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ARTICLE

Challenges of Bridging Africa: The History of the Kazungula Bridge in Botswana

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Abstract

On 10 May 2021, the Kazungula Bridge across the Zambezi River was officially opened to the public, directly connecting Botswana and Zambia and, by extension, the southern African region to the hinterlands of the African continent, making it a transnational transport corridor. Measuring 923 meters long and 18.5 meters wide, the iconic bridge has been viewed as a strategic facility that wields huge potential for the integration of regional economies into the global market with minimum delays at the one-stop border across the Zambezi, which forms the international border between Botswana and Zambia. The bridge is also important for its aesthetic value and is touted to draw tourists to the nearby Kasane, the tourist bastion of Botswana. To appreciate the significance of the bridge, it is important to understand the history of the crossing at Kazungula. This article examines the socio-economic impact at national, regional, and also on informal and small business (for the riparian communities (of the Kazungula and the greater Chobe District) levels. It reveals how, from time immemorial, cross-border trade was carried out across the Zambezi, which could have been a barrier, but through their indigenous knowledge systems, they were able to mitigate the challenge and therefore engage in social and economic activities with their counterparts across in Zambia. Drawing on the qualitative approach, the article utilises primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Kazungula, Chobe River, Zambezi River, dug-out canoe, pontoon, bridge, socio-economic and political impact, Botswana, Zambia

Introduction

One of Africa's challenges to economic growth and development has been weak infrastructure to facilitate economic integration. As such, trade and investment benefits to member states remained miniscule due to inadequate infrastructure both within and among them (Olaniyan 2008:7-10). Central to poor integration has been weak physical infrastructure such as transport links in the form of efficient railway lines, road networks and, very importantly, bridges across the continent's rivers to enable free movement of goods, capital and labour. Some of the transport infrastructure was inherited at independence with its imperfections and the newly independent countries could not rehabilitate them due to financial constraints and other competing priorities (Olaniyan 2008:7). In Southern Africa, until the recent construction and completion of the 923 meters long and 18.5 meters wide Kazungula Bridge, crossing the Zambezi was one of the region's challenges to optimal integration of countries to the south to the northern regions of the continent. The Zambezi River as has been a major impediment to trade in the region. Therefore, it was noted that 'the main objective of the Kazungula Bridge is

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to replace the Ferry service between the two countries, which suffers from slow traffic clearance as a result of limited carrying capacity'.¹

Serving as a transnational transport corridor that expedites movement of goods and people, the Bridge is only a recent construction that was opened to the public on 10 May 2021. Preceding the bridge, however, there have historically been cross-border activities between riparian communities in Botswana and those in Zambia, spanning across the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times. At the centre of the cross-border trade among these communities was the *vwaato* or *mokoro*, the dug-out wooden canoe in Chiikuhane and Setswana languages respectively (Gilmore 1979). This study examines the socio-economic and political significance of the Kazungula Bridge on the local, national and regional economies. It also inevitably impacted the informal; and the small business activities who relied on the crossing at this place. It traces the history of the crossings over time at Kazungula, from the *mekoro*, via the pontoon to the modern monumental infrastructure, the Kazungula Bridge.

