



## **Pre-Colonial Inter-Group Boundary Relations in Africa: The Nigerian Experience**

**Boypa O. EGBE & Ibiang O. OKOI**

**Department of History and International Studies**

**University of Calabar, Calabar-Nigeria**

**Email: [egbeboypa@yahoo.com](mailto:egbeboypa@yahoo.com)**

**Email: [mail.ibiangokoi@gmail.com](mailto:mail.ibiangokoi@gmail.com)**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines “Pre-Colonial Inter-Group Boundary Relations in Africa with reference to Nigeria’s Experience”. It examines the impact of inter-group boundary relations or interactions on Nigerian federation since evidence indicates that, for several decades long before the arrival of the European imperialist and the subsequent creation of the Nigerian State, the states, empires, nationalities and ethnic groups that today make up the Nigeria State today were engaging on serious inter-group relations or interactions. That these sustained prevalence of the interactions were a serious boost to Nigerian federalism, a principle that was adopted on the basis of its capacity to further encourage integration and interethnic competition amongst the amalgam of people that constitute Nigeria today. The objective of this research is to highlight the positive impact of these pre-colonial inter-group boundary relations on the Nigerian federation by drawing the attention of Nigerian policy makers and researchers to the “neglect” of the relevance of boundary issues and inter-group relations. The historical methodology adopted for this research involved the use of both primary and secondary sources. Archival materials and oral interviews used for the analysis of the paper constitute the primary sources. The secondary sources include published and unpublished works on the vexed issues. The research however submits that, inter-group boundary relations between pre-colonial Nigerian peoples was basically moderated by incessant interactions ranging from economic, social, cultural and political. The affected areas have been developed arising from urbanization and interactions. It is recommended that, both federal and state governments should continue to introduce integrative policies that will further enhance development and unity.

### **Introduction**

Historically, there is strong evidence that most independent African states today are currently confronted with “chains of political and boundary crisis,

## ***Pre-Colonial Inter-Group Boundary.....***

civil strife, conflicts, and wars” (Adedeji 5) a scenario which reflects essentially a lack of national integration, political stability and well-defined boundaries, whether international or internal (Bonchuck 12), adversely affecting the level of development in the continent. Instructively, since 1960 when most of the countries in the continent became independent, African States have been engulfed in different forms of conflicts, some of which, because of their devastating effect, have resulted in the disintegration of some political systems example Ethiopia in 1994, and Sudan in 2011. Other countries include the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Uganda, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Burundi, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho and Ivory Coast with major conflicts (Gordon-Summers 328).

In fact, to some scholars of developmental studies, the absence of national integration is the major problem that confronts the developmental efforts of most states in Africa. M. Weiner (52) states that one of “the central problems of developing nations of Africa that is often more pressing than even economic development is the achievement of national integration”. Nigeria is not left off the hook as a variety of boundary relations also characterised her pre-colonial inter-group relations.

Evidence also shows that, boundary relations constitute one of the greatest challenges to Nigerian security and developmental aspiration. It has altered or negated in a way the very essence of federalism. Yet, there is strong evidence that issues relating to internal boundary relations receive very “little” or no attention or rather are grossly “neglected” by the Nigerian State despite its impact both negative and positive (Bonchuck 8). This is because policymakers and researchers have focussed more on international boundary relations, issues of sovereignty and territorial aspirations forgetting that boundary relations whether international or internal have common characteristics and mode of management (60). It is on this context that this research seeks to examine the pre-colonial pattern of boundary relations in Africa with particular focus on Nigeria’s experience.

### **Creation of Nigerian**

Historically, it’s evident that until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the British began to make their administrative in-roads to this part of the world, the geographical span of land today called Nigeria comprised of diverse kingdoms, empires, nationalities and states, (both mini and mega) with well-structured political systems, identities and symbols existing independently (Eteng128; Ozumba 93). The ‘mega’ states according to M. Crowder consisted of widespread

empires and kingdoms established by both Hausa and Kanuri speaking people of Northern Nigeria, the Sokoto Caliphate that ruled the Northern Savanna, the kingdoms of Ife and Benin with the most recognised and accomplished art in the world, the Yoruba Empire of Oyo with well organised system of checks and balances; and the city states of Niger Delta grown partly in response to European demands for slaves and later palm oil (Crowder 11- 14; Ozumba 93).

