

Was Bakassi Sold or Just a Gift to Cameroun?

by Emeka Esogbue –

I am neither from Cross-River nor Akwa-Ibom states but as a Nigerian which I am shall always remain eternally grateful to Olusegun Obasanjo and Bola Ajibola, a duo of two Yoruba who as an act magnanimity either sold or presented our own Bakassi peninsular as a gift to Cameroun. As I write this piece, I express my bitterness on this very matter because in history no elder statesman for any reason will display such an unpatriotic willingness to part with the territory of his or her country. This team, which also comprised of Chief Richard Akinjide has since seen the man (Richard Akinjide) regretting the action of Obasanjo pointing it out as one of the wrongs done by this man (Obasanjo) to his nation.

Suffice it then that the people of Bakassi were either not considered important to Nigeria as a nation or there were just certain things known to Obasanjo and Ajibola outside the knowledge of Nigerians, all of these things are still shrouded in mystery. Surely our leaders are incapable of protecting us.

The focus of this article is that very aspect of the foreign policy of Obasanjo pertaining to Bakassi peninsular. Bakassi can be likened to Obasanjo as June 12 is to Babangida. June 12 however became more prominent because the Bakassi are minorities with almost nobody to advocate or fight their cause in the political entity called Nigeria. It remains the biggest injustice Obasanjo perpetuated on Nigeria. Obasanjo swore to the oath of allegiance to protect the territory of Federal Republic of Nigeria thereby upholding the constitution of the country but he would readily and weakly fail in this. Obasanjo and Bola Ajibola provided the platform under which the territory of our nation was given out to France and Cameroun, an act only as good as condemnably obnoxious because it led to the denial of Nigerian citizens. The whole drama was set out to please Britain, France and Cameroun by Obasanjo and Ajibola for the reasons not yet disclosed to Nigerians.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The nature of the claims by both Nigeria and Cameroun is what is known international relations as irredentism being "an act of advocating or agitating for the reunion to one's country territory (ies) which is (are) naturally or culturally relocated to it, and which has (ve) been lost to a foreign country. The Bakassi peninsular is an area of some 1000km mangrove swamp and half submerged islands known as the Bight of Bonny (previously

known as Bight of Biafra). The Bakassi is located in Cross-River state of Nigeria and its indigenes are Efiks who are by occupation fishermen.

It is important to understand here that the colonial powers are to blame for this crisis because of the injustices they visited on Africans of which Bakassi is not an exception. It is also unnecessary to point out here that colonial powers sat down in Berlin and arbitrarily demarcated drew maps of Africa in 1884 and 1885 leaving African countries with no rhymes in ethnic character and complete meaningless boundaries. This situation has therefore led to wars on some occasions and international legal disputes, which almost remain impossible to solve.

The Nigeria-Cameroun dispute can be traced to the so called July 23 and September 10 1884 treaty which Queen Victoria of Great Britain entered with the king and chiefs of old Calabar province with King Honesty vii and Edward Hyde Hewett representing Bakassi and Britain respectively. Other kings and chiefs in the region also signed acknowledging the protection of their territories from external aggression by Britain. Expectedly, the British were granted the rights of trade over the administration of justice and taxation.

1885 ANGLO-GERMAN TREATY

In 1885, Britain entered in another treaty in which she ceded all the regions she had earlier recognized as the jurisdiction of Obong (King of Calabar) to Germany, an act that greatly contravened the earlier 1884 treaty. This resulted in controversy as the chiefs of the territories totally rejected and committed themselves to the new treaty still binding on them.

JULY-AUGUST 1886 TREATY

This particular treaty between Britain and Germany sought to rectify the anomalies created by the imprecise demarcations of the boundary. This failed to make the achievement of much that was expected and much of problem having to do with these were carried over.

1906 TREATY

Again in 1906, both Britain and Germany agreed to make certain boundary adjustments when it was discovered that certain anomalies still existed, mutual agreement or understanding were to be utilized if the need arose.

THE MARCH AND APRIL 12, 1913 ANGLO-GERMAN TREATY

This agreement turned out to be the last of the agreements between Britain and Germany yet the most contentious because the Bakassi indigenes protested against this. Britain and Germany had redefined maritime boundary in such a way that Akpayafe River and the

entire Bakassi peninsular had been placed under the German authority. Bakassi indigenes again sent representatives to London office in which the traditional rulers of Calabar argued that Britain could not have given out Bakassi because Britain did not own it. Britain did not own Bakassi by conquest but by free and peaceful protection treaty. The British in their imperial and arrogant reasoning rejected and ignored this. This treaty was never ratified neither did Germany take control of the province until the outbreak of the World War II in 1914. As a matter of fact, the treaty was never completed.

