# Violence in the Borderlands of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Benin: Regional Integration Without ECOWAS

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## Abstract

The article examines how communities in the tri-border region of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Benin manage security and cooperation after the weakening of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the rise of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Using interviews, observations, and social network analysis, the study reveals that, in the absence of strong state or regional authority, local actors—such as chiefs, market women, religious leaders, and youth groups—develop their hybrid systems for resolving disputes, ensuring security, and managing cross-border trade. While these informal and locally rooted arrangements often fill gaps left by formal institutions and can be effective and innovative, they also have serious limitations. They may exclude outsiders, reinforce old hierarchies, and sometimes escalate tensions or insecurity. Digital tools like WhatsApp are increasingly important, but access is unequal. The article argues that real regional integration and security depend on recognizing and supporting these local practices, while also addressing their shortcomings and not just relying on top-down solutions from organizations like ECOWAS. The experience of these borderlands challenges traditional ideas about borders and governance, showing that both resilience and vulnerability coexist in complex ways.

**Keywords** Hybrid Governance · Cross-Border Security Assemblages · Informal Institutional Practices · Regional Integration Politics

## Introduction

The border region spanning Malanville in northern Benin, Gaya in southern Niger, and adjacent eastern Burkina Faso stands today as one of the most strategically significant and institutionally contested spaces in West Africa. Once regarded as peripheral to both national decision-making and formal regional integration, this corridor is home to a complex tapestry of ethnic groups, trade routes, and religious traditions. Malanville, a bustling market town on the banks of the Niger River, and Gaya, Niger's key gateway to the south, serve as commercial and migratory crossroads, sustaining

populations that have grown steadily over the past decade. These borderlands, long characterized by the interplay of informal commerce and cross-border kinship, have recently taken on new geopolitical importance amid the shifting landscape of regional alliances and security threats.

The departure of Niger and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2023 and the subsequent creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) mark a critical rupture in the architecture of West African cooperation. ECOWAS, founded in 1975, has aspired to promote economic integration, conflict prevention, and the free movement of people and goods across national boundaries. However, for much of the tri-border area, these ambitions have often existed more in theory than in practice. Statutory frameworks and regional protocols, while rhetorically powerful, have repeatedly proven difficult to enforce, and the lived experience of borderland populations has been shaped more by the fluid realities of insecurity, migration, and pragmatic adaptation than by official policy (Bassey, Etefia, and Ebong 2024; ECOWAS Communiqué 2024; International Crisis Group 2024). The recent fragmentation of regional institutions has thus exposed both

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the limits of supranational authority and the enduring gap between elite-driven regionalism and everyday governance at the margins.

In the wake of partial or complete withdrawal by state and regional authorities, local actors across the Malanville–Gaya corridor have not simply confronted a governance vacuum. Instead, they have mobilized traditional leadership, market associations, religious figures, women's collectives, and informal security networks to sustain social order and manage cross-border challenges. These adaptive strategies that are rooted in historical memory, kinship ties, and creative negotiation often surpass formal interventions in both effectiveness and legitimacy, especially under conditions of crisis or disruption (Radil et al. 2022; Nugent 2019).

Against this background, the article poses a core question: How do borderland communities in the Sahel respond to the retreat of formal authority, and what can these responses teach us about regional security and integration beyond the state and supranational organizations? By shifting analytical focus from elite diplomacy and institutional design to the "micro-geopolitics" of everyday borderland life, this study advances the argument that the Malanville–Gaya corridor represents an active site where the future of security and legitimacy is being forged from below (Fregonese 2021; Dittmer 2018; McGregor and Chatelard 2022).

To address this question, the article draws on original qualitative fieldwork, oral histories, and social network analysis conducted in the Malanville–Gaya borderlands. Theoretically, it engages with and synthesizes insights from borderland studies, subaltern security studies, and micro-geopolitics by bridging macro-institutional accounts with the granular realities of West Africa's most vulnerable and innovative spaces. By centering the agency and informal practices of everyday actors, the analysis foregrounds their decisive role in shaping the emerging trajectory of regional security and integration in the Sahel.