The mini-states, on the other hand, consisted of the largely politically decentralised Igbo speaking peoples of the south-east that provided the famous Igbo – Ukwu bronze and Terracotta, the small ethnic groups of Plateau and the descendants of those that created the famous Nok Terracotta (Crowder 11). The states both mini and mega were, however, relatively stable with sound socio-political settings and “fluid boundaries” till the amalgamation in 1914 to create Nigeria (Eteng 128).

However, the idea of amalgamating the different ethnic groups under one political administrative unit (Nigeria), according to E. O. Erim dates back to the Niger or Selborne Committee’s decision of 1898 which recommended that, first, the colony of Lagos with its Yoruba hinterland under the Colonial Office should by 1900 formally become the Colony and Protectorate of Lagos (27). Secondly, that, the Niger Coast Protectorate comprising the Bights of Benin and Biafra with their hinterland under the Foreign Office should by 1900 become the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria (27). Thirdly, that what later became Northern Nigeria under the Royal Niger Company should become a Protectorate also by 1900 (Erim 27).

Meanwhile, the Royal Niger Company, empowered by the British Crown had made their debut in 1886 or even earlier to the ethnic nations of Nigeria (97). Their major mission was to trade in all the territories of the Niger Basin. While other reasons that also informed the British expansionist adventure included mere curiosity, search for markets and raw materials as well as the mission to civilise and Christianise the people (Ozumba 97). The imminence of the Royal Niger Company with their examinations and interchanges, paved the way for the British switch of the previously different nations that now make up Nigeria.

Again, with Sir Frederick Lugard’s coming as British High Commissioner in 1900, the British also took control of the Niger Basin area (Ozumba 97). The Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, originally enacted in 1893 as Niger Coast Protectorate was amalgamated with Lagos under the title, “Colony and

## ***Pre-Colonial Inter-Group Boundary.....***

Protectorate of Southern Nigeria” (97). In 1906, the two southern administrations were brought under one administrator in the person of Sir. Walter Egerton (97). Thus, the history of Nigeria as a single geo-political state began in 1914 with the amalgamation of the North and Southern Protectorates by Frederick Lord Lugard. (Otite 18; Olasupo 123).

### **2.1.2 Geographical Location of Nigeria**

Nigeria is located between latitude  $4^{\circ} 20'$  and  $14^{\circ} 30'$  East, (Otite 18). It is bordered on the north by the Sahara Desert, south by the Gulf of Guinea, an arm of the Atlantic Ocean, (Udonsi 7). Nigeria has a geographical space of 923,768 square kilometres, a coastline of over 700 kilometres with a distance of 1,040 kilometres straight from the coast to the northern limits which consist of great diversities of vegetation, ecologies, economies and occupations (Otite 18). The swampy mangrove on the coastal areas changes to evergreen rain equatorial forest and thins off into savannah grassland, and desert-like conditions at the northern limits. According to the 2006 Population Census, Nigeria’s population is currently about one hundred and seventy million (180, 000000) people (2006 Population Census).

The total length of Nigeria’s international boundary with the Republic of Benin, Camerouns, Chad and Niger is approximately 4035 kilometres, while the coastline is about 688kilometers long. She shares maritime boundaries with Cameroon, Sao Tome and Principe, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea and Benin Republic (Allo 83). The country has a two hundred (200) nautical mile (370km) Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) into the Atlantic Ocean. From the (Boundary Commission, Osgof.gov.ng), Nigeria has eighty-five (85) inter-state boundaries covering about twenty-two thousand (22,000) kilometres distance (Bobbo 22).

