MEDIA AS ACTORS IN INTERSTATE CONFLICT: LESSONS FROM NIGERIAN PRESS COVERAGE OF THE BAKASSI PENINSULA DISPUTE

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Abstract: It is becoming increasingly acceptable among scholars that media play an important role in interstate affairs in contemporary global relations. Ordinarily in diplomatic circles as in all other spheres of life, the media as an institution in society, should concern itself with purveying information by acting as news sources. However, changing circumstances have redefined the role of the media in the international arena. The media may not be seen openly as participants in the nexus of factors that drive international discourse but they act as shadow parties in influencing what goes on in diplomatic circles. Sometimes, they initiate key decisions and at other times, they act as go-between among parties in a situation where open communication is virtually difficult. It is this unique role of the media in resolving interstate conflicts that forms the focus of this article using the Bakassi Peninsula conflict as a reference point. This article does not assume that the media were directly involved in the negotiation process to resolve the conflict but it establishes the fact that through cautious reportage, the Nigerian press could have positively influenced the peaceful outcome of the dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon over the Bakassi Peninsula. The article recommends that journalists should be conscious of the fact that in interstate conflicts, they have a cardinal role to play in guiding public conscience on the way forward which is a part of their social responsibility role in society.

I. Introduction

It was Cohen (1963) who wrote the thought-provoking statement cited in Naveh (2002) that “For most of the foreign policy audience, the really effective political map of the world – that is to say, their operational map of the world – is drawn by the reporter and the editor, not by the cartographer. The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (my emphasis). Recounting the words of one of the doyens of newspaper business in Britain, Taylor (2003, p.80) quotes Lord Northcliffe as saying “God made people read so that I could fill their brains with facts, facts, facts—and later tell them whom to love, whom to hate, and what to think”. According to this scholar, Lord Northcliffe was to demonstrate what he meant by this especially when he was placed in charge of the government’s department for enemy propaganda in 1918 during the First World War. Of course, every student of history, international relations or media studies would easily recall the pervasive impact of propaganda on the prosecution of the two world wars and the ripple effect this phenomenon had on advertising, broadcasting and diplomacy.

What the foregoing analysis indicates is the fact that the media have become an active participant and not just a passive observer in international issues management of which, conflict management is a subset. Liman (2010, p.16) notes, “It has been said that diplomacy, which is a vital aspect of politics on the international arena begins and ends with communication. The media of mass communication are always being utilized by politicians, diplomats and statesmen in pursuance of their political objectives”. Liman adds that “The relationship between international communication, intercultural interactions, foreign policy formulation and the mass media has been sufficiently established since time immemorial. The use of propaganda techniques by government in war time, and even peacetime, is a case in point”. Politics, to use the word in the “elevated” sense, has an indissoluble relationship with communication (MacBride et al, 1980, p.18, cited in Liman, 2010, pp 16-17). Balabanova (2007, p.1) comments that: “Arguably the reason why these wars within states have become conflicts of international concern is in some form related to the media. What follows from this is a picture of the world in which contemporary wars and modern news media attract each other. In this process, the media become a constitutive part of wars. They play a complex role in the conduct and prosecution of wars, which cannot be
simply limited to being an observer of events. They have turned into participants and even catalysts in international crises".

Especially in interstate conflicts, national media of various power brokers across the world would always strive to align with their government’s perception of issues in the conflict especially where the foreign interest of the country is at stake. A case in point was British and American media support for the invasion of Iraq which, as this study would show later, became questionable after the mission had been accomplished by the two countries. It is a maxim in media studies that conflict reporting is a pastime of the media. This is because conflicts generate a steady stream of news which also translates into some economic benefits accruable to the media in terms of patronage by the audience and advertisers. Nwosu (2004, p.103) says that conflict like other events or occurrences provide the media with new materials for their news presentation. Lowenfeld and Collins (2008) writing in Microsoft Encyclopedia note that: “Global communications and the information technology revolution have encouraged fairness and cooperation in settling disputes. When a dispute erupts, the news media are often quick to cover the story and suddenly a small issue between two countries becomes a global affair. That far-reaching news coverage often causes the countries involved to rethink their actions and act more prudently. Or conversely, a nation might take advantage of the media coverage to further their cause”.

Perhaps in the absence of the media, we would never be aware of most of these crises even when they occur in the countries we live. The media, through the surveillance function, according to Harold Lasswell (1948), report the conflicts and through this process acquaint the audience with the day-to-day happenings in their environment and beyond. It is to be quickly noted too that the media give a colouration to any event by interpreting the issues surrounding such happenings thereby supposedly guiding the audience in making informed decisions about what is at stake. This is the interpretive/correlation function of the media. It is not unlikely that at times governments do find recourse to be guided by public opinion expressed through the media on some crucial matters.

