

Nigeria-Cameroon Socio-Cultural Relations: A Borderland Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines Nigeria-Cameroon socio-cultural relations across three historical epochs: the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras, using a borderland perspective. It highlights how communities straddling the frontier have maintained ethnic, cultural, religious, and economic linkages despite shifting political orders. The paper argues that while colonialism imposed artificial boundaries that disrupted older networks, borderland communities have consistently adapted, negotiating their identities, livelihoods, and belonging across State borders. The Nigeria-Cameroon border is more than a geopolitical demarcation; it is a lived space where socio-cultural interactions unfold daily. What has emerged is that the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland inhabitants have strong ties among themselves, anchored by their shared resources, exchanges, ethnic and cultural affiliations, despite the various skirmishes experienced at the state-centric level between Nigeria and Cameroon. The continuous relations and peaceful coexistence among the border people have helped build feelings of trust and goodwill, making irreconcilable conflict unthinkable among them. Therefore, the border communities have served as mediating structures for the attainment of peace between the two States. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that the border communities serve as essential elements for fostering diplomatic ties between Nigeria and Cameroon.

Keywords: Nigeria, Cameroon, socio-cultural relations, pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era.

Introduction

One thing common about colonial administration in Africa including Nigeria is the complex web of border complications resulting from arbitrarily demarcated borders. These complexities have even become more serious after independence since many new policies were formulated that worsened relationships in neighboring regions. Nigeria has been faced with quite a few border problems like Nigeria-Cameroon Bakassi Peninsula dispute. Therefore, a lot of academic researches and discussions have been done about Nigeria-Cameroon border conflict specifically the Bakassi Peninsula problem. However, it is important to draw attention to cooperation between Nigeria and Cameroon especially in their border regions. The theme of this essay will be based on socio-cultural interconnections between Nigeria and Cameroon bordering communities. Thus, the analysis will encompass the three stages of history: precolonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. In order to conduct an effective study of the subject, the descriptive-analytical approach will be used to analyze a great variety of sources of information both primary and secondary. These include different publications of books and academic journals as well as online sources that will help to provide a detailed overview of socio-cultural interactions between Nigeria and Cameroon bordering regions.

Geographically, both Nigeria and Cameroon occupy strategically important location in Africa being located at its very center. The region was historically a hub connecting seven sub-families of African languages as well as featuring ancient routes of trade. There existed complex connections politically and economically with other nearby regions as well as outside of the continent. On the other hand, most of the literature concerning Nigeria-Cameroon relations takes a state-based view concentrating on border regime that was characterized by conflict, distrust, militarization, and litigation. Borderlands are spaces of both tension and creativity. Despite political boundaries, the Nigerian and Cameroonian communities remain bound by kinship, culture, and daily interactions.¹

Before the division of the region by the colonialists, there were centuries of integration between the various groups in the region. Thus, these communities were centres of close transactions, Interactions, interjections and interchanges resulting from movements and diffusion of cultures and practices, such as inter-marriages (ukod and iman relations), which acted as the adhesive that kept together various cultural communities within the area. Trade relations also helped in spreading socio-cultural institution concepts, marriages, and friendships. Prevalence of these institutions, including a common cosmological view, notably gods and spirits, provided a cultural identity of the region before the arrival of the colonialists. These relations existed before colonialism and have survived the colonially-inspired partition of the territory and continue binding these communities even within both sides of the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland regions. To these communities, kinship ties, religion, socio-cultural interactions, values, and traditional ways of interactions are superior to artificial borders, which do not in any way separate these people anyway.

Scholarly works have established that the Nigeria-Cameroon border region, just like other African borderlands, was quickly delineated to suit the interests of the competing colonial powers, which to-date, do not seem to have any real physical instruments of dividing the regions. This act of political division has separated not only the physical aspects of the regions but also the ethnic communities that were culturally cohesive into antagonistic systems. In his pioneering work on borderlands in Africa, Asiwaju (1989) has noted that between 1886 and 1893, the Anglo-German agreements resulted in the partitioning of the Nigeria-Cameroon borderlands region from Borno to the Cross River estuary; hence, "Europeans had cut off the head of the kingdom and left him with the body". Thus, in the Cross River-Nigeria-Southwest Cameroon borderlands region, the artificial boundary has separated the Ejagham, Boki, Becheve, and Akwaya peoples despite their common history.

