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## Natural Resources and Conflict: A Case Study of the Bakassi Peninsula Conflict

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### **Abstract**

This paper examined natural resources and conflict, using the Bakassi Peninsula conflict as a case in point. The paper is aimed at examining the role played by the availability of hydrocarbons in the 1,600-kilometre land boundary between Cameroon and Nigeria. Drawing from economic and cultural perspectives, the paper argued that even though the abundant natural resource deposits appear to be behind the squabble over the ownership of the peninsula, cultural affiliations between people of the disputed area and parts of Nigeria are contributory factors that raise critical questions. Data for the study were generated using secondary sources, and analysed qualitatively. The paper recommends, among other things, that effort should be made to reconnect the people alienated from the proceeds of the peninsula.

**Keywords:** *Boundary demarcation, conflict, cultural affiliation, interest, natural resources.*

## Introduction

The erstwhile contested Bakassi Peninsula is an area of some 100km of mangrove swamp and half submerged islands mostly occupied by fishermen settlers (Anene, 1970, p.56). The discovery of potential oil reserves in the waters surrounding the peninsula has only helped heighten tensions between the two countries. Since 1993, the peninsula, which apart from oil wealth also boasts of heavy fish deposit, has been a subject of serious dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria with a score of lives lost from military aggressions and tribal squabbles (Olumide, 2002, p.4).

There is no doubt that the presence of oil in Bakassi led to the escalation of tensions between Nigeria and Cameroon, as Cameroon or Nigeria would not have gone to the extent they went to lay claims on the peninsula without a motivating factor. The zeal of both countries was fired and maintained by the economic interests arising from the abundant fishing resources and rich hydrocarbons there. Nigeria, having maintained the property for long, did all that is within its power to retain it because of its strategic location which can help its security and also give it oil revenue to supplement what it is currently having.

## Natural Resources

Simply put, natural resources refer to useful materials that appear, or exist on their own through what can be referred to as natural forces. With some modifications, these materials can be useful to people. Examples of natural resources are hydrocarbons, air, water, soil/land, coal, bauxite, among several others. It is instructive to note that natural resources within the environment always occur in their natural form. In most cases, such resources spend decades forming on their own. At the point of discovery science and technology are often applied to extract, refine/process them before they can be utilised by humans.

It should be stated that natural resource endowment varies from country to country. This explains why Nigeria, with abundant natural resources, is often referred to as a 'resource-rich state'. In fact, most oil-producing countries are considered rich in natural resources. If properly utilised, such resources, when harnessed, can be used for socio-economic development. This, however, is not always the case as, going by the resource curse thesis, natural-resource rich countries are often conflict-prone. The conflict here emanates from how resources are harnessed and the proceeds appropriated. This is known as resource conflict.

Mcneish (2011), in his article, 'Rethinking resources Conflict', published by the World Development Report, stated that resource conflict is one of several destabilising phenomena commonly cited as defining many of the extractive economics of the global south. In the post-cold war in which stability has become a key concern of international government and investment, it has also been an issue that has encouraged a proliferation of scholarly and policy interest. In these studies and policy discussions, a large number of terms are now in use in an attempt to account for the complicated state of affairs faced by resource rich countries in the global south; intractable conflicts, new wars, resources wars, complex political emergencies, conflict trap, resource securitisation, petro-violence and blood diamonds (Collier, 2005; Kaldor, 1999; Kaplan, 1994; Nafziger & Auvinen, 1996). The consensus built around these different terminologies and theories is that an abundance of natural resources is frequently at the root of violent conflicts.

The above position shows that where there is conflict, the origin of it is often traceable to natural resources. The researcher also add that cultural affiliations play contributory role when artificial boundary demarcations are forcefully or politically made. To address the issue of natural resource conflict, vis-à-vis the Bakassi Peninsula, the following questions are expedient:

### **Research Questions**

1. Is the Bakassi peninsula conflict caused by the presence of natural resources or any other factor(s)?
2. If the Bakassi peninsula is a barren, land locked area, would the two countries sustain the crisis to the extent of having occasional military confrontations and international adjudications?

### **Theorising the Causes of the Bakassi Conflict**

Given the illogicality of assuming that there is a single cause of the conflict in Bakassi, this paper opts to examine two plausible causes – economic and cultural factors.

#### **Economic**

It is easy to say that the cause of the conflict is economic and that is why it took so long to settle and even after settlements through an international court of justice ruling and the green tree agreement, there is still on-going conflicts between Nigerian soldiers and that of Cameroon leading to the death of soldiers and fishing folks.

