

'...NEITHER CAMEROON NOR NIGERIA; WE BELONG HERE...!' THE BAKASSI KINGDOM AND THE DILEMMA OF 'BOUNDARIES' AND CO-EXISTENCE IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA

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ABSTRACT:

Boundaries or border zones in Africa, and the inter-state and inter-community relations generated across them, have been major sites for the inter-play of various social, economic and political dynamics. This paper reflects on the dialectics of the state-society relations within the socio-economic prism in the context of the Nigeria/anglo-Cameroon border. Situating the analysis in the post-independence period, the paper examines critically the socio-economic challenges and paradoxes confronting the two independent states of Nigeria and Cameroon Republic in regard to the legitimacy of the Bakassi Peninsula border zone that divides an area despite its extremely high level of cultural homogeneity. The paper shows that, as a fluid cultural zone informed by strong historical ties, the Nigeria/anglo-Cameroon borderland area has not only been a site of intense inter-state relations, but also an *arena of possibilities* for the local communities. As the paper makes clear, Africans, in many ways, turn the boundaries of their modern states from rigid barriers between countries to flexible frontiers of mutual contact and cooperation. The implication of this for the need to establish local mechanisms to promote trans-border cooperation, and ensure that "*the partitioned Africans*" of the affected border communities do not suffer unduly, becomes obvious.

Introduction

Perceived as lines defined by man, boundaries which mark the geographical limits of a state, as well as the extent of its sovereignty (Imobighe 1987:120), are also a notable strategic feature of nations' survival. This strategic relevance clearly explains why nations jealously protect and defend their political frontiers and boundaries. The implication of this protection in international relations is incessant territorial disputes among nations all over the continents of the world.

Territorial or boundary disputes are the most common sources of inter-state crisis in post-colonial Africa. Since 1961, more than half of the member-states of the continental body, the Organization for African Unity (O.A.U.), have been involved in at least one territorial dispute. On the part of Nigeria, for example, there have been various border disputes with the country's neighbours. In 1976, for instance, the Republic of Benin claimed sovereignty over the village of Shanji in Sokoto state. Cameroon followed with her claim of sovereignty over eighteen villages in the Bakassi Peninsula (Akindele and Akinterinwa 1992: 243-44).

The difficulty in the search for peaceful and mutually acceptable solutions to border disputes in post-colonial Africa can be traced to the non-delineation of disputed areas by the colonialists, the existence of rich mineral resources in most disputed areas (Akindele and Akinterinwa, 1992), and probably the un-clarity of Western international law on territorial jurisdiction (Nwaka 2007).

Comparatively, the boundary crisis in post-colonial Africa has its roots in the hasty and haphazard partition of the continent by the imperial powers of Europe towards the end of the 19th century. Whereas the boundaries of the modern states in Europe itself evolved

over the centuries as a result of revision after wars and conquests---and some are still being contested till date in some parts of Europe---state boundaries in Africa were, willy-nilly, determined by imperial fiat within a space of some two years or so, and subsequently enforced with minor but recklessly executed adjustments in a couple of decades under colonial hegemony. The consequence of this was that, patterns of ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural and commercial affinities, which for centuries bridged different social, economic and political contexts in Africa were suddenly and rudely terminated in order to accommodate imperial desires and norms. To give legal sanctity to this new boundary regime, new notions of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and exclusive jurisdiction of states were transposed from the post-1648 European international state system (Ate 1992:3).

Nigeria's national space and boundaries are as inherited from Britain as per the terms of the exchange of notes of October 1, 1960, between the incoming Nigerian sovereign state and the departing British hegemonic power---an act which, from the perspective of today's Eurocentric international law, was what gave birth to Nigeria as an independent state. Accordingly, the treaties, protocols and other legal instruments which Britain had signed with other colonial European powers (the most crucial ultimately turning out to be France---the erstwhile colonial ruler of all but one of Nigeria's neighbours) to define Nigeria's boundaries vis-à-vis these neighbouring countries, became binding on the Nigerian government. This was later reinforced by the Organization for African Unity's (OAU's) resolution number 16 of 1964, which was accepted and ratified by Nigeria (Asiwaju 1992: 58).

