
Conflicts on the Nigeria-Cameroon Border: The Case of Mbelogo in the Menchum Frontal Zones 1980-2014

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Abstract

Over the last few decades Africa has registered devastating inter-state wars and cross-border conflicts. This has prompted the rather derogatory assertion that Africa is the home of endless wars and insecurity. Most pathetic about these is that they have flouted any meaningful solution and their negative implications have retarded growth and development in the continent, while an end to them seems obscure. Cameroon, a country in the CEMAC sub-Region, has registered several border conflicts in the North, South, East and Western frontiers since independence. Some of these inter-border disputes are connected to colonial legacies, but recent trends indicate that other dynamics such as trade, insecurity, search for and control of geo-strategic resources at the border have made cross-border conflicts almost indispensable. While drawing inspiration from other known case studies of cross-border disputes in Africa, the study uses the Menchum economic border zone with Nigeria as an epicenter of border conflicts that has the potentials of provoking war between two states; Cameroon and Nigeria. The research seeks to answer the following fundamental research questions; What are the causes of these border disputes? How have they affected social cohesion, unity and political development in affected countries and cross-border relations? What can we do to overcome the problem? This paper provides answers to these and related questions.

Key words: Menchum, Mbelogo, Inter-state Conflicts, Cross-border Conflicts, Insecurity, Cameroon-Nigeria

Introduction

According to Johnson Olaosebikan Aremu (2010: 549), the economic and political historiography of Africa as a continent is replete with conflicts. Scholars of history and international studies claim that since the 1960s, several devastating civil wars, border disputes and inter-ethnic/religious conflicts and wars have taken place in Africa. The conflagrations of these

conflicts and wars have had far reaching social, economic and political implications on Africans at the national, regional and local levels. Yet, efforts to curb the ugly experience appear obscured, thereby insinuating the increasing numbers of civil unrests in almost every African country today. Examples of civil wars in Africa include Rwanda and Sierra-Leone (1991-2001); Nigeria (1967-70); Somalia (1999-1993) and Burundi (1993); Chad (1965-85); Congo (Zaire) (1960s-) and Angola (1974) and Sudan (1995-1990) as seen in SDAF (12/10/1984: 2).

Alongside civil wars there is also the problem of inter-state and cross-border conflicts. Chief examples here include the Bakassi peninsula war between Cameroon and Nigeria; the Morocco-Algeria conflict over the Atlas Mountain (1963); Eritrea-Ethiopia border squabbles (1962-1979); and the Somalia-Ethiopia rivalry over the Ugandan desert region (1964-1978). The regularity or persistence of conflicts on the African continent since the dawn of independence arguably suggests that the continent is historically characterized by conflicts which, scholars claim defies any meaningful lasting arbitration. This is not to say that Africa is the sole continent where conflicts abound. Far from that, many more cross border conflicts have taken place in Europe and Asia than in Africa (Ariel, 2020, Mona, 1999). Many cross-border conflicts are still unreported internationally, perhaps because they have not registered any significant numbers of deaths to put them on the global scale or agenda for roundtable discussions.

This paper discusses the Mbelogo and Lebo conflict. On 12 October 1984, the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria complained to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Cameroon on the territorial dispute in Furu-Awa which involved threats to social peace over the border zones of the following towns and villages Mobi, Tosso, Lebo and Mbelogo, Birama and Ndagang (SDAF, 2016:2). The border conflict was caused by serious allegations of tax extortion. It was alleged that a Cameroonian tax agent of the Ministry of Finance had been collecting taxes from Nigerian citizens and this was regarded as a violation of border rules or trespass by the Nigerian government (Etta: 2013). The need to control the economic,

social and political life of the inhabitants as well as exploit the economic resources of the area brought tension between both countries in 1985 which dragged on till 2010. This study attempts to examine the historical roots of the conflict, its manifestations and its implications on the border communities around Furu-Awa, a very important border community on the Cameroon-Nigeria border.

