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# NIGERIA – CAMEROON SOUTHERN BOUNDARY CONFLICT, 1884-2002: TYPOLOGY, INTENSITY AND PROGRESSION

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**Abstract:** Since the introduction of European model of nation-states and boundaries in Africa (1884-1885), the history of the southern section of the Nigeria –Cameroon boundary had been a bellicose one until its resolution by the International Court of Justice in 2002. For over a century, the boundary between the two proximate neighbours had gone through several alignments and realignments. This paper identifies different typology of conflicts along the International divide, from colonial to post-colonial periods. These include territorial and positional disputes, functional, resource-based and frustration – aggression dimensions. It further examines the intensity and progression of the conflict between the two neighbouring African States, from the European scramble for territories, through independence, up to the International Court of Justice ruling in 2002.

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

The Nigerian Cameroon southern boundary conflict is as old as the history of the boundary itself. From the Scramble and Partition of Africa which marked the last quarter of the century. nineteen to the independence years, the southern portion of the boundary has earned the notoriety of a conflictual frontier arising out of neglected realities such as ethnology, precolonial trade arteries and geographical ignorance. Of the known typology of international boundary conflicts, (i.e. territorial. functional. positional, resource-based and frustration aggression), the boundary under study fits the bill of all five, thus giving it a peculiarity that distinguishes it from other international boundary conflicts in Africa and elsewhere.

Like a volcano, the history of the conflict had both intervals of apparent quiescence and intense activity. The period of intense activity which is the concern of this paper manifested through varying degrees of tension and open confrontation.

# TYPOLOGY OF CONFLICT IN THE AREA OF STUDY

#### **Territorial Dispute**

In discussing the different conflict quotients that describes the nature and causes of the Nigeria - Cameroon disputes, boundary the territorial dimension is given pre-eminence. In the prelude to partition, inter-European conflicts in the coastal footholds of what later emerged as Nigeria and Cameroon frequently occurred due to claims of incompatible rights by virtue of treaties with African coastal rulers. The scramble for territories per se was acrimonious in nature and introduced in its wake a strand of conflict described by T. F. Eliot as 'elbowing' (Hargreaves 1984, p.19 -27). It was not unusual for Britain or Germany to out-smart each other through force of logic, reason or deceit in their rush to secure endorsement of treaties with African chiefs. The very elastic nature of protectorate treaties bred acrimony. For instance, the protection treaties endorsed by Kings of Old Calabar, although did not mention adjourning territories (Anene 1970, p.50) was interpreted by the British colonialist as having transcendental effect on Bakassi due to its corresponding ethnic homogeneity and the adjourning interior territories which formed the trade arteries of Old Calabar. This was a position German traders and agents were neither willing to accept nor respect.

Germany's quest for the control of Inland waterways of Akpayafe and Ndian to access the interior and also to divert trade from the interior to Duala against the former arrangement which was from the interior to Calabar, brought her into conflict with Britain. To establish an exclusive competence in the intervening zone, German agents resorted to burning down several Efik trading stations on the banks of Akpayafe (Prescott 1960)

Anglo-German boundary delimitation of 1909 otherwise known as the Milner-Simon Line and affirmation in the 1913 treaty, were bereft of ethnographic considerations. Perhaps, the Efik-Ibibio-Oro groups that inhabited the Bakassi Peninsula were thought of as marooned people by the Germans. Similarly, the authority of Efik kings over the intervening territory was considered doubtful and exaggerated. Whereas, the peninsula should have been allocated to Britain using the kith and kin theory. Reliable data gathered by British agents on ethnic distribution and pattern were deliberately disregarded by the Germans in their proposals for territorial allocation.

To the successor-states of Nigeria and Cameroon, the neglected realities in the colonial territorial allocation bequeathed on them the legacy of conflicting claims. While Nigeria relied strongly on cultural affinity, commercial intercourse and effective occupation, Cameroon buttressed the legality of her

claim on the territorial allocation spelt out in Article 20 of the 1913 Anglo-German Treaty (Hertslet 1909 p. 910 -911). Not leaving anything to chance, Cameroon embarked on the policy of Cameroonisation effective of peninsula by changing Nigerian names of villages to Cameroonian. For instance, Atabong I and II were changed to Idabato I and II; Abana to Jabane, IneAkpak to Neonjo (Ate &Akinterinwa 1992, p.162) etc. Similarly, Nigeria elevated the peninsula to the status of a local government area under Cross River State much to the consternation and chagrin of Cameroon.