#### **Theoretical Framework**

On theoretical assumptions, the research hinged on or adopt two theories of integration and boundaries. It adopts the economic interdependence theory of integration against the simple co-operative interaction theory based on marginal trade interactive benefits to groups without losing their identity (Irom 22). The economic interdependence theory according to the author emphasises division of labour and trade. That independent groups, communities or societies in a long run become dependent on each other to a point that, in most cases they find it difficult to survive without each other. In other words, the theory relates the significance of contact and interaction between different groups of people (22). In Nigeria’s experience, O. Otite in

Obar Irom's work (21) contends that the fundamental needs of man are the provision of material goods which themselves compel co-operation with others in production and consumption relationship, involving competition for access to scarce resources. For instance, Obar Irom (22) observed that, if a group of people specializes in raising cattle or other protein foods and others in staple agricultural goods, there is need for some exchange with other groups in order to maintain a given level of subsistence as demonstrated by the pre-colonial communities, empires and kingdoms that today constitute Nigeria.

On the other hand, the grass root theory of boundaries also known as the "Revisionist" or "Bridge Concept" emphasises the concept of "contact and link rather than separation and division as the ultimate function of boundary relations". In other words, the theory seeks to reconcile the people's imperative of territorial exclusiveness with the present day realities of growing interdependence amongst either nation states, kingdoms, empires or communities (Imobighe 20-21). According to M. O. Bonchuck, the grass roots theory lay more emphasis on cooperation, mutual and common development of shared resources at the border areas or zones for the mutual benefit of the border dwellers. It locates boundaries as "bridges" across communities not as "barriers", "integrated" not "separated" zones and as points of contact to be crossed at will especially on those aspect that touches the borders lives such as attending marriages, divinity consultation, various festivals and exchange of ideas and trade (Bonchuk 104).

For the purpose of this study, the new thinking paradigm which is the grass roots theory is best preferred because, it de-emphasises territorial exclusiveness of Nigeria's internal boundary relations which seems to be more increasingly dominated by the notion of state-centric theory, due to the steady erosion of national consciousness in favour of statism and the failure to evolve an equitable method of managing and utilizing the nation's resources (Imobighe 20-23).

### **Pre-Colonial Inter-Group Boundary Relations**

M. Duverger (159) defines inter-group relations as the interaction between social classes or groups in large political set ups like nations, territorial organizations such as regions or in small communal organization like ethnic groups and the conflicts which arise from such interactions. Accordingly, there is strong evidence that prior to the arrival of the European imperialist, the Nigerian area contained an amalgam of ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups

### *Pre-Colonial Inter-Group Boundary.....*

spread over numerous states which were in various stages of development (Barkindo XI) and these peoples were neither isolated nor self-sufficient, as a variety of interactions or links, some of which were natural, existed. There were links between Kanem-Bornu, the Hausa States, Nupe, Jukun Kingdom, the empires of Oyo and Benin, the Delta States and the Igbo communities. These interactions or relations sometimes took the form of war and enslavement. They also expressed themselves through diplomacy, treaties, and the visit of wandering scholars, the diffusion of political ideas or cultural diffusion and above all trade (Hodgkin 2; Enor 17-26).

Amongst them, the principal consideration in the linkages and forms of interactions mentioned above was the unifying influence of geography (Erim 2), because, the complementary role of the Sudan Belt and the Forest Zone with the intervening transitional Middle Belt encouraged the movement of goods, peoples and ideas north and south across the zones (AdeAjayi and Alagoa 225). There had been traffic of boundary relations over the years along the lagoon from Port-Novo in the West to Calabar in the South-East and among the Igbo communities and the people of Benin (Egbe 20).

The Niger-Benue as a carrier of trade was another avenue for intensive inter-ethnic interactions of boundary relations amongst various Nigerian peoples, linking Hausa land with Bornu, Bornu with Adamawa and the Benue, Hausa land with Benin; Hausa land with Nupe and the confluence; Hausa land with Yorubaland; Yorubaland with Benin; the Delta in the South with the open Savannah to the North (228; Erim 12). The point made here is that the Northern region before 1914 had existed as a geographical unit with significant historical and economic unity with other Nigerian Units.