Problem statement

One of the problems affecting Africa is the question of boundaries that were irregularly carved out by the colonialists. Following the summoning of the “infamous” Berlin West African Conference of 1884-1885 that led to the historic partition of Africa, new boundaries were created splitting ethnic groups in the continent. These African states were arbitrarily partitioned against the aspirations of their people. In most instances, the boundaries ran parallel or vertical from raw material basins to export zones. In such moves, many families or clans were divided without taking cognizance of their economic, political, socio-cultural and religious affinities that existed among the colonized peoples. The partition of Africa had several effects on Africa communities; a majority of which are still felt today. Africans lost their independence as Europeans established colonies. African economies weakened by the the European exploitation of the resources. Many African people were displaced from their homes and forced to work in the service of European exploitation. The partition also led to the suppression of African languages. Most importantly, ethnic groups which had hitherto lived in close contact and interaction with one another saw colonial boundaries separating them; causing conflicts over boundaries and difficulties to engage with one-another socio-economically and culturally as they had done before. This was bound to lead to conflicts and provides a background for the conflicts between Cameroon and Nigeria to be understood.

Within the general frame of thought, the paper wants to understand why there were conflicts within African

communities and how the Mbelogo conflicts in the Menchum valley can be articulated within inter-state or cross-border bases. Its wants to understand whether the measures that were adopted by palliative or permanent and if so why did the conflict spread to 2010. In doing this it hopes to also query whether alternative measures could have been sought in redressing the situation.

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to examine the causes, manifestations and results of border disputes between Cameroon and Nigeria with emphasis on Menchum Division of Cameroon. The specific objectives include:

- 1- Identification of causes of wars in most institutions
- 2- Examination of various structures that facilitated social border conflicts in Menchum and neighbouring communities in Nigeria
- 3- Discussion of the effects and contributions of wars on the socio-economic and political changes in Menchum Division over the years.

Description of the Menchum valley area

Menchum is an administrative unit in the North West Region of Cameroon. It has four sub-divisions which are Menchum Valley, with headquarter in Benakuma, Wum sub-division, with headquarter in Wum, Fungom sub-division, with headquarter in Zhoa and Furu-Awa sub-division, with headquarter in Furu-Awa.¹ When Wum Division was created in April 1949 by presidential decree and later called Menchum Division in the 16 July, 1968.² Menchum valley was one of the subdivisions in Menchum created in 1993 by Decree No. 93/321 of 25 November 1993 relating to the creation of Urban and Rural Councils in Cameroon. According to the 2005 General Population and Housing

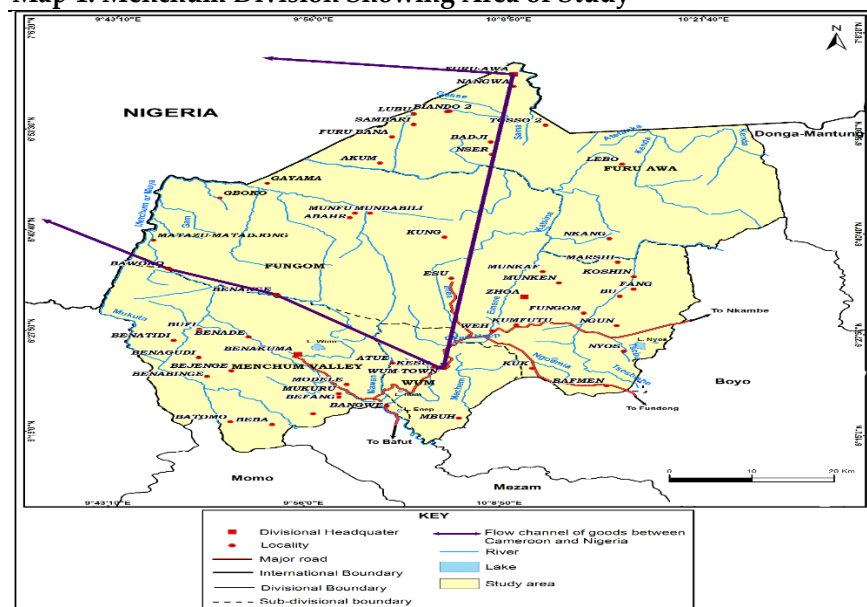
¹ Fuh, "Wum Area Development Authority....", p. 2.

² NAB, File: GC/h (1955). No. L.G., 1845, Ministry of Local Government. "Handing Over Notes Wum Division", p.68.