Indeed, boundaries constitute a very sensitive issue in inter-state relations. It not only delimits the territorial jurisdiction of sovereign states, but also constitutes (especially in the very case of Africa) a

major source of disputes in international relations (Dada 1992: 264). Unfortunately, both colonial and OAU resolutions have provided no absolute solution to boundary disputes in Africa. The same thing applies to the Nigeria/Cameroon case, even with the 2002 verdict of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in favour of Cameroon, which remained un-enforced until August of 2006. Yet, in spite of an age-long boundary dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon (Weladji 1978), there is abundant evidence to show that the Bakassi border is shaped as much by the everyday activities of the indigenous people of the affected border communities in ways that sometimes undergird, but at other times may bypass the formal structures of the states. Little wonder why most cross-border studies maintain that African boundaries are essentially permeable, constituting no significant barrier to the cross-border movement of labour and goods. Some of the studies even claim that African boundaries stimulate formal and informal cross-border trade, representing zones of opportunity for partitioned Africans (see, for instance, Asiwaju 1984; Chiabi 1986; Aderibigbe 1989; Niger-Thomas 2001; Christopher and Johnson-Ross 2007). This provides the justification for this paper. The paper attempts to examine the implications of the Nigeria/Cameroon artificial boundary within the context of considerations of cultural, social and economic activities across it, as well as diplomacy (especially international relations).

Nigeria and Cameroon: Bakassi as a Source/Site of Intense Inter-State Relations

Since independence, Nigeria's relationship with Cameroon, as well as its other contiguous neighbours, has been marked essentially by mutual suspicions, distrust and outright alienation. Put differently, Nigeria's relationship with Cameroon has historically been in conflict since both of them attained independent statehood.

The reason for this negative experience of age-long hostility is that in pre-colonial times, and even in the colonial era, a very high percentage of the people and territories that presently constitute Cameroon were part and parcel of administrative state units within the territory of present-day Nigeria. Indeed, as we shall point out later, many ethnic groups and peoples in Cameroon are ethno-culturally connected to populations in Nigeria. What, then, is the source of the negatively intense inter-state relations and structural disharmony between Nigeria and Cameroon?

It has been suggested (Ate 2000: 173) that the basic (or predisposing) factors responsible for this are related to:

- (i) Nigeria's unequal size (especially, in terms of territory and population) when compared with Cameroon;
- (ii) The consequences of Nigeria's colonial boundary with Cameroon;
- (iii) The neo-colonial presence and role of France in Cameroon; and
- (iv) The availability of vital resources in the maritime and land border areas of the Bakassi Peninsula zone.

Additionally, as is the case with most African border areas, the Bakassi Peninsula zone is an area notorious (that is, *in the eyes of the state*) for those clandestine trade activities that go by the names, 'smuggling' and 'black marketeering'. Today, as available evidence show, various clandestine trade operations thrive despite the institutions of state control put in place to check smuggling activity; in fact, smuggling and black marketeering seem to have become normalized in this area. However, this additional source of worry and conflict for Nigeria and Cameroon is also a source of considerable

wealth to the local people of the Bakassi zone who have no other means of acquiring it.

The Bakassi Zone: Historical Experiences/Ethno-Cultural Features that Bind

One of the natural features which have stubbornly frustrated attempts by Nigeria and Cameroon to physically demarcate their borders is the permanent presence of a population with common historical experiences, and of the same ethno-cultural stock on both sides of the ostensibly international divide. The people of these ethnic groups continually insist on their right of interaction for historical and cultural reasons, and for socio-economic and commercial purposes, against artificial and unfair impositions by the (colonial and) post-colonial state.

The point to stress here is that, ethnic groups and sub-groups of Nigerian origin cut across the Nigerian international boundaries with Cameroon. They are located, at least, in that part of the Bakassi border region that fall under sub-national areas where the socio-economic lives and well-being of the people are directly and significantly affected by proximity to international boundaries (Hansen 1981).