Equally, for a conflict to be sustained requires the publicity given by the media. The issue of terrorism, for instance, has been argued to be fuelled through media reports because as the terrorists launch an attack, the media are expeditiously publicizing the incident to the whole world, and sometimes, this is given live coverage as it was in the case of the Cable News Network (CNN) coverage of the attack on World Trade Centre on 11 September, 2001. What else does terrorism need to survive if not the oxygen of publicity as Margaret Thatcher (of blessed memory), the former British Prime Minister, puts it figuratively? Indeed, the terrorist is not so much elated because of the number of victims or casualties from his attack as much as the awareness of his cause generated through the reportage of the incident. Adesina (2009) cites Brian Jenkins (1975) as saying “terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press. The hostages themselves often mean nothing to the terrorist. Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims”. So, communication through the media can play both causal and remedial roles in conflict resolution (Njoku, 2006). As a causal factor, the media can intensify the conflict, while on the remedial plane, they can be instrumental to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. This study attempted to explore the extent to which the Nigerian media were instrumental to a peaceful resolution of the Bakassi Peninsula conflict.

II. Statement of the problem

The Bakassi Peninsula conflict evidently had the capability of pitting the two countries (Nigeria and Cameroun) in a war situation. Commandably, the Presidents of the two countries (Olusegun Obasanjo and Paul Biya), had earlier consented under the Green Tree Agreement facilitated by the then United Nation’s scribe, Kofi Annan, to abide by the verdict of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) sitting on the case. In other words, the two countries had indicated their readiness to resolve the conflict amicably, a promise that was actualized on 14 August, 2006 when Nigeria finally handed over the Peninsula to Cameroun. In spite of this initial peace initiative, there was the possibility of aggravating tensions in the conflict by the media which could have altered the peace plan and whether the Nigerian media toed this adversarial line or not is the crux of analysis in this article.

Objectives of the study: These were to

a) ascertain whether the Nigerian press, in the coverage of the conflict, keyed into the peace agenda set by the two contending countries
b) examine the extent the Nigerian press differed or agreed with the Nigerian government’s position on the conflict
c) identify the areas in which the Nigerian press coverage of the conflict reflected the foreign policy thrust of the Nigerian government.

Hypothesis: The following hypothesis was tested in the study.

Newspaper coverage of issues in the Bakassi Peninsula conflict was geared towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict in line with the Nigerian government’s non-violent position on the conflict.

III. Literature Review

A. Overview of the Bakassi Peninsula conflict

The story of the Bakassi Peninsula conflict dates back to the colonial times in the chequered histories of Nigeria and Cameroun. Geographically and culturally speaking, the peninsula and its people have much affinity with
Nigeria. An excursion into the ethnographic configurations of the disputed territory would reveal that the inhabitants of the peninsula are predominantly Efik and Efut, which are ethnic groups in the present day Cross River State, Nigeria. The name ‘Bakassi’ came from ‘Bassey Eke’ and that is Efik, according to the late Obong of Calabar, Edidem Nta Elijah Henshaw, reported in The Guardian (12 October, 2002, p.20). But another source, Otuka Anyasi, in a letter to the editor of The Guardian (16 August, 2006) claims that “The original name of Bakassi is ‘Ubakansi’ corrupted by contact with Europeans”.

Edet Uno writes in an article “Bakassi: The Oron Perspective (2)”, that “… contrary to the highly uninformed opinion from the wholly pedestrian minds in Nigeria, Oron [whose people were also resident in Bakassi] has a tremendous cultural affinity, which translates to vital interest, with parts of Cameroons” (The Guardian, 26 November, 2002, p.75). Mr Inyang Ekpe, erstwhile Chairman, Bakassi Local Government Council identifies the Bakassi indigenes with Nigeria saying “we are Cross Riverians from Nigeria. We owe our allegiance to the Obong of Calabar. We are Efik people. We dress like this. I’m a typical Efik man (The Punch, 18 October, 2002, p.2).

It is interesting to note that as at the time of the conflict, two prominent Nigerians, Senator Florence Ita-Giwa and Hon. Patrick Ene, the former being a federal lawmaker and the latter, deputy Speaker, Cross River State House of Assembly were natives of Bakassi. Abang (2009) in Bassey and Oshita (2009) describes the Bakassi Peninsula as a low lying region bordered on the West by the estuary of the Cross River, on the North by the Akwanyeye River (also known as the Akpa Ikang) on the East by the Rio-del-Rey estuary, and on the South by the Gulf of Guinea. The oil-rich Peninsula consists of a series of Islands covering approximately 50 square Kilometres and occupied for the most part by long-established communities of Nigerians, in several dozens of villages. Also, history shows that at various times, the ownership of the peninsula triangulated among three contending European imperialists viz Germany, Britain and finally, France.

