

## THE BAKASSI PENINSULA DISPUTE AND ITS IMPACT ON NIGERIA–CAMEROON RELATIONS: A HISTORICAL REAPPRAISAL

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### ABSTRACT

Nigeria's relations with her neighbours cannot be said to be more conflicting than cooperative. Apart from the easily mended row with Chad in 1983 and the seemingly intractable border skirmishes with Cameroon over the ownership of the Bakassi Peninsula, Nigeria has generally cooperated more than conflicted with her neighbours. However, the Bakassi Peninsula crisis with Cameroon appears to have tarnished the otherwise impressive record of Nigeria's relations with her contiguous neighbours. Nonetheless, Nigeria's border clashes with Cameroon have deep roots in various imperialist designs by European powers—notably Britain, Germany, and later France—facilitated in many ways by a plethora of colonial treaties. With the emergence of a monolithic, oil-driven economy in Nigeria, and given the significance of oil in the global political economy, the discovery of vast oil and natural gas deposits in the Bakassi Peninsula intensified the struggle between Nigeria and Cameroon over ownership of the territory. This struggle, which began following the independence of both countries in the 1960s, continued intermittently and dangerously over the decades. Bilateral and regional arrangements proved inadequate in resolving the crisis. Sensing a disadvantaged position in the event of armed confrontation with Nigeria, Cameroon took the matter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague in 1994. After several years of litigation, judicial deliberation, and international pressure, a judgment was passed in favour of Cameroon in October 2002. By 2006, an international framework known as the Green Tree Agreement (GTA) had been established to finally lay to rest the contentious Bakassi Peninsula crisis. As timely as the ICJ judgment and the accompanying Green Tree Agreement may have been, several issues remained unresolved—chief among them, the status and rights of the indigenous people of the Bakassi Peninsula, who were not adequately considered in the entire process of crisis resolution. This study, therefore, attempts to bring to light this often-neglected dimension of the Bakassi Peninsula crisis. Utilizing the historical method, it examines the plight of the indigenous people, particularly the Efik, whom the Nigerian government appeared to have abandoned to Cameroon, while the Cameroonian authorities treat them as foreigners. Plausible recommendations are offered at the end of the study to address the injustices, hardships, and marginalization faced by the Efik people, who have inhabited the region for centuries.

**Keywords:** Bakassi Peninsula, Bilateral relations, Boundary dispute, International Court of Justice

### Introduction

Territorial claims, nationalism, and natural resources have remained the main sources of conflict throughout the world. While the influence of some of these factors is waning, struggles for the control of valuable natural resources have remained a persistent feature of national and international affairs for decades. This applies not only to the Euro/American countries but also to the African continent. Natural resources have been fueling conflicts within and between African countries.<sup>i</sup> Such conflict situations typically take the form of territorial disputes over the possession of oil-laden border areas, factional struggles among the leaders of oil-rich countries, and major inter-state wars over the control of vital oil and mineral zones.<sup>ii</sup>

For a long time after independence border skirmishes and wars between African states were relatively rare, and governments more or less adhered to the sacrosanct nature of the boundaries inherited from colonial times as laid down in the 1963 Charter of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and subsequently, the constitutive Act of the African Union.<sup>iii</sup> Nigeria is not known for hostilities and animosities with her neighbors, however, Nigeria-Cameroon relations have been fraught with boundary crises. Among the many border disputes that Cameroon and Nigeria have had in the years since independence, the Bakassi Peninsula stands out very clearly as the most serious dispute of all. The Bakassi Peninsula stands out very clearly as the most serious dispute of all. The contested Bakassi Peninsula is an area of some 1,000km of mangrove swamp and half-submerged islands mostly occupied by fishermen settlers.<sup>iv</sup> What is more, the discovery of potential oil reserves in the waters surrounding the Peninsula has only helped to heighten tensions between the two countries. Isaac Olumide writes that since 1993,

the peninsula, which apart from oil wealth also boasts of heavy fish deposits, has been a subject of serious dispute, between Cameroon and Nigeria with scores of lives lost from military aggressions and tribal squabbles.<sup>v</sup> This portion of the disputed border drew increasing attention, as it became public knowledge that the peninsula is very rich in petroleum and natural gas. The show of arms between these two countries has left many dead and wounded.<sup>vi</sup> Fighting occurred on the lands surrounding the peninsula, (which are equally disputed), on the peninsula itself, and the sea. The big question that faced both nations was that of sovereignty over the mineral-rich peninsula and in answering this question, both nations until recently resorted to the use of military force to claim the territory.