At the cultural level, intergroup or ethnic boundary relations was, also, reinforced as there was evidence of basic cultural homogeneity across boundaries of the forest and savannah belts of Nigeria into which the tantalising Nok, Ife and Igbo-Ukwu cultural elements are grafted. This evidence of close similarity, interaction and relations between the Ife, Nok and Igbo-Ukwu arts, as well as other works of arts scattered throughout the Nigerian region, is a pointer to the harmonious patterns of ethnic interaction amongst the varied Nigerian groups (Erim 4-5).

It is well established that both the cross-fertilization of ideas and culture as articulated above was strengthened by trade routes which operated over the centuries. In other words, the entire Nigerian region in pre-colonial times remained one large trading block a crossed boundaries. In fact, Hodgkin and

many others have shown in their works that, there was much traffic in trade between the peoples of the Delta region of Nigeria and their hinterland neighbours of Igbo, Yoruba, Andoni, Ibibio, Efik, Idoma inter-alia (Egbe 21). In Western Nigeria, popular trade routes stretched across Niger boundaries into Hausa land and even beyond to the shores of North Africa. In fact, Niger and Benue remained the principal routes which also connected the Delta and the open savannah belt of northern Nigeria. There was the route linking Brass, Igbo, Igala, Idoma, Nupe inter-alia. Furthermore, the creeks and the maze of lagoons which dot the Lagos and Warri environments were and remained highways of commercial interactions beating all boundaries. It is evident that the British explorers namely, Captain Hugh Clapperton in 1822 and Richard Lander in 1830 took through one of these ancient trade routes to reach Hausa land (Erim and Uya 78; Erim 3; Afigbo 38).

What is now northern Nigeria was another pre-colonial enclave with intense ethnic interaction among various Nigerian groups through series of long distance trade routes that connected the different sub-regions. There was a route linking the Efik, Qua, Efut and the Ibibio through ancient Kwararafa to Kanem-Bornu Empire in the East. This route linked such towns as Muri, Wakari, and Abinsi and so on into one economic unit (Erim 10). In fact, Adiele E. Afigbo's research into the Benue-Cross River region reveals that this region was the economic zone of the ancient Kwararafa Empire. The major traders included the Igbo, Idoma, the Igala and the Iyala of Ogoja sub-region. Indeed, prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a lively trade existed between the Kwararafa rulers and the Efik in the Coast. It has even been suggested that the name, Atakpa which is the traditional Efik name for Calabar may have been derived from the name of the Kwararafa (Jukun) ruler Ata-Akpa, meaning king of the Akpa. The reason being that Calabar was the point to which the Kwararafa rulers consigned their slaves (Erim 10; Afigbo 16; and Ikime 4). In essence, the modern collectivism called Nigeria is the result of a slow historical process which mirrors the historical experience of the ethnic groups' interactions and boundary relations. What in a myriad of interconnected events have conduced greatly to the emergence of the Nigerian State.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have attempted a brief analysis of pre-colonial inter-group boundary relations or ethnic relations amongst the Nigerian peoples. Ethnic relations as noted, found expression in all facets of life with minor wars. However, prior to colonial rule, the ethnic groups of present-day Nigeria dwelt in relatively harmonious interaction. For neither the Yoruba, Igbo,

Hausa or any other group existed as self-aware entities. Rather, these interactions produced unity of the Nigerian ethnic groups (Egbe 22).

Put differently, though there were ethnic differences they were not reinforced. Dudley believes that the process of ethnic interaction was already producing a homogenising effect sufficient for one to perceive the incipient emergence of a community known as Nigeria. The point is that ethnic relations were harmonious with ethnic sentiments and assertions in their barest minimum. Indeed, Thomas Hodgkin (44) contends that migration and inter-group interactions were already inducing diffusion and assimilation, creating a common political culture before the advent of colonialism.