¹ M. O. Bonchuk, "International Boundaries and Divided People: A Study of the Boki and Ejagham Communities, 1884-1994", (Unpublished PhD Thesis University of Calabar, Nigeria, 1997).

Conceptual Clarification

The Concept of Boundary

A boundary is defined in the classical or traditional sense as a dividing line separating one object from another.² In territorial terms, he sees a boundary as a line which separates one territory from another. It could be imaginary or represented on the ground as a pathway, erected pillars, markers, walls, trees, etc. This definition reflects the traditional view, which emphasises separation.

A boundary generally marks the limit of political or administrative jurisdiction.³ He adds that where this boundary separates two sovereign States, it is called a border. Put it this way, boundaries of nation-states in Africa are mere administrative lines that separate contiguous nations that demarcate their areas of jurisdiction and sovereignty. Therefore, in this discourse, border, boundary and frontier are used interchangeably.

The Concepts of Natural and Artificial Boundaries

There is a general view that all boundaries are man-made and therefore have a touch of artificiality.⁴ He who? stated that where boundaries are drawn to conform to natural features such as rivers, mountains or with existing ethno-cultural configurations, they are termed “natural” boundaries. Artificial boundaries are boundaries that are drawn to conform or follow lines of latitude and longitude with regard to physical features. Thus, boundaries could be artificial or natural depending on the nature of the markers.

The concept of Borderlands

These are zones lying along a given bi-national boundary and in functional interaction with each other as well as with each of their particular sovereign states. They are overlapping zones in which the cultures, economies, and politics of the interrelated nation-states interpenetrate and interface. They not only separate nation-states, but they are the bases of their connection-their immediate communication link. They represent features of the period after boundary delimitation. Borderlands or cross-border areas may be used interchangeably to define land areas around the border regions abutting international boundaries, where the locational effect of the border is felt in their social, economic and cultural activities.⁵ Cross-border what?, on the other hand, are overlapping regions at states frontiers. In most cases, these areas are more or less twilight zones at the peripheries of nations. Do a brief commentary on the various types of borderlands.

Pre-colonial socio-cultural relations between Nigeria and Cameroon Border Communities

Several records have revealed cordial and powerful relationships through social institutions and practices in the pre-colonial period among the border communities and ethnic groups, which later became Nigeria and Cameroon. The major ethnic groups were the Efik, Ibibio, Effiat, Ejagham, Olulumo/Nkome, Boki, Fulani/Fulfulde, and Hausa. The inhabitants of these border communities intermarried, performed some social functions together and generally regarded themselves as brothers and sisters.⁶ For instance, O. A. Otor noted that many border communities in Cross River State (Nigeria) and South West Cameroon had enormous socio-cultural relations which bonded them together

² Bonchuk, International boundaries and divided people: A study of the Boki and Ejagham communities, 1884-1994.

³ R. T. Akinyele, “Cross-border Co-operation Initiatives and the Potential for the Development of Border Communities”. A paper presented at the National Conference on Implementation Strategies for Border Communities’ Development in Nigeria, Abuja, 2nd-3rd December, 2008.

⁴ Bonchuk, International Boundaries and Divided People: A Study of the Boki and Ejagham Communities, 1884-1994.

⁵ J. P. Kolars, & J. D Nystuen, *Human Geography: Spatial Design in World Society*, (UK. McGraw-Hill, 1974).

