

ORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN UNITY AND NIGERIA'S
MEDIATORY ROLES IN THE ETHIOPIA/SOMALI
BOUNDARY DISPUTE, 1960-1977

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Abstract

Following the departure of most of the colonizing powers from Africa, the African continent became engulfed with socio-political cleavages from the 1960s and for the rest of the 20th century. One of the energy sapping problems that permeated the newly independent African states was the escalation of border clashes. The issue of boundary disputes became a teething problem in Africa and which the defunct Organization of African unity had to contend with. Nigeria, as a leading power in Africa, was committed to the continent's project aimed at creating peaceful environment, harmonious relations, and advancement for the Africans played leading roles in conflict resolution. One of the border conflicts that plunged Africa into anarchy was the Ethiopia/Somali boundary disputes that bedeviled the Horn of Africa. This paper examines the depressing position of the Somali nation that was emasculated by daring scrambling powers and the reaction of the Somali elements which resulted in bloody tragedy. The study similarly highlights Nigeria's mediatory roles between the two countries.

Keywords: Artificial boundary creation, Ethiopia/Somali boundary disputes, Organization of African Unity, mediatory roles

Introduction

The African continent underwent the creation of artificial boundaries officially endorsed during the Berlin West African Conference of 1884-85 chaired by Otto von Bismarck, the then German Chancellor. Artificial boundaries are being conceptualized by geographers as all boundaries other than those made up of natural features such as oceans, seas, rivers, swamps, forest, deserts and mountains while boundaries or frontiers marked by such features are the ones classified as "natural". Asiwaju (1990) in his own contribution presents the definition of artificial boundaries with the advantages of a cross-cultural applicability which emphasizes the exclusivist or divisive functions as assigned by man. He therefore regards all boundaries to be man created; or artificial "if the purpose and ultimate function is to divide and separate lands and people within definable eco-systemic entities."

The argument here is that natural boundary features could be ignored in the process of dividing a homogenous ethnic group into different states or countries newly created by man. Hence, most ethnic groups that had been living together as nations who recognized themselves as belonging to the same ethnic stocks and whose habitats were defined by natural features like sea, mountains, valleys and so on later found themselves in different countries brought into being by Western European colonizing powers

Asiwaju (1990). It is against this backdrop that he (Asiwaju 1990), a renowned Nigerian boundary scholar writes:

...it was at Berlin that the theoretical foundations were laid for the subsequent balkanization of the Blackman's continent. The conference was certainly not the beginning or the end of European imperial rivalry for territories in Africa, but the rules and regulations that were drawn up by the delegates rationalized the previous activities of the contracting powers and dictated the pattern of subsequent development. For example, it was the rule about effective occupation that resulted in colonial territories with a demand for definitive boundaries and visible administrations.

The Europeans deliberately and arbitrarily delimited and demarcated Africa into states in such a way that would enable them achieve their selfish ends associated with colonialism namely exploitation of the resources in the colonial territories. Their intention was to throw a wedge between members of the same ethnic group by dividing them into at least two or more artificially created states of their own (Ogbogbo, 2002). By so doing, it would be difficult for the members of the single or same nation to rise against their new white rulers. The arbitrariness with which the African continent was divided during the age of New Imperialism is substantiated by a statement credited to a Briton, Lord Salisbury, who participated in the drawing of the Southern section of the Nigeria-Cameroun border who says as cited by Asiwaju (1990) In those days we just took a blue pencil and a ruler, and we put it down at old Calabar, and drew that blue line to Yola... I recollect thinking when I was sitting having an audience with the Emir (of Yola) surrounded by his tribe, that it was a very good thing that he did not know that I, with a blue pencil, had drawn a line through his territory.

This revelation or pronouncement reflects the fact that the colonizers were conscious of the damage they were doing against the Africans. Their efforts ultimately changed the nationality of the African peoples who became Zimbabweans, Nigerians, Ethiopians, Zambians, Algerians, Cameroonians, Tanzanians, Moroccans, Tunisians, Gambians, Angolans etc.

