

Unlimiting the Limits of African Borders: The Case of Cameroon-Nigeria Border Towns of Abongshe and Abong

Mark Bolak Funteh

Department of History, University of Maroua,
CAMEROON.

mfunteh@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The notion and function of boundary differed fundamentally in the European and African contexts. In traditional Africa, the concept of boundary was expressed in terms of neighbours with whom the particular polity shared a territory and such a boundary was conceived of in terms of a region or a narrow zone fronting the two neighbours marked off by it. Thus, the boundary was the zone where two States were joined together, not separated. In other words, African boundaries were usually rooted in ethnic and social contact. But European partition of Africa conceived boundaries as physical separation points. Africans who had become frontiersmen had no immediate knowledge that their lands and kin divided by the boundary were now "foreign". They did not know that the new boundaries functioned differently from the traditionally familiar ones. They thought the former was only for the white men until they were checked at crossing points. Its impact on their relations with their kin and neighbours made them to create secret routes across the frontiers. But these new borders soon faded in their minds in favour of their familiar economic and socio-cultural interactions, and providing favourable breeding spaces for new border stakes, namely, prostitution, smuggling and child trafficking. Often, the border regimes participated and surrendered their authority to the overwhelming influence of these phenomena. This paper, therefore, attempts a theoretical approach to the notion of boundaries, the valorisation of ethnic rather than international prescript boundaries by the inhabitants of Abongshe and Abong, and shows how their activities render this Cameroon-Nigeria frontier line a cooperating and blending zone. It, of course, brings to book the famous African-frontier-prone-conflict paradigm.

Keywords: Limits, African Borders, Cameroon-Nigeria Border Towns, Abongshe and Abong

INTRODUCTION

In July 1884, Cameroon became German protectorate. But with the German defeat during the First World War by the Allied Forces, Cameroon was divided between Britain and France in 1919 under the mandates of the League of Nations. British Cameroons was administered as an integral part of Nigeria. For the 40 years, and in February 1961 by a UN conducted a plebiscite, the British Southern Cameroons gained independence by reunifying with *La Republique du Cameroun*, and of course Abongshe became part of Cameroon and Abong remained in Nigeria (LeVine, 1971). Abongshe and Abong are towns on the banks of the River Benue. The former constitutes part of Donga-Mantung Division and the latter, part of Taraba State. The river (named Donga by Cameroonians, and from where the Division got its name), which separates both towns, forms the basis of the international boundary between both nations. Meanwhile the boundary line is acknowledged by the governments of both states, the towns' dwellers see things differently. They have been experiencing an increase in the actual quantity of cross-border flows, as well as a deepening of the penetration of cross-border operations into the heart of the nations' territories. Their interactions as well as

immigration from one country into the other are carried on with little regard for the colonial demarcation despite the establishment of state border control mechanism, namely gendarmes, police and custom officers, hence redefining the limits of the boundary between both states. Cameroon-Nigeria borders, like others in Africa, interest academics.

Davidson, for example, says that the African colonial territories, which have attained independence, cannot in a strict sense be regarded as national states. They do not embrace a common past; they are indeed the arbitrary creations of colonialism, leaving a heritage of artificially controlled borders that now demarcate the emerging African states, and serve as a source of conflict among many African states. Reflecting on the emergence of new states in contemporary Africa, he believes that their history begins anew. They reappear today in the sad evening of the world of nation-states. Yet their own tradition, he notes was seldom of narrow nationality. Their genius was for integration – integration by conquest as the times prescribed, but also by an ever partful mongling and migration. “They were never tolerant of exclusive frontiers” (Davidson, 1967:65). The nineteenth century imperialism cut across boundaries and peoples and left for Africa, the problems or redrawing frontiers on a rational plan.

East and Moody (1956) claim that all political boundaries are artificial because they are demarcated by human beings. The accidents of history, the vagaries of geography and the exigencies of economics have all played a part in determining even European boundaries. But the special circumstances operating in Africa makes its international boundaries doubly artificial in the sense that they are not, like most European boundaries, “the visible expression of age-long efforts of the indigenous people” to achieve political adjustment between themselves and the physical conditions in which they live.