⁶ B. O. Egbe, & I. O. Okoi, “Pre-colonial Intergroup Boundary Relations in Africa: The Nigerian Experience”, *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research*. 15(1), (2018), 34-46.

in the precolonial time.⁷ Otor, however, pointed out that this was so because the people were of the same ethnic group, for instance, the Boki and Ejagham people, who were later scattered across Nigeria and Cameroon through the instrumentality of colonialism. Otor noted that the border people operated the identical social institutions, such as births, marriages, age sets and burial rites or ceremonies. He mentioned some of the festivals that the border people performed together to include *Ingunita* ceremonies, which were done in the *Matengi* hunting grounds in the Cameroons, and that was presided over by a priest. Another festival that used to be celebrated by the people across the border was *Kobiamak*. This festival brought the people together. The Boki New Yam festival too, which was usually (and is still) celebrated on 18th August every year, was commonly done among the border communities such as Danari or Danare Kaabi, Danare 2 or Abonorok (old name), Bashu (Nigeria) and Bodam, Dadi, Bajie Kajifu, Kekukesim, Boka and Oyi in the present-day Republic of Cameroon. The inhabitants of *Ekok*, *Eyumojok*, *Nsanaraghti*, and *Nsanakang* (Cameroon) were also involved in celebrating the New Yam festival annually on the 4th of September with their Nigerian counterparts, thus exposing the link between the culture of the Ejagham people.

Also, about religion, the people worshiped supra-ethnic gods referred to as Bapong and Lakumboare at one time before colonization. These deities acted as a deterrence against any form of criminal activities, amongst other forms of misconduct within the South-Eastern region of the Nigeria-Cameroon border. The people considered the two deities to be very powerful and a source of their strength during battles, tribulations, and victories.

In addition, the Ejagham-Boki community had some social institutions such as Nkim (circumcision), Ebai (marriage) and Okan (age grades), which united its members even before colonization. They intermarried and co-existed peacefully together in harmony. These practices were more pronounced among the Ejagham and Boki speakers of the region. Nkim (circumcision) practice was instituted as a means of ensuring that females remained faithful in their marriages. To this end, the ritual of circumcision was performed by elderly women of the community. Socio-cultural institutions and practices were created by the pre-colonial border people to foster unity among the border communities.⁸ The integration and cooperation which seemed difficult to achieve since the period of decolonization in the 1950s, was very easy during the pre-colonial period. In terms of religious relations which were predominantly the African Traditional Religion (ATR), the Nigeria-Cameroon border communities such as Danare 1 or Danare Kaabi, Danare 2 or Abonorok (old name), Bashu (Nigeria) worshipped different gods together in peace and harmony with the people of Bodam, dadi, Boka, Kujifu, Kiku Kisim communities (Cameroon) during the pre-colonial era. The different gods that the border people venerated and what the gods represented were for instance, *Mfan* was a guardian god that killed witches and wizards either by strangling them to confess or killing them straight up. *Etale* was the god of thunder and war, *Okpata* was that of plenty, harvest, especially yam. Therefore, farmers from those border communities came together to venerate *Okpata* before the commencement of farming and during harvesting to thank him for bountiful harvest. Another god that was venerated by the border people was *Mgbe*. He was the god of merriment and enjoyment. *Emum* was the god of fortune in business. *Ata Boki* was the protector of his people and their territories while *Ada Bokie* guides against diseases, especially small pox. Whereas *Obasi njom* was that of merriment and happy moments, *Ekpo* was in charge of punishing a swindler and thieves.

Other forms of socio-cultural practices that brought the border people together during this period were hunting, wrestling and conquests, dancing competitions; cuisines and even dressing competition. For instance, the pre-colonial people organized wrestling competition among themselves for entertainment and also as an avenue to select men who were strong enough to lead in wars (a sort of strategic consideration). Cooking competition though was for entertainment, was also to teach the maidens how to cook various rich cuisines of the border people. Storytelling and moonlight tales which brought the border people together, was a source of entertainment and was a vital instrument for passing history from one generation to the next. It was usually done in the night.

⁷ O. A. Otor, "Developing a Trans-boundary Eco-cultural Tourism Circuit in the Cross River (Nigeria) South-West Cameroon Border Region: A Prognosis for Cross-Border Co-operation", *Benue Valley Journal of Humanities*. 12 (1&2)15-30.

⁸ Erim, "The Roots of Our National Unity", 1-26.