An added twist to the territorial dispute is the ongoing separatist agitation south-west Cameroonians realized after the plebiscite of 1961 that they were 'strange-bed-fellows' in the United Republic of Cameroon. Some leaders of the separatist groups and their families were alleged by the Cameroonian authorities to be using Nigerian neighbouring towns of Ikom and Calabar as operational bases and sanctuary. Efforts by the Cameroonian government to ensure a water-tight and exclusionary southern boundary with Nigeria in order to frustrate the separatist movements often brought her into conflict with the Nigerian authorities. In reaction, the separatist movements under the auspices

#### **Positional Dispute**

Positional dispute arises out of incomplete boundary evolution on an ambiguously and imprecisely delimited terrain (Prescott 1987, p.115) Boundary Studies as well as Political Geography, an international boundary must evolve through the stages of allocation. delineation, demarcation. reaffirmation and management (Asiwaju 2008). Peace is said to be achieved on the attainment of the management stage. Out of these five stages, the southern portion of the Nigeria - Cameroon boundary, from Gamana River to the Atlantic, had only undergone allocation, delineation and partial demarcation.

of the still-born Ambazonia Republic sought an injunction from a Nigerian High Court sitting in Abuia, to restrain Nigeria after the International Court of Justice ruling from handing over the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon. The separatists also sought an order mandating the Nigerian government to hold the territory in trust pending when the independence still-born republic will be recognized by the United Nations Organization. Although the orders were not granted, the action of the South-west Cameroon 'nationalists' were sufficient pointers to the fact of a territorial conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon.

With the declaration of Cameroonian suzerainty over Bakassi Peninsula by the International Court of Justice and the eventual handing over of the territory by Nigeria, an Efik-Ibibio-Oro cultural melting pot was lost to Cameroon. The rejection of the cession by 95% of the inhabitants of the peninsula and the Nigerian National Assembly were also enough pointers to the fact that the territorial conflict may not have been over yet. Recently, a section of the Nigerian press was awashed with reports of an attack launched by the Niger-Delta Militants against the Cameroonian gendarmes and a reprisal attack, both resulting in the death of gendarmes and innocent Nigerian fishermen.

Two factors account for the southern sector not being demarcated. First, Article 3of the 1893 Anglo-German Agreement established the Bakassi Peninsula both as an intervening zone and as a *terra nuilius*. According to the article:

The German colonial administration engages not to allow any other settlement to exist or be erected on the right bank of the Rio del Rey creek or waterway. In like manner, the administration of the Oil Rivers

Protectorate engages not to allow any trade settlement to exist or be erected on the western bank of the Bakassi Peninsula from the first creek

Second, the demarcation process which started in earnest in 1936 based on the Milner-Simon line of 1913, was disrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War and had since not resumed until the post-ICJ demarcation exercise. From Obokulum to the Atlantic had not been demarcated (Prescott 1960). Even in that were demarcated from areas northwards. Obokulum the Nigeria-Joint Cameroon Commission that undertook the post-ICI demarcation observed that a reasonable number of the co-ordinate pillars were missing. 10

Crops (Bonchuk 1998).Bonchuk further adds that 'though these groups lost finally, they never left anybody in doubt that they resented colonial borders'. This fact was confirmed during the field trip for this study. The researcher found out that there were no pillars marking the divide between the two neighbouring Boki communities of Danare in Nigeria and Boudam in Cameroon. Further enquiry revealed that the pillars were excavated and buried few days after planting in protest of colonial separation of kith and kin.

It is important to note that out of about 1680 kilometers distance of the Nigeria-Cameroon boundary, from the Atlantic to Lake Chad, conflicts in the post-independence years occurred only in the undemarcated southern section. The reality of undemarcated boundary is therefore a strong pointer to the centrality of positional dispute in the manifestation of other types of conflict in the area. S. C. Chime affirms that the absence of a definite demarcation of sectoral alignments of the boundary was a major source of conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon (Chime 1963). Perhaps, if

below Archibong village to the sea and eastwards from this bank to the Rio del Rey waterway (Hertslet 1909: 910-911).