International Relations observes have pointed out that the lack of ratification of the Anglo-German treaty fuelled the Bakassi peninsular crisis which enabled both Nigeria and Cameroun to continually lay claims to the ownership of the peninsular, this also made possible the various declarations made by both countries.

DECLARATIONS BY BOTH COUNTRIES

THE NGOH/COKER DECLARATION OF 1971

In 1971, experts from Nigeria and Cameroun reportedly marked the maritime boundary between Nigeria and Cameroun; these two countries met in Lagos Nigeria but in its infamy denied Nigeria the legitimate right of ownership and control of Calabar River channel and transferred it to Cameroun. This was later rejected by Nigeria because Calabar channel had remained under the territorial and sovereignty of Nigeria from time to time immemorial. The Nigerian government on quickly realizing that this was suicidal to the territorial integrity of the country took series of steps to reverse the declaration. Cameroun backed by France would stick to its gun leaving no stone unturned.

THE MAROUR DECLARATION OF 1975

Exactly four years after the Ngoh/Coker Declaration of 1971, Nigeria and Cameroun entered into another round of negotiation aimed at resolving the palaver, by this time Nigeria had hoped to correct the adverse effects of the 1971 declaration, which she was suffering. Gen. Gowon the then Head of state failed to internationally score a point against Ahmadou Ahidjo of Cameroun who had the full backing of France. Before Gowon who personally represented Nigeria would meet with Ahidjo, Ahidjo had obliterated the identity of Nigerian settlements while replacing them with Camerounian indigenous names, a situation that killed Nigeria's claims to the peninsular and diplomatically put Cameroun ahead of Nigeria.

Gen Murtala Mohammed who emerged as the president in 1975 rejected the agreement entered by Gowon, thus the Nigerian government blatantly refused to ratify Marour Declaration, declaring that the agreement was flawed and prone to shortcomings. In 1977 Obasanjo repeated the action of Murtala stating that all the accords regarding the Bakassi peninsular were biased and lacked the way forward for the determination of the true ownership of the territory.

SPORADIC CONFLICTS

Cameroun resorted to the employment of violence in seeking to affirm its claim of ownership of the region as advised by France; this was however aimed at attracting the sympathy of the international community. This caused Nigeria to lose a lot of lives and properties in this territory.

(i) The first of these cases was in 1981 when the world woke up to hear of the killings of six Nigerian soldiers by Camerounian gendarmes in the Bakassi peninsular

(ii) February 6, 1996, the most violent of such hostilities took place. An account has it that fighting broke out when some Camerounian gendarmes stationed at Atabong east portion of the peninsular seized the catch of a Nigerian fisherman off the coast and ordered hi to return to Ibaka in Akwa-Ibom state of Nigeria. A Nigerian Army officer who witnessed the act regarded it as an affront and beckoned on the fisherman to return to Atabong west for debriefing. The gendarmes then opened fire on both the Nigerian soldier and the fisherman wounding the Army officer seriously. The gendarmes who were in patrol boat returned to base within minutes opened fire again on Nigerian positions.

(iii) In May 1996, 13 Nigeria soldiers who ran into the ambush of Camerounian gendarmes along the creeks of Bekoro and Gidigo escaped death while some of them were seriously wounded. Still the Nigerian military did not take an action either for fear of possible intervention of France or "Big Brother" role.

(iv) Again in May 1997, the Nigerians who lived on the northern side of the Bakassi peninsular reported how Camerounian gendarmes who also took over their villages afflicted and tortured them.

(v) July 1997, Camerounian gendarmes captured some 300 Nigerians living in the territory and detained them in their underground prisons in Manaje under inhuman conditions. Still the Nigerian Military led by Obasanjo was not spurred to action to defend its citizens or what at best was their own.

(vi) In 2007, reports had it that some armed men in the peninsular driven in gunboat opened fire killing six Camerounian soldiers. While the Camerounian government insistently claimed that Nigerian soldiers were responsible for the killing, the Nigerian government would deny this shifting the blame to the Niger-Delta militants who also denied the allegation. Cameroun in their typical manner, the following day opened fire on Nigerian soldiers killing an undisclosed number of them. He Nigerian Military took it with strange silence

It is pertinent to add here that while Cameroun troubled Nigeria in the Bakassi region, Nigeria did not consider it appropriate to take any action or at least a drastic measure aimed at addressing the sad situation whether militarily or otherwise outside the failing treaties she continued to enter into. Any nation which values the lives of her citizens would have asked and gotten solution quite earlier. We trust that nations like USA, Britain, Russia, France, Iraq, China, Argentina, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Pakistan, India, Libya, Pakistan, Israel, Egypt, Morocco etc would have chosen the battlefield rather than losing part of their territory as did Nigeria.