It is apposite to state that the colonial powers may have succeeded in creating and imposing arbitrarily statist orientation on the Africans but that did not kill the nationalist spirit and sensibilities of those people who had themselves and their kith and kin been divided into different states or countries. This is because members of the same stock, though being divided into separate countries still regarded themselves as brothers and sisters and struggled to maintain familial contact between and among themselves. The colonial powers failed to kill or destroy the kindred spirit and natural identity of the Africans in spite of latter's forcible separation. The pre-colonial contacts that existed among African people were brought into being and maintained through long-distance trade, myth of origin, the ideological kingship and the oral histories of migrations and conquests were instrumental in creating for the ruling classes tradition that served to cement a national identity and to help galvanize political loyalty and support among their people. Consequently, " the natural fact was so real for some of these societies that, even after their disintegration as a result of external conquest and colonial rule, serious attempts were to be made to revive them in the post-colonial period"(Nzongola-Ntalaja 1987).

This reality within the African context validates and justifies the position of Por Cesar Supulveda, (1984) a former Director of Matias Romeo Institute of Diplomacy, Ministry of External Relations of Mexico, while reflecting on the U.S- Mexico border avers that:

...just as territorial boundaries cannot sharply divide nature, water or the atmosphere, nor impede the flight paths of birds and insects, they equally cannot segregate the human spirit... talents cannot be territorially confined, because it surpasses all physical barriers that people may wish to impose upon it.(Asiwaju,1990).

One of the African countries to later taste the bitter pills of the European imperial activities and subsequent artificial boundary creation was Somali. Territorially speaking, the Somali inhabit roughly 400,000 sq. miles in the Horn of Africa. 260,000 sq. miles comprise the Somali Republic and the rest extends to the neighboring countries of Kenya in the south-west, Ethiopia in north-west, and the Republic of Jibuti (Djibouti) in the north-east. To the east and north, the Somali Republic is bounded by the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden. The Somali population (as at 1984), estimated variously 4million and 6million, occupies continuously, though sparsely, this sizable chunk of territory (Samatar,1984). The demographic distribution reveals that about 3.5million Somali elements live in the Somali Republic, 2million in Ethiopia Ogadeen (Ogaden) and 246,000 in the Northern Province of Kenya while about 150,000 inhabit the Republic of Jibuti (Samatar,1984). Somali people became victims of not only the imperial powers of both Britain and France but also of Ethiopia and Kenya, a development that snowballed into bloody fights between Ethiopia and Somali republics in the post-colonial period, which forms the basis of this study.

Ethiopian/Somali Boundary Face-off and OAU- Nigeria's Intervention

A major perennial and damaging colonial legacy bequeathed to African states at independence is the issue of boundary disputes. The various western European colonizing powers - Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal - who appropriated the African continent amongst themselves, created arbitrary boundaries which divided people of the same ethnic group into two or more nation states. In doing this, the interest of the ethnic groups so divided these newly created and independent states was hardly taken into consideration (Amate, 1986). For instance, as Ogbogbo (2002) avers, across Nigeria - Cameroon frontiers, there were over eleven different ethnic groups that were partitioned who now reside in present Nigeria and Cameroon. Prominent among them are the Shuwa Arabs, Jibu, Chamba, Gude, Matakam, Wakura, Ekoi, Efik, Ododopo, Koelle and Lama. Furthermore, the Arabs, Berbers and Tuaregs were partitioned into different countries in West Africa while in Kenya and Tanzania, there are the Maasai who were divided by the international boundary of both countries (Ogbogbo 2002). In addition, the Ketu, a sub-group of the Yoruba stock were balkanized into both Nigeria and Benin Republic. Consequently, right from the early 1960's many boundary conflicts escalated into open military confrontations. Such disputes included Morocco - Somalia; Ghana - Upper Volta (Burkina Faso); Burkina Faso-Mali; Niger-Benin; Uganda - Tanzania; Ghana - Equatorial Guinea; and Morocco - Algeria boundary disputes. Indeed, the founding fathers of the nascent OAU might have been conscious of continental disasters that were likely to arise should any attempts be made to readjust the inherited boundaries by the new African states. This realization must have motivated them to insert in the OAU charter that the colonial boundaries should be accepted as the international boundaries of the newly independent African states (Amate,1986).