There were enormous socio-cultural relations among the people of the northern axis of the border between Nigeria and Cameroon in the pre-colonial times. These socio-cultural relations were evident in their shared religious engagements. Notable among them, was their shared religious activities. One of such was their participation in the worship of *Maguzuma*. It was a famous traditional worship before the advent of Islam in northern part of what came to be called Nigeria and their Cameroon neighbours. Some of the border communities who participated in the worship of *Maguzuma* were Bodo (Cameroon), Ram (Nigeria), Garuoa (Cameroon), Ngala (Nigeria) and Makari (Cameroon). *Maguzuma* was an animist religious practice where the sacrifice of animals was made for one's personal end but that it was a taboo to practice *Maguzuma* magic for harm.⁹ He stressed that cult spirit-possession known as *Bori*, had many gods which were named according to their specific powers. For instance, there was the one called *Inna* (the mother of them all). Funteh opined that *Inna* oversaw the network which was not only responsible for protecting society from malevolent forces through possession but which provided healing and divination throughout those border communities in the pre-colonial period.

Furthermore, the Abong (Nigeria) and Abongshe (Cameroon) as well as the Kanuri people of Kanem Bornu (who are today regarded as Kanuri of Nigeria and Kanuri of Cameroon) Empire shared deities and totems, ancestral shrines and major rites (such as birth, manhood, maidenhood; child-bearing and death), annual festivals and ritual that all members of each group across the border were traditionally obliged to take part in.¹⁰

Socio-cultural relations between Nigeria and Cameroon Border Communities during the colonial era

In terms of socio-cultural relations among the different ethnic groups that lived on the Nigeria-Cameroon border, there were some elements of continuity. It was for this reason that despite the colonial influence and the harsh boundary policies, there was still a high level of interconnectivity of the cross-border community.¹¹ Some of the ethnic groupings were still sharing deities and totems, ancestral shrines and major rites such as birth, manhood, maidenhood, womanhood, marriage, child-bearing and death. Annual festivals and rituals that all members of each group across the frontier were traditionally mandated to participate in. Corroborating, within the Kanem Bornu Empire, the Kanuri people, who were divided due to the colonial boundaries and came to be known as the Kanuri of Nigeria and the Kanuri of Cameroon, related socio-culturally during the colonial era and they saw themselves as brothers and sisters.¹² Similarly, the people sharing the border between the Northern part of Nigeria and Cameroon were still relating with themselves socio-culturally despite the colonial influence. They intermarried, celebrated annual festivals together and other aspects of social relations. While some embraced the Islamic religion and Christianity, others still maintained the African Traditional Religion (ATR) through the worship of the *Maguzuma* and the shrines were still commonly used for the worship in the colonial period.¹³

Furthermore, the case of socio-cultural connectivity among the Nigeria-Cameroon border was not different among the people of the south-eastern part of the border. The people still carried out most of those pre-colonial socio-cultural practices that bound them together. For instance such practices such as new yam festivals, Nkim (circumcision), matengi (hunting), Ingunita as well as inter-marriages, still took place among the border people during the colonial period. The border people were still holding onto the African traditional religion as they still venerated their various deities, such as Bapong and Lakumboare, Etale, Mfam, among others, and also maintaining the shrines.

⁹ M. B. Funteh, The Paradox of Cameroon-Nigerian Interactions: Connecting between the Edges of Opportunity/Benefit and Quandary, *International Journal of Peace and Development Studies*. Vol.6 (3), (2015), 30-48.

¹⁰ Funteh, The paradox of Cameroon-Nigerian Interactions.

¹¹ N. L. Njoku, "Neither Cameroon nor Nigeria; we belong here---!" The Bakassi Kingdom and the dilemma of boundaries and co-existence in post-colonial Africa, *Africana*. 6(1), (2012). 193-209.

¹² Kane, *The Common African Man*.

¹³ Kane, *The Common African Man*.