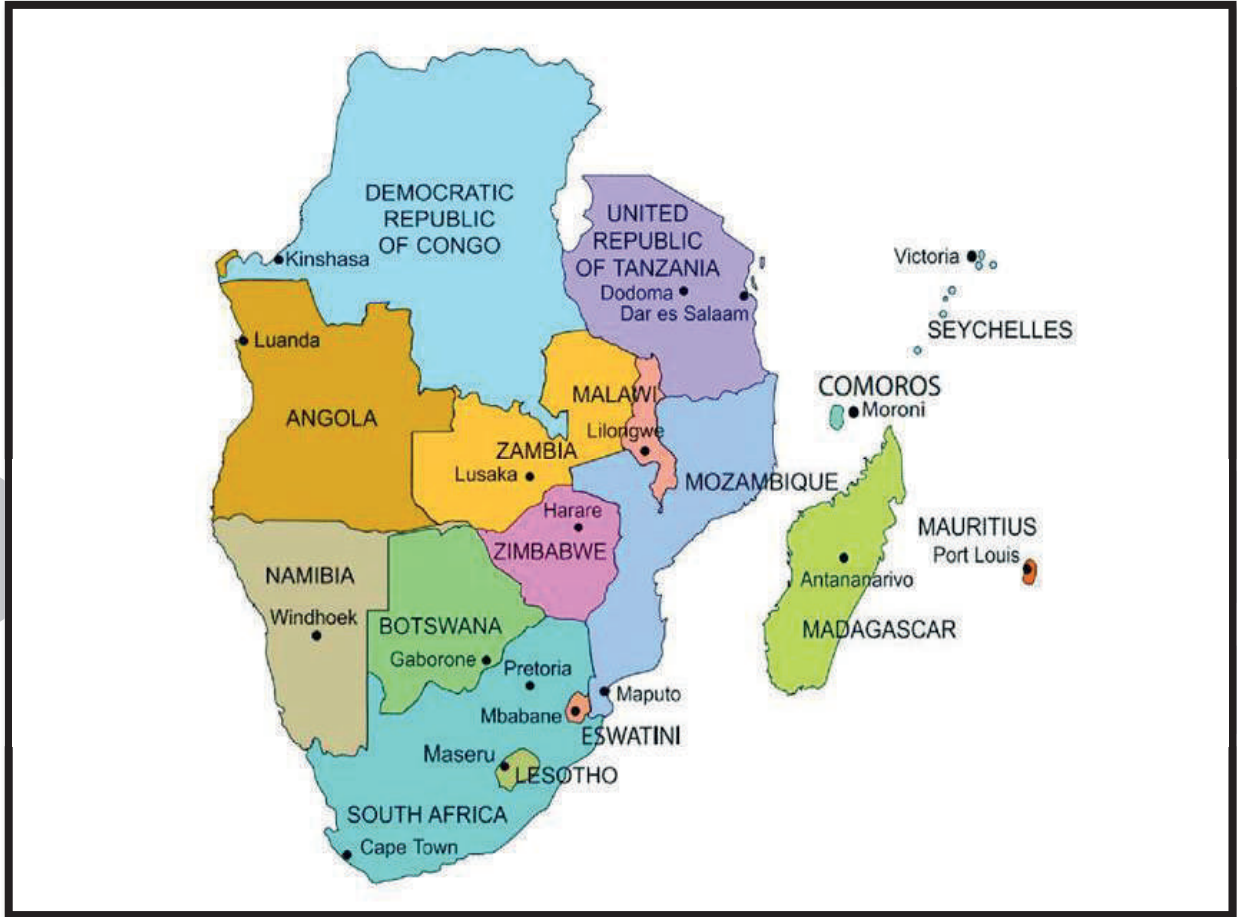
Study Area

The name *Kazungula* derives from the local Chiikuhane (ChiSubiya) language, referring to *izuungwe*, an indigenous tree, known in English as 'sausage tree', which is preponderant in the Chobe District (Gumbo *et al.*, 2021). A small *izuungwe* is called *kazuungwe*, after taking on the diminutive prefix *ka*. In fact, a small sausage tree used to stand-by the southern banks of the Zambezi River at the confluence of Chobe and Zambezi River before the formal settlement of the area in the early 1900 (Shamukuni 1972). Lying at the confluence of the Chobe and Zambezi rivers, Kazungula is a peri-urban village about eight kilometers east of Kasane – one of Botswana's prime tourist destinations and the administrative capital of the Chobe District. For its part, *Zambezi* is a Tonga word for a 'great river'.² This name also derives the name of the modern country of Zambia (Malambo 2020) Kazungula's location is unique, situated at a quadripoint – a point where four countries meet, namely Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, creating a 'cross-border area' where economic, social and cultural interactions are a daily occurrence across the frontier (Diarrah 2008). It also lies at the centre of the regional conservation area –the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA), which comprises of Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Gumbo 2022). The bridge as it will be apparent later is a regional knot that connects and ties together Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries (see Map 1).

¹ The Infrastructure Consortium for Africa, 'Briefing Memorandum- The Kazungula Bridge-Botswana-Zambia, 3-4 December 2007', https://www.icafrica.org/fileadmin/documents/Transport_Meeting/S4-Kazungula, accessed 23 July 2023.

²http://google.com/search?q=zambezi+river+meaning+of+zambezi%3F&rlz=1C1GCEA_enBW967BW967&xsrf 'Great River', accessed 3 August 2022.

Map 1: SADC countries including Botswana and Zambia between which lies the Zambezi River³



The map below focuses the area where the bridge is located, and shows Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Angola. Kazungula, where the bridge is crossing is located just some few kilometres east of Kasane. The actual point of the crossing of the bridge has been a subject of contention and dissention over the years when the bridge was finally constructed; it was the consensus of Zambia and Botswana, with the facilitation of Namibia. Zimbabwe pulled out as it problematized the existence of a physical border (Malambo 2020: 23).

³<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mark-Zuidgeest/publication/331715314/figure/fig1/AS:735993275617281@1552485879175/Map-of-the-Southern-African-Development-Community-SADC-region-5.png>, accessed 10 October 2024.

Map 2: The Zambezi crossing point between Botswana and Zambia



Source: www.botswana.maps (accessed 10 October 2024)

Colonial History of Kazungula

In order to understand the selection of Kazungula for the construction of this all-important bridge, it is critical to preface the study with a historical background of the area. This is necessary given the dearth of literature on the early history of Kazungula and the associated crossing of the Zambezi River. Kazungula has remained on the periphery of the history of Botswana, save for a few records by European traders, hunters, and missionaries in the 19th century. One of the earliest sources on the region is that of Edward Tabler (1963), who edited the diaries of George Westbeech, a prominent trader based at Pandamatenga in the then Bechuanaland Protectorate (colonial Botswana) and Barotseland (the Lozi country) in the early 1900, in the then Northern Rhodesia (colonial Zambia). In the 1890s, Pandamatenga, about 100 kilometers south of Kazungula was a thriving trading station for early European hunters and traders including South African hunting parties who over-exploited large game for trophies on the floodplains of the then Caprivi Strip (now Zambezi Province of Namibia) (Gumbo 2010). According to Maria Fisch, hides from hippos were prized for making *sjamboks* (long stiff whips for flogging) which South African Boer farmers used on farm labourers (Fisch 1999).

In the aftermath of the Berlin Conference of 1884-1895, European colonial powers 'scrambled' for territorial possessions in Africa in order to establish spheres of influence from which to source raw materials for their fledging industries and monopolize markets for manufactured goods (Akinyele 2007). As elsewhere in Africa, there were colonial contestations over territories in Southern Africa, with Britain, through Cecil John Rhodes' British South Africa Company (BSAC) ambitiously desiring to colonize Africa from the Cape in South Africa up to Cairo in Egypt. At the same time, Germany, which had occupied South West Africa (colonial Namibia) in turn harboured interests in eastward expansion to Tanganyika (colonial Tanzania), with a view to connecting two seaports on the Atlantic Ocean in the west and the Indian Ocean in Tanganyika in the east (Flint 2008). Rhodes considered this a threat to his Cape to Cairo route and decided to frustrate the then German Chancellor Count Leo Caprivi's imperial ambitions by blocking any attempt for a seaport in Tanganyika. That said, through the Anglo-Germany Treaty of 1890, Germany was assuaged by the creation of the Caprivi Strip – a small finger-like territory between the Chobe and Zambezi rivers, which allowed Germany an 'access corridor' to the Zambezi River at Kazungula, the point where the Chobe and Zambezi rivers meet (Kearns 2014).