The earliest positional dispute took the form of local resistance between the divided peoples of Boki and Ejagham on the one part, and the colonial survey teams that attempted to delimit their cultural and economic landscapes. M. O. Bonchuk alludes to this fact by pointing out that these groups virulently objected to their separation into different colonial territories by ambushing and fighting the Anglo-German survey team, resorting to supplications to the ancestral spirits and shrines for assistance, forced migration, pulling down of erected coordinate pillars and the destruction of European cash

the section under study were demarcated as its northward length, the incidence of conflict would have been minimized. The confusing paradox in the positional conflict as it concerned the southern section of the boundary was the wonderful opportunities offered by independence to address the neglected realities in the European partition yet jettisoned for *utipossidetis* (i.e. as you inherit, so you possess).

# **Functional Dimension**

Functional boundary disputes are usually associated with the activities of state functionaries (Prescott 1960) who act as agents provocateur. The varying degrees of tension and open confrontation within the southern sector of the Nigeria –Cameroon boundary were predominantly caused by the cross-border activities of over-zealous state security operatives.

The earliest manifestation of functional dimension occurred in 1967 during the Nigerian Civil War. Major Isaac Adaka Boro and a detachment of the 3<sup>rd</sup>Marine Commando of Nigeria invaded the Bakassi Peninsula as part of

'Operation Tiger Claw' designed to 'seal off Biafra from the sea' (Obasanjo 1981). The Bakassi occupation did not only opened the 'eyes' of the Nigerian government to the strategic importance of the Peninsula but also drew the ire of the Cameroonian government which protested a violation of her territorial waters (Akinterinwa 1992: 152).

In the years following the end of the Nigerian Civil War, Cameroonian government embarked on the policy of effective Cameroonisation of the Bakassi Peninsula by dispatching her state security operatives to unleash terror within the peninsula and its maritime

#### **Resource-Based Dimension**

At the time of Anglo-German struggle for littoral sphere, the Bakassi Peninsula did not offer any attraction. Claude Macdonald Major correspondence to the British Foreign Office dated January 21, 1893, described the peninsula as a 'dismal swamp, peopled by a few miserable fisher-folk' (Prescott 1960). The seeming lack of interest by Germany and Britain left Bakassi as an intervening no-man's-land. The peninsula later became a bone of contention between the two successorstates of Nigeria and Cameroon in the 1970s owing to the discovery of rich hydro-carbon deposits in the area.

Other resource endowments within the southern borderlands whose exploitation by Nigerians contributed to conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon included forestry resources fisheries. Due to the endowment of these resources within the undemarcated sector, Nigerian sawyers and fishermen were always harassed, arrested, detained even killed by Cameroonian gendarmes for timber logging and fishing respectively. It was crystal clear that these resource endowments potentials for economic leverage to either contending party, hence the conflict.

#### Frustration - Aggression

extensions. The activities of Cameroonian gendarmes ranged from tax raids, seizures of fishing boats and nets, arrest and detention, boat capsize and murders. Mav 1981, Cameroonian 16. gendarmes opened artillery fire on Nigerian naval patrol boats at Ikang, a Nigerian border town, killing five military personnels and wounding three (Nweke 1990). A heavy barrage of artillery was launched immediately afterwards by the aggressor at tree tops by the riverside followed by a Cameroonian helicopter gun-ship patrol over Ikang on a very low altitude (Nweke 1990).

The enduring existence of the Nigeria-Cameroon southern boundary conflict can also be examined in the light of frustration-aggression hypothesized by John Dollard in 1939 and further developed by Leonard Berkowits in 1962. According to the theorists, violent behaviours are not exhibited just for the sake of it, but stem from experienced frustration in bid to fulfill expected needs (Faleti 2006). Where expected goals are not attained, frustration or angst could be visited on the individual, agent or state responsible.

In the context of this study, Nigeria and Cameroon had entered into several boundary agreements which the later claimed the former never honoured. Also, while the Nigerian economy was experiencing boom from the returns on oil exports in the early 1970s, the Cameroonian economy was in comatose. Attempts by Cameroon under President Ahmadu Ahidjo in 1971 to explore the rich hydrocarbon deposits in area Cameroon claimed was legitimately hers courtesy of the Anglo-German Treaty of 1913, was flatly rejected **by** Nigeria. These cumulative frustrations naturally culminated in varying degrees of tension which eventually climaxed in the violent confrontation of May 16, 1981. To the Cameroonian government, provoking boundary conflicts with Nigeria served a triad functional utility of distracting

domestic attention from the economic crisis at home, frustrating separatist attempt and attracting international attention to Nigeria's intransigence on endorsed protocols and conventions.