Some, however, opted for Christianity. In other words, the social and religious institutions were not obliterated.¹⁴

Post-colonial Nigeria-Cameroon Borderland community socio-cultural Exchanges

In 1960, both Nigeria and Cameroon gained independence from their colonial masters but still maintained the boundaries created by the European colonial powers. This was in line with the 1963 Organisation for African Unity's decision to adopt the Latin American concept of *Utti Possedetis* in all African boundaries, meaning that boundaries should remain as they were before independence.¹⁵

It is worthy of note that despite the presence of the international boundary, the ethnic groups who were divided remain a common people, especially the inhabitants of the frontier lines. In Nigeria-Cameroon, for instance, there is still a high level of inter-dependence and relations among the border people through shared resources such as farmland, school, hospital, product exchanges and inter-marriages, among others and their relationship is usually anchored by those things that they share, both natural resources and infrastructure.¹⁶

Furthermore, it was as a result of interconnectedness that the permanent presence of a population with a common historical experience, and of the same ethno-cultural stock on both sides of international divide is one of the natural features which have stubbornly frustrated Cameroon and Nigeria attempts to physically demarcate their borders.¹⁷

Nkoju stressed that the Nigerian-Cameroon border people share deities and totems, ancestral shrines and major rites (birth, manhood, maidenhood, womanhood, marriage, child-bearing and death), annual festival and rituals that all members of each group across the frontiers are traditionally obliged to participate.

In the same view, Otor (2012) confirmed the enormous cross-border exchange among the communities bordering Nigeria and Cameroon through social institutions such as marriages, age-sets, births and burial rites or ceremonies. For instance, Becheve people of Cross River State (Nigeria) look forward every year to the *Inginita* ceremonies in the *Matengi* hunting grounds in the Cameroons, where the priest resides, adding that the border people also celebrate a festival which brings them together frequently.

The people of Boki (Nigeria) and Bodam, Dadi, Bajua, Kajifu, Kekukesim, Boka and Oyi in the Republic of Cameroon come together on the 18th August every year to celebrate the New Yam festival. This is also applicable to the people of Ekok, Eyumojok, Nsanaraghti, and Nsanakang (Cameroon) who are of the Ejagham stock, as they celebrate the New Yam festival on 18th September, every year with their kith and kin in Nigeria.¹⁸

Furthermore, in terms of religion, most of the border dwellers worship together either traditionally or in the Western way. For instance, some of the cross-border people between Cross River and Cameroon still venerate Bapong and Lakumboare, whom they see as supra deities, while some attend the same churches together. Those of Abongshe (Cameroon) and Abong (Nigeria) as well as the Kanuri people of Nigeria and Cameroon either embrace Christianity together or Islamic region. Some participate in the worship of *Maguzuma* (ART).

Many Cameroonians especially those from the border communities work and school in many Nigerian Universities notably the University of Calabar (UniCal), University of Cross River State-UniCross (now University of Uyo) and University of Maiduguri among others, while some

Nigerians from the border region also school and work in Cameroon. Many of them intermarry; therefore, intermarriage has produced transnational or dual nationalities.¹⁹

¹⁴ C. Weladji, "The Cameroon-Nigeria Border", *Abbia: Cameroon Cultural Review*. No. 31-33, (1978). 185.

¹⁵ Bonchuk, "International Boundaries and Divided People".

¹⁶ Kane, *The Common African Man*.

¹⁷ Njoku, "Neither Cameroon nor Nigeria; We belong here---" *The Bakassi Kingdom*, 193-209.

¹⁸ Otor, "Developing a trans-boundary eco-cultural tourism circuit in the Cross River (Nigeria)-South-West Cameroon border region", 15-30.

¹⁹ Otor, "Developing a Trans-boundary Eco-cultural Tourism Circuit in the Cross River (Nigeria)-South-West Cameroon Border Region, 15-30.

Conclusion

The study of the Nigeria-Cameroon Socio-Cultural relations: A borderland perspective, has revealed a lot of interesting insights about the border dynamics. Based on the examination of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial relations among the borderland dwellers, what has emerged is that the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland inhabitants have strong ties among themselves, anchored by their shared resources, exchanges, ethnic and cultural affiliations, despite the various skirmishes experienced at the state-centric level between Nigeria and Cameroon. The continuous relations and peaceful co-existence among the border people have helped to build up feelings of trust and goodwill that make irreconcilable conflict unthinkable among them. Therefore, the border communities have served as mediating structures for the attainment of peace between the two States. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the border communities serve as essential elements for fostering diplomatic ties between Nigeria and Cameroon. It is pertinent to recommend that there is a need for the governments of Nigeria and Cameroon to retain those pre-colonial ties and exchanges, harmonize laws in the border region to engender the gains of cross-border cooperation and integration.