The military struggle between the two nations did somewhat result in some form of partition of the islands. Given the disadvantage that Cameroon's population is about one-tenth that of Nigeria (roughly 12 million to about 140 million)<sup>vii</sup>, it is no surprise that Cameroon naturally resorted to accusing Nigeria of using its population advantage to populate the Bakassi peninsula – a tactic of claiming ownership. From the Nigerian end, it is common to hear accusations of Cameroon gendarmes and their tax-drive assaults on Nigerians living in the area. Thus, Cameroon initially claimed it had to exercise its sovereignty and protect its territorial integrity by taxing those who live on its soil, and Nigeria, while not relinquishing its claims of sovereignty over the peninsula had to send in troops to protect its citizens from Cameroonian aggression.<sup>viii</sup> Things became heated on May 16, 1981, when a Cameroon national radio news report informed the World that a Nigeria military patrol violated Cameroon's territory by penetrating the Bakassi peninsula as far as the Rio and Rey and opening fire on the Cameroon Navy.<sup>ix</sup>

Sensing a major disadvantage in a continued military engagement and the maneuverability of bilateral negotiation, Cameroon opted to take the matter to the International Court of Justice at the Hague for adjudication.<sup>x</sup> The complaint was filed on March 29, 1994. The ICJ called for a cessation of hostilities by the belligerents until the final judgement on the case. The ICJ was to give Cameroon a favorable ruling when on 10 October 2002, the judgement was delivered. The International Court of Justice held that:

*The Court decides that the boundary is delimited by the Anglo-German Agreement of 11 March 1913 (Arts. XVII-XX) and that sovereignty over the Bakassi Peninsula lies with Cameroon. It decides that in this area the boundary follows the Thalweg of the River Akpakorum (Akpayafe), dividing the mangrove Islands near Ikang in the way shown on the map TSGS 2240, as far as a straight line joining Bakassi "Point and King Point."<sup>xi</sup>*

Despite that, an agreement (the Green Tree Agreement, GTA) was drafted to help both states peacefully execute the ruling of the International Court of Justice. And even though Nigeria had handed over the disputed territories to Cameroon, several bad bloods and animosities have been injected into the bilateral relationship between Nigeria and Cameroon. More so, several other issues cropped up since the unconditional withdrawal of Nigeria from the Bakassi Peninsula, thereby making the problem an unresolved debacle. This study therefore examines the impact of the debacle on Nigeria-Cameroon relations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the revisionist and anti-revisionist theories of boundary disputes. The importance of these theoretical viewpoints is attempted concurrently with the explanations of these viewpoints. While it is widely accepted that the boundaries of contemporary African states are unusually arbitrary, largely as a result of their colonial origins<sup>xii</sup>, there is no consensus on whether this has been a liability for African states.<sup>xiii</sup> The revisionist and anti-revisionist theories have animated the discourse on the implications of these colonial boundaries for African states and their relationship with one another. The revisionists argue that the arbitrary nature of African boundaries has been a major source of instability and an obstacle to development and that they should therefore be urgently reviewed.<sup>xiv</sup> Supporters of this theory point out the numerous boundary disputes in Africa as a testament to the need for reviewing Africa's colonially imposed boundaries. In line with this, A.I. Nwabughuogu notes that:

*Africa is the most fragmented continent in the world. There exists some 45, 875 kilometers of boundaries in Africa as against 41, 785 kilometers of boundary in Asia. Throughout Africa, there exist numerous border problems... These boundary disputes greatly affect the process of nation-building in Africa. International boundary disputes dissipate the resources of African nations. The cost of such wars usually runs in billions... the flow of goods and services is greatly hindered.<sup>xv</sup>*

On account of these obstacles posed to Africa by her colonially imposed boundaries, proponents of the Revisionist theory campaign for overhauling and redrawing Africa's boundaries. It is, nonetheless, relevant to observe that these proponents do not say how this is to be done; neither do they proffer any opinion as to how to surmount the crisis that would arise from such an exercise. The second is that of the anti-revisionists, who argue for the maintenance of the status quo. Scholars in this category advance three main arguments in support of their view.