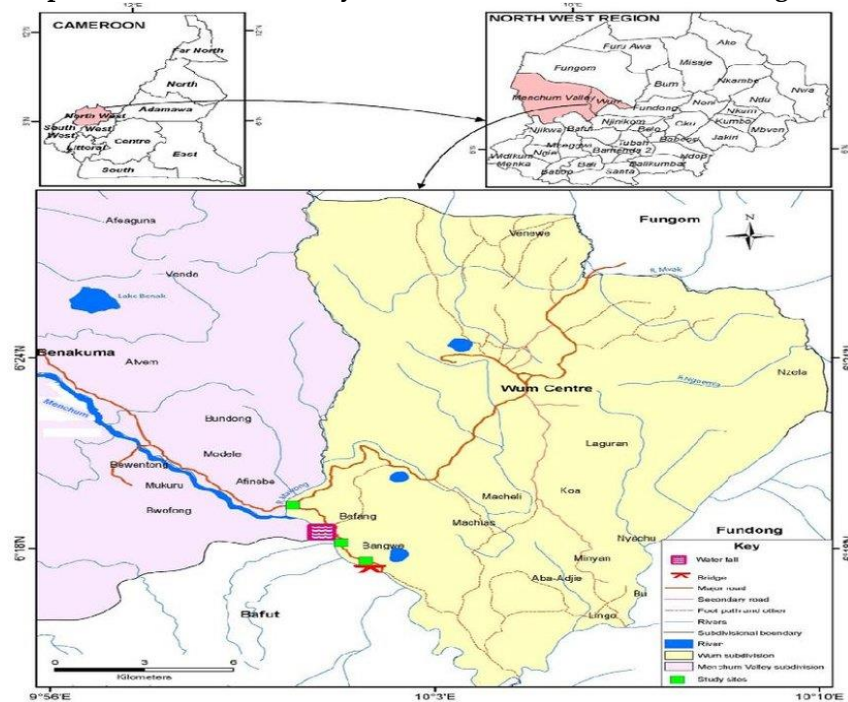
Census, the population of Menchum Valley stands at 50, 235 inhabitants with a population density of 48 persons per square Km and a growth rate of 3% per year. This population is widely dispersed in the valley owing, in part, to difficult terrain and also owing to the fact that several fast flowing rivers dissect the Menchum Valley in several places.

Menchum Valley is made up of two main clans: Essimbi and Beba-Befang clans. Fulanis constitute an important ethnic group in the council and are dispersed on the hills where pastures are available. There are for the most part herds men who originated from the Adamawa plateaus and recently inhabited the area. The Menchum Valley Subdivision corresponds to the Benakuma municipality. The subdivision is located between latitude 6°10' and 6° 31' North of the equator and between longitude 9°10' and longitude 10°20' East of Greenwich. It has borders to the north with Wum Central Subdivision, to the East with Bafut Subdivision, to the South-West with Akwaya Subdivision in the South West region of Cameroon, to the South with Njikwa and to the West with the Republic of Nigeria.

Map 1: Menchum Division Showing Area of Study



Source: Raphael Galega Gana “International Cooperation for Development”, 1992, p.184.

Map 2: The Menchum valley Area in Menchum, North West Region

Source: Raphael Galega Gana "International Cooperation for Development", 1992, p.184.

The Mbelogo Conflict

Conflicts in border zones were common among the Mbelogo and Lebo villages. Mbelogo had been a conflict zone between Cameroon and Nigeria. Another name, which the people in Menchum Division and those of Nigeria referred to Mbelogo is Tosso II (Achangkeng, 2000:16). About 90% of the people of this locality are Cameroonians from Kushin and Marshi in Fungom Subdivision and 10% are Nigerians from Gembu (Ardener 2004 :19). This area was a source of conflict between both countries. Some of the indigenes, even though they possess the Cameroon National Identity card, willfully paid taxes to the Nigerian government. Most of them identified with Nigeria for economic reasons and treated as Nigerians for the development of the area. For economic reasons, the people saw the importance of association with Nigeria than Cameroon (File E.28.03/E8/192 :7/01/1992NAB).