## Theoretical Framework

The recent institutional ruptures within the ECOWAS and the parallel formation of the AES have not merely exposed the fragility of supranational organizations; they have thrown into sharp relief the enduring, if often overlooked, significance of informal regional integration. Conventional paradigms of regionalism in Africa, which privilege state-centric and institution-based approaches, are increasingly inadequate for explaining the lived realities in the Malanville–Gaya borderlands, where state authority is frequently intermittent, fragmented, or altogether absent (Bassey, Etefia, and Ebong 2024; Meagher 2021; Grégoire and Labazée 1993). Within this context, our analysis distinguishes between "minimal presence," characterized by sporadic

and selective engagement by state or regional actors, often reactive and short-term, and "strong presence," which would imply sustained, predictable, and widely legitimate involvement in the ongoing management of security, justice, and economic flows. This conceptual distinction is not only empirical but also analytical (see Fig. 1 for a conceptual map), allowing us to capture the spatial and temporal volatility of governance in the borderlands.

To move beyond the limitations of state-centric readings, this study draws together four intersecting strands of scholarship, each of which illuminates different dimensions of borderland life: informal regional integration, borderland studies, subaltern security studies, and micro-geopolitics. Their synthesis provides a conceptual toolkit for understanding how security, legitimacy, and cooperation are continuously forged, contested, and renegotiated in conditions of institutional flux.

As the first strand, informal regional integration directs our attention to the social infrastructures and adaptive practices that sustain cross-border life when official frameworks falter. Everyday actors such as market women, religious intermediaries, transport syndicates, and traditional chiefs maintain economic and security networks through trust, kinship, and tacit rules. While scholars often warn that these
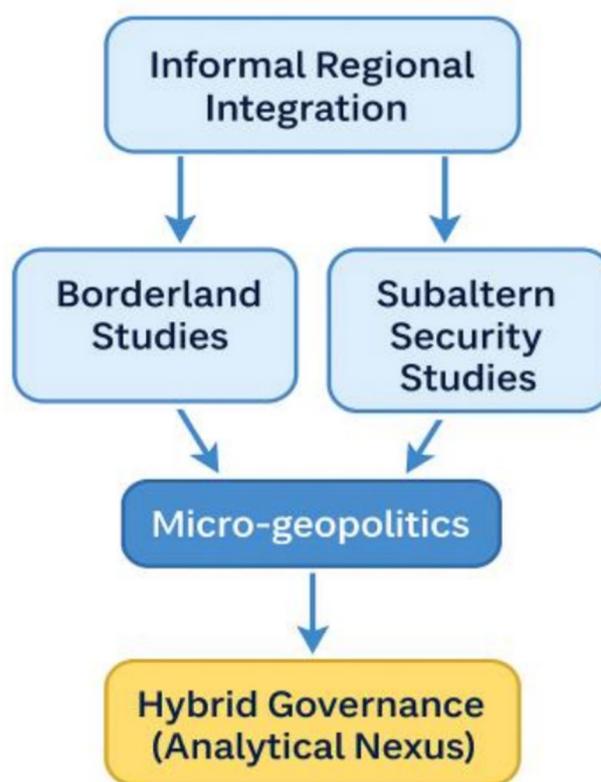


**Fig. 1** Intersection of theoretical approaches. Source: By authors, 2025

arrangements can harbor criminal or exclusionary dynamics, recent field research and testimony increasingly recognize their capacity to foster resilience, maintain order, and fill governance gaps (De Bruijn and van Dijk 2020; Lebovich 2020; Boone 2003; Walther and Miles 2018). However, the capacity of these informal networks to mediate crisis is not uniform; they are shaped by local hierarchies, historical memory, and access to social capital, and may thus exclude "outsiders," women, or stigmatized minorities.

