road between Maputo and Witbank) but only small amounts went to local development and community participation. None of which target the informal economy itself (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2008). The MDC project aims to strengthen ties between state and a few business actors, but it clearly demonstrates

the difficulties in reconciling formal decision-makers with agents in the informal economy. The result is that the contribution of informal cross-border traders remains under-recognized.

Conclusions

The case of informal cross-border traders between Johannesburg and Maputo speaks to relevant light upon the relationship between mobility, informality and urban spaces that can be extended beyond the local context. In an increasingly interconnected world, the urban environments that might seem off-the-map (Robinson, 2006) reformulate the principle of how the 'right to the city' needs to go beyond geographical boundaries. In a view of modern cities and regions that privileges a relational rather than a territorially bound approach, urban issues and politics become topological (Amin, 2008).

Primarily, it has to do with the fact that mobility acquires multiple manifestations that are not simply of ephemeral relevance to our understanding of cities but rather constitutive of urban and regional formation. Mobility associated with the informal economy has been impacting urbanity and playing a fundamental role in building urban and inter-urban linkages across national boundaries. This can be grasped only by adopting a focus on mobile people (including migrants) as ordinary urban dwellers and on their everyday life as often trans-locally lived. This can be grasped only by adopting a focus on mobile people (including migrants) as ordinary urban dwellers and on their everyday life as often translocally

lived. Looking at the trans-local everyday life of informal cross-border traders reveals how traditional, dichotomic categories such as formal/informal, official/unofficial, global/local get blurred and power is continuously reconfigured.

Secondly, this view of mobility, urbanity and globalization from below (Portes, 1997; Della Porta, 2006; et al.) re-casts the common notion of marginality. In fact, through their capacity of smartly navigating the structural constraints and opportunities they encounter, informal cross-border traders prove to be proactive social agents able to constitute globalization even as they are impacted by it (Desai, 2009). Their stories show how traditional survival practices are blending with global logics and becoming global themselves (Lindell, 2010). Informal cross-border traders uncannily disappear in the analysis of global trades, which mainly focuses on transnational corporations (TNCs) and primarily male managers, investment bankers, and corporations that move huge sums of money and goods across borders (Desai, 2009). Yet, the practices of informal traders have important implications for political economies, social justice and urbanity, which requires us to rethink governance and development.

Informal cross-border traders demonstrate how urbanisation, more than existence in city life, means constructing intersections between actors,

spaces and actants; as well as the circulation of commodities and possibilities. They also demonstrate how mobility is a way of life constituting new links between places (Simone, 2014). It is essential to identify not only spaces and niche markets left by formal economies, but also to carve out as many opportunities as possible from local and inter-local urban environment. As such, it represents a form of capital, the only possible against structural limitations.

Therefore, it is necessary to promote the 'mobility capital' in cities today. Such approach might consist, first of all, in providing a welcoming and enabling environment in the contexts of destination and a fair redistribution of the resources in the point of arrival. This might be achieved by giving value to the new spaces of transaction, operation and habitation that informal cross-border traders create across regions. Secondly, it is necessary to enable people to keep going and coming – through visa policies and sustainable border fees as well as a transparent management of the flows – as a way to guarantee the fundamental right to mobility as a partner to the right to the city.

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