First, they contend that borders everywhere are artificial and that the case for African *exceptionalism* is, therefore, weak.<sup>xvi</sup> Second, whilst they acknowledge the arbitrary nature of African boundaries, they posit that this has had only a few harmful consequences, and has moreover, presented opportunities for African populations, and, in some cases, served as assets for state consolidation.<sup>xvii</sup> Their third and most popular argument is that, while it is true that Africa has suffered from its partitioned nature, the costs of any attempt to adjust its boundaries would far surpass the hypothetical benefits of doing so.<sup>xviii</sup>

At independence, the 'anti-Revisionist' thesis appeared more appealing to both the departing colonialists and the emergent African leadership. Therefore, despite being aware of the haphazard and arbitrary nature of the inherited boundaries, African leaders agreed to maintain them as handed down by the colonialists. It was against this backdrop that the principle of the inviolability of national borders emerged as an axiom of Africa's international relations. In 1963, it was officially inscribed into the Charter of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and consequently, the Constitutive Act of the African Union in 2001.<sup>xix</sup> It was also given a stamp of approval by the United Nations (UN) system. This approach was based on the consensus that any attempt to review Africa's borders would amount to opening a 'Pandora's box' that could unleash a spate of violence and possibly anarchy on the continent. While these two theories form the platform of analyses of this study, it is the belief of the present researcher that, a systematic revision of African boundaries, one framed on consensus and participation of the ethnic groups concerned, would go a long way in eliminating the several boundary disputes which have plagued Africa for a long time.

### Methodology

This study employs the historical method of analysis. The historical method is considered useful because it emphasizes description, thematic presentation, interpretation, and analysis of facts. The sources of information and data for the study were gathered through primary sources which included government documents, contemporary records, and public reports, and to a large extent, the researcher quarried information from oral interviews with indigenes of the disputed Bakassi peninsula and specialists in legal and boundary problems. Secondary and tertiary sources like books, journal articles, conference proceedings, seminar papers, and other related publications were greatly accessed in the writing of this article.

### Findings and Discussion

#### Historical Overview of Nigeria–Cameroon Relations

Bilateral relations or bilateralism refers to the relationship between two independent regions or countries. Cultural, economic, and political factors are known to influence this relationship.<sup>xx</sup> As such, these relations may be diplomatic or hostile. Positive bilateralism comprises the most common alliance type. Independent countries have many reasons for seeking a positive relationship with other countries. For one, the two countries may be physical neighbours, and thus a harmonious coexistence is both convenient and beneficial for each party. Cultural similarities can further solidify and strengthen a bilateral bond. A friendly country, wherever its location, can make a strong bilateral trade partner and thus enhance its economy and commerce. Sensitive countries can make enduring military allies as well, offering assistance, land use, and essential resources in times of military crisis. Unfortunately, not very much is known about Nigeria-Cameroon bilateral relations outside the Bakassi peninsula debacle; not minding the fact that both countries share some contiguity along their northern and southern territories respectively.<sup>xxi</sup> Both countries maintain friendly relations with their neighbours and are not known for aggression, however, the boundary dispute between both countries has somewhat made Nigeria/Cameroon relations hostile. Again, even when it can be understood that Cameroon generally maintains good relations with its neighbours, her low profile and passive participation in African regional bodies makes an assessment of her bilateral relations slightly difficult. Finally, on this issue, a language barrier between the scholars of international relations in Nigeria and Cameroon has contributed to accentuating the paucity of materials on the two countries' bilateral relations. From available records, it is unarguable that the Nigeria-Cameroon relationship is characterized by mutual distrust and friction emanating from the claims by both countries to the disputed Bakassi Peninsular. The boundary is the longest of all Nigeria's international boundaries and is the most complicated topographically. Consequently, the boundary disputes between Nigeria and the Cameroon Republic arising from their long, but ill-defined borders (1680 kilometers or 1050 miles) appear to have conditioned these countries bilateral relations since independence.<sup>xxii</sup> In fact, in the view of Bassey Ate and Bola Akinterinwa, it has remained a source of conflict in direct bilateral relations between the two countries since independence.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In line with the ongoing observation, one can argue that Nigeria-Cameroon bilateral relations have witnessed more hostility than any other country within both countries' neighbourhood. Both Nigeria and Cameroon claimed ownership of the Bakassi Peninsular and by so doing, both countries have engaged in a series of verbal vituperations and military maneuvers which have serious political and security implications on the sub-region. As we noted in the first chapter of this study, the claim over the Bakassi Peninsular by Cameroon is based on two