Mcneish (2010) observed that earlier studies on the economic performance of resources abundant countries suggested that the causal mechanisms linking natural resources abundance and economic performance were essentially economic. In the same vein, Hallam (2018) used Prebisch and Singer hypothesis of 1950 and argued that resource-abundant countries had suffered from declining terms of trade over time, in turn constraining their prospects for economic growth and development. The Prebisch-Singer hypothesis further argues that prices of primary commodities declined relative to the price of manufactured goods over long time which causes the terms of trade of primary products – based economies to deteriorate. They further argued that there is a decline in terms of trade in their dealings with developed countries leading to a struggle and scramble to maximize the gains of natural resources which inevitably leads to conflicts.

This validates the argument that economically challenged Cameroon saw Bakassi as its only lifeline while Nigeria saw it as an avenue to complement its declining revenue. Mbaga (2012) noted that the peninsula's geographical location suggests, and numerous prospecting made by geologists and other scientists confirm Bakassi being the richest peninsula in Africa, comprising extensive reserves of oil, gas, other important minerals. The colossal foreign exchange earnings from oil as a result of the very high demand of the commodity in the global economy in recent period midwife belligerence and legal acrimony between the two countries regarding ownership of the land. The light corollaries of the imbroglio thus raised were of great interest, mistrust, tensions between governments of Cameroon and Nigeria and neighbours involved in the Hague process as witnesses.

Mbago and Njo (2012) remarked that crude oil is the blood life of the tension. They further argued that Cameroon and Nigeria remain uncompromising on their stands over Bakassi peninsula dispute. Africa's oil production is expected to double in the next seven years with USA importing



25% of its oil from the Gulf of Guinea alone. The oil sector in the continent is estimated to attract over 50 billion US dollars by the end of this decade, making oil the larger source of investment in African's history. The awareness of these facts simply gives more impetus to the already existing tensions expressed in widespread willingness to split at all cost from the main political structure in the area (Nigeria and Cameroon) and become an oil-rich autonomous state with full control over the fertile fishing grounds and immense oil reserves of the Bakassi Peninsula. That pictures the pattern of most African civil disturbances, citing the case of the bloodiest civil wars in African, the Nigerian civil war of 1967 – 1970, and the Angolan civil war of 1975.

The presence of oil reserves is one of the critical factors that increased the hostilities as Cameroon is under huge economic challenges that led to the 50% devaluation of its currency. Due to the threat of Anglophone secession, the government of Cameroon saw the peninsula as their assurance of economic recovery and prosperity. It is seen by them as the only hope hence their persistence. Colonial activity along the Cameroon Nigeria border caused more harm than good because of cultural genocide which was consciously or unconsciously ignited by separation of people through the redefinition of boundaries. This did not only leave people homeless but destroyed cultures. Culture shapes people's identity and directs their thinking, feeling and reaction as it is obtained and spread through signs and symbols which represent the distinctive achievements of human groups (Kluckhohn, 1951).

The dominant role of culture which defines the way we eat, dress, stay together, marry, do inheritance, conducts our way of life is the reason for some of the clashes on the border, it is not all conflicts that governments have a hand in. Pockets of individuals protested their separation-imposed restrictions through its violation and violence. Getting a visa or pass to see your next-door neighbour/brother can lead to resistance.

### **Cultural Dimension**

The colonial masters of Germany, France, Britain, and Portugal came because of strategic calculations that are mainly political and economic. The scramble, partitioning and divide and rule tactics created socio-economic dislocations and led to a great severance of traditional/cultural ties and affiliation. Mbiti (1969 p. 92) said; "African traditional life anthropocentric since man is at the centre of existence". The division and creation of artificial boundaries controlled by the colonial masters led to reactions by the balkanised Africans. The families and friends separated through colonial partitions resisted and conflicts started. The global sentiments for total freedom led United Nations to grant independence to all after abolishing colonialism and the colonial masters just packed their properties and left without any comprehensive and integrated plan for the smooth administration of the territories.