In the successive phase of the European partitioning of African, the lines demarcating spheres of interest were often haphazard, hasty and badly arranged. The Europeans agents and diplomats were primarily interesting in grabbing as much as African territory as possible, and were not unduly concerned about the consequences of disrupting ethnic groups and undermining the indigenous political order. This generated great conflict between states such as those between Ethiopia and its neighbours in the Horn of Africa, between Nigeria and its neighbours in West and Central Africa, between the Democratic Republic of Congo and its neighbours in the Great Lakes region, and between Cameroon and Nigeria over the Bakassi Peninsular. 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) (Ibid.). However, both indigenous and foreign efforts have constantly been put in place in the face of these African disputes. This explains why authors have multiplied interest as regards colonialism and boundary, boundary activities and disputes among African states.

Rouke (1997) assesses at length the legacy of colonialism in Africa, pointing out that the industrialization of the North was one of the factors that caused the colonization of the South in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He shows that Africa was largely controlled by its indigenous peoples in the 1878 but had, by 1914 become almost totally subjected and divided into colonies by the European powers. The colonial boundaries had little relationship to the territories occupied by the various indigenous peoples, grouping nations together in some cases and dividing them in others. Within seventy years, virtually all of the colonies regained their independence, but many they have been troubled by the legacy of trying to get two or more states to live peacefully in a single state. The strength of this document is the fluency

with which he transmits the general trend of European colonial imposed boundaries on Africa and their consequences.

Akanmode, Kolapo, Aghemelo and Ibhasebhor, and Sanusi on their part discuss the Bakassi Peninsular and the International Court of Justice. Akanmode's descriptive geographical account (as discussed by Akanmode, 2002: 4-5) of the Bakassi Peninsular puts the value of the population of the area to be mostly Nigeria. He presents the Peninsular as a paradox; a community that subsists in the midst of plenty of fish and oil deposit, but is ravaged by abject poverty. Briefly recounting the clash story between Cameroon and Nigeria of 1993 and the judgment of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) of 10 October 2002, he questions the verdict of the court and influence on the future of the inhabitants of the area.

In the same light, Kolapo, Aghemelo and Ibhasebhor (2006: 2) give a critical analysis of the far-reaching implications of the ICJ ruling on the Nigerian state. Their emphases are on the security implications, the social structures, economic jeopardy of the Nigerian state among others and the pride of the people as a whole. Like these authors, Banansi (2007: 67-71) says that the Judgment made little or no sense. His question is "How do you cede a people with different culture, language and background to another nation whose background differs completely?" He insists that the Bakassi people are Nigerians who cannot become Cameroonians overnight. He points out the need for the Nigerian government to appeal the World Court for a review of the judgment. Banansi's writing is too sentiments with shallow knowledge about the genesis of the disputed boundary. In fact the issue of international boundaries has created a great deal of such conflict on the African continent. Evident enough are those of Chad-Libya, Namibia-Botswana, Burkina Faso-Mali, Western Sahara-Algeria-Morocco, Gabon-Equatorial Guinea, and Ethiopia-Eritrea and so on).

Nonetheless, it is important to note that there are inevitable conditions of fluidity along most of the African boundary zones where must indigenous population of the border lines by-pass these colonial boundary legacies to incline to their ethnic ones; in order to satisfy their political, economic and socio-cultural needs. This transforms such boundaries into decorative imaginary line due enough to be respected only by their respective governments and not them, the subalterns of the border lines. It is in this light that the paper is written. It looks at the epistemology of boundary; both from the perception of the international and indigenous African concepts, meanwhile examining how the peoples of the Cameroon-Nigeria border towns of Abongshe and Abong abrogate or better still, redefine the limits of the application of the former in favour of the later.

EPISTEMOLOGY OF BOUNDARY AND ITS REPRESENTATION

In 1890, in his own words Lord Salisbury declared:

We have been engaged ... in drawing up lines upon maps where no whites's feet have ever trode: we have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, but we have only been hindered by small impediments that we never knew exactly where those mountains, rivers and lakes were.**

When he said this when territorial boundaries were being drawn across the world with no respect for natural or cultural boundaries that had existed before. Most African ethnic lines were never considered in the process. These boundaries were designed to reinforce an international system of absolute sovereignty of the state in which boundaries were derived from geo-military occupation of space as determined by consenting colonial powers. More

** Lord Salisbury, speaking in 1890, as quoted in the separate opinion of Judge Ajibola, in Territorial Dispute (Libya v. Chad) ICJ Report of 1994, 6, at 53.

than a century late, many of these territorial boundaries remained as they were drawn, and these international boundaries and ideas behind them still form the foundation for the present international legal system (McCorquodale and Pangalangan, 2001: 1-2).