major factors, namely: The 1913 Anglo-German Treaty and the 1975 Marcum Declaration. Cameroon's arguments are based on the treaty of March 11, 1913, signed between Britain and Germany, the purpose of which was to rearrange the boundary between Nigeria and Cameroon from Yola to the sea and regulate the navigation of the Cross River.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Nigeria-Cameroon relations are not to be seen as cat and dog all the time. Both countries maintain normal formal diplomatic relations. Nigeria-Cameroon bilateral relations commenced officially in 1961. Nigeria has a Consulate-General in Beua, appointed by the Nigerian Government to safeguard Nigeria's commercial and diplomatic interests as well as the welfare needs of her citizens living in the South West and North West Regions of Cameroon, whilst Cameroon has a Consul in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.<sup>xxv</sup> From 1961 to 1968, the Nigerian mission operated, simply, as a Consulate, headed by a Consul beginning with A.H. Ikwang (1961-1963) followed by S.T. King (1963-1965), R. Adibua (1965-1966), and Umaru Abdulla (1966-1968). In 1968, the Consulate was upgraded to the status of Consulate-General with K J.N., Okpokam as the first Nigerian to be appointed in that capacity.<sup>xxvi</sup>

After the upgrading, Dr, Kenneth NsorNsor, happens to be the 18th Consul-General of Nigeria to Cameroon, appointed in 2007. After Bakassi's cession to Cameroon, a new cordial spirit is embracing the Nigeria-Cameroon relations. Accordingly, the Nigerian Consul-General to Cameroon, Dr, NsorNsor has noted that amity exists between Nigeria and Cameroon. This according to him could be seen by the overwhelming felicitations from Cameroonians on Nigeria's fiftieth anniversary.<sup>xxvii</sup> Nigeria on her own has several Cameroonians living in the country and does not harass them unnecessarily. However, Nigerian citizens in Cameroon often complain about the high-handedness of Cameroonian officials in handling anything Nigerian. Nkang Bassey declared that:

*From all indications, it would appear that successive Cameroonian Governors have a strong dislike for Nigerians residing in their country. Most times repressive laws are made against Nigerians and there are no few stories of police brutality, extortion, etc. from highly placed government officials.*<sup>xxviii</sup>

Furthermore, the Nigerian Consul-General revealed that:

*I have always called for positivism on the part of our Cameroonian hosts where the activities of local security officials such as mid-night raids (Kale kale), extortion, and forced renunciation of citizenship rights of children born of Nigerian parents, (in some cases with Cameroonian mothers). In the majority of cases, children who have not attained majority (21 years) are forcibly made to inadvertently renounce their Cameroonian citizenship by forcing them to pay for residence permits. These issues are raised frequently because they constitute an integral part of my commission in Cameroon as Consul General. As regards dialogue, the issues have been cardinal at the Nigeria- Cameroon Joint Commission as well as sessional meetings with local authorities. We have called for the mutual abrogation of the residence permit because it constitutes the most potent irritant to the newfound relationship between our countries.*<sup>xxix</sup>

Finally, on the issue of Nigeria/Cameroon bilateral relations, it is clear that the emergence of the Boko Haram terrorist group has somewhat forced a more proactive bilateral relation between Nigeria and Cameroon. It is on record that Nigeria and Cameroon have established a joint military formation to tackle the menace of the terrorist outfit whose activities threaten the socio-economic foundation of not only Nigeria but Cameroon.<sup>xxx</sup>