### **Historical Background**

The Nigerian-Cameroon border conflict is historical particularly in the sea area of Cross-River to the Bakassi Peninsula. Tarlebbe and Baroni (1995) observed that Cameroon was confident about this lawsuit because they knew that the 1913 Anglo-German agreement shifted the peninsula from its original position in Nigeria in favour of Cameroon, and also because of the 1975 Maroua Declaration between the Heads of State, General Yakubu Gowon of Nigeria and Ahmadu Ahidjo of Cameroon. In that declaration it was alleged that Gowon gave out the territory to Cameroon (Olumide, 2002, p.4). Being the minority with only one-tenth of the Bakassi population, Cameroon felt justified that the courts will sympathise with her since Nigeria was only using its population

advantage as an occupational tactic to claim ownership of the peninsular. Nichalas and Baroni (1995, p.8) went further to state that disputes along the Cameroon - Nigeria border have been a matter of historic proportions especially along the cross – River to the sea section of wherein lies the historical Bakassi peninsula. The dispute over Bakassi Peninsula is not only the product of redefinition of boundary by the colonial powers but more so a product of resource allocation and clash of tradition and modernity in which the pre-colonial history of the ancient kingdom of Calabarhaunted the post-colonial reality of contemporary Nigeria and Cameroon.

It is a known fact that before the advent of the Britishcolonial masters, the peninsula in dispute was under the control of the ancient kingdom of Calabar which became partof Nigeria in 1914 under British colonial rule. Over time, many agreements, treaties and legal conveyance led to the transfer of the territory by the British first to Germany, later the League of Nations and trusteeship of the United Nations”. The British administered territory in Nigeria including the Kingdom of Calabar merged to form one British colony. Due to non-challenge and carelessness by Nigerian leaders, Cameroon obtained the Bakassi Peninsula in a United Nations organised plebiscite in 1959 and 1961. It was during the process that Nigeria obtained some areas which were part of Cameroon. According to Weladji (1975) the most important documents that concern the demarcation of the border between Cameroons and Nigeria are the following;

1. The Anglo-German treaty; the Anglo-German protocolsigned in Obokun, on April 12, 1913. The exchange of letters between British and German governments on July 6th 1914, the endorsement in 1961, by both United Nations General Assembly and the international court of justice of the results of the plebiscite conducted in northern and southern Cameroon Feb. 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, 1961 and the diplomatic note, accompanied by a map, dispatched to the government of Cameroon by Nigeria, in 1962 accepting the results of the plebiscite (<http://www.postwatchmiagazine.com>).
2. As has been verified from the available documents, Germany played a major part in demarcating, redefining the land, sea boundaries in West Africa particularly along the Gulf of Guinea. The Germans came early and signed agreement with the kings of Akwa in Cameroon, and Bell of Douala on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1884. These agreements brought the German colony into effect.

### **Is the Bakassi Peninsula Conflict caused by the Presence of Natural Resources?**

The Bakassi Peninsula conflict was not primarily caused by the presence of natural resources but it was initiated by cultural and historical factors but national resources discovery fuelled and escalated it on June 1st, 1975 Gowon and Ahidjo signed the Maroua Declaration for the partial extension of the 1971 maritime boundary. Again, the status of the Bakassi Peninsula proper was not even an issue for discussion. Maps from the period show Bakassi Peninsula in Cameroon. On July 29 1975 General Gowon was overthrown by General Murtala Muhammad. One of the first acts of that regime was to begin to question all domestic and foreign policy decisions made by General Gowon – including the offshore maritime border with Cameroon. In the rush to smear Gowon publicly, he was held accountable for “giving away Bakassi” an event that had occurred before he was born. Murtala Muhammad’s decision to renege on Gowon’s Agreements with Ahidjo resonated with a section of the population that had been hoping for a way to get out of its commitments to Cameroon deriving from the 1961 plebiscite and the colonial heritage dating back to 1884. Still, Nigerian official maps from that period and continuing till today except few that was

reprinted on the orders from Ibrahim Babangida's government in 1991 show Bakassi Peninsula in Cameroon (Idumange, 2010).

Babalolo and Jadesola (2012) appraised African boundary politics within the theme of boundary conflicts, questions after independence. Irredentism, the concern and intervention of international bodies with a focus on Nigeria-Cameroon boundary disputes: The quest for Bakassi Peninsula. The aim is to highlight European conquest and division of Africa contrary to existing traditional boundaries in pre-colonial Africa and how modern Africa boundaries evolved in the colonial era affected post-colonial era territorial boundaries, cross-border activities, and the basis of boundary disputes in modern African states.

Aghemelo and Ibhasebhor (2006) and Omoigui (2006) listed the following documents/instruments that changed the status of the Peninsula and its inhabitants.