Historically, these ethnic groups separated by artificial boundaries possess *community characteristics* and common experiences which make them inherently disrespectful of the concept of borders as 'barriers'. As a result, their socio-cultural (and also, socio-economic) perception of borders is wider than the statutory or administrative dimension.

Most of these ethnic groupings share deities and totems, ancestral shrines, major rites having to do with birth, manhood, maidenhood, womanhood, marriage, child-bearing, and death. Some of them, as oral evidence confirms, still share annual festivals and rituals, which all members of the ethnic groups across boundaries have traditional obligation to participate in.¹ As one well-informant informant put it, “we do not discriminate here. Our problem of survival is neither Cameroon nor Nigeria; we belong here together and we all are struggling for a better life as individuals and as a group of people.”²

The Bakassi Peninsula, a territory of about 665 square kilometers, situated between the Cross River and the Rio del Rey River is specifically “located by the right side of the Cross River Estuary on the Atlantic sea board” (Nwaka 2007). It is also a sea route to Equatorial Guinea. To the Cameroonians, Bakassi flanks the entry route to the port of Rio Del Rey and most of their South West Province. Originally, there were four major ethnic groups that occupied the boundary area between Nigeria and Cameroon. These were the Ibibio, Efik, Ekoi, some semi-Bantu and Bantu people. However, the semi-Bantu people within the boundary, namely, the Ibibio/Efik, the Ekoi and the Boki, the north of the Cross River bend, are mostly confined to the west of the Cross River, and therefore would not constitute direct problem to the assessment of the international boundary. The Efik sub-group which moved into the estuaries of the Cross and Calabar Rivers also raises no ethnic problem, except in the neighbourhood of Rio-del-Rey, where Efik fishermen founded fishing towns. But, the two semi-Bantu groups---the Ekoi and the Boki---were greatly affected by the boundary arbitrarily imposed by the imperial masters; and the effects have continued to be a source of conflict. This problem was clearly manifested in the Nigerian first census of 1921 (as can be seen in the tables below)

Table 1.0

Province	Ethnic groups	Ethnic groups	Ethnic groups	Ethnic groups
	Ibibio/Efik	Ekoi	Other semi-Bantu	Bantu
Calabar ()	918,217	7,215	11,662	45
Ogoja ()	37	44,255	24,877	-
Nigeria				
Southern Cameroun	2	38,279	1,613	83,132

Table 1.1

	Akaju	Nde	Nkumun	Ekoi	Assumbo	Keaka	Manta	Banyang	Obang
Calabar ()	-	-	-	7,046	-	-	-	-	-
Nigeria ()	7,575	9212	13894	10957	-	-	-	-	-
Ogoja									
Southern Cameroun	-	-	-	1958	2746	7506	4343	19112	2,609

Source: Talbot 1926: 26, 60-61

Tables 1.0 and 1.1 above show the disruption in homogenous ethnic groups by the Anglo-German boundary division.

The two tables above which depict the disruption in homogenous ethnic groups by the Anglo-German boundary division of the colonial period, show clearly that the Ekoi group was the most affected by the boundary division.

The Cross River-Cameroon zone is an area where there exists no clear tribal division and claims. The complexity of linguistic pattern and the diversity of the historical origin are perhaps without parallel in any African territory. In a situation such as this area presents, any question of ethnic demarcation is both difficult and meaningless. In fact, this has been the major source of the Bakassi crisis. The tribal and cultural affinity between Nigeria and Cameroon in this area is so great that one could virtually believe one is in Nigeria in some part of Cameroon. There are groups that spread into each other, particularly the Ekoi, Efik and Mandara.

In southern Cameroon (in the areas around the Bakassi and Eniong Peninsulas situated on both west and east of the mouth of Rio del Rey and Calabar channel) are Nigerian fishermen of Efik origin who settled in the areas that are being contested between Nigeria and Cameroon. Prominent among such villages being contested are Abane, Ine, Ekoi, Ine Edem Ntong, Ine Odiong, Anam Owong, Obuta, Okobo, Okobidi, Ibekwe, Afaha, Usaha, Ine Edet, Ine Akwa, Ine Attayo, Ine Inua Abasi and Ine Ikang (Alkali 1992). This is why it is difficult for the locals along the border area to understand border demarcations and delimitations as they see their kith and kin as part and parcel of their everyday life. In Cross River and Akwa Ibom states, there are Efik/Ibibio groups that spread from the Calabar area into the neighbouring littoral areas, just like the Fulani and Shuwa Arabs of Cameroon are common on both sides of Gongola and Borno states of Nigeria.