Second, borderland studies disrupt the conventional notion of borders as static or merely peripheral. Instead, borders are viewed as dynamic "zones of circulation" and negotiation (Nugent 2019; Adesina 2019; McDougall and Scheele 2012; Baud and van Schendel 1997). In the Malanville–Gaya context, empirical evidence demonstrates that borderland communities develop their own hybrid governance mechanisms, from market arbitration panels to cross-border security pacts, often operating independently of, or in tension with, formal state apparatus. The literature makes clear that such agency is deeply ambivalent: while borderland actors are often sources of innovation and pragmatic adaptation, they may also reinforce forms of exclusion and deepen existing inequalities of ethnicity, gender, or migration status (Bøås and Strazzari 2020; Boone 2003).

Third, subaltern security studies provide a critical corrective to state-centered security analysis by foregrounding the lived experiences and insecurity dilemmas of populations systematically marginalized in national and regional policymaking (Bilgin 2016). These approaches expose how communities subjected to chronic uncertainty, violence, or legal ambiguity mobilize "hybrid" security assemblages—market committees, vigilante patrols, religious mediation—constituting new forms of legitimacy and everyday authority (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011; Iocchi and Baldaro 2024; Colona and Jaffe 2016). Still, this literature is attentive to the dark side of such hybridity: exclusion, contestation, and the risk that informal actors may be co-opted by armed groups or criminal networks (Tubiana and Gramizzi 2017; Bargués 2024). The tension between resilience and vulnerability remains central.

Fourth, micro-geopolitics sharpens the analytical focus by examining how everyday practices, seemingly mundane acts of market negotiation, rumor control via WhatsApp, and cross-border funerals or marriages, actively shape and sometimes subvert wider regional dynamics (Dittmer 2018; Fregonese 2021; Cantens 2019). This approach challenges the deficit narratives that depict borderlands as simply "ungoverned spaces," instead showing how power is constantly performed, negotiated, and reimagined at the micro level. Through the lens of micro-geopolitics, the study can connect the choreography of daily survival to broader questions of order, legitimacy, and regional integration.

These approaches converge in the concept of hybrid governance, which describes the dense, negotiated entanglement of multiple, sometimes competing authorities such as chiefs, imams, market syndicates, and NGOs, who collectively shape the architecture of security and cooperation (Sowale and Ukeje 2025; Bargués 2024; Boone 2003). Hybrid governance is marked by its resilience, adaptability, and proximity to local needs, often outpacing formal institutions in times of crisis. Yet, it is equally susceptible to fragmentation, fragility, and the risk of co-optation or exclusion, particularly under conditions of escalating violence or abrupt policy shifts (Cantens 2019; Chabal and Daloz 1999).

No framework is without risk. An uncritical emphasis on local agency may inadvertently overstate the virtues of informality, potentially overlooking the enduring influence or possible resurgence of formal state and supranational institutions, especially in moments of acute crisis or external intervention. Likewise, the plural and negotiated nature of hybrid governance, while enabling flexibility, can also undermine accountability, justice, and transparency, leaving the most marginalized at risk of exclusion or abuse. Informal arrangements may yield short-term effectiveness but do not necessarily ensure resilience in the face of escalating violence, climate-induced displacement, or transnational crime. Finally, these approaches must take care not to essentialize "the local," nor to underestimate the complex, recursive relationships between local, national, and transnational processes.

In sum, the synthesis of these frameworks allows for a more nuanced, critical, and empirically grounded analysis of Sahelian borderlands. It situates this paper in current scholarly debates while recognizing both the conceptual contributions and the empirical limitations of research on hybrid order and informal regionalism in contexts of state transformation and regional fragmentation.

Figure 1 shows the intersection of our theoretical approaches. Informal regional integration, borderland studies, and subaltern security studies each offer key insights into the nature of local agency, daily adaptation, and security in West African borderlands. Micro-geopolitics functions as an analytical link, highlighting how everyday practices shape and negotiate power. At its core is the concept of hybrid governance, which combines these frameworks to reflect the layered, negotiated, and dynamic character of order in situations of minimal or fragmented state presence.