From the end of World War I (1914-1918) to the independence of Cameroun in 1960, the Bakassi Peninsula and present-day southwestern Cameroun were administered by Britain as part of Nigeria. However, in 1961, there was a plebiscite that enabled the British administered Cameroonian territory to join its counterpart as one country. Quite historically significant, Bakassi indigenes did not participate in this plebiscite. The costly assumption was that the territory already belonged to Nigeria. Obviously based on this thinking, the Nigerian government, in 1991, claimed that the Bakassi peninsula was still legally part of Nigeria. Cameroon countered with an agreement signed in 1975 by the then Nigerian military ruler Gen. Yakubu Gowon, which ceded the territory to Cameroon.

Nigeria refused the agreement and in early 1994 invaded the Bakassi Peninsula. Fighting gave way to diplomacy by the end of the year, but armed clashes resumed in 1996. Cameroon requested that the matter be settled by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which ordered both countries to cease hostilities. On 10 October, 2002, the ICJ ruled that the peninsula rightly belonged to Cameroon on the basis of the 1913 agreement, and ordered Nigerian forces to leave the area. However, Nigeria continued to occupy the region until the dispute was finally resolved in 2006.

B. Media and Conflict Coverage

Sankore (2001) cited in Nwosu (2004, p.15) explains that: “nothing defines the character of a mass establishment more sharply than any crisis that pitches nation against nation or one section of society against another. In times of crisis, the responsibility of the mass media is magnified ten folds by society’s demand for news, information and analysis, and therefore, its increased capacity to influence debate and shape public opinion. Every word, written or spoken, by the media is a potential matchet, bullet or bomb in the minds and hands of victims and perpetrators”. The UNESCO’s Convention (1978, p.14) cited in Nwosu (2004, p.15) anticipates the mass media role or influence in conflict management to go far beyond the public attention-giving function, noting that since all wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defense of peace must be constructed. Nwosu further says that the war for the mind or mind-share in war and other competitive situations, are mostly sought in the mass media.

For instance, it is believed that the interpretation given by the British Broadcasting Service (BBC), London to the first coup in Nigeria (1966) as ethnically motivated inspired the North to stage a counter coup just six months after. During the Nigerian Civil War, an aftermath of the eventual two bloody coups of 1966, the media were again used for propaganda by both sides to the conflict. To the Igbos, the Federal government of Nigeria was on a genocide mission against the eastern region while the Federal government on its part labeled the Igbos as Secessionists. Expectedly, these two positions canvassed by the parties to the war won for each side friends and foes. Unarguably, this development rather prolonged the war to three years, a crisis which initially was thought to warrant a ‘Police Action’ response from the Federal government according to the then Nigerian Head of State, Gen. Yakubu Gowon (rtd) [see Ikejiani-Clark, 2009, p.472; Abayomi, 2003, p.110; Efiong, 2012].

The issue of aggravating tension and even giving overt support to parties in a conflict is not exclusive to the Nigerian media. For example, the media in Africa have been accused of inflaming conflict by being openly partisan as was in the genocide involving the Tutsis and the Hutus in Rwanda, the two wars in the Democratic
Republic of Congo and the civil war in Burundi as documented by Frere (2007). Even beyond Africa, the issue of media bias in conflict reporting has been an allegation against such big time media outfits like the CNN and BBC bordering on issues like their coverage of the USA invasion of Iraq which led to the deposition and eventual demise of the Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein. Strenuously, the two international media have tried to justify the invasion in the form of a defence for their home governments’ involvement in the war even when the evidence on the ground seems to be on the contrary.

On this note, Iredia (2004, p.13) says, “The American media are yet to condemn their country’s invasion of Iraq even after it has become obvious that the search for weapons of mass destruction was a façade for international gangsterism”. An Austrian journalist, John Pilger, quotes a New York Times Editorial (August, 2005), which contends that if the public had known the truth before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the war would have been stopped by “popular outcry” (Nwankpa, 2011). Pilger blames journalists whom he laments betrayed the public by accepting, amplifying and echoing the lies of Bush and Blair, instead of challenging and exposing them. The same report has it that CNN and SkyNews (both broadcast media) had a steady graphic banner that read: “Operation Iraqi Freedom” displayed during their daily coverage of the war, thus tending to justify the war as a liberation project to free the oppressed Iraqis even though the world was opposed to it. Corroborating this claim, Richardson (2007) quotes Tim Ripley, a Freelancer with the Scotsman, Financial Times and Jane’s Defence Magazines as saying: “The Americans and Blair decided to go to war in March 2002. You need to look at everything that happened after that in the context of that decision and how they were organizing what was going on….And they embarked on what I would call the most centralized political propaganda campaign in modern history to shape the run-up, the conduct and aftermath of the war”.