In the 1930s and 1940s, Kazungula once again experienced international fame when the South African mining company Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNELA), opened offices there. Migrant labour was recruited for gold mining in South Africa. WNELA developed a depot at Kazungula to tap labour from across the Zambezi primarily from the then Northern Rhodesia's Barotseland district. As David Yudelman and Alan Jeeves (1986:101) put it, 'Northern Bechuanaland became a central corridor for WNA [WNELA] operations extending into adjacent parts of Northern Rhodesia, Angola and South West Africa'. Some recruits were Batswana from the local Chobe sub-district in desperate need of employment. In 1944, there were about 100 Africans employed by WNELA at Kazungula (Molefi 1996). As such, the origins and development of Kazungula are associated with the activities of WNELA (de Stage *et al.* 2011) whose offices were built on the site where Kubu Lodge stands today and the barges for water transport across the Zambezi River anchored on the banks of the Chobe River close to the said offices (Interview with Kgosi Morgan Makhanga, 2 July 2021). Once in Kazungula, recruits were either flown or transported to Francistown by a newly constructed road by WNELA where they were put on trains to Johannesburg.

Despite the relatively large population of mine workers going to the Witwatersrand, the colonial administration was not keen to develop Kazungula as a pool for contract miners where they could stay with their families. When WNELA requested the colonial government to provide a primary school for its employees in 1940, the government rejected the request and, ironically, opened a beer hall instead (Molefi 1996). Molefi (1996) states that in fact the provision of a beer hall had been prompted by a preponderance of informal beer brewing by Africans at Kazungula. As such, the colonial administration wanted to thwart this African enterprise in order to ultimately maximize profits from the monopoly of the beer industry. Be that as it may, WNELA is credited with the provision, ultimately, of a clinic and a primary school, a legacy cherished to this day (Interview with Ms Kashweka, 30 June 2021). In 1969, however, WNELA wound up its business and closed its Kazungula offices. At about the same time, it opened new ones in the burgeoning town of Katima Mulilo in Namibia's Caprivi Strip (de Stage *et al.* 2011). The 1960s witnessed a nascent tourism development around Kasane and Kazungula. The creation of the Chobe Game Reserve by the Bechuanaland Protectorate, and, simultaneously, the building of the Chobe River Hotel, created job opportunities leading to an increased expansion of Kazungula (Gumbo 2002). Accommodation shelters mushroomed to house the emerging labour force in the tourism industry. These developments led to the provision of other amenities such as government offices and community needs such as schools and trades services.

From *Mokoro* to Pontoon/Ferry: Early Zambezi Crossing at Kazungula

Riparian communities on both sides of the Zambezi have historically created identities with the river, demonstrating linkages between people, environment, and economic activity. Cross-border trade between these communities, dates to pre-colonial times (Shamukuni 1972). Residing close to riverbanks and floodplains, these communities became adept at boat-making and swimming skills. It was the *mekoro* that were used to travel from one village to another along the major rivers such as the Chobe and the Zambezi, and across the Zambezi into Zambia, or vice versa developing cross-border trade with Kazungula being the major crossing point (Republic of Botswana 1982). (*Mokoro* is a traditional dug-out wooden canoe used as transport on local rivers such as the Chobe, Zambezi and Okavango. *Mokoro* is singular, while *mekoro* is plural.) Cross-border trade activities here have been part of the history of communities in Botswana and Zambia's Buluzi villages of Kazungula, Mambovwa and Sesheke on the banks of the Zambezi, cutting across pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods (Gumbo 2012).

According to Jeff Ramsay (24 August 2020), the first metal pontoon across the Zambezi was constructed in 1883 by Czech physician and explorer Emil Holub, one of the early European travelers to the area. Upon his return to Europe, Holub sold the pontoon to the famous European trader George Westbeeck who utilized it in his activities between Pandamatenga and the Zambian villages. This facilitated capitalist activities and interest in the area. It was also here that General Caprivi was blocked by Rhodes' BSAC which already had vested interest in the Victoria Falls on the Zambezi River from progressing with the creation of the strip to Tanganyika. In Ramsay's words, 'George Westbeeck used the pontoon to commercially carry goods across the Zambezi from the point on his "Hunters Road" extension from Pandamatenga... to a point marked by a large sausage tree [*izuungwe* or *moporota* in Chiikuhane and Setswana respectively] which had been popularized by [David] Livingstone' (Ramsay 24 August 2020; also see Macmillan 2005). Using cattle, ivory and trophy trade, Hugh Macmillan (2005) underscores the colonial interest in joining/connection claimed territories to establish trade empires.