## Methodological Approach

This study adopts a multi-method qualitative approach designed to reveal the everyday realities, adaptive practices, and local strategies that underpin security and integration in

the Sahel borderlands. Official statistics and top-down policy analysis often prove inadequate for capturing the complexity of frontier spaces; therefore, this research centers on the lived experiences and agency of those most affected by overlapping crises. Data collection was based on purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diverse representation, beginning with local chiefs and traders in Malanville and Gaya, then expanding to include a wide spectrum of actors such as traditional authorities, market actors, transporters, municipal officials, religious leaders, security personnel, and informal actors like vigilante group members. A total of 58 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in French, Hausa, Dendi, and Fulfulde, with local interpreters facilitating as needed; special care was taken to include women, youth, and pastoralists, as well as marginalized groups. Interviews were guided by protocols that addressed cross-border cooperation, informal security, daily negotiation of legal order, and perceptions of institutional effectiveness. Interview data were thematically coded through deductive and inductive approaches, with interpretations cross-checked against local insights and triangulated with complementary sources to ensure contextual rigor and validity. In addition to conducting interviews, the study also gathered oral histories from elders and established traders to illuminate the long-term evolution of local arrangements and to highlight the enduring influence of historical memory and collective strategy. Participant observation in markets, religious and customary gatherings, and community security meetings allowed for the direct observation of social dynamics, trust-building rituals, and micro-level diplomacy. The centrality of informal networks was further analyzed through social network mapping, which visualized the kinship, digital (e.g., WhatsApp groups), and religious ties structuring information flow and mobilization beyond formal policy channels. Additionally, local media, rumors, and digital communications—ranging from radio broadcasts to digital alert systems—were systematically monitored to track community perceptions of threat, security, and shifting narratives around ECOWAS, AES, and other regional actors. Documentary analysis of institutional sources, including risk management plans, mayoral statements, minutes from security meetings, and communications from border committees, was conducted alongside ECOWAS and AES communiqués and NGO reports to expose gaps between official discourse and lived realities.

Given the sensitivity of the research environment, robust ethical protocols were implemented. Informed consent was obtained verbally or in writing, confidentiality was strictly maintained, and pseudonyms were used throughout. Interviews involving potentially traumatic or sensitive topics were handled with care and flexibility, and all field team members were briefed on ethical practice and participant safety. The researchers' positionality, as an external academic with prior policy experience but operating as a temporary member of the communities under study, was continually reflected upon

through field journals and collaborative debriefings with local assistants. This reflexive practice, together with multilingual teamwork and regular feedback from community advisors, helped mitigate misunderstandings and interpretive bias.

Despite these strengths, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. Some groups, such as clandestine armed actors or newly arrived migrants, were difficult to access, potentially limiting sample diversity. The use of interpreters, while essential, may have affected the depth or nuance of some interviews. Security concerns periodically constrained the duration and spatial coverage of field visits, and the presence of an external researcher may have influenced participant responses, especially on sensitive topics. While the sample was diverse, it cannot claim full statistical representativity for the entire tri-borderland region. Nonetheless, by foregrounding local actors, networks, and practices, this layered, field-driven methodology provides a robust empirical foundation for understanding the failures of formal frameworks and the emergence of alternative forms of security and integration, while remaining transparent about its own boundaries and ethical responsibilities.

## Empirical Findings

Analysis draws on in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and digital ethnography, with original cases selected to illustrate the lived complexity of borderland governance, legal pluralism, and everyday security. The findings are organized by analytic focus: people, institutions, and arrangements, with each subsection explicitly tied to the article's integrated theoretical framework.

## People

Consistent with theories of hybrid governance and micro-geopolitics, the borderlands are marked by creative and pragmatic legal adaptation, as seen when chiefs and elders assume central roles in conflict resolution. For instance, following the abduction of a trader's child in Malanville's remote compound, the community waited in vain for a police response. The chief, drawing on ritual authority and local legitimacy, convened an outdoor mediation where restitution, apology, and a Quranic oath were agreed upon: "…We waited four days for the police; nothing. So we called the families to the tree. We said, 'Bring the child or bring shame to your family.' They agreed to pay, apologize, and swear on the Quran. When the uniforms stopped coming, it was up to us…"[1] This highlights how, in the face of state absence, local actors blend statutory,

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[1] Community elder, Malanville April 2023

customary, and religious norms that embody the hybrid nature of legal order described in the literature.

