Within the framework of a research programme entitled “ANR FRONTAFRIQUE, African boundaries: arbitrary or historically embedded? New approaches on the historicity of African boundaries”, a round-table is organised on the theme of the role of boundaries in the processes of decolonisation and of African States gaining Independence. Acting as the locus of political sovereignties, boundaries are important to study. During this period, they constitute both an object to study and an appropriate scale of observation to scrutinize continuities and changes.

Ground breaking work on trade-unions and political fights has contributed to shed light on power transfers. Up to date, academic work has not focused as much on the importance of territorial stakes at the time when formal sovereignty was attained. If the theme was introduced in debates concerning balkanisation, federal organisations or panafrikanism, the measure of the role and importance of territorial stakes and boundaries at the time is yet to be conceptualised. The issue of territory was central during the twenty year process of autonomisation, whether debates on the future of colonial territorial configurations during the 1950s or the idea of the intangibility of boundaries in the 1960s are taken into account.

Taking into account the diversity of situations – and sometimes different chronologies – our wish is to examine on the one hand the preparation, the debates and the projects focusing on territory and boundaries and on the other hand shifts introduced on the ground by autonomy and changes in status. Our aim is to discuss the material and symbolic evolutions related to territorial control and boundaries at Independence. We hope to combine different scales of analysis, paying attention to international and national institutions, administrations and political organisations as well as local situations in border areas. Through the observation of rhythms of change occurring at the periphery and of transformations both effective and at the level of discourses introduced locally with autonomy, we intend to determine whether boundaries were – or on the contrary were not – an important stake in the process of decolonisation on the road to Independence. Considering that it is truly the entire and multiple processes and not only the heritage of colonialism which has given shape to postcolonial dynamics (F. Cooper, 2005), we also would like to shed a new light on contemporary issues related to boundaries. In order to examine these questions together, we are asking for contributions on the following themes:

1. At the eve of Independence, in some cases, colonial leaders decided to try and sort out boundary issues. We would like to study renegotiations, new demarcations and projected territorial reorganisations which appeared at the eve and in the first few years of Independence – whether these plans are promoted by colonial actors on their way out or by Africans.

2. What role did a discussion of boundaries play in political discourses at Independence? What role did they play for instance, in debates about institutional models (community/union, federalism), regional groupings and national belongings? At the scale of new States, what were the different types of discussions in assemblies or in executive committees dealing with boundaries? Did leaders decide to implement specific programmes with a territorial impact (development programmes in border areas, efforts to renegotiate demarcations, etc.)? What about the role of the discussion of boundaries in nationalist discourses, did the idea of a national territory remain vague?
3. How were territorial means of control transmitted and transformed at Independence? Did they constitute a priority for the new leaders? As far as procedures and staff were concerned, how did the transfer of power and competence take place? This theme might also be studied on the basis for instance of the production of guidelines to determine the new status of nationals and foreigners and identify them.

4. Finally, we also hope to look into changes introduced at Independence in border regions. What impact did autonomy have on the habits and daily practices of the people living in those specific areas? Did changes in the status of a boundary affect people’s lives? What were the individual or collective strategies to cross boundaries in relation to chronological differences in gaining Independence or to the start of new regimes? Did new practices echo older ones or did they constitute a break in time? Did the period of Independence correspond to a time when people were made even more aware of administrative and political boundaries?

We welcome any contribution on the above themes. Please send a half page abstract in French or in English to the organisers of the round-table, Séverine Awenengo Dalberto sawenengo@yahoo.fr and Camille Lefebvre camillelefebvre@yahoo.fr by the 4th of January 2010. Proposals on Anglophone and Lusophone Africa are most welcome.