The first to break out of these boundary crises was the one between Algeria and Morocco which erupted in October 1963. The OAU was therefore confronted with the responsibility of settling this and subsequent ones even when the organization was yet to set up its Commission on Mediation, Conciliation and Arbitration which was later saddled with the task of resolving disputes peacefully among member states (Agbi 1986). In spite of the problems that each of the states was facing, African leaders rose to the occasion to settle the conflicts. In fact, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, in his usual characteristic manner and radical posture, called for the establishment of a Union Government that would incorporate all African states under one continental government. His belief was that by so doing there would be no need for conflict resolution as all the states would have been formed into a single state. Most of the leaders were conscious of the precarious situation in which Africa found itself as far as the boundary disputes were concerned in relation to the unity of African states. While contributing to

the resolution of the Algeria - Morocco face - off in November 1963, the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie remarked that the Algerian - Morocco crisis was:

A threat to the unity and oneness which we seek...And a test of our strength, courage and resolve to maintain the principles of the O.A.U. Failure could deal a crippling blow to the objective which we have marked for ourselves. (Agbi 1986).

Nigeria played significant roles in conflict resolution pertaining to boundary disagreement. Having chosen Africa as the focal point of her foreign policies, it did everything humanly possible and used her resources - human, financial and diplomatic - towards boundary dispute resolution, even while its gruesome civil war was still raging. In the 1970's, particularly during the Mohammed/Obasanjo administration (1975-79), Nigeria's African policy became revolutionized. Since all the disputes cannot be examined, it has become imperative to look at one of them as a case study. It is through this that Nigeria's efforts at resolving boundary crises in consonance with the OAU doctrine of pacific settlement would be appreciated. It is on this note that the Ethiopian - Somali boundary dispute is examined.

The Ethiopia-Somalia crisis was the most violent and protracted regarding the boundary disputes that characterized the continent. As it has been pointed out, 'perhaps the most intractable and frustrating mediatory effort in which Nigeria was involved was the Ethiopia-Somalia dispute'(Garba 1991). The genesis of the problem is traceable to the imposition of colonial rule during which the Somali were divided into five different territories. These were British Somaliland, French Somaliland and Italian Somaliland. The remaining two territories became parts of Kenya and Ethiopia. In his analysis, Agbi (1986) has noted that the Somali occupy about 1/3 of Djibouti (French Somaliland), 1/5 of Ethiopia and 1/5 of Kenya. The rest lived, until their independence and unification in 1960, under the Italian and British colonial administrations (Agbi 1986). This development, in the Horn of Africa, has been described as a 'time-bomb' that was bound to explode after the departure of its initiators

The bone of contention between Ethiopia and Somali was the Ogaden region which was inhabited by Somali-speaking people in the pre-colonial days. The Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II had demonstrated his interest in sharing the 'booty' with France, Britain and Italy between 1889 and 1891 when the colonizing powers came to divide Somaliland among themselves. He moved his troops to colonize the western part of Somalia which was not yet claimed or occupied by the European powers. In 1936, Italy defeated Ethiopia and as a result placed the Ethiopian Ogaden under the same administration as the Somali in what used to be called Italian Somaliland. With the help of British troops, Ethiopia was freed from Italian imperial clutches in 1941 but the British maintained the status quo until 14 September, 1948, when the area was again placed under Ethiopian rule after much pressure from Emperor Haile Selassie (Amate 1986).