Indeed, as it was later revealed, there was not much weighty evidence to justify the invasion of Iraq by the Western Powers. Taylor, Sinha and Ghoshal (2009, p.120) reproduced a speech by the then British Prime Minister, Mr Tony Blair (Hansard, 14 July, 2004) quoting the helmsman as saying, “I have searched my conscience, not in a spirit of obstinacy but in genuine reconsideration in the light of what we now know, to answer that question [as to whether the threat of Saddam’s possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction was misconceived and, therefore, the war was unjustified]. My answer would be this: the evidence of Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction was indeed less certain and less well founded than was stated at the time”. However, Mr Blair still argues that: “...if we had backed down in respect of Saddam, we would never have taken the stand that we needed to take on weapons of mass destruction, we would never have got the progress on Libya, for example, that we achieved, and we would have left Saddam in charge of Iraq, with every malign intent and capability still in place, and with every dictator with the same intent everywhere immeasurably emboldened”.

It is instructive to note that earlier in history, American media have been accused of being used as ideological apparatuses (courtesy of Jürgen Habermas’ postulate) to openly interfere in the internal affairs of other countries against what could be considered the limits to media analysis of international issues. In this regard, Taylor (2003, p.54) notes that: “...in 1987 during the American bombing of Libya, the Voice of America was almost certainly in violation of international laws designed to prevent outside interference in the internal affairs of a state when it broadcast appeals to Libyans to overthrow Colonel Ghadafi. To ‘inform’ the anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan, the Americans established Radio Free Kabul and Radio Free Afghanistan. Moreover, the USIA was extending its brief to international television with the establishment of WORLDNET in 1978. A year later, it was serving eighty-one cable systems in thirteen European countries with daily news and analysis programmes, as well as C-Span (the US government domestic channel) and CNN. The broadcasting service to Cuba was extended to television with the creation of TV Marti in 1990, which the Non-Aligned Movement condemned as ‘an aggression and an inadmissible precedent which constitutes intervention in the internal affairs of a state’.

Cecil King, a one-time Chairman of the International Publishers Corporation is quoted in Jack (2007, p.18) as saying “Once a pendulum has started to swing, newspapers can make it swing a little further, but the pendulum itself is moved by forces much wider, more imponderable and more irrational than the press”. However, it is not all the time the press would reason along with the government on certain crucial matters of national interest. Taylor (2003, p.83) strikes this point using the American press as an example: “the American press corps, for all its First Amendment rights, knew of the 1961 Bay of Pigs episode in advance but adhered to a White House request not to publish anything about it until after it had happened. Having said that, during the American operation in Haiti in 1993, they proved less compliant, as hundreds of Western journalists defied UN sanctions and a White House demand for a voluntary embargo on live coverage, set up their satellite dishes at Port-au-Prince hotels and, complete with live-link cameras equipped with night scopes, waited to capture the invasion in real time. Something has indeed changed”.

In relation to our study, one would like to ask: could it be that the Nigerian press differed with the Nigerian government on the Bakassi Peninsula Conflict or simply keyed into the latter’s perception and approach to the conflict? The Nigerian government’s position on the conflict especially after the ICJ judgement was commendably captured in The Guardian editorial of 4 November, 2002, “Happily, President Olusegun Obasanjo has indicated his readiness to approach the Bakassi and other issues relating to the ICJ ruling from the
diplomatic and political angles of vision. This is the best course of action”. The same newspaper ran another editorial in which it unequivocally condemned war option to the resolution of the conflict, “In the passion of the moment, it will be foolhardy to succumb to the battle cry of war-mongers in our midst. A war is no picnic; it is expensive and destructive (The Guardian Editorial, 22 October, 2002, p.22). Similarly, The Guardian (30 October, 2002) quotes the President as saying: “We have a responsibility to maintain peace with our country, peace with our neighbours, peace in our sub-region, peace in Africa and the world. We will not initiate any action that will amount to a breach of peace. We will spare no effort to dialogue and negotiate. There is no human problem that cannot be resolved through dialogue. We want peace but the interest of Nigeria will not be sacrificed. It must be peace with honour, with the interests and welfare of our people protected”.

The pacifist position of the governments of Nigeria and Cameroon on the dispute equally earned the applause of the international community as expressed by Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Chairman of the UN follow-up Committee on the implementation of the ICJ ruling that “This is going to be an episode to be studied by diplomatic institutions on how disputes can be settled in a peaceful process”, (The Guardian, 18 August, 2006). Mr. Prendergast further opines “I believe the whole episode which is just of its kind, will be studied a lot by diplomats and become of great historical significance” and that “it is a situation in which there are no losers. Everybody is a winner on this. It is good example of taking initiative with the aim of conflict prevention…” (The Vanguard, 16 August, 2006, p.9).

C. Media and Foreign Policy Making

From the foregoing review of literature, one point that is worth exploring is the role the media could play in handling international conflicts by influencing policy making in this direction. The fact is that the media could raise issues bordering on interstate relations to the plane of social discourse and by so doing, might twist the hand of the government to be committed in a certain direction. In recent media studies, this phenomenon has come to be understood as the CNN Effect, (Balabanova, 2007, p. xvii; Naveh, 2002) which emanated from the dominating impact the cable television is making in reporting crucial crisis situations the world over, and which has somehow forced governments in different countries to expedite actions on such issues. In this section of our study, we focus on the relationship between the media and foreign decision making in government and how this relates to the Nigerian foreign policy thrust.