### **Origins and Genesis of the Bakassi Dispute**

The Bakassi Peninsula holds economic, strategic, and cultural significance. Its waters teem with fish, providing livelihoods for thousands of fishermen, and seismic surveys have revealed potential offshore oil and gas reserves. The Nigerian state of Cross River relies on Bakassi for access to vital fishing grounds and as a buffer for Calabar, a major port and naval base.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Nigeria's claim to Bakassi rests on historical and cultural ties. The peninsula was historically part of the Efik Kingdom of Calabar, and more than 90 percent of Bakassi's inhabitants identified as Nigerian at the time of the dispute. Nigeria argued that colonial treaties, including the 1913 Anglo-German Agreement, unfairly ceded Bakassi to Germany without the consent of the Efik people. Nigeria further contended the treaty was never fully ratified and that post-World War I arrangements placed Bakassi under Nigerian administration for decades.<sup>xxxii</sup> Cameroon, in contrast, based its claim on international law—specifically the binding nature of colonial treaties and the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, which upholds inherited borders at independence. Cameroon maintained that Bakassi had always fallen under its jurisdiction and accused Nigeria of occupying the peninsula to exploit its resources. Military skirmishes during the 1980s and 1990s escalated tensions, prompting Cameroon to file a case at the International Court of Justice in 1994.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

In its landmark 2002 ruling, the ICJ awarded sovereignty over Bakassi to Cameroon, citing the 1913 Anglo-German Agreement among other legal instruments. While Nigeria initially hesitated, it ultimately accepted the ruling, and the two parties signed the 2006 Green Tree Agreement, which outlined modalities for Nigeria's withdrawal and provisions for protecting the rights of Bakassi residents.<sup>xxxiv</sup> By 2008, Nigeria had completed its military and administrative withdrawal, formally transferring control of Bakassi to Cameroon.<sup>xxxv</sup>

### **Post-ICJ Relations and Continuing Tensions**

Although the ICJ ruling and Green Tree Agreement were intended to resolve the dispute, bilateral relations remain strained. Within Nigeria, many viewed the handover as a betrayal. Residents of Bakassi protested their transfer to Cameroon, and thousands relocated to Cross River State in Nigeria, where they faced socio-economic hardship, inadequate housing, and restricted access to fishing grounds.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Diplomatically, relations have oscillated between cautious cooperation and lingering mistrust. Both nations have strengthened collaboration in security matters—particularly around counter-terrorism against Boko Haram and combating piracy in the Gulf of Guinea—but mutual suspicion persists, especially over border management, displaced persons, and offshore resource exploitation.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Economically, cross-border trade resumed following administrative changes, but fishing rights remained a flashpoint. Nigerian fishermen frequently reported harassment and extortion by Cameroonian authorities—fueling resentment within Nigeria.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

### **Socio-Economic and Humanitarian Implications**

The ICJ ruling dramatically altered the lives of Bakassi's inhabitants. Many rejected Cameroonian citizenship and chose to relocate to Nigeria. Resettlement camps in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States became overcrowded, under-resourced, and poorly equipped to support fishing-based livelihoods. Displaced individuals experienced significant loss of ancestral lands and heightened poverty, with many struggling to integrate into host communities.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Cultural dislocation exacerbated economic hardship. Efik-speaking residents of Bakassi—who share deep historical ties with Nigeria—felt alienated under Cameroonian administration. Reports of harassment by Cameroonian security forces heightened perceptions of marginalization and fueled occasional calls for the peninsula's return to Nigeria or even independence.<sup>xl</sup> Humanitarian challenges contributed to broader security concerns. Unemployed and disoriented youth in displaced communities were vulnerable to recruitment by criminal and insurgent networks active in the Gulf of Guinea. Addressing their grievances therefore became important not only for humanitarian reasons but also for preserving regional stability.<sup>xli</sup>