# INTENSITY AND PROGRESSION ANALYSIS

The intervals of apparent calm, varying degrees of tension and open confrontation summarizes the dynamics of conflict within the southern sector of the Nigeria – Cameroon boundary. In analyzing its progression, conflict is examined under this sub-section according to stages of its manifestation.

### Primordial Stage

The primordial stage describes a period of relative calm that the area of study enjoyed in her inter-group relations long before its interruption in the late Nineteen Century by the European scramble and partition of territories. Within the area, different cultural landscapes existed, such as the coastal Efik-Ibibio-Oron, and the forest peoples of Ejagham and Boki. Prior to European incursion, these groups existed as an economic bloc remarkable for exchanges of costal and forest products. Movements goods and persons were encumbered between these semi-Bantu groups who also shared common migrational pattern. Although disputes were not completely ruled out in their inter-group relations. thev nonetheless uncommon and far between. Even when they occurred, were resolved through traditional African diplomacy.

#### Elbowing Stage

The 'seeds' of future boundary conflicts were sown during the Scramble and Partition of Africa, germinated during colonial administration and watered by successor-independent states. The nature of conflict at the second stage can be described as 'elbowing' and it spanned from 1884, through inter-colonial boundary regimes, up to 1960 when Cameroon and Nigeria

became independent. In the scramble for treaties by the British and German treaty 'hunters'. the two powers incompatible interests respectively tried out-manoeuvre each other. For instance, Nachtigal, a German agent, went ahead to secure treaty endorsement from the King of Bell and also hoisted the German flag there irrespective of the treaty endorsement earlier secured British agents. Similarly, to divert hinterland trade from the control of Old Calabar to Duala, the Germans embarked on burning down Efik trading posts on the banks of Akpayafe (Prescott 1960).

The initial threat to peace occasioned by the scramble was only arrested by the Berlin West Africa Conference (1884 - 1885), otherwise, Africa would have witnessed a European war in her domain. Subsequently, elbowing as a form of conflict was also witnessed during the Anglo-German and Anglo-French boundary proposals and allocations.

# **Confrontational Stage**

The third stage was marked by low level violence by both parties to the conflict. The landing of Major Isaac Adaka Boro and a detachment of Nigeria's Third Marine Commando in Bakassi, as a concluding part of the 'Operation Tiger Claw' against the stillborn Republic of Biafra in 1967, incensed the anger of President Ahidjo's While Boro government. Isaac succeeded in sparking Nigeria's interest to the strategic location of the peninsula, Cameroon found the invasion unacceptable and therefore asked for the withdrawal of Nigerian troops.

Immediately after the Nigerian Civil War, Cameroon followed up her earlier protest by embarking on revisionist policy of having to change Nigerian names of about twenty-five fishing settlements in the peninsula to reflect Cameroonian names (Ate &Akinterinwa 1992). The changes were deliberately done to undermine the defacto and de jure validity of Nigerian claims. Other acts of confrontation

included tax raids, seizure of fishing boats and power chain saw machines, arrests and indefinite detention of some Nigerian inhabitants of the peninsula.

### Crisis or Escalation Stage

The graduated stages of the Nigeria-Cameroon boundary conflict reached crisis proportion on May 16. 1981 with the firing by Cameroon gendarmes of a barrage of artillery at Nigerian naval patrol boats, killing five and wounding at least three in Ikang (Nweke 1990). In most familiar casestudies of conflicts, the crisis stage is always a stage of war, but this was avoided by the civilian administration of President Shehu Shagari which opted for protest through boycott of the O. A. U. Summit in Nairobi, in addition to demand for apology and compensation. It should

# Confrontational Stage

After reaching the peak (i.e. crisis point), the Nigeria-Cameroon boundary conflict refused to obey the 'Law of Diminishing Returns thus making it difficult for peace and conflicts scholars to reach a consensus as to whether the event of May 16, 1981 deserved to be interpreted as the peak. Instead of conflict abating after Nigeria's pacifist reaction to Cameroon's unprovoked attack and cold-blooded murder, tension was rekindled, this time by Nigeria.