Between July 2 and March 11, 1998 hearing of the dispute at the International Court of Justice commenced and in October 2002, the ICJ gave its infamous ruling in favour of Cameroun. The ICJ in its ruling erroneously maintained that colonial imperialism took precedence over the inalienable rights of ownership of land by Nigerian inhabitants, the court further ruled that all lands and territories comprising of Nigeria are specified in the constitution of Federal Republic Nigeria. ICJ did not bother to conduct plebiscite in Bakassi to determine the opinion of the people.

According to Chief Richard Akinjide Nigeria lost to Cameroun because:

"France was against Nigeria, and at that time, the president of ICJ was French. Also, Britain was against Nigeria because Britain knew that if Nigeria won, the illegal transfer of Bakassi in 1913 through the Anglo-German treaty would expose Britain for breach of trust. Therefore, you have two powerful members of the ICJ opposing Nigeria. All the laws and the facts (both in international and municipal laws) were in favour of Nigeria, and we canvassed that. We have some of the best brains in international and municipal laws, and they were assembled at the ICJ for the case. But they still ruled against us" (Haste to Hand Over Bakassi was not only a Blunder but also Indecent Nigerian Tribune, Sunday 25, November 2007)

Consider my candid personal opinion that Nigeria (Obasanjo and Ajibola) erred by accepting to appear before the ICJ as the same Nigerian government erroneously, misguidedly and naively believed that the ICJ will be impartial just because we do not learn from history in this country. The ICJ is owned by UNO, UNO by USA, Britain, France, Germany and the ICJ is the instrument of power as well as political and economic conquest of poor countries of Africa and Asia.

The United States was dragged before the ICJ by Nicaragua twenty-six years ago. Nicaragua won the case against USA but the judgment has not been implemented till today by the USA. In the maritime problem between Norway and the United Kingdom, which was referred to the ICJ, the judgment remains unimplemented till this day. In

another case between France and the United Kingdom, the judgment, till now have never been implemented. So, why did Obasanjo resort to indecent haste in implementing the Bakassi judgment? Only time will tell us.

USA declared war and used Atomic bomb on Japan because Pearl Harbor, its supposed possession was invaded by Japan. Britain went to war in 1982 with Argentina over the ownership of Falkland Island in an undeclared war. Israel continues to enjoy the possession of Palestinian territories backed by the USA shunning every of the resolutions the UN has issued against her. Ethiopia, Eritrea, India, Pakistan, Morocco, Spain are some of the countries with similar problems. Yet these countries exist today. France advised Cameroun to report to the ICJ because the president of that court was a French citizen and Nigeria (led by Obasanjo) in her typical manner failed to make a quick and firm diplomatic calculation. Any leader seeking for genuine judgment would have learnt of the citizenship of the president of the court would have protested against this and appeal for the leadership of the court by another national. Ordinarily, the people of the Nigeria Delta in Nigeria understood and used it against Ibrahim Gambari and it worked out.

Cameroun was also able to achieve this result with the deployment of warships by France to the region in February 1994. Cameroun and France were obviously ready to employ force if the need had arisen while Nigeria was all out to give out Abuja if only peace could be maintained. We all know that in this country our leaders lack the faintest idea of what the ordinary citizens are facing in this country, it was therefore very convenient for Obasanjo and Ajibola to majestically sit in their palaces and make policies detrimental to the ordinary citizens of this nation. Ajibola would just not choose to remain quiet and let the National Assembly clear the mess himself and Obasanjo his mentor caused us instead he would occasionally visit the press and warn the National Assembly on the dangers of not ratifying the cessation of the territory to Cameroun just to quickly cover up the mess. History will surely remember them both.

The ICJ has ridiculously ruled that the territory of Bakassi belongs to Cameroun but the indigenes Nigerians because the court realized that while the citizens were of paramount importance to Nigeria, Cameroun and France were only interested in the oil believed to abound in the region.

We thank our National Assembly for standing firmly on the side of the Nigerian masses to refusing to ratify the cessation of the territory to France and Cameroun. Our African leaders have always been ready, hasty and desperate to please the western world because of their personal gains and this must surely meet ultimate resistance. Bravo to our National Assembly