The essence of this is to properly contextualize the rather surprising concessionary stand of the Nigerian government on the Bakassi Peninsula conflict. Sanda (2004) has expressed surprise that “Nigeria in somewhat unexpected move accepted the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and proceeded to work actively towards its implementation”. Ebonugwo Mike, a social commentator writing on the issue in The Vanguard, (18 August, 2006, p.42), laments that “…..Obasanjo’s action in letting Bakassi go so easily smacks of lack of commitment to the defence of the interest and wellbeing of the Bakassi people.” The logical question is: what could have made Nigeria to hastily implement the ICJ verdict which she expeditiously rejected at first? Matching Nigeria’s foreign policy thrust with the country’s position on the Bakassi Peninsula conflict would shed more light on the probable rationale behind that decision.

Naveh (2002) maintains that the media is involved in all stages of foreign policy formulation processes and that political leaders take the media into consideration in its national and international aspects. However, the author argues that this double-edged media environment is considered mainly in the publication or media management stage. The involvement of the media in this decision–making process is complex. When an external, international event occurs, political leaders learn about it from the media. This information is processed through various image components and then the policy or decision–formulating process is set in motion. The author observes that the media are not just channels for delivering messages during the process; they also play a far more important role in the process.

The study framework perceives the mass communication networks as parts of the environment in which the international actors (mainly nation–states) exist and act. The media have a twofold role in such an environment. First, they provide input into the process as an independent variable. Here, the leaders react to the perceived reality as constructed by the press and take this into consideration in decision making in what has been described as the ‘CNN effect’ referred to earlier in this study. Second, it is part of the environment which foreign policy makers try to affect or influence by making their decisions. The author notes that the mass media as an environmental factor in a specific state is influenced by six variables:

i. The political communication regime in the state under consideration

ii. The communication policy adopted by the government of the state

iii. The political economy setting of the mass media

iv. The various communication channels and technologies existing in that country

v. The typical functions performed by media channels

vi. News values, the criteria that lead media ‘gatekeepers’ to include items and events in the news.

The media set the environment of the foreign policy process, and within this media environment, decision–makers must seek to gain support and legitimacy for their policy. They (policy makers) can do this as Davison (1982, p.183) opines that “officials not sure of public reaction may float a trial balloon, or ‘fly a kite’ –as the
British would put it, in order to test public sentiment. The balloon or kite usually consists of an unattributed statement in the press or a calculated leak. Unintended leaks may serve the same diagnostic function”. Davison (1982, p.182) further gives the reason for this: “An agreement is worthless if the parliament of one of the participating states will not ratify it, or if it is nullified by widespread opposition among interested domestic publics. Insofar as the press is able to provide a reasonably accurate picture of the essentials involved in any negotiation, and to report public reaction to the principal moves made by each side, it helps to keep the negotiators within the bounds of political reality….In serving as a link between negotiators and their domestic publics, the media provide for a two-way flow of influence: from the negotiators to the public, and from the public to the negotiators”.

Naveh (2002) again observes that the media construct reality with another tool called ‘framing’. This technique is important, since any political conflict centres on the struggle over interpretive frames (citing Wolfsfeld, 1993, p.xiii; 1997a, pp.13 – 30). In this process, the media transform the nature of events through ‘formats’, which constitute ideological or value perspectives in which the media focus on ‘story lines’, symbols and relevant stereotypes (citing Entman, 1991; Entman and Page, 1994). Finally, framing is the process in which the media create the images that reflect and filter reality in the foreign decision–making processes. To summarize the theory, the foreign policy decision-making process takes place within an environment partly created by the media. This article aligns with the submission of Davison (1982, p.174) that: “International negotiations are frequently facilitated by publicity. One can acknowledge that, under some circumstances, the news media make it more difficult for governments to reach agreement, but this qualified form of acknowledgement in itself suggests that under other circumstances the media may have a favourable influence on negotiations. The problem becomes one of defining the positive functions of publicity and distinguishing them from the negative ones”.

What this article tends to highlight is the fact that the media do influence foreign policy formulation by governments. In a case like the Bakassi Peninsula dispute that our study was set to explore, we cannot rule out the possibility of the Nigerian press influence on the final position of the Nigerian government on the conflict. However, this has to be supported by empirical evidence.

D. The Nigeria Foreign Policy Thrust

Foreign policy, according to Dickson (2011, p. 74), is hard to define because “There is no general agreement among social scientists as to the exact definition and scope of foreign policy. Therefore, the term has been variously defined”. Dickson, however, quotes Mbachu (2007) as saying “foreign policy is the primary method by which a country pursues its national interest. It consists of decisions or actions taken by states in order to achieve realization of those interests”.