### **Implications for Nigeria–Cameroon Bilateral Relations**

The Bakassi dispute left a legacy of mistrust that continues to hamper bilateral relations. Periodic conflicts—such as skirmishes between fishermen and security forces, ongoing maritime boundary disagreements, and unresolved grievances among displaced persons—have inhibited efforts to build sustained cooperation.<sup>xlii</sup> Yet there are positive signs. The Nigeria–Cameroon Mixed Commission (CNMC), created under the Green Tree Agreement, provides a forum for dialogue on boundary demarcation and cross-border cooperation. Joint security operations targeting Boko Haram and maritime threats have strengthened military cooperation. However, these gains remain fragile and susceptible to setbacks triggered by events in Bakassi or elsewhere along the border.<sup>xliii</sup>

For Nigeria, losing Bakassi represented a strategic setback—costing maritime resources and crucial access routes tied to Calabar. For Cameroon, the challenge lies in integrating a predominantly Nigerian-origin population and asserting effective governance over Bakassi. Both countries now face the task of transforming the dispute's legacy into an opportunity for constructive cooperation.<sup>xliv</sup>

### **Broader Lessons for African Border Disputes**

The Bakassi case underscores the enduring salience of Africa's colonial borders and the difficulty of reconciling legal sovereignty with historical and cultural claims. The ICJ's ruling, grounded in legal positivism, prioritized colonial-era treaties over local historical affiliations—leaving many Bakassi residents feeling disenfranchised. This reflects the anti-revisionist ethos that informed the Organization of African Unity's and African Union's adoption of *uti possidetis juris* as a guiding principle.<sup>xlv</sup>

For Africa broadly, Bakassi highlights the need for dispute-resolution mechanisms that go beyond legal adjudication to address the socio-economic realities and welfare of affected borderland communities. Sustainable peace requires inclusive processes that balance state sovereignty with the rights of marginalized populations.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Finally, the dispute demonstrates the importance of preventive diplomacy. Decades of mutual mistrust between Nigeria and Cameroon might have been mitigated through earlier, proactive engagement—such as joint development efforts and community-level governance. Strengthening institutions like the CNMC is critical to preventing future conflicts and enabling cooperative resource management.<sup>xlvii</sup>

## Conclusion

In Nigeria's relationship with her neighbours, Cameroon, which borders her to the east, occupies a special position. This is especially so because of the many years of verbal vituperation, and military and legal maneuvers over the ownership of the oil-rich land and sea reserves in the Bakassi area. The October 2002 International Court of Justice Decision facilitated the withdrawal of Nigeria from Bakassi on 14th August 2008, through the instrumentality of the Nigeria-Cameroon Mixed Commission and the Green Tree Accord.<sup>xlviii</sup>

There had been contending arguments on what Nigeria should do concerning the area, (Bakassi) which had been lost to Cameroon. Some of the observers and commentators on the Nigerian side think that since Nigeria has portrayed itself as a champion of democratic tenets in Africa and has on numerous occasions intervened militarily and diplomatically to avert open-armed conflict between countries on the continent, she should lead by example and allow the ICJ judgment to subsist. This school of thought also favours the immediate recommendations of the Nigeria - Cameroon joint Boundary Commission dated August 1970. A. T. Aghemelo and S. Ibhasebhor summarize the position of this school of thought when they submitted that 'It is hoped that the maturity and high-level diplomacy exhibited by these two countries will be emulated by other African States with similar border problems'<sup>xlix</sup>

However, another school of thought opposed to the above view and contended that "there is no morality in international relations"<sup>li</sup> They aver that it is against the national interest of Nigeria to accept the ICJ S verdict in its totality. Consequently, in their thinking, Nigeria would become vulnerable should the Federal Government accept the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) granting the disputed Bakassi peninsula to Cameroon. This school of thought contends that the area was strategic in the security of Nigeria.

Somehow, the bulk of this present study had been preoccupied with finding the balance between these two positions. The present researcher therefore concludes by noting that both countries, Nigeria and Cameroon deserve commendation for the mature manner in which they handled the Bakassi issue. War sounds simple, yet had it happened, the greatest casualties would have been civilians, especially those living around the disputed region. What should be done as a matter of urgency is to address the plight of the Efik people of the Bakassi region. A commitment to care for them and that of protection should be obtained from Cameroon for those who prefer to stay back under Cameroonian suzerainty. Those who still cherish their Nigerianity should be resettled and reintegrated. The next section provides relevant recommendations for all stakeholders.

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