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Orbital Labour: Anthropology of Work and Chinese Space Infrastructure in Djibouti

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersections between labour, infrastructure, and global power through the case of the Chinese space base in Djibouti, a strategic node within the Belt and Road Initiative. Adopting an anthropological and ethnographic approach, the research investigates how the construction and operation of this infrastructure reshape local employment dynamics, generating both new forms of work and socio-economic tensions. The methodology combines participant observation, qualitative interviews, and a multisensory soundscape analysis to explore not only the organisation of labour but also the everyday perception of a highly militarised and technologically advanced site. Preliminary findings reveal a dual dynamic: on one hand, the opening of new channels for cooperation and technology transfer; on the other, the deepening of asymmetries between local workers and Chinese actors, with significant impacts on the social fabric and the imagination of the future. This research contributes to the broader debate on the sociology of work in global frontier zones, offering a critical reflection on the forms of employment and infrastructural presence emerging in contemporary East Africa.

Keywords: Africa, BRI, China, Djibouti, Infrastructure, Space