The seeming lull or short interval of calm that lasted throughout 1982 and 1983 was interrupted by the sacking of the civilian administration of President Shehu Shagari of Nigeria on the New Year eve of 1984. The succeeding regimes Generals military of Mohammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida and SanniAbacha were respectively poised to address Nigeria's borderland security concerns as well as validate her defacto and de jure claims to Bakassi. First, the military junta of General Mohammadu Buhari on assumption, immediately went on a joint military

be noted that the Nigerian public opinion was favourably disposed to war in reaction to the cold-blooded murder. provocation and what considered national disgrace (Macebuh 1981). According to Aforka Nweke, the Cameroon Embassy in Lagos became a target of violent attacks by stonethrowing students of the University of Lagos and the metropolitan mob (Nweke 1990). Nweke further adds that 'although the physical attacks were directed at Cameroon, the objective was to force the Nigerian government to rise up to the Cameroonian challenge'.27Stanley Macebuh also summarized the national mood at the time by describing it as overwhelmingly and 'decisively bellicose' (Macebuh 1981).

show of strength code-named 'Operation Sea-Dog' within the disputed peninsula. Commanded by Brigadier Ibrahim Babangida, the operation was meant to demonstrate Nigeria's combat-readiness by land, sea and air. It was also meant to deter further harassment of Nigerians by Cameroonian gendarmes.

Other acts of rabble rousing by the succeeding regime of General Ibrahim Babangida which Cameroon deemed confrontational and therefore unacceptable included infrastructure I development in the peninsula such as building of a Health Centre, Primary Schools and provision of bore-holes. The Babangida junta also conducted the 1991 Census and the 1993 General Elections in Bakassi while also establishing a naval Forward Operation Base at Ibaka to give the peninsula a covering fire.

# Re-Escalation Stage

By February **1994**, General Sanni Abacha deployed 1000 troops to the peninsula in reaction to renewed harassment of Nigerian fishermen and traders by Cameroonian gendarmes. Intermittent exchange of artillery fire by troops from the two countries resulted in causalities on both sides. As reported in

Africa, Confidential, Cameroon alone lost 34 soldiers (Africa Confidential 1994). The Abacha junta followed up the invasion by creating the Bakassi Local Government Area. Further escalation of conflict was seemingly arrested on March 29, 1994 when Cameroon took the southern boundary question to the International Court of Justice (ICI) for adjudication. In spite of the pending matter before the ICJ, Nigeria deployed an additional 1000 troops to the peninsula in February 1996 (Ngang 2007). By May 1996, more than **50** Nigerian soldiers lost their lives while some were taken prisoners (Ngang 2007). On Cameroon's request, the ICJ at the Hague, called on both sides to stop further confrontation pending final ruling.

# Arbitration/De-escalation Stage

Between the call for cessation of hostilities by the International Court of Justice in 1996 and the final ruling of October, 2002, another interval of peace was ushered in. although with anxieties pregnant and Unilateral expectations. acts of confrontation by both the plaintiff and respondent states after March 29, 1994 were not only unfortunate but condemnable. This is because of a generally accepted rule of law universally acted upon by states that once a court has been validly seized of a dispute and a declaration made accepting its jurisdiction, all unilateral actions either made to divest the court of such jurisdiction or challenge it, becomes a nullity (Shaw 1997, p. 80)

## Outcome Stage

The outcome stage is marked by the execution of judgment through the instrumentality of the UN/Nigeria/Cameroon Mixed Commission. It is a continuation of fragile peace which has witnessed the demilitarization of Bakassi Peninsula, transfer of territory and the on-going demarcation exercise.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Before the October 2002 ruling of the International Court of Justice, on the Nigeria-Cameroon boundary. common international divide between the two countries in the Southern half, from River Gamana to the Atlantic, had been a long standing bellicose one. Various efforts were directed mitigating the enduring boundary conflict. First, through inter-colonial negotiations between Germany and Britain, and later, between Britain and France. In the partition of Africa, the delimitation of the British and German Atlantic littoral spheres in the Gulf of Guinea was a gordian knot to tackle owing to claims of incompatible rights made possible by conflicting treaties entered into with African chiefs.

From post-independence the years, the successor states of Nigeria and Cameroon equally disagreed on the specific line of their separation until the intervention of the International Court of Justice. This paper therefore identified and discussed the different types of boundary dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon, from the European scramble for territories in Africa, up to the postindependence years. The intensity and progression of the boundary conflict was examined and split into different stages for proper comprehension of the conflict.

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