In the colonial period, the crossing at Kazungula became very important for the colonial economy. The Bechuanaland Protectorate (Botswana) exported livestock on hoof from Ngamiland and Chobe to Northern Rhodesia's (Zambia's) Copperbelt to feed the labour force. Export cattle were sourced from as far as the remote villages of Shakawe and Sehitwa in Ngamiland, with some from the Chobe District (Interview with *Kgosi* Morgan Makhanga, 2 July 2021). Between the 1920s and 1960s, Kazungula was thus utilized as an important crossing point for these cattle exports which were tied by their horns to the frames of the pontoon, ten on each side, across the river at a pace determined by the Kazungula Ferry (Interview with *Kgosi* Morgan Makhanga, 2 July 2021; Ramsay 23 June 2023; Figure 1). This narrative is corroborated by another local *Kgosi*, Josephat Mwezi of Kavimba village who also stated that 'the cattle were not loaded on the Ferry but were rather tied on the side of the Ferry and driven across the river' (Shabani 25 August 2020). In addition to tying cattle to the pontoon, they were also driven across by groups of men in *mekoro*, a skill that was used in hunting riverine animals such as red lechwe and hippos. In 1943, some 8000 cattle were swum across the Zambezi at Kazungula to the Copperbelt abattoir (Macmillan 2005). This confirms the strategic significance of the pontoon and the crossing point at Kazungula, and, by extension, a semblance of regional trade. Crossing at this point occurred throughout the year using local means such as the dug-out canoe and later the pontoon.

Figure 1: Picture of the pontoon with cattle from Ngamiland, tied on the sides of the pontoon, crossing the Zambezi for the Copperbelt abattoir in the 1920s



Source: Ramsay (23 June 2023)

Perhaps more than at any other time in the history of the area, the Kazungula crossing notched another water mark, this time on the spotlight of the political geography of Kazungula. In the early 1960s, a new motorized pontoon, dubbed the ‘Kazungula Ferry’ owned by the Northern Rhodesia Colonial Administration in what is now Zambia, traversed the Zambezi waters from the Zambian side to Botswana and back, transporting export goods, including heavy trucks, cars and people feeding into the North-South Corridor. The corridor linked the mineral rich Copperbelt in Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to the southern part of the region namely Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Eswatini (formerly Swaziland); and the port of Durban in South Africa, thus enhancing regional trade and the nascent tourism in the area (Shabani 25 August 2020). Other than the Kazungula Ferry, in 1961, the newly opened Chobe River Hotel (now known as the Chobe Safari Lodge) in Kasane introduced its own small ferry across the Zambezi at Kazungula to collect tourists from Livingstone to the Chobe National Park (Parsons 2008).

Being one of the largest ferries in south central Africa, the Kazungula Ferry provided the only direct link between Botswana and Zambia. From June 1962 onwards, and at the height of Southern African liberation wars, the Ferry became popularly known as the ‘Kasane Freedom Ferry’ (Gumbo 2014:573). It was so named because it often transported liberation movement cadres/guerrillas and refugees from neighbouring white minority supremacist regimes of Southern Rhodesia, South West Africa and South Africa to ‘freedom’ in independent countries to the north of the Zambezi. The decolonization of Botswana and Zambia opened the floodgates to thousands of political refugees and aspiring freedom fighters who crossed into Zambia and countries beyond to seek political asylum and military training in Tanzania and socialist countries in Eastern Europe, from which they returned to liberate their countries (Hentz 2005). The Kazungula crossing point effectively became a ‘windbreak frontier between black and white Africa’ (Griffiths 1995:65). The Kazungula Ferry thus served

as a convenient conduit for the liberation movement recruits and asylum seekers. Freedom fighters took advantage of the Ferry to transport arms into Zimbabwe.⁴ Operated by Nelson Maimbolwa, a Zambian national who became an important link for the *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), the military wing of the African National Congress (ANC), the ferry carried approximately 25 people at a time.⁵ As the Botswana government portal notes:

Throughout the 1960s and 70s the Kazungula Ferry served as a vital link in the Freedom Corridor or “Pipeline” through Botswana that allowed thousands of political refugees and freedom fighters from surrounding minority ruled territories in the region to escape to sanctuary in Zambia and beyond. The importance of the route increased from 1962 when coming to power of the white supremacist Rhodesia Front regime in Southern Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe) was preceded by a police crackdown on movement of refugees via that territory. The subsequent independence of Zambia in 1964 and self-government followed by independence of Botswana, in 1965-66, further increased the route’s strategic importance. This resulted in sustained but ultimately unsuccessful efforts by Apartheid regime and its Rhodesian allies to try bully Botswana and Zambia into shutting the Freedom Ferry down (Republic of Botswana 26 April 2018).

With Botswana gaining independence in 1966, Presidents Sir Seretse Khama and Kenneth Kaunda of Botswana and Zambia mulled over the idea in 1968, of constructing a bridge across the Zambezi but the dream was thwarted by South Africa in a process Ieuan Griffiths termed ‘Protecting Apartheid’ (Griffiths 1995:64-65), with the Pretoria regime arguing that the bridge would facilitate ease of movement by freedom fighters to attack the apartheid state. These contentions are amplified in research by Malambo (2020) who provides the reasons for the delayed implementation of the construction of the Kazungula Bridge.