Yet, these arrangements are not fail-safe. A nearby village attempted similar community mediation for a land dispute, but ethnic tensions and accusations of bias undermined legitimacy, resulting in retaliatory violence and a deepening of social divisions: "…They said, 'The elders only listen to their own people.' The meeting broke. That night, their house burned and a boy was hurt. Now, we fear each other more than the thieves…"[2] This negative outcome illustrates the fragility and potential dangers of hybrid governance when social cohesion is lacking.

Women's associations, especially among market actors, demonstrate both the power and the limits of informal regional integration. In one notable case, a women's market collective in Gaya successfully leveraged both ECOWAS protocols and local custom to secure the release of detained traders, using law, tradition, and digital mobilization: "…We wrote to the police to ask for a release of our sisters, you break the ECOWAS law and our custom… We also called the chief and sent WhatsApp messages. After two days, they freed the women. We were proud… This is our strength…."[3]

However, another migrant woman, lacking established social ties, received no support and suffered repeated harassment and extortion—revealing the persistent exclusion of outsiders and the gendered dimensions of legal vulnerability: "…I went alone. The tax men laughed. I paid three times. No one spoke for me because I have no people here…"[4] Youth, particularly Fulani pastoralists, navigate ambiguous and often precarious legal environments. While mobilized for night patrols, they remain excluded from leadership and decision-making. Some, feeling voiceless and alienated, have been drawn into violent or extremist groups promising empowerment and retribution, as in the case of Abdoulaye and his peers: "…We carry old rifles, walk all night. But in meetings, we're told, 'Stay outside, let the elders decide.' When strangers come and offer us a voice, who will listen? Sometimes the only justice we find is not from our own…"[5] This underscores the subaltern security dilemma: those at the margins are both mobilized and marginalized, their agency constrained by entrenched power structures.

## Institutions

Institutional pluralism shapes the daily reality of law and order in the tri-borderlands, producing a legal landscape that is neither neatly layered nor easily navigated. Rather, authority is dispersed among market committees, religious councils, crisis assemblies, and the formal apparatus of the state, each with its own rules, legitimacy, and vulnerabilities. This proliferation of fora not only offers residents a mosaic of recourse but also obliges them to become adept navigators of overlapping jurisdictions.

As one trader from Gaya vividly explained, the logic of "forum-shopping" is not merely opportunistic but often necessary for survival: "…The market elders wanted a fine, the imam wanted me to pay back double, so I went to the police, gave them 5,000 francs, and the case disappeared. You must play the game; there is always another way…"[6] Here, micro-geopolitical agency is revealed as tactical, improvisational, and grounded in an intimate reading of the power relations at play. Yet, such pluralism is not unambiguously empowering. It can foster ambiguity, create opportunities for rent-seeking, and, as the trader's words suggest, risk turning justice into a commodity resource to be bargained for rather than a right to be claimed.

The fragility and ambivalence of these hybrid institutions are further exposed when legitimacy is tested. In one instance, a customary court's decision to exile a man suspected of collaborating with bandits did not restore security but instead catalyzed further violence. As a local elder lamented: "…We shamed him in public, told him to leave the village. We thought, 'He will learn.' But he joined the bandits and came back with a gun. Who will trust our word now?"[7] This episode exemplifies the unintended consequences of informal justice, underscoring how exclusionary or punitive sanctions can fuel cycles of retribution, erode communal trust, and inadvertently empower the very actors they seek to marginalize. The double-edged nature of legal pluralism is laid bare: its ability to adapt and resolve is shadowed by the risk of escalating insecurity and deepening local fractures.