Given the imperial tendencies displayed by Ethiopia, the Somali government maintained that Ethiopia was a colonial power, and like other colonial powers had been resisting the demand of the Somali people for independence. This ultimately led to the outbreak of the Ethiopian-Somali crisis as the Somali government referred to Article III (6) of the OAU Charter which supports 'the total emancipation of the African territories which were still dependent'.

In response, the Ethiopian authorities argued that there was no Somali nation before 1960 and that historically, the Ogaden region was an integral part of Ethiopia. According to them, the Somali currently living in the region were nomads who displaced the original dwellers in the course of grazing their animals. Hence, they claimed that in accordance with Article III (3) of the OAU Charter, the Somali government would have to show 'respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity' of Ethiopia and of Kenya against which the Somali government was also laying claim.(Erinosho 2010)

The divergent view of Ethiopia was annoying to the Somali government under Abdulla Osman who was committed to the creation of what Agbi (1986) describes as 'Greater Somalia' by uniting all Somali territories among which were the Ogaden region and Northern Frontier District (NFD) which was part of Kenya. The Somali abhorred the creation of the NFD as part of Kenya by the British and therefore decided to break off diplomatic relations with Britain on 18 March, 1963. In addition, there were reports of skirmishes between Ethiopia and Somalia in 1961 and 1964. There was a clear readiness of the Somali to employ force, if necessary, to realize the emergence of a Greater Somalia (Agbi 1986).

The situation was exacerbated when Kenya became independent in December 1963 and signed an Agreement of Cooperation and Mutual Defence Assistance with Ethiopia. This move was regarded by Somalia to be against her. As a result, the minor clashes between Ethiopia and Somalia degenerated into full-blown war in February, 1964.

The aggressive posture of Somalia prompted the Imperial Government of Ethiopia to send a letter to the Acting Secretary General of the OAU on 8 February 1964, 'requesting him to call an extra-ordinary session of the Council of Ministers to consider the aggression committed by the Republic of Somalia against Ethiopia'. In the same manner, Somalia implored the Acting Secretary General of the OAU to include the Somali-Ethiopia crisis on the agenda of the extra-ordinary meeting of the Foreign Ministers billed to hold at Dar-es-Salaam on February 12, 1964 (Agbi 1986). In fact, it was President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania who had summoned the February meeting in order to find solutions to the internal insurrections which had undermined his government in 1964. However, majority of the ministers placed higher premium on the Somali-Ethiopia dispute than the Tanzanian problems.

On 13 February, 1964 both the Ethiopian and the Somali delegates were called upon to present their respective cases. Ethiopia's Foreign Minister, Ketema Kifru lay historical claims to the disputed area while Somalia's Foreign Minister, Abdullahi Issa Mohammud sought an immediate cease-fire from the Foreign Ministers' Summit. Furthermore, he wanted the ministers to appoint observers to supervise the effective maintenance of the truce, and wanted the O.A.U. to check Ethiopia's imperialistic policies towards Somalia.

The Council of Ministers ruled that the two warring states should enter into peaceful negotiation of their dispute. The resolution also called upon 'all African states with diplomatic or consular missions in Ethiopia and Somalia to do their best to assist in the implementation of the ceasefire'. They were also to refrain from using damaging propaganda. The Ethiopian-Somali crisis was to be discussed during the second ordinary session of the Council of Ministers scheduled to meet in Lagos on February 24, 1964, with a view to arriving at a peaceful and lasting solution (Amate, 1986). The second ordinary session of the Council of Ministers in Lagos was a total failure as the two states were not ready to shift ground. In fact, the Somalia Foreign Minister called on the Council to denounce the defence pact between Ethiopia and Kenya as, according to him, bilateral and regional military pacts were a threat to the concept of African unity. He accused both Ethiopia and Kenya of having foreign military bases in their territories which contradicted the spirit of the OAU Charter (Amate, 1986).