On the whole, the long Nigeria-Cameroon border inherited from the British and the Germans, and subsequently, the British and the French (when France came into the picture in colonial Cameroon), was *not clearly and completely* demarcated most especially from the Cross River rapids southward to the coastline area. The discovery of oil in the creeks around the Bakassi Peninsula has intensified the

ensuing conflict. Today, the “un-acceptable boundary”, even with the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2002 (that the Bakassi Peninsula belongs to Cameroon, and not to Nigeria), remains a source of border dispute, with the problems centering on human, economic, political and strategic interests to Nigeria and Cameroon.

The Bakassi Zone: *Arena of Possibilities for the Local Communities*

As far as pre-colonial ethnic relations among the various groups are concerned, it should be borne in mind that the Efik were primarily the chief medium through whom the demands of European trade, first in slaves and later in hinterland agricultural products, were met. It was also through the Efik that European goods reached the hinterland people (Ogundele 1985: 60). During this period, there were constant struggles to gain control over trade and trade routes, although without the existence of clearly delineated boundaries of state control, it is difficult to locate any instance of disruption in ethnic relations or even in the conduct of trade.

As from the twentieth century onwards, all these changed as the colonial state came into being, and European spheres of influence for trade were defined, extending even further into the areas in question. With the coming of European colonial state structures, artificial boundaries were created. These restrictions infringed on the “free trade” that had once existed between the various groups of the Bakassi area. Therefore, the roots of the Bakassi crisis date back to the colonial times. This is true, given that, “the development of the boundary between Nigeria and Cameroon cannot be traced in isolation of events in the entire African continent between 1830 and 1960” (Oyone 1982: 1).

Of course, artificial boundaries, once created, delimit trade. Unfortunately, these boundaries cut across native areas and split communities; for example, the Ejagham and Boki groups of Manyu Division were divided between Nigeria and Cameroon into Ejagham-Nigeria and Ejagham- Cameroon, Boki -Nigeria and Boki -Cameroon (Niger-Thomas 2001: 55). These have become current terms used locally by the people of the area. The division followed the boundary demarcation of 1912-13 by the German and British colonial states (Southern Cameroons Government, 1958). The illegal---that is, illegal in the eyes of the foreign authorities---transport of trade goods and persons across what now became official boundaries followed the institution of trade restrictions. Everything changed and what had been normal trade relations for the indigenous people suddenly became illegal. That is to say that, the erstwhile free traders of the Bakassi zone now became involved, willy-nilly, in trans-border clandestine trade as smugglers. But, as has rightly been stated, “while clandestine trade impoverishes the state, it brings considerable wealth to people who have no other means of acquiring it. It represents a local solution to a local problem” (MacGaffey 199: 67).

Taking the case of smuggling within this area as an example, it is easy to validate Nugent’s (2002) argument that borders are shaped as much by the everyday activities of ordinary people in ways that sometimes undergird but at other times may bypass the formal structures of the states. Although smuggling in the Bakassi zone of the Nigeria-Cameroon border may be due to age-long cross-border interactions that have their own distinctive features, its activities offer avenues for economic survival that combine elements of inter-state and trans-national regionalism.