Religious authorities occupy an increasingly central, yet contested, role within this pluralist terrain. Interfaith councils and Friday sermons frequently attempt to harmonize sharia and statutory law, not only to reinforce moral order but also to actively mediate contemporary threats such as cattle rustling. An imam described his approach: "…Every Friday, we say: 'The Quran and the law both forbid stealing and violence. Allah sees everything; the police may not…'"[8] These efforts to anchor legitimacy in both divine and state authority can have tangible effects, such as the voluntary return of stolen livestock. Yet the moral reach of such councils is neither universal nor uncontested. Christian minorities, for example, describe feeling invisible within these assemblies: "…They talk about justice, but we do not hear our stories. The council is not for us…"[9] This testimonial

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[2] Farmer, tri-border village, April 2023

[3] Women's association leader, Gaya market May 2023

[4] Migrant trader, Bodjekali December 2024

[5] Fulani pastoralist Gaya April 2023

[6] Male trader, Gaya April 2023

[7] Customary elder, tri-border village June 2025

[8] Imam, Gaya March 2023

[9] Christian community member May 2025

lays bare the persistent boundaries of religious legitimacy, which can not only unite and pacify, but also exclude and alienate—demonstrating how plural institutions may not be equally accessible or credible to all social groups.

Finally, the digital transformation of legal practice further complicates the institutional landscape. The proliferation of smartphones and WhatsApp groups has enabled rapid reporting, crowd-sourced surveillance, and new forms of communal mobilization. However, these same tools are fraught with risk in the absence of clear legal frameworks. In one notable incident, youth shared video evidence of robbery suspects, expecting support from the police. Instead, their intervention sparked rumor cascades, vigilante violence, and their own detention. As one participant recounted: "…We thought, 'The video will help.' But the police said, 'We cannot use this—too many lies on WhatsApp.' Next day, people blamed the wrong family. They attacked the house and later, the police came for us, not the thieves…"[10] This case underscores both the promise and peril of digital innovation. While new technologies can amplify local agency and create alternative archives of accountability, in the absence of procedural safeguards and digital literacy, they also generate new forms of exposure, surveillance, and injustice.

The institutional pluralism of the Sahelian borderlands is not merely a story of resilience or adaptation, but one of constant negotiation—where every actor, from trader to imam to digital activist, is both an agent and a subject of complex, sometimes contradictory, logics of power and legitimacy. The challenge for both scholarship and policy is to recognize not only the flexibility and ingenuity that sustain these systems, but also the deep vulnerabilities and inequalities they can reproduce or intensify.

## Arrangements

In the shifting and often unpredictable landscape of the borderlands, residents have developed a repertoire of practical tools and adaptive arrangements to manage the profound uncertainties that shape daily life. These "vernacular infrastructures" operate alongside—and sometimes in the absence of—statutory protections, revealing the ingenuity and resilience that underpin social order in contexts of chronic instability.

Among pastoralists and traders, highly localized codes such as lineage flags and clan-specific greetings serve as vital credentials at both official and unofficial checkpoints. For those able to invoke recognized markers of affiliation, these tools offer a measure of safety and predictability. As one herder explained: "…At the checkpoint, they look for color. I show my flag, give the greeting: 'I am son of

Moussa.' They let me pass. My friend, a stranger, no flag, they beat him and took his goats…"[11] This testimony underscores how finely grained social knowledge can function as a protective mechanism, enabling mobility where formal documentation fails. Yet, the same codes that grant protection to insiders sharply delineate the boundaries of community, leaving migrants and outsiders exposed to extortion and violence. The exclusionary potential of these arrangements highlights a central paradox: the very adaptability that fosters resilience for some may intensify precarity for others, particularly those without kinship ties or recognized status.

Women's mutual aid networks have become a lifeline in times of crisis, mobilizing community resources to provide support after events such as market fires or thefts. As Aissatou recounted, this solidarity often "solves the problem before help arrives," filling critical gaps left by absent or slow-moving formal assistance. She explained: "…We make the list: who lost, who needs help. We collect, we share. But it is always the same few who give, and now we are tired. Last week, a fight broke out over the rice. I wonder how long we can do this…"[12] These remarks reveal both the strength and the fragility of communal self-reliance. While mutual aid embodies a form of collective agency celebrated in much borderland literature, it also exposes internal inequalities and the risk of "solidarity fatigue." Disputes over distribution are becoming more frequent as need outpaced resources, illustrating the finite capacity of informal arrangements in the face of prolonged or repeated shocks.

