



THE INTRACTABLE LEGACIES OF THE 1884/85 BERLIN CONFERENCE ON WEST AFRICAN HOMOGENEOUS POPULATIONS

Dr. Olalekan Augustine Babatunde

Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Abuja, Nigeria

Corresponding author: *Olalekan A. Babatunde
Tel.: +234-7068226832 Email: babatunde@ipcr.gov.ng

ABSTRACT

The current challenges of nation building that most African nations are facing cannot be expunged from the decisions made at Berlin Conference of 1884 to 1885 in Germany. That is, the interference and outcomes made by the major European powers including the United States to partition the hitherto homogenous communities that had lived together for time immemorial. The insensitivity and the imperialism are some of the structural drivers of underdevelopment and political wrangling in the continent, particularly in the West African region. The homogenous populations have been marginalized and underserved for too long due to this circumstance. Several lives and property are being lost while millions of people and livelihoods are being displaced as a result of the inability and dilemma of the indigenous governments to focus on the demarcated peoples.

Drawing from extensive historical reviews and conflict databases, the study, while uncovering the affected homogenous communities of the alterations in the region, recounts how the identical populations along the borderlines had lived prior to the partition. It analyses the nature and characteristics of conflict and violence that the mostly affected populations are being confronted with despite various national governments' development programmes. Therefore, to mitigate the legacies and burdens of the separation, the study advises the African national governments, regional bodies and development partners to deepen good governance and border management strategies that will foster robust socio-economic lives, security and development of the straddled populations. It is then that the impact of the Conference will be lightened in the heart and lives of the people at the inter-border homogenous societies as the region faces the 21st century development challenges.

KEYWORDS:

Border; Communities; Populations; Separation; Development.

INTRODUCTION

With pen and map, the European powers divided Africa into colonies among themselves in Berlin, Germany from November 1884 to February 1885. The resolution set the tone for its colonization after long and intense rivalries over their quest for Africa's rich resources. As one of the most defining moments in African history, that decision was taken without careful considerations for and lack of sensitivity to the communities' family ties, history, culture and environment. Many of the continent's socio-economic, political and security challenges over the decades have their roots in the outcomes of the meeting. Several homogeneous and established kinship and ties were either vertically separated displaced or uprooted families through "effective occupation".

In the light of today's rising populism, far right nationalism, protectionism, "Make America Great Again", and "Brexit", as a result of globalization and migration, one could have imagined the psychological, environmental pressures; social, economic and political damage such a foreign-induced division would have caused peoples who had coexisted since time immemorial. Their intractable problems of nation building have their seeds in the split. Nine of its fifteen countries made the Foreign Policy's Failed States Index (2018), while according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "fourteen have low human development levels" as over one-half of the overall population lives in poverty. Their youth engaged in the infamous illegal migration to Europe. The enduring legacies of the conference have either been under reported or misunderstood particularly in the Western world on the daily lives of the peoples.

Thus it is important for the world to be informed and pay attention to the decision taken some 136 years ago. Amid the rising terrorist and insurgent groups such as the ISIS and Al-Qaida-affiliated sects in Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad and across the Sahel, the West African region is reeling from widespread insecurity and community tensions including underdevelopment challenges that have proved to be difficult to resolve due mostly to the restrictive barriers and identity crisis of the straddled border populations.

Methodology and Questions

Drawing from historical and contemporary perspectives, the essay relives the nature and characteristics of the demarcation of those periods of sorrow and throws some light into the West African estrangement. Hence, the following questions are attempted: how were the divided populations interrelated in the centuries preceding the Berlin Conference? What was the demographic nature of the border populations? How were the identical groups separated? What aspects of their lives were altered by the separation?

What are the socio-economic, security and political consequences of the partition and, how can they be mitigated?

Findings and Discussions

The Berlin Conference was held under the auspices of the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the meeting had Great Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden-Norway and Denmark including the United States and the Ottoman Empire in attendance. Neither African representatives nor their interests considered before drawing the incongruous lines. Attempts by the Sultan of Zanzibar to attend the meeting were belittled by the British. With the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, all African countries were annexed and colonized afterwards, mostly through treaties and conquest. West Africa seems the most hit.