The natural tendency among people of Mbelogo was to foster the development of their community. Their proximity to

Nigeria and development projects that were already envisaged there made the people to attach themselves more to Nigeria. Moreover, their trading in Nigerian markets was unperturbed as they were willing to accept Nigerian citizenship (Ndum (08/09/2015)). In this regard, the creation of the gendarmerie brigade in Furu-Awa in 1975 brought so much pressure on them. The presence of these law enforcement officials began to bring conflicts (Nji 2016: 101). The officials often controlled the territorial borders, including Mbelogo, as part of Cameroon. Through this measure, several clashes were recorded in Mbelogo, in which gendarmes were often beaten and locked up in Nigeria (Takor, 2011). These were often incited by the local population. Thus, the area and many others located around the boundary as part of Cameroon continued to be controlled by Nigerians. It was mainly due to this conflict that relations with other border villages were strained. The strained relations between border villages caused the indigenes of Furu-Awa to stop trading in Mobi market and instead developed trading interest with Kpakia.

According to Patrick Meh, Cameroonians in Menchum had often regarded trade as a spring board for development. Through business activities, they easily get access to manufactured goods from Nigeria passing through Furu-Awa. The effects of all these are border problems, which often led and still result in open confrontations among security officers from both sides of the border. The Nigerian government under the Abuja Project constructed schools and health centers in Mbelogo in 2006 with the understanding that it is Nigerian territory, although Mbelogo was a conflict zone. The school structures were not completed but for the health unit. Unfortunately, these structures were never used based on the conflict in the area.

2) The Lebo Conflict

Lebo was another conflict zone among traders. Lebois mostly made up of people from Misong, Abar, Kushin and Fang all in the Abar area of Fungom sub division. But there existed

division among them. Many indigenes of Lebo declared that they had settled or been living in Nigeria and paid taxes to the Nigerian authorities though they were all Cameroonians. The Nigerian authorities did visit this area to collect taxes. The people paid taxes to the Nigerian government because they went there to sell and buy goods from Nigerian markets. They were afraid of being harassed by Nigerian forces due to the long-standing relations the people had with Nigeria. This made the inhabitants to believe that, they were ruled by Nigerians added to the fact that their forefathers had been involved in trade transactions with Nigeria. It was based on this premise that people looked at territorial sovereignty from an economic stand point and not from a social or political perspective. When they declared willingness to be settled on Nigerian land, most Cameroonian officials became scared (Mukunda, 2016).

There had been tension in the Lebo area since independence but matters became worse in 1992 with the creation of the Furu-Awa District. The district head, in his famous meet-the-people tour, informed them about the territorial border limits (Apkwa, 2016). Simon Apwa, the then chief of Lebo village, went further to inform the people that Furu-Awa and Lebo villages were part of Cameroon. Some of the village inhabitants and elites outside the community began accepting the realities while others refused deliberately to be part of Cameroon (Amaazee 1995:55).

It is important to note that after, reunification, most people in West Cameroon continued to live as if they were still part of Nigeria as it had been since 1922. This was peculiar with the case of Akwaya and Furu-Awa, which had little or no good communication link with the rest of the country. Most economic and monetary transactions were done in the Nigerian pound which was later replaced by the Naira and not CFA Franc (Ardener 2004:19). Till date, Cameroonian officials and citizens pass through Nigerian territory to reach these two localities according. For instance Akwaya is part of Manyu Division of the South West Region. To travel to Akwaya from other parts of the region, one needs to enter

Nigeria at the Ekok border in Eyumojok, travel through Nigerian towns before re-entering Akwaya as a result of the poor state of road networks in the South West region of Cameroon. The ease of access to these Cameroonian border towns through Nigeria and not through Cameroon intensified the contact with Nigerians more than with other Cameroonian communities and even created an impression that Nigerians were the majority in Menchum Division especially in the Furu-Awa and Baworo areas. This claim was based on their economic domination, the ethnic ties with villages on the Nigerian side hitherto separated by the partition and ease of access through Nigeria.

The fundamental bases of these relations had created tensions especially after independence. The changing situation in the border villages led to some problems. For example, in Furu-Awa during the creation of this district, certain negative repercussions in Lebo village were witnessed. The then district head, Enow Abraham in 1980, in his famous meet-the-people tour had informed the people about the territorial borders indicating that Furu-Awa was part of Cameroon. Chief Akpa then began collecting taxes on behalf of Cameroon; a thing he had done before on behalf of Nigeria. When the Nigerian authorities noticed this, the chief was arrested by Nigerian authorities (Apkwa 2016). This arrest was made easy due to the complicity of the Tosso chief and Abraham Ngong alongside some elite from that community who would rather prefer that tax money should go to Nigeria for obvious reasons.