Digital tools, particularly mobile phones and WhatsApp, are increasingly central to the legal and informational life of the borderlands. Youth collectives, motivated by both civic duty and the urgent threat of extremist recruitment, have pioneered the use of voice notes in local languages to disseminate anti-terror laws and counteract misinformation. One organizer described the approach: "…We made short voice notes in Hausa: 'Don't believe the rumors; this is the law.' We shared them in the market groups. Some women thanked us, said, 'You saved our boys.' But older women say, 'We don't have those phones—tell us at the mosque…'"[13] This innovation has reportedly prevented recruitment attempts and provided timely legal information, demonstrating the creative possibilities of "vernacular digital literacy." However, as the organizer's reflection makes clear, access to digital resources remains uneven. Elderly women and recent migrants, lacking devices or digital fluency, remain reliant on traditional channels such as radio or word-of-mouth, and

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[10] Youth association member, Gaya May 2023

[11] Fulani herder, Garou May 2023

[12] Women's association member, Gaya March 2025

[13] Young men, Malanville May 2023

thus are disproportionately excluded from new forms of legal empowerment.

These diverse arrangements, coded signals, mutual aid, and digital outreach, make visible the ongoing negotiation of security, legitimacy, and belonging at the margins. They are best understood not as informal supplements to "proper" law, but as core components of the plural legal order described by borderland and subaltern security scholars. Their strengths lie in their flexibility, rapid response, and rootedness in local practice. Yet their limits are equally significant: they can deepen social divides, shift burdens onto the already vulnerable, and risk creating new axes of exclusion even as they mitigate others. The borderland experience with such arrangements affirms that resilience and exclusion are often two sides of the same coin. For policy and scholarship, this underlines the necessity of supporting not only the existence but also the equity of vernacular arrangements, broadening access to their benefits while recognizing, and addressing, their embedded hierarchies.

## Discussion

The findings from the Malanville–Gaya corridor and the wider tri-borderlands of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Benin present a significant challenge to conventional theoretical frameworks of legal pluralism, hybrid governance, subaltern security, and micro-geopolitics, as outlined in the theoretical background. While legal pluralism is often valorized in the literature for fostering flexibility and inclusivity (Nugent 2019; Boone 2003), this research demonstrates that pluralism is deeply ambivalent. It not only enables multiple avenues for justice but also generates ambiguity, selective enforcement, and entrenched exclusion. The practice of forum-shopping among market committees, religious councils, and state police often amplifies pre-existing inequalities in power and access, leaving migrants, minorities, and the digitally marginalized with little meaningful recourse. Similarly, while hybrid governance is theorized to promote resilience by fostering pragmatic cooperation between state, customary, and religious authorities (Bargués 2024), empirical evidence reveals that such arrangements are highly contingent. They are frequently fragmented by ethnic, gendered, or kinship divides and tend to replicate patterns of elite dominance. Subaltern security theory, which foregrounds the creative agency of marginalized actors (Bagayoko 2021; Abrahamsen and Williams 2011), is partially affirmed by grassroots innovations such as mutual aid networks and digital collectives. However, this agency is often accompanied by "solidarity fatigue," intra-community conflict, and the recruitment of youth into violent groups, evidence of the psychological and material tolls of chronic adaptation. Micro-geopolitical perspectives illuminate the everyday negotiations such as coded greetings or rumor management, that shape mobility and order, but these practices are constantly shaped and constrained by broader processes such as militarization, policy volatility, and predatory state actors. Digital adaptation, though promising in its potential for rapid communication and legal literacy, remains uneven and often introduces new risks, including misinformation, surveillance, and further marginalization of those lacking access or digital skills.

