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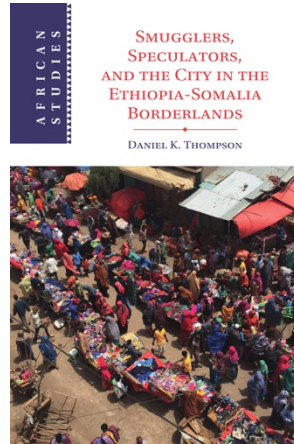
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Review of “Smugglers, Speculators, and the City in the Ethiopia-Somalia Borderlands,” by Daniel K Thompson, Cambridge University Press, 2025

Théa Klementⁱ

Daniel K. Thompson’s book *Smugglers, Speculators, and the City in the Ethiopia-Somalia Borderlands* offers a timely and empirically rich analysis of the intersection between border securitization and urban development. Thompson argues that this relationship is co-produced through the social and cultural logics of those residing along one of the Horn of Africa’s busiest and increasingly restrictive borders. Drawing on years of ethnographic and geographical study in Ethiopia’s Somali Regional State (SRS), he shows how Jigjiga’s transactional, everyday networks and cultural economies generate both opportunities and risks in relation to state-led, geopolitical efforts to control movement and border economy.

Woven among his ethnographic depictions of the everyday lives of traders, smugglers, diaspora investors, and officials, Thompson situates Jigjiga’s urban and economic development within a long history of cross-border trade and identity-making among Somalis, tracing its evolution from colonial interventions through contemporary secularization efforts. For those unfamiliar with the SRS and the surrounding geography, Thompson’s balanced historical and topographical accounts detail how Somali people have moved, worked, and made lives amidst unstable and often conflict-ridden periods. This approach and the clarity with which he writes offers a unique opportunity to understand the



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region’s history through the socio-spatial practices of survival and resilience.

One of Thompson’s primary contributions is his analysis of “ordinary” people which explicitly complicates mainstream global, neoliberal and capitalist explanations of Ethiopian-Somali borderwork. While he acknowledges the influence of these forces (particularly on Horn regimes during the “War on Terror”), he argues that the top-down practices of border externalization cannot fully explain the layered economic and social dynamics that have shaped, sustained, and resisted state control in Jigjiga and along its borders. Therefore, he insists that ‘urban borderwork’ is a necessary framework, as borders are spacial, social, and cultural constructions that any state-based or economic analysis alone cannot adequately describe. Throughout the book, Thompson argues that built space and social exchange are essential locus of analysis for urban border study. Drawing on the seminal work of Philippe Frowd (West African ‘border work’) and Henri Lefebvre (social “production of space”), this multi-disciplinary urban borderwork approach is central to his argument that Somali egalitarian and nonhegemonic norms practiced in dense urban environments behave in paradoxical ways, creating both opportunities and inequalities for different social groups. Thompson’s research highlights how these cultural logics, which include dimensions of mobility, reciprocity, and entrepreneurial aspiration, challenge simplified readings of Somali economies as either marginalized or subsumed by global capitalism.

Structurally, this book provides a helpful model for examining how local processes of social reproduction occur through securitization. Each chapter examines a different sociospatial practice, including how *kontarabaan* traders navigate the moral posturing of non-Somali border guards, how Ogaden-dominated DDSI elites and transnational networks entrepreneurially appropriate government subsidies and land, and the business deals and euphoria of Jigjiga’s chat dens. Thompson uses ethnographic detail to vividly explain how actors in these spaces mobilize connections such as clan affiliation and transnational family ties to secure economic opportunities or serve as informal credentials to ease border crossings. His exploration of the moral claims and reputational economies that

come with such practices reveal the mechanisms at play in developing a group's agency amidst strict securitization. For example, he compellingly depicts *kontarabaan* as both a means of livelihood and political commentary, placing it within broader debates on fairness and the right to economic participation.

Thompson's attention to *kontarabaan* raises broader questions about who defines these practices. The book's main limitation emerges in Thompson's limited engagement with his own positionality and the ways his presence, identity, and gender may have shaped his access, interpretation, or emphasis. While there are various asides in the book commenting on, for example, his ease of passage in contrast to his Somali counterparts, his careful critique of mainstream "Euro-Western" interpretations is weakened by his limited reflexivity. For example, although Thompson notes that women are central to certain smuggling economies, they appear mainly at the margins of his extended analysis. This is not a call for broad coverage, but rather an acknowledgment intended to invite other scholars to deepen these areas of study.

Nevertheless, these limitations do not overshadow Thompson's substantive contribution to urban and border studies and their applications in practice. He consistently engages with possible interpretations, justifying his focus on egalitarianism, local agency, and networked transactional relationships. His approach yields timely insights for urban development, border management, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution practitioners working in tense borderland settings, showing how Somalis navigate overlapping systems of authority, power, and kinship in ways that state-level analysis cannot. Fundamentally, Thompson illustrates how actors resist or repurpose state structures without engaging in political mobilization, underscoring the relational logics of the Ethiopian-Somali borderland and Somali transnational networks. This analysis has implications for anti-colonial approaches to peacebuilding. By showing how failing to recognize these local and transnational social infrastructures can entrench power norms or cause harm, this book helps academics and practitioners anticipate the unintended consequences of external interventions and design approaches better aligned with local logics. Ultimately, Thompson's work challenges siloed

research approaches and successfully identifies several avenues for continued research outside the dominant neoliberal framings of African border studies. Those working in social movements, peace studies, social geography, migration, global urban studies, and systems thinking will find this book especially valuable for extending lessons from Jigjiga's borderland to other contested spaces worldwide.

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