The primary components of the international legal system are states, and territorial boundaries are a key element in how states are defined by that system. While the boundaries determined by the system are often artificially created and contested, they exist by the operation of the system, which usually seeks to reinforce these boundaries and the concept of territorial sovereignty inherent in them. From this perspective, the purpose of territorial boundaries is to clarify which entities are states and to separate them from each other in order to structure that system. This is because at the basis of international law, lies the notion that a state occupies a definite part of the surface of the earth, within which it normally exercises jurisdiction over persons and things to the exclusion of the jurisdiction of other states. States are the representatives of the inhabitants of the territory, which must be a “permanent population”, thus ethnicity, religion or moral practices become largely irrelevant as living space is determined by the state’s territorial boundary; contrary is *co-terminous* with sovereignty. The direct connection between territorial boundaries was made in 1910 by the Permanent Court of Arbitration. It was re-enforced by the International Legal Order that emerged after the World War II and recognized as fundamental purposes in the Charter of the United Nations as reaffirmed in the authoritative declaration of principles of international law, adopted by the UN General Assembly (Ibid.).

As one intension of territorial boundaries is that they enhance “group cohesion by psychologically sharpening the deferent identification of community members from others across the boundary”, the state is meant to be the only relevant identity for the habitants of a territory. Related to this, international law has developed intricate rules regarding the nationality of people in terms of their relationship to states, as determined by the degree of connection people have to the territory of a state. By determining who its nationals are, states also determine who non-nationals are: who is the “other”. Others do not have the same rights and obligations with regard to that state. The consequence for most states that emerged from colonial administration was that the new (independent) governments sought to assert powerfully the states identity above all other identities (Mashood, Ngandu, 2011). Many of these governments argue against the maintenance of the traditional indigenous institutions which they consider to be dangerous and anachronistic and accused the tribalism, regionalism, and racism as being the better enemies of national-state building. But the respect of international legal notion of boundary has not been most African’s orientation.

This attempt of breaking down the influence of tribalism, regionalism and racism by the new states, was an inheritance of colonial influence, which was the separation and dissociation of these ethnic entities in the course of partitioning of the African continent for their convenience and interest. Asiwaju points out that a study of European archives supports an accidental rather than an intentional making of African boundaries. This meant that the European interests were of primary concern. The population of the frontier areas was envisaged, if at all, only as dim and inarticulate presences in the background. Therefore, in determining boundaries, the Europeans did not take African interests into consideration (As cited by Sama, 2005:103–122). The notion and function of the term ‘boundary’ differed fundamentally in the European and African contexts. However strict the observation of these boundaries were to be, the reasoning of the inhabitants of the Cameroon-Nigerian border towns of Abongshe and Abong respectively was not the same. Their geographical proximity caused the disrespect of the lines a familiar commodity.

Fanso (1989: 58–75) says boundary to them was the zone where two states were united or joined together, not separated. In other words, African boundaries were usually rooted in ethnic and social contact. European states, however, conceived of boundaries as lines or points of separation. In the case of Cameroon, the Anglo-French partition of the former German colony in 1916 provided that inhabitants living in or near the border region had six months from the time that the border was delimited to express their intention to settle in a region placed under the jurisdiction of the other colonial power. A problem was thereby created. The border subalterns thought the border lines was for the white men, and thus disrespected them. Such an impact was directed reflected in the Cameroon-Nigeria frontier towns.

AGONSHE AND ABONG TOWN DWELLERS: APPLICATION OF INDIGENOUS BOUNDARY

In fact, however separated these towns seem to be, some scholars consider them as a common people. They are duly associated not by colonial effort but through ethnic affiliations. Rather, colonial state creation dishearteningly fragmented brethren. But according to the inhabitants of these border towns, the presence of the international boundaries faded away fast in their minds even before it was established. International boundaries represent nothing to them but their ethnic boundaries. They insisted never to give it up for nothing else; since giving it up was tantamount to breaking up their ancestral connectivity. Shewa (2006:27) posits that the Abongshe and Abong peoples, living on both sides of River Donger, are generally referred to as Mbembe. Ntoi, 2003:13) adds: “Mbembe are only divided by the River,” which represents the international border line, and their “nearness and connectivity between them propelled them to consistently see themselves as brothers”. They depended on one another’s political, economic and social contacts and introducing a high degree of permeability on this boundary.