What this paper contributes that is original is its empirical grounding in the lived realities and narratives of everyday actors in the tri-borderlands, foregrounding a nuanced, critical assessment of how legal order and security are practically negotiated amid overlapping, sometimes competing, regimes of authority. By systematically documenting not only the successes of local adaptation but also the failures, exclusions, and unintended consequences—through detailed, field-based cases and verbatim testimonies—this study demonstrates the limits of resilience and adaptation often celebrated in the literature. Moreover, it advances the theoretical conversation by showing that plural and hybrid governance arrangements are not only sites of creativity and agency, but also arenas where old hierarchies are reproduced and new vulnerabilities emerge. Through its integration of micro-level ethnographic detail, analysis of digital adaptation, and critical engagement with negative cases (such as failed mediation or vigilante violence), the paper pushes beyond deficit models of "ungoverned spaces" and equally beyond romanticized accounts of borderland innovation. Instead, it offers an original, empirically substantiated framework for understanding the contingent, contested, and ethically complex nature of legal order, governance, and security in contemporary Sahelian borderlands.

For scholars, this research calls for a more reflexive application of dominant frameworks, one that is attentive to the full spectrum of outcomes, including exclusion, exhaustion, and fragmentation as well as agency and resilience. For policymakers, the study's original empirical insights underscore the necessity of addressing not just local capacity or digital inclusion, but the deep, structural drivers of insecurity and marginalization. In sum, by centering the voices and strategies of those navigating everyday life at the margins, and by critically interrogating both the enabling and constraining dynamics of plural and hybrid legal orders, this paper contributes a distinctive, field-driven perspective to debates on law, governance, and security in West Africa.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the Malanville–Gaya corridor and the broader tri-borderlands of Benin, Niger, and Burkina Faso demonstrates that the erosion of formal regional frameworks, which is epitomized by the fragmentation of ECOWAS and the rise of the AES, has not resulted in the

disappearance of regional cooperation or security management. Rather, what emerges is a mosaic of informal diplomacy, vernacular legalities, and micro-level adaptations that are at once pragmatic, contested, and deeply embedded in local social fabrics. Chiefs, market women, religious authorities, youth groups, and digital activists collectively sustain a functional, if uneven, security order that neither mirrors nor simply substitutes for state-led regionalism.

If ECOWAS or similar supranational institutions were to resume strong, legitimate, and continuous engagement in these borderlands, the nature of regional integration and security management would inevitably change—but not simply through the re-imposition of top-down authority. A robust ECOWAS presence could, in principle, provide more consistent resources, legal protections, and standardized protocols for crisis response. For instance, clearer mechanisms for dispute resolution, greater formal recognition of cross-border markets, and enhanced protection for migrants and minorities might emerge, potentially reducing some of the exclusions, inequalities, and vulnerabilities revealed in this study. Moreover, the symbolic power of an active ECOWAS presence could reinforce the legitimacy of plural institutions, offering a critical bridge between everyday practices and formal governance.

However, this scenario is not without risks. If external intervention were to undermine or sideline locally legitimate arrangements, it could inadvertently weaken the very networks of trust and adaptation that underpin current resilience. Historical experience in the region suggests that attempts to "formalize" or "harmonize" local orders, absent genuine inclusion and sensitivity to context, often reproduce new forms of exclusion, contestation, or bureaucratic inertia. Thus, the most promising policy scenario is not a binary choice between supranational and local orders, but a collaborative, dialogic approach in which ECOWAS (or any regional institution) recognizes, resources, and learns from the complex architectures of hybrid governance already in place.

The empirical findings and theoretical reflections presented here have broader resonance beyond the West African Sahel. They challenge simplistic dichotomies between formal and informal, state and non-state, and center and periphery. Instead, they urge scholars and policymakers to recognize that meaningful regional integration is always a negotiated process—one that relies as much on micro-geopolitics, everyday diplomacy, and plural legal orders as on summit declarations or institutional treaties. For Africa and other regions marked by contested sovereignties and fragmented governance, the "borderland perspective" advanced here offers a valuable corrective: it foregrounds local agency, highlights the creativity (and constraints) of vernacular governance, and insists on the need for multi-layered, inclusive approaches to security and integration.

In conclusion, the tri-borderlands of Benin, Niger, and Burkina Faso are not merely marginal zones of insecurity, but also critical laboratories for rethinking regional order in a time of institutional flux. By moving beyond both deficit-based and celebratory narratives of informality, this study advances an argument for adaptive, contextually grounded strategies that bridge the persistent gap between supranational ambition and the lived realities of those who inhabit Africa's most dynamic frontiers.

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