- The agreement between the United Kingdom and Germany signed in London on 11 March 1913 entitled (1) the settlement of the Frontier between Nigeria and the Cameroons, from Yola to the sea, and (2) the Regulation of Navigation on the Crossriver'.
- The Anglo-German protocol signed in Obokun on 12 April 1913, demarcating the Anglo-German boundary between Nigeria and Kamerun from Yola to the Cross River. Eight maps accompanied this Protocol.
- The exchange of letters between the British and German governments on 6 July 1914.
- The endorsement in April 1961 by both the United Nations General Assembly and the International Court of Justice of the results of the plebiscites conducted in Northern and Southern Cameroons in 1959 and on 11 February 1961, respectively.
- The Diplomatic note, accompanied by a map, dispatched to the government of Cameroon by Nigeria in 1962, accepting the results of the plebiscites.

There are enough primary and secondary materials to prove that the conflict has its origin in the historical and cultural factors as colonialism in the scramble and partitioning of the people led to their separation and occasional resistance in conflicts. Anene (1970, p.56) stated categorically that the Bakassi Peninsula is an area of some 1,000 km of mangrove swamp and half-submerged island protruding into the bight of Bonny (previously known as the Bight of Biafra since 18<sup>th</sup> Century). The peninsula has been occupied by fishermen settlers most of whose inhabitants are Effik-speaking people of Nigeria. In addition, Olumide (2002) is of the view that since 1993. The peninsula which apart from oil wealth also boasts of the heavy fish deposit has been a subject of serious dispute, between Nigeria and Cameroon with scores of lives lost from military aggressions that have been mostly instigated by Cameroon. The conflict started when the German took over the area and later ceded it to the British and the treaties the Obong of Calabar signed titled, "Treaty of protection on Sept. 10, 1984. The Obong signed away his kingdom.

On Nov. 15, 1993, Britain and Germany signed an agreement that defined the boundary from Yola to Lake Chad. The intensity of the crisis and the staying power of the contending parties were as a result of its rich oil deposits. If the area was not viable the energies/resources spent on it may not have been so. Mbagi and Njo (2012) averred that Bakassi lies roughly between latitudes 4<sup>o</sup>25' and 5<sup>o</sup>0'N and longitudes 8<sup>o</sup>20' and 9<sup>o</sup>08'E. It consists of low-lying mangroves covered Islands area of about 605 Km<sup>2</sup>. It is situated at the extreme eastern end of the Gulf of Guinea. Here there is the warm

east flowing Guinea current that meets the cold north Benguela current. These two great ocean currents come into contact leaving foamy breakers which head towards the shore thereby building submarine shoals rich in fish, shrimps and other marine life. This explains why the Bakassi area is such a very fertile fishing ground as the lakes of Scandinavia and Newfoundland. This shows that apart from the oil, there are also abundant marine resources to meet the protein and cash needs of the people. The area is rich in oil deposit because of its location in the Gulf of Guinea.

The separatist movement of Ambazonia is an Anglophone secessionist movement and its Secretary-General, Emmanuel Visha, remarked that Ambazonia is going to fight tooth and nail. Nigeria and Cameroon, two thieves fighting over a neighbour's goat.

### **Summary**

The origin of the Bakassi – Nigerian-Cameroon crisis is historical as the scramble and partitioning of Africa between Germany, British and France laid the stage for it and the rich marine natural resources in the river sustained the hostilities and oil resources deposits escalated it and led to violence. The political leaders did not play their role well as they did not act fast and when they acted, it was with selfish motives of self-aggrandisement.

### **Conclusion**

The crisis is a fight between the two ruling classes in Nigeria and Cameroon for resources and political control and the common people, the natives bear the pain of it. The benefits of oil exploration are not even impacting positively on them. There is a need to deescalate all tensions there and use the oil revenue for the benefit of the people. The scramble for natural resources arising from its economic benefits are the reason for conflicts that can be best understood from Ake (1976) explanation of the economic foundation of modern Africa that has made the struggles and politics of conflicts to make sense depending on the perspectives of the stake holders

### **Recommendations**

The paper recommends as follows:

- Since many boundary conflicts have a historical origin, if these origins are looked into to see how there can be re-connection or free passage or access for the association by the same people, people of the same culture that were separated, the individually generated conflicts can reduce.
- Crude exploration and production should not be given more prominence than other natural resources like the marine organism in the rivers as the abundant marine life that meets the protein need of the people did not escalate the crisis, but immediately oil came, tempers rose. Let the political leaders give equal importance to develop the two, namely oil and non-oil natural resources.
- The governments should not only be concerned with the use of oil revenue for wars or outright theft but they should also use it for the development of the area – Bakassi whether on Cameroon or Nigeria's side is very poor and lacking in basic infrastructural facilities.



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