Chief Simon Apwa was arrested by the Nigerian forces on July 12, 1984 and was detained for two years in Bissaula and Takum (Etta 2013:78). He was finally released in 1986 after having been charged for fraud and the sum of 105 Naira was paid according (Apkwa 2016). In the days of British tutelage (1922-1961), the Southern Cameroons formed part of the Eastern Federation of Nigeria. It is clearly shown that the then Bamenda Province had Ballin to Batibo as her Southern province boundary, Tamnya and Bissuala as border towns forming the Northern provincial boundary with the then

Adamawa province (SDAF, 1987:2). When the Adamawa province was reassigned to Nigeria as a result of the 1961 plebiscite, the Nigerian government established an immigration and custom post at Bissuala because of the open nature of the terrain from Nigeria into Cameroon via Ako district (Nji 2004:118).

Prior to this fortification, areas like Tosso, Mbelogo and Lebo, which formed part of the Bamenda Province never featured on this map. Taxes from this area were taken to Wukari via Takum for administrative convenience. After independence, the Nigerian government continued collecting taxes in Tosso, Mbelogo and Lebo. This therefore generated conflict in Lebo and Mbelogo (Apkwa 2016). The trade relation among the people of the border towns of Cameroon and Nigeria had intensified to the point that it made it very difficult for the Cameroon government to effectively rule the area. This explains why the Nigerian forces easily arrested the chief because some villages complied with them. They preferred Nigeria's occupation to that of Cameroon because they believed that their community could easily be developed by the Nigerians government.

Challenges faced by Traders in the Mbelelego Cross-Border Area

1) Crime Wave Emanating from Border Conflicts

Crime wave is a contributory factor to trans-border trade. In Menchum, crime wave was generated by both the inhabitants and the traders themselves. When bikes became rampant and plying the Furu-Awa-Nigerian border, the people became excited to the extent that head portage was abandoned and indigenes began selling their products in the farms directly to Nigerian traders according (Nji, 2004:115). The traders in most instances were taken to the farms where sales were done. The people thus sold their goods directly from the farms. Farmers within the locality realized later on that their goods like plantains and bananas were being stolen. The state of security in Furu-Awa Subdivision was very fragile and so security agents never responded appropriately to curb such

incidences. The reason behind this was the enclaved nature of the subdivision.

The lone security post in this border administrative unit was a gendarmerie brigade. This security unit was not only poorly staffed but also poorly equipped. The gendarmerie post had a staff strength of just four men for the entire sub division. The unavailability of a communication network made the flow of information to hierarchy very difficult and likewise information from top personalities could not be easily disseminated (SDAF, File no E28/02/c. (22/02/2006). The unavailability of a frontier police posts as it is found on the Nigerian border made crime very common. An incident occurred on 23 June, 2005 when a gendarmerie officer and two arms were seized and taken to Nigeria by some vandals from the neighboring villages of Panso and Birama (Rauch 2001:39). To accentuate the rate of insecurity, three Cameroonians and a Nigerian were placed under detention pertaining to the illegal importation of locally fabricated arms and ammunition into Cameroon from Nigeria (SDAF, File no. 4055/MR/E/GNW. 64/SP (05/09/1988). In 1927, 68 persons were arrested and tried for smuggling offences and all but 6 were convicted. In 1930, there were 258 arrests and 238 convicted. In 1931, all the 748 persons arrested were convicted based on Faso (1989: 329). The following statistical evidence on the scope and legal sanctions of the state of smuggling in the Cameroon Province of British Southern Cameroons in the 1920s and 1930s is an indication that 'bush trade' or smuggling, as an institution, has a strong historical link, which goes beyond the period described.

2) Deportation of Cameroonians from Nigeria

The policy of deporting Cameroonians from Nigeria posed a problem to Cameroonians who wanted to settle in Nigeria. The fundamental bases of commercial activities has always been the search for profits. These commercial exchanges, especially among the indigenes of Furu-Awa and those of Nigeria were not void of conflicts. Some of these conflicts were caused by law enforcement officers from both border

areas who often intimidated the population. On one occasion, Cameroonians escaped a raid that was mounted by the Nigerian immigration officers in Takum. It was alleged that on 17 March, 1994, Nigerian immigration officials arrived Takum and Wukari strongholds of Cameroonians residents in Taraba state and arrested every Cameroonian, whether they were in possession of a resident permit or not. The arrested individuals were packed in trucks and transported to Jalingo, the headquarters of Taraba state. Those who were not arrested were persons who had spent more than twenty-five years there (SDAF, File no. 01/27 (22/03/1994:1).