Alluding to the fact, *FragileStates* says no region in the world has more fragile states than West Africa. The region was split between Britain, France and Portugal who used trees, rock, stones, rivers, etc. as marks to separate peoples that had seamlessly lived together for centuries. Many kith and kin of the main races: Niger-Congo and Afro-Asiatic were isolated. Britain had Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and The Gambia (Anglophone). France had Benin, Togo, Mali, Niger, Cote d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Senegal and Guinea (Francophone) while Portugal had Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde (Lusophone).

For example, the Hausa cut across five countries of Nigeria, Benin, Niger, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire including Chad, Cameroon and Sudan; the Yoruba can be found in Nigeria, Benin, Togo and Ghana; Igbo in Nigeria and Cameroon; Akan in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire; Fula (Fulani) can be found in Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Togo, Burkina Faso, Benin, The Gambia, Niger, Guinea Bissau, Ghana, Togo and Cote d'Ivoire including Cameroon, Sudan and Central African Republic. But it is the demographic homogeneous societies that geographically astride the borderlines that are affected in the cut-off. They are communities that were familial, linguistically, culturally and religiously related.

According to Collins (1985), "peoples of the same culture may be found both sides of the frontier lines." For instance, the Yoruba who are the largest homogeneous group in West Africa are divided between Nigeria and Benin with several kilometre-long border from the Atlantic Ocean in Badagry up to Imeko-Ilara-Shaki to Port-Novo-Ketou, Ifonyin and Arago in Benin; the Bariba-Hausa in Chikanda in Nigeria severed from their kinsmen in Tchicandou in Benin; the Moba between Togo and Burkina Faso; the Malinka (Mandinka) who are also one of the largest groups in the region are made to astride Mali, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau and Cote d'Ivoire; Ewe in Ghana and Togo; Wolof and Serer astride

Senegal and Gambia. Others include the Mende between Sierra Leone and Liberia; Fra-fra among Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso; Igbo, Efik, Boki and Kaka between Nigeria and Cameroon; Hausa-Fulani among Nigerian and Nigerien frontiers; Toureg between Mali, Niger, Algeria and Libya; Akan/Ewe detached between Ghana-Togo; Birifor between Ghana and Burkina Faso; and several others.

Before the advent of the Europeans, the aforementioned partitioned homogeneous Africans had lived in social groups and evolved a political structure headed by a king and supported by efficient and effective administrative systems. Extended family units played key role. They moved around in pursuit of socio-economic activities and distance trade. Rewarding inter-ethnic relations developed. Peace and security was maintained through maintenance of law and order while practices such as guardianship, rights of property, inheritance, marriage, burial and others flourished. The Berlin-initiated partition put asunder all these groups that shared a long common history. It disrupted their socio-economic and political structures.

If what the Berlin Wall stood for and its collapse in 1989 that led to the German reunification were reflected upon, with hindsight, one would have imagined what the partition had done to Africa. The inherited boundaries have been a major problem for the lives of the homogeneous peoples. They must have gone through the trauma of the partition that restricted human relationships. It triggered displacement, forceful relocation and generated a wide range of cross-border criminal and conflict violence resulting from ethnic tensions and community clashes, armed robbery, smuggling, arms proliferation, transhumance-related clashes, insurrection, terrorism and extremism.

The nebulous nature of the demarcations is difficult to manage. For instance, there are cases on the Nigerian-Benin borders of some houses having their living room on the Nigerian side while the bedrooms in Benin, and vice versa. Giving The Conversation's description (2015) "Pre-Independence Africa watched Europeans...drawing lines upon maps where no white man's feet ever trod, "effective management of the regional migration, citizenship and integration is complicated. The bestridden border populations' cultural affinity makes criminals incapable of being perceived as different from each other. None of the regional governments can be said to have an effective and successful identification system. Corruption and high-level ignorance would not allow.

In addition, some of the pre-colonial practices of the identical peoples endured into the colonial era despite restrictions. For example, the congruent groups of Wolof, Mandinka, Bambara, Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, Akan (Asante) and Ewe engaged in flourished intra-trade exchanges in salt, textile, livestock, kola

nuts and ivory. The partition made their farms and means of livelihoods to be on the other sides of the divide. It was not uncommon for the border homogeneous communities to violate the rules. Hence attempts to curtail their movements by the partition did not work. The wandering pastoralists, the Fulbe, or Fula or Fulani seemed the most affected by the demarcation and therefore their flagrant disregard.