The Council of Ministers tried to use every peaceful means to resolve the dispute. Hence, despite the hostile attitude of both disputants, an eleven-nation sub-committee was set up on the advice of the leader of the Sierra Leone delegation. Members of the sub-committee were: Morocco, Benin, Tunisia, Cameroon, Liberia, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Mauritania and Sudan. They were charged to draft two resolutions - one for the consideration of Ethiopia-Somalia dispute, and the other for the Somalia-Kenya. The two draft resolutions which the sub-committee came up with were similar. They

both reaffirmed the resolutions that the council arrived at in Dar-es-Salaam. The three countries were advised to avoid what could worsen the situation and enter into direct negotiations as soon as possible. In consequence, the government of Sudan used its good offices and met with the Foreign Ministers of Ethiopia and Somalia in Khartoum in March 1964 to commence negotiations. The two countries agreed not to use hostile propaganda any more against each other, 'and to set up a joint commission to supervise the withdrawal of troops from their common border and to follow up the discussion of outstanding problems relating to the border issue' (Amate,1986).

The Assembly of Heads of Governments did not receive any progress report on the Somali-Ethiopia dispute, and so, there was neither discussion nor passage of any resolution on it. However, occasional armed clashes and the use of hostile propaganda continued until 1973 when the situation again developed into a full scale war. The efforts of an eight-nation sub-committee comprising Nigeria (Chairman), Cameroon, Liberia, Lesotho, Mauritania, Senegal, Sudan and Tanzania, during the tenth ordinary session of the Assembly were frustrated by the Somali dissidents in the Ogaden. The sub-committee had previously met the representatives of the two warring states in Algiers in September 1973, and again in Mogadiscio (Mogadishu) in June 1974 during the eleventh ordinary session of the Assembly. These meetings helped a lot in reducing tension between the two disputing states before the members of the Western Somali Liberation Front, fighting for the independence of their territory began to feature again in the crisis (Garba 1991).

By 1977, the war had assumed an alarming dimension with the involvement of aerial bombing. Before then, the Nigerian-led Good Offices Committee Chaired by Alhaji Umaru Shinkafi, Nigeria's Commissioner for Internal Affairs between 5 and 8 August, 1977 at Libreville, Gabon, was stifled by the Somali delegation who walked out of the meeting. The Somali behaved in such manner because the Committee objected to Dr. Abdurahman I. Barre's suggestion that the Western Somalia Liberation Front be allowed to take part in the negotiations affecting their destiny. The walk-out was also precipitated by the committee's strict adherence to 'the principles and objectives of the OAU Charter which respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states' (Agbi,1986).

The war escalated in 1978 with the active participation of Cuban and Russian forces which supported Ethiopia. In March, Somalia lost Jijiga to Ethiopia and this made it obvious that Somalia would sue for peace by withdrawing her forces from the Ogaden region. Instead, she demanded that all foreign troops must be withdrawn from the Horn of Africa, and 'the recognition by interested parties of the right to self-determination for the people of Western Somalia (Ogaden)'(Agbi 1986).

Barre became distressed as the situation was more serious than ever as a result of foreign intervention. He alleged that Soviet soldiers had got involved in the actual fighting under the command of one General Barisov, who was formerly a Soviet military advisor in Somalia (Garba 1991).

An Appraisal of Nigeria's Intervention on Ethiopia/Somali Boundary Dispute

Nigeria's interest in peaceful resolution of conflicts was further strengthened under the Federal Military Government headed by the retired General Olusegun Obasanjo. Three other attempts made by Nigeria between February and April were unsuccessful. According to General Joseph Garba, Nigeria's External Affairs Minister and the convener of the meetings:

Unfortunately, my hopes of convening a meeting of the (Good Offices) Commission did not materialize...As propaganda war between the two countries heightened, both began to insist on all kinds of pre-conditions. Ethiopia demanded that Somalia must withdraw her forces and renounce all claims to Ogaden, stop supporting the insurgents and renounce all belligerent intentions before she would attend

any meeting. Somalia on her part demanded that the Soviet and Cuban forces must be withdrawn from Ogaden before she would attend any meeting (Garba 1991).