Egbeghulem (2008) writes that the foreign policy of any state is sometimes or always seen as the extension of its domestic policy. In other words, a nation’s foreign policy is determined by the internal dynamics of its domestic politics. According to this scholar, Nigeria foreign policy since independence has been designed by successive administrations to secure certain goals and objectives. These goals and objectives have been catalogued to include the maintenance of her territorial integrity, political and economic development of Nigeria and the entire African continent, decolonization and liberation of the African continent. A good demonstration of this resolve was how Nigeria quickly threw herself, as a frontline state, into the liberation struggles in the South African region by taking a committed tough stand against apartheid regime. Also, sometime in 1975, the military regime of late Gen Murtala Muhammed in Nigeria took a decisive position in support of the independence of Angola against foreign rule.

Egbeghulem (2008) states again that since independence, Nigeria’s foreign policy has been characterized by a focus on Africa i.e. an Afro-centric policy thrust, which of course, is firmly rooted in the ideology of Pan-Africanism. This ideology, according to Onwubiko (1973, p.428) cited in Dickson (2011, p.81), “stands for racial co-existence on the basis of absolute equality and respect for human dignity; it stands for the political, economic and cultural unity of independent states of the African continent; it rejects all forms of foreign control of any African state…..” Nigeria is also committed to several fundamental principles which include “African unity and independence; peaceful settlement of disputes (my emphasis); non-alignment and non-intentional interference in the internal affairs of other nations; and regional economic co-operation and development” (Ogoke, 1993 cited in Egbeghulem, 2008). Nigeria hopes to achieve the above objectives through her membership of and participation in African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), United Nations (UN), Commonwealth of Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement. The Afro-centric foreign policy thrust of Nigeria is guided by this primary objective, which according to President Goodluck Jonathan, is “to negotiate the best possible outcome for Africa in the belief that when Africa does well, Nigeria’s interests would be well served” (The Guardian, 17 September, 2011, p. 46). The President said further: “…given the increasing inter-connectedness of the world, we would do well to pursue a robust multilateral diplomacy, but this should not be at the expense of our bilateral relationships. We should, therefore, continue to build and deepen our partnerships with friendly countries. In all cases, these relationships must be anchored on mutual respect and responsiveness”.

Here we could see that Nigeria’s option for a peaceful resolution of the Bakassi peninsula dispute might not be unconnected with her commitment to the fundamental principles outlined above in respect to her foreign policy thrust as it was then and now strengthened by the incumbent administration. Earlier in 1999, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, in his inaugural address to the nation on assumption of power as a civilian President had this to say concerning Nigeria’s foreign relations particularly in the aspect of peace keeping: “Our national interest requires the establishment and maintenance of peace and stability in the West African sub-region. Specifically in the case of Sierra Leone, we shall endeavour to ensure a quick resolution of the crisis by dialogue and diplomatic means by increasing activity on the second track of peace and reconciliation” (Tell Magazine, 8 June, 2009, p.35). This point was aptly corroborated by the ex-governor of Cross River State, Donald Duke in his address at the handover of the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroun, that “African leaders should use this event to come to the realization that while it is possible to win battles in the field, the peace and political stability which Africa requires to develop and take its proper place as a continent can only be achieved on the negotiating table” (The Guardian, 8 August, 2006).

However, Egbeghulem (2008) regretfully observes that in the name of African unity, Nigeria has sacrificed a lot and continues to make excruciating sacrifice for Africa. For instance, Nigeria abandoned her territory and people in Bakassi, all in the name of being a good, law abiding and responsible international citizen. Though this is praiseworthy in his view, yet most African countries do not appreciate the sacrifices made by Nigeria to bring them out of their woes. We agree with this scholar on the palpable ingratitude displayed by other African countries towards Nigeria as it was evident in the hostilities exhibited against Nigerian soldiers and nationals in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the ECOMOG Peace keeping mission in those countries. Commendably, Nigeria has continued defiantly to play a leading role in resolving conflicts in the African continent in such places like Darfur in Sudan, Equatorial Guinea, Cote ‘d’Ivoire, among other recent cases. In spite of this prevailing sense of ingratitude to Nigeria by those she tries to help, the country could still find solace in the words of ex-President Richard Nixon, USA, spoken at the peak of the Watergate scandal that “Greatness comes, not when all seems to go well, but when one is tested. It is then that those in the deepest valley will know how magnificent it is to be on the highest mountain”.

Saliu (2006) reiterates the claim that scholars and commentators on Nigerian foreign policy had, even before the attainment of independence, conferred on Nigeria the leadership role in Africa. He adds that consequently, after the attainment of independence in 1960, the country began to formulate a foreign policy that would enable it play its historic leadership role in Africa. Thus, the African centre-piece principle, according to this writer, was consciously adopted as a paramount principle of Nigeria’s foreign policy. As if it was a test of Nigeria’s commitment to this principle, the Bakassi Peninsula controversy reared its head. The author avers that the Nigeria-Cameroon border conflict has remained the most fiercely contested issue in Nigeria’s African policy between 1988 and 1992. We need to add that commendably Nigeria lived up to expectation in resolving the territorial dispute amicably.