The nomads (one of the largest homogeneous populations) cut across most countries of the region. They have been moving their transhumance activities regardless of ethnic borders in pursuit of pasture and water for their herds. To them, "God is the owner of all land." As Anthony Asiwaju, a history's emeritus professor and an international border expert say "[I]n general, African boundaries have represented physical barriers, but have functioned more as conduits, for the circulation of people, animals and goods." Such lifestyle has created challenges for the authorities in terms of border regulation, enforcement and monitoring.

Though the division affected the psyche of the peoples involved in the congruous partition, the reality of the colonial restrictions and official permission to cross the borders that bothered not only the homogeneous communities but others as well. Since their forebears had moved relatively free across the artificial borders for marriage, friendship, child naming and burial functions, succeeding generations did not see reasons why theirs must be different. Obtaining official permission to cross the barriers excluded or differentiated them from their kith and kin. Such mentality often posed difficulty for the colonial and post-independent administrations. There are lots of immigration violations.

The engendered underdevelopment of the border population or community is another legacy. Colonial transportation like railways, roads and bridges and communication such as telephone that were designed to facilitate the exploitation of food and cash crops and other resources from the hinterland to the coast did not connect other neighboring colonies, even of the same metropole. For example, in Guinea, the rail lines that were constructed to link the inland of Tinkisso River did not link same people in Guinea and Mali, yet the same colonial power. Also the 360 miles of rail lines between Port Novo and Cotonou (in French colony) were not extended to connect their Yoruba counterparts in Badagry at the Seme borders in Nigeria. Same with motorable roads. Independent states maintained the status quo. The Lagos-Abidjan Transport Corridor Project, an idea initiated by the World Bank, has been stalled since 2006. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)'s attempt to revive it is widely received with scepticism. Today, for example, because of the realization of the development challenges of the border populations, the Nigerian government established National Border Development Agency in 2009 to promote development of the border communities. According to Asiwaju, the agency

“has achieved little on the ground outside the characteristically large bureaucracy in Abuja...The truth seems to be that government at all levels...is yet to take border region development seriously, and the nation may expect to see the worsening of the danger posed to national security.”

They are suffering from decades of neglect at the expense of urban areas. It incubated criminal and radical views including self-determined gangs. From the interviews conducted, the lack of attention by the authorities was one of the reasons the youth of the frontiers engage in illicit activities such as smuggling, arms proliferation and women in prostitution as well as being indoctrinated by extremist groups.

The reinforcement of national consciousness after political independence in the 1960s added to the living difficulties of the homogeneous communities. Artificial frontiers that became very important after independence constricted relationships despite illegal crossing but at one's peril. Largely, lives of these border populations became difficult as movements across borders were officially restricted. But today, the border communities still cross the lines even without official permission.

But on the other hand, as the hacked communities became politically distinct or opposite groups, national consciousness that grew among the citizens made the identical peoples to learn what it meant to be a Senegalese, Malian, Ghanaian or Guinean and passing through the customs and immigrations posts gave realities to the new order, i.e. change in administration. That did not exempt the contiguous francophone countries, though with milder difference from their Anglophone counterparts.

Nevertheless, the vestiges of colonial separation in which the new political order presented impacted the homogeneity of the peoples. They exploited the opportunity of the colonial education. It is commonplace to see students crossing the borders in the morning to attend school at the other sides and return in the evening or market women moving into another market of a bordered nation to trade. For instance, at Aflao border post between Togo with Ghana, large numbers of students would be sighted crossing to and fro to attend schools despite their political differences. The legacy presents a serious management challenge to the government.

The astride communities are highly vulnerable. The dramatic increase in the regional flow of people, goods and vehicles created new threat to the border communities, i.e. national security. Touting and duping, illegal or silent migration, vehicle theft, smuggling, gun-running, armed banditry and of course

the transhumance activities of cattle rearers who move their herds across borders regardless of regulations. For instance, deportation affect homogeneous peoples who might be mistook for another nationality. Nigeria Customs Service said it often faced the challenge of placing some Nigeriens during deportation as they bear similar traits and names with the Nigerian Hausa group, and between the Yoruba of Nigeria and Benin. This is a result of the inability of the regional authorities to evolve an efficient and effective identification system.