Most of these individuals that fled the raids in Nigeria settled in Furu-Awa. Only a few left for their homes of origin, notably in Baya and Donga Mantung Division. Some women temporarily married Nigerians in order to avoid the raid. The number of people taken to Jalingo was estimated to be more than one hundred Cameroonians according (Abaw, 1977). The reason for the raid, as some Nigerians officials explained to Cameroonians, was that Nigerians resident in Cameroon were being maltreated and their merchandise destroyed. These reciprocal acts were often felt within the borderlands of Esu- Furu-Awa and Nigeria fringes. When a Nigerian, especially business persons were maltreated in Cameroon, they would intend promise hell to that individual during market days in Nigeria (Sadouana 2016).

The Menchum community has suffered from arbitrary application of trade-related regulations and the extended corruption at the border with Nigeria. Weak law enforcement can, on one hand, facilitate the conduct of informal trans-border trade, by letting traders get away with it without any problem. In Ethiopia, for example, customs officials often ignored informal trade flows in bulk foodstuff. Following the conflict between the Junkon and Kutep tribes in the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1997-1999) and the conflict between Cameroon and Nigeria over Mbelogo (Tosso II), people from the two countries had to find alternative ways of doing business, and turned to a parallel system of informal trade relations.

On the other hand, the arbitrary application of regulations and the quasi-automatic requirement of facilitating payments (bribes) made some traders to engage in illegal practices such as under-invoicing and/or sometimes pass through unofficial routes and crossings to avoid disbursing such payments. In this regard, the 2006 World Economic Forum's (WCF) Executive Opinion Survey, which covered 29 African countries, indicated that corruption was, and is still, one of the most important obstacles to doing (informal) business on the continent (Nji 1972: 44).

3) *The Post-independence Conflicting Role of Chiefs as a Source of Conflicts*

The formation of judiciary organizations was an attempt toward political resolution of conflicts. The judiciary system, the institution involved in the maintenance of law and order in most villages was *kwifon*. This structural organization and functioning of the judiciary system was similar to that in Nigeria. The indigenes, most of whom were both directly or indirectly involved in trade activities, adopted the system of which the chief acted as a custodian to the customs and rules of the annual traditional festivals of the people. The chief's order was highly respected than that of any other authority in the land. Most conflicts that arose between people in the area were addressed through traditional judicial institutions in the of the border towns through the chiefs and their councils of elders. This was the *modus operandi* in the British colonial days acceptable to both Cameroonian and Nigerian communities, having been administered under a single British policy of indirect rule. This explains why the people had a lot of differences with the government when a district was created and when gendarmes were implicated in tax collection.

The above scenario explains why after independence, the fundamental role of traditional rulers as auxiliary to the administration on the Cameroonian side was not greatly cherished because they had to collaborate with the gendarmes in collecting these taxes. Because of this, the chiefs in these localities were visibly regarded as part of the administration.

Unlike on the Nigerian side where the traditional rulers especially the *Kwe* commanded a lot of respect. The main traditional group in charge of maintaining law and order was made up of selected traditional elders. They were in charge of the traditional law court. They judged cases and settled disputes between individuals. The lowest traditional court constituted the youths. The traditional court equally settled disputes but difficult cases such as bloody fights, crime against elders, crimes against traditional norms, land matters and killing were forwarded to the council. The Kuteps from Badji village were noted for this practice (Achuo 1997:117). Through this organization, many other skirmishes in the border with Nigeria were solved with a lot of dexterity.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the conflicts in border areas and challenges which the traders and porters in Menchum Division encountered in trade. The particular approach to independence by the Southern Cameroons (reunification with former French Cameroon) was bound to bring challenges to the people of cross-border towns; challenges which were poorly handled and led to conflicts between people of Cameroon and Nigeria. Reunification changed the economic and political structures of around Akwaya and Mbelogo and other areas. People who had before 1961 conducted trade and other social and cultural activities without consideration of different national affiliations found themselves having to deal with one another as different nationals with little understanding of where allegiance had to be paid; a situation that the states did little to educate them or understand the need for their decisions to prevail.

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