Sanda (2004) outlines some basic principles in the 1999 Constitution [Section 19 (a)-(e)] of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which fall in line with the foreign policy thrust of the country as follows:

a) Promotion and protection of the national interest of the country
b) Promotion of African integration and support for African unity
c) Promotion of international cooperation for the consolidation of universal peace and mutual respect among all nations and elimination of discrimination in all its manifestations
d) Respect for international law and treaty obligations as well as settlement of international disputes by negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration and adjudication; (emphasis mine) and
e) Promotion of a just world economic order.

The author notes further that the emphasis on diplomacy for curtailting violence was also evident in the handling of the Bakassi dispute between Nigeria and Cameroun. Thus, we could deduce from the foregoing analysis that Nigeria’s foreign policy is firmly anchored in the Nigerian constitution, and this goes a long way to justify the claim that a country’s foreign policy is a reflection of its domestic politics. Again, the point has been made in the analysis that Nigeria foreign policy emphasizes the country’s commitment to peace in Africa and by extension, the world. This might not be unconnected with Nigeria’s peaceful approach to resolving the Bakassi Peninsula conflict.

IV. Theoretical Framework for the study

The media paradigm of enquiry adopted in this study –The Manufacturing Consent–helps to evaluate the relationship between media coverage of issues and the actions of policy makers in any country. In other words, this emerging line of thought in media analysis seeks to underscore how policy makers influence the media to act in certain desired direction to promote a country’s foreign policy thrust.

As Balabanova (2007, p.4) notes the ‘Manufacturing Consent’ thesis holds that policy-making is the prerogative of an informed elite, with the media in a subordinate status. Political elites impel newsmakers to ‘read’ global events in a particular way; therefore the media are influenced by government and government’s policy.
Consequently, the media’s agenda reflects the priorities of policy-makers. This is akin to Media Framing which Gamson (1992) in Anyadike (2009, p.325) sees as a process by which media elites or communication services such as news or political organizations define and construct issues or events (See also Richardson, 2007, p.96, “Manufacturing Consent: Modes of Proof in the ‘Pre-War’ period”). Balabanova quotes Chomsky and Herman (1988, p.23) as exponents of the ‘Manufacturing Consent’ who claim that: “[p]owerful sources regularly take advantage of media routines and dependency to ‘manage’ the media, to manipulate them into following a special agenda and framework...inundating the media with stories, which serve sometimes to foist a particular line and frame on the media, and at other times to help chase unwanted stories off the front page or out of the media altogether”.

This paradigm offers a lens with which to examine whether the Nigerian press coverage of the Bakassi Peninsula conflict followed this theoretical construct in view of the fact that the Nigerian government had already agreed to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Did the Nigerian press key into this resolve of the Nigerian government on the conflict or did they deviate from the line toed by the government?

V. Research Methodology

This study focused on what the selected Nigerian newspapers, through their reportage of the Bakassi Peninsula conflict, did or did not do responsibly to ensure that the conflict between Nigeria and Cameroun did not escalate into war. Content analysis was, therefore, employed in the study to evaluate newspaper coverage. The research method is suitable because one, “content analysis is a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables” (Kerlinger, 2000 in Wimmer and Dominick, 2006, p.150) and two, what will be used as units of analysis is recorded information in print. Also, survey method was used to determine if there was any organizational influence from the newspapers on the coverage of the conflict. The survey also gave an insight into the perception of the journalists who covered the conflict before and after the judgement of the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

For the five year period of the study, 7, 200 editions of the selected newspapers formed the population. This is based on the assumption that each of the four newspapers published 30 editions per month. Both week day and weekend issues of the newspapers were included. However, four newspapers (The Guardian, Punch, New Nigerian and Vanguard) were purposively selected for the study. It is pertinent to observe here that these newspapers were selected from the top ten national dailies in Nigeria as at the time of the research namely: The Guardian, Punch, Vanguard, Tribune, ThisDay, New Nigerian, Champion, Daily Trust, Daily Independent, and Sun (Batta 2010, p.84).

The study covers January 1, 2002–December 31, 2006. This period is considered ideal because it marked the height of tensions in the conflict and covers the year of the ruling, and four years after the ruling up till the handover time. This has placed the research in a good stead to ascertain the role the Nigerian press played in reporting the conflict at this crucial stage till when the dispute was peaceably resolved. Equally, the study is restricted to four national dailies which are believed to be a fair representation of the views of the larger Nigerian press on the issue at stake. In addition, all the selected newspapers were in circulation during the study period.