As stated earlier, the first pontoon was owned by Zambia, and, over time, in 2010, Botswana also acquired one due to the growing queues of people and truck loads of freight and other crossing vehicles at the Kazungula border (Republic of Botswana 26 April 2018). The two pontoons would go in opposite direction each time. But the Kazungula Ferry was not without challenges, including occasional breakdowns as well as threats from the racist regimes of Rhodesia and South Africa, effectively delaying the movement of freight and people across the river. The two regimes grew increasingly suspicious that the Ferry was clandestinely used by freedom fighters to and from their countries and thus regarded the Ferry as a serious security threat (Malambo 2020: 35). Consequently, security officers from these regimes occasionally attacked the Ferry to instil fear on Zambia and Botswana to hopefully abandon their support for the liberation cause (Griffiths 1995:65). So insecure were the two settler regimes that they even claimed that there was no common border between Botswana and Zambia, therefore, the ferry violated the waters of Rhodesia and South African-occupied South West Africa on the Zambezi River. ‘As a result’, In 1970, ‘South Africa claimed, the Kazungula Ferry, which links Botswana and Zambia at the quadripoint, was illegal. Botswana firmly rejected both claims. There was actually a confrontation and shots were fired at the Ferry; some years later, the Rhodesian Army attacked and sank the Ferry, maintaining that it was serving military purposes’.⁶ Clearly, these were desperate, albeit unsuccessful attempts by the two racist regimes to intimidate Botswana and Zambia into discontinuing the Freedom Ferry service.

⁴The Kazungula Ferry: A bridge Too Far? <https://tdaglobalcycling.com/2021/10/the-kazungula-ferry-a-bridge-too-far/> accessed 5 July 2023.

⁵‘South African History Online’, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/umkhonto-wesizwe-mk-exile>, accessed 5 July 2023.

⁶ ‘Kazungula Ferry-Botswana’, https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g1636878-d11966332-Reviews-Kazungula_Ferry-Kazungula_Southern_Province.html/, accessed 7 July 2023.

The ferry also experienced technical challenges, including prolonged dysfunction, with spare parts hard to find locally and only sourced from Cape Town in hostile South Africa, taking weeks to arrive. Often there were accidents too, reported in 2003 and 2006, respectively, on account of technical glitches. These challenges compelled the governments of Botswana and Zambia to revive the idea of a bridge across the Zambezi River (Malambo 2020: 41). Although mooted in 1968, the project could not take off because of political interference from the hostile settler regimes in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia. The 2008 commencement of the construction of the Kazungula Bridge was opportune because it involved sovereign SADC states. However, Zimbabwe opted out because it insisted that there was no material border between herself, Namibia, Zambia and Botswana (Malambo 2020:45) who argued that Zimbabwe feared losing business at Beit Bridge

Kazungula Ferry and the Regional Economy

For many years, the Kazungula Ferry has served the riparian communities on both sides of the Zambezi River in conducting their day to day social and economic activities (Figure 2). The Chobe District has historically been dominated by communities at the margins of the state because of its remoteness from centres of political and economic power and limited sources of employment. The area's dominant economy has been subsistent agriculture which has been in decline due to an enduring human-wildlife conflict occasioned by the nearby Chobe National Park, resulting in informal cross-border trade. But cross-border trade in the Chobe, as elsewhere in Africa, predates colonial controls, utilizing *mekoro* to carry goods and people (Mabuta *et al.* 2013).

However, in the post-independence period, with the use of the Kazungula Ferry, there was an increase in the volume of trade and the range of products and services with the North-South Corridor becoming a very important trade artery (Gumbo 2012). With a capacity of 70 tonnes, the 69 metres long ferry traversed the 400-metre-wide Zambezi River between Botswana and Zambia transporting goods for the so-called 'formal' as well as 'informal trade'.⁷ Although cross-border trade sustained borderland communities, and in the case of the Zambezi villages, the Kazungula Ferry was at the centre of transporting the goods across the river (Gumbo 2012:62). Trade goods on this north-south highway included seasonal agricultural products, second-hand clothing from Europe sold in bales, fresh and dried fish, crafts, and supermarket items, all reaching the market via the Ferry service (Mabuta *et al.* 2013; Gumbo 2010). The Ferry also transported tourists from Livingstone in Zambia to the tepid waters of the Chobe River in Kasane for tiger fishing (Gumbo 2002). All these activities supported informal and formal sector between the two countries (Malambo 2020:14)

⁷'Kazungula Bridge will Boost Trade', <https://www.whyafrica.co.za/kazungula-bridge-will-boost-trade/II>, 25 October 2020, accessed 2 November 2024.

Figure 2: Kazungula Ferry on the Zambezi River



Source: *Sunday Standard* (12 February 2020)

Commercial sex is another ‘informal’ trade activity by the riverbank on the Botswana side and around the government weighbridge where all long-distance trucks are required by law to be weighed. Sex work is a less written about activity in Botswana because the government, some feminists and religious groups regard it as abhorrent, immoral, degrading and oppressive to women. However, as Christine Overall (1992:709) argues, ‘the bottom line for any woman in sex trade is economics’. Women in sex work in the Kazungula cross-border area are victims of poverty within a depressed economy in the remote Chobe District (Gaolaolwe and Mokgatle 2023). Also referred to as ‘survival sex’ (Wojcicki 2022), transactional sex at Kazungula was a cross-border activity, drawing women participants from Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe (Gumbo 2012). Sex workers, both citizens and migrants have over the years plied their trade with cargo haul truck drivers waiting for a turn on the weighbridge and the ferry to cross the river into Zambia and beyond. Noting 30,000 long distance trucks a month crossing at the ferry, Gaolebale *et al.* (2023) posited that the Kazungula weighbridge terminal ‘is a place where all the trucks entering the Chobe District stop for a day or two, queuing to have their trucks weighed and to pay the required customs duty before proceeding to their various destinations, engaging in extramarital sex with multiple sexual partners’. Some truck drivers whiled away the long wait at the Botswana side of the border in the company of sex workers who marketed themselves at the long queues of trucks, with interviewed local women ‘service providers’ affirming ‘good business’ with the driver clients, thanks to the delays in crossing the river (Interview with Ms ‘Malebogo Kewagamang’ 6 November 2009). Business varied from a once-off transaction on the truck or spending the night together, on the truck and sometimes in a nearby guesthouse. It was undeniable, therefore, that transactional sex existed at the Kazungula Ferry, especially since Kazungula is a township near the tourist town of Kasane, despite government officials playing the moral card and

insisting on its non-existence in line with the law.⁸ Thus, the Kazungula Ferry and its social geography provided a niche for income for those involved in the ‘survival sex’.