A case in point is the fuel smuggling across the border line. The fuel, *zuazua*, mostly effected by a group of youths. The Abong youths have their customers in Abongshe to whom they bring the fuel. They board a large wooden canoe to cross the River (plate 1). The canoes are also used to ferry vehicles, which carry over 3,800 litres of fuel. The issue of border crossing and paper checking is far from being an issue since the law enforcement officers are familiar with the activities and have become part of the deal. Through this, more than 30 million litres of fuel are smuggled out of Nigeria into Cameroun yearly, even on motorcycles. Among the trade transaction going on unperturbed along the border lines, are the buying and selling of house hold utensils from Nigeria by Cameroonians (Johnson-Ross, 2009:23-35). Fridays and Mondays are market days of Abong and Abongshe respectively. Here, the border-liners trade with all types of items, including the small fire arms. During the transaction, both the CFA franc and the Nira are acceptable legal tenders without any exchange needed. On these days, both peoples cross the border to meet with friends, share information, drinks, befriend girls or prostitutes (who constitute a major activity in the area). Abongshe as well as Abong Girls (16-35 years) would visit each side for customers, where they stay for 2 to 3 days after the market days. Gradually, they founded quarters, *dumboo* 1 and 2 in both towns, for their activities and held periodic thrift or mutual aid association, *shaki*, through which they promote their activities and human trafficking. The annual dance, *tajok*, like death ceremonies, jointly performed by both peoples served as prostitution and trafficking forum as well. Traders, parents and some border regimes also help in promoting these activities, as they create systematic trafficking strategies, routes and benefits. Nevertheless, markets functioned for the ethnic folk as a social club, linking and strengthening their cultural contact and commercial cooperation. A person can stay here for long without noticing neither the boundaries nor differences between these towns’ dwellers.



Plate 1. Canoe transportation of *zuazua*
Source: Author's collection.

Whatever, human trafficking is high in these border towns, affecting both boys and girls (of 10-27 years, see diagram 1). However, the proportion of girls is far higher (see diagram 2). They are trafficked from various parts of the area (see diagram 3), because of and for varied reasons, and is done during periods of the year (see diagram 4). Meanwhile girls are for prostitution, house maids, baby sitters and bar/restaurant maids, boys are mostly involved in hawking (see diagram 5). But both girls and boys also serve as ritual items.

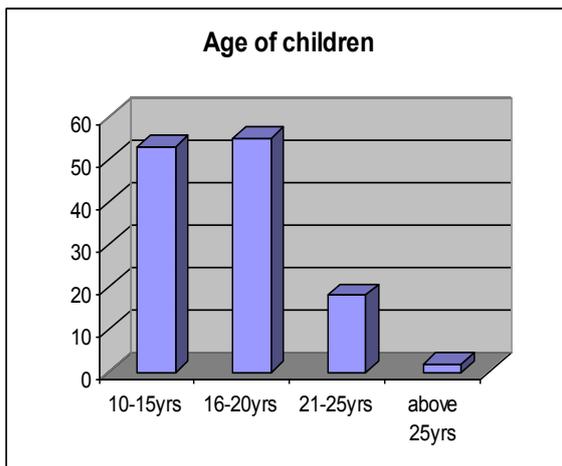


Diagram 1.

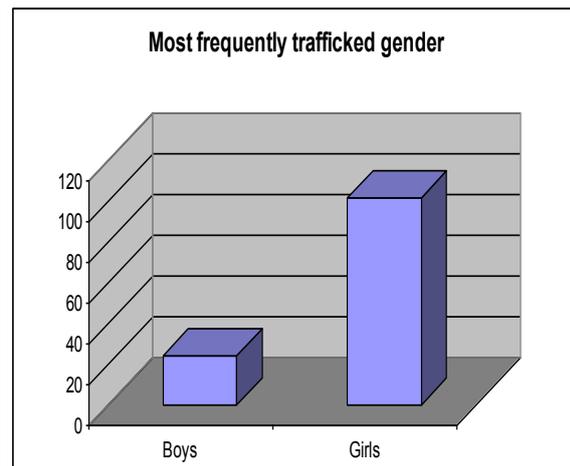


Diagram 2.