As the transiting areas for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, it altered the environment that the identical societies had been used to. Due to the large transiting migrants and the volumes of both legal and illegal activities therein, it exerted enormous pressure and turned the border landscape into criminal and insurgent environment. Prostitution, trafficking, burglary and others emerged, and festered. Therefore fuels the borders' vulnerability. As the astride communities too engaged in the illegal cross-border trading activities across the borders and got empowered, competition set in and the communities witnessed the aforementioned conflict and illicit activities.

This brings to the fore the ease at which international criminal gangs such as terrorists and extremists across the borders due to their similar identity with the local communities. Terrorists hide under the indistinguishable physical appearance and language. The origin of the recurring insurgent violence in the Northern Nigeria since the 1980s can be traced to the problem of identity with Nigerien, Chadian and Cameroonian borderlines. The rank and file of the decade-old Boko Haram terrorist group with affiliation with the Islamic State composed of members with same kinship and ties. The groups are operating in Chad, Niger and Cameroon. The problem fuels the ongoing international terrorism in the Sahel (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) by the ISIS-affiliated sects. These groups take advantage of the similarities in race and culture of the communities including the populations' vulnerabilities.

The poorly-defined and loosely-guarded borders threaten homogeneous populations with tension from the neighboring countries. Collins observed that as the governments became politically, socially and economically connected to France, Britain and Portugal respectively, geo-political disputes arose over borders and the divided peoples became the battlegrounds. Wars and violence such as the Nigeria and Cameroon over the Bakassi peninsula in the early 2000. Though the region has overcome the violence of the Cold War, but sometimes borders are closed on alleged or apparent crimes. Nigeria has closed its borders with its neighbors since November 2019 till the time of writing this essay (January 2020).

There is nothing compared to a divided homogeneous group along political lines and citizenship ideology. Unity, cooperation, inclusion and cohesion sometimes are tested and its degeneration affects growth and pattern of the society. When such happens, violence erupts among peoples that had lived together peacefully and harmoniously. For example, among communities in Burkina Faso and Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon and Benin-Niger frontier dispute. The Berlin's legacy also festered the Liberian and Sierra Leone wars in the 1980s and early 1990s. This is the bane of the straddled homogeneous communities at the regional borders prior to globalization.

But with the idea of the region's heads of state to float a body, ECOWAS, in May 1975 in Lagos, hope was revived that the colonial legacies would be mitigated and the severe socio-economic conditions of the citizens alleviated. The economic cooperation and integration body ratified the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Rights of Residence and Establishment in 1979 in Dakar, Senegal, to facilitate unhindered access of persons, goods and services across their international borders. It was targeted at dismantling the colonial separation, suspicion and resolve artificial conflict. The plight of the bestridden communities seemed to have been relieved. The expectation was that they would move freely and witness development.

41 years after, most of their daily lives and conditions have not been substantially improved. Forging social cohesion, inclusion, security and economic development among identical inter-border populations and their environment becomes an intractable development challenge. Failure of member state to fully cooperate, official corruption and the limited powers of ECOWAS to assert itself, absence of population movement and a host of other factors confront the implementation of the protocol. No member state could sacrifice free movement in the name of security. Similarly, large influx of community citizens where the economy is better might not be in the interest of any country.

Though by abolishing visa, the protocol has facilitated movements and trade among the community citizens, it has however, brought some hardships to the border communities. They still feel the brunt of the separation as social vices such as smuggling (persons, animals, arms, cars, rice, chicken and diaries products), prostitution, banditry and others festered in their midst. Their sons and daughters equally engaged in these illicit activities. For instance, many Yoruba indigenes of Owode, Idiroko and Igolo and Ajase (Port-Novo) in Nigeria and Benin respectively have been killed, arrested or prosecuted for their involvement in cross-border crimes. In 2003, the Beninese Hammani Tidjani's gang hijacked President Olusegun Obasanjo's private car in Nigeria. It took the effort of the Interpol to recover the car in Benin (Babatunde, 2009). Another practice is the immigration delays at border posts that force truck drivers to

while away time and develop amorous relationship with sex workers. Bars and hotel business is booming at the border posts. According to the World Bank in 2005, there was a prevalence of HIV/AIDS along the Lagos-Abidjan Transport Corridor.