However, 10 May 2021 sealed the fate of the Kazungula Ferry as the new bridge was commissioned. As the Dikarabo Ramadubu (14 May 2021), *Botswana Guardian* reporter, melancholically penned the ‘obituary’ of the ferry thus: ‘Memories of the ferry also known as pontoon as it crossed the Zambezi River will remain indelible in the minds of Kasane and Kazungula residents as well as the tourism fraternity. The machine that linked the north-south corridor, and traversed the Zambezi waters carrying heavy trucks with ease stopped operating this week, following the commissioning of the monumental Kazungula Bridge’.

Kazungula Bridge: SADC Regional Integration and Economic Development

If there was a decisive factor in expediting the construction of the Kazungula Bridge, it was the increased volume of trade in the SADC region, prompted largely by the democratisation of Africa’s most developed economy, South Africa in 1994, following decades of the apartheid system. Democratisation led to its integration into the southern African regional and the global economy (Mosala *et al.*, 2005). A working definition of ‘integration’ has been proffered by Eke and Ani (2017:64) who say that ‘to integrate, in general denotes making a whole out of parts of sovereign regions. Integration also designates a relationship among units in which they are mutually interdependent and jointly produces system properties, which they would separately lack’. Recasting its regional relations, South Africa abandoned the erstwhile apartheid policy of destabilising her neighbours and joined them as an independent state (Hertz 2005). Being the most developed economy on the continent and moving out of isolation to trade with countries to the north of her borders, the volume of trade in the SADC region increased tremendously. But the trade infrastructure, including transport had been decrepit, becoming the Achilles’ heel to the region’s desire for economic integration.

Regional economic integration has been one of Africa’s greatest challenges to socio-economic development. Economic development scholars on the other hand, have made compelling arguments for the importance of regional economic cooperation with a view to promoting the economic well-being of citizens of not only the African countries but indeed the global village (Asante 1980). This notwithstanding, barriers to regional cooperation in Africa persist. These are many and varied; among them ideological differences, lack of funding, widespread poverty, human rights violations, and disregard for the rule of law as well as civil strife, poor governance, and democratic deficit (Eke and Ani 2017). One of the most significant barriers to meaningful regional integration is transport infrastructure. As an analyst concluded, transport infrastructures are ‘a major drive for achieving economic development at all geographical scales, and particularly at the regional and local level, at which the units of the spatial economic systems are usually configured’ (Polyzos and Tsiotas 2020:5). There is thus a symbiotic relationship between transport infrastructure and regional development enhanced by market integration for efficient access to and distribution of goods and services. As Closs and Bolomey (2015:36) put it, ‘regional economic growth and development depend on producer and customer market access, which build on a solid transportation infrastructure system’.

It was against this background that the construction of the Kazungula Bridge was conceived. The project was motivated by the desire to create an unimpeded flow of goods, people and services across the Zambezi River on the north-south corridor and, most importantly, contribute to the regional integration of the economies in the SADC region (African Development Fund 2011). The ferry was no longer coping with the increased volume of goods and the existing border infrastructure was equally on the decline. ‘The scope includes

⁸ The *Botswana Penal Code*, Section 176, criminalizes sex work, regarding it as a ‘common nuisance’ ordering offenders to be arrested and detained.

a bridge linking Botswana and Zambia over the Zambezi River to replace the existing ferry and juxtaposed by one-stop border facilities at Kazungula' (African Development Fund 2011). While the physical construction of the bridge started in December 2014, its conceptualization and the road from Nata to Kazungula were the brainchild of Presidents Seretse Khama and Kenneth Kaunda as early as 1968 (Ramsay 22 December 2022). Zambia was the first African country to open an Embassy or High Commission in Gaborone/Botswana. Kenneth Kaunda was the first head of state to visit Botswana in 1968 (Parsons 2008). But, in defence of apartheid, South Africa supported by its Rhodesian counterpart, which were economically and militarily stronger than Botswana and Zambia, obstinately objected to the proposed construction of the bridge. South Africa claimed that Botswana and Zambia did not have a common boundary at Kazungula. But, as Ramsay argue, the real reason was the fear of possible free passage across the bridge by freedom fighters into the racist regimes' territories. This was to be one of the controversies associated with the history of the Kazungula Bridge. Although the construction did not see the light of day until 2014, that of the tarred road from Francistown to Kazungula commenced in the 1970s (Ramsay 22 December 2022).

Presidents Festus Mogae of Botswana and Levy Mwanawasa of Zambia are credited with the decisive planning of the bridge's construction in the mid-2000s. Owing to the geopolitics of the area where the bridge was to be constructed, the original plan in August 2006 comprised of Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe. As stated earlier, in many cases Africa's failure in economic development has often been a result of selfish leadership. According to Gertrude Kitongo and Tom Page, in 2007 President Mugabe of Zimbabwe pulled out of the tripartite agreement, apparently for fear that the Kazungula Bridge 'would reduce traffic through Zimbabwe's lucrative Beitbridge border post with South Africa' (Kitongo and Page 22 August 2022). Hitherto, most trade goods from South Africa to the northern countries passed through Beitbridge, creating a revenue base for the beleaguered Zimbabwean economy, hence Mugabe's fear for loss of income to Botswana. It flies in the face of logic for Mugabe to view the Kazungula Bridge as a competitor when in actual fact the two bridges of Beitbridge and Kazungula should be complementing each other in advancing the ideals of SADC to which they both belong.