### References

Abdalla, Bujra. African Conflicts: Their Causes and their Political and Social Environment. A Development Policy Management Forum (DPMF), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA); Ethiopia, 2002.

Ade Ajayi, J. F. and Alagoa, E “*Nigeria Before 1800: Aspects of Economic Development and Inter-Group Relations*” in Ikiri, Obaro (ed). *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1999, pp. 224.

Adedeji, Adebayo (ed) *Comprehending and Mastering African Conflicts*. London: Zed Books, 2012.

Ademola, Omojola “The Use of Geographic Information System in Boundary Delineation” in Akinyele, R. T. (ed) *S Contemporary Issues in Boundary and Governance in Nigeria*. Lagos: Frankad Publishers, 2005, pp. 174-183.

Afigbo, A. E. “Igboland Before 1800” in Ikime, Obaro (ed) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1999, pp. 73-88.

Afigbo, Adiele E. “The Eastern Provinces under Colonial Rule in Obaro, Ikime (ed.) *Groundwork of Nigeria History*. Ibadan, Historical Society of Nigeria, 1980.

Alagoa, E. J. “Peoples of the Cross River Valley and the Eastern Niger Delta,” in Obaro Ikime (eds) *Groundwork of Nigerian History* Ibadan, Historical Society of Nigeria, 1980, Pp. 56-76



Allo, B. T. "Demarcation, Survey and Mapping of Boundaries" in Barkindo, B. M. (ed) *Management of Nigeria's Internal Boundary Question*. Ibadan: Joe – Tolahy and Associate, 1993, pp. 83 – 93.

Amango, A. Kudu. "The Colonial Factor in the Changing Nature of Ethnic Conflicts on the Jos Plateau: A Case Study of The Rukuba and their Neighbours" in Historical Society of Nigeria's *Book of Abstracts for the 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference*. Jos: Historical Society of Nigeria, 2006, p. 4. Bobbo,

Barkindo, B. M. *Management of Nigeria's Internal Boundary Questions*. Lagos: Joe-Tolalu and Associates, 1993.

Bonchuk, M. O. "International Boundaries and Divided Peoples: A Case Study of the Boki and Ejagam Communities in the Cross River Borderlands 1884-1994". Unpublished PhD Thesis University of Calabar, 1997.

---. "International Boundary of Nigeria and Peace Management: This Search for Policy Relevance" *Journal of Boundary Management*, 1 (1) 2000

---. "Pan-African Boundaries and Regional Economic Integration" *Journal of Boundary Management*, 1 (4) 2007.

Boundary Commission, Osgof.gov.ng

Crowder, Michael *The Story of Nigeria*. London: Faber and Faber, 1962.

---. *West Africa under Colonial Rule*. London: Hutchinson, 1968.

Dudley, B. *Instability and Political Order: Politics and Crisis in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Ibadan UP, 1973.

Duverger, M. in Pongri, J.H. "Inter-Group Relations and Ethnic Crisis in Adamawa" in *Contemporary Issues on Boundaries and Governance in Nigeria*. Lagos, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2005.

Egbe, Boypa Oyama. "Ethnicity and National Integration in Nigeria: A Case Study of the Operation and Implication of the Federal Character Principle" unpublished M.Sc., University of Ibadan.

*Pre-Colonial Inter-Group Boundary.....*

---. "Mbembe Nationality: A Study of the Origin and Development of an Ethnic Identity C1600 – C1902" unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Calabar, 2006.

Eteng, Felix Onen "Nigeria and Constitutional Development" in Ozumba, G. O. et al (eds) *Nigeria: Citizenships Education*. Aba, AAU Vitalis Book Company, 2012.

Enor, Frank N. *The Nta and Their Neighbours: Inter-Group Relations in the Central Cross River Region*. Calabar, Jocurisam, 2007.

Erim, Erim O. *Idoma Nationality 1600 – 1900: Problems of Studying the Origins and Development of Ethnicity* Enugu: dimension publishers, 1981.

Erim, Odey Erim "The Roots of Our National Unity". An Article presented at a Public Lecture Organised by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Calabar.