The effort of the British High Commissioner, Mervyn Brown, who sought to broker peace between the warring states also failed. He had met with the Director of Africa Department of the Commonwealth on 10 March, 1978, who informed him that the Somali Foreign Minister had on 9 March summoned Western Ambassadors and informed them of the Somali Government decision to withdraw Somali units from Ogaden. The Ethiopian Government was not prepared to accept any intervention from the Western powers on behalf of Somalia. Thus, the war continued.

As part of Nigeria's commitment to the maintenance of peace and security on the African continent, General J. Garba confided in Cyrus Vance - the American Secretary of State, - that he was ready to take the matter to the Security Council or to the Non-Aligned Movement which might turn out to be an embarrassment not only to Ethiopia, but also to Africa (Garba 1991). The then Nigerian Head of State, Olusegun Obasanjo, did a lot to localize the war by going to Washington in 1977 where he sought and obtained assurances from the US President, Jimmy Carter, to refrain from any involvement in the conflict. After that, he sent a special envoy to Moscow to seek a similar assurance from President Leonid Brezhnev of the Soviet Union (Amate, 1986). Thus, the Ethiopia-Somalia dispute defied every attempt made by the OAU in general and Nigeria in particular towards resolving it peacefully. Yet, the committee continued with its mediation efforts in order to find a just and lasting solution to the conflict. In other words, all the efforts of the OAU member-states particularly by Nigeria were frustrated by the hard line posture of the disputing parties, thus leaving the Somali at cross roads as at 1977, the terminal year of this study. The bitter experience of the Somalia is summed up by Dr 'Abdirashiid 'Ali Shermaarke, the late President of the Somali Republic thus:

Our misfortune do not stem from the unproductiveness of the soil, nor from a lack of mineral wealth. These limitations on our material well-being were accepted and compensated for by our forefathers from whom we inherited, among other things, a spiritual and cultural prosperity of inestimable value: the teaching of Islam on the one hand and lyric poetry on the other... No! Our misfortune is that our neighbouring countries, with whom, like the rest of Africa, we seek to promote constructive and harmonious relations, are not our neighbors. Our neighbours are our Somali kinsmen whose citizenship has been falsified by indiscriminate boundary "arrangement". They have to move across artificial frontiers to their pasture lands. They occupy the same terrain and pursue the same pastoral economy as ourselves. We speak the same language. We share the same creed, the same culture and the same traditions. How can we regard our brothers as foreigners?(Samatar,1986)

While assessing Nigeria's contribution in conflict resolution, Garba (1991) has this to say:

I think Nigeria, for all the reasons of size and influence, was right on such a role, and will be right to take it on in future... whatever the jealousies caused by Nigeria's potential leadership, our mediatory efforts were often sought and never rebuffed.

Conclusion

This study navigated the Ethiopia/Somali boundary dispute which was one of the unhappy colonial legacies bequeathed to Africans. The issue of boundary conflicts which erupted as soon as many states became politically independent took centre stage in the international relations of sovereign African nations which established the defunct Organization of African Unity (OAU). The continental body founding fathers and their successors did their best to ensure that Africa was peaceful. Nigeria, using the OAU platform played prominent roles to mediate in the Ethiopia/Somali border face-off as demonstrated by this study.

The acerbity expressed in the above assertion reflects the bitterness and acrimony being engendered by the indiscriminate, criminal but deliberate and willful arbitrary demarcation of African countries by

centrifugal forces represented by the imperial powers of Europe. Thus, the Europeans created bad blood among Africans thereby putting the victims at cross-roads and perpetual hostility.

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