Commencing in 2014, completed in 2021, and financed by a consortium of funders including the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the African Development Bank, and the governments of Botswana and Zambia, the project cost US\$259.3 million (Kitongo and Page 22 August 2022). The Japanese paid 57.5%, the African Development Bank paid 31.5%, while Botswana and Zambia each paid 9.2% and the balance of 1.8% was paid by the European Union's Infrastructure Trust Fund grant (Malambo 2020: 66). The construction was undertaken by a South Korean firm Daewoo E & C, and one of the immediate benefits to the region was that some of the building materials such as cement and steel structures were sourced from regional countries (African Development Fund 2011). Conceived to improve the transport infrastructure and reduce transit time at the Zambezi crossing, the railway and-road bridge catered for trucks, small vehicles, trains and a pedestrian walkway. The railway line running parallel to the road on the bridge was meant to link with the envisaged 430 kilometres long 'Moseitse-Kazungula-Livingstone' railway line, fully connecting Francistown in Botswana and Livingstone in Zambia to transport both goods and passengers.⁹ Acceding to the dictates of the geopolitics, the bridge was designed to curve midway to strictly avoid Namibia and Zimbabwe but pass through the territories of Botswana and Zambia (African Development Fund 2011; Figure 3). A one-stop-customs facility was provided in order to quicken customs clearance on each side of the bridge-border. Kitongo and Page (22 August 2022) explain that 'At either end

⁹ Kenneth Mwenda, 2021. 'Zambia, Botswana to Construct Railway Across Zambezi', <https://www.africaninvestor.com/zambia-botswana-to-construct-railway-across-zambezi/>, accessed 20 July 2023.

of the bridge are one-stop customs offices, so freight crossing the border only needs processing by one country. Expediency is necessary now that there is a higher volume of daily traffic’.

Figure 3: Picture of the Kazungula Bridge¹⁰



Three Years On: How Far Has the Kazungula Bridge Gotten?

The Kazungula Bridge has resulted in important economic developments for Botswana and Zambia in that revenues from taxation of goods will add into the coffers of the two nations (Malambo 2020: 56). Admittedly, being only three years since the commissioning of the bridge on 21 May 2021, the full impact of its socio-economic contribution to regional integration and development is yet to be fully appreciated. Notwithstanding, there have been significant developments against which the impact of the monumental bridge can be assessed as illustrated in the subsections below.

Positive impact

On the political front, the completion of the bridge and border facilities is a ‘showpiece example of the sort of cross-border cooperation and regional trade infrastructure development to facilitate intra-Africa trade in the SADC region’.¹¹ It can be safely argued that regional cooperation and economic integration in Africa are possible if there is political will. Consequently, trade is set to increase for intra and extra regional economic activities on the North-South highway feeding into the ideals of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Predating colonial times, indigenous cross-border trade was the more viable option for poor households who now stand to benefit more from the fast crossing at the new bridge. Exacerbated by the declining employment opportunities in Botswana and Zambia, there was a remarkable increase in Botswana women traders travelling by bus with some from Gaborone and Kasane to Lusaka, to source the fast-selling European second-hand clothing, taking advantage of the new facilities brought about by the bridge (Interview with Kesegofetse Tau 21 June 2023). Known in Botswana

¹⁰ ‘[picture of Kazungula bridge - Bing images](#)’, accessed on 24 July 2023. Note the shape of the bridge bending to avoid Zimbabwean territory on the right as Mugabe snubbed the bridge project.

¹¹ Kenneth Mwenda nd. ‘Zambia Botswana construct railway across Zambezi’, <https://www.africaninvestor.com/zambia-botswana-to-construct-railway-across-zambezi/> accessed 20 July 2023.

as *inama* (bend and select from a bale of clothes), in Zambia the trade in European second-hand clothing is referred to as *salaula* (a Bemba word for select from the pile). According to Kesegofetse Tau, *inama* trader, there were minimum delays at the border due to the improved customs infrastructure saving time for the traders most of whom had advance orders from their clients back in Botswana.

In consonance with the ideals of the Kazungula Bridge project, and the commitment to job creation for communities in the area, the economic activities associated with the project created about 500 jobs (*Sunday Standard*, 3 November 2016).¹² Job creation is very key to this remote Kazungula area and is a welcome development as it provides purchasing power to the poverty-stricken communities that are far from the centres of economic power in the cities of the two countries.

The decommissioning of the ferry and replacing it with the bridge paid huge dividends. The most obvious being the creation of ease of movement for both cargo and private vehicles (with two car lanes in each direction), and people, including pedestrians utilising walkways on the bridge. There is no longer any need to rely on the pontoon with its occasional breakdown. General services delivery has improved at the crossing. Due to the expediency provided by the One-Stop-Border Post (OSBP), customs clearance services speeded up, and operational hours also increased to allow more transit traffic with a higher volume of cargo to travel across the bridge, thus potentially lowering cargo transport costs (Malambo 2020: 58). While operational hours for the erstwhile ferry were 0600hrs to 1830hrs, with the new bridge the opening hours remained 0600hrs but closing at 2200hrs. In the words of Chikumbi Chama, Assistant Commissioner at the Zambia Revenue Authority:

The bridge has allowed longer operating hours, with the border open between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. The old border facility received up to 80 trucks a day, [with a load of only two trucks and two small cars and passengers per trip across the river], now customs is receiving over 280, and the numbers are rising every day. But despite the higher volume of traffic, the transit period has been reduced to half a day (Kitongo and Page 22 August 2022).