The above points to the identity problem or mistaken identity, which have influenced the rate of ethno-religious and political crises in the region. Authorities have had difficulties in tracing suspects because they share physical, cultural and linguistic characteristics with the neighboring border communities. Such challenge has created conditions for the widespread of terrorist and insurgent violence in Nigeria and neighboring countries of Niger, Chad and Cameroon. As earlier mentioned, the Boko Haram terrorist groups that originated from the Nigeria's north east have in their fold nationalities of the adjoining countries because they speak Hausa language and look alike. The Nigerian Immigration Service and Nigerian Army often buttressed this problem. The Chief of Army Staff, Lt. Gen. Tukur Yusuf Buratai mentioned that "60 percent of these terrorists are not Nigerians" (Babatunde; 2018). Because of the problems of low level of education, corruption and poverty, efforts at encouraging citizens to use national identity cards have failed in Nigeria.

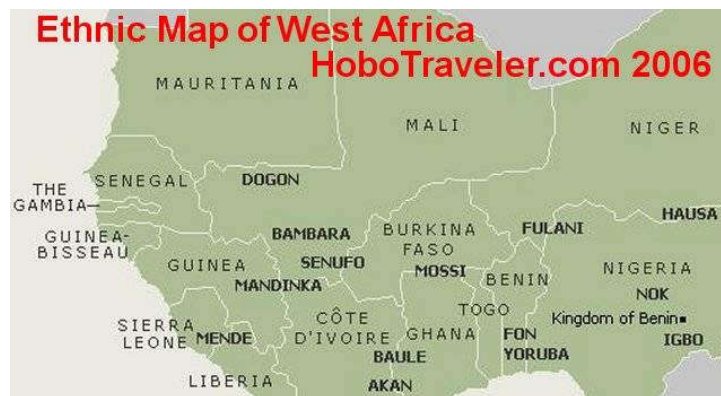
Reflections

The impact of the Berlin Conference has not only been evidenced along the region's borders but also within internal boundaries. The colonial division of thousands of homogeneous groups into provinces or states is one of the underlying causes of violent conflict in the region. Generally, it fuels tribalism, exclusion and human rights abuses in the continent through divide and rule. Nigeria with over 250 ethnic nationalities contends with this problem since independence. When considering the two border predicaments, nonetheless, it is fair to assert that it is a combination of factors, chiefly among them are the ineptitude and corruption of the independent African governments that have militated against the development of the homogeneous societies and failure to make them discover each others' humanity decades after the Berlin meeting. The political leaders at both national and supranational levels ought to have right the wrong of the conference's decision and make life better for their peoples.

In other words, though the decision of the conference still haunts West African homogeneous societies, it is the misgovernment of successive independent states to relieve the plight of the border communities in poverty and precariousness are making their conditions worse. That is the most unpatriotic service to the peoples. In an age of historic disparity and the present global order where everyone seems to be looking inward presents an invaluable opportunity for the governments to support the ethnic groups reeling from the region's arbitrary partition and promote their resilience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, it is reasonable to say that while the Berlin Conference initiated the decoupling of homogenous societies by ignoring their commonalities, it is the inability of West African governments to mitigate the its legacies and burdens. Even though they cannot be erased, good governance and better border management will foster robust socio-economic lives, security and political development of the straddled border communities. Ditto global citizenship education and deeper integration. The impact will lighten the burden in the heart and lives of not only the inter-border homogeneous societies but also the community citizens as a whole. It is expected that this model would guide public policy response to the plight of the homogeneous populations at the borders. According to Salim Ahmed Salim, the one-time Secretary General of the Organization of Africa Unity (now African Union) "The new generation of Africans...should scale up efforts at alleviating the severe conditions of the border communities, after all, integration, is about people, not only goods and services." West African governments, peoples and stakeholders should genuinely demonstrate the spirit of the so-called Pan-Africanism.



Source: www.google.com



The conference of Berlin, as illustrated in 'Illustrierte Zeitung', 1884 [WikiCommons]

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