Smuggling or informal cross-border trade is generally defined as the illegal transport of goods and/or persons in or out of a country to avoid taxation (Njoku 2010). Since it occurs across boundaries, it is

a type of international trade that avoids import duties and restrictive laws (Niger-Thomas 2001). Because of the weakness of the state in addressing the marginalized position of the Bakassi Peninsula border communities, and its inability to control this unorthodox form of trade, many people of these border communities and their families (though not without the challenges of cross-border trade) have benefited socially and economically through smuggling. It is an open secret that cross-border trade activity is a well organized business in which the indigenous people of the border communities collaborate even with highly placed state functionaries and other influential citizens within the two states.³ Within the Bakassi zone, the flow of goods illegally from Nigeria to Cameroon takes advantage of the price disparity of such goods and of the exchange rate disparity between the inconvertible Nigerian Naira and the convertible CFA franc while, in infiltrating goods into Nigeria, smugglers exploit the insatiable tastes of Nigerians especially after the prohibition by the Federal Government of Nigeria of clearly designated luxury (consumer) goods. Consumer goods, Aba-made goods⁴ at duty-free prices (Meagher 2010:76-7), petroleum products, stolen vehicles, spare parts, currency, agricultural produce and later hard drugs constitute the major items that move from Nigeria into Cameroon, while goods which suffer prohibition from time to time in Nigeria (like wheat flour, hard drinks and cigarettes, etc) are smuggled into the insatiable Nigerian market.⁵

From the viewpoint of the Bakassi Peninsula zone, the general applicability of the concept of border-lands as areas in which the social and economic function of the state fades gently into that of its neighbours (Mills 1973), is borne out by incontrovertible pieces of evidence of the way the indigenous people of the zone take advantage of the national economic trends in Nigeria and Cameroon. For instance, Nigerians and Cameroonians in the border zone at all points freely exchange each other's currency as legal tender. The Nigerian

Naira is acceptable in the neighbouring border-lands of Cameroon, just as the Cameroonian CFA franc is in the Nigerian area. Similarly shared across the bi-national lines are such national amenities as health and medical institutions, as well as agricultural services provided by government.

Thus, viewed from the perspective of the people of the border communities, though the state is deprived of resources that could be used to perform certain socioeconomic functions, there is the transfer of opportunities for profit from the state to the indigenous members of the communities. In this light, since individuals rather than the entire society seem to benefit, the border zone represents, for its immediate beneficiaries, an arena of possibilities.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper has shown that both the negative and positive aspects of border relations between Nigeria and Cameroon relate to the fact of the permanent presence of population of the same ethno-cultural stock on both sides of the international boundary, in addition to the fact that large portions of present-day Cameroon had constituted administrative domain of the separate political entities that make up modern Nigerian Federation. This aspect of history is perhaps the single most important source of the boundary crisis affecting Nigeria and Cameroon, while this crisis is itself the defining characteristic of Nigeria's bilateral relations with her.

As a result of the existence of the ostensibly international divide between Nigeria and Cameroon, relations between the two countries are now defined structurally by some basic sets of conditions or features that continue to bind and also strain. Two of these features are spelt out as follows:

- (a) Existing historical commercial interactions have been hampered as a result of prohibitive restrictions at the present border (the customs, immigration, military, police, Nigerian Drug Law Enforcement Agency, NDLEA, etc). these restrictions were unknown in pre-colonial and much of the colonial times; and

- (b) The impact of smuggling and black marketeering activities extensively distort Nigeria's economy, and *vice versa*.

With regard to the second feature mentioned above, it bears repeating that the porosity of the Bakassi border region has made informal and unrecorded trade more important than formal and recorded trade. As Akindele and Akinterinwa note, "the dilemma here is how to make the frontier less porous and more secure and how to curb illegal activities such as smuggling without hindering transnational movements..." (1992: 243). This calls for urgent action especially in the light of a shrinking world under the aegis of globalization, coupled with the ECOWAS freedom of movement of citizens within the region.

However, the paper submits, in the final analysis, that, though smuggling has a negative connotation especially from the point of view of the state, due to cross-border interactions that have their own distinctive features in the context of the Bakassi Peninsula zone, its activities offer (to the partitioned Africans of the affected border communities) avenues for economic survival that combine elements of inter-state and trans-national regionalism. This underscores the fact of the paradox of illegal trans-border commercial activities (like smuggling and black marketeering) as both

developmental and non-developmental, especially where the state is weak in addressing the marginalized position of the often neglected border communities, and also unable to control unorthodox forms of trans-border trade activities.

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