With more cargo trucks using the bridge, increasing by 400%, both countries look to increase revenue from border collection in the form of taxes and other levies (Statistics Botswana 2020). Due to its location at the quadrupoint as well as its unique shape, the rail-road bridge has become iconic and a tourist attraction that draws crowds, creating a potential revenue base for both countries (*Sunday Standard* 2024). Its geographical location in the 'tourist belt' that covers Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia and Botswana is a niche for the region's tourism industry. These four countries boast of some of the best tourist attractions within close range of each other. A new development in the form of the annual Kazungula Bridge marathon sponsored by FNB to enhance tourism and good health in the Chobe area promises to bring a positive impact to the Chobe communities.¹³

Negative impact

Like all major developments, there is rarely an immediate impact on the lives of ordinary people living on the fringes of the project. It cannot be politically correct to give glowing accounts of the contribution of mega projects to the macro-economic level while downplaying the impact on those at the margins of the mainstream economy (Malambo

¹² 'Kazungula Project creates over 500 jobs' *Sunday Standard*, 3 November 2016, <https://www.sundaystandard.info/Kazungula-project-creates-over-500-jobs/>, accessed 2 November 2024.

¹³ <https://kazungulabridgemarathon.com/>, accessed 2 November 2024

2020:57) . Informal traders that thronged the Botswana border area selling various items, especially to truck drivers have since been displaced and starved of customers as trucks no longer park for long compared to up to a month parking in past (Malambo 2020:53). Local ladies used to cook food including the sought-after bream fish and fruits both wild and supermarket-sourced, selling to drivers who usually waited for long for their turn at the weighbridge and along the short distance to the riverbank. Other negative impacts of the Kazungula Bridge construction are presented by Malambo (2020:58).

Despite the social and economic benefits to the local people mentioned above, the Kazungula Bridge construction project also impacted the Kazungula environment and society negatively. The construction of the bridge and the new border posts impacted the wetland environment (area around the Zambezi River) in several ways, for instance, loss of indigenous fauna (animal life), habitat fragmentation and reduced access to habitat. Clearing of vegetation in the construction site has exposed the soil in the area making it more susceptible to soil erosion which now requires mitigation measures to be taken to prevent soil erosion. Construction also resulted in the loss of habitat for birdlife and other fauna in the wetland.

The net effect of the coming of the bridge is that it effectively erased the past which local people had historically identified with. There has equally been a significant reduction of sex work for similar reasons, plunging the traders into hopelessness as they had lost a source of revenue that had supported them during the days of the Kazungula ferry. Whilst health benefits are palpable, the economic impacts are rather dire for the informal sector. On the other hand, the death knell on sex trade could be viewed positively. Reduced sex work led to the slow spread of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS with which the area has been associated for quite some time (Gaolaolwe 2023). The speedy clearance of trucks also reduced other unintended consequences such as inflow of drugs, illegal currency dealings and crime which had found their way during the days of the ferry and its associated delays (Gumbo 2010).

Consequently, the development of the Kazungula Bridge introduced an infrastructure that improved transportation efficiency at regional and international levels. However, this development also occasioned paradoxes in its socio-economic impact on the local community. The point is that historically, hawkers and sex workers who were able to engage with truckers who waited for a long time at the border to cross saw their fortunes drastically reduced. Thus, the local economy, arising almost from 'inefficient' infrastructure (the ferry) was then displaced when the 'efficient' infrastructure was introduced (the new bridge). Contrariwise, whereas increasing African trade required better infrastructure, building this new infrastructure adversely affected local communities that were actually dependent on poor infrastructure. Despite the fact that such major development undertook environmental impact assessments in their conceptualisation, it did not so much regard this aspect of community informal economy as it did not benefit from the improved infrastructure. Malambo (2020) perceived the Kazungula Bridge construction as having long terms benefits for Botswana and Zambia particularly, and for SADC and Africa generally. In that perspective, local communities, governments and truckers need to adjust to the new *modus operandi*.

Conclusion

This article has, in the context of transport infrastructure development, examined the development of the Kazungula Bridge over the Zambezi River and its contribution to the local economy and regional development, highlighting the importance of the facility to regional integration. It traced the history of the crossing from pre-colonial, through the

colonial and post-colonial periods and the challenges to economic activity and regional integration. The article argues that the conceptualisation and successful completion of the bridge shows that cross-border cooperation is possible with political will as demonstrated by Botswana and Zambia, an achievement which other African countries can build on and attain inter and intra-regional integration and economic development. The bridge is a significant component of the trade infrastructure of SADC countries, thus contributing to regional economic and tourism development. It has also reduced the time and cost of moving goods on the North-South Corridor, at the same time facilitating movement of more vehicles across the Zambezi River and creating a revenue base from taxation and levies.

Albeit on temporary basis, the project provided employment for local communities. Cross-border trade across the two countries benefitted from the fast clearance at the One-Stop-Border facility on each side. Nonetheless there were a few negative effects such as displacing informal traders who plied their trade on the Botswana side of the border. Sex workers were hardest hit as trucks no longer waited long at the border area where sex was traded with transit truck drivers. Symbolically, the bridge is a re-connection of local communities, regional trade routes, and therefore, a deconstruction of the colonial creation where African populations were put in four country borders. The bridge is indeed a political statement that Africa must reach out first within itself to truly develop.

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