Gordon-Summers in Abdalla Bujra, *African Conflicts: Their Causes and Their Political and Social Environment*. Ethiopia, Development Policy Management Forum, 2002.

Hodgkin, T. *Nigeria Perspective: An Anthological History*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960.

Ikime, Obaro (Ed.) *A Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Heinemann, 1989.

Ikime, Obaro I. "British Conquest of Nigeria", paper presented to the Nigeria Historical Society, University of Lagos, 1986.

Imobighe, T. A. "Theories and Functions of Boundaries in Barkindo, B. M. (ed) *Management of Internal Boundary Problems*. Lagos, 1993.

Imobighe, T. A. "Problem of National Integration: The Issue of Nigerian Citizenship and State Indigenes in *Journal of Policy and Strategy*. 2 (1), 1988.

Imobighe, T. A. "The Border Factor in West Africa's Sub-Regional Security Arrangements; Reflections on the Nigeria – Benin Border" in Asiwaju, A. I. and Igue, O. (eds) *Nigeria – Benin Transborder Co-*

*Operation Workshop*, Topo, Badagry, National Boundary Commission, 1988.

---. "Theories and Function of Boundaries" in Barkindo, B. M. (ed) *Management of Internal Boundary Problems*. Lagos: Spectrum, 1993, pp. 78 – 84.

Irom, Obar Ayami "Markets and Integration in Middle Cross River Area 1800-1920" unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Calabar, 2012.

Isaac, Olawale Albert "New Directions in Nigeria: Insight from the Activities of AAPW" in Oite Onigu and Isaac Olawale Albert *Community Conflicts in Nigeria: Management Resolution and Transformation*. Ibadan: Spectrum, 1999.

Isichel, E. A History of Nigeria. London: Longman Limited, 1973.

Olasupo, Akano "Asset Sharing and Inter-State Relations in Nigeria" in Akinyele, R. T. *Contemporary Issues on Boundaries and Governance in Nigeria*. Lagos: Frankad Publishers, 2005, pp. 122 – 143.

Otite, Onigu and Albert Isaac Olawale (eds) *Community Conflicts in Nigeria: Management, Resolution and Transformation*. Ibadan. Spectrum Books Limited, 1999.

Otite, Onigu "On Conflicts, Their Management, Resolution and Transformation" in Otite, Onigu and Albert, Isaac Olawale (eds) *Community Conflicts in Nigeria: Management, Resolution and Transformation*. Ibadan. Spectrum Books Limited, 1999, pp 1 – 33.

Ozumba, G. O. "Background to the Making of Nigeria" in Ozumba, G. O. et al (eds) *Nigeria Citizenship Education*. Aba: AAU Vitalise Book Company, 2012, pp. 93 – 99.

Tamuno, T. "British Colonial Administration in Nigeria" in Ikime, Obaro *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1999, pp. 393 – 409.

***Pre-Colonial Inter-Group Boundary.....***

Udonsi, B., N. "The Law Enforcement Agencies in Boundary Conflict Management" in *Journal on Boundary Management* 1 (1) 2006, pp. 27 – 36.

Uya, Okon Edet "Archival Collection and Historical Research" in David Imbua, Otoabasi Akpan, Ikechukwu Amadi and Yakubu Ochefu (eds) *History, Culture, Diaspora and Nation Building: The Collected Works of Okon Edet Uya*. USA: Arbi Press, 2012, pp 57-61.

Weiner, M. "Political Integration and Political Development". The Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science.  
[www.Ndibe.org/2015/01](http://www.Ndibe.org/2015/01).

[www.vanguardngr.com/2013/03](http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/03).

[www.dailyIndependent/](http://www.dailyIndependent/) 2015.

www This Day Live/ 2015.

[www.PremiumTimes/](http://www.PremiumTimes/)2016/06.

[www.CrossRiverWatch.com/](http://www.CrossRiverWatch.com/) 2014/ 04/2006 Population Census in Nigeria.