The sample size was determined by purposively sorting out the newspaper editions that actually covered the conflict. The reason for doing this was that using a probability sampling technique, some of the editions in which reports on the conflict actually featured might be skipped since the conflict was reported episodically. What this means is that the newspapers were carrying reports on the conflict in line with how events were unfolding around it. In most cases, one would not find the conflict mentioned in the newspapers over a fairly length of time until a major happening takes place concerning the conflict. This also accounts for the low number of editions (161) obtained after the rigorous sorting of the newspapers and the overall items published on the conflict by the selected newspapers.

For the survey, all editors and reporters of the selected newspapers constituted the population. A sample of journalists used in the study was drawn from those who actually covered the conflict. Two editors and two reporters who covered the conflict in each newspaper were interviewed through a questionnaire to ascertain the rationale behind the coverage given to the conflict by each of the newspapers. For editors, this added up to eight and the same number was used for the reporters. In all, sixteen (16) journalists were interviewed.

In this study, the units of analysis were straight News, Features, Letters to the editor, Editorial, Cartoons, Photographs, Opinions/Commentaries, Advertorials and Columns on the Bakassi Peninsula conflict. The units of analysis indicated above were coded using the following content categories: Litigation (reports on court proceedings and related issues), Compliance with the ICJ verdict, Rejection of the ICJ verdict, Plebiscite on the opinion of the Bakassi residents, Political Solution aside of the court judgement, Common historical Traits shared between the two countries, and Impact of conflict on the two countries and the Bakassi residents.

VI. Test of Hypotheses

Newspaper coverage of issues in the Bakassi Peninsula conflict was geared towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict in line with the Nigerian government’s non-violent position on the conflict.
Table 1 presents data for testing the above hypothesis using ANOVA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of newspaper</th>
<th>Litigation</th>
<th>Compliance</th>
<th>Rejection</th>
<th>Pol. solution</th>
<th>Plebiscite</th>
<th>Common traits</th>
<th>Impact of conflict</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punch</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Nigerian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanguard</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>440</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 below gives a summary of the ANOVA calculations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total sum of squares (TSS)</th>
<th>Sum of squares between (SSB)</th>
<th>Sum of squares within (SSW)</th>
<th>Mean squares for SSB</th>
<th>Mean squares for SSW</th>
<th>F-ratio</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Sig. level</th>
<th>Critical value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3298</td>
<td>1274</td>
<td>2024</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>6/21</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from the table above indicate that @.05 level of significance with 6 degree of freedom for the numerator mean square and 21 degree of freedom for the denominator mean square, the calculated F value of 2.20 is lesser than the critical value of 3.24. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis that newspaper coverage of issues in the Bakassi Peninsula conflict was not geared towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The research hypothesis that newspaper coverage of issues in the Bakassi Peninsula conflict was geared towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict in line with the Nigerian government’s non-violent position on the conflict is upheld.

The newspapers predicated their call for non-violence in the conflict on the following points which they articulated in all their editorials on the conflict:

1. Nigeria is the arrow-head of African diplomatic relationship with the rest of the world; going to war with Cameroun would have seriously dented this enviable leading position as the “Giant of Africa”.
2. Nigeria was absolutely committed to peace-keeping missions in the African continent as at the time of the conflict through ECOMOG in such countries like Liberia, and Sierra-Leone. It would have amounted to a contradiction for her to start another war in the continent against Cameroun.
3. The historical ties between Nigeria and Cameroun would make nonsense of any thought of hostilities between the duo.
4. There was no point giving vent to foreign interest in the conflict to destabilize the African continent further through instigating a fratricidal war between the two contiguous countries.

VII. Conclusion

By keying into the agenda of peace initiated by both countries to the Bakassi Peninsula conflict, the Nigerian newspapers have contributed to resolving a conflict that could have been another bloodbath in the African continent. This is a demonstration of its social responsibility role in maintaining societal stability and co-existence. The Nigerian newspapers used in the study also acted socially responsible by attempting to hold the Nigerian government accountable to Nigerians for the easy concession of the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroun even though the government evidently disregarded the opinion of the media in the final analysis. In the view of the newspapers, the problem could have been resolved through a diplomatic approach.

Newspapers used in this study have demonstrated the fact that the national media in any country would likely support their home government in international conflicts so long as the latter is seen to be acting in the public interest. Also, it could be implied from this study that the media contributed to the peace process in the Bakassi Peninsula conflict in line with the understanding that they have an obligation to be socially responsible to the Nigerian society. If the media had decided to take sides against the Nigerian government in pushing for armed struggle as an option to resolving the conflict, ostensibly the ensuing war would probably be ranging on till this moment. What has happened in other parts of the world in conflicts as this offers a veritable lesson in this regard.

Newspapers should support the position of the home government in the coverage of international conflict especially where such declared interest is not at variance with the public interest. Commendably, the newspapers used in this study supported the non-violent stand of the Nigerian government on the Bakassi Peninsula conflict.
On a general note, more emphasis should be accorded conflict studies in the curriculum of Mass Communication training in Nigeria so as to acquaint both trainee and practising journalists with the nuances of constructive reportage of conflict from a social responsibility perspective.


References