Source: Author's Collection

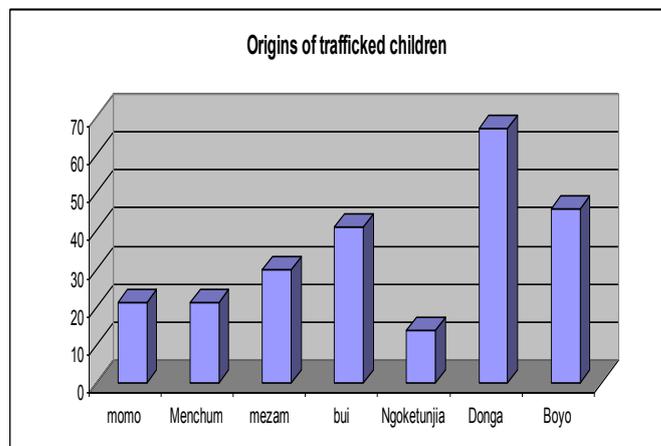


Diagram 3.

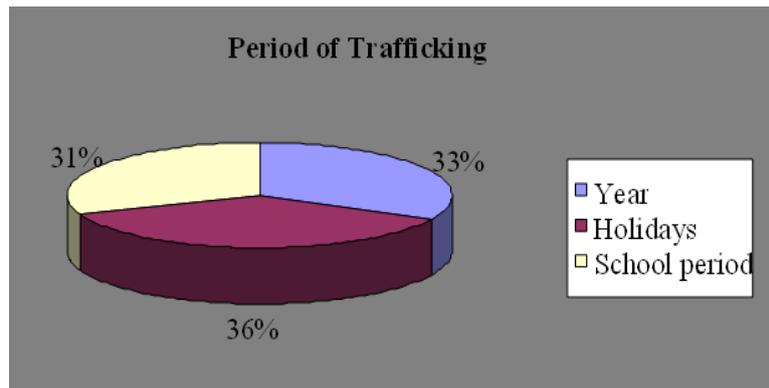


Diagram 4.

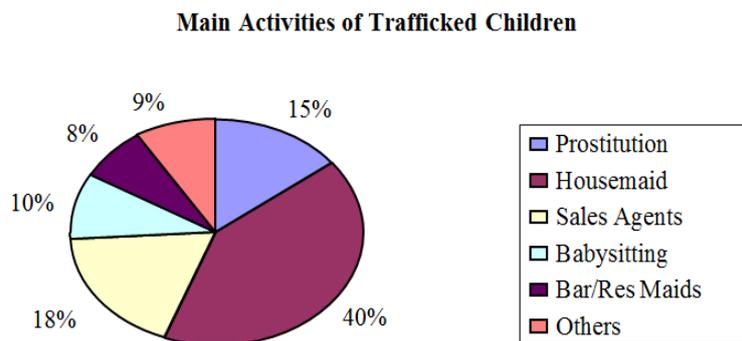


Diagram 5.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to see how the epistemological concept of boundary differed fundamentally from the European and African applications. Even though both operate within the confines of the acceptable system of International law, with the former intuit by colonial heritage confining inhabitants of a particular territory to the mandate of state control and ownership, the traditional African concept of boundary prevails and is applied most often than not, especially in the Cameroon and Nigeria border towns of Abongshe and Abong. Here, the socio-economic and cultural mores by-pass and/or abrogate these international notions and functions of boundary to incline to their ethnic jurisdiction. Due to their blending, the international border faded in their minds, consequently redefining and/or shifting the frontiers into the interior of the territories. In order to regulate this, governments of both states need to be effectively present in border towns, by not only deploying accountable forces of law, but implanting realistic political, socio-economic and cultural institutions, especially to check child trafficking (see diagram 6). It would be helpful for African nations which share a common ethnic border composition to create confederacy for a better comprehensive frontier space, as well as manifest a political will to partake in the effective implementation of the four-point African Union border zone programme, rather than valorize conflict provoking values and tendencies.

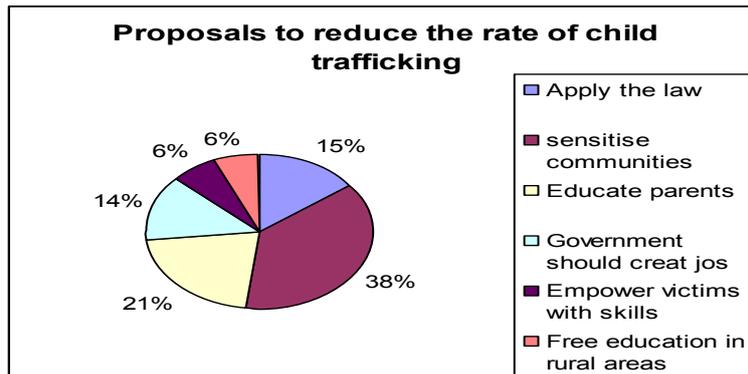


Diagram 6.

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